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STORIES**

NOVELS *Magazine*

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BACKTRAIL —
GUNSMOKE AHEAD**

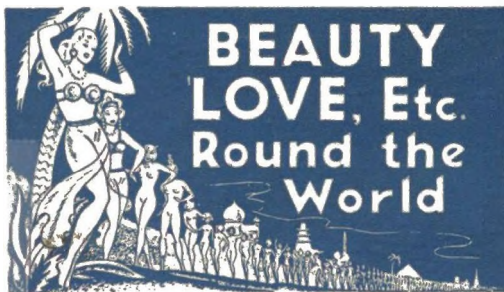
by Gunnison Steele

**WHEN A GREEN
KID PACKS A
KILLER COLT**

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novel by
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**BUSHWHACKER
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by
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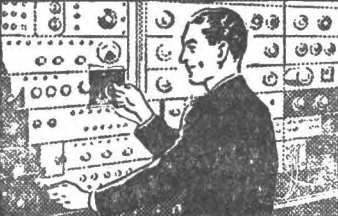
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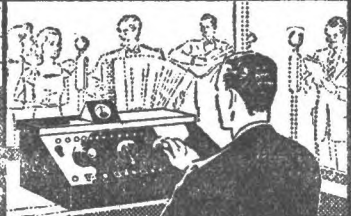
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IN
CANADA

TWO-GUN

Vol. 2, No. 6

November, 1941

WESTERN NOVELS MAGAZINE



ALL STORIES WRITTEN
ESPECIALLY FOR THIS MAGAZINE

★ ★ ★ SMASHING BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★ ★ PAGE



WHEN A GREEN KID PACKS A KILLER COLT

by Luke Tyler

8

The dust and death along the Santa Fe might spare fugitive cowhands like Lon Cowan and Yank Haggarty, but their own gunswiftness and not gold must buy them the two-bit spread they'd stake—for bullets were a cattleman's pay-dirt in gun-law Arizona, and two killer Colts his right to grass and water!

★ ★ ★ THUNDERING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★ ★

Bullets on His Backtrail, Gunsmoke Ahead.....by Gunnison Steele 72

What this hired-gun hell needed was fighting men, gents like Bat Masterson, Wild Bill, and the Texans who took their herds up the trail to Kansas, and Flint Savage aimed to tie his holsters down hard and be the first if he had to grave-send every leadslinger in the whole lawless country!

★ ★ ★ 3 FAST-ACTION SHORT STORIES ★ ★ ★

Bushwhacker Behind a Tin-Badge.....by Rod Patterson 49

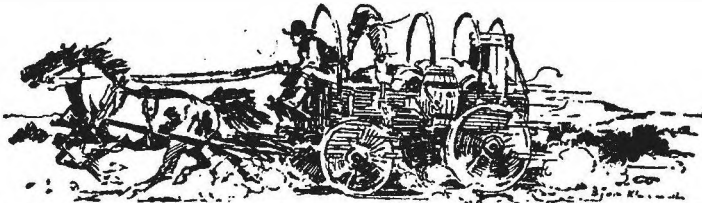
Marshal Rufe Tudge was proud of his badge and his gun and his draw, and he didn't reckon a backshooting son of Satan could handle his job of taming the toughest, bloodiest town this side of Dodge!

Quick-Draw Quarantine.....by T. K. Hawley 59

The brand was on Link Fannin, the urge to grab iron and slam lead at every gun-merchant that crossed his trail—folks claimed he'd already cut more notches in his Colt than his draw-famous father!

Fugitive from the Wolf-Pack.....by John Cody 95

Had these shifty-eyed, trigger-fast hombres become Kirk Bridges' saddlepards then for life—or could he yet fight back through hell to home range behind killer Colts?



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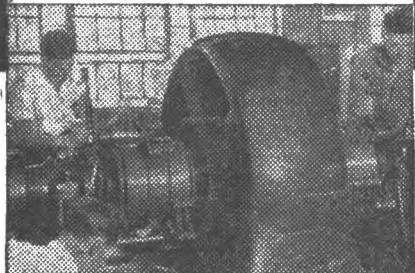
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Would You Believe I Was Once A 97 lb. Weakling?

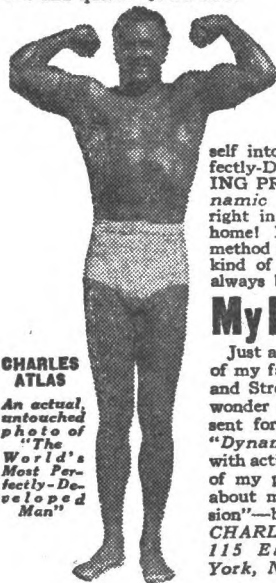
Yes, I was—a miserable 97-pound bag of skin and bones! But you'd never believe it to look at me now, would you? Through my discovery of "*Dynamic Tension*" I changed myself into "The World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man." I'm **LIVING PROOF** of the miracles "*Dynamic Tension*" can perform—right in the privacy of your own home! **NOW**—will you give my method 15 minutes a day to get the kind of **HE-MAN** build you have always longed to have?

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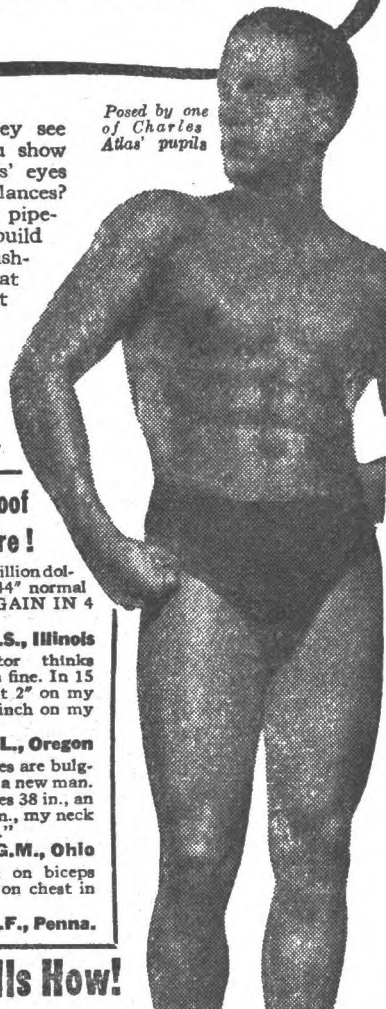
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When a Green Kid Packs



The fire and thunder of Trigger.

CHAPTER I

BULLET TALK

DUST like heavy smoke all but veiled activities at the Santa Fe railroad corral from the eyes of the two lean and weather-scarred range riders who had just jogged into the Arizona cowtown of Hualapai. To look at the taller of the two—or his companion either, for that matter — no one

would have suspected that the price of a moderate-sized ranch was wadded in his chaps pocket.

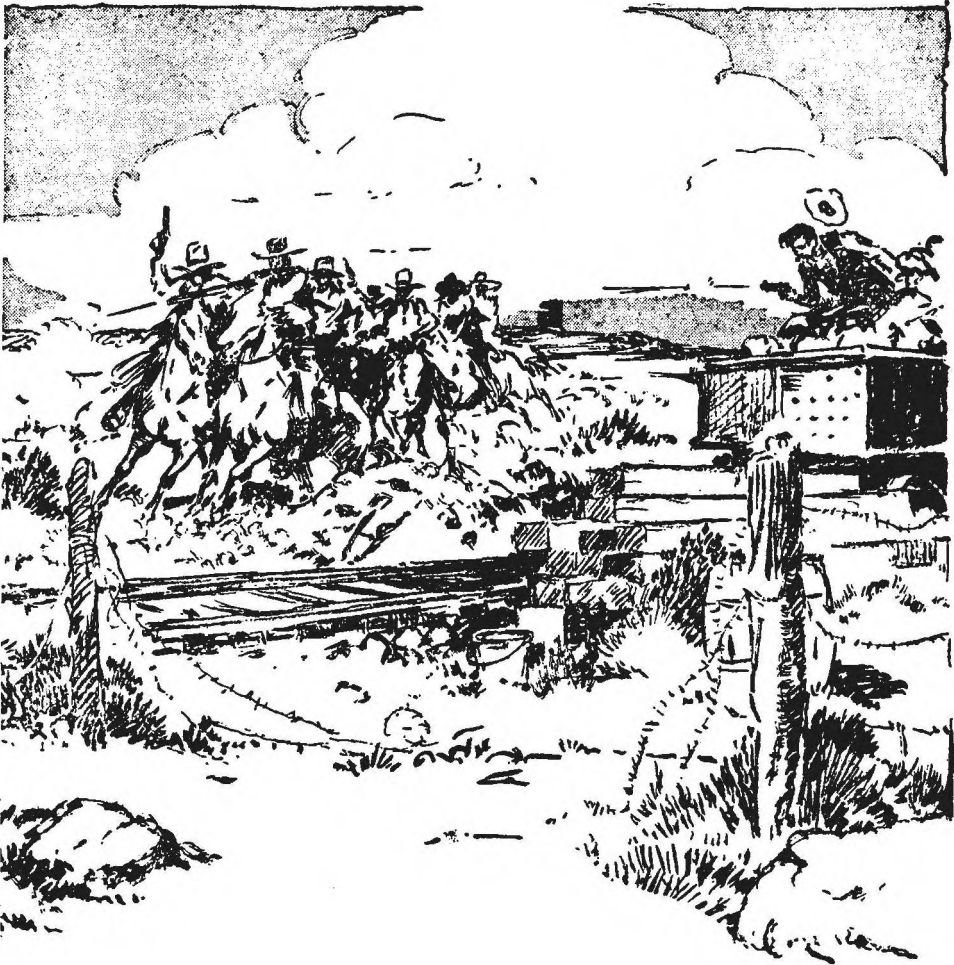
Lon Cowan and his long-time side-kicker, Yank Haggerty, had, through luck and industry, accumulated sufficient of the "paper that talks" to think about starting an iron of their own and quit riding for other men. Owners—no longer just hands! It sounded musically in their ears when they spoke of it to each other. And the range between the Santa Maria Mountains and the Painted Rock Desert seemed as good a gamble

WHEN BATTLE-LOCO GUN-CUBS BUCK DUST AND DEATH ALONG THE

a Killer Colt

By LUKE TYLER

Author of "Road Agent Religion," etc.



Bent Colts made an inferno of the trail!

Honest cattlemen didn't fill a beef contract in midsummer, and Lon Cowan and Yank Haggerty, fugitive cow-wranglers, figured maybe their own gunswift and not gold would buy the two-bit spread they'd stake here in Arizona, and two killer Colts guarantee them grass and water!

as any in Arizona, less of a gamble, indeed, than almost any other section they could think of. Here they were in Hualapai, central settlement of this particular range, seeking a ranch and

stock in which to invest their money.

"Somebody shippin' a beef cut, looks like," remarked Lon Cowan, spare-framed, homely as the well known "mud fence," but with something undeniably

HELL-SPAWNED SANTA FE! — BIG SMASH TRAIL-WAR NOVEL!

arresting in his sharply-chiseled features. A firm yet not stern mouth, with aquiline nose and wide-spaced, penetrating eyes above. A broad and high forehead, suggesting a man of unusual intelligence.

"Yeh, you'd wonder at it," Yank Haggerty, equally short on good looks and quite as alert, replied to his partner's observation, "this bein' mid-summer and fall round-up plenty far off. Mebbe the owner's fillin' a beef contract at the 'Pache agency up north."

They drifted closer, their ponies at a lope, along the main street, having for the present nothing better to do, and mildly interested in the fact that some rancher was shipping beef at this rather out-of-season period. Yank Haggerty might have made a bull'-eye with his guess as to the reason for it; or perhaps the owner was getting rid of some prime stock to meet the interest money on a mortgage.

The two cowpunchers halted their ponies at the edge of the dust-choked area and made cigarettes, watching with accustomed eyes the irregular stream of cattle passing through the loading chute into the stock cars on a siding beyond the station. Men of their own breed straddled the sides of the chute and poked lagging animals up and on with long sapling poles.

"What do you make out that brand to be from here, Lon?" Haggerty queried, slanting his head sideways to avoid a sudden gust of dust, and trying to see clearly through lids necessarily narrowed.

"Why, Triangle T," replied the squinting Lon Cowan.

"Yeh? Well, I spotted a 77 brand among 'em or else it was dust in my eye," snorted Yank. "Shippin' mixed brands don't look right, does it? Hello, who's that feller? Brand inspector, I betcha!"

The man he referred to had come

shouting out of the dust which swirled about the southeast corner of the pens, away from the railroad tracks. He was in shirt sleeves and suspenders and his Stetson was cocked awry over a very red face. His inspector's badge flashed from the left suspender. A cartridge belt banded his middle and he lifted a gun with a hand evidently practised as he climbed the corral fence and forked it directly above the chute. He could have touched one of the cattle-prodding cowboys with a half-stretched arm. Work with the prod poles had ceased at his abrupt appearance. There was menace in his manner and in the way he flourished the six-shooter.

"What the hell are you fellows tryin' to pull off?" the inspector bellowed. "Think you can get away with loadin' 77 critters along with your Triangle T stuff?"

THE punchers on the fence started with a surprise that was either genuine or well simulated. The one nearest the inspector demanded to know what he meant by such a crazy accusation; and the cowboy was advised to cast his eyes downward at the cattle jammed in the chute where he evidently saw what Yank Haggerty had glimpsed from his vantage point outside — a 77 brand on one of the cows.

"Where in hell did *that* dogie come from?" yelped the cowpoke.

"You ought to know!" was the inspector's sarcastic retort. "We've been suspectin' for a long time that you're a rustlin' outfit; this proves it. Boldest stunt anybody ever tried to work on me, too. You didn' even make a try at blottin' the brands—hazed 'em in as was!"

"May I be damned, Madden, if I savvy anything about this!" exclaimed the puncher. "Why, we'd be plumb loco to do it—be sure to get tripped up! Believe it or not, none of us noticed any

77' till you just pointed 'em out. Bein' late, we was in a hurry to get loaded and ain't filled one car yet—likely we'd 'a' spotted some 77's before we was finished, though you know how the dust blinds you. Besides, the boss told us you had OK'd the herd and we wasn't lookin'—"

"Cattle Annie told you wrong, then!" snapped Inspector Madden, and the name he had uttered caused Lon Cowan and Yanke Haggerty to prick their ears. Sounded as if the Triangle T had a woman boss. "You can't run no bluff on me, Harkness. All you fellows climb down and pile your gunbelts. You're under arrest, every last man of you, and Pat Wiggins will be here in a minute to herd you to jail."

Harkness' face darkened. From what they knew of men—and it was much, through years of cowpunching—Lou Cowan and his partner were inclined to believe the denials of the fellow. That he should show fight was natural enough; he was reaching back to grab his gun, which had twisted around behind him during the work of cowpoking, when Inspector Madden's Colt was stuck in his ribs.

"I've got the call and I'll sure bore you, Harkness!" snapped Madden. "Are you gonna *climb* off this fence or do you vote to be *bumped* off?"

The only sensible way out was for Harkness to toss his hand into the discards; he had no aces to play. So he started to climb groundward, the other men with him imitating his example. The brand inspector was right in their midst, his gun muzzle punching a button of Harkness' shirt, when at last all the Triangle T hands, five in number, stood on the ground. The cows left in the chute were jammed tight and bawling their heads off. The cattle in the first car of the string began to dribble back down the loading board and, unable to escape the confines of the fence,

crowded the runway and added their confused bellowing to the general din.

THE Triangle T boys were disarming reluctantly, with plenty of vitriolic language spilled upon the head of the perspiring Madden. The extremely intrigued Cowan and Haggerty stood in the background, when three newcomers crowded into the animated scene from the direction of the town. Three men, Cowan and his partner thought they were at first glance; a man with a sheriff's badge on his vest, a bearded fellow in a sourdough coat and snake-banded Stetson, who looked like a ranch owner, and a third, much younger, in the garb of a cowpuncher.

But a second glance revealed the fact that this third rider was a young woman, with her hair coiled up under her flat-crowned sombrero, wearing a man's double-breasted woolen shirt and bat wing chaps. She had a gunbelt slanting from waist to thigh, with a holster attached—but the holster was empty.

"That girl," said Lon Cowan in a swift aside to his partner, "must be the Cattle Annie the inspector spoke of. It looks like she is arrested—pretty, ain't she?"

"Boy, howdy! She *is*!" exclaimed Haggerty in perfect agreement. "And nothin' crooked about her, no more'n that Harkness feller. He's likely her range boss."

The girl was addressing Harkness, who had turned to face her with an appealing countenance when he heard the hoofbeats. "Looks as if they had us dead to rights Tom," she was saying in a voice of enforced calm. "It's only another move in the game to drive us out of the country. Plain enough how those 77 cattle got in with ours—Duke's men put them in the railroad corral last night. I didn't have a suspicion that anything of the sort might happen or I'd placed some of you boys on guard

at these pens. Sheriff just picked me up by the station, told me what was what and I'd have to come with him—even took my gun."

"I'd reckoned you was a *regular* sheriff, Pat Wiggins!" shouted the enraged Tom Harkness, fixing the star-packing horseman with a blazing gaze. "You're just helpin' along Duke Gunnison's scheme to put the Triangle T out of business. I didn't know you was a woman-fighter!—'course I don't expect nothin' better of Duke!"

"Seems to me you're talkin' high, wide and handsome for the ramrod of a rustlin' spread, Harkness!" rapped out the bearded man who had impressed Cowan and Haggerty as being a ranch owner. "Of course you all set up a holler when you're caught red-handed! But it won't do no good—the whole bunch of you, includin' Miss Texar, is headed for the pen. Be glad you ain't livin' in the old days, when they fitted a hombre's neck with hemp for cattle runnin'!"

"Just as leave swing as grow ghostly in stony lonesome, you hairy polecat!" roared Tom Harkness, showing signs of breaking past the gun of the brand inspector to lay hands on his accuser. "The law's on your side because you're rich; because you just about *own* the law on the range! Politics is rottener than hell! — even a honest woman ain't got a fair chance! Bad enough for us men to be railroaded. . . ."

"Chop that kind of talk!" resped Duke Gunnison. That part of his face which was visible above the beard was aflame with rage.

"No use saying anything, Tom," Miss Texar put in with a steadiness that increased the admiration of Cowan and Haggerty to the last degree. "They've got us framed. Maybe a good lawyer will help some; but I doubt it. Fighting now won't get us a thing."

"You're not bein' framed, ma'am, and

you know it!" Duke Gunnison turned on the girl savagely, but his gaze wandered before her level stare and the cold, scornful smile hovering on her lips. He faced the stony-visaged sheriff with a violent, sweeping gesture. "Do your duty. Pat—herd 'em to the calaboose! I'll have my men cut out the 77 stuff in them pens—or wait, better corral both brands as they are until after the trial. Judge Jenkins will be in town to-morrow."

BUT that didn't end the remonstrance of the Triangle T boys. And it gave them the hearty sympathy of the two strangers in Hualapai. While Cowan and his partner did not wholly understand the situation, enough of it was plain to them to warrant action in behalf of Cattle Annie Texar and her outfit. Impulsive Haggerty was for hornin' in at once, sheriff or no sheriff. Like his partner he was a two-gun man and was sliding his left-hand Colt from the holster when Lon detected the movement. Before anyone else saw what Yank was about, Cowan had gripped his wrist, leaning from the saddle to do so, and forcing the six-gun snugly back into the black, scarred holster of his pal.

"This ain't no time for us to butt in, crazy!" hissed the taller cowboy. "I'm with you in takin' up the little lady's end of the stick, you bet I am; but we couldn't do her no real good by bustin' loose into a gang with gunplay—not right now! She'd be as like to stop a lead chunk as anybody if it got to flyin' promisc'us. Keep them warped props of your'n wrapped tight round your pony's barrel, cowboy—and watch and listen!"

"Hell, my ears is full a-plenty and my eyes is plumb sore!" snorted Haggerty. Nevertheless, realizing the undeniable wisdom of Lon's speech, he subsided and became again merely the innocuous bystander.

The Triangle T boys were ordered to back their mounts, tied in a group at one end of the pens. While they sullenly trailed toward the broncs, with the sheriff fingering his gun to enforce obedience Madden, the inspector, passed within a few feet of the mounted girl in chaparejos, holstering his gun. His head was down, as if he wished to avoid her glance, but she wouldn't let him get by unrebuked.

"You should feel proud of yourself today, Madden," she said in a knife-edged tone. "Mighty proud. You don't remember telling me you had O.K.'d my herd yesterday, I reckon?"

"You misunderstood me, Miss Texar," he lamely tried to defend himself.

"I'm doin' what I'm paid to do by the Cattlemen's Association; protect their property from rustlers. I checked up on a part of your herd yesterday and didn't come across no 77 brands; but it got dark before I could finish. You see. . . ."

"Very plainly," she interrupted him bitterly. "You're nothing but a poor tool, like the rest of 'em. As my herd got in yesterday morning, you must have soldiered a lot on the job to have the checkup unfinished at sundown. Reckon you saw Duke in between and he gave you your *orders*. Like he did Doug Carlson. A week ago Doug had promised me rolling stock for five hundred head; yet when I get to town he says he won't have cars till the next day.

"Which gave Duke the time he needed to plant those 77 steers in with my stuff. Oh, what men they have on this range!" Her laugh was a little hysterical, thought Lon Cowan. The poor kid!

"You don't know what you're talkin' about!" flared the brand inspector, and darted on into the crowd which had collected before she could say more.

GLANCING at his partner, Lon perceived him sitting hunched forward in the leather, arms crossed, a hand under each armpit. "Holdin' onto myself thisaway is the daggone hardest thing I ever done," explained Yank with a grimace that contorted his whole countenance. "Holy gosh, tall man, but this range is rank with weeds that need burnin'!"

"I'm thinkin' fire *would* do it mostly some good, hothead," was Lon's rebuttal. His eyes had hardened, his gloved hands were gripping the saddle horn with an intensity that threatened to burst the seams of his thick-fringed buckskins. "Looks like we had a job of work cut out for us instead of settlin' down as money-grubbin' ranchers — there they go!"

"They" consisted of the prisoners, Cattle Annie Texar, her five cowhands and the sheriff; their accuser, Duke Gunnison, fetching up as rear-guard, with most of the gaping crowd breathing his dust as they followed to the very doors of the adobe calaboose. Cowan and Haggerty were not that morbidly curious. They forked their restive ponies in utter silence, watching the receding figures, until an unknown man's voice accosted them:

"Boys, I dunno what the West is comin' to, when a good woman is handled like an ornery cow thief. I see you're strangers in Hualapai and I reckon you're dizzy a-wonderin'!"

"I'll say we are!" ejaculated Lon, as both he and his partner twisted in the saddle to see who had spoken.

He was of the breed of the border of yesterday, a genuine old-timer who probably had trained herds up the Chisholm Trail and seen Dodge City and Abilene in their wildest moods. He could not have been more than a gawky, long-legged kid, then. He was tall and gaunt now, very gaunt, bowed in the legs and a trifle stoop-shouldered, as if the

weight of years was bending the once erect and fine figure of a man. His skin was burned a reddish brown and snow-white were his hair and mustache. His battered old sombrero, his patched shirt and ragged chaps bespoke a down-at-heels condition.

"Name's Buck Rainsford," he explained when the two younger cowmen evinced an eager interest in what he might have to say concerning the case of Cattle Annie Texar. "It's a plumb damn shame the way she's been treated. Her old man, Bob Texar, was killed short of mysterious in one of the gamblin' halls here about three months ago. Since then the gal has been tryin' to run the ranch, with the help of Tom Harkness, her foreman.

"She'd make the grade, too, if that bush-faced bum, Duke Gunnison, would leave her be. The boys come to call her Cattle Annie after she took over the managin' of the Triangle T spread."

"What's this Duke hombre holdin' against the outfit that he pesters her so much?" Lon inquired, leaning forward on his saddle horn.

"That," replied Buck Rainsford, "is about as mysterious as the way her old daddy was bumped off. Duke's been claimin' lately that he missed cattle and laid the loss to the Triangle T, when it ain't no ways possible they'd rustle from anybody. I happen to know Duke was tryin' to buy the ranch from Bob six months or more before his death. The 77 and the Triangle T boundaries joins on the west and Duke give it out that he wanted to enlarge his holdin's. Mebbe that's true, but I got a suspicion there's somethin' else behind it—can't guess what. He seems ready to go to almost any length to grab the Triangle T."

"Some men are thataway," commented Lon. "Just natural-born range hogs."

THE old-timer shook his head, unconvinced that this was so in the instance of Duke Gunnison, who had earned his title by reason of his wealth, and his pose as one of the aristocracy of the cow country. He ranged not quite enough cattle to be called a "king." "But anyways," resumed Buck, "that little gal needs help bad. Like she said, Duke bosses this range pretty much as he dang pleases and there ain't a doubt in my mind that Inspector Madden and Doug Carlson, the cattle buyer, here are follerin' orders same as Sheriff Pat Wiggins—and Pat's thick as thieves with Duke. I don't know it for a fact but I'd willin'ly gamble what little I've gathered in forty years of range ridin' that Carlson held up the stock cars he promised Annie, till Duke had had a chance to plant his 77 critters in the corral with the T stuff. The whole thing's so howlin' crooked. . . ."

"That's what it is" Lon chipped in vehemently. "And say, Buck, me an' my partner is aimin' to do somethin' about it. Our guns and what few brains we got is at the lady's service. You workin' just now?"

"No," admitted Rainsford, with a touch of sadness. "Forkin' a hoss all day long is harder on me than what it used to be. Daggone if I don't believe I'm gettin' old. The spreads don't like to hire fellers my age, though I pick up a little money now and again ridin' extra at round-up time, huntin' mavericks and the like. Why?"

"I was reckonin' you might want to throw in with us, helpin' Miss Texar," explained Lon, and smiled broadly at the expression of delight which crossed the old-timer's seamed and craggy visage.

"Say, would I? Count on me long's I'm able to yank a buckin' strap, boys" crowed Buck. "Yessir, it'd be the pleasure of my life to see Cattle Annie get her rights and Duke Gunnison his need-

in's. I got a hoss and a gun, and mebbe I'll be more use than useless, *quien sabe?* When's the shindy gonna start?"

"Well, I ain't had time to figger out very much, but what we do will have to be done pronto," answered Lon. "I heard Duke say that Judge somebody was gonna be here to-morrow and that means a trial will come off right away, I reckon. With a hand-picked jury, Miss Texar and her boys won't stand no show whatever. You savvy that. As a starter, I'm thinkin' me and Yank will visit this here cattle buyer, Carlson; where's he hang out?"

"His office is in the Santy Fe buildin', right back of the station." Buck Ranisford turned to point out the three-story structure of Spanish design. "You'll either find him there or bellyin' in a bar on Main Street. Say, what's you fellers' names? Reckon I got to call you some-thin' if we're gonna be pardners."

He did not ask what had brought them to Hualapai, judging them to be cowboys out of a job. Besides, it is the rule not to ask such questions on the frontier. He shook the hand of each warmly as Lon introduced himself, and then the grinning Yank Haggerty; and Buck declared it was the luck of a lifetime that the three had met this day. In the past, whenever he thought of the misfortunes of the courageous Annie Texar, he had cursed his powerlessness.

"You want me along?" Buck asked, referring to the proposed visit to the local cattle buyer.

"I'd rather just me and Yank interviews him," said Lon. "Accordin' to the way it turns out we'll know how to plan our campaign. Where'll we find you later?"

"Why, at Statler's Livery Stable, I reckon. Statler and me is chummy a heap. He boards my hoss for next to nothin'. Good huntin', amigos!" He tossed a lean hand as they lifted rein, wheeled their ponies and pushed the

dust for the Spanish-looking Santa Fe Building.

CHAPTER II

A HARD NIGHT'S WORK

DOUG CARLSON'S office was on the top floor. This the cow-punchers ascertained by an upward glance as they were tying their broncs to the hitching-bar out front. Carlson's name appeared in gilt on two windows. Lon had explained his scheme for worrying some information out of the cattle buyer to Yank before they climbed the stairs, and Yank was in hearty accord with the plan. It meant a hundred to one shot, but lack of success in this mission would not necessarily mean ultimate failure. Rattling their spurs up the three flights of stairs and hoping that Carlson would be in his office and alone, the punchers paused at the door bearing the cattle buyer's name and Lon knocked.

"Come in!" a deep bass called and they entered the presence of a shrewd-looking, florid-faced man of fifty, entrenched behind a mahogany desk, which stood within a wooden-railed enclosure. There was no one else in the room, though a typewriter, desk and chair in a corner hinted that Carlson employed a stenographer.

Taking in these details at one swift glance and without waiting for Carlson to voice the question which was doubtless on the tip of his tongue—"What do you want?"—Lon brushed through the swing gate in the railing to his desk, while Yank lingered by the door—for a purpose. Carlson had been lounging a little in his chair when they came in; now he was stiffly erect in his seat and regarding the intruders with a keen, suspicious glance, which boded ill for the

game Lon was intent on playing.

"Boss Gunnison sent us—" Cowan began, standing with his hat on and legs spread wide apart.

"You can stop right there quick," interrupted Carlson gruffly. "You don't work for Duke Gunnison. I never saw either of you before."

"What difference does that make?" snorted Lon. "You dunno every cowhand on the 77. As I started to say, Duke—"

Angrily the cattle buyer cut in again. "It happens that I *do* know every man who works for Gunnison and I'm certain you fellows don't belong to the spread. What's your game?" His eyes had narrowed until the lids were almost closed; there was a cruel twist to his lips that did not escape the cowpuncher. Unobtrusively he was sliding one hand along the arms of his chair toward a desk drawer.

Out of the tail of his eye Lon saw the movement and lunged forward to grip the stealthy hand. "Shove your chair back from this desk," he ordered harshly, "so's you won't be tempted no more along that line. If you want me to get rough, I sure will oblige."

"Why, damn your nerve!" exploded Carlson, purpling from the shirt collar up. Nevertheless, he pushed his chair backward as bid, Lon leaning against the edge of the desk, facing him. "What is this—a hold-up?"

"Call it what you like," returned his visitor, coolly. "Since you know we ain't Gunnison's riders, I'll drop the bluff and get down to business. You held up the stock cars you promised Miss Texar on orders from Duke so's he'd have time to plant cattle wearin' his brand with hers last night—*didn't* you? No lies, now!"

CARLSON raised a hand to run his index finger around the inside of his soft collar. If looks counted for any-

thing, he was threatened for a moment with apoplexy. Finally he spoke, in a voice husky with rage. "Certainly *not*! It's true enough that I couldn't supply the rolling stock for Miss Texar's shipment as arranged, but that was the railroad's fault, not mine. As for your talk about Gunnison planting some of his cattle in the same pens—why, it's rot! I don't know what you're talking about. Are you fellows a couple of gunmen hired by Miss Texar?"

"She don't even know us," Lon told him. "Who and what we be is for you to guess, but I'll say this much regardin' us; we mean business. We savvy all about the plot to throw Miss Texar off the range and give Gunnison the chance to hog the Triangle T Ranch. You're helpin' him. So's the brand inspector, so's the sheriff." Lon's prominent chin was outthrust in Carlson's direction; his steely glance probed the shifting eyes of the cornered cattle buyer.

Carlson stuck thumbs in the armholes of his vest and leaned back defiantly in his swivel chair. "If any of this locoed talk has an ounce of truth in it, why, go ahead and prove something!" he snarled.

"I'm aimin' to do that." Lon smiled grimly. "You're gonna tell in public what you know about the dirty scheme, for instance. Say you did hold up them cars per order of Gunnison and the railroad wasn't at fault a-tall—say it!" He slid away from the desk, reaching down to drag his six-shooter from its holster, while Carlson watched him with slightly protruding eyes.

"Wait a mo', pard!" called Yank sharply. "Someone comin'!"

"My stenog!" exclaimed Carlson, in a tone of great satisfaction. "*Poco tiempo* you fellows will land in jail, where you belong. Hold-ups get the limit in this town!"

"The ones that's got money enough to buy the law don't!" cracked Lon. He

flipped out his right-hand gun, bending it on the cattle buyer, whose jubulations ceased on the instant. "Don't you let loose one little holler, Carlson, or you're a gone guy! Handle the lady plumb gentle, pard," he admonished Yank without turning his head. "Don't let her see you till the door's closed. She'll think me and Carlson is havin' a business powwow—until she knows better."

Steps along the hall rapidly approached the office door. But they did not sound like a woman's. Yank lurked behind the door which was opened, and a young man of pasty complexion stepped briskly into the room. He was clad in a business suit, not range garb, with a straw hat on his head. Evidently this was the stenographer. Yank was thankful for that. He was no woman-mauler. A broad grin stretched his mouth as he blocked the only exit except the windows, and conjured a gun into his right fist behind the unsuspecting stenographer's back. The fellow seemed to see nothing unusual in the fact that a cowpuncher was leaning on his employer's desk, talking intimately with Carlson, for he could not observe Cowan's gun. He tossed his straw hat on a clothes-tree and was about to pass inside the railing when Yank spoke.

"Turn around, sonny, and give a squint at this smoke-pole. One peep and I'll hitch it ontuh your neck!"

Startled almost out of his shoes, judging from the way he jumped to an about-face, the stenographer cast a fishy eye on the man and his gun—and stood perfectly still.

"You like it? She ain't a fancy gun, but, boy, she sure bores a pretty tunnel," chuckled Yank. "Reckon I'd best tie and gag you, guy, because we're likely to have more visitors, and my pard has his hands full with your boss. Push through the gate, sonny, pronto!"

"Sonny" obeyed directions to the let-

ter, throwing a frightened and inquiring glance at his boss and the gun-fingering Lon Cowan as he stumbled over to the chair beside the typewriter desk. Yank lounged after him, feeling utterly foolish to be holding a gun on such a rabbitlike creature. He strapped the stenographer to the chair with his own belt and gagged him with a handkerchief; then rolled back to the vicinity of the door.

LON proceeded with his business, promising death to Carlson if he did not talk. "You think I'm foolin'," said the impatient Cowan at length, when Carlson persisted in keeping his mouth shut. "Well, you drop your eye on this hammer," he held the six-gun a little closer to the cattle buyer; "watch it rise—if you ain't talked before it falls, your light is goin' out. Savvy?"

"You'd murder me!" gasped Carlson.

"No, I'll just kill you," corrected the grim-lipped Lon. "It wouldn't be murder to rid the country of such a polecat. I suppose it ain't no crime to hell-devil and freeze a poor girl outa her rights, huh? What do you call *that*? And how about the way her old man stepped off? He hadn't no chance for his life." Old Buck Rainsford had not gone into particulars about the decease of Bob Texar, so here Lon was going strong on supposition.

"If you know such a lot, use that knowledge!" blazed the badgered Carlson, getting a grip on his faltering courage. His guess was that these two seeming cowboys were gun hirelings of the Triangle T. "I'm not talking," he added obstinately.

But once or twice in the ensuing few seconds he was almost on the point of altering his determination. It made beads of sweat gather on his forehead to watch that slowly lifting hammer of the gun lined for a heart shot. He even gave a gasp as the hammer was about to fall—but that was the only sound he

uttered. Lon jabbed a quick thumb at the tripped hammer and eased it to safety.

"One thing, you sure got guts!" the cowpuncher reluctantly complimented Carlson. "I was hopin' you'd prove to be the weak sister of the gang, seein' you've got the white collar job, and spill us the lowdown on the ranch-stealin' scheme. But you're game enough; so game it's a plumb shame you don't play straight."

Carlson said nothing. Reaction had set in, leaving him speechless, limp as wet buckskin. Lon reached down to open the desk drawer that Carlson's hand had earlier been slying for, and extracted the forty-five lying on some papers there. Then he backed away as far as the railing, keeping Carlson constantly in view, and as Yank sidled across from the door, held a monotoned conference with him.

"The bluff flopped like a dogie on a half-hitch and we'll have to try another plan—I know what," said Lon. "But we can't work it till nightfall, which is just as good, for we'll have to stay here the rest of the afternoon and tie up anybody that comes a-visitin' Carlson. If we don't, after what we've done to him, the burg wouldn't hold us long enough to get Miss Texar and her boys outa jail."

"How you plannin' to do that, I'd admire to know?" Yank naturally inquired.

"Tell you later. Ain't worked it all out in my head yet. I'll hogtie Carlson like you done o' pasty-mug there and then we can both be ready for visitors. I ain't hankerin' for any, though."

FORTUNATELY for them, perhaps, there were not visitors. The telephone on Carlson's desk took a fit of ringing, and the cowboys let it jingle, cursing the instrument's insistence. Since night was coming on, they quit

the presence of the two prisoners, who were tied, gagged and sweating, locked the office door, and jingled downstairs to their long-suffering ponies. If Lon's new plan of action went well they would not be lingering long in Hualapai, so it caused them little worry how soon Carlson's release came about now. When they showed up at Statler's Stable on Main Street to join Buck Rainsford, the old-timer was in a highly excited state.

"I thought you hombres sure had had your heads knocked off!" Buck ejaculated, meeting them under the lantern suspended on an iron rod over the stable door. "How'd you make it?"

"No time for stories now, Buck," replied Lon briskly. "All I'll say is that daggone twisty cattle buyer is hogtied in his own office and we got to be movin' fast. Lots to do. Ain't leavin' this burg until Miss Annie and her men is free and footloose. I see you're packin' your gun and primed for doin's — *bueno!* Now, listen close, old-timer!"

"But what about them 77 cattle mixed with the Triangle T's?" Buck said dubiously, when Lou had outlined his plan of action at a tongue gallop. Statler, the liveryman, was called into the conference on Rainsford's unqualified recommendation.

"Hell, man! We can't stop to pick no brands, can we? And it's gonna mean fight anyhow, ain't it?" retorted Lon, excited himself. "We'll throw loose all brands not belongin' to Miss Annie *afterward*. You on? I know where the jail's at and I'm the hombre who's headin' there after the cattle is started. You and Yank crowd their tails and hit the high places only."

Buck Rainsford nodded and, mighty spry for an old fellow, darted back into the odorous depths of the stable after his horse. The three men turned up, a short time later, at the white-gleaming railroad corral, which was packed with

lowing cattle. The empty stock cars were still on the siding, but the loading chute was closed, every head of cattle which had been prodded through it carward by the hapless Triangle T boys having been shunted back to the enclosure. The night riders were circumspect in their approach of the lonely spot until assured that it was as lonely as it seemed. Then the gate of the corral opening toward the right of way was swung wide; the nearest cattle climbed out eagerly, starting across the double tracks. Those jammed farther back in the maze of pens moved forward to freedom at a rapid trot when the congestion ahead was relieved, scarcely heeding the accompaniment of revolver shots that suddenly rent the night air to accelerate their pace. But the shooting was for a double purpose. The noise of the cattle alone might not reach the ears of those in town.

