FEB.

DELL MAGAZINE

35¢

Zane Grey's WESTERN

TWO COMPLETE NOVELS

Comanche John in

LAND OF THE I-DE-HO!

DAN CUSHMAN

TROUBLE ON BIG CAT

GLENN CORBIN

WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER • GEORGE C. APPELL • T. T. FLYNN

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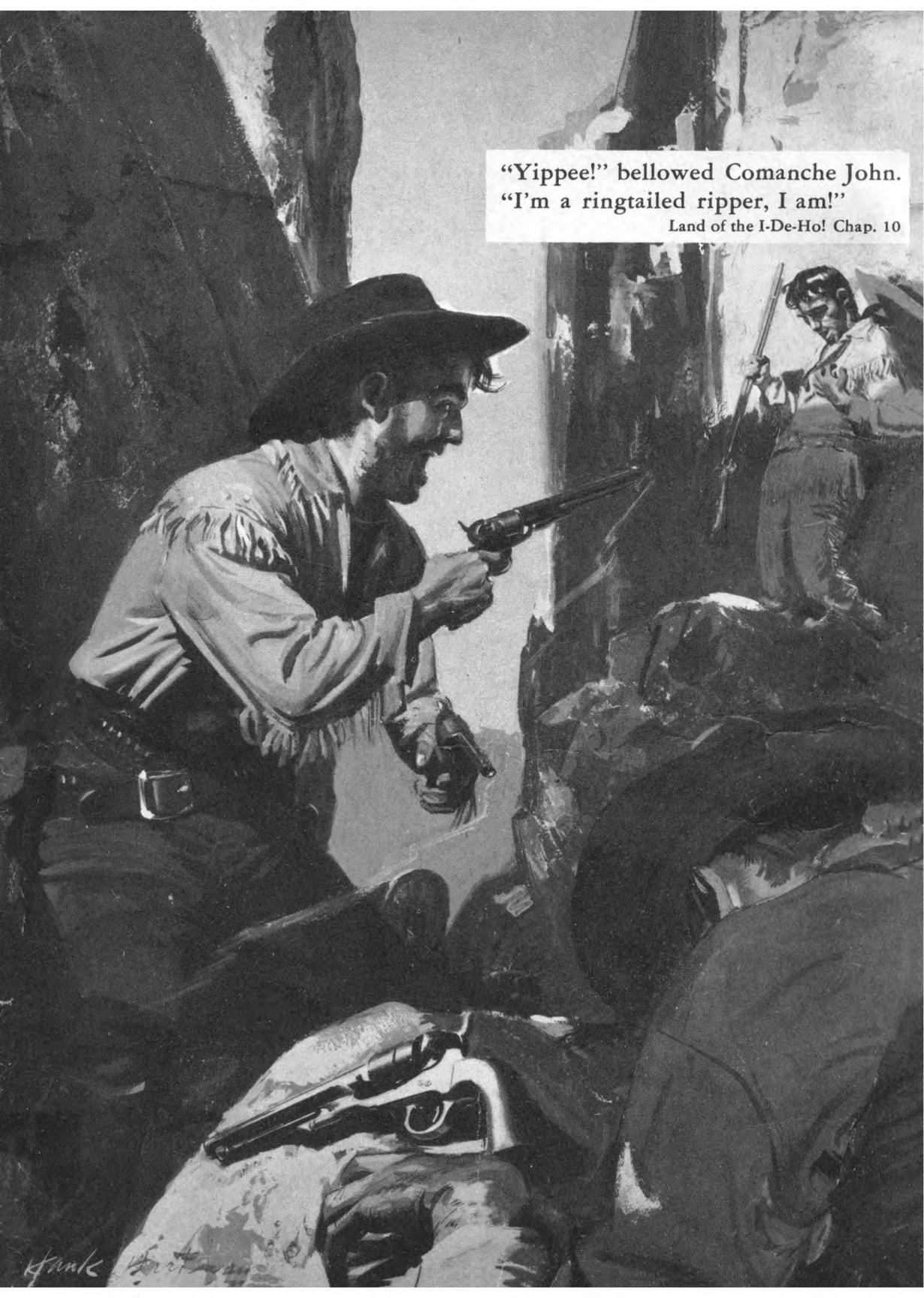
"Yippee!" bellowed Comanche John.
"I'm a ringtailed ripper, I am!"
Land of the I-De-Ho! Chap. 10

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THIS MONTH'S COMPLETE NOVEL: *LAND OF THE I-DE-HO!* by Dan Cushman

HANG ONTO YOUR HATS *and gird up your loins for some .45-caliber fun! That brash, Scripture-spouting rogue, Comanche John, is here again, still fast on the grab and twice as accurate. John has promised his old friend the Parson that he'll meet a wagon train and guide it over the Bitterroots. John meets the train, only to find that Dave Royal, who looks misleadingly like an aristocrat, has already been hired in his place. Royal, who has his own plans for the train, tries to get John to vamoose by buying him off. In rapid succession our frontier Falstaff is 'bushed and then tolled into a low-down murder trap. Trouble piles on trouble as the Old Comanche resists the wiles of a pesky widow who dotes on her men most when they're laid out in their caskets, larns a varmint how to draw his guns proper, tackles a gang of back-country rascals honing to loot the train, and protects the pilgrims from a combined attack by Indians and scoundrelly palefaces. It's a man-size job to get that train safe over the mountains, even for Comanche John—but the old hell-raiser vows he'll do just that, even if it means starting a fresh graveyard on every sidehill!*

A-bristle with gunflame and lusty humor, "Land of the I-de-ho!" is a laugh-loaded adventure of that weary pilgrim on the rocky trail of life—Comanche John, "buffeted by fate and chased by the minions of the unrighteous."

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A NEW COMANCHE JOHN NOVEL

Land of the I-de-ho!

By DAN CUSHMAN

CHAPTER ONE

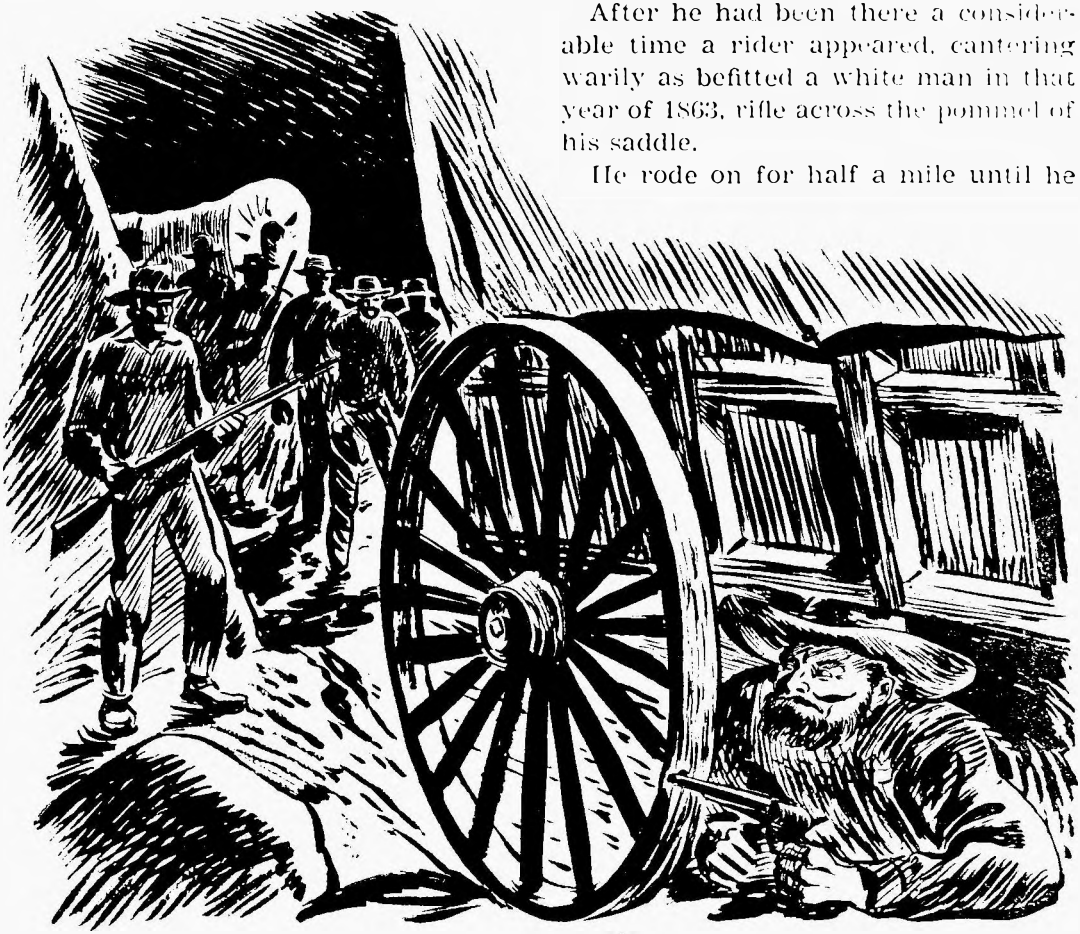
A Weary Pilgrim

THERE WAS A BITE of winter in the air, making the black-whiskered man shiver and draw his buckskin jacket more snugly around his shoulders. He pulled his slouch hat down, too, and he scrooched a trifle over the neck of his gunpowder roan pony, all without taking his eyes off the mountain valley below.

It lay lifeless, not even a deer browsing, the spruce timber green-purple-black, the brush tinted ruddy from frost, and the river, the Lemhi, like a winding strip of metal.

After he had been there a considerable time a rider appeared, cantering warily as befitted a white man in that year of 1863, rifle across the pommel of his saddle.

He rode on for half a mile until he



had a long view of the valley ahead, then he climbed his horse to a small promontory and signaled with high sweeps of his hat. Soon afterward the black-whiskered man heard the distant shouts and rattles of a wagon train: he grunted his satisfaction and spat a long stream of tobacco juice.

"Why, thar they be," he said. "Damned if they didn't make it nigh on schedule."

He took time now to scratch all through his black whiskers. His age could have been anywhere from thirty-five to forty-five. His skin was browned the hue of saddle leather. He was shorter than average, and somewhat broader, a breadth accentuated by his long-stirruped manner of sitting a horse. His hat was a black slouch sombrero, his jacket was squaw-made with here and there some beadwork, his trousers were gray homespun, he wore jackboots pulled up to protect his knees from the brush that grew thickly in those Idaho mountains. Around his waist on crossed belts was a brace of Colts, Navy model, cap and ball, caliber .36.

He was in no hurry. He watched the wagon train come lurching into sight, one and two outfits at a time and roll into a circle. The first wagoners immediately started a fire, but stragglers kept coming in for half an hour, and now early darkness was settling.

The whiskered man counted nine covered wagons and 17 supply wagons, most of the latter hitched two in tandem, and there were a couple of carts. The draft stock was all horse and mule, which was a fool chance to take with Bannocks and Palouse on the prowl now that that blasted Abe Lincoln had pulled all the federal troops home trying to lick the Confederacy. Oxen, that's what emigrants should drive, because no Injun would bother much to get an ox. The cattle, mongrel-looking milk stock, were being herded by a kid on horseback.

They were camped now and all seemed safe enough. No vigilante sign. He nudged the gunpowder pony and rode down, still watchful, still wary. On the breeze came an odor of cooking that made his stomach go bottomless from hunger. And over the talk, and the whack of axes, and the clatter of pans, came a voice and a banjo. It was a very clear, flexible tenor voice, and the words made the black-whiskered man sit up, and open his eyes with delight, for he was Comanche John, and the song was about himself.

"Oh, gather round ye teamster men,
And listen to my tale
Of the worst side-windin' varmint
That rides the outlaw trail;
He wears the name Comanche John
And he comes from old Missou,
Where many a Concord coach he stopped
And many a gun he drew."

Then a man bellowed in a rough, nasal voice, "Rusty, stop singing about that road-agent varmint or, by grab, you'll get fed hide, horns, and taller for supper."

The banjo stopped, and another man said, "Aw, let him sing, Lafe. I think I'd of gone crazy already if it hadn't been for his singin' and banjoin'."

"Well, let him sing and banjo something besides that road-agent doggerel. He ain't sung another thing since he learnt it offen' the freighters the other side of Fort Hall."

"A very beautiful piece," said Comanche John, riding into the firelight.

"Have ye ever heered the verse that goes:

"Comanche rode to Yallerjack
In the year of 'sixty-two,
With Three-Gun-Bob and Dillon
And a man named Henry Drew;
They robbed the stage, they robbed the bank,
They robbed the Western mail;
And many a cheek did blanch to hear
Their names spoke on the trail."

"I never heard that one!" cried a good-looking, red-haired lad of nineteen coming eagerly, chording his banjo. "If you—"

"Git to work!" shouted Lafe. He came up, a good-natured-looking man, short and powerful, with hair and whiskers in a tangle, grayish from wagon dust. "Ahoy, stranger, you look like you'd traveled a piece. You come from the upper Yallerstone? You come from the gold fields?"

The black-whiskered man sat his horse between two of the wagons, at the edge of the firelight. "I come from a heap o' places far and near, a weary pilgrim." He sniffed the odor of biscuits baked in Dutch ovens buried in the flames. "Share and share alike, that's my motto."

"Well, you're welcome to light."

Men were coming as the word traveled swiftly that a stranger from the gold fields of Montana country was in camp. He watched them, slouched to one side, a posture that brought the butt of his right-hand Navy Colt away from his hip; he chawed sleepily; he yawned, but his eyes were ever narrow and alert.

He called, "Be they one amongst ye by the handle of the Reverend Jeremiah Parker?"

A big, red-whiskered man bellowed, "The Parson?" and came up with a heavy-booted, tired man's limp. "Say, are you the guide that was to meet us at Fort Hall?"

"Now, I might be, but I didn't promise to meet ye at Fort Hall. The Parson said Fort Hall or the Lemhi, and this be the Lemhi."

"Well," the big man said, rubbing his chin, "you're welcome to light and have grub, but I guess we got over needing a guide."

Comanche John said mildly, "I rode five-six sleeps across some mighty rough country to meet this train and guide it to the Bitterroot, and whilst I'm in favor of an outfit being able to change its mind, on t'other hand I don't like it to be quite that free with my time." He spat and added, "And my horse don't, neither."

Lafe said to the red-whiskered one, "Listen, Stocker, that was never put to a vote."

Stocker, rearing his shoulders up in a bull-moose posture, shouted, "Dammit, no matter what he says he was to meet us at Fort Hall! He's late and we don't need him."

"Well—let's take it up later with Wood."

"We don't *need* to take it up with Wood."

Comanche John dismounted painfully; he limped around getting the stiffness out of his joints. "I ain't the man I used to be," he muttered; "I ain't for a fact. I'm going to find me a squaw and settle down."

They had sent for the Reverend Jeremiah Parker. The Reverend came at a half-lope, a spare old man with wispy gray hair that fell over his shoulders, a shaved face, and a neck like a plucked rooster's. Behind him was a kid of fif-

teen trying to get him to put on a black greatcoat.

"John!" cried the Reverend Parker, stopping and stretching his arms half toward the black-whiskered man and half toward the heavens. "*John!* I told 'em you'd come. I prayed, too. And all the while I could feel the power of those prayers like a rope dragging you across those mountains."

"If ye don't mind," said John, "I'd just as lief you didn't mention that word *rope* in my presence."

The Parson came closer, staring at him with his protruding, Old Testament eyes. "John, you ain't tooken to your old ways!"

"I'm innocent as a babe unborn, and might' nigh as bankrupt. I given up the ways of sin and its wages, too. May I be struck with lightning if I had my hand in a single robbery except for maybe one coach, and that because it had Union money on it, and no sin for me, Parson, because it was an act of war, me being a Confederate."

"Well—" said the Parson and decided to let it pass. "What name you going by?"

"Smith. Sometimes I call myself Jones, and sometimes Brown, but generally just plain Smith. It's not so unusual, attracts less attention."

"Hush!" said the Parson. "Here comes trouble."

A very handsome, well-built man of about thirty was just walking up in the strong light of the fire. He was not an ordinary wagoner. There was something of the aristocrat in his bearing. He was dressed in antelope-skin breeches and shirt, and a very wide beaver hat. The garb was ordinary enough on the frontier, but his air and body gave it quality. Around his waist, buckled high, was a new Army .44 and a patent powder, ball, and cap dispenser. His eyes were on John. He nodded. There was a cold courtesy in his smile.

"This be John Smith," said the Parson.

"Royal," the man said, and the name fit him. "I'm Dave Royal. I'm guiding the wagon train. I'm sorry if there was some misunderstanding."

"I doubt they's been one."

The smile left Royal's lips, but he came on to shake John's hand anyway. "You were to meet us at Fort Hall," he said. "You weren't there."

As if to drive this home, Royal came down hard on John's hand, showing his strength—and he was very strong. Caught unaware, it seemed to John that the bones in his hand were being ground to splinters, but he took the pain with no change of expression.

"You're a mighty strong man, Mr. Royal. Might-ee strong. And now if ye will let me have my hand back—"

"*Right* then about Fort Hall? *Right?*" Showing his teeth, he came down a trifle harder when he said *right*, and a trifle harder still when he said it again.

Comanche John had shifted his weight slightly. He thrust his left shoulder low and forward, he turned, stepped with his left foot behind Royal's right knee, and placed his foot on the man's left toe.

Royal had a flash of what he intended and tried to drop the hand and step clear, but he was tripped up. He found himself suddenly propelled forward. His feet were off the ground, his abdomen borne by the fulcrum of John's left shoulder, and he was deposited in a sprawled position, on his back, on the ground.

He lay for half a second in shock. His hat rolled off. His hair was knocked over his eyes. He recovered and twisted

over then, with a quickness surprising for one of his size, and his right hand went for the .44 Army Colt, but Comanche John, with a casual, hitching movement, had already unholstered his left-hand Navy, and had it aimed.

Royal froze. His mouth was slightly open. He did not breathe. The gun muzzle held him hypnotized. It was so quiet for the space of three or four seconds that one could hear the snap of logs in the big cookfire.

"Now that trick," said John, "I learnt off'n the Comanches, whose specialty is wrestling. And if ye ever try to strong-hand me again I'll show you a trick I learnt from Wild Bill Graves, whose specialty was shooting men right betwixt the eyes."

Royal took his hand away from his gun. Still staring at the Navy, making every move slowly, like one who has awakened with a rattlesnake coiled by his bed and fears to startle it, he got his hands behind him and climbed to his feet.

"Thar," said John. "That's the ticket. 'The meek shall inherit the earth.' I'm a man of religious leanings myself. Yea, I am a stranger amongst ye with my back turned on the black gulch of sin, and that's straight from the psalms of David, it is for a fact." And he holstered his Navy.

Royal had recovered his composure and his fury. He was hollow-eyed and hollow-cheeked from fury. The muscles stood out at the sides of his jaw and the veins on his forehead. He had a hard time getting words to come through his taut lips:

"Get out! Get out of this camp!"

John chawed, and spat, and moved back just a trifle farther into the shadows. He was wary for someone behind him. He waited.

Royal looked around at the stunned wagoners, roughly dressed men, farming men, men uprooted by war and poverty, and he waited for them to do his bidding.

"Tell him to get out! Are you going to let him walk into this camp and threaten to kill? Tell him to go or by the gods—"

"*If you ask me, you had it coming!*"

It was the raw voice of a woman. She was a gangling tall woman, her height accentuated by a high-waisted calico dress that dragged and caught in grass and twigs as she walked. On her head was a long poke bonnet. Strapped around her waist was a double-barreled shot pistol, once a flintlock and now converted to percussion, a massive blunderbuss that weighed at least five pounds.

She stopped. She looked at Royal, and at the red-whiskered man, and all around at the wagoners, and she gave an especially long look at four rough-appearing armed men who had come running over from their somewhat removed camp at the sound of trouble.

"Yes, you had it coming, Royal! Ever and a day showing off how strong you are, making like to bust the bones in a man's hand. You did it to Rusty once, fixed him so he couldn't play his poor little banjo for two days, but finally you run into your match!"

Then she turned her attention to John. "Praise be to glory, did I hear you ejaculate that you were a religious man?"

"I hit the sawdust trail," said John piously, with his thumbs hooked in his gun belts. "I turned my back on Rocky Bar, which is worse'n Sodom, and on Bannack City, which is nigh as bad as Gomorrah. I'm a pilgrim on the rocky trail o' life. I been buffeted by fate, and

chased by the minions of the unrighteous."

"Glory Amen!" she cried, lifting her arms in thanksgiving.

A trifle sourly, the red-whiskered Stocker said, "I hate to bring this up, Betsy, but he *does* seem to be a trifle weighted down with Sam Colt metal for a sky pilot."

"And why wouldn't he be, the company he has to keep? Tell me this, stranger, do ye believe in baptism by total immersion, or are you just a hair dipper?"

"I be a Methodist till I die!"

"Well," said Betsy with a slight diminution of enthusiasm, "I guess that'll have to do."

A small, middle-aged man had that moment ridden up and dismounted, and the crowd opened for him. He walked up thin and beat-out from the trail, but still carrying himself with vigor.

Betsy said, "Thar's Wood! Now we got somebody with *sense*."

"What's the excitement?" Wood asked.

It was evident that this man rather than Royal was their leader. Betsy started to answer, but he shook his head and indicated that he wanted to hear from Stocker.

"Why, this is the Parson's guide. Just showed up. Rode in out of the night. Two weeks late."

"He made no agreement to meet us in Fort Hall, if that's what you mean," Wood said in a tired voice. "I've tried to tell you that. The Parson *asked* him to meet us there, otherwise here on the Lemhi. Well, here he is. This is the Lemhi."

Stocker, scratching around at his tangled red hair, muttered, "Damn it, I say he should o' been in Fort Hall. Gettin' his money damn easy, showing *here* instead of Fort Hall."

Royal cried, "Send him on his way. I'm guiding the train. I have an agreement!"

Wood said, "Don't talk to me that way. I've told you before I'm not going to take any bullyragging."

A girl, a very pretty, dark-haired girl of seventeen or eighteen, had followed Wood into the light. A similarity in their manners revealed them to be father and daughter.

"Dave!" she said, staring at Royal in surprise. "What's the matter with you?"

"Sorry." He got control of himself. There were fragments of grass and twigs on his beaver hat and on his soft-rubbed antelope-skin shirt. He brushed himself off and fingered his wavy hair back into place. "I was just surprised to see your dad take the attitude he did. You know very well the agreement we had when I turned north with you at Bridger."

The Parson started in on him, magpie-voiced, long-armed, and wild-haired, only to be checked by Wood.

"Never mind, Parson. Save it for Sunday. Right now we're all tired and hungry. We'll have a full meeting on it after supper. Anger never settled anything. And anger isn't *going* to settle anything, not here, not while I'm captain. Not ever!"

Chapter Two

Renegades in the Train

COMANCHE JOHN, with his back propped against a wagon tongue, ate venison and dumplings, using his bowie knife, and Big Betsy Cobb kept filling his plate until he was forced to protest.

"Enough. By grab, enough! Woman, you'll spile me for heaven giving me food like that." Then he asked her, "Do you reckon Royal is aiming to fetch me some trouble guiding this wagon train over the Bitterroots?"

"I'll lay him low with a doubletree," muttered Big Betsy from inside her wagon. "By the way, brother John, be you a married man?"

"No-o," said John.

"I buried my husband." Betsy blew her nose. "On the Platte, t'other side of Fort Laramie. Died of the horse croup. It was a great shock to me. A dreadful shock." Then she brightened. "But the Reverend preached a beautiful sermon. All about the Land where we ne'r say good-by. A wonderful man, my Mr. Cobb, though he *did* take a little drop of likker now and again."

She looked down on him. "Brother John, I *do* hope you're not a drinking man."

Her unusual interest made John uncomfortable, so he got up to talk with the Parson.

"Danged widda woman! Got her cap perched for me. By grab, I'm going to be hard to catch. When I settle down it's a Blackfeet gal for me."

"Don't find squaws turning out her brand of stew," said the Parson.

"True, but ye don't find a squaw that takes such a whopping big delight out o' burying her husband, neither." He got his cheek loaded with blackjack natural twist and stood looking at the group of men gathered near big Dave Royal. "*They* ain't farmers."

"Injun fighters, stringing along for the lift."

John recognized the type, frontier renegades, too lazy for work and not nervy enough for banditry.

"Who be the long, tall, limber one with the chawed-off whiskers?"

"Calls himself Vogel."

John remembered then. Ed Vogel, Placerville. He had shot a man in the back there. A gambler named Sagrue. Sagrue had just stepped down from the platform by the High Riffle, and there was Vogel with his Navy in the shadows. They'd have hanged him that night, but he took to the timber until the affair blew over. Later on, John had heard, he joined the Bobtail Spruce gang, and then turned them over to the vigilantes for a measly eighteen ounces of gold.

All that had been years ago, back toward '49, and he rather thought Vogel would be dead by this time, but he wasn't. He was alive, dirty and lousy as ever.

"Who's the others?"

"Short one's Little Tom. He's not so bad. Laughs and jokes all the time, but I'd guess he was on the run from *something*. Black one's Sanchez, he's Mex; then the big fellow with the ox-yoke mustache is Moose Petley, used to be a whisky trader among the Piutes; and that sort of fat one is Belly River Bob, he's drunk all the time."

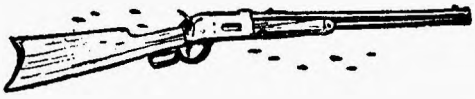
"They cooking up something for me, Parson, and I don't like it."

"Forget 'em. Joe Wood will keep these pilgrims in line. They complain,

but they stick by him just the same. He swung this deal, you know. Bought the White Pine land from the old Western Fur Company at bankruptcy court in St. Louis, bought 'er for a song, the finest land in all the Nor'west. Uncommonly smart man, Joe Wood. They'll meet, and they'll jaw, but they'll do what he says. And just between us, he's a mite suspicious of that Royal."

"How about his daughter?"

"Lela? Poor little dove! I tell you, John, it makes me choke up from sorrow thinking about her, trying to choose between Royal and that no-account banjo player, Rusty McCabe. She's seventeen, you know, and nigh onto being an old maid."



WITH SUPPER FINISHED, Joe Wood called the meeting as he had promised, and although Ambrose Stocker had his say, and a chinless, tall man named Wally Snite arose in opposition to taking John as guide, there was no serious threat to Wood's leadership. In conclusion Wood said:

"I don't expect any division of opinion about the route to the Bitterroot, anyhow. Royal will have his say. We all will have our say. And if there's any doubt we'll vote on it."

That apparently satisfied everyone with the exception of Snite, who said nothing, and Royal, who shrugged and laughed it off. Later John saw Royal by the let-down steps of Wood's Conestoga wagon, talking to Lela, who sat with her knees drawn together, her arms wrapped around them, leaning forward, listening very intently.

"Varmint!" he muttered. But you couldn't exactly blame her. He *was* the handsome one!

He ambled on among the wagons toward a little cutbank among the spruce where Moose Petley, Sanchez, and Belly River Bob had built a fire and stretched some canvas against the wind that blew down cold from the mountain passes. No sign of Vogel.

Moose Petley and Belly River Bob were engaged in an argument, their voices raised, cursing each other. Their argument concerned the shape of the world, with Petley maintaining it was round and Bob that it was flat.

John said, walking into the light of the wind-whipped fire, "You're both wrong. If ye want to know what the world is, it's square."

"Well, that's the damnedest-fool thing I ever *did* hear," said Moose Petley, giving him an ugly stare and looking to be sure where his Navy was.

John said, "In the Old Testament it says so. Thar it is in black and white. 'They come from the four corners of the world.' And who be you, or me, or any of us, to argue with Scripture?"

Moose shouted, "I don't care if the Scripture says it or if the gov'ment says it, the world's round. There was a fellow sailed around it."

"Who was he?" asked Belly River Bob.

"I forget his name. He's dead now."

"You're damned right he's dead because if he sailed out there too far he'd fall over the edge and that'd pretty well be the end of *him*."

"Well, how about those fellows, Chiny traders, sail from San Francisco to Canton, and around Good Hope to London, and then over to Noo Yawk, and maybe around the Horn to Californy again? How do you figure that?"

Bob said, spitting and wiping his chin, "I got that figured out, too. Only

one answer to it. The world *is* round in a way, but not round like a ball, but round like a saucer. It *has* to be as anybody with common sense could see, because otherwise the oceans would all run out over the edge and it'd be dry land, dry as a bone. So these fellows that sail to Chiny just go out and get turned around somewhere."

They argued some more without Belly River Bob giving an inch in his contention until Petley in a rage drew his bowie and lunged forward with its needle-sharp point against Bob's stomach.

"Shut up, damn you!" he bellowed. "Shut up or I'll whack your liver out. If they's one thing I cain't stand it's an igorant man."

And Bob, believing him, fell silent.

"Well, stranger," Moose Petley said to John, sitting back crosslegged to pare his nails with the bowie, "it ain't every day you find a man quitting the gold fields to guide an ornery wagon train like this; but I guess everybody to his own tastes."

"I've seen you someplace," Bob said, "but I can't recollect."

"I´been here and I been yonder," John said. "And as for me guiding this ornery wagon train, I'll just return the amazement, because it seems a bit strange you boys would pass up the gold-camp turnoff yourselves. Don't tell me you're farmers. You ain't the type. I hazard a guess that the things you boys have planted along the way won't sprout till judgment."

"Say, that's purty good!" said Belly River Bob, slapping his filthy pantleg.

The Mexican, Sanchez, a very stocky man with a clean-shaved, oily-looking face now spoke. "Señor, you are very sharp at guessing professions. Could you guess mine? I am a barber. If you at any time decide you need a shave—"

"You ain't going to get around *my* throat with no razor."

"Mine neither," muttered Belly River Bob.

John had been stalling, watching for Vogel, and now he saw him, a long-armed, long-legged, double-jointed man, cutting over from Snite's wagon. He was dressed in homespuns, on his head was a hat so wide and floppy he had to fasten the brim to the crown to keep it from falling across his face, on his feet were moccasins and his toes turned in after the manner of an Indian's. He carried two guns with the holsters fastened to his legs, their ends forward so the gun butts stuck back threatening with each step to fall to the ground, but they never did.

"Well, good night to ye," said John to those at the fire, and sauntered over, meeting Vogel by apparent accident. "Hello, Vogel."

Vogel drew up. His eyes were shifty, his body became tense. "You know me?"

"Yes, and you know me, I reckon."

Vogel laughed then, showing a set of tobacco-browned teeth that looked black in the half-dark. "So that's it, you were afeared I'd talk."

"Not afeared. Just wanted to tell ye that if one of these mornings somebody called me 'Comanche John' I'd walk right over and shoot you on general principles."

"You don't need to worry about me." Vogel was tensely serious, staring John in the eyes. "I'll not turn informer on my own kind."

"How about the Bobtail Spruce gang?"

"That's a dirty lie. When the Californy stranglers wasn't clever enough to get their ropes on me they spread

that story hoping one of the old gang would kill me, but it's a lie."

But John knew it was not a lie. He bade Vogel good night, and went over for his bedroll. "You're welcome to pitch camp in my wagon," said the Parson, but John refused, saying he was "a creetur of the free and open," and carried his robes down toward the river.

He knew that a man was following, so he waited. The man was Dave Royal.

"Here I be," said John.

Royal had long ago recovered from his anger. He walked up, and with perfect, though slightly cold civility, he asked, "How much have they offered you to guide them to White Pine?"

"Maybe not a cent."

Royal let a laugh jerk his shoulders. "What could be your purpose?"

John thought of saying *What could be yours?* but he decided to go easy and not start a ruckus.

He said, "That ornery old Parson—he saved my hide one time. My *neck*, I should say. Accused of highway robbery. Of course I was innocent as a babe unborn. But he saved me. Saved my neck and then he took enough interest in me to save my eternal soul from the fires of hell.

"Oh-h! what a hell that Parson did save me from! A fearful place. One night in his sermon he had 'em stretched out on those Cherokee drying-frames with hot coals all over their bare backs, and thar was screaming and gnashing of teeth, and the Parson told how the hair and flesh smelled burning that way—well, 'twas enough to give a person the jim-tods. Make him examine his conscience. How long has it been since you examined your conscience, Royal?"

"My conscience serves me." He had taken some currency from a belt inside his antelope shirt. "There's two hundred dollars here," he said. "Enough to buy you stage passage from Bannack Pass to Salt Lake. I think you'd winter much better in Salt Lake than in the deep snow at White Pine."

"What's them, greenbacks? Wuthless Union paper. Likely Robbie Lee has tooken Washington by this time. Getting mighty close, last dispatch I seen. That scroll ain't worth more'n ten cents on the dollar."

"Would you take gold?"

He looked at him, narrow-eyed. "You'd pay *gold* to git rid o' me? Why?"

Royal showed traces of a brittle temper once again. "What do you care as long as you're paid?"

John, leaning against a tree, scratched his back, and chawed, and kept his thumbs hooked in his twin gun belts. His right hand was still slightly lame from the breaking Royal had tried to give it.

"Well?" said Royal.

"Waal, no."

Royal, with a little tight tremble appearing in his voice, said, "Don't let me see you around here after breakfast tomorrow!" And turning on his heel he walked off.

John called after him, "And if ye do?" But Royal did not answer him.

Chapter Three

Gunfight Lesson

WITH days growing short and a feel of blizzard in the air, the wagon train did not wait for dawn. A bell clanged out awakening the camp while it was still dark, with stars out, and the night frost still stiffening the

grass. The stock was brought in; amid the shouts and curses of men, the wagons were hitched. The first wagons started out, gee-hawing and creaking through the cold, while the more tardy ones were still unhitched.

There was no communal fire this morning; from several wagon stovepipes smoke was coming and the occupants of these had warm breakfasts, but others ate cold dummy as they walked beside their teams, swinging their whips, fighting to get away first, to win a margin of distance against possible delay from breakdown, to get first chance at the grass. Making it over the pass or being left stranded along the way would depend on a man's stock, and a horse or mule pulled his weight or fell in the traces depending on the food he found along the way.

John found Big Betsy Cobb working like a man, backing a team of refractory bays up to the trees. She brushed off his offer to help. There was no smoke from her stovepipe, anyhow, no chance for hot breakfast there, so John walked on to help the Parson, who drove an old Conestoga held together by rawhide, pulled by a wiry four-horse team of Injun ponies.

"By grab," said John, "I wouldn't drive this outfit a mile for water. I'd pack-saddle over the hump and leave this wagon behind."

"She's rattly," said the Parson, "but she's tough. Don't let that rawhide fool you. Now you take two pieces of oak doweled and mortised together, give it a bend and what happens?—she breaks, especially in the dry climate. But rawhide *gives*. New wagon is too stiff. Give me an old one every time. This'n crawls over the rocks like a snake."

John said casually, "Royal tried to hire me to git out last night."

"He *did?* Well, I'm going to see Wood about—"

"Keep it to yourself, Parson. I won't rest easy until I learn what that rangy wolf is after."

John scouted ahead on a borrowed horse, giving the gunpowder a chance to graze. From a high pinnacle he saw the wagon train strung out along miles of valley. He rested, napped, and still he could see it, so slowly moving.

To the east and north rose the Bitterroots already white with snow, in the west were the low rounded summits of the Salmon River Range, all misty autumn purple. In another day they would reach Salmon River and follow it briefly until it made its big swing to the west, when their trail would keep going north, up, up, and up to the ridge of the world, the main range of the Rockies, before dropping down on Bitterroot River.

As yet, Royal had done nothing to back up the threat he had made. John had supper with the Parson and warmed his boots at the fire listening to the singing of young Rusty McCabe. Later he carried his robes down to the river brush as he had the night before, but he was suspicious, and stayed clear of his bed to wait and watch.

The big fire died, the camp grew silent, the moon rose. After half an hour, when John was almost ready to give it up, a man appeared, rising from the shadows no more than the length of a picket rope away. He had not seen or heard him come, he was just there, like the spirit his pappy had seen rising from the earth of a graveyard when he was a boy. Only that spirit Pappy saw was misty gray-white, but this was black.

John could not be certain who it was. The man went poking carefully

through the trees, and John waited, expecting the crash of a pistol shot when he found the bedroll, but the shot did not come, and at last he went back and found his bed untouched.

Still, for safety's sake he moved it, and next day, riding scout in advance of the wagon trail, he was careful to keep clear of ambush. He had no hint of his night visitor, and he almost dismissed the matter from his mind.

The country had broadened out, with small hills almost devoid of timber. Next day the Lemhi joined the Salmon. There was grass aplenty here, grass that blew waves in the wind, grass belly-deep to the stock. He located Joe Wood's wagon and rode down, finding Lela in the high seat, handling the lines.

"Where's your pa?" he asked, and there was something peculiar in her manner when she pointed toward a couple of men on horseback half a mile away.

The men were Joe Wood and a young, very red-faced farmer named O'Donnell.

"If I was a farmer," John said, jogging the gunpowder into talking range, "damned if I wouldn't stop right here. I been up and down this country for many a year, and this Salmon beats 'em all."

"We already own our land," Wood said with a tight set to his lips. "We'll go on to the White Pine."

"So I figured." He nodded toward the grass. "You won't find such feed when the mountains commence, and that'll be damned sudden. Mighty long haul to the top, and mighty long on t'other side. I know there's blizzard in the air, but if this was my outfit I'd camp maybe two days, gamble that way, just to put some strength in the horses."

He could tell that something was troubling Wood, so he said, "Out with it! Whatever ye got in your craw."

"I've been told you're a bandit on the jump from the vigilantes over in the Montana."

John thought about it for long, squinting off while his jaw slowly revolved on his chaw of tobacco. "Mighty big, this country. Might-ee broad, and twice as wild. This be the wild Nor'-west, and she's different than Missouri. Ye meet a man out on the trail, and ye don't ask who he was, or what he was. It's what he *is* that counts. Which bandit am I supposed to be, Whisky George, or Zip Skinner, one o' them?"

"Comanche John."

"Yip-ee!" said John. "Why, that's top riffle. Why, *I'm* the most famous road agent of 'em all. *I'm* the one they wrote the song about!"

O'Donnell in his serious manner said to Wood, "I would rather be trusting *him*."

"Never mind," said Wood.

THEY DECIDED to lay over one day for the grass, and to make wagon repairs before the tough climb began. All day John was aware of the talk being circulated against him, not only that he was Comanche John, but that he was in league with the remnants of the Snake River Gang, that the Snake River Gang might well be waiting in ambush to get their horses and supplies once they were on the Bitterroot side. By the time darkness came, the suspicion of the camp was something he could *feel*.

"They know who I be," he said to the Parson.

"O' course, you getting Rusty to sing that blame' song every chance you get."

"I doubt that was it." His eyes were on Royal's camp.

"Now don't you start any trouble," the Parson said in alarm.

"I'll guarantee this—I'll start no more trouble than I can finish."

A while later, when Big Betsy Cobb was ladling stew into an iron plate for him, she said, "Brother John, there's a story about this camp that you're that ornery, no-account, killing, robbing Comanche John, and I want ye to know I'm taking no belief in it."

"Thank-ee," said John. "Only I hear he ain't so bad. Steals from the rich to give to the poor. Confines his killin' strictly to varmints, abolitionists, and that ilk."

He ate, wiped up the last bit of gravy on a biscuit, ate that, and dropped the plate back in the plunder box. Then he cut over through river brush to the spot where he'd left his bed.

Suddenly he was aware of danger—a slight movement, a sound, a danger he seemed to *smell.* What caused him to dip his head and dive forward he never knew, but he *did*—and powderflame burst in his face, and there was a windwhip of lead passing, plucking at the crown of his black slouch hat.

He was face down in the clay dirt. He wanted to draw and shoot, but he fought back the urge. The ambusher was only a dozen steps away, across a little gully, on slightly higher ground, waiting for his slightest movement.

He was there a quarter or half a minute that seemed much longer. He could hear men talking, coming from camp, wondering what the shot was. Then he heard a crack of brush on the river side, and sensed that he was safe. Still cautious, drawing a Navy, he sat up and inspected the nick the bullet had put in his hat.

No one actually came to investigate. Someone was always shooting a grouse, or trying to stun one of those big Salmon River trout in shallow water. It was almost dark now, but across the gully, pressed in the soft clay ground, he saw the ambusher's tracks—moccasin tracks, the toed-in moccasin tracks that meant only one man—Vogel.

He first moved his bed, then his horse, picketing the gunpowder for an easy getaway if one proved necessary. He inspected the loading of both Navies and put them back in their holsters, just so. That completed, he walked through the dark to the small fire where the renegades were broiling venison ribs and baking doughgods, wrapped snail-like around sticks and propped over the coals.

Hunkered, tending the cooking, were Belly River Bob and Moose Petley. Sanchez was a shadow and a shine of oily skin in the background, and in the middle of things, swaggering around on his double-jointed legs, was Vogel.

"You're damned right I kilt him," Vogel was braying, answering some doubt on the part of his hearers. "I was thar, waiting for him, and when he came up and saw me, *well!*"

He laughed and moved around, swinging his shoulders. "Well, you know how it is, a gunman builds a rep, gets to believing the stories they tell about him, but when he comes right face up against it he turns yellow. Tried to git away along the ground, but I blasted the whole top of his head off."

"You tell Royal?" Petley asked.

"Naw. Not yet. Don't want to interfere with his lovemakin'. That redheaded sprout was playing his banjo for her this afternoon, and she *liked* it. Royal will kill that kid just like I kilt

the Comanche."

Sanchez was looking into the shadows, the firelight showing on his teeth as he grinned. "Eh, señor, do you believe in ghosts?"

"What?" said Vogel.

John said, "Why yes, here I be. What was it you were saying, about a man turning yellow when he runs face-up against it?"

For a second Vogel's face was slack from shock and sick fear. Then he recovered and tried to bluster it out. "I warn't talking about *you*. I—"

"You got mighty poor style with those guns of yours," John said. "And you be a *Californy* man, too. I hate to see a Californy man git vulgar with guns—pride, ye know, being a Californy man myself. So I decided it was up to me to give ye a lesson.

"For instance," John went on, "when ye draw, don't grip hard and jerk. Do it slow. Take your time. Make your arm sort of loose and lift that loose-going arm with your shoulder. I tell ye what, Vogel, let's both of us draw and I'll show ye what your mistake is."

"No." He wanted to get away, but he was in the open and there was no cover for twenty feet. He took a step back, shaking his head hard. "No. You'd kill me if I drew. You're trying to git me to draw and kill me. But you don't dare kill me if I don't draw. They'll hang you. They will sure if you kill me."

"That's something else I'm talking about—lack of confidence. That's pizen to a gunman. Well, if you won't draw first, I'll have to draw for ye. Watch my right hand, now. See how I do it. Up, like this!"

He drew the right-hand Navy, but the hammer caught in the bottom of his jacket, and that pulled it free of his hand. He made a grab for it and hit it instead, knocking it five or six feet away from him. He started for it, apparently off guard, and Vogel, thinking he saw his chance, jumped back spraddle-legged, and drew both guns.

They were out of the leather but John, straightening with a half-slouched pivot, had drawn his left-hand Navy. He hesitated for a fragment of time. He gave the illusion of taking his sweet time while Vogel jerked his guns fast as a coiling snake.

The Navy exploded with a pencil of flame, spinning Vogel so one of his long legs seemed to wrap around the other. Vogel lunged with both guns exploding at his own boot toes, and went down with his hat tumbling off and his face on top of the hat all under him, against the ground.

John, without losing sight of the others, blew smoke from the muzzle of the Navy, and picked up his fallen gun.

"Thar, see what I mean? Jerked, muscles too tight. I been running into a mighty poor breed of gunmen lately. Mighty poor."

Chapter Four

A Meeting

FROM the safety of the river brush, John chawed and watched the camp. They were holding a meeting by the steps of Joe Wood's wagon where everyone was attempting to be heard at once. Finally, Royal, by reason of his height and voice, took command and said there was only one course to follow with killers of John's cut, and that was hanging.

"Hang him? We got to catch him first," called a man named Kippen. "I

think he already run for it."

Royal said, "We're rid of him, then. So much the better!"

O'Donnell then tried to say that Vogel was a killer himself by his own account, and Royal started to shout him down, towering in anger as he always did when a man disagreed, but other men were heard demanding that O'Donnell be given his say, so Royal, with an effort, clamped his mouth shut and listened.

O'Donnell, halting and self-conscious now that everyone was looking at him, said, "He carried two guns. Men that carry two guns are looking for trouble."

Wally Snite said, "And how many pistols did the black-whiskered one carry?"

"Two. They were both looking for trouble. And they found it. Anyhow, it wasn't one of our bunch that was killed."

They were fairly well divided, and a crowd has to be divided mighty strongly against a man before there's hanging, so John felt safe enough to come around by the Parson's wagon for a better look-see.

"You got blood on your hands!" the Widow Cobb said, glimpsing him. "I don't know but what I'm shocked and grieved at you, Brother John. You killed a human being and you'll answer for it at Judgment."

"So'd young David have blood on his hands when he knocked down Goliath, but that didn't prevent him singing his psalms. Behold, woman, I carry my Navies to draw on the side o' righteousness and that's more'n I can say for *some* of the unregenerated varmints around here."

"Glory be, you may have some wisdom there. I don't cotton to gunfightin', but if it had to be, I'd rather it'd be that dirty, no-account, swaggering, cursing Ed Vogel than most anybody I know. Anyhow, we got to give him a Christian burial. We got to lay him out and comb him, and I wouldn't be surprised if we had to de-louse him."

"Lice don't stick with a dead man, Sister Betsy," said a small, tired-looking woman, Ambrose Stocker's wife. "That's a tried and true test for the dead. My mother's people were much afflicted with the rigid fits, and Grandmother Toston always tried 'em with a louse, and if the louse crawled off they were dead. They're the lower creeturs, and they got a seventh instinct not known to man."

"When I'm rigid," said John, "you don't need to bother with the louse, you can just bury me."

"Oh," said the Widow Cobb, "why *couldn't* this have happened *yesterday* instead of tonight? Now everybody will be wanting to roll before sunup and the Reverend will have no chance for a decent burial. Well, nothing can be done about it. I suppose. We'll just *have* to make out. It must needs be a nighttime service. They can be very nice. Very nice. I do wish we had plumes. They add *such* a touch. I wish the Reverend would come over here and tell us if he intends to preach brimstone."

"That's what I like," said John. "Brimstone."

A third woman, Mrs. O'Donnell, said, "I don't care much for brimstone at a funeral. I think you ought to go easy on the dead, especially if there's relatives present."

John said, "I guess I was closer to Vogel than anybody else, knew him since '49, both come from Pike County, ye got my consent."

They had caught sight of John, and there came Phelps and Stocker with a horse pistol and a shotgun respectively. John was now slightly apprehensive for he had no desire to be forced into trading shots with the emigrants.

"Put the guns down, boys," he said, ambling toward them, tired and dragging his jackboots. "I got no fight with you. I kilt a man, true. Kilt him in a gun duel. Self-defense. Why, they wouldn't even jail me for that in Illini."

Stocker shouted, "You went over there on the prod, looking for him. You shot him down in cold blood."

"Who said?"

"Moose Petley, Belly River Bob, all of 'em."

"Oh, *them*." He wanted to retreat but those guns were on him. *Many* of the emigrants were fingering guns. He said, "Something else, something I didn't tell ye. He tried to ambush me. Yonder, by the river, around twilight. That was the shot ye all heered. I dove and it saved me. Thought he'd kilt me, he did."

Stocker laughed and said, "Oh, hell!"

There was other talk, low talk; nobody believed him. Wood was looking around, troubled, getting ready to mount the steps. Wood was a great one for democracy; he would put it to an open vote, and that might be bad. John started looking around for retreat when Rusty McCabe, with a frightened expression, climbed to the steps.

"Hold on. I saw it." Rusty did not look at Royal. He was scared of Royal, but he was talking anyway. His face looked white as a toadstool in the light, his freckles standing out. It was cold, but there was a shine of perspiration above his eyebrows.

He went on. "We, I—I was over hunting for Lafe's gray mare, saw it all. Thought he was dead—John, I mean. Didn't know what to do. I came over here. I guess I was scared. I thought Vogel would kill me."

Royal shouted, "That's a plain lie. Look how they pal up together, him and John, him always singing that song."

Wood said in his quiet voice that carried so well, "Rusty! Was somebody with you?"

Rusty was unable to say no. He was looking across the heads of the crowd, and a second later, also frightened and sick, thirteen-year-old Veltis Stott crept into view.

"Yah. I saw it, yah." Veltis nodded his head very hard. In fright, with his long blond hair hanging over his face and his eyes shining through it, he looked idiotic. But he was telling the truth. No one could doubt he was telling the truth.

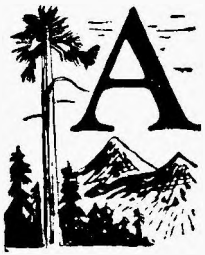
Wood said, "You have nothing to be afraid of. Was it like he said?"

"Yah."

Royal said, "You believe *them!*" He tossed his head with a bitter laugh. He took off his beaver hat and rubbed his palm across his forehead. "Look at what you're believing—*them!*" And leaving them with his contempt, he went long-striding toward his wagon.

Chapter Five

North Fork Trail



AS FOR the funeral, Big Betsy's worst fears were realized. The wagoners, already kept up late, were impatient for their beds and fewer than half of them came to the service. There was no coffin, of course, and

no funeral really *looks* like a funeral without one. And the Parson was not up to his usual form, only drawing a few morals on the fate of the unregenerated, and not even touching on the weeping and the gnashing and the seven seas of sulphurous fire. All very anticlimactic after the excitement at Wood's wagon.

"Well, maybe it's for the best," she said. "I know it might sound peculiar to some, but I *am* relieved my husband, that sainted Mr. Cobb, passed away on the Platte where we felt like we could take a decent time to bury him. It's my notion that there's nothing throws a crimp into a funeral like an overhurried preacher."

It turned colder in the night, with a few crystals of snow. In the darkness of early morning when the wagon train got into movement, the snow had stopped, but there were no stars, and the mountains were covered by gray.

The wagons pulled harder in the cold, the bumps of the rocky trail seemed to jar them worse. They camped again on the Salmon, in thicker timber, with the mountains rising steeply from the narrow valley.

Next day the main stream was left behind, and they followed the North Fork. The road became narrow. Originally it was an Indian trail, later used by fur traders who found they could cross with two-wheeled carts, and next, with wagons, by the Mormon party in '52, and by the Deer Valley settlers under Brighton three years later. Now, however, everyone seemed bound for the gold camps of Bannack and Hangtown, taking Bannack Pass far to the south, or coming over from the Snake River diggings, following the Lolo to Hell Gate, so several years might have passed since the last wagon had gone up this North Fork trail.

Windfalls continually blocked the way and had to be chopped out. There were slides and fallen boulders. In places the road was little better than a packhorse trail with the mountain on one side and the swift waters of the North Fork on the other, and wagons tilted so precariously that men had to hang to their uphill sides to weight them against capsizing.

There was no cluster of wagons at night, they camped in groups along the trail. Only a slight wind blew down the deep valley but with a feel of winter that made men turn their backs to it, and eat in the shelter of canvas, or inside the wagons.

"What the hell kind of a country you takin' us to?" Phelps said to Comanche John. "Winter come in September?"

"This is October in my calendar." John meant by his knees and hips, which became slightly lame after riding in the cold. "These mountain passes snow up early; but lower down, at White Pine where ye be headed, I'd wager on some fine weather yet."

"But how long to *get* there? Oh, *you* don't need to fret—all you have to do is tepee in with the Injuns, I suppose—but *we* got to build some sort of shelter against the cold. What route you plan to guide us to the White Pine?"

"Only *good* way there is—up to Hell Gate, then east following the freight road on the Clark's, and then south again."

"North, and east, and back again. What kind of judgment is that? Why not cut across?"

"Maybe ye can fly across like an eagle?"

"There's a cut-across road by Big Hole Pass. How about that?"

"You been talking to Royal, ain't ye? Oh, I know he's been talking the Big Hole for days, trying to say my route is the long way around. It's long, all right, but it will *git* you thar."

He could see that Phelps didn't believe him. Phelps, Stocker, and Snite were strong for Royal and it would be a fine ruckus trying to hold the train together once they reached the Big Hole turnoff.

