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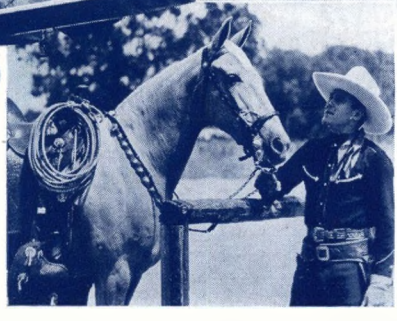

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West

Edmund Collier
Editor

April,
1936

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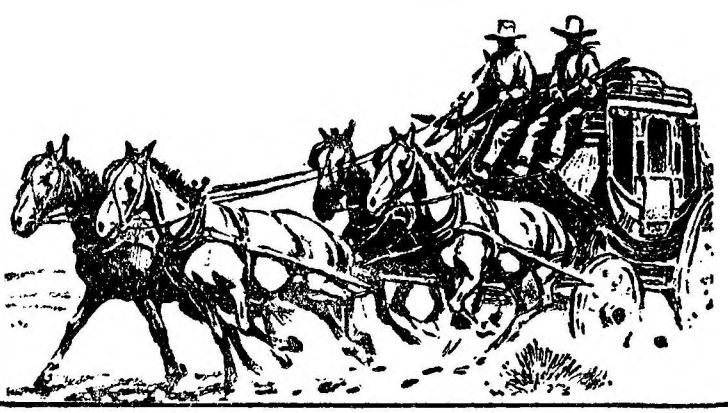

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By
R. FARRINGTON
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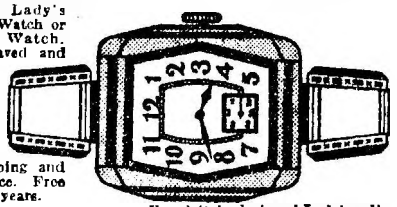

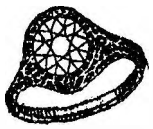

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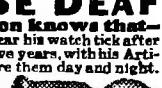

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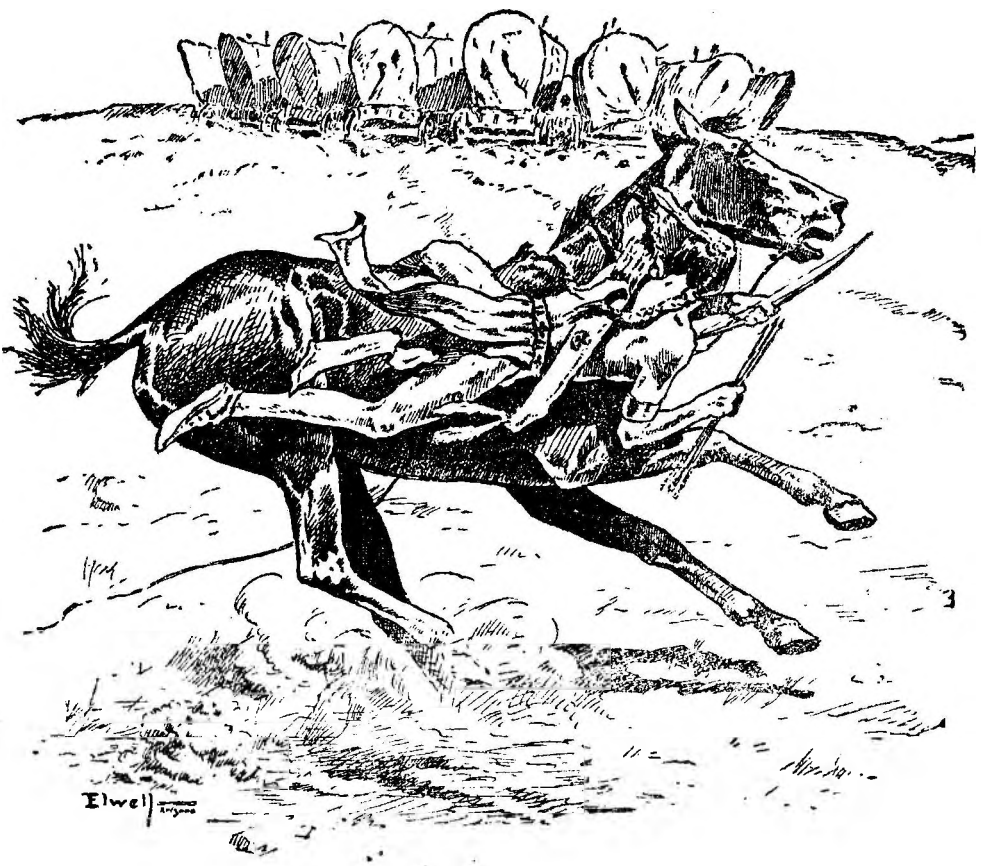


CHAPTER I

MR. WILDMAN

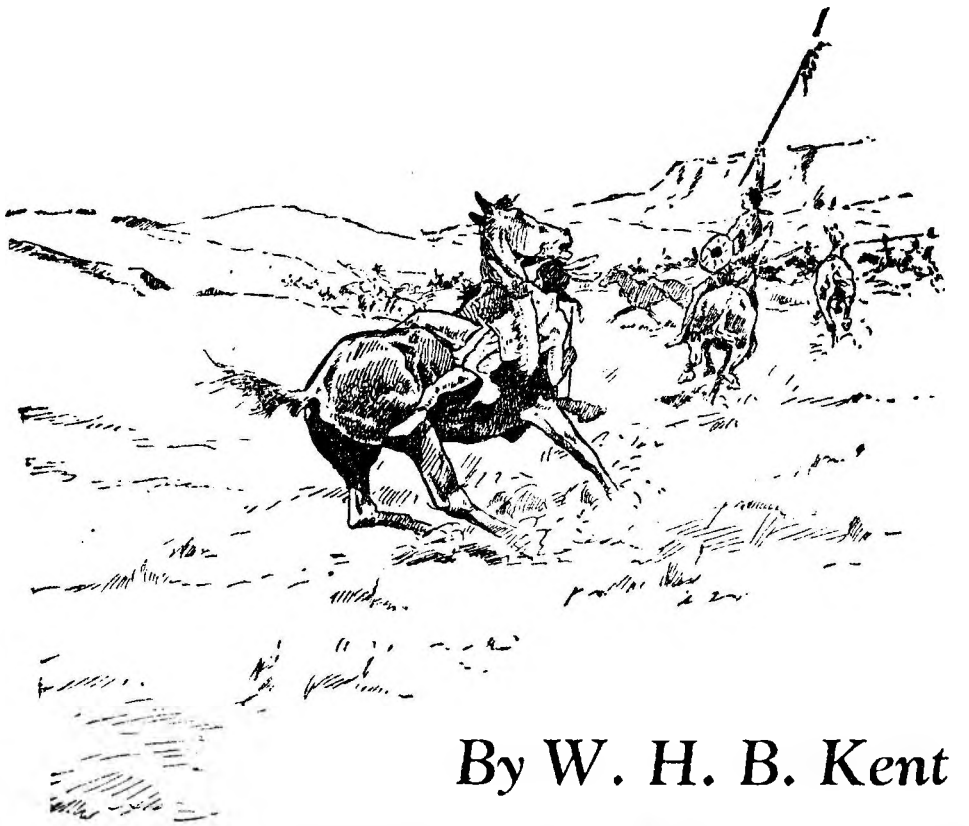
A WARM October afternoon on the Oregon-California trail in what is now Wyoming. The trail was deeply rutted and wide, as wagon train after wagon train had pulled out of older wheel tracks to seek firmer, smoother ground. A gray sea of sage covered the land, surging up like gray waves around the red hills. Tumbled hills on the north gave way to higher and higher summits, which reached up and up to disappear under dark pine forests and emerge at last in the heaven-high white peaks of the Wind River Range. East and west the gray sea of sage rolled away into remote distances. Away off to the south, beyond the Sweetwater, cool, remote, the snow-covered summit of Long's Peak seemed to float high in the heavens. It was a bleak, savage, infinitely beautiful land.

A man in his early thirties was riding slowly eastward along the trail. His rangy buckskin horse was black with sweat, showing all the signs of having been run and run hard for a long distance.

The man, Asa Dunham, occasionally looked back over his left shoulder as though fearing, or expecting, further pursuit. Asa

A Thrilling Story of Plainsmen and Pioneers

ROLLING WEST



By W. H. B. Kent

Author of "That Man Kent," "Thunder on Powder River," etc.

Dunham was tall and lean with a face burnt brown by wind and sun and the wrinkles at the outer corners of his eyes came from looking into sunlit, endless distances.

Except for a wide-brimmed wool hat he was dressed throughout in fringed buckskin. Across his saddle he carried a short, modern, muzzle-loading percussion-cap rifle. Powder-horn and bullet pouch were slung from his shoulders and a gaily beaded belt supported a long knife. His long brown hair was sheared off level with the top of his shoulders.

The tired horse stopped suddenly, head raised and little pointed ears slanted forward. Asa Dunham spoke to the horse, "Yes," he said, "I see them. But they are only elk and won't hurt you."

The horse moved on in his tired walk and a great band of elk on the rising ground to the left stood there in long ranks, their great antlered heads against the sky, and, round eyed, watched the man and horse pass along their front.

As he rode on eastward Asa Dunham noted the discarded treasures of a nation as it moved westward. A broken wagon box, the wheels gone, had been partly chopped for firewood, or for repairs to other wagons. Further along a mahogany, black horse hair sofa sat in silly dignity in the sage brush. Some woman, Asa thought, wept when tired

by the Author of "Thunder on Powder River"

animals could no longer haul that family heirloom. Then Asa leaned down from his horse in a long, graceful sweep, to pick up a poor little bedraggled rag doll—and some child, too, had wept at her loss. Then, up on a rise to the left he saw an upright board and he stopped to read the simple, tragic inscription, crudely burned into the board at the head of the little grave: ALICE ARNOLD. AGED FIVE YEARS.

A little beyond, on the lower side of the trail an older grave had been robbed by the wolves. The polished bones were scattered around and a white skull watched with sardonic grin.

"Why do they come," Asa asked himself. "And where are they going, and why?" and then shrugged, thinking, "They don't know themselves."

Then he fell to resenting the mounting tide of immigrant trains, the families, pouring westward up the Platte and the Sweetwater, eating up the grass, scaring off the buffalo, cutting the timber along the streams. And now the Indians along the route, friendly and helpful at first, tolerant and contemptuous of the silly whites, were becoming alarmed—alarmed and restive as the exodus seemed to have no end.

THREE men rode around the point of a low ridge to the eastward, saw Asa Dunham and checked their horses, sitting there with hands shading their eyes to stare suspiciously at him.

"In the desert all men are enemies," and Asa had stopped to stare intently. He was less troubled than the others by the sun, and after an instant he shook his rifle above his head and gave a joyful shout of "Ho, Santa Fé!" then kicked his horse into a slow trot. The others spurred their horses and came on to meet him.

The man on the right of the advancing three also was dressed in fringed buckskin, buckskin worn smooth and black from smoke, grease, and long wear. Long, grizzled hair hung down on his shoulders, a sweeping gray moustache hid a wide mouth. The wide brim of his hat was flipped straight up over fierce gray eyes and a great beak of a nose. Across the saddle he carried a long flintlock rifle. Worked out on the stock, in brass tacks, was the name "Santa Fé."

Riding in the middle was a dignified, kindly-faced, white-haired, old man. His store clothes, of a clerical cut, were worn and patched.

On the other side rode a bulbous-eyed young man with fuzzy sideburns. He flapped his elbows as he rode.

The old man in buckskin began talking as soon as he came within hearing. "Ya, you Asa Dunham," he shouted happily, "I been looking for you all day. Thunderhawk is camped down the trail a piece and he said you was due by sundown today. How be ye?" and old Santa Fé kicked his horse up to Asa, shook hands long and hard, grinning, and affectionately, scrutinizing Asa with his fierce gray eyes.

Then he turned briskly to say, "Padre, this is my pardner, Asa Dunham. We been trapping and hunting and fighting together for ten years."

To Asa he said, "Asa, this is Mr. Howard. He's the cap'n of a immigrant outfit. The wagons is right behind us."

Santa Fé waved his hand, a bit contemptuously, toward the young man with the fuzzy sideburns, saying, "And that there's Wilbur."

ASA shook hands with the grave-eyed preacher and liked him, but felt Old Santa Fé's contempt when he grasped, and quickly dropped, the soft limp hand of Wilbur.

Santa Fé was explaining, "These families got hung up with the cholery down on the Platte. They've had plenty bad luck and now they can't get through to Oregon this year. They'll hole up at Fort Hall for the winter and I've agreed to see 'em that far."

"Now, Asa, you jest come on along with us. We'll be back with Thunderhawk and his Cheyennes afore snow flies."

Asa shook his head, "Can't do it, Santa Fé. I told Thunderhawk I'd be with them for the fall hunt. They're having the fall buffalo hunt down on the lower plains."

Old Santa Fé suddenly stuck a grimy thumb into Asa's ribs, snickering, "Ya—and what about Thunderhawk's sister—mebbeso she's going on the hunt too?" Then he laughed, nodding his head, "Well," he

conceded, "I don't blame ye. Ain't never seen a finer gal than The Dawn, not nowhere."

Santa Fé left that to look suspiciously at Asa's sweat-soaked horse, "How come?" he asked.

Asa laughed, "We've been traveling," he explained, "and for a little I wasn't sure we could travel fast enough. Nine hostiles jumped us this morning and we had to run for it." He sobered as he finished, "It was a near thing."

"Who was it? Shoshone?" Santa Fé demanded.

Asa shook his head, "No. Not Shoshone. They looked to me like Blackfeet but it's too far south for them."

"Blackfeet!" the old plainsman ejaculated. Then he nodded his head, thoughtfully, "It might be, it might be. They're always hostile and I've known that old devil Many Horses to raid away south of even here, clear down among the Utes, stealing women and horses."

Santa Fé was silent awhile, considering, shaking his head and muttering, "That's bad. That's damn bad."

Then he asked Asa again to go on to Fort Hall with them, but finally gave it up. "Well," he said, testily, "Have it your own way. But as soon as I get to Fort Hall I'll back track for Thunderhawk's village and then we'll winter together, same as usual. How's that?"

"Of course," Asa agreed, "I expected we'd winter together, same as usual."

Santa Fé spoke to Mr. Howard, "You better drift along, padre, you and Wilbur. Got to keep moving. I'll palaver Asa here a minute and then ketch up."

Asa shook hands again with Mr. Howard and Wilbur, and they rode on up the trail.

Old Santa Fé rubbed the side of his great nose with a smoke-blackened thumb and then pointed back over his shoulder with it. "Now that Reverend Howard," he said. "Fine a man as you'd want to meet. Him and his whole flock on the move to Oregon. Hell, don't ask me why. Poor folks, they be. Ain't got nothing."

"And that Wilbur feller. He's a storekeeper. Stuff in a ship acoming round the Horn—and I hope it sinks. He's putting up the money for the families now since they run out. And what you think—every time he buys something he makes 'em sign a paper. Now what do ye think of that?"

"Why, hell, time they gits to Oregon they'll be in debt to him for all their mortal lives. 'Tain't right!"

The old man glared fiercely at Asa as if daring him to think it was right. Then he grinned, saying, "And the padre's got a daughter, Ann Howard, an' she's a real fine gal I'm telling ye, and it's all fixed up she marries this Wilbur feller. 'Tain't right."

Asa laughed, "Jealous, Santa Fé?"

The old man glared at him, "Who? Me?" Then he threw up his magnificent head and laughed, "I damn easy could be," he said.

An ungreased wheel shrieked and the first wagon of the immigrant train came around the point of the ridge. "Well," old Santa Fé said briskly, "I gotta pull my freight. Sorry you won't throw in with us, but I'll be in Thunderhawk's village afore snow flies, sure." He kicked up his horse, grinning back over his buckskin shoulder to say, "And I may have Wilbur's scalp dangling on my bridle rein. *Adios,* Asa."

ASA DUNHAM pulled his horse away from the trail, pulled the bit from his mouth to let him graze a few minutes and sat down on a little knoll to watch the passing of the families.

Nine wagons, he counted. Nine worn wagons hauled by worn horses—not nearly so good for the work as oxen. Worn women, too, and children were on the seats or in the wagon beds peering out from under looped up covers. Worn men were afoot, plodding along beside their tired horses. The whole train was trail weary.

A man came away from his wagon, a whip hung around his shoulders, walking up to Asa to ask, "How fur is it to Oregon?"

"Oh, a thousand miles or so," Asa told him. Then, encouragingly, "But you're nearly half way already."

The man went back to his wagon speaking cheerfully to the woman on the wagon seat saying. "He says we're half way, Mary."

A wagon with a gaunt, tight-lipped woman and a frousy girl on the seat passed.

The girl waved to Asa. As he waved back he heard the woman say "Now don't ye. He's one of them wild men." Asa laughed and waved again.

One wagon had been parked too near a fire. The wagon box was scorched and a hole burnt in the side of the cover. A flat-breasted, still-faced woman sat there carrying a thin, listless baby in her arms. A cow was tied to the back of the wagon and Asa noticed that the cow, too, was dry.

"Good God!" Asa muttered, "Why do they come?"

The sight of the woman and the dumb misery in her face disturbed Asa and he got quickly to his feet, put the bit back in the reluctant mouth of his horse, swung up with lithe grace and started on down the trail.

THE last wagon came on and then stopped as the train came to a halt. The wagon was close beside Asa and he stopped to look and grin. The wagon cover had been pushed forward off the last hoop. In the open space on boards facing each other were a row of small children and a young woman teaching school.

The girl was dressed in faded calico, and a pink sunbonnet had slipped back off her head. A wealth of warm brown hair was parted in the middle, drawn smoothly down over her ears and hung in a thick braid. Under level brows deep blue eyes looked directly into the dark brown eyes of the plainsman.

"Look, Ann, look!" one of the children exclaimed. "Here's another one of them wild men."

The girl flashed white teeth in a delighted laugh, and Asa laughed with her. They looked at each other, and then, without any reason they laughed together again and the girl blushed.

The girl recovered herself, asking, sedately. "Where you going? We're going to Oregon."

Asa found he had to clear his throat and start all over again to answer. "Oh, I'm going down the trail a ways."

"Where do you live?" the girl asked.

"Live?" Asa repeated, a bit startled at the question. Such a question had not occurred to him for years. Where did he live, anyway? He made a vague motion with his chin that embraced a thousand miles of mountains and plains. "Oh, around here," he answered.

"Around here?" the girl asked, a little uncertainly. She looked out at the great sweep of the gray plains, the grotesque shapes of the buttes and the towering, snow-capped peaks beyond. It was obvious that, from her point of view, "Around here," was no place at all. They looked at each other again and laughed together.

The man was feasting his eyes on the girl, as when, after long miles a thirsty deer comes at last to water. He spoke again, hurriedly, as though words would hold her there, saying, "You have a good man with you. They don't make them any better than old Sante Fé."

"Isn't he a dear!" warmly from the girl. And then demurely, "But don't you think he needs help to get us to Oregon?"

Somebody up ahead began yelling and whacking horses and, with a sudden lurch, the wagon started.

"Oh well," Asa called out, "He's got Wilbur."

The girl flushed a little, then laughed and waved, calling back to him. "Good-by, Mr. Wildman."

The wagons passed on up the trail, dropping over into a hollow out of sight and then coming up into view further and further away. The girl waved again and Asa threw up his hand in the Indian sign of friendship. The wagons dipped down over the last rise and the world was empty and lonesome.

Asa Dunham sat there on his horse a long time, slumped down in the saddle, seeing only a great mass of warm brown hair and brave blue eyes. After a long time he became conscious that his horse was in motion, padding along in the dusty trail, following the wagon train. He pulled the horse up and turned him eastward, muttering "What the hell?" On the next rise he stopped, switched around in the saddle and watched a great red sun follow the wagon train down over the edge of the world.

At last he turned to look down the long gray slopes to where the fires twinkled around the tepees of Thunderhawk's Chey-

ennes. He seemed to hesitate for a little, then straightened in the saddle and rode on down toward the tepees of his old friends.

CHAPTER II

THE DAWN

OFF to the north a long string of buffalo were coming leisurely down a white ribbon of trail on their way to water. The distant movement attracted the attention of the horse and he turned his finely pointed ears toward them —then stopped suddenly and snorted as a young Indian came down a little slope, the Indian, a grown boy, just on the verge of manhood, carried a bow and four arrows in one hand. An antelope swung across his naked shoulders. He threw up a hand in greeting to Asa, his waist-high buckskin leggins swishing through the sage as he came swiftly down to the trail.

Asa grinned his delight at sight of the young Indian and slid off his horse. The boy's face was alight with pleasure and he let the antelope slide into a dead heap at his feet.

Asa and the young Indian put their arms around each other's shoulders and patted them as they looked one another over.

"How is it with my brother The Arrowhead?" Asa asked with a note of deep affection in the soft gutturals of the Cheyenne tongue.

"It is well," The Arrowhead answered. "And now that my elder brother has come home, there will be joy in our father's tepee."

"How is it with the old warrior Plenty Coups?" Asa asked.

"It is well," the Indian answered.

Asa's horse snorted and drew back, wild eyed, as he caught the smell of fresh blood from the antelope. Asa quieted him and held his hands over his eyes while The Arrowhead threw the antelope across the saddle. They went on afoot them, arm in arm, leading the horse and talking of what had happened since Asa had last been in his adopted home with Thunderhawk's band of the Cheyennes.

"Thunderhawk is well also?" Asa asked.

"Well," the Indian answered, then he laughed, "and his little son, The Young Thunderhawk, is so high already," and he put his hand down above his knee. "He already dances before the great chief his father."

Asa was silent a long time and the boy stole swift glances at the dark brooding face. At last The Arrowhead asked softly, "Are there no others?"

Asa laughed then, pinching the young Indian's arm in his own, asking, "And The Dawn?"

The Indian answered, seriously, "A woman now. And the fairest of all Cheyenne maidens." After a little, he said, smiling, "I think she has watched the trail from the sunset all day today."

ASA walked soberly along thinking of The Dawn, young sister of the great chief Thunderhawk, and the thought was blurred by the memory of brave blue eyes and a warm voice calling out, "Good-by, Mr. Wildman."

The Indian boy spoke softly. "It is in my mind that the Lord of Life will send great happiness to you and to The Dawn."

The white man was troubled.

In the fading twilight they crossed the Sweetwater above a grove of cottonwoods and climbed a gravelly bank up onto a level bench. Along the flat, to the left, were the tepees of Thunderhawk's Cheyennes. The lodge poles flaring out above the buffalo hide covers, made a spidery tracing against the sky. Early stars were twinkling. The Indian horses were in a herd off to the right with young boys on guard, some of them singing softly in the dusk. Fires blazed before some of the tepees; others had fires inside and glowed dully through the hide covers, showing up the heraldic paintings on the skins. In the still air the white smoke from the cooking fires hung in a level cloud over the village. The smell of cooking meat, of sweating horses, of smoked leather, of drying meat, and the acrid sting of the smoke of burning sage brush—all the myriad smells of an Indian encampment hung in the air and came gratefully to Asa Dunham.

The Arrowhead shouted and men came out of tepees and groups broke up as the warriors came forward throwing up their hands in greeting and welcome. Their unaffected pleasure at his return warmed Asa's heart. He thought—"These are my people," and was no longer troubled.

Asa wanted to go to the lodge of Thunderhawk, but in courtesy he was bound to first show himself at the lodge of old Plenty Coups and his wife—his adopted father and mother.

Plenty Coups was standing in front of the tepee, a twinkling fire at his feet lighting up his fine old face. Beside him a tripod of peeled willow wands held his lance, bullhide shield and long-handled stone-headed battle axe. "Ho, Ho," he called, "My oldest son is home again."

A little, white-haired old woman came rushing out of the tepee, tried to shout her delight but half-sobbed instead, grasped Asa by the shoulders, pulled his head down on her withered bosom and hugged him tightly.

"You! Arrowhead!" she shrilled, "Why stand there and grin like a coyote? Take your brother's pony to grass," she ordered.

A MAN came swiftly into the firelight. Tall and sinewy, naked from the waist up, gleaming arm bands of polished copper, face acquiline, high and stern, hair in two long braids down in front of each shoulder and one feather of the great war eagle slanting forward over the stately head—such was Thunderhawk at thirty-five — Thunderhawk already one of the great chiefs of the Cheyennes—Thunderhawk, the son of the gods.

It was the belief of the people that the first Thunderhawk was himself a god, a god who came down from the skies and dwelt with the Cheyenne, teaching them the way of life.

The Indian's stern face broke into a warm smile as he grasped Asa by the shoulders, saying, "My brother has come to his own again."

"And with a singing heart," the white man answered.

Old Plenty Coups was grumbling, good naturedly, "Is Plenty Coups too poor," he asked his old wife, grinning at Thunderhawk and Asa, "Is Plenty Coups too poor to feed his friends?"

"Na, Na," the old woman answered from inside the tepee and came hurriedly out carrying a steaming iron pot full of buffalo hump and a handful of horn spoons. The three men gathered around the kettle sitting cross-legged on the ground. At the express invitation of his father The Arrowhead joined them, shyly.

"It is true," Thunderhawk commented, "The Arrowhead is a man now and sits with the warriors."

"Na," the old woman protested from where she was feeding sticks into the fire to make a light for the men. "The Arrowhead is but a boy yet," she said, "there is time enough for him to be a man."

"Be still, woman," said old Plenty Coups, indulgently, "My son is a man and takes the next trail."

The old woman said nothing but a look of brooding sadness filled her face as she looked wistfully at the keen face of her young son. Asa knew she was thinking of her first born—killed in the wars with the Pawnee.

After a little she murmured, half to herself, "Aye. Aye. Yesterday they were little babies sleeping in the sun and today they are men — and tomorrow, tomorrow they take the war trail and return no more."

"What would you?" asked Thunderhawk, tolerantly, throwing out his hand, palm upward. "It is sweet to die in battle." But the woman was not listening. She was thinking of a dead son.

OTHER men drifted up to Plenty Coups' fire—tall, blanket-wrapped, hawk-faced warriors, warmly greeting Asa, sitting down cross-legged in a circle to smoke and gossip. They listened intently and gratefully, for each bit of news Asa could offer. They joked with each other, poking fun at old Plenty Coups, chuckling softly, a friendly, harmonious group that Asa loved.

It was into this group that after a little Asa dropped a bomb by saying. "Today I was chased by the Blackfeet!"

Thunderhawk's eyes flashed, "Do they dare?" Then, mildly, "A haze was over the

land today and perhaps my brother did not see clearly. Shoshone, perhaps? Or Crows?"

"Not so," Asa told him. "Blackfeet. of the north country. My heart is heavy for the whites who journey westward in the wagons. They will meet the Blackfeet perhaps. Poor people—not fitted for war."

The Indians nodded, sympathetically. Of a certainty the whites were poor people, not fitted, as our brother Asa had said, not fitted to meet the Blackfeet.

"And Santa Fé," Asa went on, "Our good Santa Fé is with them."

An old warrior made noises of concern. "It is true," the old man said. "And we cannot let the Blackfeet strut and brag over the scalp of our friend Santa Fé." The old warrior looked at Thunderhawk to see if the chief wished himself to take the lead in the matter.

Thunderhawk nodded his head and Asa was content. He knew that, in their own good time, the Cheyennes would move, and nothing more could be done about it.

An old man wet his finger in his mouth and held it up in the still night air. After a little he nodded to the north saying, "Snow come soon."

Asa believed him and thought again of the girl teaching school in the wagon, rolling on westward into the face of the sudden, bitter blizzards of the region—and to what could be still more bitter and chilling—a meeting with the Blackfeet. The picture made him restless.

At last Thunderhawk rose to his feet, made a gesture of invitation to Asa and strode off to his own lodge. Asa stopped a minute before the tepee of the chief, listening to the sounds that came from the Indian encampment. There was a stir among the lodges as warriors went about discussing the nearness of a party of Blackfeet raiders. Off to the right someone was sick and the rhythmic music of rattle and tomtom could be heard and the harsh voice of a Shaman exorcising the evil spirits in the sick one.

To the left a group of warriors sat about a fire listening with absorbed interest as one of their number counted his coups—deeds of valor or of public good. At the conclusion of the recital of each deed, they yelled in shrill approval. Some dogs broke out in a snarling clamor as they fought over a theft of meat; then ceased suddenly as a woman yelled and threw a burning stick among them. Far out on the plains, the weird coyote chorus began and the village dogs yelped in answer.

THE buffalo hide cover of Thunderhawk's lodge was lit up by the fire inside, bringing out in clear relief the red and black painting of a two-headed eagle that seemed to wrap himself around the lodge. Asa looked at the fantastic eagle and remembered that, as a youth, Thunderhawk had fasted and prayed, alone on a mountain top — prayed for four days and nights that the Lord of Life would send him a sign—a sign from the Lord of Life to guide him down life's tortuous trails.

Drifting clouds let twinkling stars come through in wide bands. The stars looked wet and Asa shook his head as though warning someone. The warm, soft days of the Indian summer could not last. It was time for snow and it would come any day now—come in a sudden blinding whirl that would blot out all things. Then the dazzlingly white world would turn bitingly cold. Asa shook his head again as though he were speaking to old Sante Fé and the decrepit little wagon train crawling westward into blinding blizzards—and lurking Blackfeet. A sudden puff of warm wind lifted the hair on Asa's shoulders and drew streams of sparks from dying fires. He lifted the entrance flap and entered the tepee of Thunderhawk.

The interior of the lodge was lit up by a bright little fire. The leaping flame shone over the broad, goodnatured face of Thunderhawk's wife as she sat feeding dry sticks into the fire. From the look of pleased content on her face and the size of the pile of dry wood she had gathered, it was easy to judge what these long evenings in the lodge meant to her.

Thunderhawk had thrown aside his buffalo robe and now sat cross-legged on a pile of skins with a tomtom between his knees. He was softly beating the drum with his fingers and chanting in a low voice. Between him and the fire The Young Thunderhawk was dancing. The naked baby

boy's face was sober and rapt as he turned and danced, lifting his baby feet up and down in the rhythm of the soft beat of the tomtom. At each crisis in the song, he chimed in which his father and tried to make a very fierce yell. At each little "Wah" from the boy, Thunderhawk and his wife looked at each other in happy, silent laughter.

The little fellow made a few more turns and then staggered dizzily, to be swept up in his mother's arms and hugged. The boy struggled and yelled himself loose, turned the fallen drum upright again between his father's knees and, with a beseeching look at the great chief, began to lift and turn.

ASA DUNHAM stood and watched them for a little, laughing with Thunderhawk and his wife, his heart warming at the scene. Then he passed around the group to the guest's place opposite the entrance.

The Dawn, Thunderhawk's young sister, was embroidering an intricate design of bead work on a man's moccasin. After one shy, happy look of greeting at Asa, she went demurely on with her work. The smooth black hair was drawn down in two long plaits, worked in with red worsted. A strip of vermilion paint was drawn down the parting on the small, shapely head, and there was a spot of vermilion on each cheek of the delicately acquiline face of the young girl.

Thunderhawk's wife turned to The Dawn, saying, with mock severity, "Must our brother go hungry when even the dogs are fat?"

Through the clear bronze of The Dawn's cheeks, Asa could see the red blood flooding as she turned to put away the moccasins. The Dawn laughed, a sweet, silvery sound, as she replied to her sister-in-law. "Since when has Thunderhawk's wife ceased caring for Thunderhawk's guest?"

Thunderhawk smiled in a knowing way and Asa knew the two women had arranged that. The Dawn was to look after his wants.

The Dawn brought a wooden bowl of buffalo tongue and a handful of dried plums. For a fleeting instant she raised dark eyes to his face, breathing softly, "You are welcome."

The white girl in a rickety wagon was very far away.

ASA lay awake a long time that night, with his fingers locked under his head, dreaming dreams and seeing visions. The fire spluttered down to a bed of coals in the silent tepee and a little chill crept in. He pulled the buffalo robe up under his chin and watched a star creep slowly across the opening at the top of the tepee. The buffalo robe smelled pleasantly of smoke. He wondered at the stupendous silence of the stars. Worlds on worlds wheeling through space and never a sound.

To the right The Dawn was sleeping and Asa became acutely conscious of her. He had come for her. She was lovely—and his for the asking. Why should he not go on living with his Cheyenne friends, living his life out as he had planned? Then, with startling clearness, he saw a girl with warm brown hair and brave blue eyes under level brows, smiling at him from the end of a rickety wagon.

Asa awoke the next morning with a feeling of relief. Something seemed to have been settled for him while he slept. In the gray light he cuddled down under the buffalo robes and watched the women building up the fire and hanging the cooking kettle.

The Arrowhead stuck his cheerful face inside the door flap to ask Asa if he wanted his horse that day, "Or," the boy asked soberly, "will you gather berries with the women today?"

Asa threw a moccasin at The Arrowhead, calling after him to bring in the horse. The Dawn was listening, smiling, and looked up surprised when she heard Asa ask for his horse.

Asa got out from under the robes, pulled his long buckskin shirt and leggings to rights, tightened his belt, made a horrible face at the delighted baby and went down to the river to wash. He sat by the Sweetwater a long time in the morning chill. Sat there dreaming until the rising sun sent a welcome warmth to his back.

Inside the tepee they were eating. Asa spoke to Thunderhawk. "My heart is heavy

thinking of my friend Santa Fé and the white people traveling to a far place. It is right that I should help them on their way."

Thunderhawk inclined his head in agreement. But the light went out of the face of The Dawn. Her lips quivered a little as she looked away. Asa could not bear the hurt look and spoke again.

"It is only for a little time. I shall be riding with you before you reach the lower plains."

The little boy held up a chubby face smeared all over with buffalo meat and The Dawn was laughing as she wiped it off.

In front of the tepee, standing beside Thunderhawk and his wife, The Dawn watched the tall white man ride away westward.

"He will never come back," she said, sadly.

Thunderhawk's face softened as he laid his brawny arm across the slim shoulders of his sister, saying, "Let The Dawn go to the river and look in still water. She will see what no man can forget."

Thunderhawk's wife took it up, asking, "Are you some nameless one to be seen for a moment and forgotten? Or are you The Dawn, sister of the great chief Thunderhawk and fairest of all the Cheyenne maidens? Is our white friend a fool, think you? *Pouf.*" And the woman blew away the girl's fears, "He will come back."

But The Dawn slowly shook her head, watching the man away across the river now. Quietly, and very sadly she went back into the dreary and empty lodge.

Chapter III

OUT OF THE DUST

THE buckskin horse was restless. He tossed his head up and down, fighting the bit, trying to bolt and when held in he got all four feet close together and danced from side to side of the wheel tracks. The man knew something was wrong and became as uneasy as his horse. Something worried the horse but was hidden, as yet, from his dull human senses.

Asa Dunham lifted the rifle sling over his head, raised the heavy hammer to see if it was properly capped and laid the rifle across the saddle in front of him. He spoke to the horse, "What is it? What do you see that I can't?" The horse snorted and tossed his head impatiently.

Wild things, in flight, began to drift across the trail, coming suddenly out of the north, drifting like shadows across the trail, and vanishing in the brush and cottonwoods along the Sweetwater. A band of elk passed, then one lone antelope came, stopped in the middle of the trail and watched the man and horse coming toward him. The antelope's ears suddenly flicked and, with a great, frightened bound was gone. The scavengers came, coyotes, slinking along through the sage, turning fretful noses back over their shoulders. A great gray wolf came past, silent, shadowy.

Asa turned his horse up into the bench to the right and then rode to the top of a little conical butte. Even as he gained the crest of the little hill a quick gust of wind brought a tumultuous groaning roar. The sun went dim and dirty red behind a wall of drifting dust. The dust was churning up from the pounding hoofs of a rolling, heaving sea of stampeded buffalo.

To the left, as far as Asa could see, the mad, frightened brutes were coming on. Around the steep little buttes they separated, like some nightmarish flood and rolled together again. Under the steep cut banks of a wash, the leaders went down end over end in bellowing agony. Others piled on top of them and still others and yet more until the gully was filled level with squirming bodies—to make a road for those who came after—and the black, heaving sea rolled on over the dead.

On the left the herd found a level bench and easy running. The trail curved around in that direction and Asa felt a sickening fear as he realized the wagon train with old Santa Fé—and that girl—were probably not beyond the track of the stampeded buffalo.

The trained buffalo horse felt the shudder running through the hills and heard the dull roar. He stamped impatiently, tossing his head. Asa slid off and tightened the cinch, made certain that all was secure about the saddle, and then the long rawhide

quirt swished down the horse's flank and Asa Dunham was riding across the front of that appalling avalanche — riding for old Santa Fé—and for a girl that had waved to him—waved and called out, "Goodby, Mr. Wildman."

THE trail curved around to the north for a few miles. The buffalo were coming on the level bench in the bend, the farther edge of the great herd out of sight in the rolling clouds of dust. The wagon trail dipped down into the river bottom and Santa Fé might not see, or hear, in time. If Santa Fé were with them he would know what to do, but if he was riding far out ahead of the train, the inexperienced emigrants would have no chance at all. If the buffalo hit the wagons when they were spread out along the trail there would be nothing left but wheels and boards—and dead bodies. Asa had a sudden vision that made him sick with horror — a vision of warm brown hair going down under frenzied, chopping hoofs.

Around the bend of the trail he could not hope to be in time. Across the bench land, across the front of the charging herd, there was a chance.

The horse was flattened out, running to the limit of his power. Flecks of white foam began to drift back onto the smoothly working buckskin shoulders. With head turned on shoulders, anxious eyed, Asa watched the long, black line of crowding brutes rolling toward him in their insane fury of escape.

Dry little stream beds with straight cut banks came out ahead and flashed under him. A prairie dog town, with holes everywhere—all holes, a world of nothing but holes beneath the running horse.

A loose, rolling stone under foot and the splendid stride of the horse faltered for an instant. The horse limped, then picked up the long reaching stride.

Then the end of all things seemed at hand as the horse rose in a great leap across a deep gulley, missed with both hind feet, gave one heart breaking surge upward and caught the rim with one toe, dragged up the other and settled again into the long, mile-eating stride.

And then, from a low ridge, Asa could see the little wagon train strung out along the trail down to the left—directly in the path of the frenzied sea of maddened beasts rolling down from the north.

From down in the river bottom Santa Fé could not see the buffalo but had already sensed something wrong and was galloping his horse back toward the wagons.

ASA lifted the heavy rifle and fired a shot to attract attention. He pulled his horse to a plunging stop and jumped him back and forth, criss-cross, in the Indian sign for enemies in sight. Then he lifted and lowered his hands, as though they held a blanket, the sign for buffalo.

Santa Fé was standing upright now, feet in the saddle, as he looked over the ground, making up his mind. Suddenly he shot down into the saddle and rode for the wagons, waving his arms, and Asa could clearly hear the great voice as he yelled orders.

Asa bent forward and ran his hands down the wet heaving shoulders and petted his horse and talked to him—and with sheer will power he lifted the sobbing animal across the last mile of gray sage.

As he rode Asa watched anxiously, and then pleased, saying to himself, "Only old Santa Fé could do it."

Santa Fé yelling orders in his great voice, with wildly waving arms had quickly sent a panic through the wagon train. Dull, trail weary, they were slow to catch fire, but the fierce gray eyes and bellowing voice of old Santa Fé roused them.

Now women were screaming, yelling shrilly, "What is it? What is it?" and others went pale and frightened as they yelled "Indians! Indians! Indians!"

Men were running and yelling, tugging at wheels, lashing frantically at frightened horses. Sitting on his horse, still, calm, even smiling a little, his great voice reaching the farthest wagon Santa Fé waved them down and across the shallow river.

The wagons lurched and swayed and pitched down into the stream. Great splashes of water spouted up around them. Then with a rush they were up the farther bank and old Santa Fé was there, sitting his horse on the point of a ridge, calmly directing each wagon to its place.

A little time of mad confusion with Santa Fé's great, cursing voice directing and then the wagons fell into their places, straightened out on the point of the hill in a narrow V formation. Each team of horses was protected by the wagon ahead.

Asa reached the river a few scant yards ahead of the buffalo. The wind was now blowing the dust ahead and he knew he was in the river only from the water splashing up over him. The wild roar was deafening as he lashed the pony up the other bank and came out of the dust to find himself beside the wagon train. He rode in between the last wagons, slid off the horse with his rifle in his hand and started for the lead wagon. And as he strode along the wagons he saw a girl's wide-eyed terror change to a smile of welcome and a hand waved to him. He climbed up in the lead wagon beside Santa Fé just as the first wave of fright-maddened buffalo broke around the wagons.

Like some hideous black sea, the appalling flood of great shaggy brutes broke on the point of the hill and went roaring past. Through a rift in the choking dust, little curved horns could be seen and little wicked, blood-shot eyes and then they were lost in the blinding dust. With the dust and the darkness came the sickening smell of thousands on thousands of sweating fear-maddened beasts.

The sun was blotted out—all the world was blotted out in a choking night of terror.

Once, for an instant, the surging mass heaved itself up against the last wagon—the wagon melted and four horses, kicking and screaming in agony, went down and under.

Asa Dunham pulled Santa Fé's head down and with lips against a hairy ear yelled, "Blackfeet" and pointed out beyond the raging groaning sea of stampeded buffalo. Santa Fé nodded.

THE awful rush and roar went on for twenty minutes — twenty minutes that held always the threat of a horrible death—twenty minutes that seemed to stretch into a lifetime of sickening suspense. Then it ceased as suddenly as if a door had closed.

The sudden quiet was almost as appalling as the awful noise.

Gradually a new voice came to the people in the wagons. Out of the drifting dust came the bellowing of injured buffalo and the splashing of animals drowning in the river.

A gust of wind came, the darkness lightened and through the rifts in the dust cloud the shadowy figures of the Blackfeet drifted in.

An Indian with an arrow drawn to the head came out of the murk and suddenly disappeared as Asa shot him. A bedlam of screaming yells broke out, rifles spat and roared and there was the sudden *plunk* of arrows into wooden wagons. A little girl began to scream, "Ohh, ohh, mother, mother!" and the voice trailed off into choking gasps and then was gone—forever.

The Blackfeet drew off as soon as they found their intended surprise was a failure. They splashed back across the river through the dead bodies of drowned buffalo, and drew up on the bench beyond, out of range. Here the naked painted warriors on dancing naked ponies shook their lances and yelled their contemptuous derision.

Asa knelt in the forward wagon, using the seat for a rest and aiming carefully.

"You'll git him! You'll git him!" urged Santa Fé tensely. "They ain't used to the range of that rifle of your'n."

At the last word the rifle flashed and roared and an Indian on a white horse out in front threw up his hands, sagged slowly over, then suddenly crumpled and went down.

"Yah, yah," yelled old Santa Fé gleefully, "Take that home to yer women!"

The Indians circled swiftly, two of them threw the dead man across a horse and then they lashed their ponies into a run and disappeared among the broken hills to the north.

It was a strange sight they looked out upon—men, women and children as they began climbing out of the wagons and peering at the landscape. Where the herd had passed the sagebrush was trampled flat. A few willows by the river had been stripped of leaves and bark and shone white in the sunlight. The great bank of dust was drifting rapidly down wind to the southeast. Under every steep bank were dead buffalo.

Many had been held down and drowned in the shallow water of the river. Here and there a few, trampled, but not dead, were striving painfully to get to their feet, their rumbling bellows coming across the flats. A dozen lay dead where Santa Fé and Asa had shot them just below the wagons. The four horses that had ben hitched to the wrecked wagon lay out a little way, harnessed together in death as in life. At the foot of the little slope a dead Blackfoot lay on his back, one outstretched arm still grasping the bow and arrow. The gleaming stripes of red and white paint across his face and down his naked body made him seem like some monstrous lizard lying there in the sunlight.

Wilbur came blustering forward.

"Did you see me get that Indian across the river?"

"You git him?" questioned Santa Fé derisively.

"Sure he did," grinned Asa.

Santa Fé spat. "Yah, then the Injun must a laughed hisself to death."

Asa laughed, and Ann laughed—and Wilbur walked away with a look of dislike on his face. And so hatred was born—a hatred that brought misery and death.

THE people of the wagon train were slowly coming to themselves, looking over the damage done, untangling horses and wagons and talking it over, excitedly.

The Reverend Howard, the leader of the company, came to Santa Fé, talking about camping. Santa Fé turned and looked off to the west. Far as the fierce gray eyes could see the sage was trampled flat and the scant grass plowed up and trampled out in the rush of the stampeded buffalo. He tipped his hat forward as he thoughtfully scratched the back of his head. He shook his head in doubt and turned to Asa, asking, "What you think, Asa?"

"Bad business," replied Asa. "Getting along in the day and we have no idea how far to grass."

Mr. Howard put in, firmly, as if he wished to forestall an argument, "Tomorrow is the Sabbath you know, Santa Fé, and we do not travel on the Sabbath."

"What," protested Santa Fé, "Another one?"

Mr. Howard's eyes twinkled, indulgently, but it was plain he could not be moved.

Asa began talking, "There's really no good grass now until we get to Green River."

"We?" suddenly asked Ann, a little breathlessly as she stood looking at the tall, dark-faced hunter. Then everybody stopped what they were doing and looked at Asa, expectantly.

The girl became conscious that the man had forgotten what he was going to say and just stood there, looking at her. She blushed furiously and hid her face in the sunbonnet.

"Whoop!" yelled old Santa Fé and he gave Asa a bone rocking slap on the back, "With you along we'll git through—now I know we'll git through. What's on your mind, young 'un about the grass?"

"Well," Asa answered, "Even without the buffalo stampede, you know there's no good grass beyond here until we reach the Green. And the Blackfeet are outlying along the trail and may jump us any time. We've got to stop for a couple of days and refit anyway so we'd better go back to just this side of Thunderhawk's village. There's good grass there. The stock will get fed up a little and the hostile Blackfeet won't bother us there."

"Besides," Asa went on, "Thunderhawk is going out with a war party, and he will drive the Blackfeet out of the country."

"When's he aiming to go?" asked Santa Fé.

"Said he was going today. But you know how they are. May go today, or tomorrow, or may get over the notion entirely."

Santa Fé shook his head in approval, saying, "That's the best move." Then his great voice bellowed out to the people, "Come on now. Git started. Git them teams strung out and git moving."

The wagon that had collapsed, with its contents, had been gathered up and distributed among the others. The bloody, matted harness was stripped from the dead horses.

With a lot of shouting, of snapping of whips and creaking wheels, the wagons were started back down the trail. It was down hill and the horses remembered the good

grass of the night before. They went on almost briskly.

WILBUR'S sideburns were bristling and his pale blue eyes more prominent than ever as he grumbled angrily to Mr. Howard about going back. He did not really object to the move—he objected to not having been consulted—and he disliked Asa Dunham. Mr. Howard was talking to him, soothingly, but firmly, that Santa Fé and Asa knew best.

"Oh, him," grumbled Wilbur. "I'd like to know if I've got to feed him, too?"

Asa heard this and turned on him. The ignorance, lack of hospitality and ill will displayed by the remark astounded Asa.

The blazing wrath in the dark eyes dismayed Ann and she reached out and touched Asa's arm. Asa looked down at the little, toil-roughened hand, then followed the arm up to the fine sweet face that beseeched him to forbear. He grinned, wryly, misunderstanding what the girl was asking.

"Don't worry" he told her. "He's safe enough."

The girl saw she had been misunderstood —that Asa thought she was pleading with him not to attack Wilbur—when what she wanted to express was her sorrow at Wilbur's churlishness. But she was too proud to explain.

The little scene between Asa and Ann added fuel to Wilbur's dislike for the tall, bronzed plainsman. Wilbur and Ann rode on after the wagon train.

Mr. Howard came up with a shovel, saying, "We'll bury that poor Indian."

"Who? Me?" ejaculated Santa Fé, "Me frame up a grave for a thieving Blackfeet. Have some sense, padre."

Mr. Howard smiled, tolerantly, "Ah yes, Santa Fé probably he was as you say, a thieving Blackfeet. But now he's just one of God's children gone home. We shall bury him decently as we hope some day it will be done for us."

"All right, go on and bury him," and old Santa Fé spat with disgust, "But I ain't pulling off no funeral for no Blackfeet. Not me, padre."

Asa broke in, "I think he's right, Santa Fé. "Mr. Howard can go on after the wagon and we will look after it," and he gave his old friend a significant look.

Mr. Howard put his hand on Asa's shoulder, saying, "Thank you, Asa."

Asa and Santa Fé stood with bowed heads as the earnest voice of the preacher rose in that desolate landscape, pleading with his God for forgiveness and for life eternal for the half-naked savage lying sprawled out there in the sunlight like a monstrous lizard.

