

10 STORY WESTERN

100¢
MARCH



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!

FEATURE NOVEL

● **CATTLE POOL GUNMAN**
by **TOM ROAN**

TWO NOVELETTES

● **HELL ON HEADWICK'S HILL**
by **FRED GIPSON**

● **THE OWLHOOT RIDES TO WAR**
by **MORGAN LEWIS**

● LAWSON ● FOWLER ● WINDAS

● HOWARD ● STEELE ● FLOREN ● LANE



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for Readers of

THIS MAGAZINE

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10 FICTION BULL'S EYES IN EVERY ISSUE

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
ON SALE
MARCH 10TH

VOLUME XX

MARCH, 1943

NUMBER 4

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Western Feature

- OUR BACKS ARE UP**.....**The Editor 6**

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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OUR BACKS ARE UP

BY NATURE and training we are not a warlike people. As children our minds were nurtured on the traditions of a nation that honored peace; as adults, a sense of fair play and justice has dominated our thinking. For many years prior to December 7th, 1941, we indulged ourselves in the assurance that our nation's strength was a guarantee of our security. We went about our work and play with hearts free of fear.

Then, with the abruptness of mid-summer lightning, war smashed into our quiet, orderly existence. Our nation, devoted to peace, was poorly armed for the fierce, slashing combat of modern war. Our enemies thought of us as a weak, soft people incapable of striking back. Our army was relatively small, inadequately equipped, inexperienced in battle. We had more radios, more automobiles, more of the peacetime luxuries than any other people on earth—but very few tanks and planes and modern guns.

Yet, during those years of peace when we had devoted ourselves to working, building homes, raising families, we hadn't lost the steel in our backbones. We needed training and weapons, but we didn't need men.

Here in America we have different ways of judging a man's worth than they have in Germany or Japan. Saber scars aren't considered a mark of character; in fact, we think the strutting young Nazis a little foolish for the false pride they show for their dueling wounds, even to the extent of irritating the open cuts with salt so the scars will be sure to show.

In America, where one man has an equal opportunity with the next, we don't think so much of the flashy, horn-tooting type of manhood. We have found that very brave and heroic men are frequently quiet, unassuming and soft-spoken. We have found that courage and strength of character may take root and flourish in the peaceful walks of life, in the daily problems of a sober, earnest human being meeting the world.

These things we have known in our hearts, all along. But the strong, incontrovertible proof of them has come to us in the reports coming in day after day from the battlefields of the world where American soldiers, sailors and marines are carrying the war to the enemy. In little more than a year, peace-loving, un-

militaristic, "soft" America has put into the field a fighting force that is throwing the highly trained armies of Hitler and Hirohito back on their heels.

When they were calling us soft, and while they were observing with calculating smiles how we enjoyed our peaceful way of national life, they were forgetting one or two things. They were forgetting, first, how fiercely jealous Americans are of their freedom and of their rights as individuals, and how single-mindedly they were bound to meet a serious threat to those rights. And in the second place, these enemies of ours seemed to forget about the pulsing "never-say-die" current that underlies the American nature, that has been directing our glorious and honored destiny since the first years of our history.

If we seemed soft to them, it was because they didn't know us well enough. They are learning the error of their thinking today at the point of our driving bayonets. Yes, we Americans can fight when we are pushed.

If they had taken the trouble to get better acquainted with us, they might not have been so hasty. Our tastes in reading matter should have given them some hint. If they had stopped to wonder why Western stories are read so widely, they might have come to the correct conclusion that Americans of today worship the heroes of the Old West because those doughty old-timers lived and worked and fought for an American ideal in much the same way we today would like to. In much the same way our soldiers in North Africa and the Solomons are actually having the opportunity to do.

For generations we have been nourished on our honored frontier traditions. They are a vital part of the conditioning of our thinking. For many years they came to us in personal, word-of-mouth

(Concluded on page 8)

How to Make YOUR Body Bring You **FAME**

... Instead of **SHAME!**

**ARE YOU
Skinny?
Weak?
Flabby?**

**Will You Let Me
Prove I Can Make You
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I KNOW what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs. I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only **HALF-ALIVE**.

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What Dynamic Tension Will Do For You

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No "ifs," "ands" or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, peppy? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about "**Dynamic Tension**" and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful **HE-MAN**.

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*Charles
Atlas*

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City State

(Continued from page 6)

accounts of how Great-uncle Charles killed the bear with his bare hands, or how old Mrs. So-and-so molded bullets for forty-four hours running while her menfolks stood off the war-painted Indians. For the past few decades these stirring adventures of the untamed frontier have reached us through the Western magazines. In personal accounts or in magazine stories, the effect is the same: to keep burningly clear in our minds the ringing example of our out-trail forebears.

For next month's *10 Story Western*, one of our Texas writers, Joe Austell Small, has written a novel that fairly breathes the fire of the old frontier. Without giving away the plot, we'd like to quote a short passage that calls to mind the way hard-hitting Americans, of any generation, can and will fight when their backs are up:

"Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad! You black, dirty, scurvy murderer!" Old Gabe Watson stood swaying in the doorway, the wild look of a maniac in his eyes, a note of triumph in his voice. Thorny brush had ripped his cotton shirt to shreds. His hair was flowing; beads of dirty sweat trickled down through a heavy beard. He was staring wildly at the broad, hunched back of Mike Hinch, the crooked, vicious cowman who had killed Gabe's boss and stolen his ranch.

Mike Hinch wheeled, emitted a muffled curse and crouched tense. His shoulder holster was empty. The long-bladed pocket knife he held in his hand was his only weapon.

"Ahhh!" Old Gabe's voice was a satin strand of mockery. "Yuh wanna play with knives! Wal, I got a knife. . . ."

The two men were a primitive and savage sight as they fought there with the last rays of a setting sun sending shafts of yellow light through the cabin windows. For one of them it would be sundown for keeps—perhaps for both.

Breathing heavily, tugging, straining,

the knives ripped until steel blades showed bright crimson. Mike bore in savagely. Ordinarily, he would have crushed such an opponent easily, but now old Gabe fought with maniacal strength, a courage and fierceness brought on by long denied revenge.

The blades left behind jagged red welts as they found flesh in their long, vicious sweeps; but as yet neither man had found a vital spot.

"Stick out your left hand, yuh yellar-bellied coyote!" Gabe extended his own left as if he were offering to shake hands. "Grab my paw if yuh got guts enough—and we'll cut ourselves apart!" The old cowboy was now a grinning, fighting, bloody demon.

Mike was a powerful man, and he had played this game before. The knotted muscles in his great arms had snapped limbs, rendered other adversaries helpless. A glow of victory flashed through his fiery eyes as he grabbed the old cowman's hand and squeezed hard.

Bootheels scraped across wood flooring as the two men jockeyed for position, strained to keep balance, lunged back and to the side in their attempts to catch the other one napping and tilt that precarious balance. And as they struggled, the steel blades slashed in and out.

Suddenly Mike wheeled, brought his back to Gabe, tripped the old man with a booted leg and crouched over him, twisting with all the strength he had left. Old Gabe's arm snapped at the elbow.

A fiendish victory cry burst from Mike Hinch's blood-smear lips. He bore in recklessly, raised his knife for the finish. . . .

Yes, American men knew how to fight in those days. And they know how to fight now—the way Americans have always fought for the things they know to be right and decent. And it's just too bad for Mr. Hitler that nobody warned him that when he took on America he'd be fighting a country weaned and reared on the fight-to-the-finish tradition of the wild frontier.

THE EDITOR



Today I'M the foreman!

-last week I was only a bench worker

FOREMEN WANTED!
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FOREMEN WANTED!
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FOREMEN WANTED!
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CATTLE

When the little hombres of Devil Drum Valley saw the famed Rip Denson join Doom River's cattle pool, they figured the best they could do was try to die like men.

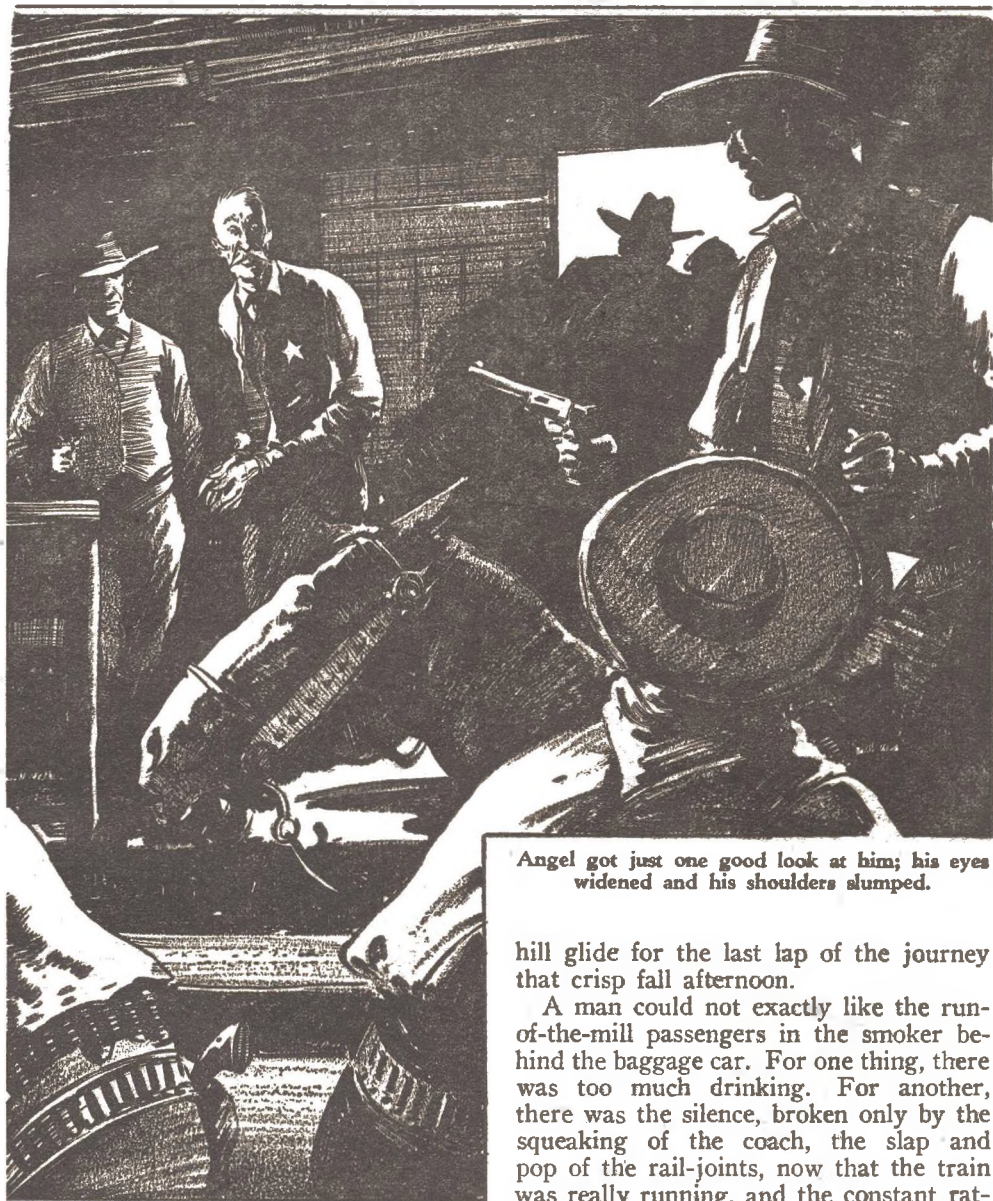


CHAPTER ONE

Sudden Death for One

THE up-country "mixed" train for Doom River was late. Leaving Funeral Rock two hours before daylight, it should have made the eighty-mile run through Cold Water Divide and reached the end of the line at noon. It was almost three when the wheezy little mountain engine dragged its string of freight and stock cars over the grade's highest point and brought the three paint-cracked gray coaches to a fifteen-minute halt at Cold Water. Doom River was still twenty miles away when the engine gave a few coughs, and the train started its down-

POOL GUNMAN



Angel got just one good look at him; his eyes widened and his shoulders slumped.

hill glide for the last lap of the journey that crisp fall afternoon.

A man could not exactly like the run-of-the-mill passengers in the smoker behind the baggage car. For one thing, there was too much drinking. For another, there was the silence, broken only by the squeaking of the coach, the slap and pop of the rail-joints, now that the train was really running, and the constant rattling of a loose chain near the car's rear trucks.

Men swore, argued heatedly. Fights were narrowly avoided no less than a dozen times. At the end of each argument the

By TOM ROAN

*A dramatic action novel of
frontier Western gun-law*

noise fell away into an abrupt hush. But the chain was never silent unless the train was at a standstill, and now—added to the popping of the joints—the rails began to wail and screech as if in protest to the sadly-kept roadbed of the Montana Short Line.

Rip Denson, in a rear seat on the left side of the coach, tried to doze, at least to pretend it. The whiskey stench of the car and the dull gray cloud of tobacco smoke made that a near impossibility, especially when one knew that he was the object of whispered discussion and sullen speculation.

Men, heavy with gunbelts and .45's under their coats and mackinaws, were constantly turning to look at him. More of their same stripe had come aboard at Cold Water, each one evidently half-drunk and bringing an extra bottle. A dangerous lot, that crowd, and yet one of the most dangerous men in the coach had not rated more than a glance.

That man occupied the third seat from the rear and across the aisle from Denson. He was small, dried-up and garbed in ragged gray that refused to tell whether he was shepherd or cowpuncher. In need of a shave, he wore a scrawny mustache, and his head was bald save for a few reddish hairs.

His eyes were rheumy, of a dusky faded-blue, and about as innocent-looking as a calf's. Jammed on the floor under his feet lay a roll of ragged bedding, a sheet-iron skillet tied to the side of it. He was the only person in the coach who appeared to be unarmed.

Old Benjamin Talefaro Murdock—better known in the Southwest as Pecos River Kid—was, without doubt, the best armed man on the train. Murdock always fooled people. He looked like a clodhopper and acted like one. At noon he had dragged out a bag of cheese and crackers to litter his seat and the aisle with the crumbs while he washed down his meal with water.

Later he brought tears from his own eyes and maudlin jets from a few of the rest when he produced a battered harmonica and proceeded to blow low and mournfully upon it. None suspected that the old man and the tall, sober-faced Rip Denson were traveling together. And had

been traveling together in many places for five years.

Ben Murdock was sixty. Denson was between twenty-five and thirty. Save for the bulges under his long-tailed coat, and the occasional glimpse of the broad buckles of his heavy belts, people would have taken him for a sad-faced sky-pilot about to take the light of understanding into this wilderness of high mountains and gun-smoke that had brought hate and war to Devil Drum Valley in the past four years. That pious look was probably the one reason no one had yet summoned up enough courage to demand bluntly who he was and why he was heading for Doom River. Few men got to Devil Drum these days without such questioning. Strangers were not welcome in Devil Drum.

Devil Drum was in sight before Rip Denson was disturbed. The train was sliding through a jagged cut and around a long bend to the right when the valley—coming like a slap in the face—was below him, high walled, many miles long and broad.

Doom River appeared in the southeast corner of it, perched on a broad flat on the rim of tall bluffs hugging a mountain, with the river curling below. A few miles across the river, to the west, was the rock that had given the valley its name.

Denson had never seen it before, but he knew that it would be Devil Drum, a great round mass of stone thrust hundreds of feet in the air. Its shining rock top was as smooth as a billiard table. It was kept clean by the winds and looked now like a red drumhead with the lowering sun upon it.

A sudden opening of the rear door turned Denson back in his seat. Ben Murdock fired him a warning glance. A girl in gray, a tall, well-dressed man of thirty and a raw-boned, straw-haired youth of eighteen came into the coach. Rip Denson had gotten a glimpse of this trio boarding the train at Cold Water. The girl was about twenty, blue-eyed, small and light-haired, a pretty little trick in range garb, a cartridge belt sagging at her right hip and a Smith & Wesson in its holster.

The man had a little lizard-tail black mustache. He wore whipcord riding breeches, a glittering black silk shirt, pearl-

gray Stetson and tailored blue coat. And he was half drunk.



WALKING slowly, glancing at each face to the right and left, the trio moved on up the aisle to the end of the coach. The dude jerked open the door, letting in a louder roar of the train and a wail of the wheels on the rails as he glanced at the empty platform and the end of the baggage and express car. They turned then, coming back down the coach. A bald-headed old cattleman, stirring out of a stupor, sat up and hailed them.

"Hi, Flapdoodle!" He half yelled it at the youth. "'Lo, Candy! Howza gal? Howdy, Silver." Even from the other end of the car Denson noticed that there was a considerable fall in the old man's tone when he spoke to the dude. "I reckon you folks are still guardin' the rails?"

"Keeping them guarded!" the man in the white hat answered. "That's the only way we'll beat the trust, and I'd like to see any more gunslicks get by me and Candy!"

For a split-second Rip Denson met the man's hard, cutting stare from one end of the car to the other, then the trio was coming on. The youth jabbed his thumb to his left and spoke when they came to Ben Murdock.

"I don't know him, Candy."

"Hello, pop!" The girl laughed. "You don't look like a bad one."

"Whatcha say, miss?" Murdock was going into his act; he leaned to one side to cup his hand to his ear. "Yo'll have to sorter speak up a little, 'cause I'm kinda deaf!"

"Let him alone!" snapped the man behind the girl. "An old bundle-tramp and nothing else. There, I think,"—his eyes were on Denson again—"might be something we're looking for."

"Howdy, stranger." The girl halted alongside Denson. "Going to Doom River?"

"I still have hopes." Denson arose, removed his hat, steel-gray eyes looking down into the girl's blue.

"Really going to Doom River, are you?" The man behind the girl pushed

her to make room for himself. "Well, if it's any of my business, just why?"

"I believe," Denson bowed coldly, "I was speaking to the lady. She first spoke to me—"

"And it's Silver Bob Draper," the man sneered, "who might have butted in. When I ask a question I want it answered."

"Very well." Denson was still holding everything as well as he could. "In the past I've made it a point to keep my business my own, Mr. Draper."

"Oh, you have!" Draper took a step back, a quick white showing in his lips and spreading in a slow blotch across his entire face. "You've maybe never been to Doom River—"

"Wait, Bob!" The girl put up her hand. "You don't have to jump into everything with both feet. There's a rough-shod way and a decent way about going at anything. If—"

"Find your way on out of the car!" Draper ripped that at her from the side of his mouth.

Behind him, soft and low, Murdock was beginning to blow on his harmonica. A "Go easy, easy, cowboy!" warning.

"I can smell a rat when I get near one, and I'm smelling one right now," Draper roared at Denson. "I'm talking to you, fellow!"

"Maybe you'd better go, ma'am." Denson waggled his thumb at the girl. "I've met his kind before, and I read the signs. Please, ma'am! It's best."

"Ladies' man, eh!" Draper laughed jarringly.

"It's not that, Mr. Draper." Denson's voice was low, almost apologetic. "When I have to kill a man I don't like to do it in front of a woman."

"You threatening me? *You!*" Draper's voice had jumped to a shriek. "Get out, Candy! Give me room! By God, I'll—"

He half struck the girl as he gave her another wild push toward the door which the youth called Flapdoodle held open. Before Candy could clear the car every man in the coach was on his feet, staring pop-eyed, half of them scared, the other half snarling, ready to take sides with Silver Bob Draper.

Even Murdock had plopped his har-

monica back in his ragged shirt pocket, knowing that a man stone-deaf and blind could not help but be aroused by all this sudden fuss. He stood there, looking little and scared.

"I've got you!" Draper was still shrieking. "I've called your tune! You're another dirty, damned Slick Hanlon man on your way to help break the cattle pool in Devil Drum. You rat!"

"You're not man enough for that talk, you fifteen-cent four-flusher!" Rip Denson's left hand had gone out in a backward blow that made a noise like a board popping under strain. It caught Draper across the nose and mouth, staggering him, blood coming as two teeth flew out and fell to the floor. "When I have to get down and cater to dressed-up scum like you—"

"Drop, everybody!" Draper's voice again filled the car as he sawed to one side, right hand a grasping talon flying to his hip. "You dirty son-of—"

The last word was washed out of Draper's mouth in sudden gunfire. A bullet struck him just below the lower lip, rooting upward and throwing the word back down his throat. He spun around even as two more bullets tore into him, stabbing flesh and bone heart-high, and dropped dead across the arm of a seat with his Colt half out of its silver-spotted holster. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Boss of Doom River

SLICK HANLON—generally Mr. Walker P. to his teeth—waited with quiet interest to watch the train roll down the grade as he sat on the top plank of the fence at the corner of the little yellow depot. Hanlon had passed his thirty-fifth birthday only yesterday. Carefully shaven and powdered, he was a long, lean man, elegantly dressed in banker's blue, a white slouch hat, spotless white shirt and black string tie.

There were at least sixty men and women waiting for the train. Two-thirds of them hated Hanlon and made no attempt to hide it. They had pooled their cattle and refused to sell a single head to him at what they called his starvation prices.

The others were either hired gunmen or men who had refused to join the pool. The latter stood mostly in a little crowd of their own. The gunmen were scattered and silent enough, leaning against a post or a wall here or there, ready for anything that might happen.

Everybody in the country for a hundred miles around knew about Bridger Cunningham's cattle pool crowd. Cunningham—formerly a Mormon bishop from Utah—was on the graveled square on the north side of the depot, keeping his crowd together. He was dressed like a preacher and sat a tall white horse, a powerful man of fifty-odd, the upper part of his face scraped with a recent shave, and a smooth-combed beard swinging from his proud chin.

In four years there had never been a great deal of open bloodshed. Cunningham had controlled things. He was a thoroughly religious man who stuck to his Book of Mormon. Some members of the pool called Cunningham a fool, but an honest fool was nice to have around at times.

While he whittled idly on a stick, Hanlon heard women screaming as the long line of stock and boxcars passed and the rattletrap coaches were being brought to a halt alongside the depot. Hanlon recognized the voice leading the screaming.

Yes, that voice was easily recognizable. It belonged to the great-bosomed, horse-sized Miss Ella Prue Lackey, president of the Devout Temperance Society of Doom River and elsewhere—far or near—if anybody had a dollar and fifty cents for joining fees and was eager to part with it to the D. T. S.

Hanlon's dark eyes sent a warning glance at his men; he went on whittling after somebody in the door of the passing baggage car yelled out that a man had been killed aboard the train. When the coaches ground to a stop the passengers came swarming down.

Ella Prue Lackey, slurringly called "That damn woman with the D. T.'s!" by the roughboots of Doom River, was one of the first to appear. Hanlon could have sworn that he heard a groan of relief from the timbers of the coach when Ella Prue Lackey dropped her three hundred and fifty-odd pounds from the train steps.

The little straw hat on her head was askew, the ripe cherries that had ridden so high and mightily upon it broken and hanging cockeyed. As Ella Prue scrambled away with her crowd—a dozen much-shaken women who looked like pink-nosed puppies from their wailing and weeping—then Slick Hanlon gave his attention to the rest of the passengers getting off the train.

“That’s him!” A passenger from the smoking car had halted with a little group of men who’d watched the train come in, just below the perch where Hanlon was sitting. “Quickest thing I ever saw. You know Silver, all quick to start and quick to shoot.”

“Kill him?”

“Three balls of lead before he hit the floor!”

“Silver usually gets ‘em.”

“But it wasn’t Silver!” the excited passenger hissed. “Silver got himself killed, this time!”

“The hell he did!”

“Yeah.” The excited man’s voice dropped to a whisper. “An’ there’s the fella what done it. He asked the rest in

the car if they wanted to take up where Silver left off. Clyde Ludlow was in that car, an’ even Clyde decided to keep his mouth shut an’ just set down.”

The man was rambling on, but Slick Hanlon wasn’t listening. His eyes, shaded by the brim of his hat, were studying the tall stranger who had stepped off the train. Expectation sharpened those eyes when Slick Hanlon heard about a killing. But now the expectation died away to give place to disappointment.



THAT stranger who had stepped off the train could not possibly be one of the two men Hanlon had been expecting more than a week. He was too young. There was nothing big, dangerous and bullying about him. Yet—if all the gabble below his perch was true—Hanlon felt that he might use a man like that.

