BIG MAN FROM MONTANA a novelet, by W. J. Reynolds

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

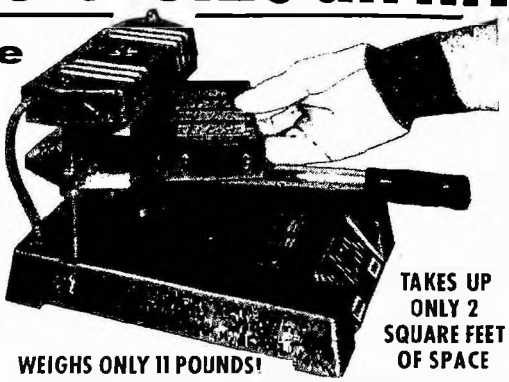
FEATURING: **THE CHINO KID** By JACKSON COLE

He was a will-o'-the-wisp killer who baffled even Hatfield

New Rubber Stamp Business Pays Beginners UP TO $9.20 an hr.

Start at home in spare time with this little table top machine

The multi-million dollar Rubber Stamp Business—once controlled by a few big companies—is now being taken over by small home operators—one in each community throughout the U. S. Men and women who have this inexpensive machine can turn out huge quantities of Rubber Stamps with special wording that buyers once were forced to order from big cities. Material costing only 27c makes a stamp that sells for $1.80. The machine that does the work is simple and easy to operate and it turns out as many as six Rubber Stamps at a time each with different wording such as names, addresses, notices, stock numbers, prices and other "copy" needed by offices, factories and individuals. Working full capacity, it can earn as much as **$9.20 an hour for the operator!** Now you can get into the big-pay business yourself, with your own home as headquarters. You don't need any experience. We supply everything, including complete instructions and eight ways to get business coming in fast. Start making up to $9.20 an hour from the very beginning. Cash in on the profitable Rubber Stamp business in your community right away.



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WEIGHS ONLY 11 POUNDS!

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1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Illinois

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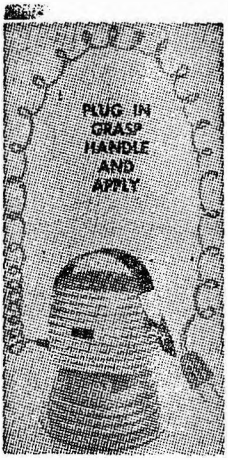

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LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

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Relax with electric Spot Reducer. See how soothing its gentle massage can be. Helps you sleep when massage can be of benefit.

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Thousands have lost weight this way—in hips, abdomen, legs, arms, necks, buttocks, etc. The same method used by stage, screen and radio personalities and leading reducing salons. The Spot Reducer can be used in your spare time in the privacy of your own room.

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Please send me the Spot Reducer for 10 days trial period. I enclose $1. Upon arrival I will pay postman only $8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return SPOT REDUCER within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

☐ I enclose $12.98. Send DeLuxe Model.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 66, No. 3 MAY, 1957

A Jim Hatfield Novel

THE CHINO KID.....Jackson Cole 12
Blood had been spilled in this valley, and plenty more would flow—unless Jim pinned down the mysterious kid

A Novelet

BIG MAN FROM MONTANA.....W. J. Reynolds 62
John Dekker had come fifteen hundred miles to kill two men, and no loud deputy, nor any girl, could stop him

Five Short Stories

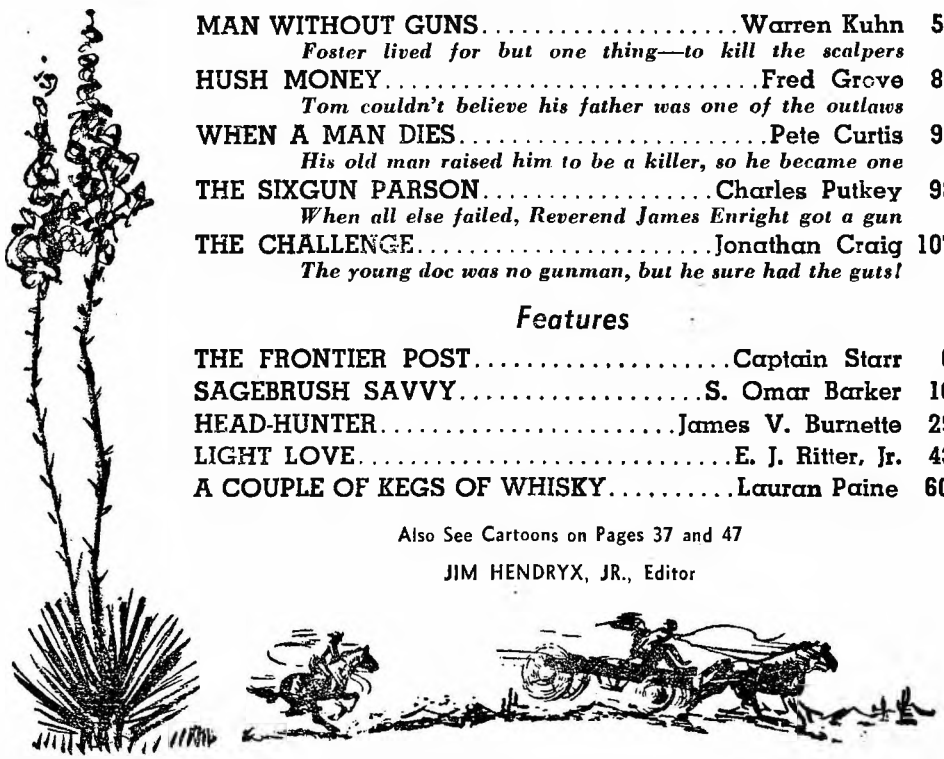
MAN WITHOUT GUNS.....Warren Kuhn 52
Foster lived for but one thing—to kill the scalpers
HUSH MONEY.....Fred Grove 80
Tom couldn't believe his father was one of the outlaws
WHEN A MAN DIES.....Pete Curtis 90
His old man raised him to be a killer, so he became one
THE SIXGUN PARSON.....Charles Putkey 98
When all else failed, Reverend James Enright got a gun
THE CHALLENGE.....Jonathan Craig 107
The young doc was no gunman, but he sure had the guts!

Features

THE FRONTIER POST.....Captain Starr 6
SAGEBRUSH SAVVY.....S. Omar Barker 10
HEAD-HUNTER.....James V. Burnette 29
LIGHT LOVE.....E. J. Ritter, Jr. 43
A COUPLE OF KEGS OF WHISKY.....Lauran Paine 60

Also See Cartoons on Pages 37 and 47

JIM HENDRYX, JR., Editor



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Bass Fishermen will Say I'm Crazy . . .

until they try my method!

But, after an honest trial, if you're at all like the other men to whom I've told my strange plan, you'll guard it with your last breath.

Don't jump at conclusions. I'm not a manufacturer of any fancy new lure. I have no reels or lines to sell. I'm a professional man and make a good living in my profession. But my all-absorbing hobby is fishing. And, quite by accident, I've discovered how to go to waters that most fishermen say are fished out and come in with a good catch of the biggest bass that you ever saw. The savage old bass that got so big, because they were "wise" to every ordinary way of fishing.

This METHOD is NOT spinning, trolling, casting, fly fishing, trot line fishing, set line fishing, hand line fishing, live bait fishing, jugging, netting, trapping, seining. No live bait or prepared bait is used. You can carry all of the equipment you need in one hand.

The whole method can be learned in twenty minutes—twenty minutes of fascinating reading. All the extra equipment you need, you can buy locally at a cost of less than a dollar. Yet with it, you can come in after an hour or two of the greatest excitement of your life, with a stringer full. Not one or two miserable 12 or 14 inch over-sized keepers—but five or six real beauties with real poundage behind them. The kind that don't need a word of explanation of the professional skill of the man who caught them. Absolutely legal, too—in every state.

This amazing method was developed by a little group of professional fishermen. Though they were public guides, they rarely divulged their method to their patrons. They use it only when fishing for their own tables. It is possible that no man on your waters has ever *seen it*, ever *heard of it*, or ever *used it*. And when you have given it the first trial, you will be as closed-mouthed as a man who has suddenly discovered a gold mine. Because with this method you can fish with-in a hundred feet of the best fishermen in the county and pull in ferocious big ones while they come home empty handed. No special skill is required. The method is just as deadly in the hands of a novice as in the hands of an old timer. My method will be disclosed only to those few men in each area who will give me their word of honor not to give the method to anyone else.

Send me your name. Let me tell you how you can try out this deadly method of bringing in big bass from your local waters. Let me tell you why I let you try out my unusual method for the whole fishing season without risking a penny of your money on instructions or lures. There is no charge for this information, now or at any other time. Send me your name for details of my money-back trial offer. But I guarantee that the information I send you will make you a complete skeptic—until once you try it! And then, your own catches will fill you with disbelief. Send your name, today. This will be fun.

ERIC B. FARE

Libertyville 16, Illinois

Eric B. Fare, Libertyville 16, Illinois

Dear Mr. Fare: Send me complete information without any charge and without the slightest obligation. Tell me how I can learn your method of catching big bass from "fished out" waters, even when the old timers are reporting "No Luck."

Name .....

Address .....

City..... Zone... State.....

The Titan of Tombstone

THE CHANCES are you never heard of Ed Schiefflin, but he was one of the most fabulous characters that ever trod across our plains. He left this country a wonderful town, a great fortune, a haunting mystery and two very choice bits of philosophy.

A Pennsylvanian by birth, who had crossed the country in a covered-wagon to Oregon as a boy, Ed Schiefflin was a man who had the prospecting fever in him practically all his life. He was only twelve years old when he ran away from home to look for gold down Idaho way. He didn't have any luck there but he never went back home. Instead he roamed all over the West, first one place and then another, growing from boy to man with a pick and shovel on his back and a grim and determined dream in his eyes.

Man of Ore

Ed barely got by most of these years, finding just enough gold scrapings to keep himself in canned beans, salt pork and a reasonably workable pick and shovel. Once things got so tough that he actually had to get a job for awhile. He served as a scout with the U. S. Army in its campaign against the Apaches in the Southwest.

Even so, there are indications that Ed Schiefflin's mind was on other things besides redskins, even the ferocious kind such as the Apaches generally were. Once, for instance, the head scout of his outfit made him dump out everything he was carrying in his saddlebags. That was because, instead of food and ammunition, they contained all sorts of rocks and ore. Ed Schiefflin considered them much more interesting than arrow heads, Indian tracks and such as that.

One day, while patrolling the lonely hills along Arizona's San Pedro River, he came upon some rock that looked unusually promising. He promptly left his post, rode to Fort Huachuca, quit his job, got the ten dollars in wages coming to him, converted it into some grocery stuff and a second-hand pick and shovel, swapped his horse for a mule and set off again for the rugged hills he's just left.

When he was warned that Geronimo himself, the tawny terror of the terrible Apaches, might be loose in those hills, Ed Schiefflin just shrugged and said, "Well, them's just the chance you got to take."

"Instead of silver, what you'll more likely be finding is your tombstone," he was told.

A Whopping Strike

But this time Ed finally tapped himself a mighty strike. It was the Tough Nut lode, a vein of silver that was to be worth $75,000,000.

Remembering the grim warning that the Army had given him about what he was apt to find in those hills, Ed Schiefflin called the place Tombstone. And that's how one of the most famous towns of the old West got itself off to a booming start.

Digging for a great wholesale quantity of silver is a complicated problem and Ed wound up with two partners. But when he'd accrued $1,000,000, although he knew he was leaving much more silver behind, he pulled out, offering this philosophy: "A million's enough for any man."

Ed just decided he'd have himself a good time from here on out. He'd heard a lot

(Continued on page 8)

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Name _____

Address _____

Occupation _____

Employed by _____ TF5

(Continued from page 6)

about New York City, so he set out for that place. He got himself a tall silk hat and a store-bought suit and had himself a high old time, living it up.

But he began to get a little bored, too. He went to Chicago and to San Francisco and Los Angeles. He even accumulated himself a wife. But the feeling of restlessness wouldn't leave him.

Back to the Wilds

One day he couldn't stand it any more and he put away all of his fancy duds and got into his old prospector's outfit and headed for the wilds of Oregon. He was still a very wealthy individual in spite of all his swank living.

Among other things he owned a veritable mansion in Los Angeles, which he'd had constructed for him. But it was just that the old prospecting urge had taken over again, and the only thing he could take a keen interest in was hunting more ore.

He went to the Umpqua River, where even as a small boy he had spent his time panning for gold. He erected himself a cabin there, filled it well with provisions and used it as a base of operations to examine and probe for ore through the surrounding countryside.

Some months later a hunter, lost and hungry, stopped by Ed Schiefflin's cabin and found his body.

And herein lies a haunting mystery that Ed Schiefflin left behind. It wasn't so much in the death itself, as a letter he'd written two weeks before. It said: "I have found stuff here in Oregon that will make Tombstone look like salt. This is GOLD."

To this day, now some 59 years later, men trample along old Oregon trails and paths looking for Ed Schiefflin's long lost gold mine.

There are some who remain convinced that Ed had struck it rich again just before his end came. Although his death appeared to be a natural one—and even if you ruled out altogether the chance that he might have been done in by someone who'd learned of his strike and was trying to extract the information of its location by force—it seemed a fairly reasonable theory that the excitement of coming upon another great valuable mineral find is what might have led to a heart attack. Moreover, if anyone knew a good strike when he saw one it would be Schiefflin, and there would seem to be no purpose in his writing about such a strike unless he'd found one.

Quite A Man

He was a rich man who really didn't need any money. He left a small fortune behind for his widow. He also left behind a very masculine-type piece of philosophy. One paragraph of his will read:

"I have no children, but should anyone, at their own expense, prove to the satisfaction of my executors to be a child of mine, to each I give the sum of fifty dollars."

Quite a man was Ed Schiefflin, the dreamer, prospector, philosopher and founder of what became one of the liveliest towns in the Old West.

How You Can Master GOOD ENGLISH

. . . in 15 Minutes a day

THOUSANDS of persons make mistakes in their everyday English—and don't know it. It is surprising how many persons fail in spelling such common words as "business," "judgment," "beneficiary," and "receive"; say "between you and I" instead of "between you and me"; use "who" for "whom"; and mispronounce the simplest words. And it is equally astonishing how few know whether to use one or two "c's" or "m's" or "s's" (as in "recommend" or "disappoint"), or when to use commas in order to make their meaning clear. Most persons use only common words—colorless, flat, ordinary. Their speech and their letters are lifeless, humdrum.

What Does Your English Say About You?

Does your English help or hinder you? Every time you talk, every time you write, you show what you are. When you use the wrong word, when you mispronounce a word, when you punctuate incorrectly, when you use commonplace words, you handicap yourself enormously. English, the very tool you should use to improve your business or social position, holds you back. And you don't realize it, for people are too polite to tell you about your mistakes.

But now Sherwin Cody offers you a common sense method of acquiring a mastery of English in only a few minutes a day. It's so easy to stop making the mistakes in English which have been hindering you and learn to present your ideas clearly and forcefully on all occasions—*without even thinking about it.*

What Cody Did at Gary

For years Mr. Cody studied the problem of creating instinctive habits of using good English. Some time ago he was invited to teach English to all upper-grade pupils in Gary, Indiana. Mr. Cody *secured more improvement in these pupils in five weeks than previously had been obtained by similar pupils in two years under the old methods.*

100% Self-Correcting Device

The basic principle of Mr. Cody's method is habit-forming. Suppose he himself were standing forever at your elbow. Every time you made a mistake, suppose you could hear him whisper: "That is wrong, it should be thus and so." In a short time you would habitually use the correct form and the right words.

Mr. Cody's patented 100% Self-Correcting Device does exactly this. It is his silent voice behind you, ready to speak whenever you commit an error. It finds your mistakes and concentrates on *them.* You are not drilled upon anything you already know; and there are no rules to memorize.

The study of English has been made so simple that no more than *fifteen minutes a day is required*—and not of study, but of fascinating practice! Those who take advantage of Mr. Cody's method gain something so priceless that it cannot be measured in terms of money. They gain a facility of speech that marks them as educated persons in whatever society they find themselves. They gain self-confidence and self-respect. As for material reward, the importance of good English in the race for success cannot be over-estimated. Surely no one can advance far without it.

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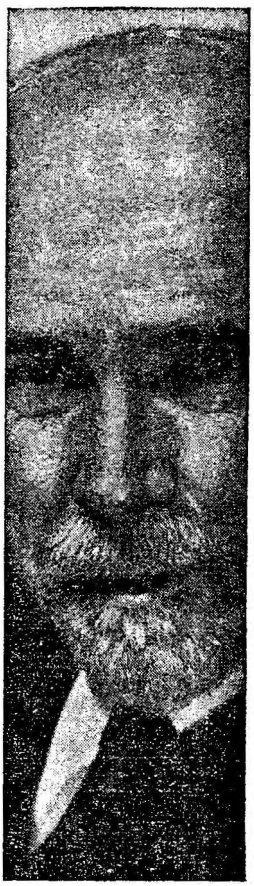
If you are ever embarrassed by mistakes in grammar, spelling, pronunciation, punctuation, or if your vocabulary is limited, this free book, "How You Can Master Good English in 15 Minutes a Day," will prove a revelation to you. It can be had free upon request. There is no obligation. Send the coupon or a letter or postal card for it now. No salesman will call. SHERWIN CODY COURSE IN ENGLISH, 2675 Central Drive, Port Washington, N.Y.



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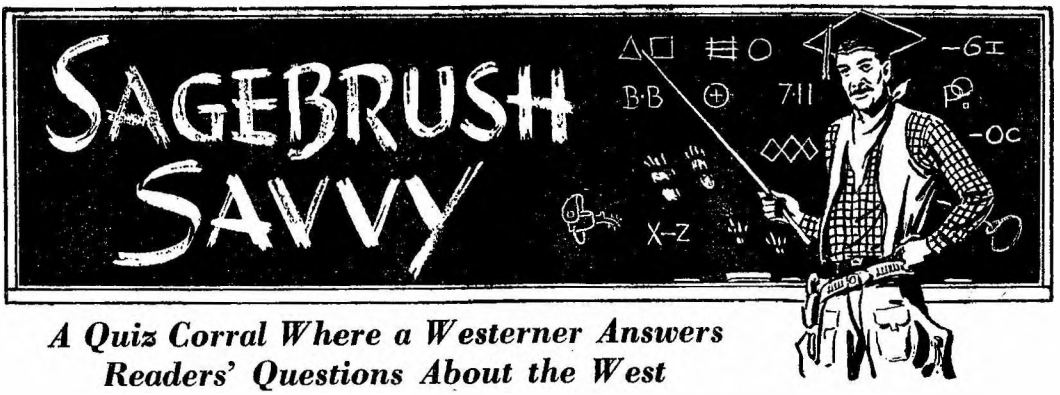

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Just what is the *monte* I see mentioned in stories of the Texas-Mexico Border country?—V.C. (Mont.).

A.—Although your Spanish dictionary gives "mountain" or "mount" as the first meaning of *monte* (MOAN-tay), the word is universally used in the Southwest to mean timber, forest or a woodsy area. In Texas "the *monte*" is the thorn-brush country thicketed with mesquite, huisache, ocotillo, brasil, agarita and a dozen other kinds of thorny growth. Thus a *vaquero del monte* is a brush country cowboy. Of course monte, pronounced MON-ty, is also a gambling card game, probably of Mexican origin.

Q.—Was James Bowie, inventor of the Bowie knife, a citizen of the United States, Mexico or the Texas Republic?—T.T.N. (Wash.).

A.—All three. Jim Bowie went to Texas as an American citizen, became a citizen of Mexico when he married the daughter of Lieutenant-Governor Verimendi of Mexican Texas, joined in the Texas war for independence as a Texan, and was among the Texas heroes who died in the Álamo. Texans pronounce his name BOO-ee.

Q.—Are Virginia City, Nevada, and Virginia City, Montana, both ghost towns?—A.C.B. (N.J.).

A.—Literally no, but in a sense, yes. Virginia City, Nevada, has a resident population of about 900, Virginia City, Montana, about 400, but the numerous empty buildings and abandoned mines that remain as relics of the old boom days give both towns somewhat the aspect of ghost towns. By preserving the appearance of its days of past glory in every way possible, Virginia City, Montana, has made itself noted as a tourist attraction.

Q.—Is there any book that gives a full history of cowboy rodeos?—Bill F. (N.Y.).

A.—The best I know of are "My 50 Years in Rodeo," by Foghorn Clancy (The Naylor Co.) and "Man, Beast, Dust: The Story of Rodeo," by Clifford P. Westermeier (Caxton Printers). There may be others.

Q.—Who was Black Bart?—R.D.G. (Fla.).

A.—Black Bart was a somewhat mysterious California bandit and stage robber of the 1870's and '80's, variously known as Charles E. Boles and Charles E. Bolton. He wrote doggerel rhymes to his victims and to officers of the law and called himself "the PO8" (poet). A full account of his career is in "Bad Company," by Joseph Henry Jackson.

Q.—What is the best breed of beef cattle on Western ranches?—W.W.J. (Miss.).

A.—Naturally cattlemen are not in general agreement on that point. Some popular breeds are Hereford, Aberdeen Angus, Black Angus, Red Angus, Shorthorn, Charolais, San Gertrudis, Brahma, Charbray, Brangus, Beefmaster, with other crossbreeds under development. Although they have plenty of competition, I believe that Herefords are still raised in greater numbers.—S. Omar Barker.

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A Jim Hatfield
NOVEL

Chino Kid

Blood had been spilled in this valley, and plenty more was due to flow—unless the Lone Wolf could pin down the mysterious Kid

CHAPTER I

Two Graves

THE SMOKE pulled Hatfield toward the east, away from the break in the hills which encircled Loving Basin. It rose in a thin gray plume which drifted slowly south, laying flat in the still morning air. Above it circled a black dot, drifting in a slow spiral that could mean only one thing in this broken, lonely land.

It took Hatfield a half hour to reach the scene. He came upon the youngster as he eased Goldy between two weathered boulders on a slight rise of ground which dipped down to a hollow.

The boy was sitting on the slope, legs drawn up and crossed, his head pillowed on his arms. His back was to Jim, vulnerable and unprotected—his long thin torso showed bony against his faded cotton shirt. The Ranger saw no cartridge belt encircling the boy's waist.

Two mounds, piled with stones, lay at the boy's feet; to one side

With gun in hand, and the distance fast closing, Jim couldn't miss

lay a shovel. Further down, tied by the pole gate of a stone corral, was a rawboned gray gelding. The stock of a Sharps rifle jutted from saddle scabbard.

The Lone Wolf's green eyes observed details of this lonely scene—moving from the corral where goats moved restlessly, across the beaten earth to the charred remains of a stone dwelling. The roof had fallen in and the door was gutted and burned out. The smoke still curled upward from the dying embers.

Jim waited, looking down at the boy who was too absorbed in his grief to sense his presence. It was not until the gray, turning and catching sight of Goldy, snorted and jingled his bit irons, that the boy stirred.

He lifted his head and looked around. He turned and saw Jim sitting saddle less than fifteen feet upslope and fear exploded in him. He lunged to his feet and Hatfield saw then that he had an old model Dragoon Colt stuck in his waistband.

The boy was dragging at it, jerking it loose, when he saw the big Peacemaker in Jim's hand. He slumped, fear tinting his narrow face to a coffee color.

The Lone Wolf dismounted and came down to the youngster. "You're a right suspicious button," he murmured, "but maybe you've got a right to be."

His glance slid past the boy to the smoke curling up from the gutted house and came to rest briefly on the two graves.

"Kin of yours?"

The boy's eyes had a wet shine. He had been crying and it had left streaks in his thin, dirty face. He looked at Jim with the suspicious wariness of a trapped coyote. A rail-thin boy almost as tall as Hatfield, his clothes hung loose on his long-armed, gangly frame. About sixteen, Jim judged—still growing. He had a splash of freckles across a blade thin nose and blue eyes under sandy brows. What hair showed under his dirty gray hat matched his eyebrows.

He looked scared and lonely and Jim felt a sudden pity for the boy. "Your folks?" he asked, nodding toward the graves.

The youngster inclined his head. His eyes were locked on Jim with that intense watchfulness.

Jim sheathed his Colt. "Reckon you've done all you could, son," he said. "Looks like there's nothing more to do here. You have relatives or friends in the Basin?"

The boy shook his head. Jim walked to him, but the youngster shrank away. He was like a cur which expects a kick. The Lone Wolf shrugged. He moved past the boy and went down to the smoking ruins.

On the far side of the gutted structure two chickens came into view. They stopped and eyed Hatfield with the dumb regard of their kind. In the stone corral an old billy goat thrust his whiskered head through the bars in the gate and bleated across the yard.

Jim turned and glanced at the boy who stood eyeing him with sullen fear.

"Do you know who did it?"

The boy was silent. He kept watching Jim like a hawk. The shock of what had happened here was still in him, Hatfield thought, and it would be a while before it wore off. He thought of his reasons for being here and he said: "Some of the Chino Kid's work?" and he saw the boy's eyes brighten and grow hard.

The boy's tone held a savage bitterness. "Yeah, some of the Chino Kid's work, mister!"

He shuffled toward Hatfield, his runover boots caked and cracked. There was an air of wildness about him he reminded Hatfield of some unkempt mongrel. The boy seemed to view the world with the same wary mistrust.

His Adam's apple bobbed along the sun-blacked column of his throat. "They never bothered nobody," he blurted out, and his voice started deep and rose and broke with adolescent shrillness. "They didn't have a dime. Just them goats and chickens. But they killed them. The hard way, mister—shot them and left them to burn."

He saw the horror in the boy's eyes then, and he pictured what this youngster must have gone through. His voice grew grim. "The Chino Kid'll pay for it, son.

I promise you that."

He saw the glitter of the coin from the corner of his eye and it pulled him around. He moved toward what had been the door and looked down at it before bending to pick it up.

It was one of the rare moments that the Lone Wolf dropped his guard, but he was expecting no trouble from this grief-stricken boy. He sensed the youngster coming up close, but it rang only a bare

JIM HATFIELD

note of warning in him. Not until the last split second, as he was straightening, did some shift in the youngster's feet alert him.

AND THEN it was too late.

The boy's Dragoon chopped down across the Lone Wolf's head and the Ranger pitched forward, almost across the doorway. He lay still.

The boy lifted the muzzle and aimed it at Jim's back. There was fear and hate in him, spilling over and a sob broke from his lips. "Damn you, damn you."

But he couldn't bring himself to pull trigger at Jim's back. He turned and ran for the gray and got into saddle. He rode west, toward the broken desolate land beyond the rim of Loving Basin.

The sun moved up higher and the shadows retreated back into the hills. Goldy came down the slope and nudged Jim. He stood over the Ranger, a bronzed statue, head uplifted, ears cocked. From the corner of the stone pen a rooster thrust out his chest, beat his black-tipped wings and crowed his defiance to the morning.

Hatfield stirred. He pushed himself up and straightened, the hammer strokes behind his eyes made him close them. His fingers gripped Goldy's pommel and he hung on until the weakness left his knees. When the ground stopped revolving he reached up and touched the lump behind his right ear.

Goldy shifted and turned to muzzle him. Jim ran his hand appreciatively over the big stallion's sleek muzzle.

"I didn't think he had the nerve," he muttered. "Looked too scared and beat to do anything but run." He turned and squinted at the lonely, tragic scene. The smoke still curled up in small tendrils from blackened boards. "Can't say that I blame him, though," he said bleakly.

Some more of the Chino Kid's work. He felt a cold, contained rage build up in him. Sheriff Luke Tipton had sent for Jim because this Chino Kid, whose reputation as a cruel, will-o'-the-wisp killer, had spread beyond the borders of Loving Basin.

Goldy nudged him impatiently and Hatfield nodded bleakly. "Reckon we should be moving." He turned to pick up his dented hat and the motion brought the sharp pounding between his eyes again. He straightened slowly, fighting the sickness in his stomach; he saw the coin at

his feet, which he had dropped when the boy had buffaloed him.

He bent cautiously and picked it up and saw that it was a half dollar into which someone had fired a .40 caliber slug. A file had been used to smooth out the jagged edges and time and handling had rubbed it smooth—it looked like it might have been worn as an ornament in someone's watch chain.

Thoughtfully Jim slipped the coin into his pocket. The stillness clung to the small hollow and the sun poured heat into it. Hatfield turned and got into saddle and rode back up the slope.

Get the Chino Kid.

Those were Ranger Captain Bill McDowell's orders. Get the Chino Kid who was terrorizing the Loving Basin country.

Behind the Lone Wolf the sun hammered the freshly turned earth over the graves and the rooster crowed once more. In the hills behind the hollow a prowling coyote cocked his ears to the sound, listened, then turned on silent feet to the faint smudge of smoke.

CHAPTER II

Drunken Deputy

A BRITTLE dryness lay over the land and the leaves of the small aspen grove overlooking Loving's cemetery hung still—in the quiet heat the measured tones of the preacher conducting the burial fell flat in the afternoon air.

Big Cal Tipton, boss of the Wagonwheel B, stood by the open grave and watched the pine box lowered into the hole. His face was still and set in the pattern of sorrow. He was a big man, standing well over six feet, heavy of body, but not soft. He wore town clothes, topped by an expensive cream Stetson, but there was an air of ruddy good health about him and a boyish cast accentuated by curly brown hair which, at forty, had barely begun to gray.

Carole Bradley, his niece, stood by his side, her head bowed. Her eyes were dry, but there was an odd stiffness to her posture. Glancing sidewise at her, Cal thought he caught a faraway sadness in her face, as though her thoughts were gone beyond this grave and this burial to someone closer and never to be seen again.

She was young. Her twentieth birthday was still several months away. But there was a maturity to this girl beyond her years. And a willfulness betrayed by a sullen set to her mouth. A maturity and a willfulness, he reflected coldly, because she owned the Wagonwheel B and didn't know how to run it.

Behind them, making a semi-circle around that grave, stood the bulk of the Wagonwheel riders. A hard, hand-picked group. Frenchy, broad, powerful, muscle-knotted like some gnarled, thick oak and as unyielding; Steve Prell, Wagonwheel's ramrod, two guns in thonged-down holsters—a rangy gunhawk with a reputation trailing him; Cibero, Mexican-dark face impassive; Dakota, spare, sallow-faced man, steerhorn mustache drooping past the corners of a weak mouth, washed-out gray eyes that seldom met a man's glance, and yet a man who killed without compassion, with an infinite cruelty.

Tipton's thoughts jerked back to the intonations of the preacher. He had no illusions about these men he had hired. But the stakes were big, and in this violent land there was no room for sentiment or weakness. A man had to measure up to his ambitions, and Cal Tipton's ambitions ran big—they ran beyond this Basin, to a seat in the Texas Senate. And perhaps some day . . .

Across the grave a group of townsmen stood with bowed heads. They stood apart from the Wagonwheel riders as though by mutual agreement. They were neutral in this gathering violence that flickered like heat lightning across the drought-stricken Basin.

Foremost among them a tall, white-haired man in outmoded silk hat and black frock coat met Cal's eyes. A flicker passed through the deep, electric blue of that

man's gaze, and then his head bowed. Cal smiled thinly.

Apart from both townsmen and Wagonwheel riders stood a man and a woman. Farmers, obviously—or seat-of-the-pants ranchers—judging from the woman's homespun and the man's bib overalls, his thick, work-calloused hands, the weathered bluntness of his face. His wife stood beside him, tall and bony and somewhat stooped, faded by work and worry, a bonnet shading her tired features from the slanting rays of the sun.

Beyond this group, so far away from the mourners as not to be a part of them, a tall, lean, blond man stood stiff-legged under the aspens. The dappled shade pattern blended him with the background so that at first glance he might be missed, but when he moved slightly the badge on his shirt caught the sunlight and flashed its semaphore signal of warning.

Cal's head turned slowly to observe this man, and a sneer drew its pattern of his thinking across his heavy face. He saw beyond this man, through him, to a small office in the county courthouse and to a vacant chair in the sheriff's office.

There was now no law in Loving Basin. Thus did he discount the man wearing the deputy's badge. No law except that which he would hereon enforce, with the guns of the men at his back.

A rising exultation almost choked him, and it was an odd feeling for a man to have, for it was the body of his brother that was being lowered into that grave.

He felt a stir behind him and he turned and caught Steve Prell's cold and watchful glance, and then Prell's head moved slightly and Cal followed the angle of his gaze. He saw the rider who pulled up on the road below them—a wide-shouldered man sitting tall against the reddening sun. And though the distance was too far away to make out the man's features, or the quest of the man's gaze, Cal felt an odd tingle cut through the sharp exultation in him.

There was something about that rider and the big golden stallion he rode which instantly commanded attention—a force that sent its gathering impact up to him. The man was a stranger, and at this moment Cal Tipton wanted no strangers in Loving Basin.

He turned and caught Steve's questioning gaze and Tipton's eyes narrowed meaningly as he nodded a barely perceptible yes to the gunslinger's unspoken query.

IT WAS a day for funerals, thought the Lone Wolf. He pulled Goldy up along the road leading over the plank bridge spanning Turkey Creek and the cowtown just beyond to watch the tableau on the small hill. In the still, breathless silence he could almost make out the preacher's droning words.

A ring of horsemen stood in silent vigil around an open grave into which a coffin was being lowered. A girl and a big man stood close by the preacher. From their position, Hatfield judged them to be close relatives of the man who was being buried.

The hard-faced riders stood behind them, forming a stony-faced shield. On the otherside, across the grave, separated by what seemed mutual inclination, stood a group of townspeople.

It came to Hatfield, as he watched, that there was a distinct cleavage here. Then his attention was arrested by the lone figure standing under the aspens. The man was tall and slender and he wore a star on his shirt. He stood in aloof and lonely sorrow, and Jim reflected briefly on this scene which placed the law apart from it.

It occurred to him that the lawman might be Luke Tipton, the sheriff who had written to Captain McDowell for help, and he had a brief impulse to ride up the hill to join him. But this slender man was young, and Hatfield had the impression that Luke was an old hand at enforcing the law—he remembered this and it held him from making his move.

And as he waited he saw the lawman turn away and come down the hill, and a frown built a ridge between Jim's level green eyes. The lawman walked with stiff gait, he stumbled once and caught himself with rigid control.

Jim saw the silent riders turn to eye the

man. The girl by the grave glanced briefly at the stumbling figure and her shoulders stiffened. The big man beside her followed the lawman's progress down the hill with a widening sneer.

The lawman came down the rutted road, scuffing in the powdery earth. He saw Jim watching him and he straightened his back and held himself stiffly erect. Close up Jim measured the lean and reckless look of the man's narrow, handsome face. The eyes slanted up to meet his gaze had a defiant glaze.

He walked past Jim, his hand brushing down over the butt of his Colt in a gesture either of warning or challenge, Jim wasn't sure which. The strong reek of whisky that reached Hatfield affirmed his judgment that the man was drunk. He took his gaze from the lawman and glanced up the hill. Against the fading aquamarine sky, the wagon drawn up by the grave, the figures around it and the horsemen behind, began to silhouette as dark, unreal shapes.

The Lone Wolf turned then and put Goldy to the bridge. He rode past the weaving lawman, across Turkey Creek which ran dry beneath the booming planks, and onto Trail Street which became the main business thorofare of Loving.

Loving was not an old town, but it had been settled long enough to have shed the raw, unpainted ugliness of the usual cowtown. Most of the buildings were painted —there were several stone and brick buildings, one of them being the STOCKMAN'S NATIONAL BANK—and a sizable sprinkling of clapboarded private homes on the rise of ground behind the courthouse.

The courthouse was a big, barnlike structure painted white. It stood at the apex of a small square and on what had been a small front lawn, now burned brown by the long drought, was a field piece flanked by two small pyramids of cannon balls.

A board sign was propped against the undercarriage of the field piece, its legend a tribute to *"the brave men of Loving who went forth to join the Texas Volunteers."*

Jim considered this with grave and unhurried concern, then he rode Goldy around the front of the courthouse and his gaze caught the sign which read: SHERIFF'S OFFICE. He swung Goldy in to the short rack under a huge pepper tree and dismounted.

The door to the sheriff's office was closed, but not locked. Jim pushed it open and stepped into a darkening room. He hesitated only briefly before moving to the wall lamp and lighting it.

The flickering light showed him a clean-swept, tidy office. A side door led to the cell block, tenantless and quiet in the shadows. Jim made his swift inspection and came back to the small office to face a decision of waiting for the sheriff or to return later.

There was a poster on the desk and the boldly printed name, THE CHINO KID, caught his attention. He walked around the desk and leaned over it and read with frowning interest that the Chino Kid was wanted for murder, robbery, rustling and arson. Five thousand dollars was being offered as a reward for the Kid's body by Mr. Calvin Tipton, Manager, Wagonwheel B Ranch.

There was no picture of the Kid on the poster, and the description attributed to him was meager and general. Slim, youngish, between 20 and 25 (the description read) and a deadly killer.

JIM tried to place the outlaw. He knew most of the wild ones still on the loose in Texas, and he knew by reputation most of the bad ones who rode outside the Texas borders—but he couldn't place the Chino Kid. A new one, he thought wearily, riding a fast, hard pace to hell.

He heard the step on the walk outside and he turned just as the slender lawman lurched through the doorway. The man stopped and pulled himself erect. He braced himself against the door framing and his right hand dropped threateningly to the walnut butt on his hip.

"The Wagonwheel B's ten miles outta town," he rasped. "That way." He jerked

his thumb over his shoulder.

"Glad you mentioned it," Jim said drily. "I happen to be looking for the sheriff. He's expecting me."

The deputy laughed shortly. He lurched across the room to the desk, pushed the poster off with a careless sweep of his hand, and sat down heavily. He was drunk and he obviously didn't care who knew it. There was a defiant glint in his eyes as he measured the Ranger.

"That's too bad, mister," he said. "You have come a little late. You won't find Luke Tipton this side of hell—or the other side, either."

Hatfield watched the man take a bottle out of the bottom drawer and tilt it to his lips. He waited until the deputy took a breather.

"Might be a good idea if you explained," Jim said. "Sheriff Luke Tipton sent for me. I'm Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger."

The deputy's head came up sharply then, and a touch of respect came into his eyes. He licked his lips, brooding.

"Jim Hatfield? The Lone Wolf?"

Hatfield nodded slightly. "I thought you'd be expecting me. Or didn't Luke let you know?"

"I knew about the letter," the deputy answered slowly. "I—I didn't think you'd come."

He reached for the bottle again, something dark and deep troubling him and Jim felt a sharp impatience prod him. He reached down and picked up the poster the deputy had swept off his desk and placed it in front of the man. He leaned over the desk, his hands palm down on the dodger, his eyes levelling coldly on the deputy.

"I saw you at the funeral on the hill," he said. "Was Luke up there, too?"

"Luke?" The deputy wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He made an effort to meet the Lone Wolf's gaze. "Yeah—Luke was there, Hatfield. Guest of honor." He shoved the bottle toward Jim. His voice lifted with bitter resignation. "That was Luke Tipton they buried, Ranger. He was killed yesterday morning. Shot in the back riding from Welker's Bar W spread."