After Mr. Howard had gone, Asa explained his plan and Santa Fé, snickering, set to work.

Their job done, they loped down the trail after the train, Santa Fé chuckling to himself. He rode alongside one of the wagons where Ann was now riding, saying, "We got square with yer Blackfeet after all."

"How was that?"

"We buried him the wrong way. According to their notions he ain't never going to see no happy hunting grounds, buried thataway," and the old sinner slapped his buckskin thigh and guffawed.

"Why Santa Fé," Ann protested, severely, "You old heathen. You're no better than they are."

"Sure I be," retorted Santa Fé, not a ripple on his serene conscience. "I buried him, didn't I?" and he kicked his horse to catch up with Asa.

Before sunset the wagons were in a circle a half-mile up the river above the Cheyenne village.

CHAPTER IV

WARRIOR

THE wagon tops, a dirty brown in the sun, turned gray as the sunlight went out. Beyond the wagons the sea of gray sage stretched away, up dim valleys between fantastic buttes, all growing dim and mysterious in the fading light.

The towering heights of the Wind River Range seemed to draw their black, pine-clad skirts close around them in preparation for the coming night. High up, far off, the sun still gleamed on the glistening peaks of eternal snow. The peaks turned to deep rose as they were caressed by the last fingers of the sun—and slowly faded to

purple. A little later they were only dream mountains.

Fires were twinkling among the Indian tepees and the smell of cooking meat drifted down the wind. Some of the tepees, with fires inside, looked like dim, gigantic lanterns. From the Indians' pony herd, off to the right, came a clear, sweet boy's voice singing the herder's song.

Asa found that he and Santa Fé were to eat with the Howards. The cooking fire was close beside the wagon, the flame sending flickering shadows over the dingy canvas top and out away from the wheels. The air was full of the acrid smell of burning sage. Ann Howard was busy with a dutch oven, carefully lifting off the coal-covered top to look inside.

The Reverend Howard sniffed delightedly, "Smells good Ann. Flour biscuits will be a real treat."

Asa dropped, cross-legged, to the ground, a little behind and to one side of Santa Fé. He placed himself a little out of the circle of firelight, where he could watch Ann.

Mrs. Howard climbed awkwardly down out of the wagon, some tin dishes in her hands. She was complaining, as usual.

She was a tall, thin woman, with straggling unkept hair. A face that had once been peevishly pretty was now merely peevish.

She spoke sharply to the girl, "Don't you let them biscuits burn, Ann. I don't see why you're so set on having 'em tonight anyway."

Ann's face was flushed by the fire, but now it turned a deep red.

Asa was dejected at what began to seem to him the clear intent of the girl to ignore him. She had been so friendly the first time he saw her, and again after the stampede. He hoped she would continue to be so. He began to tell himself he was a silly fool to be here with the wagons. He might have felt better about it if he could have heard Ann pleading with her mother for the very last of the white flour for a few biscuits for supper. And especially if it could have been given to his masculine stupidity to have understood that this little batch of biscuits was the only thing in the world with which the girl could make a holiday for the tall stranger who had come to her home.

Mrs. Howard, having eaten, felt comfortable enough to complain some more, "I don't know what you'll think of us Mr. Dunham," she said. "Living like Indians this way. But then," she put in, indulgently, "Perhaps you ain't never seen nothing better."

Santa Fé snorted, "Yah, him—why—" but shut up as Asa dug an elbow into his ribs.

Mrs. Howard to her daughter, "Ann, ain't that coffee ready?"

Turning to Asa she complained, " 'Tain't real coffee, but we call it coffee."

Suddenly Santa Fé slapped his greasy buckskin leg and whooped, "Yah, I forgot. Here I been saving some real coffee agin a time when it would be needed. Lord, now we've run into Asa is sure the time for a spree."

He got briskly to his moccasined feet, saying, "Ann, put that chickory stuff away for tomorrow and give me the kettle."

He went over to his saddle, untied the *parfleche* and brought it to the fire. After rummaging around he brought out a little buckskin bag, and with an air of importance began making coffee.

"Bring them cups, Ann," directed Santa Fé. He carefully filled the cups with the strong, black coffee and Ann handed them around. Santa Fé himself passed a cup to Mrs. Howard, remarking, "There ye are, old gal, that'll put hair on your chest."

"What!" gasped Mrs. Howard, bridling up and spilling half the coffee in her lap. "Well! I never!"

Asa choked and looked at Ann and found that she was crimson faced, biting her lips and then her eyes met his, and they both broke into peals of laughter.

"Hum," said Santa Fé, rubbing his great beak of a nose with a smudged thumb. "Mebbeso that ain't no way to talk to a lady." But Mr. Howard was laughing too, and old Sante Fé snickered and seemed a little proud of himself.

Wilbur came lounging up to the fire and seated himself, with the air of a proprietor, beside Ann.

Asa watched them, jealously. He saw

that Ann stared into the fire, abstractedly, answering Wilbur's talk with an indifferent, "Yes," or "No." Her eyes looked black in the firelight, Asa was thinking, black and velvety—but I know they are blue, the deep, deep blue of the wild larkspur.

Other men came drifting over to the fire, attracted by the presence of Santa Fé and Asa—bearded men in ragged clothes and with a generally dejected and hopeless air. They talked in short sentences of a happier past. If they talked of the present it was of troubles. From their talk Asa gathered most of their history. How they had left Ohio for Iowa, and then decided to push on to Oregon with little or no idea of the distance and hardships. They had evidently expected the country beyond the Missouri River to be like that between Ohio and Iowa.

They had left Independence in the spring with a big train of immigrants and had met with bad luck at every turn. They had lost stock in the rivers, on the road, and by Indians. Their food had given out. They had gone through a siege of the cholera. The main part of the train could not wait and had gone on ahead. Now, with winter at hand, they were in what seemed to them the most desolate place on earth, stock worn out, wagons falling to pieces, short of food, some sick. On top of this, the hostile Blackfeet, cruel and relentless as the coming winter, were hovering about the trail and would dog their footsteps until they died.

Whatever little of courage and hope they had they very evidently drew from the triumphant faith of their preacher leader.

It was something of a shock to Asa to realize their hopeless feeling. He lived in the mountains and on the plains. It was his chosen home, and a dearly loved one. There were wood for fires, water and grass for his horses, buffalo, elk and deer for food and clothes. And as for the Blackfeet, he was more dangerous to them than they to him. But he could easily understand that to these farmer, house-dwelling, community-loving people, all this was the abomination of desolation.

One of the emigrants was speaking, dejectedly. "The Benson baby can't live much longer. Dying tonight I guess. It's hard."

Asa thought of the flat-breasted woman and the little wailing morsel of humanity in her lap, staring out, hopelessly, at the savage landscape.

The group at the fire broke up, the emigrants wandering off to their wagons. Wilbur walked away whistling. Asa stepped up, swiftly, to help Ann up over the wheel, holding her hand a long time, so long that Ann suddenly pulled it away—then, in the darkness, lightly as a butterfly, she reached down and touched his hand, whispering, softly, "Goodnight Mr. Wildman."

Asa, rolled up in a buffalo robe beside Sante Fé, lay awake a long time and never once heard the slow rhythmic beat of the tomtoms from Thunderhawk's people.

THE next day was the Sabbath and the people spent the forenoon in divine services. The Benson baby died at noon.

In the afternoon they lounged about, discussing what repairs they would make and old Santa Fé fretted at their inaction. "Sunday," he grumbled, "is a terrible long day."

A group of the Cheyenne people, many of whose men were away with Thunderhawk on the war party, sauntered over to the wagon train, blanket wrapped, apparently indifferent, but with dark eyes taking in every last detail of the immigrants and their equipment. Asa spoke to Ann, saying. "Come and see my friends."

Ann, looking a little fearfully at the hawk-faced men in the lead said. "I'm not sure that I like Indians."

"But come over and see this one," Asa urged, and he led Ann up to where The Dawn stood in a group of young women. "This," he told Ann, "is The Dawn, the sister of the great Chief Thunderhawk."

"Oh," exclaimed Ann, in generous admiration. "Isn't she lovely," and she held out a hand and took The Dawn's brown fingers, even smaller and finer than her own.

The Dawn had an air of cool aloofness, but every last item of Ann's hair, skin and clothes were stamped on her mind. Then

she looked at Asa—and her heart sank in dread as she saw the look in Asa's eyes as he watched the white girl.

As the Indians moved away, Wilbur lounged up to Asa and started talking. What he was saying was a long time coming through to Asa's consciousness as he watched The Dawn walking away. "What's that?" he asked, sharply.

Wilbur was leering toward the slim figure of The Dawn slipping along through the sage, as he asked again. "How about these squaws?"

If Wilbur had seen the fierce disgust in Asa's eyes he might have halted, but he was watching The Dawn. He nudged Asa, asking. "Be they, well, you know, virtuous?"

A dangerously polite voice answered Wilbur. "These are. More so than any women you have ever known."

Then the whole accumulation of Asa's dislike for Wilbur flared and he said, softly, "And just so you'll remember it!" and he slapped Wilbur's face, first with one hand and then the other, and braced himself for the fighting rush he expected.

Wilbur backed off, his hands on his cheeks, cursing. "I'll fix you for that," he muttered and walked off.

Santa Fé's voice recalled Asa to himself. "Now ye better look out, Asa Dunham. He'll do ye dirt someday when ye ain't looking."

Monday the immigrants were busy refitting. The men were working over the wagons, shoeing horses, doctoring collar galls and the women were washing, mending, and counting their scant store of food.

IT WAS decided that two more wagons could go no farther and there was a rather heated discussion as to what should be abandoned to keep the remaining ones from being overloaded.

"Wagons is fool things," Santa Fé commented. "Pack animals is better."

Suddenly a shrill yell from a hill to the south startled the people. Men, women and children dropped their affairs and straightened up to look and listen. The yell was repeated, a high joyous note and then came the throbbing exultation of the scalp yell.

The Cheyenne village became clamorous with glee, men and women shouting, calling to each other excitedly. Children were scuttling about, getting in everybody's way and the dogs added their shrill howlings.

Asa sprang up on the hub of a wagon, the better to see and hear and stood there holding on to the wheel rim with one hand. Ann came over and stood there, lifting anxious eyes and asking. "What is going on? Are we in any danger?"

Asa looked down at her, laughing. "Not at all. It's the return of Thunderhawk and the war party."

As one of the Indians on the hill began shouting in a deep voice, Ann started to speak again. Asa motioned to her to be quiet as he listened to what the Indian was saying.

Santa Fé came over, asking. "How many scalps they got, Asa?"

The Indian on the hill went on shouting, shaking his lance above his head. The polished lance head flickered in the sunlight.

"Could ye hear?" asked Santa Fé.

"Yes. It's The Arrowhead," and Asa stepped down from the wheel.

"They took three Blackfeet scalps and ran off some horses, and The Arrowhead took one of the scalps. Pretty good for the boy on his first war trail."

"I allus said he was a bright lad," commented Santa Fé.

The lone horseman on the hill had now been joined by the rest of the war party. They sat quietly on their horses for a minute, then moved back over the hill out of sight.

"Why don't they come in?" asked Ann.

"They have to wash up, and dress up and repaint," explained Asa. "And go through the ceremony of purification after battle. It will be evening before they come in. Wouldn't you like to go over when they come? It will be a sight you will never forget—the return of a successful war party."

"I'd like to," Ann replied. Then she laughed a little. "Only I wish they wouldn't yell so."

Asa smiled. "You will certainly hear some yelling tonight."

A group of women and some of the older

children began streaming out from the tepees toward the hill, carrying clothing, robes and paints. They came back after a little bringing the things the warriors did not want to be bothered with when they made their triumphant entry.

WHILE waiting for the war party, Asa borrowed a rasp and went to work on one of his horse's hoofs. Standing with one hind foot up between his knees he had dropped the rasp on the ground while, with his knife, he was trimming out a small crack. Wilbur came walking past and, with an air he considered inadvertent, kicked the rasp out of reach. The act was so childish, so obviously intended to be insulting that the watching Santa Fé feared swift and devastating action from Asa and he stepped hurriedly into the matter.

"Hey, you, Mister Wilbur!" Santa Fé's idea of opening an insulting talk was to begin with "Mister."

"Hey, you, Mister Wilbur," and he tapped Wilbur's chest with a gnarled finger. "You ain't back in Ohio where ye can git a constable to fight yer wars. I've seen men killed fur lessen what you jest done."

"Guess I can take care of myself," blustered Wilbur, then, as this seemed to concede he had done something, he assumed an air of surprise and asked. "What you talking about?"

Santa Fé looked at him with disgust, then spat, and turned back to Asa. "Curious," he said. "Curious how some folks jest can't learn nothing."

Asa had dropped the hoof and straightened up with something very close to murder in his eyes when Wilbur kicked the rasp away. But by the time Santa Fé turned to him he was grinning.

"Oh, Wilbur'll learn," he spoke indulgently as one speaks of a peevish child. The tone did not help Wilbur's state of mind in the least. The next time they noticed him, he had a big, double-barreled horseman's pistol in his belt.

DURING the afternoon the Indian women had been busy carrying back loads of wood from the cottonwood grove up to the village and building stacks ready for firing. The mother of The Arrowhead had been especially busy, her bent old back fairly breaking under the load of wood she brought up and placed in a pile beside the lodge of Plenty Coups.

She was very cheerful about the work. The keen eyes in the wrinkled old face were alert with joy. Frequently she stopped for a minute to call to some old crony, "A scalp for my Arrowhead. I always told you he was the best of them all."

After the wood there was much cooking to be done. Boiled buffalo tongue and hump, great chunks of roasted ribs, and a supply of dried plums and service berries. Plenty Coups would keep open house that night. He was even a bit querulous in his anxiety that the preparations should be ample. Sitting cross legged beside the entrance to the tepee, wrapped in his blanket and a soothing cloud of smoke from his pipe he suggested this and that until the old woman became exasperated. Pushing back the straggling wisps of white hair from her face she burst out at him.

"Go away, old fool. Am I a giggling girl that I do not know what is proper when my son returns from his first war path?"

Plenty Coups grinned in a placating way, stood up and stretched and took a turn around the village to sun his old heart in the plaudits and congratulations of his friends.

The long northern twilight was slipping into night and the women began lighting the fires. The flames shot upward with showers of sparks, children shrilled their delight and the yapping clamor of the dogs broke out. The fires lit up the brown tepees and brought out the grouped figures of the warriors, dressed now in all their barbaric finery. Hurrying women cast long, grotesque shadows as they put the finishing touches on their preparations. Someone began rubbing a tomtom and starting up a wild chant to accompany the rhythmic beat of the drum.

At the Howard wagon supper was hurriedly finished. Asa was helping Ann wash the few dishes. Mrs. Howard complained,

"I wish they'd stop that heathenish noise."

More tomtoms joined in, and a steady undertone of rattles and more voices took up the chant. The rhythmic song of triumph stirred the hearts of the most dumb of the emigrants and they gathered in a little knot outside the circle of wagons. Their interest was tinged with some uneasiness. Primeval chords were thrumming in their breasts, sights and sounds of barbarous old racial meaning gripped them and, in staring wonder, they forgot their own forlorn condition as the savage pageant unrolled before their tired eyes.

A long yell from the hill to the west and Asa threw the last of the dishes in the box.

"Come on. Hurry," he said to Ann. "They're coming. We'll go over to Thunderhawk's lodge."

"Ann, Ann," Mrs. Howard called, "where you going?"

"Just over here a minute," Ann called back.

"I don't want you to go over among them heathen," her mother shrilled after her.

ANN apparently did not hear. She would not have heard if her mother had yelled in her ear for just then she tripped over a sage bush and stumbled a little. Asa caught her with arm around her shoulder and their hearts were racing in wild excitement. For an instant she crept closer within the protecting arm of the tall man beside her. Then, with a little, breathless voice, she protested, "You mustn't," and drew away.

Her eyes were sparkling with excitement as she laughed "It's like a fair, isn't it?"

"Only more so," and Asa laughed happily.

As they came into the circle of tepees the flaring flames, roaring tomtoms and whirling figures of painted warriors startled Ann. She drew close to Asa and slipped her arm through his. Asa was acutely conscious of the woman beside him and he almost held his breath in fear of startling her into removing the warm round arm that lay so lightly in his.

Ann shivered a little, "Oh, what's that," she gasped, as there went up a great roar of yells from the village.

"They're coming now!" Asa shouted to her. "Let's stand down by Thunderhawk's lodge. We can see everything from there."

The village was suddenly quiet—an aching, expectant hush, as when one waits breathless for a great wind to blow again. The clear tinkle of sleigh bells came to them.

"Listen!" whispered Ann, "Sleigh bells! How strange they sound here."

"That's Thunderhawk," Asa told her.

The little bells were drowned out as the returning warriors began to chant. The people of the village took it up and the tomtoms and rattles moaned and chattered in ever-increasing volume.

Some of the warriors, stripped naked to breech cloth and moccasins, hideous with paint, fell into the plunging steps and horrid yells of a dance of triumph. In and out and around a great blazing central fire they plunged and shook and scalped their enemies.

A yell went up from the people at the farther end of the village. Out of the encircling night Thunderhawk rode in among his people. Naked from the waist up, the painted blazonry of war stood out on the heaving broad chest as his deep voice took up the wild chant. The firelight flickered on the copper arm bands and cast strange shadows through the stately war bonnet of eagle feathers that swept grandly down to the ground. The black and white of the dancing horse seemed put on with paint. The glistening white of the pony's eyes gave him a wild, half-mad look. The sleigh bells around the stallion's neck shook and jangled. The stern, aquiline face of Thunderhawk was alight with pride and triumph.

Warrior after warrior on dancing ponies followed the chief as he circled around before the tepees, chanting and yelling and shaking their lances and guns. Men yelled and waved their welcome. Through it all ran the deep roar of the tomtoms. Women and children ran alongside, calling and laughing, the children jumping up to touch some favorite hero.

The shrill voice of the mother of The Arrowhead cut through the noise. "Here

comes the Arrowhead! The Arrowhead with a scalp. Look!" She screamed in joy, "Look at The Arrowhead!" and then her voice suddenly went out in a low wail.

ANN felt Asa stiffen and saw his face grow stern and sad as he stared intently at the last of the oncoming warriors. She sensed something gone wrong, some dreadful thing happening somewhere.

"What is it? What has happened?"

"I don't know yet," he muttered. "Wait until The Arrowhead comes."

The warriors came on, the wild yells and the raging roar of the drums was the same as before but to Ann there was a chill in the air—a feeling of impending doom. Thunderhawk's pony pranced past them, after him warrior after warrior, and then, toward the end, The Arrowhead.

The Arrowhead was sitting slim and straight on his bareback horse. A scalp dangled from the glistening head of his lance, but the lance was held listlessly, as though it was of no importance now. His head was held high, the face rapt, transfigured, as though some great love had come to him at last. Without looking to right or left the sad-eyed lad swept past them. A sudden shift of his pony displaced the blanket over his back and Ann gasped and hid her face against Asa's shoulder. "Oh!" she sobbed, "Oh, Oh."

The whole left side of The Arrowhead's back had been blown out.

Asa's fingers clutched her shaking shoulder until she shrank with pain. His other hand was raised high with clenched fist as he cursed the Blackfeet.

"Let's go back," sobbed Ann. "Please, let's g-get away from here."

They slipped out from the circle of tepees into the night and scraped along through the sage back to the twinkling fires at the wagons. Asa tried to comfort the girl but the shock had been too sudden and too great. She was crying as they went along. After a little she said.

"And that fine old woman, his mother. Oh, it's awful."

"Well," Asa spoke sadly, "It comes to all of them sooner or later. And The Arrowhead's mother has had her great day. She has seen her son proclaimed as a warrior. The greatest day that can come to an Indian mother."

"But it's not worth it," moaned Ann. "All the glory in the world can't pay that poor old woman."

Ann stopped a minute to dry her eyes, then choked up again; Asa standing by and feeling very helpless—and so very anxious to help. A minute later they were inside the wagon circle, Ann going straight to the Howard's wagon, and climbing up with a brief, "Goodnight."

Wilbur was standing by the fire, legs apart, warming his back. "Quite a jamboree over there," he said to Asa, and then sneered, "Your friends having quite a show, ain't they?"

"Shut your damn mouth," Asa told him and started back to the Indian village.

All that night in Plenty Coups tepee, blanket wrapped and brooding, Asa sat with the forlorn old father and mother beside the dead body of The Arrowhead.

CHAPTER V

SIGNALS!

SO THEY wrapped the dead Arrowhead in deerskins and sewed him up in a buffalo hide and buried him—buried him high on a scaffold on a hilltop. And the dead boy's mother brought food and water and built a fire to light the passage of her son's soul. Four days and nights she watched and tended the fire while her son made the long journey to those high, sunlit plains where the warriors forever hunt their buffalo.

Ann, in the twilight, looking up at the scaffold that lay against the sky like a gallows touched Asa's arm, whispering, awed, "Look, it is as if they had placed him on the altar before the Most High God."

And Asa, whispering, told her, "They have."

After the burial of the Benson baby, the grave filled with sacks to keep the wolves from digging it up, the teams were hitched, and the wagon train again started westward on the long journey.

Asa was leaning against a wagon wheel talking to Santa Fé and Mr. Howard, "You better travel until late," he advised them, "then get supper and go on some more. I've got to show up at Plenty Coup's feast for the dead. He'll be hurt if I don't—and besides, I want to. I'll catch up with you sometime in the night."

Before Asa could leave the Cheyenne village, a fine, chill rain had started—started so imperceptibly one could not say when it began, but it slowly strengthened to a cold, cheerless downfall. The wet buffalo hides of the tepees became translucent and fantastic shadows marched across them as people stepped around the fires inside. Asa's buckskin garments glistened wet in the firelight as he paused for a moment at the entrance to various tepees to say farewell to some of his more intimate friends.

Outside the lodge of Thunderhawk, The Dawn was holding Asa's horse in the rain. "You will come back?" she asked.

There was a dull ache in her low voice that hurt him, and so he spoke lightly, saying. "Of course, The Cheyenne are my people. I shall see them again."

He slipped up onto his restless horse, waved to the Indians in the wet gloom, stuck his face into the cold drizzle and rode away westward.

On the last rise he stopped a minute to look back. Through the rainy darkness he saw a spark of fire glimmer on the hill where The Arrowhead rested. He thought of the lone old woman, kneeling there in the darkness and the storm, tending the fire that would light her dead son on his long journey. He turned his face westward then, westward toward a girl with clear blue eyes and warm brown hair.

And The Dawn came in out of the wet night, a crumpled hopeless figure, to stifle sobs in the robes of her sleeping place.

While Asa had been absent in the Cheyenne village Wilbur had been busy. Busy all day riding up and down the train. Busy organizing, browbeating, bullying. They all owed him money, and would owe a lot more before they saw their women and children housed in far away Oregon.

By the time they halted for a hurried supper, Wilbur had what he wanted and took it with a satisfied air to Mr. Howard.

"It's been put to a regular vote," Wilbur told the sad-faced preacher. "Like we agreed to do, and signed our word when we first started. Well, the people have voted that Asa Dunham has got to leave our company!"

THE preacher was astonished, and then very angry. He went personally to each man in the train, but Wilbur had foreseen that and made his arrangements. It was a very saddened Mr. Howard that accepted their decision.

One of the men, with a vindictive grin, said, "Let Wilbur tell Asa."

Wilbur broke out hurriedly. "'Tain't my business. Let the preacher do it. He's the captain."

Sick at heart, Mr. Howard nodded, "Yes, it's best that I tell him—if it must be."

Asa came in late in the night. The only fire left was a bed of coals to keep warm some meat and tea for him. His buckskin pony had evidently been ridden hard and far. There were lines in Asa's grim face, lines of worry and fatigue, but he only shrugged at Santa Fé's questioning look. Mr. Howard brought his supper and they sat by themselves on a wagon tongue.

"What worries you, padre?" Asa asked between bites. Mr. Howard said nothing until he had finished eating. Then he told him.

Asa's first sensation was merely astonishment but this quickly gave way to angry resentment.

"Sure I'll go," he told the minister. "And go now."

"But Asa," pleaded Mr. Howard, "Stay until morning. I simply can't bear to have you go away like this." He looked pleadingly into Asa's blazing eyes. "Asa, I wish you would believe I am heart sick at this. All my life I shall be grateful for what you have done for us—and are willing to do."

The fine old face was working strangely, on the verge of tears, as he asked, "Where will you go?"

"Back to the Cheyenne," Asa told him, bitterly. "They may be savages, but there ain't a liar among them."

Out of the corner of his eye Asa could

see someone was telling Santa Fé. The old plainsman began cursing.

Asa turned to face the people, contempt in his face. They stood in groups by the wagons, looking on, sad and shamefaced, unwilling to meet his eyes. His glance fell on Wilbur and a smug smile suddenly left Wilbur's face. Asa's rifle slipped up in the crook of his arm, the muzzle covering Wilbur.

"Take his pistol, Santa Fé," he ordered. "Keep it till I get out of range. I don't want to be shot in the back."

"I knowed it, and I told ye," Santa Fé stopped his cursing to say, "I told ye he'd do ye dirt." He stepped over and pulled the pistol out of Wilbur's belt.

Asa fingered the hammer of his rifle and Wilbur turned pale.

"Yah," Sante Fé broke in, "I'll git our ponies and we'll drift."

"You! Sante Fé?" protested Mr. Howard.

Ann impulsively said, "Oh! Santa Fé!"

Wilbur had concluded he was in no immediate danger and he muttered, "Let him go if he wants to."

Mrs. Howard stood, her hands drawn up on her hips, facing Wilbur. "Wilbur," she said vindictively, "Wilbur, if ye open yer mouth again tonight I'll smack it."

Someone laughed. Another cheered and said, "Good for you, Maw Howard."

A slow, wry grin came to Asa's face. He stood and looked a long time at the people, then his eyes softened and yearned over Ann sitting on a box, her head held down.

Santa Fé came with the saddled horses. Asa began talking to him in a low voice the others could not overhear. Santa Fé shook his head, and kept on shaking it. Asa talked on, pleading, urging, insisting. Santa Fé's head shook less obdurately. At last he began to nod in agreement. Then Santa Fé talked awhile in a whisper, Asa listening and nodding. At last they shook hands.

"I'll stay," Santa Fé briefly told the people. They came crowding around him with pleasant words of thanks. Some of the men shook hands with Asa but most of them were ashamed and stayed away.

ASA looked at them with contempt, then turned and stepped across the wagon tongue to his horse. He stood there in the flickering firelight, brooding, then straightened with an air of decision, and came back. He walked over to Ann and before them all laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Ann," he asked, "will you go with me?"

She was crying, crying bitterly and wringing her fingers together.

"I can't, Asa, I can't. You know I can't."

They caught a glimpse of Asa's bleak and bitter face as he passed outside the wagons, mounted his horse and turned eastward into the night.

Ann stumbled hurriedly up into the wagon. She sat there several minutes with wildly beating heart, whispering over and over, "I can't do it. I can't do it." A minute later she was down the outside of the wagon, and running blindly along the trail to the east. She began calling, calling in a straining, breathless voice, "Wait, Asa. Wait for me. I'll go, I'll go, Asa! Asa, Asa please wait!" Only the hollow echo of her own voice came out of the lonely, empty land.

Over a knot of sage in the trail she stumbled to her knees and began praying, "Oh God, bring him to me. Please God, bring him back."

At length she laid down in the trail, crying. When at last she sat up, pushing the tumbled brown hair away from her face, she was startled by the sight of a dim figure seated near her, a long rifle sticking up toward the stars. With a rush of gratitude, she recognized old Santa Fé, got up listlessly and went over and sat down beside him.

Clumsily the old Indian fighter pulled her head down on his shoulder, patted her reassuringly, saying, "There, there, Ann. He'll come back."

Ann screwed her head around to look up in the grizzled face and breathlessly asked, "Oh, Santa Fé, do you think so? Do you think he'll come back?"

"Shure he will," in a comforting voice.

"How do you know?" she asked, believing, but wanting to be reassured, and want-

ing very much to talk about Asa Dunham.

"Yah," said Santa Fé, now in high good humor. "They is two reasons. One is he said so, and the other is if he don't I'll go bring him with a gun."

Ann laughed through her tears. Then came womanly worry, "But won't the Blackfeet get him, all alone out there? And how will he eat?"

"Blackfeet," scorned the old man, "You kin worry about what Asa'll do to them. And eat," he boasted, "Why, he'll be gitting fat."

Ann laughed again, almost happily. After a while, in a dreamy voice, she said, "When I climbed up in the wagon it came to me, all of a sudden, that I would never see him again."

"I seen ye slip down out the wagon, so I took a walk too."

A quick, jealous suspicion struck her and she grasped old Santa Fé's arm, "He's not going back to the Cheyennes, is he? He's not going to that Indian girl, is he?"

"Aw now, Ann, have some sense. Of course, he ain't. An' we better be gitting along back now. If they find yore gone they'll be having fits."

The wagon train was in an uproar. Ann's mother had missed her and a hurried search of the camp had not produced her. There were exclamations and protests when they entered the wagon circle. To all of which Santa Fé testily answered. "Can't me and my gal go walking without you folks having fits?"

In the dark, Ann squeezed Santa Fé's arm and then went to listen, absentmindedly, to a long complaining lecture from her mother.

THAT night, with his horse tied to his wrist, Asa slept on the side of a hill about two miles to the north of the wagon train. He was bitter and resentful at the action of the emigrants but not in the least disposed to abandon Ann. It was, had he known it, a shock to his vanity that the poor emigrants should have so quickly discarded him at the instigation of Wilbur. To his love and desire for Ann was now added the desire to take her away from them. He wondered a good deal at the hold Wilbur seemed to have over them. He couldn't understand that. That was the sort of people these emigrants were, he concluded.

The persistent tugging of the horse at his wrist made him wake up before dawn.

He shot a sage hen with an arrow. Down in the bottom of a narrow gulch he roasted the bird on his ramrod over a little fire of dry, smokeless wood. He ate what he could and tied the rest on the saddle.

After sunrise, on his cautious, watchful way westward he turned the point of a hill and came face to face with a solitary old bull buffalo. The huge, tattered beast was coming down the wind and did not smell the man. It stopped in its tracks and stared out of wicked little eyes. The dirty brown hair on his shoulder hung in patches. One horn was broken off and the other splintered, giving him a disreputable air, like some ragged old village drunkard.

Living so much with the Indians there was nothing incongruous to Asa in talking with the old bull. He sat his horse, slouched easily in the saddle. The little pointed ears of the pony were thrown straight forward and his muscles quivered with eagerness. The trained buffalo horse could not understand why he was not shoved alongside for the kill.

"Well, grandfather," Asa talked amiably to the old bull, "We ought to be friends. We've both been cast out by the herd."

The old buffalo stuck out his nose and wrinkled it, trying to catch the scent. Then he began scraping the dirt with one forefoot, throwing the dust up over his back.

"No use making war medicine, old-timer," Asa told him. "We've both been outlawed and we might as well be friendly."

The great beast glared at him out of blood-shot eyes, then with a sudden bellow of rage lowered his massive head and charged.

The horse did not need even the deft touch of Asa's knee to spring aside and let the heavy mass hurtle past. Asa pulled the pony in and looked back, but the old bull, no longer seeing anything in his path lurched on down the gulch. Discontented mumblings floated back, and so passed out of sight.

WESTWARD, ever westward, the emigrant train plodded on. The stock was only half fed, jaded, roadweary and listless. Only a constant beating kept them at their work. The people had enough to eat for the present, but they, too, were roadweary. Sick of the endless wastes of gray sage; sick of the far horizon that seemed never to draw near; sick even of the glittering snow peaks that dwarfed the distance traveled and seemed to look scornfully down on them each evening as though they were in the same place as the night before. There was a feeling of loneliness over the absence of Asa, and a rapidly congealing disposition to defy Wilbur. They never had liked him.

To their other troubles was added the dread of the hostile Blackfeet. Not a person in the train but had been brought up on stories of Indian horrors. Now that they were themselves brought face to face with the same possibilities, all the old tales came back to them. Always they watched the hills in momentary expectation of seeing them covered with a cloud of dusky warriors. The nervous strain was telling on them. Men grew surly and women peevish.

There was no particular anxiety in Santa Fé's searching glances, but he rode with head on shoulder and every once in a while spoke to some one to keep prodding the horses along.

Wilbur was in excellent spirits. He had got rid of Asa and now could see nothing between himself and Ann. Noticing that Ann was riding with old Santa Fé, he climbed up on the seat of the Howard wagon. He began urging Mrs. Howard for an early marriage. He pointed out their precarious situation and the advisability of his being in a position to take care of Ann. He did not hesitate to hint that, without Ann, he would have no compunction about letting them shift for themselves. Mrs. Howard agreed with him, perfectly.

"Why don't you speak to Ann?" she asked.

"I thought perhaps you could do more," he replied. "Seemed to me sometimes as if that Asa had kinda turned her head."

"Oh no," Ann's mother assured him. "She ain't that foolish. But, of course, you can't always tell what notions a girl will get in her head. Especially Ann. I declare, sometimes I can't make that girl out—and she my own daughter, too."

"I'll speak to her, Wilbur," and, a little grimly, "To her pa too."

"Seems to me it would be in every way best," Wilbur concluded. "Then I can look out for all of you."

Soon after noon they saw a man, who had been out ahead as a scout, come running back toward the wagons. Santa Fé spurred up to meet him and they could see the man talking excitedly and pointing along the trail. The people whipped up the horses anew to find out what it was all about. Santa Fé and the man turned back westward and kept ahead of the wagons. Around the shoulder of a hill they came suddenly on them. A dead buffalo cow was lying in the trail.

The wagons creaked to a halt and men and women came piling out to look and question. An arrow was embedded to the feathers just behind the shoulder. Santa Fé examined what he could see of the arrow and tried to pull it out. It was too firmly embedded and only the feathers came away in his hand.

"Yah," said the cheerful Santa Fé, "Ain't that nice? But git a move on ye and cut it up. Save every last bit."

"But look here," protested one of the men. "It might be poisoned. Maybe they poisoned it and left it here for us."

Santa Fé exhibited no anxiety.

"Never heard of any such doings," he told them. "That's all right. Ain't no poison. Cut it up."

Happening to catch Ann's eye old Santa Fé winked at her, rather laboriously. Ann's face flushed and she turned sparkling eyes away to the hills.

KNIVES came out and the men cut up the buffalo in a hurry, handing the bloody chunks up to women in the wagons. In a few minutes they were again plodding westward.

From her seat on the wagon of the Barker family, Ann now watched the country to the north with an intentness that attracted Mrs. Barker's attention.

"See any Injuns, Ann?" she asked abruptly.

Ann flushed and shook her head. She kept her face straight ahead after that.

The Barker woman smiled and went on. "He's real good. If 'twas me, I'da pulled my freight fur good."

Ann seemed to understand perfectly who Mrs. Barker was talking about.

Mrs. Barker shook her head. "I ain't no fool," she said. "Buffalo don't fall dead in the trail, jest fur luck."

A little later forceful Mrs. Barker went on, "Ann, if you marry that pie-face Wilbur, I ain't never going to speak to you no more."

All the life went out of Ann's face then and she said, listlessly, "But I've promised him."

"Shucks," said the woman, "Ain't a girl got a right to change her mind? Sometimes I could shake you, Ann."

Ann shook her head sadly. "A promise is a promise. Besides—"

"Besides what?" questioned the Barker woman.

"Oh, nothing," said Ann. Then she spoke hurriedly. "If I don't, he'll leave. Then what will the people do?"

"Why, the dirty skunk!" Mrs. Barker burst out. "Did he say that?"

Ann nodded but made it quite clear she was through talking about it. She went back to watching the hills to the north, hoping for just one glimpse of a lonely figure on some far hill.

Then they heard Santa Fé and Mr. Howard in an argument.

"Sunday, is it?" and Santa Fé spat in disgust. "This outfit's goin' to move tomorrow if I hev to hitch up and drive every wagon myself."

"But surely, Santa Fé," admonished the preacher, "You wouldn't move on the Sabbath day?"

Santa Fé glared blankly as if he could not believe a sane man would ask such a question.

"Yah!" he exploded, "And I wouldn't squat down in the trail and wait for a band of hostiles to lift my scalp jest cause it's Sunday."

"No sir, padre," he went on, my old scalp's gittin' dearer to me every day. I'm going to move it along tomorrow, and I don't care if it's Christmas and Sunday both. And so be you," he finished up.

Mr. Howard shook his head a little uncertainly. "If you feel it is really necessary, Santa Fé, we'll move. But I fear no good will come of it."

Having gained his point Santa Fé saw no reason for further discussion.

"Look! Look there!" some one called pointing to the northwest. Santa Fé stretched himself up in his stirrups to look. A thin column of smoke was rising in the still air. Suddenly the smoke was cut off, the base of the column rising as if pulled up from above. Then in rapid succession three round balls of smoke rose after the column. After the balls the column reappeared growing fainter and fainter, and then fading out as if the fire had been extinguished.

Santa Fé began looking anxiously around, shaking his head in disapproval. He rode back along the wagons and urged them to make all the speed they could. The people began beating the stock and shouting at them. Their efforts to hurry created a panic feeling and they were soon in wild flight.

"Injuns signalling?" Mrs. Barker had asked as her wagon came opposite Santa Fé.

"It's signals all right, mam," he replied, and then gave Ann another laborious wink.

ANN started to ask a question but the old plainsman kicked up his pony and rode on ahead of the train. The people saw him pull up and talk to Mr. Howard a few minutes, then lope on westward out of sight. It was nearly sunset when they caught up with him. He was sitting his horse on a little bench across a brook and motioning imperiously for the wagons to make a circle around him for the night encampment.

The first wagon lurched down into the brook, hung a minute, and then started slowly up the bank. The driver was standing up lashing his horses. He suddenly stopped, looked more closely at the brook, then waved his long whip and excitedly

yelled, "Look! Look! That thar crik runs west!"

For a few minutes Indians were forgotten, and there was excited chatter and happy laughter over the direction the water ran. Up in the bench Santa Fé called down to them, "Yep, that's one of the heads of Big Sandy, and Big Sandy runs to Green River."

"Where does that go?" someone asked.

"They tell me the Green runs to the southern ocean. But they ain't nobody ever followed it down. It runs in terrible canyons. They say the canyons is so deep the sun don't never shine in them. They say, too, thar's terrible falls in 'em. Bigger'n Niagry."

"I've seen Niagry," said a man with awe in his voice. They fell to arguing whether there could be any falls bigger than that. But they were a credulous people, in an unknown, mystic land and their imaginations ran riot over the mystery of the great river that ran through ghostly canyons to a far-off sea.

"Come on now," urged Santa Fé. "Git yer wagons fixed and yer cooking done, and the fires out."

Men were told off to the herd a little way down the brook, but the animals were so jaded they merely stood with low-hung heads, too tired to eat. After awhile one and then another moved down to the brook and drank, then began slowly hunting around for grass. Soon more of the stock joined the first and were all at work in a weary, half-hearted way.

"They'll be some rested toward morning," Sante Fé observed, "And terrible hungry. They'll be hard to hold then."

Away across the Green River valley the sun hung on the horizon. It seemed loth to leave the world. A strange light was abroad. The desolate landscape took on ghostly, eerie hues, slate and bronze, shading to purple shadows.

The sun sank lower and when Ann looked to the north her heart gave a great bound of joy, and then sank in sickening dread. Speechless, she raised her arm and pointed. On a ridge to the north, lit up by the last red rays of the sun, an Indian warrior rode out on to the point of the hill and sat his pony there, silent, looking down at them.

Chapter VI

ATTACK!

SICK with dread the people stood and stared up at the figure on the hill. It had come at last.

The Blackfoot and his horse stood out against the sky, immobile, staring down at the little wagon train. His lance was carried across his body, a yellow buffalo hide shield on his left arm and bow and quiver of arrows slung across his back. The red streamers on his lance hung straight down in the still air. An eagle feather slanted forward across his head and gave a touch of wild dignity to the half-naked son of the great plains.

All their lives the people had been familiar with the idea of Indian horror, but always it had seemed some far off, monstrous tale that could never come close to them. Except for old Sante Fé not one of the train had ever before seen a hostile Indian. The sight filled them with hopeless fear. They knew well the awful finality of Indian warfare. There was no surrender, no honorable captivity with hope of ultimate relief. It was kill or be killed. They stood with dread in their faces, tongues running around dry lips. The last, long finger of sunlight, like the finger of fate, touched the Blackfoot warrior and went out.

"See," said the oldest Barker girl to her little sister. Her matter of fact tones came as a shock in the silence and they listened intently. "See," said the girl, "That Indian is coming down and scalp you."

The little girl put both hands over her head as though to hold the scalp in place and began protesting and crying.

The childish talk broke the tension. A man laughed in a curious way, as though he had been holding his breath a long time.

Mrs. Barker's pent up emotions overflowed and she grabbed the girl. "Talking thataway to little sister! Ain't ye 'shamed?" she scolded. "I'll lick ye good and plenty for that." She proceeded to do so.

The horse of the warrior on the hill shook

himself and there came down the faint, sweet tinkling of little bells as the Indian's leggings shook to the movement of the horse. The Indian began talking in deep guttural tones that came down to them through the thin, clear air. Sante Fé cocked his head to listen.

"What's he saying?" some one asked.

"Can't make it all out," evasively, from the old man.

"But what you can make out?"

Santa Fé grinned a little as he answered, "Don't reckon you want to hear it, mam. He ain't polite."

The Indian ended up with a yell of derision and was gone as quickly as he had appeared.

Sante Fé took complete command, no longer bothering to consult with Mr. Howard or to ask if they liked this or that. He gave directions about the stock. They were to be allowed to graze close to the wagons as long as the light lasted and then brought up and tied to the wagon wheels. A guard was told off for the night and ordered out away from the wagons. If they saw, or heard anything they were to fire a shot and run for the wagons. Each man was appointed a place in case of attack. The sound of a shot was the signal for them to take their stations.

SANTA FÉ had them move the stuff in the wagons so it would be along the outer sides. He even looked over the rifles, seeing that the locks were in order and that each man had a supply of caps, powder and balls. His first real worry came when he found how small a supply of powder they had.

He told them they better go to bed and get what sleep they could. The old man himself seemed never to need sleep or rest. There was no sleep, however, for any but the children. Frightened, expectant and excited they sat around in groups, wrapped in blankets against the freezing air, and talked in whispers.

The stock was brought up and tied to the wagons. Sante Fé shook his head in concern, "I wish we could bring 'em inside the circle," he said, "But I don't dast."

"They'd be room," Wilbur offered, "For us to move around if we're very careful."

"I take it ye ain't never seen tame hosses in an Injun fight," Sante Fé spoke contemptuously.

"No, I ain't," Wilbur admitted.

Sante Fé shrugged. "I'd ruther be shot than kicked to death."

The weary night wore on, endless it seemed to the waiting people. They quieted down after awhile, listening until it hurt and starting in sudden alarm as some of the horses stamped or shifted about, rattling a wagon wheel.

Ann crept to the side of Santa Fé, asking in a whisper, "Do you think they will come tonight, Sante Fé?"

"I don't look fur it," he whispered back. "Break o' day may bring 'em. Or they may just play with us, keeping us cooped up here."

It did not occur to him to attempt to belittle the seriousness of their situation. He went on, whispering out his thoughts. "This ain't a bad place to stand 'em off. We can git water here and with that thar buffalo we could hold out a week."

"Then what?" Ann asked.

The old plainsman shrugged, "Reckon then it'll be up to the padre's God."

After awhile Ann questioned again. "Is it safe for a man out there all alone?"

"Ho, ho," chuckled Sante Fé, "So that's what ye come over here fur?" He reached over and took the rough little hand in his and stroke it. "No cause to worry about that, Ann," he soothingly told her, "Asa's a heap safer than we be."

"I'm glad," she said.

LATER in the night Santa Fé spoke to her again. "You stick close to me, Ann. If they rush us you lay on the ground right back o' me. I'll pass my rifle back fur ye to load. I got one of them buckshot guns here handy, too. Now remember," he spoke earnestly, "Yore place is right behind me."

Wondering a little at his earnestness she promised to do as he wished.

It gave the old plainsman some relief to think the girl would be close at hand, if the worst came. The lonely old heart was full of friendliness for the girl.

Ann sagged dreamily against the worn buckskin shoulder and appeared to be asleep. Suddenly she sat up and clutched his arm, "But, Santa Fé," she exclaimed, "You could get away!"

"Who? Me? Git away where to?" he asked blankly.

"Why, to Fort Hall," she said all animation now. "You could take your horse and get away in the dark."

"What for?" he asked stupidly.

"Why, you could get help," she told him. "One rifle wouldn't make much difference here, and you could bring help," she urged.

"Hump," grunted Santa Fé.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Prob'ly ain't nobody much at Fort Hall now. The rendezvous broke up long ago and the trappers is scattered in the hills. Besides, take two weeks to go and come."

"But you would be safe," she urged.

"Hump," he grunted, and spat with a vast contempt for his own safety.

"Better save yer breath," he said roughly.

Then he chuckled, "What'd I tell Asa if I was to pull out an' leave ye? He'd skin me alive." He snickered at the idea, "Yah, an' I'd help him myself."

She gave up and was silent awhile, then, dreamily, "Perhaps it's the best way out for me." A little later she said, "How bright the stars are. But they look so cold and far off. Do you think Heaven is out there beyond the stars?"

"Dunno," the old man grunted, not much interested, "I ain't never thought much about it anyway."

"You should," she told him.

The stars were fading when Santa Fé tried to move his cramped shoulder and let the girl lie down without awakening. His movement awoke her and she sprang to her feet, the dread of the night holding her.

"Ain't nothing yet," muttered Santa Fé, "but ye better wake yer ma and git breakfast."

Santa Fé slipped quietly along from wagon to wagon, shaking those who had been fortunate enough to forget their anxiety in sleep. He got the men out, rifles ready, whispering to them. "If they come it'll most likely be at daylight."

IN THE chill hour before dawn, when human vitality is lowest and fears loom largest they waited with every sense painfully strained. The black shadows outside the wagons turned to horses and the gray sage bushes were creeping savages. The ridge to the north that had been a black line cutting off the stars began to stand out as a hill. Individual bushes of sage came out of the gray blanket on the hills. In the waiting hush the east was silvery, then pink and a great rosy flame shot up the heavens. The first long golden fingers of sunlight were laid upon the desolate land. The people stirred, some talking, "don't seem to be nothing stirring," they said.

Santa Fé sent men out to relieve the guards and told off others to take the horses a little way down the stream where there was fairly good grass.

"And git breakfast quick as ye kin," he admonished, "we'll pull out o' here, *muy pronto*."

The people were surprised, looking at Santa Fé and then to Mr. Howard.

"Yes," nodded the preacher. "I don't like to travel on the Sabbath but Santa Fé believes we must."

"We're going as fur as them devils'll let us," Santa Fé said.

The tense anxiety of the night had caused the people to hate the place and the news that they were to move pleased them. They went about their duties with animation.

After breakfast Mr. Howard insisted on a little time for Sunday observance. Santa Fé acquiesced in spite of his impatience. Mr. Howard read the twenty-third psalm and then prayed. Prayed for help and strength and that the Lord God would soften the savage hearts of their enemies. They sang a hymn after that.

The old hymn swept long silent chords in old Santa Fé's heart. There were tears in his eyes as he sat on a wagon tongue, waiting for them to finish.

"Why Santa Fe," exclaimed Ann, "You're crying."

"Who? Me? I ain't," protested the old warrior. "Reckon the smoke got in my eyes."

"But there's no smoke here," said Ann,

looking at him a little more carefully.

"Ain't they?" he asked, then very gently, "I reckon 'twas the smoke from a fireplace away back in the old Bay Colony."

The horses were driven in and hitched to the wagons. They lurched down and up across the brook, creaked into the trail and strung out westward again. The climbing sun warmed the people's backs as they plodded on through the empty land. No Indians appeared, the trail was slightly down hill, and they began to feel a heartening sense of security. They threw off the gloom of the early morning, becoming cheerful, even hilarious as they called back and forth among the wagons.

"Guess they think we're too strong for 'em," said Wilbur importantly. "We'd have fixed 'em if they'd dared tackle us." Then he began to make fun of the caution of Santa Fé. "You ain't much of a prophet," he jeered.

Santa Fé spat elaborately in his disgust and kept up his anxious watch.

NO ONE saw the Indian appear, knew where he came from, nor how long he had been there. Santa Fé pointed, and the people suddenly silent, saw him, walking his horse along off to the right just out of rifle range. The sunlight glistened on his naked body and brought out the stripes of red and white paint that streaked his face and body.