The stranger had guts. Carrying only a much-battered brown handbag, he had stepped down, moved casually to one side, and now stood leaning his back to the

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coach while he rolled a cigarette. His face was long, rather homely, but his expression did not indicate that he was the least concerned about the excitement around him. And no fool would select that spot on which to stand! The car trucks protected his legs and the lower part of his body from any who might take a shot at him from the other side of the coach.

Four men came struggling down the steps with the body of Silver Bob Draper. The stranger only glanced at it, and calmly lighted his cigarette. He was standing there, feet crossed, thumbs hooked over his big buckles, when Candy Cunningham came off the platform. The girl turned when she saw him. She glared at him for a moment, and then—just as one might expect Candy Cunningham to do it—she slapped him flat across the left cheek.

Slick Hanlon's eyes lighted for the first time. Candy slapped him even as he was lifting his hat. Undaunted, he removed the hat, as if waiting for another slap. It looked as though Candy was going to do it. But something stopped her. With tears gushing from her eyes, she suddenly turned and walked away from him.

Odd, Hanlon thought, that Candy should take it hard over her dear Cousin Bob's getting killed! Everybody had expected it for the past three years—and everybody knew that she had tolerated the smart fool only because of her hard-fisted father, Bishop Bridger Cunningham. The bishop believed in standing by your own blood even if you knew it was tainted!

This was going to be a test for old man Cunningham, and it was not long in coming. Out of the corner of his eye Hanlon saw that the bishop had already dropped out of his saddle. He was standing there, Candy talking to him. Only one thing was certain just now. Candy would not lie. Most of those damned Mormons were like that—the take-it-on-the-chin, the truth-or-die kind.

"Then that will be all!" Cunningham had suddenly thrown up his hand, a god of it all in his own crowd. "I believe Candy. She said she looked back and saw Bob go for his gun. 'Thou shalt not kill.' is the law of God. But"—his voice rose

higher, one finger pointing like a pistol at the stranger—"he who lives in the blazing light of Hell will die in the blaze! And, now—" he turned back to his tall, white horse to swing quickly into his saddle—"I don't want the sheriff. We know who runs the law in this town. Good evening, *Mr. Hanlon!*"

Cunningham lifted his hat as he swung his horse to one side. Candy and the crowd slowly following him across the tracks, where the train had been cut loose and carried on beyond the baggage car. Ahead of them it looked as if every house and shack in Doom River was erected with broad slabs of gray stone brought down from the cliffs to make the town a great fort perched high in the air above the river.



WITH the pool crowd gone, the stranger picked up his bag, glanced casually around at those gunmen leaning everywhere, like hawks ready to plunge to an attack, and then the man came forward. He halted beside the fence, dropped his bag, and made himself busy rolling another cigarette. When he had lighted it he looked up.

"So you're Slick Hanlon?"

"Bridger Cunningham called me Hanlon." Hanlon's eyes narrowed, his knife poised in the middle of a long shaving on his stick. "You didn't hear him call me Slick. I don't like that Slick business worth a good damn!"

"But it fits you," the stranger interrupted. "Yes, sir, it really does! I noticed it from the start. You're something like oil, smooth and silent—slippery! I think I'll stick to Slick."

"If I lifted one little finger," Hanlon's smoky-dark eyes filled with a dangerous twinkle and his upper lip curled, "I might stop you calling me anything!"

"But you wouldn't be around to hear about it." The stranger smiled crookedly. "At the first reach for a gun by you or any of your crew—well, I'd knock you off that fence with a ball between the eyes. You don't talk much after you get a ball there."

"Hard bird, eh?" Hanlon snapped his knife closed and pocketed it as he slid off the fence. "Just who the hell do you

think you are, my fine bird? Merely because you bested Silver Bob—”

“Name’s Denson,” the stranger cut in. “Rip Denson.”

“Denson!” Hanlon’s eyes widened. “Not *the* Denson?”

“Denson was my daddy’s and mammy’s name.” The stranger inhaled a puff of smoke and allowed it to come out his nose. “Their marriage was legal. I’ve been called Rip since I was a tot.”

“Well, by God!” Hanlon shoved out his hand. “Hell, Rip, I expected to see a man of seventy years old—counting your reputation! No wonder Silver’s dead!”

“I wanted to talk him out of it. But he wouldn’t listen.”

“Boys!” Still holding Henshaw’s hand, Denson turned. “Come over, all of you! Swarm up! Swarm up!” He waved his left hand impatiently. “I want you to meet Rip Denson, the fastest damned man that ever pulled a hog-leg and smoked it!

“Rip, this is Booger Bill Jones,” he began. “This is Snake Fallon, Buck Harper, Steel Smith, One-Lung Jasper Kincaide, Tough George Lockheel, Unpleasant Surprise Sam Callihan—”

“Cripes, man!” groaned Denson after Hanlon had named more than a dozen gunmen. “Ain’t you got one called Raw Head or Bloody Bones? They sound tough to me.”

“They are tough!” Hanlon laughed. “They’re damned tough, Denson! Only kind I’ll have around me. That’s why I sent for you. By the way,” he glanced at the empty coaches, “where’s the other duck—Ben Murdock, I believe was his name?”

“Ben’ll be around.” Denson grinned. “In due time. Right now I’m hungry enough to eat the tail-gate out of a wagon. Where do we put on the feed bag, Slick?”

“I told you I didn’t like that name, Denson!” Hanlon snapped. “I don’t like to have to tell any damned man twice!”

“That’s what they told me.” Denson shrugged. “But I still like Slick, and *Slick*—by God—it’s going to be. Where’d you say we’d eat? Told you I was hungry, didn’t I?”

“Sure!” A sudden sneer curled Hanlon’s lips. “Come on down the street. I’ll feed you.”

“All right.” Denson grinned. “But

I’ve got a horse on this train, up ahead there, and my baggage—”

“Let me worry about that!” Hanlon jabbed him in the ribs with his thumb. “The horse will be taken to the livery stable, and your baggage will come down to the same place. I as good as own that railroad, Denson. I own the bank in this town, every place of business worth owning. Bridle John Brown has a few rooms over the front of the stables. Maybe I’ll put you up there, Rip. Anything I say goes in Doom River.”

“I was told you had a good set-in.”

“Sorry, though,” Hanlon frowned, “that you killed Silver Bob. He was one of my best men.”

“I thought—”

“Sure!” Hanlon shrugged his shoulders. “A lot *think* they *think* around Doom River! You wonder why Bob was playing badman on the train? That was for the suckers. A little play for Candy! Damned nice trick, eh? Anyway, Bob didn’t think you were Rip Denson or he wouldn’t have tied into you. Quick monkey with a gun, though.”

“Maybe I could not have got away without killing him—had I known what game he was playing!”

“Not Silver Bob!” Hanlon laughed. “He picked you for an easy one to start with. If you hadn’t killed Bob he would have killed you—just to keep his reputation. He was fast, too, like I’ve just said, and they said you were faster. Maybe I’d hate to shoot it out with a clodhopper like you. You might beat me—though I don’t think the damned man’s living who can draw with Walker P. Hanlon!”

“Never boast, Slick!” Denson grinned in his face. “Sounds bad—like, maybe, you were trying to convince yourself of something you ain’t got. I never boast. Doesn’t pay in the long run. There’s no call that I can see for us to go to war.”

“My gun-pups,” Hanlon grinned, “don’t start things with me, Denson. They know where their bread’s buttered.”



THEY were walking around the coaches and down the street a few minutes later. Ben Murdock had been the last to leave the coach, but he

was first down the street, standing to the left in front of the public stables and munching on another bag of cheese and crackers. The worst thing in the world might happen to Ben Murdock some day: He might strike a town where he could not get his cheese and crackers!

Denson was getting mad. The more he talked with Slick Hanlon the madder he got. Doom River's main street was exactly like a half moon. Buildings on the west side of it overhung the river, four hundred feet below. Walking with Hanlon was like being out with some tinhorn political thief who had to have a public-fed and public-watered rat of a gunman perched on each corner to protect the lying whelp!

They crossed the street, entering the broad purple swinging doors of the Idaho Belle. A long bar ran the length of the room to the right where a crowd was already drinking. Hanlon led the way to the left, pushing through another pair of purple swinging doors to a restaurant. Denson ordered a double portion of ham and eggs. Hanlon sat there talking until he had finished the meal and lighted up a smoke.

"How much?" Denson ran his right hand into his pocket.

"Just a moment, gun pup!" Hanlon caught his arm. "My gun dogs don't pay when they eat in Doom River. Not a damn cent!"

"I reckon they don't." Denson turned and looked at him. "But I'm neither your gun pup nor your gun dog, Slick. Silver Bob said he smelled something on the train. I don't have to just smell here. You don't *smell* a skunk. Why, hell, no, Slick, they just plain *stink*. I'm talking about *you*, Slick Hanlon, if you ain't caught the point."

CHAPTER THREE

Denson Goes to War

"**T**HAT'S fight talk, Denson!" Hanlon's face suddenly became white. His eyes were two dangerous spots and as he spoke one could almost sense a rattlesnake buzzing in his throat. "But Tull Glastone wrote me a lot to look out for about you. He said

you were a fool and I'd have to gentle you down like a bronc that's got into the habit of pawing his head to throw his halter.

"Take it easy—and go on living!" A bitter little smile, as evil as a dead man's smirk, now twisted Hanlon's thin, hard lips. "I'll give you just one thing to think about. We've got a sheriff in this town by the name of Rock Angel. Rock can be just as hard as his first name. He can also be as gentle as the latter. By noon tomorrow Rock'll have his investigation cleared up—in the shooting of Silver Bob. By noon he'll know what he is going to do. He might make an arrest, and he might not. Once he arrests a man in this town for murder, then that man usually hangs."

"I get the point." Denson shrugged and walked on out. At the door he glanced back. "Thanks for the time limit," he said loudly. "I've heard several things about your Rock Angel, but he's one man you'd better keep off of me." He snapped his quirley into the street dust.

He turned up the street and saw Ben Murdock coming out of a greasy little café three doors above the big public stables. A signal from the old man told Denson that their horses and sacked riding gear had been lodged in the stables.

"Mighty good chili in that dump." Murdock jabbed a toothpick at the café. "Hottest I've hit since we left Mexico. Knocks yuh right off the stool. Makes yuh think yo're swallowin' red-hot sidewinders. Well," he inquired, "what's new, Rip?"

"I've just told Hanlon I'm not going to be working for him."

"Sorter figured yuh would get around to it." Murdock grinned. "Yuh never would stick with a whole-hog crowd. Too much bad talk about his killin's an' the starvation prices of his one-man beef trust. I picked up some more news in the dump back there.

"Do yuh know a cow can't go out over that railroad unless Hanlon says so? An' they can't be got out of the valley any other way except in little bunches. Landslides on the trails, an' a sizable herd just pulls down the mountainside an' buries itself. Then if cows do get out—well, nobody'll dare to buy even in Funeral Rock

over Slick's head. He must be awful tough, Rip. Everybody's scared to death of him."

Denson wasn't listening. He had turned, watching a sandy-mustached rider clattering down the street on a big, one-eyed buckskin. He was a short, heavy-set man of sixty, wearing dusty-gray range garb. Denson noticed at once that this was about the first man he had seen in Doom River who was not packing a six-shooter.

"Hello, Chan Piper!" Two burly gunmen had come out of what looked like a saddle shop across the street. One glimpse at the leader of the pair and Denson knew that he was looking at Rock Angel. The man was about forty, big and dark, overdressed in black. He was trailed by a long-necked deputy who looked as if he had tuberculosis.

"Coming in to trade?" The sheriff laughed as the older man pulled his buckskin to a halt. "Went home and had a good sulk. Now you're back. But if you're going to see Walker P., then I'll speak for Walker. Where's the cattle?"

"There's five hundred head." Chan Piper turned in his saddle and nodded. "Down on the river under the bluffs, my boys are holdin' 'em. All young beef stuff, Rock. Nobody in Devil Drum Valley ever saw any better. It's a shame for me to have to try to bust out of the pool an' sell that fine stuff for ten dollars a head. My stars, ever'body knows they'll bring Walker at least twenty-five when he loads them on the main line at Funeral Rock."

"Walker's changed his mind since this morning, Piper." The sheriff laughed as he came up to the left side of the horse and rested his hand on the animal's shaggy mane. "You made him mad and he doesn't want to see you. It doesn't work out well when you argue with him. But I was asked to make an offer—if you came back."

"My stars, Rock!" Chan Piper's face paled. "Now—now don't say he's goin' to cut the price agin! I've got notes to meet, men to pay off for ridin' their brains out for me on the Bar Forty Bar, an'—an', damn it, Rock, I've just got to rake up five thousand dollars or be ruint!"

"Then you'd better go back for some more cattle." Angel laughed again as if truly enjoying himself. "Walker P. Han-

lon authorizes me to pay you exactly eight dollars a head for your young beef. You can take it or leave it, but make up your mind fast. Make Walker mad again and you'll drive your beef back home."

"You say you've got good, young beef, mister?" Stirred by one of his sudden impulses, Rip Denson had gone forward. "If you have I'll take 'em at ten dollars, and I'll split the big end of the difference with you in what we get when we sell."

"Look here, stranger!" Angel wheeled upon him. "You—you can't do this! Have—er—you got a license to buy cattle in my district?"

"Never knew I needed a license, Angel." Denson grinned at him. "The lawyers probably haven't got around to thinking about making that extra little dig out of the public's pocket. Any man has a right to go into the cattle business."

"You're trying to move damned fast in Doom River, Denson!" Angel's hand was opening and closing, eager for the feel of the big black gun-butts at his hips. "That's a lot of money you're talking. Five thousand dollars! You're not carrying that kind of change around in your vest pocket."

"If it's any of your business," Denson frowned, "I've got a certified check on the First National Bank of Funeral Rock for the amount. You trading with me, Mr. Piper?"

"Hell-fire, yes!" cried the man on the buckskin. "Yuh—yo're just as good as savin' my life, mister, an' I ain't no man to forget it."

"He may have saved your life, Piper." The sheriff turned on his heel to walk angrily away, heading toward the Idaho Belle. "But I wouldn't give fifteen cents worth of dog meat for his—or yours either now—after he's horned in on Walker P. Hanlon like this!"



WITH Chan Piper following him on his old buckskin, Denson turned and walked back into the big hallway of the stables. He unsacked his riding-rig and saddled his big Light-foot, a tall, white-legged bay. Ben Murdock—never needing a partner to tell him what to do—made himself busy saddling

his old Monument, a wall-eyed white horse.

Piper was scared. He had dismounted in the hallway, but now he turned back, peeping cautiously out the door now and then. Things were buzzing down the street, gunmen stirring in and out the front doors of the Idaho Belle. Denson could imagine what was going on after Rock Angel had carried Slick Hanlon the news.

Bridger Cunningham came walking down the street just as Denson was about to mount Lightfoot. The expression on Cunningham's face was one of fury when he faced Piper. For a few moments the men stood there, Piper looking as if he wished he was far away from Doom River, and the Mormon just staring at him. Cunningham was the first to speak.

"So I hear you're breaking away from the pool, Chan?"

"But I have to do it, Bishop!" Piper stammered. "Yuh know how it is with me. I've got debts to meet. I—I've even got to buy grub for the house! We're starvin' to death out there, with fine beef runnin' all around the Bar Forty Bar. Yuh get to where yuh can't look plain beef in the eye. My wife an' gals have curried the creekbanks for mustard greens, wild onions an' wild turnips—"

"The cattle, Mr. Cunningham," Denson cut in, stepping forward, "are not going out of the pool. Not at the price Hanlon wants to pay. I understand you're president of the pool, and I was coming to see you about this bunch staying in."

"And what, if it's any of my business," Cunningham demanded coddly, "have you to do with Chan Piper's cattle?"

"He's buyin' 'em!" Piper exclaimed. "Hanlon offered me ten dollars a head when I come in this mornin'. Now he won't trade. He sent Rock Angel to tell me I wouldn't get but eight dollars a head, an' this man stepped up—"

"And offered ten!" A sardonic smile crossed Cunningham's face. "Yes, I see. Quite unusual. Quite!"

"Now, now, Bishop," Piper groaned, "I don't want yuh goin' an' gettin' yore back up at me—"

"My back's already up!" Cunningham snapped, and he walked right on, voice flowing back over his shoulder from the

side of his mouth. "You're helping to break the pool. I'll starve before my cattle goes. That man, Piper, killed Silver Bob, my nephew, this afternoon on the train. You notice, I suppose, that he hasn't been arrested for the crime yet—and won't be!"

"Damn it!" Piper's voice was like a whimper as he swung around and looked at Denson. "I seem to jump from skillet to the fire. What's yore game, mister. I—I really don't want to turn Bridger Cunningham—"

A rifle shot crashed down the street. As if kicked by a horse, Piper groaned and lunged backward. Denson caught him, kept him from falling as he swung him back into the safety of the stable hallway.

Chan Piper was a surprise. Floundering about in the hallway on his knees for a few seconds, he came up, actually grinning all over his face. From an inner vest pocket he pulled out an enormous old Swedish watch, a double-lidded silver timepiece as broad as a man's hand and almost as thick as his wrist.

"Old Betsy saved me!" he chuckled. "Bullet squashed right into 'er, smack through the back lid, but her insides stopped the ball!"

"Back and down!" Denson snapped, giving him a push. "You don't appear to be carrying a gun, and you're apt to not be so lucky next time. Somebody must be mad because you're selling me that beef herd."

Old Ben Murdock—never slow in anybody's jam—was already into it. Time-worn .45's now dangling in plain sight, he had come scurrying forward for the saddle room with his battered Winchester. The rifle crashed. A man yelled in the distance. Denson, taking a quick shot around the high jamb of the doorway, saw who it was.

Some of the rock in Rock Angel was being taken out of him. A man down the street in a doorway was stumbling forward, and it was Angel's tall, consumptive-looking deputy, caught in a vital spot by Murdock's first shot. He struck the graveled walk, stood there teetering on one foot. Murdock's rifle crashed again, bringing the man down in a long, sliding fall.

ROCK ANGEL was tasting lead a second later. It was a long shot for a .45, but Denson was known to be good at such things. Angel had just darted out of a narrow alleyway. At the roar of the big Colt in Denson's right hand the sheriff reeled, six-shooter dropping. In a one-sided run, left hand gripping his blood-streaming right wrist, he was like a big lizard scurrying for cover.

"Better get out of here," Piper warned. "My stars, boys, yuh two ain't got a chance agin that bunch of hellers! Load up an' we'll hit it out the back way. I did want to get a sack of flour an' some coffee, though. Maybe a little else, but so far, stranger, yuh ain't paid me a dime on them beef cattle."

"Take this!" Denson thrust twenty dollars in his hand. "Out the back way and a couple or three doors down. I'll hold 'em until you get the eats. Go with 'im, Ben! I'll drumfire 'em a little. That always holds back a tinhorn breed like this."

He had a real surprise coming in less than a minute. With the street rocking with gunfire, he saw Bridger Cunningham, shoulders still squared. In his arms were a number of paper bags. Bullets whistling around him, he walked right on as if there was not a gun within ten miles of him, and soon was gone on up the street, all his haughty dignity intact.

It was only two or three minutes later before Denson heard Ben Murdock calling him from the rear end of the hallway. Pouring a twelve-shot burst of lead into the stone-rimmed doorways and windows down the street, Denson now

wheeled back to his horse. He flung up, jacking out empty shells from his six-shooters and slipping in loaded ones even as Lightfoot swung back through the hallway at a gallop.

"We got it!" Murdock yelled, saddle covered with bags and bundles, and Piper's big saddle loaded in the same fashion. "Just started grabbin' ever'thing that looked good to eat. When a man tells me he's got grandkids at home cryin' for a biscuit, then, by God, I believe in gettin' them kids some biscuits. Let's go, cowboy!"

"Yeah, boy!" Chan Piper cried. "An' I left a writ-out order. In the mornin' Sam Price will load a big wagon an' send it out to us. I hope, though, stranger, yuh ain't makin' a fool out of me about buyin' that young beef herd."

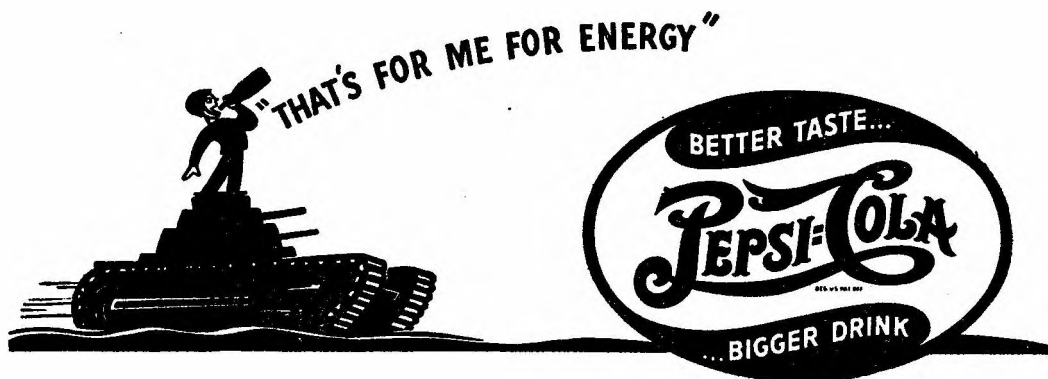
CHAPTER FOUR

When Crooks Fall Out!

"SO HE shot the sheriff and killed Con Kelly, the chief deputy!" Walker P. Hanlon did not seem at all displeased as he strode his fine suite of rooms upstairs overlooking the river.

A man who never openly took part in these sudden street fights, Hanlon had been upstairs with his lamps lighted when the burly, red-bearded Booger Bill Jones and the tall, almost black-skinned Snake Fallon brought him the news.

"Rock Angel was the biggest surprise of all," Fallon explained, thin lips twisting to a crooked little smile. "Kelly's dead within a few feet of where him an' Rock started the gun music. An' Rock



—well, yore eyes will pop when I tell yuh he took on bad enough to have got every joint busted by a ball. We had to support him across the street to Doc Miller's office, an' I shore thought Doc would shake his big belly off when he busted out laughin'."

"But—but why?" Hanlon demanded, knowing something was coming. "Rock was shot, you said—"

"Rock Angel," Fallon's lips curled again, "was hit just hard enough across the wrist to draw the blood."

"An'," Booger Bill Jones added, looking as if he could not believe himself, "he was takin' on like a dyin' cow."

"You mean," Hanlon's eyes had grown wide with surprise, "Angel lost his guts with—with a little scratch like that?"

"Booger's said it," Fallon dropped himself wearily into a chair. "Rock was moanin' an' bawlin' like a calf under a hot iron. The whole town was starin' at him."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Hanlon threw himself into a chair beside the long table in the center of the room. "Pour a couple of stiff drinks for us. This knocks the props from under me. Angel breaking up like that! People have wondered to me many times how he would act if he stopped lead—"

"An' maybe," Jones put in dryly, "yuh know now, Walker. This is the first scratch for him, though he's dealt out plenty to others. The way he acted makes me plumb downcast. I swear it!"

Angel answered for himself a minute later. Right hand in a big black sling, he knocked gingerly on the door with his left, opened it as Hanlon called out "Come!" and stepped briskly into the room. His face was still pale, but it reddened instantly when he looked at Snake Fallon and Booger Bill Jones, then saw the amused light in Hanlon's eyes and the pitying smile of contempt on the man's face.

"I suppose, damn 'em," the sheriff snarled, glaring back at Jones and Fallon, "they've told their little tale—and maybe it's damned funny to you, Walker P. My arm still feels like hell. Pain went through me like a knife. I'm subject to lockjaw—"

"Like a horse, eh?" Hanlon motioned him to a chair. "Hope Doc didn't spill

iodine on your cut. A bullet scratch with iodine on it—well, I'll swear that'll bring a horse down with lockjaw quicker than anything. Seen it happen too often in the past. Rip Denson was tough, wasn't he? Maybe you'll believe me next time."

"When I'm feeling better," the sheriff was still snarling, "I'm taking men and going out to the Bar Forty Bar and bring him in along with that damned Murdock. That was him—the old devil eating cheese and crackers when you came down the street with Denson. I'll have a warrant for Chan Piper, too. I'll get even with all three of them for shooting me and killing Con!"