Hatfield took this without too much surprise. He pushed the poster toward the deputy. "The Chino Kid?"

"So they say," the lawman sneered.

Something in his voice irritated Hatfield. "What do you think?" he asked sharply.

The man's head came up, caught by the contempt in Jim's voice. But his gaze broke away from Hatfield's regard. "What I think don't count, Hatfield. I'm just Lew Channing, drifter. The stray dog Luke picked out of the street and pinned a badge to. Nobody gives a damn what I think." He settled back and ran sinewy fingers through his shaggy blond hair. "Only man who did was Luke Tipton. And Luke's dead, Hatfield."

The Lone Wolf tried to understand the feeling behind the man's bitter self-contempt. As he waited Lew reached for the bottle again, and it touched off a sharp anger in Hatfield. He reached across the desk and yanked the bottle from Channing's hand and some of the whisky spilled across the deputy's chin and down his shirt front.

Channing lunged for the bottle and Jim shoved him back into his chair.

"Quit sopping this up and feeling sorry for yourself," the Lone Wolf snapped. "I want to know what happened to Sheriff Tipton. I want to know why you're in here, guzzling cheap rotgut, instead of out riding after the man who shot Luke."

"Maybe it's none of your damn business," Lew muttered sullenly. He eyed the bottle in Jim's hand. "Luke's dead. What happens now don't concern me." He paused and slid his murky gaze from Jim's taut features to the door. The thud of boots on the walk were heading this way.

Jim ignored the approaching men. "I see a badge on your shirt," he said flatly. "A man has a responsibility to that badge."

"That responsibility ended when Luke was killed," Channing snarled. "As for this hunk of tin—" His fingers reached up, fumbling.

"What in hell's going on in here?" A harsh, authoritative voice called suddenly. "Who is this hardcase, Channing?"

JIM turned slowly, stepping away from the desk. He put his cool, measuring glance on the big beefy man crowding into the office, and then held it on the two men just behind him.

One was big, about Jim's own height, but there was an enormous thickness to his body—all muscle and bone. A brown, tightly curled beard hid the outlines of his cheeks and jaw and the eyes appraised Jim with a lively expectation. His big hands were fisting instinctively.

The man with him seemed slight in comparison. He was a rangy man with a smooth-shaven, hawk-nosed face. The gray eyes that checked Jim held nothing. He wore range clothes and two bone-handled guns, and the way he wore them told Hatfield this man knew how to use them.

In the crowding, appraising silence the big man suddenly pointed a thick finger at Jim. "You!" he said coldly. "What do you want in here?"

Jim studied the man with cool deliberateness. He stood well over six feet—a beefy man, well dressed, with a tanned, outdoorsy look about him. The cream Stetson cocked back on his curly brown hair must have cost him fifty dollars. He didn't look his age, at first glance, but Jim placed him around forty. There was a cold and demanding authority about this man and a bleak irritation showed in the Lone Wolf's green eyes.

"I'm in here minding my own business," he said curtly. "It might not be a bad idea if you did the same."

The big man frowned, studying Jim. He saw a man not easily cowed, and his judgment warned him that this tall, wide-shouldered individual with a gunslinger's cold and confident appraisal was not a man to be pushed. He took a check on his tone, but there was anger when he finally spoke.

"What goes on in this office from now on is my business. If you're a friend of this—this *drunk*—" he emphasized with deliberate contempt—"you can get the hell out of here right now. And take him with you."

Lew Channing stumbled to his feet, his face whitening. "Just a minute," he said. He ripped the badge from his shirt, tossed it at the big man's feet. "I quit, Cal. Nobody fires me. But I'll get out of here when I'm ready. Not when some loud-mouthed—"

The big man took a quick step to the desk and backhanded the deputy across the mouth. The blow dropped Lew back into the chair and the big man reached across the desk and grabbed a fistful of Lew's shirt. He yanked the deputy up over the desk and slammed his balled fist into Lew's face.

Channing fell against the chair and overturned it. He sprawled in a limp, unprotesting heap and the big man came around the desk and stood over him, drawing his leg back to boot the defenseless man.

Hatfield caught him by the shoulder, whirled him around and shoved him across the desk. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the two men start for him, the big man with his hands, the rangy man reaching for his gun.

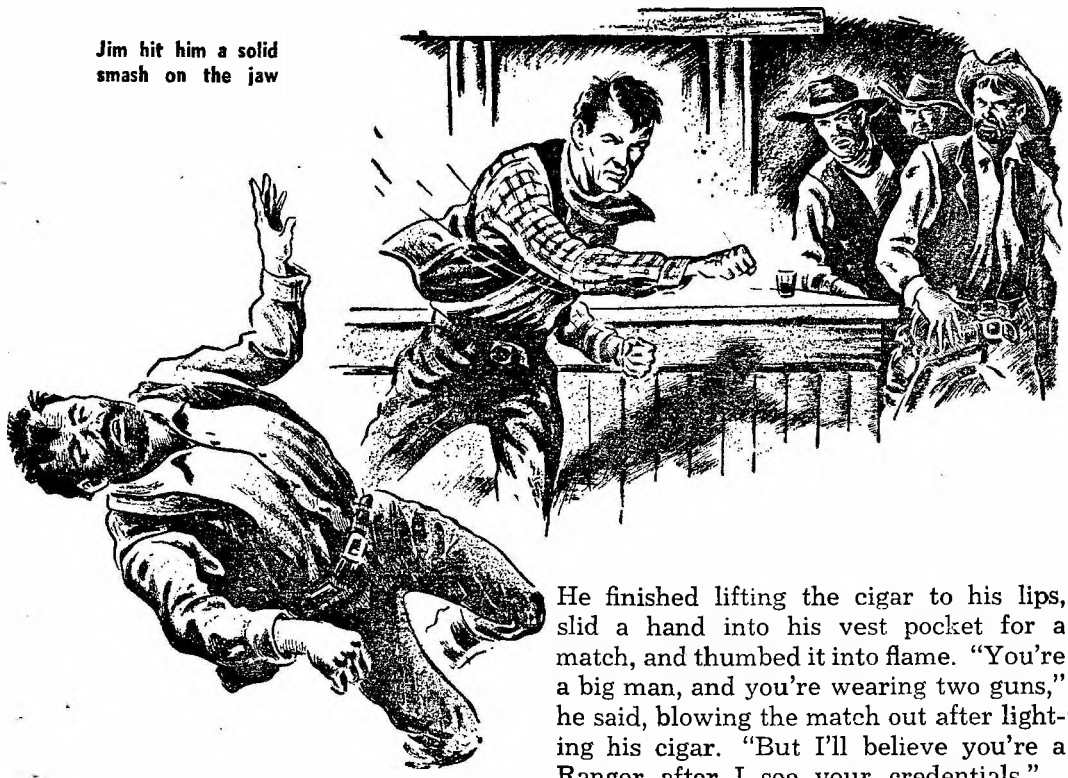
The Lone Wolf's peacemaker made its sudden appearance in his right hand, its cold and deadly muzzle stopping them.

"That's enough!" he yelled. "We're quitting this right here."

The big man pulled himself up off the desk. He shifted his angry gaze from the gun in Jim's hand to Jim's face and a murderous patience settled over him like a cold mask. He pulled his coat back into shape and glanced down at Channing who was sitting up, rubbing his palm across his jaw.

"No druken bum is going to insult me," he stated flatly. "I don't know who you are, stranger, or why you're here. But I want him out of this office, and out of town, by tomorrow night. And if you're a friend of his, the same applies to you."

"I don't know what you've got against him," Jim said. "But if anyone runs anybody out of town, I'll do it. And before we go any further with this, I'll ask the questions. Who are you? And what gives you the right to come in here and tell the sheriff's deputy to leave town?"



Jim hit him a solid smash on the jaw

"I'm Cal Tipton, Sheriff Tipton's brother," the big man answered grimly. "I run the Wagonwheel B, biggest spread in the Basin. When there was trouble in the county my men backed Luke—now that my brother's been killed we'll take over the law." He reached over for his Stetson, lying on the floor by Channing; he ignored the dazed deputy as he straightened, brushed the Stetson against his pants leg and cocked it on his head.

"Now maybe you'll tell me who you are?" he asked harshly.

Jim told him.

Cal Tipton started. He had drawn a cigar from his vest pocket, and now held it half way to his lips, his eyes darkening, searching the Lone Wolf's hard face.

"The Ranger they call the Lone Wolf?" he murmured.

Jim shrugged.

THE big man caught himself, his lips quirking with doubting smile. "Luke never mentioned he was sending for help." He finished lifting the cigar to his lips, slid a hand into his vest pocket for a match, and thumbed it into flame. "You're a big man, and you're wearing two guns," he said, blowing the match out after lighting his cigar. "But I'll believe you're a Ranger after I see your credentials."

Jim reached in his boot for his badge. In the guttering lamplight the narrow circle of silver enclosing the lone star had a cold and uncompromising gleam. He laid his paper credentials on the desk, in front of Tipton, and his smile was meager as he saw Cal's brows furrow.

Tipton nodded. "So you're the great Jim Hatfield!" he said coldly. "Well, I didn't send for you. We don't need Rangers meddling in business Wagonwheel can handle."

"Your brother thought he needed help," Jim said, reminding him. "He mentioned a killer named the Chino Kid—"

"Luke was a fool, even if he was my brother," Cal said. "He kept holding me back, tying my hands. And look what it got him! If he had let me turn my men loose—"

"We'd have had a range war in the Basin," Channing mumbled. He had pulled himself to his feet; he stood now, swaying, eyeing the big man with ugly hate.

Tipton whirled, his face darkening and

Channing's hand fell to his gun. Jim stepped swiftly between them, his voice cracked grimly. "I'm making the next move here, gents. If you don't believe me, try me."

Tipton caught himself. He stepped back slowly and glanced at his men who were eyeing the gun in Jim's hand with sullen abeyance. "All right, Ranger," Tipton agreed thickly. "Just keep that bum quiet."

Channing lifted a hand to his cut lips, his eyes blazing. "I'll—" He stiffened at the look in Jim's eyes, but he closed his mouth.

"I came here because of a letter your brother wrote to Captain Bill McDowell," Jim stated, turning to Tipton. "He didn't explain much. Just that he was having trouble with a killer named the Chino Kid."

"You got here a day too late," Cal sneered. "The Kid killed my brother yesterday."

"So I heard." Jim nodded. "I can't help him now but I can get the man who killed him. A little cooperation from you would help." He paused and saw Tipton's broad features settle into an uncooperative mask and he felt a dislike for this big, pushy man.

"I told Luke what I wanted to do." Cal said. "I wanted to hunt the Kid down and kill him, even if it meant gutting every small spread on Young Turkey Creek. I told Luke that was the only way to stop the Kid, but he wouldn't listen. Even after he got the note from the Kid, threatening him."

"What note?"

The Wagonwheel boss reached in his pocket and brought out a folded piece of paper. He handed it to Jim who unfolded it, read the pencilled, block-letter message: *"Tipton, I gave you five years to straighten out what you did to me. Now I'm going to kill you."*

Jim lifted his gaze from the message and Tipton said, "Luke got that note just four days ago. It was slipped under this door during the night, he showed it to me the next morning."

Jim was frowning. "Looks like your brother knew the Kid. Do you?"

Cal shook his head. "Not before he came into the Basin. Haven't even laid eyes on the murdering son. But he's been raising hell for almost a year now. I guess he had something on Luke, though. My brother kept warning me off the Kid. The law, he kept telling me, would take care of the Kid. Well, Luke's dead. I didn't send for you, Hatfield. But I'll give you this much. I'll give you forty-eight hours to get the Chino Kid. After that I'm turning my men loose in the Basin. We'll get the killer if we have to wipe out every thieving nester who's back of him!"

CHAPTER III

"Forty-eight hours!"

THE SILENCE crowded into the office after Tipton and his men left. Jim Hatfield picked up the badge Channing had discarded and tossed it on the desk. He watched Channing sink slowly into the chair which he had straightened, saw him brush blood from his cut lips with the back of his hand and eye the red stain with brooding gaze.

"Better pin that on your shirt," Jim said bluntly. "We've got work to do."

Channing lifted his gaze. There was a dark and bitter lack in him that shocked the Lone Wolf. After the manhandling he had received, Jim had expected some fight from the deputy. He saw instead a deep and twisted shame in the man's face.

"Cal was right," Channing mumbled. "I'm a drunken bum. I was Luke's deputy because he wanted me. But Luke's dead, Ranger. And I don't give a damn about the Chino Kid, or the Basin's troubles."

"The Kid killed Luke Tipton," Jim reminded him sharply. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"That's what Cal Tipton says," Channing muttered.

"Is he right—or wrong?" Jim's voice held a probing edge. "Who killed the sheriff?"

The deputy reached for the bottle. "That's your job, Ranger. Not mine. I'm getting to hell out of Loving!" He tipped the whisky bottle to his lips again.

Hatfield started to take it from him, then changed his mind. His eyes held a cold pity for this man. "I reckon Cal Tipton was right about you," he said. "Too bad about Luke, though. He sure picked the wrong man to pin a badge on."

Channing wiped his lips. He said, bitterly, "You're tough, Hatfield. I've heard it everywhere. The Lone Wolf, they call you. The toughest Ranger in Texas." His voice lifted shrilly. "All right, damn you, you buck this Chino Kid! You find out who killed Luke." He lunged for the badge on the desk and flung it spitefully toward the door. "Just leave me out of it, Hatfield. Leave me alone!"

Hatfield eyed him silently, unable to keep the bleak contempt from his eyes. Then he nodded without comment and left.

Lew Channing finished the bottle after the Lone Wolf had gone. But the edge was gone from him—he sat there feeling neither anger nor resentment, only a vague and depressing irritation with himself. After an untimed interval he got up and walked to the door and stood silhouetted in the lamplight. He looked with unseeing eyes into the dark shadows under the pepper tree. A hundred feet beyond, the deep-shadowed cut of Turkey Creek curved away from town. A faint jingle of bit irons drifted to him in the still, hot night and he thought he saw a mounted shadow move along the rim of the creek, then it was gone.

His interest dragged. The whisky deadened him. He shrugged and walked back into the office. He picked up his hat and his brush jacket from a hook on the wall and he dropped the jacket across his left arm. These items, plus the steeldust mare in the livery stable, were all he owned. But he had drifted into Loving with less.

He blew out the light and went out and locked the door carefully behind him. He looked at the key in his hand then, and a hurt bubbled up in him and he turned and flung the key away into the night. He was through here. He wouldn't be back again.

He leaned against the veranda support and stared up at the bright, unblinking stars and felt the parchness on his lips. Three months of drought—almost a hundred days of dry, sapping heat. He thought of the violence building up and he felt a detached pity for the small ranchers along Young Turkey Creek.

Then a wave of self-pity came over him and he clung to the porch support and felt a little sick. When it passed he turned away and walked around to the front of the courthouse.

Light streaming through an open window made its yellow pattern across the boards. He saw Henry Olvig, county clerk, hunched over his ledger at the high table and the old and familiar sight knotted his stomach with its pangs of loneliness.

He wasn't drunk any more, although he had finished two bottles of whisky in less than five hours. He felt dead, without give to him, and down deep flickered the constant small voice of self-pity.

He walked across the small square, and coming up Trail Street, he noticed the horses bunched up before the *Overland Saloon.* Without getting any closer he knew that most of those horses bore the Wagonwheel brand.

Channing paused against the side of a darkened building. He saw the carriage wheel up the street, and recognized the Wagonwheel B driver. He followed it with his bitter brooding gaze and saw it pull up by the hotel. The lanterns bracketing the glass-paneled doors flared across the walk. Channing saw them open and Cal Tipton and his niece, Carole Bradley, came into the murky glare and paused by the carriage.

Two riders wheeled up out of the night and fell in behind the carriage. These, too, were Wagonwheel B men and Chan-

ning's lips curled bleakly. They guarded her well, too well.

He wanted to leave and yet he remained, knowing he wanted a last glimpse of this tall, straight-backed girl he was in love with. A strange and helpless feeling churned deep inside him, but on the surface he was inert. He watched Carole turn and seemingly protest her departure with Cal Tipton who shook his head firmly.

"Get out of town," Channing told himself. "She'll never mean anything to you." She had smiled at him a few times, and once, at a dance in town, he had held her in his arms. He had built a dream out of this and now it was fading, and inside him a small voice cried.

He started to turn away just as Carole stepped up to the carriage seat. He saw Cal Tipton step back, into the lantern light, and then the heavy Sharps rifle rammed its heavy echoes through the town. Channing saw the red gun-flare lance from the alley across the street and he flattened himself instinctively against the dark wall and his right hand came up fast with his Colt.

He stared with hard and unblinking eyes into the alley shadows, but there was a thin and bitter satisfaction on his lips. He saw the shadows move and a rider broke out of them and turned sharply down the street, and still he didn't lift his Colt.

JIM HATFIELD had ridden Goldy to the livery stable up by the bridge after leaving the sheriff's office. He turned the big sorrel over to the man who had shuffled up to him and waited by the barn door, feeling a gathering dissatisfaction making him irritable.

He was in no hurry to get anywhere, and so he paused here, building himself a smoke.

He was a man used to long and lonely trails and he was not easily depressed. From the time he had chosen the Texas Rangers as a way of life he had lived in barracks, dingy hotel rooms or under the sky—he claimed no place as home, but felt all of Texas was home.

He fashioned his cigaret and lighted it, and his eyes reflected the growing frown in him. He had come to Loving Basin on what seemed a routine job. Get the Chino Kid. But the situation he had just encountered annoyed him. There was a pattern of trouble here which extended beyond the Kid and whose outlines evaded him.

The man who had written for Ranger help was dead—killed by the Chino Kid. Or had the Kid killed him? Luke's deputy had seemed to hint otherwise, but Channing seemed to be a mixed-up man. Luke's brother, the big boss of the Wagonwheel B, was sure that it was the Kid who had killed his brother, and the note he had given Jim to read seemed to prove it.

Jim took a deep drag on his cigaret and turned slightly as the hostler came out of the barn shadows. The man was about sixty, he had a spare man's spryness. He came up into the lantern glow and fished a clay pipe out of his overall pocket and stuck it between stubby teeth. His eyes took in the badge Jim had pinned to his shirt.

"Another week of this weather an' Loving'll dry up and blow away," he said. He sucked on his pipe and his voice came quick, curious but not prying. "You just passin' through, Ranger?"

"Not right away," Jim answered. "I'm here to get the Chino Kid."

"Oh!" The hostler looked out into the night, evading Jim's glance. "A bad one, the Kid," he said.

"You know him?"

"Uh-huh. He don't come to town."

"Anyone around here know him?" Jim asked. "Is there anyone that can tell me what he's like?"

"Some of the ranchers up by Young Turkey Creek might, Ranger," the man said cautiously. "They say the Kid is right friendly with them folks—some even say the Kid was hired by them to fight the Wagonwheel spread."

"Why?" Jim asked levelly.

The hostler squinted at the cloudless sky. "Bad summer," he mumbled. "Most

every waterhole's dried up. Wagonwheel needs water for its beef, and right now Young Turkey Creek has the only available water. Can't hardly blame Cal Tipton for wanting some of it."

Jim nodded thoughtfully. "Depends how a man goes about getting what he wants."

He dropped his butt and stepped on it and the hostler asked, "Will you be needing him in the morning?"

Jim shrugged. "In my business it's hard to say. Just keep my saddle handy."

He stepped down the short ramp and for the first time today he felt a wind rising, touching his face with the faint trace of dampness. He walked out to Trail Street and paused on the corner and the wind came stronger now, moaning softly among the dark buildings. He heard the leaves rustle in the trees bordering the creek and he put his gaze to the plank bridge and measured the darkness beyond. The low hills drew a dark and uneven line across the horizon and he saw the clouds piling up over them and he knew then that the long-awaited rain was coming.

He turned and started uptown and in midstride he stopped, as though the heavy report of the Sharps blast up ahead was a wall into which he had collided. He fell into an immediate, lax-muscled alertness and his eyes searched the uptown darkness.

He could make out some sort of activity two blocks away. Then he saw the rider break from the shadows and come down the middle of the street, heading for the bridge. And behind that rider a couple of shots exploded and then a man's harsh voice carried loud and clear:

"The Chino Kid! He just shot Cal Tipton."

The Lone Wolf took three long strides which brought him out into the ankle-deep dust of the street. A Peacemaker nestled in his right hand—at the rapidly closing distance he could not miss the rider pounding down on him.

He had a moment's brief relief that his job would terminate thus quickly—that the outlaw he had come to Loving Basin to get was even now twisting around in saddle, lined up before the uplifting muzzle of his Colt.

His voice rang hard on the night. "Hold it, Kid."

And then he saw the rider's face—the thin, sallow face, dark, frightened eyes—saw it and recognized the youngster as the lonely, scared boy he had run into this morning, and his finger froze on the trigger.

The rider swept past him, kicking dust into Hatfield's face, then faded into the shadows by the bridge and the hollow sounds of his passage drifted back to mock the big Ranger standing stiffly, gun upraised, in the middle of the street.

He was still there when a half dozen riders, led by the rangy hawk-faced Steve Prell, swept up. The Wagonwheel B foreman gave Jim a strange, hard look as he rode by—then they were gone, thudding over the plank bridge.

SLOWLY Hatfield holstered his Colt. This was the Chino Kid he had passed up. Yet somehow he couldn't reconcile that gangly, frightened boy with the reputation that went with the name.

Turning, he walked with long strides toward the hotel. There was a crowd collected about the buggy. But in the shadows of an unlighted building just beyond the glare of the hotel lights he saw a figure move, shuffle close to the outer edge of that group and pause and Jim recognized the man as Lew Channing.

Something about the way the ex-deputy approached the group roused a thin anger in Hatfield. There was a sulky, detached attitude in the man he found irritating, and he wondered what Luke Tipton had seen in the man to have hired him.

The girl he had seen at the burial was kneeling by Cal Tipton when Jim pushed through the group. Cal's face was streaked with blood. He lay on the steps of the hotel, breathing harshly. His eyes were closed and in the murky glare of the hotel lanterns his face had an oddly crumpled look.

Frenchy's huge bulk loomed over the group from the vantage point of the hotel veranda. He saw Hatfield and his eyes glittered brightly and his lips parted.

"Ah—the Ranger!" he said, sneeringly. "Under hees nose the Keed shoots my boss."

"Under your nose, too," Hatfield said shortly. He crouched down beside the girl and eyed the bullet gash above Cal Tipton's right eye. There was blood matting the rancher's hair, but he judged the slug had glanced off the bone. It was the blood which made it look bad, he thought. Cal groaned then and his eyes flickered.

The girl breathed a heavy sigh of relief. She turned and looked at Jim, something in her seeking assurance from the strong man beside her. "Is he badly hurt?"

"Not as bad as the man who shot him wanted," Hatfield said quietly.

"I'm Carole Bradley," the girl said then, straightening. She brushed her hair from her face and there was a tired, drawn look to her. "You're the Ranger who's come to town—Mr. Hatfield?"

Jim nodded.

"Uncle Cal told me about you," she said. "He said you'd come to get the Chino Kid."

"Those were my orders," Jim admitted.

A haunted look came to the girl's eyes. She started to say something and then decided against it.

Someone in the crowd said, "Here's the doc." A burly man with muttonchop whiskers came through, dropping his small black bag on the step beside Tipton and kneeling over the wounded man.

He grunted, and probed at the cut over Cal's right eye. Tipton cried out and pushed the doctor's hand away and tried to sit up.

Doctor Baker turned his head. "Take him to my office. He's all right, he has a bad cut—maybe slight concussion. But I'll have to treat Mr. Tipton in my office."

He straightened and glanced expectantly at the men surrounding him. No one offered to help. Frenchy shoved men out of the way and came down the steps. "By gar," he boomed, "I'll do it." He picked Tipton up in his arms and started through the group.

Cal said weakly, "Put me down, you fool." Anger edged his voice as he repeated the order. Frenchy reluctantly eased Tipton down. Cal swayed weakly and held on to the big Wagonwheel rider.

He sought out Jim in that group in the light of the hotel lanterns and his eyes, dark with pain, met the Lone Wolf's gaze.

"Forty-eight hours!" he said. His voice was a harsh whisper. "Then I'm turning my men loose in Loving Basin."

He let Frenchy swing a thick arm under him and half carry him to the way to the doctor's office.

The girl hesitated briefly, indecision crowding her. "Mr. Hatfield," she began quickly. "I must see you. I was about to return to the ranch, but now—I think we'll remain here for the night. Perhaps, tomorrow morning, if you are still in town."

Hatfield nodded. "I'll be here, Miss Bradley."

He watched her hurry after her uncle and noticed, then, the range-clad man who fell in behind her. He dogged her steps, a lean, gunned individual who might have been her bodyguard.

Watching this man, the Lone Wolf did not see Lew Channing ease back into the shadows. Nor was he aware of the strange, twisted jealousy that had knifed through the ex-deputy.

CHAPTER IV

Returning Posse

THE WIND pushed through the night, piling up clouds in the sky, dimming the stars.

Jim Hatfield went into the hotel and signed for a room. The desk clerk eyed the badge on his vest and his tone was respectful.

"Glad to have you with us, Mr Hatfield. I hope you get the Chino Kid."

"That's what I'm here for," Jim said shortly, and went up to his room. The heat of the day lingered here and the odor of a hair tonic used by a previous tenant. Hatfield went to the lone window and raised it. He stood by it, looking down on the dark alley. The limp curtains stirred as a breeze came in. Jim turned to the bed. He shucked his gun belts and peeled his shirt off and then, standing in the middle of that small room, he located the lamp on the small table by the head of the bed and lighted it.

He found water in the pitcher and he washed and shaved the stubble on his face. In the small mirror over the dresser his reflection had a strong, deeply-tanned cast his green eyes looked back at him with level appraisal. A touch of iron gray at his temples—he saw this and a smile pulled his mouth upward.

Tempus fugit—a man grows older, he thought, but there was no regret in his mind. The years behind him had been full ones, and those ahead promised to be as rewarding.

He heard the hesitant knock on his door and he turned away from the dresser, a towel bunched in his right hand. He was six feet from the bed and his guns, and he had lived too close to danger to be careless. He said distinctly, "Come in," and crossed the room in two long strides, his right hand slipping one of the Colts free just as the door swung open.

The girl came in and shut the door quickly behind her and turning to face Jim, she caught the glint of the gun in his hand. She pressed her back against the panels and her gasp was audible in the room.

Hatfield frowned. He still held the towel in his left hand; he lowered the gun in his right.

Carole Bradley took a deep breath. "Do you always greet your callers this way," she asked tremulously.

"Only when I'm not expecting them," he said quietly. He placed his Colt down on the dresser and reached for his shirt. His muscles bunched across his shoulders as he pulled the shirt over his head and started tucking the tail into his trousers.

"You're a big man, Mr. Hatfield," the girl said, and there was a quick, admiring interest in her voice.

He turned to face her. She was still pressed against the door—a long-legged, rather tall girl with a boy's slim hips and figure. She was wearing fawn-colored riding breeches and a pale blue silk blouse and there were faint beads of perspiration on her upper lip. Something about her at this moment struck Hatfield as oddly familiar. But he knew he had never seen this girl before.

"You didn't come here to flatter me," he said drily. "What do you want?"

"Help!" She uttered the word quickly, pleadingly. "I want to get away from here. I must get away."

"Away from the hotel?"

"No, no." She came away from the door, toward Jim. "I've got to get out of Loving Basin. I'm afraid, terribly afraid. I must get out before—"

A man's heavy fist banged on the door, and then it was flung open before Jim could answer. Frenchy's powerful figure filled the doorway. He smiled hugely, nodding to himself.

"By gar, Miss Bradley, I theenk I find you here. I theenk—if I was a pretty girl—where I go? But of course, to see the big, dark stranger who has just come to town, *non?*" Frenchy slapped his knee and roared. "Just like I theenk, you are here. But you remember your uncle's orders." He shrugged and came into the room and took the girl by the arm.

Jim stepped forward. "Just a minute," he cut in coldly. "Miss Bradley is my guest."

"Ah!" Frenchy murmured. He shoved the girl gently behind him and balled his fists. "You weesh to stop me, Ranger?"

"No—no!" the girl cried. She pressed in between them. "I was about to go. I merely came to thank Mr. Hatfield."

Frenchy's grin turned to lopsided sneer. "Ah, too bad, Ranger. But perhaps, some other time, *non?* They say you are a strong man. But I, Frenchy Duval, can break you in two—like a matchstick. So."

He made the motion with his big powerful hands.

The girl tugged at him. "Come on, before Uncle Cal gets too upset." She turned at the door, a mute appeal in her face. Then she was gone and Frenchy, still sneering, closed the door behind them.

THE LONE WOLF was frowning as he turned, picked up his gun belts and buckled them about his flat waist. He took the Colt off the dresser and slid it thoughtfully into holster.

Some men are always spoiling for a fight, and Frenchy Duval evidently was one of them. Sooner or later he'd have to tangle with the man.

The hotel walls were thicker than most, but he heard the rumble of angry voices, muted and indistinct from beyond his partition. He thought he heard Carole's voice, then a door slammed and a moment later another door banged sharply.

It was quiet in the hallway when Hatfield stepped out of his room. He glanced down the dimly lighted hallway. Two doors down and across the hall a hard-faced gunslinger came out of the room. He had a chair in his hand which he set up by the door directly across from the room he had emerged from. He shifted his gunbelt and sat down and stared at Jim with bland regard.

Hatfield guessed that the door the gunster guarded belonged to Carole Bradley.

The girl's mute appeal, and her strangely familiar features, lingered with the Lone Wolf as he walked down into the lobby and out into the main street. He *had* seen that girl somewhere before—but he couldn't place her, and the thought nagged at him.

Finally he dismissed her from his mind and cut across the street to WATTLE'S CAFE. It was a small, untidy place and almost deserted as Jim sat down on a stool at the counter.

The lunchroom was run by a tall, angular woman with heavy, masculine features. "Supper hour's over," she told Jim nasally. "Ain't nothin' left but hash. Take it or leave it."

"Hash it'll be," Jim agreed. He was on the stool next to the window and he turned and stared through the dirty glass into the cowtown's main drag. The wind was rising and dust devils whirled in the street.

The woman came and banged a filled coffee mug at his elbow and sniffed loudly and went away. Jim started to put his attention to the coffee when he saw a spring wagon turn sharply toward the walk in front of the cafe. A man and a woman rode the seat and he heard the woman's protesting voice as the man wrapped his reins around the whip handle and start to climb down.

"Buck, listen to me! It'll do no good to see him."

The man ignored her. He stumped across the planks and into the lunchroom, leaving the door open behind him. He went directly to Hatfield, who swung around to face him.

The man put his thick, calloused hands on his hips and stared with direct belligerence at the Ranger. He was a thick, blunt man with light gray eyes under shaggy wheat-colored brows. Hatfield judged him as barely thirty, but he looked older—he was a man weathered hard by sun and wind and cold and he had paid for the years of toil with his youth. He wore a shell belt and a Colt in a holster, but he was obviously not too familiar with it.

"I heard a Ranger had come to town," he said loudly, his gaze on the badge on Jim's shirt. "Glad Luke finally listened to reason before he died." He thrust out a horny hand. "I'm Buck Welker. I own the Bar W out on Young Turkey Creek."

Jim took his hand.

The rancher came directly to the point. "You're here to get the Chino Kid?"

Jim nodded. He was aware of the two men at the small rear table listening, and he wondered at Buck Welker's loud tones.

"Ranger Headquarters received a letter from Sheriff Tipton," he said. "The sheriff wrote he was having trouble with a killer named the Chino Kid."

"Luke was a blind fool. I told him so, the morning he was killed."

Jim frowned. "You saw Luke before he was shot?"

"He came out to see me," Welker said, nodding. "He was shot on his way back to town." He turned impatiently as his wife called. "I'll be right out, Sarah."

The angular cafe owner slid a platter in front of Hatfield and walked around the counter and slammed the door shut. She eyed Welker with tight-mouthed contempt. "Some people live in barns," she sniffed, but Welker ignored her.

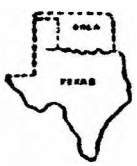
He caught the woman eyeing him angrily from behind the counter and he smiled faintly and shut the door as he went out. Jim heard Buck's wife talking loudly.

"It won't do you any good, Buck! He'll only bring us trouble." Then the wagon swung away from the walk and wheels churned in the soft dust of the street.

Jim settled back on his stool and turned his attention to the hash. He ate slowly, letting his thoughts wander.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

HEAD-HUNTER



JIM, a confirmed Easterner, was having difficulty holding his temper during a visit to Texas at the ranch of a friend who was a cattle raiser.

"Jim, you should know," said the friend, "just how big everything is here in Texas. Take the day, for instance, we drove five thousand head of cattle across a deep canyon, and there wasn't any bridge. Well, sir, we just cut down a big hollow tree that was standing by the side of the canyon, dropped it right across the deep gap and drove the whole durn herd through that hollow tree. When we got to the other side, we went on with the drive, and what I mean, forty-five hundred cattle can sure raise a passel of dust! Why—"

"Just a minute," spoke up Jim. "You first said that you drove five thousand head into the hollow tree. Then you went on with forty-five hundred. What happened to the other five hundred head?"

"Oh, those," replied the rancher, "Jim, those other five hundred cows must have strayed off into some of those hollow branches. We never did find them but didn't spend much time looking, of course. After all, what's a mere five hundred head to a Texan?"

—James V. Burnette

"Ain't got time now, Ranger," he said to Jim. "But if you want to know about the Chino Kid and where to find him, come out to my place in the morning."

Hatfield started to get up. "Wait a minute, Buck."

"Ain't got time now," Welker repeated. "Sarah'll be screaming in a minute." He walked to the door, opened it, and looked back. "If that badge means more than just a bright hunk of silver, ride out to my place."

"Get the Chino Kid!" Captain Bill McDowell had said. But the assignment which had seemed simple enough back in Houston no longer appeared that easy.

He finished the hash and the wedge of apple pie which followed it, and drained his coffee. He paid for his meal and went out. The sky overhead was dark, blotted out by clouds, and the wind moaned in the street. It was a warm wind, but there was the smell of rain in it.

The desk clerk was settled back in a

chair reading a paperback thriller when Jim entered the lobby. He didn't look up until Hatfield breasted the counter and put his palm over the desk bell.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Hatfield?" the clerk's tone was respectful.

"Who runs this town?" Jim asked levelly.

The clerk frowned. "Runs the town?" he repeated. "Why, I think—well, Luke Tipton was the sheriff."

"Luke's dead. His deputy's just resigned." Jim's voice was patient.

The clerk knuckled his jaw. "Reckon Cal Tipton pulls the most weight," he said. "The Wagonwheel B is the biggest spread in the Basin, and Cal runs the ranch."

Jim shook his head. "You have a mayor in town?"

"Oh!" The clerk seemed to see the light. "Judge Gavite." He shrugged. "Real name's Leon Gavite, but he used to be a lawyer and—well, you'll know why he's called Judge when you see him. He's the mayor."

"Where can I find him?"

"The Judge lives in the white house behind the courthouse," the clerk answered. "But, you'll find him in the Green Widow Bar tonight. Sits in a poker game with a couple of his cronies every tuesday night."

"Thanks," Jim murmured. "Reckon I'll pay the Judge a visit."

OUT in the darkness beyond Loving Steve Prell reined his rawboned gray to a stop and threw up his right hand. The others pulled up around him, waiting.

"Reckon we've chased him far enough," the Wagonwheel ramrod said bleakly. "We've made it look good. It's time we got back."

Cibero, wanted for a half dozen crimes across the Mexican border, said, "Maybe this time we should not stop, Steve. This time, maybe, he keel Meester Tipton. Maybe we should make sure."

"Cal's got a hard head," the ranch boss said callously. "I checked him before we rode out. He ain't dead. But the Kid came close this time. Mighty close."

"Time we got rid of the Kid," murmured a voice beyond Cibero.

Prell glanced swiftly at the frail-looking rider with the oversized, balding head and the weak, sad face. "I reckon Tipton'll decide that, Dakota," he said coldly.

"Might be a good idea to tell him the time is now," Dakota persisted. He nibbled absently at the ends of a scrawny brown mustache. "That Ranger is no fool."

Prell sneered. "I'll take care of that badge toter, Dakota. I got a bone to pick with that big bad Ranger who calls himself the Lone Wolf. I'm anxious to find out just how big and bad he is."

"He ees bad!" Cibero said. "Lissen to me, Steve. I know. You are quick with the *pistola, si.* But do not try to fight thees Ranger."

"You talk like a man with his head in a barrel," Prell cut in sharply. "Sure, I know his rep. But how do we know he's Jim Hatfield? He had the Kid in front of his gun, yet he let the Kid ride by. I'm going to ask him why, Cibero. And then I'm going to kill him."

The Mexican shrugged. He glanced into the darkness where the Kid had vanished and a swift foreboding chilled him. Maybe Dakota was right. Maybe it was time the Kid was killed—before the big Ranger got to him.

In the cedar break upstream the Kid eased his weary mount to a walk and finally to a halt. The wind rustled through the dry leaves, touching his hot face with feathery pressure.

The Kid raised a trembling hand to wipe his mouth. Got him! he thought over and over, but there was no exultation in him. He felt bone-tired, used-up, empty of feeling. His thin shoulders shook.

It was over now, the long, bitter waiting. He reached in his pocket for a handful of jerky and tried to chew on it, but gave it up almost at once. He turned his cayuse down to the creek bed and under the cutbank he found a damp spot. He dug in the sand and when the water cleared in the pocket, he drank, noiselessly, ears alert for sounds of pursuit.

There was none. He climbed back into saddle and set out across the rolling range. It was past midnight when he slacked his gangly frame out of saddle, picketed his tired cayuse in a grassy pocket behind a low hill and made his way to the top.

He took a pair of battered field glasses with him. He settled down and lifted the glasses and trained them on the dark buildings below.

This was the Wagonwheel B. He studied the outbuildings, the bunkhouse, the galley, and the rambling stone ranchhouse with old familiarity. The big house was dark. He waited while the stars wheeled in the sky and were smothered by the piling clouds. He kept his glasses trained on the road from town, waiting for the Wagonwheel riders to come home. He wanted to see if Cal Tipton was with them.

Down in the yard a dog barked excitedly. From a ridge east of the Kid a coyote answered the dog with insulting bravado.

The Kid waited, feeling cold and lonely . . .

CHAPTER V

With Fists and Guns

THE Green Widow Bar was a small, intimate establishment which served liquor, beer, a free lunch and was conducive to quiet card games. It had a plain walnut-stained bar and a droopy-mustached bartender named Hank who spent his spare time winding up an old Victrola and listening to scratchy ballads.

