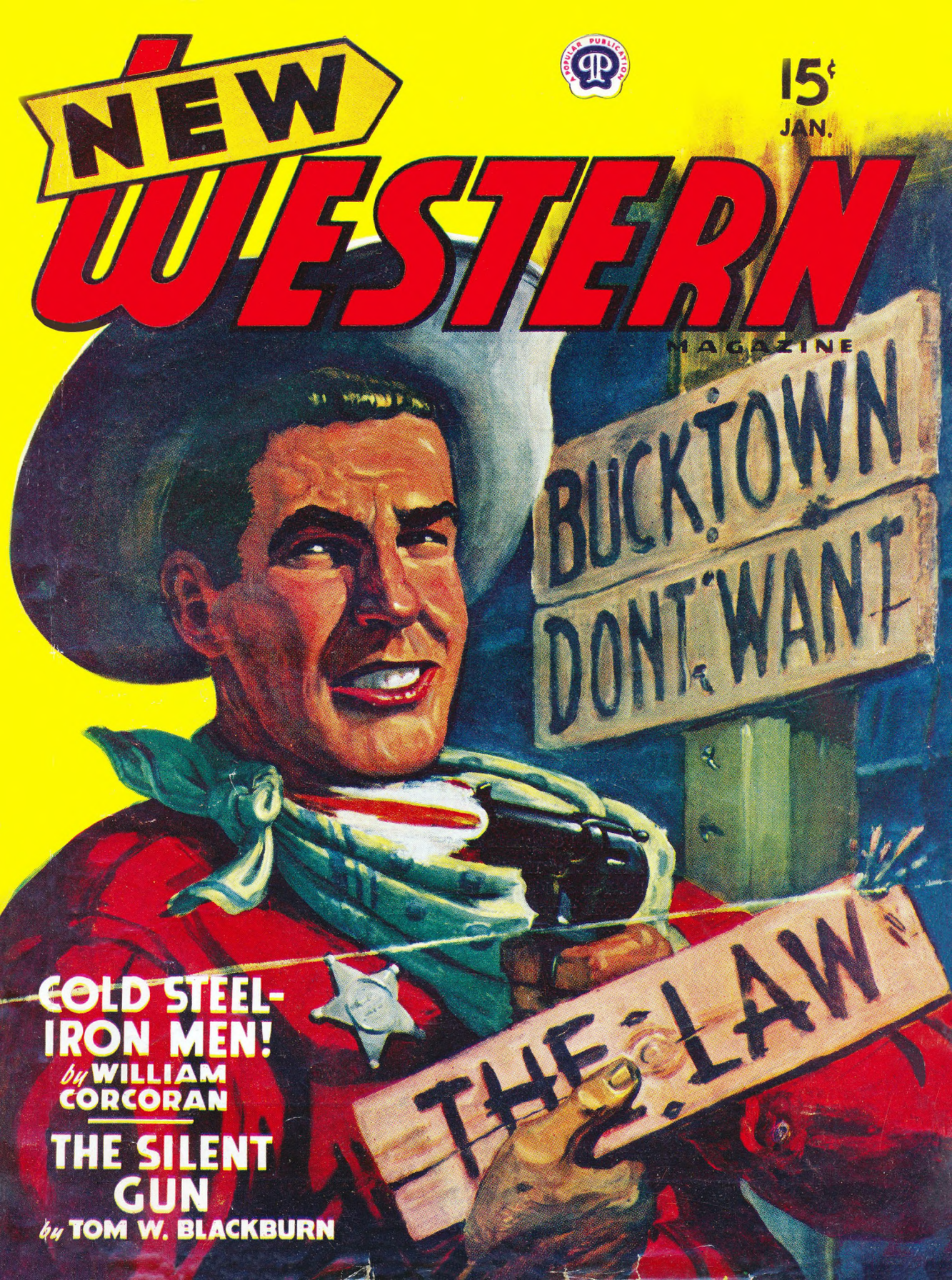
NEW
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JAN.
BUCKTOWN DON'T WANT
THE LAW
COLD STEEL-IRON MEN!
by WILLIAM CORCORAN
THE SILENT GUN
by TOM W. BLACKBURN

For once they actually agree!

Hope and Crosby, in the movies, seldom see eye to eye.

But there's one thing they really do agree on —they both think U.S. Savings Bonds make wonderful Christmas gifts!

SAYS BOB: "They're swell for *anybody* on your list. You couldn't pick a nicer, more sensible, more welcome present. Even Crosby knows that."

SAYS BING: "I hate to admit it, folks, but Hope is right. And remember this—you can buy Bonds at any bank or post office in the U. S. A."

BOB AND BING (together): "This Christmas, why not give the finest gift of all—U.S. Savings Bonds!"

Give the finest gift of all ... U.S. SAVINGS BONDS

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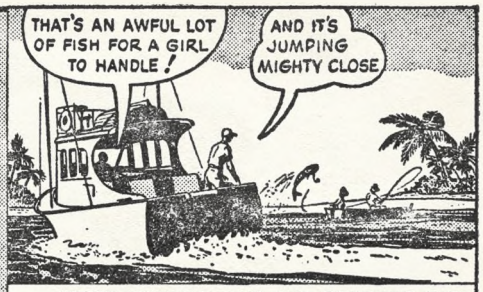
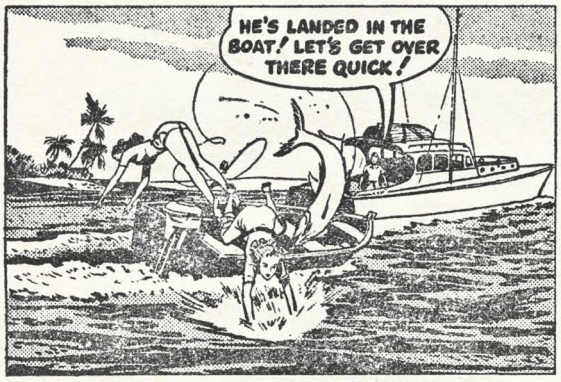
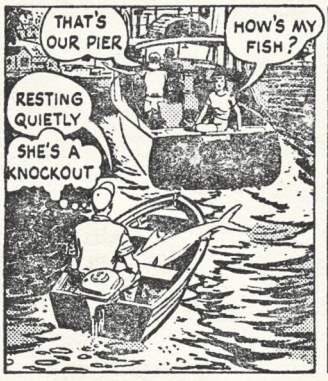
LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN • • •





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ALL STORIES NEW
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NEXT ISSUE
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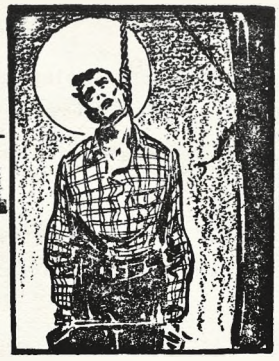


DRUMS OF THE DEAD

By JAMES G. MacCORMACK

IT WAS back in 1867, and the famed Captain McNelly's Texas Rangers had rounded up the remnants of the Taylor-Sutton feudists. And going to glory with a hempen halo was Bill Singleton of DeWitt County, Texas, a man with a dozen murders notched on the cedar handle of his sixgun.

Singleton was the nerviest of a nervy crew, and as he walked up the thirteen steps to glory, he looked at a Ranger named Durham, and said:

"George, I'm putting my trust in you to see that my last will and testi-ment is carried out," and winked knowingly at the man who had captured him.

A gambler as well as a killer, Singleton was known as a man who would bet on anything. While they were arranging the noose, he was puffing mightily on a black cigar. Just as the lawmen were fixing the loop on his neck he gave the cigar a disdainful flip, and it rolled to the feet of George Durham. "I'll bet you ten dollars, George, that that seegar goes out before I do."

"Suppose you lose, Bill? Where in hell will I find you to collect?"

"Well, you've named the location all right, but just whereabouts I'll be, I can't say," the doomed man replied.

At that moment Bill Singleton shot through the gallows trap to eternity. Fascinated by the doomed man's bet, Durham watched first the struggling Singleton, then the cigar butt. In amazement, Durham saw the butt go out before Singleton stopped kicking.

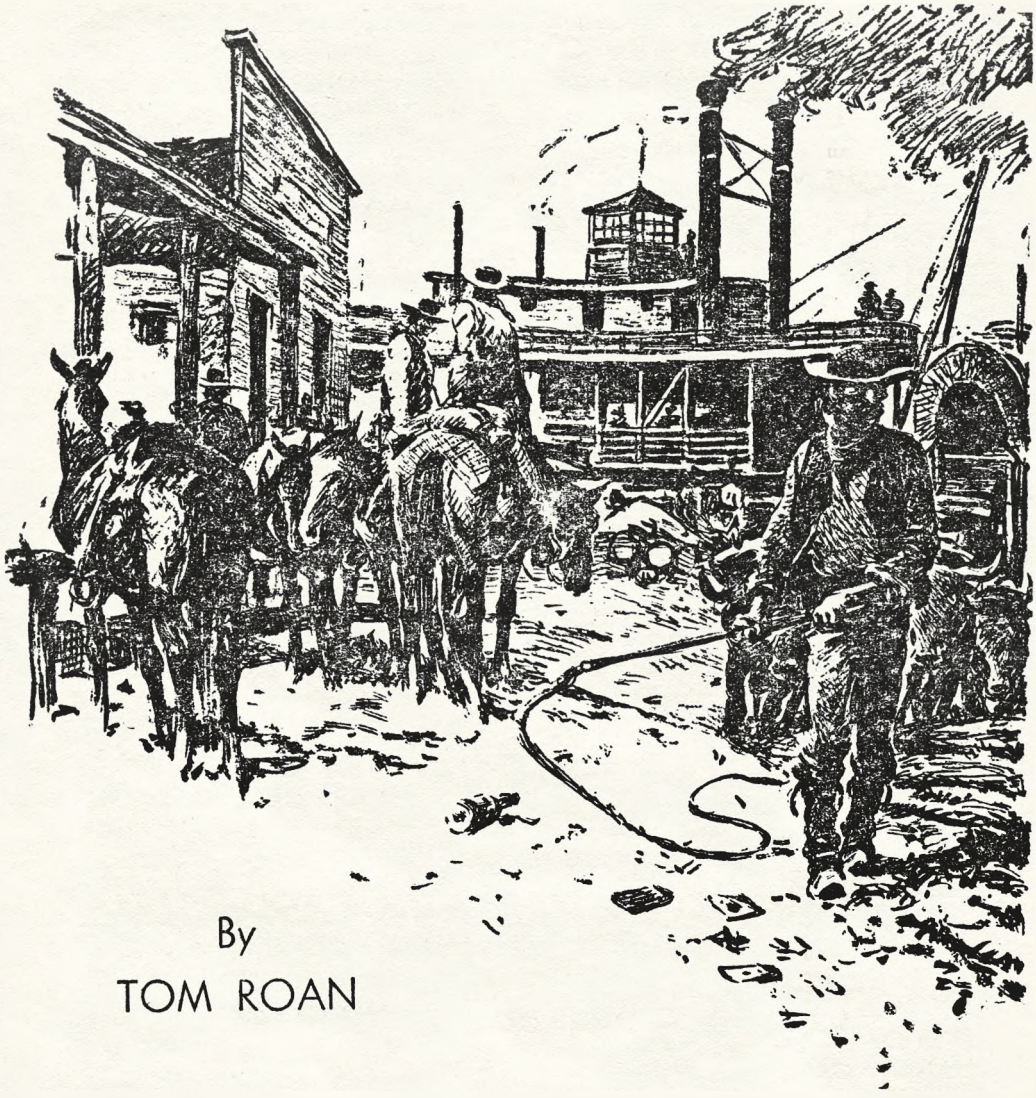
The lawmen then tore open the letter that was Singleton's will.

The dead outlaw, a few hours before he was hanged, had solemnly directed that his skin be delivered to the district attorney of DeWitt County with instructions that it "be stretched into a drum and the drum be beaten at the door of the DeWitt County courthouse every year on the anniversary of my death, as a warning to would-be outlaws."

The rest of his body he willed to local doctors to be dissected and examined to see if they could find out what "made me this kind of damned fool."

The will was legal, but was never carried out.

DEATH WAITS

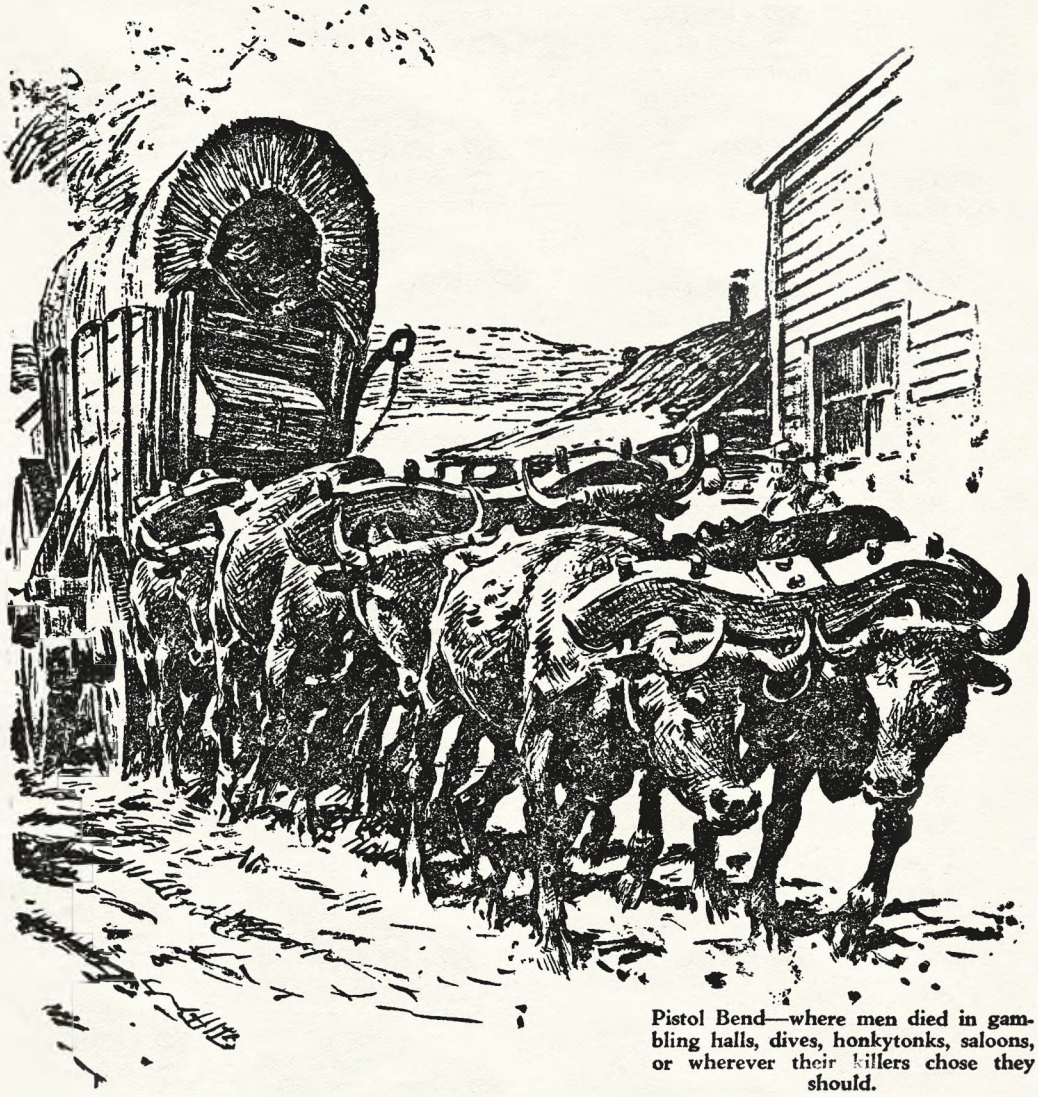


By
TOM ROAN

A Smashing Saga of the Big Muddy Frontier

It was up to Lang Horn, suave and deadly river gambler, to discover the secret lurking behind the terror-stricken eyes of that lovely girl. . . . And why she defied the hard-faced man who hated her, to keep that last, grim rendezvous in Pistol Bend—the town that God forgot!

AT PISTOL BEND



Pistol Bend—where men died in gambling halls, dives, honkytonks, saloons, or wherever their killers chose they should.

CHAPTER ONE

Riverboat Tinhorn

IT WAS BUFFALO and more and more buffalo, a great dark mass of shaggy-humped shapes pouring in a slow, endless cloud down off the high and bald benchlands east of the river. They stretched on and on across the river, then up and over another sea of high bald brown hills—on and forever on into eternity, vanishing against the red glare of the setting sun across the Dakotas in that cooling late-summer of 1875.

Lang Horn had gone back to watch them a dozen times from

the high forward rail below the pilot house. The *Lady Darling,* upriver all the way from Saint Louis, had been stopped for more than three hours, the pilot not daring to cut through the herd, not daring to blow the big packet's mournful whistle for fear of bringing a widening, thundering stampede pouring down upon him. As an old riverman he knew the possibility of having them come storming across the cargo deck and smashing into the big red stern wheel. He was in quiet water here after a long pull through one of the swiftest and most dangerous currents in the river, and he was thankful enough to hold his place without courting disaster.

"There, I think the end is in sight, Holly!"

It was not often that Lang Horn winced from anything, but he winced now at the sound of the voice to his right. Leaning there on the rail, head turned to the left, he had been looking westward for a few moments, too engrossed to hear the man and the tall, red-headed girl come up. He looked at them quickly now, then toward the benchlands to the east.

The great buffalo cloud was thinning up there, the older bulls and cows plodding along like lost souls. Hundreds of them would never live through another raw winter. Uncountable numbers would die much sooner. The bent and weary legs of old age would let them lag farther and farther behind, and the trailing wolf packs that followed those great herds would attack and drag them down.

But he had lost interest in the herd. His attention was all on the man and the girl, but one could never have told it by his face, no more than anyone else had ever been able to read it at a gambling table. Or, for that matter on a dueling ground, where he had held a yard of steel in his hand—one of those lawless affairs of "honor" down around New Orleans.

The sight of the girl had given him a queer start as she had come strolling down the promenade deck on the portly man's arm—a man with iron-gray hair and red cheeks—and as names were quick to get about, he had learned almost at once that this would be Judge William Dale from Virginia, on his way to Pistol Bend to take over the court.

In his thirty years, ten of them spent up and down these rivers from New Orleans to Fort Benton, Montana, Lang Horn had never found reason to entertain an overwhelming burst of enthusiasm for such men. He had seen too many of them who were no more than other men who took advantage of every golden opportunity.

It had been something else when it came to the girl. She was just too damned pretty for the frontier, especially a hell-hole like Pistol Bend, where men did as they pleased, where all the sins of man and more were common play. A girl like this was going to be like warm blood spilled in the midst of a pack of starved wolves.

Even now the girl's interest was not too grossly centered on the buffalo herd. Horn knew that she was studying him from the corners of her eyes, and he could almost read the thoughts going on in her young mind. She would know him, of course. Gray-haired, short and pudgy old Captain Enoch Plunkett had had the girl and her father at his dinner table almost nightly since they had come aboard at Saint Louis, and Plunkett, of course, had tried to give them the history of every frontier character aboard.

Even the first night he had seen them glancing toward his table, and could have run the old captain through with a good length of steel for his garrulousness, knowing that, as a starter, his name was being tossed on the table, not because Plunkett had any real desire to put the heel to his neck but—perhaps—as being able to boast of having one of the best gamblers on the Missouri aboard his wheezy *Lady Darling.*

And of course Plunkett had told them other things, the kind of things a man wanted to forget. There would be that New Orleans *affaire d'honneur* in which four gentlemen of the blade had died in a single morning in about the time it would take an average man to eat a hearty breakfast—and most certainly the *pièce de resistance* when it came to Plunkett's bag of tales concerning one of his "notables" aboard.

Not a nice tale, that rousing New Orleans thing, yet a tale of wild and raw adventure on the grass. But the La Roches had started it, damn them! They had asked for it, had forced the issue, thinking they had another easy mark, just as wine-

bellied old François had done so many times in his past, him and his three swarthy sons. The Roches with their infernal political pull that had allowed them to kill or slash at will with their ever-hungry blades, always crying out to avenge some supposed affront to their honorable hot blood!

WELL, now, he had hung up the name of Horn for them to remember a long time in dear old New Orleans. He had taken on old François last—feeling hellishly diabolical that cool morning, and wanting the old devil to see his three sons die before his eyes. They were the three the old man had skilled so carefully and so boastfully, making them masters at the art of killing. And how the tale had spread, a gory tale of blood on the grassy riverbank, redder in the splotches than the rising sun.

He had taken the strutting and boasting André first, because he was larger and stronger than the rest. He had made it fast—a dance of shadows on the grass, the flash of polished steel, and then the grunt that comes from hogs as the keen blade drove through, whipped clear, and left André flat on his face, the bright red blood gushing from his honorable French heart.

Paul was cooler. He tried to make it last, but who the hell could escape the singing, parrying steel that had had his number on the sharp tip at the start? And then it had been the would-have-been-gallant Pierre, the young fool, dancing this way and that, trying to keep one eye on the bloody work that faced him, the other on the old man; and the old man had been trying to signal him to bring his foe about so that the sun would fall directly into his eyes and blind him for the kill. But it had been Paul who had been brought about, tricked at his own play, and all the way the blade shot through as Paul charged like a wild pig, bellyfirst into a javelin.

And then old François himself, with the heart already taken out of him by what he had seen. He had drained it, a flask of brandy, his last drink on Earth.

"For the honor of France!" Horn had spat in his face. "For the honor of your noble French blood, you damned black lump of swine! Take one more look at the dead around you before you go to Hell to meet them! There'll be wailing instead of wine-guzzling and boasting in the house of the La Roches today! *Guard!*"

Despite all that the old killer had been no monkey with his blade. He had known things he had never been able to teach to his sons. A long-seasoned man, quick to think and quick to execute, he had made this one last longer than all three of the others. But it had been a younger devil playing him out, working him this way and that, giving him his chance and taking it away, taunting him with words, getting him down where he had to wheeze, laughing at him, telling him exactly where the long blade would go through—and then the blood had come gushing out.

They still talked down there of how old François died, the blade through his paunch, right where Horn had called it, all the way in to the hilt, his shining, sky-blue eyes looking into Roche's glaring black ones, a sneer in his face. Then Lang Horn's cold voice spoke, to follow him to Hell as he died:

"I baited you into this, La Roche." The laughter that followed must have shaken old François to the marrow of his dying bones. "You and your honorable-blooded lice took it upon yourselves to coax four of my best friends into your traps. Tell them when you get where you're going that Lang Horn sent you down."

Adventure! It had always gone surging through the Horns, singing and storming up and down their veins like an ever-restless wildfire; but Lang had never sought it. Somehow it had always come seeking him out, pulling him from a crowd, the inevitable finger searching for him. He had tried to shake it everywhere, but it was there, always beside him, always at his elbow, asleep or awake. In these past few years he had heard it whispering in the clatter of the poker chips under the green-shaded lights when the games were fast and the stakes high, and he could hear and feel it now. When he glanced toward that girl at the rail he could hear it calling him again.

"Perhaps Mr. Horn could tell us where this great herd is going."

"Mr. Horn?" The judge wheeled as if aware of him for the first time, his jowled face going very red. "Why, Holly, I—I didn't know you ever knew a *Mr. Horn!*"

"Sir, the pleasure has been mine." Tall brown beaver in his hand, Horn was bowing, the fashion plate of the gambling halls and tables. "But I must beg your pardon. I was too engrossed to notice when you came up. The buffalo always fascinate me. Like Miss Dale, I always wonder where such great herds go."

"And they say this is only one of the thousands and thousands!" cried the girl. "Is it true?"

"It must be." He smiled at her. "All the plainsmen say the same thing. It seems a pity the United States government has set a scheme to kill them all off in order to whip the Indians. It's a rather bold admission, I'd say, that the Army can't whip them alone. It must strike at them through the stomachs of their squaws and children."

"Come, Holly, it's time to dress for dinner." The judge took the girl firmly by the arm, lifting his tall black beaver. "Good afternoon to you, *Mr. Horn!*"

"But we have more than time." The girl tried to hold her plate at the rail. Horn saw her hands grip it so tightly they turned white. "Besides, let's watch the rest of the herd cross, and then we can go."

"Come!" Dale had clamped his fine hat firmly back on his head, his dark and steely blue eyes hard. Even with the girl there was something as judicial about him as if he was on the bench to sentence a helpless prisoner. "Good day again, *Horn!*"

"Good day, *your honor!*" An impish smirk twisted the corners of Horn's mouth. "Good afternoon to you, Miss Holly."

She did not answer him, but he saw her glance back as they turned the bend of the deck. Now those eyes seemed amazingly black and troubled. He smiled to her, bowed again, and she was gone.

At that moment a great, far-rolling bellow filled the river and changed into a long, mournful groan, a near-violent trembling stirring over the *Lady Darling*. Horn turned and glanced again at the river. The last of the herd was clearing it, and the *Lady Darling* was again under way, her great stern wheel kicking white water behind her and rolling her waves from bank to bank.

Tomorrow—if tomorrow should come, a gambler never being certain from one day to another—Pistol Bend would swing into sight high on the east bank of the river, hell-hole of the damned, and the place Holly Dale was going.

CHAPTER TWO

Death From the Sky

HE CONTINUED to lean on the rail, watching the old bulls and cows scramble to clear the river as the last ragged tail of the herd dragged across. The burst of speed would probably cause a dozen or more to drop out before the herd had gone another mile, and then the wolves would close in. Not one wolf had yet been sighted, but they were up there on the east rim, dropped flat on their bellies, waiting for the big boat to move on, its two trailing banners of blue woodsmoke stretching on, far behind it.

With the river clear and the danger past, a powerful rifle crashed now on the Texas, the long, wide roof behind the pilot house. At the weapon's report Horn saw a big old bull stagger and come to a dazed, head-shaking halt, wondering what had happened to him. Another crash from the rifle on the Texas brought him sprawling down and rolling over just as a second rifle opened fire on the herd.

So-called sportsmanship was showing itself aboard the *Lady Darling* now. Men on the Texas were shooting just to see how many animals they could bring down. Men like those sometimes opened fire on an Indian and his pony along the river, killing him just to see him come tumbling down. They fired at buffalo from the platforms of trains in the lower country, leaving the animals to suffer and die where they had dropped—acts of "sporting gentlemen" that aroused the Indians and set them brooding and waiting to loose trouble on innocent whites in the far places.

Blood suddenly ready to boil, Horn turned quickly away from the rail and headed for his cabin on the starboard side of the boat. That pair of gun-happy monkeys on the Texas would be a couple of plug-hatted gentlemen from back East somewhere—a tall, square-shouldered, blond-mustached Mr. Mortimer Quartz and a short, pudgy-bellied Mr. Elmer Dooley, partners, some one had said, in a banking concern.

Characters like Quartz and Dooley made a man's blood boil. He could only wonder how such cold-blooded, hard-hatted show-offs would act in a place where they themselves might be placed under a merciless fire.

His mind was still on the judge and the girl, and it came to him that he had been thinking about her from the first time he had seen her.

Intuition told a gambler things, often more than the eye or the ear. "Hunches" —those queer, knowing feelings that swept unbidden into a man's mind. Often they came in the heat of a game, telling him when to check or pass or go all-out and bet his shirt and boots on the turn of a card.

One of those hunches had told him that he was not going to get along very well with the droopy-bellied, fat-jowled Judge Dale when he saw him coming aboard in Saint Louis, but he had shaken that one aside. Now Dale's true colors had come popping out of him at the rail, not exactly in the lofty manner, but more in the flash of his eyes and the way that girl's hands had gripped the rail.

There was something definitely wrong between those two, and it was not merely that the judge had such a fine opinion of himself. It was something far deeper than that. It had been there when they came aboard, the strong hand on the girl's arm, the judge's quick eyes watching everything as if afraid someone would get too close to her.

Something mysterious about that fellow Dale and the girl, that was all. They had arrived at the landing in Saint Louis in a closed carriage. Coming hastily aboard, they had gone directly to their suite, and no one had caught as much as a glimpse of them until the *Lady Darling* had backed out into mid-stream and was well on her way up the river.

It was odd also that the Dales had no sign of a servant with them; such a man and daughter would rarely head for the wide and wild frontier without a servant. People such as these never knew what they would have to face when it came to getting themselves settled in this raw land; and servants were not in the habit of going on ahead to prepare the way for them.

Spurred by a sudden notion, Horn rang for Mr. Able Bentley, the bald, all-wise little steward. Once he had him inside he poured him a strong hooker of his best brandy.

"I want a little favor, Bentley," he began. "Would you mind?"

"At any time or anywhere, sir," bowed the steward, weak eyes glowing behind his thick glasses. "It will be a pleasure."

"It's about Judge Dale." Horn counted five ten-dollar gold coins from his pocket and dropped them in the steward's hand. "I've noticed that he's quite a bibbler at the dinner table."

"When it comes to the brandy, yes, sir, Mr. Horn." Bentley lifted his glass after taking a sip of it. "But there's none aboard such as this. If he ever tasted it—"

"He will!" cut in Horn with a smile. "You'll take him a bottle of it, not now but for his after-dinner bibbling. Bentley," he put his hand on the steward's shoulder and looked straight into his eyes, "when Dale leaves his table tonight I want him so drunk you'll have to roll him to his quarters in a wheelbarrow."

"Wheelbarrow!" The steward's eyes popped. "But—but, Mr. Horn, he's a judge! Appointed by Washington, and, besides," he looked at the coins in his hand, jingling them thoughtfully, "there's no such a thing as a wheelbarrow aboard."

"He can be carried out in his chair."

"Yes, of course, but," Bentley looked up again, "he's a judge and—"

"And some of them," cut in Horn, "get as drunk and sloppy as the rest of the whiskey hogs. But if you don't want to earn that fifty," he held out his hand to take the gold back, "there's possibly—"

"But you asked me to do you a favor." The steward took a step backward, again opening his hand to look at the gold. "I believe I have yet to fail you, Mr. Horn. Judges do get drunk, yes." He was suddenly plopping the money in his pocket. "I'll give the matter my attention."

"Your undivided attention, Bentley!"

"Absolutely, Mr. Horn!" A throaty chuckle came from Bentley now. "I may not use a wheelbarrow, but a chair, as you say, will suffice. Yes," he nodded, "most handily."

"And he will sleep deeply and well?"

"Until we get to Pistol Bend, if you say so, Mr. Horn."

"Not quite that far." Horn grinned from ear to ear. "Until sunrise will be long enough."

"And," Bentley scratched his ear, "about the girl? Shall I slip her a few winks while I'm about it? She doesn't drink spirits, but—"

"Leave her out of it," Horn slapped him on the shoulder. "Just give your undivided attention to the judge and all will be well. All will be very well. That'll be all, Bentley."

"Thank you, Mr. Horn."

THREE HOURS later he was watching them carry Dale out, drunk and very much asleep in his chair. A woman at a nearby table laughed. Others took it up. Holly Dale stood there changing colors, and it was Horn's chance. He moved in quickly and took her arm, conscious of a low buzz of conversation springing up in whispers around him. He knew what they were saying. They were saying that, at last, Lang Horn was taking to a woman aboard.

"If I can help you," he began, not at all awkward about it, "I'll be only too willing—"

"He was a pig at a trough!" cut in the girl in a fierce whisper that was heard in all directions. "I—I'm sorry he was so rude this afternoon, Mr. Horn."

"Maybe you'd better take a little air on deck." His hand tightened gently on her arm. "The steward and the waiters will take the best of care of him. After they get him in his berth—"

"But—"

"Come." He leaned her to him. "Everybody's staring, confound them. The air has a snap to it in this country. The moon should be coming up now and we'll take a look at it."

Anything to get her on deck. He steered her forward between the tables, leaving the twittering behind them. Once on deck a cool east wind fanned their faces, and then they were walking forward, back to the very spot where she had tried to talk to him.

"It was awful, everybody staring so." A little sob shook her. In the glare of the rising moon still below the horizon he saw a tear on her cheek. "He was so—so piggish after the first two or three."

"You'll see more and more of such things in Pistol Bend." He was giving it to her straight from the shoulder. "But that isn't what I wanted to talk about. I'd rather hear more about you."

"But—but," she made a gallant attempt to smile, "what of you? There must be much—"

"And you already know about it." He was blunt enough here but never a man to keep things waiting. "Captain Plunkett gave you more than enough the first night he sat with you and the judge."

"But it wasn't true—not all of it!" He saw her hands grip the rail. "It couldn't have been!"

"Most likely," he scowled, "not half enough. To old Plunkett I'm supposed to be a desperate character, and I suppose," the scowl deepened, "I am, considering the past. Look, Holly," he took her by the shoulders, turning her to face him and looking straight into her eyes, "isn't that the main reason you wanted to engage me in conversation this afternoon? Come clear with me."

"But—but—"

"You're afraid of something." He gave her a little shake. "Don't lie. I don't like such things, and most surely not from the lips of a woman as beautiful as you are."

"Mr. Horn!" She pushed back from him. "I—I don't like this."

"I do." He caught her again. "I like you, and what I like I take."

It was easy, almost too easy. Her struggle was weak, and quickly over, and her entire body wilted in his arms. His lips found her lips, his kisses holding a sudden, savage fire. Then she managed to turn her head, voice low, helpless.

"Please."

"What a damned fool I am!" He let her rock back to the rail. "I must be mad to—to think of doing a thing like this."

"They say," she gasped, "all men are mad at times. No, *please!*" She put out her hands to keep him at his distance. "I must go inside. He'll soon be out of that awful stupor and looking for me."

"And you're afraid of him!"

"Yes, I am afraid." She swung back, her hands gripping the rail again, terrible desperation in her face as she lifted it, her eyes looking up the river, and at the tall, wind-eroded gray cliffs looming sky-

high on the banks. "I—am—afraid! Please help me, Mr. Horn." She was suddenly facing him again. "You must! They say you're not afraid of anything, and I need some one to—to—well," she waved her hands frantically, "to depend upon."

"Holly," he caught her hands, hard blue eyes looking straight into her eyes that were like inky pools now in the rising moonlight. "Whenever or wherever you need me, nothing in the world will keep me away. I don't know what that old buzzard Plunkett told you, but I'm certain that there were no women in it. I'm a lone wolf of the rivers, have always been and would have continued to be, but you came aboard, and something happened, something I couldn't help, couldn't fight—"

"Be near, that's all!" she cut in. "Be near when we get to Pistol Bend. Don't leave it." There were no tears in her eyes now, no hint of a sob, only cold, stark terror shining there. "They say you're bad, that you are a terrible killer. I think I need that kind of a man, some one who won't balk, the kind I can call and—and he'll come."

"I'll come, Holly." He wanted to take her in his arms again, but he held himself. "And I won't leave you in Pistol Bend alone."

"Thank God," she half-groaned, leaning back against the rail, "there are men like Lang Horn!"

"Better thank the Devil, most folks say." He tried to smile. "He created all the Horns, they tell me. But I want you to tell me something now. Straight out, Holly. Is Bill Dale your father?"

"Why—I," she tried to draw away, "I—Oh, *God!*"

Her last word was a scream. They were in the Narrows here, the cliffs growing higher and higher on either bank of the river. From the tall top of the western wall a licking gash of flame had spurted down, a bullet whistling in the wind.

"Holly! Holly!" Horn had grabbed her as she was falling, her face white, her body limp as he caught her in his arms. *"Holly!"*

"Indians!" The cry was like one desperate scream from all along the upper deck of the boat, rougher voices below joining in with a wild bellowing: "Indians! Indians!"

"Holly!" Down to one knee on the deck, Horn was still calling the white-faced girl in his arms.

Bullets answered, whistling, slapping and popping around him, a cloud of splinters flying from the rail, the cliffs on either side of the river alive with screaming and howling figures. In all the din an arched streak took shape from above, coming from the east cliffs. At the same moment another took to the air from the west tops, long, curving and graceful as they turned downward, reaching for the *Lady Darling* like slow-shooting stars from the sky.

"Holly! Holly!"

"They're puttin' the fire to us, boys!" The yell was from below on the cargo deck. "Up with yore shootin' irons an' give them red devils the hell they're axin' fur!"

"Holly!" He picked her up now and was running, bullets appearing to skip and dance on the deck in front of him, under his feet and behind him until he turned into the dining saloon. Here Abel Bentley and the waiters were fighting to blow out the lights in a milling, yelling and screaming hell of humanity.

"There's a Dr. West and his wife aboard!" Horn had to yell at the top of his voice to make himself heard. "Get them, Bentley, and take them to Judge Dale's cabin immediately! Miss Dale's been shot!"

CHAPTER THREE

Cargo of Contraband

THERE WAS not one of the old-timers aboard who expected it to be a large attack carried out by vast numbers who would keep it up for hours, and it was not large when compared to countless other attacks along this particular dangerous stretch of water.

Here the water was narrow and swift, and Indians were always taking pot shots at boats going by. It had been like that since the first boat had started plying the Missouri, but there had been times when Indians numbering into the many hundreds had hammered away at them from the high cliffs, killing and burning the boats to their waterlines, leaving no man, woman or child alive.

It sounded now as if there could be no more than twenty or thirty Indians on each rim, but even half that number could

do a world of damage before a boat could get through the five-mile run of the Narrows. The redskins might even set the boat afire, turning it into a blazing hell from one end to the other.

Flaming arrows had started coming down with the first shot. One whizzing shaft of fire after another drove firmly in the decks and roofs, and it was not long before a wail of despair was lifting, loud enough to start women screaming again:

"The Texas is afire!"

That meant that the roof of the *Lady Darling* had been set to flame. Men were soon racing up there with pails, and two men from the pilot house were already at work with fire buckets dipping into barrels, while a third man clung to the pilot house and the wheel to keep the boat in midstream.

Unmindful of arrow or bullet, it was a battle on the Texas. In the middle of it a man stumbled, grunted and dropped to his hands and knees as he flung water on a widening circle of fire eating into the tarred roof. Another man caught him by the back of the collar, flung him to one side, and calmly finished wiping out the fire with more and more arrows falling all around him.

But it was not so one-sided now. Men below were in action, their guns crashing or roaring from each side of the boat, their charges raking the tops of the cliffs in a steady din. Now and then a yell lifted when some war-painted buck reared to his feet, stood rocking for a moment, then came plunging over the rim or reeling back and down.

It was short but furious while it lasted. A few of the Indians followed the boat for a mile, and then they were falling back, having done their worst in a sudden flurry, and now willing to turn and flee with the rest of their band.

Horn had been in it as soon as he could get the girl to her cabin and turn her over to a tall young doctor. Darting back and forth from one side of the boat to the other with a long rifle he heard the firing cease, staggering to its end. Now people could get up and cheer, and those that cheered the loudest were the first-class passengers, their part of it having been mostly to hug the floor.

"All fires are out!" That cry was the final let-down, and then silence followed.

Now Horn could drop his rifle and head back for the Dale cabin, up forward and on the starboard side of the boat. As he stepped into the outer room he saw Judge Dale again, lying there just as he had been lying when the girl was brought in.

Abel Bentley had done a good job of it. Dale had not stirred a muscle during all the excitement. Boots removed, collar unbuttoned, he was flat on his back, a man completely dead to the world and due to remain there until well into the morning.

"You may go in for a couple of minutes now," Dr. West said. "Mrs. West is still with her, and I hear some one calling for a doctor on deck."

"How is she, doctor?"

"She was hit twice," frowned the doctor. "There's a mean rake on the right side of the head from a bullet. Another struck the left shoulder, but neither were serious."

