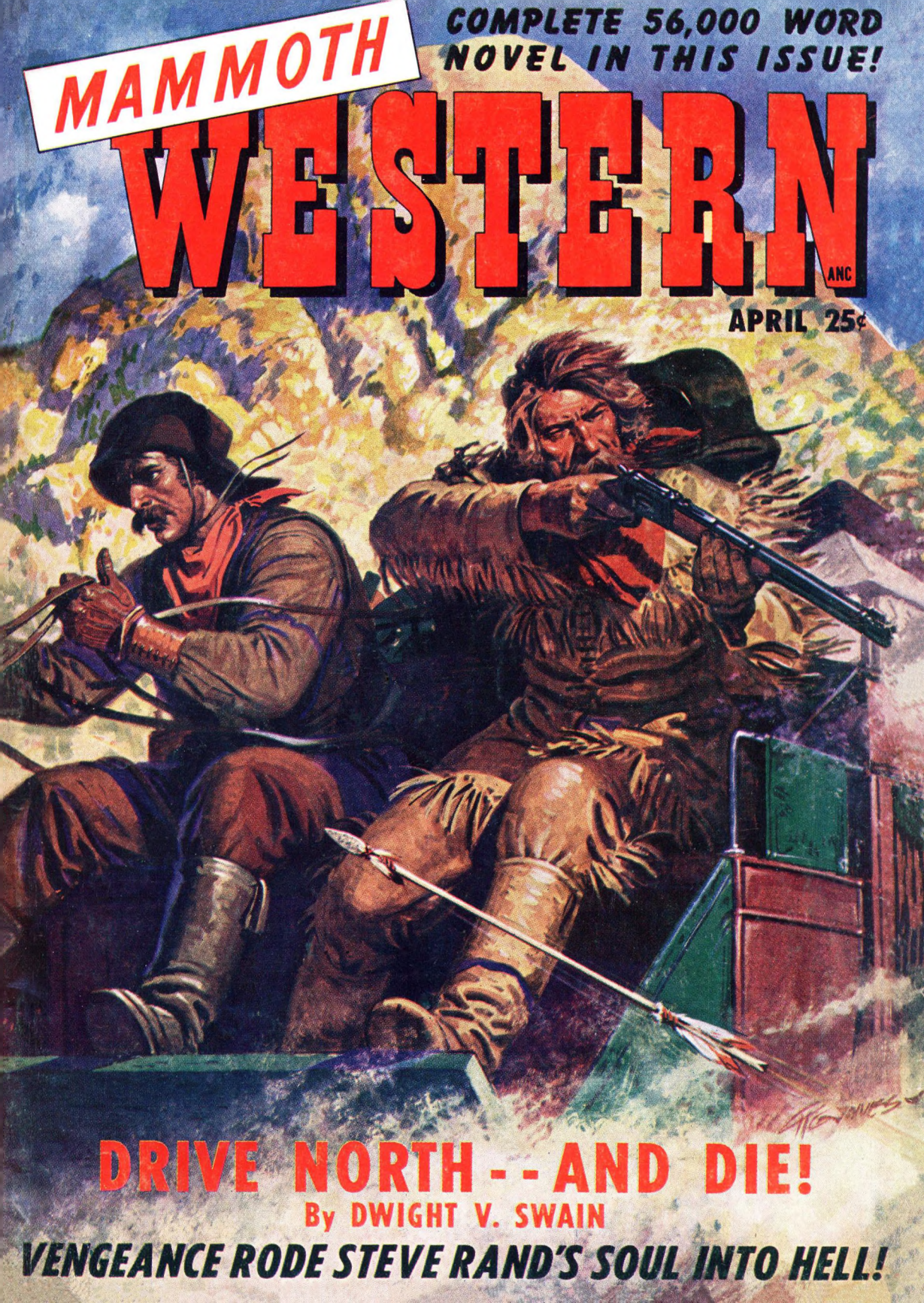
MAMMOTH
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By DWIGHT V. SWAIN
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MAMMOTH WESTERN

APRIL 1949

All Features Complete

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VOLUME 5 **NUMBER 4**

All Stories Complete

Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from "Drive North—And Die!"

YOU'VE been hammering at the bunkhouse door for a new novel length story for the past couple of months, so we sent our best hands out on the editorial range to see what was worth cutting out for your reading pleasure. Well, you'll find the result of that search starting on page 58 of this issue. The title: "Drive North—And Die!" The author: Dwight V. Swain, one of the best in the field, and certainly with this novel he'll rank even higher on your favorite list. What's the story all about? Well, you'd probably want to string our editorial necks to the nearest tree if we gave away the plot on this yarn, so all we'll tell you ahead of time is that you're in for some of the fastest, action-packed, hell-raising stories of the year. After you've finished reading it we'll guarantee you'll be out of breath and gasping loudly for more! (And while we're on the subject, how do you like the swell cover that artist Bob Jones painted around the story?) So now you can settle down beside the corral and start enjoying yourself. . . .

NOW that we've whetted your appetite with a book-length novel, we'll tell you about the lead story in this issue. You'll find it on page 8, "The Golden Scalp," by a newcomer to the field, Robert Eggert Lee. But we'd like to say here and now that Bob sure has shown that he can hold his own with the most skilled writers MW has ever presented. The story has everything you can ask for, fast action, plenty of suspense, and a carload of good human interest. What more can you ask for? Not much, we'll bet!

NEXT comes an old-time favorite of yours (and ours), Paul W. Fairman. He returns this month with a swell short entitled, "A Grave To Call My Own." And if you don't think the title is prophetic of what takes place in the story, you're wrong! You'll meet some of the toughest killers you've ever read about, and a town that is even tougher than the people in it! You could always find a job there—digging graves! And the worst part was that you never knew if the grave you were digging was somebody else's or your own! Guess that should be enough to tell you that Paul did a really neat job. So you can take over now yourself.

WE'RE presenting another new writer this issue. A talented lad named Mallory Storm. And the story he wrote for MW, "God Comes To Black Hagerty." This is the tale of a tough man who feared nobody, and went out of his way to prove just how tough he was. Well, he didn't have to try very hard to prove it. One look at him and you started running the other way! But then one day something happened to Black Hagerty that—oops! Hold that cayuse back! We durn near gave away the swell twist that Storm put in the story. But at least we've said enough to let you know that again you're in for some real pleasant reading. And while we're talking about new writers, have you noticed how your favorite magazine has been uncovering them lately? We're looking mighty hard to find the best stories in the field for you, and while we're at it we're discovering some mighty fine new writers. Along these lines take a look at the next yarn we're going to tell you about—for it too is by a new writer!

"CALICO JONES Rides By" is the title of the story, and the author's name is F. W. Paul. This is a humorous short that will have you laughing from the first page on. You'll meet a cowhand who thought he knew just about everything there was to know about being a mechanic. And the funny part was he had never seen an automobile! You think maybe that isn't the start of an hilarious story—well guess again. And if you can't wait to find out for yourself, turn to page 48 and start reading. . . .

FINISHING up this month's roundup is top favorite Alexander Blade. Alex, who has been turning out some mighty fine stories lately as you no doubt have noticed, turns in a really fine yarn this issue to sort of put the whipped cream on the dessert. "Trouble, Here I Come" is the story of a wild town where things looked peaceful-like, but where appearances sure were deceiving! As a matter of fact, a stranger in Crow's Crossing had to spend most of his time trying to keep out of trouble, let alone look for it! So with that for a teaser we'll let you get to the story and find out what happened. . . .

WHICH brings us to the end of this month's selection. And from where we're sitting, it's one of the best in a long time! You think we can't beat it? Well, just watch for next month's issue. We'll be seeing you then.....*Rap*

THE CAMEL EXPERIMENT

★ By FRANCES YERXA ★

A plan to replace our domestic burro—that nearly succeeded!

IF RAILWAYS and automobiles had not come along to revolutionize transportation in this country, camel caravans would probably now be a common sight in the arid regions of our West. An experiment was made with camels, during the nineteenth century, and it was found that the animals adapted very well to conditions here.

The idea of bringing camels to the United States is credited to Jefferson Davis, who in 1855 was Secretary of War. Under the auspices of the War Department, a man was sent abroad to purchase a herd of camels to be used in government operations in the deserts of the Southwest.

The first difficulties arose when this agent learned from sad experience that the camel dealers of the Near East knew all the tricks of Yankee horse traders, and a good many of their own. However, he finally managed to acquire thirty-four fine camels.

He also hired two expert drivers, whom he brought to Texas with the camels. He would have done better to have hired several more men who were familiar with camels, because the handling of the beasts proved to be the biggest drawback to the success of the experiment. The two men who came over with the camels were the only ones who could ride them for any length of time without falling off, or becoming ill from the peculiar rolling motion. Had the importation of camels into this country been later entered into seriously, it would have been necessary to bring in Arabs or others familiar with these beasts, or, more feasibly, have interested Americans in learning to handle, train and care for the animals.

Upon the arrival of the camels in Texas (their number, incidentally, augmented by the birth of several baby camels enroute), several of them were sent with a road survey expedition through Arizona.

The soldiers who had to deal with them quickly learned to hate them. The men were used to army mules, which had to be treated on occasion with whip and forceful words. The camels proved to be more temperamental, and resented such inconsiderate treatment. Where a mule would buckle down to business after a beating had shown him who was master, a camel was apt to retaliate peevishly by biting a hole in the man who had beaten him. Soldiers and camels soon came to resent each other much. This resulted in several picket lines being loosed in the night, so that the camels could escape into the desert.

There were other disadvantages. While the camels were very efficient on desert sands, rocky stretches caused their feet to become very tender, and slowed their progress considerably. Also, horses, burros and mules seemed to be terror-stricken at the sight of a camel, and this caused a great deal of trouble. If the camels had continued to be used, familiarity between the animals would no doubt soon have eliminated this trouble.

On the credit side for the camels, this first journey in the United States with the hump-backed animals as beasts of burden, left the more far-seeing men of the expedition very enthusiastic as to the future of the camel on American deserts. They could carry great loads easily, and were quite tractable if properly handled. A strong factor in their favor was that they seemed to be able to find food anywhere. They liked mesquite beans and leaves, and grass was not at all essential. And, of course, they were already famous for being able to go long distances without water. The tropical heat of the desert seemed to bother them not at all.

The camels were used for several years, and probably would have become a permanent asset had their use been developed. The Civil War occurred, however, and the War Department had too much on its hands in the East to bother with experimental enterprises in the Southwest. The beasts were sold at auction, and went into private hands. They were taken to Nevada, and later to Arizona. The men who had to handle them were afraid of them, and did not know how to care for them properly. When their owner died, the remaining beasts were turned loose on the desert.

For many years these camels and their descendants roamed the sun-baked plains of the Southwest. Travellers of those areas grew to loathe them heartily, for the sight of one in the distance would invariably terrify the mule teams and inspire them to sudden flight, creating chaos among the wagons loaded with merchandise, to which the mules were attached. Teamsters shot the camels whenever possible, and soon only a remnant were left, and these kept to the most sequestered spots of the desert.

From these early experiments in using camels in this country, it is certain that they could easily have been made an important part of the transportation facilities of the West, had their use been properly developed, and had not the machine age come when it did. The difficulties encountered, chief of which were their handling, and accustoming other animals to them, were obstacles that could have been easily overcome.

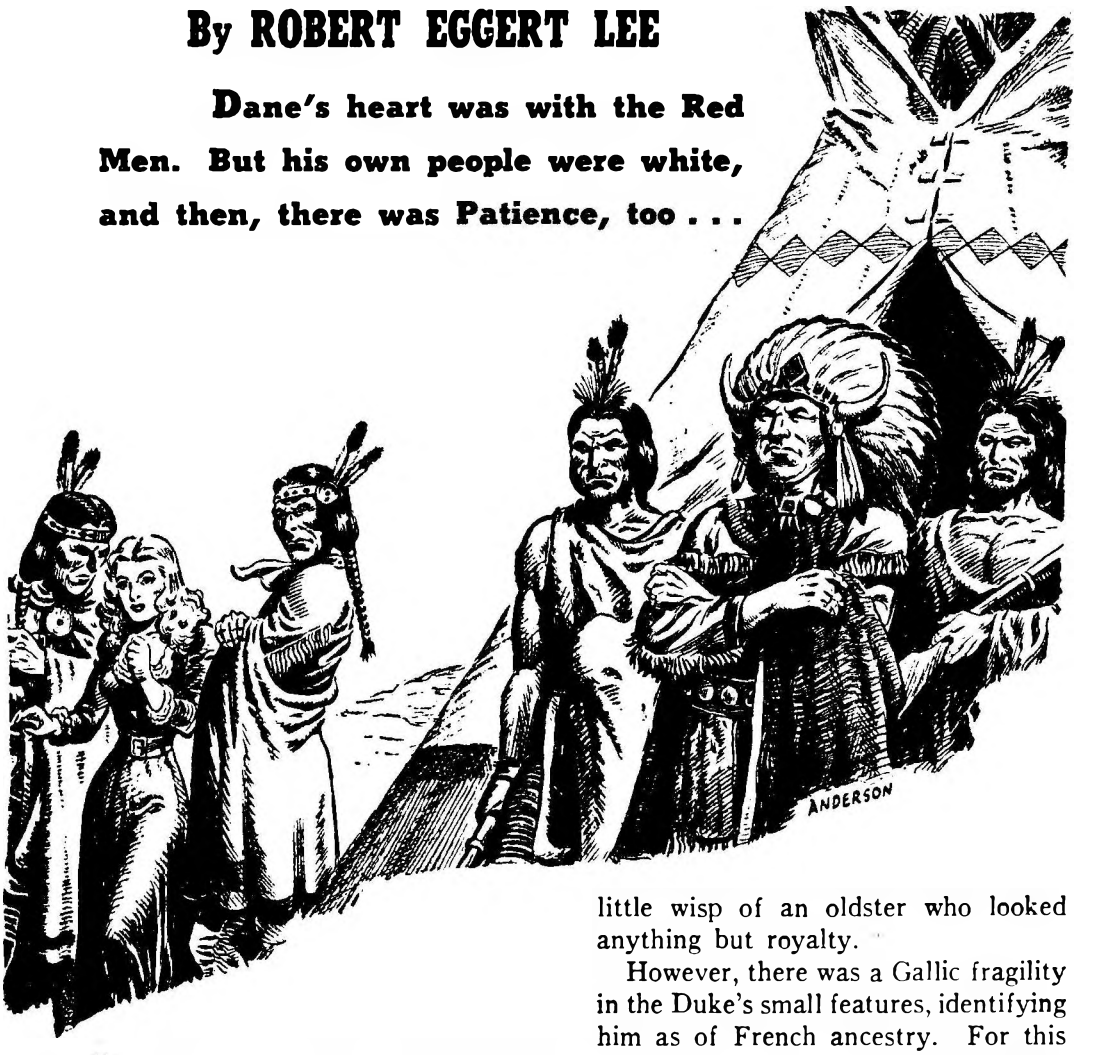
* * *

The Golden Scalp

Spotted Horse drove into him with mad fury . . . Dane barely had time to snatch out his own knife

By ROBERT EGGERT LEE

Dane's heart was with the Red Men. But his own people were white, and then, there was Patience, too . . .



"IT'LL be a stubborn outfit to lick," the Duke said. "Otherwise they wouldn't be heading for Bigfoot Pass. They were warned to swing south back at the fort."

"You're probably right," Cory Dane replied. "But all scalps are alike to the Sioux—stubborn or otherwise."

The two men pulled up their horses and watched the string of tiny, crawling objects far below them.

Cory Dane was a lean young man with perpetually squinted blue eyes and thick, sand colored hair. He was in sharp contrast to the Duke, a spindling little wisp of an oldster who looked anything but royalty.

However, there was a Gallic fragility in the Duke's small features, identifying him as of French ancestry. For this vague reason, he had acquired his title. His real name was unknown.

Dane, on the other hand, was obviously a native product. He had been born in a Shoshone tepee of a white mother after a wagon train had been swept to destruction in the rapids of the upper Missouri. The Shoshone had been benefactors rather than captors. They had managed to fish three survivors from the mad Missouri, shaking their heads the while at the assininity of the attempted crossing. When Dane's mother had died, in the infant's sixth month, a stone-faced squaw had taken

Dane in and given him a strip of aged buffalo meat to gnaw.

This should have killed him, but it didn't. Instead he waxed fat and happy among his stolid foster people.

Six dreamy summers passed before the men of a cavalry column yanked the bewildered child from the clutches of the "ignorant" savages and placed him with God-fearing people at the eastern edge of the great plains.

At seventeen Dane had furthered the extinction of the buffalo by several thousand units. In his eighteenth year, during a scouting turn for the army, he killed a single marauding Apache after which, for some strange reason, he bent his head toward the dust of the prairie, and wept.

Thus he became a man.

Now, uncounted years having passed, he sat astride his horse, high on the east shoulder of Blackhead Butte, and watched a wagon train creep slowly toward massacre and destruction.

"We better go down," he said, briefly.

The entire train had finally come in sight, a crawling snake of some fifty vertebrae. It found an easy path along the narrow valley floor. An easy path but a deadly one.

As the two scouts approached, the specks turned from ants to bugs and finally into wagons. Cory Dane could tell, now, that it was a heads-up outfit. The wagons were in good repair, the canvas snowy and free from rents. The oxen fat and shiny.

As the scouts pounded across the hard flats at the foot of the incline, the lead wagon drew to a halt. Gradually the inertia extended itself to the far rear, and the whole train was motionless.

A group of horsemen had congregated near the lead wagon. They waited in a mulling of dust until Dane and the Duke had pulled up.

Dane raised his right hand high in greeting.

"Oregon?" he called out.

A great bearded man on a sweating sorrel seemed to be in command.

"Over the backbone anyhow," he said. "We may split later on."

Some of the horses milled about, generating unrest in the others.

"Just came over ourselves. I'm Cory Dane. This is the Duke. We might hand you a little advice."

Dane spoke casually, and waited. Giving out unwanted advice could be a terrific waste of time.

THE big leader lifted a hat off a head of bushy hair.

"I'm Luke Stafford. Duly elected high muck-amuck o' this pilgrimage. Suppose you want to tell us 'bout warrin' Sioux?"

"We could do that," the Duke answered. "But maybe you wouldn't want to listen."

The flashing of the sun upon something, pulled Dane's eyes toward the lead wagon. The "something" proved to be a girl's hair. The girl wore a bonnet that had been pushed back off the golden mass of braids bound around her head. She had climbed from the interior of the wagon and was now following the proceedings with marked interest from the front seat. She had a freshness about her, a clearness of eye and complexion, that filled Dane with uneasiness and made him turn his gaze away.

"It's right neighborly o' you to be concerned 'bout our welfare and don't think we ain't grateful, but we got all the gossip 'bout the Sioux back at the fort."

Dane became aware of the fact that this last was being explained by the leader, Stafford. He gave the man his undivided attention.

"We talked it all over amongst us and then we took a vote. Majority rules, you know. We decided the talk was a mite over-exaggerated and we'd cut off two weeks and a lot o' sunburn by usin' the direct route."

"Ah, democracy—she is wonderful," muttered the Duke, under his breath. "Maybe the Sioux—they take a vote too?"

"You're wrong about the talk being exaggerated," Dane said. "We passed some wagons this morning early—what was left of them."

"Uh-huh," the Duke added. "Them Sioux devils overlooked a spade, so we dug nine graves. Took us most of the morning."

"Prob'ly an unprepared outfit," Stafford said, easily. "We got seventy-five good men in this train and all well armed. I don't think any red brothers'll be hankerin' for a taste o' our lead."

"I'm afraid you don't quite understand," Dane pursued. "It isn't just a pocketful of marauders we're talking about. It's a nation at war. Four thousand braves under Black Eagle and every one of them yearning for a white scalp. This outfit here? They'd just ride it down."

A second member of the wagon group spoke up. He was a lean, scholarly looking man with a clean shaven face. A cynical smile.

"Sometimes I think you—ah—natives like to make things difficult for us newcomers. Would you rather we stayed back east?"

Dane flushed slightly and shrugged, but the Duke spoke up.

"You got us in the wrong slot, Mister. But you're right about the natives wanting to make it difficult, only they go further than that. They intend to make it downright impossible." The Duke turned to Dane. "Let's get going, son." He whirled his spotted pony. "And luck to you pilgrims. You'll need it."

Dane frowned and held his gaze on Stafford.

"Let me put it again," he said. "And straight. You've got a train-load of women and children. And you're heading flush into four thousand Sioux bowstrings."

"With all our guns loaded," Stafford came back.

The girl's voice cut in clearly.

"Maybe you two men would like to stay with us for protection. I'm sure you'd be welcome."

Dane brought his gaze full upon her. He felt no uneasiness now. There was a minute of heavy silence. Then Dane said, "Maybe we would, ma'am. Maybe we'd like to do just that."

"You're crazy, son," the Duke snapped. "We just spent two days swinging around the damn Sioux. What for we want to ride right back into the middle of them?"

TWENTY minutes later the Duke was still grumbling. Nonetheless, he'd gone through with the about-face and was riding back in the direction he'd come. He posted himself left fore of the train and rode glumly back toward the trouble he and Dane had spent two days in circumventing.

"Maybe," he observed, "this is as good a year to die as any."

Dane rode ahead of the lead wagon with Stafford and the smooth-faced man. The sun was hot and the going was flat and clear.

"This is Squire Davis," Stafford said. "He'll teach a school we'll set up for our young uns. We got a wagon load o' books."

"Let's hope your young ones live to read them," Dane said.

After that they rode in silence.

The night's stop proved uneventful. Dane foraged to the north and brought back a small cinnamon bear. He'd have ridden the beast down and killed it with his knife to save the sound of a shot. This precaution would have been pointless, however, because from several directions came the crack of rifles; the guns of other wagon-train hunters happily courting disaster.

As he moved toward camp, all Dane's instincts were screaming at him—reviling him. They urged him to back quietly out of this trap, and then to cut and run. He rode doggedly on, refusing to admit even to himself that golden hair braided and wound around a girl's head was the magnet toward which he traveled.

Knowledge came to the aid of instinct to rave and screech and put pimples on Dane's skin. Knowledge that told him what was happening; that, in this deserted and lonely valley, every movement of the white pilgrims was being observed and recorded in the cold minds of Sioux scouts.

Incongruously, there came into his thoughts a passage he'd once read in a Bible. The passage had stated roughly that not a sparrow fell without the silent knowledge of God.

There was a simile here in this nameless valley. Not a white man or woman took five steps without the silent knowledge of the Sioux.

As darkness came, the wagons were thrown into a circle with the oxen grazing inside. This brought a feeling of relief to Dane. He'd begun to wonder if these people were going to take even this precaution.

Stars came out and campfires winked cheerfully at any dangers lurking beyond range of their light.

Dane and the Duke ate bear steaks at the board of Stafford's lead wagon. They were prepared skillfully by Stafford's small, bustling wife and she of the golden braids, whom Dane had learned was Patience Stafford. During the meal, Dane's impressions were unclear and disjointed.

The only clear mental picture he had was that of Patience' yellow braids hanging from the bonnet of a proud Sioux warrior. He kept his eyes away from the girl, but he could feel hers examining him most frankly; taking in his soft leather clothing and the lean, wide-shouldered body; the body which, to Dane felt ungainly and clumsy beyond description.

THE meal finished, Dane drifted away into the darkness beyond the wagon circle. He was not alone. He was accompanied by two Colts, an efficient Winchester and a Bowie knife. With these companions to furnish comfort and solace, he found a likely spot in a cluster of large rocks.

In a few moments a shadow floated close enough to identify itself as the Duke. The Duke had stopped being restless and had turned fatalistic.

"Those damned idiots out there," he muttered. "Tomorrow they'll be crowding the pearly gates."

He took Dane's silence for agreement.

"But what I can't figure," he added, "is why we have to go with them. I don't hanker to know what Heaven's like."

The train was on the move, the following morning, with the rise of sun. Oxen lowed, women sang snatches of trans-Mississippi songs, and cooing babies played with their toes.

Blackhead Butte had moved far rearward, but other hills and buttes and craggy ridges had taken its place. And through this rough country stretched a path, seemingly provided by thoughtful Nature.

When the sun had climbed halfway toward noon, the Duke rode up beside Dane.

"There's at least two Indians in those rocks forward to the left," he said, casually.

Dane examined the indicated terrain, as the scholarly-looking Davis, who had overheard the Duke's words, jerked his horse to a standstill.

"Old wives' tales!" he spat out.

The Duke regarded him with sudden wonder.

"All we've heard since we crossed the Mississippi has been Indians—Indians—Indians. Yet the only ones we've seen have been a few blanketed loafers at the fort and the trading posts. I'll bet my saddle there isn't an Indian within fifty miles of us."

With that he spurred his horse and thundered off toward the rocks of which the Duke had spoken.

"Come back here you fool!" Dane called, and leaned forward on his horse, but the Duke held out a restraining hand.

"He won't find anything. Ever see a Sioux scout get himself boxed in? All there'll be is tracks and he won't even see them. He's got his head too far in the clouds."

THEY watched the figure of Squire Davis disappear beyond the rocks. Behind them the wagon train lumbered on and Stafford reined up beside the two scouts.

"Where's Davis off to?"

"He's checking on some Sioux the Duke spotted beyond those boulders."

Stafford's eyes twinkled in the framework of his brown beard. "Trying to prove to you men that there's no bogeys lurkin' hereabouts, eh?"

"Something like that," Dane returned, absently. He stared hard at the rocks. Davis should be coming back by now. His horse should be coming into sight around the patch.

But no horse came. The wagons eased to a halt behind them and a group began forming. Various and sundry pilgrims wanted to know what the matter was.

"Davis is playin' hide and seek," Stafford said, but there was a noticeable lack of levity in his voice.

"You stay here," Dane muttered suddenly to the Duke. The Duke scowled, but obeyed. He sat watching Dane pound off toward the now ominous boulders.

"Can't blame 'em in a way," he muttered. "Can't expect folks to believe something they can't see. To most of 'em an Indian is nothing but a picture in some book."

A few minutes later Dane reappeared around the edge of the boulder patch. He was leading two horses—his own and Davis'. Across the back of Davis' horse lay a blanket covered object. The object could have been an over-long sack of flour, but all the watchers knew that it wasn't.

A dozen hands helped Dane to ease the body of Davis to the ground.

"Send the women back to the wagons," Dane directed. His face was stiff, expressionless.

Stafford came forward and raised the blanket. His hand jerked convulsively and the blanket fell back over the ripped and mutilated body. Stafford's rich tan turned to a wan gray.

"I—I thought they just scalped their victims," he said.

Dane was speaking to the Duke in a low voice.

"There was four of them. Knocked him off with a rock, likely. He probably never knew what hit him."

The women had been herded back toward the wagon—all except Patience Stafford. She pushed past the restrain-

ing arm of her father. "We are sharing the risks of this crossing," she said. "We have a right to know the facts."

"Maybe she's right, Mr. Stafford," Dane said, slowly. "They all might as well know this isn't a picnic we're on."

HE WATCHED the slim girl raise the edge of the blanket, watched her closely, and his admiration deepened. Her hand didn't falter as had that of her father. Her soft young face paled as her eyes read details of the horror perpetrated upon the unwary Davis. He came close, to help her rise.

But she needed no help. She turned and walked away, toward the wagons, her head high, her step firm.

Hard faced men were shouting now, milling in a circle, preparing to move on the rock patch.

Dane spoke to the dazed Stafford.

"You're the leader of this outfit. Tell them to stop this foolishness. Tell them to put Davis in a wagon and get the train moving."

Stafford stared in disbelief.

"Why, man! We've been attacked. We've got to fight it out here!"

"Don't be a fool. You haven't seen an attack yet."

There was a flicker of cold amusement in the Duke's eyes as he added his words.

"Fight when you're strung out over a half mile? Issue rifles to the toddlers and the babies? Use your silly head, man!"

"Get moving and quick!" Dane snapped. "The Sioux never attack at high noon. They come at dawn. But if your men go kiting off in fourteen directions, Black Eagle might make an exception. The Sioux like to come onto a wagon train and find nothing but women and children."

Stafford went through a period of indecision, his face working. Then he yelled, "Into your places! Put Davis' body in a wagon. Get moving! Get moving!"

There was some dissension; some argument to the contrary, but Stafford shouted it down and soon the wagons were rolling forward.

The holiday mood of the pilgrims had vanished like a mist at sunrise. There was a heavy, sombre atmosphere permeating the length of the train. The death of Davis had jarred them loose from their rosy dreams.

One of their party had been torn and mutilated by phantoms—by nonexistent fiends in a matter of seconds. They had seen nothing nor had they heard anything—yet death sat grinning on their trail.

As the sun passed over them and slid down the sky, the narrow valley widened, and by camp-time, they were in relatively flat country with the vanguard of the Rockies looming eight days to the west.

The Duke, riding beside Dane said, "Lucky it ain't Pawnees we're dealing with. Pawnees would have cut us to pieces in that narrow gorge."

Dane agreed with a nod of his head. He and the Duke knew Indians as accountants know figures. The different tribes had individual likes and dislikes relative to both war and peace. The Pawnees were raiders—never fighters. They struck at the helpless and vanished like puffs of smoke. They had not the stomach for combat as did their terrible cousin, the Apache. Backed against a wall, a Pawnee would cringe, while an Apache brave, for all his cruelty and ferocity, would die by his own hand.

But of all the tribes, Dane thought the Sioux to be most worthy of respect. They were a proud nation and they fought in the open, giving no quarter and asking none.

DANE swung his pony over toward the wagon train and pulled up beside the tight-faced Stafford.

"Better make it a close circle tonight," he said. "They'll probably strike early in the morning."

Stafford's nerves were raw. An ex-blacksmith from Illinois, he had been chosen leader because of his popularity and great amiable bulk. He'd appreciated the honor, but was only now realizing the grim responsibility with which he'd also been vested.

"Great God!" Stafford yelled. "Where are they? What kind o' skulkin' swine are they to fight like this? Why don't they come out in the open like men?"

"They will," Dane said, quietly. "I'm going to do a little looking around. I'll be back."

Dane and the Duke rode off to the north side by side. They traveled in silence, moving toward a low ridge some five miles away.

Arriving at their destination they threaded a way between jagged lava faults until they reached a place where the ridge began losing form. Now they traveled with caution. Soon they stopped.

Below them stretched a wide, flat plain full of color, brilliance and activity.

"They haven't moved a foot," the Duke observed.

Dane stared down at the scene. There was little change from the time he and the Duke had last seen it. Thousands of naked Indians in clusters; ponies on tethers or milling in the natural enclosures where the plain joined the lava ridges encircling it. Splashes of bright color on gaudy war bonnets. And an almost complete lack of living accommodations.

None of the signs of permanent habitation were here. No tepees save one, a large brilliantly colored domicile in which Black Eagle would be seated—stern-visaged.

Even now, Dane thought, the great Sioux warrior might be listening to the reports of his scouts; might be learning that, at last, the wagon train was in the open, waiting to feel the savage brunt of fire arrow and tomahawk.

But another factor indicated that the news was already in. There was a certain restlessness in the vast picture—an atmosphere sensed by the experienced Dane rather than seen. The braves, he decided, were even now aware of what the following dawn would bring.

The Duke's pony stirred nervously. "We could move on," the little scout said, wistfully. "We could slide out of here and put a lot of distance behind us by morning."

Dane nodded. "Good idea."

"What?"

"If you'd hike right now."

"Oh," the Duke replied, sadly. "Well, let's be getting back."

BACK at the wagon camp, Dane drew Stafford aside.

"No cattle in the circle tonight," he said. It was strange how he'd assumed command by directing the actions of Stafford. And even stranger how the big leader took the commands almost without question. This time, however, he was doubtful.

"But our oxen," he said. "We can't move without them."

"There'll be fire and gun-shots and screaming before we move on," Dane said. "With Sioux on one side and a herd of stampeding oxen on the other, we'd sure be through. Drive them out a half mile and leave them."

There was surprisingly little grumbling at this order. Nor were there many objections to Dane's demand for fires out after dusk.

Gradually, night deepened. For a time there was a sickle-moon. Then clouds came to bring complete blackness.

Dane selected a spot beneath the Stafford wagon. Here he stretched out his blanket and laid his guns carefully within reach. The Duke was further on around the arc of the circle, similarly bedded down.

For a time Dane sat cross-legged, staring out into the darkness. In a way he resented the urge that held him in this death trap. What good, he asked himself, was knowledge, years of experience, if you came at last into a slaughter pen with a mob of addle-pated pilgrims. He was aware, the while, of a form moving toward him from within the wagon circle. Then a hand touched his arm and a voice said;

"It's self-sacrificing of you and your partner to stay with us."

It was the soft voice of Patience Stafford and there was a senseless trembling inside Dane's chest.

"It's all right," he said, gruffly. "We like it here."

"Those beasts," she said with sudden heat. "I wish every murdering savage was dead and underground!"

The fluttering inside Dane stopped instantly.

"You're wrong, Miss Stafford. They aren't bad people. Not bad at all."

He heard her sharp intake of breath.

"Why how can you say that? You saw how they murdered poor Squire Davis!"

"Yes, I saw that. And I've seen a lot more in my lifetime. But most of the Indian's brutality was learned from the white man. I saw Davis, but I've also seen Indian squaws torn and mutilated beyond description. I've seen red men mowed down in cold blood even when they came in friendship. It never occurred to an Indian to break his word until he saw it done by the white man. It was beyond his code to torture and slaughter indiscriminately until the white man taught him how."

"Why you're—you're little better than—"

"The white man came here as an invader," Dane went on. "For that reason alone, he deserved no mercy from the Indian, and yet the Indian welcomed him. The Indian made treaties with the white man, openly deeding him vast stretches of land to which, from the Indian's point of view, he had no right. Then the white man broke those treaties and cut Indians to pieces at every opportunity."

PATIENCE STAFFORD had drawn back slightly, but she remained silent.

"There are a few thousand Indians waiting to kill us in the morning. They hate us—certainly. They feel about us exactly the way we'd feel about an invader into our *land.*"

"You sound like—an Indian yourself," she accused.

"I lived with them when I was a child. I think I know them as well as any white man could. I have great respect for them."

"Then why are you here? Why aren't you out there with them, waiting to kill us?"

There was a minute of silence before Dane replied.

"That was a decision I made a long time ago," he said. "When I got old enough to reason, I knew that a man had to be all one thing or all another. He couldn't be half and half. So I'm here because I'm a white man and I cling to my own people. I'm helping my own people take a land to which they have no moral right. But they're my people and that's that."

His voice turned suddenly brusk.

"Why don't you go about your business? Why don't you go to bed? You may not have another chance for—a long time."

Without a word, Patience Stafford faded back into the thick darkness and was gone. Dane sat motionless for a while. Then he stretched out on his blanket, his eyes open and staring upward toward the floor of the big Conestega. After long hours, he fell into a hair-trigger sleep.

THE attack came with the first fingers of dawn. It began with a sound like that of an approaching storm—thousands of hoofbeats pounding the hard prairie. Thunder—broadening and deepening. Then came the storm—a rain of hissing arrows—timed to the chilling war-cry of the Sioux.

The naked hoard moved in from the north, swerved, and formed an outer circle around the beleaguered wagons—a whirling ring of fury and flying death. There were a few rifles among the attackers, but their main weapon was the short-bow, from which came the monotonous spat—spat—spat of feathered death.

Dane crouched inside one wheel of the big wagon. From here he sent out a methodical stream of lead—each pellet knocking a shadow from atop a larger shadow. He was a machine, a thing without nerves. He could have been shooting hides out of a herd of buffalo.

Now he crawled from beneath the wagon and sought the leader, Stafford. He found the man crouched beside a wagon pouring shots into the Sioux.

"Put five men on the wet sacks," Dane yelled. "We got to beat out fires!"

As he spoke a burning arrow fantailed in and burrowed its stone head through a wagon-side. Dane jerked it away and the shaft snapped. He stamped out the fire and pushed Stafford back from his post.

"Get going," Dane said, sharply.

Swiftly, Dane judged the progress of the battle. He gave his attention to the south half of the circle. The Duke was covering the north half.

There was discordant screaming now. Quick shrieks of agony told Dane that death was visiting from all sides. The wet-sack squad was doing a good job, lashing out fires as quickly as they started. But, in so doing, the men exposed themselves and soon others would have to take up the task.

Dane crawled under a wagon and turned his Winchester over to a pair of busy pilgrims. Under another wagon, Dane found a man staring out at the Sioux, a rifle frozen in his hands. The man turned a terror stricken face to Dane.

"What'll we do?" he muttered in monotonous rhythm. "What'll we do—what'll we do?"

Dane slapped him across the mouth sharply.

"There's nothing to do but keep firing! They'll back away soon. This is only the first sally." The man raised his gun and began firing into the whirling mass.

DANE, armed with two Colts and a knife, went on patrol duty, just as the Duke was doing on the other half of the circle. His self-appointed job was to keep the more fanatical of the Sioux braves from reaching the shelter of the wagons. Once inside, a handful of Sioux could wreak horrible slaughter and turn the tide of battle.

Dane crouched in an opening, watching for break-aways. These came with regularity. With a shout a single Sioux, or perhaps a pair would turn and head directly for the wagons. To these

braves, Dane's Colts barked sharp objection. Dane made every effort to stop them as soon as their move became apparent. When he could drop them close to their own circle, the more cautious of the red brotherhood took note and continued to circle in comparative safety.

As the battle progressed, Dane was happily surprised at the mettle of the pilgrims. Their guns were taking a ghastly toll among the savages. Here and there the Sioux were forced off their path by heaps of fallen horses and dead and dying Indians.

A flaming arrow sizzled past Dane's head and jammed, quivering into the flank of a horse. Dane shot the animal and hurried on. A hundred feet beyond, he stopped to help a woman pull the body of a man from beneath a wagon. The woman looked up. It was Patience Stafford. There was anger in her eyes.

"Why aren't you out there helping *them?*" she said, bitterly.

Dane, cold faced, pushed her roughly from the body.

"You're wasting time," he snarled. "This man is dead. Go and find some guns that need loading."

She staggered away, breathing heavily and Dane cursed himself, cursed deep in his throat.

Back by the lead wagon, Dane found Stafford prone behind a wheel, firing doggedly into the massed savages. From Stafford's thigh protruded an arrow, buried four inches in the flesh. Stafford paid no attention to it.

"Pull that out and tie up your leg," Dane said. "I'll take your gun."

Stafford rolled over. Stoically, he pushed the arrow on through his leg and snapped it in two. As he bound the wound with a handkerchief, Dane knocked three Sioux off their horses and into the laps of their ancestors. Then Stafford reached for the gun. Stafford was entirely silent, but his mouth was twisted into a terrible grin.

"Where is Patience and my wife?"

"Your wife is with the children. Patience is loading guns."

DANE moved away, slipping shells into his right-hand Colt. He wondered how the Duke was faring.

Then he forgot the Duke and killed two braves who had broken from the pack and were driving toward the wagons. But this time there was another —a third attacker Dane couldn't stop.

He brought the Indian's pony down screaming with a slug in its chest, but a painted face loomed large and Dane felt the jolt of a hard body.

His knife arm came around instinctively to thud a Bowie into the savage's body. The Indian collapsed with a screech, his legs working in agony. Dane rolled him over. He jerked at his knife but it refused to give. Buried in a split breast bone, it was wedged tight.

Dane put a foot on the Indian's chest and jerked. The knife came away. It gave just in time to be thrown squarely into the throat of another warrior. The knife turned a yell of triumph into a death gurgle. Dane crawled ten feet. As he again retrieved his blade, the redman's life blood bubbled over his hand.

Swiftly Dane loaded his Colts, taking swift survey the while. To his left, a wagon burned firecely. Behind him a man, gone suddenly berserk, was beating the ground with a rifle-butt. Here and there, women bent over still forms. They tore petticoats and cut away bloody clothing.

Within the wagon circle, there was every appearance of defeat. Yet the rifles still coughed. And out beyond, in the light of morning, Indians fired their last arrows and pitched head first to the ground.

Then, quite suddenly, Dane knew. He

knew just as did the hard riding braves of Chief Black Eagle—the going was too tough. The ranks of the red men were thinning too fast. The Sioux were willing to pay a reasonable price for this wagon train. But the cost, in dead braves, was running far too high.

As though by some telegraphic order, the outer circle of attack swung out of range, back across the prairie.

At this moment, Dane felt a quick, stunning weight against his skull. His knees weakened. There was dust in his face and his nostrils. Then he knew no more.

WHEN consciousness returned, Dane was aware of a sharp pain in his head. He opened his eyes and found Mrs. Stafford looking down at him. She was crying. Stafford stood nearby, a dazed look on his face. He came close to Dane and kneeled down.

"A spent ball," he said. "You got it right on the temple."

"Looks like they've drawn back." Around him, Dane could see the ruin of what had been a fine new wagon train. Blanket covered bodies gave silent witness of the slaughter.

"Where's the Duke?" Dane asked.

Both Stafford and his wife seemed not to hear. Their minds appeared numbed as though by horror.

"The Duke! Where is he?"

"Dead," Stafford replied, dully. "Four arrows. They got her. They took her away."

"What are you talking about?"

"*Dragged* her away," Mrs. Stafford said.

"Talk sense. Who?"

"Patience." Stafford's lips worked soundlessly. Then he said, "A big painted savage drove in close to our wagon. He got hold of Patience and took her away."

Mrs. Stafford's eyes were staring.

"He dragged her—pulled her along the ground by—her hair."

A sickness swept over Dane. He sat up, braced himself with his arms until the dizziness passed. Slowly he got erect and felt life sweep back into his body.

Patience in the hands of the Sioux! The Duke dead from Sioux arrows!

DANE walked around the wagon and looked out over the prairie. There were no Indians in sight. He crossed the wagon circle and scanned the plain to the north.

Odd, he thought. The Sioux were in definite retreat. They were going back as they had come. They were leaving a helpless wagon train, ripe for the taking.

Dane sought an answer to this. The only logical one lay spread over the prairie. Dead savages, prone horses. The order to retreat had obviously come from Black Eagle himself. It was an error in judgment, but an order nonetheless. There had been about five hundred braves in the attack, Dane estimated. Evidently that was as large a force as Black Eagle would allocate to a relatively unimportant sorty.

The wily Sioux Chief knew what lay in the future; grim and decisive battle with the United States army. He would surely be challenged by the Great White Father and, to meet that challenge, he needed braves far more than he needed a victory over a wagon train. That was the only answer. Otherwise the entire striking force of Black Eagle would have beaten the wagon train into the ground.

Dane went back to the Stafford wagon. He didn't seek out the body of the Duke. The Duke was dead. In times like these all thought must be for the living.

Dane found Mrs. Stafford crumpled

to the ground. She was weeping quietly. Dane bent over and lifted her.

"I'm going after Patience, Mrs. Stafford," he said.

The woman raised her head.

"Going—after her?"

"Yes." He turned away.

Five minutes later she stared mutely after him as he rode out of the camp.

DANE rode into the Sioux stronghold entirely unarmed except for a knife at his belt. He sat erect in his saddle, eyes straight ahead. To all appearances, he was entirely unaware of the hostility hemming him in.

But his mind was poised on tiptoe. As he rode, he coldly measured the odds. His chances of reaching Black Eagle hinged entirely upon the novelty of his maneuver; upon surprise.

Around him were thousands of Sioux warriors, held in check only by curiosity, by a trifle of uncertainty. An enemy riding unarmed into their camp was a spectacle not witnessed every day.

But Dane knew that his life hung in precarious balance. In this mass of redmen, only one had to throw a tomahawk, twang a bow-string, and the spell would be broken. That would be the end.

He rode on, through a wall of silence, toward the gaudy tepee of Black Eagle. Four hundred yards—three hundred—fifty feet. He was there. He jumped from his horse and stood before the closed flap of the tepee. He folded his arms and waited.

He waited there for a full five minutes, unmoving. Around him stood grouped Sioux braves. They also waited. Finally, from the tepee came a slim, breech-clouted figure, to stand in front of Dane, arms also folded, and stare coldly into his eyes. Still, Dane waited. He made no motion of friendship. Under these circumstances, that would be taken for a sign of surrender.

After a time, the brave spoke. He used the short, low-pitched gutteral of the Sioux and his brown arms moved. His words and motions asked:

"Why are you here?"

Dane replied in kind.

"I speak only to Black Eagle."

"What are your affairs with the great Chief?"

"My words are for him."

"The Sioux speaks only with burning arrows to the white man. This is not a time of peace."

Dane did not reply. He stared at the brave—looked through him as though he did not exist. Dane knew that if his bold front so much as quivered, he would be cut down by fifty tomahawks.

The brave turned on his heel and reentered the wigwam. Another five minutes passed. Then three braves came out, forming a vanguard for the figure that followed. It was the first time Dane had seen Black Eagle, the war chief of the Sioux, but he kept his interest well masked.

HE SAW a short heavy-set figure, completely clad in soft, leather garments decorated with bright beads and vari-hued stains; a dark seamed face—the face of a leader heavy with years and wisdom. Black Eagle's brilliant war bonnet, thick with feathers, hung almost to the ground.

He completely ignored Dane—acted as though the white man were nowhere in the vicinity. He directed his words through another; the brave who had first spoken to Dane.

"What message does the white man bring?"

"The white man brings no message. He comes to take back the squaw with yellow hair."

"What squaw is this?"

"She was taken from the white man's

wagon. She belongs to him. He would have her back."

There was the vaguest hint of amusement in Black Eagle's face as he said to his brave:

"The white man comes to beg for his squaw?"

"He has no fear of the Sioux. He has only contempt for redmen who war on women and children. He delights in killing the Sioux. He can kill the brave who took his squaw."

A stir went through watching Sioux warriors, and soon, a single brown figure pushed forward. A lithe, scowling warrior. He moved close to Dane, stared at him with studied insolence.

From Black Eagle came the command.

"Bring the squaw."

The brave marched off into the throng and returned a few minutes later dragging Patience Stafford by the hand. Dane turned his head and eyed the girl indifferently. With what was almost hostility, he took in the smeared and twisted yellow braids—the bloody bruise on her cheek—the torn disheveled clothing.

"My squaw," he said, and wished his skull would stop aching.

There was a conference around Black Eagle. Then the leader spoke again, through his young follower.

"The squaw was taken by Spotted Horse. He is a brave chief by his own right. He has many scalps over his tepee."

"He is a coward," Dane said. "A killer of fallen buffalo. I will take my squaw back."

Spotted Horse had drawn a knife from his belt. He radiated hatred from every pore.

"The white man would fight Spotted Horse for the squaw?"

"The white man can kill Spotted Horse, but there are many Sioux. How many does the white man have to kill to regain his property?"

Dane directed those words toward Black Eagle together with a fresh look of contempt.

Spotted Horse gave out with a sudden squall of rage. He leaped toward Dane, only to be stopped by Black Eagle's upraised hand.

"It is with Spotted Horse to make the choice. He can have the white man tortured or he can war with him alone. But if he loses in battle, Spotted Horse must give up the yellow-haired one."

Dane inhaled a quick breath. He had counted on this—the Sioux's sense of fair play and their love of a spectacle. They would find more pleasure in a fight to the death than the torturing of a helpless victim.

HE HAD no time to congratulate himself, however, because Spotted Horse drove into him with mad fury. Dane had only time to snatch out his own knife, bend low, and hurl the Indian to the far side of the circle which formed as though by magic.

Spotted Horse was on his feet like a cat. He turned and charged.

This time Dane met him in the center of the battle-ring. The two came together at a dead run. The Indian held his knife blade downward. clutched in his right hand. Dane, however, used his Bowie in the reverse. Thus, he could easily block Spotted Horse's downward slice by grasping the Indian's wrist. But his own right hand was low and far back behind his hip when the Indian's hand came seeking his wrist. Then, with Spotted Horse off balance, Dane slashed upward and drew first blood—a deep cut into the berserk brave's heaving side.

A guttural roar went up from the spectators. Spotted Horse backed away. But Dane, throwing the entire weight

of his body into a twist, sent his foe's knife spinning out of the circle.

Instantly Dane regretted this. It meant that he too would have to continue without a weapon. Killing an unarmed Indian under the eyes of that Indian's brothers would defeat Dane's purpose. He would win but he'd never leave the encampment alive. The battle must be equal right to the end.

He tossed his own knife away and, instantly, Spotted Horse was upon him.

They went down in a writhing heap. The Indian's knee came up with flesh-tearing force into Dane's groin. Hot searing agony came, accompanied by triumphant yells from the circle. Only Black Eagle stood unmoved.

Dane whirled over on his back and snaked an arm across Spotted Horse's neck and head. He came up on his knees and heaved and the Indian went over full length to hit the ground with a thud.

Dane crawled after him, slammed a blow under his chest and contacted only iron-hard muscle. His kunckles went numb and he dodged just in time to keep a thumb from gouging his eye.

Foiled in the gouging tactic, Spotted Horse spread out a big hand and raked strings of flesh from Dane's face with sharp nails.

Now Dane backed away and wiped blood from his eyes. Spotted Horse screeched and drove in. Again the two became an interlocked mass.

At this instant a knife flew into the ring and dropped a few inches from the outstretched hand of Spotted Horse. A cry went up. But there was a quick word from Black Eagle and his young brave leaped forward. Calmly he kicked the knife out of reach. Then he picked it up and returned to his place beside Black Eagle.

The chief of the Sioux had served notice that the fight would be fair.

AS THE battle continued, both contestants tired visibly. Caked, dirt-smeared blood lay thick on their bodies. Still they fought as men will when they know that they must fight or die.

There were no sounds now, save those of tortured breathing and sodden blows.

Dane broke a death grip on his throat, pushed Spotted Horse away, and rolled clear. The Indian turned doggedly and got erect. Then he stumbled, went to his knees, and crawled back into battle.

Dane met his slow-motion attack. But now Dane's movements were also in slow motion. The two came together and the action solidified into a still-life of an Indian stretched across the body of a white man. The Indian's whole effort was concentrated on driving a pair of thumbs into the white man's eyes. The white man was straining against the Indian's wrists as the thumbs moved lower and lower, driven by every muscle in the Indian's body.

Dane stared up at the descending thumbs, holding his eyes wide open. Into his mind came the horrible picture of himself, staggering around the circle with his eyes gouged from his head. The Indians would make great sport of this. They would cheer the warrior, Spotted Horse, as he slowly killed the blind white man.

Such thoughts generated new energy somewhere in Dane's exhausted body. And with the energy came craftiness. He allowed the thumbs to come lower—lower. Then, with a wrenching movement, he spread the Indian's arms wide apart, thus jerking the warrior's head close to his own.

Now he smashed upward, driving his own head into the tortured face above him.

Fresh blood spurted hot and red from the Sioux's smashed nose, and

Spotted Horse screamed a gurgling scream as he flailed his hands in the air. Crazed with pain, he instinctively sought retreat. But he found none.

As he rolled away, Dane was on him, behind him, setting a knee against his back and hooking an arm around his throat in one terrible grip.

It was over now. The whole Sioux nation knew that it was over. They stared like men without tongues as Dane slowly applied pressure.

The back of Spotted Horse began to bend. It formed a bow. Dane opened his set mouth and spoke as loud as he could.

"The white man gives Spotted Horse his life."

THE Indian only snarled. Hate blazed from his eyes. He knew that he was going to die and his hatred, blown fair into the teeth of that death, was a magnificent thing. A chief of the Sioux would not want a life of disgrace. Better a grave on the prairie.

Spotted Horse writhed helplessly, fighting to the end. His spine arced closer to the breaking point and a little of the hatred went out of his face. He now seemed more concerned with the business of showing no fear. Later, around the campfires, they must tell of Spotted Horse that he died snarling into the face of his enemy. If they couldn't speak of his victory, they must tell of his courage.

He set the snarl on his face and held it there.

And, just as his spine snapped, he was reaching vainly for Dane's throat, still with bared teeth.

Thus did all the Sioux wish to meet death.

Dane dragged himself away from the body of his dead foe. He stood up and raised his head high. He turned and faced Black Eagle.

"Now I take my squaw."

He went to Patience Stafford and took her roughly by the arm. He dragged her straight toward one side of the circle. The circle opened just in time to let him stride through.

He hauled the girl to his pony, took a strand of the animal's tail and placed it in her hand. Then he mounted and rode slowly through the groups of silent Sioux warriors.

In a sense it was phenomenal that they allowed him to depart unharmed. And yet, not so. These warriors were ready to die at a word from Black Eagle. And it was by Black Eagle's word that Dane and Patience Stafford left the encampment unharmed.

LATER, with the dead buried, the wounded cared for, and some oxen rounded up, the wagon train was again ready to move.

"The Sioux pulled out last night," Dane told Stafford. "I think what's left of your train will get through unharmed now."

"You've sure done a lot for us," Stafford said, simply.

Sudden bitterness flared in Dane's reply.

"But do you understand now that it was wasted motion—all unnecessary? If you pilgrims wouldn't think you know it all—that you can't be told anything—you'd be safe and sound two hundred miles south of here, out of the Sioux country."

"You're right," Stafford said. "And Neal and Wilson and all the rest would still be alive."

Dane eyed him coldly.

"Spotted Horse would still be alive too."

He was mounted and ready to move when he saw Patience Stafford again. She came and stood beside his horse, looking up.

"You're—not going with us?"

There was hope and invitation in her eyes.

But the feeling in Dane which would have responded, was dead. He had looked at Patience Stafford before, and had seen a desirable woman. Now her face somehow made him think of graves—the Duke's grave; the grave of Spotted Horse; all the graves that had been dug and would be dug west of the Mississippi.

And yet she was no-wise to blame. Dane knew that. Still the feeling persisted. He couldn't understand it and didn't want to. He only knew that he didn't love Patience Stafford.

"I'm going east and south," he said. "That's where the Duke and I were headed."

"But—we want you to stay. I want you to."

"I'm not cut out for the kind of life you're going toward."

A hundred yards away he turned and waved. She was still standing there.

She stood there for a long time—even after he was out of sight.

THE END

NECKING AND KNEEING

★ **By H. R. STANTON** ★

"NECKING" was a method used to control obstreperous cattle which were trouble-makers on the long trail drives up from Texas.

Sometimes these were the mothers of new calves. In a large herd, there were half a dozen or more births each day. The drive could not be delayed by a number of tottering babies, and so the nearest cowboy shot with his sixshooter each new calf that he saw. The mother's instinct was to remain at the place where she had last been with her baby. The cowboys therefore had to rope her and a dry cow, drag them side by side, and then tie their heads together with a rope. After about a week of this Siamese twin experience, the poor mother forgot about her offspring, and plodded docilely along with the rest of the herd.

Sometimes there were outlaw cattle, ringleaders among the herd in making trouble. They continually tried to break away from the herd and head back for Texas. Sometimes they succeeded, and returned to their home grazing grounds, until they were started north with a new herd. An animal might thus acquire four or five road brands before a smart outfit finally delivered him to the shipping point. Necking was a good way to tame the wildest steers.

When several of these trouble makers had the herd in a turmoil by their continuous attempts to break away, the whole herd might be halted while the outlaws were attended to. First the herd was brought into a small, tight circle. Three or four of the cowboys mounted their best cutting ponies and circled the cattle, trying to spot the ringleaders. When sure of the longhorns they were after, they put their smart little ponies on the trail, like hound dogs on a fresh scent.

The steers, perverse and wise, tried to bury themselves in the center of the herd, but the ponies soon had them pushed out to the edge of the mass of cattle. Then each outlaw felt a rope about his horns, and before he knew what had hit him, he was jerked off his feet and tied down.

This was real sport for the cowboys, because these animals were all hardened old experts, and put up much more of a fight than did the frightened mothers of new calves. A gentle steer was roped and tied and dragged to the side of each of the wild ones, then the two were tied together by the neck. This was poor reward to the tame animals for being well behaved and amenable, as they led a rough life for a few days, until their undisciplined partners became tractable and decided to forget about the home ranges down by the Rio Grande.

"Kneeing" was even more severe treatment than necking. It was used on those malcontents which insisted on charging the horses and riders, or otherwise acting wild and troublesome. Such an animal would be roped and thrown. The cowboy would then fling himself off the horse, and tie up the rambunctious longhorn. Getting out his knife, he would split open the skin of the animal in front of the knees, pull up the muscle of the foreleg, and cut off an inch of the cord. When the steer was released, it found that it could walk or trot as before, but if it tried any wild running or goring, it would fall down.

* * *

THE BEAVER HAT

★ By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT ★

FOR some forty years, from 1800 on, beaver hats were high style for men. In England and on the continent of Europe, the elegant fashion flourished, until the beaver in Europe were almost exterminated. Substitutes for the fur were contrived, even as is done today, of wool and rabbit fur, but nothing could take the place of fine, silky, genuine beaver. The demand for this fur stimulated the American fur trade, and with it the knowledge of our West.

Western America was comparatively untouched by white men at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but it supported millions of beaver. Trappers rushed into the country, and penetrated every part of the region, hunting the beaver.

It was the era of mountain men, a unique and peculiarly individual brand of pioneer. Working singly, or in small groups, they brought their packs of furs to semi-annual rendevouz of the fur companies which handled the product, then departed again into the vastness of the great mountain wilderness.

Beaver robes, beaver coats, and especially tall stovepipe beaver hats, adorned the prosperous and fashionable gentry of Europe and eastern United States, as the great new supply of excellent beaver was tapped by the western mountain men. For four decades the fur was in great demand, and fur-trapping was the major industry of the west. Then fashions changed, and the fur kingdom declined.

But now the great expanse of the Western part of the country, especially the Rocky Mountain area, was no longer an unknown mystery. Every stream, valley and mountain ridge had been looked into. The West had been opened up, and was ready for men to discover some of its other riches, first the gold in its hills, and then the cattle pasturage of its ranges.

And what of the mountain men, those solitary adventurers who had explored the far reaches of the wilderness, while serving the fashions of Europe? Their experiences and knowledge made them extremely useful throughout the West for the remainder of their lives. They became the hunters, the guides and the scouts for the hordes of people who came into the West during the middle and later parts of the century.

PAINTED DESERT

★ By L. A. BURT ★

THE Painted Desert, home of the Navahoes, provides some interesting sidelights on the customs of man. This was well brought out in a recent short movie which showed a Navaho Indian teaching his grandson the techniques of rain-making. A flat sandy surface was prepared and on this surface a picture was painted, using ground pigments made from some of the surrounding desert rocks.

The picture had all the elements necessary for the appeasment of the desert gods. The picture showed various types of grain and so on. After a picturesque ceremony, the image was destroyed lest the gods be offended.

The Painted Desert is beautiful indeed, but it has that barren beauty that one is reminded of when looking at the Grand Canyon—it is a beauty that transcends Man and makes him seem feeble and puny. The glorious colors, the impressive rock formations, all tend to make Man's role insignificant. Yet people have conquered this territory and made it theirs. The West, no part of it, is so bad, that it can not be mastered by determined men.

* * *

WOLF FISHING

★ By JON BARRY ★

WOLVES were a great annoyance about a camp, in the early days of the frontier. The impudent, always famishing brutes prowled around in the night, snatching away anything edible that was left in their reach. Sometimes the following method was used to rid a camp of wolves.

A number of fish hooks were tied together by their shanks, and then placed in the center of a piece of fresh meat. It was an old trappers' belief that a wolf always shook a piece of food well before attempting to eat it. The hooks, therefore, were buried in the meat in such a way that they would not be shaken out when the animal seized the piece of meat. This bait was dropped where it would soon be found by one of the pesky beasts.

When one unlucky animal swallowed this bait, it would commence to howl, tear at its neck, and run from the place as fast as possible. Wolves being very gregarious in their habits, the rest of the pack would make after him at top speed. Sometimes the pack would run for fifty miles before stopping. It would not be likely to come back to that camping spot again.

GOD COMES TO

Hagerty poked his gun through the cabin and shot quickly, in sudden decision . . . the men fell soundlessly, painlessly

By MALLORY STORM

He was a vicious killer-thief, and to him no thing was holy. But in his final "kiss of death", Black Hagerty remembered Miranda Sipes and her hymns

BLACK HAGERTY

MANDY SIPES never knew Black Jim Hagerty; yet something—call it fate, or God—or chance—marked an X on the map of Arkansas, and at this spot their paths crossed.

