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DEAD-END TRAIL**

by JOHN M.
CUNNINGHAM

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● **SONS OF EMPIRE**

by WILLIAM R. COX

● **THE DEVIL IN
LEX HARDISON**

by THOMAS
THOMPSON

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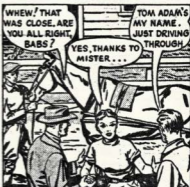
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"BABS" WEBB IS GIVING HER FAVORITE TROTTER
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VOLUME XXXV

FEBRUARY, 1948

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Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 24, 1941, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1948, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 15c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.80; other countries 2c. additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Petty, 206 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U. S. A.



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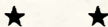
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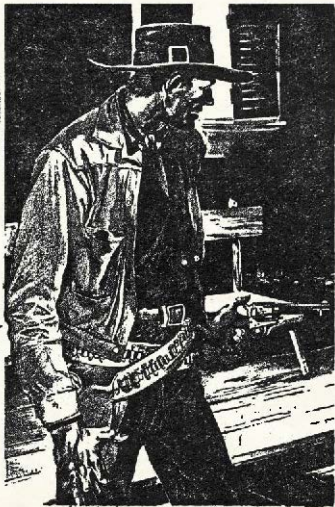
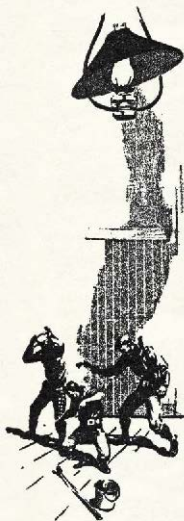
●WLH●O●T●E●R'S

Rousing Novel of the Old West

By **JOHN M. CUNNINGHAM**



Very quietly, he centered on
Pepper's chest . . .



DEAD-END TRAIL

As inexorably as a boomerang, Alabam's decree of "Death to all quitters!" winged back home. For now the outlaw boss himself was defying the gang's ruthless code—and his own brother's blood-vengeance oath.

CHAPTER

Owlhoot's Jackpot

1

Alabam Morgan dipped his hooked fingers into the grease can and scooped out a gob. His brother Hutch squatted by the fire and watched Alabam rub the bacon grease into the scar on his wrist.

"Who's going to kill Flip?" Hutch asked. "You?"

"We're going to draw lots," Alabam said. "You're going to hold the straws with the short one next your fingernail.



I'm going to pull it. Nobody's going to kill Flip. I'm going to warn him, and then I'm going to quit."

Hutch slowly picked a stem of the sun-cured mountain meadow hay and slid it between his pursed lips. "You sure picked a hell of a time to take the notion, brother. When we're hunting a man down for doing just that thing."

Alabam stopped rubbing and examined the small white scar on the inner side of his wrist with minute care.

"It just come to me, Hutch. Last night. I'm fed up. Maybe it's this hunting Flip that's fed me up, I don't know. Maybe it's just I feel my luck's running out." He rubbed the scar again with his thumb, and flexed his fingers, wincing. "I reckon I should see a real good vet about this, Hutch."

"You through with the grease?"

"Yeah."

"Then you better put it back by the coals to melt down a little. Pepper sees those finger marks in it, he might put two and two together about your arm getting well." Hutch lifted the tomato can by its ragged-edged lid and set it down next to the fire.

He said: "You aren't serious, Alabam?"

Alabam nodded slowly.

Hutch laughed shortly. "Listen, Alabam, I can understand how a man can dream about it. But you can't quit the gang and you know it. They won't let you, any more'n they're letting Flip get away with it." He held the stem up between his forefinger and his thumb, in a precise manner, like a lady orchestra leader. "You know what I think you need? I think you need to go on a good two-day drunk."

"It isn't that simple."

"That's a damn sight simpler than you quitting and making me have to hunt you all over the territory with the gang to kill you, like we're doing with Flip."

Alabam looked at him steadily. "You won't have to, son. You're coming with me."

Hutch burst into sudden, bright laughter. The sound of it shut up the jays and the squirrels in the pines and left the little meadow bright and still under the sun. Alabam could hear the tinkle of water from the creek in the silence, and he looked hard at Hutch.

"What do you mean by that? I say you're quitting, and you're quitting."

Hutch's laughter died and he sat chuckling to himself. "Why in hell should I, Alabam? I'm making plenty of money out of this deal. Why should I quit?"

Alabam's eyelids lowered a little and his mouth tightened. "I let you in this gang cause I wanted to. I let you out cause I want to."

"Now wait a minute, Alabam," Hutch said, his chuckling gone and his eyes hard. He put the stem down carefully and hunkered there with his fingertips touching the ground beside him, ready to rise. "I'm not a kid any more, Alabam. It's past the time when I did what you said cause you said it. Two years in the hills makes a pile of difference."

Alabam regarded him silently, his face set and darkening. "You're right it does. That's one reason why I'm quitting. You've seen enough of this. We both have. We're going down to warn Flip and get his help and Jordan's, too, if need be. That's four of us against Pepper and the Goose and Salty and Reinstellar. Four against four. If that doesn't scare 'em into laying off, we'll shoot it out with them."

Hutch looked right into his eyes, his face equally dark. His voice was soft. "I can see you've been doing a lot of thinking, Alabam. But it doesn't go with me. If you quit, I'll be hunting you, just like the others will, even though you are my brother."

ALABAM looked at him sharply. "You been talking a lot to Pepper lately? About getting rich quick?"

"He's no fool."

"You'll never get rich in this game. There ain't enough banks in the world, the way we've spent it. I was crazy ever to start it. I should have done just what Jordan said and swallowed that rustling charge, just like he said, and started again."

Hutch leaned forward, his face sharp. "There'd be enough banks if we hit 'em. Pepper says the only reason why we're broke now is because of you holding off for two months."

Alabam looked away from him, toward the spikes of spruce rising against the pale Montana sky, washed out as a homestead-

Hutch said: "It's too late now, Alabam. You can't go back."

Alabam stood up, his mouth set as though to spit. "Like hell it's too late." He stopped looking at that lonely sky and looked at his brother with his eyes inviting friendship; but all they saw was a hard and unaccustomed shrewdness. "You coming with me for my gun practice?"

Hutch stood up begrudgingly. Alabam turned away from the fire and walked west across the meadow toward the pines.

He led Hutch into the pines, the heels of his boots sinking into the deep bed of needles. Pushing his way through the spruce and crunching and crackling the dry, bone-gray skeletons of pine branches under foot, he walked north toward the end of the saddle where the flat gave out and steeped down the ridge again.

It was quiet, in the last of the open places, close to the sky and warm in the sun. He looked out over the Little Pine valley, far down over the pin-pointed spruce, miles down the slope of the mountain to where the alder and the cottonwood blended in and civilized the cold blue-green, and beyond that to the yellow-gray sage, and across that to the fold in the plain where he knew Little Pine lay. He stood there half-smiling while the warmth of good memories moved upward inside him, meeting the sun on the outside.

"It wouldn't be Louisa, would it," Hutch asked from behind him, "that started you thinking this way?"

"What do you know about Louisa and me?"

"Hell, you think I didn't know, just like everybody else?" With you and her mooning all over the place and little sister Jenny pining after you? Hell, it was better than a play."

The smile on Alabam's face died, and he said nothing. He was beginning to dislike the tone of Hutch's voice; that shrewd, penetrating man's judgment still mixed with the cockiness of a boy's guesses.

Hutch said: "If you are, you'd better forget it. She's married to our brother Jordan."

Alabam's right fist half-clenched. "You don't need to be reminding me of my manners, son." He turned around and saw Hutch's expression of open boldness close up with sullenness.

"And don't be calling me 'son,' Alabam. I'm no son of yours."

Looking at him, Alabam drew his right gun slowly and began rodding the cartridges out of the cylinder. "You going to help me with my practice?"

Hutch's eyes drooped sullenly, looking at the gun. There was stubbornness and unwillingness in his face, but slowly he emptied his gun also and stood back twenty feet.

"All right," Alabam said, "let's go."

THEY holstered their empty pistols. Alabam waited. Hutch's hand went for his suddenly and Alabam's hand flashed like its shadow. His gun was out, the web of his thumb cocking the hammer as the butt came up into his palm. Hutch's hammer fell with a dry click as Alabam's fore and middle-fingers jammed in the trigger guard.

He stood there and painfully forced the two fingers to work separately, curling the middle apart from the first, trying to keep his mouth still as the hot, dry pain burned in his wounded arm.

Hutch stood there with the gun hanging loosely in his hand. His eyes were cold.

"What're you going to do? You've been trying to use that shot-up hand for two weeks now, Alabam. It's not doing any better. What you going to do?"

Alabam let the gun hang at his side. "I don't know. Trv the left. I guess." He holstered the right gun. "Go ahead."

Again they went through the motions, Alabam this time using his left hand, his trigger falling a hair behind Hutch's. Sweat began to seep out of his forehead and his mouth wore into a constant twist. Sometimes his hand overshoot the butt of his gun in its holster, sometimes it landed too hard. Sometimes everything went smoothly, but never with the lightening naturalness of the right hand. Finally he stood still, panting slightly.

"What's the score?"

"I didn't keep score. There wasn't any use. You weren't close to being even. You just died twenty times, Alabam, that's all."

Alabam took the gun out and threw it on the ground. It bounced on the pine bed. He kicked dirt over it. "Curse the gun!" He stood there, both hands clenched, his

mouth drawn out at the corners and his face red.

"That ain't going to do you no good, Alabam," Hutch said quietly. He waited a moment while Alabam collected himself. "It just comes down to this. You aren't a good shot any more, brother. You aren't even a middling shot. From now on Pepper's got to take the lead, and you've got to run by the wheel. That's all there is in the cards."

Alabam looked up at him slowly. "I'm just sorry for one thing. I'm sorry I didn't call Pepper before I got shot up. I could have quit it clean, with a winning fight, then."

Hutch nodded and looked at the ground. He went over to the gun and picked it up and shook the dirt and needles off of it. "I grant you that. But it's too late now. You'd best just turn the lead over to Pepper friendly-like, Alabam, and carry along behind." He held the gun out to his brother.

Alabam took it, wiped it on his pants, and returned it to its holster. "Hutch, come along with me. We'll quit and ride on down and join up with Flip."

Hutch just shook his head.

Alabam said: "It's the only chance I've got, Hutch."

"I like it the way it is."

The friendly look went off Alabam's face. He took a step toward him. "Listen, Hutch. You came up to me two years ago and asked for a place in my gang. I gave it to you. You're still under my orders."

Hutch took a step back, out of reach. His face had that scared kid-brother look that Alabam knew.

"We're quitting tonight, when I go down pretending like I'm going to get Flip," Alabam said, taking another step. "I'm going to get you out of this while you're still alive. Now give me your word before we go back and meet Pepper."

HUTCH shook his head stubbornly. Then as they stood there facing each other, the scared-kid look vanished and he straightened up like a man. "It just came over me, Alabam. You're not my boss any more. I'm my own boss."

Alabam's hands went to his belt-buckle and slowly pulled it apart. The holsters fell to the ground. "I know who's boss. I'll make you see it for your own good."

"I think I know what's got into you. You've seen this country again and remembered Louisa, and now she's got in your blood again and you want to quit."

"It isn't Louisa. I've just seen how it should have been, us ranching up here. In peace. Not getting buried in a ditch, like Hendry. I've seen that Jordan was right."

The blood was getting heavy in Alabam's head. "You're right, I do want to see Louisa. She's in my blood and she always will be. But I don't want to see her because I want to get her away from Jordan. Just cause she's decent. And I'm decent when I think of her."

Hutch spat on the ground in front of him. "I'll tell you why you're quitting—because you're just downright scared of Pepper, that's all. Now you found out your arm's shot for good, you just want a quick way out."

Alabam's fist flashed out like a rattlesnake's strike and caught the other in the teeth in the middle of a word. Hutch's eyes closed and he bent over, his hands to his mouth. Alabam drew his fist back, his knuckles bleeding a little from tooth-cuts.

Then Hutch's eyes opened and he was into Alabam like a wildcat, knocking him over backward. They rolled on the ground, furiously struggling for the top. Alabam came up and stayed there, sitting astride the other. He sat there with his fist ready. Hutch's eyes burned up at him.

Alabam got up and stepped away.

"Get up," he said.

Hutch rose, and they stood there, trembling and panting.

"Come again," Alabam said, waiting. "I'll show you who's boss."

Hutch stood still. "You can go to hell. You're no boss. You're a lousy quitter, a double-crossing traitor. Go ahead and quit, you dirty son!"

Alabam walked toward him, his face set. Hutch dived and came up again from one of the gun belts, a pistol in his hand. Alabam stopped.

"Come ahead," Hutch said in a low voice. "Or grab a gun yourself, you beat-out bum. You'll never lick me again."

Alabam stood looking at him, watching the white, dirty, bleeding face snarling like an animal in a trap; and slowly the anger

and fury and rage drained out of him. "We're fools, boy. Come, lay down your gun. I meant the best for both of us. I'm sorry I went at things the wrong way."

Hutch spat blood on the ground. His face lost its trapped look and contempt came into it again.

"I'll tell you this: leave the gang and I'll hunt you down with the rest of them. And glad of the chance. Do what you want, you stinking faker; it makes no difference to me. I'm through with you."

Alabam said: "Cause you think I'm licked. Is that it?"

"I'm through with you. That's enough. Pepper was right. You're a coward. You've got soft—that's why you held us off that Laramie bank." He picked up his belt and looked up square into Alabam's eyes. "It's up to you, what you do. Either you go down tonight and finish off Fip like you're supposed to, or you side with him. Take your pick. And whichever you do, I don't give a damn!"

He turned abruptly and walked away, not looking back once.

CHAPTER

2

Boomerang Law

Alabam stood there with his guns on the ground, looking after him, listening as the dry crackle of fallen pine died between the trees. He turned and wiped the sweat and dust off his face with the back of his sleeve, stooped and collected his guns. Then he sat down, facing the valley, his elbows locked round his knees and his forehead resting on the backs of his wrists.

From far below he heard the talking murmur of the creek, gathering voice with a thousand feet of fall. The cut on his knuckles stung. A fly buzzed around his hand and he shook it away, and raised his head, looking far over the valley.

"Curse the day I ever left this place," he said to the air around him. "Curse the day I ever got proud."

Little snatches of memories kept coming up through him like hornets out of a well: the smell of his mother's clean, starched apron; the warmth of wooden sidewalks under his bare feet; the sound of Louisa's laughter across the road in the evening. All thoughts of peace and of quiet, all soft and as a man should live, coming up and

melting the cold, stiff ribs of his pride.

Sure, old Beldauer had called him a thief and thought he'd proved it, but what was that in the end? Beldauer was dead three years, and the empty vengeance that had made him hit the road was dead with him, and the remains of his pride as brittle as an old woman's bones.

Hutch was right. He'd gone soft. He couldn't shoot his way out of a paper bag—and what was worse, he didn't want to. That was the worst. He didn't want to.

He looked at the scar on his wrist, and thought he saw in it a sign. That was a mark like death, come as a warning. *You've got to pay, it said. You got yourself into this mess, and you've got to get yourself out of it, and you'll have to pay fare. And fare for Hutch too, because you let him in it. . . .*

And then he realized what it was that he wanted, what the softness in him amounted to. He wanted children, that was the core of it. The feeling of land owned and fenced, of cattle with his own brand on them, and not somebody else's.

He heard the shout of a man turning a horse out, and looked over his shoulder toward the camp. That would be Pepper and the Goose, come back. He got to his feet and looked down the slope of the mountain. One way to do it would be to start walking: Just go right on down through the trees, without good-by or argument, walk into Little Pine and the hell with them.

Only it wasn't that simple because they'd be down after him, with Hutch on their side; and Jordan would be mixed up in it, and Louisa.

He turned and walked back toward the camp, his head down.

Across the flat, through the pines, he could see Pepper and Salty busy at the carcass of a calf they had hung from the branches of a tree, Salty skinning and Pepper directing.

He stopped at the edge of the meadow and reloaded his right gun, studiously cleaning each of the five cartridges of the grit, lint and tobacco-dust they had accumulated in his jeans pocket.

HE WEIGHTED them in his hand, and gazed across the grass at Pepper's short, sturdy back. Pepper was standing

with his feet apart, his knuckles on his hips, his head back as usual in order to see from under the brim of the hat he wore at an aggressive, sharp-cut angle. From his fingers to the carving butts of his guns was about two inches.

Alabam gauged the distance speculatively, then looked at his right hand and smiled wryly.

He glanced over his shoulder at the sun, edging down toward the western peaks. There wasn't much time left.

He strolled over to the fire. Hutch sat beside it, staring at it. He looked up briefly at Alabam and down again, his face as inexpressive as a cat's. Alabam eased himself down and rolled a cigarette carefully.

"I'm sorry about the fight, Hutch," he said. "No hard feelings?"

Hutch slowly gathered spit in his mouth and spat into the coals. The act made him wince on account of his swollen mouth, but he did it anyway. He picked up a stick and stirred the grounds in the coffee pail.

"Look, kid, I said I was sorry. If you want to take a poke at me, go ahead. We've been together a long time."

Hutch's voice came out, low and harsh: "If you don't shut up, I'm leaving this fire. And I don't want to leave this fire."

"All right, kid. But do me the favor of rigging those straws like I told you."

Hutch looked up at him then, his eyes bright and a strained smile on his puffed lips. "It's a pleasure. Anyway it happens, whichever you do with Flip, it'll be a pleasure. I want to see you in the forked stick, brother. When it comes to the showdown between you and Pepper."

He heard the clink of spurs and the swish of boots through dry grass and held his tongue. Pepper stood beside him, vibrating tension and aggressiveness the way he always did.

"Sit down," Alabam said, not looking up.

Pepper sat, and Salty with him. Reinstellar came up, his eyes bleary with sleep. Pepper started to fry the meat.

"Hold it a minute," Alabam said. "We're going to get things lined out first."

"Let's eat first," Pepper said.

"You heard what I said," Alabam replied, not looking at him.

"I hear lots of things," Pepper answered, his eyes full on him, his torso upright and unmoving. "I'm hungry and I feel like eating."

The others watched the fire, their faces closed. Hutch smiled slightly.

"Go ahead and fix those straws, Hutch."

Pepper relaxed a little. "Maybe while we're waiting you'd like to hear something I found out in Little Pine this afternoon."

"Is Flip there?"

"Yes, he's there all right. He's living in a shack behind your brother Jordan's place. But that's not what I mean."

PEPPER waited a minute, looking from face to face. Hutch sat with his back turned, breaking a grass-stem between his knees. The others didn't look at him but their mouths were a little tighter.

"Let it wait," Alabam said. "Hutch, you ready?"

"This can't wait," Pepper said. "We only got tonight to work on it."

He looked around again from face to face, hoping for effect.

"There's forty-three thousand dollars down in Little Pine, all in one place. Forty-three thousand."

"That's right," Salty said, nodding. "That's what we heard in the saloon."

"It's the money they got in Chicago for the cattle they shipped in the roundup. The feller just got in today with it, and they're going to divide tomorrow. Tonight it's down there, and tomorrow it won't be there. Because the five outfits that rounded up together are sending their men in in the morning to divide it up. So tonight's our night."

"Forty-three thousand," Reinstellar said. They were all looking at Alabam now, covertly, in little glances, watching his face to see how he would take it.

"It looks like just the thing, Alabam," the Goose said slowly, lying back on the ground with his head in his saddle. "Just the thing we've been waiting for."

Reinstellar smiled. "That Flip. Think of him leading us up here. Looks like luck, don't it?"

The words buzzed around Alabam's ears like flies. He sat cross-legged, with his forearms drooping across his thighs, listening not so much to the voices as to some spectral commentator, saying: *See, this is the way it all plays out.*

"Where is it?" Reinstellar asked.

"It's in a little hole in the wall they got down there they call a bank. A hole in the wall. Two men guarding it."

"Just two men?" the Goose asked wonderingly.

Salty nodded.

"Hutch, you got those straws?" Alabam asked, keeping his voice down so the impatience wouldn't crackle in it.

"It's a prime setup," Pepper said. "There's a two-story hotel just across the street from this bank. I figure one of us gets a room, a front room in there. Just one of us. Then two more of us cover the bank from the room. Three of us goes over and takes the bank, scatter, and come back separately to this hotel. It's got a back entrance. That way there won't be no running."

They thought it over in silence.

"You mean," Reinstellar said, "we ain't going to scatter and meet some other place?"

"No," Pepper said, and his voice carried a note of authority and finality. "This business of breaking up and meeting a hundred miles off is no good." He looked at Alabam. Alabam kept his eyes on the fire.

"No good," Pepper repeated. "That's the way Flip got away from us. And besides, there ain't no use. If they get up a posse, so much the better. Let 'em ride to hell and gone. We'll just meet quiet in the hotel and stay there till tomorrow, and then pull out of town quiet and single. That way there won't be no suspicion, and no chance, and no accidents."

"How about it, Alabam?" the Goose asked. "Is it okay? Pepper's got a right good plan, it seems to me."

"Let's take care of one thing at a time," Alabam said. "First we'll draw to see who kills Flip, then I'll tell you what I think of it. You got them ready, Hutch?"

Hutch turned around and sat with the six straws sticking out between his thumb and his forefinger. Alabam reached and drew the one furthest out from his thumb.

"That's it," Hutch said, and spilled the rest of the straws.

"That's the way it should be," Alabam said. "I made the rule about nobody quitting this outfit. It's right for me to make it stick. Go ahead and cook, Pepper. I'm only having coffee."

"How about the stickup, Alabam?"

He looked stonily into the fire. "It's fine. You get set to knock it off at seven-thirty sharp."

The Goose sat up. "Alabam," he said slowly, "before we came up here, you said there was to be no plays on account of the sheriff being your brother Jordan. You mean you don't care about tangling with him no more?"

ALABAM put his thumbs together side by side, matching their length and said: "That's right. Me and Hutch'll finish off Flip and meet you in the hotel. I figure we'll knock Flip off about seven fifteen, and be down on the main street in time to cover whoever breaks the bank. I figure my lawdog brother will be busy seeing what happened to Flip about the time you hit the bank. That'll get Jordan out of the way."

Pepper sat deflated, looking at him. "You mean you don't care? It's all right? You ain't going to raise a stink?"

For the first time, Alabam looked directly at him. "That's right. It's fine with me."

The steaks sent up a good odor and they all relaxed. Only Hutch sat staring at his brother, his eyes intent with thought.

Out of the silence, he suddenly said: "Pepper, ask him why he wants me to go down with him."

Something in his voice stiffened them all. They did not move, but it was as though each of them had heard a warning sound from the dark beyond the light.

"Ask him, Pepper," Hutch said, his eyes narrow and his face wolfish.

Pepper looked at him, and then sat up, ready. "All right. Why so, Alabam?"

Alabam looked at them, and then hitched himself around so that he faced them both. The rest of them sat up at the movement.

Alabam looked at Hutch steadily. "Hutch, you tell them."

Hutch smiled. The firelight shone hard from the stretched skin of his swollen lips. "This is why. He figures to take me down there and knock me on the head to get me out of the way of the fracas. He figures to get Jordan and Flip and gang up. Then when seven-thirty comes, Pepper, and you and the bunch knocks over this bank, the three of them will let you have it. That's

why he wants me down there with him. Because I'm the only reason why he's scared to quit the gang."

"What?" Goose said.

"He's quitting," Hutch said. "He wants to run out on the gang. Like Flip did."

They sat silent, hardly breathing.

"Is that so?" Pepper asked quietly. "Is that so, Alabam?"

The light gleamed fitfully from Hutch's stretched and smiling lips. Alabam looked steadily at his brother, seeing his figure grow dim and sway in the firelight. Pepper was backing away from the fire, further out of the light, hunching along the grass. The rest of them sat or lay stiff, ready to jump at the first move.

"He's scared to quit alone," Hutch said. "He knows we'd get him like we'll get Flip. He had me fix the draw so he'd get to go down. That's so he could talk to Flip and Jordan. But he's got to get me to go down with him, because he knows Jordan wouldn't side against us as long as I was with you all, cause Jordan would rather get killed himself than kill me."

He paused a moment. "Only I'm not going down with you, Alabam. You'll have to play it out alone."

"I think you're a little crazy," Alabam said. "I don't know why you say this, but whatever your reason, it's a damn poor thing to try to put your own brother in such a light. If you want to know, I wanted to take you along to make a man out of you. Something which you aren't now, you dirty little yellow rat."

OUT of the silence, the Goose's voice came in a kind of whine: "There ain't no truth in what he said, is there, Alabam?"

"Get him, Pepper," Hutch said, his voice low and hot. "Get him now! His arm ain't worth a damn. He's a lousy cripple!"

Alabam sat looking at him dully, looking at the set, vicious face; not thinking of Pepper, just looking and listening to a voice inside his own head. *This is what you made him*, the voice said. *Two years ago he was just a fresh kid full of life. If he's a rat now, you made him one.*

Pepper was standing now, to the side of him and a little behind. The eyes of the others were fixed on him, not accusing, just blank and waiting.

"Kid," Alabam said slowly, "I can understand how maybe you'd get sick and tired of me bossing you around, especially since you're my brother. And I'm sorry about what I said about you being yellow. But don't ever get mad enough to say such things again."

Pepper was still standing, staring at Alabam.

Alabam looked up at him. "If you think I'm planning a double-cross, go ahead and shoot," he said.

"That's mighty brave," Pepper said. "But it don't prove anything. I tell you what, Alabam. Just to make sure, we won't hold up the bank until you're back. You knock off Flip and come to the hotel. Then we'll be sure your brother Jordan won't be coming with you. And we'll just be holding Hutch for a kind of insurance. Is that all right?"

Alabam forced a smile. "Sure it's all right. But I'll tell you this, Pepper, I don't like having my men distrusting me, or putting me to tests. When we're through with this little shenanigan, we're going to have us a little tryout, you and me. Just to make sure who's boss around here."

He looked at Pepper squarely and saw Pepper's gaze waver and fall a little. Pepper was looking at his wrist.

Alabam said, "And any time you think my gun arm isn't what it used to be, you know how to find out."

Pepper swallowed once and then sat down. His face was closed and he did not answer.

"Go saddle my horse, Hutch," Alabam said quietly.

"I'm with Pepper and the hell with you," Hutch said.

Alabam stood up and got his saddle and bridle. "I'll see you other boys at the hotel," he said. "Goose, you hire the room. The rest of you come up one at a time, like Pepper said."

None of them said anything. They were all looking at Hutch, not openly, but watching all the same. None of them answered.

The voice in Alabam's head said quietly: *There's nothing you can do until you get him out of the way. You're caught, you're trapped. You bred him up to be what he's turned into, and now you've got to pay. And Pepper'll find out about the wrist. He'll be watching, from now on.*

Goose's voice rose, questioning and plaintive. "We'll see you all right, won't we, Alabam?"

"Sure, Goose," he said slowly, his voice heavy in his ears. "Sure, I'll be there. Same as usual."

CHAPTER

3

Prodigal's Welcome

He tied his horse in front of the house, under the cottonwoods that lined the dusty street. There were no lights yet in the front of the house, though he could see, slantwise, the yellow of a lamp in the rear kitchen window. Out behind somebody was chopping wood. Not a woman: the strokes were regular and single and slow. A man in the act of chopping wood was in a bad way to draw a gun.

He stood there listening to the twitter of starlings in the leaves overhead. He toed the dirty balls of fluff on the ground under the tree. Once upon a time Jenny had tried to spin that stuff. Not Louisa. Louisa had been too much the queen.

He left the horse and walked across the sparse lawn, along the side of the house and stopped under the window. The bottom half of it was up, and he could hear their voices, the sharp sound of their heels as they walked back and forth about their cooking.

All he could see from below was the ceiling. It was still the same, with the single crack cutting across the corner and the spreading stain of water. He tried to remember what rumpus it had been, upstairs, when one of the Morgan boys had spilt the water.

The chopping stopped. He went to the corner of the house and saw Flip sink the blade of the axe into the block, stoop painfully and gather up his kindling.

He couldn't see Flip's face well in the dusk, but he knew how it would look, wincing at the pressure on his fat stomach.

Flip mounted the back steps and screeched the screen door open. He wasn't wearing boots any more. Just plain townsman's shoes with flat heels. And he wore no guns.

The wood clattered into the box inside. In a moment he came out again and walked away across the back yard toward the old chicken-shack. With the flat-beeled shoes,

he shambled and the seat of his pants hung slack, like an old man's.

Alabam waited till light went up in the chicken-shack windows and then followed him. The path went down between ragged rows of carrots and cabbage. There was a rabbit hutch to one side, one of its legs bent in so that it tilted insecurely. He stopped, seeing a large round ball lying on the ground beside it. A kid's ball, white with a blue band around the middle of it, and covered with little rubber pimples like gooseflesh. He looked back at the house, his face surprised. After a moment he gave a kick and sent it out of sight among the cabbages, and went on toward the open, lighted door of the shack.

He came into the door without sound, his gun out and in his left hand, and stood there looking at Flip rubbing his face with an old sugar-sack towel.

Flip finished and turned with the towel in his hand, and stopped dead still at sight of him. His mouth fell open and his eyes were wide and abstracted, as though he had just remembered something he had forgotten to buy downtown. The hand holding the towel stayed up in the air and he just stood there.

ALABAM stepped slowly inside and showed the door shut, scraping its toe over the dirt humps in the floor.

Then Flip's eyes came back to normal and he wiped his mouth with the towel. Then he nodded to himself, turned without paying any attention to Alabam, and hung the towel on a nail in the wall. He turned back, looked at the gun and sighed deeply. He sat down in a barrel-chair and licked his mouth. He was trying hard to look steady, but his mouth nibbled slightly.

"You'd better get a move on you in a hurry," Alabam said. "There's a horse out front you can take. I won't be needing it. I won't be leaving this town."

Flip's face looked shocked, and then the blood drained out of it and he looked sick. He leaned forward with his face in his hands. Alabam slipped the gun away.

"You'd better be going, Flip. Don't get me wrong. Nobody's letting up on you. It's just that I'm giving you warning so's you can get a lead on Pepper and the rest. They think I'm down here killing you. I'm just giving you a break."

Flip's head came up. He shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't be no safer than I am here, Alabam."

"They're all in town."

"I didn't figure you'd come here where your lawdog brother was."

"You told him who you were, and what the setup was?"

Flip nodded. "He said to stay. He said if you came after me, he'd be glad of the chance to kill you himself."

"He did?"

"Why're you doing this, Alabam? Why're you letting me off?"

"I don't rightly know, Flip. You remember the time on the train? That old man that Pepper got the watch off of? It hit me then, when he got the chain tangled in his vest and Pepper shot him cause he couldn't hurry. I got to thinking about that. That old man."

A hard look came over Flip's face. "Sure, I remember that. And I remember Pepper. There's only one reason left why I'd like to use a gun. To use it on Pepper."

Alabam said: "He traded that watch for a drink in Denver, after you left. Like he traded the old man for a drink. . . . It seemed a light thing to do, shoot that old man for a watch, just because Pepper was in a hurry. A light thing to do." He looked at the end of the towel, frowning. "And then I got scared. Scared of all the things I'd done."

"What you going to do?"

"I don't know. But I can give you a chance."

"Suppose we take off together?"

Alabam shook his head. "It would be the same old thing. Anyway, I don't like running. There's no end to it."

Flip sat up a little straighter. "You reckon if we told Jordan you'd quit, he'd side with us?"

"You think he'd believe me?"

"He did me, didn't he?"

"There's a difference. He's hated me ever since Hutch and he had that fight and I took Hutch in the gang. And there's another reason. Louisa. His wife." He looked at Flip for a long moment. "She ever say anything about me?"

Flip looked at the floor. Then he looked up, his eyes evasive. "The little one did. Jenny. Asked me questions, lots of times. Like how you looked, and if you were fat

or thin, and how you were getting along."

"Not Louisa?"

"All right," Flip said, clearing his throat. "She did once. She said she didn't want your name mentioned in the house. That's all."

Alabam looked at the floor, his face flushing very slightly. "I tell you what, Flip. You just keep your mouth shut about my being here. Pepper and the rest is going to try to take some cattle money they say is in town. I'm going down there and finish it off with them. When I get through, maybe I won't have cleaned them all, but I'll get enough to water 'em down to where they won't bother you any. See what I mean?"

FLIP stood up. "If that's what they're planning, I'd better tell Jordan. That's his business."

"He can't do anything about it. Hutch is with them, don't forget. Jordan can't go against them, not with Hutch there. And if you tell him, you'll just put him in a spot."

Flip sat down slowly.

"If that's so, how about if you go after them?" he asked. "Ain't that the same thing?"

"I don't aim to get them all."

Flip looked at him musingly. "Are you sick or something?"

"Yeah. I'm tired. I'm fed up. I went the wrong way years back, and it's been wrong ever since. There's no way it can get better, either." He stood still, looking blankly at the towel. "There isn't any more place to go to, Flip. This is the farthest I'm going. I come back here and I'm going to stay."

He turned and pushed out of the door, closed it behind him and walked back up the narrow path, his head down, his face set and cold.

He stopped by the chopping block and listened. The two women were still talking, or rather, one was giving directions and the other assenting. He turned his head and looked in the direction of the main street, as though listening to another, un-audible voice, and then slowly went up the back steps. The screen door whined and twanged as he opened it.

"Flip?" Louisa called. It was Louisa's voice, but as if from a different body.

He went across the narrow back porch and pushed the wooden back door open; stood in the doorway, looking across the kitchen to the stove, seeing her face, half-turned over her shoulder as she paused in the act of setting a sauce pan down on the range.

"Who are you?" Her voice was cold and harsh, and deeper than it had been six years before. Her body was heavy; and her face, which before had been placid and serene, was now grave, almost stern. "What do you want?"

He had opened his mouth to answer, but instead now merely took off his hat, and they looked at each other. She dropped the handle of the pan; it hit the stove-top with a bang. Her eyes squinted.

"You," she said, her voice low.

"I won't be long," he said. "I just thought I'd stop in and say good-by."

"What do you want? What are you after?"

"Nothing," he answered.

Her voice rose slightly. "Have you seen Jordan? Does he know you're here?"

"No. I haven't seen him." He looked at her steadily, his eyes searching her face as though for something that had long disappeared.

"Get out!" she said. "I don't want any killings in my house. He'll be here soon."

Jenny came out from the corner, from beyond the door which he held open. She looked at him cautiously, her eyes wide open, not afraid, but rather as though unsure that it were he. "Alabam?"

He turned his head and his hand closed a little on the doorknob. "Jenny?" he asked. "Is that you?"

She wasn't a girl any more. This was a woman; but behind that soft, rounded beauty he could still see the scrawny creature he had half forgotten.

She smiled suddenly and came a step toward him.

"Jenny," Louisa said sharply. "Get away from him. Don't get near him!"