However, the trio responsible for the corral break and the ensuing stampede need not have worried that they wouldn't be heard. A railroad watchman discovered the flow of cattle from the pens when it was too late to stop it; but not too late for a duel with the supposed rustlers. Urging the stock on from the rear to the lip of the plain edging the far set of rails, Lon, Yank and Buck smashed load around the orange-spotted stand of the railroader, shooting high, as their wish was to silence him without hurt, if possible.

BACK in town, word was hurriedly carried to Sheriff Pat Wiggins at the jail that somebody was stealing stock from the Santa Fe pens. Pat and certain townsmen who were with him in his office hit leather immediately, their waistlines heavy with killingware. Duke Gunnison was not among them; he had returned to the 77, intending to be on hand in the morning for the trial of Cattle Annie and her cowpunchers. By

the time the sheriff had raced his horse to the railroad yard, with a motley posse following at his heels, the lifted cattle were far out on the starlit plain, moving at a shank-breaking gallop. Nevertheless, it looked like an easy matter to recapture the herd and run down the thieves. Spurring from the side of the excited night watchman, who had lost out in his efforts to halt the rustling but had saved his skin, Pat headed a-clatter across the right of way and down the plain in a swooping run. After him came the valiant handful, anxious to work off the rusty loads in their sixshooters.

So grimly intent was Pat Wiggins on recovering the stampeded stock, that he never thought of ambush by the men who were convoying the herd away until, with the stragglers but rifle range away, the fire and the thunder of trigger-bent Colts made an inferno of the trail through a shallow wash. The sheriff reined in so hard that his rearing horse all but executed a back fall. The possemen charged into their leader before they could check their racing stride and there was a wild tangle of men and horses for several moments. Considerable gunplay was indulged in by the fugitives and it seemed that not one of the posse could have escaped death. What was the general amazement, however, to discover that no man among them had been nicked; likewise were the horses unscathed, nothing more than a bit shaken up by the collision.

"Starshine does sometimes fool a feller tryin' to work his triggers by it," observed Sheriff Wiggins, as he righted his horse and heard the various expressions of amazement over the fact that hides were universally whole. "But yet, by dog, I can't see how them fellers missed *all* of us, includin' the hosses. Mebbe they was just pluggin' away as a warnin', and would line the sights closer next time. Must've been anyways a half

dozen of 'em." Hand on bridle, he faced the direction in which the cattle were rolling tail, perceiving them to have gained considerably and still going strong. "Tell you what, boys, we'll put back for town and come around in the mornin' to drag their trail. Them's likely some men workin' for Cattle Annie, though I reckoned we had corralled her whole outfit to-day. Stampede's headin' the way the T Ranch lays . . . yeh, we'll pass it up for to-night. We've got Annie and most of her gang, anyways, and it'd be simple plus crazy to go breezin' intuh another bush-up. Fellers mightn't do such a jag of lead-wastin', if we give 'em a second crack at us!"

ALL were of a mind with Sheriff Pat Wiggins, whose courage in the past no one ever had had reason to doubt. And if Pat was leary of going on, his pick-up possemen certainly were not anxious to persuade him otherwise. A two-gun young-timer and a single-Colt old-timer, whose shooting had been so fast and furious—yet withal purposely innocuous, since results were obtained—that they conveyed the impression of six men dragging trigger, wheeled their horses away from the rim of the wash and, chuckling to each other, raked after the distant running herd as Wiggins and his party struck the back trail. They had hardly expected to discourage pursuit so easily, though undoubtedly there was wisdom in the sheriff's course. Were they to be forced to do powder-burning a second time that night, there is good reason to believe that Yank Haggerty and Buck Rainsford would not have drilled so many holes in the ozone. They were hoping, as they rode onward at a spur-quickenened pace, that Lon Cowan, who had separated from them early in the stampede maneuvers and wheeled around townward, was having a similar run of luck.

Lon was. He had avoided a meeting with the sheriff by crossing the back lots of Hualapai until he came to the alley between the squat jail and a blacksmith shop, now closed for the night. He wondered whether anyone had found the hogtied Carlson and his clerk yet, but judged not since nobody paid him any attention as he rode into Main Street. He passed the calaboose at a gallop, pointing for the livery stable, where Statler, the friend of Buck Rainsford and Cattle Annie, had promised to have six fast horses ready for the trail should Lon's first move against Gunnison pan out successfully. Statler welcomed the cowpuncher at the stable door, drawing him inside with a shower of honest praise.

"Leave off that," smiled Lon and shifting his feet a trifle nervously, anxious to be gone; "we ain't out of the woods yet. Pulled the sheriff away from the calaboose pretty neat, didn't we? Well, now, them hosses ready?"

Hostlers were coming forward with the animals even as he asked the question. It would have been an imposible feat to snake the mounts belonging to Annie and her man from the town corral without a battle, for Statler and Rainsford knew the corral boss to be a bosom friend of the sheriff's. No man had the right to say to whom Statler should rent his horses and the liveryman could doubtlessly sidestep a clash with Pat Wiggins later by stating that he did not know Lon Cowan nor the purpose for which the six saddlers were to be used. Statler wasn't worrying about his end of it. He wished Lon luck in his daring enterprise as the cowboy gathered up the rope on which the six were strung and towed them away from the vicinity of the stable.

THE trouble at the railroad corral had lured the curious in considerable numbers to the outskirts of Hualapai,

which resulted in a deserted condition along Main Street that was satisfactory to the man planning a single-handed jail delivery. As far as Statler could advise him there would be but one man to contend Lon's entry of the jail—the jailer. That sounded easy enough; but the cowboy wasn't going to underestimate an opponent he hadn't seen, and lose out through carelessness. He turned off the main thoroughfare several doors above the calaboose. It would have been worse than foolish to stop at the hitching-bar in front of the jail with that remuda; the jailer would have his riot gun working before Lon could tie up. He left his own horse with the half dozen livery mounts and went back to the abandoned street, tracking along the board sidewalk with the stilted, mincing gait of a man wearing high-heeled boots, until he was abreast of the jail doorway. A hard-faced citizen that he took to be the jailer was just about to step out as Lon stepped in.

"Hello, what do you want?" the fellow asked Cowan suspiciously, eyeing him up and down and failing to recognize any member of the cow fraternity he was accustomed to seeing in Hualapai.

"Lookin' for the sheriff," said Lon, in close-mouthed fashion.

"He ain't here. How long you been in town that you didn't hear the howdy-do at the cattle pens?" And from his expression the rough-tough citizen appeared ready to believe this stranger had a hand in it.

"I dunno what you're alludin' at, brother, I just hit your main trail a minute gone. If the sheriff ain't here, is a deputy on the job?"

"Listen, you, I'm Hudders, the jailer. Sheriff and deputies ain't none of 'em here. You act and talk almighty funny and mebbe I'd just better hold you till the sheriff drifts back." Hudders' jaw jutted; his eyes had a mean, hard ex-

pression.

"Hold me for what? I ain't done nothin'!" Pretense of mild surprise on Lon's part. "But I got some blame' important news for Sheriff Wiggins; seein' he's not around, I'll tell it to you." Lon stepped farther into the office, which fronted the jail proper, jerking his head for Hudders to follow. The fellow came, tight at his heels and prepared to flash a gun at the first sign that Lon was not shaking fair. The cowboy was keenly alive to this fact. "Go ahead and spill what's on your mind!" ordered Hudders harshly, not realizing for all his suspicions, that Lon was luring him out of the doorway so that what was scheduled to happen might not be observed from the street.

Lon bent his head as if to bring lips closer to Hudders' ear, then straightened suddenly, glancing doorward over the jailer's shoulder. "Why, there's the sheriff now, I reckon!" he cried.

Hudders was not deaf. But he didn't stop to think, before turning his head in the direction Lon was looking, that hoofbeats should have prefaced the return of his chief. When he saw the doorway yawning black and empty and realized his error, it was too late to do anything but take his medicine.

The swiftly drawn Colt of the puncher rapped him over the temple in a sense-deadening blow before Hudders could pivot his head on his shoulders. He sagged and was falling when Lon caught him under the armpits, easing his floorward descent. When the feverishly nimble cowboy strode from Hudders' side toward the cell room in the rear, the jailer was champing a gag and writhing in a tie-up that he could not hope to break. Along with the stranger had gone Hudders' bunch of keys.

When Lon showed up before the cell occupied by Cattle Annie Texar dimly revealed by the oil lamp in a wall

bracket at the other end of the corridor, she was coolly combing out her luxuriant, corn-colored hair, evidently preparing to retire on the cot at one side of the barred cubbyhole. She could believe neither eyes nor her ears for a moment when the strange cowboy unlocked her cell door and invited her to step forth.

"I've got horses for you and your men, ma'am, waitin' upstreet a ways," said Lon briefly. "You duno me, but I'm your friend, just the same. Later I'll explain. Please be quick."

A second longer she looked him in the eye, then deftly pinned up her hair and donned her Stetson. "You don't have to ask me twice to leave this hole . . . and just when I'd begun to believe I hadn't a friend in the world—except those in jail with me!"

CHAPTER III

DURING THE ROUND-UP

I CAN'T tell you what I don't know," said Annie Texar, dangling her hat by the chin strings as she sat in her father's old rocker at the Triangle T, the rose hues of dawn creeping through the windows of the living room and dimming the lighted lamp on the center table. "It's sure a mystery why Gunnison is trying so hard, backed up by the sheriff, to get the ranch away from me. He offered my father a good price for it, but Dad didn't want to sell; wouldn't sell. Finally he met his death in Hualapai. . . ." Her voice shook a little here and she paused, resuming presently in a steadier tone. "They said he cheated at cards. But he never did. Dad was an honest as daylight, though he had a weakness for poker. What man hasn't? I've never been satisfied that it wasn't

just plain murder, plotted by our enemy, Gunnison, who had one of his tools do the actual killing, of course. If only I could definitely fasten the guilt on Duke he'd pay—he'd pay the limit, for all that he has such a big fist in Geronimo County politics!"

"If there was any evidence to go on, Annie, I'd take that job off your hands and you know it!" put in Harkness, the foreman, who was standing behind her chair.

"Yes, I do, Tom." She twisted her head around to bestow a quick glance of appreciation. "You couldn't have been more loyal, all these months, had you been dad's own son, my brother, and I appreciate it!"

There were gathered in the living room that morning, besides the girl and Harkness, the four other cowboys and the T Ranch cook, and to mention last but not least, Lon Cowman, Yank Haggerty and Buck Rainsford, knights of the leather. Knights, as truly as those who, in the olden time wore armor and rescued fair ladies from distress. Yet, like their antecedents, they were all unconscious of any particular valor or nobility in their deeds.

The night before, Yank and Buck had arrived with the mixed herd safely within the Triangle T boundaries, had cast loose from the cattle near the main ranch house and anxiously waited for Lon and his jail-delivered party to appear on the scene, leaving their horses saddled should it be necessary to return townward and extend a helping hand. But Lon had come through without even one fight; the only person who had looked troublesome had been the jailer, Hudders, and he proved a short horse to curry. The grateful Annie and her no less grateful cowpunchers had been guided by the stranger cowboy to the horses and away, receiving explanation of his identity and sudden appearance as the hoofs were drumming out

the trail homeward.

No one thought of sleep; all were too much excited from the experiences through which they had just passed. And with apprehension for the events that were likely to crowd the near future. The Triangle T was in a tight situation, to say the least.

ALL concerned had been gathered in the living room for more than an hour, seriously discussing their plight, when dawn peeped in through the windows. Annie had rehearsed the whole history of the Triangle T brand at Lon Cowan's request, the cow-puncher desiring knowledge of all there was to be known, with the idea that he might discern a more plausible reason than land-hoggery in Duke Gunnison's efforts to possess the Triangle T, which was only an average ranch after all. And Gunnison besieged none of his other neighbors with offers to purchase their irons.

"Then, when your pop died, Duke pestered you to sell, even wanted you to marry him, huh?" said Lon, repeating what she had already said and pulling at his long nose reflectively. "And when you wouldn't do either, he rustled your stock, tried every ornery way he knowed how to discourage you from runnin' the ranch? He sure is a first class polecat, ma'am, and I wish we knowed what his real game is; why he wants the ranch so dang bad, I mean. You was aimin' to sell off some of your stock to keep him from rustlin' it, I suppose?"

"That's right," she nodded. "Tom was the one who suggested it. And you saw how *that* turned out! I don't really know what to do, although I haven't quit fighting," and she sat more erect, her mouth thinning into a firm line.

"Sure you ain't, and we're all here to help you," declared Lon, the other

men echoing endorsement of his words, even to the grizzled old "pot-wrassler," Hap Johnson. Lon crossed one leg over the other and topped the uppermost leatherclad knee with his Stetson. "If you'll let me make a suggestion or two, Miss Annie, I reckon I got a plan that will save your cattle, anyways."

"Glad to have you," she assured him promptly. "You've been a good friend in need. Mr. Cowan; you and your partner and old Buck Rainsford. I confess my hands are in the air. We've got to do something pretty quick, for the sheriff will sure be here some time today to rearrest us—and what would become of my ranch and stock while. . . ."

"I've been thinkin' of all that," Lon cut in. "The only way you can escape that Wiggins feller, actin' through orders of Duke, is to not be around when he shows up. I savvy, of course, that there's no chance of your ever sellin' another head of stock in Hualapai while Duke and Wiggins and Carlson are hangin' together. What's the next nearest town that's got a cattle buyer and a railroad?"

"Medicine Springs," said Cattle Annie, without hesitation but with little hope. "There's no use thinking of it, though. To reach Medicine Springs from here we'd have thirty miles of the worst dry drive in the country—I mean the Painted Rock Desert."

"Why is that drive impossible, ma'am?" inquired Lon, like a man to whom no obstacle is insurmountable. "I've rode herd in the wasteland, trailed catle across deserts before, and so has my pard, Haggerty."

"But you don't know how terrible the Painted Rock is," insisted Annie, and Lon saw Harkness and several others, including Rainsford, nodding vigorously, if silently, to corroborate her. "Why, I never heard of but one herd getting across that desert in all the

years I've lived here, and that bunch was, at the last gasp, half of 'em missing when they reached Medicine Springs on the other side. You'd find plenty of bones of cattle scattered over the Painted Rock, I reckon, to convince you that it's hopeless for trail driving."

"Well, what else you gonna do?" Lon asked pointblank, and of course Annie was forced to reply that she didn't know. "Let's say that it's a big gamble, but not hopeless—that sounds better," went on Cowan, a quiet smile curving his lips. "You'd be in worse trouble if you stayed here just now than if you bucked the desert. I'm a queer cuss someways, lady and gents, the kind of a feller who likes to tackle what others say can't be did. I'm votin' that we make a quick gather of all your cattle—won't take long, will it?—and hit for the Painted Rock country and across. Any man here ever been over that dry route?" He raised his glance from Annie's startled face to pass it over every masculine countenance except Haggerty's. Every head was shaken and, to judge from their expressions, Buck Rainsford and the Triangle T hands seemed to think he was talking through his sombrero.

LACK of enthusiasm did not prove a damper to his spirits, however. When Lon Cowan started out to do a thing he usually carried it through, and it was no idle boast he made when he professed a liking to attempt that which others held to be impossible of accomplishment. He talked hotly to his audience—although Haggerty, of course, was with his partner, boots and guns, in whatever he undertook—and presently Lon found that he had not twanged his vocal cords in vain. Annie, her cowboys and her cook, and old Buck Rainsford were forced to agree with Cowan that the only track out of the present difficulties lay across the

sun-cursed region known as Painted Rock Desert.

"I don't like the idea of Annie makin' the try—it'll be plumb hell!" remarked Harkness with feeling when it had been decided the drive would be attempted.

"She'll be safer in the wasteland with us than here on the ranch, facin' the sheriff and Gunnison, won't she?" Lon interrogated him sharply.

"Oh, don't think of *me* all the time, boys!" protested Annie. "Just because I'm a girl the desert won't be any worse for me than for you men. Forget that part of it."

"Hooray for you, Miss Annie!" applauded Lon. "Never say die till there ain't nothin' else to say. Now, I'd say we better have some breakfast in a hurry, all hands; and then, while cookie is loadin' everythin' e'table he's got into the old trail wagon, includin' all kegs, bottles, et cet'ry, the rest of us will round up them cattle and line 'em out for the march."

"Suppose the sheriff and a posse come along before we're ready to start?" suggested Annie Texar, her faith in the homely cowpuncher growing as she picked out the determined lines of his rugged brown countenance. Somehow he seemed to radiate confidence, to impart to others some of that unquenchable, never-say-die spirit which gave him energy.

"I ain't forgettin' that Wiggins and Duke is likely to horn in," smiled Cowan, as he left his chair and strode to the door of the living room, throwing it wide and letting in a flood of golden light.

Out there, at a distance of twenty dusty miles, lay Hualapai. For a moment Lon stood there, with all eyes in the room intent upon his back. He shook his head suddenly, as if the vista did not please him, though even a trained artistic eye could hardly have

discovered any fault in the billowing brown plain which stretched horizonward to the Santa Maria Range, the mountain peaks thrusting their clear tops into a cobalt sky above the purplish mists now fleeing before the sun. The cause of that head-shake was the billowy nature of the land. But the view from here was not straightway, unobstructed in the direction of Hualapai, for more than a mile.

Lon pivoted suddenly on his heels to face Annie. "You got a pair of field-glasses?"

"Why, yes," she answered wonderingly. "The pair dad used sometimes. Want them?"

"I do, ma'm, a little later, and also a volunteer to sit on top of this house and watch for dust smoke out toward Hualapai," he explained. "At such an elevation, with a good pair of glasses, I figger a man oughta be able to see pretty near to Hualapai, if not farther, on a mornin' like this."

"Guess he could," agreed Tom Tarkness quickly, catching the drift of Lon's remarks. "You mean for one of us to straddle the roof tree and, soon there's sign of riders comin' from town, slide down and warn the ones that's workin' the cattle?"

"Tom, you got a head on your shoulders," nodded Cowan, retracing his steps from the doorway, leaving the door open, for the morning air was wonderfully invigorating. "That's just what I'm gettin' at. Now, Miss Annie, if you'll fetch them glasses after a bit . . . and who's gonna play lookout? Don't crowd, fellers," he grinned, noting that no one seemed eager to draw this actionless job for himself.

DURING the breakfast, prepared by the excited cook, Annie presented such a worried countenance that Lon finally questioned the cause.

"No, it's not the dry drive I'm think-

ing of," she replied, setting down her coffee cup and endeavoring to force a smile. "I'm wondering what will happen to the ranch while we're away? Gunnison and the sheriff might put a torch to it or something."

"Not a chance of that," Lon reassured her. "Duke wouldn't mess up nothin' he hankers after as much as he does this ranch. No, sir! And the sheriff will keep his hands off, you can gamble, if Duke says so. What I figger on doin' is to leave you in Medicine Springs after we've sold off the herd and come back with the boys to fight it out on them polecats' own territory. Nothin' like totin' your war to the enemy, no sir! With you and the cattle off our hands and causin' us no worry—not meanin' to class you with them said bovines, of course, ma'am—"

"You'd think I was an infant," she interpolated with spirit. "I've always taken care of myself very well, thank you, Mr. Cowan!"

"Don't be misterin' me, please," he begged, and laughed at the sight of her face.

She had to laugh in response, he was so *darn ugly* when mirth moved him. And somehow her fears for her property during the enforced absence were allayed. What could she do about it, anyway? Better to have faith in Cowan's opinion and derive what comfort she could from that.

Astride the ranch house roof, which he had reached by means of a ladder, one Splinters Carney, voted official lookout by the drawing of a short straw, watched the departure of the horseback party for the range with a most lugubrious expression. He would have liked to smash those field glasses and throw up his job. But he didn't. He could hear Hap Johnson, the cook, stumping around noisily below and singing nasally of the "Old Chisholm Trail" as he loaded provisions into the chuck wagon,

backed up flush with the back door; then he heard Hap at the pump in the yard, filling the water barrels for the desert journey. Pretty soon the wagon pulled out; Hap yelled so-long to the man frying on the rooftree, and Splinters was left alone.

Meantime, with every saddle forker, including Annie herself, pressed into service, the Triangle T range was being worked for stock and all the gathered cattle were headed toward a common point on the flats above Cow Creek, which split sluggishly through the loam of the north pasture. This was in the direction of the Painted Rock Desert, hence they would be saving a few miles by selecting this locality for a general round-up. The bunch of mixed Triangle T and 77 cattle, stampeded from the Santa Fe pens the night previous, had drifted rangeward before morning and the first work of the riders was to cut out the stuff belonging to Duke Gunnison and throw it back to the south. The Triangle T cattle were hazed ahead. Hap Johnson had been instructed to set up camp on the Cow Creek floats and he arrived there simultaneously with a drive of yearlings, two- and three-year-olds, numbering in all, about three hundred. Lon and Yank were trailing them, both men and horses sun-whipped to a dripping lather.

"You want something to eat, meb-be?" Hap greeted them as they reined their mounts over toward his wagon, leaving the hustled cattle to mill around stupidly in a fog of dust, which drifted with the dry wind across the flats and thickened the mask of dirt worn by the hot, sweating cowboys.

"Hell, no, cookie," drawled Lon. "A long drink of water is all—speakin' for myself, anyways," and he glanced sideways at Yank, who was, figuratively, spitting cotton.

"Ditto me," rasped Haggerty. "I'm dry as a bone."

Cookie served them with tin cups from one of the barrels lashed to the end gate of his wagon. He would refill it from Cow Creek before he moved on into the Painted Rock country.

THE livery stable horses ridden by Annie and her punchers in the nocturnal release from Hualapai had been turned loose as per arrangement with Statler—the horses would pick the trail to town by themselves—and all hands, starting from the ranch that morning, had forked Triangle T broncs. Tom Harkness personally wrangled all extra mounts and cut a direct trail for Cow Creek with them, so that fresh horses might be caught up by any of the riders on circle at any time. Tom had left the remuda impounded in a rope corral and Lon and Yank were dropping loops on fresh saddlers, their own private horses being worn to a whisper, when the rataplan of a running bronc caused them to turn eager eyes synchronously across the dusty flats. Here came Splinters Carney, churning gravel!

"Finish ropin' them nags for us, Yank?" cried Lon, dumping his saddle and rope at his partner's feet. He legged it awkwardly, yet at a ground-devouring rate in the direction of Carney, who had pulled up by the wagon.

"They're a-comin'!" whooped Splinters as Lon materialized out of the cattle-raised storm of alkali. "Soon's I spotted 'em—and that's when they was flea size, about—I come off that roof a-whoopin'; fell ontuh my bronc's neck and burned wind."

"How many—but I reckon you couldn't tell that far away," Lon said without waiting for an answer.

"Plenty, you bet!" declared Splinters excitedly. "Nobody else ain't got here yet, huh?" his anxious gaze swept the flats, encountering only one other human figure, sweating with the remu-

da. "Gosh, it's lucky there's two of you on tap, anyhow. What to do?"

"I didn't figger on but just two of us goin' back to handle the posse," Lon informed him. "All other hands is busy workin' the range. Yank and me fetched in the jag of cattle that's here. You cinch a kack on a fresh one, Splinters, and help with the round-up. Tell the rest not to bother about me and Yank; we can take care of the posse and we'll join you before sundown."

Splinters—and the cook, too—thought this was foolish boasting. But he didn't insist on going along when the knights of the leather slashed away on the trail to the ranch, quirts whipping the best speed out of their fresh broncs. He remarked to the cook that they'd probably seen the last of that pair of fightsome jiggers alive, and he sure didn't know how this tangle was going to straighten out. Cookie agreed with him gloomily, but for the lay boss of the Triangle T they were ready to sacrifice their lives and so they forgot about the slim chances attending the effort to copper Duke Gunnison's strong-hand play.

Lon Cowan and his partner got to the Triangle T a half hour ahead of the posse from Hualapai, who were following well-beaten cattle tracks to the ranch, confident of a pretty complete round-up. Duke Gunnison wasn't along, not having reached town by the time the sheriff was ready to start. Indeed, Pat Wiggins had not been anxious to meet Duke until he had those jail breakers back in the calaboose; Duke would be in the humor to take his henchman apart for letting them escape, although Pat was not in the least to blame.

WHEN the sheriff returned to Hualapai the night before, after his unsuccessful trailing of the stampeded cattle, and found his jailer bound and

gagged, the cells empty, he had been temporarily floored. And before he could recover, he had a visit from the highly indignant cattle buyer, Doug Carlson, who, with his stenographer, had been released from bondage but a short while previously by the night watchman in the Santa Fe Building. When Carlson described the two men responsible for his plight, it was easy enough to identify one of them as the fellow who had interviewed Hudders with such interesting results. Wiggins hadn't the remotest idea who these two but-in hombres were, but they were marked down for arrest along with the Triangle T bunch—or a quick drilling if they resisted the law.

When, on the way to the Texar place that morning, the posse encountered six saddle horses identified as the property of Statler going in the direction of Hualapai, Sheriff Wiggins chalked it up in his memory that he had a row to pick with the livery stableman upon his return. The mystery of where the Triangle T folks had secured horses to carry them from town was a mystery no longer.

They made good time to the ranch, Doug Carlson riding at the peace officer's right stirrup and eager to revenge himself on those strangers who had threatened his life. At first view, as the score of manhunters drew rein in the ranch yard, the Texar place seemed utterly abandoned.

"Mebbe they kept right on goin' last night," the sheriff said as he dismounted, keeping a cautious eye on the house. But he didn't altogether trust appearances. Had he but known it, two pairs of fight-hungry eyes were watching him and his posse from inside at that moment.

Trailed by all but one of the party, who remained to guard the rein-dragging horses, Wiggins walked up the porch steps and through the screen

door, gun in hand, and his badge flashing valiantly on a dust-streaked vest. Simultaneous with this entry, Lon and Yank faded noiselessly out the back door and made their way rapidly to the barn to the rear of the main ranch house. Their horses were behind this structure, the double doors of which were thrown wide—invitingly so. The cowboys separated as they came abreast of the barn, Lon running inside and climbing the ladder to the loft, while Yank darted around to where their horses stood, with the lather of the run from Cow Creek drying on their hides. He tested for the dozenth time the rope dangling from the eaves of the barn, midway between the two small cobwebbed windows. He and Lon had had ample time in which to prepare for the posse's warm welcome. Stationing himself between the two saddlers, Yank gripped the bridle of each to prevent a runaway when the smoky music began, and waited for Lon to tune up as planned.

COWAN, edging up to the trap in the loft, facing the house, through which baled hay was admitted and lifted by block and tackle, smashed a kitchen window with long range shots from one of his Colts. There was an immediate uproar in the ranch house and the back door released Wiggins and his followers, who had no trouble locating the gunman. He was crouched in the trap-door and fired a salute toward the manhunters which caused an instant breaking of ranks. The sheriff and Carlson were the only one who stood their ground; both were shooting madly.

"That's the fellow who hadn't the nerve to kill me!" shouted Carlson. "Come on, Sheriff! Come on, men!" Redder than ever as to complexion, and no doubt seeing red, he started on a run for the barn.

"Careful, mebbe they're only drawin' us into range for a volley!" Sheriff Wiggins exclaimed, yet he was not the man to hang back and let a white-collared juniper show up his battle nerve. The other members of the posse were not to be outdone when they had two such shining examples of foolhardiness. In full cry, like a wolf pack surging to the kill, they dragged spurs across the yard toward the open doors of the barn.

Lon had hardly looked for such a precipitate charge; but he shaped his actions accordingly. He scrambled out of sight of those below as Carlson led off at a run, holstered his gun, and swung himself to the slanting roof of the barn through the square trap-door he had left open at the time he secured the lariat, which was intended as a means for a getaway. The barn building quaked with the pounding of many feet as Lon lowered himself over the eaves and slid groundward, his buckskin gloves protecting his hands from rope burn. Lon was actually grinning as he hit the sod and grabbed the reins of his horse from Haggerty—grinning at such a stage of the game!

They heard the sheriff yelling at the top of his lungs, "Come down outa that loft or we're comin' up after you!" And then the partners separated again, leading their horses at a run toward the front of the barn and approaching it from opposite sides. The purpose of this was to slam both front doors simultaneously. As they heaved the double portal to on the manhunters, and socked the heavy bar across to hold it, bullets began splintering the wood dangerously close to where they stood. The shouts of baffled rage were music to their ears, indeed. They whirled toward their bolting broncs, caught their feet in the stirrups and lifted to the leather with taunting whoops. Before they had swept past the end of the ranch house, heading for the front yard,

where the horses of the posse were grouped, the sheriff crowded his bulk into the trapdoor from which Lon had demolished the kitchen window and let go with his gun at the receding figures. Lon thumbed his nose, as did Yank, both twisting in the saddle so that the peace officer would be sure not to miss the farewell gesture. This, despite the fact that Pat Wiggins' lead whined uncomfortably near. A few more leaps of the willing broncs and they were out of pistol range.

"Ol' barn ain't gonna hold 'em long, but long enough for us to drive their broncs away and time over," said Lon to his partner as they traveled stirrup to stirrup. "I shut the trap in the roof, but it hooks from the under side and they'll soon think of it and find the rope I had to leave there. But at that . . . say, one of them hombres stayed by the hosses. Wonder what's 'come of him?" He had just remembered.

THEY were almost abreast of the forward end of the house when this oversight occurred to Cowan. The horses' heads had pushed beyond the corner, in line with the veranda before they thought of checking rein, and the thunderous belching of a Colt ended the life of Yank's horse, which was slightly in the lead. Evidently, this forgotten horseman was a dangerous customer, even if he were alone. As Yank went flopping to earth with his head-bored cayuse, contriving to kick off the stirrups so that he was not pinned under the animal, Cowan caught a glimpse of the gun-thrower's figure darting across the porch to enter the house. The man evidently believed he had a better chance against odds by placing a wall between himself and the men who had so cleverly tricked the posse.

His gun was lifted for another shot as he scuttled for cover—and the shot

rang out! But the intended target wasn't touched. Lon, being nearest to the house, flung himself from the saddle, twisting his body as he dove, so that he fell full length upon the veranda floor, chin up, his left hand supporting him and in his right, a Colt. His gun spat flame and lead; the retreating manhunter staggered into the screen door, tearing a great gap in it and sliding weakly to the "welcome" mat before the doorstep.

The fellow, a tough cowpuncher from the look of him, was breathing heavily as Lon pulled himself erect and went forward with smoking six-gun dangling against his chaps-clad leg.

"You ain't dead, feller," he commented as he stooped over and deftly yanked the Colt from the cowboy's clutching fingers. "If you are, it's one of the few times I've shot too close when I didn't mean to. I oughta salivated you, 'cause you sure meant to get me and my pard—but we ain't killers by trade." He pulled open the man's shirt, none too gently, and felt down his left side. "Burnt your ribs and shocked you some—yeh, the ol' slug turned you half-ways around—but you'll be able to squall to beat hell by the time your friends is outa that barn. Fact is, reckon I'd better twist you up in some rawhide, so's you won't lope down there soon's our backs is turned," and he wheeled to call for rope, observing Yank slipping the riding gear from his dead Triangle T horse.

"Reckon I'll have to borrow one of them posse broncs," said Yank ruefully as they quit the side of the hog-tied and cursing cowpuncher. "But a fair swap ain't stealin' a hoss, is it? Sheriff's got six Triangle T-branded mounts, so he ain't got no kick comin' if we take one belongin' to his gang. If Miss Annie feels different about it when we reach Cow Creek, we can throw the animile loose. Wouldn't it

be just the ticket to take the sheriff's hoss, huh?—that strawberry roan?"

Lon shook his head, while he grinned. "That'd be carryin' a joke too far."

For the next few moments they were exceedingly busy tying the grounded reins of nineteen horses to as many saddle horns; then, seated in the leather once more, they rushed the saddle stock over the first rise in the plain southward and watched them flee on in the direction of Hualapai. Presently, as one man they lifted rein and let the broncs under them feel the spurs. Back they raced to Cow Creek, where the round-up of the Triangle T stuff was in full swing. And it was not yet sundown when they reached the dusty flats, now thickly dotted with cattle and horsemen.

CHAPTER IV

DESERTWARD, HO!

EVEN a band of Mexicans who were herdsmen of the Southwest and marvelously expert at the business, could not have shaded the time in which the Triangle T round-up was consummated. The riders wore out almost every horse in the remount, hustling scattered cattle to the holding ground on Cow Creek. There were not so many head, when a count had been made, as Annie Texar had supposed she owned. This pointed to the fact that the Gunnison spread must have made frequent raids of late in the hope of driving the girl off the range. Fifteen hundred head was the total count, including calves, and this number the outfit should be able to drive with comparative ease, since there were eight men who knew their jobs and one girl hardly less expert than the men. They

considered that any cowboy worth his salt is competent to handle as many as two hundred and fifty cattle on trail.

Lon, who was regarded as the leader of the expedition slated for the dry drive across the Painted Rock, said that they had better make the start before the sun was up next morning. The men and the girl, the horses, cattle, were far too wearied to hit the trail sooner than that, even though it was imperative that the outfit should quit the range before Sheriff Wiggins had time to reassemble and remount his posse to trail them down. Unless Pat had unusual luck, he and his men would be compelled to foot the twenty miles from the Triangle T Ranch to Hualapai; there was no telephone at the Texar place which would enable them to summon fresh riding stock from town. The horses that had been driven off by Lon and Yank would ultimately turn up in Hualapai, as had Statler's livery broncs, but just how soon was a matter for speculation. The animals probably would graze along the way and take their time about it. Lon hoped they'd take plenty of time, for when they arrived, help was certain to be sent from town to the ranch by friends of the sheriff and his posse.

Lon might have drifted that bunch of saddle stock along to the Cow Creek camp, turning them loose when the outfit lifted trail, but he calculated the chances of gaining a little time in this way were not sufficient to warrant the apparent procedure of a horse thief.

Lon was sure that Duke Gunnison, when he got to town that morning and learned of the prisoners' escape and the sheriff's early chase after them, would himself ride to the Triangle T, with whatever force of cowpunchers had accompanied him from the 77. It might be that Duke would wait for the posse's return; but he was certain to become impatient and curious over

their non-appearance and steer for the Texar place before another sun-up. If Pat Wiggins and the rest had a grain of sense they would realize this, as Lon Cowan did, and save their feet a fierce blistering by sitting around and nursing impatience as the lesser evil.

TAKING the situation of the Triangle T folks from any angle, it was not one over which to grow sanguine. Lon, who felt chiefly responsible for the course they were pursuing, was troubled in his sleep for the first time in many moons. Cattle Annie attracted him mightily, more than any woman or girl he had ever known in the past, and her safety was uppermost in his mind, along with the saving of her herd. He could see with half an eye that Tom Harkness was madly in love with her; whether this was reciprocated by Annie herself Lon did not know, of course—but it wasn't anything new or unusual for two men to fall in love with the same girl.

Lon did a trick at night herding with the rest, cautioning all the men, out of Annie's hearing, to watch for enemies even more closely than they watched the herd. But nothing occurred to mar the peacefulness of the camp after the excitement of the round-up had drained the energy out of men and beasts, the reaction of exhausted repose setting in. Lon was in the saddle two hours before dawn. He wakened the cook and, half an hour later, when breakfast was ready, called from their blankets everyone who was not up.

Lon, Tom Harkness and Splinters Carney, who had been riding the last night trick, were already squatted in the glow of the cook's brisk fire, coffee tins cooling on the ground beside them and plates of bacon and beans in their laps, when the heavy-eyed stragglers approached the wagon. Cowan gave up his place to Annie so that she might

lean her back against the chuck wagon's hind wheel as she ate. They talked briskly of what the day ahead held for them until everyone's brain began to function normally.

They lined out the protesting cattle just as dawn was streaking the east, Buck Rainsford and Tom Harkness riding point on right and left of the slowly moving column, as these men were thoroughly acquainted with the grass country and Lon and Yank were not. Much of the time—in those first hours the herd was outbound from Cow Creek—Lon fetched up the choking drag with Splinters Carney and Hap Johnson, who had started thus on so many drives that he was accustomed to eating alkali, keeping a cud of "nigger heel" in his jaws to prevent "dustification of his pipes," as he explained it. Lon's reason for hanging about the tail of the column was not suspected by Annie, as he had assured her their lucky day was dawning, citing the tranquility of the past night. But the rest of the outfit knew that he was scouting the back trail for the alkali haze raised by pursuers.

Fortunately for the trail drivers, the way to the Painted Rock Desert was north and they were not obliged to cross any portion of the 77 range, which adjoined the Triangle T holdings only on the west. The cattle were so fagged from the hard driving of the round-up of the day before that the outfit experienced less difficulty in keeping them to the road than is usual with a trail herd the first day out. The pace set by the point men was one that should enable them to cover ten miles before sundown—if the cattle could be held to it. The spring calves, gangling along beside their mothers with flopping cropped ears, were lagging noticeably after high noon. Ten miles was fair enough time, about average for trail driving on a good route, although even

a greater distance per day has been known to be made by road herds with the country and weather conditions particularly favorable.

TO get as far as possible from the vindictive reach of Duke Gunnison and his law-riding henchman, Lon Cowan would have liked to do better than ten miles, but more speed than that was not in the cattle. He would have to be content. After they hit the wasteland, fewer miles than ten would be covered daily, perhaps only half as many. Whether Sheriff Wiggins would chase them into the Painted Rock "land of the dead" was a question, but one which the tall cowpuncher thought he might safely answer negatively to himself. Therefore it behooved them to reach the rim of the desert quickly, ahead of pursuit. There were no rivers to cross this first day, though on the morrow the Apache, rightly named for its violent humors, would be encountered athwart the northern road.

Lon sincerely hoped that no trail cutter would delay the drive to-day, when every minute, almost, counted. The Triangle T boys on swing had already chased off any number of cattle bearing the brand of Annie Texar's neighbor on the north, these animals being minded to join the flight. This neighbor or his punchers would be doing no more than range law allowed if they stopped the herd and trimmed it for stock burnt with their iron. This cutting business took time, and time was the one thing the Triangle T outfit didn't have to give away. Luck was with them in this respect, however. They traversed four miles of the neighboring range without seeing a single cowboy and after that they were upon land opened recently to homesteaders, who had no cause to bother them.

