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GUNS
By
ROBERT MOORE WILLIAM

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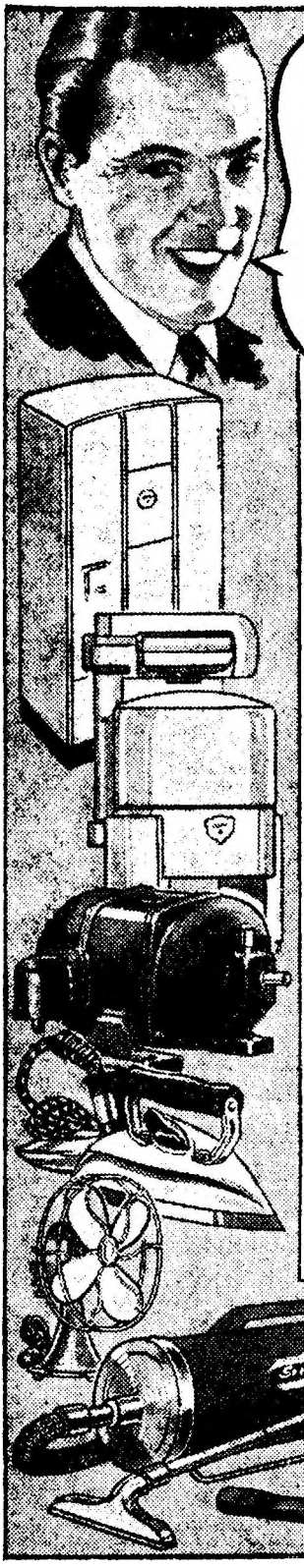

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VOLUME 2 NUMBER 4

All FEATURES Complete

Front cover painting by Arnold Kohn illustrating a scene from "Gambling Guns"
Back cover painting by Joe Wirt Tillotson depicting a scene in "Sons of the West"

MAMMOTH WESTERN AUGUST 1946

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Volume 2 Number 4

WHAT do you *Mammoth Western* fans think of the cover on this issue? In our usual candid and egotistic opinion, it is just about the finest cover ever to appear on a western magazine. If you agree, write us a letter. If you don't, don't write us a letter! Incidentally, the cover illustrates a scene from Robert Moore Williams' "Gambling Guns," which is as natural a title as could be conceived for the cover scene as well as for the story. Concerning the story, we can recommend this one as one of the best Bob Williams has done in this field. It has everything, take our word for it. You know, being editor of a western magazine means reading hundreds of western stories to pick out (as in this issue) seven. So after a few days of that sort of grind, you get to hate westerns. That's how we know a good one when it pops up, because it wipes out the grouch like magic and makes us grin all over. Ergo, "Gambling Guns" is good.

EVERY time we get a manuscript from William Hopson, we think of his tall, gangling figure poking itself into our office doorway clad in a military uniform and saying "Well, Ray, I'm out'n the armed fo'ces now, and I'm aimin' to write you a few cow stories." Aim away, Bill. If you keep 'em coming like "Montana" you can use us for your target until the Colorado river eats the West away to the bare bones! "Montana," in case you want to know anything about it before you start, is one of those blustering stories of the old west when men were men, and most of them were crooks. That is, those men who called themselves men were crooks—while the real article sat back patiently until he got riled, and then he "strung 'em up" legal and sat down again to consider a job well done. Read it, for sure. You'll like it.

SOMETIMES a big story can be told in a very few little words. R. D. Klapp (Dev to his friends) does that little trick in an unusual yarn called "The Friendly Gunner." You don't have to believe in ghosts to read this one, but if you do, it won't hurt none. Anyway, it's got a little something in it that's rare, and you'll find that it tickles something inside you even if you don't believe it.

THE same number of words (plus a couple hundred) are used by Stephen Payne in "Ralph Burrel Gets Even" to portray a "wrong guy" who finally goes "right" when the hand is dealt out to him. He had to trump his own ace, but it's the kind of game you figure he comes out winner, somehow, in the real human values. Anyway your editor likes kids in stories, and the little girl in this one was lucky to have a "right" guy around.

EACH day of the week is spelled (Tom) Thursday to us, when it brings a humor yarn in the mail from that lad! "Knocked Out Where The West Begins" will give you a great big laugh engineered by a guy who can engineer great big laughs. In fact, artist Brady, when he read the story, sat right down with a big grin on his face and captured the characters in the story as though he had photographed them right on the scene! We want to compliment Brady on a swell job of meeting an author halfway with art work that is comparable to the atmosphere of the story in every way.

REACH for your shooting irons, boys! It says here "A Man Has To Fight"! P. F. Costello is the author who says it, and he sure says it with gusto. Costello is just out of the army, and he's evidently sold on the idea men have to fight from ducking buzz-bombs and sundry items of that kind over where they fell thickest and fastest. We hope he's wrong, of course, but we can't help agreeing with his title when we consider his story. After all, a guy *has* to fight when faced with a situation like this! And it always helps if he likes to fight as well as has to . . .

NOTING the seventh and last story on our contents page for this issue, we find Berkeley Livingston's "Shooting Script" which is a western in modern tempo. It's a little different, and it's about a movie cowboy who (on the screen) fools even the wise little range lassie who owns a ranch and is not so wise as to bet that the camera doesn't lie. Well, the camera did lie, but there was something about the bet that provided a surprise line in the script—and it turns out that not all movie cowboys are exactly softies. If you like the modern touch in your westerns once in a while, you'll like this story. And with that we come to the end of the editor's stretch of riding herd for this time. Keep your eyes peeled for the next issue, which will be dated October 1946, and will be on sale August 6, to be exact. See you then . . .

Rap

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GAMBLING GUNS

By Robert Moore Williams

Phil Hammar discovered that the Four Square gambling house was anything but four square!

"WHAT'S your limit?" the thin-faced stranger asked.

Phil Hammar smiled wryly. "Since you've already got most of the money in the house, the limit can't be very high. I've got—" He ran slender fingers down the stacks of twenty-dollar gold pieces in front of him. "—nine hundred dollars here."

"That all you got left?" The thin-faced stranger had said his name was Barton. He had come into the Four Square gambling house and had said he heard Phil Hammar accommodated all comers.

Throughout all Arizona Phil Hammar's gambling house in Bisbee was known. His famous motto, *"Always give a sucker an even break"* was unusual enough to attract attention anywhere in the west. Normally, the cardinal rule in most gambling houses in that vast stretch of country between the Missouri river and the Rio Grande was "Never give a sucker an even break." Phil Hammar believed differently. In the games he ran, each man had a fair chance and the cards fell where they would. The result was that bearded prospectors swore by him and cowboys called him friend. Ranch owners, and mine partners, and eastern capitalists in Arizona to invest in mining claims, all men who liked to gamble, pitting luck and skill against the whims of fate, were honored to sit in on a game run by Phil Hammar. They knew if Hammar won their money, he had won it fairly. He might be the best poker player west of the Pecos—in a land where every red-blooded man fancied his ability to play the game, this was not a title that passed without challenge—but it was an honor to lose to him.

The fact that Phil Hammar played the cards as they fell did not keep him

The little man's boots landed squarely in the big man's exposed stomach

from winning. He possessed an almost intuitive knowledge of the game of poker. Poker is not a game of cards. It is a game of men. The cards fall where they will. The men who play them make the mistakes, they back the wrong hand at the wrong time, their nerve fails at a crucial moment, they try to break a losing streak by increasing their bets, they plunge, they go broke. Poker is a game that calls for a keen knowledge of men. The good poker player knows when to bluff and when to throw in his hand. He has the patience to sit for hour after hour drawing nothing but losing cards, to sit and wait, knowing that sooner or later the cards will turn. He has the courage to ride his luck when his luck is running right. But most of all, he must know men, he must be able to judge their courage, their strength, and their weakness.

Phil Hammar could do these things. Because he could do them, he was a crackerjack poker player. In the long run, he won.

He wasn't winning now. There were four men in the game. Two of them were small time players who stayed out of the big pots. They didn't count. They didn't have any of Phil Hammar's money. Barton, the thin-faced stranger, was the man who was breaking the bank.

"Nine hundred is all you got?" Barton asked.

"That's right," Phil Hammar said.

BARTON slowly studied the cards spread on the table in front of them. They were playing five card stud. Four cards had been dealt, the fifth and final card was coming up after the bets had been made. Hammar had a pair of kings and a seven spot showing. Barton had an ace of clubs, a queen of hearts, and a nine of spades showing. Barton was dealing.

"You're high on the board," Barton said.

"I check the bet," Phil Hammar answered.

"You mean you don't want to bet?" Barton asked. His tone of voice held the faint edge of a sneer.

"I'm passing the privilege to you," Phil Hammar answered.

Barton looked at the cards again. He studied them a long time. His thin face was emotionless but the end of his nose quivered like the nose of a coyote sniffing a dead horse. Suddenly with a swift motion of his right hand he shoved five stacks of gold pieces into the middle of the table.

"Two thousand on the last card!" he said.

"I have only nine hundred," Phil Hammar answered. In spite of the fact that this was the last money the Four Square gambling house possessed, no trace of emotion showed on his face.

Barton hesitated for just a second. He glanced around the spacious room, the bar at one end, and the poker tables. "I'll let you put this up for the balance, if you want to call," he said.

The room was silent. It was late at night and all the other games had broken up and the customers had gone home. Only the four players, the bartender, and Mr. Jones, were in the place. Mr. Jones was Phil Hammar's partner.

Phil Hammar said nothing. Outside he could hear the cobbled boots of the miners clumping down the street on their way to the first shift in the Copper Queen mine. The first faint streaks of dawn were beginning to come in through the windows of the room. Hammar looked at the cards spread on the table in front of him.

His own hand, two kings and a seven spot showing, looked strong. At this

moment, it was certainly the winning combination, because he had a third king in the hole. Three kings against an ace with no pair showing. It was a cinch hand, the kind of hand that an honest man bets reluctantly, knowing he can't lose with it.

It was also, unless Hammar missed his guess completely, a sucker hand. Barton had an ace up. He almost certainly had an ace in the hole. He would be a fool to bet as he was betting without an ace in the hole. And Barton, ever met. No, Barton was not a fool. He was one of the shrewdest, suavest, smoothest poker players Hammar had ever met. No, Barton was no fool. He had an ace in the hole, making him a pair of aces, and a fifth card coming.

Where are the other two aces? Phil Hammar thought. He knew where one of them was. It had fallen on the first round to one of the other hands. Three aces were accounted for. Where was the fourth one?

It was somewhere in that deck that Barton had carelessly laid on the table in front of him.

"ARE you calling?" Barton asked. The slight sneer in his voice was a little stronger now. He looked a little sleepy but Hammar suspected the man was not only wide awake but was as tense as a drum.

"I'll have to ask my partner," Hammar answered. He looked across the table to where the little man was sitting. "What do you say, Mr. Jones? Shall we call the bet?"

Globules of sweat were popping out on Mr. Jones' face. His bald head was streaked with perspiration. But he was loyal to Phil Hammar, fiercely loyal.

"You—you're bettin' the cards, Phil. Wh—whatever you say, goes with me."

"Thank you," Phil Hammar said. He liked this little baldheaded, scarred faced man who was his partner. He glanced at Barton. "I'll call the bet on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That I cut the cards."

"Cut the—" Barton didn't like the request. He didn't like it one single bit. He was dealing. A request to cut the cards implied only one thing. Dishonesty on his part.

"You surely don't mind if I cut the cards," Hammar softly said.

"No. Not at all. Your privilege." Barton handed the deck across the table. Hammar cut it. Barton picked it up again.

"Here we go," he said. He dealt the cards.

Phil Hammar caught a ten of hearts, a worthless card in his hand. Barton drew—the fourth ace!

"Looks like you cut me into the winning hand," he said. He turned over his hole card.

As Phil Hammar had suspected, it was an ace.

"Three aces against three kings," Hammar softly said. "It looks like you've won yourself a whole gambling house."

He rose from the table. "Thank you for the game," he said. "I enjoyed it. Perhaps we shall play some other time." If the tone of his voice revealed a hidden meaning in his words, his smile completely masked it.

Mr. Jones, looking pathetic and mournful, followed him from the room. Phil Hammar had just lost their means of livelihood on the turn of a single card. Mr. Jones might be sad about that. He might grumble and groan and complain that his partner had ruined his life, but no matter how much grumbling and groaning he did, Phil Hammar was still his partner. Where Phil went, Mr. Jones went too.

THIRTY minutes later, as they were finishing breakfast in a tiny restaurant that catered to early-rising miners, Mr. Jones got the shock of his eventful life. Speaking for the first time since they had left the gambling establishment they had so recently owned, his partner looked up from a steaming mug of coffee and said:

"I'll say this for that fellow Barton. He's the best hand at stacking a deck that I ever saw."

Mr. Jones was startled. "Stacking a deck, Phil?" he questioned. "You mean he can make the pasteboards behave?"

"That's right," Hammar nodded. "He's so good at it he ought to be a magician."

The idea that Barton, who had won all their money and their gambling establishment to boot, was a card sharp, hit Mr. Jones with stunning force. He popped out of his chair like a jumping jack coming out of a box.

"Phil!" he roared. "Do you mean that son-of-a-gun cleaned us out with stacked cards?"

The idea that they had been cheated affronted Mr. Jones right down to the bottom of his heart.

"That's right," Phil Hammar grimly said.

"And you saw him do it?"

"I saw him bring the case ace out of the deck on that last hand," Phil Hammar answered. "I saw him do it three other times during the game. He's a wizard with the cards, the best I ever saw in action anywhere."

Mr. Jones' round, seamed, scarred face was a mask of contorted fury.

"Why didn't you shoot him, Phil?" he screamed.

Phil Hammar smiled. "Shoot a master like Barton! He's a genius, Mr. Jones, a positive genius."

"I don't give a damn if he is a genius. He cleaned us out of all of our ready cash."

Phil Hammar nodded.

"He took the roof from over our heads."

"That's right," Phil Hammar agreed.

"He put us out on the street, took our jobs away from us."

"You're right again, Mr. Jones."

"And you let him get away with it, Phil Hammar?"

Phil Hammar nodded.

TO MR. Jones this was the most impossible thing that could have happened. He and Phil Hammar had met many a card sharp in their time, usually to the eventual discomfiture of the card expert. From the silver mines of Idaho to the roaring streets of Tombstone, sharpers had tried to take their money away from them. They had played against all manner of men, prospectors, hard-rock miners flush from payday, cowpunchers seeing the sights of town, soft-spoken eastern capitalists, slick-fingered gamblers, outlaws, ranchers, all the types of men who made up the great western country. Phil Hammar had met all comers, insisting only that the deal be fair.

Twice, once in Tombstone and once in Carson City, crooked gamblers had tried to stack the cards on Phil Hammar and had then tried to back up their mistake with guns. The result had been two dead gamblers. Phil Hammar hated a stacked deck worse than he hated a rattlesnake and Mr. Jones knew it.

But in spite of this, Phil Hammar had permitted a card sharp to take their shirts.

Had—the thought appalled Mr. Jones but it was the only explanation he could think of—had his partner lost his nerve?

If that had happened, Mr. Jones

could think of only one remedy. He jerked a forty-four from the holster at his hip.

"That son-of-a-gun got my money too, Phil. I'm going to get it back."

He started toward the door.

"Sit down," Phil Hammar said.

Mr. Jones stared at him in dumbfounded amazement. "Sit down?" he shouted. "You mean you're going to sit there and let that bum take everything we've got and haul freight out of town?"

"That's right," Hammar answered.

"Why?" Mr. Jones demanded.

Phil Hammar handed a worn envelope across the table toward him. "This may explain matters," he said.

Inside the envelope was a single sheet of paper. Two lines were written on it.

You will find Hammar running a gambling house in Bisbee. Use any means you see fit, but break him.

J. S.

MR. JONES read the message through. His face writhed in perplexity. He stared at his partner.

"Where—where did you get this, Phil?"

"Barton dropped it. The bartender found it on the floor. There was no name on it so he gave it to me."

"Then somebody sent Barton here to trim you!" Mr. Jones gasped.

"Exactly," Phil Hammar agreed. "Somebody sent him here to clean us out."

"The dirty b——!" Mr. Jones was on his feet again and starting towards the door. In his opinion, the fact that Barton had been *sent* to clean them out not lessen the heinousness of the crime of stacking the deck. Nor was Mr. Jones aware of all the possible implications of the situation. All he realized was that they had been cheated. That was all he needed to know.

"Hold it, Mr. Jones."

The little man's face was livid with rage. "H—Hold it, Phil?" he demanded.

Phil Hammar grinned. "Aren't you at all curious about *who* sent Barton to win our money?"

"Who sent him!"

"Not only who sent him but why?"

"But—"

"Barton is only a tool," Phil Hammar said. "If we shoot him, we may never know who sent him or why he was sent. Somebody went to the trouble to send a first-class card sharp down here to break us. That meant somebody is greatly interested in us. I want to know who that somebody is, Mr. Jones. Most of all, I want to know what is scheduled to happen next."

"Happen next?" Mr. Jones repeated. He was beginning to grasp some of the implications of the situation and he wasn't liking them a little bit. "You think something else is going to happen?"

"I would bet my last blue chip on it," Phil Hammar answered. "In fact," he continued softly. "I did bet our last blue chip on it."

Mr. Jones stared at him. The ways of his partner were often beyond the grasp of the little man. But even if he did not begin to understand Phil Hammar, he was loyal to the core. "What—what are we going to do?"

"Wait and see what happens," Phil Hammar answered. "And in the meantime, finish our breakfast."

II

PHIL HAMMAR and Mr. Jones sat on the front porch of their hotel. They had slept all day. Now the long summer day was drawing to a close and the hot sun was dipping low in the

west, promising relief from the heat of the afternoon. They were waiting. The fact that they did not know what they were waiting for did not make any difference.

They were an odd pair, these two men. Drawn together by the law that opposites attract, they were entirely unalike. Phil Hammar was tall and and slender with a smooth brown face and a trace of gray showing at his temples. Always well groomed in quiet, well-chosen clothes, he looked more like a prosperous banker than a gambler. There was nothing flamboyant about him, neither in his manner, his bearing, or in his clothing, but in this western country, his name had already become a legend. *Always give a sucker an even break* was a motto the west appreciated, loved, sought, and rarely found.

What Hammar's background was, no one knew. This he kept to himself. When he spoke there was something of the slow drawl of old Virginia in his voice, combined with the harder, more careful enunciation that could only have come from one of the great eastern colleges.

Phil Hammar was a gambler but any man who sat down in a game with him was certain of a fair deal and a square cut of the cards. He was also a roamer, staying six months in this mining camp, a year in this roaring town. Driven by some inner compulsion, he always moved on to new places, seeking new faces, new sights. He was dignified, reserved, and at times retiring into the inner shell of his own thoughts, he was aloof from the world around him. Other ages and other places might have made a philosopher out of him, or a mystic. Western America in the roaring 1880's had little use for a philosopher, none at all for a mystic. But a professional gambler it understood—all men in this turbulent country were gamblers in their secret hearts—and a professional gambler who was also a square shooter, it respected and admired.

Mr. Jones was almost Hammar's exact opposite. Physically, he greatly resembled a gorilla. He had a short, squat body, with heavy shoulders and long arms that possessed terrific strength. His round beaming face was scarred and twisted, relics of mining camp brawls. Sometime in the past a pair of brass knuckles had landed flush on his nose, leaving that important organ sadly battered out of shape. A knife had sliced his left cheek open, leaving a white scar to mark where the blade had gone. He had been a prospector, a hard-rock miner, a shotgun guard on a stage coach, a dance hall bouncer, and other things. Nothing that had happened to Mr. Jones had ever daunted him. He had only one fear—that he might have to work for a living. His refusal to work for a living was not caused by a distaste for physical exertion but by a strong dislike for bosses, for regular hours, for discipline in any form. With one exception, Mr. Jones was an individualist.

That one exception, the one boss that Mr. Jones was willing to accept, was his partner. To him, Phil Hammar was the law and the prophets. Mr. Jones might not like what Phil said to do, but he did it.

FUNDAMENTALLY, the little man was a very dignified person. Because of this, Hammar always called him Mr. Jones. He never quite understood why his partner always put mister in front of his name but he never voiced an objection. Yet the simple fact that his partner always called him Mr. Jones was one of the ties that bound the little man to Phil Hammar.

"I've been thinking," Mr. Jones

spoke suddenly from the depths of a cloud of cigar smoke.

"What have you been thinking?" Phil Hammar asked.

"Well, the way I get it, you figure that because Barton was *sent* to bust us, something else is due to happen now that he has busted us. Is that the way you figure it out, Phil?"

"That's right. What's disturbing you?"

"Well, supposing nothing does happen?"

"Something has to happen," Phil Hammar answered. "Logically, something has to happen. That's all there is to it. Something has to happen. Therefore it will happen."

"But supposing it doesn't," Mr. Jones insisted. "We've lost all our money. We've lost our place. We haven't got enough money in our pockets to bank a penny ante game. Now, supposing something don't turn up—"

"Oh," Hammar said lightly. "In that case, we go to work."

"Work!" Mr. Jones shuddered.

"Certainly. We have to eat, don't we. We will go to work."

"W—work for a living."

"Of course. The Copper Queen is taking on men." Phil Hamar seemed to revolve the matter in his mind. "I'm sure we could get on."

"Do—do you know what you're saying? That's pick and shovel work!"

"What's wrong with a pick and a shovel?"

"J—just the sight of them would make me sick!"

Phil Hammar considered the matter. "How about driving a stage coach if you don't want to work in a mine? That's pleasant, healthful work. Always out in the fresh, clean air—"

"I've had enough fresh air to last me the rest of my life."

"We might get a job on a ranch. Cowboys lead exciting lives. Once or twice a year we could come to town and see the sights—"

"P—Phillip!" There was genuine anguish in the little man's voice.

Phil Hammar laughed gently. Hearing the laugh, Mr. Jones relaxed. The worried expression vanished from his round and battered face.

"Y—you was only kidding, Phil!" he accused.

"I was only kidding, Mr. Jones," Phil Hammar reassured him.

Mr. Jones sighed with vast relief.

"If nothing happens, we will live on manna," Phil Hammar said.

"I never heard of a shower of manna falling on a couple of busted gamblers," Mr. Jones answered. "But if it comes to a choice of eating manna or going to work, I'll give the manna a whirl."

THE stage from the north dropped two passengers in front of the Bisbee Hotel that evening. Phil Hammar and Mr. Jones watched them descend from the coach. The driver handed their valises down from the boot and the two men entered the two story frame hotel building. Five minutes later one of the men came out on the porch. He was a sleek well-dressed individual with a "Who the hell are you?" air about him.

"I'm looking for a man by the name of Hammar," he announced. "They told me at the desk I could find him out here."

Somewhere inside the gambler a coil spring clicked and tightened. He rose to his feet. "I am Phil Hammar," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"You are?" the man seemed astonished. The "Who the hell are you?" eyes went up and down the gambler's clothes as if inspecting the quality of the material and the price paid for it. The stranger seemed to be surprised

to discover that a professional gambler could be dressed so quietly and in such good taste.

Phil Hammar noted the inspection and instantly resented it.

"I have my clothes made for me in New York," he said. "My tailor there has my measurements. The price of the suit I am wearing was one hundred and fifty dollars!"

"Eh?" the stranger gasped.

"You seemed interested, so I thought I'd tell you," the gambler replied.

"My dear sir—"

"Speak your piece. Otherwise you are wasting the time of two very busy men."

Hammar could give no reason for it but he just didn't like this man.

The stranger's eyes popped angrily. "Permit me to introduce myself," he said stiffly. "I am James Sarkins, attorney at law, from Globe."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Sarkins?"

"I have a proposition to make to you, if you are interested."

"A proposition?"

"Yes."

"Shoot."

Sarkins looked at Mr. Jones. "This is for your ears alone," he said to Phil Hammar.

"Mr. Jones shares all my troubles," Phil Hammar answered. "Permit me to introduce my partner. Mr. Sarkins, shake hands with Mr. Jones."

SARKINS accepted the bear paw thrust toward him without relish. Mr. Jones instantly detected the lawyer's dislike. He closed his fist with a mighty grip.

"Ow!" the lawyer yelled, jerking his hand free. "Damn you! You've broken my hand!"

"I'm so sorry," Mr. Jones apologized with obvious regret in his voice.

Phil Hammar grinned to himself. "Sometimes my partner doesn't know his own strength," he said. "You were saying something about a proposition."

The lawyer wiggled his fingers to restore circulation. No bones were broken but his dignity was badly ruffled.

"Yes," he snapped. "I have a client who instructed me to come here and offer you five thousand dollars in gold to finance the opening of a gambling house at the corner of Main and Brush streets in Globe, Arizona."

"Five thousand—" Phil Hammar so far forgot himself as to whistle in astonishment. This—this was it! His hunch had been that something was going to happen. It was happening. The coil spring inside of him tightened another notch. Beside him, Mr. Jones was standing with his mouth agape.

"Who is your client?" Phil Hammar asked.

"I am not permitted to divulge that information," the lawyer answered.

"What?"

"By law, doctors and lawyers may hold confidential information imparted to them by their patients or by their clients. My client does not wish his identity disclosed."

"Five thousand dollars!" Mr. Jones gasped. "Talk about manna for busted gamblers, this is it. Take him up, Phil."

Phil Hammar shook his head. "Not so fast, Mr. Jones. There are some things about this I don't exactly like."

"You like five thousand dollars, don't you, Phil?"

"Yes. I also like to stay alive."

"Huh? Golly—"

But Phil Hammar was talking again to Sarkins. "You will not divulge the identity of your client?"

Sarkins shook his head. "You understand that lawyers are not free agents. I must respect my client's wishes."

Phil Hammer groaned. "This gets madder and madder. What is your client getting out of this?"

"Nothing," the lawyer answered. His tone of voice indicated that he, as well as his hearers, regarded this as preposterous, but he had been retained to carry a message and carry it he would. If his hearers didn't choose to believe him, that was their privilege.

"Nothing?" Phil Hammer repeated.

"That is right," the lawyer answered.

"Your client must be crazy!" Mr. Jones blurted out.

THE lawyer had recovered his composure. He merely shrugged at the little man's remark. "My instructions were to come here and offer Phillip Hammar five thousand dollars to be used in starting a gambling hall at the designated location in Globe," he repeated. "My client's identity and motives must remain secret. That's all I have to say. You can take it or leave it."

"We'll leave it," Mr. Jones said.

Mr. Jones had had time to think. He had discovered there were many things about this offer that he did not like. Too much was hidden to suit him. He had the opinion that anyone who parted with five thousand dollars had a good reason for their action. If the reason could not be revealed, there was something wrong somewhere. Having had time to think, Mr. Jones had changed his mind. He vigorously shook his head.

"Nope," he said. "No sir. We're not buying a pig in a poke. If you want to come out into the open and lay your cards on the table, maybe we'll talk business with you, but this pussy in the corner business don't make any kind of sense. We don't want any of if."

The lawyer nodded. "Thank you for your time. I anticipated that this would be your answer but I had to perform my duty. Good day."

Seeming secretly pleased, he turned to leave.

"We accept," Phil Hammar said. "Be quiet, Mr. Jones."

Mr. Jones hastily closed his mouth.

Sarkins hesitated. "I understood your partner to say—"

"My partner sometimes speaks without thinking. We accept your proposition."

"Very well. The money will be delivered to you when you arrive in Globe. However I was empowered to advance funds for stage fare and incidental expenses—"

"That's very nice of you," Phil Hammar said. "Did you really think we would need it?"

"Why—I—that is—"

"Didn't you think we would be able to pay our own fare to Globe?"

"I—" Sarkins was suddenly too confused to speak.

"What's your first name, Mr. Sarkins?" Phil Hammar asked. The suave softness had gone out of his voice. His tone was icy cold.

"James. But—"

"Did you ever hear of a man by the name of Barton?"

"Barton? Barton? I can't say that I have."

"Then how did you know we would need funds to reach Globe?"

"Know it? I didn't know it. And I don't begin to understand the purpose back of these questions." A thin film of perspiration had appeared on the lawyer's upper lip.

"Let it go," Phil Hammar said. "Let it go. We'll see you tomorrow and work out the details."

"Tomorrow? Yes, better make it tomorrow. I'll be seeing you in the morning."

THE lawyer turned and walked away. His heels clumped rapidly on the wooden porch of the hotel. By the time he reached the front door he was almost running.

"You sure put the chills on him, Phil," Mr. Jones observed.

"I believe you're right. I believe he is a trifle scared. When I asked him how he knew we were busted, if he knew a man by the name of Barton, and what his first name was, he began to get the fidgets. He realized a second too late that offering to pay our stage fare was revealing too much—"

"Holy hell!" Mr. Jones gasped. "Do you think he sent Barton down here to clean us?"

"I don't know," Phil Hammar answered. "But his name is James Sarkins and the initials signed to that note were J.S."

Mr. Jones was never quite on time. He was always either a little fast or a little slow. He suddenly realized what his partner was saying.

"Phil—" he wailed.

"Yes, Mr. Jones."

"We're sticking our necks out if we go to Globe."

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Jones."

This admission left the little man momentarily speechless. He had expected his partner to argue with him. Phil hadn't argued. He had agreed.

"But—but, Phil, we don't know what the hell is going on. We don't know who offered us that five thousand dollars, or why."

"Think how much fun it will be to find out those things."

"Think how much fun it will be to stay alive!" Mr. Jones vigorously rebutted. "There's something dirty going on here. That slick lawyer is a crook if I ever saw one—"

"I agree, Mr. Jones."

"You always agree at the wrong time. Any man with half an eye could see we're running straight into trouble. Phil Hammar, sometimes I think you ain't got good sense."

Phil Hammar grinned. The little man was quite worked up. "Again I agree, Mr. Jones. If I had had good sense, I would never have come west."

For an instant his face darkened as old and bitter memories moved through his mind. Then he was smiling again.

"If we turn this offer down, we may have to go to work. You agree with me that it is better to buy this pig in a poke than it is to go to work, don't you?"

For a minute the face of the little man contorted into a frown that would have excited the envy of a totem pole. Bass rumblings sounded deep in his throat. His great fists clenched and unclenched. Sweat popped out on his forehead. When he spoke, his voice was a deep bass roar, the sure sign of inner agitation.

"I agree," roared Mr. Jones. "Anything is better than work."

The next day the daily stage north from Bisbee carried two former inhabitants of that town with it. They were Phil Hammar and Mr. Jones. The mining town of Globe—which took its name from a globe-shaped boulder of almost pure silver which was found on what was later to be the site of the town—was their destination.

III

ALTHOUGH Globe owed its origin and settlement to the rich silver deposits found within a twenty-mile radius around it, by 1880 most of the silver had been exhausted. The discovery of another almost equally rich metal kept the town going. This metal was copper. In the late '80s, after Geronimo had surrendered and the Apache menace had subsided—Globe lies in

what was once part of the Apache reservation — development of the incredible rich copper ore put Globe again into the boom-town classification.

That was what Phil Hammar and Mr. Jones discovered when they arrived in Globe after a long and painful trip over exceedingly rough mountain roads, a roaring, rip-snorting, booming town, hot as a firecracker on the Fourth of July. Small silver deposits lying twenty to thirty miles out of town were still being worked. There were prospectors in the hills. Eastern capital was being poured into the rich copper deposits, development work was going on, and the town swarmed with miners, promoters, speculators, and get-rich-quick artists of every variety. Tall, lanky plainsmen were visible on Main Street, Mexicans in broad sombreros and gay serapis, Cornish "Cousin Jack" miners, and occasional sullen faced half-wild Apaches still angry with the whites for stealing *Besh-Ba-Gowah*—the metal village—from them.

"She's a boomer all right," Mr. Jones observed, looking out the window as the stage picked its way down the main street. "I don't think I ever saw a hotter town. Did you, Phil?"

He turned to look at his companion. Phil Hammar was staring out the other side of the coach. His normally brown face was paper white.

"What's the matter, Phil?" Mr. Jones demanded.

His partner did not answer. Mr. Jones nudged him. Phil Hammar turned with a start.

"What's the matter with you?" Mr. Jones asked, staring at him.

Phil Hammar passed his hand across his eyes. "That woman," he said.

Mr. Jones looked out the window just in time to see a well-dressed woman disappear into the front door of what looked like an extremely high class saloon. The name—The Oriental—blazed across the front in gild letters three feet high.

"What about her?" Mr. Jones asked.

"Nothing," Phil Hammar answered. "For a second I thought I knew her. That's all. I must have been mistaken. Never in a thousand years would she—the woman I once knew—be here in a town like this."

He shook his head. There was a look of pain between his eyes. Mr. Jones was silent. In all the years he had known Phil Hammar, he had never known the gambler to show the slightest interest in any woman. Nor had Phil even mentioned any woman in whom he might once have been interested.

Mr. Jones said nothing. Phil's past belonged to him alone. But he noted that his partner was unusually quiet all the rest of the day. The job of finding suitable lodgings he left to Mr. Jones, likewise the selection of a restaurant where they could eat their evening meal. After they had finished eating, Phil Hammar went for a walk alone. Mr. Jones, with deep tact, refrained from asking him any questions.

THE next day they looked up Sarkins. The lawyer took them to the building where they were to open their gambling establishment. It was above a restaurant on the second floor of a two-story frame building.

It was located directly across the street from the Oriental.

"Is this the place where we are supposed to open up?" Phil Hammar asked.

"This is the place," the lawyer answered.

"Did your client select it?"

"Yes."

"Um," the gambler thoughtfully said. "Mind telling me the name of your

client?"

"Naturally not."

"Um. What if we don't like this location?"

"Then you don't open," the lawyer answered.

"I see," Phil Hammar answered. "Well, having gone this far, there is no point in backing out now. I guess it's up to us to like the location. If the owners of the Oriental don't like us, I guess they can lump us."

Of all the saloons and gambling halls in Globe, the Oriental was the queen bee. It was bigger than any of the others, had a longer and more brightly polished mahogany bar, had more and better trained bartenders behind that bar, than any other palace of joy. It also had a dance hall and claimed that it had more pretty waiter girls than any other establishment in the west. The Oriental was proud of its drinks and proud of its girls but its greatest source of pride was in its gaming parlors. Here every man could find the type of game that suited him. A prospector fresh out of the desert with whiskers a foot long and clothes in shreds, could find the kind of boisterous play that suited his starved tastes, if he could pay for it. He could have a girl on one knee, a drink in one hand, and with his partly free hand he could shove the chips across the table. If he didn't like the way the cards or the dice ran and chose to protest, he would find the bouncers were quite capable of tossing him into Pinal Creek.

But the real pride of the Oriental, and the source of a large slice of its profits, was in its private gaming rooms. Here more polished appetites than those of rude prospectors could be satisfied. Here the suave eastern capitalist, heavy with his stockholder's money and eager to earn a name for himself in this wild and wooly west, could find games where the stakes were high enough to suit his taste. Thick carpets, brought in at heavy cost over the mountain trails, covered the floors of these private gaming rooms, cut glass chandeliers adorned the ceilings. The only sound here was the click of the roulette ball seeking its resting place, and the soft shuffle of cards. The most accomplished bartenders mixed fancy drinks for the patrons of these rooms. The housemen who dexterously managed these games were dressed like fashion plates. They spoke in soft voices, walked quietly, and carried their guns out of sight in shoulder holsters.

SAM GULLY, sleek and suave and fat, with an appetite for fine wines and old brandies, was half owner of the Oriental. He had a partner, a woman.

They said of her, of this tall blonde woman who was half owner of the gambling house, that she was a queen, a gracious, kindly, thoughtful queen. They said, also, that she was the most beautiful woman ever seen in Arizona, and this was correct. Men had been known to wait in the Oriental for hours just for the sight of her descending the broad stairs that led down from the second floor gaming rooms. No man who had waited for her had ever thought his time was wasted. She had a smile for everyone and her smile was something to see. They said, also—and this they said in whispers—that she was a hellcat on wheels. The truth of this no one knew. Certainly in public she was never anything but beautiful and sweet.

Where had she come from? No one knew, except possibly Sam Gully, and he kept his mouth shut. All that was known was that there had been a game in one of the private rooms. The whispers said that sometime during the night a dead man had been carried out

the back door and buried no one knew where. His identity had remained a secret. Of the game that had been played that night, no one ever spoke. The next morning, Sam Gully was introducing Janet Marshall as his new partner, announcing that she was half owner of the Oriental. She had a private suite of rooms on the third floor and no one, except her maids, was ever permitted to enter that mysterious region.

Phil Hammar stood at the window looking out at the gilt letters that made up the sign of the Oriental. Behind him he could hear the bartender putting away the last of the stock in his small bar. Three days had passed since Sarkins had showed them where they were to open their gambling house. During those three days, the big room had been thoroughly cleaned, tables and chairs had been bought and set up, the small bar had been put into place, and a bartender and housemen hired. Within a few hours, as soon as night came, they were due to open for business.

MR. JONES stood beside him.

"You realize we're bucking the Oriental," Phil Hammar said.

"I know it," Mr. Jones answered. "The biggest, swankest joint in the whole damned territory, and we're bucking it." The little man sounded worried.

"You realize we were brought here for that express purpose," Phil Hammar continued.

"I figured that out too, Phil. Do you think we can cut in on their business?"

"We'll cut in all right, where it hurts —their big games. We'll get a lot of business, Mr. Jones, from people who like to sit in on a game they know is honest. You can bet the Oriental will soon know we're here."

Mr. Jones shook his head. "Sam Gully ain't going to like it. I've been asking around about him, Phil. He's fat and he looks soft but they say he's bad medicine."

"That's what I've heard too," Phil Hammar answered.

"And they say that woman who is his partner can look out for her own end," the little man added. "I'd like to see that woman, Phil."

"So would I," Hammar answered. But there's one person I would like to see more."

"Who it that?"

"The person who brought us here to buck Sam Gully and his partner, Sarkins' mysterious client."

"Phil, you certainly said something there," Mr. Jones thoughtfully answered. "The way I see it, we were brought here to run Gully and his partner out of business."

"That's exactly right. What do you think about it?"

"Think? You're doing the thinking for us, Phil. Gully and his partner and the guy who brought us here to bust them is your problem. I've got only one thing to think about, Phil."

"What's that?"

"Keeping my gun oiled," the little man vigorously answered. "Hey! Look there."

A woman had come out of the Oriental. It was the same woman Phil Hammar had glimpsed the first day he arrived in Globe. He had only seen her for an instant that afternoon. Now he got a full look at her.

His face turned paper white.

Mr. Jones, seeing his partner's face, stared in open-mouthed astonishment. It was the first time he had ever seen this happen. He had seen his partner face the roughs of the mining camps without a tremor, he had seen Phil draw the gun he carried on his hip in times

of danger, and face a gun already drawn, and shoot, and show no fear. He had seen his partner risk his fortune on the turn of a single card, and win, and lose, and smile the same slow easy smile no matter whether he won or lost, but he had never seen Phil Hammar show fear.

Phil was showing fear now.

THE woman looked up at the window where they were watching, then came directly across the street toward them. They heard the click, click of her high heels on the wooden stairs that led to the street below. They heard her call:

"Hello! Is anyone in?"

Then she pushed open the swinging doors and entered the room. She was the most beautiful woman Mr. Jones had ever seen. He wished she would look at him. She didn't seem to be aware of Mr. Jones' existence. Her eyes were on Phil Hammar alone.

"Phil!"

Hand outstretched, she came across the room to him.

Phil Hammar knew he was facing his destiny. This woman was Janet Marshall. He had known her when her name was Janet Cummings, and in that long gone time when she was Janet Cummings, of Richmond, Virginia, he had loved her desperately. He had been engaged to her in that long ago time. The night before their wedding she had eloped with another man, with the rich young Tom Marshall.

Janet Cummings was the reason Phil Hammar had come west. His restlessness, his roving, his gambling, had been to escape the hurt she had given him.

He had heard that Janet Marshall was half owner of the Oriental. He had never thought she was the girl he once knew as Janet Cummings. Janet Marshall, nee Cummings, was somewhere back east. He had never heard from her or of her during the seven years that had elapsed since he came west. He had never expected to see her again.

She was coming across the room toward him.

This was Phil Hammar's most desperate moment. The sight of her revived old and desperate longings. There was hunger in his eyes as he looked at her. He took her outstretched hand.

"Phil!"

"Janet!" He forced his voice to be calm.

"It's so good to see you, Phil."

"It's—it's good to see you, Janet."

"You are handsomer than ever."

"Thank you, Janet. You have not grown more beautiful. You could not."

"Oh, thank you, Phil. You always could say the nicest things."

Her eyes were on his face. "I heard —a Phil Hammar was opening a gambling house here. I came to see, by any chance, it was the Phil Hammar I once knew."

"That's right, Janet. And you—you are one of the owners of the Oriental?"

"Yes, Phil."

"Where—where is Tom?"

"Dead," she answered.

"Oh. I didn't know."

"We came here to invest in mining properties. He—got into a game over across the street." She nodded toward the Oriental. "He lost—everything he had, and committed suicide.

"I had only a few jewels left, with no one to turn to, no one—to protect me. I guess—" She was speaking quickly now, hurriedly, as if she wanted to get the words said and done. "I guess there is something of the gambling impulse in me too. I—I, pawned my jewels for chips, sat in on the game where Tom had lost. Before I left the table I had won a half interest in the

Oriental."

THE pulse quickened in her throat as she spoke. She was looking straight at Phil Hammar, pleading with him, almost begging him, not to misunderstand her. It was desperately important to her that this tall lean man did not misjudge her.

"I see," Phil Hammar said.

"You don't blame me for doing it, do you, Phil?"

He smiled. "Why should I blame you, Janet, for doing what I have done?"

"Oh." The pulse in her throat slowed a little its frenzied throbbing. "I'm so glad, so very glad. I want—" She looked quickly around, for the first time became aware of the presence of Mr. Jones.

"I'd like you to meet my partner, Mr. Jones," Phil Hammar said.

Mr. Jones, his round face beaming from ear to ear, bowed almost to the floor. "Honored," he gulped.

He got the briefest of nods and a curt, "How do you do, Mr. Jones." After that, he was ignored. Janet Marshall drew Phil Hammar to one side. She looked around to make certain they were out of hearing.

"Phil, I had two reasons for coming here."

"Yes, Janet."

"The first was to make certain that the Phil Hammar who was opening the gambling hall was the Phil Hammar I knew."

"It's the same man, Janet."

"The second reason, if you were the man I knew, was to warn you not to open up here."

"Not to open, Janet!"

"That's right, Phil." She spoke quickly. The pulse in her throat was throbbing frenzidly again. "Sam Gully is afraid of you, Phil. He knows your reputation. If you open here, we might as well close the second floor of the Oriental. That would be all right with me—since you're the man who is doing the opening—but I can't control my partner. Sam Gully is a dangerous man, Phil. He will take desperate measures to eliminate competition. So—"

"So you came to warn me, Janet?"

"I guess it amounts to that, Phil. It was the least I could do, considering what—what we once meant to each other."

"And can mean to each other again," her eyes said.

"Thank you, Janet," Phil Hammar said.

Her eyes weighed him, measured him, probed into him. "I hope we can see more of each other, Phil," she said. "And now—goodbye."

Her heels clicked rapidly on the wooden floor as walked out of the room. Mr. Jones hastened to the swinging doors, held them open for her, and beaming bowed her out of the room.

PHIL HAMMAR wiped tiny globules of sweat from his forehead. Mr. Jones came up to him. The little man looked out the window but said nothing.

"The Oriental doesn't like us, Mr. Jones," Phil Hammar slowly said. "They don't want us bucking them."

"And you're in love with the woman who owns a half interest in the Oriental," Mr. Jones spoke.

His partner's words startled Phil Hammar. "What?" he gasped.

Mr. Jones seemed not to hear him. "It's kind of a problem, ain't it, Phil."

"What did you say?"

"It's written all over your face, Phil. The minute she walked in here, anybody with half an eye could see you were nuts about her."

"Ah."

Mr. Jones looked up. Phil Hammar's face was frozen stiff. "I didn't mean to

hurt your feelings, Phil. But the cards lay that way, don't they?"

"Heaven help me, Mr. Jones, I don't know," Phil Hammar answered. He took a cigar from his pocket, lit it. "The question is: Are we going to open or aren't we?"

"People will say Sam Gully scared us off, if we don't open," Mr. Jones said.

Hammar's face darkened. "I am not afraid of Sam Gully," he said.

"Then what are you afraid of, Phil?"

"Nothing," Phil Hammar answered. "Nothing. We open tonight."

Mr. Jones lifted the pistol from the holster at his hip. He broke it, glanced down the spotless barrel, spun the cylinder with his thumb. Then he shoved it back into its holster.

"We're damned if we do and damned if we don't, ain't we, Phil? I wonder—" he spoke thoughtfully. "If the guy who brought us here knows the kind of a spot he put us into?"

IV

THEY opened that night with six poker tables. Poker was the only game Phil Hammar ever operated in one of his gambling establishments. Craps, chuck-a-luck, faro, roulette, all the other ingenious games devised to separate a sucker and a dollar, were out. Men who came to Phil Hammar's place came there to play poker. If they wanted to shoot craps, or buck a roulette layout, they could go somewhere else. Of the six tables in the house, neatly lettered signs over two of them showed that the play here had a five dollar limit. A third table had a ten dollar limit, a fourth had a forty dollar limit, and at the fifth the limit was one hundred dollars.

A houseman sat at each table and cut a small percentage out of each pot. The kitty thus accumulated, plus the profits from the small bar, met the overhead of the modest establishment. The housemen were permitted to play or to watch. Their winnings went to the house and their losses were absorbed by the house. Their job was to keep the play strictly on the level. They watched the customers to make certain that no customer cheated. Mr. Jones watched the housemen.

The purpose of the different limits on the five tables was to provide a game to suit the taste of every man. The customer could play for fun, relaxation, and risk a few dollars, or he could risk a lot of dollars, according to his tastes and the size of his pocketbook.

If he wanted to play for a hell of a lot of dollars, there was a side room from which the door had been removed. A plain round, oak table and six of as comfortable chairs as were for sale in Globe stood in this room.

Play here had no limit. The house did not cut this game. Phil Hammar sat in on it, meeting all comers. The success or failure of the house depended on this game. If he could play a better brand of poker than the men who played against him, he and Mr. Jones made money.

By ten o'clock that night, every table in the house was filled with players. Men were waiting for an opportunity to sit in on the game in the side room.

"Phil Hammar, I'd consider it an honor to sit in a game with you," was what Sim Larkin, one of the original discoverers of the silver deposits at Globe and still a large shareholder in the copper mines, said.

"Thank you."

"I knew Hammar in Bisbee," a mine foreman said. "He's a square shooter."

"I knew him up in Carson," a third person said. "He plays the cards as they fall."

"I don't reckon he's a better poker player than I am," a lanky rancher said. "I'll give him a whirl and find out."

BY THREE o'clock that night the last reluctant card player had gone home.

Phil Hammar and Mr. Jones were in a little side room that served as an office. On the desk in front of them were stacks of gold pieces and piles of yellow bills.

"Our net profit for the night was seven hundred dollars," Phil Hammar said, slipping the last gold piece on its stack. "This town is a bonanza. We'll get rich."

"If we stay here," Mr. Jones said.

"You think we won't stay here, Mr. Jones?"

"I don't know," the little man answered. "I talked to a lot of the customers tonight. They told me the housemen at the Oriental were playing each other."

The shadow of a frown crossed Hammar's face. "I realize—"

The door of the little office was shoved open. A masked man stepped into the rooms. He had a sawed-off double barrelled shotgun in his hands.

"Reach for the ceiling!"

Phil Hammar and Mr. Jones reached. No one in his right mind ever argued with a shotgun.

"Stand up!"

They obeyed.

"Turn around and face the wall."

Quick steps sounded in the room as a second man entered. Swift but very thorough hands removed their guns, swiftly felt for concealed weapons.

"Put the coin in the bags," the voice of the man with the shotgun ordered.

They heard the clink of metal and the rustle of silver as the money was scooped from the top of the table. Phil Hammar could hear Mr. Jones breathing heavily. He glanced sideways. The face of the little man was contorted with rage.

"Take it easy," he advised. "You don't beat a shotgun."

"Damn them, Phil—"

"You don't even tie it," Phil said quickly. He was afraid his partner was going to turn and leap at the man holding the gun. "It's only a holdup."

"But they're cleaning us out, Phil."

"Would you rather be cleaned out and alive or cleaned out and dead?"

FOOTSTEPS scurried from the room. Phil Hammar and Mr. Jones turned quickly.

They were still looking into the muzzle of the shotgun. All the money was gone from the table top but the man with the shotgun was still there.

"You two go ahead of me," he ordered.

For a split second, Phil Hammar hesitated. He had thought the masked men would grab the money and go. Instead they were taking him and his partner with them.

The masked man saw the hesitation. The twin barrels of the gun centered on Hammar's stomach.

"If you want it the hard way, you can have it," he said.

"You win," Phil Hammar answered. "I don't know of any hand that beats a sawed-off shotgun."

The shotgun covering them from behind, he and Mr. Jones were marched down the back steps and into the alley at the rear. Four horses were waiting in the alley. The man with the canvas bag that contained their money was also waiting.

"You're going for a ride," the man with the shotgun said. "Climb on those plugs. And remember this shotgun scatters to beat all hell!"

In the saddle, their feet were tied

under the horse and their hands were tied behind them. With one man leading the two horses, and with the man with the shotgun following behind them, they rode out of the silent, darkened town.

"We always give a sucker an even break," Mr. Jones complained.

"And then we get played for suckers ourselves," Phil Hammar bitterly answered. "We were warned. We should have anticipated something like this and been ready for it."

A full moon was dropping down the sky in the west. When it set the night would be dark but as long as it was in the sky the Arizona countryside was plainly revealed. In the darkness, Hammar might have taken a chance on kicking his horse in the flanks, bending low in the saddle, and hoping to hell the slugs from the shotgun would miss. Even in the dark, it would be a bad gamble and he knew it, but sometimes even a gambler had to take a chance he knew was bad.

Their captors took them several miles out of town over a rugged mountain trail. They stopped at an abandoned prospector's cabin. There were no windows in the cabin. A horse was tied at one end.

"Get down and go in."

THEIR feet were untied and they were prodded through the door. Inside the cabin a lantern was burning on the rough table. A man was seated on the broken down bunk. He looked up quickly as they entered.

He was a big man. He weighed at least two hundred and fifty pounds. Heavy jowls poured over the edges of the high collar he was wearing. He had thick black hair, pudgy hands, and wide, alert eyes.

Looking at him, Phil Hammar knew he was seeing Sam Gully, half owner of the Oriental, and Janet Marshall's partner. Seeing him, Hammar knew why she had said she couldn't control him. Gully didn't look like a man who was easy to control.

He rose quickly as they entered. He smiled with his face but his eyes did not smile.

"Come in, gentlemen."

Then he realized their hands were still tied behind them.

"Cut the ropes off them, Mike."

Phil Hammar felt a sharp knife slit the ropes behind his back. Gully looked past him. "Put the sack on the table, Bob," he ordered.

Phil Hammar rubbed his hands together, flexed his fingers to restore circulation. The second masked man placed the canvas sack carefully beside the lantern on the rough table.

"Well, Gully," Hammar said.

"I must apologize for the lack of chairs," Gully answered. He spread his hands to show he was helpless in the matter. "Really, the accomodations in this cabin are quite crude. I'm really sorry I can't ask you to sit down but you see there is no place to sit."

"We can stand a while yet," Phil Hammar answered. "What do you want with us?"

"Down to business, eh?" The unsmiling eyes searched Phil Hammar's face. "I want to make you a proposition," the smiling lips spoke.

"Speak your piece," Hammar said.

Gully stayed on the far side of the table. His two men had taken up positions near the door. Hammar didn't even bother to look to see where they were. He knew the shotgun was back behind him somewhere, covering his back.

"What do you want, Gully?"

"I want you to leave town," Gully answered.

"Leave town?"

"Yes. If you stay here, you will cause me trouble. So I thought I would ask you in a nice way to leave."

HAMMAR jerked a thumb back toward the door. "Do you call this asking me in a nice way?"

"Well, yes," Gully answered slowly. "I can think of worse ways. When you have heard my proposition, I believe you will agree it could be done in worse ways."

"There's more to it then than just leaving town?"

"Oh, yes." Gully nodded toward the canvas sack lying on the table. "You can take that and leave in peace or you can stay here—and be at peace."

There was no mistaking his meaning. And he looked like a man who meant what he said.

"Is that all?" Phil Hammar asked quietly. Beside him, Mr. Jones seemed to have stopped breathing.

"One other thing?" Gully said.

"And what is that?"

"The name of the person who brought you here, who financed the opening of your gaming rooms."

"What?" Phil Hammar asked in spite of himself.

"I've been doing some checking on you," Gully answered. "I admit I don't know the whole story but I know that *somebody* put you in business here. I want to know the name of that man. You tell me his name and you can have this canvas sack and leave in peace. My word on it."

"Is your word any good?"

"You can trust it."

His eyes showed that he meant it. He was willing to give them back their money and let them leave. The price was the name of the man who had brought them into town.

The man who had brought them to town was unquestionably Sam Gully's enemy. Gully wanted to know the names of his enemies.

Phil Hammar sighed. "I'm sorry but I don't have that information. Frankly, I'm in the same boat with you. I, also, would like to know who financed the opening of my gaming rooms here."

THE smile slid off of the fat face. The hard eyes were intense and unwavering in their stare.

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"I said it," Phil Hammar answered.

The eyes still did not waver.

"Men die easily in this country. Sometimes their bodies are never found and no one ever knows what became of them."

"I believe that too," Phil Hammar said.

"Then you had better tell me who is back of you."

"I've already told you—I don't know."

Gully changed his tactics. "I understand you went broke in Bisbee."

"That's right."

"But you turn up here and open a gambling house. Where did you get the money?"

"A lawyer by the name of Sarkins gave it to us."

"What? I thought you said you don't know who is back of you?"

"I don't. Sarkins is representing somebody else. He refused to name the person he represented.

