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by **WALT COBURN**
TWO NOVELETTES

• **HOGTIE THAT DEVIL,
WHISTLER!**

by **WILLIAM R. COX**

• **SIX-SHOOTER
SHADOWS**

by **WAYNE D.
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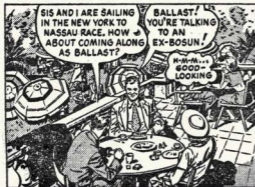
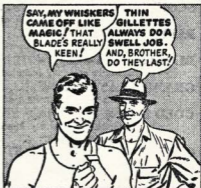
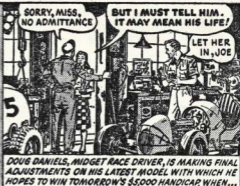
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PUBLISHED
DECEMBER 10TH

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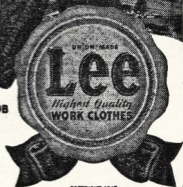
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HOT DOGIES
FOR THE
LONE STAR

By **ROY**
VANDERGoot



QUICK-MINDED John Chisum, an old-time Texas and New Mexico cowman, was a smart hombre. And a tough one. Moreover, he knew cows.

Employing these three gifts, John Chisum prospered. He fully expected to keep on prospering, and he did. Only, once in a while a hitch occurred in the process. Other men were smart, too!

When the veterans of the '61-65 fracas came drifting back to the wide open spaces of Texas, they found the country swarming with cows and carpetbaggers. None of it hardly worth the hoofs they stood in. You couldn't give the critters away, there was such a slew of 'em. While men had been uproariously killing one another off, nature had gone quietly ahead producing cows and carpetbaggers. In short, Texas was in one hell of a fix.

John Chisum took that situation in, and saw a golden opportunity to make a haul. He bought up all the better she-cows, from the over-crowded ranges of the hard-up veteran cowmen, buying them for next to nothing, and giving his personal notes as security. He'd pay later—when he had the money.

The veterans nodded. They understood. Hardly anybody had cash in Texas in the early seventies. Yes, the veterans understood, all right. Only—they didn't understand the workings of John Chisum's mind.

(Please continue on page 8)



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(Continued from page 6)

John Chisum drove the cows hundreds of miles west, clear into New Mexico, then up the Pecos River to his Jingle-Bob ranch in Bosque Grande. There Chisum turned 'em loose to fatten on the lush grass.

To do the thing right, he next bought some blooded bulls and turned these loose among the cows. The cows were very happy, the bulls were very happy, and John Chisum was very happy when he saw the ways of those bulls with his cows. Only the Texas veterans were not happy. John Chisum's notes could not be collected in New Mexico, and Uncle John, as he was jocularly called, took care not to stray into Texas.

Uncle John Chisum was a smart hombre.

Time passed. The cows had calves; the calves had calves; and the good blood of the bulls began to show. Never had Texas seen such cows! And, from the way it looked, she never would.

Uncle John built himself a brand new ranch house, a long, rambling affair of logs and adobe, along the banks of the South Spring River. Nothing like it in New Mexico—or Texas, for that matter. Uncle John had the dough, you know.

Wagonloads of fine furniture, imported from the East, went to lend it comfort and class. He even had a piano. Of course, he couldn't play; but it sure looked impressive. A four-poster, mahogany bed came to adorn his bedroom.

'Course, Uncle John didn't sleep in the thing. He spread his soogans on the floor behind the bed. After snoring in it for sixty-odd years on the hard ground or a ditto bunk, Uncle John couldn't snooze his ease in a contraption fitted with sheets and pillows to choke a man's breath off.

When the new house got its warming, guests from as far as seventy-five miles away came to add heat. It was a party that made history in New Mexico cattle-dom.

In the meantime, making some more history was being contemplated in Texas. A certain Colonel Hunter, who had for his partner a fighting son called Jesse Evans, bought up all the Chisum notes for a song.

(Please continue on page 93)

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SCOURGE of the PLAINS

★ By HARRY MILLARD ★

WHEN construction gangs were laying the Union Pacific tracks across Nebraska in 1867, bands of Sioux and Cheyenne pounced on the graders and track-layers with great ferocity, frequency and success, usually riding off with rich hauls in horses, mules and supplies.

Army posts scattered along the U.P. route were of scant help. Seldom could the soldiers reach the scene of the attack before the wily redmen had vanished.

Desperate, hard pressed, General Augur turned to Captain Frank North and his already famous band of Pawnee scouts for help.

North suggested that his scouts be increased in number from one hundred to two hundred; that they be formed into a battalion of four companies; that each company be allotted three regular army officers—captain, first and second lieutenants; that North himself be promoted to major.

General Augur readily agreed. For by that time North was already well on his way to establishing himself as one of the West's greatest Indian fighters and scouts.

Born in New York State in 1840, North was reared in Ohio and Nebraska. He was sixteen when his surveyor-father froze to death in one of Nebraska's severest winters. Frank and his brother Luther turned to farming, freighting, hunting—anything to eke out a living on the wild, Indian-infested frontier.

They got to be close friends of the Pawnees, learned their language, their customs and their war tactics, and earned their undying respect and loyalty. Presently Frank was offered a job as interpreter and clerk at the Pawnee agency.

It was there that he met General Curtis, who took an interest in him and his knowledge of the friendly Pawnees. Curtis suggested that he enlist a number

of Pawnee braves to use as army scouts.

Enthusiastic, North acted speedily. But it wasn't until January 13th, 1865 that his one hundred Pawnee enlistees were officially mustered into the service—the first redmen to serve as regular soldiers in Uncle Sam's army. North received a captain's commission.

The scouts launched their spectacular five-year career, in which they lost not a single man, with a walloping victory over a Sioux band that won twenty-seven scalps and a wild victory dance at the fort.

This was the band that the sorely beset General Augur called upon to check the Sioux's and Cheyenne's fierce, costly raids on the U.P. as it stretched its high iron across the Nebraska plains.

Forty Pawnee scouts set out to intercept them. Traveling along a circuitous route, they reached the raiders north of the North Platte, pounced on them viciously. As the Pawnees charged, the thunder of their ponies' flying hoofs mingling with the sharp cracks of their Spencer rifles, Red Cloud's braves broke and fled.

Mile after mile the Pawnees pressed the running fight. Finally they pulled up, rounded up the enemy's riderless horses and started back to camp, where the construction gangs greeted them with wild cheers.

More raids followed. But the Pawnees fought them off, or nipped the raiders before they could reach their objective. The raids grew less frequent, finally ceased.

Protection of the U.P. was the last crowning achievement of North and his valiant band of Pawnees. The scouts were finally disbanded and mustered out of service. Major North died several years later while still in his prime.

But his name will never die—one of the greatest Indian fighters and scouts ever to bless the West.

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FABULOUS JUNKMAN

By STEPHEN WEEKES

THEY built mansions at Leadville, Colorado. During the boom days, any goldpanner who had struck it rich would set 'em up in Dutch Evans' saloon and announce casually that he was building a house.

"Just a little shack," he'd say modestly. He had learned quickly that the richer you are, the less you talk about it. But everyone knew that it wouldn't be a mere house—it would be a gosh-durn palace.

Most palatial of all the residences that sprang up in the mining settlement was that built by Long Jim McGowan, whose mine, the Little James, produced bullion faithfully and daily for years after more sensational strikes had petered out.

The mansion stands today, four stories of weathered shingles, boarded up, hollow-eyed and crumbling to pieces. Its past grandeur, however, is unmistakable—some solid gold leaf still clings to the domed roof, a few rosy panes of glass still sparkle in the evening light from the great sunburst window above the wide front door. From the roofed veranda that circles the second and third stories like a coiled snake, a few crystal chandeliers still tinkle in the morning breeze.

Half-a-million dollars Long Jim is reputed to have sunk into his "shack," and money went a long way in those days. But for the more curious sightseer who peers through one of the holes in the chinked wall, there waits a rude surprise. As might be expected, the house is filled with furniture. It is crammed into every corner of every room, lined along the spacious hallways and wedged into the stairway landings. But none of it bears any trace of a glorious past. Instead, one is forced to conclude that Long Jim, millionaire twice over, furnished his half-million-dollar house with plain, ordinary junk.

It all began when Long Jim and Mrs. Jim took a trip to Europe in 1879. On the boat, Jim made the acquaintance of a man who played poker after his own heart—Baron Kurt Von Stegenhofer, princeling of a tiny German barony along the Rhine.

The aristocrat, for his part, was apparently charmed with the McGowans' off-hand mannerisms and extended a warm invitation to them to visit him in his ancestral castle. They accepted.

Long Jim was deeply impressed by the building. "That's the sorta thing I want in Leadville," he said to Mrs. Jim. That, reproduced in wood, was just about what he got. Over the interior decorations, however, he shook his head sadly.

"This is from the Italian Renaissance—400 years old," the baron would murmur, pointing to a chair or table. "And this," he added, "is 700 years old!" And he pointed to a worm-eaten chest.

Finally the warm-hearted Jim could stand it no longer. "Here," he said sympathetically to his new-found friend, "go buy yourself some new furniture. A nice fella like you shouldn't have to use that old junk." And he extended a healthy roll of sound American dollars.

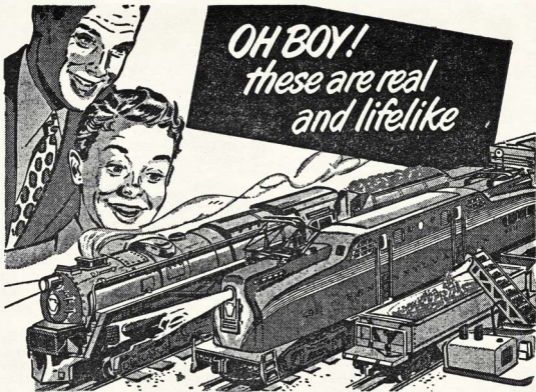
Straight-faced, the baron explained to him what the word "antique" implied. Jim was astounded to learn that his whole bankroll would hardly buy one roomful of the furnishings he had scorned.

"The older, the better, huh?" he asked, scratching his head.

"Exactly!" beamed the Baron, fingering a priceless bit of ancient tapestry.

Jim got the idea. Back in Colorado, he threw away the shining, new furniture he had ordered from Kansas City. He was determined to have the oldest antiques on the North American continent. His meth-

(Please continue on page 96)



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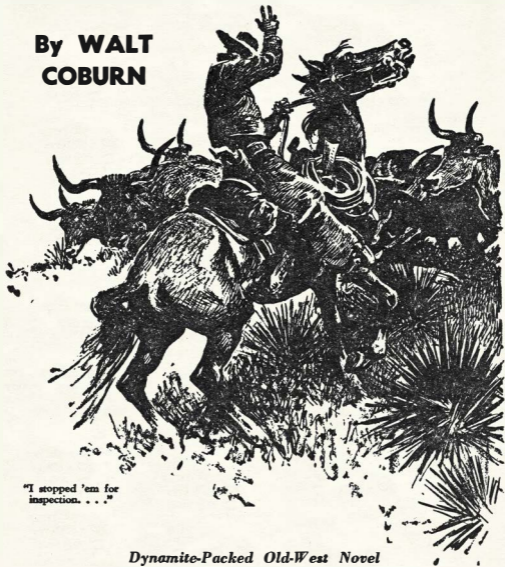
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LIGHTNIN' BRANDS

By **WALT
COBURN**

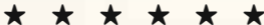


"I stopped 'em for
inspection. . . ."

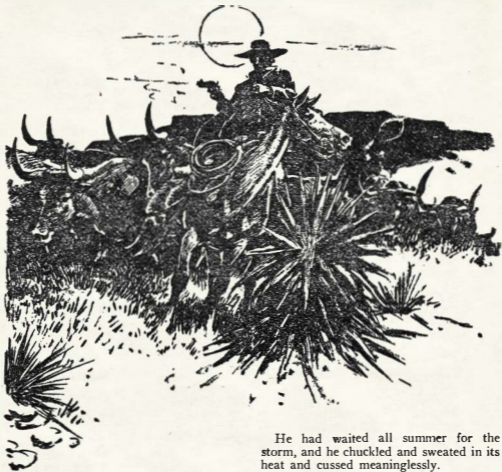
Dynamite-Packed Old-West Novel



**Treachery hogged the path hard-bitten Buck Weaver blazed—
to gau-steer his only pard into a lightnin'-plowed ditch in hell.**



A CATTLE KING



CHAPTER

Storm Trap

1

It had been sultry and the air was dead. Beads of sweat glistened on Buck Weaver's skin and filmed his hide, making his coarse black hair sodden. He welcomed the heat and the lightning storm it promised.

An evil grin played around his hard mouth. Buck Weaver was a tall, raw-boned, powerful man with a hawk-beaked nose and an old knife scar across one thick eyebrow. He sat outside his cabin with a can of gun oil, some rags and a ramrod, and cleaned his .30-30 saddle gun and six-shooter.

He had waited all summer for the storm, and he chuckled and sweated in its heat and cursed meaninglessly.

"Hold 'er back . . . hold 'er back till dark. . . . Damn you, save it fer night."

Buck Weaver's ranch was located along the Arizona-Mexican border. He had a wild cattle trap, its barbed wire cunningly concealed by the mesquite and catclaw brush. The stout ten wire fence was baited with salt and a big water tank fed by a windmill. It was the only water within miles, the only salt lick. There was a gap in the fence and the big pole gate was propped back and hidden by the brush. The trap gate set on a wooden trigger.

All Buck Weaver had to do was hide behind the brush. When a maverick strayed in with a little bunch of wild mountain cattle, he yanked the hundred-foot rope that jerked the gate trigger—and the gate closed. A lazy man's way of

trapping outlaw wild cattle, it seemed.

His pasture fence, corrals and branding chute were in splendid repair. But his adobe cabin with a lean-to shed was unswept and filthy, with a stack of dirty tin dishes and cups piled in the dishpan. When he ran through the last of his clean dishes he put them in a sack and let them soak, and dumped them out for the sun to dry.

But Buck Weaver rode a string of the best cow-horses in the country. And he was about the wildest of the wild brush-popper cowhands. He had the cattle savvy to outguess the wild mountain cattle. He wore no gloves, and the leathery hide of his hands was horny palmed. Tough as a boot, Buck Weaver was one of the most cunning and reckless cattle rustlers along the Mexican border.

Hated and feared, Buck Weaver's was strictly a one-man outfit. They told a grim story about one or two cowpunchers who had worked for Buck Weaver. He put off paying them for months. Then they just disappeared. The law couldn't prove he killed those cowboys. But they never showed up again on either side of the Mexican line. Nobody found their dead bodies. But after one of them vanished, Buck Weaver was riding his new saddle. The other had had an ivory-handled six-shooter and a pair of shop-made alligator boots and an almost new 5X beaver Stetson. Now Buck toted the gun and wore the hat and he had to slit both boots along the outside seam and sew them on a homemade pack for fit.

The cow country rode wide around the range Buck Weaver claimed. Even the law officers let him alone—the Border Patrol with its scattered camps and the Mexican Rurales.

"You claim Buck Weaver is whittin' on your cattle?" spoke a grizzled Border Patrol man. "Then kill him. There's always open season on Buck Weaver. Meb-ysso we'll carve you out a leather medal."

Buck Weaver had no special craving to build up a big outfit. His wants were few. His pleasures were getting on a town drunk whenever the notion took him and he got a craving for booze. He didn't believe in banks. He had his money hidden around in different caches. He'd take what he needed to town, get drunk

and gamble just for pastime. When he went broke, he'd saddle his horse and ride back home with his town bottle to sober up on.

He usually matched a fight or two. But he came back and went to hard, dangerous brush-popping. Cattle rustling was a game with him. He didn't know how many cattle he owned, even at a range count guess. He kept no calf tally, no maverick tally.

No greed for more cattle prompted him to steal. He stole cattle from men he had it in for. Taunting his enemies, mocking them, flaunting his cattle rustling openly. It was an insulting challenge he flung at them.

NOW he was watching the storm brewing. It had been a long dry summer. The rains were late in coming. They would fill the waterholes . . . rejuvenate the drying springs . . . make green grass grow. But it was not the water and grass for which he wanted the storm to be held back until nightfall, for which he oiled and cleaned his guns. . . .

Buck Weaver had had a side-pardner with him when he showed up in Arizona, blotting out sign on the back trail. Nobody ever knew where Buck Weaver or his side-pardner Hurl Davenport came from. But they showed up along the Arizona-Mexican border and each located a ranch.

A strange pair, they hated each other's guts—but left each other alone, like an armed truce. Hurl Davenport lived across the mountain. His outfit joined Buck Weaver's. The easiest way to get to either ranch was through a saddle between two brushy and rock-strewn buttes.

Hurl Davenport was tough enough in his own right. Short, heavy set, with wide shoulders; sandy haired with a pair of pale green eyes. Quiet, almost brooding, all he asked was to be left alone—and for the most part he wasn't bothered by visitors.

Until they got their outfits built up, Buck Weaver and Hurl Davenport worked together. They'd bought the remnants of a few brands and got 'em dirt cheap. But while they were roping renegade steers, they were gathering mavericks. They would go days and weeks

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without speaking except in the fine of work. On their sprees, they kept as far apart as the town allowed. But let someone Buck Weaver or Hurl Davenport get into a ruckus and he had the two partners to whip.

It was said that they were afraid of one another . . . that there was an agreement between the two partners not to try to kill one another. They needed one another. But because neither of them trusted the other's word, they lived at separate ranches. They were scared of each other's treachery. . . .

There was a jagged bolt of chain lightning, the first that slashed the darkening sky. A long time lapsed between the chain lightning and rolling thunder.

"That's 'er. . . Hit 'er again—that's it. . . It'll be dark by the time she hits Hurl Davenport's place." Buck Weaver chuckled while his hard pale eyes watched the lightning.

"First thunder rolls down off the mountain, first crack of that chain lightnin', Hurl will be shiverin' and shakin', white as alkali and them green eyes shore glassy. Lightnin' scares him. Only thing on earth he's a-scared of. I shore wouldn't miss this."

Buck Weaver was going prepared for trouble. The last time that Buck had gloated at the lightning-scared Hurl Davenport, Hurl swore that directly he'd gotten over his fright, he was going to kill Buck.

"But I'd ride a hundred miles and more to watch that lightning-spooked Hurl. . . Beats all the shows on earth." Buck Weaver put away his gun oil and ramrod. Then he saddled up a horse and headed for Hurl Davenport's ranch on the other side.

There was a cunning scheme for the cold-blooded murder of Hurl Davenport in his mind. He planned to kill Hurl Davenport by getting him struck by lightning.

CHAPTER *Cornered by Lightning*

2

If Buck Weaver was in cahoots with the devil himself, he could not have timed it better. The storm had been building up until the sky was blacker than

a tar pit. Heat lightning streaked and smeared the inky surface. Far away, chain lightning slashed rips in the sky, and the rolling crash of thunder kept up an unbroken and continuous growling rumble. Buck Weaver had to spur up to get through the saddle and drop down the rough slope to the Hurl Davenport place before sundown.

It was dark when Buck Weaver rode down the arroyo, keeping out of sight behind some heavy manzanita brush. He reined up and slid his .30-30 saddle carbine from its scabbard. Without showing himself, he gained the shelter of the little adobe shed built up over the spring. It stood about a hundred yards from the little adobe cabin. Tight roofed, with eighteen inch adobe walls it was rain proof and kept the dug-out spring clean of any pollution. From its ridge log hung a canvas-wrapped quarter of fresh beef. A cupboard with a wet burlap gunnysack kept cool the cans of tomatoes and fruit that were his rancher's luxury.

Later, Buck Weaver promised himself, he would tap a can of tomatoes and a can of peaches. But right now he was busy making careful preparations. He fixed the door so that it would stay open a few inches. He took a box of .30-30 cartridges from his chaps pocket, broke the box open and laid the cartridges where he could find them in the dark. From the spring house door he commanded a good view of the adobe cabin. He raised the hind sight of his saddle gun to the hundred yard notch.

He could see the yellow glow of a lamp behind the drawn blinds. It would stay burning because Hurl had a dread of darkness in a storm. Hurl would have a lamp lit and a candle or two burning in the bedroom. He would be alone behind a bolted door and tightly drawn blinds—because he kept his fear of the lightning secret.

On the roundup or at the ranch where there were men, when there was the threat of an electric storm Hurl Davenport would saddle a horse on some excuse and hightail it out of sight. It had been years before Buck Weaver had learned of Hurl's fear of lightning.

But once Buck had become suspicious. The next time a storm threatened and

Hurl had ridden off, Buck had trailed him. At the height of the storm Buck Weaver had ridden up on Hurl. Every time the lightning struck, Hurl would cringe, a scream ripping from his throat. Hurl, paralyzed by fear, had seen Buck sitting in a house in the rain, grinning.

And after the storm had passed and he had gotten over his stark terror, Hurl had spoken in a croaking voice.

"Next time you follow me, catch me lightnin' scart, I'll kill you. Say a word about this and I'll kill you. Come up on me once more, Buck—I'll kill you sure as hell."

There was a six-shooter in Hurl's hand. He thumbed the hammer back. For the first time Buck Weaver had begged a man to spare his life. While the sweat broke out, Buck pleaded:

"You don't want to kill me, Hurl. You need me. You'll be needin' me to side you in a tight. You needn't worry about my ever tellin'. Put up your gun, Hurl."

Hurl Davenport eased down his gun hammer.

"No man ever held the gun that could scare me. . . . Lightnin' is different. It's big, like the wrath of the Lord strikin'. But you're scared of Hurl Davenport with a gun. I still got a mind to kill you, Buck."

BUT Hurl made the mistake of letting him beg off. And Hurl had read the fear of death in Buck Weaver's eyes. No man could watch that and keep on living. Buck Weaver took plenty of time to plan it out. Now, in the early darkness that came like a shroud, Buck Weaver hid inside the spring house and watched the adobe cabin.

He saw the door open. Hurl Davenport, the lamplight behind him, peered out into the coming storm. Even at a distance his face looked gray as old ashes. There were a few drops of rain and the wind had come up. He stood there motionless and Buck could imagine the fear that glazed his eyes.

The chain lightning ripped a jagged gash across the black sky. Thunder rolled. Hurl let out a sharp cry and slammed the door as he ducked back inside.

Buck levered a cartridge into the breech of his gun. The rain came down

heavier, so thickly that Buck had to squint to line his sights on the chimney of the adobe cabin.

The next jagged bolt of chain lightning struck closer. In the bright glare, Buck squeezed the trigger. The puny sound of the gun's explosion was blotted out by the deafening crash of thunder. But the tin stove pipe, torn by the bullet, would send a shower of soot down its inside.

There was a five-gallon tin can built around the stove pipe for insulation against the stove heat. Buck eyed that in the sheet lightning glare. His eyes narrowed to slits. "When that slug tears through, you'll jump by the hell." He was using, instead of steel jacket cartridges, a soft nosed cartridge. At a hundred yards it would hit and mushroom and tear a hole.

The next bolt of lightning came close. Buck Weaver pulled the trigger. "Comin' close," Buck chuckled. "I'd give a purty to be inside a-watchin' you, Hurl. Better'n a circus."

Then the cabin door was yanked open. Hurl Davenport stood there. The wind-driven rain drenched him. It looked like he was quitting his cabin, but the crash of thunder set the scared man reeling back, leaving the door open.

Buck Weaver could see the lighted lamp on the table. He jerked his gun lever and ejected the empty shell and put another cartridge into its breach. He had to work fast. He caught the lighted lamp in his gun sights and pulled the trigger.

Bull's eye. He'd shot the lamp out.

When the next glaring lightning showed, the door had been slammed shut. The kitchen window was dark behind its drawn shade. Only the yellow glow of light showed in the bedroom window behind drawn blinds.

"Lightnin' sure plays queer tricks."

When the next lightning bolt hit, Buck Weaver fired where he figured the middle joint of the four-paned window would be. A bullet hole might leave no more than a round neat hole in the window glass. But a shattered frame could break it to bits.

"Luck. Can't take too much credit for that shot."

Sheet lightning showed him the broken window, the wind-driven rain whipping back the window blind.

"It's time for me to see the show."

Buck Weaver let himself out the door of the spring house. He crouched there in the rain, waiting for the next flash. Then, in the following darkness, he ran for the cabin. He flattened himself against the outer wall. Sopping wet, he edged toward the kitchen door. The door gave under his slow pressure. Lightning . . . then pitch darkness. He opened the door and slid through and closed it. He stood with his saddle gun crooked in his arm, his six-shooter in his right hand.

Then the sheet lightning showed him the kitchen. Neat and tidy, save for the bullet-smashed lamp on the kitchen table and the spilled kerosene, Hurl Davenport crouched in a far corner of the kitchen. His eyes glassy, Hurl looked at Buck Weaver without actually seeing him.

"I come over from my place—" the darkness hid them now—"to see how you was takin' it. Seen the lightnin' strike your cabin plain as it was daytime. Where're your candles?"

Buck Weaver struck a match, found candles on a shelf and got one lighted. The door into the bedroom was shut. Buck had laid his saddle gun on the table alongside the candle. He straddled a kitchen chair and hooked his arms on the back, the ivory-handled six-shooter in his hand. The water dripped from his hatbrim and he had tracked in a lot of mud on the scrubbed kitchen floor.

Weaver chuckled. "Damn you scared hide, better'n a damned circus."

For a while Buck Weaver was silent, staring, with that twisted grin at the terrorized man.

Then Buck Weaver kicked his chair over and walked to where Hurl Davenport crouched. He slapped Hurl hard and yanked him onto his feet. When Buck Weaver dropped him, Hurl sagged down and huddled there, shuddering, unable to talk.

"Before the storm's over," Buck swore, "you'll be struck dead by lightnin'. Hear me? You'll get lightnin' struck. Your cabin'll set afire. When they find you, you'll be half burnt—choked to death. I'll leave your dead carcass so that it don't show. Lightnin' struck, and no man to prove different. I've waited a long, long time for this."

It was cool in the cabin, but Buck Weaver's face was slimy with cold sweat. He wanted to see fear in Hurl Davenport's eyes—fear of Buck Weaver just as stark and terrible as his fear of lightning.

But if Hurl saw him now and realized a word he was saying, he gave no sign. Hell, there was no kind of satisfaction in killing a man thataway.

"Hear me? You know I'm goin' to kill you?" Buck Weaver's face was livid. He kicked Hurl Davenport hard in the ribs. His voice lifted above the crashing thunder, filled the cabin.

CHAPTER

Border Law

3

Outside the storm raged and the wind-driven rain was a cloudburst that tore at the cabin's walls and pounded the roof. It might have been the wind sucked in through the broken bedroom window that snuffed out the guttering candlelight. It could have been the wind that moved open the closed door of the bedroom.

Buck Weaver's murderous stare was fixed on Hurl Davenport. He picked him up off the floor and held the limp form upright, cursing him. Then he flung Hurl into a homemade armchair.

Buck Weaver had shoved the six-shooter back into its holster. His big hands closed on Hurl Davenport's neck and slowly clamped in a throttling grip. His face was close to his victim's, his eyes staring, insane with the lust to kill. Then his hands relaxed.

Hurl's breathing was choked, and a blackish tinge crept over the gray face of the choking man. But he made no effort to fight Buck off, nor did he realize that he was being attacked, so great was his terror of lightning.

Sweat trickled down through Buck's stubbled whiskers. His hands came away from Hurl's throat, and flexed and tightened into fists. There was no satisfaction in killing a man who didn't realize what was happening to him.

The cabin door opened and the wind and rain wrenched it from the man's grip and flung it wide open.

Buck Weaver felt the wind-whipped rain on his back and whirled. The candlelight guttered and almost went out.

Jim West of the U. S. Border Patrol stood in the doorway with Doc Gordon. His leather bag gripped in his hand, Doc stomped into the room. He wore an old cavalry poncho, brush snagged and leaking.

The Border Patrol officer kicked the door shut. He had a gun in his hand. "What goes on here, Buck?" His voice was a slow drawl. "What fetches you here on a night like this?" The grizzled officer's eyes were suspicious.

Buck Weaver's hand was on his gun. He was badly upset by the interruption. Using all his will power to bring himself back under control, and wipe the murder from his eyes, he forced a grin across his black-whiskered face.

The Border Patrol man cut a sharp glance at Hurl Davenport slumped glassy eyed in his chair.