For Mandy, that crossing was an exalted moment, the tangible reward for all her "dead earnest prayin'." For Hagerty, it was the final bitter jest, the kiss of death.

To Mandy, religion was life. Without prayer there would have been nothing. In the words of her patient husband, Luke Sipes, "there was never such a prayin' woman ever born" as Mandy. And Luke was ever inclined to expand on the subject.

"Prayin', prayin', prayin' all the time," he'd mutter. "And what did it ever get us? I ask you that—what did it ever get us? She was prayin' when we had that beautiful strip o' bottom land. She prayed while the railroad got our land condemned and practi'ly stole it from us. She prayed whilst we loaded the wagon and come up in the hills to this cursed pile o' rock. She prayed whilst we built this cabin and after we starve she'll prob'ly pray with the last breath in her body."

Mandy took privation and misfor-

tune in her stride. Living in the world of the spirit she was not depressed by her husband's gloomy outlook.

"The Lord knows best," she would tell him, firmly. "He's only testin' us, that's what. To be one o' God's children you got to be put to the test. He tries the patience of those he loves. It says that in the Good Book."

Luke frankly admitted that he'd enjoy being loved less and allowed to prosper more, for which view Mandy chided him.

And thus they lived on their pitiful rock ridge back in the hills, Mandy with her eyes on the stars and Luke glumly concerned with the sterility of the soil.

"Never you mind," Mandy would tell her husband. "When our time o' privation is over, the Lord will shower his blessings. Then we'll get our riches. Don't you be worryin'."

Luke was highly doubtful. A God who could find any riches to bestow in this forsaken, rock-ribbed land, was entirely too clever for his mind to grasp. So Luke concentrated on hating the railroad and let it go at that.

BLACK HAGERTY concentrated on the railroad too, but in a more practical way. He looked upon it as a benefactor. Over a period of some ten years he had collected around two hundred thousand dollars in benefits from the road.

His method of collection was simple and direct. He would tie a red handkerchief over his face and board the train at various points and in various ways. After these boardings he always arrived, eventually, in the baggage car, where he made his collections and then seemingly vanished into thin air.

The railroad was naturally reluctant to continue paying into Black Hagerty's pockets. The more so because Black Hagerty during his collections had left three men dead in baggage cars and had killed four more in the course of shaking off pursuers. In fact the railroad loved Black Hagerty to the point of offering ten thousand dollars for his body—alive or dead.

And that was how things stood for all concerned on a certain June evening before the turn of the century. While Black Hagerty was crouched behind some bushes near a water tank on the railroad right-of-way, Mandy Sipes was begging Luke to hitch up the mules and drive her to the prayer meeting in the little clapboard church at Boggs Hollow. Luke wasn't enthusiastic about the five mile drive. But he was pliable and not stubborn, so a short time later the Sipes' two Missouri mules were hitting the road. In the seat beside her husband Mandy was singing softly:

"Bringing in the sheaves,
"Bringing in the sheaves,
"We shall come rejoicing
"Bringing in the sheaves."

Her face was lighted, transfigured. She was happy.

AT THAT very moment Black Hagerty was preparing to bring some sheaves to himself. He stood, spread-legged, in the baggage car of a train that creaked and crawled along the bottomland on its westward run. In front of him were two men, a clerk and a guard.

The guard was momentarily undecided. He stared at Black Hagerty's two sixguns. Then he took a quick breath and reached for his own.

He died with his hand on the gun-butt.

Hagerty stepped over him and snarled at the clerk:

"Is your fifty a month worth dyin'

for, son?" he asked. "Open that safe and don't waste time. If I go out of here empty handed I ain't leavin' you alive."

The clerk understood. He went to his knees and turned the dial on the iron safe while Hagerty crouched over him.

The train was coming to a halt now. There were shouts and bustling activity.

"You got ten seconds," Hagerty growled.

The clerk's hands trembled as the dial spun. There was a final click. Then Hagerty reached over his shoulder and twisted the handle beside the dial. The door opened.

Hagerty brought down the barrel of the gun he held in his left hand. It smashed against the clerk's head and the clerk pitched sideways, unconscious. Hagerty holstered both guns and plunged his hands into the iron box.

There were sounds of running footsteps; shouts of excited men converging on the baggage car from front and rear. Hagerty cursed, snatched a black bag from the safe and headed for the door.

No hesitation. There was cover some thirty yards away. Hagerty plunged toward that cover, throwing lead the while from his right-hand gun.

The pursuit faltered in the face of his fire. He dived into the brush and ran.

Fifty yards further on, he encountered major misfortune. The horse he'd left under an overhanging bluff was down from a stray bullet. An aimless shot had cut through the animal's neck.

Hagerty cursed anew at this indication that his luck was running out, and hurried on his way.

The unfortunate and the unpredicted had now occurred. Hagerty was afoot with vengeance on his trail. Panting, he cut through some underbrush, waded a small creek, came out on a rutted trail leading up into the hills.

Behind him were shouts and indications of grim activity. He moved up the rutted trail at a dog trot. From behind came a wave of excited shouting. The disabled horse had been found.

They knew, now, that he was afoot in rough country; that the odds were far against his escape; that, from all appearances, Black Hagerty's head was only inches from the noose.

Hagerty trotted on up the road, cursing under his breath. He didn't even know whether his loot was of any value or not. The black bag was held shut by a flimsy lock. That was a hopeful sign, but far from conclusive.

Hot rage filled his heart. There was no regret in him for having killed the guard. He had killed men before, as casually as he would have swatted a fly. He considered the murder only as it would affect the attitude of his pursuers. There would be no mercy shown if they succeeded in cornering him. They would shoot him down like a dog and kick his dead face to a pulp.

Hagerty stopped suddenly, then dived for the cover of bushes beside the road. Some one was approaching down-hill. Hagerty crouched, waiting. Was this the end? Had his enemies circled ahead and cut him off from the high ridges? Fingering the trigger of his gun, he made plans to take as many with him as possible before he was cut down.

But his hand relaxed on the sixshooter as a pair of mules rounded a turn and trotted down the trail. They were pulling a sorry, patched wagon, upon the front seat of which were a man and a woman. The man was a hopeless-looking specimen. He sat hunched forward with dead-looking eyes on the road. A sad scowl twisted the deep lines of his face into a picture of surly resignation. Nothing to fear from him, Hagerty decided.

IT WAS the woman, however, who gripped Black Hagerty's interest. She was something distinctly new and different. Physically she bore resemblance to the average worn out mountain woman. Her body was thin and gaunt—undernourished and obviously weary in bone and flesh.

But her face. Hagerty stared at her face and, for a moment forgot his guns, his black bag and the death pounding at his heels. He had never seen a face quite like it.

It was fixed with sort of a spiritual light. Her eyes, clear, gentle, and bright, were the eyes of a young woman, and back of her features was an ecstatic underglow.

She was singing, softly, as though to herself, in a not unpleasant voice:

"Bringing in the sheaves,
"Bringing in the sheaves;
"We will come rejoicing,
"Bringing in——"

Then the wagon rumbled off down the trail and the voice faded. Hagerty jerked himself back to the present. There had been something unreal about this interlude; an eerie, yet soothing opiate seemed to well from the woman's eyes and hold the bandit in a spell. But the spell was soon broken and the woman forgotten as Black Hagerty came out of the bushes and headed on up the trail.

There was a carnival of sound behind him. Back over the rough country he could see dust clouds as the ranks of his pursuers increased like a snowball rolling down a long hill.

Hagerty stuck to the road in order to make better time. He figured they would beat the brush around the immediate holdup scene before striking off into the country. They had no way of knowing that he was not wounded. It would only be a delay however.

A mile further on he came to a dilapidated shack and to the end of the primitive road. The shack sat on a stony ridge. Around it were thin looking fields from which some unfortunate was obviously trying to wrest a living. But the corn was spotty, anemic, unhealthy, and the wheat would probably never head.

Hagerty was not interested in this agricultural failure. However, it had suggested a plan, a desperate chance of survival. It centered around the cabin and what might be found therein.

HE KICKED open the unlocked door and found evidence of indescribable poverty. The floor was of hard packed dirt. In a stone fireplace, a smouldering log sent smoke up to the chimney and also into the single room of the squalid dwelling.

Hagerty cursed. He immediately connected the place with the two people he'd met on the road, but it was the apparent poverty that brought out his blasphemies.

"That groundhog," he muttered, "prob'ly don't own no other clothes but the ones on his back."

He threw down the satchel and began hunting. He found that he was wrong. There were a pair of frayed pants and two tattered shirts in a hand-made closet by the bed.

Swiftly he stripped off his own clothing, donned the pants and the better of the two shirts. Then he gave his attention to the black bag.

With his two hands he tore the flimsy lock apart and emptied the bag's contents on the dirt floor. His raid had not been a failure. Here, spread out on the hard soil were gold coins. At least five thousand dollars, Hagerty estimated. Probably more.

Hagerty was not looking at it from

a standpoint of value, however. His back was to the wall and he considered all things with an eye to escaping his doom. He straightened up and went swiftly to work.

First he scooped the money into the same red handkerchief he'd worn over his face during the holdup. He knotted the kerchief and hung it on a peg behind the door. Then he went outside and found a sorry looking spade and selected a spot near the cabin and began digging.

The location was carefully made. Hagerty wanted it to look as though a thief was attempting to hide something. Yet he wanted the spot not too well hidden. He wanted it found without too much effort.

Into the hole he dropped the gutted satchel and covered it, leaving a rather careless mound for a searcher to stumble over.

Satisfied, he returned to the cabin, gathered up his clothing, and hurried off across the ridge, out of sight.

The purpose of his activities had been two-fold. With a change of clothing, he could mayhap pass as a roaming native, a harmless itinerant, in case he was run to earth by the posse. He had no definite plans in this direction, but if the worst came, he could possibly discard his guns and try bluffing it through. His thoughts in this direction were rather vague.

But there was another hopeful alternative. If the posse followed his trail to the cabin, a superficial investigation would turn up both the money and the black satchel. That could easily pin the guilt on whoever occupied the cabin. Possession of the loot would easily overshadow any protests of an innocent victim.

Hagerty pressed on into the rough high country. He had long since outdistanced the sounds of his trackers. Mile after slow mile unwound beneath his tired feet.

Finally he risked shooting a rabbit. He built a small fire and roasted it on a spit. After he had eaten he felt better.

MEANWHILE Mandy Sipes and her husband had attended the prayer meeting in the church at Boggs Hollow. Mandy had passed an uplifting two hours and they were now making their way back up the trail that ended at their scrawny little farm.

They met no one. The Hagerty posse had moved off in another direction and were traveling in a wide circle, beating the bushes as they went. It seemed that the luck of Black Hagerty had held again.

Luke pulled the mules up in front of the cabin while Mandy alighted. Then he drove on down to the leanto which served as a barn, unhitched the mules and turned them into the poled-off lot.

He stood for a while, regarding his sick acres. They lay in pale moonlight, a symbol of hopelessness and despair. In his heart Luke longed to have done with all this. To hitch up the mules and drive away from it, never turning his head, never looking back. California. That was the place. There were glowing reports of California. But Luke hadn't the nerve to make such a break. He and Mandy would probably starve on the way. The fact that they would also probably starve to death where they were did not provide the necessary incentive for leaving.

Luke turned from the pole fence and moved slowly toward the cabin. He pushed open the sagging door and stepped inside.

"God came," Mandy said, calmly.

She was seated on the bed and in her lap was a red handkerchief in which lay a heap of glittering gold. Luke blinked. He closed his eyes tight. Then

he opened them and the scene had not changed. Mandy was still there, so was the red handkerchief and the gold.

"God came and brought us our riches," Mandy said. "Didn't I tell you that God never forgets his children? He tested us and we prayed and remained meek and patient. Now He's left our reward. The answer to our prayers."

Luke staggered to the bed and dropped down beside his wife. The gold held his eyes like a yellow magnet.

"Great Jup! There's three, four thousand here. Where in tarnation—?"

"I said God brought it. Can't you even believe after He shows you?" Mandy chided.

Luke certainly wanted to believe. His mind was reeling under the impact of the thing. There was utterly no way a pile of gold could have gotten into the cabin—no way he could conceive of. Therefore Mandy's explanation was as good as any.

He ran his fingers through the yellow pile as if he expected it to vanish as a dream vanishes. Mandy was talking. Her words drifted into his ringing ears.

"We can leave here now. Some way I feel it's God's will that we do. You've been wantin' to head out Californy-way. I think maybe God understands and this is His way of tellin' us to go ahead —that everything will be all right."

Luke raised his eyes to Mandy's sweet calm face. There was sudden, respect in his gaze, almost reverent awe.

"That's right, I guess," he said in a hushed voice. "We can't go wrong with the Lord's blessin' followin' us."

Then he sprang suddenly to his feet. It seemed that he was suddenly free for the first time in his life. A warm feeling swept through him and he bent over his wife.

"Let's go now," he said. "Right now! Ain't nothin' holdin' us and I feel like a kid. Let's hitch up the mules and turn the wagon west and get goin'. With this gold we're the boss. We can do anythin'. Let's go, Mandy, now!"

MANDY looked quietly into her husband's face. After a pause she reached up and passed a hand across his cheek.

"Hitch up the mules, Luke," she said. "The Lord tells us we shouldn't cotton to worldly things, and He sure knows there ain't anything here to tempt us. Hitch up the mules while I write the Lord a note."

Luke paused.

"While you what?"

"Write a note to the Lord. We don't want to seem ungrateful do we?"

Things were getting too involved for Luke's simple mind. He started toward the door, puzzled but happy.

When he pulled the wagon up to the cabin, Mandy was waiting with a small bundle of their possessions. She climbed up beside him.

"The Lord took your pants and a shirt. Don't know why. Maybe it's a symbol of somethin'."

Luke clucked at the mules and shook his head.

"Wonder what He wanted of them things?" So far was he under the spell of his wife's mysticism that it never occurred to him to attribute the taking to any physical agent. If the Lord wanted those garments, he thought, that was perfectly all right. He'd certainly paid for them.

The wagon rumbled off down the trail.

"I writ a note to the Lord," Mandy said, "and put it in the handkerchief right where He left the gold."

"I'd almost like to wait around 'til he comes to read it," Luke said.

"Don't think He meant us to somehow," Mandy replied.

That was good enough for Luke. He

tapped the off mule and the wagon rolled over the brow of the hill. Neither Mandy nor Luke looked back. The wagon jounced on into the night.

BLACK HAGERTY was faring well. Safe in the hills, he had eaten well and was rested and fit again. All effects of his flight from danger had faded.

As his feeling of safety and well-being increased, so also did his sense of loss. He had cheerfully invested a pile of gold in a chance of continued freedom. Freedom was evidently going to remain his. Now he began thinking about the possibility of getting back his gold.

It was within the realm of chance that his plan had worked. Even now the owner of that cabin might be dangling from a rope and the money be back in the railroad's coffers. But then again it could have worked out differently. Maybe the posse lost the scent completely; maybe he had been smarter than he knew.

In that case, why should he leave his loot in the hands of an ignorant squatter who had no just claim to it? He'd be a fool to quit the country without checking on the situation.

After some thinking along these lines, he killed his last rabbit, had his final meal, and started back over his trail.

He moved slowly and with caution but no dangers presented themselves. He encountered two armed men and got safely hidden while they roamed here and there among the rocks. But they were obviously hunters of game, not of train robbers. He backtracked a mile and skirted the country they were scouring.

He was surprised at how far he'd come that night. It seemed incredible that he had covered so much distance on aching feet and with bursting lungs.

He stopped once to dine on basted pheasant, took an hour's nap, and then plodded on. Somewhere down in the farm country he could no doubt steal a horse. Then the going would be better.

He topped the rise above the decrepit cabin just as the sun was rising. He lay flat on the rocks for some time, watching the place.

There was no movement except when the breeze stirred the stunted corn stalks and the thin stand of grass. No sign of life about the house nor the stable. The farm was obviously untenanted at the moment.

However, he lay still watching. If it were a trap, it would look exactly as it looked now, but that cabin and barn would be filled with death; there would be a dozen eyes waiting for him to appear and come forward.

After an hour he decided to risk it. He depended a great deal upon his instinct, and to Black Hagerty the place "smelled" deserted. His nerve-ends sent him no warning signals.

He got to his feet and started down the rocky slope. Sharply alert, he carried his right hand gun elevated and cocked.

THE twenty yards across the bare yard to the cabin seemed like five miles to the tense outlaw. Then he achieved the door, pushed it open and jumped back, close against the wall.

Nothing happened. He went inside. Deserted. He holstered his gun and turned immediately to the place where he'd hung a red handkerchief containing a fortune in gold. Even before his hand touched it, an empty feeling trickled into his stomach. The handkerchief looked suspiciously flat.

Hagerty jerked it from the peg. It was empty. Again his curses sounded, full and throaty. He tore open the folds of cloth and a slip of paper fell to the floor. A piece of paper torn from the fly leaf of an old book.

He went to the door for light and read the carefully printed words:

Thank you God. We headed for Californy because we thought you would want us to. We will keep on praying. Thanks for the gold.

Miranda Sipe.

Hagerty's heavy face went black with rage. What kind of a fool's joke was this? He jerked to attention. Was it a new kind of trap? What idiot—?

He went back into the cabin and sat down on the edge of the bed. The mattress was still there—a bag of corn shucks—but the blankets were gone. He looked around the room, got up and walked to the fireplace. The log he'd seen burning upon his first arrival was a heap of ashes. He kicked at the ashes and uncovered a small core of live coals. It hadn't been so long, he thought. Maybe he could still catch them. The live core of the fire flickered and threw out feeble flames. Given air to breathe, it followed the eternal cosmic law and strove to live—even as Black Hagerty, Mandy Sipes, and her stolid husband also strove to live.

Hagerty went back to the door. If he could only get a horse somewhere. He could overtake those squatters and retrieve his property.

He leaned against the wall of the cabin, his eyes narrowed in thought. Sure! They were driving a pair of mules. He'd seen them just after the holdup. That squatter and the queer looking woman singing hymns while the mules hauled the tumbledown wagon. They wouldn't have gotten far.

Then—at that precise instant—Black Hagerty's luck ran out. Chance—so often on his side when his life hung on the toss of a coin—turned her back to him. The coin fell tails for Hagerty in the form of a group of horsemen coming swinging up the trail.

HAGERTY heard their rapid approach. He crouched and whirled. But it was too late to run. Even now the lead horse was rising up over the hill. The cabin. Only the cabin was left.

He leaped inside, trapped as neatly as though he were caught in a prison cell. Only one chance left. Maybe they'd move on. Maybe they weren't a part of the posse at all.

But Hagerty knew he was only hoping; hoping against reality. What other possible reason could they have for coming to the end of this road? What business could they have here save the deadly business of tracking down a bandit?

Of course they wouldn't know he was in the cabin, but unless they were fools they'd find out. Hagerty smiled a grim, humorless smile as he took out both guns and checked them for load. He found a crack, low down in the flimsy wall, and give his attention to the horsemen.

There were six of them. They milled about at the end of the road, fifty yards from the cabin and appeared to be in conference. They were unhurried. The leader, a bushy-faced man on a big bay, around whom the rest were circling, had his eyes on the cabin and appeared to be undecided.

Black Hagerty estimated his chances. The possibilities of killing six men were pretty slim. His main advantage lay in the fact that they would be caught unaware when he started shooting. And he fully intended to shoot. The thought of surrender did not occur to him. A yellow streak is seldom found in men of Black Hagerty's caliber.

He watched as two of the men dismounted and stood looking at the cabin. They obviously felt that it was unten-

anted. If the fools would only move on, Hagerty thought. They were ten feet from death as they stood there with thumbs hooked over cartridge belts.

Hagerty moved toward the door. It was half open and gave him a clear view of the group. He went down on one knee, back in the shadows, and waited.

The wait was a short one. In sudden decision the two men started toward the cabin. Neither had drawn a gun.

They died suddenly, painlessly, and with the minimum of messiness as Black Hagerty snapped two shots. The shorter of them, a bow-legged youth, went down in a forward stumble and skidded to a stop on his face with a bullet, sharp and clean, into his heart.

The other, a tall, sallow man, took a slug squarely in the forehead. He melted to the ground, clawing for his gun even as death brought him to a stop.

BLACK Hagerty kept on shooting, but the remaining four possemen reacted with split second speed. A slug took one in the arm as he was swinging down behind his horse. One horse screamed and went down with a .45 bullet in its chest and, by that time, the men were running for cover, throwing lead at the cabin door as they moved.

A slug knocked Hagerty's hat to the floor and another pitched splinters in his face as it clipped off a section of the door jam.

His guns empty, Hagerty calmly went about the business of reloading. Within a few minutes at the most, he would be surrounded on four sides. He wondered what tactics they would use. They could turn the cabin into a sieve with a hail of lead and probably get him on a chance shot. They could wait to answer his own fire with the idea of picking him off. They could rush the cabin, or they could wait and starve him out.

These last two seemed improbable. They would be unlikely to risk a direct attack when safer methods would get what they wanted. And starving him out would be too long a process and would also give him the opportunity of slipping out in the darkness, come nightfall.

Through cracks in the walls, he checked in each direction. His enemies were well hidden. One was obviously behind the leanto barn. Scrub growth furnished cover to the east and there were jagged rocks a hundred yards to the south. In front of the cabin, a dry creek bed gave excellent vantage, but it was some two hundred yards away.

There would be a period of caution, Hagerty felt. As yet they had no way of knowing what they faced. There could be one man or ten in the cabin. Hagerty's twelve shots could have come from two guns or twenty.

If they discovered that he was alone, Hagerty would have little chance. He could not watch in four directions at once and one raider at least, would achieve the cabin wall.

A volley of slugs hit the cabin walls from four directions. Hagerty dived to the dirt floor as the flimsy building shook to its foundations.

Hagerty crawled across the packed dirt and looked over the sill of the window in the east wall and spotted smoke puffs around a cleft in the rocks. He fanned six shots into the cleft and temporarily silenced the sharpshooter's gun.

Now there came a lull in the fire. Hagerty crawled to the wall facing the barn, put his eye to a crack, and studied the scene. He was watching for movement but nothing stirred. If he could reduce his opponents to three, he'd be twenty-five percent better off than he was now.

Then a shadow moved out there.

Hagerty could see it through a knot hole in the barn wall. He pushed out a piece of splintered wood which gave him clearance, sighted carefully, and sent a shot toward the shadow.

There was a scream and a thud. Then a yell of rage from three directions and a furious hail of lead riddled the shack.

Of some thirty slugs, Hagerty stopped one. But that one bullet heralded his swan song. As the lead tore through his chest, Hagerty knew that nothing much mattered any more. He was through.

BLOOD welled into his throat and flooded out from between his lips. He staggered back from the wall and fell in the center of the cabin space, beside the bed. He was coughing and his thoughts and senses were blinded by shock and pain.

The sharp pain cleared his mind. He rolled on his back and tried to get up. Weakness stopped him. He fell back, and then his eyes came down level with a scrap of paper on the floor. It had been torn from an old book and there was a message on it; a message written by one Miranda Sipes to God. Again, Black Hagerty read the words: . . . *We'll keep on praying. Thanks for the gold.*

His grin was mirthless.

The final bullet can change a man—change his outlook. It changed Black Hagerty. No longer did gold mean a thing to him. Of far more interest, now, was the clear face and eyes of Miranda Sipes as she sang hymns in a rickety wagon behind two Missouri mules.

Still grinning, Black Hagerty started a long tortuous crawl across the floor. Far away, in the fireplace, a small flame writhed and glowed.

Now there were footsteps outside; cautious at first, then more confident and finally breaking into a run.

Hagerty struggled on. He was closer to the fire now—closer.

His hand, clutching the note, stretched toward the flame. His body moved in one last valiant effort. Then the note dropped from his fingers, the flames licked, caught, flared, as Hagerty's arm weakened, and Hagerty's hand dropped, also, into the flames.

He did not pull it out.

THE END

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

★ **By JUNE LURIE** ★

"BRIGHT ANGEL" Trail—"Bright Angel" Lodge—"Bright Angel" Creek—"Bright Angel" Canyon. These are names which everyone has heard who has ever visited our Grand Canyon. How the name: "Bright Angel" came into being, makes a bit of interesting detail.

Altho white men have been coming for more than four hundred years to glimpse the Grand Canyon (the first group of Spaniards from Coronado's party peered over its brink in 1540!), the Colorado River which has been and still is responsible for cutting this canyon into the billion-year-old Archaean rocks of Arizona, was never intensely explored until sometime in the year 1869. In that year Major John Wesley Powell started from Wyoming and led an expedition to Calville, Nevada, a town which is now inundated by Hoover Dam. It is related that this party suffered intense hardships. At one time, with rations low and countless, dangerous rapids still ahead, they were encamped in the Canyon besides a sparkling creek. The Major, being much more worried about their plight than he had any desire to inform his men, stood apart from them and raised his voice in a now-famous prayer: "If this expedition has any right to success or survival, then listen to a scientist's prayer, O Bright Angel of Immortality!"

That the "Bright Angel" heard his prayer and answered it, is attested by the Major's appreciation and graditude!

* * *

TIMBER!

By WILLIAM KARNEY

A GROUP of westerners—and they are "westerners"—who have sadly been neglected in most tales of the west are the early loggers. These men, most of whom were as tough as anybody, did more than their share of carving out a chunk of the United States for the benefit of its citizens.

We are accustomed to thinking of logging camps in terms of power machinery, but in the seventies and eighties this was not true. Practically everything was done by hand from the felling of the gigantic trees to the trimming of them.

After the woodsmen felled the trees and the branches were trimmed, the huge logs were cut into shorter sizes so that they could be handled more conveniently, attached to huge ten-foot wheels with an axle between them and hauled by mules or horses to the nearest available river where they could be floated downstream to the sawmills—which did have power machinery. As the railroads came in the loggers' lives were eased somewhat by the application of steam powered donkey engines to do a lot of the hauling work with cables. And the narrow gauge railroad assumed more importance.

Because the loggers lived high they had more than their share of fights. Oddly enough there was relatively little crime such as infested most western towns. The men were too tired!

* * *

THE COWBOY SINGS

By FRAN FERRIS

COWBOY ballads are among the best-liked American folk songs today. The nostalgia and melancholy of these songs, or the rollicking rhythm, as the case might be, are as appealing to modern city folks as they were to the lonely cowpunchers who crooned them in the night watches of long ago.

It was the cowboys who had to stand night guard who developed the cowboy songs, and sang them for two definite reasons. First, they sang to keep themselves awake. Guarding a herd during a trail drive, or perhaps standing watch over a large band of horses, their chief concern often was to keep themselves from falling asleep on the job. Perhaps they had already done a hard day's work, and then must take a three or four hour turn at night duty as well. The soft darkness, and the quiet movements of the resting animals, were lulling, and the cowboys had to work at keeping themselves alert. So they sang, endlessly.

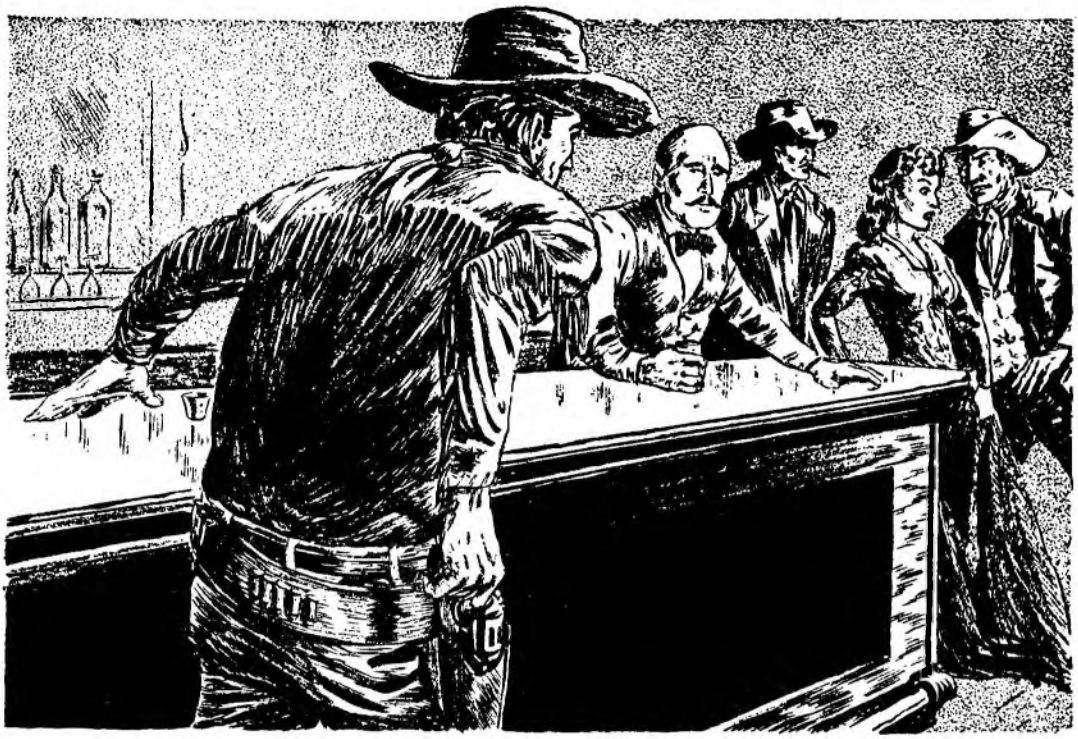
The cowboys' voices raised in melancholy rhythm also served a purpose in keeping the animals quiet. A herd would lose its restlessness and settle down peacefully for the night when the sound of mournful singing drifted through the deepening darkness. Especially after the dreaded stampede did the cowboy ballad have a definite function, in calming nervous cattle. Several of the cowhands would lope slowly around the massed herd, singing as they rode, and the jittery animals, influenced by the peaceful rhythm, would quiet down and forget the sudden fear which had driven them on a mad rampage.

A short song was no good. It had to be long, for the boys had a lot of time on their hands. Many songs took a half hour or more to get through. The cowboys improvised continually, so that no two versions of the standard ballads were the same. As to rhyme and rhythm, they didn't worry about that. Stanzas were all lengths, and so were lines, and the melody differed with the individual singing it. The ballads heard on today's stage and radio have a finish and technique entirely foreign to the original products sung on the wide ranges of the West.

Since they sang so much while at work, the cowboys also enjoyed singing in their social hours. They liked to learn new songs, and were like housewives exchanging recipes, as they relaxed around evening campfires or in the bunkhouses. Partners on night guard would teach each other songs they knew, as they met on their lonely rounds through the night.

A good many of the songs were the sentimental type, and told long stories. There was the dolorous lament, with a refrain repeated over and over. There were songs expressing passionate love of their land, and loyalty to friends, sentiments of which the ordinary cowboy could sing when he could not possibly speak of them. There were folk songs brought over from the old country, renewed and carried on in the cowboy fashion. And then, for cowboys had to laugh or they could not stand their hard, lonely life, there were the boisterous, rollicking songs of humor, of cowboys thrown from their horses, or the other things that make men laugh.

All his moods appeared in the songs that the cowboys sang long ago, as they appear in the songs of cowboys today. All America listens today to cowboy songs, and likes what it hears.



A GRAVE TO

By Paul W. Fairman

There was a feeling of tension in the town and a question in every man's eye as the sun sank. It was not *who* was slated to die—but how many? . . .

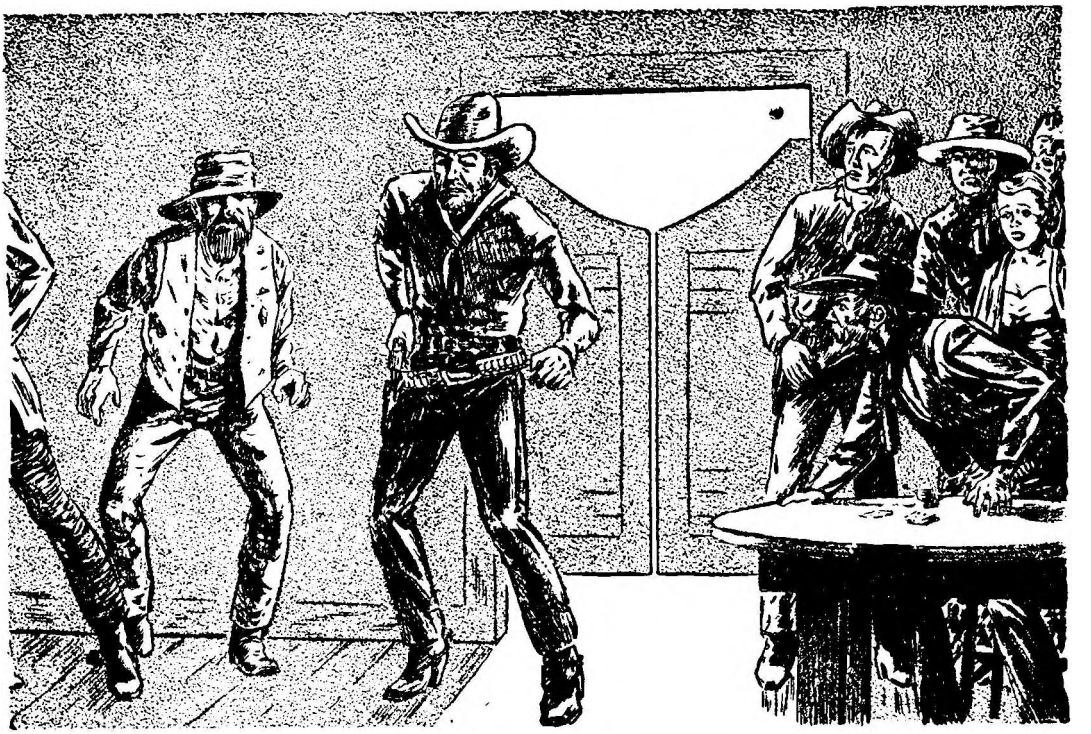
THERE would be dead men in Defiance, Kansas, come the dawn.

Marshal John Latch, sitting on the porch in front of his office, turned his gray eyes toward Orion, flaming grandly over the wide prairie, and asked a question:

"I wonder if I'll be one of them?"

Orion didn't answer and Latch—in one of his rare philosophical moods—reached down and pulled one of the guns off his thigh and gave it idle inspection.

It was a Colt .44 with no trigger. Like its companion on Latch's other



The two men faced each other for a long moment. Then they drew in swift motions . . .

CALL MY OWN

thigh, its sights had been filed away and on its black butt was carved the picture of a buffalo.

As Latch stared at the gun, the streets of Defiance faded, the years fell away, and he was a fuzz-lipped, lean-legged kid. He was banging away at a post with his dad's old muzzle-loader back on the farm in Missouri.

A shuffling of a boot behind him, a high, nasal voice, and the kid turned.

"You'll never be fast, sonny. Your arms is too long."

Tracy Beloit. He had come into the boy's life that morning, wearing a tattered Confederate uniform and an ancient revolver flapping against his right leg.

"You do it kinda like this." An apparently lazy movement of hand and wrist. The revolver just clearing the holster and tilting sharply upward. Quick thunder, and a sparrow stopping suddenly in flight—dropping straight to the ground.

The boy walked over and picked up the bird. Its head was gone.

"You can shoot awful good, mister."

Tracy Beloit said he was a mite tired. He'd fit the "dam-yankees" until General Lee "signed the paper at 'Mattox makin' the sport down right illegal!" Then he'd drifted west " 'cause there was more room in that direction!" Here he was "in Missoo and he'd like to light and set for a spell."

He lit on the Latch farm, did odd jobs and taught Latch how to use a gun. With some reluctance, however.

"Shootin' gets you into trouble, son. Besides your arms is too long. You can get pretty good and kill some men but a gun leads you right to your grave. No matter how fast you be, there's others a mite faster. Others you're bound to bump into."

"Is this the way you do it?" The old muzzle loader flamed. Lead plunked into the post.

"Not no-how. Here—try Betsy. But don't insult her by fumblin' like that."

Memories. A tired, world-weary man. A clear-eyed boy. A gun. Time passing.

"You're gettin' better. Palm the gun though. You're 'fraid of it. Quit handlin' it like a red-hot poker."

Time—time and the lashing hind foot of a Missouri mule. Tracy Beloit on the ground with a crushed chest.

"Downright disgraceful. Me that rid with Quantrell fer a spell gettin' kicked into Hades by a mule." Tracy's wry grin. "Keep Betsy. She's a good gun. She'll mind. Too bad your arms is so danged long."

Tracy dead, but still living in the facades of memory.

Swiftly rushing time. The first kill. A black-coated gambler from Cairo climbing off a horse at the gate. A gambler with a twisted mouth and death in his flexing hand.

"Where's your dad, youngster? Where's your cold-decking old man?"

"What for you want my dad?"

"'Heard he called me some names. We'll settle up now." The gambler wore a gun. The eternal gun.

Betsy hanging cold on Latch's thigh, thonged down the way Tracy Beloit said.

"You run a crooked game, gambler. My dad said so."

Rage in the pale thin face.

"Young whelp!"

The gambler's gun was in his hand as he died.

The first kill and the voice of a dead Quantrell raider in a youth's ears:

When you gun a man into his grave, sonny, remember this—that it don't end there. Comes another grave, and another, and another—'til you fill the last one yourself.

SEATED in front of his office in Defiance, Kansas, Latch now remembered those words. He closed his eyes and it seemed all his past years had returned to pass before him in review. Other graves. Yes—there had been other graves.

His reverie terminated sharply. A brushing of sound close by and he was again in the present. A shadow was drifting toward the porch.

The shadow became less vague and finally materialized into Nate Condon. Nate, as amiably worthless as the battered hat he wore. As hardy as any desert rat.

"They's going to be trouble at the Sierra Strike. They is—sure as shootin'."

Latch holstered his gun.

"That right?"

"Uh-huh. Jasper that calls hisself the Cimarron Kid's been soundin' off somethin' fierce. Tellin' the boys 'bout the eight notches in his gun-butt. It's a cryin' shame what this red-eye does to folks."

"Getting kind of rough, you say?"

"Rough enough that 'fore long somebody'll take his remarks to heart and make 'im put up or shut up."

"Thanks, Nate."

The bushy-faced messenger took that as dismissal.

"Don't mention it, Marshal. Allus like to be helpful." His run-down boots

shuffled dust as he faded back, became a shadow again, and disappeared.

LATCH got to his feet and jerked at his cartridge belt. He quit the porch and moved slowly up the dusty main street of Defiance. But, strangely, his mind wasn't on the business of the moment. It was vagrant—almost aggravatingly so. Drifting, watching the years march past.

Always another grave . . . A night long ago, but not greatly different than this one; a night with Orion flaming in the sky over a small town in central Missouri. A kid with long arms and a gun he called Betsy, seated at a poker table, looking at a hand. It was a formidable hand. Aces up. Good enough, the kid thought.

The kid laid the cards down.

"Aces and treys." He spoke the words in a tight voice.

Across the table a brittle-faced man laid down five other cards.

"Three sevens. Sorry."

The kid's toes curled.

"Don't be sorry, friend. Just keep your hooks away from that pot. I'm calling the hand you just stuck in your boot."

A sleeve gun. Deadly fast. The man had but to stretch out his arm, point it at the kid and blow him into the cemetery. Deadly fast.

But not fast enough. Betsy bellowed once. The brittle-faced man coughed.

Another slug—another death—another grave.

Latch walked on. He had a reputation in the West. Latch could outdraw any man from the Mississippi to the Rockies. He could gun down any jasper from the north border to the Mex line. He'd killed Barty Torp in a stand-and-draw. He'd killed eighteen men they said.

As a matter of cold fact there had been six. Six graves strung westward over the prairies. As Latch walked up the dark street, Barty Torp stared at him out of the past.

Big Barty. Two hundred eighty pounds of killer. He stood in a doorway, blocking Latch's exit from a saloon.

"Been hunting a long time for you."

"That so? I've been here and there."

Betsy was gone now and the black .44s hung on Latch's thighs. Barty Torp eyed them coldly.

"Knew a gambler once. A Mississippi gambler called Jim Toller. Believe he used to play cards with your dad."

"That's possible. My dad played some blackjack in his time."

"This here Toller was a pretty good friend of mine. We had some high times together back on the Big Muddy. I was right sorry to hear of his death."

"He died?"

"Yeah. Seems he was shot in the back by a no-good —— named Latch."

Those were Torp's last words. He went for his gun and drew it from its holster. He stood there in the doorway, staring down at the weapon, a trifle foolishly. He seemed amazed that he couldn't raise the gun and fire it at Latch. He watched Latch push his own .44 back into the holster. Torp closed his eyes and melted to the floor, his life having dripped from a single hole between his eyes.

Three graves now. Three lonely head-boards in Latch's wake.

LATCH jerked his mind to attention. He pushed aside the bat-wing door and walked into the Sierra Strike.

The air was thick with smoke in there. That didn't change. The smoke went on with its business of curling and billowing and clouding.

But all else stopped. All sound

ceased. All other movement hung poised, as a hundred people waited for a killing.

Some were even now setting the story in their minds; how they would tell it in times to come; tell it around chuck wagons and in other saloons:

"This yancey that called himself the Cimarron Kid had a few under his belt and they was comin' out through his mouth in big words. He was a lean-lookin' youngster wearin' a big Remington on his hip, and there wasn't a lawman on two feet he couldn't fan down, the way he told it.

"Somebody told him John Latch was runnin' the show in Defiance; thinkin' he'd quiet down. Didn't have to explain who Latch was o' course. He's the marshal that stopped Barty Torp and Nick Ferran and a dozen others. Latch cleaned up five, six towns in his time and here was a yearlin' bad man up from Texas spoilin' to mix it with him.

"No sir. The Cimarron Kid wasn't scared a bit, what with the liquor talkin' inside him. Said he had eight men to his credit and there wasn't no lead anywhere that was faster than his own.

"But shucks—all we was wonderin' was which gun Latch would use on this wild talkin' yazoo from Texas.

"So we all sat waitin' when Latch walked in the door. The Kid was standin' at the bar with space on both sides of him. Nobody wanted to be too close—"

The Cimarron Kid was standing at the bar. He didn't turn as Latch entered the Sierra Strike and moved casually forward. The Kid had one palm flat on the wood, another curled around a whiskey glass. His eyes were on the mirror in front of him. His mouth twitched.

Latch's thumbs were hooked over his belt. He took five long casual steps and was standing up to the bar close on the right side of the Cimarron Kid. The Kid's lips were white.

"Two fingers, Sam," Latch said, and the barkeep came from the far end with elaborate calm and put out a bottle and a glass. Latch tilted the bottle. Somewhere a playing card slapped against a table. It could be heard clearly, and a hundred people watched Latch take a drink.

Latch put down the glass.

"Just passing through?" He turned his eyes on the Kid.

"My business."

"Sure—sure. From Texas?"

A long pause before the answer:

"That's right. Came up here to look for a pal of mine."

"That so? What's his name?"

"Nick Ferran. Any idea where I can find him?"

When you gun a man into his grave, sonny, remember this—it don't end there. Comes another—and another—

"Sure I know. You know too, don't you?"

"You gunned him down."

"Had to. He killed a man in Provo. Shot him in the back and lifted his poke."

"You're a damn liar!"

THE Cimarron Kid whirled away from the bar. He landed three or four feet away, crouching and snarling.

"You're a damn killing liar!"

The Kid's right hand streaked but, even as it moved, his expression changed. Wide eyes. Slack mouth. He stared at Latch.

Latch hadn't moved. He leaned against the bar cocked on one boot toe. He was examining a gun with apparent interest.

The gun wasn't his own. It was a big Remington he'd slid from the Cimarron Kid's holster as the Kid spun away from the bar.

The slap of the Kid's hand against his empty holster was sharp in the silence. A gunman without a gun, he seemed suddenly absurd, a mountain cat with its teeth pulled.

Latch ran a finger over the notches in the Remington's butt.

"You do all this killing?"

The Kid's breath was coming in loud rasps. He said nothing. Empty handed, he was lost. He said nothing, but he looked murder.

"You calm down, boy," Latch said. "When you're ready to leave town you'll find this gun at my office." He walked out of the Sierra Strike—out into the dark street. Behind him, in the saloon, he heard the billowing of sudden laughter. They were laughing at the Cimarron Kid.

But, to Latch, it was unreal somehow—like the merriment of ghosts—as he lapsed again into the languor of his previous mood.

NICK FERRAN. Nick was buried on a knoll outside Provo, Kansas. Not in the regular cemetery. There had been a revulsion among the better people and thy refused to let Nick lie among the honest bones of their dead. So they buried him on a hill and someone put up a cross that stood against the sky and accentuated the bleak loneliness of Nick's end-of-the-road.

Long legged, Nick, with a big face and slab-like jaws. In high heels he had the appearance of a man walking on stilts. He had a low forehead, killer's eyes, a coward's mouth.

Latch trailed him to the Provo Restaurant after they found Bill Hentz with the bullet in his back, and most of his life gone.

Nick was eating beans; pushing them on a fork with a slab of bread. He looked up.

"Bill Hentz just died," Latch told him. "He named you."

"He's a liar."

"He said you might still have his poke on you. It's black leather and it had some dust and nuggets in it."

Beans dropped from Nick's fork.

"He's a liar."

"Maybe—maybe not. Let's check and see if you've got the poke."

"Think I'm a fool? Even if I had kilt Hentz I wouldn't keep his leather. That don't make sense."

"You may be right, but I was thinking that you might have figured Bill to be dead. Then there'd be no reason why you shouldn't keep it. No harm to look."

Nick Ferran got up from the counter. He grunted his disgust and turned toward Latch. But he turned the long way around and thus shielded his right hand. Then the hand came into view raising a gun.

The eternal gun. Always the gun.

Nick Ferran was too anxious. He fired too soon; much too soon and that was all there was to it. Never a second shot against John Latch, even though his arms *were* too long.

Never a second shot.

So they buried a murderer on a lonely hill—one more grave—one more link in the death chain—Latch's reputation one hitch higher.

Four.

JOHN LATCH, marshal of Defiance, Kansas, was tired. He realized this as the night smote his ears. Not physically tired, but possessed of a deeper weariness. An exhaustion of spirit that saturated his mind, colored his thinking, and tinged the edges of his perspective with a somber hue.

An eager youth on a Missouri farm had seen the future as a lusty parade, as a series of steps leading higher and higher toward some goal dimly sensed.

The youth had set his feet on the glamour trail, had sought the reward of living the dangerous way.

And now a Kansas lawman had learned a bitter truth. Glamour was a haze that time dissipated as the sun melts snow. The parade was a grim thing. The trail was, in reality, a merry-go-round, that moved faster and faster. Once on, you never got off. Once on, the calliope played louder and louder until the whirling and spinning culminated in a final burst of gun-fire.

Latch scowled against his mood. What was wrong? He had no kick coming. He was known all over the West. Men talked of his exploits in lonely line-cabins and in crowded saloons. His entrances were always noted with the respect of sudden silence. The glamour he'd sought was his. One-gun cow pokes regarded him with awe. He was John Latch, lawman, and he'd carved a hand-hold into the history of the West.

Yes, he was a man admired—and he was a perpetual challenge.

Johnny Combs. Latch remembered Johnny—

A drawling, pleasant voice—a voice back on the trail:

"This Latch now. I ain't thinkin' that he's so all-fired good. Stick a spur in most o' these fast trigger boys and you'll find hot air. Their reps are mostly words gettin' bigger all the time as they're jumped from one big mouth to another."

Johnny Combs leaning against a bar. Latch in a far corner playing stud. A saloon full of men, but Johnny's talk meant only for Latch in a far corner.

They told it thus:

"JOHNNY'd been itchin' a long time. He was a crazy galoot. He'd blasted his way out of two posse traps in Arkansaw and he was a gent to be handled with a long poker. Nice enough jasper if he was sober, but hell-on-wheels if he was drunk.

"Had a burr under his saddle for John Latch. No one knows why. Maybe just professional jealousy and there were some that said Latch avoided him. But that night in Little Fork, Kansas was the show-down.

"Johnny started drinkin' early in some other saloons and when he clumped into the Spread Eagle, he was primed to the ears. You'd never know it though. They say that after a ten-day drunk, Johnny could toss up a silver dollar and blow holes in it. Liquor seemed to steady him down.

"Anyway he walks up to the bar and orders red-eye and keeps on talking. His talk is about tin-horn gunmen and he keeps mentionin' the name of Latch.

"Latch is playin' poker at a corner table. He pays no attention but it's gettin' harder and harder to keep the game goin'. The players kind of lose interest. They're worried about bein' in the line of fire come trouble.

"Then Johnny calls for drinks for the house and the barkeep gets busy.

" 'And give that blank blank tin-horn over in the corner one too.'

"Latch got up then, and those that saw him say he looked kind of old and weary, like he'd seen too much of saloons and gunplay and would have just liked to fold up his cards and go home. Not scared, mind you. Nobody every saw John Latch scared. But he didn't look mad at Johnny either.

"He walked out into the middle of the room. Johnny was standin' with his back to the bar. He wasn't talkin' now.

"Latch stopped about fifteen feet from him and stood there with his thumbs hooked over his belt.

" 'Okay Johnny. Whenever you're ready.' "

Johnny Combs was ready. He'd come

to knock over the champ as men have come from the beginning of time. He'd come to reach out and take some ready-made glory and drape it across his own shoulders.

He went for his gun and Latch shot him down left handed, without unhooking his right thumb from his belt.

Five graves on the trail. Another link in the chain that held John Latch to the merry-go-round. A tighter grip on the lion's tail.

LATCH went into his office and put the Remington in his desk. Then he came back to the porch. He sat down and stared at Orion. He closed his eyes.

The town was getting into stride now. Drunks were staggering in the dark street. The doors of the Lode Star flew open and a man sailed out into the street. He roared curses and lay in the dust shaking his fist. He got up and floundered toward the bright lure of the Silver Dollar.

No gun-fire anywhere yet. Early promises were not being fulfilled. The trail-herd segundo evidently bore weight with his men. Latch pondered this and completely overlooked the real reason for the comparative calm. This reason was himself. John Latch, marshal of Defiance, Kansas. Drunk or sober, men didn't care to face the fabulous guns Latch wore.

A sound. A shuffling in the dust. Latch opened his eyes. Nate Condon standing there. Nate coughed apologetically.

"What is it, Nate?"

"Oh . . . thought you was nappin', marshal. It's that Cimarron Kid again. He's got another gun and he's actin' like a rip-roarin' yazoo. Says for you to come try and get that one away from 'im."

"Causing trouble again?"

"Not the half of it. Got the whole Sierra Strike at a standstill."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Allus like to help out."

Latch smiled swiftly in the darkness. The world was full of men eager to help out in circumstances like these. He got up and moved toward the Sierra Strike. He walked slowly.

There had been another gunman a lot like the Cimarron Kid. He'd come from the north—from Montana—and he'd had scant respect for Kansas iron. He'd come into the Silver Dollar six months back and had made the barkeep waltz out front and do a dance for the folks. Said he'd ridden the owl-hoot trail from here to hell and back again—that he craved company and loved excitement.

They sent for Latch.

This jasper wasn't impressed by the name. There wasn't a man in Kansas, he opined, who was fit to saddle a Montana horse.

"I'll take your guns, mister," Latch told him. "You welcome in our town; but our barkeeps don't dance."

"They dance when I say."

"Not tonight. Hand them over."

"Haw! Big talkin'. How's your shootin', mister? I don't like the shape o' your nose. Reach!"

A grave. A headboard without a name.

SIX graves and John Latch walked up the dark street toward the Sierra Strike. There was a high twanging ghost voice in his ear:

No vacation, sonny. No office hours. Any time of the day or night you go on filling them. Always another grave.

Latch paused outside the bat-wing doors and shook himself mentally. Hell! He was John Latch. Men lowered their voices when he walked by. He was one of a mighty clan. A member of the

high-blooded brotherhood. He walked in illustrious company.

All the names floated through his brain: Wyatt Earp. Bill Hickok. Ben Thompson. Pat Garrett. Sam Bass. Bat Masterson. Tilghmann. Daniels. Brown.

They would stride like giants, across the history of the West. With the passing of time they would become legends of a lusty era.

And he, John Latch, would stride with them. That was what he had bought with his years and his guns and his skill. The right to walk among giants.

He pushed back the door and strode into the Sierra Strike.

Dead silence filled the place. An audience set for the show. Another grave for Latch. Another inch of stature for his reputation. Another kill.

The Cimarron Kid was away from the bar this time. He stood facing the door, crouched. His face was as blank as an empty sky.

"Where'd you get that gun, kid?"

"No tricks this time, Latch. A fair draw. I can kill you any day of the week. Twice on Sundays."

Latch was like two men. One a cold machine—a brain—a reflex—a gun.

The other stood apart and thought clear, unbiased thoughts. The other looked at the Cimarron Kid and measured a string of graves from there to Missouri. The other looked at the marshal of Defiance, Kansas and said:

You're through, John Latch. This is the last grave.

To Latch, the roar of gun-fire was almost like an aftermath. The thunder that comes long after the streak of lightning in a storm-sky.

The roar Latch heard was from the gun of the Cimarron Kid.

There was a thought in Latch's mind: He's too fast. He beat me.

The .44s hadn't spoken.

As he fell Latch knew something—knew it for sure. This was the kid's first kill. For all his big talk it was his first kill, and another string had been started. Now they would say of him in the lonely line-cabins and in the smoky saloons:

"He killed John Latch in a stand-and-draw."

With a gesture of his mind, Latch tossed the mantle of glamour to the Cimarron Kid.

Then the sky was cloudy and he saw a gaunt figure in a tattered Confederate uniform and heard a high nasal twang and a chuckle.

Your arms was too long, sonny. That's what got you in the end. Your arms was too long.

THE END

FAITHFUL BURRO

★ **By SANDY MILLER** ★

THAT much-maligned little cousin of the mule, the burro, is an object of reverence with anyone who really knows the west. That little animal did more in its time to safely deliver the westerner and his goods across the bitterest sort of terrain in the bitterest sort of climate than any animal including the much-touted horse.

The burro's legend of heroism is a touching one, laden with tales of service far beyond the call of duty. The attachment of many a westerner for a burro was almost as great as his attachment for his wife.

"Stony" the burro who belonged to John Cargould, "Johnny," a veteran prospector in the California gold fields during the hectic years of '48 and '49, is one worthy of considering. Stony was bought by Johnny for thirty dollars from a Mexican and he lived with the old prospector for twelve years during which that time he worked

harder than his master and with complete devotion. Every chore that could be thought of was performed by the little beast.

Eventually Johnny struck pay dirt after many years of grubbing for the barest sort of living. Ultimately he moved to Frisco, taking his ever-faithful burro with him. When Johnny died, he had written out an elaborate will, which established a trust fund, among the other provisions for relatives and so on, for his faithful burro. The burro was to be taken care for the rest of his natural life, was to be carefully stabled and pastured, and upon the animal's death, he was to be buried beside his master whom he had served so long and so faithfully. These provisions were followed through. Stony lived six years longer than his master and eventually he was buried beside him. A monstrously elaborate headstone was provided for the animal. Engraved on this pure marble monument, were the words, simple and touching, yet thoroughly indicative of the way the master regarded the animal—"He served me long and well."

If there is an animal heaven, and some do believe that, undoubtedly Stony will be found munching fodder as sleepily as always, but still aware of his master's presence.

* * *

LIQUID GOLD

★ By MARVIN KENTLEY ★

THE OLD WEST is full of sung and unsung heroes. And as long as men are able to speak and read and write, they will hunt out these heroic sagas and tell of them. As romantic and as pleasant to listen to as are these tales of the old-timers, the new West is considerably neglected. After the opening of the oil wells in Texas and Oklahoma, the West saw action such as it had never seen and is not likely to see again. The gigantic and hurried spread of the automobile was responsible for much of this.

Black liquid gold! Rich earthy fluid extracted from ancient beds! Liquid of future destiny and power! Get it to the East—get it to industry—get it to the consumer! Western oilmen wrestled with the problem for a long time. The shipment of oil by tank car or in steel drum was impossibly slow. Oil had to be gotten to the East and Middle West in quantity. Even the Pennsylvania fields of the East had to devise new systems of transporting oil.

And so the steel pipe-line came into being and of course we all know how important those tubes of steel crossing all over the United States have become. Comparatively thin-walled steel pipe stretching hundreds and hundreds of miles across waste prairie, pouring its precious contents into storage tanks. Here was a system! It was not necessary to ship mere hundreds of thousands of barrels—here millions of barrels could be transported so simply. As a result the country has become honey-combed with networks of this type.

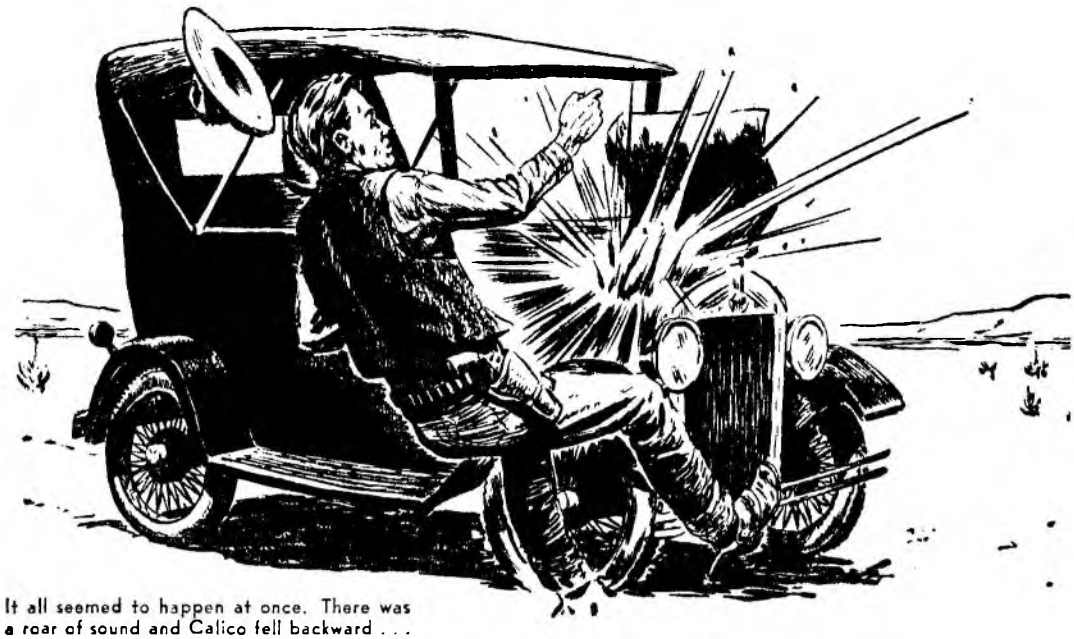
But the real story lies not in the technological nature of the problem but rather in the simple matter of man against man. The railroads wanted to ship the oil in their container cars and collect vast revenues because there was so much oil to be delivered—the demand was so great. But the oil men knew that the pipeline was the only answer to their problem. But we'll show them that pipe lines aren't safe, thought the railroaders. Gangs were organized whose duty it was to break or cut pipelines and in general foul up the thing.

PUMPING STATIONS located periodically along the line to keep the oil flowing, were often raided and destroyed. Long, costly repairs were necessary. See, the railroaders, would say, your lines aren't really safe. Deliver by tank car and make sure it gets there. But the oilmen were a rough breed of Westerners whose fathers had fought tougher Indians. Guards were posted in the pumping stations, armed to the teeth. Teams of men were detailed to patrol the lines in cars and on horseback, much as the old cattlemen watched their fences in the days of the rustlers. The oil rustlers, the railroads, and any others who wanted to do damage to the oil lines met their match. Practically open warfare raged. Long and bloody gunfights ensued with casualties heavy on both sides. But the mavericks were fighting oil men, as proud a name as cattleman.

Finally, the oil men won, by a combination of cleverness and courage—and above all, by public demand. When oil was needed nothing could be allowed to interfere with it. Like the mail, the oil "had to go through." And it did.