"Well, I'll be doubly damned!" The hard stare changed. Flecks of light glinted in the grim eyes. "Hammar, I don't know whether you're lying or not. For the time being, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt."

He started toward the door. "Bob, you come with me. Mike, you stay here. I want to find these two hombres here when I come back."

He went out the door. Mike, he of the sawed-off shotgun, remained. He stood the shotgun by the door, pulled a six-gun from the holster at his hip.

"If you gents will just put your hands behind you and back toward me—"

With an expertness born of long practice he looped the rope around Mr. Jones' wrists, then did the same for Phil Hammar.

"Sit down, gents, and make yourself comfortable," he said, with heavy humor.

They turned around. The muzzle of the six-gun was pointed down. Outside the cabin the clip-clop of ridden horses showed where Gully and his helper were riding away.

Phil Hammar kicked up and out. His foot struck the loosely-held six-gun. The weapon was knocked out of the masked man's hands. He hastily dived for it.

Hammar lunged at him with his shoulder, struck him in the ribs. All of the gambler's lean strength was behind that lunge. The masked man lost his balance. His tail end hit the hard dirt floor of the cabin with a thud that jarred him to the marrow of his bones. Phil Hammar fell on top of him. Hammar's hands were still tied behind his back.

THE masked man's fingers reached for Hammar's throat. Hammar's hands were tied. Hammar could not do him any real damage. As soon as he shoved the lighter gambler off of him, he would grab his shotgun. He shoved Hammar up and back.

Mr. Jones kicked him in the head with the round toe of his heavy boot. Phil Hammar rolled to one side. Mr. Jones jumped straight up in the air and came down on the masked man's stomach. Mr. Jones was not a dainty fighter. He fought to win in the quickest possible manner.

The masked man was still. Mr. Jones sat on his head.

"Untie my hands, Phil," the intrepid little man announced. "Then I'll do the same for you."

When the masked man recovered consciousness, he was masked no longer. But he was tied up tighter than a roundup calf.

"What—what do we do now, Phil?" Mr. Jones asked.

"The horses that brought us here must still be outside," Hammar answered. "I guess they can carry us back to town."

"G—golly, are we going back there?"

"We haven't been run out of a town yet," Phil Hammar said. "It's a little late to start now. Besides I want to talk to Sarkins, if I can find him while he's still alive."

"You—you think Gully will kill him?"

"Not if he talks."

"He'll talk all right."

"Then Gully will be looking for somebody else."

"W—who, Phil?"

"The man who financed us. Come on, Mr. Jones. Let's see about those horses."

With the canvas sack firmly tied to the saddle of the horse Mr. Jones was riding, they rode away. Dawn was beginning to lighten the mountains to the east.

V

THEY missed a turn on the mountain road and lost time. The sun had already risen before they retraced their steps, found the right trail, and came into sight of the hills of Globe.

Two horsemen were cantering slowly down the road toward them.

"It's not Gully," Mr. Jones said,

staring at the two riders.

"I see it isn't," Phil Hammar answered. "It's Janet Marshall!"

"By golly, it is!" Mr. Jones gasped. "She's riding like a man."

Normally women rode sidesaddle, combersome devices designed so that the gentler sex could ride a horse without having to undergo the indelicacy of straddling their mount. Janet Marshall scorned the conventional saddle rig for women. She wore specially made riding breeches and rode a western saddle, a scandalous rig in the eyes of most westerners though not in the eyes of Mr. Jones, who gazed approvingly at her as she rode up.

"I've heard she rides like this," Mr. Jones said. "The one following her is that tame Apache squaw she takes with her wherever she goes. They say the squaw carries a Winchester on her saddle just in case—"

Phil Hammar and Mr. Jones removed their hats as the two women came riding up. The Indian woman kept well to the rear. The rifle in her saddle holster was plainly visible.

"Phil!"

Janet Marshall saw the sawed-off shotgun he was carrying across his saddle, she saw the stubble on his cheeks, the tired sleepless look in his eyes, his dusty, rumpled clothes. Her eyes came back to the shotgun as if she recognized it.

"What happened?"

"Mr. Jones and I decided to be road agents," Phil Hammar answered. "We held up the stage last night."

"This is no time for nonsense, Phil. Where did you get that gun?"

"I borrowed it from a man who had no immediate use for it. Do you recognize it?"

"Yes." She flinched a little over the admission.

He clucked to his horse. "We're riding into town, Janet. Would you care to ride with us?"

She swung her horse beside his.

"Phil!"

There was fear in her eyes.

"This is no business for a woman, Janet." He shook his head.

"But I'm already in it. Sam Gully is my partner."

"I know. I wish you weren't."

"I'm taking a man's part in this game, Phil. I want to be treated like a man."

"It just happens you aren't a man, Janet." His eyes were on the far-off mountains.

"I'm your friend, Phil. No matter what has happened, I'm your friend."

He was silent.

"Phil, are you still hurt because—because of a mistake I made a long, long time ago?"

"Was it a mistake when you married Tom Marshall, Janet?"

"It certainly was. I was young, I was foolish, I was attracted by the glitter—" The pulse in her throat was throbbing frenzidly.

He shook his head. He knew what she was saying but the old hurt in his heart was as keen as the thrust of a knife.

"It takes more than words to convince me, Janet."

THEY rode in silence into Globe. In front of the Oriental, Janet Marshall dismounted.

"I would still like to help you, Phil. If you would only tell me what happened, there might be something I could do."

"I'm sorry, Janet, but as I said before, this is no business for a woman."

"Do you think I'm afraid, Phil?"

"I have never doubted your courage, Janet." He tipped his hat, rode down the street. Mr. Jones followed him. He dismounted in front of the Regal Hotel.

The desk clerk raised his eyebrows at the sight of the sawed-off shotgun.

"Will you call Mr. Sarkins for me."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sarkins is not in," the clerk answered.

"He lives here, doesn't he?"

"Yes. But he went out early this morning. A gentleman called for him—"

"Gentleman by the name of Gully?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Will you leave a message?"

"No message."

Mr. Jones was waiting out in front of the hotel.

"Gully has already got Sarkins," Phil Hammar said.

"So?" Mr. Jones pursed his lips into a whistle. "What are we going to do, Phil?"

"Eat breakfast," Phil Hammar answered. "Aren't you hungry, Mr. Jones?"

"I could eat a cow and bawl for the calf," the little man answered.

They ate breakfast at the restaurant under their gambling house, then went upstairs. Mr. Jones dumped the canvas sack on the table in their little office. "Well, that's a relief," the little man said, sighing. "I never expected to see that sack back on our table."

Mr. Jones looked thoughtfully at his partner. "Are we going to open tonight, Phil?" he asked.

"What do you think, Mr. Jones?" Phil Hammar answered.

Mr. Jones shook his head. "She's a problem, Phil. If we had good sense, we'd catch the first stage out of town and we wouldn't stop this side of California."

"Do you want to do that?"

"Did I say I had good sense, Phil?"

PHIL HAMMAR grinned. He picked up the canvas sack, opened it, took out five twenty-dollar gold pieces. He handed the bright coins to his partner. "I guess I haven't got good sense either. Would you mind going to the nearest hardware store and buying us a couple of pistols to replace the guns Gully's men took from us?"

Mr. Jones grimaced but took the money in silence. He went out of the room. Phil Hammar opened the box of cigars lying on the table, took a cigar from it. When he got it burning to his satisfaction, he sat down and eased the back of his chair against the wall in such a position that he could look out the window and watch what went on in the street below and at the same time face the open door. The shotgun he kept across his knees.

He was red-eyed from lack of sleep, he needed a shave, his clothes were grimy, and fatigue was beginning to creep through his muscles. He ignored these discomforts. Three faces kept coming and going through his mind.

The first face was that of Sarkins. The second face belonged to Gully. The third face was that of Janet Marshall.

There should have been a fourth face but is was missing—the face of the man who had financed their coming to Globe.

Quite obviously the man who had brought them to Globe was an enemy of Gully. Equally obviously Gully not only knew what to do about his enemies but was quite capable of doing it.

Phil Hammar felt a little sorry for the man who had brought them here. He was in a spot. Gully had Sarkins. The lawyer would talk. Gully would learn the name of his enemy. Gully would take appropriate action. After that, Gully would again be around to see him and Mr. Jones.

"Mr. Jones is right," Phil Hammar said to himself. "If we had any sense, we'd catch the first stage out of town."

He shook his head. The face of Janet Marshall had come again into his mind. If he left town, he would probably never see Janet again. He tried to decide which was worse, seeing Janet again or never seeing her.

When he saw her he remembered how she had hurt him by eloping with another man. With this in their background, he wondered if he could ever trust her completely again. On the other hand, he wondered if he could endure never seeing her.

He did not know. His enemies he could face but a woman was something he could not begin to understand.

MR. JONES returned with the pistols. Silently they cleaned the oil from them, inspected them minutely. Then they filled the cylinders with cartridges, adjusted the new belts to their waists, filled the cartridge loops with bright new shells.

"If you will lock the front door, we'll wait and see what happens," Phil Hammar said at last. "There is nothing else to do except wait."

Mr. Jones locked the swinging doors, dropped the heavy bar into place, then pulled two easy chairs together and settled himself into them for a nap. Phil Hammar stayed at the window and watched.

The usual life of Globe flowed below his eyes. Freight wagons lumbered slowly along the street. Housewives came and went on shopping expeditions. Horses were tied at the hitching racks that lined the street. He watched until noon. He was looking for Sarkins or Gully. He saw neither. Mr. Jones snored lustily in his two chairs. He sat in one, had his feet propped up in the other. It was an uncomfortable position but Mr. Jones, through long experience could sleep under any conditions. At noon, Phil Hammar awakened him. They went down to the restaurant below, ate, returned. Mr. Jones took his turn watching while Phil Hammar slept.

Late in the afternoon a rap on the door awakened him. He hastily rose from his chairs, unbolted the door. The Indian woman who was Janet Marshall's maid stood there. She handed him a small white enelope. He tore it open.

"I think I'm going to need help, Phil," was written in Janet Marshall's hasty scrawl on the single piece of paper in the envelope. *"My partner has discovered that I financed your gambling house here and I think he is going to cause trouble."*

Janet—Janet Marshall was the person who had financed the opening of their gambling house! The revelation stunned Phil Hammar for a moment. Sarkins had said he could not reveal the name of the *man* who was back of them. The lawyer's use of the word *man* had completely misled Hammar. He had thought in terms of a man. Instead of being a man, their backer was a woman. It was Janet Marshall who had sent Sarkins to them. Presumably she had also sent Barton to clean them out. Why hadn't she come to them and laid her cards on the table? Why hadn't she sent Sarkins to make them an open and above-board proposition?

THESE questions were a clot of cold on Phil Hammar's mind. They would have to be answered but the answers could wait. Only one fact was important now, the fact that Sam Gully knew who had brought Phil Hammar to Globe.

"Where is Mrs. Marshall?"

The Indian woman grunted, nodded toward the Oriental. Then she turned and walked silently down the steps.

"What is it, Phil?"

Mr. Jones had risen and come across the room. Phil Hammar glanced at him but did not see him. He walked swiftly across to their little office, picked up the shotgun. Then he seemed to see Mr. Jones.

"If I don't come back, partner, my share of this gambling house belongs to you."

He started toward the door.

"Hey, wait a minute—" Mr. Jones protested.

"This is my fight, Mr. Jones," Phil Hammar answered. "I got suckered into it and I'll handle it. You stay here."

Ignoring the little man's protests, he walked down the front stairs. Across the street was the Oriental.

VI

THE Oriental was not busy at this time in the late afternoon. Two bartenders were lazily polishing glasses behind the long bar. Three customers had their feet on the brass rail. A Mexican scrub woman was scouring the floor with soapy water and two of the pretty waiter girls who worked in the establishment were having a drink at one of the tables: There was little life in the house at this time of the day.

The little life that was in the Oriental froze at the sight of the shotgun as Phil Hammar came through the swinging doors.

There is nothing romantic about a shotgun. It does not have the sheen of a rapier, the glint of a Bowie knife, the glamour of a pair of dueling pistols. It is not a famous weapon, like the Colt and the Winchester. It is not a dramatic gun. The shotgun has only one point in its favor: at close range, it is unarguable. The man who brings a shotgun with both hammers at the full cock into a situation wins the debate every time. There is no arguing with the weapon.

The three men drinking at the bar saw the shotgun in Phil Hammar's hands. They saw the face of the man behind it. It was a lean, almost haggard face, with hot, smoking eyes. The three men set down their drinks. They did not raise their hands—they had not been instructed to do so—but they kept their hands in plain sight on the bar. The two waiter girls stopped talking. The two bartenders stopped polishing glasses. They turned very slowly and faced the bar and like the drinkers, they kept their hands in plain sight. The only person who moved after Phil Hammar came through the door was the Mexican scrub woman. Down on her knees, she had her back to the front door and did not see him.

He spoke to the nearest bartender.

"Gully?"

"I don't know—" The bartender started to say he did not know where his boss was. Looking again at Phil Hammar's face, he hastily changed his mind. "He's upstairs." He nodded toward the broad stairs ascending at the back and side of the room.

"Take me to him," Phil Hammar said.

The bartender hesitated. He did not want to take this lean and haggard man to see his boss. He knew that Gully wouldn't like to see this visitor. He could also see that the visitor had a shotgun. The twin barrels were centered on his chest and the hammers were back at full cock.

The bartender nodded. He came out from behind the bar and led the way toward the stairs. Phil Hammar stood well back so he could watch the second bartender and the three drinkers at the bar as he moved toward the stairs. Their faces frozen, they gazed with deliberate incuriosity at him.

THE carpet on the stairs deadened their footsteps as they went up. A broad hallway with rooms on both sides led to the right. At the far end of the hallway another set of stairs led to the third floor.

"He's in his office. It's the first door on your right," the bartender said.

"You go first. And don't bother to knock."

The bartender was a most unhappy man. He didn't want to go an inch nearer that door but he also didn't want to say no to a man carrying a shotgun. Hammar made up his mind for him by prodding him in the back with the gun. He moved.

"Wait," Phil Hammar ordered.

Voices had come from behind the door.

"You admit you brought Hammar here?"

This was Gully's voice.

The answer came in Janet Marshall's clear tones. "I admit I hired Sarkins to go to Bisbee and offer Phil Hammar ten thousand dollars to finance the opening of a gambling house here."

There was silence from behind the door. Phil Hammar waited.

"Why did you do it, Janet?" Gully asked. "You knew he would draw business from us. You knew in the long run he would ruin the Oriental and put both of us out on the street broke. Why did you do such a thing?"

Silence again. Phil Hammar couldn't see her but he could feel Janet groping for words to express what she had on her mind.

"There were two reasons, Sam."

"And one of them, I guess, is that you're in love with him!" Sam Gully spoke. His voice was full to overflowing with harsh, blind bitterness. Hearing that bitterness, Phil Hammar for the first time realized that Sam Gully wanted Janet Marshall, wanted her so badly he was willing to do anything to get her.

Phil Hammar held his breath, waiting for her answer.

"Yes, Sam. I've loved him all my life. Do you know what that means, Sam?"

Gully's voice rumbled as he answered. "It means there is going to be one dead gambler around here. Or one dead female. I don't know which. But if I can't have you, I'll be damned if anybody else is going to have you. Yes, I know what it means. It means you've signed Phil Hammar's death warrant or your death warrant."

"Thanks, for the warning, Sam," Janet Marshall said. "But I think you will find either of us are rather hard to kill."

SILENCE again. Through the door Phil Hammar could hear Gully breathing heavily. "I didn't mean to threaten you, Janet," the fat man said at last. "I was out of my head when I said that."

"You probably meant it all right, Sam. You're just sorry you *said* it. Aren't you interested in my second reason for bringing Phil Hammar here, Sam?"

"What was it?" Sam Gully rumbled.

"You killed my husband," Janet Marshall clearly answered.

Beyond the door, Sam Gully was surprised into silence. "But you know I killed him, Janet. Everybody else thinks it was suicide but *you* know the truth and have always known it. You also know why. The man who tries to cheat the second time at cards is not entitled to any consideration. I warned him the first time I caught him. The second time—"

"He was a cheat," Janet Marshall answered. "He was also a liar, a cad, and I suspect, a thief too. Twenty-four

hours after I had married him, I was sorry of the bargain I had made. But I had made my bed; whether I liked it or not, I could lie in it."

"If you disliked him so much, why should you care if I killed him?" Sam Gully questioned. There was wariness in the rumbling voice now.

"Did you ever hear of loyalty, Sam?"

"Yes, yes. But what has loyalty to your dead husband got to do with bringing Hammar here?"

"Why—"

Phil Hammar shoved the bartender to one side, pushed the door open with the barrel of his shotgun.

"Put the gun down, Gully!" Hammar said.

Gully looked hastily at the door. His eyes fastened on the muzzle of the shotgun. It was centered on the bridge of his nose. He quickly let a half-drawn pistol slide back into the holster inside his coat.

Sitting at the end of the table, Janet Marshall also let a gun slide back into its holster. A pistol belt was strapped around her waist.

"Phil!" she gasped.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched her fingers relax around the butt of the pistol, watched her hand come away.

"I still think it's a man's job, Janet," he said.

GULLY was breathing heavily. His high collar had wilted. His chin was low on his chest and he looked like a bull getting ready to charge. The jowls were fat rolls hiding his throat. Spots of gray mottled his cheeks.

"I have no quarrel with you that is worth your life to settle," Phil Hammar said.

Gully brightened a little. He was able to take his eyes off the muzzle of the shotgun. He centered his gaze on Hammar. Flickering lights glinted deep within his eyes.

"The world is big enough for both of us to live in it," Hammar continued.

He meant what he said. He did not want to kill Gully. It was too hard to forget that you had killed a man to take a life if there was any other possible choice.

"Do you agree with me, Janet?" He spoke to the woman sitting tense and white at the end of the desk.

"Y—yes, Phil. Oh, Lord, yes!" The way she spoke the words they were a prayer.

A minute earlier she had been drawing a gun. She hadn't wanted to draw that gun. She had lived long enough among men to know what guns meant.

"The world is big enough for both of us," Phil Hammar repeated.

He meant he *hoped* the world was big enough for both of them. So far as he was concerned, he and Gully could go separate ways and the living would not have to settle with the dead. But was Gully willing? Phil Hammar did not like the wary flickering lights deep within the fat man's eyes.

Then he realized that Gully was no longer looking at him but was watching something behind him.

"Looking behind a man to distract him is an old trick," he said sharply. "It won't work."

"Shoot the son-of-a—" Gully suddenly snarled. "Shoot him down like a dog!"

Something jabbed Phil sharply in the back. It was the muzzle of a gun!

"Drop that shotgun!" a voice rasped in his ear.

Gully's looking behind him hadn't been a trick! There was actually someone behind him. There was a gun in his back!

"Shoot him!" Gully shouted again.

"Drop that shotgun!" the voice be-

hind him repeated. It was harsh and rasping now, commanding, ordering. "If you don't drop it, I'll blow you in two!"

"Go ahead!" Phil Hammar said.

"What?"

"Shoot! But remember I've got your boss covered with this shotgun and I've got both hammers back. If you shoot me, I'll pull the triggers of this gun as I fall."

THERE was tense silence behind him. The muzzle of the pistol was still jabbing him in the back. At any instant the man who held it might pull the trigger. Hammar watched Gully.

"Don't shoot him!" Gully hastily said. He, too, had suddenly realized that a bullet through Phil Hammar's back would not save his own life. Men didn't die instantly. Even with holes in their spines they still lived the fractional part of a second. Phil Hammar would live long enough to pull the triggers of his shotgun. Anybody in the path of the blast from the sawed-off would not live much longer than Hammar. Gully's man, who had come up silently on the soft carpet, could kill Hammar, but Gully would die too.

Gully could see no profit in such a transaction.

"Either shoot or call off your dog," Phil Hammar said. The pistol was still pressing against his back but the pressure was lessening, showing indecision on the part of the man who held the gun.

"What do you want me to do, boss?" the man with the pistol whispered huskily.

"Put the gun down, you damned fool," Gully answered. "Do you want to get me killed?"

The pressure of the gun disappeared from Phil Hammar's back. He heaved a great but silent sigh of relief.

"Let's get out of here, Janet," he said.

She started to rise to her feet.

For a fat man, Gully moved exceedingly fast. One second he was sitting behind the desk. The next second he had thrown himself sideways.

One arm around Janet Marshall's waist, her body protecting him, he grinned over her shoulder.

"Why don't you shoot now?" he taunted.

VII

THE shotgun in Phil Hammar's hands was a useless weapon. Janet Marshall shielded Gully from the twin muzzles. Grinning, Gully looked over her shoulder. The grin vanished from his face as he reached up and back with both hands, grabbed him around the neck and yanked down and out.

Phil Hammar didn't have time to watch. He spun. The man behind him was raising the pistol. With Gully safe, he was free to shoot as quickly as he could pull the trigger. The only catch was, he hadn't known what Gully was going to do. Consequently he wasn't ready. He was slow in raising the gun, slow in pulling the trigger.

The shotgun blasted from one barrel. The man with the pistol looked down at his right hand.

It wasn't there any more. He didn't have a right hand. The blast of slugs from the shotgun had torn it off. Blood was spurting from the big artery in the arm. It was leaping out and falling on the carpet. He stared at it stupidly, raised his arm so he could see it better. The blood spurted on his face.

He grabbed the stub of his arm in his left hand and ran screaming down the stairs.

Phil Hammar turned back into the room. Something flew through the air at him. He had the dazed impression

that a bundle of clothing was leaping at him. Then he realized this bundle was Janet Marshall. Sam Gully had picked her up and had thrown her at him.

He tried to catch her in one arm and to hold the shotgun in the other arm. It was too much. She struck him in the chest, grabbed him around the neck to keep from falling, he lost his balance and they both went over.

The shotgun, accidentally discharged, blew a hole in the ceiling of the room.

Sam Gully dived through the side door and into the adjoining room like all the devils of hell were after him. Once he got into the next room, he stopped, jerked his pistol from its holster. He thrust them uzzle of the pistol around the corner of the door. He had seen Phil Hammar and Janet Marshall fall. He knew where they were.

Protected by the wall, he could shove his own gun around the corner of the door and empty it. He heard Phil Hammar and Janet Marshall trying to get to their feet.

He pointed the pistol in the direction of the sound.

At this close range, he couldn't miss. If he missed Phil Hammar, he would hit Janet Marshall. If he missed her, he would hit Hammar. He had tried desperately to win this cool, imperious woman, and he had failed. He knew he had failed. Failure was the one thing Sam Gully couldn't accept. Failure fanned the fires of his rage. If he couldn't have her, nobody could have her. Nor could she and Phil Hammar have each other. He was, in that moment, a raging maniac, desperate and deadly.

PHIL HAMMAR saw the pistol come around the corner of the door. He and Janet were on their knees in the hall doorway trying to get to their feet. When he saw the pistol, he shoved Janet with all his strength—out into the hall. She hit the carpeted hallway with a thud that rattled her bones, and upended in a flying tangle of skirts that was hard on her dignity but good for her chances of staying alive.

She was safe out there in the hallway, safe for the moment.

Hammar turned in the other direction, toward the doorway where the pistol was in sight. It took far less time for him to act than it takes to tell what happened. He didn't try to rise to his feet. There wasn't time for that.

He dived full length toward the doorway. He was drawing his holstered gun as he moved.

Gully's pistol blasted over his head. The bullet thudded into the floor in front of the hall doorway. A second shot followed the first.

Six inches off the floor, Phil Hammar half slid, half rolled around the corner of the door. Gully was over him. Gully was a dark fat shadow above him.

Gully saw him. Gully jerked the muzzle of his pistol down.

Phil Hamamr shot up. His first bullet vanished in the folds of fat that covered Gully's chin. The second bullet went in lower down. The third one entered lower still.

On Gully's face, when he saw Phil Hammar roll and slide around the corner of the door, a look of surprise appeared. The first bullet froze that look on his face forever. He was still looking surprised when he started to fall. He went down to his knees, then fell forward.

PHIL HAMMAR continued to lie on the floor. The gun was warm in his hands. A little curl of smoke edged out of the muzzle.

Heavy silence gripped the Oriental. All through the building, they had heard the guns let go. Even the mice in

the walls of this building knew enough to keep still when the guns began talking.

Gully twisted a little on the floor, then quit twisting. The look of horrified surprise began to disappear from his face. It went away a little at a time. It never did entirely disappear.

A thud sounded downstairs. A man came up the stairs, taking them three steps at a time. Phil Hammar heard him coming. He twisted around so he could look through the two doors and out into the hallway.

The still warm pistol in his hands covered the door that opened out into the hall. He did not know who that man was who was coming so fast up the stairway but he wanted to be ready.

Rapid but stealthy steps sounded in the hall. The round, worried face of Mr. Jones looked around the corner of the door. He saw his partner.

"Phil!"

Mr. Jones had a gun in each hand. He slipped them back into their holsters, knelt beside Phil Hammar. His scarred face was furrowed with anguish.

"Where'd he get you, Phil? Are you bad hurt?"

Phil Hammar swallowed. His throat was dry. "I'm all right," he said. His voice was a raspy, scratchy whisper. "There's a lady out in the hall—"

"I saw her."

"Go see if she is all right."

Before Mr. Jones could rise, Janet Marshall came unsteadily into the room. Phil Hammar got slowly to his feet. He leaned against the edge of the door.

Janet Marshall passed a hand across her eyes. Looking through the second door, she could just catch a glimpse of a man on the floor. A glimpse was all she wanted.

"Mr. Jones," Phil Hammar said.

"Yes, Phil."

"There's a saloon downstairs. If you would be kind enough to go down and buy a little whisky—"

The little man hurried out of the door.

"Janet."

"Yes, Phil."

"I didn't know you were backing us. Sarkins refused to reveal the identity of his client."

"I know that now, Phil. I didn't know it at first."

"Sarkins sent a card sharp down to break us. Then he came and offered us five thousand dollars—"

SURPRISE showed on her face. "But I gave him ten thousand. And I told him to lay all his cards on the table, to tell you who was financing you and—and the danger of coming here. I wouldn't have asked you to come blindly into a spot like this—"

"Then Sarkins sent Barton on his own! He thought if we were busted, we would be glad to come for five thousand and he could pocket the extra five thousand—"

Mr. Jones bounded into the room. He had a bottle of whiskey in his hands.

It was seemingly distilled out of pure fire but it gave them a little extra strength.

"Shall we go?" Phil Hammar said.

She took his arm. Side by side they went down the broad stairs. There were no customers at the bar and no bartenders behind it. The waiter girls had gone. The Mexican scrub woman had taken air. The guns upstairs had emptied the building.

Furtive onlookers watched them as they emerged, watched them as they crossed the street. No one asked them any questions, no one tried to stop them. They went upstairs.

"Mr. Jones."

"Yes, Phil?"

"Would you run an errand for me?"

"I certainly would."

"Find Sarkins. Tell him he owes you five thousand dollars. I think he will be glad to acknowledge the debt and to pay off."

"I don't know what this is all about," the little man said. "But I'll be glad to run an errand for you." He looked thoughtfully at his partner and at Janet Marshall.

"There's one other thing I'll be glad to do for you, Phil."

"What's that, Mr. Jones."

"Be you best man."

At the look on Phil Hammar's face the little man hastily left the room. But he was grinning to himself as he went out.

Phil Hammar faced this tall, grave woman.

"I overheard you and Gully talking," he said slowly.

"You did, Phil?"

"Yes."

"What do you think?"

He was a little confused but he spoke the words bravely enough. "I think I am a very lucky man."

She smiled. It was the kind of a smile that would wipe years of bitter memories out of a man's heart, that would give purpose and meaning to a man's life.

The End

★ PEDRO LOCO'S SECRET ★

By JEFFRY STEVENS

ON A day in 1890 a great deal of excitement was created in the National Bank of Mexico in Chihuahua City when a poor Mexican shuffled in and tried to make a bargain with one of the bank officials. He emptied the contents of a leather pouch, and the banker's eyes opened wide with astonishment. There on his desk were some flat-cut emeralds without a flaw, a chunk of crude gold, and one of the old-time bars of silver weighing 2000 ounces—twice as much as the regulation bar has weighed since Spain lost Mexico. The banker struck a bargain and was curious. The Mexican took his money and was silent. Within a few months he was back again with more treasure. The banker paid for it, but when the little Mexican left this time, there were two spies following close behind him.

Pedro, the Mexican, must have sensed his movements were being watched, for he didn't come to that bank again. There were other buyers to be found. Obviously Pedro had discovered the whereabouts of a cache of some ancient Indian treasure that had been hidden from the plundering Spaniards more than two centuries before. Pedro grew prosperous enough in time to purchase a large sprawling adobe house which had ample space to hold all his living relatives, near and distant.

Apparently they all depended upon Pedro for support, and he didn't let them down. During the dark of the moon at regular intervals Pedro continued to bring in modest amounts of silver to barter. Greedy eyes followed his movements, and noticed that when he left Chihuahua City, he went northwest to Sacramento. But from that point on his movements remained a mystery. It was suspected that he headed toward the mountain region known as "Victorino". It was there that the famous Conde de Majalca had his mine, enormously rich in silver, many years before.

While men pondered on the source of his wealth, Pedro went quietly about his business bothering no one. Among those who dogged his tracks and tried to wring his secret from him was the notorious bandit, Carlos Avalos. One time he waylaid Pedro in the Sacramento Canyon and there attempted by brute force and torture to make him talk, but through it all Pedro remained silent.

The victim was pinioned against a tree trunk, helpless and unable to move. His torturer drove long spikes into the jaws of the silent man, one on either side of his face, nailing the upper to the lower jaw. He rode off leaving Pedro in this miserable condition, and the man might have died there had not a wood-carrier happened along that way. Although Pedro recovered after weeks of patient care, he carried the deep scars of the experience on his face and in his brain. From that time on he was called Pedro Loco because people thought he acted a little crazy. Still, Pedro went on his secret missions into the hills returning with his pockets heavy with gold, silver, and precious gems.

Once when a very dear friend of his was in desperate need of money, Pedro allowed him to accompany him on his trip. Now, it was thought, Pedro's secret would surely come out into the

open. Felipe described the journey in later years. First the two of them traveled with their mules all the way up the canyon from Sacramento. When they camped for supper, Pedro Loco turned his mule loose, saying that it would go home by itself and the two of them would be able to proceed ahead on foot guiding the other mule ahead of them. They went farther into the mountains and after moving in that direction for about three hours, Pedro Loco decided to blindfold Felipe and lead him the rest of the way. From that point on there was very little Felipe could tell. He remembered walking and crawling, but lost all sense of direction. When the blindfold was finally removed, the two men were in a cave lit by two long slender candles. In the center was a heap of precious stones, of gold, of silver bullion, and of jewelry.

When their pockets had been filled, Pedro replaced the blindfold over Felipe's eyes and led him out of the cave. As they retraced their steps, Felipe thought he might be able to leave a trail for future reference, and he began to systematically fray the edge of his blanket and drop threads along the way. At dawn when they emerged from the canyon and Pedro removed his blindfold, Felipe realized all his planning had been in vain. Pedro's hand held the woolen shreds. The two men parted ways then and there. Every effort Felipe made after that to find the entrance to the cave met with utter failure.

In the fall of 1908, two American mining men who were familiar with the facts and traditions connected with Pedro Loco and his secret treasure, determined to pit their intelligence against that of the wily Mexican. They disguised their purpose by getting permits to prospect for minerals in the mountains thereabouts. A bloodhound was sent for out of the stock employed by the state penitentiary in Texas. A Pima Indian noted for his trailing ability was engaged as a helper.

The party waited for two months until Pedro would decide to make his trip into the mountains once more. On the evening of December 20th, Pedro Loco rode up on his mule, saluted the two Americans in a friendly manner, drank some coffee, and rode on. When night fell, they followed, the bloodhound straining silently on the leash. The trail turned out of the main canyon and up a box canyon cutting in from the north—the route that the blindfolded Felipe was so positive of.

In the pitch blackness of night the men followed the lead of the hound until suddenly the animal whined in fear, and bolted back the way he had come. The men were forced to turn back and find the dog which they had lost in the dark. They found the bloodhound back in camp, and there they impatiently waited for daylight to come. When the first grey light of morning streaked across the heavens, the men set out once more. At the mouth of the box canyon, the bloodhound balked and refused to go on. The Pima Indian proceeded to pick up the trail, but lost it again after a few feet. Pedro's tracks could not be followed.

When the plodding little Mexican died he took his secret with him. Many years have passed since Pedro Loco made his last trailless trip into the mountains, and his treasure has become part of Mexico's legendary past.

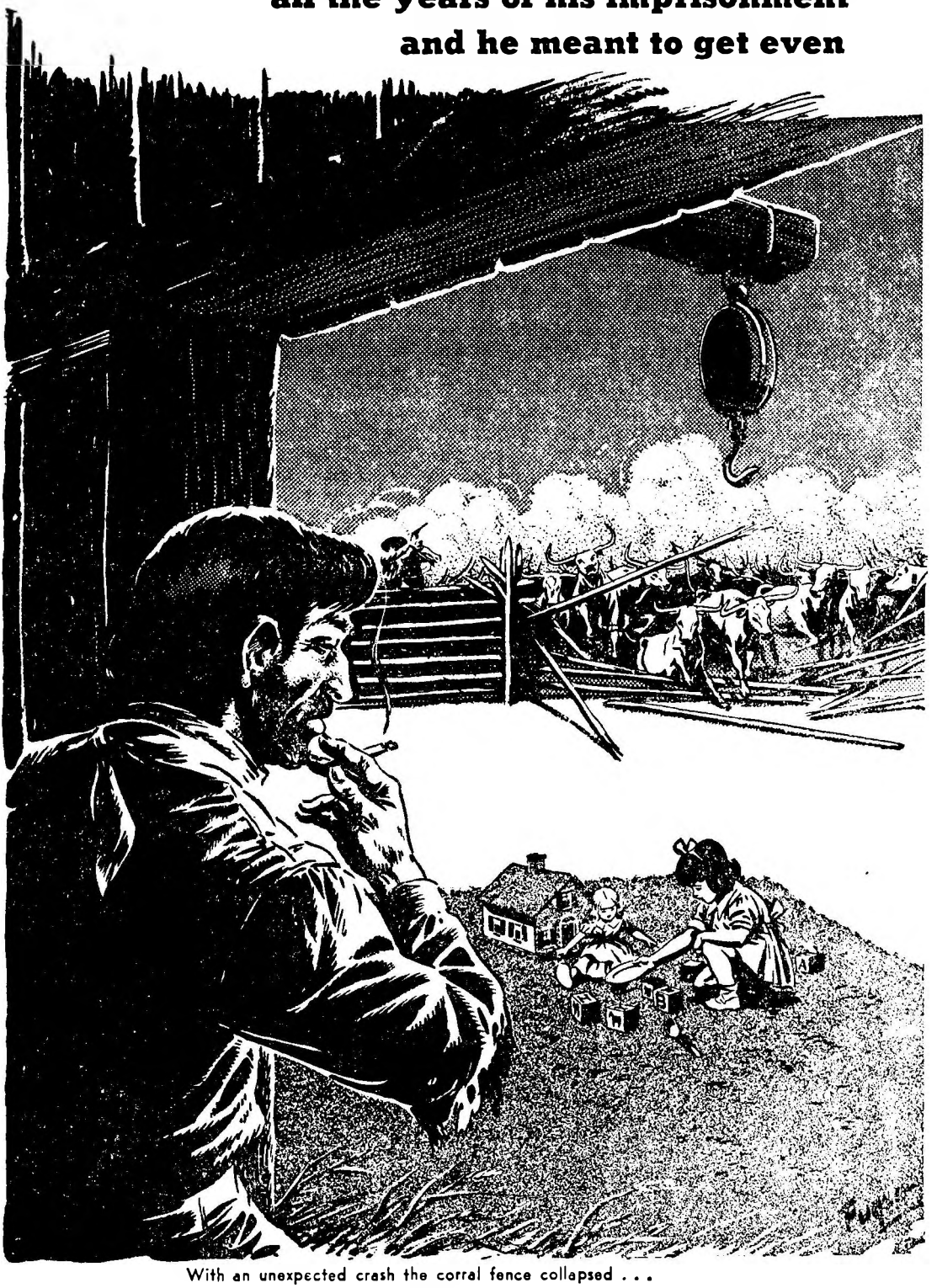
CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By JAMES A. HINES

1. If you were goin' up the trail with a large herd of cattle and wanted to turn the herd left, what would you do?
2. True or False? A good cowpuncher will ask his boss for his pay, rather than to ride the drags of a trail herd.
3. Old-time cowmen will tell you that it is quite an art to water a trail herd of cattle safely. How would you go about this?
4. In cowboy lingo, what is a "rep"?
5. Who was the first leader of the Texas Rangers to attain national prominence?
6. In what two years did the greatest number of cattle go up the Texas Trail?
7. In what year did the cattle drives begin to fall off?
8. What does a cowboy mean when he says, "that's my rope horse"?
9. How many men are there in an average crew with a trail herd?
10. What is the oldest, the largest, and the most celebrated National Park in the U. S.?
11. What year was it that Kansas passed a quarantine law against Texas cattle on account of Texas fever?
12. What ranch, in what year, brought up the three last herds of cattle on the Texas trail?
13. What does the term "pin-wheeling" mean?
14. What is the name of the first practical revolver ever made?
15. Can you name the positions and places that eleven cowboys have with the average trail herd?
16. When you "hog tie" an animal, what do you do?
17. In Little Joe The Wrangler's Sister Nell, an old-time cowboy song, who was Nell lookin' for?
18. How many head of cattle on the average is the best number in a trail herd?
19. In cowboy lingo, what does the term "coasting" mean?
20. Why do many Indian fighters and scouts ride mules rather than horses on scouting trips?

(For Answers See Page 45)

Ralph Burrel had nursed a grudge through all the years of his imprisonment and he meant to get even



With an unexpected crash the corral fence collapsed . . .

RALPH BURREL GETS EVEN

By Stephen Payne

HE HURRIED on the last and final lap of his long trek. But daylight was too near at hand for him to risk entering the bunkhouse —to steal a gun. That was his greatest need, the thing he must have if he were to succeed in carrying out his long-planned vengeance on George Sidlow here at the Flying E ranch.

Ralph Burrel knew this neck of the woods as a schoolboy knows his marbles; he'd availed himself of every short-cut and he'd set his teeth against the pain of blistered feet and aching muscles and empty stomach, forcing himself to keep walking, walking, all of last night. Hell to be thwarted now, but at least the law-hawks hadn't nabbed him—yet.

His sunken, sleep-hungry eyes watched the neat log buildings for two long minutes before he left the security of the willows along Piper Creek. The half lope with which he crossed the open area to reach the big stable resembled the gait of a hunted coyote. But every move he'd made for the past week had been marked by furtiveness. If it hadn't been for the lone sheepherder's camp he'd have died or he'd have turned back and said to the manhunters, "Take me."

Probably the sheepherder had missed the grub he'd taken, and the clothes. The clothes! If he hadn't found a change he'd still be wearing convict garb. The grub had petered out thirty-six hours ago. He had not eaten since, and could not now.

The stable door was open. He fell panting against the ladder leading to the hayloft and had to rest before he started climbing. So weak and dizzy, too. But he heard the jingle of spurs as a cowboy approached the stable, and he heard that cowboy's cheerful whistling. Red Wing.

That had been his song in the old days before the gates of the penitentiary closed behind him. Once he'd been as jovial as the wrangler, and he'd sung Red Wing to Ann Roberts, riding with her in the moonlight.

He flinched and silently cursed George Sidlow, who had spoiled the romance and wrecked his life. The old thirst for revenge, fostered and nurtured for five long, terrible years now gave him strength to climb the ladder. The cheerful wrangler didn't see him, didn't hear him.

He crawled through and over hay to reach the front wall of the loft, facing the open yard. Here was the hay hole through which hay was forked into the mow; here too were many cracks between the logs, from which daubing had fallen away. He burrowed into the sweet-smelling hay, relaxed. Wonderful to get the weight off his feet. They were on fire.

Today he'd rest; tonight after dark

he'd get the needed gun. George Sidlow must see him and recognize him, else his revenge would be imperfect. Once the job was done it didn't matter what happened to him. He reckoned—he wasn't very sure of this—he'd welcome being shot himself rather than to go back to that hell on earth, the pen.

HOOFS drummed in the yard. The wrangler was on his way to bring in the Flying E cavvy. Umph! If it hadn't been for Sidlow he, too, would have a wrangler dashing out at dawn to corral the B 4 cavvy. He, too, would own a fine ranch, lots of cattle, have good buildings—and he'd have won Ann Roberts.

Six years ago he'd had a two-bit spread, and a start in cattle, but big George Sidlow, who was also courting Ann had him topped, and for that reason he seemed to have the inside track with Ann.

So Ralph Burrel had set out to "show 'em." He'd build up a herd, and do it fast, by any means at his command. Mavericking to his mind was no crime; the sin lay in getting caught at it. Other cowmen all over the west did the same thing he started doing, and got away with it. Burrel did too—for a short time; then bad luck or Fate decreed that of all men George Sidlow should be the one to catch him.

Burrel had sacrificed his outfit fighting the case, and had lost. They had slapped him in the rock-house for that one mistake. Injustice or what he made himself believe was injustice rankled and festered. Brooding and vindictive, he lived for the day when he'd be free and could even scores with the man he hated.

Came at last the day when he got over the wall, got clear away. Now he was here on the Flying E, and tonight—He must have dozed, for when he again became aware of his surroundings slanting rays of sunlight poured through the hay hole and sounds crashed on his ears. He moved, and all his muscles, his feet, and even his empty stomach, screamed. He closed his lips on a groan, holding it in while he put his eyes to a crack.

North from the stable across the open yard lay the ranch house. A woman and a child of three or thereabouts were outside its open door. Burrel squinted and then stared, while his tired heart went thump, thump. She was a pretty woman, sturdy, plainly dressed, a little bit plump—plumper then he had remembered Ann Roberts as being, and more mature.

Her attention was on the child, a chubby and very happy little girl. Fondly Ann picked up the child and kissed her, smiling. Then, apparently she gave her consent, and the child, carrying some trivial playthings, toddled out across the yard, stopped about midway of it, settled down on the hard-packed earth and arranged her playthings—blocks and a doll and a toy shovel.

BURREL gave the child his frowning attention; then he lifted his bleak eyes again to the woman who had been Ann Roberts and must now be Ann Sidlow, the mother of a little girl. His fingers scratched the grime and whisker stubble on his hollow cheeks, and fury, temporarily lulled by his nap, again rose in him. Sildow had everything in the world a man could want—even a pink-cheeked, happy little girl chattering away to herself as she played alone.

"And just look at me!" croaked Burrel under his breath.

The woman was gazing to her right, toward the corrals of the Flying E. Turning his eyes that way, Burrel saw it was from these corrals the sounds

which had roused him were coming. They were now filled with cattle, a mixed herd of wild, horned cattle. There was a smell of wood smoke on the air, a smell of singed hair as well. George Sidlow and his cowboys were running the cattle through a chute and branding them.

The chute squeaked and groaned. and the corrals squealed as cattle crowded in the chute and other cattle milled and crowded the fences.

Burrel's cold eyes warmed slightly. This was the sort of thing with which he had been familiar, the sort of thing he'd like to do once again if—Hell, it was no use his thinking along that line. Suddenly he recognized Sidlow himself. The man hadn't changed much. There he was, doing the branding with the assurance of the successful cowman. Burrel resented that, resented even more that the fellow was so big and lean and hard-muscled. Good-looking, too, in a rugged masculine way, and simply bursting with vitality.

He had the world by the tail with a downhill pull, and as for Ralph Burrel, whose life that man had wrecked—Abruptly Burrel stopped thinking of his own long-suffering and misery, he forgot his aching body, blistered feet, his empty stomach, forgot even his revenge. For with a crack like a gunshot two corral posts gave way. A splintering crash as down tumbled a whole panel of fence, and over that fallen fence surged half a hundred horned cattle. Leaping instantly to a dead run, they came sweeping across the yard. And squarely in their path, not yet aware of her danger, was a small, downy-haired and rosy-cheeked girl.

BURREL shot a glance at the house. Ann had gone inside. She didn't yet know what was happening. His eyes dilated now not with hate or rage, but with stark fear, darted one glance to the corrals. No help would be forthcoming from the punchers or Sidlow. They were behind the stampeding cattle, their horses not even near at hand.

All of this Burrel noticed in a twinkling, and then, his body was through the hay hole. He caught the log sill with his hands, checked himself for an instant as he dropped. His feet hit ground and pain ripped through him. Worse still, sudden dizziness overpowered him. Too long he'd been a hunted creature without rest or sleep or food. Blackness was closing around him when he heard a woman's cry of dread and fright. Ann was calling. That rallied him. The dizziness passed. He was on his feet, running, running, running.

At his left a wall of horns and eyes and ripping hoofs tornadoed nearer, nearer. His gaze was on the child. She had seen the cattle, but she stood as if hypnotized or paralyzed. "God, let me get there in time!"

He'd reached the little girl. He skidded as he swooped her up in his arms. Cattle flashed past ahead of him, and he whirled to go back the way he had come. Cattle hemmed him in. They seemed to be all horns and heads and wide nostrils and glaring eyes. One passed so close its breath scorched him and its body tipped him off balance, and then the full force of the horned cyclone struck him.

He was down. Was the child under his body? She was. She was! This was his last conscious thought. He'd had another just before that instant when he went down. A clarifying, wonderful thought. All these years when he planned vengeance he'd been wrong. Sidlow was right. And that Ann had chosen Sidlow was as it should be. Right.

Hoofs ripped his ragged clothes;

hoofs tore his flesh; hoofs rained blows on his head and ground his body against the earth. But he didn't feel them.

The stampede passed. Dust began to settle, and a white-faced, shaking woman was first to reach the object in the yard. A big man, even whiter and shakier, joined her, lifted that battered object, and their little daughter, half smothered, but unharmed, sat up and looked at her parents very gravely before she began to cry.

Ann dropped to her knees beside the child. Sidlow said hoarsely, "The man's dead. I was warned several days ago Burrel had escaped and might come here."

He heard the breath catch in Ann's throat, and then he heard her fervent whisper, "Thank God he did come."

★ RACE WITH DEATH ★

By GARY LEE HORTON

ONE of the favorite yarns "old timers" of the western plains like to tell and retell is that of Circle Runner, the Arapaho hunter. In the days when buffalo were plentiful in America, the Arapaho Indians had strict rules for their tribesmen about who should hunt and when. They did not sanction individual hunting; when meat was needed all the brothers in the tribe went after it together.

Now Circle Runner had a white horse, very fleet of foot. But his tribe was dead set against having him run buffalo on it. A white horse was considered bad medicine in a buffalo hunt. The chiefs wouldn't let Circle Runner hunt with the other hunters unless he would leave his own mount behind and ride a horse of another color.

Circle Runner, stubborn as he was, just would not give in. He needed meat, and he was determined to ride his fast horse in search of it. Very late one summer night, he told his squaw to slip out of camp with him. They sneaked quietly away with pack horses carrying all their worldly possessions. Circle Runner was armed with an old brass-mounted pistol and a horn full of powder.

When they had traveled far from camp and sighted a herd of buffalo on the prairie, Circle Runner told his squaw to hide herself and the pack horses in the brush near a crick. He crossed the crick, trained his sights on a fat bull and banged away. The animal fell heavily to the ground. The others hung around sniffing at the blood on their fallen comrade. That gave Circle Runner time to reload, and he tried a second shot. The herd began to move. The excited Indian poured some powder into his pistol, stuck the muzzle into his mouth, and spit a ball into the barrel. Then he smacked the butt on his saddle horn to sock it down tight. By that time the white horse was alongside the bull. Before he could shoot, the bull whirled on him.

Then the race began. The white horse managed to be just quick enough to stay clear of the horns of the raging bull. Circle Runner, managing to twist around in the saddle for a moment, got a good look at the animal and almost jumped out of his red skin. The bull had no eyes on either side of his head. Instead he had just *one* eye which was placed right in the center of his forehead! And when he turned that single eye on Circle Runner, the Indian saw death in it. He was so frightened, he nearly fainted.

The horse must have seen the strange creature, too, for he whirled round and galloped as fast as his hooves could be made to go. The bull was right behind him, so close that his horns were brushed by the horse's flying tail.

This was one of the closest races ever run. No matter where or how the clever horse ducked and dodged, the lumbering beast was right behind him. And every time Circle Runner looked back he saw that big eye on him. Early in the chase he had given up trying to shoot—and now he rode on praying only that his life might be spared.

The horse headed straight for the river. It began to slow down, showing signs of tiring, but it crossed the river easily—almost as if it had been a puddle. The bull was still fast on his heels when Circle Runner caught sight of a group of his own tribesmen on horseback, and he certainly appeared guilty at that moment. He would never be able to convince them that he wasn't hunting for he had brought the buffalo right along with him! Circle Runner expected them to beat him and kill his horse, but he was more frightened of the bull than of the Arapaho so he headed straight for them.

Luckily, they came to his aid with their bows and arrows. Literally dozens and dozens of arrows were stuck in the ferocious animal's hide before he stopped, lurched, and buckled over groaning. But that big eye was still open and watching. The Indians were mystified by the beast; they would not go near it. An old man spoke up, and they got some paint, some red cloth, and some white shells, edged up and dropped them beside that dead bull. Then they all mounted their horses and made off toward camp as fast as they could go.

★ NO THANKS! NO WAR! ★

THOUGH history is not often written at the drop of a hat, sometimes the most trivial of incidents determine the course of a nation's future. So one man's love for luxury prevented a war in a strange story of the West.

In 1844, the United States and Britain hovered at the brink of war over the Oregon country, comprising today the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and part of Wyoming. On one side, the Hudson's Bay Company was appealing to Britain for ships and marines to withstand the invasion of the Far West by a tide of American pioneers, and on the other side, American hotheads had just elected President Polk on the slogan: "Fifty-four-forty or fight!"

At this point, English diplomats decided to send a marine Captain to the Pacific to explore the territory. He was told that if he found Oregon valuable, his country would fight for it with all its resources. Captain Gordon and his marines arrived at Puget Sound harbor boasting loudly that they would "drive every last Yankee back over the mountains." In spite of this, the inhabitants did their utmost to make the pompous Gordon at home. Hunters were sent out for game. Fishermen brought choice salmon and trout for his table. But nothing pleased him. He complained about everything.

Half-breed servants didn't attend his wants with the skill of English butlers. The rough cots provided by the frontiersmen made him long for his bed at home. He was disgusted when he was told that deer were still "hunted" instead of run with dogs, as in the gentlemen's games in England. But the last straw came when he asked for a bath—and was courteously led to the shore of the Pacific and invited to walk in to the water, as was the usual custom.

Captain Gordon lost no time in regaining his ship and setting sail for England leaving behind him the land "fit only for savages." Once home, he reported that he "wouldn't give the bleakest hill of Scotland for all of Oregon's mountains in a heap." His word was accepted without question.

Thus, the word of one man prevented a war and led to the peaceful settlement of the boundary line at the 49th parallel.—*June Lurie.*

ANSWERS TO CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

1. To turn a herd of cattle left, the cowboy on the left point will drop back and the cowboy on the right point will go ahead and start pushing the cattle over, and the cowboys behind can tell from their movements what they are aiming to do.
2. True. A good cowpuncher will ask the boss for his time rather then ride the drags of a trail herd. Only the poorest hands ride the drags. There you catch all the dust from the thousands of hoofs of the entire herd.
3. You bring the herd up and spread them out along the bank, with the lead cattle headed downstream. The leads get there first and drink clear water, and as the drags keep coming in they get clear water, too, because they are upstream.
4. The word rep in cowboy lingo is short for representative. During the roundup every big ranch outfit sends out one of their cowboys to the neighboring roundups to gather any stray cattle that bear their brand. Any cowboy likes to be a rep. He has his own string of horses, and is considered a notch higher then an ordinary cowboy.
5. John C. Hays. He become a Captain of the Texas Rangers about 1839.
6. 1883 and 1884 were said by old-time cowmen to be the two greatest years on the Texas trail; that more cattle passed over the trail in them two years then they did in any other.
7. In the winter of 1884-'85 the cattle drives began to fall off.
8. He means that is his special horse for roping.
9. There are eleven cowboys in an average crew with a trail herd.
10. The Yellowstone National Park.
11. In the winter of 1884-'85 the Kansas quarantine law was passed which forbid Texas cattle to enter their state.
12. In 1895, the X I T ranch in the Texas Panhandle brought up the last three herds of cattle on the Texas trail.
13. Pin-wheeling is a forward, upward plunge of a bucking broncho.
14. The Walker model. It was designed by Captain Samuel H. Walker of the Texas Rangers, and came into use about the year 1838.
15. In the average trail herd there are evelen men. There are two cowboys in the lead. They are called the point men, and when the herd is strung out, there are two cowboys behind the point men on the swing, then two cowboys on the flank, and two drag drivers in the rear. With the cook and horse wrangler and boss, that makes eleven.
16. That is, you tie the animal down by three feet.
17. Nell was looking for Little Joe The Wrangler, her brother, who had run away from home.
18. About 2,000 head.
19. Coasting is when a cowboy is trying to quiet a bronc by holding its head and not spurring.
20. It is claimed that mules are less likely to stampede and could outlast most Indian ponies in endurance.

THE END

It seemed that to the fire of his gun was added another . . .

The FRIENDLY GUNNER

By Dev Klapp

Out of the night came gunfire from a mysterious stranger, but he could not be found when victory was won

GUNS blinked orange in the night. The big roan screamed and floundered as bullets splatted against its heaving side. Ted Hardy somersaulted over the dying horse's head into ankle-deep mud.

Scrambling for cover, the dispatch rider clutched a strong leather pouch tightly to his side. The leather shoulderstrap was ripped in two, the ends whipping like snakes through the wet grass. He looked around jerkily, trying to pierce the damp, weed scented darkness.

Feeling about on the mucky ground for his black felt hat, Hardy realized that it must be lying on the road beside his saddle-gun and the dead roan.