The wagons were entering on a wide flat, sloping gently to the west. The little stream wandered through this plain, bits of richer vegetation showing along its banks, a dear relief from the endless gray sage.

Santa Fé nodded to the south. There were two Indians there, riding along with the train but paying no attention to it.

Santa Fé stood up in his stirrups, shading his fierce old eyes in the crook of his arm to look backward along the trail.

"Are there any there?" some one wetted his lips to ask.

After a little Santa Fé nodded, saying briefly, "Three," and then pointed them out. They were sitting their ponies in the mouth of a gulch. There were two Indians on the north now. The new one was a huge brute, the upper half of his cruel face painted black, the lower a bright red.

"Why don't they do something?" some one asked impatiently.

"They will," Santa Fé calmly replied. "They're waiting."

"What for?"

"I make it they is only these seven here. They are waiting for the rest of the band."

This situation lasted hour after hour. Sometimes the number seemed to change, but when they were counted up there were always seven. Once the big brute on the north rode out ahead and began sign talking to the ones on the south. Then he rode up the side of a butte and, near the top, began riding in little circles.

"What's he doing?" asked Mr. Howard.

"Signalling," from Santa Fé. "Telling Injuns off north they've got us." The old Indian fighter scanned the landscape immediately ahead in keen anxiety. Then he rode back along the wagons and spoke at each one. "When I wave my hat, let the women drive, and you men be ready to shoot or to help with the wheels. When I do wave, you make the circle around me, and do it quick. You'll have to jest nacherally pour them gads into the hosses. We may be jumped while we're at it."

THE hours wore on without change The seven Indians were sometimes lost to sight as they dipped down into a draw or rode around behind a hill. They always reappeared, silent, relentless. There was something infinitely wearing in the persistent, yet apparent indifference of the hostiles. It began to look as if they had always been there; always would be there, just out of rifle range.

And then, without a sound of warning the two on the north suddenly whirled and lashed their ponies into a dead run straight for the wagons. Women shrieked and men yelled. "They're coming! They're coming."

Just as they came within rifle range the Indians sheered off and yelled tauntingly. The two on the south sent up a shrill yell of delight and laughed in derision as the men of the train could be seen fingering their rifles.

When the two Indians had their backs

turned riding to their station, Santa Fé jumped his horse upon a bench to the right, yelling and waving his hat. Men grabbed their rifles, women took the reins and began frantically lashing the horses. With a creaking roar they rolled up the slope and around Santa Fé.

"Unhitch!" yelled Santa Fé. "Roll the wagons in closter by hand."

He sat his horse in the little open space inside the wagon circle, watching the Indians with one eye and with the other directing the men as they tugged at wheels and tongues. They soon had the wagons close together, making a solid wall.

"Kin yer hoss fly?" asked a man.

Santa Fé looked blank for a minute and then slapped his thigh. "Yah." and then laughed. Everybody laughed. Then they rolled one wagon back so Santa Fé could ride his horse outside the circle. It was a great relief to have something to laugh at. They laughed and talked and made fun of Santa Fé for several minutes. Some of the women became hysterical.

But they sobered instantly when someone called out, "Look! They're gone."

The Indians had vanished as suddenly and silently as they had first appeared.

Santa Fé told off men for the herd guard and sent them down along the stream a short distance west.

"They've jest got to eat," he said, in an anxious voice. He cautioned the men to drive them in at the least sign of danger.

" 'Tain't so good a place as last night," Santa Fé muttered, looking around. "But 'tain't so bad, and they's better grass."

The horses were eating greedily, working along down the little stream. They seemed to find better grass as they worked along. A low ridge came up from the south and played out in a steep bank above the stream. Santa Fé kept his eye on the stock. He began to get nervous as they neared the point of the ridge. It was absolutely necessary that the stock get a good fill of grass or they would never travel again. He hated to call them in, but was getting decidedly anxious as they worked away from the wagons. Sitting on a rock outside the circle he finally stood and waved his arm, motioning the guard to work back toward the wagons.

THE three men looked at Santa Fé and then at each other, uncertainly. They could be seen talking together. Then they started, all three together, toward the waving old man. They left the stock to graze.

Santa Fé was yelling angrily now.

"Drive them horses up here. Bring 'em in."

The men stopped and one yelled, "What?" He had on a black and white checked shirt and a black wool hat. The hat was pushed up off the bearded face. He dropped his rifle butt to the ground.

Santa Fé gave a desperate yell and began running toward the stock. The air was full of a noise like the deep rumbling of mighty drums. The frightened horses threw up their heads, jumped about, then huddled close together. An instant later they broke into a wild run across the flat to the north. Close on their heels was a white mare, a dry horsehide tied to her rump so that her heels kicked it at every jump.

From around the point, after the white mare, came a band of Blackfeet. The Indians laid out along their horses, only one foot, a head and an arm showing. The singing twang of bows came clearly out of the racket.

The man with the checked suit still stood looking at Santa Fé—a look of wonder growing in his face. Then he slumped down in the sage and could be seen writhing around. The arrows in his back slashed back and forth as he twisted.

The two other men and Santa Fé were down on one knee shooting, and hurrying desperately to reload. One Indian dropped his bow, tried hard with clutching hands to climb back onto his horse, but suddenly dropped to the ground and lay still. Two Indians circled back, one riding to each side of the Indian on the ground. Long arms swept down from running horses, picked up the dead man and threw him across a horse's neck.

The horses of the immigrants were already in a gulch between the hills to the north, the white mare, still kicking the rumbling horsehide, close behind them. The Indians pulled up their plunging ponies and

yelled and laughed their wild, derisive glee.

The last taunting laugh died away and the people still stood, petrified, staring at the gap in the hills where their horses had disappeared. Their minds fought recognition of the appalling calamity. It was so simple—and so final. They began looking at each other and at the wagons. Wagons! As useless now as so many boats. A woman sat down on a box and began whimpering.

Another woman, standing in the front end of one of the useless vehicles, was looking around in a frightened way. In a tone of dread she began asking, "Where's Jed? Where's Jed?"

She put her clenched hand to her mouth. Then she screamed. She brought the attention of the people suddenly back to the stock guard and old Santa Fé. The woman asked again, "Where's Jed?" Then climbed down from the seat and began running, stumbling through the sage down the little slope.

IN THE gathering dusk Santa Fé and the two men could be seen, standing silently, looking down at something on the ground. Santa Fé leaned down and pulled out two arrows. The two men stooped over, lifted the body and began coming slowly up the slope. The woman screamed again as she met them, then came on with them holding up the drooping head, and so they came to the wagons.

Jed, too, had gone to await the thousands who were to die along the Oregon trail in the next twenty years.

Santa Fé, watchful eyes on the hills, was giving orders, "Git your shovels and sink them wagons."

"How sink them?" some one asked.

"Dig out under the wheels," he ordered. "Bank the dirt up on the outside and make a fort. Git a move on ye. We ain't got no time to stand around."

He put men to work digging at the wheels, then ordered the women to get all the buckets, fill them with water and have them handy. As it was getting dark he sent out guards and told off men to relieve them.

Wilbur, with protruding eyes and slobbering mouth was walking around, muttering, "I been trapped. I been led out here to die."

Ann passed him with a pail of water, heard his muttering, and stopped to look at the picture of fright. Her lips curled in contempt. It came to her that all her life, however Wilbur might look or act, always she would see him as he was now.

Two men dug a grave and Jed, blanket wrapped, was hurriedly buried. Mr. Howard, in choking voice, read the burial service.

Far into the night the men toiled at the wagons, sinking the wheels in holes so that there was just room for a man to lie under the wagon and shoot out over the dirt banked up on the outside. The labor was a great mental relief. But with the fort finished, this relief soon passed, and inaction soon brought back their anxious fears.

"When will it come?" some one asked Santa Fé.

"Can't say," the old man moodily replied.

"Mebbe not till morning. Mebbe not then. They know they got us and they ain't no hurry. Unless help comes."

After a little Santa Fé roused himself, blew his nose with his fingers and began talking of his long life as a trapper. At first little attention was paid to him, but Mr. Howard helped by asking questions and before long most of them were listening. "Yah," he went on with a story, "and Pete had his mouth full of bullets ready fur quick loading an' when he tripped over the log he swallowed the bullets. Yah, that was shore funny."

"Then what?" asked Mrs. Howard.

Santa Fé started to laugh, then in mock severity said to Mrs. Howard, "I'm surprised at you, mam, asking such a question," and laughed again. Some of the men snickered a little, but any suggestion of mirth soon died out.

SANTA FÉ urged them to lie down and get some sleep. Some of the women and one or two men tried to. Most of them got up after a few minutes, shivering and came nervously to the group sitting by the Howard wagon.

A man said, bitterly, "We were fools to

let Asa go. Where you suppose he is now, Santa Fé?"

"Yah, ye shure were fools," agreed Santa Fé. "But mebbeso it works out the best way." Then, in a thoughtful voice, "Now that's curious, ain't it? I'd a said couldn't nothing worse happen than having Asa leave us. And now it's our only hope."

"No, not curious, Santa Fé," the gentle voice of Mr. Howard answered, "In His own way and in His own time He sendeth help."

Santa Fé was disposed to argue the matter but hopeful voices began asking, "Do you think he'll help us now, after us kicking him out thataway? Where you think he is? Where could he get help? How long will it take him?"

He answered them all at once. "I figure that right after that smoke signal he began beating hell out o' that buckskin pony."

"Where to?"

"East. After Thunderhawk and his Cheyennes."

"Will they help us?"

"That's the question," Santa Fé replied, "Injuns is hard to figure on. They was all set for a war on the Blackfeet, but they may have started for the lower plains for the fall hunt. I think Asa kin bring 'em. Depends on how fur he has to go and how long it takes 'em to git here."

"If the Cheyennes won't come what'll Asa do?"

"Who? Asa?" asked the old plainsman. "He'll come back, even if he comes alone and afoot."

"What for?" a hopeless voice asked.

"He's that kind of a man," Santa Fé said, in a tone of pride.

Ann's hand crept out and tightened over the gnarled fist of the old trapper.

A shaft of white light climbed up the northern sky, wavered and went out.

"What's that?" some one gasped. A woman began crying nervously, "Oh dear, oh dear."

Santa Fé shrugged, "Northern lights."

After a minute he went on, "They's bad. Stirs the Injuns up, northern lights do. Git's 'em excited, sends 'em out on the warpath. They think their gods is making signals."

Weird and shivery, a broad band of light swept across the northern sky and hung there. Streams of flickering light shot up, wavered and changed and grew higher and higher. The points of pale light crept up the heavens and shook and gleamed like the spear heads of armies. Armies long dead, marching victoriously across the sky. There seemed to come a faint rustling, like battle flags fluttering in the wind. The ghostly light turned the people's faces to a strange pallor and they looked at each other in wondering awe.

"Never seen 'em so bright," muttered Santa Fé.

The wild, flying banners of the sky increased the people's dread. A sense of impending doom stole over them. Probably no one but Santa Fé still held to the hope of rescue.

Wilbur was walking nervously around, paying no attention to anyone, talking to himself. "I'm going," he said, "I'm going to Fort Hall. I ain't going to stay here no longer."

"Why don't ye?" asked Santa Fé, and spat. "It'll be a nice walk for ye."

Wilbur apparently did not hear him. He kept on walking around, muttering, "If I had a horse." After awhile he sat down and shivered.

It grew cold. Ice formed on the pails of water. All the blankets there were did not seem enough to hold the warmth of nervous, frightened bodies.

Ann sat, wrapped in a blanket, facing the north, watching the ghostly, flickering lights streaming upward. She seemed to be living in another world as she sat with rapt face in the mystic light. A faint smile lifted the corners of her lips as she dreamed long thoughts, lost to all sense of the present.

Santa Fé went over his preparations again. Each man had his place under a wagon and the dirt banked up to suit him. Powder and bullets were ready for the women to reload. The three big double-barreled shotguns were loaded with buckshot and left in the middle of the circle. Some woman was to hand them wherever Santa Fé ordered in case of attack. He was especially anxious over the distribution of the buckets of water. He broke the ice in them

and warned the people to be careful and not kick them over as they moved around.

Chapter VII

DEATH SONG

PALING stars and the faint light of morning and Santa Fé going around the wagons and seeing that every one was alert and in his place. In the gray light the guards came in, staring backwards over their shoulders as they stumbled through the sage. They had no news of movements among the Indians.

"Git to yer stations," Santa Fé ordered them. "It'll come soon, now."

In the breathless hush of the dawn they listened and waited. The empty land was soundless as a dead world. The physical effort of listening became painful. Aching eyes began to see strange movements. Bushes moved and walked about and hill tops rose and sank. A brief glance away and rested eyes found the bushes and hills in their places, silent and immovable.

A man spoke, in nervous exasperation.

"If they're coming, I wish they'd come now."

Another man laughed, without mirth, and tried to speak jokingly,

"Gitting lonely be ye?"

Talk eased the strain and others joined in. Not to talk seemed to show obvious fear and they all began talking, making fun of each other and the Indians. One said, "I'm glad we ain't got to whack them horses no more."

"That's right," another chimed in, "I was gitting plumb wore out driving 'em all day and herding 'em all night."

"Must be lessen a thousand miles now. That ain't no walk a-tall."

"Why don't you git started?" someone jeered.

Santa Fé joined in, "Yeah, you an' Wilbur. If ye can walk fast enough ye'll be there afore dark."

Wilbur was under one of the wagons, rifle and big pistol at hand, gnawing his fingers.

A warm sun came up in a rosy blaze of light. Santa Fé produced a fire and men went out a little way tramping down sage. A good blaze was soon going, blankets laid away and people turning themselves around and around and getting warm again. Some of the men were left on guard, the rest helped around the fires. Breakfast was cooked and eaten. "That's the last of the meat," said Mr. Howard.

Santa Fé shrugged. They all realized his meaning. Unless help came they were not going to need any more.

The day warmed up, the fires burned down. Worn out with the tense wakefulness of the night and now warmed and fed the people became sleepy. Most of them lay around, sleeping fitfully. Some talked and muttered in their sleep, others awoke suddenly and sat up in fright.

Santa Fé was up on a wagon seat, watching the skyline and waiting. Often he bent his arm over his fierce old eyes and stared into the east from where help would come—if it came in time. Often somebody called up to him anxiously, asking if he could see anything, but always he shook his head.

IN THE early afternoon they saw him step quickly up onto the seat, a heroic figure in his fringed buckskin and long grizzled hair down over his shoulders. His rifle was slung across in the crook of his arm. Ann noticed a tear in the buckskin breeches and wished she had known it before. In a curious way her mind fastened on the tear. She wanted to mend it, but had the helpless feeling that now she would never have the chance. It became of immense importance, she must mend it at once and she went after a needle and thread. When she came out of the wagon Santa Fé was walking briskly around, talking quite casually.

"They're coming now! Git ready! Take it easy, now. Take it easy. Ain't nothing to be skeered of. Jest shoot and keep on shooting."

Talk died instantly. Some of the women whimpered nervously. Faces grew pale and set. The men crawled to their stations under the wagons. Muffled voices came out, as from a cellar.

"Where air they, Santa Fé?"

They called to each other under the wa-

gon, "Where be they? Kin you see 'em?"

They could see them now. A long line of warriors filing out on prancing ponies from a gap in the hills. They came gaily, as to a holiday. Lance heads gleamed in the sun, bright streamers waved, and feathered war bonnets shook above the dancing ponies. An Indian yelled shrilly and shook a gun above his head. There was deadly menace in the gesture and the yell. A gun banged and the immigrants looked quickly at each other and then back to the little cloud of white smoke floating softly upward. A calico colored pony suddenly reared upright, was yanked down by his Indian rider and then began bucking and rearing and finally threw him. The Indian landed on his feet, then sprang nimbly up onto his bareback pony again. The Indians yelled and jeered and laughed and the thrown one began beating his horse over the head with the handle of his war club. The sun glistened on naked, painted bodies and restless horses.

A heavy, gray-haired old warrior rode out along the line, to be greeted with wild yells of delight from the Indians. He backed his horse around, facing the hostiles and began talking in deep rolling tones.

"Yah," sneered old Santa Fé, "That's old Many Horses himself. I been hoping to git a crack at him fur forty years."

Chief Many Horses stopped talking and shook his rifle high in the air. His horse began prancing, siding off backward and the trailing feather of the war bonnet swept across his rump. The hostile Blackfeet yelled again, shrill and ferocious. Many Horses began talking again, faster and more urgently than before.

"How many be they?" a man asked.

"Dunno," said Santa Fé, calmly. "Bout fifty I reckon. And more coming."

"Oh, why do they?" a woman wailed. "We ain't never done nothing to them."

"Other whites has," answered Santa Fé dispassionately, "Now we kin pay."

A rifle banged again. The men under the wagons looked around nervously to see if anything was hit. They had their rifles stuck out over the dirt rampart, the heavy hammers pulled back to full cock. Some nervously took off the caps to make sure again that there was powder in the nipples.

"Now remember," Santa Fé was urging. "Kill the front ones. If they see 'em going down they'll sheer off."

SOMEBODY thrashed around and kicked over a pail of water. Santa Fé cursed him in a casual, friendly way. Eyes were big and strained, dark ringed in pale faces. Women back of the wagons where they could not see the Indians were asking questions, "Are they coming?" . . . "How many?" . . . "Oh, my God!"

Wilbur suddenly sat up, bumped his head on the lowered wagon bottom, and began to vomit. "I'm sick," he gasped between the retchings, "That meat was rotten."

"That's all right, Wilbur," Santa Fé told him, almost friendly, "I et something rotten myself jest afore my first Injun fight."

Many Horses was still talking, yelling now, shaking his rifle and standing up in his stirrups. He was working himself, and his warriors into a frenzy to kill and kill and kill. Suddenly he whirled his pony and launched the long line of yelling savages straight for the wagons.

The war cry shrilled out rising, falling, shuddering, horrible. Rifles began banging: bullets came *thud, blunk thud, thud* against the wagons. With a soft, almost caressing swish, arrows slipped through the wagon covers. A man began shouting "Oh! Oh! Oh!" trailing off into nothing. One said, "Ed's hit! Ed's hit! My God!" A woman, standing up to load more rapidly went down, the feathered arrow sticking out of her body.

The acrid smell of burning powder hung under the wagons. Men coughed and cursed and spat. The smell of powder mixed with the smell of the sweat of unwashed bodies, dust, and the sickish-sweet smell of blood. A man kept on coughing, coughing and muttering. "Oh! Oh!" He stopped coughing and breathed through the hole in his lungs.

Santa Fé was cursing steadily, standing upright at the end of one of the wagons, muttering, "Run out on me will ye?" talking to Many Horses in a whisper he did not hear himself. "Come on. Oh, come on. Jest one shot, you old devil."

The charging line of yelling demons opened and let old Many Horses back through. A long cloud of dust drifted up, the white powder smoke hanging along the edges. Some of the Indians were outrunning the rest. They came on shouting and yelling. Their fierce eyes stood out. A big brute, leading on a red horse threw up his hands and toppled backward under the oncoming hoofs. Another went down and then another, rolling and twisting on the ground. The thundering noise of the running horses, the wild yells of the Indians and banging rifles made a hellish hurricane of noise.

"Them shotguns!" yelled Santa Fé, "Quick now!" A woman handed him one and then another and he staggered from the fierce kick as the guns poured the handsful of buckshot into the charging line!

A different yell came, high and shrill. The Indians sheered off on either side, flopping over on their horses out of sight, shooting across their necks. In a terrifying roar they swept past, wheeled, and lashed their ponies back out of range. They soon disappeared in the gap in the hills.

People began talking excitedly. "They've gone! They've gone! We beat 'em off. Did ye see me git that one on a white horse? Ed's got it bad. Ed's dead."

Santa Fé still stood by the wagon, watching and listening. Many Horses was talking again, behind the ridge out of sight. A high, angry, contemptuous voice. It stopped after awhile. Then a wounded horse began to scream. The horse was lying out in front, stretching bared grinning teeth away up from the ground and screaming in agony. "Oh," shuddered Ann, "That's awful! Somebody do something!"

Santa Fé took careful aim and fired. The horse lay still.

With pointing fingers Santa Fé was counting. "Three," he said, "We got three and I saw 'em scoop up and carry off two more."

Ed was dead and the woman shot full of arrows was dead. There was nothing to do but bury them. It began to seem as if that was all the earth was for.

Santa Fé was shaking his head over the man blubbering through a hole in his lungs, "Slug out of a old Hudson Bay flintlock," he said, shrugged with an air of finality and walked off. He was not callous—he had seen too many go the same route.

AFTER burying the dead the people went listlessly about trying to straighten things out. Holes under the wagons were deepened, each man fixing his place more to suit him. Guns were cleaned and reloaded. Powder and balls counted up, redistributed. The Barker children were gathering up spent arrows and sticking them in the ground in some game they made up. Santa Fé was up on the wagon seat again, watching and listening. Whatever anyone was doing they stopped often to look long and hopefully to the east. Mr. Howard went up in his wagon to pray.

A group of Blackfeet rode over the crest of the hill. They sat there on their horses, looking down at the wagons and talking to each other. They were out of range. The people began nervously to get ready for another rush but Santa Fé shook his head.

"They ain't coming," he said, "Not yet. They're watching their dead. They're afeared we'll slip out and scalp them three out there."

"When will they come?" somebody asked.

"Ain't no telling," replied Santa Fé. "Mebbe in a minute and mebbe tomorrow, or next day." He went on thoughtfully, "I kinda wisht they was in a hurry. But they seem to figure they got plenty time."

The people looked again to the east, praying for Asa and the Cheyennes.

"Hey!" a man exclaimed, "That Injun has moved! The dead one out there to the left." The man went on excitedly, "He was laying right in front of that big sage and now he's half way into the other clump."

The people hurried to look. The Indian lay on his face, over across the brook, only his buckskin leggings and moccasins sticking out of the brush. There was a strip of bright red cloth down the outer seams of the leggings.

The immigrants began arguing. Some were certain they remembered that the Indian had been lying on his back in front of the tall bush. Others were certain he had always been where he was now. One man

claimed he shot him and saw him fall on his head right there. They watched intently, but could detect no movement.

"I tell you he has moved," the first man insisted.

"Better make sartin," Santa Fé advised. "Finish him."

The man took a careful and leisurely sight across a wagon wheel. Then he settled himself more easily on his feet and looked through the sights again. The Indian was not there!

The people broke out into a clamor of advice, "Why didn't ye shoot? Shoot into the bushes. Shoot quick!"

There was a flash of bronze and red and the Indian rolled out of the bushes and down into the brook, out of sight under the bank.

The Indians on the hill set up a yell of jubilation and banged away with their old flintlocks. Their horses reared and plunged as they yelled their derision.

The man carefully and accurately shot into the two dead Indians left out in front. The hostiles on the hill broke into a wild clamor of hatred. With knives gleaming in the sun they went through a pantomime of scalping and disemboweling. The people stopped looking at them.

The sun dipped to far off western hills, a disk of red fire that pushed purple shadows out from the slopes. The pageantry of the sunset swept up the white peaks of the Wind River Range, softening their glittering snows to pink and rose. Away off to the south a coyote chorus broke out, the shrill, discontented yapping shimmering through the still evening.

"Better eat what ye got," said Santa Fé. "Can't have no fire after dark."

THERE was but little food. They cooked and ate the scanty meal. Another day would see the end. Supper over, there was nothing more to do. Nothing but sit and wait. Some dreamed of happiness and well-fed days. Some talked. Talked in low tones of the good times they had seen in days that were ages away. Frequently they asked Santa Fé, over and over, as to what he thought about their chances. But Santa Fé had nothing new to offer. If only Asa could reach Thunderhawk and persuade him to return! And if they only would in time. In the dusk they could see the Indians on the brow of the hill.

Another night of dread came stealing down. Men were sent a little way out from the wagons to lie in the sage and listen and watch. The people sat around, blanket wrapped in the cold night air. Some dozed and nodded and slept a little, nervous and fretful.

Ann spoke to Santa Fé, "These Blackfeet don't seem like the Cheyenne. They were fine."

Santa Fé shrugged, "If they was hostile," he told her, "you'd think they was worse."

Then, with generosity and fairness unusual for the time and place, he went on, "If ye was to see the Blackfeet at peace and friendly they wouldn't seem so bad. Trouble is, them devils ain't never friendly. Still, I agree with ye, the Cheyenne is the better people. But if they ever turn hostile, life on this trail is going to be a problem."

At length Santa Fé told the people to keep still and he climbed up on the wagon seat to listen. Still, cold hours passed, watching the stars and listening. Many of the people, worn out and in reaction from the excitement of the afternoon had found relief in sleep.

The wounded man had stopped breathing through the hole in his chest. The curious, gurgling noise had gone on and on until its acceptance had become subconscious and people ceased to listen to it. It was Santa Fé who first realized that the noise had stopped. He came silently down from the wagon seat, shook Mr. Howard awake and whispered to him.

Mr. Howard was gone a few minutes then came back to Santa Fé, whispering, "He's gone."

"Well," said Santa Fé, "He didn't have no chance. Good thing he ain't got no family."

Then Santa Fé clutched Mr. Howard's arm and whispered, tensely, "Look!" and pointed. They stepped over to the wagons and saw a growing light, down to the left, in the creek bottom. The place was within

easy rifle range but the fire was hidden under the bank. It was not much of a fire but glow enough came up to make a little circle of light on the other bank and bring out in clear relief the gray bushes of sage.

"Could one of the men have built a fire there?" asked Mr. Howard and answered himself, "He wouldn't be so foolish."

Santa Fé was shaking his head, "Injuns," he said briefly. "Thar's devilment coming. Git the people awake."

Mr. Howard went along, shaking the people awake. Santa Fé began looking to his water buckets. Ice had formed again. "Git in close to the wagons," he ordered, "and stay there."

"What is it? What they doing now?" anxious questions ran around the wagons.

Mrs. Howard was wailing, "I jest can't stand it. I can't stand it no longer."

To the dreary spirits of the people this seemed a quite natural statement and others joined in, "It's terrible."

But old Santa Fé snickered a little, "Mebbeso ye'll have to stand it," he told her.

The little Barker girl suddenly pointed, exclaiming in childish delight, "Ooh, look! Pretty, pretty."

FROM down under the bank where the fire burned a little ball of flame rose up, bent gracefully over and landed "plop" in a wagon cover. The fire on the arrow licked up the side of the wagon cover in a wavering red tongue. It gave just enough light to bring out the paling faces and startled eyes of the people. For an instant, fascinated, they watched the tongue of flame catch the wagon cover and stream upward.

Santa Fé sprang up on a wheel and slapped the fire out with his hat. He laughed, without mirth, "Think it's purty, do ye?"

An instant later the air was full of burning arrows. Like fireworks on a holiday they rose up and dropped over in graceful curves. Some fell inside the circle, some outside, but many found their mark in the dried-out canvas covers and woodwork of the wagons.

Santa Fé was talking anxiously, "Git busy with the water but don't use no more'n ye have to. The rest of ye git the stuff out the wagons. Hurry!"

The people sprang to their work. Some working desperately to quench the flames, others pulling up the wagon covers and dumping things over the side. Women gathered the stuff up and were piling it in the center. One man was trying to get a bedstead out of a wagon and Santa Fé yelled at him, angrily, "Leave that! Git yer powder and balls and food and blankets."

To the women he gave hurried directions to pile the stuff in a circle inside the wagons, making a little breastwork just large enough to contain the people.

In frantic haste, with shouts of fear and calls for help they fought the fires. The Howard wagon was burning briskly now. The cover had gone up in a great puff of flame and smoke. The wagon box and the furniture inside were on fire.

"Water! Water here!" called Mr. Howard. No water came. Men called to each other. "Bring the water! Bring the water!" only to be answered, "I ain't got none. They ain't no more!"

One man grabbed several buckets and started to climb through the wagons to go to the creek to be grabbed and pulled back by Santa Fé, yelling at him, "Don't ye. They're jest waiting for that."

Other wagons were in flames. In the wild, flickering light from the burning trains the people looked black and grotesque, like devils at work in hell. Men grabbed wheels and tried desperately to move the wagons apart. The wheels were sunk too deep and buried in the banked up earth. The crackling flames shot skyward, the fire running along from wagon to wagon. The whole landscape was lighted up as the roaring flames licked up the woodwork. Painted furniture sent a cloud of black smoke drifting eastward. The heat forced the people back and Santa Fé and Mr. Howard were jumping around, getting them down inside the little breastwork. The heat was intense. The people lay on their faces, shielding them from the billows of flame that roared above them. Blankets and clothes in the breastwork began to smoke and fill the air

with the acrid smell of burning wool.

The fire arrows had ceased and the Indians were yelling and jeering in savage delight. There seemed to be a considerable body of them up on the brow of the hill. Sometimes a gun banged but the distance was too great.

In cowering fear the people hugged the earth. In flame and smoke and the savage yells of the Indians it seemed that the end of the world had come.

The wagons began to fall apart, sending up showers of rosy sparks. Tables, chairs, beds, all on fire, fell helter skelter. Women cried as they saw the last of their household goods going up in smoke.

THE fires were burning down, only an occasional flame flickering here and there. The wide circle of sage that had been plain as day shrank, and they could see but little beyond where the wagons had stood. The pits under the wagons were now filled with beds of coals. Little fugitive flames sometimes shot up for a minute, tinged with green and reddish lights. The stink of burning wool hung over the place. One rocking chair had been pitched a safe distance when a wagon collapsed. The chair had landed upright, on its rockers, and now sat there in the fading light, a mocking reminder of the homes they had planned.

Santa Fé had called the guards in when the wagons had first caught fire. He sent them out again now. The people in the little fort of blanket rolls, carpet bags, loose piles of clothes and odds and ends were cowering dumb and horrified. Even hope itself was gone now.

Relentlessly, a new day crept up across the dreary world. The white peaks of snow turned rosy red, lovely beyond words. The growing light crept down the mighty flanks of the mountains and flooded the gray wastes. Morning seemed unreal, unnecessary, as if they were through with all that.

Santa Fé, in anxious haste, had put the people to work. "Git what shovels they is and dig out inside her," he urged. "Bank the dirt up on the outside. Hurry!"

The men went listlessly to work. It seemed useless. The last of the food, a little cornmeal, made a thin gruel, a few swallows for each. Arguments and sad protestations began to be heard. Women urging the men to take their share, and men protesting they weren't hungry in the least.

There were no Indians in sight now. Even the two dead ones out in front had been removed in the night. Aside from the little band of emigrants crouching in the pitiful makeshift fort there was not a living thing in sight. It seemed unreal. There was no apparent reason why they should not walk out and go wherever they pleased.

Just after sunrise Mr. Howard got them about him, read a chapter from the Bible and prayed long and earnestly. It seemed to cheer them up, to bring back a little hope. Surely their God would not abandon them. Faces were again turned hopefully to the empty east.

Some began complaining, querulously.

"Why don't Asa come? He's had plenty time. That ain't no way to do; go off and leave us to die."

Old Santa Fé snarled, bitterly, "Who kicked him out? Ye make me sick." They were quiet after that.

The men began pointing and women whimpered. A long string of Indians was filing out onto the flat again. The gray-haired Many Horses rode a little way up the hill, turned his pony to face the warriors and began talking. The deep, rolling gutturals came down to the people as they watched him, faces white and fearful.

"Git ready," Santa Fé spoke quite calmly, "They're coming!"

The old chief was talking now in short sentences, angry and contemptuous, pausing occasionally, then beginning again. In the pauses shrill yells went up from the Indians.

They had spread out in a long line, facing the immigrants. The fresh morning sun shone on prancing ponies and flaunting eagle feathers.

In a quavering voice, then gaining strength Mr. Howard began to sing. Ann coughed, sang a few words, coughed again and then her clear young voice rose in confident beauty. Others joined in, singing the new hymn they had brought west with them.

Nearer my God to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

Voices faltered, choked, failed and began again. In gathering strength they sang the hymn, so hopeless of this life, so serenely confident of the life to come. It was their farewell to life. Like a white dove Ann's sweet voice soared upward.

Sun, moon and stars forgot
Upward I fly:
Still all my song shall be
Nearer my God to Thee.

Old Many Horses stopped talking. The long line of savage warriors sat silent, listening. They even seemed to have an attitude of respect.

Unmoved by the hymn, Santa Fé's fierce old eyes were on his work.

"They think we're singing our death song," he said. "They'll give us time for that." Then, bitterly, "Yah, they're plumb polite thataway. Sing it again."

Chapter VIII

THUNDER ON THE PLAINS

A MAN poked Santa Fé, "Look!" he said excitedly. Santa Fé screwed around to look off to the southeast. Another man spoke, "Look thar! What's he doing?" and pointed to the north. On a hill up beyond the hostiles an Indian was riding his pony in circles. Santa Fé gave a brief glance at the Indian on the hill, muttered, "Blackfoot scout signaling. He's seen something," then turned again to stare intently at the southeast.

A figure on horseback was standing motionless on a sharp-pointed butte. The figure did not seem much concerned—just sat his still horse and looked.

Santa Fé got his hands over his eyes and stared. The sun was still so low and so close to the figure it was difficult to make out anything but that it was a man on horseback.

Suddenly Santa Fé was on his feet, dancing and yelling. Yelling, "It's Asa! It's Asa! I knowed he'd come. I knowed it."

The people broke into cheering, yelling and calling and telling each other over and over, "It's Asa! It's Asa! Look. Asa has come!"

Asa shook his rifle above his head and yelled in greeting. Then slowly began walking the buckskin horse down the hill and across to the north onto another ridge. His horse was plainly worn out.

Slowly the people began to grasp the fact that Asa was alone. They stopped cheering and their hysterical relief gave way to bitter disappointment. Most of them slumped down, sitting on the breastwork, holding their faces in their hands or looking miserably at each other. Two or three remained beside the now silent Santa Fé, watching Asa riding nonchalantly along, up the long low ridge.

"What's he doing?" somebody asked. "Where's he going? Why don't he come here? Why didn't he bring the Cheyennes?"

Ann twitched Santa Fé's sleeve and whispered to him but he continued to watch Asa. Occasionally he turned his head to look at the Blackfeet. Ann pulled at his arm, whispering, "Santa Fé. Santa Fé," until he turned to her, blankly, his mind still grappling with some problem connected with Asa and the hostiles.

"What?" he asked.

"Listen, Santa Fé," she urged, "You won't tell Asa about that night, will you?"

"What night?" he asked, vacantly.

Ann flushed a little, "the night he went away and you came out and got me. Don't tell him about that. I was all wrong." It seemed to be of great importance to the girl.

"Oh, all right," he told her and turned to look again at Many Horses and Asa.

"Why don't Asa come in here?" a man asked. "What's he hanging out there for?" Santa Fé was shaking his head, uncertainly.

"I dunno. Ain't got it figured out. Yah, looks like he wanted 'em to cut him off."

ASA was still walking his tired horse along the slope, now in long rifle range from both the immigrants and the Blackfeet. He stopped his horse, lounging easily in the saddle and began jeering cheerfully at the Blackfeet in the

Cheyenne tongue. He didn't seem to have a care in the world. He was close enough so the people could see his lean, dark face and amiable grin as he made unmentionable remarks to old Many Horses.

The Indian who had been signaling on the hill to the north came plunging down, across the flat and into the group of hostiles. He was pointing and talking excitedly.

"What's Asa saying?" somebody asked.

Santa Fé snickered, "He's daring Many Horses to come out and fight, man to man," he answered evasively.

Many Horses began shouting back his own insults and the Indians jeered and applauded in short, sharp yells. After a little he turned to his warriors and spoke sharply. Half a dozen detached themselves from the main body and began riding east to head Asa off. They evidently intended to drive him in toward the immigrants.

At another sharp command from Many Horses the Indians strung out in line. again facing the pitiful little fort. They broke out into a wild chorus of demoniacal yells, shaking their lances and guns. Many Horses backed his horse around to face them and quieted the tumult with raised hand.

In the sudden, aching silence, Asa shouted again. "He's telling old Many Horses he's a coward," Santa Fé translated.

Many Horses paid no attention to Asa but began another deep voice harangue. They answered his short sentences with sharp yells of pleasure. Their ponies were getting frantic with eagerness, prancing and rearing.

"They're coming! They're coming again!" People were wailing and muttering, "We can't hold 'em off again. God have mercy!"

"Git ready!" Santa Fé spoke sharply. "Git down. They're coming. Shoot the leaders!"

They stumbled to their places, stolid faced and muttering, fingering the locks of their guns. The click, click of cocking hammers was heard. They were all intent on the murderous array of Blackfeet, braced to withstand the ferocious rush.

Only Ann was watching Asa. Once Santa Fé noticed her head was up above the little breastwork of blankets and dirt. He put his hand over on the brown hair and forced her down. "You keep down," he hissed.

As soon as Santa Fé removed his hand Ann raised her head again. This was the end any way and she wanted that Asa should be the last thing she saw on earth. She wondered at him, thrilled through and through with love and pride as he sat there on his horse, so still and cool. She began whispering to him, asking him to turn his eyes just once before they died.

"Please Asa," she whispered. "Please look, just once."

But the tall plainsman on the buckskin horse kept watching the Blackfeet.

With tightening muscles the people saw old Many Horses suddenly whirl his pony toward them, raise his hand and open his mouth to yell. With his mouth still open he yanked the horse back viciously and the animal stood straight up.

Ann saw Asa throw up his rifle ready to shoot, and then the amazed immigrants saw her on her feet, laughing hysterically, pointing and laughing and talking, "Look! Look! Oh look!"

OVER the crest of the hill, riding at a walk, came the long ranks of Thunderhawk's Cheyennes.

Naked bodies painted for war, gleaming lances and guns, war bonnets and shields flaunting gaily in the sun, the long line came on with the steady relentlessness of fate.

To be plunged instantly from the last depths of hopelessness to the heights of certain rescue was too much for the immigrants. They went crazy. Laughing and yelling and shaking hands and slapping each other.

Mr. Howard was on his knees, face rapt and mystic. "I've seen it," he said, "'And the word was made flesh.' With my own eyes I have seen it. 'And Asa had an army with banners and spears and they were all mighty men of valor.' "

"That's right" yelled Santa Fé giving the preacher a slap on the shoulder that threw him back on his haunches, sitting down, "That's right, padre," he laughed. "There's yer mighty men of valor. There's

the tigers of the plains. Now set down and enjoy yerself. We're going to see a lot of blood spilt."

Women were laughing and crying and the men throwing up their hats and yelling joyfully to Asa. The little Barker girl was asking, over and over, "Are they going to scalp us? Are they going to scalp us?"

The people began to quiet down, to cast appraising looks at the opposing bands of Indians, and consider the situation. There were many more Cheyenne than Blackfeet.

The long, close line of Cheyenne had halted, their tired horses glad to rest quietly. Their lances and guns glittered in the sunlight as the people looked up at the barbaric array. A flash of light came from the arm bands of Thunderhawk as he rode along the front of the line. The warriors greeted their chief with shrill yells of delight, red streamers from lances and shields fluttering in the breeze. Thunderhawk reined in, facing the line and began talking. The deep rolling tones rang with confidence. In one pause the whole savage line broke into a gust of shrill jeers at some reference to the Blackfeet. At the end of his speech Thunderhawk gave crisp orders, turned and rode down to where Asa was waiting for him.

The long line of yelling warriors followed at a walk at first. At a yell from Thunderhawk they broke into a trot and then began lashing their ponies into a wild run for the Blackfeet.

The Blackfeet had opened out at first, in a line to face the Cheyennes, yelling and jeering at their enemies. Then they moved in together in a close group, and a dozen warriors, with Many Horses at their head broke away from the main body and disappeared in the gap in the hills.

"Huh," somebody said, "They're running away." But Santa Fé shook his head, "Tain't that," he said. "Their village ain't far off. They got to save their women and children."

A little later he shrugged and said, "It's a bad day for the Blackfeet."

The Blackfeet moved over to the left and began riding toward the Cheyenne. They were quiet now, the quietness of doomed men.

There was a hungry look in Santa Fé's eyes. He fingered his rifle and muttered, disgusted, "They're edging over so we can't reach 'em from here."

The dense group of Blackfeet were charging for the center of the Cheyenne line. The dirt rolled up and half hid the Indians. Rifles banged and little clouds of white smoke hung along the edges of the dust cloud.

Asa and Thunderhawk were a few lengths in advance of the Cheyennes, riding neck and neck.

ANN saw Asa throw up his rifle, a cloud of smoke poured out but she could not tell the report from the others. She saw him loop his rifle over his back, rise in his stirrups with a long handled hatchet held high in his hand and plunge into the band of Blackfeet.

With a terrific impact the Indians came together. The Cheyenne line wrapped itself completely around the Blackfeet. Diabolical yells came out of the struggling mass, war whoops and shrill, agonized screams. Kicking, rearing, biting horses and battle-maddened savages in a mêlée of death.

The fight sagged down toward the immigrants as the Blackfeet fought their way into the Cheyenne line. The barbarous clamor of lance and war clubs on gun and shield came out of the seething mass. Once a sudden shift of figures threw Asa and a blood-spattered Blackfeet out of the ruck. Ann could plainly see the white circles painted around the Indian's eyes, and watched in shuddering horror, fascinated. Asa swung his axe and the painted circles fell apart. Ann screamed.

Mr. Howard was on his knees, praying. Praying for savage souls going to judgment.

Riderless horses began galloping across the flat. Some were bareback, some with crude Indian saddles, all blood smeared. The feathered shafts of arrows were sticking out of some.

The struggling, screaming mass was stationary now in a dense cloud of dust. The yelling and activity had perceptibly diminished. The Blackfeet could not break through. Cheyenne warriors came out of

the press and circled round in search of an opening. In twos and threes the Cheyenne began breaking away and lashing their ponies in pursuit of Many Horses.

Suddenly the battle was over. The Cheyenne were opening out, yelling their exultant victorious cries. Some were on foot scalping the dead Blackfeet, holding the bloody trophies up in ferocious joy.

The dust drifted slowly away. The immigrants could see the Blackfeet piled up in a heap, cut off to the last man in an effort to hold the Cheyenne until their village could get away. A ring of dead Cheyenne lay around them.

The Cheyenne were busy, capturing riderless horses, picking up guns and arrows and the spoils of battle. They were reeking with blood and sweat and drunk with battle. A group of wounded were tying up their wounds, some limping slowly, some standing up and trying to walk, then lying down again.

Thunderhawk was giving orders. A few Indians left the flat and rode off to the southeast. Upon the hill they began signaling.

Asa was on foot, leading his horse toward the immigrants. He swerved off and went down the creek, under the bank at the place where the Blackfeet had built their fire. After a few minutes he came up in sight, both he and the horse dripping wet. He had washed off all the blood. He came slowly, and reluctantly, up to the people.

The immigrants stood watching him—ashamed. Santa Fé and Mr. Howard went out to meet him. Santa Fé was boisterous, Mr. Howard very grave and very thankful. They came to the little fort. Asa greeted them amiably and then they broke loose, relieved, in a torrent of handshaking and thanking. Asa carefully kept from looking at Ann. He was through with her. He told himself over and over that he was through with her.

"Got anything to eat in yer pocket?" asked Santa Fé.

Asa grinned. "You will have plenty very soon. The Cheyenne village was right behind us. Here they come, now. Couple of men go with me, and I'll get 'em all the meat they can carry."

Ann wished he had said, "We will have" instead of "You will have." But you can't blame him, she thought. He'll probably have nothing more to do with us. For a little she hated the immigrants. She sat down, dejectedly, and wished she were dead.

THE Cheyenne village was streaming around the point of the ridge to the east. Old men and half-grown boys riding watchfully ahead and on the sides. In a confused mass the women and children came, riding, walking, running, talking and laughing. Women and children on ponies, red cloth and beads and metal ornaments, painted faces and jingling bridles all shimmering in the sun. Lodge poles were dragging from pack horses with the tepee covers rolled and tied on the poles. Often this made a secure riding place for the very old and feeble, or babies, or a litter of puppies. Some of the dogs were fitted with miniature travois, dragging the play tepees of little girls. Behind the colorful throng of the moving village shouting boys drove a herd of loose horses.

The village poured down into the flat a short distance from the immigrants. It seemed to be in hopeless confusion. Women talked and yelled to the horses, or children, or each other. A few horses tried to buck their packs off. Children yelled shrilly and dogs yapped and howled. In no time at all, out of the confusion, the gaunt skeletons of the tepees rose and buffalo hide covers were thrown up over them and pegged in place. Children were gathering wood and the first thin column of smoke drifted out of a lodge. When the tepees were up and things unpacked and stowed away, boys drove the horses down creek to water and grass. The Cheyenne were at home again.

Women began streaming out onto the battlefield, screaming shrill yells of delight and hatred. They hunted around for wounded Blackfeet.

Ann had been watching for The Dawn. She saw her help to raise Thunderhawk's tepee and then disappear inside.

The warriors who had been in battle were up the creek, preparing themselves for purification, talking joyously and yelling various orders to their women in the village.

Two men went to the village with Asa and he loaded them down with buffalo meat. Fires were ready when they returned and soon the hungry people were eating greedily.

Asa could be seen going from one tepee to another talking with the women. The women would look over at the immigrants and nod or shake their heads. He seemed to be gathering poles, one here and another there. Finally he called to Santa Fé. Santa Fé and some of the men, wiping their mouths, went over and Asa gave them old poles enough to hold up two tepees. He had also secured two buffalo hide covers—one old and one new.

Asa came over with two Indian women soon after. The women put the tepees up for the immigrants, showing them carefully how it was done. There was much good-natured laughter at the clumsiness and what, to the Cheyenne women, seemed ignorance on the part of the whites. And a great deal of pity at their destitute condition.

Indian women out on the battlefield had found a Blackfoot still alive. They were screaming shrill yells, killing the Indian with rocks.

The Cheyenne warriors who went after the Blackfoot village began coming back in small groups. They had a few more scalps, but the village had escaped. A little later, a herd of captured Blackfeet ponies were driven down and thrown in with the Cheyenne horses. Some one in the village began beating a tomtom and yells of savage delight went up. It was a great victory.

Asa came to the immigrant camp and began talking with Santa Fé, looking over what was left from the burning of the wagons, estimating its weight and bulk, and counting the people.

"Twenty-five will be plenty." Santa Fé said. "An' between me and you, I'm glad to be shut of them wagons."

Mr. Howard came to Asa and told him they all wanted him to go with them as far as he could. Asa shrugged, non-committal.

THE glorious relief of being safe from the Blackfeet and having enough to eat was beginning to give way to gloom over the loss of stock, of friends—and also wagons, tools and household goods. Men were muttering dejectedly, "Jest being alive ain't everything. We can't walk to Oregon. And what'll we do when we get there?"

They heard Asa, Santa Fé and Mr. Howard talking about horses and they crowded around to listen.

"Twenty-five," Asa was saying. "They ought to take you through. The men can sleep in the old tepee and the women in the new one. Over on Bear River you can cut some more lodge poles."

"Will they give us the horses?" Mr. Howard asked.

"They would," Asa said, indifferently. "But it's better to buy them." He then started off toward the Cheyenne village.

Mr. Howrad watched him go, shaking his head a little sadly, wondering how they were to buy horses.

Wilbur had heard Asa say it would be better to buy the horses and he broke in now, as importantly as ever, "I don't feel like wasting no money. If they'll give'm to us, what's the good of buying? I ain't no mint."

Santa Fé stepped swiftly up to Wilbur, rage in the fierce old eyes, "You and your money," he sneered and spat. "Asa's gonna buy 'em hisself."

The people stared, astonished. Some remembered dimly something about Asa having sold a partnership in the Northwestern Fur Company but they had forgotten it. Santa Fé began to boast, in an off-hand way.

"Asa's got plenty. Yah, I reckon he's got most all the money in the world. In a bank, I'm telling you." This seemed to be quite important to Santa Fé. "In a bank in Saint Louis. He'll give Thunderhawk a order on Fort Laramie and they'll give'm whatever he says to."

A great light seemed to break on Mrs. Howard's face. She pursed up her lips with an air of satisfaction.

"I always said he was real nice," she said.

In the evening the people sat around a fire between the two tepees. The swelling roar of drums, rattles, exultant yells and deep-voiced chants came from the Cheyenne village. Sometimes there was a pause and

the plaintive voices of women could be heard, wailing over their dead. Out on the battlefield the ghoulish Indian dogs were snarling and fighting over something. Ann shuddered and felt sick as she listened to the noises from the battlefield.

The Indian voices rose in still wilder yells above the undertones of the booming drums.

"They're coming in," said Santa Fé.

"It's terrible," complained Mrs. Howard. "I wish we could get away from this awful place."