A melancholy song about a cowboy who had lost a girl named Sue was emanating from the talking machine when the Lone Wolf came through the slatted doors and paused to survey the gathering. His gaze ranged over the three men at the bar, sipping moodily at their beer, and then swung to the tables.

He picked out Judge Gavite immediately. The man was dressed for the part like some ham actor. He was a tall, spare-bodied individual with a mass of white hair on which was perched a high-crowned black hat. A black frock coat dragged its tails on the floor. From boiled white shirt, string tie and carefully clipped iron gray mustache and Van Dyke the judge looked the part—but the bulge of a shoulder holster under his left arm was slightly out of character.

Jim noticed this as he walked to the table and stood over it; the five players raised their eyes for a meager, preoccupied appraisal. The judge kept his eyes on the deck. He discarded two and placed his remaining three cards face down in front of him. Then he glanced up at Jim.

"Good evening, Mr. Hatfield. Care to join us?"

Jim shook his head. "I see you know me, Judge."

"I was informed, almost as soon as you arrived in town," the judge said. His tone was neither friendly nor hostile—nor curious.

"Then you know why I'm here?"

The judge picked up the two cards dealt to him and placed them on top of the three in front of him without looking at them. He shuffled the hand idly and finally studied them, one by one. His thin, aesthetic face held no more expression than a stone.

"Luke was a mighty fine sheriff," he answered. His eyes were searching the impassive faces of his companions, following the play. "But he lacked judgment."

"And now he's dead," Jim said drily.

"Quite so," the judge agreed. "I told Luke the Kid would get him if he insisted on playing along with those out-at-the-seat nesters on Young Turkey Creek." The judge picked out a blue chip and tossed it into the pot. His eyes never once met Hatfield's. "The Kid did," he added casually.

A bleak impatience stirred in the big Ranger. Gavite sounded too unconcerned, it seemed, over a dead man who had been a good lawman, by the judge's own admission.

"I've come a long way," he said coldly, "to help out."

"I don't recall sending for you," the judge replied acidly. His eyes lifted then and met Jim's with cool disinterest. "Luke did."

"I reckon I owe Luke something," Hatfield nodded. "He asked for Ranger help and he'll get it."

Judge Gavite's smile was a thin, frozen twist of his mouth. "Nothing's going to help Luke now, Hatfield As for your helping—" he paused, his words weighted—"I heard that the Chino Kid almost killed Cal Tipton tonight. He rode into town and rode out again—right under your nose, Mr. Hatfield."

"Right past his gun, Judge! Like he was never there." The voice ripped into the room, cold and vicious. "Ask him why, Judge. Ask him!"

The voice came from the direction of the door, from Hatfield's back. Jim took his time turning. He stepped away from the table and the men nearest him got up and moved away. In the stillness the plaintive ballad issuing from the wide-mouthed horn of the old Victrola seemed slightly inane.

Steve Prell stood with his arms draped over the top of the slatted doors. There was a bit of the swagger in the gunman, a tendency to strut when he was on the kill. He pushed the doors open with deliberate slowness and walked into the room, spurs jingling faintly.

Behind him a half dozen Wagonwheel B riders followed. Frenchy Duval came in last, hat tipped back on his shaggy hair, blue eyes bright with arrogance and expectancy.

The needle reached the end of the recording and began to scratch its monotonous refrain. Hank ignored it. He walked to the cash register in the middle of the bar and put his hands very pointedly under the counter. His eyes were stubbornly angry.

"Not in here, Prell. No gunplay in here."

Steve Prell kept his eyes on Hatfield. But his voice had a vicious edge. "Hank —get your hands up on the bar. Keep them there, or I'll kill you first!"

HANK stiffened. The color washed from his face slowly. He brought his hands up and placed them on the counter.

"I asked a question, Ranger." Steve Prell's voice held a reckless prodding. "Are you gonna answer it?"

Jim's smile had an iron quality. He put his gaze on the Wagonwheel men who had fanned out along the wall. They were making it plain they were not going to interfere. This was the ramrod's play and Hatfield had a surge of anger at being cornered this way.

They were a tough bunch of hands, these Wagonwheel riders, and he would have to measure up. There was no way to escape this, and he set himself, knowing that he would have to make it fast . . . that he would have to kill Prell.

The man was pushing him, gaining confidence with his words. "I asked you why you let the Chino Kid ride past your gun," Prell repeated. "Was it because the great Jim Hatfield was afraid of the Kid? Or because, maybe he ain't Hatfield. Maybe you're just another two-bit gunslinger who's thrown in with the Kid."

"You're riding too many maybes," Hatfield said and cut him short. "Why I let the Kid ride by is my business."

Prell was close enough to Hatfield now to measure the tall man facing him. There was a merciless quality in the still brown face, a bleak waiting in Hatfield's green eyes. Cibero's words suddenly echoed in his ears and a chill went through. He ran his dry palms down his pant legs.

"You didn't come here to find out why I let the Kid by," Jim said thinly. "You don't care about the Kid, or you'd still be out there, hunting him. You came back because you wanted to prove something to yourself." There was a bleakness and a waiting to Hatfield now, and his voice cut with a steely contempt.

"Get on with it, or get out of here."

Prell drew. At the last fear broke across his face in a thin oily sweat. But he had come too far and there was no turning back. He drew and his thumb found the hammer—then Hatfield's bullets smashed

into his chest, lifting him up on his toes.

He managed to get one shot off, into the floor, before he died.

Jim Hatfield moved to the bar, got the counter edge against the small of his back. His eyes were narrowed slits as he judged the temper of the men lined against the wall.

Cibero shifted restlessly and went still, sighing softly. Dakota nibbled at his straggly mustache, but his eyes had a neutral look. The others avoided Jim's gaze —all but Frenchy Duval.

The man came away from the wall, shambling like some jovial Alaskan brown bear and with the same deceptive destruction. He paused by the judge's table and unbuckled his gun belt and dropped it among the poker chips.

He turned to Hatfield. "With the gun, monsieur, you are the boss. But with the hands, Frenchy Duval will break you in two."

The Lone Wolf measured the big man. This, too, needed settling. The Frenchman would never stop until he had pitted his strength against him—he was like Steve Prell, he had to know. And knowing this, a hard and contained anger rode Hatfield.

Slowly he unbuckled his gun belts. He turned and pushed them along the bar to Hank. Then he turned to face the huge, grinning Wagonwheel B man.

"You've been wanting this since we met, Frenchy," he said softly. "Let's get it over with."

Frenchy put his head down and charged in. He was a rough-and-tumble fighter—a dirty fighter using every trick he knew.

Hatfield broke the man's nose in that first vicious exchange by the bar. The splat of his fist was audible throughout that still room. It smeared Frenchy's face a gory crimson and the Wagonwheel B man never quite recovered from that terrible blow.

He brushed his sleeve across his face and closed in, trying to thumb Jim's eyes. Failing at this, he stepped back and aimed a quick kick at Jim's groin which the Ranger caught on his hip. Frenchy used his thumbs, elbows, and knees, he tried to pin Hatfield against the bar, use his massive weight and strength to beat down his lighter opponent.

Through it all the Lone Wolf weaved and ducked. Lighter than Frenchy by forty pounds, he hit harder and faster—he kept hitting the big man, spinning him around, keeping him off balance, battering him. He never gave Frenchy a chance to get set, to use that enormous strength, and in the end he had Frenchy helpless, a battered, bleeding hulk of a man, barely able to see.

He hadn't won without absorbing some punishment, however. Some of Frenchy's efforts had gotten through. There was a livid thumb mark along the side of Jim's neck, a swelling on the left side of his face. Two of his knuckles were broken and there were welts on his side and chest that would stiffen in the morning.

Frenchy stood swaying, hands at his sides, his huge chest heaving like a bellows. But there was no quitting in the man. He lifted his hands with terrible effort and his neck tendons swelled with the effort of speaking. "By gar," he said weakly, "I get you yet."

He lunged forward. Jim set himself, summoning the last of his strength, and hit the man a solid smash on the side of the jaw. Frenchy stiffened, then fell, slowly, like some giant timber.

NO ONE moved as Hatfield turned and walked tiredly to the bar. He buckled his gun belts about his waist and found his hat where it had fallen. His eyes had a bleak, hard look as he surveyed the Wagonwheel B men lined up by the far wall.

"Anyone else have questions they want answered?"

No one did, apparently. But the judge rose and came forward to stand beside the Lone Wolf. He gave blunt orders.

"Steve Prell's dead. You boys better get his body over to Murray's Parlors. And—" he paused, smiling gently—"better break the news to Cal Tipton easy. First his brother. Now his foreman—"

Frenchy was crawling to the bar. He

pulled himself up along it and when he was erect he sagged against it. He brought his hand up to wipe blood from his eyes, then he turned and stared dazedly at the men bending over Prell's body.

Judge Gavite pointed a finger at him. "Better take Frenchy along, too. And stop in at Doctor Baker's with him, he's going to need some patching."

Frenchy stood against the bar, a shambles of a man. He didn't protest as one of the men took his arm. "Let's go," the man muttered. "Let's go, Frenchy."

The others picked up Prell's body and left.

Hatfield turned to the man at his side. "I think I'd better have a talk with you."

The mayor of Loving nodded. "A deserving idea." He walked up to the bar. "A bottle of that bonded Bourbon you keep in stock for me, Hank." He slid money over the counter and took the bottle Hank put in front of him.

He walked back to his table. "Cash my chips for me, Charley," he said. "We'll finish this next week."

He joined Hatfield at the door. "My house is on the hill, behind the courthouse."

It was a big house with windows that looked down on Loving. The judge led Hatfield through a wide hallway to a big room lined with books. Some of the haminess of his appearance faded in that atmosphere. Turning to face the big Ranger, he seemed a courtly figure, at home in these surroundings. But the bulge under the judge's coat bothered Hatfield.

"You've come a little late to help Luke," the judge said, waving to a chair. "Two days too late."

"I came as soon as I could," the Lone Wolf replied curtly. "I had orders to get one man, the Chino Kid."

The judge nodded. "You had a chance to get him tonight. Why didn't you?"

Jim hesitated. Why hadn't he? Because the Kid didn't look like a killer? Only a scared boy?

"Because I don't think he's the man I want," he answered bluntly.

The judge's eyes widened briefly. Surprise made its imprint in his face.

"You said you had orders to get the Kid."

Jim shrugged. "If he's the Chino Kid, then the Kid isn't the killer he's been cracked up to be." He told the judge about the meeting in the broken country north of the Basin.

"A seventeen year old boy, crying. An old Dragoon pistol in his trousers he couldn't draw fast enough to beat a stiff-jointed saloon bum. I can't believe it, Judge. If he's the Chino Kid, then someone's built up a fancy front for him."

"You sure the man you saw tonight was the same man?" Judge Gavite's voice was low. he was frowning thoughtfully.

"It was the same boy," Jim corrected.

The judge turned to the lowboy against the wall, found glasses, and poured Bourbon. "You want yours with water?" Jim shook his head and the judge smiled. "I don't fancy cutting good Bourbon myself." He took a swallow of his drink. "If it wasn't the Kid who shot Tipton tonight, then who was he?"

"You're the man with the answers," Hatfield said. "There's a reward out for the Chino Kid, but I notice that reward is being offered by Cal Tipton. Luke Tipton's letter said he was having trouble with the Chino Kid, but he mentioned something which puzzled me. He said there was a range war brewing and that the Kid was part of it. But I can't make out what he meant by the last line."

He took the dead sheriff's letter from his pocket and handed it to the mayor.

Judge Gavite opened it. He read the last paragraph with care, his eyes withdrawn.

"If something should happen to me before your man gets here," the paragraph read, "tell him to get the Chino Kid. Get to the Kid first, before anyone else does. Get him alive!"

THE judge folded the letter and handed it back. "Luke was mighty close-mouthed sometimes," he commented. His tone was flat and faintly disapproving. "His brother was after him, pushing him

to do something about the nesters along Young Turkey Creek. And the Kid. Cal's convinced that the Turkey Creek ranchers brought in the Kid to fight Wagonwheel—and it appears that way, although Buck Welker seems too honest a man for that kind of dealing. About the others, I don't know. They're a pretty clanny bunch up there." He shrugged, shook his head.

"Cal's a big man, Hatfield. I think you found that out. Bigger than in mere bulk. He took over Wagonwheel when his brother-in-law, Frank Bradley, was killed in an unfortunate accident five years ago. I believe Frank and his twelve year old boy, Edward, were blasting along the upper bed of Turkey Creek—anyway, both of them were buried under a rock fall. Cal was living at the ranch, then. He had married Frank's sister, and when Frank and his boy were killed it left only Frank's girl, Carole, to run the spread. Cal took over for her. She was only sixteen then. He's been having trouble with the Young Turkey Creek nesters since then. Cal's always suspected that they were responsible for that pre-timed blast which killed his brother-in-law and nephew."

Jim frowned. "Then you think the Kid is a gunslinger hired by the Turkey Creek ranchers to fight Wagonwheel?"

The judge refilled the glasses. "That's the prevalent opinion in the Basin."

"What did the Kid have against Luke?" Jim asked.

"Luke never said. Only once, I think, he mentioned having had a run-in with the Kid down on the Mexican Border. But he didn't say when, or why it was he feared the Kid."

"Then the boy I saw tonight isn't the Chino Kid," Jim said flatly. "I understand Luke had been sheriff here at least five years, if he knew the Kid on the Border then this boy would have had to be a button of twelve or thirteen, no more."

The judge sucked in his upper lip. "Sounds reasonable," he admitted.

Jim got to his feet. "Luke's deputy, Channing—what do you know about him?"

The judge's contemptuous sneer told more than his words. "Luke and I had words over him. I've never trusted Channing. A saddle bum who got into trouble in the Wild Aces Saloon one night, about a year ago. Luke picked him up and jailed him. Next morning Luke came over and said he wanted to hire Channing, he felt sorry for him and wanted to give him a chance. Luke's deputy, Tobey Wilson, had just quit. He was a month married, and his wife didn't want him holding down what she considered a dangerous job. I tried to argue Luke out of it, but—" the judge made a gesture—"Luke could be an almighty stubborn man when he wanted something."

Jim nodded. "Cal's been making big talk about taking over the law here. Just to make things legal, I want you to issue a proclamation, appointing me temporary sheriff. And I want you to issue a restraining order to the Wagonwheel B. I don't want them on any manhunts of their own. I want that order to confine every Wagonwheel B rider to the ranch until I lift that restriction. I want that order put out tonight!"

The judge stiffened. "That's pretty high-handed, Hatfield. Cal's just been shot by the Kid, or someone who wanted to kill him. Whoever he is, he's dangerous, even if he does cry over graves. He seems almighty anxious to fill a few himself."

"That's why I want Tipton and his men on the spread," Jim repeated bleakly. "I'll get the Kid. But I don't want a dozen gunmen riding after me. I don't want Wagonwheel to have an excuse to start shooting up the spreads along Young Turkey Creek. Once it gets that far, no one can stop it."

The judge's lips were a bleak line. "You're the boss, Hatfield," he said grudgingly. "I'll put out that restraining order. But I don't like it, and I'm not sure how Cal and his men will go for it."

"Put out that order," Jim said grimly. "I'll worry about how they'll take it!"

He turned to go, then remembered something he had almost forgotten. He put his hand in his pocket and brought out the silver dollar with the bullet hole.

"Ever see this before, Judge?"

The mayor handled the coin, but his eyes were bland as he shook his head. "No. What is it, some kind of an ornament?"

"Yeah," Jim answered shortly. "An ornament, and a key, perhaps. Good night, Judge."

CHAPTER VI

Souvenir for Dakota

HATFIELD paused in the shadows by the courthouse. He had one more chore to do before turning in. He walked uptown until he saw the light in the window. Letters painted across the glass read: JOB PRINTING.

A stoop-shouldered man in his late thirties, wearing spectacles, was hunched over a type case. He turned as Jim entered and sat up on his stool. He wiped ineffectually at an ink-stained chin.

"I want two dozen handbills," Jim said. He borrowed a pencil and a sheet of paper and blocked in what he wanted. "Can you have these ready for me by morning?"

The printer nodded. "I'll set the type right away." He read the copy and glanced at Jim. "Yes, sir. I'll have them for you in the morning."

Jim stepped out into the night. The town was quiet and a crescent moon hung in the western sky. The wind seemed to have died down and the clouds remained crouched along the eastern horizon, reaching dark tendrils across the stars.

He started for the hotel and crossing the street he sensed someone move in the shadows. But the night was dark and he could make out nothing. He smiled tautly. No man was impervious to a bullet in the back—a thin fatalism shoved caution from his mind. He turned and walked with the deliberate stride of a man without fear and he reached the lobby without incident.

The Wagonwheel gunman was still guarding Carole Bradley's room, two doors from his, he saw. The man stirred and stared sleepy-eyed as Jim loomed up in the dimly lighted hallway. He came alert at once.

Jim grinned. He had not locked his door but he made a show of fitting his key in the lock and turning it. He pushed his door open and stepped inside. And then his amusement faded swiftly to the realization someone was in his room, waiting. . . .

He heard the quick indrawn breath first, then the bed springs creaked and a faint rustling. He closed the door behind him with a quick shove and a Colt was in his fist. A shape moved in the darkness by the bed and he lunged for it.

His hands came in contact with a soft shoulder and softer contours. A girl cried out in muted pain, and then he was relaxing his hold, knowing that this was Carole Bradley in his arms.

She was pressing close and he could feel the warmth of her strike through his shirt. "Jim—" she said, and her body had no resistance. He let her sink down to sitting position on the bed and took a deep sharp breath.

"How did you get in here? Why?"

She made a motion toward the window and he saw then that it was still open. He walked to it and looked down into a dark alley that fed into Trail Street, and thought for a moment he saw someone move down there but he wasn't sure.

He closed the window and pulled the shade. The darkness was thick and he felt his way to the small table by the bed. Then he struck a match and lighted the lamp.

Carole seemed to shrink from the sudden glare. She looked small and mussed-up on the bed. He saw that he had torn her silk blouse at the right shoulder—a small tear and a scratch showed on her flesh. He remembered he still held his Colt in his hand, he holstered it and came to stand over her, his eyes concerned.

"I'm sorry, Miss Bradley. I didn't know who—"

"Carole, Jim. Please call me Carole."

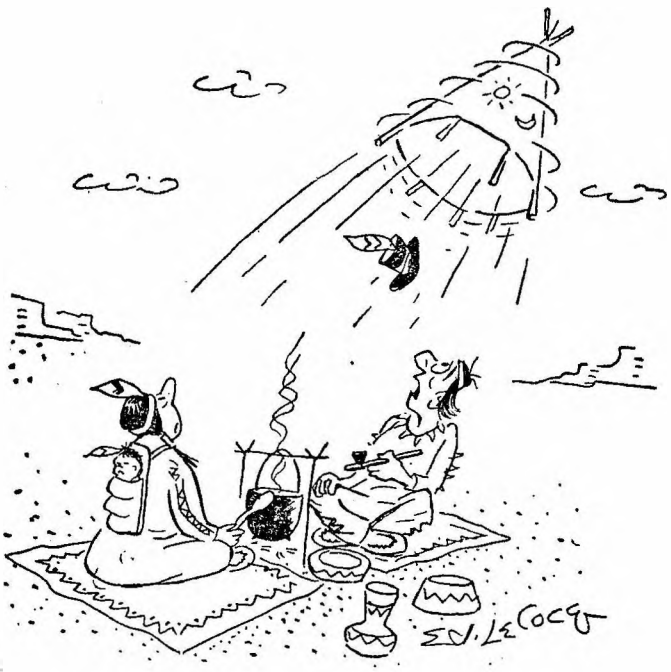
She smiled at him and he noticed the fine spray of freckles across her nose, her warm gray eyes and her figure full against her blouse. He saw this and he straightened up, nodding stiffly.

She said, "I had to come back, Jim."

Her voice had raised and he put a finger to his lips and crossed to the door and listened. There was no sound from the hallway. He slid the bolt on his door and then turned, pushing his hat back on his head.

Jim frowned. "Why?"

"Uncle Cal says it's because of the Kid. He says it's for my protection. But I hate it, all of it. The killings and the suspicion." She smiled sadly. "I used to love it when dad and my brother Eddie were alive. My mother died shortly after Ed was born, but Aunt Clara, she married Uncle Cal, was very kind. The Wagonwheel was a nice place to live then. I never dreamed I'd want to leave it."



"Something must be wrong with the air-conditioner."

"How did you get here? With that guard at the door?"

"I didn't come past Whitey," she whispered. "I used the ledge, outside. I'm only two windows away." She got up and walked to him. "Jim," she said huskily. "I have to get away from here. I can't stand it any more. I'm watched, guarded. I'm a prisoner on my own ranch. I can't ride anywhere without one or two of the riders, assigned by my uncle, with me. At the ranch I have to stay in the house, a guard is set up outside my room."

She was standing close and again Jim was struck by the sense of familiarity—she rang a chord of recognition he could not place and it irritated him.

"Things changed after Aunt Clara died. She and Uncle Cal had gone for a ride, Uncle Cal brought her home, dead. She had fallen and hit her head on a stone. And less than six months later my father and brother were killed. Uncle Cal wanted me to go to his sister's home in St. Louis. But I didn't want to go, then. I didn't want to leave the only home I'd known.

"But now, with this Chino Kid, it's been terrible. Uncle Cal has changed. He's suspicious of everyone, and he has a violent temper. I've asked him to let me leave, but he refused. He says that as long as this killer is alive, he won't let me leave."

She started to cry.

JIM felt a stir of impatience with her. She was in trouble, but coming here had only made things worse. If anyone found her in his room, he'd have a devil of a time explaining.

"Maybe your uncle is right," he said quietly. "Maybe he is only trying to keep you from being hurt."

"I'm tired of being a prisoner," she said. "I'm not going back to the ranch. You've got to help me." Her fingers went out and tightened on his hard arms, her face lifted up and the tears brimmed in her eyes. She was a woman, helpless and pleading, and he nodded slowly.

"You'll have to get back to your room," he said. He cupped her chin with his fingers. "I promise that you'll leave the Basin, if that's what you want. But go back to your room tonight."

She smiled. There was wonder and trust in her eyes. "I locked my door from inside. And I couldn't go back, with Whitey sitting there."

"You'll go the way you came in here," he said. "I'll help you."

In the alley between the hotel and the darkened bulk of the harness shop Lew Channing was a shapeless shadow. The crescent moon cast enough light to paint the upper half of the hotel in a pale glow. He was standing there, half sleepy and sodden now from the effects of the whisky he had drunk.

Some unconscious impulse had turned him into the alley after he had followed Hatfield from the judge's house back to the hotel. He had no purpose except some strange quirk of impulse to watch Hatfield —to see what this big Ranger would do against the trouble in the Basin. He was a jackal dogging a lion's steps.

The thin squeal of a window being raised caught his attention. He looked up at the hotel wall and he saw a man's leg thrust across the sill. The man balanced himself on the tiny wooden ledge that made a line of demarcation between the first and second floor.

Hatfield! Through Channing's disordered mind ran first of all surprise, then a swiftly gathering suspicion.

He watched the Ranger crouch on that precarious ledge and reach a hand inside. He inched over and a girl came through the window and stood beside the Lone Wolf. She looked small beside him, her pale blouse showing up in the moonlight, torn at the shoulder, and Channing's world suddenly exploded and a sickness ran through him.

He sagged against the harness shop wall, his mouth working soundlessly, a small and pitiful voice pleading inside him.

Carole Bradley! Coming out of Hatfield's room. Being smuggled out, like some—

He fumbled at his holster and drew his Colt and only a shred of reasoning held him from pulling trigger. If he shot Hatfield she would fall, and even in the bitter shock of disillusionment he had no wish to hurt the girl.

He stood pinned against that dark wall, his tortured gaze watching the figures on the ledge. He saw Hatfield ease the girl along the ledge to the dark window beyond and on to the next where she became a small, huddled figure for an instant before she disappeared inside.

Hatfield was a plain target then. But some of the blinding anger had drained from Channing. When he roused himself, Hatfield had gone back inside his own room.

Channing remained in the alley for a long time, his mind torturing him with the implications of what he had seen. And the cold sick knot in him began to dissolve. A dark and terrible hatred for the big Ranger began to crawl rapidly through his veins.

He had never killed a man before. But he would kill Hatfield before he rode away from Loving Basin.

JUDGE GAVITE sat unmoving in his deep leather chair, his face a gray image of inward despair. He heard the bell of his front door, but he let it jangle. Then he heard his manservant, Jason, go down the hall to open it.

The footsteps were quick and urgent and a moment later Nels Krutch, a Wagonwheel rider, clumped into the library. He halted, a scowling look of impatience on his broad, weathered face until Judge Gavite waved to Jason to leave.

Krutch waited until the manservant had disappeared somewhere in the back of the big house.

"Mr. Tipton wants to see you," he said bluntly. "Right away!"

Judge Gavite's eyes hardened, until they were two cold gray chips of stone. "Tell Cal he knows where I live. If he wants to see me, he'll have to come here."

Nels was taken back. "He won't like it, Judge."

"I don't expect he will," Gavite agreed. "But tell him." He waited after Krutch left, feeling old and futile. He had enmeshed himself in a game here which had taken a bad turn. He no longer wanted any part of it—but he knew Cal and he knew that he could not back out now.

He got up and walked to the books lining his shelves and stared at the sober bindings. These books were all he had retained of a life which once had held intellectual and professional promise. He had come a long way down the ladder from the young barrister who had passed his bar exams and hung his shingle out in Philadelphia. A long way down, but he had come down the rungs, one by one, himself. What was he now? A whisky-drinking, poker-playing ham in a one-horse cowtown, a man elected mayor on a whim by citizens who were half amused, half taken in by his intellectual pretensions.

These were his own bitter reflections and self-evaluation, and his hand shook and he turned and poured Bourbon into his glass.

Easy money. He had always had a weakness for it.

He lifted his glass and a poem, author forgotten, came to mind—*"forget not that the world owes you a living, remember only that a woman's smile is pleasing, and hard work is for fools . . ."*

He sank back in his chair and waited and his thoughts turned now to the tall, hard Ranger who had been here. The Ranger was no fool, and he had been a witness to his capabilities. Steve Prell had been rated the fastest man in the Basin, and his reputation had been built in an even wider arena. And Frenchy—he took a deep breath at the memory of that beaten, bloody hulk.

It was time to quit, he thought grimly.

He heard the bell jangle and this time he went to the door himself, dismissing Jason with an abrupt wave of his hand as the manservant appeared in the hallway.

Cal Tipton's face was flushed as he came in. His head was bandaged and his breath smelled strongly of raw whisky. He said harshly, "You're getting mighty independent, Judge. I said I wanted to see you—"

"Lift your voice any higher," Judge Gavite cut in coldly, "and they'll hear you down at the courthouse."

"The hell with you." Tipton snapped. But he lowered his voice and sullenly followed the older man into the library. He stood by the library table and watched Gavite close the heavy double doors.

"You saw what happened tonight?" he asked, lowering himself into a chair. "Frenchy won't be of any use to me for a week. And Steve—"

"I was there," Judge Gavite said. "Don't go into the details."

Cal reached for the bourbon bottle and looked around for a glass. He saw Hatfield's on the table and put out a hand for it.

Judge Gavite said, smiling coldly, "I don't think you'll want to drink from that glass, Cal. I gave Hatfield a drink in it just before you came."

Cal swept the glass to the floor. "He was here?"

"One reason why I didn't come to see you," the judge answered sharply. "He

was here, getting information. I'm the mayor of this town, or have you forgotten?" He laughed without humor at Cal's sneer. "You won't laugh when I tell you what I have to do, Cal."

The Wagonwheel boss narrowed his gaze. "Do what?"

"I'm going to hand you a restraining order in the morning. To keep you and your men on the ranch until Mr. Hatfield, whom I'm appointing temporary sheriff, deems otherwise."

"What?"

Judge Gavite nodded, secretly pleased at the outrage in Tipton's face. "He's onto something, Cal. He's smart, and he doesn't frighten. He came here to get the Kid, but he's no fool. And your brother didn't help." He told Tipton about Luke's letter.

"You know what that means," the Judge went on, relentlessly. "If he gets hold of the Kid—"

CAL TIPTON lunged to his feet. The movement sent his head spinning and he sagged back, snarling. "He won't. I promise you that." He closed his eyes. "I should have told Dakota to kill Luke a week ago. Right after he came to see me. Luke knew then, I think." He opened his eyes. "Dammit! Get me a glass!"

The judge complied. "I've been drinking this stuff, too," he said wryly, "but it doesn't help, Cal. If that Ranger gets to nosing around the Young Turkey Creek ranchers—"

"He'll get a bullet in his back," Cal said harshly. "And who'll get blamed." He took a long slug of the bourbon. It made him feel better. He smiled as he answered his own question. "Why, the Kid, of course."

Judge Gavite frowned. "That's risky."

"You know any other way?"

The judge sat down in the chair across from Cal. "I don't want any part of killing a Ranger," he said. "I didn't want any part of it when Luke was killed. I told you—"

"You wanted in before," Cal interrupted. "Ten thousand dollars worth—*after* I got the ranch."

"I don't want the money," the judge said.

"That was the deal," Cal said angrily. "That's the way it will be."

Judge Gavite said nothing. After a while he shrugged. "How are you going to do it?"

"Buck Welker."

Judge Gavite frowned. "What's Buck got to do with it?"

"Hatfield will ride out to see Buck Welker in the morning," Cal said patiently. "Buck was fool enough to invite Hatfield out in the presence of some ears who came to me with the information. I'm sending Dakota out tonight, with Cibero."

Judge Gavite sighed. He lifted his glass. "Dakota. I hope he doesn't miss. Hatfield has a souvenir for him, something Dakota dropped when he and Cibero paid their visit to the Mex shack out in the north country."

Cal shrugged. "Steve Prell was the kind of fool who had to stand up to a man like Hatfield. But Dakota—well, you know Dakota."

Judge Gavite nodded. "To my sorrow." He drank from his glass. "There will be others coming, when the news gets back to Houston. Captain McDowell won't take the killing of his ace lieutenant without one hell of an investigation."

"Let him come," Cal replied brusquely. "I'll be boss of Wagonwheel by then."

"And Carole?"

"She'll be dead," Cal answered brutally. His face was flushed. He saw the look on the judge's face and he said with ugly finality: "Why stop now? When the investigation comes, Hatfield will be out of the way and the Kid will be blamed for everything. But the Kid won't be around to talk. That, too, will be taken care of."

"And me? What do you want of me?" the judge asked softly.

"You're mayor of Loving," the Wagonwheel boss pointed out coldly. "And you were a lawyer. That's your job, to cover up."

Judge Gavite nodded, his thoughts bitter. "To cover up," he echoed softly.

CHAPTER VII

Angry Nesters

THE SUN burned in the sky and leaves hung motionless again and the dust stirred by passing vehicles and the iron hoofs of horses clung like a brown ground haze, settling slowly.

Jim Hatfield felt the heat of the sun against his face as he crossed the street to the Cafe and the thought occurred to him that it would be another hot and sultry day. The clouds which had promised rain lay on the flanks of the Basin, ready to move in when the wind rose again. There was still the possibility of rain.

He went into the Cafe and settled on the nearest stool and waited while the angular woman with the sleep-wrinkled eyes moved sluggishly to him and took his order.

The events of the night had spread the parts of the puzzle before him. He had the feeling all the pieces were there, in his head, but he lacked the key to put them togther.

He drank his coffee while waiting for his ham and eggs and potatoes, and his jaw felt a little stiff and he was mildly surprised for he had not remembered Frenchy getting in a lick there. His neck ached and so did his ribs, and he had to set himself against a tendency to limp. Frenchy's kick to his hip had produced a dark bruise.

He shrugged thoughts of the fight from him. His left hand was paining him now, and there was a swelling across the knuckles. He thought for a moment of having Doc Baker take a look at it, but soon forgot it.

He went over his conversation with the judge, and his talk with Carole. It filled in the picture here, but it gave him nothing to work on. He had a hunch Cal was pushing the trouble between Wagonwheel B and the Turkey Creek ranchers for his own concealed reasons—and it was possible that the ranchers, in their desperation, had sent for a killer named the Chino Kid. But the boy he had twice encountered was not the Kid, not the killer the Basin feared. Of that he was certain.

Then who was he?

The judge had been of no help, and Tipton seemed convinced that the man who shot him was the Kid. He remembered Buck Welker's invitation, and he knew he'd have to ride out to see the Turkey Creek ranchers.

His thoughts came around to the girl and he felt the press of an unbidden hunger. A line of restraint made its hard pattern across his mouth. She was young and in trouble, he told himself, and what she had done was because of it. Yet the memory of her lingered and held its mixture of pain and loneliness in him.

He was through with his coffee when he saw Channing come into the Cafe. The deputy stiffened just inside the door when he saw Hatfield, and for a moment he seemed about to turn on his heel and walk out.

"Buy you a cup of coffee, Lew?" Jim said pleasantly and waved an invitation to the stool next to him.

The deputy put his glance on Hatfield then, and the hackles rose on Jim's neck at the blazing hatred in the man's bloodshot eyes.

"The hell with you, Ranger!" the deputy spat out, and walked stiff-legged to the far end of the counter. He sat heavily, staring morosely ahead of him.

Wonder what's eating him? Jim thought bleakly, and then he put it out of his thoughts. Channing was a weak reed upon which Luke had leaned and at the first need Channing had broken.

Jim put silver on the counter, picked up his hat, and left.

There was activity in front of the hotel as he came back across the street. A bright-wheeled gig was drawn up by the door and riders made a mounted guard behind it.

Hatfield came up the boardwalk, a tall man moving deliberately. The sun was hot and perspiration darkened his armpits and made a bead on his upper lip.

The riders were Wagonwheel men. He counted four of them. Frenchy wasn't with them. Nor was the bigheaded, balding man with the drooping brown mustache and mild eyes, nor the dark, quick Mex. Jim noted this, but it could mean merely that they had left earlier for the ranch.

A pine box, cover nailed shut, was in the back of the gig, a third of it hanging over the tailgate. Steve Prell?

THE girl turned on the seat as Jim came up and a quick smile played across her face. Her uncle was just coming down the stairs to join her. He stopped by the gig, facing him.

Carole said happily, "Jim, I'm leaving the Basin. I'm going back to the ranch to pack. If I can get ready in time, Uncle Cal says he can get me to the stage when it stops at the Turkey Creek Station—"

Hatfield's attention centered on Tipton. The man seemed to have recovered quickly from the effects of the bullet which had come close to killing him.

"Thought it over last night and decided that my niece would be better off out of the Basin," he nodded. "Keeping a close herd over her wasn't making her happy. But I was only concerned about her safety."

It was a smooth and plausible explanation, and Carole's delight was apparent in her eyes. "I—hope you get the Kid soon, Jim," she said, putting out her hand. The contact sent color through her face and her eyes darkened. "I—I think it's best that I leave."

There was a sort of plaintive questioning in her tone as she said it, and in the silence that came between them Cal Tipton wedged his harsh voice.

"Judge Gavite was in to see me this morning. I'm not going to say I like it, Hatfield. That restraining order." His voice was loud. "It's mighty high-handed of you. But I'll play along with the law. I'll keep my boys on the ranch. I don't know how long I can do it, but I'll try."

"Do that," Jim said. "That's all I want, now."

Cal Tipton stepped up to the seat and his weight tilted the gig. He took up the gelding's reins.

"Will I see you before I leave, Jim?" Carole said, uncertainly.

Hatfield shrugged and touched his hat brim. "I doubt it, but have a good trip, Carole."

Jim went up to his room. With the instinctive knowledge of weather gained by a thousand nights in the open he knew it would rain before the sun set.

He washed and went back down and out to Trail Street. The gig and the Wagonwheel riders had gone. He walked to the print shop and picked up his posters and he tacked the first one on the side of the courthouse wall where it faced the small square. He put the other on the hotel wall. Then he went to the livery and saddled Goldy who was glad to see him. He rode out of town with the remaining posters tucked in his shirt.

Behind him men began to cluster around the posters. Comments had a puzzled edge.

"What in hell does he think he'll gain by that?"

The posters read:

THE CHINO KID

I WANT TO TALK TO YOU. I'LL MEET YOU WHEREVER YOU SAY. I PROMISE SANCTUARY.

Jim Hatfield,
Texas Ranger

THE wind freshened and the storm clouds rolled up. A smell of rain pushed over that dry and brittle land. A sigh seemed to come from the parched earth in anticipation.

Hatfield rode southwest, toward low ragged hills which flanked Young Turkey Creek. Cal Tipton's easy acceptance of the judge's restraining order bothered him. And Tipton's about-face on Carole.

The joker in the woodpile was the Kid—the boy who had been given a reputation as a vicious killer. The youngster had tried to kill Tipton last night. Jim knew that. Perhaps he was the one who had killed the sheriff, but Jim was beginning to doubt that. The pencilled scrawl Cal

had shown him, he remembered, had been unsigned. And it had been directed to Tipton. That threat could have been for Cal Tipton as well as his brother.

A thought occurred to him now and its implication brought him erect, a hard light in his eyes. "Might be," he muttered, and Goldy pricked his ears. "She does look like him—"

Goldy tossed his head, but Hatfield did not elaborate on his musing. Goldy settled to the ground-eating pace he like best.

A small TEXAS TALE

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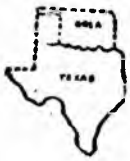
LIGHT LOVE



THE ranch hand showed up one late evening at his employer's door. "Mind if I borrow a lantern?" he asked. "I'm going courting."

"Well, young feller," said the rancher, "when I was young and went courting my wife, you can bet I didn't take along a lantern."

"Yes, sir," said the hand, "but look what you got."

—E. J. Ritter, Jr.

It was an hour later that Hatfield knew someone was following him. He didn't see the man, and though he stopped and waited, no one showed on his back trail. But he knew—he had lived to long with danger and the *feel* of someone back there was definite.

He smiled and accepted it, knowing he would deal with the man when the time came.

Mid-morning found him following a rutted wagon road down toward the creek bottoms. He heard a cock crow before he came into sight of the small wooden shack in the clearing.

A woman was washing clothes in a galvanized iron tub, scrubbing them over a washboard. She was short and dumpy and her damp red face lifted as Jim came into view and he saw fear wash across her face.

A young man appeared in the doorway of the shack, a shotgun, bound with rawhide, in his hands. At the same moment an older, weazened man came away from the ruins of what had been a barn.

The small man eyed Jim's badge with bright interest, but his mouth was pinched and his tone unfriendly.

"You visitin'?"

Jim nodded. He took in the small spread and saw that the corral had been knocked down, as though cattle had been stampeded through it. The barn had been burned. A truck garden was trampled and ruined.

"On official business," he said quietly. "I want information."

He saw the look the older man cast his son—a warning, silencing look. "We mind our own business here," the man said. "We don't know anything."

"What about the Chino Kid?" Jim asked. "Does he work for you?"

The boy sneered. "The Kid doesn't work for nobody."

"Does he bother you?"