He found the Parson in his wagon, shivering, trying to start a fire with damp wood in his little Santa Fe stove. A tallow dip, a bit of wool lying in a can of half-congealed bear grease, gave the crowded, tunnel-like interior of the wagon a flickering, ruddy glow.

"We be headed for trouble at the Big Hole turnoff," John said to the old man. "I'll bet that rangy woolly-wolf has talked half the wagons into turning east."

"Royal? He ain't convinced Wood. Nor Lela, because she'll stick with her pa. And where Lela goes, Royal will go. He's enamored o' her."

"But you sure Wood will stick fast to going by Hell Gate?"

"He'll go. Don't you worry about Wood. He's got an uncommon level head for a Pike's Peaker."

The Parson was suffering from rheumatics, so John stayed with him and helped with his work. Next day the train moved, very slowly as the trail steepened. At particularly steep pitches the tandem wagons had to be disconnected and pulled one at a time. After each pitch the grade seemed to level a little, and the worst appeared to be over, but always the next pitch would be even steeper.

They commenced to find snow in the shelter of stones and trees. The clouds that for three days had hung low hiding the mountaintops raised to reveal a new land, a land of towering peaks and ridges, a wilderness of rock already deep in snow. The mountains extended range after range, apparently forever, making more than one of the wagoners feel his own insignificance, placing a cold knot in his middle, this plunging into a cold and inhospitable land.

At a meeting that night Royal produced a map cut from a St. Louis paper some years before, and now ready to fall apart at the folds from long carrying. It showed no route at all to the Bitterroot, but two-thirds to the crest they were struggling toward was a heavy, double line pointing east marked *Big Hole Pass*. The double line ran on, straight to Deer Lodge Valley, and at the bottom was the legend: *Good Wagon Road*.

"Now *he* would be a guide for us," said John; "the editor of that St. Louis paper. Look down here—he's got his road going up the wrong side of the Salmon."

His words slightly discredited the map, but the sentiment for turning off was still well divided. Later, at the wagon, the Parson said they'd have to do something and John answered:

"I'll do *something*. I'll let 'em run their chicken crates off the brink of hell if that's their choice."

"No, John. I promised to guide 'em

to Fort Hall, and from there I promised to furnish a dependable guide the rest of the way, and that's *you*."

John got the Parson set for the night and left with black slouch hat pulled down against the wind. There was a light in Wood's wagon, and the moving shadows of many men were silhouetted against its canvas top. So they were having another powwow.

"T'hell with 'em!" he muttered.

Wagons filled the trail leaving scant room for a man to walk without climbing rocks and timber. Snow had settled in, ankle-deep in places, and he could feel it strike cold through a rent in the instep of his right boot.

"I'm in damn poor shape for winter," he muttered. "No boots, no grubstake, no fat on my horse and none on me, neither. By grab, this is my last winter of this. I'm going to find me a Blackfeet gal, snug tepee, somebody to look for my comfort. Plenty buffaler jerky, plenty camas roots, plenty dried chokecherry. Worse things in the world."

He was still muttering, getting his jacket tied against the cold, when he noticed the two saddle horses tied on the lee side of Wally Snite's wagon. One of them was the big, bald-faced sorrel that Petley liked to ride, and though it was too dark to be sure, he thought the other belonged to Little Tom.

They were gone most of the time, those two, leaving Bob and the Mexican to drive the big, almost empty Pittsburg wagon and herd the dozen head of saddle stock that formed Royal's outfit. He couldn't remember seeing them at all since the second morning on the North Fork.

He kept talking to himself because talking seemed to help keep him warm. "Scouting for Injuns. *Their* story. Makin' *friends* with Injuns, more like."

That last was a bad thought. Since the Cayuse war the Indians this side of the mountains had not been so bold. North, toward Palouse country, even the prospectors were going in parties of fifteen or more, every man with pistol and carbine! And this outfit pulled by horses and mules! Nothing an Indian will fight harder to get than a horse, unless maybe it's a gun.

He drew up, seeing a girl and man ahead of him, half concealed in the shadow of a supply wagon. They stood very still, and it took him a second to realize that the girl was Lela Wood, and the boy Rusty.

John put them at ease, saying, "Just been up tucking that danged old preacher in bed. Pining away, he is. Just too many funerals and not enough weddings. Turning morbid. Nothing *I* could do about it short of marrying that Widda Cobb, and it wouldn't be the same as marrying young folks."

"Oh!" said Lela, acting as though she wanted to stop him, but of course really she *didn't;* gals always acted that way.

He pretended to have an interest in the camp and looked all around. Then he sidled close to Rusty and said from the side of his mouth, "Go ahead and ask her. See what she says."

After a tongue-tied moment Rusty said, "Lela—" and bogged down.

"Oh, Rusty!" she said, on the verge of tears and a moment later she had her head on his shoulder.

John plodded on, saying, "I just go along, doing good deeds beside the way, gittin' business for the Parson."

He tended the gunpowder, finding a parklike area a quarter mile from camp where the grass was still untouched. He picketed the pony, and using his hat, rubbed all over his coat, thinking

how just a little extra attention paid off, keeping an animal in shape so he'd be able to make the long travel someday and save a man's life.

He put his saddle and bed under cover and went back down the mountain, digging in his boot heels and holding on rocks to keep from sliding. Soon he heard voices through the trees below and knew that the powwow had broken up. The voices were excited. He let one group of men pass, and stopped O'Donnell when he came along.

"What be it?" he asked.

"Oh, *you*, John. The two men just came back from the mountains. They were across the Big Hole pass."

"I suppose they found pavement like in St. Loo?"

"There's been a gold strike."

"Whar?"

"They called it the Proctor Diggings."

"Oh. Waal, *that's* not new. Fact is, I was to the Proctor not two month ago. Narrow gulches, five or six of 'em, in among the timber. Paystreak generally couple o' feet wide. Coarse stuff and good—gold's always good—only them that made the first rush to Proctor hogged it all. There be some claims up on the mountain, hardrock, three Chinymen making wages pounding up quartz in hand mortars. *Chinee* wages, that is, nothing to interest a human being. You mean *that's* the big news?"

O'Donnell was already calling the others, saying here was more information about the Proctor Diggings and that *this* wasn't so good. They gathered and listened—skeptically, for John's news was bad, and most of them were experiencing the glow of millionaires.

Big Ambrose Stocker came pushing through, saying, "Just why you trying to keep us to this side away from those diggings? How you greasing *your* skillet in this? You think you can cut a bigger slice of that gravel for yourself?"

John, with a cold anger settling in him, waved men from his way and took a step toward Stocker, who retreated.

"Don't you try that on me!" Stocker said with apprehension tightening his voice. "I got friends here. You won't git away with gunning me down like you did Vogel."

"Stocker, I been up and down this country for a year or three and I been much amazed at how little trouble a man gits himself into by keeping a good lead string on his tongue."

"Well, all right, but I'll leave it to Lafe and to Dilworth if I didn't say that you'd try to blow cold air on it the first chance you got."

"Why didn't *they* stay if it was so good—Petley and Little Tom?"

"They *staked* their gravel."

"What you aim on doing—just give up the White Pine and go to mining?"

More and more were gathering around, some of them women, and it was for them he intended his words about White Pine, but he soon learned that they were even more hungry for sudden wealth than their menfolk.

Mrs. Dilworth, who dressed like and did the work of a man said, "If I thought there was a chance for money I'd give up White Pine, I'd give it up in a minute."

She thrust out her hands, palms up. "Look at 'em. Calluses like a man's. No nigger ever worked harder than me, but I never heered no abolitionists beating his drum to free *me* from slavery. Look at them hands—sometimes I think I ought to have 'em half-soled like you would a pair of boots. Born in a shanty not fitten for a hawg. No floor, rain come through, married at thirteen.

"Oh, my men tried hard enough—both of 'em. Lord knows *I* tried hard enough. Slave all year for the locusts and green worms to eat up. Borry money and have the bank foreclose. Move to Kansas, scrimp and save and build three years on a house and just when you got a roof over your head, and a floor instead of the dirt, then the slavery people burn you out, *your own people.*

"Look at that shoe! Home-tanned leather soled with buffalo back. A slave in the field don't wear nothing like that. No stockings, even. And what's at White Pine but more of the same? So if we got a chance for the gold, a chance to *git* and *have* and be able to buy a few of the better things, I say *let's take that chance.* Let's head for the Proctor."

Sobered by the speech, John said, "Maybe you'd *be* better off going for the gold, I ain't saying, and that's up to you. But if ye want the gold, turn your wagons smack around and roll back to the Bannack Pass. Head up the Ruby. Thar's the country for gold, and silver too, if you're willing to drill and hammer. The point is, you're either miners or you're farmers. It's mighty hard to be both at the same time."

Wally Snite, hiding in the background, jeered, "And by morning we'll be fighting over a pass that never was, and *he'll* be gone to grab the best of the Proctor Diggings for himself."

John chose to ignore him as he would ignore a barking terrier. "Tell ye what—it's still a pull to Big Hole turnoff; why not send a couple of your men over to look at the Proctor for themselves?"

Snite and Stocker were willing to jeer at that, too, but it appealed to the better heads among them and just then Joe Wood walked up. Informing himself of the dispute, he said:

"Very well, let's have a couple of volunteers."

The only one anxious to go was Snite, and few were willing to trust him, so the decision was put off until morning.

John wanted to listen to the temper of those who had had less to say, so he hunted pitchpine along the hill for the Parson. He was returning with an armload of resinous bark when Mrs. Dilworth suddenly appeared and said, "Say, Wood has been looking all over for you."

"Whar is he?" John asked, putting the wood down.

The woman said, "At his wagon, I suppose."

There was candlelight inside, and he could see the shadow of someone moving around so he rapped. Wood said, "Come in," and he opened the endgate door and climbed through.

"What were ye wanting?" John asked.

Wood had taken his heavy wool shirt off, apparently getting ready for bed. Lela was not there.

"I didn't want anything," Wood said.

"Said ye did—Mrs. Dilworth."

"How'd that fool woman get anything like that in her head?"

John chuckled and said, "Gold fever, it makes 'em see things. Now understand, I'm not talking for the Proctor, but actually I think most folks would be happier starving to death digging for gold than getting medium-fat on a farm. With a farm you *know* ye won't get far, but a miner always has a billion dollars just ahead of his shovel. And not very damned far ahead, either."

"Yes, I suppose." Wood looked very

tired. He was not a rugged man. Mentally, perhaps, but not physically. "You've had a pretty rough time with these men. I understand. I suppose I understand better than anyone else. But once we get to the other side, once the road eases out, you'll find they're not unreasonable."

"Provided we *git* to the other side. *Won't* if they vote for the Big Hole. Listen, I've been up thar. Not from here, but from yonder, traveling this way. Anyhow I had a look at her as far as the crest. Maybe you *could* get a wagon over. But it's a cliff route, a switchback route. If there's deep snow, or there's been a rock slide—"

"*They* were across it."

"Petley and Little Tom?" In his disgust, John was tempted to spit tobacco juice on the floor.

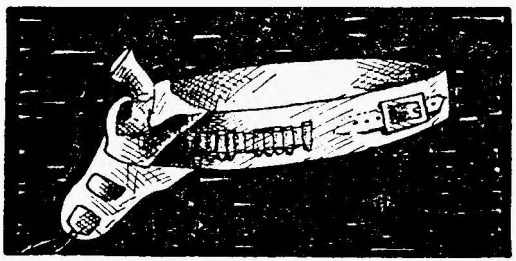
"You don't trust them?"

"Do you? They're renegades, back shooters, the worst. Why ain't they at the gold camps? I'll tell ye—because even Bannack and Hangtown can't stomach 'em. They'd starch a rope down there, you take my word for it."

Joe Wood moved around, scratching his body through his knit, woolen undershirt and looking John in the eyes. "What do you think of Royal?"

"You know that. Why in hell did you let him jine up?"

"Asked to. Knew the country. How did I know the Parson's guide would ever show up when you weren't at Fort Hall?"



"Ye know what I think Royal's got on his mind? Robbery! He'll strand ye in the snow, and you'll have to abandon and go to the low country for winter, and then he'll pack-horse your supplies down and sell in Proctor and Mucho Gulch and those other far-back camps where an ounce of gold trades for a ten-pound of flour."

"Oh, no, no! You're most definitely wrong about that."

"It war done before, yonder in Oregon, wagon train coming across the Malheur attacked by Injuns, only they *waren't* Injuns, but white men in brown ochre and feathers, with a help from some *guides* with the train. I tell ye, thar's no crime too low or devilish but a white man ain't tried it *some* time since the gold rush, and I say that's quite a record in just fourteen short years."

Wood was listening, trying to hear something over the sound of John's voice. John paused and listened, too. It was not a sound, but a tremble of the wagon. John instinctively moved into the shadows with hands dangling below the butts of his Navies. Wind rustled a bit of loose canvas against the wagonbox and the thought came to him that that was what it had been, a push of wind down the valley, making the wagon shake.

Wood, too, dismissed it from his mind and turned as if to reach something on the table, and at that instant the air was rocked by flame and explosion.

The gunshot had burst from only a few feet away, from the drawstring window at the forepart of the wagon.

John instinctively drew and spun away. He fired both pistols, aiming below the window, hoping for a lucky

shot when the man tried to escape.

Wood had been knocked across the table. He hung, bent over at the abdomen, his arms dangling. The candle did a crazy dance along the edge in its holder and fell, blinking out on the floor.

"Wood!" John said, groping for him. He was no longer on the table. He fell, striking across the side of John's right leg. He hit the floor with a dead man's loose-limp thud that shook the wagon.

Powder fumes were thick beneath the low, curved ceiling. Holding his breath, John dropped to one knee and tried for his pulse, not finding it. And now voices were coming that way, voices of men apparently on every side rushing closer.

One was Wally Snite. No one could mistake Snite's magpie voice and he was going it as never before:

"It's Wood. That dirty killer Comanche John was in there with him! They were quarreling about sending men to Proctor. I think he killed him."

"Who?"

"Wood. I think he's dead. That dirty killer—we should have hung him. I *said* we should have hung him."

There was no waiting. John left Wood's body; he did not even get to his feet; he merely slid backward, boots-first, and dropped to the ground through the endgate door.

Men were bearing down on him through darkness from up and down the road. He slid beneath the wagon. There, with one Navy drawn, he took a few seconds to estimate his chances.

On one side, the bank dropped off across rocks the size of gravestones to the swift water of the North Fork. On the other, toward the mountainside where his horse waited, was a shoulder of ground, very steep-faced and almost bare at its crest.

He moved farther under the wagon. He could hear the men very close, he could see the lower halves of their bodies as they ran up and stopped, not knowing where to go next, each fearing to be the first inside the wagon. Men were so close he could have reached from beneath the wagonbox and touched their legs. He remained crouched, his back against the underframe, cursing through his teeth.

From a distance came Royal's voice: "Anybody gone inside the wagon?"

No answer, then Dilworth: "Damn it, he might be waiting in there—"

Lela was running up around the upgrade wagons crying, "My dad, my dad—"

Poor little gal! John thought. *It won't help your sorrow, gal, but I'll git him for you. Before I'm through, I'll GIT that bushwhacker.*

Someone, braver than the rest, had entered the rear door of the wagon above him. John moved on, into the open near the front wheel. He almost rubbed shoulders with a passing man. The darkness saved him. He walked, just walked, slowly, forcing himself to go slowly.

In the uphill distance Moose Petley was shouting, "Hey, where's his horse? That's where he'll be—after his horse!"

John was away from one cluster of wagons, not yet to the next. Thirty feet farther was a trail that would take him up the mountain, but a running man suddenly loomed huge in front of him and they collided. It was Stocker, and as he staggered for balance, Stocker recognized him.

"Covered!" John said. "Drop your gun. That's it. Pistol, too. Now walk!"

At gun point he took Stocker up the mountain, through timber, to the little

open space where the gunpowder waited, ears cocked, lifting his picket string.

"Now, fare ye well," said John. "Git! And ye can brag to your children and your children's children how ye once looked into the Navy of the one and gen-u-wine Comanche John and lived to tell the tale."

Chapter Six

Captured!

COMANCHE JOHN rode through timber, following a dim deer track along the mountainside, taking his time, letting the pony pick his way, bending the pine branches away, singing in a soft monotone a new stanza that Rusty had picked up in Fort Hall:

"Thar's a forty-dozen highwaymen
'Twixt Denver and the sea,
But I sing of old Comanche John
The toughest one thar be;
He robbed the bank, he robbed the stage,
He robbed the Yuba mail,
And he left his private graveyards
All along the Bannack trail."

"By grab," he said, "that's a fine verse. A bee-utiful verse. I'd like to find the muleskinner that wrote that verse and banquet him with likker."

He built a tiny, brush lean-to, cut spruce with his bowie, and slept rolled in his robes until dawn and the cold awakened him. All day, from one remote pinnacle and another he watched the wagons move along; and he saw them camp where the rough tracks of the Big Hole Trail forked to the east.

He wondered if Royal would prevail, now that there was no one except the Parson to oppose him. Thought of the Parson troubled him, and so he did not strike out for the gold camps as he might have done; instead he shot a grouse, roasted it over a tiny fire, and ate it half-raw with a chaw of tobacco for dessert.

He slept and rode back at dawn to find the outfit still camped, wagons being repaired, stock grazing the bottoms. Later he saw Petley and Little Tom ride off toward the east, and a hunch made him follow them.

He kept them in sight for an hour; after that he trailed through the light snow. Toward evening two other horses joined them. A peculiar something about the new set of prints made him dismount for a closer inspection. These horses were unshod; that is, their hoofs were covered by rawhide stockings, heat-shrunk to such hardness that even the mountain snow and damp did not loosen them. Indian horses, Palouse or Bannock.

He trailed, and darkness slowed him. A bleak ridge of solid stone rose on one side, and the cliff walls of a gulch lay on the other, so their only possible course lay through a saddle to the east. He rode on, picking up the tracks again miles later.

He was now near the crest of the range with the Big Hole country dropping away before him, and his nostrils, sharpened by long in the autumn freshness, detected the odor of woodsmoke. It guided him to the brink of a little cirquelike valley containing a lake and meadow, an L-shaped log house, some corrals and a horse shed.

It surprised him to find such a place so deep in the wilderness until he realized that this was Desette's Rendezvous

where in the old days of the beaver trade a representative of the S. L. & Y. Company came each year to trade with the Indians crossing over from Salmon River.

Lights glowed in two brownish-amber squares—windows of the cabin covered with parchment or oiled wrapping paper.

He turned back, and at a distance of a mile, by a trickle of gulch water, he found grass for his horse, and picketed him. Then he went down, through timber, coming on the house from the corrals.

A grease-dip light was burning in a closed end of the shed, and men were talking in the Chinook jargon. He peeped through a hole in the chinking and saw five men, all of them half-breeds or Indians, crosslegged or sprawled on the earthen floor, playing a knife and stick game for gold coins. He had seen none of them before.

He went on, finding shadow, and paused at the back of the house. Inside he could hear the dull mutter of voices, but no word was audible. Wary for a sentry, he circled and walked along the front, beneath a pole awning, past one of the parchment-covered windows, to the door.

The door was closed, but it was whipsawed lumber, warped and ill-fitting, and he could see and hear. One of the men was Moose Petley; by a fireplace stood a gaunt old Indian with hair cropped like a white man; two other men, Indians or 'breeds, stood with their backs turned, and there were more, how many he did not know.

A soft whisper of footsteps told him of someone's approach from the direction of the horse shed, and forced to a quick decision, he looked around for concealment. There was none handy, but the porch roof was supported by substantial timbers, the lower braces running solidly from pillars to the house. He reached, chinned himself up and over one of them and crouched on one knee with head and back bent against the ceiling as the man came in sight and walked directly beneath him, so close his breathing was audible. He was a short, very broad man, and no Indian about him, just plain renegade. John checked *his* breathing till he went inside.

This was a fine place from which to listen and watch, provided he could make himself comfortable. He turned himself, careful for balance, braced himself on one hand and knee, and lay full length. The timber was a scant six inches wide, but it had been squared, and lying, not moving in the slightest, he was able to stay in balance. With his hat rolled up to cushion the side of his head, he listened.

They were planning an attack two days hence, three at most. But it evolved slowly, bit by bit, and each bit the subject of protracted wrangling.

HE HAD BEEN full length on the timber for hours. He was cold, his feet had gone dead, but he dared not move for fear of giving himself away to a couple of the Indians close inside the door before the last of the plan had evolved.

Then unexpectedly the meeting

broke up. It was getting daylight, and they came outside, Moose Petley and the scarfaced Indian, Little Tom and the renegade white man, and five others.

Petley and Tom disappeared toward the corrals, and minutes later he heard the sound of hoofs departing. The Indians and half-breeds had stopped directly below him and all were talking at once.

"Good!" one of the 'breeds said. "Big skookum, eh? Damn right. Plenty horse, plenty gun. Maybe plenty grub, too, sell 'em for good price in at mining town? What you think?"

The scarfaced one made a sign for him to talk lower, but John knew now that they planned to go along with Royal only so far, to attack the wagon train, yes, and when the time came, to double-cross him, for these were not ordinary Indians on a horse-raid, they were hardened renegades who long ago had learned the wealth of the white man.

He waited for them to go away, but it was morning now and they stayed outside. At last, however, only three were left and those at the far end of the porch arguing in a tongue he did not understand. It was getting brighter by the moment. He was just overhead, so close he could smell the smoky, Indian tan of their buckskin shirts when they passed beneath him to the door, and it was improbable that he would go much longer undetected. His best chance was to move now, despite the men on the porch, to escape with aid of his Navies, to gamble that his horse could outlast pursuit.

He checked his guns and tried to raise himself, swing his legs over, grab the beam and lower himself. He was unbalanced, with paralysis holding him. He experienced a long second of nightmare helplessness, muscles congealed, and he was falling—

He managed to break his fall on outflung hands. He tried to roll and draw his Navies as the men in surprise looked at him. He could not get off his elbows and knees, and of a sudden men were all around him, all shouting questions, no one realizing where he had come from.

He said the only thing he could think of, "Long riding—stiffened me. Whar's Petley? Little Tom?" He managed, with pain, to get to his feet. He stamped his feet as with a million prickles of fire life was forced back through them.

The scarfaced one—he was one-eyed with the right side of his face from cheekbone to forehead cleft from an old tomahawk wound—came up and cried, "Where you from?"

"Royal."

"I don't savvy you. Don't see you no time."

"Waal, ye see me now. Whar's Petley?"

"He go, long time."

"Then I'll just have to bring ye the word myself. It's off. The raid is off. Crawford and his volunteers—you savvy Crawford?" He knew by their expressions that indeed they *savvied* Crawford, whose group of volunteers had lately cleared the Bannocks and Cheyennes from the South Pass. "Many men. Mountain guns. Cannon, that is. German repeaters."

The scarface said, "Crawford south, many sleeps."

"All right. I'll not argue with ye. It's your grave if ye want to fill it. Done my part. Brought ye the warning like Royal asked. So now I'll just be gittin' back."

"No," said the scarface. "You stop."

John saw an Indian reaching for his Navies and saying, "No ye don't!" started to spin away, but he ran his forehead against something cold and hard. He stiffened. He turned his head slowly and looked down the barrel of a Yerger rifle.

The scarface with a crafty look in his one eye said, "You wait, maybe you sneak up, listen? Maybe not. We send, find out."

THEY HELD HIM PRISONER in a room with thick log walls that had served as the powder lockup in fur-trade days. It had no window, but he was able to judge the passage of day by the glints of light through the shake roof high above.

The door was held by a heavy bar on the outside. The pole flooring was loose, merely flattened on two sides and laid into place, but the room had its own rock foundation as a precaution against a fire creeping beneath to the powder kegs. The walls had been hewn smooth, the logs set flush one against the other, leaving no place for a finger or toehold, and the heavy pole members of the roof would be immovable anyway. It was an excellent prison. He sat with his back against a wall, chawed, and waited.

He could hear the Indians arguing horses. He learned by listening that the scarfaced one was Kinepah. John had heard a great deal about Kinepah. Kinepah was one of the Palouse chiefs in on the Steptoe massacre of '58; he had escaped later from the Indian defeat at Four Lakes and had been on the loose ever since.

If that was Kinepah, then he guessed that the younger Palouse was Deerskin Shirt, and that the oldest man, the taciturn fullblood with the roached hair, was Three Horse, who had been in trouble with white men since the Cayuse War back in '48, which was a year before John first came west.

"What a fine crew Royal *has* tied himself up to," he muttered, talking to keep himself company. "Why, these renegades will use him, and they'll end by riding off with his hair and his beaver hat!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

One Last Wish

IN A brief service, as a wind chilled the emigrants, the Parson officiated at the burial of Joe Wood. The wagons then pulled on, leaving his grave as they had left others on the long haul from Kansas. Courteous and sympathetic, Royal came to Lela holding his hat across his breast and asked with humble earnestness for the privilege of driving her wagon, and she consented.

She had not seen Rusty since the night before. At first she was bitter, then apprehensive, but later, as Royal drove the wagon and she had a chance to talk to the others, she heard hints of "proof" that he had ridden off with Comanche John. When Mrs. Stocker said it was a fact that they had been seen together, she believed it.

That night, an hour before sundown, the lead wagons came to a halt at a fork in the road where Belly River Bob had already built a fire and was warming himself.

"There she is, the road to the Big Hole," he said, pointing at the crooked, narrow trail that branched off to follow

a small creek to their right. "Road to the gold camp. If you're not satisfied with Proctor gold, why, it'll still save you ten days to White Pine."

They held a meeting with Stocker in charge and voted three to one for Big Hole. The Parson, his warning unheeded, retired to his wagon to brood, and there Big Betsy Cobb found him with a second bit of news—the wagon train had voted to lay over the next day for grass and repairs, and Royal had announced that Lela had consented to become his wife. The Parson, low from misery, was able only to hold his head and speak of fate.

It warmed very slightly next day. In the morning everyone worked putting wagons and gear in shape. In the afternoon, Mrs. Shallerbach and Mrs. Stocker took charge of the wedding and moved everything out of the Stocker wagon save a stand which they decorated with their best fancywork, making an altar. While this was going on, Big Betsy appeared again at the Parson's wagon.

She stood with hands on hips and said, "You ain't takin' a part in this wedding, are you?"

The Parson said in resignation, "It ain't of my choosing."

"He kilt Joe Wood. Her own father."

"Of that we got no proof."

"Then you mean you'll *marry* 'em, Parson?"

"Alas, it's out of my hands. Who am I to struggle ag'in' fate?"

"You make me sick!" she said and stomped through the door.

The Parson sat with his head in his hands while the fire in his stove died and twilight settled in the wagon. A rap sounded at the endgate door and he said "Come in," without looking up.

It was Mrs. Dilworth, dressed in men's clothes as usual; she looked gaunt and shaky.

"I had my hand in something terrible," she blurted out. "I did. I'm certain of it. I had my hand in murder."

The Parson showed life. "Whose? Joe Wood's?"

"Yes. I was going to my wagon when Wally Snite, I never did trust him, I never trusted a man with pale eyes—"

"What about Snite?"

"He said Joe Wood wanted to see John, so I told him, and they kilt him. I'm sure of it. They kilt him and laid it to John. I had my hand in murder. Why am I so sure? I'll tell you—because if John wanted to kill him would he have waited till Wood sent for him?"

The Parson questioned her, but she had no proof.

"Don't you believe it?" she asked.

"Yes, I believe it, but would *anybody else* believe it? You go along and say nothing. I got to think about what to do."

The Parson did think about it, and about himself, alone in his weakness. His first object was to stop the wedding. So he took to his bed and moaned. It was half an hour before one of the Orham kids heard him and went for help. Help came in the person of Betsy Cobb, who begged him to recognize her, to rise up for just one second and *say* so before he slipped over to Beulah Land.

The Parson gasped for Lela Wood and the Orham kid sped off for her, and she came running, holding her borrowed wedding dress up away from the juniper.

"He's nigh gone," whispered Betsy Cobb, meeting her at the door. "Oh-h, I could see it coming. And I talked to him so, only two hours past. Oh-h! How can I ever forgive myself?"

"Parson!" Lela said on knees beside his bed.

"Who is it?" gasped the Parson. "I heered the voice of an angel. Be I in heaven already?"

"You aren't going to die, Parson. You aren't!"

"Oh, yes, child! But I'll be a happy corpse. I will, now that you're here to promise me one thing—"

"You're not." She looked up and saw Betsy and two other women just arrived, standing there. "Get some water heated. Heat up some stones. Blankets! And some whisky. Is there any left?"

The Parson said, "No use wasting likker on me. My earthly race is run. In My Father's house thar is many mansions, as the Good Book says, and I'll soon be trading this here ornery old prairie schooner for one of 'em."

She held his hand and whispered, "No, no!"

Ague seized him and he shook all over, almost knocking the quilts off. "One last wish. It's for you, gal!"

"Yes!"

"I had a awful premonition. Don't go through with that wedding. Don't let any captain of any wagon train marry you after I'm gone, neither. I had a vision. Balls of fire and lakes of brimstone descending on this wagon train I seen if you did. Corpses and charred remains. Promise me you'll not get married until you get to White Pine."

"I won't, Parson. I won't!"

"Ah!" sighed the Parson, and subsided with hands folded across his breast.

"Is he gone? Is he gone?" asked the Widow Cobb. "Glory to his sainted memory, is he gone? Do you reckon we ought to lay him out in his old black serge, or would you say his frock coat and gaiters? And a coffin! I say *this* time we must have a coffin."

The parson, with one eye open, whispered, "Don't rush me, Sister Cobb. Don't rush me."

The wedding was postponed. All night, with women hovering close, the parson clung to life.

Chapter Eight

"Bird's on the Wing."

AT THE moment the Parson was gasping his last request to Lela Wood, Comanche John was seated in the darkness of the old powder room, chawing and spitting, still listening to the interminable Indian argument concerning horses. Then, to busy himself, he once more groped the room with the thought of escape.

The flooring again interested him. The rock foundation of the room was a hopeless barrier, but something else occurred to him. It made him spit hard, and chuckle, and say, "Why, damme, yes!" He could move some of the poles near the door, lie flat on the ground with the poles over him, and present an empty room to the eyes of the first man who came to look for him.

He had to lie on his back, full length, and in that position it was not easy to replace the pole flooring over him, but he did it, and settled himself for a long wait. The ground was cold, but not uncomfortable. Much superior to his beam of the night before. He even dozed a little.

He awakened with a start, hearing voices at a new pitch, and realizing that the messenger had returned from seeing Dave Royal. Soon he felt the jar of approaching moccasined feet, the

scrape of the bar, sound of the door being pulled open. With his eye at a crack between the pole he saw a man with a rifle aimed, peering around the room. It was the Palouse he assumed to be Deerskin Shirt.

"Ho!" said Deerskin Shirt, staying clear of the door, swinging his double pistol around at the blackness. "Come on, see chief."

John did not move the tiniest muscle, he did not breathe, he did not even blink. After a few seconds Deerskin Shirt risked sticking his head inside. He suddenly realized that the room was empty. He looked all along the walls, above at the ceiling. He came then with long steps and stopped in the middle of the room.

The Indian's back was turned. Moving carefully, deliberately, John lifted the poles and sat up. One of the poles made a thud and Deerskin Shirt started around, but John sprang and had him by the back of the jacket with his left arm bent around his throat.

The Indian was off balance for a second, then he tried to dump John over his head, but John was ready for the maneuver. It was a silent struggle across the room; the Indian young, tough, and quick, but he was unable to break the power of the bent arm which cut his breath off.

They fell to the floor and John still held him, waiting as his struggles became futile, and then waiting awhile yet. He let go then, picked up the double-barreled pistol, a smooth-bore loaded with buckshot, checked its percussion caps, and stepped from the door.

He was in a short hallway. He still had to go through the big room, and there were men there, six of them.

He walked up very quietly; a candle stood above the fireplace; rifles leaned against the wall; rifles lay on the table; his own Navies were also on the table, still in their holsters, belts wrapped around them. The one-eyed Kinepah had his back to him, talking in the Palouse tongue, gesturing his thoughts out in the sign language and all watching him.

John did not hurry. He walked to the table and picked up the Navies, put them under his left arm, the double-pistol aimed.

Then one of them saw him and raised a yell but John froze them with the twin barrels of the pistol and moved to the door.

"Bird's on the wing," he said. "Savvy white talk? Waal, I wager ye savvy *gun* talk." He waved the pistol. "Some don't savvy white talk, and some don't savvy Injun, but the language of buckshot they understand even in Chiny."

One of the half-breeds had ducked from sight and crawling tried to come up under the table with a rifle where John met him with a blast of shot that turned him over and laid him on his back. They were all after their guns, then, but John was through the door. He turned and fired again into the mass of them. The scarface was in the lead, just bringing his rifle up, and John flung the empty pistol, its five pounds of metal catching him squarely across the nose, clubbing him to the floor.

John covered the porch in five running strides and found shadow in trees. Bullets roared around him, cut fragments of bark, pounded dirt that stung the backs of his thighs.

He slowed to a heavy trot, buckling on the Navies. His jackboots were not made for running. It was a temptation to pull them off and carry them and run in his bare feet. He kept going, crossed the little valley, and was at

last on the steep mountain slope. With lungs bursting for air he lay on the first crest resting and getting his wind.

A bullet winged close, followed by a crack of explosion, stirring pebbles a dozen feet away. He crawled from view, stood, went on. He crossed the ridge and dropped down toward the depression where his horse waited.

"You're still here, pony," he said, breathing deeply, getting the saddle on.

He could hear pursuit, the thud of hoofs. He mounted and rode up the depression, over a small flank of the mountain through timber, bending branches away, keeping them from his face. No sound of pursuit now. He had just reached for his plug of tobacco, thinking he was shut of them, when suddenly he realized they had circled and were coming in on him from two sides.

He urged the gunpowder to a gallop, recklessly downhill, across rocks, through close-growing lodgepole. Bullets chased him. He kept at a trot and walk around the upper edge of timber with the giant slide-rock of the ridge above. Ahead of him lay a black chasm, and leading upward among rock spires large as churches was a crooked little trail.

He had no choice; he followed it. He dismounted and helped the gunpowder as it steepened. The trail petered out. It had come to a blind end, to a dozen blind ends. He hid the horse among rocks and went back down, digging his bootheels from the steepness, sliding on the seat of his pants.

He saw them coming, gray shapes against dark timber, drew down with a Navy, and fired. It was a miss at long range, but close enough to send them back, and make them attempt to close in on him from the sides, and all night he kept on the move, saving his bullets, anticipating each tricky maneuver.

Dawn came, and it was very quiet. He climbed high and looked down. No movement anywhere. Still fearing ambush, he saddled and found a crooked, hidden way for half a mile where a trail led him into what the night before had looked like a chasm, actually a very deep gulch. The trail led him down and down into the shadows. After a mile of twisting and turning he reached the bottom where an icy little stream flowed.

He rode, taking his time, forced to take his time. On the high flanks of the mountains the sun was bright, but he rode through deep shadows. He looked for a cut-across route to the Big Hole trail, but now he was hemmed in on both sides by peaks. It was midday before a trail took him up from the gulch, around the mountain; he crossed smaller gulches, topped a minor divide and there, far across a deep and broad creek valley he saw the moving shapes of wagons.

The sun was very bright. It was melting the snow, giving a green tint to the grass, making the tops of the wagons look spotless, like a picture with the dark mountain timber beyond.

He went on at an easy pace and was startled to hear his name called. He reined around and saw someone riding toward him, bareback, bareheaded, guiding his pony with a rope hackamore. It took him a couple of seconds

to realize it was Rusty, and he was hurt.

He had been wounded on the head, he had bled a great deal, his hair was a solid mass of hardened blood. A purplish bruise extended down his left temple across his cheek; his eye was swollen shut. He carried his right arm in a peculiar manner close against his stomach.

"Lad, what the devil?"

"It was that night, that same night, they laid in wait."

"For you? Who laid in wait?"

"I think Belly River Bob. He come up behind me, it was so quick, and next thing I knew I was down among the rocks. I don't know. I knew he was above, waiting for me to move, so I just laid there. Finally I crawled away among the rocks. Daylight before I could walk. Dizzy. Broke my arm. I followed the wagon train, but Sanchez was rear sentry. He'd have killed me. Finally I did coax this horse, Lafe's horse."

Then he said defensively, angrily, raising his voice, "You think I'm a coward. I'm not. I'll git a gun and go back after those—"

"No, now! You think because you git *scared* you're a coward? It's what a man does spite of being scared tells whether he's a coward. Ye know, this is a bull-moose country you're growing to manhood in; it's the wild Nor'west, and that ain't exactly Ioway."

A movement far across and below caught John's restless eyes, stopping them, stopping his jaw from revolving around his tobacco. A man was climbing on foot from the creek bottom toward the road where the road made a switchback about a mile's travel ahead of the lead wagon.

The man was perfectly visible from John's position, though hidden by rock from the road, and by a turn in the creek from the wagon train. He watched longer, saw one other stir of movement below, and a single shaft of gunshine from a promontory looking down from above.

"They going to be trouble," John said. "Ye got no gun?" He considered giving him one, only the loss of one Navy might serve to unbalance him. "But with only one arm, and that the left, ye couldn't shoot much. But you come along just the same. We got a service to perform, and gun or not you might be useful."

Chapter Nine

Powder and Ball!

THE Widow Cobb drove the Parson's wagon as they started at dawn up the Big Hole trail, and by midday he had recovered and felt strong enough to get from his bed and stand braced against the jolt and bang of the wagon and look through the drawstring front aperture at her back.

She saw him and almost fell off the seat from fright. "Git back to bed, oh mercy on me, I shouldn't of left the poor creetur alone."

"Sister," said the Parson, "I feel a mite recovered."

"Oh glory, glory be! But just think of Mr. Cobb, my poor sainted husband, and how he was up one minute with talk about fixing harness, and not three hour later stiff, stark, and turning cold."

He said, complaining a little, "Aren't you pushing a trifle hard for such an old contraption as this?"

"Orders. Royal, Ambrose Stocker, I don't argue. This be the fate of us poor helpless women, just be meek, don't argue with the menfolk, git along the best we can."

High on the rocks, a mile ahead, rode a single, brief glimmer of metal. It could have been Belly River Bob riding scout, but the Parson was brought up sharp with suspicion.

"Any hint of Injun trouble?"

She looked surprised. "Why?"

"Nothing, nothing at all, but I'll hold those reins while you go and fetch O'Donnell."

The Parson had unusual faith in O'Donnell, considering him the most level-headed man in the lot, and when he came he mentioned the gunshine and suggested the advisability of scouting ahead, especially up there half a mile where the road bent out on the blank hillside.

Word quickly ran along the rear half of the wagon train, and after some shouting of questions that portion of it rolled to a halt. In a couple of minutes came big Dave Royal spurring his horse in the narrow space left between the wagons and the bank.

"Gunshine be damned!" he said. "That's our own scout. Come on and roll!"

But the Parson was out of his wagon, leaving it to block the way, and was jerking the inside front wheel back and forth.

"Now what the hell?" said Royal. "I thought you were sick."

"This wheel got to come off."

"Get up there! Get to rolling."

"No!" and the Parson faced him like a gaunt, long-necked rooster.

In fury Royal wheeled his horse trying to slam the Parson with the animal's hindquarters. When that failed, in blind fury although he knew the reaction it would have among the others, he swung a brutal, forearm blow to the side of the old man's neck.

The Parson went down, doubled over in the rocks and dirt. Betsy Cobb shouted in dismay and started to jerk her double pistol, but Royal, making another pivot with his horse, smashed it from her hand.

Taking fright, the Parson's team lunged, and Betsy had to leave her gun while dragging back on the reins. O'Donnell, unarmed, grabbed up a rock, and Royal, not pausing for an instant, drove his spurs in his horse and rode him down.

Royal came to a stop with his .44 drawn. "I said roll!" he cried in a rage-hoarse voice. "Pick those men up. Keep the wagons together. Roll!"

O'Donnell staggered to his feet, pants torn and thigh bleeding, and still groggy helped the Parson into the wagon. The Parson suddenly came around and started flopping his arms like a decapitated chicken.

"Git your guns!" he shouted. "There's something afoot. They's some reason they kilt Wood and drove off John. And Rusty, I'll wager he got it, too. Some reason they're set on the Big Hole Pass!"

Royal might have killed him, but O'Donnell had him inside, and the wagons were on the move. At that instant a gun cracked, its far-off report chased by the hand-clap sounds of echoes and as the wagons slowed and men got their ears up, a high yell came from deep in the creek bottom:

"Injun! Ya-hoo! Injun!"

It was a cry they had feared for the past five weeks. "Don't anyone shoot!" called Royal, riding down the space between wagons and rising mountain

with an arm lifted. "I'll parley. If they have us outnumbered, I'll buy 'em off. I'll get your women and kids out safe."

"You mean not even fight for it?" Lafe shouted.

Royal shouted back, "Of course, *you* don't worry, *you* haven't any women and kids."

A wagoner saw someone high on the slope and fired. Royal rode that way trying to stop him. A volley came from above and below. Shallerbach was on the ground. His wife and the big Nelson boy were dragging him to cover in the wagon. Others maneuvered their teams producing tangles with other outfits on the narrow road.

One wagon, carried by a bolting team careened along the edge of the road, jackknifed and went over with a crash, spilling supplies down the mountain. A flour barrel rolled farthest of all, leaped high, and split itself on a rock with a puff of white. A man crawled clear of the wagon while the horses kicked it to pieces. Most of the wagons had found partial cover against the bank now, and the shooting, after the first flurry, had almost stopped.

Royal rode directly into the open, his beaver hat lifted high, without drawing a shot, but Wally Snite, foolishly attempting to join him, was hit and downed by a long-range bullet. The attackers were then advancing from above and below, and the fight started in earnest.

The Parson was down on one knee, an old-time flintlock conversion in his hands, its long barrel poked through a hole in the wagon box, aiming and firing and shouting, "More powder and ball!" to the Widow Cobb.

"Gimme that gun! Go to bed where you belong."

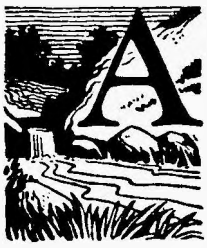
"Powder and ball! They're closing in." Then he listened. Over the firing and shouting came the faint tone of a voice he recognized. "It's him, it's him!" He hopped to his feet and did a spindly-legged war dance. "Do ye hear it? It's the Comanche! It's Comanche John! We'll tear 'em asunder now, Sister Cobb!"

"Lord help us, you mean Smith *is* Comanche John?"

"He's a ring-tailed ripper from the Rawhide Mountains. And oh! am I thankful to Leviticus I didn't convert him into laying down his Navies. The trick in this preaching, Sister Cobb, is to convert 'em just so far they ain't varmints and not so far as to make 'em useless."

Chapter Ten

A Ring-Tailed Ripper



AFTER a wild descent through the brush of a gully Comanche John reached the creek bottom, Rusty, clinging to the neck of his horse, close on his heels. There they left their horses and climbed on foot. The wagon train was partly halted, and for a moment John thought he might yet reach it before it passed into the range of the ambush, but it started again, so he fired a shot.

He was ready with more, but the one served its purpose, bringing the attack half a mile before its intent.

Now renegades were on the move, trying to make their attack on the new position, and John, pushing Rusty to cover, waited for them.

His first volley sent them scattering with one of the half-breeds down, arms outflung, sliding head foremost to a

stop among rock slabs and buckbrush. When the others turned to meet his unexpected attack, Rusty lay and drew their fire with his shirt on a branch while John came up from one place and then another, blasting with both Navy Colts.

"Yipee!" he bellowed. "I'm a ring-tailed ripper, I am! I pepper my taters with gunpowder and I eat my meat with the hair on. I kill me a man each day of the year and two on Jeff Davis's birthday just to be patriotic. I got graveyards named after me all the way from Fraser River to Yuba Gulch, I have for a fact, so give me room because it's my fancy to commence another one on this sidehill!"

The scarfaced Indian came down the slope, snaking himself on his belly, and bobbed into view with a rifle to be met and smashed backward by a cross-body shot from John's right-hand Navy. With the scarface gone, the others took to cover, every man for himself, looking only for horses and escape. Higher, about the train, the wagoners had the others in flight. It had become sniping from long range and a plain waste of bullets.

John stood now, and climbed. He found Belly River Bob shot through both legs and groaning. "Don't shoot, I done nothing to you. I'm a wounded man."

John took his guns and flung them ahead of him toward the road as protection against an ambush shot. "Well and good, we'll leave it up to the teamsters what happens to you." He climbed on, muttering, "But we still got the big one left and he's my meat."

"Me?"

He whirled at the sound of Dave Royal's voice so close beside him.

The big man had been hiding between two rocks. His Colt was drawn and John would have made a perfect ambush, but he hadn't shot. There was some reason for that.

"Why didn't ye?" asked John, looking into the muzzle of the Colt, chawing, hands dangling below the butts of his holstered Navies.

"Didn't I what?"

"Shoot me in the back, o' course. Shoot me like ye did Wood."

"I know when I'm beaten." Royal tried to smile but he managed only a wolfish show of teeth. "Beaten all the way around, the girl, the supplies, everything. I'll turn all that over to you. All I want in exchange is your horse. Where is he?"

"Yonder," said John, pointing.

"Take me there."

"Why, sure." He knew that once Royal located the gunpowder he would be a dead man. He glanced beyond Royal and said, "Rusty, whar did ye tie the horses?"

Royal did not flinch. He did not even move his eyes. "Wrong there! Rusty isn't even alive."

"Yes I am!" said Rusty.

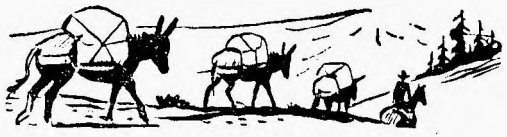
His voice made Royal start around. He could not know that Rusty was unarmed. For an instant the .44 was not aimed, and with the easy shoulder-hitch, a sag and bending of his back, John drew. Royal saw it and shot, but John was in a slightly new position. The .44 slug left a gray mark on a boulder.

Royal tried for a second shot, but his time had run out. The Navies bucked in Comanche John's hands, twin reports almost blending with the report of the .44, and Royal was spun half around and knocked backward.

He kept his feet and started down the mountain. He took ten or twelve

steps, preposterous, long, downhill steps, before he lost balance and fell face-first in a tangle of juniper. There he lay very still, with the mountain breeze waving a lock of his light-brown hair.

"Finished," John said, blowing smoke from the barrels of his guns. "No, Rusty, don't go near him. There's renegades yonder. The gunpowder will come when I whistle, and your horse will follow. Poor time to get killed now when there'll be supper coming up. By grab, come to think of it, I forgot to eat in a day or two."



WITH DIFFICULTY the wagons were turned in the narrow trail, and now they rolled back toward the forks. Rusty, with his head bandaged and his broken arm in splints and a sling, sat beside Lela in the high seat of her wagon, their shoulders touching, neither of them speaking, their happiness too complete.

The Parson in his wagon kept craning around at each bend, trying to glimpse them, saying, "Yep, yep! I *will* have a marriage to perform."

In the Shallerbach wagon, Belly River Bob lay bandaged, unable to use his legs, and big Ambrose Stocker came around to John, almost doffing his hat and bowing for reverence.

"John," he said, "what do you think we should do with that scoundrel? Personally I'm for hanging."

"No-o," John said pondering, aiming at a bit of whitish porphyry by the road, tobacco-juicing it fair center, "I ain't for hanging on a wagon train. It never seemed proper to me. I say save that scoundrel for Hell Gate. They got a judge there, and a miner's jury. Let *them* hang him. It'll liven things up, and they'll appreciate it. Git ye off on the right foot."

On foot, moving from one wagon to the other, the Widow Cobb was saying, "Well, I never! Never in all my days have I seen the equal of that Parson of ours. A miracle, that's what it was. Last night, you can take my word for it, he had turned blue. Yes, blue all over. The heartbeat was gone and thar was no breath in him. Well, I 'low, I'd of laid him out if I had had his clothes ironed. And now *look* at him! Gunfighting with a rifle and traveling on his own two pins. I say let them that scoff at miracles just see what I beholden today."

Then each time she would locate John and try to get close to him, but John always had something to do at a far end of the train.

CAMPED AT THE OLD PLACE by the forks, John was not there for supper. At midnight he crept in the Parson's wagon and started rummaging for cold biscuits.

"What's the matter with you?" the Parson asked, rousing in bed, knowing in the dark who it was. "No hangman is looking for you now."

"I'm not coming near this train again," said John through biscuits. "I'm camping a safe three mile ahead. That widda is enamored o' me. She buried *one* husband I *know* about, and—"

"Why, John. *She* wouldn't kill ye off. Be a fine wife—"

"Waal, maybe, but it seems to me she has a great fancy for funerals. I

watched her, Parson, and I don't like the way she *looks* at me, like she was measuring me off. And do you know what she said to me one time? She said, 'Brother John, do you own a black serge suit?'

"No, sir—once this creaky outfit gits to Hell Gate, ye'll see me no more. It'll be a *Blackfeet* gal for me."

Stuffing his pockets with biscuits, John dropped from the rear of the wagon, and the Parson, propped on his elbows, listening, could hear the *click-clop* of the gunpowder's hoofs, and John's monotone voice bumped from him as he rode away:

"Co-man-che John rode to I-de-ho
In the year of 'sixty-two;
Oh! listen to my stor-ee,
I'll tell ye what he do . . ."

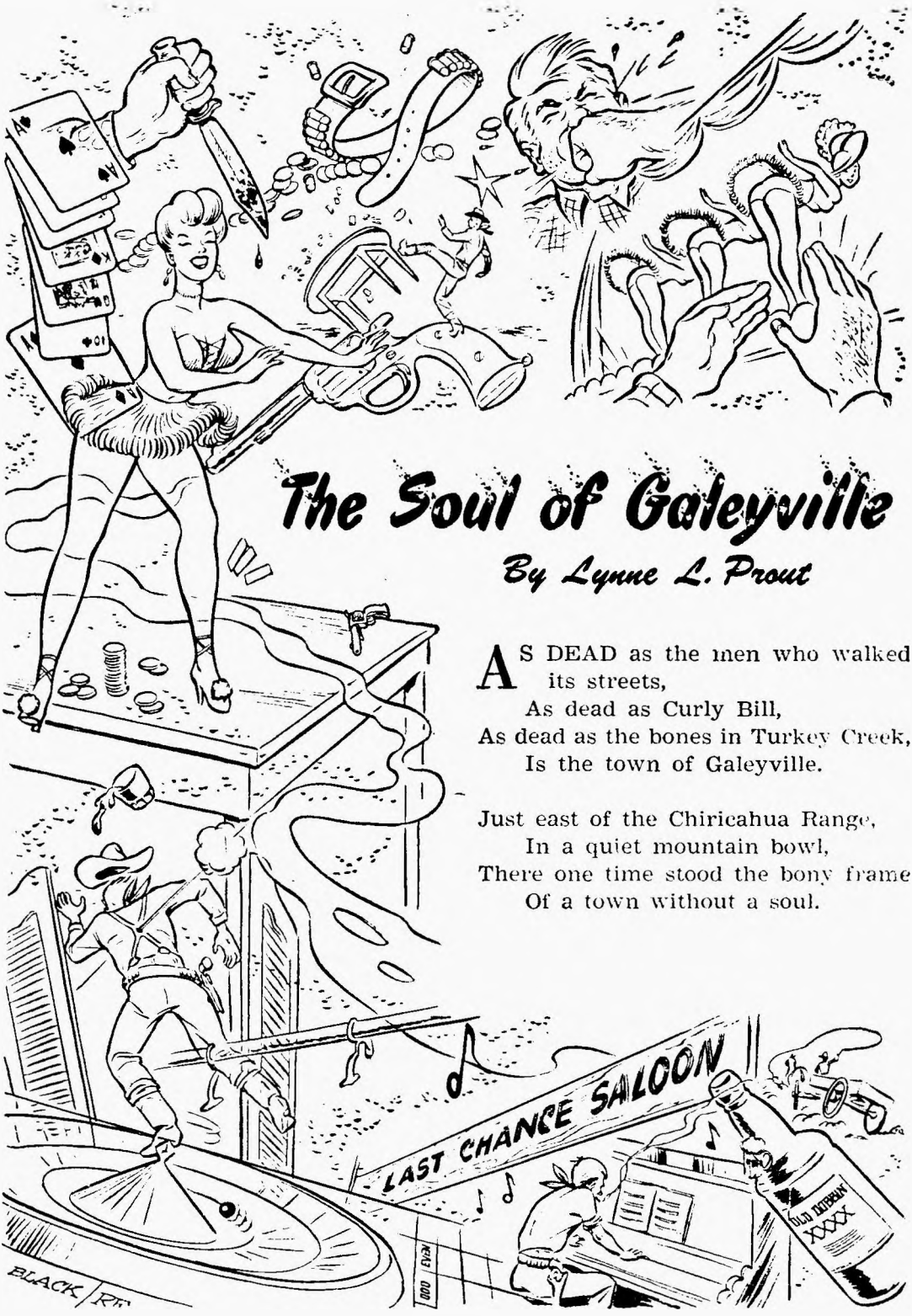
THE END

RODEO SAVVY

A Western Quiz by S. Omar Barker

WHETHER you pronounce it RO-de-oh or the original Spanish ro-THAY-oh, the cowboy rodeo is today one of the great American sports, still wholly Western in its horseback flavor. Here are 10 questions to test your rodeo savvy. The answers are not necessarily all different contests. So tighten your cinches and climb aboard! Answers on page 51.