"Chan Piper?" Hanlon looked at him narrowly. "Chan never carries a gun. He knows better. And a man without a gun couldn't have been in on the shooting, Rock. But," he shrugged, "when do you figure on going out after Denson and Murdock?"

"I—I think I'll wait until morning," the sheriff stammered. "It's too easy for them to give me the slip out there in the dark. The sun's down," he nodded toward the bay window. "Full-down. It's quite a ride out to the Bar Forty Bar. With no moon until late tonight and the sky beginning to cloud it'd be dark as black cats long before I could get there.

"Well, damn it?" He glared at them in the mocking silence that followed.

"You—you know that's a fact!" Then, in desperation: "Give me a drink! I'll go tonight—as soon as I can round up a bunch of men—if you birds think it best!"

"Rock, I'm so cold sober right now I can't think." Anyone could have seen that Walker P. Hanlon was doing his best to keep from laughing. "The way you were taken down addles me. Maybe we'd better put you on a stretcher and take you over to Doc Miller's little hospital. Maybe we'd better send to Funeral Rock for one of those special nurses to pull you through. You look bad."

"Ready to drop right outa yore chair, yeah!" added Booger Bill Jones. "Yo're so white around the mouth—Oh, *Rock!*"

BOOGER BILL JONES had literally touched the match to powder. Forgetting his bullet-scratched wrist, Rock Angel had jerked his hand

from his sling. With a swift, furious blow he caught Jones across the mouth, knocking him backward out of his chair. Then the sheriff was on his feet, with his good right hand clutched to the big black butt of a Colt.

"I'll kill you, Jones!" he snarled, voice almost a shriek. "I'll drop the heart out of you, too, Fallon!"

"Sit down—before I take a hand in this!" Hanlon's voice was full of danger. "You're not bad, Rock Angel. You're a make-believe, and everybody in town knows it. I don't yet know why I elected you sheriff when there were plenty of better men for the place. *Sit down*, I said! I'll let light-holes in your belly—"

He did not have to finish. Rock Angel jammed himself back in his chair, right hand still hugged close to the butt of the gun. Booger Bill Jones stumbled to his feet and picked up his big hat. Little streaks of blood were oozing from his nose and mouth, and cold hate and murder filled his eyes.

"If a man done that to me," intoned the ever-dangerous Snake Fallon, "I'd kill 'im if I had to shoot him out of God's hip-pocket."

"None of that talk, Snake!" Hanlon snapped. "You'll apologize, too, Rock. Yes, by God, there was no call for it!"

"Well—well, I'm sorry, Booger." The sheriff's lips moved like cutters chopping out each word. "I'm wrought-up, I guess. Forget it. I just flew off the handle. Wipe the blood off your mouth and take a drink. Hell, you're not hurt."

"I, at least," Jones curled his upper lip, "won't have to be carried across the street to Doc Miller's!"

"That'll do, I said!" Hanlon was on his feet with a jerk, face filled with rage and sudden danger. "When I tell gun-pups of mine to let something lie, then I mean let it die!"

"Sure, I know." Jones reached for a glass and the bottle. "But you didn't get slapped in the mouth by a clown with a little I-am-a-god badge on his blown-up chest."

"Lay off, Booger." Snake Fallon—as deadly as his name—was into it again. "Yore mouth'll heal."

A timid knock came from the door, stopping the talk. At Hanlon's usual

barked-out "Come!" the door opened. A little wisp of a man entered, wearing what looked like a railroad conductor's uniform. He was Mark Lewis, the telegraph operator from the depot. In his hand was a telegram.

"From Funeral Rock, Mr. Hanlon," Lewis explained as he removed his frayed cap. "I wouldn't have come right upstairs, butting in like this, but it sounds important."

Hanlon took the message, ripping open the envelope with a gold cigar cutter on the end of his watch chain. In the silence, with Rock Angel and Booger Bill Jones still glaring at each other, he leaned close to one of the big lamps, reading in silence. The message was from Tull Glasstone. Hanlon's face became like a sheet.

JUST LEARNED RIP DENSON
PLAYING DOUBLECROSS STOP
DENSON BEING BACKED TO
BUY CATTLE OVER YOU BY
SQUAREDEAL JEFF HARRISON
STOP HARRISON HAS DEPOSITED
ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOL-
LARS IN THE FIRST NATIONAL
HERE FOR DENSON TO DRAW
ON STOP LOOKS BAD TULL.

"Sounds important, hell!" Hanlon snarled, whirling to look at old Mark Lewis as if he wanted to kill him on the spot. "This is a complete bill of sale for wholesale murder!"

"Bad, is it?" put in Angel as if trying to pass over the recent quarrel. "You look bad, Walker!"

"Ever hear of Square Deal Jeff Harrison?" Hanlon sneered, now looking as if he would like to jump down the sheriff's throat. "One of the head hogs of the Far Western Packing Company? Well, Harrison's backing Rip Denson—for a hundred thousand dollars to try to beat me out on my cattle squeeze on these yokels of Devil Drum Valley!"

"You said less than a week ago," the sheriff's tone was quiet, "you would be worth more than a half million dollars by Christmas—"

"And the Far Western Packing Company," Hanlon raged, "have at least ten million without having to wait for Christmas. And they can get that much more, you can bet, from the big bankers back east. Damn it, this thing," he shook the

telegram, "is a bombshell! Get out of here and get Rip Denson and Murdock—*tonight!* And something else." He leaned forward, jamming his finger almost in the sheriff's face. "Those two are *not to be brought in alive.*"

"That," the sheriff grinned as he arose, "is the orders I like to get when I go out for a prisoner or two. Come on, boys. Let bygones be bygones. I'm real sorry, Booger." He thrust out his hand. "I was a fool, but I'll do my best to make up for it. From now on, Walker P. being willing, you two wear deputy sheriff badges. . . ."



HANLON paced the floor when they had gone, and stopped many times to look at the telegram. The noise of Rock Angel getting men together downstairs came to him several times. Twice he took a turn out the hall to walk to the front of the building and stand there looking down on the street, watching horsemen come up, then head on around the lower bend of the street to the big stone jail. Angel would have an army behind him tonight when he rode out of town, heading down and across the eight miles of the valley to Bar Forty Bar.

Back pacing his rooms when the muffled report of a shot came to him, Hanlon stiffened, listening. Then he shrugged and took himself another drink. Some nervous fool, he guessed, had dropped an overloaded six-shooter. One shot in Doom River rarely meant trouble. Certainly not important trouble like a general gunfight. He heard horsemen galloping out of the town. Snake Fallon, looking longer, leaner and darker, came in thirty minutes after the report of the shot had reached Hanlon's ears.

"You're not going, Snake?"

"I ain't." Fallon walked to the table, pouring a stiff drink. "Feel sort of sick at my stomach right now. I just come to tell yuh Booger Bill Jones is dead."

"*Dead!*"

"That's what I said." Fallon's face was mean. "I picked 'im up in the hallway of the stables where he'd gone to saddle my horse an' his while I was helpin' Rock Angel dish out guns an' cartridges to some

who needed 'em down at the jail. A bullet had caught Booger just behind the left ear an' come out the top of his head. The mess sort of got me. Good friend, Booger was.

"No," he added, scowling, "Rock Angel didn't do it or have it done. I was close to him all the time. He didn't have a chance to do it—an' no chance of tellin' anybody to do it for 'im. If he had had, Walker P., I'd kill Rock on general feelin's. Yuh know how me an' him can't get along."

"Sure, I know!" An evil leer twisted Hanlon's lips. "Never a good word for each other from the start, always at pistol-point with each other. You came here a week after Rock outran a Wyoming sheriff and a posse to the line. And tonight," he looked hard at the window, "Tull Glastone's telegram and your tale of Jones getting shot from behind—well, the two are a couple of bombshells. If somebody would tell me what I suspect now and then has suddenly turned out to be the truth, that would be the third bomb exploding on my lap."

"An' what," Fallon had his hand on the bottle again and was looking at him with a sidling smirk, "would this thing be that yuh suspect now an' then, Hanlon?"

"That maybe my daddy was right," Hanlon sneered, "when he told me there wasn't any Santa Claus. Go ahead and drink up the whole damned bottle! If what you've just reported is true, I at least won't have to feed whiskey every minute to Booger Bill Jones!"

"Booger was a good man." Fallon smacked his lips. "Just a little windy at times. Here's to Denson an' Murdock." He lifted his glass. "In a little while they ought to be bringing their smilin' faces back to Doom River—on a plank!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Face to Face

ROCK ANGEL led his gang out of town on his high-headed Black Butcher. There were twenty-two men in the mob, all armed to the teeth, most of them about half drunk, and every man who would need extra nips of bottled

courage carrying a flask in his pocket. Angel's fine rifle lay across his lap, big .45's at his hips. For the looks of the thing, he yet wore the sling, but there was not even a hint of pain where Rip Denson's bullet had nicked his flesh.

He was still cursing himself under his breath as he rode toward the north tip of the half-mooned main street with stone-walled houses at every hand for a thousand yards. The sight of blood always made Rock Angel sick and made him as weak as water. He had managed to hide that failing fairly well in Doom River, but it was one fool thing he could never get over.

He glared his malice at Bridger Cunningham's house on a beautifully shaded knoll when he passed it. It was one of the best places in town, certainly the best kept—a typical Utah Mormon's house, built to last forever! Its walls were three feet thick. Its north half was tall and roomy, two and a half stories high with an enormous white chimney at either end. The south half was smaller, one story high, a squat kitchen chimney at the end and its sides flanked by flagstoned porches.

Cunningham was one of the few men who whitewashed his house and the stables and barns behind it. Tomorrow the grounds would be filled with buckboards and droves of saddle horses. Everybody would come to Silver Bob Draper's funeral, not because they liked Draper but out of respect for Cunningham. Draper had been a bad egg, and most people were glad he was dead and gone to hell where he rightfully belonged.

Angel and his mob clattered down a long trail and came to a shallow ford in the river. Here along the west bank of the stream was where Piper's beef herd had been held by two of the cattleman's rough-looking but stalwart sons and three half-ragged cowpunchers of the type who would stick to their boss through high water or hell. The herd was gone now, scattered back toward its home range.

Hanlon had been a fool to let that fine young beef herd slip out of his hands, but a man could not talk to him. He was one of those self-made empire-builders, cocksure of everything he did. One day—if his bragging held true—he would own all this country back here, miles and miles

of ideal rangelands. As large as it was, Devil Drum Valley was not a tenth of it all told. Beyond the mouths of gorges at every hand were other valleys and great canyons, well-watered and well-stocked. A smart man could own it, all right, but one day Hanlon's smartness and luck might slip—and *somebody* with the right backing might step into his boots.

"We split here." Angel pulled his Black Butcher to a halt on the bank of a little stream fringed with small willows and cottonwoods two miles west of the river. He motioned for Tough George Lockheel and One-Lung Jasper Kincaide to swing up beside him. "In a moment you'll check your watches with mine. Jasper'll take six men and turn up Sweet Creek, here." He nodded to his right. "Tough George'll take six men and make a swing to the left. I'll wait to give you time. At exactly ten o'clock you fellows will have left your horses in the bushes and be closed in quietly around the Bar Forty Bar. Watch the barns, the sheds, every haystack and corral. I'll be at the hitchrack in front of the house right on time. Rip Denson and Ben Murdock are not to be taken out of that house alive. Is that understood by all hands?"

"It was understood before we left town," nodded Tough George. "Hell, Rock, this ain't our first night ride!"

"Check watches!" snapped the sheriff, and a few moments later men were stringing away from him. . . .

The wail of a fiddle whipping hard on *The Arkansaw Traveler* came to Rock Angel's ears as he rode up to the hitchrack under the big cottonwoods in front of the porch. The air had been still for a few minutes. He caught the odor of boiling coffee, frying bacon and the smell of hot biscuits just out of an oven. They were having a late supper, Angel guessed, remembering that somebody had told him Chan Piper and Ben Murdock had gone out of town with a load of groceries on their saddles. It would be a fine time to barge in.

Noiselessly, the seven men behind Angel slid out of their saddles. It was exactly ten o'clock, but only Angel had kept track of the time. Lights burned brightly in the big, log-walled living room ahead of him. Others shone from the long lean-

to kitchen and dining room on the west side of the house. By those lights, catching a glimpse of moving shadows here and there, Angel knew that Tough George Lockheel and One-Lung Jasper Kincade had not failed him.

Rifle left swinging to his saddle horn and big six-shooters ready, Rock Angel walked forward, the black sling forgotten and empty now. Three men followed in a half-crouch behind him. Men to his right and left had already moved quickly forward, gaining the darker shadows where ivy grew over a trellis at either end of the broad, stone-floored porch. Cocked .45 in each hand, Angel crossed the porch like a cat on ice. With a quick slam of his shoulder he sent the door flying open, and stepped quickly inside.

A little old woman sat with her back to him in front of a small pile of logs burning in the wide-mouthed fireplace in the north end of the room. That would be Granny Crockett, eighty years old and the mother of Chan Piper's tall, Indian-featured Mona. Near-deaf, the old woman was the only one in the room. She had not even glanced around and was still sawing away on the fiddle as if her life depended on it.

Led by the noisy babble ahead of him, Angel moved on, two of the three men behind following him, the third man halting just inside the doorway to slide to one side and get his back to the wall. Reaching the doorway to the kitchen and dining room, Angel halted—and swore.



ONLY women and children sat at the long table. Mona Piper sat at the end of the table with her back to Angel. One of her daughters-in-law looked up from the far end of the table. She made some kind of a sound, and the room was instantly jerked into silence.

"What do you want here, Rock Angel?" Mona Piper was on her feet, face hard in the lamplight, all the Cherokee in her blood beginning to show fire in her eyes.

"Looking for Chan." Half-sheepishly, Angel holstered his guns. "For Chan," he added, voice hardening, "and the two men who came here with him tonight."

"The menfolks ain't here," answered the woman, steadily. "They went off somewhere. They said they wouldn't be back until morning. Maybe not then, Sheriff Rock Angel. Get out of my house—and stay out!"

"I'm searching this damned place!" the sheriff snapped. "Whether you like it or not!"

"Have you got a search warrant?"

"I don't need a search warrant!" Angel leered at her. "Not when I'm looking for two dangerous criminals like Rip Denson and old Ben Murdock. That pair may look all right to you, but they're only making damned fools out of you people. Those certified checks Rip Denson's passing out!" He laughed mockingly. "Hell, woman, they're not worth the paper they're written on!"

Feeling certain now that every man on the ranch was hiding out from him and there were only women and children here to browbeat, he turned on his heel, walking back in the living room to pick up a lamp from a little table against the wall.

Granny Crockett still sat in front of the fire, sawing away at her fiddle, as unconcerned as the hearth itself. Angel swung to his right, two gunmen closely following him, and headed for the hallway to the seven bedrooms in the south end of the house. He would at least tear a few things apart to let these yokels know the law had been around here! Bootheels heavy on the floor, big spurs dragging, he kicked open the door to a bedroom to his right.

"In there," he growled to the men at his heels. "You know what to do with beds, dressers and the like."

Buck Harper and Steel Smith were two men to depend on in things like this. Angel sat the lamp on a trunk in the corner for them. They upset the bed as if they could not look for a man under it in any other way. They tore a door off the closet, and shoved over the dresser. As a last act Smith picked up a chair and casually tossed it through the window, shattering every pane of glass in the lower sash. He turned then, and stopped, eyes popping.

"Might tear up the rug," suggested a dry voice from the doorway behind Angel. "Or smash in that trunk in the cor-

ner. I'd do a real job of it if I were really trying to mess things up."

Rock Angel wheeled. Standing just inside the doorway—with Ben Murdock's back planted against his back so that the old man could watch the hall—was Rip Denson. A wicked little grin met the startled sheriff's eyes, over the barrels of Denson's .45's.

Angel opened his mouth to say something, but even that was denied him. From somewhere outside came the sudden, nerve-jerking crash of a shot, followed by a wild, animal-like screech of pain and terror. Instantly other shots were crashing and roaring all around the house. With those sounds came the yells of fear-stricken men, the running pound of

the rim of an old dry well in the back yard, three more from a lop-sided wreck of a camp wagon piled over against a pine thicket just below the new well, and others sliding down from the thick branches of the cottonwoods around the house.

It was a little army out there now that no gunman in Doom River could possibly have expected to find at Chan Piper's house. All four of Piper's sons were there, hard to hold when their tempers were high, and with them were the five Bar Forty Bar cowpunchers. But that was not all. Rock Angel was in for a grand surprise. Stripped of his weapons along with his two gun-uglies and handcuffed together to be marched out-

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spurred heels and horses snorting. Only one thing remained the same, holding a wavering tone in the din.

Granny Crockett was still sawing on her damned old fiddle!



"LOOK here, now, look here!" Rock Angel's voice was so weak and shattery it might have been the high-piping of a scared little boy trying to talk himself out of a spanking. "You—you can't do this to me. Why, Denson, I—I'm the sheriff of Doom River—the law of Devil Drum Valley!"

"Really, now?" Some of the sardonic leer in Denson's face gave way almost to a smile. "You wouldn't fool me, would you, Angel? Turn, all three of you, and keep your hands high."

The shooting had come to a staggering end outside. Rock Angel was completely deserted except for the two men caught in the same trap with him. Men were swarming around the house, coming out from under hay-stacks, two climbing from

side, he saw others in front of the house—three Dink Clayton Turkey Track riders from ten miles up the valley, and even a number of Cunningham Sago Lily cowpunchers here and there. The others were keeping back in the dark.

"Interception of a little neck-tie party, Rock," Denson explained. "We ran into quite a mad crowd here from the pool who were waiting to either string or rope-drag Chan Piper for selling cattle to Slick Hanlon. I showed them where a new deal was coming to Devil Drum. All they needed was hog-sense to see it and change their minds. We knew you'd be along. Have you got the limbs picked out for 'em, boys?"

"Shore, we have!" bawled a voice from the darkness, and Rock Angel's eyes widened as he saw more men coming up and recognized them as Wildhorse Peterson men from the Diamond Cross west of the Bar Forty Bar. "Nice big limb down yonder over the pens where Chan's wife used to fatten a few hawgs for lard an' bacon before Slick Hanlon sent down starvation. More'n that, we've got four

more of Rock's crowd. Fellas who tried to run past us in them low pines when the guns started goin' off. Seven oughta make a grand neck-tie party."

Four men with their hands tied behind them were shoved forward. As they came out of the shadows Angel's eyes widened. One of those men was One-Lung Jasper Kincade. A man by the name of Don't-Give-A-Damn Spread Hawley was next. Rock Angel saw the third man, but he did not immediately see the fourth. The third man was Tough George Lockheel.

When the lamplight from the doorway fell upon him Tough George looked as though he had been dipped in a barrel of blood. Angel got just one good look at him; his eyes widened and his shoulders slumped. Then he brought up his cuffed hands to cover his face. A moment later Buck Harper and Steel Smith were cursing him, trying to hold him up.

The sheriff of Doom River had fainted.



HELL blazed. It was in the air one breathed, in the water that ran down the valley. Many reports filled Doom River. Four of Angel's men had come back to town with bullet holes through them. Three had come in afterward, dead and lashed across horses. Angel and six more were swinging from limbs somewhere, but no one could find out exactly where. No one could actually say that he had seen anybody swinging from a limb, but the talk kept going the rounds. At the end of the fourth day rumor had it that the Governor was sending State troops to investigate.

Real bloodshed had come at last. God had let a good Mormon down! Bridger Cunningham found his own men in revolt. They treated him respectfully enough. Men had to treat Bishop Bridger Cunningham with the same respect he always tried to show even a range tramp. They listened, then just ignored him when he ordered every Sago Lily rider to lay aside his guns and stop keeping midnight rendezvous with that upstart Rip Denson who was ripping all sanity from men's minds.

At three o'clock on the morning of the seventh day, Denson appeared in person.

Cunningham awoke in his great four-poster bed in his big room upstairs to find him bending over the rosewood table in the center of the room and just replacing the chimney on the lamp he had lighted. At that moment Cunningham would have killed him if he had had a gun.

"The sight of a man like you profanes the air of the house!" raged the bishop, flouncing out of bed. "The smell of brimstone is upon you, and the blood of Satan covers your hands!"

"How many head of beef do you want to sell?" Denson demanded. "I'm buying and counting you in."

"*You're buying!*" Cunningham was snatching for his socks and boots. "Wait until I get dressed in some semblance of decency and I'll carry you downstairs and throw you out the door! The fourth day after you landed here the cattle pens took fire, making the greatest and most infernal stampede of cattle in this town man or child will ever look at."

"They were Hanlon cattle," Denson grinned. "Stolen cattle, I should say. Better quit looking at that big walking stick at the head of your bed. I don't want to have to rap you over the head with a gun. I came here to buy cattle."

"At Hanlon's prices!"

"At eleven cents," Denson corrected, "less on the hundred pounds than the Chicago Livestock quotations the day we drive them into Funeral Rock. Eleven's my lucky number. That'll be my rake-off for taking the herd out of here. It'll be the damndest herd—"

"Don't use profanity in my house!"

"Oh, go to hell, will you? I don't want to fight you. Listen!" He did not have to tell anyone to listen. A double-battered roar had shaken Doom River, rattling the windows in every house.

"That was well-timed. It means the big engines brought in here by Hanlon to haul two mile-long trainloads of cattle out of the valley for him have been knocked out with dynamite. The bridge south of Cold Water will go out in exactly twenty-two minutes."

"It'll take Hanlon six months to get another bridge there. That means the cattle he's bought will be on his hands all winter—and he'll have to get feed to them, mule-back, I reckon." He over-

looked a bet. He doesn't own a foot of rangeland in the valley."

"Denson, you're crazy!" the bishop groaned. "How are *you* going to get cattle out of here?"

"Along the railroad right-of-way," Denson said shortly. "Two carloads of lumber will be hand-braked down from Cold Water to the bridge across the Doom eight miles this side of Cold Water. We'll plank and fence that bridge. A cut at either end of it will make it easy to string the cattle across, and there'll be no trains running between here and Cold Water to push our herds off the track. Once our herds reach Cold Water we're past the slide-rock country. We'll swing them eastward and slow-trail them down off the benchlands to Funeral Rock."

"I'm beginning to see." The wrath was going out of Bridger Cunningham. "What's to hinder Slick Hanlon following the same way with his herds?"

"One hundred and fourteen feet of empty space one hundred and eighty feet across between two cliffs of blue granite and a roaring river."

"Denson!" Cunningham came to his feet with a start. "My God, man, you are talking about the trestle this side of Cold Water! You're not going to blow out that bridge behind you?"

"Swear I won't." Denson sat on the edge of the table, swinging one spurred foot. "That's mostly an all-wood trestle. When the last steer of our herds go across I'll have twenty barrels of oil on the spot. We'll drench the bridge, and," he shrugged, "touch the match."

"Denson!" Cunningham rolled the name on his tongue. "Why—why," he came forward, one foot socked, the other booted, "this will wipe Slick Hanlon out!"

"I didn't come here to build him up."

"Candy's been trying to talk to me about you." Cunningham had a far-away look in his eyes now. "Told me just last night something good was coming. Admitted under pressure she had slipped out three times to meet you fools in your plotting. I swore I'd take a latigo to her."

"You'd better not." The lamplight and shadow on Denson's face made his smile half-sardonic. "Candy met with us again tonight. You may not like it, you may even kick like hell about it, but I'm going

to marry Candy. She promised me tonight."

"Lord, spare me Thy wrath!" The bishop staggered to one side and fell into a chair. "Forgive me of my sins! This is just the kind of a fool who will marry my Candy. I—I don't know how I'd stop him!"

Then the door swung open. Cunningham sat and stared. Cattlemen and cowboys, led by Candy, were swarming into the room.

CHAPTER SIX

Gunman's Reward

WALKER P. HANLON was dreaming of cards. To dream of cards was nothing new for a gambler, but he was dreaming for the third time within a week of a particular hand no sharper liked. And there it lay, the ace of clubs, ace of diamonds, the eight of spades, eight of hearts and the queen of hearts—the Dead Man's Hand.