"The Kid? Hell, Ranger, it ain't the Kid who's giving us trouble. And it wasn't the Kid who—"

"Shut up!" his father snapped. He eyed Jim with a stubborn scowl. "We don't know anything about the Kid."

Hatfield shrugged. He could sense the fear in the man, and in the woman. The boy was suddenly silent.

"Whose place is this?" he asked.

"Mine. Joe Pruitt's the name."

"Where is Buck Welker's place?"

The older man hesitated. Young Pruitt's voice was dogged. "The Bar W is upcreek, past the Collins place. About seven miles."

Jim nodded his thanks. He took one of the poster from his shirt and handed it to the boy. "Just in case you see the Kid," he murmured. He rode out of the yard.

Joe Pruitt eyed his son with bitter resignation. The boy said defiantly: "He's the law, paw. He oughta know."

"He'll get what Luke got—a bullet in the back." There was a gray tiredness in the older man's voice. He shook his head and retraced his steps to the gutted barn.

THE Collins place was more sprawling and untended and there was no visible damage Jim could see. Several dogs barked heatedly as Jim rode up, and a rail-thin, stoop-shouldered man who could have been seventy stopped rocking in the shade of the sagging veranda. Two small youngsters were crawling on the boards in front of him and an older one was hammering on a board in the dust of the yard.

The old man turned and cackled something through the open window at his back, and a buxom woman appeared in the doorway, frowning as Jim pulled to a stop by the stairs.

"Get yore paw," the old man said to the boy hammering on the board and the youngster scooted off, heading for the thickets along the creek.

Jim said, "Howdy."

The oldster's eyes brightened on his badge. He chuckled. "Ranger, eh?"

Jim nodded. "I'm looking for information concerning the Chino Kid," he said evenly.

"The Kid?" The oldster cackled. "Yo're wastin' yer time, Ranger. The Kid ain't done nothin'."

Hatfield frowned. "That's not the way I heard it, grandpa. The Chino Kid's a killer. He shot Luke Tipton in the back, and last night he tried to ambush Cal Tipton. He's a one man army—a rustler, killer, stage robber."

"The Kid ain't dry behind the ears yet," the oldster chortled. "Just a scared button hiding out in the brush. Been living with the Gamales, some Mex goatherders—"

"Paw—hold yore tongue!" the woman snapped. "We don't know anything, Ranger!" Her voice was sullen as she looked at Jim. "My husband, Joad, will be here shortly. He'll talk with you."

She shaded her eyes against the glare of the sun. "Here he comes now."

Joad was a stocky, red-faced man with slow, blue gaze and a dull voice. He shot a look at his father-in-law as his wife repeated what Jim Hatfield was after.

"Don't know anything," he said. "Kid never bothered me."

"The Pruitt's barn was burned recently. His corrals are down." Jim's voice was patient. "Who did it. The Kid?"

Joad licked his lips. He glanced at his wife and saw the cold tight fear in her and he sighed and looked away. "Could be," he muttered.

"Dang it, tell him!" the oldster said shrilly. "Tell him the truth. Kid is being blamed for everythin' what goes on in the Basin. Tell him about them Wagonwheel B night riders."

His daughter shoved him violently and he fell out of his chair. He banged his head on the wall and a dazed look came into his eyes. A thin line of blood, from his bitten tongue, oozed down a corner of his mouth.

One of the children began to cry. The woman bent over the old man, suddenly terrified. "Paw, I didn't mean to hurt yuh."

Jim took a poster from his shirt and dropped it at Joad's feet. The man didn't look at it, nor did he meet Jim's gaze.

He didn't look up until Hatfield had ridden away—then he looked down at the poster, read it, and slowly ground it to shreds beneath his heel.

A mile out of the Collins place Hatfield knew that his follower was close. It was brushy, hilly country with numerous gullies leading to the creek which was on his left.

The Bar W was just ahead. Jim studied the cottonwood grove which screened the small valley. He had the sudden hunch that the man who had dogged him all the way from Loving would make his try soon.

But he rode as though he was unaware of the man behind him. He hit the grove and the road twisted through it and just before it broke out into the clearing and Buck Welker's place, Jim dismounted. He slapped Goldy sharply on the rump and whispered, "Keep going," and then slid down into the ravine just off the road.

He waited less than three minutes. A

rider came up fast now, a gun in his hand. Jim stiffened with surprise. Lew Channing!

The man's intentions were obvious, although why he had waited until Hatfield was almost at the Bar W before closing in escaped the Ranger. He let Channing pass, and then he came back to the road. He was behind Channing now, walking swiftly toward the clearing when he heard the shots.

CHAPTER VIII

"A Lot of Killing!"

DAKOTA stared pensively at the floor boards, at Buck Welker's sightless eyes. A fly crawled over the dead man's face and paused to wring his hands on the dead man's lips.

The woman lay slumped over the table. She had bled a lot from the knife slash and flies were thick over her body. Dakota stared absently at them, his drooping mustache making him look sad and futile.

Cibero kept pacing the kitchen floor. He had worn a path to the window which faced the cottonwoods. *"Muy diablo!"* he said impatiently. "Perhaps he does not come. We wait here—how long?"

"Till he comes," Dakota answered sleepily. He leaned back in his chair and tilted his hat over his pale eyes. "When you hear him, wake me."

The Mexican choked back an oath. He knew better than to cross this man. He knew the strange, unpredictable quirks of temper that made Dakota the most feared and disliked man at the Wagonwheel B.

He went to the stove and poured lukewarm, acrid coffee into a dirty cup and drank it, spitting out the grounds which got between his teeth. He was jittery.

He heard the horse then, coming down the road. He didn't go to the window, but said sharply, "Dakota, he comes." He was at the door, gun in hand, as Dakota stirred and came to his feet.

He stepped out and his gun was up and a sharp exclamation burst from him. Dakota came up behind him and pushed him aside and stared at the big golden stallion which came down the small slope toward them.

"It's his horse," Dakota grunted, and a faint puzzlement was in his tone.

Cibero ran to meet Goldy. He caught the sorrel's bit and led it back toward the house. "Turn him loose. Hatfield's somewhere around. We'll have to root him out," Dakota said. He chopped his words clean, wheeling to face the rider who broke through the grove.

Lew Channing had ridden with the resolve to kill Hatfield. He rode with an odd mixture of hate and urgency; he wanted to get it over with now.

He remembered Luke Tipton saying, "You'd be all right, Lew, if you'd leave the bottle alone." But Luke had never understood why he drank. He had never told Luke about his past, the miserable Missouri shack, the numerous brothers and sisters who were not really his brothers and sisters, for most of them had a different father. He didn't tell Luke about the smothering hate in him as he remembered the men that visited his mother.

But it was the girl, Carole Bradley, which had channeled his hate against Hatfield. She was distant. He had always felt small and dirty when he thought of her. But he had loved her.

He had not tried to catch up with Hatfield at first. He didn't need to. He had known that Hatfield was headed for the Bar W. He had built up his courage with the miles dropping away behind him, and now, as he burst through the cottonwoods he was ready.

But instead of Hatfield and Buck Welker in the yard he saw Dakota and Cibero. Cibero was holding a big sorrel stallion. Dakota had wheeled around to face him. In the misting sunlight he saw the surprise take up slack in Dakota's eyes.

Lew's throat constricted as he wheeled his cayuse broadside, ten paces away. "Where's Jim?" he said in a high, scratchy voice and his hand came up, and only then

did he realize he was holding his Colt.

Dakota shot first. Cibero's shot, a split second later, knocked him out of saddle.

The shock of running into these men and not Hatfield was with Lew as he fell. The pain in his chest burned, but his eyes were clear. He made no effort to move. He saw Dakota step toward him, then stop and look beyond him.

The pain came sharper now and Lew closed his eyes. The racketing explosions which broke over him seemed far away.

THE LONE WOLF came to the clearing in time to see Dakota walk toward Channing lying on the hard earth. Cibero was still holding Goldy who was trying to jerk away from him.

The sun was misting now as dark tendrils of racing clouds obscured it. In the dimming light Dakota stopped, jerked his hand up to face Hatfield. He wasted no words.

Jim's shots spun the killer around and dropped him before he could thumb back his hammer. Cibero got in one raking shot across Jim's shoulder before making a break for the corral behind Goldy's shielding bulk. Jim broke Cibero's leg before he reached it. He fell and started dragging himself toward his cayuse, then he stopped and lay still, seemingly unconscious.

Jim stepped around Channing and glanced at Dakota and knew the killer was dead. He started for Cibero and the Mexican waited until Hatfield was close, then he played his last card. He rolled over and his hand whipped up and his knife glittered. It fell out of his limp hand as the Lone Wolf's Colt exploded and the slug smashed through his hand.

Jim turned back to Channing. He saw that the deputy was not yet dead and he picked the man up and brought him inside the house. He saw the bodies of Buck and his wife and his stomach almost revolted, and then a hard satisfaction eased him. The two responsible for this lay out there in Buck's yard.

He put Channing down on the bed in the side room and Channing's eyes opened. Jim poured some black coffee into a cup and held it to Channing's lips, but he knew the ex-deputy was dying.

"Came to—kill you," Channing muttered. "Didn't expect Dakota and Cibero."

Jim asked softly: "Why?"

Channing's face twisted. "Damn you. Saw Miss Bradley—last night. Leaving your room." He said it painfully, his eyes bugging, but the bright and terrible hurt was there and the confusion. "I hate you, Hatfield—from the moment you walked in. Big man—know what you want—sure of yourself. Hate you for it."

Pity was a brief emotion in the big Ranger. He asked a question he wanted verified. "Who is the Chino Kid, Lew?"

Channing's head rolled. "Ask — the judge." A shudder ran through him and then he was very quiet, very still, and there was peace in his eyes.

Jim Hatfield went out and whistled for Goldy and when the big stallion came he swung aboard. The rain was just beginning as he headed back for Loving. It felt good in his face.

Judge Gavite watched the rain through his window. He was not surprised when he saw Hatfield turn up the road to his house. He had known from the start that Hatfield would be back.

He answered the door himself. His face was a stiff mask, fashioned in the shape of welcome.

"You're back early," he said. "Did you see Buck Welker?"

Hatfield glanced around the room. He loomed big alongside Gavite. He was soaked through and his shirt clung to his wide shoulders, outlining the long hard muscles. He looked at Gavite with a hard, compelling look.

"Buck's dead," he said flatly. "So is his wife."

Judge Gavite's face held no sorrow. "So?" he asked softly.

"Two Wagonwheel men killed them. They're dead, too. So's Channing, who rode after me to kill me."

Judge Gavite sighed. "A lot of killing, Hatfield. A lot of killing."

"Why?" Hatfield's voice was insistent.

Judge Gavite's head came up and there

was fear in him. "What do you mean?"

"Channing talked before he died," Jim said. "He said to ask you who the Chino Kid is."

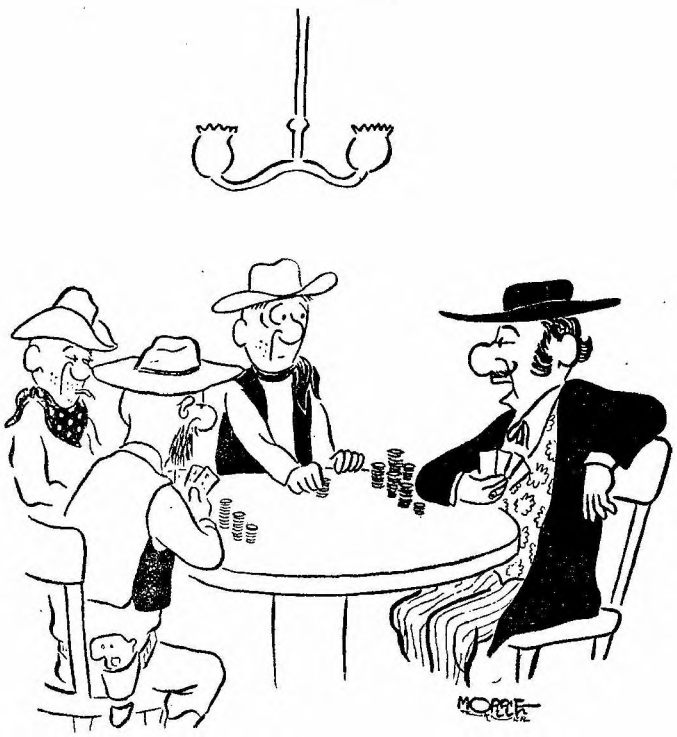
Gavite turned away from Hatfield. He walked to the small cabinet and poured drinks and came back, holding out a glass. "Channing was an odd one," he said drily. "How should I know who the Kid is?"

"I think you do," Jim said. "I think you've known all along. So does Cal Tipton. But I want you to tell me."

And when I get to him, he'll talk. Rest easy, Judge. I'll be back."

The judge waited until Hatfield had gone and the rain drummed long against the windows. It was no day for traveling. But he knew he had to leave. He had played his part here in Loving, and it had come time to exit. He wanted to be a long way from Loving when Hatfield came back.

Hatfield left the judge's house and rode Goldy through the downpour to the livery.



"Pardner, if that's your life's savings you haven't lived long enough."

The judge shook his head, an amused smile on his lips. "I don't play guessing games, Hatfield."

"The Kid's Edward Bradley, isn't he? Carole Bradley's kid brother?"

There was nothing in the judge's gaze. "I thought Edward Bradley was dead."

Jim shrugged. "All right," he said, admitting defeat. "I think Cal Tipton knows. He had run the big sorrel hard and Goldy deserved a rest. He came out to the walk and his attention was caught by the stage standing in front of the office. The driver was hunched up on the seat, waiting . . . and Jim suddenly remembered Carole's words, and the last sharp edges of the grim puzzle fell into place.

He cut across the street, sloshing

through the puddles, and his voice stopped the agent as he came out with the mail bags. The man waited until Jim stepped up beside him.

"Can you hold it up until I get into some dry clothes?"

The man hesitated. But the badge on Jim's shirt had authority—he nodded.

"We'll wait," he said.

CHAPTER IX

Stage Ambush

THE STAGE from Loving took the northern route out of the Basin, skirting the ragged bluffs that hemmed in the valley. The rain came down in torrents, making up for the long dry spell—it whipped and beat against the land with sullen fury.

Hatfield lay back against the horsehair rest and closed his eyes. His body ached and the cut across his shoulder was a reminder of the ambush which had awaited him at the Bar W. The pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place.

The rain turned sections of the road into muddy quagmires. The stage slewed and skidded and the driver's swearing beat against the pounding rain. It was full dark when the coach finally rolled into the way station yard under the bluffs skirting Turkey Creek.

The driver dismounted and said: "Twenty minutes layover."

Jim stepped out. The rain pelted him as he started across the yard to the stone shack under the bluffs. The door was open and a lanky, oldish man wearing a slicker over his shoulders came out to meet the driver. A young Mexican was with him.

Jim made the shelter of the station and stepped aside to let the two drummers crowd in. He watched the Mexican unhitch the horses and take them away. The driver and the station agent came back to the station.

"Lena'll fix yuh up with some hot grub," the lanky man said to Jim. Then he noticed the badge on Jim's shirt and he frowned.

Jim looked over the long, dingy room. Two overhead lamps cast a fitful glow. A long board table flanked by two benches were the only furniture. A slatternly woman, obviously Lena, was already setting coffee mugs on the table.

"Cal Tipton's niece was due to pick up the stage here," he said. "Have you seen her?"

The station man shook his head. "Ain't likely, in this storm." He watched Jim a moment, then drifted over to the small bar and went behind it. He took a bottle from under the counter and poured two drinks and set one up before the driver. They conversed in low familiar tones.

Jim remained in the doorway, eyeing the rain glittering in the spill of light. He had not counted on this. He was sure that Cal Tipton would go through with it.

He turned and joined the driver at the small bar. The agent filled a shot glass and placed it before Jim, and the driver said, "Bad road up ahead. We climb those bluffs about five miles up."

Jim faced a difficult decision. He was riding his hunch that Cal Tipton would see that his niece boarded this stage. It fitted in with the pattern of the man's thinking. Somewhere along this dangerous stretch of road there would be an accident.

The driver had his drink and went to the doorway. The Mex came in, dripping, showing his teeth in cheerful grin.

"Ready," he said.

The driver lifted his voice. "All right —let's roll!"

The two drummers left their beans and side bacon and made a dash for the coach. Jim followed them. The driver swung up to his seat and gathered his reins.

"See you in a couple days, Tod," he called to the station agent. The lanky man lifted a hand and nodded.

The miles ground out under the jolting wheels and worry began to sharpen the impatience in Hatfield. If he had guessed wrong, a girl would die—

He heard the hailing voice above the jolting stage and then the driver was jamming on his brakes. The stage slewed around and stopped. In the darkness of the coach Jim eased back, his hand on his Colt. One of the drummers muttered, "What's he stopping here for?"

Then Jim heard Cal's voice, hard and strong: "Have a passenger for you. We couldn't make it to the Turkey Creek station in time and decided to head you off here."

The driver's voice was noncommittal. "Baggage up topside."

Something heavy was flung on the roof. Then the door opened and Carole came into the coach.

Behind her Cal Tipton said, "Write as soon as you get there, Carole. Good-bye."

She echoed his good-bye and groped around for space to sit. Jim took her arm and eased her down beside him and she turned to look at him. He was a dark shape against the cushions, yet she recognized him. She sucked in her breath. "Jim!"

"Yes." His voice was a warning whisper. "Don't talk, don't say anything now."

She remained mute, trusting him. Cal Tipton's voice lifted against the night. "Easy on that road tonight, driver." Then the sound of buggy wheels grinding in mud came to Jim. And behind the buggy was the clatter of mounted horses.

The stage lurched into motion again, heading upgrade.

She turned to him now. "Jim, I thought you were staying in Loving."

"I changed my mind," Hatfield said. He glanced at the two drummers, shapeless bulks across from them. "Are either of you armed?" His voice was sharp.

Neither man was.

Jim shrugged. He opened the door and leaned out into the rain. "Hold it!" he yelled to the driver. "Pull up!"

The puzzled driver obeyed. Jim stepped out. He didn't want to worry the girl, nor did he see where it would help to let the two unarmed men in the coach in on what he expected would happen.

He conferred briefly with the driver and his conviction carried home. The driver's face was taut as he climbed back onto the seat.

Jim settled back beside Carole.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong, Jim?"

"I've got a hunch we're going to be held up," Jim answered grimly. "Somewhere on that bluff trail." He looked at the two drummers. "This is what I want you to do. When the stage stops—even before it stops—get out. Fast. Get out on the inboard side, and then get down on the ground. If you want to stay alive, remember that. Get out and get down fast."

In the cold, tense silence that followed Carole's voice was a broken murmur: "Why?"

THE RAIN slacked off. The stars came out, slipping from behind the hurrying clouds. The wind that blew through the hills was cold after the long dry heat

Cal Tipton sat in his buggy seat, waiting, a Winchester across his knees. He had stopped the vehicle across the narrow stage road which at this point was flanked on the right by the sharp rise of the bluff and on the left by a sheer drop of over one hundred feet.

Five Wagonwheel riders, the nucleus of his gun crew, flanked the buggy. They waited in stolid silence, suffering the rain.

"The stage should be coming around that bend in another five minutes. Kill the driver first. Then make sure the team stampedes over the cliff. Remember, we want no witnesses!" Tipton said.

The men nodded. They were hard men who had hired for this sort of work. It was just another job to them.

From the bluff a tiny rock fell and started a small slide. The sound startled the riders, it made the horses skittish.

Tipton glanced upward. He saw nothing other than a patch of clearing sky. A prowling coyote, he thought, and turned his attention back to the road ahead.

His gelding was blowing hard. He had almost killed it in the race to get here before the stage. Below him and to the left was the vast expanse of the Basin.

His Basin! After tonight it would be his. First Wagonwheel B. Then the land along Turkey Creek. And then . . . .

He caught at his soaring flight of ambition, remembering Judge Gavite's reluctance. He needed the judge now. With Hatfield dead, he would need the judge's legal knowhow in the investigation that would be sure to follow. But as soon as the judge's usefulness was over—

The run of his thoughts ran dark as the night. He had killed his brother-in-law to get the Wagonwheel B. He had had his own brother killed when Luke threatened to expose him. Only Carole stood in his way, and in a few minutes she'd be dead. And another holdup and killing would be chalked up to the Kid.

The Kid! Young Bradley who had somehow escaped the falling rock in the premature blast he had so cunningly contrived. He had not known that his nephew had survived until much later—not until the Kid had made his attempts at vengeance.

He had wanted to wipe out the Kid at first. Then he had seen in the Kid's freedom an opportunity to smash the Turkey Creek ranchers without involving Wagonwheel B. He had built up the reputation of the Kid, given him a name, tagging Wagonwheel's own crimes to the Kid. He had even put out that reward, and at first it had fooled Luke.

He had not fooled the Turkey Creek ranchers, but he had scared them into submission. All except Buck Welker, who had told Luke Tipton the truth. That was when he knew Luke had to die.

He took a cigar from his pocket and lighted it, and in the red glare of the match his face had a cruel and unrelenting cast. After Carole there would be only the Kid—

Another small rock slide rattled down from the bluff. He started and one of the riders said, "I don't like it, Cal."

Then the rattle of iron tires on the rocky trail caught his attention. He leaned forward in the buggy seat.

The stage came around the bend. The driver saw the dark shape of the buggy across the road, and the loom of the mounted men, and he jammed on the brake and left the seat.

The move caught Tipton by surprise. The stage had swung in toward the bluff, offering him no target as he lifted his rifle. He slammed a shot into the team.

From the bluff top a Sharps ripped the night apart with its heavy muzzle blast.

TIPTON was knocked back over the buggy seat, into the small bed. The gelding reared as the Sharps flared again and the bullet scoured a deep gash across its haunch. It went mad then, wheeling and kicking among the milling, cursing riders, clearing a path through them. It tried to make a turn on that narrow trail and one wheel slipped over the edge. The buggy tilted way over and Tipton slid against the side, clawing with his good arm to keep from spilling over the cliff. His voice lifted in a terrible scream.

The Sharps blasted again and the gelding fell back, dead on his feet. The weight of the buggy pulled him over.

The driver held the frightened stage animals while Hatfield cut down at the cursing Wagonwheel killers. The Sharps on the bluff helped him. Between them they emptied four saddles—the fifth rider managed to wheel his animal and head back along that narrow trail.

The Sharps on the bluff stopped him.

The rain made its soft patter in the night. The driver got the animals under control. The two drummers got up from the mud and climbed back into the coach.

Carole clung to Jim, her face white.

Stones rattled down from the bluff on the trail ahead. Jim waited. A shadow moved down the steep pitch of the slope and made the trail. A gangly figure carrying a Sharps rifle came toward them.

It occurred to the Lone Wolf as he watched that boy walk toward them, half defiantly, that Edward Bradley, alias the Chino Kid, had finally paid off his debt.

Back in the rain-swept darkness below them was a ranch that belonged to this boy and this girl.

Jim turned to the girl at his side, and said, "Carole—meet your brother . . ."

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With a brutal savagery
Foster raised the man high

Man Without Guns

By WARREN KUHN

THERE had been one bad moment the night before when he had seen the sharp distant flicker out on the valley floor below. Cook fire, Wes Foster had guessed, rousing his tired body from under the wheels of the wagon and hunching there in the dark. Too big for Apaches, he thought. Parras, maybe, or some of his troops.

Or someone else.

He'd heard uncomfortable tales of strangers recently coming down across the border. In pairs they rode, silent, bearded men bearing strange papers in their saddle bags. Papers that offered good *pesos* for ugly, wet circles of hair—Apache hair.

But if it was Parras— The thought bothered him. Why should the *soldados* be this far north of San Gordo? The Yaquis, blood-brothers to the Apache, were at peace, and there had been none of the blood-letting Chiricahuas in the region for almost two years, not since 1857. Foster found the worry gnawing at him. Once he had lived with danger as a constant brother. He had learned long ago to always worry about the new and unex-

Foster lived for but one thing — to find and kill the scalp hunters

plained changes in the routines of men.

Then he thought of home and crawled back into his blankets. Apaches or Mexican soldiers, it made no real difference. Stocky Capitan Parras of the San Gordo *presidio* was the godfather of his own little girl, Glorieta, and as for the Indians —well, Foster's wife, Rosarita, bore her strains of Yaqui blood with beautiful distinction.

Wes Foster lay back and shook his head. How the old wary habits cling to a man even after five years of peace and good living, he thought. He let his head rest on his arm, but his mind danced back over the past. Tommorrow he would be at his ranch and the supply hauling would be finished for another month. And so Wes Foster had slept, his dreams full of the fine flavor of his home.

Now it was the dawn and he sat massively on the hewn-wagon seat, slapping the reins on the team with a rhythm all his own. His strong mouth opened and his white teeth gleamed and he sang happily, the words spilling out into the crisp mountain air.

The road was crude, but it was clear and well-kept. Capitan Parras and his men had seen to that for it was a military supply road through this section of northern Sonora. Two years ago, Foster remembered, the detachments from Mexico City had roved unceasingly, protecting the outlying settlements against the marauding Apaches that wailed down like cruel night witches from the border. Now this valley had quieted and the only Indians that remained were the friendly Yaquis, once as deadly as their Chiricahua brothers, but quiet now and friendly.

And Foster thought of Rosarita. Her dark eyes, the obsidian gleam of her bone-combed hair and the cleanliness of her crisp bright skirts carressed his mind. Even here, still miles from the ranch and the mine, he could picture her welcome with Glorieta running beside her, laughing and hopping toward the wagon.

Foster rubbed his bony jaw with a big hand, feeling the old scar tissue ridging down along his neck. Five years back, he remembered, too, her hands had sewn that wound for him, her soft voice murmuring over his pain, even as he tossed and moaned in delirium, a victim of the harsh life he himself had asked for, a man whose gun had been for hire to the highest bidder. That once he had bid too high and others had driven him like a hunted wolf, until he had found himself bloody and alone in a lonely hut in the Mexican mountains.

Rosarita had given him back his life. And some of her own and Foster had taken his empty holsters and burned them among the rocks. Thinking, his hands brushed his thick, muscular middle where the broad belt drew tight. In five years, no gun had even hung there and he had learned to chew back his quick anger and swallow the heavy surge of violence in him when it rose. Wes Foster had gone through the hell of it, but he had conquered it finally and himself as well, and in the years that followed, his name had become respected by the people of this valley, his words like the words of the good padre, Brother Felipe. And if it was said that he and the padre were in a way almost like brothers, then it was said as of a truth.

The wagon wheels bounced and shook as he started down the long switchbacks that led out of the high coldness and down toward the green forests below. Through the trees, a mile or more at the most, and he would roll into the grassed level where his house stood and where, looking up, a man could see the irregular black mouth of his small mine on the hillside above.

SLAPPING the reins harder, he urged the team downhill, the wagon rocking beneath him. The road eased out to a level stretch and abruptly twisted into a forested quarter-mile. Foster shook his head angrily. These supply trips, he thought, are for younger men. I should be home with a full belly, watching my daughter grow up and my wife smile from beside the fireplace.

And then the trees were gone and beyond lay his home. His shoulders relaxed at the sight of the corrals and the *hondo* oven and the adobe house beyond. A light breeze pulled at the stubby grass and all was peaceful and quiet.

"Rosarita," he sang out, feeling glad again, happy to be back. "*Esposa*—I am home."

The team, seeing the corrals, stepped up the incline lightly and Foster drew rein watching for the telltale flash of bright clothing that would be Glorieta racing to meet him. Dust swirled from under the wheels and he kicked the brake, swinging down in the same motion.

Only there was no flash of clothing, no happy laughter. Closer now, the house bore a strange, empty look. The door was open and he realized suddenly, with a sharp twinge of worry, that there were no sounds. Rosarita's chickens were her playthings. Now none of them scratched the dusty yard. Nothing moved save the stubby grass.

"Rosarita?"

His own voice came back to him hollowly. In two quick strides he was on the wooden porch he had built, standing on the threshold of his home. He called his wife's name again. There was no answer and he stepped inside. Underfoot his high boots crunched on drift sand that had blown in through the open door.

In minutes he covered the entire house, calling again behind it and then he was back in the kitchen by the corner fireplace. The ashes were cold. The wind had blown them out onto the floor to mix with the sifting grit. Rosarita's kitchen had been as clean as she could keep it, always. The stab of fear came into his belly then clearly.

He was on the act of turning when he heard the rattle and clank of mounted men approaching. Foster was at the door quickly, face hard. Outside the first of a column of Mexican cavalry came at a weary trot into his yard. At their head rode a stocky, moustached officer, whose hand flung up at the sight of Foster. An orderly swung forward to grab the officer's mount and then Parras was coming toward him.

"You are back, *amigo*," Parras greeted, but the mouth under the black, stringy moustache was grim. "My scouts saw you from the mountain."

Foster saw the hidden answers in the man's eyes.

"Where is she?"

Parras watched him silently. The troop watched, too, in tight silence.

The stab was sharper than ever across Foster's belly. No, he thought, the black shock of it filling his throat. Suddenly, he clutched Parras's collar. There was a murmur among the men. Parras made a slight effort to free himself and then just stood there, and Foster released him, hotness filling his face.

"I am sorry, amigo," Parras said softly.

Foster began to shake his head. "Not—not Glorieta, too."

"They are with God," Parras said. "It went quickly."

Slowly, Foster turned away and went past Parras, going to the wagon and standing there, hands clenching the sideboards, staring out at nothing. Parras came to him, saying nothing.

Foster made himself ask it. "How?"

Parra's tone was flat. "We do not know much. Only that it was quick. Many others died as well, old friend."

And then Parras told the rest.

"The strangers, two of them, came with a wagon of kettles and stoves. And the Yaquis came down from their village to trade." He paused, the words coming raggedly. "They traded and drank until it was dark. The strangers had much whisky. And then—" Parras stopped.

Foster swung about. "Then?"

"Ambush. Barrels of powder hidden in the wagon. There were fifty dead, almost all the Yaquis."

"And Rosarita."

"She and the little one had come to trade. They were near the wagon." Parras broke off. When he spoke again, his voice was harsh. "The strangers left the kettles

and the dead. When they ran, they took only one thing."

The word hung in the dusty air of the yard.

"Scalps!"

THE room was hot, dark and airless. Foster brought his head up from the table, feeling the sick pains in it. His elbow knocked against the bottles and they toppled. One rolled to the edge and fell, clanking dully on the earthern floor, and by the wall a sleeping form muttered and moved in its sleep.

You're lucky, Parras, he thought. You can sleep. Especially with all the brandy that your dead relatives, the ricos—the rich ones—had left you.

Wearily Foster got up and went to the heavy barracks door, pulled it open. The night was cold, the stars bright. He stepped outside, sucking the coolness into his burning throat.

Death was strange, he thought. To Parras it had brought good wines and new horses and a promise of a better commission from the capitol. Parra's relatives had left the officer a good life, and Parras had lived richly in the week since news of their passing had come from Mexico City. News and their gold.

Foster had never envied anyone. All he envied now was Parra's rich uncles. They were dead now and they could no longer think or feel or suffer. Or remember, Foster thought.

His muscles were raw strings in his legs and there was only a dull blankness in his back. Three days and nights in the saddle had worn the skin from his thighs. He was sore, worn, burned-out, and he hardly knew it.

They had circled the mountains twice. Every pocket, every possible place where a man could hide had been trampled by booted feet and searched with drawn sabers. Runners had gone north and southwest on the main roads, sounding the word of the ambush that had happened just days before. Detachments had long since blocked the valley's exits. Nothing alive would move from San Gordo.

Or nothing dead—for in the high rocks the Yaquis made their own searches, driving away even the troops.

And still it does not bring you back, *esposa.* Foster rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. His eyes traveled the dark shadows of the hill rims. Somewhere in them two huddled figures sat patiently, forted and hidden. And in their packs, the wetness caking dark and thick upon the matted hair, was their bounty.

And one would be smaller than the others. Bearing a child's softness.

Foster felt the cold sweat on his hands and he started across the dusty barracks ground, wiping his palms on his thighs. In the wagon he had hidden a doll which he had brought along from Chihuahua on the supply trip. A rag doll for little Glorieta.

Now she lies unmoving—like that doll, he thought. And the thought that crowded in on him made him reach out in the dark and his hands found the logs of the stables. Unconsciously, he pounded the wood with his fist, desperately. A small doll with the top of its—

"Quien?"

The stable sentry's challenge was frightened. His face came from the shadows, then recognized Foster.

"A dark night, senor," the man mumbled, and Foster went on into the stables, not listening or hearing.

THERE was flickering light beyond the church gate and Foster dismounted, finding his way through the small garden within the patio. Brother Felipe had worn a small trail in the rocks underfoot to the spring below the mission, bringing water in a wooden bucket for his roses. Even now, in the darkness, their heavy fragrance crowded in around Wes Foster and in passing his hand raked an unseen thorn, and the sting made him draw it to his mouth. And he thought, She played here.

The candle was poor tallow and guttered as he opened the door. The thin-

faced man looked up from his book. Brother Felipe's eyes were hollowed and drawn. He rose, his hand going out to Foster's shoulder, his eyes searching Foster's face.

"You need sleep," he said, gently.

Foster shook his head. "Time enough later."

"Pity them," the padre said. "Pity those two strangers and their act."

"Let the devil pity them!" Foster said.

Brother Felipe placed the book on the crude table by the straw mattress and watched him. Then his eyes traveled down to where small red beads oozed from Foster's knuckles.

"Where does Rosarita and—where do they lie?" Foster asked.

"By the church." Brother Felipe was watchful. "And what will you do now?" he asked.

To Brother Felipe, Wes Foster had always seemed like a part of the earth—a tree in the wind, a seamed rock, out of place in rooms and behind doors. Yet, simple things hurt him, Brother Felipe considered. Not pain, but lies. Not physical hardship, but the fact that he had lost the ones he most loved. A shudder passed over the padre. There would be no mercy for those two if Foster found them first.

"Later," Foster said, "I will leave the valley."

Brother Felipe saw the cold purpose in Foster's eyes. He fought against it.

"Perhaps they are gone now. If the soldiers couldn't find them—"

"I'll find them."

Brother Felipe made a final effort. He nodded at the empty belt that Foster wore. "And the promise—to Rosarita about the gun?"

"I will not use a gun."

"You cannot kill them, amigo."

"Who then? The soldiers? All their stumbling—"

Brother Felipe shook his head in protest. "Soldiers are good men," he said. "Look here."

He tugged at a small, battered box by his bed. In it, Foster knew, were kept the worn pesos, chipped coins, the few items of value that from time to time bought new bells for the mission, and new vestments for the altar. Brother Felipe opened the box and reached in. He held up a thick and solidly-minted piece, a Mexico City *real*. It was gold.

Wes Foster frowned.

"No soldier left that."

Brother Felipe smiled. "Capitan Parras gave it two days ago. He has come, as you know, into a goodly inheritance. He is a good man, and his men are good."

Foster shrugged. Parras had not bragged loudly of his sudden wealth. The officer *was* a good friend. But it was no time to talk of such small things as gold pieces when a man's family was gone.

"You may be right," Foster said and stepped to the door. "Buenos noches."

"Where do you go?" the padre asked.

Foster shrugged, his face black. "The ranch," he said. "The main. *Quien sabe?* Who knows?"

"Wait," said the padre. "I ride with you."

DAWN had come up on its ghost-gray feet while they rode, the big man on the horse, the robed padre on the mule. The shadows were still thick among the trees, but on the higher ground the rocks caught the first fresh light of morning. The mine entrance was an irregular black mouth on the hill, some of the old timbers showing in the rising, slanted rays of the sun.

Together they reined in by the house, made their way inside. More dirt had blown in with the past days, and rolling sagebrush skeletons clogged one corner of the main room.

They stood in silence, surveying the empty desolation of the place. Then Foster pushed into the kitchen. Brother Felipe watched him from the doorway. Blown ash and sand lay thick underfoot and strewn over the fireplace rocks. The padre stepped forward and smiled a bit.

"Remember, amigo," he said to Foster,

and he slapped a brown hand on one triangular rock chunk above the hearth. "Together, we dug this."

His hand jerked away. The rock was hot. The truth came suddenly and he flicked his glance at Foster. Slowly, he forced himself to put his hand back, the heat burning him.

"Si," he said, feeling the pain. "This one was something to carry."

Foster was staring at him. Brother Felipe's forehead glistered with effort, and then Foster's eyes fixed on the padre's hand. With a savage lunge, he moved forward, shoved the man's arm aside and pressed his own fingered against the rock. He swore and pulled it back, flexing the fingers angrily. Then he put the hand along his belt, rubbing it back and forth, his eyes turning to the door.

"This morning," he said, and his hand came up, the one that had felt the rock, and he looked at the thin, dried beads of blood left by the scratching thorn on the back of it.

"The mine," Foster said flatly then, as if telling it to himself. "We didn't search here, for the dead slept here."

Brother Felipe anxiously caught at his arm.

"No, amigo. Come away."

Foster pushed the padre's hand away with a patient slowness.

"Stay down here," Foster said. "They will have guns."

And scalps, he thought. And death, for them, or me.

The mine entrance was as tall as the upper chest of a medium-sized man. Fifty yards below it and to the right, Wes Foster moved himself into the first shambles of the tailings that his own labor had poured from the bowels of the hillside. From here the entrance seemed smaller and further away than ever.

Brush was thick here, growing in profusion. There was no sign of footprints. What the rocks didn't hide, he guessed, they brushed clean behind them.

His eyes went up again. Nothing moved. Sunlight streamed into the mine hole, showing the twin timbers he'd hewn from logs and dragged uphill years before. The entire tunnel was well-built, much of it rock-walled. But here at the entrance only the timbers held back the rubble above.

They're in there, he told himself. Let them know you're out here.

He gathered himself and dove forward, running bent, his big legs digging into the tailing and shoving himself uphill. Thirty yards. Forty.

The gunshot was loud in the stillness. The report cracked along the hill and he threw himself, arms outspread, feeling the hot whine of the bullet.

Lying there, panting, his muscles still taut from the past days of the search, he judged the remaining yards. Fifteen to the left and he was out of range. They were waiting for him inside, but strangely now he didn't care. He had an urge to leap up to meet the bullets.

Easy, man.

Suddenly he heard a weak shout. Turning, he saw Brother Felipe coming uphill, scrambling.

No, he thought. No.

Half-rising, he flung a warning arm.

"Get back. Lay down."

THE shot ripped rock splinters and he put his hands flat, shoved and was up, running again, darting and twisting. A third shot whined out. This one boomed. Sharps, he thought. A buffalo gun, and enough lead to blow a hole as big as that tunnel into a man.

Then he was in the sidebrush, the mine entrance a few yards off, almost level with it. They couldn't reach him here, he knew, and he turned his quick attention downhill. Brother Felipe was making a sad attempt at ducking and climbing. Again Foster waved in warning, swearing bitterly, then gave it up.