"What the hell have you done to your side-pardner?"

"Better take a look at him, first, Doc."

Jim West's gun was pointed at Buck Weaver's belly. His drawl was gritty. "What have you done with Roy Irwin,

that new man on the Border Patrol?"

"Uh?" Buck Weaver grunted. "No savvy. Who's Roy Irwin of the Border Patrol? Never heard of him. Looky here, mister Jaw'n Law, what kind of a trap you tryin' to spring?"

"A Mexican fetched word that one of my men was shot and wounded. Hurl Davenport found him and managed to get him here to his place. Hurl sent the Mexican to fetch me and Doc."

Doc Gordon looked up, puzzled. "Hurl is suffering from some kind of shock. Nothing I can do right now. Where's that door lead to?"

Doc crossed to the bedroom door. It stood a few inches ajar. He shoved it open and the candlelight followed him feebly through the open doorway.

Buck Weaver stiffened. The color drained from his sweaty face as he stared into the bedroom at the motionless man on the bunk.

Bewildered, Buck stared at the man lying on Hurl's bunk, then at Hurl Davenport. If that Border Patrol man was conscious—Buck broke out in a sweat.



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"Fetch me some light," called Doc Gordon.

Jim West was watching Buck Weaver narrowly.

"There's somethin' damn queer about this." The Border Patrol man gathered candles from the shelf. "Don't rabbit on me, Weaver, or I'll come after you with a bench warrant." He went into the bedroom.

Roy Irwin of the Border Patrol opened his eyes. His lips moved in a barely audible whisper. "Shut the door, Jim."

When the door was shut, the wounded man forced a grin.

"Hurl Davenport got the bullet rip in my thigh patched up. I'm doin' all right now. But that poor devil Hurl is plumb loded by lightnin', Doc."

From under the blankets, the wounded Border Patrol man pulled a six-shooter and shoved it under his pillow. He grinned mirthlessly.

"You showed up, Jim, just in time. I'd have killed Buck Weaver to keep him from murderin' that fear-sick man. But don't let on. My life wouldn't be worth a plugged dime if Buck Weaver suspected I was listenin' and watchin'."

The storm was settling down to a steady rain. The lightning and thunder were passing, gradually growing less and less violent. When Jim West went into the kitchen, he never let on.

"That man of mine," Jim West shook his head and lied without shame, "is still unconscious. Doc's trying to fetch him alive. And Hurl Davenport's had some kind of a shock. What do you know about this, Weaver?"

"I don't know a damned thing about it. Hurl like this when I got here. You say that Border Patrol man ain't come alive?"

"Until he does, I'm holdin' you, just for the hell of it. Leave your guns here. Make yourself useful and put up my horse and Doc's."

"I ain't workin' for no Border Patrol. Put up your own damned horses. The hell with your holdin' me. Where's your bench warrant anyway? And I'll keep my guns."

Big Buck Weaver was watching Hurl Davenport. He saw the color come back into the gray leathery face and the glassy look of terror leave Hurl's eyes. He

wanted to be gone from here before the fear left Hurl. Hurl Davenport would kill him, sure as hell, with the sanction or perhaps the actual backing of Jim West of the Border Patrol.

"You can't hold me," snarled Buck Weaver. "I'm hightailin' it. Come over to my place some time. But be sure as hell you've got a bench warrant in your pocket. Your law badge don't make you bullet proof."

Buck Weaver was backing out the door, his saddle gun in the crook of his arm.

With an effort that called up all his nerve and will power, Hurl Davenport was lurching to his feet. Little, wiry, he stood on his bowed legs. "I can remember everything." Hurl's voice creaked dismally. "I can recollect everything happened to me tonight. The next time, Buck Weaver that I cut your sign, I'll chop you down with a bullet."

"Unless you get cut down first," said Buck Weaver, leaving.

Hurl Davenport shuddered and lowered himself back into his chair. He grinned feebly.

"Well, it's no longer a secret," he said to Jim West of the Border Patrol and to Doc Gordon. "I'm scared—scared yellow bellied of lightnin'. I'm a rank sniveling, shivering coward."

Doc got a flask of whiskey and poured Hurl a stiff drink. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, Hurl. It's not cowardice. Drink this."

HURL DAVENPORT figured he knew every man on the Border Patrol. If he happened to be shoving a little drive of Mexican cattle up across the border when the moon was right, and he sighted Jim West, he turned loose the bunch of rustled dogies. Or if he had one or two or three Mexican cowboys with him, he'd let out a warning shout.

"*Vamos!*"

By the time any law officer got there, there was only a bunch of cattle.

"Hell," Hurl Davenport had told Roy Irwin, "hell, Jim West shoulda fetched you over to my ranch, so I could read your law brand and earmarks. Hell of a note if you was to die on me."

"I was told to ride patrol along this strip of border," said the wounded man.

"I was transferred from New Mexico, I'd missed connections catching Jim West at camp. It was moonlight and up loomed a drive of cattle. I stopped 'em for inspection. Held up the leader. Then, ker-wham! I got it."

"I don't usually miss," said Hurl Davenport, almost apologetically. "Even in that light I don't miss. Mebbe so I'd order get fitted fer specs."

"Don't let it worry you."

Roy Irwin lay on the ground while Hurl Davenport did a good surgeon's job on his bullet-ripped thigh. He'd borrowed a bottle of tequila from one of the Mexican cowboys and poured it raw into the wound until the Border Patrol man gritted his teeth. Then Hurl had made him take a drink, and tied him on his horse.

"It's a few miles, feller, but it'll seem like a million of them to my place. Hang and rattle."

Hurl Davenport had sent one of his Mexicans to town to fetch the doctor and Inspector Jim West. He told the Mexican not to be scared of being arrested for cattle rustling. "Jim West don't play dirty."

"How come you was quick triggered?" asked the Border Patrol man. "Shoot first and ask questions later?"

"It wouldn't be the first cattle drive that I've sweated, and gone hungry and with no sleep to help me, that when all the hard brush-poppin' work was done, there'd be somebody to hi-jack me out of my gathement. Men like that don't ask your kind permission to take over your dogies. They shoot first. There ain't no honor amongst cattle rustlers."

Hurl had gotten the wounded man into bed and given him his gun and the last few inches in the tequila bottle on the table, when the first thunder and lightning sounded in the distance. Hurl had let out a sharp cry. Roy Irwin, sick with pain as he was, had seen the little tough Hurl cringe with fear. Then Hurl got out of the room. He had unsaddled and turned loose their horses, then come back into the house and lighted the lamp and candles.

Gray faced, Hurl had used up the last of his guts warning the Border Patrol man. "You're on your own, when this lightnin' storm hits."

And then the lightning had struck.

Roy had called: "Listen, listen Hurl. You shot me. You could have left me to die. Stay here with me and I'll talk to you. You've bin struck by lightnin' and knocked out and lived to remember it. A lightnin'-struck person almost always is left with an uncontrollable fear of lightnin'."

"I got a sister who was in the house when lightnin' killed my mother and father and knocked her cold. She's a grown woman now, scared of nothin' on earth. First rumble of thunder, she dives under the feather-bed. She's got her own restaurant at Nogales. Kate's—Kate Irwin. You two lightnin'-spooked things had order get together."

But Hurl had slammed the door shut behind him.

Now, in the light of a new day, lying on Hurl Davenport's bed, Roy Irwin told the story of what had happened to Jim West.

"Plain killin' is too good for Buck Weaver," he finished. "I have to stay here in Hurl's bed for a week or two. I'd like to talk to him."

"Hurl Davenport is gone. He rode away at daybreak."

CHAPTER

4

Time to Kill

Buck Weaver was bigger than a skinned mule by comparison to the little Hurl Davenport, able to whip him with one hand, as good or better a shot than he was. Nevertheless Hurl Davenport chilled all the guts Buck Weaver had.

His fear went back quite a few years ago, to the Wyoming country during the cattle war. Buck Weaver had been imported as one of the hired killers, and had worked at his gun-slinging job long enough to collect some bounty money on the dead carcasses of men who were on the blacklist. Nesters they were, so-called rustlers.

Buck Weaver had ridden up to Hurl Davenport's ranch one evening about sundown.

"Your name Hurl Davenport?" Buck Weaver had asked, his hand on his six-shooter.

Hurl had thrown his roundup bed across his pack horse and had thrown the

pack rope over the tarp-covered bed. "I'm Hurl Davenport."

"There's a thousand dollar bounty on your cattle-rustin' hide." Buck Weaver's gun slid into sight. The hammer was thumbed back and the gun pointed at Hurl. "I'm hard up for easy money."

"Yeah? Before you get quick triggered, who's a-payin' it?"

"The A Diamond. Ralph Newton and Charlie Mitchell."

Hurl Davenport grinned acidly. "They're a pair of dead geese that will lay no more golden eggs for such bounty hunters like you. I killed 'em both last night. Somebody ought to keep you better posted."

Then Hurl Davenport snarled. "There's a bunch of boys out lookin' for you. Aimin' to string you up to the nearest tree. Now help me with this diamond hitch on this pack. I'll stake you to a fresh horse. We both better quit the country."

Hurl Davenport had eyed the gun in Buck Weaver's hand like it was a harmless pop-gun, then stared into the big killer's eyes, stripping him of his toughness.

Buck Weaver felt his nerve slipping under the staring impact of that little cowboy's contempt. He'd shoved his gun in its holster, stepped down and helped Hurl Davenport.

That was how these two men who hated each other's guts had happened to throw in with one another for side-pardners and go to Arizona.

Now that partnership was severed. Buck Weaver rode to his home ranch without pulling up. He dug up his buried money from its caches, and loaded his bed on a pack mule. With grub and a camp outfit on another mule, he took a string of horses, and pulled out for the roughest part of the mountains.

He cursed himself bitterly. If that wounded Border Patrol man had wittenver be arrested. On the other hand, if Hurl Davenport was found dead or turned never be arrested. On the other hand, if Hurl Davenport was found dead or turned up missing, the law would grab Buck Weaver and hang him.

He had to kill Hurl Davenport before he drifted yonderly. He'd hide out in the mountains. Hurl might think he scared

Buck Weaver to hell and gone. When he turned up missing, Hurl would claim his ranch and outfit. Hurl would get careless. The next time that Hurl Davenport got caught in a lightning storm, paralyzed by fear, then Buck Weaver would ride up and fill his guts with lead.

"The next time—" Buck Weaver drifted his pack mules and string of saddle horses ahead of him into the roughs—"to hell with gloatin' over his lightnin' scare. I'll let him wake up in hell to find out who sent him there."

He felt better now as he headed for a hideout. He had almost gotten back his tough guts when he sighted a lone rider trailing him. The horsebacker was beyond rifle shot. But Buck Weaver recognized him. Hurl Davenport.

Fear chilled tough Buck Weaver. No matter how fast he traveled, Hurl would follow. And he couldn't lose Hurl in the mountains.

Buck Weaver headed back for his ranch. There, inside the locked cabin he could barricade himself in at night. There he'd make his stand. What was he scared about? He'd killed men with a lot tougher rep than Hurl Davenport.

Now he had a craving for booze. Buck told himself he wasn't using booze for a brave-maker—just to take the taste of something bitter out of his mouth.

Hurl Davenport did not show up with-in rifle shot. Not today or tomorrow or next week.

HURL DAVENPORT made no threats. He rode back to the ranch and swapped talk with Roy Irwin and the Mexican Jim West sent to look after the wounded law officer.

The Border Patrol man's bullet wound healed quickly. He was able to be up on crutches within a week. He never asked Hurl any questions. But the Mexican kept him informed. He said that Hurl Davenport never rode any further than to a ridge that looked down on the Buck Weaver ranch. He'd ride back and forth, slowly, along the ridge, then come home to eat and change horses and ride back to the Buck Weaver place.

"You got a pair of field glasses on your saddle, Roy. Mind if I borrow the loan of 'em?" Hurl asked.

"I'll do better than that. I'll make you a present of 'em."

Hurl sat up on his ridge, watching through his field glasses. Now and then he would ride along slowly back and forth to let Buck know he was there.

There were times when Buck Weaver was drunk on tequila and saddled a horse and rode out. Hurl would wait until Buck got up within range and drop a few shots around him. Buck would shout and holler curses. But he never had the guts to come on. He turned back. Hurl, from the shelter of the brush, would shove his saddle gun into its scabbard and watch Buck ride back to the ranch.

Cattle came to water. Once in a while the field glasses would pick up what looked to be a slick-eared maverick. But if Buck saw the maverick he made no attempt to put it in his iron. He didn't saddle a horse except to make an occasional drunken try at riding to meet Hurl or to get his jug filled at the tequila camp when Hurl let him go unchallenged. But Buck Weaver, who had never lost a maverick that came into his trap day or night, did

not pay any attention at all to the cattle.

When Buck rode to the tequila camp, Hurl slipped down to the ranch. He cut the rope on the trap gate. A week later, when Buck rode again to get his jug refilled, Hurl rode down there. The cut rope had never been mended. It lay there near the gate, its severed end untouched. Buck Weaver, who bragged that he never lost a maverick, had lost all interest in maverick trapping.

Nights, when Hurl rode back to the Buck Weaver ranch from his place, he no longer rode the ridges. He rode up cautiously, taking care that he would not blunder into a drunken ambush. The windows were boarded and the door barred. Buck Weaver never lit a candle. After a while he got too scared to risk the flare of a match to light a cigarette, unless he was too drunk to know what he was doing.

Hurl would take aim at one of the boarded-up windows or the door and put a bullet through it. Buck Weaver's hoarse wild scream would come filtering through the wind echoes. When Hurl was certain

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that Buck was fear-locked inside the cabin till daybreak, he'd ride back to his own place.

That one rain and lightning storm seemed to be all. The skies cleared and never a cloud showed. It was days and weeks before the hot weather built up to the promise of a storm.

Roy Irwin, his wounded leg healed, stayed on. He made the excuse that he would pay for the use of Hurl's ranch as a camp. He'd fetched his own bedroll and his two saddle horses and was staying on here with Hurl's permission, though Hurl said to hell with the pay. Roy could help out with the ranch chores.

"Providin'," said Hurl waspishly, "you can put up with me."

Roy Irwin was young and good natured and never talked out of turn. He tended his own business and asked no questions. Hurl forgot to be ornery and acid tongued. In their silence, he found a sort of companionship—and a comfort that never a word was said about Hurl's being afraid of lightning.

But there was a deadliness about Hurl Davenport that frightened Roy Irwin. On one of his patrol rides he told Jim West:

"If somethin' don't happen within a few weeks, Hurl will crack up like a busted bottle. If he gets more than an hour or two sleep, I don't know it. He wof's his grub and I'll bet it tastes like sawdust. He's forgot that he's in the cattle business. He's deadly poison."

DOWN below in the Mexican sky, a thunderhead rolled up in the late afternoon and the sun went down in a black shrouded sky like a brassy ball.

For the first time in weeks Buck Weaver showed signs of life. Hurl watched him through the field glasses, stirring around, getting a horse saddled. There was a lurch and swagger to his gait. He rode around the ranch, shooting his six-shooter. Hurl could hear the gun sounds. And then down below the border he heard the first low growl of thunder.

Even as Hurl Davenport sat his horse on the ridge above the Buck Weaver place, Roy Irwin rode up. It was the first time he'd ever showed signs of interfering.

"Come on, Hurl. Let's get for home."

The distant rumble of thunder sent a

shudder down Hurl Davenport's spine. A little of the color drained from his face, and he forced a hard-lipped grin.

"This is why you've camped at my ranch, Roy. So's the first storm, you could ride herd on me."

"All right, then. All right. I don't want to see you murdered."

"I'm not runnin' for home. I'm goin' down yonder to Buck Weaver's place. Win or lose—"

Sheet lightning streaked the dark sky over Mexico. Hurl winced as he forced his eyes to stare at it.

"Leave me alone. When I want help, I'll holler."

"Tuck in your shirt tail, Hurl. No need to cuss me out. I'm goin'." Roy Irwin grinned and rode away. Then he reined his horse and loped back with that same boyish grin on his face.

"You won't be needin' them field glasses. I'd like to get the loan of 'em."

Hurl unstrapped the leather case with the field glasses and handed it to Roy Irwin, who strapped them on his saddle.

"We got company for supper. Another lightnin'-spooked feller—that sister of mine—Katie. She said she'd ride up out of the first bad storm. And I reckon she will. Hell of a storm a-cookin'. It'll make that last one look like a sun-shower. You ever met Katie?"

"Yeah." Hurl Davenport was watching the blackening sky and the sheet lightning that painted it. "Yeah. I know Katie—always eat at her restaurant. A man gets homesick for home-made dried apple pie and a bait of chicken with dumplin's. She always has a smile, and she's got red hair and freckles kinda sprinkled across her nose—and a temper. She run Buck Weaver outa her restaurant because he wouldn't wash his face and hands out in the shed at the back and she's never let him into the place since. . . . You say she's comin' for supper?"

"Her first storm out alone. I gotta be back there before she hits. But she claims she's cured. I don't know—wimmin' nonsense."

"What?" Hurl's eyes watched the Mexico sky.

"Katie said for you to look straight into the storm and watch for the first lightnin'. Stare it straight in the eyes and say a

prayer to the Lord. Well I got to ride on. So long."

Hurl Davenport was watching the black clouds roll up out of the Mexican sky. He never saw Roy Irwin ride away. Yet he had not missed a word of what the Border Patrol man said.

When the first chain lightning tore the sky, before the storm rode up out of Mexico, he looked at it, unflinching.

"Amen," he said aloud. "Amen." And it was the end of an unspoken prayer.

Hurl Davenport had been scared of lightning ever since the time he was one of three kids at a swimming hole up on Powder River. When a storm had come up they were scared, pretending not to show it every time the lightning had struck.

There had been the glaring white fire like a blazing balloon bursting and pulling his body and at the same time the deafening thunder. Hurl had wakened stunned, with a metallic taste in his mouth and a terrific headache. The other two boys lay dead in that shallow swimming pool. Up on the bank, Hurl was left alive. But since then he had an uncontrollable fear of thunder and lightning. A grown man now, and still lightning-scared.

This was the first time he had ever looked straight into a lightning bolt without flinching and closing his eyes.

Then he rode down to meet Buck Weaver.

There was no sign now of Buck Weaver, who'd taken his guns and ridden off into the brush. Hurl Davenport rode down the ridge, white lipped, but stiff backed in his saddle, his eyes clear and unafraid. Every time the lightning crashed and the thunder rolled, he sat straighter in his saddle, a flat grin forced to hide any fear, and his gun in his hand. There was no cringing fear of lightning in him.

He reined up and looked around. No sign of Buck Weaver.

Then, calm-voiced, but clear, Hurl Davenport called out his challenge. "Ride out in the open, Buck Weaver and fight like a man!"

A silence. Then it was the lazy drawl of the Border Patrol Inspector, Jim West, that called out of that silence with its rumble of thunder; calmly and deadly:

"Ride out, Buck, or I'll bust your back

with a bullet. I'm here to see that Hurl Davenport doesn't get the worst of it."

A wild, snarling curse came from the brush that flanked the cattle trap.

BUCK WEAVER rode out. He'd drained the last of his bottle and threw it away. He kicked his horse out, shooting as he came, his horse spurred to a run. Shooting. Missing. His shots were wild. Now he was rapidly closing the fifty foot gap between himself and where Hurl Davenport sat his motionless horse.

Hurl let him ride up, powerless to lift his gun or pull the trigger until Buck Weaver was almost abreast of him. Buck fired point blank. The bullet grazed Hurl's cheek, ripping a shallow furrow.

Stung by the pain, Hurl Davenport thumbed back his gun hammer and pulled the trigger. He wasn't aware of taking aim. He just pointed the gun and fired.

It was dead center. Square between those murder-crazed, bloodshot eyes, Buck's big frame sagged. His horse crashed into Hurl's and their stirrups locked as both horses staggered. Hurl saw Buck topple sideways and pitch headlong from his saddle. Then Buck's horse veered off and stampeded, while Hurl got his horse reined up.

Hurl Davenport stared down at the dead body of Buck Weaver. He dropped his smoking gun. He did not know how long he sat there staring down at the man he had had to kill. Jim West had caught Buck's horse and rode back, leading the big gelding. But Hurl didn't notice him. He just stared at the dead man.

Then Roy Irwin rode down the slant and with him came his sister Katie.

Katie Irwin rode up alongside Hurl and reached out a hand and took his. That was the first person he saw: Katie, red headed and freckled and a little white. She bandaged Hurl's ripped cheek.

"Let's go back," Katie said, "to your place. Together we can fight this lightning scare."

Without a word Hurl reined his horse. His eyes looked into hers without recognition and he grinned faintly.

"It's all over," said Jim West of the Border Patrol. "I'll take care of everything that needs to be done."

(Please continue on page 97)

BLOOD, LOOT—AND

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

THIS was the devil's country and the devil was an uncommon clever gent, given to much efficiency and a way of doing things which made a man envious in spite of himself. Throughout the day the hinges had blown completely off the gates of hell. A searing heat from furnaces stoked with the greasy souls of unprincipled men had blown out across the sage and greasewood flats, raising a fine dust like pumice. The dust ground into a man's eyeballs and lined the tissues of his throat with a casing so hard that only great quantities of the strongest whiskey would ever be able to dissolve it.

When night came, the wind reversed itself. A nasty, stabbing wind with a distinct edge, it carried from snow and ice on peaks somewhere far beyond the vast, brassy ring of the horizon—as though the devil was gathering all of the heat he had dissipated over this desert during the day to use again on the morrow.

Plodding along a gravelly wagon track which he judged with a dying hope might lead to civilization or a cooler climate, the Honorable Christian Defever, ex-thespian, voyager upon the wildernesses of the frontier, and man of leisure, shivered at the night breeze which bit through his frayed, if elegant, clothing.

Somewhere to the east purportedly lay the mining metropolis of Golconda, headquarters of the cupric colossus known as the Copper Corporation. Here there would be games of chance, cards at play, and opportunity for a man with modest skill and an uncertain liaison with Lady Luck to mend his battered fortunes. Toward this hopeful mecca, Chris had been walking since before sunup.

Now, with no sign of habitation yet in sight, Chris hitched at his vest to momentarily shift the weight of the two heavy derringers sagging in specially lined vest pockets.

Suddenly he caught a wink of light ahead. He halted. For an instant he thought it could be an outpost of Gol-

conda, the city he sought. Then he realized the flicker was of a single small fire, off in the brush some distance from the trail he followed. He moved a step forward and a step back, trying to better see the source of the light, and in each case it vanished as he moved. He understood, then.

This was a night's campfire in the brush beside the trail, so screened from traffic along the road—perhaps deliberately so—that it was visible only from the single point at which he had happened to look up and see it. Still, it was light and meant companionship. Perhaps even a meal of sorts and a small share of a bottle. Chris struck off through the brush toward it.

The blaze had been kindled in the bowl of a dried wallow, protected from the night and incidentally the trail by a heavy brush thicket. An upright slab of rock served as a reflector for the heat of the fire. There was a small canvas lean-to, some iron pots, still steaming beside the fire, and the good smell and restless sound of horses on sparse grass a little distance away.

There were four men at the blaze. They had heard him coming. Perhaps they had heard his oaths back on the road. He had delivered them rather loudly. All four remained motionless as he came up to them. Chris loosened his most affable smile.

"Gentlemen," he offered in greeting. "Fellow wayfarers, hail! Permit me to introduce myself. Christian Defever, sirs, late of the theater, a wanderer in this Eden of desert beauty, a companion in the wilderness—"

"A bum," the youngest and smallest of the four men concluded bluntly. "It's a bad sign, Thorpe. We've picked the wrong time."

The man called Thorpe, biggest of the group, kept odd, tawny eyes on Chris, shaking his head at his younger companion before turning it.

CHRIS DEFEVER!

Talking himself into bullet-baiting for trail wolves—derringer-artist Chris Defever found he was talking himself into a pine overcoat.



*Thorpe lunged suddenly . . .
jerking at his gun.*

"You take a drink, Eddie," he said "You take a drink and pull in your horns. I don't work on hunches. I've told you that. I don't like talk of hunches and signs. Where'd you come from, uncle?"

Chris scowled. He had lived a full life and the mark of a certain number of years was upon him, but he was no relic, and he certainly was not this Thorpe's uncle. Removing his battered tall beaver hat, he shook out the full hang of his gray mane with a cautious show of resentment.

"In the words of the immortal Bard of Avon, sir, 'I am a man whom fortune has cruelly scratched.'"

"A bum," the youngest of the four said again, uneasiness showing through his brass like hide through a threadbare shirt. "I don't like this!"

The two others glanced at Thorpe. Chris thought they were uneasy, also, although it did not show as plainly in them as in the youngster. He began to feel that all was not well here—that perhaps he had come for succor and comradely welcome to a fire at which neither existed.

Thorpe swung on the boy, brittle anger in his eyes. "You keep squealing, Eddie, and you're going to stay out in the brush, permanent," he snapped. "You want hundred-dollar boots and a silver saddle. You got to sweat for them in any business. You keep your mouth shut, Eddie!"

Thorpe swung back on Christian Defever, then, speculation in his eyes. "Drifting, eh?" he murmured. "Empty pockets, too. Hungry, uncle? Fall to."

HE INDICATED the pots beside the fire and a littered stack of tin plates and eating ware. Chris selected a plate and an iron spoon, swiftly cleansing both on the tail of his coat with a fine show of fastidiousness. The man called Thorpe grinned, watching him. After a time the man spoke, indicating his three companions.

"Meet Tom Hagen, uncle," he said. "The Copper Kid, next to him—sometimes called the Copperhead. And Eddie Dean. Eddie, pour the company a mug of java."

Chris eyed the three of them anew over his plate without breaking the gusty rhythm of his jaws. Tom Hagen was heavy of body and reasonably tall, cut to

about the same pattern as Thorpe, himself. A solid, steady, iron-hard man.

The one called the Copper Kid or the Copperhead was misnamed in the first instance and rightly named in the second. He was the oldest of the lot—senior to Thorpe. He was no kid. But there was a reddish light in his eyes which was not wholly reflection from the fire, and the thin, stony set of his face was like the mask of death itself. Here was a man who made his own rules, and only for his benefit. The kind of man with which even Christian Defever, a notably careless man, would not willingly sit at poker.

Young Eddie Dean, studied afresh with long-practiced shrewdness, revealed other qualities besides youth and uneasiness. There was a truculence in the boy, as though he was determined to settle some score he fancied had been chalked up against him. A sort of shaky, sullen bull-headedness. And back of this was an apparent good nature and a carefully hidden but deep-rooted aversion to these others with whom he squatted at this fire.

Chris scowled and refilled his plate. Eddie set a tin mug of black coffee at Defever's knee and returned to his own side of the fire.

"Could you use a stake badly enough to work a couple of hours for it, uncle?" Thorpe asked.

The Copper Kid stirred and spoke before Chris answered. "The company in Golconda is a smart outfit, Bert," he said to Thorpe. "They're smart enough to know that if they sent a regular star-vest out into the brush, looking, he wouldn't come back. They're smart enough to rig up an old scarecrow like this and send him out to try and catch somebody with their bootheels up off the ground and a tooth-pick in their mouth. You got your neck out."

Chris did not fancy himself a handsome man—exactly. But hot protest rose in him. Thorpe silenced it with a look and turned his eyes steadily toward the Copper Kid.

"You want to sit in my saddle on this, Kid?" he growled.

The Copperhead shook his head through a tiny arc. His hand touched the butt of one of the two guns he wore.

"If I did, I wouldn't be jawing about it

with you, Bert," he said flatly. "This could be a trap. That's all."

Chris was perceiving more and more about this camp and he liked each new discovery less than the one which preceded it. Memory was at work. Bert Thorpe and Tom Hagen, the fourth of the men about this fire, were vaguely familiar names. A train here, a bullion shipment there, a bank in another place, a ranch payroll in another. Names with a patina of mystery over them, since these were clever men who vanished repeatedly and completely into the desert when their stripes were done.

These two, then, he knew. And the Copper Kid's eyes were enough. Only Eddie Dean, the young one, had neither the name nor the appearance to justify his presence in this company of the lawless.

Bert Thorpe glanced back at Chris, now pushed back from the stew pot with a full belly.