And as if to preserve a little flavor of the patrols of that fighting day, they're still maintained primarily this time to watch for natural breaks. But often they're armed for gangs have been known to break into oil lines, not destroy them but to tap them for bootleg, stolen oil. Every now and then it is poseible to read an account of such an attempt. And it can't help but stir up within us a certain nostalgic recollection of the what we now regard as the "old days." Perhaps even this will die, but the oil men's legends never will. Like other things from the West, oil has helped to make this country the great one it is.

* * *



It all seemed to happen at once. There was a roar of sound and Calico fell backward . . .

Calico Jones

HE was a lean, thirsty-looking poke with pleasant features and a healthy pair of lungs. His legs were too long for his body. One of them, curled around the horn of his saddle, looked like a length of pipe he was toting along as excess baggage.

His horse, a big roan, ambled casually along the trail toward Storm Valley, and seemed not at all annoyed by its master's efforts to wake up the surrounding hills. The horse merely flicked on indifferent ear as the robust notes poured forth:

Got a gal in Mexico.
Mexico—Mexico-o-o!
Got a gal in Mexico,
Diddle-de-I-dy-dee.

The poke stopped singing at intervals and cocked his head, listening for the echoes that came rolling back. When they came he smiled in complete satisfaction.

"Not bad, eh, Clumsy? Not bad at all for an amachoor."

The roan, addressed as Clumsy, forebore any comment, but, beyond the next hill a perplexed girl forgot her own troubles long enough to observe:

"Great heavens! Someone's dying!"

The poke couldn't see the girl until he topped the hill and turned a lazy eye down its far sweep. Then he reined up and forgot the business of producing echoes.

"Well, I'm durned, Clumsy," he said. "Looks like trouble. Looks like trouble for sure."

He pushed the roan into a gallop and pulled up a short time later beside a curious assemblage of gadgets, the like of which he'd never before seen. The

Rides By

By
F. W. PAUL

Maybe Jones wasn't so good at starting one of them four-wheeled critters—but a stampede was something else!

gadgets were ingeniously fastened together into a big master gadget with four wheels on the ground, one wheel at the end of a stick, and two seats.

In the front seat, behind the wheel on a stick, sat an exasperated, auburn-haired girl. As the poke rode up, she turned her head and regarded him not too cordially. Behind her gorgeous brown eyes lay smouldering flames of anger.

The poke raised his Stetson and smiled.

"Howdy, ma'am."

"Who are you?" The question was sharp and to the point.

"Jones is the name, ma'am. Just ridin' by and I kinda wondered if you're havin' trouble. Calico Jones, they call me."

The girl managed a quick smile.

"Oh, I—I thought maybe you were one of Black Bart's gang. I was scared for a minute."

"No need to be scared. I'm harmless as a ewe-lamb. But would you mind tellin' me what you're doin' here? Out in the desert sittin' in that contraption?"

The girl frowned, but it was a charming frown.

"This is an automobile. Didn't you ever see one before? It's a model T Ford. My father paid a lot of money for it and now it won't go. It won't move another inch!"

Calico Jones slid from his roan and stared meditatively at the automobile. He'd heard tell of them, but this was the first he'd seen.

"It's sure pretty and shiny, ain't it?"

"That doesn't make it go," the girl snapped. Then, "Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Helen Todd. My father owns the Bar-Six ranch. I don't suppose you would know anything about these automobiles?"

Calico Jones dropped his reins and stepped forward.

"I wouldn't exactly say that ma'am. I've done some pretty wide travelin' in my time and picked me up right smart bits of knowhow. Got a way with contraptions. Let's see what the trouble is here."

CALICO went to the rear, squatted down and peered under the axle. The girl had gotten out of the seat.

"It's the other end that makes it run," she said with a trifle of uncertainty. "There's a motor or something under the hood."

"Oh sure—sure," Calico returned easily. "I was just checkin' on the axle grease. You got to keep axles greased up on these things or they'll stick. That's 'cause there's no horse to pull and they have to turn by theirselves. Stands to reason, don't it?"

"I—guess so. But I think the trouble is in the motor."

"Could be. We'll take a look."

Calico went around front, got the hood unfastened and stood regarding a new mass of gadgets. He bent over, peered here and there.

"Water drippin' down from somewhere," he said. "Kinda dark for seein'."

He took a match from his pocket, ignited it against his pants, and pushed it into the vitals of the model-T.

"Yep. This thing-um-bob's drippin' wat—"

There was a whoosh and a roar. Calico went back on his heels. He teetered, went over backward and landed smack on the seat of his pants. He sat there, staring goggle-eyed at the sheet of flame that shot up from the Ford's motor.

Helen Todd screamed. Clumsy snorted and reared back on his hind legs. Calico closed his mouth and skittered back like a lizard on a hot rock.

"That wasn't water, you fool! It was gasoline! That's what makes the automobile run!" The girl imparted this vital information as the flames climbed past the instrument panel and went hungrily to work on the upholstery.

Calico got slowly to his feet. He stared at the holocaust, then glanced accusingly at the girl.

"Well now ma'am. You shoulda told me that before. The stuff looked like water. How was I to know—?"

"Oh—shut up!" Helen Todd was in tears. "You—you long drink of beer. You ride out of the desert and take a match and burn my automobile to a cinder. Now I suppose you'll tip your hat and go on your way."

The "wide travelin'" Calico stood scratching his head and absorbing another bit of "know-how." He was now an authority on how fast fire reduces an automobile to a useless mass of metal.

"No ma'am," he said, stoutly. "I aim to pay for this. I aim to get me a job of work and pay you off."

"That will be just fine. My father will be glad to hear it. Let's see now—" Helen Todd ticked off items on her smooth brown fingers. "One Ford car —two thousand dollars. One silly cowpoke at forty dollars a month. My father is sixty-one years old. He'll be sixty-six when he gets all his money back. It will be something to look forward to."

Calico gulped audibly.

"Two thousand dollars for that contraption? My gosh, ma'am!"

He caught Helen Todd's stern eye and his gaze faltered. Then he straightened his shoulders and put a grim look on his lean face.

"I aim to pay off, ma'am."

Helen Todd's eyes softened. She regarded Calico with new interest.

"I believe you mean that," she said, more softly. "I'm sure you do."

TEN minutes later, Clumsy was again ambling down the trail toward Storm Valley. He had an additional passenger now. Helen Todd occupied the saddle and Calico Jones' long legs hung down from a seat to the rear.

There was a noticeable lack of conversation. Calico was stunned into silence by the magnitude of his newly acquired debt, and the girl was busy with thoughts of her own.

That was life, Calico observed mentally. A man could drift along minding his own business, happy and care-free. Then he had only to top a hill, ride down the other side, make a pass with a match, and find himself mortgaged for five years. He sighed deeply.

Then the girl's voice, up front:

"I'm going to tell a lie," she stated.

"That so, ma'am?"

"I'm going to lie for you. If I tell dad you burned the Ford he'd probably fill you so full of buckshot you'd need a plow-horse to carry you."

Calico gulped.

"I wouldn't like that, ma'am."

"I don't imagine you would, so I'm going to tell him it was an accident."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am."

"Stop calling me ma'am. My name is Helen."

"All right, ma'am—Helen."

"But don't think that let's you out of paying. You get a job and start earning some money. Later, when you have a stake we'll tell dad the truth."

"Yes, *ma'am,*" Calico said, fervently. "I aim to pay off."

Some time later Helen Todd pulled Clumsy to a stop.

"You can get off here," she said. "Storm Valley is a half-mile farther on. You can walk it and I'll turn off and head for the ranch."

Calico slid obediently to the ground, and, before she swung away to the south, Helen Todd said, "I'll get your horse back to you."

"That's right kind of you."

"And remember—*get a job!* And fast."

Calico watched mournfully as the rear-end of his late transportation disappeared over a near rise. It sure did beat all! There he'd been, riding along without a care. And now, here he was on foot in the desert with orders from a female to hump himself and get a job; orders from a female he hadn't known existed a scant two hours back. It was a mite disheartening. He wiped his neck and started toward Storm Valley.

CALICO JONES laid a dollar on the bar in the Last Gasp saloon and said, "I'm kinda hankerin' to hire out. Wouldn't know of any short-handed spreads hereabouts, would you?"

The fat little barkeep poured Calico's shot and pursed his lips in thought.

"Can't say I do right now. You might try Oliver Todd's Bar-Six. It's the biggest outfit around."

"Don't like big outfits." Calico hastened to explain. "Some little spread maybe."

The barkeep shrugged, then a look of quick mischief came into his eyes.

"They need a printer over at the Storm Valley Clarion. Know anything about typesetting and such?"

Calico motioned for another dose of red-eye.

"Well, now, I've done some travelin' in my time and picked up quite a smatterin' of know-how."

"That so? Maybe you could get some work there. Without no printer they won't be getting an issue published this week."

"How come?"

"Jerry Loft's home with a bullet in his side. Nobody around the printing office but his daughter Josie and she ain't heavy enough for the job."

"Been a shootin'?"

"Uh-huh. Black Bart objected to some remarks Jerry printed about his business activities—stuff about acquiring a full grown herd without any

money changing hands. He dropped in town to see Jerry about it the other night and punctuated his objections with some lead."

"Where's this Black Bart now?"

"Oh, he and his gang's hiding out in the hills. He'll stay covered up until it blows over."

"Ain't they no one around here big enough to go after him?"

The barkeep poured a third one on the house and corked the bottle.

"It'd be Oliver Todd's job. He lost the most cattle. About three hundred head, he says. But wanting Black Bart and finding him out in those hills are two different things."

Calico Jones finished his drink. He said, "Thanks kindly, partner," and ambled out of the Last Gasp with a pleasant glow under his belt.

"A printin' man," he muttered. "That ought to pay better than cow proddin'. How much do I know about printin'?"

He marshalled his recollections. He'd talked to a jasper once. A saddle bum named Shorty. Shorty had had a metal rod he called a stick. He'd bragged about needing nothing more than that to make a living. Also, he chatted volubly about his trade. Calico leaned his length against the wall of a friendly building and went back into memory after Shorty's conversation.

A SHORT time later he presented himself in the front office of the Storm Valley Clarion. It was a bare room with a railing and a desk and a general air of poverty. There was no one to greet him.

After a short wait Calico vaulted the railing and went through a rear door. Immediately he came upon a pretty enough girl struggling over a type-case on a stone-topped table. The girl looked up. Her eyes were blue and wide and full of fear—quick fear. But also, there was a stubbornness in her round little chin and in her red lips.

"Yes?"

Calico took off his battered Stetson and scratched his head.

"Heard tell over at the saloon that you was short-handed, ma'am. Heard tell as how you might be needin' a first class printer."

The girl's sudden smile was the only bright thing in the place.

"We do—we really do. Otherwise I'll never get this paper out."

"Well, now, ma'am, you just quit worryin'. Gettin' the paper out is strictly my long suit. Jones is the name—Calico Jones."

The girl pushed back a wisp of rich brown hair.

"I'm Josie Loft. The reason we're in trouble is that my father is sick."

"Sick, ma'am? That's too bad."

Josie Loft's shoulders sagged wearily.

"Oh why lie about it! I'll tell you the truth and then you can go. You won't want to work here then. My father was shot by a murdering rustler he printed the truth about. He was almost killed and anyone else who puts the paper out will probably be shot at too. So you'd better leave now."

"How much does the job pay, ma'am?"

Her surprise was evident.

"Why—why not much. That's another thing. We couldn't go over a hundred a month. We just haven't got the money."

A hundred a month! Calico did some simple arithmetic. Not bad. In one quick move, his period of servitude had been cut in half! If he could learn to digest lava rocks and if he slept in the street he could pay off that danged contraption in less than two years.

"You hired yourself a hand, ma'am," he said firmly. "Now you just scat on home and see to your daddy. You're

plumb beat out. Don't give the paper another thought."

This solicitude on his part really sprang from selfish motives. He wanted to be entirely alone in the place. Undisturbed he could putter around and puzzle the thing out by himself.

"By the way," he said, blandly. "You got an extra stick? Mislaid mine somewhere."

"You can use father's." She looked at him strangely. "You mean you'll really take the job?"

"That's right, ma'am. Got some debts to pay off."

"Then I *will* go on home. I'm worried about father being alone." She turned briskly to the table. "There isn't much more. I've got most of the type set. Just these two articles left."

She indicated one hand-written piece and her face turned grim. "This one is the most important. It's father's copy on Black Bart. Not a word must be changed. Understand?"

"Nary a single word."

"The other is a social item of some sort."

Josie Loft smiled warmly and held out her hand.

"I'll stay home with father unless you get into trouble. Then you can find me in the white house two blocks west. That's where we live. Good luck."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am. Don't worry about a thing."

She started from the shop, then turned. "Alf Henderson will be in around ten tomorrow for the issue. He takes care of the distribution. You won't have to bother with that."

She was gone. A moment later, Calico heard the front door close.

HE THREW down his hat and looked around. He took a deep breath, inhaling the smell of printer's ink.

"I sure do get around," he opined. "A hundred a month! No cow poke can make that kind of money." He ambled across the shop and stood in front of a clumsy-looking assemblage of gadgets. "Guess that's what they print the paper on. I'll have to riddle out how it works. Shouldn't be too hard."

He went back to the stone-topped table and picked up the sheet of hand-written copy. He read it carefully:

"Black Bart" Coleman, the well-known assassin, cattle-rustler, and all-around thief, paid your editor a visit the other night. He came, of course, in the dark, surrounded by his infamous henchmen, and did his talking with a .45.

This scoundrel resents the truth, it seems, and is not above killing, murdering, and terrorizing, in his attempts to suppress it . . .

Calico Jones pursed his lips and whistled softly. Pretty strong talking this. It ought to curl Black Bart's hair for sure. He passed on to the other item. As he read it, his eyes widened. After he'd finished it he stared thoughtfully into space.

The item concerned one Oliver Todd and its import brought to Calico the belief that he'd been decived by Oliver Todd's daughter, Helen.

The item stated that Oliver Todd had donated five hundred dollars toward the construction of a church in Storm Valley. It implied further that Oliver Todd was a fine upstanding citizen and that Storm Valley was fortunate indeed to have him residing within its reaches.

A man like that would hardly fill a poor wandering cow-poke with buckshot, Calico thought. That auburn-haired gal had been sounding off some.

Calico skinned off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He shrugged.

After all, it didn't matter much. He had a debt to pay and he might as well get at it. He turned to the table and heaved himself straight at the mystery of setting type.

LATER, Calico Jones pointed with great pride at his achievements in the printing shop of the Storm Valley Clarion. He considered it the high point of his checkered career; the time he acquired the greatest amount of "know-how" in the shortest elapsed time; the challenge that brought out the sheer genius in him.

"It took quite a spell," he said, "to get the type set, but I managed her. And then there was me on one side and that danged infernal contraption on the other. We went at it iron and spur and, for a while, I thought the blamed thing had me licked.

"But I gave it a right clever ride and finally ciphered out which end to work from and what all the handles meant. Then I dug the spurs in deep.

" 'Fore long I had the thing spittin' out newspapers like a dry gulch empties out a spring freshet. It was pretty wonderful."

That "ride" of Calico's was probably the longest on record. It began shortly after noon, when he walked into the offices of the Storm Valley Clarion. It ended at nine o'clock the following morning.

That was when Calico threw down the last stack of papers, fumbled for his hat, and staggered out of the place. He was desperately hungry but he didn't feel that he could lift his arm to feed himself, so he headed for the hotel, got a room, and collapsed on the bed. He slept like a dead man.

HE WAS awakened by the sound of thunder. The sound beat its way into his numbed brain and changed to the sound of many voices. He opened his eyes and discovered that daylight was still upon the face of the land. He lay still, analyzing the sounds.

They were the shouts of men, angry men, unreasoning, ferocious men. He got up and went to the window and looked out into the main street of Storm Valley.

There were many people in the street and it appeared to be a time of great unrest. The mob centered around a group in front of the Storm Valley Clarion offices. The main actors in the drama seemed to be two men and a girl. The girl, Josie Loft, faced the two men. There was bewilderment in her face, but also defiance and determination.

The two men were of varied cut. One was a tall, elderly, imposing man with a white mustache and gesticulating arms. He wore black broadcloth and was obviously a person of importance. The other was a great hulk of a ruffian. He wore two guns, low, and his rather evil face was generously thatched with bushy black hair. It would appear that these two had little in common. Yet they were allies in the affair of the moment, whatever it was.

Calico hadn't undressed, so he was ready to go after the simple process of pulling on his hat. He clumped down the stairs.

The hotel clerk hadn't joined the mob outside. He sat behind a plain wooden counter, and he was reading a copy of the Storm Valley Clarion. He looked up.

"What's all the ruckus goin' on out there?" Calico asked. "It's gettin' so a man can't sleep any more."

The clerk, a white-haired old codger, grinned a big grin.

"Seems as though a couple o' the citizenry don't cotton to what's writ in the paper."

Calico walked over and snatched the sheet.

"Them two items there," the clerk said, pointing, "is what's causing all the whoopy-do."

Calico ran his eyes down the first one:

Oliver Todd, the well-known assassin, cattle rustler, and all-around thief, paid your editor a visit the other night. He came surrounded by his dark and infamous henchmen and talked with a .45.

This scoundrel . . .

Calico said, "Hmmm. I sort o' got it mixed a little I guess."

From the street came strident tones: "Then if your father didn't do it—who did? That's all we want to know Miss. Just name the varmint!"

The strident tone boded the "varmint" no good.

THE clerk looked up with bright interest.

"You the feller that printed this thing?"

Calico nodded reluctantly.

"Maybe I should o' read it over, but I was so dog-gone tuckered—"

"Looky that other item." The clerk grinned wickedly and began sidling from behind the desk. Calico read:

"Black Bart" Coleman, an upstanding and God-fearing man, has brought happiness to everyone in Storm Valley. His donation of five hundred dollars toward a fund for a new church . . .

"That's the one that's really raisin' Ned," the clerk stated. "Bart Coleman says he'll get the man that accuses him of donatin' to churches, and blow his head clean out of the country. Bart don't like bein' kidded."

Calico pushed his Stetson back. So this was why Coleman and Todd, natural enemies, were on the same side. This was a plumb mess for sure. He looked up and realized that the clerk was gone. That oldster had ducked out the front door and was even now playing the part of informer.

Calico moved swiftly. While he had no intention of running out on his just debts, neither did he feel like waiting around for a combination breakfast of buckshot and .45 slugs. Incapacitated thus, he could hardly meet his obligations.

He headed out the front door and toward the hitching rack beyond. There he selected the biggest horse in the lot—a black stallion that looked more alive than the rest. He mounted and wheeled away from the rack and headed west.

There was a shout from behind: "Stop that so-and-so. He's got my horse!"

Calico twisted his head around and discovered that the shout came from the whiskered man. Black Bart, he decided. Then he gave all his attention to getting away from there.

HIS selection of mounts had been fortunate. The black moved as though all hell trailed after. It traveled as though it had a place to go—an objective—and, in a short time, out-distanced all pursuit.

With the desert reeling away beneath him, Calico Jones gave some time to self-pity. It did beat all how a man could get dragged into messes like this. It was as much as a man's life was worth these days, just riding along and minding his own business. Take for instance, the case of one Calico Jones, a happy wanderer who wished harm to none.

This Jones, in a space of less than twenty-four hours, had left behind him a ruined automobile contraption, a probably now useless printing machine,

and a completely discredited newspaper. Also, behind him, was a town bordering on riot and murder. And all because a roving cowboy had tried to pay off.

Calico Jones sighed. What would have happened, he wondered, if he'd been roiled up and really out for trouble. He shuddered at the possibilities, and reined the big stallion toward the left.

But the stallion didn't want to go that way. The horse clamped strong teeth on the bit, stretched out its neck and went straight ahead.

Calico frowned. Things weren't bad enough. Now he was astride a runaway horse. After all, a man can be pushed just so far.

He set his feet in the pockets behind the stallion's front legs and leaned back on the reins. He almost sprained both ankles and succeeded only in arching the black's neck a little. The black had a place to go and it was going there.

A wicked light gleamed in its eyes. Possibly it was wondering whether to stop and rid itself of this gangling obstruction on its back, or to keep on going. If so, it decided on the latter. With foam-flecked lips and heaving sides, it pounded on across the desert.

After a while, an ugly cliff loomed ahead. The black beat a path straight toward it. Closer and closer they went, head on toward the fringe of green at the base of the cliff, and it went through Calico's mind that this danged fool horse was bent on committing suicide.

He sawed at the reins. The cliff loomed. He closed his eyes.

BUT nothing happened. There was the crackle and scrape of low trees and some brush underfoot. Then Calico opened his eyes and found himself in a natural rock tunnel which the stallion made short work of. The beast cleared the tunnel and went sailing over some bars at the far end. Then it skidded to a halt, neighed triumphantly, began prancing.

There were answering neighs from a group of circling mares, and Calico realized that the black had done nothing spectacular.

It had merely hurried home to its wives, as any good husband would do.

Calico dismounted, dropped the reins, and looked around. The mares were in a corral at the head of a sheer-cliffed chasm, a canyon of sizable proportions. The corral served also to block off the tunnel entrance. And, beyond this corral were some interesting things—mighty interesting.

Cattle.

Back in the canyon there grazed a herd of fat short-horns. At least three hundred of them. They raised their white faces in abstract wonder and then went back to the business of getting fatter. Black Bart's hideout, Calico decided. Without a doubt, these animals belonged to Oliver Todd. No wonder they hadn't been found. Only chance could turn up a hiding place of this sort.

From here out, Calico's thinking was elemental. If Oliver Todd owned the cattle, his property should be restored. And so long as he, Calico, knew where that property was, it became his lot to make the restoration. Then another thought struck him, filling him with elation. Three hundred white faces, returned, should more than offset the price of one model-T Ford.

Calico went into action.

He lowered the corral bars, opening the tunnel-mouth and went about rounding up the cattle. As a bribe to the stallion—for comparatively decent behavior—he took along the mares also. After all, possibly they were stolen, too.

So the cavalcade thundered out of the

canyon, a mad mixture of horses and bawling cattle. Calico eased them toward Storm Valley. The stallion was happy to have charge of his harem, and so things went well.

IT WASN'T until the parade was three miles from Storm Valley that events clouded up and trouble boded. This trouble took the form of an approaching band of horseman. Bart Coleman, Calico figured; Coleman heading back toward the hidden canyon with his bevy of rustlers. They would neatly intercept the rescued cattle.

Calico thought swiftly. Somehow, he had to get by Coleman. Speed was the answer; the only possible solution. With yells and gunfire, he went about starting a stampede.

And it was quite a successful stampede that came roaring across the sage on the last lap of the trip. It thundered head-on into the Coleman gang. It wouldn't be turned. Black Bart and his men made a valiant effort to swing the leaders. They failed and, at the last moment, saved themselves as the cattle and horses thundered by.

Stopping a stampede is much more difficult than starting one. And the stopping of this one was impossible. The white faces thundered on, with Calico and the stallion riding in their wake.

Behind came Black Bart and his men. It was an impressive parade.

"I sure can start things," Calico observed, spitting out a mouthful of dust. The dust made him remember that he was hungrier than any cow poke should ever get.

Then, ahead, loomed the town of Storm Valley. Not a peaceful place, however. The citizens had looked aghast upon the stampede thundering down upon them, and had fled for shelter. The main street was deserted as the cattle came smashing through. It was a day that made history, long remembered. The day the buildings came down.

Calico didn't stop in Storm Valley. He rode on through the town and spotted Clumsy, his own horse, galloping free across the desert, reins dragging. Other horses, also saddled, roamed free on the flats, but Calico had eyes only for Clumsy.

He caught the roan, changed horses, and kept right on going.

From some miles out, he turned and looked backward. There was shooting in Storm Valley. He believed that the honest folk, confronted with the evidence of Black Bart's activities, were cleaning out the gang.

But he had no urge to verify his idea. He headed for the far hills and away. After all, he'd paid his debt to Oliver Todd. He owed no man a dime. He was without obligation, footloose and free.

There were some hard biscuits in his bed-roll—food he kept for emergencies. And, as this was truly an emergency, he availed himself of their nourishment and moved contentedly on, through the purple sage.

After a while, his voice rolled out toward the hills:

Got a gal in Mexico,
Mexico—Me-exico-o-o!
Got a gal in Mexico,
Diddle-di-I-dy-dee.

Then Calico fell silent, his face thoughtful.

"She sure was a cute little auburn-haired filly, though," he sighed meditatively.

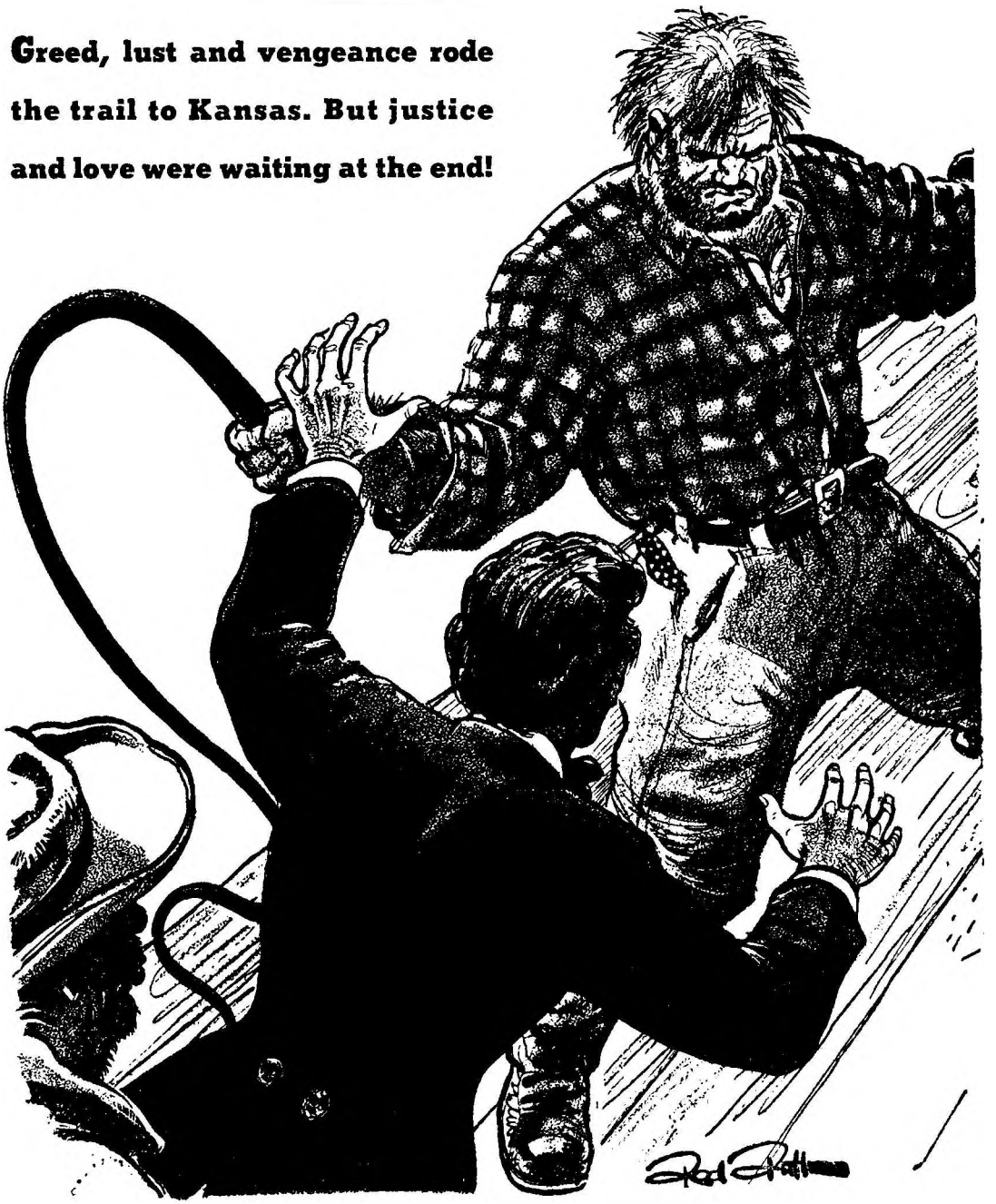
Clumsy cocked both ears as echoes rolled back from the hills.

THE END

Drive North

By Dwight V. Swain

Greed, lust and vengeance rode the trail to Kansas. But justice and love were waiting at the end!



Helen screamed as the whip struck her, and Howard went stark mad . . .

—and Die!

BECAUSE he was new to these wooded South Central Texas hills, Steve Rand rode carefully, taking his time and ranging wide.

His big steeldust gelding topped another rise. Reining in, Rand searched the countryside spread out before him. He knew he should be nearing Tonkawa, but he wasn't sure just where it lay.

Off to the east, water glistened—the brush-fringed meanderings of a creek.

Rand spurred the steeldust toward it. As he rode, a thin curl of smoke, then a mud-and-stick chimney and the gable of a cabin roof, came into view in the distance. Veering, he swung toward the cabin.

But as he drew closer, he began to wonder. Cattle were few—all longhorns, with a high percentage of unbranded yearlings. No horse-tracks showed. When at last he got to a place where he could see clearly, he discovered that cabin and outbuildings and pole corral alike were sagging and dilapidated.

A clump of blackjack loomed ahead. Halting in its cover, Rand studied the setup thoughtfully. There was something queer about it all. An utter stillness that extended even to the birds in the trees seemed to hover over everything.

Half-ruefully, he urged the steeldust on past the brush-choked thicket and into the cabin clearing.

Behind him, branches crackled. A heavy gun roared.

Rand dived from his saddle. His Colt was out and ready by the time he hit the ground. But before he could even as much as spot a target a voice rang out—a girl's voice.

"Move a finger and I'll shoot! And this Greener's loaded with buck!"

For an instant Rand lay frozen—more from the shock of the voice than the threat

of the shotgun. Then, very slowly and carefully, he twisted till he could see the speaker.

He had been right: it was a girl—a pretty girl, at that. Face pale in spite of a warm tan, breasts rising and falling too fast, she stood thigh-deep in the mixed brush and bunch grass that fringed the blackjacks, bracing an ancient scatter-gun against one slim hip.

He said soothingly, "Don't waste that buckshot. All I want is the road to Tonkawa."

A new voice cut in before the girl could answer. Thin and a trifle reedy with age, this one, yet still cold and self-confident enough to command attention. It came from a spot to the girl's left, half a dozen yards farther along the edge of the thicket.

"Leave the talkin' t'us, mister. You just do what you're told an' speak when you're spoken to. Just roll clear of that hogleg of yours, easy-like. Then stand up an' grab some sky."

Rand obeyed wordlessly. Standing, he could see the other—a gaunt, hawk-faced old man hunkered low beside a tree. The oldster held a cumbersome .50-caliber Sharps buffalo gun as if he knew how to use it, and a well-worn Remington revolver, converted from cap-and-ball, hung at his hip.

The girl spoke. "What are you doing here?" There was no tremor in her voice now.

Rand shrugged. "I told you. I was passing through. I wanted to find out how to get to Tonkawa."

"And of course it wouldn't be your fault if what little we've got left here burned down, would it? If Milam or I or both of us were killed, of course that would just be an unfortunate accident!" Her scorn washed over him. "You must be proud of yourself—you and all the others like you! My father's just a hill-country preacher who never hurt anyone in his life, but that didn't keep you from crippling him—"

"Miz' Helen, dally your tongue!" the old man interrupted. "This ain't no time to augur, nor the *hombre* to do it with, neither."

The girl was silent for a moment. Then, abruptly, she once more addressed Rand. "Well? Are you going to tell us the truth?"

"I already have."

"You expect us to believe that? That a man like you, a hired gunman"—she pronounced the phrase with infinite contempt—"just happened to stop at the Jughandle on this particular day?"

"I don't know why not. It doesn't sound so strange to me." A spark of irritation grew in Rand. He let it put an edge on his voice. "At least, no stranger than your trick of shooting a man in the back without warning before you even know who he is."

Color came to the girl's face in a rush. But it was the oldster who answered. "That was me, mister, an' all I needed t'know was the way you wore your gun. The Gills is the only ones in the county that keeps your kind on tap."

"The Gills—!"

"Don't try to act like no innocent lamb with me! You know who I'm talkin' about—an' we know they sent you, an' why. I'd've got you, too, but Miz' Helen went womany on me an' knocked my arm up." The gaunt oldster clicked his Sharps' hammer back to full cock. "Mebbe it still ain't too late."

Rand let go his temper. It flared, the way it always did—out of all proportion; without regard for time or place or judgment.

He said coldly. "If that's the way you want to play, get on with it. You won't talk and you won't listen. I've got no more time to waste on you. I'm leaving."

Heedless of the leveled guns and the prickling of his own spine, he scooped his Colt from the ground and returned it to its holster, then went after the steeldust, now grazing quietly just outside the cabin door.

Neither of his erstwhile captors moved or spoke. Mounting, he rode back. "I'd still like to know the way to Tonkawa."

Something seemed to snap inside the girl. Of a sudden she looked worn and weary beyond her years. She gestured. "That way. You cross Big Bushy at the ford. After that, it's plain enough."

Rand nodded curtly. "Thanks."

"Wait . . ." Her lips trembled. "Maybe we've done you an injustice. I don't know. But after you've seen the things that men will do for money and power—"

Her voice broke. She whirled and ran across the clearing and into the cabin.

Rand's anger drained. He looked at the old man. "It could be you're not the only

ones with a grudge against the Gills, you know."

The other's faded blue eyes grew bleaker than ever. He raised the Sharps. "Git!"

Rand rode away.

AS TOWNS went, Tonkawa wasn't much —just a straggle of sun-baked frame and 'dobe buildings strewn helter-skelter over the side of a hill.

The place Rand was looking for he found jammed tight between a harness shop and a feed barn—a narrow, one-story adobe with a weathered sign above its door that read, "O'Riordan," and under that in bigger letters, "LAWYER." Dismounting and tying the steeldust, Rand loosened the cinch, lifted a pair of bulging leather pockets from the saddle, and knocked on the door.

The third knock brought vague sounds of movement inside, then a short, stocky man with broad shoulders, too much stomach, and kinky, unkempt, iron-grey hair. His shirt was dirty and his rusty black suit unpressed, and he swayed a little, blinking against the sun. "Well?" he grumbled.

"My name's Rand—Steve Rand. My brothers owned the Crossed Diamond."

For a fraction of a second the other stared. Then, as if to hide the shock Rand's words had brought, he shuffled back into the office.

Rand followed.

It was dim inside, and hushed, with a dry coolness that made the faint, raw smell of whiskey that hung in the air stand out sharper than it really was.

The lawyer slumped into the chair in front of the desk and, uncorking a half-emptied bottle of whiskey that stood there, gulped down a good three fingers. When he spoke again, his voice was noticeably thicker.

"You're here for advice, no doubt." He belched. "I'll give you mine free. It's my considered judgment that your best and wisest course is to get out of this office just as fast as you can cut it, fork your horse, sink in your spurs, and ride till the brute drops. If then you'll slice his flanks and rub in salt and gunpowder after the fashion of our Comanche friends, he'll get up and run still more, and you may possibly get far enough out of Tonkawa County for you to keep your hide in one piece for awhile."

"Maybe." Rand made it tolerant, not curt.

The other's face darkened. "Your brothers are dead, Rand!" he rasped harshly. "Nothing you or anyone else can do will bring them back. I'm telling you—get out of Tonkawa before someone measures you for a coffin of your own."

"There's things I like better than running."

"Sure!" O'Riordan glowered. "I know your breed, Rand. You've seen your brothers' graves and you've heard the women weeping, so now you're riding the vengeance trail. You think you can carry on a single-handed feud against the Gills. Only the thing you can't get through your thick skull is that the Turkey Track's been built on ruthlessness. Oren and Howard will eat you for breakfast. They'll cut their gun-wolves loose, and that'll be the end of you."

The lawyer's vehemence made Rand smile a little. He didn't speak.

"Damn it, don't sit there grinning at me like a Cheshire cat! I'm trying to save your neck!"

Rand kept on smiling. In spite of the red-rimmed eyes and stubble and whiskey smell, he found himself liking this soured, bitter wreck of a man; trusting him, too, as his brothers had before him. A bulldog jaw could have that effect, sometimes.

"My brothers were killed in The Nations," Rand said. The momentary amusement he had felt all at once was gone, now, replaced by bitterness. "There's no proof to tie their murders in with anything that may have happened here in Tonkawa. There never will be. I killed the only man who might have talked about it to the law, and that ends it. I don't hanker to hang from a Texas gallows for a feud killing, even though I may think the Gills are responsible."

O'Riordan leaned back and locked his hands behind his head, eyes shrewd. "What are you doing here, then?"

"I've been to Goliad to see the boys'—my brothers'—widows." Rand stared bleakly off through space. "They're broke. They own half the cattle in this county, and they can't rake up a side of beef to feed their kids. They've got clear title to a ranch a man can't ride around in a day, but they don't even dare live here."

"So?"

"They've hired me to do something about it."

A spark of brooding interest gleamed in O'Riordan's eyes. "An' what might your plans to that end be?"

Rand held his voice as flat and level as he knew how to make it. He spaced his words.

"I figure to gather up every cow in Tonkawa County that carries an unvented Crossed Diamond brand, and drive them north to Kansas for sale."

It was the scene at the door, when he introduced himself, all over again. He could see O'Riordan rock under the impact of his words.

"Are you crazy, man? Stark, staring mad?" The lawyer brought an open palm down flat on his desk with a bang. "The key to this whole trouble is the Gills' determination to handle all outside cattle sales so they can dictate local prices. Do you think they'll let you challenge them on their own home ground?"

Rand tossed the bulging saddle pockets on the desk. He gave no sign that he had even heard O'Riordan. "I brought along the papers I thought I'd need in case there was any question about who owned what. Deeds, bills of sale, receipts, powers of attorney—they're all there."

"'Papers'!" Again the lawyer laughed. "Your brothers were right, Rand. They said you were a stubborn, reckless fool with more nerve than good judgment. It's a pity it's not in a better cause, too, for you'll do no one any good with it here. The Gills have the county sewed up too tight—sheriff, brand inspector, judges, everybody. They've already put out the word that they mean to have the Crossed Diamond on tax sale. As for the cattle, the minute you try to touch them—" He drew a forefinger across his own throat expressively.

"I'm not asking for help on that," Rand answered levelly. "All I want from you is the legal end. I need someone to check with me so that every move I make is inside the law."

For a long moment O'Riordan stared at the floor without answering—so long, in fact, that Rand began to wonder if there were going to be an answer. Then slowly, the lawyer's eyes came up, still darkly brooding. He laughed his bitter laugh. "Damn me for a sentimentalist! A lawyer should have no friends! Between you and Helen Inns, the Gills will have no choice but to gun me down!"

"Helen Inns?"

"A girl, an old hill-country preacher's daughter, who's in trouble because she tried to talk up a drive. They've pushed her to the wall, but I'm meeting her at the bank this afternoon to try to help her salvage a little." O'Riordan grinned sourly. "You should meet her, Rand. She'd back you—and very pleasant backing it would be!" He rummaged in one of the desk's pigeonholes, fished out a battered tintype. "Here. See for yourself."

The girl looking up from the tintype was the same one who had held the shotgun on Rand at the ranch where he'd stopped on his way into town!

IT WAS almost two o'clock when Steve Rand left the Texas Star eating house. Overhead, the sun was hotter than before; the dust more powdery under foot. The street looked deserted. Most of the loungers beneath the marquee had drifted away, and the blacksmith's anvil was silent. Tonkawa lay drowsing. . . .

The bank's door opened. Helen Inns came out, O'Riordan close behind her. The girl's face was stiff and flushed. She ignored the lawyer totally, and after a moment he fell back. The quick, worried glance he threw Rand might have meant anything—futility, warning, fear.

Ignoring Rand as completely as she had O'Riordan, the girl swung lithely to the wagon box. Her eyes were over-bright, her lips compressed to a thin, straight line. In one quick motion she dragged a washtub up onto the sideboard. Then, grasping an axe-helve, she began beating the tub like a drum.

The jarring racket of it filled the street. Faces appeared in the doorways of stores and saloons. Loiterers wandered out, to cluster around the wagon. Someone yelled drunkenly, "Hey, you Helen gal, is th' circus a-comin' t'town? Or is it a medicine show?"

The girl's dark eyes flashed. "I'll give you a show, all right—right here, right now!" Her voice had a ringing, singing edge. "I'm hiring drive hands! The Jughandle's going to push a herd north to Kansas! You all know me, you know my father; you know we'll treat you right. And I'm talking for him, even though he's crippled and in the hospital. We'll pool our stuff with whatever you other outfits want to sell—"

There was a momentary stir at the far edge of the crowd. The gaunt oldster who

had fired at Rand with the buffalo gun pushed through to the wagon, his hawk face lined and drawn. "Miz' Helen—!" he croaked desperately. "Please, Miz' Helen . . ."

She gave no sign she had even heard him. "Who'll sign on first? They say they're paying thirty-five and forty dollars for four-year-olds at Dodge this year—"

The bank's door opened again. Three men came out and took their stand along the wall.

The first, a big-framed giant with pale, close-set eyes and sweeping blond mustache, was obviously the leader. It showed in his swagger, the arrogant set of his heavy, handsome face.

The second walked with a marked limp. Tall as the first, but pounds thinner, he had white, smooth-shaven skin and narrow, sensitive features that somehow added up to a queer, puzzling effect combining both strength and weakness. Instead of rough range clothes such as the first man wore, he had decked himself in frock coat, white linens, and fawn-colored, flat-crowned Stetson. He smoked a thin cigar.

Yet, in spite of the contrast between the pair, both had a subtle cast of expression that made it obvious they were related.

The last member of the trio stood apart. There was an indefinable air of viciousness about him. Squat, barrel-chested, bull-necked, he looked to measure nearly as broad as he was tall, with dangling arms too long for his body. His eyes gleamed like tiny red danger lights, sunk deep amid greasy rolls of flesh in a stubble-matted face. A heavy bull-whip hung coiled about his throat, while twin guns swung in greased holsters thonged to his thick legs.

Three men: Oren Gill. His brother Howard. Their foreman, Anse Krueger. Rand recognized them instantly from O'Riordan's description. He flipped away the half-smoked butt of his cigarette.

Silence fell over the crowd like a deadening blanket. Men shuffled their feet uneasily; fell back a little.

"What's the matter, are you all afraid?" the girl in the wagon cried. There was a new note of strain in her voice. "Hasn't even one man in Tonkawa County still got backbone enough to buck the Gills?"

Big Oren Gill leaned across his brother and spoke to the third man, the bull-necked gun-slinger with the whip, Anse Krueger.

Krueger nodded and lumbered forward, grinning: brutish. The crowd seemed to evaporate before him. More and more of the bystanders were sifting away, slipping hastily back into the nearby buldings, till only a handful of hard-faced saloon loungers remained.

Old Milam Medford, the girl's lone cowhand, moved around to the tailgate of the wagon, between it and the oncoming gunman. One veined, bony hand lingered close to the butt of his ancient Remington. Helen Inns was still appealing: "Who's going with us? The Jughandle's driving through to Kansas. We want men, we want cattle—"

Krueger guffawed.

"We're going north to Kansas. We want drive hands—"

"You want damn' fools, you mean! An' you ain't goin' no-place!" Of a sudden the bull-necked man was no longer laughing. He stripped the whip from about his throat. "Mister Gill's took more from you than most 'cause you're a damn' addle-pated woman. Now he's through wastin' time. Siddown an' shut up before I snap a chunk out of your bottom!"

It was as if the whole town had gasped at once. The hot, still air vibrated tension. But before Helen Inns could speak, Medford was stepping forward. His faded blue eyes were chill as a Texas norther.

"Mebbe I didn't hear you right, Krueger. Mebbe you didn't rightly intend to insult Miz' Helen." His bony shoulders hunched forward a fraction. "Mebbe you'd even like to apologize to her while you still got the chance."

"Milam—!" the girl burst out. "No, Milam!"

Neither man gave any sign of having heard her.

"It's time you got over thinkin' you're still the curly wolf you once was, Medford," the bull-necked Krueger grunted. "I been meanin' t'take it up with you." His thick lips twisted. "I'm callin' your hand. I don't take nothin' back. So what the hell you figger t'do about it?"

The oldster snatched for his Remington.

It was a fast draw—incredibly fast, for a man as old as Medford. But before the ancient weapon could clear leather, two of the lingering saloon loafers leaped forward. A fist hammered the gun back. Caught by the arms, Medford was slammed hard

against the tailgate; held there, struggling but helpless.

"Like I said, Medford, there's things you need t'learn," Krueger smirked. "For one, your gun-slingin' days is over. For another, nobody but the Turkey Track drives cattle out of Tonkawa County. An' if that Jughandle boss of yours thinks different, she soon'll find out there ain't nobody but you loco enough t'take jobs with her."

He flexed his whip arm. The little red eyes gleamed brighter still.

"All right, Medford. Mebbe this'll help you remember!"

Rand said: "Krueger, you're wrong!"

IT WAS queer, the effect his words had. Purposely, he'd held his voice level and quiet. Yet somehow the sound of it seemed to slash across that echoing moment like a lightning-bolt. Helen Inns, Krueger, old Medford, the loungers—they stared at him dumbly, all of them, as if he had sprung from another world.

Krueger was scowling. Slowly, he lowered the whip till the hand that held it hung close to one of his thonged-down guns. "What the hell—?"

"I said you were wrong. If the Jughandle wants to drive to Kansas, that's their business."

"An' who the hell d'you think you are?"

"The name is Rand—Steve Rand. My brothers had the Crossed Diamond here—till they were murdered."

Krueger's scowl grew blacker. He shot a brief, uncertain glance to the two Gill brothers, still standing by the bank. When his eyes came back, the indecision was gone, replaced by a brutal, swaggering arrogance. He bared his teeth in the wolf-grin, and his words dripped insult, contempt.

"The Crossed Diamond, huh? That rustler outfit that ran with Tassie Pierce." He sneered. "You know who I am?"

"You?" Rand laughed. He let his own tone match the other's—insult for insult, contempt for contempt. The old recklessness sang in his veins, and he spoke loud enough for everyone on the street to hear. "You? Why, they tell me you're Anse Krueger—ramrod for the Turkey Track, and so yellow you need two more like you to hold an old man before you beat him up!"

Krueger's face contorted in an incoherent snarl. He clawed for his gun.

Rand leaped forward—whipping out his own Colt, driving a shoulder into the pit of Krueger's gross belly.

The wind went out of the Turkey Track foreman in a gust. He staggered. Before he could recover, Rand had jerked him about and jammed the Colt's muzzle against his backbone.

With an agonized effort, Krueger got his breath. His face was livid. He gasped, "You son of a—!"

Ignoring him, Rand gestured to the two loafers holding old Milam Medford. "Let him go!"

They looked at each other, hesitating, and Rand flicked the Colt away from Krueger's back long enough to fire, once. The hat of the nearest of the pair spun away. Its owner dropped flat with a yell of panic. His companion leaped wildly back into the paralyzed remnants of the crowd.

Rand spoke to Medford: "Get up in the wagon. Cover me."

Without a word, the old man clambered to the box and drew his Remington.

Rand prodded Krueger. "Unbuckle your guns."

Cursing, the other obeyed.

For a moment, then, there was silence, while Rand wondered bleakly how long he had to live. But there was no turning back now. Not here, with the memory of his brothers hard upon him.

Taking off his own holster, he slipped in the Colt and tossed it into the wagon. Then, stepping around to face Krueger, he poured vitriol into his voice.

"You do all right when it comes to bull-whipping old men when their arms are held. Let's see how it goes when you're on your own!"

Again silence echoed. Then, slowly, understanding—a delight that was sheer savagery—dawned in the brutal face. The thick lips parted.

"Why, damn you—!" Ape arms outstretched, Krueger charged.

Rand ducked and side-stepped, driving a fast, stinging blow to the other's midriff in passing.

Krueger roared his rage. Pivoting, he bore down once more.

Again Rand side-stepped and slashed through the clumsy guard. He felt the

rolls of fat shake under his fist. Jumping back, he hesitated just long enough to throw the Turkey Tracker off balance; then shoved in close, driving a tattoo of rights and lefts to body and head impartially.

Panting, face hate-contorted, Krueger backed away.

Mercilessly, Rand followed. He was timing his blows now, lancing them in where they would bruise and batter. That was the way it had to be, or the whole brutal business would lose its purpose.

He caught himself wondering how long it would be before the man fell.

As if in answer, Krueger spilled forward to his knees.

Rand stalked in for the finish.

Like great snakes striking, the ramrod's thick-thewed arms shot out. Hands snatched at Rand's ankles, jerked his legs from under him. He sprawled on his back in the dirt. A fist like a nail-keg clubbed at his head. Thick fingers clutched for his throat, and he could not break away. There was sand in his mouth; the hot, salt taste of blood. The street, the crowd, dissolved into a blurred bedlam.

With a convulsive effort, he tore loose one of those throttling fingers and jerked it back savagely; felt more than heard Krueger's bellow of pain as it snapped. Following up the momentary advantage, he stabbed his elbow into the bulging belly with all his might.

For the second time the wind went out of Krueger. He rocked back, trying to roll clear, his boot-heels beating a deadly riffle bare inches from Rand's face. In the nick of time, Rand twisted away and staggered to his feet.

But Krueger came up with him. Fury, desperation, was in them both now. Snarling, heads lowered, they came together with a crash of fists and feet and bodies, slugging toe to toe, all ideas of skill and science forgotten. Rand knew he was sobbing for breath. His chest and ribs were numb and on fire with pain, his arms aching till he could hardly hold them up.

Only then his right got through to Krueger's belly again. He could see the anguish wash over the stubbled face, and the sight of it gave him new strength. He hammered in another blow.

Krueger gave ground — fighting for breath, guard sagging lower and lower. Rand struck again.

Krueger went down.

Of a sudden Rand could hear the silence ring. He knew that every eye was on him, even though he was still too weak with weariness and pain to raise his own to see them.

His mind was working again, too. He knew the thing he had to do.

Swaying a little, he looked around till he found Krueger's bull-whip, still lying in the dust. He picked it up and, as he did so, he glimpsed the Gills again. They were still watching. He was glad.

Turning, he took two steps towards the baleful, sodden lump that was Anse Krueger, still asprawl on the ground. Then, with cold deliberation, he swung the lash.

The popper cracked like a gun-shot along one meaty haunch.

An animal sound of rage rose in Krueger's throat. He lurched to his knees.

Again Rand swung, and again the lash slashed home.

Krueger surged to his feet. Stumbling, reeling, he careened blindly, into the knot of watchers. A path opened for him as the whip cracked yet a third time, and he broke into a staggering run off down the street.

Rand threw away the whip. Carefully, because he was still almost too tired to walk himself, he crossed back to the wagon. Milam Medford stood waiting there, watching every movement of the onlookers, his ancient Remington cocked and ready. Helen Inns' eyes were wide with some indecipherable emotion.

He wondered if it were horror.

"My gun," he said.

Wordless, Medford passed down the holstered Colt.

Rand swung about. "If anyone else around here still thinks the Turkey Track has the say on who can and can't drive cattle out of the county, this is a good time for him to talk up."

No one spoke.

With studied contempt, Rand looked Oren Gill up and down. "I settled that easier than I figured, then. But if no one's got the sand to take it up, I guess I'll be riding."

A flush began to color the big man's heavy, handsome face. The pale eyes seemed to sink deeper into their sockets. "Don't be too damn' sure what's settled!" he blurted harshly.

"Shut up, Oren!" the lame man, How-

ard, rebuked. His tone was nearly as curt as Rand's—like a grown man talking to a child. He smiled faintly, flicked ash from his cigar. "You've put on quite a display for our benefit, haven't you, Rand? But I'm afraid we're going to have to disappoint you: we prefer not to go in for feuds or street-fights. There are other ways to settle these things."

A sort of fury gripped Rand. "Like shooting a man in the back—the way my brothers got it?"

The lame man shrugged. "Take it any way you choose." The expression on his thin, sensitive face didn't change.

"Then I'll take it as a threat." Rand glanced up at Medford and Helen Inns. "I think you two better get a head start out of town. Maybe I'll see you some time later."

"If you make it out of here in one piece," the old man grunted.

Rand's eyes went back to the two Gills. He let his hand touch the butt of his Colt. "Get moving. I'll make it."

"It's your neck, mister," the oldster shrugged. He spoke to the girl. "All right, Miz' Helen. You might as well drive."

She looked from one of them to the other. Her face was lined with strain. Then, pale and not too steady, she slid to the wagon seat and caught up the reins. Leather spatted the rumps of the team.

Creaking and rattling, the wagon jolted out into the street and swung north toward the edge of town.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS hard for Helen Inns to sort her thoughts as the ancient farm wagon careened wildly out of Tonkawa. Instinctively, she knew the ice-eyed, gravely smiling stranger belonged to the hair-trigger clan that followed Old King Colt. She had shuddered at the cold and merciless efficiency with which he reduced Anse Krueger to a crawling, battered hulk, to be driven away with his own bull-whip.

Yet in the same instant, he fascinated her strangely. The recklessness of him, the dash and fire—they held her spellbound in spite of all her father's teachings. Perhaps because he was the first of his kind she'd seen whose guns were not for hire.

Helen stole a glance at old Milam Medford, hunched unspeaking on the seat beside her, eyes set straight ahead.

She asked, "How long should the drive to Kansas take us, Milam?"

The oldster grunted something incoherent and spat tobacco juice.

"Milam . . ."

Medford's face set in stubborn lines. "No use talkin', Miz' Helen. We ain't makin' no drive."

"But—"

"Takes cows to make a drive. The handful we got left at the Jughandle ain't a drop in the bucket. Takes hands, too. We ain't got 'em, ain't got the cash to hire 'em—not even was we to find anybody fool enough to go."

"There are other outfits that might throw in with us."

"Who? How many stood up for you today?" Medford snorted. "They're all scared green, that's what. They ain't gonna take no chances buckin' the Turkey Track."

"They may not be so frightened now, Milam. That man, Steve Rand—"

"Him!" The oldster exploded the word like an epithet. Abruptly, he swung to face her. "Miz' Helen, they ain't no use beatin' round the bush. I know what you're leadin' up to: you figger to sweet-talk me into lettin' you throw in with that there *buscadero*. I'll tell you straight, right now, I don't aim to let you do it."

"But—"

"You might's well save your breath. I ain't gonna let you play his game." Again Milam spat. "I ain't just bein' ornery, neither, Miz' Helen. I got my reasons. I was a heller myself, in my day. I et my share of men for breakfast, an' I know how a gun-hand thinks. That's what that Rand is, too—a gun-hand, come to Tonkawa Town with murder on his mind. I ain't even sayin' how's I blame him, what with the way the Gills did in his brothers, up there in The Nations. But there ain't no place in that kind of a job for a woman, let alone a young gal like you."

A spark of irritation flared in Helen. "Don't you think I should be the one to decide that, Milam?"

"You?" Once more, the old man snorted. "This is a brand of trouble you ain't got no business to touch with a ten-foot pole. It'll lead to things I hope you never even hear about, believe me." A distant look came to his faded blue eyes. "Miz' Helen,

me an' your pappy's rode a long ways together, since the days when we started out as cowboys down Goliad way, back before he heard the call an' took to preachin'. He's the best friend a man ever had. Even with this little Jughandle outfit of his too broke to pay wages, an' knowin' I was too stove up to pull my weight, he took me on an' carried me, pretendin' like I was still the top-hand I used to be."

"Milam, that's not true!" Helen protested.

"Don't you tell me what's true an' what ain't, Miz' Helen; I ain't blind. I know how much your pappy's done for me. An' before they took him off to the hospital at Galveston after that half-broke stallion trompled him, I promised I'd take care of you as best I could. I aim to do it."

The irritation in Helen died, and a lump came to her throat to take its place. Her hand touched the old man's. "I know, Milam—"

Medford jerked his bony fist away. "You don't know nothin' at all!" he rapped fiercely. "That's just the trouble. If you did, you wouldn't talk about throwin' in with Rand. Because with Rand the man he is, an' the Gills the scum they are, there'll be blood an' bullets on the trail if you try to drive to Kansas."

"I know, Milam," Helen repeated gently. And then, as the spark of anger glowed again: "Only someone—some Gill rider—waited till Dad was riding a bad horse and then put a burr under the saddle to make that stallion pitch. You know that, and you know why they did it: they wouldn't leave even a preacher alone, so long as he had land they wanted!" She broke off, fighting back sudden, passionate tears. "Maybe it's time there was blood, Milam! Maybe bullets speak the only language the Gills can understand!"

"That's war talk, Miz' Helen. Your pappy wouldn't like that. He'd say to turn the other cheek."

"He wouldn't like the things that are happening in Tonkawa County, either! He wouldn't like seeing the Gills push his friends and neighbors to the wall!" Helen drew a deep breath. "And I'm not so sure what he'd do, either, Milam. Dad was a cowhand before he was a preacher. There were times, back then, when he didn't hesitate to fight, weren't there?"

Medford didn't answer.

"If you owned the Jughandle—what would you do, Milam?"

The old man looked away. "It ain't for me to say, Miz' Helen. The things I'd do might not be right, by your pappy's lights." He spat. "Besides, I ain't you. But I promised Zack I'd take care of you, an' I can't rightly let you get into somethin' you might not come out of alive."

A tremor came into Helen's voice in spite of her. "Then—then you'd have me give up? Let them take the Jughandle on their own terms?"

"I reckon I would, Miz' Helen." The old man still refused to meet her eyes. "I'll tell you the truth: you ain't got a chance, not after the way you talked in town today. Before, the Gills rode you plenty hard enough. But they still wasn't workin' at it. They didn't figger you was worth botherin' with, bein' a woman an' all. Now, though—now they'll reckon you might really make trouble, so they'll bring it to you first in earnest." His voice took on a pleading note. "Miz' Helen, I hate it just as much as you do. But your pappy needs you, lyin' up there in that hospital so bad stove up he's like to never walk again. You're all he's got. That's why I want you to give it up an' go to Galveston while you still got the chance."

"And the hospital bills? The things Dad needs?"

"I don't know, Miz' Helen, I just don't know. But you're worth more to him than anything else. He couldn't take losin' you, not now."

Helen could find no words with which to answer.

They were almost to Deacon Holmquist's tiny nester patch—half-way mark between Tonkawa and Jughandle—when they heard the drum of hoofs behind them. It was heavy, fast—half a dozen riders at least, distant but coming up at a full gallop.

For the first time in miles old Milam's eyes met Helen's. "Swing off!" he ordered bleakly. "Take Holmquist's lane an' draw up in the cottonwoods down by the crick."

Wordless, Helen lashed out with the ends of the reins. The team surged forward in a burst of speed, that rocked the jolting wagon wildly. She glimpsed Medford's bony hand descending to the butt of his Remington.

But the cottonwoods—and cover—were almost half a mile away. Already the drumming hoofs were pounding close. Then

a shout echoed faintly, and the tempo of the hoofbeats speeded up.

"Six-seven *hombres,*" Milam rasped in her ear. "They're after us, all right. They got us spotted."

Helen drove the team faster. Not that there was any hope of outrunning horsemen —she knew that—but there was always the chance that the added seconds might reveal some loophole, some tenuous gamble by which she and Milam might get away.

Behind them, a gun roared; then another. A slug slammed into the wagon box.

Dropping on one knee, gun out, old Medford turned. The thunder of the ancient Remington filled Helen's ears.

But the pursuing riders still hammered closer. Their slugs were a hail now, their shouts a bedlam. And the creek seemed still so very far away.

Just ahead, however, and to the left of the lane, lay a steep knoll, a steep-sloped little knob topped by a tiny thicket. To Helen the thicket meant cover, while riders attacking up the steep slopes would be open to fire.

Without warning, her whole weight on the reins, Helen hawed the team. The rear end of the wagon slurred, then the front, careening up on two wheels as the horses, half-falling, lunged off to the left. For the endless fraction of a second it seemed that the whole rig must surely overturn. Then, by some miracle, it righted itself and hurtled off cross-country towards the knoll.