One Dick Stephens had taken that identical hand from the dead fingers of Wild Bill Hickok in the Number Ten Saloon in Deadwood, August 2nd, 1876, when the notorious Western killer lay dead on the floor after one Jack McCall had sent a bullet crashing through his brain. When Hanlon was worried about something, and dreamed of that damned hand, something was going to happen!

The double roar of explosions, coming almost as one, brought him out of bed with a start. The next thing Hanlon heard was a rush of feet heading for the street. By the time he had turned up the lamps and had dressed, Snake Fallon was beating nervously at the door.

Hanlon opened the door. "What is it this time?"

"Both—both yore big mountain engines are gone, Walker!" Fallon was gasping for breath. "Somebody's blowed the whole—whole front ends out of 'em with dynamite!"

"And how," bowed Hanlon with his most pitying sneer, "does Mr. Snake Fallon know it was *dynamite*?"

"I used to be a hard-rock miner, Hanlon." Fallon's jet-black little eyes appeared to wink cold fire in their depths.

"I shot dynamite. Yuh don't forget the smell of it."

This time, not even glancing at the bottles on the table, Snake Fallon turned on his heel and walked out of the room. Hanlon swore at himself under his breath as he reached for his hat and a pair of short-barreled .45's.

At the roundhouse was only a gawking crowd. There stood the two powerful engines with the head-ends blown out, just as Fallon had said. Sick of the gawking fools around him, Hanlon turned back down the track after thirty minutes of cursing. He turned in at the depot, a man who needed quick action now. Old Mark Lewis was wide-awake and on the job, having been ordered to sleep on a cot in the depot since that hell-fired Denson and Murdock had struck the country.

"Get Funeral Rock!" Hanlon snapped. "I want two engines here as fast as their drivers will roll!"

"I—I thought you'd want something like that," Lewis stammered. "I've been trying to get through, but—but I can't get beyond Cold Water, Mr. Hanlon. I—"

He broke off and swung back to his instrument board, a quick hand going to his key as the sounder gave a dull clatter. Hanlon watched with an empty stomach and beads of perspiration on his forehead. When Lewis sat back limply in his chair murder blazed in Hanlon's eyes.

"There's something wrong, Mr. Hanlon." Fear was in the operator's voice. "Something's happened beyond Cold Water. There's been some loud explosions down toward Storm Creek Gorge."

"Get through, damn you!" Hanlon snarled. "We've got to have engines! There's not a damned engine this side of Funeral Rock. Keep at that key, but you get through or, by God, I'll kill you! I want engines, engines! *Engines*, I say!"

He turned and went reeling out the door, half-crazy now. What the hell were they trying to do with him? All the Rip Densons this side of hell could not get away with this!

"Even God can't beat me!" he bawled, making a fist at the sky.

Hanlon went back to the Idaho Belle, his long legs working rapidly, the black tails of his coat flapping. A tense little

crowd now leaned against the bar, the excitement biting into a man the moment he entered the door. Snake Fallon stood glumly at the foot of the bar, looking mean. A meaner glint filled Hanlon's eyes when he gave Fallon the nod to follow him upstairs immediately. Fallon came into his suite just after Hanlon had turned up the lamps.

"Sit down!" Hanlon motioned him to a chair across the table from him. "How many men have we got?"

"Around forty, countin' the new ones yo've been bringin' in since Denson hit us." There was a sullen pitch to Fallon's voice. "Some few of the bunch yuh had took a sneak, yuh know, like rats, they say, desert a house that's just gettin' ready to burn down."

"So you think that's coming!" Hanlon's lips became hard. "Listen, Snake, why did you kill Booger Bill Jones?"

"Why—why—"

"Don't gag like a dying frog!" Hanlon's hands were in his lap and Fallon's were on the table. "I'm no fool! Answer my question!"

"If I hadn't killed Booger he woulda shot Rock in the back when we got outa town!"

"So I see!" Hanlon laughed flatly. "Rock Angel's your half-brother. Don't pop those little snake eyes! I have ways of finding out things. Then there's another little thing. How'd you get from here to the roundhouse and back so damned quick this morning, and how—"

"Did I know just what had happened to the engines!" Fallon finished. "That was easy. I put the dynamite in 'em. Rock's still alive, Hanlon. Denson's got him, an' a note came through to me. I had to blast them engines or that gang would take him back to Wyomin' an' toss 'im to the sheriff, who's got a rope all stretched an' waitin' for Rock. Blood's thicker'n water—"

The heavy, thundering roar of a Lightning Colt going off in Hanlon's lap cut him short. *One! Two! Three! Four!—Five!* The lamplight jumped and the room shook, pictures knocking and twisting on the walls, the clouds of smoke puffing up from under the table. Fallon had lurched the upper part of his body forward on the table, claw-like hands

working. He was like a snake now, all dying and writhing blacksnake, hat rolling off, beastly snarl on his face, sudden blood on his lips. He spoke, words themselves twisting.

"I've always sorter had—to look out for Rock."

Hanlon was already out of his chair. He opened the drawer in front of him, tossed the empty weapon into it, and took out another Lightning Colt. A double-action had always been his favorite gun. He jammed the well-oiled and loaded weapon in his waistband. White-faced he turned and walked out of the room. At the foot of the stairs he spoke to Ruck Finn, the night bar man.

"There's a dead snake upstairs. Send somebody to wipe up the mess!"

With that he walked on, long legs fast, tails of his coat flapping like the beat of a death angel's wings. At the depot Mark Lewis told him the news had just come through that the bridge across Storm Creek Gorge had been blown sky high.



CATTLE, cattle, cattle—thirty thousand head! God, would the sight never end! Rounded-up, held, checked and counted all over the valley and up the canyons and gorges, it was now eight o'clock in the morning, and a sight to make a man's heart come up in his throat. With that gigantic string of brutes rode every kind of a rider that could sit a saddle and carry a gun—men, women, mere kids, eighty strong!

Devil Drum Valley would never see such a sight again. At the head of the herd, grim as a god, *The Book of Mormon* in his pocket, rode Bishop Bridger Cunningham; just behind him Candy. It would take hours and hours for that herd just to pass through town.

Walker P. Hanlon stood upstairs in a northeast corner room—and wept. This was the beginning of the end. Thirty thousand head—and beef higher this fall than it had been in ten years! Not a head in the herd would bring less than forty dollars. Even rangy old stag steers with beef in their hides you couldn't chop with an axe would bring that much!

Cold-faced, stone sober, Hanlon dried

his eyes after what seemed hours of staring, and walked downstairs. Disaster faced him even here. Out of all his fine gunmen only six were standing by!

Bullard McCoy was behind the bar, a man mountain of fifty. Hanlon liked big, impressive-looking men behind his bar. Bullard McCoy's eyes were red, a tear still slipping down his ruddy, scraped-pork cheeks now and then. He dabbed the hem of his apron to his eyes, and set out a bottle of Hanlon's private stock.

"The same for the rest," Hanlon ordered, and tried to smile. "It looks like I'm taking a warping this morning."

"It's a damned shame, I say!" McCoy gulped out the words. "Four years now, nearer five, you've fed an' watered men. They've took your pay, they've ate your grub, an'—an' look at 'em! Sneaks, that's what they are. Damn it, Mr. Hanlon, some of 'em are even helpin' to drive them herds!"

"An'—an' why're they helping?" McCoy glanced up and down the bar, voice stumbling and whimpering. "I'll tell you why! They're drivin', helpin' out, to try to save their own dirty skins. Sneakin' along like snakes, keepin' their hats pulled down, ashamed to look this way!"

"Drink up, boys!" Hanlon ordered, and he really laughed then. "Worse things have happened, I guess. They're not yet trying to lynch us!"

"Did you say give 'em another one, Mr. Hanlon?" McCoy said suddenly.

"Yes! All they can hold—and shoot straight after they hold it! Anybody here know where Rip Denson and that Ben Murdock's fitting into this crowd with the cattle?"

"They're down under the cliffs at the ford," a tall Texan answered. "Holdin' back the drive so the herd can string up the trail without too much crowdin'. There's somethin' else that might interest yuh, too, Mr. Hanlon. They've got Rock Angel down there helpin'. With Rock is Tough George an' One-Lung, Buck Harper an' Steel Smith. I reckon they're bein' made to do it. They ain't packin' guns."

"Very nice of them!" Hanlon sneered. "Shut the front doors, *you!*" His voice lifted into a bark. "Damn it, this place will be full of steers before we know it!

The whole street's jammed with 'em."

He went back upstairs after giving McCoy the signal to go easy on the drinks. From the window he looked down, and it was like being marooned on an island. The bawling and lowing below was deafening. A wall of gray dust hung over the whole town. At times a man could only see a blur of the moving flood of cattle below it.

At four o'clock the herd was gradually thinning, the tail-end now coming up. Arms hugged across his chest, Hanlon was back at the same window, waiting. A pair of Winchesters leaned against the wall at either side of him. A sudden thunder of shots downstairs startled him. He wheeled, gasped.

Rip Denson stood in the doorway, tired, dusty, dirty-faced. He looked like hell over the barrel of a gun.

"Take it easy, Slick." Denson grinned. "You're too fine a turkey to kill. We've simply got to have you. Don't make me shoot both hands off at the wrist. Ben Murdock and the Piper boys are downstairs. You should have kept a watch on that ledge in the cliffs under your fine house. We followed it, roped a timber, and came up and in through a side window. It was easy after that to get to the back stairs. A little higher on the reach, will you?"

"All right, Denson, damn you!" Hanlon's rage almost robbed him of a voice. "I'll keep them up until I tell you what

kind of a dirty snake you are, and then one of us will die in this—this—"

He stopped, eyes bulging. Old Ben Murdock had appeared in the doorway beside Denson.

Murdock's face twisted into a grin, "now yo've got *this!*"

"*Not yet!*" Hanlon flung back, hands flying for his guns. The small rug under his feet slipped, throwing him hard against the wall. Before he could get up or get a gun into action, Rip Denson was astride of him, pinning him to the floor.

"I said you're too fine a turkey to kill, Hanlon." Denson was still grinning. "I meant it. I checked on you all summer before I edged up into Tull Glastone's favor to get him to hire me for you. Didn't even tell Ben some things. There's an electric chair waiting for you in Chicago for two men you killed in a bank robbery. I'm going to make a deal with you. You'll sign over everything you've got—except ten thousand dollars I'll hand to you in Funeral River to go your way on—or you'll go back to Chicago. I came here to clean you, not kill you. That's why you're worth more alive than dead.

"Get up, sweetheart!" Denson hauled him to his feet after stripping the weapons from him. "They're going to get a kick out of it in this town when they see you and Rock Angel together helping with the herd. Get along!" He gave him a push toward the door. "You don't have to start whimpering. It's too late for that."

THE END



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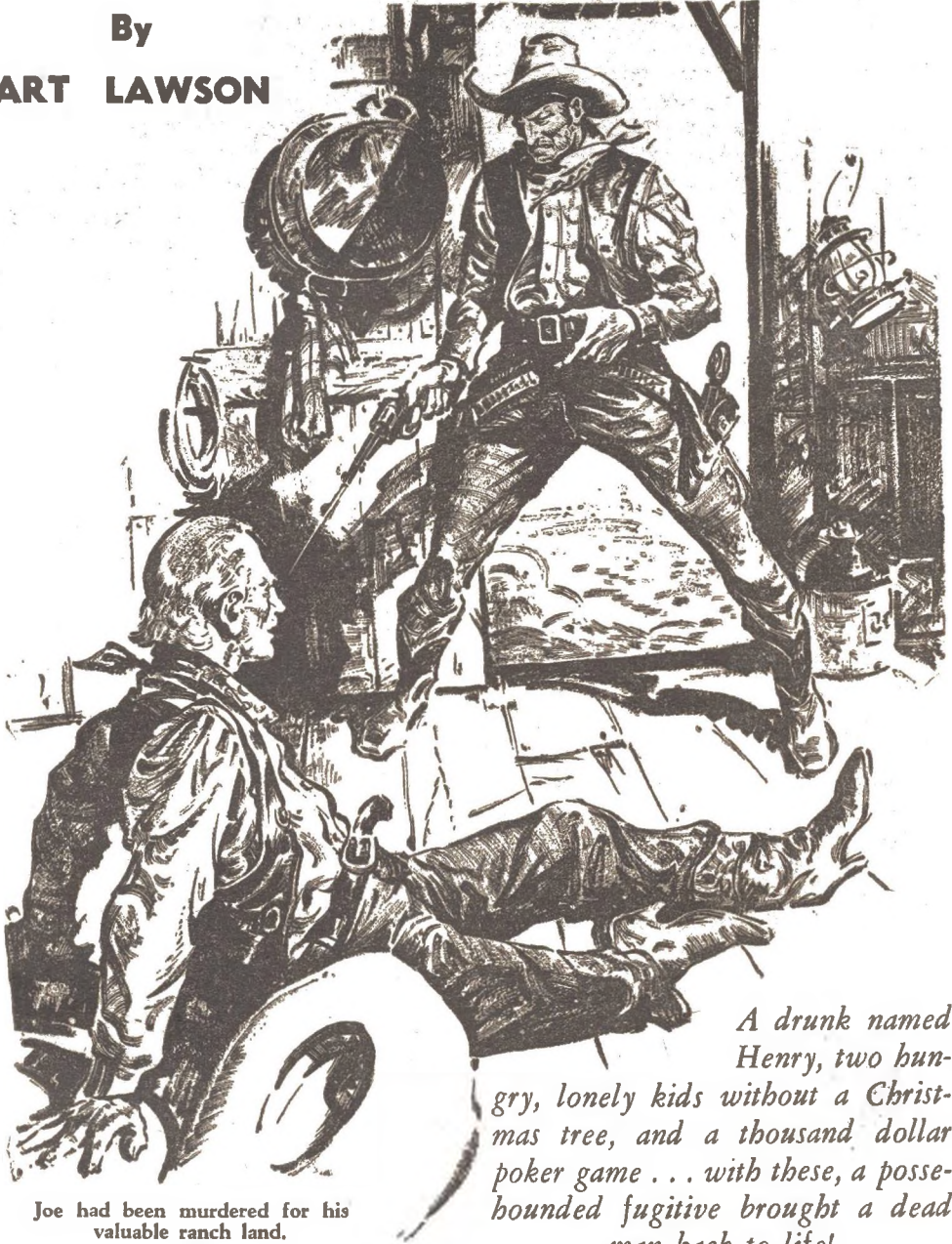
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DEATH'S ON THE HOUSE!

By
ART LAWSON



Joe had been murdered for his valuable ranch land.

A drunk named Henry, two hungry, lonely kids without a Christmas tree, and a thousand dollar poker game . . . with these, a posse-bounded fugitive brought a dead man back to life!

THE snowstorm had turned to sleet that balled in the hoofs of his roan, and the wind cut bitterly through his jumper as he drifted into town, his back hunched against the gale. But he pulled up at the Longhorn Saloon smiling thinly.

Honest men would be home with their families tonight—while sheriff's posses hunted for cover. There would be warmth inside here, a drink to loosen taut nerves. There would be hay in the livery stable where a wanderer might bed down until dawn.

He was shaking a foot from the off-stirrup when a movement in the shadows caused his fingers to tighten over the gun stowed inside his shirt where it would not freeze. Then he laughed to himself. It was only a youngster coming toward him.

"Hold yore hoss, mister?" the kid asked.

The stranger shook his head, stepped down into the snow. "That ol' hoss won't run away. He's too wore out."

The kid stood there uncertainly in cracked cowboy boots, in clothing too big for him and badly worn.

"He might get stole," the boy argued. "This here's a tough town."

Something in the kid's voice stopped the stranger for a second.

"That bein' so, button," he said, "I reckon I'll have to hire you. Jus' keep an eye on this ol' hoss an' I'll give you a dime for every drink I have."

Eagerly the boy took the reins.

"My God," he said, "if you drink like my old man I'll earn a million bucks."

The stranger's smile eased. "If you earned a million bucks holdin' Booger, I'd be too drunk to pay off. So don't start spendin' that dinero until you get it."

Heat from the big stove pushed against him as he stepped inside the Longhorn Saloon. Its impact brought a sickness to him, reminding him how bone-weary he was. The trail behind had been a long one—the trail ahead, endless.

Three men at a poker table nodded to him, and the bartender polished off a space on the mahogany before him.

"What'll she be, stranger—chilly night."

"Hot rum, if you've got it. Or hot whisky."

"We got a bowl of Tom an' Jerry."

"Later. Next round, maybe."

Via the mirror the stranger tagged the men playing poker; the house gambler in his black frock coat and white shirt; the local big rancher whose face was weather-beaten, whose rig was expensive; the sheriff, pot-bellied and tired with a tarnished badge on his chest. And, at the other end of the room, slumped in a chair with his head on the table beside two empty whisky glasses, was the town

drunk. Only the sky-pilot and the proprietor of the local store were needed to fill out the picture. All the town's leading citizens were here.

Play went on at the gambling table. The drunk snorted, managed somehow to find his feet. He approached the stranger uncertainly.

"Yes, sir," he muttered. "I could tell by the looks you were a generous man. I was jus' saying to my pal, Joe, 'Joe, there's a generous man.'"

"Joe?" The stranger blinked his ice-blue eyes.

Unsteadily the drunk turned to stare at the table he had left.

"Ain't that funny? Joe always does that. Second I turn my back, Joe beats it."

"Joe's been dead five years," the bartender told the stranger. "Henry, here, shot him."

"There you go again," Henry whined. "Say, stranger. . . ."

The stranger sipped his hot drink. It warmed his stomach, filled him with the spirit of Christmas.

"Okay, Gus, pour him one."

"An' one for my pal Joe?" the drunk begged. "He an' me—"

"An' one for Joe," the stranger added.

The bartender poured two drinks of his cheapest rotgut.

"Maybe you ain't so crazy," he muttered.

His eyes turned momentarily toward the stranger. Then he leaned over the bar in the direction of the three men at the table.

"Another Tom an' Jerry, gentlemen?"



THE stranger went out of there and found the kid still holding his horse.

"I owe you twenty cents," he said. The boy's eyes brightened. "In fact, I owe you forty cents. I had two drinks. But I bought one for Henry and one for Joe."

"He's my old man." The youngster's voice was a whisper. "You don't owe me for drinks you buy him."

"Okay," the stranger agreed. "Then it's thirty cents, huh?" He counted out three dimes. "Two for me—one for Joe."

The boy kicked nervously at the snow. "He's my old man. I mean Joe is. Joe's dead. Henry takes care of me."

The boy insisted on returning Joe's dime. The stranger took it and said, "Say, button, I'm starved. If you want to hold my hoss while I load up on some grub, I guess it will be worth another dime to me."

"Hell, mister." The youngster brightened up immediately. "The Elite's down this way. They got all sorts of chuck."

Side by side they went down the street, the boy leading Booger. They passed the window of the Merchandise Mart where a Christmas tree, sparsely decorated with tinsel and a couple of bags of candy was hardly visible through the fogged glass. Two or three dolls were propped against the trunk of the tree, and wooden soldiers and a boy-size saddle. But the youngster kept his eyes straight. He had already looked in there too often.

At the Elite they halted again. Smell of cooking drifted through the poorly-fitted door. The boy licked his lips.

"I guess it's really worth a dime, havin' me hold this hoss," he said, resolutely, ignoring the café. "Him an' me sorta got to know each other back there. He's a mighty fine hoss."

"He's a damn good horse," the stranger agreed. "As a matter of fact, he's such a good horse I ought to put him away for the night. Tell you what—take him down to the stable an' see he gets his oats an' hay. That'll be worth a quarter to me. Then come back here an' I'll have another chore for you."

He found a table where he could sit with his back to the wall, and ordered two full-sized meals. The first course, thick black-bean soup, had arrived when the youngster returned. The boy eyed the two plates enviously while the stranger paid up the quarter. He turned away to stare at the money in his small fist.

"Gosh! Forty-five cents. You know, mister, I can almost—" There he stopped.

"You can almost what?" the stranger prompted.

The kid stood on one leg. "What's the other chore?"

"Oh, yeah, the other job I had for you." The stranger grinned broadly.

"That chore ought to be worth a quarter, too. Set down, button. You see, I been ridin' alone so much I need company. I need a man to talk to."

"Maybe I could fetch Henry."

"Nope!" The stranger shook his head. "You're the man for me. You set there an' eat that soup. But don't eat it too fast because you gotta tell me about this town or about horses you know, or something. You gotta keep me amused to earn that two-bits."

The boy clutched the spoon. He took one hurried mouthful. Then, remembering what he had been hired to do, he started: "Once I had a hoss—" another mouthful—"an' I called him Geronimo." He swallowed some more soup. "But Henry swapped him—" a fourth spoonful—"for a keg of whisky."

When the steak arrived with a huge heap of mashed potatoes the boy's conversation broke down completely and he had to be reminded of the chore to be done or he would have swallowed the meat whole.

After coffee, the stranger dug up another twenty five cents and gave it to the boy. He told the youngster he had gotten his money's worth and might hire him again tomorrow for some other work. Then the boy left and the stranger paid the bill.

On the way back to the Longhorn he spotted the boy inside the Merchandise Mart discussing something with the old storekeeper. The storekeeper's voice was shrill, angry.

"You beat it, kid. Likely you stole that seventy cents. And I—"

The stranger stepped through the door. Both storekeeper and youngster turned to stare. The boy appealed to his new friend.

"Mister, Oi' man Bean says I stole this seventy cents!"

The stranger rattled his spurs up to the counter. Between the boy and storekeeper was a doll with yellow hair and eyes that closed. Tied to its wrist was a tag marked "\$1.00."

"Even if he did earn it," Mister Bean cut in, "I'm not selling a dollar doll for seventy cents. How can I keep in business—"

The stranger jerked off the tag and studied it carefully.

"Funny," he said. "This tag says seventy cents. You musta made a mistake, Mister Bean. Sorry I hadda pull the tag off to see it. I'm sorta near-sighted."

"Now, listen here, mister . . ." Bean was shouting.

The stranger's hand dropped to the butt of the gun now holstered at his hip and Bean's watery eyes followed it. Passing him the tag, the stranger said, "See—seventy cents."

Bean muttered, "I musta made a mistake."

And the boy waited for no more. He dropped the two quarters and two dimes on the counter, grabbed the doll and ran out the door.

The stranger grinned. "We all make mistakes," he observed, then walked out the door while the storekeeper hollered after him:

"That thirty cents—you gotta pay up. I'll get the sheriff. . . ."

Nearly an hour later the stranger wandered into the Longhorn. He had found the recipient of that doll after trailing the boy through the deep snow—a girl of about eight with tangled tow hair and big blue eyes bright with tears. She lived in a shack off an alley and, in the light of a stubby candle, the stranger had seen her hugging that doll while the boy sat on the floor looking proud. He had also traced the faded wording of a sign that hung on the shack.

HENRY WHITTEN, M.D.
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Then he had come back to the Longhorn.

The place was as he had left it two hours before. The drunk, the card players, the bartender. One change, however, was immediately apparent. The men at the table greeted him with more than casual interest this time and the sheriff stood up, reaching for his gun. The sheriff, the stranger noticed by water on his boots, had been out for a while.

"Evenin', gents," the stranger grinned, patting his stomach. "Christmas Eve an' a full belly. Was wonderin' if I could get into a game."

The sheriff had not yet drawn his gun and the stranger wondered if old man

Bean had been in to suggest that he look over the wanted posters. His ignoring the sheriff's start at gunplay put off the lawman for a moment. Then the gambler said, "Sure thing, mister. Was just goin' to ask you in."

The sheriff's hand left his weapon. The stranger pulled out a chair, called to the bartender: "Set 'em up, Gus. Tom and Jerry's all around." He twisted his head in the direction of the sleeping drunk. "One for Henry, too . . . an' one for Joe."

"Some day," the sheriff observed, "Henry is goin' to drive me loco—always talkin' about his pal Joe."

The other two men at the table said nothing. The tinhorn was riffing the cards. Casually the stranger observed: "He don't look like the kinda gent who'd kill a feller."

"He's a bum," the sheriff said. "He always was a bum."

The bartender came over with the drinks. He put two on Henry's table, then returned to collect the money from the stranger. The stranger paid, lifted his glass.

"To a full belly on Christmas Eve," he toasted, "and good companions."

The three men nodded gravely, joined him in the toast.