On a long trail, say from any one of a hundred points in Texas to Dodge

City, Abilene or Wichita, Kansas, in the old days, this trail cutting was very necessary, as ranchmen along the route of big drives would otherwise have lost annually thousands of dollars in critters that attached themselves to such marches without the knowledge or consent of the trail drivers. But the delays caused thereby were an unmitigated nuisance to the latter.

Lon Cowan—and doubtless he was not the only one—welcomed indeed the lowering of the sun in the west that day. They had made their ten miles without interruption, the hound of the law had not run them down—yet. To-morrow night, if all went well, they would bed down the cattle close to the desert's edge. The place selected for throwing the herd off the trail was the highest ground in the vicinity with a creek hard by, a well-nigh ideal spot for a camp that old Buck Rainsford had had in mind from the start of the drive;

AS Hap Johnson's evening fire blazed up merrily in the cool wind that caused a considerable drop in temperature as night came on, Lon Cowan sought out Annie at the wagon. He thought she would be there and she was, sitting on an upturned water bucket and enjoying the breeze, her hat off, hair down, so that the air could have free play through it. She was marvelously pretty, darn near beautiful, thought the tall cowpuncher, standing a moment entranced by the picture she presented before he opened his cracked lips to ask, "How you makin' it, Annie?" This had been the first time he had addressed her without the prefix "Miss."

"I'm glad you decided you know me well enough to drop the handle from my name," she said, smiling up at him. "Thanks, I'm doing very well. Just had a wash in the creek. And oh, it felt so good after that saddle drill. I'd

like to take a bath all over, but. . . .”

“After dark, you go ahead and I guarantee none of us boys will leave the fire,” he grinned. “Well, ma’am, didn’t I tell you our star was risin’? No Duke, no sheriff, no anybody taggin’ us, seems like. You can rest easier to-night than you did last night, but I reckon we better be on the move quite early, that is before sun-up.”

“We’ll follow the leader,” she said pointedly. “Depending on you to get us through this, you know, Lon.”

“If tryin’ will do it we’ll get there with both feet and a jingle,” he assured her seriously. Then the creases of a grin appeared. “Hungry?” he asked. “Remember, you ain’t et since that early breakfast.”

“I’m wolfish,” she told him with an answering grin that revealed her fine teeth, not in the least wolflike.

The night guard was divided into two-hour tricks and the men, on a warning from Lon, were equally as alert during the hours of darkness on this bed ground, ten miles distant from Cow Creek, as they had been on the creek. For the real leader of the drive, though Harkness was called “boss” of it, was far from satisfied that they had seen the last of Gunnison and Wiggins until they struck the desert. The pair of them were good haters, he believed, and would kill their horses to overtake the fugitive Texar spread.

Again an early start was made, the herd rolling out about dawn and working its collective legs a trifle faster for the first couple of miles. A tendency to wander a bit also manifested itself and the swing riders—of which Annie herself was one—had more than a little extra saddle pounding to do to keep the line in order.

It was nearly noon when the point riders could hear the roaring of Apache River up the canyon that held it across the greenish brown plain, above the

steady clack of horns and hoofs. This river, unlike most Arizona streams except when visited by a cloudburst, was never at low water and was sometimes a furious flood. Buck Rainsford and Tom Harkness drew in their horses, waved back the leaders of the herd and the swing riders. Then catching the signal, they prodded in close from either flank, until there was a cessation of movement along the serpentine line.

The point where the herd had stopped was about as favorable a location for crossing as any along the course of the Apache—but that was not saying much in its favor. A raft would have to be constructed of cottonwood logs and the chuck wagon mounted on it to get Hap Johnson and his precious load to the far shore, something like a quarter of a mile away. While Hap climbed from his seat with an ax in hand and approached a group of cottonwoods some fifty yards from the cattle trail, old Buck Rainsford and Tom Harkness were dismounting and pulling off boots, outing shirts and gunbelts. If an accident should happen and they were forced to swim, they wished to be as unencumbered as possible.

Buck and Tom mounted again, clad in pants, undershirt and hat, and edged the leaders of the herd down the sloping bank. When ankle-deep in the water, the leading steers paused to drink, those behind slowly pushing forward, wary of the noisy river and not thirsty enough to venture into it at a pace faster than a walk. This was just as well; a rush would have caused confusion—and probably death to the weaker cattle and the calves—spoiling the important beginning.

“You’d better go over in the wagon with old Johnson, Annie,” Lon Cowan called to the girl as he flicked by her from the rear at a fast trot.

“Nothing doing—my bronc can swim and I never did like rafts,” she replied.

HE did not pause to argue. At the same spot where Rainsford and Harkness had shed clothing, Lon swung out of the leather and began tugging at his boots. Yank Haggerty appeared at his side, with the similar intention of riding swing, before Lon stood up in his stocking feet. Only two men were needed to flank such a comparatively small herd in the water, the rest of the outfit remaining on the bank to guide the uneasy cows into the river. As Lon and Yank topped their mounts, wearing their gunbelts in bandolier fashion, criss-cross to either shoulder, and drummed the cow-ponies with stockinged heels over the sand-bar, they observed the leaders of the herd already in deep water, swimming strongly after Rainsford and Harkness, heads up, horns and wet brown backs glistening in the dazzling sun. They swam in an irregular line, from four to six unevenly abreast as an average, and though the current was swift and the undertow gripping, even the calves seemed to be having little trouble in keeping afloat, their scared white faces bobbing beside the maternal bulks, knife-marked ears dipping limply in the foam.

Lon forced his horse off on the right swing, and Yank took the left. The signs pointed to a crossing without mishap, despite the Apache's mood, since the leaders were going so well, having not once tried to double back for the shore now tailward of them.

About half the herd was in the water and swimming, and the point men were prematurely congratulating themselves when a log came sailing out of the canyon mouth above. It was on the side nearest Tom Harkness, but Rainsford saw it first and called. Cursing, Tom pulled the coiled lariat from over his arm, forced his horse out to meet the floating menace, which likely as not would start a deadly mill in mid-river if the uneasy cattle saw it. He spun

his rope to catch one end of the log. It wouldn't have to butt in among the critters to create trouble; in their present unnerved state, anything that looked the least bit unusual was going to be distorted by the bovine mind into something dangerous.

But Tom's rope missed and before he could make a second cast, the log got by him and hell broke loose. The quietly swimming leaders turned in a frenzy from the direct course and all the horned heads rearward followed the wide circle. Bawling and bleating, they cracked their horns as heads came together in collision. And worst of all, Lon Cowan was caught in the mill. The suddenly crazy leaders had swung to the right when they turned and Lon was hemmed in by tossing horns and brown hulks before he could swim his frantic pony through the closing gap. He hadn't observed the log, being on the other side of the herd, therefore had not been at all prepared for what happened. He saw the log now as he lifted his legs high to escape the crush. The inanimate cause of all this trouble lay wedged between two lines of crazy cows. There was a spreading stain of red where the water was visible, showing that the log had struck and sunk at least one of the helpless beasts.

Wishing they had fetched their guns along in the manner of Lon Cowan and Yank Haggerty, Rainsford and Harkness with difficulty swam their horses to the right-about. They churned foam in an effort to reach the leaders in that wide-circling mass before their heads touched the tails of the stragglers, intending to pound them with rope coils since nothing else was available.

THE cowboys on the bank had halted the line of cattle, throwing the few hundred head that had not yet entered the water back from the shore.

Hap Johnson left off building his raft and climbed bareback upon one of the remount horses. He and Annie, whose face was white with anxiety over Lon's predicament, took the remnant of the herd in charge, putting a stop to their scattering and halting what might possibly have developed into a stampede inland, while the cowboys splashed their ponies recklessly through shallow water to the deeper water, bent on breaking the mill.

Lon Cowan was not in a position where his two guns were of any avail. He was too far away from the leaders to hope to turn them outward with shots fired alongside their heads; he was almost in the center of the confused cows. His horse snorted wildly, showed the whites of its eyes, thrashed water futilely; then screamed as the press of cattle began crushing its ribs, driving the breath from its body.

Lon knew there was no escape for the poor animal—possibly none for himself—and drew a gun, mercifully ending its struggles of pain and fear. As the animal's head fell sidewise, Lon stabbed his gun in the holster and, desperate in his extremity, threw himself upon the broad back of the nearest steer, grasping its horns to help him keep his balance, raising his long legs clear of the bellowing, hooking critters surrounding the animal he had selected.

Presently this steer was gored so badly by its fellow creatures in frenzied distress that the nimble cowboy crawled to the back of another animal on his right. The cattle were jammed together so tightly that Lon did not pause long on the second steer, deciding he could reach the outer rim of the mill, if he were careful, by creeping from back to back. He put the thought into execution at once, glad he didn't have his boots on to make footwork more arduous than it already was. Meantime his trail mates were swim-

ming their ponies nervily into the circling jam of horned heads, popping away with their Colts; yelling with leather lungs. Buck Rainsford and Tom Harkness plied ropes furiously. Cattle were pried loose from the mill, shunted to right and left, in any direction, to scatter them.

A few started for the shore toward which all had been headed when the log came along. Others followed this lead. Lon Cowan came swimming free of the press, forking a big roan steer which had worked loose from its fellows and was now laying a nearly straight course for land. It collided with another steer, going at a tangent, knocking the straddled cowboy sideways into the roily water. But Lon was no mean swimmer and he maneuvered for the tail of the big roan as the pair broke away from each other and was towed to shore, hanging on to the tail with both hands. He was none the worse for his experience except for the loss of his good saddle horse.

Rainsford and Harkness had headed for land as soon as the mill was broken and old Buck helped Lon up behind his saddle when the cowboy let go the steer's tail in shallow water and waded ashore. A man afoot is a strange creature to cattle, an object to be attacked, and with more and more shorthorns crowding the bank every moment, wild-eyed and spooky after their experience in the river, Lon could not have stayed long off a horse and kept a punctureless hide. As soon as the remuda came across he would get a mount for himself.

But he would never recover that perfectly good rig stock saddle, that had cost him sixty dollars in Globe, for the rapacious river was sweeping his pony's crushed body downstream with the horned victims of the mill.

When the last of the herd was finally landed high and wet, every man was

vigilant to keep the cattle from breaking out in a run for the skyline, while their nerves were still taut. It was estimated that they had lost about a hundred head and many of these were calves.

NATURALLY the lady boss was considerably saddened, as were her men, but there was a silver lining to her grief for Lon Cowan had escaped death.

How much this really meant to her she did not realize herself, but Lon was surprised at the way she flung her arms about him and all but kissed him the moment she got to the side of the river on which he stood. As she left his side, Lon furtively glanced around to see if the foreman had been looking, and though Tom Harkness' gaze was not just then directed toward either of them, his attitude suggested that he had observed the embrace and had quickly averted his face. Well, thought Lon, may the best man win—but he was daggone fond of Annie Texar, he was so!

Lashing a wide row of cottonwood poles together and nailing more poles laterally on what was to be the under side of his raft, to strengthen the whole, Hap Johnson negotiated the stream with the help of Splinters Carney, Yank Haggerty and another puncher, who had swum back to get the remuda. The raft was set afloat at the edge of the bank, the wagon rolled upon it and the wheels chocked. The team had to swim and made light work of towing the raft over, with Hap mounted on his seat, one foot on the brake, the lines almost idle in his hands since a cowboy swam at the head of either of his horses.

Carney brought the extra horses to the far north shore without incident, horses being much easier to handle than cattle, due to the superiority of equine

intelligence over bovine. Seldom indeed did horses become so excited as to go into a mill, yet it took little to upset the cattle.

The cook had picked up the clothes discarded by Cowan, Rainsford and Harkness, also the gunbelts and guns belonging to Buck and Tom, and the men claimed what was theirs, donning these shortly after the wagon trundled up the bank from the raft. Taking it all in all, the outfit had much to be thankful for.

Though at least a hundred brands had gone the way of all cattle, not one man had been hurt and the Gun-nison-Wiggins faction had not as yet appeared on the back trail. The enemies of the Triangle T could have made things far livelier than they were for that outfit, had their coming been timed synchronously with the crossing of the stream.

As the Apache River was the last water barrier the outfit would strike before entering the desert, Hap Johnson was careful to fill his water barrels to the brim; and he distributed among the cowpunchers the worn old canteens he had brought from the ranch, so that each might carry a little water of his own and save that in the barrels as long as possible. They would be three days on the desert, at least, and probably more, for they were none too sure that the cattle could cover the usual ten miles with sand underfoot, even if travel were done at night to render the march sunless and less torturing. And if all the water holes along the route to Medicine Springs, beyond the northern rim of the desert, were dry, the suffering of cattle and horses, if not the members of the outfit, would be intense. What was in the barrels, if judiciously used, should sustain the humans over the long, hard drive, but there was so little that it could not be given to the stock, too.

CHAPTER V**MEDICINE SPRINGS OR BUST!**

THE coming of the next dawn found the cattle plodding through the cool sands of Painted Rock Desert, sands which would begin burning the cloven hoofs immediately after the sun had risen. Camping earlier the preceding afternoon than they had done before, the trail drivers had waited until an hour or so past sundown, then entered the wasteland at a time when it actually felt good to be on the move, so chill was the wind that came out of the canyon—as chill as the low-swinging stars appeared to be. They had made seven miles by dawn through tireless shoving of the critters, and all hands now regarded pursuit as one thing less to worry about. Indeed they had no time to be thinking of Duke Gunnison and Sheriff Wiggins, confronted as they were with the fearsome task of trailing fourteen hundred cattle over the deadly dry route.

Once the sun was on high and started brassily down into that broken waste of sand and weathered rock which, from a distance gave off shades of the rainbow in profusion, as if an artist with prodigal brush had painted the boulders and granite walls, the stock and drivers began to suffer. Alkali dust powdered hats, shirts and chaps; it would not be long before the color faded from the flannel outing shirts, turning their bright hues to a dullness that matched the drabness of the desert floor.

Painted Rock Desert was anything but flat; on every hand it was cut with arroyos, with canyons; to the west rose a mesa, streaked, in the deceitful distance and atmosphere of that terrifying yet fascinating region, with vivid splashes of purple and red.

A halt was made not long after sunrise in what little shade the walls of a canyon with a blue-tinged rim could afford. Hap, working in a shirt as damp as a dish-rag, served up a breakfast composed partly of sand and grit. He had made plenty of coffee to wash it down with, so there was no grumbling. A hot breeze stirred continually through the canyon, causing complaint from the uncomfortable cattle which, while tired from their nocturnal journey, would not lie down on the burning ground.

If sand had been sugar, the men and girl breakfasting about the old hood-torn wagon could have held their tins in the air and sweetened the black liquid to taste in a few seconds. But they were bearing discomfort with grins, Annie Texar accepting her lot with as much philosophy as the men, who were more accustomed to hardships. It wasn't often any of them struck anything as bad as this, however.

The march was resumed hours later, when everyone had been thoroughly baked, inside and out, and the cattle were bawling for water rather than grass. So sharp was the change from hot to cold after the fiery ball of the heavens had rolled down the western rim of the desert, that the men donned sourdough coats and Annie put on a leather jacket.

The cold was a huge relief to man and beast. The horses, which had grouped themselves in the most sunless spot they could find in abject misery, were ready for a feed of oats and every rider shared some part of his precious canteen water, poured into his Stetson, with the faithful four-footed pard who was to carry him onward through the approaching night. From what he had heard others say of the route, Buck Rainsford opined that they should strike a water hole before morning, where the cattle could assuage the thirst

that was doubtlessly burning them up.

Everyone felt more like eating a bit of supper than they had breakfast, but it was not long after dark that all was in readiness for a continuation of the trek, and the leaders of the herd were driven through the upper end of the sheltering canyon and out into the velvet haze of the countless stars.

THE cattle needed little urging to get somewhere else. Eager most of all to taste water, but not averse to nipping at the dry and sun-blighted sage on level and ridge as they proceeded, the column bore less resemblance to a straight line than it had when they were traveling the grasslands. The stock was forever roving off trail to find more of this poor grazing. Many pounds of fat were going to come off the critters before they reached the end of trail—if they reached it. Thus far the drivers had encountered nothing worse than they had anticipated and were exceedingly hopeful.

The monotony of jogging along on point and swing and drag, with handkerchief over nose and mouth to baffle the attack of rising sand and alkali; with the steady clack of horns and cloven hoofs the only sound of the march, was something to which every man in the saddle was accustomed and even Cattle Annie, who had not been raised softly, stood the test with a cheerful spirit. All hands knew, by the quickening pace of the herd, when the water on which Buck Rainsford was building high hopes was in the vicinity.

Dead north pointed the cattle, the stragglers bunching up, the line breaking into a trot. The cowboys were more than ever on the alert for these signs; it would be a calamity to have more cattle killed in a stampede for the water hole. And yet there was very little that the valiant cow-horses and riders could do to restrain the shorthorns, once the

smell of water wafted to them. Tails rolled and they were off, punchers racing forward in full force to be at the water hole before the thirsty bovine mass reached it.

There lay the water hole, its quiet surface reflecting a rudely circular shield of stars, which presently was invaded and hidden from sight by the dry-bellied stock dropping into it. The cowboys sought to relieve the killing pressure of the rearmost cattle who, unable to reach the water immediately and therefore frenzied, were weighing down upon those already wading and wallowing in the life-restoring water. They pounded them with hats and quirts, making daring excursions into the thick of the crowding beasts and, because they were real hands astride ponies that knew their business, snaking forth alive and unhurt. But this was dangerous and exhausting and didn't do as much good as they might have wished for.

"Leadin' critters has got their fill and are makin' some room," Lon Cowan announced to Annie Texar, as he rode past her station on a bare little knoll. Knowing that Annie was lamenting the fate of her calves, which surely would be trampled more quickly than the older and heavier cattle, Lon added, "Don't worry, girl, it's easin' up a lot. Think of what'd happened if the ol' hole had been dry."

HE did not wait for her to answer, being an extremely busy man just then, as was every member of the outfit; but she gazed after him with pulses leaping. What was it that attracted her so to this homely man? His confident bearing, his habit of tackling obstacles head-on instead of side-stepping them? Or was it because, out of pure chivalry and no hope of gain, he had espoused her rather hopeless cause? She couldn't decide, but the feeling of affinity was

there and flourishing the more she saw of him, in repose and in action.

Tom Harkness had many of the qualities that Lon Cowan had displayed, and Annie had imagined herself half in love with Tom, who was wholly head-over-heels in love with her, until now. After she met Lon Cowan, Annie was quite certain that what she felt for Tom Harkness was only a sort of brother-and-sister affection.

When the herd was loggy with water and finally urged away from the muddy and hoof-torn spot, the ponies of the outfit were led down to slake their thirst. Possibly a dozen head of critters had been killed and lay half-submerged in the well-drained pool, five or six of them calves. The tender-hearted Annie found cause to wipe eyes that were not smarting from the invisible whirling sand and dust. The men themselves drank none of this water, as it was slightly alkaline and pretty thoroughly mixed with mud that had not had time to settle. As yet there was enough water in their canteens and the barrels lashed to the chuck wagon to see them through.

That night they traversed another seven miles of the dry drive, leaving a stretch of sixteen miles yet to go before the sight of the Medicine Springs shacks and loading pens would gladden the jaded eyes of the crew. Drivers and cattle and horses huddled from the direct rays of the sun in a sandy ravine after the coming of daylight had made trailing well-nigh unbearable.

The men had grown amazing beards and their eyes were sunken from the steady drill in a land unfit for either human or animal existence. Lizards, horned toads, rattlers, these reptiles seemed to thrive, but even the desert-bred coyote was noticeably absent from this God-forgotten Painted Rock country. The weird beauty of the sunrise, as it searched out the most secluded nooks

of the rockbound and sandy region, turning all briefly to gold, held no charms for the Texar outfit, who had come to regard the sun with an enmity they had never known before.

Because of his years, Buck Rainsford was all but breaking under the strain. He had bravely fought exhaustion, riding point with Tom Harkness, whose fewer years were vastly in his favor. Tom had kept an eye on old Buck, looking for him to give away; and during this second halt in the desert, the old-time cowboy collapsed on his saddle blanket and was even a bit delirious as the furnacelike heat besieged the camp in the ravine throughout the day.

Water was lavished on him by the deeply concerned cowpunchers and the lady boss; he was given to drink of it and his head was swathed in wet cloths by Annie. The water was lukewarm, but at least wet, and served to revive the old-timer, to such an extent indeed that as the welcome shadows of night darkened the rapidly cooling land, Rainsford got up and wobbled to the group at the cook's fire, sitting in for his plate of chuck and declaring he would take to the saddle again. They couldn't persuade him otherwise.

"Figger I'm gonna let a little two-by-twice desert lick me?" he croaked, affronted by the chorus advising him to share Hap Johnson's wagon seat. "And there's that game little gal, Annie, makin' the grade as fine as any man. Can't let her beat out a seasoned top-hand at his own game, can I?"

"But you're not as young as you once were, Buck," Annie retorted. "Why, I'm just the right age to be your granddaughter."

"Here, here, ma'am, you're chalkin' me up too plumb ancient!" Buck expostulated, a trifle insulted perhaps. "Leastways I ain't old enough to be herded with stove-in specimens. I'm ridin'!"

AND he did, sticking like a burr to the leather all through the night-long march, although it must have taxed his will-power.

They were threading a cool canyon, with six miles more behind them, when the sun came hurtling over the rimrock on its shadow-chasing and life-blighting mission this morning of the third day on Painted Rock. A mile less than usual had been covered chiefly because the cattle, seeking water they could not find, wandered often from the route, necessitating much extra riding by the trail drivers.

Here in the canyon, where they were thinking to stop and pass the heat of the day, though it was a question whether the thirsty cattle could be held corralled, dire calamity struck at the very source of their existence. The jaded team of Hap Johnson, with the cook dozing fitfully on the seat, the lax lines held between his tightly compressed knees, had lagged far behind even the remuda, wrangled by Splinters Carney.

The peace of dawn was upon Hap's surroundings; doubly rude therefore was his awakening as the team leaped into frenzied life, jerking the lines over the dash and all but heaving the driver into the uneven rocky trail. Hap's eyes snapped open in time for him to glimpse the cause of the team's wild break—a rattler had uncoiled from under a withered trail-side cactus and the horse nearest it narrowly escaped a fanging by a sudden bolt, carrying a frightened harness-mate along at equal speed. Then a hind wheel crashed against a rock; Hap slid clear from right to left across his hard seat — and his eyes opened wide as he heard an ominous, double-bumping sound and the crack of wood being split asunder.

He knew it wasn't the wheel that had broken—worse than that! And so great was his anxiety that he hurled himself from his seat into the trail without

thought of his neck, without trying to stop the horses, and rushed pell-mell back to dance around the smashed water barrels, released from their rope lashings by the heavy lurch of the wagon, and now gushing their vital fluid contents over the canyon floor. The thin layer of parched sand that topped the rock bottom of the trail was avidly absorbing the water and the staves of both barrels were so badly caved in that there was not a chance to save even a hatful.

Hap groaned aloud as he danced — their precious water was all gone ten miles from the end of the trail and there was no telling whether another water hole would be encountered in all that distance. Horsemen could traverse those ten miles before heat and thirst exacted extreme toll, perhaps, but the herd would be unable to keep up, and it is the boast of the American cowboy that he has never yet deserted his herd to save himself. Hap blamed the accident on his dozing, on that damned snake. In his sudden agony of spirit he forgot entirely the runaway team which, fortunately, had been caught and quieted by Splinters Carney, who had heard that ominous bump and crash rearward and turned a scared face from the back of the wagon, where he had looked to make sure that their loss was what he feared.

CARNEY rode down-canyon, deserting the wagon team and his loose charges, and, with others of the outfit who had sensed something wrong in the rear, came upon Hap dementedly heaving rocks upon the already mangled meat of a rattler. The broken barrels and the wide moist area on the sand told the story without Hap adding anything. But he did say plenty when he finally got control of his tongue, which seemed to have become twisted with the violence of his curses, directed at him-

self and the pulped snake.

"By God, boys!" he exclaimed, facing the solemn riders with wild eyes and hurling his battered dust-sifting hat on the ground for emphasis. "If we don't get through now it'll be because of your Uncle Hap and that sarpint . . . it wouldn't be more'n I deserve to bleach my bones hereabouts for catchin' some shuteye when I oughta been awake. But all the rest of you fellers—and Miss Annie . . . my God, boys!"

Lon Cowan, who was among those who had hit the back trail at a lively lope and now confronted the distressed cook, contrived to soothe Hap Johnson while realizing, as did every man, that there was good and sufficient reason for disquiet.

"This means, fellers," said Lon, as the cook trudged below at his stirrup back to where Carney had cast loose from the team, "that we gotta buck our luck in daylight. I been watchin' them cattle and I'm as sure as can be we'd never hold 'em till another sundown. It's move now; Medicine Springs or bust!"

His manner of delivering this speech put heart into his hearers; there was a faint cheering. But this died out as they approached the chuck wagon, at which Yank Haggerty arrived simultaneously from the head of the herd with a long, limp figure athwart his saddle horn. It was old-timer Rainsford!

"Dead?" exclaimed Lon Cowan, shocked and sorrowful.

"Nope, but his spark's low," retorted Haggerty, the dust-grimed mask of his face utterly tragic. All had so admired the gameness of old Buck. "Ol' feller sunned his moccasin all of a sudden with his boss hardly more than walkin'. Too big a chaw for him, this damned desert. Water barrels, busted, huh? Good God! Well, cookie, here's a passenger for you."

Cowan leaned from the saddle to pass

his half-empty canteen into Haggerty's hands as he pushed by for the head of the canyon. "We're shovin' right along, Yank. Do what you can for him—I'll send Annie back."

He met the girl heading that way, tersely acquainted her with what had happened and flicked purposefully on. As she rode for the wagon, Annie Texar's lips were as firmly set as Lon Cowan's had been. This was the crucial test and she would not be found wanting.

Like the boys, she had a little water left in her canteen, but only a little. Perhaps there was another spring or water hole in the path ahead, one that the dry sands and the remorseless sun had not sucked dry. If not . . . she thought no more of abandoning her cattle than did the men; she was the true daughter of a cattleman. The unusual exposure, the sharp action of the ever flying sand, had roughened and darkened her skin so that she resembled very much an Indian girl, a very pretty one.

The herd was pushed on through the canyon head into the blinding glare and furnace heat. The outfit had not paused for breakfast, there was too little water in the canteens to spare any for coffee and no man could honestly have said he was hungry. Disaster was too close at their heels. Lon Cowan filled old Buck's place on left point, he and Tom loping ahead in blistered silence, saddles baking beneath them, every bit of metal about their equipment hot to the touch. The gaunt cattle wavered after the point riders, churning up stifling, stinging clouds of sand and alkali that all but overwhelmed the swing riders in the first mile or so. The lowing that told of the terrible thirst of the poor beasts gradually changed to a monotonous and piteous moaning that rasped the raw nerves of the cowpunchers. It is in situations such as this that men often go mad.

THE sight of the bleached bones of cattle, studding the trail in a meandering line as far as the eye could reach, was not at all reassuring. These skeletons did not lie about in any provision; but there were enough of them. Doubtless these bones traced out the course followed by those luckless trail drivers of whom Annie had spoken, who arrived at Medicine Springs with but half their original herd. The farther they proceeded, the more the men on point kept looking back, for the formation of the herd was breaking up badly, despite the efforts of the heat-tortured swing riders. Annie was not numbered among the latter now, but riding in the wagon, far to the rear, with old Buck, who hovered between this earth and the one-way trail.

"Gone stone blind!" Lon called thickly to Tom Harkness, some time past noon. He was speaking of the cattle, who were weaving around on legs that seemed to have lost the power to carry them on a straight course. Tom recognized the signs, too—a temporary blindness induced by thirst. He turned back. His lips were blackened and split, just as were Lon's and those of every other man of the desert-fighting crew.

To keep those thirst-crazy cattle from scattering to all corners of the desert, and yet on the move northward, was work that used up the best in every suffering but stout-hearted cow-pony. The tail-drooping head-hanging remuda was called into action, the horses under saddle at the time the cattle went blind being thrown together at the tail of the herd and the scarcely fresher ones carrying the red-eyed cowhands forward, desperately pounding at the disintegrated column.

The continuous moaning of the stumbling, unseeing herd was like a chant of the doomed, almost human in its appeal. But, cursing, quirting, loping here and there, using a gun when any weaker

animal sank dying in the sand, thus saving it from a lingering and horrible death, the heat-tortured cowpunchers made plainly slow but steady progress. At the rate the poor calves were dropping, there would be mighty few if any left when—and if—the herd rolled into Medicine Springs. Lon hoped that Annie was not looking out of the wagon; it would tear her heart to see so many carcasses dotting the way, to augment, in time, the gruesome boneyard that other luckless herds had begun.

Half-mad themselves as the frightful afternoon wore on, the sun-soaked, dust-mantled riders drained the last of the disgustingly warm contents of their canteens and wondered with a gnawing fear whether they would ever taste water again.

Lon Cowan, having tendered his canteen for the use of Buck Rainsford, was denied even these last swallows that went toward sustaining his companions on the drive. Once he got down from the saddle and secured a smooth pebble, rolling it under his tongue as desert-roving Apaches taught the early frontiersman to do, to keep the saliva flowing. But he was in a bad way; his sight was going back on him because of the relentless reflection of light from the glittering, simmering sands. Men as well as animals go blind in the desert; he hoped it would not happen to him. His tongue was so swollen he thought it must hang out of his mouth, just as the black tongues of the cattle were hanging as they ambled in groping fashion, moaning, moaning.

Once Lon straightened in the leather, squinting ahead with bloodshot, fevered eyes. Did he see trees and grass along a watercourse, sparkling in the sun, a mile or two in the offing? Good God! It looked so, and he was about to shout the glad tidings without thinking how incongruous the picture was, when the

whole verdant scene vanished piecemeal into thin air, leaving a sweep of highly-colored rock and sand dunes to mock him. A mirage! Hell! Yes, this was hell they were riding through!

REAL madness would soon have manifested itself in that herd and the crew driving it had not the coming of night relieved in a measure the strain and torture. Men and beasts were grateful for even so little. But on, on they went, the horses able to go no faster than a limping walk and groaning in chorus with the cattle.

Oblivion must have claimed Lon for a time, how long he never could have told, but he struggled back to grim reality at a hoarse shout. He had not heard the words first uttered, but they were repeated, in the voice of Tom Harkness, "Medicine Springs! God Almighty, fellers, there's the blessed ol' town! A coupla miles yet, mebbe, but there she is!" And Lon knew that those lights twinkling in the north on a level with the desert floor were not another mirage. He tried to get more speed out of his horse in a sudden frenzy over the welcome sight; but the animal could walk only and Lon's reason was not impaired to such a degree that he would indulge in cruelty; there was nothing of the kind in his normal make-up.

A few moments later the blind herd picked up its collective feet in a staggering run that would have amazed any but men who knew cattle.

"They smell water—it can't be far!" yelled Lon Cowan. At least he thought he yelled; the vocal effort in a reality was more like the croaking of a sore-throated crow, choked with his own tongue as he was and parched and packed with grit and alkali. "No stoppin' 'em, fellers, and who wants to try? They'll die happy in the water. God bless water! Aim to do some crowdin' myself at that oasis! C'mon! Water!"

His horse moved faster of its own accord; other horsemen joined the rush. Water, at that frantic moment, had the power to inspire movement as could nothing else on earth.

CHAPTER VI

LON SHOOT'S SQUARE

OLD BUCK RAINSFORD did not survive the dry drive. He died with his head in Annie Texar's lap during that terrible afternoon that no member of the outfit would ever forget. The boys buried him on a green hill beside the town of Medicine Springs in the early morning, a knight of the leather who had died where his life had been spent.

Annie refused to be comforted for some time thereafter. She made the vow that a marker would be erected at old Buck's head before they left the vicinity. Her cowpunchers to a man heartily endorsed this determination—the passing of Buck was the most lamentable feature of that terrible flight.

A few of the cattle and several ponies had been killed in the jam at that last water hole, but Annie and the men who had grittily fought the desert for her brand could register no kick against the results as a whole. They bedded down the remainder of the stock on good grass beyond the limits of Medicine Springs at something past two in the morning. No attempt was made to enter town by any of the unshorn, ragged, dirty and exhausted outfit until the sun was a couple of hours high. Even then, all but Annie, Tom, Lon, Yank and the cook stayed on the ground where they had dropped during the hours of darkness, oblivious to the sun beating down on their backs, snoring loudly in a deep, dreamless repose that was doubly

earned.

Every member of that valiant crew of trail drivers had wallowed in water to his body's content the night before, Annie with the rest, minding not its muddled condition after the cattle had crawled out upon the sand, dripping and satisfied. The herd, except for a grazing few more vigorous than the rest, was still sunk in recuperative slumber. The blindness would soon wear off in this paradise of green grass.

The jaded Hap, who had grown a few extra white hairs from the fear that gripped him when the water barrels smashed, and who never would get over being thankful that the fate of the outfit had not fallen tragically upon his shoulders, rustled some breakfast for the girl and the three men who presented themselves at his wagon and inquired if he had anything to eat. Afterwards they roped out four horses from the remuda which appeared more nearly recovered than the rest. Then they rode into town, where news of the herd that had appeared overnight on the grassy slopes, was just waking up the siesta-loving gentry of Medicine Springs.

Annie and her saddle escort were no tougher of constitution than the men who had been left lying about camp, their minds and bodies were equally as jaded and as proportionately in need of rest, but the business of disposing of the herd would not let Annie and her foreman sleep until the deal was closed with delivery and cash. Those knights of the leather, Lon Cowan and Yank Hagerty, while planning to refuse one cent for the service of chivalry, were as vitally interested in the matter as those to whom it meant bread and butter.

Lon was heartily glad that he had come along before they were in town ten minutes. Riding up the dusty little street that ran east and west through Medicine Springs, two and two abreast, Tom was in the lead with Annie when

Lon happened to catch a glimpse of two faces in the window of a saloon that gave him a tremendous start. The faces faded into a shadowy background before he got more than a whisking glance at them; but it was sufficient for him to know that the arch enemies of the Triangle T brand were in town—Duke Gunnison and Sheriff Pat Wiggins! It was disquieting to reflect that Medicine Springs was in Geronimo County and that Pat Wiggins wielded as much official power here as in Hualapai, far south.

It was not hard to guess that the sheriff and the man who owned him had come up by train, not horesback, for the only other trail to the Springs than the desert route, skirting Painted Rock, was exceedingly roundabout and more than an eight days' journey. Lon went by turns hot and cold with sudden rage. The appearance of these rascals at the trail's end was more than the Triangle T had bargained for.

HE dropped no remark, even to Yank, about noticing the vicious two as the horses loped on, Lon expecting every moment to hear the voice of the sheriff in their wake. Indeed, when the ride to the office of the local cattle buyer continued uninterrupted, his curiosity craved the satisfaction of a backward glance.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" Yank demanded, lazily licking the flap of a cigarette and shaping it with deft fingers.

"At them bung-eyed, gawkin' folks we just passed," Lon replied, shifting his gaze from the saloon to the group mentioned. "You'd think we was somethin' unusual in the line of cowpokes, the way we get the once over."

"Oh, hell, it's because we come over the desert trail alive and kickin'." Yank said explanatorily. "We're about the second outfit to do it accordin' to what

Miss Annie tells and naturally people's interested in us. Throw out your chest, cowboy, and look like you'd done some-thin' real—folks expect it and we hadn't oughta disappoint the public." His red-burned face cracked in a grin.

Lon laughed, rather hollowly, for he was thinking of other things and scarcely heard what his partner said. The sheriff and Duke Gunnison had not come out of that saloon—at least, not by the front door—and he wondered what this seeming inaction indicated. There was hardly any doubt that the presence of these men indicated they were lying in wait for the trail drivers, should the latter have been so fortunate as to reach Medicine Springs safely. If Duke had not brought along some of his cowboys to assist in a wholesale arrest, there were plenty of men in the Spring who might be deputized by Wiggins.

When they drew up in front of the cattle buyer's office, which was housed in a sand-scoured abode, Lon Cowan lingered behind with the horses, pretending there was something wrong with his riding gear and saying he would join them in a minute or so. The rest went on, even Yank Haggerty unsuspecting of anything unusual, and the door closed on them. Skirting the horses and running in the sandy street so that the patter and jingle of his spurred boots on the sidewalk would not serve as a warning, Lon dodged back to the door of the saloon where he had observed Duke Gunnison and Sheriff Wiggins. The voice of the sheriff reached him as he paused on the stoop for one brief instant:

"And I'm deputizin' all you fellers to go with me and help arrest e'm. They're sure to fight, so don't be afraid to be handy with your guns or you'll be a job for the undertaker. First we'll go to Billings' office, which is where them four was headin'; then we'll gather

in the rest at their camp outside town. Stick up your right hands, you fellers, while I swear you in."

A DOZEN right hands were in the air as Lon Cowan hopped over the doorstep and brought up against the solid wall, his spread fingers brushing the gunstocks at either hip. His voice rang through the barroom, cutting short the oath being administered by Sheriff Wiggins, who swung to the right-about in astonishment, a hand slipping down his leg, while the bearded Gunnison froze into an attitude face to face with Cowan.

"You two damn buzzards," he shouted, contriving to keep an eye simultaneously on both, for they stood not far apart, "I'm here to even the score for Triangle T. You dunno me and it don't make no difference who I am—but this is my day for notchcuttin'. Thought I didn't see you in this joint when we rode past? But I did, and so's Annie Texar wouldn't be worried none I snuck back alone. You've bulldozed and stole from and raised hell generally with the Triangle T, aimin' to lay hands on it for what reason I ain't knowin' 'nless you, Gunnison, are more kinds of a range hog than I can name. That girl and us men has just been three days in hell gettin' the last Triangle T stock through to this burg, so's it could be sold before 77 waddies rustled 'em all, and you can be damn sure, you buzzards, that we ain't standin' for to lose that herd now! Only one party can settle this argument and that's Colonel Colt—so step intuh the street after me, polecats, and we'll float some smoke, two to one!"

He waited for them to utter either yes or no, meanwhile edging away from the wall. Then he ordered them through the doorway, across the stoop and to the middle of the street, his guns in his holsters but his hands swung not far above

them. He had faced them all the way and now, as the men he had challenged walked through that wide doorway without touching elbows, he crouched lower, his legs spread, presenting the deadly yet fascinating picture of a gunman about to demonstrate his speed and send opponents stumbling on the one-way trail.

He was watching for a movement in the others' tense gun hands. It came first from Duke Gunnison, whose nerve was not the equal of the sheriff's in a gun scrap. As he tossed his gun, with a motion quick enough, indeed, too quick perhaps for anything like accurate aim, considering that Gunnison had not practised enough to cover his target instinctively, the cattleman emitted a curse in a voice that was almost a scream, "Take that!"