The riders behind veered, too. A bullet tore at Helen's dress. Dimly, she heard a thin, triumphant shout from Milam; glimpsed a horseman going down.

In the same instant, an unseen gully—deep, narrow—loomed. The wagon plunged sickeningly. A splintering crash marked an axle breaking, and a wheel spun crazily off through space. Thrown clear, Helen landed flat on her back to one side of the struggling, harness-tangled horses.

The force of the fall stunned her. By sheer power of will, she forced herself up, to discover old Milam's still, limp form asprawl in the grass on the brink of the gully.

Head still spinning, she ran to him, even though the effort sickened her. A rider, whooping wildly, raced toward her.

Medford still clutched the Remington in his hand. With strength she had not known was in her, Helen wrenched it away; brought it up and fired.

The rider's mouth sagged, queerly slack. He spilled from his saddle. Dropping into the breast-deep gully, Helen dragged Milam's limp body down after her and, somehow, straining, tugged him back into the cover of the splintered wagon. Only then did it dawn on her that it was her shot that had brought the horseman down.

A stillness of sorts settled over the scene, but there was no release of tension. Fragments of sound drifted to Helen—a creak of leather; the faint, muffled jingle of spur chains—to tell her that the other riders were still there. Her own ears were ringing and the rasp of old Milam's labored breathing seemed to echo like the ebb and flow of life itself.

Hastily, crouched with her back to the wagon, she reloaded the Remington, then bent to examine the old man. She found an ugly, ragged cut in his scalp, and the angle at which his left arm hung told her it was broken.

He opened his eyes as she finished, wincing under her probing fingers. His seamed face was gray beneath its tan.

"Looks . . . like they nearly . . . sacked my saddle for me, Miz' Helen." Pain underlined his words.

"Oh, Milam. . . ." It was all she could say.

"They . . . still here?"

She nodded.

"Then you . . . better light yourself a shuck away." Weakly, he struggled to a sitting position. "Mebbe if you Injun down this here gully—"

"I'm not going."

"Miz' Helen—"

"There's no use arguing, Milam. I'm not going," she said again. "Besides, I couldn't if I wanted to. I—I shot a man. That must be why they haven't closed in before now. They don't want to take chances. They're waiting for us to show ourselves."

He stared at her. "You . . . shot a man . . . with Old Betsy, there?"

In spite of everything, Helen found herself smiling ruefully. "Yes. It nearly broke my arm."

"I should hope so!" Medford's lips twisted wryly. "Old Betsy's a heap of gun for a gal like you." And then: "Mebbe if we can hold out till sundown—"

Movement in the bunch grass along the rim of the gully towards the lane cut him short. Helen started up.

The old man's hand stopped her. "Stay down. Make 'em come to us." A spark gleamed in the faded blue eyes. "Look: you reckon you could wiggle along the gully bottom to where that *buscadero's* hidin'?"

"Yes."

"If you was to make a scrabblin' sort of noise there, like you was tryin' to sneak by quiet, but was too paddle-footed, that *hombre* might stick his head up. Rim's high enough so's he'd have to, to see, an' it'd give me a nice clear shot." The spark in his eyes gleamed brighter. "You just let me have Old Betsy. . . ."

It might have worked. At least, in retrospect, Helen Inns thought so.

But before she could move, the pounding hoofs of the riders sounded again, drumming so close and fast it was like a roll of thunder. Guns roared as the attackers swooped in close—leaping the gully, circling the shattered wagon Comanche-style.

Instinctively, Helen dropped flat. She knew old Milam was firing back; knew that he needed help. But there was nothing she could do—nothing but lie there hugging the ground while she sobbed with helpless, impotent outrage.

Then, of a sudden, she caught scattered words, a harsh cry—"See, there by the crick! It's a man—that Rand, mebbe!"

Another voice rapped, "Ride! The boss don't want witnesses. . . ."

As quickly as it had begun, the attack ended. The sound of the thudding hoofs faded southward and died away.

IT TURNED out the raiders were wrong: the man by the creek was Deacon Holmquist, not Rand. A shuffling, stoop-shouldered farmer with somber eyes and a long horse face, he came up while Helen was still working frantically to stop the flow of blood from a bullet-severed artery in Milam's right leg. The old man had lapsed back into unconsciousness again.

She glanced up at the sound of Holmquist's hesitant footsteps; said: "Deacon! Quick! Cut me a piece from that broken rein by the wagon seat! I've got to stop this bleeding!"

Uncertainly, Holmquist peered about; finally clambered to obey. Numb-fingered with panic and desperation, Helen knotted the leather strip about Medford's leg and, using the barrel of the old Remington for a lever, twisted it tight.

Slowly, the pulsing flow ebbed, and she sank back, suddenly weak and tremulous from the strain. All at once she wanted nothing so much as to let herself go, collapse completely.

But she didn't dare. There was still too much to do. Brushing back the dark ringlets from her face—the tumult had left her hair in wild disarray—she said, "He's got to have a doctor, Deacon. His arm's broken, and there's a cut in his head besides. If you'll get your wagon so we can move him to your house, and then ride into town. . . ."

Holmquist nodded without speaking, his eyes still glued to the battered Medford in a sort of horrified fascination. He made no move to go.

"Deacon, please, hurry!" Helen begged. "Don't you understand? Milam's hurt—badly hurt—"

"Who was it?" Holmquist blurted.

"Who—?" Helen repeated bewilderedly. "Why, Oren Gill's men, I suppose—the Turkey Track. . . ." Her voice trailed off. "I—I don't understand. Why don't you go?"

Holmquist's eyes dodged hers. "Mebbe he ain't as bad hurt as you think, Helen. If you was just to take him on to your place. . . ."

"Our place—!" Helen struggled to her feet. "What do you mean? What are you trying to say?"

Holmquist looked away, not answering.

With an effort, Helen held her voice frigidly calm. "I asked you a question, Deacon."

The nester shifted from one foot to the other, staring somberly down at his heavy brogans. "I . . . well, I . . . well, you can see, can't you . . . ?"

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Well . . . well, you're in trouble with the Gills, ain't you?"

"And so . . . ?"

"Well, a farmer's got a hard enough time in cattle country anyhow, an' . . . an'—"

"And you'd rather take a chance on letting a man die than do anything that might conceivably antagonize the Turkey Track, is that it?" Of a sudden Helen's grip on herself gave way. Tears came in a scalding flood—tears of sheer bitterness and anger. Her nails bit into the palms of her hands. "You don't care about what happens to your neighbors, your friends—"

"Helen Inns, you ain't got no right to talk like that about me—"

"'Right'!" A tempest of passion swept Helen. She lashed out at the nester with every drop of scorn within her. "Right, you say—you, that never missed a month coming whining to my father for a side of Jughandle beef! You, that pray the hardest and shout the loudest at meeting, and never miss a chance to brag about your piety! You—you fraud! You hypocrite—!"

A brick-red tide was surging up the other's face. "Shut up, you—you jezebel! I won't stand for it! Get off my place! Right now!" Fists knotted, he started forward.

A broken singletree lay in the dirt at Helen's feet. She snatched it up; brandished it. "I'll get off when you bring me a team and wagon so I can move Milam, and not before! And if you come a step closer I'll brain you!"

Her determination must have shown through in her tone in spite of tears and half-hysteria, she decided, for Deacon Holmquist backed hastily away. "All right, all right. You're outa your head anyhow. Oughta be ashamed. . . ." Still muttering sullenly, he shuffled off toward his cabin beyond the creek.

In her turn, Helen knelt once again beside Medford. There was a sickness in her as she saw the slackness of his face, the way the eyes seemed to have sunk back. His breathing was so faint she could hardly detect it.

Then to her amazement, the old eyes opened. A weak grimace that might have passed for a grin tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Don't you . . . fret, Miz' Helen. I been got . . . worse'n this . . . plenty of times."

She held his bony hand and forced herself to smile back. "Don't try to talk, Milam. We'll have you out of here soon."

"Sure, Miz' Helen. I . . . heard it all." He motioned feebly. "Better . . . loosen up that strap on my leg, though. Don't . . . want to lose it. Had it . . . a long time."

Wordlessly, Helen obeyed.

The old man spoke again. "Don't . . . ride Holmquist too hard, neither. He's . . . just . . . scared. Can't even say's I blame him."

"You mustn't talk, Milam."

"Mebbe now you see . . . why I don't want you mixin' . . . with Rand. This here ain't trouble . . . not alongside what there'll be if you ride with him."

"Yes, Milam."

"You promise me . . . you'll go to Galveston now, Miz' Helen? Forget . . . all that fool business . . . about drivin' through to Kansas?"

For the fraction of a second the words almost stuck in her throat, but she forced them out. "Yes, Milam."

"You're lyin', Miz' Helen."

Helen averted her eyes. "No, Milam."

"Yes you are, Miz' Helen. No use tryin' to pull the wool over my eyes. You figger not to fuss me now, but soon's I'm safe you'll ride with him."

Helen whispered, "Oh, Milam. . . ." She could say no more.

"I know how you're thinkin'. You're sayin', 'First them Gills got Pappy, an' now they got Milam, so I'll get them, no matter what.'" Old Medford shifted. "That ain't good, Miz' Helen. That's feud talk. Your pappy wouldn't like that."

She didn't answer, and again Milam shifted.

"You promise me you'll forget it an' go to Galveston, Miz' Helen. Really promise. . . ."

Stiff-lipped, Helen said, "No, Milam." And then, in a passionate rush: "I can't, Milam, I can't!" She groped, trying to find words to express the tumult of emotion that swirled within her. "It's—it's not feuding; really it isn't. But I can't run away. If I did, I'd feel as if I were just like Holmquist and the others: a coward, a hypocrite. I'd never be able to look in a mirror again. No matter what anyone said, I'd know it was my fault we'd lost the ranch, and that Dad didn't have money for the kind of care he needs, when if I'd gone on and made the drive—Milam, I can't give up! I've got to go on!"

The old man sighed and closed his eyes. His voice sounded very thin and far away. "I was afeared you'd take it that way, Miz' Helen. Yessir, I was afeared. . . ." He sighed again. "Hear that nester's wagon on the branch rocks? Reckon I better save my strength."

"Yes, Milam," Helen whispered.

"Gotta pull through. Can't cash in my chips now. Gotta go 'long an' take care of you if you're ridin' a war trail."

"Yes, Milam," Helen said again, very softly.

She rose as Holmquist's wagon rattled up the lane.

CHAPTER III

BACK in Tonkawa, as Helen Inns' wagon rattled north toward the edge of town, Steve Rand could feel the tension mount. It showed in a host of little things—the too-casual way the knot of hard-faced, waiting men before him lounged; the cautious tendency of hands to creep towards gun-butts.

But most of all, it showed in big Oren Gill, standing spraddle-legged against the bank. He was breathing raggedly, and his face had a harsh, set look. The pale eyes glittered cold murder. His whole body seemed to have drawn together, like that of a rattler coiling to strike.

Rand moved in close to the steeldust and racked back the hammer of his Colt. "I don't shoot hats twice."

Howard Gill laughed—quickly, before anyone else could speak or move. "You're wasting your time, Rand. Put up your gun and ride. No one's going to stop you, or those fools in the wagon either."

"I'll take salt with that."

"Then you've fewer brains than I'd credited you with," the lame man came back tartly. "I told you we didn't go in for street-fights."

"Your hired help doesn't seem to know your rules, then."

Howard shrugged and puffed at his cigar. "It's your decision. However, I'll waste no more time on you." Turning, he started to limp off down the board sidewalk.

Rand said: "Either you stop or I stop you."

"You will?" The lame man paused, gestured mockingly, his thin face a mask. "Proceed, then. I'm unarmed, and I've made no move to harm you in any way. But if you're anxious to lay yourself open to a murder charge, I've no objections."

There was a disconcerting self-confidence about the man, a cool detachment that left Rand suddenly at a loss for words. It dawned on him, wryly, that Gill had called the turn.

He glanced up the street after Helen Inns' wagon. But it was already out of sight, vanished around one of the dogleg jogs in the road. Even the eddying dust had settled.

"Well?" demanded Howard Gill. His smile was more infuriating than ever.

Rand swung into the steeldust's saddle. "It might be a good idea not to try to follow me too close." Still watchful, gun ready, he wheeled the gelding about and spurred down the side street that flanked the bank, putting the building between him and his adversaries. In a matter of seconds he was out of the town and into the cover of one of the tangled points of brush that crept down, finger-like, from the hills.

But no shots, no drum of hoofs, echoed after him; only Howard's derisive laughter.

Sourly, Rand considered. He'd planned a dramatic defiance of the Turkey Track, a demonstration to the county that the Gills' deadliness had been vastly overrated. But because it wasn't in him to shoot down an unarmed man nor yet attack a cripple, what he'd gotten, in the end, was something altogether too close to farce. It gave him a frustrating feeling that, rather than achieving his purpose, he'd been made fairly much a fool of, then turned loose to run till a more convenient chance to get rid of him came.

It was a masterpiece of disdain.

Rand caught himself wondering if even the threat of a Kansas drive and the downfall of this tight little Turkey Track empire could bait such a character into the kind of open fight an outsider might hope to win.

As for Helen Inns, and old Medford, and O'Riordan. . . .

Abruptly, Rand reined about and rode back toward the town. It was time he and the lawyer had another talk.

So far as he could tell, no one saw him, for he went in cautiously, angling to hit the alley behind O'Riordan's office. There, dismounting, he peered in the window.

The stocky attorney sat his desk, alone, a bottle beside him.

Rand rapped sharply on the glass. Inside, O'Riordan started, peered blearily back, and finally got around to fumbling open the rear door. His eyes were even redder than in the morning, his tongue thicker. He clutched the bottle in one hand.

"Damn you for a fool, Rand! If the Gills ever catch you here, away from witnesses, after what you did to Krueger. . . ." He broke off, belched. "What d'ye want?"

"Information. What are the Gills doing?"

"How the hell should I know? After you left, Howard herded Oren into the hotel, and I came on back here."

"And Howard was doing the herding?"

O'Riordan's mouth twisted. "You've caught it already, then?"

"Caught what?"

"What d'ye think?" the lawyer snorted. "I'm talking about Howard running the Turkey Track, that's what. Oren's only a braying, gun-heavy jackass with a knack for getting into trouble. But Howard's the power behind the throne—even though no one but me will believe it!"

Rand studied him thoughtfully. "Why won't they believe it?"

"Because they're damn' fools, that's why!" Scowling, O'Riordan drank from his bottle. "They see only the surface—that Howard dresses too well for this country, and reads more books than any three school-ma'ams, and has a taste for sherry instead of red-eye, and lives in town because he makes no bones he hates chousing cattle. That, and the fact that he's lame, convinces most people hereabouts he's a paper-backed no-account. So they take it for granted Oren's the boss." He glowered. "Oren! How that loud-mouthed bully loves to bluster! But without Howard his fangs would be pulled, for Howard's the one who's really vicious. He proved that this afternoon at the bank."

"At the bank . . .?" Rand prodded.

"When I took Helen in." Again the lawyer's brows drew to a bushy, iron-grey fence-row. "The Gills may not own the bank—or maybe they do; no one knows for sure—but they run it, the same as they run everything else in these benighted parts. They were there this afternoon, of course, and they played it nasty. Howard especially. He has a tongue like a surgeon's lancet. He told Helen it was his personal decision she'd get no help from the bank or anyone else; that he planned to have the Jughandle on tax sale, same as the Crossed Diamond. The way he twisted the knife made it plain he was trying to hurt her all he could." He spat. "She blew up, then, and they laughed in her face, and she walked out. I can't say I blame her."

"So . . .?"

O'Riordan snorted and took another long pull at his bottle. "So she can count herself lucky if she gets out of Tonkawa County alive. As can you, as I've said before." He broke off, stared broodingly. "I mean it, Rand. I've done what I can for you—posted public notice that the Crossed Diamond range is forbidden to trespassers; put it on record with the brand inspector and the county clerk that you're representing your brothers' heirs. But all the legal maneuverings in the world won't help you if the Gills find you here."

Rand laughed without mirth. "I don't doubt you're right about that. So I'll be riding as soon as you clear up one more point for me."

O'Riordan looked suspicious. "What is it?"

"Who's Tassie Pierce?"

"Tassie Pierce—!"

"He seems to have a name around here. You spoke about him once. So did Krueger. So do a lot of people that hang around the saloons."

The lawyer leaned back against the door jamb. "Tassie Pierce," he announced, "is the nearest thing to pure and unadulterated poison Tonkawa County has ever produced. He's killed more men and robbed more travelers and stolen more cattle. His headquarters is down south in the mesquite, beyond Go-Devil Creek. He's got a gang there—Nueces Quinn, Cisco Flores, Big and Little Sam Young; a dozen of that tribe." He halted, shot a glance at Rand. "Now you tell me: why do you want to know?"

"If he's so bad, why isn't he running the county instead of the Gills?"

"You ask too many questions. What do you care about Tassie Pierce?"

Rand shrugged. "Curiosity, I guess." He let it go at that, even though he knew his voice was too flat.

"I hope so," O'Riordan grumbled. His dissatisfaction showed in his face. "As for why Tassie's not running the county, his trouble's the same as Oren Gill's. All he has to offer is meanness, and he's got no Brother Howard to do the thinking for him. That's why he'll lose in the end, when the Turkey Track finally gets around to clamping down on him. Providing the Rangers don't come in and hang him first."

Rand nodded. "Thanks. That clears up a lot of things." He mounted the steeldust as he spoke. "I'll take your advice now, too—about getting out of town for awhile."

Uneasily, the lawyer followed him down the alley. "Damn it, Rand. . . ."

"Yes?"

"You're not crazy enough to think you can team up with that *ladino* Pierce, are you?"

Rand held his face expressionless. "Now you're the one who's asking too many questions."

He rode away.

THE sun already was brushing the crests of the western hills by the time Steve Rand reached the Jughandle. The yard, the cabin, somehow looked even more desolate than before. No smoke rose from the chimney, this time, and the mesquite and prickly pear seemed to have crowded in closer than ever.

Dismounting, he walked over and looked in through the open door.

There was no one home. But suddenly, in those same draped white curtains he'd seen from afar, and in the knitted afghan that lay across the horsehair couch, and the faint, sweet fragrance of the bowl of lilacs on the center table, he could feel the presence of Helen Inns, as plainly as if she had been standing there before him.

Bleakly, he turned away; and as he did so, the thud of hoofs reached him. A horse and rider came momentarily into view in the distance, on the track across the creek, then disappeared again as the ground dipped down toward the ford.

Rand led his steeldust around behind the cabin, out of sight. For himself, he watched and waited. After a minute or two he heard the hoofbeats again. The rider reappeared—on this side of the creek, now, coming up the trail.

It was a woman . . . Helen Inns. Stepping into the open, Rand waved a greeting.

Even as far away from her as he was, he could see her body stiffen. Then, apparently, she recognized him, for she raised a hand in response and reined her chestnut mare over to meet him. He noted that she rode wearily, shoulders sagging. Her dark hair was in disarray, the smooth contours of her face marred by lines and hollows. Yet in spite of it—because of it, even, maybe—there was somehow a quality of quiet beauty in her that made his heart beat faster.

He helped her down; and in the momentary contact he discovered that his nerves were suddenly tingling. His words sounded strangely awkward, even in his own ears. "I thought I'd better come make sure you got out here all right. I was a little afraid. . . ."

Her hand came up to silence him. "I hoped—prayed—you'd be here. I had to warn you. . . ." Her voice held a queer, taut note.

"Warn me—?" he repeated blankly.

"Yes." A visible tremor ran through her slim young body. "The doctor told me when he came to take care of Milam. Someone—I don't know who—was killed, and the sheriff's sworn out a warrant for you. It's all the Gills' doings. They're trying to get back at you for helping me . . . just like they did Milam. . . ." Her shoulders began to shake, her lips to tremble.

Rand stood very still. "What do you mean—'just like they did Milam'?"

"That's right. You don't know, do you?" Her laugh wavered on the raw edge of hysteria. "They—they shot him. They caught us on the way back, over by Deacon Holmquist's, and they shot him. . . ."

She sagged forward. Rand caught her, held her while she sobbed and babbled garbled, half-coherent phrases. Her anguish stabbed at him, and his own helplessness in the face of it made him angry and a little sick.

Then the tempest passed. The girl pushed away, her flushed, tear-stained face averted. "You've got to go now. That's why I came—to tell you. I couldn't let them catch you—kill you. Not after the way we treated you this morning." Her color deepened. "We shot at you—and then you fought Anse Krueger for us! We owe you so much. . . ."

Of a sudden Rand's embarrassment was nearly as acute as hers. "Forget it." He looked away. "What about Medford? How bad is he hurt?"

"His arm's broken, and he lost a lot of blood. But the doctor says he'll live." Helen Inns' voice was steadier now. Briefly, she gave him the details of what had happened. "I've got Milam at some friends' now—real friends; not like the Holmquists. They'll hide us awhile, and they sent in for the doctor. When he told me about the warrant, I thought of what you'd said about seeing us later, so I borrowed a horse and came on." She hesitated. "Where will you go now?"

"Go?" Rand laughed. "Who said I was going anywhere?"

She stared at him. "But . . . the warrant. . . ." And then, in a rush: "You don't dare stand trial! Even if some hired gunman didn't kill you before you got to

jail, the Gills have old Judge Leathridge so frightened you wouldn't have the ghost of a chance, no matter what the evidence was—"

Rand laughed again. Harshly, this time.

"I'll worry about that bridge when I get to it. Right now, all I'm interested in is getting together a herd of my brothers' cattle to drive north from here to Kansas."

"You mean—that's what you're here for? To drive for the Crossed Diamond? And you intend to go on with it, in spite of everything?" There was sudden excitement in the girl's voice and face and manner.

"That's what I'm here for," Rand agreed. He sucked in air. "As a matter of fact, that's why I fought Krueger: to prove to the people of this county that they don't have to take the kind of dirt the Turkey Track's dishing out. So you can forget about feeling grateful to me for it. And as far as that murder warrant you came to warn me about is concerned, I've been expecting it, or something mighty like it. I knew before I started this business that the Gills weren't going to take it lying down. It was just a question of how they'd fight it."

"But what are you going to do when they arrest you?"

Rand shrugged. "I don't know yet, and I don't care. But you can count on one thing: I'm going to make that drive."

For a long moment Helen Inns continued to stare at him. She was breathing faster than before, and there was a new, tense air about her. Rand wondered what she was thinking.

She said suddenly: "Will you let us pool our Jughandle steers with yours?"

It was Rand's turn to stare. He groped uncertainly for words.

The girl hurried on: "We haven't much —not enough for a drive of our own. And a drive's our only chance to salvage anything from the Jughandle for my father. . . ."

"I'm sorry," Rand said. "I'd like to help you. But I'm afraid this whole thing is going to work into a fight with the Gills. If that happens, it's a hundred to one against our getting the herd through at all. You'd lose what you've got, and that wouldn't help your father any."

"We lose them anyhow, if we stay," Helen Inns came back. "The Gills have passed the word around. We can't find buyers here at any price." Her hand touched Rand's arm. "I don't think I even care if they're lost . . . fighting."

Rand looked away across the hills. The warmth of that hand on his arm . . . the vibrant voice . . . the darkly shining eyes —they pulled at him, twisted and warped his judgment.

"Please, Steve Rand . . ." the girl whispered. "Please . . ."

"Go back to your friends," he said roughly. "Go take care of old Medford." And then, as her hand fell away: "But . . . I'll drive your cattle north."

THE room was long and narrow and dark, and filled with unpleasant smells. A lone lamp, alight even at this near-noonday hour, flickered close to the low ceiling. The floor under foot was dirt. A plank bar anchored atop old whiskey barrels ran the length of one of the long walls. Behind it stood a fat Mexican bartender with crossed eyes; before it, about as hard-looking a half dozen *buscaderos* as Rand had ever seen. The way they completely ignored him he accepted as evidence that he was expected. He ordered whiskey.

The Mexican set a bottle and grimy tumbler before him without a word.

"Where's Tassie Pierce?"

The Mexican's crossed eyes refused to focus on Rand. The massive shoulders rose in a shrug. *"Quien sabe?"*

Rand picked up the bottle and let whiskey rill into the glass. He was acutely conscious of the silence in the room. None of the hard-cases along the bar were saying anything.

"I've had better answers than that," he observed dryly.

Beside him, a hulking, sullen-visaged bear of a man swung about and sneered, "Mebbe you rated better—someplace else."

The others snickered.

Coldly, Rand looked the big man up and down. "Is your name Pierce?"

He drew another sneer. "No—if you reckon it's any of your business."

Rand hit the man in the side of the head with the whiskey bottle.

His adversary crumpled like a half-filled meal sack. Gun out, back to the wall, Rand eyed the rest of the group. "Everybody had their fun—or do I have more takers?"

No one spoke. But their glances were amused, rather than scared.

"Then where do I find Tassie Pierce?"

A high, shrill voice spoke from the doorway: "Right here, mister!"

Slowly, carefully, Rand turned.

The man who faced him stood barely five feet tall, if that. A little man, as well as short, with spindly shanks and narrow shoulders and not enough chest to thump. His face was narrow, too—pinched, wizened, infinitely evil; and his teeth were bared in a death's-head grin that on him seemed somehow to belong. He wore a hat that looked too big for him, as did the twin black-butted guns slung at his hips.

Now, as if he had timed Rand's scrutiny, he stepped forward, still grinning, and jerked his head toward the man Rand had felled. His eyes danced in a sort of murderous mirth—shiny little button eyes, shallow and jade-hard and tinged with jade's own green color.

"You live up to your rep, Rand. That's Big Sam Young you buffaloed." He laughed, a gleeful falsetto cackle. "You must hanker to see me pretty bad."

"That's right," Rand agreed tonelessly. He didn't bother to ask how Pierce knew his name.

"Popular, that's me!" The little man laughed again. "All right. What you want?"

Rand said: "I hear you and the Gill brothers run in double harness."

For the fraction of a second Pierce's eyes were like green ice. But the grin didn't leave his face. "Sure thing. Me an' th' Gills, we love each other. Eh, boys?"

The men along the bar chuckled dutifully.

Rand said: "I'm out to break them, Pierce. I'm going to drive a herd north out of Tonkawa County, and spit in their faces if they try to stop me."

"An' maybe you'll spit bullets, huh?" the other smirked. "I heard about your brothers, Rand. I figgered you'd be along t'settle up the score." He broke off. "Where do I come in?"

"I need men to round up my brothers' Crossed Diamond cattle and drive the herd."

"An' you think me an' my boys'll turn trail hand t'help you?" Pierce rocked with mirth.

"That's right," Rand said. "I'll tell you why: in the first place, if you let the Gills beat me, they'll be after you next—and we both know they can chase you out of this mesquite, even if you and your gang are the only ones they have to fight."

"Go on," Pierce prodded. He was no longer grinning.

"In the second place, I mean to put this herd through. If you throw in with me and we get it to Kansas, I'll pay you off to the tune of fifty per cent of the sale price."

"Go on."

"If you need any more reasons than that—this is your chance to fix the Gills for all the dirt they've done you. Between us, we can break them—"

"You mean, you hope we can," Pierce interrupted. His eyes were beady with fury. "Damn them—Oren an' Howard an' Krueger too! Damn 'em all! But it won't work. They got the law on their side—there's a murder warrant out for you right now—"

"There was a warrant out for Ben Thompson once, too—till he rode into the courtroom with his guns on and asked about it!" Rand observed curtly. "But then, if you'd rather hide out here like a scared coyote . . ."

He could see Tassie Pierce's eyes go momentarily cold again. Then they cleared, and the little man studied him thoughtfully.

Rand held his face expressionless. He could feel the short hairs along the back of his neck rising. Those thoughts—he could read them himself, too clearly.

Pierce said: "You might make it at that, Rand. Like I told you, you got a gall t'go with your rep. I mebbeso'd throw in with you, if it wasn't for the way the Gills got the law tied up."

"The law never worried you too much before, did it?" Rand demanded. "As far as that goes, I've hired O'Riordan to try to take care of that end."

"Yeah." Pierce looked away, frowning, and silence stretched tautly, endlessly. Rand could hear the shouts of the children outside; the hoarse, rasping breath of Big Sam Young, still stretched full length on the dirt floor. Both sounds seemed to fray at his nerves equally. It was that kind of a moment. He found himself counting his own heartbeats.

Tassie Pierce began to laugh—softly at first, then louder and louder, till it finally

hit its previous grating, strident cackle.

"All right, Rand, damn it! You tell it good! Mebbe me an' my boys'll go along at that, if you can show me where we got a chance t'make it. I'd stake a lot, t'throw the Gills. Only one thing . . ."

"Yes?"

"Just don't count too much on any help from that O'Riordan—'cause he's the man they say you murdered!"

CHAPTER IV

HOWARD GILL slowly limped across the room to his massive leather lounge chair, brought all the way from St. Louis, and slumped into it. It was his favorite, this chair, like everything here; for here, in these two rooms of a frontier hotel amid a wild and desolate land, he had created his own world, a world of books and paintings and the music of his violin. Here were the things that made his life endurable, the luxuries that made up his share of the spoils of the empire Oren had forced him to build.

Lips twisted wryly, he selected a fine cigar from the humidor at his elbow. Yes, that was it: "the empire Oren had forced him to build," for it never would have been of his own seeking. To be sure, he had the intelligence—sometimes the keenness of his mind surprised even him—but the ambition was all Oren's. And there—again he smiled wryly—Oren had it over him, brain or no brain, for the urgency of Oren's greed and lust for power was such that he could never fight it off.

And now. . . . He grimaced, puffed the cigar alight. Now this Rand was here, ready to pull down everything he, Howard Gill, had built. Worse, Rand already was gathering allies—O'Riordan, old Medford, Helen Inns. . . .

Helen Inns. In spite of himself, Howard winced; even now, the thought of her was a knife twisting inside him. She could have made his life complete; added the one final luxury.

Instead, she had turned him away.

His tightening fingers crushed the cigar. Angrily, he threw it down and forced himself not to think of the girl. After all, the world was full of women. . . .

Somewhere outside, like an echo, a gun roared.

Howard came out of the chair instinctively. He limped to the corner windows.

Already the first taut shock of silence following the shots was breaking. Below, men from the stores stared up and down the street, blinking against the blaze of sunlight. Voices rose in a raw, discordant jangle. Then a shout rang out. Running figures began to converge on one of the buildings lining the east side of Main Street, down by O'Riordan's.

Howard cursed. Snatching up his hat, he hurried from his rooms and the hotel, heading for the scene of the excitement. If it was O'Riordan. . . .

It was. The lawyer still sat in his chair, but slumped forward till his head sagged on the desk. Four great, bloody splotches showed scarlet on the dirty white of his shirt, grouped close to the spot where his suspenders crossed in the middle of his back. He was dead.

"Who done it?" someone asked in a queer, hoarse whisper.

A man answered grimly: "Dunno; but it's nuthin' else but murder. They shot him down from behind, through the alley window. He never had a chance."

A sort of chill rippled through Howard Gill. Without a word, he fell back till he had worked his way clear of the crowd, then limped off down the street to the Silver Saddle saloon.

Save for one bartender, the place was deserted. Howard nodded curtly. "My brother . . . ?"

The man shrugged, set down the glass he was polishing. "He was here a little while ago, Mister Gill, but he left. Back before the shootin'."

"Krueger? The others?"

"They went with him."

Howard moved to the door and glanced out at the hitch-rail. It was empty of Turkey Track horses. Again he felt a chill. After a brief moment of hesitation, he made his way to the livery barn and ordered his own horse saddled. In minutes he was riding out of town, headed for the ranch, turmoil seething within him.

What had happened was all clear now; bitterly, horribly clear. Like the murderous, arrogant, bull-headed fool his brother was, Oren had gathered up Krueger and the Turkey Track's fighting crew and gone ahead on his own, deciding to use his force rather than Howard's brain—first shooting O'Riordan in the back, then riding off God only knew where, into more trouble.

This was an open break between the brothers . . .

IT WAS dusk before he reached Turkey Track headquarters; and even as he rode up he knew he had guessed wrong: save for the cook and a few hands from the working crew, the place was deserted.

Baffled, angry—almost as much at himself for not having foreseen what was coming as at Oren—he dismounted and turned out his horse, still racking his brain for some hint as to where his brother might have gone. After Rand, probably; off on some wild goose chase that might well end in ambush, with Oren brought home dead across his own saddle.

The sullen lack of welcome from the hands added to his aggravation. Always, they had sensed his condescension. Hating him for it, they made little effort to hide their feelings.

He ended by ordering the cook to serve him supper—it was the miserable beef-bread-coffee-canned tomatoes combination that he loathed—in the room he still held as his own in the ranch house. His only solace was a bottle of sherry, left over from the days before he had moved to town.

An hour later a sudden flurry of excitement caught his ear—raised voices, the thud of running feet. He hurried out; probably it was Oren and the gun-hands arriving.

Instead, all eyes were focused on the northern horizon, out where the hills dipped down to meet Big Brushy Creek. A strange orange glow was rising, faintly tinting the night-blackened sky.

A rider said: "It's fire, all right. Down in the brakes by that Jughandle place. Or maybe even farther over, beyond the creek."

"How can it be?" another demanded angrily. "There ain't no fires in the brush this time of year."

"There's always enough dry stuff down there—last year's deadwood an' whatnot. Once it gets goin' in th' thickets the rest'll catch."

"Mebbe so." The second hand spat. "Oh, well, what the hell. The wind's from this way, so we should worry. It can't hurt us, an' Oren ain't gonna be sorry if the Inns gal does get burned out."

But already Howard was limping hastily —and silently—to the corral; whistling in his gentled horse, throwing on the saddle. He caught himself hoping he could get away unseen; and realizing, numbly, even as he did so, that it made no difference now. Again, he was too late. Again, Oren was playing out his hand to suit himself.

Then he was riding toward the distant smear against the sky, pounding mile after mile, as fast as he could gallop, till at last he sat his winded, blowing horse atop a crest, looking down across a sea of glowing embers while leaping, crackling fire beat in flame-capped waves against the brush in an ever-rising tide. The Jughandle cabin-ranch house caught while he watched, exploding in a roar of heat and brilliance before his very eyes.

He thought of Helen Inns, and his stomach twisted.

It ended, finally. The flames died on Big Brushy's banks. The cattle ceased to scream. Only blackness and a smouldering stench remained.

Still shaking, Howard reined about. Slowly, he rode back towards the Turkey Track, trying to cut his brother's trail. He knew he would find it, sooner or later. The fire proved that. It had risen in too many places, stuck too close to the boundaries of the Jughandle range, not to have been carefully planned and set.

Then, ahead, he heard their voices—loud, brash voices, roaring with drunken laughter. Spurring his weary horse ahead, he hammered down upon them.

The Texas moon was rising now, pale and clear and bright. By its light, he could see the Turkey Track riders: his brother in the lead, with Krueger beside him; then the others, the hired warriors, strung out in a ragged file behind.

They paused in the same instant—caught up by the sound of his horse's hoofs, probably. Guns leaped out.

Howard shouted, "Hold it!" and Oren bellowed, "Don't shoot, boys! It's my Goddamn' yellow-bellied brother!" Then the distance between them was closed. Howard said: "I'm surprised you recognized me. From your behavior, I thought you'd forgotten I ever lived." He put ice in his tone.

"T'hell wi' tha' kind of talk!" Oren snarled drunkenly. He sneered and hiccuped at the same time. "I'm onto y'u, Goddamn' y'u! It took me long enough,

but I fin'ly got wise!"

"You're drunk," Howard clipped.

The sneer didn't leave Oren's heavy, handsome face. "Sure I'm drunk," he mocked. "Only I ain't drunk enough not t'see through y'r Goddamn' game—you, an' that snot-nosed li'l slut of Zack Inns's."

"You're a loud-mouthed, drunken fool," Howard said again. A tremor of fury shook him. "You dolt! You imbecile! You haven't even intelligence enough to stick to your beloved bullying and leave the things that require thinking to me! Always, you've been a greedy pig, but I've gone along with you and gotten you the things you wanted. Now you not only don't appreciate it, but you run kill-wild, like a mad dog in a sheep-pen. We can count it a miracle if this day's work of yours doesn't bring the Rangers down on us."

"Shut up!" Oren roared. "I'm onto y'u! I know what y'r up to." Oren's mouth worked savagely. "Y'r still sweet on tha' damn' Inns wench, tha's wha's th' trouble! Y'u tried t'double-cross y'r own brother so's she wouldn't get hurt!"

Of a sudden Oren was rising in his stirrups, lunging his horse across the short yards that separated them. Before Howard could even move a great, club-like fist was smashing straight at his head.

Sensation left him, then. He knew that the blow had landed, that he was knocked clear of his saddle and crashing to the ground; nothing more. When, the fraction of a second later, his brain cleared of haze, he was flat on his back in the dirt, still too paralyzed with shock and pain to move. Numbly, he stared up at his leering brother.

"You an' y'r Goddamn' brains!" Contempt and gloating triumph mingled in Oren's liquor-thickened voice. "Alla time bossin' me aroun' like a whipped houn'-dog —you, that's a Goddamn' yella cripple! Never done a day's work in y'r life, always spongin' every li'l thing y'u ever got from me, an' then y'u try t'boss me. . . ." His sneer trailed off in sodden laughter, and Krueger and the gun-hands were laughing with him.

Slowly, Howard struggled up to a sitting position. His blood was hammering, his face burning. But his brain . . . somehow, now when he needed it most, it wouldn't seem to work.

Oren said: "Get this: from now on, I run this outfit. You keep y'r mouth shut an' do as y'r told. 'F y'u don' like it, y'can get out." And then, when Howard said nothing: "Answer me, Goddamn' y'u! You got it?"

In spite of all he could do, Howard's voice trembled. "I . . . got it."

"Then see y'u remember it—or nex' time mebbe I'll break y'r Goddamn' neck!"

Wheeling, Oren and the gun-hands rode on.

CHAPTER V

SIDE by side, a dozen gun-slung *buscaderos* behind them, Steve Rand and Tassie Pierce stared down across the dreary, blackened acres that had but a few short hours before been Helen Inns' Jughandle ranch. The brush was gone now, the cabin a crumbled heap of ashes. Here and there charred tree-trunks still rose starkly, like grounded lances on some seared, savagely-contested battlefield. Desolation and the flat, smouldering smell of scorched earth and stale wood-smoke hung heavy over everything. Only in small, scattered patches —where the larger clearings had been—did green still show.

"You reckon they got the Inns wench?" Pierce asked at last, and for once the shrill edge was gone from his voice.

Rand shook his head. "I doubt it. She said she was staying someplace else. Old Medford got hurt too bad to move—some more Gill work. She's nursing him."

He was glad when no one made any further comment. But he knew why, too. It had been hard enough to talk Pierce into playing out this hand against the Turkey Track. Now, with this evidence of Gill vengeance before them, the murderous little outlaw and his men were watching, waiting —wondering how he would meet the challenge, and whether the game was too steep for them after all.

For himself, the sight of the charred ruins below brought no particular emotion, except perhaps a vague surprise—surprise that Howard, especially, had chosen to strike so meaningless a blow. He'd expected the attack to be a lot farther over on the devastating side.

As for Helen Inns and her loss, he was sorry; that was all. Of her own free will, she'd bought in on a war, and this was the way that wars were fought. He couldn't

afford to let it go deeper. Not while he still had a job to do for Riley and Ed and Jim and the families they'd left behind them.

The fire had stopped at Big Brushy. The hills on the other side were still green.

He said: "Who owns that country over there?"

Pierce shrugged. "Nobody, I guess, really. The K Bar runs it, but it's free range. Most of Tonkawa County is. Ain't but a few outfits—the Jughandle, here; your brothers' Crossed Diamond; one or two others—ever bothered to get a title."

"How about the Turkey Track?"

"They own some; not much. They buy up a lot on tax sale, run off the poor bastards that thought it was theirs, an' then let it go back again, knowin' no one's goin' t'have th' guts t'try t'run the Turkey Track off."

Rand nodded. "All right. Let's go." He started to wheel the steeldust about.

"Go where?" Pierce demanded dubiously. He and his men showed no signs of moving.

It was the moment Rand had been expecting. He reined up, met the outlaw's beady jade eyes coldly. "I said I was going to round up every head of Crossed Diamond stock in this county and drive it north. The Jughandle's in with us, so I'm getting their stuff, too. Most of it probably went across the creek last night to get away from the fire. That means we go have a talk with this K Bar outfit you talk about." He paused meaningfully. "That is . . . unless your feet are getting chilly."

Even as he spoke, and saw the button eyes turn to ice, he wondered if he had overplayed it. He had no illusions: thief, Tassie Pierce might be; murderer, cheat, double-crosser. But never coward. If the little man drew back, it would be because cold, considered judgment said the odds weren't right; not because of fear.

His own job was to rouse enough anger so the judgment wouldn't be quite so cold and considered; yet not so much that Pierce would turn on him.

The seconds ticked by like tiny eternities. Then, abruptly—savage; shrill-voiced again—the other was spurring forward. "Get movin', Rand! We'll see whose feet's th' coldest!"

Without a word, Rand sent the steeldust down the slope. He could hear Pierce's men pounding behind him, but he didn't look back.

Still together, they splashed across the ford, struck into the brush on the other side. Rand began to note cattle wearing the Jughandle brand. He cut off in the direction of K Bar headquarters; he'd noted the track leading to it the day before on his way into Tonkawa.

A whitewashed ranch house appeared, then scattered outbuildings, all framed in a notch in the hills. It was a nice-looking layout, stone to the windows with logs above. The neat pole corrals didn't sag.

Rand rode straight for the house. As he drew near, the door opened, and a tall, weathered beanpole of a man came out. The glance he threw Rand and the outlaws was half-worried, half-hostile. He didn't speak.

Rand reined up the steeldust. Without preliminaries, he held out the power of attorney from his brothers' wives and a similar authorization from Helen Inns. His voice was as hard and cold as he knew how to make it.

"We're repping for the Crossed Diamond and the Jughandle. If you've got bills of sale for any of their stock, let's see them now. Otherwise, we'll cut your range for everything that carries those brands."

The human beanpole's nostrils flared. "The hell you say! This ain't roundup time. You ain't gonna go chousin' my cattle all over the country!" He made no move to look at the papers in Rand's hand.

Rand looked straight at him and let the silence echo, unbroken save for the faint shuffling of hoofs, the jingle of a bit-chain. The beanpole's original uneasiness came back; increased. After a moment his eyes fell and he muttered, "We got brand inspectors t'take care of this kind of business. He ain't gonna like this."

"Maybe he isn't going to have too much to say about it," Rand retorted coldly. "Maybe he's going to decide the day's past when the Turkey Track can bribe people into keeping quiet by letting them grab off the leavings of other men's herds. You might pass the word on that around." He glanced back at Tassie Pierce. "Let's go."

They rode out of the K Bar yard, the other outlaws stringing along behind them.

Beyond the first rise, the little *buscadero* moved up beside him. "That's the way you figger t'work it, huh?"

"That's the way I figure."

"An' we draw half the sale price in Dodge?"

"Fifty-fifty, after the expenses are paid."

Pierce turned to his men, his pinched, wizened little face suddenly a mask of greed.

"You heard him, boys! Get to work! It looks like the K Bar's gonna have a mighty slim season this year!"

THEY made their headquarters at the Crossed Diamond, turning its mile on mile of rolling, brush-studded range into one vast holding ground; transforming the rambling ranch house to a thick-walled 'dobe fortress. Scouts watched by day and night alike, and gunguards rode the ridges. Tassie Pierce reserved his men for that, and for making the preliminary "business calls" upon the ranchers. The actual work of gathering the cattle he delegated to hard-bitten Mexican *vaqueros,* imported from his own private preserves, that land beyond the law which lay in the county's trackless southern thickets.

Cattle came—a few at a time, at first; then in scores and hundreds. The Boxed B herds were sifted along with the K Bar, and after that the Pigpen and Circle Dot and Teepee—a dozen others.

But of sheriff and brand inspector there was no sign; nor of the Gills. The outlaws began to lose their first hair-trigger tension. Pierce's shrill, cackling laugh sounded higher and louder and oftener.

And Steve Rand watched the work, and rode the back trails, and waited. Bleakly, he wondered when and how the Turkey Track would strike. Another day . . . Another week. . . ?

He was just leaving the house the morning Helen Inns came. He saw her afar off as he stepped out into the yard. But she was in levis and riding astride, and at first he didn't recognize her.

Then he caught the note of familiarity about the chestnut mare. A stray breeze swirled dark, glossy hair out away from the rider's shoulders.

He knew her, then. Strangely taut, he waited. When she halted yards away and slipped to the ground before he could come to help her down, it stood out in his consciousness out of all proportion.

He said: "What's up? What are you doing here?" and somehow the words came out harsher than he'd intended.

For a moment she looked away without answering, almost as if she hadn't heard him. There was just a trace of pallor beneath her tan, a tightness about her mouth.

"What's up?" he prodded again.

She said, "We've got to move. They won't let us stay any longer." Her voice was low and tense. And then, in an angry rush, suddenly facing him: "I don't blame them! Why should they risk trouble with the Turkey Track, after—after. . . ." She choked. "Don't you know what you're doing? Don't you care—?"

"Maybe you better tell me about it," Rand said. But he knew, all at once, what was coming, and the knowledge put a small, tight knot under his breastbone. It took conscious effort for him to keep his face and voice expressionless.

Again Helen Inns looked away. Her fingers twisted at a button. "You don't have to pretend, Mister Rand. I . . . was there when they came."

" 'They'—?"

"Your men. Tassie Pierce, Nueces Quinn, Flores—all of them."

"Where did they come? What did they do?"

"As if you didn't know!" The dark eyes flashed. "The Whipples, at the Cartwheel, took Milam and me in after he was hurt. They did everything for us. They were as glad as I was when I told them how you were going to take north what stock the Jughandle had left."

"So?"

"Yesterday, Pierce and the others came. They were worse than the Gills!"

"There may be two sides to that. A lot of these outfits claim they love you dearly, but that doesn't mean they still won't try to hang onto every last cow they've got, no matter what brand it wears—including Crossed Diamond and Jughandle. It takes hard men and hard words to loosen them up sometimes."

Even to Rand it didn't sound convincing. Not in the face of the things that showed in Helen Inns' face.

She said stubbornly: "I was there. I saw it all."

"Just what did you see?" Rand made it curt.

"They—Pierce and his gang—rode up and told Brother Whipple they were going to cut out every head of drifted stock they found on his range. I'd told him what you planned, so even though he didn't trust Pierce he said all right, he'd go along and give them a hand.

"Only then Tassie Pierce said he didn't

take kindly to being spied on. When Brother Whipple tried to tell him he hadn't meant it that way, one of the riders yelled and dropped a loop on him, and they all rode off around the house, dragging him. After they came back, Pierce got off his horse and hit Brother Whipple, and told him if he even stuck his nose out of the house before they got through working his range, or if he complained to the sheriff or tried to make trouble in any way, they'd come back and burn down his house."

Rand winced as he listened. The flat, careful monotone in which the girl told her story was worse than any hysteria could have been. It made it more graphic, painted the ugly picture clearer.

"Where does the part about the Whipples kicking you out come in?" he asked woodenly.

"That was this morning. Brother Whipple decided Pierce would be finished—the Cartwheel's just a small spread—so he sneaked out to take a look around. He found nearly fifty head of his own best stock gone. So he came back and told me Milam and I . . . would have to go, too."

"So?"

She stared at him. "You mean—that's all you've got to say? You don't care what Pierce is doing?" Her every aspect mirrored incredulity, shock.

Brutally, Rand slashed back. He had to handle it that way to get the words out at all.

"Caring's got nothing to do with it. That's why I tried to deal you out at the beginning, back when you first talked to me about taking your cattle north. I knew then you didn't realize what you were asking—only I knew it wouldn't do any good to try to argue you out of it, either, because nothing but rubbing your nose in the dirt of it all could ever make you understand." His laugh was bitter. "You! You talked about driving through a herd in spite of the Gills, and you talked about fighting, when you didn't even know what the word meant—"

"The Gills?" Helen Inns flared. "Who said anything about them? I'm talking about Tassie Pierce and what he did to Brother Whipple! O t h e r s, too—the Boxed B, the Teepee—"

"I'm talking about them too. They're part of this war. But they're trying to play both ends against the middle, and this is the kind of fight where there isn't any middle, nor any rules, nor anyone to call the turn. You win or you get killed."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I'm in this fight to win. I'll need help to do it—gun help, the kind that can shade the Turkey Track a fifth of a second on the draw and still walk away from the shooting. I can't get it from the honest outfits, so I'm gathering it where I find it—and that includes Tassie Pierce!"

"And it doesn't matter to you if Pierce does the same things you're fighting the Gills for?" The girl's scorn was withering.

Involuntarily, Rand's fists clenched. His voice shook in spite of him.

"That's right, Miss Inns. It doesn't matter. I've got three brothers lying dead in The Nations because the Brother Whipples of this county didn't have the guts to fight. They left the job for someone like me. Now they'll have to take their chances."

Seething, he pivoted, and would have strode away.

Helen Inns said, "Steve—"

"Well?" he lashed savagely.

Her lips were suddenly quivering, the scorn gone from her voice. "The Gills nearly killed Milam and my father, too, Steve. . . ."

Rand didn't speak.

In a small, shaky voice she said. "Don't make it too hard for me. I'm—I'm trying to tell you I'm sorry. Maybe I'm wrong . . . about you and Pierce."

"Maybe you are," Rand retorted bleakly. "Maybe I don't like Tassie's tricks, either. Maybe I'm letting him run because I have to. But I've warned him against doing any killing, and some day, if this drive goes through, I can come back and make it right for the trouble and stolen cattle."

The girl's eyes dodged his. After a moment she said, "I've got to find a place for Milam."

"Bring him here. There's plenty of room for both of you. You'll be safe enough till we point the herd north. By then, Medford ought to be well enough to travel and you can take him to Galveston."

"And . . . if I don't want to go to Galveston?"

"What do you mean?"

"Women have gone up the trail before."

Rand rocked. "Up the trail—? You're crazy!"

She smiled, then, and there was a provo-

cative glint in the dark eyes. "I don't see why you say so. After all, I've got my interests, and my father's, to protect—"

She might have said more, Rand thought, if Tassie Pierce himself hadn't appeared, flogging a lathered horse over the road as fast as it could gallop.

The little outlaw slid to a stop before them. His pinched face was working, the jade eyes beady with excitement.

"Rand!" he shrilled. "They're comin'—the sheriff an' a big Turkey Track war posse! They've scared ol' Judge Leathridge into callin' a special court. Now they're out t' grab you an' hang you for killin' that lawyer O'Riordan!"

SO IT had come. At last the Gills were striking.

Pierce talked on: "I got it from my scouts in town. The judge called court first thing this mornin'. They've already lined up a jury, all straight Turkey Track, an' a kid lawyer for you that's even scareder nor the judge. They're holdin' witnesses staked out, set to sing their song the minute the posse brings you in. An' what a posse—more'n a hundred men! Anse Krueger's ramroddin' 'em. They figger t' have your neck stretched afore sundown—if they get you alive. They'll be here in another half hour. . . ."

Rand found himself breathing a fraction faster. Grudgingly, he marked up a score for the Gills. They were handling this business right, playing O'Riordan's murder as their ace. It was viciously clever. They'd waited till his herd was almost gathered before showing their hand. If he fled, now, he'd lose the cattle. If he fought, they'd win. If he surrendered, they'd hang him.

He glanced at Helen Inns. "Go back to Whipples. Stay there, whether they want you or not."

"No! I won't—"

"You heard me, damn it! Ride!"

She flinched as if he had struck her. Her face went pale again. Without another word, she mounted the chestnut mare and galloped off.

"I'm callin' in my boys, Rand," Tassie Pierce said. "We're headin' back for the mesquite."

"So the Turkey Track can hunt you down like coyotes later?" Rand let his lip curl.

The little outlaw's wizened features seemed to draw together. His eyes were hot and cold at once, his hands close to the black butts of his guns. "This ain't th' first time you've like t' said I was yellow. Some day you'll shove it at me once too often."

"So?"

"You know we can't fight no hundred men."

"Who asked you to?"

"What th' hell—?" Bafflement showed in Pierce's face.

"We're not going to fight anybody," Rand said. "Not unless this Judge Leathridge develops a taste for trouble."

"Mebbe I don't get you."

"Neither will the Gills. We're going to ride around their posse before they know what's happening, and hit Tonkawa. If the judge is in such a stew to try me, we'll let him—with your boys standing by instead of the Gills. If there's warrants out for you, we'll settle them at the same time."

"An' the posse . . .?"

"The posse's going to follow our trail awhile, then lose it. They'll figure we've skipped the country, so most of 'em will wander back to town." Rand laughed harshly. "That hundred won't look so tough, once they find we've got the drop on 'em."

Pierce's face was a study in mixed emotions. Then, suddenly, he began to laugh, that shrill, strident, nerve-racking cackle. "Damn you, Rand! You're a man an' a half! I'll buy that scheme!"

"Then let's ride," Rand clipped.

They rode—gathering the *buscaderos,* first; then laying a clear trail straight south toward Pierce's *mesquital* domain till they struck a creek to cover their sign.

After that, they swung back to Tonkawa.

At noon, in taut, grim silence, a dozen strong, they rode into the town. The blacksmith's anvil was still, this time; the uplifted church steeple strangely incongruous. The main street looked more deserted than ever, all dust and sun and drowsing dogs. *Because the Gill gun-hands are out with the posse instead of loafing in the shade under the saloon marquees,* Rand thought, almost absently.

Then he glimpsed the squat adobe that had been O'Riordan's office. The memory of the stocky lawyer was suddenly hard upon him—the brooding eyes, the bulldog jaw; the words, like a self-signed death

warrant: "Hell, yes, I'll take the job, fool that I am!"

Rand choked. Maybe it was the dust. . . .

Tassie Pierce spoke, close beside him. "Ain't no courthouse. They use the showroom, up over the Silver Saddle saloon, there." He pointed to an outside stair.

"Get the horses out of sight," Rand said. Swinging down from the steeldust, looking neither to right nor left, he strode up the steps. His belly was a tight knot of tension, cold recklessness surging in his veins. The others crowded behind him.

A closed door blocked the top of the stairs. From beyond it came a faint hum of voices.

Rand kicked for the lock. The door burst open.

The room beyond was like a hundred others he'd seen before—big, high-ceilinged, vibrant with echoes; blistering hot in spite of open windows at front and rear. A score of men sprawled in chairs set up in rough approximation of a court's arrangement. They spun about, staring, as Rand shoved inside. He could feel the panic leap as they saw his gun, the crowding outlaws.

He said loudly: "I'm looking for Judge Leathridge."

Eyes flicked to a bulbous, sweating fat man in a rusty black frock coat, ensconced behind a sort of rostrum at the front of the room. His dome-like skull was completely, obscenely, bald, his chin so weak it had completely disappeared amid the rolls of blubber that were his face and neck. At Rand's words, he began to shake. His voice came squeaky and ragged.

"I'm Judge Leathridge, suh. An' co't's in session. What—what's the meanin' of this outrage?"

Tassie Pierce's men spread out along the walls. Coldly, Rand looked the jurist up and down. He spaced his words. "My name's Steve Rand. I hear you've got a warrant out for me for murder."

The judge's color ebbed. "I . . . well . . ."

"You have or you haven't." Rand strode to a paper-strewn table where the court clerk presided. He thumbed through the documents till he found one with his name. "So you have!"

New silence came down, taut and breathless, broken only by the faint drone of a fly buzzing futilely against a dust-washed window.

Rand made his voice flat and deadly. "I'm on the docket. I want a trial. Now!"

Judge Leathridge's fat hands pushed at the air. He seemed to be having difficulty getting his breath. "But . . . but there's no jury for your case, suh. You're not represented by proper counsel—"

Rand gestured to twelve men, grouped in two rows to the left of the judge's bench. "That looks like a jury to me."

"Well—"

"Is it or isn't it?"

"It—it is."

"It suits me." Rand pivoted, barked "Prosecutor!"

A greying nondescript who looked like a drygoods clerk jumped out of his chair as if he had been prodded with a needle. "Y-y-yes, sir!" His teeth were chattering.

One of Pierce's *buscaderos* laughed.

"Is that jury all right with you, too?" Rand demanded.

"Yes—yes—" The nondescript was so eager to agree he could hardly get the words out fast enough.

"Get going, then!"

The prosecutor squirmed inside his clothes. "There's—there's really not . . . not much of a case against you, you understand, Mister Rand—"

"Get on with it!"

There were witnesses, then—jumpy, frightened witnesses who walked on eggs, and confessed before they stated that they "hadn't really seen much of anything." There were more apologies from the prosecutor, more panicky squeakings from the chinless judge, more laughter from Tassie Pierce's men. And through it all Steve Rand stood in bitter, contemptuous silence, gun still in hand, watching the fly as it buzzed across the window, counting the particles of dust that floated down the hot, golden beam of slanting sun.

He wondered, bleakly, why he bothered to go through with such a farce.

Only he knew the answer to that, too. Because if Pierce's men laughed now, the whole country would laugh later. This was a tale that would go the rounds. Even if he, Steve Rand, died in a little while, that laughter might still set the Turkey Track a-tottering.

Besides, he owed O'Riordan something. . . .

THE greying nondescript said: "The—the prosecution rests."

"Then I'll speak my piece. In about ten words." Savagely, Rand stalked to the witness stand and was sworn. "I didn't kill O'Riordan. I don't know who did."

He stepped down. "The defense rests."

The judge's fat, trembling fingers drummed a meaty tattoo on his rostrum. He addressed the jury. "You gentlemen are acquainted with your duties without my tellin' you, I'm sure. So if you-all will just retire now—"

The foreman, a gaunt hillman in shirtsleeves and without a collar, licked his lips and cast uneasy eyes over Tassie Pierce's gun-slung crew, lined along the opposite wall. "Don't reckon as we needs t'go out, Jedge."

"You . . . have a verdict already, suh?"

"Reckon we have, Jedge. This here Rand ain't guilty of nuthin'."

Rand laughed harshly. "Thanks." He started to turn back to Judge Leathridge.

Tassie Pierce called: "Rand! I hear 'em comin'!"

Rand pivoted, strode to the window where the little outlaw stood. He could hear the distant sounds now, too—the pound and drum of a hundred horses' hoofs.

A muscle twitched at the corner of Pierce's mouth. His wizened face seemed to radiate an unholy glow, and the vision of massacre glittered in his jade eyes. "How we work it, Rand? Where do we hit 'em?"

"We wait," Rand said softly. "We wait right here."

"Here—?"

"This is where the Gills will come. They're the ones we want. We can tangle with their hired help any day."

"You mean you don't aim t'clean 'em?" the little man lashed furiously. "You'll let 'em get away—?"

Rand didn't answer. The beat of hoofs was closer now, the high horse dust swirling above the road not too far off.

"They'll bottle us!" Pierce shrilled. "They'll pen us up here—burn us out! This place is a trap for us, not them!"

"Maybe."

The posse thundered round the last bend. There were yells, war whoops, a few scattered shots. Then the riders were reining in—swinging down from their mounts, making for the saloons with the intentness of drinking men long dry. In a matter of seconds the street was almost as bare of men as it had been before.

Rand about-faced. Once more there was tension in him. He gestured with his Colt. "If anyone wants to raise a fuss, this is a good time—to die!"

Judge, jury, witnesses, prosecutor, clerk—alike, they seemed to shrivel in their chairs. Tassie Pierce's men shifted uneasily and looked from Rand to their leader.

"This better work out, Rand!" the little man snarled savagely. "If it don't, I got one bullet marked special for you!" Green eyes beady with anger, he gestured his followers back to their posts along the wall.

Again, Rand didn't answer. Drawing back a little, he glanced warily out the nearest window.

A little knot of stragglers from the posse still stood talking by the hitchrail across the street. While he watched, two of them broke away: a big-framed giant with a sweeping blond mustache; and another, thinner and town-dressed, who walked with a marked limp.

Oren and Howard Gill.

They headed for the courtroom stairs.