Ted raked muddy black hair back from his eyes with an equally muddy hand and considered his position hastily. A frown of worry bunched his rather prominent brows. He was in a tough spot and knew it. His lone six-gun wouldn't be much help when the bushwhackers came over to check up on their marksmanship. He could make a good guess who had knocked the roan from under him. It had to be Bo Davis.

The dispatch pouch was a problem. If Bo Davis and his gun slicks got their hooks on it, Tom Brady's new bank in Deadwood would have to close its doors. He didn't want that. Tom Brady used to punch cows with him on the old Hondo Circle Ranch. Now Tom owned it, and the papers were all in this pouch. Tom had shot his wad to buy the ranch, and had put his bank stock up as security. If he, Ted Hardy, lost the pouch to Bo Davis, Tom would go on the rocks, and Bo Davis would run the country with gun-slicks and wealth.

He'd have to think this thing out quick, for he could hear Bo Davis and his bushwackers batting around out there in the dark somewhere now.

Crawling stealthily, Ted felt his way along the oozy ground. If he could give this gang the slip, it wasn't likely that he'd run into any more trouble between here and town. He could deliver the papers then and maybe make the next stop before chow-time.

A flicker of light ahead flattened the creeping rider as effectively as a gun butt in the small of the back. A pine torch flared with sudden sputtering, flooding the rain-soaked ground with a weird orange glow.

Ted hugged the ground and looked about. He saw that he was sprawled in a shallow ditch between the road and a small grave-yard. Four shadowy, crouched figures were moving toward him, dodging among the wooden grave markers.

The boy licked his lips, hardly tasting the gritty mud that he spat out on the wet grass. There was no escape. He dared not fire his gun, for he knew it would attract their concentrated fire. The gun-slicks would be upon him before the torch burnt itself out.

Desperately Ted looked around for some place to hid the leather pouch. "Damn!" he exclaimed wryly, "This is a hell of a place to kick off! All they gotta do is dig a grave and dump me in!"

Weakness passed over him then. He straightened with a jerk. Dizziness made him realize that he'd been hit when the gun-slicks had knocked him from his horse. He hadn't noticed it before.

Warm blood-smell made his belly flop. Gingerly he felt of the jagged hole in his left arm that was dripping his strength away. Convulsively he tightened a muddy hand above the wound to stop the bleeding.

A WISP of damp fog rose from the grass and mud. Its eccentric behavior puzzled the groggy, light-headed rider. The vapor assumed a vague man-shape that hovered over the moist earth. Now this strange figure gained the solidity of flesh and bone. Hardy blinked. He must be out of his head. Now his attackers were five, and they seemed to be sprouting up like ghosts!

Ted could see the new man plainly. He saw pale, hollow cheeks, blonde, waving hair that fell to the man's shoulder and a dashing yellow moustache that added a dandified touch to the tall figure.

There was an expression on the grim, pale face that was hard to define. It didn't look like a killer's expression

but Hardy knew the gunner had him dead to rights. He tried to swing his gun around but knew he'd be too late.

The man stood spraddle-legged three paces to his left. Two Colts jumped and barked in the man's hands.

Suddenly it dawned upon the dispatch rider's dulled senses that the gunner was shooting at the outlaws—*helping him!* Greatly heartened, the boy added the roar of his six-gun to that of the stranger's. Those guns weren't ghostly, for sure!

Men were running now among the grave-markers. Ted could hear the thump of heavy boots, the jingle of metal spurs against rock. Cries of hurt and confusion came to him. The stranger's angry guns were playing havoc with Bo Davis and his gunhands.

Chunks of mud and grass dropped from the helping gunner's yellow hair and hollow cheeks as his body vibrated to the kick of the heavy six-guns in his hands. A smell of raw wet earth hung over the ditch. The smell of death.

Maybe he had a chance now—thanks to this mysterious helper. The gang out there must be small. They wouldn't let daylight catch them out in the open. The man looked like someone he knew —Ted shook his dizzy head and raked through a groggy mind trying to place the stranger, then gave up the effort with a sigh.

He'd have to thank this grim man, get his name for the boss. He'd saved his life coming when he did.

The boy's head wobbled. He sank lower in the ditch. His head felt light. He tried to find the stranger, but he wasn't visible. No one was visible.

The torch went out. Heavy darkness rolled back into place, blotting out everything but a pencil-thin thread of horizon glow that promised dawn sometime soon. There was no sound and Ted couldn't move.

The darkness set thoughts milling through Ted's head. Around and around they went in a small, tight circle. He seemed to be a little button again, riding with his dream heroes; Buffalo Bill, Jesse James, and all the others. Suddenly, they all merged in his fog-filled mind into one giant figure that slowly shaped up into the stranger who had saved his life tonight. . . .

"HERE'S that rider they been expectin' three hours ago, Pete!"

The voice grated Ted back to consciousness. He squirmed and waved a shaky hand.

One man began clumsily bandaging his arm, while another held a match, that paled to nothing in the light of the coming day. They tended silently to their work for the necessary time.

"Lucky we found this kid when we did," Pete announced, rolling a smoke with blooded fingers. "He's been out a long time!"

Ted tried to speak. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down several times before he could bring out any words. "Where's my dispatch case?" he quavered anxiously when he found his voice.

"Don't get uneasy, feller," the second man said. He wrapped Ted's fingers reassuringly about the leather pouch.

The boy was satisfied for a moment. He turned his head then, and looked from one side to the other. He frowned anxiously. "Where's the gunner? He saved my life. I want to thank him." Then as an afterthought he asked, "How many did he lay out?"

The eyes of the three men met over the prone body of the little pony expressman. One smiled knowingly at the other and soothed, "Take it easy, kid. We'll have you up in Doc Jones'

office pronto. Won't we, Shorty?"

The man named Shorty grinned. "Any hombre that guns down five hold-ups with one six-gun shore rates a fancy fixin'-up!"

They lifted the boy. As they scrambled up the ditch bank with their load, toward a waiting buckboard, the rider bunched his brows irritably. "Five? There was only four of 'em."

"Then one of 'em had two bodies," chuckled Pete. "They's five corpses out there!"

A shaft of light from the early morning sun slid past Ted's muddy body and reached, momentarily, through the mist, to fall softly on a moss-covered wooden slab beyond the ditch, bringing out in relief what was left of time-weathered letters:

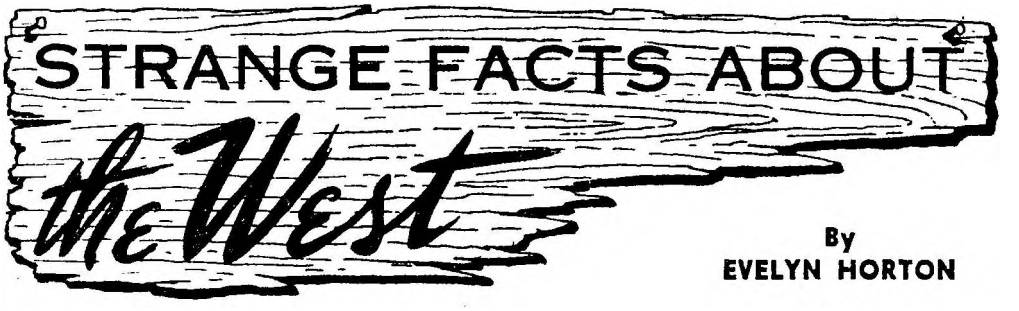
Wild Bill, (J. B.) Hickok.

"Do me a favor?" asked Hardy faintly.

"Sure, kid," said Shorty. "What'll you have?"

"Take a look at them five corpses, and tell me if one of 'em has a yellow moustache?"

"Huh?" said Shorty blankly. "Why—I can answer that right now. I done looked 'em over already, and you can take it from me, each one of them is as black as sin . . . not a blonde in the bunch."



By
EVELYN HORTON

FORT KEOGH in Montana was in an uproar on a certain morning in 1890. Three cavalry troops took the field to wait for the two young Indians who were to meet them there. To these cavalrymen it was a strange business, one that they couldn't quite understand, but were forced to carry through to the bitter end. The two boys would be outnumbered more than one hundred to one by the men from the fort, and yet they intended to ride into battle against them. It was an unusual gesture, a form of execution the Indians had chosen for themselves to repay the white man for the life they had taken.

The events leading up to that fatal morning began a few weeks before when *Chief in Head* and *Humped Over,* two lads from the Cheyenne tribe, had been out in search of meat. The buffalo had vanished, killed by the long-range rifles of white hunters. When neither deer, antelope, nor elk were available, the Indians were prone to kill the white man's "spotted buffalo" or domesticated cattle. The two boys were in search of meat to gratify the wish of their chief. When returning with their ponies loaded with the fruits of the hunt, they saw a figure riding toward them. It turned out to be a white man, Hugh Boyle, a homesteader who happened to be looking for two stray cows. When he saw the fresh meat slung over their saddles, he charged the two Cheyennes with killing one of the stray animals.

Humped Over had been to the mission school and understood English. Chief in Head knew only that the white man was angry and threatening in his manner. Before Humped Over could explain or stop his companion, Chief in Head shot Boyle from his horse. It seemed as though all the pent-up fury he had experienced while watching his people being systematically starved out by the greedy settlers, had come to a head in that moment and directed the fatal bullet.

When Boyle failed to return home, the whites in the neighborhood became suspicious and nervous even though they knew the cavalry was camped nearby. This was not the first man to be killed that season. An investigation was promptly begun in an effort to trace the killer. Searching through the hills a party of soldiers found a place where the earth had been disturbed. Later the body of Boyle was recovered. Clods of dirt had been kicked and thrown over it in an effort to hide it, but the identity of the killers still remained hidden until one of the searchers found a tiny tin jingle of the type Indians were known to wear on their moccasins.

This confirmed the suspicions of the posse.

The Cheyennes were warned to surrender the murderer or face open warfare with the troops in the vicinity. The Indians did not want war. In accordance with their time-honored custom they offered ponies and other property to the relatives of the deceased and to the Indian agent of the region. But soon they were made to understand that no such settlement was possible and were told flatly that the young men must come in and stand trial or the whole tribe would be put under arrest and marched off to Fort Keogh. Although the soldiers had no intention of carrying out this last ridiculous threat, it did not strike the Cheyennes as being illogical, and they believed it to be a possibility.

Negotiations continued. The two youths were known to be in or around the camp, but it was certain that an attempt to capture them by surprise would result in bloodshed, and this neither side desired. The parrying and bargaining continued back and forth between the two alien groups until one day the father of Humped Over approached the cavalry encampment for a talk.

He pleaded that his son did not kill the white man, that he had in fact tried to prevent the killing, which was quite true. The old Indian was informed that both boys must submit to trial by white man's law, and if one were found to be innocent, that one would escape punishment. But the boy found guilty would be hung. The Indians knew about hanging, and they regarded it a barbarous practice. Yet the white man seemed set on this form of revenge.

The father of Humped Over bowed his head and left the camp bearing his sad message. Soon the sounds of lamentations could be heard coming from the Indian village. Before long the grief stricken father returned with the news that the young men would not come for trial but had an alternate plan. At noon of the next day they promised to be at a certain point on the hills where the soldiers could come and get them. The two boys insisted that they would fight to the death, and should the soldiers refuse to fight, they would retaliate by riding into the agency and attacking the white population.

The request was a strange one, but the men who understood Indian ways were not surprised at the plan. The two young warriors would face death together rather than put themselves before the white man's court of justice. Hanging was an execution befitting a dog, not a brave.

In the camp that night there was a great thumping of drums and the shouts of the dancers could be heard above them. The two boys were to die gloriously, mounted on their best horses, rigged in the richest costumes friends and relatives could supply. This dressing for death was no unusual act. When the Indian had a feeling that he was to die in battle, his preparation for the event did not consist merely in the customary stripping and painting. He dressed in his most elaborate finery as if for some gala occasion.

At the appointed time the cavalry took the field. Some of the officers were still on the lookout for treachery so a small detachment was left to protect the agency. The main body of men advanced toward the chosen battleground with one of the Cheyenne chiefs pointing out the best place to await the attack. To these cavalrymen it was a strange business. They felt as though they were setting the stage for the two real heroes of the day. They were anxious to finish the job quickly.

The surrounding hills formed a huge amphitheater filled with Cheyennes who had come to watch the proceedings. Suddenly there was a heavy hushed silence as the two braves rode forth from the shadows of a few pines near the summit of a hill. Their horses paced forward slowly, circling and weaving back and forth displaying all the splendor of their trappings. The defiant chanting of the two young warriors echoed in that stillness as they sang their death song. Then putting their horses at full speed, they charged straight into the waiting cavalry.

The gunfire cracked; white puffs of smoke were sent into the electrified air and the horse of Humped Over went down leaving its rider stranded on foot. Chief in Head came on alone, his trailing war bonnet of eagle and ermine flashed white in the midday sun. Again and again be rode past the skirmish line miraculously escaping the flying bullets, until, as if weary of delay, he wheeled and dashed straight for the soldiers. Before he reached them, Chief in Head fell dead.

The death of Humped Over, the innocent lad who need not have died at all, came some time later. On foot he was able to evade the gunfire by some spectacular jumping from side to side—a well-known Indian trick learned from the deer. He hid behind rocks and in the hollows, taking shots at the galloping cavalry at every opportunity. He kept up the gallant struggle until the sun began to set in the west. The soldiers, noticing that no more shots were coming from his direction, approached him cautiously. There he lay in a pile of yellow autumn leaves, the vivid color of his costume, painted face, and red blood creating a weird and terrible picture.

Chief in Head paid for his crime; and Humped Over, too brave to claim exemption from the crime his guilty companion had committed, met death also. But they did not die in vain. More than one young trooper learned to respect, if he could not fully understand, a type of Indian heroism that is closely allied with what he knew as patriotism. The Cheyennes benefited later by the deed of Humped Over and Chief in Head. It was the killing of Boyle and another white man earlier in the season, coupled with the encounter with the cavalary which compelled official notice of the very real grievance of these Indians. Shortly afterward, the government bought out the claims of the white trespassers and restored to the Northern Cheyennes the hunting lands which were rightfully theirs.

MONTANA

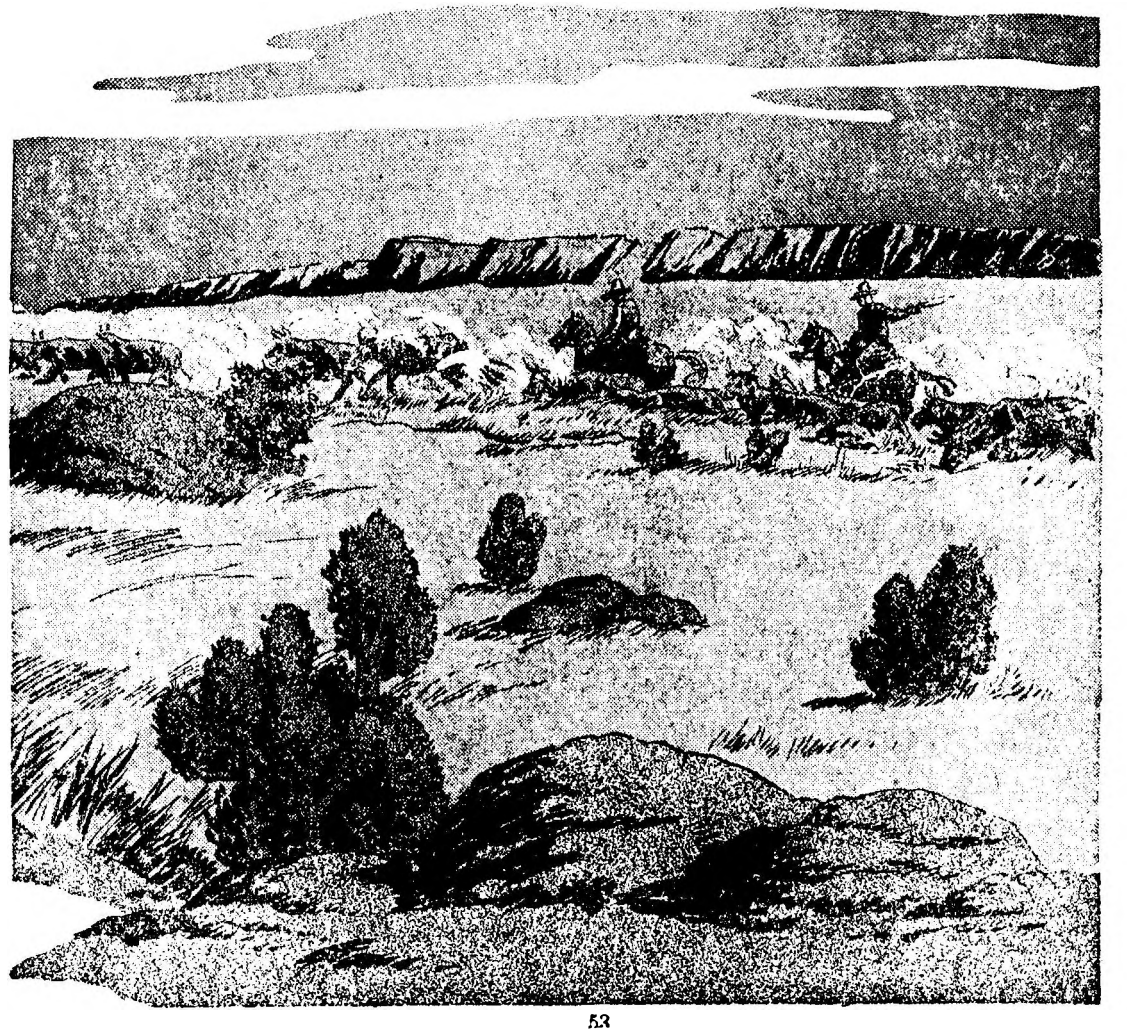
By William Hopson

Something was in the wind in Montana, and it wasn't anything good. It was the sort of thing that meant bloodshed

. . . raised himself cautiously up the river bank and aimed an arrow at a shadowy horseman tending herd

SPRING came early to the northern cow country that year, the warm chinooks melting the snow and warming the ground for the new grass, eager with fresh life, to lay its green blanket over the land. South of the Montana-Wyoming line, deep in the bad country, men were on the move and strange whispers among all the male inhabitants of unnamed settlements portended that something was in the wind. Names cropped up . . . of men like Black Jack Caswell and Dutch Saunders, horse thieves from the hole-in-the-wall; Ro Rundert, the Road Runner, who dressed like a gentleman and who, men said was on King Ramson's payroll to keep the man's hard bitten riders in line; the "King" himself, who lived in baronial headquarters just four miles north of Buckner's Crossing, where the fight had taken place.

Men would talk about that fight for a long time because there had never been anything equal to it in the northern country. Five of Black Jack Caswell's wolf pack down on the floor in front of Buckner's own fireplace, while a wispy man known only as Montana stood



rocking against the bar, shot almost to pieces, his fire flecked eyes on one of the lot who moved.

Out of that fight the name had grown until it became a legend, for men wanted to know what the rider from up north was doing down there within a few miles of King Ramson's place, on what amounted to forbidden ground. The answer was not known, for it had been lost in the yell of old Ben Carson who, carrying the victor out wrapped in a wool blanket, had squalled at a blanched face back of the bar: "Tell King Ramson that a gent named Montana has just left his calling cards, Buckner, you damned squawman!"

They had disappeared into the chill of the fall evening, and it wasn't until three weeks later that Ben put in appearance at his trading post in Smeller-A-Mile far to the south. Some said that he had stayed with the outlaw until he died and then buried him. Black Jack Caswell, foaming oaths and threats, tried to find out . . . over the winter. . . .

Whispers. Garbled names. Speculation.

Nobody knew. Nobody could say for sure. Only one thing was certain, spring came to the high country and men were on the move and big things were in the air. King Ramson was back.

At about that time that real warmness came to the land below and men began their summer activities early there was still snow upon old Horse Thief Peak's bare shoulders, one hundred and twenty miles north and west of Ben Carson's trading post in Smeller-A-Mile. Up there the wind still whistled eerily among the crags at night but down in the valley, less than a half mile below, the warm sun had got in its work. Greenness blanketed the walls and floor and the scrub pine sheltered buckbrush budding into summer plumage.

In the small cabin a fire was going with a faint wisp of smoke trailing toward the sky. The smoke suddenly turned into clouds of steam and the man inside straightened with the empty water pail in hand. He placed the pail in its accustomed place by the door, made sure all ashes were wet, and then stepped outside. He was about twenty-five, of medium build, with shoulders that, though not too wide, were spare and wiry. It was difficult to tell much about his features, for the first glance would have revealed hair so long it fell almost to his shoulders, half reminiscent of the 'breed trappers of nearly thirty years before.

His beard, a reddish tinted blond, was shorter because he had made some effort at trimming it by cutting off the fast growing tip with a sharpened knife. There had been little time for getting his warbag with the razor in it. Ben Carson had had to get him out of Buckner's in a hurry, before the frozen squawman could recover his wits; for Buckner's place, a station of an abandoned stage line, where liquor, food and meals could be purchased, was a hangout for Black Jack and many others of the outlaw breed. And Buckner was a friend of them all. And some said that he was more than a friend.

No, Montana thought, going toward the shed out back, Ben Carson hadn't had the time.

HE LIFTED the bars of the tiny pole corral, noting with satisfaction that the soreness was all gone from his arms. A month of cutting wood and clearing out buckbrush had brought back his strength, plus Ben Carson's surgery.

Thought of Ben made him a little uneasy. The trader too was friend of

many a man who might be on the offside of the law; but, unlike Buckner, who openly consorted with the worst of the wolf packs, Carson played fair with them all and was trusted. Even Black Jack and the Dutchman might hesitate before seeking vengeance on the man who had carried Montana out of Buckner's place that night. Still. . . .

Montana saddled the bay and led him toward the front of the cabin. He was in pretty good shape from the winter, the wild hay stored out back having helped fill in on what oats there had been in Carson's pack. Montana left him at the door, went inside, and came out again carrying slicker roll and heavy repeater. The roll contained not too much: the last of his flour and dried fruit and plenty of Elk jerky. Weeks had passed since he had tasted such luxuries as canned milk, sugar, coffee, and bacon. But like the razor, that too would be taken care of once he arrived in Smeller-A-Mile.

He tied on the roll and slipped the gun into its scabbard beneath the left saddle skirt. It was a long gun and a heavy one for saddle work; a 40-65 repeater that threw a 260-grain bullet exploded by sixty-five grains of black powder. That powder gave it a pretty flat trajectory up to two hundred yards, but Montana had indulged in much practice with the weapon, reloading his own shells, and at distances much greater than three hundred yards he could do things not in the rule book.

He swung up and rode over into the scrub, pulling up for a moment at a mound of dirt. Old Jorgensen had owned the cabin and old Jorgensen was the man Ben had brought him to that night, to have him looked after until he had recovered from the wounds received in Buckner's. But the long bearded old man had been sick, nor had Jorgensen gotten well. He had died, leaving a scrawled paper that deeded his small cabin and pitifully few belongings to one Brand Edmonds Thornton.

Montana left the valley, riding through the cut on the south end, and began a gradual descent into the lower country. He set his course slightly east, the instinct of the dim trails taking him in a bee line for Smeller-A-Mile, miles away. All that day he rode at a leisurely pace, letting the winter shaggy bay takes its time. Occasionally he found his thoughts flitting to the man who now called himself King Ramson and how he had been within four miles of a long awaited settling of accounts with him until that meeting with the men of Black Jack's outfit in Buckner's. He had known the job that must be done, and that once it *was* done his life wouldn't be safe. That was why Ben Carson, on the pretext of making one of his trading trips, had met him at Buckner's by appointment; met him with a pack mule loaded with supplies.

It was strange how much he owed Ben Carson. Ben had packed him out of the place, and Ben's supplies had kept him and old Jorgensen through the winter until the old man, alone and feeble, had died.

MONTANA camped that night, the instinct of the dim trails causing him to make his bed some distance from the fire over which he had prepared his supper. But nothing disturbed his sleep until the noisy scolding of birds told him it was time to get up. All that day he worked his way in and out of ravines and gullies, keeping always off the timber line and ridge tops. For this was bad country now; this was Caswell country. The back country, they called it. Once or twice he spotted riders and a few grazing horses, and on the afternoon of the fourth day he pulled up al-

most under an overhanging rimrock and saw before him Smeller-A-Mile.

It was not a town, just another settlement. Ben Carson had, many years before, built his trading post there and prospered; and where men prosper other men will follow. It was only a matter of time until a saloon came into being forty yards away and this was followed by shacks set at whatever particular spot that took their owner's fancy. When the first bedraggled woman, following a roving husband, put in appearance in the "town" Carson got the few citizenry together and said they were growing up and ought to have a name. Such names as Broken Bottle, Pistol Shot, Rimrock, Red Feather, and sundry others rapidly were discarded and the proceedings were going from bad to worse until a disgusted local man about town, suspected of being a horse thief himself, waved a bottle and yelled, "Let's call it Smeller-A-Mile after them hides you got packed out back of yore store, for you can shore smell this town a mile before you git here. . . ."

They had, by unanimous choice, called the town Smeller-A-Mile while a disgusted Ben Carson, his civic pride forever deflated, threw up both hands and bought drinks for the crowd.

Montana let his eyes play over the town. The hitch rails at both the trading post and the log saloon across from it were empty, for it was now late in the afternoon. He saw a man come out of a cabin, pail in hand, and go to the town pump, but that was all.

Montana gigged the bay into movement and rode boldly in.

He swung down in front of the post, tossed reins over the horizontal rail, ducked under and crossed the porch. The interior lay before his sun-brightened eyes, low and sprawled, with goods stacked all over the place. It was from these goods that Ben Carson selected, each spring, enough stock for the pack strings of his three traders. And when the weather broke the men went out, carrying sugar, bacon, knives, cartridges, even saddles and harness if they had been ordered, and many other things needed by ranchers and homesteaders in out of the way places. They brought back anything the buyers had to offer; hides and furs, and sometimes gold. There were whispers that some of this gold had been taken from express boxes of the train that by-passed Smeller-A-Mile up on the flats a quarter of a mile away, but such stories worried Ben Carson little.

HE SOLD for cash or barter only, played square with every man, made few close friends, and he prospered. If he liked a man—as he liked the bearded rider now entering his place—Ben would go the limit for him. He had gone the limit for Brand Thornton that night last fall, in meeting him at Buckner's Crossing with enough supplies for a getaway after the settling of affairs with "King" Ramson. And when the fight had taken place, Ben had not hesitated. He had known, as did Brand Thornton, the possible consequences that might follow his helping the wounded man to safety and sanctuary high up in old Jorgensen's hidden valley. And now, as Thornton saw him sitting back in the rear, propped against his huge iron safe in a corner, some of the tension that unconsciously had been plaguing his thoughts was relaxed.

He moved back in the semi-gloom, for it was late afternoon. The big spur rowels made little jangling sounds on the heavy floor, intermingled with the swish of batwing chaps and the rub of two lead studded cartridge belts.

Carson looked up, peering over the

top of gold rimmed specs that rested far down on his red beak of a nose. The paper he had been reading slowly slid to the floor and he rose, staring.

"Good Lord, son," he got out slowly. "You're a month overdue. I thought you were dead."

"Not yet," Thornton answered, gripping his hand. "I was afraid *you* might be."

Ben's grip was like iron, for despite his sixty years he was a vigorous, active man and the big frame that looked fattish was deceivingly solid. He stepped back and grinned.

"There *has* been a bit of a ruckus," he admitted. "Black Jack paid me a visit. Plumb riled up. Rode right into town with Dutch Saunders and about six of their cut throats. He plumb had the red up until I stuck a sawed-off in his belly and told him to get going. Wanted to know where you were. Said this country was too small to hold him and that lone wolf gun fighter Montana that King Ramson had hired to clean 'em all out."

He turned abruptly and bent over a bull hide waste basket, rumaging around among the papers. He brought up a brown quart bottle and pulled the cork with his teeth, wiping the neck on his sleeve and extending the half empty object. Thornton drank deeply, returned the bottle, and Ben took a long, satisfied pull.

"SO THAT'S what they think, eh?" Brand Thornton said slowly. "They think I was on my way to Ramson's to hire out or already was hired. This means open war between Ramson and those two, Ben. I heard about it up north. They were saying that though the King might buy stolen stock from every horse thief and rustler in the Hole-in-the-wall country and ship them under his own brand, he wouldn't buy a single head from Black Jack Caswell and that woman murdering Dutchman."

"That's what *some* say," Ben Carson said. "Others are saying other things."

"Such as?"

"Some figure it's all a bluff. There's been talk that they're really thick as thieves, particularly since last fall right after the fight when the King went east. He's sold his spread, Brand. To some millionaire from back east. They're due out here any day now. Fellow named Forrest. He's going to restock the place from six hundred head already on its way up here from Texas. But never mind all that. Get over there on that barrel while I get my shears and comb and razor. You look like a grizzly. I owe you a razor. Never had a chance to go back to Buckner's and pick up your warbag from that mean-eyed squawman. How's old Jorg?"

Thorton told him about the old man dying. Carson shook his head. "Too bad," he said. "He was a fine old gent. A little queer but he knew what he wanted up there; enough grass for a few head in summer, nobody to bother him, and his place so well hidden and high up nobody ever found it. He was shrewd, old Jorg was."

"He deeded me the place," Thornton said, seating himself on the up turned barrel. The whiskey had warmed his insides and set up a pleasant glow. He felt much better. "It'll be a nice place to hide out, if I ever need it again."

Carson had come over with an apron which he sometimes wore while cutting meat. This he flung over Thornton's shaggy head and pulled snug at the neck. Behind the younger man his eyes took on a peculiar light.

"And you might be needing it again, eh, son?" he asked.

Thornton nodded. The shears began

to speak and long rolls of hair slid down the apron to the floor.

"Still going back to get Ramson?"

Again a nod.

"You never told me last fall why you wanted to kill him, son."

"I never told you," agreed the bearded man softly. "I'll tell you now. Ben, the man known as King Ramson is really a man named Jim Thornton. He's my father."

CHAPTER II

THE shears paused in midair. Carson held them there for what might have been seconds, before they finally took up their work again.

"So," he said, and it was more of a sigh. "That's a bad thing for a man to want to do, son."

"I know, Ben. But sometimes a man can do rotten things and blot out blood ties. He killed my mother. Oh, not directly, but it would have been better; for she went through hell until pain finally put her into peace. She married him right after the Civil War, not knowing he was a killing looter and deserter. I was born the following year. She followed him for awhile, but within a couple of years he deserted her and went west, leaving us in Kansas City. I was too young to know anything about him, but it's strange how a man can grow to hate a name. I hated him until I went west to Montana and started punching cows. I hated him until I had to kill a man and slip out to small, out of the way ranches and keep my name hidden under one they tagged on me—Montana. I—"

"It's tagged on you now, all right, son," came the grim voice of the trader. "Since that fight you've been a legend. They're saying you're faster than Ro Rundert . . . that even the King has met his master in that lone wolf from up north."

"It doesn't matter," the man known as Montana said. "I'm hitting south into Arizona Territory around Tucson when I finish. Down there I can get a new start under my own name. But not before I settle accounts with the man who was my father. We never heard of him again—not for years—and as long as she was alive I had to hold up hunting for him. But I kept my ears open and finally ran into a cattle buyer who had seen him in Cheyenne—fellow who knew my mother in Kansas City. There couldn't be any doubt about it. He was Jim Thornton, all right, only now he called himself King Ramson."

It got silent in the room after that, except for the snip of the shears. Carson cut the hair to two inches on top, brought out a bottle of castor oil and slicked it down a bit, and trimmed some more. He cut the beard and finally a face emerged. It was a surprisingly young face and yet it was old. The chin was cleft, almost horn like in its jutting, and that made the face not handsome. The eyes had seen too much, looking back into the past and seeing men like Black Jack's five down on the floor . . . they had remembered too much, conjuring up a picture of what a man who now called himself King Ramson might look like.

Strange, Brand Thornton thought, that a man could thrive on burning hatred.

Don't do it, Brand, she had whispered just two days before she died. *For my sake; don't do it. He's rich and powerful now. They say he's even married. He may have a family. For my sake . . . please, Brand, don't even think of it.*

The eyes went back to the cheap funeral parlor in Kansas City . . . back, always back.

THORNTON got up. He went over, surveyed himself in a mirror, and Ben Carson, uncorking the bottle, took another drink.

"You'll want some clothes. Them's pretty ragged, Brand."

"Clothes. The best you've got, Ben. I'll take the train out tonight and flag stop it. I'm selling you that bay. He's soft and shaggy but there's none better. He's worth a hundred—"

"You'll get two hundred and I'll not lose any money," Ben Carson interrupted. "There's always some rider coming through who wants a good hoss in a hurry and has the money to pay—say, how'd you come in anyhow?"

Thornton turned on him, surprised. "Why, I just rode in. No reason why not. I've never been in here by daylight before."

Carson went over to a window on the north side of the building. He peered out, slantwise across the street. "Brand, come here," he said in a low voice.

Thornton went over and looked through, following Ben's pointing finger. Two horses stood at the saloon's rail where there had been no horses before. The saddles looked differently rigged, and long tipped leather *tapideras* drooped gracefully from the stirrups. The leather looked scuffed and scarred even at that distance, as though from much contact with rock and brush.

"All winter long it's been going on like that," Ben Carson said, turning. "Strangers slipping in. They'd stay for a few days or a week and loaf in the saloon. But they allus managed to come in here and buy a few cartridges or tobacco and look around. Oh, they weren't fooling me in the least. Black Jack never found out what I did with you that night, damn his black, thieving soul, but he figgered you'd show up some day. But these two—they're different. Look more like Texans or something."

"When did they come in?"

"Three, four days ago. One said as how he was an old friend of Joe Barrant, one of my traders who left last week. Knew him down in Arizona or New Mexico or some such place. Well, I happened to know that Joe is strictly a northern man who's never been south. Hates the place."

Carson turned from the window, holding out the bottle once more. But Thornton's system was unused to liquor and he shook his head. Ben drank long again and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"I dreaded to have you show up, son," he admitted. "I knew they were here and I didn't dare try getting up that way to warn you. But the night you killed those five owlhoots in Buckner's place you became a marked man. I'll never forget that night until my dying day. Five of them huddled around the front door and fireplace and you braced back ag'in the bar with four big bullets in your carcass. If you hadn't been close up to that bar the shock of them big slugs woulda knocked you clean through the window. You remember Buckner? He was comin' in the door with an armful of wood for his Assininbone squaw to git supper. He's a narrow, mean-eyed cuss and there's some says he knows more about King Ramson and Caswell's gang than they do themselves. I think he'd have finished up the job if I hadn't been there."

"Probably," Thornton said. "What time is the train due?"

"About ten tonight, if it's on time. You can flag her down."

BRAND THORNTON spent almost an hour in Ben Carson's store. When he was through he stood viewing himself in the small hand mirror on the

wall, while Ben, with obvious pride, held a candle. The shave and haircut had done wonders, but where Carson had got the black alpaca coat, wool pants, and the shirt and boots, he would never imagine. Not when they fit like these did. Thornton placed his riding clothes and other meager belongings into a new warbag that had a handle. All except the guns. The coat now hid them completely except for the bulge of the cartridge belts at the hips, and for this, Thornton was glad. He could slip out of town and nobody would be the wiser.

Doubts had begun to assail him. The burning hatred he felt for the now respected and feared "King" Ramson flamed as strongly as before, but he now knew that the legend of the fight had carried far and wide through the back trails down into the rough country and that once the decision was made, there could be no turning back.

He made the decision and went out to get his saddle. The horse Ben would keep and make a profit from it. Carson came out with him, and both looked across the street.

"The horses are gone," Carson said.

His voice held a queer note. It was dry; and Thornton knew that for once in his life the trader was worried. Well, Thornton thought, inwardly cursing himself, it was foolish to ride in like this.

It had been foolish. Black Jack might have held off killing the trader because there was some doubt that the man he sought was still alive; but now. . . .

"I shouldn't have come, Ben," Thornton said. "I was a fool to do it. I should have waited until tonight."

"We're seeing shadows."

"I shouldn't have come. Ben, get back inside."

"Maybe—"

"Get back inside," Thornton repeated in a low voice.

Yes, the two horses were gone, and he found himself seeing, crazily, the men on the floor of Buckner's place intermingled with the face of another man . . . the picture he had conjectured of what King Ramson might look like. It's either the liquor or animal instinct, he told himself, moving toward the bay. Aloud, low voiced, he repeated:

"Get back inside, Ben."

It came. The roar of a Winchester. He caught the movement down there back of a cabin two hundred yards away in the falling dusk and he imagined, in split seconds, a voice inside of him was saying, *it's crazy, they never saw you before, and yet they're down there two hundred yards away. They were afraid to come into the store. They were afraid to wait across the street, because of a name Montana . . . the same who was at Buckner's Crossing.* . . .

He fell, dropping flat and rolling over. Over and over toward the porch. It caused the bay to pin wheel crazily and somewhere he caught sight of Ben Carson leaping toward it. How he got the gun he never quite knew. But when the bay leaped, stung by a passing slug, the man on the ground thumbed twelve shots. It was long pistol distance, but not too long for the 40-65 repeater that Ben Carson had jerked from its boot before the bay got stung. It began to crash, adding its heavier tone to the hoarser booming of the Colts. Then both men were running across the porch and into the store. Carson slammed the front door and dropped a bar into place as the pain stung bay, snorting and sidling, wheeled crazily out toward the corral in back.

"Just let 'em try it now, damn 'em!" grunted the trader. "I got plenty of shells back there and grub galore."

"I shouldn't have come," Brand Thornton said once more. "What are you going to do now, Ben?"

"Close up shop and take a little trading trip tonight, after I see you off on the train. Wouldn't be surprised if I don't run into you up Ramson's way. I allus figgered I'd like to go back and get yore warbag from that damned whiskey selling Buckner."

THE town didn't come alive. Not a man appeared in the open space surrounded by cabins that was recognized as Smeller-A-Mile's one street. Only the distant, muffled slam of doors as men stayed inside. Blinds went down and the town went dead.

This kind of thing had happened before, happened often. It was a private affair, something to stay out of.

"Men from down south," Montana said, moving toward the back of the store. He rammed out six empty shells from first one gun and then the other and reached up toward a shelf lined with box after box of cartridges. He broke open a box and took time to fill the empty loops in his belts. The men were probably gone by now. They hardly would be foolish enough to lay siege to the heavy walled store where two men could hold out indefinitely.

"I don't see anything," Carson called from the front, his face slantwise against a window. "The town looks clear. Bring me some 40-65's. You'll find 'em over in back of that bar lead and box of primers.

Montana swung shut the cylinder of the Colt and found the cartridges and went toward the front. Carson reloaded, shoving three of the ugly snouted shells into the magazine.

"They were Black Jack's men, all right," he grunted. "One of 'em might have hightailed it back into the back country for help, but I doubt it. Not unless that horse thief and the Dutchman happen to be somewhere close by. And I don't think so. They'll be up in the back country around Ramson's section, stealing horses from the ranchers and collecting for spring shipment."

"Did you ever believe those stories about Ramson buying stolen stock at water cheap prices and selling them under his own brand?"

Carson said, still peering out the window, "He's your father, you know?"

"Do you believe it?" Montana repeated, almost harshly.

Carson turned. "Anytime a man can ship enough stock every year to have his own pens built by the railroad and a shipping point named for him, he can sell stolen stock," was his caustic answer.

It was getting dark inside now. Over across the street, lights were coming on in the saloon, but no customers were apparent. Montana went to the back, substituted a pair of moccasins for boots, and slipped out into the darkness. He crept along the back wall of the sprawling storehouse, the odor of stacked hides strong. The outlines of a horse took shape by the corral and he froze until his night accustomed eyes finally told him it was the bullet stung bay. He moved out, caught the animal, used one hand to jerk the cinch loose, and let the saddle slide off.

The corral gate creaked as he opened it, removed the bridle, and let the animal in to mingle with several others. It went on to the trough and Montana moved away. He circled the town, came to where the shots had been fired, but no sign of the men was evident.

"Texans," he said. "Texans or some place down south. Probably a couple of law dodgers up here working with Caswell and the Dutchman."

HE finished a circle of the town, peering into the back window of the saloon. The barkeep sat at one end of the bar, reading a paper, and obviously in very plain sight.

"Friend," Montana said, "who are they?"

The barkeep tried to appear startled. He didn't do a very good job of it. "Who?" he asked.

"Did you ever see me before?"

"Nope."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Nope, and I don't care a whoop," said the barkeep, returning his attention to the newspaper.

"I'm a friend of Ben Carson's."

"Ben's got a lot of friends," said the dispenser of liquids. "And will you please go the hell and gone away from here so's my six customers will come in and buy their nightly thirty cents worth of liquor? I'm a hard working man, I am. I got bills to pay. My stomach bothers me and so do my corns."

"Who were they?"

"I don't know for sure," he said. "Heard one of them mentioned as McBain."

"How long have they been here?"

"About three days, mebbe four."

"Where did they come from?"

"I don't know. I just heard McBain say something about a herd coming north for some dude named Forrest, who bought out King Ramson's spread. Don't know whether they were with it or not. Don't know anything. Don't know why they tried to salivate you out there in the street. And now will you go, mister? I heard about that fight in Buckner's last fall. I ain't got no friends, I—"

He turned, and found himself talking to an empty window. The face back of it, a pale, dead face the bartender would never forget, had disappeared. The bartender shivered a little and reached for his favorite bottle beneath the counter. He took a big one and felt better. He took a second one and felt still better. He went to the back door and looked out into the night whence the attack had come.

"So that's what you and them others been sneaking around here for, hey?" he muttered. "Lookin' for the man who killed four of Black Joe's coyotes and shot up the fifth. Well, I hope you finds him, blast you!" and shook his fist into the darkness.

He went back to the bottle, took a third, and then winced at the pain in his stomach. A mouse streaked past his chair and disappeared between two whiskey cases and the man with the pain in his stomach glared balefully. "And that goes for you too," he said angrily.

HE got up, closed the back window and door, and doused the lights. Picking up a sawed-off shotgun from beneath the bar, he made his way through the darkness across the street and knocked on the front door of Ben Carson's trading post.

"Hey, Ben, psssst!" he said to the door.

There was no answer and the man from the saloon tried again. He was a short tempered individual and his temper was getting shorter. He tried again.

"Hey, Ben. Psssst! Pssst!"

A voice at his back said, "For cripe's sake, Pete, stop standing out here and going 'psssst' and come on around to the back. Thought for a minute that you was one of our visitors. You shouldn't ought to be walking in the night like this. It's not safe."

"The hell it ain't," Pete said, in mock amazement, lining his own shotgun at Carson as he spun and gazing

down the barrel of a big Winchester. "And put that fool lead sprayer down before you hurts somebody," he finished angrily. "Hell of a note, say I! I buys yore punk bacon, eats yore wormy prunes, pays good money for the pants you sells, and smells yore hides in my sleep, and all I gets for it is to have you walkin' around a corner with a cannon and stickin' the fool thing in my face like as I'm some ordinary cow thief looking around for—"

"Shut up," Ben Carson said, lowering the 40-65. "They might still be around."

Pete followed him around the corner of the gallery toward the back.

"Hell of a note," he complained to the broad back in front of him. "Man ain't got no privacy a-tall anymore. People stickin' their fool heads in a feller's window. Woulda told him that McBain needed a bath. Knew it the first time the fool come into my place. Smelled worse'n yore hides. But he don't want one until yesterday. I say it ain't Saturday. He says the hell it ain't but he'll taken one anyhow. Stubborn cuss, he was. Mean and all that. Took his bath. Got madder'n a hornet when I went in with a kettle of hot water and asks him if he wants some more. 'That was damn good shootin',' I says. 'The hell it was, and why don't you mind yore own business?' he says, covering up the blue scars on his arms and shoulders. 'Never saw such a modest cuss,' I says. 'And it was still damn good shootin'. Three of 'em in the shoulder and right arm. That'd be a forty-five at close range. Musta knocked you down flat.' You'da thought he might appreciate a gent having such sharp eyes, but not McBain. I knew it. No good cuss. Knew it the first time he come in. 'And I'm going to knock *you* flat if you don't get the hell outa here!' he bellers. So I goes out with the water. The hell with him. He can freeze, say I. Then I remembers that fight last fall. Montana got four of them. One didn't kick off. He just gets shot all to pieces. Then this spring two gents come in here looking around. Don't talk much. Only one of 'em has blue scars —— —— —— —— blankety-blank!"

HE swore, bumping squarely into Carson's wheeling figure. "Why in the—"

Carson's face had taken on a queer look, visible even in the darkness. He stared at the cursing Pete, holding shotgun in one hand and his pained nose in the other.

"So that's it?" Ben Carson whispered. "I thought there was something familiar about him but I couldn't place it. McBain, you said? No wonder he tried to drill Montana on sight. I kinda *thought* there was something familiar about him. Figgered I was imagining—"

"So that's it?" mimicked Pete angrily, tears from the pain in his nose watering his eyes. "So you stops and I busts my smeller against the back of yore fool head! Never saw such a jackass in all my life. Why in the blazes don't you watch where you're goin'?" he blazed.

They had rounded the corner and come to the back door. Carson opened it and, followed by the still indignant barkeep, entered. From a stove over in one corner, Montana looked up. He placed the warmed-up dinner stew on the table, took biscuits from the oven, and nodded.

"Lordy, but I'm hungry. First square meal I've had in a month," he smiled.

Carson set down the Winchester and nodded toward Pete, who eyed the food. "This is Pete, from across the

street," he said.

"I've met Pete," Montana replied. What's he doing over here?"

"I'm going to run this store until he gits back," Pete put in, indignation at his bashed nose still smouldering. "Them two coyotes were Black Jack's men, all right. Tell him about the scars, Ben."

"Scars?" queried Montana.

Ben Carson drew up chairs and got an extra plate. They sat down, after Carson made a final trip to the bull hide waste basket.

"One of those men was named McBain, as you already probably know," the trader said, helping himself to the stew. "Funny I didn't recognize him before. But do you remember the night last fall at Buckner's when the last of them went down? A kind of square shouldered, sandy-haired man who lay there kicking? Well, it was McBain. I kept thinking there was something familiar about him but couldn't place him. Then Pete here said he took a bath in the back room. Had some fresh scars on his carcass. It was him, all right."

Montana chewed thoughtfully. He drank from his coffee cup and placed it back on the table. "But these men were from down south. .Their saddles weren't northern rigged. I'm positive, Ben. How do you account for that?"

Ben Carson shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, Brand, but there can't seem to be much doubt about it. And Pete's hunch was right. I'd better pull out of here for awhile. He can run the store."

"I'll get the day barkeep to look out after my place," Pete said. "And if Black Jack sends any more of his coyotes back, I'll—I'll—well, I'll lock the front door and tell 'em to go to hell," he finished, spearing at a boiled potato.

"Coming along with me?" the younger man asked.

Carson shook his head. "I know every trail in this country. God knows I ought to. I traded through here before I built my place and hired traders. No, Brand, I'll go in by horse and hit north for the rough country and lay low for awhile until this blows over. I might run into you up north around Buckner's. I've got a couple of accounts to settle personal with that mean-eyed squaw man anyhow."

CHAPTER IV

MANY miles away from the little settlement almost under the bluff, where three men sat locked behind heavy log walls, a bell-stacked two-wheeler engine groaned jerkily around a sharp turn in the mountainous country, creeping along at a fifteen mile clip, its three cars swaying. For the roadbed had been a hastily laid one, pioneered through country where road agent holdups had forced the abandonment of its only stage line. In one of those stations the man Buckner now lived with his young Assininbone squaw, but the railroad took a far different route. It came in from the west, skirting the edge of the bad country, and creaking slowly onward for distant connections with trains heading for the Gold Coast.

In the second car back the passengers were few. But up near the front of the coach two very pretty girls sat with two men. One of these men was obviously a man of affluence. He was of medium build, slender, and dressed in a dark business suit that could have come from only a high class tailoring establishment. He was about sixty or younger, with a short, neatly trimmed mustache that was grey shot. He sat facing the two girls, and from the looks

he bestowed upon the one with honey-colored hair and blue eyes it was obvious that she was his daughter.

His name was Holland Forrest, buyer of King Ramson's big ranch. Her name was Helen.

His eyes caught hers with lazy, fatherly pride and he grinned. "Tired, kitten?"

She shook her head, stifling a pretty yawn. Everything about her bespoke the woman of education and culture and wealth. She was about twenty and every movement of her slim body and toss of her head said that she was an aristocrat, a trifle spoiled perhaps, and used to having her own way.

"Frankly, dad, I'm bored," she said, yawning again with a hand over her mouth. "All I've heard you and Belle and Mr. Ramson talk about is this wonderful west and its big ranches and scads of cowboys and outlaws. It's been a good twelve hours since we boarded this train and there hasn't been a single hold up or murder yet."

The woman Belle, about twenty-three, let go a peal of laughter. She too was tall and not quite so pretty, but indelibly upon her was branded the outdoor western woman. She glanced with mischievous eyes at the second man, sitting beside Helen's father.

"I'm a little disappointed in you, Ro," she said, and there was irony in her tones.

"Why?" he grunted.

Belle Ramson, daughter of King Ramson, grinned at him. Malice crept into it. She looked over his big frame, the fancy clothes he wore, the hair that, too long, was swept back over his ears under the big white hat. This was no Ro Rundert, right hand man to King Ramson, and whispers went through the bad country that he was slated to become the King's son-in-law.

"Why?" she asked mockingly. "Because dad sent you four hundred miles to meet us and ride in, just to be sure that nothing happens. And nothing does happen. You aren't even packing a gun. What's the matter—afraid of making a bad impression on the new mistress of the ranch?"

His darkly handsome face broke into a half scowl. "I see that a few months' visit back east hasn't changed you, Belle," he growled.

"He's a regular bear, Ro is, Helen," Belle Ramson went on maliciously. "You wouldn't think, now would you, that this is the great Ro Rundert who's reported to have killed a number of men."

HELEN FORREST'S eyes widened with renewed interest, but Rundert, his lips thinning in exasperation, refused to rise to the bait.

"Yes, darling," Belle went on, "you'll hear a lot of whispers about Ro when we get into the junction and start home with the herd. He's got quite a reputation as a bad man with a gun. Almost as bad as Black Jack Caswell or even Montana."

She was deliberately needling the man and Holland Forrest saw it.

"Montana?" he asked. "I remember the King saying something about him back east a few weeks ago before he came on home. Something of a mystery, I believe. Nobody knows who he is."

"Buckner—that's a squawman who has a small place four miles south from the ranch—saw him once, the night he fought it out with some of Black Jack's men," Belle said. "He killed four of them and wounded the fifth. Dad said Buckner told him he'd never seen anything like it. And of course, Helen, Ro is very jealous."

"Belle, will you s h u t up?" half snapped Ro Rundert; and to Helen Forrest: "You mustn't pay any atten-

tion to her, Helen. She's only trying to hoo-raw me. Of course we've got some tough case characters down in this country. You're bound to have. But all the men down here don't pack two guns and there isn't an outlaw back of every tree. Nor a rustler either."

Forrest gave off a short, half amused laugh.

"Well, I certainly hope not, Ro. I paid a pretty good pile of money for the six hundred head down south. By the way, you're sure they're waiting for us at the junction?"

Rundert nodded, apparently glad to change the subject. "I telegraphed in. The boys have been holding them there for three days now. They could have driven on the forty miles to the ranch. But you wanted to set in on a cattle drive and it's all set. We've got one of the old stages from the line there for you to ride in, in case you get sore from straddling a horse."

Helen Forrest seemed to take this as a remark directed for her benefit. She tossed her head spiritedly, unaware that, half hidden in his eyes, fire had flamed back of Ro Rundert's half lidded glance.

"For your information, Mr. Rundert," she said, "we had horses on our estate. Jumpers included. I'll do very well, thank you."

CONVERSATION lapsed. Rundert got up presently and went up into the smoker. Forrest soon followed and found him in a poker game with three other men. They settled down to cards and time passed. Presently the players became aware that the train was slowing down. The coach jerked and brake shoes screeched against the wheels. The conductor came through, lantern on his arm, steadying himself against the jerk.

"What's up, conductor?" Rundert asked.

"Flag stop up ahead. Place called Smeller-A-Mile. Probably some tin horn gambler or cow puncher or horse trader."

The train stopped and the conductor got off. Footsteps sounded without and boots clanked against metal. The door opened and a man came in. Holland Forrest looked up to see a slender man in his twenties in a black alpaca coat that revealed beneath it the bulge of cartridge belts. He carried a saddle over one shoulder and another large bag. Rundert's eyes too had seen the bulge of the guns. They flicked up from his cards, flicked back again. The game went on. Montana went down the swaying aisle as the train got under way, passing into the coach where the two girls sat. He saw their quick look but paid no heed, taking a seat across the aisle and two seats back. It was going to be cold during the night and he wanted close to the stove in one end of the car.

He settled down in his seat, aware that once or twice the younger of the two women had looked his way with increasing interest. Nor did he have any way of knowing that something in his blank, fresh shaven face had aroused her curiosity. He kept his gaze straight ahead and, after a half hour, gave it up. He wanted a smoke anyhow. He got up and went into the smoker, where the card game was in progress. As he sat down the train began its jerking motion again, presaging another stop. Montana saw the man with the long hair pause, card in hand, and look up frowningly. The older man, well dressed and obviously an easterner, asked a question.

"*Now* what are we stopping for, Rundert?"

Rundert!

Something rose inside the reclining figure and Montana felt it move coldly

along his midriff. Ro Rundert! The Road Runner.

So this was King Ramson's right hand man? Montana remembered with a start that Carson had said an easterner had bought the King's big spread. This, then, would be the man, and Rundert was going in with him.

His thoughts were interrupted by the train stopping. He heard the conductor's angry voice without, a curse in reply, and then a man appeared at the end of the coach. He too bore a saddle and slicker roll.