"Hello, Alabam," the girl said softly. Her eyes went over his face little by little, then down his arms to his hands. "Are you all right?"

SUDDENLY he smiled at her, and the dullness that had been in his eyes for weeks cleared away like dawn fog.

He heard Louisa's voice again, and it was like the dull screech of a saw going through a nail. "Get away from him, I tell you!"

Jenny turned her head. "What's the matter with you?" she asked. "Is he doing any harm? Sit down, Alabam, sit down for a while. Can you stay long?"

Her eyes were still on him, bright, warm, with a happy twinkle in them; and his face and his body, angular and taut, seemed to soften and round out under them. His hand dropped from the door and he stood there relaxed.

Louisa took a step away from the stove. "Jenny, go down and get Flip. And tell him to bring a gun. Jenny!"

Then suddenly Jenny seemed to wake up. "A gun? What on earth for? To shoot Alabam?" She laughed. And then under Louisa's eyes, the laugh died, and she turned and brushed past him through the door. He stood stiff, drawn up out of her way, still feeling the brush of her dress, his eyes following her as she ran down the path.

"What did you come back for?" Louisa said again. She was standing stiffly where she had stepped from the stove, a little bent forward, her head lowered. He turned slowly toward her and looked at her distantly for a moment.

"I came back to see you, Louisa," he said.

"What for? I told you once when you got caught thieving Beldauer's cattle, I never wanted to see you again."

"That's funny. I just remembered. You did think I stole those cattle, didn't you? You know what I've been thinking, all these years? Thinking how you used to look, back in those days, and the way I used to feel. I'd forgotten you told me that."

Her eyes were dark and deep. "Don't be blaming anything on me, Alabam. I told you long ago just where you stood. Don't be thinking it's my fault you ran off the way you did, or be feeling any bitterness about me. You had nothing coming from me and I told you long ago. Now get out, before you make any more trouble."

He drew a long breath and sighed it out again, like a man who has heard the end of a long story.

"I will, Louisa. And I thank God I was smart enough to come back here. You

know what I used to think? I used to think if a man lost the one woman he loved, it didn't matter what happened to him. That he could go and get himself killed in a good cause, and it was a good end. Thanks a lot, Louisa. I went out of here six years ago a raw-branded kid."

He put on his hat. "I'm leaving. But I'll be waiting outside to see Jordan when he gets here. And in case you still think I'm a danger to you and aim to shoot him dead on sight, take these and show them to him." He pulled his guns and laid them on the kitchen table. "I'll be outside, waiting."

CHAPTER

4

Lowdog Brother

Alabam ran down the back steps and walked fast down the path. At the foot of it he saw Jenny and Flip coming up, and stopped. Flip had a double-barrelled shotgun in his hand and his hat on his head.

"Go on back, Flip," he said. "Louisa's just got her brains twisted."

"I don't think yours is exactly straight, Alabam. If Jordan catches you here—"

"I'm going to see Jordan just as soon as he gets here. You go on up and wait for me. I think maybe we can work something out between us."

Flip looked up at him sharply. "How about Hutch?"

"I think maybe I can get him out of the way. I can try it anyway—if Jordan'll help us."

Flip nodded shortly and went on up the path.

Alabam stood looking down at Jenny. Neither of them said anything. He couldn't make her face out very well in the dim light from the kitchen windows, but he could read her feelings as though they were sounds coming out from her. They stood there in silence, each looking at the other with a little smile.

"How've you been, Jenny?"

"I was wondering if you'd ever come back. Are you going to stay?"

"Didn't Flip tell you anything while you were down there?"

"About what?"

"Nothing. Except my being in town with the gang and things going to pop in a little while. I quit them."

Her face turned grave. "On account of Louisa? Is it still her? You still in love with her?"

"No. I don't think I ever was, Jenny, really."

She smiled a little. "We were pretty good friends, weren't we, Alabam? Do you remember the time I tried to spin that stuff from the cottonwood trees? I was going to weave you a coat."

He smiled. "You were? You don't mind the times I knocked you around?"

"You never hurt me. No, I don't mind."

"You've changed a lot."

Her face fell.

"I don't mean that," he hastened. "I mean, you're just grown up."

"Oh," she said, smiling. She was standing with her two hands held in front of her, holding each other as though they were embarrassed and didn't know what else to do. The two hands kept saying something that he couldn't quite make out.

"I thought I was in love with Louisa. But it wasn't that. I mean, being in love with somebody is different from loving somebody. Do you see what I mean?"

"No. What are we going to do, Albam? Just stand out here all night talking? Before you go, you might at least give me a kiss. I always used to want you to kiss me, before you went away, and I still do."

"Would it make any difference to you if I didn't go? I mean, kissing and leaving is one thing. But kissing and staying means something else again."

"That's up to you, Alabam."

"All right, then. I'm staying. You still want that kiss?"

"What do you think?"

HE TOOK her and she came close, her hands still in front of her, and then gradually they found their way up around his neck. He let her go after a minute and they stood looking at each other again.

"Somebody should have shot me in the head," he said in a low voice. "I think it was you all the time—only you were so damned skinny, I thought it was Louisa."

She laughed, and then jumped up and hung around his neck. He gave her a swing around and up and caught her in his arms and held her a moment before setting her down. "Like old times?"

The back door slammed open. "Ala-

bam." The word came out deep and chesty, a single command. He turned slowly and saw his brother Jordan standing silhouetted in the light.

All the blood drained out of Alabam's face, and his body was crabbed and angular again. "Listen, Jenny my darling, go sit in Flip's chair and wait for me. If I don't come back in an hour, go back to the house and forget me, will you? But wait for me that long. When I come back I want to find you in there, alone."

She stood silent, looking up at him. "All right, Alabam. I'm not such a coward I can't sit and—I'd rather come with you, Alabam. Couldn't you give me a shotgun or something? I can shoot good, Alabam. You taught me, remember?"

"Alabam!" Jordan's voice boomed out from the porch.

"Wait for me, darling. I'll have a better chance of coming back if I can think of you in that chair."

He turned and left her, walking up the path between the cabbages. This time his walk was fast, his face up and his eyes alert.

Jordan stepped back into the kitchen as Alabam came up the steps. He was a big man, his large, flat, hard face like a ruddy moon, his eyes as hard and motionless as slate under running water. He stared at Alabam without emotion. Temper was latent in the compression of the lips, but no passion could move him against his will, nor any kindness. Louisa stood by the stove, and Flip near her.

"Lay off of Jenny," Jordan said.

"Let's not get started on the wrong foot," Alabam answered. "I didn't come here to make trouble. Don't you start any."

"You corrupted one member of our family. Hutch is enough. Get out of here and take your rats with you. And don't come back."

Alabam looked at Flip. "You didn't tell him about the cattle money?"

Flip looked sideways at the floor.

Jordan's eyes squinted a little. "About what cattle money?"

"One thing at a time. I've quit the gang, Jordan. They're in town, but I've got nothing to do with them."

Jordan leaned forward. "You mean they're planning to get the sales receipts? Is that it?"

Alabam nodded. "We came here to get Flip. This is just something tacked onto that."

"Is Hutch with them?"

"He is. That's the only trouble. I figured we three could take care of the gang, if I can get Hutch out of danger."

Jordan's flat, dead-looking lips curved in an acid smile. "You got into trouble with them and come running for help, is that it? Things get a little out of hand, and you come back to me? Things got a little tough for you about six years back, remember? I told you what to do: stick here and face Beldauer out. But you ran."

"All right, keep on running. Get your gang and take your fight out into the country some place and shoot it out. But don't involve me in it, and don't think to come running for help."

ALABAM shook his head. "I haven't got any control over the gang any more." He held up his wrist, the white scar shining in the light. "I can't shoot worth a damn any more."

"So that's why you're quitting."

"Not because I'm afraid, Jordan. Let's just forget what you think of me, and look at the facts. The gang is going to take a crack at that money. I'm telling you that to warn you. Hutch is with them. If you go after the gang, you're running the risk of killing him. We've got to plan something out."

The clean hardness dissolved from Jordan's face. His eyes dropped and clouded.

Alabam said: "It's my fault, Jordan, that Hutch is mixed up in it. I admit it and I'm willing to pay for it."

Jordan looked up quickly, his eyes clean of hate. "Just how do you suppose to do that?"

"I can't handle them all myself, Jordan. I need your help. But I'll take the risks. I want you to plant your men to cover the bank and the entrance to the hotel."

"The hotel?"

"They've got a room on the second floor. I'll try to get Hutch out of there. Him and me'll do the robbing. While he's out of there, you can go up and get the rest of them. There'll be two in the room, and two flanking the hotel, in the street."

Jordan's lips pursed slightly. He sat back against the table, thinking.

"Don't trust him, Jordan," Louisa said. "I'm asking you from my heart, don't trust him. How do you know what he's up to? How do you even know Hutch is with them? Maybe it's a trap."

Jordan looked up at Alabam shrewdly. "Maybe Hutch is dead, for all you know. Maybe this whole thing is just a trap to get even. Maybe," her voice rose unsteadily, "even Flip here is part of it—him coming here for protection, like he said, so's he could get you off guard."

The pupils of Jordan's eyes nearly vanished. "Suppose it is," he said in a low voice. "Suppose I get my men staked out so your gang can get us from behind, Alabam. Then maybe you'd have an easy time of it getting that money."

"Taint so," Flip said sharply. "I give you my word, Mr. Morgan, it aint so."

Jordan half smiled. "I reckon not, Flip." "If you've got any more doubts," Alabam said, "leave it like this. Write a note to those two guards in the bank and let Flip relieve them. When I get Hutch in there, I'll knock him out. Then I'll come out the front door, join you and we'll go up together."

"Jordan," Louisa said again, "I tell you its some kind of a trick. There's something behind it."

Jordan turned slowly on her. "Keep quiet, woman. Any trap he springs on me, he's going to get caught in himself." He turned back to Alabam, collected his guns and held them out. "Take them. You're going to need them. And I'll tell you now, if anything happens to Hutch, you're going to have to use them on me."

Alabam took the pistols and holstered them. He turned and went out and down the back steps. He stood a moment at the chopping block and looked at the dim yellow rectangle of light from the chicken-shack door. He smiled quickly, turned, and went back along the side of the house to his horse. . . .

THE hotel was the tallest building in the street. He walked his horse along through the dust, keeping a sharp eye out for a face he knew, and then saw Reinstellar, sitting on the edge of the boardwalk at the mouth of an alley beside the hotel. A few people ambled along the walk. The stores were closed. Only a couple of bars

showed light in the windows. He glanced across the street at the bank, nothing more than a gold-lettered storefront. No light showed in its windows.

He halted his horse beside Reinstellar. "They get the room all right?"

Reinstellar nodded, concentrating on rolling a cigarette. "Salty's on the other side of the hotel. Hear of any trouble?"

"It ought to go off smooth."

"Flip all right?"

"He's all right. Where is the room?"

"This side, in the front."

He turned down the alley and went around to the back of the hotel. There were stables down below, and a light showed in a small office. He tied his horse to a tree and went in the back way.

The back stairs were narrow and steep and deserted. He went along the upper hall, lighted by two dim oil lamps set in wall-brackets. He stopped where the front stairs came up and held his hand in front of his face. The fingers trembled and sweat trickled down his forehead into his eyebrows as he looked at them. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment, and then went on.

He stopped at the door and knocked. Feet crossed the floor inside and the door opened. The Goose looked at him seriously for a moment and then smiled.

"Everything all right, boss?"

He cleared his throat. "Sure, everything's all right."

Pepper was sitting on the bed, Hutch sat in a chair by the front window, looking out and smoking idly.

"You get him all right?" Pepper asked.

"Sure, I got him."

"You was quite a while."

In the silence he heard four horses trot slowly along the street.

"You feel all right, Hutch?"

Hutch turned his head slowly. "Sure I feel all right. What's it to you?"

"Nothing much. We're going to do it, you and I."

"That's fine," Pepper said. "We all kind of figured on you doing it. Figured you'd kind of want to, to disprove what Hutch said this afternoon."

"I don't figure I have to prove anything to you, Pepper."

"No?" Pepper looked up with a tight smile. "Let's see you draw, just for fun."

"I don't draw for fun."

"Let's see you do it, anyway," Pepper said, glancing at Hutch.

"Come on, Hutch," Alabam said. "Let's get to it."

"You don't want to give us an exhibition of that lightning speed of yours?" Pepper asked.

Hutch stood up lazily and smiled at Pepper. "Be seeing you."

He passed Alabam, going to the door, without looking at him. Alabam followed down the hall and down the back steps. They stood outside for a moment.

"You feeling better about this afternoon, Hutch?"

"Sure," Hutch said.

"I'd just kind of like to know there wasn't any hard feelings before we go into this."

"Sure, that's all right," Hutch said. He went on down to the stables and got his horse.

Together they rode up the alley, past Reinstellar, and down the street. They rode two blocks east and then crossed and came back behind the row of stores. The back of the bank was the same as the rest of the stores, an unfenced yard full of rubbish.

"LEAVE them here," Alabam said, swinging off his horse. "We'll be able to get back to them before the town knows what's happened."

They walked silently through the litter of cans and bottles to the back door. Hutch drew his gun and cocked it.

"Give them a chance," Alabam said. "If we can do this without shooting, so much the better."

Hutch smiled thinly. "Go ahead."

Alabam drew his gun and knocked softly at the door. In a moment boots came toward it. "Who is it?" a low voice asked.

"I got a note from Sheriff Morgan," Alabam said.

A key turned in the lock and the door swung in. Flip's figure was black against the dim light of a single lamp further back in the room. Alabam shoved his gun into Flip's stomach.

"Don't make any noise," he said softly. "Back up into the room." Flip backed away slowly, his hands up. "Stop there," Alabam said while Flip's face was still in the dark. "Hutch, come up here and cover him while I have a look around."

Hutch shoved the muzzle of his gun up against his back. "Don't move," Hutch said. "Keep your hands up—Flip!"

"Hutch!" Alabam said sharply. "What—"

"Shut up," Hutch said. "You don't think I'd let you go get Flip alone, do you? We know the whole setup. I heard every damn thing through the window." His hand came around Alabam's waist and took his gun.

"You made it a lot simpler for us, Alabam. No shooting, this way. Nobody's going out that front door, Alabam. Jordan's just going to sit in that store with his men for the next fifteen minutes waiting for you to come out, and while he's waiting, I'll be taking my horse and going around his back, and we'll all be out of town before he knows what's going on. What happens to you when he finds out I don't know and I don't care. He'll probably figure you double-crossed him, you and Flip."

"Turn around, Flip. Alabam, get up alongside of him there."

Alabam stepped forward. He and Flip

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stood with their backs to Hutch. "Wait a minute, Hutch," Alabam said.

He heard the dull thud of metal on bone and saw Flip slide down to the floor beside him.

"Stand still, Alabam," Hutch said. "I don't want to have to shoot you, but I will if I have to."

Alabam stood still, waiting. He heard the faint rustle of Hutch's shirt. Then, more by the low grunt of effort than anything else, he knew when the pistol barrel started down, and he ducked and whirled, grabbing for the pistol with both hands. He jammed the side of his hand between the point of the hammer and the cylinder, hanging on with both hands while Hutch struggled fiercely, unable to fire. He was vaguely aware of another man beyond Hutch's shoulder.

"Having a little trouble, Hutch? Pepper asked.

Alabam struggled to keep his back away from Pepper, fighting as Hutch dragged him around. He did not hear the coming of the blow, hardly even felt it. Then Hutch's struggling body and the soft grunts of effort faded into darkness and silence. . . .

CHAPTER

5

Dead End

The dark receded and he was lying with the glow of the lamp in his eyes. He could hear someone breathing heavily. He moved his hand a little. They hadn't taken his guns.

"This is it," Pepper said. Alabam heard the dull grate of something being dragged across the floor. Very slowly he drew his hand up toward his left gun, and stopped. If he fired, he'd have to kill Hutch. He let his arm relax.

"Flip's coming to," Hutch said, his voice shaking.

"Hit him again. Hit him hard," Pepper said. "Knock his lousy brains out. Hit the other one, too, just for sure."

"I'm not going to kill him."

The scraping stopped.

"You're what?" Pepper asked. "You getting soft?"

Feet ran softly across the floor. "What the hell's the matter with you?" Reinstellar's voice said. "We're all out there

waiting. Come on, before the sheriff gets wised up."

"I can't get the damned box open," Pepper panted.

Other feet came in. "Hurry up," the Goose said. "I seen the sheriff go into the hotel."

"What?" Pepper said. "He was supposed to wait for Alabam to come out the front."

"He didn't. He'll be over here in a minute when he finds the place empty."

"I can't carry the whole damned thing on a horse. Help em get the thing open!"

Alabam heard the wrench and shriek of breaking metal hinges. He opened his eyes. Pepper was gathering bundles of bills from the box and stuffing them into his shirt. "Kill Flip, Hutch. Hurry up."

He saw Hutch standing over Flip's body, his pistol hammered in his hand. The lamp-light shone from sweat on his forehead, and he was licking his lips.

Pepper stopped stuffing money under his clothes and looked at him. "What's the matter?"

"I can't," Hutch said in a low voice. "Not like this."

"You want me to show you?" Pepper asked, and came up from his crouch. He drew his gun and came over toward Alabam. Alabam lay quiet, his eyes barely open. Pepper hefted the gun in his hand, measuring for the blow.

"Wait a minute," Hutch said. "Don't do it, Pepper."

"What's the matter with you?"

"He's my brother, Pepper."

"You was hot enough for it this afternoon. What's happened to you?"

"Hutch ain't never killed a man, Pepper," the Goose said. "I'll do it."

"Shut up. I'm going to make him do it. That or do it myself."

"Leave him alone." Hutch's hand moved his gun up to a level with Pepper's stomach. His face was white and strained. "Let's take the money and get out of here."

"Put that gun away."

"All right. If you'll promise to leave him be."

"All right, I will. Put that gun away."

Hutch holstered it. Pepper's gun swung on him. "All right, you yellow dog, I'll show you how to pull a gun on me. Come here."

Hutch stood still. The others were in a rough circle around him, their eyes unmoving in the lamplight.

"This ain't the time, Pepper," the Goose said.

"Shut up. This time is as good as any."

"Let's get out of here."

"You know what we're going to do? We're going to wait right here for that sheriff to get curious and stick his nose in. And when he does, we're going to fill him so full of holes he'll look like a cribbage board."

"You crazy, Pepper?"

"We'll have to," Pepper said. "If he went up to the hotel, it's too late to run. We wouldn't be able to get a lead on him. Crouch down, all of you, and if he bangs on the door, don't make a sound. Let him get in. We'll just wait till he knocks. Come here, kid."

HUTCH came across the room slowly. Pepper stooped and picked up the short iron bar he had used to break the box. "Take that and kill your brother."

Hutch took it slowly. Alabam waited, his hand next to his gun, watching Hutch's face.

"If you're going to work under me, you got to be hard, boy. You've got to be hard enough to kill him, or shoot it out with me."

Hutch leaned over Alabam, looking down into his face. Alabam shaped a word with his lips, very carefully. "Wait."

"Go ahead, kid," Pepper said. They were all watching now, a kind of hungry look on their faces.

Hutch looked into Alabam's eyes, relief, gladness and fear confused in his face. "Wait a minute," he said. "Give me a chance to get set."

Alabam lay quiet, listening and waiting. After a moment feet came along the boardwalk out in front, slowly and carefully.

"Alabam?" Jordan's voice came softly. "You there?"

The men in the room sank to a crouch, drawing their guns, ignoring Hutch and Alabam, to one side and a little behind them.

"Alabam?" came the voice again. "What happened?"

He heard a murmur of voices outside, and then a key in the front door lock. Under cover of the shadow of Hutch's body,

Alabam drew his left gun. All of them were looking fixedly at the front door.

"Let's go in," somebody said. "I think the whole thing was a fake. There hasn't been a shot. Those flank guards he talked about weren't there. It's a phony."

Hutch slowly turned so that he crouched side by side with Alabam. He drew his gun. The two of them waited.

"Watch out, Jordan!" Alabam shouted, sliding up to a sitting position. The gang stiffened. He heard the click of gun hammers cocking outside. Pepper's face came around toward him, vicious with rage. Alabam's gun was square on him. Hutch covered the rest.

"Don't any of you move," Alabam said quietly. "Before you can swing your guns, at least two of you'll be dead. Watch them, Hutch. If they move a hair, let them have it. Jordan, they're all in here. How many men you got?"

"Eight, Alabam."

"Any in back?"

"No."

"Get some around there."

Feet hurried outside. The gang crouched frozen.

"They'll get the horses," Reinstellar said in a low voice.

"Lay your guns on the floor," Alabam said. "You can give up now or get killed trying to get out. If we don't get you, Jordan will."

"If any man moves," Pepper said, "I'll shoot him myself."

"Not before I shoot you, Pepper."

"You reckon they'll give us a break, Alabam?" the Goose asked.

"I know damn well they will."

The Goose got to his feet, leaving his gun on the floor. He turned around and walked past Alabam to the back door, kicked it open and went out with his hands in the air.

"Pepper, you reckon we could make a run for it?" Reinstellar asked.

"I'm for quitting," Salty said. "The son has got us against the wall. There ain't anything else to do."

"We've got Hutch," Pepper said. "Jordan won't kill him. We can use him for a hostage."

"The hell with it," Salty said. "It ain't sure enough." He followed the Goose.

"Reinstellar," Pepper said, "are you with me? I'm for killing these two if we can

and making a break. They'll hang us for sure anyway."

There was a groan from the back of the room and Flip sat up slowly. He grabbed Salty's pistol and held it on Reinstellar.

"Get out while you can, Reinstellar," Alabam said. "I'm saving Pepper for myself. Get out of here, Hutch. I don't want you in any fight."

Hutch got up slowly, keeping his gun on Reinstellar.

"All right," Reinstellar said. "I'm through." He turned and walked out, his hands up. Hutch stood near the door, watching Alabam.

"Get out, Hutch."

"I'm waiting, Alabam. It's my fault I got you in such a tight. I'm not walking out on you now."

THE room was quiet. "Hutch, you said I was a coward, that I was quitting on account of my arm. I just want to prove one thing, that you were wrong. Pepper, put up your gun, and I'll put up mine. And then we'll have that little tryout we were talking about, and give you a chance to see if my arm's as good as ever."

Pepper's eyes shone in the lamplight. Under Flip's pistol, he holstered his own and stood up. He was smiling slightly. "Thanks," he said to Alabam as he rose. "Thanks for the chance."

Alabam waited, his heart pounding. "Your move, Pepper. Let's see how good you are when you aren't shooting old men."

He could see the tiny tensing of Pepper's mouth, the indecision in his eyes.

"You don't have to fight, Pepper," Alabam said. "You can quit like the rest. Or you can try me and then try Hutch. You know he's slow. Maybe I'm crippled. Maybe I'm not. If I am, you're a cinch."

Pepper said nothing, his eyes on Alabam's wrist.

"All right," he said, his voice choked.

The lamp flickered. There was sweat on Pepper's forehead. "No," he said. "No." His face twisted with indecision.

Then suddenly he moved, desperately grabbing for his gun, his haste and fear throwing him off, and Alabam went for his, steady and controlled, using his slow left hand. As Pepper's gun came up, he dodged. The bullet slammed past him, a second

burned his side. Very quietly, he centered on Pepper's chest and fired as Pepper's third shot crashed.

Pepper's hands went up before him like an animal's paws scurrying at the side of a pit-trap. "No," he whimpered. "No, please!" He went down on his knees, his eyes rolling back in his head, rocked a moment and fell over on his side.

A fit of trembling seized Alabam. He looked over at Hutch. The boy's face was pale as death.

"You got any doubts, Hutch?"

Hutch shook his head dumbly.

"You think you still want to run with his kind?"

Hutch let out a low groan.

"I laid there ten minutes when I could have shot you, waiting for him to show himself, waiting for you to see what kind of a lousy dog he was, while he tried to get you to murder me. Is that enough for you? I could have killed him while I was laying there, but that wouldn't have proved anything to you."

"Lay off, Alabam. It's enough."

"All right, kid."

He holstered his gun and went out the back door into the night.

"Is that all?" Jordan asked quietly.

He nodded, looking at the cluster of men between the guns.

"That's all," he said. "Come on, Flip."

"You going up to see Louisa?" Jordan asked. "I don't think she wants to see you."

Alabam grinned. "That's all right with me, Jordan. I don't want to see her either. Come on, Flip, Jenny and I'll fix up your head, and then maybe we'll start a two-bit ranch together someplace—with Hutch for help, if he wants."

They took horses from the cluster in the road, and headed through the back lanes. He left Flip to walk it home, and sent his horse through the dark at a canter.

In front of the house, he hitched his horse and went on past the kitchen window, past the chopping block, to the path between the cabbages. He could see her in the rectangle of light, sitting obediently in the barrel chair. She rose as he came in, her eyes darting over him swiftly. "You all right?"

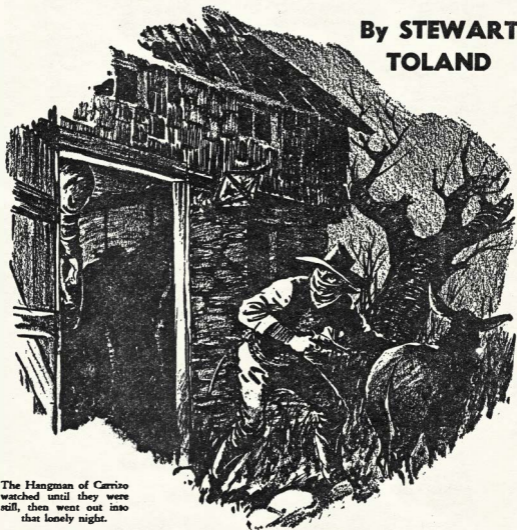
"I'm all right," he said, taking her in his arms. "All right at last."



HANGMAN'S DESERT GOD



By STEWART
TOLAND



The Hangman of Carrizo watched until they were still, then went out into that lonely night.

Amid treacherous desert dunes, young Colorado Lindsey played a bloody game with a land-locked treasure gallop—and the Hangman's noose.

NIGHT lay over the hills like a black hand choking out the day, throttling all the joy and the life, and leaving only loneliness. An owl hooted. And then it, too, was gone. A rock tumbled over other rocks. Echoes caught at its passing and turned it into lost laughter, and the wind in the brush was brittle and cautious like dead bones stirring.

Dead bones.

"Can you hear it?" It was the voice of an old, old man, high and discontent. "Can you hear it, Colorado? Can you feel it? There's death in this night."

A sigh answered him, quick and frightened, and then a chuckle to sweep it all away. It was a boy's chuckle, loud and merry. "Great grandfather, you say the strangest things! Even after sixteen years of sleeping and eating and living with you, sometimes I think I still don't know you."

"Has it been sixteen years since you were three, boy?"

"Yes, Grandfather Peter, I've put a notch on my gun for every spring that's come since then. Sixteen notches. Sixteen years since mother and father died, and I died, too. You know I appreciate that, don't you, grandfather? That I would be dead if it weren't for you. Everyone said so. I've heard folks talk of it since, that when father's fine windmill fell on him and mother—it caught me, too, and as good as killed me. They were going to bury me right along with my folks because my neck was broken."

Fingers whispered through the night over hard, tanned leather, three layers bound and studded with brass rivets. "Was it broken all the way through, grandfather?"

"No, it couldn't have been. It was cracked maybe and surely twisted. The doctor said the moment you were moved it would finish cracking and you would die. So I wouldn't let them move you until I made a collar for your neck, like a man binding a weakened wrist. I put you on my burro and took you out on the great Colorado desert and we've stayed here ever since. Do you know why, boy?"

"Because we've been happy."

"No."

"Because we've found gold, more than our share of gold."

"No. Because I wanted you to know about the sun and the moon and the earth. I wanted you to know men, about the seeds every man plants, and how he will reap them. I wanted you to come close to God."

"The desert is the place to learn these things, so I named you for it, Colorado, for the Colorado desert. And now I'm asking, have you learned your lesson, boy? Have you only lived here, or have you become a part of this land? Does it talk to

you, can you feel the death in this night?"

"No!" And now the boy was frightened. "You're tired, you've had too much sun today, you don't know what you're saying. We've passed death a thousand times. We've seen it come to men and beasts, and you've never spoken like this before!"

"That's because it was never for me. Tonight is different. I can feel it touching me on the shoulder—I can feel it breathing down my neck. It has a cold breath."

The boy talked faster, as though there were only a little time left. "Let's make camp here. We've walked much too long today."

"No, it's only a bit farther. I'm taller than you and I can see it over the edge of the hill."

"See what?"

"A lighted window. We've probably come upon a stage station, and I'm glad. I think I would like company tonight. I don't want to be alone, just you and me—and whatever it is peeking over my shoulder."

It was a stage station, one story of baked mud bricks with a shed roof and a door, and this lighted window, a high-up window that a man standing on the ground could not look through. The door was locked.

Colorado knocked on it three times. And then three times again.

AFTER a long silence, suddenly there was a bright lantern stuck out of the high window and a tousled head staring at the figures in the yellow glow below.

A burro with a sad face and one ear shorter than the other. An old man with white hair and burning black eyes, and a young man with yellow, curling hair and a wry neck.

The lantern bobbed away. "A moment, gentlemen, and I shall unbar the door."

They heard the sliding of the wood, not one but two great bars. And still the door was hardly more than a crack filled with yellow light, and the eye of a pistol, and the searching eye of a man.

The door swung wide. "Come in, gentlemen. I've never heard of the Hangman being old or of his being young and walking like a scarecrow, so I guess I can bid you welcome."

They stepped inside. There was a table and three chairs and a bed, and a pot of boiling beef on the hearth. It made all the

room seem good. The station keeper barred the door.

Old Peter watched him. "I didn't rightly understand what you said, keep. Were you looking for a hangman?"

"Heaven forbid, no!" He was a small man quite ashen with fright. "I'm giving up my station soon as the next stage comes through. I'm going to civilized country where a man can be sure of his next breath."

"What's wrong with the air here? It's kept me for forty years."

"Because you haven't met the Hangman."

"I haven't even heard of him."

The keep was flattened against the door as if he were nailed there. "You haven't heard of the Hangman of Carrizo?"

"No."

"Then you haven't talked to anyone in three months." He swallowed and the apple in his throat bobbed like a gutted fish. "In three months he has hung ten men."

"Why?"

"Because he happened upon them, because they carried rope." He stared at Colorado pulling off his jacket and showing a coil of rope fastened at his belt.

"My Lord!" he screamed. "Take that rope out of my house and bury it. Bury it deep in the earth, for don't you know the Hangman follows rope? It seems to draw him like a magnet. For three months there has been no rope in my house. Get out and bury it deep, as though it were the richest gold."

The old man frowned and took a coil from his waist, too. "There must be more reason than that men carry rope."

"There is. He was the one who was supposed to hang, there in Carrizo, for torturing and killing a prospector and stealing his gold. Only the sheriff wouldn't let the mob take him. He said next day there would be a trial, and next day the sheriff was hanging to his rafter and the jail was empty. Since then there have been nine others hung, and he always leaves a note. He says he will keep on until he has hung one for every man in Carrizo."

"Why don't they catch him?"

"He was masked when he was caught before and the sheriff allowed no visitors. No one knows his face nor when he will

come. When they do know it, they are dead."

Peter handed over his rope. "Go out and bury it, Colorado, deep, as though it were gold."

"But grandfather, that's silly! Rope couldn't be a magnet and draw a man to us!"

The black eyes kindled, and then the flame in them seemed to burn out slowly. "So I was wrong. You have lived in the desert sixteen years, but you are not of it. You won't take the desert as it is. You want to question it and make it something of your own."

Without a word Colorado crossed to the door and unbolted it, and stepped out into the night. The burro looked up from where it was munching on a bit of green and spoke as the boy passed. He went around the station and part way up the hill into a dry wash. The moon had come out and turned the gravel to silver as he scraped it first with his boot and then knelt and dug both hands deep into the earth.

That was when the rope fell over his shoulders.

It came from behind, dropping quicker than a fleeing shadow and pulling taut, pinning his arms hard against his ribs. He screamed once. Really only half a scream—and that stifled because there was a hand stuffing a dirty rag into his mouth and blocking all the warning words that were crying there inside of him.

"Grandfather, get out your gun!"

"Keep! Don't unbar your door! He's come! The Hangman of Carrizo has come and found my rope."

Words. No mouthable to say them. And no ear able to hear.

The Hangman pressed Colorado flat against his chest like a shield. He held a gun against the boy's side and with the other hand knocked on the door three times, light, careless knocks such as a boy might make.

No! No! No!

But the door opened. Colorado tried to kick it as a warning, but the keep was too quick. He tried to run and couldn't. The loose gag fell out of his mouth as he struggled, but it was too late for screaming. He tried to push back against the man behind him and flatten him on the ground. It was like pushing against an old oak tree.

THE keep was braver than the white in his face. He snaked out a gun and he shot twice above Colorado's shoulder.

Peter's voice was as high and shrill a whine as the singing bullet. "No! You'll kill my grandson!"

But that wasn't why the keep didn't shoot again. His arm had been shattered by the Hangman's gun. The keep watched the blood dropping to the floor. "What's the difference? We'll all soon be dead."

Maybe that was part of it, why one man could conquer three. Because one was a boy who didn't believe and hadn't watched the night carefully enough. Because one was a man who believed too much. He could see no possible chance for life and so he didn't fight hard enough. And one was old and slow, and so much in love with a boy he couldn't shoot through him to kill a murderer. Not even to save his own life.

So it was one standing behind that living shield and winning over three.

There was an extra noose in the Hangman's hand. He slipped it around Colorado's shoulders and down until it was knotted tight about the boy's ankles. He tossed another, like a cowboy roping steers, half away across the room and over the old man's head and down around his arms. He took still another ready from his belt and trussed the keep's arms, too. It was so quickly, so beautifully done.

He brought more rope from his belt. There was enough there to hang a dozen men, but he took only nooses for three.

And when each man was caught by his neck, the Hangman held the ends of the ropes taut like a player working at marionettes, and when any of the dolls tried to move he pulled the rope tighter and choked them harder. He held the ropes bunched in one hand and his gun in the other.

Twice Colorado tried to jump him. Clumsy, useless he was, tied until he was little more than a hopping stick. A bullet nicked him in the knee the first time and along the forehead the second.

"Be careful, kid." It was a voice that was cold as winter. "I want to hang you, I want to make this three more for the men in Carrizo. But if I can't do it my way, I'll do it yours. I'll shoot you dead."

He looked into the young face in its frame of yellow hair that fell like a cloak to his shoulders and now was pulled tight be-

neath the rope. He saw the swift, proud way the boy looked at his grandfather, almost as if he were making a promise.

"No kid, I was wrong. I won't kill you. The next time you try a play for me I'll kill the old man."

That struck home. He could see the quick fear in the boy's eyes.

"And if the old man tries anything, I'll kill the boy."