"Peace on earth and good will to men," the stranger added.

"Right," the sheriff said, and they all drained their cups.



THE tinhorn's smooth hands dealt cards. The sheriff opened. Everyone stayed. The stranger asked for two cards and caught the gambler studying his face. He smiled easily. They were each casing the other.

The stranger won that hand. Raking in the chips, he called to the barkeeper: "Got a sack, Gus, or a wash-tub, or something?"

"You ain't going to win that much," the gambling man said, giving the other two a big laugh.

The stranger's eyebrows lifted. "No?" "No!" the gambler said.

Gus brought a greasy dishpan, set it on the floor beside the stranger's chair. Care-

fully counting out one tenth of his winnings, he dropped them into the dishpan. At the clatter the sheriff's spine tightened, the cattelman searched the newcomer's face, the bartender went back to the bar, muttering, and the tinhorn picked up the cards. Henry had come to. He was talking to Joe.

Another hand went around, and the stranger won. Another ten percent clattered into the dishpan and, though everyone there was more than plain curious, they all went to elaborate means to hide the fact.

"Lady luck always calls me by the first name," the stranger said.

"She calls me 'Mister'," the gambler said, shuffling the cards.

The sheriff won the third hand. He reached for the chips, dragged them across the table and began stacking them. The stranger dropped his hand on the sheriff's wrist.

"In my country," he said, "the custom is to count out the ten percent first—drop it in the dishpan—then stack your chips."

The sheriff could not reach for his gun as long as the stranger held his wrist. His face reddened with anger. His eyes shifted to his companions.

"Damn it all," he snapped, "these crazy shennanigans of yores—"

"Just exactly what is this custom?" the cattelman asked coldly.

The stranger put on a big show of surprise but still held the sheriff's wrist.

"Why—down Texas way—Christmas Eve—". He stumbled through it—"we always put ten percent of our winnings in the collection—for the widders and orphans."

"Ten percent of each hand?" the gambler asked evenly. "If you ever went to school you'd know that would break up the game in not much more'n ten hands."

"I never went to school much," the stranger admitted, "but we started out that way, so I guess we'll have to go on with it. I stuck in my ten percent and nobody objected. You stickin' in yours, Sheriff?"

The lawman was still hunting for help. In place of it he got slight nods from his two pals. He was the kind of man who was too impulsive for his own good. The

others planned moves ahead of time, waited, and got what they wanted. Maybe that was why one was a cattle king and the other probably owned the town while the sheriff only drew his two hundred a month and did their bidding.

This time the lawman gave in with little grace. "Okay," he agreed. "Only for two hands, though."

The stranger let go of his wrist. Grudgingly the sheriff dropped his share into the dishpan.

"Besides," he added, "we don't have any orphans or widders in this here town."

"You have orphans," the stranger said, "with nothin' to eat on Christmas Eve, or a tree to set around, or a warm place to wait for Santy Claus. Joe's kid, for one."

"What do you know about Joe?" the sheriff asked abruptly.

"Nothin'," the stranger said innocently. "Never heard of him until tonight. All I know is what I been told. Gus says Henry killed him—five years ago."

"That's right," the sheriff said. "The doc was drunk. Shot Joe. Self-defense, though. Us three fellers was there. We witnessed it."

And the stranger had one more piece of information to add to the puzzle Joe's kid had introduced to him. . . .

The game went on, each man contributing his share. The cattle king ordered a round of Tom and Jerry's. When the tinhorn won, he ordered another round. They drank and dealt and played and the dishpan gradually filled. Twice they had to transfer chips back to the table to replace them with cash.

The sheriff was playing badly, his nerve shot. The cattelman played intently, conservatively. The gambler, though, was as casual as the stranger, making his bets, taking his winnings and losses with the same ease of manner that might mark a standard Saturday night's game.

The sheriff was the first to run out of cash. Next, the cattelman played his last chip. The sheriff had gone to pass the time of day with Gus. But the cattle king remained at the table, leaning his chair against the wall, his thumbs looped in his gunbelt. Finally the stranger alone was left. He stood up and, with an expansive

gesture swept the small remainder of chips into the dishpan.

"For the orphans, God bless 'em," he said, smiling, leaning over to pick up the pan and set it on the table. "Now, gambling man, how about cashing these chips?"

The stranger fished through the cash for chips which the gambler counted with slim, quick fingers. He had to go to the safe in the small room behind the bar for the money to pay off. When they added it up, there was well over a thousand dollars there in bills and a hundred more in silver and gold. The stranger was expansive.

"We ought to have a drink on this," he suggested.

"Sure thing," the gambler agreed. "But first, who's goin' to take care of this dinero?"

"A committee," the stranger suggested. "That's the way they do it down home. The leadin' men of the town. You and Sam and the sheriff, I suppose. Me, I'm out. I'm only a stranger. Glad to have done my bit, though."

It did not make sense to the three townsmen. The sheriff came hastily from the bar.

"I'd be glad to be on that committee," he said. "Wouldn't you gents?"

"Always happy to give my time to the poor," the cowman said. His eyes had a far-away look.

"More than glad," the gambler chipped in. "I suppose we should lock it up in Bean's safe. It's the strongest one in town."

The others nodded. They had a drink on it and the four of them went to the Merchandise Mart where, after serious consultation, they bought some wood, a pair of boots for Joe's kid, and the Christmas tree in the window. Old man Bean was too dumbfounded by this show of Christmas spirit to remember his antagonism to the stranger. And when they locked the rest of the cash in his safe and stalked out together carrying their bundle, their wood and tree, he could only stare dumbly after them . . .

There would be warmth in the house occupied by the two children, a fancy tree and presents. There would be full stomachs tomorrow.

AFTER a nightcap at the Longhorn bar the stranger woke up Henry to take him home. He walked the doctor the full length of town through the snow, dragging him along when the drunk refused to go any farther. Gradually the cold brought color back into Henry's pallid cheeks and life into his stride. He started swearing.

"You're just a bum," the stranger told him. "But you didn't kill Joe."

When Henry stumbled the stranger let him lie a moment in a drift. Then he dragged him to his feet, forcing him to walk on.

"You're just a drunken bum," the stranger said, "willin' to let yore kids freeze and starve. But you didn't kill Joe."

"I was drunk," Henry mumbled. "So was Joe. I didn't mean to. But Joe an' I were havin' an argument. Joe was my bes' friend."

"You ain't any good in the world," the stranger said. "You're just a no-account bum. But you're not as crazy as you act."

The doctor squared off. For a moment sense came through his whisky-fogged brain and in the faint light of a snowy midnight the stranger saw fire in his eyes. Then that dulled again and Henry slipped back into his act.

"Come on, Joe," he said. "We gotta go home."

The stranger led Henry down an alley between two dark buildings, out into the lane that ran the full length of the main street behind stores and houses. There he stopped beside the bole of a huge cottonwood tree and propped Henry against it. He swung back his fist.

"I'm going to smash you one, in just a second," he said coldly, "unless you quit playing games and tell me who killed Joe."

The fear in the doctor's eyes was genuine. "I did!" he said. "I was drunk. Slicker and the sheriff and Sam got me off."

"What did they get out of it?"

"They'll kill me, mister!"

"If I don't kill you first," the stranger said in a flat voice.

"I got to have a drink, mister," the doctor begged. "I can't stand this."

"I'll give you a whole bottle," the

stranger promised, "if you'll tell me what I want to know."

The doctor shook his head wildly. His nerves were jumping all over his body.

"It took all my property," he said finally, "to buy off Sam and that tinhorn. They got Joe's, too, somehow, when he was dead. I couldn't stand it, mister, with Joe hauntin' me. When my wife died—I—I guess I just went to hell."

"You know damn well Joe ain't still hangin' around," the stranger insisted.

"Yeah!" Henry sighed deeply. "I got the D.T.'s once and thought Joe was with me. It scared the devil out of those three. They'd buy me liquor to shut me up . . ."

"That's what I thought."

The stranger took Henry's arm and led him to the little shack on the edge of town. The cabin was warm. In her bed the blonde girl slept, clutching her doll. Wrapped in a blanket on the floor was the boy, pillowing his head on his new boots.

"She's mine," the doctor said softly. "The boy is Joe's. I haven't been a good father . . ."

From an inside pocket the stranger pulled a full pint of whisky. Handing it to Henry he said, "Forget it. Forget Joe and the past. You're goin' to be a fine daddy from now on out."

* * *

On the way from the doctor's shack he discovered he was being followed. He pretended to ignore it, went on to the livery stable and made elaborate pretense of making up a bed in the hay. When he felt safe, he crept out again, stumbled through the deep snow to the little house where he had learned the sheriff lived. He opened the unlatched door and stepped inside. It was warm here. It made him sleepy.

Half an hour passed, or maybe an hour, when the sheriff, stamping snow from his boots, woke up his uninvited guest. When the lawman scratched a match to touch a lamp-wick the stranger was sitting in a chair leaned against the wall. He grinned broadly at the lawman's consternation.

"I thought you'd gone!" the sheriff gasped.

"I sorta reckoned you were the hombre

followin' me," the stranger said. "Only you had to stop in for another drink or six with your pals. Now just go ahead an' brush your teeth, or whatever it is you do, an' go to bed."

The sheriff's face was so white it looked frost-bitten. He put the chimney back on the lamp with unsteady fingers, dropped the burned-out match on the floor. The butterfly wing of flame showed only fear in his eyes.

"I looked you up, mister," he said. "I know who you are. But I didn't do nothin' when I could of. I was willin' for you to drift on out of town. I was only follerin' you because the boys said they bet you'd rob Bean's safe of that orphan money you got out of us."

"Just go ahead an' pretend you're goin' to bed," the stranger said. "Leave your guns on the table when you blow out the light."

The sheriff washed his fat face in icy water. Slowly he undressed down to his long-handled underwear. With his boots still on, he blew down the lamp-chimney. For a moment, he did not move. The room was dark.

"You ain't goin' to kill me in bed," he whined.

"Get in there an' see," the stranger suggested.

The big bulk of the sheriff was a shadow that drifted slowly toward the bed. He sat down heavily. Boots dropped on the floor.

The stranger said, "You don't have to look under the pillow. I already took the six-shooter out of there."

The stranger heard the sheriff's gasp of dismay. Except for the creak of bed-springs, and the sputter of wood in the stove, there was only silence in the little house for many minutes. When the sheriff spoke, his voice was very small.

"I didn't have nothin' to do with that Joe business!"

The stranger said, "Shut up and pull those covers over you. You always sleep with the windows closed?"

"It's too damn cold in this country for a single man," the sheriff said.

He still did not pull up the covers. He just sat there on the bed's edge. After a while it seemed that he was whimpering. Suddenly, he burst out:

"Honest to God, mister. I never—" His voice broke.

The stranger said softly, "Just take it easy, Sheriff, an' tell me the whole story. An' when you're through I'll tuck you into your little bed and kiss you good-night."

The sheriff was shivering so violently now he could not speak. It was quite some time before he started talking in a whisper . . .



IT SO happened that the stranger did not kiss the sheriff goodnight. In the first false dawn they were still awake, terribly cold. They had been waiting behind the Merchandise Mart and now it seemed that what they had expected was finally coming to pass. Two men emerged from the back door of the Longhorn. They came down the alley to the store and one of them remained outside while the other picked the lock and went into the rear room of the big building. Minutes dragged before the slimmer of the two men came back. He closed the door softly. When he stepped into the snow both the sheriff and the stranger could see that he was carrying a dark sack fairly heavily loaded. The men held a brief conference in whispers, then went back up the alley.

When they passed the Longhorn Saloon and disappeared through the manure gate of the stable, the stranger whispered to the sheriff. "You go in there and ask them what they're up to. Tell 'em you were snoopin' around lookin' out for that dinero but fell asleep an' thought you better come down to see if my hoss was still here."

He had to drag the lawman to his feet and push him on the way. They cut through to the street, walking silently in the fluffy snow. Quietly the stranger said, "You don't have nothin' to worry about. I'll be right behind you."

The sheriff did not take that comment as a word of assurance. He stopped moving, and his eyes rolled. The stranger prodded him on. When they came to the big front doors of the stable, with the little door in the corner of one of them, the stranger had to lift the latch. He shoved the sheriff over the high thresh-

hold, ducking low at the same time.

Through the sheriff's legs he saw the inside of the barn, the dancing of a bull's-eye lantern near the long line of stalls. He could not see the two men, only the glint of bright buttons on the cattleman's coat.

The light beam swung toward the front door. As it picked out the sheriff a voice said, "So it's you, huh?"

It was the gambler.

"Yeah!" The sheriff cleared his throat. He seemed to be getting steadier now, but he could not talk clearly. "Yeah—uh—it's me."

The gambler partly closed the window on the lantern. Stray beams from the back now showed the stranger his silhouette. He and the cattleman were backed against the heavy side of a stall, kneeling there with their heads down.

"You better get out of that doorway," the gambler whispered. "That feller's likely up in the loft. He robbed old man Bean. Me and Sam got to thinkin' about it. We came over here and found some of the dinero in his saddlebags."

The sheriff coughed. The stranger wondered what had happened to him. He was shaking worse than a quakie leaf. He was laughing silently, convulsively, overwrought with hysteria.

"What are you laughing at?" the gambler demanded.

The sheriff could not answer. The stranger spoke for him: "At me, gambling-man—the law an' I've been tellin' jokes to each other all night. We followed you down from Bean's."

The gambler froze. He could not see the stranger out there in the snow. His only guide was the man's voice. His gun flashed in the dim light. The stranger fired between the lawman's legs. The cattleman's gun spoke, it's bullet taking the sheriff high in the chest, smashing him back against the open doorway where he tumbled over on top of the stranger.

The stranger felt blood on his face and knew for the first time that the gambler had creased him. He tried to get up, to push off that awful weight of the sheriff, but the whole world was whirling, a sickness was in his stomach and he could not move. Dimly he was aware of frightened horses plunging in their stalls, of a bright light glaring ever brighter as the gambler

stalked him slowly across the barn floor.

Though he was buried in snow, the stranger began to sweat. In a minute now, in only a second, the tinhorn would have him. Then came a thin, quavering voice.

The gambler swung away from the stranger. A load of buckshot stopped him.

"And—one for Joe—" the voice had said.

The little doctor came out of the gloom. His enemies were dead. The sheriff alone among them still lived. He rolled the heavy lawman off his friend. The stranger sat up grinning, wiping blood from his face with fresh snow.

"My God," the doctor said, "I thought they had you. And it would have been my fault. I was lookin' for hell to bust loose. I was up there guarding that pile of hay that I thought was you. I must of gone to sleep. . . ."

* * *

A posse came through town that day looking for their man, and they found the doctor nursing the sheriff back to life.

The sheriff had spilled his story again to Henry, but Henry kept his mouth shut. The sheriff had told how Joe had been murdered for his valuable ranch land and how Henry had been double-crossed into thinking he had done the killing in a drunken fit. The sheriff had told everything.

But what was the sense of telling these men about Joe? Joe was dead and gone. The gambler was dead, too, and the cattle king was going to be buried with him. And the stranger who had wrought this miracle had drifted on.

The doctor looked up from his work as the posse crowded the door.

"Say," he said, "I'm busy. We got trouble enough of our own in this town without worryin' about the two-bit gunman you're chasing." The sun was dazzling bright on the snow outside. "Besides, if that feller is as smart and mean as you say he is, chances are he doubled back on you during the blizzard."

"That's an idea," a posseman said. "I'll bet he did. Thanks, Doc."

They hurried out over the back-trail.



THEY CALLED HIM COYOTE!

That night, when whiskey-shaken young Johnny Gleason lay out in the brush behind the ranch, he thought he was in the grip of a nightmare when he heard big Dane Rance talk him over with Dane's brother . . . "He's seen too much. He's goin'—like Todd Mosher went last night. Only quicker!" And Johnny shuddered, remembering Mosher's body, shot in the back, down near the big haystack. . . .

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HELL ON HEDWICK'S

CHAPTER ONE

Ambush Crossing

TROUBLE was shaping up at the Hedwick's Hill Crossing on the Llano. But a bunch of wild turkeys kept old Pearl Hedwick from noticing the play till the ball opened.

The sun had set upriver. Out over the

shoal waters, bats and mosquito hawks fed on insects, swooping and diving in the afterglow. Bullfrogs squatted back in the cockleburs under the pecan trees and cleared their throats for the coming night chorus. And a couple of hundred yards upstream from the crossing a bunch of wild turkeys flopped and yelped in a

Frantic horses plunged wildly, knocking water high. It was a complete wipeout.



HILL

A novelette of the vengeance trail

By FRED GIPSON

widespread live oak, whipping the branches with heavy wings, raising all manner of hell trying to get settled for the night.

On the north bank of the river, Pearl Hedwick sat hunched in a cowhide-bottom chair that leaned against his rock-walled river store. He sat there watching

the turkeys going to roost. A little old scrawny man, who sucked at a foul pipe and unconsciously tugged at the droopy horn of a gray mustache. His puckery blue eyes were alight with interest.

Some claimed Pearl Hedwick's past was veiled in powder-smoke. If this was so, he'd now reached the age where late

Bushwhack guns closed all trails leading away from Hedwick's Hill Crossing, where one man had slipped free from the cattle king's murder trap.



of an evening like this he got a lot of satisfaction out of just sitting and watching a bunch of fool turkeys go to roost.

There was the crack of an iron-shod hoof among the river boulders. Pearl Hedwick heard it above the clamor of the turkeys and the wash of the shoal waters among the rocks. Reluctantly he shifted his gaze from the roosting turkeys to watch Wade Stilson ride up out of the river on a big cat-footed roan. It wasn't until too late that Pearl Hedwick realized there ought to have been more than one rider crossing the river.



WADE STILSON was manager of the YO Ranch of the Hill Country Cattle Company. He was a tall, rangy man who rode a long stirrup and had a habit of looking back over his shoulder a lot. He pulled up in front of the store and sat his saddle while he reached for a cut of eating tobacco. He worried off a chew with long teeth and turned lazy, colorless eyes on the storekeeper.

"Howdy, Pearl," he greeted.

Pearl Hedwick nodded and didn't get up. The other kept gnawing at his cut.

Seven men rode out of the tangle of mesquite and prickly pear back of the store, headed across the river, the way Wade Stilson had come.

These were shirttail ranchers, with little two-bit spreads strung out up and down the Llano. Each, Pearl Hedwick realized, was a threat against the vast domains of the Hill Country Cattle Company. They were getting in that outfit's hair and they knew it. That's how come they'd taken to riding in bunches like this.

Young Beck Morley called out, "Ain't you knocked me a frying gobbler out of that roost yet, Pearl?"

Beck Morley knew those wild turkeys were sort of long-range pets of Pearl Hedwick's. The rest of the owners of the little outfits knew it, too. None of them ever tried for fresh meat at that particular roost.

Jeff Cramer rawhided, "Hell, Pearl couldn't get a gobbler out of that roost with a double-snouted cornsheller!"

Not a word or a glance went to the

rangy cattle company manager sitting on the big roan horse. The riders looked and talked right past him, as if he were a snubbing post.

They rode past. Trail dust lifted by their horses' hoofs hung suspended in the air. They rode single file into the cut that led down to water.

Wade Stilson stepped down out of the saddle then and headed for the store. He had to stoop a little to miss the door sill with his peak-crowned Stetson.

Pearl Hedwick got up and followed him inside. "What'll it be, Stilson?" he asked.

Wade Stilson said casually, "I'm cold out of chewin', Pearl. Better give me a double cut."

Pearl Hedwick recollected the full cut Wade Stilson had bitten into a moment before. He glanced up in surprise. The cattle company man looked at him blandly. That's when Pearl Hedwick remembered that he'd heard a group of riders approach the far bank of the river, but only one man had crossed.

He reached down a strip of tobacco from the shelves and felt a chill run up his spine. He turned and cut off a plug, inwardly cursing himself for not wearing a gun. He was handing the purchase to Wade Stilson when the first flat report of a rifle slapped angrily across the water.

Pearl Hedwick whirled to the window. A dozen streaks of fire speared the gloom that shrouded the tall cockleburrs on the far side of the water. The streaks reminded Pearl Hedwick of fireflies cutting swiftly through the darkness. But the hell of gun thunder shattering the peace of the river didn't bear out the picture.

It was over almost before it started. One minute seven riders were putting their horses through the shallows. The next, the riders were slipping crazily out of their saddles, to be rolled over and over by the swift water.

Frantic horses plunged wildly, knocking water high. Three horses gained the bank and tore through the cockleburrs, empty stirrups flopping. Out of the top of the widespread live oak came the spooked turkeys, dark shapes hurtling low and melting into the brush with startled cries.

It was a complete wipeout—unless maybe Beck Morley escaped. Pearl Hed-

wick had seen the flea-bitten gray young Morley rode wheel and plunge off into the deep water below the crossing. The horse had quartered off downstream, swimming like a smuggler. The storekeeper couldn't be certain, but he thought he'd seen Beck Morley hanging to a stirrup on the off side.

He turned to meet the eyes of Wade Stilson. The cattle company man stood with a faint, cold smile on his face. The cut of tobacco was still in his hand.

"How much will that be worth, Pearl?" he asked.

Pearl Hedwick's old slick-butted gun lay on top of the safe at the front of the store. Wade Stilson had a hand on his own gun.

The storekeeper shrugged. "Tobacco's cheap as two-bit cowmen, Stilson," he said. "That'll cost you a dime—right now!"



A COUPLE of months after that killing a lot of little cowmen had gone out of business along the Llano. They had gone out in a hurry and left the country on the run. And since might had come to make right in this section of Texas, a lot of them weren't considered two-bit cowmen any longer. They'd left the country with a price on their heads. A good big price.

It was the first of November when Dave Chilton drove up to Pearl Hedwick's store. He drove a pair of stocking-legged bays hitched to a double buggy. He had the top of the red-wheeled rig laid back. He handled his fiery team with a don't-give-a-damn recklessness. Dave Chilton was buggy boss of the Hill Country Cattle Company and he liked a lot of color in his clothes. He cussed the bays through the tricky river crossing and swung them to a dripping halt in front of Pearl Hedwick's store.

"Howdy," he greeted past the long cigar clamped between his teeth.

Pearl Hedwick was sitting in his usual place in the usual chair. He'd been watching those wild turkeys watering at the river. The young gobblers were long-legged, nearly grown now. It was about time they were whipping out the old

gobblers and all separating from the hens. The storekeeper was hoping he'd get to see part of that fight.

He turned to eye the newcomer. He'd seen the square-shouldered, blocky man only once before, but he'd heard him cussed as far up and down the Llano as he'd ridden in the last ten years. He noted Dave Chilton's flashy clothes, the set of his jaw, and the light in the hard gray eyes that seemed to bore right through a man. Pearl Hedwick knocked the ashes out of his pipe and replied.

"Howdy," he said.

Dave Chilton shoved down the brake with a heavy hand and wrapped the reins around the whipstock.

"Fine weather," he commented.

Pearl Hedwick nodded. "Fine weather," he agreed.

The two studied each other with faces as impassive as Comanche Indians.

"Business holding up?" inquired the cattle man.

Pearl Hedwick refilled his pipe and reached for a match. "It was better a couple of months back," he said. "The country was better stocked with people then."

Dave Chilton was silent a moment, then probed, "Hear tell a heap of gents have left the country recently. Some riding hard."

The storekeeper carefully touched a lighted match to his pipe and said nothing.

"I've been told," Dave Chilton finally continued, as if with reluctance, "that the big fight took place down yonder in the river."

Pearl Hedwick sucked in a lungful of smoke. "It wasn't," he said, "what you'd call a fight. It was murder! And it wasn't pretty."

"The way I heard it," said Dave Chilton, "it was a man-to-man scrap, with the chances about equal on each side."

There was a hard, peculiar light beginning to shine in Pearl Hedwick's puckered blue eyes.

"There was a dozen YO men laying yonder in them cockleburrs," he said. "All of them hid. They waited till this little bunch of cowmen were so close they couldn't miss. Then they opened up on 'em without a word." He stabbed his pipestem at Dave Chilton. "You can call

that a man-to-man fight, mister," he said, "but not in front of me. I called it murder and she goes as she lays."



THE buggy boss took off a fancy pair of buckskin gloves and carefully put them back on again.