He swung his eyes back at the tunnel and saw a rifle barrel protrude a few inches, drawn back and then come out still further. A head followed, lank hair matting it down, hair that matched a thick and greasy beard. Foster had a vision of

his wife and child going down in flame. It was too much. A roar broke from him and he was going in, clutching and swinging.

The man in the tunnel mouth yelled in panic, swinging the gun. Gunpowder signed Foster's face and then he had the piece and was flinging it out wildly. The scalp hunter grappled and Foster swept the man's arms aside and picked him up by the middle. His arms tightened and he felt the man's breath gush out, the man's jaw opened convulsively, and with a brutal savagery Foster raised him bodily, turning there in the mine entrance, and threw him out and downward. The man spun, somersaulting, his back smashing the tailings, head snapping back. Dust and rocks fell in a small avalance, and the body with it, rolling down into the brush below. It lay unmoving and Brother Felipe crouched over it.

Foster swung back to the mine. "Come out," he yelled.

His voice reverberated in the close confines. There was no answer. His eyes darted about, seeing the battered Sharps fifty yards below, and then he saw the mine timbers. Five years had been hard on the wood. He had been too anxious then, using too green wood and the dust and sun and pressure had dried them into warped shapes, cracked and splintered.

"Come out," he yelled again, and this time a shot gave reply. The bullet richocheted in the tunnel. The man had drawn too far back to be able to pick a clear target for himself.

Foster lunged then at the timber on the right, his powerful body slamming into it. It shuddered. Again, he lunged. It shook, creaking, and earth tremored. Dust and small rock cascaded down in streams and far inside the tunnel he heard a man cry out in surprise.

He saw a shadow come forward, crouching. Heard the shot whine out. And just behind him, a voice grunted, and the shadow darted back.

Foster spun about. Brother Felipe was on his knees by the entrance to the mine, fingers pressing his side. Wetness already stained the brown robe.

Foster saw it and turned like a brute bull, his massive chest and legs carrying him forward and he threw his entire weight into the timber. This time it shuddered violently, shifted and more dirt came down. Then it splintered along the base, long shards breaking off and suddenly it cracked, collapsing. Foster drew back, the dust thick about him as the whole mouth crumbled along its length and dissolved into falling rock.

Not even noticing, he scrambled back toward the padre. Brother Felipe was sitting among the rocks, hands kneading his ribs, his mouth open a bit. He looked surprised, and Foster pulled open the robe. The lead ball had torn flesh along the bones, making an ugly mess where it had emerged, but the ball was out.

And only then did he see Brother Felipe's hand raised in the air. And the round edge of the coin protruding from the bloodied brown fingers. A round and golden *real.*

Felipe nodded downhill at the still form of the scalp hunter in the brush below. The sunlight was high enough now to find the glittering reflections that lay around the crumpled body.

Brother Felipe faced the darkness in Foster's eyes.

"Two are dead," he said. "No more."

Wes Foster said nothing. He only reached for the coin and took it, holding it in his palm. Slowly, he closed his fingers about it, the gold lost in the hugeness of his hand. Then he put his free hand under Brother Felipe's armpit and raised him.

"Lean on me," he said, and they made their way down the hill.

THE sun had reached the summit of its climb and hung like a ball of fire overhead when Wes Foster rode through the old stone arch and into the barracks yard. Soldiers squatted in groups, talking and smoking ropy tobacco. Several watched him ride by, their dark, high-

boned faces betraying their ancestry. San Gordo had been a military post in the Yaqui country for long years; when the scap hunter's wagon had blasted skyward, many of these men had lost their own wives or relatives.

The man who betrays these men, Foster told himself as he rode, that man would die quickly. Mexico City and discipline were a long way off. But still he felt the tightness in his stomach.

Not even the padre could help him now.

He drew up at the adobe structure that served as office and living quarters for the commandant. Last night he had left it unseen. Now he drew open the door with one big hand and let the hot brightness of the day outline him in the doorway.

Parras sat before his noonday meal, clay dishes greasy with food, a wine bottle a quarter empty. An orderly blinked at the sudden sunlight and Capitan Parras looked up and started to smile, one hand bending a tortilla into a scoop for his frijoles. Then Parras' eyes caught the glitter of the object in Foster's fingers and the hand froze above the plate, the sauce-drenched beans dripping from the flat tortilla.

Then there was no time for food or anything. Not even time for Parras to scramble upright and reach for the saber hanging on the wall behind him. There was time only for Foster to reach him and drag him kicking and struggling across the table. Dishes toppled and broke, the orderly was flung aside and Parras sprawled out through the door into the dust of the parade ground.

Men bounded forward, guns rising, hesitating at the sight of the wild-eyed, huge man who towered above their groveling commandant. Then their muttered question found its answer, their eyes seeing the matted tangle of grisly trophies the big man threw at their feet and with it a golden coin that rolled in the dust before it fell to its side. Then the mutter turned cold and they crowded forward, their rifles turning, the butts rising over Parras' trembling body.

Only suddenly Brother Felipe was there, limping in under the upraised weapons. And the padre was telling them of a more certain justice, one that waited in the military courts of Mexico City, a justice that would be a warning for all men like Parras and the ones at the mine.

The butts lowered, the dark soldiers drew back and Brother Felipe turned slowly to the last man remaining. Wes Foster watched him turn, his hands wanting the throat of Capitan Parras, and Brother Felipe waited as the terrible blackness went slowly out of Wes Foster's face and the big hands moved away from Capitan Parras to rest along the broad, empty belt.

And Wes Foster's eyes met those of the brown-robed padre and each knew he understood the other.

And later, as the jingling, sabered detachment turned south toward Mexico City, the three rode with the column. The big man guiding his solid-buttomed horse, his chin drawn strong and high, and beside him the slumping figure in the ripped and dusty uniform, and behind them both, in the slow rising dust of the small column, came the one in the brown robe, riding the balky mule.

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a true story
by Lauran Paine

A Couple of Kegs of Whisky

THE Sioux were tremendous fighters. The Apaches were a scourge and a terror. Comanches made Texas and the Southwest echo with their fierce yells, but of all the Western Indians the little known and vastly misunderstood Modocs of Northern California and Southern Oregon made the most impressive battle record against the United States Army.

The Modocs fought the Army to a standstill, fighting white-man style. Standing up and slugging it out toe to toe. They also fought Indian fashion, from ambush, from their lava-bed hideout, from the hundreds of vantage spots across "Mowatocknie," their homeland—their heartland.

The Modoc War was fought in a land little changed from that day to this, where Nature wrenched up a country, slathered it with molten lava, then cooled it into anguished spires, wild jumbles of razor-sharp black rock, and left it like that, tortured, twisted, misshapen. A fitting place for the bizarre Modoc war where fifty—never more than sixty—Modoc warriors fought the United States Army, five hundred strong.

Casualties? Five Modocs killed in action, two hundred American killed, including Rock Indians and other volunteers. Among these casualties was General Canby, the officer who very effectively stopped the Texan Column under Confederate General Sibley, when it made a desperate strike toward California and gold, the Confederacy's last hope for buying an overseas alliance. General Canby —Civil War hero, West Pointer, national figure, national hero—might have lived had the knowledge of the fate of two bar-

rels of whisky been properly evaluated.

This occurred during the long truce period when the Army was trying to cajole the Modocs into laying aside their arms. There was much wrangling, much distrust and hatred on both sides, and while the time hung heavily on the fighting men on both sides—inside the labrythinine caves of the lava beds and outside them, where the Army was in uneasy bivouac—the younger Modoc warriors were bored.

There was no longer any novelty in slipping past the soldiers, stealing a few horses, driving them back into the Stronghold for food. Even the water-fetching details from the nearby lake palled. The soldiers, for one thing, weren't eager to find Modoc scavening parties in the night or in the morning fogs.

Modoc restlessness drove a small band of warriors around to the east side of the lava beds and there, to their delight, they saw an Army caravan of one wagon and a light cavalry detachment of guards, making its leisurely way toward the Army's camp some miles ahead and around to the north.

The warriors watched the wagon and its escort until they had determined its route and probable course of travel, then they slipped down closer and waited.

The teamster was just about asleep on the box of the wagon, which was bringing in supplies, including two sturdy kasks of whisky. His soldier-escort was drowsy. The day was hot, the pace slow, the land still and brassy.

The Modocs had bows and arrows with an occasional gun, but they never did have enough ammunition and thus used what they had very sparingly. In this instance, when they finally leaped up and raised the yell, they fired arrows only. Naturally, the little Army caravan was thrown into confusion. The teamster almost lost control of his team, the cavalry escort hauled up short with the cry, "Indians!" bursting from a dozen bronzed throats.

But the warriors fired their arrows then dropped flat behind brush, rocks, stunted, shaggy little junipers. One minute there was a blur of movement, an arrow on its way, the next moment there was nothing to be seen at all.

During their attack the Modocs kept up their howling. It had the unnerving affect on the soldiers of great numbers of Indians. As though of one accord, the cavalrymen turned their horses after firing a few ineffectual rounds, and fled. The teamster abandoned his wagon and rode away behind a trooper's saddle. The nearest white-man town was Linkville (today, Klamath Falls, Oregon). Beyond Linkville nearly another hundred miles was Fort Klamath, where the Army's Modoc War headquarters was maintained. The soldiers made both places in record time, and in so doing concocted a story to cover up their abrupt flight and abandonment of the supplies—and the two kegs of whisky —thirstily looked forward to by the men at Fort Klamath and beyond, where the firing-lines were.

In old military department records is the brief report of how a small supply party with an inadequate detachment of protective troopers was ambushed and forced to flee by an overwhelming war party of Modocs with a resultant loss of valuable supplies—including two full kegs of whisky. Heroically, the soldiers said they'd taken the two kegs with them until, close pressed by murderous and pursuing Modocs, they'd been forced to abandon the wagon and bury the whisky along the banks of Lost River. For years there were innumerable pot-holes along the river bank at the supposed site of this poignant burial, left by dry-throated aspirants who longed to drape a fang over a cup of real hundred-proof, aged forty years and more.

But what actually happened to the whisky and the rest of the supply outfit was altogether different from what the Army's records say. After the soldiers had fled, Peter Schonchin, leader of the warriors, took his little party down to the wagon. They plundered the supply goods to their hearts contents, then built a fire in the wagon-box and lashed the team over the trail taken by the now completely vanished soldier-escort and the teamster.

(Concluded on page 113)

A novelet

Big Man from

John Dekker had come fifteen hundred miles to kill two men,

Montana

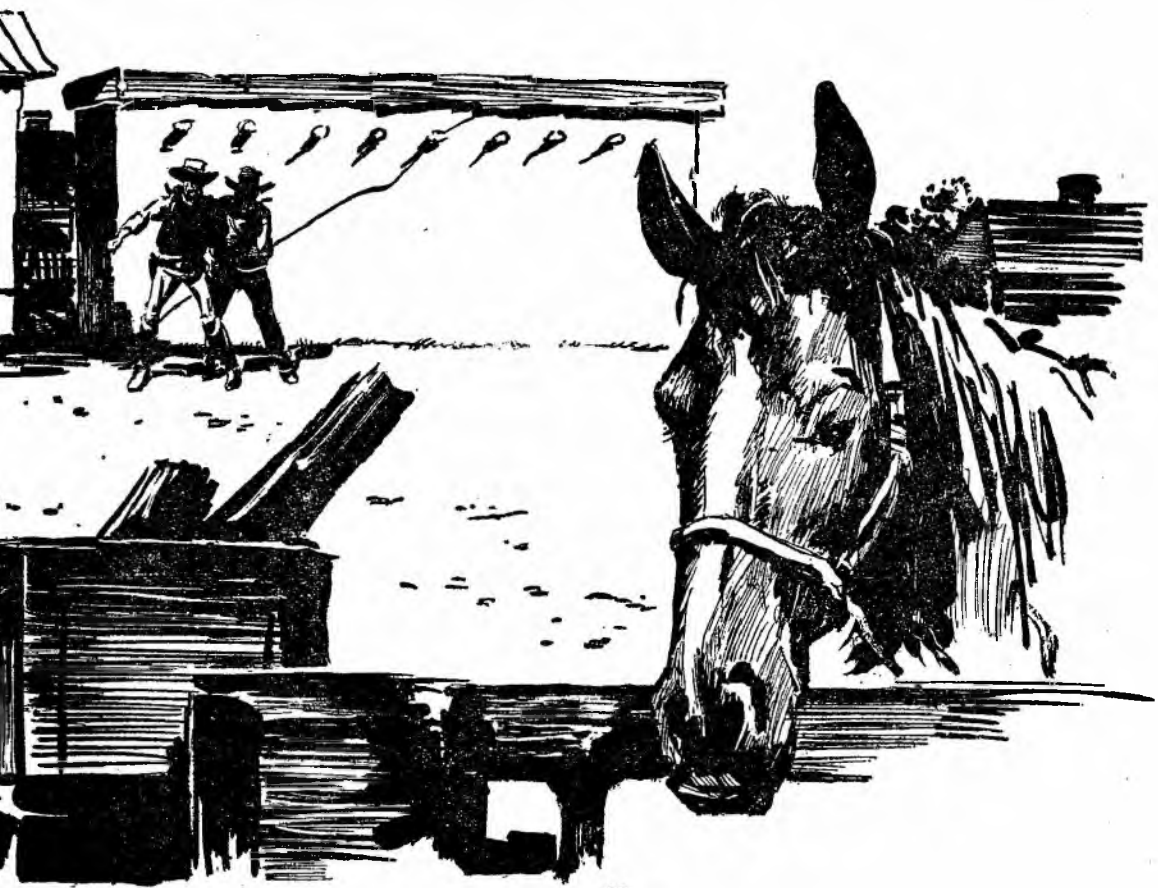
By W. J. REYNOLDS

and no mealy-mouthed deputy, nor any girl, was going to stop him

I

JOHN DEKKER came at a steady trot onto the bare flats that stretched for fifteen miles in front of him, but was the last approach to Pinal City. He was a big, flat-bellied man with a red-brown weather stain on his whisker shagged face while his bleached blue eyes held new squint wrinkles at the corners against the Arizona sun. They took a bitter shine each time he lifted his gaze to stare at the forbidding ramparts of the Pinal range rising beyond the doll houses of the town.

Fifteen miles ahead, and fifteen hundred behind, he thought with a patience that had become grimly stolid in the weeks past. This dry and hostile land was beyond his experience and if LeGrone and Lukas had already gone into the Pinals—as they probably had by now—he'd never find them. He would need local experience as they would. The wind whipped his own dust about him and John Dekker cursed and thought of his green Montana valley



where the grass grew high and the water ran cold and clean.

He thrust the thought away, turning his attention to his mission, the reason for the long hard miles behind him. LeGrone and Lukas would be as alien here as himself. They could not get local help without leaving a memory behind them, he too, would pick up a guide and go on.

He rode into Pinal City at mid-afternoon. It wasn't a large town, and was of about equal in the number of adobes and plank structures. A half a dozen businesses and a scattering of dwellings. At the western end, a creek came out of the Pinals to slice off one corner of the town, and noting the warped and shoddy appearance of that part of Pinal City, Dekker knew what would be found there and the character of its occupants.

Dekker turned into the livery, a low adobe wall flush with the sidewalk and on the far side, a long adobe with attached corrals. As he entered and dismounted, a flurry of hoofbeats sounded from the street and a rider pulled into the entrance of the livery on past Dekker.

The horse was a rangy sorrel, sweat crusted and tired, silently bespeaking hard miles used up in a hurry. Dekker gave its rider a sour glance.

The glance became a stare. The rider was a woman in a leather skirt and tough brush jacket. She met Dekker's glance and sat partly hipped in the saddle as she had prepared to dismount. As her glance ran over him and over his big northern horse and rig, her eyes flared in instant and solid anger.

Three men who sat in the shade of the building, whittling and spitting, were suddenly motionless, watching Dekker and the girl, sensing something between them that might break the monotony of their day.

Dekker looked at the girl another few seconds, then mentally shrugged, turning back to his unsaddling. He had never set eyes on the girl before so whatever female fit she was about to throw was misfounded in him and of no concern to him. He hooked a stirrup on the horn and loosened the cinch.

He was just pulling the rig off when he heard her step behind him. Her low and furious voice sounded behind him.

"You dirty, north country scum!" Twin streaks of fire burned across Dekker's shoulders while one prong of the quirt was a brand against the hinge of his jaw.

He dropped the saddle and whirled, flinging up a protective arm just in time to ward off another savage lash of the quirt. His hand instinctively grasped the heavy leather handle close to her hand as anger burst like a bomb inside him. He wrecked the quirt with a hard muscled strength, hauling her violently against him while his right hand clutched in her thick pale hair, hat and all, and held her brutally against him while her slender throat was bared, a pulse hammering violently in it.

"What the hell's the idea, you wildcat, you?" he snarled.

He was aware that the three men had come to their feet, but they stood frozen gaping at them. Still another man came across the compound from the street in a lunging run. Dekker ignored them, his angry face inches from that of the girl's. Her eyes that he had thought black were a dark blue. They had lost some of their anger and were dilated, staring into his own.

"Turn that girl loose, damn you," the man running into the compound bawled. "Turn her loose!"

The man skidded to a halt, a big man with a red and angry face. He wore a deputy sheriff's star on his vest, and held a pistol in his hand. But in his anger or excitement, he had come too close and was unaware of the savagery built up in John Dekker over fifteen hundred miles. Still raging, Dekker used his hundred and ninety pounds of slabrock muscles to hurl the girl in a headlong plunge into the deputy.

THE watching men shouted senselessly along with the deputy the second that the girl hit. Both piled up on the ground, the deputy's pistol going off in a harsh blast, the bullet narrowly missing the girl.

Dekker moved the instant he hurled the girl, and put them all on one side of him in a wide arc, his sixshooter coming out.

"Move!" he said to the three men. "Get over there!" They jumped to place themselves nearer the upscrambling deputy and the girl.

"Drop that pistol," the deputy shouted, his face red with fury and humiliation. "You're under arrest. Jump a girl will you? I'll show you what happens to hardcase tramps in my town. Drop that pistol!"

But in spite of his rage, the deputy wasn't a complete fool. Dekker's sixshooter was leveled, the deputy's slanted toward the ground and it was kept that way, stiffly held. His voice was thick but more quiet as he repeated, "I'll take that pistol, mister."

Fury still rode Dekker with the sting of the quirt still on him and the deputy's raunchy way. "Then come take it, you mouthy tramp," Dekker said.

For a good half minute it was a frozen tableau, their eyes staring at Dekker, seeing the will and the intent in his bleach-eyed stare. Dekker could see the desire in the yellow-brown eyes of the deputy but he did not see the last ditch guts to carry out his desire.

"Put it up or start shooting," Dekker said. "I'm going to."

The deputy could knuckle down when he had to, and he had to now or get killed, no matter how it galled him. He let his six-shooter sag then slid it back into the holster.

"I want the straight of this, mister," the deputy said, and his voice matched his hatefilled eyes. "Right now. If I still think you're guilty you're going to jail. Dead or alive. Start talking!"

Dekker nodded to the girl who still sat in the dried manure dust of the compound. "Ask her. She jumped me."

The deputy's face was ugly with his knuckling down rage. "By God, are you laying it to a woman now? To Amy?"

"He's right, Joe," the girl said. She got to her feet, brushing her clothes. "It's my fault. I did jump him. With my quirt. I—mistook him for someone else. I never saw him before. Let it drop." But in spite of her words, there was no give in the hard glance she sent him she wasn't through yet. "Sorry, stranger, please accept my apologies."

"All right," Dekker said just as hard.

"He manhandled you," the deputy shouted. "You want to drop that?"

"Yes."

The deputy glared at Dekker. "Well, he pulled a gun on the law, I ain't ready to drop that."

"I said let it go, Paul," she said, then added bluntly, "If you hadn't come barreling into this spouting off at the mouth, you wouldn't have had a gun on you! What could you expect?"

"She's right, Joe," one of the three men said. "The stranger was minding his business, and Amy jumped him with her quirt. You can't hold it against him."

The deputy, unless he wanted to appear even more stupid and vindicative, had to let it go, but the promise was in his eyes. He wasn't done with Dekker and the blunt contempt of the girl hadn't helped any.

"All right," he said grudgingly. He gave Dekker his hate-filled stare. "I'll want to see you later, mister. Just don't ride out till I do, savvy?"

John Dekker looked at him then deliberately holstered his gun, spat in the dust, and turned to pick up his saddle and carry it inside. There were hurried steps behind him that brought Dekker around. It was one of the idlers.

"I'll take that, stranger," he said quickly. "I'm the hostler."

Dekker allowed the man to take the saddle and noted the pleased gleam in his eye. That was for the deputy, he guessed, with the lawman's way he could not be too popular. He might not like the way Dekker had treated the girl, but then, Dekker thought with a sour grin, the hostler might be a married man.

"I'll want a good feed of grain for the bay," Dekker said. "Then hay."

"I'll see to it." He went back out with Dekker after racking the saddle, and took the reins of the big bay. There was admiration in his eyes. "Are all the horses

up north big as this one?"

"Some are bigger," Dekker said. He nodded toward a two story building down and across the street. "Is that the hotel?"

"Yeah. Pinal Hotel. Only one we got unless you can call some of those places across the creek hotels. You just met the owner of the Pinal, stranger. Amy Clifton."

Dekker looked at him then said, "You ain't got a dirty stall I can use, have you?"

The hostler laughed. "Oh, Amy will put you up. Especially if you'll listen to old Tip Clifton's tall stories. He's Amy's dad. Usually Amy is a calmish sort of woman, don't know what bit her today." He looked questioningly at Dekker but received no help there. "I'd keep an eye out for Joe Paul. He ain't one to forget how you used him today."

"Thanks. I'll do that." He went back to his saddle and got his saddlebags and his Henry rifle, and as the hostler brought in his horse, he thought, now is as good a time as any.

He said, "I'm looking for two fellers. One is big, over two hundred, redheaded with Indian eyes, missing finger on left hand. The other is small, partly bald. Are they here?"

II

THE hostler looked at Dekker a moment then shrugged. "They were here last week. Left day before yesterday, no, the day before that. Loaded up a pack horse and headed into the Pinals, prospecting, I reckon. You a lawman?"

"No. I aim to kill them." He shouldered his saddlebags. "Thanks again," he said, and headed for the street.

"You're welcome," the hostler said, and stared thoughtfully after Dekker's wide back before he shrugged and turned back to his duties.

As Dekker left the compound and started toward the hotel, he saw the deputy, Joe Paul, standing in the doorway of a squat adobe across the street. The building had barred windows of criss-crossed wagon tires riveted together and the word JAIL painted in faded letters on the front. They exchanged a solemnly hostile stare, but neither spoke.

The hotel was a two story plank building erected hard against an adobe which served as lobby, dining room and kitchen. Dekker went in and found the air a little stale but much cooler than outside. He stopped at a desk and a gimp legged man hurried up to turn the register to him and proffer a pen. Dekker signed his name, and Montana after it.

"Dollar a day," the oldster said. "For two bits more, you can have two kettles of hot water and the use of a tub."

Dekker laid out a dollar and a quarter. He was given a key. "Upstairs."

Dekker turned into the wide doorway that led into the lower rooms of the plank structure, and gave onto the stairs. As he started up, Dekker glanced back into the lobby and saw the girl, Amy Clifton, standing just beyond the desk, silently watching him. Dekker went on up to his room.

"A man would think I'd stole her goddamn paper dolls," he muttered sourly.

The hot water arrived shortly, brought by a Mexican woman, and Dekker dug his razor from his saddlebags and shaved then bathed in the cramped confines of the washtub. He donned clean clothes and dragged the tub outside his door. Shortly, he heard it being carried away. The help around here was sure well-trained, he thought, and looked again at the sparsely furnished room. It was spotless and neat. Amy Clifton might be given to violent explosions but she ran a good hotel.

He didn't hear the door open but he heard it click shut then he heard another sound that froze him still; the cocking of a gun hammer. He turned his head cautiously and stifled a bitter curse.

Amy Clifton stood against the door, a leveled six-shooter in her hand. The hand didn't shake, he noted without surprise. Her lips were pressed hard against her teeth, and freckles showed against her white face. Her eyes looked black again and held a violence ready to burst.

"Now what?" Dekker asked.

"We're going to find out what, Mr. Dekker," she said. "Or I'll kill you in your tracks." The very calmness of the statement bespoke her strain, and utter sincerity. She went on in the same tone, "I went back and talked to the hostler again and know you're looking for Pinson and Luten, if that's their names. Now tell me what your friends have done with my father, or you're just as dead as six bullets can make you." Her voice rose the merest bit. "Start talking, Dekker."

There was death in the girl and the knowledge sobered Dekker. The thing riding this girl wasn't a mere female tantrum. She was deadly serious and capable. She had smoothed over the difficulty at the stable herself. She would probably have a good reason for doing that too. John Dekker needed to talk fast and straight.

"Look, ma'am, why you're swarming all over me, I can't say. I know nothing about your father. I just got in here when you saw me. It's true I came here looking for two men, their names are LeGrone and Lukas, but they probably didn't use those names. They are not friends. I aim to kill them." He described LeGrone and Lukas. "That's all of my business here."

"You know them. You ride a northern rig and horse, like them. You may be lying and you'd better make some more talk —fast and convincing." Her lips were tight and unrelenting. "That's a poor way to find a man, start asking right out."

He had nothing to lose by telling her, and it might save his life. "I know they're here and it don't matter if they know I'm after them. We own a small ranch in Montana. My father, and brother and me. LeGrone and Lukas murdered my father and eleven year old brother, tortured them to death."

"Go on."

"We'd just sold a hundred head of steers. I'd gone to bank the money, but LeGrone and Lukas probably thought it was still there, they weren't familiar around there. They tortured Dad and Jimmy to death." His face was suddenly drawn by a bitter and terrible memory, and his eyes burned savagely at her.

"Miss, how would you feel to come home and find your kid brother dead, his young face registering the horrible way he had died, both his legs and arms broken, and the imprint of a big hand that had a missing middle finger imbedded in the flesh? How would you like to find your father tied to a bedpost with his feet stuck in the stove and burned off? Then shot to death? That's why I came here and why I intend to kill them. And if you think to stop me, start shooting now."

The pistol had sagged in her hand and was pointed at the floor, her face had gone even whiter and her eyes dilated with horror. She could not doubt the passion that rode him and drew his face tight with a terrible grief and determination. "I'm sorry, Dekker, I—" She broke off and the gun came up again. "How did you know where to come?"

THE violence had run out of John Dekker and he sat wearily down on the bed. But he felt a faint stir of admiration for her. She wasn't missing any bets. "LeGrone and Lukas murdered two pospectors the day before. They tortured them too. They were left for dead, but the doctor managed to revive one for a few minutes. He was partly out of his head, but he talked enough to identify LeGrone and Lukas. It turned out they weren't prospectors but the last two of a gang who had robbed a train down in this country. These two got away, after caching the gold from the train. LeGrone had made him draw a map of its location here in the Pinals. Or so the sheriff thought from the man's disjointed talk. He mentioned the Pinals and Pinal City. We figured they'd hit for here, it was all the lead we had."

The pistol had sagged again, and now she lowered the hammer and stuck the weapon in the waistband of her leather skirt. "I'm sorry, Dekker. I think you're telling the truth." He gave her a bitter smile that she seemed not to notice. "I'm half crazy myself with worry over Dad. Those men kept talking to him, drawing him out about his past exploits as a scout

and prospector and how nobody knew the country hereabouts like he did. Then Dad disappeared yesterday morning. This morning I was worried enough to track him. Two men had grabbed him at the barn and I tracked the horses to the Pinals. They came back after a fake start, and grabbed dad. That's why I think you're telling it straight, Dekker. They came back for Dad to make him show them the loot's location by that map you mentioned. Before, I could see no reason for them taking him. But it makes sense now."

"I guess you got it figured, all right."

Her eyes were sick with conviction as she looked at Dekker. "They'll murder him, won't they?"

He could see no use in denying something she already knew. "It seems to be a thing LeGrone enjoys. Didn't you report it to the sheriff? Get a posse out after your father."

Her face tightened. "You saw Joe Paul, the deputy. The sheriff is seventy miles away. Then the Pinals are in the next county, the creek is the line."

"What difference is that, in an emergency?"

"Nothing that doesn't profit or further his ambitions is an emergency to Paul. He thinks he ought to be sheriff. Paul would be more hindrance than help with his bossy ways. Besides, I didn't know for sure what had happened, and I just got in from tracking them to the hills. You can imagine what will happen now. I'd have to explain and when they found out about the loot—well LeGrone could hear the gang coming for forty miles and kill Dad for sure. There was thirty thousand in gold in that loot." She looked at Dekker levelly. "It will have to be done quietly, in order to come up with this LeGrone. And you're going in, aren't you?"

"Yes. Now hold up miss. Besides, I'll have to have a guide, too."

"I thought so. I'll guide you."

"Now look, Miss Clifton, I—"

"Dekker, you'll not find anybody around here who knows the mountains and desert like my father. There's another who can come mighty close though, isn't that what you want? An expert?"

"Yes. Who, and where?"

"Here. Me."

Dekker scowled at her then had to give her his meager smile. "I'll say this, Miss Clifton, you smoke a pipe till the ashes boil!"

"My father," Amy Clifton said soberly, evenly, "spent thirty of his fifty years in the mountains and deserts of this end of the state, as a scout for the army, as a deputy sheriff and as a prospector. From the time I was ten until I was nineteen, I went with him. I know the country too, Mr. Dekker. Well, very well."

"You know what LeGrone is. What if he kills me?"

"That's a chance that has to be taken. If you don't let me go with you, you'll never find him, and I'll go anyway. I'll just have to take someone else not as tough as I think you are." It was calmly, decisively spoken.

John Dekker shrugged. If she was as good as she claimed she would be invaluable to him, and if she were going anyway— He stood up. "It's your funeral."

Her eyes suddenly brightened, a brightness close to tears. Suddenly, she stepped forward and flung her arms around his neck and kissed him on the mouth, Dekker found his arms around her, his own lips pressing hers, and for a warm and breathless moment a weakness ran through John Dekker before she pulled away.

"Thank you," she whispered. Then she was at once all business again. "Your horse is tired, and you'll need another more used to the desert country. I'll take care of that. I'll have two horses and food and water ready two hours after dark. Go to the creek and follow it a hundred yards toward the mountains to a nest of rocks and brush. I'll be there with the horses."

"All right," he said dryly. "Bring a couple of boxes of .44 shells." He stood staring at the door as it closed softly behind her. Then a grin pulled at his lips as he remembered thinking how he'd have to pick up a guide here in Pinal City. "I

sure as hell picked one," he muttered. "I sure did."

III

DEKKER slept until six-thirty then got up, washed up at the basin on the bureau and went down to the dining room. He ate a leisurely meal of steak bolstered by two eggs and potatoes and a wedge of pie. It was a good meal and Dekker was feeling more mellow toward Pinal City as he finished his pie and started his fourth cup of coffee. But the mellowness left him when he saw Joe Paul enter the dining room, glance over the nearly empty room, and then walk in his heavy footed way up to Dekker.

"Mister," Paul said in his pushy way, "I said I wanted a talk with you. You didn't show, so now you will. You be in my office five minutes after you finish that coffee."

"That sounds like an order," Dekker said.

"That is an order," Paul said flatly. "Be there."

"All right, sheriff," Dekker said with just a slight emphasis on the sheriff.

Joe Paul gave Dekker his hating stare. "I'm a deputy sheriff, Dekker, so watch that big mouth or it'll land you in jail. Make no mistake, I can give you trouble."

"I'll bet you can," Dekker said. He gave Paul a rank stare, that plainly offered fight if that was what the deputy wanted. "Now get the hell out of my sight before I get sick."

Joe Paul went, his eyes glaring, and Dekker tensed for action, but then some inner and secret thought seemed to hold the deputy as his eyes moved to dart a glance past Dekker.

A pleasant voice said, "Evening, Joe."

Paul muttered thickly. "Howdy, Harry." Then giving Dekker a furious glance, he wheeled and stalked out.

The man who had spoken to Paul, passed Dekker with a courteous nod, seemed to remember something with a small, sharp gesture of his hand, and turned and walked out behind the deputy. Dekker looked after him thoughtfully. The man had looked like a gambler with a black suit and white shirt and slender white hands. He was also a good actor. His presence had been too pat, and in spite of his pleasant voice and quiet manner, he had dashed cold water on Joe Paul's temper.

Dekker finished his coffee, paid for the meal and walked outside to lean against the front of the adobe. He smoked two cigarettes through while he stood in plain sight of the sheriff's office where Joe Paul stood in the lamp light from the office doorway.

Then Dekker shrugged a little guiltily at his own stubbornness. His actions were about on a par with the deputy's. Paul had to salve his pride at Dekker's expense, and he might as well get it over. If the deputy had the sense to not use the spurs he'd try to stand it. He had another three-quarters of an hour till he was to meet Amy.

He flung his butt into the dark street with a shower of sparks and started toward the sheriff's office. Joe Paul turned and went back into the office, and this action brought a sour smile to Dekker's lips.

He was still two buildings short of the jail, and passing the dark space between two buildings when a voice said, hard and quick, "Hold it, mister. This is a shotgun I got. Just do like I say, or I'll blow you apart."

Dekker stopped, his back muscles crawling. The voice said, "Get his gun, Juan." Dekker heard the slither of moccasins and felt his gun lifted out. The hard voice said, "Now, Dekker, just step this way, and real careful like."

Dekker did. "Just what the hell is this? A holdup?"

"You'll find out. Keep walking. Circle behind the hotel and across the creek. Don't make no quick moves."

With a shotgun at his back, there wasn't much else to do except as he was told, and directions from the shotgun man took him across the bridge into Helltown but skirting all but the outermost shacks, and eventually to a shack with its back in the

brush. Dekker was told to go in.

A lamp burned in the shack and a lean blond man opened the door for them. "Here he is, Bill," Dekker's captor said. "Is Harry here yet?"

Harry, Dekker thought, the smooth-faced hustler he had seen in the dining room.

"Not yet, Boyle, but he'll be along any minute."

Dekker's hands were tied in front of him by Boyle, a chunky ruffian with a brick red face. He kept looking at Dekker and grinning with a strange eagerness. He fastened a length of rope to the bindings around Dekker's wrists and threw the other end over a rafter. He licked his lips, his grin growing and suddenly he hauled Dekker upward to the limit of Boyle's lesser weight. Dekker knew then what the grin was for. Boyle enjoyed this kind of work.

"Just so you'll know we want some answers," Boyle said. He tied the rope, with the squat and beady-eyed Juan's help, to a built-in bunk's stanchion.

Boyle came back to stand in front of Dekker, licking his lips and grinning. Dekker had his teeth shut against the pain of his rough treatment, now his temper was boiling. He feet touched the floor but with only part of his weight on them. Enough for some traction. Suddenly, Dekker drove a booted foot forward against Boyle's shin. Boyle's leg flew from under him as he squalled with pain, and Dekker kicked savagely at his head, but the blow was short. Then Boyle was up, bawling curses and swinging sledging blows into Dekker's belly and chest.

A SHARP voice said, "All right, Boyle, don't kill him.

The blows ceased and Dekker saw the well dressed man Paul had called Harry. He stopped in front of Dekker but out of reach of his feet. "Well, Dekker, now that you have met the boys, let's get to business. Just answer my questions truthfully and quickly and you will be free that much sooner."

"You're doing the talking," Dekker said through his teeth. "You and your back alley hoodlums."

Boyle pushed up, his face red with anger. "Let me knock some of the sass out of him, Harry."

Harry held up a white hand. "In a moment, Boyle. Now, Dekker, let me forestall any hedging. We know that you're here after a pair known as LeGrone and Lukas, to avenge your father and brother. We know they also murdered two prospectors who turned out to be the remaining two of the train robbers over west of here, the two the posse didn't kill. We also know that one of them drew LeGrone a map to locate the hidden loot. We might be able to trail him but Tip Clifton knows these mountains like the palm of his hand and, consequently, we have no time to waste. Reading between the lines at my source of information I can only assume that the train robber did a great deal of babbling. You were there, you knew where to find them. So again, I assume you are familiar with the babbling. Now, Dekker, tell us every word, every word, remember, that this dying train robber said. Even a single word might give us a clue where to go to. Do you understand?"

"I understand, you smooth faced bastard," Dekker said. "Go ask your deputy sheriff friend Joe Paul. He showed you the information he got, let him tell you where to go."

Harry stepped back. "All right, Boyle."

Boyle stepped forward and hit Dekker a looping blow in the stomach. Dekker's breath exploded out in a *whoosh* of sound and Boyle hit him again, in the same spot. Dekker hung there gagging for air, his gut numb and sick.

"Let him get his wind, Boyle," Harry said. "Perhaps his memory has improved." Harry's eyes were black and seemed not to set deep enough in his head, and had a peculiarly flat appearance. He was staring steadily at Dekker. "Better spit it out, Dekker, save yourself plenty of punishment. We intend to find out what you know." He smiled pleasantly. "We might even cut you in on a share."

"To hell with you, you—"

A rifle slammed from Helltown, then again. Men shouted and women screamed then the rifle began a steady pounding, and the screams and shouts rose to a peak of panic.

The men in the shack had gone tense. The one called Bill said, "Harry, that's at your place. Somebody is shooting it to hell and gone."

"Boyle," Harry said, "stay here. The rest of you come on. I'll gut some drunken sot!" They rushed out and Dekker heard the pound of their running feet fade toward town.

Boyle stood in the door for several minutes, listening. The rifle had stopped, apparently after emptying the magazine, and the shouting was still going but excited and angry now. Boyle turned back into the shack and came to stand slightly behind Dekker. He was grinning again.

He hit Dekker over the kidney then, and kept hitting him there slowly, methodically. The pain was an excruciating numbness that seemed to be tearing Dekker to pieces. He swore, however, that he wouldn't give Boyle the satisfaction of hearing his groan, but he knew that before long he could not hold it back.

Suddenly, Boyle stopped with poised fist, his head twisted toward the door. Dekker looked too, and saw Amy Clifton standing there. She held a rifle in her left hand, and a leveled six-shooter in her right.

The six-shooter blasted deafeningly in the small room as Dekker looked. Boyle cried out a wordless shout as the slug knocked him down to huddle against the bunk, his hand grasping his broken shoulder. Amy's face was dead white, but she wasted no time on words. She came forward and Boyle threw up his good arm and opened his mouth for a shout. Amy slammed the barrel of the six-shooter alongside his head, and Boyle flopped to the floor senseless.

Amy had changed her leather skirt to denims and she wore a belt and holster. She holstered her gun, and pulled a knife from its sheath on her left hip and cut Dekker down, then cut his bonds.

Dekker grabbed his six-shooter from a shelf where the man Juan had placed it, and then Amy thrust the rifle at him.

"Here, this is yours. It's empty. Follow me." She ran out with Dekker on her heels.

Dekker was hard put to keep up with her. She went through the brush like a Texas cottontail. She hadn't been lying any at the hotel, he thought with increasing admiration. She was a salty gal and no mistake!