"Can't move till day after tomorrow," commented Santa Fé. "Got to fix ropes, and packs and saddles, and git a supply of jerky and all that."

"Well," from Mrs. Howard. "Living in tepees like we are now, we ain't no better'n Indians ourselves."

Ann was thinking of that other triumphant entry she had seen with Asa. She grieved over the fate of The Arrowhead. Now others had gone. And through the years more and more would go until, perhaps, there were no more left. What was it all about, she wondered drearily. Why couldn't life be different?

"Why don't Asa come over and stay with us?" somebody asked.

"He's dancing with the Cheyenne tonight," Santa Fé answered.

"I wouldn't think he'd be so heathenish," from Mrs. Howard.

"Wal, if ye want to know," put in Santa Fé, "most likely he likes them better'n he does this outfit."

"Yes, and I don't blame him," declared Mrs. Barker.

Mr. Howard spoke gently, "We all feel very badly, Santa Fé, about the way we treated him."

A man asked, "Is there any chance of him going with us?"

Santa Fé nodded. "Yep. Me an' him's going to Fort Hall."

Ann had listened carefully to the question and answer and felt a glow of content. Much might happen before they reached Fort Hall. Then she resolutely put away the dim hope of happiness. That was not for her. It was Wilbur the people would have to depend on at Fort Hall. Still more so when they reached Oregon. Wilbur would demand his price. There was no way out.

Ann gasped and clutched at Santa Fé's arm, "What's that?"

A long, desolate howl came from the hills to the north. The people stopped talking and listened, cringing a little. The howl rose again, rising higher and higher, falling and breaking out again in wild clamor. It was an infinitely lonesome cry.

"Wolves," shrugged Santa Fé, indifferently, "coming to the feast."

The Indian dogs broke out into angry yappings and could be dimly seen padding away toward the Indian village, their tails between their legs. Before it became entirely dark, gaunt gray shapes were seen moving silently out on the battlefield. Occasionally a wolf sat back on his haunches and wailed out the gruesome cry for the dead.

The immigrants sat very late around the fire. Between the wolves out on the battlefield and the noise from the Cheyenne village they could not sleep. The infernal racket of the scalp dance died down after awhile and tired warriors sought their lodges. Then the sad minor tone of the wailing women could be heard. Women, mourning over their dead.

The people crawled into the two tepees. Talking to each other, men and women calling back and forth from one tepee to the other, "Had they got blankets enough?" and "Are you all right? 'Tain't so bad, a tepee ain't. Better'n a wagon to live in."

Santa Fé grunted, "Ain't no better house been built, nowhere, than a good tepee."

Some protested at this, but they gradually quieted down, dropping off to sleep.

IN THE tepee of Plenty Coups, late into the night, Asa, Thunderhawk and Plenty Coups sat beside the fire. The wife of Plenty Coups fed dry sticks into the fire to make a light for Asa. He had a piece of buckskin laced in a wooden hoop. With a hot metal arrowhead, held in a cleft stick, he was lightly burning words and figures into the buckskin.

"I make a talking skin," he told Thunderhawk, talking in Cheyenne. "You give it to the head man at Fort Laramie and he

will give you things we agreed on for the horses."

Old Plenty Coups leaned over and watched, absorbed. "The talking skin of the whites," he said, astonished. "I have heard of them but never before seen. Your old father is filled with wonder."

"And also," Asa went on, "things that are not for the ponies but a present to my brother Thunderhawk." Asa told over a new rifle, so much powder and lead and a bullet mold, so many bolts of red cloth, and other things. The mention of the new rifle brought a deep guttural of satisfaction from Thunderhawk.

Then Asa looked at him, smiling a little grimly, "It is because The Dawn goes with me."

"Ai ai," the wife of Plenty Coups voiced her pleasure and satisfaction. "Our son takes a Cheyenne maiden to his lodge. He will leave us no more."

Thunderhawk's stern face softened in a pleased smile. "It is well," he said and shook hands across the fire with Asa, in the manner of the white men.

"Does The Dawn know?" asked Thunderhawk.

"Not yet," Asa told him. "In the morning I tell her. Then we go to Fort Hall to place the poor people in safety. Before the deep snows come we shall be in my brother's village again."

Thunderhawk's grave tones were heard. "You are all Cheyenne now. The last drop of white blood has drained away. You sit within our hearts. I have long hoped my brother would dwell with us for all time."

"I fear for the future of my people. The white have brought us nothing but sorrow. They brought the whiskey and turned our young men into hooting jays. They brought the sickness that steals over the plains and kills my people in hundreds."

Old Plenty Coups was nodding and exclaiming in sympathy and agreement. Thunderhawk went on, a little pensively, "Once the Cheyenne dwelt far to the northeast, on the great river. We built lodges of timber and dirt to last through many winters. The squash and beans, the tobacco and corn grew for us in the river bottoms. In the winter we knew no hunger, for the Lord of Life had given us those good gifts.

"Then the whites came pressing westward, like the grasshoppers that devour all things. They drove out the mighty people, the Dacotah. We love our homes. We fought for them, but the Dacotah were too many. They drove us out from the pleasant groves and gardens on the great river. Out on to these desolate plains to wander always with only the buffalo between us and starvation."

Thunderhawk threw his hand toward Plenty Coups, protesting, "Your father, Plenty Coups, is an old man and has seen much, but he has never seen the corn standing green in the sunlight."

Old Plenty Coups nodded sadly. "It is true," he said.

"In my ignorance," Thunderhawk went on, his voice gaining animation. "In my ignorance I thought at last we were safe. The whites would never come to these desolate lands. And now the plains are white with their wagons. I am filled with fear. They kill the buffalo in rotting heaps—for fun. To waste the gifts of the Lord of Life is bad."

The aquiline face was thrown up in a lordly gesture and there was an angry gleam in the dark eyes. "We can go no further. In the end we shall fight. I see it coming. It will be war until the last Cheyenne has taken the long trail after The Arrowhead.

"The future is dark to me. I am glad that my brother will be sitting at the council fire of the Cheyenne."

Thunderhawk sat a while, silent, gazing sadly into the dying fire. Then he rose to his stately height, pulled the buffalo robe up over his massive shoulders, spoke very gently to Asa, "The Dawn is yours," and went out into the night.

IN THE freezing dawn the immigrants were busy cooking breakfast. They were telling each other it was the first real night's rest they had known in ages.

Under the level rays of the morning sun the dead Blackfeet could be seen out on the battlefield. White bones glistened where the dogs and wolves had been at work.

The Indian village, too, was early astir.

Smoke was stealing up out of the tops of the tepees and hanging like a benediction in the frosty air. A group of Indians came over to the immigrant camp and threw down piles of jerked buffalo, rawhide ropes, and a few curios, Indian made saddles.

Ann, rather unconsciously, kept watch of the Indian village. After awhile she saw Asa coming out between the golden brown tepees. The Dawn was walking beside him. By the last tepee they stopped and talked a minute. With a jealous pang Ann saw Asa put his hands on The Dawn's shoulders, shaking her a little, the Indian girl laughing happily up in his face. The Dawn went back among the tepees and Asa came on alone. He was a little grim and aloof.

"Good morning, Asa," called Mrs. Howard. "We was hoping you would come over last night." She had preempted the rocking chair and was rocking herself back and forth near the fire. She seemed to be quite satisfied with herself.

"Good morning," said the polite Asa.

With Santa Fé and some of the men Asa went busily to work, dividing everything up into suitable packs for the horses. Santa Fé had managed to save his own saddle, but the others had been burned. Rawhide surcingles were rigged with stirrups of looped leather to hang from the sides. Most of the people would have only blankets for saddles.

"What is Thunderhawk doing?" asked Santa Fé.

"They move out tonight or in the morning," Asa told him. "They will take their dead back to the cottonwood grove and raise the scaffolds beside The Arrowhead."

Idle Indians began drifting over to watch the immigrants. They sat in a little group, blanket wrapped, faces stolid and indifferent but dark eyes glancing here and there in eager curiosity. Apparently oblivious to the whites, not a movement nor a facial expression escaped their searching eyes.

Plenty Coups was there, in high good humor, talking occasionally with Asa and Santa Fé.

Wilbur sat down beside Mrs. Howard's rocking chair. "Seems to me," he began, "Me and Ann might as well be married right off."

"Well," Mrs. Howard drawled, uncertainly, "I don't know, Wilbur. Ann hadn't ought to be rushed."

"What do you mean?" demanded Wilbur, his face reddening in growing anger. "I thought it was all settled."

Mrs. Howard tittered and smirked. "'Taint never settled 'bout a girl till you've got her."

"Now look here," argued Wilbur, "I ain't going to stand this. You said she was going to marry me."

"Well, dear me, Wilbur," she protested, "A girl can change her mind, can't she?"

WILBUR followed Mrs. Howard's gaze and saw that it rested on Asa. His face went dark red in jealous rage. He went over to his pile of stuff and, with back turned to the people, examined his big horse pistol and stuck it down in his belt. He came and sat down on the breastwork, moodily looking from Asa to Ann and back again. There was murder in his heart. He could see that when Ann or Asa thought themselves free from observation their glances sought each other out. If their eyes met they quickly looked away, both disgusted that they should be looking at each other. What Wilbur saw in their eyes set him to walking restlessly around biting his nails. He noticed the people ignored him. All their friendly talk was for Asa. They were casting him off, like an old shoe they had used and worn out. After all he'd done for them. He wouldn't stand it.

Mrs. Howard called to Ann. "Ann, go and get a pail of water." Ann picked up a bucket and started for the creek. Then Mrs. Howard spoke to Asa. "Asa, I wish you'd go with Ann. I don't like having her go alone so near them heathen Indians."

"Oh, mother, I'm all right," protested Ann, dislike in her voice.

Mrs. Howard spoke again. "You go with her, Asa."

Asa threw down a rope with a gesture of annoyance and followed Ann. Some of the people smiled broadly. One man whispered, "Mrs. Howard knows which side her bread is buttered." Wilbur overheard that remark. Perhaps the man wanted him to.

Asa stood beside Ann as she dipped up a bucket of water. He tried to keep his eyes on the cool white peaks that reached up to the sky. He found he was yearning over the bright brown hair and the sweet misty eyes. Without a word he took her in his arms and pressed her strong young body against him. Hand on her forehead he tipped her head back and kissed her. Kissed her eyes and hair and lips, murmuring "Oh Ann, Ann, I love you."

She gasped and struggled free; with flushed cheeks and questioning eyes she stared at him.

"Will you marry me, Ann?" he said.

Ann's eyes softened. She looked away and then back to him. She threw out her hands in a gesture of abnegation. There was heartbreak in her voice. "I can't, Asa. I told you I can't."

"But why?" he insisted. "You love me, don't you?"

"Yes," drearily, "I love you."

"Then why can't yon marry me?"

"Oh, can't you see," she pleaded. "The people are ruined. They have nothing. They are dependent on Wilbur. If I don't marry him he will leave them to starve. Can't you see? They have nothing at all but what I can give them. It is my duty."

Asa smiled quite happily. "That's all right," he said. "I've got plenty. I'll take care of them," and he took her in his arms again.

She beat at him with clenched fists and struggled free again. "You brute," she gasped. "Can't you understand? I can't do it now anyway. Sell myself to the highest bidder!" she stormed.

Asa stared at her, the happiness draining out of his face. "It's you who are the brute," he said, in scorn and anger. "We love each other and because of your silly pride and sense of duty, you'll wreck both our lives."

He stared at her, and asked, quietly, "Is that so?"

She looked away across the gray sage and up at the white peaks through tear-dimmed eyes. She nodded, and whispered, "I must."

Asa stood and looked at her a long time, seeing her dimly. In a sudden burst of anger he shrugged, muttered, "To hell with you," and started back to the camp.

HE THOUGHT fast and furiously as he walked. His anger left him—ashamed. Poor girl. He could give things to the people. Give more and before Wilbur did and keep her from marrying Wilbur. Things would work out yet. He wanted to go back and say comforting words to Ann, but silly pride wouldn't let him—yet.

He saw that Thunderhawk and The Dawn were coming through the sage from the Indian village. With a sudden, sickening shock he stopped and stared at them. "God" he muttered. "What a fool! What a fool! What a mess."

The Dawn had been so happy that morning when he told her of the agreement with Thunderhawk. He hated to hurt The Dawn. He wondered if The Dawn had seen him down at the creek with Ann. She must have. They were in plain sight of everybody. He waited for them to come up. Thunderhawk greeted him as usual but The Dawn was very quiet, a remote look in her dark eyes.

Old Santa Fé was sitting on a roll of blankets. He had cleaned his own rifle and now was at work on Asa's. As Asa passed him he said, "Hand me yer knife, Asa. I got a good whet rock here and I'll take the nicks out."

Asa handed him the long knife, absently, not even grinning at Santa Fé's insulting reference to nicks in his smooth, keen knife.

Wilbur, too, had seen Asa and Ann down by the creek. His lips were twitching and he slobbered a little as he walked nervously back and forth. He saw Asa and The Dawn standing with Thunderhawk, looking down at Santa Fé and talking a little. He kept looking at Asa. Finally he could see nothing but Asa. Asa grown to fill the whole world and crowd him out of it. He walked back a way, then turned and walked toward them, eyes dilated, shivering a little.

For long years afterward the people argued over Wilbur's next action. They argued as to whether Wilbur had noticed that Asa was completely unarmed, or whether, in jealous rage, he suddenly went crazy.

The people were grouped around the little breastwork. It made a convenient place to sit down. Most of them were busy, mending, contriving, fixing things. Beyond them, close at hand, the two tepees rose up against the far background of the snowy peaks of the mountain. Santa Fé was sitting on a blanket roll in front of the tepees, working on Asa's rifle. His own and Asa's knives lay beside him ready to be honed.

Ann came up, moved the knives along and sat down beside Santa Fé. To the right, Asa, Thunderhawk and The Dawn were standing, talking idly. There was a gleam of pleasantry in Thunderhawk's eyes as he looked at Asa and The Dawn. Back of them, across the creek, the brown tepees of the Cheyenne village rose out of the flat. A group of Indians sat on the ground a little way from Thunderhawk. They sat immobile, watching the immigrants in unappeased curiosity. Occasionally one spoke a few words in the Cheyenne gutturals and the eyes of the rest shifted toward whatever had been mentioned. Around and beyond, the gray sage flower flowed away into the distance.

Asa and Thunderhawk were facing the Indian village with The Dawn in front of them. They were talking to her in Cheyenne, playfully, and she was laughing up at them. The long plaits of hair hanging down in front of her shoulders had strands of red worsted braided in. There was a spot of vermilion on each rounded cheek. As she glanced up at Asa with dancing eyes the warm blood deepened the coppery bronze of her face.

WILBUR had walked out a little way into the sage. He was moving his arms and fingers as if in pain. No one paid any attention to him. He circled around and then walked back. Walked up to within a dozen paces behind Asa. The Dawn noticed his red face, bloodshot eyes and half-open slobbering mouth. She stopped talking and her eyes widened a little in wonder.

Without warning, Wilbur had his big pistol out, aiming at Asa's back. With a shriek of fear, "Na! Na!" The Dawn broke through between Asa and Thunderhawk, pushing Asa aside as she came. With a shattering roar the pistol exploded. The Dawn gasped, quivered, and sank back into Asa's arms.

A tigerish leap and Thunderhawk's knife slipped into Wilbur's heart. An instant later Santa Fé's high swung rifle butt came down on his head. Skull crushed, Wilbur sank down in a huddled heap.

A fiendish yell from the group of Cheyenne warriors. In a flying leap an Indian was on his knees on Wilbur's back, his knife circling the scalp. The Indian bent down, seized an edge of the gashed skin in his teeth and tore it loose. With a diabolical yell he held the blood dripping trophy high in the air.

Pandemonium broke loose. Women running and screaming, men yelling and jumping for their rifles. Thunderhawk and Plenty Coups were yelling at the maddened Indians, knocking down knives and hatchets. For one breathless instant it seemed there would be an immediate massacre of all the whites.

Tense eyed, clubbed rifle in hand, ready for the battle, Santa Fé watched the efforts of Thunderhawk and Plenty Coups to gain control of the Indians. Some of the older warriors joined the efforts of the chiefs, and the younger warriors, bitter and sullen, were hustled off toward the Indian village.

Santa Fé relaxed and shook his head. He never expected to be as near death, and live, as he had been at that moment.

Asa had caught The Dawn in his arms as she fell. He was sitting on the ground now, her head resting on his knees. After the first shock of horror Ann had come to them, kneeling beside the Indian girl, holding one of her hands. Santa Fé came and stood over them, leaning on his bloody rifle, unheeded tears in the fierce old eyes. Thunderhawk came and dropped to his knees beside his dying sister. "Little sister," he pleaded, "do not leave us, little sister."

The Dawn was conscious. She seemed to be in no pain. The elk teeth on her dress rustled a little as her breast rose and fell spasmodically. A little trickle of bright blood ran down from the corner of lips that would never laugh again. Slowly she

raised one arm up around Asa's neck. With a gulping sob he laid his face down to hers and kissed her. Her eyes smiled a little, quite happily.

She began to whisper, her voice gathering a little strength, talking to Asa, as though there was no one else in the world. "I am willing to go. Your heart is in the lodges of your people."

"Not true," groaned Asa. "My heart goes out with The Dawn."

There was a look of smiling wisdom in her eyes. Slowly she brought the hand of Ann up onto her breast and began groping for Asa's. She found it and brought them together. She held them under hers, whispering again to Asa, "Make my words plain to the white girl. You are to go together. I, The Dawn, ask it."

The dark wide eyes grew dim. Through a haze she saw her brother and smiled a little tender smile, then sought Asa again. She held his eyes to the end.

NEXT morning, in the level rays of sunrise, Asa stood on the deserted camp ground of the Cheyenne and watched the village file away to the east.

It had been a bitter night. Watching beside The Dawn, and, at length, telling Thunderhawk and the good old Plenty Coups and his wife that he must go now with his own people. The sob-rocked frame of the forlorn old woman had been a grievous thing to bear. He gave Plenty Coups a talking skin for himself, an order on Fort Laramie so that as long as he lived he should never want. He had begged Thunderhawk if the time ever came when his counsel was needed that he would send him word. Long years afterward, suffering under broken treaties, beset on all sides by treacherous and hostile whites, his people decimated and starving, Thunderhawk sent the word and Asa redeemed his promise to help.

Asa stood now, tall and straight and very much alone in the morning sun watching his Indian friends disappear around the point of the ridge to the east. Very sadly he watched them riding away out of his life. Thunderhawk was the last to go. On the last rise he turned his pony and sat there, looking back at Asa. He waved to Asa, the sunlight flashing on the burnished copper arm bands. Asa threw up his hands in the sign of peace. He was whispering "Good-by, Thunderhawk." The Indian chief turned and rode on over the hill out of sight.

Asa wandered sadly around the abandoned camping place. He noted the tepee circles, an old moccasin, bones split open for the marrow. He picked up a broken arrow and threw it down again. He was bidding farewell to all that.

After a while Asa noticed the immigrants standing around their camp, watching him. He shook his shoulders as if throwing off a garment, then walked briskly over to the lodges of his people. They had just finished burying Wilbur.

His eyes searched the group for Ann, but did not find her. Santa Fé was all business. "Yah, Asa, let's git them horses packed. We got a right smart piece to go yet."

Asa paid no attention to old Santa Fé. He had seen Ann going down over the bank of the creek, a bucket in her hand. He walked rapidly after her.

Ann had been wondering, smiling a little to herself, happily, and then feeling shocked at what she called her levity. Telling herself it had all been so awful. The sudden, violent death of two people should have sent her, mourning, to her prayers. Well, she prayed for them, and would continue to do so, and smiled happily. She wondered when Asa would come to her. She began to be a little afraid of him. He was so dreadfully direct sometimes. She sat down by the creek, hidden under the bank from the people. Asa wouldn't find her there.

But there was a swift movement above and a grave-faced Asa came down the bank in long swift strides. He stood there, looking down at her. The sunlight was dancing in her hair, bringing out the coppery tints. He put his hand down on the dear head.

"Ann, Ann," he asked her very softly, "will you marry me, Ann?"

She kept her head down. He could see the red blood creeping up her bent cheek.

In a very little voice she said, "I thought you told me to go to hell."

He laughed, stooped down and swept her into his arms. After a while he said, "I may be going there myself."

"Oh, well then," she laughed, a happy catch in her voice, "then I want to go there, too."

THEY sat and talked of this and that and mostly of each other. Talked as lovers will who at last have found each other. "When did you first know you loved me?" and "I've loved you all my life." "Silly, how could you before you knew me?" "I loved the dream that was you."

They became conscious that someone was standing on the bank looking down at them. Old Santa Fé was there, his hands on his hips, smiling.

"Whenever ye git a little time, Asa," he said, "let's go to Fort Hall."

Asa grinned up at him. "This is a good place. Why move?"

Then he told Santa Fé to come down, he had important news for him.

" 'Taint no news to me," laughed Santa Fé. "I seen it coming way back yonder."

He came down and they put the old plainsmen between them.

"The news is this, old-timer," Asa told him. "We're all going to Oregon. Live in a house. Plant cabbages and all that."

"Who? Me?" protested Santa Fé. "Yah, I ain't got no cabbages."

"Oh please, Santa Fé," Ann begged. "We just can't get along without you. You won't have to plant things. You can hunt and trap out there. Then between whiles you can come to us. Our home will be your home. Please, Santa Fé," and she took the gnarled old fist in her hands.

There was moisture in the fierce old eyes. "Yah, I dunno," he parried. "Mebbeso, Asa here ain't keen about having a fine looking man like me hanging round his tepee."

Asa spoke gravely, "We've been together a long time, Santa Fé. Let's don't lose each other now."

"Please, Santa Fé," Ann begged.

The fierce old eyes were winking fast. His voice was husky as he said, "It's real nice of you two. All right. I'll try it a whirl."

The old Indian fighter brushed his eyes with the back of his hand and became very brisk and businesslike.

"Come on now," he urged. "If we're going to Oregon let's git started."

With Santa Fé between them, their arms through his, they walked up to the camp.

Asa went direct to Mr. Howard.

"Will you marry Ann and me right now?"

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Howard, his careworn face lighting up. "You and Ann? Asa, I am glad, glad." It seemed he would never get through shaking Asa's hand. Then he hurried off after his Bible. Ann was still wearing the doeskin Indian dress. Asa went over, unrolled his parfleche, took out and put on the new buckskin shirt The Arrowhead had brought him so long ago. They came and stood, hand in

hand, before a grave-faced Mr. Howard. The people gathered about them.

Mrs. Barker broke in with, "Wait, Ann. Wait a minute. I got something for ye." She reached inside her neck, pulled out a string and untied a thin gold ring.

"Here," she said. "I want ye should use this. And if ye git along as well as me and Abner did, that's all I ask."

"But, Mrs. Barker," Ann protested, "That's your wedding ring. You want to keep it."

"Ain't nothing I'd ruther do than have ye have it. Ye got to please me in this, Ann."

And so, in the sunshine and the gray sage, under the towering white peaks of the mountains, they were married.

Mrs. Howard seemed to feel the occasion called for some display of emotion from her. "Well," she said, lugubriously, "I hope it all turns out for the best."

Asa grinned at her. "Oh yes, mother," he said, "We all hope so." Then, in tones of mock sadness he said, "But cheer up, perhaps it won't." Ann giggled.

It took a long time, that first packing of wild horses by inexperienced men. Under the skilled direction of Asa and Santa Fé they at last got it done.

"It'll be easier each time," Santa Fé told them, "and then ye'll be glad ye'r shut of them wagons."

Asa had picked out a chunky, dark dappled gray for his wife to ride. He saddled and mounted the pony to see if it was gentle. The pony promptly tried all the pitching tricks there were but Asa merely grinned.

He lifted Ann to his own buckskin and would himself ride the gray until it gentled down. With Ann at his side, for all of life, he rode out westward on the long trail to Oregon.

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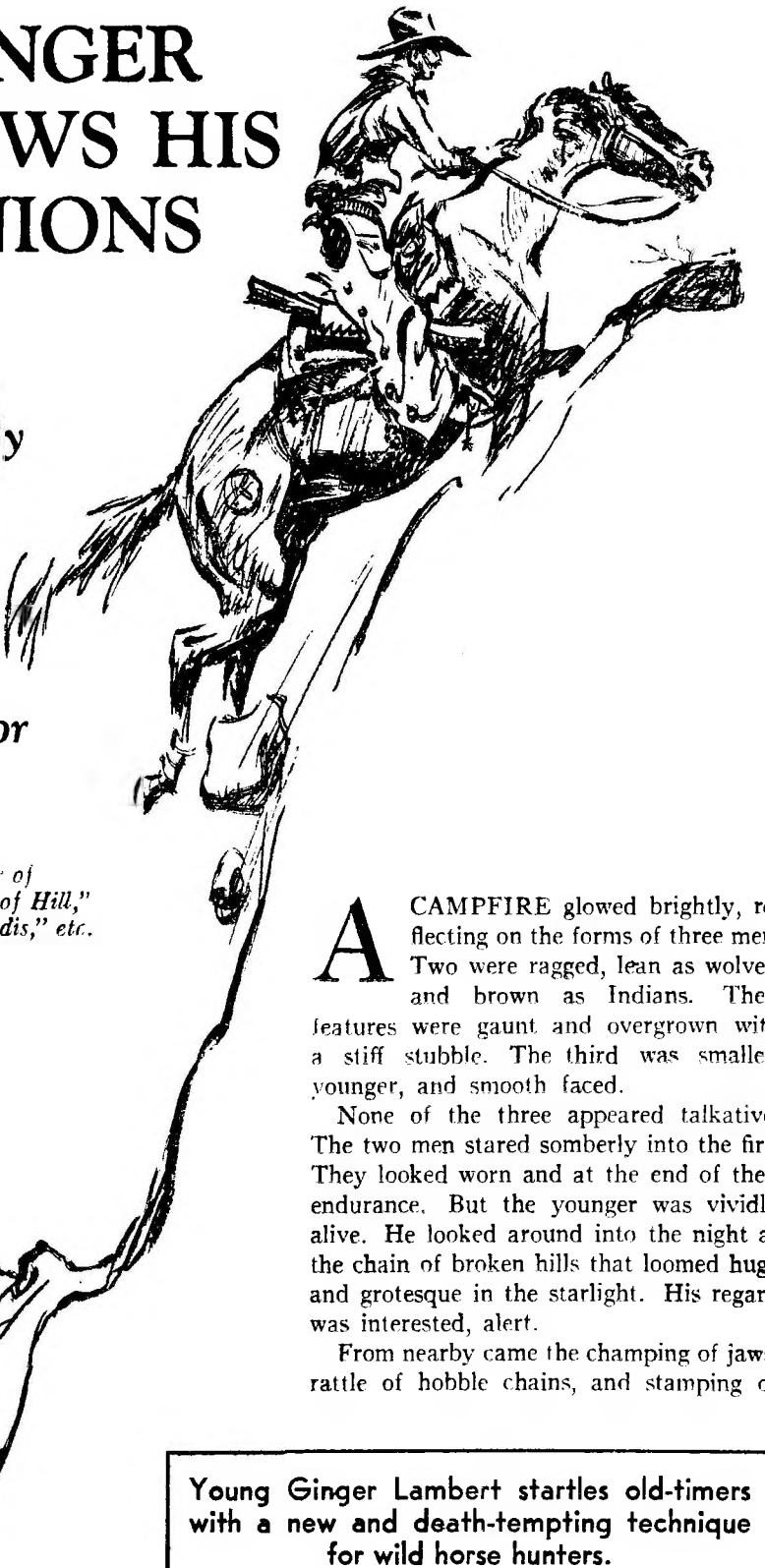
GINGER KNOWS HIS ONIONS



By

Glenn A. Connor

Author of "The Gifts of Hill," "Lucky Faddis," etc.

A CAMPFIRE glowed brightly, reflecting on the forms of three men. Two were ragged, lean as wolves, and brown as Indians. Their features were gaunt and overgrown with a stiff stubble. The third was smaller, younger, and smooth faced.

None of the three appeared talkative. The two men stared somberly into the fire. They looked worn and at the end of their endurance. But the younger was vividly alive. He looked around into the night at the chain of broken hills that loomed huge and grotesque in the starlight. His regard was interested, alert.

From nearby came the champing of jaws, rattle of hobble chains, and stamping of

Young Ginger Lambert startles old-timers with a new and death-tempting technique for wild horse hunters.

hoofs where the horses were rustling for feed. Ginger, the boy, could make out their dim outlines on the narrow flat. Two stood stationary, with drooping heads—like their riders, too weary to eat. Ginger bit his lip to hold back an impulsive remark.

Their outfit was poor and scant—all except the horses, of course. Saddles and pack-saddles lay scattered about upon the ground. A piece of dirty canvas was covered over the panniers that contained their supplies. There were no tents. They had nothing but their tarpaulins to shelter them from the weather, henskin blankets to sleep between—inadequate but light to carry about.

This was the camp of Truit and Bowers, wild-horse hunters. Ginger Lambert, an eighteen-year-old Canadian, was along in the capacity of cook. His face was unlined, ruddy and good natured, his eyes blue and twinkling, his hair—the color of ginger.

"Guess we'll have to give 'im up, Lew."

It was Truit who spoke. His voice was husky and came forth with difficulty. Bowers turned a slow look in his direction. Ginger likewise ceased contemplating the night and looked at Bowers. He wasn't sure whether it was the flash of the campfire he caught in Bowers's black eyes or whether they glittered from another cause. Anyway, Truit added quickly, "Our grub's gettin' low."

Bowers continued to regard him with that same hard look. A harsh laugh suddenly broke from his compressed lips. "I know, Jim—you want to quit. All right. But I'm stickin' to that grulla hoss till I get him!"

Truit flushed. There was a hint of contempt in Bowers's reply. But instead of making a bad situation worse, Truit got stiffly to his feet and stumbled off to bed. Ginger let his eyes stray back to their former occupation, but now his brow was creased.

Fifteen minutes later Bowers followed the example of his partner and turned in. But Ginger lingered at the fire, his bright, intelligent face screwed up in thought. Once he slapped his thigh in appreciation of some idea. This deep study he maintained for some time, until the late moon popped suddenly into view to bathe their rugged surroundings with its weird light. Then he, too, crept off to bed.

WHEN Lew Bowers awakened in the gray dawn it was to find himself alone. An involuntary laugh of bitterness escaped him when he saw that his partner's bed was missing also. Truit hadn't risked being talked out of quitting, he had pulled out some time during the night.

Ginger, too, was gone. His bed was still there, but Bowers readily found an explanation for that. It consisted of little more than a ragged tarp that the kid hadn't thought it worth while to carry back to civilization.

Again Bowers laughed but there was a distinct hurt in his laughter now. Even the kid had deserted him—Ginger, whom Bowers had grown to like, his cheery smile that greeted them after a fruitless day. Bowers hadn't appreciated until now just all that it meant. But he realized now that it had given him new hope. Had he been mistaken in Ginger and that "never say quit" grin?

Bowers flung his tarp aside with a vicious gesture and started tugging on his boots. What Truit had said about their grub stock being low was true enough. But with the two others gone the stock would last him just three times as long. Flipping the canvas protector aside he ascertained that Truit and Ginger had taken none of it.

Still, there was no use in wasting time even if his aching bones and protesting muscles did hanker for rest. The chuck would probably be exhausted as it was before he captured el Cabra.

Bowers' black eyes glittered at the thought of him. All that was required to uplift him and keep him going, was to think of the wild grulla stallion. That he and Truit had been pursuing el Cabra for the past six weeks—that the wily stallion had as craftily evaded their crafty set traps—that their taking turns running el Cabra to wind him was equally unsuccessful—that their running horses, fleet, superb animals themselves, were ridden to a whisper—none of this came under consideration as he considered the prize.

The Humboldts, a wilderness of almost

impenetrable brakes, were home. Neither Bowers nor Truit had been aware of such an animal, nor had there been a wild stallion known to them by that name, until they had invaded the brakes in pursuit of their profession. Ginger accompanied them, more in search of adventure than anything else. Carrying a cook along was a new experience to these two, but not averse to trying out the experiment, they had let him come along. Ginger had asked for nothing but the experience.

The Humboldts abounded with salty little mustangs. But once Bowers and Truit had caught sight of the grulla leader of one of these herds, the rest had been forgotten. They were wild horse hunters because they loved the wild, untamed little beasts, and one sight of the grulla stallion was all that was needed to concentrate all their efforts on capturing him.

At the constant risk of life and limb they kept upon his trail. They haunted him like twin nemeses. But the horse was like a goat among the rocks which led them to name him. The trails he took them over were almost suicidal—up the sheer faces of cliffs, along the dizzy brinks of gorges, over treacherous rock slides that their thundering, clashing hoofs often started moving anew. They rode along narrow shelves cut out of the abrupt faces of cliffs where a stumble or misstep would have shot them into oblivion. Some of the shelves were rotted and crumbled back of their horses' hoofs, echoing up from an abyss with a hollow plunk.

That Truit had got his bellyful of this was not to be wondered at. Their narrow squeaks were many and hair-raising. To have a horse go skittering for hundreds of feet down the smooth face of a rock, his steel-shod hoofs striking fire in his frantic endeavor to keep his feet under him, going so fast that the wind of the descent stings the rider's face—is no experience for weak nerves.

If Truit was not exactly addicted to nervousness he found it, nevertheless, a nerve-wracking experience. The glamor of the life and the desire for el Cabra was eventually rubbed out for him. He lost all ambition for riding hell-bent in such a country, especially since they were no nearer copping the prize than when they had set out.

But Bowers was of different caliber. Truit had always been the cautious one of the partnership. Bowers always rode wild, heedless of neck and limb. If he had nerves they were forged of iron. He followed on el Cabra's trail wherever it led, disregarding his mount's sore disadvantage from carrying his weight. Once he leaped his horse across a chasm a dozen feet in width, a treacherous, gravelly, abrupt slope on the opposite side. His horse made it by scrambling desperately. Had it been otherwise Bowers would have had no further interest in el Cabra. Spikelike rocks awaited them fifty feet below, worn almost to needle points by the dashing torrents that tore down the chasm in flood time.

Truit had plowed up and looked on aghast. That was the nearest they ever came to picking el Cabra up. Not even the grulla horse had the nerve to take that chance. He had fled around the head of the gorge. Truit took the same course. That was why el Cabra escaped. Had Truit been the dare-devil that Bowers was, they might have trapped the wild stallion against that chasm. But Bowers had been unable to head him alone.

That stuck in Bowers's craw. It was the nearest they had ever come to an outright quarrel. Truit called Bowers all kinds of a fool, and Bowers told him waspishly that he, Truit, didn't have the nerve of a sick cat.

There was a marked difference after that. Truit lost all interest in the chase. Bowers's attitude was that of one who had come to the conclusion that if el Cabra was to be captured he would have to do it alone. Both men were worn to shadows and irritable.

Ginger was a closer observer than they gave him credit for. He knew a split was coming before the two riders themselves realized it. But he gave no more of a hint of this than he did of his disapproval of their methods in trying to capture el Cabra.

Ginger knew practically nothing about horses, their natures, habits, or anything else. This was his first experience with wild-horse hunters. But he had ideas. And

he had the intelligence to see the insurmountable obstacles they were bucking. el Cabra was in his element in this wild, broken, dangerous country. All the odds were in his favor. They could never catch him under such conditions, and only death or serious injury awaited their efforts.

That Truit was first to realize it did not awaken any considerable respect in Ginger. That was because Truit was willing to pass el Cabra up. Truit had never said it in so many words, but Ginger knew it was so. Oh, yes, there was more depth to Ginger than either Bowers or Truit realized. But how could they plumb the boy's mind? Ginger seldom spoke and never offered an opinion. He just used his eyes and ears, and let his mind analyze the rest.

BOWERS was bent over whittling shavings to kindle a fire. He straightened up suddenly, listening in amazement. From down the draw came a merry whistling, a rattling of hobble chains, and the crack of shod hoofs on rocks. Then several horses scrambled into view. Bowers stared with fallen jaw.

"Ginger!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

Ginger it was, with his accustomed grin and as optimistic in manner as ever. Bowers sat back weakly, trying to control his sudden emotion. For some reason he couldn't explain he wanted to shout—wanted to rush over and snatch Ginger off his decrepit little nag and pummel him—for joy. The life of a wild-horse hunter was trying enough without the hell of loneliness. If he had liked Ginger before, he loved him now.

But Bowers never acted on his impulses. Wholly unconscious of the effect of his appearance on Bowers, Ginger slid to the ground and started rubbing down the animal that Bowers would be riding that day. Bowers watched him. Ginger appeared as usual, still Bowers sensed a difference. His curiosity moved him to speech.

"Thought maybe you'd pulled out with Jim."

Ginger looked around, surprised. His surprise was evident to Bowers. Ginger appeared almost offended.

"Why, no, I'm still stickin' around," he said slowly. "Did you want me to go?"

"Hell no!" Bowers spoke violently. Something about it emboldened Ginger.

"Then I'm stayin' with yuh. Goin' tuh help yuh catch el Cabra—if yuh'll let me," said Ginger, flushing.

Bowers almost choked. "Ginger, c'mere!" he ordered gruffly.

Ginger sidled over like a school boy caught in some misdemeanor. He stood astraddle of the dead coals of their cooking fire, doubtful and ill at ease. Bowers closed one eye and squinted up at him. With an impulsive gesture the wild horse hunter thrust out a paw. "Shake, Ginger. From now on we is partners. And, by grab, we're a-goin' tuh get that grulla hoss!"

Ginger met him in a hard grip. Then something happened to Ginger. His abashment disappeared. He was a partner now and he had equal rights to speak. Always before he had addressed Bowers as "Mr. Bowers." Now, "Lew, you bet we're goin' tuh get him!" he agreed enthusiastically. "But not the way you been goin' at it."

There! It was out! Ginger waited in fear for Bowers's reaction. But Bowers regarded him stoically to hide the effect. "How'll we go about it, then?" he inquired with difficult calm.

Ginger grinned with renewed confidence, then mysteriously. He again took the bull by the horns so to speak. "Lew, you've tried your way," he charged warmly. "Look at yuh! Rode to a shadder! Six weeks now you been after el Cabra an' no nearer tuh gettin' him 'n when you set out. Lew, yuh can't never get him the way you're goin' at it."

Ginger's earnestness impressed Bowers in spite of himself. What did this kid know about wild horses and how to capture them? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Yet Bowers found himself listening to him and appreciating the truth of his remarks. Faced with what had been his past experience it did not look hopeless.

"I *got* tuh have that grulla hoss!" he muttered.

"Then let me show yuh the way tuh get him."

Bowers jerked his head erect, his black eyes ablaze. "Shoot!"

Ginger shook his head. "I can't tell yuh —I'll have tuh show ya. And it'll take some time," he warned.

"Don't care if it takes a year!" Bowers averred strongly.

"An' will yuh trust me? Do just what I say?"

Bowers's hesitation was brief. It was unorthodox. But Ginger's effect on him just then was overpowering. Bowers nodded his head. His assent was as good as his bond. No matter what might be his change of heart later, he would live up to it.

"It's your turn. Now what?"

BOWERS not only kept his contract, but he asked no questions. But by the time they were housed in a dugout Bowers began to suspect the workings of Ginger's mind. They were to be in there for the winter. That was evident.

Did the kid think they could play the grulla out by running him through snowdrifts? Well, they might at that, but where was the horse that could buck the snow with the wild stallion? Where was there any relay of horses that could? Bowers's string were of the best but he couldn't claim any such ability for them.

No doubt the snow fell and drifted to unbelievable depths in the Humboldts. All the signs indicated it. But on the other hand a continuous wind seemed to blow in them. That meant the hills would be swept bare, which was necessary for the wild horses to get feed. But at the same time didn't it stand to reason that el Cabra would stick to these bare ridges? So where would be the advantage?

Ginger said nothing of his theory. But during the weeks that followed Bowers became even more convinced that he had guessed it. All their time was spent making preparations for the winter. Nothing was done even toward locating el Cabra's whereabouts.

"Well, I guess we're ready tuh start packin' in our winter supplies," Ginger said one morning. This was the latter part of October.

A couple of weeks later Bowers looked up at a murky sky. Already the hills had been blanketed with a light covering of snow. The air was heavy with a deathlike silence except for a low moaning that seemed to issue from the very heavens themselves. Bowers shivered. There was a chill in the air that cut to the very bone. Then his rugged features became wrinkled in a worried frown. Ginger had made a last trip out alone. Bowers couldn't imagine what for. The stock of grub they had on hand now seemed inexhaustible. There was even hay and grain stored in a second shelter they had constructed.

"Looks like a mean storm brewin'," muttered Bowers. "I wish Ginger 'ud hurry up back!"

Then a merry whistling again reached his ears. For the second time Ginger handed him a surprise. He appeared in sight on the naked ridge—on foot! The horses! Where were their horses? Ginger had gone with every solitary one. His first sigh of relief turned into a curse of consternation. Unable to control his anxiety he hurried to meet Ginger.

Ginger explained in a few words. He had arranged with one of the ranches outside the Humboldts to winter their animals. Bowers stared at him utterly confounded. "We won't need 'em," Ginger volunteered. "An' we ain't got no way of feedin' 'em."

"But that hay and grain?" choked Bowers.

"Oh, that's for el Cabra," Ginger informed him easily.

Well, here was something else for Bowers to chew on!

The morning arrived in a blinding blizzard. Bowers rolled out of his bunk grumpy and on edge. Without a horse he was wholly lost. He couldn't fathom Ginger's maneuver. He had roiled the matter over in his mind the greater part of the night but was no nearer to an answer.

After dressing he fought his way through the piling drifts to the stable shelter. What his purpose was he had no more idea. He stared at the empty stalls. Of course he had not expected to keep all their horses. But two at least. He shook his head. What did the kid figure to accomplish with them both afoot?

His drifting eye fell upon his saddle and he gave it a vicious kick. "I don't know

what the hell use I got for you now!"

"Tuh ride with."

Bowers was ignorant that Ginger had followed him. He whirled about. Ginger was chuckling. Bowers cursed. He seemed on the point of blowing up. Ginger's face sobered. "You promised tuh trust me," he reminded gravely.

"Hell!" Bowers turned and walked out before he lost all control.

The matter was beyond his depth. Was the kid crazy or what?

In the corner of the dugout stood several long burlap-wrapped packages. Bowers's eyes happened inadvertently upon them on his return. He had wondered before what they contained. Ginger entered and saw him eying them. Again that mysterious smile. Bowers had never asked concerning them, but Ginger knew he was bitten with curiosity. Maybe in Bowers's present mood it might be wise to let him have a peek at his hole card.

Without remark, but with eyes glistening with something of youth's superiority, Ginger proceeded over to the packages and started undoing their wrappings. Bowers's eyes were popping as two pairs of skis and two pairs of snowshoes were brought to his view. But not with comprehension. Bowers's ignorance of such things was too great and his knowledge too slight for him to realize how they could play an important part in capture.

"I bite, kid. What's the answer?"

"The answer, Lew. Once I run a deer down on a pair of these." He indicated the skis. "In deep snow of course. That's what give me the idea. I come from a snowy part of Canada an' was raised on snowshoes an' skis.

Bowers looked at him blankly, his credulity taxed. "Run a deer down! On them things?"

Ginger merely nodded, eyes glistening.

"You got tuh learn how tuh use 'em, Lew. Soon as this storm is over I'll take yuh out an' give yuh some lessons."

Bowers looked his disdain. "Plumb foolishness," he growled.

But a few days later Ginger gave him a demonstration that opened the wild-horse hunter's eyes. Ginger shot down the steep slope back of their dugout like a rocket. The skier had gained so much momentum by the time he reached the dugout that all that was visible to Bowers was a blurred streak and a skither of snow. If he was not entirely convinced, he was at least given food for thought.

"I'll admit you got a hoss skinned right enough for speed, in goin' *down* hill," vouchsafed Bowers, when they were again in the dugout. "But how about goin' up hill? Bet yuh couldn't outstride a turtle!"

"There's a lot we got tuh depend on Lady Luck," Ginger admitted. "But so far everything's fallin' in our favor. For instance this storm. Drifted considerable, but the snow's layin' pretty even. Now if it crusts before the wind starts tuh blow again we're sittin' prettier still. No, he agreed, in answer to Bowers's query, "I can't make much time goin' up hill. But if the snow gets a foot or so deeper I can make as good or better time than a horse can. You see they gotta plow through it while I'm walkin' over the top. Then I'll use snowshoes for up-hill work."

Bowers considered. Ginger's argument was sound enough. And the snow had sifted around pretty evenly. The hilltops were not bare as a rule. Bowers's thoughts reverted to the freaks of nature and this unusual action of the wind that seemed a permanent part of the Humboldts. The elements themselves seemed to be in sympathy with them.

But there always returned his own failures to assail him with doubts. El Cabra had grown upon him in the past week as almost unattainable.

"We-ell, I don't know," he muttered. "You *may* show me something yet."

The day was not far off when Ginger's theories would be put to the test. The first snow that fell did crust as they hoped it would, and before the wind did any mentionable damage. Then came more snow, fine, powdery crystals that piled up in great ridges, shifted hither and yon by the capricious winds, and by freakish chance drifted in spots light of snow before. The whole land was enveloped in it, a treacherous wallow as deceitful as quicksand. The two determined it so by close inspection. In places

it was packed so hard as to hold their com- now they had caught sight of el Cabra and at other places they dropped in up to their armpits.

Ginger said the time had arrived. Twice now they had caught sight of el Cabra and his bunch along the brow of a distant ridge, pawing down through the snow to feed. Now they had to dig their way out of the dugout, completely buried under the snow. It was a strange sight to see smoke arising out of the center of a huge snowdrift.

"Him an' his herd is holdin' out back of that divide," Bowers said, not without excitement.

"I'm startin' out after him in the mornin'," Ginger declared quietly. The sky had cleared, and Ginger predicted that the weather would remain settled for a few days at least. Bowers was to climb to the top of the hill back of their dugout and there keep a lookout. Ginger had found him a helpless experiment on skis. Bowers was at home in the saddle, but on snowshoes or skis he didn't belong at all. Give him half a day, he said, and he believed he could make it to the top of his lookout.

That night found Ginger preparing for the chase. Bowers watched him with interest although his preparations were simple enough. He assembled a handful of matches stored in a waterproof box, an army haversack stocked with rations, two wool blankets rolled in a piece of canvas—all just in case of emergency. Then he looked to his snowshoes and waxed the runners of his skis. With that he was ready.

The next morning early they both set out, Ginger with his pack on his back and at his hip Bowers's six-shooter that the latter had insisted he take along. Both were mounted on snowshoes. Ginger carried his skis upon his shoulder. They separated a short ways from the dugout. While Bowers struggled along, making painful progress up the steep slope, Ginger struck out in the opposite direction, a long, graceful shuffling stride carrying him quickly from sight.

Bowers's progress was floundering and slow. Once he kicked his snowshoes off in disgust and started on with them over his shoulder. But when he suddenly sank to his chin and wasted precious time digging his way out, he decided that regardless of how difficult and slow was his progress with the snowshoes it was better than no progress at all.

An hour after he left the dugout Ginger topped the divide where they had seen el Cabra and his bunch grazing. He exchanged snowshoes for skis and flew down the opposite slope with breath-taking velocity, swung around the foot of a pinnacle, and came into sight of a broad valley. He swept down upon it on the momentum he had gathered descending the slope.

Ginger had slid a considerable distance when he suddenly slued his skis and brought about with an excited exclamation. The snow was pawed and trampled all down the valley. Not a horse was in sight, but the evidence was undeniable that horses were not far distant. Ginger whistled softly as he stared around. Then it flashed upon him!

The horses had been there as he had descended the ridge. Either el Cabra had been on guard and had seen him, or had heard the burr of his skis on the crusted snow and had fled without investigating.

Ginger's eyes lighted upon the single trail that led on down the valley, and he knew he was right. It was fresh—the new-flung snow scattered either side of the trampled path told that the animals were running. He paused to marvel at the smartness of their leader. Each had followed in his tracks, and Ginger could picture el Cabra in the lead breaking trail with his superior strength and intelligence.

Ginger had an unobstructed view of the valley for more than a mile. His brow puckered at this. He didn't believe the bunch had had time to disappear during his descent of the ridge. Of course the pinnacle had hid them from his sight as it had hid him from theirs. But he had swooped down with terrific speed. Where had they gone then?

Where the valley swung to the right from his view, the two ridges closely converged. Therefore he reasoned they must have crossed one or the other of the ridges. Which one?