Seconds ticked by in echoing eternities. Feet thudded on the steps. Rand caught himself holding his breath.

The door opened. The Gills stalked in.

Rand said: "Congratulate me, boys! I've just been acquitted of murder!"

He'd heard often enough of men freezing in their tracks, but never before had he seen it so literally portrayed. Oren's color drained as if his blood were being siphoned off. Howard stood stock still, like a statue carved in flesh.

Then that, too, passed.

"Damn you, Rand!" Oren rasped. But his voiced trembled.

Rand said: "Next time, don't try to make the law do all your dirty work. Stomp your own snakes for a change." He holstered his Colt, and the recklessness sang through him. "You can even make your play now, if you've got the backbone."

A tremor shook the big man. His hands worked, and his pale eyes mirrored cold murder. But just as on that other afternoon, when Krueger had gone down, he made no move to draw.

Howard's recovery was better. He smiled, a thin, superior smile, then deliber-

ately brought a cigar from the breast pocket of his coat and lighted it.

"Still playing the exhibitionist, Rand?" he inquired coolly. "Surely you're not dolt enough to believe any decision this court might reach under your brand of duress will stand?"

"I wouldn't know," Rand retorted. "All I wanted to do was let folks see how a stacked deck can backfire. Maybe next time people around here"—he glanced at the judge, the prosecutor—"will think twice before they go whole hog for your schemes."

"And now that your demonstration's over, what do you propose to do?"

"What do you think, Gill?" Tassie Pierce cackled. He drew one of his big, black-butted guns.

Again both brothers stood stock still. There were beads of sweat on Oren's forehead.

Rand held his voice flat. "No, Tassie."

"No—?" Pierce shrilled incredulously.

"No," Rand repeated. He held his cocked Colt rock-steady. "Sorry, Tassie, but murder's not my line."

The outlaw's face grew livid. His dwarfed body drew together like a tight-coiled spring. For seconds the silence crawled and eddied.

Then, slowly, the little man relaxed. An infinitely evil slyness replaced the rage on his pinched face. "You take some awful chances, Rand."

Rand looked at the Gills. Almost to his surprise, his voice stayed steady.

"We're leaving now. Next time you're looking for us, or Helen Inns, drop in at the Crossed Diamond—without a posse. We'll be waiting for you."

He stepped close to Oren as he said it, and brought up the Colt. Before the big man could move, the muzzle slammed home on his chin. He spilled to the floor.

Rand turned to Howard. "You're next!" He struck again, even as fear leaped in the lame man's eyes.

"Let's go, Tassie." He stepped across the unconscious pair. And then, speaking to the quaking spectators as the outlaws slipped silently from the room: "It might be an idea to wait a minute or two before you start yelling. I might be waiting outside, you know."

He backed out the door, closed it, and followed the others down the stairs.

CHAPTER VI

THE days that followed the courtroom fiasco were even worse for Howard Gill than those that had gone before.

At first, after the bleak ignominy of that night of the Jughandle fire, with the hands and his brother roaring their laughter while he sprawled upon the ground, he had taken it for granted that though the voice thundering his downfall might be Oren's, it was really whiskey talking; and that as soon as the effects of the drink had passed there would be abject apologies and remorse.

He found, instead, that the liquor had been only a catalyst, a trigger to release all the dark and ugly things bottled up in Oren Gill. With a shock, he discovered that far from knowing his brother, he stood face to face with a man he had never met before, an arrogant, aggressive, querulous stranger—quick to take up any fancied slight, quicker to turn the knife in any wound persistent probing might uncover.

Yet once Howard learned these things, it was not too hard for him to understand and—after a fashion—accept them. He was, he realized, for the first time seeing the Oren Gill that the rest of the world had always known: the swaggering, churlish, gun-hung braggart and bully that Tonkawa County feared and hated. And once he got used to the idea he knew, too, that sooner or later this process of humiliation to which he was now being subjected had been bound to come. It simply was not in Oren, swept along by an all-consuming greed and lust for power as he was, ever to share his triumphs with anyone else, not even the brother whose brain had raised him to the peak he for a moment held.

In spite of it, Howard stayed on. He wasn't quite sure why. Partly out of habit, perhaps—some queer, twisted sense of duty that lingered even in the face of bitterness and mortification; partly from a feeling that sooner or later the tide would turn and Oren would be forced to crawl back, begging for help.

And partly—though only in his darker moments could Howard bear to admit this last, even to himself—partly because that one blow, that single brief, terrible moment of downfall, had shaken his confidence in himself. For if he had so misjudged Oren, knowing him as he did, could he not also

have misjudged his own competency to crisis? Might he not, upon breaking away, find himself unable to cope with life in a place where the Gill name was unknown, the Gill guns no longer behind him? So it was he brooded, pouring himself glass after glass of strangely bitter sherry; smoking fine cigars whose savor had suddenly gone.

Then came the posse's raid on the Crossed Diamond; the humiliation of that crisis in the courtroom.

By nightfall, Oren had changed to a ranting, raving madman. Eyes bloodshot, face fury-contorted, he paced the floor of Howard's rooms. His threats would have made a Comanche's blood run cold.

"Let them drive!" he bellowed. "Just let them try it! I'll give them law—gun-law! By the time I'm through—"

"—You'll be dead," Howard cut in coldly. The old contempt touched his voice. "Give credit to Rand: the pots are all his, so far. Every trick you've tried, he's outmaneuvered you. Now you're getting ready to fall into another trap. Gun-law? With Tassie Pierce and that crew at his back, he'll out-gun you."

It was as if the other hadn't heard him. "I'll gun-shoot them all—him, Pierce, that old bat Medford. I'll stake them out on ant-hills, like the greasers do—feed them to the coyotes, a piece at a time. And that slut—that Inns wench: I'll give her to Krueger! He's got a way with bitches like her. We'll see how proud and pious she is after a night with him!" Abruptly, Oren halted: laughed. Some of the tension seemed to go out of him. A wicked light danced in his pale eyes. "That's it! The girl goes to Krueger! You'll like that, won't you?"

Still laughing, he stomped out of the room.

Krueger. Helen Inns.

A tiny thread of chill rippled down Howard Gill's spine. That girl, that slim, soft-curved girl. . . . No matter how she rebuffed him, she was still the Achilles heel of his armor, the one weak spot in the wall of cold indifference he had erected about him. If only she would have had him. . . . He shut his eyes tight against the taut, poignant vision of her—and still, in the back of his brain, he could hear her screaming, screaming, as the slavering, obscene animal that was Krueger closed in upon her.

No. No matter what she had done—no matter how much she had hurt his pride—he couldn't let it happen.

Only he had no choice. Oren was out of control, running wild. Oren would never listen. Besides, his own brain . . . again, when he needed it most, couldn't help him.

With a curse, he lurched up out of the massive leather chair and stumbled blindly toward the door.

FOR a long time he lay on a high, wooded hill overlooking the Crossed Diamond ranch house. Helen was there, he knew, for he had brought a telescope with him, and occasionally he could glimpse her through the kitchen windows with it, even from here. But he still didn't dare go down; not till he was sure Rand and Pierce and the other men were away.

Then, at last, the only hand he could discover saddled up and rode away. In his turn, Howard limped hastily to his own horse and moved cautiously down toward the house. Already, his heart was drumming too fast. But he reached the yard, and then the back door, safely, and half decided that his fears had been foolish after all.

He knocked.

There was silence for a moment, then the quick, sure whisper of a woman's feet. Helen Inns opened the door.

Sudden confusion caught Howard. His cheeks went unaccountably hot, and the words he wanted to speak stuck in his throat. But then he saw Helen's face—her eyes all at once gone wide, her hand at her throat in a panicky little gesture.

It broke the spell. He said: "Don't be frightened. I'm not going to hurt you. I haven't even got a gun."

The hand at her throat fell away and some of the first fear left her face, but there still was no welcome in her eyes. "Yes, Howard?" she asked coldly.

"I want to talk to you. May I come in?"

She shook her head. "No, Howard. I'm afraid nothing you could say now would interest me."

"You're going through with this? You intend to ride north on this crazy drive with Rand and Tassie Pierce?"

"Yes."

"Helen, you can't!" He floundered, groped for words. "Believe me, those two

are scum, Helen, not even fit to lick your boots. Rand's a gunman, a professional killer. Pierce has always been a cow-thief and a cutthroat. That's why we drove him and his crew back into the mesquite. God only knows what they'll do to you once you're away from here and at their mercy—"

Her voice held its edge. "Will it be worse than what you and Oren have already done to the Jughandle, Howard? Will they put burrs under my saddle when I'm riding a half-wild horse, or hold my arms while they beat me up, or burn the house down over my head, or laugh in my face and tell me they'll buy my land on tax sale when I come to them to beg for mercy?"

Heat rose again in Howard's cheeks. "You don't understand—"

"I only understand that my father's in the hospital at Galveston, and that this drive is the only way I can even hope to raise money to pay the bills." The girl broke off. "You'd better go now, Howard." She started to close the door.

Blocking it with his foot, he said desperately: "Helen, you don't know—I haven't told you—there's something more, something worse—"

She didn't speak, but the pressure of the door against his foot stopped.

"It's Oren," he blurted. "He's out of hand."

Still she said nothing and, as before, he groped for words. They were hard to find. His lips seemed stiff. Somehow, he couldn't meet her steady eyes.

He said: "That trouble in town . . . it infuriated Oren. He swears he's going to kill you all, do terrible things. He won't listen to me."

Her face didn't change. "Of course. We expected him to do his worst."

"But you—" he choked.

"I haven't any choice, Howard. I've no home now, and I've got to raise money somehow. So I'll take my chances with the others on the Western Trail."

Once more, she tried to close the door. Once more, he held it open. His heart was suddenly pounding. "I've got money, Helen," he burst out. "I'll give you a home and see that your father's taken care of. We'll go away together, you and I. Out of all this, to New Orleans or California—"

Slowly, she shook her head. "No, Howard."

"But why . . . ?"

Her face was no longer set and stiff, and the chill had left her eyes. Again she was as he had visioned her in a thousand broken dreams—infinitely desirable, lovely beyond belief; warm, vibrant, all woman.

Only then he saw that her eyes held pity now, and that was worse than the chill had been.

"You don't understand, do you, Howard?" she murmured, almost gently. "You never did, you never will."

He stared at her, bewildered.

"Once you asked me to marry you," she went on slowly. "I told you I couldn't, not only because I didn't love you, but because the way you and Oren were running the Turkey Track—smashing the little outfits to gain more land and power, trampling under everyone who got in your way—made you the kind of man I never could love."

"But what would you have me do?" he protested. "Oren's my brother. I've had no choice but to go along with him. I couldn't break away—"

"You say you'll quit him now. You talk about taking me out of Texas."

His eyes fell in spite of him. "I didn't know what Oren planned, before. Now, he's gone mad. The things he wants to do. . . ." He shuddered.

"They're no different than the things he's done in the past. It's only that they're more dangerous now."

He looked up sharply. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Howard," she answered levelly. Her eyes held no compromise. "I mean that you went along with Oren on everything, even the murder of Rand's brothers, because you were too weak to say no. Now that he's facing men as hard and cruel and ruthless as he is—men who may beat him, even—you're too weak to stand by him. That's the real reason you've come here today. I don't doubt that you love me, in your way; but underneath, you want me to leave with you because you're afraid yourself. That's why I can never love you. A woman wants her man to be strong, strong enough to fight for the things he believes—even if those things are wrong; even if he loses. And that kind of strength just isn't in you.

Married to me or alone, you'll never stand against the tide to fight for anything."

There was silence for a moment, then, while he writhed under the things she'd said. Shame swept through him in a hot, engulfing wave and, in its wake, fury. A scarlet haze swirled up to blur the lovely face before him. "Damn you!" he snarled. He clutched for her arm.

A choked cry of fear rose in her throat. She stumbled backward, out of reach—and, in so doing released the door.

Wildly, he lunged in pursuit. That panicked cry—it touched some trigger in him that had never been released before; set his heart pounding, blood hammering in his ears.

"I'll show you, damn you!" he raged again. "I gave you the chance to come like a lady and you spit on me! Now I'll have you the other way!"

Again, he could see the fear leap in her; again, he thrilled to the sight of it. Yet even in the same moment a sort of horror at what he was doing filled him. It was as if he were two men, one good, one evil; and for now that evil one had the upper hand.

Then he had her cornered, driven back against a wall, and there was no more time for thinking; only the hot, ragged sob of her breath, the strained, writhing softness of her body against his as they struggled. Her nails raked his face. Cursing, he struck at her. Barely in time, she jerked away, and his fingers hooked into the front of her dress, ripping it clear of one white shoulder.

He heard the footsteps in the same instant. Something hit him in the side, a hammer blow that drove the breath out of him. He careened wildly, to land with stunning force against the base of the kitchen stove. As from afar, he heard old Milam Medford's voice: "Miz' Helen—!"

Her answer came shakily: "I'm . . . all right, Milam. He didn't . . . hurt me."

Someone laughed—a high, shrill, falsetto cackle that knotted Howard Gill's vitals. There was only one man in Tonkawa County with a laugh like that.

He opened his eyes. Tassie Pierce stood spraddle-legged in the doorway beyond old Medford, thumbs hooked in his belt close to guns that looked too big for him. A grin split his wizened face, and the very dwarfed scrawniness of him somehow came out as menace. His ragged, ruffian crew crowded close behind him.

He laughed again while Howard watched, paralyzed. "I knew it'd pay off, keepin' a scout on the ridge to make sure the Turkey Track didn't pull no raid. But this—this is more'n I ever dreamed of! To get that damn' lily-livered Howard hisself! This is too good to believe!"

The way he said it brought silence to the room like a thunderclap. Old Medford seemed to stop breathing. The color that had begun to return to Helen Inns' face now drained away again.

She whispered, "You're not going to—?"

"Kill him?" Pierce's grin belonged on a death's-head. "Oh, no, ma'am, I wouldn't think of killin' him. What with his brother an' him runnin' the county the way they do, the sheriff might even make out it wasn't legal, an' we wouldn't want that. Only"—something sly and infinitely evil slithered across his wizened face—"only, I wouldn't be too awful much surprised if before we're through he don't wish he was dead!"

THEY took Howard out into an open space behind the corral, after that. With a new chill, he saw that only Pierce and his *buscaderos* were present—Helen Inns and old Medford had stayed inside, and Rand was nowhere to be seen. Grinning wolfishly, expectantly, the hands straggled into a circle about him. They were a hard crew; they would never have ridden with Tassie Pierce had they not been. Howard knew most of them by sight, and how little mercy lay in them.

Pierce shrilled, "Nueces!" and a great bull of a man reminiscent of Anse Krueger lumbered forward, scrubbing at a scar on his stubbled chin with the back of one hand and smirking.

"I get the idea you rate yourself as a fighter, Gill," Pierce announced, "so seein' as how it ain't legal to kill you, I thought mebbe you wouldn't mind puttin' on a little exhibition for the boys. Nueces Quinn, here, says he'll take a chance on tanglin' with you."

"Yeah, Gill, I don't mind at all," the man called Nueces Quinn rumbled. "Your boy Krueger put this scar on my chin with his bull-whip awhile back. Said it was your orders, Gill. I like to pay back that kind of favors."

A single icy drop of sweat trickled jerkily down Howard's spine. He had trouble speaking. "I . . . I won't lend myself to any such outrage. It's—it's not fair. . . ."

Even before the roar of laughter burst about him, he knew how childish, how absurd, how completely idiotic, his words sounded. He was crawling before these saddle tramps. He knew it and they knew it. The acid of their contempt bit through even his fear.

"You hear that, boys?" Tassie Pierce shrilled. "You hear the yellow-belly? It ain't fair, he says! It ain't fair!" Of a sudden the murderous little outlaw leader was leaping forward, catching up a handful of Howard's shirt-front. "You lily-livered polecat, you think we're gonna get you another girl to rassle with?" He shoved violently, so hard Howard almost fell down. "You'll fight Nueces! Now!" And then, to the hulking Quinn: "No fists, Nueces! I want him to last!"

"Don't worry, Tassie. He'll last!" Already Quinn was lumbering forward.

With a desperate effort Howard dragged together the tattered remnants of his dignity. He drew himself erect, held his hands stiff at his sides, making no pretense of defense. "I won't fight. You can't make me—"

Quinn cuffed him in the face, open-handed. The force of the blow threw Howard off balance, and he staggered back. His head was ringing, his ear and jaw on fire.

Again Quinn struck, still with that insulting open hand, thick lips twisted in a contemptuous sneer.

The slap seared Howard's other cheek. When, instinctively, he tried to dodge a third blow, his crippled leg buckled under him. He sprawled, panting and sobbing.

Only then Quinn's fingers were twisting in his hair, dragging him to his feet again. The open hand took up a savage, stinging rhythm: *slap . . . slap . . . slap . . . slap . . .*

Within Howard Gill, something snapped. Of a sudden nothing mattered but that leering, sneering face above him. He had to get at it, smash it, destroy it utterly. Screaming, he launched a flurry of desperate blows.

Yet still there was sickness in him. Even if by some miracle he were to beat Quinn, he had already lost: for he had said he would not fight—had meant it—; and now, after half a dozen buffets, here he was fighting, playing the cornered rat for the scum that rode with Tassie Pierce.

One of his wild swings must have slipped home, then. Suddenly Nueces Quinn was leaping away, his astonished, angry oath echoing in Howard's ears. But only for a moment. In the fraction of a second the other was charging in again—and this time there were fists where the open palm had been. Howard rocked as a mule-kick punch smashed into the pit of his stomach. The wind went out of him with a rush. He retched. Again, his bad leg buckled. He was only dimly aware of what was happening by the time Quinn dragged him up once more and recommenced the slapping.

When it stopped, he was surprised, almost—surprised that he hadn't lost consciousness completely; surprised that he was still alive.

A voice came distantly: "You heard me, Nueces! Put him down!"

The surprise grew. That voice—it was Steve Rand's! With an effort, Howard forced his eyes to open.

Rand and Tassie Pierce stood toe to toe just inside the circle of onlooking hands. Rand's face was bleak; Pierce's flushed and angry. Nueces Quinn, in turn, though still gripping Howard, showed scowling indecision.

"Don't you order my boys around, Rand!" Pierce shrilled. "They got a right to their fun, an' this bastard Gill rates worse."

His hands hung close to the over-big guns.

Rand's expression did not change. "I don't care what he rates," he rapped brittlely. "Gill or not, he's a cripple. With that bad leg he can't fight back. I'm no Anse Krueger. I'll not have him beaten so long as I'm boss."

Pierce's eyes sparked, for an instant. Then, slowly, his thin lips parted in a mirthless grin. "Have it your way, Rand. Like you say, you're boss," he observed, too softly. And, to Quinn: "Nueces, let him down."

Sullenly, the big man freed Howard. Rand snapped, "Where's your horse, Gill?"

"He's . . . by the house. . . ."

Rand turned to the nearest man and ordered, "Go get it," and the man hurried away.

It was a queer moment, Howard thought. He ached in every bone and muscle, and there was blood in his mouth, and his ears were still ringing. He should, he supposed, be feeling gratitude to Rand for saving him.

Instead, he stood atremble, seething with an icy hate that loomed blacker than anything he had ever known before. These others—Pierce and his crew—they were blundering, bloodthirsty fools, and as such he could hold them in proper contempt even while they pounded him to a pulp. But Rand . . . Rand had killed Hoyt in The Nations. Rand had bull-whipped Krueger down Tonkawa's Main Street.

And Rand had saved him, saying, "Gill or not, he's a cripple."

Six short words: but they stung worse than the beating or Oren's bullying or Helen Inn's pity. They set him apart in a class by himself, unfit to meet other men on even terms.

It was the final insult.

The man Rand had sent for the horse returned, now, leading the animal. Painfully, Howard limped over and, gripping the horn, pulled his aching body up into the saddle.

Rand said: "Ride, Gill—and don't come back if you want to live!"

"One warning deserves another, Mister Rand," Howard retorted coldly. "Up till now there have been occasional points of difference between Oren and myself as to how best to dispose of you. This afternoon's events have resolved such details for me. If you and your ruffian associates are foolish enough to try to drive cattle north from Tonkawa County, it will be my pleasure to help see to it that your bones bleach with your brothers' along the Western Trail."

Wheeling his horse about, he rode away.

CHAPTER VII

THE head of the herd was far down the valley, the bed-ground fast emptying. Swing and flank riders had fallen in behind the point men on either side of the drifting stream of cattle. Skillfully, they threw straying steers back into the line of march; prodded laggards to a quicker pace.

"Ain't too bad a lookin' bunch," Medford grunted grudgingly.

"Three thousand head," Rand said. "Mostly prime four- and five-year olds—no sick, no cripples. Not all the Crossed Diamond cows in the county, maybe, but enough for this time. Enough to make this drive stick in the Gill brothers' craws."

"Or yours," the oldster muttered.

Rand looked at him sharply. "What are you getting at?"

"Rounded up some of your critters on Turkey Track range, didn't you?"

"A few. I figured our stuff wouldn't drift any farther than Sawyer's Creek, so we didn't go much beyond that."

"Nobody didn't try t'run you off, did they? Sheriff nor brand inspector ain't come round a-raisin' hell neither?"

"No."

"Ain't struck you funny, though, huh? Reckon you figgered after that last set-to you an' th' Gills had in town, at ol' Leathridge's court, they'd just give you a free rein?"

"I thought maybe they'd put a check-rein on their tempers for a while, yes," Rand answered levelly.

Medford spat. "Mebbe you're that big a damn' fool. Mebbe."

"But you're not, is that it?" Rand snapped. He let the mounting aggravation in him come out in words a little. "You talk a good game, Medford, but I disremember ever seeing you show your cards. If you've got something to say, say it and get it over with."

The other's thin nostrils quivered momentarily. The leathery cheeks colored just a trifle. "I mean you're a damn' fool if you ever think for one minute you've scared them Gills into lettin' you alone! If you get this here herd out of Tonkawa County, it'll be because they want you to."

"Is that supposed to mean you think they do?"

"Stranger things has happened."

"Why? What good does it do them if I drive?"

Medford snorted. "Why'd they let your brothers make it all the way to the Nations before they pushed 'em under?"

"Well?"

"They done it 'cause they—th' Gills, I mean—had murder up their sleeves, that's why! But they figgered if they handled things too rough here in Tonkawa, they'd likely have the Rangers down on their necks. That's why they ain't bothered you no more. They're past usin' th' sheriff an'

court trials now. They're out for your hide, an' they reckon t'peel it off theirselves!"

Rand sucked in a breath. His fingers tightened on the saddle horn in spite of him.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you were right, at that, Medford," he said softly. And then, as the tempestuous things he felt got the upper hand: "Maybe that's how I want it, too."

"I figgered it that way," the old cowhand nodded dourly. "I knew th' minute I laid eyes on you that you was on th' kill."

"So you decided to come out here this morning and tell me about it?"

"Huh?"

"You heard me! What are you here for?" Rand rapped. He studied the other bleakly. "You've got no time to waste on me, ordinarily, nor words either. But this morning, you come hunting me up on horseback, even though your arm's still in a sling. I want to know why."

Medford grimaced. "All right. So I ain't just a-ridin' for my health." He hesitated. "I'm here 'bout Miz' Helen. What you figger t'do with her?"

Rand shrugged. "What is there to do? I can't leave her in Tonkawa County, so I'm taking her along with the herd. First sizeable town outside we pass close to—Karnes City, maybe, or Floresville—I'll put her on the stage to Galveston so she can be with her father."

"You mean that?" The old man's faded blue eyes mirrored his doubt.

"I mean it. Does it suit you?"

"I reckon." Medford stared off down the valley, watching the moving herd. "If we get that far, that is."

Rand followed the glance. The last of the cattle were in column now, the remuda and chuck wagon angling around to take their places to the rear of the drags. He could see Helen Inns on the wagon seat, her slim body swaying with each jolt. The sight of her, the knowledge that within a few days she'd be gone—out of his life forever, probably—somehow gave him a twinge that was almost pain.

He forced it down. "We'll get there."

"Mebbe." Old Medford started his horse back down the slope in the direction of the wagon.

Rand touched spurs to the steeldust to follow. But as he did so, a rider came galloping hell-bent toward him from the valley's northernmost spur.

The man was one of the scouts sent out far in advance of the herd. Rand swung to meet him. "What's up?"

"Tassie wants t'see yuh. In a hurry!"

The rider wheeled his horse and headed back on his own track at the same wild pace. He didn't speak another word.

Frowning, Rand followed.

The trail led far to the west, to a shallow, brushy draw. Tassie Pierce waited there—Tassie, and three of his aides, and a still, slicker-covered form on the ground.

Rand looked from one to the other. "Trouble?"

Pierce jerked his head in the direction of the figure sprawled in the dew-drenched grass. "You call it." His shrill voice rang brittle as splintering ice.

Silently, Rand swung down and peeled back the slicker.

Beneath it lay the corpse of Nueces Quinn.

THE body was naked, a sodden lump of bruised and bloody flesh, so battered as to be almost beyond recognition. A whiplash had peeled the skin away in gory ribbons till hardly a square inch anywhere was left whole. For all practical purposes, Quinn had been flayed alive.

A sickness rose in Rand, but he held his face expressionless as he let the slicker fall back. "The Gills?"

Pierce's thin shoulders lifted in a shrug. "What would you think? Nueces beat up that lily-livered bastard Howard, an' Anse Krueger dotes on bull-whips. That's good enough for me."

"Where was Quinn supposed to be? What was he doing?"

"I sent him out last night t'scout the Turkey Track ranchhouse. I didn't aim t'take no more chances on them polecats sneakin' up on us. When he didn't come back this mornin' me an' th' boys figgered we'd look around a little. That's how we come t'come onto him. He'd been tied across his saddle like a sack of meal an' his horse turned loose. Whoever done it wanted us t'see him. They figgered the *caballo*'d drift back t'our horse herd."

A coldness crept over Rand as he visualized that scene—Quinn, somehow surprised and captured; Krueger, little red eyes gleaming, licking thick lips as he limbered

up the whip; Howard Gill's thin, pale face —taking on color, maybe, as he savored his vengeance. And then the doomed man, screaming. . . .

He said: "Bury him. Then get back to the herd." He swung onto the steeldust.

"An' th' Gills—?" Pierce shrilled querulously.

"They can wait. We've got a herd to push through. That don't allow for any side-trips."

Heedless of their angry mutterings, Rand rode away. He didn't care particularly what they thought; and in the mood he was in, he didn't want to hear. The more so since it went without saying that, save for his interference, they'd have done as bad or worse to Howard Gill.

He pulled up beside the wagon; halted it.

Surprise showed in Helen's face. The Mexican driver eyed Rand curiously, and old Medford threw him an open scowl.

He didn't care. He spoke to the girl as if she were alone: "Get packed! You're leaving! Now!"

"What—?"

"I said you're leaving. Now, for Galveston."

The fears he'd felt put an edge to his voice he hadn't intended. He could see the quick color come to her cheeks, the spark of temper light in her eyes.

"Maybe you'd better explain."

Her tone made him flush in his turn. He tried to ignore it. "The trouble's starting. I want you clear of it. I'll take you ahead to Karnes City."

"Trouble—?"

"Murder," he rapped brutally. "Somebody caught Nueces Quinn and whipped him to death. What's left of him doesn't make a pretty picture. I'm taking no chances on the same thing happening to you."

He was glad when she shuddered. It had to be that way. It was his job to make her see she had to go.

Only instead of turning hastily away to gather up her things, she drew a breath and said, "I'm sorry, Steve. But I don't see how that affects me. There's nothing I can do about it."

"No one's asking you to do anything, except go to your father. I'll take you to Karnes City, and—"

"No, Steve."

He stared at her unbelievingly. "No—?"

"No," she repeated levelly. "I mean, I'm not leaving the herd."

"But—"

"It's no use talking. I'm going up the trail."

"Miz' Helen, you're plumb loco!" old Medford croaked in an anguished voice.

The girl paid him no heed. There was suddenly the same determination in her face that Rand had caught that first morning when she stood before him with the shotgun. "I know you've told everyone you intended to send me back to Galveston as soon as we were far enough out of Tonkawa County for it to be safe. But I've never agreed to it. I've planned from the beginning on going all the way to Dodge City, and I expect to do it."

Rand's temper climbed. He let his tone go chill. "I'm afraid you're not going to have too much to say about that, Miss Inns."

"I'm not?" The angry spark was back in her eyes.

"That's right," Rand said. "This particular job is a little more important to me than what you want to do. I don't reckon to carry you along as a millstone around my neck, nor yet to have whatever might happen to you on my conscience. There's no reason for you to travel north with us—"

"Isn't there?"

"What do you mean?"

The girl's eyes flashed. "I mean that I do have reasons for going—all the reasons in the world! Our Jughandle cattle are in this herd. I appreciate your letting me throw them in with yours. But they're also my last chance to get the money I need for my father. It's my duty to stay with them, and see that the cash they bring when they're sold is taken back to him."

"I see." Rand laughed harshly. "What you're really saying is, you don't trust me. You think I'm going to skip with the money from your handful of scrub steers if you're not at Dodge to grab it first."

Helen Inns' color deepened. "I didn't say that. But . . . some of these others—Tassie Pierce, his men. . . ."

"I won't argue it with you," Rand snapped. "If you didn't want to make the gamble, you shouldn't have thrown in your bunch. But you're not going. That's flat."

"But I *am* going," she came back stub-

bornly. "You can't stop me!"

Rand said coldly: "You've got two minutes to pack. If you aren't ready then, I'll carry you to Karnes City hog-tied."

Again, he could see the girl breathe deeply. The stubbornness stood out sharper than ever. "You won't do that."

"I won't?"

"No." Her voice stayed steady. "You won't, because if you do, the moment I'm free I'll notify the Rangers that you're stealing my cattle."

Rand shrugged. "I can always cut out everything that carries your Jughandle brand." But underneath the words, in spite of him, there was suddenly a ragged note of doubt and tension.

Helen Inns shook her head. "I'm afraid that won't help you. Once the Rangers take over, you'll never be able to get to Kansas. You can't afford to have them asking questions, any more than the Gills can. They'll want to know too many things. Like . . . about Tassie Pierce. He and his men will have to run for cover. And you can't drive a herd without trail hands."

Rand stared at her. It was as if he'd never really seen her before. Involuntarily, his fists clenched. "You little devil, you'd do it!"

She nodded quietly. "Yes. It means that much to me."

Rand clipped: "All right. You'll go along with us to Dodge. You don't give me any choice. But I doubt like hell you're going to like it!"

Seething, he rode away.

THE Mexican drive hands left that night.

They went silently, slipping away like shadows as soon as the herd was well bedded down. No one even knew they were gone till a wandering longhorn stumbled over the mestizo who handled the remuda. The half-breed's angry yells as he drove off the brute jerked the camp awake.

Steve Rand roused with the rest. Groping, drunk with sleep, he stumbled to his feet just in time to see a half-dozen steers bolt wildly away. Hastily, he shouted orders. Cursing men raced for their horses.

The whole herd was up now, milling and bellowing. More by luck than good judgment, the hands managed to get into the saddle before any real stampede developed. Circling, they turned back a dozen abortive break-throughs. Slowly, the panicky cattle quieted, lay down again.

The facts of what had happened began to clear, too. It was simple enough. The Latin *vaqueros* gathered by Tassie Pierce to take care of working the cows had been left to tend the herd alone. Save for a couple of scouts set far out to guard against possible Turkey Track raids, the white outlaws—lazy at best—were all sleeping soundly, tired out by the long, hard day of trying to break the wild *ladinos* to the trail.

At which point, without warning, the Mexicans had abandoned their posts and their beds alike and ridden off into the night, leaving only the lone mestizo wrangler behind.

Grimly, Rand looked at Pierce. "What's the answer?"

"Th' damn' greasers are scared, that's what. That business with Quinn—it got 'em. They don't like bull-whips."

"Then why'd the wrangler stay?"

"He's half white. They didn't trust him. I doubt he even knew they were takin' off." The little *buscadero* shrugged. "Me, I knew they was talkin', but I didn't think they'd ever get up the sand t'light a shuck."

Rand pondered bleakly. "All right. From here on out, we double up. Everyone rides two turns instead of one till we can pick up more men."

Pierce stared at him. "You loco? My boys is fightin' hands. They ain't gonna eat dust like no bunch of forty-per drive riders."

"So?"

"We'll go after th' damn greasers an' drag 'em back. They ain't runnin' out on me!"

Rand laughed harshly. "That's where you're wrong, Tassie. You and your boys aren't going anywhere."

"No?" The little outlaw's beady eyes gleamed in the flickering radiance of the cook-fire.

"No." Rand clipped his words. "By now, those Mex are miles back in the brush and still traveling fast. We've got a herd to tend to. Even if you caught those hands, they wouldn't be worth anything—not if they were scared enough to take off in the first place."

For a moment Pierce's face stayed set and angry. Then, slowly, he relaxed and

grinned his wicked death's-head grin. "Have it your way, Rand. You're the boss . . . for now."

Rand nodded unsmilingly. "Thanks, Tassie. I'm glad we both understand that." He gestured towards the faint line of grey beginning to fringe the eastern horizon. "We might as well get moving. Things are going to be hard enough, short-handed like we are."

Pierce pivoted, spat shrill orders to his men. Grumbling and snarling, they moved to obey.

It was the beginning of a nightmare, a grueling hell of fatigue. A hundred times, a thousand, the rebellious steers tried to break from the line of march. But hour after hour, day after day, the sweating, cursing riders threw them back.

The grind was even harder for Rand than the rest. Now, more than ever, he had to keep up his guard against his outlaw aides, as well as the Gills. He could guess the thoughts Tassie Pierce was thinking; the plans that brewed in the little man's twisted, evil brain. Night and day, the *buscaderos'* sullen watchfulness—or maybe it was just plain hate—hammered at him. Yet there was nothing he could do but ride and hope and pray, while weariness racked his body to a shadow and his nerves wore ragged beneath the surface calm he still forced himself to maintain.

The eighth day, it rained.

The storm swept down from the north, beginning as a misty drizzle an hour after the herd arose from the bed-ground in the morning. By noon, it had increased to a chill, driving downpour, half sleet, that soaked clothes and frayed tempers. Steers broke from the herd before it, bolting away toward any clump of trees that offered shelter. Wearily, the cursing riders turned them back—only to find upon their return that still more had departed. Progress slowed to a snail's pace.

Hastily, Rand scouted out the ground ahead. A mile onward and west of the trail, he discovered a narrow cleft that soon broadened to form a pocket between two high hills. Its north slope—steep, craggy, wooded—shut off the worst of the storm, while to the south, beyond a shallow creek, rock ledges rose to form a natural wall.

Returning to the herd, Rand ordered the men to throw the cattle into this valley. But by now the storm was raging so fiercely, and the animals were in such a state of panic, that starless night had descended before the last of the drags shambled through the narrow natural corridor that led into the pocket.

Still the icy rain beat down. Lightning slashed across the sky in gigantic bolts, illumining the whole wild scene with an eerie violet glow. Thunder crashed without end, roll upon reverberant roll. Between it and the rain, even the melancholy chant of the circling riders as they sought to soothe the milling, frightened cattle was drowned out.

Taut, restless as the herd itself, Rand too rode ceaselessly. He checked on each man half a dozen times; made sure the horse herd was adequately sheltered, the chuck wagon on high ground. Then, still uneasy, he sent his steeldust loping westward toward the far end of the little valley.

But after only a few hundred yards, he found his way barred. Here the creek left the stone bastions to the south and angled sharply across the floor of the pocket to the base of the northern hill, there to continue its meanderings westward. In so doing, it had carved out a great ditch stretching from one side of the valley to the other. Half a mile long, its precipitous banks were twenty to thirty feet high in places, with jagged rock and murky, swirling water at the base.

No human ingenuity could have planned a more perfect cattle trap for a night like this. In case of a stampede, the valley's steep walls and narrow entrance would leave the steers no choice but to come this way. Blinded by fear and darkness, they'd charge headlong over the high bank, straight down to the rock of the creek bed —and death. It would be a miracle if half survived.

Shuddering, Rand reined the steeldust about and spurred back toward the herd. Short-handed or not, he knew he must find riders to place here, guards to ward off any rush of the cattle into this death-trap.

But before he had ridden half the distance, a faint sound of metal on metal—the jingle of a bridle chain, maybe—came to him through a momentary lull in the storm. He caught the quick beat of a galloping horse.

Rand halted the steeldust; sat waiting, motionless. Anger welled up in him. Those sounds—they could mean only one thing,

at a time like this: some one of the outlaws, lazier even than the rest, was sneaking off to steal an hour's sleep.

And yet, it hardly seemed possible. . . .

Vague movement showed through the murk. Then lightning flashed. With a start, Rand recognized the dwarfed, wraith-like silhouette of Tassie Pierce. But before he could move, the little outlaw disappeared again, riding into a black gash in the hillside that marked the mouth of an arroyo.

The next instant, light flared in the gully—flickering yellow light that grew brighter with every second. There was a rattle of loose stones, a churning of mud. A hoarse, agonized bellow echoed over the noise of the storm. In the same second, a longhorn lunged out of the arroyo in a mad rush. The light Rand had glimpsed came from flaming wads of oil-soaked rags tied to the spreading horns. Now, crazed with pain and fright, the animal raced wildly away across the floor of the pocket.

Cursing, Rand raced in pursuit. He didn't dare shoot at the brute for fear of startling the panicky herd into a stampede. But the steer had a long head start. A weird apparition, it veered away from him and thundered straight for the mass of milling cattle. Before any of the riders on guard could act, it slipped past them; hurtled into the herd in a headlong charge.

The cattle fled before it. The bedlam of their bellowing echoed even above the thunder. A wave of close-packed flesh and rattling horns, they surged wildly up the rocky hillside, only to break on its crags and fall back again. Then, swirling, they doubled about; took the only path still open to them in a ground-shaking dash westward, straight toward the precipitous death-trap that was the creek bank.

Caught in the fast-narrowing crevice between cows and cutbank, Rand moved by instinct. Whipping off his slicker, waving it wildly, he raced head-on into the leading edge of the stampede.

It was as if he didn't exist. White-eyed with fear, the herd kept on coming. It flashed through Rand's mind, for the fraction of a second, that they weren't going to turn. That he'd die here, in this valley, beneath their pounding, grinding hoofs.

Then, abruptly, the lead steers faltered. Rand yelled and waved the yellow slicker harder.

The whole front rank of the charging animals wavered now. A handful on the far edge veered, swung southward.

Three thousand strong, the others followed. More riders were coming up, crowding the frantic animals still farther from their path. Seconds more, and the swing was complete, the tide reversed. Already, some of the cattle caught in the middle of the loop were beginning to mill.

Rand fell back, away from the turmoil. He was shaking a little now, in spite of himself, and he found that the spot on which he and the steeldust stood was mere yards from the creek bank.

Strangely, it seemed to mean little to him. His mind was back on Tassie Pierce, and that tortured longhorn that had raced from the arroyo like a flaming arrow to start the stampede. Silently, he touched spurs to the steeldust; guided it back to the black mouth of the gully. His hand touched his gun.

It was black in the arroyo; black as any murderer's heart. The footing was uncertain, and water ran hock-deep. But Rand kept on going. There were questions in his mind, and he wanted answers . . . answers from Tassie Pierce.

A roar of gun-fire ahead blended with the thunder-claps, the rush of the storm. Rand spurred faster. He came out of the arroyo into a brush-fringed clearing. For a moment he waited there, wary and silent.

Movement showed through the gloom. Straining his eyes, Rand glimpsed Pierce's hunched, crouching form. He let the steeldust move a few steps forward.

As he did so, the little man straightened, waved. One of the heavy, black-butted guns that looked too big for him was in his hand. A lightning-flash revealed his thin lips peeled back from his teeth in the ghoulish merriment of that horrid death's-head grin that marked him.

"Some stampede!" he shrilled above the wind and rain. "Gill-brand, you might say. Only these two won't do no more stampedin'!"

He gestured, and for the first time Rand saw that two still, huddled figures sprawled in the mud at the outlaw's feet. Dismounting, he bent over them and struck a sulphur match. But the faces indicated nothing. They were nondescript faces; stubbled, with eyes now glazed and staring. He didn't know them.

"Two of Krueger's pets," Pierce chuckled. "There was another with 'em, but he got away. I been waitin' for 'em t'make their play. This was the kind of a night for it, so when I saw a light up here for a second, I come a-huntin'. That damn' steer they set fire to t'stampede th' herd damn' near trompled me, too. But I guess I got th' last laugh."

Rand nodded woodenly. He had his answers now—but with them had come new thoughts to plague him. About the stampede, and the two dead men, and the one who'd gotten away. About Tassie Pierce, and how that murderous little human enigma had anticipated a trap at this time and triumphed in spite of it in the face of three-to-one odds.

But most of all he thought about the Gills.

Pierce was laughing now—the shrill, keening, falsetto cackle that belonged in nightmares.

"We better be gettin' back, Rand." His tone grew openly mocking. "You got a herd t'boss north, you know."

Ignoring the jibe, Rand nodded again. His thoughts still held him.

The Gills had made another play. The Gills had lost. This time.

But next time. . . .

A numbness crept through him. He wondered when they would strike again.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR Helen Inns, the drive dragged into an endless succession of bed-grounds and watering places, interspersed with days of blazing sun and choking dust and the eternal lowing and bellowing and ankle-cracking of the cattle. She had voluntarily cut herself off from Steve Rand. The tired, short-tempered hands were too weary to be interested in anything but sleep when they came in from riding herd. Old Milam rode beside her in the jolting chuck-wagon, but he tended increasingly to fall into long, pessimistic silences in which he stared bleak-eyed across the seemingly-endless hills and brush and short-grass, or cleaned and re-cleaned his ancient Remington.

Only Big Sam Young paused to pass a word with her occasionally. She found him pleasant enough in spite of his reputation. When he brought her a fragile, white-blossomed sprig of wild plum one day, she made no effort to conceal her pleasure.

Rand came to her that afternoon, thin-lipped. "I hear you're playing up to Big Sam," he clipped without preliminaries.

Any other time Helen might have tried to explain, but the way he said it, the implications, stung her. She retorted as brusquely, "Is it part of your job as trail boss to spy on me, too, Mister Rand?" and was secretly pleased, somehow, when faint color touched his face.

He said stiffly: "Since you want to put it that way, Miss Inns—I guess it is. Anything that affects the chances of getting this herd through to Dodge is part of my job."

"Oh." Helen gave him a calculatedly-maddening smile. "I'm afraid I didn't understand. I thought that as part-owner, whatever I might say was my own business." And then: "I . . . still . . . do."

For an instant Rand's grey eyes blazed. The color in his cheeks darkened. But then, apparently, he got control again, for when he spoke his voice was flat, without emotion.

"I guess maybe I started off wrong, Miss Inns. Let's put it this way: this isn't an ordinary outfit. Tassie Pierce's men aren't just the regular run of good-natured Texas hands. They're a rough string. They've had their man for breakfast."

"So . . . ?" Without quite knowing why, Helen gave him the smile again.

"So—" He broke off. His words crackled. "Damn it, haven't you got any eyes in your head? These gun-wolves aren't used to decent women. All they know are the cats from the dance halls and deadfalls. That's why I didn't want you to come in the first place, but you were too stubborn to listen to reason. Now you're here, the least you can do is keep your distance before there's trouble over you. Big Sam's bragging already—"

"He is?" In spite of sudden misgivings, her pride made her mock him. "I'll have to speak to him about that, Mister Rand."

She turned away and moved off to the chuck-wagon without a backward glance. But there, in more sober reflection, she could not but recognize the justice in Rand's complaint. This drive was a gamble at best. If there was fighting among the men, and over her. . . . She shrugged away a shudder and promised herself that Big Sam Young would get no more of any-

thing that might possibly be construed as encouragement.

THE trouble came that night.

Helen felt it first in the glances the hands threw her as they hunkered down for supper, even though she couldn't place just what was wrong. A faint, indefinable tension hung in the air. Faces were blank, eyes at once curious and inscrutable. She noticed that old Milam made it a point to eat close by her.

Big Sam came up as she finished, puffing at a cigarette. There was a swagger about him, a touch of belligerence and arrogance mixed. His nod seemed almost as much for the others as for her.

"Nice night, huh?"

Helen held her face immobile and her eyes averted. "Yes."

"Mebbe you'd like t'ride out a ways, huh? Get th' stink uh them cows out uh your nose for a change?"

"No, thank you. I'm—I'm a little tired."

"Aw, come on. Do you good." Big Sam's voice was louder than necessary. Again, Helen got the feeling he was playing almost as much to the others as to her. But before she could answer, Milam Medford cut in harshly. His hand was very near his Remington.

"You heard her the first time, Young. She said no. Now leave her alone!"

Big Sam wheeled, flushing. "Who asked you t'butt in, you ol' *cabron?*"

"I did, Sam."

It was Steve Rand talking. As he spoke, he stepped out from the shadow of the chuck-wagon itself, and it dawned on Helen that he must have placed himself there in preparation for this very moment.

Young's eyes darted back and forth between Medford and Rand, hesitating. "Takin' a lot on yourself, ain't you?" he sneered.

"Could be. I reckon I can carry it."

Young continued to hesitate. Tassie Pierce, still hunkered with his tin plate a few feet away, shrilled, "Take it easy, Rand. Sam don't mean no harm."

"I'm taking it easy," Rand answered levelly, eyes still on Big Sam. "When we made our deal, I laid it down that no one was to try anything on the girl. I expect your boys to stick to that. That includes Young."

"Sure, Rand—"

"Make him say it."

Pierce's eyes were bright and angry. "You reckon t'push my boys almighty far, Steve Rand!"

"No farther than they reckon to push me." Of a sudden the flatness fell from Rand's voice, replaced by a hot, vibrant note. "You, Young! I'm talking to you! You know the girl's to be let alone! Now you'll stick with it or make your play!"

Breathing hard, eyes on the ground, Young snarled, "All right, I'll say it! Now t'hell with you!" He pivoted, spurs ringing angrily, and strode to his horse and rode off into the dusk. Tassie Pierce followed.

The tension lifted. With a queer feeling of discovering the obvious, it dawned on Helen that the other men around the chuckwagon all were new hands, men hired along the trail. Too, Medford's position had been such in relation to Rand that both Big Sam Young and Tassie Pierce would have been caught in a crossfire had shooting started.

Yet at the same time, Helen knew that somehow she was missing the most important fact. Impulsively, she went over to old Medford.

"Milam. . . ."

It was as if he were reading her thoughts. "Don't fret yourself, Miz' Helen. It warn't your fault, not altogether. Young an' Rand had trouble back before we even left Tonkawa. Besides, Tassie put Big Sam up to this, feelin' his own way about how far he could push Steve."

"But why—?"

Milam laughed shortly. "You play with fire, you got a good chance t'get burned. That's why I didn't want you mixin' with Rand. An' it's just as true gospel for Rand mixin' with Tassie. Was Rand pushed under, Tassie reckons t'drop his own loop on the whole herd. But he don't figger to stick his neck out too far, neither, so he lets Sam scout out the lay of the land for him, with him all set in th' background just in case a good chance comes t'make his play. Only Rand outfoxed him—for now."

"Then—"

"I talk too much." The old man's seamed face was suddenly bleak again, and dourness settled over him like a shadow. Grunting, "Git bedded down—an' stay there!" he moved away through the darkness.

Slowly, Helen climbed into the chuck wagon and slid between the blankets of her makeshift bunk. Frustration, a sense of guilt, clung to her. More and more, it was dawning on her that her insistence on traveling with the drive had multiplied Rand's problems far out of proportion to her own importance.

Her feelings where Rand was concerned complicated the problem even more. For while she bitterly resented his bluntness and refusal to accept her on her own terms, the spell of him—his very hardness, perhaps; the cold recklessness that made him ready, willing and able to take command of this mad venture—still held her tight in a web of fascination.

She wondered why.

She was drowsing on that thought when the clink of a spur against a wheel-rim brought her suddenly wide awake once more, to lie frozen in the bunk, vainly straining her eyes against the night.

The wagon bed rocked. She knew instinctively it was from the weight of a man swinging up. There was a whisper of cloth on wood; a sagging as the intruder slid swiftly toward her while she lay paralyzed, mouth cotton-dry with terror.

A great hand pawed for her throat.

It broke the paralysis. She screamed with all her might.

In the same instant the chuck-wagon sagged again. The hand at her throat jerked away as a sulphur match flared.

A voice crackled—Steve Rand's voice: "You asked for it, Sam! Here it comes!"

There was Colt thunder, then, and flame and powder smoke and surging bodies; and when it was over another match blazed, and there was Big Sam Young, asprawl on his back half across her, with stains on his shirt-front and his eyes glazed in death.

Up by the driver's seat, tight-lipped, Rand holstered his gun. Stepping inside, under the canvas hood, he caught Young's body below the armpits and, with a heave, sent it thudding over the tailgate.

Only then did he speak to Helen. His voice was infinitely dry. "You can sleep now, Miss Inns. I doubt you'll be bothered again."

Dropping over the gate himself, he disappeared into the night.

HELEN got the story in pieces—from Milam, from chance remarks of the hands, from the colored cook. It was a study in character evaluation.

Humiliated by the way Rand had called the turn in the first conflict, Big Sam apparently had felt it a point of pride to make some effort in Helen's direction. Rand, in turn, had expected it, and had lain waiting by the wagon. He had waited till Young was in the wagon and Helen had screamed, so that there could be no doubt in anyone's mind as to what was happening. Then he, too, had swung up. . . .

That afternoon, when Rand rode in for coffee, Helen was ready. The pride that first had made her resent Rand now drove her forward.

She said, "I owe you an apology, Mister Rand."

He drained his tin cup without answering. The grey eyes stayed steady and unsmiling.

"Before we started on this trip, you told me I shouldn't come, but I wouldn't listen. I—I didn't believe you when you said it was because there might be trouble; that it wouldn't be safe for me. I needed the money from our cattle for dad, and I—I guess I was afraid you'd steal the herd. I don't know what I thought I could do about it if I was along, but I was afraid. Now . . . . I know you were right and I was wrong."

Rand still said nothing. His silence, the directness of his gaze—they disconcerted Helen. She could feel heat climbing her cheeks. But she hurried on.

"You warned me against Sam Young, too. I—I laughed at you for it. That was because I was angry. Or . . . or maybe I thought you were jealous. I don't know. It was crazy—all wrong. And then because of it you had to kill him—"

He nodded, cold-eyed. "Yes." There was no relenting in his tone.

"I—I wanted you to know I was sorry, that I didn't understand—" Of a sudden her voice broke in spite of her. "Oh, why do you have to be so hard? What do you want me to say? I know I've been a fool. I'm telling you so. Isn't that enough . . . ?"

She was crying, then—a flood of scalding tears she couldn't hold back; and that was worse than all the humiliation that had gone before. She'd grown up in a world of men. She knew how they felt about women's tears. A thing her father had said, years back, flashed through her mind—"If

you've got weeping to do, go out behind the barn for it."

And here she stood, tear-blinded, before a man she suddenly knew meant more to her than any other.

She whirled and fled. Only dimly did she hear the ring of Rand's tin cup as it fell to the ground. Sobbing, she pulled herself up into the chuck-wagon; threw herself upon the bunk.

A rap came on the wagon box beside her head. Rand said, "Helen . . ."

"Leave me alone!"

"I can't come any closer, Helen. I've laid down the law to the men that no one but you sets foot in the wagon, and it goes for me, too. But I wish I could—"

"Go away!"

"Not till you've heard me out. When it comes to apologies . . . I guess I owe you some, too."

Unbelievingly, Helen raised her head and stared at the blank canvas wall that separated them. "What do you mean? I—I don't understand. . . ."

"I mean . . . any trouble . . . it's as much my fault as yours. I've made it hard for you—lonely; tiresome—"

"You . . . have . . . ?"

"Yes, I have." There was almost a tremor in his voice, she thought. "I thought you were just being stubborn when you made us bring you along, and I was afraid for what might happen to you. And . . . you were right about the other."

"The . . . other?"

"About my being jealous. I was! The idea of Sam Young mauling you—" He broke off, and there was no denying the tremor this time. "Look, Helen: I killed Sam because Tassie Pierce had worked things around to the point where if I didn't, sooner or later Sam would kill me. I had to do it, to keep this drive moving and to hold Tassie back from going on the prod any farther than he already has. Besides, Sam rated killing, for trying to get at you. But even if he hadn't—even if he'd been God's own Christian gentleman and trying to marry you by law as such—and I'd thought you were going to take him up on it, I'd have gunned him down for that just as quick."

Helen whispered, "Steve . . . oh, Steve—!" and even as she said it her heart was pounding with a poignant, agonized joy.

"I won't bother you any more with this kind of thing, Miss Inns," Rand's voice came to her through the canvas, flat and emotionless once more. "I've said enough and too much already. But I couldn't let you go on thinking you owed me any apologies. Not the way I feel."

"Steve . . ." Helen said very softly.

"What?"

"I know you can't come in; you've made a rule." She paused and smiled to herself—a bit tremulously, for her heart was still beating far too fast—and dried her eyes and smoothed her hair. "But . . . there's no rule to keep me from coming out. . . ."

MORE days dragged by; more miles and water holes. Clear Fork, Elm Creek, Pony Creek, Pease River, fell behind. And always there was the eternal sun and dust and lowing, the endless rattle of hoofs and horns.

Then came Red River, and Doan's Crossing, with its handful of huddled buildings: last outpost before the wilderness that was The Nations. An undercurrent of excitement ran through the crew. They could pick up news of the trail ahead, here, and swap yarns with the Doans and their men, and buffalo hunters and travelers. There would be rest, at least for a few days, while flour and coffee and cartridges and clothes were bought, horses shod, the herd shaped up for the rest of the trip.

For Helen, the thrill was even greater. Here were the Doans' wives, the first white women she'd seen since the herd took the trail. She found them merry and friendly. They even let her hold their babies—in winter a special treat in days not too far gone, as they explained; for there had been only a buffalo hide for a door, and the seat closest to the fire was reserved for whoever had the youngsters.

Too, they were able to tell Helen more about The Nations. Corwin Doan had once operated a store on Cache Creek, near Fort Sill. Aside from the chance of Indian raids—the young bucks among the Kiowas and Comanches still sometimes took the warpath—they doubted that the trip to Dodge would prove too dangerous, what with the herd having a large and well-armed crew.

But that night as she passed the Cow Boy Saloon on her way back to the chuck-

wagon, Steve Rand, frowning, fell in beside her. "Helen . . ."

"Yes, Steve?"

"There's a commission man here, down from Dodge to check the north-bound herds."

"Yes . . . ?" Helen repeated, puzzled.

"He says he'll buy your Jughandle steers here for two-thirds the Kansas price and drive them the rest of the way himself, if we'll cut them out of the herd. And Corwin Doan says he'll see you to Denison with the money. You won't have any trouble getting to Galveston from there."

It was so sudden, so completely unexpected, it rocked Helen to her shoe soles. Unbelievingly, she groped. "You—you mean you . . . want me to leave the herd? You . . . don't want me to go on to Dodge City with you?"

Rand nodded slowly. The grey eyes were very grave. "That's it, Helen—and I don't like it either. But we're not through with the Gills nor Tassie Pierce. They've held off while we were in Texas because they didn't want to chance mixing with the Rangers. But once we cross to The Nations, anything goes. Not only from them, but others—the Kiowas and Comanch', and the white trash that hides out up there. I think I can get the herd through anyhow—I know some people—but it's a gamble, a long shot. I can't risk letting you in for it. I . . . the way I feel won't let me. Not when you could be safe in Galveston with your father."

Helen said: "No one here seems to think it would be so dangerous." She knew her voice sounded strained.

"No one here knows the Gills are out to get us, either. No one knows what Tassie Pierce's plans are." Rand stopped, took her hand in his. "I wish it was different, Helen. But all I can do is ask you to try to understand."

Dully, Helen nodded. "I . . . understand."

"And you'll go to Denison with Doan?"

"I suppose so."

"Then tomorrow—" Abruptly, Rand broke off. "Good night, Helen." Turning, he walked swiftly away.

Helen stood looking after him, unseeing. Her head all at once was throbbing. The day's excitement, the pleasure of seeing the women—of a sudden they had turned bitter in her mouth.

Then someone laughed—a high, shrill, cackling laugh, so close it stiffened her.

She spun. "Tassie—!"

"It's me, all right." The dwarfish, spindle-shanked little *buscadero* was coming towards her out of the darkness, thin lips peeled back in an ugly wolf-grin. "So you reckon to cut th' herd, huh?"

Helen didn't answer.

"I figgered I'd get the straight of it if I stuck close enough, after I heard Rand jawin' with that commission agent." Again the little man smirked. "Only there's one thing he left out."

"He . . . left out?"

"Yeah. One thing." The wizened face was a mask of menace now, the black eyes glittering pin-points. "He didn't tell you me an' my boys signed on t'take this herd to Kansas—not just part of it, th' whole herd. That's what we reckon t'do. We ain't standin' for no cut."

"But . . . why? What do you care? You don't own the herd. They're not yours."

"Why's our business. But if that herd's cut, Steve Rand gets cut with it—by a Sharps slug betwixt the shoulder blades, say. The deal's already made, so it won't do you any good to tell him. Even should he gun me down, he still gets it." Once more, Pierce laughed his high, shrill cackle. "It's up t'you, ma'am; all up t'you. So think it over."

As silently as he had come, he faded back again into the night.

For a long moment Helen did not move. She could not. A sickness was in her, twisting and writhing. In the back of her brain she had known without asking: one way or another, up there in The Nations, Tassie expected to take over. From the beginning he'd planned it. Tassie was no forty-and-found cowhand, to be content with wages. Not when he could collect on winner-take-all.

And that meant, too, that when the play was made, Steve Rand must die.

Almost without conscious effort, she was moving, plodding drearily back over her own steps towards the dim lights and huddled buildings that were Doan's Crossing, and the Cow Boy Saloon. For if it was death for Rand, now or later, then let it be later. She could postpone it, at least for a little while.

But he must never know. Not with his pride. . . .

The men at the bar looked up frowning as she entered, but she came on, heedless of their disapproval.

"Steve . . ." she said.

He, too, was frowning, puzzled. "Helen, this isn't any place for you," he began, a trifle stiffly.

She repeated, "Steve . . ." and then, "I've changed my mind, Steve. I won't let you cut my Jughandle cattle out. I'm . . . going with you."

CHAPTER IX

RED RIVER fell behind. Doan's Store and its out-buildings faded to a blur on the blue horizon; finally disappeared altogether. The sun overhead grew hotter.

Ever alert, Rand ceaselessly searched the rolling plains ahead. There was danger here, he knew; for this was the trail his brothers had traveled—the blood-stained trail that wound beside their graves.

Beside Rand, the point rider drifted closer; gestured. "Hey, Steve! Over there—"

Off to the northwest, a mounted man had appeared atop a rise, there to stand silhouetted against the skyline. Another followed, and then another.

Rand reined up. As he did so, a quick drum of hoofs sounded behind him, and Tassie Pierce drew abreast. "Trouble?" His voice was shrill with excitement, his head thrust forward, vulture-like.

Rand held his face expressionless. "Friends of mine, more likely. I put out the word when we hit Doan's for them to meet me about here."

"Friends—?"

Instead of explaining, Rand spurred forward towards the waiting trio. A sort of grim mirth rose in him, a satisfaction at the shock in the little outlaw's tone. All these weeks, Tassie had held his murderous urges in check, waiting till they were out of Texas and Ranger jurisdiction to make his play. The idea that he might run into even greater obstacles in this lawless country north of the Red obviously hadn't even occurred to him.

The three men from the rise were riding to meet them now. Their leader, a brawny giant with flaming red hair and beard, wearing greasy buckskins and mounted on a huge, pudding-footed horse, raised his hand palm outward in greeting. His great bass voice boomed. "How, Steve!"

Rand brought up his own hand. "How, Jake! I was beginning to wonder if something had slipped. I sort of figured you'd drop by at Doan's before we started."