The doctor was gone then with his bag, heading in one direction, Horn in the other, the deep, drunken snores of the judge behind them. At the door to the girl's room he rapped softly, and small, dark-haired Mrs. West let him in. With only a bow he stepped past her and on to the girl lying there in her bed, one bandage around her head, another on her shoulder. Something like a quick little start filled her eyes when she saw him.

"I'm sorry, Miss Dale, but I had to come." It seemed such a stupid thing to say, but he was not used to things like this. "I feel that it was all my fault for getting you out on deck—"

"Don't talk of it." She lifted her hand, those big, dark eyes on the door to the judge's room. "Is—er—he all right?"

"He's sound asleep, and slept through all of it."

"They say there were Indians up there. Was it true?"

"Yes, Indians." He wanted to pull up a chair, Mrs. West keeping in the background, but the expression on the girl's face kept him standing. "Small bands like that make trouble for boats ever now and then, but I think we'll have no more of them into Pistol Bend. If we do—"

"Please," she cut in, voice a whisper, eyes still watching the door to the judge's room, "you'll forgive me, I know, if I think

it best if you go. He has such a terrible temper, and I'm going to have a world of explaining to do when he learns of this."

"Tell him you went out on deck for a little air." He turned now and glowered at the door. "If that doesn't suit his royal highness, you can send him to me. I'll tell him you needed air after he had sprawled out of his chair like—well, like a fat sow!"

"Please!"

He left her then, realizing that he was making very much a fool of himself. And making a fool of himself around women was not a habit with Lang Horn. Women simply had never done this to him, had never made him a blubbering idiot, but that was exactly the way he was acting tonight. Paying fifty dollars in gold and giving away and oversized quart of the world's best Napoleon brandy to knockout a strutting, drop-gutted judge, and then getting the girl out on deck to grab her and kiss her like a love-crazy fool!

He took another look as he passed through the room, pausing for a few moments to stare at the sprawling figure with the big, loose mouth gaped open, the heavy lips puffing. Then he moved on, heading now for the Gentlemen's Salon up forward—fast draw poker or equally fast stud on his mind. A good game always cleared his head.

But when he stepped inside the salon he saw that the excitement on board was still too high for men to think of games. Regan and Smith, the two big bartenders, were idle behind the highly polished counter, and there was not another man in the room. With a nod, he headed on for his old green-felted table in the corner, feeling that the suckers and sharks would finally come drifting in. Five minutes later he was looking at Mr. Mortimer Quartz and Mr. Elmer Dooley, the two who had been shooting tired old buffalo from the Texas.

Neither Quartz nor Dooley looked like fine sportsmen now. Each had his plug hat whammed down over his ears. Their lips were white, both dripping wet. Quartz's right eye was already nearly closed and doomed to become blue-black before morning.

Dooley's fat little pug nose dripped blood and looked as if some one had tried to push it up between his eyebrows. With both hands he was twisting at his jaw as if it had been knocked out of place by an efficient sledge-hammer fist.

Then came the bull-chested buffalo hunter. He was buckskins and beard, a six-shooter at either hip, a ten-inch knife and his poison tube swinging against his belly—six feet four of all-out fighting man, known up and down the far reaches of the Missouri, the Powder and the Yellowstone as Pistol Sam McGee, smelling like a boar and as tough as a grizzly. Now Horn could see that the burly hunter had his big hands gripped in the collars of the scared pair in front of him. With the bellow of a wounded bull he gave them a push that sent them stumbling and falling to their knees in front of the bar.

"In thar whar yuh belong!" His voice could have been heard all over the boat. "Yuh brave pair of scared cats! Take a look at them, Mr. Horn! They could stand on the Texas shootin' buffer, but when thar came to be some fightin' to be done they headed for the cargo deck an' got down 'twix the b'ilers where nary bullet ner arrow could find 'em!"

"We'll—have the law on you for this!" Quartz was finding his voice. "You—you can bank on that!"

"Then let's have 'er!" Pistol Sam roared to fill the room again. "All yuh do here to call it is just reach for yore hip! *Reach!"*

"Don't talk back to him!" yelped Dooley. "You know what he'll do, dipping us over the side in the river, then beating us up!"

"Regan, yuh or Smith dig me up a gallon of whiskey." The hunter was suddenly ignoring the pair on the floor on their hands and knees now. "An' a bucket of beer to go with it. We don't care a cuss what yuh do with them two squirts on yore floor, but," he stabbed a finger at the bartenders, "keep 'em up here an' off the cargo deck. Hell, fightin' men an' not cowardly skunks ride this boat down thar!"

Less than a minute later—with a grin toward Horn—Pistol Sam McGee was striding out, a gallon jug of whiskey in one hand, a huge pail of beer in the other.

Mr. McGee was going below to have a few drinks with his friends, and would probably be back within an hour for another gallon of whiskey and a bucket of beer. Behind him, hugged around the bend of the bar, were the two sporting gentlemen, both too scared to open their mouths.

QUARTZ and Dooley each gulped down hasty triple drinks of 100 proof whiskey when it was safe enough for them to straighten from their crouches, then immediately ordered another round of the same thing.

Horn sat there at his table, toying with a deck of cards, an amused glint in his eyes. He knew Pistol Sam McGee well, knew him as a rough and rowdy, ready at all times to wade and swim a roaring and raging river to fight a devil. But he was a man without sympathy for those two mauled plug-hats at the bar—and far less when Quartz started to rant in a thick voice after his third drink.

"No man can do this to me and get away with it!" He looked toward the door to the deck. "Not and boast about it. I'm a gentleman, no common man, I can tell you!"

"And so am I a gentleman!" put in Dooley, tenderly feeling of his nose and pressing it. "There's law even in this accursed country!"

"Where you seem to see and meet only the lowest of human cattle!" agreed Quartz with a nod. "Yes, of course there's law!" His spirits seemed to be lifting by the second. "I know law. I studied it in college. These are federal waters. Every steamboat is under federal control, and we have a federal judge right here aboard."

"Mr. Quartz," Horn was simply having to say something now, "Pistol Sam McGee told you where to find the only real law in this country. You carry it on your hip, or swinging as a good steel blade on a strap. The first hand to the butt of a gun or the hilt of a knife is *the law,* of course," he shrugged and riffled the cards in his hands, "if the man has the guts to fight."

"A *gentleman,*" the answer came back with a snarl, "doesn't have to fight with his hands like a savage or a common beast!"

"Probably true enough, Mr. Quartz." A queer, half-patient little quirk moved Horn's lips. "But that word 'gentleman' covers a world of sins. It too often means a timid man or," he shrugged again, "a man just too plain hell-scared to fight."

"Did it ever occur to you," Dooley was curling his lip now like a dog baring his fangs, "that my friend didn't ask *you* for a definition?"

"That I know." Horn was smiling at him now. "I'm merely trying to place you *gentlemen* on the right track. Out here in the Dakotas, at least. You might get Judge Dale to take some cognizance of your coming to certain woe for hiding between a couple of boilers—"

"And that—that was a lie!" cut in Quartz, voice sounding now as if gagging on his own words. "We—er—just happened to be down there when the trouble started."

"A most convenient time, I'm sure." Horn tossed down his cards, the little smirk on his face full of contempt, blue eyes a pair of hard-cast bullets. "Embarrassing, too, I'll bet, with women and children aboard crying in terror and looking for fighting men—not timid men—to fight for them."

"You seem to be taking a damned concerning view in the issue." Now, whiskey making him strong, Quartz looked like a bull getting ready to charge. "We are not the kind of men to relish it!"

"Suit yourselves, *gentlemen.*" Horn picked up the cards again and started toying with them. "I am afraid, however, that I'm only wasting words. To be straight from the shoulder with it, I have little but contempt for cowards who'll stand on a Texas shooting down helpless old buffalo."

"That was our business!"

"And so was the fighting." He riffled the cards, and the cards now somehow sounded like sheets of tin crashing together. "We already have six wounded men aboard, one, I heard, who can't possibly pull through—men, by the way, who were fighting while you two would-be gentlemen were hiding below. It just seemed to me that we've had enough blood until we get to Pistol Bend.

"But you can go see Judge Dale." He smiled now, remembering the sprawling, slack-mouthed figure in his cabin. "He might be just fool enough to try to call court here on board, and if he was still a bigger fool he might try to collect a fine out of Pistol Sam McGee. If that happened," his smile grew wider, "I might tell you what would happen to you. Pistol Sam would string you up by the heels, along with the judge, and slit your well-fed paunches from spine to spine, *gentlemen.*"

"Let's—get out of here and find the

doctor, Mortimer!" Trying to push his sad-looking hat up from his sorely bent ears, Elmer Dooley was suddenly heading for the door and the clear air on deck, the truth of Horn's cold, hard words having jarred through him. "My face hurts!"

"I'll stand my ground!" Quartz struck the bar with his fist hard enough to rattle the glasses in front of him. "I'm a gentleman and—"

"Wait a minute, brother." Smith, always the peacemaker, cut him short by leaning half-across the bar to whisper to him. "We've had this floor mopped no less than six times since early morning and don't want to have it mopped again in the next few minutes. If you don't know it, that's Lang Horn at that table in the corner, and he's ten times worse than that big buffalo hunter."

"Lang Horn?" Quartz's swollen mouth bagged. Like Dooley he had never been a patron of the bar or the game tables since coming aboard at Saint Joseph. "Why—I thought he was another party. I—I," he plucked at his collar as if it were suddenly choking him, "believe we'd better see the doctor just now. Wait for me, Elmer!"

It was the end of it. Turning abruptly from the bar, he headed for the door and out, trying with both hands to push his own plug hat up from his ears. After the door closed behind him, the bartenders Regan and Smith gripped their stomachs and doubled into knots to keep their spasms of laughter from being heard on deck.

Horn grinned at them, but that was all. He had weighty things on his mind. He had expressed his contempt for those two monkeys and had shut them up for the rest of the run to Pistol Bend.

IT WAS just as well that Quartz and Dooley did leave. Pistol Sam McGee was back in fifteen minutes. He was three sheets to the wind and as mean and dangerous as a coiled rattlesnake. He was back for another gallon of whiskey and a bucket of beer.

Another popeyed old frontier hellion in shabby black buckskins—a man known all over as Hell-a-rollin' Bleek Kidd—came right behind McGee. Armed like McGee and uglier than sin, he was arrow and ball-scarred, left eye gone from the slash of a knife, the right one as large and round as a silver dollar—a hell of a nice character.

"Fill 'er up again!" McGee whanged the bucket across the bar and flung down a fifty-dollar gold slug. "Another gallon of whiskey, too. That thar brand was good, best I've had since me an' Bleek was a-comin' off our summer-long spree in Saint Joe just 'fore this boat got in. Take out yore pay for that thar other gallon, too. Clean plum forgot 'er, them two would-be tomcats makin' me so damn mad I could eat hay. Step up an' have a drink with us, Mr. Horn!"

"The drinks are on me this time, Sam." Horn tossed aside his cards. "And so would the gallon be on me, but you only did a half-job."

"Whut'n hell yuh mean, half-job?" Kidd turned toward him, big good eye popping, the one of glass looking turned upside-down and ready to drop out of its socket. "We ain't half-job men."

"Tonight you were." Horn shoved back his chair and moved forward to join them at the bar. "At least Sam was, from what I heard."

"Who, me?" McGee turned and leered. "Why an' how?"

"Otherwise," grinned Horn, "you would have let go of Mr. Quartz and the delightful Mr. Dooley when you dipped them overside in the river."

"Hell, no, Sam was smart!" Kidd banged the bar with a knotty fist, a grin stretching from ear to ear in his ugly face before he broke into a wild, ass-braying burst of laughter. "We hunt buffer in the fall an' winter when the hair's better. Dumpin' them in woulda piouleted the wauters clear back to Saint Joe an' a-killed the buffer even for of drinkin' it, an' whar'd we be for hides this fall?"

"But I coulda done some better at that, I reckon." McGee looked thoughtfully at the six-ounce glass filled to the brim with whiskey in front of him. "I coulda pitched 'em clear hell out on the bank of the river an' left 'em for the buzzards."

" 'Twouldn't a done, Sam." Kidd shook his head and reached for his six-ounce glass. "I love buzzards, them kind that fly. They pick up the carrion an' sorter tell a man things when yuh see 'em circlin' in the sky. Them two polecats lyin' dead on the bank woulda poisoned 'em. Drink up, men, my belly goes drier an' drier the

older I get. An' whut's the matter with yuh two squirts!" He looked at the bartenders, voice almost a yell. "Don't we smell good enough to drink with, or must we sorter powder-smoke up this dump a little to soothe the air?"

"Shoot 'er full of holes if you feel like it, Bleek!" Smith knew how to handle them and reached for glasses for himself and Regan laughing at them at the same time. "Maybe then Sam'll give us a job skinning buffalo for him!"

"Wouldn't have yuh at a dime a dozen!" bellowed McGee, banging the bar. "An', anyhow, how could anybody wanta drink with yuh, Bleek? Yuh are so ugly yuh ain't human, I swear!"

With eighteen full ounces of whiskey under their belts, they were soon hilarious, the scrap with the Indians and the mauling of Quartz and Dooley apparently forgotten. But Horn knew better than that. These two had something on their minds. It came out with a nudge from McGee's knee to the side of Horn's leg.

"An' now that we're drunk our tubs sorter dewey moisty with yuh," growled the hunter, "an' yuh not lettin' us pay a dime without a fight on our hands, I think it's high time we got back down below to the dry crowd." He nudged Horn's leg again. "It's plum important." He nudged again. "Leastwise I think it is. Better give us another gallon, yuh squirts. A gallon down there don't last long."

They barged out after that. Horn waited for ten minutes, sitting back at his table riffling the cards again, a habit he seemed to be able to keep up all day or night with tireless hands. A couple of passengers came in to the bar. He yawned, tossed down the cards and strolled out. Shortly afterwards, watching his chances, he went down an iron-runged ladder on the port side of the boat near the stern and dropped lightly to the cargo deck, face to face with McGee.

"Sorter kinda thought yo'd come this way," grinned the hunter, now as sober as a deacon. "Bleek's watchin' on the other side just to make shore."

"What's all the mystery, Sam?"

"Guns." McGee glanced around in the darkness here as a burst of singing lifted from the forward end of the deck where lanterns were burning in a clearing among the high-piled boxes and bales of cargo. "Me an' Bleek feel queer 'bout such things, 'specially when yuh kinda sorter think they're a-comin' out here to be slipped into the hands of redskins to kill white wimmin an' young uns with—to say nothin' of us fellas in the buffer business. Let's get Bleek."

There was no use asking him anything more. Horn knew that well enough. Pistol Sam McGee had said enough. The rest would be up to him to prove, and he led the way, twisting and squeezing through the boxes and bales piled high at every side. They moved up forward past the boilers. Then they came to the waiting old Hell-a-rollin' Bleek Kidd, squatting there in the darkness and gumming his chaw.

"Here he is," half-whispered McGee, "but how're we gonna show 'im without some kinda light?"

"Hell," growled the old hunter, "he can feel, can't 'e?"

" 'Spect he can." McGee touched Horn's arm. "We'll show yuh whut's supposed to be a pie-anner first. It's here."

They were near the starboard side of the boat now, the moon well up in the sky and throwing some light. McGee led the way to a long, thick box that would be almost like lead to move. Stopping beside it and feeling over it, he took Horn's hand and moved it to a charred opening in the side of the box.

"One of them burnin' arrows got through somehow," he explained, "an' burned the hole. I saw it was no pie-anner when I was a-washin' out the fire with a bucket of water."

Horn was already feeling inside. The first thing his hand had encountered was the barrel of a rifle, then another and another as far as he could reach.

"An' there's three more nearer the water," explained McGee. "We had to dump them over to make shelter when we was returnin' the fire from them fool cliffs. We cracked open all three. Two's rifles an' one's catterriges for 'em. The most of this stuff was put aboard at Saint Joe, shipped there an' reboxed, yuh can bet."

"If we had a light," Horn removed his hand from the charred opening, "we might find out where they're going."

"An' we already know." McGee's voice was a low growl. "I can read enough for

that. There's maybe five or six tons of this stuff, maybe more'n that. It's goin' to Judge W. Dale to be unloaded at Pistol Bend as his furniture."

Horn almost whistled with surprise.

"An' more'n that," put in Kidd, "it means he's not exactly alone on this boat—an' I ain't just meanin' the gal. He had to have he'p at Saint Joe, an' while we was waitin' for the boat an' tryin' to get off our spree me'n Sam saw two certain fellas mighty busy 'round the waterfront. Them squirts was the two plug hats Sam sorter smacked 'round an' dipped in the river tonight."

At that moment Horn might have whistled as loudly as he pleased. A wilder burst of singing was suddenly lifting from the forward end of the deck. Up there buckskinned buffalo hunters and skinners were having a good time on some of the whiskey McGee had brought down.

"Listen, Sam." Horn took the hunter by the arm. "Get that hole closed somehow in that case. Get the other boxes back together at the same time so that everything will look exactly right. You have friends in that crowd ahead, but don't let them know a thing. We want this stuff to go ashore in Pistol Bend without a hitch."

"But," growled Kidd, "it's bound to be for the Indian trade. No one man would want that many guns!"

"Of course it's for that," nodded Horn, "and it's up to us to see that it doesn't get through—and I expect help from you two. I'm going ashore at Pistol Bend and staying there until I see this thing through."

"An' we'll be with yuh," a grin streaked McGee's face in the darkness, "with all the friends we've got behind us, gut an' toe!"

CHAPTER FOUR

A Town of Blood and Guts

HORN WAS up early. Dr. West had been back to see the girl and had found her sleeping quietly. His report in the morning was good.

"She's excellent," he smiled. "Perfectly excellent. She should be able to leave the boat on her own feet when we reach Pistol Bend. The bullet that struck her head was really only a slap. The other must have been from an old muzzle-loader with a weak charge. Indians, I'm told, have a funny habit of guessing at everything.

"The judge, himself," his smile widened, "is the one who is really sick—and rather puzzling, too. He swears he did not have much to drink, but he looks as if it might have been gallons—and it was that or ungodly poor liquor. He's like a horse dying with a bellyache. Anything I give him refuses to stay down long enough to strike the bottom of his stomach. Obstinate fellow, it seems."

"I wouldn't exactly know." Horn's lips tightened, keeping back a smile. "He seems to be a man who thinks himself exalted and entirely too godly to converse long with a common riverboat gambler. I'm wondering what he'll think of the honky-tonk type when he gets to the Bend. He'll have to like them far better," the smile had forced the issue then, spreading across his face, "or he's doomed to a very lonely existence."

Judge Dale appeared at eleven for breakfast, looking like something that had been dragged backwards through a knothole. His eyes were bleary, great dark bags under them, lips yet inclined to slack and quiver, his hands shaky and legs a trifle like rubber. He spilled his black coffee and blamed the waiter for it, and then left the salon so quickly he knocked over his chair and came close to upsetting the table. He reeled violently away in a terrific hurry with his napkin clamped to his mouth—and was seen no more until nearly six o'clock when Pistol Bend was just coming in sight.

Horn watched him at the table from a far corner of the salon. The gambling tables often held Horn until dawn, and now and then for a two or three all-day, all-night session in a stretch when the stakes were sky-high and the play trembling with excitement. After Dale disappeared he saw Mr. Bentley on his way to his cabin with a napkin-covered tray that held bottles and glasses. When Bentley came back to Horn's table there was one of those all-knowing gleams in his eyes.

"Rather overshot the dose, I think," he smiled. "And yet he wants to try his lunch in a couple of hours. Men like him, the over-paunched porker, certainly want to get every penny of their money's worth out of what they pay for passage."

And now they could see Pistol Bend, up

there on the high east bluffs that might have been duplicated in a dozen other places along the Missouri. A long wharf lay at the foot of it, a crazy looking stairway leading up from it. The street was wide and wheel-gutted, the dust thick enough to bury a man in the middle of it, the houses, saloons, gambling halls, the dives and plain honkytonks of unpainted rough planks, boards or logs. As the *Lady Darling's* old whistle blew, mourning for miles up and down the river and out across the rolling hills, Horn could picture gamblers limbering up their fingers, girls and women putting on a little more powder and rouge, everybody looking forward to the coming suckers.

He turned back into his cabin, packing his bag and slipped an extra six-shooter in his waistband. When he came back on deck the *Lady Darling* was already easing in at the landing, a great crowd collecting at the head of those crazy-looking steps.

Yells now filled the cargo deck, the roughnecks down there hollering to men they knew above them. The moment the boat started to touch the landing some of them were leaping for it without waiting for the gangplank. One husky, buckskinned figure missed the landing and fell with a belly-bursting flop in the water, bringing a loud roar of laughter. In a couple of seconds he might have been crushed into a pulp between a piling and the boat, but he escaped by a miracle, getting in behind the piling just in time to save himself.

Death was a constant visitor here, all up and down the rivers and out across the hills and prairies. With the shooting season in full-blast, reports would come in almost every day telling of a last desperate stand of some buffalo hunter and his crew of hardy and uncaring men, tales of blood and guts and gunsmoke, until the last cartridge was gone, and then the ever-handy poison tubes crushed between their teeth so they could die quickly and escape the torture of the redskins.

And others died, also, men and women in the far places, sometimes entire settlements of them. And girls were carried off to the hills by red bucks who took a fancy to them at the last moment. And the smoke of the burning houses and cabins lifting high in the sky behind them.

In the towns they died in the gambling halls, the dives, honkytonks and saloons or the streets: a word or a glance bringing on the fights between men charged to the eyes with whiskey or rum or gin. The knife or the gun was the law of the land, the badges of respectability or plain, cold-blooded murder.

Some of the yelling gang going ashore now from the cargo deck would probably get the daylights shot out of them before morning, and the most dangerous place in town for that would be Wiley Harper's Golden Wheel on the west side of the street, the only two-story in town.

Pistol Sam McGee and Hell-a-rollin' Bleek Kidd were with them, yelling as loudly as the rest. Neither man so much as glanced up at Horn leaning there on the rail. He pretended to pay no attention to them. He was waiting and watching for something else. A strange little glint came into those blue eyes when he saw Dale.

The girl's right hand was in his hand, his arm hooked under her arm, the patient little Mrs. West on the other side, the doctor behind them, waiters carrying their bags. Behind them appeared Quartz and Dooley, the latter with his face almost masked behind court plaster and Quartz with a big square of gauze over his eye.

Men were already moving cargo off the boat by the time he reached the landing, and they were cursing and straining when they came to the heavy boxes and bales consigned to Dale. The judge was halfway up the steps now, the girl still half-hugged to him, Mrs. West at the other side, and then, a figure that made his Horn's lips tighten.

It was Mr. Wiley Harper in person up there—tall, slender and handsome, the fashion plate of Pistol Bend in his well-fitted gray and the tall, pearl-white beaver riding high on his curly head. At once he was on the steps and coming down, brushing people out of his way to make room for the king of the Dakotas.

When Harper reached the judge and shook hands with him, the old hard-cast bullets came back to glint in Lang Horn's eyes. He swore under his breath when he saw Harper taking the place of Mrs. West beside the girl. Harper, always the gallant where women were concerned, was moving in rapidly.

Holly Dale was now on the arm of the

slickest crook one could find in any thousand-mile stretch of the Missouri.

WITHOUT a crane above the lower side of the landing—constructed of a long timber of hard-seasoned fir and managed by a hand-cranked windlass—Judge Dale's boxes and bales would have been an ungodly task for workers to get up to the level of the town. But everything was brought up and immediately swung piece by piece into two giant bull-wagons—the first cargo to be lifted from the landing. And the wagons had come on the scene as if a snap of a thumb had brought them.

Lang Horn could easily guess whose thumb had snapped after seeing Wiley Harper come down those steps to greet the judge. Losing himself in the crowds as the tale of the Indian attack spread like a shot up and down the town, he had headed up the east side of the street for old Pop and Mom Jordon's little house at the north end of it.

There would be nothing strange, nothing to cause any immediate excitement about his coming ashore and heading for the Jordons. The *Lady Darling* would remain at the landing until morning, a safety measure usually taken by boats bound upriver late in the afternoon. Swift and narrow water marked by dangerous bends was just five miles away, and only the most daring rivermen wanted to risk it after nightfall.

Lang Horn owed his life to long and lean old Pop and short and thin little Mom. Everybody knew that. It had been those two kindly souls who had nursed him back to life after a roaring gunfight one night three years ago in the Golden Wheel—a fight in which six men had died, two of them his friends, and four of them bullies and killers. One of them had shot him down from behind to start the fight, then the others had turned their blazing guns on his friends. Horn had killed three of them while lying there in his blood on the floor.

When it came to Pop and Mom, Lang Horn was a gentleman through and through. True, he was a professional gambler, but it was a calling to be found everywhere and followed by some of the best of men.

So it was from the little sitting room in the southwest corner of the house that he watched the big wagons take on the judge's boxes and bales.

He had seen the judge and the girl being steered into the Golden Wheel. They would probably go upstairs to a couple of rooms.

Now the big wagons were coming up the street in the twilight, each drawn by three yoke of oxen. He watched them crawl on past the house and slowly mount a knoll covered with a grove of pines a thousand yards above the head of the street. That meant they were going to a big log house up there that Wiley Harper had erected and furnished for himself and a redhaired girl who had lasted for six months with him before a tall, languid looking blonde had come along to take her place.

That house on the knoll meant other things, too. There all those rifles and ammunition could be stored until lighter wagons slipped loads away in the dead of night and hurried them off to some given place between suns to trade them to Indians.

Nice work, and very nice. With Judge

Dale having taken over the house on the knoll no one would suspect him, no one would openly dare to expose him; and yet Lang Horn smiled, making up his mind now as swiftly as calling a thousand-dollar bet, and depending on the turn of a card to win or lose.

CHAPTER FIVE

Burn-Out!

WITH POP and Mom uneasy, knowing that something was wrong but asking no questions, he slipped out the rear door of the house at ten o'clock and moved quietly away in the shadows. He had been watching the street and had not seen the girl and the judge leave the Golden Wheel, and now he kept to sheltering clumps of brush and low pines until he came to a deep ravine six hundred yards behind the house. At the edge of the ravine he squatted and whistled softly, then wheeled like lightning on his heel as a little flutter of low laughter sounded behind him. His quick turn brought him almost face to face with Pistol Sam McGee.

"Yuh might be a mighty fine card player, but yuh ain't no Indian," chuckled the hunter. "I been followin' yuh for nigh a hundred yards, an' coulda stuck a knife to the hilt in yore back a dozen times. Let's get on to where Bleek's waitin'."

"What have you learned?" Horn's breath was still sharp from his suddenly finding McGee so close behind him. "Anything?"

"Enough, I think, to know whichaway the wind's gonna blow." McGee seemed to float on past him, his moccasined feet making no more sound than moving shadows on the ground. "Bleek's back an' oughta be waitin' for us by this time."

It meant another three hundred yards to eastward, then they were mounting the sharp, rough slope of a tall, rimrocked rise covered with pines. It was here, sitting with his back to the bole of a tree, that they found Kidd.

"Now maybe we can talk." McGee stood straight for the first time to stretch his back. "What'd yuh find up there on the big hump, Bleek?"

"Guards all 'round," half-whispered back the old man. "Ain't Indian men, though. Just plain gun-lawyers who ain't never worked the plains an' hills. I had no trouble findin' 'em. Wyley Harper's movin' fast, like he generally does."

"An' that much we've already found out." McGee was stretching his back again. "Will Kelly, the Indian scout, told me some, 'cause we've been goin' since we come off the boat. Harper's playin' with ol' Thunder Horse, meanest chief among the Cheyennes, as yuh no doubt know." He sent a quick glance at Horn. "An' the biggest double-crosser, a redskin only a crazy man would try to trade with. The Army's huntin' 'im high an' low, but nobody's yet been able to lay a finger on 'im.

"Wess Hawley's wagons took them loads of guns up on the rise, an' Wess is about the dirtiest man on the frontier, the only one, too, what could act as a go-between for Harper an' Thunder Horse. Wess is married to about six Cheyenne squaws, an' they say one's ol' Thunder Horse's sister, which makes 'im kinfolks. They'll probably keep that stuff up there on the hill till some night in the dark of the moon, an' then they'll let it all go out to some place where the redskins can take it."

"Them reds are gonna take a heap tonight," put in Kidd, sourly, "or I ain't no scout an' never was 'fore I started in on buffer. That jump on the boat down the river, now. Hell, it ties in with this all hollow, but I reckon Wyley Harper's too greedy to see it. Thunder Hoss handlin' it, yuh can bet. He maybe figgers half the danged town would go splurgin' down the river tryin' to pick up the trail, an' that'd leave the Bend just about open for anything. Twenty-five or fifty Indians on that high rise where the fine house stands could do just about as they danged well pleased, an' I'm thinkin' Harper's in for a surprise. I've already counted fifteen goin' up that big ravine back there, an' some of the boys think they've counted more."

It was not until then that Horn saw there were others here on the rise. A shaggy buffalo hunter came crawling out from under a low-sweeping limb, followed by another and another. Later he was to know that there were others, men as silent as moles in the shadows, even the moonlight failing to reveal them.

"An' this is Poke Hunt." Kidd nodded to the first man. "Got his whole big outfit

in town. Other'n's Rube Tigle an' Frank Robert. Set in close, fellas, an' tell us what yuh know."

"Use yore own eyes an' see," Hunt answered him, sitting back on his moccasined heels and pointing under the limbs to a long, ragged line of brush in the distance. "That'll maybe be Thunder Hoss, 'imself, goin' up with his body guard, now that he's got enough redskins ahead of him to see that he ain't double-crossed. There'll be more in the distance, I think, to come bustin' in as fast as their ponies can fly the ground if things do start."

Horn looked at the line of brush, but it was seconds before he could see anything. The moonlight was bright enough, but he saw nothing until he realized that the line of brush was moving here and there. His gaze followed the movement until it came to a thin place in the brush; then he saw a head and the shoulders of a man bent low over his pony's mane. After the tenth head had passed the spot he heard the keen-eyed Hunt whisper.

"Yep, looks more an' more like Mr. Harper's in for real big doin's in his barn tonight. Maybe he's a-figgerin' that only a few Indians are comin' to take back a handful of rifles to ol' Thunder Hoss as samples of the rifles to show what he's gettin' this time. With the cartridges to show that they'll fit, of course. Harper's double-crossed a lot of redskins in the past, an' yuh can bet Thunder Hoss ain't one to forget."

"An' it's time, I think," nodded Kidd, "that we got a little stir on ourselves an' sorter started movin' up toward that rise. 'Twix yore bunch, Poke, an' the men Rube an' Frank rounded up, we've got quite a crowd to get in place."

"Yo're slow in the head, Bleek." Hunt chuckled softly in the darkness. "The most of the gang was kinda slidin' in place an' told just what to do long 'fore an Indian was in sight. Let's get goin'."

IT WAS only about seven hundred yards to the foot of the larger rise, but every step of it was like man-killing. Horn followed McGee, watching his every move and learning more and more all the time. One thought burned in his mind, and that was what the amount of damage such a comparitively few Indians could do to Pistol Bend from the rocks. Even if nothing happened tonight the rifles the Indians would carry away to show to others hiding in the hills could mean death to some settler.

A general uprising was already afoot and due to spring into a real war before another summer passed. Something had to happen tonight to keep those guns from falling into Indian hands.

"Yo'll fight like sixty, I know, Mr. Horn," McGee had growled before leaving the rise; "but yuh fellas who stick to steamboats can't be real Indian fighters when it comes to open territory work like this. Stick close to me an' follow my ever' move. If I drop an' hold my hand behind me, yuh stay where yuh are when I move on. I'll come back for yuh."

Horn knew what he had said was true. He was no Indian fighter unless it was from the deck of a steamboat. All men could not be Indian fighters. Only a man like McGee could have spotted the guards circling the rise, each hidden in the rocks or bushes—town gun-lawyers as Kidd had said. They were half-way up when McGee dropped flat on his stomach and held his hand behind him. Horn had not seen a thing.

This was a job for the knife, a job that needed no moon in the sky, and it was up there shining like a new gold coin. The sheltering brush and the few rocks were thin here, but Pistol Sam McGee was like a snake going into a hole. The minutes dragged, then came a slight kicking sound, then the old silence again; Sam McGee was back, wiping his bloody blade on the grass, his voice a faint whisper.

"Come on. He's finished."

The rest was probably easy for him, the devil for Horn. They passed a place where a pony stamped and snorted in the darkness at the head of a deep little draw to their right, a place shaded by dense trees. That meant Indian ponies down there with a guard watching them, but it seemed to bother McGee no more than the buzz of a fly.

Now Harper's house loomed ahead of them, no crack of light showing in it, but they soon discovered a tiny sliver of light in the big barn eighty yards behind it. Once more McGee held his hand behind him as he oozed flat on the ground. This time he was gone a devil of a time, and returned again wiping that long knife.

"Had to fix three this time." Each word like a breath. "Other of our men in place. Indians all 'round. We've got to work fast. The only way to stop them guns is to burn the barn down. There's a big haystack on the east side, an' the barn's nigh full of Indians already, Quartz an' Dooley's there, the judge an' Harper—biggest damn fools I ever saw. Come on."

Horn could never have made it without him. With only eighty yards to go they saw Indians hiding in the rocks and bushes to their right and left, redskins who had probably killed guards themselves in order to get in as close to the barn as possible. They had to work their way on to the back doors beyond the big haystack. Hidden by trees, these doors had never been used, and only stout planks spiked across them held them in place.

"Made to order," breathed McGee. "When yuh go up to that hay," he pointed to an opening above them, "an' hear a shot, then yuh light the hay. I'll take care of the big pile an' try to get back to help yuh down. If I don't yo'll have to jump for it."

But they had to peep through a crack first, and the sight was enough to make any frontiersman's blood boil. There were no horses inside, but the hallway seemed jammed with Indians. In the center of it were the bales and boxes. Behind the piano case stood Harper, handing up a new rifle and a bandoleer of cartridges. Beyond him, in the open, were Mortimer Quartz, Elmer Dooley and Dale, all looking nervous.

"Thunder Horse, 'imself, takin' that rifle an' shells." McGee was breathing words again. "Hold to them planks an' skin up to that hole. We ain't got time to lose."

Horn was going up a second later. Just as he crawled through the hole, having used the crook of McGee's arm and a shoulder as stepping stones, a terrific yell sounded a few rods east of the barn. McGee was already gone, but there was no single shot from either of his guns. It was a furious burst of them, sounding from all directions. With them came more yells and curses, Indians all around sending up a fierce screaming that was like the crying of fighting swarms of eagles.

Taking one look downward through a hole in the floor before he came to the great pile of hay, Horn was setting his fire. It was like a match to powder. The hay was old, the flames appearing went over it in one quick puff, and a great light spread east of the barn at the same instant.

Now it was get out and get out fast. Even as he wheeled for the hole, the light in the burning hay of the loft behind him, a bullet whistled past his head, smashing into a rafter above him. Then he was making his jump without waiting for McGee, a crashing figure coming down in the limbs of a little pine behind the doors. Then he was out in the light, the world appearing afire all around him.

"Front door's barred!" bawled a voice from the front of the barn. "They'll none come outa thar!"

"Left leg's gone, Mr. Horn!" That was McGee, dragging himself around the corner of the barn. "Make yore run while yuh can. That damn hay was filled with redskins who'd got through somehow."

"Get on my back!" Horn dragged him to his feet. "Hang on and we'll go through it."

Seconds later he was running for it, and it was like carrying a horse straight through hell. McGee hung on desperately, a six-shooter in each hand, his arms clinging too tightly to make much use of them. Bullets whistling around them, they made it to a little ravine. Four half-naked figures popped out of the bushes, but Lang Horn's six-shooters crashed, and the high-riding McGee got in two shots. Then they were across the ravine, somebody's heavy buffalo rifle crashing a bullet at them by mistake.

"Go on!" McGee was suddenly releasing all grip and letting himself drop. "Make it through if yuh can!"

But Horn had come this far and was not deserting him now. He swung back, blazing a bullet into another half-naked red figure just as old McGee opened up with both six-shooters from the ground as two more Indians popped into the picture.

"Come on!" Again Horn had him up, first dropping himself to the ground to reload. "What are you, a quitter?"

It was more hell after that, the light stronger and stronger behind them, making them easy targets. The towering billows of smoke went up to cast a great black cloud in the sky, and the flames were roaring. All Pistol Bend was aroused and racing for the fire—drunks and half-drunks opening up on

them, and yet they somehow came through to safe ground, old McGee half-laughing, half-cursing as Horn eased him down on it carefully.

"IN A FASHION, I hated to come to you, Holly." He had found her as quickly as he could, in a cheap and gaudy room upstairs in the Golden Wheel. It was a room with a sagging bed, a lopsided washstand and a couple of rickety chairs against the walls.

"Tonight I only intended to see the barn burned and those rifles destroyed. I set the fire in the loft. Just before I set it I looked down through a hole. The Indians inside had gone wild. Wyley Harper had tricked them so many times in the past, they thought this was another. He'd sold them Indian rum that poisoned them, and guns that wouldn't shoot. And now—a fire. One leaped for him and tore into him with a knife. That brought the blood, and not a man was left alive—"

"And—and," she cut in, "he's dead? Are you sure he's dead?"

"All of them, Holly." He nodded, looking at the floor. "Not a white, not an Indian or a rifle got out of that barn. Nothing, Nobody."

"Then—I guess," a quick little shudder swept over her, "I won't say I'm sorry. He was not my father, Lang. He was my uncle. Once he was a judge, but he was forced to resign. He saw this chance, tying himself in with Quartz and Dooley. They ran guns to Wyoming, and I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid. I've always been afraid of him. I've had no place to go since my father and mother died. No place at all to live, no one to help me."

"You have a place to go now, Holly." He slid his arm around her. "You helped a lot to clear this mess, and I know you would have told me everything at the first chance—"

"Yes!" she cut in. "I wanted to tell you on the boat, but—"

"It doesn't matter now." His arm tightened. "The water's high for a change at this time of year. We can ride the old boat on to Fort Benton and forget it all. There's a lot I want to forget, gambling tables most of all, now that there might be something else in life for me. We have a parson right here in town. Tonight we can go to him—"

"Lang," she leaned closer, "do you truly mean it?" He saw her dark black eyes watching him from under her slanting lashes, and there was a look of wonder and joy in them.

"We'll go to him now!" he cried. "Come, I'll help you pack if you will let me. He won't mind getting up to put Lang Horn on a straight and narrow road—not after he sees you!"

THE END

PESKY'S SHOTGUN REUNION

By WILL C. BROWN

WELL, friends, it was this way:

Them two short and tall saddlebags of human gunpowder from the Bar B cow and bull emporium—meaning, of course, Corporal Fegin and Colonel Hudd—dusted into the metropolis of Pesky one sundown with their spurs turned on and made a beeline for my store, as usual. I was on the verge of bedding down the Pesky Mercantile Company, "Where

"Notice to Bog Blaylock: Get out of town, or meet me on Main Street for showdown." That's what the fool notice in the *Pesky Weekly Pennant* said. It was signed by some suicidal-minded gent named Bud McDonald. Which, so help us, was—*me!*

Melissa flung herself at Bog Blaylock and threw her arms around his neck. "You!" Bog yelled in terror.

Western Oklahoma Trades At," and counting the day's profits, which is never much of a chore. The Bar B waddies quick-hitched at the rail and drug bootheels across the planks. From the expressions on what served as faces for those two beef engineers —like two run-down stone quarries with noses stuck in the middle—I could tell at twenty paces Oklahoma better be battened down with guy ropes for the night.