Thorpe shrugged. "The Copper Corporation always pays off on a Thursday morning. That payroll will be due along tonight. And it'll be traveling under some guard. The man that first shows his head out there on the tracks will have himself a piece of trouble—particularly if he looks like one of us—like he means business.

"But if a busted-down old drifter with a skull too thick to have a better idea than filling his belly or saving his feet a few miles of walking was to hail the company's spring-wagon express, it might throw the guards off enough to give the rest of us a chance at jumping them, cold."

Tom Hagen grinned a little. "Not bad, Bert," he said. "But we don't cut uncle in on shares. Not on the pay wagon. It'll

be carrying near forty thousand and I got a use for my ten. I don't peel that for an old bum."

Thorpe was still looking at the Copper Kid. The wizened, flinty-faced veteran of the dark trails returned the look unblinkingly. Chris thought Thorpe was afraid of this deadly man. And since Thorpe was obviously planning to make the Honorable Christian Defever no more than a lure with which to draw the attention of nervous guards and very likely the charges of their pistols—Chris thought it was useful to learn swiftly all he could of this quartet of the devil's henchmen, who hated whom and who was afraid of whom. Out of such straws in the wind, a clever man could occasionally erect a structure of considerable value to himself.

"I've heard of Bert Thorpe," he said thoughtfully and with eyes rounded a little as though in some awe. Chris paused and eyed the man.

"I have no desire to be a target for the guns of edgy guards, sirrah, but if a small fee could be earned in the darkness without undue risk, you have a man who will listen to you. It isn't often a man of principle has opportunity to study devilry at the hand of a master."

Thorpe grinned, obviously pleased at the tribute. "You're sharper than I thought, uncle," he said. "We can use you."

The Copper Kid grunted softly. "You get your damned horses ahead of your wagon all the time, Bert," he cautioned gently. "You ought to quit it. You say we can use this big-headed old fool. But what do the rest of us say, eh? Kind of forgot to ask, and that's important. We

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went into this on quarters. Quarters on the risk, quarters on the cut when it's over, and quarters on the say-so as to what we do. Hagen will string with you, I reckon. But what about Eddie and me?"

The Kid swung his colorless eyes toward young Dean.

THE boy shifted uncomfortably, head down a little. Suddenly it came up. "You know why I'm in this," he said defensively. "I got lawed off a hunk of Texas land that belongs to me by rights. A damned good hunk of land. With ten thousand iron men, I can hire me a good lawyer, too; I can get it back.

"I'll take my chances with the rest, but be damned if I'll see you send an old man out there to get himself shot up, just to save your own hides. All three of you know that if he came out of it with a whole skin, you'd cut him down from behind, one of you, so you wouldn't have to peel what you promised him off of the take."

"What do we do about him, now he's come in, then?" Hagen asked.

"Tie him up in the brush when the stage comes. Leave him there till our business is done. Turn him loose when we pull out. We've got horses. He's afoot. There's nothing he could do, then."

"Except shoot his mouth off in every bar between here and Albuquerque," Hagen growled, "giving descriptions and naming names. The kind of proof the Copper Corporation would need. They'd hunt us all down to the last man and not give a damn if it took them ten years. We'd have our cuts, all right, but no peace to enjoy them in. A dead man troubles my conscience a hell of a lot less than a live one sticking on my trail. The old fool shouldn't have come over here to our fire!"

Chris swallowed a certain dryness in his throat and glanced gratefully at Eddie Dean. The boy might be bad—probably was—but getting lawed out of a rightful piece of ground could make any man bitter. His proposal that Chris Deever be turned loose, rather than penalized for his unfortunate arrival here, betrayed an inner man of some worth. And it offered the one hope Chris could see of escaping

this nest of deadly vipers in the sage.

He did not look at Eddie Dean, but he backed away from the fire a little and sat down in such a way that the camp took on a pattern in which it was Eddie and himself against the other three. Not obviously, of course, but in his mind—the way a man should build a pattern which involved his own life.

Parting the loose folds of his coat, Chris worked them back with an expansive shift of his wide, bony shoulders, so that the use-darkened walnut on the butts of his guns winked dully in the firelight. The eyes of all four men touched them briefly. Thrusting his hand into the side pocket of his coat, Chris rattled the dozen or so loose shells for the heavy weapons, which he habitually carried there. A metallic clanking sound came from them, a sound he found more beautiful to his ear in this moment than the singing of golden coins.

"Talk about a hanging before you put a noose on a coward's neck and he screams for mercy," he observed. "But never waste talk on a man with a little sand. Just what kind of a fee did you have in mind. Thorpe, if I joined your—ah—profitable enterprise?"

"Uncle," the Copper Kid said sharply before Thorpe could answer, "maybe you didn't hear me. You're out of this! No cut—"

"Thorpe made me an offer," Chris said stubbornly.

"Thorpe ain't all!" the Kid snapped. "Maybe you ain't heard of us, but Tom and me and Eddie count."

"Four hundred bucks," Bert Thorpe said, his voice roughening. "A hundred from each of us to get the pay wagon stopped and the attention of the guards pinned down. I cooked up this show and I'm bossing it!"

"Not with money out of my pocket," the Copper Kid snapped. "You're crowding me on this, Bert. I don't crowd. I've seen this game played before. A setup made. A little powder burned, and suddenly there's only three shares to cut up. It could keep on till there was only one."

Eddie Dean stirred uncertainly. "Pipe down, both of you!" he said. "We've got nothing to cut up, yet!"

Tom Hagen pulled out a big, ornate watch bearing initials other than his own.

He snapped its face open.

"Ten minutes," he said. "Ten minutes, the way we figured, and that wagon will be along. We got to know how we're doing this before ten minutes are up. You figured about right, Kid. Maybe it ain't smart, but I'm sticking with Bert. He says we use this old goat for flag-down bait with the wagon. I agree."

The thought of Bert Thorpe and himself pulling together gave Hagen confidence. He snapped the case of his watch closed.

"You said it wasn't smart, Tom," the Copper Kid agreed softly. "It sure as hell isn't."

Chris Defever, who could spot a deal in thirds and cut one himself if his luck was so ragged as to make it necessary, did not see the Kid begin his draw. It was made from a hunkered, almost sitting position—as awkward a bend of body as a man reaching for a gun could move in—but his weapon came smoothly and with incredible speed to his hand. It fired when it was only inches from leather.

The bullet hit Hagen in the center of his face and slammed him over on his back in the brush. His bent knees straightened slowly, his two heels digging two short, deep furrows in the sand.

Chris had made half a move toward one of his derringers. He halted it abruptly, smiling with sudden engaging charm as the smoking muzzle of the Kid's gun swept toward him. The weapon swung on past, toward Bert Thorpe, but the swing halted as abruptly as had Defever's half-born draw and the Copper Kid smiled much as Chris had smiled at him.

Bert Thorpe had drawn his gun perhaps only an instant behind the Kid. It lay solidly in his hand, hammer back, its muzzle steadily on the Kid. Eddie Dean cleared his throat shallowly and spat, keeping his head turned from Hagen's motionless body.

"It's thirds, now," the Copper Kid said softly. "A three-way split between you and Eddie and me, Bert." There was oily conciliation in his voice. He dropped his gun back into its holster.

Thorpe watched him for an instant more, then nodded slowly. "And uncle, here," Thorpe said, "flags down the stage for us—at six hundred bucks. Two hun-

dred for each of us out of our new shares. Tom doesn't mind, now. Do *you*, Kid?"

The thin-faced veteran shook his head slowly, oil in his smile, also. "No," he said. "Not now. You got a quick hand, Bert. Quicker than I'd heard."

"I ride a crew tophand or I don't ride," Thorpe said.

"Sure," the Kid agreed.

Eddie Dean hawked and spat again. He had lost color. His eyes were on the Kid. "That was murder!" he said, rolling his head at Hagen's body.

"It was to split Tom and me up, so there wouldn't be two against the Kid," Bert Thorpe said bluntly. "He wasn't quite fast enough to cut the odds to zero."

"It was murder," Eddie Dean repeated woodenly. "No damned reason, except to put a bigger cut into your own pocket, Kid. The hell with this. A man dead and a drifter being sent out where he'll get nailed by the guards, too. I want nothing to do with it. I want no part. The hell with it!"

CHRIS saw that Thorpe was watching him, a ghost of amusement in his eyes. This was working beautifully. Still, there was much which could go wrong. He turned his attention to the Copper Kid, certain of Thorpe for the next few instants. Impatience was high in the Kid. It showed through the stone of his mask.

"He's right. The boy, here, is right."

The Copper Kid shot a look at Bert Thorpe as though making a secret agreement with the man.

"I like to see a man get his wanting," the Kid said, and he reached for his gun again.

Chris knew this was coming. He had been prodding for it, trying to bring it into the open. And he thought he knew the result. But it was hard to watch a serpent strike at him and at the same time defend himself from danger from another source.

The Kid, having looked once at Thorpe, did not look at him again. Chris, unswinging one of his derringers, did not attempt to line it at the Kid, but swung its muzzle toward Thorpe. These were movements which occurred simultaneously. The Copper Kid's gun dropped into line and fired. But in the same instant

that its hammer fell, Thorpe—who had drawn while the Kid's attention was on Chris—also fired.

Thorpe's bullet entered the Copper Kid's body in the left armpit and tore through his chest area with explosive violence. The Kid swung around on his heels, came to his feet, and fell from his full height onto his face. Blood ran swiftly from him and was swallowed greedily by the firelit sand under him.

Chris looked down the barrel of his derringer at Thorpe, frozen in a half turn toward Chris with his own weapon re-cocked for a second shot. Thorpe smiled as Chris had smiled at the Copper Kid and as the Kid had smiled at Thorpe. He put his gun back into leather with a careless shove. Chris looked then at the scuff the Kid's bullet had torn in the sand inches from his own knee. And he looked at Eddie Dean.

"He tried to kill you!" Dean breathed. "He tried to kill you and you and Bert trapped him between you. You decoyed his attention while Bert shot him. You did it on purpose that way—"

"You're a sharp old boy, Uncle," Bert Thorpe said. "We got to change things, now. I rigged this thing. I got a bigger slice coming, with Tom and the Kid checked out. And you've earned a little something. Eddie's sat tight, so he's got a little more coming. Half for me, then. Three-eighths for Eddie. An eighth for you. It beats six hundred dollars, old man—"

Thorpe broke off. The sound of a team running in harness came in across the night. The whine of wheels on gravel. A driver's command to the horses ahead of him. The pay-wagon rolling toward the mines at Golconda. Almost forty thousand dollars in good spending cash.

For a moment Christian Defever struggled with temptation. But Eddie Dean had come to his feet. While Chris argued swiftly with himself, fighting the devil's counsel that he join with Bert Thorpe for this plunder, Dean spoke quietly.

"I'm going back to riding a beans-and-bacon job," he said. "If I get my graze back, I'll do it with my fists. Both of you stand still. Let that wagon go. Jump wagon and I'll nail you."

Although the boy had barked his order to both of them, his eyes were on Thorpe and the weapon he had slipped clumsily but effectively from its holster was steady on Thorpe's belly.

Thorpe lunged suddenly, then, went down and to one side in a rolling, twisting turn, jerking at his gun as he went. Chris automatically palmed a derringer from his vest. Eddie Dean fired at Thorpe as he went down, missed the man, and was much too slow in re-cocking his weapon.

Chris had a clear shot at the side of the boy's head. It cost him a half interest in a forty-thousand dollar loot, but he depressed the muzzle of his piece and sent a bullet smashing through Bert Thorpe's forearm an instant before the man's weapon tilted up into Eddie Dean's face.

Thorpe writhed on the ground, half in anger and half in pain, but he made no attempt to reach for the weapon smashed from his grip. He stared up at Defever.

"You crazy, damned old fool!" he raged.

"Ain't I, though?" Defever agreed. He turned to Eddie Dean. "That wagon's stopping. The guards'll come in this way. Bring up two of the horses. The pair of us'll get out before they come."

Dean blinked, then grinned. He shook his head.

"By the hell, you are crazy!" he said. "Man, this is Tom Hagen and the Copper Kid dead and Bert Thorpe alive enough to answer some questions that have been deviling the sheriffs of half a dozen counties for years. They're worth three thousand dollars a head, the lot of them, alive or dead."

"Fortune brings in some boats that are not steered!" Chris murmured, clutching at a line from the boards of the stage to fit the moment. He prodded Bert Thorpe with his toe as the man came up onto his knees.

"The name," he said, "is Christian Defever. Call me uncle again and I'll kick every tooth out of your head!" And to Eddie Dean he said: "Hail that express wagon and get those guards over here. There's enough of the night left for a bath and a good sleep in a hotel in town. Let's be at it, boy."

GRAMP'S LAST BLUFF

Tad would be a real buckaroo afore he knew it, Gramp figured.



A yunker will sometimes get wild ideas — when he covets a certain horse.

By JOSEPH WAYNE

ACCORDING to the way young Tad Blivens saw it, there wasn't anything worse than being a homesteader on the high Oregon desert. If it was a good year, there might be enough rain to get the wheat up, but there wouldn't be enough to keep it going.

A man would work himself to death for nothing, Tad said, and Gramp agreed. Old Eli Ash over on Bear Creek told Gramp that nobody could make a living farming the desert. It was cattle range, nothing else. Eli ought to know. He'd been raising beef on it since Vigilante days.

The trouble was, Tad said, that his pa and ma were land hungry. They thought

that when the government gave a farm away under the Homestead Act the land was free.

Stubborn, Tad's ma and pa were. Ma claimed you could have anything you wanted if you worked hard enough. Working was Ma's main suit. Pa was a worker, too. Had a job in a sawmill in Bend, but seemed as if it took all he made to live.

It was tough. Had been right from the start. The bitterness in Tad that had been a mere seed grew into an ugly plant. It wasn't that Tad was lazy. He grubbed sagebrush and hoed in the garden and ploughed up more land. He was husky for sixteen, Tad was, and Gramp told Ma that the boy was a better worker than most men.

"Maybe," Ma sniffed, "but he ain't got no call to get notions. We're farm folks and it's going to be mighty good to get this place patented."

"You never will," Gramp shouted angrily. "Eli, he says . . ."

"Eli's a stockman and he hates farmers," Ma cut in. "When the railroad gets through to Burns, we'll have a valuable farm."

"Never will," Gramp bawled. "Might as well believe in fairies 'n such."

It was an argument that never ended. Tad took no part in it. If Gramp and Ma started it when he was in the shack, he went outside. There was always something to do, even if it wasn't any more than working in the garden.

Tad knew he wasted his time with a hoe. The peas and beans and corn faded out to a sick yellow, just like the wheat. If it did rain and the garden began to look better, a jackrabbit would get through the fence and clean everything up.

Sometimes, when it was dusk and Tad couldn't stand the wrangling, he'd climb to the rim behind the cabin and lie on his back. He guessed he could count to a million, but if he did, he still wouldn't have all the stars counted. He'd hear a coyote call from somewhere along the rim, a melancholy noise that made him think the coyote felt the way he did. Then he'd start dreaming about the bay saddler.

It was fun to dream. Gramp knew how it was. He hadn't ever amounted to much according to Ma. Sure, he'd lost a leg at Gettysburg, but he had a wooden leg and

there were plenty of jobs a man with a wooden leg could do. Trouble was he never got around to doing them. Lazy, Ma claimed. Lately he'd even got to complaining about his stomach.

Tad guessed it was just as well Ma didn't know about his dreaming. He'd told her once he wanted the bay gelding. Ma asked how much the horse cost, and when he told her a hundred dollars, she got mad.

He knew how much grub a hundred dollars would buy without her telling him. She could say they'd have saddle horses after they'd proved up on the place, but Tad knew Gramp was right. They'd never prove up.

It helped to talk to Gramp. Seemed as if the real old knew more about the young than the ones in between. Tad never understood why that was. He just knew that Gramp liked to come out and stand in the sun while he worked the juniper into stove wood or hoed the garden.

"Good clean country out here," Gramp liked to say. "Ain't bogged down with disappointed people's dreams like it is back East. You can look from the Steens Mountains plumb over to the Three Sisters. Trouble is everybody from your ma to the folks in Harney county think they can go contrary to nature and farm a cattle range."

"I'm going to stay here," Tad would say somberly. "I'm going to be a buckaroo. I'm going to have that bay saddler."

"Sure you will, boy," Gramp would put a hand on his stomach then and maybe walk off.

Or if the pain passed he'd stay and go on talking. "A man's got a right to live like a king with a horse between his legs. No sense grubbing in the dirt."

Then Tad would lean on his hoe handle and look across the valley. There was bunchgrass tucked in between the clumps of sage and rabbit brush, and junipers off back of the rim.

He'd bring his eyes to the tar paper shack and the sickly yellow garden and his mother, bent by too much work, as weathered as a wind-turned juniper. It wasn't any way to live. If it wasn't for Gramp's Civil War pension, they wouldn't have enough to eat.

It was along in June that Tad heard about the shindig in Bend. Parade and dancing and a trout barbecue. He told Ma he was going, and she said he'd walk if he did. He wasn't driving the team fifty miles just to waste his time when there was work to be done.

He walked out of the shack. He always did when Ma talked that way, but this time he didn't hoe. He sat down and kicked at the sandy dirt. When Gramp hobbled out, Tad said, "I'm fixing to run away."

GRAMP didn't say anything for quite a while. Tad thought he'd get a working over, but there wasn't a scolding word. When Tad looked up, he saw that Gramp was staring at the mountains, a strange look on his face.

It was the first time for years that Tad felt like crying. Gramp knew he was going to die. Tad couldn't tell how he knew. It was just right there on the old man's face.

"Maybe if I got that bay for you," Gramp said finally, "you wouldn't run away."

"No, I guess I wouldn't, but anyway, you can't. . . ."

"I guess maybe I can, boy," Gramp said slowly.

Gramp didn't tell Ma what he was up to. He waited until Eli Ash rode by. Then he hobbled out to the road with a tin can full of silver dollars and gave them to Eli for the horse. He even got Eli to throw the saddle in.

Tad didn't go to Bend for the Fourth. He worked as if it was just another day.

When it was dusk, he saddled up and went for a ride instead of climbing up on the rim and listening to the coyotes.

"Never saw a boy take to riding like Tad," Gramp told Ma. "He'll be a real buckaroo afore you know it."

Ma sniffed. "What good does a buckaroo come to? We're farm folks, we are. Buying a horse don't change nothing. You'd better have bought a cow with that money."

It wasn't as good a world after Gramp was gone. Not even after Ma finally gave up and moved to town and Tad started winning the calf roping in the local round-ups.

Not even after he'd won the contest in Pendleton.

Years later Ma told Tad about the money. Gramp had saved those silver dollars out of his pension, one each month, aiming to pay for his coffin and a lot in the graveyard in town.

But Tad knew it was all right the way it had gone. Eli Ash made a right nice coffin and lined it with black velvet. There wasn't any burying in town, but that was all right, too.

Tad had an idea Gramp liked it better out here on the desert where a man could look from the Steens plumb over to the Three Sisters, and the air was fine and clean and smelled of sage. He reckoned Gramp was happy here.

Funny about Gramp. Wasted his life, Ma claimed. Never learned to read much and couldn't any more than sign his name. But Tad understood how it was. A man who knew about a boy's dreams hadn't wasted his life.

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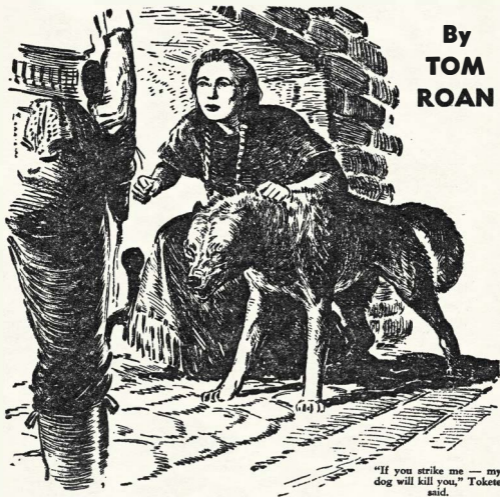
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GOLD FOR A REDMAN'S SKIN

By
**TOM
ROAN**



"If you strike me — my dog will kill you," Tokete said.

FLAT on his stomach on the north rim, tall dark horse hidden in the pines behind him, Long Wolf, the Bannock, lay listening and waiting, fierce black eyes as sharp as a lance in the after-midnight silence. There was no moon, no stars, only a leaden gloom, making the world seem dead and black, only a slight drift in the air now and then.

The only hint of sound up here was the faint murmur of water in the bowl-shaped basin six or seven hundred feet below

★ ★
Trapped and surrounded, noose-haunted Long Wolf had to scheme his way out of a triple shoot-out.



under the huge old cottonwoods and willows that lined the banks of a hurrying little stream where a rude log cabin stood hidden in the trees.

Long Wolf had been on the rim for more than two hours. He had twice circled it, keen nose scenting the slight drift in the air here and there. A certain odor had come to him several times. It was faint and sweet, an all-clear sign that came from small quantities of brown sugar burning in a low fire and rising from the rough, squat chimney of the cabin.

That certain sweet smell always meant that the basin was safe for this tall outlaw to come down and slip into the cabin. It meant that he would not ease into guns and men hiding in the darkness and the bushes—hungry reward-hunters ready and eager to blow him down for the easy dollars a quick murder would bring.

But tonight there was something else in the air. The sweet odor was there, all right. There was no mistaking it. But with it there was a faint tinge of burning sulphur and black pepper, either one of the latter always the old danger sign, invisible and noiseless, not to be even noticed by the average man going by along the high rim.

The three smells told a story. There was trouble below, and not only men who had come sneaking up in the darkness, the keen eyes and ears of a pretty three-quarter Bannock squaw, Tokete, spotting them.

In addition to Tokete there would be Skookum, the half-wolf black dog, weighing close to one hundred and twenty-five pounds. Skookum had no bark. He was as quiet as a shadow, but he saw and smelled all, and was never to be found a dozen yards away from the side of his mistress. Skookum had often told her of danger when it was a mile away, for the slender, pretty little squaw was able to read his every manner.

No one man was down there. One man did not hunt Long Wolf. He knew all about them, having lived among white men for more than half his life, learning their ways, speaking their language even better than the most of them. The white man, especially the reward-hungry, was a tricky fellow, one who liked to wager his bets on sure things.

Tonight Long Wolf had come to put an end to this thing. He wore the gray garb of a cowpuncher, his light-copper skin making him look like a white man from the distance. More than half of him was white man in every act. The full-blood Indian was in the background, coming to the front when danger faced him.

Tokete was in trouble down there, and tonight he had come to take her out of this tall Idaho country. A second horse waited for them in a little valley to the west. Once to that horse, Skookum silent and black at their heels, he would swing southward along the creeks until he came to the Snake.

Down the Snake they would go, breaking away from it only to hug the timber and the hills, gradually bending westward until they were at last in the high California-Nevada Sierras. Many days from now they would be slipping across the line into old Mexico, leaving this country far, far behind.

Nothing would turn him back tonight, not a posse of a thousand men strong. Tokete was ready and waiting for him. She was his squaw and knew all about him, knew every crime with which he had been charged, that eight out of ten acts of horse-stealing or robbery had been piled against him—when he was miles away from the scene.

The law had had her in jail in Gold Lode, twenty-odd miles eastward. The best of them had not learned a thing, with their sly questions, against her Long Wolf.

The law had nothing that could be pinned on Tokete. All men knew that she was Long Wolf's wife. They would know, too, that they might subject her to any torture and yet not one word would come from her.

Unable to wait any longer, he started down, rifle at his side, a long black Colt at either hip and a ten-inch knife in his belt. There was a good trail to his right, but he was too smart for that. He took the impossible, a creeping, shadowless thing in the face of a dark cliff.

At the bottom he squatted in a pocket of rocks, listening and watching. Then he swung to his left, getting away from the little stream at the foot of the cliffs

and just beyond the other, broken trail.

His first warning of nearby danger came to him when he was eighty yards east of the cabin. It was so light only the keenest ear would have caught it. It came to him in the stir of a watching man in the rocks and brush to his right, from the mere thing of a man straightening a leg. Instantly Long Wolf was on his face, apparently having ceased to breathe there under the brush.

In a minute he was moving on again. He could have killed swiftly here in a very few moments.

But Long Wolf, the Bannock, was not interested in killing. Too many kills had been recorded against him in the past. Down in Mexico he would have a chance.

HE PASSED two more men, and was finally within a few yards of the cabin. On a slight rise here he could see Tokete moving back and forth. Two big, square-shouldered, black-bearded men sat before the smouldering blaze in the fireplace. One of them reached down at his feet and picked up a paper bag, taking something out of it and throwing it in the fire. Brown sugar! But Tokete was equally as smart. She threw on a handful of bark and twigs from the corner as if helping to send the odor of the burning sugar far in the night.

But Tokete was fooling those two smart white men. In each handful of bark and twigs there would be sulphur and black pepper, always mixed with the bark and twigs there in the corner for a thing like this—a squaw's way of telling her buck of the danger!

He knew those two white men inside. One was Big Ike Kelty, the second Rube Hopper, looking enough alike to be brothers, a couple of courthouse hang-ons, professional jurymen. Before every election they could be seen riding the rangelands, hunting up the votes for the side that would give them the most once in office. Tonight they were here, brazenly pushing in on Tokete, out to kill her man!

Long Wolf heard Kelty laugh. "Smart trick, all right, purty squaw! We ain't been watchin' this ol' basin for nothin'. Keen noses me an' Rube Hopper has. One night we knowed yuh knowed we was watching. That night we smelled a hell

of a smell where it had been sweet before—an' yore damn Indian stayed away. We was smarter the next time. We come back an' smelled burnin' sugar—an' then we had yore trick."

"Yep, we're smart, all right!" Rube Hopper was agreeing with a short sputter of laughter. "Sulphur, 'twas, yuh was burnin', purty gal. That's why we grabbed them two boxes off the fireboard the first thing. Ain't no damn Indian who's gonna keep right on gettin' the best of us. Seven mighty good men besides me an' Ike are out there waitin' for him tonight. The minute he shows, then down he goes!"

Tokete was letting them talk without bothering to answer, and Long Wolf eased on again, even the air feeling heavy with danger. He kept clear of all the flashes of firelight on the window, then had to drop entirely and lie motionlessly when he saw the faint outlines of a man coming from the drop-off to the front door.

"Ike, this is Pete Fuller." The voice was low and guarded. "That damn squaw's foolin' you fellas somehow. I'll swear me and Tige Walker's twice smelled sulphur burning with yore sugar."

"Naw, she couldn't!" Kelty was jerking to his feet, spurred heels scraping on the planks of the floor. "We got her sulphur the first damn thing!"

"Maybe not all of it at that!" Hopper was up and suddenly moving forward.

"Stand back, white man." Tokete's voice was low, but commanding. "If you strike me—my dog will kill you."

"I'll fix that!" Hopper must have dropped a quick hand to the butt of a six-shooter. Under the house now, Long Wolf heard Skookum growl. "I'll kill the damn big brute!"

"Naw, you don't, Rube!" Kelty's voice was quick, excited. "We're not wantin' no big row with Sheriff Casper Malone when we get back to town. Keep yore hands off that thing. Just have a look in the corner and see what's in that bark and trash, that's all!"

"Sulphur and whole black peppers!" Rube Hopper's voice was a low yelp thirty seconds later, and Long Wolf, worming his way back under the rear end of the room, knew that the man had dropped to his knees in the corner where the firewood was kept. "She's been

ruin' everything! Hell, Ike," spurs scraped and the dog growled again, "why, that damn Indian must be miles away from here by now!"

"Maybe ain't come yet." Kelty was holding himself. "I'll pile in more sugar, an' she's got still more in the lean-to."

It was a case of waiting and listening now. Long Wolf heard Pete Fuller go back and down the deep drop-off to the creek. Feet moved back and forth in the cabin. Tokete was keeping silent, the wolf-dog beside her, ready to spring to her defense. Tokete knew that her man was near.

"We'll fix yore purty little wagon! Whether Long Wolf comes or not, we're takin' yuh back to town and lammin' yuh in jail."

"They have had me in jail." Tokete's voice was low, unruffled. "It was only to turn me out again. This time it would be the same."