"You orter knowed better," the red-bearded giant grinned. "I'm your huckleberry, Steve. You call Jake Branwynn, you get Jake Branwynn. But not in Texas. I'm sorta unpopular down there, you might say, an' them damn' Rangers make too much of a habit of sneakin' up on a man." He jerked a thumb towards his two companions—one blond and bulky; the other thin, copper-faced, though with a marked Negroid cast to his features. "Meet my boys. Three-finger' Tom Taylor. John Bias, of the Creeks. They'll do to take along, come any trouble."

"Howdy," Rand nodded. And then, shrugging: "May not be any trouble, Jake. But I wanted to make sure I got this herd across The Nations, and I knew you could clear the trail for me if anybody could."

"You'll get across," the big man grunted. He glanced at Tassie Pierce, who had now come up. "This your *segundo?*"

Rand nodded again. "Tassie Pierce, Red Jake Branwynn." A sudden idea struck him. "Tassie, Jake's from up in the Osage country. He's an old friend of mine. Folks that know The Nations don't cross him." Then, turning back to Branwynn, he spoke deliberately. "Tassie's a good man, Jake. Only one thing I don't like about him. He figures to cut me down and steal this herd before we get to Kansas. You might remember that."

Red Jake's mouth kept on grinning, but his eyes all at once were cold and hard. "Well, he may get away with it, Steve. At least, the part about cuttin' you down an' stealin' your herd. But I doubt he makes it to Kansas."

Pierce looked from the one of them to the other. His wizened face went pale with rage, but he didn't speak.

Branwynn said: "Sorry I can't stay an' powwow with you a while longer, Steve, but I got some things t'see to. You go right ahead, though. Nobody won't bother you nor your herd while you're in The Nations. Not of they want to keep their hair. Anyone starts anything, you tell 'em that's what Red Jake said." He jerked his head to his men. "Come on, boys."

Wheeling, the trio rode away.

FOR a long moment after Branwynn left, there was taut silence. Tassie Pierce's hand shook with fury, close to his gun-butt. The hate in his eyes crawled over Rand like a living thing. Then, still without a word, the little *buscadero* reined his horse about and galloped back to his place beside the herd.

Rand followed; took up his stand again with the point man. He had no illusions that the outlaws in his crew were cowed, but at least he'd let them know the herd couldn't be taken over without a bloody fight, plus the possibility of Red Jake's brand of repercussions afterward. Getting the trouble out into the open was in itself a relief. It left the next move up to Pierce. Meanwhile, for his own part, he would be content to keep his eyes open and bide his time.

But the days of dust and sun and cattle noise dragged wearily, drearily, by, and still Tassie showed no signs of striking. The herd moved on across the Indian country, following the north fork of Red River. The Wichita Mountains loomed ahead, then fell behind again.

They left the Red at Old Indian Camp, striking out cross country towards Kansas once more. There was a parched brown look to the prairies now. Little water showed in Elk Creek, and Cache had even less. Other herds, up the trail before them, had thinned the graze. What was left rasped harshly, stalk against brittle stalk, with every whisper of breeze.

Still nothing happened. Rand found himself plagued by a hundred questions, a thousand doubts. Where had Jake Branwynn and his men gone? Why hadn't they come back? What were the Gills planning? Or had they given up? When did Tassie Pierce expect to make his play? How? And what about Helen Inns . . .?

On the banks of the Washita, a passing horseman informed them they couldn't count on finding more water nearer than the South Canadian, thirty-five miles away. After that, Rand had no time for his thoughts. A thirty-five mile drive without water meant pushing the herd. No longer could they afford to let the cattle browse leisurely at a ten-mile-a-day pace. The resentful brutes had to be prodded, shoved ahead in spite of short tempers and fatigue.

They reached the Canadian shortly after noon the second day. The river bed lay naked before them, a sun-shimmering ribbon of sand and red clay . . . and not a drop of water.

Again, there was a rider—a Cherokee, this time mounted on a fat, panting paint pony. He'd scouted the river up and down, he said, and nowhere in miles were there any holes with enough water even to touch the thirst of the herd. Ahead, Sand Creek was dry. Wolf Creek? Yes, there still was plenty of water there. But that lay thirty blazing miles away. . . .

Once more, they threw the thick-tongued, weary cattle forward. The sun blazed down, a living enemy, and dust billowed up from the parched dunes under foot to choke horses and cows and men alike. The riders sagged in their saddles, eyes bloodshot, faces so masked with dirt as to be hardly recognizable. The weakest of the animals in the drag staggered; fell, and could not rise again. They left them there, bellowing piteously from throats already swelling shut. When night came and they paused for rest, the herd refused to lie down. All through the long, dark hours it milled, lowing its anguish till at last they started it forward again . . . driving, driving.

Another day dawned, hotter even than the last. More cattle fell. The rest moved onward as in a daze, eyes filmed and blank, heads dragging lower and lower, as if the weight of the great, spreading horns were more than their necks could bear.

Then, from the north, a faint breeze sprang up. Heads lifted. All down the line, the lowing chorus swelled. Ankle joints crackling, horns rattling, the herd lurched forward, moving faster with every step.

Old Milam Medford fell in beside Rand. His gaunt body was hunched, his leathery face chiseled with deep lines of strain. But his voice had a suddenly urgent ring. "Wolf Creek ahead—an' there's water in her. They smell it. Another couple of minutes an' they'll stampede for it. You don't hold 'em, you'll lose five hundred or a thousand head, drowned an' trompled an' foundered. Throw th' boys up front. That's where you'll need 'em."

Wearily, Rand nodded. "Thanks, Medford." He shouted orders. Men galloped past, taking new positions. After a moment's checking, he followed. He was as tired as he had ever been. He hadn't slept since they left the Washita; hadn't eaten but a couple of times, and then only in hasty snatches. His whole body ached.

The relatively clear air up in front of the herd tasted good. He sucked in deep lungfuls of it, wondering as he did so whether he'd ever get the dirt worked out of his pores, his nostrils.

Then, of a sudden, while he watched, a dust-cloud appeared to the north—the high, thin dust of horsemen, riding fast. Beside him, Tassie Pierce called, "What th' hell—?"

Rand strained his eyes. The cloud rolled closer. He began to glimpse riders—strange-looking riders who hugged so close to their mounts that it was difficult to tell where horse left off and man began. Sun glinted on naked bronze bodies. The breeze brought the echo of a shrill, wild yell.

Rand wheeled his steeldust; brought his arm up in a peremptory gesture. "Hold it!" His voice rang harsh even in his own ears.

The trail crew pulled their horses to a halt. Behind them, nostrils flaring with the scent of the distant water, the cattle bellowed angrily at the delay. Some of the bolder kept on coming till the hands turned them with kicks and quirt blows.

The oncoming riders were closer now, plainly recognizable as Indians. Half a hundred strong, they raced toward the herd. Rifles and lances glittered in the sunlight. In strange incongruity, one brave was carrying a parasol. A woman's print dress draped the shoulders of another. A third wore a frock coat and battered stove-pipe hat.

Tassie Pierced laughed shrilly. "Look at 'em! Parasols—plug hats—"

"Shut up, you fool!" Rand snapped. "They're hostiles—a war party off some reservation! They got that stuff in a raid!"

The onrushing warriors reined up a hundred feet away and ranged themselves in a line parallel to that the trail crew had formed. Then, arrogantly, the brave wearing the frock coat and top hat rode forward. His greasy face was set in a sneer.

"Me Crazy Wolf. You steal wohaws. Me take now."

A knot drew tight in Steve Rand's belly. He held his face expressionless. "What are you talking about? These are our cattle. They're not stolen."

Crazy Wolf's face set into an ugly, sullen, copper mask. "You steal wohaws," he repeated stubbornly. "*Tejano* Turkey Track tell Crazy Wolf. Me takum back."

"The Turkey Track lies," Rand snapped. "These cows are ours." And then, after a moment's pause: "Anybody that tries to take 'em away from us is going to have to answer to Red Jake Branwynn."

"Branwynn! Wagh!" the Indian sneered. He raised his lance.

A fresh scalp, the hair flaming red, dangled from the shaft.

In spite of himself, Rand caught his breath. A sickness gripped him. He couldn't tear his eyes from the awful trophy.

"Crazy Wolf kill Branwynn," the brave snarled. "You make trouble, Crazy Wolf kill you too."

The knot in Rand's stomach drew tighter. He could hear the cattle crowding forward again, bellowing and pawing as they tried to work up courage enough to charge through the line of riders and on to Wolf Creek's water; but of a sudden the sounds meant nothing to him. He knew that every eye—white and Indian alike—was on him. That didn't matter, either. Nothing mattered—nothing but the black realization that all his plans and work had come to naught. He'd gambled, and he'd lost.

Tassie Pierce's shrill voice cut through. "Rand! I don't get it. What's th' buck talkin' about?"

Without quite knowing why, Rand laughed. He glanced down the line at the little *buscadero* and his half-dozen remaining outlaw riders. At the others, the good-natured Texas hands he'd hired along the way. Their faces were set, now, all of them, as they tried to hide the panicky thoughts he knew were in their minds.

Across the hundred feet of intervening space, the Indians were crowding forward a little. The rifles, the lances, were poised and ready. Some of the braves were scowling, others openly grinning their triumph. Crazy Wolf's black eyes gleamed like chips of obsidian. He sat straight on his pony, taut as a Comanche bowstring.

Rand laughed again. Recklessly, this time.

"Tassie," he said, indicating the warrior before them, "this gent's name is Crazy Wolf. I've heard of him. He's a Comanch' —renegade Comanch', with bad braves from half a dozen tribes in his band. The cavalry was looking for him, last I heard. He's just killed Jake Branwynn. Right now, he's got a job with a white man. The Gills have hired him to take this herd away from us."

Pierce began to chuckle—louder and

louder, higher and higher, till it became that keening madman's laugh that branded him. A spark of admiration flared within Rand. For all his faults, there was no yellow stripe down Tassie Pierce's spine.

Abruptly, the little man's shrill cackle stopped. He looked from Rand to the scowling Comanche, then back again. "So what's our play, Rand? I'll leave it t'you. This is your country. You know th' ropes."

Rand grinned. He let his voice ring out, so that the farthest hand could hear it. "Do I need to tell you? Crazy Wolf says he'll let us live if we give him the herd—but we know better. He wants our hair worse than he does the cattle. So I say—give 'em hell!"

He sank in his spurs with a yell, then. His Colt bucked in his hand as the steeldust leaped forward, and he saw Crazy Wolf slam backward under the impact of its slugs.

After that, the world dissolved into a mad maelstrom of gunfire and horses and gleaming copper bodies. He had no idea that he and his Texans could fight through; the odds were too great. But at least it was better to go down fighting than to surrender, then fall to the Indians' sudden rush without a chance to take a toll.

He downed three of the raiders. Then a rifle butt caught him in the side of the neck, and he spilled from the steeldust's saddle. Prostrate, in a haze of pain, he glimpsed Tassie Pierce charging down on the buck with the parasol, revolvers roaring. Cisco Flores raced past, shooting—Bo Hess, old Medford, a dozen others. But he knew they couldn't hold. Even as he watched, a war club crushed Flores' skull like paper.

Only then, suddenly, new thunder rose, drowning out even the roar of the guns. Staring, Rand stumbled to his feet.

It was the herd, the cattle. Maddened by thirst, three thousand strong, they hurtled forward, stampeding straight across the field of battle. Those in front tried to veer from the tangle of shouting, shooting men. They failed. The surge of close-packed flesh and bone behind drove them on, spilled over them in the wild rush for water.

Barely in time, Rand lunged from the longhorns' path. Indians and drive hands alike broke before them.

Crazy Wolf, a score of his warriors, were dead. Now, with the fight broken off for the moment, the rest of the tribesmen seemed to lose heart. They hesitated, then fell back. When a handful of the Texans spurred toward them to renew the fray, they raced away.

The battle was over.

IT TURNED out to be a Pyrrhic victory. Scarcely a man of the crew had escaped unscathed. Cisco Flores, Bo Hess, Joe Whipple and Mike Hull were dead; Dallas Pruiett, Sim Adams and Blackie Rister too badly wounded to travel save in the bed of the chuck-wagon. Hundreds of the cattle had been killed.

But they'd won. Further, losses had been heaviest among Tassie Pierce's gunhands. While the little *buscadero* himself had miraculously come through the thick of the fight with only a few scratches, he wouldn't be able to count on help from any of his men for weeks to come.

That part came as a relief to Rand. The lifting of the outlaw menace was, in itself, worth almost any price. For weeks, their sullen pressure had held the forefront of his mind. He'd ridden with it hovering over him; slept with it, breathed it in the very air.

It was a distraction he couldn't afford. Crazy Wolf's attack proved that. For Crazy Wolf had been set upon them by the Turkey Track. The Gills hadn't given up. They never would. Always, till the day he cut them down, they'd be lurking in the shadows like crouched cougars, watching and waiting and poised to spring.

The knowledge of it somehow loosed a tide of fury in him. Before, he'd half resented the role of avenger that circumstance had pressed upon him. Now, night and day, the memory of his murdered brothers rose to haunt him, a thirst that only blood could slake.

The problem of getting the cattle to Dodge remained. For two days, he let the weary brutes rest and fill their bellies. Then, slowly—since the outfit now was desperately short-handed once more—the crew took up the northward drive again.

Luck for once was with him. A providential heavy rain freshened the graze. Water ran high in the Otter, the Beaver, the Buffalo.

By the time they reached Wild Horse Creek, Rand had planned his strategy. A messenger could ride ahead to Dodge with the papers for the herd and quietly let an

option to some buyer. The arrangements would call for the option-holder to meet the outfit at Mulberry Creek, just outside of town. They'd close the deal there, collect the cash before the Turkey Track had any chance for further tricks. Then he, Steve Rand, would pay off Helen and start her on her way to Galveston; deposit the money for the Crossed Diamond stock to the credit of his brothers' widows.

After that, he'd be ready for his own private meeting with the Gills.

Who to send as messenger, however, remained a problem. He needed every man to help handle the herd. Further, he didn't want to bare his plans or rouse Tassie Pierce's suspicions by sending off any member of the crew.

The answer came to him with his first glimpse of the familiar creek-bank. There was a Texas cowhand he'd done some favors —a youngster who went by the name of Jack Williams and lived in The Nations.

And Williams used a squatter's cabin a few miles up this very stream as his headquarters.

It was the final detail. Despite various difficulties with the law, Williams was a trustworthy boy, the kind that took friendships seriously.

A weight seemed to lift from Rand's shoulders. Casually, he let the steeldust fall back to a place beside the chuck-wagon; nodded to Helen Inns. "Everything all right? The boys resting easy?"

She stared at him. "Are you . . . speaking to me?"

He managed a smile. "Doesn't it sound like it?"

"Oh, yes. But I'm not sure I can believe my own ears." She, too, smiled; but there was a faint, bitter twist to her lips. "You see . . . it's been so long—not since Doan's Store, if I remember."

"And if *I* remember, you gave me plenty of reason!" Rand broke off, already regretting the momentary temper. "Look, Helen: I didn't come to fight with you. All that trouble's past, anyhow. We're nearly to Dodge, and it's time to get ready to sell the herd. I thought I'd pick up the papers for your Jughandle stuff—"

"Why?"

Inwardly, Rand cursed his own clumsiness. He'd brought up the business too abruptly, given Helen an excuse for asking the one question he could least afford to answer.

He said: "Some of the buyers make a business of coming down a ways in order to get their pick of the herds. If we get a good offer, I want to deal right then, before they take a notion to cut the price or change their minds. I'll have to have everything all set—"

He could see the suspicion rising in her eyes.

"You mean it would take too long for someone inspecting the herd to stop back here at the wagon for the couple of seconds it would take me to sign my name to a bill of sale?"

Rand floundered. "It's not that. Lots of times buyers don't like to deal with—with two people, a split outfit. Especially if one'a woman. They're afraid there might be some kind of disagreement. You see—"

"I'm afraid I don't see, Steve. I'm afraid you'll have to make it a great deal clearer before I'll give you the papers for my Jughandle stock."

He almost told her the truth, then. But the recollection of that night in the Cow Boy Saloon—her stubbornness, her own refusal to explain—rose to halt him. She hadn't trusted him then; she didn't trust him now. Why, he had no way of knowing. But he didn't dare take a chance.

Besides, there really wasn't any need for Jack Williams to take the papers with him. Maybe it would even be safer if he didn't. He could execute an option without them.

Helen was speaking again. The suspicion was open now.

"These steers are my last chance to get the money my father needs, Steve. I don't intend to take any chances on losing them, or the money for them."

"And you figure I'm likely to steal them, is that it?"

Helen's voice was very level. "No, Steve, I don't think so. But the only reason you started this drive in the first place was so you could take revenge on the Turkey Track. That's all you really care about, even now—and I won't risk my father's life for it. Because for all I know, you may want our cattle just as a weapon to use against the Gills, somehow." Her slim shoulders lifted, ever so slightly. "I'm sorry, Steve. But you'll have to tell me the whole truth before I'll let you have control."

"I see!" Rand snapped. "What you really mean is, it's all right for you to hook me into taking you and your handful of

scrub steers north, even if you have to threaten to sic the Rangers on me, or butter me with sweet talk, or lie to me and double-cross me like you did at Doan's. But when I ask you for a little faith, that's something else again." The muscles along his jaw drew tight with angry tension. "All right, play it that way! You've won! I won't bother you any more!"

Seething, he galloped away.

RAND took out his temper in hard riding, all the way up Wild Horse Creek to Jack Williams' cabin. He found Williams both at home and agreeable to a quick trip to Dodge City, and within an hour was himself heading back to the herd.

Although by now he felt heartily ashamed for having flown off the handle at Helen Inns, he decided, after due consideration, to let stand the things he'd said. There was truth enough in them to give him as good cause for feeling aggrieved as she; and, until the drive was safely over, it seemed not too bad an idea to keep her at a distance.

The herd moved on. To the Cimarron, this time: almost the last milepost before Dodge along the far-flung Western Trail. Ahead lay Kansas, and victory. The tension that had gripped the weary crew seemed to ease a little.

Night came down soon after they crossed. There was time for a drink at the Longhorn Roundup. A couple of men slipped off to visit old Julia's place.

But for Rand there was no release. He stayed in camp, staring bleak-eyed into the fire as he recalled another night, and black shadows, and a snarling gunman whose name was Grimes. . . .

Then morning came, and they took the trail again. More days passed. They followed Bear Creek to near its head; crossed, and struck out for Mailey's roadhouse on Bluff Creek.

Jack Williams met them three hours after they left the bedgrounds north of the Bear. According to instructions, he played the role of a footloose cowhand drifting back to Texas. He gave Rand no sign of recognition, but his grin told plainer than words that his mission was a success. On the pretense of discussing the condition of the trail the rest of the way to Dodge, Rand rode with him a mile or so, till a rise in the gently rolling prairies had cut them off from the others' view. There Williams delivered a copy of the option he'd arranged and collected his pay, then spurred on south towards his haven in The Nations.

Rand, in turn, swung back in the direction of the herd. As he rode, he debated what to tell Helen. Or, more accurately, whether to tell her anything. His first impulse had been to show her the precious paper at once, let her know that they'd won. The bargain Williams had struck for them, the price he'd gotten, was all anyone could ask for. Helen couldn't help but like it and be thankful.

Yet at the same time, something held him back. Distrust, maybe; maybe just a lurking wariness that Tassie Pierce or the Gills might still have plans. After all these endless hours and days and weeks—the work, the blood, the fighting—it didn't seem credible, somehow, that at the last the pieces should fall into place so neatly.

But in the end, the decision turned out not to be his to make, for as he once more came in sight of the trail, he discovered that the herd had halted, ringed by a chain of watchful riders who wore the blue uniforms of United States cavalry. The crew, gathered together back by the chuck-wagon, sat their saddles with sullen stiffness. A little apart from them, more uniformed figures and a handful of strange civilians clustered about a fluttering guidon.

Rand pushed the steeldust forward at a gallop. Bewilderment vied with quick uneasiness in him.

The group by the guidon wheeled as he approached. A cold-eyed, heavy-set man in town clothes rode out a few steps. His voice, his manner, were curt.

"Where you think you're goin', mister? Who are you?"

Rand matched the other's tone. "I could ask you the same thing. I'm boss of this herd—Steve Rand's the name? What's up?"

The other flipped back his coat to expose a gleaming metal star. "I'm Sandburg, United States marshal. You're under arrest."

"Arrest—?" Rand rocked. "What for?"

"As if you didn't know!" the marshal glowered. "This here herd's Injun beef, earmarked for the Pawnee reservation."

Rand rocked again. "Listen, there's some mistake—"

"You bet there's a mistake," Sandburg snapped. "You made it, the day you rustled these cows. You don't get away with that kind of stuff. Not when Uncle Sam's on

t'other end of the deal." He turned in his saddle. "What about them other warrants, Joe?"

A second badge-wearer fumbled through a sheaf of papers. "Three more of 'em. They're for Milam Medford, Taswell Pierce, an' a gal name of Helen Inns. We got Medford"—he jerked a thumb toward where the old man hunkered—"but the other two must have vamoosed."

Rand stiffened, cast a wary glance about. Sure enough, there was no sign of either the little *buscadero* chieftain or the girl.

The realization set a hundred questions buzzing in his head. A tiny flicker of panic ran through him.

But old Milam was talking: "Vamoosed is right!" he announced sourly. "Miz' Helen an' Pierce is dead—kilt by Crazy Wolf's renegades. They hit us down Wolf Creek way."

It suddenly dawned on Rand that the gaunt ancient had spoken loudly enough for the whole crew to hear; and that gave him new angles to puzzle over.

Sandburg scowled at Medford. "If you're lyin' . . ."

"He may be tellin' it straight, marshal," the deputy interrupted. "They had 'em a fight, no question about that. They got three wounded men in the wagon."

"All right, all right," the marshal grunted. "It's a cinch none of these curly wolves is a girl, anyhow."

A cavalry officer edged his horse forward. "What about the rest of these men? What happens to them?"

Sandburg shrugged. "From what these Gills that tipped us off said, they're just hired help. They ain't wanted. Use 'em to push the herd down to the reservation, if you want to. Then turn 'em loose."

Rand said tightly: "Marshal, when you say the Gill brothers tipped you off, it clears up a lot of things. I don't know what they told you, but whatever it was, it isn't true. This is my herd. I've got the papers to prove it. But the Gills are out to break me, and they're using you to do it. If you'll just let me explain—"

"You can explain to me till doomsday an' it still won't do you any good," Sandburg retorted curtly. "I'm under orders. The cavalry is, too. Them orders say they're to take over this herd. I'm to put you in jail. So save your talk for the federal court. That's where you'll have to answer." He gestured to the deputy. "Take his gun, Joe. Shackle his wrists. The old man's, too."

For a long moment, Rand hung trigger-taut. He could draw and fire before the deputy reached him, maybe. The steeldust would run its heart out to get him away. . . .

Only then the facts rose stark before him: even to try to escape, he'd have to kill. He'd have to gun down honest men, men doing their duty under the laws they'd sworn to uphold. And in so doing, he'd put himself beyond the pale forever. There wouldn't be any explaining, then; no turning back.

More, the crew, in their wild loyalty, might try to follow him; and that would be the end for them, also. Helen Inns, his brothers' widows, would lose any lingering chance they might have of salvaging some few pennies of the herd's value by lawsuit.

No. He couldn't do it.

Wordless, sick, he let the man called Joe take his gun. The cold iron of the shackles clamped about his wrists.

A cavalry lieutenant was cantering over to the crew. Blurred words drifted back: "Swing these cows around, to the southeast. We're delivering them to the Pawnees. And in case you've got any ideas of trickery, just remember that our troop will be escorting you every foot of the way."

"Report to me at Dodge when you're through, boys," Rand called with an attempt at cheerfulness. "One way or another, I'll see you get paid off."

But the sickness within him was growing. That the drive should end this way, after all their efforts. . . .

His mind swung back to Helen Inns. Where had she gone? Could she be hiding somewhere in this prairie wilderness in a crazy effort to keep out of the hands of the cavalry? Was she to be left here, alone and stranded? Or, worse, had Tassie Pierce dragged her away as part of some warped scheme of his own?

Even the thought made Rand shudder.

The deputy was putting irons on Medford now. The task completed, he swung into his saddle. "All set, marshal."

"Let's go, then," Sandburg grunted heavily. "I want to get these prisoners back to Dodge."

A tight little knot of men, with Rand and Medford boxed in the center, the marshal's party galloped north.

CHAPTER X

ACTUALLY, neither Tassie Pierce nor the arrival of the cavalry was in any way responsible for the Helen Inns' disappearance. Her departure dated back, instead, to the afternoon at Wild Horse Creek when she last had clashed with Rand. His contempt, the sting of his words, had cut her more deeply than she believed possible. She wanted nothing so much as to run away, to hide herself and seek release in tears.

Denied the refuge of her chuck-wagon bunk—the men wounded in the batle with Crazy Wolf's band now occupied it—she threw a saddle on the horse set aside for her from the remuda and rode off downstream half a mile. There, beneath a spreading sycamore, she dismounted and threw herself full length on the grass.

But once more solitude was denied her. Grass rustled. She looked up to see old Milam Medford creakily getting off his horse.

"Miz' Helen—" he began.

Choking on her tears, she turned away. "I—I don't want to talk, Milam."

"T'ain't what you like that makes you fat, it's what you get," the oldster retorted dourly, hunkering down beside her. "They's times to keep quiet, but they's times t'gab, too. This here's one of 'em."

Wearily, Helen sat up and blotted her eyes. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Ain't nothin' wrong. That's just it."

"What—?"

Medford's seamed, leathery face grew suddenly sober. The chill, the curtness, that had so often marked him these days and weeks upon the trail seemed to fall away. One more, he was the man she'd known back at the Jughandle—the weary, gentle old cowhand who had been almost as close to her as her father.

He said: "We been out o' sorts with each other a few times about you ridin' this trail, Miz' Helen. But I reckon we both know the other was tryin' t' do th' right thing as he seed it."

"Yes, Milam."

"At the start, what you wanted was to git your Jughandle cows north to Dodge so's you could raise some money, t' take care of your pappy. Only thing I had ag'in it was I was scared you'd get yourself killed tryin' it."

Helen touched his hand gently. "I know, Milam."

"We're just about there, Miz' Helen."

"You mean—?"

"Two hoots an' a holler more an' we'll be out of The Nations an' into Kansas. You can count th' days t' Dodge on your fingers now. Th' trouble's over."

In spite of her, Helen's heart beat a fraction faster. It was true, all true. She'd known it, really. And yet, somehow, she hadn't dared let herself think about the end.

Old Milam was still talking. "Crazy Wolf's dead. He was th' Gills' ace in the hole. By now, they're ridin' hard an' fast for new country. Ain't neither of 'em got the sand t' meet Rand face to face. So we can count them out."

"But Tassie Pierce—"

"He's through, too. Them wolves he had behind him—Cisco Flores, Quinn, Big Sam Young—was what made him poison. Now they're gone an' he's alone. His fangs is pulled."

Helen pulled at a tuft of grass. "I know, Milam. But. . . ."

The old man's eyes met her's, bleak beyond belief. His bony fingers caressed the butt of his ancient Remington. "He's through, I said. You got my word for that."

A shudder ran through Helen. Always, it was this way—always the roar of guns, and cold-eyed men, and killing.

She caught herself wondering how she, a preacher's daughter, had let herself be caught up in it.

Medford said: "I still ain't got around t' what I want to tell you."

She sighed. "Go ahead, Milam."

"You got a herd t' sell, Miz' Helen."

"Yes. Of course."

"It might be a sort of an idee if you was to . . . to sneak away, like, an' ride ahead t' see th' buyers, once we cross to Kansas."

A sudden, uneasy prickle flicked at Helen's spine. Pushing it down, she studied the old man. "What are you trying to say, Milam?"

He dodged her eyes. "Well . . . well, you sure-nuff don't want nothin' t' go wrong, not now. You can't afford not t' get your share for your pappy, after all this grief an' ridin'."

"Is it Rand, Milam?" She made herself speak levelly. "Are you telling me you're

afraid he'll try to rob me?"

The old man shifted, grunted. "It ain't that, Miz' Helen—well, at least not exactly. But he's rode a lot of twisty trails, an' there's times you've rubbed him wrong. It might not do no harm to remove temptation, as your pappy'd say. All you'd need to do would be to ride ahead with your papers an' make a deal with old Jed Connors to take over everything in the herd that wears the Jughandle. Jed's square—I know him from the old days, when he was a trader down in Santa Fe; he'll treat you right. Then, when you get the money banked. . . ."

Helen fought against the pain. "You've heard something, then, Milam? Is that it? Steve's . . . making plans?"

Medford stared at the ground. "I dunno, Miz' Helen. I just plain don't know."

"I see." The pain stabbed deeper. Helen's fingers were trembling. She tried to smooth her dress, her hair, to hide it. But that was motion only. Inside, one name kept echoing, like the beat of a giant drum: *Steve . . . Steve . . . Steve . . .*

She said dully, "All right, Milam. I'll go."

ON MILAM'S advice, she waited till they had crossed Bear Creek. Next morning, rising early, she slipped away and hid in a clump of cottonwoods. Medford already had a horse tethered there for her.

Waiting till the outfit was moving, she mounted and rode swiftly north toward Dodge City, veering just enough west of the trail's hoof-slashed track to keep out of sight of the crew.

She pushed on till finally, in mid-afternoon, a moving line of smoke showed on the horizon. She stared at it for a moment, uncomprehending. Then it dawned on her that this must be the railroad, the steam cars—first she had ever seen. Caught up by the novelty of it, she spurred ahead.

An hour later she was riding into Dodge City itself.

The town was smaller than she'd expected. Its newness showed in the unweathered boards of many buildings.

There were several churches and, on the hills beyond the commercial district, neat homes. She even passed a milliner's! Men and women in the formal garb of the east were common—so much so that Helen felt a momentary twinge of embarrassment for the frayed and rumpled dress in which she had been forced to come.

But clothes were something that could be remedied as soon as she had a place to stay. Milam had suggested the Dodge House, the town's leading and eminently respectable hostelry. She located it without difficulty. Leaving her horse at a livery stable, she approached the desk and asked for a room.

The clerk nodded politely and extended pen and register.

Helen started to sign. But as she did so, two names in heavy script close to the top of the page leaped out to catch her eye.

She stopped short. The pen slipped from her fingers. Of a sudden her heart was pounding.

Two names: *Oren Gill. Howard Gill.*

The clerk caught her arm; steadied her. "Miss! Is something wrong?"

She forced out words: "No . . . no, nothing." Picking up the pen once more, she inscribed her own name. But her heart still was beating too fast, and she moved to the room assigned her in a daze of panic.

The Gills—Oren and Howard both! Not at Tonkawa, but here, in Dodge City, this hotel!

She couldn't understand it. What were they doing? Why had they come?

Then reason again took command. After all, it was possible the Gills had made their bargain with Crazy Wolf from this end of the line, and now were lounging about town, drinking the heady wine of expected victory. Perhaps they hadn't even learned of his defeat yet. Or, hearing, they might have already checked out, to flee as Milam had predicted.

Hurriedly calling in a chambermaid, Helen removed and whisked the worst of the dust from her own dress and sent it out to a tailor's for pressing. By the time the maid returned it, she had managed a bath of sorts and brushed her dark hair to a glossy, ringleted sheen.

Dressing, she inspected herself in the washstand mirror.

The portrait it revealed could not but bring a little flush of pleasure to her smooth, tanned cheeks. Nor was it from vanity alone. Woman-like, she knew instinctively that here in this brawling frontier town her femininity would be her strongest weapon; and with her father's very life perhaps at stake, she made no pretense even to herself

that she would disdain to use it.

Leaving the hotel, she sought Jed Connor's office.

A thick-bodied, elderly man well over six feet tall, with great, spreading shoulders and a shock of white hair, rose from behind a deal table as Helen entered.

"Ma'am?" he inquired in a booming bass voice.

"I'm looking for Jed Connor," Helen said.

"It's my pleasure, ma'am. I'm him."

"I'm Helen Inns. I have some cattle to sell. Milam Medford said I should see you about it."

"Medford—!" It was more a whoop than an exclamation. A tremendous grin split Connor's face, and he sent the table spinning like a footstool in his hurry to get forward. For an instant Helen thought he was going to sweep her up in a bear-hug. "How is the old coot? I haven't seen him since Santa Fe, in fifty-nine."

Helen smiled. "You can ask him yourself, tomorrow or next day, Mister Connor. He's coming in with the herd."

"He's coming up the trail?" Again, Connor whooped. "I tell you, ma'am, Milam's made of whang leather an' steel springs. He'll never wear out, I swear!" And then, still chuckling: "What herd is it?"

Helen said: "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Mister Connor. The herd's from Tonkawa County, under a Crossed Diamond road brand. Most of the cattle are Rand Crossed Diamond. But there's some Jughandle." She hesitated. "I . . . well, the Jughandle is my father's outfit. He's in the hospital, and we need money. That's why I came on ahead. I—I want to sell now, so I can hurry back to Texas." She fumbled in her purse. "I've got the papers right here. . . ."

It dawned on her as she finished speaking that Connor had all at once grown very still. Now he shot her a sudden, piercing glance. "Trouble?"

She tried to smile; failed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, have you been having some kind of a scrap with the Crossed Diamond on the way up?" he rapped bluntly. "Is that why you want to sell before the herd gets in?"

For the fraction of a second denial was on her lips. But Connor's eyes wouldn't let her. She nodded mutely.

"I thought so," he grunted. "It all stacks up."

"What do you mean?" she asked again, her voice a choked whisper. "Is something wrong? Won't you buy?"

Connor's face was carved in stone. Somehow, he didn't look so genial now.

"That's right, ma'am, I won't buy. Because you haven't got anything you can legally sell. Your trail boss, Steve Rand, sent in a rider two days ago, and I contracted to take the whole damn' herd!"

IT WAS, without doubt, the longest night Helen Inns had ever spent. For hours she lay in her darkened room, debating, till at last she could stand it no longer. Rising, she lighted a lamp and tried to read an old copy of *Harper's Magazine* some traveler had left behind. But the words blurred before her eyes, and at last she threw it aside.

She knew what she must do.

Slipping into her clothes, she left the hotel, sought out a restaurant, and ate. Then, steps dragging in spite of her resolutions, she went in search of Jed Connor.

The big cattle buyer was in his office, as before. Helen said: "I've reconsidered, Mister Connor. You're right. This . . . business . . . belongs in the hands of the law.

The other studied her soberly from behind the deal table that served him as a desk. "Why?"

"Why . . .?"

"What's made you suddenly change your mind?"

Helen dodged his gaze. Her words came hard. "I'm afraid I haven't any choice, Mister Connor. Not really. My father . . . he needs any money we may get from our steers too much for me to take chances." She hesitated. "If you'll just tell me where I'm likely to find the sheriff. . . ."

The big buyer frowned and ran blunt fingers through his shock of white hair. "I wish I could, ma'am, but I can't. I checked up last night. A couple of United States marshals rode in yesterday and had a confab with the sheriff. He rounded up some deputies and they all rode out again together. They haven't come back. Something's up, something big. I hear there's even troops out—" He broke off, surged up from his chair. "Maybe there's some word

on 'em by now. We'll go over to the jail an' find out. But I want to tell this business to somebody quick, get it on record before me an' you both burns our fingers."

He held open the office door for Helen to pass. Wordless, she fell in beside him while he led the way to the jail, a squat frame building located across from the millinery store.

The only man on duty at the jail was the turnkey, a lanky, garrulous individual with a huge quid of chewing tobacco pouched in one cheek. He allowed as how Sheriff Masterson wasn't back yet.

Connor scowled. "When's he due, then? Theres' a herd on the way up here and I've got an option on it, only there seems to be a good deal of question about who rightly owns it. I want to get it straightened out."

The jailer shot him a sharp glance. "What herd is it?"

"Crossed Diamond road brand, out of Tonkawa County. Man by the name of Steve Rand's the trail boss. This young lady"—Connor indicated Helen—"owns part of it, though."

"Yeah, I heard about that one." A sudden air of mystery seemed to descend about the lanky jailer. "Reckon you'll have to wait till Bat gits back, though. I ain't supposed t'talk about it. But I will say one thing: you don't need t'worry about no crooked business that Rand tries t'pull. It's already bein' took care of."

"But—"

"Talk t'th' sheriff. I ain't allowed t'say nothin'."

"Damn it—!" Connor broke off, turned to Helen. "Look, I'll take care of this. You just tell me where I can find you when Masterson gets back."

Helen nodded wearily. "Thank you, Mister Connor. I'll be over at the milliner's across the street for a little while, then at my room at the Dodge House."

Without waiting for a reply, she left the jail and crossed to the tiny hat shop.

But even as she entered, she knew it had been a mistake to come. There was no pleasure in this visit now, no thrill of anticipation as she glanced at the gaily feathered bonnets.

A girl no older than herself came forward. "Yes, miss?"

Helen gestured towards the nearest hat. "That one—I'd like to see it."

"Of course." Smiling, the clerk took it down.

Out in the street, hoofs drummed a heavy beat. Riders reined up in front of the jail. There were at least six or eight of them. While Helen watched, they dismounted and started into the building. Two grim, manacled figures moved into view, shoved along and into the jail by one of the riders.

Steve Rand—! Old Milam—!

Beside Helen, the clerk was saying words, holding up a hat admiringly. As in a daze, Helen heard herself choke, "No, no—not now!"

Then she, too, was out in the street, pressing through the noisy hubbub of a gathering crowd.

One of the riders, a rifle in the crook of his arm, still loitered in front of the jail. She caught his sleeve.

"What is it? What happened?"

The man chuckled. "Nuthin' t'worry your pretty head about, miss. Just a bunch of damn' cow-thieves that didn't git away with it."

"But who were they stealing from?" Helen demanded desperately. "Who put in the complaint?"

The rider chuckled again. "Nobody you'd know, miss. This outfit's all th' way from Texas. A couple of ranchers down there took up a gov-ment contract t'supply th' Pawnees with beef. Only then this bunch come along an' swiped th' herd. Figgered t'sell it right here in Dodge."

"But who—?"

"Who tripped 'em up?" The man with the rifle grinned. "Why, it was th' fellers that had th' contract, of course. They saw they couldn't lick these rustlin' coyotes in an open fight, so they come up here to Kansas as fast as they could an' threw th' whole business into fed'ral court. So when th' herd got here, there was a couple of United States marshals an' Sheriff Bat Masterson an' a troop of cavalry waitin' t'meet 'em."

"Oh. . . ." It was all Helen could manage to say.

Her informant snapped his fingers. "Say! Mebbe you do know them two cattlemen, at that! They been 'round town quite a while now. One's big, an' t'other walks with a limp, crippled-like. Two brothers—name of Oren an' Howard Gill!"

CHAPTER XI

HELEN INNS was not the only one to see the weary knot of Jughandle-Crossed Diamond drive hands herded off to jail. Standing at a window in their suite at the famed Dodge House, Howard and Oren Gill, too, watched the curtain fall on the scene down in the street.

Then the jail door slammed shut. Oren laughed harshly, pale, shifting eyes alight with triumph. Heavy-handed, he thumped Howard on the back. "Damn you, you smart bastard! Your crazy scheme worked! Krueger can finish Rand tonight. I take back anything I ever said against those brains of yours right now. You were right, I was wrong. You rate all the credit on this!" Howard felt no surge of elation; he had the sensitivity to writhe under waves of scalding shame in the same instant that, with chill ruthlessness, he laid detailed plans for murder. There was pride in him, too, burning so fiercely as to drive him headlong into blind hatred of Steve Rand, even while his brain recognized that in so doing he was only furthering Oren's cause—the cause of a loud-mouthed, brutal bully who clutched greedily for land and power, only to waste and abuse them when won.

And Helen Inns . . .

He loved her, yearned for her till desire turned his belly to an aching, quaking void; yet out of the pity she had shown him he could dredge up such savage passion as would allow her to end ultimately in the hands of the beast Krueger and a fate that sickened even the hard men of a hard country.

A knock came at the door. Oren strode to open it, and Krueger himself entered. A wolf-grin of triumph wreathed his greasy, stubble-matted face. His eyes gleamed dully red above the bulging rolls of fat that were his cheeks. "It's all right. They're in jail."

"Sure. We saw that from here." Oren rubbed at his blond mustache—a trick to mask eagerness that Howard knew of old. "But out there—what happened? Was there trouble?"

Krueger's massive shoulders lifted in a shrug. "How could there be? The cavalry was out. Besides, Pierce's hard-cases was gone, lost on th' trail. They'd filled in their crew with saddle tramps they picked up all along the road."

"What about Pierce? They didn't bring him in. And that Inns slut—?"

"I asked one of th' deputies about that. He says old Medford told 'em Pierce an' th' gal both went under in th' run-in with Crazy Wolf." Krueger scowled. His tongue moved along the thick lips, almost slavering. "Goddamn it! That's the only thing about this business I don't like. I had that little squaw all marked out for me, first chance I got."

Oren guffawed. "You'd have fixed her up, all right," he nodded. He shoved the bottle and a glass forward. "Here, have a drink while we talk about tonight—"

"No need to talk. I got it fixed already." Ignoring the glass, Krueger gulped a full half-pint of the whiskey straight from the bottle, then lowered it with a heavy, belching gasp and wiped his mouth with the back of one hairy hand. His eyes gleamed even redder than before. "I talked around the saloons a little. There's two bad 'uns—train robbers, they say—in the jail. They got friends that wants t'break 'em out. For a thousand cash in advance they'll do the job tonight—an' Rand an' Medford'll get shot accidental-like in their cells."

For an instant there was silence, taut silence. Then Oren threw back his head and laughed till the room rocked with the sound of it. "Train robbers! By God, Krueger, it's perfect! It's the kind of a setup I've dreamed about—"

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Krueger was still grinning. "Only, it costs a thousand, on account of it ain't exactly a safe sort of job, an' these boys ain't gonna wait around afterward to pick up their pay. . . ."

Again Oren roared laughter. "Hell, for that kind of a deal I'd pay double. Come on! We'll go fix it now." He turned to Howard. "Let's go."

For a long moment Howard studied his cigar. Then, slowly, he shook his head. "No, thanks. I'd rather stay here and get some rest."

"What's the trouble? Don't you like the scheme?" Of a sudden the laughter had gone out of Oren. Krueger was scowling.

Howard considered. It was so hard to sort out the things he felt.

But it *was* a good plan. . . .

He said: "I think the idea is excellent. It simplifies things from every angle. But

after Rand's dead, we'll no doubt be leaving, and riding exhausts me. So for now I want to rest." And then, as a spark of the temper of arrogance he'd allowed himself in days gone by flicked at him: "Am I to understand that you object?"

"Now, Howard. . . ." Instantly, Oren was all smiles and solicitude again, save for the slightest veiling of the pale eyes. "I want you to do anything you feel like. But we wouldn't want to go ahead with this scheme unless we knew you backed it. Like I said, it's your brains that have carried us this far."

Howard held his face immobile. "Thank you, brother," he murmured sardonically. "However, you need have no fear. I approve wholeheartedly."

"We'll get moving, then."

The door closed behind them.

VAGUELY, Howard had hoped that the departure of his brother and Krueger would ease the mood upon him. But now that they were gone he knew the hope had been false. As always, the pressure was within him, not outside.

Bitterly, he tossed his cigar into the nearest cuspidor, poured himself a glass of sherry, limped to a chair, and sat down.

What should he have done? He hated Rand, yes; but to have a man murdered, shot down in a cell. . . .

He cursed violently. Always, he debated. He never could be sure, never could map a course in such a way that doubts did not ultimately rise to trouble him.

A new knock came at the door—a light brush of knuckles, barely audible.

Howard stiffened. "Come in."

The door swung open. A woman whispered, "Howard. . . ."

It was Helen Inns.

A strange sort of paralysis seemed to grip Howard Gill. He half-rose from his chair, then slumped back; finally rose again. "Helen—! They said you were dead. . . ."

It was as if she hadn't heard him. She said: "I saw your name on the register. I—I had to come, to see you."

With an effort, he fought his way back to self-control. He could feel heat climbing his cheeks. The knowledge of it roused him to quick anger. He made his voice icy. "I'm afraid I don't understand. It was my impression, after the last time we met, that our . . . friendship . . . was at an end." He smiled thinly. "Mister Pierce and his men were quite . . . persuasive. Perhaps you can see the scar below my ear."

He turned his head as he spoke, raised a forefinger to indicate the line of tissue where a cut had been slow to heal.

Her face went scarlet, then white, and her lips trembled. The sight of it pleased him inordinately, as if the mere fact that he could cut through her defenses in any way were somehow a victory.

She said: "I—I don't know what to say. I was so frightened . . . by what you did . . . and then they took you out. . . ." Again her mouth trembled.

"You should have been thankful for the experience at being manhandled." Howard let his lip curl. "I have no doubt it was splendid training for your trip up the trail, the lone woman among a crew of outlaw drive hands."

Even as he spoke, he wondered why he was saying such things to her. A dance-hall trollop, even, could have taken such language only in terms of insult. And Helen Inns, this girl before him . . . his heart still ached at the very sight of her. His whole body was stiff with the strain of fighting the impulse to take her in his arms.

He caught himself thinking, fleetingly, that perhaps that was the answer: perhaps, in some dark way, that twisted brain of his hoped to bait her into throwing herself at him in an attack. At least, it would give him the excuse to hold her, if only for an instant.

But the attack didn't come, though for an instant there was fire in the dark eyes. Then tears rose to quench it, and she half-turned, bringing up a handkerchief to catch them.

It was the first real glimpse Howard had had of her hands. It shocked him to see how rough they were. And her clothes—she'd worn the same outfit almost as long as he could remember.

Yet she was still achingly, breath-takingly lovely.

Angrily, he rapped, "What do you want? Why did you come?"

Her voice was a whisper. "Steve and Milam . . . they're in jail."

"Of course. I put them there." He laughed, twisting the knife in the wound. "You'd have beaten Oren, you know. The

fact that he's my brother makes him no less a fool. Given his way, he'd have depended solely on lynch law and open war—tricks like flogging Nueces Quinn to death for beating me, and stampeding your herd, and hiring Crazy Wolf to raid you. All those were his ideas. Against some men they might have worked. But not Steve Rand. I knew it—knew it even before you started. Those were the tactics Rand was expecting. That's why he joined forces with Tassie Pierce."

"But what—?"

"What did I do?" Howard laughed again. "It's plain enough, isn't it? A trail herd travels ten or twenty miles a day at best. I came here ahead of you and presented certain evidence—manufactured, I confess—to the law. By interesting a couple of Army officers, a judge, and an Indian agent financially in our success, I was able to turn the task of defeating Rand over to the cavalry and the federal marshals." He paused, eyed the girl coldly. "You, though, you still haven't told me why you're here."

"They've arrested Steve and Milam. . . ."

"You said that before."

"I want you to get them out."

"I regret that that's beyond my power—"

"Please—!" Her hand came up to halt him. Of a sudden she seemed cool and calm again, as in those long-gone days in Tonkawa. Her eyes were dry, and her lips no longer trembled. "You see, I know you, Howard—better than you know yourself, perhaps. And, knowing you, I know that Steve and Milam will never come out of that jail alive. Something will happen."

"So?" Howard's voice was still cold, but all at once there was a queasy little knot in his stomach. If Krueger or Oren, drunk, had talked—maybe in some saloon. . . .

"Nothing is going to happen, Howard."

"What—?"

"They're going to go free. You're going to see to it. And no one's going to shoot them as they come out the door."

"And why am I—?"

As quickly as it had come, the self-possession vanished. Helen's eyes flicked away. Her voice was the barest whisper. "You told me once . . . you wanted me to . . . go away . . . with you. Now . . . I'm ready."

"You're . . . ready?" It was Howard's turn to whisper. "You mean . . . you'll go?"

"Yes, Howard."

He couldn't believe it. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't. Only whether he believed it or not, his heart was suddenly pounding. Blood drummed in his ears, and his hands, his whole body, began to shake. The world whirled dizzily about him. He wanted to laugh and cry and shout, all at the same time.

But then his brain took back control. Always, in the end, it was his brain that brought the conflict.

He said: "You love Steve Rand, is that it? You're willing to go through with this to save him?"

Again she whispered, "Yes, Howard."

There was sickness in him, then. Slowly, the world stopped rocking. The crazy, delirious, wonderful joy he'd felt for those brief moments died.

He wished he could die with it.

He said: "Get out!"

Helen's eyes came up. She stared at him—dazed, uncomprehending.

"Get out!" he raged again. "You talk about knowing me—and then you think I'd want you that way? Can you actually believe I'll let you stay, after you've told me you love Rand? That I'll take you in my arms, when I know all the time you're gritting your teeth against me and trying to imagine I'm another man?" Once more, his blood was pounding; but this time it was with fury, not passion. "Get out, I tell you, and don't come back! And tomorrow you can dance on your damned Rand's grave!"

HOWARD GILL never knew how long it was after Helen Inns left before his mind began to work again. Despair—black, abysmal—engulfed him; and when he crossed the room he lurched and stumbled and nearly fell, like a drunken man.

Drink! He clutched at the thought. Always, there had been only contempt in him for the brute-men who sought oblivion in alcohol. But now. . . . He clawed up the whiskey bottle Oren had left behind, slopped full a tumbler and, trembling till he could hardly hold the glass, gulped it down in great, sobbing swallows, even though the taste of it made him cough and gag.

But to him, now, it brought no release—only hideously-magnified realization of his own weakness and inadequacy; incredibly bitter, razor-sharp.

With a curse, he hurled the bottle away.

It smashed through a window-pane with a jangling crash, and the sound of it brought him up short once more, his whole body shaking with an anguished tension for which he could not find release. Snatching up hat and gun-belt, he fled from it, out into the blaze and hurly-burly of the street.

Ahead, a gaudy sign marked the famed Long Branch Saloon. It was, Howard had heard, one of the biggest gambling hells in Dodge City. Without quite knowing why, he found his steps angling towards the swinging bat-wing doors.

Though the afternoon was still young, the great hall already echoed tumult and excitement. Trail hands crowded the bar and swarmed around a dozen tables, shouting their eagerness to throw away their pay on roulette, faro, blackjack, poker. Somewhere to the rear, a rattletrap piano banged tinnily. Cattle buyers from the east rubbed elbows with railroad men and buffalo hunters and a thick sprinkling of pallid, cold-eyed professional gamblers. Painted waiter girls, daringly dressed, hurried back and forth through the crowd.

Howard limped to the bar and ordered whiskey—whiskey he didn't want, whiskey that made his stomach quiver with revulsion. Then, glass in hand, he moved on to the roulette table.

Across from him, a brawny trail boss swayed drunkenly as he shoved a handful of gold double-eagles onto the black. He had been winning, apparently, for his pockets bulged with money and there was a great heap of coin piled helter-skelter on the table before him. A dozen Texas men, his crew, crowded close and urged him on.

Howard glanced to the wooden-faced croupier, now leaning forward to spin the wheel.

The man's left hand was creeping under the edge of the table.

Howard almost laughed his contempt aloud as he shoved a fistful of his own cash —about half what the trail boss was betting—onto the red.

The faintest flicker of irritation momentarily tightened the croupier's mouth, then vanished again. He set the ivory ball arolling.

Red won.

The trail boss cursed bitterly and shoved forward more of the double-eagles, still playing the black. Howard, in his turn, stuck with the red; but he was careful to take up what he had won on the first spin, so that his wager ran substantially less than that of the big drunk.

Again that flicker of aggravation touched the croupier; and again red won.

Howard smiled thinly. What fools men were! Here was a rigged wheel, a croupier so clumsy that anyone but a drunken trail hand could detect his trickery. Yet by betting against the heavy money—by playing red when the other man played black and holding down his own wagers to the point where it was more profitable for the house to let him, rather than the trail boss, win—he could pile up his gains without the slightest possibility of error.

It was so absurd it almost made him forget Helen Inns.

The play went on—through three, six, a dozen spins. All but one time, Howard won. That once, the croupier's now-obvious irritation brought the black up simply for the sake of spite. Howard laughed when it happened, and gestured mockingly to the trail boss. "I lose a hundred. Pay him five."

A touch of color came to the croupier's face. He didn't look at Howard again.

Then, at last, the Texas men were broke, their last cash gone. Bleakly, Howard started to turn away.

The croupier's voice reached after him: "Quitting so soon . . . sport?"

The sneer of it lanced into Howard. He spun. "Watch your tongue!"

"Touchy, sport?" The croupier sneered again.

It was a channel for repressed fury. In an instant, Howard was back at the now-deserted table. "I said watch your tongue!"

"Sure . . . sport."

Howard said: "Spin your wheel . . . and keep your hands where I can see them!" He was reaching into his gold-sagged coat pocket as he spoke, lifting out a thick stack of coins and placing them on the layout. " I play thirteen."

A smirk twisted the house man's lips. The ball rattled into motion.

Hands suddenly slick with icy sweat, Howard watched it roll. He wondered what was wrong with him. He knew the odds against a man that played single numbers on a wheel, even if that wheel wasn't gaffed. Gambling could never be anything but a fool's game.

Yet here he stood by a crooked wheel, baited into betting by a cheap tinhorn,

even though he neither needed nor wanted the money he might win.

The clicking ivory ball slowed; dribbled to a halt. The croupier's face went suddenly pale again.

"Thirteen," Howard rapped. "Let it ride."

Once more the ball clicked into staccato motion. A half-dozen bystanders drifted close to watch.

In spite of his brain he was a fool, Howard Gill thought—a poor weak fool so tossed and twisted by his own inadequacies that the loss of a woman threw him into turmoil beyond control. Why else was he here, playing a game he hated like some addlepated yokel? He was worse than the cowhands, even; for they were ignorant rabble, so befuddled with drink as not to know better.

The ball stopped. Even through the tumult Howard could hear the croupier suck in a panicky breath.

"Thirteen again," he said. "Let it ride."

The wheel and the ball, spinning again. More talk, more bystanders—excited now; voices loud and high.

And more dark thoughts.

"Thirteen!" a buffalo hunter in ragged buckskins screamed hysterically. "Goddamn it, he's hit thirteen!"

The croupier all at once was shaking like an aspen leaf. His voice went shrill. "The —the game is closed. . . ."

Howard turned his tongue to a whip-lash of contempt. "Quitting so soon . . . sport?"

"Soon?" Apparently, in his panic, the croupier didn't even recognize his own words being thrown back at him. "You fool, do you know what you've won? I— I haven't enough here to pay you. I let you go over the limit. . . ."

"Oh, there's a limit, then? The house puts a limit on what a man can win?" Howard swept the crowd about the table with a glance. "You see, gentlemen? No doubt there's a limit on what a man is allowed to lose here, also."

An angry rumble eddied through the crowd. But even as it started men were pushing roughly through—gamblers, gunmen. "What's the matter here?" the one who seemed to be in charge demanded.

"He got a streak, boss," the croupier muttered. "He played the thirteen three times and won and let it ride."

The man in charge stabbed a quick look at Howard. "Well?"

"This is a gambling house, is it not?" Howard inquired. He made his tone infinitely caustic. "I merely wish to continue playing."

"What do you want to play?"

"This wheel. Number thirteen."

"How much?"

"I intended to let my winnings ride."

"Do you realize what that would amount to?" The other gestured to the heaped winnings. "I don't know what you have there, but I do know the house doesn't hold enough cash to pay you off if you bet all of it and win again. That's why we have a limit. It's the amount beyond which we don't dare accept bets for fear of bankrupting ourselves and having to welsh on the payoff."

"Of course," Howard mocked him. "No doubt you have a system for insuring your patrons against bankruptcy, too."

The other's eyes were hard and bright. "I'm not arguing," he clipped. "The game's closed, that's all." As he spoke the gunmen, the other gamblers, began to push by the bystanders.

Howard did not budge. For the first time in his life he felt rash and bold and reckless, heedless of what came after. The tension about him was suddenly a stimulus, the danger in the other's eyes strangely exhilarating.

He said loudly, "So the Long Branch is really just another tinhorn gambling hell where they're afraid to put their money if there's any chance of losing!"

The crowd took up its rumble; and this time there was a deeper, uglier note.

Abruptly, the gambler in charge gestured. His men fell back.

"You talk big, Texas man," he snapped icily. "I said we couldn't pay you off if you won, and I meant it. But if you're so damned anxious to show yourself for a sport, I'll tell you what I'll do: I own forty-six per cent of the Long Branch, and I'll stake it against your winnings. Now put your money where your mouth is or get out!"

"My winnings still ride the thirteen," Howard retorted just as coldly.

HIS adversary gestured to the croupier. "Let it roll."

Face a pasty grey, the croupier spun the wheel, and the ball leaped into whirring action. As it did so, and under cover of

the instant focussing of attention on the tiny ivory sphere, the man's left hand started ever so slowly to slide over the edge of the table.

"I said to keep your hands where I could see them!" Howard cried fiercely. Almost without volition, his own hand dipped to the gun at his side and brought it up in flaming thunder.

The croupier lurched backward with a hoarse scream. The packed mass of humanity jammed tight around the table dissolved in hurtling, panicked bedlam.

Instinctively, Howard swung the gun to cover the gambler chief, hammer drawn back and ready to fall. He knew, without knowing how, that he was snarling, twisted in a gunman's crouch; that the Long Branch's hired warriors had frozen, their own weapons not yet clear of leather.

But the gambler's hands were already in the air, his face stiff and sweat-sheened. The dying rattle of the ivory ball, still spinning in the roulette wheel's bowl, came echoing through the momentary vacuum of silence.

The wheel stopped.

For a long instant the tension held. Then, ever so slowly, Howard let the muzzle of his gun sag down.

Save for the choked cursing of the croupier as he nursed his broken, bullet-torn hand, and the faint, biting scent of powder smoke, it was as if the shot had never been fired. Breathless, a hundred men leaned tensely forward, craning to see the final resting place of that little ivory ball.

"Double zero," snapped the gambler who had bet his share of the Long Branch. "You lose." Deftly catching up the croupier's rake, he scraped Howard's heaped-up winnings away.

A mass sigh whispered up from the crowd about the table. Wordless, after one glance of confirmation, Howard dropped the gun back into its holster and, wheeling, limped blindly out the swinging doors. He was shaking now, his fingers suddenly atingle with prickling, icy needles. His face was on fire, too, and once more he felt a thousand times the fool.

But as he walked, the heat slowly ebbed, replaced by a sort of stunned awe at the thing he had discovered. Out of the depths of hate and chagrin, and the liquor he had drunk, he had for the first time in all these aching, empty years come up against men in man-size conflict, and still triumphed. There had been speed in that draw of his, speed and skill beyond all logic; and that and the things that had showed in his twisted, snarling face incredibly had earned the quick respect his brain had never brought him. Men—hard, dangerous men—had backed away from the gun in his hand and fearfully held their own fire.

It was a revelation. It made his playing the fool almost worth while.

New iron in his back, new briskness in his steps, he turned toward the Dodge House once more. Perhaps, in this so-different mood, if he were to meet Helen Inns again. . . .

A shuffling, tattered ancient intercepted him as he started into the hotel. "You Mister Gill?"

"What—?"

"Yer brother ast me t'bring yuh where he's at." As he spoke, the derelict turned and shambled away.

Frowning, half-suspicious, Howard followed.

Oren was waiting in the livery stable where they kept their horses. Uneasy lines etched his heavily handsome face. Their mounts were already saddled. "Howard—! Damn it, where've you been?"

Howard held to his new-found dignity. "What seems to be the difficulty?" he inquired coldly.

For an instant his brother's pale eyes went hard and angry at the tone, then cooled again as some emotion even stronger took command. "Don't get on your high horse now, damn it! We've got trouble enough without that."

"What . . .?"

"Tassie Pierce isn't dead! He's here in Dodge and on the kill! If we ran into him, we'd both be goners. But by luck, I saw him first. I've already unloaded the contract for that Injun beef at a discount to raise cash so we can get out of town in a hurry. Then I made a big show of buying tickets to Kansas City. That's to throw him off the track; we'll really ride south. I put Krueger out to find some boys to take care of Pierce after we've gone, too. He's to meet us at an old sod shanty a couple of miles south of here as soon as he gets finished."