Something struck hard at Montana's memory. A man, yelling hoarsely, going for his gun, the fire in Buckner's big stone fireplace outlining his half crouched figure. The face leaped out and it was an unconscious movement that caused the man smoking the cigar from Ben Carson's place to slip loose the buttons of the black alpaca coat.

He sat there, waiting, saw the man look at Rundert. A signal passed between them. Rundert's eyes dropped back to his cards, squinting a little harder, while the man dumped his saddle and its sweat dampened blanket into a seat.

Then he strolled over and stood above the players.

"Mind if I git in the game, strangers?" he asked of Rundert and the others.

"It's a free country," Rundert grunted in reply.

Then McBain sat down and reached for a big leather purse.

MONTANA sat there for another five minutes, while the train puffed on through the night. Although spring was fully come, it was high mountain country through which they travelled and the air was growing colder in the car. The brakeman came through, stopped over the stove in the corner, fumbled with paper, kindling, and coal, and soon had a fire going. A blast of cold air hit the coach and the two girls came in, closing the door behind them. Montana saw she of the golden hair go to the man in the business suit, who looked up with a half frown of disapproval.

"Now, now," she anticipated teasingly, "it's cold in there and we're tired of sitting practically alone. And I'm terribly bored, dad."

McBain had, Montana thought, ridden a few miles out of town after the attempted dry gulch in town had failed. The outlaw probably had left his horse with his companion, sending the other back to Smeller-A-Mile while he boarded the train and went in to King's Junction. There he would get off and most likely ride in to report to Black Jack.

He watched the game, from his position further back, thankful that McBain had not noticed him when the man entered the coach. For there was a little doubt but that he would recognize the man he had tried to kill only a few hours before. The girls stood in the open space in front of the now warm stove, Helen Forrest looking over her father's shoulder, the other woman beside her. McBain had pulled out the firewood box from back of the stove and sat on it in the aisle, a big square board on the laps of the others serving as a table.

It's *coming*, Montana thought. *It's got to come because he knows who I am. It's coming.*

The pictures were running through his mind again and he was seeing the cheap funeral parlour back in Kansas City and his mother as she lay in the coffin. *Don't do it, Brand . . . for my sake, don't do it. . . .*

It was coming.

He sat there, watching the flickering lights play upon Helen Forrest's aristo-

cratic, almost haughty face. Beautiful, she was, and the sight of her roused something within him. He had been long months up there under old Horse Thief's snow shrouded peaks and she was the first woman he had seen in months. Forrest tried a bluff, then threw down his hand as McBain chuckled and raked in the pot. Montana heard the older of the two young women say to Forrest:

"That's lesson number one."

"Such as?"

"Don't try to bluff one of these westerners in any kind of game. . . . specifically poker."

Forrest grinned wryly and threw in an ante chip for the next hand. "What would you have done?"

She laughed at him g a y l y. "I wouldn't have tried a bluff."

"Why, Belle Ramson!" Helen exclaimed, in mock dismay. "I believe you could play a good hand of poker yourself."

"I ought to be able to, darling. Dad taught me early enough. And King is a good gambler. . . ."

SHE said something else too; something that Helen didn't hear. Her eyes had gone back again to the quiet man further up the coach, and now she saw something that escaped the notice of the others. At the mention of Belle's n a m e, the man's fingers, clamped around a long cigar, had jerked tight until the band burst. She couldn't understand—not knowing that at mention of Belle's name, some strange voice Montana heard clearly within, had cried out: "Belle . . . Ramson! King Ramson's daughter. Then this woman is my . . . half-sister!"

Helen's pretty brow wrinkled and she turned her attention half to the game, yet her eyes always drawn to that strange man with the cigar. Rundert was dealing and McBain was stacking his winning, flattening out the bills in a neat pile. At that moment the train gave a lurch and two of the silver dollars slid off the top of a pile and dropped to the floor of the coach, in the aisle. McBain bent over to retrieve them, his eyes going along the floor to the second, just beyond his reach. Helen, aware that she would meet many men of this type, was taking note of his clothes, the hunch of his shoulders, and the uncut hair at the back of his neck. Now she saw his eyes meet those of the man further back. McBain went rigid.

For what might have been seconds he remained in that half bent position, head up, staring. Then his right hand began sliding back toward the heavy pistol at his hip. With the movement he pushed aside the board to free his knees and came slowly to his feet, kicking the wood box backward, his eyes still riveted on the other's face.

The others had become aware for the first time that something was wrong. Helen saw her father look up, startled, his face changed. A hard, racking cough broke from him and he hurriedly reached for a handkerchief, putting it to his lips. Rundert paused with a card in hand, half off the top of the deck. The other men, strangers, twisted and craned around to see what was up.

As for Helen Forrest, her attention was riveted on the man beyond McBain. He was up now, the cigar gone from his fingers, lying underfoot. Somehow the black coat she had known concealed weapons was back and she caught a glimpse of gleaming cartridges in long belted loops and two ugly looking pistols with dark, polished handles.

"When did you get on this train, mister?" came in a strained whisper from the man McBain.

"About seven miles before you did,"

came the reply.

"At Smeller-A-Mile, eh?"

"You rode out of town about seven miles after sundown, looks like."

It sounded queer to Helen Forrest. She had heard much about these men of the cattle country; men with strange codes and, to her mind, inexplicable ways of doing things; men who would die for a friend and kill on short notice. Two minutes before a friendly, even jolly, poker game had been in progress to help while away a few idle hours. That friendly atmosphere had gone, its place taken by a tenseness that spoke of only one thing: death was in the air. She could see it, feel it; she watched it gather and grow as the few other men suddenly slid down out of sight in their seats. She saw it in the big pistols now in plain sight, in the tense way the man McBain's hand lay close to his right hip, within three feet of where she stood.

SHE wanted to cry out, to move away; she felt Belle's hand suddenly reach out to pull her aside, out of harm's way.

Then death struck.

With a bawl, McBain went for his gun.

In a dim paralysis of thought she saw McBain's hand go down to his hip, flashing with remarkable speed. She hadn't ever realized that a man's hand could move that fast, and yet she saw every movement as though it were slow; the clawing hand, slapping hard against the fang-shaped butt of the big pistol. It started up, came half way out, and then all was blotted out in the smashing roar of another pistol. It roared again . . . and still again from the quiet man's right hip. Flame spurts, orange in color, jetted out almost in a continuous flash from in front of the black coat, lurid against its background. She might have heard the big bullets driving into McBain's chest and midriff, or thought she heard. That she would never know for sure. The scream that came up in her throat froze as the man standing less than two feet away seemed to be driven back by some invisible wind that struck him in a gust. He went over backwards, turning as he fell, and the arm of the chair across the aisle gave off a sodden *thud* as his face struck it. He went down, rolling over, resting flat on his face in the aisle with his hat off, the mop of shaggy, uncombed hair almost against the door in the end of the coach.

A hard object that rattled metallically, a long barrelled pistol with worn blue finish, clattered and came to rest against her foot. A trickle of crimson began to run, but her eyes went in newly awakened horror to McBain's fingers. His arm had gone outflung and now the fingers that had drawn the pistol too slow were curling and uncurling, as though even in death he was still reaching for the big weapon.

Helen Forrest lifted her eyes to the man who had shot him.

He stood wooden faced and strangely motionless, one hand, the left, resting on a seat back to hold his balance in the aisle. The other hand lay low at his right hip, gripping the big six shooter from whose muzzle end a faint wisp of acrid smoke was rising. His eyes were upon the man who lay at the end of the coach near the stove. McBain's lifeless body had begun to rock now, limp, almost jelly-like, in motion with the train. The horror that first had been engendered now turned to sickness and revulsion toward the man with the gun.

His eyes, she noted, had switched. They rested upon Ro Rundert's tense face. The Road Runner sat rigidly, his countenance passively stone-like, the deck of cards still in his hands. Now

he spoke and his voice carried a faint sneer in its tones.

"No doubt about it, you'll know me the next time you see me."

"Friend of yourn?" asked Montana slowly.

"I never saw him before in my life."

"Yo're a liar," came the quiet reply.

RUNDERT'S face changed, whitened. He put down the cards and rose to his feet in the seat, pushing aside the board the better to stand. "I'm not packin' any guns," he grunted.

"I know that, but yo're still a liar if you say you didn't know that gent there on the floor."

Montana slid the heavy weapon back into its sheath and dropped his coat tails into place again. He saw the look in Helen Forrest's eyes, noted that the woman who undoubtedly was his half sister stood cool and calm, and a tinge of admiration shot through him. Whatever kind of a scoundrel the man who now styled himself King Ramson had been, his daughter appeared to be a thoroughbred.

A gust of wind hit the coach again and the conductor, followed by the brakeman, came in. They stopped in the aisle, peering over Montana's shoulder at McBain's body.

"What's going on here?" demanded the conductor.

"It's all over," Montana said, and moved forward past Holland Forrest's amazed eyes. "You can notify the sheriff at the next stop."

A grizzled cowman, sitting alone midway in the coach, gave off a grim chuckle. "Sheriff? That's a corker, stranger. There ain't a sheriff within two hundred mile of this place. Up here, sheriffs we just ain't got. A few town marshals maybe, but sheriff . . ." he broke off and chucked again.

Montana nodded curtly, opened the door to the rear, and want back into the last coach. He wanted to be by himself and not talk, for his thoughts were on the loose again and he found himself a bit confused. Belle Ramson, his half sister . . .

He gave little thought to McBain at the moment. Later it would all come back and he would be a little sick. It It was always that way, this sudden sickness that came on after the taking of a man's life.

He sat down in his seat and after a time saw the conductor and brakeman carrying something toward the baggage car. Through the door the men were talking, but presently resumed the game, with the grizzled cowman taking McBain's place. Once he saw, through the glass, Holland Forrest look at the place where the horse thief had fallen and then bring out the handkerchief. But the game went on and the players settled down. Presently the girls came back. Neither of them spoke. Helen Forrest, she of the lovely, aristocratic face and honey hued hair, was careful to avoid his eyes; but the horror at what she had been forced to witness was still too evident. And Montana was thankful when the conductor, a little pale and uneasy, came through and turned down the lights.

He curled up in his chair and tried to sleep but slumber came little that night.

CHAPTER X

A SHARP jerk of the coach awakened Montana. He opened his eyes, straightened his neck to get out the kinks, and was surprised to note that the sun was up. Outside the dirty windows the terrain eased slowly by. He looked at his watch and saw it was almost eight o'clock.

Most of the passengers were still asleep. Two or three sat huddled up

with their coats around them, for it was bitingly cold. The brakeman had let the fire go out.

Montana got up from his seat and brought down the warbag from above, opening it. He brought out soap, towel, and tooth brush, and added a comb. He looked at the stove, and then put down the articles, making his way up the aisle.

Forrest and Ro Rundert were absent, probably up in the other coach either asleep or still sitting in on an all night poker session. The two girls were sound asleep, heads pillowed on each other's shoulders, coats wrapped warmly around them. He looked at them both with mingled emotions. One a half sister he had never known. The other, coils of spun gold piled in heavy braids and around her aristocratic face, arousing something strange within him and making him sharply aware of all the things he had missed.

But it wasn't in the cards, and he dismissed the thought with a shrug. Perhaps after this was all over, somewhere down south. . . .

He shrugged again and got the fire going with kindling and coal from the box in back of the pot-bellied stove. It threw out a warm glow and he went back to his seat for the toilet articles. He went to the latrine in the rear, splashing cold water into a tin basin bolted to the wall. He removed coat and black, flowering tie, washed and combed his hair. Instinct caused him to eject the empty rounds from one of the pistols and drop them through the opening to the track below, reloading with fresh ones from his belts.

They were up, she of the spun gold hair stifling a sleepy yawn as they stood with their backs to him, standing close to the warm stove.

The conductor came through; a different one from the evening before. "We'll be in King's Junction in about ten minutes, ladies. We're stopping there for breakfast, or I'd fix you up some coffee."

"Thank you," Helen Forrest said. "Have you seen my father and Mr. Rundert?"

The trainman grinned. "They're just breaking up now. Been going ever since I took over at midnight. Pretty heavy game."

"There they come now," Belle Ramson said.

Rundert, followed by Holland Forrest, entered from the next coach. Both showed the effects of no sleep. Their clothes were rumpled and Rundert's long, hard jaw needed a shave. His eyes were a little bloodshot.

"Morning, girls," Forrest greeted, bending over to plant a fatherly kiss on his daughter's cheek. "We'll be in in a few minutes and you'll have a chance to clean up in town. I want to see that herd—but if there's a bath in town I'll find it."

THEY started collecting baggage together and the train rounded a half mile curve and finally puffed to a clanking stop. Helen Forrest gave a peal of laughter as she lost her balance and fell against the wall.

"And you, Mr. Rundert, were talking to me about riding *horses,*" she chided to the Road Runner.

Texas, Montana thought. McBain had been shot in Buckner's during that fight and badly wounded. Months later he had shown up in Smeller-A-Mile, using a Texas rigged saddle. He had shown up there at about the same time Holland Forrest's new herd was approaching King's Junction, where it was being held awaiting the arrival of the new owner from the east.

Montana followed the other passengers down. He stepped out into the

warm sunshine bag in hand and saddle slung over one shoulder. Rundert was piling baggage and Helen Forrest was looking about her with brightening eyes at a land that was strange and new and opening up, for her and her father a new life.

The log station from which the agent emerged squatted alone there on the siding, in sharp contrast to what appeared to be a wilderness of tall evergreen trees seeming to close in from all sides. But down the track some distance lay loading pens and through the trees, a quarter mile distant, lay the town of King's Junction. The "King," self-styled, had needed a railroad outlet for his big shipments of cattle and horses, and Ramson had a way of getting what he wanted. It was from here too, that he freighted in his supplies some forty or so miles southward over the old road of the abandoned stage line, whose first way stop was Buckner's Crossing.

Helen Forrest seemed to have forgotten, at least temporarily, the events of the night before, for now she looked about her and gave a soft little cry.

"Oh, Belle, it's wonderful. I've seen trees and mountains, but never any like these."

Her attention caught a man over by the station, and Montana heard her say, in a lower tone of voice: "Look—over there by the stage. That cowboy wearing a pistol. I'm beginning to be afraid—" with just a little shudder—"that some of the things I've heard about this country are true."

"One of Dad's riders, darling," Belle said. "Oh, Austin! Come over here, you handsome devil."

Austin had been leaning against a corner of the station in complete relaxation, smoking a cigarette, hat shoved far back on his head. Now he swung his out-thrust hip into place, straightened, tossed away quirly butt, and ambled over, an easy grin on his face. He was rangy, sun tanned and there was something good naturedly calm in his blue eyes that Montana instinctively liked. Back of where he had stood, a neat KR stamped on its side, was a weatherbeaten stagecoach with a big, heavy-set driver up in the seat, holding the lines to six horses. The stage evidently was one that had belonged to the now defunct line, and was to be used to transport Forrest and his daughter along with the herd.

AUSTIN ambled up, an easy grin upon his face as he looked at Belle.

"Howdy, Belle," he grinned in a drawl that was unmistakably Texan and without the usual touch of embarrassment. "Glad to have you back at the ranch."

"Austin, you old horse thief!" Belle cried out in evident delight and shook hands with him, man style. "I'm glad to get back. Where's that claybank of mine?"

"Back at the barn eating his fool head off and getting plumb ornery from no exercise. Sonofagun tried to kick the slats out of me the other day when I went in to curry him down."

"I'll take that out of him in a hurry," Belle promised. She turned to Helen and her father. "Helen, this is Austin, from down in Texas. How he ever got this far away I don't know, but I'm glad of it. He's the best man with a horse on the ranch. Austin, meet Helen Forrest, the new mistress of the ranch. You've already met Mr. Forrest."

Austin shook hands with them both. Forrest had the handkerchief out again, and something in his too careless way of handling it aroused Montana's suspicions.

"How are you Austin?" Forrest said.

"Fair to middling, I reckon," Austin replied.

Rundert stood aside and now he nodded a curt "Howdy" to the rider. Austin acknowledged it with a cool jerk of the head. It was evident that there was distrust, even antagonism, between these two men, and Montana found himself wondering why.

"Herd all right?" Rundert asked.

"Herd's all right," Austin said shortly.

"Where's King?"

"I wouldn't know. He don't tie me to his belt buckle every time he leaves the ranch."

"I thought Dad would be here to meet us," Belle put in, seemingly aware of the open dislike between the two men.

"He got called away for a few days, Belle. He'll be in soon, I reckon." Austin turned to Forrest. "We got the herd out about four miles, holding 'em on good grass. Trail crew busted up the town for a couple of days and then caught the train out. When do you want to start for the ranch?"

Forrest had put away the handkerchief. He looked at the rider. "I'm pretty well played out after an all night poker session on the train, and I'm sure the girls could use some rest and a bath too, if there's one available. Suppose we all clean up and rest a bit and see how we feel by this afternoon?"

"Fair enough. Hey, Orndorf!" he called to the driver atop the stage, turning.

"Load up all this baggage and take it over to the hotel. Better put the hosses away until after dinner."

THE heavy-set driver scowled and began wrapping the lines. He clambered gruntingly, almost sullenly down, and came striding over. His eyes evinced no welcome for both Forrest and his daughter. He acknowledged their greetings with a grunted "Howdy-do," shifted the pistol at his hip out of the way, and bent over the various bags as the others went to the coach. Montana picked up his own warbag and saddle and set off for town.

CHAPTER VI

HE passed the corner of the station and was half way along the road leading through the trees when the stage rattled by. Back of it loped Austin astride a black horse. He caught sight of Montana and reined up, easing in to a walk and looking down.

"Howdy," he said and bent over. "I'm goin' that way. Lemme take the saddle."

"Thanks," was the reply, and Montana allowed the weight to be relieved from his shoulder.

"Stranger here abouts?" Austin asked.

"I reckon," Montana said.

"Figgered you was. You look northern but not from around here. Lookin' for a job?"

"A man can always use the right job."

Austin grinned at that one. "A man allus can," he agreed. "You might get on with Forrest—that's the easterner and his daughter—at the ranch. King Ramson's. He sold it and most of the old hands don't like to work for a dude. Some are stayin'. Mostly older gents. The biggest part of 'em pulled stakes."

"What about Rundert? He staying on?"

Austin's easy-going countenance lost its expression and let it vanish in a flash.

"You know Ro?" he grunted.

"Saw him on the train last night."

"He saw you *too*, I reckon. He was shore givin' you a queer look when you left the station just now. Funny—I heard the conductor sayin' something about them taking the body of a man named McBain off the train last night when he came on at twelve. Seems this McBain tried to throw a gun on one of the passengers and didn't throw it fast enough. Nope. I reckon you wouldn't be lookin' for a job," he finished.

"You can never tell," Montana half shrugged, as nearly as a man can while walking.

AUSTIN rode on for a few yards in silence. The horse plodded beside Montana, his saddle bobbing in front of the man who carried it. Then the rider spoke again.

"This much I can tell you, mister. McBain gettin' plugged wasn't no accident and neither was Ro lookin' at you the way he was. I don't know who you are, but look out for the Road Runner. Mebbe McBain got what was comin' to him. He was shore a no good hoss thief who got himself plumb shot all to hell at Buckner's last fall. But Rundert's a bad man to cross. That's all I got to say."

"Is that why you're staying on the ranch?" Montana grinned, looking up.

"Who said I'm stayin'?" he snorted, to cover his confusion.

"I did. Rundert wasn't the only one who was doing some looking," Montana said. "So were *you*. At Belle Ramson. But I hear that's been earmarked for another brand."

"Stranger," Austin said angrily, leaning down to return the saddle. "You can go plumb to hell!"

He loped off, and the walking man watched him go, smiling a little. Montana had taken a liking to Belle for her hard-hitting way of talking and the manner in which she seemed to delight in needling Ro Rundert. Her gibes cut deep and she could hold her own. Somehow she didn't seem to be the type who would marry the big man who kept Ramson's hard crew in line, and yet. . . .

He was beginning to find himself more confused. He had grown to hate a name, the name of Jim Thornton. He had fed on that hatred of the man who had abandoned his mother, never dreaming that one day he would meet a cool, capable, thoroughbred woman who would be a daughter and half-sister to Brand Thornton. And now he was on the way to kill the father of this same woman.

He frowned and went on into town. It was like most of the others. A main square, surrounded by various types of buildings placed at whatever location their builders had fancied. On the north corner was a square, box-like affair of logs, with a wide gallery running across its one story front. Toward this Montana moved, his eyes on the lean-to restaurant on one side. He went in, dumped saddle and warbag in a corner, and went to one of the six stools at the counter.

At a corner table, drinking coffee, sat Ro Rundert and Belle Ramson, Holland Forrest and his daughter. Suddenly Rundert put down his empty cup and got up.

"Why, Ro, where are you going?" Forrest asked.

"Just saw one of the boys over on the corner," was the reply. "Want to find out about the herd. I'll be back in a minute."

He passed by, and Montana thought, noting the two ivory-butted guns the man now wore, that it was strange Rundert wanted to find out about the herd when the man, Austin, had just come from it. Rundert crossed the square and Montana saw him nod to a

man in front of a small saloon. The man followed him inside. Montana saw, too, that the black horse ridden by Austin stood at a hitch rail in front of the saloon.

"What did you wish?" asked the buxom, florid faced waitress in charge of both counter and the three tables.

"On second thought, not anything," Montana replied and got up.

He left the waitress staring after him, unaware that the others at the table were doing the same. But Austin was in that saloon and Austin had made it pretty obvious that he didn't like Rundert.

The Road Runner. . . .

SOMEWHERE down in the bad country Ben Carson was making his way toward Buckner's to lie low down that way until things blew over. Montana wanted to get out—go back to that train and keep going. But the die was cast and he couldn't let down any man like Ben Carson.

His plans had changed, in a flash, back there when Rundert went out. He would go to Ramson, identify himself. Ramson was a power in the hole-in-the-wall country. His word was almost law. His word would make even Black Jack Caswell forget the grudge he had against the trader. Once there was no danger of Ben being shot by the horse thief or some of his riders the rest would be simple: south for Tucson, where a man could start afresh.

It was as simple as that.

He moved toward the door of the saloon, the coffee forgotten in the sounds of men's voices coming from within. Someone was cursing in burning rage and Montana recognized the Road Runner's voice.

"I warned you before I left to pull stakes," Rundert was saying coldly. "I don't like you. I never did like the way you hung around Belle, taking care of her horses and such."

"Now I reckon that's shore too bad," came Austin's drawling voice, cool in reply. "I must have plumb forgot all about it."

Montana stepped quietly through the doorway, the coat back and his hands hanging carelessly at his thighs. Over in a corner, at one end of a crude bar, an untouched drink before him, Austin stood as though at bay; for he was facing a number of men. One was Rundert, his back to the open front door. The others Montana had never before seen; hard, lean men with the stamp of the back country upon them. Most were freshly shaven and bore evidence of recent hair cuts, and here and there a new shirt or pair of pants indicated men long in the outlands in town for a few days. They appeared to be at ease, taking no part in the impending action between Austin and Ro Rundert. But there was something in their attitude—in the contemptuous looks they cast upon the Texan that showed without any doubt where there sympathies lay.

Two of the men Montana's brief glance caught in detail. One was short, of enormous girth, and stood at the opposite end of the bar noisily chewing a large hunk of barbecued beef the silent and uneasy bartender had taken through an opening that led back to a kitchen. Through this opening was a bedraggled woman's frightened face. The eater appeared to have no neck, merely a lump of fat at the back of it. He wiped a greasy hand on his pants leg, and, over the beef, watched Austin through piggy eyes.

The other man was different. He was angular to a point bordering the skinny, and that angular frame was encased in a long, dirty, black coat that reached to the tops of his knee-high

boots. The most striking feature about his was a beard so jet black it glossed like the sheen of a skunk's fur, and above it were eyes to match.

That beard gave Montana a clue to the man's identity, and the other too.

BLACK JACK CASWELL and Dutch Saunders were in town. They were in town at a time when Holland Forrest was arriving to go out to his newly purchased ranch with six hundred head of cattle.

McBain had been one of Black Jack's men, sent to Smeller-A-Mile to take turn waiting for Montana to show up down there. And Ro Rundert had known McBain. That made it clear. Rundert, right hand man of King Ramson, was beyond any shadow of a doubt in with Caswell and the Dutchman's pack of horse thieves.

Black Jack's eyes flicked once to Montana, then went back with that half amused look to Austin. Austin's face was a little pale, for he knew he was doomed. He was not a gun fighter and Rundert was. Yet his voice still retained its peculiar friendly drawl as he spoke to the man who faced him.

"Shore I stayed on on account of Belle, though *she* never knowed that. It's the *only* reason I kept working for a man I'd already found out was a damned cow thief on a big scale."

Black Jack Caswell's chuckle broke the silence. He spoke, his yellow teeth parting the glossiness of his black beard. "Now I'd say as how that was a right unfriendly thing fer a man to say about his boss, Texie. Of course, a lot of other people think the same thing, but not out *loud*. They knew that if Ro here ever caught 'em speakin' sech nasty things about his boss he'd up and salivate 'em on the spot, He-He-He!"

Rundert ignored Black Jack's sally, his eyes burning into Austin's slightly off-color face.

"That all you got to say?"

"I ain't even started yet. I know—and you know—it's mighty funny Ramson sold all his stock to the packers before selling the ranch to that easterner Forrest. Stripped the place clean except for a hundred or so head of good hosses. It's purty strange also, that he talked Forrest into turning right around and buyin' six hundred head of Texas stuff, when he could have sold him six hundred of his own for breeding. And you know why he did it? *Because Ramson is going to rustle Forrest clean or just drive him off the ranch and take over again!*"

Some of the men stiffened, shot looks at Black Jack and then Rundert. The big man's body had tensed as though he was going to throw his guns, and Montana started to speak; but something stayed the Road Runner's hand. He might have been toying with Austin before he killed him. He might have been delaying it, drawing it out, with Black Jack and the Dutchman and their men as spectators.

Now he spoke again. "You ain't goin' to see Belle again, Austin," he said quietly. "This is chips out for you. I warned you last week, before I took the train down to meet Forrest, to be off the ranch by the time I got back."

"Shore—now you mention it again, I do recollect somethin' about it," was the cool reply. "Plumb slipped my mind, I reckon."

"It didn't slip mine, amigo. And if it had, I'd have changed it when I saw you getting chummy back there with that gent who killed McBain on the train last night. I've got a few questions I'm going to ast *him,* too."

Black Jack seemed to be struck by something funny. The chuckle rose again and parted his beard, and he be-

gan an open snicker.

"No time like the present, Ro," he he-he-he'd, "because I got a hunch that same gent is standin' right behind you, he-he-he!"

CHAPTER VII

RO RUNDERT turned slowly, his big body seeming to pivot on a boot heel. He looked at the newcomer, carefully, from head to toe.

"You can start asking anytime," Montana said.

"Who're you?" Ro Rundert whispered.

"The name is Brand Edmonds," which was the truth, for his full name was Brand Edmonds Thornton. "And while you're asking questions, you can do a little explaining about McBain—the gent you weren't supposed to know when he boarded the train last night."

Rundert now found himself at a disadvantage, for he was between Austin at one end of the bar and Montana by the front door. The back country men stood immobile, quiet, eyes darting, but obviously not ready to take a hand in the game. It was a showdown and Rundert was at the losing end.

"Why did you kill McBain last night?" he queried coldly.

"Because," Montana answered softly, "he tried to pull a gun on me."

Austin's dry, amused chuckle sounded hard in the silence that followed. "So that's how it was? I allus figgered, Ro, that you were playin' both ends against the middle and this shore bears it out. Kinda funny . . . you gettin' all worked up over McBain being plugged. You'd mebbe call that a co-incidence, hey? Mebbe you'd call it another co-incidence that you don't hardly get in town until you head for the saloon where Black Jack's horse-stealing coyotes are hanging around and have been ever since that herd got here."

And then his gun was out in a flash, covering them all and at the same time keeping its muzzle half tilted at Ro Rundert's side.

"Clear out, Ro," he ordered. "And you other buzzards too. Edmonds here has already done the country a good favor by plugging McBain and I don't aim to have him risk getting killed in a two to a dozen game. Clear out!"

They went, filing silently through, but it was noticeable that Rundert went back to the hotel and the men from the back country slouched down the street. Then Austin, sheathing his pistol, said to Montana:

"Thank's, Edmonds. I was a goner, I reckon, until you stepped in that door. If there's anything this Texan can do for you, just say the word."

"Seems to me it ought to be the other way around," Montana replied. "Austin, I killed a man last night and I didn't like it. I'm not a gun fighter. I'm packing these because I've got to pack them to stay alive."

Austin nodded understandingly. "I know—I rode the border country a couple of years before drifting up this way to see what this northern section looks like. I've seen it happen before. It happened in Dodge City with Hickock. It happened in Tombstone not more'n three or four years back with the Earps and Doc Holliday. You pack 'em or you don't live. Me—I'm pretty good beans with a Winchester, but this short gun stuff is out of my line. Whew! —that was so close I'm still shakin'! Have a drink. I need one bad."

Montana declined and Austin downed the one on the bar, and called for another. The bemustached bartender poured and Montana said: "Got any more of that beef and some coffee?"

"I reckon so."

HE TURNED to the opening to give the order to his wife in back. "Make it two coffees," put in Austin. "Never mind the barbecue. Seems like I've plumb lost my appetite."

Footsteps sounded and the two men turned. Holland Forrest had come in.

His face was haggard and the handkerchief was out again. But the haggardness had increased and Montana was struck by a sudden thought as he looked at the easterner.

"How long have you been outside?" he asked sharply.

"Long enough. Will you two join me in a drink?"

The bartender came back and set out a bottle. This time Montana drank, after Austin poured out for the three of them.

"You overheard?" Austin asked bluntly.

Forrest nodded. He downed the drink in a single gulp and poured another. Then he placed the empty glass on the bar and looked at Montana; at the face that was young and yet old, at the sharp chin and eyes that were hard to fathom.

"Do you want a job?" he asked.

"What kind?"

"Protecting a girl, Edmonds. You see, I'm done for."

"There's guns for hire in this country. Other men, I mean. Ramson is powerful but money talks to these men who take such pay. Hire them. More than you need. You're the owner of that ranch. You can hold it."

"I'm afraid you don't understand. I've three months at most to live. It's inside here—in my chest—something malignant. Helen doesn't know how bad it is. And I don't intend that she shall find out. And now this ghastly business."

The meat and coffee were brought and Montana started to eat. He said, between hungry bites: "Why did you buy?"

Forrest was pouring himself a third drink while Austin, sipping his coffee, watched with sympathy in his eyes.

"I got wiped out in a sudden crash back east. Cleaned. Then Ramson came along, dabbling a bit in finance himself—the big, bluff, hearty cattleman from the west. He had Belle with him and the two girls became good friends. He told me about the possibilities in cattle ranching out west and that he was figuring on heading south. Wanted to sell his ranch at a fair price, minus stock. It sounded good to me. I had enough left from the sale of my estate and a few securities, and I knew I was about through anyhow. I figured it would be something substantial for Helen, who's been wanting to leave the east and come out here. So I bought the ranch. I put the last money I had into six hundred head of good breeding stock. And now . . . this business. It's hard to believe that the man I called friend is what he now seems to be. But after overhearing Austin here, there seems little doubt that I've been taken in. So I'm offering you a job. Run that ranch for us and name your own salary. Hire any men you want. But run it so that when the—ah—time comes I can go out knowing Helen is secure."

"I'm not looking for that kind of a job, Forrest. But I'll throw in a little advice. Start that herd on to the ranch and let the women rest up. Then send them on in by stage. I don't know where Ramson is—"

"I do," interrupted Austin calmly. "He pulled out of here and headed over in the back country. He's probably rounding up some of his tougher case hands to start rustling a few head

along. So I'd personally advise you to wire for some cars and load the whole six hundred up and ship 'em east to the packing houses. They're lean and tough and stringy after that long drive north, but it's better to take a big loss from that than to risk the whole caboodle."

FORREST leaned against the bar, reflectively scratching with his fingernail at a small splinter, his face a study in indecision. He was a dead man—a living dead man faced with a decision and not knowing what to do.

"Perhaps that would be best," he finally said.

Montana watched him, thinking swiftly. An idea was forming, making little ripples on the surface of his mind and spreading wider.

"Suppose Ramson was stopped?" he asked Austin. "What about Black Jack Caswell and Dutch Saunders? You think they'd try it?"

Austin shrugged his shoulders. "I doubt it. They're more sneaking hoss thieves than rustlers on a big scale."

"I hear they don't exactly love this Ramson man," Montana pressed on.

"Few people do. What you got in mind, Edmonds?"

"I can stop Ramson," Montana said.

Austin stared at him. The Texan obviously wanted to believe this strange man but couldn't bring himself to it.

"He's got men who'd shoot for him at the drop of a hat," he said.

"I can stop him," Montana repeated, harshly, his face ugly with what was expressed there.

Austin turned to Forrest. "Well?" he queried.

"Get the herd under way," the easterner said. "I want to die on that ranch and I want to see cattle grazing in the basin out there when I go out. Get them going, Austin, and you're in charge. Whatever you say goes."

CHAPTER VIII

"ALL right, Mr. Forrest," Austin replied. "You're the boss. I ain't quittin' King just yet—not till I tell him to his face that he's a damned cow thief who ought not be alive with a daughter like Belle. So I'll do my best to get that herd through to the ranch with the men I've got; but it's only fair to warn you they're not gun hands. All the tough case gents slipped out when you bought in. The ones left are mostly old timers who can't hold down a hard job anymore. I allus suspected that King kept 'em around to mostly look after the cattle while his hard case gunnies did the dirty work. But if Edmonds here says he can stop Ramson, then I'll bank on it. If that herd can be got through them forty odd miles to the ranch, I'll get 'em through."

He paused and looked at Montana. "Only one thing I don't like about this—leavin' town with you stayin' here."

"If you mean Rundert," Montana said, "I'm avoiding trouble. I've no quarrel with him as long as he don't force one."

"I want Rundert on the stage with us," Forrest said. "I don't believe he'll make trouble in the presence of the girls. And if he went with the herd, Austin, one of you two men wouldn't get there alive."

He turned toward the bottle again, and a cough began to seize him. It grew from somewhere within, caught him in an enraged clutch, and shook him until all the blood drained from Forrest's already haggard face. It bent him, half along the edge of the bar, his face down toward the brass rail, and Montana grabbed him.

Forrest was coughing the harder, trying to speak. He made a weak ef-

fort to straighten up and a gurgle that was unintelligible came from lips fast turning red. The bartender grabbed a glass of water and slid it across and Montana held it to the stricken man's mouth; but Forrest, still doubled over limply in the grip of the paroxym, weakly shook his head and tried to get his left hand to the side pocket of his coat.

On a hunch, Montana slid his hand in. He brought out a small box that rattled. Medicine! Quickly he dumped two white pills into his palm and got them down Holland Forrest. Forrest swallowed and Montana's hand came away red with blood.

A couple of minutes more and it was past. The easterner sat at a card table, too weak to get up. He wiped his lips with the handkerchief and put the stained cloth back into his breast pocket.

"That's about the . . . worst one I ever had," he managed to smile. "Been about two weeks since the last bad one. They're getting worse all the time. . . . But thank God I won't have many more of them," he finished.

When he was able to talk again Montana and Austin took him back to the hotel. The Texan left them at the lobby and mounted his horse to return to the herd to start the forty mile drive. The girls were already upstairs, said the clerk, in bed asleep. With Forrest's arm over his neck, Montana helped him up the stairs to his room and got him into bed. The easterner lay on his back, white sheets tucked under his chin, his face still drawn from the ordeal.

Then he asked a question.

"Edmonds, do you know King Ramson?"

MONTANA shook his head, his face turning stony. He was thinking of Belle and of the news that soon must be broken to her about her father. "Only by name."

"You said you could stop him."

"I did."

"I believe you can. But I'm worried very much."

"You'll feel a lot better after a few hours of sleep."

"I know you can take care of yourself—you proved that rather conclusively on the train. But those men in the saloon—they were this fellow Caswell and his friend Dutch Saunders, I believe. McBain was one of Caswell's men, as I understand it. They're still in town. You're one against a dozen, not including Rundert."

"I know," Montana said.

He went to the window and looked out, down upon the broad expanse of flat land some two hundred yards in width that comprised the center of the junction. A few scattered buildings forming more of a horse shoe curve than a street line. Horses were visible at numerous racks, and from the number at one of the other saloons across town, he judged that Caswell and the others might be there.

He would try and keep out of their way. Too much was at stake. Montant turned toward the door, figuring to get himself a room and catch up on a few hours sleep. It would be a good way to stay in the clear for the rest of the day. Now that the herd was gone, perhaps Black Jack and the others would go too. But again Forrest's tired voice came from the bed.

"I'm gambling six hundred head of cows on the word of a man I never saw until a few hours ago. I'm gambling Helen's future security on it too. For all I know you might be one of Ramson's men, or anybody else. But I believe in you. And there's still a big question in my mind: How are you go-

ing to stop Ramson? For all his flamboyant manners, he's a pretty tough character in many ways. I recall one night in New York when we were all having dinner at one of the fashionable hotels before taking a carriage for the theatre. Reggie Stewart—he's a big game hunting playboy from one of the old banking families—came in with a party, a little under the influence of liquor. An all around athlete and a tremendously big man. He came over to our party and got a little loud and a little obnoxious. Ramson stood it for a few minutes, until Reggie made an off color remark to Belle. Then Ramson got up. With one blow he put Stewart down on the floor, then bent over him and lifted him by an arm and leg. Reggie weighs over two hundred pounds, yet Ramson carried him above his head to the door, out into the street, and threw him headlong into the gutter. That's the man you're going to stop."

"I guess he's got it on me there," Montana said, smiling a little at the picture of the man who was his father. "I seem to have taken more after my mother, who weighed less than a hundred pounds, though she used to say I took after him in many ways."

THE sick man's wan face took on a look of puzzlement. "Mother?" he queried.

"This man who calls himself King Ramsom is my father, Mr. Forrest," Montana replied, moving over and sitting down on the bed. "His real name is Jim Thornton. My real name is Brand Edmonds—after my mother's family—Thornton. He married my mother right after the beginning of the war between the states—deserted after a few months of service. I was born in 1861. This is 1885. We never saw him after he left, until a cattle buyer ran into him in Cheyenne and recognized him as Jim Thornton. So last fall I came in to kill him. I got as far as Buckner's Crossing and ran into some of Black Jack Caswell's men. We shot it out there and Ben Carson got me away. I was—"

"Then you are this notorious—this legendary man they call Montana?"

Montana nodded. "That's what they call me, Mr. Forrest. Montana. I'm the man Black Jack Caswell has sworn to get for that fight at Buckner's."

Forrest lay silent for a few moments, trying to absorb it all and get it straight in his mind, his eyes on the face of the younger man. He was seeing things there, not noticeable before; things that his daughter also had seen.

"And that's how you're going to 'stop' him?" he asked.

"That was my intention," was the low reply. "But something happened on the train. I saw a woman; the kind of woman I think I've always wanted as a sister. Belle Ramson. No," he went on, "I can't throw a gun on this man now. But I've promised you I'd stop him and I think I can keep that promise. Anyhow, that's the story. He seems to have married again. What happened to the woman who is Belle's mother?"

"She's back east," Forrest said. "King's rough ways—and perhaps an eye for other women—finally forced her to leave him. Belle visited her this last winter and tried to effect a reconciliation, but it was no use. Ramson wanted her back on his own terms and she refused to budge. Anyhow," he added, smiling, "I feel a lot better now. I have a feeling I'll still get a chance to sit on that hundred foot front porch that overlooks the basin and watch those six hundred head grow. A good sleep will do wonders for me right now. And you've no need to fear that I'll

reveal your identity to anyone. I'll keep my word to a man to whom Helen and I already owe much."

And Holland Forrest kept his word. He died in his sleep an hour later.

MONTANA found him at two o'clock that afternoon, when he got up from a heavy sleep and came along the hall from his own room to see if the man wanted anything. Forrest lay as he had slumbered, eyes closed, his pale color unchanged. Only when Montana placed a hand on his cheek and brought it away cold did he realize that the easterner was gone.

He closed the door behind him and went down the hallway again, knocking gently at a number. The door opened slightly and Belle Ramson's face looked through. She was fully dressed, but her hair appeared to be in the process of being dressed.

"What do you want?" she said coolly, her eyes appraising him.

"Is Miss Forrest awake?" Montana asked, his hat off.

"She's still asleep and you're wasting your time, cowboy. She wouldn't like to eat with you now or this evening. They're not hiring any more riders—particularly those as handy with a gun as you are. You'd better go now."

He put on his hat as she started to close the door. But with his next words a little g a s p came from her and it opened wide. She stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind her.

"Who did it?" she demanded breathlessly, coming with him toward Forrest's room.

He told her of the coughing attack in the saloon as they moved along the thin, worn carpeting. That was all he told her. He made no mention of what had taken place in the saloon between Austin and Rundert, nor that Black Jack and the Dutchman were in town with a number of men. He wanted only to see that they got safely to the ranch without trouble. For despite her obvious coolness toward him, he had the feeling that if he couldn't stop King Ramson by revealing his identity then Belle could. She must have known, being ranch-wise, that some of her father's deals were not exactly on the up and up. But then many respectable ranchers who had become rich cattle barons had, from Montana to Arizona, got their start by carrying a running iron on the saddle and being not too particular about roping and branding "stray" mavericks. And if a man used his power and money to buy cattle at cheaper prices, and not ask too many questions, that too, had been done by more "honest" men than the man who now called himself Ramson. But Montana instinctively knew she'd never countenance an open steal of the kind her father apparently was planning.

In the room Belle stood looking down at Helen Forrest's father. She didn't cry out or make a scene. She was too strong for that. But her face had softened with pity at what Forrest had suffered, only to be defeated when his last goal was within grasp.

She turned to Montana. "Will you see that a grave is dug in the cemetery this afternoon?" When he nodded she went on: "And find out if there's an undertaker in town since I went east last fall. There wasn't then. But if not, then old Henry Applby over at the store will take care of him."

"I'll go over and see," he said and went downstairs.

CHAPTER IX

THEY buried Holland Forrest the following morning in the little cemetery among the trees a half mile north of town, with a dozen curious

townsmen standing around and some helping Montana and Rundert to lower into the grave, the freshly painted white pine box old Applby had built. He stood back as the shovels began to move, the clods making hollow, thumping sounds on the box below. But his eyes were partly on Rundert, who was watching Helen Forrest. She had, after a first burst of grief, made an amazing recovery, and there was something in Rundert's eyes that Montana didn't like. They were hard, speculative, and a little lustful, as though the glimmering of a new idea was forming in the man's mind.

It wasn't easy for Montana to guess what it was: she had taken Belle Ramson's place as heiress to a big cattle outfit and Rundert seemed to have switched accordingly.

They stayed in town three days after the burial, because Helen Forrest wanted to stay. Between himself and Rundert had sprung up a cool politeness beneath which was a weariness not to be misunderstood. They were enemies, and sooner or later, unless circumstances prevented it, a clash was inevitable. Thought of that clash made Montana anything but easy. He had been forced to kill and he didn't like it. He knew Rundert was vain and a gun fighter who went out of his way to keep his reputation, and after what had happened in the small saloon the Road Runner hardly could be expected to let things go between them.

For that reason Montana remained more or less close to the hotel during those days. He stayed in his room and read, making a careful effort to avoid meeting either Belle Ramson or Miss Forrest. That killing on the train had been unavoidable, but he instinctively realized that it had thrown open a chasm between them which might never be bridged; certainly not in the short time he expected to remain in the northern country. He would keep out of their way, settle his affairs with Ramson, and then head south.

Once or twice he caught glimpses of Black Jack Caswell's black-coated figure stalking along in front of a building or standing idly in conversation with some of his men. In a way, this was reassuring. It meant that the herd at least was not being molested. Had it been, Austin would have sent a rider back in a hurry to break the news.

But on the fourth morning when Montana came from the lean-to restaurant against the hotel, wheels clattered and the stage from the ranch rolled around from the livery stable with the man Orndorf up top. He pulled up with a screech of brakes, tied the lines, and clambered down. Belle and Helen Forrest came out, ready for travel. Montana looked at the latter and new respect for her rose within him. She had taken the tragedy head high. Three days before she had been the somewhat spoiled daughter of a supposedly rich man. She now knew the truth, that she wasn't rich, and her recovery had been rapid. Out of it had come a woman still aristocratic, still beautiful but a stronger woman who realized her responsibility.

RUNDERT came up. He had been drinking a little too heavily and his freshly shaven face and his eyes showed the effects of it. But his clothes were neatly pressed and once again he was the self thought gallant westerner and a big hand with the ladies.

"You're looking pretty good this morning, Helen," he grinned, doffing his hat and at the same time brushing at the flowing locks of his hair. "One thing I'll say for you; you come through in a way that'd make your dad proud. I'm glad I had the pleasure of

meetin' him before he cashed in."

"Thank you," Helen answered in a low, sweet voice. "I do appreciate all you and Belle have done."

It was then that Montana stepped forward and removed his hat.

"Miss Forrest?"

The cool grey eyes looked at him; at his untanned face where a man was supposed to be tanned, at eyes that had seen too much and lips that were expressionless, at outlines beneath his black coat whose significance she knew only too well. It would be a long time before she would forget that night in the coach. She still saw, in her mind—had seen many times—the picture of him as he stood with the gun in one hand. She would remember always, she thought, McBain's fingers, curling and uncurling within inches of the pistol that lay by her foot.

"Well?" she inquired.

"I'm going down the line a ways. I'd intended to buy a horse and ride in, but if it wouldn't be imposing upon you I'd like to ride in say—to Buckner's Crossing."

He would have preferred to ride in alone by horseback, but the quickest way to King Ramson would be through this girl and Belle Ramson, and he intended to get on to the ranch, after a visit with Buckner.

He wanted to make the squawman sell him a good horse, and he wanted to make the squawman reveal any information he might possess concerning Ben Carson's whereabout. Ben had had four days to ride from Smeller-A-Mile and should have made the trip with ease. He would be down there in the bad country somewhere, and Montana had to find him.

Belle Ramson looked at Montana. She had taken on the role of protector for the eastern girl, though it was pretty obvious that Helen Forrest soon would be able to cope with things herself.

"You don't talk like a cow puncher," Belle said. "And you certainly don't throw a gun like one. Why should you be going in to Buckner's? That sneaking squawman a friend of yours?"

He shrugged and there was a coldness in it that brooked no further questioning concerning his personal affairs. The shrug seemed to say. That's my business, Miss Ramson, and the shrug seemed to infuriate Ro Rundert.

HE stepped forward authoritatively, arrogant, and domineering, seemingly having forgotten the incident of three days ago over in the saloon.

"Hold on fellow! That coach belongs to the ranch and if you've got any ideas—"

Helen Forrest cut in then, as coolly imperious as Belle herself could have done. "That is quite correct, Mr. Rundert. The coach *does* belong to the ranch." And to Montana: "Did my father offer you a job?"

"He did."

"Are you working for us?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then you turned it down?"

"Yes ma'am, I turned it down," he answered.

Orndorf, puffing a little and red-eyed from too much drink the evening before, was coming from the lobby with their bags. He began tossing them up on top before climbing up himself.

"Why?" Helen Forrest asked. "Because he was an easterner?"

"I just turned it down, I reckon," was the reply.

She smiled then and the smile stirred within him things he had never realized could be, as she answered politely: "Of course you may ride with us. We'll be glad to have you. It's the least I can do to repay you for what you have

done for us."

He went inside and brought out saddle and war bag. The saddle he tossed up to a surly Orndorf. The war bag he handed up carefully because the shiny stock of the 40-65 protruded from one end. By the time it all was roped and covered with a tarp the two women had got into the stage and made themselves comfortable. Then Rundert's bulk filled the doorway. The vehicle rocked on its springs as he settled himself across from them, in the seat behind Montana.

The driver clambered over the top and got into the seat and called down.

"All set, Ro?"

"All set."

The stage gave a lurch and seemed to leap away from the hotel. It fell behind and presently they were in among more trees. The old stage road led on through timber, topped a rise, dipped low, and was in a flat bottomed valley that, in daylight, was a sea of virgin grass. Three miles down the valley the grass showed signs of having been grazed and then parts of the road itself lay trampled where the path of the herd had covered it. The stage rattled on, headed for distant mountains far ahead that were a mass of morning purple.

HELEN FORREST drew her coat about her shoulders, for it was getting a bit chilly due to the rush of air about them. Looking at her occasionally Montana found his mind filled with conjectures. He wondered what she would say—what Belle would say—if they knew that King Ramson probably intended to take over the ranch again, now that he had received the money for it. Thought of Ramson brought to mind Montana's own mission to see the man who was his father. . . .

"King" Ramson!

And Belle. . . . his half sister. . . .

"How far do we go?" Helen asked.

"It's about forty miles to Buckner's Crossing by this old stage road," Belle said. "We might stay there tonight, if you're tired. Heaven knows I never trusted the man, but his Indian wife can make up a clean bed.

"We'll go on in," Helen replied.

"As you wish, darling." And to Rundert, sitting silently and taking no part in the conversation: "Did Austin say why dad went over into the back country?"

Rundert's broad shoulders moved perceptibly in a slight shrug. "I didn't ask him. You know the King—always worrying."

"Ro, there's been trouble hasn't there?"

"Hasn't there always been?" he countered evasively, almost harshly.

"Out with it, Ro. I've got the right to know what's in the wind. I knew there was trouble as soon as I heard dad was gone and didn't wait for us at the junction. I'd have come directly on to the ranch to find out if it hadn't been for Mr. Forrest's attack and sudden passing. Now I want the truth."

"I don't know what's up," he said with a half grunt. "There's some things the King doesn't even tell me. But I hear whispers. You can always hear whispers down our way. Some say it's Caswell and the Dutchman."

"Black Jack?"

He nodded as though loath to continue the subject. But Belle's clear eyes were upon him penetratingly.

"It seems to have started last fall after that gun slammin' outlaw Montana downed four of Black Jack's men in Buckner's and shot up another one. Black Jack and the Dutchman swore your dad had hired him, and Black Jack is out to square accounts. I don't

know. Them's only whispers. You know how it is down in this country."

"Montana," Helen Forrest said. "Strange . . . that man's name seems to keep cropping up down here as though it was some evil influence. One of you mentioned it on the train. I heard it again in the restaurant, two men talking. Who is this man?"

CHAPTER X

THE conversation was getting decidedly uncomfortable for Montana and he cast about him for a way to switch it to a less dangerous subject. A little more and Rundert, undeductive type that he was, might start piecing together the fact that McBain had been on lookout duty in Smeller-A-Mile, had boarded the train within seven or eight miles of the place, and had been killed by the man who had gotten on there. He undoubtedly had appraised Black Jack of these facts, and Black Jack was no fool.

"I don't know who he is," Rundert half growled in answer to Helen's question. "Nobody does, except maybe Buckner. Buck was comin' in his place that night with an armful of wood when the shooting started. Buck's nobody's fool. He might surprise a lot of people someday. But he wouldn't have knowed even then except that Ben Carson, when he carried the gent out, let go with his name. Until then Buck thought he was just another gun packin' rider from the out trails. Buck's a pretty shrewd man and knows a lot more than people think. A lot of people around this country who think of him only as a money grasping squawman would get their eyes opened up if they knew how many irons he has in the fire," he finished meaningly.

"I heard in town," Belle said, "that Black Jack and Dutch Saunders were there. I saw one man with a black beard crossing the street that could have been that cheap horse thief. You know anything about it?"

Rundert's eyes went to Montana's face. He was evidently wondering how much the latter had told Belle and Helen Forrest about the clash in the saloon. He was on a spot but apparently decided to take a chance.

"He was in town, all right. I talked to him."

It was Belle's turn to register surprise. "You talked to *him* . . . to Black Jack Caswell?" she demanded.

"For a few minutes. He wanted to know about McBain. I told him what happened . . . that our friend plugged him when, Mack, for some reason, went for his gun. What about it, Edmonds?" he asked.

"Sorry, but my affair with McBain was personal," Montana answered shortly. "Maybe he thought I was somebody else. Maybe he thought I was this Montana gent you've been talking about. Whatever it was, it's past history and I'd rather not mention it again."

He turned his attention away to indicate the subject as being closed, looking out the window and back along the road. Movement caught his eyes, far to the rear. The stage rocked on another mile and the movements came again, more plainly. Horsemen were back there in the rear.

They were being followed.

"Belle has told me much about this country," Helen said half musingly. "About its ranches and its men and names that sound strange. Black Jack. The Dutchman, whom, I believe, killed his wife with a knife. Montana. Ugh! Why do these men do such things?"

She looked at Montana, realized too late the slip, and a blush mantled the embarrassed features she turned toward the window.

HOUR after hour the stage rolled on through wild, virgin country. Now and then a small shack dotted a clearing with a horse or two in a brush or pole corral out back, but that was all. It was big country; country made for men like Ramson; men who could and would fight to gain and hold what was theirs. Orndorf, taking frequent nips from a quart bottle, drove the horses on at an amazingly fast clip; now trotting briskly down gentle, undulating slopes, pulling up inclines, and pausing at regular intervals to blow the six long limbed bays. At the rate they were going it would be easy to make the ranch shortly after dark. Dust began to sift into the coach and the girls put on their veils. It grew warmer.

Montana sat watching and occasionally added a word to the conversation. But for the most part he was thinking of those riders back there. It might be a co-incidence. They might be some of the back country men coming in from another settlement, but something told him they weren't. Twice more within the next ten miles he had caught sight of them. They had pulled off to one side, keeping to the timber.

It would be Black Jack, all right. No doubt of that. Black Jack would be remembering the man who had killed McBain, for Black Jack was a man who didn't forget. But why hadn't he tried it in town? Was it out of deference to the new owner and mistress of the Ramson spread? Montana doubted it. But something had stayed his hand, and now it looked as though he might be closing in to pay off for the man who had tried a dry gulch in Smeller-A-Mile and failed, that failure subsequently costing him his life on the train.