SHE went up the creek in the direction she had told him she would be, and shortly, they arrived at the horses. "Take the dun, Dekker," she said as she mounted a rangy roan. In another minute they were lined out toward the forbidding bulk of the Pinals.

After a good ten minutes they were a distance from town. Amy pulled up then, and silently, Dekker dismounted and walked back a ways, listening, then he lay down to press an ear to the ground. There was no sound, he went back to the waiting girl.

"Not a sound, Amy. Thanks, they had me stretched. How'd you know?"

"I had taken the horses to the brush, and was going back to change into these clothes. I saw them herding you around the hotel. I only had my six-shooter, so I changed and got your rifle. You know the rest."

"You'll do, Amy," he said. "You're a handy partner to have around, but I sure hate to expose you to LeGrone."

"Thanks, but it's something I have to do. You can understand how I feel. What was Harry Julian sticking his nose into this for?"

"A little matter of some thirty thousand in loot."

"How did he know you could tell him anything?"

"That's what I wonder. Of course, he didn't actually know, but he knew a devil of a lot, Amy. That information went to the law, but I don't think it would be made public until the law had done what it could. Is Paul a crook, Amy? He must

have got that information from Paul, and Paul must have got it in the last day or two."

"Today," Amy said. "The stage only runs once a week here. He could have gone for the smell of that money. Paul is a jealous and bitter man, Dekker. He's been defeated for sheriff twice, badly, and it galled him. He just can't get along with people, as you know. There have been whispers of a few shady deals he's been in on. It could be." He felt her steady gaze in the darkness. "I hope you do know something, Dekker. We need to move fast, to save Dad's life."

"Yes. I'll tell you every word I can, all the sheriff told me—and I quizzed the man until he was ready to shoot me." He repeated his story to her carefully, then started on the dying train robber's babbling. When he came to a word that the man had repeated several times, and which Dekker pronounced as the sheriff had, *dogelo,* "Wait!" Amy said.

Dekker looked at her.

Amy said, "Was there anything else with that word?"

"Yes, but the sheriff couldn't get it. Just *dogelo.* Does that mean anything?"

"*Deguello,* Dekker, Deguello Spring! Or No-Quarter Spring. Deguello is a Spanish bugle call meaning no-quarter. Dekker, that might be it. But go on."

"That's about it, Amy. But that's a start and that's something."

Amy Clifton was silent, and John Dekker sensed her hesitation, her uncertainty. His sympathy went out to this slender girl. He thought he knew why she was torn with uncertainty now. They could hurry to this spring and if the guess was bad then Tip Clifton was dead. There was nothing Dekker could do but wait.

Finally, he said gently, "There isn't much choice, Amy. With a two-day start we could never trail them. LeGrone is part Indian, he can hide a trail."

"Yes, you're right. Dad is stubborn as a mule when pushed. He'll use up all the time he can winding around. I can only hope he doesn't carry it too far. LeGrone might kill him. We'll try the spring, it's our only chance, isn't it, Dekker?"

"That is my opinion, Amy." He was stuffing shells into the Henry rifle. "How far is it?"

"About twenty miles. We can make it to Nugget Canyon tonight. Then we'll have to wait until daylight. That will take us to the summit, then another six-seven miles to No-Quarter Spring. We should be there late tomorrow afternoon."

"You said you tracked them a way. How did they go?"

"They came to the mountains just ahead, then came out—they probably showed Dad the map—then went east through the foothills." The worry crept into her voice again. "That's what worries me. It's in the opposite direction. I can only hope it was Dad's stubbornness."

"As long as we'll have to stop at this Nugget Canyon, is there a chance we can follow their trail a way then double back to throw Julian off? They'll be along at daylight, or maybe with lanterns if they can pick up our trail."

"Yes, we'll do that."

IV

IN THE next two hours, John Dekker's admiration for Amy Clifton grew steadily. The darkness was relieved only a little by a first quarter moon that sank far too rapidly. But Amy used the time like an expert. She was an expert, Dekker thought, no doubt about that.

They followed the trail that Amy had picked up that day, and they rode fast considering the kind of broken terrain, then without seeming to think about it, Amy left it at a rocky slope and they doubled back. Dekker didn't think that an Apache could have done any better in the darkness. Julian and his trackers could unravel the trail, but they'd surely lose some time doing it.

At midnight, Amy pulled into a wide and rocky gap in the mountains, and pulled her horse to a stop. "This is Nugget Canyon. We'll have to wait till daylight now."

They made camp simply by picketing

the horses with a small ration of oats Amy had brought, and spreading their blankets. They were soon asleep.

Dekker was up before daylight, careful not to awaken Amy, and gave the horses the rest of the oats. He had coffee boiling over a small fire and bacon frying when Amy sat up.

"You're an Indian yourself, John Dekker," she said.

He grinned at her in the growing light. "I didn't have the heart to wake you, Amy. You were snoring."

She gave him an indignant glance. "I don't snore!" She smiled then as he chuckled. "Thanks, John, I'll saddle up while you finish burning the bacon." At daylight they were riding, and Dekker saw at once why Amy said they had to wait for light. The canyon was dry now but with cloudbursts in the Pinals, it would become a raging monster as evidenced by the stunted and uprooted brush, the jumbled rock and huge boulders tossed about, and the potholed and treacherous footing. Even daylight riding required constant attention to prevent injury to both horse and rider.

By mid-morning the canyon was a furnace, and they stopped often to blow the horses, there was no such thing as cooling them. Once, while stopped, John Dekker wiped a stream of sweat off his forehead with a crooked finger, and Amy smiled at him, the heat not seeming to bother her.

"You won't sweat as much soon now," she said. "You'll be too dry."

"That's something to look forward to," he said wryly. "Amy, did you ever dream of a green canyon, wide and lovely with the blue-gray curl of buffalo grass, bunch and foxtail, and hollowjoint and other grass to your stirrups? The greenest of green, and mixed in it a riot of color with lupine and columbine, globe flowers and paintbrush asters and—"

"You're a sadist, John Dekker."

He grinned at her. "And water, Amy, a mountain stream rolling through it all, running cold and clean. Did you ever dream like that, Amy, while you baked in this devil's playground?"

For a moment she seemed to forget their grim mission, and her eyes went soft and dreamy and eager. "You'll never know how often, John. I used to carry my pockets full of pictures of just such places. Dad used to threaten to take me north and let me freeze one winter. He claimed I'd be glad enough to sweat a little then."

Their glances met for a breathless and shaky moment before Amy looked quickly away, the color running in her cheeks that wasn't all heat from the weather. But the moment's results were not gone, and Dekker drew an uneven breath, and knew, as she must know, that the world would never be the same for either of them.

"I know where there is a valley like that, Amy," he said softly. "Our summer pasture, and three thousand feet lower is another, our winter holding and hay land, where the ranch house is. I'd like you to see it, Amy."

Her eyes were soft, shy. "I'd like it too, John."

But there was a grimmer thing to think of, and John Dekker shook off his mood, and said, "How much more of this canyon?"

"Another hour or two, nearer two."

"Is there a place where I could get a look at our back trail?"

"Yes, another mile, and you can climb the side and see several places below." She rode on then and Dekker followed.

After awhile, Amy pulled up. "I think this is the best place," she said.

He left his saddle, and made his slow and sweating way up the canyon's side. Eventually he attained the rim, and stood there, gasping back his breath, looking back down the torturous trail. But from his height, he had several looks in different places along the canyon. He watched with searching glances. Then he saw them, and was surprised to note their closeness, before he remembered the slow

pace and let his tautened nerves relax. Still, they were less than two hours behind, and were pushing their horses harder than he and Amy were.

THEY disappeared for a good ten minutes before they came into view again, and Dekker recognized Harry Julian's black dress and the white patch of his shirt. There were four riders and five horses. Dekker studied the fifth horse and decided it was a saddle and not a pack on it. Something had happened to the fifth rider, but why were they bringing the horse? A spare?

He climbed back down to the waiting Amy. "They're coming. Five horses and four men."

"Five horses?" He saw her eyes darken and dart rapid and searching glances at the rim. "Could you recognize any of them?"

"Julian and maybe Paul."

"Did you notice a short, chunky man. Juan Inez?"

"No. They seemed all about the same size. No, that squat character wasn't there." He looked at her sharply. "What are you getting at, Amy?"

"Juan Inez is half Apache, and all Apache in the mountains. An Apache can outdo a man on a horse in the mountains, John. He might be trying to head us."

"I'd say we'd better get moving, and keep our eyes peeled."

They rode on, and pushed the horses as fast as they dared. Once in the next hour, Dekker thought he caught a flash of movement on the rim, but he didn't see it again. When Amy pulled up finally to blow the panting horses, he said, "How much farther to the end of this canyon?"

"Less than a mile. The canyon plays out in a series of washes and eroded rock and earth, and is covered with brush on the high spots. It would be a good place for Inez to nail one of us if he's got past."

"If he can get along up there, so can I," Dekker said. "He'd be less apt to be watching there than in the canyon." He studied the trail ahead. "He can't get many glimpses in here, Amy, if he's bushed up."

"No, and soon he won't see me at all, he'll have to go by the sound of the horses." Her eyes were concerned, dark with worry. "John, an Apache isn't anything to fool with. You'd never sneak up on him, and he'll be watching the place where we'd come out."

"Neither are the Crows anybody to play with," Dekker said. "And we have no choice. I'd rather try it than walk head on into a bullet."

He dismounted, rifle in hand, and passed Amy the reins. He removed his spurs and hung them on the horn.

Amy said, "I'll come out on the left side, John. There's a tall, red, wind-eroded spire with a sort of flat top. I'll come out almost at its base. He'll be along there someplace."

She held out her hand, and Dekker took it in his own, and again that breathless moment hung between them. "Good luck, John," Amy said softly, then leaned down to kiss him quickly. She kicked her horse forward with Dekker's trailing, and from the stiff set of her back, Dekker knew she was not going to let herself look back.

Dekker turned for the canyon's side and ten minutes later he was on the rim, his breath raw and gusty in his throat. But he didn't pause this time to let his breathing ease. He pushed on, scrambling over rock and cross reefs, forcing his way through scrubby and stiff brush, in and out of washes and rock fields that were broken and eroded.

But finally, he saw close ahead, the red rock spire Amy had mentioned and the terrain ahead flattened somewhat. He soon found the flatness was deceptive, merely a general flatness and the rough going was unabated.

Then as he slanted up a wash that had ground rock and earth in its flat bottom, he suddenly stopped, staring at the freshly made moccasin tracks. They had guessed correctly, Juan Inez was ahead of them. Waiting up there, maybe no more than a stone's throw from John Dekker, his black Indian eyes alert, ready over a cocked

rifle to do murder.

Below in the canyon and slightly behind Dekker, he could hear the crack of shod hoofs on stone. Shortly now, Amy would be appearing near the red spire. Dekker was more cautious now, and eased up to study the lay of the terrain.

The spire was a hundred yards farther and to his right, and Dekker moved cautiously, with no more sound that Juan Inez would make, and closed the distance to fifty yards. He could see the opening now where he thought Amy would emerge. He dared not go any closer, yet he was in a sweat of worry that the halfbreed might shoot Amy even as his reason told him that his own absence when Amy showed, would hold the breed's fire until he had located Dekker.

Carefully, Dekker soaked the sweat from his face and eyebrows with his shirt sleeve, and waited, his eyes searching minutely for the halfbreed.

Then the horses and Amy appeared with startlingly suddenness in the opening, and Amy pulled to a stop to blow the horses. Dekker had to admire the coolness of the girl, sitting relaxed in the saddle and glancing back occasionally as though she expected or was watching Dekker somewhere still out of sight.

Then not twenty yards in front of Dekker and almost directly between him and Amy, the top of a black head appeared, moving, searching. Juan Inez. And the man was obviously taking alarm over Dekker's absence. Dekker dared not risk a shot that might kill Amy. Then Inez was gone.

Dekker cocked his rifle, his glances moving but there was no sight of Inez, or any sound. Dekker felt the tension building in him and he had to force himself to relax, loosen his muscles for whatever was to happen now.

V

IT HAPPENED so quickly that he had no warning. One moment he was alone, the next Juan Inez dropped into the wash not ten feet from him. They were face to face for a ticking second and Dekker's only advantage was his ready and cocked rifle while Inez's rifle was out of line from his jump into the wash.

Dekker fired, and Inez's shot was only a piece of a second behind. Dekker never heard Inez's bullet in the sound of the shot, but he saw the breed stagger, then he was going out of the wash like a huge cat. Dekker fired again, and saw the breed jerk in mid-air. He dropped his rifle, caught at a jagged rock to steady himself and Dekker drove a third bullet through his neck and saw the blood spurt, and then Inez slid off the rock out of sight. John Dekker didn't bother to go look at him, but was out of the wash and heading toward Amy and the horses.

She met him on foot, and didn't hesitate, but came on to rush into his arms. He held the suddenly trembling girl tightly, and finally tilted her chin to kiss her gently. She kissed him back with a passionate relief and bared emotions.

"It's all right, Amy," he said gently. "That part is over."

She kissed him again, then briefly pressed her cheek to his. "John Dekker," she said shakily, "you've made a softy out of me! You and your darn valleys! Tell me now that you're married or you've got a woman waiting, and I'll shoot you myself!"

He kissed her, smiling. "Only you, Amy. But if we want to see that green valley, we'd better be traveling."

"It's easier now, soon as we start down. Another hour and a half."

"How many approaches to that spring?"

"Three. This way, the flat beyond it, and a narrow canyon coming in from our left. That will be the way Dad will take in—if he led them the way I think he has."

They went back to the horses and moved on, and soon she led them into a narrow wash that became a canyon that dropped away before them in a far steeper slant than the one which they had come up. As Amy had said, the going was easier and they moved at a brisk pace.

The canyon grew steadily wider and

Amy kept to the left wall. Dekker was getting a look at open country ahead, and thought they must be getting close to the spring. Finally Amy pulled up close to a jut of the wall, forming a shoulder.

"Deguello Spring is just around this shoulder, John." Her voice held a nerve-deep strain. "Will—will you look, John?"

He knew and sympathized with her reason; she was afraid LeGrone had beat them here and that she would find her father's body. "I'll take a look," he said and dismounted.

He moved to the point of the shoulder, and gained a position where he had a clear view. Here, he was still a few feet higher than the spring. The spring had its source from the base of the wall and had furnished a seep of water to cause willows and other brush to form a quarter acre of growth, appearing green and restful in the surrounding desolation.

THERE was no sign of LeGrone or a horse, and more important, there were no buzzards. He called to Amy, "No sign, Amy. I'm going for a look."

He traversed the uneven ground and dodged sizeable boulders, working his way around the clumps of brush. When he was close enough to see birds flitting among the willows and other brush, he moved faster.

He studied the damp ground as he neared the spring itself but he saw no sign of horse tracks. There were numerous tracks of deer, and smaller animals, but none of horses. When he was convinced that LeGrone had not yet arrived, he started back.

Suddenly he stopped, head canted, listening. Then he heard it again. The faint crack of a horse's shod hoof against stone. The sound came from a narrow split in the wall some fifty feet from the spring, and no more than twenty feet wide. He remembered Amy's telling him that this was where she expected LeGrone to come from, under Tip's guidance. Amy was still figuring with a sharp pencil.

Dekker hurried on then, gaining a point some thirty yards from the opening and with a clear field of fire but for scattered brush and smaller rock. He took up position behind a rock reef, then turned to look at Amy.

He could see her at the shoulder point. Dekker put his hand to his ear, then pointed up the narrow canyon and followed the gesture by putting his hand to his mouth. Amy gave him a quick wave to indicate understanding.

Dekker turned his attention back to the opening, and made sure the mechanism of his rifle worked freely. He cocked the piece and waited. The sounds grew louder and louder and set up echoes until it seemed a regiment was coming out of there. Must be solid rock, Dekker thought.

Abruptly they appeared, two riders and three horses. Dekker's stomach tightened and, momentarily, the rifle shook in his hands as he got his first look at the man he had come fifteen hundred miles to kill, the murderer of his father and brother.

He knew LeGrone instantly. He was a big man, well over two hundred pounds, and he had flaming red hair. His face was shagged with a beard of the same red, while little, quick Indian eyes moved alertly. He carried his rifle in his right hand, reins in his left.

The second rider was an old man with white beard stubble. A tuft of white hair poked through a rent in his dilapidated old hat, and he kept tightening and loosening his toothless jaws in a cranky indignation. His hands were tied to the saddlehorn. Tip Clifton.

The third horse was riderless, and Dekker felt a jolt of apprehension. Had Lukas sneaked ahead on foot? He thrust the thought away. If he had, he, Dekker, would already he dead. He would take care of Lukas when he came to him; right now he had LeGrone, the main torturer.

Dekker's lips peeled back from his teeth and he lifted his rifle. He would like for LeGrone to know who was filling him with lead, but the man was tough and mean, and it was senseless to take chances.

"LeGrone!"

LeGrone acted instantly. He threw him-

self on the opposite side of his horse in the old Plains Indian trick, and hooked the animal with his spur. But the horse was tired and LeGrone was heavy. As the horse leaped with a pained grunt, it lost its footing and went to its knees. Dekker put a bullet through LeGrone's knee where it hooked over the cantle.

LeGrone hit the ground with a grunt as his horse scrambled away, then the big breed had his rifle slamming and rock splinters flew off the reef in front of Dekker.

Dekker moved quickly a few feet and shot LeGrone again. The slam of the heavy slug knocked LeGrone on his back but he recovered to work the lever of his rifle. Dekker noted that the bullets were less accurately aimed now. LeGrone was hard hit.

Clifton wheeled his horse with the first shot, using his knees to guide the animal, and LeGrone turned his rifle to snap a shot at Clifton's back. But Dekker's hasty bullet spoiled his aim and Clifton was gone back into the canyon.

Dekker waited a moment, then called, "How does it feel, LeGrone, to be on the other side?"

A short silence followed. Then LeGrone called, "Who are you?"

"Name is Dekker. I'm the son of the man you tortured to death in Montana. A brother to the eleven year old boy. You're going to die, LeGrone."

"I'm bleeding to death now," LeGrone said.

"That's fine, I'll wait."

DEKKER moved then, a good fifteen feet and peered cautiously out. LeGrone was coming for the reef, his chest was bloody, his left arm all but useless, and he was dragging his right leg. Dekker took careful aim and fired.

The six-shooter in LeGrone's hand was jerked away and flung ten feet away. The big man looked at it, then toward Dekker, and hung propped there on his bloody hands. Dekker got up and walked up to him, his cocked rifle menacing LeGrone.

LeGrone stared at him from black, emotionless eyes. "You don't take no chances, do you, Dekker?"

"Why the hell should I?" John Dekker asked. "Why should I give you a chance? How would you like some of your fire treatment?"

"Not a chance, Dekker. You lose there." He sank down, then turned to stare up at Dekker's set face, and his blood ran out in diminishing spurts from the severed artery under his arm.

The bright eyes dulled and slowly closed. Dekker felt sick as he watched LeGrone die and he could feel none of the satisfaction he should feel, only a bitterness and sadness as he remembered the young life LeGrone had taken, and that of his father. All so useless and without reason.

He didn't even look up as Amy Clifton came past with a rush, shouting, "Daddy! Daddy, it's Amy."

LeGrone was dead, and Dekker was sitting twenty yards away on a boulder when Amy returned with her father. They both dismounted near Dekker. "John, my father. Dad, John Dekker of Montana. I told him about you, John."

Dekker stood up and gripped Tip Clifton's hand. Clifton said, "I'm right much obliged, John Dekker. Figured I was a goner this time. Then you near scared me to death when you hollered at that feller."

"Where's the other one? Lukas?"

"The baldheaded one? He got snake bit the first day out. You know what LeGrone did? He just up and cut Lukas's throat from ear to ear. Said he'd need the horse to carry the gold anyways!"

"It sounds about like LeGrone, all right," Dekker said.

"What now?" Amy asked. "Can we—*Look out!*"

Dekker and Tip Clifton followed Amy in a lunging roll as rifles opened up from the canyon floor near the shoulder. Dekker snapped two hasty shots as Clifton and Amy made the reef, then Amy was firing her six-shooter as Dekker made the reef with only a bullet burn on his left ribs.

"That was a hell of a time for us to take a nap!" Tip Clifton said sourly. "Now

here I stand like a fool without a gun. Dekker, lend me your pistol."

Dekker gave him the six-shooter, and looked at Amy. Her rifle was still in the saddle boot. Two six-shooters and a rifle against four tough men with rifles.

"Our tails are in a crack, looks to me," Dekker said.

"It don't look no different from here," Tip Clifton said. "Did you see him? The damned doublefaced—" He burst into a flood of curses.

"Who?" Dekker asked.

"Joe Paul! Our fine deputy sheriff! Him there big as life with Julian and Bill Sherwood and that damn Rass Bulls."

"Amy and I figured that's where Julian got his information," Dekker said. "From Paul. I guess we figured right."

"Hey, Dekker!" Julian shouted.

"Say it."

"Give us the map and you can go."

"I believe that," Dekker said.

"Take your choice. It's that or we'll kill you."

"There's three of us, Julian, better think of that."

Julian laughed. "I have. You have one rifle there and two, or possibly three, pistols. Better think it over yourself, Dekker. You ain't got long."

"Go to hell, you snake-eyed bastard!" Tip Clifton roared. "The map is in the dead man's shirt pocket, soaked to pieces with blood, but come and get it if you feel lucky."

"We'll get it, Tip," Julian said. "I guess we can find the money now anyway. How about the small caves behind the spring, Tip?"

"You're doing the guessing," Tip said, but the watching Dekker saw the old man's indignant spit and figured Julian was guessing close. Those men had been in a hurry and were hard pressed when they hid the gold.

"Paul," Dekker shouted, "are you backing Julian in murder?"

"I hope I get the first shot at you," Paul snarled.

Tip scowled at his daughter to hide his worry. "Baby," he said, "when they come, you run like a rabbit for the canyon mouth. Me and Dekker will cover you. They'll never get you once you're away. Hear me?"

"I hear you, Daddy," she said. She looked him straight in the eye, jiggled her six-shooter and gave a passing imitation of her father's spit. "But I won't do it."

"Now listen here—"

VI

A BURST of fire came from the spread-out men, and rock splinters flew from the reef and the bullets howled away. No one returned the fire. Dekker moved to a spot where he could get a view of one man's cover through a split in the reef, and waited, rifle cocked and ready. Finally he was rewarded by the point of a shoulder showing. He fired.

The man jerked, went too far the other way and Tip Clifton's pistol roared. The man reared up then, Bill Sherwood, and Dekker shot him again. He sprawled limply. Dekker and Tip grinned at each other.

Another burst of fire from the rocks, and Dekker said, "Tip, who'd you say was the other man? Bulls?"

"Yeah, a bum that's been hanging around town for months. Does odd jobs for Julian to get whisky money. Why?"

"That's him on the left wing. He fires right along with the others, but if you'll notice the smoke when he fires, squirts up at an angle that'll put a bullet ten feet over the reef! He's either the world's worst shot or he's not trying."

"Don't take no chances with him."

Sherwood's death had made Julian cautious and only sniping fire came now and they remained low and well covered. The three at the reef waited grimly.

Suddenly a rifle bellowed out there, and a man shouted high and hurt. Then before Dekker's amazed eyes, Julian reared up, a hand clutched to his side, then fell in a loose sprawl.

Joe Paul bawled a surprised question, then shouted a furious curse. His rifle blasted and rock splinters flew from the

rock behind which Rass Bulls was hidden. Bulls' rifle blasted again, and Dekker saw part of Paul's back as he scooted around his rock. Dekker fired.

Paul shouted, raised up a little. Bulls' rifle fired and Joe Paul was slapped down. He tried to crawl behid the rock but Tip Clifton's bullet stretched him out.

"Dekker!" Bulls shouted, "Clifton!"

"Speak up," Dekker shouted.

"Hold your fire, I'm coming out! I'm a railroad detective."

"Come out then," Dekker said. "Leave your rifle."

Rass Bulls stood up instantly, hands lifted and came toward them. He was grinning. "I hope there isn't any more talk of shooting for that damn map." He stopped as they cautiously stood up. "In my right boot lining are my papers, gents. I'd be pleased if you'd look at them."

"We'll look, don't doubt it," Tip said. "And we might have taken even more convincing but Dekker noticed you wasn't shooting straight. At us, that is."

BULLS grinned, his teeth white in his dirty face. "Something you might not have noticed. I was close enough to jiggle Sherwood's arm on that first volley, or one of you wouldn't have made it."

Bulls' papers seemed to be in order, but Tip Clifton growled, "Maybe you're all right, Bulls, but we'll just sort of watch you anyhow."

"Suits me," Bulls said. "Soon as we get that gold back to the railroad I'll likely be a director, and above such as you and your suspicious ways!"

Tip glared at him, but Bulls' grin was so wide and happy that Tip had to doubt the fierceness of his scowl and spit twice to keep from grinning back.

Tip knew, from LeGrone's map, where the gold was hidden and it was soon lugged down from the small cave behind the spring and stacked ready to be packed on one of the spare horses.

Tip, more from stubbornness than suspicion, was still keeping an eye on Bulls. The detective grinned at Tip. "Now, old timer, I'm going to see that you get enough of the reward to buy you a set of store teeth, and maybe a pair of dime store specs so you can read about my big job in the papers."

Tip snorted, and refused to be dragged into such small-time squabbling. Bulls chuckled, and Dekker grinned at the smiling Amy. "Maybe it's just as well, Amy," Dekker said, "that Tip doesn't go for store teeth. That cold Montana water would just crack them wide open anyhow."

"What Montana water?" Tip snarled. "Arizony water is good enough for me. And any daughter of mine too, I reckon."

"Not any more, Daddy," Amy said.

Tip's mouth dropped open for an outburst at this open rebellion, then he saw the way his daughter's eyes were glowing at John Dekker, and the way the big Montanan was looking at Amy. Tip's mouth clamped shut, and he transferred his scowl to Bulls. Tip spit indignantly, then slowly his toothless gums were exposed in a wide grin.

"I'll be darned! Always had a hankering to see that Montana country!"

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Naves hit the Indian with his gun, and then kicked at the dogs crowding in

Tom Worth couldn't believe his father would play along with outlaws

TOM WORTH reviewed his instructions in detail as he took the beaten path toward town. He wasn't to linger after he left Landow's store, which meant passing up Simon Rolling Thunder and his dogs outside Rhiner's butcher shop. He wasn't to stop more than a minute at the express office, and not at all in front of the Palace pool hall where the roughnecks collected.

"You will," Kathleen Worth had said, her blue eyes fixed on him, "march straight home. Remember, I won't have you trailing that dirty old Indian. You're almost eleven now, Tom. Old enough to do as you're told. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll roll my wheels."

"You'll what?"

"Hurry, I mean," he amended, already moving and realizing once again that women didn't savvy freighter's talk. In his haste, he neglected to shake the

screen door two-three times to ward off the flies.

Only this was early June and the scrubby blackjacks beckoned, cool and green, and it came to him that it wouldn't hurt none to prowl some on his way. Like yesterday, when he'd saved that wagon train of poor, helpless women-folks, bug-eyed kids and greenhorn men. When Red Cloud himself, after he'd given up, admitted just one man could have done it—and that was Texas Jack. Other times he might be Yellow Hawk, chief of the Osages, smoking up a war party against the Pawnees, because he ranged mighty far once he got stirred up.

Angling off the path, he held a dog-trot for several minutes. Shadows formed black patches under the crowded trees; and where sunlight trickled through, the sandy earth looked yellow as California gold. Not far distant the new oil field grumbled, making noises he'd grown to listen for in the few months since his family had come here. A steady, comforting sound, beating good in your ears after you'd shifted around so much, from town to town.

He came to a wagon road, rutted and twisting. Across it the timber massed. Smoke smell hung in the morning air. It grew stronger as he legged ahead and he stopped half curiously.

He spied the hobbled horses first; they looked tuckered, their saddle-marked backs caked with dried sweat. One, the bay, had a fine blazed face. The other was all mouse-colored, just plain horse in Tom's appraisal. Two men squatted back from a low-smouldering fire, built between sandstone chunks which supported a blackened coffee pot. Emptied cans, unwashed tin plates, flung-down saddles and horse blankets completed the careless clutter.

A hurry prompted Tom. He started on, but the nearest man jerked to attention. He rose smoothly and Tom checked up, at the same instant fighting a sudden desire to run.

This man was rawboned, with small, quick eyes and a black forest of beard stained yellowish brown by tobacco juice. His pistol wobbled as he straightened. His pouched-out jaw worked briefly.

What's the matter, kid?" he asked in a liquid drawl. "Ain't you ever seen white men before?"

Tom didn't like the amused tone. "Most folks don't camp in here, that's all."

"Any law against it?"

"Nope, but the freighters like it along the road. Water's closer."

"We ain't freighters. A man can bed down where he takes a notion, can't he?"

"Guess so," Tom replied.

"Vamoose!" It was the second man, growling and inclining his head townward. He was blocky as a true stump, scowling and cranky. The wide beaded gunbelt circling his vast middle strained to the last notch. His blunt fingers tapped a gurgling pipe, its strong stench fouling the clean woods, causing Tom to draw in his nostrils.

When Tom hesitated, the man growled again, "I said vamoose!"

At once Tom turned, jogging fast, relieved to go, and yet annoyed that strangers should pitch their dirty camp here.

Coming presently up the wagon road, he found Rocky City before him. A sort of funny, no-where place to move to, he figured, though not minding. These scrub buildings everybody called a city; what was really just a boom town sprung up around Landow's old trading store. But his folks sensed a longing within his mother when she talked of Reedville.

A right nice little town, she said. Clean streets, neat store buildings, pretty houses and gentle elms shading the walks. Yellow grain fields rolled like waves in the summer wind, instead of blackjacks and lonesome prairie. The town where Tom and his mother had lived while his father was away from home so long that time.

HE WAS slowing, fascinated by the sights and greasy smells, his ears throbbing to the din of heavy machinery pounding in the oil field. Yonder more wooden derricks than he could count

reared toward the clear, bright sky. At night they looked on fire, like torches, which his father said was just waste gas burning.

He gave them one more scanning and trotted between slow-moving freight wagons to the supply yards, so loaded down with stacked pipe, bull-wheels, rig timbers and such you'd think the ground would bust, and across to the express company office on the opposite corner.

Going in, Tom saw his father behind the long counter, in vest and black sleeve guards up to his elbows. He did not look around and Tom's interest strayed to the squatty iron safe. He knew it held plenty of money, having watched his father open it, and there was an old single-action .45 close in a drawer.

His father kept gazing stiffly out the murky glass, as if he hadn't heard. You could see he was just faced that way, gazing into space, his face troubled. Then he turned and his face smoothed.

"What is it, Tom?"

Although he was given to leanness, he had the strong wrists and capable hands of a much larger man. Carried his head good too, Tom thought. But his face was too old for a man his age, and his hair, white as cotton along the temples, and his slate-gray eyes, sometimes showing a stored-up bitter caution, made you wonder if maybe he'd lived and done things he'd never tell a boy, not till he got man-size, anyhow.

"I'm going to the store," Tom told him.

"Well, tell your mother I won't be home at noon."

Tom eyed him with disappointment. "Y'mean Mister Hines—"

Tom!" His father shot him a warning glance. "See you at supper." He turned to the counter, his curt movement a dismissal, as Adam Hines, the company agent, entered briskly.

He had a long, unsmiling face. Now he nodded in his precise manner to Tom. Folks said one sure thing about Mister Hines. He never wasted words or money and he wasn't the easiest man to work for.

Mumbling a greeting, Tom went out and walked slowly past the Palace and the noisy oil field workers around the door, smelling the damp, close odors from inside.

Long-eared hounds whined before Rhiner's butcher shop. By that, Tom knew Simon Rolling Thunder was in there. Tom's father said you could set your watch by the time Simon bought meat, since he came to town every day to feed his dogs. Even on Sunday, when Rhiner's was closed, he loafed on the plank walk, soaking up sun.

Tom eased through the pack, ducked into Landow's store. Afterward, leaving with his groceries, he found Simon outside Rhiner's. About him his dogs wrangled, leaping for the chunks of meat Simon tossed.

Tom took a long look, for Simon was no ordinary Indian. Maybe the richest in the world. Leastwise, the way Tom's father told it, all the oil in the county belonged to the Osages. Not that you could tell Simon was rich. He wore a bandana around his broad head, his red flannel shirt hung loosely, the tails flapping and his trousers were rusty with age.

Of a sudden two dogs lunged together, snarling, their sharp cries over-riding all other sound.

The next thing Tom knew Mister Landow appeared in his doorway. "Simon!" he called sharply, gesturing. "Can't you feed those dogs somewhere else? They're raising an awful racket."

Simon's mahogany eyes blinked. He nodded good naturedly and dangled red meat above the dogs. Instantly, they leaped after him, and Tom's curiosity carried him after them. Between the Palace and the express office Simon halted, turned and pitched, and the pack rushed in.

In front of the Palace one man stood apart. If there was any expression on the dark, craggy face, it was one of sullen boredom. Tom noticed him mainly because he wore a gun on his hip. Also, fancy like, a wide-brimmed hat, yellow-

topped cowboy boots with Levis tucked inside, and a dirty blue shirt, instead of oil-spattered clothing and high-laced oil worker's boots.

It happened swiftly, as Simon lobbed a piece of meat. A scrambling dog struck the stranger's yellow boot, throwing him off balance. He caught himself, quick as a cat, and wheeled on the dog.

Tom read a sheen of touchy anger in the large, bulging eyes. He saw the pistol flash upward. There was one shot, another, and Simon's hound howled and tumbled.

TOM NEVER remembered running, but he was, his arms loaded. With a sense of shock, he bent down. One glance was enough. His skin went cold, prickling. He was flinching, hurting inside while his stomach turned. He swiveled his head and ran against Simon's gaze, the coffee-black eyes glinting dangerously.

"Tom Worth! Get away from there!"

It registered on Tom that his father was shouting somewhere, but he couldn't budge for the life of him. Couldn't rouse his wooden body or tear his fixed eyes from the man's bulky pistol.

"You shot my dog," Simon said dismally, which wasn't how Tom expected a real fullblooded Indian to talk when he got stirred up. Not pounding his chest or making signs. Then Tom felt powerful arms grasping him, and his father was pulling him back.

"Ran into me, didn't he?" Tom heard the stranger say.

"You shot him." Simon's persisting voice rose a notch, stronger. "You pay me."

"Pay—for that flea-bit mutt?" Suddenly it became a crude joke. The stranger's laughter rolled, except it lacked any funning. Until now, Tom hadn't noticed the closeness of the bulging eyes, how thin and mean the mouth curled.

"Now," Simon muttered and extended the broad platter of his hand. "You pay me now."

In return, the stranger mocked him with his eyes, while keeping his pistol level, as much as telling Simon to collect if he was man enough. The crowd stayed put, not coming any nearer.

Simon moved forward one stubborn pace. The stranger waited. All at once Tom knew nobody was going to stop it.

"No, Naves! No."

Tom heard his father's tight voice. He saw him in fast stride, as a man might rush in before he thought, the skin around his mouth white as he stepped between them. "Don't be a fool, Simon," he said, the words piling out. "Better get out of here. Take your dogs."

"But he ain't paid," Simon protested.

"And he's got a gun—you don't. Go on, I tell you!"

His father gripped Simon's shoulder. For a moment Tom wasn't sure what the Osage would do. Simon stood erect and unmoved, glaring. At length his glance, centered on the pistol, lifted grudgingly. With a reluctant slowness, he stooped and gathered up the dog's body, cradling it, and shuffled into the street.

But it wasn't finished. Tom realized that darkly as his father turned.

"You had no call to butt in," the stranger said coldly, holstering his weapon. "I wasn't gonna shoot him. Pistol-whip him, maybe, if he climbed me. That's all. Way I see it, I did the town a big favor. Got rid of a public nuisance."

"No more nuisance than your loose gun."

"Loose gun?"

"Yes. You'd have shot Simon. Same as you did the dog."

"That's mighty strong talk," the stranger said. "And I'll show you're wrong. Look, my gun's up. I won't use it." He shifted his feet, suddenly raising his fists. "Come on. You an' me."

Tom's father kept his arms down, but his hands were knotted.

"What's the matter?" There was no answer and the baiting voice came again, harsh with contempt. "I know, you're afraid to fight. You're all bluff. You're yellow. Hear me? You're yellow!"

Still, his father said nothing. He stood there tight-lipped, stiff, his chest rising and falling.

Tom felt himself shrinking to an inner numbness, unable to understand, and all the while it deepened that his father was backing down and the entire town could see.

Without a word, his father made a sudden movement and shouldered through the crowd. As he followed behind, Tom couldn't miss the stilled faces of the men, Mister Hines' among them. And, last of all, he saw some look aside in embarrassment.

"Tom," his father murmured when they reached the office door, "never mind telling your mother. I will tonight."

Boots striking the walk drew Tom's eyes to Cab Morgan, who ran the blacksmith shop. A bushy-browed man, friendly and massive. Looking broad in his leather apron, and unaccustomed to running.

"John," he asked, breathing fast, "what's this all about? Anybody hurt?"

Tom's father spoke in a few crisp words.

"Wouldn't have happened if we had any law in this town," Morgan said. "Wait'll we get ourselves incorporated. Hire us a marshal." He was peering at the milling crowd as he spoke. "So that's the gunny in the blue shirt, big hat? Don't place him around here. You know him?"

"Never saw him before."

Not until he was lengthening his strides toward home did it occur to Tom that his father had called the stranger's name, this man nobody knew.

DURING supper his father appeared to have forgotten the morning. He talked little, frowning while Tom's mother spoke of the railroad spur being built to connect Rocky City with the main line, of more families moving in. It was old news, yet tonight her enthusiasm made it take on added importance.

Tom squirmed in uncomfortable silence.

"Rocky City might be a real good town," his father agreed. "If the wells don't play out and the market holds. A lot of things can happen to a boom town, Kathy. Not many last long."

Undaunted, she held her pleased, musing expression. "Why, only yesterday you were talking about the new wells west of town," she reminded him teasingly. "How they extended the field. I'm just thinking of what might be and what it means to us."

"I know," he said without expression.

"If the town grows, Tom can go to school regularly like other boys. Not just a few months each year." She paused and Tom caught the earnesteness in her long sigh. "We'll have church buildings. There'll be paved streets like in Reedville, new stores, a bright red depot. We can stay here—grow up with the town. Be somebody."

"Kathy," he began and the frown edged into his face again. "I hope everything works out. But let's not count on it too much, just in case."

Her face darkened and, for several moments, Tom saw the same uncertainty between them. She rose quickly to clear the table.

Dusk fell. His father lighted the hall kerosene lamp, his face unreadable as he turned up the wick and a yellow glow filled the room. Later, John Worth dried the dishes for his wife and you could hear them in the kitchen, speaking of everything except that morning.

By late evening Tom decided his father had no intention of telling. He carried the realization to bed and was still awake when a knock sounded at the front door. Cab Morgan's voice boomed through the house. His heavy body made the floor creak.