1. In what rodeo contest is the horse trained to stop quickly and hold the lass rope tight while the cowboy gets off to finish the act?
2. In what contest is the horse trained to keep on going for a short distance after the rider gets off, then stop and keep the catch rope tight while the cowboy finishes the job?
3. In what contest is the running horse trained to keep on going and get out of the way after the cowboy leaves the saddle?
4. In what contest is the horse not trained at all, but just doing what comes natural to him?
5. In what contest does the cowboy mount and ride three or more horses in succession?
6. In what contest is the horse, with no cattle involved, ridden wholly without any reins?
7. In what roping contests are two cowboys entered as a team?
8. In what contest does a cowboy use a bottle or tin cup?
9. In what contest must the steers used have fairly long horns?
10. In what contest are no horses used at all?



The Soul of Galeyville

By Lynne L. Prout

AS DEAD as the men who walked
its streets,
As dead as Curly Bill,
As dead as the bones in Turkey Creek,
Is the town of Galeyville.

Just east of the Chiricahua Range,
In a quiet mountain bowl,
There one time stood the bony frame
Of a town without a soul.

A few square mounds reveal the place,
A pile of stones the site,
Where gambling-halls and loud saloons
Went roaring through the night.

The live-oak trees and junipers
Still grow on the rocky shelf;
Perhaps the flask asleep in the sun
Was drained by Curly himself.

For Galeyville was the stomping-ground
Of the outlaw, Curly Bill,
And his cutthroat gang of cattle thieves
That courted hangman's hill.

The names and episodes that flit
Across the written page
Can scarcely tell the raucous tales,
Or set the bloody stage.

John Ringo was an actor there,
As Curly Bill's right hand;
His lightning draw left many bones
To bleach in the desert sand.

He killed, debauched, and drank until
His mind began to wane;
He lies beneath a live-oak tree
With a bullet through his brain.

And Old Man Clanton, with the gang,
Helped haunt a canyon floor;
They murdered thirty Mexicans
And lined the gorge with gore.

They took their loot to Galeyville
And boasted of their deed,
While buzzards and the mountain lions
Enjoyed the monstrous feed.

The canyon known as Skeleton
Is full of shrieks at night,
And bones rise up from the grassy floor
To dance in the moon's pale light.

They dance to celebrate the fact,
That Old Man Clanton's dead;
Some greasers ambushed him one dawn,
And pumped him full of lead.

Now Galeyville was a hole of Hell,
Filled with a godless breed;
A Tombstone preacher one time tried
To sow the Christian creed.

He opened up his service with
"Thou shalt not ever kill;"
The church door opened wide just then,
And in strode Curly Bill.

He sat down on the foremost seat;
The audience dispersed;
Bill made the preacher sing until
His lungs had almost burst.

There was Russian Bill, a tenderfoot,
Who drifted in one day;
He looked just like a catalogue,
His dress was new and gay.

He swaggered down the dusty street,
Of roaring Galeyville;
A pistol cracked, his cigar drooped—
He had met Curly Bill.

He joined the bawdy outlaw gang,
And stole a piebald mare;
The Shakespeare sheriff strung him up,
And made him dance on air.

One Pat O'Day of Galeyville
Took out his gun one day,
To kill a rat named Cherokee
And drag his bones away.

The killing stage was getting set
In Mr. Shotwell's store;
"Don't kill him here," kind Shotwell said,
"You might mess up the floor."

The prairie pirates rode at night,
They robbed the Benson stage,
They killed and plundered far and wide,
In that Arizona age.

They trod the lonely desert trails,
In twos and tens and scores;
Their roaring guns meant sudden death
In flaming rangeland wars.

These barons of the bandit reign,
Laid good and bad men low;
They rustled cows far down the trail
In the wilds of Mexico.

Their bloody sins they carried back
To drown in Galeyville,
In wild and riotous revelry,
They'd drink and fight until

Their last gold ounce of loot was gone;
And then they'd ride once more.
To rob and kill and leave their dead
To rot on a canyon floor.

There was Sandy King, the Clanton boys,
All sons of the Old Man;
There was Richard Gray, and Charlie Snow,
Joe Hill, and Billy Lang.

There was Rattlesnake Bill, and Jimmie Hughes,
All dealers from the floor;
Jake Gauze was one, Ike, Tom, and Frank,
And half a hundred more.

Their bones are slowly moldering now,
Their souls have taken wing;
Hot lead has laid the bodies low
Of those that didn't swing.

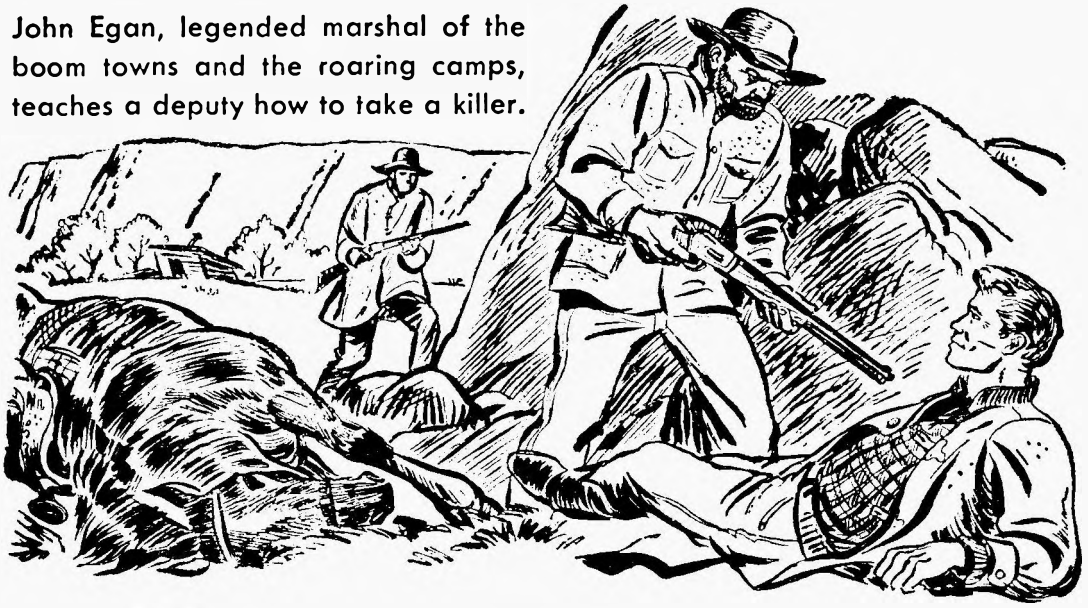
Old Curly Bill rode off to where
The angels never sing,
When Wyatt Earp blew his head in half
At the edge of Iron Spring.

The live-oak trees and junipers
Feed deep in the blood-soaked hill,
Where once there stood a soulless town,
By the name of Galeyville.

All that remains is a few square mounds,
And rocks to mark the site;
A lonely coyote guards the hill,
And howls to the moon at night.

As starkly dead as the Clanton boys,
As dead as Curly Bill,
As dead as the bones in Turkey Creek,
Is the town of Galeyville.

John Egan, legended marshal of the boom towns and the roaring camps, teaches a deputy how to take a killer.



LAST WALTZ on WILD HORSE

By T. T. FLYNN

JOHN EGAN WAS NOT dancing tonight. His right leg, still bad from the gun fight in which the outlaw Teller brothers had escaped, kept him on a wall chair in the long, merriment-filled hall. His wife was dancing. His daughter was dancing, too often, with Dick Starr, his young and increasingly cocky deputy. Starr would have Egan's job, and daughter too, after the election, Egan suspected. Six years ago he'd guessed settling in Elkton would end about like this.

Six years ago the Nuckols gang had killed the former sheriff, and urgent telegrams had reached Egan in Wyoming. Elkton needed an iron-willed peace officer. Elkton wanted John Egan of the legends, Egan of the wild boom towns and roaring camps. And when Egan had come, and cleaned up the Nuckols bunch, Elkton had elected him the new sheriff.

His wife had wanted it, Egan recalled. Wanted relief from endless worry about Egan's safety. Wanted a peaceful home for young Ann, already leggy and fast maturing. He'd warned Ruth dryly the public never remembered long. Local men would soon eye the sheriff's job again. As they were now.

The real trouble was Sam Quinby, influential rancher and horse trader, from whose mountain pastures last year Egan had culled eighteen stolen horses.

Quinby had produced bills-of-sale, and finally, furious and shaken, had grudgingly admitted to being tricked by slippery strangers. Now Quinby and friends would probably make Dick Starr the next sheriff. *John Egan was half-crippled, wasn't he? Not even a local man! Send him back to his stale boom towns and fading camps. . . .*

Six years made a difference, Egan

thought ruefully now, watching the dancers. A man got older. Home took roots. This time he didn't want to move on— Egan looked up without expression as Sam Quinby finally stopped to greet him.

Quinby was elegant tonight in frock coat and polished boots. His sandy beard was trimmed and combed, his smile was broad and his question genial. "Egan, how's the leg?"

"Still on," said Egan blandly. "How's horses and slippery strangers?"

"Business," said Quinby, "is slow." His eyes were cold.

Egan's eyes were colder as Quinby moved on, shaking hands. They understood each other. Quinby was a thief and knew Egan knew it. Dick Starr wouldn't have culled those eighteen horses, Egan thought restlessly. Dick was honest but friendly and lacking in suspicion.

Outside now it was blowing and raining, but no one in the gaily-decorated hall cared. Egan sat with his thoughts, and he was probably the only one who sensed trouble arriving with Ira Burch.

A small man with thin, harried features, Burch owned a hardscrabble homestead and large family back in the Clear Creek Hills. He came in alone out of the wet night almost furtively, and sidled to Egan, pulling off a wet, yellow slicker.

Burch's question was hurried, secretive. "How much reward on the Teller brothers?"

Egan sat very still, lean and brown, tough and composed, his shock of black hair streaked with gray. A smolder kindled in his boring blue gaze. Losing the Teller gang and getting crippled while doing it, was a rankling failure Sam Quinby and friends were exploiting.

"Sit down, Ira." And when Burch gingerly took the adjoining chair, Egan said, "Better'n three thousand on both the Tellers. Why?"

Burch's Adam's apple slid nervously in his leathery neck. "Even a small chunk of reward'd help, the way kids eat an' get sick . . ." His voice trailed off dispiritedly.

Egan nodded. "Know where they are?"

"The Tellers an' two other men pushed forty-fifty horses into Big Blue Canyon at sundown. They never seen me back in the brush."

Egan said, "Horses?" and glanced at the far end of the hall where Sam Quinby stood by the orchestra platform, elegant, impressive, respectable, and influential.

"Horses?" Egan murmured again, and remembered his bad leg and looked out on the dance floor.

Dick Starr and Ann were dancing this schottische also. Young Starr was taller than Egan, hard-flanked and friendly-looking. Ann, like her mother, had a sweetness of brow and a gay sparkle. She was laughing up at Dick.

"Wait at my house," Egan said abruptly to Burch.

Then Egan sat quietly. Big Blue Canyon headed not far from the high mountain meadows of Sam Quinby's horse ranch. Easy to guess where the Teller brothers were heading with rustled horses. If Dick Starr broke it up tonight, Sam Quinby might lose his enthusiasm for Dick as sheriff. Egan smiled faintly.

The schottische was ending. His wife came flushed and smiling to the chair Burch had vacated. Her escort was pudgy Len Hall, owner of the Emporium.

"I get older an' stiffer and Ruth gets

younger," Len complained gallantly, blowing ruddy cheeks; and when Len walked away, Egan murmured, "Still the prettiest one."

Ruth touched his hand. Her brown hair had more gray than Egan's black hair. Otherwise Ruth hadn't changed much, Egan thought. He said casually, "Tell Dick I want him to help me home."

The old apprehension about Egan's safety darkened in Ruth's look. "I saw that man come in. Trouble?"

"Not for us. Sam Quinby, maybe."

He watched Ruth go, wondering how her laughter and faith and pride had persisted through all the years he'd been a notorious peace officer, hired usually when other men refused the risks. These six years as Elkton sheriff had been by contrast quietly peaceful. And Ruth was grateful.

A gay varsoviana was beginning as Egan, cane in hand, limped awkwardly from his chair. He stopped several times for casual, low-voiced talk with different men, and finally reached young Doctor Marsden.

"Time for this leg to make a ride, isn't it?" Egan wheedled.

Marsden put on his sternest look. "You can't dance tonight, either, John." Then young Marsden's grin was encouraging. "Patience. You might wreck that knee for good if you force it. Do I have to ride herd on you?"

Egan chuckled ruefully. "You've herded me too much now." He saw Dick Starr coming and limped to meet him. They went out together into the blowing rain.

Dick's question was airy. "Something wrong?"

"Ira Burch saw the Teller gang pushing horses into Blue Canyon before dark."

Dick whistled softly. "Rustled horses?"

"They ever have any others? And it's not far from Blue Canyon to Sam Quinby's horse ranch."

Dick said with amusement, "You'll pin something on Sam Quinby yet, won't you?"

"Probably." Egan wondered if it mattered to Dick, who had never mentioned Sam Quinby talking him up for sheriff. But Dick had been getting cockier lately. "We'll get the Tellers," Egan said tersely. "You'll have to do it. I'll drop you at the livery stable. Come to my house. Don't talk."

Pacing Egan's slow limp on the wet boardwalk, Dick protested, "Tonight?"

"When else?" Around the corner, Egan hauled himself into his buggy and backed the team out of the solid rank of wagons, buggies, and saddle horses. Dick Starr sat beside him silently. "When you sight 'em," Egan advised, "don't hold back."

Dick sounded absent, unenthusiastic. "Telling me to bring 'em in dead?"

"You know what I mean."

"You've said it enough." This was some of Dick's new cockiness. He was deputy, but not too seriously.

"It's kept me alive," Egan reminded brusquely. "I've tried to tell you. Never give a killer a chance. He'll kill you."

"Will he?" muttered Dick politely, and Egan held back a caustic retort.

From the livery barn, Egan drove to his small frame house. Ira Burch was waiting in the kitchen. Other men Egan had contacted at the dance rode into the back yard and stamped into the kitchen.

Fred Stovel was short, bandy-legged, and active. Carl Flegge was stolid, muscular, with red veins netting his face. Bob Joyner and Harley Cook arrived

together, both big men. Then Dick Starr came in, shedding his slicker off broad shoulders and sizing up the gathering.

Ira Burch had put a pitch-pine stick into the range and heated the big coffeepot. They swigged black coffee while Egan talked from his chair beside the kitchen table.

"Only one good place to hold horses in Blue Canyon tonight. Wild Horse Flat. You can ride by Dry Bone Creek, over Baldy Knob, and take that old mustang trail down into the upper canyon, and come at 'em from above."

Dick protested across his coffee cup, "That mustang trail is dangerous on a night like this."

"It's the sure way to surprise 'em," Egan insisted. He watched Dick's jaw set silently.

Bob Joyner said bluntly, "We need more men."

"There's enough of you," said Egan flatly. "Last time, a bigger posse gave it away. Someone warned the Tellers. No one but us knows this now. Back out if you like."

"Guess not," Joyner decided.

Dick Starr eased the heavy shell-studded belt on his hips. His quizzical grin ran over the five men. "Egan's calling this dance; we'll waltz the Tellers around Wild Horse Flat. Let's go."

Cocky, Egan thought uneasily. The iron, somehow, was missing. From the kitchen doorway, he watched their mounted, slicker-clad figures, hats pulled low, vanish in the blackness and pelting rain. He limped to the range for more coffee, and sat down, nursing the cup.

The house was quiet. The range fire popped softly. Rain tapped the windows, tapping memories of other bad men Egan had known, braggarts, blusterers and quiet ones. And the worst of them had a common trait: they killed callously, efficiently. John Egan had been more efficient. He had lived.

Did Dick Starr really understand that, Egan wondered, and wished he knew what Dick was thinking. It was more than Dick, more than Egan and the job now. It was the way Ann looked at Dick, the gay, eager giveaway in Ann's smile.

Egan lifted his head as the front door opened. Ruth and Ann came into the kitchen. They were damp and deceptively cheerful.

Egan answered their unspoken question. "Dick's off on a little business."

Ann carried cups to the coffeepot. She looked flushed and tense. "Is it dangerous?"

"Never can tell." He was aware the legends of John Egan had never been prideful to Ann. Violence appalled her. Now Ann's low voice held a note of accusation.

"Isn't it more dangerous when 'wanted' men think the law may kill them?"

Egan pushed his cup back. "Been talking that way to Dick?"

"Is it wrong?" Ann asked defiantly.

"No. But an outlaw who's killed other men is already dangerous. Let Dick do his own thinking. He's got plenty of it to do."

Ann said tightly, "You're jealous of Dick, aren't you?"

Her mother's hurried question headed off Egan's mild outrage.

"John, why should Sam Quinby send his foreman from the dance hall after you left with Dick? And when the man came back, Quinby leave quickly with him? I came home to tell you."

Egan said softly, "So Slippery Sam didn't miss a move. Means he knows the Tellers are due." Egan picked his cane off the floor and heaved to his feet.

"Ruthie, get my work duds."

Worried, Ruth asked, "What is it?"

"The Tellers are in Blue Canyon with rustled horses. Dick's trying to trap them. Sam Quinby's evidently trying to stop it."

Ruth said apprehensively, "You can't try to ride there with that knee."

Ann was biting her lip. Egan eyed her and caustically reminded, "The Tellers kill and argue later. Dick'll have to match them. If he don't, he's a boy on a man's job. Just the kind of sheriff Sam Quinby and the Tellers would like."

Ann looked confused and frightened. Ruth eyed her worriedly, and then silently left the kitchen to help Egan get ready.

A little later Egan rode into the night alone, another bowed figure in slicker and down-pulled hat. In the horse shed, Ruth and Ann had helped him saddle the sorrel by lantern light. Ann had said unsteadily under her breath, "Don't let them kill him!"

"Course not, honey."

Ann had seemed comforted. John Egan had promised her. Egan of the legends and roaring towns. Ann was learning, Egan thought morosely, what her mother had lived with. Rain gusts whipped the slicker. Egan rode with a long right stirrup, putting little weight on the stiff knee. It was awkward, tiring. His thoughts settled professionally on the Teller brothers.

Luke and Joe Teller had known prisons. They'd killed. In their forties now, the Teller brothers were hardened and dangerous. The men with them would be as bad.

AROUND MIDNIGHT, Egan forded Dry Bone Creek. The rushing, soupy current, swollen by the rain, made the horse stagger and lunge. The rain was slacking to fitful spits. Egan rode hunched and silent. Dick Starr would probably wait until daybreak. If the Tellers had been warned, Dick and his unsuspecting men would ride into waiting guns. Bob Joyner, Egan thought, had been right. Too few men in the posse.

Over Bald Knob the trail was muddy, slick. It climbed into the dense blackness of jack pine stands. The wind soughed overhead. The uneasy trees dripped. In daylight, this higher country gave glimpses of grandeur. Tonight Egan rode through chill, damp blackness to the timbered ridge which dropped in treacherous shale slopes to the great gash of Blue Canyon. Pain throbbed now in the bad knee as he dismounted clumsily and tightened saddle cinches and tried to remember details of the hair-raising descent.

Hauling into the saddle, Egan put the nervous, reluctant horse to the narrow down-trail and gave the beast its head. At his left, yawning black space whipped the imagination. Close to his right stirrup, the dripping canyon wall lifted sheer. Small stones dislodged into space fell far and long.

Strain sawed at Egan's forced calm. Not seeing it was worse than the hair-raising reality of daylight. This pinned a man against black space, at the mercy of imagination. When the horse suddenly slipped, Egan was already braced taut.

The beast floundered. Shod hoofs struck red sparks from stone. Egan grabbed the saddle horn, expecting a frantic slide into space. Then, miraculously, the horse got uncertain footing, and braced, shivering.

Carefully Egan gathered the reins and spoke soothingly. He was sweating.

He wondered how Dick's men had fared on this wet, treacherous descent into the upper canyon. Presently the horse moved hesitatingly and continued slowly down, and down. At long last it reached the bottom. Egan was weak.

Here in the deep canyon the rushing pour of Blue Creek growled through the darkness. The trail was not wide but it was safe. Egan breathed deeply, smiled wanly. It had been close up there. Close.

Sometime later, miles down the canyon, Egan's horse suddenly nickered.

Another horse nickered in the blackness ahead. Egan was already reining back hard, reaching inside the slicker. Should have had the gun ready in his hand, Egan knew disgustedly.

Must be the posse. . . . Then Egan heard the soft trample of many horses moving up the canyon toward him. A suspicious demand blurted from the dark at him.

"*Who is it?*"

Egan said, "Sam Quinby. Which one are you?"

"*Make a guess, you lyin'*—" A gout of orange flame blotted the rest of it.

Egan fired at the flash and battled an impulse to duck. Reining the startled sorrel hard, he half-emptied the gun in one tearing burst of sound—and saw no other muzzle flashes replying.

Through the slamming echoes, he heard the horse herd stampeding back down the canyon. Distant yells came from men who'd been pushing the herd. They couldn't have met the posse; so Dick Starr hadn't come this way.

A man on the ground ahead sighed gaspingly. Egan's gun covered the spot. "Where you hit?"

The reply was mumbled. "Belly—"

"Which one are you?"

"Teller—Joe—"

Egan said coldly, "So you were tipped off?" and got no reply. "If it'll cheer you, I'm shot too," Egan said. "Hang on if you can and I'll hang you later."

Joe Teller's horse trampled uncertainly in the darkness as Egan rode past warily. He reloaded the half-empty gun, his anger blazing. Dick Starr had let the job down like a man eying election. Like a man wanting Sam Quinby's approval. It came to Egan now how much he'd wanted Dick to handle this right. Wanted the best for Ann. Only the best would be prideful to Egan and deserving of Ann.

The Tellers, Egan guessed, believed now the posse blocked the upper canyon. Overhead cloud-scud above the high canyon rim was letting through the first faint dawn. Daylight soon now. Egan reached under the slicker to a torn flesh wound in his left hip. Blood was oozing into the boot.

Bad knee, bad hip; he should turn back, Egan knew. An odd feeling of being completely alone now caught at him. He thought of Ruth at home, waiting out one more night, and felt less alone.

Cottony mist drifted along the canyon bottom where Egan cautiously rode. He shoved the handgun into the slicker pocket and pulled the carbine from its scabbard under his right leg and jacked in a shell.

The hip hurt. Pain needled the bad knee. Egan pulled his mind off that and watched the canyon ahead. An elbow-like bulge where the canyon bore off to the left held Wild Horse Flat, several acres of grass and scattered trees. Sluice miners, long gone, had left a rotting cabin.

Egan had it figured. If the Tellers were escaping, some of the abandoned, stampeding horses would stop at the

flat and start grazing. Mist hugged the flat and wraithlike trees lifted out of it. The rush of the creek bore off to the left, against the towering rock of the canyon side. Horses were grazing on the flat in the mist, and Egan smiled thinly and rode toward them.

His only warning was a belated glimpse of one more horse off to the right by the fringing brush. A saddled horse, reins tying it to the ground.

Derision howled in Egan's mind at his carelessness. Joe Teller's saddled horse was far back up the canyon. No one else had been shot. This horse had an owner close. Then Egan sighted the man at the back corner of the old cabin, a vague, solitary figure in the drifting mist, leveling a rifle.

Egan ducked to the sorrel's neck, heeling the animal into a lunge which might put one of the grazing horses between them and the rifle. With sound legs, he would have rolled off Indian-like and fought with the sorrel for a shield.

The snapping rifle report drove a bullet soddenly into the running sorrel and Egan had to roll off helplessly anyway. The derision howled again. This shot had come from the brush near the saddled horse. Not from the man at the cabin.

He hit the wet earth sprawling and tumbling. It beat him helpless with shock and hurt in the hip and knee. He stopped on his side, the slicker peeled up around his hips. Egan of the legends, caught cold and helpless. And by the Tellers, a second time.

Yards away his horse was down, kicking. *Dropped the carbine, too,* was Egan's groggy thought as he rolled over painfully and pushed up. He saw the indistinct figure running through the mist at him, rifle ready. This, Egan bleakly guessed, was the time he didn't ride home.

He sat up, bracing with a hand on the ground, watching the man half-circle him, to keep Egan and the trail up-canyon in sight. The WANTED dodgers, Egan thought, had been clear enough. Medium height—brown mustache on a wide, beefy, stubble-roughened face—ears larger than average, batting out a little.

"Luke Teller," Egan said, noting the man's grimy saddle jacket, collar turned up, heavy cartridge belt strapped outside.

The reply was rough and panting. "Where's Joe?"

Egan said succinctly, "Shot. You want to surrender?"

"You John Egan?"

"Yes."

Luke Teller got his breath back and gazed up the canyon. "Where's your posse?"

"Got it in my pocket," said Egan coldly. "You and the rest want to surrender?"

"Just me waited for Joe. So Joe's dead?"

"Wasn't when I left him. He'll probably hang if he lives."

Luke Teller looked up the canyon again. He was calm now. "One sure thing, Egan; you won't hang Joe. Or anyone."

Egan was trying not to watch the second figure off there in the mist, vague and crouching a little as it moved toward them. A Teller man wouldn't come like that. It looked like Dick Starr. Egan was afraid to believe it was Dick Starr coming from the cabin corner.

He thought Ruth would understand what he was going to say. They'd lived it together. Sitting awkwardly on the

soggy earth, bracing with a hand, Egan spoke coldly.

"It's always the law hangs them. Which is why fools like you hide out and stay on the run. You shoot a few men, but you never kill the law. So someone like me gets you finally. Want to bet I won't hang you or shoot you?"

"Hell of a bet," Luke Teller said. He was peering through the mist, trying to see what was up the canyon. He looked at Egan and brought the rifle centering on Egan's chest. A vagrant thought moved his mouth corners in a grimly humorous smile.

"How's this for a bet, Egan: I'll live longer than you will?"

"Dead man's bet," Egan said. "You wouldn't collect." He could feel the harshness in his throat. This was more than talk; this was the barely delayed pressure of Luke Teller's finger on the hair trigger.

Teller's grin was jeering, and Egan looked at the face, not the rifle, and said coldly, "I'll bet a thousand you aren't fool enough to shoot. I'll write it an I.O.U. Sam Quinby can collect and pay you. If you win."

Luke Teller was amused. "How'll you collect, Egan, if you win? I'll be dead."

"I'll share in the rewards on you."

A vague puzzlement filled Luke Teller's stare. Slowly Egan swallowed. Couldn't help it. He'd always known what to do. Now, suddenly, he was uncertain. Was this right? Was this the thing to do?

Like moves ahead in a desperate checker game, his thought flashed over it. If Dick Starr was slow or inclined to words—if Dick even hesitated—then Luke Teller was going to kill Dick.

Then the gun still in Egan's slicker pocket would be out, covering Luke Teller, who would die or hang later. But Dick would be dead, traded for Luke Teller.

Would Ann understand that the law sometimes had to work like this? That it wasn't a question of Egan's life, but whether Luke Teller got away to kill again?

Egan knew. All her life Ann would *not* understand. Each time she looked at Egan, Ann's mute accusation would not understand.

Puzzled, irritated, Luke Teller demanded, "What are you tryin', Egan?"

For hanging, Egan thought. *Wanted for hanging!* A man lived with his beliefs and held to them. Coldly, calmly, Egan said, "Shoot me and your gun will be empty. Look behind you."

Coldly Egan studied the disbelief struggling on the wide flat face. Luke Teller moistened his lips. His side step was sudden. His glance swiveled over a shoulder. Dick Starr was not far off in the mist now. In frantic haste Luke Teller swung his rifle.

Egan shouted, "*Now, Dick!*" and clawed at the slicker pocket.

Dick's rifle snapped its sharp, clean report against the dawn. After a moment, Egan let his gun stay where it was.

Dick looked shaken as he ran up and kicked the rifle from Luke Teller's prone, groaning figure.

"First time I ever shot a man," said Dick thickly, stepping to help Egan lurch up. "And the last, I hope."

"It won't be," said Egan shortly. "Goes with the job. This kind would take over the law if not stopped. You won't last long as sheriff until you learn it."

Dick looked puzzled, then his shrug was careless, his slow grin amused and admiring. "That talk of Quinby's? Why, there's only one John Egan. I'll never

be that good. Ann and I are planning to ranch. We were settling it at the dance tonight when you pulled me away."

"That so?" Egan muttered weakly. He was feeling light-headed anyway, from losing blood into his boot he guessed. He fought an urge to sit down again and said caustically, "That don't excuse you from taking the easy way here. They hadn't run into me an' thought I was the posse, they'd have had you. Where's your men?"

Dick's jaw looked stubborn again. "That mustang trail was too dangerous at night. The men are holding prisoners. Three of the gang rode into us thinking the posse was up the canyon behind them. They were too surprised to fight. They said Luke Teller waited here at the flat. So I came after him."

Egan was feeling more light-headed, and a little proud, suddenly, of Dick. "Came after him alone? You *rancher!*" Egan took a deep breath. "Well, you had one waltz with the bad ones, to remember." He knew he was going to sit down and he reached for Dick's steadying hand.

"Go ranching," Egan said weakly, trying to sort out his thoughts. "You and Ann. You'll live longer. A man likes this work or he don't last."

Dick said, "Yes," humoring him.

"Got the Tellers. Got you an' Ann settled," Egan muttered, trying to think. "Something else, though—" He captured it with immense effort. "Third man you caught—one of Sam Quinby's men?"

"His foreman," Dick said.

Egan nodded, satisfied now to be light-headed, with Dick handling the rest of this.

"Something for Sam, too," Egan murmured. "We called it for him, too—last waltz for Sam. Tell him so, Dick, an' lock him up."

Reflectively, contentedly, Egan sat down on the wet ground again. Ruth, at least, he thought, would understand and be a little proud, even if Egan was packed home this time and tossed in bed.

Answers to "Rodeo Savvy" quiz on page 39

1. Calf roping.
2. Big steer roping (one man).
3. Steer bulldogging and steer "decorating."
4. Bronc riding.
5. Range relay, pony express, or other relay races.
6. Bareback bronc riding.
7. Team steer roping and sometimes wild-cow milking.
8. Wild-cow milking.
9. Steer bulldogging.
10. Steer or bull riding.

Upstart in Petticoats

By HAROLD PREECE

The true story of Esther McQuigg Morris, who placed the sunbonnet on a par with the sombrero.

THE YEAR WAS 1869, and the cause that a buxom, motherly-looking woman fought for was as new as the raw young territory itself. A scorching summer was made even more torrid by the buncombe and bombast of Wyoming's first election campaign. Democrats and Republicans alike were making florid promises about mining and grazing and homestead rights.

But overshadowing all the issues being thrashed out in bunkhouses and mine pits was the plaguing one of whether women should vote. That troubling question had been introduced, much to the embarrassment of the Territory's ambitious politicos, by the wife of John Morris, who ran a prosperous general store at South Pass City.

By all that was right and proper, Mrs. Morris should have stayed at home to look after her husband and three grown boys. Women who could cook and sew and run a house were scarce enough in Wyoming, where the white female population consisted largely of the tarts in the mining-camp dance halls. For that matter, women voted in no state or territory under the American flag. The idea that it might be otherwise shocked a handful of ultra-conservative settlers as much as a whole host of new fads that had followed the Civil War—like daily baths and sleeping with one's windows open.

In private, Ben Sheeks, leader of the traditionalists, conceded that the Morris woman had a place in the Territory. But that was in her kitchen, since she

cooked the best meals that a man could taste from Cheyenne to Dodge. But John Morris's wife saw beyond pots and pans, though she never ceased being handy with both. They helped her change the whole course of American history, perhaps because the convictions of men, like their hearts, can be reached through their stomachs.

Few remember her today, for she was scarcely the chic glamour girl typical of so many modern ladies who tackle the rough game of politics. She was, as one pioneer Wyoming merchant described her, "a large forthright woman whose friendly helpfulness made her a favorite with the miners who thronged into South Pass City." Yet, as authentically as Jim Bridger or Jesse Chisholm, Esther McQuigg Morris was one of the West's great trail blazers, even if the signs along the trail she marked were different from the conventional ones of hoof track and wagon rut.

She had already pioneered on one frontier and been a fighter in two causes when she moved with her family to newly created Wyoming. She was born Esther Hobart McQuigg in Spencer, Tioga County, New York, on August 8, 1814. Among her forebears were a migrant Scots Covenanter who had served as a captain in Washington's army and hardy English Puritans whom the eminent Boston preacher, Cotton Mather, had described "as having feared God above many even when they were maligned by the irreligious for their Puritanism."

During her girlhood in upstate New York, she had been a leading figure in the anti-slavery movement. Before she was twenty, she had dispersed a pro-slavery mob which had invaded the local Baptist church to break up an abolitionist rally. Flourishing guns and clubs, the mob had stormed down the aisle to announce its intention of burning the building "if the ladies would leave."

The meeting was in a seething panic when Esther McQuigg had stood in her pew and declared:

"This church belongs to the Baptist people, and no one has a right to destroy it. If it is proposed to burn it down, I will stay here and see who does it."

Afterward she became financially independent from a millinery shop that she operated and, at the age of twenty-eight, married Artemus Slack, a civil engineer for the Erie and Illinois Central Railroads. Dissatisfaction with the terms of the property settlement at his death had given her a second cause—woman suffrage. When she received her share of the inheritance, she concluded that "the rights of women under the law should not be less than those of men." As she meditated on the gross injustice of settlements executed under laws made by men, she decided that "women could not exercise those rights unless enfranchised."

She helped to organize some of the first women's suffrage societies in the Midwest after moving to Illinois to claim land that had been left her by Slack. Shortly after her arrival, she married John Morris, a merchant whose views were liberal and tolerant. Her capable, strong hands did much to relieve sickness and suffering in an area where there were few doctors and practically no hospitals. No one in need of care or help was turned away from the home or the store of John and Esther Morris.

When she wasn't helping behind the counter or nursing at some bedside,

she was campaigning for her two causes. Freeing of the slaves and enfranchisement of women were bound up together in her practical, far-seeing mind. Bondsmen and womankind, both were fighting for emancipation, one from chattel slavery, the other from a mumbo-jumbo of legal restrictions which kept women from making their full contribution to their country. Liberate both of these downtrodden groups, she argued, and American democracy would be strengthened by millions of new citizens taking their full and rightful parts in its workings.

When Abraham Lincoln, whom she had probably known in Illinois, freed the slaves, Esther Morris felt that the first step had been taken. Four million people, Americans for generations though their skins were black, had been added to the ranks of democracy. But still the end result was what she called "freedom on the halves," since the victory could not be a complete one till women were also emancipated.

But her chance to strike a blow for women came not in the Midwest which, by now, was becoming as stable and comfortable as New England. The first opportunity presented itself in the Far West which witnessed a great new boom of pioneering in those years following the Civil War.

In 1868, Congress carved great chunks out of adjoining territories to set up Wyoming, whose outposts of civilization in the shape of cow towns and mining camps dotted the newly laid tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad. Almost immediately, newspapers buzzed with reports of wealth to be had for the taking in the virgin territory. Fabulous strikes of copper, gold, and silver confirmed the spectacular accounts. Wyoming took on in the public mind the same symbolism that California had stood for during the gold rush of '49.

The Union Pacific was begging merchants, as well as miners and farmers, to settle in the new Eldorado. Canny John Morris talked to the railroad's colonization agents and decided to relocate in the land where money flowed like water. Esther was hesitant about the move. Fifty-five is not an easy age for a woman to tear up established roots and sink fresh ones in rough, new country. Besides, she hoped to wage a fight for woman suffrage before the next session of the Illinois legislature in Springfield.

Loyalty to her cause finally made the decision for her. Someday, she realized, these emerging territories of the West would be sovereign states of the American Union. New ground had to be broken for new ideas within their borders as surely as it had to be broken for wheat fields and flower beds.

Within a few months, she was following her husband and sons to Wyoming. John Morris's business was booming when she set foot in South Pass City. The transition from a quiet, ordered community to a boisterous, turbulent one must have been disturbing, even for a woman of her pioneer background. That great migration to the Midwest, in which she had participated, had been one of families who had organized their communities around such stabilizing centers as church and schoolhouse. But the exodus to the Far West had been largely a movement of unattached males who, lacking the sobering responsibilities of wives and children, brawled and gambled and guzzled.

Yet the wholehearted chivalry of Western males toward her sex made

Esther believe that she had found ripe soil for the planting of new ideas. Women were valued in this lonely land because they were so scarce. Men solemnly doffed their hats to little girls of twelve and thirteen, then begged them "to marry me when you grow up." Any man who insulted even a dance-hall jezebel was likely to be strung up from the nearest corral. Territorial leaders, including the handful of conservative ones like Ben Sheeks, acknowledged that Wyoming had no future unless women could be persuaded to move out and start homes and families.

It was natural that wifeless men should gravitate to a kindly woman. Miners and cowpunchers flocked to Esther Morris for help in their troubles. They came to enjoy her well-cooked meals—welcome fare after so many weary months of flapjacks and dried jack rabbit. Esther had hardly set up her stove before she had acquired the reputation of being the best cook in the Territory. Men vied for invitations to her table, or simply dropped by her house at suppertime.

She welcomed them all, and fed them all. For Esther Morris had none of that sour distrust of men which characterized so many of the later leaders of the woman-suffrage movement. Nature, she knew, had meant men and women to be mates and collaborators in the building of society. That was particularly true in the West, where men staked out land claims only to abandon them and drift on because they were unable to endure the loneliness and monotony of living alone.

Women, she told her guests, could do their share of the job better if they were given the vote. An unassuming homemaker whose strange political notions never dimmed her warm human sympathies probably made the first sizable number of male converts to woman suffrage—made them through her convincing wisdom and maybe a slice of mouth-melting apple pie.

But, meanwhile, with so much sentiment churned up for suffrage, Esther had forces to mobilize and plans to lay.

A few days before that first election of 1869, she invited forty leading men and women to a tea party in her home. It was an odd kind of gathering for Wyoming, where social events had generally taken the form of bellying up to the bar. Esther's two honor guests were the two rival candidates for the Territorial Council, or Senate, from the South Pass City district. One was Colonel William H. Bright, the Democratic nominee, whose child she had nursed through a long illness. The Republican hopeful was Captain H. G. Nickerson.

After the guests had stuffed themselves on tea and crumpets, Esther arose and asked for silence.

"There are present," she said graciously, "two opposing candidates for the first legislature of our new territory. One of them is sure to be elected, and we desire here and now to receive from them a public pledge that whichever one is elected will introduce and work for the passage of an act conferring upon women the right of suffrage."

Warmed by Esther's hospitality, both candidates rose gallantly to the occasion. Both pledged themselves to fight for woman suffrage if elected, and shook hands in the presence of the assembled guests to seal the bargain. The party broke up with a salvo of applause. Whoever went to the legislature from South Pass City, Esther was assured of support for her suffrage bill. Hers was a strategy that any shrewd politician of today might envy.

As it was, Esther's Wyoming Tea Party laid the basis for woman suffrage in America, as that all-male affair called the Boston Tea Party had set off the movement which had led to her country's independence. A few days after the session in her home, Wyoming's male voters walked or rode to the polls. Colonel Bright, the Democrat, won in South Pass City, and his victory was part of a clean Democratic sweep in the Territory.

All of the nine council members and twelve assemblymen chosen to make Wyoming's laws were Democrats and, disturbingly for Esther, all were Southerners. One of them was the Honorable Ben Sheeks, who had been chosen to the Assembly in the Democratic landslide and who regarded Esther as a bad influence for the Territory's future.

As the time neared for the legislature to convene, Esther was glum and worried. Many of the legislators had been soldiers in the army of the fallen Confederacy. She lived in grim fear that they might kill outright any bill backed by a woman whose record as a crusader against slavery had followed her to the new land.

Possibly even she did not realize how sacred Western men considered their word, particularly when that word was given to a woman. Colonel Bright had been elected president of the council, and he had promised to introduce the bill. Realizing what his official position would mean in terms of its passage, he stepped down temporarily from the chair and presented it to his colleagues, who passed it unanimously, then sent it to the Assembly for approval.

Esther Morris had won the first round of her battle, and the opposition led by Assemblyman Sheeks had been caught napping. But the conservative faction stirred like a pack of awakened grizzlies after the Council had acted, and Esther Morris found herself the target of more abuse than had ever been heaped on the head of any Western woman.

When the bill was placed on the assembly's calendar, Sheeks mustered all the die-hard forces in the Territory to discredit "the petticoat upstart." Esther was pictured to Southern settlers in the Territory as "a smart-aleck Yankee female trying to wear man's breeches." Men for whom new ideas came as hard as Lee's surrender at Appomattox thundered in stores and barrooms that she was "a black Republican trying to overturn the foundations of society." They were joined by a small clique of woman-haters who had fled West from domineering wives or demanding sweethearts. These, having found the absence of females comforting, swore that the Morris woman ought to be run out of Wyoming.

For a tense two weeks, it looked as if the bill would die in an organized campaign of anti-female hysteria. Then other men began speaking up for other reasons.

The word got round the camps and bunkhouses that putting the bill on the books would attract marriageable women to Wyoming. Esther, herself, could have come up with no better argument than this one that prospectors and line riders handed each other when they met on some creek bank or cattle range.

When the tide began turning, Esther bade her friends in the Assembly to bring up the bill. The minute that the clerk had finished reading it, Assemblyman Sheeks took the floor to denounce the measure.

He shouted that the bill would give a voice in Wyoming's government to "Negro wenches, Indian squaws, and dance-hall trollops." The argument fell flat in a territory where the dearth of women made their color or occupation irrelevant. It was particularly unfortunate for Ben Sheeks's side that he should have made sneering remarks about Indian females. Westerners had been marrying the maidens of the tepees from the time that the mountain men had first pushed across the Missouri to trap beaver.

Day after day, Sheeks and one or two die-hard assemblymen supporting him filibustered, using rambunctious Dixie oratory and shrewd parliamentary tricks to keep the bill from passing. But day by day, the opposition became fewer in numbers as the bachelors began making themselves heard.

Cowboys on the ranges dispatched riders bearing round-robin petitions for passage to the capitol. Without much prompting from Esther, miners and merchants buttonholed legislators in the lobbies to demand that they put the bill through "and do it damn quick." Bets were running a hundred to one in the bars and faro banks when Sheeks suddenly changed his tune.

He declared that women were too "pure" and "tender-minded" to undertake the rough craft of politics. It was exactly the sort of argument destined to influence his Southern-born colleagues who had come from a region where, perhaps, women were "protected" too much. Esther feared his persuasive eloquence when he began on that tack. But Wyoming's legislators were developing new concepts of chivalry.

They had seen women standing on their own and meeting every challenge faced by men in a land where survival was guaranteed only to the strong. There was Grandma Hamner in adjoining Nebraska who, alone except for six big hounds, had held her homestead against claim jumpers and Sitting Bull's rampant Sioux warriors. There were other women of their acquaintance who had cut timber and run ranches, conducted businesses and fought outlaws. Gallantry, if it were more than an empty flourish, decreed that the ladies must be granted the equality they had earned. It meant that they must be given the vote.

Ben Sheeks's rumbling oratory had subsided to a tired squawk when male pressure from inside and outside the legislative halls finally brought the bill to a vote. It was passed at last, with only a few dissenting votes. On December 10, 1869, Governor John A. Campbell, himself an early advocate of woman suffrage, signed the act which made Wyoming Territory the very first commonwealth of the American nation to place the ballot in the hands of women. For that, the sprawling big state deserves as much credit as tiny Rhode Island for first establishing complete religious toleration, or giant Texas for its memorable law that a settler's homestead could not be seized for debt.

After that first historic victory for women's rights, nationwide attention was focused upon Wyoming and the woman who had so magnificently generaled the suffrage campaign. Conservatives throughout the nation might be alarmed and point to what had happened in the Territory as "a mark of the general lack of civilization in the West." But to the struggling woman-suffrage movement, that first triumph was like a shot in the arm. Now they could point to one place where

women actually voted and use Wyoming as an example for other states and territories to follow.

The forces that Esther McQuigg Morris, housewife and citizen, set in motion would continue to gather strength over three generations until the final ratification, in 1919, of the Nineteenth Amendment, guaranteeing all American women the vote. The year after Wyoming broke down the first political barriers of sex, Utah Territory followed its example by passing a suffrage act. It was in the Far West that the suffrage movement continued to make its strongest headway, as it was also the section where women first ran successfully for office. It was the West which first placed "the sunbonnet on a par with the sombrero."

Wyoming itself continued to show the way as Esther kept busying herself with nursing and hospitality. On February 14, 1870, she became the first woman ever to hold public office in the country when U. S. District Judge John W. Kingham commissioned her as justice of the peace for South Pass City. She served nine months on the bench, then resigned. During her term of service, not one of her decisions was reversed by a higher court.

Tradition has it that her own husband was one of the culprits haled before her. When she fined him and some cronies twenty dollars apiece for playing poker, he protested the judgment. Esther laughingly retorted that the fine stood because "it had been a blue moon since she had had any pin money from him."

Esther lived to see women by the thousands migrate to Wyoming Territory and there take their places at the ballot box beside their men, as they stood side by side with them on the ranges and in the Sioux uprisings. Her proudest moment came during that year of 1890 when Wyoming leaders refused to accept statehood unless Congress agreed that the woman suffrage act stayed on the books.

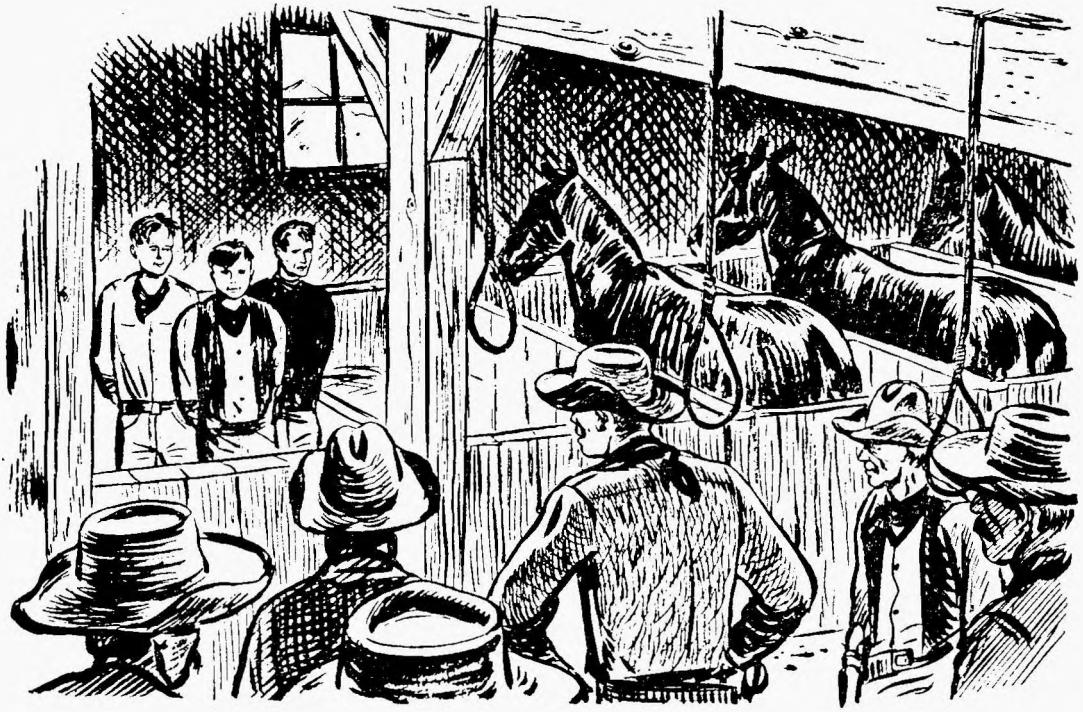
"We come in with our women," those leaders said bluntly, "or we stay out with them."

Wyoming was admitted with the ladies keeping all rights they had won during its twenty-odd years as a Territory. Significantly, perhaps, it was the first state to elect a woman governor, with Texas, also of the West, being the second.

Esther Morris, "Mother of Woman Suffrage," was nearing eighty-eight when she died on April 2, 1902. No monument marks her grave in what is now the ghost town of South Pass City. None except a cairn of stones that Grace Raymond Hebard, Wyoming state historian, trundled in a wheelbarrow to her last resting-place, some thirty years ago. Yet Wyoming's official motto, "The Equality State" is, in its own way, a lasting memorial to the woman whom J. Donald Adams declares to have led "one of the great revolutions of modern times."

Esther Morris had guts and brains, tenderness and understanding, and all the other resources that went to make up the pioneer woman. Her work might be eulogized in many fancy speeches and flowery elegies—still undelivered after this half-century which has seen her name sink into obscurity.

But the task that she accomplished is summed up best in the words of Don Adams, who wrote that her shining courage and downright common sense gave women "the right to vote for the first time anywhere in the world."



The Rustlers

By ELMORE LEONARD

Emmett Ryan vowed that rustlers must be hanged . . . but could he hang his own brother?

MOST OF THE TIME there was dead silence. When someone did say something it was never more than a word or two at a time: *More coffee?* Words that were not words because there was no thought behind them and they didn't mean anything. Words like *getting late*, when no one cared. Hardly even noises, because no one heard.

Stillness. Six men sitting together in a pine grove, and yet there was no sound. A boot scraped gravel and a tin cup clanked against rock, but they were like the words, little noises that started and stopped at the same time and were forgotten before they could be remembered.

More coffee? And an answering grunt that meant even less.

Five men scattered around a campfire that was dead, and the sixth man squatting at the edge of the pines looking out into the distance through the dismal reflection of a dying sun that made the grayish flat land look petrified in death and unchanged for a hundred million years.

Emmett Ryan stared across the flats toward the lighter gray outline in the distance that was Anton Chico, but he wasn't seeing the adobe brick of the village. He wasn't watching the black speck that was gradually getting bigger as it approached.

All of us knew that. We sat and watched Emmett Ryan's coat pulled

tight across his shoulder blades, not moving body or head. Just a broad smoothness of faded denim. We'd been looking at the same back all the way from Tascosa and in two hundred miles you can learn a lot about a back.

The black speck grew into a horse and rider, and as they moved up the slope toward the pines the horse and rider became Gosh Hall on his roan. Emmett walked over to meet him, but didn't say anything. The question was on his broad, red face and he didn't have to ask it.

Gosh Hall swung down from the saddle and put his hands on the small of his back, arching against the stiffness. "They just rode in," he said, and walked past the big man to the dead fire. "Who's got all the coffee?"

Emmett followed him with his eyes and the question was still there. It was something to see that big, plain face with the eyes open wide and staring when before they'd always been half-closed from squinting against the glare of twenty-odd years in open country. Now his face looked too big and loose for the small nose and slit of an Irish mouth. You could see the indecision and maybe a little fear in the wide-open eyes, something that had never been there before.

We'd catch ourselves looking at that face and have to look at something else quick, or Em would see somebody's jaw hanging open and wonder what the hell was wrong with him. We felt sorry for Em—I know I did—and it was a funny feeling to all of a sudden see the big TX ramrod that way.