Shortly after one o'clock the stage rolled down through an opening among the trees through which they were passing and the brakes on the rear wheels gave off sandy, grinding sounds. They hit the bottom into soft sand that was the bed of a creek which had changed course and Orndorf's whip sang out. He crossed over, pulled in among more trees and swung off into a small clearing where a stretch of boulder strewn ground lay in the shade. Beyond the clearing the sun glinted on the clear waters of a cold little creek. Above the tall trees thrust green tops up toward an azure sky.

Orndorf sat the brakes and leaned down with a bellow. "We'll be here about an hour while I rest the horses and cook up some grub. Roll out and make yourselves comfortable."

Rundert got out, his hand solicitously sliding along Helen's slender waist as she alighted. All were a little stiff from the long ride and the earlier morning cold. Helen flexed her soft young body and looked about her, and again Montana caught the veiled look in Ro Rundert's eyes.

But Helen had, in the presence of the country's grandeur, forgotten for the moment the recent loss of her father. She was young and alive and the new life she now faced was closing its clean grip upon her, helping to blot out the tragedy that had so recently befallen.

SHE glanced at the man who had come with them. He was brushing the dust from his clothes. He removed his coat, for it was now quite warm, and again her eyes went with a slight revulsion to the big pistols he wore. She turned away as he clambered up on the stage and brought down his war bag.

Montana placed it on the ground, then began giving Orndorf a hand with the traces. He went in among the horses, hung the chains over the hames, moved around to the wheelers and dropped the breast yoke. Orndorf, the

quart bottle sticking from one hip pocket, took up the lines and drove the six down among the trees, with Montana following. He put down the war bag, brought out his working clothes, and began a swift change. Orndorf paused in adjusting nose bags, his eyes on the two guns. He took a pull from the bottle, then extended it.

"Snort?" he asked, weaving a little.

"No, thanks."

"Two-handed, eh?" he said, anent the two pistols. "And you're goin' to Buckner's. Know him?"

"Briefly."

"No talkee, eh? Well, Buck don't talk much either, but if people only knew. . . ." He broke off, coughed and spat, took another drink and shoved the bottle back into his hip pocket. "Rundert don't like you," he said.

"So I gathered." Montana was slipping into his worn levis, pulling the belt snug at the waist. He swung the gun belts into place, the two worn sheaths falling low at his muscular young thighs.

"Black Jack don't like you either," Orndorf said. "Heard him talkin' in one of the saloons in town. Said there wasn't any use in raisin' a ruckus in there, when he figgered you'd be comin' down Buckner's way. That's what I'd call a good guess, eh? I heard about that little fuss you had with Rundert, too. It's a wonder he ain't salivated you by now. Ro don't like competition with the gals."

If he noted that Montana continued to ignore him while he finished dressing, he was too drunk to be incensed. He went after the bottle again.

"Oh, he's a regular heller with the ladies, Ro is. I went with him to Kansas City onct with a shipment of the King's cattle. He shore cut a swath through the parlour houses. There was one little black-eyed tramp named—"

"I'm not interested," snapped out Montana coldly.

Orndorf rocked back on his heels and sneered. "You ain't going to be interested in *anything* much longer, my fine feathered rooster. Not with Black Jack Caswell gunnin' for you over the killin' of McBain. As for that dirty, stinking Dutchman, I hopes you plugs him cold. I hates his guts and tol' him so right to his stinkin' face. Told him he was a—"

MONTANA, his good clothes in the bag, turned his back and strode off toward the creek to wash up. Orndorf stood watching him through red-shot eyes and then grinned and waved a hand. He turned and went back to the stage to start cooking dinner.

Montana finished his ablutions in the cold water of the creek, and returned to find the girls had spread blankets beneath the rear of the stage and were sitting in comfort. Orndorf was almost ready to serve the food. And Montana heard Belle Ramson saying:

"Out with it Ro. You've stalled long enough. What's wrong at the ranch?"

"It's not only the ranch—it's a lot of other things," Rundert grunted, from his position on a nearby rock. He was making queer little marks on the ground with a sharp stick. "King seems to think that Black Jack and the Dutchman are back of it. He's been losing a lot more stock than even he thought. I was supposed to clean the last of it off the ranch a week before the new herd got here from down south, but I wasn't long finding out there wasn't any. Belle, King's been rustled pretty badly. I never trusted half the riders on the ranch and told him so. But they were good men in their way and he kept them on. After him and Forrest came out here and looked the ranch over last winter and then returned east, I was to round up everything—cattle, horses

and all. But it didn't take long to find out what I've been suspecting for some time: your own riders were long loping KR stuff and selling at least some of it to Black Jack and the Dutchman. And that includes yore white-haired boy Austin," he sneered.

"How do you know?" Belle Ramson demanded while Helen sat quietly waiting.

"Through McBain. I met him in Buckner's one night a few months back. He was still limping around after the shooting. I got a few drinks down him and he talked. Said he was going south for Black Jack to look over a couple of deals. I know now that Forrest already had bought the ranch, or was getting ready to close the deal sometime during the winter. He'd written to Texas about those six hundred head of white faces, and McBain kept Black Jack informed of what was going on. That's why he was heading south. Anyhow, we got friendly and after he got back a short time ago, I saw him again. He figgered we was cronies by then and spilled the whole deal. Some of King's riders, seeing as how he was selling out, were long looping right and left on what cows remained. Black Jack bought some and hid 'em over in the back country. He rustled a lot more on his own. That's how I knew McBain, though I wasn't advertising it."

"Then Black Jack and the Dutchman intend to steal on this herd?" gasped out Belle, the audacity of the plan hard to believe. Six hundred head!

"That's my guess," grunted Rundert.

CHAPTER XI

HE SEEMED to take pleasure in her surprise, and was silent for a few moments. Then he went on:

"What makes it bad—damned bad—is that Black Jack thinks it was your father who hired that Montana gent to clean him and his men out of the country, and swore he'd square accounts. But I don't think you got anything to worry about. King can take care of things. He always has."

"Yes," Belle Ramson added, half musingly, "he always has. It's strange how you blind yourself to something when you love somebody very much. I was raised down in this country. When my mother couldn't stand it any longer, living with him, and left, they gave me the choice of remaining here or going back east with her. I stayed because I worshipped Dad. I heard many whispers about him. Some were pretty unsavory. He might have bought the wrong kind of cattle a few times, but I'll never believe that he is most of the things people say."

Rundert got up and strode away toward the fire and Belle Ramson turned to Helen, still a silent spectator. The older woman said softly:

"Don't let it worry you, darling. Dad would never have let your father buy the ranch only to lose it and the stock to rustlers and cheap cut throats like Caswell."

"I'm not worried," Helen replied.

"Good. Everything will turn out all right, once I see Dad. But this is a rough country and there are men in it who must kill to survive. Ro is pretty ruthless in many ways but it's his kind who will eventually clean out these outlaw gangs and make this country safe for honest ranchers. Then it will be only a matter of time until the men who cleaned out will be, in turn, victims of organized law that will come, and there will be no more outlaws and gun fighting. It's all coming. But not before a lot of good, and bad, men die. But let's not talk about it anymore," she smiled. "Let's take a nap while Orndorf is finishing with the cooking."

Montana rose from where he had been some distance away, listening and picked up his war bag. Out of deference for the two women, he moved away from the coach and soon stretched out in the deep grass a hundred yards away, the bag serving as pillow. Vague thoughts floated uneasily through his mind; they and fear. Fear that trouble would sweep the country before he could get in and then go his way again. And Rundert puzzled him slightly in many ways. On the one hand he appeared to be a ruthless parvenu out to gain his own ends in a double-cross of everybody, especially the man for whom he worked and whose daughter he reportedly was going to marry. On the other hand, he seemed genuinely concerned over events encompassing the ranch—possibly because he had his eye on it for himself.

HIS thoughts grew hazy and before he became aware of it his eyes closed drowsily and he dropped off to sleep. He lay on his back and the world was a pleasant place of weird relaxation until the first sharp note of a horse's hoof striking rock came. It came again and Montana, cursing himself for not remaining on guard, rolled over with a start. He heard more of them and the sounds were broken in upon by a sharp command in Ro Rundert's voice, held to a low pitch. The Road Runner now stood in plain view in a small opening surrounded by buck brush as the riders pulled up.

"Howdy, Black Jack. Howdy, boys," the road runner greeted. "Had an idea you'd be showing up pretty soon. Spotted you a couple of times this morning, and cussed the daylights out of you all. Lucky for us all Belle was sitting facing the front," he added.

"We kept pretty well back," Black Jack said, dismounting and brushing back the long locks showing under his hat. Black Jack Caswell, it appeared, didn't like barbers. "How long ye been here?"

"About an hour. Orndorf wanted to get on to the water here before stopping. He's got the grub cooked."

"Drunken scum he is," cut in Dutch Saunders.

"Forget it Dutchie," Black Jack said, stretching lazily and yawning. "If ye got something to settle with him, let it go fer the time bein'. Right now we're all set, looks like. It's taken a long time, but today we've got King Ramson where we want him. We're taking over the whole country—with something extra to boot."

"Vare iss the vimmin?" demanded the Dutchman.

"Keep yore shirt tail in," Rundert advised easily. "They're over there asleep under the coach. I didn't wake 'em up when Orndorf got the grub cooked. Wanted to wait for you boys."

Some of the men had dismounted, still in new clothes and still freshly shaven; but stamped upon them indelibly was something that marked them as men of one breed, one code, one way of life.

"Forrest cashing in his chips was the best break we could have had," Rundert said, reaching for tobacco sack and papers. "I was allus a little afraid that after we made him pay off to get his daughter back and then rush him outa the country, he wouldn't take it layin' down. He was one of those gents who believe in law and order. I figgered he'd like as not blow in here some day with a U. S. Marshall and a hundred men from Cheyenne. We can make our own law up here, but bucking the Federal Government is something else."

"I nefer intend that he should git away," growled Dutch Saunders im-

patiently. "You talk, talk, talk like the fool, Ro, *nein?*"

Rundert ignored the remark and asked about the herd. Black Jack grinned and ran dirty fingers through his glossy bear. "I had a couple of the boys trailing it. They came through in fine shape. They're out in the basin at the ranch gettin' sassy fat in no time. Where's our friend, Mister Two-Gun Hombre?"

RUNDERT jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Over there hanging around the girls, I guess."

"Good. We'll take care of him first. Might be a good way of lettin' that Belle filly know we mean business too. It'll cost Ramson every cent he's got to get her back too. Have an idea where he's at?"

"He's supposed to be over in the back country looking up some of the hard case riders who quit when he sold out to Forrest. But I doubt if he'll have much luck. Too many already found out they can make more stealing from him than workin' for him, even at gun pay."

"He-he-he!" chortled Black Jack Caswell. "That's a good 'un, that is. He-he-he!"

"He figgers you'll make a play for that herd and is trying to get set. Thinks maybe if you make it, you'll try to drive south and mebbe ship from Cheyenne or some other point, after the blotted brands heal over."

Black Jack's high-pitched he-he-he came again. "So he figgers we're after the herd does he? He'll dam' soon find out we ain't goin' to drive it a single *foot*. We've got him where we want him and we'll just take over the ranch. As for the gals—"

"As for the girls," Rundert cut in quietly, something deadly in his tone, "don't go getting any ideas. Not about Helen Forrest. Sabe?"

"Now that's what I'd call a plumb fickle man," snickered Black Jack Caswell. "Ye go and spend months and months workin' for King Ramson and makin' Belle think ye're goin' to marry her. Then along comes this eastern gal and ye switch right over and leave Ramson's daughter in the lurch. Why, Ro, ye surprise me no end! Jest a regular heart wrecker, he is, eh, Dutchie?"

"Talk, talk, talk! growled the Dutchman surlily, his eyes looking in the direction of the distant clearing. "Vy ve don't do something?"

"Now, now take it easy," Caswell soothed. "Just be a good boy and forget all about the wimmin and maybe this winter when we're all drinkin' likker in front of Ramson's big fireplace I'll let ye pinch one of them young Assiniboin Indian girls he got workin' in the house. Only just a little pinch, he-he-he!"

CHAPTER XII

MONTANA had heard enough. Many things now were plain. It was plain why Black Jack and the Dutchman and their men had been waiting in the Junction; spying to keep an eye on the herd and the new owner until Forrest and the girls left town. They were going to close in on the stage and take over, and then get in touch with Ramson. As for Ro Rundert, the man was playing for very big stakes. He had crossed up the man who called himself King Ramson, apparently believing that, working with Caswell and the Dutchman, the haul would, in the long run, be the richer. He was an unscrupulous gunman, vain, believing in himself and his cronies.

The Road Runner. . . .

Montana rolled over. With a lithe

movement he twisted sideways, jerked the 40-65 out of the war bag, reached in for a belt of cartridges for the weapon, and slung them over his shoulder, bandolier fashion. He crept down through the buckbrush, looking back, the big repeater gripped in his right hand. The stage showed up through the trees and his first thought was of Orndorf. The driver lay in a half sitting position, his back against the trunk of pine, his mouth open and heavy snores coming from it. The whiskey had almost put him out. In covered pans the food was waiting among the ashes and down by the creek the horses, fed and rested somewhat, stood with hips slumped, eyes closed drowsily.

It was a matter of moments for Montana to get his saddle. He slipped the Winchester into its boot and then carried saddle and bridle to the horses. He didn't know whether they were saddle broken or not, but there was little time to bother about such things. Selecting the three gentlest looking ones, he quickly removed nosebags. No time to water them now. They couldn't run on bellies filled with water.

Orndorf had not unharnessed and Montana worked fast, almost frantically getting off the harness but leaving on two of the bridles. It was but the work of moments to cut lines into reins and lead the three mounts over to a tree. He tied them there and hurried back to the coach. Orndorf still snored heavily, his big lips quivering with each outgoing breath, hands folded across his chest. Montana crept by and went to the back of the coach.

Both girls were sound asleep. He bent and touched Belle Ramson, she the half sister he had never known, and her range wise eyes opened at once. He placed a finger to his lips.

"Don't talk," he said, low-voiced. "Black Jack Caswell and Dutch Saunders are here with about a dozen men."

"Where?"

He nodded toward the east. "Over there. You're both being held for ransom. Rundert seems to have engineered the deal."

She was a woman of action. She turned to waken Helen and Montana, knowing the hard riding job that lay ahead, risked all by climbing up on top of the coach for Rundert's saddle. But Orndorf was still asleep and too far away to hear. When Montana reached the ground again Helen looked at him, her eyes widening. Gone was the well dressed man of a little while ago. In his place stood a westerner in riding leather, gun belted, and carrying a big Winchester, a third cartridge belt slung over one shoulder bandolier fashion.

"Can you ride?" he asked.

"Quite well, thank you."

"We'd better get going . . . fast."

Something about him, the stoniness of countenance, the guns he wore, brought a doubt to her mind. She was remembering McBain on the train.

"Who are you," she whispered. "Why did you come with us?"

"They call me Montana, Miss Forrest. And I came with you to save a man's life."

HE LEAPED at her then, at the both of them, for fear and indecision had come into their eyes. They were seeing a name now, a name that was notorious and legendary. They were seeing the fight at Buckner's, where four men had died under this man's guns.

He hurried the two of them along, for sounds had come from over in the trees. They came up to the horses and Montana slipped the saddle on what he took to be the next best horse. He bent

swiftly, grabbed the dangling girth, and cinched it tight, an unsaid prayer going out that it needed no adjustment.

He dropped on his knees before Helen Forrest and before she was aware of what was happening the knife flashed and a two foot rent appeared in her skirt. He spun her around and ripped again. Then she was being flung bodily up into the saddle. Belle Ramson calmly tore her own skirt.

"I played you for a square one all along," she said. "Maybe I was mistaken, maybe not. But any gamble with a gun fighter is better than to chance falling into the hands of Dutch Saunders. Help me up."

He grasped her foot and swung her to the saddle, and admiration filled him at the manner in which his half sister had met the situation. She was the daughter of an unscrupulous man almost proved a direct cow thief, but she was a thoroughbred. He leaped astride his own mount and gigged the animal toward the creek. The horses tried to lower their heads and drink but were pushed on across. One of them stumbled on a smooth rock in the shallow water and the sharp noise sounded like a gunshot.

A yell came from behind and that was the signal that Montana had been dreading. No chance now of slipping away unseen and getting a big head start. They would have to run for it.

With a slash of the long cut harness he sent Helen Forrest's mount plunging ahead and the three broke into a run through the timber. Montana spurred his own mount and plunged on beside them. His eyes went to the eastern girl. Thank God she could ride! She jockeyed her mount in and out among the trees with skill while beside her the western girl who had almost been born on a horse rode hard.

Montana threw a glance back. A group of riders had come out into the clearing by the stage and were yelling and pointing. This much he could make out as his bare backed mount plunged on. He caught a brief glance of a startled Orndorf leaping to his feet, saw a movement of Dutch Saunders' right hand stabbing downward over the saddle. A report, faint in the rushing wind, drifted to his ears.

Saunders, in bestial rage, had shot down the renegade Ramson driver.

The others had not hesitated. They spurred hard through the trees and Rundert suddenly appeared among them, astride another of the coach horses. For a mile Montana worked his charges ahead, ducking in and out of gullies while he tried every trick in the book to throw off the pursuers. Those tricks were few; there was no time. He happened to be mounted on a rangy gelding, and, without the weight of a saddle, it carried him easily. Two or three times in that mile he swung off to one side and over low hummocks, baring himself to their view; but it availed him little. Those hard, oncoming riders seemed to realize that if a man was risking his life to get two women into the clear, then he hardly would flee and leave them to what looked like certain capture.

SO THEY rode out that mile, each thunder of the horses hitting the ground a warning to the grim faced bareback rider that such a pace could not last. Belle knew enough to hold her mount down to enough of a pace that the men coming up behind could not close in, yet conserving its stamina by not forcing the pace; and Helen Forrest, well bred horeswoman that she was, followed suit.

But the pace was beginning to tell and Montana flung his horse over almost against Belle Ramson's mount as

the three of them fled down a shallow, grass carpeted ravine.

"They're gaining," he yelled. "Up ahead about a half a mile is a deep gully that makes a sharp turn to the left. Hit up that gully until we come to the turn. I'll be right behind you. But when we get there cut right into the thick timber and buckbrush and go straight up over the ridge . . . and *keep going!* I'll swing left and try again to throw them off."

No use to tell her that he was going to try *standing them* off. It would do little good. She jerked her head in answer, and his last glimpse at their faces showed him that something was there which hadn't been there before. For a brief, startled moment, back there at the stage, his name had struck fear and distrust. It was gone now.

He slowed up to let them get ahead, the shrill whistle coming from the gelding's nostrils a danger sign that it was about through. The long trip hauling the stage had been too much.

Rifle fire came, as he had expected. With the first reports he swung the horse over to get himself out of line of rifle fire with the girls now forty yards to the fore. Bullets began to drone and Montana flung a look back over his shoulder. He was not too worried yet; not as long as they were shooting from the backs of running horses. But even as he looked, a man jerked off to one side and was down on one knee, levering shots from a Winchester. Dust spurts that had been hitting thirty yards away, now suddenly began leaping up all around Montana's mount. A leaden slug glanced off a rock and turned sharply upward, screaming off into the sky as though in angry protest.

The mouth of the gully opened wide its jaws and swallowed the three of them, safety for what could be only a few moments. Belle Ramson looked back and so did Helen. He waved them on, trying to indicate the turn ahead. He saw Helen Forrest raise a hand in goodbye, briefly before the timber and buckbrush covered ridge at the turn loomed up.

It seemed miles away when measured in the labored, agonized panting of mounts that had given all and were about done. The riders behind, their own mounts in a like fix, appeared to sense what was at stake too for they redoubled their efforts. A hundred yards, fifty . . . and still the turn seemed miles away. Then it loomed up, hidden by trees through which Montana flashed, and a look back showed him no riders in view behind. Seconds now, a few seconds. . . .

The turn came, almost flung itself at him. He reined hard over, saw Belle and Helen throwing their straining mounts up the sharp incline, mounts and horses bobbing into sight every few yards. They went up, higher and still higher. He caught a last glimpse of hind legs straining hard at the incline near the crest, two hands that waved, and they were over and he was alone, going hard down the other way on a horse that could go no further without a blow.

Timber and more rocks showed up. It was now or never. He jerked the stage mount to a halt and leaped off, leaving it panting and too winded to do little more than move off a few steps and stand with forelegs braced far apart, its belly heaving. Winchester in hand he ran back and dropped behind a cluster of protecting boulders. A minute passed.

Then he heard them coming.

CHAPTER XII

THEIR horses were tired too. He could tell by the sound of the hoof-

beats. He knew without seeing that they had been spurred mercilessly, could see without seeing the flaring nostrils, heaving sides, and lathered flanks and shoulders and necks. The beats swept nearer and nearer and Montana, crouching back of the boulder, made a final inspection of the heavy Winchester with which he had practiced so much. He eased down the lever and the breech opened slidingly, revealing reassuringly the cold bright gleam of new, unexploded brass. The breech went closed once more and he lined the barrel across the top of the boulder again, shifting a booted foot to a more comfortable position.

The first rider shot into view, a heavy haired though clean shaven outlaw who must have been a very tall man. He loomed high in the saddle, hat brim pressed back by the wind, his eyes darting everywhere. Montana aimed swiftly and low, four feet below the dot that was a freshly shaven face, and squeezed the trigger.

He hated to shoot the horse. No man liked to kill a good horse. But there was no other way out. A man astride a running horse, plunging around a turn toward him, was a hard target to hit; and if Montana missed it would give the first of Caswell's outlaws the opportunity to come down hard at him, working a colt.

So Montana shot the horse with the 40-65. With its sharp recoil against his shoulder the brute went down head first, struck somewhere around the shoulders and chest, the tall rider somersaulting. He rose to his feet staggering, the white that had been his face now a dirt covered dot fast turning red from contact with the ground. More riders had come in and one of them ran in to bend from the saddle. But he made a still target at not more than a hundred yards and Montana wasn't used to missing at one hundred yards. He shot the outlaw out of the saddle and the tall one, half way up, fell back. He rolled over, started to rise, and then went over to lie face down without moving. Twice more the repeater crashed with deadly accuracy. The lone man back of the boulder fired fast but coolly. On his face was the same lack of emotion that had been there the night McBain had died under his guns. He reloaded while Saunders, Black Jack Caswell, and Ro Rundert hauled cursingly on reins in the midst of milling riders and just as cursingly gave orders; and it came to him with something of a start that he was fighting for King Ramson when he had originally come into the back country for a far different reason: to kill the man. He found time to wonder how far away Belle and Helen had gotten on their played out mounts, and whether any of the outlaws, circling to surround him, would cut the tracks of their horses. He remembered Pete the bartender in Smeller-A-Mile and how he had looked, sitting woodenly and talking to the man in the window. . . .

Don't do it Brand, she had whispered, *for my sake, don't do it. He's married now and has a family, perhaps.* . . .

He threw the last of a second magazine at Dutch Saunders' thick girthed figure and knew he had missed, fired too hastily, as the horse thief wheeled with his men and broke back out of sight—anything to get away from the man who shot as though the Devil himself had guided his hand.

MONTANA got to his feet and ran toward his mount, trying to jam more cartridges into the magazine. He got in two, heard Black Jack Caswell's stentorian roar come floating over the elbow shaped ridge beyond the turn.

"Cut up over the thump and git him from behind," he was bellowing. "Hurry before them two women get away."

Montana, leaping at the now suddenly plunging gelding, was conscious of a sense of relief. His plan had worked. Black Jack thought the girls had gone on down the gully while he remained to hold off the others. The bay, some of its wind back, was dragging him in circles. His sharp boot heels cut double narrow furrows in the ground as he hung on and tried to quiet it. After what seemed like ages he got it quieted and half dragged it to where he had dropped the repeater. A bound carried him up and he loped off down the gully again, ducking from sight in the timber.

But his luck was not to hold out. From somewhere back behind, the remainder of the regrouped riders had taken up the pursuit and were firing wildly through the trees. One of those shots found its mark. The bullet drove in through the right flank and seemed to explode the gallant heart of the animal Montana rode. It stumbled first and then a cry that was almost human came from its throat. That cry was a warning as it went down. He went over its head and rolled over and over, regaining his feet, dazed and wobbly. The trees were spinning into blurred green and dust smote his nostrils. He wiped at his dirty face and tried to clear his head. It cleared and he saw his mount, lying on its side, legs outstretched, its broken neck doubled back queerly. The once heaving sides were still.

Montana glanced down through the timber. They were running by, unaware that a chance shot had dismounted him. A look at his repeater showed a muzzle choked with dirt. The weapon was temporarily useless. He ran staggeringly along the tree studded incline of the gully, buckbrush grabbing at his legs. Limbs slashed at his face. He climbed higher and finally fell panting back of a rotted log. Something tawny took shape on a limb above him. He caught a glimpse of tawny ears above flaming eyes and a long tail lashing nervously. He grabbed for his guns but the Mountain lion already had leaped. Its long length flashed over him and struck the ground and it was gone with a rush of frightened, huge padded feet.

He forgot the men hunting him for a moment, wiping the sweat from his face with a sleeve. He knew it would be put a matter of time until the riders would circle below and find no tracks of Belle and Helen's passing. A hope flashed into his breast that they would continue on southward, instead of west where the girls had gone. He might be able to go back and pick up one of the mounts of the riders he had shot there in the gully.

Hoofbeats sounded from somewhere down below. More followed and they came from opposite directions. He heard them pull up together.

"See anything of him?" yelled a voice.

"Nothing. He just disappeared in thin air."

THE next voice belonged to Ro Rundert. "He's got to be around here somewhere," the Road Runner said. "We'd have heard his horse otherwise. Get in that timber all around here and flush him out!"

"You don't say," came in jeering reply. "Listen, Ro, if you'd a plugged him back in the junction while we was in that saloon, this wouldn't a happened. Black Jack is going to be plenty riled at you at this mess. You wait and see. And if you're so all-fired

anxious to git him, then go hunt him all by yore purty little self. I'm goin' back up and see what Black Jack says."

A yell came then, from far up the gully. Montana heard it plainly, his panting subsided, and the words shot cold fear into his heart.

"Hey, Dutch! Oh . . . Dutchie! Send somebody out to round up the boys and come over here pronto. Two of these hoss tracks lead off up the ridge. We've split 'em up! The two wimmin went this way. Come on, you men—we've got those two wimmin. They'll never get more'n three miles."

It was true. Those two girls wouldn't have a chance now. They would be run down and caught.

And he was alone, afoot in outlaw country, with probably a dozen outlaws soon to be combing the country to shoot him on sight; for if the girls were caught, his identity as the man who had shot it out with Black Jack's men at Buckners, would definitely be established.

Nor would the horse thief ever stop until the man who finally returned to Ben Carson's was wiped out.

Montana sat down on the log and unloaded the repeater, cleaning out the barrel the best he could. By hurriedly cutting several lengths of a slender limb some six inches long he made a makeshift cleaning rod. A piece of his shirt tail served as a patch. He inserted the patch and pushed it down the barrel with the stick. It went protestingly and was followed by another that showed it along a few inches further. In that manner he got the patch through and shook out the sticks from the bore. Quickly he reloaded and then began creeping through the timber, back in the direction where the fight first had taken place. It was quiet now and he saw no signs of men about. He came to the place where the girls had gone up and looked down upon the scene below. No emotion bothered him now as he saw the sprawled figures of men he had killed, but his lips thinned as he saw the saddles. Caswell had ordered the horses of the dead men unsaddled and turned loose, out of reach of a man on foot.

"They've gone, I reckon," Montana said slowly. "They'll get the girls first, or try to. Then they'll come back, figuring I couldn't get very far on foot."

Nor could he, but a man could try. He set off in the direction of the stage.

IT TOOK him more than an hour to cover the distance that the running horses had made in what now seemed minutes. He crossed the creek two hundred yards below where the stage could be seen, wading with boots in one hand. He circled the place all the way around before coming in. But the hopes that had risen so high now fell flat as he saw only emptiness where the other stage mounts had been. They either had broken loose at the first shooting or Black Jack had sensed Montana's plans and sent a man back.

It didn't matter. They were gone.

Orndorf lay sprawled in death where he had fallen. Saunders had shot him through the side of the neck. Montana strode past and went to the place where the fire had been. The coals were still faintly warm and the food lay untouched except for a little pecking at by the birds. He sat down and ate the cold food, fixing up some of the biscuits and bacon to carry with him.

Then he rose and headed due west again, toward Buckner's Crossing.

CHAPTER XIV

BACK in Smeller-A-Mile the town had, after the first flurry of shots

that evening, settled down into its usual ways. Nobody asked questions because it wasn't the business of anybody to ask questions. Smeller-A-Mile woke the next morning to the fact that Pete was in charge of Carsons' store and that the trader had, during the previous night, disappeared.

As for Pete, that worthy took over his new duties with dignity and aplomb. He spent the first day charging whatever he thought the price might be, argued violently with one of the few town ladies over the size of her husband's trousers, sold her a pair for him three sizes too large, and then settled with the irate owner himself, when that indignant individual came in brandishing the merchandise in one angry fist. Sometime late in the afternoon, while hunting for a pair of non-existent gold scales, his hand struck a flat object and it gave off a musical *thrummmmm*. Pete hauled out the battered guitar, security for a three dollar loan to an indignant rider, and gave the strings an experimental twang. The discordant reply brought joy to his soured soul.

He went back to the bottle he'd thoughtfully had sent over from his saloon, hoisted one, and plunked again.

"Let's see now, he cogitated, eyeing the ceiling. "All the songs I knows ain't fit to be sung in a public place, and I forgot the words to all the others. Mebbe I could make one up. Less see what rhymes with goose. Papoose—caboose—loose. Soos or souse—nope, that's somethin' else."

He took another drink and eyed the ceiling again. A shadow darkened the doorway and its maker moved inside. Pete, busy with the guitar, focused his gaze to the far away places to woo the muse.

"We ain't got any," he said, over his shoulder to the customer. "Been out for a month now. Don't know when we'll have any more in, come back in six or eight months."

"Where's Carson?" asked a hard voice.

"Damfino. Fishin' maybe. Shore, that's where he went. Said he's getting tired of eating beef. Less see now—goose, hooch, loose, moose, noose—" He broke off and tried an experimental line.

The out of tune strings groaned. "I onct had a squaw who had a papoose, she—"

"Turn around and stop that damned noise," snarled the voice.

Pete turned, found himself staring blankly down the barrel of a six shooter. At a distance of three feet, it's muzzle looked like a railroad tunnel.

"I'm strictly neutral," he said hurriedly. His forefinger caught under one of the strings as he shifted position and the string gave off a mournful sunnnnng! "It's kinda outa tune," he apologized.

THE man moved closer. Pete was a little drunk but now he recognized him. It was the man who had been with McBain.

"My name's Horton, in case you've forgot," the holder of the Colt announced grimly. "I'm going to ast you some questions. Where's Montana?"

"I'm blowed if I know," Pete answered truthfully.

"Where's Carson?" snapped Horton.

"He ain't here, is he now?" Pete said, and forced down a titter at his own quick wit. "If he was I'd be over in my saloon. Been kinda thinkin' I'd sell out and hit further north. You wanna buy a saloon? Four hundred cash for the stock. I'll throw in the building free. It leaks like hell anyhow," he apologized.

Horton's lips thinned in exasperation.

After they had been driven out of town by fire from in front of the store, McBain had decided to catch the train north and report to Black Jack. He, Horton, was to remain and find out what he could. So Horton had camped that night by the tracks and returned to town the following afternoon. Cautious query had elicited the information that the stranger who had visited Carson the previous evening was gone and that, sometime during the night, Carson had disappeared too. To Horton, this meant that Montana and Ben Carson had ridden out together. Yet a circle of town had disclosed only *one* set of horse tracks leading north.

Horton, his anger rising, stepped a little closer at the unperturbed post manager.

"Are you drunk?" he demanded, pretty certain that Pete was.

"Hell no!" swore the ex-dispenser of whiskey indignantly. "Haven't been drunk in five years. Hurts my stomach. Only take a little now and then to ease the belly ache. Hey, can you sing?" he suggested suddenly. "Somethin' sentimental like, 'While The Tears Ran Down Her Back'—or maybe it was her chin. I'm blowed if I know which it was. Couldn't a been her back though. Any wall-eyed pirute oughta know if she was squallin' like a hootowl she'd have to twist her fool head clean around to let 'em bounce off her danged shoulder blades. Musta been her chin. Oh, well, the hell with it! Serves her right for bellerin' in the first place. We'll try something else."

Horton had stepped up close, his eyes blazing. The hook hammer of the big pistol gave off a metallic click as the back country man cocked the weapon. "Just one more time I'm asking," he snarled. "And if you don't tell me I'll blow you to kingdom come. Where'd Montana go?"

"Go to blazes," snorted Pete. "I can be stubborn too. You won't sing with me, I won't tell you that Montana went north on the train."

"When?"

"Last night. Only one train through here, blast you."

"Carson go with him?"

But Pete only wagged a cunning forefinger, having a little difficulty in holding his balance in the propped back chair. "Oh, no you don't! You got to sing first—"

BUT Horton already had moved. He slid the uncocked weapon into its sheath and turned. In his mind Ben Carson had gone out with Montana and both were, by now, in the junction. Horton thought of the train, remembered that he had two of Black Jack's valuable horses, and decided he'd have to ride up. He hurried out the door and mounted, and Pete, a bit unsteady on his feet, followed him as far as the door. He stood with hands on hips, guitar neck gripped in one fist and the bottle in the other, squinting.

"Now what in the blazed hid *he* get mad about?" he snorted. "Oh, well, he probably couldn't sing anyhow. Ten to one he'd a sounded like a tomcat shot in the stomach with a bootjack."

He went back to the chair, sat down, and plunked at the strings. Soose, goose, calaboose—" Pete said, eyeing the ceiling.

As for Horton, his and McBain's horses were rested and it was late afternoon. By switching saddles at regular intervals he could make pretty good time. He drove northward into the evening and rode until it was too dark for easy travel. He was up with the dawn and saddled and on the trail once more. Hour after hour he rode and dusk was almost down three evenings later when at last he pulled up in coun-

try that was quite familiar. From the top of the ridge he sat astride one of the sweat crusted horses, a faint wisp of blue smoke visible a mile and a half away. Horton thought of the young Assiniboin squaw's cooking and gigged his mounts forward again. It had been a long ride and he was tired. The trail descended into a ravine whose bed was a narrow ribbon of sand and gravel, washed out during rains. This led, a mile further, to a flat expanse of creek bottom, presaging the narrow, shallow creek that ran almost at Buckner's back door. It was thick with evergreens and buckbrush, and it was in one of these clumps that Horton suddenly came upon the horse.

The man pulled up, his eyes darting here and there, hand on his pistol. The horse turned an inquiring head, then went back to dozing. Horton's eyes saw the beaten area around its hoofs and knew it had been there for two or three hours. He rode forward cautiously and finally pulled up beside the animal. One look at the BC carved inside the dish cantle and an oath of astonishment escaped him.

The saddle belonged to Ben Carson!

Leather creaked as Horton swung down. He reached up and took his glasses from their case and began to sweep what little area there was not shut in by the limbs of the evergreens. He moved over to a higher point, stepped up on a boulder, and focused the glasses on Buckner's corral. It was filled with horses. The distance was too great to make out ownership, but a splash of grey showed him a chinless roan owned by one of Black Jack's riders.

"Talk about luck!" grunted Horton, his eyes shining. "It's the boys all right, and have I got news for them. Black Jack and Dutchie will be plumb surprised when I tell 'em that Montana is up in this country."

He went to Carson's horse, took up the reins, and began leading the three of them forward, following the tracks of a pair of boots.

A half mile away he tied the three mounts and went on alone, cautiously, a heavy pistol gripped in his right hand.

BUCKNER'S Crossing lay like a sprawled black box that evening along about dark. It lay some twelve or fifteen miles west of where the coach had made the noon stop, and the former way station for the stages made an ideal place for Buckner's kind of business. It was not far from a small creek, with part of the rambling corral out back running right down to the water's edge. That made the watering for the horses of Buckner's customers an easy one.

Inside the former station's main room, three lamps glowed brightly, two from the mantel above the huge fireplace and another from back of the short bar the squawman had built. There was a fire in the fireplace tonight, not because of the cold but because Black Jack Caswell preferred his coffee that way. He sat comfortably upon a low rawhide stool, drinking coffee. Ro Rundert stared moodily into the small fire from his position by the mantel. Dutch Saunders ate noisily from a plate of fresh beef brought by Buckner's Assiniboin squaw, and a half-dozen riders lounged about, drinking whiskey and taking life easy.

Caswell put down his empty tin and reached for the blackened coffee pot again, inserting a stick through the handle to drag it from the glowing coals. He looked at Rundert and chuckled complacently.

"Ye sorta look low, Ro," he observed.

Rundert shifted his position to the other hip and grunted. "Can't get that

gent out of my mind," he admitted. "He plugged McBain cold on the train. Mack got on about seven or eight miles from Carson's place. Must have had something to report, I reckon, for he signalled me. Then he spots this Edmonds gent and goes for his gun. Edmonds plugged him cold. There's something tryin' to get through in my mind and don't quite make it. Something that'll make everything fit. You reckon Ramson was suspicious of me all along and had him aboard that train as a sort of bodyguard to see that nothing happened to the girls?"

"Ye talk like a younker," Black Jack grinned. "If he'd suspected anything of the like you'd have been dead by now—shot without warning."

"Talk, talk, talk," cut in the Dutchman's voice from the small table where he sat alone. "Vy you all don't shut up?"

"Why don't *you* shut up, Dutchie?" chuckled Black Jack. "Ro is plumb worried about his gals, that's all. How'd you feel if you had a choice of two and couldn't make up yore mind until another gent comes clean out of nowhere and swipes *both* of 'em?"

Back of the bar, a very small, wiry man with narrow eyes poured another drink for one of the riders and took the quarter. He nodded to the Indian woman to take over and she paddled silently forward, bright black eyes in contrast to the red skirt and white waist she wore. Buckner moved over by the fireplace, the flames showing up the grey streaks in his coarse, once black hair.

"I've been thinking," he said.

"Naw!" ejaculated Caswell, snickering through his beard.

"I know who your man is."

"Vell," demanded the Dutchman, wiping his greasy hands on his flannel front.

"HE'S about twenty-four or five year old, I reckon. He's got hair that ain't either red or sandy or blonde. You don't notice his hair, but you do notice his face. It's got something in it that makes a man think twice and then look again. I saw it that night last fall. Yore riders woulda seen it that night last fall too only they was a little too likkered up to care and there were five of 'em. So they gets plugged and Carson packs him out, shot all to pieces. McBain and Horton are the last two you sent down to Smeller-A-Mile and what happens? A gent gets on the train there. Mack gets on and this gent plugs him pronto. He comes on to the junction and right in with the stage, heading here, he says. He was heading for King Ramson's ranch. He was coming back to take over the job he was hired to do last fall—wipe you out. That's your man, and, Ro, you're mighty stupid not to have known it before now."

They were staring at him and it was quiet in the room. Rundert's face was hard, frozen. The ice broke in a single whisper:

"*Montana!* So that's who it was! That gun slammin' outlaw who shot it out here last fall and then got McBain on the train. *Montana* . . . on that stage with me—in the saloon backin' Austin's play—on the train. . . .

The whisper trailed off into silence. Buckner had gone back to his place of the bar while the Assiniboin woman came and silently removed the platter from in front of Dutch Saunders.

One of the riders spoke up. "Maybe he can't do a lot out there afoot. We shore combed that country for him all afternoon. What are you-all worryin' about?"

"It's him, all right," Rundert suddenly almost snarled. "And I'll bet money Belle and Helen knew it. I'll

choke it out of them!"

He looked less the dapper gunman now, his clothes rumpled and smelling of horse sweat from the hard ride back before switching to a dead man's saddle down there where the lone rider had ambushed them and then got away on foot; for they had found the dead horse within an hour.

"I reckon I'll go in and see how they're coming along," he sneered.

He tossed the contents of his cup into the fireplace and placed it on the mantel, turning on a boot heel and heading for a door that led off into another part of the building. Buckner reached back and brought up a shotgun from back of the bar and stepped outside the back door. A chain rattled and he quieted the huge mastiff that rose with a growl. He slipped the hasp from its collar and circled the corrals. But all seemed quiet and he returned, leaving the mastiff free.

RUNDERT was still in the other room, looking down at Helen and Belle. The new owner to what once had been King Ramson's vast domain looked up coldly.

"Is there something you wanted, Mr. Rundert?" she asked coolly.

He half grinned at her and there was, back of it, a touch of fire and of hate and of triumph. She had gone through much during her few days out west; fire had burned her and out of it had come something tempered in steel.

"For an easterner, you're not doing too bad," Rundert said.

"Somehow, Ro," Belle said. "I guess I'm not too surprised at you turning renegade. But it still seems a little far fetched. Always the player for big stakes, eh?"

"How are you feeling?" he grunted, ignoring the jibe.

"As well as could be expected considering the rough treatment we've had. We gave you a pretty good race too, after Montana threw you off. What a pity we couldn't have gotten back to dad with the story."

"So it was Montana after all?" he gritted, his eyes blazing.

"Yes, she admitted quite calmly. "And it wasn't until after we got here tonight that I overheard some of the riders talking. It seems they had been in town when Austin clashed with you in a saloon. Shall I go on?" she finished mockingly.

"No," he grunted.

"So the great Road Runner backed down?" she jeered at him. "The odds were a dozen to two and you wouldn't stand. I think I always have felt that you were scum, Ro. That underneath that flashy outside of yours, you were a four flusher. I guess it's why I never consented to marry you."

"You won't get the chance now," he said; and then he told her about Ramson and the man's plans for stealing his ranch back; that the sale to Forrest had been a part of a well-planned scheme. It was his turn now and he was brutally merciless.

Belle Ramson listened, her face slowly changing color. She wanted not to believe. She wanted to cry Liar! in his sneering countenance. But the words wouldn't come. It was all too perfect. Too many little things that had seemed immaterial now fitted together.

Whispers. . . . *Ramson's buying stolen stock!* She had known instinctively that his profits on bought cattle could never be quite so large. But he was King Ramson, her father. . . .

Her shoulders sagged and she broke down. Helen's arm went out around her shoulders.

"It's true," Belle whispered slowly, brokenly, over and over again. "It's true, Helen. My father, hiring that cold

blooded outlaw killer Montana to spill blood for money's sake. So that's why he came in on the train and stayed around? So that's why he rode out with us? Yes, I see now why he tried to get us away from Black Jack and the Dutchman. God, what a blind fool I've been!"

She began to weep softly and Helen Forrest held her close there on the bed, the stronger of the two.

Outside in the night the big mastiff began to bay. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

WITH the instinct of a mountain man Montana had trudged on westward in a bee line for Buckner's. It was awkward going in high heel boots and the big repeater was heavy, but mile after mile went by with only few stop for rest and to drink at some of the small streams he crossed. He averaged about three miles per hour on the flatter stretches, and thus it came about that just at sundown he pulled up and lay on a ridge looking down upon Buckner's Crossing. Smoke was coming from the sprawled building and in the corral were quite a number of horses. Montana lay there, resting his tired body, and watching the house.

After a time the door opened and he saw Buckner come out. The squawman appeared to be uneasy. He carried a shotgun as he went to the corral out back and fed the horses. It was at that period of the evening when stillness has come and sound carried far. Laughter floated plainly from within and the watcher knew that some of the squawman's customers—Black Jack's unholy crew, he hoped—were drinking and getting ready for supper.

"Wish I had a pair of glasses," Montana muttered. "Like to see the brands on those horses down there. But they're probably stolen or rebranded anyhow."

For another half hour he lay flat on his stomach watching, his ears alert for any sound in the country back of him. He had no way of knowing that the riders already had given up their search for him and ridden on to the whiskey and food at Buckner's. It grew dusk and then darkness was down and the stars were out, and a shadowy figure of a man began moving in toward the buildings. Montana crawled down the slope, slipped in among the trees, and pulled up again. He was less than a hundred yards away from the corrals now, and presently the bark of a dog broke out. It subsided into a low growl and the growl was repeated. The mastiff was uneasy.

The door opened, throwing a square of yellow on the ground. Buckner's figure, shotgun in hand, appeared and Montana's breath sucked in in a little hiss as he recognized Ro Rundert, Black Jack Caswell, and Dutch Saunders over by the fireplace.

He had guessed right!

"Anyhow," he muttered to himself, "if they got the girls, I know where they are now. If they didn't get them, Helen and Belle are safe at the ranch."

Buckner had released the chained mastiff and Montana edged toward the stream, a part of which flowed through one end of the corral. He slipped off boots and crept in to his knees, crouching from sight back of a huge, half rotted tree trunk that lay at the water's edge. Buckner finished and went back and the mastiff followed. Montana moved closer to the corral again. He was worried about the dog. He couldn't go into the corral and get a horse without the mastiff setting the night athunder with its barking; and long before he could get free Buckner and the others would be boiling out of the house.

And that wouldn't do. He couldn't

afford to chance it. Over there four miles north was King Ramson's ranch. If the man himself wasn't there, then Austin and some of the riders were. Montana remembered how Austin had looked at Belle. The man would give his all to square up with Ro Rundert and the others. As for the riders . . .

THE darkness hid Montana's shrug. He was crouching there in the darkness, his mind wrestling with the problem of getting a horse out of the corral unseen and unheard, when the mastiff suddenly broke into baying, bawling life and dashed past the corral straight for the water. It hit the creek with a splash, passing within fifty feet of Montana, and fled out into the darkness. The door flew open again and Buckner appeared once more.

"Somebody comin'," the squawman called back over his shoulder. "Three horses."

Black Jack appeared beside him, followed by Ro Rundert.

"Who the devil do ye think it might be now?" the horse thief asked.

"I don't know," came the grunted reply. "Might be any one of a dozen men from the back country. But they're coming from the direction of Smeller-A-Mile. There they are now."

The horses had come out of the flat expanse of land beyond the creek. Montana saw them, single file, enter the water and splash across toward the back of the house. He crouched low, and something about the second rider's bulky outline struck a familiar chord in his brain.

"Carson," he muttered. "With his hands tied to the pommel. So they got Ben all right? But I wonder who?"

He wasn't long in finding out. Buckner's voice challenged sharply and a man's voice came back in reply. "It's Horton, from Smeller-A-Mile. I got Carson."

The two stopped in front of the square of light and Montana saw Carson's face. It was bloody, his lips smashed. Ben's hat was off and his grey hair too was matted. He had been pistol whipped.

"What the devil did you bring him all the way up here for?" snapped Buckner as the rider Horton swung down.

"I didn't bring him all the way up here," Horton said in a nasal voice. "I found him playing watchdog on this place here just at dark. I stayed in Smeller-A-Mile for a little while after McBain left. That damned Montana showed up, all right, Black Jack. Come down out of the hills and rode right to Carson's."

"Well, now, ye don't say?" Black Jack said in an interested voice. "Ye really *seen* him, hey?"

"Seen him!" boasted Horton. "We tried to plug him right there in the street but missed. Him and this damned trader here opened up on us with everything they had, then ducked into the store. So me and Mack hit out of town. Mack flagged the train and come on to the junction to report to yuh. Told me to stick around. But the next mornin' Carson was gone and so was Montana. I figgered then hell might be poppin' up this way and headed up. Then a little while ago I sees a hoss and sneaks up on it, and who do I see but our friend Ben Carson layin' a look siege to this place. Did Mack get in all right?"

"No Mack didn't git in all right," snorted Black Jack. "Of all the dumb jackasses I ever see you and Mack were them. Ye damned fool, Horton, Montana was *on* that train. He plugged Mack on it—kilt him. He's within miles of here right now. And if ye hadn't a brought in Carson here there

ain't no tellin' what I might a done to ye."

HE BROKE off and looked up at the weather battered trader. "Well, now I'm right glad to see ye, Ben. I hadn't forgot about that little visit I paid ye down at Smeller-A-Mile when ye got a mite rambunctious with that shotgun. Stuck it plumb in my belly, remember?" and Black Jack Caswell began to chuckle.

Carson deigned to reply and the man Horton, under Buckner's orders, freed the trader's bound hands from the pommel and let him get off. Montana caught a good look as he stepped to the ground. Ben looked old, tired, beaten. He knew what was in store for him.

"So ye ain't talkin', hey?" chuckled Black Jack and his hand went up. Ben tried to duck but the sodden blow caused Montana to wince. "Well, I am. We got two more visitors with us tonight. King Ramson's gal and one from back east. Nice lookin' fillies. So I reckon we'll just bed ye all down for the night. Tomorrow we'll tend to a little business on hand, along with some unfinished business I got with ye over that little argument we had down at yore place. I ain't exactly narrow-minded, Ben,. but it just makes me a mite nervous to have a sawed-off shoved in my bread basket, he, he, he!"

Carson was shoved inside and the door closed. Buckner came out once more, got the tired horses, and started toward the corral. But Montana knew it was of no use now. He could kill the trader and the dog and get a horse—and doing so put Black Jack Caswell on his guard. No, it had to be some other way.

He waited until the man had returned to the station, then he rose to his feet and melted into the night. He was weary and he didn't know where the ranch was, but he had to chance it. He circled around from the south, making a complete circle until in a narrow defile, north of Buckner's, the twin white lines of ruts showed up in the darkness. The stage road to the ranch.

A MOON came up after a time, peeping up over the timber lined ridges as though in apology at being late. It revealed the road leading through a sharp cut and beyond the cut, the flat expanse of a basin. Montana remembered what Forrest had said about wanting to see his cattle grazing in front of his ranch, in the basin. He started through the cut and then a man's voice rang out, hard, commanding.

"Stand and freeze, brother! Who're you and what're you doing here?"

"I'm froze, Austin, and what are you doing out here at this time of night?"

"Who're you?"

"Edmonds."

"Holy cow!" ejaculated Austin's surprised voice and a man's figure rose out of brush forty feet away. He came forward, Winchester in hand, "Edmonds! What in the blazes—say . . . where's Belle and the others?"

"Where's King Ramson? I've got to get to him. Quick!"

"He's back at the ranch. Where's Belle and Ro and Miss Forrest?"

Tersely Montana related to the Texan what had happened and Austin's curses were not a pleasant thing to hear.

"That dirty, yellow-livered Rundert," he grunted. "Him with his fancy clothes and purty guns. Come on, my hoss is back here. I'll take you to King. I'm about due to be relieved anyhow. We're takin' turns guarding the cut here to throw back any cattle as might want to graze over, and also to keep a lookout for visitors. I reckon

King must figger something is up. He's shore tired and worried lcokin'. Never saw him that way before. So Black Jack's holdin' Belle for ransom? I'm thinkin' King would be foolish to pay it, because Black Jack shore ain't intendin' to let him get Belle back. That hoss thief has got a debt to square up."

"Debt?" queried Montana, striding along beside him.

They reached the horse and Austin untied the reins, nodding. "Black Jack figgers it was King hired that outlaw Montana to make that cleanup in Buckner's last fall on five of his men."

"But that's not true, Austin," the man who had called himself Edmonds said.

Austin was silent, about to mount. Now, in the bright moonlight, his face took on a hard curiosity as he turned. "How do *yuh* know?"

"Because my name is Montana, Austin. I'm the gent that shot it out with those five. Ramson didn't hire me."

"Yuh're—"

"I'm Montana," the tired man with the big Winchester said.

"Great God!" cried out the Texan. "Come on, man, get up behind me!"

CHAPTER XVII

THEY mounted, with Montana up behind and the rangy horse carried its double burden down the declivity and out of the trees where Austin had been on guard, under cover. They rode through the cut, the twin ruts a bright dual ribbon in the moonlight and was of such brightness that most of the basin's breadth unfolded before Montana's eyes. There was a small creek running through the middle of it and by it could be seen the hazy forms of quietly grazing cattle and horses. The herd.

Off to the west, against a slope that formed one side of the cup, were dark blobs with a few pin points of light twinkling through the night.

"That's the ranch over there," Austin said, putting the horse into a lope. "Quite a place."

"How'd you make out with the herd?"

"Nothing to it. We pushed 'em along purty fast and got in. They waded right out in thet knee high grass and made themselves right to home."

A jumble of conflicting emotions fought through to the surface as Montana rode on toward the huge mansion that presently loomed up, for meeting with the father he had hated so dispassionately for so many years. He had, many times, pictured in his mind that meeting and what he would say. He saw in that picture the look of astonishment and then fear on King Ramson's face. Heard his own cutting words—and saw his guns spouting at the man's body, ripping him through and through. Yet as they rode up to the big barns and past them through corrals that made a lane to the huge twenty room house all these things he had dreamed of and gloated over fled back into peurile childhood, and he knew they had been but the imaginary work of a mind obsessed with a hatred to which he had been raised.

He felt, strangely enough, no hatred now. He hated only a name; he was meeting a total stranger. He was coming to that stranger for help because of a girl whose aristocratic face and another girl—his half-sister—who had to learn the bitterness of stark truth. That her father, this so called King Ramson, was a cow thief and a crooked swindler of a man now dead.

Montana felt that shrug coming again. Ramson would pay. He'd have to pay. He couldn't afford to risk the lives of the two girls by not paying.

Let him put forth some of his ill gotten gains to get back his daughter. He then could use his hired gunhands to settle the score with Black Jack and the Dutchman, as well as Ro Rundert. Carson then would be free of all danger for his aid to a wounded man, if Ramson bargained right. And Montana would go his way in the morning, when things were settled, perhaps back to the cabin old Jorgensen had left him, perhaps south. He didn't know. He was all confused. Events would have to shape themselves.

Austin pulled up in front of the house.

It had been built on a gentle declivity coming down from the west rim of the basin, and the front porch, some ninety feet or a hundred feet in length, rested nearly eight feet off the ground, where it faced the east and the basin out there. Steps led up and the two men mounted. Their spurred feet made hard sounds on the heavy plankings as they entered a massive door, painted white.

"Just a minute," Austin said, half apologetically. "King's riders just don't walk in on him this way. Not even me."

He reached inside and pulled a cord. From somewhere within a bell jangled.