"This Morley," he said. "The story goes that he wasn't killed. Seems he got away somehow."

He was watching Pearl Hedwick closely while he said it. The blue eyes of the storekeeper met his without wavering.

"There's a heap of stories go around after a killing like that," Hedwick said.

Dave Chilton nodded. "You're right there," he agreed. He released the brake and reached for the reins. "Well, I'll be getting along."

He touched a bay on the rump with his buggy whip. The team shot away in a cloud of dust.

When the rig was out of sight, Pearl Hedwick got up and went out to the stables back of the store and saddled a couple of horses. He rode one and led the other, heading upriver. An hour later he was squatted inside a cave where young Beck Morley was holed up to let a gunshot wound in his thigh knit together again.

"Beck," he told the young rancher, "you better be hauling your freight out of these parts. Dave Chilton's just pulled in, headed for Mason. Inquired about you. They'll be combing the brush for you like a squaw hunting lice now. He's hell bent on making it a clean job."

Compared to the general run of Texas men, Beck Morley was slight of build. He'd tip the scales at a hundred and a half, maybe. But what there was of him was all man. Tow-headed and eager of eye he'd been before the killing at Hedwick's Hill Crossing. Now his hair was a shaggy, streaked mane and there was a look in his eyes that made him appear older than his years.

The eyes softened as they looked past the storekeeper to where a good horse stood hitched to a hackberry. There was a Winchester stuck in the scabbard and the saddle pockets looked as if they held a bait or two of grub.

"What I haven't got figured yet, Pearl," he said, "is how come you throwing in with a newcomer like me. You've gone to a hell of a lot of risk, pulling me out of that river, hiding me out and feeding me till I'm able to make a run for it. I reckon you know I appreciate it. At the same time, you know how slim my chances are of paying you back."

Pearl Hedwick's old pipe rattled as he sucked it. He studied the pain-lined face of the young rancher sitting there before him.

"Beck," he said, "you'll learn before you're much older that you'll do a heap of things you don't expect to get paid for." He stuck out his hand. "Goodbye and good luck," he added. "I wouldn't be in no hurry to come back to the Llano."

CHAPTER TWO

Way Station to Hell

BY NOON the next day, Beck Morley figured he was far enough off the Hill Country Cattle Company's range to risk taking a rest. He'd thought that bullet wound in his thigh was about healed up. But every movement of his tired horse was a stab of agony now. And his strength was all gone. That two-month stretch of lying wounded in the cave had weakened him.

He found a seep-spring waterhole in a dry creek that drained into the San Saba. He watered his horse there. He filled his canteens and led his mount into a brush-choked draw back away from the water apiece. He unsaddled it, let it wallow the sweat off on a sandbar. Then he saddled the horse once more and staked it in the best grass he could find. Finally he slipped the saddle gun out of its scabbard and went back to the mouth of the draw, where he could watch his back-trail while he ate.

The pain in his thigh had subsided. The noonday November sun was warm. Insects hummed drowsily in the fall air. Beck Morley managed to get his cold biscuits and bacon laid out on a flat rock before he leaned back against the comfortable roots of a mountain elm and dropped off to sleep.

The shadows were long when he started awake. Someone was calling, "Hup! Hup! Whoa! Stand still there!"

Beck Morley's right hand had clicked the hammer of his Winchester back.

The voice lifted. "Hup! Hold it, partner. I'm friendly as all hell!"

The young rider looked up into the benign face of a stranger who leaned back in the seat of a dusty buckboard drawn by a pair of white horses. With a feeling of guilt, Beck Morley eased the hammer back down to the safety cock.

"You sort of spooked me, I reckon," he tried to explain.

The stranger was somewhere in his sixties. He was slight of frame and there was little sign of sun or wind on his lean features. White hair curled out from under a hard-crowned hat. He grinned down at the cowboy and his face was seamed with many little lines—some of them shrewd, all of them good-natured.

"A man," he chuckled, "who'll awaken a gent out of a good sound sleep deserves to get shot."

Suddenly the honest, placid smile of the stranger went out like a candle flame in a gust of wind. The head bowed and the body slumped forward to slide off the seat. The crashing report of a Winchester sounded among the shinoak brush from a ridgetop to the left.

Beck Morley sprang to his feet, swinging his saddle gun to his shoulder. The horses wheeled sharply, cramping the buckboard until the off hind wheel quit the ground. The stranger pitched out into the rock-littered creek bed. The lifted wheel came down with a crash and the horses lined out at a dead run.

The dying man raised himself to his elbow. There was a grisly smile on his face. "Well, I got shot, all right," he grunted. He choked suddenly and slumped to the ground. "Get—word—to—" His voice died to a dry whisper and he lay still.

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L EAD slapped into the elm back of Beck Morley's head and the bushwhacking Winchester spoke again. Beck Morley sighted movement along the top of the ridge and opened with two quick shots with his saddle gun. He saw a horse rear and go down. He didn't wait to see more. He whirled and tore into the brush-choked draw, headed toward his horse.

When a man's on the run and the stake in the race is his own life, he has to deny himself some things. Beck Morley would have liked to make sure of getting that ridgetop bushwhacker who'd committed murder before his eyes. But he'd been in the Hill Country long enough to realize that power does not always lie with those whose cause is right. Say that he got the killer and laid his body out beside the man he'd shot down. That could easily lead to complications that might bring a dozen lawmen out on his own trail. It had been a cold-blooded murder. But the man was dead now. No matter what the cowboy did, he couldn't bring the stranger back to life.

Beck Morley got his horse and rode east out of the draw, taking plenty of pains not to show himself against the skyline.



The sun was down when he remembered where he'd left what grub old Pearl Hedwick had stuffed in his saddlebags. The bacon and biscuits still lay on that flat rock, where he'd gone to sleep before he'd taken a dozen bites. The range hogs would get it tonight, and likely feed on the body of a kindly old stranger who'd died with a smile on his face.

Beck Morley shivered at the thought, then bent his course toward the stage-coach station at Camp San Saba. The cowboy hated to show himself at the station, even if the chances were all against anybody's recognizing him. Yet a man had to eat. And it was better to try for grub at night than in broad open daylight.

Night had shut in when he circled the station and approached from the north. The mud-daubed old log house was a blurred shape, soft as velvet against the blue night. A windmill rasped out a creaky complaint against a gentle breeze. Birds twittered drowsily in the live oaks beyond the cabin.

Beck Morley rode quietly toward the oaks, where he could hear saddle stock stamping in the pole corrals. He tied his horse there and strode toward a rectangle of yellow light that spilled out through an open door. He was on the steps before the dogs of the place heard him and bayed a half-hearted warning to the black skies.

Inside, three men and a girl sat at a long table that was adorned with a red-checked cloth. The girl was turned so that Beck Morley could see the profile of her face. It was a dead white in the light of the smoky coal oil lamp hanging from an overhead beam. There was a tenseness in her slender figure, as if she were containing herself only by supreme effort. Her hair gathered lamplight and reflected it like finely spun gold.

The pot-bellied man beside her was holding a knife-load of beans in front of a florid face while he complained about the price of blackstrap molasses.

"It's a confounded holdup, the price of blackstrap these days," he said and shoved his knife-load of beans into his mouth up to the handle.

By his talk, this one had to be the landlord, Beck Morley reckoned. The

pair opposite were busy sopping biscuits into plates of blackstrap and wolfing down the mess. They were paying the landlord no mind.

One was a burly man, thick-chested, with a bristle of black beard on his wide jowls. His companion was sandy-haired and his shoulder blades protruded remarkably from under his dusty shirt.

A couple of hard-cases, all right, Beck Morley figured, and noted the guns hanging to brass-studded belts around their waists. But hard-cases were common in these parts right now and Beck Morley had never laid eyes on these two before. He walked on in and called to the landlord to show him where to feed and put up his horse.

When the cowboy returned to take his place at the table, the two strangers regarded him in cold-eyed silence before they resumed their attack upon their plates. It was the sort of a meal a man could expect: scorched beans, soggy biscuits and mud-black coffee, all topped off with strong blackstrap lick that served as sweetening. The girl was picking at the edges of it; that was the best she could do.

In silence, Beck Morley long-armed a biscuit and looked up to catch the girl's eyes on his. There was a look in them that made him suck in a quick breath. It was as if she were crying out to him for help. A little later, when he glanced up and met those fearful eyes again, she said, "You ride in from the south?"

He suddenly felt the weight of every eye at the table turned on him with hard, cold suspicion. He shook his head and lied.

"No, from the north."



THE fierce regard of the two strangers held him for a second longer, then the men pitched into their grub again. Beck Morley wasn't sure, but he thought there was relief in those eyes as they turned away. He had a sudden premonition that these three—the girl and the two hard-case gunmen—were somehow involved in the murder he'd witnessed back yonder at that waterhole a couple of hours ago.

All of which, he told himself, cut no ice with him. He had plenty of tracks of his own to make and cover up. He wasn't biting himself off an extra hunk of trouble.

The girl finally stopped all pretense of eating. She shot a quick, fearful glance at the two strangers and half rose from her chair. When the two gave no sign of noticing her, she stood up and walked quickly across the wide room and entered a curtained door.

Beck Morley ate slowly and wondered what had brought her here. She did not belong to this country; he was ready to bet on that. There was about her a daintiness of manner and appearance that did not fit his idea of a woman used to the fierce sun and dry, burning winds of this rough, arid region. There was something in the idea of her, shut up in that room with her fear, that made the sorry food more tasteless than ever in his mouth.

He leaned back and rolled a cigarette. The others were smoking, and the landlord's complaint now was about the ungodly price of horse feed. Outside, the windmill groaned. The birds quit their roost in the live oak with startled cries, evidently disturbed by an owl. Somewhere to the south, wheels clattered over rocky ground.

Beck Morley's spine stiffened. He got up and tossed his cigarette into the black cavern of an empty fireplace.

"That high-priced lick calls for drinking water," he said to the proprietor. "Where'll I find it?"

Like he'd hoped, the water bucket was on the back gallery behind the kitchen. At a sign from the red-faced keeper, the cowboy stepped casually through the back door. He found a cedar water bucket suspended by a chain from a rafter. He rattled the tin dipper against the bucket while he listened to the creak and rattle of the approaching rig.

He heard the two strangers step out the front way and he moved quietly around the corner of the house.

It was the rig, all right, the same buckboard in which the kind-eyed old stranger had driven up to that waterhole. Beck Morley couldn't see much in the darkness, but he recognized the pair of white horses.

Wasn't likely there'd be two such teams in the same section of the country. He peered more closely. There was no saddle horse hitched behind the buckboard. So the man who drove it was the killer. Beck Morley had killed the bushwhacker's horse and the bushwhacker had caught the runaway team and driven it in.

"If I was smart," thought Beck Morley, "I'd have high-tailed it out of here before now."

If he'd had any doubts as to who the driver was, they vanished when he heard the man say in a sharp, rasping voice with an ugly edge, "What's he look like?"

"Young duck, with a shaggy mane of light hair." That was the big one with the bristles on his jowls; and he added, "Claims he rode in from the north."

"Like hell he did," the driver snarled. "Lying like he shoots—wild. Is he still inside?"

"Went out for water. Ought to be back by now."

They passed so closed that Beck Morley could have made a dead shot of it—and his hand was resting on his gun. The driver, a little man with a quick, sure step, walked in the lead.

They halted there at the corner of the house.

"You two go ahead," said the newcomer in a lowered voice. "If he ain't there, wait till he comes. One of you get on each side of him. Then if he makes a play when I step in, hand it to him."

The passion to kill surged strong in Beck Morley then. He slipped his revolver out. It was the sandy-haired man who saved the newcomer's life.

"What about the girl?" he asked.

Beck Morley stiffened. *What about the girl?* He lowered the gun.

"You're right, Arch," said the big-jowled man. "This has to be handled like eggs. She wasn't to see nothing. Nor hear it. And she's already scared out of a year's growth. She didn't swaller all that talk we handed her on the way down, if you ask me."

The newcomer swore. "Let her be scared," he jerked out savagely. "We've got to move fast, I tell you. We've lost too much time already. Taken me a couple of hours to catch this team, after that bird gunned down my horse. We've

got to polish it off here, quick. There's game bigger'n that fool lawyer up the road. You do like I tell you!"

They stepped toward the front door.

Beck Morley stood there at the corner of the house and thought of his horse in the corral. With any kind of luck, he could still saddle up and make a clean getaway. He could shake this bunch in a ten-minute run in the brush. What if there was a frightened girl involved? What was she to him? Where was the pay-off, if he did manage to get her out of whatever kind of jackpot she was in?

CHAPTER THREE

"To the YO Ranch!"

THE words of old Pearl Hedwick jumped out at him. "You'll learn before you're much older, Beck, that you'll do a heap of things you don't expect to get paid for."

Beck Morley gave the men time to get inside and eased toward the outside door of the girl's room. As he passed the kitchen, a man stepped out, almost in his face. The cowboy froze in his tracks. The man failed to see him, disappeared with a hurried step into the darkness.

"Belly-aching landlord," the cowboy told himself. "Hunting cover before the show opens. Price of lead's too high, I reckon."

It was slow going in the gloom. He had to take it easy. The slightest noise would tip his hand. He wished to hell the girl were out of the picture.

Inside the big room he heard a muffled curse. That raw-edged voice of the killer charged, "You've let that devil rabbit on you!"

He waited and heard the whisper of footsteps come outside and spread in the darkness.

He was almost at the girl's door when he first became aware of a blurred shape squarely in front of him, less than an arm's length away.

There was an instant when they stood fast, the two of them. And in the passing of that time, Beck Morley saw the glint of the other's weapon rising beside his belt. But he'd been the first to move. He brought up his heavy revolver in a

sweeping arc and chopped at the other's head with the barrel.

The blow sounded strangely loud in the night. The black bulk lurched toward him. He reached out to catch the falling man and ease him to the ground. In that instant the other's gun fired twice, pointing downward.

It was too late for caution. Beck Morley sprang for the door leading into the girl's room. Behind him, he heard a startled shout and the scuffle of running footsteps. He grabbed the doorknob and flung open the door.

The girl was standing in the middle of the room. Her eyes were fixed upon him, wide with fear. He noticed, even in this tense moment, how deep blue they were, almost as dark as violets. Her hands were clenched.

He whipped the door shut behind him. He got a blurred glimpse of the dingy, whitewashed walls, the fly-specked water pitcher, dilapidated washstand, the mean bed with corn-husk mattress. Then he was gazing into the eyes of the girl again.

"It's all right," he said soothingly. "I'm just trying to help out."

She merely nodded. But it seemed to him that suddenly the fear which had held her petrified was gone.

Outside a voice sounded. "He ain't dead yet!"

"Just as well be," whined that raw-edged voice, "for all the good he is to us now!"

There followed a long silence, then muffled whispers. "I tell you," one said aloud, "I heard the door to that gal's room shut!"

That was all Beck Morley caught, for the girl was moving toward him. It was the first time he had seen color come into her face. She made a quick motion of her hand toward the washstand. He understood instantly and squatted behind the piece of furniture. He heard the men at the door.

She stepped forward and flung it open. "What happened?"

Beck Morley could see her face in profile as she stood looking out into the night. Her lips were parted slightly and she was breathing hard. But her voice had been steady.

The men stood facing her, guns in

their hands. Before one of them could reply, there came a sound from behind the kitchen, where the landlord had taken refuge from stray slugs. Two of the men stepped quickly away.

"Anybody go past here?" It was the little killer, called Arch. He wore a flat-crowned hat and his bulging eyeballs gathered light like the eyes of a cat.

"There was shooting," the girl said. "Then somebody ran around the house. Was anybody hurt?"

The man did not wait to answer. He melted into the darkness. A moment later she closed the door and turned to Beck Morley.

The cowboy came to his feet. "We've got to move fast," he said.

He started toward the door, but she interrupted him. "Why are they after you?" she asked.

The cowboy let the question go, to ask one himself. "Do you know a man who came from here this afternoon? An old gent with gray hair, driving a buckboard and a white team?"

She gasped. "You saw him, then! You did come from the south!"

"I saw him," he admitted. "But too late. They got him!"

"Oh!" she said, and the color drained from her face. Panic showed in her eyes again.

"We can make it to the corrals if we'll be quick and careful," he said.

He started toward the door again, but she caught him by the sleeve.

"Wait," she whispered. She went to the door and opened it. She peered out for a moment. When she came back her lips were trembling. "There's one standing beside the main door with a shotgun. You can't go out now!"



BECK MORLEY stared at the floor. By himself, he still believed he could force his way out of this jackpot. But with the girl— He swore softly.

"I'm going to talk to him," the girl said. "Then you slip out. I'll meet you at the corrals." She left before he had time to protest or agree.

When he peered out a moment later,

he could see her in earnest, low-voiced conversation with the shotgun guard. She stood beyond the man, so that he had to turn his back to the door.

The cowboy stepped out and shut the door softly behind him. Another moment, and he was around the corner of the building and racing quietly for the corrals. His pulse hammered in his ears. Before, it had been excitement that gripped him. Now, it was fear—fear for this game girl who could play out her hand in spite of the terror she endured.

She was running when she finally came. Running and breathing in shuddering gasps. He stepped out and guided her toward the buckboard, swung her bodily up into the spring seat.

"*He's out this way!*" came the voice of the little killer, Arch.

Beck Morley leaped to untie the team. "Don't wait for me!" he commanded desperately. "Line them out and bathe their rumps with the whip!"

His sudden movement toward the team boogered the spirited animals. They reared back in fright, fighting the bits. He jerked loose the slipknot in the tie-rope and flung the slack line across the backs of the grays. They snorted, wheeled and bolted. He thought for an instant the vehicle would capsize. He leaped aboard, just as it righted itself. Behind him a .45 opened with a thin streak of fire. Lead struck a whirling wheel and whined off into the night. The grays quit the place, running wild.

The girl drove with her feet spread and braced against the dash, trying desperately to bring the team under control. The cowboy stepped across the seat and grabbed the reins.

They were headed south.

"Which way?" he called.

Her voice came to him through the noise of clattering hoofs and whining tires: "To the YO Ranch!"

He thought, "*My God!*" and began to saw the bits across the mouths of the runaways.

In the darkness, he could not see the road, only the blurred outlines of the brush that stood on either side of it. He held the team in the opening the best he could and let them run.

A wheel struck a boulder and the wagon

bounced high. The girl cried out. Beck Morley reached and grabbed her by one arm in time to keep her from falling. She slumped against him. He shifted the reins to his left hand and flung the other arm about her, holding her tight. She made no sound, and he could feel her pressing close against him.

After a mile, the team had settled down to a steady run. Beck Morley listened, but no sound came through the noises they made in passing. He waited for another mile, then pulled the team down to a walk, finally to a halt.

Far behind him, the silence of the night was disturbed by a faint sound, a dull throbbing beat, hardly louder than the drumming of the pulses when a man has been running hard.

The girl stirred. Beck Morley looked down at her and said quietly, "They're after us now."

He started the team again and thought, "They know which way we're heading."

The rig rolled down into a tree-lined watercourse. The streambed was dry and smooth with white sand. He swung the grays off the road, following the twisting course of the creek for half a mile. Then he pulled up to wait. One of the horses was still spooky. He kept pawing the sand and slinging his head.

Beck Morley handed the reins to the girl. "Hold the lines," he said. "I'll see if I can't quiet him down."

She took the reins without a word. He got down and approached the nervous gray, speaking softly. He held a hand over the muzzle of each animal, ready to clamp down and stifle a whinny when the riders passed. He was thinking of the girl's silent acceptance of each situation as it presented itself.

"Some women," he thought, "would be wanting to know what's up. She keeps shut and waits to find out!"

The pursuers rode past, burning the road. Gradually, the sound of their passing died away. Some time later, Beck Morley came back and took over the reins.

The girl said, "You were riding north. Now I'm taking you back. I haven't even thanked you."

"Up to now," he pointed out, "there hasn't been much time for conversation. You got folks at the YO?"

"My father, Dave Chilton," she answered. "He owns the ranch."

CHAPTER FOUR

When a Man Needs a Gun-Mate

SOMEHOW the girl's answer didn't even surprise him. He guessed he'd been expecting something like that all along. It seemed to fit into the string of cockeyed events of the day for him to be giving assistance to the daughter of the man who was combing the brush for him with a hangrope.

"How did this play come up?" he asked.

"What I know is little enough," she said. "You see, we live in Abilene. Father had been promising me a trip to the ranch. He was in San Antonio and sent me a wire to come on down, that he was driving through. When I got to Brady, his lawyer was there to meet me—Elliott Salters. The old man they killed this afternoon."

She drew in a sharp breath, but went on steadily, "Salters was to drive me through. But when we reached Camp San Saba this evening, there were three men there and they warned us about going ahead. They said an outlaw named Beck Morley was in the country, robbing and killing every time he could stage a holdup along the roads.

"So Salters advised me to stay there overnight. He said he'd drive on to Mason and get some of the YO hands to come back for me. He left, and then sometime later one of these three men left, following him. And there was something in the way the other two acted when they looked at me that made me afraid. Terribly afraid. Then—well, you came then."

Beck Morley was thinking of the dying words of Elliott Salters: "Get—word—to—" And what he'd overheard out there behind the kitchen: "There's bigger game than that fool lawyer up the road!"

He reckoned it had to be Dave Chilton they were all talking about.

He sat and stared to the south. They were scouring the brush for him down there. Already they'd run him off his own ranch. They were claiming he was a bushwhacker and holdup man. Dave Chilton was out after his scalp. Somebody was

after Dave Chilton's scalp. And here he was, trying to play hero to Dave Chilton's daughter!

"Father will thank you for this," the girl said. "He'll be as grateful as I."

Suddenly the cowboy laughed aloud. The water was getting too deep for him.

The girl gave him a quick, apprehensive look and he said, "We ought to make it to Harve Baxter's outfit by daylight. Him and his bunch'll see that you make it to the YO, all right. Me, I'm in a sort of hurry to get out of the country."

He swung the team out of the creek and back toward the road again. He could tell that the girl was studying him covertly. But she said nothing, and he was somehow glad that he didn't have to make further explanations.

of brownstone slabs cemented together with adobe mud and sitting on top of a ridge that erosion had cut down to the raw, red bedrock.

"Like where the buzzards have picked over a pile of bones," was the thought that entered Beck Morley's mind.

The girl stirred, came awake, and smiled up at him.

"We're nearly there," Beck Morley said.



HE COAXED the tired team up the rocky slope toward the house. He pulled up near a hitchrail. A mountain of a man with a bald head came to stand in the doorway and stare at them.

Walt Coburn and Fred Gipson, two salty Westerners who spin a stirring, dramatic story as deftly as they can drop a rawhide loop over the horns of a running steer, will head the all-star lineup of April BIG-BOOK WESTERN. No Western reader can afford to miss their two never-to-be-forgotten book-length novels: Coburn's "The Z-Lightning Strikes," and Gipson's "Half Interest in Hell." On sale February 19th.

Before morning the girl was asleep, nestled against him. The warmth of her body and the false feeling of security that the darkness gave him had him dreaming of things out of all bounds of reason. But daylight, and the sight of the ugly, slab-rock dwelling of Harve Baxter's, standing atop a bald ridge in the distance, brought him back to harsh reality.

From the best he knew by hearsay, Harve Baxter's Pitchfork spread was an ally of the YO outfit. The owner packed a lot of weight in this country. He ran a big tally of cattle and had a government contract to furnish beef for the soldiers at Fort McKavitt. The way Beck Morley figured it, Harve Baxter could hardly do less than take care of the girl and furnish a man a horse to get out of the country on.

But there was something about the bleakness of the unadorned ranchhouse squatting there on that bald, high ridge that sent a slight twinge of apprehension through the weary cowhand. Not a shade tree of any kind grew near the place. There was no grass in the yard, not a flower, not a shrub. Just a desolate pile

He offered no greeting, just stood and stared with eyes like two opaque marbles. They roved over the buckboard and team, its occupants, and on past toward the left flank of the brush-covered slope beyond, where the rattle of brush and the clank of iron on stone indicated the approach of two riders. Then he turned and spoke to someone within.

Beck Morley got down out of the wagon and reached for the girl. The big man was coming on out now. From behind the house came the rattle of hoofs, leaving on out.