Gosh looked like he had an apron on, standing over the dead fire with his hip cocked and the worn hide chaps covering his short legs. He held the cup halfway to his face, watching Em, waiting for him to ask the question. I thought Gosh was making it a little extra tough on Em; he could have come right out with it. Both of them just stared at each other.

Finally Emmett said, "Jack with them?"

Gosh took a sip of coffee first. "Him and Joe Anthony rode in together, and another man. Anthony and the other man went into the Senate House and Jack took the horses to the livery and then followed them over to the hotel."

"They see you?"

"Naw, I was down the street under a *ramada*. All they'd see'd be shadow."

"You sure it was them, Gosh?" I asked him.

"Charlie," Gosh said, "I got a picture in my head, and it's stuck there 'cause I never expected to see one like it. It's a picture of Jack and Joe Anthony riding into Magenta the same way a month ago. When you see something that's different or hadn't ought to be, it sticks in your head. And they was on the same mounts, Charlie."

Emmett went over to his dun mare and tightened the cinch like he wanted to keep busy and show us everything was going the same. But he was just fumbling with the strap, you could see that. His head swung around a few inches. "Jack look all right?"

Gosh turned his cup upside down and a few drops of coffee trickled down to the ashes at his feet. "I don't know, Em. How is a man who's just stole a hundred head of beef supposed to look?"

Emmett jerked his body around and the face was closed again for the first time in a week, tight and redder than usual. Then his jaw eased and his big hands hanging at his sides opened and closed and then went loose. Emmett

didn't have anything to grab. Some of the others were looking at Gosh Hall and probably wondering why the little rider was making it so hard for Em.

Emmett asked him, "Did you see Butzy?"

"He didn't ride in. I 'magine he's out with the herd." Gosh looked around. "Neal still out, huh?"

Neal Whaley had gone in earlier with Gosh, then split off over to where they were holding the herd, just north of Anton Chico. Neal was to watch and tell us if they moved them. Emmett figured they were holding the herd until a buyer came along. There were a lot of buyers in New Mexico who didn't particularly care what the brand read, but Emmett said they were waiting for a top bid or they would have sold all the stock before this.

Ned Bristol and Lloyd Cohane got up and stretched and then just stood there awkwardly looking at the dead fire, their boots, and each other. Lloyd pulled a blue bandanna from his coat pocket and wiped his face with it, then folded it and straightened it out thin between his fingers before tilting his chin up to tie it around his neck. Ned pushed his gun belt down lower on his hips and watched Emmett.

Dobie Shaw, the kid in our outfit, went over to his mount and pulled his Winchester from the boot and felt in the bag behind the saddle for a box of cartridges. Dobie had to do something too.

Ben Templin was older; he'd been riding better than thirty years. He eased back to the ground with his hands behind his head tilting his hat over his face and waited. Ben had all the time in the world.

Everybody was going through the motions of being natural, but fidgeting and acting restless and watching Emmett at the same time because we all knew it was time now, and Emmett didn't have any choice. That was what forced Emmett's hand, though we knew he would have done it anyway, sooner or later. But maybe we looked a little too anxious to him, when it was only restlessness. It was a long ride from Tascosa. A case of let's get it over with or else go on home—one way or the other, regardless of whose brother stole the cows.

Gosh Hall scratched the toe of his boot through the sand, kicking it over the ashes of the dead fire. "About that time, ain't it, Em?"

Emmett exhaled like he was very tired. "Yeah, it's about that time." He looked at every face, slowly, before turning to his mare.

IT'S ROUGHLY A HUNDRED AND THIRTY miles from Tascosa, following the Canadian, to Trementina on the Conchas, then another thirty-five miles south, swinging around Mesa Montosa to Anton Chico, on the Pecos. Counting detours to find water holes and trailing the wrong sign occasionally, that's about two hundred miles of sun, wind, and New Mexico desert—and all to bring back a hundred head of beef owned by a Chicago company that tallied close to a quarter million all over the Panhandle and north-central Texas.

The western section of the TX Company was headquartered at Sudan that year, with most of the herds north of Tascosa and strung out west along the Canadian. Emmett Ryan was ramrod of the home crew at Sudan, but he spent a week or more at a time out on the grass with the herds. That was why he happened to be with us when R. D. Perris, the company man, rode in. We

were readying to go into Magenta for a few when Perris came beating his mount into camp. Even in the cool of the evening the horse was flaked white and about to drop and Perris was so excited he could hardly get the words out. And finally when he told his story there was dead silence and all you could hear was R. D. Perris breathing like his chest was about to rip open.

Jack Ryan and Frank Butzinger—Frank, who nobody ever gave credit for having any sand—and over a hundred head of beef hadn't been seen on the west range for three days. R. D. Perris had said, "The tracks follow the river west, but we figured Jack was taking them to new grass. But then the tracks just kept on going. . . ."

Emmett was silent from that time on. He asked a few questions, but he was pretty sure of the answers before he asked them. There was that talk for weeks about Jack having been seen in Tascosa and Magenta with Joe Anthony. And there weren't many people friendly with Joe Anthony. In his time, he'd had his picture on wanted dodgers more than once. Two shootings for sure, and a few holdups, but the holdups were just talk. Nobody ever pinned anything on him, and with his gunhand reputation, nobody made any accusations.

Gosh Hall had seen them together in Magenta and he told Emmett to his face that he didn't like it; but Emmett had defended him and said Jack was just sowing oats because he was still young and hadn't got his sense of values yet. But Lloyd Cohane was there that time at the line camp when Emmett dropped in and chewed hell out of Jack for palling with Joe Anthony. Then came the time Emmett walked into the saloon in Tascosa with his gun out and pushed it into Joe Anthony's belly before Joe even saw him and told him to ride and keep riding.

Jack was there, drunk like he usually was in town, but he sobered quick and followed Anthony out of the saloon when Emmett prodded him out, and laughed right in Emmett's face when Em told him to stay where he was. And he was laughing and weaving in the saddle when he rode out of town with Anthony.

Until that night Perris came riding in with his story, Em hadn't seen his brother. So you know what he was thinking; what all of us were thinking.

Riding the two hundred miles to find the herd was part of the job, but knowing you were trailing a friend made the job kind of sour and none of us was sure if we wanted to find the cattle. Jack Ryan was young and wild and drank too much and laughed all the time, but he had more friends than any rider in the Panhandle.

Like Ben Templin said: "Jack's a good boy, but he's got an idea life's just a big can-can dancer with four fingers of scootawaboo in each hand." And that was about it.

THE SPLOTCH OF WHITE that was Anton Chico from a distance gradually got bigger and cleared until finally right in front of us it was gray adobe brick, blocks of it, dull and lifeless in the cold late sunlight. Emmett slowed us to a walk the last few hundred feet approaching the town's main street and motioned Ben Templin up next to him.

"Ben," he said, "you take Dobie with you and cut for that back street yonder and come up behind the livery. Don't let anybody see you and hush the stableman if he gets loud about what you're doing. Maybe Butzy'll come

along, Ben—if he isn't there already."

I looked at Emmett watching Ben Templin and Dobie Shaw cut off, and there it was. His old face again. All closed and hard with the crow's-feet streaking from the corners of his eyes. And his mouth tight like it used to be when he thought and ordered men at the same time, because he always knew what he was doing. You could see Emmett knew what he was doing now, that he'd set his mind. And when Emmett Ryan set his mind his pride saw to it that it stayed set.

Emmett walked his mount down the left side of the narrow main street with the rest of us strung out behind. When he veered over to a hitchrack about halfway down the second block, we veered with him and tied up, straggled along before two store fronts.

Em stepped up on the board walk and moved leisurely toward the Senate House hotel almost at the end of the block. He stopped as he crossed the alley next to the hotel and nodded to Lloyd Cohane, then bent his head toward the alley and moved it in a half-circle over his big shoulders. Lloyd moved off down the alley toward the back of the hotel.

"Go on with him, Ned," Em whispered. "Stick near the kitchen door and if anybody but the cook comes out shoot his pants off."

Ned moved off after Lloyd, both carrying carbines.

Em looked at Gosh and me, but didn't say anything. He just looked and that meant we were with him and supposed to back up anything he did. Then he turned toward the hotel and slipped his revolver out in the motion. Gosh moved right after him and pointed the barrel of his Winchester out in front of him.

Two idlers sitting in front of the hotel stared at us trying to make out they weren't staring, and as soon as we passed them I heard their chairs scrape and their footsteps hurrying down the boards. A man across the street pushed through the saloon doors without even putting his hands out. A rider slowed up in front of the hotel as if about to turn in and then he kicked his mount into a trot down the street.

In the hotel lobby you could still hear the horse clopping down the street and it made the lobby seem even more quiet and comfortable, feeling the coolness inside and picturing the horse on the dusty street. But there was the clerk with his mouth open watching Emmett walk toward the café entrance, his spurs chinging with each step.

It seemed like, for a show like this, everything was moving too fast. The next thing, we were in the café part and Jack Ryan and Joe Anthony and the other man were looking at us like they couldn't believe their eyes.

None of them moved. Jack's jaw was open with a mouthful of beef, his eyes almost as wide open as his mouth. The other man had a *taco* in his fingers raised halfway to his mouth and he just held it there. Didn't move it up or down. Joe Anthony's right hand was around a glass of something yellow like mescal. His left hand was below the level of the table. The three of them had their hats on, pushed back, and they looked dirty and tired.

Jack chewed and swallowed hard and then he smiled. "Damn, Em, you must have flown!"

The other man looked at us one at a time slowly, then shrugged his shoulders and said, "What the hell," and shoved the *taco* in his mouth.

Joe Anthony wiped the back of his

hand over his mouth and moved the hand back, smoothing the long mustaches with the knuckle of his index finger. The other hand was still under the table.

Emmett held his revolver pointed square at Joe Anthony and seemed to be unmindful of the other two men. Lloyd and Ned came through the kitchen door and moved around behind Emmett.

"Get up," Em ordered. "And take off your belts."

Somebody's chair scraped, but Joe Anthony said, "Hold it!" and it was quiet.

Anthony was staring back at Emmett. "Do I look like a green kid to you, Ryan?" he said, and half smiled. "You're not telling anybody what to do, cowboy."

"I said get up," Em repeated.

Joe Anthony kept on smiling like he thought Emmett was a fool. He shook his head slowly. "Ryan, the longer you stand there, the shorter your chances are of leaving here on your two feet."

"You're all mouth," Emmett said. "Just mouth."

The outlaw's expression didn't change. His face was good-looking in a swarthy kind of way, but gaunt and hungry-looking with pale, shallow eyes like a man who forgot where his conscience was, or that he ever had one.

His smile sagged a little and he said, "Ryan, let's quit playing. You ride the hell out of here before I shoot you."

"I'm not playing," Emmett said, leveling the revolver. "Get up, quick."

"Ryan," Joe Anthony whispered impatiently, "I've had a Colt leveled on your belly since the second you come through that doorway."

I thought I knew Emmett Ryan, but I didn't know him as well as I supposed. His face didn't change its expression, but his finger moved on the trigger and the room filled with the explosion. His thumb yanked on the hammer and he fired again right on top of the first one.

Joe Anthony went back with his chair, fell hard and lay still. His pistol was still in the holster on his right hip.

Emmett looked down at him. "You're all mouth, Anthony. All mouth."

Nobody said anything after that. We were looking at Em and Em was looking at Joe Anthony stretched out on the floor. I heard steps behind me and there was Dobie Shaw tiptoeing in and looking like he'd dive out the window if anybody said anything.

Emmett waved his gun at the other man and glanced at his brother. "Who's this?"

Jack spoke easily. "Earl Roach. We picked him up for a trail driver. He didn't know it was rustled stock."

Roach was unfastening his gun belt. He shot a look toward Jack. "Boy," he said, "you take care of your troubles and I'll take care of mine."

Dobie Shaw moved up behind Emmett hesitantly and waited for the big foreman to look his way.

"Mr. Ryan—Ben's holding Butzy over to the livery." He went on hurriedly trying to get the whole story out before Em asked any questions. "Butzy walked right in and didn't move after Ben throwed down on him, but there was another one back a ways and he turned and rode like hell when he saw me and Ben with our guns out. Me and Ben didn't even get a shot at him 'fore he was round the corner and gone."

"All right, Dobie. You go on back with Ben." Emmett hesitated and glanced at Jack like he was making up his mind all over again, but the doubt

passed off quickly. He said, "We'll be over directly. You go on and tell Ben to keep Butzy right there."

FRANK BUTZINGER was flat against the boards of a stall, though Ben Templin was standing across the open part of the stable smoking a cigarette with his carbine propped against the wall. Ben wasn't paying any attention to him, but even in the dim light you could see Butzy was about ready to die of fright.

Gosh Hall pushed Jack and Earl Roach toward the stall that Butzy was in and mumbled something, probably swearing. Jack looked around at him with a half smile and shook his head like a father playing Indians with his youngster. Humoring him.

Emmett stood out in the open part with the rest of us spread around now. He said, "You sell the stock yet?"

"A few," Jack answered. "We got almost a hundred head."

"You got the money?"

"What do you think?"

The foreman motioned to Gosh Hall. "Get some line and tie their hands behind them."

The little cowboy's face brightened and he moved into the stall lifting a coil of rope from the side wall. When he pulled his knife and started to cut it into pieces, the stableman came running over. He'd been standing in the front doorway, but I hadn't noticed him there before.

He ran over yelling, "Hey, that's my rope!"

Gosh reached out, laughing, and grabbed one of his braces and snapped it against his faded red-flannel undershirt. "Get back, old man, you're interfering with justice." Then he pushed the man hard against the stall partition.

Emmett took hold of his elbow and pulled him out toward the front of the livery. "You stay out here," he said. "This isn't any of your business." He turned from the man and nodded his head to the stalls where three horses were.

The stable was large, high-ceilinged, with stalls lining both sides. The open area was wide, but longer than it was wide, with heavy timbers overhead reaching from lofts on both sides that ran the length of the stable above the stalls. The stable was empty but for the three horses toward the back,

"Bring those horses up here." Em said it to no one in particular.

When Dobie and Ned and I led the mounts up, I heard Lloyd ask Em if he should go get our horses. Em shook his head, but didn't say anything.

Lloyd said, "Shouldn't we be getting out to the stock, Em?"

"We got time. Neal's watching the cows," Em reminded him. "The man that was with Butzy spread his holler if there were any others out there. They'd be halfway to Santa Fe by now."

He turned on Gosh impatiently. "Come on, get 'em mounted!"

I picked up one of their saddles from the rack and walked up behind Gosh, who was pushing the three men toward the horses.

"Look out, Gosh. Let me get the saddles on before you get in the way. You can't throw 'em on with your arms behind your back."

Gosh twisted his mouth into a smile and looked past me at Emmett. There was a wad of tobacco in his cheek that made his thin face lopsided, like a jagged rock with hair on it. He shifted the wad, still smiling, and then spit over to the side.

"You tell him, Em," he said.

Emmett looked at me with his closed-up, leathery face. He stared hard as if afraid his eyes would waver. "They don't need the saddles."

Gosh swatted me playfully with the end of rope in his hand. "Want me to paint you a picture, Charlie?" He laughed and walked out through the wide entrance.

Gosh didn't have to paint a picture. Ben Templin dropped his cigarette. Lloyd and Ned and Dobie just stared at Emmett, but none of them said anything. Em stood there like a rock and stared back like he was defying anybody to object.

The boys looked away and moved about uncomfortably. They weren't about to go against Emmett Ryan. They were used to doing what they were told because Em was always right, and weren't sure that he wasn't right even now. A hanging isn't an uncommon thing where there is little law. Along the Pecos there was less than little. Still, it didn't rub right—even if Em was following his conscience, it didn't rub right.

I hesitated until the words were in my mouth and I'd have had bit my tongue off to hold them back. "You setting yourself up as the law?" It was supposed to have a bite to it, but the words sounded weak and my voice wasn't even.

Emmett said, "You know what the law is." He beckoned to the coil of rope Gosh had hung back on the boards. "That's it right there, Charlie. You know better than that." Emmett was talking to himself as well as me, but you didn't remind that hard-headed Irishman of things like that.

"Look, Em. Let's get the law and handle this right."

"It's black and white, it's two and two, if you steal cows and get caught, you hang."

"Maybe. But it's not up to you to decide. Let's get the law."

"I've already decided," was all he said.

The stable hand crept up close to us and waited until there was a pause. "The deputy ain't here," the old man said. "He rode down to Lincoln yesterday morning to join the posse." He waited for someone to show interest, but no one said a word. "They're getting a posse up on account of there's word Bill Bonney's at Fort Sumner."

He stepped back looking proud as could be over his news. I could have kicked his seat flat for what he said.

Gosh came back with two coiled lariats on his arm and a third one in his hands. He was shaping a knot at one end of it.

Earl Roach looked at Gosh, then up to the heavy rafter that crossed above the three horses, then Jack's head went up too.

Gosh spit and grinned at them, forming a loop in the second rope. "What'd you expect 'd happen?"

Jack kept his eyes on the rafter. "I didn't expect to get caught."

"Jack's always smiling into the sunshine, ain't he?" Gosh pushed Earl Roach toward his horse. "Mount up, mister."

Roach jerked his shoulder away from him. "I look like a bird to you? You want me up on that horse, you'll have to put me up."

"Earl, I'll put you up and help take you down."

When he got to Butzy and offered him a leg up, Butzy made a funny sound like a whine and started to back away, but Gosh grabbed him by his shirt before he took two steps. Butzy

looked over Gosh's bony shoulder, his eyes popping out of his pasty face.

"Em, what you fixin' to do?" His voice went up a notch, and louder. "What you fixin' to do? You just scarin' us, Em?"

If it was a joke, Butzy didn't want to play the fool, but you could tell by his voice what he was thinking. Em didn't answer him.

Gosh finished knotting the third rope and handed it to Dobie, who looked at it like he'd never seen a lariat before.

Gosh said, "Make yourself useful and throw that rope over the rafter."

He went out and brought his horse in and mounted so he could slip the nooses over their heads, but he stood in the stirrups and still couldn't reach the tops of their heads. Emmett told him to get down and ordered Ben Templin to climb up and fix the ropes. Ben did it, but Em had to tell him three times.

Before he jumped down, Ben lighted cigarettes and gave them to Jack and Earl. Butzy was weaving his head around so Ben couldn't get one in his mouth. Just rolling his head around with his eyes closed, moaning.

Gosh looked up at him and laughed out loud. "You praying, Butzy?" he called out. "Better pray hard, you ain't got much time," and kept on laughing.

Ben Templin made a move toward Gosh, but Emmett caught his arm.

"Hold still, Ben." He looked past him at Gosh. "You can do what you're doing with your mouth shut."

Gosh moved behind the horses with the short end of rope in his hand. He edged over behind Earl Roach's horse. "Age before beauty, I always say."

Butzy's eyes opened up wide. "God, Em! Please Em—please—honest to God—I didn't know they was stealing the herd! Swear to God, Em, I thought Perris told Jack to sell the herd. Please, Em—I—let me go and I'll never show my face again. Please—"

"You'll never show it anyway where you're going," Gosh cracked.

Earl Roach was looking at Butzy with a blank expression. His head turned to Jack, holding his chin up to ease his neck away from the chafe of the rope. "Who's your friend?"

Jack Ryan's lips, with the cigarette hanging, formed a small smile at Roach. "Never saw him before in my life." His young face was paler than usual, you could see it through beard and sunburn, but his voice was slow and even with that little edge of sarcasm it usually carried.

Roach shook his head to drop the ash from his cigarette. "Beats me where he come from," he said.

Ben Templin swore in a slow whisper. He mumbled, "It's a damn waste of good guts."

Lloyd and Ned and Dobie were looking at the two of them like they couldn't believe their eyes and then seemed to all drop their heads about the same time. Embarrassed. Like they didn't rate to be in the same room with Jack and Earl. I felt it too, but felt a mad coming on along with it.

"Dammit, Em! You're going to wait for the deputy!" I knew I was talking, but it didn't sound like me. "You're going to wait for the deputy whether you like it or not!"

Emmett just stared back and I felt like running for the door. Emmett stood there alone like a rock you couldn't budge and then Ben Templin was beside him with his hand on Em's arm, but not just resting it there, holding the forearm hard. His other hand was on his pistol butt.

"Charlie's right, Em," Ben said. "I'm not sure how you got us this far, or why, but ain't you or God Almighty going to hang those boys by yourself."

They stood there, those two big men, their faces not a foot apart, not telling a thing by their faces, but you got the feeling if one of them moved the livery would collapse like a twister hit it.

Finally Emmett blinked his eyes, and moved his arm to make Ben let go.

"All right, Ben." It was just above a whisper and sounded tired. "We've all worked together a long time and have always agreed—if it was a case of letting you in on the agreeing. We won't change it now."

Gosh came out from behind the horses. Disappointed and mad. He moved right up close to Emmett. "You going to let this woman—"

That was all he got a chance to say. Emmett swung his fist against that bony tobacco bulge and Gosh flattened against the board wall before sliding down into a heap.

Emmett started to walk out the front and then he turned around. "We're waiting on the deputy until tomorrow morning. If he don't show by then, this party takes up where it left off."

He angled out the door toward the Senate House, still the boss. The hard-headed Irishman's pride had to get the last word in whether he meant it or not.

THE DEPUTY GOT BACK late that night. You could see by his face that he hadn't gotten what he'd gone for. Emmett stayed in his room at the Senate House, but Ben Templin and I were waiting at the jail when the deputy returned—though I don't know what we would have done if he hadn't—with two bottles of the yellowest mescal you ever saw to ease his saddle sores and dusty throat.

We told him how we'd put three of our boys in his jail—just a scare, you understand—when they'd got drunk and thought it'd be fun to run off with a few head of stock. Just a joke on the owner, you understand. And Emmett Ryan, the ramrod, being one of them's brother, he had to act tougher than usual, else the boys'd think he was playing favorites. Like him always giving poor Jack the wildest broncs and making him ride drag on the trail drives.

Em was always a little too serious, anyway. Of course, he was a good man, but he was a big, red-faced Irishman who thought his pride was a stone god to burn incense in front of. And hell, he had enough troubles bossing the TX crew without getting all worked up over his brother getting drunk and playing a little joke on the owners—you been drunk like that, haven't you, Sheriff? Hell, everybody has. A sheriff with guts enough to work in Bill Bonney's country had more to do than chase after drunk cowpokes who wouldn't harm a fly. And even if they were serious, what's a few cows to an outfit that owns a quarter million?

And along about halfway down the second bottle— So why don't we turn the joke around on old Em and let the boys out tonight? We done you a turn by getting rid of Joe Anthony. Old Em'll wake up in the morning and be madder than hell when he finds out, and that will be some sight to see.

The deputy could hardly wait.

In the morning, it was Ben who had to tell Em what happened. I was there in body only, with my head pounding like a pulverizer. The deputy didn't show up at all.

We waited for Emmett to fly into somebody, but he just looked at us, from one to the next. Finally he turned toward the livery.

"Let's go take the cows home," was all he said.

Not an hour later we were looking down at the flats along the Pecos where the herd was. Neal Whaley was riding toward us.

Emmett had been riding next to me all the way out from Anton Chico. When he saw Neal, he broke into a gallop to meet him, and that was when I thought he said, "Thanks, Charlie."

I know his head turned, but there was the beat of his horse when he started the gallop, and that mescal pounding at my brains. Maybe he said it and maybe he didn't.

Knowing that Irishman, I'm not going to ask him.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

It took some several years for civilization, silk toppers, thirty-day notes, and compound interest to overwhelm the gold camps of the Mother Lode. However, they came in time and with them came due process of law to replace the summary justice of the Miners Court. One of the more unreconstructed fragments from '49 was eventually summoned to a jury panel to be used in a murder case in a town as nameless as he must be.

In due course, he was placed in the box for prospective jurors while the attorneys gave him the business. The defense attorney, of course, asked him the statutory question whether he had any conscientious scruples against inflicting the death penalty for murder. In a loud, clear voice, the prospective juror replied, "I have!"

Broad smiles wreathed the courtroom, with an audible snigger here and there, as the audience remembered vividly that the juror being questioned had been the Captain of the local Committee of Vigilance in better days and had personally hanged anyone needing it, summarily and out-of-hand. The Court took notice of the reaction before it and knowing the juror of old, reminded him of his oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The ex-Vigilante looked His Honor square in the eye and his temper was in his voice.

"I'm telling the truth, Your Honor," he said. "This prisoner's a stranger to me—and I don't hold with hanging a man unless I've got something against him!"

He was excused for cause.

—Old Hutch

A NOVELETTE BY GEORGE C. APPELL

Challenge West

Egged on by renegade whites, Kiowas and Comanches were on the warpath again. Jeff McCall, circuit-riding medico, judged that the situation called for emergency surgery.

CHAPTER ONE

Ready for Trouble

AT THREE O'CLOCK that morning Jefferson John McCall, M.D., rose to a mud-black world topped with swollen clouds that were breaking in violence against a northeast wind and releasing fat rain which searched through the whipsawed planking of his home in Comanche Wells and put a sticky sweat upon everything.

In the flapping shadows of a lamp, he started the stove and set out coffee, then looked to his bag of instruments which he would carry in an oilskin roll behind his cantle. There were his lancets, honed sharp and bright; his

catgut and Blasius pincers and the Darmschere for drawing bullets; his laudanum and haemostats and ether and swobs—and, of course, the pharmacy box.

As the coffee came to a boil he heard his wife's first stirrings from the next room. He drew his Pony Express .31-30 from its oiled holster, unwound the

cord attached to its butt-ring, and held it up so that the gun could dangle freely and straighten out the cord. He yanked up the gun and examined it with care, then cracked it open, spilled out the cartridges, and looked down the barrel.

He snapped it shut again, pulled the trigger several times, sighted it on the candle flame, and clicked it once or twice more. Satisfied that it was in proper working order, he reloaded it after examining each cartridge. He took some more cartridges from a pouch and put them in the flare pocket of his traveling coat; the gun went back into its holster, and the holster went under the doctor's left armpit.

Then he turned to his coffee and sipped it gratefully. Today would be a sullen, end-of-the-world day, as yesterday had been, and for as many days back as Dr. McCall cared to remember. The weather didn't affect him adversely, he was yet supple of body and temper at thirty-seven, and he pondered only the important things in life, the things that he could guide his living and thinking by. A man's existence, say, or a family's future. The weather—well, you couldn't challenge the weather and do much with it.

Theresa McCall came in from the next room, her slim body wrapped in a cloth duster that was caught at the waist by a bright red sash. She was a tall woman with handsome features and an assured carry of the chin, so that even at this early, miserable hour she seemed quite prepared to make any decision that might confront her.

She raised a hand to the lintel and leaned on it, watching her man sip scalding coffee. "I suppose you have to go, Jeff." There was no whininess in her tone, only resignation.

"They pay me to ride circuit every three months, and I'd just as soon do it now as later."

The doctor drew candlelike fingers the length of his long-jawed face and smiled upon his wife. Comfortable humor stood deep in his ash-gray eyes as he added, "I don't think anything important will come up. Emetics, and per-

haps a feloned finger that'll need reducing."

"I smell gun grease." She said that smiling, so that any accusative implication might be softened.

Jeff shook his big head. "A habit I have, that's all. There'll be no use for the weapon. If I see any Indians, I'll prescribe a diet of government salt beef unless they leave me alone."

Theresa stepped to the stove and poured herself some coffee. "I still wish you'd take Jimmie Eldridge. He can ride and shoot and—"

"I'll not be encumbered, my dear." He raised his cup to her. "Cheers—and please don't worry."

"I'll try not to."

They gazed at each other a moment through coffee steam, those two. They had packed a lot of living into one short year, and they understood each other well enough to click but not so well that either took their marriage for granted. The year before—early summer of '89—Jeff had come out to Oklahoma to take a chance on winning some land when the Comanche Reserve was opened on a raffle; and the widow from northward, Theresa Terry, had come down for the same purpose.

More than a thousand people had won sections and settled to new lives on that borderland, but neither Jeff nor Theresa chose to plant or to plow. They had gone to a minister each with the faint memory of a past marriage in his mind, and had erased those memories by commencing their own.

Jeff leaned across the lamplight and kissed her rough and hard. "I'll be a week, maybe more. You have company with the Killenroes and Ellimans and Hebbles and such." He winked at her, because it was a joke between them that those people, while fine and steady, had little to offer in the way of small talk. "If I find a copy of *Taylor's Monthly Fashion Report* somewhere along the route, I'll steal it for you."

"Don't come back without it." She made a face at him as he went out.

In the pre-dawn darkness, wind rushed past him with its fat, stinging rain. He got a lamp going in the shed and soothed his fawn-colored mare and talked to her while he saddled up. He liked the mare for circuit work because she was steadier than a gelding might be, and seemed to have more endurance for the long hauls. And she was larger than most—sixteen hands—and could produce speed when it was needed.

McCall always rode padrone-fashion, with spade bits, Spanish housings, and a silver-studded cantle. He was the only doctor in the entire Reserve and he was not going to disgrace himself or his Hippocratic Oath by appearing on the land dressed as a tramp—self or horse.

He led the mare to the kitchen, and secured his cantle roll. He kissed his wife's cheek again, swung a long leg over the damp saddle and mounted. Below him, down beyond the intersection of Sunflower Walk and East Street, sallow lights showed in the Boomer House. The rest of the world was still dumb and dark in a trance of weather.

Pretty soon, he knew, the town drunk would awake with a shriek and rush into the dawn to escape the ethereal Apaches who were always pursuing him.

The doctor kicked the mare's flank and swung his bits west toward the desolate country beyond. The only light he saw now was an orange glow coming from the Eldridge's tar paper shack out in the distance where young Jimmie, the blacksmith's son, was already pumping his forge into heat.

Theresa McCall looked long after her husband as he topped the rise, became silhouetted for an instant against the paling skies, then disappeared from sight entirely. A sense of utter loneliness caught her under the heart, as it always did when he went away.

She turned back into the kitchen and listened to the humming of the wind in the alder tops above her. It was restless and urgent and complaining, that dirty wind, and she wanted to speak sharply to it and command it to go away.

A dim shriek sounded from town, and she started. But it was only the drunk, and she relaxed.

Or tried to.

JIMMIE ELDRIDGE stepped away from his rearing forge and peered into the wet grayness as Jeff McCall drew up and leaned his weight into a stirrup.

"Mornin', Doc." Jimmie was fifteen now, and straight as a sapling despite apprenticeship to a trade that kept him bent over most of the day.

"Morning, Jim. I'm on my way. Sometime today, take a look at Mrs. McCall's team, will you? She might want to ride out to see the Killenroes."

Jeff smiled as he said that, for he knew that she would not. But he wanted to create a diversion for her and cause someone to visit. The only ladies in town who were anywhere near Theresa's age were those described in the monthly newspaper as being "of the hetaerae." So she had to ride to the outlying sections if she wanted to talk to a friend.

Jimmie Eldridge stroked the mare's tawny neck with a callused hand. It was getting light now, light enough to show the elegant horse furniture and the casual elegance of the doctor's saddle posture. Jimmie looked up.

"Don't s'pose you'd like some company, Doc?"

"Thanks, Jim, but there's little need."

"I ain't so sure." Jimmie stood closer. "Old Man Cronkhite was past earlier, an' he said the Comanches was riding with the Kiowas."

"Off reservation?" A thin finger of alarm tapped the doctor's conscience.

"Yessuh! Old Man Cronkhite, he said John Grubb at Washita Station ast him to git a tellygraph over to Fort Sill. He says they slipped out've Wildhorse Agency an' got some buffler guns somewheres."

"Well, maybe they want buffalo meat."

The doctor rode on into the rain-whipped grayness of early morning. He was slightly worried, not for himself but for what might happen to the homesteaders if any Indians decided to raid this far east. The 'steaders were Dr. McCall's concern, they were his people, and he wanted nothing to happen to them that he could not cure. He had no brief against the Indians, but he did believe that they should stay home and not gallivant all over the place scaring folks with drunken threats.

His uneasiness left him as full daylight came to the land. He put his attention to the muddy broadness that was called the road, alert for mires or pot holes. It was a hard country during the rains, and not too soft during dry season. It could break your heart if you'd let it, which was why only the good men stayed.

It was dusty and glaring in summer and balefully hideous in winter; and right now, in spring, its whole nap was ruffled and the land looked as if it had been rubbed the wrong way.

There was a whispering in the air that annoyed the doctor and made him twist his head this way and that, as if in fear of being dry-gulched. Toward midmorning he put that from him and concentrated on the road. There was no use in seeing ghosts where ghosts did not tread, and if the Indians were up, they'd be much farther west, between Moore's Ordinary and Washita Station.

McCall respected the land because despite its raw ugliness it presented a challenge to a man's way of living, and it either bent him to its will or he bent it. And if he didn't, it crucified him and his future.

The doctor hit his pommel a few times with the heel of his hand, vowing to himself that no depredations by acre-greedy renegades must interfere with the new lives of a thousand peaceful people living on this productive Reserve. It had been fashioned by rude and violent men, to be sure, in an age when there was no Oklahoma or Texas or anything else. They had wanted peace but they'd had no time for it; living violently, they'd died violently.

But most of those were gone now and all that was left to mark their passing were a few grave cairns and some shot-up trees and walls and, occasionally, a rotted rope trailing from a dead limb. It was the new people who counted, the ones who were trying to shape their lives into an image of prosperity and decency. And Jefferson John McCall, M.D., represented most of those people.

He slipped a hand inside his coat and closed it over the beaded butt of the .31-30, for reassurance's sake. He could snag it out and fire it in less than a second and, in fact, had done so the year before when Matt Varner had tried to ambush him for being witness to one of Matt's murders. The doctor practiced self-defense often in his woodlot at home, whirling and snagging and firing, dropping and turning and firing again. A pile of rusted, bullet-punched tin cans attested to his marksmanship.

He rode through the viscous slot of Pony Gap at noon on that wild day, and gave loose rein to his mare on the downslope, letting her pick her own careful way into the wind-lashed bottoms of Caddo's Ferry. He was hunkered low in his coat, shielding himself from the rains that spun down and smoked away over the slopes, and more than once he had to pull up his feet to ride through flank-high clutchweed that bearded the trail to the Ferry.

The stream was booming along between low banks, filled with whirling driftwood and the half-frozen accumulations of a long winter. There was no bottom to the trail here, and he whacked his mare and braced his lean frame against the weather and went on through it, as only circuit riders and escaping criminals did.

The ferryman, Mr. Harans, was a shrunken little man who resembled a very old and a very evil baboon.

"Dollar for the horse, fifty cents for you."

He unlooped the tow and cast off, and the line sang through yellow waters and came in over a bollard. Mr. Harans pulled steadily, and the overhead loops scraped along on their cable.

Dr. McCall dismounted and stretched his legs. "It's a ripper, isn't it?"

Mr. Harans screwed his eyes into an expression of pain. "Seen wuss. Where you for, Doc?"

"Washita Station and return."

Mr. Harans hauled manfully on the tow, sweating and grunting. "I got cricks in my back that keep me awake nights."

"You haul much?" The ferry was almost across now.

"Not so much."

"Try sleeping on a bedboard. When I come back next week, I'll examine you."

Mr. Harans leered at Jeff. "Next week? If this tow's here next week, I'll be a mite surprised. An' if you're here, you can have my seat in hell."

The ferry bumped against the bank and Mr. Harans snaked out a line and laid its loop cleanly over the tie-post.

Jeff mounted. "Going out of business?"

Mr. Harans spat into the current. "Somebody else might be comin' into it. Cronkhite was past, an' he said the Mangum Boys an' Joe Twombly are up from Texas swappin' off guns to Comanch' an' Kiowa in return for gettin' 'em to plunder west o' here. Walter Mangum allus did hate the 'steaders for gettin' all that land free, on a raffle. He wants it for hisself."

Jeff kicked his mare onto the sodden bank. "Suppose a troop comes out from Fort Sill? Or up from Fort Hood?"

"Troop o' what? Horse-sojers?" And Mr. Harans spat again. "Hell, it'll take 'em a week to get here an' a month to find the guns."

"Then we'd better devise our own methods." Jeff climbed from the bottoms and took the upland route again, grateful for the higher and firmer ground but colder, nonetheless, for the change. There were no other travelers, no houses, and all settlements lay ahead.

He spent that night in some forlorn cottonwoods, crouched in the flimsy protection of a quivering deadfall and feeling for the first time the stringency of his contract with the Homestead Association. He slept badly and awoke stiff-limbed and coughing, and pushed on west.

He re-entered the mist-shrouded bottoms where another stream looped across his trail, and spent hours therein searching for a suitable ford. He found one and, in the stinging drive of the northeaster, ascended and came again to the trampled trace of the trail. A day more, he reckoned, and he'd be at Moore's Ordinary, where he could take care of his mare and pass the word for the sick and the ailing, the lame and the lazy.

He gave the mare her head toward a pine stand, face low against the weather, arms crossed inside his coat to relieve the ache in his fingers. His feet were numb.

The Mangum Boys.

That phrase clattered through his head and left a warning echo, like the shimmering vibrations of a beaten gong. He knew of them, and the knowledge was unclean. They had been rustlers, and later stage robbers—holdovers from the violent men who first had come to this land, and who now wanted a king's share of it in return for remaining so long on it.

Midnight traders, they were, dealing out rifles and ammunition to half-domesticated Indians in order to frighten off the 'steaders and open the fallow land for themselves. It wasn't nice to think about, but it remained in the doctor's mind like a conscience stain.

He slept in the pines, blue-faced and shivering, and was on his way long before dawn. It was still raining.

He rode until noon, and came quite suddenly to Moore's Ordinary. The wind was still brushing in gusts but its force was weakening and the skies were less mournful. By the time he was entering the Ordinary's single

street, the rain and the wind were gone and there was a grinning hint of light overhead.

Log buildings were irregularly aligned on each side of the churned street; some were cabins, a few were false-fronted houses and one was a tavern. Jeff McCall put up there, handed his mare to a boy, and carried his instrument bag inside with him. A popping fire filled the wide hearth, blackened and caked from much use, and a free-Comanche girl was laying out pewterware.

Jethroe Moore was a wide-bellied man with a bald head and a perpetual frown. "Seen any paint an' feathers, Doc? Cronkhite was through here an' said John Grubb's got the wind up."

"The marshal? Damned if he has."

Moore shook his head impatiently. "Damned if he hasn't. Arthur Mears, the Wildhorse Agent, was killed two days ago. What's left of him's over to Washita Station now."

The doctor felt fear again, this time more authoritatively than before. "You sure that Indians killed him?"

Moore snorted dismissively. "Who else? The Mangums won't put a direct hand into anythin'."

Dr. McCall permitted himself the luxury of silent profanity. With such reasonless incidents the whole structure of a peaceful country could collapse into smoking ruins and set the entire frontier back twenty years—all because a handful of men wanted land that was not theirs.

"Are they headed this way?" Jeff asked.

"They're all over the place, Cronkhite says." Jethroe Moore let out his breath in a long gust. "My little girl's ailin'." Something else seemed to be on his mind too, but he didn't voice it. He started to speak, and didn't.

Then the door screaked open and a small girl came in and stared uncertainly at McCall, who was standing high and muddy and gaunt above her. She curtsied and walked toward him with the ancient and solemn dignity of all of womanhood.

"I thought you were Harvey," she said. She asked her father, "Is he home?"

"No, he ain't." Moore sat down suddenly, his fingers locked around his knees, his head down. Harvey, whoever he was, had been uppermost in the man's mind. "Go to the doctor, there, an' cough for him."

She faced Jeff, opened her mouth, stuck out her tongue, and, abruptly, coughed. Jeff took off his hat and knelt to her and swung her shoulders around to the light and peered down her throat. He asked her where she lived.

"Here, sir. I'm Marianna Moore. Harvey's my big brother, but he's not home, he's gone to the hills."

"I see." Jeff fumbled in his bag and brought out a salve. "Let's put some of this in your throat, it won't hurt. Then we'll send you to bed. You've got to stay in bed for three days—hear? And I'll tell your father what you can eat."

"Yes, sir."

Jethroe Moore apparently wasn't listening, he was still sitting with his head lowered and his shoulders sagging. Jeff sent Marianna off to bed, closed his bag and approached the tavern owner.

"She has no mother, has she?" he asked.

"No." Moore shrugged apathetically.

"No mother, no sisters or friends. No dolls, even. It's—it's a hard life for her here."

Jeff said, "Here's the diet list. It calls for broth and light food. She has a quinsy throat that shouldn't get any worse if you follow directions."

Moore looked up. "You goin' to Washita now?" He took the list and held it loosely.

"I am. There's no charge for my services here; the Homestead Association pays my fee while I'm on circuit."

Moore nodded heavily. "I wasn't thinking of that." He heaved himself to his feet and faced the doctor. "You heard what she said about her brother—that he's run off? Well, he's gone to join up with the Mangums!"

Moore smacked one huge fist into the palm of his hand. "My son!" Then he shoved the diet list into his pocket and straightened his shoulders. "If you come across him, Doc . . ." He turned his palms outward, and shrugged.

Jeff knew. "I'll see that he gets a fair trial—that it?" He put on his hat and slanted it over one eye. "Romance and adventure, eh? The magnetic pull of derring-do. If you'll look in the barn, you'll probably find a paper novel about Jesse Woodson James. How old is Harvey?"

"Nineteen."

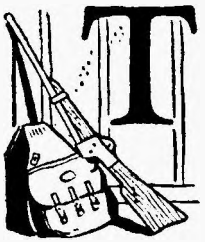
"Still time to change his ways." Jeff strolled out with the image of Jethroe Moore's thankfulness in the front of his mind. He thought, *Sometimes, circuit riding has its rewards.*

He mounted his freshened mare in the new sunshine and trotted west away from the Ordinary with his coat flung back so that he could reach his revolver in a hurry if he had to.

He no longer doubted that he would have to.

Chapter Two

Renegade Plan



THE afternoon skies were the hue of scrubbed brass, and the ground underfoot was firmer. Birds chittered in the branches of weather-wearied trees, and on the open prairie antelope jacks leaped into sight and flowed away over the sandy slopes.

The afternoon was well down on Jeff McCall before he cast about for a camp site north of Hondo de los Pinos, and he found one as the sun exploded in a flare of crimson and slowly bled to death, promising a resurgence of warmth on the morrow.

He slept in some juniper scrub—slept so hard that he didn't get on his way again until the sun was above the horizon. All around him, the dry prairie lay blue and gold, humming with insects. By midday, a warm drowse was on the land.

Washita Station was stirring with suppressed excitement. Nervous horses pranced and tugged at tie-rails, tails switching at flies, nostrils blowing. Men with sharp-pointed spurs tramped the plankwalks and sent dust spinning into the sunlight.

John Grubb, the marshal, was a bandy-legged little trout with a tobacco-stained goatee and twin guns that rode high above his hips. He was in his office when McCall found him, and he came right to the point:

"It was Kiowas who killed Arthur Mears."

"How do you know?"

"Because they tried to imitate Comanche methods of torture, and muffed the job. Comanches would have scalped

him clean, not clumsy." Grubb rolled a cigar between thumb and forefinger to moisten it. "Damned funny, but Kiowas and Comanches are usually at each other's throats, and now they're raiding together. Yet Kiowa gets suspicious and tries to make murder look like Comanche work." He lighted his cigar. "Want a look at the victim?" He held the door open and followed the doctor out. "I can only guess where these buffalo guns are coming from."

He marched along next to Jeff, his short legs criss-crossing shadows in the sun-dappled street. "My guess is that the guns are being brought up from Texas in case lots and distributed as the need arises, as the Comanches and Kiowas follow the buffalo."

"Are the Mangum Boys distributing these guns?"

"I can't prove it—although Walter Mangum was seen last week with a buckboard carrying wooden cases. That was just before they got Mears. These Indians—they got to eat before they can plunder, and they're sick of US salt horse. So they stick to whatever buffalo they can find."

"But you don't know where the distribution point for the guns is?"

"No. If I could find that, I could find the stud link and break it." Grubb led the way into an unused stable that did not smell of straw and manure but of sweet-rotten flesh and charred leather. "The distribution point is never the same, it's always moving."

He stepped to a rickety table and whipped a blanket back from what had been until lately Arthur Mears, Agent at the Wildhorse. "Ain't he a sight?" The mutilated body was still arched in final protest against its last agonies.

Jeff McCall removed his hat, coat and cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. He bent over what was on the table, poking into it here and there with his Blasius pincers until he found what he was looking for. He nipped it, caught it, and thrust it at John Grubb.

"A .45-90, five-fifty buffalo bullet. Powerful enough to break down a barn."

Grubb squinted at it. "Flattened out some."

"Conoidal, we call it for a higher fee."

"Is that what killed him?"

"I'll tell you in a minute." Jeff went back to work. "That's clumsy scalping. It must have been done in a hurry."

"That's my opinion, too."

Ten minutes later, Jeff straightened and asked for a basin to wash his instruments in. "Big as that bullet was, it didn't kill him—and neither did the scalping."

"Well!" Grubb was slack-jawed. "What in hell did kill him?"

"The fire they built under him. He was still breathing when they left him to fry, because his lungs are full of soot— See?"

"I'll take your word for it, doc." Grubb went out into the sunlight, filling his own lungs with cleaner air and spitting the green corruption that was rising from his startled stomach.

Jeff lighted a cornshuck and spouted smoke. The restlessness of the Station was entering him, making him want to sweat out the last of his fatigue in sudden and prolonged exercise.

"That's only one body, Marshal, and one bullet. Not much evidence against smugglers."

"No?" Grubb squirted a last stream of spit and jerked his head. "Come on back to my office, and listen."

The marshal's brittle voice was spang-sharp with held-down fury as he

ticked off his points on his fingers: "Arthur Mears was found twenty-five miles southwest of Washita Station and forty miles northeast of the Wildhorse Agency. In his house at the Agency we found a broken .45-90 five-fifty that he'd found on a dead Kiowa, and that he was coming here to tell me about when they bagged him. The possession of that evidence was too much for somebody's peace of mind."

"Keep talking."

"The Kiowas, although raiding in company with the Comanches, still want the dirty work to look like Comanche work. It's an old tribal feud, and I'm sure that Mister Walter Mangum & Company are aware of it. Further: sixty-two miles southeast of where Mears was found, a nester named Powell surprised and killed a prowling Comanche and found on him a brand-new .45-90, five-fifty with extra ammunition. Powell was ambushed and killed the next day, which was the day after Mears was killed. And further: thirty-odd miles north of Powell's, and slightly east of here, a panner was found dead of a broken skull, with the splintered stock of the .45-90 that had killed him near by. And the stage driver who brought the body in was fired on along the route by the same caliber, but he outran 'em."

John Grubb tamped out his cigar. "If you can picture those points in your mind, Doc, you'll see that the killings are all with the new rifles, and are gradually moving east from Wildhorse, where the devils slipped out last week, toward Moore's Ordinary and Comanche Wells. There must be about a hundred of them, and they must be moving east off the known trails, which is probably why you didn't spot any of 'em on your way out here. That's why I sent Cronkhite to pass the word to Fort Sill by telegraph from the Wells."

Jeff's heart did a back-flip. There weren't enough rifles in Comanche Wells to hold off a bunch of buzzards, let alone a full-scale raid. And beyond town, out on the land sections, the menfolk were too far apart to make a stand against a concerted attack. They could be picked off like sitting pigeons.

And Fort Sill was almost a week away, and Fort Hood farther.

The doctor felt like a fly caught in amber, helpless and isolated and left to wither and die. His first thought was of Theresa, and then of the whole Reserve—the Yanceys and Killenroes and Hebbles, the Harans and Moores and the Pennoyers and the hundreds of others who like himself were here to stay but who were powerless to fight at hundred-to-one odds.

"It's like a disease," he murmured. "It takes hold, then spreads until the whole body is infected."

"All because a bunch of ghouls started before we could stop 'em." And John Grubb tore a gun from its holster and spun it and caught it. "Goddam 'em!"

Jeff stood up and lashed at a fly with his hat. "There must be a way to remove the cause of the infection, though. The body isn't dead yet. I mean—if we can find the distributing point and destroy it—amputate it—there won't be any more rifles or ammunition for either Comanches or Kiowas, and they'll have to return to Wildhorse and be satisfied with salt US brand."

"Sure they will." Grubb's smile was thin. "But how do you destroy the distributing point? It keeps moving like a shadow."

Jeff clapped on his hat. "What makes it move?"

"The buffalo they eat so's to get the

strength to raid—" John Grubb came out of his chair in one smooth motion, eyes widening. "By God, Doc!" Quick admiration flashed across his face. "Wait here 'til I talk to some friends."

The marshal was back before Jeff had finished his cigarette, and he was fidgeting with eagerness. "You ready to ride, Doc?"

"I can stand it if my mare can."

"I've rounded up a dozen hands who don't mind stamping out vermin. Let's go!"

Quick in Jeff McCall was the thought that it was crazy to grope through the emptiness between the Station and Moore's Ordinary on the faint chance of surprising a war feast; but equally quick was the thought of the people who were yet to come out here on the borderland, who were barely started toward the broad parishes of the vast and opening west. He thought of those things, and he remembered Theresa's calm words—"*I'll try not to worry.*"

He decided that the goal was worth the gamble.

Chapter Three

The Last of the Buffalo

THE tiny posse rode the day down, and by full dark they were twenty miles southeast of the Station, bearing on Hondo de los Pinos as it lays south toward Wildhorse. The outer world in its sleep closed in on them as they groped, closed in across the wide distances that were no longer as empty as they had been before a forceful breed of men came to make them tenable; closed in across the board towns and the strungout fences and across the plowed furrows and the long lands in between.

Jeff McCall shut his eyes tightly a moment against the dull agony of his steel-cold saddle, and he saw the image of Theresa. His thinking went to her in that moment, for suddenly he needed her image as some men need their liquor, some their God, and some their money. And he searched in his mind for the elusive answer to the old question: what brings women west to this way of living, to board shacks and babies dead of the pox and cheeks bleached out? To new dresses eternally cut from the old?

He tried not to ponder it for too long, because there was a wet shadow across his brain and it brought his eyes open smartly and he was back into the present again, lurching through star-darkness with a dozen hairy madmen who were just as mad as himself. It was healthier to be here in the present danger than back in the dangerous past anyway; for time dies in the mind, and the years and their passing are only yesterday until memory's milestones lay them bare again for the long road they have been.

John Grubb called, "Circle wide and spread your threadies! We'll ride again in six hours—I smell wet hides on the wind."

They sweated out the hours of full night, waiting uneasily. The old exhilaration of impending action was keeping them awake now, for these noisome men had followed their chosen battle flags from San Jacinto to Palo Duro, and from Shiloh to the Shenandoah.

Darkness went over to dawn, and at first look-around John Grubb scaled his hat into the air and yelped. A long smear of troubled dust was hanging above the flattened grasses from west

to almost due east, trailing low like spent gun smoke.

It was a herd moving in parallel columns, so closely-packed that the compact mass of it looked like one great column. Where the slopes fell away in the direction of Hondo de los Pinos and where the bluestem and wild flowers grew thick, the columns wandered left and right, north and south, widening their front of advance to ten miles and more.

"You won't see that again in your lifetime," Grubb whispered reverently.

It was in truth, the last time that the buffalo passed in many numbers across the Territory, using the trails they had followed before iron rails and prickly fences cut across their way.

"Dumbest critters in the world, Doc. If you can get downwind of them they'll stand and be shot to pieces, yet for no cause at all they'll stampede and go panicking across the prairie for miles. But the damnedest thing they do is run toward what frightens them, not away from it. They'll gallop right into quicksand, over a cliff, straight at fire. Brute fascination for self-destruction, I guess you science gents'd call it."

Dr. McCall tried to measure the size of that herd, but he couldn't. As he rode in its wake, he couldn't measure much of anything with his ever-curious mind because the morning wind was bringing the saffron dust down on the posse and blanking out the sun and tinting everyone gritty yellow. They were lean and worn and scorched from both sunlight and swirling yellow dust, and the combination almost blinded them.

Then John Grubb whimpered with excitement and stabbed a finger downward and twirled it at the double ruts of wheel tracks. "A light rig—a flatbed or a buckboard's been this way not long ahead of that herd."