"I see." Howard caught his horse's bridle. "I'm glad that for once you're using your head, instead of charging in like

a drunken Indian roping a locomotive."

"You bet I'm using my head!" A wicked gleam came to Oren's pale eyes as he, too, mounted. "You'll see. Just to make sure nothing goes wrong, I've got a hostage staked out down at the shanty. An old friend of yours."

Something in the way his brother said it caught Howard—some off-key note, a faintly mocking inflection. Of a sudden he was tense and wary.

"What do you mean? Who is it?"

"An old friend of yours, just like I said." Oren's grin was openly sadistic now. He rubbed at the blond mustache in his characteristic gesture. "It's that Inns tart, Howard. You know our plan: we had to kill her, along with the rest, so there wouldn't be any chance of a slip-up in court. Well, this is our chance—to put her out of the way and pay her back for what she did to you, both at the same time. I ran into her a while ago in the corridor outside our rooms at the hotel, so I knocked her stiff and sent her out to the shack. And I told Anse Krueger that tonight he could have her!"

CHAPTER XII

THE jail at Dodge City was new and tight, with iron-barred cells and a full-time guard. A cold, uneasy lump seemed to gather in the pit of Steve Rand's stomach at the very sight of it. Yet he had no choice but to allow himself to be shoved into one of the cramped cages.

Behind him, the door clanged shut. The grillwork didn't improve the view any.

Rand commented bleakly on it to Milam Medford, who occupied the adjoining cell.

The oldster grunted, sagged to a seat on the bare wooden frame that served as both bench and cot. "Huh! You call this a jail! Last time I hit this here town, they was usin' a hole on the order of a dried-up well for a lockup. Soon's you hit bottom, they pulled up the ladder an' left you t'fight it out for yourself with all th' rest of th' pizen-mean drunks they'd picked up."

Rand let the subject drop, and looked about. He hadn't had any chance to talk to the old man privately all the way in. Now, however, the jailer had gone back to his office. The only other occupants of the cell-block, a sullen-looking pair of ruffians charged with train robbery, were engrossed in a game of pitch.

Lowering his voice, he turned again to Medford. "What about Tassie and Helen?"

Milam shrugged. "Miz' Helen's all right, I reckon. I sent her ahead t'talk with Jed Connor about sellin' her steers. She left yesterday mornin' early, three-four hours afore th' trouble started."

"You . . . *sent* her ahead—?"

"Reckon I did." The oldester met Rand's bitter gaze squarely. "I'll tell you flat, mister, ain't nothin' matters t'me but that gal. I didn't aim t'let you nor nobody else cheat her out of th' money for them cows of hers. An' even with that aside, it's still all-fired lucky I sent her when I did, too. If I hadn't of, she'd likely be sittin' here in this *calabozo* with you an' me right now."

"And how long do you think she'll stay out as it is?"

"Might be quite a while," the hawk-faced ancient retorted, with surprising calm. "Jed Connor used t'be a right good friend of mine. Miz' Helen gets t'him, he'll see she's took care of. He might even sneak her onto th' cars an' head her back to Galveston; Jed ain't th' sort that takes kindly t'throwin' real pure-quill ladies in jail."

For a long moment Rand hung on the verge of open anger. But the futility of it was too apparent. He forced himself to shrug off his irritation.

"All right. That takes care of Helen. But what became of Tassie Pierce?"

"Dunno. One minute he was there. Then th' cavalry come a-poundin' down on us, an' by th' time I looked around again, there warn't no sign of him. Reckon he just decided he didn't like th' looks of things, so he high-tailed while he had th' chance. Can't say's he was too far wrong, neither."

THE day dragged endlessly. Slowly, the sun climbed higher. Shadows drew back beneath the eaves of their buildings, and the last whisper of breeze died away. Inside the jail, the heat grew stifling; the air so thick with dust and the stink of sweating, unwashed bodies that Rand could hardly breathe.

Noon came, and with it the jailer, bearing tin plates of luke-warm stew, thick with mushy potatoes and congealed grease.

No one ate much. Even the sight of the slimy mess was enough to spoil an appetite.

After awhile, the keeper returned and took away the plates. Old Medford stretched out on his wooden bench and soon was fast asleep, his rattling snore vying with the drone of the flies. The two train robbers tried for a few minutes to work up new interest in their game of pitch. Then, wearying of it, they too lay down and drifted off.

Slowly, the afternoon waned. Milam awakened and, dourly, took a fresh chew of tobacco. The two train robbers resumed their game. Again pools of shadow crept out into the street. The first grey haze of dusk began to shade the blue sky to the east.

Up front, beyond the office, the jail's street door slammed. Rand strained his ears, trying to catch the drift of conversation.

The jailer's nasal twang seeped through the partition. "Howdy. . . ." He sounded cautious, wary.

"Howdy yourself," a second voice retorted cheerily. "Sandburg asked me t' drop around. Said mebbe you'd want someone t'spell you. Or t'go by the eatin' house an' pick up some chuck for his prisoners."

High, this voice. High and shrill and brittle—and familiar.

Tassie Pierce's voice.

Rand went rigid.

"Well, say, thanks!" exclaimed the jailer. His earlier wary note was gone. "I reckon you could get th' grub, at that. Here. I'll give you th' money—"

A faint, meaty thud came dimly. The jailer's voice chopped off, followed by a heavier thud, as of a man slumping to the floor.

The next instant the door to the office was jerked open. Black-butted gun in one hand, a ring of keys in the other, Tassie Pierce slipped into the cell-block. At the sight of Rand, his lips peeled back, baring teeth in the old, malevolent, death's-head grin.

"End o' th' line, gents!" he announced shrilly. "All out for Dodge City! Ever'-body change!" He was unlocking the cell doors as he spoke. "Rand, you better drag that thick-headed jailer back here an' throw him in your cell. He's a little long for me t' handle, an' I just give him a light tap alongside th' head."

Rand moved hurriedly to obey, pausing only long enough to retrieve his Colt and Medford's ancient Remington from the desk drawer where the lawmen had placed them that morning.

By the time the turnkey was safely locked away, Pierce had freed old Milam. Then, ignoring the still-captive train robbers' mingled curses and pleas for freedom, the little *buscadero* pushed past Rand. Crossing the office, he opened the front door. There, seemingly casual, he paused; glanced up and down the street.

His hoarse whisper sifted back: "All right! Everything's clear!"

Taut nerves, raw with tension, Rand followed the dwarfish outlaw out the door. Medford came close behind.

Pierce waited till they were abreast him, then led the way across the rutted roadway. On the far side, he veered, and moved north along the board sidewalk. His jade eyes were hard and bright, ceaselessly searching; his hands poised close to the butts of the too-big guns. But his face showed no strain, and the pace he set was easy and unhurried—almost a saunter. He nodded cordially to passers-by. When he spoke, the words were idle, meaningless banter.

Walking close beside him, Rand marveled at the little man's control. Milam, too—the oldster's shambling pace was a masterpiece of nervelessness.

Behind them, from the vicinity of the jail, an excited yell echoed suddenly. "Hey—! Them rustlers! They've broke out!"

As if on steel springs, Pierce side-stepped swiftly into the cramped slot between two buildings and raced for the alley to the rear, there to turn back south.

After that, for a minute or two, there was no time for anything but running. Ahead, the setting sun gleamed redly on the twin steel rails of the Santa Fe tracks. A long, low building, unpainted and without windows, loomed beside the right-of-way.

"Freight house!" Pierce gasped over his shoulder. Veering again, he sprinted towards it and ducked under the loading platform, then quickly wormed his way among the pilings beneath the building itself. A moment later, straightening, he put his shoulder to one of the heavy flooring planks overhead. It lifted, and in seconds all three of the fugitives had clambered

through the opening into the vast, shadow-shrouded room above, replacing the board behind them.

In the darkness, Tassie Pierce chuckled shrilly. A match flared in his hand. Lighting a candle-stub from his pocket and setting it on a nearby barrel, he grinned across at Rand and Medford.

"They won't never look for us here. This place closes early, an' there's locks on all th' doors. I figgered it was right close to where we needed t' be, so I dropped around this afternoon an' slipped one of their thick-headed Irish freight hands a double eagle t' pull a few nails for me."

Rand nodded. "It's a good hideout, all right," he agreed cautiously; then hesitated, trying to organize his own thoughts. The escape—it had been so sudden, so completely unexpected, he still couldn't quite believe it.

Even less could he fathom Tassie Pierce's motives. After the long weeks of constant tension between them, the thinly-veiled hatred and open conflict, it seemed incredible that the little *buscadero* now should choose to lend a hand.

Pierce was laughing aloud. "Good? I'll say it's good! It's better'n that, even! Tonight you'll see!"

"Tonight? What do you mean?"

Tassie continued to smirk. In the flickering candlelight, the effect was strangely sinister.

"I mean th' Gills are pullin' out on th' night train east, that's what! Oren caught sight of me once before I could duck, an' it scared him so's he can't think about nothin' but gettin' away from here. What he don't know, though, is that I saw he'd seen me, so I climbed on his tail an' stuck there, close as a burr under a saddle blanket, till I knew what he was up to. He's turned over the contract on them cattle we brought north at a discount for quick cash, an' bought tickets clear through to Kansas City. Only when they start puttin' th' train together, th' three of us'll sneak out from under this place an' get aboard ahead of him an' Howard. Then, after th' train's away from town, we'll finish the pair of 'em an' take that bag of cash they got from the bank, drop off, an' high-tail it back to Texas."

"So that's why you broke us out of jail. . . ."

Pierce shrugged. "Sure. I don't aim t' lose my share of th' cash from that herd after all this time, an' I ain't damn' fool enough to try to hold up a train by myself."

Rand nodded wordlessly. In spite of all his efforts at control, his heart was pounding, his blood singing. Tassie's motives didn't matter; not now. Nothing mattered, except the grim, triumphant knowledge that tonight, on the train, he, Steve Rand, would meet Oren and Howard Gill. His brothers would rest easy, after all. There'd be money for the widows. . . .

The little outlaw was still talking: "It will be no cinch play, even with the three of us, though, Rand. There'll be both Gills, an' mebbe when they hear you're out of jail they'll line up some gun-slick t' ride a piece with 'em."

"What about Anse Krueger?"

Once more, Pierce's shrill, strident cackle of laughter rang out. "We got no worries with Anse from here on. The Gills are payin' him off cheap—but he don't know it yet. All along, he's been frothin' crazy t' get his hands on Helen Inns. Then, this afternoon, Oren nabbed her at th' hotel. He's staked her out in an old sod shanty south of town, an' told Krueger that tonight he can have her. Only what Krueger don't know is, that while he's tryin' out his fancy ideas on th' gal, the Gills'll be shuckin' it out for Kansas City on the train!"

THERE comes a time when shock alone, if great enough, can stun a man. So it was with Rand. He never knew how long it took Tassie Pierce's words to hammer through to his brain. The blow had hit too hard.

Then, finally, the first paralyzing wave ebbed. Panic swirled in its wake—a black, bottomless well of fear, the like of which he'd never felt before. It tossed him like an aspen leaf in the gale; left him breathless, shaken.

He fought it desperately, clutching for control. Slowly, the haze resolved. Pierce's leering, pinch-featured face again took form before him.

He forced himself to speak. "Did I . . . hear you right, Tassie? That Krueger's got Helen—?"

The little outlaw eyed him curiously. "Yeah, sure. From here on, she's his meat."

"He's . . . got her—"

A wariness flickered across the *buscadero's* face. He fell back a step further into the shadows behind the barrel on which the candle stood. "Hell, Rand! What d'you care? All she's ever given you was trouble."

But the panic was sweeping over Rand again—surging, swelling. It was a thing beyond his grasp, without sense or logic. Pierce, Medford, the echoing room, the world itself—they all dissolved before its onslaught.

He said: "I'm going after her!"

The words came as a shock. He hadn't realized he'd spoken.

"Rand, you're crazy!" Pierce exploded shrilly. "I wouldn't have told you if I'd thought you'd blow your top. I thought you'd get a laugh out of it. Hell, th' damn' wench hasn't even passed th' time of day with you since Doan's—"

"I'm going," Rand said again. He started to turn.

"Listen, she's double-crossed you all along the way! Remember back at Red River? She promised you she'd go to Galveston, an' then went back on it—"

Rand halted sharply. "You seem to know an awful lot about that, all of a sudden, Tassie!"

"Now, wait a minute, Rand. Just because I didn't want th' herd cut. . . ."

So that was the answer. Tassie Pierce hadn't wanted the herd cut.

Rand could imagine the way it had been put to Helen.

". . . An' there's another angle, too, Steve." Pierce was wheedling, pleading, now. "You made this drive t'smash th' Gills. Tonight's your chance t'do it. But if you skip out on a wild goose chase after the Inns gal, you'll never catch 'em. They're prob'ly headed east for good. You'll lose the cash, everything. An' th' law'll still be on your trail—"

It was true. Every word of it was true. If he left now, he'd lose his last chance to pay off the grim gun-debt he owed; the pledge he'd made to his murdered brothers. The thirst for vengeance would go unslacked. All his life, be it hours or days or years, he'd have to live with the black thoughts that had haunted him in the jail.

Only somehow, that didn't matter now. Nothing mattered—nothing but the hideous, burning vision of Anse Krueger, slavering like some gross animal as, bull-whip in hand, he closed in on Helen Inns.

He said, "I'm still going, Tassie."

"Wrong, Rand!" Of a sudden the whining, pleading note vanished from the little outlaw's voice. Shrill, brittle defiance replaced it. Cat-like, he stepped out from behind the barrel—and now one of the big, black-butted guns that looked too heavy for him was in his hand. "I signed on to drive north with you for a fifty-fifty cut on th' sale price. I don't aim t'lose it now. Either you give me your word you'll lend a hand with the Gills on that train, or you cash in your chips right now! Take your pick!"

"I've already taken it, Tassie!" Cold recklessness sang in Rand's veins. It was a relief, almost, after all these weeks of tension, waiting, at last to come to the showdown. "Win, lose, or draw, I'm leaving!"

The little man's thin shoulders hunched forward. His pinched, evil face was a baleful mirror of menace, the jade eyes aglitter.

"Don't be a damn' fool all your life, Rand! You're fast, but you ain't fast enough t'draw an' down me before I can let my hammer fall!"

For the fraction of a second Rand hesitated. He was staring into the face of death, he knew. Tassie was right: no man could draw and fire fast enough in a spot like this.

From off to the side, in the semi-darkness, Milam Medford's breath rasped harshly. The sound of it keyed Rand's tension higher: the old man had been a curly wolf in his day; he knew the answers, too.

Only then he thought of Krueger and Helen Inns again, and that was enough to outweigh all the rest.

The recklessness burst its bonds. "Here it comes, Tassie!"

The words were a shout; and as he shouted, Rand was leaping, clawing for his Colt.

But even in that moment he knew he'd lost. The muzzle of Pierce's forty-five was following him, the outlaw's lips peeling back into the familiar, triumphant, death's-head grin. Rand braced himself to take the bullets.

A gun roared in the same instant. But not Tassie Pierce's gun. No. The little *buscadero* was slamming back stiff-legged, like a man struck in the chest with an axe. When his nerveless thumb released his pistol's hammer, the slug tore into the floor a bare yard in front of him.

A paralyzed void of powder smoke and dying echoes descended on the room. Through it, old Medford stalked forward, his ancient Remington in his hand. The candlelight gave his faded eyes an icy sheen.

He said: "That was right close, Rand. If I hadn't eased old Betsy out afore you started your play, he'd a'got you sure."

Speechless, Rand stared at him.

Medford said: "Like I told you, Miz' Helen's just about all I got t'live for. But I'm too old t'go up ag'in Anse Krueger in an open fight. That means you got t'do th' job. I didn't aim t'see you kilt afore you started."

Outside the freight house, a clamor of excited voices rose. Someone yelled, "This is where that shootin' come from! Inside th' freight house!" Another joined in, "Mebbe it's them Texican rustlers that broke jail! I'll get th' sheriff!"

Hurriedly, Rand tugged up the loose floor-board. "Come on, Milam!"

"Get goin' yourself! I'm stayin'!"

"What—?"

The oldster rammed a fresh cartridge into the Remington to replace the one that had killed Tassie Pierce. "Someone's got t'keep th' sheriff busy while you find Miz' Helen. You'll need all th' start I can give you."

Of a sudden there was a lump in Steve Rand's throat. "Milam—"

The expression on Medford's gaunt hawk face didn't change. "Get movin', I said!"

He was still standing there—grim, defiant—as Rand dropped through the hole in the floor.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR Howard Gill, the two-mile ride to the abandoned sod shanty south of Dodge City stretched endlessly. Already the temporary surge of self-confidence his moral triumph over the Long Branch gamblers had brought him was ebbing. Once more indecision, inner conflict, hung heavy upon him.

And all because of Helen Inns.

Bleakly, Howard wondered if he would ever succeed in shaking off her spell. It was strange, the way she affected him; a thing separate and apart from her beauty or his desire for her as a woman. Sometimes he doubted that the emotions which churned his vitals when he thought of her had any relationship to love. She appeared as a foil to his ego, rather; embodiment of the decent forces in that dark struggle eternally raging within him.

Love! Even the thought brought quick heat to his cheeks. How could any man love a woman whose only response was pity and then defiance? If there had indeed been vestiges of decency left in him, she had killed them. Her offer to go away with him if he would agree to spare Rand's life was the final blow.

No, he didn't love her; he hated her. And because he hated her, it was good that she should be in his hands. Now, at long last, she would cry and cringe and beg for mercy, while a slavering Krueger had his way.

Ahead, as they topped a slight rise, low twin mounds showed against the sweep of the prairie. Oren gestured. "There's the place—a shanty for us, an' a barn to hide the horses. Some fool hoe-hand built it. I got the wench chained to the stove inside." He grinned as he said it, and there was a jibing mockery in the pale eyes.

Wordlessly, Howard nodded. He knew, all at once, that this whole episode had been planned for him; that it was Oren's vicious, malicious notion of how best to twist the knife. For why else bring Helen Inns here? Not just to please Anse Krueger, certainly. The danger far outweighed any possible benefits.

Still silent, still seething, he stabled his horse and followed Oren down rickety board steps into the semi-dugout.

There was darkness for an instant. Then a sulphur match flared noisily as Oren lighted a lantern. The gloom fell back a little, revealing a long, narrow, dirt-floored room. Overhead, the rafters sagged. The only opening, aside from the door through which they had entered, was a lone window at the far end, roughly covered with a draped feed-sack in place of glass. The furnishings consisted of an ancient, rusting stove-pipe poked through the roof—a pole bunk in one corner, a packing case that served as a table, and two wobbly nail kegs for chairs.

But there were details for which Howard barely had eyes. Instinctively, his whole attention was focussed on Helen Inns.

She sat on the floor by the stove, slumping wearily against it for support. Struggle had transformed the rippling gloss-black hair to a tangled rat's nest, and lines of

fatigue marred the smooth oval of her face. There were dark hollows under her eyes, too; a livid bruise along her left jaw. A length of heavy chain linked her to the stove.

Oren said: "Here she is, Brother. All yours—till Krueger comes." His laugh rasped Howard's taut-stretched nerves raw.

Slowly, Howard limped forward. He could see the anticipation that gleamed in Oren's pale, shifting eyes, and it came to him that somewhere inside his brother lay a streak of savage sadism every bit as black as that which drove Anse Krueger on. Oren wanted to see him degrade himself. Oren wanted him to wallow in the same kind of bestial lust and cruelty Krueger would use. Or, that failing, Oren stood equally ready to watch him writhe at the things which would happen when Krueger took command.

Yet he himself still had no idea of what to do. Groping, he said, "You didn't think it would end like this, did you, Helen?" Somehow, he managed to give it an ugly sneer.

Her eyes came up to meet his—weary eyes, eyes racked with pain; yet still steady and grave and quiet, without a trace of panic. "No, Howard."

The very calmness of her words flicked at his ebbing poise. The cringing, the begging for mercy he'd expected—they weren't there.

"Perhaps you know what we have planned for you?" he inquired icily, to cover his confusion.

Her shoulders lifted in the slightest of shrugs. "Does it matter? Whatever Oren and Krueger want to do, you'll go along."

"I will, will I?" Howard knew his voice was echoing hoarse with anger. It dawned on him that of a sudden he was breathing too hard.

"Yes, Howard. You're too weak ever to stand on your own feet. You always have been. I told you that back at the Crossed Diamond."

"Why, damn you—"

"It doesn't matter, Howard. It's the way you are. I'm only sorry for you."

It was true, and in his heart he knew it. Always, the things she said were true. Mere words, they slipped through his guard, pierced his heaviest armor. He had no defense against them.

Shame and rage swirled up in him. "Damn you, Helen!" he choked. And then again, half-sobbing, as the full force of fury struck him: "Damn you, damn you, damn you!"

He stumbled forward as he said it, out of control, striking blindly. His clenched fist caught the shackled girl high on the cheek. Her head rocked back. Her dress fell from her shoulders at the same time and he saw, with a sort of fascinated horror, that it had been torn away from her, as on that other day in the Crossed Diamond kitchen.

"Oren—?" he blurted.

She drew the ripped dress up and rearranged it. Her face was white, save for the darkening bruise along her jaw and the scarlet patch where his fist had struck, and her fingers trembled. But her voice held only contempt. "Does it matter?"

Oren said harshly, "Don't let the damn' little tart play you for a fool, Howard. I don't want her. Her dress got torn coming out here." Then, stiffening abruptly, he moved toward the door with quick steps. "Watch it! Someone's coming!"

For an instant Howard hesitated, then limped after Oren. The tension had broken now, leaving him drained and sick. Once more he wondered dully whether he would ever succeed in reconciling the welter of emotions that surged within him.

At the door, to his surprise, he discovered that the sun had already set. The black hush of a prairie dusk was over the rolling land, shrouding contours and outlines to meaningless blurs. There were not yet even stars to break the spell.

Faintly, a beat of hoofs drifted through the stillness; then a long, low whistle.

"It's Krueger," Oren grunted, turning back from the doorway. His eyes were wary and mocking, and he inclined his head in the direction of Helen Inns. "Well?"

"To hell with her," muttered Howard Gill.

ANSE KRUEGER'S squat, bulbous body very nearly filled the sod shanty's narrow door. There was an air of repressed tension about him, and his tiny, deep-set eyes gleamed redly amid their rolls of fat. He didn't speak.

Oren glared at him. "What's the matter, damn you? Talk up! Did everything come off?"

Krueger laughed harshly. "'Did everything come off'," he mimicked caustically. He lurched forward a step, and from the

way he swayed it was apparent that there was almost more drink in him than he could handle. "That's about what I could expect from you. 'Did everything come off'."

A visible ripple of anger went through Oren Gill. He caught the brute-bodied Turkey Track foreman by the arm and jerked him around. "Talk sense, damn you! What happened? Did you get Tassie Pierce? What about Rand and Medford?"

The other's little red pig-eyes seemed to draw smaller, brighter. The dangling ape-arms lifted till the hands hung close to the well-greased, thonged-down holsters.

"Don't lay your dirty hands on me, Oren Gill. Not without you wanta die.

"About that business in town there—why, yeah, it came off." Krueger leered. "It came off like this: while I was fixin' it up t'get Tassie Pierce took care of, Pierce crashed the jail an' broke out Rand an' Medford. They're on the loose now, th' bunch of 'em. Lookin' for us."

Howard Gill alone caught the little gasp that came from Helen Inns. Or at least, if the others heard it, they gave no sign.

A sort of wonder came to Howard as he heard it. That, and dull pain. This girl—she could face the prospect of Anse Krueger's tender mercies unmoved: yet word that the man she loved had escaped brought open joy to her lips.

The uneasy lines were back in Oren's heavily handsome face. His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Then—then . . ." He broke off. "Anse, what can we do?"

"Do?" Krueger's laugh roared like thunder. "Why, you yellow son, you're spittin' green already!" And then: "I dunno what you figger on. Me, I came out here to pick up this Inns slut an' my share of th' cash you got for that herd. After that, I'm ridin'. A long ways—Californy, mebbe, or the Oregon country or Mexico. Someplace Steve Rand ain't like t'look. 'Cause he'll be lookin', you can bet on that, an' this time he'll shoot first an' ask questions afterwards."

"But Tonkawa—the Turkey Track—if we leave he'll grab everything we own. . . ." Oren's voice was ragged, uncertain.

"If you don't, you won't own nothin' they don't plant with you, six feet under. Providin' they bother to bury you at all." Krueger laughed again, till the long room echoed. "Hell, Gill, give up. You're just plain licked. When this deal gets told around, you ain't even goin' t'be able t'hire gun-hands to bushwhack Rand. He'll be too close behind you. Everybody'll know he's on th' kill, takin' no chances."

"But the law—"

"Who the hell cares about the law? Rand? You're crazy! Once you're dead an' buried, a lot of th' scum that's worked for you one time an' another will talk. All them papers you faked'll backfire. Rand'll prove he owned that herd legal, an' the sheriff an' ever'body else back in Tonkawa that went along with you while you were winnin' will change their tune in a hurry. If it ever get t' th' U.S. court, they'll clear Rand an' put out a warrant for you." Krueger spat. "No, Gill, your best bet's to run, the same as me—an' I do mean fast an' far. So pay up. . . ."

"Howard . . ." Oren appealed.

Howard stared. "What—?"

"What do we do?" Unrepressed fury echoed in Oren's face and voice. "You're always braggin' about your Goddamn' brains; now use 'em. Think of something! Quick!"

Very slowly, Howard drew one of the thin cigars he loved so well from his breast-pocket case and puffed it alight, enjoying its full, rich flavor. It was strange, the way he felt. That appeal; the things in Oren's eyes; the sudden, too-violent fury—they set fires burning in him. As if he were looking through doors always before barred; or seeing the face of a painting for the first time, after years of staring bewilderedly at the reverse, the canvas.

It dawned on him that at last he knew what lay behind his brother's eternal bullying and greed and lust for power.

Oren was afraid.

Yes, there lay the answer. Brutality and arrogance and ruthlessness were only a mask, a shield behind which hid a clumsy, blustering coward. That was why Oren had tried to drive all men who would not bow before him from Tonkawa County: he feared that if he did not, some day such men might force him, instead of his hired gun-hands, to fight, and in so doing strip him naked to the world for the craven he really was.

With it all came another realization:

He, Gill, the weakling, felt no fear.

He wondered why. Had his storms of emotional conflict finally exhausted him to

the point where even his sensitivity to panic was dulled? Or was it that his encounter with the gamblers of the Long Branch had imbued him with false courage?

It didn't matter. For the moment, at least, he wasn't afraid. That was what counted.

"Howard, damn you—!" lashed Oren; and somehow, this time, Howard thought he could detect a whine beginning to creep through the blatant fury.

He said: "Shut up, I'm running this show!"

For an instant rebellion leaped in Oren's pale eyes, then died again. He didn't answer.

Howard said: "I'll tell you one thing right now, though: we shan't run. Anyone who wishes to"—he glanced coldly at Anse Krueger—"may do so; but without their share of the money."

Still no one spoke. Howard contemplated the curling blue-grey ribbons of cigar smoke. His brain was racing now—weighing, considering, rejecting.

"We shan't run," he repeated. "There's no necessity for it. And we haven't lost. We'll still get Rand. We'll get him right here."

Again the silence shouted. But not for long, this time.

"You're crazy," Anse Krueger rasped. "You been loose in the loco weed. Steve Rand ain't comin' here."

Thoughtfully, Howard puffed at his cigar. "I beg to differ," he clipped. "Rand is going to come here. We shall kill him as he walks through the doorway."

"You're crazy," Krueger repeated, greasy, stubbled face a mask of disbelief. And Oren began, "Now, listen, Howard. . . ."

"I am in full possession of my faculties," Howard came back coldly. He paused to puff at his cigar again, enjoying their incredulity and the drama of the moment. It was as he had always said: in times of crisis, always it was intelligence that counted. He was even putting the lie to Helen Inns; for had he not taken command, standing alone against Oren and Krueger?

He said triumphantly: "You see, gentlemen, we still hold an ace you tend to overlook. Helen Inns and Steve Rand are in love, and emotions often get the better of a man's judgment. When Rand finds Miss Inns is missing, he will recognize instantly that she is our prisoner. I have no doubt he'll succeed in tracing her here. For fear that she might be hurt in any general attack, he'll come alone."

"And then . . .?" Oren's pale eyes were gleaming.

Howard laughed aloud. "There's one door to this shanty; the window's too small for a man to get through, even if it weren't covered. When Rand enters he'll find us three-to-one against him—and Helen Inns will be swung from the roof-beams just inside the door, blocking off his line of fire!"

THERE were wild whoops and astonished oaths after that; praise and promises and back-slappings. Howard Gill could almost forget the darkest of his thoughts, so long as he didn't look at Helen Inns. He even rationalized half-successfully—telling himself that this conflict had become a matter of self-preservation; that Helen could blame her own stubborness for anything that might happen.

Then Krueger grunted, "All right, so that's the way we play it. But till Rand comes, the girl's mine. I got plans for her. I'm gonna make her change her tune."

He was uncoiling the great black bullwhip from about his thick neck as he spoke. The little red pig-eyes were redder still with lust, and a tiny trickle of saliva showed at one corner of the thick-lipped, sensuous mouth.

"They say you know how to do it, Anse," Oren Gill murmured softly.

Howard stood unspeaking, unmoving. A numbness seemed to have crept into him. Of a sudden all the inner tumult was back.

A quiver—of anticipation, perhaps—rippled through Krueger's gross body. His eyes never moved from the girl. "Gimme th' key to the padlock that holds the chain on her," he grunted.

Wordless, Oren held it out.

Krueger flipped the bit of metal in the air; caught it. Then, head sunk deep between his great, spreading shoulders, he shuffled slowly down the room toward Helen Inns, to take his stand a bare six feet from her. His drink-blurred, gloating words drifted back: "Y'know what comes now, sweetheart?"

She didn't answer.

"I'll tell you what." Krueger rolled the syllables, as if he liked the taste of them.

"Trouble with you is, you're too damn' good for th' likes of me. At least, t'hear you or your old man tell it, you are." He chuckled deep in his throat. "Only I aim to change that."

Howard Gill stood rooted to the floor. There was new anguish in him now, anguish such as he had never known before. And yet . . . what could he do?

Krueger was droning obscenely on: "Was a time you could get away with that holy sister stuff. Reckon you figgered it'd always work. But now——" He cracked the bullwhip, mere inches from Helen's head. His voice went guttural, savage, and his fat rolls shook in a gust of rage. "Goddamn you! I'll teach you to say 'no' to Anse Krueger! You'll come t'me. I'll let this old bull-popper of mine kiss your behind till you beg me t'take you! I'll strip you bloody naked with it, an inch of hide at a time! I'll make you crawl to me on your belly an' lick my feet! We'll see how your Goddamn' Rand likes you then!"

He swung the whip.

So many things happened after that, and all so fast, they could never be straightened out.

The whip cracked like a pistol shot. Helen Inns screamed.

Howard Gill went stark, staring mad.

It was the scream that did it. Like a tight-wound spring released, at the sound of it he leaped for Krueger without even knowing he was moving. His hurtling body sent the Turkey Track ramrod careening, off balance, to crash against the nearest wall. With a lunge, Howard was after him, jerking the whip away. There was no thought, no reasoning, not even consciousness of what he did; only a sudden, swirling, scarlet hate.

Then it cleared. In dazed disbelief, Howard stared down at the lash in his hand. His heart was pounding, his whole body shaking. Dimly, he became aware that Krueger had risen, fat, stubbled face contorted in a snarl. Oren was eyeing both of them incredulously.

Krueger grated: "What the hell was that supposed to mean?" and Oren—sneering, taunting—answered, "It's the girl, Anse, the girl. He's still soft on her!"

"Nobody knocks me down!" Krueger snarled. The gorilla arms were bringing his hands closer and closer to his guns.

Howard knew then. Always there would be that inner conflict if a man had the sensitivity to feel it. Always, the fork in the road would face him.

He knew, too, which way it was his destiny to go. The gun-wolves, the Orens, the Kruegers—in his weakness he had tried to follow their path. But that road wasn't his, and his efforts to claim it had earned him nothing but contempt. Sooner or later, now or a day or a year from now, a crisis would come in which he couldn't delude himself any longer. He'd have to face it.

Recklessly, he said, "To hell with you, Krueger! I'll knock you down if I feel like it. Take it or make your play!"

"Why, damn you, you yellow pup—!" Krueger roared.

Oren shouted, "Howard—! The door!"

It caught Howard in the middle of his draw. For a split second it held him undecided, eyes and attention torn between the entrance and Anse Krueger. Even before he looked he knew Oren had planned it that way—that the doorway was really empty.

Then a gun roared, Krueger's gun, and he, Howard Gill, was rocking back as the hammering bullets slammed into his belly. The floor came up to meet him. As from afar, he heard Krueger say, "Thanks, Oren. That might have been close, except for you. They said he was fast down at the Long Branch today."

And Oren, smoothing the blond mustache: "What the hell, Anse. He'd have caused trouble sooner or later. He always was too big for his britches, damn him."

Oren, his brother.

Howard laughed a little. Or maybe it was only his imagination, for a blackness kept creeping over the edges of his mind now, and he couldn't be quite sure of anything.

Fingers touched his face, cool fingers. With a tremendous, creaking effort, he forced his eyes to open, to realize suddenly that he had fallen so that his head was almost in Helen Inns' lap. She was smoothing his hair, and there were tears on her cheeks.

"Forgive me, Helen. . . ." he whispered.

The blackness closed in.

CHAPTER XIV

THE moonless prairie night clung close about Steve Rand. Darkness hemmed

him in, mocking him with a sea of trackless, all-obscuring shadow.

Somewhere amid this rolling wilderness of grass lay a mound a little higher, a little steeper, than the rest: an abandoned sod shanty. He had Tassie Pierce's word it was here. The liveryman who'd rented him the stallion had remembered it, too, and given him directions of a sort for reaching it.

And in that shack, lay Helen Inns. Helen Inns and . . . Anse Krueger.

The sickness in Rand grew. Again he wheeled the bay, searching feverishly for some clue, some landmark.

Then, off to the left, a gun roared. Four fast shots, so close together that, muffled as they were, the last three might almost have been echoes of the first.

Rand sent the stallion leaping forward, straight for the sound. In seconds, they were dropping down a slope into a tiny swale. Beyond it, the ground rose again. A long, low mound with contours a trifle too sharp and regular for nature showed dimly against what tonight passed for skyline.

Rand reined up the horse and slid from his saddle. Then, on foot, he cautiously moved closer to the blurred shape.

As he'd expected, it was an old sod shanty. Wary, gun in hand, he circled it. A dim, vaguely glowing square at one end marked what he took to be a heavily-curtained window. At the other, three thin lines of yellow light seeped around a door frame. But though he strained his ears, he could hear no sound from within.

A few yards to one side, a second mound rose: a barn. Shadow-silent, Rand crept across to it. Here, there was no light. But there were small horse-sounds. Keeping flat to the ground, he wormed his way through the doorway.

But no guns roared. It surprised him, just a little. After a moment of taut waiting, he rose and felt his way along the stalls. There were three horses. More important, their owners' saddles were slung alongside. One was ornate with hammered silver. It had a monogram in one corner of the skirt. Two letters: HG.

Howard Gill.

So Tassie Pierce had been wrong. The Gills hadn't left on the night train, after all. They were still here. They, and Anse Krueger too.

Three guns to buck instead of one.

A trickle of icy sweat rilled down Rand's spine. As silently as he had entered the barn, he left again and moved back across the yard to the shanty.

He still could hear no sounds within. Pressing flat against the thick sod wall just outside the door, he raised his voice.

"Gill! I've come for the girl!"

There was no answer.

Rand spoke again: "I know you're in there, all three of you. I've found your horses. Bring her out while you've still got the chance!"

Inside, a roar of bull-throated laughter echoed. Krueger's laughter. "You want her damn' bad, don't you, Rand?" he mocked. "Well, then, come in an' get her!"

Rand said: "Put it this way: you've got two choices. If you let her go, you can ride out of here with the money you got for the herd, and I won't try to stop you."

"An' if we don't turn her loose—?"

Rand's voice was as flat and cold and deadly as he knew how to make it. "If you don't, I'll just stay here, with my sights lined on this door. Sooner or later, you'll have to come out, and then I'll shoot . . . low, so you'll take a long time dying."

Krueger laughed again. "Go to hell, Rand! We got us another choice, one we like better. You think you're some shakes as a gun-slick. All right, let's see if you're good enough t'come in an' take th' gal away from us!"

"No, Steve! Don't come!" Helen Inns cried desperately. "They'll kill you, Steve! They're waiting for you—"

Krueger's bull-whip cracked. The girl's words broke off in a scream of agony.

"Come on, Rand!" Oren Gill shouted. His voice was a blare of savage triumph. "Come in and get her! That's the only deal we'll make with you! And if you don't—"

The bull-whip cracked again. Again, Helen Inns screamed.

Inside Steve Rand, something snapped.

A rain barrel stood against the wall a dozen feet from him. Moving through a swirling scarlet haze, he swept it up bodily and sent it spinning down the warped steps, straight at the dugout's door.

But even before it struck he was running, sprinting madly around the shack to the window in the rear. Heedless of cuts, he clutched the sash and the sack that draped it. Wood splintered as he heaved. The rotten cloth ripped and came away.

For a brief, incredible instant, Rand

glimpsed the dugout's interior. Krueger and Oren Gill were whirling—guns up, faces contorted. They stood far apart, one on either side of the long, narrow room. Beyond them, the door hung crazily from one hinge, half blocked by the rain barrel. Helen Inns sprawled limp against it.

Then guns were roaring—Gill's, Krueger's, his own. Bullets smashed at him. Dimly, he became aware that he couldn't see out of his left eye, that blood was flowing into it. His chest, his shoulder, were suddenly numb. Only his grip on the window frame kept him erect and shooting.

But inside, Oren Gill was tottering backward, a look of shock and horror on his heavily handsome face. Krueger had doubled, fallen. His fingers kept digging into the fat of his gross belly, but still a scarlet flow seeped through between them. Slowly, silence came. . . .

At the other end of the room, Helen Inns raised her head. She stared at Rand, and her face, her voice, were twin mirrors of panic. "Steve—"

"I'm . . . all right," Rand said. Only somehow, the words came out a whisper. With a queer sort of surprise, he noted for the first time that Howard Gill lay inside, close by the stove. It was strange he didn't remember shooting Howard. . . .

He fainted.

IT WAS spring again in Tonkawa.

Steve Rand rode the wooded hills carefully, taking his time and favoring his wounds. Sun warmed him as he drifted through the brush-choked brakes and grassy hollows. The rich, mixed scents were just as he remembered—the lilting breeze, the mockingbird's song, as yesterday.

As on that other day, an endless year ago, a feeling of peace seeped through him.

He didn't try to turn it off, this time. He'd done his job. He'd earned his dreams. Oren Gill lay dead. The Turkey Track's power was smashed.

Riley and Ed and Jim could rest easy.

Rand thought once more of their widows, their kids. He'd seen them all, in the course of these weary months of riding. The things in their eyes when he'd handed them the cash, the way they'd tried to put their gratitude into words, had repaid him a hundred-fold for all the blood and pain and bullets.

But vengeance wasn't enough; nor gratitude. They left an aching void where a man's heart ought to be. That was why he had come back . . . back to Tonkawa County, back to a steady job managing the Crossed Diamond, back to the one woman he had ever loved.

Back to build a home and marry Helen Inns.

Those were goals worth fighting for. They challenged the wasted, roving years with a promise of the peace toward which he had been groping. . . .

His big steeldust gelding topped a post oak-studded rise, the last before the Jughandle. Off to the east, Big Brushy's meandering waters glistened. The break in the foliage along the bank, the wagon track, were still there, like pictures from his memory.

He brushed the steeldust with his spurs, and they dropped down the slope at a quickened pace. The gable of the cabin roof came into view. A new cabin, this time. The fresh-cut butts of the poles showed white and clean in the sunlight. Smoke curled lazily from the chimney.

A flame-blighted clump of blackjack loomed ahead; beyond it, the cabin clearing. New grass carpeted the yard in sparkling green, hiding the scars of last spring's fire. The rose arbor had been replaced, and starched white curtains draped the cabin windows.

The door stood open.

Rand pulled up by the blackjacks; dismounted. Minutes ticked by, and still he stood there. The steeldust drifted to the nearest clump of tender grass and fell to grazing.

Bleakly, Rand wondered why he'd halted. He'd ridden a thousand miles just for this moment; a thousand miles, a thousand dreams.

Yet now, of a sudden, he hesitated. Fears and doubts and qualms of conscience rose to nag him. Those other days, those precious days with Helen . . . they were long gone. He was a gunman, a rider of dark trails; she, a preacher's daughter. She'd been frightened, bewildered. She'd seen him through eyes clouded by strain and loneliness. That was why she'd said the things she'd said. She couldn't have meant them; not really. It wouldn't be fair for him to try to hold her to them now.

No. Better that he keep on drifting,

riding the tangled trails. Better for everyone. Now that the Gills and Tassie Pierce were dead, his brothers' widows didn't need a gun-hand to boss the Crossed Diamond. He'd seen the surprise in their eyes when he'd told them he'd take the job. If now he wrote that he'd changed his mind, they'd understand. . . .

He reached for the steeldust's reins.

Only then a girl appeared in the cabin doorway—a slim young girl, with dark eyes and warm red lips and hair that hung in glossy ringlets; and all at once Rand's heart was pounding, pounding.

Her eyes met his. A choked, incoherent little cry rose in her throat. Before he could move or speak, she was running toward him. There were tears on her face. . . .

Then he, too, was running, till at last they met and she was in his arms once more —her hair soft and fragrant on his cheek, her vibrant body warm against him.

Words came through the tears: "Steve . . . oh, Steve, you're *home!*"

THE END.

ISLETA LEGEND

★ By GLENN STRATER ★

THE Indian Village of Isleta lies near U. S. highway No. 85 thirteen miles south of Albuquerque, New Mexico. The name which means: "Little Island," suggests that at one time the site may have been an island. The village nestles close to the banks of the Rio Grande—and perhaps, in some pre-historic past, the stream may have been split at that point to have made an island of the present location. A further explanation might be that the dark block of lava which rises to the west of the present village—and looks somewhat like an island, might have been the site of the original village in some distant past. Be that as it may, the present village is a pleasant place to visit in any season of the year, but particularly in autumn when its sun-drenched walls are hung with vivid strings of chili beans, corn and pumpkins. Their houses are white—because of the kaolin in the earth which they use for plaster, and the whiteness is kept gleaming by the energetic squaws who replaster their homes every year.

Driving thru their village one finds it singularly dignified. Its streets are usually deserted—except for the half dozen children who will follow your car offering souvenirs for sale. These are miniature shoes, sombreros, etc., made of buckskin and brightly beaded. The men are off working in the nearby fields and the women work indoors—unless you are fortunate enough to be there at baking time, when you may see women taking fragrant loaves from the outdoor ovens.

Here life has changed little since the village was first sited by Coronado in the year 1540. The little white Church is a fine example of early mission architecture. It is known to have been there in 1629; how much earlier history does not record. It is heavily buttressed and plain to be seen that it was built for protection as well as for worship. An incongruous note about its architecture is that its two steeples, shuttered and shingled, are perched high above the adobe towers and look for all the world like a bit of misplaced Old New England! If you ask, you will be shown the spot within the Church and near the altar, where Padre Padilla rests—and they will tell you about Isleta's favorite legend.

It is said that when Padre Francisco Padilla came north with Coronado in 1542, he chose to remain in New Mexico when the conqueror returned to Mexico. Even at that early date, the Isleta Indians were friendly to the white men. Later, when he was killed by a band of hostile Indians, during a raid, they buried the good Padre —but history does not tell us *where* he was first buried. Surely there was no Church at Isleta during those early days. However, it is assumed that the body was later moved and buried within the Church, after its erection. Periodically the Indians would report hearing footsteps in the pueblo and sounds in the Church at night. Also, at times the hard-packed earth near the altar would crack and the coffin of cottonwood would be exposed to view. Evidently the Padre could not rest, even in that holy ground! In 1895 Archbishop Chapelle ordered an inquiry. Nine priests and one doctor exhumed the body and just as reported, the mumified body of a short man dressed in Franciscan garb, was found within the cottonwood coffin. The report to the Archbishop included the substantiated reports of the Indians who had known the coffin to rise. The coffin was replaced and since then Padre Padilla seems to be resting more quietly.

And life goes on—even as in ages past, in the little village of Isleta. It is one place little concerned by such stirring events as world progress—or the election of another Democratic President!

* * *

Two men held his wrists firmly so that he couldn't break away. Then the third man stepped in close and his fists lashed out savagely . . .

Trouble, Here I Come

By ALEXANDER BLADE

When a man walks around with a gun in his hand it's a cinch he's looking for trouble—and out around Crow's Crossing you didn't have to look far!

THE PLACE LAY on the south bank of the Red, where Texas and The Nations meet. It went by the name of Crow's Crossing, and it didn't look like much of a town, from up here in the hills. Just a scrabble of shabby, false-fronted frame buildings leaning one against the other in an eddy of Texas dust.

But then, it didn't take much of a town to breed trouble, in Shane's experience. Especially gun trouble. And after a few thousand miles of dodging assorted killers and posses and lawmen, he felt pretty well qualified to pass judgment on such. That was why old Cal Johnson had sent for him, he figured.

So here he was riding into Crow's Crossing and trouble. He didn't know just what the trouble was yet, and he didn't much care. It was enough that Cal had written. When a man picks you up off the prairie as a kid, after the Cheyennes have wiped out your folks, and he raises you like you were his own without any reason but the decency that's in him, you get so you sort of look forward to any chances you can find to do him a favor or two in return.

Ahead, the twisty hill trail Shane had been following jogged abruptly, then merged with the rutted track that was the town's main street. Dust puffed up around his big grulla horse's hoofs, murky red in the late afternoon sun. The closer he got to the drab, unpainted buildings, the dreaier they looked, and the more he knew he'd been right about the trouble. It was as if he could smell it, almost, like a dog scenting a hungry, prowling painter.

He passed a livery barn and corral, then one big store and two little ones. There was a place labeled "HOTEL." Most of the others had signs that said "SALOON," or "SILVER DOLLAR," or "TEXAS STAR"—the kind of names men picked for honkytonks all over this wild country. The loungers along the boardwalk had a cold-eyed, speculative look about them, and they wore too many guns. Shane knew what they were thinking. He'd eyed strangers in town that same way himself, in days not too long gone. But there was nothing he could do about that, so he just kept on going, slow and casual, sitting loose in his saddle and scanning the street for old Cal Johnson and letting the grulla pick its own pace.

Then, finally, just past the blacksmith shop, he came to an open space where three massive, battered, Murphy freight wagons were drawn up. A long barn stood just beyond, a cramped little cracker box of an office tacked onto the street end of it. The weathered sign above the door said "FRATE."

SHANE breathed a little deeper. There was a hitchrack in front of the saloon on the other side of the street, so he drew in there, swung down, and looped the grulla's reins over the rail. Then, ignoring the scowl of a big, black-browed man who stood framed in the saloon's doorway, he crossed back to the freight office.

Only there was a girl in the office instead

of Cal. She sat working over a ledger at a deal table in one corner. Now, as Shane opened and closed the door, she looked up, and the dying rays of sun that still filtered in the west window threw a tawny light over her face and set dark, coppery fires to glinting in her hair.

"Yes?" she queried. She was smiling. It was just a normal, friendly sort of a smile, but somehow, there was something about it that made Shane catch his breath. He took off his hat—carefully, because he had a sudden, queer feeling that if he moved too fast, the girl might disappear.

He didn't want that to happen.

He said, "I'm looking for an old friend of mine, miss. His name's Cal Johnson. He runs a little two-bit freight outfit north into The Nations from here, and I sort of figured this might be his office."

Apparently it wasn't the right thing to say. The girl's eyes got big and dark and fearful, and most of the color drained from her cheeks. She kept looking at Shane's guns. That was what was wrong, he decided—the linking of him and his guns with old Cal Johnson.

But before he could figure out the right way to probe around about it and get the details, the office door clicked open behind him. A gravelly voice said, "Well, mister? What do you want?"

Shane fell back a step, half-turning. The way he did it, it got him close to the wall, and facing the voice, in a fair to middling hurry.

The voice turned out to belong to the scowling, black-browed gent from across the street. He was a big man, and he wore two big, black-butted guns slung low on his hips. He kept a pair of hairy hands close to the guns, and his eyes and thin lips said he was hoping he could find an excuse to use them.

Shane gave him a carefully pleasant nod. "I'm trying to find Cal Johnson. I thought this might be his place."

THE scowling man's face went blank—too blank. The gravelly voice rasped, "No one here by that name. This is Jake Talmage's outfit." The slit mouth closed tight at the finish, as if Black-brows figured he'd answered his quota of questions for the day and didn't intend to open it again.

"My mistake," Shane said. "Sorry I bothered you." He meant it. He'd come to Crow's Crossing expecting trouble, but it would be nice if he could at least find out what kind of game he was bucking before he braced the things that showed in Black-brows' eyes.

Only right now, the job was to get out of the office in one piece. Shane turned to the girl behind the deal table, nodded politely, and put his hat back on. Her face didn't make him feel any more comfortable. It was white to the lips now, and there were shadows of tension about her eyes.

Walking on eggs, he moved towards the door.

Still scowling, Black-brows stepped out of the way and, passing Shane, headed for the girl.

It wasn't the kind of move Shane liked. It gave Black-brows too good a chance at his back. But the door was only a couple of steps away now, so he kept on going.

Behind him, the girl sucked air in sharply.

It wasn't much of a sound, but it was enough. Shane bounced sidewise cat-footed, whirling, and somehow his gun was suddenly in his hand without any conscious thought or effort on his part.

The timing was close—too close for comfort. Already, one of Black-brows Colts was whipping down into the exact spot where Shane's head had been a split second before.

But the blow—and the lack of anything to stop it—threw the scowling man off balance. Before he could recover, Shane slashed for his chin with the pistol-barrel. The front sight connected, and Black-brows' head snapped back. Eyes glazed, chin gashed open, he spilled limply to the floor.

The girl was on her feet now. Her breasts were rising and falling too fast, her lips trembling. She gasped, "Oh! You fool—!" in a tight, choked voice. And then, breathlessly, "Cal Johnson's at the hotel. But don't try to see him—not after this! Kramer's killed men for less! Just get out of town! Hurry!"

"I'll think it over, miss," Shane replied gravely, wiping the blood from his gunsight. "It would help, though, if you'll tell me a little about what's going on here."

For an instant she stared at him, not speaking, while color rose in her cheeks. Then, abruptly, she said, "You are a fool,

aren't you? You don't have any idea of leaving." Her voice climbed. "All right! Stay! Let them kill you! Only get out of here. Now! Get out!"

Shane shrugged. "I'm sorry, miss, but that's the way it's got to be."

Holstering his gun, he pivoted, stepped out into the gathering dusk, and closed the door behind him.

SHANE decided he'd seen a few worse rooms, maybe.

Maybe.

It didn't have a window, and the stink of it reminded him of that of a particularly filthy Mexican *retrete.* Old dirt greased the floor, so thick it scuffed up under the toes of his boots. The bed was a sagging, sheetless affair, with mildewed prairie hay for a mattress.

There was a man in the bed. He lay flat on his back, twisting as if he was having a bad dream. But he couldn't twist far, because a plank had been strapped to his left side, armpit to foot. His bones poked up under his skin like he hadn't had a square meal for a long, long time, and his thin white hair hung in the limp, uncombed tangle of a handful of raveled thread.

Shane didn't know how long he stood looking at the man. The longer he looked, the sicker he felt. It was like a knot inside him, drawing tighter and tighter. "Cal," he said. "Cal . . ."

The man on the bed opened his eyes. Slowly, as if it almost took more strength than he could muster. An inch at time, he turned his head.

Shane said, "Cal, it's me. Shane. I got your letter and came on."

Cal Johnson nodded. If you could call a move as slow and tired as that a nod. "Sure, Shane, boy; sure. I knowed you'd come. Only it ain't no use. They've won. Nothin' anybody can do about it now." He seemed to have trouble getting his breath, and it was all Shane could do to catch the words. "You . . . you better get out of town, boy. I bragged you up too much. They might figger you'd try somethin', fix you up like they did me."

"Who, Cal?" Shane asked. "What happened? You wrote there was trouble, but you didn't say what it was."

The old eyes stayed dull. "Not much to tell, Stevie. There's a fella runs a store here, name of Jake Talmage. He's got a couple of little tradin' posts up in Indian Territory. I hauled for him. Only then he made a deal with one of them outlaws that hangs out up there. Or mebbe he just got squeezed into it; I dunno. Anyhow, he wanted me to run liquor, along with the other stuff. I wouldn't do it. It's bad business, peddlin' whisky to Injuns. I wouldn't sell out, neither, an' that made him mad, so he sicced his outlaw *compadre's* rough bunch onto me. That's how come I sent for you; I knowed I couldn't fight 'em all by myself. Only the day after I writ the letter, somebody sawed the axle on the wagon I was drivin'. She throwed a wheel at Hell Creek ford an' went over. I come out of it with a busted hip. Talmage bought up my notes, took over my outfits, fired my reg'lar crew, an' filled their jobs with his Territory gunnies."

"I wish I'd known, Cal," Shane said. He stared bleakly at the littered floor. "If you'd ever told me you had overdue notes—"

"Overdue?" Old Cal gave a feeble, bitter laugh. "Who said they was overdue? The time ain't up on 'em yet. I had it all planned to pay 'em off out of my contract with MacDougal, that runs the big store down the street. I was haulin' a load for him ever' Tuesday an' Thursday; sometimes more. But once I got crippled like this, I didn't have no way to stop Talmage from grabbin' whatever he felt like. Ever'body else is too scared to butt in. Ain't no law here but a Ranger once in a while, or mebbe a Federal Marshal out of Fort Smith. A man's gotta stomp his own snakes."

THE knot in Shane's middle drew tighter. He'd bucked a lot of guns along his backtrail; a lot of trouble. He'd thought he knew what it meant to hate. But he'd never felt like this before.

Abruptly, he said, "I'll see you later, Cal," and turned away.

"Where you goin'?"

Shane held his face expressionless. "I don't know, yet. Maybe I'll have a talk with this MacDougal—"

"It won't do you no good, Steve. Not after what happened to me. He's too scared of Kramer."

"Kramer?"

"He's the outlaw I told you about. The one that Talmage made his deal with.

A big fella, a Kansas killer that rode with Bloody Billy Anderson. He's got bushy black eyebrows that come together—"

"I've met him," Shane said dryly. He opened the door. "Go back to sleep, now, Cal. And don't worry. You're going to get your outfit back."

"Shane, boy—!" The old man's voice went ragged. His eyes weren't dull any more—only scared. "Don't try it, Shane. They'll kill you—"

"Go to sleep, Cal," Shane repeated gently.

He closed the door behind him, and strode off down the hall to the lobby. Outside, darkness had come down. The fat, stubble-faced hotel keeper stood by the desk, fussing over a smoking lamp wick.

"Mister," Shane said, "you're moving Cal Johnson into your best room. A clean one, with a window and a bed with sheets." He didn't bother to try to make his tone cordial.

The fat man sneered. "That's what you say. Me, I do things like that when I see the color of your cash."

SHANE caught him by the shirt front; jerked him forward. "You'll do it now, mister—or the money won't do you any good when you get it!"

Sweat popped out on the hotel man's forehead. His fat hands flapped. "All right, all right! You don't have to get tough about it."

"Then get moving!" Shane gave him a shove that sent him reeling towards the hall. Then, pivoting, without a backward glance, he stalked out into the blackness of the street. The sickness he'd felt in Cal's room was passing now, replaced by cold, vindictive fury. It wasn't good; it tightened a man up too much. Only somehow, now, he didn't care.

There were lights in MacDougal's store, and the door still stood open. A tall, spare man behind a counter glanced up as Shane entered. He had a mousy, worried look about him. It got worse when he saw Shane, and the smile he twisted up belonged on a corpse.

"You're MacDougal?" Shane asked.

The storekeeper nodded, not quite steadily. He didn't speak.

"I dropped by to tell you Cal Johnson's back in the freighting business," Shane said. "He told me you ship a load north every Tuesday and Thursday. That means there's one due out tomorrow. I'll be around to load it in the morning."

MacDougal ran his tongue along his lips. The worried lines etched deeper. "I wish I could, friend. But I've got a business to think about. It's not fair for you to ask me—"

"Was it fair when Cal got crippled?" Shane lashed. "How much have you worried about him, lying over in that stinking hole in the hotel."

"But you don't understand. Talmage and Kramer would kill me—"

"Leave Talmage and Kramer to me," Shane said. "I'll pick up that load in the morning."

Turning on his heel, he left the store and strode off down the street.

TALMAGE'S store turned out to be one of the two smaller places he'd noticed as he rode into town. The door was locked, but a thin thread of light marked a door at the back. Talmage's living quarters, probably, Shane decided.

Cat-footed, he circled the building; found a rear door, and knocked. His hands were sweating a little, he noticed. If anyone suspected he might be fool enough to come here, the reception could prove almighty warm.

Too warm.

It wasn't a pleasant thought. He found himself straining his eyes and ears, probing the darkness for some hint of ambush. Bleakly, he checked the hang of his guns.

Then the door opened. Only it wasn't a man who stood framed against the light beyond, it was a girl—the same girl he'd met in the freight office that afternoon. Her face showed tired lines now, but no surprise.

"So you didn't leave," she said.

"That's right. I didn't leave," Shane nodded. "Right now, I'm looking for Jake Talmage."

She nodded, like she'd been expecting that, too. "Come in. I'll call him." And then, with a twisted, unhappy little smile, "He's my uncle, you know. I'm Helen Talmage."

Shane heeled the door closed behind him without answering. He didn't know quite what to say. While he was trying to make up his mind, the girl moved off across the room and disappeared through a curtained

doorway.

He didn't like that. It gave Talmage and Kramer too much warning—too good a chance to come out shooting. But having the girl here made it hard for him to figure out what to do about it.

In the end, he didn't do anything at all—just stood and looked around the room and waited. It was a small room, bare except for the curtains at the windows. The windows were open, he noted idly, and the curtains swayed and rustled faintly in the cool night breeze.

THEN the thud of heavy footsteps drowned out the rustling. The doorway curtain parted, and a short, red-faced thick-bodied man stumped in. His hair was kinky, iron-grey; his eyes a queer, too-shiny blue.

He said: "Don't bother to tell me who you are. I know you. You're that Steve Shane hellion that old Johnson was always gabbling about. So what? Don't think you can come in here and upset my apple cart, bucko! I eat your kind for breakfast." He said it all in one breath, in a loud, hoarse voice.

"You talk too much and too loud, Talmage," Shane said. "Save it for somebody it scares. I'm taking a load north for MacDougal tomorrow. In Cal's wagons. It might be a good idea for you and your bunch to be on your way before I get back."

Talmage's nostrils flared. "You can't get away with that kind of thing around here!" he blustered. "There's a price on your head, and I've got word a Federal Marshal from Fort Smith is coming through tomorrow or next day. You'll get out or you'll hang. I'm a respectable business man—"

"I wouldn't talk too much about marshals or respectability, Talmage," Shane clipped. "It doesn't go with running whisky into Indian Territory. And don't count on my having to run out, either. The law found out about the frameup that put me on the 'wanted' lists, and there's a full pardon from the governor of Texas in my pocket."

Jake Talmage seemed to shrivel. His red face worked, and the bluster drained out of him. All at once he looked more like a cornered, snarling coyote than a man.

"All right, boys!" he bellowed.

Behind him, the barrel of a Colt poked between the curtains that screened the doorway. Shotgun muzzles appeared in each of the two open windows.

"We'll see who gets out of town!" Talmage snarled. "Go to it, Kramer!"