The cowboy turned to find the big man smiling. That is, the lips were smiling; the eyes were as unresponsive as ever. The cowboy could feel anger boiling inside himself at this kind of reception for strangers.

"You're Harve Baxter?" he inquired coldly. The other nodded and offered a ham-like hand for shaking. Beck Morley couldn't see it. "This is Dave Chilton's daughter," he said. "She's in trouble."

"Dave Chilton's gal," Harve Baxter said slowly. "Well, now. Maybe you'd

better come in." But the opaque eyes had already left the pair and were searching the brush along the slope of the hill.

He turned and led through the door. The two followed. Inside, the house was as bleak as the outside. Almost as dirty. A huge saddle with a frayed blanket lay just inside the door. They had to step around it to reach the long pine-board table cluttered with dirty breakfast dishes.

"Ain't much of a place for women," Harve Baxter said. He motioned toward a closed door to the right. "You can go in yonder, Miss Chilton. I'll have the cook rustle you a bait of grub."

The girl started toward the door, then turned and held out her hand to Beck Morley. "Thank you for all you've done," she said sincerely.

His eyes were still on her as she went through the door. She smiled at him when she turned to close the door behind her. It was a wan little smile, it seemed to Beck Morley.

Harve Baxter slid a chair toward Beck Morley and straddled one himself, facing the back of it.

"Set," he invited curtly. "Let's hear the yarn."

Harve Baxter had a hard name. He appeared to be harder than his name. Beck Morley had it on horseback authority that the big cowman had thrown in with the YO's manager, Wade Stilson, helping to rid the range of two-bit ranchers. But, the cowboy figured, for that very reason, Harve Baxter would take care of the girl and see that she had safe escort to Mason. And that would get her off Beck Morley's hands.

"But that don't make me like the big devil," he thought to himself.

Briefly, he recounted the experiences of last night, leaving out his name and the urgency of his getting out of the country. Twice he was interrupted. Both times with the same question.

"See what iron the hoss wore?"

Beck Morley hadn't. He'd left in too big a hurry to see what brand was on the horse of the murderer at the waterhole. And darkness had hidden the brands on all horses at Camp San Saba.

"Too bad," said Harve Baxter. "Me, I sure would like to know who's back of this play. I'm a friend of Dave."

"He's lying about some of that," thought Beck Morley. "There's a nigger in the woodpile somewhere." He wished now he'd taken a chair that faced the door. He said, "That's how come I brought the girl here."

A Mexican cook came padding in with a plate of hot biscuits, bacon and eggs and set them before the cowboy. Harve Baxter rose.

"All right," he said. "I'll take care of the gal till I can get word to Dave."

Beck Morley reached for the plate of food, then swung suddenly around at the soft *clink* of a spur rowel behind him.



HE SAT there for a moment with a fork in his hand and silently cursed himself for a fool. In the doorway stood three men. One of them was the little raspy-voiced jasper with the bulging eyes who had killed the old lawyer at the waterhole. The other was the sandy-haired hard-case with the protruding shoulder blades. The third one, Beck Morley didn't know. But it was no trouble to read the brands of the horses all three had ridden in on. A Pitchfork was plain on the front shoulder of each.

"Now, Morley," ordered Harve Baxter, "you can lift that fork higher or lay it down and go for your gun."

Beck Morley turned his head and looked into the muzzle of the single-action revolver in the cowman's hand. Harve Baxter's face and opaque eyes registered a faint, pleased expression.

There was no reason for the next move Beck Morley made, only a cold, deadly anger that had to vent itself in gunsmoke. With a slow, deliberate movement, he rose from his chair and laid the fork down.

Behind him he heard a quick intake of breath. Then the door at the side of the room whipped open and Dave Chilton's daughter stood there with a double-barreled shotgun in her hands.

"Put those guns down," she said.

Her voice held near-panic, but the muzzle of her gun didn't waver.

Beck Morley couldn't see the men behind him, but he watched the face of Harve Baxter turn a dull gray.

The girl stepped forward. The color

was high in her cheeks now and there was a light in her eyes Beck Morley had never thought to see there.

"I called the wrong card," he thought. "She belongs to this country, all right." He said quietly, "Let him have it if he don't listen!"

The girl swept the weapon to her shoulder. The click of a hammer drawn back to full cock was loud in the silence.

"Put down that gun!"

Harve Baxter laid his gun on the table. Beck Morley stepped quickly aside and swung toward the three men in the doorway. His gun was in his hand now.

"Any of you birds got different ideas?"

The little bulge-eyed killer was the first to step forward and put his weapon down on the table. The other two followed.

Beck Morley reached for a Winchester that hung on a deer-horn rack over a door.

"There's horses outside, miss," he said.

"I can ride," she said.

One by one Beck Morley picked up the revolvers on the table and hurled them out an open window. Then he swung the Winchester on Harve Baxter.

"You can lead the way out," he invited. "The rest of you boys follow."

CHAPTER FIVE

Gunsmoke Jackpot

HE HELD them there with their hands reaching up into the early-morning sunshine while the girl mounted. Then he untied the two remaining horses, mounted one and spanked the other across the rump with the barrel of his Winchester. The riderless horse snorted and set a hard pace for the other two, headed for the trail leading down the canyon.

A Colt barked from the corner of the house. Evidently the Mexican cook was throwing in his two-bits' worth. Beck Morley couldn't see the man with a gun, but in his anger he swung up the Winchester and cut down on the three figures running around the corner of the house to the side where he'd tossed their guns. On the second shot, he saw one stumble and fall with arms outflung. He couldn't tell which one it was, but he hoped it was that little killer with the bulging eyes. He

heard the roar of Harve Baxter's voice. He caught the flash of a rider going up into a saddle at the corrals. Then the brush closed in and he could see no more.

The horses they rode were evidently grass-fed ponies with no bottom. The tail of the loose horse flew up in less than a mile. He cut off into the brush and quit the race. The other two were stumbling and breaking pace in thirty minutes. It was either slow up or run them off their feet. Beck Morley signaled for the girl to halt and pulled his mount down. They listened. If that horseman he'd seen mounting at the last minute were following they could hear nothing of him.

They swung off the trail into the brush, riding at a walk. Beck Morley frowned. The men without horses back there would naturally be delayed. They'd have to rope new mounts out of the corrals and saddle up. Maybe even hunt some out of a trap. But that rider he'd seen mounting a horse, where had he gone?

When a possible solution came to him, the creases deepened between his eyebrows. He and the girl were following the old government road toward Mason. Maybe it wasn't the shortest one. He had no way of telling. He didn't know the country up here. But he was willing to bet that other rider was headed for the YO. Beck Morley needed a fresh horse. He needed one badly. He turned toward the girl.

"There'll be a man ahead of us before we can reach the YO," he said. "And there'll be more behind us. I reckon the next best bet is to keep to the brush and head for old Pearl Hedwick's store on the Llano. Pearl will take care of you."

The girl's troubled eyes met his. "Baxter was supposed to be a friend of my father's, too," she said pointedly. "What's gone wrong?"

"Seems like about everything is wrong, miss," he said wearily. "I reckon Harve Baxter and his bunch was after scalp money. There's a right good price on my head." He didn't reckon he needed to tell her that it was her father who had put it there. "I'm ready to take off now and thank you for helping me."

There was color in the girl's cheeks again and a light in her eyes.

"That makes us even then, doesn't it?"

"Just about," he admitted.

"Then why," she wanted to know, "are you still bothered about what to do with me?"

His tired eyes swept over her with a quick, searching look, then strayed wearily toward the brush.

"Pearl Hedwick claims that lots of times a man does things without much reason back of it," he said lamely. "I dunno. Maybe you'd be a heap safer riding on to the YO by yourself."

"I doubt that," she said quietly. "Let's ride to Pearl Hedwick's store."

"Pearl Hedwick don't claim to be close chums with your dad," he said finally, "but he'll take care of you, like I said."

If the girl heard him, she didn't answer. The cowboy drew a deep breath and thought, "They'll get the word out. I'll have to keep on the jump for the next twenty-four hours. God, but I need sleep!"



OLD PEARL HEDWICK was puzzled. For better than an hour now he'd been sitting out in front of his store watching the grandest fight he'd seen in years. The two old gobblers belonging to that bunch of wild turkeys were game birds. They were making a stand-off fight to beat anything in the books. Just the two of them, out yonder on that grassy slope across the river, fighting off young gobblers by the dozens.

They were the fathers of these young gobblers. They'd helped to raise them. They'd spent the whole summer finding the youngsters the best feeding grounds, fighting off hawks, warning against snakes and other predatory varmints. And now they were making a desperate last stand against their own kind.

Either of them could have wiped out any five of the youngsters. But neither of them stood a chance to win against the dozens that cut and hammered at them from every side, with the noisy yelping hens urging the fight on. Their beaks were bloody. Their wing-blows were stunning. They were taking a heavy toll in blood and feathers from the young gobblers. But Pearl didn't have to guess the outcome.

It wasn't the fight that had Pearl Hed-

wick puzzled. All that was right and proper, according to the laws of nature that governed the lives of wild turkeys. What brought the old man out of his chair with a start was the suddenness with which the battle halted.

One moment, the clamorous bunch was mixing it in a fog of feathers. The next, all was quiet, and the birds were separating and sneaking off into the brush.

Pearl Hedwick couldn't see what had disturbed them. His eyes roved the bank, looking for a fox or bobcat. He glanced up. Not a hawk was in sight. Down there in the cockleburs beside the water he saw a willow sapling quiver slightly, as if maybe a range hog had brushed against it. He waited all of ten minutes, maybe longer, his puckered old eyes searching closely. The sun was nearly down.

Finally there was the rattle of buggy wheels along the old road south of the river. That would be Dave Chilton coming in from the YO line camp on Beaver Creek. Pearl had seen him pass with those high-stepping bays early that morning. But that couldn't have been the noise that had disturbed the turkeys. The rig had been a mile away when the turkeys had stopped their show.

A disturbing sense of apprehension that he could in no wise justify caused Pearl Hedwick to come out of his chair. He turned at the approach of a rider from the north. It was Wade Stilson on his big roan horse.

The YO manager pulled up. "Howdy, Pearl," he said.

Pearl Hedwick nodded and said nothing. The rattle of the approaching buggy suddenly sounded loud as it topped the last rise the other side of the river.

Wade Stilson took one quick look in that direction and stepped out of the saddle. He headed toward the door.

"I'll take another cut of that eatin' tobacco, Pearl," he said.

There was something too familiar about the whole set-up for Pearl Hedwick to let it pass. He followed the cowman inside. And while Wade Stilson stalked on down toward the counter opposite the tobacco shelf, the storekeeper stepped past the safe and lifted off a smooth-handled old .44 and slipped it into his belt.

"Seems like you've been fighting that

chewing mighty regular since Dave Chilton showed up," he remarked pointedly.

"Me'n Chilton get along," Stilson said harshly.

"That's what I'm driving at," said Pearl Hedwick. He thought, "I can't draw with him. I'll have to try something else."

He turned back toward the front door. "Help yourself to that tobacco, Wade. You know where it is."

"Where you going?"

Pearl Hedwick could feel goose pimples running horse races up and down his spine. He waited till he'd stepped through the door before he answered.

"To spring a death trap," he said and leaped sideways.



THE roar of Wade Stilson's gun was loud in the confines of the store. Lead shattered the frame of the sagging screen door Pearl Hedwick let fly behind him.

The old storekeeper surprised himself at the speed he picked up rounding the corner of the building. Inside, he could hear the pounding of Wade Stilson's boots headed for the door.

Pearl Hedwick halted. He caught sight of Dave Chilton's matched bays coming down the far slope of the river at a sweeping trot and planted two quick shots in the dust ahead of them. He saw the spirited bays rear up and fall back in fright. He flung himself to the ground at the corner of the building. He peered around the corner in time to see Wade Stilson come bursting through the shattered screen.

"Hold it, Wade," he called, and heard the angry snarl of Winchesters opening among the cockleburrs along the river.

Wade Stilson was a big rangy man, but he moved fast.

"You damned old meddler!" he lashed out as he came through the door.

Maybe it was cold nerve or maybe it was the anger of frustration that caused him to disregard Pearl Hedwick's leveled gun. He stabbed a quick shot at the old man lying there behind the corner of the house. The shot missed, and old Pearl Hedwick was pulling off his .44 when a shot from across the river cut through his

scrawny rump like a white hot knife.

His own gun exploded. But the involuntary lurch he gave when the rifle lead caught him kept him from seeing the results of his shot.

He lay there for an interminable time, it seemed to him, fully conscious, but paralyzed with an overpowering numbness. He couldn't even lift the gun in his outstretched hand.

He heard the savage bark of Wade Stilson's gun again and wondered that no lead came his way. There was a startled cry from behind the store, then the crashing report of a Winchester. The YO manager came into view then past the corner of the house, staggering backwards, his gun hand sagging. He turned suddenly and pitched face down in the dust not three feet in front of where the old storekeeper lay. There was an ugly hole in his back.

With a superhuman effort, Pearl Hedwick forced his muscles into action. He inched forward and peered around the corner. He saw Beck Morley dragging a girl from the back of a lathered pony.

Lead *spanged* against the building above Hedwick's head. He rolled sideways and called, "It's me, Beck. I'm a-comin' inside!"

But he couldn't make it. He managed to get to his feet, then his legs gave way under him. Beck Morley rushed out and dragged him to safety.

"You hit bad, Pearl?" he panted.

The old storekeeper saw the white-faced girl standing inside the store and grunted, "Hit in a damn bad place to talk about! Git me to that cot yonder by the winder and hand me a Winchester from that case under the counter. Hurry! They're trying to wipe out Dave Chilton!"

From the cot, he could lie propped up on his elbows and view the uneven fight across the river. One of Dave Chilton's bays lay dead in the middle of the road. The other had succeeded in overturning the red-wheeled buggy before kicking free of the harness and stampeding into the brush. Dave Chilton was squatted behind the overturned vehicle. He had a bucking revolver in each hand.

Beck Morley placed a loaded Winchester in Pearl Hedwick's hands and reached for the one the frightened girl was handing to him.

"What is it this time, Pearl?"

"Tell you later, boy," Pearl Hedwick said. "Watch this!"

He drew a quick bead on the top of an agitated cockleburr, dropped down to where the base of the stalk had to be, and squeezed off. The Winchester leaped and roared. There came a strangled cry and a man lurched up out of the ambush and pitched off into the water.

"That," said Pearl Hedwick, "is what you call shootin' 'em sight unseen!"

"My God!" Beck Morley cried. "That was Harve Baxter!"

"What'd you expect?" said Pearl Hedwick and quickly drew a second bead on a spot below the quivering top of a cockleburr. "This here's the payoff."

Beck Morley laid his rifle across the window sill and went to work.



THEY talked it over inside the store after sundown. Pearl Hedwick, lying belly down on the cot, with his spindly rump bound up till he couldn't wiggle it. Dave Chilton sitting in a cowhide-bottomed chair and feeding the old storekeeper whiskey out of a tin cup. Beck Morley sitting dumbfounded on top of a counter, with Dave Chilton's daughter, Merle, standing beside him.

Pearl Hedwick was generally known to be an outspoken man when cold sober. And now he was a little drunk.

"I'll drink the whiskey you feed me, Dave Chilton, because I ain't able to get up and get my own," he said. "But I want it understood here and now that I don't set much store by big cowmen. Never knowed one yet that wasn't as greedy as a razorback hog."

Dave Chilton chuckled, then sobered. "Maybe you've called my hand at that, old man," he said. "But it's nature with a man to fight for his own. Ever since I bought out the YO it's been a losing proposition. Rustling, Wade Stilson told me. And put the blame on the little cowmen hereabouts." He squared his shoulders and looked at Beck Morley. "I took him at his word. I played the fool there. There never was a buggy boss that wasn't a fool, I reckon. And the lives of the good men

my damn stupidness cost are done setting heavy on my shoulders."

He paused and handed Pearl Hedwick another drink. "It was a couple of months back—when I learned of this first affair at Hedwick's Hill Crossing—that I made up my mind to take hold myself. Aimed to straighten out things and weed out the rustlers. Clean up matters in general. So the first thing I done was to hire me a good lawyer—Elliott Salters.

"It took me just two days after I got here to find out I'd been made a fool of. I got the lowdown today, from that spotter I had out at the line camp on Beaver Creek. He showed me where it was my manager, Wade Stilson, that was rustling me clean. Him and Harve Baxter. Filling Baxter's government contract for beef at Fort McKavitt.

"The only trouble was, Wade and Baxter saw how the land lay and had their own scalps to save. They were expecting me to show up with Salters and my daughter. They overplayed their hand there, and then young Morley here threw a wrench into their playhouse. So they laid a second trap for me here. I reckon, Pearl, you and young Morley know how much I appreciate your stepping in."

Pearl Hedwick grunted. "I reckon you know," he said, "that you're fixing to lose a girl to this same gent you run out of the country with a price on his head."

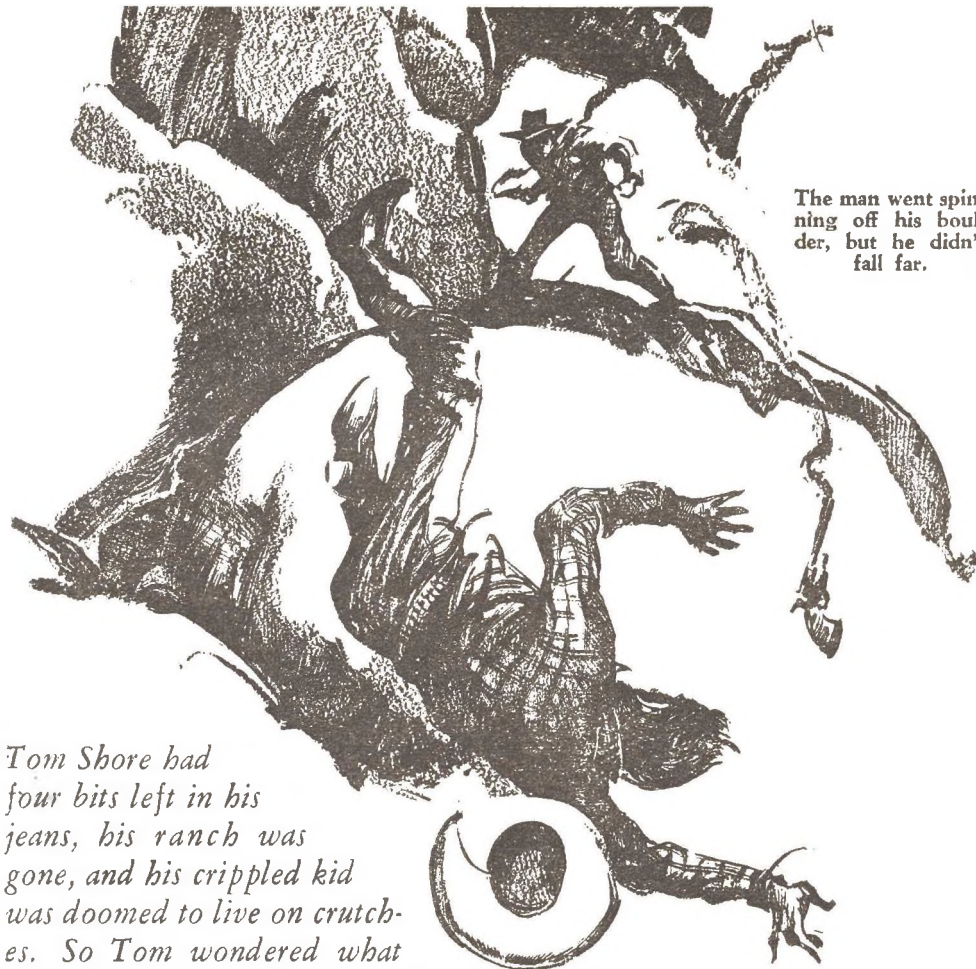
That stopped Dave Chilton for a second, shocked him cold sober. He jerked his chair around to stare at them.

"No," he said. "No, I didn't know that."

His bold eyes were boring into Beck Morley, searching him out. Finally, he got to his feet, studying his daughter's face, and saw the truth.

"Well, I'll say one thing for the young devil, girl," he said. "He's a fighter."

"Speaking of fighting, now," put in old Pearl Hedwick. "You hang around here till tomorrow, and you'll see some fighting. There's a bunch of young wild gobblers roosting across the creek yonder that's whipping their papas out of the bunch, and the scrap them two old boys is putting up beats any gunfight you ever laid eyes on. Hand me another cup of that likker, Dave Chilton!"



The man went spinning off his boulder, but he didn't fall far.

Tom Shore had four bits left in his jeans, his ranch was gone, and his crippled kid was doomed to live on crutches. So Tom wondered what to do: Get stinking drunk—or bet his life against a stagecoach fortune!

BOSS OF DAMNATION RANCH

By KENNETH FOWLER

LET'S SEE, now. . . ." Tom Shore tried vainly to get his old light-heartedness into this game Johnny and he played. . . "we need flour and beans and some side meat—" He paused, scratching his head as if in puzzlement. "Seems like I'm forgettin' somethin'."

Johnny, standing pathetically in the doorway on his home-made crutches, grinned in delight.

"Pep'mints!" he shouted. "Remember,

dad—you promised me, next time you were goin' to town?"

"Well, what do you know? And I nearly forgot 'em."

Tom Shore forced a grin in spite of the sharp lump that was cutting his throat. He mounted his chestnut—a well-built, young-looking man, with blade-keen blue eyes set in a flexible, deeply tanned face.

"Adios, dad," Johnny cried. "Any bears or buff'loes come by while you're away, I'll give it to 'em a-plenty!"

It was another standing joke between them.

Tom Shore swung the chestnut up out of the ranchyard. The lump in his throat became a savage, gnawing pain as he reached the top of the ridge and looked back. Johnny was still standing in the doorway and now, as Tom turned, he waved, pitifully, with one crutch.

Bitter resentment flooded Tom Shore. He remembered the complacent words of Chad Hamilton, the bank president. "Sorry, Shore, but I've already given you two extensions on this note. I can't do any more for you. It wouldn't be good business."

Good business! That was all Hamilton had to think about. He didn't have to think about a twelve-year-old crippled boy. A boy who had to have an operation on his leg and have it damned quick, the Doc had said, if he was ever going to do any better than hobble around on crutches for the rest of his life.

And this was the day the bank was supposed to serve the dispossess papers on him. This was the day the notices would go out, advertising the Muleshoe for sale. A man could take a knock like that, Tom Shore reflected somberly, if there was just himself to be thought of. The ranch was not so important—except as a means of making enough money to send Johnny away for that operation. The kid had to have that; he *had* to.

But how was he to get it for him without the Muleshoe? Why didn't he give up trying, just forget about the whole damn thing and admit he was licked? Without the ranch, and without any collateral on which he could negotiate a loan, he didn't have a leg to stand on, and was a fool if he thought he had. About the best he could hope for would be to get a job as an ordinary cowhand some place—and trust to luck that they'd let him keep Johnny there with him.



HE RODE on, his thoughts keeping this somber trend, and a half hour later hit the rutted wagon road of Custer Junction's main stem. He racked his horse in front of Ace Coogan's Blue Chip and strode abruptly inside.

Ace Coogan stared at him in surprise as he went up to the bar and ordered a straight whisky.

"Thought beer was your drink, Tom," he ventured mildly.

Tom Shore downed his drink without answering. Then he said, "Guess that brand'll do. I'll take a bottle of it."

Ace had known him a long time; and Ace took the privilege of that long acquaintance.

"Bank's finally called you, has it? Think of Johnny, Tom."

"Damn it, you're in business to sell this stuff, aren't you?"

Ace shrugged, turning for a bottle.

He pushed it toward Tom Shore, across the bar.

"Your choice, Tom. But it'll all be back with you again, tomorrow mornin'."

"By tomorrow mornin'," Tom Shore said, "the bank'll have my ranch."

He picked up the bottle and glass and carried them to a table at the back of the room. He sat down and took a drink, then another. A pleasant warmth crept through him, and he felt the pressure inside him beginning to ease. About to pour his third drink, he had a sudden startled awareness of the words that were floating out over the transom to him from the saloon's private back room.