"Guess what, Uncle Bud!" Corporal Fegin started sputtering like a Cherokee squaw barefooted in grassburs, then stopped suddenly. "I beg yore pardon, sir," he turned to the tall, beanpole Colonel Hudd with a low bow that dern near bumped his head. "Let it be yore honor, my dear stretched-out friend. Spill yore esteemed craw to Uncle Bud."

"Naw, naw, Mister Fegin," Colonel croaked, solemn-eyed. "After you, little man with the checkerboard freckles, after you!"

"Now lissen here!" I squawked, picking up a handy stove poker. "Don't you two Alphonsers start none o' that politeness stuff in here and wind up in a wildcat tangle, wreckin' showcases like last month. Now you just back off one at a time and give it to me kinda slow—what the double epilepsy brings you frothin' into Pesky this time of the week for, and if so, I ain't gonna be no party to it, I can tell you here and now, for certain. At least," I tacked on cautiously, "I don't think so."

Them two cow waddies could put on the falutin'est manners, and then suddenly turn into the fur-rippin'est pair of turpentined panthers, you ever saw. And when they was the nicest was when I would get the worriedest. They had once fought with the cavalry out in the Indian wars—which is how come 'em with them military nicknames—and if they was as fire-poppin' out there as they was around Pesky, no wonder the geysers squirted hot water and Sitting Bull stood up.

"A great thing," Corporal beamed, hitching up his too-big chaps and gun holster which usually worried down to around his bowed knees, "is about to happen to our fair city of Pesky!"

"Oh," I said instantly. "Don't tell me you two blemishes on the native terrain are about to move to some unfortunate distant locale?"

"Huh?" Corporal looked dazed and coughed on his tobacco cud.

"Aw, naw, Uncle Bud," said Colonel. "Honest—something mighty big's gonna happen! Pesky is, in fact, gonna have a noosepaper!"

"Newspaper!" I echoed. "Who's gonna start a newspaper?"

"Gentleman from the East named Horace Greeley Jones," Corporal chimed in, excited. "He's at Bar B right now, freightin' in a wagon load of print shop stuff. Ain't that gonna make this here town citified, though!"

"We wanted you to be among the first to know," Colonel said. "Also, we thought you might rent a building to the editor. We oughtta celebrate! How 'bout comin' next door to the Tall Jigger Bar and we'll let you stand us a shot o' Pesky Special."

"We forgot our change," Corporal added.

Well, being a public-minded citizen, and anyhow tired of nothing to read all winter but the reward posters in the post office, I considered it was a right pert prospect, at that. Old Pesky was sure a-booming. The year before last we'd got a combination one-chair barber shop and dentist. The next year we got our thirteenth saloon. Now we was gonna get a paper. Old Pesky'd land on the map yet, I reckoned. I began to glow and feel right proud about it.

When we had breasted the suds platform next door and barbecued our tonsils on a round of the liquid prairie fire that passes for Pesky Special, the sawed-off Corporal hitched at his britches self-consciously and looked as smug as a billygoat under a Monday clothesline.

"Tell him the rest—the *big* news!" he said to Colonel.

"Aw, you spill it," Colonel said, kinda hacked. "Imbecile before beauty. You're the best orator anyhow, little man!"

"That's a damn lie!"

Uncle Billy Wilkins levelled a half-grown doublebarrel across the counter. "One more apology between you two," he announced, "and I'll blast you clean back to the Dakotas. I ain't a-gonna have my rye parlor wrecked."

"All right," Corporal squared off at me, his chest puffed out. "When this here *Pesky Weekly Pennant* starts publication, Uncle Bud, me and Colonel're gonna be ferrin correspondents!"

"Not ferrin enough, though, I'm afeared," I choked on the Special. "How'd you mean, correspondents?"

"We're gonna write the North Pesky County news," Colonel boomed out. "Horace Greeley Jones already said we could. And sell subscriptions."

"We're gonna gather news items around the Bar B country," Corporal beamed. "In our spare time. And send 'em ever week to be printed in the paper. "

"We get a free subscription," Colonel said.

"And our names in the blockhead," Corporal added.

"Masthead," I corrected.

"Same to you, too," Colonel said politely, hoisting his glass.

"And many of them," Corporal added, following suit.

"You're making me dizzy," Uncle Billy complained.

"It's the fumes off the Special," I allowed. "Don't nobody strike a match."

Uncle Billy Wilkins leaned on the counter and stared at us with sad eyes. "Newspaper comin' here, you say?"

"Yessir," Corporal spoke importantly. "The new editor's freightin' in tomorrow. He's campin' at Bar B tonight."

"Can't be done," Uncle Billy said firmly.

Uncle Billy's a man whose word is respected around Pesky.

The Bar B waddies frowned at him. I seemed to recollect something in the back of my mind, then, but couldn't quite run 'er down.

"Can't be no paper here," Uncle Billy proclaimed. "Bog Blaylock said he'd sic Greasy Kid and Washita Joe on any damn editor that ever showed his nose in this town. Remember what happened a long time ago?"

Suddenly I recollected. "Paper claimed Bog's pappy's spread down in the badlands was a rustler hangout," I nodded. "Bog and them two half-breed nephews of his, Greasy Kid Broketree and Washita Joe Broketree, came callin' on the editor. Plant burned down one night, editor's up in boothill now."

"Bog Blaylock growed up sayin'," Uncle Billy warned, "that any dern printin' man that ever showed up here again would lay down in boothill alongside the other 'un. If enough of him was left."

I put my glass down and backed off. "That's all, boys," I said sorrowfully. "It was a good idea while it lasted. Maybe yore editor friend can locate over at Hide City or sommers else."

Bog Blaylock was a combination volcano and mountain lion, ranching in the roughs to the south. He must have been born with a chip on his shoulder and nursing a .45 muzzle. Them two nephews, Greasy Kid and Washita Joe, didn't show up in Pesky much, which suited Pesky just fine. When they did, even the polecats tried to stay as far away as possible. The three of them batched down there at Bog's isolated spread and I reckon they never had the influence of a woman's taming hand. Bog had drifted around, some, but he always came back to the badlands.

"Bog Blaylock!" Colonel grumbled mildly. "You don't mean he'd actually try to harm this here noosepaper man?"

"That would not be neighborly nor civic," Corporal declared.

"I wouldn't want to be around," Wilkins shook his head emphatically. "Bog's bitter in the gall about papers. The editor we had here once nearly got his pappy lynched. Remember, Bud? That clan swore they'd blow the next paper that tried to start here about twice as high and into ten times as many pieces, as they did the first 'un. Nope, it ain't the healthy thing to do. Not a healthy thing at all!"

"That's right," I agreed. "Better get him to call the whole thing off, boys."

"We won't get to be no ferrin correspondents," Corporal moaned.

"And Miss Melissa will be right sorrowful," Colonel blushed.

"Who's Miss Melissa?" I asked, suspicious.

"This here Horace Greeley Jones has got a sister," Corporal blushed, too. "Mighty nice lady."

"Anxious to settle here," Colonel related. "Reckon she asked a thousand questions about this country."

"Oh-oh!" I reached for the Special again. "No wonder you two dogey-diaperin' Romeos er so all-fired interested."

"You're a leadin' citizen, Uncle Bud," Colonel argued. "Folks consider you stand for law and order around here and kinda look up to you—can't you do something about it?"

Well, put that way, I kinda let my chest puff an inch.

"You're the most important man in the community," Corporal nodded.

I cleared my throat modestly. "Aw, I wouldn't say that," I protested, but not too strong. "Lots of good people in Pesky."

I took another shot of Special and sleeved my mouth. "Well, what I can—I mean, what can I do for this editor gent?" I asked recklessly, avoiding the warning eye of Uncle Billy Wilkins.

"We was gonna ask you to rent him a building for his paper," Colonel admitted. "That shack over by the cattle pen. Would you rent it, Uncle Bud?"

"Reasonable, of course," Corporal added.

"If he's bound to have it, I would," I gave in. "But he'll have to take out fire, explosion, bullet, stampede and sudden disaster insurance."

"Sorry to hear that," Uncle Billy sighed. "Killin's depress me."

NEXT AFTERNOON, this Horace Greeley Jones rolled in, driving a rickety wagon and two broke-down mules. He was a gray little man with an earnest face and optimistic outlook. His sister, Melissa, was a tolerably sweet-looking old maid with a sharp eye and firm mouth, but nice construction. I could see they was way outa their element out there in Western Oklahoma, but there they was. They hired a boy to help unload their stuff at my old shack building and by nightfall they'd got bedded down.

They went to work next day erecting their equipment. "Mighty fine prospects," the editor told me. "Mighty fine town you got here."

"Did you," I asked cautiously, "ever heard of a man named Bog Blaylock?"

"Seems like," Editor Jones nodded evasively while 'Miss Melissa stood silent. "Must be quite a dude."

I went on back to the store, a little sad about what Jones and Miss Melissa were on the verge of finding out.

By Saturday, word had spread all over the country that a weekly was setting up in Pesky, and I knew it must have traveled as far as the badlands. Gamblers around the saloons started making bets on whether the newcomer would live to get out his first edition. The town marshal, Old Eddie, who's ancient and not so good of eyesight as he once was, fanned himself at the news and talked about going way off on a vacation.

Corporal and Colonel rode in Saturday afternoon. They didn't tarry but a minute at the store. Just long enough to say they couldn't be out at my house for the usual Saturday night pot of chili and game of pitch.

"We plan," Colonel fidgeted, avoiding my eye, "to take Miss Melissa for a buggy ride."

"In the moonlight," Corporal added, his face a shade pinker.

Then they headed for the *Pennant* office to visit the Joneses.

They no more than had rode off when I looked up at something that had clouded the front door and there was Bog Blaylock, moving in slow like a brush-covered mountain with legs. Bog was a big man, sudden as a riled badger, with a habit of grabbing his gun first and thinking afterwards.

Trailing right behind him like a pair of small-size shadows of Bog himself were

both the Greasy Kid and Washita Joe.

While Bog was giving me a grub list to fill, my other customers and a few loafers managed to ooze out of the place like they'd thought of urgent business somewhere else, and then Bog fixed me with a burning eye.

"Hear they's a newspaper a-gonna start up in Pesky," he spoke, and the end of my spine buzzed.

"Now don't be gettin' excited over old scores, Bog," I started out to say. But he cut in, snarling:

"Where might I find this here damn dude that's askin' for trouble?"

"Down in the shack by the cattle pen," I groaned. "But—"

"C'mon, boys." Bog gave a tug at his gun belt and stalked out, the Kid and Washita gliding after him.

I ran out the back door. If I could get there first, maybe I could help avoid bloodshed. I threw a saddle on my horse, which took a little time, and lit out across the mesquite pasture back of the store. Time I got to the clearing alongside the branch line railroad tracks, where I could see the newspaper office, I found out I was too late. Three horses were ahead of me, pushing their dust toward the paper place. I recognized those three white horses. Bog and the Kid and Washita were hell-bent for calling on Horace Greeley Jones.

There wasn't much I could do then. I circled off the road and came in from the rear of the shack. I sighted Corporal's and Colonel's mounts tied to a mesquite, and groaned again. Maybe if Bog and his boys had called on Jones alone, nothing much would have happened, but some hard-word palaver and an order for Jones to pull freight. But with them Bar B waddies on the scene, it was a natural setup for a lead explosion.

A gun boomed out and I jumped six inches off my saddle seat.

Then another Colt spoke up, somewhere there in front.

I got off my horse and tiptoed to the corner.

Another gun roared out then, and I pictured corpses all over the place.

I stuck my head around the corner and a gun blasted again and off to my right an old tin can hopped up in a spray of dirt.

Then I saw them. Corporal and Colonel were settin' lazy-like on the dilapidated front porch, sixguns in their hands. Facing them, a little ways out in the yard, their faces long and mean, and their hands well up in sight on their saddlehorns, were Bog and Kid and Washita.

"Now it's my time," Corporal was saying to Colonel. "Watch me hit it."

His gun roared out and the can jumped again. Then Colonel laid a bullet into it.

I ran my sleeve across my forehead.

"Hi, Uncle Bud," Colonel said absently. "We just happened to be havin' a little target practice. Just happen to have our guns out and Corporal bet me he could score the most hits."

"Where're the Joneses?" I asked, fearful.

"Off in town somewheres," Corporal said.

"Hey," Colonel spoke abruptly. "There's some visitors. Where's yore manners, Corporal? Howdy Bog, howdy boys. You-all want anything?"

He paused with his gun half-raised for a shot. Corporal grinned innocently at the trio on the horses. The visitors eyed those sixguns and looked sufferin' uncertain. I never saw such mad faces.

"I got word for the editor gent," Bog rumbled.

"Me'n Corporal're his ferrin corresponents in North Pesky County," Colonel said politely. "Any message we can deliver for you?"

He banged down carelessly at the tin can and it jumped again, and Corporal raised his gun for his turn.

Bog stared a long minute. Greasy Kid and Washita Joe squirmed.

"We'll call back some other time," Bog muttered savagely. "And you can be damn sure of that! You can tell that editor if he wants to keep breathin' he can drag tracks. If he prints one damn issue, he's askin' for it!"

He whirled his horse then and tore back towards town, the nephews following.

The Bar B waddies put their guns in leather and stood up, all looking solemn as a hanging.

"What a coincidence." Colonel looked at Corporal.

I groaned. **"Innocent target practice! Innocent as a rattler with his fangs just innocently in yore leg!"**

THE FIRST issue of the *Pennant* was due to come out the following Friday. Editor Jones bounced around all over the town, gathering up ads and news, all enthusiastic, with Melissa helping, asking questions, working in the shop some. The editor was a spunky little guy, a good hustler, and he said he foresaw great things for Pesky with a paper to help build up the country. But I groaned every time I saw him. Brother, I was thinking to myself, maybe you ain't worred. But I'm like Uncle Billy Wilkins—killin's depress me. The better element of the town worried, too, but generally liked the prospect of having a paper. And word kept drifting in from the south badlands that the Bog Blaylock clan was going to wipe out the editor, plant and all, if a single issue was printed. I was getting nervous as Friday approached.

On Thursday morning, Editor Jones found a note stuck under his door, saying if he didn't pull stakes pronto he'd never live to print a second issue. And right after that, Corporal and Colonel slipped into town from Bar B. They visited the *Pennant* office a long time, mostly to see Melissa Jones, I figured, then came by the store

Colonel shoved a piece of paper under my nose while I was busy weighing up spuds.

"Sign that, Uncle Bud," he said hurriedly. "It's a subscription order for the *Pennant*. Me'n Corporal're kinda on the staff, you know."

I was in a hurry and scrawled my name and handed over a dollar and a half.

"Much obliged, Uncle Bud," Corporal said. "You're now a full-fledged subscriber to the new paper." They rushed to the door, and Colonel skidded and turned his head back.

"You have made a great investment in Pesky," Colonel said solemnly.

"You're the No. 1 citizen," Corporal murmured.

"I'll bet I'll never see the second issue," I grumbled.

They looked at each other.

"You might be right, at that," Colonel nodded wisely.

The *Pennant* was due to go to press Thursday night. The whole country was on edge. Some claimed it was going to set off a new civil war. Others said it was bad enough for Mister Jones to risk his hide, but twice as bad considering his sister.

People were down bright and early Friday morning to see the first edition, also to see if the paper office was still there. I got my copy in the store and unfolded it and started reading. It was a newsy-looking sheet.

And then all of a sudden it hit me.

"Gee-holy blastergrast!" I yelled. "Great gods of a misspent life in hell! What—!"

I started choking. The whole store dipped and swayed like a coffin being lowered. I leaned against a counter, limp as quicksand, and fanned myself with a cabbage. I read it again, thinking maybe I was going batty. But no, there it was. Boxed off two columns wide right in the middle of the front page. Plain Oklahoma English, big black type. It said:

NOTICE TO BOG BLAYLOCK

I'm personally backing Editor Jones and the Pesky Pennant. I hereby warn Bog Blaylock and his two coyote nephews Greasy Kid and Washita Joe, to lay off the editor and not make trouble. If it's trouble you want, see me. If you're tired of living in this country, then either move out or meet me on main street in Pesky one hour before sundown Saturday. But come prepared to be good citizens or dead ones. Take your choice. I ain't fooling. Now put up or shut up.

Signed: BUD McDONALD

Saddling up was too slow. I hit the back road in one long dive and went past two jackrabbits and a low-flying hawk. I took off in a long gallop afoot to the *Pennant* office, cussing at ever jump. I was out of breath when I got there but I still had wind enough to let our a roar that shook the press.

"Where'n hell did that come from?" I bellered at Horace Greeley Jones, shaking the paper under his nose. "Who in double tarnation authorized you to run that stuff—you want me to get my head shot off and my golamighty hide hung on Bog Blaylock's saddlehorn? Why you sneakin', lyin', double-crossin' old—"

I started wheezing like a dry windmill and Editor Jones adjusted his specs and looked at what I was waving at him.

"Why that," he said, "why you authorized that yourself, Mister McDonald. Over your own signature. Here—this your own writing, ain't it?"

He showed me a piece of paper with my signature at the bottom. And then things

began to dawn like the sun coming up between Twin Peaks.

"Corporal and Colonel brought it over yesterday," Miss Melissa said. "They said you wanted it run on the front page."

"Corporal and Colonel!" I spewed. I collapsed to a chair. "Godamighty, what they want to do? Get graveyard dirt packed in my face? If I ever catch them double-crossin' scum of a wayward jackass I'll lay their skulls open with a scantlin'! I'll—"

"We were very grateful for the way you stood up for us like that," Melissa said.

"Since you're a leading citizen, it will command much respect," Jones declared.

"Corporal and Colonel let their interest in new calico addle their brains," I snapped. Melissa blushed.

"You mean you didn't actually send that notice to be printed?" Jones asked.

"I thought I was signin' a subscription order," I moaned. "Instead, I was signin' my death warrant. I've been framed, hoodwinked, hog-tied, dehorned and made a corpse of. Bog and his two nephews will wrap me up in lead. I'm as good as dead now. And I thought that Bar B pair was my friends!"

They looked sympathetic, but the harm was done. I dragged out of there and slunk back to the store.

All day long, folks came just to look at me, kinda odd, kinda respectful, too. They praised my bravery. There wasn't much I could say—if I told 'em it was a raw frame-up and that I never challenged Bog and Kid and Washita to a shoot out, they'd think I was crawfishing. And if I confirmed it, I was just making my fix worse. I was either gonna be a public coward or a corpse. I squirmed inside ever time somebody said "You're a fine, brave citizen, Uncle Bud. You'll teach them bad 'uns a lesson. We need more citizens in Pesky like you!"

I sweated and suffered. But it was kinda strange—you know, by Saturday, the more I heard that kind of talk, the more I got to sorta halfway believing it myself. Maybe it was the shot or two of Special that kinda help build the fire. Hell, maybe I *was* a dangerous man when prodded! I even quit thinking about trying to get word to Bog and his nephews that it was all a mistake.

Uncle Billy Wilkins came in and eyed me with something like new respect.

"You're kinda a fire-eatin' buzzsaw on two legs, ain't you, Bud? Never knowed you was such a double-mean gunslick. Rumor even has it now you cleaned up seven Californy gold mine tough towns in '50. Others swear in yore youth you fit off two Indian war parties single handed and eloped with the chief's prettiest daughter and the scalps of her other four husbands. You been right reserved about it all these years."

"I never either," I groaned. "It's all a mistake, Billy. I didn't write that dang notice. Corporal and Colonel did."

"Aw, you're just modest," Billy said. But he stopped at the door to give me a mournful eyeing. "But as I always said," he mumbled, "killin's depress me."

Old Eddie, the near-sighted town marshal, creaked in.

"Bud," he said, kinda embarrassed, "I'd side you in this thing tonight but it so happens I got pressing business over to Hide City today, all day."

I didn't want to hurt Old Eddie's feelings. So I didn't tell him that he'd be about as much help as dry kindling wood in hell. He quick ambled out and I was left with my misery.

IT SEEMED like the sun was jerked across the sky that day on greased skids by a ten-span fast mule rig. Before I could get my rattled brain untangled, it was nearing sundown, the store was deserted, the main street was deserted, and I knew all eyes in Pesky was stuck to window corners and cracks in the walls and from back in the alleys, a-waiting. I felt as lonesome as a two-headed cousin at a family reunion.

I took a shot of Special. I kept telling myself I was a brave man, a double-tough, bullet-slingin', outlaw-eatin' hell-cat, and Pesky's leading citizen, like everybody'd been saying. I moved around in a daze, like I was on a tight wire with a thousand people looking. I gathered up what armament as was in the store. I sidled out on the street, knees twitching, lugging my old .45 persuader around my middle, a double-barrel shotgun loaded with bird shot, and a short saddle rifle in the other arm.

Maybe—just maybe—if Bog and the Kid and Washita got close enough, I could get in a shot or two before eatin' the dirt of main street. I was wishing Corporal and

Colonel could see me now. They would be right proud of Uncle Bud making his last stand. Then I thought of the damn double-crossin' stunt they'd pulled and wished they was there so I could unload a pound of bird shot in them where it would be longest remembered.

I got out on the dusty street and looked south. The street was deserted. I leaned up against the hitch rack and waited. The sun was a hand up from the Washita hills in the west.

Then I saw it. There was a dust cloud coming on the road. Way to the south it floated, then got bigger. One speck turned into three. In a minute they were three white horses. I wished for a slug of Special, but Uncle Billy had already barred the door of the Tall Jigger, and anyhow there wasn't time. I kept trying to swallow my heart back down, and reminding myself what a leading citizen I was.

I could make out the mugs of Bog Blaylock and the Greasy Kid and Washita Joe. They slowed their horses to a walk. I moved a little farther out in the street, wondering which weapon I ought to use first. I wished I could shoot all three at once and throw a stick of dynamite for good measure. Something hit the dust at my feet and I jumped and looked down. I thought it'd been a bullet, but it was just the sweat dripping off my chin.

I saw Bog say something just before they got in range. They all three pulled up and got off their horses. They came on afoot, eyeing me, all advancing a little apart, the gunbutts on their legs looking as big as a hearse.

"Now wait a minute, Bog," I tried to call. My voice just croaked and petered out to a dry gargle. They kept coming.

Greasy Kid drew first, and Washita was right with him. I upped with the double-barrel.

"Stand yore distance!" I yelled then.

We was close enough to start doing damage. I might of shot in another split second, if it hadn't been that a woman came running out of the shadows at the alley entrance alongside the Pesky Eatery.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Git outta the way, you dumb—!"

Then I saw it was Melissa Jones. She was running straight toward Bog and his nephews, her skirt pulled up around her ankles and feet a flying through the dust.

They looked startled at her and half turned their guns.

"Git back, woman!" Bog roared.

"Just a minute!" Everybody heard Melissa screech it.

Ever eye in Pesky must have popped then. Because Melissa flung herself at Bog Blaylock and threw her arms around his neck, and stuck her face deep into his whiskers to kiss him with a smack you could hear to Hide City.

"*You!*" Bog yelled. He fell back a step.

"You're marrying me before you get killed, Bog!" Melissa yelled out, right in his face. "Pa's right behind me with a shotgun and Corporal and Colonel are backing him up with Colts, and the preacher's there in the alley with the marrying book!"

"Put your guns up, boys," I heard Bog moan out. "I been kotched."

More figures loomed out of the shadowy alley then. One shadow was tall, one was sawed-off, and they had sixguns in their hands. Corporal and Colonel! It hit me that they'd been hid out there all the time, and that the three bad 'uns would of never lived to throw lead at me, even if they'd tried. Right behind was a little guy with a shotgun bigger than he was. Horace Greeley Jones! And trailing him was Brother Fitzhugh G. Moseley, the parson.

"Remember that summer you visited in Little Oak, Ohio?" Horace Greeley Jones was saying to Bog.

Bog squirmed.

"You said we'd marry if I'd come out West," Melissa put in firmly. "We been trailing you ever since. And here I am, Bog."

"I never oughta made that trip," Bog stammered. But he looked at Melissa a long time, and a more peaceable expression came to Bog's mean face, and I knew this must be the climax of a little romance chapter in old Bog's life that nobody'd heard about around Pesky.

The preacher stepped up and Pesky began to ooze out of doorways.

"Belay everything one-half second," Colonel Hudd spoke, holstering his gun.

"Won't take a minnit," Corporal added, doing likewise.

(Continued on page 98)

THE SILENT GUN

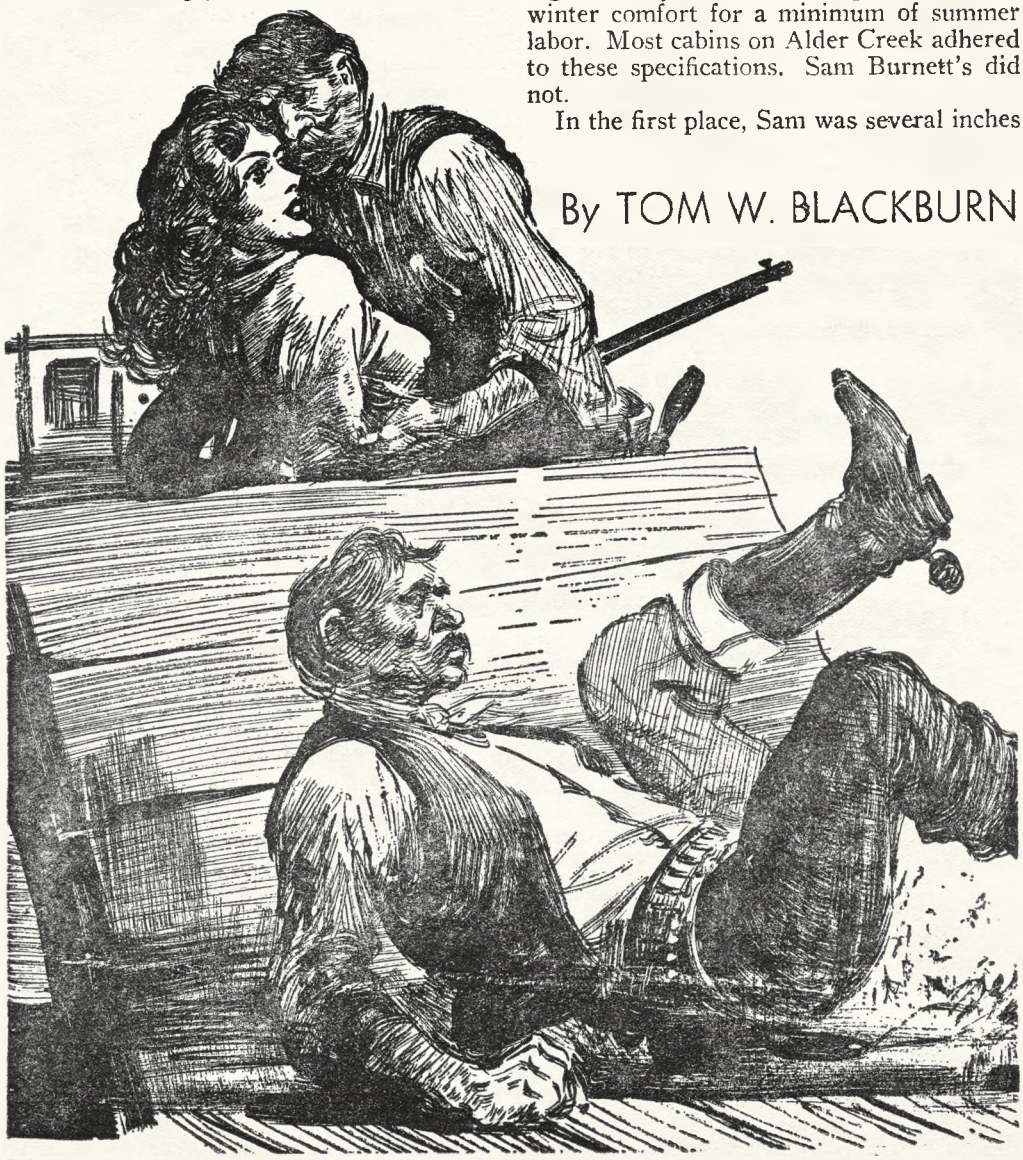
CHAPTER ONE

Most Deadly Blackmail

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

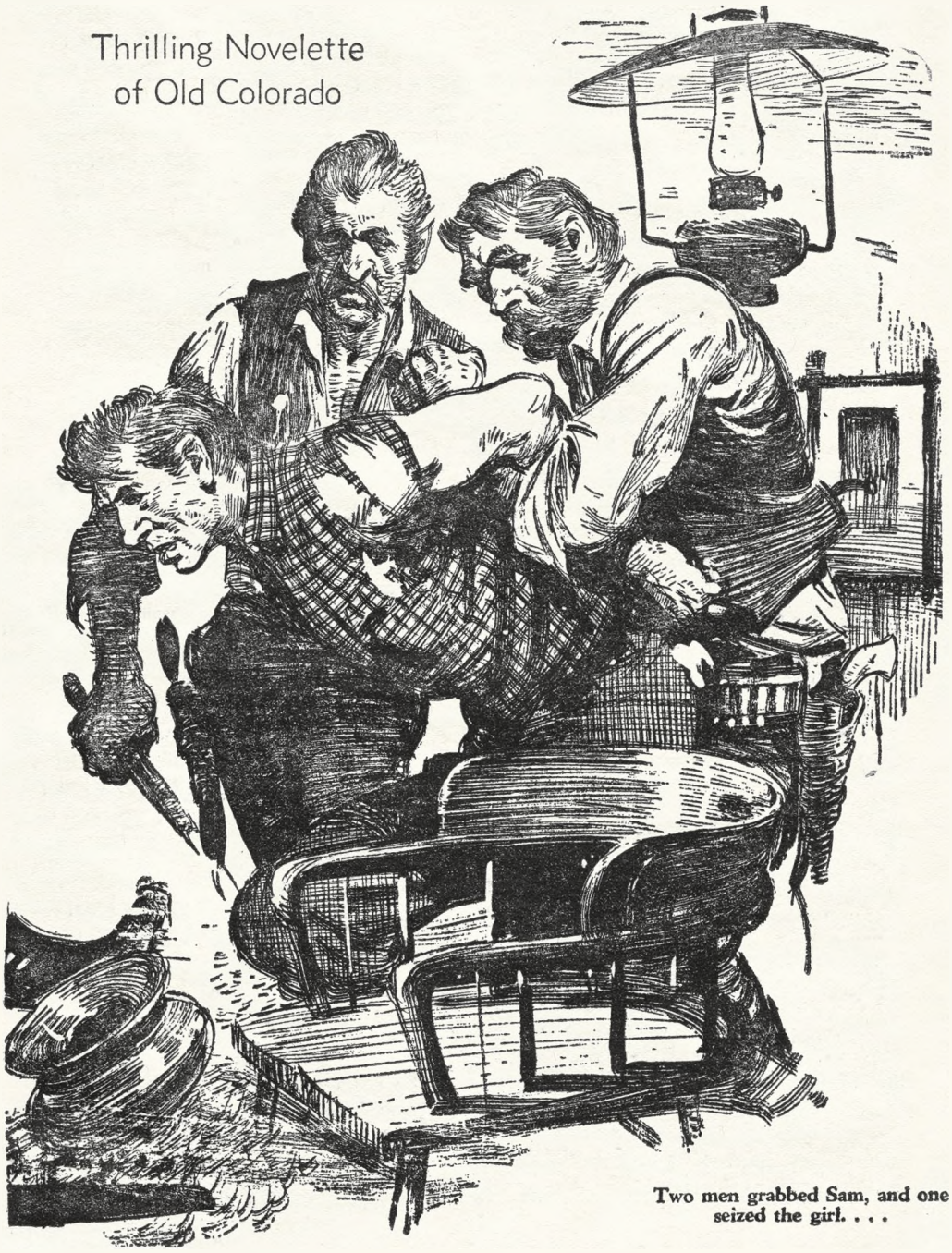
THERE was a sound rule for the construction of a cabin in the high country. First, build a fireplace that draws, then hang your rifle across the face of it, end-wise. Use the rifle to measure length and width. Double-chink the walls. Put a two-foot sod roof on top, an inch higher than your head. This gave maximum winter comfort for a minimum of summer labor. Most cabins on Alder Creek adhered to these specifications. Sam Burnett's did not.

In the first place, Sam was several inches



Sam Burnett had faith in that strangely silent gun—a weapon far more deadly than any snarling pistol. . . . For it alone could knot a hangrope around a killer's neck . . . and hog-tie Sam's cold corpse inside a forgotten coffin!

Thrilling Novelette
of Old Colorado



Two men grabbed Sam, and one seized the girl. . . .

longer than his seldom-used Army-surplus Springfield '78, and he had been forced to expand dimensions a little in order to have room to stretch out in sleep. In the second place, he had more than himself to house, so dimensions had to be expanded again. A corner for his huge 24x24 box camera, with an 8 x 10 on the shelf above it. A cabinet for light-sensitive, hard-to-come-by silver compounds, more precious than the raw gold Alder Creek's citizens were extracting from its gravel. Tins of chemicals, collodion, developers, and fixatives. A rack for plate glass. A tight cabinet for exposed plates. Baths and a washing tank. And print paper.

Sam's cabin was one of the larger ones in the camp, but it was not the most comfortable. He stood in the doorway with the cold mountain night beyond and Flora Carpenter standing in front of the night, an ostrich-plume under-collar poking bravely up out of her wrap-around greatcoat, and he was a little ashamed of his cabin.

"Well, do I get invited in or do I pass small talk tomorrow that the first man I ever went to on the diggings turned me away from his door?" Flora asked in her deep, husky voice. "You better let me in, Sam. My feet are cold. Besides, if the boys hear you didn't, they'll figure you're crazy for sure, and you're bad enough off now!"

Sam Burnett backed out of the doorway more embarrassed than ever and a little stung by the truth in this. He was sort of a fence in Alder Creek. He'd filed one of the first claims on the strike, then sold it off much too early because he had little taste for mining. He was owned by his cameras. The way he figured, the mountains were his country. But camps like Alder Creek were not a crack at the Big Chance, as far as he was concerned. They were excitement, something new. They were development, the fabric of history. And history had been a long time inventing photographers. There weren't three hundred good ones in the whole country, yet. And they had a lot of back work to do.

However, Alder Creek was a Colorado camp and the men of Colorado camps were devoted to three things, only: gold, whiskey, and women. A man who couldn't or wouldn't lay hands on his share of all three when he had the chance either wasn't a fit citizen or he was crazy. And this conviction among the miners had let Sam Burnett in for a bad time.

Flora was some different than the miners. There was something about her coming here to his door which made Sam Burnett feel a good deal more stupid than he really was. Flora was a tall girl with a full figure which made even the pines whisper when she walked through them. She sang at the log-and-sod Liberty Bell. Occasionally, she danced. And once Sam had seen her drink with some of the boys. She had a vocabulary which could startle the most somnolent mule and a hard and direct manner which had its own dignity. She was young; she had a strong, generous animal beauty. She tried to be always fair and she was a good friend to those who earned her friendship. But that friendship was limited and every man in camp knew it.

Flora Carpenter was an entertainer. She was comradely in line of duty, but that was all. To occasional men newly arrived in camp, Flora looked like something she was not and the process of their education was usually somewhat painful to them. But to Sam Burnett the limitations Flora Carpenter set upon her professional life were not surprising. Not at all. He approved of them. And by extension, he approved of Flora.

To him, she was the mountains, the high country. Superb and a little awesome. Symmetry and strength. A challenge and a delight and a mystery. Sam guessed he loved the mountains. He wasn't sure about Flora Carpenter, but watching her step into his crowded cabin out of the night made him sweat.

"It stinks in here," Flora said matter-of-factly as Sam closed the door.

"Fixative," Sam said. "Always smells. Pretty soon you get used to it. Kind of like it, myself."

Flora wrinkled her nose.

"Do I sit or do I got to stand up, Sam Burnett?" she asked.

Sam hastily spilled some cartons off of his single chair, dusted it with the palm of his hand, and pushed it toward her. Flora folded her long skirt expertly and sat down. She picked up an 8 x 10 print of a tumbled granite peak, taken above timberline.

"Holy Cross Mountain," Sam said. "First picture of it. Isn't one of mine.

Bill Jackson took it. First man to get pictures of Yellowstone and Mesa Verde, too. Worked for him in Omaha. Learned my trade in his shop. He gave it to me."

Flora put the picture down.

"Had my picture taken once, down in Leavenworth. Hope I catch that camera man some day!"

"Why?" Sam asked.

"I got up in my best dress," Flora said. "Parasol and everything. I was on my first job, just a kid. This camera man gets under his black sheet and his box snaps at me and I am very pleased with myself until the boss starts selling prints of that picture two days later. Lucky I bought one of the first and tore the rest up."

"It wasn't good—the picture?"

"Too good!" Flora said sharply. "No wonder the prints were going fast at five dollars a throw. That baboon with the snap-box had taken all my clothes off!"

"Retouching," Sam murmured. "I've seen it done."

Flora leaned suddenly forward.

"You can do that, too—take something that's on a picture off and put something that isn't there onto it?"

"It's fussy work and it doesn't always come out right, but—yes—I can do it . . ." Sam paused, heat in his throat. ". . . but, Flora, you're not thinking of—"

Flora laughed suddenly.

"Lord, no!" she said. "I wouldn't trust you with that job, Sam Burnett! I want you to take some pictures of Black Canyon and run a railroad grade up it so it looks like there's a trail already there. I can get you a surveyor's chart and his measurements and figures for it. Can you do it?"

Sam had leaned back against the mantel of his fireplace. He chafed an itching spot between his shoulder blades against the rough rock there.

"I think so," he said slowly. "But I'm not going to, Flora."

"The yellow must be inside, Sam. It doesn't show," the girl said.

"Mike Lenahan and Ed Durfee have got a tight contract for hauling ore and concentrate out of the gulch here over Empire Pass. Pictures like you want of Black Canyon, with a railroad grade in them, would make Mike and Durfee pretty mad. They might do something."

"That's what I'm hoping!" Flora Carpenter said. "I like to stand up on my feet and I like to have my friends stand up on their feet when they're talking to me. Lenahan and Durfee have got this camp whipped clean down to its belly. What it needs is to get out from under their freight line. What it needs is to have a railroad and cheap freight over the hump to Leadville. I aim to see some money in Denver gets interested enough to build that road. You make the pictures, Sam, and I'll keep quiet who did the job."

Sam Burnett shook his head.

"I'll make the pictures, Flora, but I'm going to keep it quiet who hired me."

"You're not going to get paid much, Sam," Flora Carpenter said. She rose from her chair. "I'm short of cash and this is going to take money. Quite a bit of it. But I can start you off with this—"

She pressed against Sam and caught the back of his head with both her hands. Sam didn't know for sure if he even felt her lips, but the cabin took a sharp spin and he thought maybe the roof had fallen in on him. He leaned back against the mantel

when Flora stepped away, watching her.

"When that wears off," Flora said softly, "come around for another collection. And Sam—I'm sorry for what I said about the yellow—"

Sam grinned.

"You'd sure be surprised what pictures can cost," he said. "But you'd better be careful. Don't cross tracks with Lenahan or Durfee. They don't holler before they hit."

Flora pulled open the cabin door. She looked back over her shoulder.

"I've been purring," she said. "Don't let it fool you. I've got claws."