That held them. It was like a paralysis catching at each of their hearts, and it left it just one against one. A keep with a shattered arm, and a Hangman with a gun and three stout ropes.

He stepped up on the table and the figures jerked after him. He laid the ropes over the low rafter. Twice around he wove them and he pulled them tight one after another, secure as though they hung from a gallows. He had Colorado jump up on the table first, and all the while he knotted the rope the Hangman kept his gun pointed on the grandfather. Then it was the old man's turn, and after that the keep.

They stood in a row, three men on a table with firelight shining up in their faces, and the smell of boiling beef that had seemed to make the room so good.

The Hangman smiled then behind his red bandana mask. Little laugh wrinkles came around his eyes as he took out a piece of brown paper and a stub of pencil. "I've got to leave a note. I can't let folk think this might be someone else's work."

"You don't need to fear." It was the old man, Colorado's great grandfather Peter, speaking. Or maybe it was the desert speaking.

"You don't need to sign your name. It will be here always, in the stone and the earth, even in the empty wind. 'The Hangman of Carrizo did this. Three men died here because of him.'"

The Hangman's eyes slitted with hate, and something else, as he stared up into that old face without any fear showing in it at all. It was as though there was no noose tight about Old Peter's neck, as though he didn't notice how his words came jerkily because it was so hard to swallow.

"It isn't as if you killed in San Francisco or Chicago or New York. You've done your killing in the desert. Don't you know what that means?"

"No." He had to answer, he had to find

out what was behind the crazy old gent's words. It was as though they were warning him. Or was it pity? It couldn't be—not a man with a noose about his neck, not a man as good as dead pitying his hangman. "No!" He said it again, hard and quick as if it was a whip to strike against the blue-ting lips.

"In other parts of the world things happen and die and are forgot. But not in the desert. The desert is a place of yesterday. Always. It is as it was on the first day God made the earth. It is a place that belongs to the past. Even the water is still there, all the water that was once the sea that covered it. Men call it a mirage but it isn't. It's yesterday hanging low over the desert. Many yesterdays.

"And on some of these yesterdays you killed ten men. And on today that is tomorrow's yesterday you will have killed three more."

A log cracked and a spark flew out to burn on the wood of the floor. No one noticed. All eyes, every ear was on this brighter, hotter fire in the words on Peter's lips.

"Yesterday never dies in the desert—it is always there. You live it over and over, and what you do comes round to meet you once again. Whatever you have given you have to take back, life or death, you will reap what you sow. It is the desert's only crop, the yesterdays."

Yes, it was pity. My Lord, the old man was pitying him! The Hangman grabbed for the table. He started to yank it from under those frightened feet.

"No!" Colorado screamed at him. "If you kill us, you'll be killing your chance at treasure."

The gun wavered, and that one hand on the table. "How much treasure?"

"A million. Maybe two million dollars."

"Where?"

"In claims. We have a hundred scattered all over the desert, so many we've forgotten half of them. But we've got the papers and some of them are worth maybe a thousand, some five thousand. There's gold in every one. They're yours for our lives. Three lives in exchange for a hundred gold mines."

"No. If they'd been any good you would have stayed with them."

"That isn't true. We're prospectors. It's the excitement we want, not the gold. You know that a real desert man will leave five thousand lying in the sand to go on for the fun of finding ten."

"But I'm not a prospector, son. I'm a hangman. Or haven't you heard?"

He was quite mad. It was in his eyes, the lust to kill. Only for one second had it been erased by the word treasure. The Hangman's hand tightened on the table. Colorado watched the rings of white grow around the knuckles and it was as though each one called to him—*Treasure. Treasure. Treasure.*

"I do know where there's treasure." It was a whisper born in tales about camp fires in the night. It was a last chance. "My grandfather and I know where the old galleon is."

The old galleon. For two hundred and more years, the ghost of the old galleon had set men's hearts to thumping on the Colorado desert. And this night was no different. A pulse jumped in the Hangman's throat like a prisoned frog.

"What do you mean?"

**TOPS
FOR
QUALITY!**



"I mean I know where it lies buried in the sand. I have seen its three carved decks all touched with gold. I have felt its broken shrouds blowing in my face. I have walked its slanting deck and down into the hold and seen the pearls. A ship loaded with precious pearls."

"I don't believe it." He wet his greedy, wishing lips. "That is only a mirage people see; it is not a ship."

"It wasn't a mirage in 1615 when Nicolas Cardona and Juan de Iturbe with thirty soldiers and a host of Negro divers left Mazatlán on a pearl hunt into the Vermilion sea. That is history.

"It wasn't a mirage when instead of getting into the Straits of Anian that led from the Pacific to the Atlantic, they went instead into the Salton Sea lying in the middle of the Colorado desert, and in that sad day still connected with the gulf. That is history.

"And the cloud burst that came and locked them in forever with the earth it washed down from the mountains—that is history, too.

"And in 1774 a boy from Sinaloa named Manquerna was a mule driver for Captain Juan Bautista de Anza. Going from Sonora to the California coast and hunting a shorter, better way to do it, the boy stumbled in the night upon an ancient ship. The pearls he took from its hold made him a rich man, and he spent the rest of his life trying to find it once again. That, too, is no mirage but history."

He let the words hang there in the air. "A rich man. Pearls."

And finally the Hangman spoke. "If you know where the old galleon is, why are you dressed in rags? Why aren't you a rich man?"

The boy shrugged his eyebrows—there was not freedom enough to do more. "You heard my grandfather. He believes the desert is the life and death of all its people. He believes that you must take back what you give, and you must put back what you take. So he will take nothing that belongs to the desert. Not even a ship loaded full of pearls."

The Hangman listened, and he weighed each word. "What do you believe?"

"I believe that I would like to live. I believe that three lives is not too much to ask as **barter** for the old galleon."

Peter laughed, short, choking laughter. "Forget it, Colorado. You can't bargain with the devil. Leave him to his fate. He hasn't damned his soul enough—let him kill us, and be wise and take our secret to the grave with us."

"Take our secret to the grave—" it was a tune played on the harp of greed. The Hangman heard it, he was trembling.

"Where is the old galleon?"

"We will take you there, the three of us."

"And stab me in the back the first time I try to sleep!" The spell had broken. He laughed, oh what taunting laughter. "This is nothing but a trick!"

"No!" It was old Peter with his eyes glazed as though he were seeing things far away. "The old galleon is not a trick. Many have seen it, some have even seen a bearded man in fancy dress walking its decks, but when they get close the man is gone and so is his ship.

"On the east shores of the Superstition mountains I saw it, like it was trying to climb the rocks, like it was the only way it could at last get to heaven."

"The east shore of the Superstition mountains!" His voice was very sly. "You've told me. Now there is no need for barter. I know."

"The east shore of the Superstitions covers a lot of ground. Even I, after having walked them off and on for forty years, do not know it all. Take the word of Peter Lindsey that you won't, that you can't find it without our help."

Peter Lindsey. So this was Peter Lindsey. The Hangman had heard of him. Everyone in the desert had heard of him, lucky Peter Lindsey and Sally, his gold-smelling burro. Men had tried to steal that burro, and they had tried to buy it, and now that mangy little beast outside was anyone's. No, not anyone's—but his.

"I'll have your help, Peter Lindsey, all of it I'll need in Sally. She'll smell the ship out if anyone can, and if she can't—least I won't have a knife in my back which is more than I can say if I went with you."

He yanked at the table and knocked it over. Six feet clawed at the air for just a moment like strange, grasping hands, and then they swung slower and slower. Back and forth, making monsters on the wall. Slower and slower. Three clocks running down.

The Hangman of Carrizo watched until they were still, and then went out into that lonely night.

DEATH took over the stage station. The silence of it, the coldness of it, even the fire was dying in the grate. Everything but words—

"The desert is a place of yesterday, and yesterday never dies on the desert. You live it over and over." Like a little boy living because a man made a collar for his neck, and the little boy growing up and not dying because the man had made a bigger collar for his neck.

Even though the neck had seemed well, Peter Lindsey had made Colorado wear the brace. "You've broken your neck once, boy, and someday you may be in the way of breaking it a second time. Because on the desert you live things over and over."

And hanging there from the roof beam with the rope tight against the riveted leather collar that was as stiff as iron and all but hidden by his shirt collar and his yellow hair, Colorado Lindsey began to believe. He felt as though his head were going to pop off, he felt he couldn't stand the agony of taking another breath. But he did, and his head didn't pop off, and he was living.

Colorado opened one eye and looked under his lashes. The room was empty. He began working feverishly at the rope around his arms. He could just touch the knot with his fingers. He didn't try to undo it, but tugged on it till the rope slid from the thickness of his chest to the thinner waist.

After he'd snaked his arms out and he was free, he grabbed the rafter and pulled with all the young strength in him until the noose could be loosened, and let him drop to the ground. He made an awful thud. It seemed loud enough to be heard clear around the desert. Colorado ran on feet with pins and needles shooting through them to bar the door. After that he cut the others down.

And Peter Lindsey had been right as he stood there on the trail seeing the lighted window. There had been death in this night.

Colorado buried them in the hill, deep as though they had been precious gold. He ran through the brush and found where Sally had been picked up, he found where

her tracks went off into rock shale. He knew this country, hills and canyons and stone and sand—he might hunt a thousand years, and never find the Hangman of Carrizo. They might pass only a dozen feet apart in the dark and not see each other. He would have to bring the Hangman to him.

But not tonight. Not by screaming his hate blindly. Not that the Hangman wouldn't hear, but the echoes would bring him running back to meet a boy without a gun and only hate for his weapon. A poor weapon and a blind one. It would be like the bird inviting the cat into its nest.

No, he would have to bring the Hangman to him; but he would have to be ready, and this time not be caught burying rope. Peter Lindsey had believed in the vengeance of the desert—but Colorado Lindsey believed in the vengeance of his hands.

Dawn fingered the hills, pink and fresh and lovely as on that first day when they were made. Colorado watched it come. He waited until the full sun shone down and warmed that grave, and then he dug up his great grandfather's cache of gold. Like all cautious men, each night whatever wealth they carried was buried far from camp to keep it safe. This was about one-thousand dollars in gold nuggets.

In the town of Carrizo it bought a burro and a long-handled shovel, a short axe and a long axe, a hammer, two guns, ammunition, flour, beans, baking powder, salt bacon, cooking utensils, one for coffee and one for everything else, two big canteens, knives, spoons—everything a desert man needed, except rope. Colorado already had that—and three things most desert men didn't need, a brush, one gallon of red paint and three of yellow.

It was a long way he had to go. In the shade of the Coyote mountain, past the Painted Gorge, beyond the Dry Lakes and around the southern tip of the Superstition mountains.

Every step of the way he took with caution. Each night was spent alone in the dark, bedded a mile or more from his burro in case it should start talking. The only meals he cooked were in the morning mist with the smoke covered and spread into just a few more wisps of gray. And finally he came to the eastern shores of the Superstition mountains.

He walked beside them quite away out, along the ancient shoreline of the sea that had come in from the gulf and then dried up when half a mountain sat down in its narrows. He walked until he saw a high tumble of fallen rocks set out apart, and a dead tree growing in their midst. It was but lately dead with the bark still on, and its gnarled top he painted yellow. And he painted all the rocks by it yellow and red, until from the distance they might look like a three-decked ship poking up out of the sand with a mizzen mast in its middle.

And he took the rest of the thousand dollars in gold nuggets and scattered them about. That was for Sally, because as every prospector knew a burro could smell gold. Gold for Sally and the ship for the Hangman of Carrizo. The ship and the boy hiding among the painted rocks, a boy with a gun in one hand and a rope in the other.

For three days and three nights he waited, breathing and thinking hate. Every grain of sand stirring in the breeze told it to the next grain of sand.

"Hate. There's a young man here waiting to kill. He's never killed before, but he's going to now. With a rope."

THE desert listened. Hour after lonely hour sitting there in the silence, it was as though the whole world was listening to the beating of his heart. Sun broiled down on him and the moon shone, and then the clouds came. Queer, saffron-colored clouds rushing above the earth, and Colorado Lindsey didn't have time to see them because a man had touched the horizon and was running. A man and a burro with one ear shorter than another.

Colorado watched him through the field glasses he had brought in Carrizo, and still he couldn't be sure. Burros looked so much alike, and this man had no mask on his face now. He was running as if he'd seen the end of the world, but any man would run at sight of the old galleon. So Colorado didn't pick up his rifle and kill. He crouched behind a rock and waited. He listened to feet crunching into gravel, he heard the cursing, and he stalked around until he was behind the man, until he could take the shovel off the short-eared burro's back and read the name low on the handle. Letters etched with a red-hot poker: "*Peter Lindsey.*"

"Hangman! Hangman of Carrizo!" It

was as though a wind had suddenly been born to scream it over the desert.

The Hangman whirled. Standing high on the painted rocks like an eagle on a crag, he looked down on the boy mocking him. The same lust to kill was in his eyes as he reached for his gun, and shot point blank at Colorado Lindsey's heart.

Only the young man wasn't there any more. He'd ducked behind a finger rock and he shot around it and brought a scream and a spurt of blood. He shot again and again and again. Bullets flew fast on the wind, and the wind blew faster.

"Hangman! Hangman of Carrizo!"

Maybe it was a boy screaming. Maybe it was an old man. Or the desert calling.

Colorado crept through the echoes. He came to a rock with a man breathing on the other side. He could hear it, heavy and gasping as a tired animal. The boy dropped his gun and his rope and raised his great grandfather's shovel. That was what he would do it with. He would smash the Hangman's skull with Peter Lindsey's shovel. He held it high over his head in a great swinging arc, and over the rock, and he looked down into the Hangman's eyes.

And the desert spoke.

The queer saffron clouds had changed while these two men had played hide and seek with death. The clouds had grown dark and ugly, until suddenly they were blotted out entirely by blowing sand.

The wind screamed. The sand choked. It blew in his nose and his mouth, even in his closed eyes. The shovel fell useless and forgotten. It was not a time to think of death, but how a man might live, how he might breathe when the only breath was sand. Colorado clawed at his lips. He wrapped his shirt tails over his nose and mouth. He turned his back to the wind and still he could hardly stand against it.

It seemed as though the very earth was rocking beneath his feet. He tried running and there was a strange hollow sound as though he were running on boards, and there were shrouds whipping into his face. He could feel them, torn bits of cloth slapping at his cheeks, and yet he knew it wasn't so. It couldn't be. Not the boards, not the shrouds, not even the bearded man he brushed against. A bearded man when the Hangman was clean shaven.

He must be imagining it as he had so

often when he heard the tale about the campfire. It was odd that he should seem to hear and feel and touch these things of so long ago, when they couldn't be true. He knew a man can believe anything in a sand storm. He is like a stranger in hell, tortured on all sides with nothing left that seems real, nothing he can catch hold of. As if the whole world was spinning to destruction.

The storm stopped. As quickly as it had come it had breathed its last. It left a vast silence. It left new dunes of sand. It left the painted rocks bare and black and naked as on that first day when they were made. It left the dead tree barked and broken like a short mizzen mast, and hanging from the top of it was the Hangman of Carrizo.

"Whatever you have given you have to take back, life or death." Words beating in a boy's heart, words to stay here always, in the stone and the earth, even in the empty wind. *"The Hangman of Carrizo has reaped what he has sown."*

Colorado walked close, softly, as a man does creeping up on a mirage. He looked into the purple face and the bloated lips and at the eyes popping and dull with death. No, he couldn't look at them. He couldn't look at anything but at the rope about the Hangman's neck. It seemed almost as though it were made of three strands of pearls. He raised his hands to touch them, and one of the strings broke, and a little mound of iridescent white fell into his palms.

He turned like a frightened child in a night of terror and ran. And ran. For five miles he never stopped, until he came upon an old prospector boiling coffee over a fire.

The prospector smiled. "Did you see it,

boy?" He pointed to the west. "Turn and look. The old galleon's done riz up again."

Colorado turned.

He saw a ship with its bow buried deep in the sands, and a richly carved stern raised high above. Three decks it was, shining like beaten gold. Torn shrouds swung in the breeze and it looked as though the ship was rocking, and there was something hanging from the stubby mizzen mast.

The old prospector squinted harder. "I saw her first in '48 and again in '56, but I don't recollect anything on the mast. Looks like a man hanging there, don't it?"

Yes, it looked like a man.

It looked like a man, and it looked like a ship. Maybe it was. Or maybe some of the paint had been left on the rocks after all and with the sun on it— Maybe the bearded man in the fancy dress had been imagination and the Hangman of Carrizo had stumbled in the howling wind onto the broken top of the tree and hung himself with one of his own ropes. He might even have tried to tie himself there to keep from being blow away, only the rope had slipped. And a forgotten cache of pearls had blown from somewhere and nestled in the thick hemp coils. Maybe.

Maybe not.

He looked up and the old galleon was gone. He had known it would be. Colorado Lindsey began to shake. He sat down on the ground and he counted out the pearls in his hand. There was one for every man in Carrizo. Very slowly he put them in his pocket, and he asked no questions.

And suddenly it came over him that he had learned Peter Lindsey's lesson. He wasn't living in the desert. He was part of it.

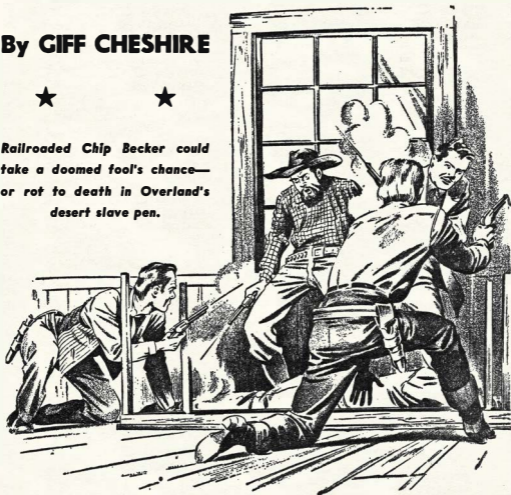
Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946, of 10 Story Western, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1947. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of 10 Story Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, held stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of October, 1947. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40, Register's No. 262-W-8. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) (Seal)—Form 352b—Rev. 7-46.

STOPOVER IN ALKALI HELL

By GIFF CHESHIRE



Railroaded Chip Becker could take a doomed fool's chance—or rot to death in Overland's desert slave pen.



They lifted guns in a frenzy of firing.

IT WAS one of those breaks a man has no reason to hope for but which shape sometimes before his surprised eyes. He carried two cans of water, suspended by wires from his shoulder yoke. For several hours the sky had been building a sooty overcast. While they were filling the converted oil cans at the spring, the first jagged streaks of lightning lashed across the sky, thunder rocking the still, oppressive heat. Rain splashed immediately there—

after, at first turning the desert dust around them to a powdery dough.

All these things built the undreamed of opening for Chip Becker.

The armed guard had witlessly kept too close behind him as they came up the slope from the spring. The alkali underfooting, running suddenly with water from the cloudburst, had turned slippery as grease. Chip heard the guard go down hard in a

graceless sprawl. As he turned, Chip heard the man's throaty oath.

The guard was on his knees, pushing up, his front smeared with mud. Instinct powered Chip as he moved his broad shoulders in a whirling motion. The heavy right can reached and lifted on centrifugal force. The guard wasn't even expecting it, and the can impacted solidly against his head, scarcely spilling a drop of water. The guard let his face drop into the mud again, and in the next instant Chip had thrown off the yoke and landed hard on top the man. He made a trip hammer of his right fist, and presently the guard was still.

Chip climbed to his feet and turned his face against the streaming rain to let it beat into the cracks his three weeks in alkali desert had sanded there. They were still a quarter mile from the borax camp. He sucked in a deep breath of the damp but still warm air. He had no plan. What he had just done had been an animal reaction of escape from a cage.

He turned and bent, got the guard's gun belt and took the gun. There was only a little mud on the outside, which he wiped away carefully, and the barrel was not fouled. His fingers trembled as he buckled on the belt and slipped the .45 into leather. It was unbelievable luck, after weeks of misfortune.

From long brooding, he knew that if he headed due south he would, in time, hit the isolated road to McDermitt on the Nevada line, though a lot of southeastern Oregon desert lay between. He welcomed it after what he had endured in the prisoner-manned borax camp.

Plans shaping, he bent again and took the guard's pants belt and bound the man's wrists and ankles together behind his back. He had no mercy. Stub Clayton had been the most brutal of the four men Jace Overland kept out here to guard his political prisoners. He took Clayton's dirty bandana and affixed a tight gag. Chip worked fast now, taking these measures to give him all the time possible to get a start on his getaway.

The die was cast. After this assault on his guard, his life would become a deeper hell unless he made good his escape. This cloudburst, following rainless weeks, was a blessing, for it would keep the other guards, down at the camp, under cover for a while.

None of them liked discomfort, much less the cleansing effect of water.

All around him the bowl-like desert stretched, glistening now under great sheets of rain water. As he climbed atop the rim and stretched flat there, Chip could see the great reach of dry lake beds, turned completely white by crude borax deposits, at the bottom of the long slopes. He could see the three sod huts of the Overland works and the indistinct shapes of the evaporation vats and crystallizing tanks.

Chip Becker found himself paralyzed. Every instinct cried for flight, for self-consideration and escape. Yet now that he had committed himself to a desperate course, he couldn't help thinking of the dozen other prisoners, and particularly of old Bill Nemers.

The old man would be dead before long if he stayed here—either from overwork and the desert's punishment, or deliberately murdered by one of the guards. They wanted him dead. Jace Overland wanted him dead. All the prisoners had known that.

Chip swore softly to himself. He owed no one in these parts a thing. He had had only abuse since he had tried to pass through the country on his way from a Montana riding job to a possible one in California. He had been picked up for vagrancy in the iniquitous little desert town of Yellow Jacket—Jace Overland's town—not because he was a tramp but because he had pulled Overland's whiskers.

Locked up in the town jail, he was tried before a sour-faced, stone-deaf justice of the peace, sentenced to sixty days and sent out here to the borax camp. Since, he had learned that Yellow Jacket's little jail was only a receiving depot for Overland's borax works. Not only was the man seeking cheap labor; he was using the device to rid himself of his enemies.

Chip reminded himself that he had got into this trouble because of Bill Nemers' girl. If he now interceded for old Bill he would greatly jeopardize his own chances of escape.

He noticed then that the driving rain had slacked a little. He had to make up his mind. The other guards would be wondering presently why the water detail, sent down to the sweet springs, had not returned.

ALMOST against his will, an alternate plan began to form. There were three Overland men left down there. If one of them, or maybe two, headed up the spring trail to investigate, Chip Becker had a show to get the jump on the one or two remaining at the borax works. With another gun or so, the whole bunch of eleven prisoners could burst over the landscape like a stampeding herd.

Waiting gave him a few minutes to review the unpleasant picture in his mind. He had ridden into Yellow Jacket late one night to pass the night in the local hotel. Heading straight for the livery to leave his mount and pack pony, he had run spang into trouble.

The barn was at one edge of town, and at first it had seemed deserted. Then, deep in its shadowed recesses he had seen a man struggling with a girl. He had his hand over her mouth and, though silenced, she was fighting like a wildcat. The litter on the floor had muffled Chip's steps, and he was nearly upon them before the man heard him. The fellow released the girl then, whirling around. Chip learned later that it was Jace Overland.

Chip landed all over him before Overland gathered his wits. The man was big, probably five years older than Chip's twenty-five, handsome in a heavy-jowled way. Chip bore in, keeping him off balance, dropping him finally with a clipping jab to the heavy jaw.

He learned then that the girl was Cora Nemers and that she was running the livery while her father was working out a jail sentence.

"Railroaded!" the pretty Cora had fumed. "Bill Nemers is one of the few men left in this town with guts enough to speak his mind about Jace Overland! There isn't a business man in town but what has to kick in to him. And he's tried to treat me like one of his saloon wenches from the day he laid eyes on me."

Overland had got his eyes pried open again and staggered to his feet. He looked at Chip in a cold way, then left without a word.

Chip had turned back to the girl. "What's he got your dad in jail for?"

Cora Nemers' lips curled bitterly. "He worked it the same way he's jailed everybody else in town with the courage to buck

him. He owns the mayor and council and the marshal and justice of peace. They either frame up something or pass an impossible or distasteful ordinance. They call it cleaning up the town.

"In Dad's case they made it illegal for a livery to operate inside of certain limits and gave him thirty days to move the whole works. Can you imagine that! It was impossible, even if Dad would have submitted—but he didn't. He sounded off to everybody, just as he always has about Jace Overland. So they jailed him and sent him out to the borax works, and it's my idea they'll find an excuse to kill him out there. It's happened before. On half an excuse they shoot down the ones they want to get shed of permanently."

Chip had glanced at her thoughtfully. "How come Overland gets away with working town prisoners on his own borax works?"

"Oh, he pays a small wage to the town. The council sanctions it, claiming it saves the expense of keeping undesirable boarders." Cora Nemers' dark brown eyes grew thoughtful. "Mister, if you're smart you'll get on your horse and ride right away from here—or you'll get a dose of the same. It's because they don't like that kind of medicine that the town puts up with Jace Overland."

Chip had laughed at that. He wasn't letting anybody put him on the run. Yet he was only half way between the livery and the hotel when the town marshal came down the street toward him, half running. Taking no chances, he had thrown down on Chip and taken his gun. They threw him in the lock-up as a vagrant and suspicious character. The money Chip had with him the marshal claimed was probably stolen. The next day Chip had found himself in the borax camp.

Since then he had spent half of his sixty-day sentence in unmitigated hell. He had seen at the start that Cora was probably right about Overland's intentions regarding old Bill Nemers. The white-haired oldest was a tough turkey in his own right and a spunky, outspoken one. The guards out here had singled him out for special abuse. It was grueling, unpleasant work in the borax deposits, under the open desert sun, and that alone was wearing Bill out.

None of the prisoners had come in for

soft treatment. It was a matter of kicks and clubbed guns, of rotten food, deliberately denied water for drinking and cleanliness, disrupted sleep at night. Clayton, Lecky, Joss and Imes—Overland's men had been hand-picked for their work and they took relish in it. They had poured it on, daring old Bill Nemers to fight back, knowing that in time he would. Then they would gun him. . . .

CHIP tensed and pressed flatter into the slippery mud so that he could not be picked out in the clumps of sage. The rain was dwindling, and a man had emerged from one of the soddies. Chip recognized the blocky figure of Lecky, who was Clayton's buddy and would be the first to wonder about the man's delay in returning from the spring. Lecky came around the corner of the sod house, heading up the spring trail.

Chip pulled back and, still flat, slithered to his right, getting away from the trail. Then he waited till Lecky topped the rise. Lecky would be a few minutes in getting down to where Clayton lay trussed and in figuring it out and getting back to the works with the alarm, if he didn't tackle trailing Chip on his lonesome. Chip rose then and went pounding down the bank, the gun in his hand.

He knew that this open, headlong approach would bring curious men to the doors of the soddies, and he only hoped that some of the prisoners wouldn't thoughtlessly spoil his chances at Joss and Imes. Then Imes stepped through a door, staring and grabbing for his gun, and Chip shot him, dropping him in his tracks.

Purdy Joss loomed in another door, trig-

gering in quick panic. A slug shoved Chip around, blocking the nerves of his left arm, flopping him on the treacherous underfooting. There was a moment in which he thought the long gamble had failed dismally at the cost of his life.

Joss' next shot splashed mud into Chip's face, then a white-haired figure loomed behind Joss, inside the soddy, and a wielded chair came down across the man's head and shoulders. Joss pitched out through the door, landing on his face in the mud, and old Bill Nemers stood in the doorway grinning wickedly.

Bill galloped across to Chip, and Chip grunted, "There's still Lecky! He'll come smoking back in a minute!"

"If he don't decide to light his shuck," said Bill. He helped Chip to his feet, then swept up Joss' gun and rolled the man out of his gun belt, which he strapped on. Then he and Chip went to meet Lecky, not wanting to give the man a chance to sneak up on them.

There was nothing but tracks to show that Lecky had lit out at the sound of shooting down at the works, disappearing over the rim in the other direction. No horses were kept here for fear of their tempting the prisoners to tackle escape, supplies being brought out from Yellow Jacket by buckboard and the refined borax being hauled away on the return trip.

The two men stared at each other.

"Well, he's going for help," said Chip. "It'll take him a couple hours to get there afoot and mebbe another hour for the marshal to get out with more gunmen. We better make tracks south."

Bill Nemers' said, "You start, Chip. The rest of us can't. Our homes're here."

James E. Sorrels*

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It was the first Chip had thought of that. And he had induced revolt in the camp, giving Jace Overland excuse for lethal retaliation.

Chip said, "Bill, we got three guns." "Yeah," Bill agreed. "And there's no sense forting up here trying to stand 'em off. If I ain't lost track of time, today's Tuesday. The town council will meet tonight. All of Jace Overland's key men'll be there together, in one room."

"Reckon you're right, Bill. We gotta clean up the whole mess, or we're finished."

Stub Clayton had long since recovered consciousness and was glaring up at them with a mixture of animosity and fear. Lecky had departed at the first shots, without untying or ungagging him. Chip freed the man, while Bill stood with a ready gun. They drove Clayton ahead of them back to the soddies.

The ten other prisoners made an excited group. They were a mixture, some young, some old, all of them united by a common hatred of Jace Overland and his henchmen and the present hope of escape. Since he had started it, Chip assumed leadership of the rebellion.

"I want a volunteer who's a first-rate shot and not scared to practice it. The other nine of you stay here. The marshal'll be out here with more gunmen, and if you show any fight they'll beef you in cold blood and use the revolt as an excuse to cover it. If we win the gamble, we'll have you out of here for good and back in your own home. But on the chance we might lose, be extra polite to the marshal and his boys when they get here."

Nemers and Chip Becker and a young purcher called Dave Manet left at once. Manet was not a political enemy of Overland's but his strong back had looked useful to the borax workings and he had been picked up on a drunk charge. They had only a couple of hours until a posse would be on their trail, and their tracks were impossible to conceal in the alkali gumbo left by the cloudburst. Yet darkness was only a few hours off, and Bill Nemers knew the country intimately. He led them to a ravine where run-off water still stood, and they waded its length. They found other similar temporary watercourses and at the end of an hour knew they had left a hopelessly tangled trail behind them. By the

time they felt free to move with definite direction, dusk was rolling in over the horizons.

AN HOUR after dark they were in Bill Nemers' livery in Yellow Jacket, having easily made the last sneak at the edge of town. They were tenser now, not talking much, each privately getting himself set for what lay ahead.

Cora Nemers had been overjoyed at the sudden appearance of the three through the back door of the livery, and now her father had a use for her.

"Honey, you make like you're going home to supper and see what's happening down to the town hall. Marshal Stockhurst's back in town by now. He can't do no trailing till morning. I figure it'll be a right anxious meeting tonight, boys. And they're going to have to deal with some unexpected motions."

Cora left, and the three men waited in the harness room behind a barred door. Chip kept trying to break the tension within himself, but it was impossible. His first glimpse of Cora, a while before, had told him he was in the fight for keeps.

A nerve-wearing hour must have passed before Cora returned. She came in casually, but when she spoke her voice was tight. "They're all there now. The four councilmen and hizzoner, Jace Overland. Marshal Stockhurst and even that phoney justice-of-the-peace, Pete Lonerger. Seven men. Too many for three to handle, no matter if they are mad as hornets. We better all of us just light out of here."

Chip shook his head. He said, "We've got surprise on our side. They'll never think of our forming a delegation to their meeting. If we can cut in on 'em sudden we can mebbe halve them odds, making them even. That's a good enough deal for me."

"Me too!" said Dave Manet, and old Bill Nemers nodded.

Chip was calm again. When they first got in, Cora had disinfected his shoulder wound with horse medicine and bound it. It felt like a live coal there in the flesh above the collar bone, and that arm was practically useless. But he only needed his good right hand, and a little luck.

Set for the showdown, the trio stepped boldly into the street. They encountered

only a few townspeople, but they left stirred men behind them, for the whole town knew the entire roster of the borax camp. If they were stirring up any voluntary help, Chip did not know, but he couldn't count on it.

The town hall was a fairly small structure, on the front side of the jail. They went up the steps openly and into a small hallway and down this, figuring that boldness would be less likely to incite alarm than an escaping sound of stealth. There were, fortunately, two doors to the large room where the meeting was in progress. Bill Nemers stopped by the first, gun drawn, and waited until Dave Manet and Chip were at the second. At a signal from Bill, they wheeled the doors open.

Their eruption into the smoke-filled room froze it for a second. The seven men who were choking off the town's life with their greedy hands sat around a large table. Some of them looked up, staring, and the others swung around in their chairs.

Chip Becker's voice was deadly. "We'll give you a chance to fill your hands, gents, then we're shooting!"

They required no second invitation. Chairs shoved back as their occupants scrambled. The two doors were putting them between two fires and they tried to get the table between. Somebody loosed a shot in midstride, touching off bedlam. Chip dropped the rattled man who had fired in tight-nerved wildness. He shot without cover for himself, powered by a bitter hatred. He caught the rocking beat of Manet's gun close to his left. There would be no time for reloading. Eighteen shots had to beat this odorless bunch or it was the finish for the three escaped prisoners.

Men piled in the smoke-filled room. Somebody shoved over the big table, and Jace Overland's bunch fortified behind it. It gave them slight protection—but was somewhat of a handicap in that each man there had to expose himself to hunt a target. Out of the corner of his eye Chip saw that Bill Nemers was down on his knees now, but still shooting.

For the second time lead bit into Chip's flesh, catching his leg and knocking him sprawling. He swiveled around, flat on the splintered floor, seeing a little better there under the eddying, rocking powder-smoke.

Then he got another man. The firing died almost as abruptly as it had started.

Chip had no taste for letting the thing wear itself out. He crossed the room slowly, dragging with his hands and pushing with his good leg. Bill Nemers saw what he was up to and started crawling toward the other end of the table. They reached it together and both shoved.

The table crashed over, bottom up now, and only two able men crouched there, Jace Overland and Stockhurst, the crooked town marshal. Both lifted guns in a frenzy of firing. Chip heard Manet's jubilant yell, saw the marshal collapse. Chip exchanged shots with Overland, who was the fraction of an inch wild, and got his man.

When the sound had died, men poured into the place, coming from all over town. Blood coursed down Bill Nemers' face from a scalp wound, but he was grinning with the elation of a man who has passed through a long ordeal. Dave Manet had a finger shot off. Unable to stand, Chip Becker was propped against a wall. The only thing he could think of was to ask somebody for the makings.

On his feet, Bill Nemers made a motion with his arm, as he addressed the gathering crowd. "Boys, I declare this town meeting adjourned. And if you ask me, it's transacted some plumb handsome business. If nobody objects, I'll now call a new one and we'll elect us a new set of officials."

"Nobody objects, Bill!" somebody called. "But I can tell you it'll be a rigged election again. Bill Nemers'll be our new mayor or I'll gut-shoot the men who say different!" A shout showed there would be no dissension.