The burly, black-browed outlaw pushed through the curtained doorway. There was a wad of bandage on his chin, but he was grinning. It wasn't a nice grin.

SHANE stood very still. When Kramer told him to unbuckle his guns, he did it. Slow and careful.

"Outside," Kramer said.

Shane opened the door and went out. One of the men with the shotguns was there ahead of him. The other came up a moment later. Kramer bringing up the rear, the four of them moved off across an open field. Talmage, apparently, was staying back at the store.

Shane wondered if he'd feel the bullet that cut him down. Then, remembering Kramer, he knew that he would. Blackbrows was the kind of a gent who'd enjoy letting him have the first one in the belly.

Only that was the breaks, the sort of thing that happened to a man sometimes when he bit off more trouble than he could chew. It didn't bother Shane as much as the other, the gnawing realization that he'd let old Cal down.

Then, for some reason he never could quite figure out, he thought of the girl, Helen, and that was worst of all. It was crazy. He didn't know her. And she was Talmage's niece—maybe had even helped them plan all this. But that still didn't change the way he felt. He kept remembering the way she'd looked when he first saw her that afternoon, with the sun on her face and in her hair . . .

"This is far enough," Kramer said. There was a new note in his gravelly voice. He sounded almost as if he was laughing inside.

The two shotgunners grabbed Shane's arms and jerked him around. "All set, boss," one of them said. "We got him."

Kramer chuckled, deep in his throat. He came in close to Shane. "This is a good deal for both of us, mister. Talmage's got a yellow streak a yard wide. He's scared of shootin'—thinks it might bring the Rangers down on us. So instead of lettin'

me go ahead an' gun you down, he made me promise just to beat the tar out of you an' chase you out of town, this time. I couldn't see it for smoke, at first. But now I'm used to the idea, I kinda like it. Mebbe it'll teach you not to play so free an' easy with that gunsight of yours. See?"

He struck for Shane's chin with the barrel of his Colt.

Shane ducked by instinct. By instinct, too, he launched a kick at Kramer's belly.

But the two outlaws holding his arms jerked him back in time. Kramer, twisting, took the boot on his hip. Before Shane could duck again, a hairy fist crashed into his face. . . .

SHANE never knew how long it lasted. After the first half-dozen blows, he couldn't see. His brain rocked with blazing pain. A knee caught him low, and he vomited.

Then he got to the point where he couldn't feel, either. That helped a little. But he knew Kramer was still slugging, because the shock of each punch made his head boom and echo as if it was a big tin tub that someone was beating with a knuckle bone.

Finally that passed, too. The ground slipped away beneath him, and he felt himself falling, falling, through endless miles of pitch-black space . . .

He came to slowly, painfully. Every bone and muscle in his body ached, and his face felt like it had gone through a meat grinder. When he heard the sobbing, he decided he probably was delirious, too. It was a cinch no woman was wasting tears over him at this stage of the game.

Only then he felt the fingers on his cheek. They were trying to be gentle, it seemed like, but they still made him wince. So they could be real.

He made up his mind to open his eyes and find out.

It took some doing. Finally, though, he managed to pry the lids apart in spite of the swelling—and discovered it hadn't been delirium, after all. Helen Talmage was kneeling beside him, her face dim and shadowy in the starlight.

"Steve," she whispered. "Oh, Steve." He could see the tears sparkle as they fell.

Somehow, he managed to sit up. He was still where he'd fallen, apparently, out in the middle of the little patch of open prairie behind Jake Talmage's store.

"I'm . . . all right," he mumbled. And then: "What . . . are you . . . doing here?" It was hard work, getting the words out. They sounded mushy and muffled, even to him.

The girl put her arm around his shoulders, supporting him. It was a nice arm; he liked the feel of it. "I—I thought they'd killed you," she said. "I came out here as soon as they'd gone, but you were so still—" She broke off; laughed a small, shaky laugh.

Shane didn't say anything. There were too many assorted aches in his carcass; and the girl's tears embarrassed him out of all proportion. Besides, he still couldn't figure out why she'd come—why she should give a hoot whether he was dead or not, tied up with Talmage like she was.

SHE must have sensed the way he felt because the tears stopped. She said, "He's my uncle, Shane, but that doesn't make me proud of these things he's doing. I think he's ashamed, too, underneath. But he's hot-tempered and stubborn and . . . well, greedy . . . and now he's in so deep Kramer won't let him quit—"

She broke off again. Her slim shoulders lifted in a helpless shrug.

There didn't seem to be anything for anyone to say to that, so Shane got up. It was quite a job, but Helen Talmage rose, too, steadying him, and that helped.

"Wait here," she said. "I'll get your horse."

"I won't need any horse," Shane answered. "Not where I'm going." His hands brushed his guns. Wobbling a little, he turned towards Jake Talmage's store.

The girl's eyes got big and frightened, the way they had at the freight office that afternoon. "Steve, no—!" She clung to him. "Don't you understand? They'll be expecting you, waiting for you—"

"I'm going," Shane said. He tried to jerk away from her. But the strength seemed to have drained from his muscles. For a moment he thought he was going to fall.

She steadied him again. "You're hurt, Steve. Badly. You've got to get out of town till you're back on your feet. You wouldn't have a chance if you went against Kramer now." And then, when he still tried to push by, "Please, Steve! You've got to listen! Take a wagon north for MacDougal

in the morning, like you'd planned. I'll find some of Cal Johnson's old hands to load it for you. Then, when you get back—"

"I'm going now," Shane mumbled.

Only the prairie was rocking as he said it. The stars lurched crazily.

He fell.

HE DIDN'T know the man who shook him awake. It was too dark to see faces. But there was straw beneath him, and the smells were the smells of horses and hay and leather, so he judged he was in a stable.

"The wagon's ready, mister," the man whispered hoarsely. "I left it down back of MacDougal's like the gal said."

Shane struggled to his feet. It wasn't the easiest chore he'd ever tackled. All last night's aches were still in him, but now they'd had time to stiffen.

His brain was clearer, though. Lots clearer. He wondered how he could ever have been punch-drunk enough even to think about bucking Kramer and Talmage in the state he was in.

"Sure you can make it, mister?" the man who'd wakened him asked.

Shane tried a couple of uncertain steps. The effort made him grit his teeth, but at least he didn't fall down again.

"I can make it," he nodded.

"Then I'll be gettin' out," the other grunted. "It ain't gonna be too healthy for me around here if Kramer ever finds out I give you a hand, no matter what the pay was. The load goes north thirty miles to MacDougal's place on Kettle Creek. Just follow the tracks across the river. You can't miss it."

He shuffled off through the semi-darkness. Hinges creaked. An oblong of greyish light appeared, then vanished again as the man slipped out and closed the door behind him.

Shane gave him a couple of minutes' start, then followed.

He stepped out into the kind of chill, wet dawn that makes a man's marrow curdle in his bones. The building in which he'd been sleeping, he discovered, was an ancient, ramshackle barn, located a few rods to the rear and the right of MacDougal's store. Directly behind the store, an eight-mule team, hitched to a cumbersome old Murphy wagon, stood ready and waiting.

Shivering, huddled against the cold, Shane waded through dew-dripping, knee-high prairie grass to the outfit. The wagon was already loaded, so he dragged himself up onto the seat, to find a box stowed beneath it containing food, a bucket of cold coffee, and a blacksnake whip.

He was glad for the coffee, especially. Black and bitter though it was, he gulped it down. Then, feeling a little better, he swung the heavy whip, cracking it close to the rumps of the lead span of the team. The mules threw their weight forward. Creaking, the wagon inched ahead. Another crack of the whip, and it was rolling—out from behind the store building, first; then into the rutted street, still empty and deserted at this hour, and north towards Red River and the Indian Nations.

THE crossing wasn't too bad. Shane had expected to have to ford, but it developed there was a ferry of sorts, run by a snaggle-toothed buckskin-clad old-timer who chewed a cud of tobacco the size of a pullet egg. He kept pretending that he heard liquor gurgling in the wagon, and swore he'd turn Shane in to the first Federal Marshal who came along if he didn't draw a quart of it on top of his regular pay, but he got the Murphy across, and that was what counted.

From there on the job settled down to the dull, temper-twisting business of keeping the mules moving northward. It wasn't too bad. The track showed clear enough, and when the sun came up the country looked better. The warmth took the worst of the edge from Shane's aches, too, and, slowly, he relaxed. He still didn't feel too sure about Helen Talmage's motives for giving him a hand, but at least it didn't bother him as much now as it had for a while. At worst, he'd have time to get some of the kinks out of him before he met her uncle and Kramer again. And after that . . .

Bleakly, he wondered whether there'd even be any "after that."

Then, behind him, he heard the faint thud of hoofs. When he looked around, high horse dust was already rising along his backtrail. There was too much of it for any one rider, and it was coming towards him too fast to be anything but pursuit.

Shane swore and swung his whip. The

swearing was at himself and his own thick-headedness, as much as the mules. Taking Helen Talmage at face value, he'd let her send him blundering up here into The Nations, where there was even less law than at Crow's Crossing.

Kramer couldn't ask for anything better than that.

Shane lashed out with the whip again. But the riders behind him kept coming, cutting down his lead with every jump. They were fanning out, now, too, swinging wide so they could box him.

Then, abruptly, one man spurred ahead of the rest. He was riding a big roan horse that was built for speed, and he came abreast the wagon in seconds, shouting words Shane couldn't catch.

Shane wondered how much chance he'd have if he jumped off the wagon and took to the brush.

The horseman spurred on again. He was ahead of the wagon, now, and there was a gun in his hand. It roared, and dust kicked up in front of the lead span.

Shane dropped the whip, clawed out his own .45, and fired. Not that he had much hope of hitting anything, the way the wagon was bouncing and swaying. But it seemed like a good idea to try, at least.

The man on the roan horse slammed out of his saddle as if he'd been struck by lightning.

BUT the others were already closing in. There were three of them, Shane saw now. That was all he had time to notice, because they loosed a hail of bullets that forced him to duck hastily under the seat. To make matters worse, he lost the lines.

A moment later, the wagon bumped to a halt. "Come out of there with your hands up, mister!" a tight voice commanded. "Let's see what kind of a fish we got in the net this time."

Shane came. He didn't have much choice.

The first thing he saw was the badge on the vest of the man who was doing the talking. The man's face went with the badge—square, chiseled with rocky lines that said he'd walk up to any brand of trouble the badge told him to and spit in its eye.

A lawman's face.

The man said, "You're under arrest for shootin' a Federal Marshal in the performance of his duty." He wheeled; called to one of his *compadres* who'd hunkered down beside the man Shane had shot, "How's he doin', Ed?"

"Not too bad. He got it high through the shoulder. Didn't hit no bones."

The marshal turned back to Shane and eyed him bleakly. "You're lucky, mister. If you'd killed Ed, I'd string you up right here an' now. But seein's he'll live, we'll let ol' Hangin' Ike Parker at Fort Smith have the say about what happens to you."

Shane thought about all the stories they told about Judge Parker and his court and his hangman. Then he wished he hadn't. Because the stories all ended with someone stretching rope.

He said carefully, "It might not hurt to hear both sides of this, Marshal. I ran into trouble"—he indicated his battered face—"up at Crow's Crossing last night. When you whooped down on me like you did, I figured it was more of the same. If I'd known you were the law, I wouldn't have tried to run for it. I haven't got any reason to."

THE marshal's expression didn't change. "Mebbe. Or then, mebbe again you was runnin' a load of liquor into the Territory, like we was tipped off. Sometimes a man'll chance a lot to dodge losin' a wagonful of whisky. 'Specially if he reckons he may have to do him a little time besides if he's caught." He swung around. "Joe—"

"I'm 'way ahead of you, Al," the man the name apparently belonged to, answered. Stripping back the wagon sheet, he clambered up and surveyed the load. "Four kegs here. Just wait'll I see what's in 'em." Drawing his gun, he put a bullet through the bung of the nearest one.

A clear, amber stream gushed from the hole. The deputy bent and tasted it. When he straightened, he was smiling, after a fashion. If you could call a business of a man tacking his mouth up at the corners a smile, when his eyes still stayed cold as murder all the time.

"That was a good tip we got back at the Crossing, Al," he drawled. "We're far enough north so's this skinner can't make out he didn't know he was in Injun Territory—an' his kegs is full of snake-head whisky!"

"I figgered it'd be like that," the Marshal nodded. He spoke casually to Shane,

"Joe lost a brother to one of you liquor runners a while back. He hasn't forgot it. I just thought I'd let you know in case you had any fool notions about tryin' to skip out on us."

There wasn't any more talk after that, except orders. The Marshal had the wagon turned around. Then they loaded the wounded deputy aboard and headed back south again. They let Shane do the driving, but he noticed that the man named Joe didn't stray very far away from him. Joe looked like he had a standard treatment for liquor runners, and was aching to use it.

Shane didn't care. He was too busy thinking the kind of thoughts a man is better off without. About old Cal, with his broken hip, lying in that filthy crib in the hotel week after week, while the heart and health drained out of him. About Jake Talmage, blue eyes shiny-scared under all the big talk, hollering up his bully boys to do the dirty work. About Kramer, and guns.

And about the girl, Helen . . .

THERE wasn't any jail at Crow's Crossing, so they decided to stake Shane out in a stall at the livery barn, with his ankles hobbled and Joe to guard him.

That suited Shane fine, because he'd finally made up his mind as to what to do next. It probably wasn't the best idea in the world; but then, he doubted that any scheme he might come up with right now would take prizes for brilliance. He was drawn too tight, too full of bitter tensions. But the thoughts he'd been thinking kept roweling him on. They wouldn't let him sit back and ride the current till the breaks came right. Not while he knew the things he knew, and felt the things he felt.

He waited till everyone but Joe had left the stable, then made a business of fumbling through his pockets. He hoped it was a good act. Because if it turned out not to be, he'd spend a long, long night in this stall. The marshal had left his hands and feet free, but the hobble rope that ran between his ankles was looped through the slats of the manger so that he couldn't move more than a single short step away from it. And any time he tried to untie himself, or otherwise fool with the hobble . . . well, Joe—who sat in a kitchen chair tilted back against the wall at the far end of the stall, watching him unblinkingly—looked like he'd be able to figure out what to do about it.

Shane decided he'd given the fumbling act enough of a play. "Got any makin's, Joe?" he asked.

The corners of Joe's mouth flicked up in what might have passed for a smile on anyone else's face, and his eyes measured the eight-foot distance between them, as much as to say that he wasn't coming close enough to give Shane a chance to grab him. Then, still without a word, he fished out a bag of tobacco and some papers and tossed them at Shane.

IT WAS the moment Shane had been waiting for. He started forward to catch the little sack, as if he'd forgotten his hobbled ankles.

The rope brought him up short, off balance. With a show of tripping, he pitched headlong, pawing the air as he fell in what he hoped looked like a convincing effort to save himself.

He landed full-length on the floor—lunging ahead as he hit, straining the last inch of play from the hobbles. Arms outstretched, he clutched for Joe's feet.

Joe scrambled out of the chair, clawing for his gun.

The scrambling was a mistake—for Joe. It brought him just far enough forward so that Shane could grab his ankles and jerk his legs out from under him.

After that, it was devil take the hindmost. Together, panting and pulling and punching, they rolled back and forth across the stall. Once, Joe's gun went off, and Shane felt the hot blast of it sear his side. Once, a knee came up in his groin, so hard he almost screamed in spite of himself. Even through his boots, the hobbles tore his ankles raw. With his feet anchored to the manger the way they were, he thought a dozen times that bones were going to snap under the strain of the savage twisting.

Then he managed to sink his elbow into Joe's Adam's apple. For the fraction of a second, it took the fight out of the man. Before he could recover, Shane drove in a right to the jaw.

Joe went limp. Rolling clear, Shane snatched up the gun.

But men were already yelling, not too far off. He could hear feet pounding, too, like someone was heading for the barn in pretty much of a hurry.

It was time to move, but fast. Shane fired through the hobble rope, clipping it in two. Then, clumsy with pain, so tired he could barely keep on his feet, he staggered out the nearest door.

The horses the marshal and his men had ridden still stood at the rail outside the stable. Shane forked the big roan gelding that belonged to the man he'd wounded. Scattering the rest to slow pursuit a little, he headed north cross-country at a gallop in the general direction of Red River.

BUT that was just more misdirection, part of the rough plan he'd worked out. As soon as he was well out of sight of the little knot of men gathering by the livery barn, he veered back towards the town once more.

Not that he wanted to. No. Everything in him that resembled common sense—every particle of judgment—screamed for him to keep straight on at a gallop till he hit Indian Territory. There was a lot of country up there where a man could lose himself; where even the Federal Marshals couldn't find him. While if he went back to Crow's Crossing now, the odds were he'd do no one any good; and even if he came out alive, his name would be back on the "wanted" lists. He'd have to keep on riding the long, dark trails.

No; the smart idea was to head north now.

Only he couldn't do it. It was the frame-up, maybe, or the roughshod way Kramer and Talmage had smashed old Cal. Or maybe just the sting of his own pride. But whatever it was, it wouldn't let him alone. He'd come to Crow's Crossing to do a job, and now that he'd started, he couldn't stop.

So he rode back to town instead of north; back to Jake Talmage's place, and trouble.

Reining in behind the store, he swung down from the roan and checked the gun he'd taken away from Joe. Then, shoving it under his belt, he strode to the door. The tight knot was freezing his stomach again. He felt reckless, a little crazy.

He walked in without knocking, this time, only to find the rear room deserted. Pushing through the curtained doorway, he moved on to the next.

It turned out to be the living room. Helen Talmage was sitting in a rocker by the window, her fingers busy with handwork. She was the only one there.

She looked up as Shane came in, and her lips parted in a sudden, shocked, wordless, little exclamation. The cloth she'd been working on fell to the floor as she rose, but she didn't seem to notice it. Her face mirrored so many conflicting things that Shane couldn't read any of them.

He said, "Where are they?"

It broke the spell. She ran to him, words tumbling over each other breathlessly in her haste to speak. "Steve, I didn't know! Kramer found out about the wagon, somehow. He sneaked in the liquor, then had the Marshals tipped off as soon as they got in this morning. But I didn't know—not till it was too late to warn you—"

"Where are they?"

She clung to him. "You can't do it, Steve! They'll kill you! Let the Marshals take care of them. I'll even testify . . ." Her body was warm against Shane. He could smell her hair, too, and it made him a little giddy. Maybe that was why he put his arms around her . . .

A familiar, gravelly voice said, "That's all, you two! You're through!"

Shane spun about.

KRAMER stood scowling in the doorway, his guns already out. There was an ugly set to his mouth. His two helpers, the outlaws who'd held Shane the night before, followed him into the room.

Jake Talmage crowded past them. "Not Helen, Kramer," he begged raggedly. "You can't down her, too. I won't let you. She's just a girl, a kid. She don't understand—"

Kramer's expression didn't change. His eyes didn't leave Shane, either, not even for the fraction of a second.

"You're yellow, Jake," he sneered. "She said she'd testify, didn't she? Kid or not, that could hang us!"

Slowly, then, as if he was enjoying it, he racked back the hammers of his Colts.

For Shane, it was one of those seconds that last a thousand years. He had to do something. He knew it. Only there wasn't anything he could do, and he knew that, too.

Because he'd be dead before he could even get the gun clear of his belt.

Kramer's lips peeled back in a death's-head grin. The red was draining out of Jake Talmage's face, leaving it grey as Pecos dust.

Shane felt a tremor ripple through Helen.

Something snapped inside him. "To hell with you, Kramer!" he cried. "Cut loose your wolf!"

He gave the girl a shove that slammed her clear to the far wall, out of the line of fire, and braced himself to take Kramer's bullets.

Only the bullets didn't come. Not quite yet. Because Jake Talmage suddenly shrieked, "Kramer! No! I won't let you!" and started to draw.

It didn't get any farther than a start. A slug from one of the other outlaws' guns took care of that.

But it slowed Kramer. His eyes flicked to Talmage for the barest instant. Then, catching himself, he snapped back, firing.

Hot lead hammered at Shane's ribs. He rocked back under the impact. But his own gun was out, now—roaring, bucking against his hand. Through a queer, shimmery haze, he saw a red splotch appear in the middle of Kramer's shirt-front.

Kramer's face contorted. He lurched backwards. Then his knees gave under him.

He fell.

One of the other gunmen was sagging, too, his face strangely lopsided. The third staggered out the door, clutching his belly.

But the haze kept getting thicker. It dawned on Shane that someplace along the line he'd dropped his gun. When he tried to pick it up again, the floor seemed to disappear beneath him. . . .

CROW'S CROSSING still didn't look like much of a town, Shane decided. Just a scrabble of shabby, false-fronted frame buildings leaning one against the other in an eddy of Texas dust on the south bank of the Red.

Yet it had changed, somehow. There wasn't the smell of trouble in the air that stood out so sharp for him that first day, months ago. The boardwalk loungers had lost their hostile look, and somehow the drabness didn't matter.

Yes, the town had changed.

Or he had. Maybe it made a difference when a man rode in on a lumbering, mule-drawn Murphy wagon, instead of a raw-boned grulla horse.

Especially if the man was working out a half interest in the freight outfit that owned the wagon, and had a home here to come back to.

The thought brought a warmness deep down inside him. Still mulling it around, enjoying the taste of it, he passed the livery barn, the honkytonks, the stores.

MacDougal was standing out in front of his. "Old Cal got up for a little while today, Steve," he called. "Doc says he's doing fine."

"Fine, Mac. Tell him I'll be around to see him as soon as I put the team away," Shane called back. He cracked his whip, and the mules picked up their feet a little faster.

The blacksmith shop came into view ahead; beyond it, the long, low barn and the cracker-box office. Shane hawed the team, swinging the wagon off the road and into its place in the yard beside the others.

Then the office door opened, and Helen came running out to meet him. The late sun threw a tawny light over her face. Dark, coppery fires were glinting in her hair.

"Oh, Steve!" she cried. "I'm so glad you're home!"

"*You're* glad!" Shane choked. He held her close.

They stood there for a long, long time.

THE END

GOLDEN SANDS

★ **By R. A. Maxwell** ★

OUR West has no monopoly on gold-laden soil, of course, and gold mining of one kind or another is carried on in many parts of the world. A peculiar and primitive method of procuring gold dust is used by the natives in some parts of Mongolia. The sandy banks along the small rivers well repay those with the patience to work the placers.

The Mongol flattens himself upon the ground equipped with, of all things, a feather! With this unusual excavating implement, he begins brushing the sand aside. He blows into the small depression thus formed. When he spies a small grain of gold, or a tiny nugget, he wets his finger and picks up the gold on it. These particles he drops into a little bag which, for efficiency's sake, hangs under his chin.

In this way, with perserverance and luck, a man can collect about a quarter of an ounce of the precious yellow metal in a day.

LIFE IN THE WEST

★ **By LEE OWENS** ★

Unusual Bits About Our Western History

RANGERS' BEGINNING

WHEN an American society was first established in Texas, the people were intensely practical. They had to be in order to survive. Fancy theories of government simply didn't work in the rugged frontier country.

When the inevitable trouble with the Indians started, Texas citizens banded together under a local leader and set out to fight. They did this without any fanfare or fuss. The Indians had to be fought—therefore let's fight them, was the common and effective creed. The experience they gained was tremendous, for this isolated fighting taught them the basic principles of combatting Indians most effectively. These earliest fighters were not known as Texas Rangers, nor did they have any formal organization, but out of them and their bitter experiences was to grow what later became the Rangers.

Stephen R. Austin, that famous name in Texas history, was the first Texan to be captured by the Comanche Indians. In 1821 he had brought a few settlers to Texas. Because Texas was Mexican territory at the time, Austin had to make a trip, one of his many, to Mexico City to talk with the Spanish governor. He went by way of Laredo and Monterey. While crossing the Nueces River, he and two companions were grabbed by the Comanches, who incidentally took everything away from them. Fortunately the Indians had had no experience with Americans although they hated all Mexicans. Consequently, they released the three men and gave back everything to them after Austin had talked with them.

Meanwhile the settlers Austin had left behind were being troubled by the raids of the Karankawa Indians. They appealed to the Spanish governor of the district for protection, who sent them a sergeant with fourteen men. In a sense they were "Rangers" because they were effectively irregular troops, but we do not know whether they were Americans or Mexicans.

When Austin returned to his settlement, he organized a group of ten volunteers—this was in 1823—and he called them Rangers. This is the first actual use of the word. The Tonkawas were making raids on Austin's settlement. With thirty more "Rangers" he followed these Indians who had stolen horses and equipment from his people. When he caught up with them, he and his rangers demanded their stuff be returned and that the thieves be whipped by both the Indians and his men. The Indians complied, giving a real victory to these rangers.

There are records of many bodies of irregular fighters like these being used to combat the Indians, and in a sense they were all Rangers, but it wasn't really until the Texas Revolution that there was an organized body of fighters or militia which actually took the title "Texas Rangers."

The funny thing is that the Texas Rangers were organized during the Revolution not to fight the Mexicans but rather to protect the western frontiers of the state from the Indians.

They did an effective job, but in no real way did they distinguish themselves during the Revolution. And too, all during the Revolution against the Mexicans, the Indians were rather quiet, so that the 150 men who first formed the Rangers did nothing but patrol. They took no part in the great battles against Santa Anna. However, many of the Rangers distinguished themselves later, away from their organization. It was clever for the Texans to pacify the Indians as best they knew how, so as to leave their hands free for fighting the Mexicans.

The Rangers did make one worthy contribution during the Mexican fighting which is rather interesting to consider. Isaac Burton became a Captain of the Rangers in 1835. He was ordered by General Rusk, to keep an eye on the gulf coast for Mexican landings. Twenty men were assigned to him and he did a good job.

One day Burton and his men were concealed on the beach watching the coastal waters when they spotted a vessel offshore. This was in the Bay of Capano. They signaled the boat which sent five men ashore. The minute they landed, Burton's men captured them.

Then sixteen Rangers loaded themselves in the small boat which had brought the Mexicans ashore. They rowed out to the Mexican vessel, boarded it and found it loaded with military supplies for the Mexican Army. The started to sail the ship to Velasco but unfamiliarity with the ship delayed them.

Meanwhile two other Mexican vessels approached. Forcing the captain of their ship to act as a decoy, the Rangers managed to lure the officers of the other two ships aboard their captured one. And in this way they captured all three boats carrying the tidy amount of twenty-five thousand dollars worth of military supplies to

the Mexican Army.

Burton managed to sail the three ships to Velasco where the equipment was turned over to the Texas Army. Humorously, Burton's Rangers were nick-named "the horse-marines."

After the Revolution had succeeded, the Texas Republic did not pay a great deal of attention to the Rangers. It was a period in which Sam Houston, being very favorable to the Indians tried a policy of economy wherever military bodies were concerned. Perhaps this was the wise thing to do.

In any even we do not hear a great deal about the activities of the Rangers at this time. But as the Indians became more angry and much bolder, it became evident that military protection was going to be needed particularly for the northern frontier. It was then that the Rangers came into their own and eventually became one of the most famous organized bodies on earth—the Texas Rangers.

* * *

EL PASO DEFENDER

WHEN you examine the endless documents and legends about the West, you encounter the names of many Indian fighters, but George W. Baylor is one of those that stands out from the run of the mill type. He was the son of an Army surgeon, and in 1879, after a good deal of military experience, was given command of the El Paso Rangers.

After a six hundred mile journey by wagon from San Antonio, and guarded by six Rangers, Baylor and wife and two daughters arrived at El Paso. Baylor expected to run into Indian trouble but he hadn't been at his command with his thirty or forty Rangers for more than a day when news came.

A Mexican messenger dashed into camp with the news that five Mexican hay-cutters had been slaughtered by Indians. Within minutes Baylor had his men ready and mounted, with provisions on mules. He set out for the spot where the massacre was supposed to have occurred. In some respects, the whole thing was funny. Baylor questioned one survivor after the other, and before he was done, it was found out that while the Indians had made an attack, all the Mexicans had escaped, though each thought the others had been killed.

After examining the Mexican camp, Baylor saw that the Indians had indeed raided it and robbed it. In the company of some Mexicans, he and his Rangers got on the trail. They encountered a dead herder and learned that the Indians had raided Don Ramon Arranda's ranch near the Mexican border.

With their Mexican allies the Rangers chased after the Indians and finally caught up with them. A running battle ensued which lasted half a day but the only results were one dead Indian, no dead Americans or Mexicans. At Guadalupe on the Mexican border, Baylor made an impromptu treaty with the Mexicans permitting him to join them in chasing the Apaches in Mexico. This Baylor did and a number of the Apaches were killed.

But not all raids were as simple and as harmless as this. The last serious trouble that occurred in the El Paso region was started by the Apache chief, Victorio who left his reservation in 1879 with a hundred and twenty-five warriors and some women and children. He was a shrewd leader and knew the country. He made a practice of way-laying Mexican and American wagon trains.

On one occasion his men stole some mules and horses from the Mexicans, at the village of San Jose. Fifteen Mexicans chased along the trail after them. Victorio spotted them and ambushed them neatly slaughtering all fifteen.

Thirty-five more Mexicans set out when they learned their comrades had been killed. They too fell into the trap. The Indians waited until their pursuers had gotten into a narrow arroyo. Then they opened up. .The slaughter was complete. Meanwhile Baylor had set out in pursuit of the Apaches under Victorio when he learned what had happened. Baylor chased after Victorio for a long time without catching up with him. Baylor realized that Victorio was bound to come out in force in the spring and because he was so clever and such an effective warrior, there was going to be a great deal of trouble. In an effort to prevent this, Baylor organized a raiding party for the spring which sent itself out, determined to bring the wily Apache to justice.

All that summer Baylor chased after Victorio. He came up on ambushed soldiers, Mexicans, Americans, and everywhere he saw evidence of the clever Indian's work. Telegraph poles were torn down, towns were raided—even occasionally Baylor was able to engage in a little skirmish here and there with isolated bands of Victorio's warriors, but he was never able to come to grips with the main body of men or with Victorio himself.

Finally in desperation, Baylor assembled a company of soldiers, some more Rangers in addition to his own men, some companies of Mexican soldiers, Indian scouts,—all in all numbering hundreds of men. With this Army he determined to catch the devilish Victorio who seemed to be everywhere. Eventually with this force of men, and with the aid of a Hotchkiss rapid-firer, Baylor managed to track down a large body of Indians which proved to be the main group of Victorio's and in the ensuing battle many of the Indians were killed. But still Victorio was not caught. Baylor wrote in his notes that he was embarrassed at his results.

What made some of these attacks more shameful to Baylor was the fact that almost invariably in the course of a battle the Indians left their women and children behind and they were often directly in the line of gunfire from the soldiers. The results were often tragic and shameful.

Baylor kept up the pursuit futilely for quite a the trail changed from one point to another. Several times Baylor and his men found themselves back in Texas. Finally they wound up again deep into Mexico. Here they lost Victorio.

Baylor kept up the pursuit futiley for quite a long while more without catching the wily old devil. He did succeed however in so crippling the Indian's forces that they no longer constituted a danger.

Baylor's tenacity in the face of all this trouble and hopelessness is admirable and characteristic of most of the Indian fighters of the day. It would be almost impossible to list all of Baylor's personal bravery in the numberless skirmishes he fought. There was nothing at all glamorous about this type of fighting. Mostly it was hard insufferable work, meaning that most of his time was spent in the saddle and under the most trying conditions with little food. But Baylor did his job.

* * *

WIRE AND BLOOD

FROM the time of the earliest settling of Texas to the Civil War's end, Texas had been primarily an agricultural land devoted to the farmer and the raising of crops. Such cattle and horses that existed were of more nuisance value than real value to the average citizen. All they did was to trample down the hard-raised crops.

But the cattle trails to Kansas, the Abilene railroad junction to the Eastern markets changed this picture a lot. The longhorn cattle, the wild mustangs, changed the whole picture. The kings of Texas became the cattlemen who looked on farmmers, "sodbusters" as a bunch of galoots that did nothing but ruin good grazing land by plowing it up and planting crops.

To get their cattle anywhere these cattle kings simply drove them across the land regardless of what stood in the way. The farmer had no recourse but to protect himself with guns—and here he stood no chance. Texas was open range country. There was no law to protect the farmer.

Oddly enough though, the farmer was rescued by his very opponent. The stubborn farmers sat tight and sure enough something came up that saved him.

John W. Gates was the man who made a fortune out of barbed wire. He showed Texas cattlemen that four-strand barbed wire could successfully keep in cattle, resist bull attacks, and stop hogs. He made so much money later out of selling barbed wire, that he became known as "Bet-a-million Gates."

The big cattle men saw a perfect opportunity in barbed wire to get rid of their bitterest opponents, the small cattle men. So they fenced in thousands of square miles of the finest grazing land and the best watering holes after they had formally leased the land from the state.

The little cowmen fought back the best way they knew how. Long handled wire cutters became the rule of the day and the more rapidly wire was put up the faster it was cut down. Furthermore they saw no harm in taking with them some of the fine cattle encased behind these fences they were forced to cut in self defense. It was sort of "interest" on their work.

Then the big cattlemen declared war on the small ones by taking the law into their own hands, since there was no formal law they could appeal to, nor would they if they were able to. There was a terrific shooting war with the big cattlemen winning on all accounts. "Oxcart" John Irland, the Governor at the time, finally brought the slaughter to a halt by declaring the legality of barbed wire.

He sent out the Texas Rangers to enforce the law and after a time, barbed wire became stabilized. There was very little of the terrible bloodletting that had characterized the free range days.

It brought some great changes to the land and to the people. The older cattlemen were a rugged breed who have changed radically into the somewhat domesticated and calm businessmen of today. All because of barbed wire.

Now the farmer, that long-suffering and patient and stubborn creature got in his licks. Up until the fencing in of the ranges, the farmer had been treated as less than nothing and the state of Texas had been run for the exclusive benefit of the cattlemen. Things began to change.

Texas soil was rich and fertile and the farmers gradually pushed cultivation westward. They believed and rightly so, that the false prosperity introduced by the cattlemen was not a healthy state. The Texas farmer went to work and built the state into one of the foremost, producing areas in the United States.

Instead of the rip-roaring towns that have always characterized the West, these humble, determined farmers saw the introduction of the small community which centered around the church, around the community hall. This stability that came with the development of farming in Texas was to prove a healthy forerunner of the industrialization that followed later.

So the introduction of barbed wire changed the face of the land in every respect—and it was all to the good. It is amazing when you think how one small technical innovation can cause such a complete about face. Of course Texas will always remain a strong cattle state, but its agricultural pursuits are not to be sneered at either.

This all took place between 1890 and 1900. Thereafter even greater changes were to come in this magnificently lusty state. It was to take quite a while before the state really grew up but before our very eyes today we see it in its process of gigantic growth. Just as the farmers forced the cattlemen to concede their right to live, so the industrialists of Texas entered the lists. And it was a new influence that appeared based again on the natural resources of the state—black gold!

When oil became the talisman of modern civilization, naturally Texas stepped into the forefront.

But the coming of oil meant that the state had to have all the accessories of an industrial civilization, tools, machines, living facilities, population. All that is necessary now is to see what has occurred in a brief span of years to realize that the state has come into its own.

There is a steady trickle of industrial potential that was once a stream—during the late war—that is making of Texas, an industrial Mecca. "Barbed wire and blood" started off the whole thing. Apparently oil and steel will finish it. Soon there will be nothing left of the old romantic Texas so long associated with the longhorn, the sixgun and the Ranger. And who is to say that this is not for the best—certainly it seems to be.

* * *

MRS. HIBBONS

THE early activities of the Texas Rangers include some tales of bravery and heroism that have not been surpassed. The help they gave the settlers of the new Texas Republic was incalculable. There was the case of Mrs. Hibbons.

Captain Smithwick and Captain Tumlinson with a company of about sixty Rangers were bivouaced about ten miles below Austin when a half-naked, bleeding, beaten white woman stumbled into their camp. She was hysterical and half crazed but in a little while she recovered enough coherency to tell her story. She and her husband and brother were journeying to their home in Guadelupe with their two small babies in a wagon, when the Comanches attached. Her husband and her brother and the oldest of the children were killed quickly. The husband and brother were shot from their horses while a Comanche annoyed at the oldest child's crying calmly dashed its brains out against a tree.

Mrs. Hibbons and her small baby were then made captive. She was tied by the hands and the baby was wrapped in a blanket and slung on one of the Comanches' horses.

The attack occurred on a lonely road and the Indians realized that there was little danger of their being discovered, before it was too late. So they headed for the Colorado. But a severe storm came up and they sought shelter in a cedar brake to wait out the storm before proceeding.

They knew Mrs. Hibbons couldn't escape so they didn't even bother to tie her or the child. It was terribly cold which further allayed their worry of the prisoners escaping.

When the Indians fell asleep, snugly wrapped in their blankets without even posting a guard, Mrs. Hibbons stole over to the baby, made sure it was wrapped warmly, and then decided to escape. She knew there were settlements in the vicinity. She left the baby with the Indians realizing her chances of escape were so much better.

Eventually she came upon the camp of Rangers and told her story. All this had occurred less than twenty-four hours before and so there was an excellent chance of coming on the Comanches. The two captains organized their men and set out after the Comanches. As soon as it was light they came upon the trail and traced it to the brake of cedar. Because they had made such excellent speed, they encountered the Comanches just as they were breaking camp. Apparently the Indians hadn't been alarmed by the escape of their prisoner.

The resulting fight was fast and furious. Smithwick headed straight for the fleeing Indians who had dropped everything in their mad flight to escape. They took nothing with them but their weapons. Smithwick's horse was quite wild and carried him into a bunch of Indians before he could control it. One Indian, on foot, fired on Smithwick from behind the shelter of a tree. Unable to control his horse, Smithwick jumped from it, and chased after the Indian on foot. He caught up with him and put a bullet into him. The redskin fell.

Smithwick loaded again and ran on looking for more game. The Indian he had shot however was just wounded, and lying on the ground, he managed to load and was just about to shoot down Smithwick, when another Ranger spotted him and beat him over the head with a rifle.

Most of the other Indians managed to get into the shelter of the cedar brake where it was almost impossible to follow them. Nevertheless, the Rangers hunted for quite a while.

The baby was discovered perfectly safe, lashed to the back of a mule. One of the Rangers spotting the mule, alarmed by gunfire, fleeing in the distance took aim at. Several times he tried to fire but fortunately his weapon missed fire and eventually another Ranger spotted the baby on the mule and stopped the other Ranger from injuring the child unwittingly. The one Indian who had been killed, was scalped by the Indian guide and his grisly trophy present to Captain Smithwick, who gingerly hung it from his saddle although the idea didn't appeal to him.

Mrs. Hibbons was extremely grateful naturally, and in spite of the shock of the events of the previous couple of days, recovered admirably.

Smithwick and his rangers returned the lady to the nearest settlement and saw that she was taken care of. They moved on to their station where they built a fort called Fort Tumlinson. Here they remained for sometime, until Santa Anna's forces so menaced the Republic that they were recalled.

This tale of Mrs. Hibbons is a far from an isolated one. The Texas Rangers, even in these early days were frequently called upon to perform some feats of derring-do that far exceeded the above tale.

It will be noticed however, that fact differs considerably from fiction. We are so accustomed to thinking that the Indians fell like ten-pins before

the fire of the white men, that we fail to realize that this was rarely the case. In fact, it was the exception. The Indians, except for some few pitched battles on the plains were almost always wily enough to either get away or to conceal themselves very well before, during and after the attack.

It was rare indeed when terrific slaughter occurred. In the first place the Indians were usually not that numerous. In the second place, the whites rarely got that close to them. The bitter battles of Custer were a rarity too.

Most Indian fighting, even as done by the Texas Rangers, involved comparatively little slaughter.

* * *

BIG BEND

EVEN to the uninitiated, the comparison of state maps gives some idea of the vastness of the state of Texas! Texas is vast to a native Texan; more so to the visitor from another state—but particularly so to an Easterner who has been in the habit of counting tenths of miles between cities and villages. In southwestern Texas lies the country of the Big Bend which is a vastness within a vastness! Big Bend National Park comprises an area of approximately 707,895 acres of semi-arid plains thru which runs a group of mountains, notably the Chisos, a part of the Rocky Mountain System. Sixth largest of our National Parks, its southern and eastern sides are enclosed by the big bend of the Rio Grande River —from whence its name is derived.

Big Bend is a country of contrasts: miles of desert areas interrupted by towering mountains rent by the canyons of the Rio Grande. It is a place to fit the moods of any man for within its boundaries may be found the silences of stone and the sparkling conversation of waters. It is fitting therefore that about such a country innumerable legends and long-remembered facts should have woven an aura of romance. Such as the legend of Lost Valley!

It is said that only one white man ever descended into Lost Valley and came back to report his find. Rimmed around by rugged mountain peaks, it is said that its floor was covered year-round by lush grasses thru which flowed a gurgling trout-stocked stream. Thus food and water were provided for innumerable black-tailed deer and wild turkeys. There was only one pass into it and this was a narrow ladder of ledges and canyon cuts. The man who found it, later became lost while fleeing from a band of Apaches and altho he and other prospectors attempted to find it later, it is not known ever to have been seen again. The immense land of trailless spaces kept it hidden until at last people began to wonder whether there really was a Lost Valley! Is it fact—or fiction?

More truth can be substantiated about the story of the Seminole Indian-Negro who, while working for a band of cattle smugglers in the Big Bend, found pieces of gold ore, the story of which will probably make him remembered for generations to come. After his find a two days' ride on the Southern Pacific Railroad took him to Sanderson where he arrived with a morral (a fibre bag carried on the saddle horn) filled with ore. Knowing nothing about ore himself he turned a sample of it over to a railroad conductor, one Lock Campbell who took it to San Antonio and sent it off to have it assayed. It ran $265,000.00 to the ton! Before the assay had been completed however, the Seminole had had some difficulty with his smuggler bosses—and disappeared!

When turning over the sample to Campbell, he had given only the sketchiest of information about the source of his find and altho Campbell grubstaked many prospectors, secretly at first, and then openly, none ever found the mine again. Eventually the story became known far and wide and the illusive mine became known as "Lost Nigger Mine." Season after season prospectors still look for it and the stories concerning it spread and multiply. But the mine itself has remained lost in the loneliness, the primeval silences and the mirages that lure men on beyond the limitless horizons of the Big Bend Country!

* * *

SALTON SEA

JUST below Palm Springs lies Salton Sea. It is a great lake in the desert that came in from the Gulf in 1905 when the Colorado River went on a rampage. It is the only sea that modern man has seen created. The water is so highly chemicalized that it is really a medicated bath forty miles long. You can ride in a boat on the surface and look down on the roof of an old salt factory that was inundated.

INDIAN AGENT

ALMOST in every story where an Indian agent is mentioned, he is painted in a black light. This is a great injustice. Many of the Indian agents provided by the government to look after the welfare of the Indians and to see that they were not cheated by the white traders, did their job honorably and well. The few bad men among them gave the whole position a bad reputation.

The function of the Indian agent was simple. He, at first was designed to influence the Indian to settle down, to get away from the influence of the British. Then as the agent went west with the rest of the expanding country his job became more or less supervisory. He had to see that the Indians who had made peace with Washington remained on their reservations, that they got sufficient food, that they were able to obtain the trinkets and tools that they wanted, and that they were not gypped by white men who took advantage of their ignorance. Most agents performed their duties admirably. Unfortunately the Indians loved whisky, and so one of the first duties of the agent was to see that they did not get it. However a few bad agents made a regular practice of smuggling it to the Indians. The results were usually dreadful. The whiskey would inflame the simple Indians and soon they would go on the warpath. Some agents also smuggled guns to the Indians. The combination of whiskey and guns resulted in some of the most devastating massacres that ever occurred in the west.

Because the government was committed by treaty to giving the Indians money and food and powder, it had to allocate these fairly and in the fashion desired by the Indian. Unscrupulous agents of course could make a fortune by cheating the Indians of what was rightfully theirs. And there was little danger of the agent's villainy getting back to the authorities.

Oftentimes, the agencies were located in beautiful territories. Someone had the theory that the Choctaws would settle down if they were provided with plenty of machinery—they would take to farming. Hundreds of brand new expensive wagons were delivered to them by the government. For a while these toys interested the Indians and they drove around like mad in their shiny new vehicles. In a short time they lost interest however, and soon they began trading away the wagons. Before very long every white settler in the vicinity had a brand new wagon which he had gotten for a mere pittance from an Indian acquaintance. It was criminal but many times the Indian agents prevented this very sort of cheating. The Indians often were so fond of good agents that they practically worshipped them. In one case, they asked to build a shrine to Joseph Street, an agent who had died but who had been wonderful to them. They even went so far as to provide a thousand dollars for the burial ceremony!

COW COUNTRY QUIZ

By JAMES A. HINES

1. According to the cowboy's way of thinking, a Christmas gallyhoot is: Going after a Christmas tree? A big spree in town? Taking a gal to a Christmas ball? Getting thrown off a horse on Christmas Day?
2. Larry Chittenden wrote the most famous of cow country poems, *The Cowboys' Christmas Ball.* It is all about a Christmas ball held in Jones County, Anson City, Texas. What year?
3. Can you name three famous old-time fiddle tunes that have always been favorites at the cowboy Christmas balls ever since the settlement of the Western country?
4. Christmas is the name of a post office in one of these cow country states: Texas, Montana, Arizona, New Mexico. Can you name in which Western state the post office is located?
5. *Noche Buena* is the Spanish spelling of what two well known words in the West, especially heard at Christmas time?
6. In the old-time cowboy song, *Christmas Carols by the Old Corral,* what will the little children be doing?
7. True or False? Rattlesnakes will not strike during Christmas time.
8. The principal design on the flag and seal of Texas also is the symbol of Christmas. What is it?
9. You will find golden mistletoe growing upon Western trees. Can you name two kinds of Western trees on which it grows?
10. Beautiful Yosemite Falls creates a display of falling water unsurpassed anywhere. In which Western state is it located?
11. Most people know that the Grand Canyon is in Arizona. Can you name the cow country state in which the Petrified Forest is located?
12. True or False? The Mexican word *"bueno"* (bway-noh) means "Good."
13. Kit Carson's Mountain Men sometimes left off their trapping and came down out of the mountains for a Christmas celebration in town. What town in New Mexico was their favorite hangout?
14. When did Al Scheiffelin one of the discoverers of the famous Tombstone mines die?
15. What kind of cactus was it that the early settlers named "God's Candle?"
16. True or False? The Cholla cactus is known to all Westerners as "Jumping Cactus."
17. About how many miles a day, can you travel with a herd of cattle?
18. On Christmas Day in 1846, the Battle of Brazito, was fought near El Paso, Texas. Between what forces was it fought?
19. What does the well-known Spanish word *Navidad,* mean?
20. ....., Arizona, the town which is known as the "Gateway to the Hopi and Navajo Indian Reservations.

(Answers on Page 150)

MINER'S JUSTICE

★ By A. MORRIS ★

HALF a dozen men held a claim, in the California diggings, which happened to lie in the bed of a creek at a bend in the stream. It was sure to be a good claim, rich in gold washed down by the water from the mountains above and deposited as the water swerved around the bend. The men had banded together on the claim, because to procure the gold involved the large task of digging a race in which to turn the water, thus exposing the part they wanted to work.

They had dug the race, and were anxious to turn the water, as the water level in the creek had fallen low enough to make this operation fairly simple. They wanted to get their claim worked over before the fall rains made the stream hard to handle. But about here they ran into some strenuous objections. A number of other miners were working claims which lay near the race, which were certain to be swamped once the water was turned.

What to do? How to settle the differences justly and amicably? Contrary to an opinion held by many, all early Westerners did not shoot first and ask questions afterwards. Many were not at all quick on the draw. True, every man carried his gun, but most depended on it chiefly for self defense from wild animals, hostile Indians, and the occasional bad man who thrived in that lawless land. Most men were interested in conducting their affairs in a peaceful and equitable manner. But attorneys and courts of law were few and far between in the early years of the gold rush, and disputes such as the above were often settled by a jury of miners.

In this case, notice was sent to all the miners for a distance of two or three miles up and down the creek, asking them to come to the claim in question the next morning. Although the miners hated to lose an hour's work, yet they were interested enough in supporting the laws of the diggings, and in helping to find the right in an honest difference of opinion, that about a hundred of them appeared at the time appointed. The two opposing groups of men then drew lots for first choice, and each chose six jurymen from the crowd.

The jury seated themselves upon a pile of rocks, and prepared to listen to the evidence. Each group had appointed a spokesman, and each of these two men had his chance to make a speech supporting his claims, and to call witnesses to prove his statements. The rest of the assembly sat around on the ground, smoking and watching and listening to the proceedings.

After both sides of the argument had had their say, the jury examined the ground in question, then called a few more witnesses for further in-

formation. Then they put their heads together and talked over what decision should be made. In a short time they announced their verdict: that the men who would be injured by the new race, should have six more days to work their claims, and that then the water could be turned.

Both sides grumbled a little at the decision, but that was a pretty good sign that the judgment was an impartial one. Neither side had any idea of resisting the verdict, for the rest of the miners present would have helped to enforce the decision of the tribunal. It was the highest court, and from its decisions there was no appeal.

Similar groups of miners met occasionally to pass laws, or to amend or revise existing laws of the diggings. Some respected old fellow would be asked to preside, and the meeting would be conducted with considerable formality. Discussion concerning the problems at hand would be general, and an honest attempt was made to formulate rulings as equitable as possible for all concerned.

These impromptu legislative bodies decided such things as how many claims a man could hold at one time; how long he could be absent from his claim without forfeiting it; how many feet of land a man could hold in the bed of a creek, a ravine or on the bank of a stream; how a man could hold a claim which, for want of water or other cause, could not be worked immediately; and many other contingencies occurring in the peculiar nature of the various diggings.

The laws made by such bodies were generally accepted and adhered to in good nature. The crowded diggings were often true democracies, where every man considered the rights of his neighbors, and the laws were made for the best good of the majority.

* * *

COW COUNTRY QUIZ ANSWERS

1. According to the cowboy's way of thinking, a Christmas gallyhoot is a big spree in town usually with whiskey.
2. Larry Chittenden's famous cow country poem is all about a Christmas ball held in Anson City, (now called Anson) Texas, in 1885.
3. *Over the Waves, Soldier's Joy, Down Yonder, The Virginia Reel, Devil's Dream,* are some of the old-time fiddle tunes that have always been, and still are, favorite tunes heard at Western Christmas balls.
4. Christmas is the name of a post office in Arizona.
5. *Noche Buena* is the Spanish spelling of Christmas Eve.
6. In the old-time cowboy song, *"Christmas Carols by the Old Corral,"* the little children will be merry—singin' those merry Christmas Carols by the Old Corral.
7. False. Rattlesnakes will strike.

8. The star is a symbol of Christmas, also the principal design on the flag and seal of Texas.
9. Ash, walnut, poplar, cottonwood, willow, sycamore.
10. Yosemite Falls is located in Yosemite Valley, California.
11. The Petrified Forest is located in Arizona.
12. True. The Mexican word *Bueno* means good.
13. Taos (Touse), New Mexico, was the favorite stopping place of Kit Carson's Mountain Men when they came down out of the mountains at Christmas time.
14. Al Schieffelin, one of the discoverers of the Tombstone mines, died in Los Angeles, in 1885.
15. The Yucca (or Spanish Dagger), is the cactus that the early settlers named "God's Candle."
16. True. The Cholla cactus is known to all Westerners as "Jumping Cactus."
17. From ten to fifteen miles a day, according to the condition of the cattle.
18. The Battle of Brazito, was fought between the U. S. forces of Col. Doniphan and Mexican troops under Lt. Col. Ponce de Leon.
19. *Navidad*, is Spanish for Christmas.
20. Flagstaff, Arizona, is known as the Gateway to the Hopi and Navajo Reservations.

TIDE BORE

★ **By T. R. SIMS** ★

THE Colorado River is one of the few rivers in the world which occasionally experience tide bores. A bore is a tidal wave which rushes into a river mouth and advances upstream, its force ferociously opposing the power of the river current heading downstream.

When a tide bore occurs on the Colorado, the conflict of the opposing forces of tide and current is terrific and dangerous. Heavily silt-laden, the strength of the Colorado's current at the mouth of the river is phenomenal. Against that force pours the wall of water which is the tidal wave. Advancing relentlessly, it sweeps up the river, sometimes for as much as thirty-five miles.

* * *

OLD BEN'S MINE

★ **By DON WADE** ★

THE Guadalupe Mountain Range—of which Guadalupe Peak is the highest point in Texas, punctuates the landscape in Southwestern Texas. The range is significant not only because for centuries past it has dominated the surrounding area and served as an orientation point for much borderline history, but because these mountains have also served as a repository for many secrets in the evolution of mankind. There, may still be found the last of the Bighorn Mountain Sheep. The Golden Eagles and Mountain Lions which are mercilessly being warred upon by the present owners of domestic sheep, find sanctuary in the same crags and canyons!

The Guadalupes were the last stronghold of that fierce Indian Tribe, the Apaches. "Broncos" is the word the Mexicans applied to the Apaches—and the word translated, gives us such fitting adjectives as "wild" and "fierce." No names could more fittingly be applied to the Guadalupe Mountains themselves. They too are "Broncos"—and no civilization within the limits of modern man will ever be able to tone down their essential ruggedness and toughness. Such Apache characters as the historical Geronimo fitted them admirably.

No man within the memory of present generations knew the Guadalupes as did Old Ben Sublett. In his day he was considered a "crazy prospector"—for he traveled alone and penetrated the fastnesses of the Guadalupes at a time and in places where no other white men would venture unless in bands and for the purpose of routing the Apaches. He was peculiarly secretive and where and when he entered them, no one ever knew. One day he would disappear and months—or perhaps years later, he would reappear. All he would ever disclose to anyone was that: "He had a secret!" Legend also had it that he had a friend among the Apaches who told him his secret—a secret which he never divulged!

One day in the 80's after he had returned from one of his periodic absences, he drove up to the Mollie Williams saloon in Odessa, east of the Pecos. He was in a rickety rig but he wore an air of importance that no one had ever seen upon him before. Stepping grandly from the rig he strode into the saloon and triumphantly called for drinks for everyone in the house. The barkeeper waited. He didn't believe in credit business. Dramatically Old Ben reached for a buckskin pouch and threw it on the bar. It was stuffed with gold nuggets—and at its appearance all hands came to life! They crowded around him and pressed him for information but all that he would say was that: "Old Ben had been pore—but he was pore no longer!" "He had found the richest gold mine in the world!" They drank—and Old

Ben drank with them, while he ruminated on his future greatness. He would buy the state of Texas for a back yard in which his children would play—and he would bring marble from "Californy" with which to build his mansion!

Later he disappeared again—and brought back other nuggets, but he never got around to building so much as a shack—nor did he own so much as a quarter section of land when he died. He had a golden secret and it kept him happy all the days of his life. At times men trailed him, waylaid him, and tried in every conceivable way to worm his secret from him—but the more they tried the more clever he became in eluding them.

He died half a century ago and took his secret with him. It is just one of the secrets the Guadalupes guard as they continue to stand sentinal over Old Ben's grave!

COMING NEXT MONTH:—

"TOMBSTONE IN LEAD"

By S. M. TENNESHAW

A GREAT NEW ACTION NOVEL!

THE NAVY COLTS

★ **By J. R. MARKS** ★

IN ALMOST every tale of Indian fighting, the Indians do come off second best, not only according to the dictates of fiction but of fact also. Occasionally though the Indians, in straight out and out fighting succeeded in giving a pretty good account of themselves even when the odds were against them.

About eighteen-forty Captain Jack Hays, that volatile, mercurial commander of a bunch of Texas Rangers had a run-in with the redskins that was really a lulu. When making one of his numerous visits to the Texan capitol, Hays ran into a bunch of crates lying in a warehouse. From their appearance they hadn't yet been opened. Hays broke into the crates and found that they contained numerous five-shot Colt revolvers, originally ordered for the Texas Navy but never issued. The guns were rusty and in bad condition. This didn't bother Hays who as leaders of the Rangers was accustomed to doing things quickly and efficiently.

He confiscated a few cases of the weapons and upon his return to camp issued two of them to each of his men. He had the men clean them up, remove the rust, and he taught them to load and handle them.

A short while later he took fifteen men out on patrol with him and looking for trouble he ran into what he thought was a small bunch of Indians. He decided that there were only a couple of dozen of them so he thought it would be a good opportunity to test the revolvers. Leading a charge directly into their midst, Hays attacked the

Indians. But unfortunately he had made a mistake. There were more than eighty of the savages awaiting him. Consequently he checked the charge and withdrew to the safety of a thicket while he debated with his men as to what to do. The men, contemptuous of odds, as always and anxious to test out their new revolvers, wanted to sail right into the Indians.

But Hays was more cautious. Fighting the Indians on horseback and in the open wasn't generally regarded as the best procedure. Finally however he gave in to his men and decided to go along with their wishes.

Leaving their rifles behind as simply a useless encumbrance on horseback, they sailed into the Indians. The Indians were armed with everything —tomahawks, spears, muzzle-loading rifles, shotguns and what have you. And fifteen Rangers charged into six times as many redskins. At the first contact, six Indians and two Rangers were killed outright.

It was the first occasion where revolvers were employed against the Indians and it was certainly disappointing from the standpoint of effectiveness. The revolvers had to be loaded with cap and ball and this wasn't too much of a handicap because they could certainly shoot fast. But their range was poor and their hitting power was bad.

A man had to get close enough to the Indian to be sure his shot was effective, and it was almost a certainty that if he got that close, be would have to fight hand to hand with the Indian if he failed to kill him at the first shot.

Soon the battle degenerated into a bitter free for all. By now eight Rangers had been killed. Finally the Rangers withdrew into a circle and fired out from that circle surrounded entirely by Indians. They kept this up for several hours until their ammunition began to run low.

Eventually Hays realized something had to be done or they would all be cut down. He spotted a rifle strapped to the saddle of one of his men. Gillespie, the Ranger, dismounted and obeyed Hays order to knock off the Indian chief who was out of revolver range. Taking careful aim he planted a bullet between Yellow Hammer's shoulder blades and the man crumpled into the dust. This took the fight out of the remaining Indians and the attack was broken up.

All told they had killed thirty-two Indians. They had lost eight of their own men, but all of them were wounded some lightly, some severely.

Gradually better revolvers were acquired and everyone now knows the record that the gun made in opening up our West. But the Navy colt, in later models, was refined to the point where it became a good gun even at surprising ranges.

However, as any man who is familiar with arms will tell you, a revolver is a limited weapon, good for infighting and close-range work. When anything has to be done at a distance though there is nothing as reliable as a good rifle.

FANTASY AS YOU LIKE IT!

CHILLS!

THRILLS!

ACTION!

Eerie and haunting, the voice calls out of the mist—shockingly, suddenly, a rocket ship blazes across the skies—menacingly the cloaked figure advances, blazing red eyes staring hypnotically—beautiful, clad in filmy draperies that accentuate her haunting loveliness, the mysterious Moon Goddess beckons from the moonbeams—stark, terrible, crimson with the color of blood, the corpse rises from its freshly open grave.

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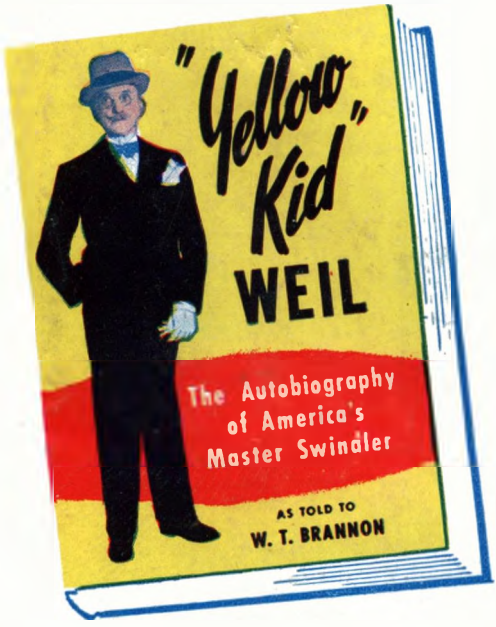

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