"Not this time, yuh redskin wench!" Kelty laughed leeringly at her. "Me and all the rest of the fellas here tonight aim to swear out warrants agin yuh. This time old Casp Malone will have to lock yuh up and hold yuh, leastwise till the next term of court. Spring term's just out. That means yo'll have to lie there in a cell till fall term, and then," he stomped the floor, bringing a growl from the wolf-dog, "we'll all pitch in and swear yuh to the pen for the rest of your life!"

"I am not afraid." Tokete was suddenly laughing at him. "You will be the one to shake in your bed at night—all of you who dares to swear a lie against me. My Long Wolf will hunt you night and

day. Even now," she laughed again, "your face goes white when I tell you that."

"She's got yuh, Ike!" Even Hopper had to laugh at him now. "That damn Indian of hers would be on our trails, and nobody'd sleep."

They grew quiet again, but it was grinding on big Ike Kelty's nerves as the time dragged on. He could not stand that amusement in the pretty damned Indian's eyes.

That same expression soon seemed to be in the wolf-dog's eyes. He was on his belly on the floor now, broad black muzzle resting on the shining back paws. The wolf-brain behind those coppery eyes was alert, a killer ready to strike. Yet a brute that minded the woman perfectly and from the mere lift of her hand. A dog like that could ride a man to the floor in his first furious rush, and tear the throat out of him with one slash of those long, yellow fangs.

Then, suddenly, it came to Ike Kelty that the dog was not watching him after all. He was intent on something in the rear end of the room. Easing out of his chair, Kelty turned, gasped, and slowly started lifting his hands. Hopper glared, eyes popping, and then swore.

"What'n hell's the matter?" He was on his feet, his hands beginning to lift. A low, hard voice spoke to them.

"Careful with the hands, white men. If they bring a single sound from outside the cabin I'll blow your hearts into that fireplace behind you. Take their guns, Tokete. This time they will give people something to talk about—"

"Long Wolf!" warned Kelty. "I—I'd

**MEN CAN
HAVE THE
NEW LOOK
TOO...**



**WITH
WILDROOT
CREAM-OIL
HAIR TONIC**

GROOMS THE HAIR
RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES LOOSE
DANDRUFF



EASY TO USE
NO WASTE
OR SPILLING
HANDY FOR
TRAVELING

know that face in hell." He stood staring.

The fire was low, the light dim. Tokete worked swiftly, taking their big weapons. It seemed no more than a minute at the most before she had tied their hands with two strong lengths of rope. Without stopping she made gags from the black neckerchiefs around their necks, and had them silent. Just as she finished a yell came from outside the window, one of the watchers having glanced inside.

"Ike and Ruge are in a fix! Help, fellas! That damn Indian wench—"

A SHOT stopped all that from the opening in the floor. The bullet struck the cross-bars of the window, glass shattering outward.

Calmly, Long Wolf spoke again. "Wash out the fire." Tokete had seized a pail of water from a shelf and was slopping it on the fire, making the cabin black.

Long Wolf spoke again: "Remember the wolf-dog. Make a false move in the darkness and he will kill you. Keep that in mind."

Neither Kelty nor Hopper could answer him, their mouth filled with the gags, breaths whistling through their wildly pumping nostrils. Long Wolf was behind them. He reached up and removed the gag from Kelty.

"Silence is no longer needed, white man." His voice was a low growl. "Maybe we will yet need the use of your mouth. If it starts going too far a single bullet will shut it forever. Tell them outside to keep back or you and Rube Hopper will die."

"They—they might shoot even us, anyhow!" Kelty's answer was a scared series of jerks. "To get the reward money on you, Long Wolf!"

"Such is the way of the noble white man who seeks blood money called rewards!" Long Wolf laughed at him. "Do as I say." He shrugged. "If they kill you you will only be dead—and have no use for money!"

"Back up, fellas!" Kelty had his face to the shattered window a few moments later, Tokete hastily gathering up her few possessions and a bag of food for the trail. "Long Wolf and this damn squaw's got us! If yuh start gunning, they'll kill us dead as—what'd I tell you!"

He was suddenly falling back from the window, a flash of fire and the noise of a six-shooter outside landing a bullet in the wall of the cabin a foot from his face. "They won't give a damn as long as they get you, Long Wolf!"

Long Wolf laughed at him as he helped him up from the floor, shoving him toward Hopper. "Let them taste this!"

He stepped to the side of the window, six-shooters in his long hands, another bullet smashing into the wall of the cabin. The heavy six-shooters jumped in the copper-colored hands, bullets slapping the rocks in the darkness, clipping off twigs from the bushes, creating merry hell with men falling backward and yelling at the tops of their voices.

"Get ready to run for it!" Long Wolf's voice was loud enough for most of the men outside to hear. Now he yanked the front door open, and again filled the night with the lightning roaring of his six-shooters. "If they fire on us they will kill you two!"

But he was not going out that front door. Tokete was ready, the weapons that had belonged to Kelty and Hopper now belted around her. She fell in behind Kelty, fitting the muzzle of a six-shooter against his spine. Long Wolf was behind Hopper, taking the lead.

Swiftly, almost silently, they passed through the lean-to and out the rear door, the wolf-dog at Tokete's heels. The dash was quick, out across a narrow back yard and into the brush and rocks, but it was not quick enough to stop shots. Kelty yelled, stumbled and was going down, Tokete almost falling over him.

"Damn it, I'm hit! Told—yuh—they'd kill us!"

Rube Hopper was reeling off his feet before they had gone another ten yards. Long Wolf silenced one of the hiding gunmen in the darkness by whipping a .45 slug into him by the flash of his weapon. Now it was just the two and the dog, turning, twisting, keeping as low as possible in the brush. Horses snorted in the distance and Long Wolf headed for them.

A guard had been left here. Long Wolf saw him make a wild rush to gain the shelter of a clump of brush and rocks. Long Wolf shot him down, drumming the heavy slugs of lead into him. Then

they were rushing on, the world a blazing, roaring sea of gunfire behind them.

Two horses lunged backward and fell. The mob back there had gone absolutely crazy, thinking only of the reward money escaping right in front of their eyes.

But with horses under them now, Long Wolf and his pretty squaw were fleeing in the darkness, getting eastward as rapidly as hoofs would carry them. The noise was still a howling, cursing and shooting hell back there.

They came to a break in the wall of the basin, and started up, the wolf-dog right behind the heels of the bay Tokete was riding. The tall black Long Wolf had grabbed led the way, and they were soon on the rim.

Up here he might have turned and opened fire again, but the true killer instinct had never been a part of him. Getting back from the rim he headed his black to northward, letting the shots, the howls and curses gradually die away behind them.

"And now we are safe!" cried Tokete when they reached his waiting dark horse in the pines. "They will never stop us!"

He caught up the dark horse's reins. "But know as we travel that the fight is not ended. We will make sure they follow us."

They were swinging on in a matter of seconds, a hint of light beginning to tinge the sky. Boldly Long Wolf rode to the head of the trail and once more rolled lightning gunfire toward the men below to let them know that he was heading westward and daring them to follow.

Down there in the basin around the cabin more pandemonium was in the air. The horse guard was dead. Dead also was Rube Kelty. A third man cursed from a hole through his shoulder, but no bones were broken and he was still able to ride and fight.

Big Ike Kelty had been the smart one as usual. No bullet had touched him. He had merely pulled a smart trick, crying out, stumbling and falling, pretending that death was upon him.

OUT of the nine, five had been left. Two men had to double up on a big sorrel, and they were galloping away, still

full of fight, the reward money as good as dangling yet in front of their eyes.

They swung westward after the roaring of the shots from the north rim. Crossing the creek in a break in the rock-walled banks, they shot on through the trees. Westward was the logical place for Long Wolf to go, back there in the taller, darker hills that would lump the sky for many miles.

Northward or eastward would soon mean the open country. Wolf in act as well as in name, the escaping redskin and his squaw would hug the shelter of the hills, shunning open ground.

Dawn found them still riding. At daylight they came to a big cattle outfit. Here they managed to get fresh horses and an extra one, and five men were talked into joining them with the tale of ten thousand dollars in reward money. With a couple of cowboys taking horses to return to the basin and send the story on back to Gold Lode, they kept on, every eye brightening when they finally came upon the clear trail Long Wolf and his squaw were leaving behind.

"Ain't no missing it!" cried Kelty, again the roaring bully of the lot. "There's even the damn dog's track here in the sand."

In the late-afternoon they were going wild. Long Wolf and his Tokete were sighted far ahead, going up a deep break in a mountainside. A yell came from big Ike Kelty:

"Goin' right into a pocket. Ain't no way for 'em to turn now! We've as good as got a dead Indian roped crost his saddle!"

It looked even better at sundown. Big Ike Kelty thought he knew all this country back here. When they came to the mouth of a narrow gorge with the trail leading squarely into it he was wild again.

"A blind gorge!" he cried. "We'll pull 'em down 'fore midnight! Damn it, they're in a box now."

But it was two hours before the first shot rolled, flashing to their left, the gorge here widened to seven hundred feet. Something struck Kelty on the shoulder. With a yell he tumbled off his horse and hit the ground on his hands and knees.

"I'm shot!" he bawled. "I'm shore shot this time! They've kilt me!"

Yelling was useless. Others were yelling, shots roaring, the high walls of the gorge taking it up. For every shot they fired a flash came back to them from the other side. By all those flashes on the other side of the gorge they were certain that Long Wolf had led them into a trap where a gang of his friends were waiting. For they knew that the redskin had friends, many of them scattered through the hills.

The fight raged on and on. Big Ike Kelthy kept groaning, and then discovered that he was not bleeding. Unable to understand that, he tore off his old riding jacket and his shirt, feeling his shoulder tenderly.

"Ain't no blood," he muttered. "Just a lump. Hell, it feels like a rock was dropped on me."

Another stone struck, smashing to bits in front of him. He stared at it and the flashes of light from across the gorge. Then every man was startled to his feet by a grinding, crushing sound in the distance as if the mountains were coming down.

A yell of terror lifted:

"That damn Indian's started a rock slide back there! He's cut us off in a pocket! We're trapped!"

"But who'n hell's that who keeps shootin' back at us!"

They understood it better when morning came. Everything had grown quiet, only a faint trickle of water sounding in the distance. Men had gone sneaking back along the way they had come. In the growing light they had seen the great

wall of rock that had come down in a narrow trough in the north wall, completely blocking the gorge in its most narrow place, making prisoners of them.

"Damn to hell," groaned Kelthy when he had a look at it. "That fool redskin didn't wanta kill us! Hell, he just wants us to be the laughing stock of the whole damn country. We'll be a week getting outa here. Why—why, we'll have to get down and move rock by hand to make a trail up and over that fool slide, and Long Wolf will be long gone by then. We'll never find him!"

"But I still wanta know one thing," growled someone, staring across the gorge. "Who'n hell was shootin' back at us over there?"

"Nobody, yuh damn fool!" snarled a big redhead. "Can't yuh see that straight wall of rock over there? This is Glass Gorge. Nobody was shootin' at us! Hell, that was only the reflection of our own shots, and Long Wolf and his Tokete was above us, laughin' at us! All they had to do once they got us stopped was to swing back and kick a few rocks down to get a slide started. And here we are, in a bottle. Get on yore feet, Big Ike. I've always had a notion to knock hell outa yuh, and now I'm gonna do it."

Far away on a distant peak, Long Wolf and his Tokete looked back, watching men fighting in the gorge, looking like scrambling ants. He lifted his hand, giving them the Indian's farewell, and they were gone, around the peak. Safe country was ahead—Mexico—far away—but there was no question about getting there now.



Next

10 STORY
WESTERN
MAGAZINE

Issue

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December 10th



Old Devil Lance Hassett once again took the trail of the bloody Rattlesnake-Who-Sings-In-The-Wind and came upon the redskin's latest masterpiece of charred smouldering wagons and scalped pioneers.



Rattlesnake and Crazy Caledonia, the sailor who hated all white men, met on the scene of the massacre, watching their raiders loot—to the beat of Caledonia's deadly voodoo drums that now heralded another slaughter.



Stealing into Rattlesnake's camp, Lance met an Indian brave who saw through his borrowed feathers. Hell-bent for vengeance for the massacred pioneers, Lance's answer was a quick thrust of his long-bladed knife.



Crazy Caledonia and Chief Rattlesnake were at a victory feast when Lance entered. The two killers leaped at him. . . . The complete story will be told by Tom Roan in his novel—"Old Devil Lance Crashes Hell."

*Whistler
Kid
Novelette*



Caught in a double, cold-decked play the Whistler Kid rode the owlhoot trail—gambling that all the rope he was giving the outlaws wouldn't hang himself.

CHAPTER

Cross J Jargon

1

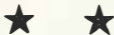
Willy Wooten rode down the trail of the old Cross J, a slim figure, too light and too young for the heavy guns in his belt. His cheeks were smooth; he had light blue eyes, innocent and clear. His battered hat did not match his neat, hand-stitched boots.

The town of Silver was northward, while the Cross J lay against the mountains to the south and west. For years the Cross J had lain fallow, although it was pretty fair grazing. It was a big

HOGTIE THAT DEVIL, WHISTLER!



He made the fastest draw ever seen west of
Kansas City. . . .



By **WILLIAM R. COX**

ranch which could be prosperous. Old Man Lee had died with no heirs and now Bent Belden owned Cross J.

Bent Belden was new to Grant County. Willy Wooten knew him, because he was a member of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, which employed Willy as a sort of trouble-shooter. But Belden was not of the Territory—no one knew where he was from.

It was enough that Belden had stocked Cross J, worked over the land and buildings and established a good account at the National Bank of Silver. He was a handsome young man, rather quiet in manner, always well-dressed. True, his foreman was a bully, his men inclined to ruffishness, but Belden controlled his employees and ran a smart outfit. People thought it very fitting that he should court Mary Ann Orden, the town milliner—and beauty.

There was a swale along the trail to Cross J, and beyond it a rising hill on which the ranch house was set. But Willy Wooten did not go directly to the house. He turned off in the swale and proceeded southward. He came to a copse of cottonwoods which he knew well and reined the bay pony downstream along a winding creek.

There was a spreading, sturdy oak standing alone. As Willy Wooten came to it, he dismounted. Bent Belden had sent word that one of his men had been killed by the bunch from the hills. He had said that the man lay along the creek, where Cross J had let him stay, pending the investigation by the Cattlemen's Association's detective.

That was the word in the scribbled note which bothered Willy. It was plain silly to describe Willy Wooten as a detective. He was just a young man working for Foster Deal and the cattlemen, he thought, sorta looking into things.

He scowled and walked upstream. If someone was going to bushwhack a Cross J man, upstream was the place. But the body wasn't upstream and the creek lay open all the way.

Twenty rods below the oak he found the man. It was Squinty, the horse wrangler, a slim, wry-necked veteran. Willy's father, Bronch Wooten, had been a wrangler.

Willy looked down at the dead man. Squinty lay half in the water. There was a bullet hole through his back, all right. Willy could tell where it went in. But Squinty didn't look right.

Willy bent and unfastened the shirt. Bruises covered Squinty's body. The bones beneath the leathery skin were broken. Willy stared long and hard. The dead man's face was contorted in agony. His left arm was twisted under him. He looked like a man Willy had seen once after the Apaches had finished with him.

Willy sighed and got up off his knees. He walked slowly, bent almost double, making a circle. Ever widening, he cast away from the stream, northward. Each swing of the arc brought him back to Squinty, where he paused, thinking.

He found no prints. He whistled and the bay came trotting. He patted the pony's neck, mounted, forded the stream. There he found the tracks, leading to the hill trail. There had been only three horses. That would be Esteban, Cayuse Ed Mack and Big Mose, the giant.

Willy sighed. Posses had gone out after Esteban often enough. Men had died trying to trap the bandit leader of the hills. Esteban was a hiyu night-rider, thief, rustler and bank robber. Willy had tried once or twice to hit the trail of this will-o'-the-wisp menace—and Esteban had paid him the compliment of temporarily leaving the county. But never had Willy sighted Esteban, except from a distance too far for identification.

Still, he had studied Esteban and secretly admired the man. He often wished Esteban was on his side. . . .

He came back to the creek and a harsh voice said, "What the hell you think you're doin'. Wooten? We been over all that. Nobody ast yuh to snoop around Cross J."

Willy set the bay back into the water. When he had come to the other side he said, "H'lo, Layton."

The big man sat a black stallion with flaring nostrils. He had a heavy jaw, protruding beneath his mustached upper lip, wide-spaced eyes which seldom blinked. He was a heavy man, with big hands and arms and feet. His legs were bowed to the saddle and surprisingly slim.

Job Layton, foreman of Cross J, said, "The boss wants yuh up at the house. Not down here on our land."

"Okay, Layton," said Willy. He had not taken his quiet gaze from the man's face.

Layton said, "Don't see why the Association hires a button fer their dirty work nohow. I'd go into the hills myself and git that greaser. The boss says no, but I'd string him up inside a week, gimme a chance." The big hands opened and closed as though Layton would have enjoyed strangling Esteban.

Willy shrugged, shook his head and rode toward the Cross J. . . .

Bent Belden was a courteous young man with sideburns of close-cropped black hair down the sides of his tanned cheeks.

He spoke in a soft, refined voice. "Wooten, this trouble is growing and I cannot send men into the hills. It's close to roundup and I feel sure that Esteban might raid a weakened ranch. We are far from neighbors here. I would hate to lose any part of my herd to rustlers. The murder of Squinty Hara was the last straw. Something must be done."

Willy said, "Uh-huh. It sure must."

"My suggestion is that you work alone. Or with a trusted companion. A posse can never catch a man as clever as Esteban. I will warn my men that you have carte blanche on this ranch and you may use this as headquarters."

"Uh-huh," said Willy. "Good idea. You sure fixed up the old place, Mister Belden. It was a mess after Old Man Lee died. That corral, now. Got a new fence." He moved easily toward the rails. There was a lone horse within, head

down, sucking wind. Its flanks were terribly roweled, its mouth dripped blood, its ears looked as though someone had been chewing them.

Belden said, "Yes, we've worked hard. Squinty had just broken that iron-jaw when he went down to the creek and got shot."

"He ride that hoss down there?"

"Why, no," said Belden.

"Uh-huh," said Willy. "Squinty didn't have no trouble with any hombre on the ranch now, did he?"

Belden said, "What are you driving at, Wooten?"

"Nothin'," said Willy. "Jest askin' questions. Uh—make sure you tell Layton it's okay for me to prospect around, will yuh? He allowed as how he didn't cotton to such an idea."

Belden said, "I'll be responsible for my foreman, Wooten. I know he's a hard-case, but he's a worker. Don't worry about him."

Willy said, "Shucks, I ain't worrying about him. It's me I worry over." He grinned and Belden smiled in return.

Willy went on, "I seen the tracks of the three cayuses headin' for the hills. I'll make a pasear after I report to Foster Deal. Esteban's had a lot of rope. Mebbe it'll hang him yet."

Belden said, "I know your reputation, Wooten. I have confidence in you. I stand to make a lot of money this year if I don't have trouble. But I'm short of cash and I could be ruined by a big raid."

"We'll try and prevent that," said Willy. He went back to the bay pony. Layton and a couple of lounging cowboys watched him. Willy made a leaping



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mount for their benefit. He looked down at the solemn, handsome Belden and said, "Any message for Mr. Deal?"

Belden came close and said in a low voice, "No, but you might tell Miss Orden I'll not be in town till tomorrow night."

"Glad to." Willy nodded.

RIDING into Silver, Willy Wooten surveyed fondly the town of his birth. There was the little white house in which dwelt Miz Croy and her daughter Pru.

The blonde-haired girl came out onto the veranda and waved.

Willy reined in. He looked down into the clear eyes of his beloved and said, "Uh—you're looking purty enough to eat. . . . Belden said to let on to Mary Ann Orden he wouldn't be in town t'night. Tomorrow."

Pru nodded, then said, "Who was killed?"

"Squinty Hara." Willy took off his sombrero and ruefully surveyed the broken brim. "Got to buy me a new hat. Keep forgetting alla time. Beat up Squinty real bad. Stomped him, I reckon. He was shot in the back."

"Why, Squinty was the mildest of the whole outfit," said Pru, shocked. "He minded his own business."

"He shore did," agreed Willy, paying him the highest compliment he knew.

Pru said, "I'll tell Mary Ann. You be careful now, Willy."

"Uh-huh," he said. "Tell your maw hello. Tell her I'm ready to git married whenever she says the word." He winked and nodded and rode on into town.

The millinery shop was open and he could see Mary Ann through the door. She was a tall girl with a full figure, a beauty by town standards but not able to hold a candle, in Willy's book, to the slim, almost boyish Pru Croy.

Foster Deal was in the back room of the Knave of Spades Saloon, a white-haired man of dignity and force. Red Morgan, one-legged proprietor of the bar, limped in and put a bottle of sarsaparilla before Willy, closed the door and sat down at the table.

Watching their faces, Willy told them what he had found.

Foster Deal said, "You want to take Bud Cole and go after Esteban?"

"Bud's busy at the mine," said Willy. Bud was his sidekick, but the mines were running full time these days. "Besides, I got ideas."

Foster Deal said, "Ideas like what, Willy?"

"Like things don't add up. Like beating poor Squinty ain't Esteban's way. Sure, Esteban turns Big Mose loose on people for reasons. But not to lead to a kill. Furthermore, what for was Squinty killed?"

"Outlaws kill without reason. We know that," said Foster Deal. "If he spotted Esteban and recognized him, that would be good enough reason. The thing is to nail Esteban dead to rights. You're a great tracker, Willy. But you been after Esteban before."

"I'll 'tend to Esteban some day," said Willy. "Right now I'm looking for a purely cruel hombre. A man-killer who likes to hurt folks. Also, naturally, a hoss-killer and dog-kicker. You take folks which are cruel, they stay cruel all the way through. Me, I'm against a man like that."

Foster Deal said, "Willy, you do what you must. But I think a small army oughta clean out the hills and at least chase Esteban away again."

"Belden don't agree," said Willy softly. "Belden wants me out there—alone."

- Foster Deal said, "It's your play."

Willy nodded. He finished his sarsaparilla and started back down the street toward Pru's house. He had reached the shop run by Mary Ann Orden when a man rolled into view, blocking the board walk.

Job Layton's mien was dangerous. He growled, "So yuh hadda run to the boss. Yuh hadda squeal like a yella coyote."

Willy Wooten paused. His lips pursed and a tuneless whistle ran lightly on the late afternoon air.

"The Whistler Kid," sneered Layton. "I got a notion to take a fall outa you right where yuh stand. I gotta notion—"

Willy did not seem to move fast, he scarcely seemed to move at all. But one of his father's large-snouted revolvers appeared in Willy's right hand and aimed itself at the middle of Job Layton.

Willy said tonelessly, "Drop your belt."

The big man roared, "Yuh can't run no blazer on me, yuh—I got rights."

"Twice today," said Willy, "you started it. Now drop your belt!"

The big man's hand went slowly to the buckle of his gun belt. His opaque eyes were red with rage. He unfastened the catch and the belt slid to the boards. Willy shoved it off the walk.

Red Morgan was limping as fast as he could from the saloon. He planted his wooden peg on the gun belt.

Job Layton said eagerly, "What you aimin' at, Wooten?"

Willy said, "You throw a lot of weight around Silver, Layton. You done beat up a couple of good friends of mine. Now you can come and beat me."

Layton hesitated. His gaze went to Red Morgan, but the saloonkeeper was unarmed. Other men were running to the scene, but no one offered to side Willy Wooten. The big foreman stared at the slight, boyish figure of his adversary and snorted.

Willy said, "It's okay, Layton. Come on." He poised, waiting. He had worked in the mines, he had wrestled and fought with men all his years. He did not think he had ever fought so tough a battler as Layton, but his only reaction was that it would be plumb interesting. The big man rushed toward him.

Willy's small feet carried him aside. His bony, small fist licked out. Layton floundered and the punch landed behind his ear.

Willy moved in closer. Walking easily on his toes, he sent in quick, pole-like punches.

He slammed against Layton's ear again and again.

Layton jumped in. Willy faded, then came back, amazingly close to the bigger man. Willy's fists began slashing into the middle. Layton bellowed and retreated.

And then Willy slipped. His smooth soles met a piece of axle grease smeared on the edge of the walk and he lost balance.

Layton's arm licked out. His fist caught Willy on the jaw and knocked him against the door of the millinery shop. He bounced back, conscious even then of Mary Ann Orden staring as though

fascinated through the glass upper half of the portal. He staggered and Layton was on him, dealing thunderous blows.

He bent almost double, then came up with both fists. The left met the oncoming Layton. The right chucked into the base of the heavy, undershot jaw. Layton stopped in his tracks, open-mouthed, bleeding, staring. Layton took one short step, spun and collapsed in a heap.

Red Morgan said solemnly, "Yuh should never of let him last thet long, Willy. I swear, yer gettin' more careless every day."

A couple of men dragged the foreman of Cross J down to the Knave of Spades. The girl was gone from the window of the shop. Willy re-donned his gun belt. He was thinking hard when he went down the street to the white house.

Miz Croy, tall, spare, her hair pulled sharply back, scolded, "Fighting again, Willy Wooten! Just like your father. Always whipping somebody."

"Jest so somebody ain't always whipping me, huh, Mom?" grinned Willy. "I sure would admire a hunk of apple pie and some milk. When you going to let me and Pru git married, Mom?"

"Not so long as you're fighting on street corners," she snapped. "The pie ain't cool yet—Oh, go on an' help yourself, you little rascal."

Pru was in the kitchen. She bathed his hands and fed him and listened to him talk.

When he had finished she said, "I don't know Mary Ann very well. But then, she isn't the kind you get to know. I never saw her with Layton. I think she's in love with Bent Belden, anyway."

"You're generally right," said Willy. He ate the pie and drank the milk. He was getting so many ideas, he thought, that in a little while he would be like them detectives, after all.

CHAPTER

Bushwhack Barrier

2

The town of Silver, lying in the southwest portion of the Territory, was prosperous, bustling. The mines produced silver and copper, the ranches provided cattle and trade was brisk. Mr. Carey's bank was stuffed with money, Red Mor-

gan's Saloon did a thriving business. Marshal Dick Bland kept out the tin horns and cutthroats.

There was violence in Silver on a pay day of the mines or a cowboy's Saturday night, but there was little crime. Esteban and his kind rarely invaded the town. But there was still plenty for Willy Wooten to do to occupy his time.

On this night there was a small matter unattended which he sought to accomplish while en route to the Cross J. A rancher named Aswell had reported the theft of a dozen prime head from his pasture, which adjoined that of Cross J's northern boundary. Mounting the bay pony in the quiet of evening, Willy Wooten rode southward out of Silver.

He followed the main trail for only a short way. Turning off at City of Rocks, a queer natural formation of stone, he made his way across fields to the west, abandoning all marked trails.

He found little. As darkness enveloped the scene of the rustling, he discovered a broken bush to the west and one hoof-print, forgotten by the thieves when they had carefully covered their tracks. He studied the print by lighting matches.

The horse had been a big one and the shoe was not made in a smithy. That was all he learned. He remounted and rode for the hills.

He shoved on into the mountains, to a ravine, and paused awhile, debating. The easiest way led through, but clever rustlers would drive the cattle round-about, always getting closer to their hidden corral. Then they would spend much time and care covering track before they routed their stolen steers to safety. And he knew these rustlers were smart.

He thought of a gulley surrounded by rock, a place where water ran, called Whopping Falls. It was not too deep in the fastnesses, it was close enough to the southern trail. A smart gang might hide cattle there, maintaining their own quarters on a nearby hillside which overlooked the gulley and all trails leading in. He whistled a tune, heading the pony up into the mountains.

He was almost to the trail approaching Whopping Falls when he decided to dismount. His highly developed sense of danger had suddenly started working. He

tethered the bay pony beneath a pinon and took down his rifle. Never much of a shot with the long gun, he still appreciated its value in open country or the hills. He saw that the breech was working and loaded, hitched at his six-guns and began walking. He hated to walk, but Whopping Falls provided a neat problem in approach.

He was almost to the hill where a shebang could well be placed. He crouched, listening. The waterfall was a trickle, falling peacefully into a pool below. He heard the sound almost at once, heard the muffled hoofs.

He nodded in satisfaction. He began going northward, until the base of the hill sloped sharply upward. The moon took a peek and Willy dropped flat on the ground.

At long last he moved. He wormed his way around the hill. The moon went behind a cloud and he got off his knees and ran swiftly down toward Whopping Falls, where the sound of the water would cover any noise he might make.