It advertised ragged nerves. In the next split second the guns of the crouching cowboy were flaming, drawn with two-handed deftness, and a second scream floated from the lips of Gunnison as he lurched sideways, dropped his smoke-curling gun and missed the stalking sheriff with his outflung hands by barely an inch. The sound of Gunnison's fall seemed to act as a spur upon the stony-faced Wiggins, who was dead game, taking big steps across the stoop, walking into his cowboy enemy.

He reached for and heaved his six-shooter with an underhand sling. At the moment he fired, a bullet crashed into his body above the beltline, fairly spinning him on his heels; and thus his shot missed by a whispering margin the bent figure of Cowan. But for the latter's swift pegging, three bodies instead of two would have been lying there in the brazen sun-light, with the gun smoke slowly dissipating in the still air.

Lon, hawklike, was eyeing the sheriff, in whom he thought he detected twitching movement as he lay sprawled on the hot stoop, when the command to "stick

'em up" was addressed to him from the rear. He switched a startled glance to the face of the speaker, saw an undersized but determined man focusing a steady gun on him. A town marshal's badge on the little man's vest reflected the sun in Lon's eyes. However, he held to his six-shooter, making no move to comply with that authoritative order; simply saying:

"Marshal, you don't savvy the rights of this!"

"I savvy enough to know you killed two men, one of 'em as big a ranch owner as Arizony boasts, t'other the sheriff of this here county—and that's plenty to get you arrested! While I ain't likin' the highhand way Sheriff Wiggins come bullin' around my balliwick, deputizin' folks and never askin' me in on it, I'm upholdin' my end of the law now he's cashed in. Damn it, shake loose from that artillery and put your hands up!"

STILL Lon did not move; he had no intention of surrendering and yet was loath to start a gunfight with the little marshal, who spoke like an honest man doing his duty as he saw it, uninfluenced by the sinister power the deceased Duke Gunnison had wielded in his life. The men Sheriff Wiggins had been deputizing when Lon Cowan dodged into the saloon, were trooping forth now to the aid of the marshal, one stopping at the hitch-rack to untie the rope from a lone pony there and brandishing this coil as he came loping after the others.

"Lynch him, Marshal! Lynch him!" rose the cry. "Give him to us—we seen the killin'!"

A horse was tearing up the street, bearing Yank Haggerty, with both guns out and blood in his eyes—and Annie Texar and Tom Harkness quivering in his wake, the hatless cattle buyer of Medicine Springs puffing through the

dust behind them afoot—when a faint cry from the supposedly dead sheriff arrested the advance of the saloon loungers. Wiggins was trying to lift himself to a sitting posture.

The man with the rope hurled the coil on the ground and darted back to help him, and, down on his knees, was supporting Pat as Lon walked closer, still armed and with the little marshal dogging his tracks to hear what the sheriff was saying between gasps for breath. Precious little attention was paid the warlike Haggerty as he reined up in the rear of the crowd now surrounding the low-speaking sheriff, whom he could hear by standing in the stirrups and leaning forward. Annie and Tom arrived not too late to learn from Wiggins' own lips the amazing reason why Gunnison had so avidly fought for possession of the Texar holdings.

"I'm dyin' and I want tuh go clean as I can," the sheriff said. "That Triangle T range is gold bearin' ground. For years I was a desert rat, rovin' the wasteland of this state, and one day, after I'd been elected sheriff, as me and Gunnison was cuttin' across Triangle T benchland to reach the 77, we came accidental on some float rock that looked almighty like a big strike to me. We had it assayed, secret of course, not lettin' even Gunnison's punchers know as they might've blabbed in liquor and started the whole country on a gold stampede before Duke could get control of Texar's ranch.

"Results of that assay was sure satisfactory and Duke tried to annex old Bob's outfit, sayin' he wanted more room to run his cows. Bob was plumb mule-jawed about it, wouldn't sell for no price and finally, gettin' mad and bein' gold-crazy right along, Duke hired a gambler to do up Bob in a poker game, the said blackleg quittin' Hualapai soon after. Bob's darter proved to be just as stubborn as her old man and Duke

was tryin' every plan he could think of to get her off the range, short of killin'. . . ." Here he choked and closed his eyes; whiskey was poured into him and he was able to go on, yet briefly, his words wide-spaced as he labored:

"Them 77 cattle—was planted—with Annie Texar's cattle—so's Duke could railroad her and her outfit—to the pen. Dirty scheme—but I was—takin' orders from Duke. Carlson and the brand inspector the same—they wasn't to blame—Duke was boss—down Hualapai way—the boss! Marshal," here his glazing eyes shifted to the face of the little man with the star at Lon Cowan's side, "I got the come-up-with I deserved—so did Duke. That tall cowpoke there I dunno, only he's workin' for Annie Texar—he shot square—let him go! Let 'em all go—they had guts crossin' the Painted Rock—three days in hell, he said, yes, hell. . . ." He breathed his last quietly in the arms of the man who had swung the rope coil. But there was no thought of a lynching in that man's mind now; he was thinking to get him a miner's outfit as soon as might be and take the first train south to that range where gold had been discovered. He was not the only man in that crowd busy with such thoughts; and before noon the general store was cleaned of mining tools, with late customers cursing their luck.

It was a tearful Annie Texar who turned her horse campward off the main street of Medicine Springs. Her father had been murdered, just as she suspected, and he who had done the actual killing probably would never be apprehended, although the man higher up had paid the price in full. This was some satisfaction, and besides, her dad's name had been cleared—he had never cheated in his life. What wouldn't men do for gold! She hated the very sound of the word in that moment of grief. Just then Lon Cowan spurred alongside,

leaning from the saddle to murmur his sympathy.

A MOMENT ago, Tom Harkness had said, with level eyes looking into Cowan's, "Tall feller, you ride with the little lady. It ain't me she loves, though I hoped so. It's you. She as much told me. 'That Lon Cowan,' says she to me, 'is the finest man ever born to the leather—I could love a man like him, Tom.' Her very words. I've seen the way you looked at her and—well, I've lost out. I reckon the best man won."

"You're plumb white, Tom Harkness!" the amazed Cowan exclaimed, his heart in his voice; then he gripped Tom's extended hand hard before riding on. Then Tom glanced at the long face on Yank Haggerty, jogging on his left, and asked what the matter was.

"Hell! It's because a perfectly good pardnership will be busted wide open!" growled Yank. "I'm filthy with money—me and Lon was goin' in for cattle together!"

Up ahead and out of earshot of those trailing in the dust, Annie was declaring, "I hope that vein pinches out."

"Don't you want to be rich, girl?" asked Lon hopefully.

"I can make enough for my needs running a cow ranch," she interrupted him.

"Well," said Lon with a slow grin, "if you're in earnest hopin' thataway, I reckon I'm with you. I'm no miner, I'm a cowpuncher—a cowpuncher with a hankerin' to be a ranch owner, runnin' his own brand. Say, I got the price of a tol'able little place in my chaps' pocket right now. Never had a minute to tell you about it before, things has been happenin' so fast, but that's the

reason me and Haggerty drifted down here—to buy a ranch."

She thought a moment, her eyes fixed ahead. Then she turned impulsively, her tears gone. "You and your friend are going back with us to Triangle T, of course. Hang onto your money and maybe—if this gold strike is a fizzle—if you'd like to throw in with me, we could go partners in a bigger and better ranch. I can't thank you enough for what you've done for me and I can't offer you pay—nothin' but a share in the Triangle T . . ."

As she paused, he considered her closely, the ponies meanwhile bearing them nearer and nearer the camp. "That's a daggone good idea, ma'am," said Lon at last. "But before we decide anything I'd admire to ask you a very personal question—when we get to camp, where nobody can listen in."

She nodded and said demurely, "I think I'll be glad to hear what you have to say."

His heart palpitated at the look in her eyes. He couldn't understand how such a lovely woman could love a home-ly cuss like himself—but why try to understand?

"Let's hurry, ma'am," he said suddenly, briskly applying the spurs to his horse. "We gotta rout out them sleepy heads and get the herd over to the railroad pens, so we can collect the cash for 'em and start south not later than the rest of them gold hunters who heard Wiggins talk. Seein' there ain't no sheriff to stop 'em, I dunno how you're gonna prevent 'em turnin' the ol' cattle range into a gold diggin'."

"Damn the gold, I'm a cow-woman!" she cried, her horse's stride matching his. "You know what we both hope, cowboy!"



Bushwhacker Behind a Tin-Badge

By
ROD PATTERSON

Author of "Too Colt-Fast to Side Satan," etc.

The fame of this tough town and its fighting tin-badge rode out on the dust and the din as far north as Dodge, and Marshal Rufe Tudge didn't reckon a dim-trail orphan could take over his law job merely by wearing his badge and matching his lightning draw!



Rufe fell like a log, firing pointblank at the killer!

FOR forty years Rufus Roscoe Tudge had been marshal of Mormon Springs. The toughest, bloodiest town in the Washoe basin, it had been only a two-bit burg when old Rufe started, but when the first great trail herds bellowed up from the Panhandle to the Wichita Mountains, the fame of the town and its fighting marshal rode out on the dust and the din as far away as Dodge City and old

Cheyenne. Through hell and high water Rufe rodded the law in that bibulous Babylon of the West. In his first five years, he carved five nicks in the butt of his Walker Pistol and earned the rep for being as proddy as a red-eyes mossy-horn out of the hills. Folks said Rufe smelled a ruckus a week before it broke, and when it did, could shuck iron faster than hell could scorch a feather. Rufe was proud of his badge and his gun and

his draw. But. . .

Rufe had the neatest little house in Washoe Township; and the neatest wife. She had silver hair and cobalt blue eyes, like the two Dresden china dolls on the fireplace in the living room. Folks couldn't help but envy a man with a settin' room that had no bunks in it and a wife who could cook like Annie could. And Rufe felt mighty proud.

And Annie was proud of her fighting marshal husband, too. She wanted Rufe to have a better home than those tinhorns and gun-toting cowmen who battled and wore calouses on their elbows leaning on the bars in town. But there was one thing Annie regretted: that Rufe couldn't spend more time in his home. Maybe he could, too, if only he'd get some sense and turn his badge in to Mayor Bowerhan. But she had to be careful about mentioning that; Rufe was apt to get his bristles up if you reminded him that he was seventy-two.

Now, on the way to the bedroom to call Rufe for breakfast, Annie thought again of Ben Bowerhan and had the same strange feeling of foreboding she'd had the day previous when Chuck Jones, Rufe's moon-faced deputy, had stopped at the house, three miles from town. Chuck's usually placid face had been drawn and worried-looking.

"Land sakes, Chuck," Annie said, "you look like you'd jest come from a witch's barbecue!"

"Nothin' like that, Annie," Chuck said. But I shore got a load o' trouble on my mind."

"Mebbe if you was to talk about it, t'would help some."

Chuck twirled his hat nervously a moment before blurting: "I wish yuh'd git Rufe to quit, Annie."

"Glory be, Chuck, I been a-tryin' to do that for three years! Rufe's as ornery as a muley-bull."

"Damn it, don't know it!" Chuck got up from where he was sitting and walked over to the stove and back. Then he said, "Ben Bowerhan's got an hombre name o' Bat Serango hangin' 'round the courthouse. I jest learned he's a gunman from up Dodge way."

"Well," Annie said, "if the mayor's so sot on takin' up with a gun-toter, guess it's his funeral, ain't it?"

"By grab, it ain't as simple as all that!" Chuck brought out tightly. "Yest'dy I happened to overhear them two swappin' tongue-oil in the mayor's office. Only roped a little of it, but t'was enough. I heered Bowerhan mention Rufe an' the Miners' an' Herders' Bank in the same danged breath. An' I remembered right off that the Rollin' R brand from Sweetwater jest rolled into the Flats with five thousand head."

"What in the world are you drivin' at, Chuck?"

Chuck spoke in a whisper: "The Rollin' R sold ev'ry damn head o' beef in that trail herd to Tom Milo day 'fore yest'dy, an' deposited eighty thousand iron men in Belcher's bank. An' Bowerhan knows Rufe sticks closer to that bank nights than a houn' dawg to a hot stove!"

"But—"

"I got a hunch Bowerhan an' that Bat Serango are gonna try to git shet o' Rufe Tudge somehow," Chuck went on, "so they kin bust inter that bank 'tween now an' Friday. I allus figured Bowerhan fer a stinker!"

Now as she stood at the bedroom door, thinking of how deadly serious Chuck had been, Annie felt again that helpless, sinking sensation. For she knew with irrevocable finality the uselessness of telling Rufe anything; he was too loyal, too innocent of wrongdoing to even suspect anyone else of it. Drunkenness, rowdyism, yes. And even murder in some men. But not dishonesty in the mayor of the town he loved.

SHE paused, hating to wake Rufe; he needed his sleep after being out so late nights recently. Finally she went in. She had to shake him hard before he yawned and knuckled his eyes and asked what time it was.

"Time all old dogs was dead," said Annie tenderly.

"Ain't you the slick one," Rufe said, throwing his long legs out of bed. He looked comical in his dinky nightshirt. Rufe was a big, raw-boned man with a seamed red face and gray eyes that were just beginning to get a little watery. Despite the hectic nature of his calling, there was a certain damn-it-take-your-time look around his long-lipped mouth. Now he said, "What we got fer breakfast, Annie?"

"Guess."

"A big durn' steak an' rais' biscuits an' sop," grinned Rufe, reaching out to the bedside chair for his hat. He always started dressing with his headpiece — a hangover of his Texas range-riding days. He put it on carefully now before adding, "An' no danged whittle-whangin' 'bout it, neither."

"You'll git pan cakes an' lick, ol' shaky shanks," she informed him tartly, "an' like it!"

"My, my," he mocked her gently, "ain't you got the pepper on yore tongue! Now git, so I kin put on my pants!"

When they finished the simple meal, Annie said, "When you goin' turn in your star and enjoy lie fer a change?"

"Now don't start that again," Rufe warned her. He got up from the table and strapped on his gun belt, clipping his steel-linked handcuffs to a brass ring on it. "I ain't *never* gonna quit; I tol' yuh that afore. Bowerhan can't git nobuddy who kin handle them Texas trail boys when they come skally-hootin' into town. An' besides, the mayor needs an honest, straight-

shootin' marshal, with the bank bulgin' with beef money like it is this time o' year."

"Bowerhan!" Annie snorted. "Don't mention Ben Bowerhan an' honesty all in the same breath to me, Rufe Tudge! I've heered a-plenty about that man's shady dealin's."

"Oh, Ben's all right, I guess." Rufe pinned his old ball-pointed marshal's badge in a fresh place on his cowhide vest. "People shouldn't oughta run a man down on plain heresay. Besides, Ben's only been mayor a month. Give 'im time to show what he's made of, I say."

Annie studied her husband a moment, then heaved a sigh. "I do wish you'd listen to your wife onct in a while." She sighed again. "Reckon when you git to be an ol' man, Bowerhan'll have to start packin' a gun an' do his own marshalin'. You bein' the only able-bodied man in Mormon Springs."

"When that happens, old gal, you ain't gonna be 'round to see it. My paw lived to drive an eight-mule baggage wagon when he was ninety-six. An' then he—"

"An' then," she supplied Annie caustically, "he fell off a bar stool and busted his brisket. Tellin' that windy over and over is goin' to tucker you out, if nothin' else does."

"Now, now," Rufe said. "Yuh got my lunch ready?"

"Yes." Annie sighed. "You'll find it on the pump shelf. And be sure your boots is clean afore you walk onto my clean kitchen floor."

A half hour later, Rufe rode into Mormon Springs. Humming happily to himself, he lit down from his bay in front of the courthouse, tied the horse, and went briskly up the steps to his office in the east wing of the building.

He was glad to find Chuck Jones there ahead of him. Good man, Chuck. But Bat Serango was in the office too.

He was sitting in the sun, with his shin-boots propped up on the front window ledge, hat slapped back on his sleek black head. Serango, Rufe knew, was a friend of the mayor's, but that didn't make you like him any better. Serango had a shifty way of looking right over your head when he was talking to you.

"'Morning, boys," Rufe said, sitting down at his roll-topped desk in the corner. "Anything new, Chuck?" He turned quickly when his deputy's reply came tautly across the room: "Mayor wants to see yuh right away, Rufe."

"What's he wanta see *me* about?" Rufe's gray eyes bored at his deputy.

Chuck kept his gaze averted. Rufe saw his round face was almost gray underneath its tan. "Says fer yuh to come right over. That's all I know."

Rufe stood up. He shot a glance at Serango over by the window. Serango was picking his teeth with careful concentration and staring out on the street. There was no expression in his pale eyes.

Rufe went across the hall to the mayor's office. A short, stocky man with crisp black eyes, Ben Bowerhan was sitting at his desk with his big flat boot-soles sticking out from under it. "'Morning, Tudge," he said pleasantly.

Rufe felt a little quiver of relief go through him. He said, "Chuck told me yuh wanted to see me."

"Yeah." The mayor looked down at some papers he was riffling, then up again. "I was wonderin' if you'd be good enough to show Serango the ropes."

Rufe scratched his jaw. "Mind chewin' that a little finer, Ben?"

"Didn't Jones tell you?"

"No, sir."

"Why the hell didn't he?" Bowerhan acted irritated. "I told him to."

"Give 'er to me straight, Ben, if I done something wrong."

BOWERHAN cleared his throat. "Well, Tudge, it's this way. Runnin' a town the size of Mormon Springs is a business proposition and the records show you're gettin' too old for the work. You're seventy-two, Tudge, and much as I hate to do it, I got to ask you to step aside for a younger man."

Rufe swayed a little; his hands balled suddenly into fists at his sides. "Yuh mean—yuh mean I'm—fired?"

At the utter incredulity in Rufe's voice, Bowerhan allowed a pained expression to cross his heavy features. "Now, Tudge," he said patiently, "you got to look at this reasonable. We all got to get old some day. And in your case—well, it oughta be pretty gratifyin' to know you done your job good all these years and that you're checkin' out with a whole hide."

Rufe gulped. "But what've I done that's—"

"Hell, it ain't that!" Bowerhan snapped. Then, holding his voice down low: "I savvy this is kind of a shock to you, Tudge. And takin' that into consideration, I'm gonna stretch a point of law and give you a bonus of two months' salary."

Rufe's shoulders were sagging; there was a stunned glassiness in his eyes. "Yuh fire Chuck Jones too?" he asked thickly. "An' him with a wife an' three kids?"

Bowerhan made an impatient gesture. "He'll get a bonus too."

Rufe stared. Then he said:

"Who yuh gonna appoint in my place?"

"Damn it, Tudge, didn't you hear what I said about—"

"I wanta know who's gonna wear my star."

"You know goddam well I already swore in Bat Serango!" barked Bowerhan. "A man with some get-up-and-go! Not a blasted moss-back!"

A spasm of fury shook Rufe; his

face seemed suddenly to crack into deep furrows, like cleft chisel marks in a granite mask. "Yuh mean to sit there an' tell me you're gonna make that—that Serango marshal o' this town when the bank is loaded plumb to the winders with—"

"Look, Tudge." Bowerhan's tone went flat, dead. "I don't aim to sit here all day augerin' with you. If you don't want to stick around for a couple days, till Bat gets the hang of things—all right."

"It ain't square," Rufe moaned, "to cut me down like this in the prime o' life."

Bowerhan's mouth had the curl of a whip lash. "Seventy-two," he said.

Rufe dragged in a deep shaken breath. He drew a hand falteringly over his eyes as if he was trying to clear his sight. Then, slowly, he began to fumble at the tarnished marshal's badge on his vest. "It—it ain't square—" he whispered. He tried to get the star unpinned, failed. Bowerhan eyed him coldly. "You can keep it," he said brusquely.

Rufe let his hand fall limp. When at last he spoke, there was a reedy quaver in his voice. "Listen, Ben, I come of a race o' long-livin' men. I—I still got fifteen years o' good active lifie. An'—I ain't sure about my age nohow—like's not I'm only about sixty."

The mayor was looking out of the window. "Wonderful weather we been havin', Tudge." He pushed abruptly to his feet and turned to a filing case in back of him.

Rufe faced toward the door. Slowly. He made it all right, but he bumped hard against the door frame going out. Chuck Jones wasn't in the office when he finally got hold of himself and went in.

But Bat Serango was. And Serango was sitting at his desk already. Rufe's desk. The one he'd used for so

long it had two polished hollows on it where his elbows had rubbed.

Rufe dropped his handcuffs on the desk.

He said, "The mayor asked me would I show yuh things an'—an' kind of introduce yuh 'round town."

Serango tipped back in his chair. He anchored his pale gaze on a spot just over Rufe's gray head. "Okay with me, Grampaw," he said. "Ready any time you are."

Rufe saw the brand-new marshal's star on Serango's gaudy vest and went all tight inside. Forty years rodding the law in the toughest, bloodiest town this side of Dodge. Forty years taming down a town where there hadn't been enough peace and safety to wad the barrel of a smooth-bore gun. And he, Rufe Tudge, had made that devil's den a fit place for women and kids to live in. But now, he was through. Now he had to take a lot of rotten lip from a blasted cold-deck pilgrim from the brush. Why, damn it to hell, he had a good mind to tell this flat-bellied, squint-eyed gent he could gun-whup or hand-whup him seven days out of a week! Seventy-two or no seventy-two! But he didn't. Instead, he said, "We'll go over to see Ed Belcher at the bank, fust thing. That'll be the spot to watch close. Leastways till the beef money that's there now goes out Friday with Wells Fargo."

"Hope you don't think I *tried* to git yore lousy job, Grampaw."

More than anything else in the world, Rufe wanted, right then, to smash that smirk clean down Serango's throat. But he didn't even answer. He turned away, disgusted. Sick. He took Serango across the square to the Miners' and Herders' Bank, stiffly introduced him to the president and cashier. Ed Belcher, a whiskery, cheerful little man, came out from behind his wicket and shook hands.

RUFÉ explained: "Serango's gonna take care o' things fer a while, Ed. I—I jest wanted yuh to know he's got full authority." Realizing suddenly that he was stammering it out, Rufe flushed clear up to the brim of his hat. Then, feeling the banker's astonished stare, he added hastily, "Hell, I'll be a-rollin' my tail 'round town jest the same, only I—well—I ain't quite as spry as I usta be."

Ed Belcher laughed a little uncomfortably, then said, "Jupiter! This here town would fall plumb apart if anything happened to you, Rufe!"

Bat Serango hooked his thumbs into the arm-holes of his brocade vest and swaggered around the bank, squinting at this and that and asking questions. Damn fool questions. Rufe thought. Like: "Yuh keep that back door barred up night and day, Belcher?" and "Jest how much dinero yuh got on hand right now?"

Rufe held in as long as he could, then burst out, "Damn it, we ain't supposed to run the bank, Serango! We're jest supposed tuh take care nobuddy busts into it."

"Did yuh say we?" Serango asked with heavy irony. "Look, Grampaw, yuh don't tighten the latigo on that jaw o' yourn, I'll have tuh do it fer yuh!"

Rufe's right hand flicked down, hung fire a moment above the black butt of his gun. But Belcher stepped into the breach. "Shucks," he said calmly, "the bank ain't never lost even a short bit since Rufe's run this town. When the longhorns hit here he keeps watch on the bank from eight till midnight, then Chuck comes on. Say . . . who you gonna make yore deputy, Serango?"

"Deputy?" Serango sounded incredulous. "Me need a deputy? Hell, Belcher, this ole smoke-wagon's all the deputy I need!"

Ed Belcher eyed him a moment, stiffly. Then he said, "Well, after Fri-

day it'll be normal again. The money'll be outa here then—most of it, anyhow."

Annie was in bed and asleep when Rufe got home that night. He didn't wake her to say goodnight as he usually did. He just crawled between the blankets and lay quiet, thinking. It was almost dawn when he fell into a fitful slumber.

Tuesday morning at breakfast time Annie waked him as usual. But the meal was different. There was chicken and salt pork and homemade peach preserves.

"Wish ev'ry day was like this," Rufe said.

"T'would be," Annie said, "if you'd only get some cow-sense an' quit that star-totin' job o' yourn."

"There yuh go again," he told her sternly. "Women talk too much."

Suspicion hit him suddenly, suspicion that somehow she had learned about his getting fired. He said, "Was you in town yest'dy?"

"How would I get time to go to town—with all this housework?" She said it so indignantly that he felt easy in his mind again. But when he opened his lunch that afternoon at the courthouse, his feeling of security evaporated. There was so much in his pail that it looked sure as hell like Annie was trying to console him for something. And, ironically, today he didn't feel like eating it. Maybe he was going into a fast decline. Seemed like he'd heard somewhere that some old men did go all to once like that.

All day he tried to duck people on Main Street and kept to the courthouse, dozing and smoking by the gray metal door that lead into the jail's cell-block. But when he went out for coffee at eight o'clock he ran spang into Bert Downey, owner of the Silver Chip Saloon. Bert said, "What in time ails that there mayor of ours, Rufe? If this Bat Serango ain't a cat-eyed killer from away-back, I'll eat yore shirt."

"Reckon he can't help his looks," Rufe said gruffly.

"Mebbe not," Bert replied, "but last night in my place, I seen him get into a jangle with Sam Purvis and dig for his blue lightnin'. Thought surer than cripes he was gonna unravel some slugs."

When Rufe arrived at the courthouse Wednesday morning, he found Mayor Bowerhan waiting for him on the steps. "Monte" Clayton, the local blacksmith, and Jeff Caldwell, the night barkeep at the Silver Chip, were lounging in the shade nearby. That's what made it so tough when Bowerhan said, out of a clear sky: "You won't be needin' to ride in after today, Tudge."

Rufe felt his face get red. He swallowed hard and said, "That's all right, Ben. I don't mind none. It's only two whoops an' a holler—"

Bowerhan cut him off: "Listen, after today I don't want your carcass clutterin' up the scenery around here. Is that plain enough?"

Rufe nodded dumbly. Then, as the mayor wheeled and stomped back to his office, he dragged himself wearily up the steps after him. There was a lump in his throat, a consuming bitterness in his heart for the two men who were at last kicking him flat-footed out of the life he loved. And the irony of it was: he was as helpless against the pair of them as a scrub-calf in a stampede.

SINCE Monday, the breakfasts Annie prepared for him kept getting better and better, and devil take the expense. "What's come over yuh, Annie?" he growled at her at Thursday's breakfast. "Feedin' me up like I was hell bent fer Glory Hallelujah!"

"I jest get sick and tired hearin' you take on so about your meals," Annie said tartly. "But I guess you'd holler and yell anyhow, no matter what kind o' chuck you was gettin'."

"I ain't *kickin'*, Annie. I jest figured t'was—well—kind of queer."

"Land sakes," she came back at him, "you're a-gettin' so old and wuthless, if you're ever a-goin' to eat good cookin' you better do it now!"

It did him good to hear her jump on him like that; it meant he'd fooled her, too. But he was still worried. He knew he couldn't go on like this forever. Judas Priest! He realized with a sudden hard pang of alarm that he had no place to go today. The first time in over forty years! The knowledge hit him in the stomach and turned him sick. Bowerhan had meant what he said; no doubt of that. Well, the hell with Bowerhan! Bowerhan couldn't stop him from riding to town. He'd hang around some place. Hang around till midnight which was his regular hour. Then he'd ride home as if nothing was wrong. And then, tomorrow. . . .

In town, he stopped at Clayton's to have the bay shod, which gave him a good excuse to pass a pleasant hour. It didn't work out as he thought it would, though, listening to Monte's belly-aching. Because, for the first time in his life, his own troubles seemed to be the lumped-up sum of all the grief and anguish in the world. So he left the horse at the blacksmith shop and went over in back of the Union Church and sat in the wagon shed and cleaned his .45.

At four that afternoon, he suddenly recalled that he'd forgotten to bring his lunch pail, so he sneaked across the square to the Hip-High Restaurant and had a cup of coffee. When he saw Ed Belcher coming over from the bank, he pushed up in a panic from the counter and tried to duck out before Ed spotted him. It didn't work.

"Hold on, yuh old son-of-a-gun!" The banker hopped across the boardwalk. "Say, what's eatin' yuh, Rufe? Your lip's hangin' down like a blacksmith's apron!"

Rufe screwed up a grin. "Perky as a jay-bird, Ed."

Belcher pulled him aside. "Do me a favor, pard, will yuh?"

"Spit 'er out, Ed."

"Listen." Belcher stopped, looked to see if other ears were near, then went on in a half-whisper: "Stay in town tonight like a good fella and keep an eye on the bank, will yuh? I don't cotton to that new marshal o' Bowerhan's. Not any."

"Hell, Serango's only—"

"I got to think o' my stockholders, Rufe," the little banker broke in irritably.

"And there ain't hardly a family in Washoe Township ain't got a piece o' money in that bank o' mine. And—well, I'll feel a heap easier when the express comes for that eighty thousand beef deposit tomorra morning." He dropped a hand pleadingly on Rufe's arm. "I could mount guard myself, but Cynthia's sick and—"

"You're gettin' yore nerves in a jingle, Ed. You—"

"Look, I run into Bat Serango last night comin' out of the alley in back o' the bank. He was drunker'n a fiddler's clerk."

"Now yuh can't go and trust a man like that, Rufe!"

Rufe suddenly was remembering things — little things: the whispered gossip about Ben Bowerhan; Bert Downey's cynical reference to Bat Serango; Bowerhan's offer of two months pay, his seeming attempt to make him, Rufe, stay out of town. Somehow the pieces fitted together to make a picture. True, a hazy one. But still. . . .

Rufe's seamed face brightened; there was a new look in his eyes. More like the old sure blaze of power and determination. His shoulders came up, almost imperceptibly. He said, "Keep yore shirt on, Ed. I'll kinda watch out fer things."

ALL his life Rufe had believed in self-decision. He had made his own judgments, had lived by them, and had taken the rewards or the penalties they brought him, asking no help from anyone and caring little whether the next jerk of the trigger brought him death, or just another notch on his gun for law and justice.

So, when he stepped out of the shadows of Comanche Street under the light of the quiet stars and saw two men ease stealthily down the steps of the courthouse, he felt the old thrill of danger, knew the old quick surge of pride in his chosen calling.

Unconsciously his left hand came up to the ancient marshal's badge he still wore on his faded cowhide vest. The star was there, all right, in the old familiar place, cold and ball-pointed to his touch. Paused stolidly in the gloom, he watched the two dim figures slouch unhurriedly across the dusty square toward the Miner's and Herder's Bank. One was short and stocky, the other a little taller. Rufe didn't need to see their faces. He knew them: Ben Bowerhan and Bat Serango, sure as hell!

Rufe's shoulders pulled back straight; he felt the hot blood hammer again through his hardened veins. And he felt a swift jolt like that of an electric shock streak through him from hat to boots. A slow fierce joy began to build up in him; it loosened every stiffened muscle of his body, put a springy snap into his legs as he stepped forward.

Bowerhan and Serango had vanished abruptly down the dark alley beside the bank. It was ten o'clock, but there were no loiterers abroad. Rufe stepped quietly off the plank walk, for the boards might clatter under the impact of his high boot heels. Down the street a banjo twanged out its plangent rhythm. A drunken voice yodeled off key, from behind the batwing doors of the Silver Chip.

Rufe kept to the shadows cast by the high false fronts of the buildings and approached the bank, warily examining each dark alley opening as he walked. His gun was out. Cocked. He'd give 'em time to get their dirty hands on the money. That was all. Just time enough for that. Then he'd crash 'em.

He reached the alley beside the bank and stopped. He waited, calmly, ticking off seconds in his minds. Then, abruptly, he moved up the darkened alley. He didn't hurry. He walked with a slow, firm tread. Quietly. Past a rain barrel, and a big heap of rubbish, a pile of wood. . . .

He was there. At the bank's rear door. The opening yawned, a black loom of shadow, right in front of him. He reached out, touched shattered wood where the door sagged inward. He moved. Across the sill. Three wooden steps angled downward into the bank's musty interior. Now he could see the steps plainly because there was a light down there—a coal oil lamp. Burning yellowly on the floor. Huge, fantastic shadows jigged and wavered on the white-washed wall—the shadows of Ben Bowerhan and Bat Serango. Rufe saw them suddenly, hunkered down close together near the lamp. He didn't raise his voice at all. He said, "All right, boys," and made the three steps to the level of the floor in a single nimble jump.

Simultaneous with the whack of his boots against the floor a gun flamed up into his face. He fired his own piece point-black at the nearest shape, fell like a log, feeling the searing impact of lead against his left shoulder. The lamp went out with a crash of glass. Rufe fired again, rolled over on his wounded arm. Boots kicked across the floor toward him. They raked his side as they pounded past. And then Bowerhan and Serango were blocked clearly against the stars in the opening of the rear

door.

Rufe fired twice, swiftly. Bowerhan went down in a groaning heap outside in the yard. At that instant Rufe felt nausea wash through him. Everything went blank for what seemed to him the space of a heart beat. And then he was fighting to his knees, choking, as swirling black smoke stung his throat and lungs. The lamp had started a fire across the room. As Rufe wrenched himself upright, flames caught on dried-out wood-work, sent red tongues of fire spurting upward.

Rufe broke into the rear yard, jumped the mayor's silent form and sprinted out to the street. He came to a slithering halt, gun arcing up, his left arm swinging limply at his side.

Bat Serango was out in the middle of the square, moving away into the gloom with a kind of hitching limp as though he'd been nicked by a slug. He had a war-bag in his left hand.

Rufe called, "Come back here, Bat!"

Serango's hands pushed air in his effort to stop. He dropped the bag to the dust. Then he turned. Slowly. Cautiously. "By God!" he snarled. "So you was the one, Grampaw!"

"Come on back here!" Rufe repeated. He was beginning to feel sick again.

"Yuh better come out an' get me, Grampaw; I'll be right here."

"No," Rufe said. "Drop yore belt, Serango, an' walk this way."

RUFE could remember scenes such as this, when time thinned down and moments were like lagging pulse beats. He couldn't shoot a man who hadn't even drawn. He had to wait. Rufe held his sixgun down flat against his thigh and called, "Make up yore mind, Serango," and went on waiting.

There were scenes that cut an indelible mark in a man's memory; this was one of them: Bat Serango's lean

body crooking over from the effort of his draw, his boots braced wide apart in the dust. And that was how he was when Rufe's bullet smashed home. The echo of the two shots rocketed up and down the street and Bat Serango bowed his head and bent his legs as if to kneel. He pitched face down into the dust.

Other things began to happen, swiftly, Guns were banging out an alarm all over town. A hundred citizens, sober, half-drunk, drunk, were pounding through the streets. A fire in a frontier town could be a dreadful thing if it got away. The Miner's and Herder's Bank was a mass of rolling flames. A fire brigade roared up. Bucket lines were being frantically formed. The iron triangle on the porch of the Suttler House was clanging out its wild alarm through the redly lit night.

Rufe stumbled and fell flat a few yards from the burning bank. As he lay there in the dust, gun still clamped in his outstretched hand, Chuck Jones came kicking through the crowd and reached him. And then the deputy had the old marshal's bloody head pillowed in his arms, and he was crying, "Yuh danged ol' war-hoss! What the hell was yuh tryin' tuh do? Git yoreself a han'-holt on Saint Pete?"

Rufe struggled vainly to get up. "Blast it," he bawled, "leggo my neck! The money — she's in the bank! I gotta—"

"Shet up, yuh ol' fireball!" Chuck held him down by main force. "The money's okay, I tell yuh! Serango had the hull kaboodle in his bag! An' they jest drug Bowerhan outa the alley; he's dead! Hear me, yuh hell-cutter . . . ?"

But Rufe wasn't listening any more. He had passed out cold as frog's legs in December. . . .

Rufe had his broken arm in a sling and his head done up in yards of lint and bandage when he reached home that night. Chuck rode with him, "tuh

make shore yuh don't fall an' bust yore brisket like yore pappy done."

There was a lamp burning low in the kitchen when Rufe went in; and a fire in the fireplace. He limped all through the house but couldn't locate Annie anywhere. "Helluva hour to go a-visitin'!" He sat down wearily on the bed and tried to shape a cigarette with his good hand. And the next thing he knew Annie was shaking him. "What ails you," she was scolding him. "You gettin' so old yuh can't even take your duds off when you git in bed?"

Rufe squinted through his bandage. He suddenly realized that he was plumb tuckered—and hungry, too. "Ain't so old," he grumbled, "I can still show 'em how tuh rod the law 'round here."

"I heard about the whole thing," Annie said calmly. "I was down to the Farrelses till jest now."

"I suppose," Rufe said with heavy sarcasm, "yuh heered 'bout me bein' made mayor in Bowerhan's place—an' all about how they're goin' tuh hol' a special election nex' week tuh make 'er stick. S'pose yuh heered that too."

Annie was smiling. She tried to hide the happiness in her eyes until she could muster up a frown. "Your arm," she said; "does it hurt yuh much?"

"Hell no!" Rufe smothered a groan as he sat up on the bed. "Golly, Annie, I wish't yuh could'a' seen me tonight! Guess even you would'a' said seventy-two ain't so old!"

"Quit your braggin'," Annie said.

When he went out into the kitchen, Annie was dishing something into his plate. "Hey, what's that?"

"It's good vittles," Annie snapped back at him. "You been gettin' a'ltogether too much rich grub lately—made yuh brasher'n a sunpecked jay. Now you sit right down an' eat your pan cakes an' lick. An' then"—there was suddenly an impish twinkle in her eye—"you kin git to bed, ol' shaky shanks!"