Ginger again resorted to his capable power of reason. It told him, considering

the direction of the prevalent wind, that the snow on the slope of the ridge to his right was not as deep as on the slope to his left. He gave el Cabra credit for as sound reasoning, instinct, or whatever it is you want to call a horse's intelligence. El Cabra would follow the line of least resistance in getting gone. Of course the snow on the other side of the ridge would be just as deep as this left slope, but it is much easier to plow through it down hill than up hill.

Confident that he had reasoned the matter out right, Ginger replaced his snowshoes and took a diagonal course up the right-hand slope. If he had made an error he could easily and quickly ski back down farther along the valley where, if he did not strike tracks, he would know that the horses had crossed the opposite ridge.

TRUE to their predictions the weather held off fine. But that in no way relieved Bowers's mind. Ginger had been absent for three days. Bowers had struggled to the top of the hill each morning to spend the day staring off across a vast white wilderness, returning to the dugout only after the stars had started gleaming clear and cold. But his vigil had gone unrewarded. He was almost frantic. Helpless as well.

The fourth morning he arose as usual, prepared himself a hasty breakfast and donned his sheepskin coat preparatory to starting out. Unless he saw some encouraging signs he meant to strike out in search of Ginger, fatal as such an act might be to himself. He cursed el Cabra, and he cursed the fate that had ever led him into the Humboldts. Then he had to chew savagely on his lip as he thought of Ginger and his possible fate. It never occurred to Bowers that in their present environment Ginger was more capable and able to look out for himself than Bowers was. Ginger had been born and raised in far northern Canada and snow was his element.

But as Bowers swung the door open and burrowed his way to the top of the drift, an amazing spectacle greeted his eyes. Not a hundred yards distant floundered a horse, half buried in the snow. Bowers didn't recognize him then as el Cabra, he was frosted white with snow, and before Bowers had time to penetrate this disguise a shrill, triumphant yell drew his attention.

Down the slope sped Ginger, the burr of his skis ringing. His pack was gone, his snowshoes gone, even the wool mackinaw. He was bareheaded and shirt-sleeved. His long, ginger-colored hair was whipped back by his speed. Ginger yelled—what was it? —el Cabra!"

El Cabra made a final desperate plunge as his pursuer descended upon him. Ginger left the snow as he cast himself forward. One ski shot skyward to descend and stick upright in the snow. The other shot past Bowers as though borne on the tide of a millrace. Bowers stood stunned at the sight until horse and captor disappeared in a smother of snow. Suddenly Ginger's head popped into view out of the hole.

"Lew! C'mon, Lew! I got el Cabra for yuh! But the dang smart cuss—he near out-reasoned me!"

When Bowers arrived on the scene he saw el Cabra lying down in the pit. He had ceased his struggles as futile. Ginger sat on his head, shoveling snow away with his hand from el Cabra's muzzle so he could breathe. All Bowers could think to say as he looked down upon the sight:

"Ginger, you sure know your onions!"

HORSE THIEVES OF PLUNDER CITY

By Norrell Gregory

Author of "Fighting Foreman," "Never Let Him Run," etc.

Clinch Carey aimed to be a peaceful raiser of top-grade horse stock—but when anyone tried to do him dirt he could sure raise hell on horseback!

I

BURNED OUT

THE four men came into Plunder City from the south, riding played-out horses wearing unreadable brands. The leader was a hawk-faced man with deep-set eyes and a mouth as cruel as a reptile's. They reined in before Luke Lundy's barn and big, red-faced Pete Pinos, his face redder than usual under the stern bite of the November wind, saw them.

"Well, if it ain't Abe Drill!" he exclaimed. "Light, Abe. You're in good hands."

Abe Drill got off. So did the other three. Two of them were about Drill's size, but one was a hulking monster of a man with a head like a peanut. All were over forty.

"Boys," said Abe Drill, showing his crowded, yellow teeth. "This is Pete Pinos. He's a right guy. Pete, this is Jim and this is Bill and this is Hoose." Hoose was the big guy.

Pete Pinos shook hands with them.

"This Luke Lundy's barn?" said Drill. "We understood we could git fresh horses here."

"You can, Abe, you can," said Pete Pinos. "With me speakin' for you. Are you crowded close, Abe?"

"We ain't so damn much afraid of anything catchin' up with us as we are the law here," said Abe Drill. "How's it?"

"Oh, Sheriff Dobey is a right guy, too!" Pinos assured him. "I just thought if you boys wasn't too hard crowded we might pull off a little—er horse trade."

"Lead us to it!" said Drill. "We always was hot on hoss-tradin', hey, boys?"

The two smaller men grinned and the big one opened his mouth a mile wide and tilted his head back. Pete Pinos kept listening for the guffaw to come out, but it never did. Hoose always laughed that way. Everyone of them wore tied-down gun holsters and had *wanted* written all over them.

"There's a couple of boys out here twenty-thirty miles with a bunch of good stuff—breeders," Pinos explained in a low voice. "Of course, bein' located here, I can't take a direct hand, but I think I can rig—wait a minute, there's one of 'em now!" he exclaimed.

A lengthy young fellow with a two-months' growth of fuzzy beard on his face came riding a magnificent black stud down the street. His hair was so long it brushed his coat collar and both it and his fuzzy beard were the color of tow. He saw Pinos standing there in the doorway and stopped the horse. Turned him to ride up to the barn door, but Pete Pinos stepped forward quickly and met him near the middle of the street.

"Hello, Clinch," he said. "You want to see me?"

Clinch Carey twisted the black's mane with long, strong fingers. He looked down on Pete Pinos with eyes that were level and gray.

"We got them horses in off the range now, Pinos," he said. "Where do you want yours delivered—here in town or over at your ranch?" Then he looked quickly past Pinos' shoulder and saw Abe Drill and the other three standing there before the barn, watching.

Pete Pinos hemmed and hawed. He scrubbed one side of his blood-red face with a hand not at all work-hardened. He looked at Clinch out of the corners of his eyes, then he looked across the street at the double doors of Luke Lundy's saloon. Then he looked at Clinch Carey again.

"I've been intendin' to ride out and tell you boys," he said at last. "I can't use them horses."

CLINCH CAREY'S eyes hardened. He was only twenty-two, and fired as quick as a gun. With one swift motion he dismounted.

"Can't use 'em!" he said, unconsciously clenching his fists. "Look here, Pinos, I knowed all along you was a slippery devil, but you bought them horses fair and square, and you ain't reniggin' on us that way. We've passed up several good offers for them horses."

"Well, what are you squawkin' about, then?" said Pinos sharply. "Sell 'em! I can't take 'em and that's all there is to it."

With those gray eyes of his smouldering the way they were and that fuzzy beard of his covering his face, Clinch looked pretty tough just then, for a twenty-two-year-old fellow, naturally goodnatured and good looking.

"No, that ain't all!" he said hotly. "I reckon we can't force you to take 'em, but I shore as hell can tell you what I think of you! You're a damned mangy skunk, Pinos! You know we need that money to winter on and you know we can't sell them horses, now. And if you so much as bat an eye at me, I'll just naturally frail hell out of you here and now——"

"Hell, Clinch!" said Pinos, "that's no way to take it. I just——"

"——and if you think you can wait till we're down to bed rock and then make us take any old offer you're badly mistaken. We'll see you in hell before we let you steal——"

"You gone plenty fur enough!" snapped Pinos. "I never stole anything in my life——"

"You're a bald-faced liar!" said Clinch clearly. "You've stole all your life!"

Pinos made a grab for his holster and his face went several shades paler. Clinch stepped in with smooth swiftness and hit him under the chin with a fist clenched bullet-hard. Pinos sat down on a section of very hard frozen Idaho soil and grunted vehemently.

He rolled his eyes a bit to get them to tracking, then he saw Clinch coming at him again and he clawed for his holster while he scrambled to his feet. Clinch hit him as he came up, and Pinos ran clear to the other side of the street, trying to keep his balance and fell there. Clinch started after him again, and across the street, Abe Drill whipped out his six-shooter and threw down

on him with uncanny swiftness. One of the men knocked his arm aside.

"Hell, Abe, let's not get in Dutch here, right off!" he said.

"Lay off!" snarled Drill, and again threw up the gun.

At that moment, and before Drill could fire, the stage from down Poky way, big Ben Bass wheeling them, came down the street at a charging trot and stopped before Lundy's saloon, cutting Clinch off from Abe Drill's gun sights.

And Clinch was so mad that he was still going for Pete Pinos when the stage door opened and Letha Lundy jumped down, almost in Clinch's face. Clinch would have run her down if he hadn't put on the brakes mighty sudden.

He looked at her, and she looked at him. Her eyes were big, and blue as a mountain lake, and her nose was as straight as a gun barrel.

"Well!" she said, surprised. "If it isn't Clinch Carey. Have you quit shaving, Clinch?"

"While we're [illegible]yin'," he said, and tried to look past her for Pete Pinos. Pete had gone thither.

"Am I in your way?" she asked him.

Clinch stretched and looked again, to make sure. He didn't have to stretch a lot to see over her for he was a lengthy fellow, and she was smallish.

"No'm," he said and grinned.

"Don't say 'no'm' to me again!" she stamped her foot in mock indignation. "I ain't a grandmother."

"Yes'm," said Clinch, and grinned again. Lord, she was a sure-nuff purty girl! If she only had a decent old man!

LETHA LUNDY put her nose in the air and walked past him as if he were only a hitching post. Clinch looked after her and scratched his head.

"What did I say that was wrong, Ben?" he asked Big Ben Bass, up there on the high stage seat.

Big Ben laid back his head and let out a laugh that could have been heard halfway to Boise City. Ben never did anything by half-way measures. Clinch looked at him, hard. Big Ben closed his mouth with an audible snap and shut off the guffaw.

"*Ph-tew!*" he said and spat clear over his leaders' ears. Then he rolled a chew about the size of a turkey's egg from one side of his mouth to the other. He had to keep tucking it back with his tongue to retain it all.

"Didn't I see Pete Pinos run backwards plumb across the street a while ago? Er is my eyes a-failin' me in my old age?" Ben was about forty-five and healthy as a yearling stud.

Clinch didn't say anything, just grinned.

"Mebby Pinos has tuk up running backward across streets to keep his laigs limbered up," continued Big Ben. "You reckon he has, feller?"

"He might," said Clinch, "but a better guess would be that he run up against somethin' that was comin' to meet him."

"Fer example, what?" said Big Ben.

"Four fingers with a thumb wrapped over 'em," said Clinch, grinning again.

Big Ben suddenly showed twenty teeth and at least six square inches of moist tobacco. He dropped the tobacco into his hand and splattered it on a hame knob. Then he hauled out a plug as hard as stone and popped off a piece and ground it down before answering.

"Feller," he said, "you should always wrop your fingers around your thumb, when you hit a man. Then he stays hit."

"I don't believe it!" said Clinch. "But if you'll step down I'll be glad to demonstrate."

"Git-dap!" said Ben Bass.

Clinch got on his horse and headed home. He was feeling pretty low. This was going to make it pretty tough on him and Bob. They needed that horse money bad, and they didn't have feed enough to winter those extra horses.

Bob Carey didn't say much when Clinch told him about Pino's refusal to take the horses. He was older than Clinch—about thirty. Quieter, wiser, in some ways.

"You say you punched him," he said. "You acted like a boy, Clinch, and you spoiled whatever chance we did have at Pinos.

"Which was damned slim!" retorted Clinch. "And I'm kinda glad I did. I

believe he was buyin' them horses for Luke Lundy anyhow."

"You're wrong, Clinch. Pete ain't that low-down."

"He could walk under a snake's belly without bendin' his back an inch!" replied Clinch contemptuously.

"I'd sooner think it was Lundy that made Pete back out," said Bob. "If he comes around and tries to buy them horses in a few days, I'll know it."

"He's got some more customers," said Clinch. "I seen four-five standing in front of his barn with *wanted* wrote all over 'em."

"Yeah, and I'll bet he's out here, tomorrow!" said Bob. "If I had a dollar for every horse thief and killer he's helped git out of the country I'd never have to work no more."

LUNDY came the next day, riding his line-backed buckskin pitched forward a little and his fifty-dollar Stetson pulled low over his heavy brows. Lundy owned the big saloon in Plunder City; he owned the barn; he owned Sheriff Dobey. Some said he even owned Plunder City. That was probably an exaggeration but everybody knew he was rich as black strap molasses.

He folded his hands on his saddlehorn and talked to the boys in level, business-like tones, his big form immobile, his eyes flashing from one to the other of them, for Clinch stood on one side of the horse, Bob on the other.

"Rode out to see if you boys would have any horses to sell this fall," he said. "I could use several good, fast ones. I hear you're breedin' some good stuff out of that Black Morgan stud of yours."

Clinch didn't say a word. He just let Bob talk.

"Yes," said Bob Carey, "we got some horses to sell. But not to you, *Mister* Lundy. We're kinda funny. We raise honest horses, and we don't like to sell 'em where they'll be contaminated—ever."

Clinch thought that was putting it on pretty thick. He expected to see Luke Lundy step down and ask Bob to explain that, but he didn't. He just sat there gripping his saddlehorn, his eyes looking straight off towards the Rustler Mountains. Watching him close, Clinch thought he saw his big mustache twitch a little.

"I think you're makin' a mistake," said Lundy finally. "I'll pay top prices. I don't see that it matters to you where the horses go after you sell them. I know Pete Pinos renigged on you. You probably think I had somethin' to do with it, but I didn't——"

"You're a liar, Lundy!" said Bob, baldly.

Lundy's eyes blazed. He made a half-involuntary movement, then froze when Clinch reached up and jabbed his thumb violently into the small of his back.

"You're covered, Lundy!" he said. "Just keep your hands right where they are and ride away from here. You ain't buyin' no Bar 44 horses today. Don't make any false moves or I'll be compelled to separate your backbone right where you need it most!"

Luke Lundy didn't say a word. Just kneed his buckskin about and rode off with his back as stiff as a gate post with Clinch standing there pointing [illegible] thumb at him, grinning. And then Bob saw that Clinch had been running a shinney.

"You damned reckless highbinder!" he said softly, but with a lot of respect in his voice. "Don't you ever try that stunt again—not on Luke Lundy!"

Clinch just grinned some more and pretended to holster the thumb. Then he scowled.

"Between us," he said, "it shore looks like we're workin' purty to kill sales. I messed up our chances with Pinos, and now you knock any Lundy deal in the head."

"Why, Clinch," said Bob, surprised, "*you* wouldn't want to sell horses to Luke Lundy, would you? You know he's got rich furnishin' horses to outlaws on the jump. Why, I'll go out and live with the squirrels before I'll do it! The only horse any outlaw gets off of me will be by stealin' him."

"That's probably what Lundy is figurin' on this minute too," Clinch replied. "He could steal our eyeballs and what recourse would we have—him ownin' the law like he does?"

"There's one recourse no man ever got a cinch on," replied Bob Carey. "Six-gun

recourse, an' we may have to fall back on that."

"I'm plumb ashamed of you—you're actin' like a boy!" Clinch mimicked Bob's tone of the day before. But he grinned as he did it.

Bob grinned too—but faintly. "It looks like we might be forced into slow-elkin' to get through the winter on," he said.

"There's still genuine elk up in them hills," replied Clinch. "We'll have a try at them before we go outlaw."

THAT evening Jean Jeneau, an itinerant young puncher came drifting down from the hills. It was getting dusk then and back of old Rustler Peak storm clouds were piling heavy and black.

"Snow t'night, by hell," said Jean cheerfully, piling off his horse and turning it into the corral. "I tink I lay up with you fella."

"Sure, Jean," said Bob heartily. "We still got a few slices of bacon left, and Clinch can't p[illegible]even-up worth a damn any more."

"T' night we play the pokaire, eh?" said Jean, flashing his teeth and stroking his slender black line of a mustache.

Quite a dandy, Jean Jeneau, and a great hand with the ladies. He stepped into the cabin, threw off his big gray Stetson and his hand-tooled chaps with the silver conchas. Just about Clinch's age—maybe a year or two older. About Clinch's height and build too, but there the resemblance ended, for Clinch was very fair and Jean as dark as a Ute. And across the swarthy darkness of his face, from eye corner to mouth, ran a white scar. Singularly enough, that startling scar was not disfiguring to Jean.

The three played poker until nearly midnight. Clinch won three dollars and Bob lost four. Then, when Jean returned from an inspection of the weather he reported snow.

"This bring down them ol' elk I see up in de mountain," he said.

Clinch's eyes quickened. Elk meant meat.

"Where did you see them, Frenchy?" he asked.

"Over back Rustler Peak," said Jeneau. "Fifteen, twenty, mebbyso moaire."

"Bob," said Clinch, "I'm goin' after them fellers in the mornin'. We need that meat. And I mean to have one if I have to tail 'em plumb into Utah. You wake me early, if I don't wake myself."

"We can shore use one," replied Bob. "But for gosh sake don't shoot an old stringy bull."

"I'll shoot anything that gets in front of my gun," said Clinch. "We got good teeth and plenty of time, in the winter."

He got out the old 30-30, which had been collecting dust for many days. He cleaned and oiled it carefully, and stuffed the magazine with soft-point bullets. Bullets that would ream a hole plumb through an elk that a man could put his arm through. And then Clinch whetted up his hunting knife. He went to sleep with the cabin weaving under the savage push of the wind.

It was still dark when he awoke and the wind had died somewhat. Bob and Jeneau were still snoring, so Clinch grabbed a few bites from the supper left-overs and went to the barn carrying his rifle and knife.

He saddled the big Black Morgan stud, Pluto, for the trip even though he knew Bob wouldn't like his chancing the crippling of so valuable an animal in the rough country where he was going. But he wanted a horse that would take him there and bring him back—with meat. And if he got an elk that meant upward of a thousand pounds of it, and Pluto was the only horse on the ranch that could make such a trip and bring in even the best parts of such an animal.

It was still snowing when he rode up through the meadow, although the wind had dropped to a steady push. He didn't waken Bob, but if he had known what he knew later he certainly would have told him so-long.

About half-an-hour after Clinch had left, Bob Carey got up. He made breakfast then awoke Jeneau.

Jeneau looked around the cabin with that flashing glance of his.

"Clinch, heem gone after elk, eh?" he said.

Bob nodded. "And took our black stud,

dog him!" he said. "Probably break a leg up in that damned country."

"Why borrow trouble, friend Bob? Clinch is the very excellent rider, eh? Suppose I hang aroun' to keep away the lonesomeness till he return?"

"Sure," said Bob. "But you got to earn your keep. We got some hay to haul out and we ought to cut the mares and colts out of the bunch in the pasture."

"Certainly—I help," said Jean. "I am the very excellent helper," and he flashed his teeth at Bob.

HE DID help with the feeding, and the cutting out of the mares and colts, and he proved that he could make a hand. They cut ten mares with late-foaled colts from the pasture above the meadows and threw them in the barn corral, then they hauled hay to both bunches.

It was high noon when they returned to the cabin and there they found Pete Pinos, with dinner ready on the table. Pete Pinos peeped out of the door at them, just showing his head, with mock alarm.

"So it's Jeneau with you, is it, Bob?" he said. "I didn't know but what it might be that fire-eatin' Clinch and got ready to run."

Bob grinned his appreciation of the prepared meal.

"You're all right, Pete," he said. "Me 'n Jean is plenty hungry, ain't we, Jean? Clinch has gone elk huntin'. I don't much figger on him bein' back tonight."

"I come over to explain about that horse deal," said Pinos. "Clinch wouldn't give me a chance yesterday. Lundy put the pressure on me, Bob. That's why I had to back down."

"I told Clinch it was that way!" replied Bob. "It's all right, Pete. I'll make Clinch apologize when he comes in."

"Not necessary," said Pinos. "I know it looked bad on my part. Lundy been to see you yet?"

"Yes, and went back faster'n he come. I'll *give* away every horse we got before I'll let that crooked devil get 'em."

"Don't talk too loud about Lundy," warned Pinos. "He's rank poison, and he's rich, Bob."

"Rich, and how?" said Bob hotly. "With the money us pore devils have sweat our hearts out makin'——"

Jean Jeneau laughed.

"Bob here," he told Pete, "is won hal of a fella when he get his dander up. He fight like de ol' Scratch, eh, Pete? But he cannot play the pokaire."

"Can't!" yelped Bob. "Wait till we eat then I'll show you two rannies whether I can play poker or not. I ain't got much money, but I got plenty of good horses. They good in a poker game, Pete?"

"Sure they're good," replied Pete. "For that matter, so's your word, Bob."

After the meal Pete Pinos went over to the corner and retrieved an object wrapped in a gunny sack. He grinned and unrolled the sack and set a gallon jug of whiskey on the table.

"Poker ain't worth a damn without whiskey," he said. "Get right, boys!"

"I can drink you both under the table!" said Bob Carey.

Jeneau laughed.

"Bob," he told Pinos, "heem always the ambitious fella, eh Pete?"

"We'll ambish him!" said Pete Pinos, laughing loudly.

They played and drank all through the afternoon. Bob was too clean minded to suspect treachery, and so he did not notice that they were ganging him on the drinking, and ganging him with the cards. But he came very near making good his boast of drinking them both under the table, for when night fell he was still going strong and had all the money in the game before him. Neither Pete Pinos nor Jeneau were in any too good shape.

"Gotta git some air!" muttered Pete Pinos. At the door he turned and jerked his head swiftly at Jeneau, then went on out. Jeneau followed him shortly.

Outside the two held conference.

"That fella," Jeneau drew his breath hissingly, "he drink like ah—like the fish!"

Pete Pinos weaved on his feet and swore bitterly.

"Never seen nothin' like it! We got to git him under, Jean! Got to. If he's up when Drill and his gang come foggin' in here there'll be hell to pay. You have any

trouble gettin' that damn Clinch away?"

Jeneau chuckled.

"He jump the bait. Ho, ho! Be wan long tam finding de elk I see. Ho, ho, ho!"

"What will we do with Bob?" asked Pinos desperately. "Whiskey's about all gone."

"When we go back," said Jeneau, "I feex heem. I set de jug on de floor by me. I smoke de cigarette. I feex heem, Pete."

THEY returned and Bob Carey hooted at them.

"Can't take it, hey!" he jibed. "And you two rannies claim to be poker-playin' rootin'-tootin' sunsaguns. Bring on some more whiskey!"

"This Bob, he the hog," laughed Jeneau. "I set the jug, so, out hees reach, eh, Pete?" and he laughed again and lit a cigarette.

He smoked it but a few draws then he idly let his hand fall and dropped the still burning cigarette into the mouth of the whiskey jug. Then he lit another . . . and another, dropping each into the almost empty jug. And when Bob Carey again clamored for whiskey, he lifted the jug and poured the last into Bob's glass. Bob drank it. Looked queer, then set his glass down. Jeneau exchanged significant glances with Pinos.

In less than two minutes Bob Carey suddenly pitched forward and fell over the table, his face striking hard. Almost at the same moment the thunder of speeding horses, muffled by the snow, came down the wind.

Pete Pinos rose.

"Just in time!" he grunted. "Throw him on the bunk, Jean. I'll talk to Abe."

The riders, four of them, pulled up outside the door as Pete Pinos stepped out, shutting it.

"All set?" it was too dark to see faces, but the voice was unmistakably Abe Drill's.

"All set," said Pete Pinos. "Jeneau says there's ten mares with colts in the barn corral, and twenty head good stuff on the pasture above the meadow."

"Just as well make a clean sweep while we're at it," said Drill. "Got that Bill of Sale made out yet?"

"Not yet."

"Then make it to cover the whole damn bunch. Two of you," he spoke to his men, "haze the stuff out of the pasture. Git 'em bunched tight before you put down the gate. We'll cut the mares and colts out when we hear you comin'. Get back in there and fix out that paper, Pete, and see you do a damn good job on it."

Pete Pinos went back into the cabin and made out a bill of sale purporting to convey to himself so many head of horses and colts branded Bar 44.

"How many head should I put in here, Jean?" he asked. "Drill's takin' the whole shebang."

"Twenty . . . thirty, about forty-two head, Pete, if you count de colt."

Pete Pinos wrote "forty-two" in the blank space.

"Now," he said, "we got to hunt a signature of Bob's.

They found one—on a canceled note. Pinos laid the note on the bill of sale and traced the signature with an awl. Then he removed the note and traced the faint indentation of the awl with the pen.

"There you are," he said.

Jeneau eyed the signature critically.

"Nize," he said, "but she pretty—er—wave—eh, Pete?"

"Sure. I wanted it that way. Bob was dead drunk when he signed it. That'll take care of any forgery charges, if any are ever brought. They won't be. Everthing is against——"

Suddenly he leaped to his feet and jumped to the door. Flung it wide and uttered a stifled curse.

"They've fired the stacks!" he ranted. "The damned drunken fools!"

It was so. The stacks had been fired, and burning brands were flying towards the barn and sheds. Down at the corrals a wild mêlée was raging. Drill and his men were having trouble with the colts. It seemed that they couldn't herd the colts, and the mares would not leave without them, nor the other horses without the mares.

"Shoot the little sons!" Pinos heard Drill shout. "We'll never git 'em lined out!"

A six-shooter barked and a colt screamed in mortal anguish. Then another and an-

other gun bellowed and the entire bunch of horses went wild. Flames from the burning haystacks ignited the barn and corrals and for a time the most unholy racket imaginable prevailed. Horses rushing through burning corrals, shots booming, colts screaming, mares neighing frantically and above all the throaty roar of the flames.

THERE was din enough to have raised the dead. And it did rouse Bob Carey. It was not drunkenness that had put him out, it was the quick, vicious kick to the nicotine. And his stout constitution had thrown it off quickly. He rolled over and hit the floor with a thump. Got to his feet staggering, saw the weird light of the stacks and buildings dancing on the wall, heard the shouts, shots, neighs, screams of slaughtered colts, and while his body did not return to normal efficiency, his mind seemed to clear with a snap. He made straight for the rifle hanging on the wall, had his hand on the forearm, ready to lift it down, when Pete Pinos, whirling, saw him, whipped out his six-shooter and shot him exactly between the shoulder-blades. Bob Carey tip-toed a minute, then seemed to fall backward from his heels. He didn't crumple, as most fatally shot men do, he fell with his body a straight, tense line.

Pinos holstered his gun and bared his teeth. Down at the corrals the shooting suddenly stopped. Drill and his men had at last got the horses into a compact bunch, and headed right. Away they went, their hoofs like thunder, a dark speeding blotch against the snow.

"Now," said Pete Pinos, "since all this has happened, we got to git that damn Clinch. And that means one of us has got to lay right here till he comes and pot him. I've got to get to town, and besides I've done my share," and he jerked his head towards Bob Carey's body.

Jean Jeneau showed his teeth mirthlessly.

"That means Jean Jeneau must keel him, eh, Pete?" he said.

"It does!" said Pete. "Is it agreeable to you?"

"First, my friend," said Jeneau. "I wish to know my—ah—whack of de loot."

"You cut in for a sixth," said Pinos coldly. "I can sell twenty of them horses to Lundy for two hundred apiece. That's four thousand to split. Then there's the mares. Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly," said Jeneau. "I just want to, ah—make de sure."

So Pete Pinos rode after the raiders and Jean Jeneau took down the rifle Bob Carey had died trying to reach and began his vigil.

II

FIVE BULLETS

WHEN daylight came Clinch was far back in the Rustler Mountains, ploughing through snow that was belly deep to the big stud, and threading log patches that would have stopped any but the most stout-hearted of horses. He didn't regret, then, his choice.

He had plenty of time to think that day as he threaded the mazes of those hills, his eyes and ears alert for meat sign. But the thing that he found his mind coming back to, time after time, was something he had tried to keep from his mind a long time. It was Letha Lundy.

All day he threaded the hills and saw not so much as a jay bird. It was growing dusk. He had decided to make camp and lie out for the night, when he came to an open park, hemmed in on all sides by black spruce. Out near the middle of that whiteness was a dark splotch. He thought at first it was a bare patch of ground. But the black stud suddenly snorted and the dark patch swam into motion. A clack of hoofs, a clatter of mighty antlers and eight elk broke for the timber like a bullet from a gun.

There was no time to dismount for shooting, so Clinch yanked his rifle, leaned far out so the powder blast would not break the stud's ear drums, and cut down on them.

He threw a solid stream of 180-grain soft points at those elk. He heard them hit the timber with a crash, heard a dull collision, as of a heavy, speeding body striking a tree bole, a grunt, then silence, absolute and thunderous.

Quickly he kneed the stud forward. Two rods into the timber he found the animal, a fine young bull, dead as anything would ever be in this world.

Off he piled, knife in hand and went to work on him. He didn't take time to skin the elk—that was too big a job in the dark and tired as he was. He cut out the best pieces and tied them on either side of his saddle, before and behind. Then he rolled the remainder of the animal up in his hide, threw a rope over a limb, and horsed it up out of reach of wolves or other marauders. One of them could come for it any time.

Then Clinch headed for home with a load that would have sunk any but the kind of horse he was riding. He judged he was between ten and fifteen miles away, but long before he came to the meadows he saw the glow of the fire.

He didn't think much of it at first, but as it continued to grow he knew that it could only be one thing—their stacks or buildings, or both. There wasn't anything else in forty miles in that direction that could make a fire like that.

So he did the only thing he could to help him get there quicker. He cut the strings that held the precious meat and let it fall by the way. Then he lifted the tired stud to a slogging trot and bored on.

BUT when Clinch came to the upper meadow it was all over. Ahead he could see the glowing embers of the stacks and barn. Over all hung the scent of fire desolation.

The stud's sides heaved with a ringing neigh. But there was not a single answering nicker.

Beside the glowing embers of the barn Clinch stopped the horse. He could see the dark blotch of the cabin, still standing.

"Bob!" he cried in agonized tones.

A lance of flame spat from the doorway of the cabin. A heavy ball scorched his ribs and threw him sideways in the saddle. Instinctively he completed the fall, taking his rifle with him as he went down. He hit the ground hard—mighty hard. The big stud humped his back a little, but he did not move an inch out of his tracks.

Lying there, Clinch could see under the horse's belly. He had one foot resting on the stirrup, and he left it there as if it were hung. He saw the cabin door open, after a while, open very slowly, very gently. There was glow enough from the barn embers for him to watch, for as the door opened, the black spot widened.

He saw a man steal out of that door, holding a rifle in his hands. He came very slowly, very cautiously, holding the rifle at ready.

Clinch couldn't let him get too close! Stealthily he lifted his foot from the stirrup. Then he drove the hook home. The stud leaped his length and Clinch snapped to a sitting position, his rifle leaping to his shoulder. He surged back from the powerful recoil just as he saw another lance of red spurt from the other's rifle.

No bullet touched Clinch, but he saw his assailant blasted straight backward a full yard as if a cannon ball had caught him. He turned over twice when he struck the ground.

Up Clinch leaped and made for him. He knew the time for caution was past, so far as this rannie was concerned. A soft nosed high-power seldom leaves a crippled animal —or man.

He bent over the man and scratched a match. His bullet had caught him just about the bridge of the nose, where the bone is hard and thick, and it had exploded. There was hardly enough of the fellow's head left to hang a collar on. But in spite of that, Clinch knew who it was. Knew by his build, the color of his skin, his clothing. The boots alone would have identified Jean Jeneau.

He stood erect and looked towards the cabin. He dreaded to go in there. He knew what he would find. But he made himself go, and put a match to the lamp.

Bob lay with his eyes open, unseeing, where he had fallen when Pete Pinos's bullet had struck him. Clinch knelt down there beside him, put his hands over his face and cried like a baby.

GRAY dawn brought a full realization of the awful desolation of the aspiring Bar 44. Clinch stood in

the doorway and surveyed it with a face that had aged ten years in a night. He seemed inches taller, standing there, his eyes sunken and dead.

Black mounds marked the stack yards. A wavering black line was the corral fences, a still smouldering heap of embers, the barn. Down there stood the big black stud, nuzzling a colt that had been shot through the back and paralyzed from the withers back. The little fellow could get his forefeet under him, and his head up, but that was all.

Clinch didn't know until then of the slaughter of their colts. His face didn't change. It couldn't register any more despair and still be the face of a living person. He went past the woodpile on the way down and picked up the ax.

One swift, hard stroke and the colt was past misery. Then he took the saddle and bridle off the stud and rubbed out the cinch weld, took the horse down into the willows where he could paw for water grass, and went back to the cabin.

First he buried Bob under the ashes of one of the hay stacks. That was the only place he could dig a grave in the hard frozen earth. Then he came back to the barn and cut the bullets out of the colts and picked up all the empty cartridge cases he could find. He had a handful when he finished.

He put them into his pocket and went back to the cabin. Standing in the doorway he tried to visualize the position of Bob when he had been shot, and the position of his killer. The ball had gone completely through Bob's body, and Clinch knew it might be buried in the walls.

He found it, almost exactly where he had expected to find it, buried so lightly that he worked it out with his fingers. He put it into his vest pocket, alone, and looked for the empty hull. That he failed to find.

On the table were three card hands, an old canceled note of Bob's and a pen. On the floor was a gallon whiskey jug. He picked the whiskey jug up and turned it over and shook it. Three swelled cigarette stubs rolled out.

That was all he could find of any significance. He put the empty cases he had picked up about the corrals on the table and to each succeeded in fitting a bullet cut from a colt. There were four calibers —two forty-fours, one thirty-two-twenty and one he could not identify. It seemed to be between a thirty-two and a thirty-five, and was longer even than the thirty-two-twenty's.

HE REMEMBERED that those cases, there were five of them, had killed exactly five colts. Whoever was behind that gun was deadly.

Then he took out the bullet that had killed Bob. It was a forty-eight. He didn't need a case to identify it. But he would have given more for that case, at that moment, than for anything on earth. He knew that firing pins as well as people had individuality. You didn't need a microscope and a lot of funny doo-dads to tell when one firing pin hit high, another low; where one was blunt and another was sharp; where one barely dented the primer and another drove a hole clear through.

Clinch picked up the old canceled note of Bob's. Turning it over he could see plainly where the signature had been traced. It was all pretty clear to him then what had happened. Jeneau had lied about the elk—he hadn't found a sign in five miles of where Jeneau had claimed to have seen them. They aimed to get Bob drunk, and either hook him in a poker game, or just plain forge a bill of sale. Something had gone wrong. They had had to kill Bob, and Jeneau had been left to kill him.

The bullet burn where Jeneau's shot had scorched his ribs began to hurt. He tore open his shirt and looked at it. Just a red welt. He stepped over to the medicine chest for the iodine. The stain of the powerful antiseptic turned his pure white skin to a muddy brown. He looked at that stain, thinking fast.

He was just about the build of Jeneau, his height and their features were not too dissimilar. If he could make them think Jeneau had really got him, and impersonate him a while it would be a vast advantage.

There was a bottle of harness dye in the chest—black. He mixed a little of it with

the iodine and experimented on his body. He found he could, with a certain mixture, and by wiping quickly, achieve almost exactly Jean Jeneau's skin color.

He got out his razor and shaved. Shaved very close. His beard was so fine and light that a close shave reduced his face to the softness of a boy's. Jeneau had always worn his hair long, so he didn't have to bother his hair. But in shaving, he left a thin line of mustache, such as Jeneau had sported, trimming it short.

Then he dipped a feather in the dye and touched the mustache. It leaped into evidence with startling distinctness. He dyed his hair coal black, like Jeneau's; his eyebrows. Then he took up the more difficult job of staining his face.

The scar was the most difficult. But, by pasting a strip of heavy paper on his face, the same size as the scar and in the same position and leaving it there while he daubed on the dye, he could do it. After he had taken the paper off he saw that the edges of the scar were too clean cut, and it required some careful touching up. When he had finished the scar was somewhat smaller than the original, but not to a noticeable extent.

Clinch went out then and carried Jeneau's body into the cabin. It was very difficult to remove his clothing and boots, but Clinch got them off and donned them. The boots were tight, but the clothing fitted him well. He was mighty glad, then, that he had hit Jeneau in the head. An expanding bullet would have ruined the wool jacket.

Then Clinch got the ax, demolished a chair and cut it fine. He made a pile in the middle of the floor and fired it. Then he put on Jeneau's fine chaps, his hat and went out, leaving the door open a little. He mounted the black stud and rode off with never a backward look. Jean Jeneau's expensive boots hurt his little toes.

Southeastward, thirty miles, was Plunder City. Southwestward, also thirty miles was Ben Bass's stage station. There wasn't a house nor a building of any sort between the two points. It was all rough country, very rough.

Clinch headed for the stage station. He knew that if he had a friend in that entire section, it was big, bluff Ben Bass. And he knew that if his disguise got past Ben, it was good. He made no attempt to follow the trail of the horse thieves and murderers. He didn't want to know where they had gone—yet. He wanted to know, first of all, who had shot Bob in the back.

THIRTY miles is a long, long way, threading cow trails over rough country in snow often belly deep, with a tired, hungry horse, and a bitter wind cutting into them. But the black laid back his ears and bored through it. Snow was flying again, and as Clinch rode on, the flakes thickened until he could hardly see his horse's ears. Old King Winter was on the ramp for fair; yesterday's storm had been but a breather.

The black had bottom and drive. He seemed to derive a savage exultation in bucking storm and snow. Thirteen hundred pounds of fighting black Morgan, the best damn breed of horse that ever fluttered a nostril.

Darkness was closing down when Clinch raised the lights of the station. Willie Salt, the old Ute that rustled horses for Big Ben peered out the barn door at Clinch with his beady-black eyes unswerving, his saddle-leather face expressionless. Those eyes of his were as intent as a mink's.

Clinch half stepped, half fell, from the saddle.

"Thees horse," he jerked, trying to mimic Jeneau's way of speaking, "feed him good, fella. Heem had wan hal long jant."

"Hu-uum!" said Old Willie through his nose, and reached for the reins with a bony hand.

Clinch tried to beat some circulation back into his cold-stiffened form.

"Ben, heem home?" he asked.

"Hu-uum!" said Willie through his nose again.

Clinch tacked towards the station. Through the window he could see the fire leaping in the big fireplace, see big Ben standing there before it, his legs spraddled, his hands clasped behind him, rocking up and down on his heels and toes as a man does when he's home after a hard drive

and exulting in his well-earned comfort.

Clinch didn't knock—he knew Jeneau never did—he just shoved in. Big Ben jerked his head around.

"Huh!" he said, "it's the damned Frenchie! Come on up to the fire since you're in, Jeneau."

Clinch sailed the big Stetson adroitly over the prong of a deer's antlers.

"Ol' man winter, she com', eh Ben?" he said, flashing his teeth.

"She com'!" said big Ben dryly. "Where'd you blow out of, Frenchie?"

Clinch waved his hand airily to all parts of the compass.

"You seem not so glad to see me," he said, lifting his eyebrows and looking at Ben out of the corner of his eyes—a trick he had noticed on Jeneau a hundred times. "Something wrong, my friend?"

"You hear anything about a fire over at the Carey boys 44 ranch?" Ben suddenly hurled at him.

"Have there ben a fire?" said Clinch, apparently surprised. "Who bring the news?"

"I don't know," said Ben. "I just heard it talked over at town. It wasn't certain they'd been a fire but the report was somebody had seen somethin' that looked like a fire over that way last night. I was just wonderin'——" Ben stopped and looked at Clinch hard.

"Yes?" said Clinch, pleasantly.

"Listen!" said Ben bluntly, "I seen Clinch Carey knock Pete Pinos half-way across the street the other day. I was just wonderin', if they *wus* a fire, if he wasn't a damn sight closter to it than——"

"An' mebbyso Frenchie, too, eh?" said Clinch, flashing his teeth.

"Yes, and Frenchie too!" exploded big Ben.

Clinch laughed at him. He knew that was exactly what Jeneau would have done under the same circumstances. Then big Ben's fat Mexican cook announced supper.

"We'll gab after we eat," said big Ben.

OLD Willie came slipping in the back way, noiseless as an owl and furtive as a mink. Clinch noticed that the old Indian kept watching him furtively throughout the meal.

He found himself absolutely ravenous after the first bite. Big Ben, always hearty in everything he did, ate in the same manner. He finished by breaking off a wedge of Mexican style corn cake as big as a brake shoe, putting it into his mouth entire and washing it down with one mighty draught of coffee.

"Let's git back to the fire, Frenchie," he said.

Old Willie had already finished and gone out. He put his head in at the kitchen door and mumbled something.

"Well, hell, can't you drench a horse without me?" Ben said to him.

Willie mumbled something else.

"Go on in to th' fire, Frenchie," said Ben. "I got to help this damned ol' Ute doctor a sick horse."

Clinch went back to the fireplace. He had hardly settled himself before Big Ben came, his heavy boots hitting the ground, slog-slog, slog-slog. He burst into the room and came straight across to Clinch. Gripped his shoulders and lifted him out of his chair as if he had been only an air-filled dummy. Turned him so the light would hit his face good.

"Willie was right, by gosh!" he yelped. "Gray eyes—gray—Clinch, you damned—what the hell does this mean——"

"Sit down, Ben," said Clinch quietly. "I'll explain everything. Willie spotted me, did he? I never thought Jeneau had black eyes——"

"Blue, so Willie claims. It wasn't your eyes, it was your fingers. Willie claims the Frenchie had a joint missing from his little finger. And if he says so, you can be damned shore it *is* so. Feller, I never had such a foolin' in my life! You talked jist like that damned Frenchie—that rig—that scar—damn it, Clinch, I ain't plumb shore yit!" He stared at Clinch almost fiercely. "What about that fire?" he asked anxiously. "Was there a fire?"

"We're cleaned out, Ben," said Clinch quietly. "Our hay, our buildings burned, our stock run off, Bob murdered——" his voice broke then in spite of himself, and Big Ben went almost to the ceiling and let out a terrible oath.

"Tell me the rest, Clinch!" he cried.

So Clinch told him, his voice breaking badly when he recounted the finding of Bob on the floor, shot through the back. Told him about the slaughtered colts, the total destruction of their ranch. When he had finished Ben hauled out a big red bandanna and almost shredded it with the blast he blew from his nose. Then he got up and kicked so savagely at a fire stick that he showered the room with sparks.

Clinch then showed him the bullets and the empty cases.

"These killed the colts," he said. "This one," he brought out the forty-eight ball, "killed Bob. I couldn't find no case for it. Every man is ticketed for hell, Ben, when I find out who he is, but I've got to get the one that got Bob *first*. I want to make shore of him."

Ben cleared his throat two or three times.

"Pinos is in on it, you can be damn shore of that," he said, "and them four hellions that rode int' town yisterday. And Luke Lundy."

"Do you honestly think Lundy was in it, Ben?"

"He's the pole hoss of the outfit!" said Ben. "No qustion there, Clinch. Git to him and you'll git it all."

Clinch sat with clenched hands and a set face.

"All along," he said, "somethin' has told me to keep away from that girl of his, and I done it. She's mighty easy to like, Ben, and she always been mighty friendly with me. I'm shore glad I stayed in the clear, Ben, 'cause if Luke Lundy even furnished horses for that bunch, I'll git him."

HE STOOD up suddenly and extended the empty cases and bullets towards Ben.

"Keep these for me, Ben, till I call for 'em. They're too valuable to pack around."

"Ain't you goin' to stay all night with me?" asked Ben incredulously.

Clinch shook his head.

"Clinch," begged Ben. "Go slow, boy. You're too damned fine a feller, you got too much future, to send yourself to hell tryin' to git that bunch. Take it slow. They're too many for you, boy. I don't blame you for wantin' to git 'em, and git 'em quick, but don't go to hell with 'em, boy!"

"I'm perfectly willin' to go to hell—if I can take 'em with me!" said Clinch through his clenched teeth. "So long, Ben!" and he held out his hand.

Big Ben gripped it with almost brutal force. Wrung it and looked at Clinch with his throat muscles swelling in and out, in and out.

After he had gone Big Ben stood and stared into the fire a long time. Old Willie came sidling in.

"Willie," said Ben, still staring at the fire, "I jist shook hands with as fine a young feller as ever wore boot leather, and watched him go on the last stretch of the road to hell!"

"*Hu-ummmmmm!*" said old Willie through his nose.

III

CHICKENS COME HOME TO ROOST

LUKE LUNDY lived on the second floor of the building that housed his saloon. He had half-a-dozen other houses in Plunder City and could have lived in any of them, if he chose, but he didn't. Letha Lundy had not got up that morning when she heard the knock on the hall door and heard her father admit the visitor.

"Got them horses, Luke," it was Pete Pinos's voice, brisk and urbane. "They're down in your barn right now and a better bunch I never seen. Them Carey boys shore know how to raise horses."

"How many?" asked her father.

"Twenty head you can use."

"How much are you holdin' for?"

"Two hundred," said Pinos. "And they're cheap at that. I'll guarantee you won't have no fault with the horses."

"Got a bill of sale?"

"Right here," said Pinos. "Signed by Bob Carey."

There was a little silence. Then her father spoke again.

"This calls for forty-two head, Pinos."

"Yeah. I know it does. That's what I bought. Got 'em cheaper that way. I'm

keepin' some myself. They are breeders."

"Make out a bill of sale for twenty head at two hundred," said her father.

She heard the rasp of the combination lock in his safe, then heard him counting money.

"Correct," she heard Pinos say. "And much obliged to you."

She heard him go out then and got up and hurried into her clothes. Her father was studying the bill of sale Pinos had left.

"Why didn't you buy those horses direct from the Carey boys, father?" she asked him.

He grunted.

"They wouldn't deal with me," he said briefly.

In the street below Letha heard the screech of a brake then Big Ben Bass's roar, "*whoa.*" She flung a fur jacket about her and ran down the stairs. She wanted to talk to Ben.

Ben had stopped the stage, passengerless, right in front of the barn. He wasn't in sight, but as she ran towards it he came out of the barn, rather hurriedly, and went up into the high seat with a heaving surge. She knew he saw her coming, but he would have driven off just the same if she hadn't called to him.

"Ben!" she called, "Wait!"

Ben sat still. He looked down on her with a face heavy with disfavor.

"Well git it over!" he said. "I'm in a hell of a rush!"

"Ben!" she said, reprovingly. "You're mad. What have I done to make you mad, Ben?"

Ben looked straight at her and his eyes were fierce as an old he-bear's coming out of a winter den.

"It ain't so much what you done as it is what that damned old whelp of an old man of yours has done—er had done!" he growled. "And I ain't got but damn little use fer anybody that'd live around him."

LETHA went white. Ben Bass had always been mighty nice to her. Joked her a lot about Clinch Carey and other boys. He was rough but he was never rude—with her. This was far worse than rudeness.

"Ben," she said coldly, "I'm sorry I stopped you. I won't trouble you again, you can be sure. I think you must be drunk."

"I may be, I may be!" said Ben. "But I ain't so damned drunk but what I can read brands yit. You tell me: How come your dad's barn is full of Bar 44 horses before the ashes of the Carey boys' haystacks and ranch buildings is cold. Yes, and Bob and Clinch Carey dead and stiff and buried? You tell me that!"

She looked at him with her eyes distended with horror.

"Ben!" she gasped. "It isn't—it can't—"

"It is too!" he replied, but his eyes softened a little towards her. "Look in th' barn if you don't believe me! Git-tup here, you mangy—" And Ben released a lot of pent-up emotions with an unprintable epitaph, and didn't care if Letha Lundy was standing within six feet of him when he spit it out.

Letha did look into the barn. And it *was* full of Bar 44 horses. She went back to their rooms with steps that were unsteady. Her father looked at her when she came in and suddenly put down his pen. He arose as if powerful springs had been released under him.

"What's happened, daughter?" he asked gravely.

"Father—" she gasped. "I—you—" she tottered, and he stepped over to catch and steady her.

She writhed away from him as if he were some horrible object of contamination. Then with her face as pale as it would ever be in death, her eyes two blazing pools, she spoke with a flat dead-calm voice.

"The stories I've heard are true! You are a fence—a—a—you're a monster! The Carey boys wouldn't deal with you!" Her voice took a wild hysterical swoop upward and she suddenly threw back her head and laughed. It was a laugh that would turn a deaf person's blood cold. "You murder—you burn—you——"

With one fierce stride Lundy caught her. He shook her so savagely that her head snapped.

"What in God's name are you talkin'

about?" he shouted. "Get a holt of yourself, girl! Talk sense."

She swallowed convulsively. Then she spoke, her voice husky, her words jerky phrases:

"The barn's full—Bar 44 horses—Bob and—and Clinch m-murdered—their buildings burped——"

Lundy shook her again—harder, more fiercely. He began shouting at her, he shouted until he drowned her voice completely out and all the time he never left off shaking. He shook her until she was limp. Then suddenly he became quiet and sane. He held her close against him, straining, and spoke very low, very tense:

"I reckon some of my chickens are comin' home to roost!"

She looked into his face beseechingly.