Sam Burnett twisted a little against the fireplace and looked at his cameras. They were, he thought, very fragile equipment with which to destroy the monopoly of a pair of very hard-handed men. Very fragile equipment with which to run a railroad up through the granite gorge of Black Canyon. And a woman's kiss was fragile pay for the risk involved. Whistling a little, he moved to his plate rack and began to sort out the thin, two-foot squares of glass which fitted the plate-holder of the bigger camera.

CHAPTER TWO

Duel in the Darkroom

SAM BURNETT didn't care a hell of a lot whether the mine owners who were beginning to work the under-surface stuff in Alder Gulch had to pay the better part of their profits over to Mike Lenahan and Ed Durfee or not. He didn't care whether the two freighters made a fortune by standing on their neighbor's toes. He didn't even care very much whether a railroad was run up Black Canyon to the mills at Leadville. What he did care about was taking pictures of the mountains.

Part of it was art, he supposed. Privately, he let himself admit there was artist in him. There had to be. It was the only way to account for the desire which flagged him constantly to preserve the beauty of silhouette and shadow and bulk he found among the high peaks. But the rest of it was just plain good feeling—the same kind of feeling he figured made a doctor put up with a hell of a lot for medicine or an engineer risk every nickle he had ever made to get a big project built. A desire to pass on something he had found to the rest of the world.

He could have stayed in Omaha, running Mr. William Jackson's studio while Jackson was out with the Hayden Surveys, photographing mountains and valleys. He could have made good money in Omaha and found himself a woman and made a fair thing of life there. But he'd been in the mountains once when he was a kid and he wanted to come back—with his cameras. He wanted to print pictures, a lot of them. He wanted to see them scatter across the whole country.

There were a lot of people with slow blood in their veins who'd be content with the pictures, but there'd be a lot more who would want to see the mountains themselves, after they'd looked at his prints. And that was his real desire—to get more people onto the slopes of the divide. There was too much here for the Utes and a few trappers and a few scattered, gold-blinded mining camps, to have to themselves. So he had already taken a lot of pictures. Not as many as he wanted, because taking pictures with a wet-plate camera was not only very hard work above the timber-line, but it cost a lot of money and money was hard come by for Sam Burnett.

Sam wasn't sure just what Flora Carpenter wanted. Leastways, he told himself he wasn't. So he pulled two or three plates he'd already taken in Black Canyon from his rack and he rummaged until he found and old 8 x 10 print of a Union Pacific work train on a siding. Screening off the fire with a blanket, he went to work.

In the morning, the result didn't look too bad. In superimposing the plate exposure on the carefully trimmed print, he'd fuzzed out a little detail, and there were two thicknesses of paper, which gave the whole thing away. But the effect was good enough for a trial—a work-train pulling up a road-bed apparently carved out of the vertical granite of the canyon walls.

He went uptown and paid a swamper in the Liberty Bell half a dollar to point out the Window of Flora Carpenter's room in the hotel across the street. Then, because the hour was early, he avoided the hotel lobby and the inevitable surprise and ribald comment, and climbed the outside stairs on the back of the building which also gave access to the second floor of the hotel.

Flora was not dressed when she answered his knock, and when she saw who it was, she practically snatched him into the room and pressed her back against the door when she got it closed.

"Sam Burnett!" she gasped. "What are you doing here this time of day? You crazy?"

Sam shook his head. He thought he was quite the opposite of crazy. He thought he was pretty smart for a man who had gotten rusty at figuring women and such. This was a very good way to start out the day. Nice and pleasant. It made Sam feel right good. He had found out something very interesting. It was a pretty general miner's conclusion—Sam had often heard it voiced—that it took a man with a strong stomach to look at a dance-hall girl or a saloon singer before breakfast.

In Flora Carpenter's case, this was not true. Her hair was not caught in tight and curled up in a bun on top of her head, as it had been when she was in the Liberty Bell. And she was three shades darker in color than when she was up in powder. But the darkness was a good, healthy, sun color and Sam liked her hair shaken out like this better than rolled tight. Flora looked fresher than when she was dressed for the street, and although she had obviously just awakened, her eyes were bright. Sam handed her the superimposed photograph.

"This something like you want?"

Flora looked a long time at the picture, then back at Sam.

"Without the train, yes," she said. "And a smoother job, of course. Just the roadbed, for now. Just showing how the survey would take it through the canyon. Maybe later we can put the train in—or you can take an honest picture of a real train rolling through there—hauling ore—"

Flora paused.

"I figured I'd go up into the canyon today," Sam said. "Stay maybe a week. Get some shots specially for touching up when I get back. They'd work better, and I'll do the tricks on the plate with them. Get a single print that way that'll fool anybody."

"I'm not trying to fool anybody, Sam," Flora said. "Just show how easy a line could be run up that canyon. Look, Sam—that's all you came up here for this morning—to show me that picture?"

"Well," Sam said slowly, prodded further than he intended by honesty, "well, I—"

Flora pushed a finger against his chest.

"Don't try a shakedown on me, Sam Burnett!" he said. "That picture isn't worth more pay. And I doubt like the devil that the installment I gave you last night has anywhere near worn off. Now, get out of here—"

Sam continued to grin, and he pulled the door open. Flora's hand dropped to his arm and her eyes softened.

"Sam, you've got to be careful. I'm afraid somebody followed me down to your cabin last night—"

"It was you they was following. It's you that had better be careful."

Flora's fine, white teeth showed beneath her lips.

"I'll get along all right, Sam," she said softly. "The claws—remember?"

MIDMORNING of the third day Sam camped in Black Canyon, he was standing beside the little tepee-like tent which served as a portable darkroom in which to treat his wet plates, before and after exposure. Balancing a glass plate flat on the tips of his fingers, he was pouring a little collodion into one corner. The trick was then to tilt the plate carefully so that the film-forming liquid ran evenly, spreading itself in a uniform coat over the glass. And he had to use the collodion sparingly. It was expensive and hard to get.

Ordinarily it took him thirty seconds to coat a plate, after which he'd thrust his hands and head into the dark-tent. Within this he'd pour the light-sensitive silver compounds which formed his photographic emulsion onto the coat of collodion already on the plate. This also must go on smoothly, although the process was done in the dark of the tent interior. The plate, still wet, was then slipped into a plate-holder and taken immediately to the camera. The light shield in the holder was slid out of the way, and he was ready to make his exposure. As quickly as possible, the still-wet plate had to go back into the tent for a developer wash, a fixative bath, and rinsing. The process required deft hands and the swift skill of long practice.

Sam was having trouble. His hands seemed steady enough, but his mind kept

drifting and the collodion wouldn't run smoothly onto the plate. He had made more bad tries on this trip than he had in six months. It bothered him. Particularly when he knew the source of the bother. Not the railroad and the implication of a fight with Lenahan and Ed Durfee which it certainly promised.

Flora was his trouble. He kept thinking of her. And although he also kept telling himself that Flora was interested in the railroad—or maybe in just beating Lenahan and Durfee—and that he was incidental, a useful guy to whom she was obligated to be nice—he still kept thinking of her.

Sam watched the collodion on the plate in his hand sharply. This time it had to run smooth. It was his last piece of untreated glass and he wanted a shot of the Big Bend of the canyon. The toughest hurdle for railroad men. If he got the right angle here, he could work a fine, sweeping curve across the plate to represent the proposed railroad grade. A very convincing picture.

Just as the viscous liquid reached the opposite edge, a voice hailed. Sam jumped a little. The plate tilted crazily. He saved it from falling to the ground by acrobatics, but the coating was ruined. He began to swear. He was still holding the ruined plate in his hand, when Mike Lenahan rode up.

The freighter had a saddle roll on and was obviously on an overnight ride, at least. Leadville, undoubtedly. And it was a commentary on the justness of Flora's contention there should be rails up Black Canyon that Lenahan should take the horse trail up the canyon to the smelter town, rather than follow the long and indirect toll-road he owned and over which his freight wagons rolled.

Lenahan rode up to where Sam was standing and dismounted. He was a long man, swarthy of skin, with a powerful body, strikingly handsome predatory features, and a mass of jet hair which lay close to his well-shaped head in ringlets. He was vain of his appearance. He swung across the grass and looked idly at the hooded camera on its tripod beside the dark-tent. He glanced sharply at Sam.

"What you doing up here in the canyon?" he asked.

"Taking pictures," Sam told him.

"I didn't figure you were fishing!" Lenahan growled, and his black eyes snapped.

"No," Sam agreed. "But you are."

Lenahan swung on him.

"All right, Picture-Maker," he said softly. "So we pin our target right up where both of us can see it. That Carpenter kid from the Liberty Bell was down to your place two-three nights ago. I been watching for you in town, since. What was she there for?"

Sam's irritation at the spoiled plate in his hand turned toward Lenahan.

"Look," he said softly. "You got most of the miners in camp heads-down in a barrel account of your freight wagons. You got most of the dealers and bartenders in camp hopping every other step because they're about convinced you're the big boss of Alder Creek. But not me, Lenahan. There's some things that are my business and they're going to stay my business!"

Lenahan smiled deceptively.

"All right, Picture-Maker," he said. "Let's talk about business, then. You could do plenty—for me. You could make a living good enough to suit you out of the camp if you'd pick your friends on the right side of the street. But you're being stubborn. You're apt to find yourself with so damned little business you'll have to move on—in a hurry. What was that girl doing at your cabin?"

"Never thought of business with you." Sam said thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right. There is one shot I'd like to get, but I reckon I'll have to wait a spell before I can get it posed—" He paused a moment. "You and your partner—on the ends of a couple of stiff lengths of rope!"

Lenahan's face tightened.

"There was a surveyor up this canyon last month. Horse fell on him and broke him up pretty bad. Had to ship him out on one of my wagons. He had a notion somebody might build a railroad up this cut to Leadville. I think the idea scared his horse. Had something to do with his accident, anyway. Know what I mean?"

"You're going to have to show me," Sam said unconcernedly.

Lenahan's lips lifted from his teeth.

"Picture-Maker, you asked for it—" he snapped. Swinging sharply, Lenahan kicked at the dark-tent. It went over. With his other foot he raked the tripod out from under the hooded camera. Completing his

pivot, Lenahan landed with both booted feet on the tumbled dark-tent and the sound of plate-glass shattering came from under the canvas. Lenahan had just time for these three swift movements before Sam Burnett plowed into him.

CHAPTER THREE

Bust That Toll-Gate Down!

MIKE LENAHAN was a big man. He had brawled his way upward from a freighter's jerk-line to something pretty profitable. He had, as Flora Carpenter had charged, practically hand-whipped the entire camp on Alder Creek. But he had not been hauling a heavy box camera, a tripod, a collapsed tent, jugs of solutions and water, and dip-pans on his back up and down the shoulders of the biggest mountains between the Missouri and the Californias. And he wasn't near half as mad as Sam Burnett was.

Sam's charge bowled Lenahan over. They rolled into the overturned camera tripod. Sam got Lenahan's head between a couple of the tripod's legs and brought the two ends together like a pair of scissors. Lenahan bellowed. Sam stepped on his face and put a knee in his belly. He bounced a little. And when he had got some of the freighter's starch ironed out of him, he tossed the tripod aside and hauled Lenahan to his feet.

This was the kind of work he really liked. Hand work. He did it carefully and with wicked joy. He closed one eye and then the other. He loosened up three or four of the beautiful white teeth. He bent the strong, aquiline nose fifteen degrees out of plumb. And when Lenahan refused to get up any more, Sam sat astride him and whacked off a generous tuft of the curly black hair with a knife that was not too sharp.

He continued to sit astride Lenahan until he was sure the man could hear him, and he spoke distinctly, so that he could be understood.

"It don't pay to get me mad," Sam said. "Don't do it again. If you do, one of us is going to have to get out of these mountains, Mike. Now, hoist yourself up and start walking. It's quite a piece back to camp and you've busted my stuff up so bad I'm going to have to use your horse to haul in the pieces."

Sam got up and Lenahan got up. The freigher reeled off across the meadow below the mouth of the canyon. Sam sat down on a deadfall and looked at his skinned knuckles. His mouth tasted dry. He wished he could remember to bring some whiskey along when he started off like this into the high country. There were times when whiskey tasted very good, indeed, and this was one of them.

Sam did not make the time he thought he ought to on the trip down to Alder Creek. It had taken him time to salvage his equipment. And Lenahan's horse was not a patient packer. The folded dark-tent and the long legs of the tripod seemed to fill the animal with dark suspicion, so that Sam had his troubles. And Mike Lenahan had apparently gotten in a few good licks while they were rolling on the meadow grass. Sam had three ribs which seemed to have shifted position a little and protested with every breath he took. And he had a sore shin. One of Lenahan's heels had skinned off a fair patch of hide over the thick leg bone.

It was well after dark when he came into the thick belt of pines which headed the gulch in which the camp lay. And it was in this timber that Flora Carpenter met him. He heard her coming in the dark but he held on stubbornly up the middle of the trail until she had recognized him and spilled from her saddle, anger masking her relief.

"You idiot!" she cried. "You stupid, bone-headed idiot, get off of the trail!"

She was pushing Sam, jostling him, but he was clinging to his arm and he didn't mind, even when she hurt his sore ribs. He led both horses into the darker shadows of the timber and stopped when a gap through the ridges let him look down into the gulch. A ruddy glow was lighting the whole lower half of the camp. Flora turned him until faint light was on his face. Her lips compressed and she pulled a filmy square kerchief from the wrist-band of her dress. She touched this to Sam's face. Sam was surprised to see it come away stained with blood.

"Cut myself—shaving," he muttered.

"What were you using, an axe?" Flora asked bluntly. "Sam, this wasn't good. Not good at all. Lenahan—"

"Felt good while I was doing it," Sam

said. "He busted my plates. Made me kind of mad."

"Half of Lenahan's freighters are in camp, Sam," Flora said quietly. "And they've had their orders. They're to get you, Sam. You understand? They're to get you!"

Sam understood. He supposed he had known this was inevitable. This was the thing he had scrupulously avoided since he had come into the mountains—this taking of sides, this making of enemies. A man couldn't carry a camera and do much fighting. A dead man couldn't carry a camera at all. He wished he hadn't eased up on the tripod legs when he had Mike Lenahan's head caught between them. He said so. Flora Carpenter pointed out over the gulch.

"See that fire?" she asked. "Know what it is? That's your cabin, Sam. The first thing they did was burn it."

Sam sat down on a deadfall. He rubbed one hand over his marked, stubbled face.

"That finishes it," he said. "That finishes the pictures. All of them."

"I was afraid they were going to do that first," Flora said. "I got the swamper from the Liberty Bell to help me. We moved most of your stuff, Sam, before they got to the cabin. A buckboard full of it. Sneaked it down the old trail in the creek bed and hid it in a prospect hole. It's all right, Sam, almost all of it."

Sam stood up again.

"If what I need is there, I'll be getting up to Black Canyon again in the morning," he said.

"No," Flora answered flatly. "There's no use you getting farther into this. With that camera and all the stuff you have to use, you'd be a sitting duck for the first of Lenahan's men that saw you. I won't let you do it. We can get by without the pictures, Sam."

"Then we got to get rid of Lenahan's men," Sam said thoughtfully. "I aim to take pictures. If not yours, then my own. For instance, what goes on along the freighters' toll-road. They won't let anything but their own wagons onto it. Why? I think I'll find out."

"Sam, forget about the freighters and the railroad," Flora said. "While you've been gone, Amos Clayton, from the big Summit Mill in Leadville has come into camp. He's expanded his plant and can handle a lot more ore. He wants some from Alder Creek and he doesn't like Lenahan and Durfee's freight rates, either. He's got money, and he's a more important man than either Mike or Ed Durfee. He wants the rails and him wanting them will get them faster than your pictures. So you forget about it, Sam."

Sam grinned at her.

"You gave me a job and I liked the pay, what I've seen of it," he said. "I don't quit that easy, Flora. Where'd you hide my stuff?"

She smiled back at him.

Flora and the swamper from the Liberty Bell had found a good hiding place. A shallow prospector's tunnel with good headroom and a brush-screened entrance, a good two miles from the mineralized district in the tangled floor of the lower gulch—not likely to be discovered. Sam hung blankets from the first timbering within the old tunnel, making an effective screen, and lit a lantern. A quick survey told him that Flora's judgment of what to rescue from his cabin had been good. He had everything he needed. All he had to do was sit down to wait.

Flora had ridden a livery horse up the Black Canyon trail. She was afraid that her protracted absence with the animal might raise suspicion in camp and a Lenahan and Durfee party might start out to find just where she had gone. She had pointed out the brush thicket screening the mouth of this tunnel and then had turned off toward camp, promising to return as soon as she had taken her horse back to the livery.

She also promised that if she could locate the Leadville mill-owner, she would bring Amos Clayton back with her. Among the things from his cabin Sam had an envelope containing several more earlier shots taken in Black Canyon. Pictures which covered a lot of ground easily and which would save Mr. Clayton a couple of days of strenuous brush work if he was really interested in studying the terrain over which the ore-rails might be run.

Sam wasn't particularly interested in Amos Clayton, but he was in Flora Carpenter. He waited impatiently.

Plenty could happen to Flora, and he hoped she would take care of herself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Deadlier Than Lead

FLORA was a long time returning. Sam heard her coming, finally, running blindly through the brush. Stumbling, running recklessly. He stepped past the blanket and caught her as she staggered into the mouth of the tunnel. Her dress was badly torn. Her face was scratched. She was trembling, out of breath. She was frightened. This shocked Sam more than anything else. Not her condition, but her fright. He hadn't thought Flora Carpenter was capable of fear. But she was. It was almost a terror, almost hysteria. The brassy sureness which had been her chief defense was completely gone.

"Sam!" she choked. "Oh, Sam, it was terrible!"

Leading her back past the hanging blanket into the lamplight flooding the interior of the tunnel, Sam opened a cannister marked *Fixative* and lifted out a small bottle of whiskey. He sloshed some of this wordlessly into a tin cup and made the girl drink a little of the liquid. It steadied her.

"Now," Sam said steadily, "what was terrible?"

Flora drew a long breath with effort.

"I found Mr. Clayton in camp all right," she said. "We were standing on the walk in front of an empty lot next to the Liberty Bell, talking. Ed Durfee came along the walk. He stopped. 'I thought you were leaving camp, Clayton,' Durfee said. Mr. Clayton looked at me and grinned. 'Leaving?' he asked. 'Just when I've found a reason to like it here? Move on, Durfee. I'm busy—' "

Flora paused, her lips tightening.

"Durfee said something I didn't catch. A threat. Mr. Clayton laughed at him. Durfee passed us. A few minutes later, there was excitement up the street. We stepped out into the ruts to see what it was, but we saw too late. An ore-wagon was coming down the street with its team at a wild full run and apparently out of the driver's control—"

Flora paused again, still trembling.

"We thought it would pass us, but at the last minute it swerved right into us. Mr. Clayton shoved me hard. I rolled clear of the wheels. But he—oh, Sam, it was such a heavy wagon and it was rolling so fast!"

The girl shivered.

"A runaway," Sam said. Flora lifted her head.

"When I got up I couldn't look at what the wagon had done to Mr. Clayton. The driver got it stopped, down the street, and he came running back. It looked like an accident. Then I saw Mike Lenahan and Durfee standing in their office doorway across the street. The driver of the wagon saw them, too. Mike Lenahan raised his hand to the driver, Sam, in a signal of some kind—a signal of approval. It wasn't a runaway or an accident. It was murder—only they meant to get me, too!"

Sam nodded.

"Sounds like it," he agreed. "That's enough for me. And I think this about does it. I think those boys have had their last chance. Flora, you willing to learn some new tricks in a hurry?"

"Tricks?" Flora repeated uneasily. "New ones?"

"Photographic tricks," Sam said. "Like washing plates and timing them and the like. You can't go back to the Liberty Bell and I've always had a hankering for an assistant—somebody to help me and—uh—well, just help me—" Sam finished a little lamely. Flora looked relieved.

"Oh, that kind!" she said. "It's the only thing we can do, Sam. We'll get out of the gulch tonight. It's best. Old Ben, from the Liberty Bell, lives on the edge of town and he'll keep his mouth shut. He can get us a buckboard when he gets off work. We'll load and get before dawn. And Sam—I can learn new tricks. I've got to. I got you into this. I'll be a help and I'll stick with you when we're outside. We'll get pictures—the kind you want—"

Sam shook his head.

"How we going to get this buckboard and its load out of the gulch?" he asked quietly. "Over Lenahan and Durfee's toll-road? Or do we take it right through the timber and over the rocks of the divide? No. It won't work right that way. And when we got outside, you wouldn't stick. You couldn't. It isn't in you. You'd get to thinking you were stuck with a picture-maker who wouldn't fight. We'd be quitting if we pulled out here, now—both of us. You couldn't forget it and neither

could I. I don't give a damn for pictures of Black Canyon or for the railroad. But I can't quit. We're staying!"

Flora's face drained of color.

"Sam, this isn't any time for big talk." she said sharply. "This is a game where the chips are really down—all of them. Driscoll, the engineer who was in here from Denver two or three months ago, was thinking of a railroad. He was shipped home in one of Mike Lenahan's wagons with his back broken. I got to thinking about it and got you and Amos Clayton to thinking about it. Now Mr. Clayton's dead and you and I are hiding out under a rock because if we didn't, our toes will turn up in a hurry. Lenahan and Durfee have got Alder Creek right where they want it—inside their private noose—and tonight we've got our only chance to get out of it!"

"Sure," Sam said. "The freighters will be particular who travels their toll road, now. Gives them control of who comes in and out of camp. And they'll likely string a guard across the lower end of Black Canyon to keep anyone from using that trail. The camp can't kick too hard. It doesn't dare. Particularly when it hasn't got much more than hunches to go on, the way it is now. If the camp bowed up, Lenahan and Durfee could just stop their wagons. No ore would go out. No money would come in. The camp couldn't last long. It's a tight tin box, all right. No way out. But just the same, we're staying!"

"Sam, listen to me," Flora begged. "Mike and Ed Durfee have stuck with their accidents, so far. But they're bad men. The whole payroll they've got on the wagons are bad men. Men with guns, Sam, men with guns!"

Sam picked up the battered camera which Lenahan had overturned in the meadow below Black Canyon. He grinned.

"There's other things than guns can be shot, Flora," he said quietly, "and we've got them!" He put the camera down on the head of an upturned box.

"Sam, you're crazy!" Flora said wearily, and Sam wasn't sure whether she meant it or not.

FLORA'S dress gave out in the first two hours in the brush and Sam had to rig her out in a pair of overalls with the cuffs hacked off and one of his shirts. She thinned down. Her hair tangled and caught in overheads until she rolled it tight and left it permanently wadded under an old hat of Sam's. The scratches she had inflicted on herself the night she had run from Alder Creek were nothing compared to those she got following Sam across the slopes. And her hands showed the work she had put them to. Black silver stains rimmed her nails. The strong chemicals in the plate baths with which she worked reddened and roughened the skin.

But she did her share. Not always approving, oftentimes asleep on her feet with sheer wearinesss. But she did her share well. Sam had never worked with an assistant, and once Flora had grasped the cranky idiosyncrasies of wet plates, he was delighted to discover the time involved in making an exposure was cut to a fraction of what it used to take him. This was important, working as they now did, without freedom, with considerable risk, and always under the pressure of haste and discovery.

They moved only at night, making their set-ups in darkness. And when the set-up was made, they had to sweat through endless periods of waiting for the subject they wanted and proper light. Even taking more risk than was wise and with Flora's help, it took Sam six days to secure the exposures he wanted, and this was too long. They were on short rations before they were finished because Flora had saved photographic suppies from his cabin at the sacrifice of food, and what little they had hidden in the old prospect tunnel could not be added to.

Once, when they were working their way up a slope above a watering-place on the Lenahan and Durfee toll-road, Sam paused. He had his camera and tripod over his shoulder. A cumbersome, exasperating burden to attempt to pilot soundlessly through timber and heavy brush. Flora was close behind him, perspiring under a makeshift pack containing a portion of the developing equipment. Sam waved the tripod legs with a twist of his body.

"Feel like a damned elk," he said. "How those critters can navigate these blasted mountains with the horns they got on their heads—!"

"I'll never let a man beat a pack mule while I'm around the rest of my life," Flora answered.

"Look," Sam asked her suddenly. "Why you doing this—why you sticking it out? On account of the railroad?"

"Call it that," Flora answered. He could get no more out of her on the subject.

They were never closer to the camp of Adler Creek than their hide-out in the old tunnel. Freight wagons still continued to roll down the Lenahan and Durfee toll-road. And occasionally travellers in or out rode the wagons. It was apparent that whatever Mike Lenahan and his partner had crammed down the throat of the camp, the rest of the miners had swallowed.

On the evening of the sixth day, half an hour after full night had settled and they could safely come in, Sam and Flora returned to the tunnel. Sam immediately prepared to run prints of the plates they had been collecting.

"Going to have to rig a bulls-eye on the lantern and print with it," he said. "I don't want to wait another day for sunlight to print by. Won't be quite as clear as if we had the sun, maybe, but I think they'll do."

"Why not another day, Sam?" Flora asked. "We can't just walk into camp and start showing these pictures. We got to figure a way to get them into the right hands without Lenahan and Durfee finding out about it. If we do it that way and get away with it, maybe the whole thing will work. Maybe the pictures will do what hunches and gossip wouldn't—maybe they'll build a fire under the camp. But we got to keep under cover till we're sure."

Sam tapped the stack of plates he was preparing to print.

"I promised Mike Lenahan if he gave me any more trouble, I'd take a crack at running him clean out of the mountains," he said. "After what we've been through the past ten days, I figure he's given me plenty of trouble and I'm not going to cheat myself out of the fun of watching that promise I made take a bite out of him!"

"Bullhide Burnett," Flora said derisively, "the bucko bully of Alder Creek! Only one thing you're forgetting, Bullhide. Where's your gun?"

Sam tapped the stack of exposed plates again.

"Some kinds of bullets don't need a gun," he said. "Now, hand me that packet of paper, but don't open it, yet—"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Devil's Own Proof

SAM BURNETT started up the gulch toward the lights of Alder Creek just before midnight. Flora ignored both orders and pleas that she remain behind.

"I've been crazy enough to work myself to death the last ten days for you," she said. "I might as well be crazy enough to see the rest of it. But it won't work, Sam. It can't work. You're going to get yourself plowed under. I wish—"

Sam interrupted her with a shake of his head.

"The camp's fed up full of freighters," he said stubbornly. "Lenahan and Durfee have been sitting on a drum of powder, safe enough because they knew fire couldn't get to it. Now—" Sam tapped half a dozen paper-wrapped packets under one arm. "Now we've got a fuse for that powder and a pocketful of matches. It's going to be a good show. But you keep back out of

the way, Flora. Hear me? Be careful."

"Give your advice to somebody that needs it," Flora said grimly. "Just don't crowd me. Give me room to work when the lid comes off—"

She came abreast of Sam in the shadows, matching his long strides with long strides of her own. Sam saw she was carrying the heavy old Springfield rifle which had been across the mantel in his cabin. The gun was gripped purposefully in both her hands. Sam thought wryly that it would be a fine thing for a man someday if Flora Carpenter would put as much spit into a fight for him as she was putting into this fight for a fair ore-road from this camp to Leadville. She was a fine figure in the shadows. A tall girl in overalls and a man's hat, with a smudge on her cheek and great, dark eyes. A little ridiculous, maybe, but a woman and an attractive one, for all her masculine attire and the big gun in her hands.

Sam smiled a little. Whatever happened uptown, Flora would be all right. The freight bosses would take it easy with her She had a lot of friends in Alder Creek, friends who must have been wondering where she had been the past few days. Courteous and admiring friends who might crawl on their own bellies, but who could not stomach harm coming to a woman in their presence. Lenahan and Durfee would recognize there was a limit beyond which they could not go with her. The old Springfield had no firing pin. Sam had lost it and not replaced it. Flora could do no harm with the gun and she would not be harmed.

Sam wished quietly that he could feel the confidence in his scheme that he tried to show Flora. He wished he could count on the strength and the anger of the miners in the camp for sure. It was a thin, unpleasant business to risk one's neck on a few photographs and the just anger of half a hundred brow-beaten men. Flora was right. It was crazy. But a man had to do his fighting with the weapons he understood best.

The moonless street of Alder Creek had a certain amount of night traffic from resturant to saloon to dance palace and Sam saw that a number of Lenahan and Durfee freighters were in town. But in the darkness, because they were careful, Flora and he were not accosted. They located the proprietor of the Alder Creek Mercantile, a man whose entire stock in trade reached camp only by way of the freight-wagon toll-road. A man whose profits were only a slim margin left by Lenahan and Durfee's exorbitant freight rates. Sam handed him one of the packets under his arm.

"Get under some light and look these over," Sam said quietly. "If they mean anything to you, come on up to the Liberty Bell."

The mercantile man took the packet and peered narrowly at Sam in the darkness.

"Burnett!" he grunted. "I heard you'd quit camp."

"Not permanently," Sam said. "Legs are too long to run good. See you at the Liberty Bell—"

He moved on up the street with Flora close behind him.

"It won't work, Sam—" she muttered.

A rod farther on, Sam found the chairman of the helpless Alder Creek Miners Association. He signalled the man, and when he approached, he handed him three or four of the packets.

"Spread these around among the hard-rock boys," Sam told the miner. "If anybody's interested after looking at them, they'll find me at the Liberty Bell."

"Dead!" the miner said. "Stay away from the Liberty Bell, Burnett. Lenahan is up there with his partner and a bunch of his freighters and the lot of them are mean half drunk. Lenahan's been boasting he's run you over the divide for the mauling you give him. He'll take your hair, sure—"

"It'll cost him," Sam said imperturbably. The miner shrugged and turned away. Sam turned in at the camp doctor's yard and pounded on a window until he wakened the medical man. He passed the last of his packets in through the window.

"Look these over, Doc," he invited. "If a prescription comes to mind when you have, I'd appreciate it if you'd come on up to the Liberty Bell and tell the rest of the boys what you figure the cure might be."

On the walk in front of the doctor's house, Sam paused. Flora caught his arm.

"None of the freighters have seen you, Sam," she said. "You've still got a chance. Come on, quickly; get back down the gulch! I'll get a wagon for your stuff—"

"We settled that," Sam said. "Remem-

ber? Come on. Here's where we light our matches. You're either going to get your Leadville railroad or a fine bunch of fireworks. I want to see which one—"

Sam stepped down into the street, abandoning the shadows of the building fronts, and angled directly toward the bright windows of the Liberty Bell.

THE LIBERTY BELL was the pride of Alder Creek. It was a large, square room, fitted with ornate elegance. The rear wall was occupied by a stage, with professional wings and curtains. The other three walls were lined with a huge U-shaped bar. In the center of the room were scattered customers' tables and the rich felted platforms which supported roulette, chuckaluck, and monte games. At peak, the place could accommodate three hundred men. Sam had been often in the hall when it was busy, and it seemed empty to him, now.

Mike Lenahan and Ed Durfee and a dozen of their roughest looking teamsters were gathered along one short segment of the bar. There was no other trade in the place. Sam saw they had already gotten hold of one of his packets of pictures. He didn't know which one. Flora's last plea for him to get out of town had been useless. Lenahan and Durfee had known he was in camp. They knew he was coming to the Liberty Bell. They were waiting for him. This was showdown.

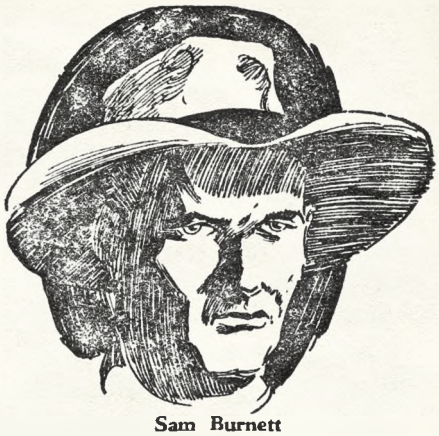
Sam straightened his shoulders and walked unhurriedly across the room. Mike Lenahan grinned unpleasantly at him and made a little space at the bar, on top of which were spread one of the series of pictures which had been in each of the packets Sam had brought into camp.

"Have a drink, Picture-Maker," Lenahan invited mockingly. He turned to his companions as Sam lifted the offered glass. "To a gent with more sand than brains—" he proposed. "—while he lasts!"

Slamming his empty glass down on the bar, Lenahan leaned sharply toward Sam and indicated the pictures spread out at his elbow.

"Who you trying to squeeze, Burnett?" he rasped.

Sam looked at the pictures. He thought they were well done, including the caption on each. The first was labelled: *Free Trade.*



Sam Burnett

It was an untouched photograph of Ed Durfee in angry argument with a small mine operator. Sam had gotten this exposure at considerable risk. It was a close study which caught Durfee's confident arrogance as plainly as the mine operator's fear.

The second print was captioned: *Transportation Losses.* The caption referred to a claimed shrinkage in ore shipments which Lenahan and Durfee maintained resulted from unavoidable sifting and spillage in the trip over their road. The photograph showed Mike Lenahan supervising several of his crew in the process of high-grading likely chunks of ore from a string of loaded wagons and transferring the culled rock to a waiting empty wagon. In the background was the Half-Way Corral, the freighter headquarters at the mid-point along their toll road. Flora and Sam had crouched for twenty hours in the timber across from the corral to photograph this one.

The third print was captioned: *From the Easy-Touch Mine.* It showed the wagonload of culled highgrade from the previous picture pulling up in front of the Consolidated Mill in Leadville with Ed Durfee on the seat beside the driver. Sam had gotten this exposure on the fourth day of his campaign from the window of a cheap hotel across the street from the Leadville mill.

The fourth picture was two exposures, printed side by side. One was of Mike Lenahan and his partner watching a long string of ore wagons move along the toll road. The expression on the faces of both, the whole flavor of the picture, was one of smug dominance. The other exposure was a much smoother duplicate of the super-

imposition Sam had first made for Flora Carpenter—a representation of a narrow-gauge ore train steaming up Black Canyon. Underneath the double picture was the query: *This—or This?*

"Nice work, Burnett," Lenahan said thinly when Sam's eyes raised from the prints. "You take good pictures. Too bad you're through."

"It's not me that's through, Lenahan," Sam said quietly. "It's you and your boys. I warned you—"

"You think you've stung this crawlbelly camp?" Ed Durfee growled. "Hell, I could hand-whip any ten of the toughest in the lot! This is our gulch, Burnett. You've just dug yourself a hole in the ground. Now you're going to get planted!"

Sam's grin was hard work.

"I'll have company," he said. "You're not as tough as you think, Durfee. Nobody is as tough as a whole camp—not when it's got proof it can look at that it's being clipped. Alder Gulch will be in here in a couple of minutes to settle with you boys. You better get ready—"

Mike Lenahan glanced at his teamsters and nodded. They began to converge unhurriedly on Sam. Flora pushed in beside him.

"Sam!" she cried. "Don't be a fool, please. Admit we faked every one of those pictures—not just the one with the train. Admit the whole thing was faked—"

"Good advice, Burnett," Lenahan said.

"Sam, please!" Flora urged again.

"No," Sam said.

Lenahan shrugged.

"All right," he said. "Couple of you boys watch the door. The rest of you go to work. This picture-maker has got to have his mind changed."

THE FIRST man lashed out without warning, catching Sam on the shin with the metal toe cap on his rock boots. Driving pain doubled Sam. He was struck in the face, jostled, and spilled onto the floor. He had a glimpse of Flora, levelling the big rifle she had carried up the gulch. He heard the futile snap of the hammer against the head of the empty firing-pin channel. He saw a freighter seize the girl and he heard Lenahan's sharp order to them:

"Pry her out of this an' keep her clear. That long-legged hell-cat has got some private lessons in minding her own business coming from me—later!"

More men piled onto Sam. He heard Flora cry out once more:

"Kill 'em, Sam—kill 'em!"

Then hurt was up raggedly in him and perceptions receded. It was brutal, merciless, and calculated. A determined measuring out of maximum punishment without risking his death. Flora had guessed correctly. The freighters wanted a denial of his pictures from him—a false admission that they had been faked. In the end Sam knew he'd have to agree—or die very uncomfortably. But there was a little time. He had a strong body and he was stubborn.

Boots thudded into his ribs. A man ground a heel against his cheek bone. One arm was doubled and thrust impossibly up toward the center of his shoulder blades. Somebody was slowly twisting one foot so that it felt like the leg would wrench loose at the hip socket. Sam's free hand sought flesh and found it, closing like the jaws of a double-spring bear trap. A man cried out sharply. Sam's free leg lashed out and he felt bone crunch under his heel. More of them piled onto him.

Alder Creek had already had twice the time it needed to gather its forces. So Ed Durfee had been right. The camp hadn't the guts to get off of its knees. Sam's pictures had not been the inflammatory fuse he had hoped they would be. That hurt the most. He had had faith in his pictures. They had failed and he had failed with them. Flora Carpenter wouldn't have her railroad to Leadville.

Nausea swept Sam. Unconsciousness reached for him. He tried to lean into it, but suddenly it began to recede. The pain eased. The weight on him lifted. Somebody hoisted him to his feet and he leaned against the bar. Soft cloth dabbed at the blood on his face and Flora Carpenter was saying: "Sam, Sam!"

The interior of the Liberty Bell steadied. Sam saw the doctor and the mercantile man and the chairman of the miners' association. He saw Alder Creek, in arms. Part of the armament was anger and guns; part was his pictures. Lenahan and Durfee and their teamsters were bunched under guard in one corner of the U-shaped bar. The

(Continued on page 97)

If he went back up the mountain, he would die in the snow. If he could get down the mountain he would not die . . . right away.

By JIM KJELGAARD

One thing about a head-high snowdrift, it doesn't fight back—it just lets a man die battling it. Blizzard-beaten Johnny Conyers fought it anyway—for he figured he was too damn' cold to make a decent corpse. . . .

JOHNNY CONYERS rolled his cigarette very deliberately. He dampened it with his tongue, pinched one end, and held the finished product half an arm's length away from his eyes. Probably it was as good a cigarette as he had ever rolled; its smooth roundness was almost as perfect as

DOLLAR-A-MILE HORSE

that of store-bought smokes. Then, because he really did not want to smoke, Johnny sent the cigarette spinning into the snow, watched it sink, and turned to look at his horse.

It was a brown horse with a ewe neck and a long bony head. Both ears, frozen in one of the storms through which the horse had wandered before it was caught and broken to saddle, were misshapen stubs. The horse's legs were long and muscular. Its chest was massive. Johnny Conyers had bought his mount for twenty dollars over in Eaton, on the other side of the mountains, and now he spoke to it.

"Twenty miles to Pinchville—I guess."

As though the words were a signal, great, feathery flakes of snow again started on their soft white wings to float out of the overcast sky. The horse jerked its head nervously, and Johnny looked a little wistfully at the place where he had thrown the cigarette. He had been told in Eaton that was no snow and he could still get over the mountains. Well. . . . There hadn't been much snow until last night. Now he might just as well try to go on. It was, he hoped, only twenty miles to Pinchville. It was at least sixty back to Eaton.

The horse began to dance and Johnny cussed fervently while he fought it to a standstill. These no-good crow-baits knew all there was to know about everything, and the brown horse understood the situation perfectly. Long ago the elk and the deer that browsed throughout the summer at these altitudes had filed down the narrow little gulleys and passes to low country. They knew as well as the horse did that to be caught in the high snows at this season meant to die. The horse raised its head and snorted, and Johnny scratched its neck.

"Talkin' to me, eh?" he soothed. "All right, Croppie. I'll talk right back. We're caught."