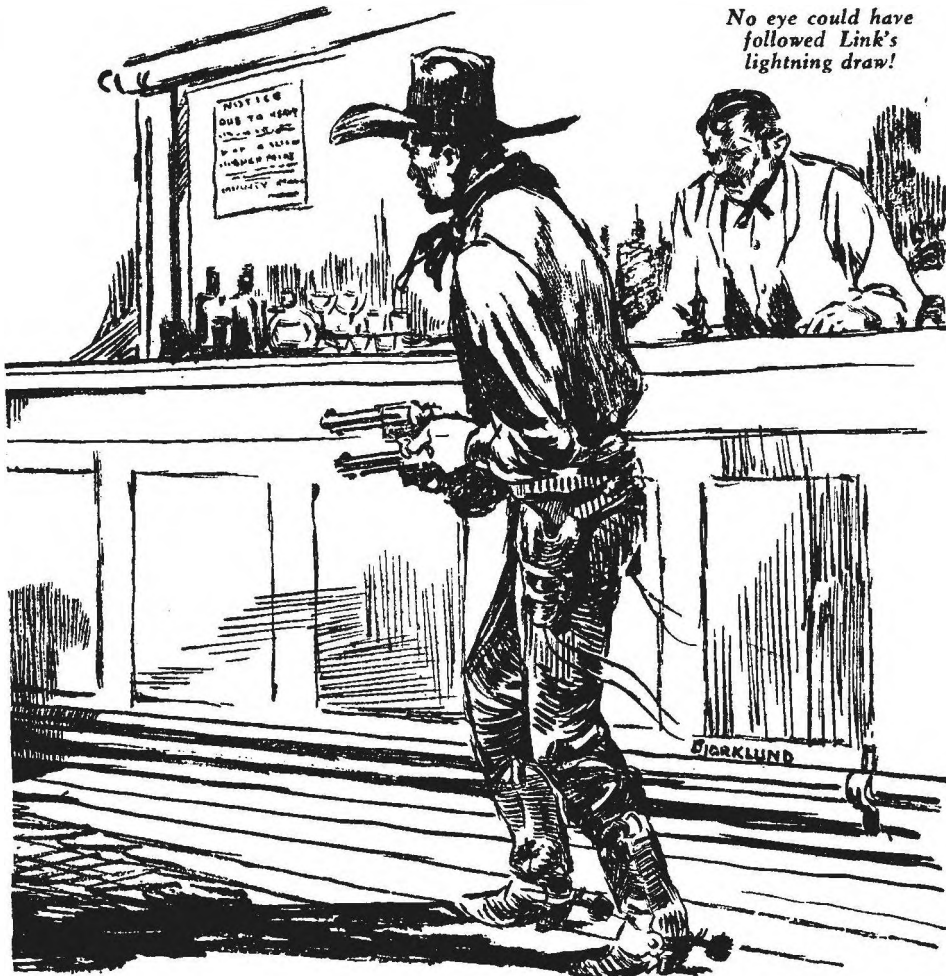
Quick-Draw Quarantine

By

T. K. HAWLEY

Author of "Long Loop Law," etc.

Guns smoke was in the kid's blood and quick-draw hell in his holster, and there were Colt-handlers who claimed he threw lead faster than his battle-famous father!



No eye could have followed Link's lightning draw!

CHAPTER I

DANDIFIED "Chance" Traill, proprietor of the Forty-rod Saloon and Dance Hall, sauntered down to the log-built station of the

Boulder Creek Stage Company at one end of Wadley's main street. In the corral back of the stage station two young men were at work, one tall and lithe-limbed, the other of stocky build.

"Mornin', Link; mornin', Billy," greeted Chance, peering through the

bars of the corral. "Link, I'd like to see you out here a minute."

Billy Drago, the smaller of the two in the corral, and assistant to Link Fannin, the stage company's hostler, grunted a reply to Traill's salutation, and wielded his currycomb brisker than ever. He would drink Chance's "forty-rod," but he had no liking for the smooth-mannered, lily-fingered "honka-tonk" proprietor. Nor had Link, for greater reason than Drago. Nevertheless, the boss hostler put aside the harness he was mending, and opening the corral gate, stepped out.

Traill moved to a spot halfway between corral and station, so Drago could not overhear, Link rather reluctantly following. He was sure that anything the gambler had to say could be of no possible interest to him.

"Link," began Chance, rolling an unlighted cigar from one corner of his slash-shaped mouth to the other, his sneaky glance intent on the darkly tanned face of the younger man. "I reckon you're missin' your dad a whole lot—I know I am. Had an idea that the man wasn't born who could down him, but them two desert rats, blast 'em, was chain-lightnin', no less. Ol' Triggerless drilled them, all right, but at the same time they got *him*."

"Yes," said young Fannin, harshly, his extreme dislike of the gambler manifest in tone and look, "dad died doin' your dirty work — not strange you should miss him, Traill."

Chance frowned. "Easy, easy, Link; your ol' man was a killer years before ever I met up with him. That's why I hired him, on account of his notches, an' he got good pay all the time he was with me."

Link slowly nodded. While it hurt him, he must admit that it was nothing but the truth that Traill had spoken. "Yes," he said, "dad was born with the ability to sling a gun better than most,

and the wild days he lived through made him what he was. The blood on his hands killed my mother, who thought to reform him when she married him. No changin' his nature, though!" He brought this out bitterly.

TRAILL'S frown had cleared away. When next he spoke it was in an ingratiating tone:

"Your dad made a sight of money workin' for me, an' he'd left you a pile, Link, if he'd let cards alone. Poorest gambler I ever seen, an' I told him so often. But he couldn't see it, an' as the money he lost was his own, I figured it was none o' my business."

Link indulged in a slight sarcastic smile. He could imagine the amount of effort Traill had put forth to prevent the money he paid his gunman coming back to him via the poker route. Chance pretended not to see the smile.

"Now, Link," he continued, "I need a quick-gun artist in my business as much as I do bartenders, card men an' the like. The man must be one I can rely on absolutely, like your dad. The pay is big, an' most of the time there's nothin' to do. I've seen you handle yourself at the shoots we've had here in Wadley, an' you're every bit as fast with two guns as your dad was, mebbe a shade faster. I'm reckoned a man of nerve an' no slouch gun-thrower, but I'm tellin' you—an' I'd say it to nobody else—that I'd dodge a gunfight with you same's I would've with your ol' man, 'nless, I was hankerin' to rest eternal."

Link discerned that Chance was not trying to insinuate himself into favor by this admission; the gambler was entirely sincere, a surprising fact. And Traill misinterpreted Fannin's quiet tone when he said, "So you're makin' me the offer to step into my dad's boots."

"Sure," eagerly, "same salary—"

"Wait!" Link raised a hand commandingly. An angry red seeped through the tan of his beardless face. My answer is NO! One killer in a family is too many, to my notion. I've got the taint, the impulse to kill at times, but I've fought it down, an' will keep on fightin' it whenever it crops up. Gun-slingin's a disease. I'll not let it get me, if I can help. My mother prayed I wouldn't follow in dad's footsteps an' I aim to have that prayer answered. That's final, Mr. Triall. I reckon our li'l talk's ended."

Chance stood regarding the son of "Triggerless" Fannin with something feral in his eyes. He bit through the cigar he was chewing, slowly replaced it with a fresh one from his breast pocket, and then, as Link was turning away, said:

"Don't give me your answer now, Link. Take time to think it over, all the time you want."

"I've done my thinkin' an' decidin' right here an' now, Traill." replied the hostler. "No use to hope. I won't change my mind."

But Chance did hope. He considered young Fannin worth waiting for.

"I might pay you even a bit more than I did Triggerless, an' he was gettin' top-notch wages," the gambler tempted.

"Told you I'm not for hire, that I'm no killer, an' I sure meant it!" retorted Link angrily. "Look somewheres else for your new gunman, Traill. You'll never get another Fannin to do your killin'!"

He started briskly toward the corral. Chance did not move for some moments, fighting anger and disappointment. A calmer mood, mingled with faint optimism, gradually rewarded his efforts. The honkatonk owner considered himself an astute reader of character; and to a degree he was.

"I'm thinkin' he'll come 'round," he

muttered. "He's the son of his dad. Feels the hankerin' to kill sometimes, huh? I won't give him up yet; he's worth a lot of patience an' nursin', an' I ain't handled men all my life for nothin'. Sure there's no better man for the job, or one as good, in ten counties. He's a plumb wolf with the irons!" Aloud he called, "S'long, Link, see you later," and without waiting for a reply, which was as well, for none came, he retraced his steps to Main Street and headed for his place of chance and violent amusement.

CHAPTER II

AT noon Link and Billy quit the stage corral to wend way to Jerry Burling's eating-house, the only restaurant in Wadley worthy of the name. Halfway there, Link stopped suddenly.

"Just thought!" he exclaimed. "Todd's is over the way an' I want to see Miss Nell about somethin'. Meet me at Jerry's in ten-fifteen minutes."

"All right," grinned Drago. "Bet I don't see you in no fifteen minutes—half hour, more like."

Link reciprocated the grin and started across the dusty street, entering the yard of a cottage that, with its neatly curtained windows, and small, well-kept garden in front, was a relief to eye-soreness among the many drab structures of Wadley. Link slapped the corral dust from his flannel shirt as he walked up the flower-bordered path, and slicked back his heavy hair with the flat of his hand. His brown fist rapped on the door, and he stood, Stetson in hand, a smile curving his lips. Nell Todd, apron-clad almost immediately answered the firm knock. She started back and her eyes fell when she beheld the tall young man on the stoop. His

smile faded; surprise and perplexity replaced the expression of pleasurable anticipation.

"I'm only stoppin' for a minute," Link hastily explained. "I've got one o' those hair bridles you've been wantin'. A dandy. Can I bring it to-night?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I wish I'd known sooner—you shouldn't—I can't accept it. Thank you very, very much just the same." Miss Todd seemed to find it difficult to raise her eyes and her face was crimson.

"What!" he exclaimed, wide-eyed. "Can't accept it?"

"No." A somewhat lengthly pause, during which he regarded her intently, wonderingly. He had been several times a visitor at the Todd cottage, had come to like the girl very well—not deeply, although time might have altered that. And she had seemed always to enjoy his company, though her parents had never been over-cordial. "Mr. Fannin," she said, at last—"Link" she had called him before, "I must tell you that you're not to call any more."

"An' why not, Miss Nell?" His tone was one of amazement; he tried to look squarely in her eyes, but she avoided direct contact with his gaze. "Who says I'm not to? You?"

"Pa and ma say so. They object to you because—because your father is—or was—"

"But, good Lord, they knew about dad all along. It's sure been no secret. Why this sudden—"

Middle-aged, buxom Mrs. Todd loomed from somewhere in the rear, thrust Nell aside and confronted Link Fannin with rigid countenance.

"Young man," she said, ignoring Link's bow, "Eleanor has been brung up right. She's a good girl an' does what she's told, knowin' that when her parents say a thing it's for her own good. I heard you pesterin' her with why an' wherefors, an' I want to state

emphatic, Mr. Fannin, that we'll take it as a extreme favor if you'll quit callin'—an' speakin'."

"But, Mrs. Todd, if it's about dad—"

"It is. I never did approve of your comin' here, nor the mister, neether. Don't force me to speak more plain, Mr. Fannin. I think you understand." Mrs. Todd folded fat red arms and eyed him with positive hostility.

Link did not press her for an explanation, though he was a good bit at sea. He managed a polite bow and a steady-voiced reply before he turned from the door. "Mrs. Todd, I don't aim to horn in where I'm not wanted."

As he closed the gate behind him, he muttered: "She's *nice*, the girl is, but she's sure no thoroughbred! An' if the old folks objected to me so strenuous because I'm the son of my dad, which they knowed from the first, why in time didn't they say so before?"

PLODDING upstreet to Burling's restaurant, his mind grappling with the problem, he saw coming toward him the angular Mr. H. Linton, attorney-at-law. To Link's greeting Mr. Linton nodded briefly, scarcely seeming to see him, and the lawyer increased his gait when Fannin gave indication of stopping.

"I loose that bet, Link, I sure do!" exclaimed Billy Drago as Link entered Burling's and sat down heavily. "You wasn't more'n the fifteen minutes. Wasn't she home?"

Link did not reply. In fact, he gave his friend and helper no explanation of his black mood until late afternoon, when the hurt to his pride had worn off something of its poignance. However, the galling incidents of that day, just twenty-four hours after the passing of "Triggerless" Fannin, were but a foretaste.

It was "Old News," chief gossipmonger of Wadley, and a hanger-on at the

Forty-rod, who informed Chance Traill of the changed attitude of the better element toward Link.

"Yas," said "News," enjoying to the full the gambler's surprise, "Wadley's effect sassiety has done throwed the young un down cold. Hadn't you heard? Wal, it's a fact. Showin' that their friendship for him was just bluff, an' why they bluffed ain't hard to guess. While Ol' Triggerless was livin' it was sure the safest play not to go insultin' of his son in any way, which he sure thought the world o' that boy, an' proper, too. An' you bet that crowd of knee-benders, that deems themselves so howlin' respectable, knows what's safe an' what's suicide, an' lets Link think he's aces with 'em, him wantin' to be, mighty bad an' not mixin' a-tall with we 'uns.

"He's wised up since Triggerless passed you bet! There bein' no two-gun rawhide to let daylight through 'em for a misstep no more, they've quit foolin' young Link an' are sayin' right out what they've been thinkin' secret. Ain't hardly any of 'em even speakin' to him—they're givin' him the cold shoulder all along the line. 'Don't tell me he won't be another Triggerless,' says Sile Kummer, arguin' with Patchin when I was in Tom's store a while ago. 'Young Fannin's killer streak, got from the old un, is bound to bust out sometime.' Uh course, I've allus favored young Link throwin' in with us, Triggerless would've killed me for sayin' so, but it's a raw deal them knee-benders are handin' the boy, now ain't it?"

"No more'n you could expect from such kiote-hearted stock," sneered Traill. But he was hugely delighted at this turn in Link's affairs; would visit that young man shortly. "You must have worked up a thirst gettin' that off your chest, Old News. Breast the mahogany with me."

Within the hour Chance made again

his bid for Link's services as gun-artist, expecting young Fannin would be ripe for acceptance. But he wasn't, even though embittered, his faith in human nature well-nigh shattered. His attitude deeply chagrined the gambler.

"If the knee-benders, as you call 'em, reckon they're too good to associate with me, let 'em," Link told Traill. "I've figured out it was fear of dad that made 'em act friendly, an' I sure don't want friends I can't depend on. There's always one thing I can do, you know—quit town—an' I reckon it's coming to that. Anyway, if the Santa Fe makes this a stoppin' point, like it's been rumored, the stage line won't last long an' I'll be huntin' another job—honest job, you savvy."

Chance perceived at this interview that persuasion would never win Link. But if Link could be made to spill his first blood, it was probable that he would become an easy victim to the disease that had afflicted his father—"triggerities." And to that end Traill's fertile mind plotted, Fate, in a propitious mood, aiding him.

CHAPTER III

TRAILL was an early visitor at the stage company's corral next morning, and glad to find Link Fannin alone. At sight of the honkatonk owner the hostler called out:

"Traill, if you're figgerin' to offer me that gunman job ag'in, don't stop. You're gettin' to be a sort o' nuisance."

Chance neatly counterfeited a hurt expression. "Nice way to treat a feller who's bringin' you a warnin'," he rebuked, entering the corral. "I'm your friend, Lincoln Fannin, but you don't seem to savvy the fact. Be good now, an' I'll tell you somethin' you ought to know."

Link was unconvinced, but drove the milling stage horses to the other side of the enclosure and stepped up to Traill.

"Let's have it, Traill," he said crisply, "I ain't got much time. Warnin', you said?"

Chance nodded. "Hombre callin' himself Gila Sanders sifted into my place last night, lookin' for your dad. Has three notches on his gun an' aimed to make Triggerless the fourth. Seems your dad drilled his brother coupla years back, in Arizona."

"Sanders?" Link repeated. "Name ain't familiar, but dad was in a lot of fights different places in Arizona an' I don't know who all he killed off. Well, where do I come in?"

"Oh, you're in it all right. Learnin' that your dad was dead, this Sanders wanted to know where 'that gun-shy son of Triggerless' could be found. Seems he knows of you, even if you don't remember the name, an' that you an' your dad was generally not far apart. Bein' told you was here in Wadley, he got to roarin' that he'd settle with *you* for the killin' of this brother; he'd make you fight."

"Terrible bad hombre, this Gila person," murmured the unimpressed Link, mindly scornful.

"No four-flusher, if that's what you're hintin'," declared Chance earnestly. "All the genu-wine bad ones ain't soft-voiced an' cat-steppin', you know. You'll allow I ought to know the real thing from what ain't, Link, an' take my word for it this gun-packer's as wicked as original sin, an' revenge is ridin' him with spurs on. When I got the drift of his rantin's last night, I got him loaded proper, so's he wouldn't start huntin' you before I could put you on your guard, me knowin' you don't pack a gun. He's sleepin' off his jag in my place now, but when he wakes up you can expect him to come canterin' round

for blood. Now, Link, my advice to *you* is to get heeled an' keep your eyes peeled."

But Link clamly declined in the matter of hitching lethal weapons to his person; thanked Traill just the same, thanked him *very* much for all he had done.

"But can't you see the risk you're runnin', all onnecessary?" argued the exasperated gambler. "This Sanders is out to get you, sure as I'm your friend. You'll be drilled in cold blood, that's what! It's within the law to shoot in self-dense, so why shy off from packin' protection?"

"Friend Traill," said Link, with a note of finality in his voice, "all this talk's gettin' nowhere. Quit worryin'. When I meet up with this Sanders party, I'll take care of Number One. But I'm not playin' any hide-an'-seek with trouble-huntin' gun-toters. Dad started his career that way."

And the gambler could not shake his resolve. Traill was a very angry man who he left the corral. Gazing after him, a half-smile on his lips, Link muttered: "I'm doubtin' a whole lot about your friendship bluff, Mr. Chance Traill."

THE afternoon stage brought a passenger who caused the little knot of Wadleyites at the station to stare and exclaim in open and unbounded admiration. The instant Gloria Patchin, slim and straight and graceful, alighted from the old Concord, she won the male members of the gathering, if not the female.

Link Fannin, hastening to the heads of the leaders, heard the expressions of approval running through the crowd and favored the cause with a perfunctory glance. He was soured on all his kind, sex regardless, with two male exceptions, yet found himself looking again, and not carelessly this time.

Then something happened to divert Link's thoughts into channels scarcely as pleasant—yes, in spite of himself, he found the girl easy to look at; he even wondered who she might be. He had not noticed the crowd moving down the middle of Main Street. They had erupted from the Forty-rod about the time the stage arrived. In the van stalked a hatless man with drink-flushed face, lipping curses and peering intently at the people grouped in front of the stage station and about the coach, as if searching for someone. Chance Traill was one of that small mob, coming along not far behind Gila Sanders, the man in the lead.

Sanders roughly gouged his way through the townspeople gathered to see the stage come in. "I'm lookin' for the houn'-dawg son o' that bush-whackin' Triggerless Fannin!" he roared, glaring around, and almost immediately saw Link, recognizing him from the oft-repeated description of Chance Traill.

"I don't admire all those names you've throwed in, Mister Man, but I'm Link Fannin, son of Tracy Fannin," said Link, turning from the task of unhitching and looking Gila Sanders in the eye.

"You young kiote, listen!" bellowed Sanders, advancing swiftly upon his intended victim. "It's Gila Sanders talkin'. Mebbe you know the name, mebbe not, but if yore blood-loco ol' man was livin' he'd remember it mighty quick, remember Bill Sanders, my brother, that he cut a notch f'r at Burro Flats, Arizony. Pore Bill was fast with a gun, but no match for Triggerless Fannin, an' fo' more'n a year I've follered yore ol' man to settle for that murder—it was murder, Bill bein' so much slower. An' now when I've located Triggerless, I find he's cashed an' planted. But yo're his son—tharfore my meat! Lookit," he patted low-slung gun, "thar's three notches on this handle, an' I aim to cut

a fourth for you to even up for brother Bill!"

Link, unarmed, faced the bad man as easily as his fighting father might have done, armed. When he spoke there was not a trace of agitation in his voice. "Old Man" Dingle, the express agent, whose influence had got Link his job as hostler, and Billy Drago, were hovering near and mentally "milling."

"Can't say that I remember this particular killin'," declared Link. "Name of Sanders means nothin' to me. But no matter. It may be as you say, for I wasn't always taggin' around with my dad. As to shootin' it out with you—"

"Don't plead yo're not wearin' iron!" Gila Sanders cut in. "Git a gun, borrry one, an' foller me to the middle o' the street. You can't git out of it by takin' water, Fannin, don't think it! I'm here to square up for Bill if I got to down you coldblooded!"

Link's hands were hanging negligently at his sides. He felt cold iron suddenly pressed into his right hand, and heard the low voice of Traill, who had slipped around behind him, "Here! The mangy cur means business!"

Link closed an empty fist, took two long steps forward, eyes narrowed, jaw jutting, coming breast to breast with his enemy. Sanders backed off. Link stepped after him, almost on his toes. Glances locked, they covered several yards, Sanders backing, Link closing up, the crowd breathlessly intent on every step taken by the men. In Gila's path stood a hitching-post, and suddenly, in his backward progress, he brought up against it. The violent and unexpected impact shocked him into action, but as his hand streaked holsterward, gripping the protruding Colt, Link's left hand, equally swift, closed vise-like on his wrist. The gun cleared the holster, pulled, not by Sanders, but by Link, its muzzle pointing down. With his right hand Link twisted the six-

shooter from the bad man's clutch and released the latter's wrist. Deliberately Fannin broke the weapon and spilled the cartridges at his feet, Sanders standing the while as if suddenly petrified.

"I reckon, Mr. Gila Sanders, that you're not such a curly-haired wolf as you've been thinkin'," said Fannin distinctly, and extended the notched Colt's butt-end.

WORDLESS, Sanders took it, slid it in his holster, and abruptly about-faced and slouched away, with a droop to his figure that reminded more than one spectator of a coyote tucking tail in the presence of a "lobo."

As Link turned and walked back to the stage horses, "Old Man" Dingle and Billy Drago whooped in chorus, and separating themselves from the fringe of the crowd, which was drawing a long breath, they charged Fannin and pelted him on the back. A few faint murmurs of applause arose, but not from any of the Traill faction. Traill, smothering a curse, intercepted Link en route to the restive four-in-hand.

"Some nerve, I'll say," declared the gambler, with heavy heartiness. "My congrats, Fannin. But," he added, in lower tone, "you'd saved yourself future trouble if you'd taken my gun an' let him have it. He's sartin' to try an' pot you from cover now, an' he's got a fast-lookin' hoss."

"I'm not worryin'," replied Link, wagging the proffered hand, and he passed on.

Strange, after all the vows he had made in bitterness of spirit, that he should be seeking a face in that crowd, almost eager for its expression of approval. He saw Gloria Patchin's gaze upon him, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining very brightly. That look he could not misunderstand, and it was wholly satisfying.

The crowd began to scatter. Link and

Billy were busy unhooking traces when a feminine voice close by exclaimed: "Uncle Tom!" Link looked up to see Tom Patchin keeper of the general store, embracing the girl of the shining eyes. And he saw something else — something that caused his brows to draw together in a frown. Chance Traill evidently had been on the point of following his crowd, drifting honkatonk-ward, when the girl's voice fell on his ear and for the first time drew his attention to the new arrival. As Link looked, Traill pivoted on his heel and approached the pair, doffing his expensive sombrero with almost cavalier grace.

"Did I hear the young lady say 'Uncle Tom?'" said Chance, smilingly. "Patchin, I didn't know you had such a charming niece. I'd like to extend to her the welcome of Wadley."

Patchin was not of the Traill crowd; there was anger, repugnance in the glance he fixed on the gambler. Yet he introduced Chance to "Miss Patchin, my niece;" with manifest reluctance, but he did it. And Link, watching, wondered. The gambler had compelled Patchin, against his will, to make the introduction—for what reason? Fear of personal injury on Patchin's part if he refused? Link thought not. He always regarded the storekeeper, one-time stage-driver, as rather well able to take care of himself.

That moment was the turning point for Link. Awhile ago he had been minded to quit the town and start fresh where he wasn't known, some ranch that needed a wrangler; now he decided to stay.

Returning to the Forty-rod sometime later, Chance Traill found Gila Sanders in front, aboard his horse.

"I'm leavin'," announced the thoroughly sobered bad man. "Any hombre that's got the nerve o' that Fannin ain't hooman, an' if he's gunned, it won't be Gila Sanders that does it! I'm

tellin' you straight, Traill, the way he come at me, packin' no gun, the look on his face, druv every drap o' redeye outen my system. I'm guessin' now you hired me 'cause I was a stranger an' didn't know him none."

"You're a mighty cheap imitation of a bad man!" flared Traill, just as if the gunning of Link Fannin had been his real desire. The night before Sanders had demonstrated his speed, and while it was more than average, if the meeting brought about by Chance had resulted in a gunfight, the lightning-handed Link would have been through shooting before Gila had his gun out. "An' the money I paid you for that job was plumb throwed away!" went on Chance inwardly seething over the failure of his well-laid scheme. "Why didn't you shoot? You had all the chance in the world! An' the marshal, like I told you, don't mess in nothin' 'nless I tell him to."

"Jes' couldn't! He had my nerve stampeded. Reckon if I hadn't bumped into that post, I'd have turned an' run without even tryin' to draw."

Chance snorted. "Well, get goin'!"

Gila Sanders' wicked little eyes suddenly flamed. "I'm takin' my time. I'm admittin' Fannin chucked a scare into me, but I ain't runnin' from you, Traill! An' the ol' smoke-tube ain't empty now!"

CHAPTER IV

THAT evening Link Fannin entered the frame structure bearing the legend "T. Patchin, General Merchandise," hoping to find the niece on duty behind the counter. She was not just then in evidence, but Patchin was—and the gambler, Traill. They were in close conversation. As Link stepped into the store, he heard Patchin

say: "You'll not call on her, or have nothin' to do with her, an' that's an end to it!"

Traill replied, menacingly: "That's not the end of it! Don't forget, Patchin, that you—" Then he stopped, hearing Link's footsteps, and swung around. Link was keenly disappointed that Traill hadn't rounded out that sentence.

"Night, Patchin," said Traill, starting abruptly toward the door. "'Lo, Link," in passing.

As Link advanced to the counter the door of the room in the store's rear, where Patchin lived, opened, and entered the charming niece.

"Uncle," she addressed the plainly agitated storekeeper, "take a night off and read your paper that came on the stage. I'll tend store."

"But ain't you tired out after your trip?" he asked. "You must be."

"Not at all," she assured him. "Go on now," and she laid a persuasive hand on his shoulder.

"Well, I will," said Patchin, not needing to be coaxed. "See what young Fannin wants," and he disappeared in the back room.

"Evenin', ma'am," the secretly delighted Link lifted his hat as the girl came forward, smiling. "I'll take two sacks o' Bull." He laid the money on the counter; when she handed him the "smokin'," Gloria remarked:

"I'm glad to know you, Mr. Fannin. The way you disarmed that gunman today was the bravest act I've ever seen."

"Nothin' to it, Miss Patchin," Link claimed. "I took a chance an' was lucky, that's all. If that buck-jumper hadn't been yellow, I'd be dead now for doin' what I did."

But Miss Patchin refused to see it in that light. The conversation drifted around to the girl herself. Yes, in reply to Link's query, she expected to stay in Wadley. Most of her life she had lived in a little Colorado mining town, where

her father had had interests; he had failed and the shock killed him; when he felt that death was near, there being no mother to look after Gloria, he had written his brother in Wadley, and "Uncle Tom" had replied that he would gladly take his niece into his bachelor home. So here she was.

Mrs. Linton, wife of Wadley's one and only lawyer; entered the store at this juncture. She favored Link with a cold stare, and stopped at the farther end of the counter, as if afraid too close proximity to the gunfighter's son would contaminate her. While Gloria was waiting on her, Mrs. Linton took occasion to lean across the counter and whisper in the girl's ear, with a nod toward Link. When Gloria came back after Mrs. Linton's departure, Link's face wore a grim expression.

"Reckon I ought've told you you'd get yourself in bad with the good people of this town by talkin' to me."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed the girl.

"Mrs. Linton was sayin' things about me, wasn't she? About me bein' the son of a killer, an' so on?"

"Yes," admitted Gloria. "But that doesn't make *you* one. Why, you don't even carry a gun. And today when you had the best reason in the world to shoot, self-defense, you didn't."

Link's face fairly glowed. "I've never killed a man, Miss Patchin. I'm fightin' hard not to be a killer, even though I'm the son of my dad, who was — well, pretty much what people say about him, although he'd rather have seen me dead than follow his example." He paused. "Then my unsavory rep around here don't make any difference to you?"

"No. I know the narrowness of small-towners. I've lived in a small town all my life."

"Will you take my hand on that?" said Link eagerly.

"Indeed I will!"

They became good pals. Gloria had

the same affection for horses that Link had, and they took several horseback trips in the surrounding country. As a consequence, Gloria found herself up-popular with the better element, the women more than the men, for the latter could not wholly overlook her beauty, despite their opinion of her choice of acquaintance. Even Link's gunless out-facing of Gila had not made a lasting impression on those of the decent element who witnessed it; the scourging memory of Triggerless was too new.

CHAPTER V

ONE evening, two weeks after her arrival, Gloria sought Link at the stage station. At the time he was alone in the place. Some terrible calamity had befallen her he knew the instant he saw her face, and his chair struck the floor as he leaped up.

"Uncle's been killed!" she gasped before he could inquire the cause of her great distress. "A gambler in Traill's place, Dolan, accused him of cheating and shot him!"

Link repressed an oath. Was Traill beginning to show his hand? "What was your uncle doin' in the Forty-rod?" Link asked gently. "I didn't know he gambled, Miss Gloria."

Her tension gave way to sobbing. "I didn't know either—'till to-night. Two men from Traill's carried uncle to the store about fifteen minutes ago, then left. They thought he was dead, but he roused up a few minutes after they had laid him in the back room. He lived just long enough to tell me that he was heavily in debt to Traill, and because of it, Traill had tried to force uncle to let him call on me. And when uncle wouldn't be bullied he framed up this—murder! Uncle Tom never cheated at anything in his life! He died

with tears running down his cheeks, crying, 'What'll become of you, Gloria? Keep out of Traill's reach. Get away from this town.'"

"Can't something be done?" she sobbed. "It was murder."

"It can," affirmed Link. This town's got a marshal, such as he is, an' sure as my name's Fannin, Haskin's is goin' to arrest Dolan for the actual killin', and Traill for plannin' it."

"But will this Haskins arrest these men?" doubted Gloria. "I understand he is a particular friend of Traill's."

"True enough. Traill and his friends put him in office," nodded Link, "but in spite of that fact," there was iron in his voice, "Haskins will lock them up—you'll see. It's the beginning of the end for Mr. Traill. He's ruled too long an' needs his comb cut. Now, Miss Gloria, you'd better stay here till I come back. Dingle an' Drago will be returnin' any minute an' they can keep you company."

"But—but aren't you running a great risk going alone?" she asked.

"Why, no." Link gave her a reassuring smile. "I'm merely goin' to remind Mr. Haskins of his duty an' see that he does it."

But, being Western-bred, Gloria was wholly unconvinced as he left the station, and she waited anxiously for the return of Dingle and Drago.

Amos Haskins favored Fannin with a sour glance not unmixed with surprise, as the hostler stepped into his boxlike, superheated office.

"Where's your deputy?" asked Link, looking around.

"Ain't here. Why?"

"Not in town you mean?" persisted Fannin.

"Yes!" barked Haskins. "Now what's the difference to you?"

"This," said Link, coolly. "You'll have to appoint me deputy to go with you. One man couldn't face that Traill

gang. Don't look so surprised, Haskins. You savvy my talk all right. I mean that you're goin' to arrest Traill for puttin' Dolan up to killin' Tom Patchin, an' Dolan for doin' the same."

"You're locoed!" gasped Haskins.

"No. I just aim to see that justice gets a square deal for once in this rotten burg," replied Link, smoothly. "Didn't you take oath to uphold the law in Wadley, Haskins?"

"Sure," fumbled Haskins, "but that Patchin affair wasn't irreg'lar. One o' the boys drapped in to tell me about it awhile ago. Patchin was caught cheatin'—an' you know the penalty for that in every town on the frontier."

"Towns that are run like this one, yes," nodded Link. "And I'm bettin' Patchin wasn't even wearin' a gun—it was cold-blooded murder, an' Traill's back of it, wantin' Tom out of the way 'cause he barred Traill from his niece. An', Haskins, I've got a dyin' man's word for it that he wasn't cheatin'.

HASKINS still sat picking at his stubby mustache. There was a gun belt hanging from a peg in the wall. Link went over to it, slid the gun from the holster, found that it was loaded—Haskins watching him narrowly the while—and buckling on the belt, came back to the marshal.

"I'm ready," he announced sharply.

A cunning gleam entered Haskins' eyes.

He rose abruptly, hitched on his six-shooter and preceded Link outside. Up the darkened street they walked toward the blaze of light and blare of sound that advertised the location of Chance Traill's clapboard palace. The inimical pair were not at once observed when they pushed into the honkatonk.

"There's Traill, an' Dolan talkin' to him," said Link, in an undertone.

"I see 'em," snarled the marshal, "not bein' blind."

Traill, standing beside "Dapper Jack" Dolan at one end of the long bar, happened to catch sight of Fannin and the marshal coming through the crowd that filled the spacious floor.

"Look who's comin'!" Chance exclaimed nudging Dapper Jack. "First time young Fannin's ever been in here. An' Amos bringin' him—or is he bringin' Amos?"

"Well, boys, what's the word?" greeted Chance, puzzled and alert, as Haskins and Fannin halted in front of them. It was disquieting to note that a gun was slung against Link's right leg.

"Speak your piece, Haskins," urged Link, when the marshal stood dumbly, seemingly incapable of utterance.

"I shore will!" blurted Haskins suddenly. "Chance, you'll never guess what this young whelp up an' orders me to do—orders, mind! Arrest you an' Jack for Patchin passin'! Not only that, but app'ints hisself deputy to come erlong an' see it's done. I thought I'd humor him an' come, an' let you talk to him."

"You must be foolin', Link," Chance said, swallowing his anger. "Dolan here will tell you—"

"I'm not wantin' to hear anything from you or Dolan now, Traill—save it all for the circuit-court judge." How Link reminded Chance in that moment of a youthful implacable "Triggerless." He was hard as granite. "I know your game, Traill. Patchin wasn't dead when he was toted out of here. Lived to tell things to his niece, an' a man who's dyin' talks center. Findin' you couldn't bully Tom into lettin' you ooze 'round his niece, by holdin' his gamblin' debts over him, you decided on this cold-deckin'. See, I know what I'm talkin' about," as Traill's eyes widened at this unexpected knowledge in Link's possession. "Haskins, it's your move!"

HASKINS had been tensely awaiting this moment. "So it is!" he flung

out, and with the utterance, sprang far to one side, whirled, and drew his gun with the motion of turning. And then Link shot him, shot Haskins just as the latter's gun-muzzle cleared the top of his holster. No eye could have followed Link's draw—he was his father over again, a shade swifter.

As the marshal crashed floorward, Dapper Jack's hand dived within his coat, flashed out, and there was a roar that seemed to split Link's eardrums. Simultaneously a pain stabbed him in the side, almost doubling him up. By a tremendous effort he straightened, shooting from the waistline as he faced Dolan. Dolan dropped away from his unsteady gaze and stretched out quietly.

"Your turn, Traill!" Link said hoarsely, squaring on the gambler. "Draw!" His head swam, his knees felt weak, but the blood of his father was rioting, held momentary sway.

Chance Traill faced him with sweat oozing from every pore and a great fear in his eyes. His hand was on his gun and twice he strove to draw, but could not. His nerve was gone! The stark dread of death was upon him!

"You're hit, but you'll get me—if I draw!" he blubbered, and the onlookers marvelled at the sight of his face. "Can't miss me—you can't! It's Triggerless I'm seein'—an' Triggerless was sure death!" He twitched his hand away from his gun-butt as if it were hot and covered his eyes.

Link stared waveringly at this spectacle of a ruthless man fear-conquered, then weaved over to the fallen marshal, fumbled in his pockets and unsteadily approached the cringing Traill. And Traill offered no resistance while Link fitted the handcuffs to his wrists, nor even when the son of Triggerless took his arm and said, "Come on!" He stumbled along at the long-stepping Fannin's side, and silence reigned behind them as they emerged into the

night.

Link was wondering whether his strength would hold out until the jail was reached, when in the gloom ahead loomed two running figures.

"Link!" cried the taller of the two figures, hatless Old Man Dingle. "Who ye got thar? That shootin'—"

"Traill. Lock him up," mumbled Link, and collapsed at the feet of his fear-beaten prisoner.

CHAPTER VI

IT was a week later that Link, slowly convalescing, received a delegation of the town's decent citizens in the stage station. There were, in fact, no other kind of citizens in Wadley now, had not been for seven days. The night that Link had nearly lost his life, Old Man Dingle, leaving Fannin in the care of Billy and Gloria, ran from home to home of the better element, calling them to arms. Tersely he told them of Link's feat, that Chance Traill was behind bars, and the hour was come to clean Wadley of undesirables. With the armed citizens at his back, the redoubtable express agent arrived at the jail in time to prevent Traill's release by his friends. Ensued a pitched battle between the Dingle-led crowd and the Traill mob. And before the sun rose, two freight wagons, commandeered by Dingle's followers, were miles on the outward trail, carrying the effects of the Forty-rod, with dance-hall girls and numerous hirelings and hangers-on, all who had survived the wrath of the aroused citizens, topping the loads. The Forty-rod itself was wind-blown ashes.

This morning Link was propped up in Old Man Dingle's bunk, attended by Gloria, whose faithful nursing, coupled with the local doctor's skill and his own clean, strong youth, had pulled him

from the Valley of the Shadow. The committee filed in and ranged around his bed. Dingle, who had opened the door for them, took up position in the background beside Billy Drago.