"And I'm nominating Chip Becker for the new marshal!" a girl's voice called. Cora shoved through the crowd toward Chip, and her eyes were shining. She hunkered beside him, a small, trim figure in her boy's clothing. To cover her sudden confusion she drew a match from her pocket and lighted Chip's cigarette.

Chip inhaled the delicious smoke, grinning down at her. "That ties me up with a steady job in this town, does it, Cora?"

She met his eyes then and smiled into them, her own glowing. "A buckaroo like you could go a long ways in this town, fella!" she said softly.

JUAN POKER'S FIRE-SALE

ON THE bleak north shoulder of Mt. San Jacinto the desert blew itself out, leaving a steeply piled dune of sand against the mountain. Beyond this lay the Hemet Valley. Juan Poker, coming in from the sere wastes of the Coachella and the even more savage deserts which lay beyond the lower Colorado, pulled up with relief.

After a long look into the green valley, Poker glanced behind him. Half a dozen miles away he saw the dust of pursuit. Pursuit which had kept an ominous, dogged, even distance behind him for four blistering days.

Poker eased in his saddle, his lips tightening. His errand had made him tolerate this grim tracking this far, but now that he was in sight of his goal he couldn't risk it farther.

He reined from the trail into a brushy boulder field above him. A sandy pocket afforded shelter for his mount. He swung down and ground-tied the dusty animal. Retracing his course, he found a vantage point above the San Jacinto trail and hunkered down to wait.

A curious revolt was in progress in the Hemet Valley. An affair in which Juan Poker had no personal stake, but in which he was inextricably involved. Perhaps because he was inclined to meddle in the business of others. Or because he was a Yankee who believed that his fellow countrymen now pouring into the Californias could create grave injustices—that there was good among the Spanish people who had first settled the valleys between the Colorado deserts and the sea.

Glancing again into the valley below him, Poker smiled a little. Neither of these was the true reason for his long ride. The fact was that he was promoting a romance.

Nothing more complicated than this. He had ridden three hundred miles into the badlands of Arizona to find an old padre with a long memory and to bring Raquel Descante a wedding present. An earring. Not a pair. A single earring. And for that he was being followed.

The dust on the downslope came closer and the rider beneath it identifiable. A small man, hunched a little forward in his saddle in the fashion of an old man, but riding with the easy slouch of a trail veteran and at a veteran's fast, ambling, distance-consuming walk. The fellow showed no indication of stealth or caution.

Poker wondered if the man knew whom he was following. There were those in the Californias who would not crowd Juan Poker on an open trail or a busy street unless the odds had been carefully stacked in advance. This lone rider was a brave man or a careless one—or he did not believe the stories heard in paisano cantinas and carpeted parlors alike.

As the man drew close, Poker's muscles tightened a little in anticipation. He moved down a little closer to the trail. The rider was a Yankee of a thin, harsh-featured, hard-bitten type. He was powdered with dust and obviously as weary as Poker himself, but he was armed and his eyes were wary.

Poker permitted him to ride fully abreast of his hiding place before he stepped out onto the trail, his hands hanging loosely down by his sides.

"Haul up, amigo!" he invited quietly.

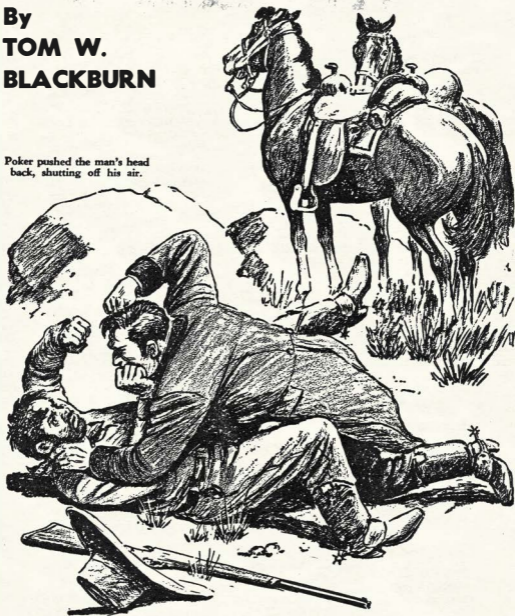
The rider checked his mount with a quick, instinctive jerk on his reins, but he seemed only mildly surprised at Poker's sudden appearance. He grinned.

"Sure," he agreed easily. "Now, you tell me why."

★ *Senorita Descante's gold-spiced marriage depended on Juan Poker's lively wits—pitted against the gunslicks of a sly ranchero.* ★

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

Poker pushed the man's head back, shutting off his air.



"I figure you must have business with me," Poker suggested.

"Business?" The man's brows went up. "Clean up here on the mountain? A sour guess, friend. Why'd you make it?"

"No other reason for you to follow me for four days."

"No?" the man asked mockingly, his grin widening. "You sure?"

"Light down, and I'll make sure."

A voice sounded from behind Poker.

"Go ahead, Brent, light down, like he says. I got him covered. You just lift his gun—"

Poker stiffened, but did not turn his head. The man on the trail continued to grin as he slid from his saddle. He crossed unhurriedly to Poker and snaked his gun from its holster. Boots scraped on rock and a short, florid man carrying a large-bore

carbine came out of the brush and into Poker's range of vision.

"Where'd he go, Brent?" this one asked the man on the trail.

"Padre Betancour's."

The man with the carbine nodded.

"Like you said he would, eh? I figured as much when I seen him pull off of the trail to wait for you, as you said he would when he got in sight of the valley on his way back. Left his horse within a hundred yards of where you told me to be waiting. Did he get what he went after?"

"The earring?" Brent asked. "I think so."

"Must be on him, then. I searched his saddlebags while he was waiting down here."

Brent frowned a little and held out one hand.

"Want to make it easy or do we get rough?" he queried sharply.

Poker shrugged. He could pull against odds but not against the inevitable. Opening the flap of a breast pocket, he fished out a small, lint-wrapped bit of silver and turquoise.

BRENT unwrapped it and grunted satisfaction. "It's the other one of the pair all right. When Luis Descante gets rid of this, there'll be nothing to keep him from clearing title to the ranch. He'll pay a pretty price for it.

"Cotter, you take this bucko back to the big dune. Plant him and his horse just over the crest. The wind and drift tonight will take care of the rest of it. It'll cover them completely. By the time it uncovers them again, we'll be long gone from this forsaken country. I'll meet you at the Descante corals as soon as it's full dark."

Cotter nodded again, keeping a wary eye on Poker. Brent returned to his horse and swung up. He started the animal, then reined up again, as though with afterthought. He looked at Cotter and grinned.

"Better be careful on the way back up to the dune," he said. "Watch your step. I forgot to tell you. This here is Long John Poker—the one the paisanos call Juan Poker. And they claim he's bullet-proof!"

With an unpleasant laugh, Brent lifted his horse into a lope.

A slight grayish tinge washed into Cotter's color. He brought the muzzle of his

carbine up sharply, lining it against Poker's belly, and a stubby thumb eared back the hammer of the weapon.

"Start moving!" he growled. "Up the slope toward the horses—"

"Nothing like a reliable partner who lets a man in on everything," Poker said lightly. "One you can trust, like that boy. A rattler with a quiet tail!"

"Move!" Cotter repeated stubbornly. "I'd as soon cut you down here and take the time to pile rocks on you as take chances on getting back to the dune!"

"That isn't where you're taking chances," Poker corrected softly. "The chances are in letting Brent out of your sight, now he's got that earring."

Cotter made another tense gesture with the carbine.

Poker started up the brushy, rocky slope, but he didn't check the easy flow of his speech.

"Luis Descante is as crooked as a creek meander and greedy as hell," he said. "He doesn't care who he deals with, you or me or Brent, or how the take he deals out is split. What counts is that his niece wants to get married and he's about to lose any claim he might have to Hemet Valley, to the Descante ranch. Ever hear the story?"

Cotter's grunt was unintelligible. Poker frowned in mock thoughtfulness, and he measured the man.

"Well," he went on unhurriedly, "when old Grandpa Descante was ready to die, he called in his son and his granddaughter, Luis and Raquel. Luis was to be second in line for the ranch. Raquel's mother had married a Yankee ship's officer who had later been lost at sea. The old man never forgave his daughter for what he thought was a mistake.

"He didn't want his granddaughter to make the same one. He gave her an earring. He told her he had given its mate to Padre Betancour. When she was ready to marry, the padre would give her the other earring only if he was convinced the man she wanted to marry had no Yankee blood. And Raquel would inherit Descante ranch only if she wore both earrings at her wedding—"

Poker broke off. They had reached the place where he had left his horse. Another animal was now also in the pocket. At a gesture from Cotter, Juan mounted and

started back down through the brush. After a little he twisted in his saddle to complete his story.

"Miguel Molin, the boy Raquel wants to marry, is pure Californio and the girl should get the ranch. Padre Betancour has been transferred to a mission across the Colorado. Miguel planned to go to him for the other earring, but he had an accident with a gun. Maybe you know something about that, Cotter. Not quite fatal, but enough to keep him from riding.

"Luis then planned to send a Yankee to the padre, posing as Raquel's intended. That would have been Brent, I think. So I had to beat Brent across the Colorado. I've known the old padre a long time. I knew he'd believe my story and give me the Descante earring."

"What story?" Cotter asked distrustfully.

Poker smiled. "It doesn't matter. I got what I went after."

"Why did you have to beat Brent across the river?"

"Because I knew how much that earring would be worth to Luis Descante, too. It costs as much to feed my belly in this country as it does yours or Brent's."

"You won't get nothing for it now but lead—" Cotter said.

"No," Poker agreed. "And neither will you. You sure you want to meet Brent at the Descante corrals after dark? You plant me, Brent plants you, and all the money is his."

"Brent wouldn't cut me out—" Cotter protested.

"A man's crazy that'd lie to himself like you're doing!" Poker charged. "If you're in this on even shares, why didn't he stick around to give you a hand with me instead of clearing out the minute he got his hands on that earring?"

Cotter reined up.

"You trying to make a deal?" he asked sharply.

"A partner that'll stick with you and cut on even shares," Poker agreed. "You and me—"

The man had reined close. His carbine was across his thighs, just back of the saddle horn. He had lowered its hammer from full cock. He turned his head instinctively toward the valley for an instant, looking at the trail down which Brent had ridden.

Juan Poker did not wait for his answer.

Swinging his weight onto his near stirrup, Poker came up on the leather for momentum and launched himself at the man. Cotter heard the movement and turned back at the moment of impact. Shock drove the carbine from his hand. It spilled into the dust. And locked together, the two men tumbled down from the shying, frightened horses almost on top of the weapon.

Realizing Poker's bid for partnership had been a trick, Cotter fought savagely, silently. For all of his shortness and rotundity, he was a powerful man and he understood ground fighting. Poker had intended to leave this Yankee here in the brush, securely bound, where a paisano later sent out from the ranch could find him and bring him in. However, Cotter gave him no choice.

Twisting away from powerful, flailing blows, Poker caught the man's chin in the crook of one arm and pulled his head back until the thick, straining muscles of the man's own neck flattened his windpipe and shut off his air. They rolled together through the brush and rock, but Poker retained his grip in spite of the punishment.

Cotter was stubborn, even in dying. It was an incredibly long time before Poker rose unsteadily to his feet and picked up the fallen carbine to replace his own gun, carried away by Brent.

With returning wind, Poker unsaddled the dead man's horse and built the cairn of rocks Cotter had promised him over Cotter's body. Mounting, Poker rode down-slope toward the Homet Valley, already beginning to darken with twilight.

THE house at the Descante rancho was in the best tradition of the Californias, with many large and comfortable rooms grouped about two centers. Down a slope and some distance away were the corrals, the stone cooling cellar, and the granary. Between the house and the work buildings, along what amounted to a street, were the adobe huts of the paisanos. The whole effect of the ranch was of a little village, with the Descante house the residence of the most important citizen. It was of this little empire that Luis Descante was trying to cheat his niece.

Juan Poker approached the house directly, riding in the open but attracting as lit-

tle attention as possible. Despite what he had said to Cotter, Poker was reasonably certain that Brent would wait for Cotter until after nightfall at the corrals, as he had promised—because he would want company when he talked price with Luis Descante for the earring.

Luis was an unpleasant and unprincipled man who would immediately recognize that if his price was not satisfactory, Brent could offer the earring to Raquel and Miguel Molin. Luis might take steps to prevent this. So Brent would be wise to wait for his partner. And if he was waiting at the corral, he was not likely to see Poker's approach to the main house in the evening shadows.

No one was under the ramada across the front of the house. Poker stepped under the shelter of the roof before he saw Raquel Descante motioning frantically to him from a partially opened doorway. He crossed swiftly to this and slid into the room within. Miguel Molin was propped up in a rawhide chair, the arm and shoulder which had been injured in his gun "accident" still in a sling. Raquel knelt beside him.

"You got it?" she begged softly. "Senor Poker, did you get it?"

Bending, Poker rammed his fingers into his boot-top and dislodged a small parcel gummed in place there. He smiled as he handed it to the girl.

"With Padre Betancour's blessing, Raquel," he said. "The padre shares your good opinion of Miguel. And he helped me with some plans. Hide this where no one, no matter how hard they looked, could find it. There are apt to be too many of these earrings on Descante rancho for a while tonight and your uncle won't give up easily. Pretend now that you haven't seen me, either of you."

Pulling the door open, Poker recrossed the ramada to his horse. Then, as though just dismounting, he raised his voice and called out:

"Is somebody here? Senor Descante—hola—!"

Steps sounded on the tiling of an inner room. Another door was hauled open. Luis Descante stared sullenly out, his eyes narrowed.

"Well, Poker, you found the stupid old padre?" he snapped.

"I found many things," Poker answered

cryptically. "I've got to talk to you before—"

"Before you see Raquel?" Luis cut in.

"Or before she sees me—" Poker agreed.

A shadow of a smile crossed Luis Descante's lips. He stepped aside in the doorway. Poker passed into the room. Luis closed the door carefully.

"A Yankee always has something to sell," he growled. "What is it you have—a preposterous story that Padre Betancour knows of Yankee blood in the Molin family and wouldn't part with the second earring my thin-witted father gave to him?"

"Miguel Molin is as good a Californio as any Descante," Poker answered bluntly. "The padre knows that as well as you and I do."

"What is it then?"

"The price, first—" Poker suggested.

"A thousand Yankee dollars ought to be enough," Luis Descante offered impatiently, "if it insures my title to this ranch."

"What it insures is up to you, Senor Descante," Poker answered. "Put the money on the table."

Descante opened a drawer and brought out a small leather pouch. He shook a cascade of heavy gold coins onto the table-top.

Poker smiled. "The earring is lost," he said.

"Lost?" Descante swore. "Where?"

"Padre Betancour is old. The old have faulty memories."

Descante swore again. "Then nothing is settled! This news isn't worth a thousand dollars!"

"You haven't heard it all," Poker corrected easily. "I'm saving you much more than you're paying me. I saw the Yankee named Brent among the Indians on the Colorado. There's a clever silversmith in their village—a man who could make a copy of an ornament from a drawing of it.

"This afternoon, on San Jacinto, Brent and a companion waylaid and searched me—apparently to be sure I had nothing. Then Brent came on here. His companion was—ah—delayed a little." Poker paused and smiled faintly.

"If the original earring is lost, you'd be foolish to pay a fine price for a duplicate, Luis. And perhaps there are two duplicates, so that when his deal with you is complete, Brent could sell another to your niece, also—and that would cost you the ranch!"

Descante leaned heavily on the table behind him.

"You're lying!" he charged. "A Yankee trick of making much smoke over little fire."

Poker shrugged and smiled.

"If you're burned, remember I warned you," he said. Reaching out, he raked the gold on the table into his pocket while Luis Descante glared. "You're cheating Raquel." Poker went on. "Maybe I'm cheating you. But you'll find Brent at your corrals, waiting for the partner who won't come down off San Jacinto. See what he offers you and what he asks for it.

"Give him time to also see Racquel and Miguel Molin. Then search both of their rooms. You'll find something in one of them. And you'll have proof of how many times Brent has sold the missing earring to this family—an earring which I tell you is actually lost."

"You'll stay here tonight," Luis Descante said slowly. "It would be foolish and fatal for you to attempt to leave. Keep the gold in your pocket for now. We'll see if you've lied or earned it honestly."

Poker nodded.

Descante called a servant who led Poker to a guest room off of the patio at the rear. From within this Poker heard Descante send another servant to the corrals to bring in another Yankee who might be lurking there. Grinning, Poker pulled a small packet from his boot-top, a duplicate of the one he had left with Raquel Descante. There had been a clever silversmith at Padre Betancour's mission, far beyond the Colorado. With one of the two original earrings as a pattern, the copies he had made were flawless.

Presently Poker heard a man being ushered into Luis Descante's quarters and he recognized Brent's brassy voice. Stepping into the patio, Poker crossed swiftly to Raquel's room and pushed open the door. The room was empty. A bone pin lay on a table.

Taking this, Poker pinned the packet in his hand to the inside of a window hanging—apparently a carefully considered hiding place but one certain to be found in a thorough search. Satisfied, he returned to his own room and stretched out on the bed to nap while the results of his planning took root and thrived.

DINNER was a curious affair. Descante and Brent were already at the table when Poker arrived in the large dining room. Descante greeted him with hooded, unreadable eyes. Brent, obviously wary but confident still, glared truculently at him in an open, unspoken promise of retaliation for the matter of Cotter, lying under a cairn of rocks on Mt. San Jacinto.

Poker was barely seated when Racquel Descante and Miguel Molin came in. Racquel was wearing one of the fateful earrings. Only one. This could be the one given her by her grandfather at his death. However, Poker rose as the girl came in and the action brought his eyes close enough to the silver-and-turquoise ornament to see the fine fibres of the lint in which it had lately been wrapped still clinging to it.

He sat down with a new admiration for the girl. Her one of the original earrings had probably been long hidden in some secure place, possibly not even within the house. When Poker had given her another

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and told her to hide it as well, she had pinned it to her ear, knowing that since she was supposed to have one of the baubles, this would not cause suspicion.

Still, sight of the earring seemed to stir both Brent and the girl's uncle.

Luis Descante rose abruptly. "You and your Yankee-blood will eat elsewhere," he said in Spanish. "I have business with these two and you interfere."

Racquel colored and shot an uneasy, warning glance at Poker. But she turned and left the room without comment. Miguel Molin followed her, the hot answer on his lips silenced by a little gesture from the girl. Descante sat down and glared at his guests.

"We'll get this straight," he said grimly. "It is this land I've always wanted. I've been patient, but my patience is now thin. An accident occurred to young Molin, unfortunately not as severe as I had hoped. A Yankee who is useful to me will be well paid. But I promise you that a Yankee—or even my niece, herself—who stands in my way will also meet with an accident. And this time I'll be sure of my sights!"

Poker was eating with relish. He looked up and grinned provocatively, indicating the meal.

"Excellent dinner, *Senor*," he commented.

Brent exploded. "There's your customer for an accident, *Descante!*" he said. "He lied to you. I tell you, he got the original earring from the *padre* all right. I took it from him on the trail this afternoon. There ain't no duplicates. He's trying to cross us both up!"

"Very possible," *Descante* agreed. "An accident for *Senor* Poker can easily be arranged. On the coast and in the San Joaquin, where the *paisanos* believe him cousin to a saint, there might be some risk. But here in this valley the *paisanos* have heard only echoes of his reputation and none of them know him. Our dinner companion is in grave danger of his life, *Senor* Brent."

Brent grinned satisfaction and began to eat. Luis *Descante* suddenly produced a large-bore Spanish dueling gun from beneath the table cloth and put it down beside his plate. Poker saw that the weapon was at full cock.

Luis *Descante* looked steadily at Brent.

"I have paid you a thousand dollars gold for an earring which I now have in my pocket, *Senor* Brent," he said quietly. "The same earring *Juan* Poker has sworn for a thousand dollars in gold had been lost and replaced with duplicates. It's only fair to tell you that you, also, are in danger of your life."

Brent looked at *Descante's* gun.

Luis smiled.

"While we eat, servants are searching four rooms in this house—*Racquel's*, *Molin's*, yours, and *Juan* Poker's. If no other earring but the one you sold me and the one we saw in my niece's ear are found, we will bury *Juan* Poker. If a duplicate is found, the funeral will be yours, *Senor* Brent. Now, gentlemen, some more coffee?"

Poker's appetite waned. He was unarmed. The carbine which he had salvaged from his tangle with *Cotter* was too bulky and he had left it in his room. His trap was set. He could do nothing more. He didn't know what instructions the searching servants had been given by *Descante*. He couldn't be sure they would find the packet he had pinned to the window hanging in *Racquel's* room.

And he couldn't trust Luis *Descante*, even in this. Even if Brent was snared in the trap *Poker* had set for him, *Poker* was afraid *Descante* would not be able to pass up this opportunity to deal alike with the two Yankees at his table. The cost was small: two burials and two bullets instead of one.

Tension mounted at the table. As though the muscles of his legs were tightening involuntarily, Brent was slowly pushing back in his chair. An infinitesimal movement which was nevertheless giving him additional room for action, when he needed it. *Descante* seemed unaware of the movement. He sat hunched forward a little in his chair, one hand on the ornate grips of the cocked weapon beside his plate.

A DOOR opened suddenly. A houseman came into the room, bearing the drapes from *Racquel's* room across his arm. The little packet *Poker* had pinned to the cloth was exposed to view. *Descante's* hand tightened on his gun.

"Open it!" he rasped at the servant.

With thick fingers, the man broke away

the paper wrapping and lifted a familiar silver-and-turquoise ornament from the wadding of lint in which it lay.

Descante's head swung toward Brent. "From Raquel's room!" he said hoarsely. "How much did she pay you for this—after you sold it to me?"

Brent came half out of his chair, his face white.

"A trick!" he shouted. "I didn't—I never even saw her—or that!"

He broke off. Descante's heavy gun had started an unhurried upward sweep. Brent crouched, half out of his chair, one hand snapping to his own holstered weapon with a sharp, explosive sound.

Poker went sideways under the table, finching against anticipation of the roar of Descante's heavy gun. However, there was only the hard, flat jolt of Brent's more modern weapon, the man was that fast.

From under the table Poker saw Descante lose his footing. As the man's body came down, it pulled the tablecloth and the old gun spilled to the floor, also. Poker's hand closed on it as Brent sent a shot through the table-top, searching for the man beneath.

Lying awkwardly on one side, Poker flung the old Spanish gun up in a quick, snap shot at Brent's thigh—all that was exposed of the man below the table edge. However, he held it a little too high. The prodigious ball with which the weapon was loaded struck the edge of the table and gouged out a great strip of oak, which it slammed into Brent at the belt line, nearly tearing the man in two.

Brent spilled back into his chair; it over-

turned, and he sprawled on the rug. Poker crawled out from under the table as Raquel ran in from the rear of the house with Miguel Molin close behind her, clumsily carrying a rifle in his left hand.

The girl glanced quickly at the two men on the floor, then flung herself across the room.

"Juan Poker—Juan Poker, are you all right?"

Miguel Molin looked sharply at Poker for an instant, then smiled.

"You have heard the legend, Chiquita," he said. "Bullets do not harm Senor Poker."

Poker looked at the two men on the floor.

"Kind of a messy wedding present, Molin," he said.

"Wedding present?" Raquel asked.

Poker nodded. "Padre Betancour is only two days behind me on the trail across from the Colorado. Hardly time to get your sewing done. He not only wanted you to have your other earring, but he's coming to perform the ceremony himself. Just gave me time enough to sort of clean up the ranch a little before you took it over."

The girl, too excited to make sense, looked at the disarranged table.

"Your dinner!" she said. "It's spoiled. I'll get you another from the kitchen. Wait—" She ran out.

Poker started for the door.

Molin touched his arm. "You're not going. You can't. The wedding—"

Poker grinned at the boy.

"Don't tell me you need help with that, too, son," he said. And he stepped out to the ramada.

THE ZUNIS HAD A NAME FOR 'EM

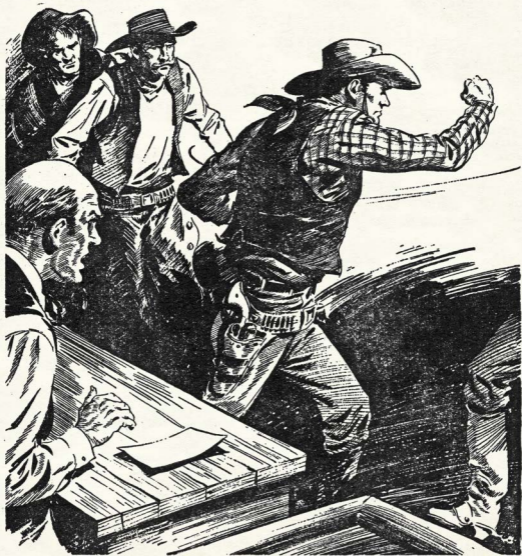
The Apache Indians got their name from a word in the language of the Navajo Indians, although the word *Apache* is not a true Indian word. Centuries ago the Navajo Indians were plundering and killing the peace-loving Zuni Indians in the section of the Southwest now known as Arizona. In order to hang a descriptive name on the marauders, the Zuni Indians borrowed a Navajo word, *Apachus*, meaning "enemy." When the Spaniards came they picked up the term, changed it to Apache, and applied it to the Indians who roamed the Southwest, plundering and killing their fellow redskins and the whites alike. The name lived on.

JWQ

THE DEVIL IN

Action-Packed Southwest Novelette

Neither hired gunhawks nor a girl's pleading eyes could stop Lex Hardison from killing Gurn Orcutt—in a blazing, man-to-man gun-battle . . . or in cold, calculated murder.



LEX HARDISON

★ By THOMAS THOMPSON ★



Tab Gafford's hands jerked up. . . .

CHAPTER *One Ticket---One Way*

1

Here in Casa Grande, confusion blended with the dust. Three thousand Chinamen, like queued termites, gnawed their way through the sand and sage and each day pulled the Southern Pacific along

behind them, unrolling it like wire from a reel, laying it precisely, each day five miles closer to its destination.

Outbound stages were loaded with as many people as could find seats inside or out, and the town was filled with a floating conglomerate of mismatched humans, waiting passage to dip their fingers in the silver flood that poured from the open sores in the Tombstone hills to the south. It was a place that was to Lex Hardison's liking, and to the liking of the devil that was in him.

He dropped a question here and there as he moved around town; questions that were neither veiled nor direct. Some men knew him and some didn't, and they tempered the answer to his questions according to the degree of their acquaintanceship.

"Gurn Orcutt?" some said. "Big man now. But just as common as an old shoe. In here just the other day he was and I said, 'Gurn'—"

They were usually left wagging a finger at an empty space at the bar. Lex Hardison knew Gurn Orcutt was a big man. A man had to be big to make the laws of Arizona Territory work his way. A man had to be big to hire his killing done for him. Big and afraid. Lex Hardison wanted to know where the big man could be found.

Only once was he challenged. Then a claw-like hand gripped his elbow and spun him around. A desert-dried man whose bones rattled in the parchment of his skin stood there and glared with quartz-bright eyes.

He said: "I gave you credit for havin' more guts, Lex Hardison. The valley won't miss you none. Decent folks will look out for Jessie."

"Obliged to you, Jake Ebbets," Lex Hardison interrupted softly, and he turned and left quickly, leaving the old man staring after him.

There was no sense trying to explain to a man like Jake Ebbets. Nor the others, for that matter. They had fought Apaches and they had whipped the weather, those men in the valley, but they couldn't know how it was to fight a devil that wouldn't let a man cry.

They said they knew how it was, seeing Jessie sit there day after day, refusing to believe Frank was dead. That's what they said when they talked of lynching and

fighting and killing. But they couldn't know how it was to come back unexpected and find things like this. To them Jessie and Frank were the 'young couple' up at the head of the valley. To Lex Hardison they were sister and brother-in-law. That was a lot when it was all a man had.

At first it was just Frank and Jessie he thought of, but now it had grown even bigger. At first it had been just this girl with the shawl around her shoulders, sitting there rocking, saying Frank would be back, the reflection of gunsmoke and the red glare of a burning hay barn still in her eyes. At first it was just that, but in time it got to be more. It was more now.

Now it was the whole valley—a dozen families, each one a unit, like Jessie and Frank had been. As units they were helpless against the influx of Gurn Orcutt gunmen who came in the guise of homesteaders to claim the land they said was legally open. As a unit a family could starve while they struggled with the maze of legal confusion. Or a unit could fight. Frank had done that, and now the gunsmoke and the red glare of the burning barn was in Jessie's eyes.

They knew these things, these people of the valley, so now they talked of organization and lynch law and killings, and they looked to Lex Hardison for leadership, for it was his unit that had been touched.

One man might call it the coolness of hate; another might say it was the devil in him. Whichever it was with Lex Hardison, it served him now, for he saw that a valley war was the thing Gurn Orcutt had planned. There was never an indictment for mass murder. The courts would call it war. The survivors were the winners, then, and the guns Gurn Orcutt hired were not hired to die.

And Lex Hardison saw that it had always come to this with himself and Gurn Orcutt. Ever since they were kids. Lex Hardison had whipped Gurn Orcutt before; but each time he had whipped him by making him face his issues alone.

So Lex Hardison accumulated his answers and sorted them out and they all led to one conclusion. He could wait around Casa Grande. Two weeks—maybe a month. Eventually Gurn Orcutt would come here. Or, he could take a stage to Tucson—a twenty-four hour trip—and in

Tucson he'd find the man. Lex did not toss a coin to decide.

Like most men with a weakness, Gurn Orcutt had his likable points. Handsome in the way women like, an easy going manner, a natural polish—those were the things that made him strong. With persuasion he could accomplish things that required the crack of fists with other men. As a kid Lex Hardison had stood back and marveled.

But always, given time, Gurn Orcutt would go too far and Lex Hardison would have to break through in the only way he knew. It took fists, sweat and blood to get through that outer circle of protection. But once inside, Gurn Orcutt himself was easy to handle. His weakness was that face to face with an issue Gurn Orcutt was a coward.

But Lex Hardison had a weakness, too. It was the devil in him. A thing that found room to prowl in over six feet of heavy-boned and well-meated man. It was a thing that whetted the zest for living in the man-thing in which it dwelt, and it could be satisfied only by large doses—be it whiskey, women or hell. It was a devil that made him an individual, and as such he could not explain his moves to the men in the valley. Let them have their thoughts. Lex Hardison had to handle things his own way.

A HUGE six-horse coach of the Butterfield Overland Stage and Transportation Company emerged from a swirling cloud of dust and a scatter of people and dogs. It pulled up in front of the one-story hotel, and Lex elbowed his way through.

The ticket agent was a slight man with a thin moustache and a foppish air. "Not a chance, Mister," he said arrogantly, secure behind his counter and the name of Butterfield. "Not a chance in the world. It will be at least four days before we can find a place for you."

The change must have been in Lex Hardison's eyes. It was not in his voice. He said simply: "I want a stage to Tucson. Today."

The clerk backed against the many pigeon holes behind him and put one finger inside his collar. He said: "There's another line of course, sir. Mr. Orcutt runs a small wildcat line—"

"Located?"

"At the Gypsy Belle down the street, sir."

"Thank you," said Lex Hardison. So he had a stage line, too, did he? Lex Hardison hadn't known that, but he wasn't surprised. Gurn Orcutt was like a cancer that way. Once he had started growing he hadn't stopped. Some said the cattle he sold came up from Sonora through the San Pedro Valley, through the pass in the Dragoons. Some said Gurn Orcutt had an agreement with Old Man Clanton and Curly Bill at Galleyville. Some said Gurn Orcutt knew the right people in the Territorial Government. Lex Hardison didn't know for sure and he didn't care.

He knew only that the railroad was here and the silver was in the Tombstone hills. People came from every quarter and the cry was for beef—more beef. The Army needed beef; the miners needed beef; the bullwhackers needed beef; the ladies with red lips who peered from behind the shutters in Tucson needed beef.

Gurn Orcutt had grown big on that need, but he had moved too far. Now the night riders had come to the narrow ribbon of valley between the high cliffs and a young girl sat and rocked, and there was the cloud in her eyes that gunsmoke makes. There'd be more blood in the valley unless Gurn Orcutt changed his plans.

The devil inside him was in full accord with things as Lex Hardison pushed aside the doors and entered the Gypsy Belle. He was after a ticket to Tucson. A ticket on Gurn Orcutt's stage. . . .

He didn't go directly to the makeshift ticket window there at the end of the bar because a woman was there ahead of him. She was different from any woman Lex Hardison had ever known and she held his attention. In the first place, she had that intangible quality that stirs the primitive instincts that smoulder in any man. In the second place, she was being escorted by Tab Gafford.

It was strange seeing Tab Gafford with his hands full of hat boxes and carpet bags. It would have seemed more natural to have seen him with his hands full of gun. Lex made it his business to hear what was being said, and he felt no tinge of guilt about it. For Tab Gafford was a Gurn Orcutt gunman, and Gurn Orcutt was Lex Hardison's business.

The girl had a way of tilting her head and smiling when she spoke as if the words she used were mere inadequate commodities, leaving a tantalizing double meaning somewhere behind her dark eyes. Lex Hardison studied the provocative lilt to her voice, the practiced coquetry of her lips, and wondered what would happen when she met a man who refused to be satisfied with only a smile.

She was saying: "It was wonderful of you to help me, Mr. Gafford."

Tab Gafford, a bullish, hulking man who could split a one-inch pine board with his fist, colored under his stubble of beard and dragged his boot toe across the floor like a ten-year-old boy.

"Gurn said there was nothin' too good for you, Miss McKenna. He said you was to have the best, and I don't blame him! He's a lucky man."

She held her skirt daintily in the tips of her fingers and made a tiny mock curtsy. "Why, thank you, Mr. Gafford," she said. And she tilted her head and let her eyes with their hidden meaning rest full on his face. Lex Hardison could see the pulsing of the heavy vein in Tab Gafford's throat.

For some reason Lex Hardison didn't like it. He decided that a girl like that needed a man who could love her hard enough to keep her out of mischief, and the devil inside him got up and told him that maybe he was just such a man.

But he put the thought aside and watched her accept a ticket from the grinning toothless clerk—a man Lex knew only as Baldy. As soon as she had taken the ticket Lex moved toward the cage, and it was then for the first time that Tab Gafford noticed him.

The gunman hitched his belt slightly and said: "Hello, Hardison. Thought you was over in the valley."

"Hi, Tab," Lex Hardison said casually. "Ticket on the stage to Tuscon, Baldy."

Baldy glanced first at Lex Hardison, then at Tab Gafford. He said, "No room, Hardison. We're booked up for a couple of months."

"Ticket on the noon stage to Tucson," Lex Hardison said, as if he hadn't heard.