He mounted, and almost before Johnny was settled in the saddle the horse began to run. Undisturbed by any wind whatever, the great snow flakes were coming down very fast now. It looked, Johnny thought, as though a hundred million little men were hidden somewhere up in the overcast, and each had a long invisible string to which was attached an immense snow flake. By putting each flake exactly in its place the little men were making a marvellously intricate pattern consisting of a hundred million pieces.

Sinking through the snow to the firm earth underneath, the horse's thudding hoofs created a little symphony in drums that was not heard, but by some miracle was passed up through the horse's body and felt by the rider. Johnny's lips were cold and dry, and he could not whistle. But a pleasant little tune in keeping with the drums passed through his mind as he rode. Remembering songs, he discovered, was all right. It helped him forget that, unless it had wings nothing got out of the high snows alive.

Johnny guessed that even the horse did not think he could run out of it. He was running only because that was better than standing still, and in his own fashion the horse was doubtless applying all the equine epithets he knew to a rider fool enough to be here at this season. Certainly, no horse that knew anything at all would ever be caught in such a predicament.

The brown horse was caught, and he knew it, and he was doing the best he could to run out of it. He was running in the right direction, too, though he might have been this way before. Then again he might not have. Horses that had run wild seemed able to smell out any trail, and some of them could go safely where only mountain goats and eagles had any business.

Suddenly there was a difference in the atmosphere. It was not any notable thing, and nothing at all that could be seen through the blanket of snow that the hundred million little men were still lowering on their strings. However, even though it was impossible to see anything, previously there had been an impression of distance on all sides. They had been on top of a mountain then. Now there was a definite impression of being shut in and surrounded. They had entered and were going down one of the little gulleys that trailed like carelessly-dug trenches from the mountain top.

Five minutes later the smooth rhythm of the horse's beating hoofs became a broken sympathy. He began to labor, then came to a full stop in a drift.

FOR A MINUTE Johnny Conyers sat the saddle, and it occurred to him that he should be cursing the fate that had brought him here. But he didn't feel like

cursing, and he had to think very coolly and methodically to remind himself that he was in any danger. To look at it, there seemed to be nothing menacing about this blanket of snow which the hundred million little men had woven. Johnny Conyers smiled whimsically.

He knew that he should be making profound decisions, all of which must contribute something towards getting him out of the snow and into Pinchville. All he could think of was that it would be the essence of simplicity to get out of the snow if only he had snowshoes. Everybody who traveled over the mountains should carry snowshoes. Then, if they got stuck in the snow—

Johnny swore, softly and gently, and turned in the saddle. The trail they had made coming this far stretched like a ragged tear in the snow blanket, but already the drifting flakes were taking the newness and sharpness from that trail. They could travel back up, but so doing would be foolish. The only place they could reach was the top of the mountain, and in a short time snow would be piled very high there.

Johnny slid backwards off his horse into the broken trail, and the brown horse backed out to stand beside him. The horse kept looking down the gulley, and Johnny patted him softly on the nose. You couldn't fool mountain horses. They knew the ways they had to go.

Very casually Johnny rolled another cigarette, lit it, and stood beside the horse watching the smoke disappear in the swirling snow. If the little men who had made the snow blanket had just distributed it smoothly and evenly all over, a horse could still travel. Here in this gulley the wind had taken its own part in the storm. Sweeping up or across the gulley, it had gathered countless snow particles and deposited them in a huge, smooth heap. The drift might be six, or twelve, or twenty feet, deep.

Johnny puffed out the last of his cigarette and threw the butt down, and he was annoyed with himslef because things still did not seem as they should be. This situation should present almost innumerable faces, and it annoyed him because the entire thing resolved itself into a simple problem. If he went back up the mountains he would surely die in the snow. If he could get down he would not die.

Oh, there was a little more to it. A nine-hundred-pound horse was a wonderful asset as long as he could be ridden, but only nine hundred pounds of liability in deep snow. The brown horse—he could get another as good for twenty dollars—wouldn't be much loss. Johnny hitched thoughtfully at the place where his gun should have been, and frowned. Just one bullet and the horse's troubles would be forever ended. Only—

Why the devil wasn't he packing a gun? Well. . . . He'd just abandon the horse in the snow; there was no point in being sentimental about anything worth only twenty dollars. Horses had starved before and would again, and it was not as though he wanted to abandon his. He just couldn't help himself. He—

"Oh hell!" he said gruffly. "Come on! We'll try it together!"

The brown horse followed very closely when Johnny attacked the drift with his bare hands. The snow was soft, light stuff, but the most he could pick up was two

hands full. At that rate, and shoveling a path that the horse could get through, it would take him a day to make ten feet. Then he thought of the leather shields on his saddle bags, and unlaced one.

That worked better. Instead of two hands full of snow he could get several times that much. But, though the snow was soft and feathery, stooping over and tossing it to the rim of the trench was hard work. Johnny found himself sweating, and stood up for a moment to wipe the perspiration from his face. As though it was urging him to return to work, the brown horse nudged him with its muzzle. Grimly Johnny resumed his bending and scooping. A man who knew that he could not get even himself out of the deep snow was a fool for trying to take a horse with him. Well, he was a fool.

Twilight floated like a silent gray bird into the sky, and with it the softly-falling snow began to thin. To the left a treeless and very steep pitch rose, and to the right was another slope. The snow became a few scattered flakes that seemed to hurry, as though they might not be in time to join those already on the ground. It was, Johnny Conyers reflected grimly, exactly as though the hundred million little men had become tired, and had dropped the last flakes and rolled up their strings so they could go to bed. Johnny felt a very factual envy of little people who existed only in fancy. He himself would get no sleep.

For, with the ceasing of the snow and the approach of night, the cold came. It crept up the gulley, a silent and invisible but very deadly thing whose probing fingers recognized no obstacles or barriers. Johnny worked a little faster, and thought wistfully of the sweat that had been on his brow a while back. There wasn't any now. The cold was a pitiless master. It stood over him with a whip and indicated very plainly that he would freeze if he did not work.

He was a robot now, a stiff, mechanical thing which moved to the timed turning of a gear. All time was reversed and nothing was correct. The night had no end, but was an accumulation of hour-long minutes each of which was exactly like the other. Johnny was surprised to see a gray streak in the sky, and to recognize it as approaching dawn. It seemed that so miraculous a thing must be heralded with trumpets and drums, and for a few minutes Johnny seemed to hear the music that should accompany breaking dawn. But it was only the wind keening up the gulley. Then came full daylight.

Johnny stretched himself stiffly, and looked behind. He and the horse stood in a trench just big enough to accommodate both of them, for except where they stood the wind had blown the snow back into the drift. Johnny's eyes were exactly level with the rim of the snow, and by standing on his toes he could peer over it. A frightened shiver ran through him.

The earth itself had changed. It was no longer a pleasant place of trees, and bare rocks, and ridges, and creeks, but snow. That's all there was; an immensity of snow with himself and the horse lost in the very center. Johnny clenched and unclenched his weary hands, opened the saddle bags, and took out a hand full of frozen beans. The horse arched its neck and flicked its stubs of ears, while its nostrils quivered. Johnny looked away from him, and back again. Then he took two more hands full of beans, held them out, and let the horse eat first. Of course a man was a fool for doing that, but only a fool would try to get a twenty-dollar horse out of here in the first place.

It was mid-day when they finally broke through that drift.

JOHNNY STOOD a minute, the curved and cold-cracked saddle bag shield still in his hand and frosty breath rolling from his mouth into the almost unbelievably-calm air. The horse had a rime of frost about its mouth, and in some inexplicable fashion, a sheen of frost had arranged itself on both sides of the horse's neck. The horse brushed past Johnny and broke into a little trot that carried him down the snow-draped gulley. He had seen some of the grass tussocks that thrust like small drum-major's hats above the snow.

Johnny Conyers put his hands in his pockets, and thought that they were much too big to go there. The pockets must burst at the seams if anything so unwieldy was not at once removed from them. He took his hands out and looked at them curiously. It was hard to tell whether they were swollen or not, because it was impossible to remember the time when they had not been like this. Very definitely they were raw,

and thin little traces of blood ebbed from the cracks in them. Clumsily, Johnny rolled another cigarette.

He lit it, and puffed slowly and luxuriously until all he held in his cracked hands was a tiny stub of white paper that bore a scepter of black ash and burning tobacco. Regretfully Johnny cast the butt into the snow. All he wanted to do, now or any other time, was sit by a fire and eat and smoke.

Johnny looked down the gulley, and up at the pale blue sky that seemed to rest on the ridges hemming the gulley in. It was a clear sky, but a cold and unfriendly one. Still, there seemed to be no immediate threat of more snow. The brown horse was down the gulley, cropping eagerly at the grass that thrust above the snow, and Johnny grinned again.

Yesterday, and last night, he had been digging for his life and that of the horse. Now he was walking through scarcely six inches of snow, and it was very difficult to reconcile that with what had been. Of course, looking at it through strictly logical eyes, it meant only that the wind had carried the snow away from here and deposited it in a drift. But it was hard to be strictly logical, and Johnny had an eerie sensation that the hundred million little men were still up there, stretching and yawning in their beds, and that soon they would waken to inspect the snow that they had lowered on their long strings. If the pattern did not satisfy, they would lower some more.

When Johnny followed the brown horse down the gulley, the horse raised its head and looked at him. He had pawed aside a great area of snow to find grass that was hidden, and he was still hungry. But he was even more afraid of being left alone, and when Johnny walked past, the horse swung obediently in behind him. Johnny felt again for the gun that he should have been carrying. He could have shot the horse. He could not leave him to starve.

He walked on, and there was neither any special hope nor any particular elation in his mind because he did not have to shovel. It was hard to tell, looking at the snow blanket, whether it was six inches or twice that many feet deep. His next step might plunge him into snow that was over his head, and he felt an inward, gnawing tension because he did not know exactly when he was going to take that step. Then he rounded a shoulder of the slope to his right and looked at something down the gulley. He rubbed his eyes and looked away because it was impossible, at once, to believe the great good fortune that was his.

Another hundred yards down, and to the right, there was a small dead tree. Its ragged and crumbling branches had born no leaves for the past ten years, but its stubborn roots still supported the dead trunk that had one found life within them. Johnny walked forward, slowly and almost reverently, and when he got to the tree he reached up to snap a thin twig from it. For an ecstatic moment he held the twig in his hand, then frantically he started kicking the snow aside. Wood meant fire, and fire meant warmth, and it had seemed to Johnny Conyers that he never would be warm again. He laid a little piles of broken twigs on the place he had cleared, and held a lighted match beneath them.

A tendril of blue smoke curled up from the twigs and a tongue of yellow flame followed it. Johnny gazed, so fascinated that he almost forgot to break off larger twigs and add them to his fire. The brown horse, who knew that a rider would stay where he had a fire, looked and went on to find more grass. Johnny watched his fire grow, and it seemed that the most miraculous thing in the world was having a fire when you didn't expect to have one. He sat comfortably with his back against the trunk of the dead tree and dozed. Cold awakened him as soon as the fire died, and he rose to add more wood. When he awoke in the middle of the afternoon it seemed that he had never been so refreshed. Johnny cooked bacon and beans, and the horse came in to stand beside him.

Johnny ate, plucking the strips of bacon from the skillet with two fingers, putting them into his mouth, and crushing the hot, juicy morsels between his teeth. He scooped up the beans with a fork, then rolled another cigarette and speculated on whether or not it was worth his while to have some coffee. It was, he decided. They had come through one drift, but it was only one and nobody knew how many more lay between them and Pinchville. Johnny melted snow water in the tin coffee can he

carried and put a heaping handful of ground coffee in it. He crouched by the fire while it came to a boil, and drank the coffee so hot that his tongue and cheeks remained pleasantly numbed.

He got up, looked once at the remnants of his fire, then broke off a great quantity of dead sticks and lashed them to the horse's saddle. He couldn't depend on finding any more trees up here, but he needn't spend all night scooping snow. If he became too tired he could have another fire. The brown horse walked willingly beside him when he went on down the gulley.

Twenty minutes later they plunged into another drift.

THAT WAS an endless drift, Johnny Conyers thought. Or what was it? In the two days and nights since he had left the gnarled, beautiful little dead tree, there had been so much of snow and drifts that he could no longer remember clearly exactly what had taken place. At times there was a memory of two more fires. Little sparkling things they had been, built in a snow trench when he was too exhausted to lift even one more hand full of snow. The brown horse, a monstrous thing that had no business whatever being there, had stood beside Johnny while he crouched over those tiny fires, and the horse had a gargantuan mouth into which Johnny had eternally fed the small stock of food in the saddle bags. In the clear spaces between the drifts the horse had also found and eaten more grass, and Johnny himself had tried to eat some after the food was all gone.

Or was that conception utterly wrong? Johnny was no longer sure because so many conflicting factors had entered into his journey down the mountain and each was important according to the sequence in which it occurred. He had not been born at all, but had suddenly found himself, a twenty-five year old man, in a whole new world that consisted of nothing but snow. He had somehow been told that, if only he scooped snow hard enough and fast enough, he could reach a place where men like himself lived, and talked, and laughed, and sat in dry rooms in front of leaping fires or hot stoves when they were tired of snow. Somewhere the devil that had put him here was enjoying a monstrous laugh because he kept digging.

Then the snow was all a delusion. He was in a warm room, and in the center of the room there was a table. The table held a platter upon which was a roasted goose, a great brown bird stuffed with sausage dressing and clothed in crisp, juicy skin. With the goose was a whole peck of fluffy mashed potatoes, a gallon can of brown gravy, and a gigantic apple pie. Johnny had to eat it all, and drink a huge pot of coffee afterwards, and he was silently amused because he knew that it would not be half enough.

Throughout, a sane and quietly calm little voice continued speaking to him, and urging him on. He had bought a twenty-dollar horse in Eaton, and mounted upon it he had started over the mountains to Pinchville. Twenty miles from Pinchville they had become trapped in the deep snow. There was nobody at all to help them, and the horse would starve if he didn't somehow manage to get him out of the snow. It was unthinkable to let anything at all starve.

Johnny looked at the piece of leather in his hand, and turned wearily to glance at the remnants of the saddle still carried by the brown horse. Somewhere back along the mountain trail the saddle bag shields lay, broken and crumbled, where he had thrown them. Then the empty saddle bags themselves had been converted into shovels. Again Johnny looked at the piece he held in his hand. It was, he thought, a good idea to buy a two-hundred-and-fifty dollar saddle. Any cheap leather would have given out long before this.

He turned to scoop at the drift through which they were passing. Behind him the brown horse patiently moved up one step as soon as Johnny had cleared a place for him, and overhead the sky was again threatening. The hundred million little men, Johnny thought dully, were stirring in their beds. Pretty soon they would unroll their long strings and lower more snow. Not that that made too much difference. He could scoop more snow out of the path, and to hell with the hundred million little men and their strings.

Johnny raised wooden arms and tossed a scoop of snow out of the trench he was making through this drift. He looked speculatively upwards, considering the fact that he had to look up to see the rim of the snow. This, he reflected, was the deepest

trench he had dug. From somewhere out in a world he could not see came a high-pitched whining, and after listening a moment Johnny defined the sound as the singing of a high wind. Or was it?

Johnny turned deliberately to get another scoop of snow. He knew that he had been the victim of hallucinations, and he must not let them gain control or he would be irretrievably lost. When men trapped, such as he, reached a certain stage, everything became wonderfully warm and comfortable. Instead of continuing to fight, they merely settled into a sleep from which there was no awakening. Johnny shook his head, annoyed and a little afraid because he had already had such sensations. They were still present, but the sane little voice kept them helplessly trapped. If they became dominant. . . . It was then that Johnny heard the horse scream.

He turned around, and his first sensation was one of mild surprise. He had thought that the horse was constantly at his elbow. Now he was fifteen feet behind; for some reason the horse had lagged. Or maybe he hadn't. Maybe he had seen or sensed what was going to happen and had tried to run out of it. He hadn't been able to do so. Only the horse's head and the top of his back thrust out of the great pile of snow that had fallen or been blown by the wind back into the trench.

The horse screamed again, and tried to struggle out of the snow.

"I'm coming," he said. "Don't worry. I'm coming."

He turned, and with his leather scoop attacked the wall of snow that had fallen between himself and the horse.

Johnny stepped aside as the horse broke through the remaining wall of snow and leaped almost to the end of the scooped trench. He screamed again, shrieking his mighty fear of the hundred million little men who were busily unrolling their long strings, and leaped at the end of the trench. Johnny watched dully as that wall broke too, and the horse thundered through the break.

Johnny followed, and down the gulley now the snow was broken by the green of pines. There was something else, and a light leaped in Johnny's eyes as he saw the trail sharply-etched in the snow. Within the past hour or two a herd of elk had crossed the gulley and gone down the mountain. You couldn't fool elk. They knew that the hundred million little men were awakening, and were about to lower more snow, and the herd knew also that it had better go while it could. The broken trail they had left would be very easy for a mounted man to follow. Johnny Conyers smiled very happily.

It could not now be twenty miles to Pinchville.

PRAIRIE

The certain knowledge that his covered caravan would soon be a flaming funeral pyre for greenhorns made Jim Street decide that one dead bucksin man was better than half a hundred charred bodies of too-trusting emigrants!

And then Jim Street's blood ran cold with shock at what he saw.

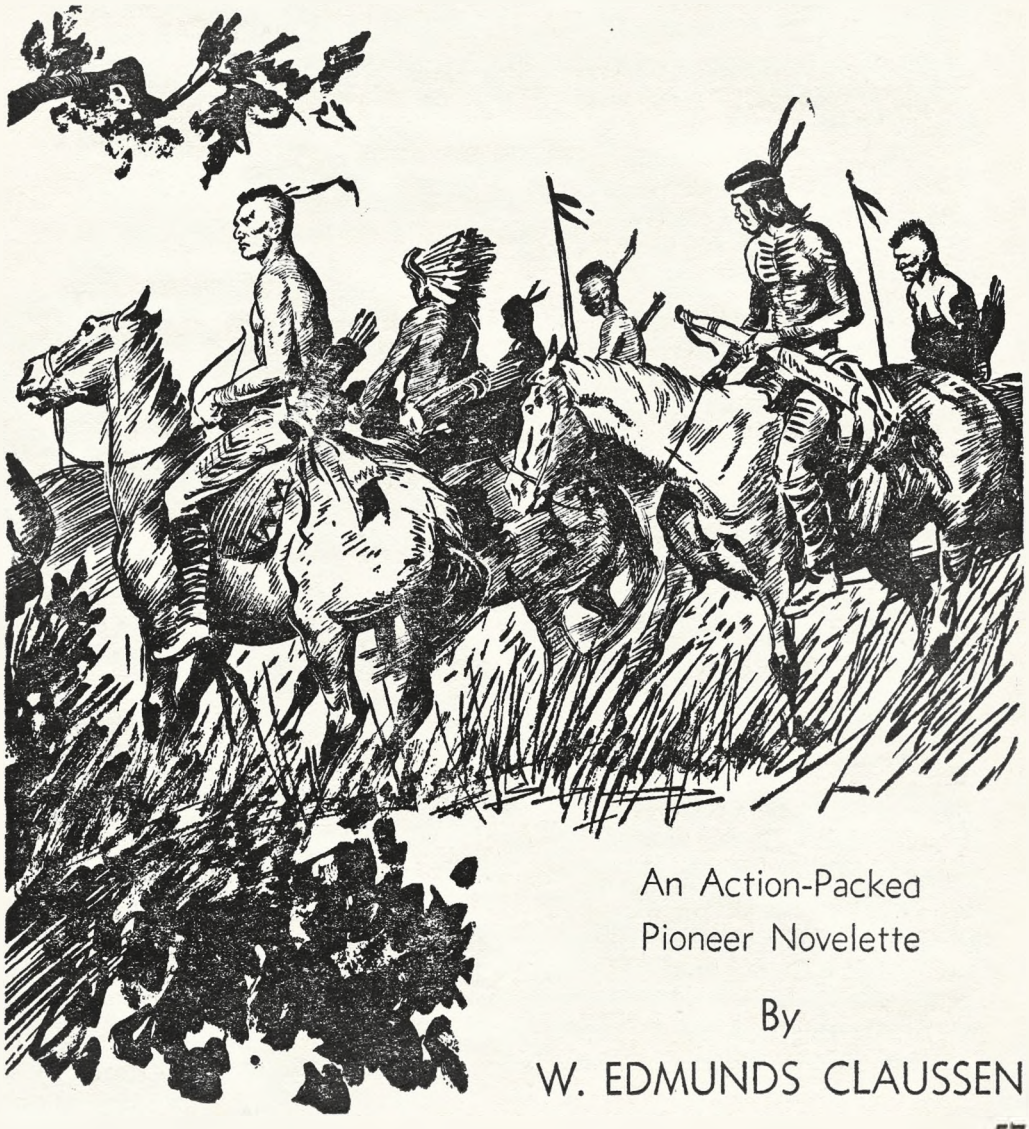
DEATH-MARCH

CHAPTER ONE

Red Death

THE YEAR was 1846 and the ruts of the great Overland Trail had not yet been hard-packed by the six-inch rims of the California Gold seekers. The Big Blue crossing lay immediately behind them. James Street looked eastward and icy fingers laid a frosty edge to his spine.

Eastward to the crossing lay the soft sand of the river bottom, and there Alden Price's wagon still smouldered in the evening air. The canvas was gone and the box sprouted arrow shafts. The great arched



An Action-Packed
Pioneer Novelette

By
W. EDMUNDS CLAUSSEN

hoops were standing charred and awry—appropriate markers for the faithful oxen who still lay shackled in their trace chains, in the center of the trail.

The Pawnees had struck with amazing speed and ferocity just as their nineteen wagons had crawled out of the lazy river. The guards had screamed their warning and shot into the racing mass of naked bodies with their rifles. But the red devils had broken through and struck before the white men could swing their Hawkins rifles and beat back the attack.

This had been a quick raid by glory-seeking braves. They had struck hard and violent, like wolves. Then they had ridden off, with Burl Patch and Phil Lavender leading a dozen of the wagoners in their wake. But they would be back, Street knew, and when they struck their next blow it would be no mere test of strength, but a dragged-out, bitter fight until the end. Swallowing his personal dislike of Patch and Lavender, Street hoped that the wagon-boss and his scouts were not leading the enraged teamsters into a Pawnee ambuscade.

Street's gaze ran westward to the high ground over which they would drive their train as soon as the drivers returned. The sky was a mass of gathering thunderheads, and through them the sinking sun was painting a fiery tapestry. Against this ruby glow he saw the silhouette of her well-rounded figure. Already they had buried Alden Price in a shallow grave. Over the spot, his daughter Norah now held her lonely vigil.

A teamster's voice broke into his consciousness.

"She'll have to make up her mind about gettin' hitched. It ain't good for her kind of woman to be footloose long. She'll get into the blood and bewitch all the single men."

Came the answer in a woman's crisp voice—the gray-bearded teamster's wife. They were a Vermont couple—cold, practical, pragmatic in their manner of reading the world about them. "She won't have long to wait," came Keziah Pritchard's answer.

Street was conscious of her eyes shuttling his way. She was looking him over, examining the length of his slender torso. He had not as yet adopted all of the West, either in mannerism or in costume. His tailored woolen jacket still covered his shoulders, a tattered reminder that he had come from the cities, despite the buckskin trousers.

Keziah's voice came again: "It's either him, the Boston rake, or that other one."

"Burl Patch, you mean," Ezra Pritchard finished.

"We'll tell her," Keziah said. "We'll let her know she ain't to take much time with her choosin'."

Street heard the gray-bearded man spit out his cud, and then he heard the rattle of iron. Ezra was returning to work, replacing a chain that had broken in the mad pull through the deep sand.

Street turned on his heel and made his way toward the front of the stalled caravan. Everywhere faces of women peered from the seats of their wagons. They were white and drawn and anxious. Their menfolk had joined Burl to chase the Pawnee across the prairie.

Street himself would have ridden too, except for the arrow that had entered his arm. They had had to break the shaft and cut the head out of his flesh and when they had finished his stomach had revolted as he clung to his saddle horn. For the time being he had been good for nothing more strenuous than grave-digging.

NORAH turned to meet him and there was an immobile look to her young face. The long rise and fall of her deep bosom belied her calm. Street knew she was fighting with emotions pent up in her. She was alone now in this vastness and savagery of the wilderness—alone except for a younger brother. Alone, Street corrected himself—Gerald Price didn't amount to much in the way of manhood.

"Please leave me with him for a few minutes," she asked quietly.

"You ought to come down into camp with the others, Norah. Let the womenfolk talk to you."

"Womenfolk," she said with her lip curling slightly. Then her mind returned to the man beneath her feet. "Only two hours ago he was slapping his lead team into the water. He was laughing at me then. It seems like just a moment ago, Jim. Then again it seems to have happened in another lifetime."

"It's hard, Norah." He let a stolid moment run by. "Will you want me to drive for you?"

The hardness and independence of the Illinois farmer crossed her face. Her hands were pressing hard against the gingham that covered her thighs. She had fingers that were strong and capable, that had already done a share of useful work. Her blue eyes shone and the tilt of her chin looked as though it had been cut with a knife.

"I'll drive my own wagon, Jim Street. There'll be no loose-tongued slander against my name if I have my way. If I need help from men there's always Jerry."

Then as he watched a softness came to her lips. Shock had numbed her, crowding out all feeling, but now something else was breaking in. There was something there her face had held when he had asked for the first dance that night around the camp fire. They had broken away from the camp that night and found the shadows of the willows. She, too, was remembering. Her generous mouth moulded with a wistful smile.

"You've been good to me, Jim. Ever since we met on the river steamer, and in the camp at Westport. When we jumped off there wasn't enough you could do for Dad—for us. You've been the gentleman. More than that. I'll remember, and if I ever need you I'll not fail to call. Only—"

"Only what?"

"I don't want you ever again to gamble with my brother."

In spite of himself Street bit his lip, and for the instant his head hung. He was conscious of her low voice reaching him through the gathering darkness. It was cool again, and indifferent. "Leave me alone now. Just let me have a few minutes more with him."

Street turned on his heel and walked toward the straggling encampment. His hand instinctively reached into a jacket pocket and came into contact with the wad of crisp bills. Four hundred and thirty dollars he had taken off Gerald Price last night in a poker game. A lot of money for a weak-spined kid to lose. He had taken it in a remarkable run of luck, before Lavender had had his chance to fleece the lad.

Of course money meant nothing on the trail. Brawn was the thing; an extra yoke of strong oxen, a bucket of clear water, a handful of lead pellets—these were the things of value. But if they lived to see Oregon, young Price might place a fresh value on that amount of currency.

He had meant to give it back sometime during the morning but the opportunity had not presented itself. Beside, he had wanted the boy to feel its loss. He cursed himself under his breath, now. Norah had found out about that game. Among other things she now thought him a cold-blooded gambler.

He had done his share of gambling in the back-rooms of Boston's fashionable society. But those games had been with men who could afford to lose. All that now seemed part of another lifetime. When the inept existence of the Back Bay palled, he had pulled stakes with the fever of Oregon burning high in his blood.

Keziah Pritchard's voice came to him from the high seat of her wagon. "Well, did you ask her, Boston?"

"What?" Street looked up.

"Is she going to take you for husband?"

A cold shudder passed through him. He turned stiffly from the tall, white-sheeted Conestoga and stalked away. Through the corners of his eyes he made out a line of horsemen appearing on the hillcrest. His ears picked up the sounds of their approach. Someone in the lead took off his hat and waved it. The wagon boss and his grim-faced partner, Phil Lavender, were bringing the balance of the wagoners back to their stalled camp. He made his way toward them with anxious steps.

CHAPTER TWO

Pages of Death and Hope

THE MEN came pouring down out of the sand hills at a gallop and drew to a halt amid flying gravel. Burl came out of his saddle while his rangy roan was still running. He ran across the dry grass with his boots raising little clouds of dust.

He was a short man, stocky and thick-chested, with a wide, red face and two sharply brittle eyes sunk deep beneath a low, shiny forehead. The train had picked him up at Westport where he was holding six wagons of his own party and waiting for others to gather. Twice before he had been

up the trail. Many considered him a reliable man.

Behind him trailed his shadow—the long-faced, stern-lipped Phil Lavender.

"They're gone," Burl told the waiting wagon camp easily. "A couple bucks over-anxious for scalps."

Gerald Price had pushed up beside the leaders. "We licked 'em before we had the chance for a real fight!" he crowed. He was flushed with excitement now that the Pawnees had shown their heels. It had been otherwise at the Big Blue crossing. In the thick of the melee Gerald had not been so prominent.

"They'll be back," Street said firmly. He saw Burl's eyes run to his face, and he saw the anger deep inside them. Burl's mouth curled, and then he caught sight of Norah. He moved instantly toward her, covering the ground in long strides.

She saw him coming and started briskly toward her own wagon, deserting her grave on the hill-slope. Burl caught her and his arm found its way about her shoulder in familiar fashion. He tried to turn her about to face him but she twisted from his grasp and sprang to a wheel. She lost no time getting within the bows.

"We licked 'em all right," Lavender said. "We chased them six miles and they scattered like rabbits."

"You didn't lick them, you only chased them," Street said again.

Lavender's eyes were lifeless. A hard man, Street concluded. One who moved ever beside his boss and put teeth into his orders. A Walker cap-and-ball hung in a blackened sheath from his wide belt, and on the opposite hip hung a Green River knife, twelve inches long. But no blade could cut as did Lavender's stolid stare. "What was the matter with you riding, Boston?" he drawled.

Jim held his tongue, a sharp anger stirring through him. He saw a woman in one of the forward wagons pointing with her arm. "What's the meaning of that smoke?" she asked.

Burl's chill laugh came to them. "Don't let yourself get jumpy over every little Injun fire you see. Plenty of them between here and Fort Hall. Pawnee signals, so what? They ain't fighters. You saw the way they run. They're a thievin', yellow-bellied breed with the sand all run out of their backbones. We'll roll the wagons yonder to the top of the hills so we don't bog down if it rains tonight. In the morning we'll push toward Grand Island."

What was Burl selling his followers? Street pondered. The Pawnee *had* backbone, and plenty of it—as the graves they had encountered already along the trek testified. Tough old White Buffalo was cunning and vindicative, fighting his battle bitterly against the whites who were slicing trails across his hunting grounds. He had heard a mountain man in their river rendezvous tell how White Buffalo had rattled his drums and two hundred braves had responded to the call.

Street spoke his mind plainly, "You'll be heading into the heart of a war camp," he said.

The wagon boss ignored him. "From here the travel's easy through the bottoms of the Little Blue. About four marches ahead of us is Amos Parks and a big train of wagons. We'll reach Parks by the time he makes Grand Island."

"Parks is traveling with seventy rifles. The Indians will let him through. But they'll jump us," Street said. He was thinking of Norah and all the youngsters with their sun-bleached curls. He spun to the listening wagoners.

"I say we should wait here until the next train comes through and join them. If we go on as Burl advises we'll push into an Indian ambush for certain. We don't even know for sure we'll meet Parks at Grand Island. All we have is Burl's say-so. He's been wrong before."

The wagon boss closed in on Street with open hatred in his eyes. He was breathing hard, and still smarting under the rebuff Norah had handed him. "Are you trying to say I lie?"

"No," Street said quietly. "Just mistaken."

The blood was hammering at a big vein in Patch's temple. "Sounds more like you're trying to say I'd lead my train into the Pawnees on purpose."

Street glanced in the direction of Norah's wagon, but he could find no trace of her. He threw the full force of his feelings into Burl's face. "Now that we're calling a spade a spade, I'm thinking it was singular how the painted bucks picked Alden's wagon and made such short work of it."

Patch moved from the toes of his feet, flinging himself forward with every muscle of his body. He came at Jim not as a fighter with his fists, but as a mauler who barred no holds and fought to maim or kill. His clawed fingers reached Street first and the stubby thumb worked into his face, hunting his eyes. His powerful left arm circled Jim's back, to keep him held tight.

Fashionable Boston had no time to teach her gentlemen the tricks of boxing. Nevertheless, Jim had applied himself aptly to the art and through constant practice his lean torso had grown supple. He drove a fist deep into the unguarded stomach and heard the air rush out of the mauler's lungs. He lowered his body quickly and slipped out of the bear grip even while the wagon-boss was grunting.

He realized as he stepped in to deliver another stinging punch to Burl's midriff that he had started the fight under severe handicaps. His left arm hung worse than useless at his side. The pain of the wagoner's butchery was still sending throbbing waves into his head. Burl had thirty pounds over him, and his brown body had been toughened by constant outdoor labor. As Street's fist sank for the third time into Patch's belly he realized the results of his hammering would prove as futile as though he jabbed repeatedly into a feather mattress.

Burl was getting his second wind. He charged down fresh, with his arms flailing and his guard still wide open. If he ever connected one of those blows, Jim realized an ox would go to its knees under such a terrific impact. He backed slowly, working easily from the balls of his feet. His only hope lay in breaking through those swinging fists and driving continuous blows in.

They moved closer to the circle of men. He was conscious of a guttural warning from one of the drivers. "Stand up to 'im," the wagoner chortled.

Jim thought he saw opportunity. He stepped in nicely and planted a hard fist to the side of the wagon-boss's face. The pain ran clean back to his elbow as the blow crashed home, but the only effect he could see to his adversary was a rocking to one side. Burl shook himself and came charging in with murder in his eyes.

He tried to dodge away from those pitiless blows but his foot slipped in the sand, and something as unyielding as a wagon box collided with his face. He was conscious of falling through space until the earth brought him up short.

"That's enough. Don't try anything more."

It was Lavender's voice. It came from far away. Nothing mattered any more. Even the feeling of the earth spinning ceased to be important to him and a deep blackness came up to smother him.

HE OPENED his eyes to look into a wiggling pattern of pin-point lights glowing between masses of black clouds. They resolved themselves finally into stars and he found he was lying on his back between two Conestogas, staring into the cloud-filled sky.

From beyond his boots a dull red glow wavered before his vision. He sat upright and pulled himself to the side of a wheel. The movement sent pain jabbing through his temples. His injured hand was numb and little needles worked through his fingers. Someone had bound a clean white linen about the wound in his arm. Seeing the bandage brought his mind into instant focus. Norah!

Then he made out her figure in the circle of dejected travelers. She was seated at the edge of the shadows, on the tongue of a wagon. His mind registered the dark, lowering bulk of a man squatting on the tongue beside her. Burl was talking and staring intently into her wan face. Jim felt the blood run through him. To the victor belonged the spoils.

On Norah's opposite side sat her brother, staring absently into the shadows. He would remain close to his idol. And yet, tonight, Jim's heart flowed with thankfulness that Gerald Price sat beside his sister.

Nearer to him, and hunkered down on his heels, sat the buckskin-garbed Lavender. Street found himself wondering for the hundredth time about the scout. He was a deadly man, apparently loyal to the wagon-boss beyond all question. And yet what was it about Phil's face that seemed at times to offer mute assurance? He recalled the words that had come through just as unconsciousness had claimed him. Phil had intervened and saved him.

No, he was wrong—Patch had dared go no further without danger of alienating himself from Norah. Lavender was Burl's right hand, commuting his every wish into accomplished law. To buck the will of Patch was to call down the wrath of this long-faced giant who wore his guns and knives openly about his waist.

Tonight Lavender's mood was dark. The somber lines of the long profile showed plainly as he looked upon the low fire. Some underhand, death-dealing move could be expected from him at the first opportunity.

Jim saw Patch stand by the wagon tongue and hook his thumbs into his belt. "Let's have music," the wagon-boss said sharply. "Boy, get your squeeze box."

Norah's hand ran out and touched his arm. "Not tonight, Burl," she begged.

"Tonight's the night for it. The men are tired; the womenfolk jumpy. It'll do a heap of good."

Lavender had lifted his head. He said now, more as a question than as a contradiction to his boss: "The redskins, Burl?"

"Bah! They know we're here anyhow. We've got guards out. Let 'em know the white man is sure of his medicine!"

A gangling, plaid-shirted youngster had run into the shadows at Burl's command. He came back now into the firelight carrying his battered instrument. A few introductory notes wafted into the breeze.

"Make it lively," Burl ordered and the boy squeezed out a dance number. Burl turned to talk with Norah, but found she had vanished into the shadows. He, too, melted into the dark, stepping in the direction of her wagon.

The wagoners sat silent for a time, their moods not tuned to the music and at first irritated by it. But presently Jim noted some of them began to beat the ground with their thick-soled boots. One by one they commenced to hum. Within a few minutes they would be dancing. If Burl would be so foolish to allow the bottles out, they would be tilted constantly through this night.

Jim could watch no longer. Something within him revolted and he drew himself to his feet and walked to the end of the Conestoga. The train had been moved to higher ground while he had lain unconscious. Along the river bottom he could distinguish a dark fringe of elms and oaks and sycamores that lined the east bank of the river, silhouetted by the dark sky.

Closer, he could see the remains of the wagon that had been abandoned. It looked macabre and desolate, standing alone in the chalky starlight. He felt himself drawn to it. His heavy steps led downward through the loose sand. He must have one final look over this scene of devastation before they pushed onward into the West.

The oxen still lay where they had fallen. Even as he approached the scurrying shadows of wolves melted into the dark night. He drew himself to the tail gate and peered into the burned-out interior. What could be salvaged had already been removed from the box. Nothing remained but twisted iron and ashes.

On the sand beside the tail gate he found the Price plow. Already hauled a thousand miles, it would lie like this and disintigrate into the soil. For a while it would be a monument to the man who had given up his home in hope and faith and with fresh vision.

Then his eyes sought the darkness beneath the wagon. He reached down and drew forth a thin, flat object from the sand. It was a book. Even in the weak starlight he could read the dog-eared title page. He discovered the volume to be by Hall J. Kelly, the Boston school-master, writing of Oregon. Kelly had written of a good land where peace and a measure of security could be won. A queer feeling touched at his chest. So now he understood the motivating force that had drawn Norah and her family into the West. Unfortunately, before he had reached this land, Alden had found a violent ending.

He was about to toss the volume beneath the wagon when a thought came to him. He reached into his pocket and found there the bills he had won from the younger Price. He placed them in the center of the volume, and carried it with him up the slope.

Burl had prevailed over Norah and she was pressed against his chest, dancing. She was dancing, Jim realized, as an example for the frightened caravan, hoping to restore the shattered confidence of the womenfolk. She was a brave soul.

But her head hung heavy as she stepped listlessly to the tunes of the accordian.

He moved silently to the tail gate of her wagon. His tent, he saw, was here within Norah's wagon, leaning against an oaken

chest of drawers. His revolver belt, too. lay on her bed. He reached inside after it. A warm flood passed through him as he turned away, leaving Alden's book placed carefully on the pillow of her bed.

CHAPTER THREE

Twisted Trails of Destiny

THE CLOUDS were coming down closer to the earth and they brought a feeling of closeness to the air. He drew together the blanket they had spread for him and walked with it slowly back into the darkness. He had no desire to lie there and watch Norah dancing in Patch's beefy arms.

He spread his bed beneath a half dead elm and was about to stretch out, when movement in the sand arrested his attention. His fingers reached for the revolving Colt. He had fired it but once—at a buffalo bull—and so far as he could tell the bull had paid it any attention at all. A useless thing, and if a man dropped his loaded cylinder he stood a good chance of blowing himself to kingdom come.

"Don't reach for a gun," a voice came to him out of the dark, "unless you mean to kill a man."