Jeff reasoned it out in his raddled mind. "Pushing buffalo out of bed ground, to be met by Comanches and Kiowas further east." He glanced questioningly at the marshal through the flinty air. "Where after a handout of ammunition, there'll be a big victory feed, and the raids can be thrown against the bigger settlements—like Comanche Wells, where the free grass is more desirable to the Mangums than it is here."

An expression of pleased surprise broadened the marshal's features. "Tell me more, Doc."

"In other words, the Mangums are plotting their raids from west to east to get everybody scared and make 'em pack up. And they're raiding fast so as to jump the abandoned claims before troops can arrive from Sill. And"—he swung a grimy sleeve at the bumbling herd—"they're bringing their larder with them."

John Grubb wiped his steaming forehead with a greasy handkerchief. "You better sell your practice and sign on with me. I can use an observant scout."

They glanced quickly at each other as they rode, and something passed between them and lighted their dust-masked faces with that shared knowledge. It was a sense of pitting decency against banditry, law against intrusion.

The afternoon was low behind them now and the dust of the trudging herd made a pale refraction of light across the width of the skies. The dust was trailing high to their right, south; but ahead, east, it was circling into the shape of a huge scythe.

"Bed ground again," John Grubb muttered. "And somebody's goading them into it."

The others had noticed that, and were closing up, letting their soaked horses bump and collide, back and quarter. They were big-boned men, most of them, and smothered to the eyes in hair. Frontier men, with frontiers running endlessly ahead of their thinking. Men who flung challenges against any odds, and who expected the same in return.

The slow approach was pulling their nerves fiddlestring-taut, and Grubb cleared his throat of alkali and spat it out. "Know what that is ahead?"

"Hondo de los Pinos," one answered.

"That's it—Piney Deep." The marshal rubbed sweaty palms on his thighs. "Make sure your triggers aren't clogged."

The precision of Dr. McCall's schooling in civilization remained stubbornly untarnished, however, and a rat-gnaw of worry began inside him and he faced sharp around to Grubb.

"Why not ride straight in and make the arrest? If the .45-90s and the cartridges are on the buckboard, you'll have plenty of evidence."

John Grubb leveled a cold eye at him. "It's not healthy out here to accuse a man of anything serious unless you can kill him right afterward, before he kills you. There are three Mangums and Joe Twombly and some hundred redskins in that canyon."

"So what'll you do?"

"Pick them off from the upper rim. What good will evidence ever do when the court that sits in judgment is five hundred miles away, and we're all dead, scalped, and burnt?"

Annoyance clicked through the doctor's head, because that solution still did not make sense to him. "Twelve of us firing how many rounds—a hundred? Two hundred? And almost ten times our number firing how many rounds back at us—five thousand? And they have trees to duck under, so that when night comes they can crawl up the cliffs and jump us before a skinner's mule can save us or a buzzard can pick us clean."

John Grubb pinched his goatee between his fingers. "Maybe I'll parley with 'em, while one of us skeedaddles for help."

"Let's take a look first."

They rode up to the canyon's northern rim and dismounted, watching the dust from the herd in the twilight. It was over there on the southern rim, a quarter of a mile away, buckling up on itself and hanging high in the greening light. Shortly, half-naked hunters would urge their ponies up there and expend precious ammunition for meat to give them the strength and spirit for further raiding—precious ammunition, because Walter Mangum issued just so much at a time, not trusting his hatchet men to rampage too far or to turn upon their benefactor with their new-found instruments of death.

Below in the shadow-laced jack pine, four white men were standing on a buckboard passing out bandoleers to reaching red men.

John Grubb spoke behind his hand from instinct: "There's Walter—the big one. The other two are Davey and Lucius. That's Joe Twombly holding the teams."

Jeff counted almost a hundred Indians down there, and an equal number of ponies grazing. About half of the tribesmen were lingering upcanyon, toward its mouth. He saw all that, and he saw other things that rose like faint echoes in his mind's eye:

Arthur Mears convulsing over a fire and burned almost in half and still

alive to know his agony; the nester Powell going down under a panther-rush and thrashing to the final impulses of life; a panner in the lonely sand hills taking a gunstock in his forehead and wind-milling in shocked reflex and hurling himself into the air in a last frenzied spasm, and dying that way.

And he saw Moore's Ordinary wreathed in flames and he saw the butchered body of little Marianna, who'd never even had a doll to brighten her short life. He could have conjured up other images, but he didn't. He didn't want to imagine what would happen to Comanche Wells if these marauders got that far.

John Grubb was cupping filthy hands to his mouth to shout down at Walter Mangum when Jeff McCall knocked those hands down and thrust him aside.

"You can't parley—the odds are all his!"

Anger flared in the marshal's eyes. "What else can I do?"

"This." And the doctor snagged out his .31-30 and emptied it at the opposite rim in six quick flashes. Then he whipped off his wide-brimmed black hat and flapped it wildly to and fro.

Across from them, the huge blanket of buffalo was rippling with movement in the yellow dust of evening; but at the torn echo of the shots and the frantic waving of the hat, there was a fearful hesitation, an immense brute fright. The rippling became a surging, a broad wash humping toward the rim, drawn immutably to the sight and sound of that which was frightening them.

In a panic they wove their way to the edge and spilled over it, kicking and bucking, dropping three hundred feet to self-destruction in a crunching of carcasses that tumbled endlessly down into the jack pines and smothered the buckboard and obliterated the men who were on it or near it. And still more came, melting into each other and bobbing over the chopped rim in a crazed avalanche that left nothing but spinning dust and churned sand behind it. They poured over like a waterfall that is tangled with limbs and logs, until the sound of their falling was one long booming, like the sound of shotted drums.

Jeff McCall and John Grubb and the others stood without speaking, for there was nothing to say. They stood watching the mass destruction and the dust clouds billowing upward from the canyon bottom, and they smelled the hot salt smell of blood that came steaming up with the dust. Buffalo blood and pony blood and the blood of malicious men, hammered into one gelatinous mass composted in eternal oblivion.

Then it petered out, and the coming buffalo turned away from the rim and trotted off snorting and undecided. The blood-scented dust hung like some immense ectoplasmic headstone for a long while before it faded away, leaving nothing but the rocketing echoes of destruction in the ears of the living.

And there were live men down there—half a hundred of them, moccasined and breech-clouted and greased—scampering toward the canyon's mouth, clawing and scrabbling to get out, to get away from the hideous thing that had happened to the others.

Dr. McCall put on his hat carefully, raking the brim across his left eye, flaring it over his right. "They'll be on foot for a long time, those who got away." A wash of relief slid through him, for now he could finish his circuit and go home.

John Grubb gasped, "Listen!" And

held up a finger.

They all cocked their heads east, frowning. "Hear it?" They heard it, and nodded with the acceptive attitude of men who rely on hindsight to assure themselves that they knew it would happen all the time. It was the stuttering brass rip of a cavalry trumpet breaking through the evening, bouncing off the slopes, echoing away in impish repetition.

The troop came up to Hondo de los Pinos at the gallop and braked down wet and slimy and stinking of sweat and leather and old flannel and curdled grease. Every man was powdered Confederate gray to the armpits, and the last platoon was masked to the eyes in yellow neckerchiefs to keep out the dust kicked up by the first platoon.

The white-haired commander was a first lieutenant, from the moss-green tarnish on his silver shoulder threadings. "My name's Greatrakes," he croaked, and flung thick spit. "B Troop from Fort Sill to the Reserve." He leaned out of his sweat-blackened saddle and blinked into the smoldering dusk below. "See you beat us to it. We guided on that herd. If it hadn't stopped raining, we never would have spotted the dust."

"There are more yonder—more hunters. On foot," Jeff grinned, and added, "as infantry."

The voices of the survivors came up through the thickening darkness, howling in lost dignity and outraged pride. Greatrakes sent the last platoon down to round them up. "There's supposed to be a doctor out this way, Marshal. Have you seen him?"

His eyes flicked to Jeff. "You?" And the lieutenant tugged off a gauntlet and offered his hand. "You have to get down to Wildhorse Agency right away. There's an epidemic in the Comanche camp, and it may spread to the Kiowas. They're adjacent, you know."

The doctor stood there, his shoulders slumped, his hands dangling at his thighs, his breathing deep and labored. He was summoning the strength to answer this latest command, for there was always something to be done against the meager facilities that he had to do it with—forever, he thought, and beyond the borders of infinity.

It never occurred to him that he had the right of refusal, nor would he have refused if the thought had entered his head. He felt as if he had just passed through a great door and the door had shut softly but firmly behind him.

He lifted his unshaven chin. "What's the epidemic?" His innate curiosity and intellectual restlessness were overcoming his bone weariness and the sandiness of saddle fatigue.

"I don't know. But the ones who stayed there, the ones who didn't bust out to raid the Reserve—they're supposed to be dying pretty fast. One was a big chief."

Jeff reacted to anger and cussedness for the job in hand. He had no sense of working bravery, only that old sense of fear crouching just beyond his sensitivity in gray outline, with a lacing of death miasma to it.

"All right, we'll get started."

The moon broke the horizon, cleared its lower rim and stared blandly across the west.

Greatrakes said, "As soon as these survivors are tallied, and we've cooked a ration. . . ."

Jeff nodded dumbly, and turned away. A curtain was dropping across the back of his mind, and he felt that nothing that had happened before could come beyond it because it no longer

could have continuity with the rest of living. And deep in him, wrapped in professional humility, was the consciousness that no man can be very important in this world beyond the daily work that he does; and that humility walked him close to God's footsteps. He had to buck the eternal challenge of the west and try and fail, and try again; and then again, for as long as the glove was flung at his feet for the taking.

Chapter Four

Surgery

THERE was a breeze rising to the southwest and the mists began to weave against it, wisping in long tatters and trailing off into the plum-blue night—a dry wind coming up from the Panhandle. It would sigh eastward and whisper restlessly down the shallow valley of the Caddo and nudge gray smoke from the tufted tepees of the Wildhorse Agency, rattling dried gourds and setting mangy dogs to howling insanely.

. . . Comanches play reed flutes tasseled with buckskin, and their squaws dress in licey flannel and stitch bright beads through the hems. The Kiowas speak of Nihansan and how he fooled the bear goddess into devouring her own children, and they chant a senseless tale of a knife, a mirror, and a turtle. . . .

Greatrakes's cook fires swirled across the silver lace of the trees, ghostly against the rising of the late moon. And then the fires were stomped out and covered, the mess gear was sanded and secured, and B Troop stood to horse. John Grubb spoke his good-bys and wished his good-lucks and led his posse west back to Washita Station, with many a respectful glance thrown back to where Jefferson John McCall, M.D., was sitting his fawn-colored mare.

The elegant saddlery was filthy now, with no polish to it, and the spade bits were curded with dried foam and masticated grass ends. And the doctor himself was a sight, dusted and battered as he was.

They moved away from Hondo de los Pinos in a long breath of sulphur and horse-nitrogen and sweaty leather and body grime and gun oil. And ahead of them, always ahead of them, were the effluvia of uncured tobacco and animal tallow and bird lime—the stench of the walking warriors who were being herded back to the Agency.

Miles they trudged that night—miles away from that canyon. The bones of the stampeded buffalo and the crushed ponies and the flattened white and red men are still there, scattered and bleached out, strewn among the rocks like sea shells, all of them mingled with greening cartridges which calibrated at .45-90 and were propelled with a charge of five-fifty.

And Kiowa spoke not to Comanche as they trudged, and all frowned in sullen silence, for it was many miles back to the Wildhorse Agency—broken-moccasin miles littered with split parfleches and wilted feathers and abandoned jerky pouches and thready bandoleers emptied by the troopers and slung to the night, useless and harmless at long last. And behind them, always just behind them, came B Troop —fifty gaunted cavalrymen back-trailing the raiders in their sulk.

They would return to their squaws without pride or trophies, and that can

lash an Indian's soul to insensate fury. Each, as he walked, was blaming the other—the Comanche accusing the Kiowa of fumbling, the Kiowa charging the Comanche of wanting too much. It was building up into angry flame as they plodded down the miles to home, and Greatrakes watched it carefully.

He was a horse soldier who functioned perfectly from old habit, and he had a youthful curiosity for other men. Easing his butt in his saddle and turning sideways to McCall he asked, on the second day out, "What ever made you ride circuit, Doctor?"

"The pursuit of surgery."

Greatrakes's eyes narrowed. "Is that all?"

And McCall had to laugh. "Not a woman, I assure you—though there's one I care to return to." He coughed dryly. "I lost one home, some years back, and concluded to establish another. So I came to Comanche Wells. I have the feeling that I must function for the Wells and the Reserve it's the center of, and not have them function for me. Peculiar, perhaps, in this day of greed, but there you have it."

The dry dust of the waddling Indians and the riding troopers hung high against the sun and far down the line of march, trailing off thin at the rear and rimming the horizons of early May with a golden corona. Greatrakes stared off into the sandy distance ahead of the muffled column, and he was silent for a while because the timeliness and the cold logic of what McCall had done at Hondo de los Pinos was suddenly a live thing to him, and it lived in the whisper of girths and the soft creak of leather and in the dust thud of the animals' hoofs.

For Greatrakes had an intact command because of Dr. McCall's quick thinking, and not a strewn-out mess of dead cavalrymen bloated black and bursting their faded shirts. There was doubt in the lieutenant's mind that he could have fended off a twilight attack by twice his number supported with endless rounds of ammunition from a buckboard.

He said, "It may be cholera at the Agency, I don't know. The courier informed me from Sill on my first day of march to get the circuit doctor down there."

"Cholera or smallpox or measles or dysentery," Jeff McCall told him. "One of them will always be endemic among men as long as they eat and drink in filthy surroundings."

Greatrakes squinted ahead again, to the slogging Indians. "If some of those bucks get infected it may break up their combination of strength, although right now they don't seem to like each other much. But if they ever come together again they'll be a threat. They're still potentially strong despite what happened at the canyon. I don't want 'em to bust out any more."

"Except against each other?"

"That would be one way to reduce the threat," Greatrakes admitted.

They filed on through the heat, lengthening the miles behind, riding them down ahead. Camping under the brittle stars at night with the orange glow of their fires silhouetting the ever-watchful sentries. The talk fell apart, and they chipped it back and forth sparingly, so that it wouldn't lose its flavor.

. . . On the low ground where the powder-blue trace of the creek snakes through the burnt-yellow grasses of the Agency, the squaws and the young men yet to be blooded had their camps. The dogs howled on the rancid wind of

the column's coming and the breeze carried tepee smoke far into the valley, a slinking gray omen of things to come. . . .

Out of respect to the vanquished, Greatrakes allowed the footsore, ankle-weary bucks to pass into their camps alone and unescorted. Then he bivouacked his pocket command on the high ground west of the camps and took a long look at them through his glasses.

Without removing the lens from his eyes he told McCall, "No new graves, so it can't be much of an epidemic. They wrap their dead in wattle hoops and reeds and hoist them onto tree limbs, so the coyotes won't get 'em before the Great Spirit does."

He lowered his glasses, closed them and cased them. "Don't go near the graves, Doctor, no matter what happens. I've seen what followed when a white man violated a grave for souvenirs, and I was on the Rosebud when Oglalla Sioux raided Cheyenne graves for their medicine totems. It took the remnants of the 7th Cavalry, half the 2nd, and one squadron of the 6th to put down what ensued. I want no part of going within half a mile of an Indian grave, and I don't choose to be on hand when anyone else does—white, red, black, or tan."

Below them in the big bend of the creek the two camps fanned out in sprawling disorder, separated from each other by almost a mile. The limping bucks were entering those camps—Comanche downstream and Kiowa upstream—without a word or gesture for one another. The mutual loss of face had been overpowering.

Greatrakes said, "I can't order you down there, in the absence of an Agent. The medicine chiefs would probably stop you."

Jeff McCall turned to him. "Do you speak the tongues?"

"Enough." And the lieutenant shook his head. "Though this isn't clear enough to me. What's bringing the two tribes together is mutual hatred of the white man, which overrides all ancient tribal differences. So they won't try to destroy each other—yet. I wish something would happen to make them swing hatchets at each other, something that would break them up and remove their threat, their bloodfest, for all time. Well—do you want to risk entering?"

"That's what I came for," Jeff said.

Greatrakes's nod was solemn. "You must remember that if you find an illness and cure it, the medicine men will make things awfully warm for you. And if you find it and don't cure it, and the patient dies, you'll be cut to ribbons before you go ten feet."

"Well, I might have to do a little amputating in order to save the whole body— Are you coming, sir?"

THEY RODE DOWN into the camps and raised whining dogs and simpering children and sullen braves. They rode on into the farther camp, the Comanche spread, and trudged from tepee to tepee inspecting the ailing occupants. Then Greatrakes called out the chief and explained why they had come.

The chief was neither trail-worn nor abashed, for he had not accompanied the raiding parties that had gone out under the aegis of the Mangum Boys. He had remained here to send spiritual strength to the plunderers on the holy winds of supplication.

He mentioned his squaw; and looked away.

Greatrakes winked at Jeff. "He knows his own medicine is no damned

good, so he's putting it on you. But for Christ's sake, sir—don't fumble it!"

Jeff felt the threat between his shoulders more than he did in his mind. One slip with the chief's woman, and the rush to destruction would be certain. The chief could then claim to a judging warriors' council that his powers had been sapped by the evil presence of this white alchemist who had just destroyed his wife.

She was lying on a fouled blanket with her abdomen swollen and tight and her nether limbs twitching with pain. Jeff took her pulse, palpated the distended abdomen with gentle fingers, and rose.

"Greatrakes, this is a curious illness. The others we visited in the tepees haven't cholera or anything else that's epidemic—they have diarrhea from living filthily and eating with their hands. But this woman—" He frowned and blew out his breath over his underlip.

"Will she die?" It was an important question, because now that Jeff had touched her, her death would lead swiftly to theirs.

From somewhere in the sprawling camp came the monotonous tumping of a medicine drum as an old man of many winters invoked the sky gods to release the evil spirits from this woman's body.

McCall asked Greatrakes for more light in the tepee. "She may, and she may not. I used to get two dollars for saying that." It was twilight outside, and the wailing of a reed flute cut through it and chilled the ears. "This is known as cholera morbus, for lack of a better name or a successful method of treatment, though I deem the label to be professional slothfulness, nothing else. There's a saying—'I dressed his wounds and God healed him'. But that no longer applies, so far as I'm concerned."

He pushed his hat back wearily. "Twenty-five hundred years before Christ, all surgery was wound surgery. Forty-three centuries later, all surgery is still wound surgery. It doesn't make sense." He buttoned his coat.

"What's the matter with that woman?"

"Vesalius wrote a suggestion of her ailment—but that was in 1543, in disproval of Galen's theory. From then on, the four abdominal muscles of the ape were no longer possessed by man, the multi-lobed liver was a thing of the past, and with it went the segmented sternum, the duo-bile duct, and the horned uterus. I now intend to pick up where Vesalius left off, and disprove cholera morbus for what it isn't. Greatrakes, ask this chief as carefully as possible: has anyone else in either camp had what this woman has—the swollen abdomen? And have they died from it?"

Greatrakes spoke carefully, skirting protocol with grace. "He says that his wife's brother had it. He was a big chief himself. He died a week ago. That would be when I got the word from Fort Sill."

"Ask him: when the brother had it, did he complain of a pain in the right side?"

The chief replied that his brother-in-law's side had been tender, as was his wife's now.

The doctor's eyes brightened in the firelight. "I think I'll open her up. I have a feeling that I'm near something that's never been done before."

"Don't touch her again unless you can save her!"

"And ourselves, too? Of course not. Tell the chief we'll be back, that we're

going for a sleep potion. You come with me."

They walked their horses to the edge of camp and then spurred to the gallop. Greatrakes wanted to know where they were going all alone in the moonlight, and McCall pointed to the tree-line against the sky.

"To those graves, to find the dead chief. There's something I must know before I can help that woman."

They threw off, and the doctor grabbed his bag of instruments. Greatrakes came at him with arms held wide.

"You're not going to violate a grave!"

"You stay here and hold the horses. I've made an educated guess and I'm going to back it up—or try to."

The doctor's fever-bright eyes were intense. He yanked off his boots and went toward the Comanche graves in his sweat-hot stockings, running low and keeping to the gravel and the rocks. He darted under the trees, looking for the one with the most food on it, the biggest pots; for the one with the richest robes wrapped around its hoops. And when he found it he dumped it to the ground and ripped off its reeds and knelt to the dead face that had been painted for the journey to the Great Spirit.

He worked with quick skill, the skill of a curious mind that is troubled by guesswork and must fling it aside and find the underlying fact. The bright gleam of his instruments beside him winked at the omniscient moon overhead.

Then he stood up and laughed happily, for he had just brought three hundred and forty-seven years of muddled assumptions into the cold light of fact, and killed them. Now he could open up that squaw.

In his haste he left the corpse uncovered and unwrapped, and raced back to where a nervous Greatrakes was holding the horses. He put on his boots and mounted.

"Come on, Lieutenant—I just dug for gold and found it!"

HIS MIND WAS IN A TURMOIL as he galloped to the Comanche camp with the sweat of anticipation greasing his hands on the reins. "Greatrakes, tell the chief to stoke up that fire in the tepee, because I wish to put his wife to sleep with this"—holding up a phial of ether—"and cut out the evil spirit that is in her."

McCall went to work with an assured ease that lent to his lancet a deft and amazing quietude that matched the measured snap of haemostats. He cut in and probed, and felt his way down through those stretched abdominal muscles with true hands, swobbing and coiling, digging with his fingers, running the intestinal loops down to the bloated, heated knot that he was after. He snipped it free and drew it out and applied catgut and a stumping dilater, then closed and sutured.

Paling moonlight was glazing the waters of the creek; dawn whispered in the trees and early woodsmoke scented the air.

The chief spoke in command, and Greatrakes said, "You must show him the evil spirit you have removed."

McCall held up the ruptured wet string in the firelight. "Vermiform appendix," he said, and slung it into the coals. "She'll have to lie still for a month, tell him."

The chief came forward, hands extended to Jeff, offering a carved image that was wrapped in red flannel. Through Greatrakes he said that it was

the image of woman's soul, and that the white medicine chief was to have it because he had drawn its power into his own hands and made this woman live.

Jeff almost refused. Then he remembered that he had a use for it, so he nodded his thanks and accepted it.

A rageful shout broke out and dogs roused themselves in savage symphony and many voices snarled and cackled all at once.

Greatrakes whispered, "Someone's found that violated grave, Doctor." Suddenly his eyes sharpened. "Or did you deliberately leave it open and unwrapped?"

McCall moved slowly toward the creek to wash his instruments, stumbling like a sleepwalker, for the excitement and the triumph had ebbed from him and left only a heavy emptiness.

Angry voices were nearing the tepee and the chief listened to them in stolid fury, cruelty darkening his eyes. He glanced from time to time at Jeff. But Jeff didn't care. His surgeon's mind at that moment was a mixture of dying exhilaration and rising weariness and the gentle echo of his wife's voice and the flickering image of the child Marianna.

All he was sure of was that he must balance evil against good, that he must always destroy the life in limb to save life in the rest of the body. And comes war, the balance is between white people, your own kind, and red people whose primitive lust takes its creed from devils and dark spirits.

An immense placidity took the place of the doctor's inner turmoil. "Greatrakes, since I've saved this squaw's life, the chief will probably believe me when I say that it was not I who violated his brother-in-law's grave, but someone else. Tell him that when we went back for the sleep-bottle, the ether, we saw from a long distance what was happening out there under the trees in the moonlight.

"After all, it's the tribes against each other, or against every white settlement in the Territory. So I'll amputate again. Tell the chief it was Kiowas who did it! Remind him of Kiowa clumsiness with Mears's murder!"

Greatrakes made the Kiowa sign and spoke hurriedly, adding furbelows of his own. The raging bucks were closing in now, yelling for the blood-sweetness of retaliation against desecration.

Then the chief wheeled and flung up his arms. He was still speaking when Jeff and Greatrakes walked slowly to their horses; he was granting permission to raid the neighboring Kiowa camp when they mounted and splashed through the creek and headed for the bivouac on the high ground.

It didn't last long—war ax against parfleche shield, knife against studded club. Frustrated plains tigers destroying each other in animal fury, stabbing and gutting and splitting and tearing. It didn't last long, but the peace that followed is still in effect down there in the Wildhorse country, because the body survived the amputation and grew healthy and vibrant and strong.

Jefferson John McCall, M.D., reached Moore's Ordinary two days later and presented himself to Jethroe Moore. There was a younger man there, a man with careless eyes and well-muscled hands and restless feet.

"My son, Harvey," Moore said. "He never did get to join up with the Mangums."

"Couldn't find 'em," Harvey said. His

grin came and went quickly, as if in apology for past errors. "Just as well, I guess."

Little Marianna came in breathlessly and stopped suddenly and looked large-eyed at Jeff McCall and at the doll he was holding out to her. She turned her small head to all of them, then back to Jeff with his red eyes and haggard face and smoke-stained clothes.

"I hoped it was you, Doctor. I'm well now." She took the flannel-wrapped doll with a silent gratefulness that reached out and touched Jeff with warm hands, and the way of his living was suddenly worth more to him than all the emeralds of Hind and he was glad that his daily work took him so close to God.

He rode east through the dry heat that he could smell for the plowing to come, and reached Caddo's Ferry in two more days. Mr. Harans said that his back was much better, thank you, and that in return for the advice about the bedboard he would carry the doctor over free.

During the slow crossing of the subdued current, Jeff totted up his accounts for presentation to the Homestead Association. He had been riding circuit for ten days, which totaled twenty dollars; he had paid out $1.50 for one ferry crossing, which raised the total to twenty-one fifty. He made no charge for the autopsy on Arthur Mears nor for the appendectomy on the Comanche chief's wife, because one had been utterly final and the other utterly original.

He rode on toward the Wells and his Theresa, and always in his ears was the faint sound of tramping feet and turning wheels—the muted music of the nation's future marking time to the cavalcade that soon was to come out here and challenge the land and give it battle and, ultimately, bend it to civilized use.

Jeff waved to Jimmie Eldridge, who told him that Mrs. McCall's team was peart, but that Mrs. McCall herself had done no visiting during the doctor's prolonged absence. "See any Indians, Doc?"

"A few. Nothing to worry about."

He arrived home crotch-stiff and neck-stiff, and with a beard that remained obdurately foul despite daily shaving. Hot water would feel good on his face again. He had been of a mind to tell Theresa all that happened, but now he decided not to. It seemed unimportant somehow, because it was firmly fixed in the fabric of the past and had no place in the future at all—because the future could take care of itself.

She laid her head against his shoulder and held him that way for long minutes, with no words necessary.

He wasn't much of a talking man, and a terrible helplessness came upon him at thought of the fact that he'd forgotten to find a copy of *Taylor's Monthly Fashion Report* for her. His breathing quickened and his heart alarmed her with its violent pulsing against her skin.

She stood back. "Are you all right, Jeff?"

"I'm fine." He sat heavily in a rocker and tugged off his boots.

Theresa had venison in the pan, and now was the proper time to add onions and potatoes and parsnips. She turned to him, and an austere benevolence came to her face.

"No trouble, then?"

"Nothing that couldn't be handled," Jeff told her.

THE END

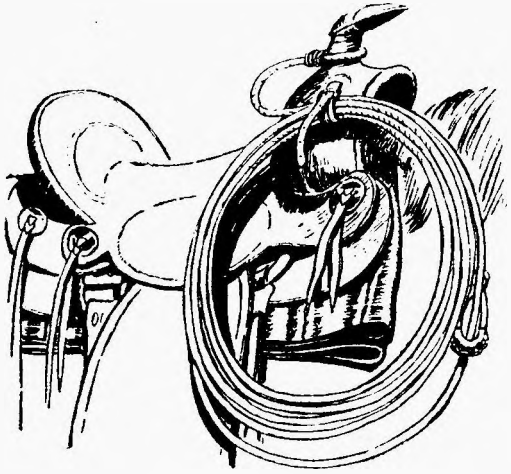
THE TIE-HARD-AND-FAST TEXAN

Story and Pictures by Randy Steffen

WHEN the salty cowpuncher from the Lone Star state latches onto a critter, nine times out of ten he'll have his rope tied hard-and-fast to his saddle horn! There's an old saying here in Texas that a man should be able to hang on to whatever he gets in his loop no matter what the country's like, or what his horse might do. When a cow critter's tied to the saddle horn she's usually there to stay unless the rope breaks or the rider gets in enough of a tight to cut himself loose.

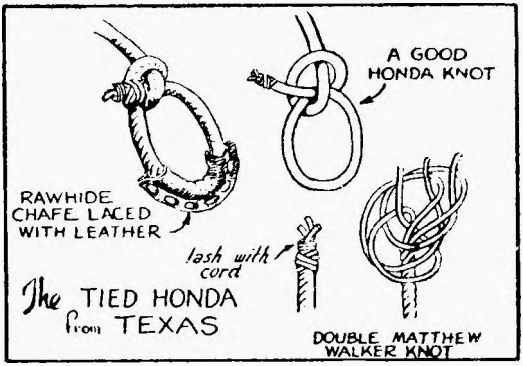
The origin of tying hard-and-fast isn't known for sure, but students of the Texas cowboy pretty much agree on this theory: when the first *gringo* cattlemen invaded the territory then under Mexican rule, they took up the cow work the *vaqueros* were

so proficient at, all the time striving to better methods and equipment. The Yankees soon abandoned the long rawhide *reata* for the shorter, stronger grass ropes. Since they were forced to work alone a greater part of the time, they soon started tying their ropes to the saddle horn so both hands would be free to handle their half-wild ponies, and the plumb-wild Longhorns.



The art of roping came naturally to these reckless youths from the young United States, and they soon outdid the Mexicans who had, shortly before, been their teachers.

This drawing shows how the Texan's rope is made fast to the saddle horn. A

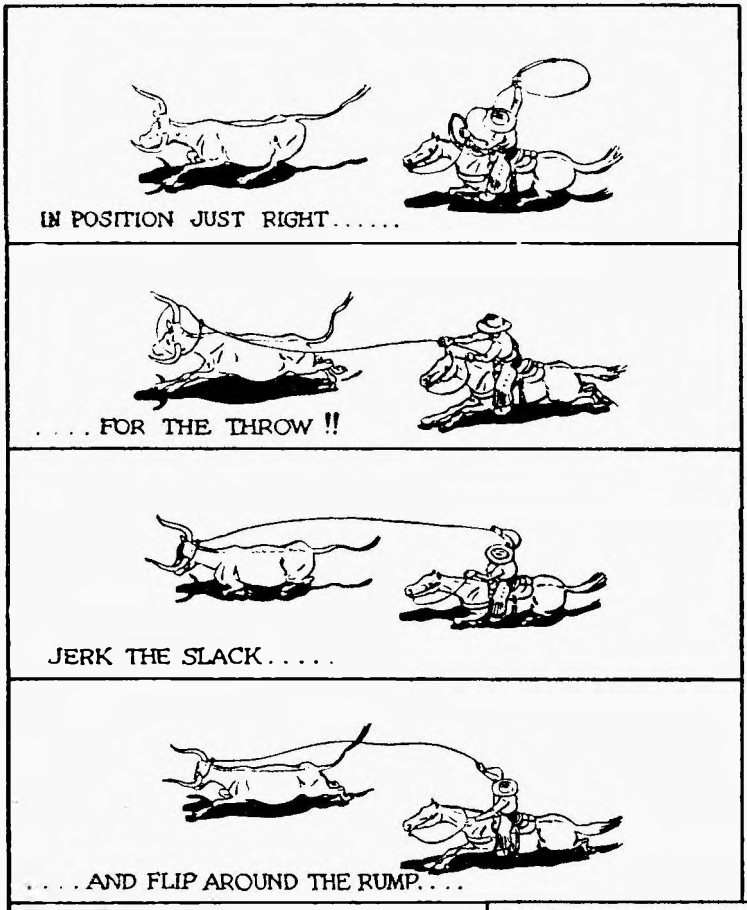


horn knot, actually a sliding knot, allows the rope to draw down tight around the horn, but can be loosened easily to remove the rope altogether.

The drawing at the bottom of the last column shows a little about the other end of the rope. This method of tying the *honda* is strictly Texan, but it has spread all over the cow country during the past seventy-five years.

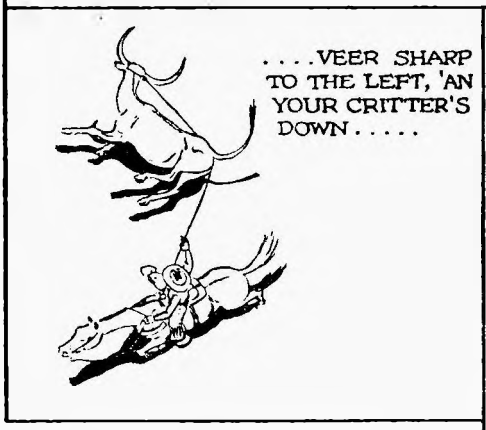
The Texas tie-hard-and-fast method of roping is practiced almost everywhere in today's cattle ranges. Only in California, and several of her neighboring states, do some of the cowboys stick to the rawhide *reata* and the dally method. Instead of tying their rope to their saddle, they take several turns, or dallies, around the horn, and play the critter they've roped like an angler plays a fish on a light fly-line.

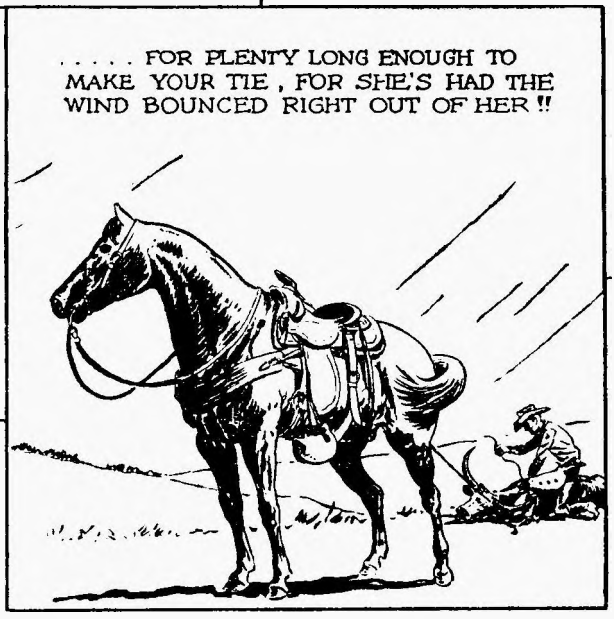
Modern rodeo has been responsible for the very great trend toward hard-and-fast roping. Calf roping has become a highly specialized profession, and one where the dally man wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance when tenths of a second spell the difference between dollars or debt! It's a pleasure to watch a real artist with a rope, mounted on a well trained horse, catch and tie a wild Brahma calf in twelve seconds



S.P.C.A. put the pressure on the state governments. Now there are only two or three states where this event is allowed. This series of drawings shows pretty well just how the steer is caught, when the trip is made, and how both cowboy and horse must work together to get the job done. This is another event that requires the rope being tied to the saddle horn. While this type of roping is often hard on cattle, it's not quite as rough as it appears to be.

The fall knocks the wind out of the critter long enough for him to lay good and quiet while the cowboy gets down and ties up three feet.





or less! He'd have a tough time doing it without his rope tied.

Steer jerking has been one of the most popular timed events in rodeo —until a few years ago when the

On the outside, Sheriff Shorty was a runt. On the inside, he was MAN-SIZE!

Inside Measure

By EDWIN L. SABIN

IT WAS A FAIR JUNE morning in the Colorado high country. Sheriff Shorty Botts rode at a comfortable jog up the winding trail through Ten-Mile Draw. He sat compact, for he was a small man, low-built, with stumpy short legs shaped to the saddle.

A mild-appearing little hombre, the sheriff, riding stripped to his galluses, for the draw was warm with the sun; his russet-stubbled face calm under the brim of the old Stetson, his hazel-blue eyes roving carelessly, his slung gun content in its weathered holster, his nimble cow pony setting its own pace.

The horse pricked his ears; the occasional click of hoofs on before sounded an approach and attracted the sheriff's eyes in a casual query. Beyond the next curve a rider came on at an amble, tossed up a greeting hand in sign of recognition, and at the meeting-place drew rein for a pass-the-word.

"Howdy, Shorty." He was a slim and ready young sorrel-top in Texas eagle-wing chaps and with a grin breaking his freckles.

"Howdy yourself, Nip."

Nip deftly rolled a cigarette. "Takin' a little scout?"

"Well, I dunno," Shorty said reflectively. He wasn't much on palaver.

Nip inhaled.

"What's the news?" he asked.

"Things are toler'bly quiet."

"Seen a friend o' yourn last night, back at Jackville."

"Might be who?" the sheriff queried obligingly.

"Arkansaw Pete. On the prod. Said if you wanted him, come get him, but come a-shootin'. Been tol' you're lookin' for him."

"Well, now," remarked Sheriff Shorty, "That's accommodatin' of him to send me word."

"What's he done?" Nip asked. "Held up that stage I heared about?"

"Wouldn't say," the sheriff pronounced.

"You're tighter-mouthed than a feller with no teeth," Nip complained. "Reckon on goin' to Jackville, mebbe?"

"Calkilated to when I started."

"Somebody must have passed the tip to him you're on his trail. Thought I'd jest wise you. 'Rested him before, haven't you?"

"Yep."

"He says he's tired of it. Won't stand no more. You get the drop on him 'round a corner, Shorty, 'fore he sees you fust. His heart's shore bad."

"Thanks a heap, Nip," said the sheriff. "Well, I'll be makin' on. Got an errand to do."

Sheriff Shorty resumed his way. Yep, as town marshal of Jackville and now as county sheriff called hither and thither he had arrested Arkansaw quite numerously, on charges of drunk, disorderly, gunplay, road holdup, misappropriation of hoof and hide, et cetery. When the Law hollered for action, Arkansaw was a likely bet to figger in the deal.

The sheriff jogged at ease for about half an hour. In another curve a rock shoulder on the right sentineled the opening of a lesser side draw. His pony shied from a red bandanna on a stick planted like a flag in the trail.

Danger sign, Shorty took it. Be keerful. Mebbe a slide, mebbe a road-work blast bein' set off.

He swung from the saddle. On bowed legs, leading his animal, he ventured to reconnoiter; was countered by the bawl, "Sky yore paws, Sheriff! Got you kivvered."

A lanky, whiskered, frowsy big man erupted from the rock covert. Booted, belted, and flannel-shirted (shirt and trousers consider'ble mussy), he had fierce black eyes squinting along a huge bulbous nose, and his approach was decidedly hostile.

Arkansaw Pete, this was, advancing behind his leveled Colt. The horse snorted, the little sheriff elevated his arms to form a U. Arkansaw sidled in at menaceful crouch, his gun muzzle pressed into the sheriff's ribs, with a swift reach he plucked the sheriff's gun from its holster, and he stepped back. He exclaimed in triumph:

"Naow, you runt! Jest drap yore belt. You won't want to tote it, fer you're on the hoof. Lost my hawss an' nigh lost my pants in a leetle bluff with a bobtail flush ag'in' four aces, so I reckon to borrer yorn. I seen you comin' up the trail an' laid fer you. Tell 'em in Jackville you seen me but that I seen you fust."

"What's eatin' on you, anyhow?" Sheriff Shorty demanded.

Arkansaw swelled with fury. "I ain't to be took no more by you. Savvy? I'm done bein' pers'cuted. I heared you was a-comin' fer me ag'in, but I didn't wait. I hain't busted no law. I hain't stole no hawss—"

"You act like you're goin' to," accused the sheriff.

"That's yore suspicion, hey? But 'tain't a hawss, it's a measly bronc. I hain't likkered up promiscyus, I hain't lifted no caows, I didn't go to hold up that 'ar stage. I dunno what you think you got on me but I'm callin' yuh. Gimme them lines."

He snatched them free of the sheriff's fist, managed to sling the dropped belt, with the gun holstered again, over a shoulder and to clamber upon the bracing pony. He reined about, jeered, "Adios, Sheriff. I'm headin' thisaway,"

and with knees high rode up the side draw. He made a curious figure in the short stirrups adapted to the sheriff's stumpy legs.

The sheriff thoughtfully puckered his eyes upon the retreat, with a shrug announced decision, and with a preliminary hitch at his galluses he trudged in pursuit, up this side draw flanked on the right by rocky ridges and on the left by the timbered rising slopes of Old Squaw Mountain of the Divide.

Arkansaw, perched doubled forward and cradled by his high knees, occasionally glanced to rear with a show of discomfort and impatience. His gait was uneven: an experimental trot, which quickly lapsed to a walk; a try again with long legs dangling; a halt while he fumbled, dismounted, at the stirrup leathers; another start, crotched with boots almost dragging, or else stirruped so that he rode high and huddled like an overgrown jockey or a booty-laden Indian on a getaway cayuse.

The sheriff, at steady waddle, now closed in, now was distanced by a brief spurt; but, grim and sweating, held to the trail. A shout from Arkansaw, again off saddle as if to straighten his kinks, came echoing down the draw:

"Hey, you pesky wart! Quit follerin' me or I'll leave you wind-busted halfway up Squaw Mount'in."

The sheriff made no answer. Arkansaw went humping on, with shifts of seat to a long straddle and with increasing irritation of mind and muscles. His backward shout echoed wrath and defiance again:

"Am goin' straight up, durn ye! Gittin' tired o' yuh. Beat you to the top by two whoops an' a holler, Sheriff."

He turned his animal and struck up the timbered slope of Old Squaw. The sheriff wasted no breath, kept to the course, marked the tracks of the turnoff; paused there to mop his face, settle his hat; and with another hitch to his galluses he took to the uphill climb.

The way was a succession of rises thinly cloaked with pine and spruce and patches of low bush, now and then broken by a sunny little park, level and open, like a stairway platform between flights.

Sheriff Shorty could tally Arkansaw, humped forward, leaning to the grade, upon the pony also humped while working its haunches and digging in for footing. Arkansaw would pause upon a level, for a shift of easement and a peering survey. The glimpse of the sheriff toiling on up like a slow hound on a scent put him into motion again.

"Still a-comin', be ye? You'll bust a lung."

He would spell by leading his mount, as if to relieve it and unkink his own joints; but after a bent-kneed stagger he swarmed aboard once more for another stint, with boots hoisted to clear the stiff brush. Noting the maneuver, Sheriff Shorty, at hard labor with legs and wind, indulged in the flicker of a smile.

By token of the scanted breath and the stunted trees the chase had made plenty altitude; must be nigh at timberline, the sheriff calculated. Wheezing on up another rise and into another piece of level bench, he was there startled into a grunt by the sight of the horse posted alone, close before, with saddle empty.

In the discard, was it? Or mebbe this was a decoy—a trick—for a holdup ag'in; some sort of an argument at gun point, with Arkansaw jumping from cover.

The sheriff plodded right in for the

showdown. The receding sound of boots on rock and gravel fetched a grunt of disappointment from him. That was Arkansaw making a getaway on the hoof—he glimpsed the bulk of him at a stoop and a hobble up yonder.

Here was the hawss, anyhow. He halted for a moment's breather and an eye to the animal. It stood spraddled, with head drooped. 'Bout plumb blowed, eh? Might carry him downgrade, he bein' light in the stirrups; could be ridden and led, turn-about, to lower country. Or might serve fer enough to overhaul that fugitive?

Nope! One pair of legs ag'in' t'other. It was a good hawss. Needed a rest. "A merciful man is merciful to his beast," Sheriff Shorty often opined.

He stumped on. The growth dwindled to sparse shrub, timberline announced, the view before bared to a long steep up-stretch of bleak rock and gravel extending to the snowline finish and punctuated by the lone figure of Arkansaw.

Arkansaw was at a hulking squat, on his hams, supported by his hands while with twist of head he peered back. His croaked hail drifted down to the sheriff's ear:

"Why don't you take yore hawss an' git?"

"Still a-comin'," the sheriff answered.

Arkansaw braced himself and heaved half up. He tried a spurt, going at a forward stoop, cumbered by his artillery, his arms swung low, his boots slipping as his long legs pushed him with loose knee action. The sheriff kept on, also at a stoop, weaving with short steps by his bowed legs, his breath whistling through his nostrils, his lips set firmly.

Arkansaw's shaggy visage turned repeatedly, as if nosing the distance. The distance lessened; Arkansaw stumbled again, went down, floundered like a bogged beef, took to a crawl. With a final squirm and a hoist he sat propped against a boulder, and his two guns wavered in the sheriff's direction.

"You backtrack to yore hawss an' git!"

"Not yet, by gum!" the sheriff panted.

"Left it fer you, didn't I, so you could git?"

"Use it later."

"I've outclumb ye. I'm closer the top than you be. You keep off."

"I'm a-comin'," said the sheriff. "You couldn't hit a barn if you was inside it with the door shut. Pull trigger an' I'll arrest you for disturbin' the peace."

The sheriff plied on. He passed the guns, he passed the boulder; beyond it he poised to set a heel into the gravel. He made back and plumped down to puff.

"I've beat you by an inch an' ten foot. There's my mark. Ekil it if you can."

"I cain't," Arkansaw wheezed. "Hain't got the legs. But 'twarn't the climb. It's them short stirrups crippled me. I'm split too high. I couldn't let out them straps nohow."

"Nope. I cut 'em short on pu'pose so nobody could. It's my pussonal rig."

"All right. You kin take me down but I won't straddle that 'ar bronc. What you want me fer, anyhow?" Arkansaw asked.

"I don't," said the sheriff.

"You was comin' to Jackville fer me, warn't you?"

"Nope. I'm headin' there to pay a little bill."

"Wall, by gawsh!" Arkansaw gasped. "All this trouble I been put to—an' fer why? You hain't got nothin' on me, you say?"

"You bet I have. Got the inches on you," the sheriff told him.

Arkansaw gawked. "Hey? You runt! Me six foot three, an' you warped to five foot?"

"Mebbe so, outside measure," the sheriff granted. "But I size thirteen inches to the foot, inside measure. Those extry inches come handy. Set in to bluff me, did you? Reckoned to outclimb me? Run shy of yore inches, an' I topped you with my last thirteenth inch! Beat you with that inch an' ten foot besides."

"I'll be dawggoned!" Arkansaw faltered. "Say that ag'in."

"Yep," the sheriff wagged. "Inside measure of thirteen inches to the foot. That's proper man-size."

"What you aim to do with me now you got me?" Arkansaw rasped.

"Let you chaw on what I've tol' you while you get the cramps out your legs an' your wind back, you big lummox. Gimme my fixin's." The sheriff reached for gun and belt. "I'm goin' down to my hawss, for Jackville ag'in. You can hoof it out, along with your misery. Mebbe you'll get somewhere 'fore dark. I'll tell 'em in Jackville you saw me fust, but I saw you last an' called yuh."

Sheriff Shorty, with a hitch to his galluses, set off at a plunging wallow on the down trail. Arkansaw blackly watched the retreat; pondered; gingerly rubbed his scalded nose; with groans managed, by degrees, to totter up.

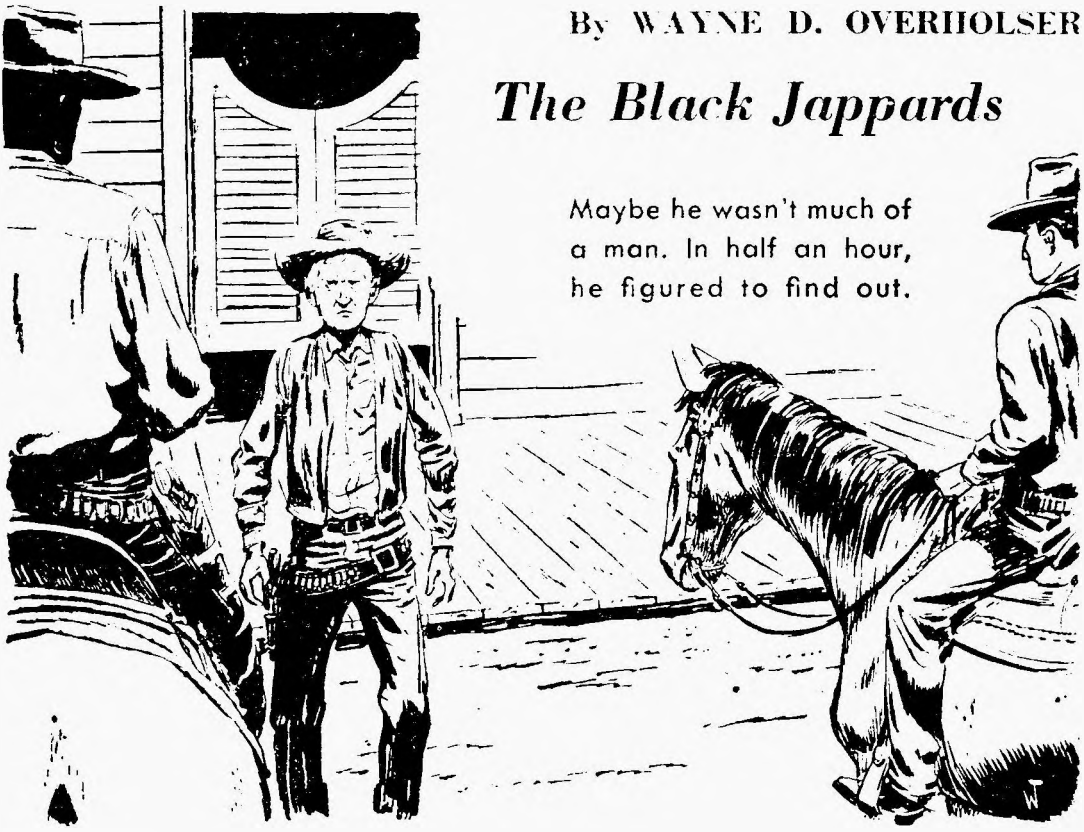
"That runt! With them spar' inches! *Inside him*, he says!"

"Quit wastin' yer time—nobody kin find that old hermit when he don't wanta be found!"

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

The Black Jappards

Maybe he wasn't much of a man. In half an hour, he figured to find out.



WHITEY JAPPARD was at his desk in the sheriff's office when he heard a man yell, "It's the Black Jappards!"

Whitey put his hands on the arms of his swivel chair and started to get up. But he didn't. For a moment he was incapable of movement. Sweat beads glistened on his forehead; he raised a hand and wiped them off, then some of the tension went out of him and he sat slack in the chair, his arms at his sides.

A man pounded by the office, headed south, quirting his horse at every jump. Whitey didn't look up. He didn't need to. He knew without looking that it was Corrigan, a Rafter B rider who had come into town earlier that morning. All the Rafter B men had their orders. Bill Briscoe who owned the outfit wanted to know it if the Black Jappards ever hit town again.

The thunder of hoofs died. For a time there was no sound except the ticking of the clock on the wall. Whitey glanced at it. Eleven! He had about half an hour. Not enough time. Half a year wouldn't be enough time. He drew his gun and checked it and laid it on the desk in front of him. He was staring at it when Peggy Cannon came in.

She said, "Whitey."

He didn't look up. He'd known she would come; he'd known this whole thing would happen, and he knew what would come next. He'd dreamed it over and over; it was like a play with one scene following the other.

He said, "Go away."

She crossed the room to the desk, her heels clicking sharply on the floor. She wouldn't understand. No use trying to explain it to anybody.

Even old Zach Ollinger, the sheriff, hadn't understood, but he'd been glad enough to get a deputy so he could go fishing now and then, even if the deputy was the Black Jappards' kid brother. And Bill Briscoe had said Whitey was crazy to quit a good riding job and make bullet bait out of himself for the piddling wages they paid a deputy. Maybe he was, but there were times when a man knew what he had to do, and this was one.

"Where's Zach?" Peggy asked.

"At the falls."

"Go get him."

He looked up then. She was a small girl, just turned twenty, blond and pug-nosed and freckled. Not pretty, not pretty at all, but he loved her and she loved him and that was the way of it. He wasn't much for looks, either. Maybe he wasn't much any way you figure a man. He'd find out in about half an hour. He was sweating and he wondered if she could see it on his face.

"It takes three hours to ride to the falls," he said, "and three more to come back. By that time there wouldn't be any need for him to be here. I reckon I'll just let him keep on fishing."