"You didn't—tell me you didn't——"

"No," he said, "I had nothing to do with it, Letha. I admired those boys more than any two young men I ever saw or knew. They despised me. They didn't know that I supplied fugitives from the law with horses because I myself had once been wronged by the law. They didn't know——"

"Father," she began.

"Let me finish!" he said almost fiercely. "I've helped many a man fleeing from the law. Some I've helped I know were the wrong ones. But some were not. And from those I've been well repaid. Tell me, isn't it better to help some that do not deserve help than to let one good man hang? Tell me, girl! I can count ten, twenty, and more, that I've helped that are today good, law-abiding citizens. I know I'm despised by such as the Carey boys. But they don't know—they can't know——"

"They're dead!" she whispered. "You forget they're dead! What are you going to do, father?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Punish the men that did it! You can do that much at least."

HE LOOKED at her almost whimsically. "You don't realize what that means, girl," he said. "I am legally an outlaw. If I were to attempt to bring those men to justice they would turn on me. What about my barn full of Bar 44 horses? What about this bill of sale?"

"You can!" she said. "You'll have to. I'll never respect you unless you do. I—I—loved Clinch Carey, father!"

Luke Lundy suddenly stepped to the hall. He shouted downward in a mighty voice.

"Dobey! Come up here, Dobey."

Somebody shouted back. Lundy came back into the room. He looked at Letha and his mustache twitched.

"Some more of my chickens. I elected Dobey—a poor stick if ever there was one. He'll cut my throat right with the others when the moment comes."

Sheriff Dobey came in panting, his tight paunch undulating in and out.

"What was it—Luke?" he puffed.

"Go bring Pete Pinos here," Lundy ordered.

Dobey's eyes widened.

"Arrest him?" he gasped.

"Yes!" thundered Lundy. "If necessary. But bring him. Move!" he thundered as the sheriff hesitated.

Dobey almost fell over himself getting out of the place. They heard him go clattering down the stairs and it was not long before he came back, trotting behind Pete Pinos.

"Want to see me, Luke?" asked Pinos.

Lundy stepped close to him and snatched his gun from the holster. Then from under Pinos's coat he drew a wicked looking knife.

"That the way you arrest men, Dobey?" he snapped. Pete Pinos stood as if petrified. Lundy fixed him with a terrible eye and leveled a rigid finger at him.

"Pinos," he said, "I'm goin' so swear out an affidavit chargin' you, Abe Drill and his men with murder, arson and rustlin'. But knowin' you for the cowardly hound you are, I'm givin' you a chance to turn state's evidence. That'll save your miserable neck. Will you do it, or will you hang with the others?"

Pinos blustered.

"There'll be more than just *others* hang!" he blurted. "Lundy, you ain't in no——"

"Choose!" thundered Lundy.

Pinos swallowed noisily.

"Give me a little time to think," he mumbled.

Luke Lundy turned to Dobey.

"Lock him up!" he snapped. "Bring him back in an hour—if he's ready to talk. Don't let anybody talk to him."

Sheriff Dobey took his prisoner out.

Luke Lundy turned to his daughter.

"Girl," he said, "the fuse is lit. I reckon you'd better get on the next stage and go over to Boise City for a spell."

"I'm staying here," she replied steadily.

IV

THE FIFTH CASE

FROM the station Clinch rode straight to Pete Pinos's ranch. It was past midnight when he got there, snowing and blowing fiercely.

The place seemed deserted; not even a dog barked at him. He rode into the barn and dismounted. The black was so fagged he staggered when Clinch took his weight off him. Clinch found a lantern in the gear room and lighted it. He looked in every stall and corral. His horses were not there.

Then he went to the house. It, too, was deserted.

He experienced a terrific let-down. He had felt sure he would find Pete Pinos and at least a part of the horses there.

Back he went to the barn. The black was lying down with his chin resting on the ground. Clinch decided to let him lie, but he took off the saddle and bridle. Then he went into the gear room and rolled up in the bunk blankets.

It was broad day when he got up. He heard the black nicker and strike the manger with a hoof. He fed him dampened oats, watered him then headed towards Plunder City.

It was past noon when he got there. The one street was wind swept and snow choked. There was a drift of it before Lundy's barn door, where he dismounted.

The stud neighed and pawed the ground. From within the barn came an answer. Clinch's pulses quickened.

He slid back the entry door far enough to enter and he saw that every stall was choked with horses—Bar 44 horses. The effrontery of it staggered him. They must feel pretty sure of themselves!

From the barn he went to Lundy's saloon, the black following at his heels like a dog. There were no horses tied to the hitch-rack.

He shoved open the doors. A blast of hot, liquor-laden air rushed out. Clinch swept the place with a glance.

The bar was deserted except for a frowsy-headed bartender. But over by the wall four men sat about a table.

"Ah," said Clinch, "Abe Drill and his friend, eh?"

"C'mere, Frenchie!" said Abe Drill.

Clinch strolled over.

"Set down. Have a drink." Drill's speech was jerky.

"But with pleasure," said Clinch.

Abe Drill poured him a drink from a fluted bottle, and watched him down it.

"You seen Pinos?" Drill growled throatily.

Clinch showed his teeth. "That is why I come, my friend. Pete, he is not so easy to see, eh?"

"He's hard as hell to see!" growled Drill. "If that red-faced hog tries to run a shinney on *us*——" He broke off and stared hard at Clinch with those reptile eyes of his. "How about it—did you nail that rannie?"

Any doubt as to these men's complicity in the affair was now dispelled from Clinch's mind. But he smiled and shrugged his shoulders as Jean Jeneau would have done.

"I," he said, "am here. Outside you will see hees hors'. We do not speak too plainly on such things, eh Abe?"

Abe Drill sloshed liquor into a glass and gulped savagely. Clinch leaned back in his chair and stared up at the big swinging lamp, suspended from the middle of the ceiling. It had a big ceiling reflector, and all about the reflector hung small glass prisms. The smallest draft of air would cause those prisms to swing and tinkle, and, when the lamp was lighted, to cast off varicolored flashes of light.

"My friend, Pete, say you the very excellent shot, Mistaire Drill," Clinch said, still staring at the lamp. "I bet you the ten dollaire you cannot cut the string," and he motioned to the lamp.

DRILL looked upward. His eyes seemed lidless.

"You mean on one of them glass doodads," he said.

Clinch nodded.

Drill's gun exploded almost instantly. A glass prism struck the floor with a *tunk* and the severed string gyrated back and forth.

Clinch stepped over and picked up the prism. There was the proper respect in his voice when he spoke.

"A most wonderful shot, Mistaire Drill!"

Abe Drill laughed harshly.

"Kids' play!" he broke his gun and punched out the empty case. It rolled to within a foot of Clinch's toe. "Hoose here, the poorest shot in the bunch can do that."

"I bet the ten dollaire he cannot!" said Clinch quickly.

"Hey there," bawled the bartender. "Cut out that shootin'. People live upstairs."

"Shoot, Hoose!" said Drill.

Hoose, the big fellow drew his gun and took careful aim. And he, too, dropped a prism. Abe Drill laughed mirthlessly.

"That's twenty *dollaire* you owe us, Frenchie!" he gibed.

Clinch didn't have twenty dollars in his pockets. He didn't even have five.

"But wait," he said, "the other have not shoot. You will give me the chance to get even, eh Abe?"

"You want Bill and Jim to take a shot too?" said Drill.

Clinch nodded and smiled.

"Then you'll owe us twenty more. Shoot, Jim."

Jim shot and missed. Abe Drill swore.

"Your turn, Bill," he said.

Bill shot so close that the prism swayed. But it did not drop. Again Abe Drill swore bitterly.

"What the hell's come over you two?" he wanted to know. "Now we're right where we started from. Want to bet me again, Frenchie?"

"Ah, but," said Clinch sagely, "you would hit it, my friend. I will bet," he stooped and with a single motion swept up the four empty cases, "the ten dollaire you cannot hit thees when I toss it so—" and he made a motion with his hand.

"You go to hell!" said Abe Drill. "Next you'll have us shootin' at snowflakes. You——"

At that moment the door back of the bar opened and Pete Pinos came out, followed closely by Sheriff Dobey. Pinos walked swiftly towards the front door, the sheriff trotting behind. Clinch noticed that the sheriff's face wore a woe-begone expression and Pinos's eyes were glittering. He looked at them very briefly and flipped his hand towards the door.

Abe Drill got up hastily.

"Let's git it while the gittin's good boys," he growled.

"Hey there!" called the bartender, "who's payin' fer that likker?"

Clinch turned towards the bar quickly.

"I, my friend," he said.

Abe Drill and the other three went on out the front door and Clinch strolled to the bar. He didn't want to attend the confab, first because he was afraid of his disguise at close quarters with Pete Pinos. And he wanted a check on those four empty cartridge cases.

There was a window at the end of the bar giving to the street. The door through which Pete Pinos and the sheriff had come was still open. It gave to the inner stairway.

The bartender gave him his change and turned to washing glasses. Through the window Clinch saw Letha Lundy, a fur cape wrapped about her head and shoulders, hurry past the window towards the front.

The bartender's back was turned and the stairway door not farther than one good step from where he stood. He made it with one long, silent stride and went on up the stairs very cautiously. He knew he probably wouldn't have a better time to talk to Luke Lundy. He knew he shouldn't bother to talk with the hound at all. Those Bar 44 horses in his barn should be enough reason for shooting at sight.

In the hall above the boards creaked under his feet. Lundy's door was ajar. Clinch pushed it open and found himself looking straight into the ugly muzzle of a six-shooter. Over the sights of that gun Luke Lundy's eyes blazed.

"So!" said Lundy, softly. "Come on in, Jeneau!"

CLINCH stepped through the door cursing himself for his stupidity. Still covering him with the gun, Lundy stepped to the window and raised it with his left hand. Clinch knew that Dobey and Pinos were doubtless in sight and that Lundy intended to shout to them. Saw his big chest swell with a sudden inspiration.

From a standing start Clinch made ten feet at a bound. The gun blazed almost in his face, carrying away his hat and singing his hair. Then he was under it, at close grips, his arms locked about Lundy's middle, his head under Lundy's chin.

"Drop that gun or I'll break your neck!" he hissed.

The quarters were too close for shooting, so Lundy clubbed at the back of his head, savagely, with the gun. The first blow landed too low to do much damage.

Instantly Clinch released Lundy and shoved him as he stepped back. Lundy, caught unaware, by the move, staggered for a moment off balance. That moment was plenty long enough for Clinch. He hit the man under the chin with all his power. It was like hitting a stone pillar and his arm went numb to the elbow.

Lundy's head snapped back but he didn't go down. He did stagger back a step or two, then he shook his head fiercely and waved the six-shooter uncertainly, trying to get his vision clear. Clinch leaped in, tore the gun away and smashed Lundy over the head with it. Still Lundy didn't go down, so Clinch hit him again—hit him a fearful smash.

Lundy fell, but grudgingly, it seemed. Clinch stood panting, watching him. He didn't move. Clinch stuck the gun in his waist band and turned to the desk. The first thing that met his eyes was the forged bill of sale. A big hunting knife lay beside it.

Clinch slipped the bill of sale into his pocket. Then he turned back towards Lundy with that old deadlike look on his face. Drunk or sober, he knew that Bob would never sell nor gamble what was not his.

The high foresight of the six-shooter had cut a deep gash in Luke Lundy's head. Blood from that cut was flowing over his right temple and down across his face. He didn't seem to be breathing, so Clinch knelt beside him and slipped his hand inside his shirt to feel for heart beat. He couldn't detect any.

He stood up and turned towards the door. He stopped dead. There stood Letha Lundy with her face dead white, her eyes blazing. He saw her eyes drop swiftly to her father, then back to him. He could hear the hard, quick rush of her breath.

"You—you——" she hissed, then sped straight towards the desk.

She moved faster than Clinch had ever seen any living thing move. Before he could so much as bat an eye she had snatched up the big knife and was at his throat slashing and cutting.

Clinch's backward bound saved his life from that first fierce slash. The way Letha drove that knife it would have laid him open from breast to groin had he not moved. As it was, it sheared right through the stout clothing he wore and down to the skin. He felt the sting on his right breast, felt the cloth loosen and sag.

Letha was not a big girl and looked anything but strong. But she was quicker than light itself and before Clinch could recover from that first wild attack she was at his throat again.

Clinch could have knocked her senseless with a single blow, though he didn't. But he couldn't keep away from her and in sheer desperation dived forward, threw his arms about her and pinioned her arms.

She fought like a wildcat. She kicked she writhed, she buried her face against him, where the knife had laid open his clothing, and he felt the sharp stab as her teeth sank into his bare flesh.

"What, for gosh sake, will I do?" he thought. "If I turn her loose she'll cut me to ribbons, and if I don't she'll gnaw me down to my framework!

SUDDENLY he felt her go limp in his arms, heard the knife strike the floor as it dropped from her hand. He put her on the wall couch. He didn't feel any resentment towards her. Nobody could find fault with a girl that fought for her

old man, scoundrel though hers might be.

With the knife he hacked a splinter from the desk and with the splinter pinned together the edges of his slashed jacket. Then he picked up the big Stetson, tilting it so it would hide the place where Lundy's powder charge had carried away his hair, and went down the outside stairway.

When he got around to the front the black stud was down in at the barn, calling to the other horses through a door crack. Nobody showed in the street.

Clinch caught the horse, mounted and headed for Ben Bass's stage station. Again he came to it at nightfall, and when he stepped through the door, big Ben's relief at seeing him again was touching.

"I'll tell you straight, feller," he said. "I never figgered on seein' you on your two laigs agin. I got some dope on that Abe Drill gang today, and if what I got is straight, they don't come any wusser. They claim that Drill can shoot the eyes out of a gnat, flyin' sideways."

Clinch pulled out the four empty cartridge cases.

"Let's check, Ben," he said.

By the firing pin marks they easily established the fact that it was Abe Drill and his men who had slaughtered the colts. Drill's gun was the one that used the unknown caliber case.

"Here's something else," Clinch brought out the forged bill of sale.

"Whur'd you git that, Clinch?"

"On Luke Lundy's desk," said Clinch.

"Didn't I tell you!" said Ben triumphantly, "that Lundy was the pole hoss?"

"But we don't know yet who killed Bob," said Clinch. "We just know that neither Abe Drill nor his men did."

"That narrers it down to Pete Pinos er Lundy," Ben pointed out.

"Or Jeneau," said Clinch.

"You got Jeneau's gun, ain't you? You know it wasn't it that fired that bullet."

"He could have used somebody else's," said Clinch.

"You know damn well he didn't. Accordin' to your report, Bob was tryin' to reach his rifle when he was dropped. I don't believe Pete Pinos has got guts enough to shoot a man, even in the back. You weakenin', Clinch?" asked big Ben.

Clinch stared hard at the wall.

"Funny what a man will do because of a girl, ain't it, Ben?" he said. "Here I am, tryin' by every means I know to give Luke Lundy a clean ticket, and I know he's the dirtiest hound of the lot. I'm glad you pulled me up, Ben- -"

Just then the door opened and old Willie Salt came sidling in.

pulled me up, Ben——"

"Where you been, you copper-hided ol' devil!" he roared. "What th' hell you mean, runnin' off and leavin' me to wrangle hosses after an eighty-mile drive? Snuck off t' git drunk, hey, and couldn't find no likker. Serves you right, you mink-eyed old——"

Old Willie stuck out a bony paw and dropped something into big Ben's hand. Big Ben stared at it as if it were a coiled rattler.

"Why, it's an empty cat'ridge hull," he said. "Whur'd you git this, Willie?"

WILLIE suddenly spouted a torrent of Ute lingo. Clinch couldn't make head nor tail of it, but big Ben listened attentively.

"He says he found it in the crack of the floor in your cabin," Ben told Clinch.

"He's lyin', Ben," said Clinch. "I burned the cabin. Burned it to get rid of Jeneau's body."

"No burn!" said old Willie vigorously. "No lie. Findum cabin."

"Listen, Clinch," said big Ben, "when Willie tells you a thing is so you can bet your life it *is* so! Where's that bullet that killed Bob?"

Clinch suddenly reached out and took the case from Ben's fingers. His own shook a little when he fitted the bullet into the case.

"Told you!" Ben's voice was triumphant. "Fits, don't it?"

Suddenly Clinch reached down and pulled from his waistband, the gun he had torn from Luke Lundy's hand. He punched out the empty case and compared it with the one old Willie had brought in.

"Ben," he said, his voice deadlike again, "it looks like we reached the end of the

trail. Here's the gun that killed Bob and I took it right out of Luke Lundy's hand not three hours ago. I reckon I won't try to find excuses for him any longer."

"Come out jist as I figgered it would," said Ben.

"Get out your razor," Clinch told him. "I'm sheddin' this disguise here and now—and your horse clippers. I want every one of them hounds to know it's *me*, not Jean Jeneau that's throwin' down on 'em!"

"*You*, hell!" growled Ben. "I've lived forty-five year and had a good time, mostly. I reckon now's as good a time as any to kick in, and I know it's a damn good cause. I'm trailin' along, feller. Hey, Willie, think you can still sling a knife?"

"*Huu-uummmmm!*" said old Willie, "Me stick-um!"

V

JUSTICE

IN THE sheriff's office, Pinos, sheriff Dobey, Drill and his men held conference. Drill was plainly and viciously suspicious of Pinos. Pinos talked hard and fast.

"I tell you, Abe," he said, "I did get the money for them horses. But before I could reach you boys to make the split Lundy called me back. He'd heard what happened out there. He took the money off me, took my knife, took my gun, and ordered Dobey to throw me in jail. Ask Dobey."

"He'd lie just as fast as you!" growled Abe Drill. He slapped Pinos' empty gun holster. Felt for his knife. "But I reckon you ain't lyin'. What's the matter with the old coot? Why did he turn on us? We understood he was a right guy."

"Not the way you think," said Pinos. "I was afraid they'd be hell after you boys set fire to things and shot them colts. And then to top it, we had to kill Bob Carey—"

"*We?*" snarled Drill. "Who's *we*, Pinos?"

There was a silence. Drill spoke again. "The only thing I can see to do is to bump Lundy, crack that safe of his and drift."

"Wait!" said Pinos. "I still believe we got a chance to get Lundy to back us. He'll be in a bad hole if he don't and he knows it. Let's swear it was Jeneau that killed the Carey boys and the fire was an accident. With the five of us against one we can put it over."

Drill stared hard at Sheriff Dobey.

"How about you?" he growled. "Will you stick?"

Pinos spoke for the sheriff.

"Of course he will, Abe. I told you he was a right guy. If it goes the other way he'll have to slope with the rest of us."

"We'll try it!" growled Drill. "But at the same time we'll have horses saddled and ready just in case it don't go over. When do we make the bid?"

"Let's wait till night," said Pinos.

Luke Lundy was propped on the couch with a bandage about his head when he heard them coming up the stairs. He had not long recovered consciousness.

"Letha," he said quickly, "take that gun of Pinos's and get in your room."

They were at the door then and Letha did not have time to tell him that the gun was gone. She slipped into the room just as Pinos shoved the door open and came in, followed by Abe Drill and his men. Lundy swung to a sitting position.

"Luke," said Pinos, "we come to tell you jist what happened out at the Bar 44."

"Talk!" said Lundy shortly.

"When we got out there that Frenchie, Jeneau, was there, playin' poker and drinkin' with the boys. They had a gallon of whiskey and was all drunk. Bob, signed the bill of sale and I paid for the horses. Bob was drunk—you can tell by the signature—but not so drunk but what he knowed what he was doin'. I had the deal all made before I went out."

"What did you tell Clinch Carey you wouldn't take the horses for?" asked Lundy.

"To get 'em cheaper," replied Pinos readily. "Clinch was too drunk that night to write his name, and I knowed it wasn't necessary. When we went to get the horses out of the pasture and corrals, one of the boys throwed away a cigarette, and it fired a hay stack. There was a strong wind blowin' and that stack fired the others and the barn. We hated it, Luke, but it was just an accident."

"And the killing of the Carey boys—that was an accident, too?" said Lundy sarcas-

tically.

"No, that wasn't no accident. As I told you, Jeneau and the Carey boys was gamblin' and drunk. You know how crooked Jeneau is with cards. I reckon he must have got a little too raw, because after we'd got the horses started I rode back to the cabin to tell the Carey boys we'd do the right thing about the fire, both of them was dead and Jeneau was gone. That's the straight of it, Luke, and all these boys will back me in it."

"Why didn't you tell me about it when you first come to me?" demanded Luke Lundy. Pinos had made a mighty plausible case.

"I should have," confessed Pinos. "But I was afraid you'd hold up the money on account of the fire. And it couldn't be helped. Another thing, I hated to squeal on Jeneau. As I see it, it was two against one, and if Jeneau come out on top he couldn't be blamed too much. Maybe the Carey boys was tryin' to crook him. I ain't seen him to talk to him yet."

LUKE Lundy was plainly impressed.

"Crooked as you are, Pinos," he said, "I can't believe you and Drill here would ride out there, burn them buildings, shoot the Carey boys, drive off their horses and expect to get away with it—not even in a country like this. What do you want me to do?"

"We want you to stand by us if the thing ever comes to the courts," said Pinos.

"And we want the dinero for them horses!" put in Drill harshly.

"*Well*" said Lundy pointedly. "I understood Pinos was making that deal."

"I am, I am," said Pinos hastily. "But I promised them a little whack to help me herd 'em in. And I owed Abe some to boot."

"First," said Lundy, "I want them horses took out of my barn. And there won't be any deal made until everything is straightened up. If Jeneau killed the Carey boys, as you say he did, and *that* is proven, then we'll talk business. And not until then. Is that satisfactory?"

"Shore, shore!" said Pinos, and nudged Abe Drill to keep silent.

Just then the door to Letha's bedroom swung open. Letha stood there, her eyes ablaze, scorn and contempt on her face.

"Lies! lies!" she cried. "Father, they're all lies! Don't you believe a word——"

"Letha," he said quickly, "let me decide this. I promise you justice shall be done. The killer of Bob and Clinch Car——"

"Clinch Carey is not dead!" she cried. "It was him that was here today—" She stopped suddenly, then spoke in a calmer voice. "I *know*, father. Clinch is not dead. He——"

Like a striking rattler Abe Drill moved.

"Cover Lundy!" he hissed and leaped straight at Letha.

She stepped back quickly and whipped from her dress the big knife she had picked from the table as she went out. Drill hurtled past her and she slashed at him viciously. He whirled and knocked her senseless with a single blow. Lundy who had come surging to his feet with a roar, was struck over the head by the giant Hoose and knocked senseless across the couch.

"Git busy on the safe, Pinos!" snapped Drill. "I thought that guy was phony when he picked up the empty hulls."

"But—" began Pinos, stupefied.

The door creaked. Pinos whirled. There stood Clinch, looking him straight in the face.

"Hell's hinges!" screamed Pinos, and went for his gun.

Clinch shot him straight through the body and Pinos went down, doubled, and screaming in mortal agony. Then Abe Drill's gun spoke and Clinch staggered against the door as the heavy ball tore through him. He cut Drill down with his next shot, then went deathly sick and leaned against the door frame.

THE window was dashed to fragments and in leaped big Ben, long hair flying, a gun in his hand and a knife in his teeth. He snatched the knife out and hurled it at two men leaping at him and his six shooter began to boom.

"Cut 'em down!" he roared.

One of the men fell. Another kept coming. Big Ben hurled the gun at him—he wasn't worth a damn with a six-shooter

anyhow—caught the man about the middle and hurled him clear across the room. Then the giant Hoose, caught him from behind, forearm under Ben's chin and surged back with all his great power. Big Ben's neck cracked and his eyes bulged. He beat the air helplessly with his big hands.

Then a bare brown arm reached in from the window, a knife glinted in the lamp light, and old Willie, leaning far over the sill, cut Hoose's throat from ear to ear.

Over in the door Clinch still remained upright, fighting back the blackness that kept rushing at him. Through the powder smoke he saw Luke Lundy come to a sitting position on the couch.

He had been looking for Lundy, and the sight of him seemed to shoot new power into his fading sight. He raised his gun—it seemed to weigh a ton, now—and he put the sight firmly on a spot midway between Luke Lundy's eyes.

"Lundy, you hound," he said with deadly flatness, "you didn't give Bob a chance—you shot him in the back. But I'm shootin' you right between the eyes!"

And then, since the blackness was coming back at him again, he squeezed the trigger quickly. With the roar of the gun, Luke Lundy dropped like a poled ox.

It was daylight. The sun was shining.

Clinch could see it gleaming on the tree tops through a window. He was in bed, he discovered. A big, high-posted bed with a cover as white as snow that rustled when he stirred and moved his legs slightly.

Even that slight movement brought a response. A cool hand touched his forehead. Two eyes of blue looked down on him with serene authority.

"You must lie perfectly still!" said Letha Lundy clearly, firmly.

Clinch considered this amazing situation. He felt all washed out—weak as water and when he tried to breathe deeply, it seemed that a knife was being twisted inside his chest. But he remembered, clearly, that he had dropped Luke Lundy with his last shot, and he didn't want any mistake about that.

"Takin' mighty good care of a man that killed your father, ain't you?" he said.

"You didn't kill father, Clinch. You just thought you did. You thought he killed Bob, didn't you?"

"The bullet—the gun——" he began.

She nodded.

"That was Pete Pinos's gun. Father took it from him that morning. It was Pete Pinos that shot your brother. Father had nothing to do with that—that raid. Can you believe that?"

"It ain't very hard to believe anything you tell me," he replied. "I'm shore glad I missed. When did you get on to me—when we had that battle and you started to eat me alive?"

She colored and nodded.

He looked out the window. Heard the rumble of the stage and big Ben Bass's mighty "Whoa!"

"So the mustache didn't fool you?" he said.

She leaned over and looked into his eyes. She was close, mighty close. He could feel her breath on his face.

"No," she replied, softly, "it didn't fool me—much. But I like you better—without it!"

Clinch looked up at her.

"Prove it!" he said.

GUN SLINGER

By

William Gardner Bell

CHEROKEE SLIM was a gunman,
Some said that he couldn't be beat;
But there's always another that's faster,
That the master is sure bound to meet.

Now Cherokee's reign was a long one,
For it seemed none could equal his draw;
And because of his bad reputation,
He'd been forced to steer clear of the law.

There was many who claimed him a rustler,
Though he hadn't been caught in the act;
So the lawmen had watched him and waited
Till the claim could be proved solid fact.

They had figured that someday he'd slip-up,
And then's when the law's chance would come;
They could stick him away for a nice little stretch
Where he wouldn't have use for his gun.

But the law never got him for rustlin',
For he'd one day got hard while in town,
And he'd started to bully a cowboy
Who wore his six-shooter tied down.

First the cowboy had stood for his naggin',
Till the crowd really thought he lacked sand;
But when Slim loudly called him a coward,
The cowboy had soon called his hand.

Slim didn't feel at all nervous,
For he thought he was forked-lightnin' fast;
But his gun hadn't hardly got leveled,
When his body was shocked by a blast . . .

Even the best meet their master,
And in this case the lawmen were glad,
That the master was someone whose instincts,
Would lead to the good, not the bad.

In the torturing flames of a mountain forest fire a blood feud flares to a bullet-laden climax.

STEEL JACKETS

By John Briggs

Author of "Cougar Branded," "Life Sentence," etc.

A GUST of warm wind swished down the mountainside, picking up the resinous scent of pine trees that sweltered under the hot afternoon sun. Gabe Zimwalt, crossing his mill yard between stacks of bright new lumber, glanced up at the waving pine tips as he heard the rushing approach of the breeze. The sultry weather in late September, coupled with freakish air drafts foreshadowed a gale. For a week, the horizon had been red and hazy with smoke from forest fires raging somewhere in the high Sierras. The red demon of destruction would sweep through hundreds of square miles of virgin timber, if fanned by a gale. The present fires were seventy or eighty miles distant, and yet Gabe had the constant feeling of uneasiness common to mountaineers during the season of fire hazard.

But the scowl which knotted his black heavy brows and tightened his bearded lips was due to a matter more definite and personal than his subconscious fear of fire. He stepped within the long, barnlike mill shed as the wind rattled the shakes on the roof. The vagrant breeze passed on, leaving an empty, brooding hush throughout the mill building in which the big circular saws had hummed daily during the summer months. A trickling splash of water from the spillway made a lonesome sound. The

huge water wheel was not turning. For Gabe had closed his mill for the season.

Today he walked through the mill shed without glancing about, without his usual interest and pride of ownership. He strode into the tool room, opened a chest and lifted out a new Winchester repeating rifle. Almost caressingly he fingered the black, shiny barrel and the polished hardwood stock. At odd times, he had worked on the gun to make it operate as smoothly as flowing oil. He had filed the trigger catch until the slightest pressure would release the hammer. Backwoodsman fashion, he had endowed the weapon with a sort of personality that was responsive to his expert touch.

Sitting on the tool chest, he filled the rifle magazine from a new box of metal-nosed bullets. His motions were slow and mechanical. Several reasons had prompted Gabe to send out for the steel-nosed bullets. He had pride in his reputation as a crack shot. And he had the sportsman-like idea of hitting his game in a vital part, instead of tearing it to pieces with soft bullets from a high-powered gun. Besides, he believed that a steel-capped bullet was less apt to be deflected by twigs when shooting a deer through the brush.

AND yet his thoughts were far from deer hunting, as he loaded the rifle. He injected a cartridge into the breech and lowered the hammer with his thumb. A tenseness marked his attitude as he stood up, hugging the rifle to his side. With swift strides, he crossed the interior of the mill shed to the partly open side which overlooked his two-story frame dwelling.

The house stood at a distance of two hundred yards beyond the mill stream. It faced the dusty wagon road that had been only a pack trail when Gabe Zimwalt had first settled at the head of Bear Creek Meadows.

Although the parklike forests of yellow and sugar pine sloped gently down to the meadows, Gabe had not thought of operating a saw mill when he had selected his home site. The broad green valley had appealed to him for stock raising and farming.

As the land had not been surveyed, he had simply squatted and had begun carving his home out of the wilderness. Others had located near him, doing likewise. And, after the government survey had been made, Gabe had expected to locate his homestead on meadow land below his first cabin which had stood at the edge of the pine woods.

But his nearest neighbor, John Maddock, had beaten his squatter's right to the meadow land, merely by being the first to file a claim. The resulting quarrel between Gabe Zimwalt and John Maddock had ripened to a rifle duel in which Gabe had killed Maddock. But that had not ended the feud. Maddock's oldest boy, Dace, had sworn to avenge his father's death. Dace, of course, had believed his father to be in the right of the argument. So far, young Maddock had been restricted by his mother's wishes. He had reached manhood without fulfilling his vow of vengeance. Still there was not a resident of the Bear Creek settlement who doubted that he was living with the purpose in view. It was publicly understood that he would go prepared to kill, if he should ever set foot on Zimwalt's property.

Gabe himself had never overcome his sense of injury, despite the fact that he had prospered as a mill man. Since Maddock's son had sworn revenge, Gabe felt that the affair was not closed. And he did not intend to be caught napping. Gabe's mountaineer forebears had settled arguments by exchanging a life for a life, as long as a member of an opposing clan remained. Most of his neighbors also understood the hillman's code. They had left homes in the South before settling in the West.

Looking out from his mill shed, Gabe stood at an angle which permitted him to see into the attic of his house through a window which gave him an unobstructed view of the opposite window. The upper story of the building had never been partitioned. Gabe had converted it into sleeping quarters for some of his mill hands. Since he had shut down the mill, the attic was vacant. He could see the afternoon sun shining in through the westward window. Then suddenly the sunlight was shut out as a blind was drawn down. Gabe's bearded

features convulsed with sudden wrath.

Lately he had learned that the lowering of that blind was a signal which could be seen at the Maddock Ranch. In his own house, there was but one person who could have drawn down the window shade. Since his wife's death, Gabe's household had consisted of himself and his daughter, Myra.

IMPELLED by an unreasoning rage, Gabe turned away. He climbed down the brace-beams to the planking under the water wheel, then stealthily made his way through the alder thicket up along the creek. About a hundred yards above the mill, he crossed the creek and entered the woods, walking silently and fast. For a short distance, he followed an ascending skidway on which he had pulled sugar pine logs cut from the timber claim that belonged, really, to Myra. At her father's behest, Myra had filed on the claim as soon as she had reached the legal age.

Puffing and perspiring from his climb, Gabe pressed into a thicket of buck brush from which he could look out in the direction of his house. The one he expected to see soon appeared ascending a shadowed glade among the trees. The girl walked with lithe grace, unhampered by her wide skirts of checkered gingham. She was tall, her dark, straight hair fell in two heavy braids over her high, plump bosom. Strolling along leisurely, she neared the thicket in which Gabe waited. She turned aside to pass around the brush. An amused smile flashed across her lips as a gray squirrel scampered fifty feet up the huge bole of a sugar pine and then turned to eye her saucily, curling his bushy tail.

Gabe stepped out from his hiding place and confronted her startled glance as she turned swiftly. For an instant, he caught a look of pleased expectancy in her smiling lips and eyes. Then her face paled, her dark eyes widened as she interpreted the meaning of his glowering expression.

Gabe's anger heightened at the sign of her sudden fright. He spoke in a high-pitched, rasping tone.

"Gal, I never counted on livin' to see the day thet my own flesh and blood would betray me!"

Color slowly returned to the girl's cheeks. She clasped her hands at her waist and a flare of defiance replaced the fright in her eyes. She made no attempt to feign innocence.

" 'Pears like you've found out, paw," she said. "Since you know I've bin a comin' here to meet Dace Maddock, you might as well know that he and I intend to marry!"

As though dazed by a blow, Gabe struggled to steady his reeling senses. He shook his head like a punch dizzy fighter.

"You—you——" he frothed, choking. "You ken stand here afore me and speak the name o' Maddock to my face? You ken turn agen yore own father fer a man thet's bounden by oath to set foot on my land to kill me? So, he's been bolden enough to carry on with you, right here on my own propity! And him sworn to shoot me on sight, if I ketch him here!"

"No!" the girl cried. "Dace ain't set nary foot on your land! We've met on my land—my timber claim. He don't any more want to kill you, paw. Even if he can't forget you killed his father. And he don't aim ever to set foot on your land——"

All of the old enmity flared anew in Gabe Zimwalt.

"John Maddock robbed me by a dirty, low-down trick!" he blazed. "I only killed him defendin' my life. His boy's the same kind of a yellar sneak—lurin' you out from under my very nose! Thet young houn' is only foolin' you, gal. He's only doin' it to fetch me low. He playin' you a scurvy Maddock trick!"

Myra's color heightened. She stood erect, defiant.

"Paw, I knowed it was comin' to this, sooner or later," she said. "Dace and I have been figurin' on it for a long time. Him nor me ain't to blame for what happened atween you and his father. It ain't right that you should stand in the way of us marryin'."

Gabe gave a grating laugh. "I'll say as to the right and wrong o' it!" he stormed. "I'll do as I see fittin' fer you, bein's you've done lost yor own head. Now you ken trot back to the house——

"Do you aim to mind me, gal?" he demanded as she continued to face him. "I said, go back to the house!"

Myra's glance darted to the rifle in his hand. Horrified, her gaze lifted to his.

"Paw, you're aimin' to go gunnin' for Dace!" she accused. "Wasn't it enough that you killed his father?"

"I aim to settle my affairs atween man and man," Gabe asserted. "Must I hev' to whop you, gal, to make you mind? If the young whelp was to kill me, I reckon you could go ahead and marry him. But not ontil then, you hain't! Now, aire you a-goin' home?"

"No!" cried Myra, trying to dash by him. "I'm a-goin to tell Dace!"

Gabe thrust out his thick arm and blocked her. She tried to scream a warning to the youth who might be on his way to meet her. But her father's heavy hand pressed her cries back against her lips.

Gabe realized that his daughter was no longer a child to be sent home by a whipping. In his desperate fury, he believed that he was acting for the best. He forced Myra, kicking and struggling, back against a fir sapling and tightly bound her hands to her back around the young tree trunk. He tore off her gingham dress sleeve, twisted it and used it to muffle her screams. Making sure that she was securely fastened, he picked up his rifle and strode on without a word or a backward glance.

FOR nearly a quarter of a mile, he hurried on among the pines. He proceeded warily, watching the short forest lanes toward the county road. He made a close guess at the place where Myra and Dace Maddock had been meeting. It would be on his daughter's timber land, at a point which the neighbor youth could reach without crossing Gabe's own property. There was a meandering swale, thinly timbered, by which Dace could approach, avoiding undergrowth and young tree thickets.

Gabe selected his place of concealment behind a pile of timber slashings that had been left after the summer's logging. He waited impatiently, fanning the gnats from his moist face. He didn't know the exact workings of the signal system between Myra and her lover, but he supposed that Dace Maddock would arrive to keep the tryst as soon after seeing that drawn window blind as he could make it.

As he waited, Gabe's temper reached an explosive point. He had nearly decided to walk down to the Maddock Ranch, when he heard the cawing of a mountain blue jay and then glimpsed a tan-jacketed figure striding swiftly toward him among the trees. He recognized Dace Maddock and noted that Dace was carrying a rifle. In his seething temper, he accepted the youth's weapon as evidence of a challenge to himself.

The approaching trespasser seemed to be watching the noisy jay bird as it flew zigzagging between the shadow-laced branches of the tall pines. Sun-splashed, the jay's wings glistened like petals of blue iris, but in the shadows, the sight of it was apparently lost to the young mountaineer whose march it was derisively leading.

Kneeling motionless, Gabe watched as young Dace halted by the mottled trunk of a giant tree. He could hear the young fellow's soft-toned, amused speech addressed to the bird.

"Plague take yore cawin' racket!" Dace complained. "I wish't you'd shut yore beak fer a change, or quit flappin' on ahead o' me, every time I ketch up. How come yo're alluz hangin' round here, you gol' dern pest?"

The speaker wore a buckskin jacket that blended with the yellow patchwork patterns of the enormous tree boles. His head was uncovered and his hair glinted golden where a sunbeam struck it. His tanned face was the sienna hue of red cedar. Even his eyes were visible to Gabe, as he lifted them against the sunlight. They were nearly as violet as the mountain jay's wing.

The jay itself had perched momentarily in the shadow, after passing high over Gabe's head. Suddenly it set up a raucous, squawking: alarm. Its tone was much more excited than its previous mild scoffing at Dace Maddock, with whom it seemed to be on familiar terms. Any woodsman could have interpreted the bird's meaning, for nothing grieves a bluejay more than to become aware of a silent watcher who has had the advantage of seeing him first.

Gabe saw Dace Maddock glance quickly about, and saw the flash of a smile be-

ginning to show on the youth's lips.

"Myra?" Dace queried joyfully. "I'll bet yo're a hidin' yonder behind the brush pile! How long you been waitin', honey?"

The young man's words reacted upon Gabe Zimwalt as a match to powder. Furious, he stepped out from his hiding place. It gave him a spiteful satisfaction to note the look of consternation that swept over Dace Maddock's face.

The youth took several backward steps and brought up against a large pine stump.

WORDLESS and tight lipped, Gabe stepped out to another sawed-off tree butt which separated them by about thirty paces. He pulled a heavy, silver-cased watch from the small, tight pocket of his overalls. Holding his rifle in his right hand, he placed the watch on the flat stump top before him. He executed his movements without withdrawing his menacing stare from young Maddock who was regarding him as if stunned. He waited until a rush of wind expended itself and then he spoke.

"Young feller, you ken hev' one minute to try and get yoreself outa range afore I start shootin'. If yo're a mind to run, you'd better get sot to leave when I start countin' time. But afore you go, let one thing sink in yore head. I don't aim fer you to meet Myra agen, as long as I ken pull a trigger. So, if yo're still hankerin' to settle yore grudge agen me, now's yore chance!"

Dace Maddock shifted uncertainly, glanced about, harried and desperate.

In his grim rage, Gabe suspected that the boy had made vows of vengeance that were not so easy to face out in gun smoke. From the corner of his eye, he glanced at his watch. And at that instant, Dace answered his challenge.

"I've tried powerful hard not to hold my grudge agen you, Gabe Zimwalt," the young man declared. "On account o' Myra. 'Pears like you'd oughta be satisfied to let it rest, if I am. You'd oughta be willin' that Myra and me should get married—"

"I'd oughta plant a bullet atween yore eyes whar you stand!" bellowed Gabe. "I'm entitled to, seein's yo're sworn to kill me. Ef I hev' to drill you on the run, it won't look so good, mebbe. But it'll show thet you had a yeller streak!"

With an eye to his watch, Gabe saw that the second-hand was creeping upward to complete the minute circuit. He believed that Dace Maddock would turn tail and run, and that the youth would thereafter cease his attentions to Myra.

"This here's the showdown, young feller," he said. "You ken go. And from now on, you ken leave me and mine alone. In one minute, I start shootin' ef yo're still in sight. Yore time's up!"

Again Dace Maddock's gaze wavered. Even at thirty yards, Gabe could see that his face was pale. Yet his feet apparently were frozen to the spot. Abruptly he stiffened and stared back steadily, eyes narrowed to slits above his pallored cheeks.

"I ain't a-goin' to give Myra up!" Dace cried. "I'll swap lead—if I have to. Yo're drivin' me to it!"

For a brief instant, Gabe was surprised. But his fierce rage upheld his resolve. On the stump, his watch ticked off the seconds. Then he brought his left hand forward to grasp his rifle barrel, ready to shoot from the hip.

DACE MADDOCK maintained his stunned stand. But, at Gabe's final gesture, his pale face tensed with hate. He leaped behind the stump. And Gabe's shot sliced the air exactly where his head had been just an instant before.

Even so, Gabe was fairly sure that his bullet had parted the agile youth's curly, yellow hair. However, he saw where the bullet struck. Two-hundred yards across the logged-off clearing, a tiny white smudge floated upward against an outcropping of ancient lava rock.

Amazed for an instant, Gabe watched the small puff of smoke, or rock dust, rise until it was whisked away by a head of wind which swept moaning down the mountainside. It held his attention only for an instant. But that was long enough for him to notice that the white puff lazed upward like smoke, instead of splashing out like rock dust. Moreover, the rock against which it rose was black obsidian lava. Gabe did not have time enough to consider the dry pine

slashings that were heaped around the base of the rock.

The wind rushed on, abated slightly, and he shouted taunts at the youth who remained entrenched behind the opposite stump. Then Dace Maddock's blood-streaked forehead flashed for an instant into view along a gun barrel. Both rifles spoke as Gabe made a snap shot. Gabe felt a jerk at his open shirt collar. He saw splinters fly as his own bullet creased the opposite stump top.

But Dace had ducked before firing.

"Try agen!" came the youth's wild yell as he withdrew his rifle. "I'm done with holdin' back on you, Gabe Zimwalt! I'm plumb pizened up! I ain't beholden to you, on account o' Myra!"

"Show yoreself!" Gabe shouted back, resting his Winchester, waiting.

Standing ready, Gabe had a distinct advantage in timing. For his entrenched opponent would have to expose head and hands before aiming.

"I'll show myself when I'm good and ready!" came the cornered youth's response. "You got the bulge on me, y'u buzzard!"

Suddenly Gabe's attention was attracted across the stump-littered clearing to a wind-driven streamer of smoke. As he stared stupefied, red flame tongues licked out along the tinder-dry slashings by the big rock which his first bullet had hit. For a moment, it held him horrified. Then he bellowed at his hidden foe.

"Fire! Look behind y'u! The whole woods'll burn up! Nothin' this side o' hell ken stop it!" After a harsh laugh, he added, "Well, you'll be movin' afore long!"

"I ken roast as long as you ken," shouted Dace. "I reckon one o' us won't be leavin' here, mister. You started that fire. I heard about them metal-nosed bullets yo're shootin'. And that there rock is mostly flint. Yore bullet made sparks!"

"Stand up and scrap like a man," Gabe screamed, beside himself with fury, "or we'll both be burned alive!"

"You ken leave any time yo're a mind to," sounded the sneering reply. "The first one o' us that shows himself gets a bullet. Ain't that fair enough?"

BLACK smoke rolled up from the pitch red flames. Popping like firecrackers, the blaze sped with terrific speed and heat, causing local whirlwinds that picked up and scattered red cinders afar.

In half-a-dozen places, new smoke pillars bellowed up above the pine tops to be caught and carried on by a shrieking gale. In less than five minutes, the gunners were surrounded by a roaring, crashing inferno of flames that were leaping into the high branches of the pines. A wind squall hit with a booming noise, blanketing down the rolling smoke clouds and driving a hail of blazing cinders before it.

Heat blistered through Gabe's clothing. Smoke seared his eyes and strangled him. Through the blinding black drifts, he could catch only brief glimpses of the stump behind which Dace Maddock still crouched. Then a bullet ripped through his hat. There was a movement which his watering eyes could barely register as he retaliated. The odds were against him now. Gabe realized that the younger eyes of his foe might be more resistant to smoke. Straining to recover his sight, he dropped to his knees. Hopelessly he reflected that the fire was almost certain to destroy his house and his mill.

Then, with an appalling shock, his thoughts flashed to Myra! In his violent frame of mind, he had forgotten her. Flames soon would lance through the undergrowth. The terrific heat would burn her to a crisp almost before the fire could reach her and turn her tether-tree into a cremating torch. He pictured her muffled and bound, struggling and trying to cry out for help. His imagination skipped to another idea in his half-crazed mind. He could use Myra's danger as a lure to draw Dace Maddock into range of his gun! Already the fire meant ruin to him. But by quickly settling his business with young Maddock, he might still reach the girl in time.

Choking and gasping, he reared himself cautiously and peered over the stump. Swiftly he stepped out and forged through the swirling smoke to within ten yards of the other stump.

"Maddock?" he shouted querulously. Re-

ceiving no answer, he bawled, "Maddock, ef you want Myra, you ken go and cut her loose. I hitched her to a tree. She cain't get loose—D'you hear me?"

"I'm listenin'," the other answered.

Gabe gripped his rifle and blinked his smarting eyes.

"I met her comin' here to meet y'u!" he wheezed. "She wouldn't go back. I done tied her up. She's half-ways to the house from here. Do y'u know whar the buck brush is?"

"No. I ain't bin on yore land," Dace retorted in a skeptical tone.

"It's the truth!" Gabe roared hoarsely. "I'd ruther see her daid then married to you. But she's tied thar. She cain't get loose, till you or I cut her loose! One o' us has to git thar quick! Aire you man enough to stand up and fight fer yore woman? Would y'u let her burn to death to save yore mis'able hide?"

ALMOST blind, Gabe thought he distinguished the smoke-wreathed figure of Dace Maddock springing to full height at one side of the stump. He wheeled and fired with swift, instinctive body aim. Whirling blankets of smoke blotted the youth's vague outlines from his blurred vision as he fired again. His own rifle reports blended with the popping explosions of the forest fire.

But Gabe distinguished no sounds, felt no pain other than the deadening impact of bullets that spun him half-around. Darkness swirled about him as he sagged to the ground—darkness split by lurid flashes. With a sense of unreality, he commenced crawling forward, still clutching his rifle. Dimly he made out the darker blur in the swirling smoke as his young foe standing and looking down at him. An awful lethargy clutched at his grim will to play out the game to the end. By a terrible effort, he tried to raise his rifle and it dropped from his nerveless hands.

He slumped flat down, feeling a strange, peaceful calmness steal over him. Oddly his thoughts raced. Queerly it seemed that his recent violence and wrath had been senseless and futile. Under a great strain, he lifted his face and saw the youth standing closer, pale and undecided, appraising him peculiarly.

Then the frightened face of Dace Maddock drew nearer and bent over him.

"Get a move on, boy," Gabe rasped. "Save yoreself and Myra. Don't mind me. I—I been an ol' fool."

With a fumbling hand, he dragged his rifle muzzle toward him. "I won't burn up alive," he groaned out. Lightheaded and with a crackling chuckle, he added, "I'll leave thet for the hereafter . . . I had this comin' to me," he wheezed on. "Them steel-nosed bullets, boy . . . I got them . . . fer to make a pretty corpse . . . . out'n you."

Gabe tried to stir himself as a blast of suffocating heat swept over them. Foggily he saw Dace drawing the buckskin jacket over his head.

"Hump yoreself, boy!" he croaked. "You've got my blessin's. Now, get out!"

And he was aware that Dace had leaped to his feet running, his head ducked and muffled.

CALMLY, Gabe lay face down, drawing the rifle close till its hard muzzle pressed his temple—just in case. But he reckoned he wouldn't need it. Calmly he waited, wondering what it was going to be like—but more than that—glad! He'd never got the right slant on life, somehow, but he reckoned he was leaving it in the clear. He'd settled matters in gunsmoke. Funny, that! That little puff of smoke from a steel-nosed bullet, striking against a rock. That had caused all the damage. It had caused the fire and clouds of smoke that blinded him. Well, he was glad.