Phil Lavender! Jim's hand froze hard on his grip-plates. This was it, then. Burl had sent his man to finish him off while the boy played on the accordian. He saw the faint starlight catch at the man's long face; somehow the stolid features had softened. Tonight they held an odd pathos.

"I'm not ready to be killed," Lavender went on. "Put up the gun."

"I'll not die without a fight, either," Jim said, acidly.

"I saw that, Boston." A dry, humorless laugh slipped unbidden from the scout's tight lips. "I didn't come to kill you, man. When I fight I do it in the open. A man has an even break. Patch doesn't know I'm here. I came to warn you."

"You came to warn me?" Jim repeated, surprise running through him.

"Sit down, Boston. You're weak from loss of blood. Otherwise you'd have finished off Patch back there in the sand. You've got to get out of camp or he'll kill you first chance he gets. Tonight's none too soon. If you're willing I'll get your horse and call off the guards to let you through. If you ride upstream you'll cut the other crossing—the St. Joseph Road. Sooner or later you'll run into other trains and you can join one."

"I'm not leaving."

Lavender let a brief time run by. A sound came from him, like a long-drawn breath. "I was afraid of that. Well, here's luck, Boston." He turned on his heel.

"Wait a minute, Lavender. Whose interest do you represent? The train, or Patch?"

"My own," Lavender said frankly. "You won't believe that, Boston. But think. I was supposed to break the kid in last night's card game. Patch thought he could make the boy eat out of his hand and get a step closer to the girl. Did you ever hold card hands like you did last night?"

Things cleared in Jim's mind. If he'd not been so prejudiced against the scout, his phenomenal luck would have been easier to comprehend. Lavender had deliberately dealt young Gerald Price's money into his own lap. Why?

Lavender's cool, impersonal words were coming from the shadows: "You're right about the Pawnees westward of here. This is pretty far east for Pawnees—don't usually see 'em until you get beyond Grand Island. But there's a war party out there painted and feathered and waiting for a weak train to come into killing distance. If you go on with us you'll go to your death."

"You and Patch are leading the train into disaster!" Jim groaned.

"Patch, maybe, but not me. I don't even know for sure if there's enough Pawnees to do the trick."

"But why are you riding with your mouth shut if you feel as I do? There's women and kids along!"

"I told you they don't mean anything to me. They've got their husbands along, and the husbands're supposed to protect them with the hands and brains God gave them. I'm in this thing for myself, Boston."

"What do you get out of it?" Jim asked, slowly.

"Last year I was in Oregon. I'd built a home and cleared the fields. There was a good crop under way. My wife was coming up the trail to meet me. She never arrived, Boston. Her train was met by Omahas and Pawnees along the way and they scalped

her. This same Burl Patch headed the train, and he came into the Willamette with the news. Neither him nor his men knew me when I joined this party. I'm riding close to Burl in the hope of finding out what really happened and what went on before they buried her.

"I'm telling you this because you proved back there what kind of heart you've got inside you. If you let it slip and it comes back to Patch I'll kill you, Boston."

"Phil, let's side each other in this. We'll ride ahead and find out how many braves White Buffalo has in hiding. We'll know for sure if we're in for an ambush."

The scout shook his head. "I'm not interested in Indians. I'm only interested in Esther. When I find out about Patch, I'll kill him with my fists and then the Pawnees can have my hair if they want. You ride yourself."

"You won't join me against Patch?"

"I'll find out about Esther, first. I fight alone, Boston."

The sound of the dancing died away and Lavender disappeared into the blackness. Jim heard a few muffled footsteps in the sand and then silence. He sank onto his blanket, too tired to stand any longer. His horse, he realized, would shake him out of the saddle. He was in no condition to ride a dozen miles all by himself into hostile country.

And then a flood of wild thoughts poured through his brain. Norah was heading into almost certain destruction, along with the train. But he would be with her! He tried to accept the same stoic indifference that hung about Lavender. But it was hard against the background of wolves howling in a circle not far from the encampment.

IN THE DEAD of night a steady rain commenced. Exhausted as he was, Street slept it through and awoke in the morning aching in limb but refreshed. Already the sound of the braying of mules and the clank of chains was filling the air. He walked into camp and found a sorry-faced gathering about each mess.

Patch and Lavender were eating close to the Price wagon. Discreetly he selected another mess on the far side of the encampment. Shallow-faced women—their hair damp and stringy and their rough homespun hanging shapelessly—ran about like scratching hens. No fires could be started. Keziah Pritchard offered him a slice of uncooked pork, between layers of a stale biscuit.

The train elected to push on for the higher ground between the Blue and the Platte Rivers. Better to face the gruelling labors of mud than to lie around worrying over the possibilities of imminent attack. Although as far as he could discover, the train held to the opinion the redskins would not attack while it was raining.

The road continued westward in horrible condition. Extra oxen and mules were hitched to the wagons, and men pulled at the wheels and kept the caravan rolling. The canvas covers were waterlogged and lay in a soggy mass upon their bows. The outriders, wearing coats and rubber coverings, trudged sour-faced through the downpour. They could not hope to cover many miles today.

Toward noon the rain stopped and the sun came out, but the endless road ran on, flat and wet and muddy.

Shortly after the nooning Patch rode ahead himself to find a suitable campsite. The train trudged on, men and women afoot, lifting the heavy wains from the mire while young children held the reins and coaxed the tired animals. Jim's brows lifted when young Price rode closer on a mud-splattered pony. Like himself, Price had been knee-deep in mire all morning yanking at wheels. Surprisingly, the lad was taking this tough going in good stride.

"Norah's been keeping me humping," he grinned lopsidedly and pointed with outthrust arm. "Wagon in trouble."

They rode stirrup to stirrup toward a veritable lake by the side of the trail where a solitary Conestoga floundered in a sea of mud. Beside it, the driver stood in mire that ran well above the ankles, swinging his bull whip in an endeavor to urge the oxen to greater effort. So begrimed was the wagon's sheeting that young Price himself failed to recognize it. When they neared he let out a laugh.

"Blast me! Look who 'tis. It's Sis!"

The figure in the mud proved to be Norah. Mud dripped from her boots and her short skirts, and a smudge of grease lay across her homespun blouse. They rode up and she yelled to her animals and cracked her whip.

Then she heard their approach and she turned, eyes showing quick anger. She tugged a loose strand of hair that had fallen from under her slouch hat and all the fury in her directed itself against the straining oxen. Was she mad at these gaunt beasts, Jim wondered, or angry that he should see her so?

She said, haughtily, "Get away with you, Jerry. I don't need help from any man."

Price laughed as they hitched onto the forepart of the mired wagon. "We been loosening rigs for most every other female in the train," he chuckled. "Can't see any reason why we should let you sit for the Pawnees."

"I'll pull out my own wagon," she insisted stubbornly.

Jim's mouth lifted as he tied his rope fast to his saddle horn. Even her anger had been unable to erase the deep, clear beauty of her face. He thrilled to her courage. A woman to stir the blood of any man, and make him a comfortable fireside once they reached the new country.

They touched their horses with their boots and Norah cracked the wet backs with her whip. They felt the heavy wagon ease out of its bog and slowly regain the firmer ruts of the trail. He turned in his saddle then for a look at her. The glow in his eyes warmed his face.

"I'd have done it myself," she insisted. "No mud can stop me. I didn't ask you to do it."

He looked beyond the trail stains that lay on her face, and saw the quality of what lay beneath. The mold of her nose and chin possessed rugged determination. And the frank openness of her eyes was to him something that could still the hunger of his soul. He rode nearer. The rise and fall of her young bosom beneath the homespun became rapid.

"I'll give you something else you didn't ask for, Norah," he said.

With his good arm he lifted her to his stirrup. For the moment she fought him, with her hands wound in his shirt. Then the warmness of her mouth was against his own, and he felt the fight and the anger ebb out of her. The blood of youth was surging through him.

He said simply, "Norah, Darling."

"Jim, Jim!" she whispered. "I'm wondering, would you have left the book had I not spoken about it to you, and asked?"

He lifted his eyes and saw that she was looking straight into his face. "What do you think?"

"Jim, I knew, of course. The woman in me had to ask!"

A flanker came spurring up, splashing mud as he came. "Break it up," Lavender shouted as he pulled down beside them. "Patch is comin', across that hummock yonder. You ain't well enough to take another thrashing, yet!" There was laughter in his eyes.

Jim helped Norah to a wheel and watched while she sprang to her seat. He had been alone and floundering in a sea as hopeless as the one from which he had just drawn her wagon. He knew now their destiny lay together—Westward across the hills.

Keziah Pritchard drove past in her high-wheeled craft. Her old man was trudging lamely through the mud afoot, flaying at the oxen with his leather. There was a gleaming across Keziah's wrinkled face, as though she had recently witnessed a sin.

Then Jim's eyes ran beyond, to Patch beating his horse across the swells.

CHAPTER FOUR

Smoke Signals

IT WAS a wet camp that night. No music and no dancing, and the fires smouldered from the dampness of the wood. The feel of Indians was present with every man and darkened his mood as the dusk came down.

Ezra Pritchard ran toward camp from the horse pasture. He yelled through his trumpeted hands.

"Some mules missing. Patch needs men to hunt for tracks."

Jim's horse stood picketed beside his tent. He swung immediately into his saddle and faced a scowling Lavender topping a tall sorrel. "Indians don't want mules," the scout grumbled.

Jim hutched a shoulder. "They've got us by the hair if they get our stock."

"All the same, you ride hawk-eyed, Boston," Lavender warned.

They rode out toward the pasture where the animals had been held in the lush spring grass, under guard. Jim could see at least half the caravan men spaced about the cavvyard, their eyes recurrently casting into

the dusk that was settling about them. Soon the tired, gaunted animals would be turned from their feed and brought in closer to the camp.

Far to his left he made out a thin line of trees that marked a stream. Two other horsemen were bearing toward it. His eyes instinctively ran to the ground, but the soil was soft and retained a criss-cross pattern of many animals. He bore further to the east than the other horsemen, still scanning the grass and drifting apart from Lavender who rode upstream.

He surprised himself when he cut the sign of four mules heading for the stream. Overlapping their prints were the clear marks of a horse's shoes. Some other man of the train, then, was already following the strayed mules, for the feet of Indian ponies were unshod. He slapped his horse with the end of his rein, expecting any moment to see a member of the caravan hazing the mules out from the scrub timber.

Yet he entered the motte of young elms before he found the animals, and then he spied them bunched together in a narrow clearing beside the stream. There was no sign of other horsemen. Night was coming down fast and he hurriedly pierced the darkness under the trees. Suspicion that he had been trapped built quickly in him. Patch had baited his trap cleverly, and he had stepped into it like a perfect coney.

His hand ran impulsively to the Walker cap-and-ball riding his belt. Yet he failed to draw the weapon. Acting as though he were being pulled by some invisible string, he stepped from his saddle and moved toward the timber.

The sudden action was all that saved his life. He never heard the shot that crashed. He was conscious only of something running across his temple like a hot iron and then for a second time within a few hours his world grew dark . . .

He came to hours later with fingers of fear gripping him. A cold sweat stood over his body. What was it that had awakened him and at the same time startled him?

He bolted upright and looked through the pattern of branches that waved above his face. It was then that his blood ran cold with shock. He found himself staring into a patch of moonlight sifting through the branches. In bold relief it picked out the vermillion streaked faces of a party of Pawnees. Breathlessly he sat riveted to his seat while the procession wended its slow way upstream.

They carried lances and bows and quivers filled with shafts across their backs. Some few held old trapper's rifles and the early muskets of the traders, and in the hands of one stolid warrior he discovered the long rifle of the mountain man.

All had their heads shaven except for the tuft of scalp lock on the crown. One, riding a magnificent pony with white powder in its mane, had fastened to his scalp lock a red crest made from the hair of a deer's tail. Surmounting this he wore his eagle's quill. A buffalo robe lay about his shoulders, but his chest was bare and upon it was painted the white buffalo.

The old chief himself, marshalling his forces in preparation for an attack! White Buffalo, who had struck relentlessly at his foe these dozen years in retalliation for the small pox epidemic that had ravaged his tribe. Through the carelessness of the white trappers, half of White Buffalo's people had been exterminated, and for this White Buffalo could never lay down the lance.

Spellbound Jim Street looked through his screen and counted the red bodies disappearing to the west. When the last padding sound of ponies' hoofs had died on the air, he shook himself and crawled to his knees.

His own injuries remained neglected. He was conscious only of the dizziness that ran through his head. He lifted his hand to his temple and found a long welt that throbbed beneath the lightest touch. Burl's bullet had not broken the skin—another quarter of an inch would have crushed his skull. He shuddered as he crawled from beneath the brush.

He found his horse lying further back from the stream where Patch had downed him. Not even the saddle had been touched. It was plain Burl thought him dead and wanted only to be sure the animal could never return to the caravan. By morning it would be too late for investigation. Patch knew this. By some signal he had understood that White Buffalo would attack with the dawn!

Again Jim drew back, holding his breath. The fresh padding of hoofs came to his ears and he drew the pistol from his belt.

The moonlight was laying a white streak

between the trees, and through this lane he saw Gerald Price knee his pony. Price had discovered his tracks and followed them by moonlight. Curiosity tugged at him as he stepped into view and watched the youth sawing back on his reins. What happened next came too fast for him to understand. The rider was out of saddle and pressed in his arms. It was not Gerald who had ridden the paint, but Norah.

"Don't talk or sob," he whispered into her hair. "The trees are filled with Pawnees."

She ignored his warning, speaking into his shirt, "I stole his horse. And these clothes while he slept. Shameful!"

"Not shameful—bewitching, in the moonlight, Norah," he told her softly.

For a time longer he stood and held her at his side. All the while his mind was running ahead, weighing possibilities and discarding them. Four marches westward was Parks—the closest certain point from which they might expect aid.

Yet what was it Lavender had tried to tell him the other night? The St. Joseph crossing! Occasional trains crossed the plains here in order to save a little of the monotonous prairie. His luck had been prodigal thus far. Gambler that he was, his code had ever been to press his luck while it ran. Norah was speaking again, barely above a whisper:

"They came into camp and told how you had gone after the mules. We all heard the shots, and Burl said that the Pawnees had gotten you. But I wouldn't believe. Never, Jim. It couldn't be! It was Gerald's watch and while Patch and Lavender were quarreling I climbed into his clothes and rode away. The incoming guards let me pass."

"I've got to get you out of here!"

The river below them might be alive with redskins. Their only hope lay to the east. All of life was a gamble. He lead her back to her paint and helped her on the animal's back. The saddle boot carried a rifle, he saw. He handed her his cap-and-ball and drew the long gun from its sheath. Slowly, yet with the constant crackling of twigs underfoot, he lead the paint along the winding course of the tiny stream.

AN HOUR drew itself out. The strain upon their nerves became almost unendurable. Each dark clump held its nest of savages, waiting to count *coup*. In his imagination it was not he, but Norah, who died a thousand times that night. He looked up once at her face and it was a white oval above his shoulder.

"Will you be going back to the cities," she asked in a broken whisper. "Ever, Jim?"

He shook his head, soberly. "Our future lies over the hills. Westward, to Oregon, where Alden had set his course, that's where we must go."

Her hand touched his arm and the fingers tightened. "I'm glad," she sighed. "It must be a good land. Don't let's ever leave it."

What had been her train of thoughts, Jim pondered, while he had fretted over redskins? Her mind had been at work with their future, striving to find some fundamental and stable point to cling to.

Another hour dragged by before the sky became streaked in the far east. Trees commenced to take on form and shape in the gray half light of dawn. The sound of the flowing of a heavier body of water came to them, and then they stepped into the water of the Big Blue. At that precise moment the far away rattle of rifles reached them.

Norah stiffened in the saddle. "Hark, Jim! They've struck the wagons!"

Tight-jawed, he headed the pony upstream. His mind had long since been made up. He would lead her as far as the St. Joseph crossing and here he would point her along the trail where other wagons must soon be met. He himself would be returning to the doomed caravan. Thoughts of the youngsters with their sun-bleached hair crowded all else from his mind. He only hoped he might not arrive too late.

"Jim, Jim! We must go back! Those helpless little imps who used to jump over the wagons! Jim, do you hear me?"

The same thoughts were crowding into Norah's mind. Blindly he drew her pony onward, almost running now in his haste to reach the crossing. A silence had fallen over the prairie. In his mind's eye he could see the caravan with its veil of gunsmoke almost as plainly as though it lay before him. The first wave had been beaten back. The red savages would be rallying into the hills to reform, gathering their dead and wounded as they retreated. But how many

white men lay in their blood beneath the wagons?

"Jim! Turn back!" She was calling desperately now.

There was a note of complete finality in her voice that Jim could no longer ignore. They broke into the rutted marks of the upper crossing and here he turned to face her. A grave sobriety had dropped over his features.

"Norah, there's no place I can hide you. Some Pawnee tracker's no doubt reading our trail already. You've got to ride as fast as the paint will carry you. You've got to get out of here fast!"

"Never!"

"You're bound to fetch another train yonder."

"You forget I have a brother with the wagons. I can shoot a gun as fast as those other women!"

He saw the determination written across her face. There could be no arguing the daughter of Alden Price out of her decision. She had the horse, and any way he looked at it she was the master of the situation. Her head nodded, and he knew she was reading his thoughts.

"I'd only ride back to the train, while you were on foot. The sensible thing for us both is to ride as far as the pony can carry double. Hurry, Jim, they need us. We must get there soon!"

Grimly he nodded. He said quietly, "First, Norah, we'll send up a smoke. If there are trains on the St. Jo road they may see it."

He gathered some of last season's dry grass and twigs from the bank of the Blue, and then stooped and struck a sulphurous match. His little pile caught and flared brightly and the smoke was prodigious. Again they could hear the rattling of rifles —waves of shots as volley after volley was fired. He looked at Norah and her face was strained and white. He knew his own must be somewhat the same.

She helped him hold his jacket while together they sent aloft their balls of smoke. Three times he sent them aloft. If there were frontier men among that train they could ride close enough to catch the sound of the firing. He caught Norah's look as he helped her to the back of the pony. She was thinking the same as he—*if there was another train. . . .*

CHAPTER FIVE

Last Long Gamble

HIS MIND was still set on leaving her safe behind in some slough before he charged into the circle of Pawnees lancing at their wagons. They entered a draw about a half mile distant from the besieged train. He looked about him at the clustered brush. It was made to order. He was certain the redmen were unaware of their approach.

He was about to tell her she must hide herself here with the pistol he had given her, when a blurred movement caught his attention over the lip of the draw. It multiplied itself by three and an instant later he found himself staring into the paint-streaked faces of three savages. Naked surprise ran across their hideous countenances. For the instant they were too taken aback to wield their weapons.

He recovered first and swung Alden's rifle across the pommel and pressed the trigger. The discharge sent the weapon back into his stomach, and he realized with bitter chagrin that he had fired in haste and missed his Indian. His horse, driven half from its wits by the redskins and by the discharge, weaved crazily up the side of the draw. By this time the Pawnees had recovered and their shafts were singing through the air after them. The wildness of their pony alone saved them.

Then Jim heard the cap-and-ball bark from Norah's hand. Twice he saw a savage lurch forward and fall with his arms about his pony's neck. She missed with the remaining charges, but he saw the third Pawnee kick his snorting animal out of range of this white woman who held the power of lightning in the palm of her hand.

They went racing across the brown grass toward the wagon park, with the shouts of the braves ringing in their ears. The whites had just broken another charge and straggling remnants of the circle were still riding in close and gathering their dead. With half the Pawnee war party looking their way, they had nothing to do but charge across the intervening prairie and attempt to join the train.

Norah's arms were wound about his wrist and in one of her hands she still gripped his cap-and-ball. She shouted now in his ear, "Jim, take the pistol before I drop it."

Her voice had an odd timbre. The sight of two redskins spilling off their saddle pads had proved too much for her. There was a tightness of her arms about his middle, and then he again heard her voice crashing in his ear:

"Jerry and I practiced together back home, before we left. If I hadn't used one of those things a good deal we'd both of us be without our hair, Jim Street."

He'd had the actual proof of what Sam Colt's weapon could do and he nodded mutely. They were entering the outer perimeter of the Pawnees and a dozen braves had spied them and were kicking their ponies towards them.

But the wagons had seen them also. He could see the white smoke of the breech loaders beneath the wagons and puffs of dust lifting between the feet of the Indian ponies. He drove his heels into the paint's sides and, with Norah, leaned forward over the pony's neck.

They made it with a margin of safety, and the wagoners closed about them helping Norah down. Everywhere women were loading rifles in frantic haste, scarcely looking up. Men lay beneath wagons. Some, with red bandages, waved at him and grimaced through their powder-blackened beards. Others would never fight again.

Ezra Pritchard, too, lay beneath his wagon bed, a sodden patch of red spreading over his hickory shirt. Keziah knelt grimly with her husband's rifle clutched in her hands, and a diabolical gleam lighting her pinched face. She nodded thinly as Jim's glance lingered on the stricken figure. He read from her gesture that Ezra would live.

He made out Patch and Lavender at the far end of the wagons. Patch was climbing to his feet from beneath a wagon and the scout was shouting. Burl paid him no attention but continued walking toward them, his eyes held on Norah. Lavender took one step closer and swung a fist that held a pistol barrel. It connected with the side of Burl's head, and the wagon boss went down in his tracks like a sack of grain.

"Get back to your posts!" Lavender yelled. "The red killers'll be back directly!"

Jim thumped down a ball in Alden's rifle and walked closer to the scout. "You fighting Indians?" he drawled.

Phil's mouth was a straight line across his face. His eyes met Jim's for a fleeting instant. "There's young kids along who oughta be in a schoolroom," he said. "What the hell else can a man do?"

"Patch?"

"Burl showed his hand last night after Norah changed places with her brother. He raved like a madman when he found out she was gone, and I found out about Esther. I'd kill him now only we need his gun this minute killin' the red men."

The Pawnees came again chanting their war songs and yelling like demons. A good many had rifles, and their lead whined through the enclosure. Others sent their shafts screaming through the wagon canvas and Jim saw the heads of others cut into the wooden beds. The arrow heads were wrapped with elk sinew, the custom with the Pawnees.

He shot his rifle and saw a saddle pad suddenly empty. Norah was lying at his side waiting for the empty gun. He drew his Colt and fired into the racing ponies.

This charge melted and broke. It had been but a light one to cover riders gathering their dead. The next one would carry all the weight the Pawnees could throw into the fight. He glanced hurriedly around the enclosure. Already half the men were out of the fight and the women were taking their places. The next charge would be the last the Pawnee need make.

As he looked he saw Patch draw himself between a barricade of boxes filling a gap between wagon tongues. Patch was shouldering his brass-bound Hawkins rifle. A cold moisture came to Jim's palms. The wagon boss was aiming at someone inside the enclosure. He had no time to look behind him to discover what Burl's target might be. He took hasty aim with his cap-and-ball and pulled the trigger.

The hammer fell on an exploded cap. He heard the roar of Patch's gun and at the same time the corner of his eye picked out Gerald Price leaping in with his hands wrapped about the barrel of a breech loader. He brought it clubbing down in a terrific arc and Burl's head opened like a shell before his eyes.

Behind him there was a scuffling sound on the ground. He turned and found Lavender fighting to lift himself to his knees. He sprang to Phil's side.

"Watch Patch," the scout gasped with blood-filmed lips. He did not know the

wagon boss already lay dead in another part of the camp. "He was going to run out with Norah and leave us here to fight the red devils alone. Only—she—beat him to it."

Phil's head dropped against the crook of his arm. He was conscious of another figure stalking beside them. He glanced up and saw young Price. A look of full manhood had come to the youngster in these past minutes. Fighting Indians could bring out the full true measure of a man—either the good or the bad.

Gerald Price was ringing the wagon train with his gaze. "If they hit us again we'll be hard pressed," Gerald said.

THEY came after two hours—two hours during which they left the train to fret and worry over the next moves.

In that time the train also had time to dig in deeper beneath their wagons. Jim Street would allow no man to worry in the waiting. He and the son of Alden Price had been everywhere fanning the slim faith of the wagoners and bolstering the courage of their womenfolk.

Now when they came, the red warriors drove in with an air of confidence that struck terror into the bravest heart. Fire arrows fell amid the enclosure and already half a dozen wagons were blazing in the hot sun.

They met the point-blank fire of the pioneers and drove on through it. Spellbound, Jim watched Keziah squeeze her trigger and miss her Pawnee at twenty yards. He screamed his blood-curdling war song and raced between the wagons flourishing his axe as he came.

She leaped from the ground and flung her long rifle end over end at him. It struck him in the temple and he went down across the tongue. She was on top of him instantly, wielding a butcher knife that had come from her waistband. Jim felt his face blanch whiter as Keziah made a slash with the blade and came up holding a scalp lock dripping with Pawnee blood.

Such fighting spirit was not easy to quell. Everywhere he saw the lean, gaunted men of the caravan fighting with their knives at the fringe of the enclosure, while their womenfolk and children ran fresh charges into the barrels of hot rifles.

His own Whitney rifle was freshly loaded. He thrust it over the top of a trunk now, and the first thing he saw through his sights was the powdery white mane of a horse. His blood leaped faster. The rider topping this animal had shed his buffalo robe and Jim recognized the shining, bronzed shoulders of White Buffalo.

It was a long shot across the heat swells and the dust and the smoke that rolled across the prairie. But with a rifle he considered himself a good shot, and this rifle was an accurate one. He drew the trigger lightly and took the kick of the stock as the .52 calibre ball went spinning across the distance. He saw the white pony of the Pawnee chief go down in a mushrooming cloud of dust.

Before the dust blew clear he was conscious of other sounds. About him men were shouting and women laughing and praying. He glanced over them quickly and looked again into the prairie before he understood. Topping a rim were the dark outlines of a score of riders charging in from the east. A thought hammered in through his brain even as he sent a fresh charge into the chamber of his rifle. The men of a caravan using the St. Joseph road had seen his signal. The Pawnees were withdrawing under the murderous cross fire.

He had pressed his luck to the limit. It had held. Fortune had been good and he had won. It would be his last gamble, he told himself. When Norah and he arrived along the Willamette he would go into something—freighting or logging or portage. But weren't all these things a gamble? Life itself was that.

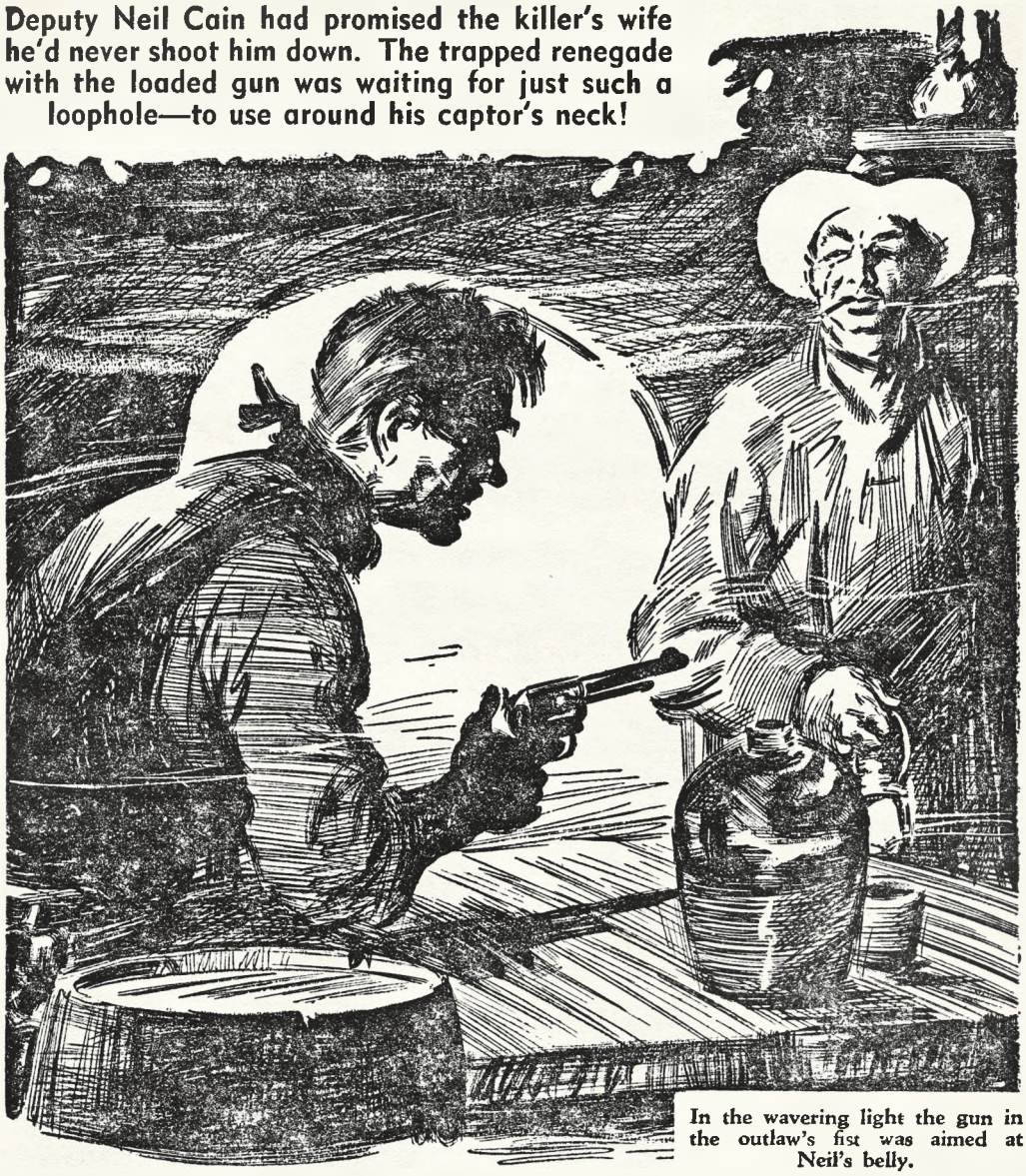
She was at his side, running her hand down into his. He could feel her fingers trembling now that the fighting was over. And then he saw the color flood her cheeks. He followed her glance and saw that she was looking at Keziah Pritchard.

He could almost read what was going between these two. Norah had spent part of a night with him, away from the camp. Norah's lips now held a slight lifting around their edges and her voice was somewhat tantalizing. "Don't worry, Keziah," she said, "I am going to marry him when we reach Fort John."

The fingers inside his hand had stopped trembling.

THE END

Deputy Neil Cain had promised the killer's wife he'd never shoot him down. The trapped renegade with the loaded gun was waiting for just such a loophole—to use around his captor's neck!



In the wavering light the gun in the outlaw's fist was aimed at Neil's belly.

SLOW DRAW— QUICK COFFIN!

By KENNETH FOWLER

DEPUTY SHERIFF NEIL CAIN met the challenge of Sheriff Dan Bentley's steady blue eyes, then rose from his chair in Bentley's office and walked to the window. He stared out for a long moment before he turned, finally, and said: "Probably just another grapevine rumor, Dan. We been gettin' a heap of 'em

lately. Got so it's hard to tell what's really so an' what's just fiddle-faddle."

Bentley, a wiry, grizzled little man, getting creaky in the joints and ready to admit it, scowled up at his deputy, then tugged at his scrawny gray mustaches and somberly shook his head.

"Wire come just this mornin', Neil—from Sheriff Breen, over in Cattelo County. Breen had a posse after him, but they lost his sign up in the Blue Smokes. Only decent trail out o' them mountains leads this way—right spang inta Buckhook County. You kin savvy well enough why Pierce might cut down here towards Privilege, I reckon."

A slow flush stained Neil Cain's lean, high-boned face under the old man's steady scrutiny.

"He wouldn't dare take the chance, Dan. He wouldn't come near Molly's."

Dan Bentley snorted. "Hell he wouldn't, if he needed grub bad, or was mebbe wounded."

"I still think you're barkin' up the wrong tree, Dan. Cad Pierce never wore any deep tracks around here, except to the saloons and gamblin' joints. He don't know the high-line trails. He ain't no fool, either. Buckhook County'd be the last place he'd come to, he was lookin' for a spot to hole up."

The old man's eyes stabbed up at him keenly. "That what you really think, son—or what you *want* to think?" For a moment, his glance remained a deliberate pressure upon the face of his deputy; then his voice softened to a subdued earnestness. "We been workin' together a long time, Neil—six years, come September. We been quite a team. When I quit, next November, I want to see you steppin' into my boots. You've earnt the job, and I kind of been pullin' some wires. You're gonna be the next sheriff of Buckhook County, Neil. An' you'll make a good one."

Neil spoke against the sudden tightness crawling up in his throat. "I appreciate all you've done for me, Dan. Wasn't for you and Ma Bentley—after dad died—"

"Hogwash!" The old lawman glanced away in sudden embarrassment. Then, with a crotchety abruptness, his glance swerved back to the tight face of his deputy. "You know what I'm hazin' it around to, Neil. You never made no secret how you felt about Molly—that is, not before Cad—"

Neil cut in flatly: "What you mean is, for the sake of Molly I might shut my eyes—if Cad Pierce did turn up around here."

Dan Bentley's voice drove back sharply: "Mebbe she's worth more to you than the sheriff's job, Neil; mebbe she ain't. Whichever, she's still married to Cad, and you know the kind of gossip gits booted around in a town like this." He rose suddenly and stepped around the desk, gripping Neil Cain's shoulder with a stubby-fingered hand. "Hell's shuckins, son, you know what I'm thinkin' of most. It's you. You and your future."

Neil's words spurted tightly. "You've gone this far. You might as lief go the whole hog, Dan."

Dan Bentley snorted. "Hell, I don't have to write it out, do I? Suppose Cad Pierce *is* headin' this way, with the loot of that Red Butte Stage Line robbery in his saddlebags? Suppose you git back that eight thousand in gold eagles for Wells Fargo—and git Cad Pierce in the bargain? You'd be a big auger in this County, Neil. Hell's shuckins, they wouldn't even need count the votes, come election!"

"Come election," said Neil Cain stonily, "maybe you'll have another candidate to vote for. I'll hand in my resignation now, Dan, you want it."

Dan Bentley's fist banged the desk top. "Hand it in then, hand it in! By gory, I'll hand it back so fast it'll make your head rattle!" He controlled himself with an effort. "Look, son, all I'm askin' you to do is think this over. You know where Cad Pierce is li'ble to go, he gits this far. And as far as Molly's concerned—hell's shuckins, you ain't worryin' about a happy reunion between them two, I hope!"

Neil Cain moved to the door, his gray eyes pinched bleakly. He paused there, glanced back. "I reckon if Cad did show up in these parts, I'd think about Molly first, then the job. You laid it on the line how you feel, Dan. That's the way I feel."

"That's how you *think* you feel," snapped Dan Bentley. "But mebbe I know you better'n you know yourself, Neil. That's how *I* feel. And now you fog outta here before I git any more hell in my neck and give you a boot to kick your brains straight!"

A half hour later, Neil Cain found him-

self on the trail that led to Molly Pierce's little Short Arrow ranch, in the Blue Smoke foothills. But he didn't hurry his grulla, for he wanted time to think, time to organize his churning thoughts into some kind of orderly, functional pattern. Yet all the time he knew the pattern was there, unchanging and changeless; his thoughts were furiously stitching a fuzzy border around it, but this didn't alter its essential outline, could never alter it.

It didn't seem as if it could have been two years ago, that night he had first met Molly—Molly Hannaford, then—at the schoolhouse hoedown. But he had come into the picture too late. Cad Pierce, a newcomer to the Blue Smokes country, had eased into it ahead of him. Cad had just bought Short Arrow, which had never been any more than a little three-up outfit, but he'd talked mighty big about it, trying to cut a rusty with Molly Hannaford.

He, Neil, had twice been on the verge of expressing his feelings to Molly, but each time his innate shyness had throttled the words before he could nerve himself to speak them. Cad, not handicapped in this respect, was brash, impulsive, confident. He had slick-talked Molly Hannaford into quitting her teacher's job, and she had married him.

It never occurred to Neil until later that Molly might never have guessed the true depth of his feelings towards her. When it did occur to him, it was too late. Then she was Mrs. Cad Pierce, and the shock of that had hit him like a blow in the belly.

Twice, during that first year of his marriage to Molly, Cad had made long, unexplained visits away from Short Arrow. And each time, upon his return, he had seemed to have money to burn. And he had burned it—at Sid Winkleman's monte tables, in Privilege. Then, a year ago, Cad had disappeared again, and had not returned. "Business," Molly had tersely told her friends. "Cad is away on business." But by then, reports had begun to seep back into town. Holdups, robberies, killings. And soon there was no longer any hope of concealing it from anyone. Cad Pierce had turned outlaw. And he had deserted his pretty wife.

But if Cad Pierce's streak was badness, Molly Pierce's was pride and stubbornness. Never by word or gesture did she indicate that she believed the stories now being openly circulated about her husband. And she had held her head as high as ever.

She had taken a job at Dolores Sanchez's Bon Ton Millinery in Privilege, and from time to time Neil Cain had seen and talked with her. He had scrupulously avoided any mention of Cad, and so had she. But he had known, then, that it wasn't approval of Cad that had held her silent; it was her rigid pride which would not let her admit her impulsive marriage had been a mistake.

NOW, topping a rise in the trail, he saw the low white ranch house where Molly Pierce still lonesomely made her home and he thought again of Dan Bentley's words: "Whichever, she's still married to Cad, and you know the kind of gossip gits booted around in a town like this."

He did know, but the little ranch he had inherited from his father lay only two miles beyond the Pierce place, and stopping off here occasionally to talk with Molly had been a compulsion he had been unable to suppress. Yet he knew the hopelessness of his feelings, as far as Molly Pierce was concerned. She had always been friendly enough, when he had made these visits. But it was a careful and guarded kind of friendliness, although there were times when he had sensed a deeper feeling in her—intangible, and unexpressed—yet running behind her words like a dark and hesitant current.

He swung the grulla down off the trail now into the weed-grown ranch yard, and as he did, the front door opened and Molly Pierce stepped out on the low-roofed veranda. He drew his breath in sharply at the sight of her, as he always did, as—he knew with deep conviction at this moment—he would always do

For, while Molly Pierce had changed physically in these last two years, had become thin-cheeked and habitually pale-looking, the pallor seemed to accent her frail loveliness, and her dark beauty was as breath-taking as ever.

She had on a neat, simple dress of dark blue gingham, which blended well with the jet hair she wore in a glossy coil at the nape of her neck, and her hazel eyes, gray-tinged faintly with a warm, soft green, were large and vivid under silky dark lashes.

She stared at him blankly, almost star-

tledly, as he swung down from the grulla and walked forward to the veranda. And when she spoke he felt an undercurrent of strain in her low, usually unhurried voice.

"Why, Neil! This *is* Saturday, isn't it? I thought this was the day deputy sheriffs had to stay in town in case the curly wolves get howling too loudly."

It wasn't like her to be flippant, and now the nervous little laugh that followed her words—laughter at nothing—was like a dull warning bell.

He said unsmilingly, "Deputies don't always stick in town, Molly," and came up on the porch, facing her. Again the feeling of foreboding was strong in him as he studied her tight face, the nervous quickness with which she pulled out a chair for him instead of inviting him into the house.

Now she was saying: "Well, I'm glad to see you anyway, Neil. Since you apparently haven't any young lady you buy hats for, I don't see much of you in town any more." The laugh came again, so flagrantly false that Neil Cain stood tracked, staring at her bluntly.