Tab Gafford watched Hardison closely, then said: "Maybe later Baldy will have a ticket to Tucson."

Lex jerked his thumb over his shoulder

toward the girl. "If you got room for her you got room for me."

"She's a friend of Gurn Orcutt," Tab Gafford said softly.

"So am I," Lex said.

He moved smoothly, swiftly, and his left hand shot out and caught Baldy by the shirt front. Jerking the man against the counter, he shook him twice—hard—as easily as a woman snaps lint from a cloth.

"A ticket, Baldy," he said softly.

He was aware of the swift silence that had dropped like a blanket on the Gypsy Belle. And before Tab Gafford had quite made up his mind, Lex Hardison had turned, his entire weight behind the fist that smashed against the base of the gunman's jaw. Tab Gafford's hands jerked up shoulder high, and he went over backwards, his mouth hanging loosely open.

LEX Hardison had a gun in his hand now. He somehow covered the bartender and the men who stood along the bar. His left hand was locked around Baldy's right wrist.

He said: "One way's all right, Baldy, if you can't give me a round trip."

The girl's face had gone white. It made her eyes darker and her lips more full and red. She said: "You filthy unmannered pig!"

"Hardison's the name," Lex said, tipping his head. "Lex Hardison."

"My father warned me that a lot of scum had come to this country!"

"Did he warn you about the kind you'd find if you didn't quit rollin' your eyes and twistin' yourself around?"

She slapped him so hard it knocked his hat off his head. And as he stood there, the devil inside him kept saying, "*She's like you, Lex. She's just like you!*"

He released his hold on Baldy and leaned forward and picked up his hat. Placing it on his head he said: "There's no use us saying all we got to say, ma'am. We'll be real close for a night and a day on that stage to Tucson."

Something warned him. The sudden widening of her eyes—the quick intake of breath. He rolled quickly to one side, and the second he had done it he knew she had saved his life. Tab Gafford, a trickle of blood on one side of his mouth, had drawn a gun and fired from the floor. The bullet

slid by Lex Hardison's cheek and buried itself in the ceiling above his head.

He knew these things even as he felt the familiar buck of his own gun against the palm of his hand; even as he flared his nostrils against the acrid sting of powder smoke and felt that thundering slow pound of his heart that somehow told him he had killed his first man.

Tab Gafford lay still now, and Lex Hardison's bullets had made an ugly mess of his face. The girl was sobbing and an older man came and put his arms around her shoulders. There was a babble of voices, tinged with angry overtones, then the high pitched squeak of an excitement-crazed youngster yelling: "Marshal Creig will be here in a minute. He's down by the Butterfield Station now. He's comin' on the run! He's got one of his deputies with him. He's up on the porch—"

The boy's running account was cut off as the paunchy, middle-aged marshal shoved his official way through the crowd. Gun drawn, feet wide spread, he stood in front of Lex Hardison. His belly was heaving with exertion as he said: "Shuck that gun belt, Lex. Now, what the hell's been goin' on here?"

"He come in here raisin' hell like a curly wolf," Baldy said shakily. "Grabbed me for no reason, knocked Tab down, then shot him while he was layin' there!"

"That's right," a half dozen voices agreed. "He was on the prod. Got mad 'cause Baldy wouldn't give him a ticket on the stage!"

"We don't put up with plain out and out murder around here, Lex," the marshal said softly.

"Don't you?" Lex Hardison said, ap-

parently surprised. "Since when don't you? Or is it only murder when somebody beside Gurn Orcutt's gang does the shooting?"

"I'm askin' the questions," the marshal said sullenly. "Anybody else got anything to add?"

"Hang the dirty son to a telegraph pole!" somebody suggested.

The marshal had unsnapped a pair of handcuffs from his belt. "I'm chargin' you with murder, Hardison. Shootin' a man in the face when he's layin' on the floor is first degree murder."

He didn't see the girl step forward and push the handcuffs aside. He only heard her when she said: "These witnesses are lying, Marshal. I was standing right here and I saw the whole thing!"

"Hold on a minute, ma'am" the marshal said reluctantly. "Jest where do you fit in?"

"I'm Mary Ellen McKenna," the girl said. She said it as if it made a difference. "My father is Colonel McKenna at Fort Huachuca."

There was a quick murmur went through the room. It was a known fact that Gurn Orcutt catered to the Army. It was a rumor that he had more than a business acquaintanceship with Colonel McKenna.

The girl said: "It is true this man rough-housed with Baldy. Baldy lied to him about not having a ticket on the moon stage. Mr. Gafford started to draw a gun and this man knocked him down. While we were standing here talking, Mr. Gafford drew his gun and shot from the floor. After Mr. Gafford had fired, this man—the prisoner—drew his gun and fired. You'll find the bullet hole from Mr. Gafford's shot right there in the ceiling."



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She stood defiantly, face drained of color, eyes wide, looking at no one in particular, while mumbled disappointment ran round the circle of faces.

The marshal said: "I still got to take you in, Hardison." He added: "You willing to make them same statements before the Justice, Miss McKenna?"

She said, "Of course." She didn't look at Lex Hardison.

"That's mighty fine of you, Miss Mary Ellen McKenna," Lex Hardison said softly. And he meant it. "And just so you won't have to be calling me 'the prisoner' all the way to Tucson, my name's Hardison. Lex Hardison."

CHAPTER

2

A Man to Kill ...

It was near dusk when the stage pulled up to the first eating station. It was a downy dusk that lay across the land like purple velvet, softening the sage and muffing the glare of the day.

He had not said a word since they left Casa Grande. She had chattered continually with the other passengers, and by now he knew that she was fresh from an eastern college and she was returning to be with her father at the fort. She did not say she had come to be married and he caught himself wishing she'd either affirm or deny it.

She was Army, through and through, and her father, a graduate of the Point, had had a command since the day she was born. It was this that gave her that care-free assurance and freedom that was so much a part of her. She had been raised in a man's world where each man had considered it a sacred duty to honor and protect her.

As they lurched on through the choking clouds of dust, Lex Hardison found it harder and harder to keep his eyes from her face. He was watching for the first sign of weakness, he told himself. That was all. Soon now she'd start complaining about the dust, whimpering about the sway of the stage. Crying before they were half on their way. That's what he was watching for. But it didn't happen.

They piled out of the stage there in the hard-packed court surrounded by a low adobe wall. A long table was spread under

a *ramada* formed by a rough pole framework over which willow and cottonwood boughs had been thrown. The dust from the horses' hooves settled on the Indian-made pottery plates, and the acrid ammonia manure-smell mingled with the tang of over-spiced cooking.

He watched closely to see her weakening, but she talked gaily and she cocked her head in that provocative way, glancing obliquely and wrinkling her nose a bit as she complimented the grizzled stage driver on his handling of the team.

"Like to wash up a bit, Miss McKenna?" the driver asked. "Reckon it was pretty dusty back there."

She closed her eyes tightly and spoke as fervently as if he had offered her a piece of heaven. "I'd like nothing better than to freshen up," she said.

Lex Hardison laughed shortly. This was it. He watched as the driver pointed out a large Indian basket set on three sticks driven into the ground under a mesquite tree. He wondered what she would do now, faced with the horribly alkaline water that had already sluiced the grime and sweat from a dozen or so less squeamish freighters and muleskinners.

She walked straight up to it, removed her gloves, washed her hands thoroughly, and kept up a steady stream of conversation while drying them on the long roller flour sack towel nailed to a tree. After that she disappeared for a few minutes into the long narrow adobe. She walked with the same self assurance she might have displayed in one of New York's finest hotels.

And when he looked up and saw her across from him at the supper table, he swallowed hard. In some unexplainable way known only to women—with some cream or magic ointment—she had removed every streak of dust from her face. She was as radiantly beautiful and refreshed as if she had just arisen from a long sleep in a feather bed. Lex Hardison didn't like it worth a damn.

He was glad when they had piled back into the coach and were rocking gently into the cushioned darkness of the night. He couldn't see her now and that helped some, yet from time to time as he looked her way a feeling knifed all the way through him and told him she was returning his gaze.

And then at the third night stop where they pulled in for water, it happened, just as he was afraid it might. A saddle horse travels faster than a stage, and Gurn Orcutt was not a man to wait patiently for death.

The door of the adobe opened, and in the narrow flash of light he saw two sweat-streaked saddle horses and he knew that the word had passed along down the line that Lex Hardison was heading for Tucson.

He piled unceremoniously out the right-hand door of the stage before it had quite pulled to a stop. His legs tripped over her legs, and he fell full length through the door, hitting the ground in a pile of dust, jerking his gun free as he did.

The two men, hidden there in the shadows of the ramada, did not see him until it was too late. His gun roared twice. There was a scream of pain. Flashes of fire from the corner of the ramada and flashes from the dust of the yard. The stage team reared against the harness, and the driver, caught off guard, let them get the bit in their teeth and they wheeled off through the night, dragging the careening coach behind them.

Two more shots, then Lex Hardison vaulted into the saddle of one of the horses standing there. Guided by sound and instinct, he rode after the stage, and in time he was alongside the tiring team. He cleared the saddle and snatched at the bit of the off-leader and dragged the heaving team to a stop.

He followed the stage back to the watering place then, riding the horse. A Mexican with a lantern stood near the two dead bodies, mumbling prayers. The passengers stood in wide-eyed silence, awed by the presence of death. Mary Ellen McKenna kept clenching and unclenching her hands, looking at the tall young man who set himself up as law and executioner.

The gnarled old driver got down from his seat and walked cautiously across the clearing. Lex Hardison hit him with the open palm of his hand and knocked him sprawling. The old man reached toward his belt for a gun, and Hardison tromped on his hand, kicking the weapon aside. There was a sharp intake of breath from the passengers as they watched an old and apparently harmless man being kicked by this big young one.

Lex Hardison offered no apology as the old man got to his feet and started to brush the dust from his clothing.

"You knew they were waiting for me here," Hardison said flatly. "You usually drive in the other side, over near the wall. Somehow you knew." When the old man started to answer Lex Hardison said "Start walking. Toward Casa Grande."

The driver mouthed an obscene threat but moved away. Lex picked up the gun on the ground and tossed it after him. "Here, take this with you," he said. "You might meet up with a rattlesnake or something."

He turned quickly, now in full command, and gave orders rapidly in Spanish. A Mexican came out and spread a tarp over the dead bodies. A tall handsome Yuma Indian set an *olla* of water and an *olla* of wine on the table.

He didn't know she was standing behind him. He did not know that a woman could put such bitterness into words, nor did he know a woman could be so close to tears and not cry.

She said: "You thoroughly enjoy killing, don't you, Lex Hardison?"

A ROAD-RUNNER raced down the mesquite-lined corridor that was the stage road. Lex Hardison, sitting too rigidly on the high seat, the lines gripped between his fingers, kept his eyes glued to the bobbing tail of the sprinting chaparral cock. Tucson by noon, he figured.

The sun came over the top of the towering Santa Catalinas and he thought of the broad San Pedro Valley that lay beyond that range, then of the narrower valley winding peacefully through the Mescal further to the north. His valley. His, and his neighbors.

He felt that way about it, and here alone in the dawn he could admit it to himself. But there was no use trying to explain it to those who had known him too long. They said he didn't have the feel for his land the way they did, and they said that as soon as the going was rough he left them to fight it out alone.

And Lex Hardison let them think that way, for he was not one who could stand there bareheaded, face tilted to the sun, with the good soil trickling through his fingers, saying, "See? I love the land!"

It was the same reason he hadn't said much to Jessie, but he knew Jessie would understand. They had always understood each other, somehow. She would remember that when they were kids together things could only go so far with her brother and Gurn Orcutt, and she would know that after that point the babble of the mob meant little.

But the babble of the mob was a dangerous thing, and it sickened Lex Hardison to hear women and old men talk of lynching and fighting. It was the way Gurn Orcutt, secure in the center of his iron ring, wanted them to talk. Before his hired gunmen these people would fall like new grass before a mower. . . . But Lex Hardison was not the one to say these things to the people of the narrow valley.

He had known them too long, and they had known him too long. They were men who loved their land fiercely, and they were men who had twisted that land from the clutches of Apaches and weather. But they were old men now, and while time could not wear down their courage, its steady drip had bent their backs and slowed their hands. And years of looking toward one narrow goal had left its mark, too. They could not see beyond the valley.

It was this that made them say Lex Hardison was a young one with a devil in him. A wild one who from time to time had to strike out and feel the world outside the valley, like a man testing the plumpness of a grape with his fingers. It was true he always returned, and it was true that after his father died he took a hand and ran things until Jessie and Frank were safely married. But he didn't have the love for his land and now he had run. That's what they said.

These were the things Lex thought as he passed between the Santa Rosas and the Tortillitas and hit the cottonwood-lined course of the Santa Cruz. Twenty miles to Tucson, now. Twenty miles to destiny. And yet he found himself wondering more about whether she'd marry Orcutt than whether he had what it took to shoot Gurn Orcutt in the back it need be.

The stage tilted down the slope into the bed of a dry wash, the horses strained against the weight as they labored through the deep dust up the other side. And suddenly the muscles across Lex Hardison's

shoulders tensed, and his eyes no longer burned with the sting of the new sun. There at the top of the short grade he had caught the flash of light against a gun barrel and the glint of sweat-sheathed hide. With his foot he kicked the sawed-off shotgun between his knees and yelled loudly to the team. The holdup men met him just as his outfit topped the draw.

There were two of them, and they fired one shot only; that dropped the off leader, stopping the stage dead. They were completely masked and seemed to be old hands at the game. One, a tall thin man, stayed on his horse and covered Lex with a rifle. He said: "Take it easy and nobody gets hurt. This will be over in a minute."

The other, short, with a pleasant voice, moved quickly to the side of the stage, opened the door, and ordered the passengers out. Small timers, really, Lex caught himself thinking. This stage carried neither mail nor payroll. He shrugged, more or less disinterested, and kept his hands shoulder high. Some of these easterners swarming in here carried more money with them than was sensible. If they lost it, it was none of his damn business. And he would have left it that way if he hadn't heard the girl scream.

There was no time to think or consider. He moved swiftly and he heard the bullet smash into the seat. He rolled, threw up the shotgun and fired one barrel. The man on horseback screamed horribly as the charge of buckshot lifted him out of the saddle.

The other outlaw lost his head and made a run for his horse. The shotgun thundered again, and the outlaw kept running with his hands high above his head, his steps getting jerkier and jerkier, until he fell face forward against a thorny mesquite.

And even before the man fell, Lex Hardison was on the ground and had the girl in his arms, holding her close against his chest, trying to comfort her sobbing. It was minutes before he heard the steady round of praise that was being heaped upon him. Minutes before he felt the slap of flabby hands against his back and the tearful jabbering of a mouse-like man who might have lost a railroad watch and a twenty dollar gold piece.

He tried to ignore the thing that was rebelling within him as he spoke to her.

She didn't lift her head from his chest. She just said: "I lost my nerve, I guess. This miserable traveling—Tab Gafford—last night—"

He let her go and stood back, seeing for the first time the passengers who were now so quick to acclaim him a hero. He looked at the two dead men, blown half in two by the blasts from the shotgun, and he became violently sick while the devil in him told him these men had died needlessly.

They had died because they had dared trifle with the great untouchable god—a man's pocketbook. And in so doing they had become fair game and it was legal to shoot them down. But men could trifle with the hearts and dreams and destinies of a people, crushing a thing that could be neither mined from the ground nor minted in the blast furnace. If you killed a man such as this, it was murder, unless you could get him to fight back.

He felt a seething bitterness in him that he had never known, and then he felt the touch of her hand on his and he looked down into her upturned face. She seemed different, somehow.

She said softly: "I know what you're thinking about, Lex Hardison. I'm sorry for what I said last night. You're not a killer, really. I didn't know how it was with you. I hope you get what you're after."

He turned away quickly, without speaking. He cut loose the harness of the dead leader, unhitched the other leader and tied him behind the coach. Level road from here on into town. Two horses could handle it.

He climbed back to the seat, popped the whip, and braced himself against the first swaying lurch. There was a strange singing inside him that he didn't understand. Level road from here on in. Twenty miles to Tucson. . . .

STREETS that were neither wide nor straight. Low flat blocks that passed as buildings; dirt floors and dirt roof separated by sun-dried adobe brick. Teamsters, bullwhackers, soldiers, Army officers, miners, Mexicans, Indians, and men who fit no pat classification. Women who did not try to hide their profession; women of every color—red, white, black. Too many

dogs and too much dust and the soft flow of the Spanish language somehow making it all acceptable. This was Tucson, with life vibrating at the tips of her raw nerves. It was contagious, and Lex Hardison caught the feel of it even as he catalogued the upturned faces, looking for Gurn Orcutt.

He wound the coach down the alley-like streets. Ahead there he caught the sight of a racy Army ambulance drawn by six handsome mules. The ambulance was filled with Army officers, and somehow his thoughts went quickly to the girl there in the coach. This was the life she would live; the life Gurn Orcutt would share.

He turned his coach toward the one story hotel that bore Gurn Orcutt's name. He had come to Tucson to kill a man.

There was no apparent show of emotion when the two men faced each other, and yet it was there. It was in the unnatural easiness with which they spoke and it was in the pasty pallor that was somehow under Gurn Orcutt's skin. But he managed a smile when he said: "It's getting so I don't know who works for me any more. Since when did you take up stage driving?"

Lex Hardison wrapped the lines around the brake, got down easily and slapped the dust out of his trousers with his hat. His head tilted up and his eyes met those of Gurn Orcutt. Hard eyes, rimmed by the tiny crowfooted pattern of a mirthless smile.

"Since Cottonwood Well," he said. "Your regular driver quit there and I knew you'd be anxious for your passengers to come through on time."

Gurn Orcutt said: "One passenger in particular." And he looked intently at Lex Hardison when he said it, as if making a challenge.

Lex Hardison opened the door of the coach and said, "Tucson. End of the line."

He would have walked away then but the human cargo piled out like olives from a narrow-necked bottle. Together, hysterically, they told of the holdup and of the dead men, told it over and over, until that teeming block of humanity, infinitesimally small in this expanse of country, became for this scant second a focal point of pulsing life. And then Lex Hardison saw her in Gurn Orcutt's arms.

She was sobbing unashamed, repeating his first name, over and over. And he was

holding her tight, his eyes bleak and hard. Lex Hardison turned and pushed his way out through the crowd, and she came and caught him by the elbow, tugging at him, turning him around. He fought against it for a second, then the devil inside him said:

"Go ahead. Turn around. Face her. You're not big enough to whip this, Lex Hardison."

So he whirled quickly and met her eyes.

She did not tilt her head provocatively nor did she purse her lips. Instead her lips were half parted and moist, and they did not move when she spoke. He could see the even tips of her teeth; he could see the depth of her eyes. He felt his own nostrils flaring widely, and he knew that the pupils of his eyes had dilated.

She said: "You're leaving?"

He nodded, not daring to answer, afraid that he might admit this sudden fear of her.

She said: "Thank you, Lex Hardison," and he could not tell whether she thought he would abandon his quest or whether she too knew the danger of their being together.

He could barely hear her words, and yet they thundered against his eardrums. He had to make an answer—an answer that would let her know. He had never before felt his own voice come ripping out of his lungs, pounding out through his teeth. He said: "You saved me from hanging in Casa Grande. I killed the two men who were making you nervous. We're even!"

Then he hunched his shoulders against the unyielding crowd and when a Mexican got in his way, he struck the man in the face and knocked him sprawling in the dust. After that a path was opened for him and they let him through to the hotel that bore Gurn Orcutt's name.

He signed up for a cot—one of a dozen in a sticky, hot, twelve-by-fourteen room thick with sweat and the moist breath of humans. The terrible thudding in his chest had passed now and had changed to a weak trembling in his hands as he washed up at the wooden sink in the dark hall back of the bar room.

He was steady again now, and perfectly calm. And again he could think of the valley and the people who loved their land.

He glanced around to see that no one was watching, drew his .44 Colt revolver

from its holster, wiped it off carefully on the dry end of the towel, pushed open the gate and rammed out the loads that were in it and reloaded from the cartridges in his belt. Then he dropped the gun back in its holster and went out to the teeming bar room that was the lobby of the hotel.

When he was able to get to the bar he had two shots of whiskey straight, then said to the bartender: "Where would be the best place to see Gurn Orcutt on business?"

The bartender studied the tall, well muscled man for a long minute. "Why don't you ask him yourself, stranger?" He jerked his head toward the far corner of the room, twitching one side of his mouth as he did.

Lex Hardison saw them standing there, close to each other, looking intently into each others eyes. He felt that pounding in his chest again and had no trouble getting back through the crowd that pressed toward the bar. He stood there, feet flat and wide apart, close to them, and he looked first at Gurn Orcutt and then at the girl.

He knew little of such things and it was none of his damn business, but she did not look like a girl in love. He himself had never been in love—never wanted to be. And yet he knew now what love would be like and he couldn't explain how he knew.

Love was an emotion. A hard, driving, primitive emotion that pushed all else aside. It knew no barriers, accepted no traditions and tolerated no dictates. These things were not in the eyes of this girl who stood and looked at Gurn Orcutt.

He heard Gurn Orcutt say: "It's all arranged for next Sunday, darling. Your father will be here tomorrow night and I've already made arrangements with the padre at San Xavier. Happy?"

She nodded her head slowly and said, "Yes. Happy." Then she happened to turn to the left and she saw Lex Hardison standing there near them. Their eyes met and somehow in that violent split second the change he wanted to see came into her face.

He felt his lips twisting. He said: "When you're through at talkin' over your wedding plans, Gurn Orcutt, I want to see you. Alone."

She made no outcry. He thought perhaps her cheeks paled a shade. Her eyes seemed more intently dark. But she knew,

now. There could be no doubt about the identity of the man Lex Hardison hated. And, made it clear what he intended to do once he found that man.

CHAPTER

A Woman to Love

3

It was one of the few rooms in town that had a wooden floor. There was a hand-carved desk made of mahogany hauled in on muleback from south of the border. There were two Mexican-made bullhide chairs, and on the floor a pair of Navajo rugs. Lex Hardison and Gurn Orcutt stood facing each other in the center of the room.

"We got nothing to talk about," Lex Hardison said finally. "You know how it's always been with you and me. I've never let you touch things that mattered to me."

That same pallor was under Gurn Orcutt's skin, but there was no hint of panic in his voice. He said flatly: "I refuse to fight you, Lex."

Something like fear began to worry through Lex Hardison. Gurn Orcutt was a general. He was smart; he had always been. He had a way of out-thinking people.

Lex said: "Afraid?" But he knew that was not the answer.

Gurn Orcutt shook his head. "Smart." He saw the doubt in Lex Hardison's eyes and pounced to pry his opening wider. He said: "I'm to be married, Lex. You saw her. You expect me on the eve of my wedding to stand here like a common drunk, blasting away with a six-shooter?"

Lex had never felt the devil in him so strong. It was like when he had ridden

back and found Jessie sitting there, saying over and over "Frank will be right back." It was like when he had seen the dead men, back there at the stage robbery, and yet it was all confused with the memory of holding Mary Ellen McKenna close and with the memory of the look he had seen in her eyes when she had turned toward him.

He hardly knew he was speaking when he said: "You'd even use her, wouldn't you, Gurn Orcutt? You don't love her. You don't give a damn about her. But you'd marry her just to get what you want!"

Gurn Orcutt had lifted the heavy gold watch chain from his vest pocket and twisted it around his finger. His eyes were wide and glazed now, like the eyes of a man who has suddenly come face to face with danger. He said softly: "You're crazy, Lex Hardison. You'd have to be crazy to think you could get me to fight you. You'd have to be crazy to talk like this!"

"You're willing to use her," Lex Hardison said softly. "The big men buy your beef but they don't ask you to their parties. That it, Gurn? You ain't changed none since you were a kid. Remember the time you broke that pup's neck and told your folks the wagon had run over it? You wanted to go with them to Casa Grande that time. They didn't have the heart to leave you home after they seen how upset you was over your dog gettin' killed."

"This is nothing to you," Gurn Orcutt said, his voice a tone higher. "I'm sorry about Jessie but it was an accident, I tell you. I've got interests to protect."

"And you'd marry her to do it." The

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devil inside him was on a rampage now, and the blood film was across his eyes. He said: "Have a gun or don't the next time I see you, Gurn. It won't make any difference."

He backed out of the room, pulled the door closed with his left hand, then stepped quickly to one side. There was a sharp trembling in the pit of his stomach and a weak helplessness in the muscles of his forearm. He hadn't known before that disgust could be stronger than the killing urge. His hand trembled when he wiped his forehead. Maybe it was better this way. He would always know now that he had given Gurn Orcutt a chance. He wandered why that should make any difference, and again he found himself thinking of Mary Ellen McKenna.

He got out of the hotel as quickly as he could and went into the full glare of the street, keeping well into the press of the crowd. He did not know which men were Orcutt men and which men were not, nor did he know for sure just how Gurn Orcutt would strike out. He could draw a hideout gun at the last scound. He could meet the opening of the door of his office with the double-barreled blast of a shotgun. He could hire a killer for little or nothing here in Tucson. More than likely that would be his way. But Lex Hardison had cut his way through Gurn Orcutt's hired protection before.

He moved up and down the streets, pushed along by the mass of humanity that seemed to flow in ordained channels. A tall, well muscled man with the parched taste of sleeplessness in his mouth, the sting of it against his eyelids. A man whose facial expression never changed. A man whose hand never left the vicinity of his gun butt. A man with a devil in his soul.

But in time the dusk came and the streets were more deserted as people went to supper. He walked alone, eyes, nerves, muscles alert, ears attuned to every sound. He was after the life of only one man, but maybe a dozen were after his. A dozen men who were mere shadows. That man coming toward him there—perhaps he was one. Or the short squat man across the street. . . .

He did not realize he had walked so far until he saw that the buildings of the town were behind him and the broad flat valley cut by the silver of the Santa Cruz was

ahead. Then the moon came out of the distant Chiricahuas and laid a faint aurora across the nearby Rincons. He heard the slight rustle of sound, dodged swiftly to one side and his gun whispered as it cleared the leather. She called his name softly.

THERE was no way for him to tell what emotions were in him when he saw her standing there. He saw the faint moon glow against the whites of her eyes, caught the contour of her upturned face.

She said: "I'll go away with you, Lex Hardison. Now."

A sound came into his throat—a whimper of a sound that he could not control. He moved swiftly, caught her in his arms and held her so fiercely that she was unable to move. The fire ran out through his lips—his finger tips. A painful, exquisite thing. . . . Then he let her go and she stood there trembling, sobbing a little.

He said: "To save his life?"

"To save yours," she said. "They'll track you down—you know that."

"Maybe he'll fight."

She turned her head away, but it couldn't hide the raw wound that found its way into her voice. She said: "I heard what you said back there." He thought he caught a faint sob in her throat. "A man who could do that to a woman wouldn't fight. You know that."

There was a slow dull thudding in his chest. He didn't know whether or not he was just reading things he wanted to hear, so he said: "How could you hear?"

Pride, rubbed raw now, still held its haughty strength. She said: "I didn't want to walk through the barroom alone. There's a back door to his office—off the alleyway. I didn't know you were already there. I wanted to warn him . . ."

He thought that over a long time and then he said: "You didn't need to warn him. We've known each other a long time."

She said: "Who is Jessie?"

He said: "Does it matter?"

"Yes."

He knew now what the devil inside him had been trying to say. If he lived he would tell her about Jessie and she would understand why it had to be this way. He was no longer afraid of shooting Gurn Orcutt down in cold blood.

He turned around and started walking

slowly back toward town. She came behind him, trying to match his stride, failing and taking an extra step. She was crying now.

"You're a fool!" she said. "He'll have men planted all around the saloon. I told you I'd go away with you!"

"I don't want you that way. You know that."

"Why?"

"You and me," he said softly. "That's why. We're alike, you and me. We know what we want and what we've got to do. Do you want me to spend the rest of my life feeling the same way you'd feel if you were to marry Gurn Orcutt now?"

She caught his hand and he turned toward her. The light of the first building caught her face, strained and white. And as it is with two who love she knew his mind. There was no need of a kiss between them. She said: "There's one man by the back door. I saw him when I left."

He said, "Thanks," and he walked on quickly, turned into the first alley and began moving catlike along the darkened sides of buildings. The perspiration dripped freely down his back as he felt his way through the shadows. This could be a trap. If she were telling him the truth, she must know that she was signing the death warrant of Gurn Orcutt.

Once he stumbled against a burro, sleeping there in an alley. Another time a dozen dogs came out of nowhere and set up a clamor at his heels. He felt his way cautiously along the side of the building and found the door. This much, then, was the truth. There was a back entrance to Gurn Orcutt's office.

He drew his gun and put his left hand on the latch of the door. A pear of flame spit out of the darkness and seared across his eyes. He whirled, fired twice. A man pitched forward at his feet.

There was the quick silence that follows a gunshot at night, then the synchronized scraping of chairs followed by the hoarse bellow of men afraid. Feet pounded on hard-packed ground and a woman screamed twice, then stopped. He bunched his shoulder against the door and spilled himself into the room.

He turned, and there with his back pressed against the adobe wall, Gurn Orcutt stood in helpless terror. Lex Hardison moved slowly around the wall, his gun lined

on the center of Gurn Orcutt's forehead.

He said: "I told you to have a gun, Gurn. It would have made you feel better having a gun."

Gurn Orcutt slid slowly down the wall, as if the strength had gone out of his spine. He sat huddling there in the corner, his mouth open, choked sounds coming from his throat. Lex Hardison watched, sick to his stomach. Then his thumb pressed against the hammer and he pulled it to full cock.

He squeezed a lifetime between his finger and the trigger. He seemed to relive every moment he had ever spent with Gurn Orcutt and he saw especially the fears that had always been with the man. It came to him that a man could rise to a position of power—hire killers by the dozen—on nothing more than a fear of fear. "*If I am feared enough then fear cannot reach me. . . .*"

The blood pounded in Lex Hardison's temples and was hot across his face. The finger tightened against the trigger and Gurn Orcutt's eyes became wider and wider and wider, then lowered. He heard the slobbering sobs of the man who had the power to wrench a life dream from a dozen families.

"Get out of Arizona," Lex Hardison said softly. "If you ever cross the line into the Territory again I'll know it somehow and I'll kill you! Sure as hell I'll kill you!"

He had to pick the man up by the coat collar and help him to his feet. Then he opened the back door and shoved Orcutt out into the darkness.

After that Lex stood there, still seeing the deep terror in Gurn Orcutt's eyes. Perhaps she had seen that. Perhaps she knew that seeing it Lex Hardison would be unable to kill. . . .

The thunder of a single horse, ridden fast. A blood yell, the cry of predatory men, spared through the night. The hair crawled on Lex Hardison's neck. He ran to the door, started to call out.

It was too late. Gurn Orcutt's killers, trained to hair-trigger fitness, had spotted a shadowy figure, fleeing in the night.

There was a solid wall of gunfire, then the dead silence that tells the hunt is over. For a second Lex Hardison fought against the sickness that was in him, then he slipped out the door and lost himself in the silent

crowd that ringed a dead man there in the dust of the alley.

* * *

"Stage to Casa Grante? Sure, Mister. Lots of room going that way. Thought everybody was headin' for Tombstone. How come you're goin' back? Say, ain't you—?"

"Ticket to Casa Grande," Lex Hardison said flatly.

"Sure. Sure, Mister."

Two hours until stage time. Two more hours in which to search for her. He knew she was still in town, and he had to see her, just once. Too many dogs, too much dust, a soft flow of Spanish. . . . A racy Army ambulance came around a corner, small leaders at a full run, giant wheelers at a fast trot. For a second he stared at it, then he stepped directly into the path of the oncoming team.

The driver yelled and sawed on his lines. The mules veered and turned, confused, and people scattered, screaming, as the ambulance plunged crazily across the street and came to a splintering stop against a cottonwood pole. Lex Hardison ignored the curse of the driver. He removed his hat and put one foot on the step near the seat where the girl was sitting.

She refused to look at him, but it didn't make any difference. She was dressed in black and to him it accented her beauty. He spoke softly—more softly than he had ever spoken in his life. He said:

"Every place I look I see you. The moonlight will be your moonlight, and the colors will be your colors. You're the first there's ever been, and I reckon you'll be the last. In time you'll see that things had to happen the way they did, and then I'm gonna come lookin' for you. I hope you'll be waiting."

He turned and went back into the crowd, and later, on the stage, the terrible thunder in his chest became more controlled. He could think better. Those so-called homesteaders wouldn't be so anxious for land now that Gurn Orcutt was gone. And the Territory courts would be glad to get shut of the whole mess. They'd need help in marketing their beef, those men in the valley. That set him thinking.

He wondered if his coming home—back to the land—wouldn't be the thing that would drive the gunsmoke and the red glare of a burning barn from Jessie's eyes. That and having another woman around the place. And he wondered if somehow the folks there in the valley wouldn't mean more to him now. He decided they would, now that the devil wasn't in him any more.

THE END

WITH HOWLING HELL BEHIND THEM

When Indians were first confined to reservations, the problem of feeding them soon became acute. To ease transportation trouble, the government issued wagons and harness to the redman so he could help hauling supplies to his new "home."

For motive power the Indians had to depend on their own horses. These, unbroken to harness, were fully as wild as the neophyte teamsters. They made freighting an interesting experience to all connected with the business or privileged to watch it.

The Indians would, by might and main and sheer force of numbers, span in the bucking broncs. Then they would mount their riding cayuses and race alongside the hitched-up ones, crowding them from both sides so the snorting and plunging beasts couldn't run any place but ahead, which they did, driven by yells and shrieks, goaded by blows and kicks and quirtings, and by the screechings of the squaws sitting the wagon seats, howling like demons from hell. . . .

Those ponies sure traveled. The freight was hauled in record time, the government warehouses emptied and the Indians' bellies filled, and a good time was had by all!

RV

YOUNKER'S BATTLE SCARS

By
**J. WALTON
DOYLE**

"Pop, don't let me
down."



**When his gamblin', likker-lovin' daddy
got in a shoot-out jackpot, boy-sized
Clay had to take on a man-sized job.**

YOUNG Clay Thatcher looked across the table at his mother. She was sitting with the Almanac spread before her, her arms flat on the table, one hand twitching the leaves of the book, her eyes slowly traversing a printed line, then snapping back across the page and fastening hard to the first word of the next line.

Outwardly, she appeared calm, but she wasn't fooling Clay. He knew that if she had the Bible spread before her, her mind would be free and unruffled, but the Alma-

nac was her "frettin' out" book. When ever she had a worry that nagged at her, she would always get out the Almanac and try to get lost in the wonders between the pages.

"Makes a body realize how puny and small he is just to read about all the rest of this big universe," she would say. "Kind of makes you feel like the little old frettin' you got in your system isn't worth while, after all."