Suddenly he felt that he was being dragged back from a great distance by strong, frantic hands that lifted him partly up. Dace Maddock had returned!

"Gabe, you've got to hang on!" sounded the youth's fierce plea. "You've got to show me the way. If I miss the place, it'll be too late!" Dace panted. "Crawl on my back, Gabe! Try—try hard! You jest got to!"

Arousing to be tortured, Gabe weakly tried to rebel. But his mind cleared slightly. The pain of movement impelled him to

think. If he had to, he reckoned he could. Getting a terrible grip on himself, he clamped his arms about the other's neck, felt himself shifted to the kneeling youth's broad back, then felt himself being carried swaying and joltingly through heat and smoke, down the mountainside. Finally he attempted to see his surroundings. He was being carried swiftly parallel to a running pillar of fire.

"Goin' too far down," he mumbled into the ear of his bearer. "Got to get across yonder—head the fire."

The jolting turned him faint again. Clinging to the will to keep his arms clamped, he felt himself plunged into searing blasts of heat. His eyes were tightly closed. He tried to hold his breath and flame seared his face. Giddily he marveled at the strength of the staggering back that bore him along. His ears were roaring. Slightly the heat abated, and for a space Gabe battled to breathe. Then he gazed about from dimmed eyes. The whole mountain seemed to be burning up, flames leaping at every side.

"Straight ahead!" Gabe grated. "A leetle mite higher—up the slope."

And a wretched panic gripped him. He came almost into his complete senses with the realization that it was too late! Yonder above the tree-tops, flames were licking up through the dense smoke that rolled from the grove where he had left Myra. Gabe groaned. He could feel the rattling gasps and the quivering muscles of Dace.

"Drop me, boy!" he moaned. "Y'u got to get over yon low rise. Ef y'u see her, then, mebbe you ken get to her. The thicket's afire."

Gabe relaxed his deathlike grip, let himself slip. Reeling, he plunged into a void that was broken by a dull, jarring thud. He seemed to be whirling, whirling out into vast space.

WITH great reluctance to waken, Gabe felt himself being dragged back into a painless state of consciousness. Voices about him droned and blended together without making sense. Slowly he got the impression that he had been groping through a tremendous blank of time, disturbed by queer dreams. His staring eyes took in the outlines of a room with which he was faintly familiar. It was a room in his own house. The voices were penetrating to him from an adjoining room, from the big living room. Women were chattering.

Gradually he recognized the voices of neighbors. He tried to move and was astonished at the lightness of his arm. There appeared to be no forest fires burning outside. Under the half-lowered window blind, a white glare entered the dim room. By turning his light-feeling head on the pillow, he could see that it was snowing.

For a long time, he lay trying to piece things together. His mind worked sluggishly, but painfully he began to recall the past. Details of remembered events fitted roughly into their places. He became more awake to his present condition. In the adjoining room, the crackling sound of logs blazing in the big fireplace made him shudder. Then bits of women's gossip registered in his mind. He gathered that neighbors were partaking of a Thanksgiving dinner in his house! The discovery gave him a shock.

Then he heard the gruff voice of Zeb Foster replying to a nasal-toned remark of the Widow Glenn.

"Hit ain't no cause to be scart, ef Gabe only wakes up to find he's got a son-in-law! What ef he don't wake up till he's a gran'paw?"

A chorus of masculine guffaws was finally squelched by the sharp reprimands of women.

Gabe Zimwalt scowled painfully. Then gradually his bearded visage relaxed and a broad smile settled upon his lips. Traces of the smile still lingered when Myra peeked into the room a few moments later and saw him apparently sleeping.

No, Gabe didn't want to interrupt that Thanksgiving dinner. He was too thankful himself.

THE RED

A girl with outlaw blood in her veins calls on a cow-country sheriff to save the man he's sworn to hang.

CHAPTER I

OUTLAW BLOOD

THE sinister whine of a rifle bullet droning past his head sent young Sheriff Rand Dahlan plunging from his saddle into a screening copse of chaparral.

Squirming through this to the rim of the low mesa beyond, he peeped down into the wide coulee from whence that ambusher's shot had come.

A hundred yards away, the crown of a sombrero showed above a boulder. Dahlan's steel-blue eyes contracted to pinpoints behind slitted lids. He laid a sun-tanned cheek to the maple stock of his own rifle and waited.

Slightly to the left, light glinted on metal, as a puff of gray smoke vomited from a black muzzle. The screaming slug behind it splintered the trunk of a dwarfed liveoak six inches from his nose.

SCAR *By Russell A. Bankson*

Author of "The Tin Cayuse," "Law and Outlaw," etc.

Still Rand held his fire, watching intently. A heavy, ominous silence settled down over the badlands. Five minutes that were as long as a day in Hades dragged by. Then a man raised his head and shoulders cautiously above the protecting breastwork of rock, and surveyed the mesa's brink, his rifle clutched at firing angle in his hands.

Taut muscled, Rand drew a fine bead on the center of that broad chest.

"I'll call on him to throw up his hands," he counseled himself, crooking a finger around the sensitive trigger. He was exultant, thinking that he had the "Masked Killer," or a member of his outlaw band, covered. Already he was considering how best to disarm him and make him captive. But before he could issue his command, another figure stood up in full view.

It was slight and boyish, in chaps and bloused shirt. Yet there was no mistaking it for other than that of a girl. Like the man, she held a snubnosed carbine ready, while her eyes traveled along the brink of the mesa.

Staring at the two of them in breathless amazement, Rand let his own gun muzzle sag to the ground. Nor did he stir to stop them, when they turned and picked their way along the coulee to the mouth of a ravine, where they vanished from his sight.

He knew them. The man was Dolph Kettler, owner of the Lazy K spread, below the Mesa Orondo Pass. The other was Dolph's girl, Roana.

When they had been gone for some time, Rand got up and walked slowly back to where his cream-colored mustang, Toughy, had stopped with dragging reins, after he had quit the saddle. He was thinking of the Kettlers, father and daughter, forgetting that he had laboriously trailed the "Masked Killer" into these rough brakes, only to lose him here.

THE Kettler blood was tainted with outlawry, so the folks of the Grand Ronde insisted. He knew their story well, though it had always seemed unfair to him to condemn a man for his brother's acts.

Nearly a score of years before, when Roana Kettler was a motherless baby, a ruthless band of outlaws had spread terror across the peaceful range country. They had come out of the Grand Ronde badlands by way of the Mesa Orondo Pass, where the Kettler brothers, Dolph and Tick, were already operating the Lazy K.

Old Tobe Dahlan, Rand's father, who was sheriff then, had set the trap which ensnared Tick Kettler, with the positive proof that he was the leader of the band. Dolph Kettler was arrested, too. At the trials, Tick was speedily convicted and sentenced to hang. But Dolph was freed for lack of evidence, though the snarling Tick tried to shift the whole blame upon Dolph. His failure to do so had turned him into a raging beast. He had sworn that he would yet live to see his brother take his place on the scaffold built for him.

And to make good his threat of vengeance, Tick had escaped from the jail in Kalotus three days before the time set for his execution. Only he had not come back to see his brother hung. Instead, he carved a trail of banditry across the rangeland from border to border, and finally vanished out of the picture, with news drifting into Kalotus that he had been slain in a battle with a posse down in New Mexico.

Dolph stayed on at the Lazy K, raising stock and minding his own business, while Roana grew up. Time had softened the attitude of folks toward "the bad Kettlers," but had not entirely erased the taint upon their name.

Then a month back, shortly after Rand succeeded his father as sheriff, a fresh scourge of banditry, with a score of killers hiding their identities behind black hooded masks, swept down out of the Grand Ronde badlands once more. One after another, three separate cattle spreads situated advantageously to the Lazy K, had been raided in the dead of night. Buildings and equipment were destroyed. Ranchers and waddies were shot down in cold blood.

With the first outbreak, recollections of the bad Kettlers were revived. There were wild tales told of the two brothers who had headed a band like this many years before. The brothers were spoken of together, forgetting that Dolph had been cleared. Then it was remarked that Tick Kettler was dead, but that one of the bad Kettlers still lived up there by the pass. And soon there were angry, suspicious mutterings against Dolph.

Rand argued and pleaded with his neighbors to use reason. Then he angrily informed them that he was the sheriff, and that he would bring the "Masked Killer" in. He saddled Toughy then, and alone grimly took the trail of the outlaws. Only now the trail had ended with Dolph Kettler and Roana crouched behind a nest of boulders, shooting at him!

TRYING hard to puzzle out this dilemma Rand cut down through a canyon and came into a saucer basin. There he drew a sharp rein, dropping his hand to the butt of the .45 holstered at his right hip.

Three horsemen were riding toward him. They were no strangers, either. The leader was Fulton Stoneman, the sheepman, who had come into the country a few months before with a hundred thousand sheep which he was running back in the badlands, menacing the free government range, which had always been used exclusively for cattle. Before long, with the grass in the badlands burning out and the watering holes drying up, the sheep would have to be moved across the deadline set by the stockgrowers. Then would come a bloody showdown between the two forces.

Stoneman now carried a carbine carelessly across his saddlebow. The men with him were tough-looking hombres, well-heeled with carbines and six-guns. But Stoneman towered above them, dominating them, his leathery, sun-parched face twisted into a snarl, his eyes hard and cruel.

"Some luck, findin' the sheriff here!" he sneered.

"What are you doin' in these parts?" Rand suspiciously demanded, looking levelly back at him.

"We're settin' hard on the trail o' the Masked Killer's outfit!" Stoneman answered. "They raided my sheep last night. Five thousand head butchered or scattered clean from hell t' breakfast. Two o' my best herders beaten till they're near dead. Long's these outlaws hold themselves t' cattle spreads, it ain't none o' my business. But when they buck up ag'in' me, they've signed their death warrants."

"Maybe you've got an idea who the Masked Killer is?" Rand asked, holding himself in restraint. He had an intense dislike for Fulton Stoneman.

"You're the only one which pretends you don't know," the sheepman swore. "Who besides Dolph Kettler is benefitin' by wipin' out them cattled spreads, with their fine meadows an' water? Nobody! Who'll it help more'n Dolph Kettler to keep my sheep off'n the Entiat Plateau? Nobody! An' that's your answer, Mister Sheriff!"

"That's a guess, but it ain't proof," Rand retorted with mounting rage.

"We found the proof for you last night, if you got the guts t' use it. One of my boys tore the hooded mask off'n the leader's head an' seen his face. He looked like a devil, with a red scar across his cheek. My herder'll swear to that before a jury. There's only one man in these parts wearin' a red scar on his cheek. His name's Dolph Kettler. We're hot after him right now. We've run him in here, an' if you'll follow us, you can clamp on the handcuffs, when we blast him out!"

Thin-lipped, his eyebrows drawn into a dark slash across his forehead, Rand watched the sheepman. And when he spoke, his voice cut like a knife, though he could not have explained why he was defending Dolph Kettler, under the circumstances which he himself knew.

"The Lazy K has always run its stock on the Entiat Plateau," he said. "That should be warnin' enough for you to keep your sheep off."

"Everybody knows you're sweet on that gal o' his'n," Fulton Stoneman sneered, leaning forward in his saddle, his distorted face livid with anger. "You wouldn't turn a hand agin her ol' man."

Tight-jawed, steel-eyed, Sheriff Rand Dahlan let him finish, restraining an almost irresistible impulse to strike out at that leering face.

"That's a lie!" he choked, angrily.

"We'll see. You'll soon have the proof that Dolph Kettler's the Masked Killer, because I'm goin' t' lay it down before you an' everybody in this country, so's you can't be mistaken!"

"When you do," Rand flung back at him hotly, "I'll see to it that Dolph Kettler's hung on the scaffold that was built for his brother Tick!"

CHAPTER II

MESA RIDERS

A RAUCOUS laugh in his throat, Fulton Stoneman stared at Rand.

"When you do," he mocked him derisively, "you'll be fitten to call yourself the Sheriff." Then, pirouetting abruptly, he put spurs to his pony's flanks and rode swiftly away, closely followed by his two henchmen.

Giving up further pretense of following the trail which had led him into the badlands, Rand swung northward, heading in a direct course for the Lazy K, which he reached just at dusk. And all the time that he was riding, he planned the manner in which he would approach the rancher.

The two who had tried to ambush him out in the badlands, had only just arrived. Roana had disappeared in the house, but Dolph was still down at the corral, unsaddling their ponies. When he saw Rand coming, he dropped a bridle and gathered up his rifle, which had been leaning against a rail. He held it ready in the crook of his right arm, his eyes unblinking beneath shaggy brows, the disfiguring scar across his left cheek a flaming scarlet as it always was under stress of anger, a sullen glower twisting his whole face.

In spite of his age, Dolph Kettler was a powerful man, physically. He was as big as Fulton Stoneman, the sheep-raiser. And there must have been a time, before that ugly scar was laid across his cheek, that he was considered handsome. The wound,

said to have been inflicted during an encounter with his brother Tick, extended from the outer corner of his left eye, down to the corner of his mouth. That, and the bitter years of living among people who shunned him, had soured his soul, so that he wore an habitual look of sullenness on his face.

Rand let his hands dangle loosely at his sides as he came up to the corral. His eyes were slitted, but he was not letting on that there was anything unusual about his call. He could not be sure that Dolph and Roana knew whom they had tried to drygulch. He had been riding back away from the mesa, so that only his head and shoulders were exposed to the coulee where they were hidden. He was waiting for Dolph to make the first break.

"Whatta you want here?" the rancher arrogantly demanded, when Rand halted. "If you aim to lay the law on me, I'll blast yore heart out!"

"Is there reason why I should want to arrest you, Dolph?" the young officer countered, swinging to the ground, so that he faced the older man.

"There might be, seein' me an' my waddies treated some o' Stoneman's woollie nurses kinda rough last night."

"I heard about that, but I wasn't interested," Rand answered slowly. "It's somethin' else that's brought me here, Dolph. This Stoneman swears you and your boys wore black hoods over your heads, the same as the Masked Killer's band. What do you say to that?"

"We done it to put the fear o' the Devil into them sheepherders. You got any other fool questions to ask, 'fore you head outta here?"

"Yes! Why did you and Roana try to ambush me this afternoon?" Rand flung back.

At that Dolph Kettler stared at him in unfeigned surprise.

"Was you there?" he demanded. "Stoneman's gunmen trailed us after the fracas last night. The boys split up an' scattered. Roana went out there ag'in' my will. Them killers kept to my trail, pressin' Ro an' me purty hard at times. I didn't know you was ridin' with 'em. Only if I had, I'd a shot jes' the same."

"Rand Dahlan! Are you siding in with a low sheep-raiser, against the cattlemen?" the voice of Roana Kettler sharply demanded behind them. She had come down from the house without his having heard her.

"This business you're hintin' at, 'bout me an' black hoods an' the Masked Killer, keep it to yourself!" Dolph warned, in a harsh whisper, at sight of his daughter. "Ro's got plenty o' worries without more foolishness."

Rand glanced sharply at the rancher, then wheeled to greet the girl.

"Nothing like that, Roana," he assured her. "I told Fulton Stoneman this afternoon that the sheriff's office would not help him put his sheep onto cattle range."

"Then what were you doing in the badlands, so that we mistook you for one of Stoneman's outfit?" she insisted, unrelenting toward him.

"I followed the Masked Killer in there," he bluntly informed her.

At mention of that name, the girl's face lost some of its color. She came closer to Rand, looking into his eyes.

"Did you—find him?" she asked.

DOLPH glowered at him threateningly.

"No, Roana," he answered steadily. "I didn't find him. He got plumb away."

"Do you have any idea who the Masked Killer is?" she persisted. A quick look of relief crossed her face. It startled Rand.

"I couldn't say," he answered, darting another glance at Dolph, who was tilting the muzzle of his rifle so that it carelessly centered on his heart. "But I know I'm goin' to get him. I'm goin' to hang onto his trail night and day until I've run him and his whole murderin' outfit to earth."

Swinging back up across his saddle, Rand adjusted himself to the leather. All the time Dolph watched him, like a cornered animal.

"You better keep your nose outta this affair up here!" he suddenly burst out, a harsh threat in his words and his tone. "If you don't you might get a taste o' hot lead!"

"Dad! What do you mean, talking to Rand like that?" Roana demanded.

"Nothin'," Dolph caught himself up. "Only this Masked Killer won't stop at anything."

"I'll take care of myself," Rand assured him, gathering up his reins. "And as for keepin' my nose out of this, why I guess you forgot I'm sheriff!"

"I'm warnin' you to quit yore snoopin'!" Dolph snarled angrily, the ugly scar across his left cheek flushing scarlet. "You ain't wanted 'round these parts right now, an' you'd better stay away!"

Roana stared from her father to Rand, and back again. But Rand, bottling a hot retort, touched Toughy's flanks with his roweled heels and rode swiftly away into the deepening dusk without a backward look, before she could speak.

There was something wrong here. He had been trying to find excuses for Dolph Kettler. But Dolph himself was not helping. When Toughy had carried him out of sight of the two who stood by the corral, watching him, he slowed to a walk, following along the trail at the base of the Mesa Orondo, toward the pass that cut through it, up onto the Entiat Plateau.

Only he did not continue on to the pass. Within a few minutes night plunged down upon him with the suddenness of a door slamming in his face. Then he turned off the trail, crowding in behind a juniper thicket, where he waited.

Within half an hour a full moon nosed up above the horizon, setting objects about him into bold relief. This was what he was waiting for. He could see along the trail for a considerable distance in both directions, while he and Toughy were both well screened behind the tangle of brush.

Satisfied with his position, he waited, quietly alert to the sounds of the night. But it was nearly twelve o'clock before anything unusual happened. Then he heard a rider coming along the trail, from the direction of the Lazy K. He was using what caution he could, holding his pony to a walk. Rand drew his .45 from its holster, his eyes fixed on the point where the rider would appear, a dozen yards from where he crouched in the saddle.

He was expecting to see a figure with a black hood drawn over its head, and he was set to spur out onto the trail in front of it, either to kill or to make a capture.

"Hold 'er, Newt!" he whispered to Toughy, stroking his ears to keep him quiet, as the soft squeak of leather and the tinkle of metal reached him. Then the night rider swung into full view around the bend.

He did not wear a hooded mask. Staring at him, where the moonlight set his features into bold relief, Rand let his gun slip weakly back into its holster. He was looking at Dolph Kettler!

Quickly surveying the trail ahead of him, the Lazy K owner then moved on toward the pass. Rand let him go, watching him out of sight. He had expected that it would be the Masked Killer who passed that way in the dead of night, for this was the trail that the bandit band must follow in going to or from the Grand Ronde badlands. But again, in his search for the hooded outlaws, he had found only Dolph Kettler!

Determined to know why Dolph should ride the mesa trail at night, Rand crowded back up out of his hiding place.

There was a quick way to reach the top of the Mesa Orondo, without traveling the three miles around to the pass. Back toward the Lazy K a short distance, a deep crevice split the face of the high mesa, extending from the bottom to the top. This offered good footing for an agile person to climb up or down. Roana had once pointed it out to him, telling him how she often scaled the sheer cliff wall, to sit on the rim of the mesa at dusk. The place was marked by a dwarfed pine tree, rooted in the crevice, two thirds of the way up.

By making use of this natural ladder, Rand could get up onto the Entiat Plateau in time to secrete himself and determine just what Dolph's purpose was up there.

When he spied the tree marker, he ground-reined Toughy in the trail and started to climb upward. The trick was more difficult than he had guessed, to hear Roana tell about it. He was forced to cautiously feel his way.

He had gained a height of about fifty feet, and was clinging to a precarious ledge, searching for another hold higher up, when he heard a cavalcade of riders approaching

swiftly from the same direction that Dolph Kettler had come. There was no time to descend and escape on Toughy, nor could he make it to safety on top. Flattening himself against the rock wall, he waited.

There were a dozen of these mesa riders. Looking over his shoulder, he saw them clearly in the moonlight. All of them wore black hoods over their heads. When they came upon Toughy in the trail, they drew to an abrupt halt, shouting and cursing in wild excitement.

"That's the kid sheriff's cayuse!" one rider identified the cream-colored mustang.

"Look out! He's ambushed around here sommers," another warned.

"Drill him dead, when you spot him," cautioned a third.

"Let's grab him alive an' show him t' the Boss," someone else loudly suggested.

Evidently thinking that Rand had quit his saddle at sound of their approach, and was hiding close at hand, they spread out, beating the brush within a radius of a hundred yards. They spent ten minutes searching. Rand's arms and legs were nearly paralyzed, clinging desperately to the crevice. When he could stand it no longer, he shifted his position. In doing so, a rock broke loose and landed in the midst of the group below. At the same time Rand nearly lost his balance, clutching wildly for another hold. Miraculously he saved himself.

A shout went up as all eyes turned to the mesa wall.

"Climb down from there!" came the harsh order. "An' leave yore gun alone, or we'll cut you into ribbons!"

Tight-lipped, stiff-muscled, Rand stared at the hooded killers, debating his chances against them.

Then slowly he began to feel his way downward, into their midst.

Chapter III

RENDEZVOUS

WHEN Rand set his feet on solid ground again, the muzzle of a gun was pressed hard against the small of his back.

"Easy, brother!" a heavy voice snarled at him. "You're peppin' right straight into hell!"

All of the hooded riders had drawn up in a semicircle around him, at the base of the mesa. Two of them had dismounted, and were standing on either side of him.

"Nice seein' you out here, Sheriff!" sneered the one who held the gun, a raucous chuckle in his throat. "Looking for the Masked Killer, I reckon. How'd you like to pay a visit to him in style?"

Rand still had his own holstered gun. He turned slowly, so that he was looking at the dark silhouettes crowding in close to him. They were all standing in the deep shadows so that he could not see them very clearly. But this was to his advantage as well. Tense, poised, his right hand started downward in a swift draw.

As though this move had been anticipated, another hand shot outward, and one of his captors shucked the gun from his holster ahead of him.

"Tryin' to kill yoreself, you danged fool?" the night rider rasped. "Don't try no more moves like that!"

Rand raised his hands above his head again. "Nice meetin' up with you boys at last!" he said, between his thin lips.

"Get out here into the open!" the man with the six-shooter ordered, giving him another vicious prod in the ribs.

He moved away from the mesa's base, so that the moonlight fell on him. The shadowy forms were all about him, holding him in a close circle of bristling guns. One of the hooded killers produced rawhide thongs, and his wrists were quickly bound behind his back. Then Toughy was led up beside him, and he was boosted across the saddle, where his ankles were trussed to the stirrups, to prevent him from throwing himself to the ground again.

The whole procedure occupied no more than a couple of minutes. Then they all swung into their saddles again, ready to proceed.

The man who had held the gun against Rand took the lead, with Toughy following close behind him. The others strung out single file along the trail, moving toward the pass that would take them across the Entiat Plateau above, and on into the

badlands. They rode in silence for the most part. But when they had gained the top of the pass, and the trail widened, the guide dropped back, falling in beside Rand.

"Aimed t' drygulch the Masked Killer, did you?" he asked.

"Maybe," Rand answered evenly. "Or maybe I was just out enjoyin' a moonlight ride."

"Or sparkin' the Kettler gal!" the outlaw sneered.

THERE was plenty of moonlight up on the plateau. Rand took advantage of it to study his captors. He made mental notes of the characteristics about them and their ponies, so that he might recognize them, should he meet up with them again, under different circumstances.

They seemed in no particular hurry to reach their goal. Jogging along, they were strung out for a hundred yards behind that leader. Glancing back, Rand saw them slouched in their saddles, each with his black hooded mask drawn down over his head and shoulders.

It was evident to him that they had not been on a raid this night. If they had, there would have been more excitement among them.

Once across the plateau, they plunged unhesitatingly into the Grand Ronde badlands. Here was the beginning of a wild, broken country where wolves had their dens and rattlesnakes flourished, a country traversed by a labyrinth of secret trails which, to the uninitiated, would lead nowhere, but which seemed familiar enough to these grim night riders.

After another hour of twisting and winding along a tortuous course, during which time Rand's eyes were blindfolded with a bandana to confuse him, the cavalcade pitched down off a ridge, into a narrow ravine. Here the blindfold was removed, and Rand saw that they were entering a little secret basin, like an ampitheater, walled in on all sides by high granite cliffs that tilted forward, so that the opening at the top was smaller than the space at the bottom. The whole effect was that of a spacious room with a skylight transom, through which the stars and the moon shone, softening the blackness of the interior.

A fire made of sagebrush stalks was burning in the center of the chamber-like space, adding its light to that of the moon. And around this fire a group of six or eight hooded men was already gathered, their horses standing with dragging reins, back in the shadows. All of them were on their feet, watching the new arrivals. And when they saw that there was a prisoner among them, there was considerable excitement.

"Boss got here yet?" Rand's immediate captor demanded of the group by the fire, as he swung to the ground and moved over beside Toughy.

One of those addressed jerked his head toward the mouth of a canyon leading out of the opposite side of the secret basin.

"Went up on top t' have a look around," he growled. "He's got somethin' heavy on his mind. Looks like another raid comin' up."

They all apparently knew Rand, or who he was, though he had no way of recognizing any of them behind their masks.

Within a few minutes a rider emerged from the mouth of the canyon on the far side of the basin, and came toward the group. Rand noted a tensing of bodies as the outlaws watched their leader, the "Masked Killer" himself.

Like his followers, he wore a black hood that covered his head and draped down to his shoulders. He rode in among them slowly, his face turned toward Rand, who was still on Toughy. His eyes glittered through the slits in his mask. Ten feet from Rand he reined in. No one could mistake him, in spite of his hood, once they had seen him.

He was a big man, broad shouldered and powerfully built, like Dolph Kettler. His voice, when he spoke, was not exactly Dolph's, but he was plainly disguising it, talking deep down in his throat.

"What'd you bring him in here for?" he snarled at the group.

"We snagged him below the pass an' didn't know what t' do with him," one of the riders answered, uneasily.

A cold sweat was forming all over Rand's body. In the presence of the Masked Killer at last, he could have little doubt but that

he was looking at Dolph Kettler. And now he knew that all the time he had been trying to find excuses for Dolph, trying to prove that he was not the outlaw chieftain.

"If I could see the scar on his cheek," the thought ran through his mind, until he brought himself up with a jerk. He was still trying to alibi for the Lazy K owner. So aloud, his thin lips curling, he addressed the man.

"You've got me, so it's up to you to decide whether it'll be a rope or bullets for me!"

THE Masked Killer swung down from his saddle and stood in the full light of the fire, looking up at Rand.

"The boys made a slight mistake, bringin' you in here," he said slowly. "I got no use for you. But rubbin' you out would only stir up a big mess. So I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna send you back outta here, an' let you go home. Only if you're smart, you'll stay outta our way!"

Dumbfounded at this turn, Rand stared at him. The Masked Killer half turned his face away, giving a snarling order to one of the men.

"Hey, you, Ed! Come here with your hoss. Guide Sheriff Dahlan back to the edge o' the plateau an' turn him loose, then tear back here. We'll take a little rest while we're waitin' for you. Then we got plans to make."

As he spoke, the Masked Killer lifted one side of his black hood, exposing a portion of his face. Rand could not tell whether he did it purposely, or whether it was an unconscious gesture. Across the cheek, from the corner of the eye, down to the corner of the mouth a livid red scar was visible!

Mute, thinking in that moment of Roana, and what would happen to her, Rand turned his head quickly so that he would not give away the fact that he had seen that scar.

"You mean for me to turn him loose without doin' a danged thing to him?" the rider called Ed questioned doubtfully.

"You heard me!" the leader cursed in sudden rage, his glittering eyes fixed upon Rand, watching him closely. "Get him outta here an' get back!"

The fellow was about Rand's own size and build. He wheeled in beside the prisoner, picking Toughy's reins from the pommel, to lead him.

"Be back pronto," he slurred over his shoulder, kicking Toughy's belly.

Before they came out of the canyon, into the broken badlands, his guide blindfolded him again.

"Ain't takin' no chances o' you doublin' back," he growled.

They rode swiftly, and in no time at all, the fellow Ed, halted and ripped the bandana from Rand's eyes. They were at the edge of the plateau.

"Lucky you ain't gonna feed the buzzards," he said, getting down to the ground and drawing a knife with which he slashed the thongs binding Rand's wrists behind him. "Most generally the boss plugs them as gets in his way."

His hands free, Rand rubbed them together to get the blood started to circulate again. Ed cut the bonds holding his left ankle to the stirrup, then walked around on the other side and severed that cord.

As he felt himself free, Rand bunched his body muscles and flung himself forward, full upon the outlaw, with a lightning move that crushed him to the ground, and wrenched the knife from his grip before he could strike. Then he reached for the bandit's gun, jerking it from its holster. And in the same move, he brought the steel barrel down on the other's skull in a terrific blow that laid him out cold.

Working swiftly, he completely changed outfits with the unconscious bandit. Then he boosted the limp form up across his own saddle on Toughy's back, and bound it there securely with a lariat rope. After that he rummaged a stub pencil and scrap of paper out of his saddlebag and wrote:

"Here's one of the Masked Killer's band. Shove him into jail. Then start a big posse backtracking Toughy into the badlands from the northwest corner of the Entiat Plateau. Rand."

Pinning the note to the outlaw's shirt, he pointed Toughy and his burden toward the pass, and the town of Kalotus, ten miles away.

"Toughy, old pal, you've got to do your stuff now," he said to the pony. "Head into

Kalotus with no stopovers. S'long, and good luck to you!"

With that he gave the cream mustang a friendly slap, and started him on his way through the night with his strange freight. Then he gathered up the vanquished outlaw's black hooded mask, adjusted it over his own head, and climbed up across the outlaw's saddle.

Watching a moment to see that Toughy was moving steadily on, he then pirouetted his new horse, turning back into the badlands, out of which he had just come.

Letting the pony follow its own back trail, he headed unerringly into the secret rendezvous, where once again he faced the Masked Killer.

Chapter IV

NIGHT ATTACK

THE outlaws of Grand Ronde were sprawled about on the ground, waiting, when Rand, disguised as the one called Ed, rode back into the hideout.

In the test ahead of him, his life hung in the balance. One false move, and these killers would riddle him with bullets. But he did not hesitate. All of them still wore their masks. It appeared to be a rule of their leader that no chances were to be taken by revealing their faces even to each other. At sight of him, the Masked Killer leaped to his feet.

"You're plenty slow gettin' back," he swore. "What the devil did you have to take him clean t' town for?"

"Waited to make sure he got outa the country, Boss," Rand answered, raising his voice to make it sound like Ed's, but tensely alert to any change on the part of his hearers. For a tense instant the leader stared up at him, a puzzled look in his eyes, where Rand saw them through the slits in his mask. Then he dismissed the fleeting doubt which had seized him.

"Come on," he said, harshly. "We gotta get busy."

Rand dropped to the ground, breathing easier, as he joined the group.

"What's up this time, boss?" one of the hooded men asked.

"The hardest job we've had!" came the harsh answer.

"Why'd you want to turn that Sheriff feller loose for?" still another injected uneasily. "He'll head straight t' town an' get a big posse."

"Mebbe that's what I'm playin' for," the Masked Killer retorted, with a raucous laugh. He was in high spirits now. "He'll round up every man in the country to ride through the badlands with him all day t'-morrer, lookin' for us. That'll leave the range clear, without no interruptions. The posse'll come right back here, only we'll be scattered, like always."

"Where we landin', boss?" Rand ventured.

"There's only one place left that's any benefit to the Lazy K," came the sharp answer. "That's the ZB spread, down below the Double Arrow, which we wiped out last week. That's where we're hittin' for this time, boys. An' when we get through, the ZB will go outta existence."

"That's a strong outfit, Boss," someone objected. "I'm thinkin' it won't be no easy job."

"You ain't paid to think," snarled the leader. "I'm handin' over big money to you boys to do what I say an' take your chances. We're wipin' out the ZB! An' you'll get paid the next day."

His blood running hot, then cold, Rand sidled over to the Masked Killer and drew his attention.

"This Dahlan jasper done some braggin' when we was ridin' out, Boss," he said. "Reckons he seen your face, when you raised your hood."

"Then he got a jolt that'll wake him up!" was the sneering retort. "What else did he have t' say?"

"That he'll see you hung, 'fore you ever pull another job!" Rand flung back recklessly.

DID he speak my name, for sure?" the Masked Killer demanded.

"He called you Dolph Kettler!" Rand said boldly. "An' he aims you'll stretch your neck from the same scaffold that was built for your brother Tick!"

"Smart young sheriff, ain't he?" the

leader laughed harshly, without mirth. "You hear that, boys? You're all invited to the hangin' o' Dolph Kettler. Watch for the date, an' be there to laugh.

"Only right now we got more important work ahead o' us. We're gonna work this thing t'morrer night 'bout the way we've handled the others. We'll get back t' our reg'lar places through the day. Then we'll meet at the foot o' the pass at ten o'clock t'morrer night. Sehriff Dahlan an' his posse'll be scattered from hell to breakfast through the badlands by then, so we don't have to worry 'bout them.

"It's likely that there'll only be a handful in the bunkhouse at the ZB, too. We'll creep in there an' get ourselves planted all over the place. Then one o' you boys'll go ridin' like the devil was after you, straight up to the bunkhouse, hollerin' that the Masked Killer's comin', like we done over to the Double Arrow. That'll bring the crew out, an' Ol' Man Jones, too. When they're all in the open, we'll open wide an' mow 'em down, with the first blast. Now which one o' you'll make that ride to the bunkhouse? There's fifty dollars extra waitin' for the one which does it."

"I will!" Rand spoke up eagerly, his brain on fire.

"You made it at the Double Arrow, Ed," the Masked Killer reminded him. "Give somebody else a chanc't if they want it."

"I need the dough," Rand insisted.

"Aw, let him have it," several men spoke up.

"All right, then, Ed. You'll make the play. An' do a good job. A lot hangs on gettin' 'em all out in the open at the start. Some o' us might get hurt if you don't. That's all now. Scatter outta here an' don't nobody be late t'morrer."

Masked riders took to their horses then, leaving the rendezvous, drifting out of there in groups of twos and fours. Then in the open they headed in different directions, toward the cattle spreads where they were evidently daytime waddies. One fellow, called Gyp, clung close to Rand, nor would he be shaken off. It was apparent that Ed and Gyp worked at the same ranch.

Rand was desperate. He had to be free that day. He had to contact the ZB ranch, and give it warning, or else meet the posse which he hoped would be backtracking Toughy. Still Gyp clung to his side.

Gyp talked a lot. But he failed to add any information to what Rand already had. When they were alone, Gyp pulled his black hood from his head. It was full day now, and the sun was hot. "Better shed 'er," he said.

"I ain't easy 'bout Dahlan," Rand answered. "I didn't like the way he acted when I set him free, an' I ain't aimin' for him to get no eye full o' my mug." At that Gyp put his hood back on. Rand continued to lead the way toward the Entiat Plateau. Finally Gyp drew a halt.

"Where the devil you drivin' for, Ed?" he demanded suspiciously. "I thought we was goin' over t' the line shack an' grab some sleep."

"You go ahead," Rand urged. "I'll be along later."

"You ain't a big 'nough fool to make another try at Roana Kettler, after what she's handed you?" Gyp scornfully demanded, turning on Rand. "I'd shoot myself, 'fore I'd let a gal pull that on me a second time."

This gave Rand an opening. "I ain't givin' up that easy," he answered. "Them high an' mighty kind falls hardest, when they do come down."

"Suit yoreself, only I wouldn't be playin' 'round with Dolph Kettler's gal when she feels that way," Gyp said. He turned his horse, heading north, alone.

RAND moved straight across the Entiat Plateau, for the pass. A few minutes later, topping a low ridge, he looked into a coulee and saw Dolph Kettler, without a hooded mask, riding swiftly toward the Lazy K. But he did not try to overtake him, though he removed his own black hood and put in in his pocket.

A little further on, climbing to the top of a low butte, he looked to the west and saw Fulton Stoneman's big headquarters camp, and his hundred thousand woollies scattered over the landscape.

Keeping track of Dolph, Rand saw that the rancher was making for the pass, so he turned toward the Mesa Orondo, above the Lazy K buildings, where he hoped to ob-

serve Dolph's actions. But before he had gone far, Fulton Stoneman, having spotted him when he climbed the butte shortly before, came charging at him, across the plateau, from the direction of the sheep camp. His right hand cupped over the butt of his gun, Rand drew up and waited for him.

"Takin' my tip on Dolph Kettler, are you?" Stoneman sneeringly asked.

"Guess you're right about him," Rand grudgingly conceded. "The blackhoods grabbed me last night and took me to their secret lair over in the badlands. Dolph was there. I saw his red scar. He didn't have the nerve to bump me off, so turned me loose. We'll get him before he breaks loose again."

"Good work!" Stoneman said with satisfaction. "You run the outlaws. I'll attend to the sheep business. That way we'll get along fine."

"The less I met up with that jasper, the better I'll feel," Rand grated aloud, watching Stoneman ride away with a triumphant leer on his face.

Leaving his pony back out of sight, Rand crept to the mesa's brink. Dolph Kettler had reached home. Rand saw him standing with his saddled horse, at the corral, talking to Roana. But almost at once he turned again toward the pass.

Satisfied that Dolph was hurrying back into the badlands to rejoin the hooded outlaws, Rand got his pony and cut swiftly across to the trail, to head him off. Screened behind a nest of boulders, he was within twenty yards of the rancher when he rode by. That was the time to act. Yet some impulse beyond his control stayed his gun hand. He let the other go on out of sight, without moving to stop him.

"I should have drilled him!" he belabored himself for his weakness.

Someone was climbing over the rocks behind him. Wheeling, his gun drawn, he faced Roana Kettler! She was afoot, and breathless, having climbed up the crevice over the mesa, in an effort to head off her father. She was as surprised to see Rand as he was to find her. He dropped to the ground, facing her.

"Why are you spying on dad?" she angrily demanded.

"I could have shot him when he went by. But I let him go."

"I know why you were at our place yesterday, and why you're here now," she told him fiercely. "You think the Kettlers are all bad, because Tick Kettler was bad. You think Dad's like him. But he isn't, and you leave him alone!"

She was nearly hysterical. Rand tried to quiet her. "Roana!" he pleaded. "That don't make any difference about you."

"Go away from here!" she cried, her slim body taut. "Leave me alone. If you think things about dad, then you can think them about me. We're both Kettlers."

RAND got slowly into his saddle. White-lipped, Roana reached out and seized the pony's bridle reins, stopping it. Her dark eyes flashed.

"Dad's not one of the outlaws, like you think!" she cried. "He found the Masked Killer's meeting place last night. He crept close enough to overhear them planning to destroy the ZB ranch tonight! He's going to try and stop them. Only I'm afraid he'll be killed if he fights all of them alone. That's why I came up here now, to try again to keep him from going. Oh, Rand, please help dad!"

Rand stared down at the forlorn, distraught girl, scarcely able to believe his ears. She had told him things which he knew were true, things which would spell the destruction of her father by turning the law upon him. Also he knew that he trusted Roana Kettler, had always trusted her.

"Listen, Ro!" he said tensely. "You've got to do what I say now without asking any questions. Will you promise?"

"Yes! Yes, Rand, I'll do anything you say, to stop the outlaws!"

"I'll be riding with the Masked Killer and his band tonight when they attack the ZB ranch. They think I'm one of them. I've already sent word in to Kalotus to get a big posse organized. I was waitin' up here to meet that posse, and give it directions for surroundin' the ZB, ready to welcome the outlaws. But for me to stay around here might spoil everything. I don't know where you come in on this, Ro. But I'm trustin' you, and I'm askin' you to meet

those possemen and tell them about the ZB raid. Tell them to set the trap careful, and that I'll lead the Masked Killer and the whole outlaw band into it. Roana! Look at me. Answer careful!"

The girl looked steadily up into his eyes, unflinching, fearless. "I'll promise, Rand!" she whispered.

"Tell them that I'll be the one who rides up to the ranch first, shoutin' the warnin' that the outlaws are comin'," he hurried on. "That will be the signal for the possemen to lie low, pretending the place is deserted, until the outlaws come into the open. Then they can all be captured."

"Yes, yes, Rand. I'll do everything you say."

She left him then, running swiftly back toward the brink of the Mesa Orondo, to reach the Lazy K and her pony.

Rand turned back into the badlands, where he waited impatiently for nightfall. Then when it came he assumed his black hood again thereby transforming himself from an officer of the law into the bandit known as Ed and rode boldly back to the foot of the pass below the Mesa Orondo, where the entire band of hooded outlaws was quietly assembled by ten o'clock. There, too, their leader joined them, in a sullen, suspicious mood that was explained by his first words to them.

"Rand Dahlan hung 'round here all day," he snarled. "He didn't go into Kalotus. He's figgerin' to pull somethin'. Every one o' you better have yore eyes open." Then he addressed Rand directly. "Ed! Come over here!"

"Y'bet, Boss" Rand answered promptly.

"I'll be standin' at the south corner o' the bunkhouse, waitin'," he said. "Ride up to the door, shoutin' yore warnin'. When they start pourin' out, ride tow'rd me. I'll cover yore getaway."

"O. K. Boss!" Rand answered evenly.

It was after midnight when they reached the ZB spread and cavvied their ponies in a draw below the lower corral. Only Rand stayed in the saddle, and one other, designated to guard the horse cavvy.

"Wait ten minutes," the leader instructed. "Then start yore ride!"

Rand guessed at the time, and when he thought ten minutes had passed, he went forward at full speed, in a wild race straight for the bunkhouse. And to the clattering echo of the pounding hoofs, he added the full power of his lungs. Straight to the door he went, leaping from the saddle, to send the pony speeding out of danger from slashing bullets.

"The Masked Killer's comin'!" he shouted.

The door swung open. In the shadows at the corner of the house, Rand saw a figure rise up quickly, waiting.

A hand reached out from the inside and seized Rand, jerking him through the opening. The door went shut behind him with a bang. Rand Dahlan knew then that everything was in readiness for the outlaws of Grand Ronde.

Roana Kettler had kept her promise.

CHAPTER V

HOODS OFF

"EVERYTHING'S set!" a voice whispered to Rand, inside the bunkhouse.

"Come on!" Rand said. "We'll get the Masked Killer first."

They hurried on tiptoe to the back door, and sped around to where the hooded leader crouched. Rand had his gun leveled.

"You're covered dead center!" he harshly warned the outlaw.

The answer was a flash of orange powder flame. The posseman beside him plunged forward on his face. Rand's gun spoke as the killer fired again. Hot lead creased the flesh of his left arm. He jerked his gun over and pressed the trigger. The pin fell on a dead shell. The weapon was the one he had taken from the bandit, Ed, the night before.

Throwing it angrily from him, he leaped aside as another bullet stabbed at him. Then he flung himself upon the Masked Killer, wrenching the gun from his hand, uplifted for another shot, sending it spinning away. For an instant the advantage was with Rand. His adversary had been squatting, and Rand came down on him with his full weight, knocking him over

backward. Then the outlaw was up, and they were locked together, rolling over and over, twisting and struggling.

By now the outlaws knew that the plans of their leader had gone amiss. From down by the harness shed a shot was fired. Over by the barn another bullet went whining into the night. Then a fusillade started, and hot lead poured from a dozen secret hiding places. The bandits, suddenly aware that they were trapped, began to carve their way out.

The staccato roar of the battle was all about Rand, who was fighting desperately for his life. Guns were blazing from every shadow; screaming death was lashing the night. Reaching upward, Rand wrenched the hooded mask from the head of the leader. Crushing arms closed about him, stopping his breath. Another figure crawled up beside them on the ground.

"Which one is you, Rand?" a voice begged. But Rand could not answer. The breath was gone from him. The posseman struck a match, cupping the flame in his hands. In this light, Rand looked straight into the twisted, snarling face of the Masked Killer, and saw the wide, livid scar across his cheek.

Then the leader of the outlaws loosened his hold and rolled to one side, as Rand's rescuer fired point blank at him. He did not stop. He rolled over again and leaped to his feet. Crouching low, he sped across the open space between the house and the woodshed, as the posseman emptied his gun after him.

The battle ended almost as suddenly as it started. The outlaws, knowing from the crack of the first gun that they were doomed, fought their way to liberty—as many of them as could make it through. There were dead and wounded left behind, but some made it. And one of these was the leader, who escaped in a hail of lead.

Reeling dizzily, Rand stood up and headed for the corral, where the other possemen were saddling their ponies. He called his name out to them, so they would know who he was, and they greeted him with a shout. They had his own Toughy already saddled, and waiting for him.

"We was back-trackin' yore hoss when that Kettler gal rode in an' give us yore message," one man told him. "I take back what I been sayin' about all the Kettlers. One o' 'em's straight!"

Rand felt a warm glow inside him at this praise for Roana. Then he touched Toughy's flanks and rode swiftly out onto the open range alone.

GRAY dawn was washing the rim of the eastern sky as he left the ZB to its solitude, after the raucous battle. He followed the most direct route to the Kettler spread. And when he came to the Lazy K, nestled at the base of the Mesa Orondo, he rode straight up to where Roana was standing just outside the kitchen door, watching him.

"Is—everything all right?" she asked, quickly.

"They're mostly wiped out," he answered her grimly. "Only the Masked Killer's got away. Where's your Dad?"

"What do you want him for?" she demanded, in sudden fear.

"I'm here!" Dolph Kettler snarled, from the open doorway behind her.

Rand was without a gun, but he looked levelly at Dolph Kettler, whose hand was cupped over the butt of the .45 at his hip.

"I'm right, Dolph!" he said, sharply. "That scar runs across your LEFT cheek bone! How come the scar I saw on the Masked Killer's face at the rendezvous, and again at the ZB a while ago, was on the RIGHT cheek?"

Roana stood beside her father, looking up at Rand.

"Don't you understand?" she pleaded. "It's dad's brother, Tick Kettler. He's forgotten which cheek the scar was on. Dad has known right along that it was Tick, come back to keep his promise that he would see dad hung. He's been working to throw the suspicion onto dad, so's the law would hang him."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Rand asked the cattleman. "I'd have believed you. I wanted to believe you."

The bitter, cynical sneer did not leave Dolph Kettler's scarred face. "What's the difference?" he asked. "It's in the family, ain't it?"

"There's a lot of difference," Rand retorted. "He's not Roana's father. And you ain't your brother's keeper."

"I could have drilled him at the rendezvous night before last. And I could have done it again last night, when he come down through the pass," Dolph shrugged. "But when I had a chanc't, I couldn't send a bullet through my own blood brother. Anything else you'd like t' know?"

"Yes!" Rand grated. "I want the Masked Killer. And since I've found out about the scar, I've got an idea where I can find him in a hurry. After yesterday, I knew it wasn't you, in spite of the scar. Roana would never have turned on her own father, even if he had been wrong."

Dolph looked quickly at his daughter. The habitual, twisted sneer on his face had lost some of its severity.

"I stayed away from the ZB last night on purpose," he explained, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Ro here begged me to. Said you'd handle the job all right. An' that if I got mixed into the fightin' an' anything happened t' me, everybody'd take it wrong, sayin' I was there t' help Tick."

"I've got everything straightened out now," Rand assured him.

Then to cover his emotions, he changed the subject. "I ran into Fulton Stoneman yesterday. He's crowdin' his sheep in pretty close to your range up there on the plateau. Shouldn't be surprised but what he's started the big drive already. Think I'll get up there and keep an eye on things."

"I'll ride with you," Dolph Kettler decided.

The two followed the trail along the base of the Mesa Orondo, up through the pass and onto the plateau. And there, within a short distance, they came upon a group of waddies and others who had composed the posse of the night before, and who had been pursuing the outlaws who had escaped. They stared in amazement at Dolph Kettler, for all of them had been certain that he was playing the role of the Masked Killer.

"He's straight!" Rand said curtly, jerking his head toward Dolph.

So the whole group fell in and rode with them. They met the advance guard of the sheep within a mile. The woollies were pouring in over the Entiat Plateau like a billowy sea.

"Wait!" Rand cautioned his companions.

A lone horseman rode out of a side coulee toward them, and he raised one arm as a signal that he desired to parley. They all recognized the rider as Fulton Stoneman.

"As sheriff, I'll go up alone and meet him," Rand told the others.

He had borrowed a gun from Dolph Kettler, and as he drew up facing the sheepman, he covered the butt with his right hand, ready.

"Still nosin' into my sheep business, are you?" the bigger man snarled, his hard eyes glittering. "I warned you before. Now get out, 'fore lead flies!"

Rand's grip tightened on his gun, as he leaned forward, staring intently at the other's face.

"When I was in the outlaw's rendezvous, the Masked Killer made a deliberate point of lettin' me see the red scar on his cheek," he said, slowly. "Last night, down at the ZB ranch, I saw that scar again."