He said: "I might as well tell you straight out, Molly. Sheriff Bentley's had a wire from Joe Breen, over in Cattalo County. Cad's supposed to be headed this way. If you see him, you'd better steer him away from Short Arrow—fast."

Her hand flew up to her throat, and at that moment the staring wildness in her eyes was all Neil Cain needed to know the bald and bitter truth—Cad Pierce was already at Short Arrow. He was here—here in this house—and Molly was shielding him, was going to try and save him.

An angry tightness welled up in him then; he put his weighted glance on her and said: "He's here, isn't he, Molly?"

Her hand dropped limply to her side. "Yes. Yes, he's here, Neil."

"Then we'd better go inside."

"But—Neil! You can't—your job—"

His voice was a dry rasp. "Jobs grow on bushes. I can always get a job swamping out saloons. Where is he?"

"He—he's—oh, Neil, why did you have to come here today?"

"It was either me or Dan Bentley, Molly. We may not have much time."

"All right, Neil." Her voice dropped away hopelessly. "You'd better come in. He's in the back room, sleeping. He's been shot—his left arm. I—I don't think it's bad, but he's lost a lot of blood." Suddenly, fiercely, she reached out and gripped his arm. "Neil, why don't you go—now? Forget you ever came here. Forget—forget you ever knew me!"

He gave her a hard and deliberate glance, and thought: *I wonder if she thinks it's as easy as that.* Then he went to the door and held it open for her. "You'd better go in, Molly," he said quietly.

He waited in the living room five minutes. Presently he could hear muffled voices from the back of the house, then a sound of footsteps. The door opened, and Cad Pierce stepped into the room. His right hand, balanced negligently on his hip, was closed upon the butt of a leveled Colt.

Even now, with his left arm rockered in a sling, with the marks of exhaustion and dissipation printed deeply upon his pallid, delicately sculptured face, there was a swaggering cock-sureness in this man, a certain grace and flamboyance.

His thin, mocking voice ran at Neil softly. "Now wouldn't you know I'd pick Visitors' Day to drop in here! Howdy, Neil. Long time no see."

Neil's words detonated flatly. "You can put up that gun, Cad. You won't be needin' it today."

"Same old Neil," grinned Cad Pierce. "Good old reliable Neil. Always ready to give us Pierces a helping hand." His dark, quick eyes remained on Neil with a guarded watchfulness as he squatted on the arm of a chair, the gun still chocked in his fist, like a pointed blue finger. "Molly"—he jerked his head in a backward nod—"says you're here to give aid to the crippled and downtrodden, Neil."

"Cad!" Molly's voice was a shocked whisper, from behind him. "Cad, put up that gun! If you don't—"

"Shut up!" Cad snapped across his shoulder. "I can manage this without any help from you." His eyes were sullen, now, searching over Neil Cain. "What's the deal, Cain? There must be a joker in this someplace."

Neil Cain's voice leveled flatly. "It's no joker, Cad. I'm givin' you a chance to get out of here and go straight. But the price is eight thousand dollars. That goes back to Wells-Fargo."

"Oh, just a little item like that!" jeered

Cad Pierce. "I get a sweet goodby kiss from my pretty wife and then you step in and—"

Neil snapped: "Take it or leave it, Cad. But better make up your mind fast. Bentley knows you're here in Buckhook. There won't be no time for lallygaggin'."

"Ha! And suppose I say no? I can still ride, if I have to. This arm ain't so bad I can't—" He twisted around with a grimace of pain as Molly Pierce's voice lashed at him.

"Cad, unless you've gone completely crazy, you'll do as Neil says! He's risking his reputation—his job—" She was moving to the window now, and Cad's voice cut harshly through her words.

"Why? Why, is what I want to know." His cold glance bored at Neil Cain, hard with suspicion. "She's pretty, ain't she, Cain? Pretty as a painted wagon. But you stay away from her, you hear me? By God, if I hear of any funny business—"

Molly had the curtains of the front window parted. Abruptly she spun around, her face paste-white suddenly.

"Neil! It's Sheriff Bentley. I—I think he's coming this way. Cad—"

Cad Pierce jerked up from the chair arm. "All right, Cain. I'll take that deal." He twisted around, facing his wife. "Molly, you picket my horse down in that alder brush, where I told you?"

"Yes, yes! But you'd better hurry, Cad. The cave—the cave up under the rimrock. But hurry—please! We'll come there—as soon as it's safe."

Cad wheeled without a word and went out, and a moment later they heard the thud of the back door. There was a fading scuff of footsteps, then silence.

Molly was at the window again, peeking out tensely through the slit in the curtains. She turned suddenly. "Neil! Neil, if Dan finds you here—" Her soft eyes were pulled wide with fright, but whether this concern was for him, or for Cad Pierce, he could not tell.

He said: "You'd better calm down now, Molly. Dan won't be surprised to find me here. He'll think I've come to question you."

"Oh, Neil, why didn't you stay away! Why did I ever let you in for this!"

He took a deep breath. There was no question, this time. Those words were for him. And they left a bitter taste of ashes in his mouth. They left a taste of honey—and wormwood.

TWO hours later they met at the cave under the South Trail rimrock, and found it empty. There were no tracks, no sign of any kind. Cad Pierce had not come here.

Neil Cain's mouth knotted grimly. "He's lit a shuck, Molly."

"But he couldn't have, Neil! He was half-starved when he came to the house this forenoon. He'd never make it without help—he doesn't know these trails the way you know them. And with that wound in his arm—"

Neil Cain studied her somberly. "You'd risk everything for him, wouldn't you, Molly?"

She stared at him startledly. More startling, to Neil Cain, was the sudden passionate vehemence with which she answered him.

"I despise him! I despise him and hate him! But I've been too proud to admit I could have made a mistake. It takes honesty and courage to admit a mistake. And I—I'm just—just—" Her voice shook, shattered upon a sob.

Neil spoke quietly, wonderingly. "You have the courage to tell me—now. But if you feel that way about him, why don't you let the law take its course? Why do you have to shield him?"

"I told you I was proud, Neil. Stubbornly, selfishly proud. It was hard enough—just hearing about him—catching the sly whispers, the talk behind my back. If he'd been caught—if he'd been brought here to Privilege—"

Her voice caught. "I wanted him to get away, Neil—I wanted him to get so far away I would never hear from him again! But when he came in today—half starved, wounded—I—I guess I pitied him a little, to. He looked like a wretched dog, starved and hurt, licking its wounds. I — I couldn't—"

"I reckon we'd best be ridin' back, now," Neil suggested quietly.

They parted in front of her place, and there he reluctantly left her to backtrack two miles to the little slab-sided ranch house where he had spent his somber boyhood. He had never known his mother; she had

died when he was still a baby; when he had been only fourteen, his father had been thrown by a locoed bronc, and killed. Then Dan Bentley, who had been a friend and neighbor of his father's, had taken him in and raised him.

Neil Cain's mouth drew pinched at the thought of Dan. Dan Bentley had done more for him than many a real father would have done for his son. And now he was running out on Dan. Dan was trusting him to do the right thing. And because a woman—an outlaw's wife—meant more to him than honor, he was betraying that trust.

Bleakly, his thoughts came back to Cad Pierce. One thing was certain—without help, Cad would never get very far in this mountain country. Nobody but an experienced hillman could find his way through that wilderness maze of risky passes and blind, dead-end trails. Maybe Cad had tried for the cave, and had been spooked off. Whichever, he had committed himself to this now, and would have to go through with it. And his reward? A woman's soft smile. A woman's thanks. And that would be all. That would be another dead-end trail. . . .

In front of the ranch house door he dismounted and ground-hitched; then, moving up to the doorstep and crossing the threshold into the small front living room, he halted in shocked surprise. Cad Pierce sat sprawled in the big leather-bottomed easy chair before the fireplace, finishing a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

He grinned up crookedly as Neil entered. "Howdy, Sheriff. I'm ready, any time you are."

Neil stared at him, tight-lipped. "I thought you were to wait at the cave. Molly and I went there—"

"Dan Bentley could have known about that cave, if you and Molly did. I figured I'd be safer here."

"Don't take any unnecessary chances, do you, Cad?"

Cad Pierce smirked. "Sometimes. When I have to. Like now."

Abruptly, Neil Cain turned into the kitchen. "I'll pack a little grub. Some coffee and jerky ought to hold you till you get through the Blue Smokes." Suddenly he swung around in the doorway. "What about the money? It's in your saddlebags, I suppose."

Cad Pierce's dark eyes flicked up at him cunningly. "I suppose. Wherever it is, it's stayin' there till you put me on the right trail. I ain't takin' no chances—*sheriff*."

Neil said grimly, "Neither am I, Cad, so watch your step," and went on into the kitchen.

Two hours later, when they were halfway up the slope of Big Blue Mountain, the sky began to darken and through the overcast thunder rumbled ominously. The sound remained muffled and distant for a time; then the first sharp flashes of lightning stabbed through the swollen cumulus, and the thunder beat resonantly between the hazed peaks, rolling down-mountain towards them with threatening bumping sounds.

Cad Pierce, riding a little ahead up the narrowing trail, glanced frowningly back at Neil. "Looks like a bad storm makin' up."

Neil grunted. "If it hits bad, there's an old mine shack five, six miles farther up the mountains. There's an old pack train trail out of there. I'll show you how to get to it, then we split the blankets."

Cad Pierce's eyes thinned slyly. "Why can't we split 'em now? You tell me where I'll find that trail, and you can turn back here."

Neil stared at him coldly. "You wouldn't find the right trail in a month of Sundays. Some of those old mine shaft tracks just lead off to precipices. I promised Molly I'd get you out of this safe. I aim to do it."

Cad Pierce's laughter spurting out of the deepening darkness had a mocking, arrogant sound. "Ain't afraid you're gonna miss out on that dinero, are you, Neil?"

Grimly, Neil held silent. Rain began to splatter down, fat, loose drops, big as silver dollars, and then it thickened, began to pour. Neil unloosed his saddle roll and took out a rubber poncho, pulling it down across his shoulders. Cad Pierce wrapped himself in a heavy saddle blanket. They rode on, lightning cutting around them in fierce angry jabs, thunder crashing with menacing, sulphurous detonations.

Down the rocky slant to their left a rimrock of soft limestone gave way and went roaring down into the underbrush. Neil Cain's voice whipped at Cad Pierce above the increasing tumult. "Gig your horse! This is fixin' to be a goose-drownder. We'll

really have to fog it, to make the shack."

BY THE time they finally came in sight of the shack, chilled and bedraggled, the rain had settled into a steady downpour, with no sign that it would let up immediately. The shack was small, but weather-tight, and inside there were a couple of chairs sawed out of barrels, a rickety sawbuck table, and a small fieldstone fireplace, with a rusted tin-pipe chimney. Neil started breaking up an old flour barrel for firewood, and Cad Pierce volunteered: "I'll go out and picket the horses."

Neil felt safe, letting him go. Cad probably intended to hunt for the out trail. If so, in this storm, with dusk already beginning to settle over these mountains, his chances would be about as slim as locating a needle in a stack of hay.

Rummaging around, Neil found a battered lantern with a little kerosene left in it. He lighted it. Thunder now was almost constant—brittle, shuddering claps that shook the cabin—and lightning flashed intermittently, illuminating the walls with ghostly bursts of light.

In about ten minutes Cad Pierce came back, soaked from head to foot, and Neil walked casually to the table and picked up the lantern. He looked at Cad, saying: "Mind the fire a minute, Cad. I'll be right back."

A gleam flickered briefly in Cad's dark eyes, then went out. "Go ahead, Big Mister. But if it's my saddle pouches you're lookin' for, you won't find 'em."

Neil turned at the door and said with quiet emphasis: "Maybe not, Cad. But you will. Before you leave here."

Outside he paused and held up the lantern, letting the rain drum its relentless tattoo on his hat and poncho. There was no sign of the horses, but the storm hadn't yet washed out the deep hoofprints leading around to the rear of the shack. Already the tracks were filling, but the light from the lantern betrayed the slick tiny puddles where cloven steel had punctured the saturated earth. Neil followed the tracks from the rear of the shack. Twenty yards away he came upon Cad Pierce's big claybank, snubbed to the bole of a live-oak. His own horse was nowhere in sight!

Then he saw the continuing hoof-prints, leading to the false trail down to the old mine shaft. This was the only obvious trail out from the cabin, but it led nowhere, dead-ended, far down the steep slant to the abandoned dump. He bumbled on, a sharp foreboding hitting him suddenly. He went fifty yards, a hundred. Suddenly he stopped, blood pounding up to his temples. The grulla lay in a little clump of brush alongside the trail, sprawled out stiffly. It had been shot through the head.

He felt his heart bump up and slam violently against his ribs. Cad Pierce had done this. Cad Pierce never intended him to leave this place alive!

Abruptly the steady throb of the rain was swallowed by an earth-shaking roar, and thirty yards ahead the narrow spindle of the trail seemed to burst open sickeningly and vanish. An avalanche! Trembling, taking careful, mincing steps, Neil went on to the drop-off and held up the lantern. Here, where the narrow trail had wound precipitously down towards the mine dump, there was now a yawning chasm, a down-pitch into a bottomless black pit. Shuddering, Neil drew back from the ledge and headed back for the shack.

At the rear of the cabin he paused and peered cautiously through the tiny window. Cad Pierce, apparently confident that he would not find the grulla out there in the dark, was still seated before the fire, idly building a cigarette. His hand close to his gun, Neil cat-footed around to the front door. He still didn't want to kill Cad Pierce, if he could help it. Cad was rotten all through. He wasn't worth his weight as buzzard's-bait. But for Molly's sake—

Softly, he opened the door. Cad wasn't at the fire! Neil spun around as Cad's voice hit him from beside the door.

"Find your horse, Neil? You been gone fifteen minutes. I figured mebbe you had."

In the wavering light from the fire, the gun in Cad Pierce's fist glittered blue. It was aimed at Neil Cain's belly. Neil put down the lantern. His voice fell flatly against the pinched silence.

"I should have known, shouldn't I, Cad?"

"Sure, you should've." Cad smirked. "But you're so crazy head-over-heels about Molly, you don't know your right hand from your left. You must've thought I was loco, not to see that. Hell, I got better'n Molly, stashed out there in my saddle

pounches. Only I ain't leavin' her for you, neither. I'm leavin' you here with a bullet in your gut." His flat mouth puckered in a grin. "I found the trail, too. It wasn't so hard to locate."

Neil said: "That trail won't take you anywhere, Cad—except plumb to hell."

Cad jeered: "You'd like me to think so, wouldn't you, *amigo?* Only this bullet I been savin' for you here says you're a damned liar!"

Neil Cain's body tightened like a coiled spring. A rash fury drove up in him as he hurled himself at Cad Pierce.

The roar of Cad's gun was like a brittle thunderclap slamming against the room's flimsy walls, and Neil felt the hammerlike punch of lead against his left shoulder as the momentum of his catapulting leap drove him at Cad. His right hand stabbed for Cad's wrist, but Cad jerked back. Another shot slammed, and Neil felt a bomb of pain explode in his right side. He rocked back, the room darkening suddenly, the light from the fire dimming strangely. Cad's harsh, arrogant laughter dinned in his ears. It was the last sound he heard. A great dark cloud was rushing down on him. It swept him into oblivion. . . .

Neil felt a cooling wetness around his eyes. He opened them stickily, blinking them in surprise against sharp sunlight. He saw the faces as a kind of vague blur at first, then gradually, almost imperceptibly, they became more clearly defined, like images measured slowly into focus on a telescope. One was the grizzled, scowling countenance of Sheriff Dan Bentley. The other was the face of Dan's second deputy, young Hank Peterson.

"Comin' out of it now," Peterson said, and Neil forced a grin up at him.

"Comin' out! Hell, I am out, you big maverick!"

Dan Bentley leaned down. "You're gonna be all right, son. Shoulder wound ain't nothin' but a scratch. But your side's gonna be some sore fer a spell. We patched you up, best we could. Doc Hennessy'll do the rest, soon's we kin tote you back to town."

Bentley turned to the deputy. "Hank, you skin out and git that bottle of whiskey outta my saddlebag. Snort of red-eye's what he needs most, right now."

When Peterson was gone. Dan Bentley stared down at him morosely. "You should've let us in on it, son. I been tryin' to keep a tab on you. If we'd got here jest a couple hours earlier—" He gusted out a sigh. "Well, we lost out, that's all. You should've got in the first shot, Neil."

A thin smiled peeled back Neil Cain's lips. "It's the last that counts most, Dan."

Dan Bentley stiffened. "The last! You mean—you mean you—"

"No, I didn't shoot him, Dan. God help me, I—I couldn't. But sometimes these things get taken out of a man's hands. There's only one trail out from this place, but nobody but an old-timer in these parts would ever find it. There's another, but it dead-ends down at the old mine dump. Take a look-see, Dan. There—there was a washout, last night. I—"

But Dan Bentley was already rushing for the door. When he came back, twenty minutes later, Neil was propped up in a chair, and the slug of whiskey Hank Peterson had given him was curling warmly in his belly.

Neil looked at the weighted saddlebags Dan Bentley was toting into the room. "All there, I reckon, Dan?"

Dan Bentley's breath went out in a noisy gust. "Eight thousand. All here, son. And Cad Pierce is down at the bottom of that gulch." He shuddered. "Must've dropped a couple hundred feet."

Neil sighed. "I warned him, Dan. I told him—"

"The hell you did!" Dan Bentley gave him a blunt stare and hoisted the saddlebags over his shoulder. "Now shut up and see if you stand on your feet. Soon's you git back on 'em permanent, I'm turnin' in my badge. Gittin' too ripe on the bough for this kind of work. Man's gotta retire *sometime.*"

With Dan and Hank helping him, he got to Dan's horse. Dan and he would ride double, Dan supporting him from behind.

"We'll take 'er slow," Dan grumbled. "I reckon there ain't no hurry now."

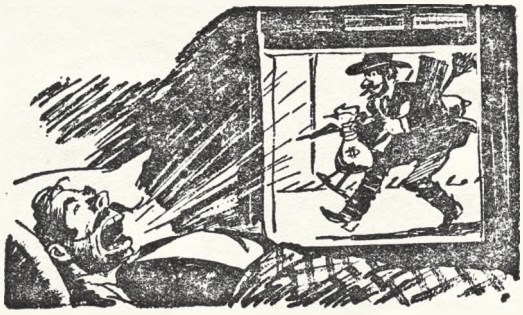
Neil's fingers closed on the old man's shoulder in a tight squeeze. "That'll be fine, Dan, because I want to stop off at a neighbor's before we hit town. Got a message I meant to deliver there two years ago. Seems a mite past due, but long as you ain't in no hurry I—I reckon I'll get it off my chest!"

The RIPROARIOUS WEST

BY Robbins and Farren

During the depression of 1886, which was characterized oddly by a surplus of money and a scarcity of goods in the West and exactly opposite conditions in the East, a famous New York dressmaker moved to Red Rock, California, with three wagonloads of silk. Setting herself up in business she turned out, at fabulous prices, the first silk gowns there. Finally the spoiled young wife of the Mayor decided that she, too, wanted a silk dress. His Honor, a man noted for his thrift, but completely under his wife's thumb, called the council into hasty session. The result: a statute, outlawing, on pain of fine and imprisonment, the wearing of silk fabric.

Takers of sporting bets who are these days stymied by unsympathetic laws prohibiting the use of modern means of communication for their business purposes, might well take a leaf from Henry and George Childs, bettors of the 1850's who ran up a seventy-five thousand dollar fortune in the space of three months before a loose-tongued redskin gave them away. Their system lay in placing bets after the race was run—a common practice in the days when it took a week to find out, in Tucson, which horse had won a San Francisco race. The betting brothers, however, had received news from the coast within twenty-four hours—via Indian smoke signs!



Loneliness and boredom, it is thought, explain why people fall under the exciting if misleading spell of medical quacks, and perhaps it was why the hard-working, dull-living populace of Bradsbad, New Mexico, fell for the considered advice of "Dr." Manuel Esplanosa. "Rest," he said, "is the secret of life." Urgently, he propounded the Mexican siesta as the cure for all ills and, soon, he had the entire citizenry taking long, conscientious naps after lunch. It was while their occupants were slumbering that he broke into the saloon, the bank branch, the hotel and a dozen homes, robbed them of everything in sight, and disappeared.

East or West, there is no animal quite so anti-social and thoroughly unpopular as the common skunk. There was a time, however, when this white-striped species of pussycat saved the life of gunman Sam Bass. Frank Collyer, lawman from Dallas, had closed in behind Sam's dugout, while rattling fire from a posse held his eye out front. The deputy had just lifted an arm to shoot, with a bead directly at the outlaw's head, when he stepped on a skunk. A sensitive stomach overcame his sense of duty and Collyer fled, leaving his fragrant weapon, and most of his recent lunch, behind him.

COLD STEEL—

Cold, deadly, inflexible as the steel in a Toledo blade were the rigid exactions of the *code duello*, which a kill-hungry boom-camp bravo used to win himself a fabulous golden fortune—plus the lives of Clay Amberson, cold-nerved gentleman of chance, and Clay's best friend!

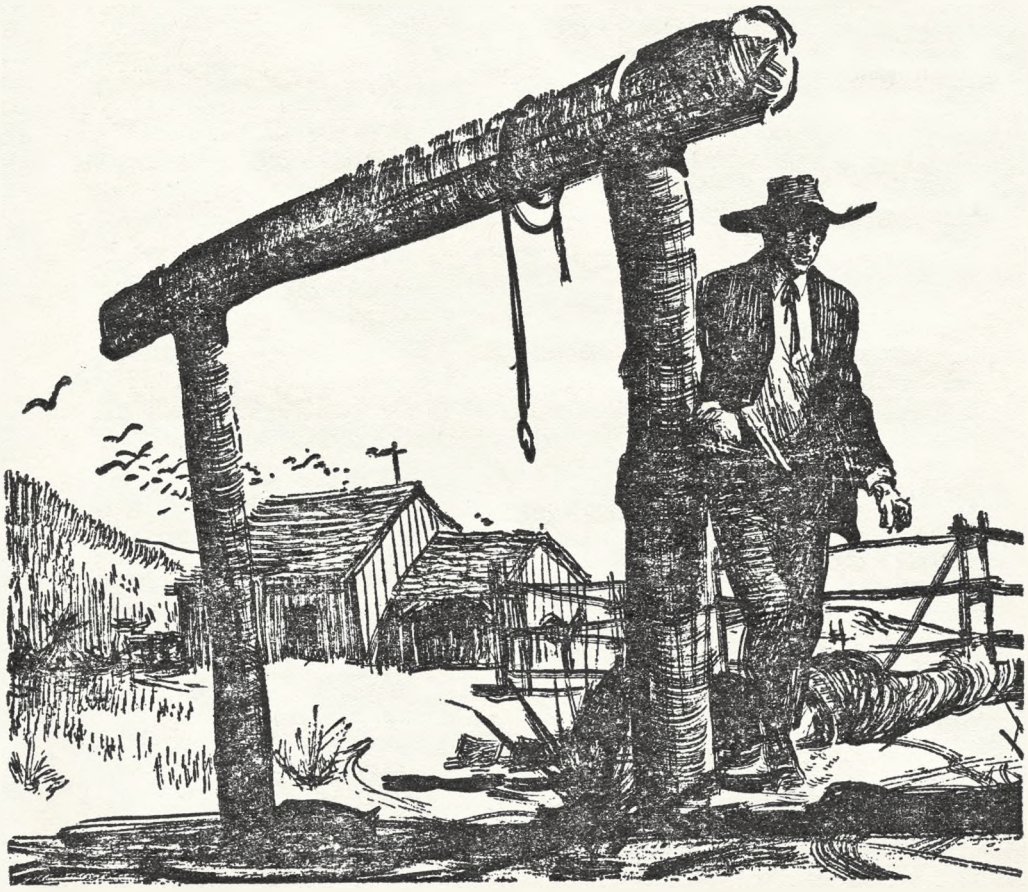
CHAPTER ONE

Trap of Tempered Steel

IT WAS the eve of July Fourth, and the elegant, decorous Palladium Saloon, in deference to the patriotic fervor that swept all Sun City, was a minor bedlam.

Tonight the wheel, the dice, a few card tables drew a scattering of the faithful, but the enthusiastic, bonanza-minded gentry crowding the bar were in no mood for the long-drawn, austere drama of high-stakes poker. Their champion and foremost challenger, Clay Amberson, gentleman gambler

By WILLIAM CORCORAN



IRON MEN!

Thrilling Novel of the *Code Duello*

Johnny Callender staggered from the cabin, his shirt stained crimson with blood.

and expert if reluctant duelist, was missing from the familiar stage.

He sat at a desk in his small private office off the far end of the bar where he was able to put from mind the uproar beyond the door in his amazement and consternation at the suffering young man in the chair before him.

"By the Lord Harry, Johnny Callendar, you mean you agreed to fight this fellow *with swords?* This German—what's his name again—Bohrmann?"

"Von Bohrmann," corrected the tall, slender, brown-haired, young mining engineer. Despite his youth, the candor of his deep blue pupils, he was a trained mining expert, a brilliant graduate of the Royal School of Mines back home. The young Englishman now had full charge of the King Solomon workings outside Sun City.

"*Von* Bohrmann," he emphasized. "He's a stickler for that."

"Why, of course," Clay recollected wryly, "Fritz von Bohrmann. Big beefy Prussian with a scar on one cheek. Engineer with the Grand Electrum. Rude, domineering and contemptuous of everything in Sun City—except the highgrade in the ledges. Why on earth did you let him name swords?"

"I didn't stop to think. All I've heard since I came here is the six-shooter. I actually brought a Bentley five-shooter .44 over with me, used up all my ammunition the first week, practicing—and haven't touched it since. Still, I assumed—well, when in Rome, you know."

"Do as the Romans do?" Clay retorted cynically. "Johnny, not since Alaric and his Goths first sacked Rome has that applied to any Teuton of Bohrmann's gait. He sucked you in. He'd never have tried it on one of our local primitive Americans—he damned well knows the consequences!"

"I lost my head, no doubt," the sufferer admitted quietly, unhappily.

Johnny Callendar was altogether a likeable, brave, intelligent and modest young Englishman.

Abruptly he ran an agitated hand through the shock of chestnut hair. "Amberson, the fellow declared I was an amateur, a fraud, an impostor. I ignored that. But then he—dammit, he libeled my training, my school. Van Bohrmann cannot jeer at the Royal School of Mines."

The tone was acid. "Yet he did, for a purpose, and you rose to the bait, and he declared himself required to defend his honor. As the challenged, he was entitled to name the weapons. That right?"

"That's about the ticket. It's to be swords. Before sun-up, on that flat bench east of town. And I cannot back out."

Clay Amberson knew it was bad, deadly serious. Clay had reason to know. Scion of a powerful Alabama plantation family ruined in the late war with the North, he had been reared to the code duello, learned at first hand its dread exactions and consequences.

But Clay was a gambler, and a gambler is a realist. Character was marked in his features, the prominent nose, the large firm mouth, sardonic, a little ruthless, as he studied this victim of a palpable, calculated frame-up.

"How much do you know about swordplay, Johnny, first of all? Foils, épée, saber?"

Callendar shrugged. "I rather fancied myself a fencer once. Decided it was schoolboy nonsense. I dropped it quite early."

"Still, you remember the fundamenats. The balance, the footing? The eight guards and the parries?"

"Against a dueling corps graduate? You know about Heidelberg?"

"So it's Heidelberg, eh? Yes, I know." He pondered his cigar. "Tell me, Johnny. What exactly brought you here tonight?"

"Brought me?" The Englishman reddened. "Why, I had to talk to someone. I badly need advice. You, as a bit of a friend, and as an expert, as I'm told—"

"Ah!" breathed Amberson, puffing on the cigar. It was not a pleasant sound. "So they've told you I'm an expert. What did you expect of me? To take over and fight your duel?"

Johnny Callendar stared, rigid. The color faded to a pallor. He came abruptly to his feet.

"I beg your pardon, Amberson. There's really nothing further to say. I'll bid you goodnight, sir."

He had reached the door when Clay's tone stopped him. It remained hard, yet not cruel or unkind.

"Johnny, hold your horses. You actually mean to go through with this then?"

Johnny's gaze was blue ice. "There are

things no gentleman can do—and some he cannot undo."

"Against such odds?"

"I'll take my medicine, as you fellows put it."

Clay shook his head. "You're crazy!" he breathed in marvel. "But I had to turn on the heat, to make my assay, as *you* fellows put it. Forget it now. I won't be your second, if you had that in mind. But I'll go you one better."

"How, if I may ask?"

"I think I can fix it for you to beat the German."

"You mean—aboveboard, on a fair field?"

"Fairly, on the field of honor," Clay said wryly. "If you'll put yourself entirely in my hands."

"Done, fellow," Callendar said quietly. "How shall I start?"

"Sit down," Clay bade him. "It will require most of the night, with an hour's sleep for you before the meeting. First, I want to know every detail, every word of the arrangements."

The arrangements were appaling. Bohrmann had simply taken the high hand and arranged everything. A fellow countryman, Gus Schultz, had presented himself and demanded to see Callendar's second. At wits' end, Callendar had impressed the nearest fellow countryman of his own, a rather callow and irresponsible remittance man named Rainsford, to act for him.

Rainsford was horrified and practically helpless. Schultz set the time, the place, the rules. He could even supply the dueling swords. They were Bohrmann's, of course.

Amberson interrupted, "You mean the fellow actually packed a set of the things with his gear—all the way out to this high-desert hell hole?"

"So it seems, Amberson."

Clay swore. The set-up grew more and more sinister. There had formerly been some dispute between the Grand Electrum and the King Solomon over rights and boundaries, but the matter had been peaceably settled in the courts. This was personal—and inexplicable.

"Your friend Rainsford must have had his hands full," Clay said dryly. "I'll talk with him. Is he around?"

As Callendar frowned, hesitated, there came a small, urgent knock on the door. It opened without waiting. McBride, head daytime bartender, white-haired, dignified, a diplomat by nature and profession, entered.

"Clay," he said in sharp concern, "there's trouble spoiling at one of the tables. A big fellow, loud, surly and losing—and no way to stop him."

"Who's dealing?"

"Harry's dealing an open blackjack game."

Clay made a sound of irritation. "A big fellow, eh, loud and surly? Know his name?"

"I don't. I think he's that foreign mining engineer with the Grand Electrum. This calls for authority."

"Moses on the mountain!" breathed Clay. "Fritz von Bohrmann in the flesh!" He thought fast, stood up. "I can find out what makes the man tick, besides bailing out Harry. Johnny Callendar here fights a duel at dawn."

"A duel!" exclaimed the shocked McBride.

"Exactly. With swords. And you're a party to it. Johnny needs you for second. Listen to his story before you decline the honor."

McBride opened his mouth to protest and shut it hard again. Then he remembered something. "Clay, this Fritz fellow ain't armed. So it looks, at least. But his partner, another big German, is openly packing a six-shooter."

Clay's smile was grimly confident; he carried no weapons of any kind, nor would he. The rule was inflexible.

"I'll take care, Mac. But Bohrmann, believe it or not, is probably the most dangerously armed man in town. Ask Johnny. The matter needs tending, and I'll see what can be done."

He left Mac swearing to himself in mute harassment of soul.

IT REQUIRED a large measure of Clay Amberson's most astute affability to make his way through the thronged Palladium without becoming entangled in one or another group of zealous friends. In the somewhat ruthless democracy of the gold camps all men were friends and brothers until proved otherwise, subject to every claim and obligation—from a friendly drink

to a funeral oration—in any situation.

Clay's first endeavor was to find City Marshal Rank, but there was no sign of him.

Only two tables were engaged by intent seated players, in contrast to the fluid groups more or less hilariously patronizing the wheel and the dice. Clay spotted Bohrmann immediately. The German was a heavy-set, muscular young man with tightly curled yellow hair and a small waxed moustache. On one cheek was the long slash of an old scar, the mark of honor, doubtless, of a student duelist. It was clear at a glance—as he intended it should be—that here was a young man who had long since left all shyness or self-doubt behind.

The stout, taciturn, darker man alongside was a type cast in a markedly different mold. Schultz was a good hardrock miner, one of the most proficient, but he had the reputation of losing some of the best men hired after a few days' work in the Grand Electrum.

Clay roved among the tables for a few minutes, and presently stood watching the blackjack game. The play was fast, the stakes high, and Bohrmann, crowding the limit, dominated the game yet failed ignominiously to command the luck.

The situation was a familiar and delicate one. It was approaching a crisis. In a moment the big man would decide, as the only tolerable explanation, that the house was cheating. Blackjack was notoriously a sucker's game in a crooked house: it was easy to play—and a cinch for a good "mechanic" to manipulate.

Bohrmann spoke in harsh German to his companion, who silently handed over a small additional stack of gold coin. In English, precise and bookish, yet almost without a trace of accent, Bohrmann announced truculently, "There is something here of a bad odor, something like fish. *Leider*, I do not yet know what it is. It costs high to find out. Very good. I sit here till I find out—once and for all!"

Amberson tapped the houseman on the shoulder. "All right, Harry. Relief."

Harry put down the deck and slid silently from the chair. Clay took over, his own expression a mere replica of the other's. Blackjack is no game for sociability or finesse. Since each individual hand stands or falls by the player's sole judgment, there is no contest of wills, no subtle build-up from one deal to the next. It is a dry routine business for a professional, who needs no false-carding to let the run-of-the-mill customers beat themselves.

Clay had revised his plans sharply. Here was no opportunity to draw his man out.

From the moment Clay sat down, Bohrmann's luck underwent a miraculous change. Clay shuffled, let the deck be cut, burned the top card and dealt in a smooth, sober style. The watchers could detect no trace of art, of control.

Bohrmann took his luck for granted. He gloated in his sudden turn of fortune. Then presently he fell silent.

As it worked out, Bohrmann methodically won three hands out of four. The house lost steadily. Often enough, Bohrmann had no need to exercise judgment one way or another: the deck dealt him a natural, a "blackjack" cold, paying three to two. Bohrmann, a strangely wordless winner, had presently accumulated a sum slightly larger than the stake he had brought into the game.

At that precise moment Clay picked up the losing house cards, tore them across and tossed the pieces into the center of the table.

"That'll be all, gentleman. This table is closed for the night."

No one moved. Clay was stacking and counting the bank, oblivious to Bohrmann's glaring red face.

"May I ask," demanded Bohrmann, "what is the meaning of this?"

"No meaning, sir. It's a custom. Custom of the country."

Bohrmann got to his feet. "I demand an explanation."

Clay smiled. "There is no explanation. But perhaps, Mister Bohrmann, you are not too familiar with the customs of this country?"

Bohrmann had no reply for that. A curious pallor was replacing the crimson in his face.

"Herr Schultz, perhaps you can enlighten your friend as you leave. It might even be inadvisable for him to come here again, at least until he has familiarized himself with our peculiar ways. Such as the standing rule that the house confers the privilege of playing when, and upon whom, it pleases, accountable to no one for anything—least of all for explanations of the

obvious. Do I make myself clear, or not?"

Schultz scrambled to his feet, talking rapid German. He thought he recognized the morass into which this bewildering talk was tending. It was a trap—coolly baited by the most deadly duelist in Sun City.

Bohrmann was no coward. He was above all, a *Junker,* a gentleman. Unwittingly he had permitted a situation to arise in which a common gambler had dealt him a mortal insult.

But a Bohrmann—a Von Bohrmann—could no more present his card to a common gambler, then he could take wing and fly. The situation required special study.

"Dummerjon! Sei 'mal ruhig!" Bohrmann exploded, silencing his harassed deputy. Then, giving Amberson a final glare, he turned on his heel and marched grimly for the doors of the Palladium.

CHAPTER TWO

A Damn Sure Thing

CLAY'S WRY, reflective smile remained after the pair were gone. He had been sardonically amused to note that the crowd had parted magically, to make a path. They made a strange and sinister team, the aristocrat and the peasant, the *Junker* and his self-abasing serf.

Ted Rank's stocky, powerful figure eased through the crowd and put all else from his mind. He had business with Ted Rank.

The Marshal's gray, gimlet gaze warned and silenced Clay. Rank had business with *him.*

Clay felt no serious apprehension. Rank, a St. Louis man, had fought through the War on the Union side, but he was a just man, and for both of them the conflict was a closed chapter. The years of stirring action and movement had interrupted a career dubiously aimed at the law, and afterward Rank had balked at the prospect of a lifetime of legal hairsplitting. He came West, a knowledgeable, shrewd, and forthright man, and was immediately at home. They were friends, these two, although they lived in separate worlds and the friendship was guarded and wary, even though ungrudging.

"I thought you were lighting out on me," said Rank.

Amberson smiled. "I was just looking for a party. Join me—I'm buying a drink."

"Glad to," said Rank, "but a word with you first. What was wrong with *der Fritzer?"*

"Bohrmann?" Clay shrugged. "Bad temper. He was fixing to make trouble for my houseman. I had to step in and get rid of him."

"Hm," Rank mused skeptically. "I've been keeping an eye on big Fritz. You wouldn't have tried to pick a fight with him, now would you?"

Clay's nerves tingled. "On the contrary, I let him win back his losses and closed the game. I made it impossible for him to start trouble, and at the same time managed to suggest that he stay away from the Palladium."

"I can believe that," the marshal acknowledged.

"Will you believe me if I tell you that I I have never fought over a gaming table in my life, and that it was my sole intention tonight to avoid trouble?"

"If you say so, I'll have to. Just as I'll have to believe it if you tell me flatly that you have no intention of appearing as a party to a duel in the morning. A second, maybe. A duel involving that Bohrmann bully-o."

"I can answer that as frankly as you wish," he said coldly. "I'll be glad to do so directly—in the privacy of my office."

Clay watched Rank enter the office, and next signaled one of the bartenders.

"Red, keep an eye out for McBride. See he doesn't come near my office under any circumstances. Tell him Marshal Rank is on the warpath."

Red hurried off.

The gambler and the peace officer were punctilious and urbane over the fine bouquet of the brandy in the quiet office. It was unthinkable that they should ever clash as avowed enemies, yet only too possible that their undeviating wills and purposes might unhappily cross.

"Ted, you Bohrmann is fighting a duel?" Clay remarked abruptly. "With whom?"

"You haven't yet answered my question. I'm still waiting."

"It was a leading statement, if I recall, not a question."

"Precisely. I'm chary of questions. The

expression, 'to lie like a gentleman,' has pith in it. A duel involves others. I'd be duty bound to misdoubt any answer of yours to a direct question."

Clay smiled faintly. "Go on."

"A leading statement it was," Rank said bluntly. "Say nothing at all—and I reckon that tells all I need to know."

Dueling was conspiracy, and all parties were culpable before a weapon was drawn. It was Rank's duty to arrest all concerned —a paradox, surely, in a place like Sun City, where juries, nine cases out of ten, solemnly freed the survivors of sudden, impassioned gunplay.

Conspiracy was another matter. Americans were suspicious of the duello. Fighting in hot blood, while deplorable, was natural. The coldblooded punctilio and protocol of dueling smacked too much of decadent Europe.

CLAY smiled now because Rank was feeling his way.

"I'll give you the straight truth, Ted. I have not promised—I've certainly not been asked—to serve as second in any duel tomorrow morning. I would refuse if requested. I think you know why."

Rank glanced at him and grudgingly assented. He remembered—the fact that Clay went unarmed, the private vow he stoically preserved. It was a secret shared in town by Rank alone. Clay had killed his best friend in a mistaken, tragic duel long ago. Learning the truth too late, he had forsworn private vengeance, private justice, the travesty of "honor," and that vow had never been broken.