Clay went back to mending the bridle hanging over his knee, but his fingers moved slowly, his mind not on his task. He shared his mother's worry and it put two, thin creases in the young flesh of his forehead, creases that didn't belong there.

Vaguely, he wondered why his Pop had to be like that. Gambling, of course, was fun. He had tried it himself in mild forms and found the exhilaration in games of chance to his liking. But when a fellow let it get such a hold on him that he wouldn't tend to business, that was bad. What was worse, it worried Mom, and Clay knew the situation had to be pretty bad before Mom would do any worrying.

He thought he heard the distant cllop of hoofs, turned his head sideways to hear better. His mother heard it, too, and raised her eyes to the door. But the noise didn't occur again.

"Probably the grape vine on the porch swingin' in the wind," Clay said.

His mother sighed. "Why don't you go to bed, Sonny? No use both of us sitting up waiting."

Clay nodded. "All right, Mom." He wished she would quit calling him Sonny. That was kid stuff. He was a man, now. A seventeen-year-old man, and that was pretty darned old.

He went to his room and undressed. Yes, he thought, a man. A grown-up man doing a man's work. Where would they be if he hadn't taken ahoid the last couple of years and done a man's work? With Pop away gambling every day, their Lazy B spread would have gone to pieces mighty quick if it hadn't been for him.

But this knowledge didn't seem to give him the sense of satisfaction it should. It was Pop's ranch, not his. Pop was the feller who should be making it pay, not him.

He mused about this for a moment, try-

ing hard to put his fingers on the discord in his mind. Though he wasn't conscious of it, the thing his soul craved most was to be able to look up to his father. Say proudly, "That's my Pop." And he didn't have it.

The bed didn't feel good tonight like it usually did. He fidgeted and turned, closed his eyes, then opened them again. Staring out through the window he absently watched moon and stars wheeling the sky.

It was after midnight when he heard the unmistakable sounds of approaching horses. The clatter stopped. There was a guttural curse.

Clay jumped from bed and looked down from the window. His breath stopped for a long moment and his hands drew up into hard knots. Then he was breathing heavily through his nose, his mouth clenched tight.

It only took him a few seconds to throw on his clothes and tear down the narrow stairway. His mother was across the room, hand on doorknob.

"Mom." Clay's voice was high pitched, tense. "Don't!"

SHE half turned. Her usually rosy face had gone pale, but there was still that determined set chin, as if she were ready to take things as they came.

Clay crossed quickly, pulled her hand from the knob. "Go to bed, Mom. I'll take care of this."

There was surprise under the pain in her eyes as she looked at him. Surprise at the command in his voice.

She shook her head. "No, Sonny. . . ." "Go to bed!" Clay's voice was harsh and his face harder than a seventeen-year-old's should have been. "This is a man's job."

Her head dropped and her shoulders seemed to sag a little. Without another word she turned and left the room.

Outside, Clay hurried to the huddled bundle lying near the corral fence. The clatter of receding hoofs was growing faint as he bent over the prostrate form on the ground.

"Pop!" A lump as big as a fist seemed to well up in Clay's throat. His hand on his father's warm body, his thoughts turned bitter. This was his Pop, this bundle of unconscious, no-account flesh.

Jeff Thatcher was a squat man and grunt-heavy. Clay had to kneel to get him onto his shoulder. In the house, he laid him on the bed in the back room, got water and washed the blood from Jeff's face, then felt with knowing hands for broken bones.

His hand brushed across his father's hip pocket. He hesitated a moment, then dug into the pocket and pulled out a battered wallet, slowly opened it. Other than the slight twitching of a nerve in his cheek, his expression did not change as he looked down into the empty wallet, then stuffed it back into his father's pocket and left the room without a backward glance.

A lamp in her hand, his mother was standing in the doorway of the room where she and his father slept. She didn't say a word, but her face and eyes were a big, tense question mark.

Looking at her, Clay felt suddenly tired. Tired, old and helpless. He had a quick thought that Mom surely must love Pop a heap to let him hurt her like this time after time.

"He's all right," Clay told her, his voice gruff with the fight he was having with his emotions. "Go back to bed and don't worry. He'll be 'round in the morning."

The corners of her mouth turned up ever so little in a tiny, wan smile. "You're a good boy, Sonny," she said, then turned and went back into her room.

But Clay knew his father wouldn't be all right. Physically, yes. Mentally, no. With the fever of the gambling hot in his blood and an empty wallet, he would probably sell some more of their too-few cattle in order to continue the losing game in Nel's Sogerson's saloon in town. He had done it before; he would do it again.

His father was at the kitchen table eating breakfast when Clay came down the next morning. Jeff Thatcher's face was swollen and sullen and he didn't look up as Clay came in. His mother kept her back to him, standing at the stove, but he could see the tauntness in her body and feel the strained tenseness in the room.

Clay gulped his breakfast, then went out, a heavy unhappiness hurting within him. He stopped on the porch. The bridle he had been working on the night before hung on a peg. As his hand reached for it, his father's voice, harsh and hot, came through the open window.

"Dammit, Ella, I tell yuh I can't help it. We'll have to leave, an' that's that."

Clay wasn't conscious of moving, but the next thing he knew he was standing, beside his father, staring down at him.

"Why?"

HIS father swiveled his red-rimmed eyes and looked up at him without lifting his head. "Why what?"

"Why will we have to leave?"

His father's mouth was a thin, hard line as he looked down at his gnarled hands resting on the table. "I lost the ranch."

"Gamblin'?" It was almost a whisper.

His father nodded his shaggy head slightly. "Weren't 'all a my fault. Smoke Drugger dirty-dealed me. Cheated me outa it."

Clay felt his blood quicken, felt the heat of it in his face. "Why didn't you call him, then?"

Head down, his father's forefinger worried at a crumb on the table. "I did. But I wasn't wearin' my hawg-leg. Smoke an' that rat sidekick a his, Nels Sogerson, gun-whipped me an' threw me out."

"Well, you're goin' back there an' gun-smoke it out with them snakes!" Even as he uttered the words, Clay was shocked with the audacity of what his own mouth was saying.

His father's head snapped up, his red-rimmed eyes flashing. "For a shirt-tail young'n, yore kinda spreadin' yoreself, Sonny. An' I've heard enough. Shut yore face, pronto, or I'll shut 'er for yuh."

"But, Pop, you had no right to gamble the ranch!"

His father jumped to his feet, a deep growl in his throat, his hand reaching for Clay.

Clay grabbed his father's hand, put his other hand on his father's shoulder and shoved him back into his chair. His eyes had dilated to little pin-points and he was breathing thinly off the top of his lungs. "Pop, you lay so much as one finger on me an', so help me, I'll break you in two."

Normally, Jeff Thatcher wasn't the kind of a man to crawfish to anybody, but this was his own flesh and blood standing over him, glaring at him with eyes of chilled steel. His own son, turned on him. The thought struck him harder than any blow Clay could have given him.

He wasn't afraid of the boy, but he was afraid of what was going on in his son's mind. He sat hunched in his chair, his face a blank mask, but inside he was quivering.

Suddenly, Clay whirled and rushed out of the kitchen, swallowing hard at the heavy sobs that kept wanting to break loose. Blindly, he ran toward the corral. "You big baby," he whispered. "You damn, big cry baby."

He kept away from the house all day, not going in for lunch. With unseeing eyes he rode his big gray over the flats to the foothills and back, talking aloud to the horse at times. Several times the horse pricked up his ears and looked back over its shoulder with an inquiring eye, as if not understanding the slack reins.

The sun had gone down behind the mountains when he finally rode up in front of the barn. He ground-tied the horse, leaving the saddle on, then crossed quickly to the house. There was a hard set to his face and a determined quickness in his straight, young body.

Wishing to avoid his father, he went in the front way and darted up the stairs to his attic room. Inside, he closed the door, then took a holster and its heavy burden, a .45, from a peg on the wall. He unleathered the gun, ran a fond hand over the smooth, wood handle, rubbed his finger across the barrel where the blue had been worn off from much pulling of the piece from the holster.

The first time he had shot it, he thought his wrist was broken, but that was three years ago. Since then, a lot of powder smoke and hot lead had come out of the barrel, and there wasn't a tin can within ten miles that didn't have at least one bullet hole in it.

He got up from the bed and belted the gun, letting the holster sag well down on his thigh. Then he undid a rawhide lace from a shoe and thonged the holster securely to his leg. He had practiced using the gun from a killer-slung holster before, but this time. . . . He swallowed hard, pushed out his chin and headed for the stairs. This time he wasn't aiming to practice.

DOWNSTAIRS, he went right to the kitchen. His jaw hurt from the hard set of his teeth and his legs felt stiff and

unwieldy. His father had just finished supper and was getting up from the table when he entered. Jeff gave the boy a quick glance, then turned away and reached for his hat, hanging on the wall on an antler hat-rack.

"Pop." Clay fought to keep his voice level. "You goin' to town?"

His father grunted without turning, nodded his head.

"I'm goin' along," Clay said.

His father whirled, his eyes jabbing at the boy. "Yore what?"

"I'm goin' with you." Clay was beginning to shake a little. He almost ran across the room, grabbed his father's gun belt from the antlered hat-rack, shoved it out toward the older man. "Guess I'm growed up enough to have a little rare in town with my Pop if I'm a mind to."

His father's body seemed to jerk at Clay's words. His mouth fell open and the pupils of his eyes widened. Then his gaze fell to the boy's low hung gun. "You damned little fool," he growled, his voice jagged with sarcasm.

Underneath his tan, Clay's face was chalky, his chin quivered slightly. "I may be a fool, an' mebbe not very big—but I'm standin' on my own feet."

Jeff's face turned livid. "Meanin' what?"

Clay fought valiantly at the quivering chin. Things weren't working out at all like he'd planned them. His Mom didn't help any, standing there, one hand on her throat, a scared look in her eyes.

"Sonny," she said. "Sonny, what's got into you?"

"Dammit, quit callin' me Sonny!" Clay flared. He regretted the words before they had hardly left his tongue. It was the first time he had ever spoken so harshly to her.

"Pop," he said, his hands still extended with the gun belt. "Pop, don't let me down."

Something in the simplicity of the boy's entreaty got through his father's hide. It twisted inside him like a hot knife. Little barbs of shame speared through his whole body. Slowly, the fire in his eyes faded. His gaze held hungrily onto the boy, as if seeing him after long years of absence.

Abruptly, he reached out and took the gun belt, latched it to his squat, barrel body with quick, short-armed motions.

"Jeff!" Clay's mother wrapped up a good many words of agony in the one, lone word. "Jeff—you can't take Sonny."

Clay's father raised his head, looked at her, his eyes glowing. "I'm not takin' Sonny. Son—" he emphasized the word—"is takin' me."

Clay ran out ahead of his father, blood tingling in his ears. Jeff hesitated a moment, hand on the open door. "We'll be back directly, Mom."

The trip to town was made in complete silence, each busy with his own thoughts. But occasionally, the older man twisted his eyes sideways enough to take a long look at the young man riding beside him, his eyes straight ahead, back ramrod stiff.

They pulled up in front of Nels Sogerson's Saloon, tied their horses. Walking ahead, the older man crossed the board walk, shoved in the batwings and held them open for Clay to pass through. It was yet early evening and only two men at the bar. One more lay across a nearby table, well in his cups, and three others played poker at a table in a far corner.

CLAY crossed the room quickly, put one foot on the brass rail and tossed a dollar on the bar. "Rye," he told the bartender. The sound of his shrill voice in the quiet of the big room seemed to beat back at him from the walls. He hunched his neck a little lower into his collar, glanced quickly at the other two men at the bar.

The bartender scowled darkly, pulling at one handle bar of his moustache. "Yuh mean sassparilly, don't yuh, younker?"

Clay gulped. His mouth seemed suddenly dry of words.

"He said rye." His father's voice was low and level, but it seemed to cut at the bartender, who took a quick, backward step, his eyes widening. "Make mine rye, too."

The bartender shrugged, reached for a bottle. "It's yore party, Jeff."

Clay took the liquor at one gulp, as he had seen other men do. It scorched a burning path down his throat and brought mist to his eyes, but he managed to keep a straight face and his breathing even.

His father put his empty glass back on the bar. "Rot-gut whiskey Sogerson sells," he said with man-to-man casualness.

"Yeh," Clay agreed, striving hard to make his voice sound as off-hand as his Pop's. "Not so good." He was beginning to feel the warm glow of the liquor spreading through him and it made him feel good. But what made him feel better was the way his Pop was treating him like a man.

The three men at the table in the corner had stopped their game. All of them had their eyes fastened on Jeff. Suddenly one of them said something, rose to his feet. One of the other two followed suit. The third man shrugged his shoulders, turned back to the table and picked up his cards.

In the back-bar mirror, Jeff saw them coming. "The tall geezer in the black coat is Smoke Druggar," he said quietly. "The other is Nels Sogerson."

Clay felt his heart spurt. "They're the ones?"

His father nodded. "Looks like they're gonna pay us a visit." He motioned to the bartender. "Nother rye for Clay an' me, Mort."

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JUMPY
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Worry on his face, the bartender slopped the glasses full, his eyes flicking over Jeff's shoulder toward the approaching men.

His eyes glued on the mirror, blood pounding in his temples, Clay watched the two men approach. Sogerson was in the lead. He was about middling tall and greasy looking. One of his eyes had a cast in it that gave one side of his face a malicious leer. Smoke Drugger looked like what he was, a typical tinhorn gambler. Tight-cut clothes and flowered waistcoat covered his sparse frame, and the skin of his thin, emotionless face was an unhealthy, wax-like color.

Clay's father turned from the bar slowly, half-faced them.

Sogerson halted. Under his wide nose, a heavy lip was turned up in a half snarl. "Thought I told yuh last night not to come back here no more."

"You did," Jeff admitted.

Clay, following his father's lead, had also turned away from the bar. Drugger had walked up and stopped close to him, so close he could feel the other man's body brushing against the butt of his gun.

It was an old gun-fight trick. Drugger was trying to hem him in so he couldn't draw, then both of them could work on his father. A little chill worried at the short hair on the back of his neck. Forgotten, whiskey slopped from his glass.

"Don't want yore kind around," Sogerson was saying, his voice raspy.

"My kind's good enough while there's money in my poke," Clay's father said.

Sogerson sneered. "Had tuh bring yore button along tuh back yuh up, huh?"

"No," Jeff said, "I'm figger'n on havin' a little game with you two. Clay's gonna just kinda watch on. See that they's no bottom dealin' like you pulled last night."

Clay felt Drugger's body stiffen. "Yore a damn liar, Thatcher."

DRUGGER'S hot words seemed to burn something into the inside of Clay. Almost without knowing it, his hand flashed up and out. Drugger caught the contents of the whiskey glass in his face.

Drugger gasped, stepped back, his hand whipping up. An ugly-looking derringer jumped from his sleeve. Clay lurched sideways, his hand flashing down toward his

thigh, but fire bloomed from the derringer's snout as his fingers reached his gun.

The sting of the whiskey must have blurred Drugger's eyes. The slug struck the edge of the hardwood bar, angled off in a ricocheting snarl, striking Clay's elbow a glancing blow as it went by.

Clay felt his arm go numb. Paralyzed, his hand refused his brain's command to raise the gun, half out of its leather. He knew Drugger's derringer would grunt again in a fraction of a second. Fear, coupled with ageless survival instinct, sent his foot kicking up in a flashing arc.

The derringer's mouth spouted flame again just as his boot toe hit Drugger's hand. Clay heard the death whisper of the bullet as it went by his head. A hanging lamp at the end of the bar shattered.

Beside him he heard the sudden, harsh bellow of his father's .44. From the corner of his vision, his brain recorded the surprised look that jumped to Sogerson's face. The half-raised gun in his hand faltered, fell back to his side, then he slowly disappeared out of the angle of sight.

As the toe of his boot connected with Drugger's hand, Clay gritted his teeth and, summoning all of his will-power, forced his unfeeling fingers to trigger.

Drugger jerked, his head snapping back. A little, black hole, blue at the edges, suddenly appeared between his eyes.

As the blast of gunfire died away, it seemed to take all other sound with it. The big room was held in a silent vacuum for a full minute. Then Clay's father sighed.

"Son, I've learned my lesson. The size a the stakes in this game jest naturally scared all a the gamblin' fever right outa my system."

* * *

Her face gray and haggard, Clay's mother was standing in the middle of the kitchen when he and his father came in. And suddenly she was running across the room towards Clay, a little, soft moan deep in her throat.

"Sonny—Sonny. My boy!"

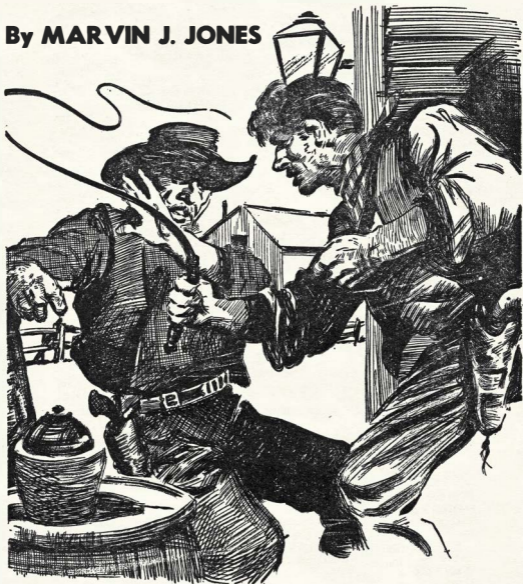
Her arms were extended to enfold Clay, but something in his quiet attitude made her pause.

Clay's father stepped to her side.

"Mom," he said softly, his voice husky. "I reckon we better quit callin' him Sonny. We got another man in the house."

THE WRATH OF JEB WHALEN

By MARVIN J. JONES



Cliff plied the whip mercilessly. . . .

• • •
Cliff Whalen now cringed in fear of the hulking brother he had always cherished with whiplash and gun-butt.

TOM JOHNSON and his wife Emilie were driving from their ranch to Tenspot. It was shortly after dusk, the road was little more than passable and the moon hung over their left shoulders like a weird, gleaming ball. It was cold.

Tom Johnson was a man of average courage. Certainly, he was no coward. Too, his wife was these six months pregnant, so he had other things to consider. But, above all, Tom was honest.

He said afterward that the first sight he caught of the lurching, giant figure, through the steaming breath of the horses, turned his spine icy in an instant. He reined the horses in sharply and peered ahead, trying to see what manner of beast walked the road.

"What is it?" Emilie Johnson asked breathlessly, clutching her husband's arm.

The shambling figure did not look back, although it was incredible that it had not heard the rattling buckboard and the hooves of the horses. But no beast walked erectly the distance the figure had gone and Tom Johnson had never seen an ape, so he answered with the barest hesitation.

"It's a man."

Then, he flicked the reins against the horses' rumps and drove on, not caring to pass the man ahead, but not content to follow the fellow's slow progress into Tenspot, either. As they drew closer, it could be seen that the stranger was tall, six and a half feet, at least. He wore a huge, bearskin coat and a bearskin hat, both of which, even in the moonlight, looked old and mouldy.

As the horses drew abreast and began to pass the man, they shied nervously, something that did not contribute to Tom Johnson's peace of mind. Indeed, the huge, ungainly figure in the bearskins, with its slouching gait, was not a thing to inspire confidence in either man or beast.

However, as the buckboard itself drew even with the man, Tom Johnson cleared his throat, having in his mind to offer the other a lift—it being obvious that the stranger must be headed toward Tenspot, as the road led nowhere else.

It was at that instant that the giant turned his head and looked full into the faces of Tom and Emilie Johnson. Emilie Johnson took one look at the black-bearded, cavernous face, with its sunken, red-rimmed, glittering eyes, and screamed.

At the same time, the creature raised its mittened hands, its mouth opened and a noise more bestial than human bubbled from its throat. Tom Johnson laid the whip on the already frightened horses and

the buckboard careened down the road.

It was a credit to Tom Johnson that he pulled in less than a hundred yards away, turned and looked back, oblivious to his wife's tearful pleas to flee for their lives. Tom's face was pale, but a frown had come into it. Suddenly, he began to rein the horses around.

"Emilie," he said ruefully. "That was Jeb Whalen. I'm sure of it."

But Emilie Johnson didn't care if the thing back there was the angel Gabriel. If Tom Johnson was going back, she was going to get out and walk.

Unwilling to face hysterics from his pregnant wife, but thoroughly ashamed of his own cowardice, Tom drove on slowly, turning over in his mind the significance of Jeb Whalen's return to Tenspot. By the time they reached town, Tom Johnson was quite as excited as he had been scared before.

Within twenty minutes of the Johnson's arrival, nearly everyone in town knew that Jeb Whalen was on his way to Tenspot. The news went from the general store, where the Johnson's stopped, to the street and then to the Ace In The Hole saloon. Cliff Whalen, sitting in a poker game, was one of the last to hear it. When he did he turned ashen pale.

The wise heads of Tenspot were already wagging. There was one reason only why Jeb Whalen should return to town, and that was to kill his brother. The same thought must have crossed Cliff Whalen's mind when he heard the news. Cliff's reaction, people said, proved that he was aware that he richly deserved it.

From the time the Whalen brothers had first arrived in Tenspot, up to and including the time when Jeb left, Cliff had treated his unfortunate brother like a dog. And like a dog, Jeb Whalen, if anything, had responded with a more unselfish devotion, a greater loyalty and a more marked humbleness.

Cliff Whalen was trim, strong and handsome. Jeb was huge and shambling. Immense as his shoulders were, his head was too big for them. Long as his body was, his arms still dangled awkwardly. Also, he was dumb, in the sense that he could not speak. His huge ears could hear the faintest whisper, but his throat and lips could form no other sound than a guttural, bubbling

"ah-h-h-h". With that and his eyes he told of his joy or sorrow, his acceptance of life or his anger with it.

In a sense, Cliff Whalen catered to his brother, but only because of the necessity of it. If Cliff bought a new coat, he must also buy Jeb one—exactly in duplicate. If he sported a pearl-handled six-shooter, the same weapon must grace Jeb's thigh. Humored in this, the giant was a mountain of willingness and energy and a grateful slave. He became sulky and morose if this whim was neglected.

LOOKING at the two brothers, when they first arrived in Tenspot, there was one fact it was difficult to accept. Jeb Whalen's appearance and docility belied it, but in the grotesque head worked a brain that was trigger quick. His big movements were slow and awkward, but his lesser ones were fleeting.

It was as though the brain extended throughout the huge body, even into the fingertips. Big Harry Goshen was the first man in Tenspot to find it out, but his newfound knowledge helped him not in the least.

The two brothers first rode into Tenspot one afternoon, on the heels of a minor silver boom. They were both mounted on black horses, straddled identical saddles with the same trappings. They wore broadcloth trousers tucked loosely into stitched, soft leather boots, broadcloth coats and grey Stetsons.

When they dismounted at the livery, there was a glimpse of a pearl-handled Colts on each of their right thighs. But other than that, there was scant evidence that they were brothers.

Leaving their horses at the livery, the brothers went to the hotel, engaged a room and then walked down the street to the Ace In The Hole saloon. Cliff Whalen walked with a slight swagger that was faithfully duplicated by his shambling brother. They had one drink at the bar and then Cliff headed for the faro table, leaving Jeb standing at the bar.

From the moment the brothers came in, they were covertly watched by every man in the saloon. Of the two, Jeb attracted the most interest. The bigness was grotesque—frightening, too.

That may have been the reason Big Harry Goshen started the trouble. Harry

was a big man in his own right and enjoyed it. What prestige his size didn't give him, Big Harry could back up with a gun, but he was the proudest of the way people cowered before his bulk.

Jeb Whalen was lounging at one corner of the bar, his face ugly and placid, watching his brother's every movement with patient worship. Big Harry got up from a rear table and swaggered over, standing beside Jeb and facing the bar.

Perhaps he wanted to see if the stranger was actually larger. Jeb certainly was. It might have been, then, that Big Harry got a taste of how it felt to be towered over. At any rate, he took an instant and apparent dislike to Jeb. He turned to the other and let his gaze run up and down the silent Jeb.

"Have a drink?" he asked then, as though sparring for an excuse to make trouble.

Jeb Whalen glanced quickly at his brother Cliff and then nodded, turning to the bar. The bartender filled glasses and the two men drank. Big Harry Goshen set down his glass and wiped his mouth.

"Where in hell are you from, stranger?" he asked tactlessly.

Jeb Whalen hesitated, then pointed at his mouth, shaking his head. Big Harry stared at him bewilderedly and then threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"The guy can't talk!" he yelled across the saloon. "Talks with his fingers!"

The rest of the men stared curiously at the two at the bar. Cliff Whalen, playing faro, did not so much as lift his head. Big Harry laughed again, almost genially. Here was a man bigger than he, but dumb. Harry's self respect was restored. He was superior.

"Have a drink," he offered again.

Jeb Whalen looked again to his brother, but this time he turned back to Harry and shook his head. Nobody saw a signal pass from one brother to the other, but it obviously did, because Jeb's slow shake of his head was regretful. Perhaps he knew there would be trouble, if he refused. Probably, Cliff Whalen knew it too and that was his reason for making Jeb decline.

"Come on—have another!" Big Harry urged, an edge in his voice. "Don't be so damned sensitive."

Jeb Whalen shook his head again slowly. Big Harry's face darkened. Apparently,

he had the idea that he had hurt the other's feelings by laughing at his defect.

"Look," he said harshly. "I laugh when I feel like it, see? Now, if you don't want to drink with me, this saloon ain't big enough for both of us, see?"

Jeb Whalen looked helplessly at his brother and stood his ground. Big Harry growled, set his feet and swung a ham-like fist for the other's jaw. Jeb Whalen made no effort to duck.

His left arm came upward and his fingers closed on Harry's wrist. He stepped backward, absorbing the blow with his arm. Then he shoved the big gunman from him, Harry Goshen went flying across the room and smashed a table against the wall.

Big Harry got to his feet slowly. That one feel of Jeb's fingers on his wrist convinced him that his strength was no match for the giant's. He set his feet and his hand shot down in a slapping draw.

The men watching swore afterwards that Jeb Whalen looked again to his brother Cliff before he drew his own gun. When Jeb did draw, there was just a flicker of movement and the gun flamed in his hand. Harry's shot tore into the floor. The slug from Jeb Whalen's gun caught Big Harry full in the face. Cliff Whalen looked up from the faro table and that was all.

THAT same afternoon, the brothers deposited fifty thousand dollars in the bank. Where they had gotten so much money, no one knew, but everybody speculated. It was soon apparent what the money was for. Cliff Whalen, almost immediately, began dickering for the Crystaland, saloon and dance hall.

It was clear from the beginning that Jeb Whalen did only what his brother told him to do. He ran the errands for both of them. He waited on his brother hand and foot. If Cliff became involved in an argument, however minor, the silent Jeb always appeared. And his presence, alone, was sufficient to make his brother's opponent hastily change his point of view.

Cliff and the owner of the Crystaland haggled for weeks over the price of the dance hall, without coming to an agreement. It did not seem to worry Cliff. He took an immediate interest in the dance-hall girls and frequently treated the prettiest to rides in the country in a rented buggy.

Jeb always remained in town. He never spent any money—probably had none. And apparently, for the same reason, he never gambled. It was noted that on the days Cliff stayed away from town all day, Jeb went without his noon meal.

One morning, Jeb Whalen was in the Ace In The Hole saloon, sitting in a chair against the back wall. Cliff had left earlier with the buggy and a new dance-hall girl.

Jeb was watching a poker game when a slight, beady-eyed stranger pushed through the batwings, hesitated and then strolled to the back of the room. It was obvious that he was looking for somebody and also obvious that he was disappointed in not finding him.

About that time, Hank Goddard, an old prospector, appeared in the batwings and started to come in. When he did, he caught sight of the stranger, his face paled and he backed out again.

Whether or not the beady-eyed man saw Hank is unknown, but he sauntered the length of the saloon and went out. A moment later, the ashen-faced Hank beckoned to Jeb from the rear room. Hank had ducked around the side of the saloon and crawled through an open window. He was shaking with fright.

Jeb got up from his chair and went into the back room. Hank Goddard closed the door and the card players could hear his low, earnest voice for several minutes. Finally, Jeb Whalen came out and hurriedly lumbered from the saloon. In less than a quarter of an hour, he returned, carrying two well filled saddlebags. He went in the rear room where Hank was still hiding.

It afterward developed that Jeb had gone to the bank and drawn out the fifty thousand deposited by the brothers. Pop Wells, who owned the bank, had been reluctant to give it to Jeb, but afraid not to. But being aware that Jeb did only what Cliff Whalen told him to, Pop assumed that he had been sent to get the money.

Jeb Whalen was in the room with Hank, this time, for only a minute or two. He came out again, still carrying the saddlebags, went to the batwings and looked up and down the street. Hank watched from the rear door until Jeb motioned for him to come. Jeb had a horse waiting outside.

Hank mounted it and went tearing out of town, saddle bags and all, as though the

devil were behind him. Then, Jeb Whalen went over to the livery and stayed in front of it the rest of the day, waiting for Cliff to return.

Cliff Whalen drove in at four-thirty in the afternoon. He helped the red-haired dance-hall girl from the buggy and turned to find Jeb at his elbow. He frowned, took the paper that Jeb handed him, read it and then grew deathly pale.

Those that saw what happened next said Cliff Whalen went stark raving mad. The color came back to his face in mottled patches and his whole body trembled with rage. The dance-hall girl took one look at him and fled. Jeb Whalen stood in dumb agony before his raging brother, his huge body quivering helplessly.

When Cliff Whalen could control his movements, he stalked over to buckboard drawn up at the side of the livery, pulled a heavy whip from its socket and stalked back. His eyes were burning like a madman's.

He slashed the whip across Jeb Whalen's face. Jeb flinched, but his body stopped quivering and he stood stoically from then on, as long as he remained on his feet.

Cliff Whalen plied the whip mercilessly, against his brother's face, neck and body. And wherever it touched, it brought blood. When Cliff stopped, panting and reeling with exertion, Jeb was still on his feet, though his face was unrecognizable.

With the last strength that Cliff Whalen could summon, he reversed the whip and brought the loaded butt down on Jeb's head, again and again, until finally, the giant's knees buckled and he sank to the ground. Jeb Whalen lay quite still then, once he had fallen sprawling and bloody. Cliff flung the whip at his brother's body and staggered across the street to the hotel.

AS SOON as he had disappeared, a score of people ran over to the fallen giant, to see if he was dead, to help him if he wasn't. Jeb wasn't. He stirred and struggled slowly to his feet.

How he could see out of his eyes, when his face was cut to ribbons, was a mystery. But he did. He turned slowly and walked into the livery, the blood making sucking sounds in his boots. There wasn't a face in the crowd that had any color in it, as they watched him.

Slowly and soundlessly, Jeb Whalen led

his mare from her stall and saddled her. His movements were halting and unsure, but patient. It took him three attempts to get into the saddle. When he did, he rode out of town, humped over and reeling, spattering blood drops marking his going. The same thought crossed the minds of many, as they saw him leave. Like a mortally wounded animal, he was going away to die.

Tenspot pieced the story together in the next few days. Hank Goddard had sold Jeb his Silver Streak mine for the fifty thousand dollars. If Jeb had asked anyone in Tenspot, they would have told him it was worthless. But Jeb couldn't have asked anyone. That, the wise heads said sagely, was why Hank Goddard picked out the giant, when he found the beady-eyed stranger on his trail and had to leave town.

Tenspot was wrong. On the third day after Jeb Whalen disappeared, news came in of a new strike. It was on Black Knob. It was reported to be far richer than any of the previous mines already in production.

Hank Goddard's Silver Streak mine was also on Black Knob. Cliff Whalen went out to it and kicked aside a few shovelfuls of dirt that had been hastily thrown over Hank's recent diggings. Underneath was the mother lode. Hank had found it, covered it and gone into Tenspot, probably to get equipment and there encountered the beady-eyed stranger.

Almost overnight, Tenspot was the biggest, boomingest wildest town in Arizona—and the richest. Silver flowed out of the mountain in a steady stream and the Silver Streak mine was the richest of them all. Cliff Whalen awakened each morning those first hectic weeks, his wealth practically doubled.

People looked then for Jeb Whalen to return and kill his brother, but he didn't. Before, Tenspot had felt that Cliff Whalen deserved death, merely because of the savagery and brutality of the beating he had given his brother. Now, he deserved it a thousandfold.

It was clear that Jeb could not defend himself with his tongue. And he wouldn't defend himself with his strength, because even he didn't know if it would be just. Perhaps at the time he had accepted the beating, the thought was in Jeb's mind that

Hank Goddard might have tied to him.

Cliff Whalen gave no thought to his brother's disappearance. He may have thought Jeb dead, as many others did. At any rate, he did not try to find him.

He bought the Crystaland and rebuilt it into the showplace of Arizona. It whooped and caroused twenty-four hours a day. He built a theater and imported the furnishings for it. The silver flowed out of his hands and the stamping mills, freight lines and timber lands poured back into them.

Tapestries and delicacies, hardwoods and paintings, rugs, china and furnishings came to Tenspot to enrich his holdings and tempt his appetite. Nothing was too fantastic or to lavish that silver could not be found to pay for it. One by one, the other mines came under his control, bought by the silver that flowed in an endless stream from the Silver Streak.

Cliff Whalen was drunk with wealth, power and insatiable greed. In his mad conquest, he found nothing that money would not buy. Tenspot was the queen of Arizona and Cliff was the king. What his final goal was, no one knew. Whatever it was, it turned out to be a vision.

Water began trickling into the mines—all of them. First a trickle, then a flow. Overnight, the people of Tenspot were sober and thoughtful. Cliff Whalen laughed in their glum faces and brought in pumps—and more pumps.

In the end, he scoured the world for pumps and then raged helplessly as his empire fell with a crash that almost eclipsed Tenspot. And out of the vastness of that empire, Cliff Whalen retained a precarious hold on the shabby Ace In The Hole and that was all. The whole thing had taken just under three years, from start to finish.

There wasn't much left of Tenspot, when it was over. There hadn't been much when silver was discovered. The people that stayed, now, were the same bewildered people who watched the boom. They had less than they had had in the first place. There was not much to live for, or hope for. In another three years, Tenspot even quit waiting for Jeb Whalen to return.

AS IT was, the cobwebs were already thick in Tenspot's deserted boom buildings the night the Johnsons saw Jeb Whalen on his way into town. As the news spread,

there was a rippling wave of excitement that spread with it, something that had almost grown foreign in the dying town. The people who had witnessed the beating Cliff had given his brother were the most excited of all.

Then men who sat at Cliff Whalen's table in the Ace In The Hole excused themselves one by one, when they saw Cliff's stricken face after he heard the news. They remembered Jeb Whalen's enormous strength and the quickness of his hands, and got out of the way.