"That's what I said you'd see, wasn't it?" Stoneman snarled.

"Yes," Rand went on evenly. "There was a red scar *on the right cheek.* Dolph Kettler's got a scar like that *on his left cheek.* How come there's signs of red paint on YOUR right cheek—*Tick Kettler!*"

INVOLUNTARILY the sheepman's hand went flying toward his cheek. Then he caught himself, started for his gun, a savage oath ripped from his thick lips, a maniacal lust to kill, in his glittering eyes.

"I'll blast yore heart out!" he cursed.

"No you won't!" Rand barked, covering him in a flashing draw. "Drop that gun! And get your hands up!"

But Tick Kettler, alias Fulton Stoneman, alias the Masked Killer, seeing then that he had come to the end of his rope, drove his spurs deep into his pony's sides, lunging madly away from there at full speed.

Rand could have dropped him with a bullet in the back. Instead, he sent Toughy

after him, leaning into the lancing muzzle fire which the murderous outlaw leader spilled back over his shoulder.

Rand scarcely heard the angry bullets. He was gaining. Faster and faster they raced, straight across the Entiat Plateau, toward the Mesa Orondo. Closer and closer Rand crept upon the killer, as Toughy lengthened his strides.

The fleeing desperado was making for the pass, which broke down over the mesa just ahead of him. And still Rand had not overtaken him.

Then up through the cut, in front of him, blocking his escape, came Roana Kettler, her snub-nosed rifle in her hands.

The sheepman saw her and veered suddenly to the left along the brink of the mesa, with Rand close behind him.

The end had come for the terror of the Grande Ronde. Yet in that last moment he had a choice as to his way out. And he made it without hesitancy.

Straight toward the brink of the mesa he turned his pony. Then when there was no more than a dozen feet between him and eternity, he drove his spurs still deeper. The pony leaped high, arching out into space.

There was a sudden hushed silence over the Mesa Orondo. Then from far below, there came to Rand Dahlan's ears one single piercing scream of death, torn from the pony which had carried its desperate rider to the close of his bloody career of outlawry.

Rand drew rein as Roana came up beside him.

"Who was it?" she whispered, with bated breath.

"The only bad Kettler," he answered her evenly.

The two of them turned to await Dolph Kettler and the possemen who were riding madly toward them. Then Roana Kettler raised her chin proudly, unashamed, as well she might.

The Sheriff had his arm tightly about her slim waist, so that all might see what the law thought of the good Kettlers.

A SETTLEMENT INCLUDES SHEEP

By Raymond S. Spears

Author of "A Meal on the City Marshal," "Just Another Killing," etc.

A
Wild Bunch Story

There was plenty of dead-or-alive money on John Ryan's head, but he could tarry to repay a debt of gratitude

FOR public and private reasons John Ryan was riding alone down the line from the Hole-in-the-Wall country in the direction of the Blue Mountains. He intended to bear toward the Mogollons, south of which was the English outfit where he could get a riding job.

No one knew just how much money it would be worth to bring John Ryan in to

a jail and deliver him to the law authorities. Some said it would mean $25,000 or so to the captor. A good many of the rewards offered for his capture were contingent upon conditions difficult to fulfill, some including the waiving of rights on rewards offered by others. Such string-haltered offers were cheats, false pretences for the purpose of having the noted outlaw killed or caught. But still there was enough reward on his head to well pay whoever did the job of killing him. Accordingly, Ryan had to keep moving.

He was guiding his course by the glaring sun and using peaks and ranges of mountains for landmarks. In the more dangerous country he rode at night and lay holed up by day. Hunches often halted him for long spells while he watched the gloom or the dust and kept his eyes on his horse's ears. In a low voice he told his mount things he never had told any human being.

Going down a valley once, he swung around a point and went back a mile to wait an hour or so, making sure no one was trailing him. And once he went twenty miles out of his way to avoid passing Gambrel's Box-X ranch. He climbed 5,000 feet to follow a ridge back through scraggly timber rather than risk showing his dust across a flat barely two miles wide.

HIS eyes squinted and smarted from staring at the white glare across a basin where he knew an active and aggressive sheriff waited. The officer was eager to collect that $25,000. He figured Ryan owed it to him. The sheriff had deposited $16,000 of questionable money in the Snake Butte Bank for safe keeping; and John Ryan had single-handedly robbed the bank and ridden off with all its money. The bank then failed, and the sheriff blamed Ryan for the misfortune. Ryan had to laugh, and he had sent word to the sheriff that it wasn't illegal to rob a thief, even one popular with the voters. Now he got through that worthy's bailiwick without being spotted.

He continued his lonely ride, hiding from view, avoiding ridges and all habitations and humans and keeping to the wooded land.

THEN at last John Ryan saw a nester ahead of him, down a long sage-and-gravel grade tucked among the upheaved landscape and surrounded by cottonwoods. After a time, as he rode toward it, he remembered that when seven years before he had stopped there Harve Bronson had set up grain for the horses, and Mrs. Josie Bronson had served five outlaws with a meal that included chicken, hotbread and molasses, coffee, milk, layer cocoanut cake and bowls full of wild berry sauce.

The couple had refused to take pay for the meal, and Ryan remembered the satisfaction he felt at being able to leave a $20 gold piece under each empty berry bowl when the long riders went on their way. Josie Bronson was a nice-looking young woman, as he recalled, clear eyed, hopeful and with a deep love for that vast, lonely land.

Ryan, not sure of any one or anything, looked down into the creek bottoms. There he saw twenty-three sheep, gaunt, scraggly, ragged mongrels.

Sheep in the Spangle Water Country!

Ryan had stolen thousands of sheep and shipped them East at loading sidings he knew were right—right as Hell, as the saying is. He had cleaned sheep out of whole counties, and sheepfolds had closed down, had been abandoned, it was said, because of the depredations of John Ryan. A hundred sheepmen, and a thousand cattlemen were ready to shoot down John Ryan because he had ruined them. But Ryan grimaced at this, for he had driven men out of that country where they never could make a living farming or raising sheep or cattle.

"I did them a favor and they didn't know it!" the desperado grumbled to himself. "I saved them slow-dying to ruin by doing a quick job killing off their hopeless raising projects."

And now there were the Bronsons with sheep. It would cost them ten or fifteen dollars a head to raise those sheep and, counting wool and all, they never in God's world would get more than six or eight dollars a head for them.

The fur Bronson caught in winter, the day labor he did in the mines and for big

cattle ranches, every dollar he took in would be wasted feeding those sheep. The more sheep he had, the harder he would have to work to support them. The twenty-three sheep would cost him over a hundred dollars more than they would bring in. Cattle and horses were going to be pretty much the same way in that basin, too. The more live stock, the bigger the loss. It was no place to ranch.

JOHN RYAN knew cattle, sheep, horses and humans. He wondered how he could save the Bronsons from disappointment, help them to better ways and teach them something. An outlaw can't do much!

Riding down to the nester's cabin after scouting around it, he came in from the east instead of north, and then hailed the house.

A woman came to the door wiping her hands on her blue apron. She was Mrs. Bronson, and she was still pretty, but she was sad eyed. The look of loneliness and privation was in her expression.

"Why, Howdy!" she greeted. "Light? I'll set up a snack, stranger!"

The same hospitality and the same brave welcome. Ryan went to the stable and pitched some hay for his horse. It was evident that Bronson had been away quite a while. The need of a man around the place was obvious. Lots of little jobs hadn't been done lately. Fence repairs, haying, picking up around . . . Ryan had seen lots of homesteads like this! Nesters were generally better able to look after themselves, making more even than ranchers if trapping was good and markets handy for venison and beef.

"Reckon the old man's out working," Ryan said later as he sat down to a rabbit pie.

"Yes, sir." Mrs. Bronson said grimly, "he's working, sure 'nough—on the road."

"What? How come?" Ryan exclaimed, astonished.

"We had twelve-fifteen head of cows and calves up the creek where there are beaver meadows and plenty of lush grass in the wet, and strong grass higher up the slopes." The woman poured coffee and sat down before continuing. "Harve went up there and branded the calves. We had twelve. Old Gambrel of the Box-X outfit came over snooping around. He found 'nough grass for a hundred head and he blustered down on us, claiming that was his pasture. Harve isn't any hand to talk—so Gambrel lit out. Didn't hear anything from him for probably a month, and then Sheriff Scaper rode in with a posse, took Harve, and they gave him six months on the road. At the trial Gambrel claimed that two of those calves were sucked up to two of the Box-X cows. You c'n see what happened. He traded mothers on our calves."

"Gambrel did that?" Ryan repeated. "I get-cha."

RYAN rode away after eating. He headed west but worked back north for fifty miles to the Fire Hole district, where he picked up three men he knew. He told them what Mrs. Bronson had said. The boys remembered her kindness to them, and felt about it the same way Ryan did. They wanted to do something about it. They laughed when he told them his ideas. Ryan was like that—full of ideas that made a man laugh.

Two days later the four men rode over into the Box-X country. Old Gambrel was crowding his pasture pretty badly and he needed that grass up Bronson's creek bottoms. The Spangle Water, sparkling in the sunshine on every rift, was over the ridge from the Box-X, but it would take care of the 150 head of baby beef Gambrel had there, now that Harve Bronson was helping improve the road past the Box-X place, without pay and under guard, with quite a few other ornery characters. Gambrel's plans were working smoothly.

Ryan led the way down toward the Box-X and as the ranch corral was on a flat, quite a way from the house, he and his companions just naturally took four horses that didn't need to be broken, and rode them over the ridge into the Spangle Creek head; and straight down to Bronson's house.

Then Ryan and his three companions massacred the Bronson's twenty-three sheep.

When they rode away they left odds and ends of rope, a horse blanket, a broken bridle rein, and two quirts. One of the quirts had a deer shinbone for a handle, and it was one of the fanciest sinew-braid quirts in the whole country, a whip that anyone would remember. It belonged to Gambrel.

Ryan and his companions were very particular to restore the horses to the corral, after wiping them down so they wouldn't show the sweat of their ride. Then the outlaws headed on foot over into the rough country to their own horses and headed back for the Fire Hole hide-out. They weren't any too sure of the success of their plan, but it was the best thing they could think of.

Waiting around for the echoes, Ryan poked over into the Spangle Creek Valley, looking things over from high-up overlooks. There he saw six horses with riders, and from the way they rode and from things he already knew, he had to laugh. Sure enough, Mrs. Bronson had gone to Sliderock and brought back Sheriff Scaper with a posse. She showed the sheriff those dead sheep. He took off his hat and scratched his head.

"A sure ornery bunch of scoundrels, killing a road-gang widow's sheep thataway!" Ryan grinned as he watched the sheriff's activities.

The posse began to circle around, picking up tracks. Ryan could almost see the tracks from his own lookout point.

The Sheriff presently talked privately with Undersheriff Long Red Jack Poller about the tracks of one horse they seemed to recognize. Then the five men talked with Mrs. Bronson and persuaded her to stay at home. This wasn't any woman's job. She was spunky and she wanted to go along, but finally she went back to her cabin. The posse headed up the creek.

JOHN RYAN paralleled along on the other side of the ridge. He didn't very often have a chance to watch the other fellow getting his, and for once he was enjoying the show from the sidelines. He despised Old Gambrel, who cheated his riders out of their pay and overcharged them on commissary stuff—who would do anything to get the best of anybody, even of those he needed on his ranch.

Sheriff Scaper rode up to Gambrel's and lit running. He meant business, on account of having recognized those two quirts he knew personally belonged to Gambrel and his foreman, Hip Gibers. The sheriff also had picked up a fancy saddle blanket along that dirty trail. Scaper had awarded the blanket to Dud Peaks, for a good ride over at Sliderock Court two years before at a local rodeo.

"By gad, Gambrel!" Scaper declared, hotly, "You went too far, killin' them sheep!"

That started the fight, and they went at it. Gambrel would be blessed all ways before he'd take an insult, being accused of killing sheep. They opened up on each other with guns, and the posse and Gambrel's men joined in.

Ryan caught his breath. He hadn't figured on things going as far as to have a real gunfight out of that proposition. But seeing as that was what had happened, he watched with the best eyes he could from the distance.

Three of the boys went down, one of the deputies, Gambrel and his foreman. The battle was sure pretty and sassy while it lasted, everybody emptying his gun two or three times, but it ended in a victory for the law. Presently the posse hitched two lively horses to a long buckboard and lifted the three men into it, and headed for town.

John Ryan watched the dust of the wheels and the galloping team and the cavalcade of deputies stretching out hell-bent for Sliderock Court along the Fire Hole country highway, hurrying to get the wounded men to the doctor. Presently they'd pass the road gang in which Harve Bronson was helping improve the thoroughfare for nothing but his board for six months.

John Ryan decided that after all he wouldn't go down to the English Outfit below the Mogollons. The Fire Hole country was pretty cold in the trapping season for fur but nobody ever bothered him or his crowd back in there. Of course, he felt kind of restricted in a way, on account of having

only about ten thousand square miles of reasonable security around him. But he wanted to hear first hand how the trial came out, for Judge Burden sure despised anybody who resisted arrest, no matter who he was.

THE word drifted back that Old Gambrel was just scratched, and that he was salty, impatient and champing at the bits. With the two best lawyers he could get he demanded an immediate indictment, if any, and a trial pronto. They couldn't convict any innocent man of his position, standing and influence, not in his own home county, they couldn't!

So they called the Grand Jury and it surprised him by returning plenty of indictments, for sheep-killing, resisting officers, violence, night-riding, all those things. And it held a circuit term of trial court then and there.

John Ryan dyed his white hair black and grew a mustache with a Van Dyke goatee, so he could attend. He found a pair of knickers belonging to an Englishman who had come into the country to observe the peculiar natives in the past year, so he put them on, and some army boots, and one thing and another.

He sure was a comical-looking jigger, not recognizable by any one as long as he would keep his mouth shut and not show his small, white, even teeth. Even his two lieutenants had to look twice at him, and then grab their mouths in order to keep reasonably quiet. They all sat in the crowd that filled the Court House, and everybody wondered about where the Englishman came from, and why.

The trial was short and sweet. Sheriff Scaper and all his posse testified. They identified the exhibits, they described and proved the horse-hoofs tracks, and they left nothing to the jury's imagination.

Then the defence put in some character witnesses, but Gambrel lost his temper on the witness stand and publicly announced how important he was and how nobody dared to do anything to him which didn't set well with the court.

He was convicted of raiding, sheep-killing and malicious mischief in the first degree, and the jury recommended the upholding of the dignity and integrity of the law as regards Box-X Gambrel the same as in the case of Harve Bronson.

Old Gambrel stood with his mouth wide open as the jury from the foreman to No. 12 declared him guilty as charged. And then Judge Burden said he might as well do the sentencing and get it over with.

In view of the fact that only the ranch owner was charged and convicted, the remainder of the riding scamps having been covered up by the accused, except as regards things they apparently had lost, he could take fifteen days for each sheep slaughtered, which meant eleven months and fifteen days in jail.

"Hard labor!" the Judge remarked, "Preferably in the road gang!"

The spectators gave a whoop of suppressed delight and joy. The correspondent of the Garvel Springs Welkin Ringer said, "This is the most popular conviction and sentence in the Sliderock Court in many a day."

Old Gambrel had been riding high, wide and handsome, no matter who swallowed his dust. And now look at him!

John Ryan and his two cronies went over to the Whiskey Spring House and drank to the success of crime, nesting and sheep killing. Ryan was not a heavy drinker habitually, but now he made up for a lot of abstemiousness. Every time he drank, he had to laugh. Every time he laughed he opened wide his mouth to let his joy through the safety valve.

This showed his small white teeth, and when Sheriff Scaper and Undersheriff Long Red Jack came in to have a quieter after their arduous case, they noticed the Englishman and his boisterous, wide-open-places laugh.

They noticed the small white teeth and Scaper looked at Long Red in a meaning way. Then they looked down at the wide belt, the double rows of cartridges, the two heavy 45 Sixes and the Englishman's two companions.

They licked their lips. There stood $40,000 worth of hilarity, at odds of 3 to 2.

But Long Red wasn't feeling any too

pert, though he was getting around all right, limping some, where a bullet had bruised his stomach, hitting an army belt buckle.

So the outlaws walked out, looking as innocent and ignorant as possible. As soon as they were outside, the three of them headed for the alley and, mounting their horses, rode for the back country, thinking that if the sheriff and undersheriff returned with a posse to the Whiskey Spring the odds would be 6 to 3, shortguns against long—a bit too steep. Even heavy drink didn't make John Ryan reckless nor dull his alertness.

They swung out of the trails, ran their tracks zig-zagging through the tracks of bands of wild and nearly wild brand horses, and came down to the Spangle Creek bottoms where they reached the nester cabin as blue smoke rose from the kitchen log annex. At their hail the nester's wife came to the door, wiping her hands on her apron.

A bright smile and more than kitchen-stove color was in the cheeks of Mrs. Bronson.

"Why, good morning, boys!" she greeted, looking at Ryan, puzzled, "If'n you'll light, I'll breakfast you right soon!"

"I'm sure hungry!" Ryan smiled, and she stared at his mouth, those little teeth.

"John Ryan!" she exclaimed, and then bit her lip, embarrassed, for it probably wasn't polite to mention to an outlaw that you know his name, and then she laughed. "And I thought you were an Englishman in all that get up!"

The boys baited their horses and presently were sitting down at the kitchen table, the young woman joining them and eating heartily. She said she always ate better if company was around. She was elated with the conviction of the sheep-killing raider. She wondered if Gambrel would appeal.

"I reckon not." Ryan shook his head. "His lawyers advised him not to, the way things were. Course, they could probably beat the conviction in the appellate courts, but he couldn't beat what'd be coming to him for framing your man with those calves, Mrs. Bronson. My friends and I couldn't testify as witnesses, getting into courts being so much easier than getting out of them. But the old boy is going to be good, now. Did anybody mention settling for those sheep that got killed up?"

"Why, you know," Mrs. Bronson stared at him, "one of Gambrel's attorneys came to me with a paper, and—and said the old scoundrel would be glad to pay for them. He—he paid me five hundred dollars. I put it in the bank right away."

The three men grinned.

"My land!" she beamed, "we can buy practically a hundred to maybe two hundred sheep with that much! Of course, Mr. Gambrel had to pay punitive damages as well as sheep values—"

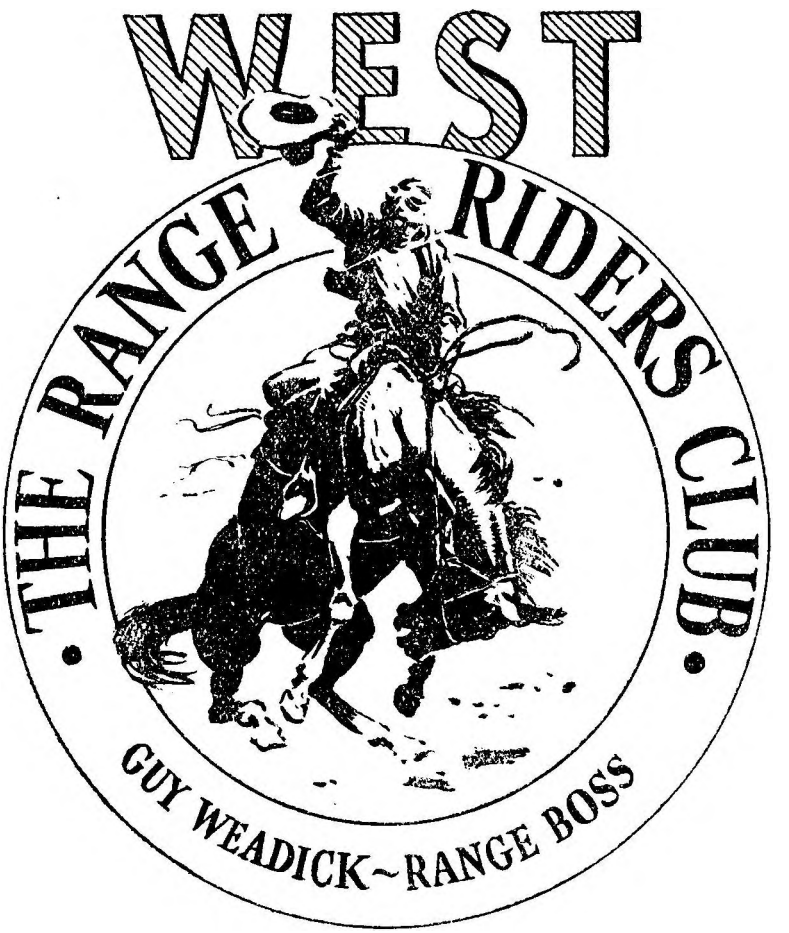
"I wouldn't buy no more sheep!" Ryan advised her, "In this country sheep don't do very well. Nobody ever made money on them. The more you have, the more you lose on them. I don't mean it's any better as a cattle country, for you lose four-five dollars on every steer you ship. A nester c'n live on Nature, trapping, killing game meat, moss agate, crystal, placer gold washing, and such. He can make money if he don't throw it away tryin' to raise sheep. Better spend yo' money on yo'selves."

"You know," she frowned, "I've been wondering. We've been making good money wildcrafting, and spending it all on farm upkeep, overhead, all kinds of expenses. I've decided you're right."

The three men rode on their way after breakfast. Out of sight and hearing, Ryan grunted:

"This is a good time to move those Box-X cows around the Spangle Creek ponds. Gambrel's boys are all drowning their joy at him being in jail. We can circle 'em around and beef 'em for the mines. They hadn't got time to trail and ship 'em yet, so we will do it for 'em."

And presently, a nice bunch of Box-X stock was vanishing in the broken lands to the tune of "Get along, little dogies, get along!"



ADVISORY COUNCIL

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Captain Tom R. Hickman
Frazier Hunt
Peter B. Kyne
Captain J. A. Hutchison
Will James
Frank M. King
J. C. Kinney
Grace M. Sparkes
Ross Santee

Marshal Sid Willis

THE RANGE RIDERS' CLUB is an organization to bring together all people interested in the West.

Guy Weadick, rancher, cowboy, and the world's greatest rodeo producer, is range boss.

Ten members in any one district may organize a local branch of the club and elect its own officers. Branches are called "Chuckwagons." We allot names and brands to each branch. Let us know what name and brand you desire—and why your particular choice.

Members combine to get the best rates on cowboy equipment, and trips to Western ranches. They attend and promote rodeos,

Western costume dances, barbecues, picnics, camping trips, and other Western stunts.

Members correspond with each other. Chuckwagons exchange ideas and news and combine for trips. Their news and notes are published in this department. "Lone Wolf Members" are invited to join in localities where a Chuckwagon has not yet been formed, and will be made welcome at any Wagon.

Members are entitled to query Guy Weadick on anything pertaining to *The Range Riders' Club*, cowboys, ranches, rodeos.

To become a member of the club and receive a membership card entitling one to full privileges as well as to compete for prizes it is necessary only to send in one year's subscription to WEST, which is $1.50 in the United States and Canada.

Prizes are awarded monthly and semi-annually to members getting the largest number of subscriptions. In addition commissions of twenty per cent are paid on all subscriptions sent in after the first one.

The official Stetson hat designated for the club is called The Range Rider, especially designed by Max Meyer, the famous cowboy outfitter of Cheyenne, Wyoming, from which all particulars may be had.

The official cowboy and cowgirl boot of the club is made by H. J. Austin & Sons, veteran caterers to the cowboy boot trade since the early "trail days." Their new Range Rider boot is a pip. Write them for full particulars.

The official rope of the club is Plymouth, made by the Plymouth Cordage Company and sold by every up-to-the-minute dealer in cowboy supplies.

The official knife of the club is Remington. It has *The Range Riders' Club* embossed on one of the blades.

The Snook Trading Co., of Billings, Montana, who specialize in colored prints of pictures by Charles M. Russell, are the official Western picture supply house of the club.

All these items of equipment are the best obtainable, and are marked with the Range Riders' Club insignia. Special rates are available to members of *The Range Riders' Club* only.

Through the courtesy of these companies a choice of Plymouth lariats, Remington stock knives and Snook prints is given as a prize to the member obtaining the most subscriptions each month. H. J. Austin & Sons and Max Meyer have donated a pair of Range Rider Boots and a Range Rider Stetson Hat for the members obtaining the most subscriptions over a six month period. Ten subscriptions are needed to win any of these prizes.

If you have not already joined the club, do so now. Get your friends to join. Send in the coupon prepared below for your convenience.

WEST, Garden City, N. Y.

Please send me a membership card entitling me to full privileges as a member of The Range Riders' Club and WEST every month for one year. Enclosed is $1.50.

Name .....

Address: .....

Make all checks and money orders payable to WEST Magazine.

CLUB NEWS AND NOTES

OUR CLUB is growing. Already its members include those from other organizations, prominently identified with things western, such as *The Chuckwagon Trailers* and *The Riding Actors Association of Hollywood.* Several from various Western Chambers of Commerce, stock ranch owners, dude ranch owners, real range hands, dude wranglers, rodeo managements, rodeo contestants, pioneer cowmen, stage coach drivers, western pioneers of every discription, Western authors, and fans of all things Western, from every district on the continent.

If *you* have not already joined, send your subscription *today.* Send only $1.50 to WEST MAGAZINE, GARDEN CITY, N. Y. asking that your membership card in *The Range Riders' Club* be mailed you at once, together with a copy of WEST each month for one year. *Do this now* so you can communicate and visit with members of the club in about every district in North America, during the coming year.

The Riding Actors Association of Hollywood is composed of men who do the riding in all motion picture productions. The majority of its members are ex-cowpunchers, many of whom are famous for their skill, and daring horsemanship, outside the motion picture field. In a coming issue I will tell you something about this organization and its members.

CHUCKWAGONS of the Club are in the making up in Canada. Since the new trade treaty between the U.S. and Canada went into effect January first, the annual subscription to WEST is $.150, same as in the U.S. It used to be $2.15. So let's hear from our Canadian readers, with your $1.50 which brings you WEST direct to your address each month for 1 year, and also a membership card in *The Range Riders' Club.* AND DON'T FORGET: Whenever there are 10 members in any one district, you can form a Chuckwagon and work the range with the other outfits all over the continent.

ALL CLUB MEMBERS will be glad to know that an opportunity has been provided for them to meet each other on a special Western trip to be conducted by the Great Northern Railway under the sponsorship not only of WEST and *The Range Riders' Club,* but of the other magazines of The Ranger Group, MASKED RIDER WESTERN and BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE.

This trip will be to the real West, the West of ranches where cowpunchers herd cattle and go on roundup much as they always have. It will not be the usual trip to see only the thing that the tourist ordinarily sees. And in addition to a taste of real cow-country life, good times such as barbecues and shakedowns, rodeos, and other forms of truly Western entertainment will be enjoyed by the party.

The Great Northern is offering a very special rate for this trip, which will take about two weeks, one of which will be spent on a genuine cattle ranch, and it would be advisable to make your reservations as early as possible while there is still room.

Further details will be announced in future issues of WEST, MASKED RIDER WESTERN and BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE.

Will Mr. Edgar J. Smutny, owner of the Lincoln Dude Ranch at Stormville, N. Y. let me know if he has organized a Chuckwagon at his ranch? A communication from him stated that he probably would.

FOR the benefit of many, I impart the following information. Edward Borein, cowboy artist, life-long friend of Charlie Russell, Will Rogers, Fred Stone and many others, including the writer, has *not* crossed the Big Divide. Oh no! He is still in the land of much activity, living at Santa Barbara, California, where his "home camp" is permanently located. World famous for his black and white drawings and etchings of cowboy, Mexican and Indian life, he is still on that labor of love—and his work in that line is acknowledged to be among the world's best.

The famous bucking-horse drawing titled "I-C-U" that I have used for years in connection with *The Stampede* advertising is one of Borein's originals. This drawing is claimed by many—including the late Charlie Russell—to be the best drawing of a bronk and its rider ever made. If you get in the vicinity of Santa Barbara, look Ed up at *El Patio* there you will see some of his famous work, as well as one of the finest collections of Indian handicraft, Mexican work and cowboy equipment, a collection that cannot be duplicated anywhere. Not one article has been obtained from a curio dealer, but all are the genuine stuff, the results of many years personal collecting. No, the collection is *not* for sale. It is just part of Ed's furnishings. Of course, he reads WEST each month—he is familiar with all parts of the WEST just as he is with many of its famous characters—in fact he is one himself.

I AM mighty glad to get letters like the following from new members. Mr. Harper will be welcomed by other members of *The Range Riders' Club* in Tucson at the Fieste De Los Vaqueros which will be going on when this WEST hits the stands. The Club will be well represented there.

"Dear Guy Weadick:

Enclosed find one dollar and four bits, together with application for membership in *The Range Riders' Club*.

The West, and everything pertaining to it, especially horses, has always been my hobby. I am twenty-nine now and have spent several years in the cattle country of the West—California, around Salinas, Lompoc, Santa Barbara and the Santa Ynez Valley; Tucson, Prescott, Tombstone, and Willcox, Arizona; Las Vegas, Glorietta, Silver City, and Lincoln, New Mexico; and Houston, Ft. Worth, Tilden, Kenedy and Kingsville, Texas. I have a complete Hamley outfit and an old Stetson now more than ten years old and still going strong.

Enclosed find pictures of three horses I now own—Speed-ball, a grey cow-pony, smooth mouth now, which was shipped in here a five-year-old from Round-up, Montana.

Johnnie Walker is a mahogany bay, three socks and a snip. Five-year-old registered saddle-bred gelding.

"Jimmy" is nine years old and I have had him since he was a colt. We have made quite a "trick" horse out of him. He will do everything but talk and likes to show off.

Hope this letter has not bored you, and I am mighty glad to be getting in with a bunch of fine fellows who are keeping alive the traditions of the Old West.

Best regards,

J. C. Harper,
218 E. 12th Street,
Davenport, Iowa.

"P.S.: I am planning on going down to Tucson in time for the 'Fiesta.' I have been to Pendleton, Salinas, Cheyenne, and many other rodeos, but never to Tucson."

G. M., TORONTO, CANADA, writes:

"I have been a reader of WEST for several years and am of the opinion that their western fiction leads in the pulp field. I think *The Range Riders' Club* and its objects a good thing. Your news regarding real Western characters and places is most interesting. Possibly you can enlighten me upon the following questions about the Canadian Northwest: First, I have heard that in the early days in the Northwest Territories — particularly in that portion now known as Alberta, especially before the coming of the Mounted Police—there, being no railroad, all mail from that section

had to go out via Montana, and that it required United States postage. Is that correct? Second: I have heard that during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific, when the construction had reached a point that lies between what is now Medicine Hat and Calgary, the Indians would not let the work proceed until they were finally persuaded by a missionary to withdraw. Third: I have also heard that in those days, before the railroad came from the east, much of the goods brought to that section came via Montana and that most of the banking was done through the I. G. Baker Co., a Montana trading firm. Do you know if there is any truth in these reports?"

First of all, I'm glad you like the fiction in WEST. The principal reason for that is, that authors writing for WEST, know their subject. Most any story published in WEST, although fiction, could reasonably have happened, and many of the stories, in fact, have had as their basis, real happenings, with names and locations changed, and, of course, the liberty of fictional license taken.

As to your questions 1 and 3:

The I. G. Baker headquarters was located at Fort Benton, Montana, at the head of navigation on the Missouri River. This company owned steamboats, the old-style paddle-wheel affairs, that brought freight and passengers "up the river" from as far south as St. Louis, and at the time the end of the railroad was at Bismarck, South Dakota. Much of the freight destined for points west and north of Ft. Benton, including locations in the districts of the Northwest Territories that you have mentioned were transported from Benton, north by ox-teams, freighting outfits to the Hudson's Bay post at Edmonton, and later the I. G. Baker Co. opened stores at Calgary, Macleod and other points.

The famous Hudson's Bay Co. received freight in this manner in no small quantities.

Old-timers have told me and shown me canceled postage stamps—U. S. postage—showing that mail sent from what is now Alberta, was mailed in that manner, there being no Canadian post-offices, closer than the American one in Fort Benton at the time.

As to question 2: It is a matter of record that when the construction crews of the Canadian Pacific Railway had reached a point that is close to where the town of Gleichen, Alberta, now stands, the Blackfeet Indians refused to let the work proceed. This location was some 800 miles west of Winnipeg, with a vast open and for the most part sparsely settled country. It was a long distance from military assistance, their only protection being a comparatively small number of Northwest Mounted Police scattered over a vast area.

The Reverend Father Lacombe, a Jesuit Missionary, who had spent much time among the Blackfeet, and was loved by them, was successful in getting the Indians not to molest the railway constructers. In later years, President Van Horn of the Railway, while on a visit in the West, paid a courteous compliment to the old missionary by making him President of the Railway for a day, at the same time advising him that any request he made of the railway would be granted.

This wonderful old man, whom I had the privilege of knowing personally in his last years, asked only one thing, that the railway would erect a suitable station on their line, where he had built a home for orphans and aged people, regardless of their religious beliefs. This was done and the station is known as Midnapore, Alberta, about eight miles south of Calgary.

The Canadian Northwest, like all other portions of Western North America has many thrilling incidents in its colorful pioneer history, that have an appeal not only to Canadians, but to everyone interested in the settlement, development and experiences of those who pioneered in those sections. I hope later to give stories of many of these people.

ALL our readers like Western fiction. They like facts as well. That's why they read WEST. They get both. The publishers want every reader to take advantage of their offer and fill in the Reader's Choice Coupon each issue advising them what you like best, and why. In this manner your wants can successfully be catered to.

And regarding the suggestion of Evelyn Perkins, of *Hoofs and Horns*, the Southwestern range journal, suggesting a "Western Book of the Month Club"—That's an idea that every writer and reader of WEST should be really interested in. I'm sure the publishers of WEST will mount that sterling idea and give it a good ride.

Reviews on such books by authorities on the subjects would be of great benefit to all concerned. There are many authors of books of the West, whose works should be brought to the attention of those who want the best in that line of reading. WEST is going to give its readers such reviews. Watch for further details.

RODEO NOTES

LET'S start off right early this year by receiving all news from rodeo managements everywhere, regarding their plans for 1936. Many new travellers to all parts of the West, will be then able to make advance plans to visit rodeos, in the districts in which they will be touring. I will publish a list of such locations and dates each month as far in advance, as I receive them. Get busy managements, don't wait until the last moment.

AS promised in a former issue I will tell you something about the rodeo called *The Stampede* that I produced at Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, last summer in connection with their pioneer Jubilee. It was an amazing success. 42,000 paid attendance in three days. The population of this little enterprising city is 14,000. They enjoyed the greatest crowds in their history. Merchants and all business men report greatest business since town was formed.

A large ranching district surrounds the city. Cowpunchers from the ranches as well as a large delegation of rodeo contestants attended. Thousands of Indians of the Blackfeet, Piegan and Blood tribes were on hand, coming from their annual Sun Dance held on the banks of the Belly River a short distance southwest of Lethbridge. The whole camp moved into town with their big painted tepees, camp equipment, pots, pans, saddle and pack ponies and dogs. The big camp was a most colorful background, and there were many Indians entered in the various rodeo events, as well as in the Indian races.

Old-timers and pioneers by the hundreds were in evidence—veteran Mounted Policemen, cowmen, trappers, stage-coach drivers, miners, prospectors, packers, in fact old-timers, men and women and their famlies, the actual settlers of the Northwest, when the cattle first came in. All who participated in the gigantic Pioneer Parade were originals of the types they represented, not persons dressed to play a part.

Thousands of tourists from all sections of the continent were present. They came by railway, aeroplane and motor car.

In 1936, in July, Lethbridge will again present their genuine old-time reunion of pioneers and a rodeo in conjunction with their big industrial and agricultural Fair.

Both railroads serving the locality of this

vicinity will offer special summer rates enabling visitors a chance to attend the big celebration, as well as visit many scenic and historical Western points of interest. The Canadian Pacific railway can route you to Lethbridge, Banff, Lake Louise and other points in the Canadian Rockies as well as Waterton Lakes Park, in the southern part of Alberta. The Great Northern Ry. will bring you to the dude ranch section of Montana and to Glacier National Park via rail, and from there to Waterton Lakes Park in Canada and via motor to Lethbridge.

All routes are fine and detailed information regarding all of them can be had by writing to A. O. Seymour, General Tourist Agent, Canadian Pacific Railway, Montreal. Canada and to Mr. A. J. Dickinson, Passenger Traffic Manager, Great Northern Railway, St. Paul, Minn.

RODEOS that depend upon contestants' entry fees, paying the biggest part of the cash purses advertised are about caught up with. As one contestant remarked, "A bunch of us boys might just as well put so much money in a pot and cut high cards for it, it's easier than ridin' bronks, doggin' or ropin' for your own money." Managements who have been working along those lines better come alive.

ATTRACTIVE, truthful advertising, proper livestock in quantities necessary, clean performances, fast, thrilling and skillful, proper arena direction, participants, dressed and equipped to do their part in an entertaining manner, competent announcers and proper public address systems, are necessary to properly present a real rodeo. This with honest and capable judges, fair decisions and cash purses that are reasonably attractive to draw genuine exponents of cowboy sports, rather than a bunch of amateurs, simply to collect their entry fees, are very important things to be considered when planning a real rodeo that will draw and satisfy paying patrons.

RODEO DATES

MARK DOWN THESE RODEOS FOR 1936. IF YOU GET NEAR ANY OF THEM ATTEND SURE. THESE DATES WILL BE ADDED TO AS OTHERS ARE ANNOUNCED.

NAME	PLACE	1936 DATES
La Fiesta De Los Vaqueros	Tucson, Arizona	February 20-23
Wickenburg Rodeo	Wickenburg, Arizona	March 20-22
Fort Worth Fat Stock Show and Rodeo	Fort Worth, Texas	(Early in March)
Mother Lode Rodeo	Sonora, California	May 9-10
Hanford Pioneer Days	Hanford, California	May 12
California Stampede	Marysville, California	May 30-31
Livermore Rodeo	Livermore, California	June 13-14
Gilroy Gymkhana and Rodeo	Gilroy, California	June 13-14
Hayward Rodeo	Hayward, California	June 20-21
Reno Rodeo	Reno, Nevada	July 2-4
Livingston Roundup	Livingston, Montana	July 2-4
Black Hills Roundup	Belle Fourche, S. Dakota	July 3-5
Canadian Rodeo	Canadian, Texas	July 3-5
Red Lodge Rodeo	Red Lodge, Montana	July 3-5
Prescott Frontier Days	Prescott, Arizona	July 3-6
American Legion Rodeo	Nowata, Oklahoma	July 4-6
Wolf Point Rodeo	Wolf Point, Montana	July 9-11
Sheridan-Wyo. Rodeo	Sheridan, Wyoming	July 15-17
California Rodeo	Salinas, California	July 16-19
Cheyenne Frontier Days	Cheyenne, Wyoming	July 22-25
Ogden Pioneer Days	Ogden, Utah	July 22-25
Ski-High Stampede	Monte Vista, Colorado	(Last of July or 1st of August
Kiwanis Rodeo	Hinton, Oklahoma	August 5-7
Henry Stampede and Stockmen's Reunion	Soda Springs, Idaho	August 6-8
Midland Empire Fair and Rodeo	Billings, Montana	August 10-15
Iowa's Championship Rodeo	Sidney, Iowa	August 18-21
San Benito County Saddle Horse Assn's Rodeo	Hollister, California	August 21-23
Harris Western Shows	Woodstown, N. J.	August 21-25
Gooding Rodeo	Gooding, Idaho	September 3-5
Nevada Rodeo	Winnemucca, Nevada	September 5-7
American Legion Rodeo	Dinuba, California	November 10-11

Send me any corrections or dates omitted for publication. All news pertaining to all rodeos received in time will be published. Send your news early. DON'T FORGET TO JOIN THE RANGE RIDERS' CLUB NOW.

COWBOYS I HAVE KNOWN

PROBABLY there is no better indication, that each year there is an increasing interest in cowboys and their sports, than the fact that persons all over the continent are genuinely interested in reliable information regarding cowboys who have made a name for themselves in the competitions of riding, roping, etc., not only in the present day exponents, but, in the men, who over a quarter of a century ago, were the tops in their line. Many old-timers have written me asking to give data on both the old-timers and the younger boys.

In this connection a few words about Clayton Danks might not be out of order. Danks has been prominent in cowboy competitions in one way or another for the past 35 years. In his younger days as a rider and roper and of late years as a judge, having acted in that capacity at Cheyenne for many years, as well as at other contests in Wyoming and Colorado.

Clayt Danks was born at Chadron, Daws County, Nebraska, on July 21st, 1879, which makes him fifty-seven years of age now. He was raised on a ranch and for several years followed the work of a range hand drawing wages from such well known Wyoming outfits, as the Campstool Ranch, Cheyenne, J. C. Coble outfit, Iron Mountain, Wyoming, Swan Land & Cattle Co., Chugwater, Wyoming, the Reverse Four Cattle Co., Baggs, Wyoming, and the Spade outfit at Moorecroft Wyoming.

His first contest was at Cheyenne, in 1902. He won the steer roping there in 1904 and the bronk riding in 1907. In addition to this he has twelve firsts to his credit at other contests he has attended, which on the whole are too numerous to mention.

Danks is still active and is a great booster for all things really western.

He thinks Steamboat—the original—was the best bucking horse he ever saw, although he rates a lot of others as real horses. He is of the opinion that Jake McClure is the fastest calf roper on a bunch and that today Bob Crosby leads in tying down wild steers. Earl Thode is his choice of the present day bronk riders, and Clayt thinks that Mike Hastings in his prime was the top steer bulldogger, when it came to twistin' 'em down.

HERE'S another Bowman that is salty. You've heard of John Bowman of Trent, Texas. I mentioned John in a former article, and then there's Everett of Ft. Thomas, Arizona, a leader in all lines of cowboy sport, but the one I'm telling you about now is L. E. (Ed) Bowman of San

Carlos, Arizona.

Ed was born at Hope, New Mexico, Nov. 27, 1890, on a cow ranch and for years did range cowboy work for such real outfits as, the Diamond A's, the Circle Diamond's owned by the Bloom Land and Cattle Co. and Hugh McKeen's H U Bar. Now he has his own spread. These ranches are located in New Mexico and Arizona.

Ed's first contest was at Prescott, Arizona, in 1924, where he busted right into the business by winning the calf roping, was second in the team roping and first, every day, in the rangeland race.

Since then he has contested at about every contest of note in the U. S. and Canada, as well as attended numerous small affairs in localities all over the west.

For four consecutive years he won first in the rangeland relay race at Prescott, Arizona. At that contest in 1927 he was first in the relay race, first in calf tying, first in bulldogging and second in team roping. He won second in calf tying at Cheyenne in 1927, first in bulldogging at Sumas, Washington, first in calf tying at Ellensburg, Washington. That same year he won first in calf tying at Pendleton, and later over at Idaho Falls, Idaho, he stood first in both the calf tying and steer bulldogging. Ed mostly enters roping and dogging, and in 1927 he tied the fastest calf at about every contest he appeared at. That season he was using his steeldust sorrel horse Pete that was ten years old, stood 14½ hands high and weighed 1,000 pounds. Ed thinks this is about the best roping pony he ever climbed up on. Ed trained the horse himself, but it was the property of Mrs. Ed.

Ed Bowman thinks Jake McClure is the top calf roper, Fred Lowery when it comes to steer roping, and Bob Crosby in his day —before getting crippled—the best all around cowboy. In 1927 he thinks Bob Askins was leading the parade in bronk riding.

He is of the opinion that once a year there should be a contest held open to no contestant but the winners of recognized contests during the preceding season, and there and then determine who is who in their respective lines.

Ed Bowman still is to be seen at contests, mostly in the Southwest, as he spends most of his time now on his place at San Carlos. A real booster for rodeos and real hands is Ed.

LET me mention another boy, from out in California, who is ranked among the tops. He is Perry Ivory, born at Doris, Siskiyou County, California, April 1, 1905. Perry has worked on various California cow outfits but of late years has been with the Hoffman SX Ranch at Alturas, Calif.

He attended his first contest at Lakeview, Oregon, in 1920. Since then he has attended about all the leading contests on the continent and has won at many of them. Went to London, England, with that rodeo outfit, contested at the New York rodeo three times, Cheyenne three times, Pendleton three times, Chicago twice, Salinas, California several times as well as at many, many others. Makes a specialty of bronk riding, although he usually enters in other events as well.

Next month I'll tell you about some of the other boys, and possibly about some of the outstanding cowgirls, as many requests have reached me to tell something of the ladies in the rodeo competition.

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28x5.25-18	2.60	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.60	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.60	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.90	1.15
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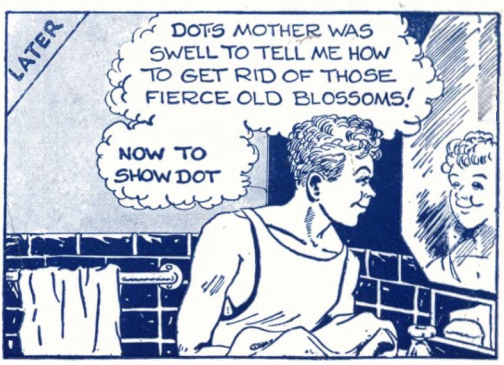

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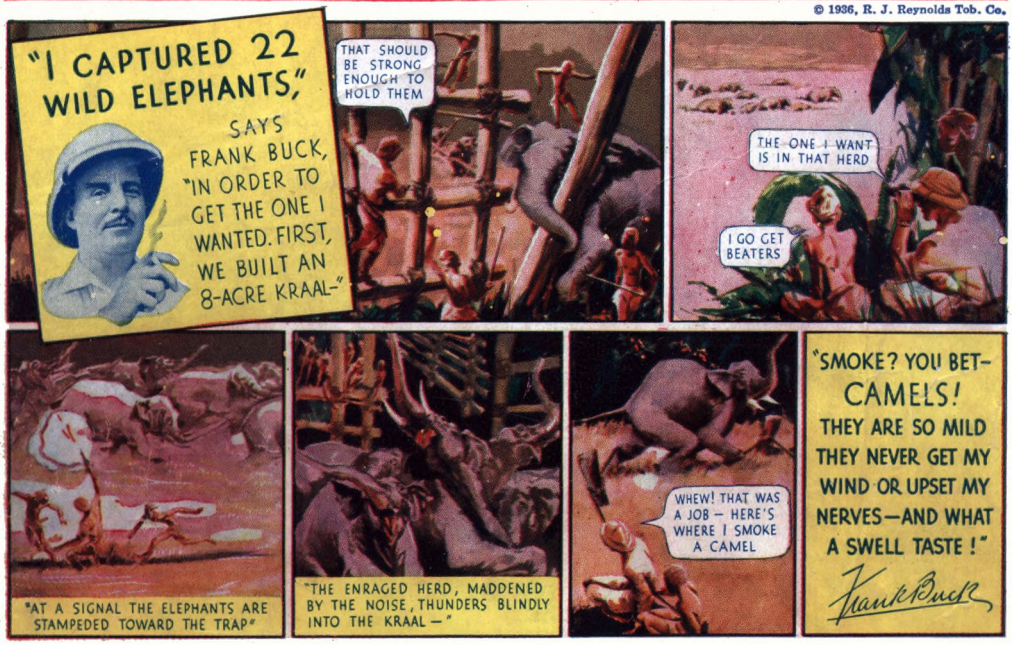

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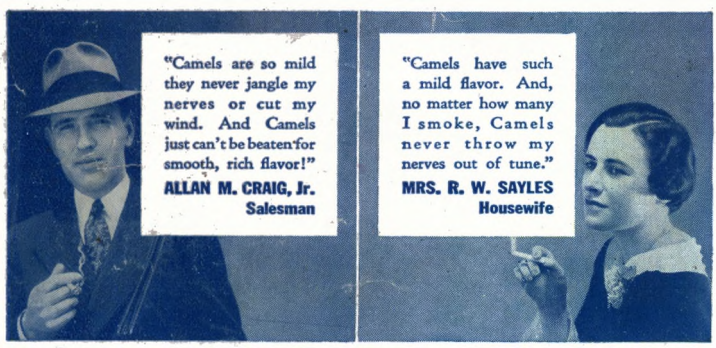

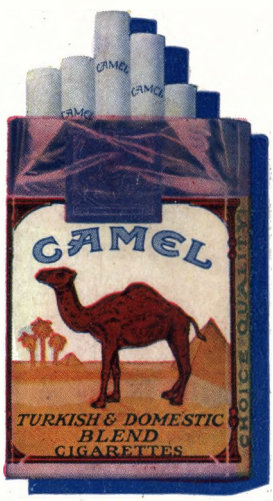

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