"But he'd want to be here—" She stopped, blinking back the tears. She said in a low tone, "You can't do it, Whitey, you just can't do it."

"I don't know whether I can or not," he said, "but I figure I'll try."

"I don't mean that. I mean, you can't even try. Not if I mean anything to you."

He rose and dropped his gun into the holster. "That's why I've got to try." He walked around the desk to the door, then he stopped and looked back at her. "Did Pat send you over here?"

She whirled to face him, suddenly and violently angry. "Of course not. You know better." She sat down on the desk, the anger leaving her as suddenly as it had come. "You aren't like them, Whitey. They've never done a thing for you, and I don't know why you think you owe them anything."

"I don't," he said, "and if I was like them, Zach wouldn't have given me the star."

He went out into the sunlight. St. Gabriel's Main Street was deserted. There was usually a flurry of business on Saturday, but this was the middle of the week. He could be thankful the Black Jappards hadn't hit town on Saturday.

Whitey glanced at his watch. Ten minutes after eleven. He slipped the watch back into his pocket, not noticing that Pat Cannon was standing in the doorway of his store until Cannon said, "You'd best be lighting out after Zach. They'll mind him."

"You'd like for me to do that, wouldn't you?" Whitey licked dry lips. "It'd prove what you've been trying to tell Peggy ever since we got engaged."

Cannon shrugged and tongued his half-chewed cigar to the other side of his mouth. He put a thin shoulder against the door jamb, eying Whitey gravely.

"Why, I wasn't thinking of that. I know what Zach will do when he finds out you didn't even try to get him. He'll fire you."

"I reckon not," Whitey said, and went on along the boardwalk to the Palace, thinking that the sheriff couldn't fire a dead deputy.

He pushed through the batwings of the saloon and went on to where the

Jappards were standing at the bar. A bottle stood in front of them, but neither was drinking. They were too smart to drink on a day like this.

Whitey said, "Hello, Sim." He put a hand on the smooth top of the bar. "Howdy, Lafe."

They looked at him, and then they looked at each other. Sim said, "What do you know about that, Lafe. The kid's got a star."

"I heard something about that," Lafe said, "but I didn't believe it."

They had believed it, all right. That was why they were here. Chances were they had come down the river and they'd seen Zach fishing. Otherwise they'd have waited and got the sheriff out of town in one way or another.

Sim gave Whitey his back and poured a drink. He let it stand, turning the glass slowly between his fingers. They were twins, the Black Jappards, and alike as twins should be except that Sim was a little larger. Both stood a head taller than Whitey, heavy-boned and thick-bodied, and before Zach Ollinger had run them out of town they'd bragged they could lick any ten men on the Swiftwater.

Whitey felt his heart hammer as if it were going to break out of his chest. He hated them; he had every reason to hate them. They were three years older than he was. That made them twenty-five. Now, thinking back over the years, it seemed to him that he had never known either of them to nourish a decent or charitable thought.

"Won't be long," Sim said.

Lafe said nothing. Sim had always been the talkative one. Staring at their swarthy faces, Whitey wondered how Zach had ever got the Indian sign on them. He was the only man they'd been afraid of, and he'd had them in jail more than once. The last time they'd gone on a tear here in the Palace, Zach told them they'd get a sixty-day sentence if they weren't out of town by sundown. They'd taken him at his word.

Whitey considered asking them to leave and decided against it, knowing it would be a waste of breath.

He asked, "What did you come back for?"

Sim looked at him and shook his head. "You've got a bad memory. A real bad memory, ain't he, Lafe?"

"Yeah, real bad," Lafe said.

"I'll freshen it up some. Nothing wrong with our memories. Bill Briscoe made a big dent on mine. I took his girl away from him at a dance, and it made him sore, so some of his boys got the drop on us and held us while he beat hell out of us. I've been thinking about it ever since."

Whitey knew that Bill Briscoe had thought about it, too. If it hadn't been for Zach Ollinger, the Jappard twins would have finished Briscoe before they'd left town if they'd ever caught him alone. Briscoe used to talk about it when Whitey had been riding for him, regretting that he hadn't killed them when he had a chance.

Whitey said, "I ain't gonna let you turn St. Gabriel into a battleground. Somebody might get hurt."

"Somebody might," Sim said. "You figure to stop us?"

"That's exactly what I figure. You stay inside when Briscoe hits town."

"Sure, that's what we aim to do, but when Briscoe comes through them batwings, we're cutting him down."

"He won't come through the batwings," Whitey said. "I'll send him back home and then you're getting out of town."

"So you think you'll send him back home," Sim breathed. "Why, nothing on this earth will keep him from coming through that door. Will it, Lafe?"

"No," Lafe said.

"Then we'll make a deal," Whitey said. "If I send Briscoe back home, will you get out of town without making me no more trouble?"

Sim laughed and punched Lafe in the ribs. "Hear that, Lafe? He'll make a deal."

"Yeah," Lafe said, "I heard."

"Fair enough deal, ain't it, Lafe?"

Lafe said, "More'n fair."

Sim nodded. "You heard him, Whitey. We'll keep our word. We'll get out of this country and stay out." He shook his head in mock concern. "You're sure young to die, Whitey, awful young."

"They tell me Corrigan's fast with his iron," Lafe said.

"He'll be the one," Sim agreed. "Briscoe won't take no chances. Corrigan will put a slug between Whitey's eyes just like he'd measured it."

Whitey turned on his heel and walked out. He was sweating again. If he heard any more of Sim's talk, he'd lose his nerve. This part had gone exactly as he'd known it would. The dream. Like a play. Just one more scene.

He stood in front of the Palace, looking along the street. No sign of Briscoe and his men yet. He wondered what it was like to die, how a bullet felt when it tore through a man. He thought of Corrigan, lean and weathered and deadly fast with his gun. Whitey had seen him draw once. A year ago here in the Palace. The other man was dead before he'd hit the floor.

Whitey glanced at his watch. Almost half past eleven now. Another minute or two. He thought briefly of Peggy, and then of Pat Cannon, who didn't want him for a son-in-law.

"This is a tough country," Pat had said. "Peg's the only child I've got. She's going to marry right." He might as well have said the rest of it, that she was going to marry a man who could look out for her and himself and their children no matter what came up.

That was the way it was and Peggy should have understood that a man had better be dead than to be denied the one thing in life he wanted. But a woman never understood those things. His mother hadn't. She had died hating his father, who had been shot defending a water hole that belonged to him.

They had lost their place and moved to town after that, and somehow his mother had made a living for all of them. But age and hard work had made her bitter, and more than once she'd said vindictively that it wouldn't have been like this if their father hadn't been so mule-headed he'd got himself killed.

WHITEY GLANCED ALONG the street again. Still no sign of them. He worked the fingers of his right hand, the palm damp with sweat, then he saw the Akins kid playing marbles across the street. He went over there, walking fast, wondering where the boy had come from.

"Get off the street, Tad," Whitey said.

The boy looked up defiantly. "It's a free country, ain't it?"

"Not today. Get off the street."

"What're you sweating about?" the boy asked. "It ain't hot today."

"Get off the street," Whitey said, "or I'll warm you up so you'll be sweating."

The kid grabbed up his marbles and disappeared down an alley. Whitey went back to the front of the saloon.

He saw them coming then, five of them, Briscoe riding in front with Corrigan beside him. It struck Whitey that it had been odd Corrigan was in town this morning. Maybe they'd heard the Black Jappards were in the country again and Corrigan had been watching for them.

Whitey moved into the street and waited, the sun almost noon high, his shadow in the dust beside him very short. Takes a big man to throw a long shadow, Sim Jappard used to brag. The dream like a play. The last scene. Suddenly it occurred to Whitey that he couldn't remember how it had gone. Funny. His mind was blank. He just couldn't remember.

Briscoe was abreast of Pat Cannon's store now. He glanced sideways, and it seemed to Whitey that he stiffened. Probably he'd seen Peg. They'd gone together until Whitey had cut him out, but Briscoe had taken it well enough. At least he'd hired Whitey to ride for him and the matter had never come up between them.

But if Whitey was dead, Briscoe might have a chance with Peggy again. He'd think so, anyhow. Whitey sleeved sweat from his face again. Sure, Briscoe would think that.

They reined up not more than twenty feet from where Whitey stood. He said, "There'll be no trouble today, Bill. Not in town."

Briscoe leaned forward, his high-boned face troubled. "It's got to be settled, Whitey. I won't live this way, wondering when it'll happen. We're going to wind it up."

"No," Whitey said. "If Zach was in town, you wouldn't even be here."

Corrigan laughed softly. He was a knobby-faced man who took pride in his gun skill. He had never liked Whitey, probably because Whitey had told him once the country would be better off without him.

Corrigan said, "Zach ain't here. You forget that?"

"I'm here," Whitey said. "Zach wouldn't let you shoot the town up just because you've got a bone to pick with the twins. I won't, neither."

"Look, Whitey." Briscoe gripped the saddle horn, still leaning forward. "I've got nothing against you. It's the twins. Now don't make it tough."

"I'm making it tough," Whitey said. "If you ride out of town, the twins will leave the country and you'll be done with them, but if you get out of that saddle, you're a dead man."

Corrigan laughed again, glancing at the men behind him. "I never heard a bigger windy in my life than I'm hearing right now." He nodded at Briscoe. "Look at him, Bill. He's swimming in his own sweat."

"That's right," Whitey said. "I'm sweating and my belly ain't where it ought to be, and I never was so scared in my life, but I'm still saying that the minute Bill gets out of his saddle, he's a dead man."

"Why, you chuckle-headed idiot," Corrigan said, "I'd drop you while you was still hunting for your gun."

"You ain't quite that fast," Whitey said, "and I won't be throwing no lead at you. Bill gives the orders and it's Bill that's hunting for trouble, so Bill's the one I'll plug."

"He'll cave," Corrigan urged. "Let's get it over with."

"Wait," Briscoe said. "Have I got your word that the twins will leave the country?"

Briscoe was sweating, too. Two big drops rolled down his cheeks. Whitey was surprised—and then he had the an-

swer to why Zach Ollinger had the Indian sign on the Black Jappards. He'd been sheriff for a long time; he'd learned that when you pit toughness against toughness, one or the other breaks, but once your own toughness is established, the rest is not so hard.

"You've got my word," Whitey said.

"Why, hell, Boss—" Corrigan began.

"I don't figure he'll cave," Briscoe said, "and he's right about us shooting up the town. We'll give his way a try."

Briscoe whirled his horse and rode back down the street. All the others but Corrigan followed. Corrigan sat his saddle, pale-blue eyes on Whitey, shocked and incredulous.

"You aiming to do the job yourself, Corrigan?" Whitey asked.

"Not me," Corrigan said. "I don't give the orders. I was just trying to see what you done."

"It ain't something you see," Whitey said.

"No," Corrigan agreed, "it ain't. Well, if you ever need a tough hand for a posse, I'm your man."

He grinned and nodded and rode back the way he had come. Whitey turned to the batwings, but he didn't go into the saloon. The Black Jappards came out, Sim looking a little dazed.

Whitey said, "You gave me your word. The only good thing I can remember about you is that your word used to be good."

"Still is," Sim said. "Well, keep that tin star shined up nice and pretty."

The Jappards took their horses from the hitchrack and mounted. Unexpectedly Lafe said, "We learned something, Sim."

"Yeah," Sim admitted grudgingly, "we did. I always figured a Jappard who was a runt and a towhead didn't have no right to the name, but you'll do."

They rode out of town, heading north. Whitey watched them go, his face crusty with the dried sweat. So this was the way the last scene went. Funny, now that he thought about it. He hadn't got this far in his dream.

Suddenly he thought of Peggy. She was waiting, somewhere, dying a thousand deaths with the waiting. He ran toward the store, but when he went in, only Pat Cannon was there, standing behind the counter and chewing on a fragment of a cigar.

"Where's Peggy?" Whitey asked.

Cannon motioned with a thumb toward the back room. "Yonder. She couldn't stand it. You did right well, Whitey." It was a grudging concession, coming from the storekeeper.

Whitey said, "You've always bucked me and Peggy getting married, but now I'm telling you. We're going ahead. You can take me for a son-in-law and keep Peggy, or you can keep on being mule-headed and lose her. Which is it going to be?"

Cannon chewed on his cigar stub. "Mighty sure of yourself, ain't you?"

Whitey nodded. "That's right, I am."

"Well," Cannon said, "if I don't have no choice, I'll try to put up with you."

"Then I'd better tell Peggy," Whitey said, and ran along the counter into the back room.

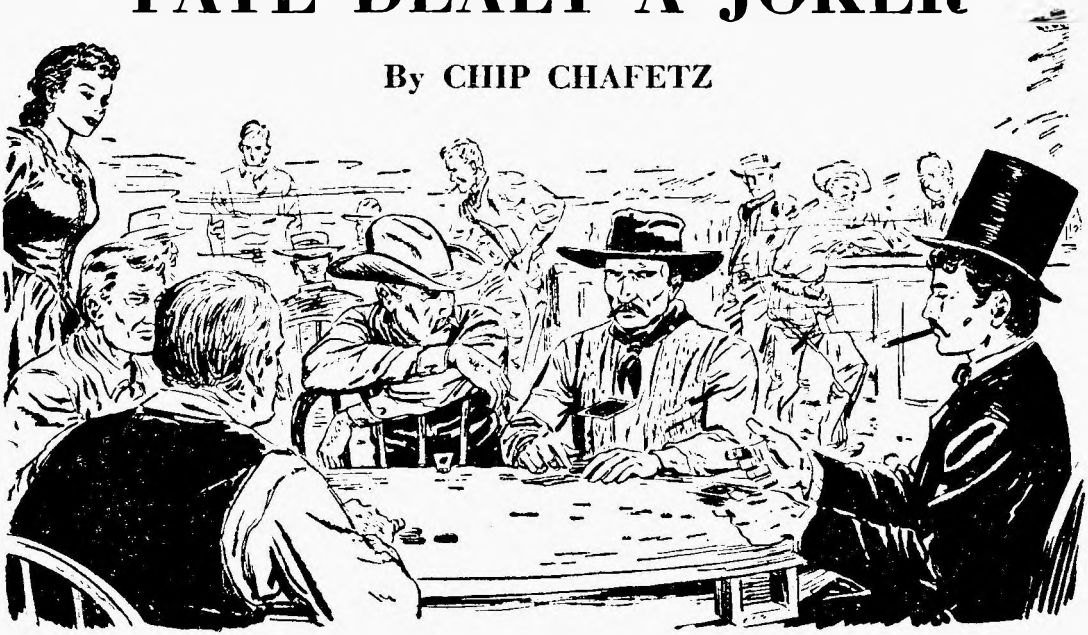
Cannon grinned, eyes following Whitey until he disappeared. He said aloud, "That's all the kid needed, just to stand on his own two legs and get them black brothers off his neck."

He glanced down at the Winchester that he kept behind the counter, frowning. "If Bill Briscoe ever lets it out that I had a bead on him all that time, I'll skin him alive, so help me."

Gambling king and dance-hall queen called life's bluff — but

FATE DEALT A JOKER

By CHIP CHAFETZ



Anton-Chicot is still on the map, the final "t" in its name dropped somewhere along the years. The old-timers who were around when Mike Shaw shot and killed dandy Jean Pierres have long since gone, some buried in the same boot-hill lot; and the wild frontier times are only memories. Anton-Chicot is now a peaceful and friendly place. On sunny days the children run to the Pecos River that still flows noiselessly by. Life is normal and death comes by natural causes, just as in a thousand and one little American towns with a few shops bunched together on a main street and quiet pressing in from all sides.

MOST OF THE CROWD in the Barbary Coast combination gambling-hall and saloon were drinking up and listening to an old "professor" thumping on the piano. A voluptuous thrush was singing the doleful words of a song popular in the Southwest and just now coming into vogue in San Francisco in 1870.

"I sat down to a coon-can game,
But couldn't play my hand.
I was thinking about the woman I love,
Ran away with another man.

Nobody knows my name,
Poor boy!
Nobody knows my name.
I ain't got a friend in the whole
wide world,
Nobody knows my name."

One of a group of Barbary Coast red-light beauties wandered away from the entertainment over to the rear where a red-hot poker game was in session.

Smoke from the seegars of the intent gamblers circulated in mists above their heads.

The woman, Ann Masters, a prominent figure in San Francisco's brothel society, looked with interest at the face of one of the players, the tall and darkly handsome gambler, John Peters, before whom was piled flashy stacks of gold, silver coin and chips. Peters, recently come to the Barbary Coast, had already earned himself a reputation through his fancy clothes, dissipation, wits, and card manipulation. There was a seegar between John Peters's lips, and he studied his cards with the controlled and inscrutable poker-face mask that has always been the trademark of seasoned professional gamblers.

John Peters was beginning to be talked about in the Barbary Coast demimonde as a man who bathed and shaved every day. Peters dressed in nothing but the finest and could not bear to have a speck of dirt on anything he wore. It was even rumored that he had shot at a Chinese laundryman who did not wash and iron one of his made-to-order white shirts to the gambler's satisfaction.

John Peters looked up from his cards long enough to catch the woman's glance. The eyes of the gambler and the Barbary Coast queen met, stayed locked for the brief eternity of a few seconds. Peters remembered for days afterward the dark hair that was bright and soft as he never believed dark hair could be, and the eyes that were brown and deeper than a wild doe's.

Her nose was short, her complexion clear—altogether he had never seen a prettier face. He looked right into her eyes, and then slowly shifted his gaze to where the swelling of her breast was visible above her low-cut neckline.

Ann Masters was a beauty. Her gown, showing off a powdered and opulent bosom at its best, further stimulated John Peters's attention. His blood raced. Something more dramatic than aces and deuces was shaping up for once in his career.

Peters played out his hand and then carefully pushed in his chips to the houseman.

"Count them up. I've had enough for tonight," he said quietly.

He went over to where Ann Masters was waiting. There was ease and poise in his manner as he introduced himself.

"The name is Peters. John Peters."

"Ann Masters," she said.

She exhaled a clean perfume that sent his heart hammering almost to the point of pain.

"Let's go upstairs." He spoke to her as if he had known her all his life.

They went upstairs into one of the private rooms. It could have been routine with her. You didn't have to know much—or anything—about a man on the Barbary Coast to take him up to your room.

The drunken laughter and song downstairs had risen and the sound of chips tossed on the gambling-tables was stronger as the night became older. The hours passed over the man and the woman like good brandy; they were contented and their hearts were warm for each other. Before the night was over these two hardened, worldly-wise characters discovered that each was honestly in love for the first time.

Ann wondered about the other women in John Peters's life. It was not her custom to ask men their names or their past. Most men on the Barbary Coast preferred to keep their antecedents and their records secret. Men were merely

paying customers. It was as cut-and-dried as all that.

But John Peters had suddenly become different from all men to her. This night she didn't take money. Ann had seen his gambler's eyes turn warm with admiration and become tender and shiny, she could hear his heart beating.

"Tell me about yourself, Johnny," she murmured.

He dropped his gambler's mask when he saw that she was watching him attentively and waiting for his words. Slowly, effortlessly, he told her about himself.

JOHN PETERS, the son of a prominent Connecticut clergyman, exemplified the proverbial old American belief that clergymen's sons often follow the sinful path of Satan early in life. He was given every opportunity available to a young man of his family background. He had attended Yale, he said, steeping himself in English literature and the classics. He had also embarked on a wild and sporty career during his college years.

Athletically inclined and physically well-built, John first became a boating man and then an outstanding pupil of pugilist Bill McCabe, well known in bare-knuckle circles as the "London Pet." He next took to the student gambling-nests and became noted on the campus as a reckless and successful card player.

John Peters graduated without honors and was shunned by his fellow alumni as a card shark. He showed up in New York as a professional gambler but, restless, he soon drifted south until he reached New Orleans. He resumed his blackleg activities here, and achieved notoriety as a handsome, well-educated, and unscrupulous sport.

Peters fled New Orleans to St. Louis when a homicide charge made him a refugee from Louisiana justice. He talked like a scholar, slicked himself out like a gentleman, and gambled among the monied bloods and the fast crowd of St. Louis.

But St. Louis became too tame for John Peters after cheating the suckers had netted him a small fortune. He next journeyed to San Francisco and soon became one of the Barbary Coast's most elegant, dangerous, dissolute, and dashing gamblers.

Women were nothing new to John Peters. Six feet tall, dark and handsome, he never lacked chances to make them happy. He had many light love affairs and was familiar with sporting-house femmes in every city he touched, but there was no dealing from the bottom in Ann Masters's case. His love for her was strictly on the square.

It was her turn now. "Where do you come from, Ann?"

Ann Masters spoke softly, carefully watching his face, as she began to tell what she had always considered nobody's business but her own.

THE DAUGHTER of respectable parents in a New England village, Ann was a young and pretty dish who knew little of life when she first "went wrong." She ran away from home and began to ply the trade of the scarlet sisterhood in Boston. She soon moved on, hustling in Philadelphia, Chicago, Denver, and at last in San Francisco.

Ann Masters was not bitter. She had long ago become a high-toned baggage who enjoyed life in the lace-curtained, high-chandeliered, plush rooms of the better bawdy houses where men paid

well for her talent. Ann was built big and ample-bosomed, and she had a pretty face. Her clients showered her with gifts.

Ann did not dwell on the men who found her favorable. She only wished, out loud, that John Peters had been the first.

LOVE WAS SOMETHING to be avoided in Ann's profession, but now she had fallen hard. She quit her chosen trade and moved into John Peters's rooms above San Francisco's most famous gambling-house, the El Dorado.

Ann became prey to new feelings. She knew John Peters never gave a sucker a break. Someday he might be caught cheating, and she would lose him to a gun or a knife. She wanted life to be free of fear for her lover and beautiful for them both. This novel emotion had cleansed her, and she yearned to be a lady.

One night, while preparing for bed, Ann turned to John and spoke to him in low, serious words.

"Johnny—let's leave the Barbary Coast."

If John was unprepared for this, he gave no visible sign.

"Why?" he murmured. "The cards have been running very good for us here."

"I'm afraid somebody'll try to finish you off for bracing him in a game, *and I want us to live respectable*," she said.

"I'm a gambler," John declared. "All my years have been spent practicing and playing cards, learning all the tricks and dodges. I'm not good for anything else. Where could we go? How could I make out for the both of us?"

"You could be doing the same thing, Johnny," Ann answered. "What's wrong with dealing cards for a living? Only let's do it in a big way and on the level. Run your own games in a square gambling-house."

He looked at her thoughtfully.

"You got enough card sense to win on the level most of the time, Johnny. And you can run a house. You can do it," she exclaimed. "Why, you got more education—more brains than most sports; you even look the gentleman type. Between us we've enough to stake a good gambling-palace of our own."

He was impressed by her enthusiasm. He'd go to hell for her if she asked him—and all she wanted was for them to live respectable! He could afford to laugh at luck, and his chances at cards were as good as anybody else's. Perhaps better. His card instinct and gambling experience should give him the edge on the men who would gamble against him.

He gave her a quick smile. Ann would get to play the role of a lady if that was the way she wanted to make her life with him.

"We could set up 'bank' in cattle country," he said. "I hear the games have been running high there since the Texans began driving longhorns up the trail. They have plenty of money to toss around, and I never knew the cowboy who could play his hand right in stud or draw."

Ann gave him a hug.

The Barbary Coast vibrated the night Ann Masters and John Peters said goodby and left to open a gambling-house in the wide-open town of Anton-Chicot, an end-of-the-trail rendezvous for Texas cowboys in New Mexico territory. Ann had been popular, and no one had cause to complain about John Peters. The scarlet ladies kissed Ann

good-by and cried in their bubble-water as they wished her well. The men took the drinks that John had the house set up for them. One blond jade, who sat in a corner with a male prospect, idly fondled a bottle of whisky and watched the departing pair receive the blessings of the Barbary Coast.

"Hell!" she commented. "It ain't meant for a Barbary Coast chicken to live like an angel."

Her companion was too drunk to reply.

ANTON-CHICOT stood on a plateau eighty-five miles east of Albuquerque and thirty miles due south of Las Vegas. Mountains bordered its plains and a branch of the Pecos River flowed by this town which donated many a lurid chapter to the history of the Old West during the 1870's. Bad men with quick six-shooters, steely-eyed gamblers, Mexicans, and half-breeds rubbed shoulders in Anton-Chicot. Texas cowboys came off the trail for a wild carouse of gambling, drinking, and a visit to the bagnios. The cowboys bet away their money as if it were cheap Mexican wine.

Ann Masters and John Peters established their gambling-palace, the Casa Rouge, on the Plaza, the most central location in Anton-Chicot. The Casa Rouge was a one-story adobe dwelling with a gardened and water-fountained courtyard. It was admirably situated, and all other buildings seemed to cluster around it.

Peters changed his name to Jean Pierres to hide his true identity. There was that homicide charge in Louisiana, and throughout the years he had been involved in other unlawful events that made him a wanted man in several states.

Ann Masters and John Peters, alias Jean Pierres, set up housekeeping in the rear rooms of the Casa Rouge. Ann ordered a big four-poster mahogany bed, a fancy dressing-table, a full-length mirror with an elaborate frame, and an oriental rug for their bedroom from San Francisco. It was the most elegant room in Anton-Chicot. They lived happily in back of the Casa Rouge and they prospered. The Barbary Coast and places like it in their past were all but forgotten.

Peters hired a bartender to serve whisky at a bar which ran the whole length of one of the Casa Rouge's walls, and he put three sharp-eyed tinhorns on his pay roll to deal for the house. The house gamblers were given strict orders to handle the cards honestly.

Peters took a hand when the games ran high. He tried his best to make the Casa Rouge an orderly as well as a square gambling-establishment. He gave notice that hossplay would not be tolerated in his place. Anybody in high spirits who wanted to make the customers and the chips dance at the point of a gun would have to deal with him personally.

Peters threw out a few men for trying to shoot up the place soon after he first opened. Twice he shot six-guns out of the hands of cowboys when red-eye gave them desperado dispositions. He could have shot to kill, but he went for their gun hands instead. The hard-cases who came to gamble and drink at the Casa Rouge put Peters down in their book as a fast shot and a clean gambler with hidden steel in him.

Ann looked on admiringly as Peters, always trim in an unspotted Prince Albert coat and his fancy gambler's clothes, went up and down the tables checking the play, appraising the customers, keeping order in his casual

calm way. Even bully Mike Shaw stayed in line when he came in to drink or gamble at the Casa Rouge.

Mike Shaw looked the burly desperado that he was; six-foot three, long muscular arms, and a heavy coarse face that was constantly unshaven. Shaw's wrangling ways earned him the fearful respect of even the most hardened desperadoes with whom he came in contact. Men always came to attention when Mike Shaw appeared. They were afraid of his quarrelsome, bullying streak.

Shaw first swaggered through the streets of Anton-Chicot in the spring of 1873. The swarthy bartenders in the Mexican cantinas were impressed by this giant gringo's enormous capacity for the potent tequila; they were thrown into panicky fear when his drunken roar bellowed through the Mexican quarters asking for trouble. When Mike was banged up to his eyes with liquor he threw Mexicans around the cantinas as easily as a boy tossing toothpicks. They kept inside their adobe shacks whenever Mike was on a rampage.

Many men knew plenty about Mike Shaw. They had learned something of his life from his drunken boasting. They were able to piece more together from the tales told by the hard-faced characters who had known Shaw in the restless and savage years gone by when only the strongest of men—good or bad—were able to survive in the Old West.

Mike had been a New York Bowery B'hoy in his younger days, a sidewalk bully and barroom brute who hired himself out cheap for brawls and dirty work with fist and club. He became a volunteer fireman and made money looting valuables from the burning buildings he was supposed to help extinguish. But Mike slugged and stole once too often and left New York with the police after him.

He resumed his bully-boy tactics and thievery in Chicago, but the underworld itself forced him to quit that city at the point of a pistol. The Vigilantes in San Francisco dangled a noose under Mike's nose, giving him notice to leave immediately or be hanged. In Denver, Shaw barely escaped from the Regulators, another band of citizens who resolved all criminal problems by lynch law.

Shaw next fled Santa Fe as a horse thief, and went down to Anton-Chicot to become its biggest and most feared public nuisance, always drunk and disorderly. The authorities in Santa Fe, fifty-five miles away, offered a standing reward for Mike Shaw—dead or alive. No one, however, had the courage to try and collect. They just didn't come more ornery than the former Bowery B'hoy.

THE CASA ROUGE was doing good business the night fate involved two men with each other and set the stage for a tragedy. Men were elbow to elbow along the bar and the games at the tables were going strong.

Mike Shaw, drunk as usual, was one of the hands at the poker table. Mike played smart poker, but tonight the cards were against him, and he was losing heavily. He slipped himself some high cards from the bottom of the deck when it came his turn to deal. It wasn't the money he lost that made Mike Shaw cheat—he just couldn't stand losing or being shown up by other men.

The houseman caught Mike in the act and called him on it. Shaw got up with a roar. The gambler who accused

him had risen also, a sweat of fear showing on his face as he read a cruel beating or worse under Mike Shaw's heavy eyelids.

"I'll send ye to hell, ye tinhorn bastard!" Shaw bellowed in anger, and reached for his gun.

Peters, walking around the tables near by checking on the games, took the situation between Mike Shaw and his houseman in with a quick glance. He leaped at Shaw with incredible swiftness and force before the big man could use his gun.

Peters's flying body sent Mike and himself to the floor and knocked the six-gun out of the burly brute's hands. The floor of the Casa Rouge became a cleared arena for Peters and Shaw. The card players quickly left the tables, lined up against the bar and the walls, and centered their attention on the gambler and the desperado.

Mike Shaw was bigger and heavier, but Mike was drunk. The excited men who watched from the walls reasoned this made the fight pretty even between Mike Shaw and the tall, broad-shouldered gambler. Ann had come from the rear of the Casa Rouge to watch also.

The two men were back on their feet. Mike roared fiercely and rushed at Peters, who grimly waited for him. They dealt each other murderous blows. Shaw was active and wiry despite his big weight and the whisky in him. The two men fought like animals in a jungle clearing, their blood afire with insensate hatred. Each used punishing bull-strength, battering fists, and every dirty trick in the book to knock the other out. They hit below the belt and kneed each other in the groin.

Perspiration streaked their faces when they locked arms and went down for about the tenth time, grappling and tearing each other's clothes. Both were beginning to weaken; their breath came hard. Mike got his big hands around Peters's throat and tried to choke the gambler, but Peters gasped and threw him clear. Something flashed in Mike Shaw's hand.

"He's got a knife, Johnny!" Ann screamed.

Peters quickly pulled a knife also from somewhere inside of his shirt. Like other men in Anton-Chicot, he carried a knife in a sheath that hung from a leather thong around his neck.

The eyes of the combatants gleamed. Peters lunged swiftly forward. He took Shaw's knife in his shoulder, but managed to stab his own knife through the former Bowery bruiser's left forearm. Both uttered cries of pain and sank helplessly to the floor.

Each was taken to bed and had his wounds treated. A group of Texas cowboys bore Mike away, but he still had strength enough to curse at Peters and threaten him with death.

"Ye'll taste my lead next time we meet," Mike snarled.

THE PAIR, when finally recovered from their wounds, warily avoided each other, but they were never without firearms and knife on their persons. So matters stood for several months. Mike Shaw was a dangerous man to cross; the town waited for a showdown.

The sun was just starting to climb in the sky one beautiful July morning when John Peters was out of bed and shaving himself. He was the only man in Anton-Chicot who shaved both morning and evening. Somehow, shaving this morning freed him of the inner tension he had been feeling ever since the wrangle with Mike Shaw.

Ann, eight months' pregnant, had

awakened also and her admiring eyes quietly took in the special care her man gave to his dressing. Peters combed and scented his long curly hair and stroked and twirled his droopy dark mustache. He put on his best silk undershirt and pants, and his well-starched linen shirt was studded with diamonds. He wore a pair of black doeskin trousers, a brown velvet vest, made-to-order boots of unvarnished leather, a long cutaway coat of brown cloth to match the vest, and a black silk string tie.

Ann was watching his movements with pride when a sense of alarm flashed across her mind. She suddenly remembered her man once said that fine clothes set the gambler apart from the other men in the West, and that a good gambler should look every inch the polished gentleman when it came his time to die.

It was Peters's custom to wear a fine black silk topper whenever he gambled, but this morning he donned an expensive wide-brimmed felt hat. Ann was uneasy.

"Where are you off to?" she asked.

"Only to open the bar. Go back to sleep."

"What's the time, Johnny?"

"Six." He stooped over her side of the bed and gave Ann a kiss.

"You never open the bar this early," she commented. "Please don't go out. Something is going to happen."

"If anything should ever happen to me there is plenty of cash in the safe. You need never worry, angel."

Ann held him close to her and pleaded. "Don't go out, Johnny. Don't!"

Peters kissed Ann gently on the cheek and firmly loosened her hold. He went to a drawer and drew out an ivory- and silver-handled forty-five which he placed in his pistol pocket. Then he left the room.

Ann felt for her slippers and called for her half-breed maid to help her dress. Ann slipped a keen-bladed stiletto down into the bosom of her dress and went out of the room as fast as she could in search of Peters. She was greatly relieved to find him smoking on the veranda, the light of early day on his face as he stared absently toward the sun coming up bright and promising a warm day.

Her Johnny was safe, but Ann kept beside him all morning and enjoyed the still crisp air and the scenery of the courtyard. The morning was quiet and beautiful—but to Ann the beauty was only relative and the quiet was ominous. The presentiment of trouble enveloped her like a hot wind passing over the Panhandle and disturbed her like a dark word spoken in a troubling dream.

The morning passed without incident, but during the early afternoon John suddenly left the Casa Rouge before Ann Masters could pick up her hat and accompany him. The sound of a pistol sent a chill through Ann as she stepped out of the door.

Out she went, as fast as her condition and her hammering heart would permit. She hurried to where men were quickly gathering, and there Ann saw a terrible scene.

The body of her gambling man lay face up on the ground, a red blot spreading over his heart. The handle of the forty-five gleamed from his pocket; her Johnny never had a gambler's chance to use it.

Ann arrived in time to hear him cough out his last words, "Thank God, I die dressed as a gentleman."

Burly Mike Shaw's pistol was still

smoking as he stood triumphantly above the dead gambler. Ann fought down a scream as a mist born of fury and tears rose before her eyes. She could see only the hateful face of Mike Shaw in the agony of her mind. Unnoticed by the excited crowd, she slid around to where Mike Shaw stood, an exultant leer on his face.

Drawing the sharp stiletto from her bosom, Ann plunged the blade with lightning speed and all of her strength into his thick throat.

The thrust was almost immediately fatal. Ann tore the dying bruiser's hair, bit at his hands and arms, and spat in his agonized face. She screamed curses at him until he sank dead at her feet. Then she fainted.

Rough hands carried Ann as tenderly as they could to her room. That night her child was born and died. For weeks, she lay in bed, near death with her grief, and the Casa Rouge stayed silent and dark.

"What's living now?" she moaned and muttered over and over again. "What's living now—"

But Ann eventually recovered her strength. She auctioned off the Casa Rouge and left Anton-Chicot, for parts unknown.

Where she went and how she lived has remained a secret; no word was ever heard of Ann Masters again.

John Peters and Mike Shaw were buried side by side in Anton-Chicot's boot-hill plot.

PAPER MONEY PAID PROFITS

DURING the decade of the 1860's, California merchants probably enjoyed the greatest profit-making opportunity in the gilded history of that state. This was not due to business acumen, smart merchandising, the law of supply and demand, or simply boom times. It came about as a by-product of the Government's currency manipulations in financing the Civil War; specifically, the Federal legal-tender law of 1862.

Despite this law, perhaps because of it, people still mistrusted the "shinplaster" money—there was nothing you could get your teeth into. California, although loyal to the Union, still regarded gold as the proper medium of exchange and was producing millions per annum of the yellow stuff. So California mercantile houses bought merchandise in the East for currency, shipped it West, and sold it for gold at gross profits up to 100% of the invoice price. This was pretty good, but the best was yet to come.

With the gold they got for selling their merchandise, Californians were able to buy currency to make more purchases at the rate of $250 in currency for $100 gold. As one leading California merchant wrote in later years, "We made more in selling our gold when buying Eastern exchange than we did on our goods."

—OLD HUTCH

TROUBLE ON BIG CAT

A Short Novel by Glenn Corbin

Wayfarer Ridge Grannet was big—the biggest man Kitch Newberry had ever seen. Maybe he was big enough to lead the valley ranchers in a winning fight against the twin threats of drought and a land-grabbing giant spread. Maybe . . .

Chapter One

The Wayfarer

KITCH NEWBERRY RAN her pony hard as she crossed the crest and started down the long sage slope. She was a thin, tanned girl of fourteen, bony from shooting up so fast, but she sat her saddle as if she flew on her own wings and carried the horse with her. She could still hear shooting in the trough without yet seeing who was doing it and what it was about. But presently she discerned smoke, not much—just that of a campfire.

The camp itself emerged as she topped the last ground swell. It was a wayfarer's careless pitch, showing a couple of picketed horses and a heap made up of a packsaddle and riding and camping gear. But it was a spot of solid comfort in the great empty plain. She had already seen its occupant, she realized, just recently.

The man held a smoking pistol in either hand but was through shooting.

He had a pleasant face and was the biggest man Kitch had ever seen. His eyes, she remembered from his stopping at headquarters that afternoon to ask for work, were a deep and lively brown. Weather had burned his face and the trail had stubbled it with black whiskers.

He had stripped off his shirt, and Kitch saw great muscles turn and writhe under a velvet smoothness of skin. Long, fine hair tumbled over a sweating brow. He would stand out from most men like a big stallion in a bunch of plugs, even though Kitch knew such a comparison was not ladylike.

"Howdy, younker," the giant said, grinning at her. "You trailing me?"

Kitch shook her head, bouncing pigtails that were the color of sulphur. "Had to ride a errand for my dad out this way. I heard shooting."

She was looking at the man's target. He had cut himself a willow stick when he crossed the creek. He had stuck it in the earth down the gully. Now the sprout looked like a beaver had gnawed it down. She knew that bullets had done the chewing, spit from a gun in each of the man's hands. She blew out her cheeks. No man around here could have done it with one hand and a prayer. A man might as well try to hit the edge of a shadow.

"Getting set for trouble?" she asked.

The man laughed. It was chesty and had a ring Kitch liked. "Just honin' my razor, I reckon, Sis."

"Name's Kitch," she said, not liking the childish "Sis" which her folks used on her. She stared with fresh interest at his huge upper body, causing him to frown. "Ever hit anybody with them fists, mister?"

He shook his head. "Not lately, Kitch. I got the cards stacked against me. I was born big and I was born fast, and neither's a credit to myself. Can't fight anybody without hurting 'em. Know that beforehand. So I don't fight. Much."

The man wasn't braggy—just apologetic. His merry eyes showed that he liked a lively time and was really handicapped. Hit a man and it would be like socking a pumpkin. Likely he'd ruin any girl he hugged and was out of the fun there, too.

"Hope you find a job around here," she said somberly. "Pa's got enough work, and I wish Penny had been there when you stopped. See her once, and you'd want to stay. Pa claims she's like the sun. Man sees her and he's one of her satellites, bobbing around her forevermore. She's due home, too."

"Who's Penny?"

"My sister. She's beautiful. Not a bundle of bones like me, though she says I'll fill out, too." Kitch frowned down at her long, tubular thighs, stretched into view by the saddle swell, unaware that it caused his attention to drift that way, too. "What's your name?"

"That ain't a polite question."

"But I'd like to know."

"Then it's polite enough," he said. "They call me Ridge Grannet."

"Well, this piece of country needs a man like you." Kitch made a sour face. "It could use your fists and guns. Drought's bad enough, but there's Speel Tacker, to boot. Pa says Speel could give a skunk a three-squirt start and outstink him. He needs killing."

"No, thanks," said Ridge. "Anybody around here ever try?"

"Nobody's hankered to."

"What's his caper?"

"Well, you've surely noticed we got

a bad case of drought. Everybody hanging on by his fingernails. Tacker, he aims to see they don't make it. Man he works for figures on buying a drought herd cheap and driving it north. That's only half of it. Pa says another man aims to pick up the range that would be vacated and just as cheap."

"That's sure skunk mean," Ridge agreed.

"If you're going on to Yellow Bluff you might run into Tacker," Kitch said hopefully.

"I'll wind up in Yellow Bluff, likely. But I'm a peaceable citizen, Kitch. I need a job. Jails I've seen don't feed to my hankering. Now, let me tell you something about staying out of trouble. You're getting too big to drop in on a stranger's camp in the middle of nowhere. Lot of drifters would see you different to what I do. You ain't so far from that filling out as you figure."

"You sound like Penny," Kitch retorted. "But I get the hint. So long." Yet she smiled in farewell as she turned her horse. "If you get a job close, come over. We'd sure like to have you on our side. And Penny's coming in on the stage tomorrow afternoon."

"Should I stay," said Ridge, "I'll sure be over to see her. Adios."

RIDGE WAS SMOKING by his supper fire, an hour later, when he straightened in close, listening. From the east came the sound of hoofs hitting the earth hard and fast. He shoved to a stand, shooting his glance up the gradual rise of land. A dusky sky lifted above, the slope was sage-shadowed and it was a moment before he saw a rider bob up over the top and come on.

Bent and obscure though the figure was, he could see flopping pigtails and recognized Kitch. A second horse was coming behind, and it whipped up into sight. It came on for a hundred yards before it halted on balled feet. The rider was a man and he straightened in the saddle and stared down at the disclosed camp. He swung his horse about just as Ridge yelled.

"What you up to—runnin' that girl?"

Kitch boiled into camp as he spoke, and her frightened face answered him. He had pulled up a gun and it chopped and spat. The man's hat sailed from his head. That was all Ridge wanted, more than the man cared for. The horse skimmed over the rise and its thunder grew distant as Ridge ran forward.

He came back with the hat. Kitch was blowing out her cheeks.

"Whose hat's this?" he demanded.

"His," Kitch panted.

"Thunderation, I'm asking who he is?"

"One of—the polecats!" Kitch gasped.

"So," bawled Ridge, "you figured to go out and tow 'em in to me, did you?"

"Had no idea he was around," Kitch faltered, "till he jumped me. Then I sure lit out for here."

"To get him shot?"

"To save this hide I keep my bones wrapped up in." Kitch swallowed. "Pa, he sent me over to tell Buffalo Brown to come to a drought meeting. Buffalo, he's a old coot and lives off to himself. He wasn't there. But Ernie Bell was, and foolin' around. Big A, it's been hoorawing Buffalo. I scared the britches off of Ernie catching him about to pour sheep dip in Buffalo's well. He took after me. If he'd a-caught me, I reckon he'd of whaled a promise outta me to keep my mouth shut. Now is it

all right I towed him here?"

"Fine," Ridge agreed. "Ernie rides for Big A?"

Kitch nodded big. "That's the outfit wants to get cheap range. Creek's running dry, and a lot of wells have got sheep-dipped, already. Big A's got all kinds of water, and that's what breaks a body's heart. Got a lake, and it won't share a drop."

"I better saddle a horse," said Ridge, "and see you home."

Kitch grinned. "By now Ernie's fogging into Big A wondering who ventilated his hat. I'll be all right. And thanks."

"Any time," said Ridge. "Any time at all, Kitch." He had a notion that the tadpole was heading for trouble with her brashness, but he grinned as he watched her ride into the obscurity of the twilight.

THE DUST OF THE AFTERNOON STAGE still filled the street of Yellow Bluff when Ridge came out of the livery where he had put up his horses for the night. He carried his saddlebags and was thinking of a haircut, shave, bath, and change of clothes. Then he would have a good supper, a night's sleep in a decent bed. He had been on the grub line a long while. It was like Kitch had said. Everybody in the country had work—too much—but no money to hire it done.

The stage office was down the street from the livery barn. There was a saloon sign between, and the door of the place stood invitingly open. But Ridge's attention was drawn away from it by the stage. A girl was lighting down from the Concord, a male passenger helping her eagerly. Her yellow hair made Ridge think of Kitch again. She had expected her beautiful big sister home today. The hair and face structure linked them, and young Kitch hadn't been too biased in her description of this Penny.

The big sister wore a plainly tailored suit that showed how well her own slim body had filled out, why Kitch was dissatisfied with her own progress. A warm mouth was giving the man passenger a smile of gratitude. Gray eyes matched the mouth, both warm and pleasant. Then she looked at Ridge, and the eyes widened in surprised interest.

Women usually looked that way the first time they saw Ridge. Something in them responded swiftly to the superb fleshing of his body. Afterward they took to panting or became wary because he couldn't seem to touch one lightly enough not to hurt her.

CHAPTER TWO

China Well

AT THAT moment another man came through the open door of the saloon. He was as big as Ridge and equally interested in the yellowhead. He carried a package under his arm, swinging along briskly. Their paths simply converged, and the two men hit like colliding planets. It was the other who was knocked off balance, Ridge being quicker on his feet. The package dropped and smashed on the sidewalk, disclosing itself to have been a quart bottle of whisky. The man hit the boards on an elbow and let out a roar.

Ridge started to speak an apology but halted when he saw pure murder blaze

in the downed man's eyes. The man scrambled up, cried, "Goddam your hide, you blind?"

"Watch the language, man," Ridge warned.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?"

"Comes to that, why don't you?"

The way people came edging up showed how touchy a situation it was. It seemed to Ridge that two dozen people appeared out of nowhere to form a gallery. They wanted a fight and they weren't the only ones. So did this big huckleberry. The enraged man looked down at the broken bottle, then back at Ridge. Except for the spoiling arrogance in him, Ridge would yet have bought him a drink and laughed about it.

Then Penny Newberry spoke up, saying, "It was no more his fault than yours, Speel Tacker. You both were gawking where you shouldn't have been."

"Who asked your opinion?" Tacker demanded.

"Charity work on my part, Speel. I'm trying to save you from getting hurt."

Ridge shot her a sharp glance, scowling. Just like her kid sister, for she surely had sense enough to know that her remark would not cause Tacker to pull in his horns. But Penny smiled at him in a kind of comradely superiority, as if they enjoyed a degree of understanding denied to Tacker. For the first time temper made flame in Ridge's eyes.

"You can't bump into me," said Tacker, and he hunched his shoulders and spread his legs.

"You can't bump into me," Ridge echoed. "Nor swear in mixed company. Nor show lip to a lady. We better both reform, hadn't we?"

"Saying what I can't do, are you?"

"Only to me and to ladies," said Ridge. "Now, I'm going to get a haircut. You find a post and scratch your back."

"I say I can cuss where I please and bump who I want."

"Well, I gave you a chance." Ridge lifted the saddlebags off his shoulder and placed them on the walk against the saloon wall. He had barely straightened when Tacker bored forward, throwing balled fists right and left.

Ridge belted with his left, hitting Tacker under the ribs. It didn't look hard but Tacker stiffened his cheeks and pulled back. He scraped his feet and charged forward. His punches exploded like sticks of dynamite all over Ridge. Ridge felt them; his size had not rendered him immune to pain. He went backward, quantities of a dangerous temper now spilling into his brain.

Tacker drove him down the street half a dozen steps, each blow so stiff it made them both grunt.

"Fight him, man!" somebody bawled. "Or he'll murder you! That cuss don't know the meaning of mercy!"

Ridge planted his feet, stiffened his belly muscles, with his back arched and his weight forward. Tacker got in two blows that sounded like sticks on a drumhead. But they hurt him, too, sending pain to his shoulders that made him wince.

Then Ridge stepped forward, one hand up, the other down, fingers open. He reached out and caught hold of Tacker, neck and crotch, too swift for the other to apprehend him. Ridge swung the man off his feet and on up, a free lift into the air so swift Tacker could not defend himself. Then Ridge threw him halfway across the street and watched him hit the deep dust with

a splat.

The dust cushion saved Tacker from being completely smashed, but the man lay motionless out there save for tearing gasps in the cloud he had raised when he hit. Nobody went out to help him.

Ridge looked around for Penny. She stood right on the edge of the gallery and wore a look of deep personal satisfaction. The Newberry girls, Ridge discerned, were not of delicate constitution.

"Who you trying to get into trouble?" he bawled.

"Pooh. I knew you'd whip him."

"Look, I'm hunting a job. Man can't make all kinds of enemies and expect anybody to want to hire him. Next time you want to see a fight, get you a couple of roosters."

A man said, "I can tell you this. You only made one enemy when you whupped that cuss. Penny, anybody coming from home to meet you?"

She shook her head. "I'll stay at the hotel and ride out tomorrow, Fred." She gave Ridge a frown, picked up a carpetbag, and moved along the street.

The others, wearing varying expressions, began to drift away. One lingered, an old man who stood eying Ridge with a look of shrewd speculation. The oldster glanced at the unmoving figure of Speel Tacker, then back at Ridge.

He said, "So you want a job. Well, you got one if you figure you're going to stay ahead of Speel Tacker. You hang around here and he'll fix you."

"Friend of his?" Ridge drawled.

"By gawd!" breathed the oldster, "if you wasn't a stranger around here, I'd pop you one for that! But I could use you, if you really hanker to go to work where you'd earn your salt. Come on and have a drink."

"What kind of job you got?" Ridge asked cautiously.

"Spread you can run, lock, stock, and barrel. I own it. But I got to go away for my health. They call me Buffalo Brown."

"They do?" said Ridge. "You know Ernie Bell tried to sheep-dip your well, last night?"

"He did?"

"Would have, if Kitch Newberry hadn't caught him and run him off. Why don't you stay home?"

"Come on and get that drink," said Buffalo Brown, "and I'll tell you why."

"Ernie's outfit got something to do with your poor health?" Ridge asked narrowly.

Buffalo Brown didn't answer. He had been a fair-sized man once himself, but age had bent and shriveled him. His eyes were keen and fearless. He wore his hat shoved back and didn't appear ever to have lost a hair of his snowy head. He steered Ridge into the near-by saloon.

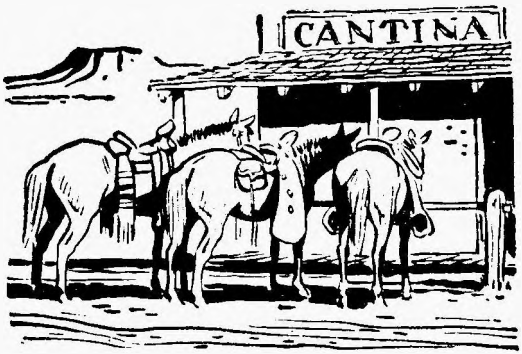
The place was empty save for the bartender, a fat man so short Ridge had to peer down his nose at him.

"Welcome, stranger," the barkeep said. "They're on the house, even if that means a free drink for Buffalo Brown."

"Hell, I'm buying, Henry," snapped Buffalo. "Stuff you set up free's worse than the sheep dip they been putting in the wells. You see this man play horseshoes with Speel?"

"Sure did, and they're still on the house."

Whatever the job Buffalo had in mind, he did not seem to want to discuss it before Henry. They had their drinks, the bartender joining them. Then Buffalo ushered Ridge back to the street.



After its moment of exhilaration, Yellow Bluff had slipped back into lethargy. The tieracks made their display of cow ponies, a few buckboards, and a couple of wagons. The soft haze of late day was descending on the town, mellowing the heat without seeming to lessen it.

When they reached the corner, Buffalo said, "You taken a hotel room?"

"Aim to."

"Then get it, and we can talk private."

Ridge needed no steering to the town's big two-story hotel. It sat on a corner and its canopy roofed the sidewalk on two sides of the building, a gallery running above. Ridge signed for a room, which proved to be on the second floor, spacious enough but barely furnished. He dumped the saddlebags on the scuffed floor, motioned the oldster to take the room's one chair, and seated himself on the edge of the lumpy bed.

"So they got you scared out," he said, reaching for the makings and eying Buffalo carefully.

"Ain't no sin to be scared," said Buffalo. "But I ain't scared out. I'm smart. Need a man I can depend on to take over my spread. My outfit ain't much. It sets against the hogbacks. Next door to Big A, the kingpin hereabouts. On the other side's Pat Newberry."

"Camped close to your place last night."

"You let me tell this," Buffalo retorted. "After me and Pat come a whole string of greasy-sackers. Big A wants to spread. So me and Pat are the first to feel its hot breath on our necks. This drought's brought on the showdown. Me, I got water, and no need to worry on that score."