WHILE Montana waited he turned and looked down at the corrals and barns below. It was the kind of view that would please the eye and give contentment to the heart of its owner. It was a peaceful scene, there in the moonlight almost as bright as day, yet over it all the man who waited to see his father felt a strange, brooding silence, and he instinctively knew that burdens hung heavily on the shoulders of the man who had amassed it all.

"King Ramson". . . .!

Again Montana repressed an inner sneer.

From within the house a young Indian girl, full bosomed and in a white apron, came forward along a lamp lighted hall, a question in her darkly blank eyes.

"Leota," Austin said to her, "tell King he's got a visitor who wants to see him plenty bad."

"He eat supper," the girl said. "You wait."

"I'd better see him now, I reckon," Montana said.

"You wait," she insisted. "He eat supper."

"He'd better see him now, Leota," Austin said. "It's about Miss Belle."

Leota turned and motioned for them to follow her. They went, the thick carpeting muffling the clank of their big spur rowels. They went through another room, and then into a big windowed nook that Montana instinctively knew was a breakfast room.

A man sat at a large table, eating alone, served by another Indian girl. Montana saw before him a massive pair of shoulders, well set neck, topped by a close cropped shock of hair shot through with barely discernible streaks of grey. He looked no more than forty-five and this father Montana had never seen was still a strikingly handsome man despite the lines of worry etched deep into his face. He was tired-looking, as though he had just come in from a long ride. But there was a frown of annoyance on Ramson's face as the three entered.

"Hallo, Austin," he greeted, and of the Indian girl in an authoritative tone of voice: "What's the meaning of this?"

"He want to see you much," she said.

"Who're you?" asked Ramson, laying down his fork. "Who is this man, Austin? Why'd you bring him in here?"

"He's got some news of Belle and

Miss Forrest, I reckon," Austin said. His voice had gone cold and Montana, shooting a look sideways, saw that the Texas rider's eyes were smouldering. "And of this minute, I reckon I'm quittin', King. A allus figgered yuh was a damned cow thief but I never figgered yuh'd sell an eastern dude a ranch and then—"

THAT was as far as he got, for Ramson had risen, his face a thundercloud. "Get out of here, you saddle tramp!" he yelled. "No man can come into my house and talk to me like that, you hear?"

"He hasn't even started," Montana cut in quietly. "I'm going to finish it up—*father!*"

"What's that—what did you say?" snapped Ramson.

"Mother is dead," Brand Thornton said quietly. "Died last year in Kansas City. As long as she was alive, she kept me from squaring accounts with you for deserting her. I came in with the intention of killing you. I was on my way in last fall. Got as far as Buckner's when I ran into some of his men and we had a little shooting fracas there."

Ramson had come slowly to his feet and now he leaned forward over the table, both arms rigid and braced. He looked like a shaggy shouldered bear at bay, waiting. Comprehension seemed to have dawned; that this quiet looking, quiet speaking young rider before him with the two guns was both a son he had never seen a legend that had spread the length of the cow country after that fight. Austin too was staring.

Ramson suddenly seemed to wilt. He sat down again and the hand that picked up a white napkin and placed it to his lips was shaking a little.

"Then you are—" he began hoarsely.

"Brand Edmonds Thornton, though after that cursed fight at Buckner's last fall I believe they call me by another name."

"Great God," Jim Thornton, alias King Ramson, half whispered.

He looked up again, and the first shock of recognition was already passing. He swallowed hard, then regained his composure. It was a hard thing to do, that Montana could see all too plainly. But this man who was his father seemed all iron and such a thing as had transpired could not shake him for long. He proved it in his next words.

"Have you eaten supper. . . . Brand?"

"Not since early this afternoon."

"Sit down. You too, Austin." He turned to the Indian girls and spoke. "Rustle up some more ham and eggs, Leota." And to the two riders. "I always eat them when I come in late. Been over in the back country again today to look up one of the men who used to ride for me. Here, you fellows, help yourself to some coffee."

The Indian girls brought more cups and the elder man lifted the silver urn beside his plate and poured. He had been shaken but it was gone. The King of the bad country was again master of himself and the situation!

CHAPTER XVIII

JIM THORNTON, alias King Ramson, leaned back in his chair, studying the face of the younger man. Memory was flooding his mind, carrying him back to a small house near the railroad yards in Kansas City. Some things a man never forgets, and though this older man with the close cropped hair had been married again and come far, he was seeing again in his mind a patient wife and a very small son. He was seeing a few cattle too from the surrounding Kansas plains, where a

few hardy pioneers, risking a wipe out at the hands of plains Indians, brought in some head of stock to sell to the packers.

Something about those people and the cattle had fired Jim Thornton's imagination, he now recalled. But there was a wife and a son and he didn't want them to risk the rigors of the wilderness country further west; and, truth to tell, Jim Thornton was restless. His brief period of service in the union army had taught him to ride a horse, that same restlessness sending him fleeing the same army.

There had been weeks, there in Kansas City, when he felt the call and couldn't find the courage to heed it. When it came he slipped quietly out, just as he had done from the army, and headed west. He went, salving his conscience by telling himself over and over that as soon as he "made his pile" he would send for them. He had learned the cattle business pretty fast, but he had been equally quick to learn that a man didn't become an owner by saving his monthly wages. There was much wild stuff—mavericks, they were called, after a Texan who hadn't believed in branding stock and thus was considered owner of every unbranded critter in his part of the country—to be roped and worked on with a running iron. Land was cheap and grass was plentiful. Thornton had prospered. A gambling house in Cheyenne had helped a lot and it was there, rapidly growing to affluence, he had married the eastern woman.

With that marriage he put his past behind him. At times there rose up a picture of the wife and child he had deserted, but time was dulling this, sending it further into the background the higher he climbed. He had been quick to discover that good clothes and affable manners were a big asset and had acquired them accordingly. By the time Belle was ready for school the big ranch he had dreamed of was a reality and "King Ramson" was on his way.

By the time the stage line had to be abandoned the King's wife began taking Belle back east for schooling. At first the trips were of two or three months duration. They gradually lengthened into nine months. Only during summers did Ramson's wife return with Belle to the ranch. And as these trips lengthened King Ramson, accompanying them east sometimes, began to make friends. They came to the ranch, parties of them, and always there were in the parties young women who were taken by the owner's power among the ranchers, his reputation as a dangerous man, his bluff manners . . . and his money.

Ramson's wife never knew of these escapades, nor did Belle, then almost fifteen. The year she had reached that age King Ramson's wife could stand it no longer. She went east to stay for good; and because she didn't believe in divorce there was no divorce. Belle, electing to remain with her father, had grown to womanhood. She was now due at the ranch with Helen Forrest.

RAMSON, sitting there in the breakfast room of the big house he had built, looked again at this younger man who was his son, wondering what would happen when the two realized their relationship. He was aware, too, that he'd have to tell Belle the truth. That thought made him wince.

"Tell me about . . . your mother," he finally said.

Montana stirred his coffee. "There's little to tell, and that part is past history. She remained in Kansas City until the end."

"And you?" the man revealed as Jim Thornton asked.

"I stuck around until I was sixteen, working on farms, in the stockyards, and so on. Got itchy feet and went out to Montana for a stretch of ranch work. I wanted her to come out but she didn't care to move. So I sent her enough to live on out of my wages and a fair hand at bunk house poker."

"Try to branch out for yourself?" Thornton asked interestedly.

"I gave it a try," Montana said; he didn't know why he was talking to this man he had hated all his life but "Ramson" seemed to have a way of drawing a man out. "I began buying and selling a few head along and making a few dollars until about two years ago. Then a two bit deputy sheriff accused me of stealing a bull I'd bought. I found out later he was a horse thief himself who had a way of acquiring ownership of stock of men he'd arrested! By then it was too late."

"Killed him, eh?"

"I had to."

Austin sat listening intently, his coffee forgotten. The two young Assiniboin girls stood side by side over by the wall, black eyes on the three men at the table.

"So you had to go on the dodge?"

"I had to clear out, if that's what you mean," Montana answered. "I drifted over east around Billings and went to work again, being pretty careful about not giving my name out. The men at one of the outfits got to calling me Montana. It didn't mean anything until a gent named Joe Bostick went on a drunk in town one night and hit the prod. I had to down him and light out again. I swung west, figgering on a try at the mines for a change, but mother got sick and I had to go back to Kansas City. That was last spring. There was a cattle buyer there in town with a big shipment of part Mexican stuff he'd picked up the line. I'd sold him a few head and he'd looked up mother when he was in town. Got to dropping by every time he was in to see how she was getting along. His name's Harry Thatcher."

"Thatcher?" Jim Thornton exclaimed. "You mean you know old Thatch?"

"Pretty well."

"Why," Montana's father said, smiling, "Old Thatch and I were in the war together. Lordy, how long ago that seems now."

"Long enough that he still recognized you when he ran into you in Cheyenne," Montana added shortly. "So he told us who you were and last fall I headed down this way. Mother was dead and no longer a promise to be kept."

He paused and the elder Thornton looked puzzled. "What promise, Brand?"

"Not to kill you as long as she was alive. I wouldn't promise anything after that," was the reply.

JIM THORNTON leaned back in his chair, a queer look crossing his big boned face. For some reason he took the fingers of one hand and straightened them, looking critically at the nails as though he ought to trim them. He took out a big jack knife and inserted the tip of a blade under the black line of dirt.

"You were going to go gunning for . . . me?"

The eggs were done and the listening Indian girls brought the two big platters. Montana began to eat hungrily. Jim Thornton continued to pare his nails assiduously, though his eyes kept going to Montana's face.

"Go on, Brand," he finally prompted.

"That was my intention," Montana said. "She begged me not to. She knew you had married again. But I don't care about that end of the deal. All I

could remember was that we'd lived pretty close to scratch until I finally got to making a little money on small cattle deals. I took pretty good care of her then. But after that lawman threw his gun on me and I had to go on the dodge she had pretty tough sledding. And after she died I kept remembering how she begged me to promise her I wouldn't square accounts. She didn't know about those two men out west. I never packed a gun when I was home. She didn't know I was on the dodge. All she knew was that I mustn't do it —mustn't spill the blood of my own father. But I kept seeing that cheap coffin in the funeral parlour and how she looked in it the last time I saw her. So I hit for the hole-in-the-wall. I'd got acquainted with Ben Carson down in Smeller-A-Mile. Ben had tipped me off to a few small, out-of-the-way ranchers who traded with him and would sell their few head a lot cheaper when I went in after them. I made money through Ben. So when I came in after you last fall I knew that after I'd thrown a gun on you I'd have to hit the breeze out of this country fast. That was how Ben came to be down at Buckner's with a pack horse loaded with supplies when I stopped off at the squawman's place that night. I was there when some of Black Jack Caswell's raiders came in, a little drunk. You know the rest. Ben packed me out to the hideout where I stayed all winter. Then a few days ago I decided to go back."

"I'd like to see Ben again," Thornton said. "I don't know him too well. Saw him a number of times. Where is he now—still located down at the post?"

"He's down at Buckner's again. Black Jack has got him prisoner," was the reply. And Montana shook his head slightly.

CHAPTER XIX

MONTANA told him what had transpired. He told of the attempt on his life down at Ben Carson's trading post, of meeting Forrest, of the killing of McBain. Jim Thornton's face remained impassively hard as this son he had known but briefly related what had taken place at the stage coach.

"I hoofed it into Buckner's," Montana finished. "Black Jack was there with the Dutchman and Rundert and the girls. Carson was brought in all beat up. He's a goner unless you can do something about it."

"What do you reckon their next move is?" Austin cut in.

"I don't know. I'd bet they'll be getting in touch with Ram—er my father here in the morning. But morning will be too late. They'll kill Carson before then. But you"—to the older man—"can pay. It's the easy way out. If you gather up your riders and attack the place anything is liable to happen to Belle and Miss Forrest. That's why you've got to go down there tonight and try to bargain."

"Ramson" didn't say anything for a moment, and then his face, his whole body seemed to change. Before Montana's eyes he seemed to grow much older. His shoulder sagged. He bent forward and placed his face deep within a big hand.

He was an old broken man when he rose and began to pace the floor of the breakfast room. Finally he turned, and his eyes, once so authoritative and dominant, were now almost pleading as he looked at his son and at the silent Austin.

"Brand . . . boy, this finishes me," he finally got out. "I'm through. Through, do you hear? I could stand anything. I could try anything to undo some of the wrong I've done to Belle

and the Forrests. But Belle undoubtedly has been told by Rundert—damn his rotten soul!—the whole thing I planned. She knows now that I'm more than a cow thief; that I'm a crooked swindler of her best friends. Oh, I was the clever one, I was!" he went on passionately. "I was the man who was going to show them New York financiers how to run their stock market. Well . . . I showed them, all right. I lost everything I had trying to buck their game—buying railroad stock in railroads that never even were built; throwing money into big schemes. Forrest, poor devil, warned me, but I wouldn't listen. I was the big fish from out west who was fool enough to play another man's game. So I sold out to Forrest—got cash from him and came back here. Tried to recover by plunging again. And they took me like a lamb among wolves. Cleaned me out. I'm broke, boys. I haven't got a dime. If the half dozen riders who're still on this ranch tonight quit I couldn't pay off. I'm done!"

It had been a long speech and when it was over the man who had called himself King Ramson sat down again. His hand shook hard as he poured himself another cup of coffee and drank it black.

He looked at the two younger men. "Word must have got around among my riders. My old ones. Because when I went out to hunt some of them up to help me take over the ranch again, not a one of them would come back. They all are mostly outlaws—horse thieves—gunmen—road agents—the scum of the bad country, and as long as I was in the saddle they took my pay and stole me blind behind my back. I know now that Rundert was in on it and helped. I trusted him because I thought he was in love with Belle. Thought he'd make the kind of son-in-law who could take over this place and run it. God, what a stupid, vain, rotten human being I've been!"

"And now," Montana said softly, "they've got Belle and Miss Forrest. They've got about a dozen riders and themselves against . . . how many?" This to Austin.

AUSTIN put down his cup and scratched his head. "I don't think you can figger on most of the boys. They're the ones who stayed, remember; the quiet ones who didn't go in for slinging a gun like the bad ones. The question is, what are you goin' to do now, Montana?"

"If it wasn't for Carson, I'd say wait. Two gets you one that by mid-morning tomorrow Black Jack or Buckner or Rundert will be in here to talk business. But I owe Ben Carson a lot. If it hadn't been for Ben I wouldn't be here tonight. Buckner would have finished me off that night last fall. I've got to go down there and make a try. Go see how many riders you can round up."

Austin rose to his feet and went out. Montana looked at the older man. *Strange,* he thought, *but we're almost a family; Jim Thornton, Belle, and myself. Yet the woman who should be my sister knows me only as a gun fighter of Ro Rundert's stripe and creed. We're scattered, like three limbs stemming from the same trunk and all growing in different directions.*

"You haven't said what you're going to do," he said to Jim Thornton.

He felt little or no pity for his father. The man had played the game his way, and now he was taking the consequences. He had gambled big and he had *been* big, but now he had been brought to bay, old and wounded, like a big stag surrounded and cornered by the wolf pack.

Thornton roused himself as though

from lethargy. "I don't know . . . son," he said dully. "I'm thinking only of Belle—that she knows the truth about me. That's what hurts. Nothing else seems to matter at the moment. Just sit tight, I guess, until I hear from them. I don't know what else to do."

"They say you're fast with a gun," the younger man said. His eyes were on a fancy, polished bow and a quiver of arrows hanging on the wall beside the window. "You can still fight."

The other shook his head. He laughed and it was a harsh, self condemning sound. "Fight?" Jim Thornton said, "I can't hit the barn with a six shooter. I never could. I built up that legend because the riders under me needed it. They would remain loyal to a man faster with a colt than they. And Black Jack as well as Rundert are chain lightning with a pistol. That's why I hired Rundert . . . as a cover for me."

MONTANA put out his cigarette, squashing it in the dampness of a coffee saucer. "If I had a daughter down there," he said evenly, "I'd go after her if I had to use that Assiniboin bow and arrow outfit hanging there on the wall."

Austin soon came back. His easy going face was harrowed with new furrows. "I got bad news for us all, I reckon," he announced. "Three of the boys quit cold, when I put it on the line. Seems they've been hearing reports about some of your latest deals, King. Said you could send their money into the junction. They're pulling stakes tonight."

"And the others?" Montana asked. "How many?"

"Four left. But they won't fight. They're cowhands and nothing more—older fellows who haven't packed a gun in years and don't intend to start in now. I guess one of 'em hit it on the head when he said as how he reckoned the main reason why he was still in the saddle at sixty-three was because he'd walked on the other side of the street when the gun packers came along."

"Then . . . it's just the three of us?" Montana said slowly.

Austin nodded. "Just the three of us," and he looked at the older of them there in the room.

"I guess you can't blame a man for that," Montana admitted. "I'd probably do the same thing if I was in their shoes. You're sticking, of course?"

"I'm sticking."

"Good."

He talked on for several minutes and the other two men listened. Austin's face tightened and he got up out of his chair. "I don't like it, Montana," he grunted.

"That's the way it's got to be," was the reply.

He went to the wall, to the long, unstrung bow and quiver of arrows. As part of his convalescence, up in Jorgensen's hidden valley below Horse Thief Peake, he had fashioned crude bows and stalked the trails made by big footed snowshoe rabbits. He had gotten pretty good at it, and for that he was thankful. The practice might come in handy. Buckner's walls might be thick but wouldn't stand up against fire arrows. While Leota fetched the things he asked for he strung the bow, and gave it a preliminary pull. About forty pounds, he guessed at its required pull.

Followed by Austin and a silent "King Ramson", he went down to the barns. Several riders rode out, warbags back of their cantles, but there were other saddles inside and horses in the corrals.

The three men saddled and loped southward toward the cut and Buckner's crossing four miles away.

CHAPTER XX

IT DIDN'T take long to make that four miles, astride fresh horses, and the time was still less than midnight when finally the three men pulled up a mile north of the crossing. They cut a wide circle, crossed the creek, swung south and finally came in again, pulling up in the timber a long distance away. Montana was remembering the Mastiff and how it had spotted the two riders earlier that evening.

He was tired from the long walk, but the ride rested him somewhat. He swung down and removed his boots, putting on a pair of moccasins he'd got from the girl Leota.

"You wait here," he said to Austin and a silent Jim Thornton. "The three of us wouldn't have a chance. One of us might. If you hear shooting, don't come in. Stick to what we've planned."

He swung the quiver and newly strung bow over his shoulders and waded into the water, carrying his Winchester. Across from him the creek rose three feet to a level with the ground. It was this same bank that led through a part of Buckner's corral now little more than a quarter mile away. Montana crouched below it and began working his way down. He was surprised to note that a light was still on in the former stage station. Apparently they were laying plans for the morrow. Montana crept on. About him were sounds of the night and once or twice shadowy figures that were big bats flew low overhead and then were gone in silence among the trees. Buckbrush thickened and for this the stalker was thankful. He moved on and presently the corrals loomed up not far away.

Above the rails he could see the moon, not so white now but very yellow as it moved downward toward the timber covered ridges looking down on the crossing. But there was enough light for Montana to see the dark form of the mastiff as it trotted into view around a corner of the corral and then stopped, ears up and nose lifted. A low growl came from its huge throat. The huge dog was uneasy.

In a way, the dog reassured Montana. He knew that Buckner had confidence in the huge canine and that as long as it was around nobody could approach the place undetected. This meant that most likely there would be none of Black Jack's riders posted as sentinels.

But the big brute seemed to have sensed something, for the growl came again. With hardly a breath, Montana bent swiftly and laid down the Winchester. The newly strung bow came off and from the quiver a long, tufted arrow. He fitted the slender shaft into the bow and gave it a preliminary pull, then raised his head cautiously above the bank again. His eyes widened and only his position kept silent the startled exclamation that would have broken from him.

The mastiff had vanished!

A voice somewhere inside him flashed a warning. It seemed to be saying, *Look out, I don't like this!* and he knew it was his inner self—some sixth sense warning him that the dog had spotted him. Montana turned his head slowly, sweeping every foot of ground from the corrals to the timber not far away. But the night, lit by the downing moon, showed only emptiness and silence.

DOUBTS began to assail him. He remembered that the animal had barked at Carson and his captor long before they came into sight—knew now that Buckner had trained the dog well. It relieved Montana's mind

somewhat and caused him to start edging forward toward the station again. Somewhere inside were the two girls and Ben Carson. He had to find out where, even try to get them out. If not . . . he put the thought of it from him and moved on. The corral loomed up and he waded out into the stream to move around it and to keep under cover, crouching low below the shallow bank above it. But the horses still dozed and the world was dead and quiet.

The dog, he decided, had gone into the timber.

That relaxed him and he half lowered the bow, raising his head above the bank. He caught a brief glimpse of two flaming eyes and long, slashing teeth, wide apart in agap jaws, and a hurtling, hairy breast with two huge forelegs outstretched. It was half over the bank and almost on top of him like a launching catamount when the bow bent back and gave off a sharp *spuuuunnnngggg!*

The mastiff seemed to halt in midplunge, half landing on its hind legs with forefeet still outstretched. For what seemed seconds it paused almost in Montana's face, eyes flaming, gaping jaws white with long teeth, the feathered end standing straight out in front of its throat. Then its body crumpled upon the bank and Montana could reach out a hand and touch it.

Something like a cold sigh went out of his body and the terror of it only then hit him fully. He sat down weakly and swallowed hard, too shaken for a moment to move. For the first time he was aware that he was trembling and that beads of cold sweat had popped out on his hatless forehead.

He got up again and moved forward toward the house, silent on wet moccasined feet. He knew the place well, from his previous visit. Outside of the door through which rugged old Ben Carson had packed him that evening so many months ago he paused. He tried to listen but the voices that came though the thick, bullet proof walls were merely muffled jumble. Montana left it and began a circle around the building. He came to a shed-like affair, more of a lean-to built onto the south side of the former station. It had been a storeroom. The door gave with a barely audible squeak and he was inside with it closed again, standing in pitch black darkness.

He became aware that he was not alone and without further ado dropped to his haunches to get out of line of possible fire from any of Black Jack's riders who might be sleeping in there, a heavy colt in his right hand. Breathing came then—heavy, labored breathing.

Then a man's voice. "Who's there?"

Carson's!

"Quiet, Ben, "Montana whispered. "It's Thornton."

"Thank God, boy, you've come. Over here in the corner. I'm tied hard."

MONTANA risked a match, moving over to where Carson lay in a corner on two saddle blankets. His eyes went hard at sight of the trader's blood dried, purple marked face.

"Who did it, Ben?" he took time to ask.

"Horton . . . the other one with McBain. Caught me flat footed."

"I know. I saw them bring you in."

"Black Jack finished up the job after they tied me in here. Get my . . . hands loose, will you, Brand? Circulation is about gone. I was about to start . . . yelling with the pain.

That Black is a devil, but watch out for Buckner. He's bad, that scum."

"I know," Montana said, working swiftly.

The knots wouldn't loosen. They were buckskin and tied only as an Indian—or a squawman—could have tied them. Montana fumbled at his belt, and discovered that somewhere during the ride from his father's ranch his knife had gotten lost out of its scabbard. He glanced about him, holding a second match. In one corner was a dust covered object of which made his heart leap.

He went went to the long lost war bag, delving furiously. The absent razor came into view and it was a matter of moments until Carson's bonds were free.

"Thank God I didn't have time to get that war bag last fall," gasped out the trader. "Tuck that razor into my shirt pocket, will you, Brand? If I ever get back to the post I'm going to frame it right above the safe in the corner."

"Can you walk?" asked Montana.

"I don't know. Circulation is coming back and it's shooting hot needles into my arms and legs. Here, give me a hand."

Montana hoisted him to his feet. Carson's knees buckled and the younger man held him while he tried to get his limbs moving. They started toward the door and then in the darkness Ben Carson's stumbling boot struck an empty pail.

Its rattle sounded like all the devils in hell banging a symphony in a trash pile.

"Out the back door," Montana hissed. "The creek bank's not too far away. If we can get that far it's something. I'll cover you from there if you can make it the rest of the way."

"I'll try," Carson replied through puffed lips. "And if I ever get out of this, I've got a score to settle with Horton and McBain too."

"The score with McBain," Montana said quietly, "is squared. I killed him on the train that night I left, when he got on seven miles above town."

CHAPTER XXI

INSIDE the big room Buckner, Black Jack, Dutch Saunders, and Ro Rundert still sat in a semi-circle around the now dead fireplace, talking. It was almost midnight. The riders lay sprawled around the room on blankets, all sound asleep from the effects of Buckner's whiskey and his squaw's heavy cooking. The squaw herself sat on a box back of the bar, nodding drowsily. She had, a half hour previous, fixed the bed for Helen and Belle, and then gone out to make a final inspection of Ben Carson's bonds. An impassive woman, this young squaw, with little emotion in her life. Her father had made the deal with Buckner, five years before, and some cash had changed hands, plus two good head of horses. In return Buckner had received as a gift a beautifully done bow and quiver of arrows. She had come up in the world though, doing the cooking and work about the place for this rather strange white man who was her husband; and in her big breast might have been some slight touch of Indian pride that he consorted with tough men of the back country like Black Jack and the Dutchman and gave them orders. His will was hers, and the fact that the white man tied in the back room was to be executed at dawn made little impression upon her. She was the white man's wife and he allowed her to drink all the whiskey she wanted and never beat her unless

she got drunk.

The squaw drowsed on and Buckner, speaking in a low voice, continued what he had been saying:

"The cut goes as is and you can take it or not, Black Jack. I know you and Dutchie think you're pretty rugged gents, backed up by this bunch of snoring cut throats here on the floor. But it was me that made all the plans for this deal and kept an eye on Ramson all the time. It was me that knew when he was at the ranch or in town. It was me that lined up his riders so that you could buy some of the stock they stole at prices that would shame an honest man. So don't get any ideas, now that we've got Ramson where we want him, that I'm still not the boss. I've been running things like I wanted them for a long time. And I'll keep right on doing so. I've been content to stay in the background and let you boys do the rough stuff. It made no difference to me that half the men in this country think I wouldn't have a chance against a man like . . . we'll say, Montana. I'm not a quick draw gent wearing a couple of pistols—though I never could figger out why some man don't stick a gun in the waistband of his pants and kill half the quick draw artists in this country before they could clear leather with their low hung guns. Me . . . I'll still stick to a sawed-off."

"I don't like this kind of talk," growled the Dutchman's voice, his piggy little eyes suddenly venomous.

"That goes for me too," cut in Rundert. "We did our share. Plenty. Shore, you made some of the plans and we let you run the show, but I don't like you taking all the damned credit for it."

The squaw man seemed unperturbed. He continued to smoke his pipe and gaze into the fire.

"Of course you don't like it, Ro," he said quietly. "Vain men of your stripe generally don't. But what I said goes: I've been bossing this country this far and giving the orders, and now that we're closing in for the kill I just don't want any of you getting any ideas."

BLACK JACK too seemed calm about the matter. He gave his queer chuckle and looked at the squaw man. "Like Ro here, ye think ye're a plumb bad boy when it comes to a showdown, but when it came last fall and ye had the chance to git Montana it didn't happen."

"I didn't know who he was until Carson packed him out," Buckner replied. "And if it had been anybody but Carson I'd got them both that night. I tried hard enough . . . trailed Ben a mile before he gave me the slip. Ben's a mountain man as much as anything else. He's the one gent who knows this country better than I do. And I still can't figure out where him and that shot up gun fighter disappeared to that night. I tried for three days to pick up that trail, but you notice I didn't find it and you notice Ben didn't talk tonight when you worked him over again."

Back of the bar the squaw's drowsing eyes had suddenly opened. Her ears had caught a faint rattling sound the others hadn't heard. She straightened and a couple of short gutteral words came from her lips. Buckner rose casually, stepping to the bar where the sawed-off lay.

"Where ye goin' *now?*" demanded Black Jack.

"The squaw heard something out back," Buckner replied.

"Never see sech a gent in all my life," chuckled Black Jack, a sneer back of it. "Nervous like a cat all the time. Allus prowlin' around with that bloomin' lead sprayer."

"It's one reason I'm still alive, I

reckon," Buckner said, and went out.

He closed the door back of him and called out in a low voice. "Ring! *Ring!*"

No answer in the form of running feet, big and padded. Buckner's eyes went to the corral. He could tell by the attitude of the horses that it was pretty quiet out there; but the dog was usually always around and the squaw didn't imagine things. He didn't like the looks of the place. He knew that somewhere out there the gun fighter who had killed a number of Black Jacks men was playing his own game. What that game was Buckner didn't pretend to know, but one thing was certain: none of their lives would be safe until that man was dead.

The squawman called again to the absent dog. He paused as though in uncertainty, glanced at the shed where Ben Carson had been bound, and then moved toward the corral. He went not like a white man walks, but as an Indian; low, half crouched over, shotgun craddled at his hip and keeping in the shadows. He reached the corner of the corral and then he saw the dog. He saw two things too, almost simultaneously: the long feathered shaft sticking from its throat and the man who crouched below the bank not far away. A splashing sound flicked his attention elsewhere and he recognized Ben Carson's figure stumbling through knee deep water to the opposite shore of the creek and the timber beyond.

BUCKNER looked down the barrel of the cocked colt, his own gun, uncocked lining Montana's middle—knowing that if he tried to cock the sawed-off it would be his death warrant.

"I'm going to kill that damned squaw," Buckner said in a low voice. "I'm going to get her by her black hair and twist until her head comes off."

"I'm not interested in the squaw," Montana replied tonelessly.

"Her father told me that bow and quiver of arrows were a good omen for us. Injun superstition, mebbe, but he said never to let it out of the house. And then she got drunk and gave it to Leota one day. I'll kill her, I tell you!" he almost hissed.

"I'm not interested," Montana repeated. "We've got this place surrounded."

Which was stretching things a bit, but then Buckner couldn't know. He asked a question.

"Where's Ramson?"

"Out there," jerking his head back, his eyes never leaving the uncocked sawed-off. "With a Winchester's sights lined on the back door."

Buckner let go a grim sound that might have been a chuckle. "Men live by guns in this country, Mister. That door and those walls are bullet proof. I've got a piece of sheet steel bolted to it on the inside. Come again."

"The deal stands, Buckner. You've got the girls and we can't close in. We're out here and you can't get out alive—not a one of you. It's your move "

"You forget the Dutchman," grinned the squawman, his eyes now, in the night, the eyes of a rattler; opaque, unblinking. "The minute you open up he'll make for the bedroom with a knife. He was married . . . once, you know. It's *your* move."

Montana thought swiftly, eyeing that strangely calm man with the shotgun. He felt calm and yet he knew that that man five feet away was the calmer of the two; it was in Buckner's words, his bearing. He had the upper hand and he knew it.

Montana tried once more. "I was asleep not far away from the coach today when Rundert welcomed his cronies. I overheard the whole deal—

ransom and all. I've talked to my—to King Ramson. He can't pay what you're going to ask. He's been cleaned out. He's broke, through. He hasn't got a dime. So the money part of it is out. If you hold out for the Forrest girl's ranch it would only be a matter of time until we brought a United States marshal in here with plenty of men and that means a rope for every man of you."

"Well?" almost whispered Buckner.

"Let the girls walk out. We'll pull out. After that it's any man's move."

"I'd have to talk it over with the others inside. And I might not come out again."

"You'll come out, all right. I've got a small bottle of kerosene and some rags from the ranch to make fire arrows. Those walls might be bullet proof, Buckner, but that shed where you had Carson will burn like tinder. I'll give you five minutes."

CHAPTER XXII

BUCKNER turned, slung the deadly double-barrel carelessly over one arm, and started walking toward the building. He sauntered easily, confidence in the set of his shoulders, and Montana watched him go with mingled emotions. Four men: Black Jack, the Dutchman, Ro Rundert . . . and Buckner. Of them all he now feared Buckner the most. The others were horse thieves, long loopers, and men who would kill when it furthered their own nefarious ends. Buckner was none of them. He had never stolen a horse outright—though he'd bought and sold many that *had* been stolen—, used a hot iron through a wet blanket to blot a brand, nor had he ever killed a man . . . yet.

He was too intelligent. Buckner was cunning. Let the Blacks and Ro Runderts keep to the fore. Buckner preferred to remain in the background.

He went inside, closing the door.

They were a long five minutes. An owl hooted, somewhere out across the creek among the trees. It hooted a second time. Montana gave back an answer to Austin, waiting over there with a broken Jim Thornton. If the bluff worked, Thornton would, in a matter of minutes have back his daughter; a daughter going back to him with the knowledge that he was more than a buyer of stolen stock. He was a father who had swindled her best friends.

And Thornton, in turn, would have to break the news to her of his past; that the man with them was Belle's half brother, her name not Ramson but Thornton.

Don't do it Brand, the voice began to whisper again, *For my sake, don't do it, don't do it, don't do it* . . . and he knew that the strain of waiting was causing his imagination to play tricks upon him. He threw off the thought and hurriedly waded back up the creek to get the Winchester. As he returned and settled himself into position with his head above the creek bank the door re-opened.

Buckner came out, his short, compact frame outlined in the doorway. Even the long earstraps on his knee length boots showed up against the yellow background. Montana saw no others. The hearth was deserted, as though Black Jack and the others feared a fusilade of shots through the open door.

And then there was more movement in the doorway as two women came through. They must have been lying down in one of the rooms. They followed close behind the squawman, and for a moment Montana was unable to believe it had happened. It was too easy. He knew there were no men to

watch the opposite side of the place. If Black Jack or any of the others were imaginative to take a chance, it would be simple to slip out the front door for an investigation to see if the place were in reality ringed with the men from Ramson's ranch.

Montana crouched low beneath the bank with only the top of his hat showing. His eyes were on all corners of the building, waiting for movement there, the hammer of the big repeater far back under his thumb. No movement came and then the three were directly above him, looking down.

Buckner said, shortly: "You win this hand, Mister. Ro and the Dutchman stood pat but Black Jack and me overruled them. Take the women and go."

"Go back and tell Black Jack that this ends it, if he wants to let things ride that way," Montana said.

BUCKNER'S eyes took on that unblinking, opaque look. "Black Jack ain't giving the orders around here. I am. I run this end of the country. Take the women and go. Then it'll be my turn to play the game our way."

Montana looked at the two girls. He nodded his head back toward the timber. "You'd better get going. Your father and Austin are waiting over there among the trees with horses. The creek isn't deep About a foot."

Belle Ramson let her eyes play upon his face. According to all the evidence he was a hired gun fighter working for her father. He was risking his life now because it was his job!

"I'll say one thing for you anyhow," she said with womanly candor. "You earn the money my father pays you. Come on, darling, let's get out of here. I told you tonight that King wouldn't let us down."

"Aren't you coming with us?" Helen Forrest asked in a low voice.

"I'm earning my pay," Montana replied dryly. "You'd better be moving. You've a long hard ride ahead."

He wanted to look at her but didn't dare, because the strange thought came to him then that he loved her. He didn't know how it had happened or when. Perhaps back there on the train as she slept with her arms around Belle, her face framed in the honey hued hair. It might have been as she stood in front of the station looking about her at the grandeur of the country. He remembered what had been in her face as she stood at the grave's edge in the cemetery back at the junction. It was hard to tell when such a thing had happened. Not that it mattered now. He loved her.

The two girls went down the bank and then lifted their torn skirts at the water's edge. They waded in and started across the foot deep flow of the shallow creek while Montana half crouched under cover of the bank, his eyes alert for any sign of treachery from the house. Buckner stood immoble.

Finally he spoke. "So I guessed right, after all?" he asked. "You're King Ramson's hired gun fighter and that little ruckus in here last fall was a pay job, eh?"

"That little ruckus in here last fall," Montana said evenly, "was what happened when five gents got too much liquor in them. I'm not King Ramson's hired gun fighter. I'm his son. Belle Ramson doesn't know it yet, but she's my half sister."

"I see," Buckner the squawman said softly.

He was grinning now, and there was something about his countenance —about the parted lips and gleaming teeth that reminded Montana, somehow, of the gaping jaws of the mastiff as it had stood, still reared on it's

hind legs in mid-air, with the turfted arrow shaft protruding from its shaggy throat.

"But that only cinches it," Buckner added, looking down. "Maybe you ain't taking gun pay, but you're his son— you say— and them guns you throw so fast are still working on the other side. Not that it matters. I'm dealing the cards for the second round."

"I'll have to call and raise, of course," Montana replied. "A man thinks about a thing and dreams about it, and then he realizes that it was just a dream. I never knew I had a half sister until I saw her on the train, when I came up from Ben Carson's after McBain and that other gent made their play. I never met my father until tonight. I was on my way in to kill him last fall when I stopped here and Black Jack's men horned in."

BUCKNER was interested in spite of his impatience for the man with the Winchester to get going. "Why? Just why would a gun slammin' outlaw want to kill his father?"

"A small matter of him deserting my mother more than twenty years ago. That makes the laugh on you and Black Jack Caswell. If those five liquored up riders of his hadn't been hunting trouble I might have saved you a lot of it. Strange how things work out, eh?"

He was listening while he spoke, stalling for time. They should be across and into the timber by now and mounting. Ben Carson was in bad shape and might not be able to ride too far, but give him enough time, working in and out of creeks where a trail couldn't be followed, and Buckner and the others would have their work cut out for them.

"Very strange," sneered the squawman. "Strange that you've got two women and a busted up trader on your hands and can't ride fast. There's about a dozen of us all told. We can pick up that trail at daylight and get all of you before sundown tomorrow night. That's why the women are free. I didn't want my place shot up or burned down."

"Hey, Buck!" Black Jack's voice called from the doorway. "Ye all right?"

"Come out here," Buckner called over his shoulder.

Black Jack came, cautiously, his long black coat flapping about his angular frame. His glossy beard seemed almost to gleam as he pulled up beside the squawman and looked down.

"So this is him again?" he said amusedly.

"He's Ramson's son," Buckner announced.

Black Jack said, "Hmmm", and chuckled in his beard, and then looked across the creek toward where the two women had disappeared into the timber over there. "And he's goin' to stay here all by hisself and hold us 'til they get away, hey?"

"That's about the size of it, I reckon," Buckner said.

"A regular heller on wheels, hey? A rip snortin' gun fighter who's goin' to clean out the hull bunch of us. My, My!" and the horse thief chuckled again.

"I'll make a deal with you," Montana said. "Carson's in bad shape and will have to ride double. I forgot to bring a horse for him. The girls are played out. But Austin has his orders where to go and Carson, bad shape as he's in, is enough of a mountatin man to get them there by a trail that can't be followed, if given time. It's our only chance as we both well know."

"Deal? You're offering *us* a deal?"

"I'm offering to sell you a ranch and six hundred head of cattle for the same price Forrest paid Ramson. Don't tell me that the lot of you can't rake up the money. Deliver it to Ben Carson's store in thirty days".

Black Jack threw back his head and laughed. He roared with laughter, bending forward to slap his leg while Buckner, a little taken back at the lone man's audacity, stared. Black Jack wiped his eyes with the back of a dirty hand and he-he'd into his black beard.

"That 'un takes the prize, Buck," he tittered. "He wants thirty days to git the United States marshal at Cheyenne down to Smeller-A-Mile and be all waitin' for the bunch of us when we show up. He's makin' a *deal,* knowin' we'll git the whole bunch of 'em within a few miles."

"I've got seventeen shots here in two Colts and this Winchester—unless you tell that gent who climbed out the girls' bedroom window to get his head back around the west corner of the house. Then I'll only have sixteen. I can put seventeen horses down, dead or crippled in that corral. Half of your men will be left here on foot. That's my last offer."

"And if we take it?" Buckner asked.

"Give us a twenty-four hour start. I'll stick out there in the timber until tomorrow sundown and then pull stakes."

THEY had talked long enough; too long. Black Jack sensed it and Black Jack looked at Buckner, bony fingers thoughtfully caressing his beard.

"Well, Buck?"

"Get your people out of here," snapped Buckner.

He turned with Black Jack Caswell and strode back to the house. The steel lined door slammed and almost at once voices rose in violent dissent. Montana started up over the bank, ducked and then rolled down as the shot from the corner of the building roared harmlessly over his head. He came up five feet further on, fired once and saw a burst of splinters fly from the chinked logs. More movement caught his eye, from the other side, and he knew that while they had talked that Dutchman and Rundert had investigated the other side of the house, found it not covered, and were slipping men out. A man ran toward the corral and this time Montana didn't miss Horton. He sprinted for the gate, running speedily in his moccasins, heard a roar come from inside. The Dutchman. The horses came alive and began to mill, and then he was at the gate and jerked it wide. He ran inside and yelled. Pounding hoofs lunged, throwing up clouds of dust that burned into his nostrils. It rose and swirled as the last mount fled out.

Through that dust came walking the figure of a man; a tall man whose two heavy pistols with their ivory butts gleamed brightly. In the dust that obscured all else, Ro Rundert seemed to stand out alone, towering in his boots.

"I sorta figgered something like this might happen," he said.

That was all he said as he flung himself sideways and his right hand flashed to his hip. He drew fast, and Montana, a gun already in his hand, shot him. He felt the jar of the heavy .45 against his palm, saw it's short, lashing tongue of fire leap out in a direct line with the gunman's middle. He shot his twice more as Rundert fell, his hat off and one leg partly doubled back under him. The gun in his hand finally exploded and flew away from

fingers already gone limp, and Montana was running toward the opposite side of the corral with the yells of Black Jack and his men somewhere through the dust. He went up over the rails and they twisted on their rawhide lashings. The screeching sound carried far and brought the double roar of a shotgun. Buckshot tore into the wood four feet away and dried, yellow splinters splashed out into the night.

"Spread out along the creek," yelled Buckner. "Git him when he crosses."

But the thunder of hoofs drumming around the station drowned out the sound. Montana hit the ground again, the Colt still gripped in his right hand, the weight of the big Winchester dead in his other.

From over across the creek, in the timber, a shout came and mingled with it was a woman's scream: Belle. "They've got him, and I won't leave!" Austin's voice carried faintly, "It's a stacked deck and he knew what he was doin'. Come On!"

Horses began to crash through the timber then and Montana, gulping in great sobbing breaths of air as he ran, knew they were on their way. In the confusion he got across the creek; how he never quite knew. He ran staggering, his limbs trembling, and came at last to where his horse had been left.

Sitting alone on a rock, reins in hand, was his father.

CHAPTER XXIII

MONTANA'S trembling legs seemed to give way all of a sudden. He fell on the grass and lay there panting, too weak to move. The terrible run had set his heart pounding furiously and the blood seemed to have rushed to his head. But he knew the weakness and the light headedness was something else. He was seeing Ro Rundert going down in the corral with that booted and spurred foot doubled so queerly under him, the man's insides torn apart by the smashing impact of the three big slugs. Something caught at Montana's own midriff. He rolled over, away from his father, and began to retch.

He lay there for what might have been a minute or more before he rose weakly to a sitting position.

"I . . . . I've just killed Rundert," he said.

Jim Thornton didn't answer and Montana looked at his father. The older man sat like a wooden statue, eyes half staring at the ground in front of him and half going across the shimmering waters of the shallow creek. He seemed oblivious to the sounds coming from over there, both hands cupped around his jaws.

"I can't get over it, Brand," he finally said. "We waited over here, watching, until the two girls came wading across. Austin was all for giving Ben his horse and coming over to give you a hand. But we'd planned it out the other way and he had to stand pat. Then the girls came up. Belle walked straight to me. She didn't say a word, Brand—not 'til she came up and put both arms around my neck. Then she said, 'No matter what you've done, Dad, you're still my father and I still love you and I always will'. That was hard to take. Me—buyer of stolen cattle on a big scale to get richer when I was already rich. And I stole some too. I stole it from weaker men and then lost it to men who were stronger . . . . or perhaps more sneaking than I was. It doesn't matter. All that mattered then was that she was sticking by me and I had to tell her the rest of it—about you."

It had begun to quiet down over there at Buckner's. The shouted oaths

had subsided and Montana guessed that Buckner and the others were out on foot, trying to haze one or two of the gentler horses back into the corral to use in rounding up the others. But if those mounts followed the usual traits of cow ponies, corralling any of them afoot wouldn't be an easy task.

"So Belle knows about me?" Montana asked, half musingly, his eyes too looking out into the night.

"She knows—that you're both my own kids. She took it for a minute and then broke down completely. It's strange, Brand, but in all the years that youngster has been with me I never saw her cry. Not even as a baby. She just wasn't the crying kind. She said something about you never forgiving her for what she believed you were—a hired killer. The Forrest girl didn't say anything, but she was plenty upset."

Montana changed the subject. "Did they get away, all right?"

His father nodded. "I told Ben Carson to go where you'd said. Up to that place he took you before, under Horse Thief Peake. It's not too far from here and they ought to make it in a few hours. They'd better because the trader is about done in. Belle didn't want to leave, but Austin took care of that. That slow moving Texan surprised me. He'd be a bad man to tangle with, if you got right down to cases. Anyhow, Brand, promise me one thing: When you get to the girls, stick by Belle through thick and thin. She's my daughter, but she's a thoroughbred all the way through; and she's always wanted a brother. Well" Jim Thornton finished, rising to his feet, "I guess she's found one."

MONTANA got to his own feet as the older man wearily mounted. "Where are you going?" he asked sharply.

"Back," his father said. "Back to the ranch. I built that ranch and I'm going to die on it. Black Jack is no fool. He'll swoop in by daylight at the latest and take over with part of his men while the others go after Ben Carson and Austin and the girls. I want to be right there waiting for them, no matter what odds. I built that ranch, Brand, and the only way he'll move in is over my dead body. It's the least I can do to make up to the Forrest girl—and Belle—for what I've done."

"In that case I'll go along with you," Montana said.

He slipped the repeater into its saddle boot and mounted and the two of them made a roundabout way through the trees, swinging wide of Buckner's crossing. Day was beginning to break when they reached the ranch, unsaddled and led their horses into a corral where water from a hillside spring flowed sweet and cold into the long horse trough. There were other animals in the corral and something about one of them, sweaty and blanket marked, brought Montana up sharp. He saw another and still a third.

Somebody had beaten them to the ranch!

Boots crunched and Austin's voice said casually, "The girls are in the house. Kinda tuckered out, poor kids."

"What the devil are you doing here?" rapped out Montana. "Why didn't you hit the breeze south?"

It was too dark to see the Texan's grin, but the grin was there. "Well I reckon I'm working for Miss Forrest now, and that girl has got a lot of set ways, for an easterner. She said we was headin' back and Belle backed her up. Ben was plumb out in the saddle

anyhow—had to half carry him in front of me. So here we are."

"And Belle figured I'd come back?" asked Jim Thornton.

"Something like that, I reckon. And she also kinda thought that if this new brother of hers got out alive he might be traipsin' along. Purty good figgerin', I'd say. You-all must be about tuckered out. Better get some sleep. I'll stand guard until morning."

In the chilly darkness Montana nodded, too weary for further talk. Every bone in his body ached from fatigue and his muscles were stiff and sore. The terror of it back there, the strain of waiting, had snapped at last, and he was about ready to collapse. He wanted only to get into a bunk and sleep for the next month. He went toward the bunkhouse, went in amid gentle breathing men, found a straw lined bed in a corner and sank down upon it. He was asleep almost at once.

DAWN broke at last and the sun came up over the basin with its big house resting against the west rim. Some life began to stir on the ranch, but there appeared to be little. Four sleeping men woke up, glanced curiously at the sleeping stranger in a corner, and went out to wash up. One of them, in lieu of an absent cook, got breakfast. They didn't speak much, and after it was over sat around talking in low tones. They were older men, and they obviously were worried. Outside in the sun a mother duck, trailed by a file of web footed offsprings, came out from under the ranch house and padded toward the small pond below the corrals, where overflow from the big spring on the slope above was dammed up. A hungry milk pen calf, outside with its mother inside, pulled its wet nose from between the bars and bawled its empty bellied misery.

There wasn't a horse in sight in the main corral. All had been put into the big barn. Austin has seen to that. He sat on a bench, his back against the bunk house wall, a Winchester cradled across his lap. He hadn't spoken to the others nor eaten breakfast. Now his eyes, turning always toward the cut in the south end of the basin a mile or so away, squinted as movement came and riders took shape. Austin switched the repeater to his other arm and turned, sticking his head inside the doorway.

"Here they come," he announced, calm-eyed.

A buzz of excitement rose among the old men. They came to the door, saw the nine or ten riders, and exchanged glances.

"It's not yore fight, I reckon," Austin said.

"I kinda hate to leave," one of the oldsters said. "But, as you say, it ain't our fight."

It didn't seem to be an accident that their war bags were packed, nor that, down in a smaller branding corral, four horses stood penned by themselves. They moved out, those four men, and the Texan rose, going inside. He went to the bunk and shook Montana. "They're coming through the cut," he said.

"Found our trail?"

"Maybe. I kept to the creek bed as much as possible when we circled. Maybe they're just comin' in to take over. I woke up Ben a half hour ago, up in the house."

CHAPTER XXIV

"I'LL BE right out," Montana said. He rose, stretched his stiff, aching muscles, surprised that he'd forgotten to remove his boots. He was still tired, and a glance in the mirror

showed him red-eyed and unshaved. *Somehow,* he thought, *A man ought to be shaved if he has to die.* But did it really matter? No, the thought came again, it didn't really matter.

Out in the basin the riders came on.

They were half way to the house when four men, unarmed, rode out, almost as if to meet them. The oldsters swung wide and the two groups cautiously passed each other two hundred yards distance apart. Raucous laughter floated from the larger group now nearing the ranch. They rode in past the lower corrals, into a lane formed by the corrals and a blacksmith shop and several sheds on the opposite side. At the bunkhouse two of the riders swung down and peered inside, guns in hand. Then they let out a whoop and shoved the weapons back into leather, and that seemed to be the signal for a wild scramble among the others for preferred bunks.

"They're gone!" yelled a voice, almost hilariously. "All pulled stakes and the place is ourn."

Three of the riders—Buckner, Black Jack Caswell, and the Dutchman—apparently had other ideas. They rode on up the lane and pulled up in front of the steps leading up eight feet to the long veranda.

"Hey," called Buckner. "Anybody at home?"

There was no answer. The front door was closed and there was no Indian girl present to answer.

"Probably took the squaws with dem," grunted the Dutchman, with disappointment. "Vun of dem, I vant."

He twisted his huge girth and saddle leather creaked as they swung down. Buckner was first up the steps, still carrying his sawed-off. Stuck in the waistband of his pants was a short barrelled pistol whose front sight had been freshly filed away to prevent snagging. Black Jack and the bigger man followed. They were all half way to the top, with Buckner still in the lead, when the front door opened and Montana stepped through with his father at his heels. The elder Thornton held a heavy six shooter, barrel down, at his right side.

"Howdy," Black Jack said affably, grinning through his glossy beard. "Nice mornin'."

"This is the pay-off," Montana said.

There might have been something else to say. There might have been explanations as to how and why they had decided to come. But, in the silence that followed, the smashing roar of a Winchester broke out from down at the corral and to a man the three wheeled. It sang out again, back of the blacksmith shop, across from the bunkhouse, not thirty yards away. One rider was down in the doorway, and with the second shot a man yelled and leaned forward to drag him inside while another slammed the door. It went shut with a bang and Austin, calmly working the lever on his Winchester, put a third one through one of the small windows of the box shaped affair and effectively sealed in the men of the Buckner-Caswell-Saunders gang of horse thieves and cut throats.

THE Dutchman wheeled, his face a mask of fury. From somewhere a gun flashed out and then the air over the steps seemed filled with flame spurts and a thin veil of black powder smoke. Black Jack half wheeled sideways, right hand already inside his old coat, and short jets of flame lashed out from under his partly raised left arm.

King Ramson fired only once, a wild shot that missed its target by five feet and slashed a long gash in a porch sup-

port before one of Black Jack's shots drove him back against the wall and left him sagging.

Fire caught the raider then. He was spun completely around and Montana shot him twice through the side as he turned and tumbled down and then turned his guns on the Dutchman and Buckner. Saunders' bestial face turned a bursting red as the blood seemed driven to it by the shocking impact of the big bullets. He didn't reel. He started backward down the steps with both arms outflung, as though trying to keep his balance. He went down four of them, making queer jerking motions of his body, before he went over backward, his head striking the side of Buckner's horse.

But Montana, the terror of it still upon him and shaking him through, had missed Buckner. He had missed him at not more than ten feet distance as Buckner, deadly cold and unperturbed, slapped the sawed-off into his left hand and snatched the pistol from his waistband.

"Allus knew it!" he spat out triumphantly, probably meaning that a man with a waistband gun could come out victor in a pistol duel even with that flaming faced rider on the porch above him.

He might have attained it too, except that from a corner of the porch another man, his face swollen and blue, had stepped into view with a short carbine in his big hands. It exploded once, snap shooting of the kind Carson had done on startled deer, and then a hot, empty shell went spinning over the rail of the porch as Ben Carson jerked the lever. He gave only a cursory glance at the body rolling down the steps and then went over in a one hand vault. He landed heavily eight feet below and began a lumbering run for the protection of the barn. From there he could cover the back of the bunkhouse where Caswell's raiders were barred in.

Montana turned slowly to look at his father. Thornton sagged against the wall beside the doorway, his gun gone, one hand clamped to his side. The fingers that had broken more than one man in physical combat but never mastered the use of a pistol were turning red against the spreading blotch on his shirt.

A WOMAN'S cry came from somewhere and Belle, in a long white gown, came running, followed by Helen Forrest. She looked at Montana, at his unshaved, haggard face and tired eyes; at the two pistols in his hands. He saw the look. It might have been fear, new horror,—he wasn't sure. He turned to Belle, who was slipping an arm around her father's waist.

"Better get him inside quick in case of shots from the bunkhouse," he heard his voice saying almost wearily, and ran for the barn himself.

Austin had carried his saddle inside and the 40-65 was still in the boot. Ben Carson lay back of a manger, slamming shots through a rear window.

"We got 'em," he grunted, reaching into his coat pocket for more shells.