Where he had been these six years, nobody could guess. Lord knows what out-of-the-way spot he licked his wounds while his brother wallowed in a fortune and lost it. A fortune he had secured for him. Perhaps the news of those six years had barely reached him and that was why he had not come sooner. At any rate, there wasn't a man in Tenspot who would have traded shoes with Cliff Whalen that night—not for the wealth of a dozen Silver Streaks.

Jeb Whalen came, as the Johnsons had told. He came into the Ace In The Hole, pushing the batwings aside slowly, as though his strength was barely enough. He shambled inside a few steps and then stopped, blinking his eyes to accustom them to the light.

While he was doing this, he took off his ragged mittens, stuffed them in the left pocket of the bearskin coat and flexed his fingers, warming them. His head moved from side to side, his glittering eyes looking at everything and everybody—until they had searched out the face of Cliff Whalen.

And while he went through these motions, the men in the saloon stared, shuddering, at his face. Under the straggling black beard were lumps and welts of flayed crimson flesh. It was not a face at all. It was a split, slashed, lopsided thing of horror, made of teeth, bone and mutilated meat.

Cliff Whalen's face was grayish green with the terror that must have twisted his narrow soul. And when Jeb Whalen began shambling across the room toward him, Cliff drew out his Colts with the strained, jerky movement of a paralytic.

"Get back, Jeb! Stay back—or I'll kill you!" he said hoarsely. "I mean it!"

Jeb Whalen stopped, looked blankly at the black bore of the revolver and started forward again. Cliff drew back the hammer

of the Colts and it clicked into place. He drew his lips back from his teeth and his breath whistled harshly from them.

The giant stopped again, his hands opening and closing, slowly, as though he still warmed them. But he was no fool. He was fifteen feet away from the black bore of the Colts. He did not step forward again—neither did he step backward. His right hand plunged, instead, into the right-hand pocket of the bearskin great coat.

The Colts in Cliff Whalen's hand jerked and roared, once—twice—and then a third time, and three separate puffs of dust jumped from the front of the coat. Jeb Whalen's hand froze in the pocket and his huge body shuddered as it absorbed the lead. Then his hand started coming out of the pocket slowly.

From the lips of Cliff Whalen came a low, moaning scream. He cocked the revolver and pressed the trigger again, blasting out the remaining shells in the gun. And each time he pulled the trigger, the moaning scream came from his throat and the puffs of dust jumped on the bearskin coat.

Jeb Whalen reeled on his feet, his hand

motionless again, almost out of his pocket. His head began to roll on his shoulders and his mouth gaped wide open. He took a step forward, his hand came out of the pocket and then he crashed down on his face, the impact of his huge body making long lines of dust leap from the cracks in the floor.

In the silence that followed, there came suddenly a harsh, grating sound. A sobbing, mirthless laughter that rose and fell and preyed on the nerves. The horrible, meaningless laughter of a madman. Cliff Whalen laughed until he could no longer stand, then he writhed across the floor like a convulsed snake, toward the thing that had spilled from his brother's lifeless hand.

There was pity in the eyes of some of the men, horror in the faces of some, and in others there was a vacantness of expression that comes with great shock. For it was apparent to everyone present and even to the mad Cliff Whalen that Jeb had returned with no thought of revenge. He had come to redeem himself. The thing that had spilled from his hand was a gold nugget. It was as big as a man's thumb.

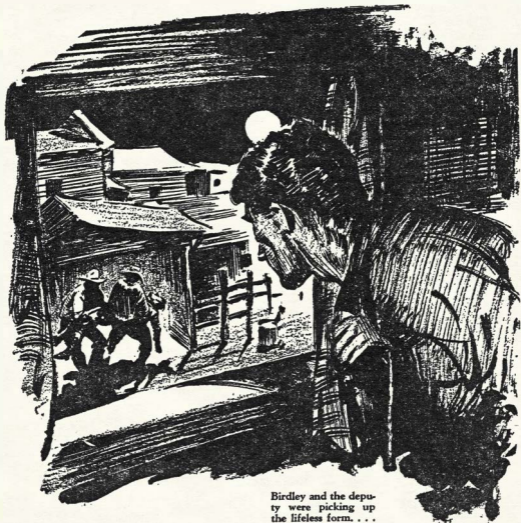
NO LIFE FOR A SISSY

Goods brought by fur-traders to their wilderness outposts for sale to trappers and Indians were sold at staggering prices. Coffee beans cost from a dollar twenty to three dollars per pint cup, the usual measure for anything that would pour. Tobacco was a dollar fifty a plug; alcohol two to five dollars a pint, depending upon quality, of which the best was bad. Gunpowder fetched a dollar sixty a pint cup.

These costs were subtracted from the prices the trappers were paid for furs, on which the trader already made exorbitant profits. If a trader failed to get rich in one or two seasons, he was a piker, or—that very rare animal—an honest man.

The high cost of living was the least of the trappers' troubles—they were lucky to stay alive. The average life of a mountain man in the fur regions was six years. It wasn't a failing stomach that killed him, it was usually the loss of his hair. Scalps had the habit of departing suddenly and violent-like. And the chill following was usually permanent. And permanent was the mountain man's stay in the mountains!

RED CHIPS ON HIS SHOULDER



Birdley and the deputy were picking up the lifeless form. . . .

By **JOHN JO
CARPENTER**

It was election day and banished Bud Worth swaggered back into town—to delegate himself for a killer's badge.

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THE waspish buzz of bullets sped Bud Worth out of Benjamin, Texas, on a rainy January afternoon. He left behind his bedroll—seized to pay his hotel bill—and \$135.65, stolen from him the hard way, by two men who waylaid him in his own room and half brained him with a gun butt.

When he was far enough from town to feel safe he pulled in his winded horse

and looked back. Pursuit had vanished. He could barely see the strongest light in the town—the corner room of the hotel which was the bedroom-office of Ovid Birdley, the proprietor.

"I think I'll come back," Bud whispered. "Yes, sir, I'll just come back sometime, I think."

He had lain on the hotel room floor an hour and a half after that blow on the head, before he could gather the strength to go down and complain to Ovid. They had left him sixteen cents, which he still had in his pocket—all that was left of a year's savings.

Ovid gave him the bum's rush, all by himself. Ovid was big and fat, but Bud was still dizzy, and trying to nurse a two inch gash on his scalp. The bedroll was impounded, and Bud landed on his face in the muddy street.

Bud thought of his horse just in time. He was sneaking it out of the hotel stable when Deputy Sheriff Marc Trillingham came roaring through the door. Bud went for his gun. He was first out with it, because he had trained himself always to be first.

When the lawman made a last, desperate dive at him, just as he mounted, Bud rode him down. Thanks to the speed of his big gelding, he made it to the street safely.

He remembered one man, a stocky, youngish fellow with a scar on his cheek who had appeared inclined to take his part in the brief melee before he broke through the half-dozen men who tried to block him at the street. The others jumped at him like fools, and he clubbed them off with his gun.

Scar-cheek yelled, "Bash in their danged heads, cowboy—tain't fair, six to one!" Scar-cheek even felled one of the men with a powerful left-fist haymaker.

And then Bud was through them, and the big gelding had his belly down to the ground and was running like a fool. Bud did not care whether he had killed Marc Trillingham or not. He did not care.

* * *

Bud had left Benjamin unshaven for two weeks, in ragged range clothing, and riding a big, powerful, somber-colored horse. He had denied himself everything,

even clothing, to save the \$135.65 which had been stolen from him in the Birdley Hotel. That money was for a down payment on a piece of land a few miles out of Benjamin, and the self-denial had been worth it—at the time.

He came back that fall, in the blazing dog-days. This time he was smoothly shaven, except for well-trimmed sideburns and a black close-clipped mustache that followed, narrowly, the line of his upper lip. He was dressed like a dandy, and he rode a handsome white and chestnut pinto stallion. It couldn't run with his old horse, but it fitted the new characterization he had deliberately adopted.

Entering the saloon that occupied one side of the hotel, the first person he saw was Ovid Birdley. He never had been sure whether Ovid sent the two men up there after he personally searched the room and located the money, or whether he had merely been angry because someone beat him to it. All Bud knew—or cared—was that he had lost the money in Ovid Birdley's place and got the bum's rush when he complained.

He spoke to the proprietor deliberately, affecting a smart-aleck air because the old Bud Worth had been a silent, sober, grim sort of an hombre in the week he lived here. He was sure he went unrecognized. He had a few dollars in his pocket. He bought drinks freely, signed for a room, and tossed the flunky two bits to take care of his horse.

When Ovid took him upstairs, Bud found he had been assigned to his old room. For a moment he was unsure of himself, but a second look at the fat, brutal-faced proprietor convinced him that it was strictly coincidence. As such, it fitted in perfectly with his conception of justice.

"Town seems pretty lively," he said. "Lot bigger than a feller would think, offhand."

"About a thousand," Ovid growled, in his rasping voice. Then pride in the town—his town—awakened in him. "Election time, and that brings in everybody. Next Tuesday we got a special election to pick a new sheriff. Old one died, and we got us a red-hot race on our hands. You'll see some high old times if you stay. Aim to?"

"I might," Bud said, itching to get his hands around the hotel man's fat throat.

He was alone with Birdley now, and—
Ovid gave him an appraising, sideways glance.

"Like to make an extry dollar or two? We need votes. Might be able to find a man who'd say you had worked for him the year it takes before you can be a voter. It'd be worth mebbe two dollars for a vote for our man—another two if we can get you past the opposition judges for a second time."

"Man can always use a coupla dollars," Bud said, forcing a laugh. "Who's your man?"

"Marc Trillingham. Used to be first deputy. Knowed more about the job than the sheriff did. Good man, Marc. He keeps this town policed."

He sure as blazes does, Bud thought!

Aloud, he said, "What kind of opposition has he got?"

OVID, in one of his sociable moments now he was with what he thought a kindred scalawag, scratched his head and talked volubly.

"Nobody much. Young married feller that runs a few cows out Tres Palos mesa way, feller by the name of Adam Woolard. He's one of these here reform fellers that are the ruination of many a good town. And you know, these danged fools around here have het up quite a campaign for him! Marc might get beat."

He shook his head peevishly. "Yes sir, a reform man might beat Marc and kill the town. You'd know this feller if you ever seen him. Short, burly built, blue eyes and short-cut hair—got a little scar on his cheek."

Bud said carefully, "What do I care who he is? Line up your election judges and the 'boss' I been workin' for. We'll give you a coupla votes."

He was glad when the fat man went out. He could not have stood it much more without laying violent hands on him.

He heard nothing but electioneering that night. There were two other saloons. Oddly enough, both of them displayed *Adam Woolard For Sheriff* campaign signs. Bud talked to the bartender at one of them, and said he thought Woolard was a reform candidate.

"Oh, Adam wants to clean things up a little. The town's gettin' a bad name. Been

two men killed here in a year and a half, one over a woman and one that claimed he was robbed. We can stand a little of that reform," the barkeep said.

Bud's big test came late that evening when he was "introduced" to Marc Trillingham by Ovid Birdley. Marc had escaped that encounter with Bud's horse by a very narrow margin. That white scar that sloped up from his left eye past the hairline could not have been made by anything but the grazing hoof of a horse.

"Sure is a case, both candidates wearing scars," he said, laughing right into Trillingham's face.

The candidate, who wore the star of Acting Sheriff by virtue of his previous position of first deputy, flushed. He was not as tall as Ovid, and not as fat, but he was younger, and there was power in his wide shoulders and thick arms. One of his big hands shot out and caught Bud by the upper arm.

"It's funny to you, stranger," he said, "but not to me. In the future, you ask me when to laugh."

Bud said, "I don't ask anybody when I can laugh or leave, my friend, and this is poor campaigning."

He peeled Trillingham's fingers loose, aching to drive his fist into the deputy's face. Trillingham, reminded of the votes that were at stake, was easily mollified. He apologized for his display of bad temper and went away.

"Marc's tetchy about that scar. A feller rode him down and got away. Not many of them get away from Marc," Ovid explained.

"Oh?" said Bud.

* * *

It was eleven o'clock before the saloon was really going good, and two o'clock before things quieted down in it. Bud strolled the town, and saw the other two places were closed, no doubt by the officious Trillingham.

Ovid's front door was closed and the blind's were drawn, but trade of a sort went in and out freely. For once, cowboys who had drunk up all their money were not pitched out into the alley. Their votes were too precious. Ovid had them taken upstairs and put to bed, but Bud saw him

write down a bill against each of them, to be collected after election.

Bud went up to his room shortly after two. He pulled off his boots—brand-new hand stitched ones, with metal crescents on the heels—and sat down on the bed. It was a big building, and all up and down the hall he could hear the snores and moans of men sleeping it off. The noise from the bar was dying down now.

Restless, Bud went to the open window and stood there a minute in his sock feet. In a moment, a form appeared below him, dimly. By the shape of the hat, he recognized Marc Trillingham. Marc tapped on the window of Ovid Birdley's room, and in a moment more, Bud heard Ovid's querulous voice.

"Who is it? What do you want?"

"It's me, Ovid. Open up!"

The window came up, and Bud listened carefully now, leaning his head against the screen and trying to see more of what went on below. He could make out Trillingham fairly clearly, but Ovid, in his window, was out of range of his vision.

"What's wrong now, Marc?"

Trillingham's voice was apologetic.

"Ovid, there's a dead man back of your place. You know that young feller, the kid with the yella scarf, that was tossin' down the liquor so heavy this evening? He was loaded with money. It's him. I reckon I surprised whoever it was did it, because I seen two men run through your stable. They got away.

Ovid swore harshly. "That'll be ruination! Right before election, to have a killin' like that. Wait there a minute, Marc. I'll be out, and we'll think of somethin'."

Shortly afterward, Marc was called to the back of the building.

STILL in his sock feet, Bud went quietly out into the dark upper corridor and made his way to the end of it, which opened over the back yard and stables. There were wooden steps down here, but the door was kept locked lest someone try to leave by this route without paying Ovid his innkeeper's fee. The door could be forced, Bud concluded, but not without attracting attention from the back yard.

Two rooms, one on either side of the hall, overlooked the backyard, too. He ~~cried the door of the right one, and it swung~~

open. Two men, dead drunk, were snoring loudly on the bed. He shook each one by a foot to verify the fact, and then went to the window.

From here, he could see and hear clearly. Birdley and the deputy were in bright moonlight at the edge of the stable, just then picking up the lifeless form of the dead boy. Bud had seen him swilling Ovid's bad liquor that evening, having a hell of a time in the way of youths with too much money in their pockets. Well, he never would again. . . .

They carried the body into deeper shadows and knelt down by it. Bud heard Ovid whistle.

"Nigh four hundred dollars! Th' punk musta made a cleanin' at a wheel somewhere, or mebber he's got a rich dad. We'll clean him out to make sure it's pegged as a robbery job, and then we'll just carry him down the alley away from my place."

"Ovid, you shouldn't take that stickpin," Marc protested feebly. "Too many people seen that black pearl. The money—yes, but you could hang for havin' the stickpin."

"Shut up!" Ovid snarled at him. He was going through the dead boy's wallet. "Here's his dad's name and address. *In case of accident, notify J. C. Coleman, Flying X Ranch, Deer Glen, Montanny.*" Ovid chuckled. "We shore will! Why, I can hardly wait. I'll just take this along, too. Now, let's tote him away, Marc. I'll tell you what. We'll blame this on Adam Woolard and his campaign against you. Be smart! Just ask how you expect rowdies to respect the law when busybodies like Adam is stirrin' up disrespect for it?"

Their voices dwindled. Sickened, Bud tiptoed out and found his way back to his own room. The strategy lined out by Ovid was sound, he knew, and the killing could be turned to Trillingham's advantage if he only had sense enough to listen.

But more than this, the thing Bud then did was forced on him by his knowledge of what had been in the dead boy's wallet. Over and over he memorized the name and address—J. C. Coleman, Flying X, Deer Glen, Montana. At least he could see that the bereaved father was notified. But also, he intended to get the wallet and send it back. By election time it would be

too late. The money and stickpin—these could be kissed good-by anyway, but at least he could get the kid's personal papers.

He waited until he saw Ovid come back alone. The hotel man entered by the back door. Listening at his window, Bud shortly heard his gusty sighs and grunts as he stretched out on his bed. He slept lightly, Bud surmised, and his room could not be entered like that of the two drunks.

Bud did not wait. He slipped on his boots and tiptoed out and down the stairs and through the lobby. In the street, he clung to the shadowy sides of the building, away from the moon. He was not likely to meet Marc Trillingham—that worthy would stay as far away from this neighborhood as possible, and let someone else "discover" the body. It was chance passers, drunks who had no place to go, that Bud most feared.

He reached the stable without any trouble, and passed through it to the corals behind. In one of them, forty feet from the stable, was a haystack. He touched a match to it and darted back into the stable.

He did not have long to wait. The dry hay caught quickly, and someone gave the alarm from the upper hotel window, as he knew they would. He waited until Ovid himself came galloping around by the street side and entered the hotel.

Ovid's room was locked, by an automatic catch. There was no time to lose. The noise outside would cover whatever sounds he made anyway. He kicked the panel out of the door, reached in and turned the knob.

The first thing that met his eyes were the wallet, the money and the stickpin. The money was in gold, in a little tanned leather pouch. He pocketed it and the wallet. The stickpin he left there on a hunch.

Bud started for the door and heard someone come in at the rear end of the corridor, running hard. Whoever it was, he might or might not notice the broken door. Bud declined to take chances. He unlocked the window—the same one Ovid had talked through to Marc Trillingham—slid it up, pushed through the screen, and dropped to the ground.

He had no more than reached the sidewalk when men came running around the

corner toward the fire. He ran too, shouting, "My horse! My horse! The stable's afire!"

Ovid Birdley, in the middle of the bucket brigade line, snarled at him, "The stable's safe, you danged fool, but the hosses are out. Grab a bucket and make yourself useful."

With the dead boy's money and wallet in his pocket, Bud passed water until the fire was out and in no danger of spreading. He walked back to the hotel, taking pains to pass through the stable on his way. In less grim circumstances, he might have taken pleasure out of the fact that Ovid Birdley walked beside him.

As they passed the stableman's tool box in the dark, Bud reached out and caught a hoof-rasp from it and slid it up his sleeve, and Ovid missed the motion. He might need it or he might not. . . .

And when they passed Ovid's window, he was sure he would. The moon had moved up by now, and the soft ground under the window was brightly lighted. His boot mark was plain there, steel crescent and all.

He saw Marc Trillingham in the crowd, but Marc and Ovid took pains not to speak to each other.

WHEN he got back to his room he took off his boots and pried off the steel crescents and the first layer of leather from each heel. Then, with the hoof-rasp, which would cut a horse's hard hoof down as though it were cheese, he filed away at the heels.

By the time he was through, they were as efficiently run-over as though he had walked on them for months. The soles were next, and in a few moments he had a hole in one, and another one threatening to break through the other. Then he regarded his handiwork dubiously.

"Look mighty funny, with all my fancy clothes. Hope nobody noticed my boots too much yesterday," he said.

He pitched the hoof-rasp out of the window as far as he could throw it. The pieces of leather and the shavings he dropped down the chimney opening in the room, replacing the thimble lid. It was four o'clock before he went to bed. Exhausted, he drifted off to sleep immediately.

It was only five-thirty when he was

awakened. It was light outside, but still dim in his room. Marc and Ovid were there, Ovid with a lantern, Marc with a gun. Down the hall, the full length of it, Bud could hear men cursing and complaining.

"Let's see your boots," Marc growled.

Bud's first impulse was to offer them eagerly, but he had been insolent to Trillingham yesterday, about the scar. He dared not be too civil now.

"What do you want with my boots?" he grumbled, swinging his feet out of bed. "Who gave you leave to come in here anyway?"

Trillingham reached for the boots. Bud came to his feet and shoved his hands against the deputy's shoulder and sent him spinning across the room. Trillingham swore and went for his gun, and Bud dived at his legs. The gun crashed once over his head, and then Ovid Birdley was swinging on Trillingham's gun-arm, forcing it up, swearing at him.

Marc Trillingham holstered the gun and stepped back, and Bud said, "Now what's this all about? Don't lay hands on my stuff without a good reason, Mr. John Law. I'll handle you worse next time." It gave him pleasure to say it that way, and to see Trillingham have to take it.

"There's been a murder and a robbery," Ovid said. "A man was killed and my place was broken into. We found tracks under my window—pretty clear ones. We're checking on everybody, cowboy."

"Oh!" Bud said. "Then help yourself."

They examined his boot soles carefully under the light of the lantern. He had taken care to rub them across the oily, dirty floor, but under this close inspection he was sure they would fail.

Nevertheless, Ovid sighed and dropped them. "You're clear, cowboy. Go back to sleep. Come on, Marc. Next room. We'll find him!"

They went out, and in the next room another man cursed at having his hang-over sleep interrupted at this hour. Bud had lost all desire to sleep. He dressed and went out and found a Chinese restaurant just opening. He stuffed himself with breakfast, and by then it was broad daylight.

He strolled back to the hotel bar, and found it full, despite the early hour. Many

of the customers were those who had been awakened for boot inspection and were now seeking the hair of the dog. Others were riff-raff simply seeking free election whiskey. Bud did not see Ovid Birdley or Marc Trillingham. He went out.

Later in the day, Ovid handed him a slip of paper bearing a name: *Joe Bacon, Big Stone Ranch.*

"You work for him," Ovid said. "Memorize that and tear it up. Vote early, and we'll try to vote you again. You'd better hang around town the next few days so people will get used to seeing you, and keep your eyes out for a feller with steel-shod boot heels. There's fifty dollars reward if you find him."

His tone was curt; he was already regarding Bud as another of his cheap retainers. Bud swallowed it and went on about his business, which consisted mostly of loafing on the street.

He was sitting on a bench in front of the postoffice when he saw Adam Woolard go by. The man had four followers with him—good, substantial citizens by the look of them. There was no mistaking him; he was the man who had taken Bud's part last January. Bud's impulse was to go up and speak to him, but he fought it down. Their eyes met briefly, and Woolard went on.

He ran into Woolard two or three times more, within the next hour. He was back at his old postoffice bench when the candidate appeared again and sat down beside him, with perhaps two feet between him. He did not look at Bud when he spoke, and he kept his voice low.

"I place you now. I've got a good memory for faces, particularly eyes. You were here under the name of Worth before, if I remember the fuss rightly. Now you're Smith. You owe no love to Ovid Birdley or Marc Trillingham, yet I hear you're going to vote for them as one of Joe Bacon's men." He laughed softly. "Joe Bacon never had money enough for one first-class hand, but he'll vote twenty this time—or try it."

Bud said nothing. In a moment the other went on.

"You got a bad deal and you're sore. It ain't worth the risk, friend. They'll get you for it good, if they catch you."

Out of the corner of his mouth, Bud

said, "How'll they know who I vote for? Slip word to your people to pass me without challenge."

Woolard shook his head.

"I don't want to win that way. I'm going to lose anyway. They've got it stacked too well. The town won't like it, but what are people going to do, with the riff-raff pouring in this way. By the time Tuesday comes, they'll have votes ricked in the hotel like cordwood. If anybody objects, he'll get his head caved in. My people are getting scared. There was one killing last night, you know. Knife."

Bud leaned forward and whispered what he knew about the killing. Woolard's warning had impressed him, and in case the *did* catch up with him, he wanted J. C. Coleman notified nevertheless.

"What did you do with the wallet and money?"

Bud grinned. "Hid it in the stable, in Ovid's horses's feedbox, down deep."

"Risky business!" Woolard shook his head. "You should have hollered for help. They're two witnesses to your one, and they can pin it on you quick as scat."

The same thought had been lurking in the back of Bud's mind, kept down until now by his craving for revenge. Woolard promised to retrieve the money and wallet if anything happened to Bud. He warned him again, "Ride on out of town and let me take care of it when things cool off. Be hard to find, and you'll never be connected with it anyway." Bud shook his head, and Woolard went away.

"Well," Bud whispered, to himself, "there goes a man! Won't win crooked and won't take help. Yet he'll give it on the say-so of a man he saw get run out of his own town."

It stirred something in him. He became restless. He got up and paced to the other end of the street. It was filled with men—undesirables clearly, half drunk and acting as though they already owned the town. Bud heard one storekeeper protest to Marc Trillingham.

"Well, what do you expect? I can't do anything with them by myself!" Trillingham snarled at the merchant. "I used to have the respect of that element. They was scared of me, until you holy joes started campaignin', and tellin' them I was a no-good law officer. But I'll clear 'em

out of Benjamin after next Tuesday!"

Bud saw doubt in the merchant's face. *There goes another vote from Woolard to Trillingham*, he thought

HE WAS standing there, chewing this over in his mind, when a little, rat-faced man leaned against him and whispered familiarly, "You a Joe Bacon man too?" He smelled of liquor, but more than that, he smelled of the gutter, of jails—of anything but hard work.

Bud realized then how open the whole thing had become. A secret kept this way was not kept at all. He looked up and saw distaste written all over the storekeeper's face, and a crimson flush crept over his own. It galled him like lime on a raw wound to be classified with this rat.

His hand went out in a purely instinctive motion, and he caught the rat-faced one by the shirt front and jerked him close.

"Listen, you!" Bud said to him. "If you ever speak to me, or look at me again, I'll break you into two little men. Git!"

He pushed, and the man took to his heels, shouting. Marc Trillingham had gone into the store next door. He came out and yelled after the fleeing man, but the latter had had enough—he was making too much noise of his own to hear. Trillingham came over to Bud, and Bud rubbed his damp palms against his pants and wondered if he could hold it past this moment. And the first word Trillingham said made him sure he could not.

"What happened, cowboy?"

Trillingham had been seething under the diplomatic necessity of holding Bud's one or two "votes." Bud knew now that he would have had trouble getting out of town in one piece within five minutes after he cast his vote. And somehow, it didn't matter now. He looked up and saw serious-faced Adam Woolard standing at the corner two rods away, watching him. Woolard wore a gun now.

Bud hitched up his pants, and the motion settled his own gun more to his liking.

"Who do you think you're talking to, farmer?" he drawled.

Trillingham flushed, and his big hand went out to grab Bud's arm again. It was the small-town law officer's usual come-along grip for recalcitrants. Bud met it coming this time.

He knocked the arm aside, letting it touch him first to give him what moral excuse he needed. Trillingham grunted, and Bud drove his fist into the deputy's stomach, and the man grunted again and tried for his gun.

"No you don't!"

Bud kicked up and knocked Trillingham's arm away. He saw Adam Woolard run toward him, eager to mix it, his face flushed until the scar on his cheek stood out. He was grinning and flexing his thick arm muscles. Bud slammed Trillingham up against the wall and held him there with one arm and hit him twice with the other fist.

As the deputy slumped, his stare going glassy, Bud heard Woolard's low voice.

"Get your horse, friend Smith. I'll stand 'em off until you get a runing start. It was crazy—but oh, friend Smith, it'll do a lot of good in the long run."

Bud shook his head, and Woolard whispered, urgently, "Now they'll find some way sure of hanging that murder on you. Light a shuck while you've got the chance."

As someone moved in the crowd that had gathered, the stocky one turned and gestured sharply with his gun. "Don't anybody move. The fella gets a five minute start, whether anybody likes it or not. He's got that much coming on guts alone."

Bud could see it clearly now. It had all sifted down in his mind. The confusion, the anger had caused it, and his own selfish desire to be avenged—he had lost all that when he slugged Trillingham.

"No, that's not the way to do it," he started to say. "You can't hide things. You've got to play your game your way, right out in the open. No Ovid Birdley's way, not—"

Trillingham had backed away, propping himself up on the building and shaking his head to clear it. Bright drops of arterial blood flew from his battered nose, but his eyes were lucid when Bud's met them.

Bud saw the deputy's legs spread, saw his thick body bend in the blood-hungry crouch of the born killer. He saw the man's hand dip down, and for the moment he didn't care. He was dead sure of one thing—that he wouldn't die, now that he had it straight in his mind.

He leaned forward on the balls of his

feet and his hand sloped down easily, and it felt good when the big butt of the gun touched his palm. He threw it out and squirted two shots, and he heard Trillingham's slug hit the sidewalk between his legs, and then Trillingham went down on his knees and crumpled over on his face.

"You hit him low," Woolard said automatically. "In the belly, the way he always did it, because they died harder. You've got a five minutes start, friend Smith, but it's not so much good to you now, because you've killed a peace officer."

Bud said, "No, I don't want any start. There was a man killed last night. I don't know who did it, but I think it was that hombre that spoke to me a minute ago. That's just a hunch. But there are a few things I know about it."

Woolard's face showed his dismay, but Bud quickly told what he had seen and heard last night. He told everything—where they would find the stickpin and wallet, where they would find the money and hoof-rasp and the shreds of leather.

"Pick yourself one man, just one honest man, and break into Ovid Birdley's room. Make him go with you. Find the stickpin. Tell him who told you it was there. See if he doesn't give himself away," Bud said.

"Because they're on the run now, and if you move fast you can whip them. You can have yourself a sheriff that will keep the trash out. You can have the town clean by tonight. You can have my gun anytime—after you've braced Ovid Birdley!"

The storekeeper said quietly, "I'll go, Adam. Would a man kick in the door to plant evidence?"

Woolard gave Bud an odd look. He holstered his gun and went away with the storekeeper, and shortly they came back with the proof. But it was no longer necessary to have it, because Marc Trillingham, dying the hard way, wanted to clear his soul as much as he could. He talked.

It was a quiet town that night, and no one drank and no one electioneered. Bud and Woolard composed a letter to J. C. Coleman, Flying X Ranch, Deer Glen, Montana, and they told the old man how his son had been buried that afternoon. It had been particularly impressive to Bud Worth. The preacher's text had been:

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!"

MAVERICK MOUTHPIECE

If his impassioned oratory couldn't win a case, his sixgun might.

By ARCH NEWMAN

PROBABLY Temple Houston, eccentric, hard-fighting son of the frontier's famed Sam Houston, is the only lawyer in the records of jurisprudence who ever won a case by shooting up the jury. But the flaming legends of this wild and woolly legal eagle begin a dozen years before this particular case made history.

Young Houston crossed the Texas border into Oklahoma just after a series of rude circuit courts was set up under Federal administration. To these, Temple Houston brought his golden voice, his magic oratory and his lightning .45.

Modern criminal mouthpieces have nothing on this talented Texas giant. In appearance he was picturesque, and in his courtroom methods, he was nothing less than sensational. Standing six foot five and weighing an easy 220 pounds, he wore his black hair hanging long to his shoulders.

Around his neck he wore a three foot rattlesnake skin, neatly knotted at the throat. This was for the benefit of one particular judge who had a deathly fear of snakes. Rather than look at Houston's diamond-back four-in-hand throughout a trial, this jurist would rap hastily on his desk and order, "Case dismissed."

No one, however, disputed Houston's reputation for painstaking honesty. Once a Texan who was part Sioux ran afoul of the law in Oklahoma. Jailed and charged with murder, he sent for Houston.

"My name is Winters," he said. "Bill Winters. My father knew your father. Believe me. I'm innocent."

Houston believed him. The trial lasted three days, an unusually long time in that period. The famous lawyer championed his client magnificently. The decision was, of course, "Not guilty!"

As Houston and the freed Winters left the courtroom, triumphant, the lawyer paused to exchange pleasantries with the disappointed prosecutor. In that conversation, Temple picked up some stray scrap of evidence and suddenly realized, to his intense humiliation, that Winters was un-

doubtedly guilty. A murderer would go scott free, simply because he had been a good lawyer.

On the steps of the courthouse, he turned to the arrogant Winters. His words were simple. "I know you're guilty," he said. "I also know you can't be tried for the same crime. But you're going to die for it, anyway. Get your gun."

A few minutes later, Winters' dead body rolled down the steps of the courthouse. It was a long time before anyone found out why Temp Houston had shot his star client.

The frontier lawyer's kaleidoscopic career hurtled onward like a shooting star. It was ten years later, in the last case he argued in Oklahoma, that he went too far.

Defending a local storekeeper who had shot a cowboy, Houston was convinced that it was self defense, even though the merchant had shot first. The rider, with a reputation as an unbridled killer, had threatened him, and the terrified storekeeper, reaching for a gun for the first time, had pulled the trigger. The case, however, was going badly for the defense.

"Gentlemen," Houston argued, "you are all familiar with this cowhand's reputation as a gunfighter. What would you do if you were threatened by a man you knew could shoot like this?" As he spoke, he whipped out his own sixgun and emptied it point-blank at the jurymen!

Jury, judge and spectators fled from the court and tumbled for cover in the street. Houston, in a twinkling, was alone in the room full of overturned furniture.

"Come back!" he bawled cheerfully. "They're only blanks!" Sheepishly, the angry jury crawled back into their seats and sat sullenly through another hour of oratory. It took them exactly thirty seconds to find the storekeeper guilty.

"Now," snapped the judge sarcastically, "just what did you hope to accomplish by that performance?"

"Why, Your Honor, I'm going to ask for a new trial," replied Houston smoothly. "On the grounds that the jury left the courtroom before this trial was over!"

Next

Published

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

issue

February 11th



A crooked border syndicate wanted to elect young Johnny Madden the new sheriff. Johnny wanted no part of the lousy deal. But holster-happy deputy Kramer picked a fight with Johnny—and got himself a pistol whipping. And Cleo, Johnny's girl and Kramer's sister, tigerishly attacked Johnny.



A border patrolman told Johnny that Johnny's father had been murdered because he got caught playing the border syndicate's game. Now, the patrolman wanted Johnny to play the same dangerous game. And Nora Milligan, hash-house queen, listened to their daring plans as Johnny decided to throw in with the crooks.



At a riotous celebration thrown by trigger-tough Wilkes, tinhorn king of the Border, Sheriff Black Andy Withers took off his badge of office and pinned it on Johnny's shirt, making Johnny buzzard bait for the renegade horde that fested on the lower bank of the Black Rio.



Johnny won the hand of Cleo—and had to face Wilkes. . . . The gambler's gun was in his hand when he said: "You double-crossed us, Johnny. . . ." The story of Johnny, Cleo and the tinhorn will be told by Walt Coburn in his novel—"Renegade Keeper of the Border Bastion."

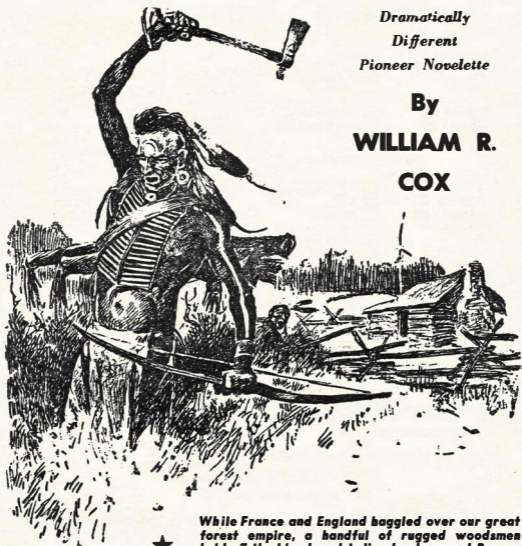
There was another, a big
one, and Sandy ducked an
axe-swing.