Risking the emergence of the moon, Willy ran on light feet. He found the gate where it had to be, on the south side of the corral. He whipped it loose, then flung it wide. He fired his rifle into the air and let out an Apache war whoop which would have gladdened the heart of Geronimo himself.

The cattle surged out of the pen. Once free they crashed away, each in his own direction. Willy chuckled to see them separate, heading for the home ranges from which they had been stolen.

But after a moment Willy did not laugh. For no rustlers came down from above to save their charges. No shots sounded, no shouts in the night. When the last cow had cajoled her calf from the corral, silence fell upon Whopping Falls, broken only by the murmur of the water.

Willy shook his head. Still snaking along, he worked his way back by the route which he had taken to the Falls, close to the hill where the shebang must be located. He stopped at intervals, listening.

He hit the path leading back to where his pony was tethered. He hesitated long here. Then he continued on his way,

keeping to cover as much as possible. There was one patch of utterly bare land which had him worried. He took off on a dead run, dodging and ducking as he went.

Rifles crackled like firecrackers. Shots snapped around him, burying themselves in the ground. A bullet drove his hat ahead of him and he rolled ten yards into the piñons, then dashed another ten to the right before he unslung his own rifle.

Peering upward he still saw nothing atop the hill. He tentatively loosed the Winchester, moved, fired again, ran ten yards toward his horse, threw yet another shot. The hilltop remained still.

Finally he called as loud as he could, "Esteban! You better give up. We gotcha surrounded."

After a moment a voice, not Esteban's, he was sure, called back, "Yuh better hightail-it outa here now, Whistler. Yer number's 'bout up."

Willy yelled, "Stealing cows is bad enough, but just killing for no reason is sure death hereabouts."

Esteban's gang was silent only a moment. Then the deep voice, that of Cayuse Ed Mack, Willy guessed, replied, "No use tryin' tricks on us, Whistler. Yuh got us riled now. Better take yer side-kick an' git."

Two shots sounded almost simultaneously on the dying echo of Mack's voice. They criss-crossed uncomfortably near Willy's head and he cursed himself for parleying and lining himself up for the marksmen above. He ducked back, firing at the one flash he saw. Esteban was angry, sure enough, and Esteban was not a man with whom to trifle.

Esteban had been too smart to come down into the ambush—not quite smart enough to know Willy was alone. Willy fired a shot, moved and fired two more, moved back and let one go from his original spot to keep up the deception, then rolled beneath a fallen log and lay there while the rustlers combed the piñons with their shells.

It looked like a Mexican stand-off. Willy called, "There'll be no peace for you now, Esteban. Killing Squinty was sure a bang-up mistake yuh made. Yuh might as well quit."

"Tricks," said the voice of Cayuse Ed. "I'm s'prised at you, Whistler. Ain't no Esteban here, just only us chickens. And we ain't murdered nobody."

Willy said, "Come down, or we're a-coming up." He went through his procedure of firing and moving about once more.

It was then he noted that only two rifles were returning his fire. Two rifles, not three.

The Whistler Kid did a strange thing. He hugged his rifle to him and ran through the trees. He untied the bay pony with a gulp of relief, mounted in a flying leap, grabbed reins with left hand and flashed his revolver in his right.

There was a pinging sound and he bent low. Fanning his fire to the right, he emptied the chambers of the six-gun at a thicket and rode like an Apache. A rifle bullet parted his hair. He had already lost his hat and the wind sang through his hair along with the lead. He kicked the bay into a sidwinding maneuver and barely escaped being riddled by a lead slug. He slid the pony

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back and lit out for Cross J land as hard as he could ride.

HE SKIRTED the buildings of the Cross J and came to a glade by the side of the stream in which Squinty had lain that morning. He unsaddled the bay and staked him, unrolled his blankets and kicked off his boots. He missed his old, worn hat, and thought he might borrow one tomorrow at the ranch. He stretched out and composed himself for sleep.

The voices brought him erect, reaching for his boots. He heard a woman say, "Darling, you know I love you. But it seems wrong. . . ."

The man's voice was muffled to a whisper.

Again the woman spoke, "I'll do whatever you say. Honest I will. You know I'll do it."

There was silence while Willy Wooten strove with the footgear. Then a horse broke into an abrupt trot. With one boot on and one off, Willy crawled as fast as he could to the edge of the glade. One horse was fording the stream. The other was already disappearing in the dappled moonlight toward the ranch.

He could not be sure of the man. But he easily discerned and recognized the woman going for Silver. It was the tall, handsome Mary Ann Orden.

Willy went back to his blankets. He thought of Mary Orden watching the fight outside her shop, of the peculiar expression in her eyes.

Yet Pru Croy had said that Mary Ann was in love with Bent Belden. Pru was seldom wrong about things like that.

Of course it could have been Belden, riding away to the ranch house after a tryst with his girl. . . .

The dawn was bright with promise of a warm autumn day. There was no frost as yet, although there would be frost in the hills, where Esteban lurked, Willy knew. The stream provided washing facilities and a cool drink and then Willy saddled the bay pony and rode two miles to the Cross J.

The cook grinned from ear to ear and gestured toward the kitchen. Willy went in and the fodder was first class. His third cup of coffee satisfied him and he winked at Carl, the cook.

The old man said, "Ya seen Layton?" "Jest for a minute," said Willy. "He seemed like he had some trouble."

Carl guffawed. "Trouble? Looks like a catamount jumped him."

Willy said, "He ain't plumb popular with you, huh?"

The wizened face of the cook tightened. "I'm an old one, all right. I got this game leg. But if he starts on me again—" Carl whipped aside his cook's apron and snug in a special pocket of his jeans Willy saw the flat shape of an ugly belly gun.

Willy said thoughtfully, "A tough man, Layton. Cruel."

"Aye," said Carl. "Insane, sometimes, I swanny. I seen dogs beat to death. I seen chickens cut up. . . . It ain't natural for no man to act thataway, Willy."

"Uh-huh," said Willy. Unconsciously he had pursed his lips, whistling gently in his tuneless fashion. A step behind him caused him to break off and come to attention.

Bent Belden said pleasantly, "Well, you're on the job early."

"On it last night," said Willy. "Scared up something, too. Have a man check your herds today, Mr. Belden. Some of yore missing cattle might've strayed back. I turned loose mebbe a hundred head of assorted brands."

"Esteban?" demanded Belden.

"Allowed he wasn't it," said Willy. "Had a confab with some honibre up around Whopping Falls. Said he wasn't Esteban, said he didn't know nothing about a murder."

"You talked to rustlers and didn't bring them in?" Belden's smile grew thinner. "I thought you always got your man, Wooten."

"There was some gunfire. Lost my hat," said Willy. "Thought I might borrow one."

Belden said impatiently, "There are a dozen in the next room. Help yourself to any with my initials in it. . . . Are we to remain on guard against this Esteban forever? Or do we go up there and clean out that robber's roost?"

Willy said, "You can go up there. Won't be anybody there."

"But you cut and run?" Belden seemed perturbed and almost disbelieving.

"Yep," said Willy. "Run like a rabbit."

Esteban is a mighty smart, tough hombre."

Belden said, "Yet you deliberately beat up my foreman yesterday, and he's a very tough man. I don't quite understand you, Wooten."

"It ain't necessary to understand me," said Willy gently. "Mr. Deal says he will skin me any time I go against folks with better judgment and am proven wrong. That covers the ground, don't it?"

Belden stared a moment, then laughed. "I reckon it does, at that. Have another cup of coffee while I eat, Wooten. You are quite a character. I've heard fantastic stories about you, and when I saw Layton's face I had to believe them. Maybe you taught Job a lesson, at that. He has been a bit above himself lately, perhaps. . . . Tell me, have you any plans for catching Esteban and hanging him for murdering Squinty?"

Willy said mildly, "Esteban allows he didn't kill Squinty. Leastways, he had Cayuse Ed Mack tell me so. Cayuse allus talks for Esteban."

Belden said, "You don't mean to tell me you take seriously the denial of a thief and killer. You saw the trail leading to the hills. Three horses. Esteban, Mack and Big Moses."

"Uh-huh. Seen the tracks," said Willy. "Big Moses rides an out-size cayuse, him being over two hundred pounds. Wasn't any of the horses at your creek that big, Mr. Belden."

"That's no sign Esteban didn't kill Squinty!"

"I'm no detective," said Willy. "But we got to use our heads. Could be Squinty had some enemies. Could be he got kilt over something private. Nothing to do with Cross J, mebbe."

"That's impossible. . . ." Belden stopped and shrugged. There was a pair of parallel wrinkles between his eyes. He said haltingly, "But of course you may be right. I get a thing in my mind . . . can't get it out. It just seemed that Esteban had to be the killer."

Willy said easily, "I expect to spend two-three days looking around. I get paid for that, yuh know."

Belden said cordially, "You're all right, Wooten. You've got a head on your soulders, at that." He ate eggs and

bacon and wheat cakes covered with syrup, chatting between mouthfuls about the ranch, seemingly much relieved since his conversation with Willy about the killing.

Belden finished eating and said, "About that hat. I keep a supply. . . ." He led the way into a room at the front of the building, an office and store-room. There were cases of cartridges piled in a corner, new bridles and saddles and gear arranged neatly on pegs about the long wall. Willy stared at the books, scarcely understanding many of them.

Belden said, "I began studying for medicine, you know. My health wouldn't stand it and I came out here to get strong."

Willy said, "You musta had some education." He wistfully turned away from the books. He never had time to read.

There were several sombreros and he tried one for size. It fitted him perfectly, a neat grey hat.

Belden said, "Oh, take a good one. Here's a fine beaver." He threw a creamy, curl-brimmed headpiece across the room. It was a beautiful hat, with a snakeskin band. Willy put it on and glanced at himself in a mirror which hung over Belden's desk.

"Never was much for hats," Willy said, grinning self-consciously. "Makes me look kinda dudish at that, huh?"

Belden said, "Wear it in health. I suppose you'll be working the hills west of my land today?"

"Uh-huh," said Willy. "Got a couple ideas."

Belden said, "We've got to get the murderer of Squinty. The outfit is uneasy. You know how that is."

"I'll check with yuh," said Willy. He adjusted the stiff, strange hat. He walked out and strolled around to the bunkhouse. He mounted and rode back toward the hills.

CHAPTER *Whistling in the Dark*

3

He worked along the foot of the mountains that early morning, scanning the earth for telltale track, covering deep thickets and natural corrals for signs of

more stolen cattle, always alert lest Esteban should spot him and take drastic action.

The sound of the bee was not a bee-sound, he knew at once. He heard the flat crackle of rifle fire. The hat was plucked from his fingers and went rolling under a bush.

Willy followed the hat. He landed, rolled over and came up with the Stetson. He shook his head at the nick in its brim. He clamped it firmly on his head.

There were at least two rifles, firing from opposite sides, one to the north, one to the south. Willy crawled to where the pony lay quiet and got his own gun. He threw a shell into the chamber of the Winchester and looked around.

He was calm, as, always, in action, whistling between his teeth. He found what he wanted, a tall pine. He hesitated, then removed the sombrero, tying it firmly to the saddle. He crept to the pine, the rifle slung over his back.

He got around on the west side of the tree, where there was a low limb. He heard two more shots, both winging at the spot where he had first been seen by the attackers. He leaped and caught the branch of the pine.

He huddled there, waiting. No bullets came to knock him down from his branch. He hoisted himself up, climbing. The pine grew thicker and he worked his way with care.

The sun was very bright. The man to the north was so far away Willy could not recognize him. He was working with a range-finder scope of some sort, firing without seeing his quarry. He wore a dark shirt, possibly blue. He had a black hat pulled over his eyes and was pumping lead, stupidly Willy thought, into the hill where the bay pony lay and trembled.

"Scaring my boss," muttered Willy. "Trying to bushwhack me." He had to get up some steam before making this attempt. He was a sixgun man, who liked to face his opponent and shoot it out. But still, Willy rested the rifle on a sturdy limb of the tree, pressed the trigger.

The man in the dark shirt seemed to throw his gun away. Then he flopped around for a moment, disappeared among some scattered rocks.

Willy hitched around to peer north-

ward, from whence came the other shots. He could see no one. He listened, and there was no further rifle fire. He frowned a little and began working his way down from the tree. He got to the hilltop and the bay pony scrambled to its feet.

It was a good hour before he reached the spot where he had seen the dark-shirted hombre. He rode in without caution, staring at the ground.

There was no dead body, just some blood and scattered empty brass cartridges. There was the sign of two horses. Someone had come in, picked up the man who was hit, carried him away. The tracks led eastward, then onto shale. It would take maybe the rest of the day to pick them up beyond the shale.

He whistled thoughtfully, shaking his head. Neither of these horses was large enough to carry Esteban's Big Mose. Of course they could have left Mose behind and come for him—or maybe they had run onto him by accident, Cayuse Ed Mack and Esteban himself.

It could be, but he did not mean to find out. Willy preferred to be sure before he struck. He followed along to the boundary of the shale and stopped to stare at a dead coyote. The animal's head had been blown to bits with several shots. Any one of them would have killed the small animal. Someone had emptied a sixgun into it.

Willy shivered a little and rode on. . . .

Pru Croy said firmly, "She is in love with Bent Belden. I talked to her."

"Honey, I know you're always right about such things," said Willy Wooten. "But it don't add up."

"That girl means to marry Bent Belden," said the blonde Prudence. "She's got her hopeful chest all full."

"Guess that settles it," said Willy. It was eight o'clock at night and he was sitting in the Croy kitchen eating lemon pie and drinking milk. His guns hung on the wall. He was slouched down, staring at the cream-colored hat with the nick in the brim which hung over the gun-belt.

Pru said, "I wish we were as close to marriage as they are. Mary Ann is a lucky girl."

Willy said, "I kin wait if you kin. Not that I like it." He kissed her, very in-

expertly. He had his arms around her when the door opened without ceremony and the two men walked in.

They were masked, but he knew them at once. The very skinny one was Cayuse Ed Mack. He held a large revolver in his hand. The one who had to turn sideways and bend his head to get in the door was Big Mose. The latter did not even bother to draw a gun.

Willy put Pru behind him. The guns were clean across the room and he had no chance to reach them before he would stop lead from Cayuse Ed's ready weapon. Miz Croy was at a church supper and the marshal would be down at Morgan's Knave of Spades at this hour. The little white house stood on the edge of town and no one would be dropping in. Willy guessed that Esteban, the mysterious, was outside to prevent that eventuality anyway. . . .

Cayuse Ed said drily, "Sorry to interrupt, Whistler. But we got somethin' to take up with yuh."

"Pretty risky coming in, Cayuse," said Willy. "Must be important."

"We know the risk," said Cayuse Ed tightly. "It's about thet murder."

"Reckoned it was," said Willy.

"You better git yore hat," said the rustler. His eyes slanted snakewise at the cream-colored sombrero and he chuckled. "Nope. Mose'll get it for yuh. And take them guns, Mose. Them were Bronch Wooten's guns. We might need them."

Willy drawled, "Supposing I don't wanta go? You boys wouldn't kill me right here, would yuh? Cause a heap of trouble thataway."

Cayuse Ed said, "Now you wouldn't want the lady t' see yuh toted outa here like a sack o' grain, wouldja? Mose loves totin' things. He'd jest as soon it'd be you as them guns."

Willy said, "Mose can try it."

Cayuse Ed shook his head. He said patiently, "Yo're too smart fer a play like thet, Whistler. Long as yer healthy yuh ain't makin' a fuss. Come on, act sensible."

Willy said, "Fact is, I allus had a curiosity to see your boss close up. Mebbe I'll go along at that." He put the hat on his head and winked at Pru. "I'll be back, honey. You hold the fort."

She said, "I know you'll be back, Willy."

"Sure," said the Whistler. "Fact is—" He swept the new hat from his head in one swift motion and flung it. He shoved the table. "Douse the lamp, honey."

The hat went into the eyes of the lean man with the gun. Willy's foot swung up in a long, quick kick. Cayuse Ed's revolver plunked against the wall.

Willy dived under the careening table as it struck against Big Mose's knees. His hand grabbed a thick ankle and pulled. Big Mose crashed to the floor.

The lamp went out. Willy's hands sought his guns. He grabbed the butt of one and shoved the muzzle hard against Big Mose's back as the giant tried to scramble from under the table. He said, "Cayuse, if yuh try anything I'll blast Big Mose into another world entirely."

From outside came another whistle, urgent, full of warning.

Cayuse Ed swore heartily. "C'mon, Mose. He won't murder yuh. Git goin'. The jig's up."

The bulk of the big man slid away in the darkness. Willy could have disabled him with a shot and taken a chance on Cayuse. But he held his fire as the two went out the back. He heard Miz Croy coming through, still muttering imprecations. The redoubtable widow always carried a big revolver in her bag and would be looking for warfare, he knew.

He crawled to the door. Big Mose was mounting a horse fit to carry him. The skinny Cayuse Ed vaulted into the saddle of another. The third figure, slim and erect, was waiting in the yard astride a dark horse of splendid proportions. Willy slid out of doors, holding the one gun waist high.

The three riders took off, silent as ghosts, going for the hills. Willy ran around to the front of the house as Miz Croy lit the lamp in the kitchen. Willy mounted the bay pony without the gun belt and his other weapon and called, "I'll be back, honey."

HE WAS almost to the edge of town when the shout went up. It came from Red Morgan's saloon. Willy reined in the bay. He distinguished the voice

of Foster Deal, calling his name. He wheeled the pony and raced back into town.

He flung down while the horse was still running, lighting on the walk before the Knave of Spades.

Foster Deal's red face was wild with anger. "Saddle up a posse. They hit my south herd. Killed Tandy Debs and Joe Sparrow. Shot them full of holes. Shot 'em twenty times each, the dirty devils. Don't know how long they've been gone." Willy said, "They took the whole herd?"

"Every last calf," snarled Deal. "It's a big gang, all right. Esteban musta roused up every devil in the hills."

Men were running in all directions, saddling up. A rider came down the street as though all hell were on his horse's heels. He made a circus dismount at the saloon and gasped, "All tarnation's busted loose at Cross J. Micky Devlin is dead. They run off five hundred head and they're shootin' it out with Belden an' Layton and a couple boys at the edge of the hills. Must be a big gang come down. Belden says send help."

Foster Deal snapped, "Willy, you go to Cross J with half the posse. I'll head the rest up my way. This is the biggest raid ever made in the Territory. That Esteban needs hangin' worse'n anyone since Murrieta."

Willy said, "Let Dick take the bunch up to Cross J. I got business to attend to."

Foster Deal said sternly, "Willy! Don't you go off on one of them crazy hunts of yours now."

"Nossir," said Willy. "I ain't aimin' to go no place."

The town was like a church. The streets were deserted.

In the hotel yard Willy stood beside the bay, stroking the pony's nose. His rifle was unhooded, his sixgun nestled uncomfortably in his waistband. He leaned against the horse, waiting. His face was tight and grim.

The girl came from the shadows alongside the hotel. She called, "Willy Wooten? Are you there?"

He said softly, "Uh-huh. That you, Mary Ann?"

She stole closer. "What happened?

Where is everyone? Was Bent Belden in that crowd of men?"

"Nope. He's fighting rustlers tonight."

She said, "You mean there was a big raid?"

"Two of them, folks say." Willy was looking past the girl, seeking movement in the shadows.

She said, "Then Bent's in danger. There's a fight?"

"Uh-huh," said Willy. "There sure is a fight."

"Oh, I'm frightened," she said. She was close enough to touch him. She put her hand on his right arm.

"No use to be scared," he said, moving away.

She clung to him. "But Bent might be hurt—killed." Her hands were strong on his arm. There was no one behind her. . . .

But the bay pony shied. Willy held the bridle with one hand, the girl clung to his right arm. He tried to shuck loose and a voice said triumphantly, "Got him!"

Then, for a long while, Willy Wooten did not know anything.

When Willy Wooten awakened he was tied hand and foot. He lay on a rude pallet in the corner of a one-room log cabin. It was dawn and the eastern light seemed gray.

The girl sat across the room, staring out of the window. Willy waited a few moments, listening, moistening his dry throat. He heard the sound of water falling and nodded. It was Whopping Falls, and this was the shebang. He knew the sound of that stream.

He said suddenly, "Don't like it much now, do yuh, Mary Ann?"

The girl whirled, blanching, her arms outspread against the wall. There was real terror in her dark eyes. She said, "He's going to kill you. He smiled when he said it. He's going to torture you. He's got no reason to do that."

"You wouldn't object to a nice clean, quick take-off, huh?" Willy grinned at her.

"I didn't bargain for this," she breathed. "I didn't want anyone killed."

"You played around with it," said Willy. "You thought it was hiyu adventure. You thought you had Robin Hood

for a man. You thought it was all just another game."

She said, "It was the only way. He—there was no other way out. He had to have money. . . ."

"Uh-huh," nodded Willy. "Quick money. That's allus the way with them boys."

She said, "You don't understand."

"I understand good enough," Willy said. "I jest don't like it. Killing people is never good. Killed a few myself, but I never did plumb enjoy it. Killin' people because you like seeing 'em suffer . . . that's lowdown. That's as low as a man gets."

She said, "I never knew that part of it. I swear I didn't. I only found it out when he—when he brought you here. You were to be left in the hotel yard. . . ."

"While the bank got robbed?" asked Willy. "And the express office, and the jewelry store and the mine office? There was sure plenty of chance to git it all, what with the posses riding off in all directions. Hadn't been for you, Mary Ann, I coulda stopped it all."

"I know," she sobbed.

"Love sure is a funny thing," said Willy. "Now you take Pru, she wasn't even scared last night when Esteban's men came for me. Gave me nerve to run a blazer on them fellers. . . . I reckon the posses done chased Esteban and his two clean out of the country now."

She said, "That was the idea. To put the blame upon Esteban."

The cabin door banged open and she jumped, cringing. Job Layton strode into the room and stood above Willy Wooten. His scarred face was cold and expressionless.

Layton's fist doubled, but he held himself in check. He said, "All right. Git on yore feet."

Willy said, "You are plumb pale, Layton. What's the matter? Yore guts turning a lil, mebber?"

Layton's grasp was cruelly rough, yanking him up. Willy's head spun like a top, but he managed to keep it high and to gain his balance. He found that he had been hobbled so that he could walk, taking short steps. His arms were tied behind his back.

CHAPTER *Dig Your Own Grave!*

4

There were two tough-looking men in the clearing. They were the cow hands he had seen at Cross J, the ones who had been around the house. He said, "Good morning, boys. Where's the boss?"

The man stepped out from behind a tree. He said, his sneer knife-like, "You always know it all, don't you, Wooten?"

"Nope," said Willy. "I was real slow figgering this play, Belden."

The rancher's nostrils pinched in. He was shaven and shorn and neatly dressed to the last detail. His white teeth no longer seemed smilingly pleasant; they were sharp, rodent-like beneath the curl of his lip.

Belden said, "You had your chance to get away." He stepped in quickly and before Willy knew his intent he had swung a sharp blow. His fist caught Willy on the cheek and the blood ran from a cut. Willy went headlong.

He managed to get up despite his bonds. He said, "Uh-huh. Knew it was you, after awhile. Layton's tough, but not that kinda tough. Cutting up dogs an' chickens—that ain't Layton's style. 'Course I knew Esteban hadn't killed Squinty Hara right off—Esteban is a mighty straight thief. When I found Squinty didn't have no trouble with Layton, and when I seen those phony tracks, I knew it was someone on the Cross J."

Belden said, "You talk too much, Wooten." He struck again, but this time Willy rolled with the punch. "All your cleverness gets you nothing, and talking won't save you. Your friends are chasing Esteban. The last place they will look is the spot Esteban has just quitted." He laughed and there was a strange note in his mirth. "I'm getting rid of you, Whistler Kid."

"Like you beat Squinty to death, then shot him in the back?" asked Willy. "I've figgered that was because you abused the hoss. I seen the hoss in the corral and I knowed Squinty never broke him thataway. But you were sort of laying that rough stuff off on Layton." He narrowly watched the foreman and saw him start. "You had Layton for the fall guy, all right."

Willy remembered the broken body of Squinty Hara. Inside his stomach a flock of butterflies began a dance. His muscles stiffened in anticipation of the beating which would kill him and leave him a broken corpse above Whopping Falls. But he said coolly, "Yuh'll never make it, Belden. I'm too tough to die thataway. Fact is, I don't believe the boys here can stand watching it. They ain't that mean. . . ."

The door to the cabin flew open. The girl came running out. She seized Belden's arm and clung to him, her hair wild and disarrayed. She cried, "No, Bent, you mustn't do these things. What has happened to you, Bent? You didn't use to be like this. Please, Bent, tie him up, leave him here and take the loot."

"Go?" He smiled at her, his eyes cold as ice. "Go and leave you?"

She said, "Bent, you're not the way you were. I love you. I'll always love you. But you've changed—"

"You'd stay and be arrested? Sent to jail for interfering with Wooten when we captured him?"

She moaned, "Oh, Bent, what is it? You're mad, that must be it. That jail—it drove you mad!" At the word "jail" he struck with the whip.

Job Layton took a long step and the girl staggered into him, her arms across her face, weeping. Layton said, "Hey! That ain't right, Belden!"

The lean, handsome man had a gun in his hand. He said, "Always had your eye on her, eh, Layton? Sneaking into town, making excuses to carry messages to her. You'd have had Wooten up in the hills yesterday and Deylin would still be alive if you hadn't been mooning about."

Layton growled, "Take it easy, Belden. Remember. . . ."

The revolver barked. Layton's arms went wide. He fell away from the cowering girl, going to his knees. His right hand crept up, trying for his gun, even as his eyes glazed. Blood poured from his chest.

Belden said, "I know you've been after her. I've waited for this." He fired again, aiming carefully. The bullet struck Layton's hand, tearing it away from his gun butt. The man groaned, sagging. Belden shot twice more.

Belden said, "One less to share with. I never trusted the fool. You two watch yourselves. But walk gently, my buckos, while I finish with Wooten—and the girl!"

Willy had landed with his back against a tree. He braced himself there. For once he had underestimated an enemy. His suspicions of Belden, begun when the faked tracks at the stream had told him that Squinty had not been murdered by Esteban, had mounted with events, but not fast enough.

He could put it all together now. Belden had been especially clever to keep the finger of suspicion on Layton. That had really thrown Willy off.

Now it was too late. It would be the kind of death no man could face with disdain, bound hand and foot, at the mercy of a madman whose only pleasure was cruelty. Willy uttered a brief prayer that he would not cry out, that he could die silently, like a man.

From behind the tree a hand stole. There was a cold feeling of steel. A voice whispered, "Silent, no?"

The knife slashed. Belden was coming past the nearest of the tough cowboys. Willy held his breath. He held his arms rigid in the position in which they had been bound. Every nerve in his body tingled with suspense.

The knife was at his ankles. In a moment those ropes would fall free. He held the ones which had tied his arms, but he could not control those about his legs.

There was a final quick cut. Belden, stopping dead, opened wide his eyes. He said, "Stop!"

Willy ducked. A hand grasped him and he found himself hurtling down the hillside.

There was water and above there were shots and shouts. Willy swam and the hand never left his shirt, tugging him. As his lungs gasped, demanding air, there was a rocky ledge beneath his boots.

He was standing beneath the falls. There was a curtain of water between him and all outdoors. It was damp there and rather dark. But he was out of sight of the pursuers.

He turned and stared at the man who had saved his life. It was a very young

man, slim and dark. He was sharp-featured and there was a small scar at the corner of his lip which made him seem to be always smiling at a secret jest. He wore range clothing and a revolver belt, but the holster was empty.

Willy said, "Hullo, Esteban. They musta run you down close."

The slender man said, "I send Cayuse and Mose and my horse, eh? I stay. I look, see what is this? Mucho trouble, si, Señor Whistler? But I do not murder, no. Never, never do I murder. Many times I do not keel when perhaps I should keel. Now I know about these things."

"Now you know. And I know. But we got no guns and that devil is about to kill a gal. He's plumb loco," said Willy.

Esteban said, "Si, Señor Whistler. No guns. But you are very clever, no? I bring you free. You solve the rest." He smiled and the scar danced at his lips.

It wasn't very funny, Willy thought. But it was good to be free.