"Man with the sheep dip might come back. Maybe has, with you round-siding here in town."

"That's the dug well he must have worked on. Let me lose it and I'd be riled but not ruined. Pat, he sets on the crick. It's about dry, and his dug wells are either dry or ruined by that stinking stuff they're using. Know how it works? Makes a soapy, stinkin' stuff that's poison to a steer or horse. Well's got to be dipped dry time after time to put it back in shape. No well in these parts has got enough water to allow that."

"Except yours," said Ridge.

Buffalo shook his head. "Not my dug well. I got what they call China Well to boot, and that's something else again. Ain't got any bottom. Name goes back before my time. Story is a Chinaman washed up in it once, sucked plumb through the earth. Let 'em dip that all they choose and she'll still run sweet. Yep, I got water and fair-enough grass and stand a good chance of getting plugged."

"Only way to root you out?"

"They're trying to scare me into selling, which I won't. So the next caper would be to beef me. I got no heirs. Outfit would go to the state and be put up for sale, and Big A kin bid higher than anybody else. When I seen you go after Tacker, I knowed I had a way to

fix 'em. If you're willing to string along."

"Tacker works for Big A?"

"He works for Brule McKay. He's another sharp cuss but as far as I know he ain't after me. Fact is, he hates Big A worse than poison, and that's a story in itself. Woman in it—a red-hot and lovely woman. It just happens that this drought's good for both Big A and McKay. What I want, son, is for you to take care of my place while I go into hiding. It happens I got to look yellow in this ruckus. If I get killed, Big A's on its way down the basin."

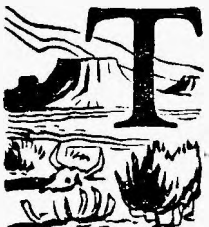
"What would they do to me?" Ridge asked.

"What could they? You can't sell the place. You won't even know where I am. Place is stocked up. What you don't have you can buy and charge to me. And I'll give you three months' pay in advance. By that time it ought to be settled for this year. Before then you won't see hide nor hair of me. Want a piece of it?"

"Guess I do." Ridge admitted.

Chapter Three

"You Can't Buck Big A."



THE next morning Ridge cashed his check, got his delayed haircut, paid his hotel bill, then went to the mercantile to lay in a supply of tobacco. Buffalo Brown had departed for home the night before, stating that he would have vanished into thin air by the time Ridge reached the place. Afterward Ridge had drifted about town, only to give it up when he discovered that he had become something of a celebrity. Now he was anxious to get out on the strange job he had finally found for himself, and he went to the livery to get his horses.

Presently he was riding along the long basin trail he had followed coming in the day before. Yet he saw the basin with new eyes. The road was a dusty, wheeled-out affair. The scattered ranch buildings he occasionally passed looked stark and miserable in the morning heat. Even close to town the range showed grass so dehydrated it seemed incapable of sustaining life. Sweat began to mix with dust to form mud on his face. He wanted to hurry but the pack horse held him to a jogging pace.

An hour out of town, he heard sound drum up faintly behind him. He twisted in the saddle to perceive a rider coming on at a rapid gait. Presently he could detect a daub of color too bright to belong to a man. He kept on indifferently but the other rider overtook him shortly. It was Penny Newberry.

She had changed to a riding-skirt as trim as the suit she had worn when she got off the stage. Good boots showed beneath it, and the blouse was a bright yellow. She had a crush-crowned hat resting back on her shoulders, and the sun brought out the gold of hair and skin. Considering how he had pinned back her ears the day before, Ridge was surprised when she slowed her horse.

"You've become the talk of the town," she said. "And that talk is that you came in from the basin yesterday. Now you appear to be going back."

"Not necessarily," Ridge said stiffly. "It's the horses that want to go, not me. Since I ain't got any other way to travel, I got to string along."

"Get wind of a job?"

"Got the job."

"Fine," said Penny. "Where?"

"Buffalo Brown got a craving for travel. I'm going to hold down his outfit a spell."

"Well, what do you know!" Penny breathed. "But that's like Buffalo. The army lost a great strategist when the cow country got him. So we'll be neighbors."

"And I'm invited over to see you. How nice you filled out. Kitch is as hell-bent as you, but she's got eyes. You sure did."

Penny looked shocked and she looked fussed. "Where did you see Kitch?"

"She can tell you."

"Aren't you a friendly soul, though!"

"You bet. With people who don't try to get me into a fight. Where you been?"

She gave him a look of annoyance. "You've earned a snub, but I'm not so tight-lipped. I visited my aunt in Scott's Ford."

"Dry there, too?"

"As bad as here. I dread getting home and seeing how much the crick has fallen."

"Buffalo left word for your dad. You might as well fetch it to him and save me the ride. He said that if the creek went, Pat Newberry was to water his stock at China Well. Buffalo kind of figured he was leaving Pat to face the music and wanted to make that arrangement. What I hear, the two spreads make a fence holding Big A back from taking the whole basin."

"I'll tell Dad," Penny said. "But I don't think he'd do that."

"Why not?"

"All the other people are dependent on the creek and their wells. My father's sort of the leader of the little outfits. The others are about ready to sell their cattle to Brule McKay, their graze to Judd Anders, of Big A, and call it a day. Dad's urged them to hold on. He'd look pretty falling back on China Well when the going got too tough, wouldn't he?"

"Likes a fight, too, does he?"

"Don't you?"

"No. Gets a man into trouble."

"Once you're steamed up, you do a fair job, though. Now, if you'll excuse me I'll dust on."

Ridge watched her pull into the forward distance until the rolling landscape swallowed her. The basin road came down finally upon the edge of the creek, which Buffalo Brown had said was called the Big Cat.

Like most open-country streams, it had a bed cut by winter floods that now seemed ridiculous in comparison to the trickle of water running in it. The stream rose in the hogbacks, Buffalo had said. The first thing it did, thereafter, was to form Skillet Lake, which lay entirely within the boundaries of Judd Anders's Big A. An earth depression impounded the water, with the Big Cat getting only the run-off from the lake.

Following directions, Ridge came finally to the spread he had hired himself out to run. The land had been rising for the last few miles and, far forward, it broke against low mountains. He rode in on a pleasant little headquarters. The buildings were old, unpainted, the boards and corral poles weathered to a saddle brown. But Buffalo had picked the shade of a locust grove. He had the dug well here, he had told Ridge. China Well was farther up on the plateau.

Ridge rode in to find that, as he had said he would. Buffalo had taken his departure. When he had put up the horses, Ridge went to the house to cook, for he had not eaten since break-

fast. He found the larder well stocked, the little shack pin-neat. He started a fire in the stove, put coffee on to cook, then sliced bacon to fry.

When he had satisfied his hunger, he went out to the porch to smoke. A sense of satisfaction rose in him as he watched evening shadows creep across the range.

He rose early the next morning. Besides his own, there were two of Buffalo's horses in the pasture below the house. There were half a dozen more, Buffalo had said, running on the range with a herd of nearly five hundred head of Herefords. One of the in-horses was a good-looking gray. Ridge caught it and threw on his saddle. Thereafter he rode out for a look-see at his new responsibilities.

The steers were fair shape, he observed as he scouted about, and their tracks took him to China Well, about which he had grown curious. He found it to be a type of spring he had observed before, filling a volcanic pit in sheer rock, fed by some subterranean reservoir. It wasn't over twenty feet at its widest, and the crystal-clear water was now a foot below the top. It could fall too low for the stock to reach, Buffalo had said, and there was a pump there and a dry tank downhill.

In winter, however, the spring could become an artesian, Ridge had been told, as was attested by the growth of another locust grove in the gully below the tank. Ridge scratched his head, wondering how long it would be before he had to pump water for the whole herd. Buffalo himself had done it on occasion but had not put in a windmill to fall back on because drought weather usually brought slack air, and that was the only time he ever needed to pump.

Ridge rolled a smoke and by the time he had finished smoking was toying with an idea. Buffalo probably had never seen such a thing, but once Ridge had passed through the Mormon settlements in eastern Idaho. They had a way of lifting water automatically when the land lay right. He had seen big siphons throwing more water than a dozen men could pump, keeping it up day and night and without effort.

It looked to him like one would work here, and it would certainly beat pumping. He had a notion to get pipe and try it, just to be prepared if China Well fell too far for the stock to reach the water naturally.

He spent the rest of that day making himself acquainted with the spread. A great deal of it was in the highlands of the hogbacks, some was flat. Buffalo had never run a very big herd, had never had the desire nor, since he was a bachelor, any need. But he had had himself a good, independent life out of it. Ridge could understand why the old man had not wanted to sell the place, leaving the threat that would pose for his neighbors out of it.

He was checking on the levels at China Well, the next morning, when

he discerned a horseman on the northern ridge, coming toward him. An oppressive heat attended the early hour. It seemed to have congealed the air. His exertions had him sweating until his clothes stuck to his body. He had measured at the well to find that the water had fallen over an inch, and this had hurried him in his investigations.

He watched the arriving horseman with careful interest. As the figure came on, he began to narrow his eyes in annoyance. He recognized the man who rode up truculently.

"I see you had two hats," he drawled. "But don't forget that you ain't got two heads."

Ernie Bell apparently had not gotten a good look at him the evening when he had chased Kitch into Ridge's camp. But the remark about the hat caused him to jerk up straight in the saddle.

"Who in hell are you?" he demanded.

"Man from yonder. I see you didn't bring your sheep dip, and I know of no other business to bring you here. So get the hell out, Ernie, before I pitch you in the well."

Ernie Bell was a wiry man. His chilly eyes and truculent jaw warned that surprise had scampered him the other night, not fear. He raked Ridge with a hot glance and said, "Where's Buffalo?"

"He quit the country. Said it had got too hot for him."

"He sold out?"

"Don't think he'd give his spread away, do you, Ernie?"

"Why, God damn him!" Ernie exploded. "But ain't it just like that schemin' old coot!"

"Our business was brief," Ridge said. "Never got very well acquainted with him." Ernie had jumped to the wrong conclusion, but Ridge wasn't of a mind to set him straight.

"You got title yet, stranger?" Ernie demanded.

"Don't see how that's your business, man. But get this, Ernie, and take it to Judd Anders. I heard how Big A's got ambitious. I heard how Buffalo was hoorawed and deviled, Anders trying to force him to sell out. It won't work any more. Anybody from your outfit who throws a rim shot at me or gives me any other kind of trouble is going to be sorry. I don't want trouble. I hate it. Gets a man messed up. So when somebody brings it to me, I like to get it wound up fast."

Ernie's eyes were streaked with hostility. He had got an enormous jolt, and Judd Anders was going to get one.

He said, "Whatever you paid for the place, mister, Judd Anders will pay you two thousand more. That's a nice profit for owning the outfit one or two days. The best chance you'll ever get to pull out of this with a profit. Ever' day you refuse, that offer'll come down a hundred. Then there won't be one. And pretty soon you'll get hurt. You can't buck Big A. Don't try it." He pulled his horse about and rode off.

Chapter Four

Bullets in the Night

RIDGE was grimly amused, although he knew that Judd Anders would not be deceived very long. When he got over his shock enough to check at the court house he would discover that no transaction had been recorded there. Yet he would not understand the nature of the deal between Buffalo Brown and the new man on his spread, and would have considerable

trouble trying to learn the straight of it.

The night's stillness, somewhere in its middle, was violently broken for Ridge. He came out of sleep with a bolt of apprehension causing him to push up on his elbows. He swung his feet to the floor and began dressing, definitely hearing the punch of pistol shots not too far off. The steady beat of running horses accompanied it. He got into his Levi's but lacked time for boots. Hooking gun and shell belt off the chair back by the bed, he paced out to the porch. Three more shots hammered out in series, and the hoof pound was closer.

Ridge saw a rider coming like a streak down the slope, driving straight for the ranch buildings. A group of three horses broke together over the rise behind and there came a second exchange of shots. The fugitive vanished, then reappeared in a near gully and whipped on into the yard.

"What in hell's this?" Ridge yelled.

"It ain't a picnic, and them ain't lawmen! They're—!"

The man broke off, throwing himself from the saddle and running for the house. The other riders were coming headlong after him, not of a mind to quit. The man who sprinted past Ridge was not large.

Ridge weighed it and might have told the fellow to fight his own battles had not one of the others thrown a bold, heedless shot at the house as he came up out of the dip. It eliminated the three as citizens of decent responsibility and brought Ridge's blood to a boil. He had gripped his gun and fired back before he had reached a conscious decision. It drove the three mounted men into cover of the outbuildings. A slug hit the wall back of Ridge and he retreated indoors.

"Who in blue blazes are you?" he demanded of the inner darkness.

"Pat Newberry." The man knocked out a window glass and threw a shot into the night.

"By damn, you Newberrys have sure got a way of bringing me trouble!" Ridge rapped.

"Did my damnedest to shake this batch loose afore I got here," Pat drawled.

"Who is it?"

"Big A. They caught me trying to dynamite the outlet of the lake. I couldn't tow 'em home to scare the daylights out of three women, could I?"

"Why here, then?"

"Killed me if they'd caught me. Wasn't any place to fort up." Pat fired another shot. "Besides, this place was a lot closer."

Ridge no longer cared much since that was Big A out there. He had left the door open and he dropped flat in the protecting darkness and began to hunt an opportunity. He had a long wait, then two blobs of fire bloomed together across the ranchyard. He and Pat fired together, and the next wait for a target was even longer. Then came a volley of emptying revolvers to be followed by the hammer of hoofs. Big A had gone into saddle, fired a broadside, and withdrawn.

"You're nailed down until morning," Ridge reflected. "They might lay for you between here and your place. What took you off your rocker?"

"Trying to blow open the outlet. Two months of drought. Six inches of water left where it comes out of Skillet Lake. Didn't find no guard, like I expected. They're savvy. There but hid. Hoped to get around it, but I guess I got to take a army in and do it by force."

"Ain't dynamite force?"

"Well," said Pat, "it's on the sudden side. We already went to Judd Anders and got down on our knees and begged for permission to deepen that outlet."

"Haul him into court."

"Not Judd. He ain't been out of bed in three years. He's paralyzed from the waist down. Ernie Bell's his ramrod. Some say he does all the scheming, and Judd don't know half of what goes on. Specially when it comes to his woman. By the way, I want to thank you for helping Kitch, the other night. That young 'un can get into more trouble."

"Knew how to get rid of it, too," Ridge drawled.

The horses had pulled out of earshot. Before he would risk lighting a lamp, Ridge wanted a look-see about the place. He slipped outside and made a careful inspection of all the back corners and dark recesses and found nothing. He returned to the house and touched a match to the lamp wick.

"By damn, you're pinked, Pat!" he exclaimed.

"Got it the first pop out of the box," Pat said. His left arm dripped blood. He pulled up the sleeve for a cautious look. The slug had gouged its way through the thick of the forearm. He frowned at it, about the way a man would at a bee sting. His daughters resembled him closely, although what might once have been yellow hair was now mouse-gray.

Ridge undertook to administer first aid. While he worked, Pat Newberry divulged more of his experience. Big Cat Creek was bound to go bone-dry in another week or two as the level of Skillet Lake fell below that of its outlet into the creek. The cowmen depending on the creek were itching to deepen that outlet at least a couple of feet. To keep some knuckleheads from getting killed trying it, Pat had quietly taken it onto his own shoulders and made his lone-handed effort. But Big A had just been waiting for something like that. They had tried to capture Pat, but he had broken away and run for it.

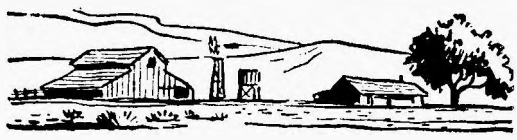
"Got to go now," Pat said, when Ridge was done with his arm. "Women'll be worried."

"Then I better ride over with you."

"No need," Pat began, then he hesitated. "Do that, and have breakfast with us. It's my turn to entertain."

Ridge saddled himself a horse, caught Pat's, and brought it to the house. He was thinking about China Well and his itch to try a siphon to see if it could be run dry. If not, and a siphon would work, he could throw an awful lot of water into the ravine below. That would save Pat, who was near enough so his steers could be choused over to water. It would take some of the strain off Big Cat Creek.

One thing was certain. Something had to be done soon, or the basin was going to have to make a drought sacrifice of its herds to the man wanting to buy them. That would leave most of them too weakened to fight Big A's range encroachments. One Brule McKay wanted the steers and Judd Anders wanted the range. Buffalo Brown had said there was enmity between them over some woman, but they seemed to be working together hand in glove.



Dawn caught them on the ride to Pat's place. It created a softness over the land that was serene and pleasant, denying the violence of the night and affirming the deep peace of nature. Pat

pointed the way, and in the first light they topped a juniper-clad crest to come down upon cattle with a running N brand. A cowpoke would call it a zigzag, and Pat said that was the name of his outfit.

Dropping down the long slope in brightening light, Ridge discerned the distant huddle of buildings. Then they rode in on the place.

It was Kitch who first saw them. She whooped as she came bolting out of the house. "You scared the living daylights out of us, Pa! Why didn't you tell us Ridge Grannet was going to help you?"

"Howdy, Kitch," said Ridge. "I just come along for the ride. Figured it was time I started my courting."

"Well, there she is," said Kitch, for Penny had come to the door with an older woman, both of them looking enormously relieved.

"Her?" Ridge scoffed. "It's you I got in mind, gal."

"Me?" Kitch squealed.

"Why, Pa! What's the matter with your arm?" The older woman fled off the porch as Pat swung lamely down from the saddle, for the first time disclosing his bloody sleeve.

"Big A beat me to the boom," Pat drawled. "Winged me, but I outrunned 'em to Buffalo's place. Ridge, he sided me real prompt and we beat 'em off. He don't like a ruckus. So when he gets into trouble he settles it fast."

"You ought to see him stripped!" breathed Kitch.

"Kitch!" Penny shrilled.

"I mean without his shirt. The way his muscles go up and down makes a body all quivery."

"A lady never notices such things, Kitch," Penny remonstrated.

"Wouldn't know about that," Kitch said doubtfully. "I recall the way you looked when you told us how he whipped Speel Tacker in town."

Pat said, "This is the missus, Ridge. Ma, we're hungry. He fixed my arm. There's nothing for me to do but set around and let you wait on me hand and foot."

Mrs. Newberry was as slender as the girls and as pleasing to the eye. She said, "It gave us a turn to hear that Buffalo had lined out. But from all I hear and see, he picked the right man to take care of things. We're glad to have you there, and you're welcome here as often as you want to come."

"Got two girls to marry off," said Pat. "It worries Ma."

Ridge ate breakfast with the family. Pat scoffed at the suggestion that he go to a doctor with his wound. He had stopped lead before, expected to do it again. Ridge left shortly afterward but before rising to the saddle, he put a question to Pat.

He said, "Winter times, when China Well's gushing like an artesian, what happens to all that water?"

"Runs into the Big Cat," Pat said. "But that only happens two-three months each winter. Hell of a note all the water we got then when we don't need it."

"How does it get to the creek?"

"Snakes down Bobcat Canyon. You'd see the sign if you went home that way. Go up Big Cat from here and you'll find it. Never more than a brook, and just a little dry wash now."

"Think I will," Ridge reflected. "And I got a curiosity. What made a cripple out of Judd Anders?"

"Load of buckshot in his back. Not two hours after he got married."

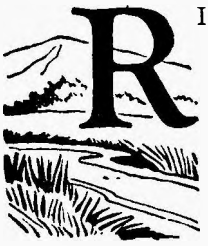
"Shotgun wedding, huh?"

"Hind end to. Lot of men wanted the woman he got. He was 'bushed. They

never found out who done it. He's never been able to move anything but his arms and head, since then. Changed Judd. He was fair-to-middlin' decent before then. Since, all he seems to do is lay there and figure out devilments and new ways to grow powerful."

Chapter Five

A Restless Wife



RIDGE took the dusty road that followed up the Big Cat to Skillet Lake. The lake, Pat had told him, had a big round body of great depth, its outlet being a long narrow neck that followed a canyon to spill out into the creek. The lake was due north of Zigzag and not far away, with lake, neck and outlet within the boundaries of Big A.

The wasted creek was a somber sight to a man who knew how many thousand steers were dependent upon it, their owners also, because if the steers went the operators were ruined. The forward distance lifted into a tangle of mountains, and Ridge noticed a big rim which he knew also ran past Buffalo Brown's Double B layout. He came into low hills, then reached a lateral canyon that had to be the Bobcat because its bottom showed water scouring. He followed it and, an hour later, came in below the locust grove that marked China Well.

By then he was on fire, his initial desire to test the well's output now enormously enlarged. If a one-inch siphon would work, so would a six-inch one or one of any size. He was almost afraid to hope, but maybe he had a way to keep the Big Cat from going completely dry. The creek was already baffled by small earth dams the stockmen had put in belatedly to conserve the precious flow. Ridge knew he had to get pipe and make his tests.

He had less doubt of a siphon's working properly than he had of the reserve of water on which China Well could draw. Rimrock country could present some staggering surprises, he knew. A cold and hot spring could emerge side by side from the same rock formation. Water could boil up in arid desert to create an oasis. He had a feeling that the big rim that stopped abruptly where Skillet Lake should be had something to do with China Well. He meant to investigate the rim and lake, but wanted nighttime to do it in.

He did his range work. The well seemed to have fallen a little more, and he had noticed with interest that it seemed to fall at about the same rate, by Pat's account, as the water coming out of Skillet Lake into the creek. That was a strong indication that the well drew on the lake through an underground fissure under the rimrock. It would be like a sandboil appearing behind a dike, Ridge reasoned. The water in the well would remain at the same level as that in the lake. If he was right, the lake could be tapped indefinitely, its depth giving it an enormous storage capacity, and Big A would have no lawful way of preventing it.

Ridge slept through the afternoon, then rose and fixed a meal. He waited an hour past dark, then saddled a horse and rode out, this time following the rim westward. Warned that Big A kept guards at the lake outlet, he rode so as to come in above them. The ground was more open than he had expected, and he wanted a look at the big lake, itself, and its relationship to the rimrock.

Presently, from an eminence, the moonlight glinting on something below told him he had come close to the main body of Skillet Lake. A parklike stand of pine ran down to it, emboldening him to ride on down. He rode quietly and was about to come out upon the road that skirted the lake, undoubtedly going on to Big A headquarters, when his horse gave him sudden warning, throwing its ears forward and lifting its head.

Having no wish to be come upon this deep in Big A territory, Ridge reined in and swung down. He walked forward to a clump of pine above the road and halted there, standing at the head of the horse with his hand pressing its muzzle to keep it quiet.

He could hear the sound of slow travel coming on along the road. He still was not worried, although there was a good chance the other horses would betray him, depending on how jumpy the riders were. If complacent, they would take it to be some loose range horse hanging close to the water.

Presently Ridge discerned the shapes of two people coming slowly through the starlight, sometimes lost among the pines, again plainly visible in the open. As they neared, he narrowed his eyes in interest. One rider was a woman. The other was a man, and from the way they kept watching each other they were engrossed in conversation. Ridge breathed a little easier. The poking horses seemed half asleep.

As they came closer, Ridge heard the man say vehemently, "I've got to have your answer tonight, Lorinda! I won't be put off any longer!"

"I can't give an answer, Brule," the woman said. "I don't know yet what I want to do. Be patient."

"Damn it, woman, I've been patient long enough!"

Then it happened. The man's horse abruptly threw its head to the left and snorted. To Ridge's surprise, the man simply bent forward, drove in his spurs, and whipped forward. The woman halted in her tracks, stiff in the saddle and staring toward the pines that concealed Ridge. Her escort had thundered out of sight in the forward distance.

"If that was Brule McKay," Ridge called, "he seems to be of a nervous temperament."

"Who are you?" the woman challenged.

He walked forward, leading the horse. The woman made no attempt to bolt the way McKay had done. But as he came closer he saw that her hand was on the grip of a gun on a belt.

"New neighbor," Ridge answered, touching his hat. "And I don't blame McKay. Was I foolin' around a crippled man's hen house, I wouldn't want some puncher catching me at it, either."

She tossed her head, giving him a fixed study. In the starlight her hair appeared to be jet black, her face ivory pale and beautiful. In the saddle she seemed slim and lovely, probably a little on the tall side, and firm breasts made their impressions against her white blouse.

"Are you the new man on Double B?" she asked, finally.

"I reckon."

"What are you doing here?"

"Why's that your business?" he asked tartly.

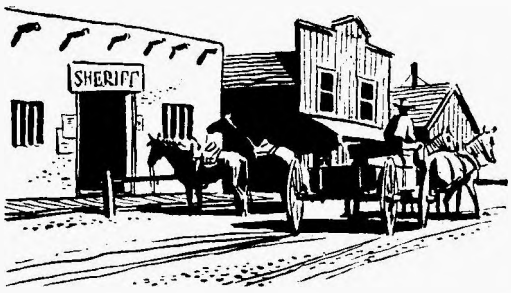
"I'm Lorinda Anders. I expect you realize that you're on my husband's property."

"Got to wondering," Ridge answered, "if there was really a lake in here with

a man too hog-mean to share it with droughting neighbors. Why so high-handed? How do you know I won't tattle on you to your husband? I heard how him and McKay hate each other because of some woman. Heard how Judd Anders got crippled because of some woman. I understand that better, now that I'm looking at the woman."

Lorinda Anders laughed coolly. "You're not displeased with what you see, either, are you? And you don't look to me like the tattling type. Don't blame Brule for running in hopes that he hadn't been recognized. It would be more dangerous for him to be caught on Big A than it would for you to be. See you again, I hope." She turned her horse, lifted it, and went thundering away.

Fearing that he had crowded his luck too far, already, Ridge started home. He had gained more than he had set out to learn. The rimrock was broken by the lake, as he had surmised that it might be. Moreover, something underhanded was going on between Brule McKay, who hoped to buy the basin's droughted cattle, and the ravishing wife of the man who was denying the basin water. That was something for a man to puzzle over.



THE NEXT MORNING Ridge hitched a team to Buffalo Brown's old buckboard and headed for Yellow Bluff. It was a long, slow trip that way, and he did not reach town until late in the afternoon. Once there, he went to the hardware store and put in his order. The largest pipe he could get was two-inch, although he would have preferred it four times that size. But it would do to make the test.

He bought what he wanted, with fittings, and placed an order for larger pipe to be shipped in from the wholesaler. He paid the bill from his own advance wages, it being an experiment and something he did not want to charge to Buffalo Brown.

When he had loaded up, he put the buckboard in the wagon yard and turned the team over to the liveryman. He got a hotel room, had his supper, and began thinking about Brule McKay. Inquiry at the restaurant told him he would probably find the man at the Palace saloon. Ridge took himself there. He found it to be a much larger place than where he had had a drink with Buffalo.

He had a drink at the bar and looked about. The place was big, busy, and offered girls. Ridge had not got a clear enough look at McKay the night before to be sure he would recognize him again. He saw no one in the place that looked familiar. It was doubtful that McKay had seen Lorinda Anders since the preceding night, and he still would not know who had spied upon them, or even that they had actually been spied upon at all.

Ridge's problem was solved for him when a voice he recognized instantly spoke at his shoulder. It said, "You got cheek coming in here, Grannet."

Whirling about, Ridge stared into the battered face of Speel Tacker. The man had a truculent look in his eyes, but over it he had pulled a shallow amiability.

The man resumed, "McKay gave orders you was to be brought to him the first time you showed in town. He wants to see you."

"Fine," Ridge said. "I want to see him. Where is he?"

Tacker pointed toward the door under the stairs. "In his office there."

"He owns this fleshpot?"

Tacker nodded and walked forward. He halted at the closed door to rap, and a voice within called an invitation. Tacker pushed the door inward, stepped through, and Ridge followed. Brule McKay stood in the middle of the room, watching Ridge without any sign of recognition or else with a feigned aloofness. He was middle-aged, on the soft side, and yet was a handsome man, one that could attract a woman like Lorinda Anders, although there must have been a vast difference in their ages.

"This the man who licked you, Speel?" McKay said then, and he laughed.

"Licked me hell. I tripped."

"And fell over a hitchrack and landed in the middle of the street. Get out, you damned liar. I want to talk to your better."

Tacker mumbled something and retreated, pulling the door shut hard. McKay said, "Sit down, Grannet. I hear you bought Double B."

"Got anything against it?"

"Nothing at all. I don't want land. I haven't even got any hope of buying your cattle, any more than I did when they belonged to old Buffalo. But it appears that you might play the white knight for Pat Newberry and his crowd. That I've got plenty against. They're going broke. The drought's ruining them, not me. But every day Newberry gets them to hold out against my offer, the more weight I lose from the cattle."

"Weather man been sheep-dipping wells?" Ridge inquired. "Story I heard was that Tacker and some other hardcases who work for you done that."

McKay shrugged. "Well, maybe we have hurried things along a little. It makes no difference in the end result. Just trying to save fat for myself, Grannet. And I'd like to have you on my side."

"I don't play your kind of game."

"Then take heed." McKay's face had stiffened. "Don't butt in."

"Not even with the man's restless wife?"

McKay's cheeks made hollows as he sucked in a breath. "So it was you."

"And my horse," said Ridge. "The horse can't talk, but I can. It wouldn't do your case much good if it got out that you're having secret dealings with the man who wants to buy drought range, the same as you want to latch onto cheap drought cattle. There's no guarantee you mean to drive a road herd to grass and water. If Big A gets the range it wants and you the cattle, the lake outlet will be deepened enough to restore the crick. Big A'll be twice its size, all of it a going concern again. So back out or be found out. You've got your choice."

Brule McKay's eyes held twin cyclones. "There's only one thing wrong with your theory," he murmured. "Judd Anders hates the very thought of me."

"His wife don't."

"What does that mean?"

Ridge grinned coolly. "Something happened to her husband, she'd own Big A and be in a position to marry again. To my mind, that beauty's double-crossing her husband. Him not even able to get out of bed, and probably

not worth a hang to her in bed."

He stared for an instant into a pair of murderous eyes, then turned and walked out.

Chapter Six

The Siphon

IT WAS late in another afternoon when Ridge drove the loaded buckboard back into Double B's ranchyard. The rig groaned under the weight of the pipe, which he had bought in short lengths so that he could fit it together to conform to the changing contours of the ground at China Well. He left it in the yard, expecting to take it on to the well in the morning. He unhitched the horses, took care of them, then went to the house to fix a meal.

He had barely got it started when a quietly ridden horse came into the yard. He went to the door and stared out, suddenly smiling. Lorinda Anders, forking a fine bay horse, smiled back at him.

"Hello," she said.

"Why, howdy. Light down and rest your saddle."

She swung nimbly from the saddle. Standing there in the full light of the sun, she was as lovely as the starlight had displayed her. She dropped the reins and came toward him, smooth-swinging. But she shook her head when he stepped aside so that she could enter the house.

"I can't stay. I was riding and saw your place and got an impulse to come on down."

"Like the impulses you get," Ridge said tauntingly.

She looked at him unabashed. "The impulse stemmed from a desire to straighten you out on the other night. I wasn't trysting with Brule McKay. Far from it."

"None of my business."

"I want you to understand it, Ridge Grannet. For one thing, I'd hate to have gossip started. For my husband's sake, more than my own. He leads a life of hell. I don't want to add to it. I once worked for Brule McKay in the Palace. I sang there. He hoped to marry me, but I married Judd Anders."

"Same day Judd got shot in the back."

She looked at him closely. "That's right. We were married in town. He was shot on the street not two hours afterward. From a roof. They never caught the guilty man."

"Hell of a honeymoon."

"We never had one. I've been Judd's wife in name only. For three years."

"Long time."

Again her appraisal was sharp, searching. "If you're insinuating that I've had affairs with other men, you're wrong. I have to ride, to be moving. Brule knows that. Sometimes he waylays me. He wants me to leave Judd and marry him."

"You sounded halfway inclined."

"Could you blame me? I'm a whole woman. Not half a one, to match a half-husband."

Her candor and the level regard of her eyes sobered Ridge. She was pleading her case to him because she did not want him to betray the fact of that meeting with McKay. Had she lied, trying to conceal her marital dissatisfaction and relation with McKay, he might have laughed at her. Now she had him bewildered. She seemed to discern his sudden doubt of his own judgment.

"Can I trust you?" she asked quietly.

"There wasn't ever any danger of my snitching on you."

She smiled, and it sent a thrill through Ridge. Then she gave him a full, friendly study, pulling in a tremulous breath, and her eyes traveled in the way he had seen so many other women make inspection of his size and find it pleasing.

"Thank you, Ridge," she said and turned back toward her horse.

Ridge stared into the empty yard a moment after she had ridden out, his heart slamming against his ribs. He had felt it a little, the other night, but it was full in him now, the magnetism of the woman, the restlessness within her, the direct, frank way she met a man, then the interest in him she had finally displayed openly.

Somewhere deep in his brain a warning sounded. It seemed unimportant. He knew suddenly why a good man went bad, a bad one wild, over a woman. *Thank you, Ridge*—and then away, to leave him hungry and bewildered.

He had forgotten his supper, but he finished cooking it and ate without much appetite. Even the siphon he now could test out seemed of no consequence. Yet he knew that it was of vital importance. The situation was bitterly weighted in favor of McKay and Big A. The drought seemed certain to continue so that time would deliver them what they wanted.

Ridge hoped that his bald statement of his suspicions might cause McKay to go easy. But what he had read in the man's eyes warned him that McKay was not easy to stop. Therefore the little ranchers were bound to make another effort to blow open the outlet from Skillet Lake, as Pat Newberry had tried. They wouldn't knuckle down until they had. China Well and the hope it held was the only solution.

THE NEXT MORNING he took the pipe to China Well and unloaded it. He had bought tools in town and a chain vise, which he nailed to a tree. He drove the team into the shade and fell to work. He laid out the pipe, starting at the well and running it down into the tank below.

It gave him all the fall needed to pull the well down another ten feet. Long before then he would know whether he was right about the well's level being equal to that of the lake, the connection being formed by the earth fault created when the rimrock had been pushed up.

He first formed a right angle, dropping a twelve-foot length of pipe which was capped on its lower end straight down into the well. He used a T at the bend over the lip of the well and ran a length of pipe at an angle across the ground. He connected a shut-off valve to the vertical extension of the T, used another short pipe into which he inserted a funnel that came directly under the pitcher pump Buffalo had installed there.

By then he was wild with impatience and worked without pause although the day's inert heat soon bathed him in sweat. It was not hard to couple the remaining short lengths of pipe together so that they roughly fit the shape of the ground, white-leading each connection to make it air-tight. When the last length was so joined, he put a cap on

the lower end.

He paused then to smoke a cigarette, his fingers trembling. He didn't need the water but others did with a life-or-death urgency, and this put an unbearable suspense in him. After two pulls, he threw away the cigarette. He opened the shut-off valve, primed the pump, and went to work filling the siphon with water. That done, he shut the valve.

He worked now in an obsessed, onrushing drive. Taking a catch-rope he had brought, he tied one end about a near-by rock, carrying the free end back to the well. Tightening the rope, he tied a clove-hitch about the pipe. Loaded, the pipe was heavy but he began to raise the vertical extension, snubbing with the rope at the end of each lift.

When the capped end of the pipe was only a foot under the surface of the water, he stopped, stretched flat with a wrench and reached down to remove the cap. Then, gingerly, he lowered the pipe back down to its former depth.

Strain coupled with exertion to give him a sense of dizziness as he dropped down to the catch basin. A few turns with the wrench, and that cap dropped off to let water spurt out onto dry earth.

Ridge watched it, tongue out, dreading to hear the awful gurgling in the pipe that would tell him he had failed. He heard nothing but suddenly the outpouring seemed to falter while his breath caught. Then it came on, even fuller than before and thereafter was a steady issue. He sat down weakly on the bank of the tank, watching in hypnotic attention.

By God, I cut it, he thought finally, and at last felt like reaching for his tobacco.

Within ten minutes the catch basin was spilling over and pouring into the ravine below. The water level in the well had not dropped, proving that when that happened it was because of some remote factor.

He spent the day there, watching and gaining confidence in his plan. A declivity below China Well was presently trapping the water to form a pond, but the far obstruction was low enough that the water would spill over if the siphon kept working.

Ridge knew he was employing a principle that had to work as long as he met its requirements, yet anxiety nagged him steadily even while he watched a pond appear where one had not been that morning. Earth cracks disclosed that a similar pool was created each winter when the well was gushing, only to evaporate and seep away when no longer fed. Fed constantly, it would be a splendid reserve of water.

But with the present setup it was not and could not become salvation for the droughted basin. He had to repeat the process with much larger pipe and keep it in operation against men determined to stop it. This was gain; it was hope for harried men yet it also was an undertaking that might bring on trouble as great as an attempt to blast the lake's outlet. After all, Big A was supplying the water now appearing on Double B soil. And Big A was only one of two elements working to deny the basin water.

Restlessness had Ridge up at first light the next morning. He didn't wait to cook breakfast but at once saddled a horse and went thundering out of the yard for China Well. As he came over the last rise, an exhilarating excitement filled him. The pooled water was spilling over now and a brook was running in the bottom. He went on to the

well and, without dismounting, saw what he hoped to see. China Well was holding its own against the siphon, while the siphon still ran steadily.

Ridge sat his saddle through a long moment in which he pondered the wisdom of disclosing this thing to Pat Newberry and, through him, to the other desperate ranchers. He would much prefer to press the venture on through by himself, rousing no hopes that might be smashed down, simply presenting them with water or never letting them know how he had hoped to get it for them.

The question was decided for him for, before he had left the well, another rider appeared on the ridge top. He saw at once that it was a woman, and a feeling of guilt flushed through him with the hope that it was Lorinda Anders again. The guilt deepened when he identified Penny Newberry riding down toward him. She came on fast, and he realized that the spread-out water she had observed had given her a shock of surprise.

Her face showed her amazement as she arrived before him. "What on earth have you done here?" she gasped.

"Tapped the earth's insides," said Ridge.

"Heavens to Betsy! It's siphoning, isn't it?"

Ridge nodded. "Don't let it scare you. A siphon's a siphon, whether you're stealing whisky from a keg with a little hose or using a pipe a man could ride a horse through."

"And the well's still holding up!"

Ridge pointed. "Down under that rim there's a fault. Connects Skillet Lake and China Well, which'll run till the lake goes dry."

"Aren't you stealing water?"

"Not when it comes up on Buffalo's property through an outlet that's been here as long as the lake has. Glad you come over, Penny, but what for?"

"I'm riding the basin. Dad's calling another meeting for our place, this evening. He wants you there. When I didn't find you at the house, I took a chance on your being here."

"What kind of a meeting?" Ridge asked.

"McKay's upped his price. It's still ruinous, but he's about got us where he wants. The creek's all but gone. So's everybody's endurance. Most are ready to sell to McKay. Dad wants to make one more effort to get them to hold on a little longer."

"That's fine," said Ridge, his decision made for him. "Go ahead and call 'em to the meeting. But get 'em to wait by telling 'em I'm going to get water for them."

"Some could drive here," Penny said dubiously. "You've got the water but not the grass to keep boarders. It's too far for them to drive back and forth."

"Now, you go on and lure 'em to that meeting," Ridge retorted. "Promise 'em water. Bat them pretty eyes at 'em. Wiggle your hips. But get McKay's new offer off their minds and get 'em to hoping. I'll need help. We'll have to keep a heavy guard on this place night and day. But I think we'll get our water."

"Ridge, you're wonderful!" Penny breathed. "What can't you do?"

"One thing I can't," said Ridge, "is keep my hands off a pretty girl looking at me like that. Get on, now. Carry new hope to your neighbors."

He smiled as he watched her ride off again. This country was too damn full of women who could set a man's blood to boiling!

Chapter Seven

Fight at the Well

HE HAD mounted to ride on for his look-see at the herd, an hour later, when he heard another horse coming on. When he glanced to the north, in the direction of Big A, he saw a man riding down upon him. Ridge felt a cold wave run through him, for it looked like Ernie Bell, and it was too early in the game for the secret to reach that outfit.

It was Ernie, who slid his horse to a stop at China Well to stare at the pond below and gasped, "Where in hell did that come from? What is this?"

"Maybe you're drunk, Ernie. Had a nip this morning?"

"That damned well ain't gone down a bit! Man, what you going to do with all that water?"

"Swim in it. This is hot country. Dusty. A man gets filthy."

"So you figure to water for your neighbors, do you?" Ernie said, his eyes narrowing.

"Might buy me a yacht. Hell, Ernie, why can't I have a lake, too? You got one."

Ernie was all but beside himself and he looked dangerous. "You can't do it!" he bawled. "By God, you can't!"

"Stop it, Ernie—!"

But Ernie Bell had gone for his gun. His eyes were bright with the agitation which drove him heedlessly on. His hand slashed down for the grip of his holstered pistol. The urge drove him to destroy the man he faced, to destroy the siphon.

Ridge let his own hand fly. He swung up his gun, had cocked and fired it before Ernie's cleared leather. The bullet smashed through Ernie's arm and plowed on into his side. The pistol dropped as Ernie jerked and thereafter stared through a long moment.

"You fool," Ridge said and he swung down and walked over. "You got stakes enough in the rotten game to throw away your life for it?"

Sanity had returned to Ernie's shocked eyes, pain not yet having assailed him. He stared at Ridge in bewilderment. Then he toppled toward Ridge, who caught him.

Ridge had little concern for Ernie whole and on his feet. But Ernie hurt and unconscious was another matter. He dismissed the idea of lashing the man's inert figure to the saddle and taking him to Big A to be cared for. He roughly bandaged the two wounds his one slug had made, carried Ernie into the shade, then swung into his own saddle. He rode directly for Big A headquarters. They would have to send for the doctor and make some disposition of the wild little cuss.

He dropped down off a hogback finally to see below him an impressive ranch layout, buildings and a corral system that covered much of a hill-hemmed flat. He rode in grimly.

Nobody but the cook, horse wrangler, and Lorinda were there, he found, leaving the bed-ridden owner out of account. The two hired hands stared as Ridge rode in. Then Lorinda appeared on the porch of the big house.

"Your man Ernie came to see me, a while ago," Ridge told her. "Never did learn what for. He went wild and pulled on me. I had to plug him. If you figure he's worth the trouble, send somebody for a doctor. And somebody to fetch him home."

Lorinda's mouth dropped open. She

lifted a hand and let it fall. "What—what was the trouble?"

"What was his business over there?" Ridge retorted.

"I don't know. I have nothing to do with the work."

"Then maybe your husband knows. I want to see him."

Her face set. He thought she was going to refuse, then she said, "All right, come on in."

He swung down, trailed reins and climbed the steps. She turned, and he followed her into the house. It was less lavish than he had expected, a big place furnished for utility and no different from thousands of other ranch homes. Lorinda went down the hall and stepped through another door. She wore a house dress which accentuated rather than diminished her body appeal.

Ridge got a shock when he stepped through the inner doorway. The wasted man who stared at him without interest seemed more like the girl's grandfather than her husband. He was slightly propped by pillows but didn't move even to return Ridge's nod.

"This is Ridge Grannet, Judd," Lorinda said.

Judd Anders's voice had a hollow rasp. "The new man on Double B?"

"He says Ernie came over and drew on him. He shot Ernie."

"Kill him?"

"No," Ridge said. "But you better send for a sawbones."

"Go tell Klip to go," Anders said to Lorinda, and she departed at once.

That left no doubt in Ridge's mind that Anders was still running Big A. The wasted face had an eerie touch of cruelty, he thought.

Anders said, "So you beat Ernie. Never seen him work, but he always let on he was pretty fast."

"He never stated his errand. What did you send him for?"

"I found out you never bought Double B. Sent him to find out where the hell old Buffalo is. He was a damned fool to get rough. Told him to raise the bribe he offered you."

Ridge let out a sigh of temporary relief. As long as Anders believed that to be the cause of the trouble, the secret of China Well was safe a little longer, for Ernie might never regain consciousness.

Nodding, Ridge said, "Looks like he decided to get the drop and save the money. Come in peaceable, then all at once he reached."

"Where's Buffalo?"

"I don't know. If I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"Four thousand in it."

"Damn you, I don't know. You're wasting your breath."

Ridge wheeled and walked out, disabused of his suspicion that Anders himself might not be playing much of a part in Big A's aggressiveness. The man was running the caper from flat on his back in bed, reaching out for power to compensate that which had been taken from his body. That kind of man, Ridge knew, could be more deadly than an able one.

Lorinda came across the ranchyard as he reached his horse. There was a slight tic at the edge of her mouth as she whispered, "All right, you got in to see him. What did you tell him?"

"Not what you're scared of." He was sorry for her, suddenly, aware that her life with such a man would be an onerous burden.

"Thank you," she said. "I didn't think you would. Was Ernie badly hurt?"

"Slug in his guts. Might be dead by the time I get back." He went up,

swung the horse, and rode out.

He reached China Well again to find that his warning had been well founded. Ernie Bell had not moved. The life had gone out of him. The horse he had ridden still waited where Ridge had left it. Now Ridge threw the body across the saddle, tied it, and started in for Double B headquarters. When Big A came for him, Ridge didn't want them at China Well. He could hope for a few days yet before his enemies found out about it.

He had to wait two hours before a buckboard showed up for Ernie, driven by Big A's cook. The man took one look at the figure on the porch and said, "Well, I see there was no need for all the fuss. Help me load him on, and I'll take him back. Ernie always did have more drive than sense."

Ridge was glad to see the rig roll out again presently. He had not tried to kill the man, and Ernie's position when he reached for his gun had been responsible for him being hit fatally. Ridge had few regrets about that, but he was a little worried. There had been no witnesses, just himself and a man now dead. Judd Anders might decide to make something out of that. If the law showed up here in a demanding frame of mind, Ridge knew it might be hard to prove it was self-defense.

Yet Ridge failed to see how it would profit Anders to crowd that chance. The man had plenty of his own dirty work to keep covered up. He had shown no fondness for his dead ramrod. Ridge hoped that he had heard the last of Ernie Bell.

The buckboard had scarcely disappeared, going back to the creek road, when a group of a dozen or so men appeared in the same direction, coming toward Double B. They rode at a trot, and Ridge stood with a frown until a forward rider waved his hat in a friendly gesture. Presently he could detect a sling and knew this was Pat Newberry. They came on, filling the ranchyard with racket and dust.

"What the hell happened between you and Ernie?" Pat demanded. "We met Klip and the buckboard. And Ernie."

Ridge told them, concealing his fears as to what it might involve by way of trouble with the law.

"Good riddance," Pat said. "Ernie was born bad. They hated him on Big A, even. It was in the cards he'd get ambitious with a better man someday. Now, Ridge, Penny spread the word the way you asked. But the meeting wouldn't keep until tonight. We figured seeing was a lot better than hearing. We want a look at what you got at China Well."

"Fine," Ridge said. "I'll get me a horse."

He led the party out to the well and let the situation there do most of the talking. It was his first meeting with most of the basin's small operators. They were concerned men, each showing his disturbance in a different way. Some were testy, impatient. Others looked haggard, a few slack-mouthed and beat. But when they came down upon China Well and saw the big pond that spilled into the old artesian water course, they were wholly energized.

"I seen that in winter!" a man yelled. "Be damned if I ever figured to see it in a drought! Where's that water coming from?"

Ridge explained his theory about it, then detailed his further plans, concluding with the fact that he had already ordered much larger pipe hoping to turn the baffled creek bed into an elongated watering trough.

"The physical problem's licked, I think," he added. "We've only got to build the same thing on a bigger scale. We can share the work, and if you jiggers are satisfied you can help with the expense. But mainly, once we start the big work, we got to keep a heavy guard on it day and night. Both Brule McKay and Big A will do their best to wreck it."

"Rather walk guard all night," a man retorted, "than to walk the floor worryin' about my steers. You'll get help any way you need it. When do we start?"

"I'll get word from the storekeeper when the big pipe comes in to Yellow Bluff. Then we'll haul it and set to work. I'll let you know."

An elated group of men rode away from China Well, leaving Ridge deeply satisfied with his accomplishment.

EACH MORNING Ridge's wakening thought was of the siphon and his nagging fear that he might ride out to find it stopped, its supply of water exhausted. But this morning he took time to eat his breakfast before he saddled and rode out. It was the same overly bright and sticky hot kind of day, yet somehow it seemed less oppressive to him. Then he came over the rise short of the well and stiffened in the saddle.

He saw a horse below with trailed reins and empty saddle. It wore the Big A brand, which brought a quick scowl to Ridge's face. He could not see the rider, so he put his own mount to a sharp quarter, cutting over to bring the tree stand between himself and the well. Thereafter he rode at a quiet walk, expecting trouble and ready for it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Woman in Love

HE HALTED the horse on the blind side of the trees and swung down quietly. Pressing forward through the foliage, he came out on the pond side and once again hung in arrest. There was something in the pond, itself, that riveted him there.

He saw the gleam of a white body beneath the surface; he saw a black head above. Lorinda, swimming indolently, was moving away from him, wholly undisturbed. Her clothes lay on the near bank. Ridge slipped forward, seated himself upon them, and reached for his tobacco sack.

Lorinda turned lazily on the far side of the pond. Her face twisted in stiffening surprise. She dropped her body upright, but the limpid water failed to conceal it.

"You get out early," she called. "I expected to catch you at breakfast."

He finished rolling the cigarette, glad she could not see how much tobacco he was spilling. He saw her launch herself and come toward him in clean, strong strokes. She stopped to tread water a few feet out from him.

"Go look at your well," she said, "and let me get dressed."

"What you doing here?"

"I had to see you. I came by here. And I couldn't resist trying this pond."

"You got a whole lake."

"Cold and deep. This is like bath

water. Please, Ridge. Don't punish me for it."

He grinned. "Punish you? I'm mighty happy you got the notion. And you might as well come on out. That water's like window glass."

She could not refrain from looking down hastily. When she glanced back at him, the edge of temper showed in her eyes. She tossed her head, then swam forward as he rose and turned his back. She picked up her clothes and walked in among the trees. He waited, pulses racing.

"Now you can look," he heard her say as she came back.

Turning, he could only stare at her, his breath shallow in his lungs. The anger died in her eyes as she stared back at him. Her lips made a trace of a smile. He saw her breath catch.

She said, "I'm awful, but I can't help it. I love you."

"Want me, you mean," he corrected harshly.

"I fell in love with you that first night I saw you," she insisted, lips parted.

"You're married."

"Am I? Would you say so?"

"No," he said. "I guess I wouldn't."

"I hate to go home. But I've got to."

"Why'd you come?"

"Really just to see you again. I've thought about you ever since you were at the house, yesterday."

"Don't come here any more. This is a terribly risky thing."

"I'll come often," she whispered. "You'll want me to."

He said, "Go home. Don't come back here."

"Where, then? There must be a place. There must."

He took a guilty, careful look around the near horizons. There was nothing disturbing in sight. He sat down at the edge of the pool, absently reaching for tobacco. His fingers trembled as he rolled a cigarette. He knew that when she sought him again he would be ready.

She let her fingers lace through his hair, then wordlessly went to her horse. He didn't look around as he heard her ride out.

Ridge was on the point of leaving for his routine inspection of the range when he saw a party of horsemen come over the rise from toward his own headquarters. Hats disclosed them to be men, and they halted on the near side of the rise to stare down at the new pond in the bottom, glistening in the morning sun. Then they came on at an increased gait, trotting down the slope.

By the time they were half down to Ridge he had identified Brule McKay and Speel Tacker, and had judged the nature of the two men accompanying them, the hardcases who probably worked for Tacker. He stood with a scowl building between his eyes. He was still at the edge of the pond when they rode down to him.

McKay looked at the water, then at Ridge, and breathed, "So this is the big secret!"

"How'd you know there was one, McKay?"

"So far this morning," said McKay, "we've had half a dozen greasy-sackers tell us to take our offer and go to hell with it. I figured you had something to do with that attitude. It's time we had

it out."

Tacker, looking truculent as ever, had stopped his horse directly behind McKay so that he was cut from view. As if by pre-arrangement, McKay swung his horse, disclosing that Tacker held a gun in his hand, its sights lined on Ridge's big body. McKay swung down from the saddle and came toward Ridge. His face wore a cold smile, but before he reached Ridge he halted and stared down at the ground.