"John," he said, "we've called a special meeting of the merchants Sunday night. Eight o'clock sharp. Over Landow's store."

"Meeting?"

"Don't you figure it's time we organized?" Morgan shot back. "This morning showed that. Why, you might've been killed, John. Aw, I know how you

feel, eatin' crow in front of a crowd, even after he put up his gun. But I don't care what people say, you had good reasons or you'd have fought him," he finished with some sympathy.

A stillness followed. Tom found himself upright in bed, straining to hear.

"Who had a gun?" His mother's words were half swallowed, dragged up from her throat. "John, you didn't tell me."

"I was going to, Kathy. Later. I didn't want to worry you."

"Sorry, Mrs. Worth," Morgan interrupted hastily. "I thought you knew. I'll run along. Can we count on you, John?"

"I guess so, Cab."

Morgan clumped out. His heavy boots rapped across the yard, faded in the night, before Tom's father spoke again.

Tom heard his father's voice.

"Duff Naves is in town. He had the gun."

"Naves? Oh, no!"

"He came to the office this morning. Hines was out. Later, he shot one of Simon's hounds. That's how it started."

"That old Indian!"

"Wasn't his fault. I thought Naves was going to shoot him. Then, when Naves offered to fight me, I backed down."

"He's caught up with us, just when we thought—"

She did not finish and Tom's father, pacing back and forth on the creaky floor, said with a firm gentleness, "You quit fretting about it. He can't send me back. I served my time for mixing with his bunch."

Without a sound, Tom slipped from his bed to the door. His mother was slumped in a chair, her hands wadding a handkerchief. What held him rigid, though, was the sight of her face—the sickened shock there.

"What did he say?" she persisted in a voice much dimmer than Tom had ever heard.

"Just passing through the country."

"That all?"

"He didn't say much."

"He wants something," she said, an ancient knowledge within her. "Why else would he come here? Remember, he fixed it so you took the blame before. Oh, John, why can't you turn him in? He's an outlaw. He's killed men."

Tom's father stopped, in the grip of a powerful emotion. "And have him tell Hines that an ex-jailbird is handling company funds?" He shook his head savagely. "No, I can't do that. Besides, there's no law in Rocky City."

She stared up at him, her face white. "What can we do?"

"We'll have to wait and see, Kathy. But I know one thing for certain, I'm mighty tired of running."

On numb legs Tom went woodenly to his bed. Drawn tight, his mind spinning, he lay awake long after the house darkened and there was no sound save the wind off the blackjacks. He pulled tighter, loaded with an overwhelming fear and shame for his father. He beat his balled fist into the pillow, wet against his face.

A knot began to form in the pit of his stomach, and it was still there in the morning when his mother called him to breakfast.

LATER, Tom straggled behind as they walked through glassy sunshine to the open-air church, no more than a short row of seats shaded overhead by a framework of blackjack brush. Sitting on the rough bench, he was soon aware of the Reverend Mather, long-haired and showing need of a week's board somewhere, warning of Rocky City's increasing wickedness. There was a rough element drifting in, he shouted. Decent folks would have to stiffen their backbones . . .

Tom's mind wandered. He was suddenly alert as the preacher, waving his scarecrow arms at the climax of his sermon, called on everybody to have courage when enemies camped around. And to Tom, the Reverend Mather's penetrating glance appeared aimed straight at his father.

His own face reddening, Tom stole a sidelong look. His father had that far-

away expression, like in the office. He wasn't even listening. And as the people filed out after the services and his own family's turn came to shake hands, Tom thought the Reverend Mather took extra long today.

Once home, his father shed his coat and went to the woodpile behind the house, snatched up the double-edged ax and began chopping so fast you figured he had a hate against the scrubby logs.

"Tom," he said, after a minute, breathing deeply, "I know you're wondering about yesterday. Wondering why I didn't fight."

"I'm not—a bit." Tom tried to make it sound right. The moment he blurted it out, however, he knew he'd failed. Loyal, that was all, and miserable.

The gray eyes studied him. "Honest, now?"

"Yes, honest," Tom declared in a loud voice, too loud for conviction.

"You wouldn't be much of a boy if you didn't wonder why," his father said and buried the blade halfway. He left it there, his knuckles like white knobs around the handle. "I'd do the same in your place. Just remember this, sometimes it's harder not to fight."

Afterward, he labored without letup, making the chips fly, splitting and sizing the logs into stove-length pieces, cutting enough to cook Sunday dinner all summer. At intervals he rested and gazed off in his detached way.

Called to dinner, he ate slowly, lingering over his meal. At last he stood and took up his hat.

"Working today?" Tom's mother protested.

"Big week coming up." He smiled dryly. "And you know how Mister Hines is."

"Too well. But he won't be there—it's not that." Into her eyes edged a gleam of fear.

"It's nothing unusual. I worked last Sunday. Remember? Tom, you stay within call."

Upon reaching the screen door, his father slowed his steps and he looked at them with an intentness that was approving and also curiously sober. Something fast ran across his face. He was gone, then, and glancing through the window, Tom could see him striding up the path toward town.

Not long afterward Tom drifted outside, into the warm, still afternoon. He stood a moment. And when the woods called, as they always did if you watched good, the branches seeming to wink and signal all at once, he made tracks.

Inside the shadowed coolness of the black-boled timber, he was Texas Jack once more, this day on the Santa Fe Trail. Sure enough, what looked like a whole tribe of screeching Pawnees dusted up on their painted ponies, all raw to fight. So he tended to that business right off and rolled his wheels, in no great hurry now. He chased antelope and shot himself one buffalo whenever the fancy struck, which was anytime, because Texas Jack did as he pleased.

Somehow, though, the game lacked its old appeal today, and for the first time the thought began in him that maybe he was growing up. His mind kept going back to yesterday morning.

He was dog-trotting, circling, when he made out the flutter of movement along the road. A hat and next a tall shape. A few steps further he turned motionless, his mouth dropping open, watching his father stride down the road from town.

Tom started to call out. But the impulse died almost as it welled up, squeezed down by a peculiar unease that thinned to caution, formless and vague.

His father stepped to the timber's edge and peered in uncertainly, as if he expected somebody but wasn't sure. He gave a sharp, plaintive whistle.

Time dragged. Tom's heart tugged at the wall of his chest, thumping high, and he realized it wasn't right, spying this way. Yet, when he thought of leaving or calling, he could not act. Meanwhile, his father fidgeted, thrusting hands inside his pockets and kicking his boots at the ruts.

AT THAT moment dried branches snapped. His father straightened, stiffly waiting, and Tom saw horses in single file, bulking high. In front rode Duff Naves.

Everything in Tom seemed to tighten. Behind Naves came yesterday's surly campers, still dirtier and unshaven in daylight. The bony, quick-eyed man astride the fine blaze-faced bay, which irked Tom deeply, and the cranky, thick-bodied man aboard the dun. The polished handles of their pistols cast greasy glimmers above the worn holsters.

For no reason at all, Tom caught himself remembering the Reverend Mather's sermon. About enemies camped in close, and he called on the strength he needed suddenly and did not have.

Naves' swarthy face shone with a brittle satisfaction. He growled at Tom's father, who nodded heavily and turned up the road. The horsemen followed.

Something warned Tom to stick to cover as he trotted behind, drawn by a mixed urgency of fear and puzzlement. When the timber scanted out to prairie and Rocky City loomed, he took hesitantly to the road. From a distance back he saw Naves dismount and walk beside his father. Together they went past the storage yards. The campers, leading Naves' horse, reined out of view at the corner.

Tom stared a moment, in relief. Nothing was wrong. The campers were riding off. Scattered wagons and people marked the street. Not so many on Sunday afternoon; nevertheless, they provided a comfort, just the sight of them. Everything looked in place, even Simon Rolling Thunder hunkered on his heels in front of Rhiner's butcher shop, which was closed for the Sabbath. His restless hounds ranged the walk, again and again sniffing hungrily at Rhiner's door. Simon seemed to be dozing on the sun-drenched street.

The next instant Tom froze, his gaze pinned to the express office, watching his father unlock the door and enter. Pressing close behind was Naves.

A sense of wrongness stabbed Tom as his skinny legs carried him to the supply yards. Heaving for breath, he scrambled to the end of a rack of pipe, scanned the street, then pulled back instantly.

There, in the mouth of the alley, the campers slouched in their saddles. And yet Tom sensed an unmistakeable vigilance beneath their indifference. Something in the way their attention kept swinging to the corner.

The fear that Tom had almost driven from his mind moments ago stirred again, growing. He dreaded to look at the express office, and when he did, quickly, the feeling seemed to surge and swell. His dry throat contracted as understanding crashed through him.

His father was letting Duff Naves rob the office, while Naves' men waited with the horses!

Sound erupted without any warning. There was a gun booming, its deep-throated roar hanging muffled along the quiet street and turning Tom cold.

He saw Simon's head perk up, saw him jump to his feet and break into a lumbering run for the express office, his hounds racing playfully with him. Just before he reached the door, it jolted outward and a man sprang through.

Tom recognized Naves. He carried a lumpy sack. His pistol glinted in his hand. He half spun on the closing figure. Simon grabbed.

Naves' gun hand rose swiftly and chopped, the barrel taking Simon across his upflung arm before his face; and as Simon reeled backward, he shrilled to his dogs. Naves was free, only to come against the lean shapes crowding underfoot. He kicked and cursed.

Now Simon, crying out in Indian, lunged like an aroused brown bear. Naves slued around with his pistol, this time to kill.

Tom flinched at a single ear-splitting blast and waited for Simon to buckle. Instead, Naves jerked strangely. His sack dropped first and his pistol right after, making a hollow whap on the plank walk. Then he clapped both hands to his chest,

twisted back and fell.

Tom stared. He was scared to death and sick. Movement pulled his eyes sideward.

His father stood swaying in the powdersmoke doorway, gray-faced, that old .45 still leveled on Naves. He flicked Naves a quick look and limped toward the corner of the building.

In an instant Tom remembered, even before he heard the pounding racket and glimpsed the blaze-faced horse charging forward. There came a flash of flame from the rider's pistol, but Tom's father didn't go down. His own gun was bucking and suddenly the horse swerved off, riderless, and the third man was swapping directions, racing his mount out of town.

IT WAS over by the time Tom ran across. His father stood hard as a post for several moments, still defiant, strung tight. And that was the part Tom always remembered best, better than the gun battle. Him rooted there, kind of gaunt and great, with a terrible light in his eyes, with blood sopping high along his trouser leg and powdersmoke blooming around him.

All this before he clawed suddenly for the support of the building, missed, and crashed into the arms of Simon Rolling Thunder.

An awkward hurry seemed to come over Cab Morgan and Adam Hines after a minute in the cramped lamp-lit room that smelled like a doctor's medicine case.

"You won't run in any Fourth of July sack races, but you'll be there," Morgan boomed and started to go.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do," Hines murmured.

From his station by the foot of the bed, Tom saw a frown crease the lean, pale face on the pillow. "Wait a minute," his father said curtly.

They halted.

"There's something I want you to hear. Especially you, Mister Hines." He swallowed and Tom saw the sudden search of his glance upon his mother, then felt it himself, as if his father needed strength.

Morgan and Hines eyed each other. "It can wait," Hines replied agreeably, turning.

"No, it can't." Tom's father raised himself so abruptly that pain pinched his face. "You're going to have to hear this!"

Hines regarded him a moment, once again the old Mister Hines. All business, brisk, disapproving.

"I see you're determined to talk, John. However, there's nothing you can tell us about the holdup, or why Duff Naves happened to pick an off-trail place like Rocky City. We know because Naves' wounded friend has been talking his head off."

Surprise built in his father's eyes, then plain dismay. "So you already know?" he said.

"Most of it—enough. Naves' price to keep still to me was for you to let him rob the office. So you played him the hard way. Even took his insults in public. And now you want to tell me the very thing you fought to stop." In the next moment, the long, strict face of Mister Hines switched to a surprising meekness. "Good heavens, man! Maybe it mattered once, but not now. Come along, Cab. We'll be late for the meeting at Landow's store. Let's get up there before some fool passes an ordinance against loose dogs."

And suddenly they were gone from the room.

For a time nobody spoke. Then Tom's mother said, "Everyone's been asking about you, John. Simon Rolling Thunder was here."

"Sorry I missed him."

"You were sleeping. I—I told him to come back."

Her tone quickened his gaze.

"Tomorrow," she said. "On Sunday, too. He's coming to dinner."

"Why, that's fine, Kathy," Tom heard his father answer. "We'll be here. We're going to be in Rocky City a long time."

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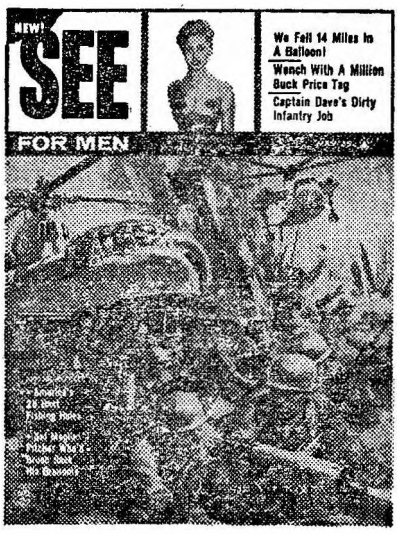

"Sometimes," he said, "like today, I have no feel for drawing a gun."

WHEN A MAN DIES

By PETE CURTIS

THE girl's lap was a warm, soft pillow for Dan Tice's head. The lilty song of the thrasher high in a tree, the drowsy sibilance of the creek and the silent, hot Texas day all but lulled Dan into as pleasant a sleep as a young man could want. Yet he knew that he should be getting back to the house, for practice time was drawing mighty near.

He opened his eyes and saw Nancy Thame's sweet, oval face tilted above his own. An amused smiled made her lips petal-smooth.

"Old sleepy-head," she whispered.

Dan Tice reached up and traced his fingers over the soft flesh of her neck. "I'll have to get back, Nancy. Lew will be waiting."

A sulky disapproval appeared in the darkening expression of her eyes, and her voice held a plaintive note.

"Why can't you miss just this once? We're having such a fine time."

On the heels of her complaint sounded

His old man raised him to be a killer — and so a killer he became!

a flat, echoless gunshot. The saddle ponies, drowsing in the shade of higher ground, stirred restlessly with the sudden noise. Dan pushed slowly to his feet. He lifted his arms, Indian-style, and stretched away the last delicious laziness of this drifting time. He smiled rather sheepishly at Nancy Thame, gripped the up-reaching hands and helped the girl lightly to her feet.

Nodding to a questioning look, he said, "That was Lew. I've let the sun slip by."

"He's such a mule-headed old devil. He knows you're with me today. I'll bet he did that on purpose," Nancy said.

Dan burst out laughing. "Practice time, honey. Doesn't make any difference who I'm with or where. Practice time, that's all."

Her depthless sulkiness could not entirely conceal worry. "Dan, what's Lew trying to do, anyway? Why does he make you work at it so hard?"

"I'm a Tice. In Lew's mind that's reason enough."

"Don't you ever get tired of it?"

"Sometimes," he answered. "Like today, for instance. I have no feel for it."

"Seems to me Lew's been much more strict since that trouble in town," she said.

His stare was scolding and critical. "Oh, come right out and say he killed John Henley Smith, Nancy. There's nothing wrong about that."

"I can't bring myself to say it so matter-of-factly. After all, Lew's your father."

A trace of iron came into Dan's tone. "He shot John Henley Smith in self-defense. When he said John Henley was carrying a gun and made a move for it, I believed Lew. When he said one of John Henley's followers sneaked the gun out of John Henley's waistband and ran off with it, I believed him again." He paused, the anxious, bitter time of that affair sweeping back keenly. "Even with witnesses to back his story, there's too many John Henley Smith kin around Buckhorn for Lew to have kept his town marshal job."

An instant, apologetic light touched his eyes. "That didn't mean you or your family," he said.

"Oh, I know that, Dan," she said, assuring him. "Heavens, we were so distant in kinship to John Henley Smith that it practically means nothing. Even so, I'm certainly not proud of having been even remotely related to a man who had killed over thirty men. Why John Henley was ever paroled—well, goodness, they might have known he'd eventually violate his parole."

Dan mused, "I figure the tip Lew got that John Henley was packing hardware came from one of the man's enemies."

"Well," said Nancy. "It's all over."

"Not for Lew, it isn't. He thinks we Tices are fair game in this Buckhorn country."

A twinkle broke through the sober cast of Nancy's expressive eyes. "Well, I know one Tice who's fair game for *me!*"

DAN chuckled and twitched her pert nose, and helped her up the bank, made slippery by weeds. His eyes trailed over the firm roundness of her body, appreciating the sweet ripening of womanhood, the graceful, gentle movements.

They swung to saddles, and Dan said, "I'll come calling."

"Don't stay away too long." She cocked her head and her dark blue eyes studied him with intimate amusement. The tip of her nose and the skin over the cheekbones were faintly sun-dusted, her hair a shiny, silky black. He grinned at her, his brow lifting quizzically.

But without further word she turned her pony's head in the direction of her father's ranch. Dan watched her ride off, the strong pull the girl had on him was a kind of sweetly troublesome one. He drew in a long breath to ease a tight feeling in his chest, and jokingly reproached himself. "You dang fool. You'll be getting love-struck." He touched spurs to the horse's flanks and rode for home.

His father was seated in a rawhide-bottomed chair in the porch shade. Lew Tice's eyes followed him about as he unsaddled and turned the horse out. When he crossed the yard to the house, Lew was standing spraddle-legged and with

long arms akimbo, clearly upset by Dan's tardiness. Lew Tice was a Texas fighting man, a tall one, his eyes piercing and fiery-lucid as a hawk's, his mouth grim-lined in an unnoticeably thin and tough-hided face.

"Off with the Thame girl," Lew's rough voice boomed, "when you should be at your practice. I seen you out there. She's got Smith blood in her veins."

"So has half the population around here," Dan replied tersely. "She didn't know John Henley Smith any more'n I know an Eskimo."

"Still no excuse for you to reneg on your practice stint." Lew's voice became intense. "Now, you listen. I been watching this sort of easy way come over you. You been slacking, boy. Your practice comes first, no matter what. It's the most important thing in your life, and you dang well remember it!"

He turned swiftly to the chair and snatched up the gun rig. He shoved it at Dan. "Get out there and go to work."

Dan unbuckled the belt and strapped it on. He stooped to tie the toe of the holster to his thigh, and voiced lamely, "Awful hot today, Lew."

"Get out there," snapped his father, motioning with impatience.

There wasn't an inch variation in their heights. Lew was broader and heavier, for Dan had not yet reached full maturity. A few more years would lessen the discrepancy.

Dan drank from the water bucket, then moved rather listlessly into the yard, his shoulders hunched more than usual. He halted with legs braced comfortably apart. And his movement, then, was so swift as to be past before the eye could register it; the gun in his hand bucked and roared five times, a slight pause between the fourth and fifth shots until the sight could be lined up on another target.

The targets were tin cans scattered in a certain area of the yard; cans battered, punched, jagged and twisted from countless bullets. There was a thick, heavy plank Lew had erected, six feet high from ground to top, braced with timber at the back, all of it sunk deeply and solidly into the earth. Lew also had painted on its surface the crude silhouette of a man. Dan called it the Black Ghost. The portion of the shape which represented a man's chest was splintered and chopped by many a round of target practice. An irregular hole, where daylight showed through, had finally been bullet-chewed into the wood. It was a perfect effect, however, because the bullets had punched through where the heart of a man would normally be located.

Dan went through the paces—draw and shoot, draw and shoot—until his eyes stung and his mouth and nose were bitterly dry from gunsmoke. Sweat trickled down the planes of his young face and sweat made dark patches on his shirt.

His father stood watching critically from the porch. Now and then Lew Tice shook his head with disapproval. During a reloading pause, he shouted sternly, "Put some grit in that shootin', boy. Put your mind to it!"

Dan's motions were strictly instinctive this day—mechanical. It was too all-fired hot to be sucking in acrid gunsmoke, the dust under his boots giving up heat as a kitchen range would when baking bread. His shooting was near perfect, though. The lead sang true, and it sang often.

THEN came the third phase of this ritual. Lew strapped on his own gun and stepped into the glare of the sun. With guns empty of cartridges, they faced each other across thirty yards of ground, Lew as grim and foreboding as though he were about to make a kill, motionless until his hand jumped to gun. Dan tried to match the draw of his father. It was not an easy thing to do.

This simulated gun duel was performed over and over, always dragging on until it seemed to Dan pointless in result. Yet he knew there was sound reason for it, simply because it was part of his father's planned routine, a part of the way his father forged a top gunhand.

Lew Tice had the battle scars and savvy of an old wolf. His gun had brought him

through, in one piece, many a tight and bloody fracas. He'd ridden with the Texas trail crews to the northern cattle markets, and he'd operated his own gaming pits in those wild and woolly towns. He'd been a Texas lawman off and on, the same as he'd been on the night he shot and killed John Henley Smith. Now he was a part time rancher, and faro dealer for the Alhambra Saloon in Buckhorn, living on in a country where many feared him, and hated him because they chose to believe that he had shot down a drunk and unarmed man.

He and Dan could have departed from the Buckhorn country when ill feeling turned against Lew, but it was their home too, and Lew was not a man to fade out of the picture when things went bad. It only sharpened his fangs.

He called this day's practice session to a halt, and Dan transferred water from the bucket to a basin and rinsed off. As he was toweling himself, Lew said, "Reckon you're far enough along to start your brag. Don't back down from any man. You're as good as the best."

Dan was surprised by the compliment and not a little pleased. He remarked lightly, "When it comes to shootin' at tin cans and painted boards, maybe."

Lew's stabbing look was deadly serious. "Don't think of a man with a gun as any different. Just another target."

"Easy to say," Dan drawled, grinning wryly. "That dang Black Ghost out there can't shoot back."

There was a long moment in which Lew Tice stared at his son with rankling displeasure, and then he murmured, "Your easy banter has a yellow smell to it."

Dan's face instantly sobered and his eyes showed hurt and resentment. "You know me better than that, Lew."

"Then watch your tongue," his father replied surlily. "A Tice doesn't make loose talk."

The incident was passed over soon enough, forgotten by supper time. Later, Dan saddled a pony and rode to Buckhorn, a taste for cold beer at the end of this hot day and a few hands of stud a pleasant inducement. Before he had left the house, though, Lew had told him impressively, "Remember, don't back down from any man. There's nobody in these parts who can touch your draw-and-shoot."

Dan racked his horse among a string of others in front of the Square Deal Saloon and entered that playhouse with lighthearted anticipation. An out-sized bunch of cowpunchers, representing the two largest ranches in the Buckhorn country and about evenly divided, were by chance in town and in the same establishment, and their noisy camaraderie made the Square Deal an unlikely place for silent and museful drinking.

Their rough, spirited antics did not unsettle Dan Tice; he liked the noise, the smells, the bright and obviously carefree atmosphere. He took his beer at the bar with a feeling of solid contentment and then made himself the sixth member of a stud poker game already in progress.

Dan was bucking a losing streak when the inevitable fight broke out between the two factions of boisterous riders. In moments the Square Deal was a blast box of turbulence.

DAN TICE stepped away gingerly to place his back against the wall, a rolling excitement building within him as he watched the sea of bobbing heads and flailing arms. No man was immune from the pummeling. He shoved and pushed to keep himself free of the pressing edge of fighters, but at last his own suppressed and youthful recklessness spilled over and he jumped into the swirl of grunting, crazily struggling bodies.

There was no space nor time for finesse. He was hit from the side and butted from the back, and he commenced pumping his fists willy-nilly into anybody who gave him fight, having the peculiar sensation of his feet being mostly off the floor, that he was riding the crest of a swift race of flood water.

It had flared quickly and was dying almost as fast, like a bolt of lightning striking and fading statically. There was no

malice, no urge to hurt fatally. Many men in the melee were laughing, but when the bill for damages reached their respective bosses, that laughter no doubt would be echoed with mournful wails.

Dan finally made it to the swinging doors and was propelled through to the walk. His chest rose and fell with heavy breathing, a trace of a grin was on his lips, his eyes were bright and flashing. He took out his bandanna and dabbed at a trickle of blood coming from his nostrils and a fair flow of it from a cut cheekbone. His right eye was swelling, the flesh a wickedly inflamed hue, and it had a tight, numb feeling. The knuckles of his fists stung now, two knuckles on his right hand scraped raw, and he sucked at the burning sting and then shook the hand.

The racket inside gradually diminished, but it was late now, time he should be riding. With the blood flow from his nose and cuts checked stopped, he forked saddle and rode out of Buckhorn with the good feeling inside him of an evening well spent.

His father was asleep when he got home. Next morning, as he came into the kitchen for breakfast, Lew Tice saw his face and stared as though thunderstruck. Rage suffused Lew's sharp features, strikingly pronounced as it broke through his normally sullen morning expression. Dan had been on the verge of throwing out a casual reference to last evening's free-for-all, but the words stuck in his throat. He was startled when Lew loomed toward him like a cranky bear and snatched up his right hand.

Lew intently examined the hand with his fiery eyes, pressing fingers roughly over the knuckles. He awoke pain in the barked and somewhat swollen hand, causing Dan to wince.

Lew exploded, "You crazy maverick! Never use your fists on a man."

The heat of his truculence swirled around Dan, and wildness that was an extreme rareness for Lew Tice. Dan muttered dazedly, "Nothing to fret about, Lew. Be as good as new in a couple days." He tried to pull the hand away.

"A broken bone could maybe stiffen a finger for life! Don't you know that?"

Dan shook his head in confusion, and Lew stormed on, "Enough batterings and the knuckles swell and stay that way. The hand loses its quickness, its—its limberness. I thought you had better savvy than to use fists. By damn, I never do!"

And it was true. Lew Tice had never been in a rough-and-tumble brawl. He settled arguments with his gun.

Anger began working through Dan's bewilderment, and he jerked his hand out of Lew's grasp. "I'm not going to shoot a man for throwing a haymaker at me."

"Use the barrel of your gun on his head!" Lew ranted. "Listen to me, boy. There's damn few gunfighters who can draw and shoot the way you do—maybe none. I ain't ever seen the man your equal, and that includes me. You're a diamond, boy. A real diamond. You can be the greatest Tice in a line of top gunhands. Don't throw these years of training to hell by mixing in barroom brawls."

"How many have I been in?" Dan challanged sarcastically. "Not enough for you to snort around like a wild bull."

Lew's long arm swept out and the palm of the hand cracked sharply against Dan's cheek. Dan stepped back with the shock of the blow showing in his expression. His eyes blinked and watered and his hand reached up quickly to caress the stung flesh.

Lew warned hoarsely, "Don't ever use that tone on me, boy."

THE sound of Dan's breathing was harsh and quick, his chest swelling as fury smote him momentarily. His jaw muscles rippled as he clenched his teeth together. He pivoted and slammed out of the kitchen.

Lew's raking voice bounded into the outdoors. "Come back here, you sassmouthed maverick! I ain't through telling you a few things."

But Dan kept going, his bootheels gouging the earth of the yard. In moments he had a horse saddled and himself in leather, pounding hell-bent for nowhere.

Lew stood in the doorway watching the dust marker recede. Maybe I shouldn't have cuffed him, he thought. He ain't a kid no more. He'll ride around till his mad wears off, then wind up over at the Thame's ranch.

Lew's surmise was correct. Two hours later Dan was sitting down to a man-sized breakfast in the Thame's kitchen. Nancy's mother discreetly left the two young folks to themselves, and busied herself in another room of the house. Thame was out riding with his crew. The mother and father had nothing against Dan, but they were always a little chary, a little uncertain of him. He was a Tice, and it was common knowledge in the Buckhorn country that Lew was moulding him into a fighting Tice.

He explained his cut and bruised face and told of the ruckus with his father.

Nancy remarked, "It should be clear now what Lew expects of you."

"Oh, I've known all along," Dan answered shortly, his anger blunted but still riding him. "It's not what he wants that rowels me, but the way he goes about it. If he'd use a little horse sense about all this, there wouldn't be any reason for a flare-up. But he's always preaching to me about it, eyeing me and keeping me close-penned like I was some prize stag."

Nancy's face was solemnly pretty as she watched Dan fork food into his mouth with absent-minded briskness.

"You're different from your father, Dan. You're easy-going where he's rawhide strict. You're—well, you're fun-loving where he's tough business. And you've got a warmth, a feel for things, for life and Lew's heart is cold and icy and unforgiving. Dan, Lew's god is his gun."

"That last sounds like one of your old man's sayings," he said thoughtlessly.

"Well, whose ever it is, I don't care," she retorted, her black hair jouncing when she snapped up her chin. "It's the truth!"

Dan's eyes blinked slowly, meditatively. "What's a man without a gun in this country? I'm a Tice. I like to look at guns, to handle them, to shoot them."

Nancy was silent a long moment, then she intoned softly, "Dan, you haven't got your 'man for breakfast,' as the saying goes. Have you ever thought how it would be to kill a man? Could you do it so easily as Lew?"

His eyes swung cuttingly to her with surprise, then faltered to gaze at his plate, a scowl forming on his brow. He became so enwrapped with inward thoughts that he did not hear the approach of a horse in the yard until Nancy remarked, "Someone's coming."

Lew Tice's voice sounded his name.

Dan and Nancy exchanged puzzled, wondering looks, and Dan pushed his chair back and went out to the gallery. Lew was sitting a horse with that stern, commanding demeanor of his, but in his right hand he held two cane poles, and the hardness of his face and the unyielding burn of his eyes had retreated to some reservoir of his crusty being.

"Let's go catch a mess of panfish for dinner, boy," he said roughly. Embarrassment flickered across his features when he saw Nancy come through the doorway to stand next to Dan.

Lew was apologizing for the slap, Dan knew, the nearest thing his father could extend openly. Dan slowly felt the scorch and moodiness of the morning flow out of him. He let an easy, forgiving grin show his feelings.

"Sure, Lew. We haven't been fishing in a long time."

"Nancy," Lew invited with awkward generosity. "You come along."

The unexpectedness of it flustered the girl. "I—I can't, Lew. I'm needed here today."

"Well, then," he mumbled heavily. "Some other time, maybe."

Before Dan stepped out to his pony, he half turned toward Nancy and said in a whisper, "You think that heart is all ice now?"

THE next day Dan resumed practice on his draw-and-shoot. Nancy's talk of a 'man for breakfast' had not completely stilled itself in his mind, and at the practice session's end he inquired

hesitantly of his father, "Lew, you never told me, and I never asked before, but—well, how does it feel to kill a man?"

Lew Tice was actually startled. The flash of his eyes betrayed him. Yet in seconds he was pushing a long, measuring stare against Dan.

"A man with a gun don't sort his feelings. Don't let such notions enter your head."

"I was just wondering, that's all."

Lew was silent for a time, then said almost viciously, "Killing a man is no different from killing an animal. Remember that, boy. No different from killing an animal."

It was something new to preach to Dan in the weeks that rolled on. Dan was ripe for his first gunfight. Obsession for it gripped Lew in the end, for with the passage of time the rancor and fight of John Henley Smith kin or others in the Buckhorn country did not formulate in fact as it did in imagination. The hate was there, Lew felt, but not the fight. No one wanted to face the business end of a Tice firearm.

This dearth of initial combat for his son greatly disturbed Lew. He, himself, had been two years younger than Dan when he had shot and killed his first man in a draw-and-shoot. He knew that the first kill was the important one, the one which gave those following a nerveless familiarity.

So he watched and waited, keeping Dan at the daily practice stint, an insistent anxiousness riding him to the point of exasperation. These days found him all the more snarly and surly as he waited for the first break which would start his son following in the footsteps of his and other fighting Tices.

The break came with the visit to Buckhorn of a young gunman of artificial self-importance and arrogant mannerisms—a dandy who called himself the Lightning Kid. What brought him to Lew's attention was the round of talk that had the Kid entering a Buckhorn saloon and, with soft kid gloves, flouting his challenge by slapping each man's face.

Lew keenly surveyed this foppishly attired gunman for a few days and decided that here was ripe pickings for Dan. The Lightning Kid naturally made his presence known in every saloon and gambling hall in town. He made the rounds of the tables with scornful airiness. His number came up the night he sat at Lew's faro layout.

Lew, his insidious scheme giving him perverse amusement, said to the Lightning Kid, "You know my boy, Dan, don't you, Kid?"

"I've seen him around," replied the high-pitched, haughty voice.

Lew's thumb slowly riffled the corner of a pack of playing cards; his hawk eyes shone harshly. "Dan says your brag with the gloves that first day in town was a fake. Says you were lucky he wasn't in the place at the time. Dan says you're pure bluff."

The Lightning Kid knew the significance of those words—the fight or run meaning of them—and he was no fool. His thin face had blanched from the pronouncement, but he kept a good front when he murmured, "Lew, you must hate your boy, to want him killed."

Lew shrugged. "Just passing on what he wanted me to tell you."

"Is he too yellow to face me with them words in his own mouth?"

"You ask him," Lew voiced softly, nodding toward the swing doors. "He's eating over at the cafe, but he'll be along soon. Why don't you wait for him outside, Kid?"

The Lightning Kid stared at Lew Tice. The brilliant cast of his eyes could have been interpreted as anything from wicked kill-lust to freezing fright. He stood up then, slowly, and turned to the doors.

A grim smile curved Lew's rigid mouth. He started the word of the impending gunfight with, "The Lightning Kid is gunning for my boy, Dan. Come out and get your look at the fastest Tice to ever draw a gun!"

He stationed himself in the next doorway east of the Alhambra, his eyes piercing the early shadows and diffused glows of the street, swinging from the Lightning Kid who seemingly waited so unconcerned

to traverse the wide thoroughfare where beamed the brightly, half-steamed window of the cafe. An excitement he hadn't felt in years swayed him, and intenseness of anticipation to view the fighting product of his arduous training campaign, gave Lew a hollowness of belly which he had never known in his own gunfights.

DARK shapes of men flitted yonder, blending with the shadows, and then Lew saw his son come out of the cafe. Dan began the diagonal cross-street walk which would bring him to the Alhambra's doors, so wholly unaware of what was coming that Lew felt a little sorry for him, a little apprehensive that maybe the startlement would unnerve him too much. But it would be a good lesson, a good way to break in.

When Dan Tice reached the middle of the street, the Lightning Kid's falsetto voice sounded from beneath the overhang of the Alhambra, oddly shallow as its challenge ran out to halt Dan in his tracks. "Dan Tice, I got your war-talk. I'm throwing it back in your face!"

Dan was a still, arrested shape in the dusky light. "Who's that? Who's talking?"

The expensively dressed figure of the Lightning Kid became a second entity in that light and Dan Tice, his eyes peering with the utmost of perplexed intensity, rapped sharply, "What's your game, Kid?"

But a second voice, a hoarse baritone, reached Dan from the recessed shadows on his right. It was Lew speaking.

"He's just another Black Ghost, boy. Just another target."

Dan had not stirred with the sound of his father's voice. He threw his words at the now motionless shape down-street. "I've made no war-talk against you, Kid. What's your game?"

The Lightning Kid made his move then, a fatal move—for him. Dan Tice's gun was jumped from leather and roaring its death talk even before the Kid could complete his throw-down, and Dan was a little shocked by the slowness and clumsiness of the Kid, so at variance with the smoothly liquid action of his father in their simulated gun duels. And in the precise moment of triggering, it *had* been like shooting at 'just another target.'

Yet the cold, objective feeling was not in his breast now, for the Lightning Kid was rolling in the dust, his legs thrashing feebly. With a kind of stiff-legged walk Dan moved toward the downed Kid, and with the interval half closed his father fell in beside him and laid an arm across Dan's shoulders.

Lew said keenly, "That was shootin', Dan boy. Pure beauty to watch."

Men had converged on the Lightning Kid. They formed a ragged circle, their faces oddly void of emotion. Some fell aside and made passage for Dan and Lew.

Dan saw the Kid lying on his back, unmoving except for his eyes. His gun and stetson lay in the dust near him. His yellow hair appeared vivid against the dust. Blood trickled from his mouth corners and his breathing was a sawing rasp.

The Lightning Kid's eyes found Dan Tice—eyes shiny with the fear of death, poignantly expressive with deep hurt. "Like a little kid, scared and alone," Dan whispered. No one heard him.

"Somebody help him," Dan voiced, glancing up and running his eyes along the peculiarly stoic faces of the crowd.

"In seconds he'll be dead," said Lew.

Dan stared down at the dying Lightning Kid. His lips compressed bitterly. Suddenly his hands moved to the buckle of his gunbelt, his fingers worked swiftly and he jerked off the rig. He slammed it against his father's belly.

"What's this you're doing, boy?" Astonishment showed on Lew's face.

"I'm riding. I'm getting Nancy Thame and riding away from this Buckhorn country. I never want to shoot a gun again as long as I live."

It was the only way, Dan Tice knew. His father would never understand; there could be no living with the man after giving up the gun. He walked away.

Lew Tice stared down at the gun rig in his hands, a man shocked to absolute stillness, standing as a figure of granite.

By CHARLES PUTKEY

The young Reverend unbuttoned his frock coat and moved along the bar toward the outlaws

The SIXGUN PARSON

When all else failed, Reverend James Enright bought a gun

SUMMER heat smothered the town of West Bend under a blanket of oppression unlike anything the Reverend James Enright had known back in Vermont. A haze of red dust hung almost constantly over the town. The odor of well-sweated horse flesh was ever present. Occasional flies of enormous size and a particular relish for the taste of consecrated flesh harrassed the young minister.

Stopping in front of Clayton's general merchandise store, James Enright pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. Taking off his black, wide-brimmed hat, he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. A tall man, thin of chest and narrow of hips, his hair was black and neatly trimmed. Deep-set eyes and prominent cheekbones imparted a lean, ascetic look to his youthful face.

Replacing his hat, the Reverend Enright entered Clayton's. Inside the store the heat was even more intense. An unceiled roof concentrated the sun's rays, turning the store into a veritable oven.

"Howdy, Parson," Henry Clayton said, greeting the young minister cheerfully. "Nice weather for July."

"Hot," James Enright replied tersely.

"That's what I said," Henry rambled on.

"Nice weather if you like it hot."

"I don't," the clergyman answered.

"Wouldn't be near so hot if you took that coat off," Henry said, and appraised the man.

The Reverend Enright shifted uneasily on his feet. The frock coat he wore, though woolen, was as much a mark of his office as the collar about his neck. In Vermont a minister dressed as a minister, regardless of the weather. In three brief months the unorthodox social standards of West Bend had not yet shorn him of his Vermont-bred instinct for propriety.

"Got to get rid of some rats," the minister said, changing the subject. He was much too hot for an inspired defense of his wearing apparel.

"Got just the thing," Henry said, digging about in a counter heaped up with door locks, bridles, buggy whips. "Latest trap on the market," he said proudly, holding up a contrivance similar in size and construction to a wire wastebasket.

"Too small," the minister commented.