"I reckon," Montana said casually, and crawled to the opposite end of the long barn to start driving 40-65 slugs through the back door of the bunkhouse at a different angle. "They can't last long without water. Austin just shot the pail off its hook as I ran from the house."

It was over in a surprisingly short time. Carson had run out of shells and gone to the house to get Buckner's sawed-off shotgun, the nine pellets from each load he poured into windows playing havoc with the fear filled men back of the walls. The doors were splintered sieves and all the windows were shot

out when, less than an hour later, a bandana waved from the window.

Montana sat there in the barn in the midst of a pile of scattered shells, watching as Austin and Carson took over the unarmed captives who came filing out with their hands in the air. He saw Helen on the porch, saw Belle come out and stand anxiously beside her; he felt sick again and suddenly very lonely.

It was while the other two men herded the prisoners toward the front porch that Montana made his decision. He picked up his saddle, cinched it on a long-legged claybank, led the animal out the opposite end of the barn, and mounted. A group of trees grew along the west rim of the basin, south of the corrals, and into these he disappeared.

A mile below the house he suddenly came upon four riders; old men with grey hair and seamed faces and twisted bones that hadn't healed straight after horses rolled on them. They sat in a little knot, talking among themselves. They had been sitting there for quite some time, listening to the sounds of gun-fire.

They reined around to face the rider, and Montana pulled up.

"We was sorta arguin' amongst ourselves about goin' back and settin' in," one of them volunteered. "But King'll probably chase us off the place now, same which I don't blame him none."

"Go back," Montana said. "He won't chase you off . . . now."

He rode on and the oldsters exchanged glances. "Why, I plumb forgot fer a minute. The King don't own thet ranch anymore. We got a new boss."

CHAPTER XXV

A MONTH passed and things changed on the ranch. The basin bloomed out still greener and new men came. Up in a cleared spot in the timber grass began to grow again over five unmarked graves, beneath which rested Black Jack Caswell, Dutch Saunders, Buckner, and two of their riders killed in the bunkhouse. Seven more went on trial in Cheyenne and, with Austin and the two women testifying, heard a judge close the doors of a penitentiary upon them with a sentence of from thirty to fifty-five years. Carson returned with them on the train and got off at Smeller-A-Mile to find his friend Pete had sold out and disappeared. The spring lengthened into summer as two more months went by. Things were still changing.

New men had come into the back country. Quiet men who wore the badges of a U. S. Deputy Marshal beneath their shirts, backed by other men who had been picked for their jobs. Lone riders hiding out in cabins stepped out of a morning to find themselves facing guns in the hands of these same men. Horse thieves rounding a trail jerked up sharp and raised their hands as other men stepped from concealment. Some of these captured were the King's former riders, the men who had rustled his stock while they drew his gun pay. Word went out along the dim trails that the back country wasn't safe anymore, and the cabins soon became shelter only for the pack rats who scurried past open, wind banged doors.

The law was coming in.

On an early afternoon in July a rider jogged out of the timber and headed his horse toward the creek that flowed through one end of Buckner's corral. It was a little wider of late from recent rains but the water flowed clear and clean over the gravel and the horse sank its warm muzzle deep. Montana sat there in the saddle, a little surprised to see smoke coming from the kitchen

stove pipe and a couple of horses in the lot.

Three months seemed to have done wonders for him. He was full weight and healthy looking and the haggard look was gone from his young countenance. There was in it an eagerness and longing as his eyes swept past the house and along the road that led to the ranch four miles away.

As the horse raised its dripping muzzle and rolled the bit in its mouth the back door of the former stage station flew open. A man came through it. Running. He legged it straight for the bank of the creek, turned long enough to shake his fist at the belligerent Assininbone woman in the doorway, and then did a beautiful slide down the bank. He sat there, a look of disgust upon his face until he saw the grinning rider.

Recognition was mutual and Pete, the saloonman from Smeller-A-Mile, got to his feet. He jammed both fists upon his hips and glared.

"What in the hell are *yuh* grinnin' at, you ring tailed, blankety-blank polecat?" he roared.

"You," Montana said, urging his horse on across. "I thought yore stomach hurt—or maybe it was yore feet."

PETE turned long enough to shake his fist at the full bosomed young woman again, who by now had been joined by Leota and the other girl from the ranch. He let go an indignant snort.

"Of course my belly hurts," he snapped. "That's just the trouble. 'Me good cook,' she says. 'I don't care if you are,' I says. 'My blankety-blank stomach won't take them steaks of yourn.' Then she gets mad. 'You eat more,' she hollers. 'I'm damned if I will,' I holler back. Then she throws the bloomin' skillet at me. Look at 'em! Now they're *laughing* at me. They drinks up my whiskey an' then laugh at me. Me—the *owner* of the place!"

"Owner?" Montana queried. "You own this place?"

"Wellllll," Pete admitted, a little sheepishly, "I just sorta moved in a couple months ago after I sold out in Smeller-A-Mile and come up here".

Montana laughed again, bade Pete goodbye, left him to his marital woes, and rode on. He was in no particular hurry. Austin probably wouldn't be in until sundown. Montana let the mount under him take its time, and the sun had swung far down toward the west rim of the basin when he finally rode through the cut and headed his horse toward the ranch buildings.

He reached the lower corrals and jogged up the lane past the bunkhouse where three men lounged on the bench outside, waiting for supper call. One of them, not a day over sixty, looked up, recognized the rider, and lifted a hand in greeting. Montana went on past and saw Austin over beyond the corral, opening a gate to enter and unsaddle.

The ranch had changed a little, in that just north of the corrals and not far from the big mansion, a small but comfortable house, new and gleaming with fresh paint, had been erected. On the porch stood Belle, his half sister.

She saw him coming and her hand went up to her throat as he rode up. He reined up and swung to the ground in a long step, and he noted the clean house dress she wore with an apron around her waist. She looked fresh and wholesome, and yet this was a different Belle than the one he had known so briefly before.

She didn't speak as he took off his hat. Just as she had done to her father that night at Buckner's, so she did to her brother. She came forward with-

out a word, put both arms around his neck, and kissed him. Her eyes were a little misty when she stepped back.

"How are you, Belle?" he asked, trying to be casual and finding it hard. A lump had come into his throat.

"I couldn't be better. And you?"

"Fair to middlin', I reckon," he replied.

"Where have you been?"

"Up north, taking care of a little business. I kind of wanted to clean a couple of things off the slate first and start off fresh."

"We thought perhaps you'd gone back to Carson's," Belle said. "But when we met him in Cheyenne during the trial of Black Jack's men he said he hadn't seen you. They got from thirty to fifty-five years on the abduction charges. I feel a lot better now."

"You look a lot better," he observed, for want of anything better to say.

She laughed a low, rich laugh. "Much better than you think. You're going to be an uncle."

FOR a moment he didn't quite comprehend and Belle laughed again.

"I'm going to have a baby," she explained. "Austin and I were married in Cheyenne during the trial. Look—there he comes now."

Austin was striding up from the corral. His shirt was open at the neck displaying an area of sun burned skin and his big hat was back on his head. He wore leather chaps and carried a saddle carbine in one hand. His face split in a wide grin as he came up and seized Montana's hand.

"Brand, you old sonuvagun!" he said delightedly. "I'm really glad to see you back here, boy. How's things goin'?"

"No complaints, I guess."

"Me neither, Brand. I'm running the spread for Helen, and her cows are rolling fat. We won't make any money this year, I reckon, but you watch the beef crop next year. That isn't the only crop either. Belle and me are going to have a son."

"I've already told him," Belle said, half indignantly, her arm going around his waist. "And I'm not sure about the son business either, Mister."

"Well," drawled the grinning Austin, "I don't know what he'll be, but if he's a half Texan, half Wyominger he oughta be a humdinger. Just wait'll King finds out."

Montana had for a moment, forgotten his father. He asked a question.

"King?" Belle said. "He's back east. He was pretty badly hurt with that bullet through his side, but within two weeks he forced us to make a bed in the stage and make a slow trip to the junction. The minute he got there he started burning up the wires to every sheriff in Montana. He finally found out the details about those . . . that trouble you'd been in. And his name was still powerful enough to get results."

"So that's how it was?" mused Montana thoughtfully. "I figgered I'd have to stand trial on at least the deputy sheriff fracas but the new sheriff told me it was all water over the dam. We had a hearing on the Bostick charge up in Billings. I found a couple of the boys who had witnessed it. So they called it self defense and cleared the charge."

"I'm glad, terribly glad, Brand," Belle answered softly. "And King will be pleased too. He went on east on the train, still in pretty bad shape, and if you'd ever met my mother, you'd have known what would happen when he was carried in wounded. It's probably the only thing that could have brought them back together."

"What's he going to do now?" Mon-

tana asked.

Austin was divesting himself of his chaps. He kicked the leather free and tossed them over a porch chair. "They're coming out here this fall," he said.

"King's going to start ranching again," Belle said. "Mother has quite a lot of money in her own right, and there's a place about five miles north of here on the creek where they're going to build. He's going to work a small spread and raise some blooded horses."

Again that awkward pause. Belle waited, finally looked toward the front porch, took him by the arm and turned him. He saw a lone figure in white, her eyes going far over the basin to the distant horizon, toward, perhaps, the junction where Holland Forrest lay beneath a new headstone put up by old Applby. Over Montana's shoulder came in a soft whisper the voice of this half sister he so loved:

"She's been like that week after week, Brand. I think she was sometimes a little afraid you didn't care enough to come back."

"Care?" he said, low voiced. "If she only knew."

"Perhaps she does, Brand. But if you knew a little more about women, you'd know they like to be told. Go to her—she's been waiting."

He went, feeling strange inside, the tightness reminding him again of the night in Buckner's when the guns he no longer wore had spoken out; of the night on the train when the horse thief McBain had died.

He saw her turn at the sound of his jangling spur rowels and her face change. It lit up with something new he had never seen in it before. He saw the beauty of it and the welcome, and for some strange reason there floated into his mind a picture of the valley far up under old Horse Thief Peake's craggy shoulder as he went up the steps to meet her. Old Jorg, he thought, would like it very much if he knew that one day in the not too distant future that cabin would shelter two people who wanted to shut out the rest of the world from themselves while they were on their honeymoon.

THE END

★ U.N.O. — INDIAN STYLE ★

FOUR hundred years ago the Indians of the North American continent tried to form a United Nations Organization. They, too, realized that this banding together was their only hope for the establishment of universal peace. Continual warfare and strife between the tribes was depriving their civilization from coming into full flower. The leaders among the Iroquois realized this—and their two great statesmen, Hiawatha and Dekanawida set about the founding of the Iroquois League.

Their message was spoken so eloquently that they persuaded the Mohawks, Onandagas, Senacas, Oneidas, and Cayugas to join together in a federation with the common purpose the abolition of war, forever. Oddly enough, they called this amalgamation the League of Five Nations. Their plan might have succeeded, but it, like the modern League of Nations found that the feeling of universal brotherhood was sadly lacking among certain of their contemporaries. Distrust and greed began to play against the forces of good and the League of Five Nations found themselves with a fight on their hands. They took their first false steps with the decision that peace could be established by conquest.

From their homeland in New York the Five Nations proceeded to conquer the other tribes to draw them within their ranks. When all the north was united, there remained the most formidable foe of all, the southern Cherokee.

Then began—two centuries before our Civil War, a war between North and South which was to last a hundred years. But it was a war fought in vain. The empire of the North couldn't break the spirit of the southern tribes, nor could the Cherokee wear out the iron will of the Iroquois.

In 1768 peace was made between the two greatly weakened forces. There was another enemy to face—and this time he was to win out. Undoubtedly the fact that the Indians were constantly fighting between themselves made them fall easy victims to the snares of the invaders from across the Atlantic.—*R. C. Voh.*

KNOCKED OUT

He made a few passes with his hands—

By Tom Thursday

RIGHT away I told Ballyhoo Burns that the idea was screwy. He admitted it was and we decided to try it. We had been shacked off in a burg entitled Homicide Hollow where we had been flopped by a mud-show carnival, which same had been completely wrecked by sheriff's attachments.

Between us we had four bucks, Truman currency, and no odd cents. Reaching the general store—hay, pork and ginghams sold in the attic—we observed a bevy of cowboys and rangers reading a posted bulletin. Taking a gander we noted that several gents were wanted for everything from murder to wife and cattle stealing.

"This," buzzed Burns, "is a very tough country."

"It doesn't look tender," I conceded.

Silently, we strolled toward what passed for a river, both in fairly deep thought. Suddenly, Burns slapped me

WHERE THE WEST BEGINS

—and the local yokels sat with their mouths open

A hick western town is certainly the place for a hypnotist to display his abilities!

on the back, right in the middle of my pet neuritis.

"Listen!" he exclaimed. "Did you know I used to be a hypnotist?"

"Nope," I replied, and let it go at that.

"With a few deft passes of the hands," he goes on, "I can put people to sleep."

"So what? The movies and radio can do the same thing, without any hands being used at all."

"I was famous throughout the world as Professor Omar Bey Mahoney."

"Meaning Hialeah, the Bronx and Kneecap Center, Vermont," I cracked.

"I also gave lectures for the benefit of art, science and humanity in general."

"And the benefit of Burns," I added.

"Right," he grinned. "Now that we understand the new gimmick, all we have to do is promote some joint to give

the exhibition and find some dizzy subject to hypnotize."

"What do you do with the umpchay after you hypnotize him?"

"That," said the professor, "is the real beauty and profit of the act. After I have him asleep in my power I put him six feet in the ground for six days and nights."

"What are you trying to do," I demanded, "have the undertakers union picket the joint?"

"The act," raved on Burns, "should be a riot in this country."

"Riot is right. But look: after you plant the monkey in the ground, what happens? Is he supposed to sprout or bloom or just kid the worms?"

"The towners walk up and take a look. At two-bits per look. First, we charge 'em admission at the door, then, after I slap the punk to sleep, we charge them to see him dreaming."

"You figure these cow-cuckoos must have good eyesight. Could you explain how they see six feet down in a dark hole?"

"Quite simple," said Ballyhoo Burns. "They'll look down through a homemade periscope. Get it?"

"Periscope, hey? What the hell you going to do—hypnotize a submarine?"

"Listen," he said patiently. "I'll give you the whole scheme in a nutshell."

"Why mention the shell?"

"After placing my subject in a complete state of hypnosis, we put him in a plain pine box. You know, the undertakers' standard home pall for the horizontal customers. The box will be six feet long and two feet wide. Next, we cover him with the lid and then plant him six feet down. He will remain in the ground for six full days and six full nights. The idea is to have the customers come in each evening, at two-bits a peek, and see how the ape is progressing."

"What is he supposed to eat—worms?"

"The feeding of the subject is very efficient and simple," explained Omar Bey Mahoney. "After the visitors leave every night we dig him up and feed him. Then all he has to do is play around the joint until the next night. But he won't be permitted to leave at any time. See?"

"I see. If a hypnotized guy was seen walking around town it might cause raised-eyebrow comment. Gents in pine boxes are supposed to remain quiet and peaceful."

"Now that you understand the gaff, you run along and get me a subject."

"Who would you suggest—the mayor or just the sheriff?"

"Anybody will do. Makes no difference, especially if he is a little dumb. You can even bring back Hitler or Hirohito."

"I'll try and get Adolf."

THE assignment was the old apcray and I knew it. Only a fifth-wit would consent to act as a subject and, what's more, I knew that Ballyhoo Burns, even with the nom de plume of Omar Bey Mahoney, couldn't hypnotize anybody without an axe in one hand and a blackjack in the other. Bam!—if you know what I mean.

I started looking for some clunkhead, while Burns began searching for a barn to give the exhibition. After two hours, I quit. I run into some possible subjects but they all carried guns. Further, most of the lads looked like they had a sense of humor like a Democrat Vermont.

"Well," said Burns, "where's the subject? I promoted a barn with no trouble at all."

"What did you use for money—hypnotism?"

"I took the old buzzard in as a partner."

"I trust the proposition was favorable."

"It was appetizing and tasty," confessed the professor. "He gets ten per cent of the net, if he wants to count the gate receipts personally. If he lets *us* count, he can have fifty per cent."

"Where is this new opera house?"

"Follow me. It's on the whoopskirts of town—and 2345 miles from the nearest subway."

It wasn't bad. Big enough to be a hangar for a set of Flying Fortresses. On the left side is a hayloft. Our attention was attracted to same by what I think is a sawmill in full operation.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I think it's an electric icebox cranking up," said Burns. "Take a trip up and see."

I climb the ladder on a tour of investigation. Curled more or less neatly in a corner I spot a lad who has enough whiskers to supply all the Civil War generals. He's rather long and slim. I tweaked his beakus or nose.

"M'yah," he remarked, in beautiful English. For a moment I think I catch a Brooklyn accent but I'm not sure. I give his snout another clout. For a short moment he opened a pair of steel-gray eyes, then reached out his right hand under the hay. It came back with a jug of hard cider. He took a long gulp, choked like a 1914 car back-firing, then flopped over to snore again. I returned to the edge of the hayloft and gave my report of the expedition to Ballyhoo Burns.

"The gent up here," I said, "has nothing in the way of comment for either press or public."

"No comment, hey?" replied Burns. "Well, toss the congressman down. He'll make an ideal subject!"

"Before I let 'im drop," I said, "maybe I better throw some of this hay or breakfast food down first. Something soft for him to land on. I don't think he's the kind that bounces."

Burns arranged the hay in a pile as I threw it. Then I grabbed the sleeping cutey by the neck and rear-end, tossed him over my shoulder, and gave him a heave-ho over the edge. He made a three-point landing and stopped without applying the brakes. Came a few bored eye-blinks and then he began to scratch his whiskers.

"How are you?" greeted Burns. "You are about to become initiated into the vast mysteries of show biz."

"M'yah," whinnied the new playmate. This time the accent was distinctly Arizona via Montana.

"I think this bean has had too much to swig," guessed Burns. Considering the cider fumes, an alligator could have guessed as much. The professor began to curry him around the ears and face. The lad seemed to fancy it like a pooch having his pet fleas scratched. He grinned like a tomcat in a creamery.

"Thanksh, pardner," he mumbled.

"WHAT'S your name, pal?" asked Burns.

"Wash muh name? Lemme see, now, wash muh name—wash muh name—wash muh—"

"Turn it off," I said. "There's a crack in the record."

"Allow me to introduce myself," bowed Burns. "I'm Professor Omar Bey Mahoney."

"With the degree of OPA from the College of Griftola," I added.

"Muh name ish Snyder," said our new pal, and fell back to sleep.

"The proposition is simple," remarked Burns to me. "I'm convinced this bumso is an ideal hypnotic subject. All we need to do is keep him well-oiled with hard cider."

Well, sir—or ma'am—we sleep in that night and the next morning we are up bright and brisk. But not Brother Snyder. He's still entered in a sleep marathon and has a swell chance of winning. Burns started out to find some yamhead to build him a coffin while I out-talked the local printer and promoted some advertising dodgers.

The printer is an old coot with tobacco-stained whiskers and did not relish doing business with strangers. However, when I offered him a ten per cent cut in the show—pointing out the great financial possibilities—he dashed off an extra five hundred for luck. Which same we'd all need, so help me, Barnum. The throwaways looked fairly snooty, when you consider they were printed on Ben Franklin's original hand-press, with shoe-blacking that doubled in brass between boots and the printing.

The publicity was fairly modest, and took me almost five minutes to compose. It stated that Professor Omar Bey Mahoney, world's most eminent exponent of scientific hypnotism—direct from a triumphant tour of Europe, Africa, Asia and at least six election districts of the Bronx, N. Y., would give a public demonstration of his great powers next Monday evening. At which time he would hypnotize a human being, place the subject six feet in the earth, and keep him there for six days and six nights. All without food, water, or even root beer passing his lips.

The goo went over like Jimmy Doolittle over Tokyo, and attracted attention from surrounding counties. By the time we opened the barn doors for the first performance the c r o w d is standing in two lines, all at fifty cents per head and even half-head. They are a tough-looking flock of hombres and those who didn't carry .38's had .45's. It was a very rough burg, where even the sparrows never cheeped above bass.

I collected the dough at the entrance and gave each client his correct change. I had seen the size of the cemetery and, besides, it was not well kept. As soon as the last patron entered the barn I closed the large doors and walked to the front to join Professor Omar Bey Mahoney. The g r e a t scientist was strutting up and down, stroking his sideburn and goatee, which same he had sprouted over night. This growth was due to the generosity of a passing sheep and a billy goat, aided greatly by a little glue. Burns was giving the customers the impression that he was in very heavy thought, probably figuring out a method for making the atom bomb as harmless as a popgun.

However, the big fraud is not fooling me. What the professor really has on his mind is what he will do if Snyder becomes unmannerly and glaums up the works.

"What's the net take, kid?" he whispered, meaning how much cash did I nick at the door.

"Never m i n d the take," I said. "Worry about the fake. Suppose this bum gets temperamental?"

"Fear not. I got that clunk floating in hard cider. Right now he don't know whether he's in Boston, Buffalo or a vat full of whipped cream."

SUDDENLY, and dramatically, the professor turned and faced the audience with a stern face. After holding up two fairly clean hands for attention, he went into a short speech on the aspects of the forthcoming exhibition.

"I need not tell you intelligent people," he intoned, "that this is a very dangerous scientific experiment. If this brave subject—who has so kindly volunteered to assist science—fails to revive at the end of six days and six nights, it wll mean that another great

martyr has sacrficed his life to the advance of scientific research."

I take a quick gander at Brother Snyder. He's weaving unsteadily back and forth, as if uncertain whether to fall on his puss or his rear-housing. A stray bird flew into the barn, circled around Snyder's whiskers, got a whiff of his ciderized breath, then speedily flew out, positive that it was no place to build a nest for its young.

After lecturing for about ten minutes, using yard words with inch meanings, the profound professor walked over to Snyder—who is weaving more groggily than ever—and gazed at him with what they call fatherly compassion. A few feet from the subject is the pine box and I'm afraid he will trip over it and bust his neck.

"Sir," said Burns, looking Snyder straight in the whisker, "I congratulate a country that can produce a man like you. I congratulate you for your great courage and humanitarian spirit. You are, indeed, one of nature's noblemen!"

This buxom baloney did not seem to impress Snyder in the least. Had the professor presented him with the Distinguished Service Cross—with clusters of five-gallon cider jugs—he would have remained unimpressed.

"I appreciate the fact," drooled on the professor, "and I'm sure that this very intelligent audience appreciates the fact, that you are a great officer in the army of marching science. And, sir, you shall go down in history and posterity as one of the heroes of modern research. Sir, I salute you!"

All of which got no reaction from Snyder. He continued to yawn and weave and keep up with his own peculiar dreams, probably a Niagara Falls of hard cider oozing directly down his gullet.

"Gentlemen!" boomed the professor, whirling to face his audience. "I shall now place this honored subject in a complete state of unconscious rigidity. In brief, I shall now proceed to give you a demonstration of the great power of hypnosis!"

He turned, with all the pose of a ham actor, and faced Snyder. Comes now a series of more or less magic passes with the hands. The subject never even blinked.

"You are now entering the Kingdom of the Beyond!" snapped the professor. "Sleep. Sleep. I command you to sleep!"

THIS was the cue for Snyder to fall over into my waiting arms. We hoped. However, he failed to keel over per instructions. I hastily walked up to his left ear and buzzed, "Fall over, flatfoot! And make it damned sudden!"

Perspiration the size of Mardi Gras confetti began to pop out on the professor's brow. As to my own, I thought some one was throwing Lake Erie over my head. Finally, Snyder got smart and gave a performance that would have done credit to the whole Barrymore family. First, he stiffened, then fell over into my anxious arms.

"And now, folks," said the professor, like a guy just rescued from going down the third time, "you will observe that the subject is in a perfect state of hypnosis. He cannot hear, he cannot see, he cannot feel. I shall now proceed, with the aid of my assistant, to place the subject into this pine box. Then we shall lower him six feet down into the bowels of the earth. The hole will then be filled with the earth you see piled before you. Once in the earth, he shall remain there for six days and six nights. During all that time, my friends, I call your attenton to the fact that no food or drink shall pass his lips. On next Saturday evening, at 8

o'clock, I shall exhume the subject and revive him in full view of this audience!"

We laid Snyder in the box, nailed down the lid, then attached the periscope, and lowered him into the hole. Over his head and chest we have strung a flashlight so the gazing ginzos can see him. During the next half hour the clients walked past, took a glimpse at the sleeping sap, and seemed spellbound at the exhibition. I took a quick peek myself and was happy to note that Snyder was enjoying a first-class snore, complete with sawmill effects.

The professor invited the paying patrons to visit us each night, see how the subject was getting along, and all for the small sum of two-bits.

"Remembah, folks," boomed Burns, "the big night will be Saturday, at 8 p.m. That will be the time for reviving. I know you will all want to see this great scientific experiment reach its climax. Formerly," concluded the professor, "this reviving demonstration cost as much as five dollars, but since I see that my present audience is extra intelligent, and really interested in the advance of science, I have decided to allow you to come in at a mere fifty cents."

Well, everything went along hunky and likewise dory until about midday the following Saturday. When we returned to the barn, and opened the doors, we are treated to a very weird sight. A strange-looking gent is sitting near the grave and he has a most puzzling grin on his face.

"Say," barked Burns, "who's *that* guy?"

I take a quick see-see and note that the lad is slim and smooth-shaven. I promptly guess that some smart smick had busted into the joint to do a little unscientific investigating.

"We got to get that bird," snapped Burns, "and tie him up in the hayloft before he spills the whole show!"

"Let us be calm but speedy," I said.

We walked cautiously toward the sitting figure. As we approached he merry monkey grinned ear-to-eary.

"Howdy, pardners!" he said. "Ah seem to recall you hombres a little bit but ah guess ah was kinda dizzy for a few days; huh?"

I LOOKED at Burns and he popeyed back at me. Then we both caught on at the same time. The baby before us was no less than Brother Snyder. Worse, the big b i m z o has shaved his whiskers off—but clean!

"For the love of General Custer," yelped Burns, "what and the hell did you shave your whiskers off for?"

This remark s e e m e d to puzzle Snyder quite a wee morsel. His puss registered zero and also blank.

"Whut's the mattah, pardners?" he drawled, with the greatest of innocence. "Ah seems to remembah yore faces but ah can't recall whut took place."

"You've ruined the show!" woofed Burns. "What are we going to do when the suckers come in tonight for the big revival? They all know you had a map full of whiskers all week and they will want to know how come you can shave yourself while down in a coffin and likewise hypnotized!"

Snyder's face took on a peculiar expression. He was trying to think, something he was not used to.

"Wal, pardners," he finally said, "mebbe you bettah tell me whut it's all about. Ah felt kinda itchy with all that hair on mah face and just swished it off."

"Listen," snorted Burns. "You are supposed to be hypnotized and dead to the world. What about *that,* you bindle-stiff!"

A new glint came into Snyder's eyes.

"Ah guess ah been kinda sick lately," he said. "And ah'd like to know whut's been goin' on, pardners."

"Listen, pal," I put in. "You are supposed to be buried in that coffin and six feet down in that hole. See? We have been giving a scientific exhibition and charging admission to see you. Get it? Tonight is the big night, when we are supposed to revive you in full view of the audience and charge four-bits per customer. Understand?"

"And you have ruined it all by shaving!" whooped Burns.

"Ummmmnn," sniffed our subject. "Ah see. So you have been makin' money off'n me and ah don't know it, huh? Wal, pardners, whut do I git out of it?"

"We were going to give you ten per cent of the net profits," I explained. "Very easy money. What did you do? *Nothing,* except swig hard cider and play dead in a pine box."

"Ten per cent ain't enuff," belched Snyder. "Ah crave fifty per cent and ah aim to git it."

I hold a hurried business conference with Ballyhoo Burns.

"Better give it to him," I buzzed into his ear. "Or do you prefer that we all get hung?"

"Okay," whispered Burns. "Fifty per cent is okay. We do all the counting, don't we?"

Then I got one very sour thought—*what about those whiskers!*

"How are we going to get a new set of whiskers for Brother Snyder?" I asked.

"You rush back to town," said the professor, "and grab me a pair of good scissors and paste. While you are gone I will find a stray pooch or a tomcat and attend to the whiskers."

Just then comes a hard knocking at the barn doors.

"Who could that be?" asked Burns.

"Ten to nothing it isn't Truman or Churchill," I guessed.

COMES a splintering crash and the left door collapses. Three guntoting beezarks race toward us. The badge on the leader is three times the size of the other two, so I judge he is the sheriff. Brother Snyder gets one peek and tries to jump into the hole. He trips over the coffin and lands on his pan. The sheriff dashed up to Snyder and covered him with a gun.

"Aw right, Snodgrass!" he bellowed. "Yore under arrest for six cases of cattle-rustlin' in Cactus county and two for attempt tuh murder in Homicide Hollow!" Then he turned to his pals, and said, "Ah reckon thet gits us the one thousand dollars reward, hey?"

Burns, always quick on the mental-trigger, gets the idea at once. He rushed over to the sheriff and makes a grandstand play.

"You got here just in time, sheriff!" beamed Burns. "We were having a hard time holding that outlaw!"

The sheriff gave Burns a disgusted look. Then he switched his cut-plug from the right to the left jaw.

"Yup," he finally said. "Yup; you shore had a hard time holdin' him. Yuh held him for six days and thet's some powerful holdin'—and ah wonder why you nevah onct sent for the law."

"Yep," added a deputy, "it's a good thing ah cum in last night, looks down thet perryscope and sees him. Even with them whiskers he nevah fooled me!"

"You mean to say we don't get that reward?" bellowed Burns. "And after risking our lives trying to hold him? We should get something, at least!"

"We're gonnah give you somethin', pardner," said the sheriff. "We're givin' you one hour to git outta town!"

A MAN HAS TO FIGHT

By P. F. Costello

HE SWUNG off the train at the dusty, weather-beaten station, took his two grips from the porter and then walked to the ticket agent's office.

The man behind the grilled window wore a green eye shade and he looked hot, dusty and irritable. He was writing on a report sheet with a pen that made the sound of a nail being drawn across sandpaper.

The young man put his grips down.

He said, "My name is Larry Keefe. I'm Jed Keefe's nephew. Could you tell me the best way to get out to his place?"

The last of his words were drowned by the rhythmic roar of the train as it began to pull away from the station. It clattered past and the man behind the grilled window didn't look up until the noise had faded, and the hot, breathless stillness had again settled over the station.

He put his pen down and scratched his nose. Then he pushed the eyeshade back on his forehead and peered through the grill work at the young man.

"How's that again?" he asked.

"I'm Larry Keefe, Jed Keefe's nephew," he repeated. "I asked you how to

Larry Keefe was the kind of a man who has to fight—because he likes it, and because he has to fight!

The horse reared back viciously as Larry leaped for the reins . . .

get out to his place."

"It isn't far," the agent said slowly. "Just about five miles from here. The noon bus will take you about a mile from there and you'll have to walk the rest. What was it you wanted out there?"

"I'm going out to see my uncle," Larry Keefe said. "Thanks for the information."

He was reaching down for his grips, when the agent said, "No use going out there then."

Larry Keefe straightened and said, "What do you mean?"

The agent pulled his eyeshade down low on his forehead and picked up his pen. "Jed Keefe was killed last night in an auto accident," he said.

The agent peered at the young man as he made this announcement, but there was no change in Larry's expression. He looked thoughtful, that was all.

"I see," he said. "Where is the body?"

"It's over at Chambers Parlor," the agent said. "That's on the main street, just next to the billiard room. Goin' over that way?"

Larry Keefe picked up his grips and smiled briefly at the agent.

"I might," he said, and walked away.

The main street of the small town of Mountain Rock, Montana, was only a half mile long. It wound in from the desert, widened slightly on its way through Mountain Rock, then narrowed again and stretched off into the desert, as if it were in a hurry and anxious to leave.

Frame buildings, with an occasional one of brick, lined either side of the street. There were narrow board sidewalks that looked as if they had been dusty and hot for an eternity.

A few parked cars stood at the curbway with the sun shimmering on their dusty, cracking paint, and a few people were on the street, a woman or two carrying shopping packages and an occasional man hurrying from one building to another, as if anxious to get out of the heat.

THAT was the scene that spread ahead of Larry Keefe as he walked from the station, which was a few hundred yards beyond the business district. When he reached the first of the line of buildings he crossed to the sidewalk.

Both his suitcases were large and heavy but he carried them without any particular effort. He walked easily, with a free-swinging stride, and only a person watching very closely would have noticed that he favored his left leg slightly. His hair was dark and the tanned look of his skin and the rangy, almost bony, look of his tall body had the appearance of a man who had spent a long time under hotter suns than Mountain Rock had ever known.

He passed a barber shop, a saloon, a combination grocery and hardware store, and several other shops, before turning into the Mountain Rock hotel. The lobby was cool and dim and empty. There was no one in sight but the room clerk, a thin young man, with pale features and a scrawny little mustache.

"I'd like a room with a bath," Larry said.

"Can't give you a private bath," the young man said. "But there's a shower in the hallway you can use." He turned the registration book around and pushed it toward Larry. With his other hand he held out a pen. "Expect to be with us long?"

"I don't know," Larry said. He registered, then asked: "Where's a good place to eat?"

"Right across the street, the Crescent Cafe," the clerk said. "Pretty good

meals. I eat there myself, all the time."

"Thanks," Larry said. He picked up his key, then his grips. There was no elevator. He walked to the third floor, found his room, went in and locked the door behind him. The room was dusty and airless. There was a narrow bed that looked clean, a chest of drawers and a small closet. He opened the window wide and pulled the thin curtains back. The air that came was hot but fresh.

He took off his coat and shoes and stretched out on the bed. He had been riding and sleeping in a coach for three days and his muscles relaxed gratefully. He lit a cigarette and lay there enjoying the sensation of quiet and relishing the strong taste of the smoke. When the cigarette burned short he sat up, put it out and started to unpack his bags.

He took out a light gray flannel suit, that wasn't too badly wrinkled, a clean white shirt, clean socks and underwear. He debated a long time over a tie and finally picked a cool-looking blue.

Then he stripped his clothes off, put on a bathrobe and slippers and went to look for the shower . . .

WHEN he returned he felt better. He rubbed himself down briskly, but was careful of the inside of his left thigh, where the scar tissue was still raw and tender. The army doctors had told him it might take a full year before it stopped bothering him. And that had been just four months ago.

He dressed carefully, combed his hair, then went downstairs and crossed the street to the Crescent Cafe. It was a small place, with six or eight tables and a counter. But it looked clean and it smelled good.

There were three men sitting at one of the tables and they looked curiously at him as he sat down at the counter and picked up a menu. He glanced in their direction and they all looked quickly away.

He felt hungry now and clean and relaxed. The waitress who came from the back room, which was apparently the kitchen, put a glass of water in front of him, and studied him with frank curiosity.

She was a tired looking woman of about forty and she had the vaguely hungry look of a person who lives on a diet of gossip and other people's business.

"You're Jed Keefe's nephew, ain't you?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I'd like the steak dinner with french fries and coffee."

"Have you been to see him yet?"

"No."

"That's funny. I was over at the funeral parlor most of last night. He looks real good."

"Did you know him well?"

"Lordy no, but I always like to go to wakes. It's nice to watch how people act." She glanced at the table where the three men were sitting, then leaned closer to him and lowered her voice. "Some of them can act mighty pious and sorrowful now after practically killing the poor old man. But their day will come." She picked up the menu then and with one dark, mysterious nod at him, disappeared into the kitchen.

Larry lit a cigarette and thought over the conversation. His face remained impassive, but the fingers that held the cigarette were trembling slightly.

He was putting out the cigarette when the door opened and the girl came in. She looked around the cafe, then walked to the counter and sat down on a stool several feet from Larry. She was wearing riding clothes, expensive, tailored jodhpurs, a pale silk shirt open at the throat and beautiful black leath-

er boots, polished to an impossible lustre

Larry didn't like the clothes. There was affectation in their very simplicity, because it was the type of simplicity that only money could create. And the beautiful luster on her boots took hours of someone's time to produce. And not the girl's time.

SHE was an attractive girl, almost beautiful, with dark wide eyes, a flawless skin and thick mahogany-colored hair that was drawn tight and shining into a neat bun at the back of her neck. But there was something in her manner, an inner impatience and an outer austerity, that made her seem as removed and glacial as the snow capped peaks of a distant mountain.

The waitress came in then with Larry's plate. He didn't miss the expression of distaste on her face when she saw the girl sitting at the counter.

She put the plate before Larry, gave him a cup of coffee, then walked down to the girl.

"What do you want, Miss Whitmore?" she asked.

"Just orange juice," the girl said. "And try to take at least half the seeds out, please."

She was very much the cultivated young mistress of the manor talking to the hired help.

"Certainly," the waitress said. She started away, and then she stopped, and a sly, expectant smile hovered about her lips.

"Oh, Miss Whitmore," she said, "you should know Mr. Larry Keefe here." She nodded down at Larry. "He's Jed Keefe's nephew. I thought you should know, being as you're practically neighbors."

The girl looked down at Larry, one brief, impersonal glance that measured him, catalogued him, and dismissed him as something of no importance. She looked away and busied herself lighting a cigarette.

Larry went on eating.

The waitress said, "I just thought you'd like to know him, that's all."

"Would you mind terribly to bring me my orange juice?" the girl said coolly.

The waitress tossed her head like an impatient old mare and walked angrily to the kitchen.

The girl studied the tip of her cigarette for a while, then looked again at Larry. "So you're Jed Keefe's nephew," she said. She paused a moment and when he continued eating in silence, she went on, "I'm sorry about his accident."

Larry drank some of his coffee, then looked at her impassively. He made a studied, obvious job of inspecting her, from the tip of her boots to the top of her clean shining hair.

"Do you feel like talking?" he asked at last.

She flushed slightly. "Not particularly."

"Then why bother," he said, and went back to his meal.

She ground out her cigarette and two spots of color appeared in her cheeks.

"Don't flatter yourself that I wanted to talk to you," she said. "I just said I was sorry to hear of your Uncle's accident."

"I heard you," Larry said.

"You've got a lovely disposition," she said.

"I'm not trying to sell it to anybody," he said.

THE girl lit another cigarette furiously. "You wouldn't have a chance if you tried," she said. "I was simply trying to be nice and you've bitten my head off every time I opened my mouth."

"Don't bother being nice," Larry said. "It's too much of an effort for you."

While they had been talking a man had entered the restaurant. He stopped beside the girl and removed his hat. He was big, heavily muscled, about thirty-five. His face was square and tanned and he would have been handsome but for his close-set, too-small eyes. He had apparently heard some of the conversation between Larry and the girl.

"Miss Gwen," he said, "I don't think your father would care to have you talking with any or every seedy stranger who drifts into town."

While he spoke his eyes were measuring Larry with an unmistakable challenge.

The girl made a gesture of annoyance.

"I'm no child, Frank. I don't see that it's any of your business who I talk to."

"Your father's business is my business," the man called Frank said. "Anything that concerns him is my business." He looked down at Larry and his eyes narrowed. "If he's been bothering you, Miss Gwen, I'd be happy to teach him a lesson."

Larry felt his fingers trembling. He set his cup down as carefully as he could, but some of the coffee sloshed over the edge onto the counter. The feeling of panic was closing in on him. It was like something inside him beginning to tighten and tense. The doctors had told him it was just an aversion to violence and that it would wear away gradually. But Larry knew it was fear.

"Maybe," the girl said, looking up at Frank and swinging one booted foot idly, "that the lesson would be the other way around."

"I don't think so," Frank said. He smiled grimly at Larry. "What about it, stranger? Miss Gwen thinks you might teach me a lesson. Do you want to try?"

Larry locked his hands together to keep them from shaking. He felt sick and cold.

"No," he said, and his voice sounded dry and husky.

"I didn't think you would," Frank said. "Now let me tell you this and get it straight. If I catch you talking to Miss Gwen again I'll make sure it never happens again. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Larry said. He kept his eyes on the counter.

The girl stood up and looked down at him with an expression of mingled pity and contempt.

"Let's go, Frank," she said. "I guess you were right. Dad wouldn't like the company here any better than I do. He doesn't like things that crawl."

THE waitress came out with the orange juice as they were leaving. "Miss Whitmore," she called, "aren't you going to wait for your orange juice?"

The girl turned and shook her head. She nodded at Larry.

"Give it to him. He needs something to straighten his back."

The waitress stared at her retreating back, then set the glass down uncertainly before Larry.

"I heard everything," she said. Her face, Larry noticed, looked as sharp and cunning as a mouse on its way to a cheese dinner. "I heard it all," she went on avidly. "That Frank Blake! And her and her father acting like they were better than the whole world put together! They act like they aren't happy unless they're pushing somebody around just to show they can do it."

"Blake? Is that his name?" Larry

asked. The tight feeling of panic was dissolving now. He could feel his heart slowing to a normal beat.

"Yes," the waitress said. "Why did you let him talk to you that way? Why didn't you jump up and smash him?"

The suppressed bitterness and violence in her voice started his hands shaking again. He put a dollar on the counter and got up quickly.

"I guess I'm not the type," he said, and left.

He had been lying on the bed in his room for about a half hour when there was a knock on the door. He got up, put his shirt on and opened the door.

The man who stood in the doorway was short and fat. His face was damp and shining from the heat. He was wearing a white linen suit that seemed to be having a hard job holding his sagging folds of flesh together. His white shirt was damp with perspiration and the black string tie he wore was almost lost under one of his extra chins. But his eyes looked sharp and shrewd.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Mr. Keefe," he said. "My name is Silas Barnaby, attorney at law." He extended a soft moist hand as he spoke. He smiled as they shook hands, and his eyes almost disappeared into the soft folds of his cheeks. "May I come in?" he asked. "I think a little talk may be to our mutual advantage."

"Come ahead," Larry said.

WHEN the fat man had seated himself he pulled out a thin cigar and lit it carefully. When it was drawing well he said, "Mr. Keefe, I represented your uncle, Jed Harris, in his negotiations with Mr. Whitmore. Have you met Mr. Whitmore as yet?"

"No," Larry said.

"A highly estimable gentleman," Silas Barnaby said pontifically. "Now," he went on briskly. "I'll come to the point. Your uncle owned a small section of land, as you may know, which adjoins the Whitmore ranches. Your uncle had been breeding horses but, I am sorry to say, not very profitably. Your uncle had realized that he stood no chance of ever making a respectable living from his small holdings and he was prepared to sell out to Mr. Whitmore, but before he could take the necessary steps he was killed in an automobile accident. The evidence seems to point to a hit-and-run driver. But it was late at night and possibly the motorist ran your uncle down through no fault of his own. That, of course, is beside the point. The point is, Mr. Keefe, that your uncle has willed you his property. And Mr. Whitmore is now anxious to make to you the same offer he made to your uncle."

"And what is the offer?"

"Ten thousand dollars cash for the land. You will retain the stock, if you like. I can assure you it's a fair and generous offer."

"I've never seen my uncle's property," Larry said. "So I can't tell whether Mr. Whitmore's offer is a good one. My uncle sent me a wire when I was in the Marine hospital in New York, asking me to come here and go to work for him. I didn't know my uncle, in fact I'd never even heard from him until this wire came. But his proposition sounded good to me. I know something about horses and I want to find a quiet place to settle down. So unless I change my mind I'm afraid I'll have to pass up Whitmore's offer."

The lawyer puffed on his cigar a moment, then he said, "Mr. Whitmore has his mind set on adding your uncle's property to his own. I don't think he's going to like your attitude."

"Maybe I didn't hear you right," Larry said, "but I thought you were representing my uncle."

"Of course I am, my boy, and that is why I'm so interested in you. I don't want to see you make a mistake. I'd hate to see you get into any trouble."

"I'm not planning on getting into trouble," Larry said. "I'm not going to bother anyone. I simply want to work hard and be let alone. Is that too much to hope for?"

The lawyer stood up, and his eyes were sharp and cold.

"I'm afraid it is, Mr. Keefe. Your present attitude is going to bring you more trouble than you've ever seen."

Larry smiled a little. "I've seen a little trouble," he said. "And one thing I learned is that it generally takes two to start it. And I'm not going to fight so I don't think there'll be any trouble."

"If you change your mind," the lawyer said, "get in touch with me." He walked out of the room.

LARRY sat for a moment thinking, then he started to pack. He carried his grips downstairs a few minutes later, checked out of the hotel.

There was a battered car at the curb with a sleepy-looking, freckled young man sitting behind the wheel. He was chewing a straw and he acted as if that were the most important thing he ever intended to do.

"Can you drive me out to the Keefe place?" Larry asked.

The youth thought it over.

"For a buck I can," he decided finally.

"Good enough," Larry said.

Larry Keefe's first glimpse of his uncle's place came when the car came to a panting stop at the top of a slight hill.

The youth said, "You can see the Keefe place down there now. Old man Keefe called it the Flying Bar. We'll have to sit here a little and let the engine cool a bit."

The Flying Bar was nestled in a natural valley with a floor of green lush grass. There were three buildings visible, a living house, a feed shack and a large corral. The house was half shielded by a grove of tall cottonwoods and beyond them, Larry could see the crystal-blue water of a small pond. There were a half dozen horses, on close tethers, grazing near the corral. The scene looked peaceful, restful and quiet.

The youth pointed to a hill on the opposite side of the valley, where an immense, sprawling stucco-and-brick house was silhouetted against the white sky.

"That's the Whitmore place," he said. "Regular palace. Thirty rooms, swimming pools, half dozen cars. Old Man Whitmore owns everything within thirty miles except this little old valley right here." He squinted curiously at Larry. "Suppose he'll own even it pretty soon."

"Let's go on down," Larry said.

A hundred yards from the house the road ended and Larry got out. He paid the driver, picked up his grip and started walking through ankle deep grass toward the cluster of buildings.

When he turned the corner of the house he stopped. There was a man in faded blue jeans and boots sitting on the front porch, whittling intently. He looked up when Larry appeared. His eyes were mild and blue in a craggy, solemn face. His skin was like saddle leather and it made his gray hair look almost white. He could have been forty or sixty.

"Howdy," he said. He went back to his whittling.

"I'm Jed Keefe's nephew," Larry said.

"I'm Bill Peters. Worked for your uncle." He didn't look up and his fingers kept busy with the small knife.

Larry swung his grips onto the porch and sat down on the top step.

"I just got into town today," he said. "I don't know much about the set-up here but I want to learn. My uncle didn't tell me about you, but I'd like you to stay on, help me out."

"I'm not staying," Bill Peters said. He shut his mouth tightly after every sentence as if he regretted using the words.

"Why not?"

THE mild blue eyes met Larry's directly.

"I heard about you," he said. "One of the Whitmore hands was by here a while back. Told me about the way Frank Blake, Whitmore's foreman, talked to you. I won't work for a man that'll take a thing like that without fighting."

Larry was silent for a minute. He looked away, over the sweet blue grass that was whispering to a light wind, beyond the valley to the high, clean peaks that stood out with vivid sharpness against the sky. This was his, but no one seemed willing to let him enjoy it without a fight. He sighed a little, and he felt the old familiar tremor in his fingers.

"I'm sorry you won't stay," he said. "But maybe you can put up with me long enough to give me an inventory on the stock and help me get straightened out. How about it?"

Bill Peters scowled.

"I'll stay 'till tomorrow morning," he said. "If you want to look the place over, better change and I'll saddle a horse for you."

"Fine," Larry said.

He picked up his grips, went into the house. It was cool and clean inside. The floors were polished to a high luster and the rugs were hand woven, and brightly colored.

He went into a room which had obviously belonged to his uncle and changed to denims, and a wool shirt. He didn't bother hanging his suit in the closet or putting his shirts and linen in the drawers of the bureau. He wasn't sure he'd be here long enough to bother.

He dumped his suitcase on the bed. At the bottom was a .38 automatic and four flat blue cases with gold inscriptions. He looked at them without expression and without any particular emotion. The cases contained medals, the last of which he'd earned at Okinawa. That was the Purple Heart. The .38 was a souvenir with sentimental attachments. He'd carried it for three years in the Pacific.

Leaving his clothes strewn on the bed he went out on the porch. Bill Peters was waiting for him, astride a bay horse. A roan, saddled, was pawing and blowing nervously beside him.

There was little conversation during the two hour ride. Peters told him briefly, almost monosyllabically, of the problems of feed, pasturage and water. He gave him an inventory of the stock and supplies on hand, and closed his mouth tightly and kept his eyes straight ahead.

They rode to the end of the valley, to the mouth of the draw that led to higher land, and eventually to the Whitmore holdings.

"We'll go back now," Peters said. "Whitmore has threatened to shoot any trespassers." He glanced at Larry and said drily, "And we don't want anything like that to happen."

Larry didn't answer.

THEY rode back in silence and Larry helped Peters unsaddle and bed down the horses. As they walked to the house, long purple shadows were beginning to fall across the valley, and the setting sun, half-visible behind the high peaks of the range, was blood-red. There was a light breeze now, and the

air was cool and sweet.

Larry paused on the porch and let his eyes drink in the almost incredible beauty. Peters looked at him for a moment in silence and then said, "What's the matter? Never seen anything like this before?"

Larry shook his head slowly. "I never imagined anything like this existed anywhere in the world."

Peters' expression was curious. "Most people don't like it. Think it's too bare and lonely. You'll probably be thinking that way yourself after a while."

"I don't think so," Larry said.

Peters shifted impatiently, but his weather burned face wore a slightly uncertain expression. "Well," he said, "this ain't getting supper cooked." He started for the door and said over his shoulder, "It'll be ready in about a half hour. Nothing fancy though."

"I'll help," Larry said. He started after Peters, but the old man waved him back.

"Don't want no help," he said, and all the original curtness was in his voice.

Larry shrugged. "Okay, I'll take a swim before dinner, if that lake is okay."

"It's okay," Peters said, and went out into the kitchen.

THE lake wasn't large. About two hundred yards wide and five hundred yards long, but the water was clean and refreshingly cold.

Larry swam for about ten minutes and then waded ashore and stretched out to let the last heat of the sun dry his glistening body.

He closed his eyes and rested, trying not to think of the problems that seemed to be forcing themselves on him. He had been lying quietly for about five minutes when he heard the sound of a horse's hooves approaching.

He sat up and looked around.

A magnificent bay mare was coming toward him at a spirited gallop; and a frown of irritation crept across Larry's forehead as he recognized the rider.

It was Gwen Whitmore. Her mahogany-colored hair was flying loose and her slender body seemed a part of the horse. She reined him up suddenly, not a dozen feet from Larry, and there was a laugh on her lips as the mare fought the bit and reared, pawing the air viciously with his forefeet.

She brought her down smartly and held the animal quiet. Her face was flushed with excitement.

"She's a wonderful horse," she said.

Larry stood up, feeling oddly self-conscious in his swimming trunks.

"I didn't mean to trespass," Gwen Whitmore said, "but Lady is the one to blame. She brought me here."

"Why?" Larry asked drily.

The good humored smile disappeared from the girl's face.

"I wanted to apologize for the way I acted this afternoon," she said, "but you've got a fine capacity for making me regret any decent thing I try to do. I'm sorry I came now."

"Am I supposed to turn handsprings for sheer joy because the pampered darling of the Whitmore estate drops in for a visit? I learned today that your father has threatened to shoot any trespassers on sight. That doesn't exactly make me brim over with happiness about the Whitmore clan."

The girl looked down at the ground, and Larry noticed she colored strangely.

"I'm sorry about that," she said. "But it's not my doing. He wants this property and it's making him just a little bit crazy to think he might not get it. He's never been crossed in his life and once he sets his mind on some-

thing he's stubborn as a ten year old child."

"Ten year old kids," Larry said, "don't generally want things that are going to upset someone else's life."

"I know," she said. She seemed embarrassed and uncertain. "I think I'd better be going. I'm sorry about this afternoon, really. I don't blame you for not wanting trouble with Frank Blake and it was my fault for trying to force you into a fight. He's thirty pounds heavier than you and he's been fighting all his life. It wouldn't have been fair. He might have killed you."

"Maybe," Larry said. He couldn't trust his voice to say anything else. The tight sensation of panic was closing on him, sending nervous tremors through his body.

"I've got to be going," the girl said again. She seemed to be waiting, or hoping, for him to say something.

He said, "Take it easy. That horse has plenty of ginger."

The remark seemed to annoy her.

"I can handle any horse I can top," she said. She picked up the bridle in one small hand and with the other brought the crop across the mare's ears with a whistling snap.

A HORSE'S ears are sensitive. Some horses will react favorably to that kind of treatment, but the mare didn't.

Her eyes rolled wildly and she reared violently. The girl was a good rider but the sudden jar unsettled her, causing one foot to slip from its stirrup, and when the horse plunged forward the reins were jerked from her hand.

She slipped sideways and only the fact that she grabbed the pommel with both hands saved her falling. With the reins free and her one foot dangling ineffectually, she was completely helpless, completely at the dangerous mercy of any whim the crazed mare might decide to take.

Larry moved almost as fast as the horse. He took three running strides, dove for her rearing head. His hands caught the snapping reins close to the bit, and then his arms were almost wrenched from their sockets as the horse reared again, jerking him under its flailing forefeet.

By some miraculous luck he avoided the threshing hooves and when his feet touched the ground again, he dropped to his knees and jerked the mare's head down with all his weight and strength.

She came down with a thudding jar and braced herself for another effort, but Larry's arm was about her neck and he talked to her, easily and softly.

She settled down under his soothing touch and in a moment or so her head was nuzzling experimentally against his bare chest.

Larry gave her a final pat and then he looked up at the girl. She was clinging to the pommel and the color was gone from her cheeks.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I think so," she said in a subdued voice. "Just a little shaken up."

He put his hands on her waist and swung her easily down from the saddle. "Better rest a minute and get your breath."

They were silent for a moment and then she looked at him curiously. "You seemed like another person there for a while. Why is that?"

Larry shrugged, and then he felt a stir of anger. Why should this girl consider it unusual of him to do what any man would have done under the circumstances? And then the second thought came to him: why should he worry about what this girl thought? He hardly knew her, and he didn't like her. He was very sure of that. But the anger persisted.