THE two young men had talked for maybe half an hour. Willy said, "I knew you didn't kill Squinty. I knew you did steal them cows from Aswell. Following a fella, you get to know him pretty good. I been looking fer you nigh onto a year now."

Esteban sighed. "I should have shot you, no?"

"No," said Willy. "Foster Deal and Dick Bland would've got out the soldiers, the Navy and the Injun police after yuh."

Esteban said, "So. And now, the Señor Belden, who kills coyotes to see them die, who cuts up chickens for the fun—what of heem?"

"Reckon they've taken off," Willy decided. "The posse's aiter Big Mose and Cayuse Ed. Belden's got the loot from the town and will be checking east as soon as he kin. Unless he stopped to kill the gal." Willy shuddered.

"He would not stop," Esteban said. "If I had been armed, eh? That would have ended it. Now there are three men and we have no gun."

Willy said, "Durn it, Big Mose has got one of my pappy's guns and Belden's got the other. I prized them guns."

Esteban said, "But Mose did not carry your gun away. I have notice."

Willy said, "He didn't? Say, let's swim outa here!"

They dived and came up to the surface of the pool beneath the Falls. They swam quietly to shore and dragged themselves out, dripping. There was no sound except the water coming over the rocks.

They came to the top of the hill where Job Layton lay, bullet-riddled, in the clearing before the cabin. The others were gone without a trace.

Willy said, "At least he ain't killed Mary Ann yet." It occurred to him that Mary Ann had come to Silver ahead of Belden and opened her shop. He wondered if she had put up the money to finance Cross J. Belden had certainly fooled everyone, using the ranch for a front. He had actually made Cross J pay off—except he lacked the capital to hang on.

The girl must have been in love with Belden for years. They had come West for a "new start"—and Belden had made a new start in crime.

Esteban had gone into the cabin. Willy

How Santa Claus found out...



AT ALL DRUG STORES, U.S. AND CANADA

followed, standing in the door. The dark young man was reaching into a cache beside the stove. He turned triumphantly, a revolver in his hand. It was Willy's black-butted gun. "Ho! I know where Mose, he hide things!"

Willy stood very still. He said quietly, "Uh-huh. That's good, Esteban. It'll help you git to the border. Reckon you've got plenty of friends south of Juarez."

The scar dimpled. "In Ciudad Juarez have I the friends," boasted Esteban. "In El Paso, even!" He reached out, extending the belt and gun. "But thees, it is yours. There is a job, no? That cruel hombre, that Belden. He is encumber the earth too long!"

Willy took the belt. He buckled it around his middle and he felt whole again. He drew the gun once, twice, spinning it in his small, thin hand. He sighed, shucking cartridges, throwing fresh ones into place.

Esteban's grin did not fade. He said, "We go now?"

"Yuh want to go with me?"

Esteban reached behind his neck. A shining blade appeared. He tossed it, catching it lightly by the hilt. He said, "I am not bare-hand, eh? Thees Belden, he put it upon me, I am a murderer. I do not like, Señor Whistler."

"Uh-huh," said Willy. "Come on, then."

The town of Deming lay miles to the south. Willy pondered, sloughing along. His wet boots nearly killed him and the sun was not high enough yet to thoroughly dry his clothing.

"We'll make for Cross J," he said. "May pick up mounts there. It's pretty hopeless, trying to ketch 'em."

"Me, I have years," said Esteban cheerfully.

"Me too," said Willy grimly. They followed the trail he had made the previous day, coming to Whopping Falls. They were nearing Cross J land when a rider loomed on the horizon. The two of them hit cover together.

The rider was coming very slowly, leading a second horse. Willy squatted behind a brush, his Colt in his hand. Esteban was calm, the scar dancing at the corner of his mouth. The two horses looked

wonderful to the young men with aching feet.

"Suddenly Willy leaped erect. He cried, "Pru! It ain't possible."

The bay pony threw up its head and whinnied. Pru, in the saddle of a chestnut Willy had given her, uttered a glad cry. In a moment they were in each other's arms and she was saying, "I just gave him his head. I took off from town when you were gone and the bay was left and he brought me this way."

Willy said, "Honey, you're great. Great!" He saw her staring at Esteban. He said, "Uh, this here's a friend. Helped me get away from Belden. Name's—uh—Ben."

Pru said, "If you helped Willy, you are my friend, too."

Esteban swept off his hat and bowed almost to earth. "Señorita, your pleasure."

Willy said, "Uh, Ben, you take the chestnut. We'll double on the bay. At the edge of the Cross J lot we'll dismount. Okay?"

"You do not go to town with the bay?"

"Pru? She wouldn't think of it." He got her behind him on the bay and told her the story as they slow-trotted toward Cross J.

When he had finished, she said, "Poor Mary Ann."

Willy had sense enough to keep his mouth shut. They were nearing the ranch, anyway. He rode in as close as he dared.

They tethered the horses and went on afoot. There was a laurel clump within fifty yards of the rear of the house. Willy stopped, whispering, "Look! The horses. They're here."

Esteban murmured, "He could not take them all. He is el diablo, that hombre."

Willy said, "Pru, you stay here—" He was already running toward the rear of the house. He heard one scream and the blood ran cold in him. He ran faster.

He burst into the rear of the house. He saw the pale face of the first tough cowboy. The man tried to go for a gun. Willy had not even drawn.

He drew now, seeing the second of Belden ruffians behind the other. He

made the fastest draw ever seen west of Kansas City. The gun belched twice.

One fell, the other tumbled atop him. Like a flash Willy was on one knee, partially protected by the two men. He saw into the room where he had selected the cream-colored sombrero—which was designed to mark him for death in the hills, he now knew.

Belden had a revolver in his hand. The girl, crouched against the wall, was bleeding from a welt where the whip had struck her.

Willy flattened himself. The lead tore into one of the cowboys as Belden cursed. There was a knife on the floor and Belden was disarmed, hugging his wrist. Obviously, Esteban had been here already.

* * *

Esteban came into the front door for a moment. He was grinning and the scar was very white and noticeable. The outlaw said softly, "So, Señor, I save you for the gallows. The Whistler, he shoot you, you are dead. It is more fitting, I theenk, you should suffer, as you made others suffer."

Belden snarled. A slight froth covered his lips. Esteban said in his smooth voice, "You will be in the jail. You will sit and wait. For the noose, eh? Oh, you will dance pretty, on nothing, you peeg-man, you murderer!"

Belden shrieked, "I won't."

Willy said, "You make a bad move and I'll shoot the other hand away. You'll swing, all right, Belden."

The girl wept. Esteban said, "And now, my friend, I will leave, no? Unless you want me to stay?" The smile broadened.

Willy said, "You leave. And stay gone. I like you too much, you understand?"

Esteban said, "I understand very well, amigo. Adios. Mucho love to the pretty señorita." He bowed again, spat once toward Belden. He walked jauntily away from the ranch house, toward the horses. Willy sighed. He would have to get Pru a new horse to replace the chestnut.

He turned back to the prisoner under his gun. Belden was chalk-white, cursing. His voice was thick and incoherent now. The blood seeped from the wound where

the thrown knife of Esteban had caught him.

The girl on the floor had ceased sobbing. Willy raised his voice and called, "Pru. Come and see to Mary Ann."

He kept a sharp eye on Belden. Pru came across the clearing and into the house. She said, "Ben borrowed my horse. It seemed strange. . . ."

"It's all right," Willy said hastily. "He didn't have time to ketch up one of the Cross J bunch. Ben's, uh—in a hurry. Got a date in Juarez."

Pru espied Mary Ann. She said, "Oh, you poor dear." She started impulsively across the room.

For one second she was between Willy and Belden. Willy cried out, jumped sideways.

Belden was snapping an ugly derringer out of his left sleeve. He had a slight chance, at that. Willy hated to shoot in that small space, with the two girls so close.

There was a loud report. It was too loud to have come from the derringer. Yet Willy had not fired.

Belden spun like a top. The little gun dropped from flaccid fingers. He sighed deeply and went to his knees. He hung there a moment, then collapsed into a small heap.

Pru said, shocked, "Mary Ann!"

The girl crawled to her feet. She dropped a gun on the desk nearby. Willy stared. It was his father's black-butted Colt. Mary Ann said in a voice which seemed to come from caverns below the earth, "He would have died a thousand times in jail. Then they would have hanged him. He was utterly mad—"

Willy caught the tall form as it toppled. He eased the girl onto a rude settee.

He said, "Whew. Reckon I don't know nothing about this love deal. She helps him steal a fortune. Then she shoots him to keep him from the gallows. Reckon I oughta stay around with straightforward characters like—uh, Ben. Reckon I savvy that kind a whole lot better."

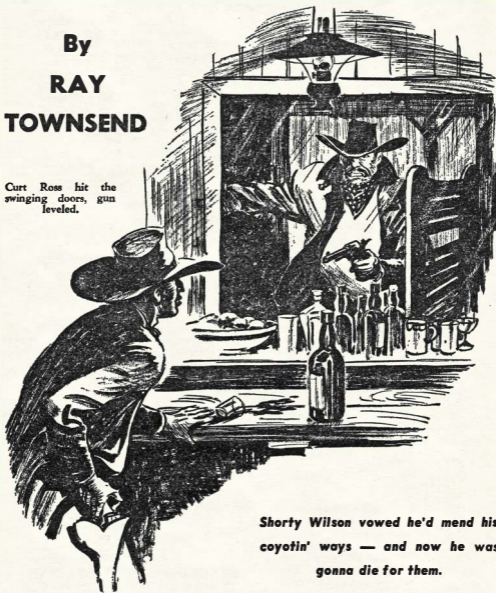
"You got the murderer, and the stolen money," said Pru. "I reckon you do well enough."

Willy said, "Uh-huh. I reckon I got you, and that's well enough."

GUNSLICK'S ONE-NIGHT STAND

By
RAY
TOWNSEND

Curt Ross hit the
swinging doors, gun
leveled.



**Shorty Wilson vowed he'd mend his
coyotin' ways — and now he was
gonna die for them.**

TACK WILSON thought he'd heard the shot when he'd headed into the ravine from above. But with the steady onslaught of the rain, the dull, drenching monotony of it driving against the sodden slope, hammering in heavy

persistence on hat brim and the leaky, worn slicker he wore, he'd dismissed the sound finally, knowing the tricks nature could play on the senses of a man alone in the hills.

But as he let the mare beneath him

work her way down the steep incline toward the road he figured must be near, he came alert suddenly. He stiffened in the saddle at the sight of a horse, phantom-outlined through the wet grayness of the day's light. The horse shied, riderless, and went away through the mist. And as Tack dropped down to where the horse had been, there was a further figure, smaller, dark against the running ground. It was a man on his face in the muck, arms and legs asprawl, lifeless.

Leaving the saddle, Tack bent above the man. His eyes coming up then strained against the half-light, the driving rain. Chill seeped down his spine, prickling the short hairs of his neck as he remembered the sound of the shot and realized his own position.

Tack Wilson was a little man. Men who had known him had never been afraid of Tack. Nor had he been the one they would turn to in case of trouble, any kind of trouble. He had a sharp, dark little face, a ferret's face, and a ferret's ways, quick, furtive and not long in one place. He was smart, though, Tack Wilson—smart in the clever little ways that all clever little men have to keep them from beneath the heels of the larger, firm-walking men who rule.

It was Tack Wilson's smartness that held him there now, above this man who had been murdered, whose blood still oozed, thinning as it mixed with the pounding drive of dank water. Even against the fear that pimpled his flesh, Tack Wilson held, waiting out the man in the rain beyond. The body had not been searched and when his first quick fear had faded, Tack's brain told him that the killer would not wait. Whoever had fired the shot had wanted this man's death alone. Otherwise, Tack figured, he would have come across the killer himself, stripping the body.

Tack's conclusions were instantaneous and he ripped the slicker back from the prone body, going through the pockets deftly, feeling the bulge of money belt beneath the shirt and stripping it off. He deposited the articles he found in his own pockets, feeling now a different chill as he hefted the weight of the money belt, stuffing it into the saddle bag on the mare and swinging up in a quick urgency that was

easily conveyed to the waiting horse.

He rode off then, at a quicker pace than before. The day that had been dark grew light suddenly and the blood surged warm through the little ferret body that had been shrieked with the wet and the cold. . . .

Tack Wilson dropped down off the rise into Eureka's main street at dark. The rain was still coming, making little pinpoints of glitter outside the windows and doors of lighted buildings. The sloping street was a running sea of mud and water. Traffic was light in the town. There was one cursing skinner berating his mules. The animals strained against the barely moving weight of the freighter. Several men paused along the walks at either side to watch the doubtful outcome of the driver's attempt.



Light streamed from the town's four saloons. Though he'd not eaten in more hours than he remembered, Tack Wilson reined in before the first and went up across the walk and through the batwings in quick, catlike movement.

It had always been Tack Wilson's way to scout a place before he entered, making sure that things were rocking steady, that the chances of trouble were at a minimum. Tack Wilson could smell trouble. He could tell it in the set of a man's shoulders, the gleam of an eye, the tone of a jovial voice.

He knew, too, that whenever trouble stirred in his vicinity he was the one to get the dirty end of the stick. The little man always was. And so he'd learned through the years to smell it before it smelled him—and to run.

But this night was different. He'd strode openly to the bar, ordering his whiskey without even noticing the sharpness of the heavy barkeep's glance, downing his first drink without seeing the half-dozen men along the plank before he realized the unconscious brazenness of his own manner.

Seven thousand dollars! The thought was a warm, unaccustomed happiness in his blood, along with the whiskey. He'd

stopped out there on the trail, counting with unbelieving eyes the astounding sum in gold coin and crisp yellow-backed bills. It was there now, against his skin beneath cotton shirt, coat and slicker.

Seven thousand dollars! He rolled the sound of the thought upon the tongue of his mind and even when he finally noticed the squinted glances of the other men, the old caution failed to rise.

FUNNY what money will do for a man. He grinned wryly at the thought. But there was seriousness there, too, and he scowled suddenly, taking his second drink. *A man—that's it! That's what money does! No damned whining around, cadging a meal and a bed in somebody's barn! Money! A man! I'll bet these two-bit four-flushers couldn't show five hundred between 'em!*

His eyes cut around at the men along the bar and he realized that, automatically, he'd not even bothered to look at the bartender. He, Tack Wilson, to whom a bartender had always been authority! He remembered the years of bumming drinks, of the tactful, complimentary approach he'd been in the habit of using in order to get a slice of gristly beef between two layers of stale bread from the free lunch counters in the dozens—no, the hundreds—of saloons back down the trail. He looked at the man now, revelling in the new-born freedom of his very disinterest. And he poured another drink, almost savagely, fiercely, challenging the harsh whiskey-burn as he gulped the raw liquor.

He caught the movement of his own reflection in the dirty mirror behind the bar then, and for the first time in his entire life, Tack Wilson met and held the glance he saw there. The narrow, swarthy face. A rather predatory nose. The eyes—Here was the revelation!

Tack stood there, feeling the hot glow of whiskey in his blood, his freshly grown power and confidence. It came to him that he had never looked at any one thing for any length of time. He had never realized the sparkling, black quality of his own gaze, when held. He was remembering the look of men he had avoided, sensing trouble, domination; and remembering that the look of their eyes had been steady and unshifting as his were now.

"Pardon me, mister."

As he'd stood there looking into the mirror, a heavy-bodied, middle-aged man in rough miner's clothes had moved along the bar, stopping an arm's length from Tack. "But it'd sure pleasure me to buy you a drink."

Tack looked the man up and down, slowly, carefully. It came to him that he'd never looked at a man the way he was looking at this one. Now he'd done so automatically, as though it were his right to question the privilege of any man to speak to him. *Seven thousand dollars! Brother, you're in!*

He almost grinned at the man, saying: "Don't mind if I do, pardner. Might as well be wet inside as out."

And the man was talking then, small talk, about some kind of trouble the miners were having—mined ore being high-graded from the stock piles, shootings. But Tack was only half-listening.

You're a man, Wilson! Good as the rest! Better, by seven thousand dollars!

He looked at the man's lined face, conscious now of his own direct gaze, and saw that the man was waiting, as though for an answer. He'd not been listening to the man's words and now, for the first time since coming into the saloon, he felt a touch of the old uneasiness, not knowing what to say, and he kept his glance from sliding away only with a pull of effort. But the older man only smiled and repeated:

"I said we kind of been expecting you, Mister Taylor—me and the rest of the boys. I ain't surprised none that you're kind of took-up like, figuring the circumstances and all. I—" For a moment he stammered. "I'd like to say we're sure glad to see you, and me, well, I'd just like to shake the hand of the man who's going to get Curt Ross!"

And it all came flooding back then—the old caution, the unsureness. And above it all, the sure smell of trouble. In spite of himself Tack Wilson could not hold his gaze on the older man's face. He felt the blood rush into his features and grabbed, almost blindly, for the glass on the bar.

The whiskey was burning in his throat, the drinks he'd already taken and the heavy reminder of the belt around his middle bringing the new confidence on. And

his own will slammed in hatred against the weakness. He took the man's rough hand in his grip, forcing a grin as he nodded silently.

The miner said his name was Bill Reid and before Tack could stop him he was calling to the other men along the bar and Tack's hand was being shaken by one man after the other: Jeffers, Dunlap, Svenson; and even the beetle-browed barkeep was reaching a meaty hand across the bar and saying his name was Dawson.

"We was sure sorry about Ross getting your kid brother that way, Blackie."

"Yes sir, Blackie. We thought mighty high of young Tom Taylor in these parts."

"I was just tellin' Jeff here Blackie Taylor'd show 'fore another week was out," Dawson was saying across the bar. "I guess you'll finish what Curt Ross started that time in Elk City, eh, Blackie?"

The drinks were on the house and Tack Wilson, unspeaking but busy with bottle and glass, was feeling the fame and receiving the respect of one Blackie Taylor whose younger brother had been killed and who, famed himself for his courage and accuracy with the sixgun, had come to avenge the crime upon the person of his old enemy of Elk City days, Curt Ross.

But the whole thing was indistinct to Tack Wilson, the old uneasiness, caution and fear buried beneath uncounted glasses of rotgut liquor and the knowledge of the seven thousand dollars about his waist. The black eyes swaggered in the darkness of Tack Wilson's face, and men pushed through the batwings as the word went down the street and the little man was a lion for the night.

WAKING, Tack Wilson grimaced in half-conscious revulsion, running his furry tongue distastefully about the rancid dryness of his mouth. His head throbbled awake with the first stirring movement of his body, and the old familiarity of a rotgut hangover.

The money! He jerked upright, oblivious to aching head and sodden, dank taste. Only when the clawing reach of nervous fingers clamped on the belt at his middle did his narrow shoulders sag back in relief. Feeling each compartment of the canvas belt, he assured himself that the seven thousand had not been tampered with. Now that his first anxiety was gone, he saw that he was sitting upright on the lumpy mattress of an iron-framed bed in a small, wall-stained room that had all the earmarks of a hotel room.

Memory came then, in sketches, along with the insistent return of throbbing headache, the sudden, growling emptiness of his stomach. He was fully dressed, he noticed, although someone had removed his boots. The forty-four was there beneath the pillow—his own automatic caution, he knew.

But he recalled now the body he'd found, and his own beastful collaboration in allowing Reid and Dawson and the others to take him for another man—another man who was slated to seek out Curt Ross and kill him.

Kill him? Tack Wilson's eyes shifted suddenly to the window where the pale light of day filtered through the cracked blind. *Today! I gotta get out of here!* Thoughts of the unknown Curt Ross and his gang racketed against the throbbing of his head as he came off the bed, and he


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cursed himself bitterly, thinking of the fool he'd been. *That seven thousand'll do you a lot of good, Wilson, with you shot so full of holes you wouldn't blow away in a heavy wind!*

He was suddenly shaking, he noticed. Telling himself it was only the liquor, he reached blindly for a boot beneath the bed. His hand hit the bottle and it went over, there beneath the bed, his eyes widening in sudden thankfulness as he brought it up, seeing it was over half full.

The whiskey was raw and gagging. For a moment his stomach twisted and he didn't think it'd stay down. He crossed to the wall in a quick stride and took a mouthful of stale water from the pitcher on the stand. *You gotta eat, man! Eat and get the hell out of town!*

But the whiskey was warm and alive, now, in his stomach, creeping into his blood. He took another drink, without the water, found the boot and put it on. He found his hat and had another drink, standing there by the door. The bottle was still a quarter full, and he hesitated, knowing he should be gone and yet not going.

Hell, man, what's the matter with you? You got seven thousand dollars!

The thought and the liquor were both warm, and as Tack Wilson stepped quickly into the hall he laughed softly and squared the narrow shoulders beneath his coat.

Downstairs, he had a moment's hesitation as the balding man behind the counter, whom he never remembered seeing before, nodded and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Taylor. I trust you slept well?"

"All right, I guess," Tack said. He couldn't help but notice the man's expression of respect, and in spite of his worry about Curt Ross, he felt again the confidence he'd had the night before. "Somebody stable my horse?"

"Mr. Reid attended to it, Mr. Taylor." The man nodded again.

As he went to the door, Tack saw that the rain was still coming down, making the street outside more like a river than ever. He shrugged into the worn slicker he carried, stepping into the rain. And as he felt the slanting water hit, he thought again of the fallen man, dead, the rain beating into the sodden lifelessness of him

as he lay in the mud of an unknown ravine.

In spite of himself he was thinking of the respect and good fellowship he himself had received as a result of being taken for the dead man. There was no doubt in Tack's mind but what the dead man actually was Blackie Taylor. The dead man had been slightly built, his hair as black as Tack's own.

Tack Wilson caught himself suddenly, realizing he was standing in the middle of town in broad daylight. *Get a move on! This Ross and his buckos're liable to show up and start blastin' before you know what it's all about!*

But he'd hardly turned when he heard a man's voice call, a couple of doors further down. *Wilson, you're going to fool around and get this Blackie Taylor guy killed twice, only the second time he'll be you!* Tack turned, unable to avoid Bill Reid's insistent joviality as the older man came along the walk.

"Well, well, had quite a sleep, eh?" The man's hand was on his shoulder, almost propelling Tack toward the swinging doors of the saloon. "Guess you had a pretty tough ride the last few days, though, Blackie. Couple more of the boys I'd like you to meet in here. Guess you could stand a little eye-opener after last night, too, eh?"

The man's laugh was hearty as they pushed into the saloon. Half a dozen men were lined along the bar, Dawson's chunky form moving up behind. And again Tack Wilson was shaking hands, nodding as men called him by a dead man's name. For the first few minutes Tack felt the urge to run.

A black-bearded, heavy-shouldered chunk of a man was saying, "It sure did my heart good to hear about you runnin' Ross outa Elk City the way you did, Blackie. He's a thievin', back-shootin' skunk and there ain't no two ways about it. And if you need any help handlin' him today, you can sure as thunder count on me."

Bill Reid's hand was on Tack's shoulder again as he stood beside the little man. "Sure, boys, Blackie knows we're all with him, but that ain't the way he works. Blackie Taylor don't need no help. Why he's so fast with a gun you wouldn't be-

lieve it if you saw it with your own eyes!"

IT WAS sometime after the fourth drink that Tack Wilson quit thinking about the necessity to leave town. The whiskey was in him, all right, but it wasn't so much that, either. Blackie Taylor was beginning to get him.

Because of the fact that the entire conversation was nothing but a running commentary on the life and deeds of Blackie Taylor, Tack Wilson could hardly join the backslapping.

He couldn't get it out of his mind that Blackie Taylor, too, had been a little man. As he looked up he saw his reflection again before him in the back-bar mirror. Automatically, his eyes went away from the glance he saw there. But he caught himself at it, bringing his eyes back, studying himself again as he had the night before.

But this time, in spite of the whiskey, in spite of the respect and admiration of the other men, it was no good. He drank again, and again looked into the mirror. And now even the seven thousand dollars didn't help. No, the other men might be seeing Blackie Taylor, but he saw only Tack Wilson. And the seeing was suddenly sour and even the whiskey tasteless and flat.

Should he tell them? For a moment he toyed with the idea, knowing at the same time he wouldn't. There was the bitterness of empty laughter in him then and Tack Wilson knew he hated the reflection before him. If there were any justice on earth, his would be the corpse in the ravine and Blackie Taylor would be standing here now, where he belonged.

But the men's voices had dropped off abruptly. Tack saw that a tall, gangling youth had come through the door, standing there, eyes big in the hollow lines of his face. "He's comin' into town now!" The boy almost whispered the words, but every man heard. For a second there was only the sound of rain on the wooden awning outside.

Men looked at Tack Wilson then. And then they filed out, slowly, so as not to show the anxiety that was in them. But when they had gone through the doors, Tack heard the quickening of their steps,

going away along the walk. Then quiet.

"The back door's open, Blackie." Dawson's voice came hoarsely as the big bar-keep moved toward the rear of the room, behind the bar.

But Tack Wilson hardly heard the man. He stood rigid before the bar, as though frozen in his tracks. Slowly then his head turned and once more he met the black-eyed gaze in the dirty mirror.

He knew that the man named Curt Ross was coming. He knew that Curt Ross would kill him, would finish the job he thought he'd already done out there in the ravine. It just didn't matter, somehow.

As he squinted into the mirror, all the hatred of Tack Wilson's life went into his two dark eyes. Being little was not enough excuse for that worthless kind of a life. Blackie Taylor had been little too.

Tack turned away from the mirror then, stripped off the slicker and faced the door. When he heard the footsteps on the walk outside, even the pleading cry to run had died from Tack's mind.

Curt Ross hit the swinging doors, gun up and leveled, a big man, meaty faced and heavy bodied. But even as the gun in his hand crashed in explosion, Tack Wilson saw the fear in his eyes. A big man's fear of a little man. And in that fleeting second, as he felt the man's bullet graze his ribs and jerked into his own draw, Tack Wilson knew that, dead or alive, he would never be afraid of another man.

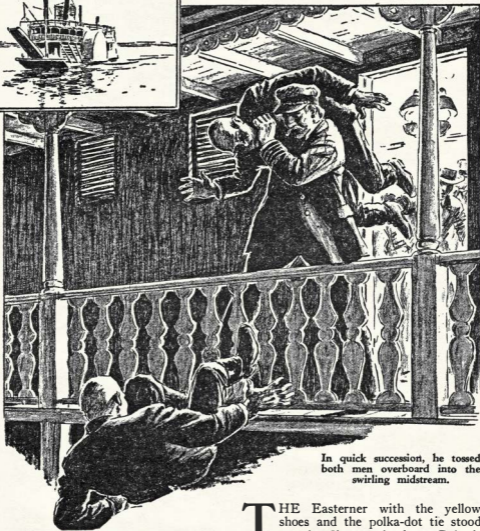
His own weapon blasted sound in unison with the other man's second shot. There was no feeling in Tack as he watched the fear in the heavy features of Curt Ross blank out beneath the impact of shock, watched the man fall in loose collapse. There was other firing from the street outside, the sloshing sound of hoofbeats in the road.

Tack Wilson holstered the forty-four and shrugged once more into the slicker. He didn't glance at the mirror as he went toward the back, past Dawson's round eyes to the rear door.

He took off his hat as he went around toward the stable. He was remembering a body in a ravine that needed burying, and somehow there was a regret in Tack Wilson that you couldn't talk to a dead man—that you couldn't thank him.

MISSOURI MINNIE'S LAST RIDE

By JIMMY NICHOLS



In quick succession, he tossed both men overboard into the swirling midstream.

Even in her last frantic ride—Minnie was a lady.

THE Easterner with the yellow shoes and the polka-dot tie stood on the flimsy wharf at Baker's Landing and laughed until his sides ached. "Pardon me, old-timer," he chuckled, tears of amusement running down his cheeks, "but just tell me—what's that out on the end of the wharf?"

He might well ask. The frail side-wheeler bucking the eddies of the wild

Missouri bore only the slightest resemblance to a steamboat. Rather, she appeared to be composed of a towering white superstructure left over from the Spanish Armada, jammed down on top of a flat-bottomed, snub-nosed scow.

The only visible evidence that she could move under her own power was in the two smokestacks, resembling burnt-out cigars, that poked out through the forest of decks and railings. The fact that one pointed forward and the other aft only added to the general raffish effect.