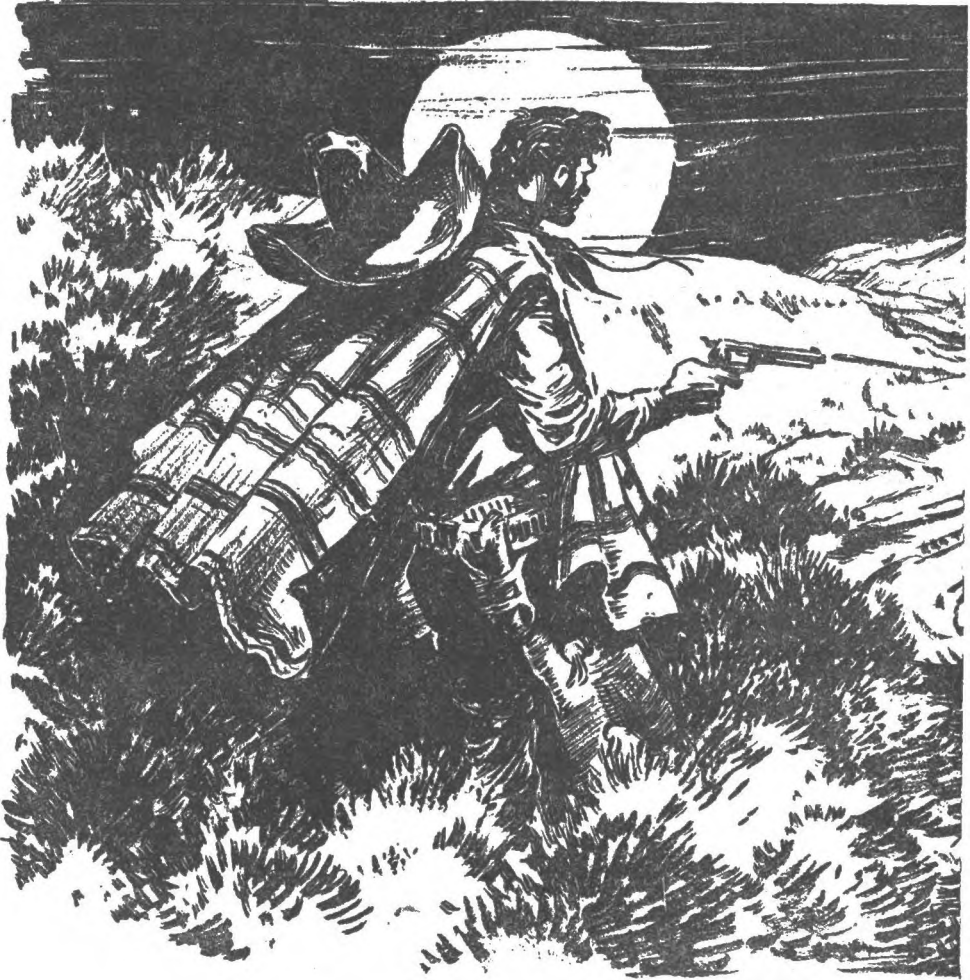
"We have come, Lincoln," began the Reverend Cordley, acting as spokesman, "to extend the heartfelt thanks of Wadley for your single help in ridding the town of its undesirable citizens, and to apologize for our — ahem — unwarranted attitude toward you—wholly unwarranted and unfair, we see now. You are not only a courageous, but a resourceful young man, and when you are entirely well and about again, we would deem it an honor to appoint you town marshal of the new Wadley which shall rise from the ashes of the old.

"Yours is the credit for the beginning of this new era. Traill, now in jail awaiting trial, was the leading spirit of evil, cunning and merciless, and with Haskins and Dolan would have ruled yet but for your single-handed stand in the name of the law."

Link lifted a hand that was as yet comparatively feeble. "If you please, parson, you've rode that trail far enough," he said quietly. "The townsmen, with Dingle to lead, did their own clean-up work. That business at the Forty-rod was more of a personal matter than anything else. Now, I'm plenty willin' to let bygones be bygones, but your marshal proposition don't appeal. With Traill's bunch gone, all you'll need is a brace o' policemen. Besides, I'm leavin' here for good, just as soon as I can stand on my two feet ag'in, an' startin' a hoss ranch—somewhere. An' this lady," indicating the bright-eyed Gloria sitting at the foot of the bunk, "is goin', too, as my wife."

A sudden thought struck him and he sat up straight. "Long's you're here, parson, I reckon you might tie that knot now! I've got my mother's weddin' ring to seal 'er up!"

Bullets on His Backtrail,



The outlaw's gun vomited smoke and lead, and suddenly

CHAPTER I

GUNTRAP!

DEATH hovered on dark and silent wings over the frontier cowtown of Beartooth. The hot wind whispered it among the false-fronted, canvas-walled shacks; its grim portent was on the hard faces of the roughly-dressed men who swaggered along the plank walks and drank poisonous liquor in the numerous

saloons.

For dapper, gun-quick Deuce Shane was in town, reckless drunk, and bragging loudly about what he'd do to Flint Savage when he saw him. There was already bad blood between Shane and Flint Savage. This meant a gun-smoky showdown. . . .

A Crazy J waddy rode ten miles out of his way to bring the news to Flint Savage at his little cow outfit on Beaver Creek. Flint Savage was a lean youngster, brown faced and tawny haired,

THIS HIRED-GUN PURGATORY NEEDED FIGHTING MEN, LIKE BAT MASTERSON,

Gunsmoke Ahead

Author of "Kid Who Chose Bullets and Blood," etc.

By
**GUNNISON
STEELE**



Texas Red fell to one knee, pain and horror on his face!

Deuce Shane and his deadly cutters wouldn't be the last, Flint Savage would be forced to showdown with every leadslinger in this lawless country before he was through . . . They'd steal his cattle, cut his fences, poison his water, and there'd be no tinbadge or posse or vigilante army to back the kid who chose to homestead in this hired-gun hell!

with a hint of bitterness in his smoky blue eyes and about his thin lips. He was dressed in flat-crowned hat, hickory shirt and buckskin-fringed trousers worn outside scuffed boots.

Flint listened, his thin lips drooping downward at the corners; then he strapped a gunbelt holding a scarred six-shooter about his lithe waist, mounted a wiry bronc and headed for

WILD BILL — AND FLINT SAVAGE! . . . SMASH FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL!

the tough town of Beartooth.

He reached Beartooth at sunset, just as the serrated peaks of the Red Devil range to the west were casting their dark shadows like harbingers of evil across the range. His eyes were bleak, smoky openings as he rode up and stopped before the Buckhorn Saloon and Gambling Palace. As he started between the batwings a chunky, leathery-faced cowboy placed a hand on his arm and stopped him. The cowboy's name was Dusty Malone, and he rode for old Adam Pike's big Crazy J outfit.

Dusty said swiftly, "I wouldn't go in there, Flint."

"Why the hell wouldn't you go in there?" Flint asked flatly.

"Deuce Shane's in there, for one thing."

"That's why I'm goin' in."

"Deuce ain't by his lon'some. Chink Ord's backin' him."

Flint Savage said harshly, "So what? Shane's been shootin' off his mouth a long time, and now I'm fed up. Now I aim to kill him!"

"And get killed—later!" Dusty said earnestly. "Look, Flint—Shane and Ord are both Krupp men; you know that, well as I do. Old Lute Krupp and Gantt Vulch are behind this. They've baited a trap, with Deuce Shane as the bait, and you're stickin' yore neck into it. Kill Shane, or get killed—either way, you lose. Better not—"

"Mebbe Krupp and Vulch are behind it, mebbby not," Flint said impatiently. "Deuce Shane worked for me, up till a month ago. I beat him because he hit a bronc with a club."

"Krupp or Vulch sic'ed them two onto you," the chunky waddy insisted. "If you live through this, they'll roast you outa the country. You know Vulch; you know what happens to men he don't like. He tears 'em apart with his bare hands."

Flint grunted, "He won't tear me," and turned abruptly and went between the batwings. He paused just inside, his smoky blue eyes sweeping the big room.

SEVERAL kerosene lamps had been lighted and cast a reddish pall over the crowded room. A haze of tobacco smoke hung like a curtain from the ceiling, and the close air was pregnant with the taint of stale beer and raw whiskey. Men lined the wooden bar—buckskin-clad plainsmen, broad-shouldered mule-skinners, lean, sun-darkened men of the cattle trails, soft-voiced, darkly-dressed gamblers; wild, hard men who were as ready to fight with fist, gun or knife as they were to drink. A battered piano ground out tinny music, and loud-mouthed, strutting men swung short-skirted dance hall girls about the room.

A four-handed stud game was going at one of the tables. One of the four was a fat, red-faced cattleman who had been drinking too much. Across the table from the fat rancher sat a grizzled, rawboned oldster with snow-white beard and hawkish features. Every man on the Beartooth range, and far beyond it, knew old Adam Pike. Adam Pike, who had risen from a wild, hard-fighting cowboy to become owner of one of the biggest outfits in the territory, the Crazy J; to become boss of one of the saltiest, hardest-riding bunch of buckaroos west of the Missouri.

Facing the batwings, their backs to the wall, were Deuce Shane and Chink Ord. They saw Flint Savage as he entered, and swift, wary tension came to them. Deuce Shane was slender, dark-faced, flashily-dressed. Chink Ord was chunky, buck-toothed, with slanting, yellowish eyes that were too far apart.

Flint Savage stood a moment just inside the batwings, arms hanging loosely, smoky eyes riveted on the two gunmen at the table. Then he shouldered his

way among the dancers, and a path opened to let him through. The piano stopped on a jangly note. Quick silence came to the room, and, as if at a signal, all eyes turned toward Flint Savage. The tension spread over the entire room, like a bad odor.

Flint stopped ten feet from the poker table where Shane and Ord sat. He stood spread-legged, contempt and anger darkening his brown young face. Here, he knew, was the showdown; and in that instant he wondered if Dusty Malone had been right, if Lute Krupp and Gantt Vulch were behind this play—if what was about to happen would set the whole range ablaze in an inferno of gun-flame and death. . . .

Flint's flat voice scratched like a lighted match. "Shane, I hear you're wantin' to see me!"

Four chairs scraped as the gamblers came to their feet. The fat cowman cursed drunkenly, sudden panic in his voice, and staggered back against the wall. Adam Pike stood stiffly, shrewd eyes studying the tense scene before him.

Deuce Shane was hunched forward a little, grinning, slim fingers twitching over the ivory handle of his fancy gun. Chink Ord stood slightly behind Shane, squat body slouched carelessly, slant-eyes brimming with cat-cruelty.

These two, Flint saw, were cold sober. They'd just been playing at being drunk.

SHANE sneered, "Yeah, I *did* want to see you, Savage. It took you a hell of a long time to get here."

"I'm here now!"

"And you'll be carried out—feet first. I been sayin', ever since you caught me drunk and fist-whipped me, that I'd send you to hell, and now I aim to do it!"

"Any time, Shane—any time! And you weren't drunk when I beat you, no

more than you are now. I beat you with my fists, and I can beat you with a gun."

"That's a damn lie," Deuce Shane said furiously. "And that ain't all. Allus acted like I was dirt under yore feet, didn't you? You, who's the whelp of ol' Slow-Elk Savage. Yore daddy was a booze-hound, a cow-thief, and worse. He charged sick men a dollar a swig for the rotten slop he called whiskey, and robbed women and kids for the dinero that fed you!"

Flint Savage's voice was flat and deadly. "Shane, keep my daddy's name outa this."

"Not proud of your old man, huh?" Shane taunted. "Not proud that he stole and robbed, are you? Slow-Elk Savage was a lousy, white-bellied snake, and you ain't no better. Why, you—"

A blasphemous tirade drooled from Shane's writhing lips.

Flint Savage spat, "Go for your gun, Shane!"

Four men grabbed for their guns at the same time.

Flint's gun came up first, its muzzle blossoming redly. The spouting gun-flame caught Deuce Shane in the stomach, slamming him sidewise across the table, scattering money on the floor. Shane's fancy .44 belched fire and lead into the floor as he rolled to the sawdust.

Chink Ord had gone for his gun at the same instant Shane went for his. But it never cleared leather. Old Adam Pike's gnarled hand swooped downward, lightning-fast, came up grasping the butt of a long-barrel sixgun. Never checking the upward movement, he jabbed the gun-barrel solidly under Chink Ord's chin. The slant-eyed gunman cursed, reeled backward, still clawing at his gun.

But, coolly, Adam Pike followed him, whipping him over the head with the clubbed gun. Whipping him, not gent-

ly, but with chopping, hard blows that drove the buck-toothed killer to the floor where he lay dazed and half-conscious.

Flint Savage turned, smoking gun in hand, knowing that Adam Pike had saved his life. His smoky eyes raked the circle of hard faces ringing him.

This was old Lute Krupp's place, and many of these men were Krupp's followers. Wolf-eyed, they stared at Flint Savage; but no man among them moved or spoke, and Flint knew the reason: Adam Pike. Lute Krupp's riders were wild, soulless men who recognized no law of God or man; they might rob and kill and pillage with impunity—but there was one man who was always free from their rapacious raids.

That man was Adam Pike.

Adam jammed his sixgun contemptuously into its holster. To the silent, glowering men whom he knew to be Krupp's followers, he said, "Go back and tell Lute Krupp—and Vulch—that their little scheme failed. Tell 'em to bury this carrion good and deep, where it won't smell. And tell 'em that if they don't like the way I gun-whipped this slant-eyed hellion, I'll be waitin'!" Then, turning to Flint, he said, "Son, let's get out where the air ain't so foul."

THE fierce passions ebbing away inside him, Flint Savage followed Adam Pike onto the shadowy street. A chill wind moaned down from the crimson-tinged Red Devils that towered against the darkening sky, rattling the windows of Beartooth's shacks. Orange tongues of light had begun to glow in doors and windows.

In one of these dirty rays of light that filtered onto the street, Adam Pike stopped.

He said bluntly, "Get outa town, younker—and stay out! But first, here's some advice. You killed Deuce Shane. He needed killin'—but when

you killed him you signed your own death warrant. Gantt Vulch will be lookin' for you."

Flint Savage was silent a moment. He knew that Adam Pike spoke the truth. Lute Krupp owned the big Pitchfork outfit, up in the northern end of the basin. Gantt Vulch was Krupp's right-hand man. But there were rumors that Vulch was the real boss of the lawless Pitchfork crew. There were other tales told of the huge, brutal Vulch—tales that made the hair rise on the back of a man's neck.

"The trouble between me and Shane had been hangin' fire for a long time," Flint said. "It ~~had~~ had to happen."

Adam Pike nodded his grizzled head slowly. "A man must fight—or run. You'd have been better off to run. Listen, younker—Krupp and Vulch framed this. They want your spread. They knew there was bad blood between you and Shane; they sic'ed Shane and Ord onto you, hopin' they'd kill you. You killed Shane, and that gives them an excuse to start gunnin' for you. You wouldn't have a chance against them. I sided you tonight, to give you a chance to get outa the country."

Flint Savage said flatly, "I won't run! Krupp has been tryin' to smoke me offa the Cross T for a year. He's stolen my cattle, killed them, cut my fences, poisoned my water. I've fought, and I'll keep on fightin'."

"Mebby you could fight Krupp, but not Vulch."

"Why the hell cain't I? I sabe nobody in this country has had the sand to buck him. But I aim to fight him!" Flint quieted, his face still and pale in the murky light. "You heard what Deuce Shane said in there, about my daddy. We both know he was right. Slow-Elk was a thief, a murderer, no knowin' what else. The Cross T, while Slow-Elk lived, was a hell-hole, a meetin' place for the scum of the Territory

—a rendezvous for thieves and killers, any lawbreaker who had the money to pay for protection. Slow-Elk Savage belonged to Lute Krupp, body and soul."

"Slow-Elk's dead now—"

"Hanged by a vigilance committee," Flint said bitterly. "I'm Slow-Elk's son, and I've never been allowed to forget it. My daddy tried to learn me all his thievin' tricks; I learned 'em, but all the time I was disgusted with the drunken scum that gathered there to gamble and fight. When Slow-Elk was hanged, I broke away from it all. I swore I'd go straight."

"**Y**OU'VE done a damn good job of it," Adam Pike said gently. "I know Lute Krupp has made it hard for you, tried to make you play the same game Slow-Elk played. You've got sand in your craw, younker. But I say again—you cain't fight Krupp and Vulch. They've got a stranglehold on this country, all except the part I rule. Men who try to buck them, just vanish. This is wild, new country, boy. Gun law is the only law, a man's speed his right to live. And Krupp and Vulch are the Big Augurs. Everybody's afraid of them."

"I can see that," Flint said contemptuously. "They're so used to being kicked about that they've lost the will to fight back. They tack tail and run."

"They'd rather run than be killed."

"What this country needs is fightin' men—men like Bat Masterson, Wild Bill, and the Texans who're takin' their herds up the trails to Kansas!"

"No doubt about that," Adam Pike nodded. "And there are men here like that. Krupp and Vulch have gathered a murderous gang about them, men who'll kill quick as they'll down a glass of rotgut. But I haven't lost a cow to rustlers in ten years. I've got a big bunch of fightin' rannies, and Krupp

and Vulch don't bother me. They know that if they did I'd chase 'em clean to hell and push 'em off. But so long as they don't bother me, I don't bother them. The minute they break the truce, war starts."

Flint said quickly, "Give me twenty fighting men—"

Adam Pike shook his white head jerkily. "No! I cain't help you, younker. Nobody else can, or will. If you fight, you fight alone. And remember, it's not old Krupp you'll be fightin'—it's Vulch. Vulch does the dirty work, the thievin' and killin' and burnin'. Vulch is bad, soulless. A month ago he branded a puncher's face with a hot iron."

Flint nodded, remembering the night, a year ago, when he'd seen Vulch gouge out a smaller man's eyes in a fight. "I'll fight Vulch, then, but I won't fight him alone. I've got four riders—four loyal, hard-fightin' men with guts. They'll fight."

"And be murdered," Adam grunted. "Five men cain't fight fifty. Besides, you don't know where to find the worst of Krupp's gang. He's got a place up in the Red Devils, a hidden valley, where the worst of his hell's spawn stay—men who are afraid to show their faces to the outside world, and who fight and kill each other like wild mountain wolves. Gantt Vulch rules these mountain men; sometimes he leads them down into the lowlands at night, and the next morning we hear of some awful crime. Sometimes Vulch is gone for days, weeks, and that's where he is—in that lost valley, fighting, and drinking and carousing with the mountain renegades. I've never seen this valley, never seen a man who has; but I know it's there."

Flint said softly, "I've been there."

Old Adam nodded, without surprise. "You're Slow-Elk's kid. But knowin' where the valley is won't help you either. I'm the only man in the basin

who could help you, and I won't." The old cowman was silent a moment, his seamed, bearded face thoughtful in the murky light. "Boy, I aim to tell you somethin' no other man in the Territory knows. Me and Lute Krupp came from the same town in Texas. We're cousins; Lute Krupp's mother and my own mother were sisters."

Flint Savage said quietly, "I won't ever ask you for help again. But I still aim to fight!"

Adam Pike nodded, a gnarled hand on Flint's shoulder.

"All right, fight—fight hard. And when it's over—if you're lucky enough to be alive—come to me and I'll give you a job on my Crazy J. But I warn you, you'll need a hell of a lot more than just luck to live long enough to call for that job!"

CHAPTER II

WHIPLASH FOR A BATTLE-CUB

THE relentless wrath of Krupp and Vulch fell swiftly, two nights later, as Flint Savage lay asleep in his Cross T bedroom.

He'd worked hard all day, and was drugged with exhausted sleep. The room was full of shadowy figures before he awoke. Heavy hands gripped his arms, his shoulders and feet, and a ring of cold steel pressed against his throat. In the inky shadows he could hear the harsh breathing of the men, the scuff of their boots.

Silently cursing himself for being caught unawares, he bunched his steel muscles and heaved his body upward, twisting sidewise like a spitted snake. One arm came free, and he lashed out fiercely. A man cursed. His other arm came free then, and he fought to his feet. But a dozen other hands clawed

and hammered at him. Huge, hairy arms went about him, lifted him and slammed him with savage force back against the bed and held him helpless.

A shrill, nasal voice said, "Make a light, you fools!"

A match flared and was applied to a candle, and in the dirty light Flint Savage looked up into a circle of grinning, wolfish faces. The muzzle of a sixgun was six inches from his face, held in the talon-like hand of a man who was hunched over the footboard of the bed. The man was runty and warped and old; he was shabbily-dressed, with wrinkled, bearded features that held evil and cruelty and fierce hatred.

"Crave to fight, huh?" Lute Krupp spat. "Ol' Slow-Elk's cub ain't got the brains his daddy had, looks like. Slow-Elk knowed who his friends was."

Fighting his rage, Flint asked, "What do you want here?"

"I'll show you what I want," Krupp snarled. "You killed one of my men two days ago, in my own place in Bear-tooth."

"What of it? Deuce Shane started the trouble; he went for his gun first, and I killed him."

"That's a damn lie! Chink, you saw what happened. Did Shane have a fair break?"

Chink Ord, his head bandaged, his face swollen and purple, had been staring over Krupp's shoulder. He said, "Shane didn't have a chance. Shane had his back turned, and when he whirled this gent lets 'im have it plumb center."

Fresh anger engulfed Flint Savage. He struggled furiously against the men who held him. A huge figure shoved his way among the milling men. They fell back, and somebody said, "Vulch!" The giant placed one knee on the bed, drew back a knotted fist and crashed

it with deliberate, savage force into Flint's face.

The blow smashed Flint back against the bed. He lay a moment, stunned; then, as his brain stopped spinning, he stared up into a face that was stamped with the stark ferocity of a mad cougar. Gantt Vulch was huge, bull-like, dark-faced, with raven hair growing low on his forehead above round, reddish little eyes. His cheek-bones were high, rock-like, and thin lips curled back from fang-like teeth that looked capable of tearing human flesh from the bone. Gantt Vulch, folks said was a throw-back to the dark ages.

"Vulch's a mite rough," old Krupp was chuckling. "He don't believe in giving gents a chance, like I do."

SOMEBODY laughed, and then there was silence for a space; and in the silence Flint Savage listened hard. His four-hard case riders slept in the bunkhouse, fifty yards away.

"Won't do you no good to listen," Krupp grinned. "Yore riders are tied up, good and tight. And now, younker, let's talk turkey. You've had yore chance, you cain't deny that. Slow-Elk wasn't too good to call ol' Lute a friend, and you're no better than he was. Yore daddy stole and robbed, and done worse things—and you helped him do them things, when you was a little tyke. Then, after pore ol' Slow-Elk got his neck stretched, you taken cold feet. You throwed Slow-Elk's pals down flat. Go straight, you says, and be a law-abidin' citizen. Hell!"

"I've said before, and I say again, I want nothing to do with you and your scum," Flint said. "Say what you came to say, and get out!"

"I done give you a chance to throw in with me, like yore daddy done," Lute Krupp went on. "Slow-Elk was a fine, up-standin' man, and he knowed who his friends was. Now you've gone

back on his teachin's—and now you don't get another chance! You're through, Savage. Get out, get clean outa the Territory!"

Flint Savage laughed in the angry oldster's face. "Just because I killed a skunk that drew your rotten pay? There's Chink Ord—Adam Pike gun-whipped him, in your own place. What about Adam Pike?"

Lute Krupp almost danced in his rage. "Dammit, never mind about Adam Pike. Question is, are you goin'?"

White-faced, defiant, Flint said, "No, I'm not goin'. You may murder me, like you've murdered others, but I'll take some of you with me. I'll find other men who have the guts to fight, and when I do, you're through Krupp—and you, Vulch! We'll fight you, whip you from the face of the earth, plant your damned carrion so deep its stench won't ever rise again in the nostrils of decent men!"

A snarling curse ripped from Krupp's whiskery lips. He spat, "Get 'im, Vulch. Teach him to keep a civil tongue in his head!"

Again, with savage deliberateness, the giant Vulch smashed his fist into Flint's unprotected face. Numbed, his brain seething with dark currents of hate and rage, Flint felt rough hands seize him and turn his face down on the bed. Clutching his ankles and wrists, they held him spread-eagled and helpless.

"Give me room," he heard Vulch say.

By twisting his head about he could see Vulch. The giant stood beside the bed; he was grinning, and in his hand he held a rawhide quirt. The quirt was heavy, and halfway down the stock it split into two separate lashes. The Pitchfork men cleared a space about Vulch.

Vulch's huge, hairy arm rose, deliberately, and chopped downward in a

quick, fierce arc. The double lashes made an angry, hissing sound as they slashed through the air. Fiery pain lashed at Flint's bare back as the whip bit viciously into his flesh. He writhed and twisted furiously in a vain effort to break loose from the hands that held him, but he didn't cry out.

THE keen-lashed whip rose and fell again—and again. . . . His whole body seemed on fire. He could feel blood running over his back. Vulch was enjoying his fiendish work. His thin lips were twisted in a wolfish grin; each blow brought an animal-sound from his corded throat that was half-chuckle, half-growl. Still the whiplashes rose and fell with a fierce, terrible rhythm.

Flint heard himself say, "*I warn you, Vulch—I'll kill you for this!*"

Vulch laughed, a low, bleak sound. Flint was helpless to protect himself. He knew his back was being cut to ribbons; but he didn't feel so much pain now, only a steady, fiery burning as the lashes rose and fell. A dark mist was beginning to cloud his brain, and the room reeled crazily before his eyes.

Dimly, he heard Krupp's nasal, triumphant voice: "That's what happens to them as try to buck Lute Krupp. Now mebbly you won't be so eager to fight!"

It seemed to Flint Savage that that vicious, hissing sound from the whip went on for ages. The fiery pain had spread to his whole body. His mind was reeling. His clenched teeth bit into his lips still the blood came; but still he didn't cry out, and the fact infuriated Gantt Vulch all the more. But all Vulch's bull-like strength and ferocity couldn't increase Flint Savage's pain and misery. The whirling mists deepened in his brain. . . .

And then, after a long time, he knew that the whipping had stopped. Half-

conscious, he heard the scuff of boots as the Pitchfork men left, and the room was quiet and still. Then he felt his senses sliding away, and the whispery darkness rushed in. . . .

CHAPTER III

GLORY—OR BOOTHILL!

AWHILE before dawn his four riders, who had managed to slip their bonds, came into the room and roused him.

A hard-bitten lot, these four who had stuck through the relentless warfare of the last year, men with dark and secret pasts. There was the Taos Kid, a chunky, towheaded youngster with reckless, bitter young eyes and a wholesome contempt for man-made laws; "Frenchy" LaRue, who had come down from the North for reasons best known to himself, with the strength of a grizzly and a fierce love for combat; Blacklock, a gaunt, dour man with dark, morose features, who seldom spoke; and "Texas Red" Pines, a tall, handsome man with flaming red hair and lightning speed in the long-barreled black guns he wore.

Each of these four owed Flint Savage a debt, and were fiercely loyal to him. Flint had taken them, human derelicts with all hands against them, and given them jobs.

"*Sacre bleu!*" Frenchy swore, after they had doctored Flint's lacerated body the best they could. "I am finish, through. Like the bull yearlin' I am tie to me bed by thees *cavcajou*. I am insult—I am ready to mak' the fight. For w'y do we wait?"

"By hellity blue, Frenchy, you're right!" said the Taos Kid. "We've swallowed a lot from Krupp's swine, but we won't swallow this. We're

ridin'!"

Flint Savage spoke through swollen, torn lips. "Not so fast. We're not ridin'—yet."

The four stared at him. Texas Red said, "Hell! Why ain't we ridin'?"

"We wouldn't have a chance against the Pitchfork crew," Flint pointed out. "Anyway, mebby after this they'll let us alone."

"They won't let you alone, *mon ami*," Frenchy declared. "Not till we are finish'—or they are dead. Me, I am rather see them dead."

"Not yet," Flint said stubbornly. "We could kill a few men, mebby, before they killed us. No, I know they won't let us alone; I know a show-down's comin'. It's a fight or run, and I won't run. But the fight's mine, not yours. I'll pay you boys off, and I want you to pull stakes."

Frenchy spat, like there was something bitter in his mouth. "*Sacre bleu!* You say zat again an' I bus' you open!" The dour Blacklock said nothing, just sat staring off toward the mist-shrouded Red Devils. Texas Red and the Taos Kid laughed, and that was Flint's answer.

Flint said, "I knew you'd feel that way, boys. And I sabe you want to go after Krupp's scum. All right, we'll fight—when Krupp or Vulch makes one more break."

It was a promise, and they had to be satisfied with it. . . . They all knew that they wouldn't have to wait long for the final show-down. And none of the four dreaded that show-down with Flint Savage's dark foreboding. For it probably meant that that one thing he'd always wanted above all else, and had never had, would be forever lost—a chance to live in peace and friendliness with his neighbors.

HIS whole life had been a fierce battle. When a boy he'd fought

tooth-and-nail with neighboring ranch boys because they sneered at him for being the son of a thief; later, he'd fought grown bullies for the same reason. Wishing desperately for peace, he'd had no peace. Now he had to run, or fight, and he wouldn't run. He meant to fight, but he didn't know how. He'd just have to wait until Krupp or Vulch made the next break. He knew that wouldn't be long in coming. . . .

Three days later, as the setting sun was filling the gaping fissures of the Red Devils with seething flames, Flint Savage stood in front of the ranch house and watched two riders thunder across an alkali flat half a mile away. There was a chill feeling inside him as Frenchy and the Taos Kid dragged their sweating mounts to a halt and tumbled to the ground.

Frenchy's face was battered and bloody. The Taos Kid held one arm stiffly, and was pale with rage.

"By damn, now I am finish', for sure!" Frenchy roared. "Me, I am not like the dog to be kicked and spat on, *non!*"

Flint asked tersely, "What happened?"

"Hell's to pay," said the Taos Kid. "Me and Frenchy spent the night over on the west range, like you told us, guardin' the herd over there. Vulch and a bunch of his gunnies jumped us just before dawn. There was a fight, and we killed a couple of men, but they was too many for us. I got a slug in the arm. Vulch beat Frenchy, while a couple of his hard-cases held him, because Frenchy talked back. Then they tied us up, while they drove off what cows they wanted."

"Which way did they go?"

"West, toward the mountains. These hombres with Vulch don't ride for the Pitchfork; they must belong to that renegade bunch up in the Red Devils."

"Mon Dieu!" Frenchy spluttered.

"All zee day we lay in zee hot sun, while zee red ants she crawl over us. Zen we get loose, and here we are. And now me mak' zee fight!"

Blacklock and Texas Red had come from a nearby tool-house. Blacklock said slowly, "When there is no other recourse, then fight. The time has come."

Texas Red started toward the bunk-house, saying, "We'll need rifles. Damn Vulch's dirty soul!"

Flint called him back. "We'll fight, all right," he said. "But there's no hurry. Those cattle Vulch stole won't be driven onto Pitchfork land; they've carried them into the mountains, to their hideout up there."

The Taos Kid asked, "But how're we gonna find that hideout?"

"I know where it is," Flint said slowly. "I was there once, when I was a kid. At dawn, we're headin' for that valley. Some of us won't come back, mebby none of us. I'm givin' you boys a last chance to pack your warbags and ride."

There was a short silence, then Frenchy growled, "By gar—we waste zee time!"

Flint Savage said huskily, "We trail at dawn."

They struck the trail of the stolen cattle out on the plain and followed it toward the towering crags. They reached the base of the foothills at mid-evening. Here the trail became rougher, progress slower. It was sundown before they began the ascent into a country that was lined with walls and corridors of granite. When darkness came they made camp, for yawning canyons and pits made night travel perilous.

THEY didn't make a fire, but squatted on packs and saddles in a ravine and ate sparingly of the provisions they had brought. Afterward,

Blacklock stalked off into the shadows and was gone a long time. Frenchy and the Taos Kid tried to see a poker deck by the starlight. Flint and Texas Red talked in low tones.

The desert and plain fell away below them in the night like a purple-spotted carpet. To the northeast lay the Cross T; due east was Lute Krupp's Pitchfork outfit; and far to the southeast was old Adam Pike's wide and rich domain. To the west lay a savage wilderness. Up there, yet many miles away, was a hidden outlaw stronghold, where few honest men had ever been.

Now, as he huddled there in the shadowy ravine, Flint Savage's mind went backward over the years—to the night when he had ridden to that hideout with his father, Slow-Elk Savage. He remembered the ride up through the dark peaks, the chill wind moaning among the walls, the black shadows cast by the ragged peaks. Stark in his memory was that long sleepless night, while he huddled in terror and watched Slow-Elk carouse with evil-faced, gun-belted men. He remembered the drunken fighting, the barbaric revelry; he remembered seeing men fight with tooth and nail, like jungle beasts, and seeing a man killed in a gun-fight.

That hidden outlaw valley was still up there. And now, if he lived long enough, he'd see that sinister valley again. . . .

With the first streaks of gray in the sky, they penetrated deeper into the Red Devils. The foothills dropped away below them and they entered a primordial world of deep canyons and high red walls where pits and caves stared back at them like hostile eyes. Quickly the sun became blistering hot, flinging its blinding glare back from the appalling walls. The climb became gruelling on man and beast, and they stopped often for rest.

Long ago they had abandoned the

trail of the stolen cattle; for by now Flint was certain that the raiders were heading for the hidden valley high among the silent peaks. Guided by familiar landmarks, he led the grim-eyed little cavalcade unerringly toward the renegade valley, knowing that by mid-day they were in outlaw country.

That evening, as the lowering sun was streaking the peaks like a drunken demon had raked bloody fingers across their faces, Flint Savage called a halt.

"Vulch's valley is no more than five miles ahead," he said. "They may have a lookout watching the trail. You boys wait right here, while I scout on alone."

"Non, by gar!" Frenchy protested. "What if thees *carcajou* jump you?"

"Better jump me alone, than jump all of us. See that bald knob up there?"

He pointed, and the five squinted upward. Plainly visible on the mountainside, a mile above, was an outjutting knob of rock.

"From that knob I can see in every direction. If everything's all right I'll wave my sombrero. Sabe?"

"We sabe, *mon ami*, but we do not like," Frenchy grumbled. "Me, I got the hunch some theeng weel happen, for sure. . . ."

FLINT slapped the big man from the North on the shoulder, waved a hand and rode up the mountainside, leaving the four in a compact group in the center of a clearing three hundred yards across. The clear space was a sort of funnel, with ragged walls on both sides.

Looking at the pitted walls, Flint thought that here would be an ideal spot for an ambush. Then he shrugged and rode on. All day they had seen no sign of the mountain renegades.

He left his horse in a ravine and clambered upward to the huge, flat-topped slab of rock. From here the view was marvelous, and he unslung a

pair of powerful binoculars from his shoulder. On three sides of him there was nothing but towering peaks and twisted red lava beds. He shifted the glasses, and the cliffs below seemed to leap upward at him.

His four riders were still grouped closely in the hollow between the two rows of walls. The glasses brought them so close he could even see the expressions on their faces. Frenchy was talking, gesticulating with a huge hand. Texas Red and the Taos Kid were staring upward toward the flat rock where he crouched; the gaunt Blacklock was staring suspiciously at the cliffs on their right. The setting sun bathed them in a blood-red glow.

It happened with numbing, devastating suddenness, as Flint Savage watched.

The Taos Kid's roan reared straight up, turning on hind feet. Frenchy, Texas Red and Blacklock whirled toward the walls on their right. Texas Red grabbed his rifle from under his leg, and at the same instant his horse went down, rolling and threshing on the sand. Texas Red leaped clear, landing like a big cat on his feet.

Flint could see tiny geysers of dust spurting from under the hoofs of the other horses; could hear the flat, harsh sound of gunfire. He shifted the glasses quickly to the walls on the men's right—and felt like a cold wind had washed over him. Ropes of flame and smoke were leaping out from the base of the walls. He could see the heads and shoulders of men, jutting out from the pits and fissures, half-hidden by fogging gunsmoke. And in that instant Flint Savage knew that he'd lost his battle with Krupp and Vulch even before it had started.

Bitter curses clogging his throat, he shifted the glasses back to the clearing.

The Taos Kid's bronc was whirling in circles. Frenchy was yelling, point-

ing toward the cliffs. Blacklock was sitting his horse calmly, rifle to his shoulder. Texas Red dodged from under the churning hoofs of the Taos Kid's horse; he crouched on one knee, his rifle came up and vomited smoke and flame.

Then, suddenly, Texas Red rose stiffly to his feet, fell forward on his face and lay still, his fiery hair glinting fiercely in the sun's last rays.

Now the Taos Kid's horse was down. The chunky youngster leaped clear; he stood a moment, rifle upraised as if looking for something against which to unleash his fury. Then he turned, tiny geysers of sand spurting about him, and started running toward the boulders and walls a hundred yards to the south.

But he didn't make it. He stumbled and sprawled on the ground. The Taos Kid got to his knees; then, as if finding the effort too great, he dropped back and lay like a man asleep.

FLINT SAVAGE lunged to his feet, his face white with rage. "My God!" he cried aloud. "They're bein' murdered, shot down like dogs—without a chance!"

He started running wildly down the mountainside. Then he stopped. It wouldn't do any good to go down there. He would be too late to help. Down there, he would be killed, as the others were now being killed.

Seething with helpless fury, he raised the glasses again.

Blacklock's horse was pounding across the sand, stirrups flapping, saddle empty. Blacklock was on the ground, on hands and knees, crawling toward the walls where the mountain renegades were concealed and pouring out their murderous hail of lead. A bullet kicked sand into Blacklock's eyes; but he kept on crawling, blindly, doggedly.

Then, all at once, Blacklock stopped crawling and fell forward on his face.

Only Frenchy was left. Frenchy had a blazing sixshooter in each hand, and his powerful figure was wreathed in curling gray ropes of gunsmoke. Frenchy was laughing as he blazed away at the cliffs. But now the fire from the cliffs was concentrated on the big man; no man could live long in that deadly hail of lead.

Frenchy didn't.

All at once he dropped his smoking guns and started fumbling in an aimless sort of way at his chest. Then he tumbled stiffly from the saddle, his squat body bouncing as it hit the ground. Frenchy rolled over, his face turned directly toward the slab of rock where Flint Savage stood. Flint couldn't be sure, but he thought that the big French-Canadian was smiling. And maybe he was mistaken when he thought he saw Frenchy's lips frame words.

"Me, I am finish"—oui, zee coyote, she 'ave lay low zee grizzly. I go now, *mon ami*. . . ."

Then Frenchy's eyes were closed, and he lay still.

Flint stood a moment, stunned and weak. Now he could see men pouring from the fissures at the base of the walls—gaunt, wolf-faced men, clad in ragged buckskins and other nondescript garb. They had guns in their hands, and some of them were leading horses. They weren't looking at the still figures out there on the sand, but upward toward Flint Savage. At their head Flint could see a huge figure, dark-faced, and with raven hair growing low on his broad forehead.

Vulch!

Suddenly aware of his own deadly peril, Flint raced toward his horse a hundred yards away. Only by a miracle, he knew, could he hope to escape that blood-thirsty pack of killers.

CHAPTER IV**TO HELL—AND BACK!**

IT WAS that miracle that kept him alive during the next few hours: Long, nightmarish hours of running, dodging, crawling, using every trick he knew to throw Gantt Vulch's baying killers off his trail. A score of times he escaped death by a hair's breadth.

For what seemed like hours he lay motionless, racked with fierce pain from scratches and bruises, while huge red ants made fiery paths over his body. With the coming of night a white moon soared into the sky; but the darkness didn't send the killers back to their mountain lair. They crept with drawn guns through the shadowy ravines and walls, or crouched motionless in the darker places, waiting for Flint Savage to move or show himself.