"I didn't want to see the horse hurt

itself," he said. "After all, it's a valuable animal."

"I see," she said in a small voice. After a moment she said, "I'm all right now. Thank you for helping me. I'll be going."

She was still looking at him and then her eyes noticed the red welt of scar tissue on his leg. "Were you in an accident?" she asked.

"No," he said shortly.

She looked uncertain. "How did it happen?"

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"Please," she said. "I'm not just making conversation. I want to know."

"It happened a long time ago," he said, and he wasn't looking at her now. He was seeing things that were just memories.

"Where?"

"Okinawa," he said. "It happened at night." His voice was toneless and dry. "I don't remember much of it. The medics told me later it was a grenade."

HE DIDN'T say any more. His fingers were trembling and everything inside him was dry and cold. He had never said this much before, and the words hurt.

He wasn't aware of the strained silence until the girl said, "Will you excuse me for being a stupid fool?"

He didn't answer. His eyes were on the blue lake and deepening shadows of the valley. He wasn't seeing them, he was seeing other things, other pictures, and his face was set and hard.

He didn't remember how long he stood there, but he realized suddenly that he wasn't trembling anymore and that the tightness inside him had dissolved.

He became aware of where he was, and then he realized, with an odd sense of loss, that the girl had gone.

He went back to the house.

"I been thinkin'," Peters said, as he poured a second cup of strong black coffee, "that I might as well stick around for a while 'til you get straightened out." He sat down and made a great show of rolling a cigarette with complete unconcern.

Larry watched him closely. "What made you change your mind?" he asked.

"A fellow can change his mind, can't he?" Peters said testily. "Maybe I figure I can't get another job."

Larry knew that wasn't the reason. But he wasn't going to argue with the first bit of good luck that had come his way since he'd hit Montana.

"Fine," he said.

Peters got up and started collecting the dishes.

"I'll help," Larry offered, but Peters shook his head.

"I can manage," he said. "You'd better turn it, get yourself some rest. I won't call you in the morning 'til breakfast is ready."

Larry looked at him in bewilderment, unable to understand the solicitude in the old man's voice. "Okay," he said finally, "but I'm no invalid."

"Didn't say you was," Peters said crossly. "Just want you to get to bed so I can finish my work in peace."

"Okay," Larry smiled. "Anything you say."

He went into his own room and began to undress slowly. And then he noticed something strange. His clothes had been put away. He opened one of the bureau drawers and he saw his shirts and socks and handkerchiefs folded neatly. He opened the next one and there he saw the four flat boxes that contained his decorations. They were lying side by side on a carefully folded white tablecloth.

Larry walked slowly back to the

kitchen.

"Thanks for putting my stuff away," he said. "It was nice of you."

Peters turned from the sink and clear blue eyes met Larry's squarely. But his weather-hardened face looked suddenly old and tired.

"I enjoyed doing it," he said, and his voice had a far-away quality, as if he were speaking to someone who might be listening from the dark of the night. "I had a boy in Europe and I felt like I was putting away his things. I never had the chance."

He turned back to the sink and Larry knew from the stiff set of his shoulders that it was a time when words were useless.

"Good night," he said softly.

"I'll call yuh in the morning," Peters said, and his voice was almost back to its normal crispness.

A HAND on Larry's shoulder awoke him, and from long habit he lay still, his senses fully alert.

The room was dark and there was someone standing beside his bed with a flashlight.

"There's trouble." It was Peters' voice. "I heard someone nosin' around the corral a bit back. I went out there. Both our studs is gone, Larry."

Larry sat up and shoved the covers back.

"I'll get dressed," he said.

A few minutes later he and Peters inspected the corral, which had separated the studs from the string of mares. A section of the barbed fence was down and the studs were gone.

"How did they break out?" Larry asked.

"They didn't," Peters said grimly. He flashed his light on the trailing strands of the fence wire.

"Horses don't use wire cutters," he said.

Larry looked closely at the ends of the wire and saw that they had been cut, sharply and cleanly. His first reaction was bewilderment, and then he felt anger.

"Who'd do that?" he asked, and he tried to keep his voice quiet.

"Three guesses," Peters said. "We maybe can round 'em up tonight if we're lucky. But I'm worried. There's more to this than just letting them studs out. Let's ride."

The trail wasn't hard to follow. The studs had headed straight down the valley toward the draw that led to the Whitmore land.

When they reached the narrow entrance Peters reined up his horse.

"Another ten feet and we're trespassing," he said. "But this is the way our horses went."

"Let's go then," Larry said.

They headed their horses into the draw and rode in silence. The draw was crooked and the footing wasn't good, but soon they were out of it and heading for the higher land that spread about the valley. This was Whitmore land, lush rich pasturage, smelling fresh in the cool night wind.

Another mile and they found the horses.

They were lying in the shadow of a small clump of trees and if their horses hadn't tried to skirt the place, they might have missed them.

THEY dismounted and Peters used his flashlight. For a long moment they didn't say anything.

Then Larry dropped to his knees and made a careful examination.

"Looks like thirty caliber shells at close range," he said finally.

Larry knelt beside his dead horses and he felt an anger growing in him. An anger that was cold and hard and violent. His fingers weren't trembling,

and the cold knot of panic wasn't closing on him, but he wasn't aware of either of these things.

"What can we do?" Peters said, and his voice sounded dull and hopeless and bitter.

"I don't know yet," Larry said.

"Whitmore will have the law on his side. Our stock ain't supposed to be here on his land."

"I know," Larry said. "But we're going to do something."

In the pale moonlight Peters' face was troubled.

"We don't have much of a chance, son. Whitmore's got everything figured out 'fore he makes a move. He knows all the tricks. He knows how to fight clean, and how to fight dirty. You're asking for more trouble than we can handle if you go to war with him."

"All right," Larry said, "I'm asking for it. They've been asking for it ever since I got here. They won't let me alone. They won't give me a chance to live without fighting." He looked up at Peters and there was a grin on his face that wasn't pretty, and it had nothing to do with humor. "I'll show this crowd what a fight means. They've been begging for it and they're going to get it."

Peters felt something close to fear as he saw the look on Larry's face. And because he suddenly felt that he was talking to a man who was older and harder and colder than he would ever be, he kept his mouth shut.

"Let's go," Larry said suddenly. "I've got a few things to do at the house."

THEY rode back in silence. Larry left his horse saddled and went inside. He took the .38 from his grip, loaded it, then jammed it inside his belt.

When he turned Peters was standing in the door.

"I'm with you," he said, "but let's try and use our heads a little first. If you go stampeding up there you'll be playing right into their hands."

"There's no other way," Larry said.

"Listen to me a minute. When your uncle got killed I made a pretty careful inspection of the road. I found one clear set of tire tracks that has a few unusual marks on 'em. I dug that set out and put it away in the stable. I don't know what car made those tracks but it might be interesting to check the tires on the Whitmore cars and see if any of 'em match up."

"Why didn't you tell me that when I got here?" Larry asked.

Peters shrugged. "From what I'd heard of you I didn't think you'd do anything about it. I was going to do a little snooping on my own after I quit here. Just to satisfy my own curiosity."

"I'm curious too," Larry said. "Let's look at those tire prints."

WHEN they headed back for the Whitmore estate it was almost daylight, and by the time they were riding through the draw that separated the two holdings, the sun was showing over the peaks that formed the valley.

They had ridden for several miles on Whitmore land when two horsemen spurred out from a line of wind trees and cantered toward them. Both men carried rifles in the crooks of their elbows.

"Here it comes," Peters said.

"Let me do the talking," Larry said.

The Whitmore hands reined their horses to a stop about fifty yards ahead of them, and waited. Their rifles looked unfriendly and ready.

Larry and Peters reined up. One of the Whitmore hands, an ugly, wide-shouldered man, with a scar running along his cheek from his temple to his chin, raised one hand in an unmistakeable signal.

"Hold it right there," he drawled. "You're trespassing on Whitmore land. Turn them horses and start back the way you came."

Larry said, "I've come here to see Mr. Whitmore on business at his request."

The scar-faced rider looked doubtful. "They didn't tell me nothing about it," he said.

"That's not my fault," Larry said. "Does Mr. Whitmore generally take you into his confidence on his business deals?"

"Don't get lippy," Scar-face said. He appeared to be thinking hard for a few minutes, and then he said, "Okay, I'll take you up to the house. Get up here in front of me where I can keep an eye on you."

The Whitmore home wasn't as big as the Waldorf-Astoria, but it was just as impressive. The brick-and-stucco exterior had a clean washed look, and the front porch, which extended across the front of the building, could have accommodated several tennis courts.

THEIR guards led them past the main house on a wide gravelled bridle path that led to the rear of the ranch. Scar-face swung off his horse before a two-story building that would have been impressive, if it weren't for the towering magnificence of the main estate house.

He disappeared into this structure and returned in several minutes with a man who Larry recognized. And with that recognition came a sudden tightening of his muscles.

Frank Blake looked just as capable and hard now as he had that morning in the crescent cafe. His square solid face was expressionless, but his tiny eyes measured Larry and Peters carefully.

"What's your business?" he asked. He stood on the porch of the two-storied house, legs spread wide and his powerful hands resting on his hips.

"My business is with Whitmore," Larry said coolly.

"You'll do your talking to me," Blake said. "And make it fast."

"And if I don't talk to you?"

"I'll throw you off the place faster than you got on," Blake said grimly. "I warned you once I didn't want you bothering anybody around here. If you haven't got anything to say get moving."

Peters broke into the conversation. "Did you know, Blake, that two of our studs were shot last night on your land?"

Blake turned his head just enough to meet Peters' eyes squarely.

"Sure I know it," he said. "We don't want anything but Whitmore stock on this land. Keep your horses on your own pasturage and there won't be any trouble. Now I've wasted more time on you than you're worth. Do you hit the road, or do you want a couple of my men to throw you off?"

"Just a minute!" a testy voice sounded behind Larry. "What's all the war talk about, Blake?"

Larry turned in his saddle and saw an elderly man, dressed in gold knickers and a woolen sweater, standing behind him, and looking at Blake with a petulant, worried look on his face.

"No trouble at all, Mr. Whitmore," Blake addressed the new arrival. His voice, Larry noticed, had changed to a pleasant, sirrupy drawl. "Just straightening out our neighbors here on a few points."

Larry was looking at Whitmore with interest. He was a small man physically, with narrow shoulders and thickly veined hands. He didn't look well, but his eyes were alert and sharp.

Those eyes were sizing him up now.

"You're Jed Keefe, are you?" Whitmore asked. "I've been rather expecting a visit from you. Are you ready to sell me your property now?"

Whitmore, Larry thought, didn't look like the rapacious land hog he'd been expecting to meet. He looked like a tired, and slightly confused, old man.

"I didn't come up for that," Larry said.

"Well, what's on your mind?" Whitmore asked. "And you might as well climb down and rest your legs while you're talking. Have you had breakfast yet?"

"Yes, thanks," Larry said. He got down from his horse and faced Whitmore directly. "I'm not here on a pleasant job, Mr. Whitmore. Two of my studs were shot on your land last night. That's one of the reasons I'm here."

BLAKE moved down from the porch and stepped closer to Larry. "I told you once Mr. Whitmore wasn't interested in your complaints."

"Two studs, eh?" Whitmore said. He looked embarrassed as he turned to Blake. "Is that right, Frank?"

"Yes sir," Blake said. "Those were your orders."

Whitmore frowned. "I know, I know," he said irritably, "but you said it would never come to the point of shooting anyone else's stock. You said the warning would be enough to keep our range free. But this is different. Doesn't seem very neighborly to go shooting a man's horses just because they've strayed a few miles from home."

"They didn't stray," Larry said quietly.

"What's that?"

"They didn't stray, Mr. Whitmore. The corral wire was cut last night, and the sign shows clearly that the studs were led to your land and then shot."

Mr. Whitmore's face reddened. "I don't believe it," he said explosively. "If that's what you came to tell me then I've been wasting my time and patience."

"That's what I told them, Mr. Whitmore," Blake said. He turned to Larry and his face was hard and set. "You heard what he said. Fork that horse now and get going, before I forget you're a cowardly rat and throw you off myself."

There was another interruption then, one that took Larry completely by surprise.

Gwen Whitmore had appeared while Blake was talking, and Larry turned at her first words.

"I won't have you talking to Mr. Keefe that way, Frank," she said hotly. Her cheeks were crimson, and her chin was set angrily. She was wearing a blue cotton dress and white sandals. She looked very much like a girl, a very lovely, very angry girl.

Mr. Whitmore said, "Gwen, this doesn't concern you. I think Frank may be right."

"I know he's wrong,' Gwen cried.

"You know a lot about him, don't you?" Blake said, and there was just enough deference mingled with his sarcasm, to make it doubly insulting. He went on, "I know something about him too. I figured him for a four-flushing coward when I first saw him. You should remember that, Gwen."

Larry turned enough to face Blake squarely. His anger was coming back, and it was as cold and hard as steel. But his voice was so calm that it almost sounded indifferent.

"You've been getting more and more careless with your talk," he said gently. "I'm going to take that up with you in detail in just a moment, but I've something else to say to Mr. Whitmore." He

turned his back on Blake. "Mr. Whitmore, my uncle was killed by a car that left a very clear tire impression on the road. I've studied that impression. Now I'd like to look at the tires of your cars."

Whitmore looked as if he didn't understand, and then his face went red and white by turns.

"I've never heard of such impertinence," he gasped. "You accuse my men of deliberately killing your studs, and now you accuse me of murder."

"I didn't make any accusations," Larry said mildly. "But if you're sure it wasn't any of your cars you shouldn't have any objections to my taking a look."

"You can have your look," Whitmore blazed. "And then I'll thank you to keep off my land for good."

"And I'll see to that," Blake said.

LARRY felt a moment of doubt. He glanced at Gwen, and she was looking at him strangely. He turned and saw a look on Blake's face that added to his uncertainty. Blake was looking almost pleased.

Peters rubbed his lean jaw and shot a glance at Larry.

"Let's get started," he said. "But first, are all your cars here now?"

"Of course they're here," Whitmore fumed. "Do you think I leave them out on the road at night?"

"The station wagon isn't here," Gwen said clearly.

Her words were followed by a heavy, thick silence. Whitmore looked uncertainly at Blake. "Is that right?" he asked.

Blake frowned. "I'm not sure. What difference does it make? I think this damn nonsense has gone far enough. Just say the word and I'll wind it up fast, Mr. Whitmore."

Whitmore didn't seem to hear. He turned uncertainly to Gwen. "Where is the station wagon? Do you know?"

"I think Blake does," Gwen said. "He was driving it the night before last. And it's not here now."

Blake shrugged his heavy shoulders and said, "I seem to be the one that has to clear himself. Now that Gwen mentions it, I drove the station wagon into town the other night and left it there. Had some trouble with the ignition and thought I might as well get it fixed."

Larry looked at him thoughtfully.

"Didn't get the tires changed, too, did you?" he asked softly.

Blake said, "You've said enough, Keefe."

"Not quite," Larry said, with an odd smile. It wasn't a smile that had any humor in it, and there was something in his eyes and face that wasn't pleasant to watch. Peters saw it and said, "Easy son," but Larry wasn't conscious of anything but Blake. "The night you drove into town was the night my uncle got hit," he went on, in the same soft voice. "And then you leave the car in town. Why? Was there a little blood on the fender, or something?"

Blake said, "I told you you've said enough, Keefe. No man calls me a murderer."

"I do," Larry said.

"I don't consider you a man," Blake said contemptuously.

"That's a mistake," Larry said.

He didn't say it loudly, and there wasn't bitterness in his voice. He said it musingly, and as he spoke he started walking slowly toward Blake.

Blake looked uncertainly at Whitmore, and he saw something in the old man's face, that must have decided him there was only one way to play the game. He said, "You're close enough, Keefe. Stop!" And he took the gun from his holster and pointed it about two inches above Larry's belt buckle.

Larry stopped. "So you did it," he said.

"You'll never prove it," Blake said. "You're just talking. Now get on that horse and get out of here. The next time I see you I won't give you that much of a break."

LARRY knew what he was going to do. And he tried to hold down the cold anger he felt. That had never helped. It made him excited and reckless and destroyed his timing.

"Thanks for the break," he said, and then he was driving forward, his legs uncoiling like powerful springs beneath his charging body.

A gun exploded over his head, and then his shoulders hit Blake's knees, jarring the man, spilling him to the ground. Blake pounded at his hand with his left fist, but Larry didn't feel the blows. He moved fast, scrambling astride Blake's struggling body, and reaching for the gun with both hands.

His left hand caught Blake's wrist; his right closed over the back of Blake's hand, forcing it down with sudden sharp pressure.

Blake screamed and the gun slipped to the ground. Larry kicked it aside, and then his hands fastened into Blake's collar, and he stood up, dragging Blake with him.

Blake was heavy and powerful, and his fists were driving hard into Larry's body, the instant his feet touched the ground. His face was savage.

"You wanted it," he gasped.

Larry twisted sideways and kept his grip on Blake's collar with his left hand. His right swung free. He chopped down with the hard edge of his palm across Blake's face. It was a deadly blow, merciless and vicious.

Blake's nose splintered under it, forcing a groan from his lips. He brought his knee up suddenly, but Larry twisted away from it, and his right hand chopped down again and again.

There was nothing pretty about it. Each blow was intended to maim or kill. It was a kind of fighting learned at places like New Guinea and Saipan.

Blake sagged forward, sobbing, and Peters caught Larry by the arms and dragged him back.

"That's enough, son," he said hoarsely. "For God's sake, that's enough."

Larry watched Blake crumple slowly and sprawl face-forward into the dust. And the red mist began to clear from his eyes. He shook his head tiredly and said, "It was what he wanted. He wouldn't let me alone."

Gwen's hand touched his arm lightly. "Come into the house," she said quietly. "You need a little patching up. There's nothing to worry about anymore."

A HALF hour later he felt much better.

Two adhesive strips across his chin made talking difficult, but he managed a little.

"Thanks," he said, and grinned up at Gwen. "You might make a medic with a little more practise."

Peters and Whitmore came into the room then, with the air of men who have settled all problems.

"Well," Whitmore said, "I guess I might as well get it over with." He shuffled awkwardly and said, "I've been a stiff-necked, blind old fool. Blake was running things here, and I was just dumb enough to give him a free hand. He told me he'd get your land for me, if I'd let him go about it in his own way. Well, the sheriff's on his way up for him now. I wanted the land because I was stiff-necked and obstinate as a ten-year-old. Anything I can't have, makes me start acting foolish and silly." He

(*Concluded on page* 177)

The chute fence splintered beneath the impact and Dale catapulted off the horse

SHOOTING SCRIPT

When a movie hero can't ride a horse, he ought not to go around bragging about his exploits where real riders can hear him . . .

By Berkeley Livingston

"SO HELP me, Dale," Bill Todd groaned, "I'll shoot the next guy that mentions horse to me."

" 'S matter, Billy boy?" Dale Garret asked. There was a big smile on his wide, unhandsome mouth.

"Matter! F'r the love of Hattie! You know what's wrong. Playing wet-nurse to an imitation cow poke and his trick horse isn't my idea of the easiest way of making a dollar."

"Chin up, Billy Boy. It was your idea, you know," Dale said in reminder. "After all, that's what Apex Features pays you for, publicizing Griff Morton, its glamor man western star."

"Oh sure, sure," Todd grunted sourly. "But I didn't think it meant tucking him in at night. Or chasing kids away from his, *ooh, so pwecious body.* Nuts! I'm about ready to call the rest of the p. a. tour off."

"Don't talk like a fool," Dale said. "This lug is the biggest thing in westerns. Besides, I'm getting some swell angles on a story for him. Like this sheriff's rodeo they're having here. D'you know that in—"

"Okay. Okay," Todd said, his dour features breaking into a smile. He was more than thankful for Garret's having been included in their party.

It had started out as an excuse for a vacation. But big Axel Swenson, head of Apex, had thought it an excellent idea. Griff Morton was a very valuable hunk of Apex property. And publicity never hurt either the studio or the star, so long as it was in their favor. That was where their troubles began. It was rodeo season around the southwest. And since the purpose of the tour was to show the prize animal that was Morton, the best place to show him was at the rodeos. The catch, they discovered, was that the directors wanted him to perform.

Morton was all for it. He had been working on a dude ranch at a time when a talent scout for Apex took his vacation there, and the combination of Morton's personal charm and evident knowledge of horsemanship had convinced the scout that here was a fine deal. Swenson had bought.

All this flashed through Todd's mind even as he grunted his reiterated agreement to Dale's demand that he forget his personal animosity to the big man. Yet it rankled. For Morton wanted to show his prowess at these rodeos. And, as Todd had continued to refuse, Morton grew first angry, then sulky.

At the very moment Todd and Garret were discussing him, Morton was in his room, where he had gone in a rage at Todd's latest refusal to let him perform at the sheriff's rodeo.

Todd heaved his overweight bulk from the overstuffed chair, groaned at the effort it took, mumbled something about "takin' off a little weight," and poked a thick forefinger at Garret's midriff.

"You win . . . as usual. But get this, Dale. I don't wanta hear anymore of his bellyachin'. So get him to tie a can to it. You know if it was up to me, I'd be more'n glad to let him try his hand at some of these stunts they pull—only because I'd like to see him break that thick neck of his. But he's my meal ticket! And I like to eat. I suppose that makes me out to be a jerk, but that's the way it is."

Garret threw an arm about the thick shoulders and pulled the other toward the cocktail lounge from which raucous

voices could be heard singing. Just as they reached the entrance, Todd was reminded of something.

"Wonder if junior is s t a n d i n g guard?"

"Stop worrying," Dale said. "That sawbuck you gave him, plus the fact that he thinks Morton is the Lord come to Tumcora, is enough to make him heed your command, O mighty Todd. Not even a mouse will disturb Morton. Not unless he gets the kid's okay."

BUT more than mice were to disturb Morton.

Alec Jones, bellhop, errand boy and general slavey of the Tumcora House, the hotel at which the Apex trio were staying, leaned comfortably though precariously on a chair against the wall. From where he was perched he had a full view of the rather long and narrow corridor of the second floor run of rooms. Three rooms down was the large suite which Griff Morton and the other two men had. Alec's eyes were closed and he was running over a favorite scene of his in the last Morton release. It was where Morton confronted the rustlers. The villain had Morton covered and was holding the girl. Alec was playing the part of Morton. There was a thin smile on Alec's boyish lips. The villain had the drop on him, and all around him were the other cattle rustlers. But no odds were too great when a woman's honor was at stake . . .

"Look, son," a voice broke in on the boy's revery.

The chair went down with a crash as Alec opened startled eyes and saw a half-dozen men gathered about him. The face of each man was covered by a bandana from the eye level down.

One of them hauled the quaking boy to his feet.

"Where's this Morton man stayin'?" one of them asked.

Alec's vocal cords refused to function. But his muscles acted from a frightened reflex. A shaking hand came up and pointed down the corridor. The one holding Alec looked toward a large, heavy-bellied man who seemed to be the one in command. The leader nodded his head and as if it were a signal, Alec was thrust forward with the command, "Take us to his room."

One of the six pressed an ear to the closed door. He shook his head negatively when the fat man held out expressive hands in a questioning gesture.

"Must be asleep," the one who was listening said.

"Got a key, kid?" the fat man asked.

Alec shook his head, no. But the one holding him shook him until his teeth rattled. And whispered something to the effect that Alec's life wasn't worth a plugged nickel if he didn't produce the key. Alec produced.

Morton was sprawled out on the bed, sound asleep. His mouth was open and he was snoring softly. One of the masked men shook him, at first gently, and when that didn't awaken him, hard enough to rattle his teeth.

Morton's eyes opened, blinking in the light. They stopped blinking when he saw the odd welcoming committee.

"Wha-wha-what the hell is this?" he asked, his voice going up the register.

He gulped loudly when the six men produced guns from under their jackets. The large holes, blackly menacing, were directed at him. And he could see that there were cartridges in the guns.

"Better get up, Morton," the fat man said.

"Why?" Morton asked. He didn't realize it, but there was a tremor in his voice. His mind flashed to a scene in his next to last release, in which

there was an almost exact duplicate of this incident.

He sat erect, dangling his legs over the bed, smiling that brave smile known the nation over, loved alike by woman and child. Oddly enough, it seemed to have no effect on these men. Maybe they hadn't seen that picture, Morton thought, moodily.

"LET'S not waste no time, Heavy," a tall, slender man said. "Those bodyguards might get here any minute."

"Jed's watchin' 'em," the fat man said. "They won't bother us. But you're right about time. We ain't got too much of it. C'mon, Morton get up. And don't be fool enough to think you can beat us. Our guns are out."

Morton accepted the situation with grace and the shoulder-shrugging ease that was always a good camera shot. He arose from the bed and drawled, "Lead on, I fear no man."

Alec looked at him, big-eyed in adoration. Gosh, he thought, he was sure going to have a lot to tell the kids when and if he saw them, for he was almost certain that these men were going to kill him. His shoulders squared like Morton's, and a smile lighted his mouth. The man holding him grinned when he saw it. And the hand around the boy's shoulders tightened in affection, although to Alec, the grip was of a more painful pressure.

Morton, a limber-legged man above six feet in height, ruggedly handsome, and dressed in elaborate cowboy costume, with silk, mauve-colored shirt open at the throat; tight-fitting, buff jodhpur pants; and custom-made boots whose elaborate heels gave him an extra two and a half inches of height, thrust his hands out and said:

"Better tie me, men. I might give trouble."

"Be crazy if you did," the tall one said softly. "Besides, you don't even know what we want with you."

"And we ain't tellin' till we get outa here," the fat one said.

It proved to be rather simple. There were two stairways which led to the second floor. One started from the lobby of the hotel, the other led from a service entrance. There was no one at the service entrance. And when they got out into the chill, starlit night, seven horses had been lined up waiting their arrival.

Morton wondered what kind of villains these were when he saw his horse among the seven. There was no mistaking Silver. The wind brought the scent of his master to the horse, for his ears pricked erect and a whinny of welcome came from his nostrils.

"Did you tie the kid up good?" the fat man asked.

"Good enough so's he won't get undone for a spell," one of the men replied.

"Then we're off," the fat man said, setting his heels to his horse.

TODD was in a singing mood. Garret knew then that the little man had his snoot full. Besides, Garret had begun to wonder about their charge. Usually, Morton's sulk wore off in a half-hour, and he joined them for a last drink or two. Two hours had gone by, yet he was still above. Of course the most simple explanation was that he had fallen asleep. But a persistent, though unreasonable, thought kept intruding that all was not as it should be.

"Okay, Billy boy," Garret said, pulling at Todd. "Let's make for the hay."

Todd's companion, a man whose name was Jed, and who had attached himself to them the moment they had appeared in the lounge, insinuated a

hand between the two men and said:

"What's the matter? You this man's keeper? Why'nt *you* go up, effen you're tired, and let's have another drink."

Garret's lined and tired features settled into lines even more tired as he shoved the other's hand away.

"Look, mister," he said, his voice edgy in anger. "Suppose you have a drink by your lonesome . . ."

"Jus' a minute," Jed broke in. He was a beefy man, well in middle age. His Stetson was shoved back on his head. Whiskey had given his normally red face an even bloodier tinge. His voice was hoarsened in anger. "I don't like for to be shoved around. I'm likely to take a man apart for that."

Garret held quick debate with himself. It was obvious that the stranger's truculence could only lead to a fight. And Garret didn't want that. Not that he was afraid. As a matter of fact, Garret had every advantage except that of weight. Nor was it on any moral plane. It was just that Todd was the same sort as the stranger. Another few drinks, and Todd, too, would seek some excuse to show his physical prowess. With an accompanying loss of prestige, both on the company's part and the personal side. Todd always lost his fights.

"Tell you what I'm going to do," Garret said hastily. His right hand which had been deep in his trouser pocket came up with a coin. "Heads, he stays down here, tails he comes up."

"Ne'er mind that," the other said, attempting to brush Garret aside.

"Of course if you're afraid to gamble," Garret said, shrugging his shoulders eloquently.

"'Fraid nothin'," Jed said. "Toss that coin."

It landed tails.

Todd's almost dead weight led them a weaving path down the hotel corridor. Garret had noticed the absence of the boy the instant they had come to the stair head. Tucking his arm more firmly under Todd's, Garret dragged him at a quicker pace. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the door was locked. So Morton had fallen asleep. Then he opened it.

Todd sprawled flat on his face as Garret released him suddenly.

Alec, his jaw bound with a kerchief, his arms held tight to one of the bed posts by a short rope, was nodding his head furiously in his direction. Quickly, he untied the boy, and while rubbing circulation through the stem-pipe-thin arms, asked:

"What happened, son? Where's Morton?"

"They took him, mister. Them rustlers did! Just like in his pi'tures! They're a'goin' to try to hang him! Better get up a posse, mister. I'm tellin' ya! They're . . ."

"Easy, son," Garret said worriedly. It was evident that the boy was lost in a scenario of his own devising. But Garret wanted facts. "Just tell me what happened."

ALEC told his tale, highlighted by some imaginative details, such as the terrific battle Morton put up, and how they had to finally knock Morton out. But Garret got the important thing, that six men had kidnaped him, not more than an hour before.

Leaving the boy, Garret stepped to the common closet and removed a pistol hanging from one of the hooks. He nodded his head in satisfaction when he saw the gun was loaded. Taking a heavy leather jacket from another hook, he removed his sport coat and donned the other. Alec watched him, wide-eyed.

"Now here's what I want you to do,

son," Garret said. "Get down to the lobby and notify the desk man what happened. Have them send out deputies as fast as they can."

Alec didn't wait for anything else, but started off at once. Before he quite reached the door, Garret recalled him. Something had occurred to the scripter which made him change his mind.

"Wait! That's no good. We don't know what these men wanted with Morton. Or even if they intended harm . . . Damn! I'll have to chance it alone. Now listen close, junior. Get me a horse and bring him around to the service entrance. Then get back to this room and wait for Mr. Todd to come to. When he does, tell him what happened and that I went to see if I could follow these guys. Got it?"

Alec shook his head vigorously.

"All right then, let's get that pony."

Garret seemed oddly at ease on a horse for one whose only relation with them had been through a typewriter. Were it not for the fact that he wore his battered brown felt, he would have looked like any other cow poke as he galloped off into the night. Alec wondered how it was that he had known which way the many hoof prints led.

SEVEN men sat around a small mesquite fire.

Six of them were oddly ill at ease. The seventh, Griff Morton, was completely relaxed. In fact, he was sound asleep. One of the men cursed in a vague sort of way. But the rest paid no attention to him. Their interest was centered on the nodding figure of the cinema hero.

"Prod him alive, will ya, Clem," one of them suggested.

"Pore critter's wore out. Wonder why?" another asked. "Hollywood sure softens them up, don't it?"

A harsh laugh followed the pronouncement. And many remarks on the beautiful women to be found there. But the heavy-set man who was their leader found no amusement in the talk.

"That's enough of that!" he said. Leaning toward Morton, he shook him roughly. "Mr. Morton," he cajoled as he shook. "Come on man, wake up."

"Huh? Huh?" Morton said stupidly, coming out of his daze. "Wha ya want?"

"Look alive," Heavy said. "Listen to me."

Morton shook himself wearily. They had ridden for an interminable length of time. His body was a solid ache. And as the ache centered itself in a particularly sensitive spot, he shifted with a low moan of pain.

"Okay. Okay. What do you want now?" Morton demanded.

A sibilant sound was exhaled simultaneously from six throats at the words. Now Heavy could explain.

"First of all, Mr. Morton," Heavy began, "we want to apologize for what we've done."

"Apologize?" the word came wonderingly from Morton.

"Yes. For kidnaping you the way we did. But it was the only way we could get to you. Those friends of yours wouldn't let anybody see you unless they had a pass from God. And time was wasting."

"It was?" Morton acted even more stupidly than was usual with him.

The heavy man's patience was about at its end. He'd never known anyone to sound so dumb. And that took into account the fact that Morton was in the dark about what had taken place and why.

"Look!" Heavy said incisively. "There's been lots of talk around these parts, since you and those two guards of yours came here, that all that fancy stuff you do in the movies is just put on.

What's more, some of the boys been hearing how you want to put in your licks at the rodeo. That right?"

Morton expanded under the other's prompting.

"That's right," he said. "I sure would like to try my hand at one or two things. Heck! I haven't had a chance at . . ."

"That's what we wanted to know, brother," Heavy broke in. "And that's why you're here. We're holding a rodeo in the morning and you're going to be the star, maybe, of our private show."

"Well, gosh," Morton said. "You didn't have to go to all this. Todd and Garret would have let me go."

"Would they?" a voice from outside the reaches of light of the small fire asked.

"Why sure," Morton replied.

THEN the figure was standing almost at their feet. There was something menacing in the way he stood, bent a little at the waist. Or perhaps it was the long-barreled pistol held at hip level and thrust out from him about six inches.

How he had gotten there was a mystery. There had been no sound of hoof beats. He seemed to have materialized from the air. It was impossible to see his face. They knew he was a tall man, but it was the only thing they knew other than he was armed. The last was enough.

"Better guess again," the stranger said. "I don't know what these men want of you, Griff, but we're not having any."

Morton recognized the voice then.

"Garret! What the devil are you doing here?"

Heavy, however, asked the more pertinent question:

"How did you trail us? Man, I didn't think even an Indian could have found us."

"Maybe I am an Indian," Garret said. "But that's neither here nor there. The main thing is, Morton's going back with me."

"I am?" Morton asked.

"Of course, you idiot!" Garret said.

"Think again," Morton said smugly. "I've been wanting to try my hand at bronc riding and calf roping, and now I'm going to do just that."

"Oh, no!" Garret said in horrified tones. Then, as though he was pleading with a child, "Look, fella! There's something fishy in all this. Can't you see . . ."

Quite suddenly, the fire died. Instantly. And a half dozen figures were scrambling on hands and knees toward Garret. One of the men had surreptitiously kicked sand on the small blaze, extinguishing it. Garret tensed, afraid to shoot for fear of hitting Morton. Then they were on him.

A man moaned in sudden pain as the pistol in Garret's hand slashed down across his shoulder. And another shouted aloud as his hand clamped down on the gun hand and fastened itself there with desperate fingers. Garret tried to wrestle his hand free. But as the rest joined in the assault on him, he forgot the gun. With knees and free hand he jabbed and pummeled them. But it was soon over. There was a bone-jarring sound, and Garret slumped to the ground.

They stood over him, breathing heavily from the fight he had given them.

"Holy cats!" one of them said. "What a terror that guy was. Think he was out to beat the whole six of us?"

The one called Clem holstered his gun and said regretfully, "I sure hated to do that. But we ain't got too much time, now. For sure the other guy's got a posse on the trail. And Miss Lucy'd sure be mad if we didn't get there." (*Continued on page* 166)

KNOWLEDGE
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SHOOTING SCRIPT

(*Continued from page* 164)

"Yeah," another said. "But what we gonna do with him? Can't leave him here."

"We'll take him along," Heavy said. "Tie his hands and feet. Clem, you ride him cross-saddle."

GARRET opened his eyes and looked wonderingly about him. He was in a bunkhouse, he knew that. He also knew that he had an awful head. For an instant he wondered how he got it. Then memory returned and he swung his feet off the bunk with a startled oath. A short, barrel-chested individual, stripped to the waist, was washing his face in an enamel wash basin. He looked up at the sound. He peered through the soap lather, and said:

"Hi, there. Wondered when you'd come to. Took an awful crack from Clem last night, you did."

Garret peered closely at the man. He wasn't sure. The firelight had been low and the faces were mere shadows. But it was evident by his words that whether or not he was there, he knew of what had happened.

"Yep," the other went on. "Big things gonna happen today. Biggest day the Lazy Lucy ever had. Yessir!"

"So I gather," Garret said. "Now would you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"Yup," the other said. And bent over the wash stand. There were a few seconds of frenzied efforts, and splashing sounds, a square-jawed face was immersed in a towel, and at last emerged. "Yup," he said again. "Don't mind ef I do.

"Miss Lucy . . . that's Jem Purdy's daughter, and Lige Wilson . . . he's from the Bar-Q, has been havin' a wordy shindig about these here movie critters. Miss Lucy hardly ever misses a new show over to Tumcora. This here Morton man we got last night's her favor-rite. Lige has been giving her a going over on account he thinks no man's built for such goings on. Especially Morton. Thinks Morton's a sissy. That he's got one of them doubles workin' in the rough scenes. Matter of fact, Lige says Morton's a fake all the way around."

Garret's face had settled into thoughtful lines as the half-dressed puncher's tale unfolded. He more or less knew what the conclusion was. And he was frightened of the possible consequences.

"Couple of nights ago," the other continued, "Lige and Miss Lucy were so het up about it, I thought sure ef she were a man he'd of swung on her. Matter of fact, Heavy Jenkins, our range boss, had to hold back Miss Lucy from hitting Lige, things got so hot.

"They calmed down for a spell. The Lige says, mean-like, 'I ain't all talk.' Miss Lucy wants to know what he means. He says, 'Well. This Morton man's comin' to Tumcora for the sheriff's rodeo. I'll bet a hundred dollars he don't perform.' Well that was silly, 'cause we all know that he ain't performed at any of the shows."

"Of course he hasn't," Garret broke in "It's not his fault. The studio won't let him."

"That's what Miss Lucy says. She reads all them fan magazines. Can't get her short on what's going on. So Lige says, 'Might be so. 'Bout doing it in public. That shouldn't stop him from doing it private.' Well that set Miss Lucy to thinking. And that's what happened last night, what she thought of. An' here's the reason. She and Lige made a bet, a thousand head, even, that there ain't no movie critter that

can beat his man at bulldoggin' or better his man's time on White Head."

GARRET digested the puncher's information in a worried silence. The other finished dressing and started for the door. Turning with his hand on the screen, he said:

"Ain't you going to have breakfast? Or does that bump on your head. . . ?"

"It's all right," Garret said, getting off the bunk and wincing as he did so. "I guess my head's more solid than I thought. And I *am* hungry."

"That's fine, then," the puncher said. " 'Cause they're waitin' for us. Reckon they were a bit scared that Clem hit a mite harder than he should, the way you stayed knocked out."

There were some twenty men at the long table in the bare, though neat, wooden structure which served as dining quarters for the men. And at the head of the table, beside Heavy, sat Morton. Garret received many sidelong looks as he passed the row of men. Sitting on the other side of Morton was a lantern-jawed man, whose deep-set eyes showed concern at Garret's entrance. There was a vacant seat next to him, which Garret took.

Lantern-jaws said:

"Sorry I had to hit you last night. But I guess you know how those things are?"

Ruefully, Garret said, "Yeah. What did you hit me with, a road marker?"

There was a roar of laughter at the remark. Clem grinned, knowing that Garret bore him no hard feelings for what took place. Heavy, whose moonface bore an expression of great good nature, grinned at Garrett and said.

"I suppose Shorty told you what's going to take place around here?"

"That he did," Garret said. "But what bothers me, is does Morton know?"

"Oh sure."

"And it's okay with him?"

"Why shouldn't it be?"

Garret shrugged the answer away. They'd find out soon, and when they did . . . he let the thought pass. Of course he might be wrong about Morton. He had often expressed a desire to enter some of the stunts that were pulled on the Apex lot. Of course they hadn't let him. Garret wondered whether his desire would have been as great had they said, go ahead.

The door slammed and a little Mexican boy trotted up, his mouth opened in a broad smile, showing immaculate teeth.

"Senor Heavy," he began. "Mees Lucy wants you and senor Morton and the other one to come weeth me. Breakfast."

"Okay Pancho," Heavy said, ruffling the black hair of the boy. "Tell Miss Lucy we'll be there in a moment."

"Clem," Heavy began to give instructions as soon as the boy left, "Lige and the boys'll be here pretty quick, now. Get the men out to the corral and set things up for the shindig."

Clem nodded his head and said, "Everythin' will be ready."

Heavy motioned Garret and Morton to come with him, just as a couple of Mexicans bearing huge platters of eggs and steaks came through the inner door.

IT WAS a sunny room, painted in pastel colors to give a cheerful, airy tone to the room. Garret didn't know whether it was the golden-haired girl or the sunlight streaming into the room, which gave to it that smiling look.

He hadn't known what to expect, but from Shorty's description of the Lucy gal's argumentative nature, he more expected an older woman. This girl, with the softly rounded face, whose every line showed feminine charm and gentleness, didn't stack up with the picture he had in mind.

She was sitting at a desk. At the men's entrance she arose and waited for them, extending a hand in greeting to Morton and Garret. To Morton, she gave something extra, a warm, intimate smile. Garret felt his face flush. He felt a strange irritation that she should single the other out for special attention.

"I know you're hungry," she said. "And apologies can wait until you've had something to eat. Besides," she continued, her cheeks dimpling in a smile, "they'll be easier to accept then."

A Mexican woman, short, heavy, broad-bosomed, and as good-natured as the day, entered, a huge platter of food held in her arms. They sat, without waiting for ceremony, completely at ease and under the girl's spell.

Garret smacked his lips on finishing the second cup of coffee. Never had he tasted anything as good as that breakfast. He almost forgave her the night's mis-adventure.

"Mr. Morton," she came right to the point, "I don't know whether you meant what you said at the end of your last picture. I mean about helping those who need your help. But, as you know, I need your help."

"Ma-am," Morton flopped right into it. "No need for you to ask. Just *tell* me what you want."

Garret could have kicked him. He knew to what she had reference. The trailer at the end of the picture. It had been a publicity stunt, designed to bring in more fan mail. All they had expected were letters. Now this. He damned both Todd, whose idea it was and Morton for falling so easily into her trap.

"Well," she went a little hesitantly, as though she were still afraid that he might back out, "Lige Wilson and I

made a wager. Really, he made me so angry, saying all western stars were just fakes, I had to do what I did . . ."

Morton reached over and patted her hand. And Garret felt like reaching over and patting her head with his fist.

". . . Thank you," she said. And her smile broke Morton out into a chivalrous rash. "But we know that's against studio rules for you to perform at rodeos. However," she paused for effect, "I don't see why you can't show your *friends* what you can do . . . "

Garret shook his head in admiration. She was such a charming minx! Quite blandly, he threw his monkey wrench:

"Did it ever occur to you, Miss Prudy," he said, "that perhaps Morton *can't* do those little tricks?"

THE smile went away from her eyes for a second. And her lips paled. Then all was as before.

"Tell me," she said, giving Garret her full attention, "why do *you* say that? How much do *you* know of him?"

"Well," Garret's hands went out and his shoulders lifted, "maybe not too much. After all, I only write the scripts for him. But I have an *idea*. Let's say I'm right. Then what?"

"Then," she said softly, "I lose a thousand head of cattle, that's all."

"That's all!" Heavy broke in in horrified tones. "That'll just about ruin her. Look, mister," he continued, talking directly to Morton. "You better say right now whether you can or not."

Three pairs of eyes turned their intent gaze on the red-faced Morton. His glance fell before them. But before another word was said on the subject, there was an interruption. The door opened and a man walked in, threw his hat on the sofa, and hauled a

chair up to the table.

"'Mornin', Lucy," he said. "And to the rest of you."

Garret watched with interest the reaction to the stranger's entrance. Heavy's face, usually bland and good-natured, turned dour and grim. The girl greeted him cordially, but her eyes were narrowed and chill.

"Good morning, Lige," she said. "Had your breakfast?"

"Yup. This the Morton feller?"

She introduced the two men to each other, but didn't bother about Garret.

"Mighty sporty lookin' man," Lige said admiringly. "But them clothes is gonna get messed 'fore the mornin's out."

"Look, Lige," the girl said.

"Now just a minute," Lige broke in. "Ef you're gonna ask me to re-consider our bet, why, I reckon it was made in anger, but it was made. And s'far as I'm concerned it stands—that no man from them movies can beat my puncher, Randy's time on White Head."

"But White Head's a killer," Heavy broke in desperately. "It ain't fair asking Morton to ride him."

Garret swiveled his glance to Morton when Lige mentioned the fact that the horse was a killer. Morton developed a pale tinge about the chops. Garret cursed both the girl and Morton for what was happening.

"I wasn't going to ask you to reconsider anything," the girl said coldly. "But Morton's had a hard night, with little sleep . . . "

"Shucks," Lige said. "That shouldn't make any difference to him. Why in the movies I've seen him do the dangdest things, and on less than a night's sleep."

Nobody joined Lige in his laugh. He pushed himself away from the table, eyes narrowed and mouth drooping at the corners, and said:

"Guess we'd better get on with it. Randy's out in the corral."

THE four of them sat there for a few seconds after Lige left. Then the girl arose, wearily, and said:

"Might as well get on with it. What's the matter . . .?"

Morton remained at the table. There was a look of panic in his eyes. He turned white-faced and sick-looking. And they knew that there wasn't going to be any rodeo, private or otherwise, as far as Morton was concerned.

Lucy's voice was flat, as she said, "Guess that's that."

Suddenly Garret ran around to where Morton was sitting, and hauled him roughly from the chair. Morton sagged in his arms like a limp sack.

"You're going to get out there and try, anyway," Garret grated.

"I—I can't," Morton replied with a groan. "I'm scared. That horse'll kill me, if I do."

"And I will if you don't," Garret said. "So that doesn't leave you much choice."

"Let him alone," the girl said. "It's no good. I made a fool bet and I lost."

Suddenly there was a confusion of sound outside. A number of voices were heard shouting an unintelligible something, and they could see a dozen sweaty horses outside the window.

The three ran to the door and stood for a moment framed in it, staring-open-mouthed at the scene.

Bill Todd had come to the rescue. He was surrounded by all of the girl's men, plus those Lige had brought with him, and the dozen or so deputies. He was in the center of the group, his arms flailing about as he shouted excitedly:

"Where's Morton? Damn it! I'll have every mother's son thrown into the hoosegow if he ain't brought out. Kidnapin'! That's what it is."

Garret stepped out into the patch of sunlight. Todd took one look and bellowed, "The Marines have took over!"

"All right, Billy Boy," Garret said soothingly. "You can calm down."

"Oh, fine! Now I can calm down. Where the hell . . . Oops! Sorry, ma-am . . ."

"Quite all right," the girl said stepping into the midst of the curious crowd. Heavy, shoulders hunched and a deep frown creasing his face, elbowed his way to her side.

Garret took command of the situation.

"It was all a mistake," he said, speaking quickly. An idea had taken form the moment he saw Todd. Perhaps the girl could still save her herd. "You see Miss Purdy here took it on herself to bring Morton to her ranch. She wanted to see him do some of the stunts he does on the screen. You know what some of these fans will go through . . ."

Todd's jaw dropped at the explanation. It dropped still further as Garret went on:

"I kept telling her that the studio won't let him. But you know women . . ."

Todd didn't understand what Garret was talking about. But he did get the broad wink thrown his way by the scripter. If only Lige hadn't stuck his face in at the moment. He saw the wink also.

"Now that's too bad," he said judiciously. "But my man's here. So's the horse and a couple of heifers. Can't help it none if yellow's Morton's favorite color."

THE girl's shoulders drooped, then straightened abruptly. Her eyes flashed fire.

"All right, Lige," she said. "You talked me into this bet. And I'm not renigging. Get your men out into my range and get your thousand head . . . and if you ever show your face here again, I'll see to it that there'll be a load of buckshot where you sit!"

Garret heard her through in surprise. It was the first he heard about Wilson talking her into the bet. According to Shorty, it had been she who . . . He understood then. Lige knew that Morton couldn't perform, or better, that Morton wasn't a real cowboy, but something Todd had foisted off on Apex. Although where he got the information was beyond Garret. He could ask, though.

Lige laughed at the question. It was a pleased laugh, as though he enjoyed pulling something as slick as he did, on a woman.

"Sure I knew it. I was at the Diamond Y when this Todd showed up there. Heck! This Morton was nothing but a good-looking guide they hired to squire the ladies around. Matter of fact I was the man what gave Todd the idea."

Todd, to whom all this had been a

mystifying puzzle, looked oddly at Lige. Then his eyes widened in recognition.

"He was drinkin' at the bar, and I mentoned that if Morton could only ride a horse, the movies'd sure grab him," Lige went on with his recital. "And Todd says, heck that's easy."

"Holy Hattie!" Todd broke in. "Now I get this guy. That's right too. He did give me the idea. So I had some guy show him the ropes about horses. Then I got the scout down."

"Man," Garret said admiringly. "That's what I call figuring long range."

"Oh, no," Lige said. "I wasn't thinking about this, then. But when Morton came to Tumcora for the rodeo I thought how crazy Miss Lucy was about Morton. And so I kept giving her the needle until she was ready for anything. The bet was a cinch."

And Garret knew that there wasn't anything could be done about it. She had just been outsmarted. That is maybe.

"And what exactly was your bet?" he asked.

"That no man from Hollywood can beat my man, Randy," Lige said.

"You mean an actor?" Garret pinned him down.

"From the movie business," Lige said. "Ain't nobody in westerns can hold a candle to him."

"You all heard the bet," Garret said.

There was an affirmative chorus.

"All right, then," Garret said. "Bring on that horse."

There was an instant's shocked silence, which was broken by the girl:

"Just a minute. You mean you're going to try to ride that killer?"

Garret shook his head. "That's right," he said.

"Wait a minute," Lige thrust his way in between them. "You ain't got

no right in this. You don't count."

"But I do," Garret said. "You see, I, too, am in the movies."

"Why are you doing this?" the girl asked.

"Maybe," Garret said, "because I don't like him. Or maybe it's because I like you."

WHILE three men cornered the enraged horse and hearded him back into the chute, Garret and another ran to Randy's aid. But the fallen man got to his feet before they quite reached him:

"Damn horse's a devil," Randy gasped. "Man! Thought sure he was going to stomp me into the ground."

"He is a killer," Garret said thoughtfully as he helped the limping Randy to the fence. Heavy looked down at them and said, "Pretty good time. Eighteen seconds. Think you can better that?"

Garret shrugged. It had been a long time . . .

Randy turned to Garret and said: "Luck fella. And I want you to know that I didn't have anything to do with this. If I had any idea . . ."

"Skip it," Garret said smiling. "Well boys. Looks like it's my turn."

He started for the chute, but before he had gone more than a few feet, Lucy came running to him.

"I-I," she stammered, " I don't want you to do it . . ."

He was facing her, and suddenly he pulled his head down and planted a kiss full on her lips. She turned and ran to the fence where she climbed up beside Heavy and Todd.

They waited tensely. They saw Garret mount the horse inside the chute, and then the man at the gate swung it open. A raging mass of horseflesh erupted from the chute.

White Head didn't do anything

fancy. There was something on his back he hated. Hated more than anything he knew. He rose straight in the air, and came down on stiffened legs. But the thing on his back only sent steel prongs into his side. A shrill scream whistled from his throat at the feel of Garret's spurs. The hammer head came down, despite the terrific pull of the leather and metal in his mouth. Just a little more and he would be boss. Ah! Now he had it.

A little sun-fishing. The thing was beginning to saw at the reins. Now . . . a little more. Now! The fence! White Head threw himself sideways at the fence. And as quickly as a striking rattler, went straight up into the air again, to twist in mid-air and come down on those stiff legs again. There was a sound of pain from the thing on his back. Another few seconds. But the thing only dug those steel things into his sides. White Head went mad then.

There ahead of him was the chute. If he could get in there?

A HUNDRED hammers beat in Garret's skull. Never had he known anything like the shock of riding this horse. It was more than a killer. It was mad! Through pain-filled eyes, he saw as in a haze a whirling kaleidoscope of fence, humans, earth and sky. And they all revolved around this demon of a horse.

Suddenly the mad carousal stopped and for that instant, Garret saw and knew the horse's intention. The chute! Desperately, he hauled at the reins. But it was no use. Another ten feet and they would be in the narrow confines. The screams of the spectators rang in his ears as he made a last desperate tug at the reins.

But it was no use. White Head's

head, would not come down.

So it was that the horse did not see the wind swing the gate. The animal plowed head on into the edge of the gate. A long slat, splintered from the shock of the blow, entered the throat and went all the way through. Garret went spinning through the air to fall in a heap in the chute.

They helped him to his feet. He looked dazedly about him. Four men were taking the body of the horse from the wooden spike. Lige was standing above him, white-faced in anger.

"Damn you," he shouted. "You killed my horse. Runnin' him into the fence like that."

Garret turned to Heavy. "How long did I last before the accident happened?" he asked.

"Nineteen seconds," Heavy replied.

"I won then," Garret said. "But you get something, Wilson. And here it is."

Garret's fist exploded on Wilson's jaw.

Not even Randy bothered to pick the man up. They crowded around Garret, asking where he had learned to ride the way he did.

It was Todd who explained.

"Ever hear of Red Garret. Well, that's him, the guy you just saw in action, the same guy who broke a world's record while riding with a splintered bone in his leg. Sure. That's Red Garret, who used to wow 'em at Madison Square Gardens, years ago."

"Then how come he's writing for the movies, like he says?" someone asked.

"Laying in a hospital with that bad leg, he got to writing of the west. And sold some of the stories. It's a lot easier way of making a buck than risking your neck at this business."

"Well," said the same man, "it looks like Garret's going back to the same business."

But the man in question was not

listening to what was being said about him. Who wants to hear of horses, when a girl is in your arms?

A MAN HAS TO FIGHT

(*Concluded from page* 157)

looked indignantly at Gwen and then at Peters. "I guess that's enough humble pie to eat at one sitting. Now I'm going to get a drink to get the taste of it out of my mouth."

"Make it two," Peters said, and winked down at Larry.

When they had gone Gwen said, in a small voice, "I've got some of that same pie to eat, Larry."

"Please," Larry grinned. "I won't like it. I like you a lot better when you're walking and talking like you just took a mortgage on the whole world and are thinking about foreclosing it, and chasing everybody else off. Don't act humble, it won't become you."

"I'm not being humble," Gwen said indignantly. "And what makes you think I care whether you like the way I act or not?"

Larry laughed and took her hand.

"Much better," he said.

Gwen tried her best to look indignant and annoyed, but she didn't take her hand away. And a little later she discovered that it's practically impossible to look indignant while you're being kissed very thoroughly.

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