SONS OF EMPIRE

*Dramatically
Different
Pioneer Novelette*

**By
WILLIAM R.
COX**



While France and England haggled over our great forest empire, a handful of rugged woodsmen held off the blood-mad Indian hordes—and Ranger Sandy MacFarlane combed the wilderness for a kidnapped girl.

WRITTEN BY

Wilderness Warrior

1 Sandy MacFarlane could feel them in the woods about him. The shadows closed in and he hunched over beneath a sunac, his legs throbbing. He had discarded his deerskin jerkin and was down to breeches and moccasins, his powder horn slung over his lean, leathery shoulder, knife in his leggin, the long rifle ready in his hands.

It was one of Kennedy's raiding bands of Injuns. They had cornered him twice, but he was a woodsman trained in Kentucky, under Boone. He killed three of them, silently, in the dark. They had harassed him so closely that he could not eat, that was the trouble. He was weak and faint from days with only water from an occasional pool to stay his flat belly.

If he could make it westward he might meet Clark, he thought, although he had only a vague underground message to as-

sure him that Clark had finally been allowed his army of trained woodsmen to go against Kaskaskia. He had faith in Clark, but in the burgesses of Virginia he had little confidence. The war was going bad in the East—it was '78—and there were frightened men in high places, the shadow of George III's noose hanging over their wigged heads. . . .

He heard the telltale sounds of red men slinking. He moved, silent as a snake, going ever westward. They were behind him, but he was not positive whether they were ahead. He came from behind a tree and a fickle moon sent a sliver of light among the trees.

He saw the brave as the Indian saw him. He leaped with his last remaining strength. The knife came from his leggin; he dropped the long gun. One elbow smashed the brave's throat and a hand caught a red wrist and jerked until the tall Indian went off balance. The knife sunk deeply, drinking blood.

He seized the rifle and ran. He staggered among brush and into a clearing. He thought he heard Chief Kennedy's long cry. If they had discovered the dead man, they would be hot in pursuit.

He ran, a lean, red-haired man, moving among trees like a fitting animal. He feared a barbed arrow more than a musket shot. The Indians were fleet runners and he was weary and starving. He was thinking fast, wondering if he should make his last stand, like many a frontiersman before him, using the one shot from his rifle, then closing with axe and knife to kill as many as he could before they got him.

He burst from the trees. Suddenly he was in a clearing. He saw light, blessed light, from a square of oiled-paper window. Silent as a panther, he came close and whispered hoarsely:

"Hello, the house! It's a white man."

A heavy voice said: "Don't want no white men hereabouts."

He said desperately: "Kennedy's braves are out. If they see me here they'll attack you. Let me in!"

The heavy voice said: "Kennedy ain't comin' in on us. Go away."

"No," said another voice, sibilant. "Father, you cannot do this."

"Our cousin warned us about these rovin' riflemen," grunted the first voice. "Des-

perados. Stirrin' up the Injuns with their killin's. Like as not this feller's carryin' skelps right now."

Sandy disengaged the dried things from his belt and threw them far into the night. He said: "They want me. If they spy me, they'll attack!"

A third voice said: "Aw, let him come in. I'd like t' talk to a forest runner, paw."

There was the sound of a door unbarred. Sandy stood upon no ceremony. He slid over the threshold and in one motion reached the candle and blew it out. He had only a glimpse of the rough interior of the log cabin—but he saw blue eyes, almost violet, set in a pale, lovely face; saw the rounded contours of the first white woman he had met in weeks.

The heavy voice said: "Ye needn't 've done that. We're protected by Pierre Loutrec. He's my dead wife's cousin on 'er mother's side, once removed. Kennedy don't bother us none."

"If I'm here, you'll be bothered," Sandy said in the darkness.

Outside it was too still. Moments passed. A slim hand sought Sandy's in the dimness. The sweet voice whispered:

"Up the ladder. There is a loft. . . ."

He lay on straw, listening, rifle in hand. The unnatural silence persisted. Then a voice, so close it was startling even to Sandy, said gutturally:

"Linsey Norman. You got white devil?"

It was Kennedy, all right. He had learned English and French, the better to murder.

The man named Norman said in surly accents: "We're asleep, Kennedy. We're workin' folk. Go away or Loutrec'll gitcha."

Kennedy said: "You got white devil. We stay and see."

Norman said heatedly: "Ye know what'll happen if ye worry us folk. They'll hang ye in Kaskaskia."

Kennedy said: "White devil kill four braves. We git him."

"He ain't here," lied Norman. "G'wan back t' the fort, Kennedy. Ye was warned. Ye got no right on the war path."

"Kennedy wait." It was a threat, undisguised. "Loutrec not here now. Kennedy want white devil."

Norman said: "Then wait, ye scoundrelly redskin. I hope Loutrec come fer a

visit and brings a troop of his sojers." Chief Kennedy, prince of murderers, despoiler of white men, women and children, did not reply. There was a rustling on the ladder. The smell of food came to Sandy. He ate ravenously.

A boy's voice said: "Ye kilt four of 'em? In a runnin' fight?"

"Got 'em separated," Sandy explained between bites. "Ye got a chance at them that way."

"Knifed 'em, huh?" The boy's voice trembled with eagerness.

"Or the axe," said Sandy with satisfaction. "I got three scalps. I chucked 'em into your lot when your father spoke about 'em."

"I'll hide 'em tomorrow," said the boy. "I'm Alex Norman. My sister's name is Lissa. Paw is Linsey Morgan. Pierre Loutrec, our cousin, is a lieutenant of Rocheblave, at Kaskaskia. We're doin' good with our corn and grain, sellin' it to the fort. . . . But I keep wonderin' about the Colonies. Is it true they seceded from England?"

THERE was another sound on the ladder and Sandy knew he had an audience. The girl. He told them of Washington's retreats, how the Colonial army fought bravely against desperate odds, how France played the game both ways, longing for a border empire, but indisposed to allow Britain to retain the colonies on the Coast.

And then he spoke of Clark, George Rogers Clark, red-haired as was Sandy, a tall young man who could fight Indians.

"He's comin', if they let him. He's smart. He knows the woods. A thousand frontiersmen will follow him. Every runner in the West will come when he calls."

The girl said: "We only want peace. We want to raise crops." Her voice sent a shiver down the fugitive's spine.

Alex said puzzledly: "England claims this land. But the French claim rights under treaty. The French hold Kaskaskia."

"Aye," said Sandy. The French held Kaskaskia—and Kennedy plundered the pioneers. He knew it well. But if these people were protected by the French, he had nothing to add."

The young folk talked of other things. The girl's sweet voice was more and more

exciting. But the unaccustomed food had its way with Sandy and his eyelids were of lead. He muttered: "Kennedy'll wait till daylight. I'll stay up here and you all go about yer business. If he comes into the cabin, I'll get him."

"But his braves would get you," exclaimed the girl.

"Sooner or later you're dead in this western country," said Sandy without heroics. "That's the life here. . . . Don't ye fret. Go to sleep."

He was breathing deeply before they got down the ladder. . . .

Kennedy went away the next day. Sandy came down from the attic. The girl was staring at his bare chest—he was brown as any Indian and his hair was bleached by the sun.

She said: "I'll have to make you a shirt."

He sniffed at the pone and she fed him. He ate ravenously, said: "You got your winter meat yet?"

"No." She was dark, with long, braided hair the color of night. Under the loose dimity gown the figure of a goddess moved with pliant grace. He had never seen such a girl on the frontier. Even her bare feet were shapely. His blue eyes lingered until she turned away, embarrassed, but he thought he detected a tiny smile at the corner of her red lips.

He said: "We'll need a deer, for the jerkin. In return I'll bring you the meat to hang."

She said pertly: "You plan a long stay in our attic?"

He grinned. "Why long? Your father is no hunter and your brother too young. You shall have game, but soon."

He was still weak, but he took the long gun and disappeared into the forest behind the planted field's. He saw father and son bending their backs at the labor of the day and shuddered. The thought of such work was the more frightening because he knew what broad targets the two made for a wandering Indian. He would not trust any Frog named Loutrec to stay a red hand on a bow and arrow. . . .

He shot the deer first. Down at the lick he picked off a buck, skinned him and skillfully butchered him. There were no Indian signs, so he shouldered a couple of hams and went back to the cabin. He stretched the skin and hung the hams in

the outhouse. The girl was watching him, but he paid her no heed, going blithely back into the woods.

He brought home turkey, partridge and a possum at night fall, all prepared for the smoke house. Lissa Norman watched him with wide-open eyes. He was nineteen, thin for his height, a solemn boy. The father was meaty but strong; a hard-headed man, as all pioneers must needs be.

The girl fed them at supper and they sat about the flickering candle. Linsey Norman had firm ideas about everything, especially the war.

"The pulin' Colonies kain't stand up to England. We're well out of it, here in the West. The carpin', narrow-faced New Englanders druv us out and done us a favor."

His speech was ignorant and positive, and Sandy thought that the mother of the children must have imparted to them their intelligence and better use of the language. Lissa especially seemed almost aristocratic; there was the French blood, of course.

A horse galloped into the clearing. Norman arose in haste and said: "Up the ladder, MacFarlane. It's Pierre. Kennedy must've met up with him an' complained on us. Quick, fool!"

Sandy was accustomed to hiding. He was into the attic like a flash.

THROUGH a convenient crack, he peered down. Loutrec was clad in a jackote suiting, a clean white shirt, all frills. His boots were polished and he even carried a kerchief. He was a handsome young man with black, snapping eyes close-set to a hawk nose. Sandy knew him at once.

This was Loutrec the go-between. This was the man who was trusted only by Kennedy, the chieftan who was not to be trusted by anyone. It was Loutrec who protected Kennedy when he slew Frenchmen. Many of the sins of Kennedy could be traced to Loutrec's door.

Sandy had never quite believed it of any white man not turned Injun. He had known it was true, but it was a hard thing to digest. He had seen pathetic piles of charred bones amidst the black ashes of burned cabins, the babies skewered on sharp sticks, the torn scalps of people harmless and defenseless, and this he accepted as Injun handiwork. But that a

white man could condone such happenings; such hideous savagery, he could scarcely understand or believe.

Loutrec was saying: "You had a forest runner here?"

"Naw," said Normangruffly. "Thet fool, Kennedy, sees a Yankee in every bush."

"This one eliminated four of his best man," said Loutrec. His black eyes went to the ladder, turned away, falling upon Lissa. His thin lips smiled, showing discolored teeth. "But if you say so, cousin. . . . Lissa, I would a word with you, ma petite."

Morgan said: "Got to see to the cow. C'mon, Alex." He was pleased, yet perturbed, yanking the boy from the cabin. He knew Sandy would be listening, yet he evidently wanted the girl to hear Pierre's words. The door closed heavily and Sandy squirmed silently to get a better view.

"You have evaded me, Lissa," said Pierre in a purring voice which reminded Sandy of a cat—a woods cat, not a house cat.

"I am always here," the girl said stiffly. "You did not come to the ball. There is to be another Lissa. A gay affair. I expect you—in the dress I bought in New Orleans."

She said: "We are so busy. Father and Alex need me."

The voice smoothed out, hardened. "I shall expect you, Lissa." He had her hand. You understand, Lissa?"

She said through set teeth: "I understand, Pierre."

"I am patient, Lissa. You are of my family—remotely, but still of the family. You are safe from molestation—so long as I am patient. I will expect you, Lissa." His yellow smile was wolfish as he pulled her closer. She turned her cheek at the last moment, and Sandy's hand ached on the handle of the axe.

The door closed behind the Frenchman. The girl sank onto a stool, her face in her hands. Sandy came recklessly down to kneel beside her.

He said: "You are buying the safety of your father and brother. It is an unfair thing, d' you hear?"

She said through her fingers: "There is nothing I can do. The French will not harm anyone within the family. . . ."

"French, English, American—men in pursuit of women are the same," he said doggedly. "You should leave here."

"Where can we go?" She dropped her hands and stared at Sandy. "What can we do? This farm is all we have."

He touched her awkwardly. "I'm just a forest runner, Lissa, in a war you don't even know about. I got to jine Clark, somehow, when he gits here. But I'll be back for you, Lissa. Ye know that, don't ye?"

She smiled at him shyly, and his arms went about her. Life is short on the frontier. Each moment seemed precious, because there were not too many moments. . . .

The men came back and they fell apart. Linsey Norman said in his harsh voice: "I hope ye was polite to yer cousin." His eyes darted briefly at the girl as he awaited her reply.

"He asked me to a dance," she said. She turned to the fireplace, moulding the ashes over the banked fire.

"It'll be a fine marriage fer ye," said Norman. "We'll be big people hereabouts, MacFarlane, when the British make a treaty with the French and the land is peaceful."

"Ye'll have no peaceful land while Kennedy lives, him and the other chieftans," Sandy said. "The forest runners are yer only chance. Sojers can't fight Injuns. Look at Braddock. . . ."

But they knew nought of it. He was talking up the wind.

When the leather jerkin was finished, Sandy had to leave. He saw Lissa alone for one moment. She wept a little at his going, and his heart leaped.

She said: "I'll wait. Always I'll wait, Sandy."

He kissed her again and shouldered the rifle. He took a last look at the clearing, the sturdy cabin. Alex waved from afar, hoe in hand. He returned the gesture and pigeon-toed into the fastness of the forest.

The hoe was a poor weapon against Kennedy. If Loutrec ever slipped, if the redskins were turned loose, they would make directly for this rich clearing. The very sight of the hand-ploughed fields would set them crazy. A white girl, the scalps of two white men—it would be a prize indeed. He shuddered. . . .

CHAPTER

2

Cry of Death

Out of the woods and across the plains came swift-stepping, bearded young men in buckskin smocks, trailing long rifles, bearing axe and knife. At their head the young man strode, tireless, thinking nothing of the fifty hard-won miles left behind in the past forty-six hours. The weaklings had been weeded out by now; this was the core of the force.

Sandy MacFarlane made himself heard from a safe distance. He came from the brush, rifle overhead at arm's length.

The leader said: "MacFarlane! It's good to see you."

"Aye, George Clark. Ye are late," said Sandy.

"It was not easy to get the burghers to outfit us," said Clark. "It took a year. What is the news?"

The rangers gathered, staring curiously at the lean young man in his ragged deerskins. The shirt that Lissa had made was torn and mended in many places, and his face was tired and gaunt.

Sandy said: "The French are strong at Kaskaskia. They have become emboldened—and they turned Kennedy loose a fortnight ago."

The giant, beetle-browed ranger said harshly: "There've been killings then?"

Sandy said dully: "There are few settlers left along the river. I was headin' for a certain cabin. . . ."

"The French want Empire," said George Rogers Clark. "In the East things aren't going well. But we move, MacFarlane. At last we move."

"Kaskaskia!" breathed Sandy.

"Right!"

"I need a day," said Sandy softly. "I have some friends who have been protected—sorta—by a devil named Loutrec. But Kennedy has been runnin' free. I need a few men, and a day. Then I will lead you to Kaskaskia."

"A day?" Clark frowned. "I have waited a year." He grinned. "But what's one more day? We will all go. Is it far?"

"To far," said Sandy. "Give me a few men and you stick to this course." He drew a hasty map in the dirt, crude but plain to the knowing eyes of the rangers. "We will ketch you overnight."

"You know Kaskaskia?"

"I've been inside," said Sandy grimly. "I attended a ball—dressed in a blanket, my face red with paint." He had seen Lissa there, seen her dancing, listless, pallid among the drunken French officers. He had not dared to make himself known to her and the torture had been exquisite, as though Kennedy's braves had him over the sacrificial fire.

Clark said: "Tend to your friends. We'll meet you here." He pointed to a place on the rough map.

Six young men came eagerly. A jot of hope entered the feverish soul of Sandy MacFarlane. He led them at a dog-trot. They did not ply him with useless questions. They were silent men, his kind of men. His heart warmed to them through his agony and doubt.

He knew how little Loutrec's word meant now. Rocheblave himself had secretly given Kennedy the right to plunder and kill. Kennedy was thirsty for settler's blood. And the Normans were the most prominent and prosperous in the valley.

He moved as swiftly as possible. It was night, but they still went on, uncomplaining. They came into the valley where the Norman cabin lay. Sandy slid silently into a clump of alders as his men faded to immobile positions, spread in a thin line. A lone pine against the moonlit sky marked a spot Sandy well remembered. They were within a quarter-mile of the Norman cabin.

Far ahead a whippoorwill called. The note sounded faintly false to Sandy's woods-trained ears. He motioned his men forward, fear almost choking him. Lissa. . .

Ahead, upon a sudden, the dreaded cry came. It was a panther wail against the whites, against invasion of the sacred soil. It stemmed from the throats of a hundred Indians, wailing, threatening. Shots sounded. Sandy leaped ahead of his little band, knife flashing.

He almost ran full tilt into a brave rising from the weeds. He pulled the rifle trigger without aiming. The savage shrieked once, falling back into his weed bed.

There was another, a big one, and Sandy ducked an axe-swing. His knife crept upward, slashing at belly muscles. There was a third, and his rifle butt swung up into the dim face, and he was slashing, tearing, fighting to go forward. He heard the others

along the thin line, dealing their blows with precision; he heard the death cries of the Indians as the white rangers advanced.

But it was slow, too slow, agonizingly slow. Kennedy had left a strong rear guard. Sandy seized a warrior by the wrist and spun him and slashed with his knife again. Red blood ran down red skin as the Indians died before the only men they feared—the Yankee rangers.

Sandy's one thought, to gain the cabin, broke him through the line of the rear guard. He paused long enough to reload, shoot a pursuer, ram yet another charge into the hot barrel of the long rifle. He heard his men coming in, as soldiers and rangers should, carefully, cleaning up as they came. But they did not know Lissa.

He ran on, his eyes feverishly fixed upon the horizon. He knew the way and his step was swift, but suddenly he knew he could not get through. At that instant the fire arose and he fired at the last shadowy form as Indians melted in the night, answering a master cry from in front, a long drawn out wail of triumph and glee.

He made himself stop. Shivering, wishing he were dead, he knew it was suicide to go ahead—suicide to no avail. He was too late, too late. He cursed the Virginia burgesses, the fat men who had detained Clark.

He plodded ahead, coming up behind an oak with a fat trunk. He saw an Indian skulking across the clearing in the light of the fire. He drew a bead and shot him through the lower part of the back, so that he should lie and suffer before he died.

The fire leaped. The cabin was almost gone. It had not lasted long beneath the torches. He stared at the two bodies in the yard.

They were lacerated beyond description. He could barely distinguish Linsey Norman from the boy. They lay punctured with arrows like pincushions and ripped with knives like dead cattle.

HE MADE himself look for the third body. He never showed himself, knowing there would be lurkers waiting just such a move on his part. He circled the clearing. Behind him his boys were coming up, collecting scalps, despatching any wounded they might find, emulating the savage in this frontier warfare with no thought of right or wrong.

And then ahead, he heard one wild scream: "Pierre! It was you, then!"

He raced for the sound, but a man laughed, low in his throat and a horse galloped through the woods. Four Indians moved apart, stringing arrows to their bows. Sandy leaped aside, but a shaft tore at his jerkin. He dropped and rolled.

He lay still among the shrubs. His men were closing in, but these four were Loutrec's special guard. They would be formidable warriors.

He saw the first of them coming close. He knew these small bands, knew there would be another close by. He fingered the trigger of the long rifle. He let the Indian come very close.

He moved as he fired. Leaving the rifle, he sprang a dozen feet to a tree. The second Indian leaped for his moving form. Sandy drew his tomahawk, threw it in one whistling motion.

The axe struck between the eyes of the big Indian. He toppled silently. The other two were coming from opposite directions. Sandy turned and ran.

He ran twenty yards, then flung himself into a bush. He lay there, waiting. Then he saw the two Indians, heads raised, noses pinched, sniffing the spoor of white men like hound dogs.

He went in close, berserk with rage. He shot the knife upward, slashing. He could have called the men, but he wanted to fight, wanted to let blood. He twisted the knife in the guts of the brave and rolled over on his back.

The remaining Indian flew at him, axe upraised. Sandy's two feet shot out in a calculated move. The soft moccasins impaled the brave, thrust him back. Immediately the young ranger came over and atop, the blade rising, falling, to be imbedded in the bronzed, strong throat of his victim.

The blood lust ebbed, then. Cool reason returned to him. He went straight to the cabin. The men were digging hasty graves with their long knives.

Among the ruins, Sandy stood with head bowed. He saw a birch parchment, charred on the corners. He picked it up, upon impulse, and held it to a flickering last ember.

There was printing on it, small, neat, done with charcoal. It was hard to spell out, for he had little learning, but he could

understand the pathetic writing at last.

Pierre knows about you. Look out. I love you.

The pitifulness of this hopeless message, which she had never known he could find, clutched at him. He hurried the men. There were no prayers over the graves of Linsey and Alex Norman—but many a curse was uttered and many a threat of revenge. . . .

It was the Fourth of July, 1778, though none of them in the wilderness knew the date. It was hot, and the sweat ran unheeded on the freckles of Sandy's drawn countenance. The banks of the Kaskiaska River were downy with fern yellowed by the sun, and bright with lush summer flowers. Like cats the ranger company paced behind the lean young man.

The sun went down and immediately there was a cooling breeze. This was the country of future farms, orchards; this was the Ohio Valley where man was destined to raise food for millions of the people of a future world. A blood-stained rock showed in the last rays of the sun, where an Indian had dried the scalp of his latest victim. . . .

Clark said: "Boats. We must have boats."

Sandy said: "I brought you here. I'll getcha across." There was not much spirit left in him. Pictures of what had happened to Lissa in Loutrec's hands kept recurring, spoiling the sleep he needed. Yet he went on, hoping in the depths of him, always hoping. Only hope kept him alive.

Clark said: "We can't swim that stream." "Give me ten men," said Sandy wearily. "We'll head up the river."

"I'll go myself," Clark said. "Time is pressing."

He chose ten men, and they wormed along through the dark underbrush as evening deepened into night, catching tree trunks along the slippery bank of the Kaskiaska to avoid falling into the water. At last they came to a house upon the edge of the stream, a ferryman's shanty.

Clark whispered: "Sandy, you're a jewel. We'd never have come to it so easy without you."

"The man is protected by the French, of course," Sandy said. "The garrison will be strong on the other side, Colonel, but Kennedy's braves must've got tired and left for their own huntin' grounds. I ain't seen no sign. That means only renegades—and

Chief Kennedy hiss—will be around.”
Clark said: “Good. Now let us take these men—silently!”

The husky, lean rangers closed in. The two outposts saw them, but as they opened their mouths, Sandy slipped an elbow about one throat, Clark encompassed another. Knives slit throats as calmly as at a pig-sticking. This was war; this was empire-building.

In a moment six corpses lay about the fire. The fat ferryman chattered with fear. They tied him up and were gentle with his wife and child, although certain of the young rangers looked hungrily at the woman.

Sandy was in the first boat. Muffled oars swept to and fro as backs bent to the task. A rifle bumped against a thwart and low curses whispered on the still air. The opposite bank held danger unseen. If an alarm were given, a fire lighted, the rangers would be helpless.

There was no acceleration of Sandy's pulse. Inside him there was a pain, a terrible despair. He almost did not dare find Lissa. . . .

CHAPTER

3

Revenge!

His boat touched land. Like a swift ghost he went ashore. Here was bold action; in this he could lose himself. He hauled the boat to dry land with the others, making it safe in case a retreat was necessary. The rangers came leaping, seeing to their precious rifles. Clark had given the orders and they moved without pause.

One band circled, wary of outposts, their mission to surround the fort. Clark led the others, Sandy at his side. They went straight as arrows to their objective.

The walls of the fort loomed with surprising suddenness. He put his hand on Clark's bulky shoulder. But no sentry challenged where once a guard had stood.

Clark said, “Listen!”

The rangers held their breath. Faintly, on the evening air, a violin sounded, lilting, gay. A woman laughed and the flutes shrilled a dance tune.

Sandy MacFarlane said drily: “The French are over-fond of dancing—and winning. I'm sure Kennedy is in, now. It's a ball.”

“Incredible,” said Clark. “These folks do not deserve an empire.”

“We've come a long way to attend a rout,” said Sandy. “Follow me.”

He led along the lower wall. They came past open windows, heard the voices of young officers, the banter of ladies of the Fort. The dance was going on most merrily when the rangers finally came to the postern gate.

There was a niche where a sentinel always stood. Sandy explored it, knife in hand. He had scouted this well. . . . But there was no sentry. The lure of rum and music had taken even this lone guardian from his appointed duty.

The rangers filtered into the very streets within the stronghold, unmolested. Sandy and George Rogers Clark strode across a wooden bridge. In a moment they were upon a gay, brightly lighted scene.

They paused in the ballroom itself. Music played, couples whirled. There were snatches of song as the dancers pirouetted. The wine had mixed with the rum, flowing freely. The contrast between this scene and the crumbling ruins of Morgan's burning cabin caught at Sandy's imagination, holding him crouched, stony-faced, the anger stirring in his depths.

An Indian bedecked in savage finery, half drunk, reeled along the wall. He peered, his wrinkled old face twisting, undecided for the moment. There were many redskins who knew—and feared—George Rogers Clark. Sandy slipped aside, going close to the old brave. But another figure moved first, dropping a blanket to show a magnificent torso, bronzed long limbs—and a ready hatchet.

It was Kennedy, the chieftan. Sandy's hackles rose as he leaped. Kennedy's sonorous voice echoed through the hall: “*Le Bostonnais! Le Clark!*”

The axe flashed. Sandy reached out the moment it left Kennedy's hand. His hard palm smacked the haft, batting the lethal weapon aside. He came in and faced Kennedy's long knife.

The wail of the violin lifted, then died in discordance. Frightened, pale faces turned to Clark. The big man did not move, did not unfold his arms. Out in the street the rangers were acting, rushing the disorganized, half-drunken garrison, taking the town with vim and gusto.

Sandy went in close. Kennedy's knife sliced at him, missed. Sandy's toe went behind the redman's calf, his hand shoved. Kennedy toppled, his knife arm waving wildly, all dignity lost with his balance. Sandy stepped lightly about, and his own blade was keen, whipping across the wind-pipe of the renegade. Without losing motion, he whipped it in, beneath the armpit. Kennedy thudded to the floor. A woman fainted nearby and screams rent the air.

Sandy did not hesitate. Coolly, carefully, he made his circular incision, ripped with his fingers. He arched, bearing the scalp for all to see. His blue eyes scanned the ballroom, feverish, challenging.

Clark's voice held them under its spell. "Pray, good folk, do not let us interrupt the festivities. Dance! Be merry! Remember only this—you dance now under the flag of the Commonwealth of Virginia!"

Sandy did not linger to hear more. There were women galore—but not the dark, slim girl he sought.

He glided to the exit. A pair of French ensigns made a drunken show of resistance. His fist swung, still holding the scalp of Kennedy. One of the officers fell and lay still. The other tried to draw a sword. Sandy kicked him and left him grovelling on the stairhead.

In the Fort there was no sign of real fight. The rangers were mopping up. A brawny ranger held the hook-nosed commandant, Rocheblave, in a hearty grasp while French oaths and threats fell on amused ears. Terror-stricken faces peered from windows along the moonlit streets, but the cat-footed forest men were cool and dangerous at every strategic point.

Sandy began his search. He commanded a huge sergeant and began going through the houses. *Le Bostonnais* had been painted as hellions of the forest by the authorities, and people hid under beds, in closets and any place they could thrust their trembling carcasses, making his search difficult. Sandy and the sergeant roamed the streets for hours, looking for the dark girl, for Loutrec.

At last a scared storekeeper said: "He go out queeck, thees Loutrec. He see *Le Bostonnais* come in gate—he go. Weeth Indian, weeth ma'mselle, hein?"

Sandy roared. He raced back to the

ballroom, but Clark was playing the diplomat, reassuring Rocheblave. It seemed that Louis XVI was right now aligning himself upon the side of the Colonies, against the hereditary enemy of the French, the British Empire. It seemed that only because of Kennedy's ravaging had it been necessary to use such high-handed methods in taking Kaskaskia—and now that Kennedy was dead, Rocheblave could consider the incident closed. Thus the progress of history in the making. . . .

Without asking permission, Sandy departed. There was no peace in his heart. There was an image of a girl, and behind that the smoking debris of a cabin where Linsey Norman had only wanted to raise food, to found a homestead for his family. Poor, ignorant, hard-working Norman and his eager, lively son—they knew nothing of Louis XVI and the machinations of the French and the British Empire. They were dead.

He went past the ranger guard without speaking. He stalked to the river and sat on the bank. He saw a canoe drawn beneath a bush and some inner, deep feeling prevailed upon him to get into it. He thrust in the paddle with strong arms and floated with the current, head bowed, heart aching. . . .

HE COULD go on killing Indians, he thought grimly. He could spend his life, like other grief-demented frontiersmen before him, scourging the red men. But he had not the heart for it, somehow.

He had always, in the back of his mind, thought there would be a day when the killing would be done with. He had killed enough. He had killed without compunction, because it was the frontier, because women and children must be safe sooner or later, from the raiding bands of Indians. He had purpose, even in his most cold-blooded slayings.

Now the purpose would merely be revenge. It was not enough. It would not bring back the Norrnan men, it would not bring back Lissa.

He came to a cove he knew. He swung the canoe in and beached it. He lifted out his long rifle and walked among the trees. He came to the tall pine which he knew so well. He felt empty, like a hogshead with the rum drained off.

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The bodies of the Normans lay a quarter mile ahead. They had been buried only with the hunting knives, in a shallow grave. He had turned in upon impulse, thinking to dig deeper, to mark with a cairn the place where they had died. It was a small thing, but it would please Lissa, if she could know.

He saw the flicker of fire and stared. He crept closer, among the clutter of the forest. On the edge of the clearing he lay beneath a bush, and his eyes could scarcely believe what he saw.

A campfire flickered on the edge of the glade, fifty yards from where the Norman cabin had stood. The light slanted across two fresh, deeply dug graves. Someone had been before him.

The Indians lounged in blankets, their faces turned curiously toward a white man standing nearby. It was a play to them, something strange, absorbing. The man was pleading with the woman—and the woman's feet were bound.

Pierre Loutrec was saying: "I swear it on your father's grave—your Virginian is dead. I saw him die. In a week we shall be in New Orleans and we shall be wed. I swear it!"

"Your word!" Lissa spat the words at Loutrec. "You deserted the Fort when the rangers came in. You quit on your own kind. You are a coward and a liar, Pierre!"

The Frenchman's hand licked out, slapping her cheek. An Indian grunted, as though now Loutrec was really doing business.

Loutrec snarled: "I wanted you to be willing. But beware—you push me too far!"

"Coward," she taunted him. "Kill me, Pierre! I want you to kill me!"

Loutrec said: "Ah, no, ma petite. You shall live. You shall regret treating me this way!" He was working himself into a rage. The Indians delicately arose as he advanced upon the bound girl, his yellowish teeth showing, his hands clenched. They winked at each other and padded toward the woods.

The girl said: "I'll bite you and scratch you and I'll die. . . I know how to die. You killed my father and brother, you dirty, thieving pig-man!"

One Indian had stopped and he was staring at the spot where Sandy lay. He had

SONS OF EMPIRE

beady, small eyes, very sharp. Sandy looked coolly back. He had to be very careful now. The other redskins had caught the first one's tension. Soon it would be too late.

With great coolness he shot the first Indian through the head. He had to keep the Indians away from Lissa. He knew their neat trick of throwing an axe into the head of a prisoner when attacked.

He came out of the brush, into the ruins of the cabin, that tiny bit of empire that lay in ruins. He came running, reloading the long rifle, the cap in his teeth. He rammed home the charge by slamming the butt upon a cornerstone. There were hatchets flying, but he timed them, moving his head. They flew by his ears and he fired again. The second Indian measured his length as the third and fourth wailed in the night, "*Le Bostonnais!*"

He held his own axe low. An Indian turned to separate from his fellow, intending a flanking move. Sandy threw the axe. He aimed at the spot where the shoulder joins the neck. The sharp edge of the axe sunk in, biting deep. The Indian gave a drunken lurch, then staggered into a tree.

Loutrec had a musket, army style. Sandy laughed, feinting, dodging, sprinting. The charge sped into the woods. Loutrec's teeth were like faded tombstones, a trickle of saliva dribbled from his mouth.

The last Indian was a giant. He came racing in, throwing his tomahawk ahead, lunging with his knife. Sandy dodged the axe. He slashed upward with the rifle barrel, holding it in his right hand, the knife in his left. He got the Indian under the chin. As the head went back, Sandy ran in and jammed his knife into the gaping mouth. The Indian sank back, blood streaming from a fatal wound.

Pierre Loutrec was discharging a pistol. The ball cut through the long, sandy hair of the young ranger. Then he was balanced, his blue eyes bright and hard, facing the Frenchman.

With a sudden move, Loutrec produced a second pistol. Sandy balanced, smiling a little. Loutrec raised the gun, aimed it. Sandy began walking toward him across the clearing. He said:

"Shoot away. I'm comin' right through the bullet. It may kill me, but I'm a-comin' through and git you, Loutrec."

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He could see Loutrec's black eyes over the barrel of the pistol. Sandy smiled even more broadly and moved with a rolling, easy gait. He heard Lissa cry, "No! Do not kill him!"

Deep in the black eyes of Loutrec the moment of indecision passed, a little red flame arose. His finger tightened on the trigger.

In that second, Sandy acted. He sprang forward, then seemed to dissolve, as though the earth had amazingly swallowed him. Boneless, inert, he dropped to earth in one flowing motion.

The gun spat flame. The bullet sang into the forest. Sandy came up from earth, smiling. "An old trick. Dan! Bone larned me. You have a knife, Loutrec?"

The Frenchman plucked forth a poniard, needle-sharp. With a great cry he launched himself.

Loutrec was coming, insane, frothing, stabbing, stabbing. Sandy moved aside, allowing Loutrec to go past. Then he spun and wrenched the Frenchman from his feet and the knife rose and fell, once. Loutrec's body tensed, stood alone for one moment, his hands clutching at his heart. He fell, full length, across the body of one of the Indians. He did not rise.

On her knees among the fronds, Lissa stared intently. Sandy followed her gaze.

She said: "Sandy! He died on the hearthstone! On the hearth that was ours, where our fire was built."

Sandy strode close, cutting her bonds, lifting her. He said: "Ye don't have 't look, darlin'. So much blood. . . ."

"The blood of my father and brother," she said. "His will wash it clean."

Sandy took her in his arm. "Mebbe it's a sign, Lissa," he said softly. "A sign that here we must build again."

He tightened his hold upon her slimmess. Suddenly he knew that empire is always built in this way, upon the dead bodies of those who have suffered in the empire's making. . . .

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