"Too small?" Henry questioned apprehensively. "Just how big are these rats you aim to get rid of?"

"About six feet tall and approximately a hundred and eighty pounds—on an average." There was no trace of humor evident on the Reverend Enright's face.

"Six feet! Why, Parson," Henry scoffed, "you know what the Good Book says about joshing."

"What does the Good Book say about joshing, Henry?"

"Well, now," the storekeeper drawled, his face reddening slightly, "I can't exactly quote book and verse, but it appears to me that you're exaggerating just a mite, Parson."

"Exaggerating?" the minister asked. "Just how tall would you say Slade Johnston is?"

"Slade Johnston!" Henry Clayton laughed. "Why, Parson, you'll have a deuce of a time getting Slade Johnston into a trap."

"I came in to buy a Colt revolver, Henry," James Enright calmly informed the storekeeper. "I intend to run Slade Johnston and his gang out of town at the point of a sixgun."

"You ain't been walking around in the sun with your hat off, Parson?"

"I have complete control of my faculties, Henry," the minister replied. "I am suffering from neither sunstroke nor delusions of grandeur. The law, unfortunately, has failed to rid West Bend of Slade Johnston and his men. As a self-respecting man, I feel obliged to do something about it."

Henry Clayton stared at the minister with incredulous eyes. "Why you wouldn't stand the chance of a snowball in—in—Don't you know that Slade Johnston is the fastest man on the draw in the whole blamed Territory? Even the sheriff thinks it'd be pure suicide to try and arrest Johnston."

"The sheriff could deputize sufficient men to help him," the Reverend Enright commented. "The Johnston gang couldn't fight the whole town."

"Maybe not," the storekeeper admitted, "but they'd make a powerful lot of widows and orphans in a big hurry. They're professional gunmen."

"I am well aware of that," the minister said. "I saw them practicing their trade on Ben Richards the day before yesterday."

James Enright walked to the showcase in which Henry Clayton kept his stock of revolvers. Lifting the lid of the showcase, the minister tested the balance of each gun. He selected a bone-handled forty-five. He also purchased a gunbelt, a holster and a box of cartridges. Reluctantly the storekeeper began wrapping the minister's purchases in an old newspaper.

"Just one question," James Enright said.

"Shoot, Parson," Henry replied, interrupting his wrapping chore.

The minister picked the sixgun up from the counter. "Just how do you load this contrivance?" he asked.

Henry Clayton shrugged his shoulders resignedly, took the Colt in his hands and demonstrated the loading technique. "It holds six cartridges," he explained.

"That's why they call it a sixgun."

"Looks relatively simple," the clergyman admitted.

"This end," the storekeeper said, indicating the muzzle of the Colt, "is the end you point at Slade Johnston."

"I'll try to remember, Henry," the Reverend Enright said.

WITH the bulky package under his arm, James Enright walked through the dusty streets of West Bend. The pastor's residence, a small, white cottage, stood beside the community church on the outskirts of town. After a quick appraisal of the effect the heat was having on his roses, the minister entered his home. Taking off neither his hat nor his coat, he strapped on the gunbelt. He slipped the Colt into the holster and walked over to the full-length mirror which stood in the parlor.

An hour later he was still before the mirror when a frantic knock sounded at the door. Turning away from the mirror, he opened the door. Before him stood his fiancé, Julie Bachman. Her flushed face glistened with tiny beads of perspiration. Several of her golden curls hung awry. Beneath her high-necked dress her bosom rose and fell with her rapid breathing.

"Henry's been spreading the vilest rumor about town," she gasped. "As soon as I heard it I rushed right over."

"Come in, Julie," the minister said. He led her into the parlor, then resumed his place before the mirror. "I've been practicing. Look."

With a suddent movement, his right hand swept aside the skirt of his coat and disappeared from Julie's sight. Moments later the hand reappeared, clutching the Colt. Sighting the gun on his own image in the mirror, James Enright squeezed the trigger. The hammer of the revolver clicked sharply. There was no resultant shot.

"Not loaded," the minister explained, smiling. "Not a bad draw for a beginner?"

"So it's true," Julie said angrily. "You *are* going gunning for Slade Johnston. Are you completely out of your mind?"

"West Bend has no room for the likes of Slade Johnston," the Reverend Enright declared soberly.

"But you're a man of God," the girl cried. "You have no right to go strutting about town with a Colt on your hip like some drunken cowhand."

"And Slade had no right to shoot down Ben Richards," the minister retorted. "It was cold-blooded murder."

"But it wasn't murder," the blonde girl protested. "Ben drew first."

"I saw it, Julie," James Enright said. "Slade deliberately provoked Ben into drawing his gun. Ben was drunk, he hadn't a chance."

The young minister paused, gazing hopefully into his financé's eyes for some hint of sympathy. He saw none. Obviously she had no comprehension of the motives which were driving him to pit his life against Slade Johnston's."

"This morning I visited Emmett Pearson," James Enright continued. "They told me it was Emmett. I would never have recognized him after the beating Slade and his men gave him last night."

"Emmet Pearson was a fool," Julie Bachman cried.

"Does hitting a lucky streak in poker make a man a fool?" the young man asked.

"Playing poker with Slade Johnston makes him a fool," Julie replied.

"Granted," the minister agreed, "but no fool deserves the beating Emmett got last night."

"Maybe he didn't," the girl replied, defiance still crisp in her voice, "but does that give you an excuse to appoint yourself a committee of one to make this town safe for drunks and fools?"

"I'm a man, Julie. A self-respecting man. I want to be able to hold my head up, to live at peace with my conscience."

"At peace with your conscience," the girl scoffed. "How are you going to reconcile that Colt with your conscience? How will you ever be able to mount a pulpit again and preach submission to the will of God, or patience in time of

trouble, or forgiveness of enemies. If you go through with this madness you'll lose your parish, and—" she added slowly, with obvious regret—"me."

For a moment he said nothing. His hesitation was not an attempt to gain time for a decision. He had no decision to make. Though he loved Julie deeply, he knew what he had to do—even at the risk of losing her love.

"Without self-respect, a man is nothing," he said slowly. "I lost my self-respect when I stood by and watched Ben Richards die. I intend to get it back."

THAT evening, as he passed the white, clapboard church on his way to the Silver Dollar, James Enright considered the ironic turn his life had taken. Believing in the basic goodness of man, he had left Vermont intending to bring salvation to the frontiers. Now he was on the verge of losing the very faith which had brought him West. The foundations on which he had built his life were crumbling. He had come to preach love of God and of fellow man. But now the only fire that was burning in his heart was one of hatred. He was no longer a man of God, a man of peace. Slade Johnston had turned him into a man of violence.

The Reverend Enright pushed his way through the swinging doors of the Silver Dollar. The glare of the many gas lights temporarily blinded him. As he accustomed himself to the brightness of the room, he sensed a change of mood sweeping through the saloon. The piano player glanced up and saw the minister standing in the doorway. His fingers continued striking the keys of the piano, but the tune was suddenly bereft of its gaiety. The uninhibited laughter of the men and women gradually died away as they turned to gaze on him with apprehensive eyes. The card and dice games continued, but the actions of the players became wooden and heavy.

Slowly the young clergyman started down the aisle between the bar and the gambling tables. As he walked he sensed the men behind him moving aside, out of the line of possible gunfire. Slade Johnston sat at a poker table in the far corner of the Silver Dollar. His back was to the wall. At his right sat Sonny Williams. Behind these two stood Rex Loverich and Jake Mason. These four men comprised the Slade Johnston gang. Each a reputed killer, each rumored to be sought by sheriffs from a half-dozen States and Territories, yet they openly walked the streets of West Bend. Their contempt for the law of the town was obvious. Sheriff Ridgeway, an adequate lawman under ordinary circumstances, was too old to match his gunhand with any one of Johnston's killers.

At the outlaws' table Johnston shuffled a deck of cards, apparently unaware of the minister's entrance. Slade was a large man. Bulky of chest and shoulder, his hands were, nevertheless, slender, his fingers exceptionally quick. He wore a several-day growth of beard. His lip was curled in a perpetually insolent smile.

"Johnston," the Reverend Enright said sharply, "I want words with you."

The outlaw did not look up. He slapped the deck of cards on the table. "Cut," he muttered to the man on his left.

"I said I want words with you, Johnston," the minister snapped. As he spoke he unbuttoned his frock coat. The cartridges lining the gunbelt shone in sharp contrast to the black clothing he wore.

Johnston leaned back in his chair. Looking up at the clergyman, he worked his lower jaw wordlessly. Finally he spoke. "Make it short, Parson," he growled. "I just lost a flush to a full house. Losing makes me irritable, Parson."

"Johnston," James Enright said, surprised at the calm strength of his voice, "I'm giving you until tomorrow sundown to get out of town. Let the sun set on you here in West Bend and I'm coming after you."

Slade Johnston spat on the floor, picked up the cards and casually began dealing them.

"Johnson, I said—"

"I heard what you said, Parson," the

outlaw leader interrupted angrily. "We've got a poker game going here. You've had your words, now get."

The disinterested manner in which the outlaw had received the threat infuriated the young minister. He had expected anything from Johnston—anger, insults, contempt—but not indifference. Had he been spat upon he would not have been more enraged.

In two quick steps James Enright stood beside Slade Johnston. Surprised, Slade looked up. His hand went for the butt of his gun, but before he could draw, James Enright had raised his right foot. Pinning Johnston's shoulder to the chair with his boot, the minister pushed with all his strength. A shower of playing cards followed Johnston's path as he skidded along the floor.

The Reverend Enright turned and walked to the door of the Silver Dollar. The blasphemous curses of Slade Johnston followed him. But the bullet James Enright expected at every step did not come.

AT DAWN the next morning James Enright awoke and crawled sleepily from his bed. He dressed, walked to the kitchen and pumped up a basin of cold water. The water stung his face, driving the wispy remnants of sleep from his eyes. Briskly he rubbed his face with a coarse towel. Deciding against a shave, he kindled a fire in the wood stove and put the coffee pot on to boil.

Later, with two cups of hot coffee warming him and his collar turned up against the chill, early-morning breeze sweeping down from the snow-capped mountains to the west, the Reverend Enright walked down the alley past the livery stables, past the blacksmith shop until he hit the wagon trail that led north out of town. Before him stretched the vast prairie, countless miles of gently rolling hills, scrub grass and sage. With a long stride, the young minister walked steadily until he reached a point where the trail passed Ed Lorimer's sod hut. Here the minister paused to pick up a discarded tin can. He also picked up an unwanted companion in the form of Ed Lorimer.

"Hi, Parson," Ed said, hailing the young man from the front of his hut. "Traveling light, ain't you?"

"Not traveling far, Ed," the minister replied. Again picking up his stride, James Enright walked on.

Unabashed by the somewhat less than warm answer he had received from the minister, Ed trotted along behind the Reverend Enright until he was walking beside the minister. "What you aiming to do with that can, Parson?" Ed asked.

"Going to use it for target practice, Ed," the young man replied.

"Well, that's all right then," Ed Lorimer said, obviously relieved. "I use that old can for fishworms and I sure wouldn't want nothing to happen to it."

Turning off the trail about a quarter of a mile past Lorimer's place, the Reverend Enright found the spot he was looking for. A large boulder jutted up from the earth to a height of several feet. Behind the boulder was a claybank of adequate height to serve as a stop for the practice shots he meant to take.

"About the right height," the young minister observed as he set the can on top of the boulder. Stepping back from the rock ten paces, he planted his feet firmly in the sandy soil. Then he drew his Colt, raised it to eyelevel, and fired. The bullet ricocheted off the rock. The can did not even tremble.

"No, no, Parson," Ed Lorimer said in exasperation. "You got to fire from the hip. Why, Slade Johnston could of rolled a cigarette, lit it and still got in the first shot."

"From the hip?" the minister asked.

"Right, Parson. From the hip."

Twenty four practice shots later the can was still in prime shape for use as a fish worm can.

"You're improving, Parson," the old sodbuster encouraged. "Couldn't of missed by more than a foot that time."

"I seem to be getting the hang of it," the minister said, smiling wanly.

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"Wouldn't surprise me none if you made a right passable gunhand," Ed replied, encouragingly, "say in a year or two."

"It's suicide, plain suicide, that's what it is," Ed Lorimer informed Cy Wheaton as they stood at the bar of the Golden Horseshoe, sipping tepid beer.

"Tell me the part about the shooting again," Cy shouted, cupping a hand to his ear. "And speak up, drat it."

"I said," Ed Lorimer repeated in a louder voice, "that the parson stood off ten paces shooting at an old can and didn't hit nothing but that rock once."

"Only once," Cy gasped. "You sure, Ed? Only once?"

"I swear it, Cy," Ed repeated vehemently. "I may be old but my eyes ain't give out on me yet."

"It's a fact," Cy Wheaton told a dumbfounded Hugh Barrows. "The parson was out practicing this morning and put nine out of ten shots through a tin can at twenty-five paces. From the hip, too."

THE rays of the afternoon sun slanted down through the high window above the bar, etching squares of sunlight on the green cloth of the poker table at which Slade Johnston sat. "You lie through your teeth," he said, angry at Sonny Williams.

"It's a fact," Sonny repeated, a trifle apprehensively at this time. "The whole town's talking about how this sinkiller used to be a trick shot in a circus before he give it up for sinkilling. He can shoot a ten dollar gold piece out of your hand at twenty five paces. Blindfolded."

With dusk still an hour off, James Enright began preparations for shaving. He poured scalding water from a kettle into a basin which lay in the bottom of the kitchen sink. He washed his face carefully, then over his moist skin, he lathered thick suds. With the tips of his long, sensitive fingers he worked the lather into his skin. He felt the wiry toughness of the stubble on his chin wilt before the warm tide of soap.

He held his straight razor with a steady hand. He was devoid of fear—almost devoid of feeling. Reality in life seemed gone. Slade Johnston, the six gun which now hung heavily at his own hip, the ultimatum he had delivered to Johnston—all these seemed like part of a tormenting dream. He tried to convince himself that he would awaken momentarily. He wanted to awaken to his life as it had been. He wanted the security of his beliefs which had brought him West; he wanted to know that the love of Julie Bachman was still his.

But the razor in his hand scraped sharply on his cheek. The Colt was at his hip. He was not dreaming. He was awake—awake and disillusioned.

After shaving he changed into a clean white shirt and slipped on a fresh clerical collar. Slipping into his coat, he had nothing to do but wait. He walked into the parlor and sat by the window overlooking the street. It was almost deserted. The empty street seemed an omen. He sensed, bitterly, that he was being left to face Slade Johnston alone, that West Bend was turning, as if in shame, from what he was about to do.

Then Julie hurried up the walk. In a white dress she was crisp and fresh on a hot afternoon. Through the window James Enright saw that she was meticulously groomed. Each golden curl was pinned neatly in place. A starched bonnet shielded her face from the sun; about her neck was a black choker.

James Enright did not answer her first knock. Nor the second. At this moment he had no desire to speak with her. He knew why she had come. But nothing she could say would keep him from walking down the street to face Slade Johnston. Seeing her would only make it more difficult. Finally, after the third, insistent knock, he opened the door.

Quickly she walked past him into the parlor. There she turned to face him. Her face was almost colorless, the hollows beneath her eyes shone dully with the remnants of brushed-away tears.

"You're going through with it?" she asked.

"I am," he answered simply.

Without another word the girl slipped off the ring she wore and handed it to him.

"Giving back this ring doesn't take away your love for me," he said.

"I loved a different man," she retorted. "I loved a man who came to West Bend with love in his heart, a man who believed in the dignity of men. I didn't fall in love with a man who believed that justice can come from the muzzle of a Colt."

"Seeing a man shot down in cold blood can change a man's beliefs," the young minister stated flatly.

Suddenly Julie was in his arms, sobbing. Holding her, he felt her body tremble with pain. He tried to share that pain with her, but he couldn't. Vainly he sought the words which would alleviate the hurt she was experiencing.

"For my sake," she pleaded, almost hysterically, "can't you give up this madness. He'll kill you. If it's pride that's driving you to do this, we can leave here. We can live someplace where they never heard of West Bend or of Slade Johnston."

"If I give up now," he said determinedly, "I wouldn't be a man worth living with."

The girl stepped back and stared at him with uncomprehending eyes. She drew a deep breath, seemingly on the verge of another desperate plea. But she bit her lip and held back her words. Then she walked quickly to the door and left him alone.

AT DUSK James Enright pulled on his hat and walked from the house. His path to the Silver Dollar took him past the church. He had not intended to stop. There seemed nothing inside that could help him now. What he was about to do was a negation of all the church stood for. The plain wooden cross which hung above the pulpit was the symbol of a meek man's triumph over the perversity and injustice of men. But the triumph of the cross was not a victory that James Enright was capable of sharing. He knew that he could not look upon that cross. Not with the forty-five holstered at his side.

But neither could he pass the church. Drawn by some force he could not resist, he moved up the walk and entered the chapel . . .

Ten minutes later the Reverend Enright re-appeared on the street. He walked quickly now; all hesitation was gone from his step. Boldly, confidently his boots struck the boards of the walk. His arms swung loosely at his side; determination shone in his dark eyes.

As he passed the jailhouse, the sheriff stepped from the doorway to walk beside him. "You're dead set on facing Slade?" the sheriff asked.

"Dead set," the minister replied tersely.

"I'll stand with you," the sheriff replied unhesitantly. "Ain't much of a gunhand any more, but I've got a tough hide. Take a good shot to put me down permanent."

"Thanks, sheriff," the young man replied.

A block from the Silver Dollar, Henry Clayton fell in behind them. No words were exchanged. The sixgun Henry wore spoke adequately enough.

Outside the Silver Dollar they were joined by Sam Delaney, Swede Olsen and Johnny Lopez. Not a good pistol shot in the bunch, but these were good men with no hint of fear in their eyes. James Enright was happy to have them stand beside him.

The six men filed through the swinging door of the Silver Dollar. The saloon was almost deserted. A few tough cowhands from the ranches of the valley stood drinking whisky at the bar. Several poker tables were occupied—one by four of the more prosperous men of the town. At none of the tables, however, was there a game of poker in progress. The men sat talking and smoking.

Slade Johnston was at the same table he had occupied the night before. With him were his three men. A whisky bottle, partially filled, stood on the table. The four men were in a cheerful mood.

Several raucous laughs rose from their table.

James Enright unbuttoned his frock coat and started down the bar toward the outlaws. The men standing at the bar seemed to ignore his approach. But unlike the previous night, they did not melt away as he passed. He heard the shuffle of their boots as they moved along behind him. In the mirror hanging behind the bar, the Reverend Enright saw the men at the poker tables rise. Every man in the saloon was intent on standing with him when he faced Slade Johnston.

"Johnston," the minister said sharply, "I see that you chose to disregard my warning."

Johnston looked up at James Enright. His lower lip twitched nervously. "I like this town, Parson. The air's good for my lungs."

"I can't breathe the same air you breathe, Johnston," the Reverend Enright stated. "I'm counting to three. By the time I get there, either draw your gun or head for the door."

"I like counting games, Parson," the outlaw said, pushing his chair back from the table and getting to his feet. "Wouldn't miss one for the world."

His men stood with him. They moved to stand with their backs to the wall. The four stood against twenty.

"One."

"Slade, we ain't got a chance," Sonny Williams, the baby-faced, tow-headed killer, cried.

"Shut up," Slade commanded. Then, looking directly into the minister's eyes, he asked coldly, "Where do you want it, Parson—in the head or in the guts?"

"Two."

The hushed silence in the room was disturbed by the labored breathing of many men. James Enright flexed the fingers of his gun hand. His eyes were fixed on the right hand of Slade Johnston which hung tensely, four inches below the butt of his Colt.

"Wait a minute, Parson," Slade Johnston cried suddenly.

"In a minute you'll be dead," the minister replied.

Slade Johnson swore as he kicked away the chair that stood in front of him. "I'm heading for the door," he muttered.

AN HOUR after James Enright had watched Slade Johnston and his three gunmen ride out of West Bend, he knocked on the front door of Julie Bachman's home. The girl opened the door to his knock. Her expression was stony, her blue eyes were void of emotion.

"I heard the news," she said. "I congratulate you. I imagine you'll be running for sheriff next."

"No political ambitions," he replied, smiling warmly at her. "Only romantic ones at the moment." He put his hands on her shoulders and attempted to pull her into an embrace. Her body stiffened under his hands.

"So you drove Slade Johnston out of town without getting yourself filled with lead," she said cooly. "Now you think I'm going to welcome you back with open arms. But you're wrong," she stated sharply, her indifference melting away under rising anger. "You carried a gun against a fellow man. With that one act you denied your whole life as a minister of God. I loved you because you stood for justice and truth. I'll never marry a man who has to resort to the Colt for justice."

"Before I went to the Silver Dollar," James Enright said, "I went into the church. I didn't go to pray. I couldn't pray—not with a sixgun strapped to my side. I just stood there, in church. And as I stood there I realized that I was fooling myself—that I really couldn't draw a gun on Slade Johnston. All my work, all my training in the ministry made it impossible for me to carry a weapon against Slade. I just couldn't hate him enough to overcome all that."

"But you did carry a weapon against Slade," she protested. "You're still carrying it."

"Is this a weapon?" he asked, drawing the gun from his holster and handing it to her.

(Continued on page 114)

The CHALLENGE

by JONATHAN CRAIG

FROM the window of his second floor office he watched Curly Bratcher cross the rutted street below and swagger into the Border Pride Saloon. It was stifling hot in the small room, but the sheen of sweat on his flat-planed face was chill. There was no use denying the fear, he knew; it knotted too tightly in his stomach.

He turned from the window and stood quite motionless for a long moment—a tall, heavy-shouldered man in a black suit, high wing collar, and black string tie. At twenty-seven, Jesse Hammond was very young for a cow country doctor, but already his straight black hair was silvered at the temples and there were tired lines at the corners of his eyes.

He glanced at his watch again. It was ten of six. Ten minutes till his showdown with Curly Bratcher. He sank down at his desk, vaguely conscious of the sounds swelling up from Main Street, trying desperately to think of something, anything besides the coming trouble. But the fear was there to stay; he could not force it from his mind.

He folded his hands before him. They

The young doc was no gunfighter — but not for any lack of guts!

were slender hands with long tapering fingers; the sure, slow hands of a surgeon. He thought about Curly Bratcher's hands. Curly's hands were equally skilled, but the skill had been limited to the use of a sixgun—the only skill Curly's short, thick hands had ever needed.

There was an urgent knock at the door and Jesse Hammond started nervously. "Come in," he said and ran his tongue across dry lips.

The door swung inward, and Hammond felt a little of his tenseness wash away. "Hello, Marshal," he said. "Come in and sit a spell."

Marshall Walt Carmody was big-boned and loose-skinned. His flat-crowned Stetson was pushed back on his head and his pale eyes bored directly into Hammond's. He closed the door behind him and leaned back against it.

"I'm not letting you go through with this, Doc," he said.

"It'll be a fair fight, Marshal."

"Fair fight, hell! Curly Bratcher's faster'n greased lightning. Faster'n anybody else I ever saw."

"So I've heard."

"But you aren't, Doc. Hell, you haven't even packed an iron in four years."

"Speed isn't everything."

"It is when two men come up against each other in a pitched gun fight."

"I asked for this," Hammond said quietly. "I'm seeing it through."

Carmody pushed away from the door and crossed to the desk. He took Hammond's shoulders in his big hands and shook him. "You listen to me, you damn fool. I've watched you and Curly since you both were pups. Him and his helling and his gunfighting, and you studying every night, trying to make something out of yourself. You think I'm going to let you get yourself killed by the likes of Curly Bratcher? Is that what you think, Doc?"

Hammond took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. "I know how you feel, Walt. But—"

"But, hell!" Carmody interrupted him, his face dark. "Sulphur Bend don't need the likes of Curly Bratcher. But it sure'n hell does need a good sawbones. I'm not letting you do it, Jesse, and that's final."

"You thinking of arresting me, Walt?"

Carmody's pale eyes narrowed. "Don't think I wouldn't, if I could. There's no way I could do it, under the circumstances. If there was, I'd have you in the hoosegow right now."

Hammond looked at his watch, and then stood up. "It's almost time, Walt. I guess you'll want to get over to the saloon a little before me."

The marshal's shoulders sagged. "Jesse. For God's sake—"

"I'm sorry, Walt. This is something that has to be."

THE marshal studied Hammond's face carefully, the way a man will do when he knows he is seeing a good friend for the last time. Then he shrugged and looked away. "I guess there's no reasoning with you. But I'll tell you something, Jesse. I'm a pretty fair hand with a gun myself, but I wouldn't want to be the one that stood up to Curly Bratcher. If it was me, I'd let him wait in that saloon till hell froze over." He paused. "The man that meets Bratcher is as good as dead."

Hammond smiled grimly. "Not quite. I'm going to make a play, Walt. It'll be a fool play, maybe, but it's the only one I can make."

Carmody shook his head and walked to the door. "There's no play in the world will do you any good against a man like Bratcher, and you know it." He opened the door, then took one last look at Hammond. "Hell," he said shortly, "I've spoke my piece." The door slammed behind him.

Hammond waited a full minute, and then he locked his office and went down the stairs to the street. His shoulders were straight, his long arms hung straight at his sides, and he wore no gun.

He stood for a moment on the boardwalk, staring across the white dust of the street toward the motionless batwings of the Border Pride. Inside, he knew, men were waiting for the coming slaughter.

There would be the usual bets, of course, but the bets would not be on who would win the fight; the winner was already certain. The bets would be on whether Hammond would show up for the fight in the first place. And there would be much talk of Bratcher the gun-fighter, and of Hammond the doctor—and of Elaine Roberts . . .

Elaine had come to Sulphur Bend four months before and opened a millinery shop. Both Hammond and Bratcher had been suitors for a while, but it had not taken Elaine long to show her preference for the doctor. Her warm, dark-eyed beauty had become the talk of the county by then, and everyone had thought that she and Hammond would make the perfect match.

But Curly Bratcher had thought otherwise. When he'd heard of Elaine and Hammond's engagement, he'd stayed drunk for a week; and afterward he had missed no opportunity to provoke the peaceable doctor into a fight. Both Hammond and the town had laughed Bratcher off—at first. But Bratcher's jealous hatred had festered day by day, until he had almost forgotten the original cause. Last night in the Border Pride he had called Hammond a killing name; and as an afterthought, he had insulted Elaine Roberts.

Hammond had challenged Bratcher to take off his gun belt and fight with his fists, but Bratcher had defied him from behind his .44. Then Hammond had done a rash thing; he had promised a gunfight with Bratcher if the gunman didn't leave Sulphur Bend within twenty-four hours. He had realized his folly as he spoke the words, but he had been unable to rein his tongue.

And now the twenty-four hours were up. Behind yonder batwings, waiting for the kill, was the gunslick no one else could beat.

Hammond's mind jerked back to the present. He glanced up and down the street. People had stopped where they were, turning to stare at him, studying him curiously. The piano music from the saloons had stopped almost the instant his boots touched the boardwalk.

Sulphur Bend was waiting.

Hammond stepped off the planking and crossed the street toward the Border Pride.

THERE was only one man at the long bar. Curly Bratcher. Everyone else had crowded to the rear of the room, out of any possible line of fire.

Bratcher turned from the bar slowly, a hulking, wedge-shaped man in a red silk shirt and California pants. His hair was the color of wet sand and almost as long as a woman's. His hooded green eyes, set deep in a triangular, short-chinned face, were expressionless. A .44 in a tied-down holster rode low against his right thigh.

"Well, now," he said. "I figured you'd be wearing a gun, Doc. What happened? Did you turn yellow?"

Hammond shook his head. "I wouldn't have a chance with a gun, Curly," he said. He let it hang there, watching Bratcher's eyes.

Bratcher took a short step forward. "You're right," he said. "You wouldn't have no chance at all. But you'd better get one, just the same."

"I thought you might be good enough to loan me yours," Hammond said, and somewhere in the crowd a man snickered.

Bratcher's eyes seemed to darken. His right hand lifted an inch toward his gun, then dropped away again. "That kind of talk don't make a hell of a lot of sense," he said. "Go back and get your gun, Hammond. They're waiting for you over on Boot Hill."

"Maybe," Hammond said. "And maybe not." He turned to face the crowd of men and percentage girls at the rear of the saloon. "Folks," he said, "Bratcher here has been goading me for as long as I intend to take it. I'm going to make him a proposition." His eyes swung back to Bratcher. "You're pretty long on gun speed, Curly. But I don't know how long you are on guts. I intend to find out."

"Don't let it sweat you," Bratcher said. "But what good'll finding out do you, when you're dead?"

"We'll see," Hammond said. "You've forced me into this, Curly. You made me challenge you. But this isn't going to be just another gun duel. We're going to change the rules."

Bratcher laughed softly. "What interests me most is when you're going to start talking sense."

"Shut up a minute. When I said just now that you might loan me your gun, I meant it. One gun is enough—if we take turns with it."

Bratcher's lips peeled away from yellowed teeth. "What the hell are you talking about?"

An excited murmur went through the crowd and everyone pushed a little closer.

Hammond saw Marshal Walt Carmody in the front row and motioned to him. "I'm going to ask Bratcher to give you his gun, Marshal," he said. "You're to shuck out all the shells—all except one."

Bratcher's face twisted. "I don't know your game, pill-roller, but I ain't playing! Stand back, Marshal."

"Just hold on a minute, Curly," the marshal said. "Let's hear what the Doc has to say."

"Damned right!" a mule-skinner yelled. "Let the sawbones talk up."

Hammond waited for the crowd to quiet down. Then he said, "What I propose is that we leave just one bullet in the gun, spin the cylinder, and then take turns pulling the trigger on each other. It would be a fair fight that way." He looked straight into Curly Bratcher's slitted eyes. "I'm even willing for you to go first, Curly."

There was a moment's stunned silence, and then the crowd let loose roar of shouts and cheers. There wasn't a man or woman in the saloon who didn't hate Curly Bratcher, and few who hadn't been forced to swallow his insults. But now they had a champion in Jess Hammond, and they were letting him know it.

HAMMOND watched the surprise in Bratcher's eyes change to indecision while the bigger man struggled to regain the traditional, expressionless mask of the gunfighter. The mask came on, finally, but before it was firmly in place Hammond thought he saw another emotion in those green eyes. It was the emotion he had been counting on, had been praying for. But he couldn't be sure.

"Well?" Hammond said. "How about it, Curly? You game?"

Bratcher looked back at the crowd. Sweat studded his upper lip. A tiny pulse ticked beneath his left eye. Suddenly he shrugged contemptuously, lifted the .44 from its holster, and extended it to Marshal Carmody.

The marshal took the gun, and abruptly there was silence in the big room. These men and women had seen violence and instant death many times, but this was something different, something more cold-blooded than anything in their experience. They held their breath and waited.

The marshal broke the gun and shucked five of the bright copper shells into the sawdust that littered the rough pine floor. Then he looked from the gun to Jesse Hammond questioningly. "What now, Jesse?"

"Spin the cylinder, Walt," Hammond said. "That is, if it's all right with my opponent."

Bratcher wet his lips, and then nodded almost imperceptibly.

The marshal spun the cylinder three times, handed the gun to Bratcher, and stepped back. "There won't be any cheating," he said as he took out his own gun. "I'll make damn sure of that."

Hammond felt the blood pounding in his temples. He watched Bratcher step back and cock the .44, and for an instant he cursed himself for a fool. He could have avoided this, he realized. He could have taken Elaine and run away. They could have built a life together in some other town. No, he thought. No, I could never have run away. I might have run away from Sulphur Bend and Curly Bratcher, but I could never have run away from myself. There would have been too many years to remember, too many years to face Elaine, and myself.

He saw Bratcher's finger curl around the trigger. He watched, not breathing, as Bratcher's knuckle whitened. The hammer plunged home—on nothing.

Bratcher mouthed an oath, slid the gun along the top of the bar toward Hammond. Hammond lifted the gun without looking at it. He was searching Bratcher's eyes, probing for the thing he thought he had seen there a moment ago. But the green eyes were guarded now. Bratcher returned his stare, and he was almost smiling.

Hammond raised the gun, trained it just to the left of the second button on Bratcher's shirt. He triggered. And once again there was only the sharp click of metal on metal.

Hammond put the gun on the bar and shoved it away from him, toward Bratcher. Two chances gone now. From the corner of his eye he saw Marshal Carmody swing his gun toward Bratcher. The lawman was ready, waiting for the first wrong move.

From the loading pens at the far end of town a cow bawled, and then another. Here in the tension-charged saloon a man's boot heel scraped against the floor. That was all. There was no other sound.

Bratcher pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked harmlessly.

Hammond looked up. Bratcher hesitated for a moment, then reluctantly pushed the gun along the bar. The pulse beneath his eye beat rapidly now. Sweat stood out on his sharp-featured face and turned the red shirt to black beneath the arms and across the chest.

JESSE thumbed back the hammer and levelled the gun, feeling the cold weight of it, the death it held. He tried again to look into Bratcher's eyes, but the gunfighter was staring at the floor. "I don't want to kill you, Curly," he said. "If you'll leave this town for good, we'll call it off."

Bratcher said nothing.

Hammond waited. His throat was dry

[Turn page]

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and his tongue was thick against his teeth. "Curly."

"Go to hell!" Bratcher said. "Pull that trigger and be damned."

Hammond felt the skin tighten across the bony structure of his face. He pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

He slid the gun back toward Bratcher, breathing rapidly, calculating the odds that were so rapidly running out on him, numbly waiting for the impact of Bratcher's bullet. He heard Bratcher jerk back the hammer, and he heard the harsh, ragged breathing of the crowd, but somehow his thoughts were all of Elaine Roberts. He thought of the way she had looked that day he saw her for the first time: the soft, white oval of her face and the blue-black hair that caped her rounded shoulders; the way her eyes had laughed, and the impossibly tiny waist above the curving swell of her hips . . .

"Damn you, Hammond!" Curly Bratcher's voice was shrill. "Damn you." He jerked up the gun and trained the muzzle on Hammond's belt buckle. "This is the one, Hammond."

Marshal Carmody edged forward. "One shot, Bratcher," he warned. "There's two chambers left in that gun, but only one of them is yours. You try anything, and I'll drop you where you stand."

The hammer blurred forward. There was no explosion.

Above the gun, Bratcher's face worked spasmodically. He stared down at the gun with disbelief; and then, suddenly, a sobbing noise welled up from his throat and he dropped the gun to the floor. His whole body shook, and his hollow sobbing filled the room.

Hammond picked up the gun, thumbed back the hammer, and looked at Bratcher. There was no thought in him now, no emotion of any kind. He looked into Curly Bratcher's eyes, and now, at last, he saw the thing he had prayed to see there—fear.

The fear crawled from Bratcher's eyes and out across his face. "No!" he screamed. "Don't do it, Jesse! Don't." He sank slowly to the floor, his hands raised to Hammond. "Jesse, for God's sake, don't kill me."

"Get up, Curly," Hammond said quietly. "Get up and get out."

Bratcher struggled to his feet, glanced about wildly at the crowd, and then bolted for the batwings. Seconds later a horse's hooves pounded along the street. Then, for a long moment, there was no sound at all, either in the street or in the saloon.

Hammond knew it was over, but the chill of death was still inside him, still knotting his stomach like a cruel fist. He tossed the gun to Marshal Carmody and strode quickly from the saloon.

Outside, he strained his eyes into the red glare of the desert sun and watched the racing silhouette of Curly Bratcher and his horse as they topped the rise beyond the cluster of shanties at the far edge of town.

And then the click of high heels brought him around and he saw something else—the beautiful, dark-haired girl running along the boardwalk toward him.

Suddenly a strange warmth flooded through him and the chill of death was gone forever.

He breathed deeply, smiling, waiting for Elaine.

A COUPLE OF KEGS OF WHISKY

(Concluded from page 61)

Elated and anticipating what was to come next, the Modocs lugged the two whisky barrels all the way back to the Stronghold. With ear-splitting laughter they recited how they'd come by their prize and in due course the Army sentries out beyond the lava beds in the stillness of the black night, heard the most hideous, scalp tingling shouts and cries, screams and songs, they'd yet heard during the Modoc War.

Word was passed back to the bivouac that the Indians were up to something. More soldiers were rushed up, a veritable cordon was thrown around the Stronghold.

The soldier camp was roughly two miles away, far enough to discourage Modoc infiltration. This wasteland was filled with videttes. The Army was positive the Indians were organizing a do-or-die charge which would take them out through the Army's surround.

All night long the soldiers stood to their guns, the cavalrymen with their reins in their hands. All night long the wild shrieks resounded from deep within the broken, twisted, lava beds. All night long the Modocs were staggering, stumbling, blind drunk. Men, women and children. By dawn the two kegs of whisky were empty.

Peter Schonchin said later that the Army could've sent in a corporal's guard and taken the whole fighting force prisoner, as the warriors, their women and children, were totally incapable of putting up any defense they were so drunk.

But the Army didn't know, didn't try to get close enough to find out, and didn't grasp the single opportunity that would have ended the Modoc War in its early stages, long before several hundred men were killed and others maimed for life—and General Canby was assassinated in cold blood while trying to work out a peaceable settlement to the differences between the two races.

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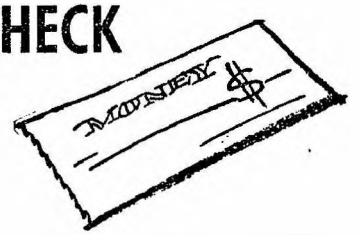

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THE SIXGUN PARSON

(Concluded from page 106)

Julie took the gun, turning it slowly in her hands. Suddenly her eyes widened her mouth fell open in amazement. "Why, it's not loaded," she cried.

"I took out the cartridges in church," he said quietly.

"But how did you know that the other men would be there to back you up?" she asked excitedly.

"I didn't," he replied. "In fact, it hadn't even occurred to me that they would be there."

"But you practically committed suicide," she gasped. "What good would that have done?"

"How long do you think Johnston and his men would have lived once it was discovered that he had gunned down an unarmed minister?" he asked. "His life wouldn't have been worth a lead nickel anywhere in the west."

"Then you intended to sacrifice yourself for—for—"

"For my sheep," he answered. "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep."

Then Julie was in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder. Gentle sobs of joy shook her body. "How can you ever forgive me for not believing in you?" she asked.

With his left hand cupped under her chin, James Enright held her head up. He kissed her. "It shouldn't be difficult," he said.

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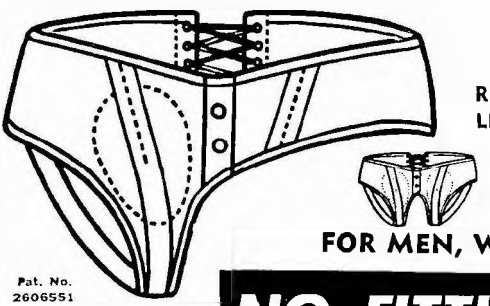

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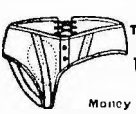

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