"If you tell me so, I'll take it as Bible truth," Rank said somberly. "But I must warn you. Bohrmann is bad medicine. I think he's a killer and suspect he's a crook, for all his high-and-mightiness as a crack mining engineer. He fought a man at Telluride. The man thought he could handle a saber against any upstart mining man. Bohrmann almost cut hin to ribbons. A party of friends got wind of it and rushed up in time to stop it."

"Is this hearsay or do you know it for a fact?" Clay asked sharply.

"Facts are my business," Rank retorted. "This fact accounts for Bohrmann's presence in Sun City. He had to clear out of Telluride."

Clay Amberson eyed the gleaming brandy. He must get on with this, he must be very sure.

"Ted, what is Bohrmann's standing in the profession? You called him a crack mining engineer."

"I accept the word of others for that. The Grand Electrum people—well, let's say they're too smart and too well heeled to be taken in by an amateur."

"Very likely. And a little too shady themselves, perhaps?"

Rank shrugged.

"I see," breathed Amberson. "You also said you suspect Bohrmann is a crook. I'm right curious."

"Hell, you know what I mean! Every man's entitled to his opinion!"

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"About the King Solomon ledge dispute. Bohrmann's a willing party to it."

"I thought that was settled. Didn't the courts rule on it?"

"They settled half of it. The Grand Electrum filed a plea for an injunction to halt work on the King Solomon. The plea alleged trespass: that the King Solomon ledge was one and the same as the Grand Electrum. The plea was thrown out."

"Yes, I know. And what's the other half?"

"Maybe there ain't any. I'm no engineer. But I've got good ears. What would be the outcome, say, if the King Solomon people turned the tables, proved there actually was a single great ledge and a clear case of trespass—and closed down the Grand Electrum?"

Amberson whistled softly. A light began to dawn. "Bohrmann would be out of a job, for one thing."

"Bohrmann would be ruined. What reputable company would hire him?"

The light intensified in Amberson's mind. One of the unhappiest features of deep-mining development was the uncertainty of ownership. Overnight a conscientious miner might lose everything—perhaps to an unscrupulous band of swindlers on to the intricacies of mining law.

Was Bohrmann trying to kill or main Johnny Callendar before Callendar could act on the professional knowledge — the secret both men must necessarily share?

Clay gave Rank a piercing glance as the marshal drained his glass.

"Ted," Clay said soberly, "if you have wind of a duel, and you suspect Bohrmann to be all you say, why not arrest him out of hand and stop it dead?"

"Insufficient evidence," Rank said bluntly. "Couldn't hold him."

"You mean you're only guessing?"

Rank snorted. "I know what I know. It's up to you now, Clay Amberson. I think you know something's up. If you care to talk, maybe I can make an arrest stick."

"And what about his opponent?"

Rank's tone was quiet. "I said it's up to you."

Earlier, Clay's proposed "business" with Rank had been simple: to pump the marshal about Bohrmann, about Callendar, with subtle cunning. To learn, if possible, of any leaks. He had got more than he bargained for. Now, no matter the risk, his duty and obligation was to shield Johnny Callendar — from assassination by Bohrmann, from entanglement with the law, from future molestation by either.

"I'll stand on my statement, Ted. If I dislike a man and bar him from play, it's for obvious reasons. If I've made an enemy, it's open and aboveboard."

Rank grunted. He had his answer, and it was final and a blow to his official hopes. He poured another drink.

"You've made yourself an enemy, my friend. I know that Dutchman!" He raised the glass, halted halfway. "The Palladium will be open all night." It was a statement, not a question.

"Wide open. The mines close down tomorrow."

"Town will quiet some toward morning."

"You're always welcome, Ted. Stick around."

"Thanks," Ted said dryly. He was watching Clay intently. "I might sit in and take a hand of poker."

Clay saw the trap clearly, but betrayed no dismay, no consternation. "By all means," he urged. "If there's a game, I'll hold a hand open."

"Fine," purred Rank, "just fine! I seldom gamble. But I'll play a sure thing any time."

He chuckled as at some grotesque, ironic joke, and then he turned and walked out, still laughing to himself.

CHAPTER TWO

Hot Deck, Cold Death

THE MARSHAL had barely taken himself off when Red, the bartender, darted in to report. McBride, he said, in company with young Callendar, had turned up in due time, making straight for the office. Red had flagged them just in time. McBride, grim and determined now, was incensed at Marshal Rank's intervention. Red persuaded them both to stay out of sight.

"Where are they now?"

"Somewhere along the row, I expect," said Red. "You'll find them easy. They'll be watching."

As Clay stepped out the front doors of the Palladium, his name was called from the shadows. It was McBride. The sidewalks of the town's main street were crowded, and the resorts were breaking all records tonight, but for the moment the two had this spot to themselves.

"Johnny's gone home," McBride reported worriedly. "He insisted he must write some letters, just in case. Smart as a whip, but he don't lead easy."

Clay grinned. "Fritz von Bohrmann will learn a few things about Johnny he never suspected."

"What's bothering Ted?"

Clay gave McBride a rapid outline of his talk with the marshal. It only increased McBride's alarm.

"Dammit, I shouldn't have let him go off alone! But I had to stay here. Johnny lives by himself, Clay."

"Where?"

"He moved into the old cabin on the alley behind the Capitol Hotel."

"No fear tonight," Clay assured him. "Bohrmann's too intent on the morning. You go rouse Johnny. We'll all meet at Cullen's livery. On your way, drop by at the hotel again. Talk to Eb Williams; on the wall of his lobby he's got a pair of crossed Union Army officer's swords. You needn't explain, but tell him I want to borrow them."

Mac looked dubious. "He sets great store by those swords, Clay."

"So do I, even greater. Wrap them in a blanket. If you meet Ted Rank, dive for an alley and run. He has second sight!"

Cullen's livery stable was commonly as public a place as any resort in town, but on a holiday eve the high-desert night coolness allowed the doors to be closed and locked. They had room for movement, and there were enough lamps handy to provide illumination sufficient to fend accidents. Cullen, a lean, leathery, silent man was an interested observer. A gold piece had tempered his misgivings.

Clay asked Callendar, "Where's your friend Rainsford? He's got his role to learn too."

Johnny Callendar blushed. "I'm afraid, Amberson—well, frankly, we'll have to get along without him. He may be fit by morning."

"Drunk?"

Callendar's gaze was level. "Quite!"

Clay grunted unemotionally. "In such case, we're better off without him. Mac will stand up for you better than a dozen."

Clay requested a few empty grain sacks, and with one of the borrowed sabers, slashed these at the seams. Clay was devising a pair of makeshift padded turbans, which, wound around and finally fastened to the head by a kerchief, were to be their only protection.

"Judas Priest, Clay," said McBride, "you ain't fiddling with those blades without any body protection!"

Clay was testing the temper of his saber, bending, thrusting it, sensing the tension and spring in the steel.

"We'll have no need for fencing masks or jackets, Mac," he said. "There's no time tonight for the school of the saber. We'll brush up the guards and parries and study one single attack. The thrust, the lunge, the cut—we'll eliminate them, now and tomorrow morning."

Mac snorted. "The Dutchman won't be forgetting them! Johnny's one hope, I'm thinking, is to get him quick and sudden and to the hilt, before Bohrmann has chance to size up his style. That sword point is his one salvation."

"The point would be his ruin," Clay said coldly. "One thrust or lunge, and he'd be wide open. Bohrmann is an expert. Understand this, both of you. Bohrmann must be attacked with the flat of the blade, and nothing else."

They stared blankly. The statement made no sense.

Clay went on, "Mac, I've told you how Rank has tied me hand and foot to the Palladium. I can't go along even as a bystander. Your main job tomorrow will be to stare down, talk down Bohrmann's seconds if they raise objection. Wear your gun and take no back talk. They won't have a single valid argument. The attack I have in mind isn't to be found in any manual, but it's legal, ethical, there isn't a point of honor against it. It's high time Bohrmann discovered that America can teach him something, even in his own art of bloodletting."

"Then, Amberson—you expect him—that is—to survive?"

"I most certainly do."

Johnny released the breath, unable to conceal his relief. "A trial for murder might be as embarrassing as being run through."

"What Bohrmann will do I have no idea. We'll take care of that when it comes. Now let me demonstrate. Johnny, hold out your saber. Just to one side, cutting edge down. Get a firm grip. I'm going to strike it hard. Watch the blades."

Johnny obeyed. Clay advanced his saber, touched the other weapon lightly, close to the guard plate, then struck it a sudden flail-like blow with the flat of the blade Johnny's grip was firm, his wrist strong. Clay's blade merely dipped, spring-like, and whipped erect again.

"What did you see?" Clay demanded, turning to Johnny.

Johnny was baffled. "See? You used the sword like a bludgeon. A simple rolling high parry would fend an attack like that."

"You fended my blade, to be sure. But what happened to my point?"

Johnny knitted his brows, shook his head. "Try it again."

The force of the blow again bent Clay's blade; then it fairly leaped away from the blunt back edge of Johnny's weapon.

"The point?" Clay insisted. "What happened to it?"

"It bent, dipped."

"Right enough. Suppose your head were there? Suppose you were in guard of high prime when I struck for your head with the flat?"

"I'd parry and attack. You'd never reach my head." Johnny paused and stared

at Clay. "The point, you say? My God, Amberson! The point would probably dip down over my guard and half scalp me!"

Clay grinned. McBride looked lost in amaze. Johnny began to smile, almost wickedly.

"Let's try it," said Clay. "We'll take it by easy stages. Don't be deceived—it's not as simple as it looks."

They assumed the half-seated crouch of the fencer and advanced till the saber points touched. The blades flashed with fire in the preliminary gambit of feint and parry.

THE LATE hours of the night were long and tense with the stealthy imminence of drama. Clay Amberson, grimly bent on repaying Ted Rank in kind, had recruited four of the toughest poker hands in town. Marshal Rank, turning up about four o'clock, made a rather surprising sixth.

Ted Rank seldom played. When he did, it was with the ironbound determination to win. Tonight he was beyond his depth in this company. He had intended no more, it seemed, and was stolidly satisfied—even if Clay Amberson was not.

It was a four sided duel. A contest of wits, of spite, of urbane malice.

"Funny thing happened tonight," Rank once remarked ruminatively. Rank was an unreadable man; his idea of a funny thing could curl the hair too, on ocassion. "Robbery, looks like. Makes no sense to me from any angle. You mind those swords Eb Williams had mounted on the wall of his lobby for ornaments? They disappeared mysteriously sometime since sundown."

Clay Amberson sent him an intense, opaque glance. A cattleman named Paulson encouraged, "Disappeared? Now, Ted—what in hell would a thief want with a pair of swords?"

"Eb Williams wouldn't believe me till I took and showed him the spot."

"Didn't he have any ideas?"

"Well—there are parties around who might not be able to abide the sight of those Union Army officers' swords any longer."

"Who?"

"I name no names." The tone was dry. "Could have been any of a dozen or more. Some unreconstructed Rebel, say, with a secret grudge that'll never let up."

There was a dead silence. One by one, as they finished a stony study of the hands, they shot a covert glance at Amberson. Clay Amberson, late of Rebel Alabama! There was no trace of expression on his face.

It was Amberson who provided the next diversion.

He had finally come to a conclusion about Rank's motive. It was to stop Clay from getting himself involved in another man's duel, by obligation, accident or design.

Clay's tone was a little vindictive as he remarked, "Speaking of swords — I remember an uncle back home who invented a whole new school of the sword all by himself. He put to rout the champions, the *Schlager* duelists of their day in Germany. At least he only fought one duel; he was never challenged again."

"You mean he killed his man?" one asked.

"He did not. It was at the University of Berlin. He wanted to teach him a lesson they'd none of them ever forget. So he took thought, recollected all he'd ever learned, and came up with an almost unheard-of method of attack."

He paused, smiling inscrutably.

"My heretical uncle," said Clay, "met his formidable opponent and charged into combat. The fight set a record—it lasted less than two minutes. His opponent was only superficially hurt—but he couldn't see to fight, blinded by his own blood. He was licked before he started. My uncle wasn't even scratched."

They stared at him, skeptical, suspicious. Tall stories were nourished by the very soil of their barren frontier land, but Clay Amberson had never sought renown in the art.

Clay did not in the least mind. He proceeded to explain. He could not demonstrate as vividly as he had once earlier that very night, but the convincing simplicity of his explanation stopped all doubt.

Ted Rank was the first to comment. "Ever try out those tactics yourself, Clay?"

"No, indeed."

"Suppose you had?"

"Why, I'd try to follow the uncle's example, no doubt. But I'd take every precaution to avoid the necessity. A man's a lamb for the slaughter or brave beyond belief who'd buck another man's game, willingly."

"Yes, willingly," Rank acknowledged, picking up the cards. "Your uncle, I take it, was no fool. He got into a fix and he got out of it. A man could get into a fix anywhere. Even right here." He took out his watch. "I reckon it'll come daylight inside fifteen minutes. Maybe daylight will tell us—since no one else is willing—the answer to those missing sabers."

The others stared at him, vaguely astonished and touched with wonder. It was almost a confession, coming from Marshal Rank.

Tentatively the man named Paulson said, "I reckon I'll open, if nobody minds."

There was no more conversation at the poker table. There was no sardonic amusement now. Each man knew, instinctively, that death hovered somewhere in the daybreak over the great gulch of Sun City.

It was Ted Rank who first gave under the strain. Minute by minute, the grayness outside had gradually changed to the hue of pearl. The first sun had climbed and spilled over into the last deep lurking place of night. It was suddenly day, intensely quiet and treacherously peaceful.

Ted Rank stood up suddenly and tossed in his cards. "I'm taking a walk," he announced. "Deal me out."

Amberson glanced at him. "You coming back?"

"Could be." He added, "I might sit in again, if you're still here."

"I'll be nowhere else."

None of the others said anything. Ted Rank turned abruptly and strode for the doors.

Paulson, gathering the cards, said mildly, "I don't suppose a little light on the matter is in order yet, by any chance?"

"It isn't," Amberson said sharply.

Paulson shuffled the deck.

CHAPTER THREE

The Gun That Lied

THE FIRST arrival with the new day at the Palladium, to nobody's surprise, was the head bartender of the day crew. To be sure, he was at work uncommonly early. A few noted that he still wore last evening's modestly starched finery, like a man who has been out all night. That was certainly not like the McBride.

There was a sternness about McBride as he came through the doors. His glance swept the room and then fixed grimly on the poker table in the corner, to identify each player in turn. His gaze met Clay Amberson's, and there was a wordless exchange between the two, but no sign for the world to read.

Clay Amberson passed his hand and dropped it in the discard and sat there, motionless, waiting.

McBride was a cautious man, and he was in no hurry. He began to stroll among the tables.

After briefly observing the other two games, McBride arrived at the poker table. He exchanged nods of greeting all around and fell to watching.

Clay Amberson was acutely, painfully conscious of McBride standing alongside. He could feel the spirit of the man reaching out to him, trying to convey an urgent message. One thing was certain. It was not merely news, it was a warning of grave and imminent danger.

Clay became aware that McBride was folding and unfolding the corners of a white linen handkerchief, absently, as a man might whittle a stick or braid rawhide while thinking of something else. Clay glanced at it. At that instant McBride opened the handkerchief to expose what it contained—for Clay's eyes alone. Only for an instant; then he folded the linen and thrust it out of sight.

Clay picked up the fresh cards in front of him. The thing in the kerchief was a small shapeless wedge, pallid, soiled looking. Attached was a tuft of curled yellow hair. There was no possible doubt about it. Symbolically and literally, Johnny Callendar had taken his enemy's scalp.

Clay studied the cards. "Pleasant morning, Mac?" he breathed.

"Rather," allowed Mac, as if he had borrowed the expression from Johnny. Then, going wholly native, he murmured, "And a damned sudden morning, by Christmas—the suddenest, I guess, I ever seen!"

Then Ted Rank strode in from the street. He was grim and full of purpose. His icy glance challenged McBride as he slid silently into the vacant chair.

"The swords are back in their place again in the Capitol lobby," he announced. The tone was impersonal, commanding.

"Don't know how, I didn't bother to shake up Eb Williams. I looked in on Doc Peterson. I found him at work. Accident case. Looked like a man who had been pitched head first into a mess of Spanish bayonet. Not bad hurt, certainly not by the amount of profanity I heard, but scalp all lacerated, blood all over—a God-awful sight!"

"Who was it?" asked Paulson.

"The big Dutchman. Bohrmann."

"Von Bohrmann of the Grand Electrum?" exclaimed Paulson. "By Judas, Ted, he's been going around looking for it! What happened to him?"

"He ain't telling," Rank said dryly. "Nor is his man Friday, Foreman Schultz. They resented my curiosity. I got cussed out at considerable length, all in German. They talked *too* much in German, as they have more than once before this. Their ignorance and their conceit are, as they would put it, *aber kolossal!*"

"You mean you understand their talk?"

Rank snorted scornfully. "I ended the War as a lieutenant of infantry with a regiment of Missouri volunteers. More than half our effectives were German-born."

Clay Amberson had been watching the marshal intently. Now Rank met his eye.

"After I left the doc's place, I saw woodsmoke in the chimney of the old cabin where Johnny Callendar lives. I knocked on the door to ask what was he doing up so early? He was just having his tea and breakfast before work, he told me — it seems he clean forgot about our Independence Day. Trust an Englishman, I suppose! Anyway, I stayed for a bit of talk. Didn't get anywhere there either, to speak of, but I brought this along." He reached inside his coat and brought out a walnut-handled Colt .45 and placed it on the table.

"You took that from Callendar?" Amberson demanded. "Why?"

There was a trace of doubt in the marshal's tone. "I was afraid, at first, it might get him into trouble. There are bound to be some Irish around town today only too willing to damn George III and all the bloody English. But maybe I overstepped myself."

Rank pushed the .45 across the green cloth of the table toward Amberson. "Clay, I'll take it kindly if you'll return that for me. Just tell Johnny Callendar I changed my mind."

Amberson glanced at Rank. "Anything to prevent you from telling him that yourself?"

"Yes, I think there is. As city marshal, I never explain a change of heart."

McBride, unable to contain himself, blurted earnestly, "I can take Callendar his gun, Marshal. I've got nothing to do for a while yet."

"Nothing to do? That's fine, Mac! Sit right down. Take over for the house till Amberson gets back. Clay, let Mac have the chair."

Clay stood up. He picked up the gun. In the corners of his eyes lurked a secret smile, sardonic and understanding. He slid the gun into a back pocket.

"I'll return your gun, Ted. Without apologies."

The gray gaze was steady. "Use your own best judgment."

He was halted halfway by McBride, who came after him regardless of orders. Mac spoke in an undertone of suffering.

"Clay, those Dutchmen know! About last night, and the borrowed sabers. Some miner or countryman of theirs spied me, like as not, or spied on the livery."

"I gathered something like that," Clay said calmly.

"They claim you tricked them. And they're not just sore or put out—they're crazy desperate."

"I take it Johnny's all right?"

"Not a scratch. Gus Schultz yelled blue murder, and Bohrmann was helpless, and we stopped it. But understand me, Clay. That pair will do murder, if they can fix it."

Clay smiled. "Then we'll unfix it."

He strode through the doors into the brilliant day.

THERE WERE places in the world where the morning was fresher and more fair than the gulch confining Sun City, but none where the joy of morning was more rare or treasured. The main street truly never slept, but it could nod, and it was quiet, tawdry and dissheveled yet full of peace in this unique hour.

Clay met no one as he walked the wooden sidewalks.

Death, Clay knew, walked beside him in the morning, invisible and unpredictable. Its presence only made the pulse of life

seem to beat much faster than it had.

The street or alley alongside the Capitol Hotel was a dead-end byway leading into a scattering of houses and outbuildings. Johnny Callendar's cabin was exceptional in that it was built of sparse, scarce native timber, exhausted overnight in the first wave of the original gold rush.

Its door now stood ajar. A door open wide, or a door shut fast, expresses the definite will of its owner. But a door neither one nor the other is indecisive, suspicious. Clay frowned and walked a little faster.

Then he heard a sudden shout, guttural, imperative, unintelligible. It came from somewhere ahead among the shacks and outbuildings. It continued in a voice of sharp command, angered and menacing, rising to a point verging on hysterical rage. The speech was German.

Clay broke into a run.

Immediately came the sound of a shot. It came unmistakably from inside the cabin. With the report, the shouting ceased abruptly; there was total silence.

A man stepped from the concealment of one corner of a dilapidated horse shed. He was close to the cabin, barring the way, still a good many yards distant from Amberson. It was Bohrmann, hatless, an absurd blue bandanna ineffectually disguising the sinister swath of bandages about his head. He carried a shotgun at the ready, finger on trigger. He stood waiting, the high color of his complexion reduced to a pallor—murder as hot and sharp as noonday sun in the sky-blue pupils.

Clay came to a halt. He studied both cabin and shotgun. He was not yet within effective range of a load of light shot, even medium. It was possible, but unlikely that the double-barreled gun, a handsome hunting piece, was loaded with the more deadly buckshot. He slid the Colt swiftly from the back pocket. The range was not too extreme for a six-inch barrel and a marksman's eye.

"Put down that shotgun, Bohrmann!" he commanded.

Bohrmann cursed him. "What brings you here at this hour?" he snarled. "I think it is remarkable, Amberson, that you are just in time. It is an inconvenience you save us, the necessity of going after you."

"Drop it, Bohrmann! I can drill you right square in the eye, and you know it."

Bohrmann stepped carefully from the shed into the roadway, advancing, the gun ready, like a stalking hunter.

"You aspire to be a duelist, I am told, Amberson. A card-sharper, a common swindler, you would now be a gentleman too? Your countrymen are a credulous lot. And so easily frightened by empty words, like children, not so?"

Clay made no reply. Talk was futile.

"A great duelist," mocked Bohrmann, "who talks much and fights no duel. Who slyly sends out others, tutored in trickery, to do the fighting."

Clay's inexpressive face was a graven image in the floodlight of morning.

"*Leider,* to meet such as you on honorable ground would be impossible," Bohrmann said with cold ferocity. "It is more fitting that we meet in a back alley. It is a more seemly place for you to die, *du dummer Junge!* I am going to kill you, Amberson."

Clay pivoted, swung the Colt level, and all in one movement, fired—well to one side and past the man advancing.

In the chink of the cabin door, poised and aimed with infinite care, a pistol barrel was visible in daylight. It flamed, recoiled. The range was still not too extreme. But for this gun, this desperate, unschooled hand and eye, trained and expert in tools of lesser precision, the handicap was too much.

There was a miscroscopic, immeasurable space in which time stood still. Bohrmann, silenced, dared not look back over his shoulder. He saw Amberson, icily recock the Colt. He could hear a cry of anguish from the cabin behind him, a strangled oath, obscene and shocking. He jerked the padded butt of the shotgun to his shoulder and pulled trigger, dead on target.

The charge in the shotgun demonstrably *was* buckshot. It plowed the road midway between the men. A jet of sand and dust leaped up from the violent impact.

Amberson's second shot was timed and deliberate as the striking of a clock.

Bohrmann's shot was a miscalculation, an incredible mistake! Bohrmann strove desperately to level the drooping, deceitful gun for the second barrel. He cursed it hoarsely. The sun darkened and a weight was crushing. Blood welled in Bohrmann's

throat and nostrils. Then gun and man collapsed together into the wagon-tracks, suddenly lumpish and undone as an old broomstick and a sack of oats.

Clay Amberson waited. The dread that gripped him, that froze his will, was greater than the dread of gunfire.

Then the cabin door opened wide. Johnny Callendar, clumsy as a man with palsy, succeeded in the vast effort of stepping over the moaning, cursing figure sprawled helpless over the doorsill. There was a great spreading of blood on Johnny's white shirtfront. He took an uncertain step, swaying.

"Clay Amberson, I presume?" He smiled faintly in irony and pain, peering into the day, eyes clouded. "Can't see too well. This bloody sunlight—damned American extravagance!"

Clay ran for the cabin. "It's all right, it's Amberson, Johnny. Son, what happened?"

Johnny essayed an absurd gesture of regret. "Visitors—this time of day. Took me unawares. Totally unprepared. No tea left—used my last. No milk anyway—damned tinned stuff soured. Worst of all, my word, no bullets. Inexcusable, you know. Let them down badly. They did count on a few bullets."

Clay swore under his breath. "Johnny, if I'd been five minutes sooner! I brought you a gun. Request of Marshal Rank—that I return it."

"Rank? Return it?" Callendar said politely. "Very kind of you, Clay. I'm not missing a gun. Mine's inside on the floor. Never carry the thing. It's not much good without bullets, but I tried my damnedest!"

"Tried what?"

"I heard the shouting. Sounded like help was on the way. I grabbed up the gun and tried to bluff. Gus Schultz simply called me—and raised."

He gasped and closed his eyes, and Clay caught him just as the knees gave way.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shoot First—Shoot Once!

THE HISTORY of Sun City was too brief and meteoric for adequate comparisons with the past. Lacking that yardstick, its citizenry would have unhesitatingly bet all the town's limitless future, if such a wager were possible, that no Independence Day to come would ever be ushered in with a more brilliant blaze of "glory, gumption and gunfire!" That phrase belonged to the *Sun City Mercury* and fairly reflected the public mind.

The story of the sunrise gunbattle was too big, too hair-raising for any single faction to quell or control. The events leading up to it were minutely discussed. The dubious legal feuding over the ledge. The calculated exchange of remarks, insults and calling cards. The weird rehearsal in Cullen's livery. The brief and bloody clash of swords on the high bench east of town, ending abruptly in complete defeat for Bohrmann.

Then there was the matter of Clay Amberson's inflexible rule about guns. He had not been armed all that night. It was established that he had carried the mystery weapon with reluctance and then only as messenger. Yet he had walked into an ambush, fought a gunbattle without hesitation and downed his two would-be assassins with the cool aplomb of a general executing a subtle and carefully planned campaign. Clay Amberson's reticence was equally understandable, and no one ventured to press him for explanation.

The loss of two of its leading lights in the production of precious metals was suffered by the town with philosophic calm, if not open approval.

The darker motives and ambitions of Fritz von Bohrmann had to remain in the realm of public surmise. He was found dead where he fell. His behavior from first acquaintance had been incomprehensible. His employers were no help, for the resident promoters of the Grand Electrum fled town that morning before the sun was high. They fled, in fact, in fear of their lives. A satisfactory settlement out of court eventually ended all claim and counterclaim, merging the workings into those of the King Solomon.

There remained Gus Schultz, who survived the gunbattle by an hour. It was beyond the powers of Doc Peterson to stem the internal hemorrhage that carried him off. He freely admitted shooting Callendar, defiantly declared he had fired at Amberson on Bohrmann's command.

Alone at a table in the Palladium, in the

relative quiet of the supper hour, after prolonged inquiry and perfunctory inquest, after the town's daylong parading and speechmaking and explosive din, Clay Amberson and Ted Rank opened a vein of talk they had carefully avoided all that day. They were discreet, deferential, guarded. Clay would as soon have closed the chapter, but Rank, who knew more about the case than anyone, was still unsatisfied.

"I'd give a good deal," he said, "to have been with you this morning, Clay. I suspect that in that moment, with the rules suspended and deuces wild, Bohrmann tipped his entire hand."

"I doubt he said anything we haven't learned," Clay returned. "Using English to me, he said nothing startling. Insults, gibberish about cardsharps and aristocrats! The very game he worked so successfully on Johnny Callendar. We know he ordered Schultz to drill me from the cabin doorway while he held me hypnotized with that shotgun. That was obvious, if poor judgment. In a crossfire, if one didn't drop me the other would—*if* they were gunfighters, and sharpshooters to boot."

"It worked out like that," Rank admitted. "But why did it fail, Clay? How could you ignore a shotgun right in front of you and trade shots with a third party—and live to tell it? Why didn't Bohrmann get you then?"

"Because Bohrmann was a swordsman, which means he was not a gunfighter. He tried and intended to get me—coming and going, you might say. But I knew that I had, and could rely on, a margin of safety just sufficient for my needs." The tone hardened. "Let's cut out the heroics, Ted. Bohrmann hadn't a chance from the moment he stepped out into the daylight from the horse shed."

Rank's glance was skeptical, cynical. "I'm no old poke myself, but would you mind explaining that large statement?"

Clay smiled wryly and shook his head. "When I was quite young I spent hours and days and months practicing target shooting from the hip. The object was not blind speed, the so-called fast draw. It was to train the hand to follow the eye without conscious direction, to plant a bullet at the exact point where the eyes focused. In dueling, or even close street fighting, the advantage of such training is tremendous. There's no need for aiming and sighting, no time lost. The object is to shoot first, to shoot *once!*"

"I'll go along with you there," murmured Rank.

"Well, now, in field gunnery, hunting with rifle or shotgun, the problem is entirely different. You have to allow for windage or trajectory, or a moving target. Speed and accuracy are essential, yet you almost never aim at the target—you *lead* your target."

Rank uttered a grunt of assent and leaned back in his chair.

Clay said, "I doubt that Bohrmann ever fired a shotgun off the shoulder in his life. His shotgun was a sporting piece. Lifelong training ruled him." He hesitated, as if in reluctant confession. "I knew he'd shoulder it and aim, quick as thinking, never doubting. That was my margin. He wasn't quick enough. I planned my timing—and you know what happened."

Rank smiled almost sardonically. "Indeed I do know what happened."

Thoughtfully Clay bit the tip of a cigar. "From your long acquaintance with the breed, Ted, would you say that Bohrmann was a typical aristocrat?" Clay watched Rank's eyes intently.

Rank's laughter was harsh. "I think your so-called aristocrats are no different from the common run except in the head start they get, the vast superiority of opporunity. Trouble is, when they're too young, too poor, or too stupid to shine on their merits, they tend to turn into bullies."

Clay grinned faintly. "And to remind you never to forget to call them 'Von'."

"Exactly!" snorted Rank. "No German at home is ever 'Von' Anything. That's an American, an English delusion. Asked his name, he may say 'Schmidt'; his full name, 'Franz von Schmidt'—if entitled. Friends will refer to him as 'Schmidt.' A directory will list him as 'Schmidt.' But if he pointedly tells you his name is *Von* Schmidt—watch out. He's either a faker or he's selling a gold brick."

"Well, thank God we called his bluff and won the pot," Clay smiled.

"Thank God *you* are a good poker player as well as a master in the code duello," Rank amended, finishing off his brandy.

THE END

THE STRAWBOSS

By THE EDITOR

WILLIAM CORCORAN, whose boom-camp novel of the *code duello* "Cold Steel—Iron Men!" appears on page 80 of this issue of *New Western,* writes an intriguing note touching on some of the background of the story.

Dear Sir:

Attached to this letter is a quotation from one of the most entertaining books of personal memoirs I know. The author is a distinguished American now in his 80's whose father and uncle were mayors of New Yory City, and whose grandfather was Peter Cooper. The dueling incident he relates carries authority. I cite it to assure you that I haven't let my imagination run away with me. I doubt the ability of my imagination to concoct out of thin air so realistic a bit as this.

Apropos the German words used in dialogue: *Schlager* approximates our "champion." *Leider* means "unfortunately." *Dummer Junge,* "fool"—the accepted form of insult, redeemable only in blood. It might help also to recall to you that Mark Twain fled Virginia City, Nevada, to escape a bench warrant for his arrest on a charge of conspiracy, even though the duel itself *never occurred!*

So much for that. The quotation follows, taken from page 154, *Those Were The Days,* by Edward Ringwood Hewitt, Duell Sloan & Pearce, 1943. (Reprinted by permission of the publishers.)

In 1891 the author, then 25, entered the University of Berlin for a year of post-graduate study in chemistry. The narrative goes on:

"As I became better acquainted, I was taken in by a group of German students, who took their meals in a small restaurant where they had a small room to themselves. I wanted to learn German, so I avoided Americans in the University as far as possible. My German companions

were always talking about student duels. One day I happened to mention that I was distantly related, by marriage, to Pinckney Green of Kentucky, and at once a chorus exploded. *"Night der beruhmte Pinckney Green?"* . . . After that I was treated with the greatest respect.

Pinckney Green, I learned, had been a student at Heidelberg and was the most famous "Schlager" duelist ever to fight in Germany. . . .

"There was a young American in my laboratory who was placed next to a domineering German in the balance room, where materials were weighed for analysis. The German kept edging over toward the American's part of the desk and finally upset the latter's crucible. The American threw the German's materials on the floor. The German at once presented his card—which meant a challenge to a duel. The young American came and asked me what he should do, as he did not know any swordplay. . . .

"I had received two years' training in fencing with a man named Von Taube, who had escaped from Russia after killing the Governor of Kiev in a duel. . . .

"We trained several hours a day. I showed him the trick of hitting with the flat of the sword instead of with the edge. If this is done with force, the sword can be made to bend over the guarding opponent's sword and cause the point of it to hit the opponent's head. . . .

"On the night of the duel between the young American and his German opponent I had such a bad cold and high temperature that I could not attend. Next day, I met the American friend in the laboratory, with no apparent marks on him. I asked him how he had come out. He replied, 'Oh, all right. I only had to hit three times with the flat of my sword. Then the seconds knocked up the swords, and I saw this on the floor.'

"He drew out a piece of scalp about as large as a silver dollar, with the hair still on it. After that, he carried this dry piece of scalp with him in his pocket. Nobody interfered with him again."

Well, that's all for now, and thanks again.

William Corcoran.

(Continued from page 48)

doctor crossed, gave Sam a quick professional survey.

The mercantile man gripped Sam's hand.

"I knew the lid was off when I saw those pictures, Burnett. Sorry we were late, but we figured we'd have a clean sweep, so we went after the bucko that was driving the runaway which killed Amos Clayton a couple weeks ago, first. He didn't want to talk, but he finally admitted it wasn't a runaway and his bosses put him up to it."

"We're going to have us a court and some camp government from here on," the

Flora Carpenter

Miners' Association Chairman said. "And I figure the whole camp can get behind that railroad of yours."

"Talk about that to Miss Carpenter," Sam said wearily. "It's her railroad and I'm done with it."

Flora pressed against Sam's shoulders.

"What you going to do?" she asked him.

"Take pictures," Sam said. "Drift the high country and take pictures."

"Then it's my business, too!" she said quietly. "Talk to somebody else about the railroad. It isn't mine. It's really Alder Creek's—" she turned back to Sam. "I've got to stick with you if I'm ever going to collect my back pay for the last ten days—"

Sam remembered the coin in which he had promised to pay her. He dropped his uninjured arm over her shoulders and bent toward her upturned face. The Liberty Bell and those within it faded from his awareness. Mountain photography was not apt to be as lonely a business as he had once feared, after all.

THE END

(Continued from page 33)

"After you, sir," the Colonel bowed to him.

"Naw—together," Corporal nodded back to him.

Their two fists started from down around their heels and went up. They connected at the points of two chins. Greasy Kid and Washita Joe did a backward flip-flop in the street and lay still.

"Now," said the Colonel, brushing off his hands.

"On with the wedding," Corporal said. "Our loss is Bog's gain."

The parson moved closer. So did I. So did dang near everybody in Pesky. Jones cradled his shotgun. Bog looked sheepish. Corporal and Colonel turned to me, almost apologetically.

"We wasn't gonna let you get hurt, Uncle Bud," Colonel said. "We thought it was a good way to bring everything to a head, get a showdown, out in the open. A way to get the uncertainity of the *Pennant* situation settled."

"We didn't know at first," Corporal added a little sadly, "that Melissa here was actually on the trail of her man Bog in the first place."

"That summer visit in Ohio!" Colonel scowled darkly.

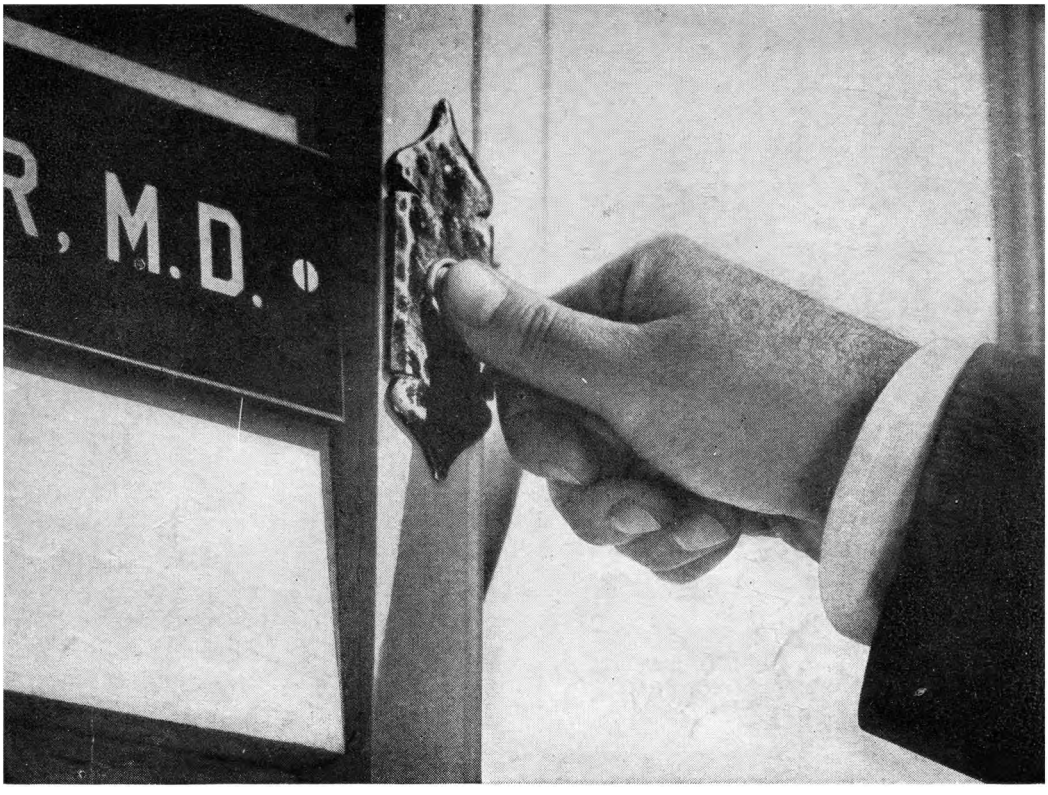
"Anyhow," Corporal said, "we made you a hero, Uncle Bud. If you wasn't the leadin' citizen of Pesky before, you sure as hell are now."

"The way you went out to meet 'em," Horace Greeley Jones declared, "was the bravest thing I ever saw."

"Let's forgit it and start the marryin'," Bog grinned sourly, but he looked kinda happy at that, eyeing Melissa and the preacher. "Kin folks all got to pull together."

"I still got a little score to settle," I retorted, squinting at the Bar B pair. "I been scared outta ten years growth. And I ain't a man to be monkeyed with—did I ever tell you about the time I cleaned out nineteen rough-tough Californy gold mine towns?"

"Aw git the marryin' over with," complained Uncle Billy Wilkins, "then everybody come have some Pesky Special on the house. Weddin's depress me!"



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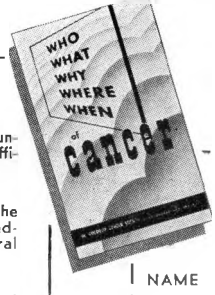
4. Persistent indigestion.
5. Persistent hoarseness, unexplained cough, or difficulty in swallowing.
6. Bloody discharge from the nipple or irregular bleeding from any of the natural body openings.
7. Any change in the normal bowel habits.



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