Far in the night Flint came to an icy stream, where he quenched his burning thirst. He bathed his face, and lay awhile in the cold water, then climbed wearily out of the shallow canyon to its rim. He huddled there a moment, straining ears and eyes for a sign that his pursuers were near. But he heard nothing, saw nothing, and started moving along the rim.

Roaring flames lashed suddenly out at him from the shadows fifty feet away. He flung himself backward, feeling the hot sting of a bullet across his ribs. Thrown off balance by his wild lunge, he tried desperately to pull himself back from the rim of the chasm that yawned blackly below him. But the rotten shale crumbled under his clawing fingers, and he felt himself falling.

He heard a harsh bellow of triumph, "Got 'im, by God!"

Instead of the jagged rocks that he

expected to rip his body to pieces, Flint Savage plunged head-first into the icy water. Weak from pain and exhaustion, he fought his way to the surface and to shallow water. No light from the moon reached the canyon bed, but on the opposite side of the stream he could make out an overhanging ledge.

He lay there on the ledge, listening to the excited voices on the canyon rim. Apparently, the renegades were satisfied that they'd killed Flint Savage, for after a while the voices faded away.

Two days later a slim, dark-eyed girl found Flint Savage down on the edge of the desert. He was feverish from heat and thirst; his clothes were in tatters, his hat gone, his guns, horse—everything. His body was a mass of cuts and bruises.

The girl was Sue Pike, daughter of old Adam Pike. At first she thought the skulking figure in the brush was a wolf, then she saw that it was a man. Flint Savage stared unbelievably at her as she approached, then sank down to the ground, unconscious.

Pityingly, Sue Pike forced water from her canteen between his swollen lips. Then, somehow, she got him onto her horse, and carried him to the Crazy J ranchhouse. Adam Pike himself lifted Flint gently from the horse and carried him inside and placed him on a bed.

"I found him out on the desert," Sue said, unmindful of the blood and grime on her clothes.

Lean, bronzed, gun-belted men came silently into the room and stood looking down at Flint Savage. These were a portion of Adam Pike's fighting buckaroos, the only bunch of men in all the Territory that Lute Krupp feared.

FLINT writhed in his delirium as Pike worked over him, and the oldster said grimly, "Vulch's wolves did this to him—and God only knows what happened to his four riders. They went

into the mountains after Vulch's renegades, after they raided the Cross T and drove off a bunch of cattle. They were ambushed, likely—Vulch aimed that none of them should return to tell what happened. Damn his black soul!"

It was another day and night before Flint regained consciousness. Adam Pike watched over him part of the time. At others, it was slim, dark-eyed Sue Pike who kept vigil; who wept, unobserved, as Flint Savage writhed and babbled as he relived in his delirium those long, tortuous hours as he sought to escape from Vulch's mountain outlaws.

Sue Pike was the first person he saw when he regained consciousness. She was smiling, and he lay there looking at her a long time.

It was a week before he could sit propped in a chair; another week before he could hobble about the ranch. Simply, he'd told Adam Pike what had happened, skipping briefly over the ghastly hours of fighting, hiding, crawling through thorny thickets; over the terrible trek, wounded and without water or food, down through the mountains to the desert.

"What now?" Adam Pike asked, one evening as they sat on the shady porch of the big, fort-like old ranchhouse.

Flint said, "I don't know."

"You aim to quit the country?"

"No! I still aim to fight. I don't know how, but I'll fight!"

Adam Pike nodded, like he expected that. The Flint Savage he saw now wasn't the stalwart, self-confident youngster he'd talked to in Beartooth three weeks ago. Instead, here was a man who was bewildered and heart-sick; a man ruined, with baffled, despairing eyes trying desperately to see a way out.

"Where will you go?" Adam asked.

"Back home, because there's nowhere else to go. I'll find a new lead,

someway."

Adam puffed moodily on his pipe. "Still not licked, huh? All right—when it's over, if you're alive, don't forget what I said about havin' a job here on the Crazy J for you. I need a man like you."

They didn't talk any more, for just then Sue, slim and fresh and pretty in checked gingham, came onto the porch. Old Adam got up and went inside, thinking from the signs he'd seen lately that he wasn't needed here. Flint thought that, too.

Knowing Sue Pike had been like a bright ray of light shining through the bitter darkness of his existence. He'd known but few girls, and never before one like Sue. Decent girls had always had only distrust and scorn for the son of Slow-Elk Savage. But Sue didn't seem to care that he was the son of a thief. Long hours, as he slowly regained his strength, he spent with Adam Pike's dark-haired daughter, roaming about the pine groves near the ranch house or riding across the broad grassy plain.

AND, as the time neared for him to leave, his mind was a fierce battleground. Why not stay here on the Crazy J and take the job Adam Pike had offered him? Why not admit he was whipped, and try to forget the terrible things that had happened? He *was* whipped, his men all murdered. Why not abandon the Cross T to Krupp's hellions, and remain here where he would be always near a smiling, lithe-limbed range girl?

Flint Savage knew the answer to those things: Because he was a fighting man.

Nobody begged him to stay. Adam Pike gave him a horse and saddle, a gunbelt and sixshooter, a complete outfit. Sue watched him ride away with white face and troubled eyes, then went

to her room and stayed for a long time.

Flint Savage rode back to the Cross T, hoping for peace and forgetfulness. But he found neither.

He spent the first day or two puttering about the ranch buildings, finally riding out across the plain to the southern portion of his outfit. And there he came upon a scene that sickened him.

The rotting, stinking carcasses of cattle dotted the prairie and flocks of hissing, croaking buzzards were gorging themselves on the loathsome repast. Still other cows, walking skeletons, staggered around or lay on the ground too weak to move. Instantly, Flint saw what had happened.

A big water hole, the only one on that portion of his range, had been poisoned. Furthermore, a high strong fence, surrounding a patch of golden-rod and loco weed, had been torn down, letting the cattle through to gorge themselves on the deadly weeds.

Flint spent the rest of the day repairing the fence and stringing a strand of wire about the poisoned water. It was after dark when he got back to the ranch house. He lay awake most of the night, the silence roaring in his ears—a lonely, beaten man with strange ghosts parading the empty corridors of his soul. At dawn, haggard and with nerves on edge, he rode into Beartooth.

He asked about Gantt Vulch—but nobody had seen Vulch for three weeks. He saw some of Krupp's Pitchfork riders. They stared at him, wide-eyed, like they thought they were seeing a ghost. They'd heard about the fight in the mountains, Flint knew, and had thought he'd been killed by the mountain renegades.

Flint had no bone to pick with them; Vulch was the man he wanted to meet. He returned to the Cross T that same night.

Several days passed—quiet, peaceful

days, with no hint of the violence and hatred that lay like a pall over the range. Then, on the seventh day since Flint's return, the leashed violence exploded in a blazing holocaust of gun-flame and death.

At noon, Flint Savage sat on his shady porch and watched a lone rider, horse's belly flattened to the ground, thunder across the alkali flat below the ranch house. The towheaded rider he recognized as Dusty Malone, one of Adam Pike's riders.

Flint got to his feet and stood waiting, in his heart a chill premonition of impending evil.

CHAPTER V

RED DEVIL RENEGADES

DUSTY MALONE was hatless, and one side of his face was covered with blood. In a few terse sentences he told what had happened.

At last, Vulch and his cut-throats had ridden onto Crazy J range, breaking the unwritten law that lay between Lute Krupp and Adam Pike, breaking the truce and loosing merciless war. They'd ridden to the Crazy J ranch house itself, looking for Flint Savage whom they'd heard had escaped from the mountains and made his way there.

Less than a dozen Crazy J waddies had been on hand when Gantt Vulch and his band of ragged mountain renegades had ridden up and arrogantly demanded that Flint Savage be delivered to them. Adam Pike hadn't even taken the trouble to deny that Flint was there—he'd given the signal for swift battle. And the fight that followed was one that would be recounted with bated breath for years to come in the Territory, a fierce fight with guns and knives be-

tween untamed men of the frontier. Half the dozen Crazy riders had been killed.

But that wasn't what made Flint Savage's heart grow cold and heavy inside him. Gantt Vulch had beaten his way into the ranch house, ruthlessly shooting down old Adam Pike who barred his way—and when he'd ridden away with his raiders toward their mountain hideout they'd carried Sue Pike with them!

Badly wounded, Adam Pike had dispatched riders to round up his fighting buckaroos. He'd told Dusty Malone to ride for Flint Savage, well knowing that Flint was probably the only man alive who could and would lead his men to the hidden outlaw valley where Sue Pike had been taken.

Numb with the rage and fear that were inside him, Flint turned and ran for the corral, and five minutes later was thundering beside Dusty Malone toward the Crazy J. Reaching there at mid-evening, they found fifty lean, gunbelted men standing beside saddled mounts and ready to ride. Adam Pike lay propped on a cot on the porch, grim-eyed and fighting to hold in check his rage and bitter helplessness.

He told Flint Savage, "Yunker, bring back my girl and you can have anything I've got, or all I've got."

Flint rapped, "I'm ready to ride. I'll need a fresh horse."

The horse was already saddled and waiting, a big, black gelding, built for speed and endurance. Flint leaped into saddle, and something Adam Pike said was lost in a wild thunder of hoofs. Flint rode with set face at the head of the grim-faced cavalcade. A hot wind beat at him, roared away behind him, as miles flashed under the black's pounding hoofs. They reached the base of the hills a while before sunset, and paused to rest their horses.

And here, as they rested, he learned

more about the fight at the Crazy J. Lute Krupp hadn't been with Vulch's cut-throats. He'd arrived at the Crazy J just before the fight started, and had tried in vain to avert trouble.

"I don't sabe it," Dusty Malone said. "Lute Krupp slung lead side by side with Adam Pike. Gantt Vulch killed him. Queer, huh?"

Flint nodded, and kept his counsel.

"That leaves Vulch," Dusty went on. "Vulch's a devil—some say he can't be killed."

Flint said grimly, "We'll see about that."

THEY mounted and rode on, and the sun vanished suddenly, as if gulped by the greedy throat-masses of the Red Devils. A purple mist obscured the plain and spread to the heights. But they didn't stop with darkness, and soon a silvery moon soared into the sky, pointing the way with silvery fingers. A chill wind moaned down from the peaks and swept the granite ridges. And the cavalcade thundered on along rocky ledges and shaly slopes, the horses sliding on their haunches and dragging with them avalanches of loose rock and dust, only to emerge, ghost-like, and race on.

Flint Savage rode with eyes blinded to the peril of roaring along those wind-swept ledges and along the rims of gaping canyons. And the Crazy J waddies followed him, now etched darkly against the sky as they raced along a bare hog-back, now plunging without thought of peril into inky fissures and ravines, and out.

Flint rode with only one thought in his mind—to rescue Sue Pike from Gantt Vulch's brutal hands. It wouldn't be easy, he knew, and it might prove impossible. He'd tried to reach that hidden valley once and failed. But now he had fifty fighting men at his back, instead of four. He knew that

this was the final showdown, a showdown to determine whether the Bear-tooth country should remain a festering sinkhole for the scum of the frontier, or become a place where decent folks could live and raise their families in peace and safety. . . .

An hour before dawn they again rested their mounts and themselves, then pushed on. The sun came up out of the desert and almost instantly was scalding hot. The wind had died, and the mountains were silent. A while before noon they passed between the pitted walls where the mountain raiders had ambushed and murdered Flint's riders three weeks before. Four skeletons, bleaching white on the blazing sand, told the ghastly story.

Flint Savage passed the spot with averted eyes; and, soon after, he told the Crazy J riders to stop and wait his return. He left them, riding northward, then circling back westward. And thirty minutes later he crouched atop a massive yellow wall and stared down into a little valley.

The valley, gourd-shaped, was no more than two miles long and half as wide. At the northern end of the valley Flint could see a dozen long huts, and near the huts were sheds and corals that held gaunt mountain horses. The place had but one entrance or outlet, at the southern end, a passage a hundred yards wide that slashed between towering walls. It was hemmed on all sides by steep, broken walls that towered upward hundreds of feet. The broken floor of the valley was covered by a thick carpet of dry grass and underbrush and stunted trees.

Small bunches of cattle grazed over the valley—his own cattle, Flint supposed. At first he could see no sign of life about the huts. Then a bearded figure, carrying a heavy sack over his shoulder, came from one of the cabins, mounted a saddled horse and rode at

a gallop toward the mouth of the valley.

FLINT stiffened suddenly. A second figure stood briefly in a doorway of another cabin, staring after the man on the horse. The man was Gantt Vulch. After a moment, Vulch turned back into the cabin.

Flint remounted and rode swiftly back to the spot where the Crazy J waddies waited impatiently.

He said, "Vulch's valley is just ahead, beyond the next nest of walls. There's just one way in or out, through a narrow passage—and that passage is guarded by half a hundred men."

A puncher asked, "How we aimin' to get into that snake's den?"

"I don't know," Flint admitted. "But we're goin' in. Let's ride!"

They mounted and pushed on through the walls, rifles naked in hands. The cliffs lifted higher suddenly—and splitting the walls asunder as if a giant knife had cleft them was a ragged gash. The defile was funnel-shaped, widening gradually at its mouth until it merged with the valley itself. Like the valley, the pass was covered with a carpet of grass and underbrush.

Flint's upraised hand stopped the cavalcade, and they stared with slitted eyes at the valley entrance. Flint saw a movement inside the passage, at the base of the walls, and yelled a warning, and at that instant a streamer of flame and smoke lashed out where the movement had been. A Crazy J horse screamed, rose straight into the air and crashed over backward; its rider hit the ground running, sheltering his body behind the plunging mounts of the others as they wheeled amid a hail of bullets to the shelter of other cliffs fifty yards away.

The Crazy J riders tumbled from their horses and, rifles in hand, started creeping from boulder to boulder to-

ward the pass. But the men on the walls inside the corridor spotted the men, and smashing sound beat back from the granite walls as half a hundred guns crashed. A Crazy J waddy rose stiffly to his feet, then slumped forward on his face.

Dusty Malone, his young face twisted with fury, dragged the body to shelter.

After that they kept to shelter, knowing that instant death awaited them on the bullet-raked slope. The renegades in the passage were firing wildly, and yelling drunken, ribald taunts. The Crazy J buckaroos answered with a blasting hail of lead, but the bullets for the most part splattered harmlessly on the granite walls, for the renegades were well hidden in pits and fissures. It would be almost impossible, Flint knew, to dislodge them from their positions.

Meanwhile, Sue Pike was inside the valley—and so was Gantt Vulch. . . .

The sun dropped behind the red-tinted peaks, and suddenly it was night. Then a moon appeared, softening the grimness of the black-mantled crags. Taking advantage of the half-light, Flint again led the Crazy J waddies up the slope, their guns pouring a deadly stream of lead into the dark defile. But the mountain outlaws were on guard. Their furious gunfire drove the attackers quickly to shelter.

AS THE moon arched higher, the shouts from the men guarding the pass became more drunken and taunting. And now Flint Savage knew what had been in that sack he'd seen the outlaw take from one of the cabins—whiskey!

"Waugh!" a thick, jeering voice called. "Come on in, you low-country rannies, and take your medicine. Come on in!"

"Yeah, what you waitin' on?" an-

other voice said. "What'sa use waitin'? Us, we got plenty time, though. We got plenty whiskey, and Vulch, he's got a purty gal back there in the valley to keep him cheered up. Vulch picks 'em purty, he does. Haw! Haw!"

Black rage flooded through Flint Savage. He was half crazy with dread and impatience. And he knew that to try to fight their way through the pass in the face of that murderous fire would be suicidal. It would take hours, maybe days, to get through, or force the renegades to surrender.

Calculatingly, he looked into the pass. Gunflame cast a flickering red glow over the walls. An empty whiskey jug crashed on the rocks at the base of the walls. A glowing cigarette made a crimson arc as it fell to the floor of the pass. Tiny blaze flared briefly in the grass, then winked out.

Adam Pike had said, "Bring back my girl, younker, and you can have anything I've got. . . ." Flint Savage didn't want anything Adam Pike had. All he wanted was to help Sue Pike—and to meet Gantt Vulch face to face. And, to do that, he had to get into the valley. . . .

He started wrigling back down the slope. He didn't tell the Crazy J riders what he aimed to do. He gained the cliffs where the horses were concealed, mounted the big black and spurred back down the mountainside. Then he swerved, made a circle, and ten minutes later dismounted at almost the exact spot on the valley rim where he had been that evening. Memory of what he had seen had forged a desperate plan in his mind.

Here the walls fell away sheer from the rim. But, forty feet below the rim, invisible in the inky shadows that shrouded the eastern wall, Flint knew that there was an out-jutting ledge of rock. Below this ledge, the walls were pitted and broken, where a man *might*

be able to clamber downward to the valley floor hundreds of feet below.

Flint took his rope from the saddle. There was no tree here, nothing to which he could fasten one end of the lariat. He looped one end of the rope over the saddlehorn, flung the other end over the rim; then he spoke soothingly to the black, seized the rope and lowered himself over the cliff-edge. He didn't know whether the black would stand, or whether he was directly over the ledge—those were just chances a man had to take.

Slowly he slid down the rope, bumping into jutting slabs of rock, peering downward into the shadowy abyss. Now he could see the ledge. He was directly over it, but the rope lacked several feet reaching, and he had to turn loose and drop. His feet turned as he landed, and for a moment he dangled with half his body off the ledge. Then slowly, weak and wet with sweat, he pulled himself back onto the slab of rock.

He huddled there a moment, watching the rope crawl back up the cliff-side as the black moved away from the rim. Flint grimaced in the shadows. He couldn't go back up—now he *had* to go down, one way or another.

HE slid feet and legs over the edge of the rock, found a toe-hold, and started easing himself downward. Now the ledge was ten feet above him, now twenty. The moon-rays didn't penetrate here. At times he could see the pits and cracks that afforded him hand and toe-holds; others, he had to feel blindly, praying desperately that the hold would be there.

Fifty feet below the ledge, he paused on another narrow slab of rock to rest briefly, then moved downward again, inch by inch. He was drenched with sweat, his hands were cut and bleeding. A dozen times his groping hands

or feet caved under crumbling shale, and for age-long seconds he fought and strained to keep himself from being hurled into the dark pit that yawned below him.

Now he was halfway between the rim and valley floor. He could see the tree-tops below him, and the cabins off to the north. To the south, he could see red blobs of flame in the pass, could hear the crash of the gunfire, as the outlaws and the Crazy J waddies fought their fierce, dead-locked battle. All the huts in the valley below were dark, except one. In the biggest cabin, set apart from the others, a light glowed dimly.

This was the cabin where he'd seen Gantt Vulch that evening—the cabin where Sue Pike would probably be.

Seething with impatience, Flint tried to lower himself faster. But he couldn't go fast; a single mis-step or false move might hurl him crashing to the rocks far below. He had to creep downward, inch by tortuous inch, while the dread inside him mounted to an almost unbearable crescendo.

CHAPTER VI

OWL-HOOT CUB'S SHOWDOWN

THEN he was on the floor of the valley. His brain was reeling; he didn't know exactly how he'd got there. Forty feet up, he recalled, he'd come to a place where the wall was sheer and smooth, with no place to turn for a foot-hold. Below him, and fifteen feet out, he'd seen a dark, swaying mass; he'd bunched his powerful muscles and flung himself desperately outward, praying not to miss.

By a miracle, his wild leap had taken him to the pine top, and he'd crashed half its length before clutching a stout

limb and checking his plummeting fall. Then he'd slid down the pine, and here he was.

Off to the south, toward the pass, the gunfire had slackened. He could hear men yelling, and a portion of the walls were lighted by a flickering red glow. Without taking time to wonder about this weird glow, Flint turned and started running toward the cabins a quarter-mile away. . . .

Outside the pass, the Crazy J waddies saw something that made them lower their hot guns and stare with amazed eyes. A tiny blaze, kindled by a glowing cigarette butt flicked outward by one of the outlaws, had started at the base of one of the walls. Fanned by a strong wind that was blowing through the pass, the blaze began to spread; it began to reach out greedy yellow arms for the dry grass and underbrush.

"Fire!" breathed a cowboy. "Them drunk hombres have started the pass ablazin'!"

A drunken voice yelled across the pass, "Who made that fire over there? We don't need no fire—douse that blaze!"

But it was too late to put out the fire now. With incredible speed the flames spread over the pass. The renegades, suddenly realizing their peril, started cursing and yelling with alarm.

"We got 'em!" Dusty Malone said exultantly. "Unless they come humpin' outa there in just about three minutes, they'll be roasted like rats in an oven."

"Yeah," somebody else said slowly. "And that fire is being' sucked right into the valley. That pass is the only way in or out. Anybody in there wouldn't have a chance. And Sue Pike is in there!"

Shocked silence held the group for a moment. Faces pale and set in the red glow, they watched the flames spread swiftly over the pass and toward the valley inside. . . .

Gantt Vulch's huge body stiffened suddenly. He turned his head, without turning his body, and stared at the man who stood in the doorway.

Sue Pike cried out sharply, a sobbing cry of relief, and collapsed on a rude bunk, staring with unbelieving eyes at Flint Savage. Flint didn't even look at her, didn't take his eyes off Vulch's sinister figure. For now Vulch had whirled, stood half-crouched, tensed for a spring, his dark, rock-like face contorted with fury in the murky light from a kerosene lamp on a rude table.

FLINT said, very softly, "Do it, Vulch—go ahead, do it! You'll live just about as long, either way."

The silky deadliness in Flint's voice, the stark purpose in his smoky eyes, seemed to send a shock through the giant. He straightened, licking his lips.

Deliberately, Flint stepped forward and rammed the muzzle of his gun into Vulch's belly. He lifted the gun that was thrust into the waist-band of Vulch's frayed buckskin trousers, and backed away, placing the table between him and Vulch.

"Vulch, I said once that I'd kill you. Remember?"

Vulch sneered, "Guns make a difference!"

"So does a whiplash," Flint said bleakly. "Ever since you whipped me, Vulch—ever since you had my riders shot down like they were dogs—I've wanted to get my fingers about your filthy throat."

Vulch's huge hands gripped the table edge. "Now you've got the chance, and you ain't got the guts to take it. You talk a lot—for the girl's benefit. You think she's sweet on you, don't you? You think—"

Flint said harshly, "Vulch, you don't deserve to live, any more than a snake. You won't live, because I aim to kill you now!"

Gantt Vulch was a *malo hombre*, but he was afraid to die—and in Flint Savage's eyes he saw ruthless, tearing death. Tiny globules of sweat stood out on his suddenly blanched face.

"Wait," he begged hoarsely. "That—that'd be murder, kid."

Flint spat, "What of it? You murdered my riders. You've robbed and burned and killed too long. If you think prayin' will help your black soul, you'd better start prayin'!"

"The girl ain't been hurt," Vulch whimpered. "Ask her—she'll tell you I ain't bothered her. I'll let you and her go. I'll get you outa this valley. You can't kill me, kid. It don't take no guts to murder a man, not when he ain't got a chance. If I just had a chance, now. . . ."

Suddenly, Flint Savage knew that Vulch was right. He couldn't murder a man in cold blood, not even Gantt Vulch. Suddenly he placed the two guns on the table—his own, and Vulch's.

"All right," he said flatly. "You don't deserve it, but I aim to give you that chance you're whinin' for. Two guns are there on the table. I aim to count three, and then I'm gonna grab one of them guns and start shootin'. You can grab the other one—or stand there like a yella-bellied rat and be shot to pieces!"

Quick, vicious triumph leaped to Gantt Vulch's reddish little eyes. He licked his lips, and rivulets of sweat started running down his dark face. Slowly, his huge fingers uncurled from the table edge.

Sue Pike screamed, "Flint—look out!"

Without waiting for Flint to start the count, Vulch's big body jerked convulsively, and he lunged for the gun nearest him, a split second ahead of Flint Savage.

Vulch took time to raise his gun on

a level with Flint's eyes. Flint fired from the table-top, and the terrific force of the close-range bullet smashed Gantt Vulch half across the room. Briefly, the buckskin-clad giant's moccasined heels beat a tattoo against the floor, then he lay still.

FLINT stood a moment, swaying, the fierce passions ebbing away inside him. Gantt Vulch, scourge of the frontier—dead! It was almost unbelievable.

He felt a soft touch on his arm, and turned. Sue Pike's face was white, strained with the terror of the last few hours. Flint put his arm about her and led her outside.

And there they stopped, appalled at what they saw. A crimson mist seemed to hang over the valley. To the east a blood-red moon hung in the sky; to the south, toward the mouth of the valley, the sky was blotted out by a leaping mass of flames and smoke that rolled up to the towering walls. A surf-like roar beat in their ears, and burning embers fell about them.

Suddenly they realized the truth: The whole southern end of the valley was afire, and the flames were sweeping with incredible speed toward them. In a few minutes the whole valley would be a seething inferno!

Bitterness hammered anew at Flint Savage. They were doomed, and just at the moment when he had tasted the sweet savor of victory. From wall to wall, the valley was carpeted with a thick growth of tinder-like grass and underbrush. Everything between those walls was doomed.

Desperately, Flint's eyes probed about the valley. He'd come down those walls, but they could never be scaled from the bottom. He looked again at the racing fire. A black pall of smoke was billowing upward, and from the smoke lurid tongues of flame

licked upward.

Suddenly, as Flint watched, a horse and rider darted from that boiling mass and raced toward the cabins. The rider, a wiry oldster with a scorched beard and his buckskins burned half from his body, dragged his mount to a halt and tumbled to the ground.

The little man started toward the big cabin, yelling, "Vulch! Vulch! Hell's to pay—"

Flint's gun was in hand. He rapped, "Vulch is dead—just like you'll be, if you don't stand hitched!"

The wiry renegade stopped, stared at Flint Savage and the girl, and spat. Then Flint saw that the man had no gun.

"What's happened out there?" Flint asked.

The oldster cursed tonelessly, plucking at his singed beard. "Them drunken lice set fire to the pass;" he said bitterly. "Then there wasn't nothin' we could do, except lay down our guns and surrender to Adam Pike's waddies—or head back through the fire. Some of the boys, includin' me, done that, hopin' to get back here and crawl into the cave. But I was the only one to make it."

Flint asked quickly, "Cave? You

know where there's a cave?"

"Ain't that what I just said?" The little outlaw turned and started running with a limping, crab-like gait along the base of the walls. Flint seized the girl's arm and they followed, for already the heat was beating at their faces like the breath from a furnace.

THE oldster stopped, started clambering up a section of the wall where it was broken and slanting. Flint and the girl followed, and after a fifty-foot climb they came to an out-jutting ledge. And there before them they saw a ragged black hole, the mouth of a cavern that led back into the cliffs.

They stood a moment, looking at the advancing wall of flames.

The fire-scorched oldster grinned, and said, "A gent what was born to hang won't ever burn. Me, I allus wondered did a rope scratch!" He turned and went into the cave.

After a moment, Flint and the girl followed. Flint's arm was about Sue Pike's slim waist as they went into the cool, velvety shadows. And in that instant Flint Savage knew that, with this slender, dark-eyed girl beside him, he was entering upon a new world—a bright, happy world of peace.

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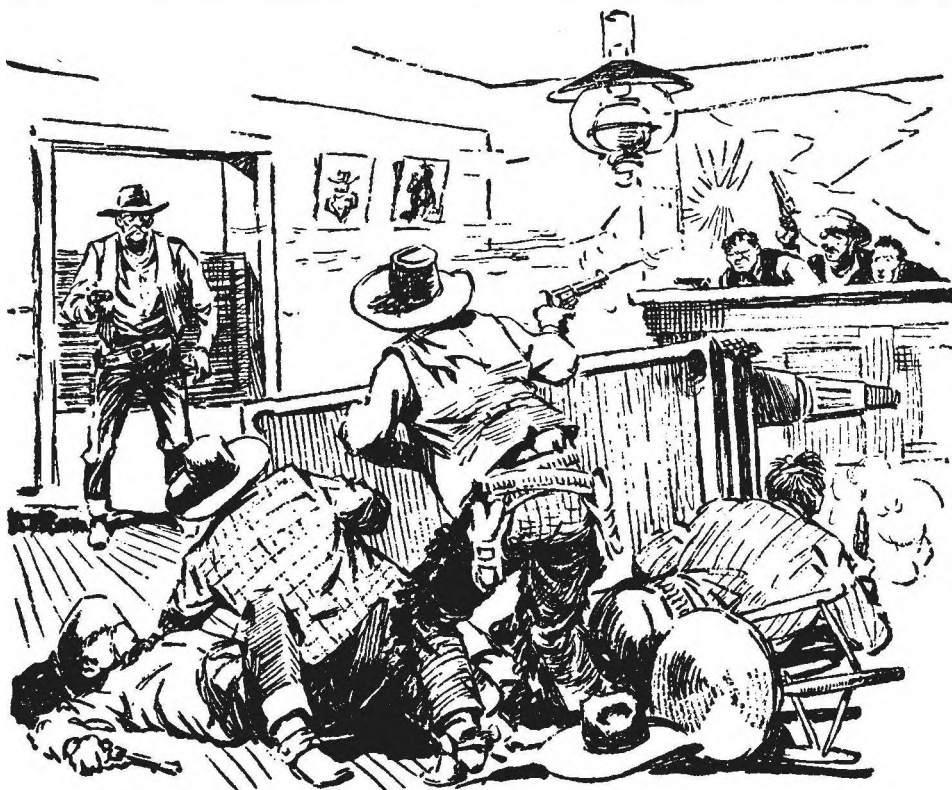
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BULLET-BRANDED, COULD THE KID YET BUY BACK HIS FREEDOM WITH BUSHWHACK BULLETS? — DRAMATIC NOVELETTE OF THE DIM TRAILS!

Fugitive From the Wolf-Pack

By JOHN CODY

Had these shifty-eyed, trigger-fast hombres become Kirk Bridges' saddlepards then for life—or could he yet fight back through hell to home range behind killer Colts?



Their shots thundered together in the dead silence of the saloon!

CHAPTER I

CONDEMNED TO THE OWLHOOT

A CRESCENT moon rode low above the tall scarps of the Tecumari Mountains. Stunted pinon and cedar were notched against the star-spangled blue of the New Mexico sky. It was a warm spring night, like many on which young Kirk Bridges had ridden the Perdition ranges with

Henrietta Carter by his side.

But all that seemed a long time ago to Kirk. Now he sat like a graven image studying the ebb and flow of the camp-fire, victim of rampant thoughts and memories that plunged his whole being. Involuntarily his pale, troubled eyes lifted from the flames to rove somberly over the assemblage gathered about the blaze.

He realized abruptly just how much of a misfit he was here, one of an even dozen of shifty-eyed, tied-hard hom-

bres whose collective head bounty would have made a man rich. But there was little he could do about it now, except think of what might have been in the past. His fine lips were compressed into a thin line of bitterness as absently he listened to the muttered cascade of conversation about him.

He was not like any of the gunsters lounging about the fire, despite the twin, long-barrelled Colts snugging his lithe thighs. For the brand of the owl-hoot was stamped indelibly on each and every beard-stubbed face but his. He knew them as Strake Marlin's boys, wanted singly and collectively by the law the length and breadth of New Mexico and Arizona. A hangnoose awaited each the moment he was captured.

Kirk's mobile mouth quirked sardonically as he remembered that he wasn't one of this renegade band of killers, but the same hangnoose medicine awaited him if he ever returned to the Perdition range. And during this last half hour of silent counsel with himself, he had decided to do that very thing. . . .

For perhaps the hundredth time in the past month he had been reviewing the chain of circumstances that had brought him to this outlaw hideout in the Tecumari's for protection. His left shoulder was still a little stiff from the lawdog lead that might have cost him his life had not an out-rider guard of Marlin's found him in time to stop his delirium from fever and loss of blood. For that he was grateful, but now he was recovered and determined to go back. His pale eyes, tawny in the light of the flames, glowed at the thought and then darkened again at the pain memories had awakened within him.

ONCE more he relived the night he was sleeping at a line-camp near the quick-sand pits of the Rio Concho on the Perdition when a shot brought

him tumbling from his soogans. Fumbling into his boots he had caught his pony and saddled it in the darkness. A quarter mile down the bosque of the river a few minutes later he had discovered a riderless horse standing over a huddled figure.

Flinging himself from his saddle he discovered the man to be his brother, Bell, lying in a spreading pool of crimson that trickled clear to the water's edge. His saddlebags had been plundered of ten thousand in gold and currency, sale money for a herd just disposed of in Las Vegas. But at that moment he had grief-drenched eyes only for his brother. Bell was desperately wounded and Kirk saw at once that he could never live through a ride to town on horseback. So he rode his mount into the ground to reach Chaperitos and Dr. Shires. Quickly reporting the shooting and robbery to Sheriff Rome Wicks, both had followed the doctor to the scene.

Then had begun all this trouble for Kirk. A stimulant brought Bell back to consciousness for a brief moment and Kirk knew he would remember to his dying day the horror of hearing his brother's only words: "Kirk shot me," Bell wheezed. "My own brother gunned me for the cattle money. . . ."

And he fainted. Stunned emotionless by the sudden tragedy, Kirk had helped the sheriff lift him into the doctor's buckboard. The medico headed into town and Kirk remained with the lawman, too numbed to even think. Then he took Wicks to the line camp to prove he had been there asleep when the shot awakened him. He remembered lighting a candle and staring with surprise-stricken eyes at his own saddlebags half-hidden beneath the rough table in the shack, crammed with gold and greenbacks. Someone had framed him!

To the stolid Rome Wicks it was proof of Kirk's guilt and before the

young puncher could recover from his shock he swung to the sound of the sheriff's gun snapping to full cock. Sweat mounted on his brows now as he remembered smashing bodily into the lawman and taking lead in the shoulder before reaching his mount outside. The rest was a nightmare of hard riding, of agony; of circling across tumbled swales to the Perdition ranch. In quick, painful phrases he told his mother of Bell's mistake in identity, of the cruel method with which someone had framed him.

Dry-eyed at this sudden double trouble she had in turn given him Doctor Shires' report. Bell might live, but he would be paralyzed for life from the waist down.

His lips colorless from his own agony, Kirk kissed his mother and whispered to her his intentions of seeking sanctuary in the Tecumaris.

All these things and many more passed through his mind as he sat before the fire of Strake Marlin and his long-riders. He realized that now after a month in hiding he was no closer to the solution of Bell's shooting than the night it had happened. Again he found himself wondering why Bell had named him as his would-be assassin and why the guilty person or persons had left the money in the line shack. He found no answer. But it was galling and now that he was able to handle his guns again and ride without that awful agony in his shoulder, he was steadfastly determined to solve the mysteries. He felt he owed it not only to himself, but to his mother and Bell . . . and Henrietta Carter . . . to devote his every breath from here on out to clearing the stigma upon him and to avenge the ruthless gunning of his kin.

FROM the shadowy depths of the canyon behind the campfire came the jingle of bridle chains and the rest-

less stomp of saddled mounts. The sound broke Kirk's silent counsel. He looked up at the outlaw nearest to him and asked: "What's up, Steve?"

The swart-faced renegade chuckled. "Ain't you heard, Bridges? We're takin' the bank over in Las Vegas in the mornin'."

"We?" Kirk came to his feet, his eyes shuttling over the faces of the men about him. He felt the impact of their intense looks upon him and sensed a change in their attitudes. They seemed stern and unfriendly now and suspicion was plain on their stubbled faces.

Strake Marlin strode out of the shadows. Kirk involuntarily dropped into a half crouch as he saw the obsidian-eyed leader of this wolf-pack sway to a halt in front of him, a belligerent cast to his blue-black jowls. His heavy hands brushed the guns at his massive hips.

"You heard him, Bridges," he smirked. "*We* means *all* of us."

A shaky little laugh surged from Kirk's throat. He silently condemned himself for not realizing that after having accepted this gang's hospitality and protection, they would sooner or later make certain demands upon him. This was it. He decided abruptly if he ever got out of this camp alive, it would have to be through gunsmoke. Strake Marlin ruled his hard-eyed band with an iron hand and those who disobeyed him found soon graves.

Kirk straightened, but his right hand hovered near his gun-heel. "That's takin' in a lot of territory, Marlin," he gave back tightly. "I'm mighty grateful for what you an' your men did for me, nursin' me back to health, feedin' me an' all that. But I ain't blind enough not to see your game here. You want a *front man* to cover your raid on the Las Vegas bank . . . a dead man to leave behind as a sort of peace offerin' to the law. Well, I ain't your huckle-

berry, Strake. I'm leavin' for Perdition to do some chores uh my own."

"That's what you think," clipped Marlin. "Either you go with us or dig your own grave right here!"

He took a menacing step forward and then out of the night a woman's scream halted the play, coming from somewhere in the canyon. "Kirk . . .!" the voice cried. "You're surrounded! Give up before they kill you!"

For the fraction of a second the camp was motionless. Only Kirk new the voice of Henrietta Carter, and then another he recognized as Sheriff Rome Wicks sheered the crackle of the fire. "Don't none of you touch iron or we start shootin'. Every one uh you is covered! Drop yore gunbelts easy like an' reach for the sky . . . pronto!"

It sent Kirk's blood hammering to realize Henrietta Carter had thought only of his safety, but before he could speculate on her presence, Strake Marlin went into action. His eyes burned on Kirk and his gun, already drawn, arced up. "You dirty double-crosser!" he snarled. "You put a finger on us for Wicks! Take it, damn yuh. . . ."

Gunflame lanced at Kirk. But he had been expecting it. A wild leap sideways was all that saved him from the promised grave. He felt the tug of Marlin's slug through his sleeve. Hot anger flooded him. All sense of obligation to this gang that had befriended him was gone now. It was every man for himself.

CHAPTER II

DELAYED MESSAGE

HELL broke loose in the renegade camp in answer to that spiteful shot from Strake Marlin's gun. The outlaws made a mad scramble for safety, but Wicks' posse had already

cut loose from the surrounding brush. Lead poured hotly into the camp and the echoes thundered back and forth across the canyon as Kirk threw caution to the winds in a wild effort to escape. For he knew once captured by Wicks, his chances of clearing himself would be nil. He glanced over his shoulder as he ran toward the saddled mounts. The carnage in the camp struck chill to his spine. It was slaughter, and the possemen were intent upon saving the law the expense of trying him, too. Lead whined perilously close to him as he ran.

Then the huddled shapes of the mounts confronted him, tended by the gang's old hostler. Kirk caught the glint of gun metal in his hand. "You ain't leavin' here alive, cowhand," the man spat. "Strake's orders to gun you if you made a break. Here it is, feller."

In full stride Kirk smashed out with one gun. The man went down as if pole-axed. Kirk leaped over his writhing form. He caught the shimmer of silver bridle chains and knew it was on Strake Marlin's black gelding. The outlaw leader rode the best horse of the bunch.