But the squat, broadshouldered "old-timer" with the neat handlebar mustache did not share the Easterner's sense of humor. As the dude took out a huge pocket handkerchief to wipe his eyes, the man beside him said sourly, "That's the Minnie Anne. She's mine."

"Oh, pardon me," said the Easterner faintly. Then he caught himself. "The Minnie Anne! Great guns, that's the boat I'm waiting for!"

"Wal, don't order yer coffin," said Seth Rivington dryly. "She still floats."

It was an understatement. After twenty years of steamboating, the fragile Minnie Anne and her ham-fisted captain were still undisputed speed champions of the swift northern rivers. With the surge of river trade that had been released like a pent-up dam at the close of the Civil War, there were big profits to be made hauling freight and passengers up and down the upper reaches of the Missouri.

Captain Seth Rivington had watched with furrowed brows the appearance on the river of first one, then another, then five spanking new steamers brought off the easy New Orleans run by the giant Inland Waterways Company to offer competition to the Minnie Anne.

But he needn't have worried. A steamboat needed more than power to navigate on those waters—she needed heart. And the Minnie was all heart, a great big glowing red furnace of a heart, that put her out in front of shipping built from trees that were mere acorns when the Minnie's creaking timbers were cut.

Unlike most river boats of the time, the Minnie was a lady and she kept her skirts clean. It was Seth Rivington's open boast that tin horns and gamblers couldn't buy a ticket from him at any price. Meet-

ing the challenge, it was the lifelong ambition of every rascal on the river to slip past the captain's eagle eye and steal a ride.

He sold the tickets himself, standing at the gangplank with a cashbox at his side, a gun in his belt and a roll of pasteboards in his hand. Every prospective passenger was treated to a searching inspection by those keen gray eyes. The captain had definite prejudices that he used to identify suspicious characters.

Too much hair oil, for instance, brought an immediate cancellation of passage. Visible bottles of whiskey were taboo. He also had a long, long memory.

Once the notorious Earle brothers of New Orleans succeeded in slipping aboard, disguised as friars in long brown robes. They even went to the extreme of shaving their heads to authenticate the deception, leaving only a small round patch in the middle of their skulls about the size of a silver dollar.

The pious captain had a deep respect for the members of the devout religious orders that went unarned into the wilderness where contingents of crack cavalry refused to ride. He drew back respectfully as the bogus members of the brotherhood strode solemnly up the gangplank, and he had them conducted to a private stateroom.

It wasn't often that Seth cursed the Minnie, but he said harsh things to her that night as they struggled upstream together. The old girl just wasn't herself. She was balky, slow to get up steam, and shying at measly little currents that she ordinarily would have hopped over with a disdainful snort.

Several times she turned around and started back downstream. Once she deliberately poked her nose into a giant whirlpool and turned majestically in circles like an outsize merry-go-round while the passengers screamed or laughed, according to their temperaments, and the Minnie's master sent up more smoke with his swearing than was coming, at that moment, from the Minnie's stubborn boilers.

Along about two o'clock in the morning, Captain Rivington began to wonder. "Maybe we're dragging a tree trunk," he thought. "There must be something

wrong. She shore isn't right this trip."

Anxious now, he climbed down out of the pilot house and began a minute tour of the ship. Passing the grand salon he stopped for a moment to peer through the windows at the handsome red velvet drapes and the gleaming gold sconces. And he nearly froze at what he saw.

There, right smack in the middle of the dignified drawing room, were the two "friars", minus their robes but easily recognized by their tonsured heads, sitting at a round table dealing out poker hands.

Gold coins and blue chips were stacked in heaps beside them and, as the captain watched, the passengers they were playing with shook their heads, flung down their cards and pushed still another heap of chips toward the gamblers.

In a twinkling the captain leaped across the sill, descended on the gaming table and swept both men up in his powerful arms. Heaving them over his shoulders, he staggered quickly to the rail.

It was past midnight, and the steamer was well into the heart of hostile Indian country, but the enraged steamboat captain didn't give it a second thought. In quick succession, he tossed both men overboard into the swirling midstream.

They squalled pitifully as they descended from the high deck, and a shower of money fell from their inverted pockets to line the bottom of the Missouri. Then the passengers heard two splashes—and silence.

At the same time, a cheerful snort of steam came out of the Minnie's funnels, the boat headed straight and true up-river and began to make time in her accustomed manner.

Almost in tears, the captain leaned remorsefully against the rail and patted the Minnie's gleaming brass. "Old girl," he said, his voice shaking. "I apologize. I should have known."

Fortunately or otherwise, the two Earle brothers survived the dunking and, returning to their old haunts in New Orleans, resumed their careers, apparently untaught and unscarred by their experience—except that their hair never did grow out again.

It was on that same trip that two rival steamers, the Louise and the Pride, belonging to the Inland Waterways Com-

pany, set out in pursuit of the Minnie. Aboard each vessel, hanging irritably over the shoulders of the sweating, straining captains, were members of the company's board of directors. Unable to understand the patently ridiculous alibis offered as to why their brand new boats were losing cartage contracts to a kind of Noah's Ark, these gentlemen had come to see for themselves.

"CATCH her, damn you, catch her!" they fumed, as the freshly painted new steamers rocked in the Minnie's wake. But the wily Missouri seemed to lift the funny old sidewheeler up in its tricky currents and carry her upstream with the same ease and grace that most boats floated down.

In desperation, the pursuing steamboats piled on fuel until they were both sending forth columns of thick black smoke like blast furnaces. Showers of sparks started a dozen fires and even singed one company director, divesting him of his white flannel pants.

Everyone aboard both boats was black-faced and spitting soot. But the Minnie, trailing a delicate gray feather of exhaust behind her, forged steadily ahead.

"I'll have your job, and by Saint Peter, your head too, if you don't catch that boat!" was the threat leveled at the captain of the Pride.

"We'll catch her, all right, sir. The Minnie has to lay over beyond the next point and wait for a trader to unload. We'll pass her then," the frightened skipper assured his boss.

"You mean there's a wharf up in this wilderness?" the man demanded.

"Oh, no. The Minnie throws out an anchor and the trader paddles out with a fleet of canoes and takes his stuff off that way," it was explained. The director stroked his chin, stamped out a small blaze with the toe of his boot and looked thoughtful.

Seth never told how he knew those two steamers were going to ram him. Maybe there was something suspicious in the way they sidled up, one on either side, heading up-river. Or maybe the Minnie told him. At any rate, it was some sixth sense that made him suddenly bellow, "Up anchor!"

The heavy iron weight came quickly up from the muddy bottom and the Minnie, her boilers cold, was instantly in the grip of the current. Like a matchstick, she was swept suddenly downstream—at the precise moment that the bows of the two rival steamers turned inward to attempt to crush her between them like an eggshell.

But the slippery Minnie had squeezed out of the trap and the Louise and the Pride rammed, instead, into each other. The Pride was completely stove in, and the Louise didn't look too good.

Seth promptly put upstream again and circled around solicitously, helping the Louise to pick up survivors. In a few hours, however, there was nothing left of the shattered Pride on the surface of the river but a few splintered timbers and one very wet, struggling member of the Inland Waterways Company's board of directors.

For another decade, the Minnie Anne and her grizzled master held out. In that ten years, steamboats became as thick as horseflies on sections of the Missouri where once only the Minnie had dared to prod.

Government surveys and carefully charted navigation maps took the guesswork out of steamboating. Gradually, Seth Rivington lost his taste for the game. It had become too easy. He decided to retire.

On July 12, 1883, the Minnie loaded for her last trip. She carried a heavy cargo and a full passenger list, for by this time she was an historic curiosity and many people were anxious to say they had rid-

den on her. Minnie was a popular gal.

For the final time, the captain stood at the gangplank, dispensing tickets. Without rancor, he turned away two gamblers that he spotted in the crowd, although twenty years ago he might have thrown them overboard just for practice. Almost sluggishly, the Minnie put out into mid-stream. She didn't seem to be in her usual form, this day.

No one could ever tell just why it happened. Steamboats had exploded before, but it was always because the fire was too high under the boiler. But the Minnie had barely gotten up steam and she had passed a rigid engine-room inspection not an hour before. Some said the gallant old lady of the Missouri had given up and committed suicide.

However it was, as she rounded Topper's Bend, her bottom boiler suddenly blew clear through her top deck. Pieces of molten steel were later found a quarter of a mile inland. It was quite an explosion, at that.

In her bone-dry timbers, fire broke out at once and spread from the lower deck to the deckhouse. Instantly, Rivington slammed the flaming steamer against the muddy bank and, guided by his calm roars, passengers and crew scrambled safely ashore.

From that holocaust, a river legend was born, one that was later repeated in song and poetry. And the records show that, of all the miracles the Minnie had in her day performed, this last was her greatest. For there were only two casualties—the never-to-be-forgotten Minnie Anne, and her gallant master.

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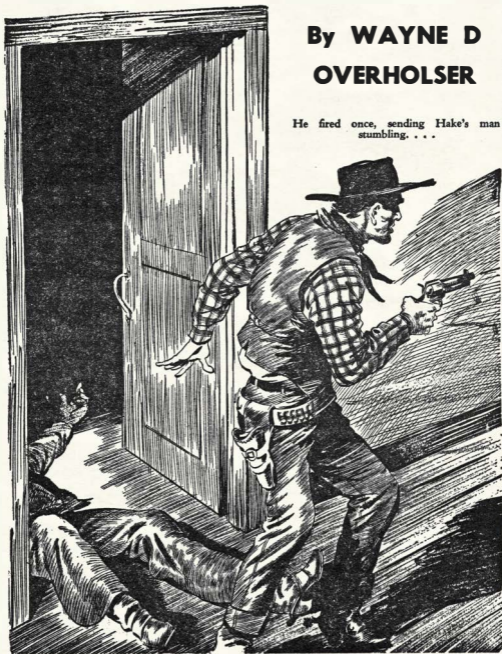
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He fired once, sending Hake's man
stumbling. . . .



SHADOWS

With a gun-proddy banker lording it over his folks
... and his girl—Larry figured he'd drifted back
home to a killin' chore.



CHAPTER *Prodigal's Homecoming*

1

Larry Lane was not sure in his own mind why he was returning to Red Bend. It might have been because his father was getting old, that times were bad and Larry knew he was needed in the store and freighting business. Or because no one seemed to have a job for a gunslinger. Or—although he would not

admit it—he wanted to see Ruth Royal.

Larry put his roan gelding up the steep road from the San Miguel river to sage-covered Elk Park. He took a long breath, eyes sweeping the flat from the pines on his left to the canyon rim on his right and seeing something hard to believe—water on the Park. Whit Royal and the settlers had succeeded finally. Much of the sage was gone. In its place was grain ready for the binder and alfalfa.

He came into Red Bend and found it unchanged even to the weathered sign across the front of his father's store, *General Merchandise, Lane and Son*. John Lane had put that sign up on Larry's twenty-first birthday. Three years ago. The old man hadn't asked if it was what he wanted. He'd just nailed it up and called Larry over from the barn and pointed to it.

Sometime during the years since he had left the Park Larry Lane had grown up. He hadn't understood when he'd ridden out. Since he'd been a boy, he'd worked in the store or around the barn and corals. He'd taken a freight outfit through to the Disappointment country. None of it had satisfied him. He hadn't been ready for a steady job. There was too much of the world he hadn't seen.

Now he'd seen enough of it and he was back and those wind-worn letters on the sign were the most beautiful things he had ever seen. He was a partner in his father's business. He was old enough to settle down, to be a part of this country for which his father had done so much.

Then Ruth Royal came into his mind—as she had many times since he had left. He swung around the hitch pole and went into the store, trying to forget Ruth and failing and suddenly irritated because he could not control his own thoughts.

Nothing had changed. Larry stood for a moment inside the door, feeling the coolness of the long room, smelling the same smells he had known through his growing years: pickles and vinegar and dried apples and lard and tobacco. Dry goods on the left side: bolts of cloth and socks and levis and shirts, shoes and saddles and harness. Even wrinkled old Pete Ord who had come to the Park with John Lane more than twenty years ago was still behind the counter, peering at Larry as if

seeing something familiar about his face.

"How are you, Pete?" Larry cried, and striding toward him, held out his hand.

Pete gave the hand a quick grip and dropped it. He said indifferently, "Well, if it ain't Larry."

"It sure as hell is." Larry cuffed back his Stetson. "Three years ain't changed anything in Red Bend, Pete."

The old man's face hardened. "Maybe you're blind if you can't see no better'n that. Everything's changed."

Ord walked away and began stacking boxes of .30-.30 shells on the counter. This wasn't the Pete Ord who used to slip him sacks of peppermints when his father wasn't looking.

"What's happened, Pete?" Larry asked, a vague uneasiness growing in him.

Ord didn't look up. "What do you want to know for? You ain't interested in your dad or the store or Red Bend. You ain't even interested in Ruth, and the way I see it, that makes you a damned fool."

"Pete, you're crazier'n—" Larry began. He stopped, remembering he had been gone three years and he hadn't written. He couldn't expect to come back and take up where he had left off. He asked, "Where's Dad?"

"In back."

Ord didn't look up as Larry walked away. Anger built a small fire in him. Ord hadn't asked whether he was back to stay. He just hadn't given a damn. *A hell of a homecoming*, Larry thought, as he walked past his father's desk and on into the warehouse that made up the back of the long building.

He heard the stamp of horses in the alley. Then, in the light washing through the open door, Larry saw that his father was behind a hand truck.

"Dad." Larry dodged around a stack of hides and jumped some barbed wire to reach his father.

JOHN LANE stopped and straightened his work-bent shoulders, gaunt face showing his pleasure. "Larry! I . . . I hadn't heard from you. I didn't know if you'd ever be back."

Larry put his hands on his father's shoulders and looked down at him. "I never knew a face could look as good as

yours. In fact, you're beautiful, Dad."

Three years ago John Lane would have laughed and joshed back. He didn't laugh now, and in the thin light Larry saw the worry lines that marked his father's forehead. Hopelessness. Perhaps fear.

"I'll be done in a minute, Larry," Lane pushed the truck to a pile of sugar sacks. "I've got a wagon going out to Bedrock."

Larry stared at his father. Three years ago he had had men to load the wagons. Now he lifted a sack from the pile and struggled with it a moment as if it was too heavy before he dropped it.

"Let me do that," Larry said.

Lane stepped away. "I just ain't much good no more, son. Seems like those sacks weigh a ton."

"Where's Slim?" Larry asked as he lifted a sack into place. "And Joe? They used to do this."

"Gone," Lane said laconically.

Larry didn't press it then. He loaded the truck and pushed it through the door and across the loading platform. Later, when the wagon was ready to go, Lane said dully, "This is the end of it, Charley. Tell Moore I've got to have my money."

"I'll tell him," the driver grunted, "but it won't do no good."

Larry watched the driver climb into the seat. Later, after the wagon had rumbled away, he rolled a smoke. Eyes on the brown paper, he asked casually, "What's wrong?"

Lane took a long sighing breath. "Maybe you ain't heard, son. Times are hard."

"Yeah, I've heard, but you've gone through hard times before."

"Not like this."

Larry wiped a match against the wall

and fired his cigarette. He had always thought of his father as a rich man. As long as he could remember, John Lane had given credit to anyone who asked. He had the biggest store in the country; his freight teams hauled to the Disappointment, to the La Sal Mountains, and down the San Miguel. Now John Lane was a broken man. The discovery hit Larry like the blow of a club against his middle.

"Let's hear it, Dad. Pete had the notion I wasn't interested because I went away. That ain't right. I had some riding to do. Now I'm back to stay."

"You'd best kept on riding," John Lane muttered. "There's nothing here to come back to."

"You're here."

"And broke."

Larry motioned toward the building. "Plenty of stuff there."

"It's cash I need. I'm like the pitcher that went to the well too often. I borrowed ten thousand dollars from Breck Flanneran to help the settlers. Whit Royal signed the note with me, but he doesn't have a dollar. The rest of the settlers don't neither. They finished their ditch and they'll have a crop, but it ain't worth nothing. Be too late anyhow."

"Who's Flanneran?"

"A banker. Came in a couple of years ago. Loaned money around like I'd always done, only he's the kind who closes a man out the minute a note's due." He gave Larry a straight look. "He's sweet on Ruth, too."

Hot words were on Larry's tongue. Pete Ord had called him a damned fool because he wasn't interested in Ruth. His father thought the same. They just



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didn't know. But Larry just tossed his cigarette stub into the road, saying mildly, "Ruth's level headed."

"Flanneran's the kind who don't take no for an answer. Ruth'll find that out."

"How much time have you got?"

"A week, but it wouldn't do me any good if I had a month. Someday this will be a good country, but right now everybody but Flanneran is in the same boat."

"What about Ed Plummer?" Larry asked. "You loaned him twelve thousand once, didn't you?"

"I wrote to him. Fact is, I wrote to everybody who owes me."

"I heard Plummer made a stake in Leadville."

"He left Leadville. I don't know where he is now. I hate to admit it, but looks like he's the one mistake I made in judging a man's character." Lane reached for his pipe. "Damn it, Larry, I kept hoping I'd have a good business, something you'd grow up into and like. Now you'll have nothing."

"It isn't important, Dad. We'll start over."

John Lane shook his head. "No use, son. I'm finished. Folks used to say I was a fool to give credit the way I have, and I guess maybe I was a fool to borrow money for Whit Royal and the settlers." He gave Larry a straight look then and his words were a challenge. "But I don't have no regrets about being the fool. I'm proud I had a part in building that ditch."

"You ain't busted yet," Larry said stubbornly.

"Nothing this side of hell will change Flanneran."

Larry patted the black butts of his guns. "These will."

"No." Lane caught his son's arm.

"They'll kill you."

"They?"

"Flanneran and a gun hand named Flint Hake who's packing the marshal's star. Flanneran claims money and a fast gun can do anything, and he's made it stick."

"We'll see," Larry said, and dropped off the loading platform.

"Don't do it," John Lane cried.

Larry looked up at his father, smiling a little. "I reckon I was wrong to ride off

the way I did. It's time I was paying back a little that I owe you."

CHAPTER:

2 *Outmatched Pilgrim*

He had ridden away with bitter words from Ruth in his ears. Now he was back home without anything. But at least he had become fast and sure with his guns.

Larry came around the building to Main Street, guns riding lightly in leather, his gaze sweeping the short business block. He saw Flanneran's bank, across the street and on the corner. It had been a vacant building when he'd left. Now, studying the town more closely, he saw that there was another change, a tiny shack across from the bank. It was marked: *City Jail and Marshal's Office*. That would be Flanneran's work, Larry guessed.

He crossed the street to the bank, not knowing what he would do and shadowed by the certainty of failure. A man who had cut as wide a swath as Breck Flanneran had would not be one who could be bluffed.

Larry stepped into the bank and went directly to the one window. The teller was working behind a desk at the far wall. A door to the right was ajar, and Larry heard the mutter of low voices coming through it.

The teller looked up, stared a moment, and dropped his gaze to the papers before him. Anger began to burn in Larry. The teller had sized him up as a saddle bum and he let his indifference convey his contempt. Larry reached through the window for a bottle of ink, stepped to the gate at the end of the counter, and threw the bottle at the teller. As it cracked against the desk, the cork came out and the ink splattered like black rain over the papers.

The teller reared up out of his chair, mopping at the ink with his handkerchief and cursing in a high angry voice. He threw his soaked handkerchief down and strode toward Larry, round-cheeked face scarlet.

"What's the matter with you?" the teller raged. "I'll have the marshal throw you into the jug for vagrancy."

Larry waited until the man came within reach. He knew how he looked. He was tired and dusty and the long days on the trail had sweated him dry. His clothes were worn and patched and there was a week's growth of stubble on his face.

Gripping a fistful of the teller's shirt, Larry said softly, "You know what I'll do to you if the marshal arrests me?"

The teller lost his arrogance. He stared at Larry's hard-lined face, at the narrowed gray eyes, and he began to tremble. He breathed, "All right. Let's forget it."

Larry began shaking him, gently at first and then hard enough to make his teeth rattle. "I don't forget that easy, mister. Fact is, I don't forget at all." He let the teller go, his smile a humorless twist of his lips. "I've got business, and I ain't one to cool my heels for a greenhorn like you."

The teller jumped back out of reach. "What kind of business?"

"I want to borrow ten thousand dollars."

"Why, I—I—" The teller swallowed. "What collateral do you have?"

Larry drew his guns. "These."

The man retreated, darting a glance at the door of Flanneran's office. He brought his eyes to Larry, breathing, "This a hold-up?"

"No. I'm asking for a loan."

"This is very unusual. I'll have to ask Mr. Flanneran."

He ran past the ink-splattered desk and banging Flanneran's door open, stumbled into the office. "Holdup," he panted. "Man out there with guns."

Two men ran past the teller into the bank, both grabbing for guns and dropping their hands when they saw Larry.

"Your pet nouse got things a mite twisted," Larry murmured. "This ain't a holdup. I came in to ask for a loan."

The stocky man with the heavy brown mustache would be Breck Flanneran. He wore a black broadcloth suit and a white silk shirt. A heavy gold chain dangled across his vest. His eyes were green and bold, and in that first measuring glance, Larry made his judgment of him. He was smart and tough and unforgiving.

The other, slender and barren-faced with a star on his flannel shirt, would be Flint Hake. His pale blue eyes were fixed

on Larry, cold and calculating as he measured his chances and decided against making a play.

"A loan," Flanneran murmured. "How much?"

"Ten thousand."

Flanneran smiled tolerantly. "Quite a chunk of money these days, friend. What security can you offer?"

Larry motioned with his guns. "These."

"So that's why Baggot thought it was a holdup." Admiration washed across Flanneran's face. "You're smart, stranger. If you're looking for a job, you're hired."

Larry shrugged. "I'm not looking for a job." He slid his guns into leather. "I'll go at it another way. I understand you figger on closing John Lane out in a week."

Flanneran's face went sober. "Lane surprises me. I didn't think he'd try using a gunslick. Go back and tell him we don't scare worth a damn. If he wants to shoot it out, we'll oblige him."

Larry shook his head. "This is my idea, Flanneran. He didn't send for me. I just rode in awhile ago."

PUZZLED, Flanneran scratched a wide jaw. "Look, friend, John Lane and Whit Royal are one kind of men. You and me and the marshal," he motioned toward Hake, "are another. You and me understand each other. We play a tough game and we don't bet our pile unless our hand is high. Right now I hold the high hand." He smiled again. "If you don't want to work for me, keep riding."

"I'm done riding, Flanneran," Larry said curtly. "You and me and your start-toting slug-slinger understand each other all right, but I ain't satisfied with what I understand. When I left the Park three years ago, it was a hell of a fine place. Plenty of sunlight. Now there's something between us and the sun. We're standing in a shadow. I aim to change that."

Flanneran scratched his chin, the sound of it faintly rasping. "So there's a shadow, is there? I hadn't noticed it. What got in front of the sun?"

"You."

Hake laughed, a strange crackling

sound. "That's funny, Breck. You're getting bigger all the time."

Flanneran was done talking. "I never know whether a man's bluffing when he packs a pair of irons, but I always find out. Get out."

Flanneran swung back toward his office, saw the ink-splattered desk, and bawled, "Baggot! What the hell happened?"

The teller was standing in the office doorway. He jabbed a shaky finger at Larry. "He threw the bottle at me. The cork came out."

Flanneran wheeled to face Larry. "What was the idea of that?"

"I came in, and that sheep-faced pilgrim saw me, but he kept on figgering. I threw the bottle so he'd know I wanted something."

"Well, I'll be damned. What's your angle in this business?"

"My name's Larry Lane."

Flint Hake began to curse. "Why, he's old—"

Flanneran nudged him into silence. He said softly, "So that's it. I heard John had a boy who went off and left him a few years ago, but I never figured he'd be back."

"You figgered wrong. The idea is that you're not closing him out."

"That's where you're wrong," Flanneran said crisply. "So far I haven't had to use slugs. They're all like sheep, your dad and Whit Royal and the rest, but if you start worrying me, I'll move you out—permanently."

Flanneran walked back to his office, leaving the door open. Flint Hake stood where he was, hands inches from his gun butts, face as expressionless as granite. He said, "Vamoose."

Hake would be fast with a gun. Whether Larry was faster or not was a point that would have to be determined, and this was as good a time as any.

"I ain't showing you my back," Larry said flatly.

Hake's lips tightened against yellow teeth, his ready hands reaching downward when Flanneran called from the office. "Come here, Flint."

Hake straightened, not liking it, but Flanneran had forced obedience upon him. He said, "Get out of the Park, son-

ny," and turning, tramped back to the office.

Flanneran slammed the door, leaving Baggot outside, a trembling, frightened man. Larry grinned at him. "Funny how important some men get because they work in a bank, ain't it, Baggot? Funny 'cause they ain't important at all."

Larry went out, still smiling. If what he had seen of Baggot today was typical of the man, he was a weak link in Flanneran's organization. Larry had learned that the way to break a chain was to put pressure upon the weakest link. Before his father's time was up, Baggot would feel that pressure. . . .

Larry stepped into the Saddle-Up Saloon and shook hands with the barkeep, Dude Samuels, who had been in the Park almost as long as John Lane and Pete Ord.

"Saw you ride in," Samuels said. "Reckon you'll be moving on in the morning." He shoved a bottle and a glass at Larry, pallid face showing no interest in further talk.

"I'm staying," Larry said sharply. "What makes you think I'd move on?"

"Drink all you want to," Samuels said, ignoring Larry's question. "If you need any help saddling up in the morning, I'll give you a hand."

Larry wheeled out of the saloon without his drink. Samuels had liked him before he'd left. He stood on the boot-trodden boardwalk and rolled a smoke, thinking about it. John Lane's friends thought he should have stayed to work for his father. He stared at the letters across the front of the store. *General Merchandise, Lane and Son.*

And Son! Why, he wouldn't be working for his father. He'd be working *with* his father. He hadn't thought about it that way before.

He thumbed a match to life and lit his cigarette, thinking about Ruth Royal and what she had said the night before he'd ridden away. She was only eighteen, but she had already taught a term of school.

"You're a hair-brained fool," she said hotly, pulling out of his arms. "Your father needs you and he's got a good business for you to work into."

He had tried to tell her he couldn't be tied down here, that he hated everything

about the store and he wanted some fun, that there never would be anything here but sagebrush and cedars and cattle.

"All right, Larry," she had said. "Go hunt for your fun, but you'll be back. You'll find out that you'll never get anything worthwhile by riding away from your obligations."

HE WENT back to the store. Pete Ord glared across the counter at him, his dislike pushing at Larry.

"Dad here?"

"He went home," Ord said coldly.

Larry stepped behind the dry-goods counter and rummaged among the underwear, shirts and levis until he found what he wanted.

"Got any money to pay for 'em?" Ord asked sourly.

"Damn you, Pete, you're getting so ornery it's a wonder you don't bite yourself."

"Sure, I'm ornery. I got cause to be. I seen this country when it was new, just after the Utes was pushed out. I seen John stake every cowman that came in here. He staked the settlers until they got their ditch built. Now Flanneran's taking everything he's got and the fellers that owe John say they can't pay."

"I was here then, too," Larry said testily. "Remember?"

"You didn't remember." Ord wagged a finger at him. "Look, sonny, John lived for you. He worked for you. He planned for you. He painted that sign for a surprise for you. And what'd you do? You was like a damned ungrateful pup biting the feller that feeds you."

Larry picked up his clothes. "I know, Pete. I'll square it someday."

Pete's laugh was a taunting jeer. "You ain't got enough money to pay for the duds you're taking, but you're gonna pay Flanneran off. You fixing to hold up the stage?"

"Maybe."

Then he was turning into the lane that ran to the barn behind his father's house. Larry dismounted and watered his horse, standing so he could see the house. Ten rooms. Well built, for that was John Lane's way, but he had never told Larry why he had built such a big place.

Larry led his horse into the barn.

He forked hay into the manger and went back into the sunlight, pausing again to look at the house. One week! Then Breck Flanneran would move in and he'd have the best house in the Park—the way a banker would want it. He went in through the back door, heard the sizzle of frying meat and smelled it, and hunger hit him.

"That you, Larry?" Lane called.

Larry stood in the doorway. "It's me."

Lane was standing by the stove, a white apron around him. He looked up, smiling. "I thought you'd be home and maybe hungry."

"Got a hole in my middle big as the stove."