Too late Ridge noticed what had caught his attention. There was the print of a bare foot in the mud at the edge of the water, a small foot. Ridge himself stood at the spot where Lorinda had undressed for her swim. He saw no other prints, just that one where she had emerged. The one was enough.

"Somebody been swimming, Grannet?" McKay intoned.

"Could be," Ridge admitted. "It's weather to make any kind of water look inviting. Some button was by, likely, and decided to jump in. Been tempted to, myself."

"A button," McKay agreed. "Or a woman."

He was looking about, searching the ground above the water. A wild apprehension swirled in Ridge. Impulsively, McKay swung toward the dense grove. Bent grass showed plainly that it had been recently entered from this spot. He moved forward, swinging himself angrily, moved by some roiling suspicion and rage. Then he was cut from view.

When McKay emerged an ugly smile stretched his face. "Your button lost his comb," he said. For a moment he exhibited the thing he held in his hand. Ridge had trouble to keep from swallowing. It was a pocket comb, the type a woman would carry. He knew Lorinda had smoothed her hair and somehow had dropped the comb.

McKay's eyes burned into Ridge's, trying to learn something from them. He knew that a woman had been here. Perhaps he guessed the identity of the woman, having seen her use the comb.

But McKay said no more. With an arrogant swing, he stepped around Ridge and walked on to the well. Twisting slightly, he called, "Bring him up here, Speel."

Tacker made a motion with his hand. His two cronies sat their saddles warily, alert-eyed and restless. Turning his back to them, Ridge walked up to the well. McKay was looking about. Ridge saw his eyes go from the siphon to the wrenches left out there.

McKay swung his glance to Tacker's men and said, "Swing down. Take the wrenches and tear this thing up."

"No, by God!" Ridge exploded.

He almost moved on McKay before Tacker let out a warning curse. Ridge stood motionless, fighting down his rage. The two men swung from their saddles. They were grinning. They walked over to the box by the pump, took up wrenches and began to disjoin the pipe. The first loosened coupling let in air and stopped the siphon's action. As each length of pipe was disconnected it was dropped into the well to sink into its unmeasured depths.

A half-dozen times as he watched the thorough destruction, Ridge repressed a wild urge to defy Tacker's gun. Finally he saw the last pipe vanish in China Well. Then McKay swung on Ridge. He apparently had dropped the lady's comb in his pocket. He nodded to the two men, who were running with sweat. Without hearing a word, they seemed to understand McKay. They

came toward Ridge.

"Bucko," Tacker warned, "I could plug and throw you in that well and nobody'd know what become of you. Stand nice and take your currying."

The two pluguglies came in behind Ridge. He knew what was coming but had to choose between it and death. They cut in with quick strides at the last, each seizing him by an arm. They twisted the arms behind him. Then Brule McKay stepped forward. Looking into the man's heated eyes, Ridge realized it was still the comb more than the siphon that moved him.

McKay's fist shot out and hit Ridge squarely on the mouth, drawing blood on the lips and sending a jar through the brain. McKay threw his other fist in the same way into Ridge's undefended face.

The man made a thorough, careful job of it. He punched Ridge's face until it was pulpy. He punched him in the belly. He spent his strength at it, with Ridge's stamina greater than that strength. At last he quit, taking Ridge's gun and tossing it into the well then striding to his horse and going up to saddle. Ridge was only partly aware of the others following him.

Ridge was left exhausted, ill, bleeding, but aware defiantly and proudly that McKay's utmost strength had been insufficient to beat him senseless.

When he had rested through long moments, Ridge went down to the water to wash himself. Afterward he rose to the saddle and started in.

Another figure sat a horse in his ranchyard waiting for him. A flood of embarrassment washed through Ridge as he came up. It was Kitch, with shock on her face and her mouth open.

"Nobody around here could do that!" she gasped. "Where'd he come from?"

"What brought you, younker?"

"Errand. The big pipe's in Yellow Bluff. George Jarbow was in and heard. He's gettin' word around for everybody to meet at our place, tonight. Pa wants you there, and Ma says to come early enough to eat supper with us. Ridge, what did you smack with your face?"

"If it'll make you feel better," Ridge said, "it was four men, one with a gun."

"Thank the Lord," Kitch breathed. "I couldn't stand it if it had only been one. Ridge, were you serious about going to court me? I mean sometime. The folks wouldn't stand for it yet."

"Man couldn't do any better," Ridge said. "Now, you go tell 'em I'll be there if they can stand to look at me. Tell your dad it was McKay and Tacker and a couple of others. They tore the siphon to pieces, and it's a godsend that pipe got in. Well's fallen a couple of inches. That means the lake has, too. It won't be long till the crick's plumb gone."

Kitch left on the wings that seemed always to carry her. Ridge shook his head. He didn't feel like facing an audience, and cared even less for the prospect of facing Penny through supper. His face was too sore to shave and would be for days. But urgency drove him. He'd had a taste of the opposition they would face in replacing the destroyed siphon with a bigger, better one. It would even be impossible to load the new pipe in Yellow Bluff without McKay's hearing of it and guessing its purpose.

It was only a little past midday. The thought of fixing himself a meal was distasteful. His body ached from its merciless beating, seemed drained of strength. Memories of Lorinda haunted him. He dreaded the things that must come before he could be free of her, if he ever could. He did not love her; yet

somehow he thought, he feared, that she had meant the words when she had said them to him.

He put in the afternoon doing what he had been hired to do on Double B. He had a period of reaction in which he wished he knew where Buffalo Brown had taken himself so that he could write and tell the man to get home and then be off, himself. Yet it had never been in his nature to walk off from problems he had himself created and this urge soon passed.

Chapter Nine

Trickery

HE ARRIVED at Zigzag around six in the evening, knowing Mrs. Newberry would want to have supper early because of the meeting. Kitch had changed to a dress and was in the yard to greet him. Penny and her parents had come to the porch.

"Where did McKay find twelve men to bring to China Well?" Penny asked. "And how come you to let six of them get the drop on you?"

"One of my off days," Ridge said, deciding that his own veracity was less important than Kitch's pride in him. "Don't you ever have 'em?"

"Sure do," Penny agreed, smiling at him.

He was glad they all took it that way, for it swept away his embarrassment. Later he found supper a somewhat painful undertaking, but appetite had come up in him and the food was excellent. But they had barely finished the meal when ranchers began to ride in. Word of what had happened at China Well had not gone forth. They arrived in noisy good humor.

Ridge quickly killed that when he joined them in the ranchyard. They were all there by then, and he gave a brief account of the squabble.

"That much is my business," he concluded, "and you men had no part of it. I built that one siphon, and it was me got the beating. But you'll all have a hand in the new one, and it might be tough going. I want somebody who's got a wagon to take it to Yellow Bluff yet tonight. I want four men to go with me to guard it on the way back. I want at least another four to go to China Well yet tonight and stay there till relieved. Scares the hell outta me to think what some dynamite dropped in that well might do. Might fizzle or it might ruin the well. Somebody's apt to get curious and decide to find out."

He got unanimous support, and thereafter it was only necessary to organize. A man had a big, wide-tired wagon and agreed to start for town as soon as he could get home and hitch it up. From the volunteers, Ridge picked four of the younger ones to serve with him as a guard for the load of precious pipe. He told the rest to work out a continual watch at the well. Then he left for home, having agreed to join his party in Yellow Bluff before noon of the following day.

He was in the saddle and riding by dawn. There was no way in which a freight wagon could be concealed, no means of getting the vital pipe to China Well in secrecy. It had to be rammed through by force. As far as Ridge knew, Brule McKay had an active crew of three men but he would know where to find recruits and, in the showdown, there was little doubt that he and Judd Anders's big force would join up openly. The little outfits were thus handi-

capped by inferior numbers, with the initiative in the hands of the enemy.

He overtook the wagon an hour short of Yellow Bluff, and by the time they reached the town the three riders had overtaken them. The horsemen pulled forward so as not to draw undue attention any earlier than necessary. Ridge left word with the driver to come in quietly and park at the loading platform in the rear of the mercantile.

When they reached town, he told his companions to rack their horses casually and drift into the store to be on hand to help with the loading. As soon as that was accomplished the load was to be battened under canvas. The wagon would pull out quietly, and its escort would not join it until it had put the town behind. He promised to join them again as soon as possible.

It was by then midmorning, too early in the day to find McKay at the Palace or the kind of audience there that Ridge wanted when he confronted McKay about the manhandling at China Well. But the bench in front of the stage office, occupied by a few town gaffers, drew Ridge's notice and he studied it for a moment. He rolled a cigarette, left it unlighted, and moved down the street.

He was making a cool, deliberate use of two things, the notoriety he had gained when he whipped Speel Tacker here in town and the present mauled appearance of his face. He drifted past the bench, halted abruptly and looked at the men who stared at him.

"Anybody got a match?" Ridge drawled.

"Who in tunket done that to you?" gasped a man with a tobacco-stained mouth.

"My business," said Ridge, "and I aim to settle it. If he's got the nerve. You got a match?"

The man fumbled into a pocket, then seemed to forget what he searched for. "Tacker?" he gasped.

"He's small potatoes."

"Not McKay? He couldn't—!"

"With enough help he could," Ridge retorted. "Do I get a match?"

He accepted the match, which the man drew out vacantly, struck it and lighted his cigarette. Nodding his thanks, he went on up the street. At the corner he drifted across to the right, halted and put his back to the wall of the saddle shop. By then there wasn't a man left on the bench in front of the depot. The old-timers were scuttling off, each eager to be the first to spread the news that a beat-up Grannet was in town looking for Brule McKay.

Tension was building in Ridge. This situation was a thing he wanted and had to have, yet its immediate purpose was to create a diversion so magnetic that the wagon behind the mercantile would seem of little importance. The next fifteen minutes told him he was getting it. Along the street men took quick looks at him from doorways and shuffled about seeking a point of vantage. By then, Ridge reasoned, the news would have reached McKay or one of his men who would speedily take it to McKay.

Yet it was nearly an hour before Brule McKay came swinging down the hotel steps. He seemed to know where to go for he spun right and came on toward Ridge. It was a challenge he could not afford to ignore, and this consideration fully occupied his mind. He seemed fearless and he walked briskly. Ridge still had his back against the boards of the saddler's wall.

"I hear you're making talk, Grannet," McKay called, and he halted ten

paces from Ridge.

"Don't recall that I mentioned names. How come you're excited?"

"What are you doing in town?" McKay asked.

"Maybe paying some bills. Where's Tacker and them two toughs?"

McKay could not repress the relief that glinted for a second in his eyes. "They're around."

"Hiding?"

"Go find out," said McKay.

"You going to hide, too, McKay? Or run?"

"So it's me, too. You're ambitious, Grannet."

"Got to be. You won't fight without their backing. Proved that yesterday at Double B. I'll be in to see you boys before I leave town, McKay."

"Do that," said McKay. He swung and walked back the way he had come. Ridge had no doubt that the man was glad to postpone the showdown until he could set the stage for it. Ridge meant to take his time about the rest of it, time enough to let the wagon get far down the road to Double B and China Well.

Ridge eased thereafter, confident that he had as good as locked McKay and his whole crew in the Palace. Ridge kept away from the mercantile, going to the hotel porch where he took a round-back chair. Presently he saw the wagon cross the main street and disappear, on its way home. Afterward Ridge tilted back his chair, pulled his hat over his eyes and seemed to doze.

He let three wearing hours go by, then rose to meet the price he must pay to gain safety for the wagonload of pipe. He had lost one of his guns the day before, but he rarely carried more than one though he owned two, and now wished he had both for he had a ticklish business to contend with.

He went at once to the Palace door and stepped through. The place was empty of patrons and not even a bartender was in view. But at a back table sat three men, McKay, Tacker, and one of the pair who had been with them at the well. The other man was not in sight, and in this arrangement Ridge saw death staring fully at him.

The three at the table had seated themselves so as not to have to move to be ready for whatever came. Their reliance was upon some hidden gun, stationed where it could not miss. McKay directly faced him, the others at the end of the table, so it had been assumed that he would be the target. He would not need to make a fast draw. He would fire a shot in order to show a powder-fouled gun but the shot that would kill the victim of the cross-whip would come from the concealed marksman.

Ridge built a cold smile. "Which knothole's loaded, McKay? That one over your head?"

"You're cool enough," McKay murmured. "But a fool. Yesterday I had no good excuse to kill you. Now you've given me one."

"Not yet," Ridge drawled. "You used all the roof shots this town'll stand for on Judd Anders."

"Anders?"

Ridge used that moment of astonishment to swing his back toward them. "And you can't get away with a back shot at all. I'll be waiting outside, McKay."

He felt a prickling the full length of his spine as he thus exposed himself to treacherous men, gambling his very life on the cogent impact of his words. He walked out, coming upon a crowd that filled the street yet kept safely out

of line of the front windows. He saw surprise and bewilderment jump onto intent faces and watched them scramble back.

His breath loosened a little as he moved beyond reach of the trickery within the Palace. He had left the door open. He crossed the street, which emptied itself as swiftly as it had filled. He turned there to face the Palace.

Moments passed that were like hours. Nobody appeared in the Palace doorway. Then a man conspicuously identified by a white apron came cautiously and shut the door from within. Nobody but McKay's own men had actually heard the challenge. And McKay was standing pat for the time being.

Going to his horse, Ridge untied the reins, swung up, and himself left town. In his allusion to the shotgun crippling of Judd Anders, he knew, he was leaving McKay and Tacker something to keep their minds off the wagonload of pipe. Now Ridge set out to overtake the wagon party.

When in late afternoon he caught up with it, the wagon was within easy reach of Pat Newberry's Zigzag. The men with it recognized him in the distance and were looking puzzled when he closed the gap.

"What in blue blazes happened to you?" the driver demanded.

"Fiddle-faddled around," said Ridge. "Have any trouble?"

"Not a speck. Makes a man feel silly the big way we planned this and nobody even givin' us a second look."

Ridge only grinned.

The road thereafter followed the Big Cat. Several times Ridge had noted an impoverished pool of tepid water caught behind an earth fill, the means by which the little ranchers had sought to stretch the creek's vanishing flow as far as possible. None of them could last more than a few days longer for the trickling stream coming down from above was at places all but lost in the gravel bed.

The wagon reached Zigzag to remain for the night. Ridge agreed to stay with it so that his companions could get back to their own spreads. They in turn promised to be on hand in the morning to take the pipe on to China Well and get the work of assembling a new and adequate siphon started.

Ridge did not expect that to take long. He had solved the technical problems and it was just a matter of doing the work. The crucial test would be in keeping the siphon going once word was out of its existence. That would get about swiftly if the drying creek suddenly showed a rise.

RIDGE WAS FINDING IT PLEASANT taking meals with the Newberry family. Pat was quiet but in the way of a man satisfied with his situation even though it was one that was bound to require more fight. His wife seemed bent on fattening Ridge up, although Ridge couldn't see where he needed it. Kitch wore a pair of worshipful eyes, and only Penny seemed restrained.

He didn't get a chance to speak to Penny alone until long later. He had made up a bed under the wagon, although Pat had promised to sleep with one ear open. Ridge was sitting there in the darkness, smoking a cigarette, when he saw Penny slip out of the house and come toward him. He rose, feeling a pleasant lift of spirit as she neared him.

Quietly, she said, "I've been wanting to speak to you, Ridge. My conscience has been giving me fits ever since I saw your beat-up face, yesterday."

"Why?" he asked, astonished.

"We Newberrys dragged you into this fight. I remember how you insisted, at the start, on keeping out of trouble. Now--now—well, if anything happens to you, I don't know what."

He felt his heart speed its beat. The starlight showed him a tilted, concerned face, a slim body full of woman's loveliness. Yet the odd thought came to him that a man wanted more in a woman than the ability to forget his troubles for a while. It was good having someone concerned for his safety; he couldn't remember anyone else's ever having expressed it. It was good to be fighting a fight for good people.

He said, "Tosh. I'm just cagey till I know what I'm getting into."

"You needn't try to ease me. It wasn't fair. You have no stake in this. Yet it's all been dumped on your shoulders. Even Buffalo Brown turned it all over to you and walked out. We've taken advantage of your human decency."

"What makes a stake?"

"A spread to fight for. A family."

"And friends," he added softly.

She smiled then. "You're all right, Ridge. Plenty all right." She turned and went back to the house.

He lay awake a long while, combing her words for their true meaning, hoping that her concern for him stemmed from much more than a troubled conscience, that her talk of spread and family and serious purpose had been designed to probe the inner thoughts of a man with all the outward earmarks of a born drifter. If so, she appeared to have been satisfied, and this pleased him as he fell asleep.

Chapter Ten

Two Enemies Unite

THE pipe went on out to China Well the next morning. By the time it reached there, every small time operator in the droughted basin was on hand, wild with impatience to complete the project.

Ridge found himself with little to do, thereafter, but direct the work. The big pipe was much more awkward to handle and required special tools, which had been brought out from Yellow Bluff with it. But evening saw the thing done, the siphon loaded and placed in operation. The big gush of water that it threw gave every promise of saving the life of the previously doomed Big Cat. Yet the triumph found work-weary men who only looked upon the accomplishment with quiet satisfaction.

A guard had already been organized and was now enlarged. It would have to be maintained until the first substantial rain. But Pat Newberry said. "If we get trouble it'll come afore we've had a chance to store any water in the creek channel. How long would you say that'll take, Ridge?"

Ridge shook his head. "I ain't engineer enough to tell you, Pat. It's already running down the gully. Take a lot just to wet the winter watercourse, and some'll soak up and some evaporate. But I'd say that if we can keep this thing secret three-four days we can take on the devil and still have water. Hell of it is, Bobcat Canyon will show water where Big A goes back and forth on the town road. Somebody's apt to notice long before we're set."

He accompanied Pat as far as Double B headquarters and was dead beat. Left alone there, he built a fire in the cookstove and started a meal, for the first time remembering that none of them had eaten a bite since breakfast. Afterward he cleaned up and went to the porch steps to sit and smoke and watch the wheeling stars.

He was thinking of the stake Penny had talked about and wondering if Buffalo Brown would consider selling this spread to the right man. Buffalo had grown old. He might listen to an offer that would bring him an income through his remaining years and permit a penniless man to set up in business.

She's wrong, he thought. *I got a stake here, though I can't rightly say what it is.*

HE CAME AWAKE in the night because of a voice saying quietly, "Ridge! Ridge!" Even in its half-force he knew the voice and why the impact of its sound had sent his heart racing even as he aroused. He sat up in bed and saw her where the moonlight fell through the window, a slim and breath-taking shape for a man to open his eyes to.

"Lorinda!"

She stayed over there, uncertain yet held by something that had her in its power. She whispered, "I had to come. And I had to sneak in this way. Judd knows what you're doing at China Well. He's had men spying on you all day. They're going to attack you."

"When?" Ridge asked harshly.

"He's sent word to Brule McKay to join forces with him. That'll take time. Probably not before tomorrow night."

"Why did you want to tell me?"

"You know why."

Quietly he said, "Step out, Lorinda, and I'll get dressed."

She moved through the curtain at the doorway. Swinging out of bed, Ridge got into his pants and tugged on his boots. She had crossed the outer room and was watching as he came out to her, almost hidden by the darkness yet oppressively present. Though she could so easily have been trying to deceive him, to throw him off stride for the benefit of Big A or McKay, himself, Ridge had an almost intuitive feeling that caused him to dismiss that possibility.

He said, "I'm grateful. You know you're betraying your own practical interests, don't you?"

"Ah, no. I'm being loyal to my interest."

"If Judd suspected?"

"He'd kill me. And you, if he could. I can't help my part. I'm not sorry."

"Well, you got to go back, now."

"Must I?"

His answer was low. "Yes."

"It just isn't any good, is it?"

"No."

"Luck, then," she said, "and so long."

"So long and thanks."

He watched her move slowly toward the door and it seemed minutes before she reached it. It was like hanging to a rope at which fire ate hungrily, like dreading its parting yet voluptuously stirred by the closeness of a force so fiercely consuming.

He nearly spoke out to stop her. He nearly strode after to sweep her up and carry her to the warm luxury of his bed. But he watched her dissolve in the outer darkness and was vaguely warned that she walked toward disas-

ter. Her horse slipped away so quietly that he had no knowledge of its going.

Slowly practical considerations rose up to steady his mind. She had raised more questions than she had answered with the information she had brought. One thing required immediate attention. She might have been wrong in her estimate of when Big A would bring a fight to China Well. The men guarding the new siphon had to be warned at once and preparations made to meet the attack. Yet he dared not tell them how he had learned of its imminence and certainty. He would respect and forever conceal what had been between him and Lorinda Anders.

He finished dressing, then went out to the corral to catch and saddle a horse. Riding out, he cut a slant toward Bobcat Canyon, coming upon it short of China Well and without encountering one of its sentries. His ears picked up the cheerful gurgling of water as it moved along the old dry wash, while moon glint confirmed that an appreciable quantity now ran down toward the creek.

He turned his horse on west, wanting to know the extent to which the recreated little stream had gone. He came upon pools where the on-creeping movement had halted temporarily. But he came down at last upon the Big Cat with the sure knowledge that water had reached it to turn down its course and create the reservoirs so important to the droughted basin.

That gave Ridge a way to warn the men at China Well of the impending assault upon it. He started back up the canyon and was gratified at the prompt way he was challenged as he drew near the well and its defenders. Identifying himself, he rode on to the guard and was passed through. They had sentries out on all the likely approaches with a reserve of half a dozen men around a fire at the well.

Still sitting his saddle, Ridge said, "I just come up through Bobcat, boys. The new water's hit the crick. Hope I'm wrong, but we've got to act on the assumption that tomorrow will tip our hand. Then we'll get a fight. Even if we can't win it, we've got to hold them off till we've built a little reserve in the Big Cat channel. Then, even if they knock out this siphon, too, we've bought us a little more time. What size of a force could Judd Anders send against us?"

"Well," a man said, "Big A carries a pay roll around thirty men. Likely half of them are young and wild enough to fight. That's more than we got, and they'll give us a time."

"I got a feeling," Ridge said carefully, "that when it comes to a showdown, Anders will throw in with McKay."

"Them two hate each other," the man retorted. "Anders, he got the woman McKay wanted. Everybody knows McKay was responsible for the shotgun blast that ruined Anders as husband and saddleman. Likely he didn't fire it. He hires that kind of work done. But he was behind it, and Anders has the sense to know it."

"That's water under the bridge, though," Ridge said. "This drought's created a situation they both can profit from plenty. To my mind, we've got to expect them both to hit us."

"How we going to meet it?"

"From now till we've got water in the Big Cat, we've got to keep every available man here at the well. Ready to fight at the drop of a hat. Henderson, you and Lamark ride the basin and muster every man and every gun you can raise."

Ridge swung down then. There was coffee on the fire, and he poured himself a cup. Thereafter they fell to developing a plan of defense, a bristling fight put up by men resolved to stick to the last before they would permit the new siphon to be destroyed. Ridge stayed at the well until the middle of the next morning. By that time every droughted rancher on the Big Cat was on hand, some of them having brought teen-age boys to help in the fight for survival. They comprised a force of fourteen men, three-quarters of what could be thrown against them if Big A and McKay joined forces as Lorinda had predicted.

Dissatisfaction rode Ridge. He probed the situation again and again, seeking a way to wrest the initiative from the enemy as he had in bringing the pipe out from town. He could see nothing ahead but a stubborn frontal fight, costly as it was bound to be.

Around ten o'clock he tightened his cinch and swung into the saddle. He rode toward the northern hogbacks, seeking a point of vantage from which he could perhaps detect something of what came from Big A. He reached the pines and their pools of shadow. He headed west again, coming closer to the Big A road to town. Prospecting carefully, he found a place presently where he could see both a stretch of the road and a considerable sweep of Big A's upper graze.

Anders believed the time of his projected attack to be a secret, although he realized it would be expected. He would try for such surprise as he could gain. Ridge swung down from his horse and seated himself for a long vigil.

He got the long wait, so long that he thought he was doing a fruitless thing. But when the sun reached its zenith, throwing its heat fully upon the lower terrain, he stiffened in sudden full energy for he had caught sight of dark dots, far down the slant. They were riders, coming toward him. He sat motionless because he was upwind where his scent would not warn their horses.

It was a large party, at least a dozen men, but was not the whole force that could be thrown against China Well. They drew nearer, riding cautiously, but still Ridge did not move. They were on a slight quarter from him, he had detected, and would pass a little to his left. Then Ridge's eyes narrowed in interest as they came yet closer.

The bed-ridden Judd Anders was only the mind behind this movement. Ernie Bell, his ramrod, was dead. A big man led this war party. Ridge half-divined and half-detected that it was Speel Tacker. The two enemies of China Well had united for the assault.

Chapter Eleven

The Attack

THEY were soon lost in the pines. Ridge rose to the saddle. He was aware that, with its reinforcements, Big A was planning a double attack. A heavy force would hit China Well and pin down its defenders. When they were settled in their positions and engrossed in the fight, a second force would hit hard and fast, hoping to achieve a rout.

Ridge set himself to getting back to the well ahead of his foe, riding swiftly and blazing a new trail. He rode boldly down the last open stretch, waving his hat above his head, knowing his haste would disclose the urgency of the mo-

ment. Then he was back with his fellows.

He swept a hand toward the open land above them. "They'll have to cross that baldface. We'll bust it up if we can and pin it down if we can't. And we won't get caught napping by their second push."

Sober men moved quietly to the stations he assigned. He posted two of them south of the grove to watch the other horizons. This was scarcely done when the northern slope abruptly displayed riders. They whipped over the top and came on boldly, riding hard. Guns cracked at the well and were answered. Tacker's party spread out, not checking its gait. The dancing gunfire split the air. It leaped about in its wrath. Then Tacker's men left horse at some signal, flinging down in the sage and scattered rock. The riderless horses instantly wheeled about from the forbidding foreground and drove themselves into the distance.

The dissolved lump of the attackers had become a line. It moved down the slope, crawling, shooting, and crawling again. Strange silences occurred in the din, only to be destroyed by renewed outbursts of anger. Tacker apparently did not mean to fight a battle of attrition. Every hour that the siphon ran was an hour of extended hope for the drought-ridden basiners.

On the other hand, Ridge meant to fight for that time. He was in a rock scab by himself. Now and then a searching bullet came close, while he could not see the results of his own efforts. He wasted no lead and the foreground was sufficiently broken to make it all but impossible to find a target.

From across the grove a man's high cry rang out. It was a warning and was followed instantly by an outburst of shooting over there. The next moment brought the heavy drum of horses' hoofs. From his position, a back glance let Ridge see them, a half-dozen riders who swarmed down on that side. They were bent low and shot as they rode at a headlong clip.

Despair hit Ridge. They kept saddle and were bent on staying mounted until they had rammed their way into the grove. Once there, they would be in position to raise hob with the defense.

Ridge reached an instant decision. He lacked the men to hold the line confronting him and still contest the new movement. He twisted about in his position and began crawling away from the defense perimeter. Some marksman picked him up and three times slugs nailed into the ground too close for comfort. He slid down past the well, then came into the grove on its free side.

The men he had put out on the south side had fallen back into the brush. Now Ridge risked rising up and making his bent way forward, moving with haste. They were putting up a spunky defense but the horsemen charging down upon the trees came like Indians, low bent, quartering, driving impetuously on.

Ridge came close to his man and yelled, "I'm going to set fire to this thing! Burn it out! If they get in here, they'll have their way with us!"

"Go ahead!" a man called back. He kept on shooting.

Ridge tore off a handful of dried grass, struck a match, and ignited the fagot which he tossed back into the matted grass at the grove's center. His men fell back then abreast of him, and the three took station behind trees to prevent the horsemen, now crashing into the distant edge of the grove, from

extinguishing the flames before they had got started.

The first riders discerned the menace to their maneuver and tried to come on. Ridge emptied a saddle, for the first time seeing something to shoot at and knowing he had hit it and drawing a grim satisfaction from the change. Smoke spread out on either side of the set fire and made a mantle over the whole surrounding area, while the flames leaped into the tinder-dry underskirting of the trees.

"Hold 'em awhile!" a man bawled.

"They won't come through!" Ridge answered. "Now we got to keep them from coming around!"

His quick judgment and decision had knocked the edge off the surprise assault. Over on Tacker's side men discerned that fact and made puzzled inquiries back and forth. Tacker was bawling at them to hold fast, but the man knew now that he was going to reap no quick and fruitful harvest. The courage of the defenders strengthened and their firing bristled.

Ridge rarely knew whether a sudden outcry meant that a friend or foe was hit. Twice more he had dust kicked into his face by a searching bullet. He moved about, scraping the hot, hard earth with his belly. Once he saw Pat Newberry, his sling thrown away, forcing his still unhealed arm to help him use a rifle. Once he discovered a dead man, a basiner, and again a whiskerless boy with a slug through the shoulder. These things reminded him again that life as well as water hung precariously in the balance.

The whole grove was presently a mass of roaring flames. The rear attack was nailed down at the point where its plan had gone awry. Smoke whipped about and was at times a torment to the defenders of China Well, while again it plagued the attackers, and always the heat spread out to compound the merciless heat already coming from the midday sun.

Not long after that Ridge realized that pressure was building up on the west flank of Tacker's line. He at once divined the intention, which was to drive the defense back from the well proper so that the siphon could be seized at that point, its big gate valve opened to let in air and kill the pumping action. That achieved, Tacker could pull back and conserve his men with the comfort of knowing that no more water was running down toward the Big Cat.

Finding Pat Newberry, Ridge said, "They're making a push for the valve, Pat. I've got to pull off men over here even if it means letting 'em in closer. Spare me three or four?"

"Help yourself," Pat said and fired a shot at something that interested him.

Ridge gathered the reinforcements and threw them into the line west of the well proper. He wished that he had three or four more with which to execute his next step, but there was only himself to undertake it. The fire pattern proved now that Tacker was concentrating on seizing the upper end of the siphon.

Waiting until the ever-shifting smoke wagged out on the west side of the burning grove. Ridge made a scrambling run forward and into the smoke. By then he was so sweat-drenched and smoke-irritated that he seemed not to notice any difference. Some of Tacker's second party were scattered through here. Ridge was ready for a sudden fight but wanted to get through and behind them so that he could swing in on the rear of the wedge driving on the

siphon's valve.

He managed to progress for some distance and began to believe that he was safely through the enemy line when a figure presented itself before him. The other man was as surprised as Ridge. The smoke had kept him inactive for a moment and he was coughing. But he shoved onto an elbow and fired just as Ridge spotted him. Ridge went flat and was instantly up again. One shot flattened the other, then Ridge sped on into the smoke.

The sound pattern now told him that he probably was far enough out to be able to swing back on the rear of the piece of line preoccupying him. A few steps to his right and the smoke began to thin. He bellied, thereafter, coming into fresh air and dragging it into his lungs in relieved gasps. Paused in that wise, he studied the foreground and picked out a rock scab for himself. He went on, not knowing what movement might bring him the fruit of death.

He reached the scab without having been detected. He had gained an advantage in that he could harry Tacker from the rear. But once his presence was known he would be alone against many ruthless men with them in the superior position. He had known more comfortable circumstances, but he lay catching his breath and trying to search out the obstructed ground 'that ran downward before him.

He changed the pitch of his voice slightly but used the full power of his deep chest when he bawled out.

"Hey, Tacker! They're getting help from somewheres! Must be a dozen men fogging in from toward town! Blast it, man, come here!"

"Who's that?" a voice answered from directly below him.

"Charlie. And I'd admire to know who's coming."

There was apt to be a Charlie in any fair-sized group of rangemen. Ridge's eyes strained into the forward distance, where smoke hung heavily and other obstructions combined to cut off sight. He saw a figure dimly appear and grow plainer, drawn forth by new concern. Ridge shoved to his feet and saw Tacker recognize him and try to cut back. Tacker flung a shot just as Ridge's gun chopped down and fired. Tacker gave a forward pitch and went down.

But Ridge was yelling again, "Come on, boys! We got 'em in a vise!"

It had an even more ruinous effect on Tacker's leaderless men than Ridge had hoped for. Some of them had seen Tacker cut down from their rear. They cried out their warnings to those about. Even the defenders were lifted in the false hope of rescue, and Ridge heard their puzzled but welcoming shouts. In a moment the attacking force was pulling back. The horses that had brought them here were too far distant to be readily caught and mounted.

Pat Newberry's voice rang out, "Come on, men! We ain't collected their tickets for this ball!"

The basiners spilled out of their defensive positions and took a running fight to the men now retreating in disorder toward the distant horses.

Ridge ran down to Tacker, who lay with his arms under him. He rolled the man and saw that he had shot him in the small of the neck. Then Ridge joined the last of the fight, which quickly petered out, with scarcely half of those who had come in so confidently managing to leave again.

As the racket, the dust and smoke cleared from the scene it disclosed an intact siphon that still ran steadily. Yet its cost was grim, for three of the

droughted ranchers had paid with their lives, five more were hurt.

To Pat Newberry Ridge said, "They've shot their bolt. Take over, Pat. You'll want the doctor and the sheriff. Take 'em down to Double B. Help yourself to what you need."

"Where you going?"

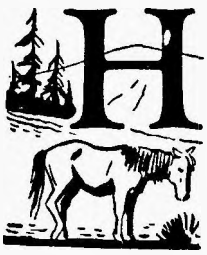
"Big A."

Pat stared. "Why's that?"

"When I kill a snake, it's the head I want to put out of business."

Chapter Twelve

A Stake



HE WAS halfway up the long slant, riding north again, when he saw a horseman appear on the rise ahead of him. The rider was slight, appeared to hesitate, then came on. Presently he took shape as a bent old man, and Ridge dug spurs, speeding forward.

"Buffalo!" he yelled. "Where in blue blazes did you show up from?"

Buffalo Brown gave no evidence of having traveled very far, either by horse or stage. He made a sweeping motion toward the hills behind him. "I been holed up. Got me a cave back there. Been keeping tabs on things, bub. Today you've been having quite a racket around here."

"Seen what I done to your well?"

"Been down a couple of times at night."

"Is it all right the way I been giving away your water?"

"Hell," Buffalo retorted, "if I'd known about that trick Big A would still be a little one, and the rest of this basin would sure have had it easier the past twenty years. Of course it's all right. How did the ruckus come out? All I could do not to come in and help."

"We beat 'em off," Ridge said. "That's about all except that Speel Tacker's done for."

"That ain't all," said Buffalo. "I got a friend on Big A. He always kept me posted on what went on over there. Old Klip. Him and me figured out the way to make Anders give up trying to force me to sell Double B. Klip knew where I holed up. Kept me supplied and posted. And I just seen him. Judd Anders is done for, too. Shot himself last night."

"Shot himself?"

"What Klip said."

"He was murdered!" Ridge exploded, and his face was tight. "Why'd he shoot himself just when he was set to drive the big spike?"

"Well, that's what Klip wonders. Was a shot in the big house just afore daylight. Klip was one of the first to get there. The woman was there. Judd was in bed and had a gun in his hand. And a hole in his head. All she heard was the shot, too."

Ridge's throat was tight. That would be after Lorinda's stealthy visit to him in which she had conveyed the warning of the attack. Had she told Anders what she had done? Or had she herself killed Anders?

"But Big A went on with the attack!" he gasped. "Who ordered that?"

"Brule McKay. He's there now. He figures to fill Judd's boots and bed."

"And has all along," Ridge breathed. "He killed Judd Anders."

"Her helping him."

"Buffalo, there's no need for you to hide any longer. You get down to your place and help them." Ridge rode on before the old man could question him

as to his intentions.

He was well over the rise before his mind began to thaw out. He hated to believe what Buffalo had stated so flatly. Yet it made sense. Nobody knew better than himself how restlessly dissatisfied and unhappy Lorinda was in her life with a helpless husband. There had been the night when she had ridden with McKay, the man pleading with her, Lorinda hesitant but not refusing whatever the man was after. All along McKay had been the prime mover in the plot against the harried basiners, hoping ultimately to have not only Lorinda but Big A with an extended range and greatly increased herd.

For all his own scheming, Judd Anders had played the fool. So had Ridge Grannet in his short-lived pity for the unhappy woman.

Ridge reined in, staring into the distance. Far below the bottom brush spilled a horse and rider onto the slant. A glint of white bespoke a blouse, and the bent figure whipped the horse on with a quirt. The speck kicked up dust and telegraphed to Ridge an urgency that caused him to switch direction and head down on a quarter to intercept it. His motion seemed to have drawn notice for the distant rider cut over, now heading straight toward him.

Then the lower brush again made issue. A man forked this horse and was riding in the same headlong way. Ridge had no time to puzzle about it. He knew by then that the forward rider was Lorinda, and she was riding for her life. Even at that distance the clothes of the man in pursuit identified Brule McKay. Whether or not she recognized Ridge, Lorinda was trying to reach him.

Ridge let out an involuntarily yell when he saw what happened then. He didn't realize McKay had drawn a gun until he saw the man's arms lift and chop down. Thinking it was to drive himself away, the distance being too great for effect, Ridge pulled up his own gun and drove his mount on.

Then McKay fired three swift shots, not at Ridge but at Lorinda. Ridge saw the girl tip and thought she would spill from the saddle, but she straightened. McKay then swung his horse clean about and went thundering at an angle down the slope. Ridge yelled a challenge, which McKay disdained. The man kept out of the brush, wanting clearance and a chance to escape.

McKay twisted in the saddle and emptied his gun warningly, and thereafter Ridge saw him ride with the reins dropped on the neck of the horse while he shoved in fresh loads. He was still too far ahead for Ridge to want to waste his own powder, and he seemed to have the faster horse. Ridge had worked his own mount considerably that day but now showed it no mercy for his mind burned with a single purpose—to make McKay stand and fight.

He had divined that McKay's purpose was to outrun him and gain the town road, and he had guessed that the return of the defeated fighters to Big A had precipitated this strange crisis. Ridge flung one backward glance to see that Lorinda's horse had gained the edge of the pine and halted there, that she was not now in the saddle.

When Ridge realized that McKay was slowly widening the gap between them, still out of pistol range, he again pressed his horse for more speed. He was running a little above McKay on the slope and seemed to be holding his own again when they came to the end of the long woods copse. McKay seemed to be aware of that for suddenly he

swung his horse downward toward flatter and faster ground.

In that sudden full right turn he made his first mistake. It created seconds in which the distance between them was lessened, and Ridge used them to shoot across the two lines of the right angle, aiming at the surer target of McKay's horse. His first shot might have been effective, but he had fired again before the animal dropped its head and did a full somersault, throwing McKay wildly above it.

McKay came down in a spin, causing Ridge to flinch involuntarily at the hard, unbroken way he smashed against the earth. Ridge pulled to a sliding stop beside the figure on the ground. It was unnecessary to dismount. McKay's head was tucked under one shoulder like the head of a bird beneath a wing.

By the time he reached her horse, Ridge had discerned Lorinda on the ground in under the pines. She lay on her face and the back of her blouse was blotched with red. He felt his throat tighten and his knees were weak as he swung from the saddle. He hunkered beside her, somewhat relieved at seeing the shallow rise and fall of her chest, deeply puzzled by the mystery of this woman's mind and heart.

She apparently had dismounted, walked a few steps and then collapsed. He placed her arm under her cheek to lift her breathing from the dusty pine needles. She was hard hit, by outward signs, and the sound of her breath confirmed the fact. He could not leave her, she could not be transported, and so he waited there.

Her first words, when at long last she spoke them, were odd. "Shot in the back—like Judd—at the start—of this trouble—"

"And by the same man, Lorinda?"

"Yes—Ridge—"

"Don't try to talk."

"I've got to. See Klip—he's got something—for you—"

He thought from the way her voice trailed off that she was gone. He was certain that she had stopped breathing, but when he felt for a pulse it was faintly there. He scarcely dared to breathe, himself. Then with great effort her lips worked again, though she failed to open her eyes.

"I let him kill Judd. And—and I knew he'd kill me when he found out what he did. Long ago—he swore no other man—would ever touch me. He—was wrong—"

"Lorinda!"

But he knew she had slipped away on the exertion of those words. She went with half a smile.

IT WAS THE EVENING of the next day when Ridge found himself alone with Buffalo Brown and old Klippel from Big A. They were on the porch at Double B, still shocked and slack from the recent violence and its draining aftermath.

Old Klip said. "What I'm going to tell you had best be kept to the three of us. I mean her knowing McKay was apt to try for Judd and not warning us boys so's we could put a guard around the house. To my mind, though, she done the right thing. Judd's mind went bad when he got crippled. If he'd lived he'd of kept on giving the basin hell one way or the other. She knowed McKay was bound to kill her, too, because she wasn't going to go along with him.

So after Judd cashed his chips, she got hold of me and Hack—he's our cook, Grannet—and she wrote a will and me and Hack witnessed her signature."

"Will?" Ridge breathed.

"I turned it over to the bank in town. Neither her or Judd had any heirs to contest it. But just the same we ought to keep still about her sort of exacting Judd's life as the price of her own. She left the land holding the handle of Skillet Lake to Pat Newberry. It joins his property, anyhow, and now it's his and he'll see his neighbors never lack water. The rest of Big A, its stock and equipment, goes to a young 'uns' home. She was raised in one. She never had much love in this world. The less we do to sully her memory, the better."

"You bet," Ridge breathed.

"The sheriff was satisfied with what shows on the surface. Everybody knows Judd Anders turned range hog. And it's plain to see Brule McKay hoped to outfox Judd and get not only his spread and its maybeso additions, but his wife. He was dead wrong, and I got a soft spot in my heart for the woman that helped bust it up."

"Amen," said Ridge.

Klip left for home, presently. For a while after he was gone, Buffalo Brown sat nibbling his lip.

Finally he said, "Like this country?"

"I would from here on," Ridge said.

"How'd you like to run Double B permanent?"

Ridge sat up straight. "You mean it, Buffalo?"

"Well," said Buffalo, "I reckon every man has trouble when he comes to my time of life. Hate to come right out and admit I'm an old gaffer. But, hell, that's what I am. Wished for a long time there was some up-and-coming young buck I could turn things over to. Me, I hanker to spend my mornings on that bench in front of the stage office in town, gassin' with the other old coots. Then move across to the bench by the harness shop when the sun crosses over at noon. And wind up the day's gassing there."

"You'd sell out to me, Buffalo?"

"That's the only way you'd really be happy with it. No hurry, but we'll go in and fix up the papers one of these days. Now, let's hit the hay."

"Hay?" Ridge demanded. "I just hit the stars, and I got some riding to do."

WITHIN FIFTEEN MINUTES he was in the saddle, riding a beeline for Zigzag. Pat Newberry didn't know yet that he had come into possession of the outlet of Skillet Lake, and it was not Ridge's purpose to inform him. He was glad to see lights in the house when it appeared below him in the benighted distance. He rode into the ranchyard at such a clatter that it brought Kitch to the door. Her parents and sister were right behind her.

"Anything wrong, Ridge?" Pat called, sounding worried.

"Not unless you'd figure it so having me your permanent neighbor. And son-in-law. I just bought Buffalo out. And I aim to propose to your daughter before the night's any older."

"Why, Ridge!" Kitch squealed.

He strode up the steps, put his finger under her chin, tilted back her head, and kissed her. "I give you my word you'll like me better as a brother. Penny. I got me a stake in this basin and always did have. You want me to claim it here or in privacy?"

Kitch let out a long sigh. "Take her out under the stars, Ridge. She's been going out there to moon every night since she laid eyes on you." THE END

free-for-all

"LAND OF THE I-DE-HO!" is another colorful novel chronicling the adventures of that bewhiskered road agent, Comanche John. It's John's second appearance in ZGW, so he's an old friend by now. He's still as full of lusty humor and as fast on the grab as ever, so it looks like he'll be around as long as rascals—and graveyard space for them to fill—hold out. If you enjoy this new adventure of the Old Comanche as much as your editors did, don't hesitate to write!

Author Dan Cushman has already delivered a third Comanche John story, so stay in your saddles and be ready to read sign! The title is "The Fastest Gun Thar Be" and it gives our free-booting hero plenty of chances to exercise his golden gift of gab and his casual speed with a pair of Navy sixes.

We take extra pleasure in presenting two novels this month. The second one, Glenn Corbin's "Trouble on Big Cat," signals the arrival of another fresh talent for ZGW. We're counting on hearing more from this writer, a native of the Northwest who is still living there; (we'll give you more of his personal history the next time he appears in these pages). We've provided an illustration for "Trouble on Big Cat" inside the back cover in place of the usual pictorial feature.

The dramatic short, "Last Waltz on Wild Horse," is the first ZGW appearance of T. T. Flynn. First T's for Thomas, second's for Theodore (call him "Ted"). Ted's big (six-two) and no tyro at fiction writing—he's been herding a typewriter keyboard some twenty-eight years so far. He got his first peek at the world in Indianapolis but soon moved on to Washington, D.C. After high school he toiled in railroad yards and on shipboard: crack railroading yarns and sea stories ensued. His first fiction efforts, however, were tales of the Blue Ridge Mountain folk—colorful character studies of the people Ted knew in that region during the years he spent there. He's had a long history of successful detective- and Western-story appearances, too; and has sold to the slicks as well as the pulps. An early devotee of auto-trailer living, he spent several years roaming in this style, working at his writing trade as he traveled. Currently Ted is a resident of New Mexico—formerly Santa Fe, now Albuquerque. Married, he has two sons.

This month's novelette, "Challenge West" by George C. Appell is another Doc McCall yarn. George's better-known character, Ross Ringler, is due for a slam-bang comeback soon!

Author of "Fate Dealt a Joker" is Henry ("Chip") Chafetz, a native New Yorker. Born in Brooklyn, he's now a resident of Manhattan, where he and a partner run the Pageant Book Company on Fourth Street, which is one of the largest old-print stores in America besides managing to sell plenty of books.

A latter-day pilgrim, Chip bummed his way to the Chicago World's Fair two years in a row, describing himself in that period (he was then a teen-age boy) as a "boxcar bum . . . one of those wild boys of the road." He saw service in the Second World War as an Air Force navigator.

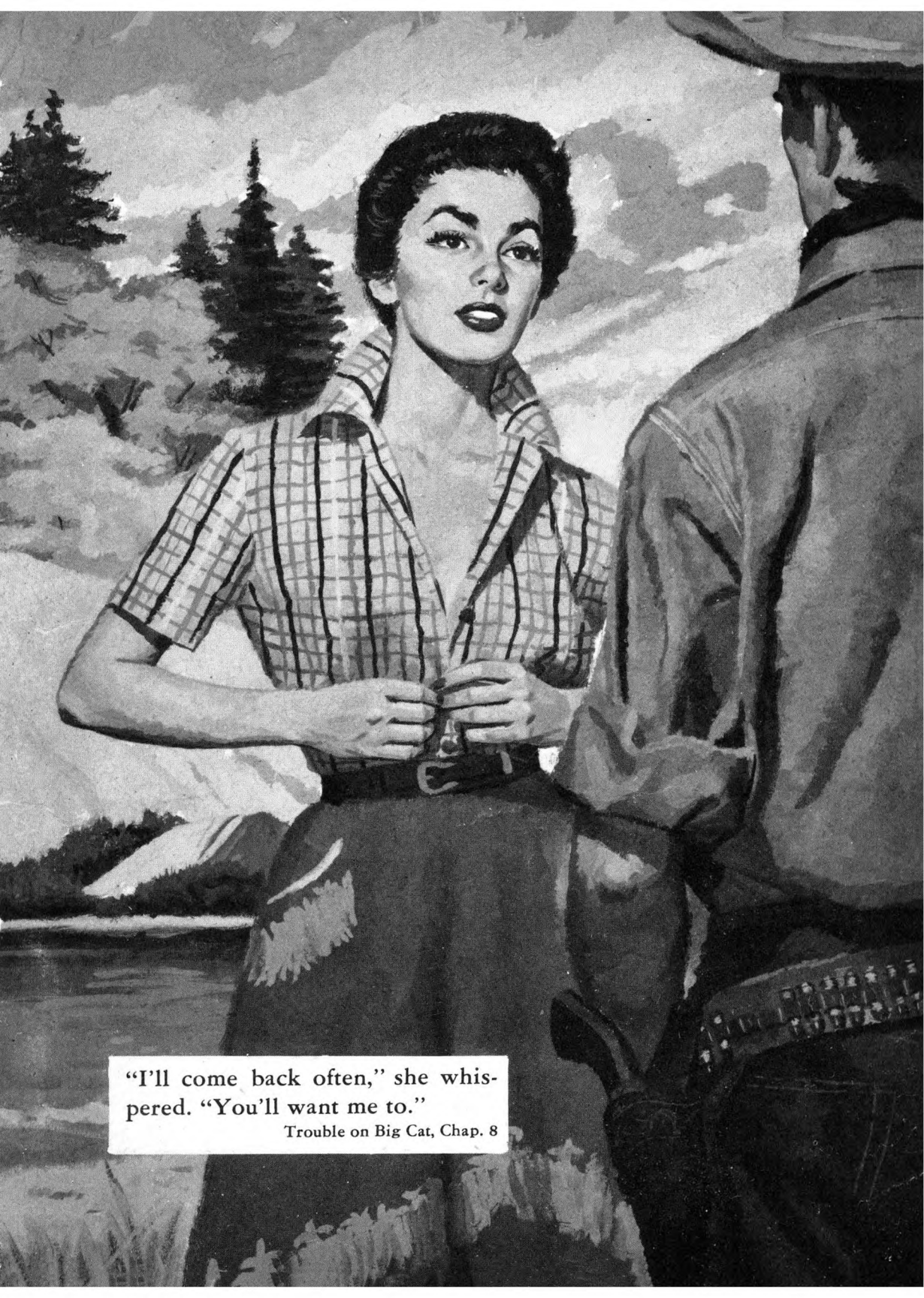
"Fate Dealt a Joker" is a sideline-result of three years' research which Chip has done on a forthcoming history of gambling in America. More of the same will be printed in ZGW's pages from time to time.

Edwin L. Sabin, whose short story, "Inside Measure," appears in this issue, is one of the grand old men of Western writing. He recently went through hospitalization for a fractured hipbone, but has recovered nicely and is again active at the typewriter. That, we depose, is something to be grateful for!

If you like Wayne D. Overholser's "The Black Jappards" and want to read one of his novels, you can probably still pick up a copy of the Dell pocket-size edition of his *Steel to the South* at your newsstand.

And on the stands in January are two new Dell Book Westerns, both by writers who are tops in their field: *King Colt*, by Luke Short; and *Outlaw on Horseback*, by Will Ermine—a pair of stories that no lover of Westerns would consider missing!

—THE EDITORS.


"I'll come back often," she whispered. "You'll want me to."

Trouble on Big Cat, Chap. 8

In this Issue:

LAND OF THE I-DE-HO! *by Dan Cushman*

A complete short novel about that frontier gamecock, Comanche John. In this new adventure, the garrulous, gun-wise old rogue undertakes to guide a wagon train across the Bitterroots. As he says, he's the man to do it, even if he has to start a graveyard on every sidehill. A slick-talkin' gent tries to buy John off; then to get rid of him by bushwhack trap and murder frame-up. John finally skips out—to save the price of a black serge suit—but he returns in time to unlimber his Navy Colts when Indians and renegade whites attack the train. The rascals are as vicious as hungry wolves in mid-winter—but the old Comanche likes his meat with the hair on!

TROUBLE ON BIG CAT, *by Glenn Corbin*

A novel-length story of greed on the range. A dry spell means trouble enough, but on Big Cat Creek they had to fight against the twin threats of drought and a ruthless land grabber. Judd Anders had all the water the small ranchers needed—and he aimed to keep it so they'd be forced to sell out to him cheap. Big trouble for sure—and then a wayfarer who looked big enough to handle it rode in!

CHALLENGE WEST, *by George C. Appell*

When circuit-riding Dr. Jeff McCall has to outsmart raiding Kiowas and Comanches, he uses surgery to do it. With some old-fashioned tools, he cuts away the malignant growth to make room for the healthy tissue.

THE RUSTLERS, *by Elmore Leonard*

Blood is thicker than water—and it may be stronger than the law. When his own brother turns rustler, Emmett Ryan has to decide which is stronger for him.

—along with two fact stories: "Upstart in Petticoats," by Harold Preece, and "Fate Dealt a Joker," by Chip Chafetz; and short fiction by Wayne D. Overholser and T. T. Flynn.