Kirk chose it and swung to the saddle. He flung one glance back at the firelit circle. Sprawled figures that would never move again, cast grotesque shadows against the ground. The end of Marlin's wolf-pack was at hand. Marlin himself had set off the debacle by his insane urge to kill the refugee from Perdition. Had he played his cards differently, most of them might have slipped back into the shadows, to saddle the mounts waiting here. Some at least, would have gotten away, Kirk reasoned. He whirled the black and pelted back into the draw.

He knew the location of the trail in the dark, and guided the gelding into it. The animal lurched under him, taking the rough way like a mountain

goat. Kirk gave the black its head on the perilous trail. His own thoughts were treadmilling on the wheel of conjecture. In his ears still rang Henrietta Carter's frenzied scream. The abrupt manner in which it had been cut off could mean only one thing. She herself was a prisoner of Wicks and his possemen.

Rage surged through him. If Wicks hurt the girl, he would make the sheriff pay for it, though it meant the owlhoot for life. His thoughts ran on, analyzing the surprise event that had saved him from a showdown battle with Marlin. If the girl was a prisoner of Rome Wicks, it made sense to Kirk to presuppose that she had been the first to find the trail here. The Sheriff had followed her from Chaperitos, captured her, and brought her along.

But why had she been so far off the home range? Had she come into the mountains to try and locate him? It seemed the only logical answer.

The hooves of his mount scrambled on smooth stone, then caught and held. Nothing but dark depths loomed on his left. He was but a hand away from eternity in that moment. Then his eyes tipped up to the jagged scarps above as the animal took the last stretch of the ladder-like trail. Kirk leaned forward and patted the black's straining withers. It was a good mount, but he felt sure that it would have to see him through plenty before the night was out.

As they crested the trail Kirk reined in for a moment to give the animal a blow.

He stared down at the distant ring of light where new wood had been thrown on the outlaw fire. Figures fore-shortened by distance to the size of ants darted about the blaze. Those would be the possemen, identifying wanted owlhooters so they could claim the blood money posted by various counties.

KIRK studied the distant men for a thoughtful moment, then with the quick definiteness that characterized all his decisions, he girmed his mount to life. He rode along the slanting trail that led down the flank of the mountain. His tawny eyes flared as he figured he had just about enough time to dip down to the canyon before the posse finished its task. For somehow he had to reach the side of Henrietta and hear the message she had come to deliver. Nothing else could have brought her into these mountain fastnesses. He remembered that on leaving the home ranch he had told his mother that he would hole up in the Tucumcari Mountains. With no other clue than that, Ada Bridges had evidently started the girl out to find him.

Kirk knew that only something of dread magnitude could have made his mother risk it, for Ada Bridges was emigrant born and bred—capable of handling most emergencies herself. She had come into this country when by her own words, "Chaperitos was nothing but a sod shanty and three buffalo hides." She had stood shoulder to shoulder with her husband fighting off renegade Apaches. A self-sufficient woman, she had held the north range of rich Perdition Valley single-handed after her husband had died of *cholera morbus* from eating bear grease, kept over-long in a copper kettle.

A picture of his mother, whom Kirk loved next to life, crossed his mind. Tall, gaunted by toil, she yet could smile at life and its problems. Remorse whiped through Kirk at thought of their plans, so hopefully made not many days before disaster had struck.

The sale of the herd driven to Las Vegas would have paid off the last four thousand dollars of money borrowed from Ross Wood, saloon-keeper in Chaperitos, and political power of Roma county. It would have given

them a cash balance, plus the remaining stock, fattening on rich Perdition range. But that picture of a comfortable future had vanished with the impact of bushwhack lead. Stubbornly Kirk vowed that he would bring that picture into focus again.

On the lower slope of the canyon wall he tethered the black to a pinion pine. Moving cautiously from stone to stone he reached the bosque of Boulder Creek. He paused, listening. No sound but the chuckling of the stream came to his ears.

Was he too late? Had the posse already gone back down the mountain? Abandoning caution, Kirk began to run up the dark trail, slipping, stumbling along the stony path. The sound of the stream covered his approach, but he was past caring.

He had the premonition that more disaster had come to haunt Perdition range. If his guess was right, the odds were stacked high against him. A crippled brother condemned to life in a wheel chair could do little to help his emigrant mother—or a brother he himself had condemned to a hang-noose fate.

The trail, Kirk knew, flattened out just ahead of him to a small, narrow level rimmed by skunk brush and aspen. If he wasn't too late, he would find Henrietta Carter and whoever had been left to guard her, there.

Slowly now, on hands and knees, he inched up the last of the steep trail, and lifted his head over the edge. An electric shock of elation winged through him at what he saw.

To combat the chill of the night, now that the one-sided battle was over, the cavvy-man had built a small blaze. By its light Kirk saw the huddled shape of Henrietta to one side of the fire. She sat on a rock, head bowed disconsolately. He saw her shoulders shaking with uncontrolled sobs.

The guard stood with his back to

Kirk Bridges, warming his hands over the blaze. He was badgering the girl with incessant questions.

"Why for did yuh say you come here? How come ye knew thet bushwhackin' son of a Bridges was here? Huh? What were ye agoin' tuh tell him—?"

KIRK went over the lips of the rise like a springing catamount. The guard turned at the sound of Kirk's boots scraping on stone. His hand forked back toward his hip, then froze just above the butt of his gun. His watery eyes widened, clung to the twin muzzles centered on his middle. Then slowly his gaze lifted to the grim face of the youngster.

"Loosen your gun belt, and let it fall," Kirk ordered. "Give out a yip to warn those above and I'll chop you wide open. It's what you deserve anyway, for tormentin' a woman—"

Henrietta Carter lifted her face. She looked like a slender, wide-eyed boy in Levis and flannel shirt. "Kirk!" she exclaimed. "Oh my God, I thought you were dead with those others—"

"Hold everything, Etta," Kirk told her softly, "until we get this sidewinder tied up and gagged."

She came close to him, and the intoxicating nearness of her small body made him remember for a moment nights beneath the stars, when hand in hand, they had spoken of the future together. Nights they had planned for the time when the whole north range of Perdition Valley would be under one brand, a spread united by their marriage. Kirk wondered now, dismally, if that day would ever come. In view of the past, and the unpredictable future, it did not seem possible. He was doomed to follow the dark trails unless he found the man who had shot his brother. Then he put those somber thoughts behind him, and concentrated on the business at hand.

He gave the girl one of his guns, and holstered the other. "If this varmint moves, give it to him," Kirk ordered. He strode up to the bleary-eyed guard, and kicked the man's gunbelt a safe distance away. "Take off your neckerchief and re'glar belt," Kirk ordered.

Hate speared out at him from the cavvy-man's eyes. "You'll hang fer this, mister, an' I hope I hold the rope!"

Kirk shrugged. "I always like to go whole hog," he drawled. "Move pronto, Skeeter. Get those things off. Think of the story you'll have to tell around Wood's saloon when you get back to Chaperitos."

He took the man's belt and lashed his hands behind his back. Skillfully he knotted the fellow's dirty bandanna between his teeth. Then he prodded the guard toward the brush. Kirk made him lie down, and with his own bandanna, he tied the man's ankles together.

"That'll hold you long enough to suit me," he told the guard, and turned back toward the fire.

At sight of him emerging from the brush the girl rushed forward. He took his gun from her and holstered it, then hungrily his arms went about her square little shoulders. He held her thus, pressed close to his wide chest. He bowed his face into the soft mass of her dark hair, and for a moment neither of them spoke.

Then the girl pushed back from him. Her eyes rose to search his face. "Oh Kirk," she whispered, "I was so afraid for you. Your mother told me you were somewhere here in the hills. She didn't want me to try and find you—but somebody had to come! Then just as I stumbled on the trail Sheriff Wicks and a posse galloped up. The Sheriff admitted having followed me—he thought I was coming to find you.

"Kirk," her breath caught in her throat, "if you go back home he'll track

you down like he would a mad dog. And yet you've got to come back to save Perdition—"

"Now ain't this a touching scene!" said Sheriff Rome Wicks.

CHAPTER III

AN OWLHOOTER RETURNS TO WAR

KIRK'S head tipped up. Ears attuned only to the girl's words, he had not heard the cat-footed approach of the sheriff and others of his posse. Now four of them were on the edge of the clearing opposite him, light from the small fire glinting on their drawn weapons. For an instant Kirk stood turned to stone as the men came farther into the open.

Against flickering lights and shadows he got a look at the advancing quartette. Sheriff Rome Wicks was in the lead, a heavy-set man with a smile of good fellowship always on his face. The townspeople of Chaperitos considered him a good lawman, Kirk knew, except that most agreed he was a mite hasty on the trigger. For his prisoners usually came in under a diamond hitch, on the back of a pack mule.

Siding him on either flank were his deputies, Chet Ragsdale, and Clyde Bowen. The former was the most dangerous of the three, Kirk felt, as he analyzed his chances of breaking free of this trap. Spots of high color blazed in Ragsdale's cheeks. The man was splinter-thin, a pale-eyed, reckless killer, doomed himself to death as a consumptive. He killed from behind the protection of the lawman's badge he wore.

On the other side of the sheriff was Clyde Bowen, impassive of face as a good gambler. And that was the garb he wore—the Prince Albert and white stock of a man of the tables. He was

the unknown equation in that foursome.

The last member of the quartette loomed behind the three lawmen, taller than any of them, a giant in a land of big men. Kirk's eyes flitted over him. It was to Ross Wood that his mother owed the four thousand dollars on Perdition ranch. But the herd money had been recovered, and that debt squared now. To take care of it couldn't be the reason he was needed so urgently in Perdition.

Kirk felt the girl's finger nails biting through the thin material of his shirt. "What will you do?" she breathed.

It was something he didn't know himself. Yet Perdition called him—an invalid brother, and a mother who faced life with a smile. He had to get to them—

Inwardly he cursed the advent of these men who had cut short the girl's tale. Thirty seconds more might have given him the answer. But now Kirk knew definitely that it would never be forthcoming if he submitted to capture here. He saw that in the eyes of the quartette. If they took him, his return to Perdition would be under a diamond hitch.

Inexorably they were drawing nearer to him, guns poised.

Kirk had to consider the girl close beside him. If lead started to fly she might stop some of it. Grimly then he stepped forward, sheltering her by his breadth. "I guess I'm yours Rome," he said submissively. "But I sure hate the thought of going in aboard a pack-horse!"

Wicks small eyes darted to the side. Kirk saw that his guess had hit home, and in that instant knew he had nothing to lose. He took another step forward dragging his guns as his feet moved. The value of the footwork was a trick he had learned in Santa Fe. The eyes of the three lawmen were involuntarily on his boots. But as their gaze rose

they looked down the twin muzzles of the refugee's Colts.

"I'll take all of you as you stand," Kirk droned, "if you don't drop those cutters. Drop 'em!"

TENSION crawled in the clearing. It tightened Kirk Bridges' throat muscles and made his voice harsh when he spoke again. "Wicks, I don't know why you're so powerful anxious to pin a bushwhackin' on me. True, my brother said I'd done it, and true we found the saddle-bags with the money in the shack where I'd been sleeping. I took you there, but you don't think I'd have been fool enough to do that if I'd left the money on that table. It means somebody framed me, Wicks. I've been laying up here, gettin' well from the lead you were so danged anxious to sling at me. Seems now that you were a little too anxious!"

Kirk flung a challenge in the teeth of the quartette as he backed slowly toward the down canyon trail. "I'm goin' back to Perdition, Wicks, to find out why you're so hell-fired desirous to see me dead. Mebbe it's because you know the bushwhacker who crippled Bell, and mebbe you know why he done it. I'm goin' to find out—"

Boots of the other possemen were scraping on the trail from the draw above.

Kirk kept backing away, his steady weapons holding the quartette in their place. His eyes roved hungrily for an instant to the girl he had to leave behind. Pain jerked at his heart-strings.

He wondered involuntarily if he would ever see her again.

"Adios!" he drawled at the Sheriff. "I'll see you in Chaparitos!"

Kirk turned then, and began to run. Excited curses rolled after him as the quartette scrambled for their dropped weapons.

Bullets began to search him out, but in the dark only a lucky shot could fell him. Grimly Kirk figured that now it was his time to have a little luck.

He came to the turn-off that led up he rocky side of he canyon to where he had tethered the black gelding. He slipped from boulder to boulder climbing toward the scarps notched against the sky.

Kirk squatted behind the pinion pine to which he had tethered his mount and twirled a cigarette. He held his position there and smoked it, gathering his impressions by sound alone. Horses were pounding down Boulder Canyon. A steady stream of sound rolled up to him, but words spoken down there were garbled by the thudding of hooves so that he could make no sense to them. After a short time the sounds drifted away.

Stiff with cold, he mounted the black, and picked a way down the slant ridge to the edge of the valley. Behind him the mountains loomed huge against the sky.

Ahead stretched the rolling swales of Perdition valley, and the thread of the Rio Concho. Far off to the right almost at the foot of the mountains he could see a glittering point of light. It was the home ranch of the Barker Brothers Cattle Company. They owned this south range.

Again pointing to the right, but far ahead he could make out the clustered lights of Chaperitos, like a group of stars fallen from overhead. The little cattle town was on the dividing line of the south and north range.

Kirk's face hardened as he stared at the distant lights of the town. Some man in that town had hidden at the crossing of the Rio Concho and gunned down Bell Bridges. Kirk knew it was up to him to name the party—and pay him out in gunsmoke.

CHAPTER IV

THUNDER ON THE CONCHO

FEAR rode with the refugee from Perdition as he trailed north along the winding bosque of the Rio Concho. It was not fear for himself that Kirk felt. He was willing to take his chances in the hide and seek duel that would inevitably result from his challenge to the sheriff. That move had been planned as he had made it. He figured now as he had then that his challenge would force into action the guilty man or men who had bush-whacked his brother.

They wanted something, Kirk reasoned—the end of the Bridges clan, perhaps. The acquisition of Perdition range. And they were in a fair way of getting it! A crippled brother, a fugitive, and a lone woman was small strength to pit against odds that were shadowed in mystery. If only he had had opportunity to hear out Henrietta Carter, some defense might be planned. But there was no use thinking about that now, Kirk realized.

Two hours passed swiftly and he was nearing the Concho crossing on the regular Chaperitos-Las Vegas trail. Kirk turned off into the brush and tethered his mount on high ground. Enough time had elapsed, he judged, for the sheriff's posse to have returned to Chaperitos and spread north into this territory. Their direct route against his winding one in the bed of the river would give them at least a half hour edge.

The thought made him cautious as he stole down to the river crossing, and reconnoitered from the cover of the willows edging the stream. The sand gleamed whitely. He searched it for the imprint of fresh tracks, but saw none. He moved into the open, conscious that

he could expect nothing but flaming guns to greet him if he was mistaken.

Only the silence of the night and the drowsy murmur of the stream answered his move. Memories awoke in Kirk that made him close his eyes for a moment. He could picture the guarding shape of Bell's mount, standing over a huddle of manhood that was shattered now forever. It was an end worse than death for a man who had been active all of his life.

Kirk held nothing against his brother for the fact that by his own words he had condemned him to the owlhoot. It was his only clue, in fact, as to the identity of the bushwhacker. It meant that Bell had seen the man who had shot him, and that he resembled the refugee.

Kirk walked to the exact spot where Bell had fallen. Carefully from this position he scanned the bank in both directions, seeking the covert where the ambusher had lain. The shot, Kirk remembered, had come from a Colt. It had been moonlight, and fire from any distance would have been erratic. Yet one bullet had done the trick. Bell had fallen to the left, the force of the slug throwing him that way. Grimly Kirk paced in a direct line to the nearest clump of willows on the right.

He was playing a part that he had rehearsed while in the mountains. Excitement was in his blood now. He had planned it so often, and waited so long for the chance of execution, that he knew he couldn't be wrong. Delving carefully into the copse he found where some of the tender willow sprouts had been bent and broken. There the bushwhacker had lain. But to shoot down his brother the man had had to step from cover. That was when Bell had seen him.

Without much hope of accomplishing anything further here, Kirk started a careful search of the ground. Vague

moonlight mottled the sand underfoot. He made out the shapeless imprint of heels where the man had squatted. Then something half-buried by a moving foot caught his sharp eyes.

KIRK reached for it and as he did so a sullen sound came rolling down the bosque of the Rio Concho. For an instant he froze in mid-motion, then he scooped the bit of metal out of the sand.

Without examining his find he jerked erect, and broke from the copse. He was half way to his mount before he opened his clenched fist. In his palm lay a silver dollar. The center of it was dented, scarred by lead. At sometime, he realized grimly, that silver piece had saved its owner from possible death. Now it might condemn him.

The shape of the rising hills rolling away on either side of the stream made the bosque of the Rio Concho a funnel that picked up and magnified sound. That sullen roar which had Kirk on the run came tumbling down to him from upstream. It was the noise of a herd in motion—stampeding!

The black snorted as he made its side, and jerked the tie-rope free. Kirk swung into the kak, raked the horse to action. He tumbled down the slant, crossed the Las Vegas trail at a high lope. He headed into a scattered patch of timber that covered a few acres of their range at this point. The masking growth hid view of what lay beyond.

But Kirk needed no sight to picture the scene there. He had seen it often enough. For on the other side of the grove the river widened for a space. Sloping, grassy banks led down to sand which looked solid but wasn't. His heart thudded against the walls of his chest as he thought of it. By the sound, that herd was headed straight for those quicksand pits, those pits of perdition as his mother called them.

Every year they had lost stock in them until recently he had fenced off the stretch of no man's land with stout poles and heavy barb wire. He had been patching that fence on the day before the night his brother had been ambushed. Thought of that fence which he himself had made stout eased his torment a little. If the leaders of the stampeding herd were not too wild-eyed with fear they might shy off from the pronged wire, start to circle and mill.

Kirk ducked low to avoid a hanging branch, patted the withers of his racing mount. The animal moved with a quick-footed grace, avoiding tangling brush with the skill of a good cutting horse. The gelding seemed to realize what was wanted of it. Kirk tossed the reins on the black's neck, guiding it by pressure of his knees alone. They were nearing the edge of the timber now. He drew both guns. His face felt stiff as raw-hide left too long in the sun.

The noise of the stampeding cattle was loud in his ears. Grimly he made up his mind that he was going to turn that herd from the quicksand pits or go down with them. It was a long chance he was taking and he knew it. Suddenly Kirk wondered what had started the stampede. Weather conditions were good. The feed on the range ample. Yet something had brought the bedded herd to its feet, sent it charging down toward the quicksand pits.

A branch whipped Kirk's hat from his head, then they were in the open. A lock of his golden blond hair fell across his forehead, and he shoved it back. His tawny eyes widened at what he saw, then he lifted his mount to greater effort with a high-pitched yell. The black strained under him, picked up speed.

POURING down from the low hill came a hundred or more steers.

The thundering of their hooves seemed to shake the ground. Fine dust rose from chopped grass-roots. The leaders, as Kirk had suspected, were heading straight for the shimmering pits of death.

He cast one glance in that direction, and a surprised curse came from his lips. Where only a month before six strands of barbed steel had barred off the pits nothing remained now but tangled strands curled and snarled about the posts. Wire-cutters and cutters only had done that. Ruthless hands had opened the quicksand pits again.

It was almost too much to believe. A hard laugh slid between his teeth. "I guess it don't pay to go away—" Kirk muttered.

He was able, with a macabre touch of the sardonic, to see that at last true perdition was about to descend on Perdition range. Suddenly he wondered if it was word of this that Henrietta Carter had been bringing to him in the mountains?

Close to his ear through all the lifting thunder of the nearing herd, he heard another spiteful sound and involuntarily ducked. It was like tearing paper—the unmistakable song of lead. Then vaguely he heard the muffled whip-crack of the Winchester from somewhere behind the herd.

It was so like an anti-climax to the wall-eyed death already rushing toward him that Kirk threw back his head and laughed. A skeleton hand seemed to be reaching for his last stack of chips, as he urged his mount straight across the face of the charging herd.

He emptied one gun to no avail, and the nape of his neck crawled. Deliberately then he aimed at a blaze-faced steer, shot it through the head. He downed another and another, and saw the herd split off at a tangent rather than pound across their own kind.

Kirk rode with one wing of the herd

stuffing fresh shells into his guns. The cattle acted as a living bulwark for him, sheltering him from the death that rode behind the herd. That one spiteful messenger had been enough to warn him. He knew now how the stampede had been started. Punchers, shooting and waving slickers, had startled the herd into movement. They had gathered momentum like a landslide, but now that he had split them he felt pretty certain they would be safe at least for the night. Too tired to run they would turn to grazing and sleep.

But there would be no sleep for him, of that Kirk was certain. For whoever had been hazing that herd on to destruction had seen him, and would be on his trail as soon as they could pick it up.

Kirk's fingers clutched the silver piece in his pocket, as still running his mount he cut ahead of this half of the herd and ducked into a slanting gulley that curled back into the hills.

This draw would lead him across country to Perdition ranch, and it was there that he intended to go. Safety lay no place on the range for him, and come morning, possemen would be scouring every nook and corner of the hills. Darkness was his only refuge. He was going to have to make the most of the black hours before dawn. This realization furrowed his high brow, but with it was the wicked comfort that he had already made progress—plenty of it.

For that one snipping shot had told him that Sheriff Rome Wicks or one of his possemen was mixed up with the night-riders. They had brought back word of his returning, and it had loosed the dogs of war.

KIRK hitched his twin belts higher on his lean hips. He tried to forget that he was one man battling the law and mysterious raiders. The only thing he let himself remember now was

a brave-faced emigrant mother, and a brother that would never sit a saddle again. Perdition range was theirs and his.

"And we'll keep it, come hell—" Kirk gritted.

He came out cautiously on a low shelf directly behind the sprawling ranch house stretched below in a little bowl of encircling hills. Giant cottonwoods towered over the house and beyond them were the corrals and barns.

Kirk stared down at the house and a warm glow washed over him. It was good to see home again. Then he noticed that light was behind none of the windows. No sound but the wild, mournful keening of a coyote came to break the death hush that hung over the premises.

CHAPTER V

COLT HUNGRY

SOMETHING was wrong down there—damned wrong. He picked out one window that he had never seen dark since he could remember. Behind that pane of glass his mother had burnt a lamp every night since his father had died.

"It keeps his memory fresh in my heart, Kirk," she had told him many times. "He seemed to move in light when he was alive, and that is how I like best to remember him!"

Kirk gighed his mount down a short steep trail that led to the bowl. He couldn't take his eyes from that lightless window. He felt a tear against his cheek, and was not ashamed. He tethered his mount to a corner of the porch, for there was no sign of anyone here.

White against the dark wood of the main door that led in from this front verandah was a square of paper. In three long strides he was to it, scratch-

ing a match to flame on his Levis. The words of that notice blurred in front of his eyes.

He read only: Eviction notice. "Until said claim is rendered to Ross Woods in the amount of four thousand dollars—"

From inside the house a hoarse voice grumbled. "Who's comin' out there—? Who—?"

Kirk whirled and made the edge of the porch in a long leap. He smashed one shot into the thick adobe wall beside the door, and forked leather. The fellow inside the house was cursing, but Kirk knew he wouldn't come out until he had plenty of time to get away.

Now he headed across the open, past the barns, and into a trail that led toward a notch in the hills. He felt numb all over, like a man succumbing to a blow. Automatically he pointed his mount into this north trail. The Carter spread lay three miles away across the hills. His heart warmed for a moment at thought of again seeing Henrietta's father, War-horse Carter, by his own admission. The grizzled oldster was a holdover from the days of the buffalo hunters. Leathery-cheeked, and snaggle-toothed he was still clean of limb, and with his old frontier model Colts he could shoot a fly off a wall at ten paces.

Carter, Kirk kept telling himself, would know what had happened to his mother and invalid brother. It was of his mother he thought first. How would she take the shock of being turned out of the home she had helped build with her own hands? It might be too much for her. Kirk gritted his teeth in helpless rage.

But there was one grim consolation in what he had found at their ranch. That eviction order was another link in the chain of guilt he was forging. Yet it brought one burning question. Why hadn't his mother paid that debt to

Woods? The herd money had been recovered—

It was midnight by the stars when he reached the Carter spread. He saw the lights in the ranch house glowing from a distance and the sight cheered him more than anything had in a long time. He rode up the lane of cottonwoods that led to the house and the front door swung open promptly at the sound of his approach. It was as though someone here had been waiting for him.

Henry War-horse Carter, stood framed in the portal and his first words confirmed the refugee's surmise. "Tarnation hell, but it took ye long enough tuh git here. Light an' come in, son. Have ye got any nicks that need patchin' or did ye git through the varmints clean?"

KIRK smiled at the friendly, homely greeting, and swung down. "Clean," he admitted. His muscles ached with weariness but he paid them no heed. He climbed to the porch and took the grizzled oldster's hand.

"Mom? Bell?" he asked. "Are they here, Hank?"

"Sartainly," Carter responded. "You think I'd let 'em go anywhere else? Yore troubles are mine, and mine's yores. Looks like some of the varmints in this here territory has done taken the bit in their teeth and gone hog wild. But come in. Here I stand jawin' ye, and I know yuh want tuh see yore folks." His sharp blue eyes began to twinkle. "We got a leetle surprise inside for you—"

Kirk thought he was referring to the return of Henrietta from the sheriff's wipe-out foray into the Tucumcari mountains. He was not prepared for the sight that greeted him as he turned from the hall into the long main room of the house.

For a tall man with the same high forehead and tawny eyes lifted himself

carefully from a deep chair and stood there, a smile on his face.

"Bell!" Kirk exclaimed. For a moment all of the hell he had lived through since lifting his brother's wounded body into the doctor's spring wagon vanished. Joy that was as good as water to a thirsty man flooded through him. He rushed forward, then halted and gingerly stretched out his hand. "I'm not dreaming, am I Bell?"

They shook hands heartily. "Kid," Bell said brokenly, "can you ever forgive me for what I've done to you? I must have been out of my head to tell Wicks you were the man who shot me."

"Sit down," Kirk said, "and take it easy, fella. How come you're on your feet anyway?"

"The sawbones was either drunk or crazy," Bell grinned. "He changed his tune the next day. Shock was all that paralyzed me. When my nerves came out of it, I could move. I'm most well now, but I won't be riding range again for a long time." His face darkened. "But I guess none of us will be ridin' Perdition—"

Those words brought everything into grim focus again. Kirk reached in his pants pocket. He pulled out the dented silver dollar and laid it on his brother's knee.

"Tarnation hell!" exclaimed Carter. "What's that, an' why?"

"I found it at the crossing of the Rio Concho on my way in," Kirk told them. "Bell, it fell from the pocket of the man who gunned you down. It was his luck piece," Kirk ended. "He's lost it now."

Bell covered his eyes for a moment with his hands. When he looked at Kirk again they were filled with anguish. "I've tried and tried to figure out who it was I saw," he groaned. "But it happened so fast all I got was a slant at some yaller hair like yours, kid. It caught fire in the moonlight, the way yours does, and I guess that's what

made me think it was you."

Kirk's fist clenched about the silver dollar. His eyes suddenly narrowed to slits of tawny ice. "I—"

"Get 'em up high, boys!" said a voice from the doorway behind them. "Touch the ceilin'—"

REFLECTED in the ornate mirror above the mantel Kirk saw two rough-clad, beard-stubbed men. He recognized them as hangers-on at Wood's saloon. Broken down cowpunchers, they were scum fit only for the gallows. But ironically he knew that with Colts in their fists they were the equal of any man. From the leering expressions he could see on both their faces they were getting a great deal of pleasure out of this.

Slowly he hoisted his arms watching them in the mirror as they moved cautiously into the room.

Then Kirk's eyes widened. A delighted grin spread his lips. Coming right in behind the pair was his mother. She cradled a cocked Winchester across her arm, and her finger was on the trigger. Neat in the voluminous black dress that he knew to be her Sunday best, her weather-beaten countenance showed the emotional stress of the past month.

Her soft, well-modulated voice cut into the silence with the pleasantness of a knife. "You can drop those six-guns, gents," she said quietly. "I've got a Betsy in my hand that's set on the hair-trigger!"

Astonishment and fear sagged the mouths of the pair from Wood's saloon. Kirk saw their fingers loosen from the pistol butts as though they were hot. The weapons thudded to the floor.

Without taking her eyes from them Ada Bridges called: "Etta, come on in, and pick up this hardware. These boys won't be needing it again."

Kirk turned, letting his arms fall. Henrietta Carter came through the

door. She, too, showed the effects of the ordeal she had been through. But calmly she stooped and harvested the guns the pair had dropped.

Kirk took one of the discarded weapons from her. He turned it on the men and dropped his other arm about the girl's shoulders.

"Lay face down," he told them, "and put your hands behind your backs. Hank, get some rope and hogtie these hombres. Then you and me will go for a ride."

His mother let the hammer fall gently on the gun in her hands, and came across to stand on the other side of her tall son. She looked at him proudly, yet there was anguish in her face.

"Kirk, where are you going now?"

He shrugged her question aside, asking another. "How come you didn't pay off Ross Woods?"

Ada Bridges laid a work-worn palm on his arm. "Son," she said simply, "you had little more than left home when two masked men walked in and took the saddle-bags back again. They had served their purpose of incriminating you, but that wasn't enough. They wanted the money too. I tried to raise cash in Las Vegas, with no luck. Word of the night-riders who began to harry our cattle as soon as you were gone had already reached there. I could borrow nothing, not even interest money while trouble rode our range. When the interest came due the sheriff served us with an eviction order. That was when I agreed to let Henrietta try to find you. We knew that if Hank headed for the mountains the sheriff would trail him, but we thought he might not suspect a girl."

That, Kirk realized, was the story. But it was not ended yet. He drew a deep breath and stared down soberly into the face of the girl he loved. "Etta," he said, "you've got another ride to take. Will you do it?"

She pressed his arm. "I'll do anything, Kirk—"

"Then saddle the fastest horse in the stable," he told her, "and head for Fort Butler! Tell Major Perkins what has happened here, and tell him to come running." His voice turned hard. "Chaperitos is going to be minus a sheriff and two deputies come morning. Colt-hungry lawdogs and night-ridin' don't mix!"

CHAPTER VI

PERDITION PAY-OFF

BY DEVIOUS trails Kirk and Henry Carter rode toward Chaperitos. Silent most of the way, Carter finally asked: "How you figger Wicks an' his depitties in on this deal?"

Dispassionately Kirk laid his cards on the table. "Rome tried to kill me in the line-camp when we found the money there," he said. "I believe now that his gun must have been in his hand all the time I was lighting the lamp. Hank, *he knew what we'd find in the cabin!*"

"Which don't explain why Bell accused you of bushwhackin' him," Carter pointed out.

"That's where I ran into a dead-end every time I tried to figure it out," Kirk admitted. "But its plain as the tail on a dog now that I've had a chance to talk to him. You see, Hank, I couldn't figure what it had been about the killer that made Bell think it was me. But as soon as he mentioned the similiarity of hair—"

"Thar's a sight of yaller-heads in Chaperitos," the oldster grunted, "an' a few yaller-bellies too. How you goin' tuh pick out the one that pot-shot Bell?"

Kirk flipped the dented silver dollar. "Mebbe one of 'em will recognize

this!"

Chaperitos was a huddle of clapboard shacks before them. Wooden awnings shaded the boardwalk. Hitch-racks lined the dusty street. The town was somnolent under the star, but for Woods saloon and a couple of others half a block away. Kirk's eye narrowed as he saw at least a dozen horses lined along the rack in front of Wood's place. A tinpanny piano from in there sent noise rocketing outward. Stomping boots and yells mingled with the raucous notes of music.

Henry Carter's old eyes sparkled as he looked at Kirk Bridges. "Son," he said, "what you make of that?" "Pears like they got somethin' tuh celebrate."

"They have," said Kirk grimly. "They've got pelt money coming from the massacre up in the Tucumcari mountains. Mebbe it'll make our job harder, an' mebbe easier—"

A dry smile edged his mouth as he dismounted and hitched the black alongside the other horses at the rail. He drew both his guns and examined them swiftly.

Carter beside him went through the same motions.

"Hank," Kirk murmured, "you ever stuck up a saloon before?"

"Naw," returned Carter, "but I held off a bunch of yowling Comanches oncet thet wanted my h'ar, so I guess I can swing this deal."

"Then lets go," Kirk said quietly. "I want ten minutes alone in Wood's office." He took the oldster's hand for a moment. "Hank, we're goin' to hope nothing happens. But if it does I want yuh to know that I think you're a man to ride the river with."

Side by side they strode across the boardwalk fronting the stairs. They climbed to the verandah. Excitement pumped through the refugee's veins. Here was the end of the trail for him. He had come a long way to face a man

who would be in the room inside. And one of them would leave it on his back.

SHoulder to shoulder the young man and the old crushed through the swinging doors. For the barest instant no one saw them. Then a girl screamed shrilly: "Stick-up—"

The piano crashed out a last sour note, stilled. Silence sharper than sound settled over every man and woman in the smoky room.

Kirk, crouched a little, moved toward the corner of the bar. His eyes picked out Chet Ragsdale, Clyde Bowen, and Sheriff Rome Wicks along the mahogany from him. Ross Woods was not in sight.

Kirk halted for just a moment. He said in a flat voice that was almost pleasant. "There's only one man due to get hurt here tonight. But if anybody else wants trouble each of us has got twelve tickets to hell in our guns, and we like company!"

He cast one sidelong glance at Henry Carter backed to the wall alongside the door. The oldster's drooping mustache bristled as he smiled.

"Jes' watch yore P's and Q's folks," he was droning. "Don't nobody go fer his smoke-pole 'cause it might change tuh a pitchfork!"

Kirk turned his back on the room and ducked past the corner of the bar to a closed door. He kicked it open. A towering figure was crouched before an open safe—the only safe in Chaperitos.

Ross Woods whirled, got his gun half out of the holster. Kirk's bullet knocked the giant's hand from the gun-butt. The force of the heavy slug drove the man back against the open safe, tumbling paper-wrapped packets of greenbacks from the tiers inside. The stamp of the Cattleman's Bank in Las Vegas was still on the wrappings.

Woods' bovine face was suddenly blank as he stared up into the slit-eyes

of the man bearing down on him. "What were you trying to do, Ross," Kirk asked flatly. "Take a run-out on your partners? Or were you jes' gettin' kind-hearted and counting out the six thousand dollars change you owe me from the settlement of our debts?"

Ross Woods licked ashen lips. "I—"

"Were you?" Kirk's thumb slowly tautened on the hammer of one gun.

"Yes," Woods stammered. "Yes, that's it, Bridges." Blood dripped down on the scattered sheaves of bills, speckling them with red.

"You got one good hand," Kirk went on inexorably, "count out six thousand and put it in one of your money bags. Then just take that note of ours you got in there and tear it up while I'm wachin' you. Do it pronto, Woods! I got some more unfinished business out front. If you try stallin' now I'm goin' to chop you wide open."

Kirk watched the saloon keeper fumble packets of bills into a small sack, then from an inner drawer of the safe take a note signed by his mother and strike a match to it.

"Kid," Woods groaned, "I swear to God I didn't have anything to do with this. I didn't know this money was stolen. Wicks gave it to me for safe-keeping—"

"You can tell that to Major Perkins in the morning," Kirk said. "Maybe he'll believe you. I don't. Now get up from there and lead the way out. Stand away from the bar when you do, unless you want to get shot, 'cause I think one man out there is going to cut loose at me."

CAT-LIKE Kirk followed along behind the spineless giant. He was one of the yellow-bellies Carter had mentioned. But the man he was going to brace, Kirk knew, was not yellow. Deaths stamp had been on him so long he was not afraid to die.

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The front of the saloon was as he had left it.

Nothing moved but the black muzzles of Carter's forty-fives, swinging lazily, covering the crowd.

Kirk saw many eyes whip toward him as he came to the end of the bar. They were watching him, waiting for his play. A muscle twitched in his cheek as he slowly faced the sheriff and his two deputies.

His glance roved over them. Wicks, slack-jawed now, fear bugging his eyes. Clyde Bowen, impassive of face as ever, his white stock and black Prince Albert accentuating his pallor.

Then Kirk's burning eyes halted on Chet Ragsdale. High color splashed across the man's prominent cheekbones. His wide lips were slitted back from grimy teeth. His pale eyes were shadowed by the black, flat-crowned, Mexican Hidalgo hat he habitually wore pulled low.

Slowly, paying no attention to the crowd which watched breathlessly, Kirk holstered his guns, and put one hand in his pocket.

"Sheriff," he said almost formally, "please stand away, and you too, Bowen."

Even as he spoke his hand came out of the pocket. A silver dollar with a splash of lead graying the center of it flashed into the air, and hit the mahogany ringlessly in front of Chet Ragsdale.

"You left your luck at the crossing of the Concho," Kirk gritted.

Ragsdale jerked back from the coin, as though it were a ghost. His hand raked hipward. Kirk's sloping shoulders dropped rhythmically. He seemed but to shrug. Three shots thundered almost as one in the dead silence of the saloon.

Smoke dribbled from the muzzles of Kirk Bridges guns. He leaned a little forward, watching Chet Ragsdale sway

toward the bar and topple across it. The man's fingers clung to the wood as though for support, then slowly he crumpled. He was dead before he hit the floor. His head nudged the brass foot-rail as he struck. His black hat was knocked off. In the lamplight of the room his hair caught and held the shimmering light. Kirk reached up and with the hot barrel of one Colt shoved his own hat off his head. The light seemed to kindle and flame in the yellow-gold of his hair.

"You couldn't blame Bell for makin' his mistake," he said quietly, almost to himself.

A sigh that relaxed tension whispered through the saloon.

KIRK lifted his gaze to the sheriff and his remaining deputy. "Your horses are outside," he told the men. "Major Perkins will be here in the morning.

"He don't think much of bush-whackers, and he don't like men who ride at night against women and cripples. I'd head for the Border if I were you—"

Sheriff Rome Wicks bowed his head. At a stumbling run he moved toward the door followed closely by his deputy, Clyde Bowen.

No more than thirty seconds later the sound of two hard-ridden mounts faded down the street.

The giant Ross Woods cleared his throat.

"The drinks are on the house, folks," he said in a sick voice. "An' I ain't denyin' I need one!"

Kirk holstered his guns as Henry Carter came across the room to stand beside him.

Carter said wistfully: "Henrietta don't approve of my drinkin', but—"

Kirk smiled. "She might as well get over that idea. I like a snort myself, once in awhile."

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