"Bout ready." Lane motioned to the boiler on the back of the stove. "I filled this up. Thought you might want a bath. Thought you'd want to see Ruth."

"Yeah. I'll go on over there after supper."

They didn't talk much after that. They ate slowly, a strange restraint upon them. Larry could not guess what was in his father's mind, wondered whether his coming back was a mistake.

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After the meal, he bathed, shaved and put on the clean clothes he had brought from the store.

It was dusk when Larry went into the front parlor. John Lane was sitting beside a window, smoking his pipe and staring into the fading light.

"I saw Flanneran," Larry said. "He's tough, all right. So's Hake, but I'll stop them. That's a promise."

Lane took his pipe into his hand. "Son, this is my ruckus. No use of you getting mixed up in it."

Larry took a long breath, said, "When I got into town, I looked at the sign across the front of the store. It's the finest thing I ever saw, Dad. The way I figger, this is my ruckus as much as it is yours. We'll fight it through together." He went out before his father could say anything, crossed the porch and walked through the gate in the iron fence.

LARRY saw Ruth working in her flower garden before he reached her house. She didn't hear him until he stood behind her and said softly, "Hello, Ruth."

She turned her head to look up at him. She cried, "Larry," in a quick, excited voice. She jumped up and came to him, her arms going around him, her lips lifting to his. He kissed her, knowing he had all the proof he needed that she loved him. And he knew something he had never fully permitted himself to think about, how much he loved her.

He drew his lips from hers and tilted her head back and looked down at her smooth-skinned face. Her hair was raven-black, her eyes a dark blue, her lips long and rich with expression. He wanted to tell her he loved her, that they would get married tomorrow, but he had only a handful of silver dollars in his pocket. No job and no prospects.

"I won't try to tell you what happened to me while I was gone," he said finally, "but I've got one thing to say. You were right. I came back like you said I would."

"Larry." Her hands tightened against his neck. "I was wrong, too. I didn't think you should go, but now I know you had to get rid of your restlessness."

"I reckon Pete was never that way," he said bitterly. "Or Dude Samuels."

"They've forgotten."

"I told Dad I'd stop Flanneran," he said, "but I don't know how I'll do it. I thought I'd borrow some money in Montrose or Ouray."

"It won't do any good," she said wearily. "We've tried. They just don't have that much to loan."

"What will Flanneran do to you and Whit?"

"The same as he will do to your father and you, except that we don't have much to lose—just our house and farm."

"What about the settlers?"

"He'll get them sooner or later," she answered hopelessly. "They'll borrow from Flanneran, and that will finish them."

He remembered his father saying that Flanneran was sweet on Ruth, that he was not a man to take no for an answer. He knew how much value Whit Royal placed upon his farm and how much Ruth thought of her father. It was not a bet that Flanneran would miss. Whit Royal could save his farm if Ruth married Flanneran.

Royal, next to John Lane, was the most respected man in the Park. He had surveyed the ditch; he had been the one who had organized the settlers and kept them working. Marriage to Ruth Royal would be exactly what Flanneran needed to overcome the bitterness that would rise from closing John Lane out.

Larry knew he couldn't ask her to marry him, to ride from one campfire to another. No love was strong enough to survive that kind of living. He let her go, saying, "I'll ride out tomorrow. I'll get that money if I have to hold up a bank. . . ."

He came to the iron fence in front of his home and to the big cottonwood at the gate before he saw Flanneran, standing in the shadow of the tree. It was almost dark now, and Larry stared a moment before he saw who it was. He reached for a gun, but he didn't draw. Flanneran said coolly, "I saw you kiss Ruth. Natural enough, I reckon, you being gone for three years."

"Yeah," Larry breathed. "That was one good thing I came back to."

"It was your last kiss," Flanneran said as if there was no doubt about it. "I'm marrying her, Lane."

"She won't marry you."

Flanneran laughed softly. "You think not? Maybe she promised you."

"I—I didn't ask her."

"I didn't think you would. If I pegged you right, you're enough like your old man not to want to ruin a woman's life. I'll make her a good husband, give her anything she wants. What have you got to offer her?"

"Nothing." Larry started toward the house.

Flanneran said, "Wait."

Larry swung back. "If you think you can bluff me into pulling out. . . ."

"I've got a deal to offer you. Interested?"

"I'll listen."

"Stay away from Ruth. Let her know you don't give a damn about her. When she marries me—I'll tear up your old man's note."

Larry stared at the banker, trying to see his expression, but his face was only a dark blob in the thin light. He said, "That don't sound like you, Flanneran."

"She's been holding me off because she thinks she loves you. With you out of the way she'll marry me. Is it a deal?"

"No deal, Flanneran." He turned up the path toward the house.

CHAPTER**3***Gunman's Showdown*

Larry wasted five days futilely asking for a loan. Every banker from Delta to Ouray told him the same thing. It didn't make any difference if John Lane owned all of Elk Park and the ditch to boot. Nobody had ten thousand to loan. Larry sensed fear and doubt in the men he talked to. None would admit it, but he saw they were afraid their banks might fail.

It was the old story of the man who had cash money being on top when times are hard. Breck Flanneran had the cash, he had made a lucky loan to John Lane, and John Lane was caught. All Flanneran had to do was to wait until the plum was ripe and catch it when it dropped from the tree.

Larry ate dinner the fifth day at Ridge-way, gloom a darkness moving in around him. He had failed. Now, with two days

left, he had no hope, no plan. He knew, also, Flanneran never intended to keep his promise even if Ruth married him.

It was when Larry left the restaurant that he saw the little man with the black bag. He was old, perhaps seventy, with a yellow-skinned face as wrinkled as the last apple in the barrel. He sat close to the counter, hugging a battered black bag on his lap, watching the men around him warily.

Outside, Larry looked back through the window. The old man was staring worriedly at two gunmen who were idling behind him along the wall.

Larry waited until the old man had finished his meal and came outside, one hand clutching the bag, the other in his coat pocket. Larry stepped up behind him as he started toward the train, asking, "Anything I can do for you?"

The old man spun toward him, faded eyes wide with a fear that was close to panic. "Get away from me. I've got a derringer in my pocket. Get away."

"Those two hombres—"

"Get away I tell you."

Angered, Larry wheeled toward his horse. Let the old fool get held up for whatever he had in his bag. The gunmen who had been watching in the restaurant followed the old man to the train, both eyeing Larry with cool amusement. The anger died in Larry as he rode out of town. He couldn't blame the oldster. One stranger with a gun on his hip would look much like another to him. Besides, it wasn't any of Larry's business. He had too much trouble of his own to waste worry on the old man and his black bag.

It was dark before Larry reached Placerville on the San Miguel. He stabled his horse, took a hotel room and had supper. The train had pulled in hours before him, and he had forgotten the old man and the two hardcases. Now memory rushed back, for they were all here again. The oldster was at the counter drinking coffee, the black bag hugged between his knees, the gunmen at a table behind him. Only—now the Red Bend marshal, Flint Hake, was with the two hardcases.

Quickly Larry stepped back through the door and out of the light. He wasn't sure, but he thought that Hake had not



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seen him. The marshal's attention was fixed on the old man.

There was an early morning stage bound down the river. The chances were good that the oldster was headed for Red Bend. Larry waited until the old man had finished his supper and gone to the hotel. Hake and the other two followed. Once before he reached the hotel, the oldster swung around to look behind him. Hake and his friends stopped. The street was too dark for the old man to see them. He hurried on, Hake and the others following. Larry held his position by the restaurant until the four of them went into the hotel. He followed, saw that the lobby was empty, went in.

"Who is the old gent with the bag?" Larry asked the clerk.

"Signed his name here." The clerk ran his finger down the list. "Here it is. Plummer. Ed Plummer. Comes from Cripple Creek."

"Plummer!" The name was jolted out of Larry. Ed Plummer was the man John Lane had loaned twelve thousand dollars to years ago. "Where's he going?"

"Red Bend, I guess," the clerk answered. "Or Paradox maybe. He just said to get him up in time to catch the down river stage."

ED PLUMMER was on his way to Red Bend to pay John Lane what he owed him! Larry sat down in the corner of the lobby and built another cigarette. Plummer's actions were a giveaway to what he had in his bag. Larry couldn't guess how Hake and the others had picked up the scent, but if Plummer was on his way to pay back the old debt to John Lane, twelve thousand dollars would be enough to attract vultures like the three who were trailing him.

Larry toed out his cigarette and returned to the desk. "You know Flint Hake?"

"Sure. He's the Red Bend marshal."

"Who were the two with him?"

Suspicion worked into the clerk. He reached under the counter for a gun, eyes showing hostility. "What's it to you?"

"John Lane's my father. I'm Larry Lane."

The clerk relaxed. "I know John well, but I guess you left the country before I got this job."

"Plummer is an old friend of Dad's. He doesn't know me, so if I went to his room, he'd probably be suspicious. I have a hunch he's got dinero in that black bag he's hugging all the time."

The clerk grinned. "He acts like it. Touchy as hell."

"What's Hake's room number?"

"He's beside Plummer. He's got ten. Plummer's room is twelve." The clerk pulled at an ear as if puzzled. "The whole thing's damned funny. Hake came in this morning and got his room. Then he paid for the one next to his and said that a gent named Plummer would be in either tonight or tomorrow night, but I wasn't to tell him who got his room for him. Plummer couldn't figger it out when I told him, but he took it. Only one I had."

The pattern began to appear. Certainty grew in Larry that Plummer was aiming to pay John Lane back. And maybe Breck Flanneran had found out

somehow and meant to prevent the money from reaching John Lane.

"Thanks," Larry said, and went up the stairs.

He moved slowly along the dimly lighted hall. He reached ten, paused to listen, but heard nothing. Going on, he tapped lightly on twelve. No answer. He turned the knob and pushed. The door was locked.

Larry put his face against the door. "Plummer."

"Get away," the old man yelled. "I'll shoot you through the door if you don't let me alone."

Larry stepped away and swung to watch the door of Room Ten. He waited, hand on gun butt, but the door remained closed. He catfooted back along the hall and down the stairs to the lobby.

Larry went back to the restaurant and had his supper. He considered camping along the river and riding on to Red Bend in the morning, but gave it up. Plummer was the one chance his father had. When Larry finished eating, he went back to the hotel and took the corner chair in the

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lobby. If there was trouble, he'd be on hand.

It came with unexpected and explosive violence. Larry had dropped off to sleep; the clerk was dozing back of the desk. First there was the crash of the door being battered open, of Ed Plummer's frantic yell, "Stay out." Then the derringer's report, the crash of heavy Colts.

Larry was across the lobby and up the stairs before the echo of gunfire had died. Still, he was too late. One man lay in the doorway of Plummer's room. Hake and the other one were racing for the back stairs. Hake was in front and going down before Larry reached the hall. He fired once, sending Hake's man into a stumbling fall, but Hake was out of sight.

Jumping over the body of the man he had shot, Larry ran along the hall and down the back stairs. He reached the alley, heard the beat of hoofs, and glimpsed the shadowy bulk of horse and rider. He fired futile, wasted bullets.

Back at Plummer's room, he was sick with a prodding sense of failure. He had failed because he hadn't guessed that Hake would smash Plummer's door open and shoot him. He had credited Hake with too much sense to rob and murder in the clumsy way he had.

The doors along the hall were open and a dozen men had crowded around Plummer. One of them, a doctor, said, "He isn't hit so bad."

Larry pushed through the circle and knelt beside the wounded man. He said, "I'm John Lane's son."

Life seemed to flow back into the old man. "You get that money back. I owed it to your dad."

"I'll get it," Larry said.

LARRY left Placerville at once, but Hake's horse was fresh, and Larry's roan was worn down with steady travel. Time was against him, for the instant the money was given to Breck Flanneran, there would be no way to prove it was Ed Plummer's.

The road followed the north side of the river, a long slice of black, star-studded sky framed overhead between the high walls of the canyon. The hours slid by, Larry riding with alert attention. Flint

SIX-SHOOTER SHADOWS

Hake was entirely unpredictable. He might stop to listen, and hearing Larry's horse, wait to ambush his pursuer.

Faint dawn promise was showing in the east when Larry crossed the river and followed the narrow road angling up the south wall of the canyon. Hake could not stay in the Park. He'd deliver the money to Flanneran and ride on, or he'd just ride on. Either way Flanneran would have what he wanted, for John Lane would be smashed, Whit Royal and the settlers would be in Flanneran's hands, and Ruth . . . Larry would not think of that. Flanneran would die first at Larry Lane's hand.

Circling Red Bend, Larry rode into the town from the east, daylight washing across the land in steadily deepening waves. He reined up in front of his father's house.

John Lane was up and dressed. He heard Larry come in and stepped out of the kitchen into the hall, a lamp in his hand, eagerly asking, "Larry, did you have any luck?"

"A little," Larry said. "I aim to push it now. Where does Baggot stay?"

"He has a room in the hotel. End of the hall on the right side. What are you going to do, Larry?"

He told his father about Plummer, and he saw how satisfaction warmed the older man.

"I'm glad about Ed," Lane breathed. "Where does Flanneran live?"

"In the white house back of the bank." Lane took a long breath. "Larry, what are you going to do?"

"Get your money. Go after Whit Royal. Take your gun."

"You can't prove anything."

"I'll prove it," Larry said.

He wheeled out of the house, heard his father cry out, "It isn't worth getting killed over, Larry," but he went on. Mounting, he rode on into town, and raked his roan in front of the hotel.

There was no sign of life along the street. Larry paused, gaze sweeping the dust strip, wishing he knew for sure what Hake had done. A rooster crowed from somewhere at the edge of town. Somebody was chopping wood, the sound of

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ax on pine a sharp clear ring in the thin air. Larry went in, crossed the deserted lobby and climbed the stairs. He tried Baggot's door, found that it was locked, and drawing back, smashed the door open with a single thrust of a hard-muscled shoulder.

Baggot was in bed. He reared up, hair tousled, shouting, "What's the meaning of this?"

Larry shut the door, put a chair against it, and crossing the room, raised the shade. When he swung around, Baggot recognized him, and throwing back his covers, lunged for the door. Larry grabbed him by the collar of his nightshirt and jerking the teller back on his heels, ripped it across the shoulders.

"Let me out of here," Baggot bawled.

Larry gripped the man's round soft neck between thumb and forefinger of his right hand and squeezed. "Shut up."

The man whimpered, tried to jerk free, and suddenly became still. "What do you want?"

Larry pulled him around and pushed him down on the bed. "Two men were killed last night in Placerville robbing Ed Plummer. Hake got away with his money. What do you know about it?"

Baggot began to tremble, round face going entirely white. He whispered, "I don't know anything about it."

Larry drew his gun. He said without feeling, "Baggot, you're tied up with a crook. You know that. I don't want to kill you, but I will if that's what it takes to stop Flanneran."

Baggot tried to get up, but the strength was not in his body. He breathed, "I haven't done anything wrong, Lane. It's Flanneran who wants to break your father. Killing me won't change anything."

"No, but your testimony will change everything. Two men were trailing Plummer. Hake was waiting for them in Placerville. That don't look like an accident, Baggot." Larry pronged the hammer of his gun back, an ominous sound in the quiet. "I'm listening, Baggot."

The teller stared at Larry, and what he saw in the tough weather-burned face

SIX-SHOOTER SHADOWS

helped him make up his mind. He swallowed. "Will you protect me from Flanneran if I tell you?"

"I'll do all I can."

Baggot swallowed again. "Flanneran was Plummer's partner in Leadville. That was before Plummer went to Cripple Creek. Flanneran had heard Plummer tell about this country and how your dad had loaned him twelve thousand dollars without security. Plummer said he was going to pay it back. He wanted to show everybody who had called your dad crazy that it was the smartest thing he ever did.

"Flanneran came over here, liked the country and started the bank. When he got your dad in a corner, he sent a couple of men to Cripple Creek to watch Plummer, knowing that Plummer was the only man who could give your dad enough to pay his debt to the bank. They got word to Flanneran that he was starting out with a bagful of money, so Hake waited for them at Placerville."

Larry motioned with his gun toward the bureau. "Get some paper. Write down what you told me and sign it."

"Flanneran'll kill me if I do."

"I'll kill you if you don't."

For a long moment Baggot stared at the gun in Larry's hand. Then he said a surprising thing. "I hope you'll kill Flanneran. I've been ashamed to look at myself too long." He rose, found paper and ink, and wrote what Larry had told him to. He signed it and handed it to Larry.

"Was I you, I'd be on the upriver stage today, Baggot." Pocketing the paper, Larry wheeled out of the room.

WHEN Larry came into the street, he saw that the town had not yet wakened, that neither his father nor Whit Royal were in sight. He strode along the boardwalk to the bank and around it, knowing that if Hake had not ridden on, he'd need help. Baggot had been ashamed of his part in Flanneran's scheming, but that shame would be overpowered by his fear of Flanneran once the banker faced him.

Larry checked his gun as he strode around the bank building. Flanneran's

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house faced the opposite way, and as Larry came into the alley between them, he saw a lathered horse standing behind the house, head down. *Hake had not ridden on.*

Again doubts spilled over Larry like a thundering avalanche. It was broad daylight now. If Hake had suspected he was being followed, they'd be ready for him inside the house, but he couldn't turn back now. He strode into the house, eyes swinging around the kitchen. It was empty, but aspen wood was cracking in the stove.

The door into the front parlor was shut. Larry threw it open. They were there, Hake and Flanneran, the black bag on the oak table between them. They wheeled to face him as the kitchen door swung open, and at first he thought they were surprised to see him. Neither had a gun in his hand. Then he caught the insolent mocking smile on Flanneran's lips, and he sensed that he had stepped into a baited trap.

"So you walk into a man's house without knocking, do you, Lane?" Flanneran said softly. "We don't stand for that in Red Bend these days. Arrest him, marshal. You can see he had robbery in mind."

The bland gall of it shocked Larry. "Damn you for a fool, Flanneran," he cried. "That star Hake packs won't keep him from going to the pen for robbing and shooting Ed Plummer."

Flanneran's brows lifted in mock surprise. "Can you prove that Flint shot and robbed this man you mention?"

"Plummer is going to live," Larry flung at him. "He'll testify."

"Suppose the robber wore a mask when he was in Plummer's room?" Flanneran asked.

"Hell, I saw Hake going down the stairs. I can testify."

"But you didn't see him rob and shoot Plummer, did you?" Flanneran shook his head. "You have no proof against our marshal, Lane. Your father used to be the big wampus on this range, but he's finished. We're a long ways from the county seat and the sheriff lets us alone."

"That black bag on the table—" Larry pointed—"that's Plummer's. Hake stole

SIX-SHOOTER SHADOWS

it. I suppose you'll claim I put it there."

"Not at all," Flanneran said easily. "It's been my bag for years. It has my initials on it." He opened it and showed Larry the contents. "Just a few of my clothes. I'm making a trip. I thought I'd go with the marshal when he takes you to the county seat. I want to tell the sheriff about how you broke into my house and tried to rob me. Get his gun, Flint."

Flanneran could make it stick. Hake would swear to anything the banker told him, and their combined testimony would send Larry Lane to prison once that he was disarmed and handcuffed. Plummer's money was somewhere in the house, but there was no way to find it and prove it wasn't Flanneran's.

"Just a minute, marshal," Larry said. "You know I won't give you my gun, don't you?"

"Then I'll kill you," Hake said tonelessly. "I've killed men who were a hell of a lot faster than you." Hake was a killer, certain of his speed with the gun he had spent so much time learning to use, certain that he could beat him to the draw.

"All right, Flanneran," Larry said. "The way you figure it, I've got two choices. If I pull, Hake drills me. If I submit to arrest, you'll make your frame stick."

"That's about the size of it." Flanneran nodded compacently. "Which way you aiming to play it?"

"I'll submit to arrest. When you get me into court, I'll produce a signed statement from Baggot telling that you sent Hake to rob Ed Plummer.

Flanneran stroked his mustache. It was one thing he had not considered.

"You're lying," Flanneran said. "Baggot hasn't got the guts to buck me."

"You wouldn't know how an honest man feels. Anyway, Flanneran, I've got the paper."

"Let's see it," the banker said coldly.

Larry shook his head. "You'll see it when you get me to the county seat. You wouldn't keep a bargain, Flanneran. You're just too damned smart, trying to plug every hole in the boat. You missed one and it'll swamp you."



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Hot Dogies for the Lone Star

(Continued from page 8)

The dance, he promised, would come later.

With a sackful of these notes, Colonel Hunter hid himself to Uncle John's Jingle-Bob in Bosque Grande, New Mexico. The Colonel wanted to buy some of Uncle John's fine cows. How many? Oh, let's say twenty-thousand or so.

The Colonel named a figure. Uncle John gulped; then he leaped at the offer. Never had New Mexico heard of such prices! And never had Texas had such a Colonel!

John Chisum set his punchers to work rounding up the critters. The Colonel was there to see that they didn't shove in any culls and scrubs. The Colonel knew Uncle John from way back.

In the meantime the Colonel's partner, Jesse Evans, had gone to Dodge City to hire fifty hard-bitten, gun-slinging cowhands. With these he started driving the twenty-thousand dogies to the Lone Star State while Colonel Hunter and Uncle John hiked to Las Vegas to settle up. The Colonel's word, John Chisum knew, was as good as gold.

It was. It was, as a matter of fact, as good as Uncle John's.

In the back room of a Las Vegas saloon, the Colonel dumped his sackful of notes on the table and told Uncle John to help himself. Uncle John hit the ceiling and let out such a beller, you could hear it clear down to Fort Worth and Austin. He hollered so loud, the sheriff came in to see if by chance Uncle John was getting murdered.

Uncle John swore he was. Only, the notes were O.K. There was John Chisum's signature staring him and the sheriff straight in the eye and defying them to say it wasn't so.

Uncle John was so damn mad, he tried to hire Billy the Kid and cohorts to go after Jesse Evans and his fifty fighting men. But Billy said, no, thank you. Billy had other cows to brand. And anyhow, the twenty-thousand dogies were in Texas by now.

Uncle John went home, crestfallen and disconsolate. Whenever after that episode he went outdoors of nights, he kept his eyes to the ground. He couldn't stare a twinkling star in the face no more.

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INDIAN



ONG ago, in the days when the pioneer, the settler and the soldier were wrestling the West from the Indian, newspapers ran thousands of exciting accounts of their struggle against the redman.

Out of it all grew a general conception of the Indian, his appearance, his customs, his manner. The public drew a picture of the Indian that was a composite of fact, fiction and exaggeration.

It's a picture that exists, without much change, even to this day. And it's chock-full of boners.

Like the color of the Indian's skin—red as the devil's own. Actually his skin ran through various hues of copper and brown. But he painted himself with red pigments, such as found in other clay, which gave his skin a permanent wash-proof stain. If he exists at all, the Indian anywhere whose skin is actually red is as rare a sight as an Eskimo in the desert.

The Indian was tall, slender, muscular, possessed of a handsome physique we are told. He looked tall, usually because of his high-feathered bonnets. Actually, the average Indian was comparatively short. And more often than not he was just as bandy legged as you would expect of any veteran cowhand.

Nor did he stay slender for long. The tendency toward flabbiness and the development of a paunch came early in the Indian's life—much earlier than it does in that of the white man.

The ability to endure pain without expression or whimper seemed an admirable and enviable trait. The Indian could do it through sheer power of will. But—he had to know when and from what source the pain was coming. Let him step on a nail or touch something hot and he'd let out a yelp just like anyone else.

Often the Indian submitted his captives to assorted types of torture. This did not necessarily mean that he intended cruelty for cruelty's sake. Proud of his own cour-

BONERS

age, he welcomed and expected torture from his captors. For then he could demonstrate his bravery. It seemed only reasonable that he should afford his captives the same opportunity. That was just his reasoning.

The Indian was stonily impassive. Rarely, if ever, did he laugh or smile. This was not a part of his true nature. Among strangers he was inclined to be shy, even embarrassed. And of the white man he was wary, always wary. But among his own he was full of fun. He laughed and smiled, jested and played pranks. He reveled in games.

Doubtless he'd liked to have scalped the man who started the story that no Indian baby ever cried. Indian babies could wail as loudly and lustily as any other—and generally did.

He'd kill the senile, the crippled, or the hopelessly ill among his kin. This was not to escape the responsibility or the annoyance that went with their care, but as an act of mercy.

He had his images and his idols, but he didn't worship them for themselves. They were his symbols through which he paid homage to the Great Spirit.

Integrity was something that the Indian cherished. A promise was something to be kept. Such was not the case with the white man in his dealings with the Indian. Time and time again the Indian saw the white man break his word. The Indian soon realized he had to fight fire with fire, treachery with treachery. He did not like it. It was entirely contrary to his kind nature.

The public took a long time before it got around to seeing the Indian as anything but a fiend incarnate, ruthless, barbarous, about as an inhuman a creature as ever walked the face of the earth in search of blood.

But it turned out that he was human after all, and more a human being, perhaps, than many of his conquerors.

—J.W.Q.

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(Continued from page 12)

od was simple—he purchased anything and everything that looked as though it were about to fall apart. Rusty iron cots salvaged from scrap heaps, crude packing cases, broken china, tin eating utensils with the green mold of age upon them—the most incredible and certainly the most completely worthless excuses for furnishings.

They were old, all right. No one could sit down on a chair without risking a shattered spine. Twice Mrs. Jim broke her leg when her bed resolved into sawdust beneath her. But Jim was satisfied. His house had class.

Meanwhile, every sharp merchant and many equally sharp amateurs were reaping huge profits at McGowan's expense. To buy an old milking stool for two bits and sell it to a crazy man for two hundred dollars seemed like an easy way to make money. The racket went on for nearly seven years. Then, quite accidentally, Jim tumbled to it.

A man who had sold him quite a lot of his so-called antiques sent over on approval one day a load of furniture that seemed to Jim faintly familiar. The merchant insisted it was "real Mayflower in origin" and that it had sailed from Holland with the early Pilgrim Fathers, but Mrs. Jim recognized it immediately.

"Why, that's real Mayflower, all right!" she exclaimed happily. "That's the furniture we threw away when we came back from Europe—the furniture we bought at the Mayflower Home Store in Kansas City!"

Long Jim never made another purchase. He lived on among his crumbling treasures as before, but they brought him no joy. The day before he died he sat in the middle of his fifty-foot drawing room, passing the bottle among some of his old gold-rush cronies. Sadly, he surveyed the assembled furnishings, brooding again about how he had been tricked.

"Just think," he remarked to his pal, George Upton, who had figured with him in the Lucky Seven strike of '78, "I'll never know, now, how much of this is genuine antique and how much is just plain Kansas City junk!"

Lightnin' Brands a Cattle King

(Continued from page 27)

Roy Irwin asked if Katie and Hurl wanted him to ride to Hurl's ranch with them.

"I should say not," said Katie. "You need him, Hurl?"

"Nope." Hurl managed a grin. The glazed look left his eyes. "Me'n Katie may need you. But we don't want you tagging along."

They rode off together, hand in hand. The rain was starting. The thunder rolled and crashed and the chain lightning ripped the sky.

"I was scared to stay alone at the ranch. Then, I thought you might be needin' me."

"Put on your slicker." Hurl reined up.

"Scared, Katie?" he asked when the storm hit, and the wind-driven rain was at their backs.

"You bet I'm scared, Hurl."

"Me, too!" Hurl Davenport had to shout to make himself heard above the crashing thunder.

"We'll lick it!" shouted Katie.

"Sure thing. Together."

The lightning struck and the clap of thunder was deafening. They clung to each other's hands as they rode along.

"Will you, Katie?"

"What?"

"Just when that lightnin' struck—I asked you would you marry me," he shouted.

"That's why I came out—hoping you'd ask me—to be your wife. Yes."

"What?"

Katie pulled up. She leaned sideways in her saddle, her rain-washed face pale, her red hair curly. Her face was close to his.

Hurl was white lipped but he blinked the rain from his eyes. His bridle reins dropped. His arms went around her and their lips met and clung and held.

"Yes. I want to be your wife."

Then the thunderclap deafened them and they were clinging to each other. Their lips met and held.

Then they grinned at each other.

"That did it, Hurl."

"That did it, Katie."

They rode home together in the storm.

THE END

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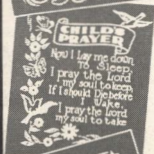
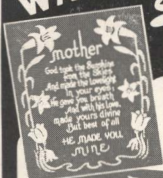
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