"Okay," a voice was saying, "we'll roll with it tomorrow, then. I'll dig up another shotgun guard someplace."

Abruptly, there was a sound of chairs scraping back.

"Too bad about Ed Moore, though," a second speaker said, and Tom Shore started as he recognized the voice of John Sordelet, superintendent of the Big Yankee Silver Mine at Placerville. "Ed was a good man," Sordelet's voice rumbled on. "You could always depend on him."

"Sure, Ed was all right."

On impulse, Tom suddenly dropped his head to the table just as the door behind him swung open.

"But don't you worry, Mr. Sordelet. I'll get somebody that'll be just as—"

Tom froze as the speaker broke off. A heavy hand had fallen to the back of his collar. In the next instant the hand was a tight fist, with a thick wad of his shirt twisted up inside it. He felt him-

self jerked upright by that big fist.

Heart slugging, he peered up blankly into the narrowed, hard-staring blue eyes of Great Dawson, driver for the Dakota & Great Western Stage Company.

"Huh!" Dawson said. "So it's you."

With deliberate contempt, the stage driver pushed Tom's head back against the table. "Come on," he said abruptly to Sordelet. "Just Tom Shore, sleepin' one off."

Tom waited until he had heard the swift dying out of their footsteps, then, still without lifting his head from the table top, swung his glance across the nearly deserted barroom to the motionless batwings. They had gone.

He shuttled his gaze to Ace, but Ace had been busy with a couple of customers and apparently hadn't noticed him. Rising, he walked quietly out.

His head felt a little fuzzy from the unaccustomed whisky and he made his way around to the pump in the side yard. He worked the pump handle until a gurgling sound came from the pipe; then as the water suddenly gushed out, he bent over and bared his head to its icy shock.

Gasping, he straightened, feeling a tingling refreshment all the way down to his toes. His head was clearer now, and he felt steadier on his feet. He brushed the hair from his eyes where the water had plastered it down over his face and walked back to the hitchrail.

Mounting, he swung the horse out into the hot, dusty center of the street.

Was he loco, to be thinking of a thing like this? But why was it so loco? Society had done nothing for him.

Ahead, a sudden hum of voices reached him from the doorway of Mack Harvey's livery stable. The sound pulled his eyes that way; and as he looked, he felt himself stiffen involuntarily. Two men stood talking in front of the stable's big open doorway—Hinch Dawson and Jim Huck.



TOM PULLED even, but neither of the men noticed him and he heard Jim Huck say, "Okay then, Hinch, I'll see you first thing in the mornin'," and at that moment Huck turned away and moved up toward the

boardwalk. Hinch Dawson had already disappeared inside the livery stable, and Huck gave Tom a preoccupied, unrecognizing glance as he swung away.

A startling thought stuck in Tom's mind as he rode on. Could Jim Huck be the shotgun guard Dawson was hiring to take Ed Moore's place? Huck had never held a decent job in his life, and he'd been mixed up with a pretty bad element at one time. No, that couldn't be it. And yet Huck had used the words, "First thing in the morning." Suppose. . . .

Tom stiffened, and for an instant his glance was abstracted. Then he suddenly remembered about Johnny. The peppermints. He'd almost forgotten them. With an exclamation, he angled his horse across the road to the hitchrack in front of Jim Lyddane's general store.

He went into the store and ordered a piece of bacon, two pounds of beans and some flour.

"And a sack of pep'mints," he added. "Those chocolate-covered ones."

Outside, packing the provisions into his saddlebag, the realization hit him that his purchases had left him with exactly fifty cents in his pocket. Well, this was the finish. Unless. . . .

His mind picked up its former thought. And suddenly a hard gleam tightened his eyes, and he urged the chestnut on.

It wasn't, however, until a half hour later that he crossed the brushy ridge that brought the low, log-sided ranchhouse into view, and then he saw with surprise that there was a horse racked in front.

He pointed his own pony down the slope toward it, suddenly annoyed, as he always was these days, at the thought of a visitor. Then the door opened and he saw Sheriff Dan Kessler. Kessler had come out and stood waiting beside the doorstep, a tall, compactly built man.

Now, Tom saw Johnny hobbling out behind the sheriff, and as he came closer, the boy unexpectedly flipped up one of his crutches and waved it excitedly.

"Dad, lookit!" he cried. "New ones!"

A quick anger flared in Tom Shore, causing him to ignore the boy and keep his stiff glance on Dan Kessler. He stepped down from the chestnut, and as he moved up to the doorstep Kessler said, "Sorry, Tom. The notice is inside."

"I expected it. You don't have to hang around and explain anything."

"Know that, Tom." The sheriff's voice was gently deliberate. "Just thought you'd like to know one thing. The bank's going to give you plenty of time to move out. I spoke to Chad Hamilton—"

Abruptly, Tom Shore whipped his glance to Johnny. "Go inside, Johnny. I'll be with you in a minute."

The boy stared at him blankly. "But dad, I thought you'd like to see my new crutches! Mr. Kessler—"

"I said to go inside, Johnny."

The boy gave him a quick, hurt glance, then obeyed.

Tom Shore turned to the sheriff. "He didn't know about the bank. I wanted to keep it from him as long as I could."

"Sorry, Tom. If I'd have known—"

Tom Shore cut in bluntly: "And I wish you hadn't brought those crutches. It only reminds him that he's a cripple."

Dan Kessler's tone was gentle. "As long as he has to use them anyway, a good pair won't hurt him, will they?"

"But damn it, he's not gonna need those things forever! Doc says he could have an operation that'd let him walk as good as anybody!"

"I know, Tom." Dan Kessler spoke gravely, sympathetically. He anchored his foot in a stirrup and hoisted himself up to his buckskin. Then, looking back at Tom Shore, he said, "I like that boy, Tom. I'd like to help him—and you, too."

Angry confusion stifled the words Tom Shore wanted to speak, crushed them back as he watched Dan Kessler wheel the buckskin and move slowly out of the yard. For a moment, a hot feeling of shame swept him; then his jaw clamped, and he turned, striding abruptly into the house.

Johnny wasn't in the living room and Tom walked across to the door of the bedroom, a sudden apprehension gripping him.

Johnny lay stretched out on the bed with a blanket drawn up over his face. Underneath it, Tom Shore could see his shoulders shaking.

"Johnny! Son!"

Abruptly, the boy turned his head, plunging it down fiercely into the soft hollow of the pillow.

"Son, listen to me! What's the matter? Come on, now, you don't want to be like this."

The boy's words came muffled, from under the blanket. "I—I heard what the sheriff tol' yuh about—about movin' out. You never tol' me—"

"I know, but shucks, you don't wanta worry about that. We'll be gettin' us a bigger place, you wait and see. And we'll be sendin' you along soon now to that big Eastern specialist."

The boy twisted around at that, his red-rimmed eyes staring up at Tom Shore.

"You're jes' sayin' that," he blurted finally.

Tom Shore's voice thickened. "Nope. I've got a deal comin' up, Johnny. Things ain't as bad as Kessler thinks. You wait. I'm gonna have the money to send you to that Eastern sawbones quicker than you think."

"Gee!" Johnny's eyes glistened. "Gee, I didn't mean to be no cry baby, dad. But —" And his glance fell on his stiffened right leg.

A lump rose piercingly in Shore's throat. "All right, but how about comin' out now and helpin' me unload my saddlebag? Of course, I'm not promisin' for certain, but if you looked around you might find some pep'mints—maybe even some chocolate covered ones."



TOM SHORE rose next morning before Johnny was up. He ate a quick breakfast of cold johnnycake and jerky, then went over to the closet next to the fireplace and took out a pad and pencil. He scribbled: "Johnny, Am off to see about that deal. You look after things, and I'll be back soon as I can. Dad." Then he tip-toed into the room where Johnny lay, still sleeping.

The boy's breathing was quiet and easy, his thin, freckled face composed peacefully. Tom silently moved up to the bed. Canted at the head of it, like ugly sentinels, were the home-made crutches. Tom's lips drew tight as he looked at them. Then, abruptly, he dropped the note on the table beside the bed and hurried out.

It was a two hours' ride to Big

Boulder Canyon, but Tom Shore kept his chestnut down to a walk, aware that there was no need to hurry. The stage didn't start from Custer's Junction till nine o'clock; it would be at least an hour before it reached the canyon, the one point on its route to Placerville where the narrow trail would force it to slow.

But now, as he rode, Tom Shore's mind was increasingly troubled. He had never attempted anything like this before. True, he had made plenty of mistakes in his life, but they were the sort of mistakes all men made, at one time or another. Mistakes of judgment; never anything intentionally dishonest. He stared ahead, abstractedly. Well, it still wasn't too late to change his mind. Why didn't he just turn around and go back to Custer's Junction? At Ace's, there would be one sure way of forgetting.

Suddenly he was remembering Ace's words of yesterday. "Feelin' sorry for yourself and gettin' pie-eyed drunk ain't gonna help yuh none." And: "If you didn't have that kid. . . ."

Johnny; sure, Johnny was the only thing that mattered. Johnny was back there at the Muleshoe waiting for him, trusting in the promise he had made. And there would be a three or four thousand dollar mine payroll in the boot of that stage today.

He went on, but in spite of this thought, his mind remained troubled. Where he was now, there was only the prairie's soft undulations, but ahead of him he could see the beginning of lava rock, sharp crusts that edged out into the trail and would, soon now, lead him to the mouth of Big Boulder Canyon.

He reached the beginning of the long up-grade into the canyon; at the top of this the stage horses would be slowed to a walk, and then would be the time to make his play. And there was a high rocky shelf where it would be easy for him to throw down with his rifle on Jim Huck.

But suppose something went wrong; suppose he was caught? What would happen to Johnny then? The thought turned him sick.

He was nearing the rock shelf now, and all at once he stiffened, reining in his horse to an abrupt standstill. From up ahead, somewhere, there had been a

muffled sound of horses' hoofs. Swiftly, he dismounted and led the chestnut into a thicket of mesquite beside the trail. The sound of the hoofs became distinct; then it stopped, and in the next moment something blindingly bright flashed against his eyeballs and then was gone. Stiffening shock ran through Tom. That had been the reflection of sunlight on gun-steel.

Tensed, his glance ran ahead to the rimrock. And then he saw the two dark shapes that lay flattened on its top.

The irony of this struck Tom and the tightness went from his mouth momentarily and his lips traced a wry line of humor across his face. Well, he thought, why not? Let those two do the dirty work for him. And then. . . .



QUIETLY, TOM back-tracked to the mouth of the canyon, leading his chestnut by the bridle. After that it took him fifteen minutes to get where he wanted, but when he did, he had a grandstand seat. His horse was out of sight, picketed several yards in back of him, behind a boulder. And from his observation point above the rimrock, he could watch both the two men on the ledge below him, and the trail itself.

He concentrated on building a cigarette, his mind confused, his feeling still one of harassing uncertainty. He smoked the cigarette through, then made and smoked two others before the dull rumble of a heavy vehicle coming up the canyon whipped him into alertness.

The stage was rolling along rapidly; but as it neared the half way point of the grade the horses could not maintain the pace and began to lean harder against the hames, slowing. Now, Tom was able to recognize the thick, solid shape of Hinch Dawson in the driver's seat; and beside Dawson, shotgun braced across his knees, sat Jim Huck.

Tom tried to draw a full breath into his lungs, but felt it blocked by a sudden tightness in his chest. The horses were almost to the top of the grade now, moving at a plodding walk. Then, just as he was wondering if the men below him hadn't decided to let it pass unmolested, he heard the sharp command from the shelf.

"All right, driver, stop those horses!" Then, punctuating the command, the abrupt slam of a shot.

Tom tensed, and at the same moment saw Jim Huck jerk up his shotgun and fire. Instantly, two shots replied from the shelf, and Huck dropped his weapon and with a spasmodic movement slapped up a hand to his right arm.

"That was just a sample," warned the voice from the rimrock. "Now throw out that money box, driver!"

Hinch Dawson glared toward the sound of the voice. "You're a pair of damn' fools," he flung out, "if you think you'll get away with this!"

A voice from Tom's right said softly, startlingly, "They won't get away with it. Put up your hands, boys," and then, as Tom turned, he saw Dan Kessler. The sheriff was walking out from a boulder, his gun up and steady, braced against his hip.

Tom saw the outlaw nearest him, a little screened by the rock he lay flattened against, jerk up his Colt and fire over the top of it. Dan Kessler seemed to sway a little as he fell back. The man went spinning off his boulder, but he didn't fall far. Then Tom was standing out in full view, and his command rang with a kind of angry vehemence.

"You boys are cross-ripped. Now throw down those guns!"

He started walking toward them, picking his way carefully down the slippery grade, and though he had one swift thought that this was the end of hope for Johnny, he went on.

Both of the hold-up men had thrown down their guns, now; one was squatted on a rock, paying attention only to his wrist, which Kessler's bullet had apparently broken.

Tom saw blood on Kessler's sleeve, but the sheriff paid no heed to it as he moved across to the two men and, without speaking to either, snapped handcuffs on them. Then he looked at Tom.

"Howdy, Tom," he said, without surprise. "Appreciate what you did."

Tom said, confused, "You're wounded," and that was all.

"Only a nick. Come on, let's herd these hombres down to the stage. One of them could use a doctor."

They moved their two scowling, sullen prisoners before them, down the steep bank to the trail.

Hinch Dawson, at their approach, put out a stiffened leg from the driver's seat and came down, leaving Jim Huck on top alone. He gave Tom a look of staring surprise; then, nervously, his glance crossed to Dan Kessler.

"We'll carry 'em in for you, Sheriff," he volunteered. "Didn't have no passengers today."

Dan Kessler said, "One of them is hurt. I'll go along." He turned. "Tom, you could take my horse back to town."

Tom sensed sudden agitation in Dawson. "But you wouldn't have to do that!" the driver broke in. "Jim can ride down. He can watch them for you."

Kessler's voice was dry. "Don't seem like Jim has done such a very good job so far."

"But he got it in the arm," Hinch Dawson said quickly. "We'd have done all right, wasn't for that."

Tom spoke in a whisper to the sheriff: "Hold it a minute," and moved idly in front of the horses to the opposite side of the stage. The sun glittered on the small object he had seen, and it flashed brightly as he bent and picked it up. Dan Kessler gave him a waiting, inquiring look as he came back.

"You'll take my horse along then, Tom?"

Tight-lipped, Tom shook his head, staring at Dawson. He said, "Seems like you got that bandage on Jim Huck's arm right pronto, Dawson. Nice pretty white one too, ain't it?"

"What the hell do you mean?" Dawson cried. "I always carry bandage in case of trouble."

"Oh, sure," Tom Shore said, softly. "But that wouldn't account for the bottle of red ink."

Dawson paled, tensing. "Ink! You must be drunk! Sheriff, if you're gonna waste time listenin' to a—"

"Just a minute, Dawson." Sharply, Kessler looked at Tom. "What is it, Tom?" he asked quietly.

This bottle that had red ink in it." Tom took it out of his pocket. "Found it across the road, there," he went on. "I just thought you might like to ask Jim

Huck to take off that bandage so we could see if—”

There was a sudden pistol-like report and the horses lunged in their traces.

Dan Kessler jerked around, yelling: “Hey! Stop those horses, Huck!”



TOM'S breath jammed, but he had a clear, instant awareness of two things: Jim Huck, turning in the coach seat with the shotgun swiveling in his hands; and the quick movement of Hinch Dawson's hand toward his hip.

“Hold it, Dawson!” he clipped, and then from his right heard the hammering concussion of Dan Kessler's Colt. The shotgun's blast didn't come, and, warily, he walked to Dawson and took the gun from his holster.

Then he glanced around. The stage had stopped a few yards up the trail, and now Tom saw why. Jim Huck, falling from the high driver's seat, had somehow kept a grip on the reins. He lay tangled in them beside the right front wheel of the coach, unmoving.

Dan Kessler, with the still hot sixgun lowered against his side, turned slow, wise eyes back to Tom Shore.

“Huck and Dawson too?” he said.

“Huck and Dawson,” Tom nodded.

Hinch Dawson's mouth split to angry words. “You're loco!” he exclaimed. “How could I—”

“Shut up,” Dan Kessler said, evenly. Then: “Watch him, Tom,” and walked up the road to Jim Huck.

After a minute, he came back. He said, “Huck's dead. But you were right, Tom. There's no wound where that bandage was put on,” and he swung tight eyes to Hinch Dawson.

“Caught up with you, eh, Hinch?”

“You'll have a job proving this,” Dawson sneered. “No court—”

“You were careless, Hinch,” the sheriff interrupted mildly. “Spilled some of that ink on your hands. And Jim Huck never tied on a bandage like that all by himself.”

He motioned to Tom. “Some rope on top of the stage, back there. I only had two pairs of handcuffs; have to tie Daw-

son up. Then we can hogtie the lot of 'em and ride back in peace on the driver's seat.”

In ten minutes they were done and had the big coach swung around and headed back towards Custer's Junction.

Neither spoke, for a long space. Then Tom murmured, “Mighty lucky, your just happening by like this, Sheriff.”

“Can't claim it was lucky, exactly. Just a fool mistake I made,” Kessler said.

His glance drifted off, then came back to Tom, narrowing. “Took a crazy notion,” he said, “that you were fixin' to do that hold-up yourself. Loco, wasn't it?”

Tom's attention swung suddenly back to the horses. “Yeah,” he murmured. “Wonder what gave you that idea?”

“Johnny,” Dan Kessler answered. “Stopped by this morning to see if I could do anything for the kid—in case you weren't there. Well, he showed me that note you'd left. And he told me about that big deal you had on.”

The silence lengthened again, had little pulses that beat in Tom Shore's head. Finally he said, “You've guessed anyway. I might as well tell you that—”

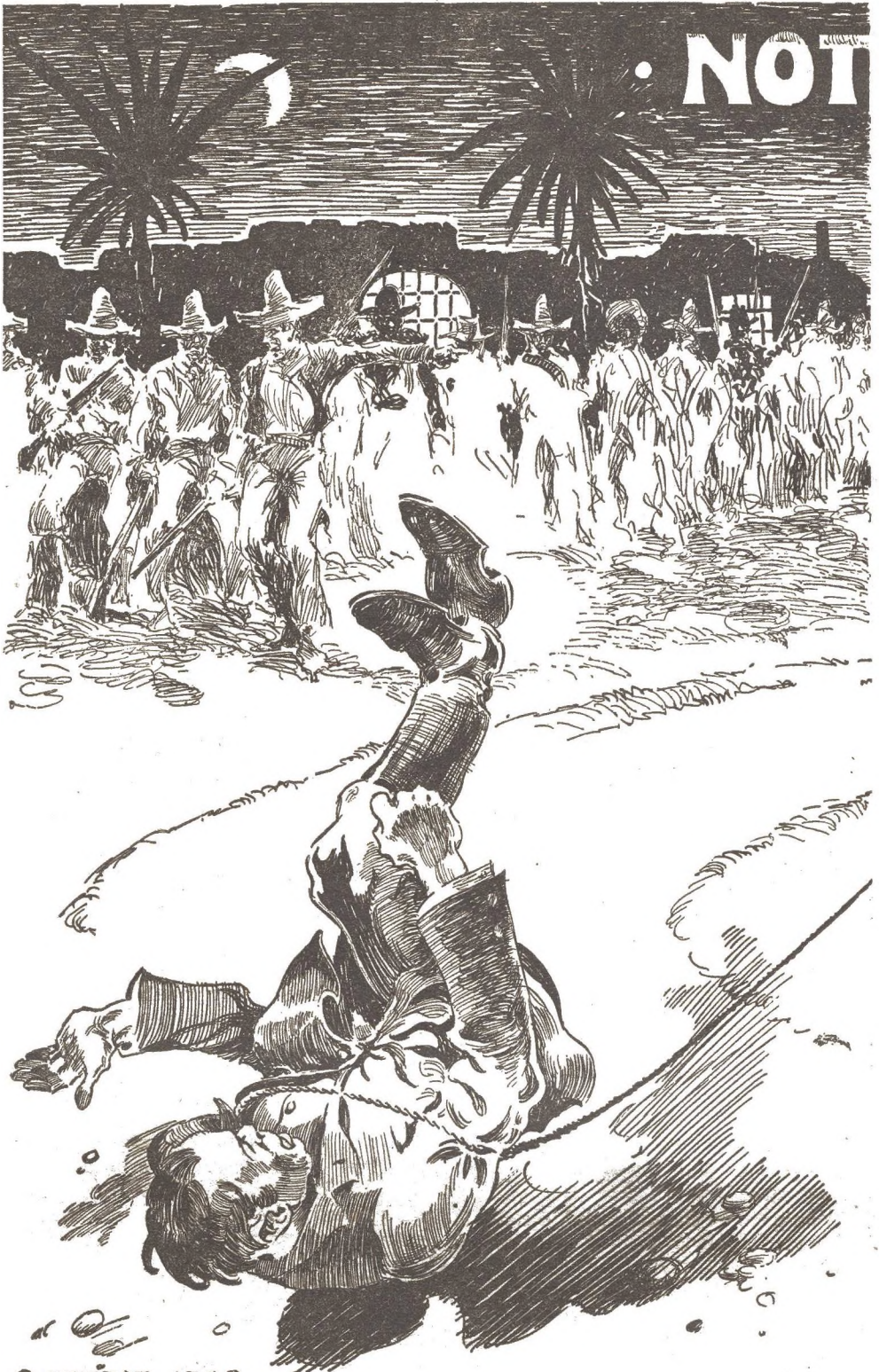
“Shut up!” Dan Kessler made a menacing movement towards the whip socket. “Shut up, or I'll brain you with the butt of this whip.”

Tom felt a sudden hot tightness pressing down in his throat. Dan Kessler was running on: “One of those hombres downstairs is Lew Breslow, with five thousand bounty money on his head. That would be twenty-five hundred apiece for us. But what I'd like to do with my share, is sink it in a little spread, some place. Now if you knew of a place—”

Tom's thought leaped ahead, to Johnny. A different Johnny; a Johnny who could run and swim and play like other kids, on two good legs. The ranchhouse wouldn't have to be big. But it would be a nice cool white one, and there would be some big shade cottonwoods, and—

He interrupted the dream to look at Dan Kessler.

“Sure, I might know of a place,” he said huskily. “I—I think I might know of just the place you'd be interested in, Sheriff.”



• NOT

WINDAS 1947

Ellis was dragged to his death behind the galloping pony.

WORTH HIS SALT

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED by CEDRIC W. WINDAS



*Charles Howard, robber of the poor, could afford to be a gringo noble
—till his peon victims stood him before a 'dobe wall.*

THE tandem of pot-bellied burros hauling the little cart with its glistening load fresh from the salt lakes of Guadalupe plodded steadily along the interminable road, heading eastward for far-off San Elizario.

It was hot. The westering sun climbed slowly down from its zenith, splashing the craggy silhouette of El Diablo with streaks of fire. Not the slightest breeze stirred to dissipate the dust which enveloped burros and cart alike in a dun-colored pall.

Chins slumped on breasts, the two men seated on the wagon wilted with weariness; the sun's fierce rays scorched their shoulder blades. It was hard, hot work loading salt on a day like this; it was even hotter driving home.

One star of hope glimmered in the drowsy brain of each: tomorrow they would be in San Elizario, where there would be much cool wine. Ah! *Mañana . . . vino. Bueno!*

In the meantime, sleep would rob today of much of its misery. The plodding feet of the little burros pushed the long ribbon of road systematically behind them. . . .

The following morning, as they neared San Elizario, the men were halted by a sheriff and a deputy, who informed them that they were under arrest.

"Arrest?" mumbled the astounded Jose Gandara. "But, señor, I do not understand. My fran', Pedro Juarez, and myself, we are not banditti. We have done no wrong theeng."

"Yuh've been stealin' salt," the sheriff

said. "That's what the warrant says, an' that's all I know. Air yuh comin' with us, or do we take yuh?"

"Stealing salt?" the peon faltered. "But, Señor Sheriff, we do not *steal* thee salt. Eet ees ours for the takeeng. Always eet has been so. My father and hees father before heem. Always we get thee salt free for the hauleeng."

"Well, it ain't free no more," the officer growled. "Not since Señor Charles Howard filed claim on the west slope of Guadalupe. If yuh want salt, yuh gotta pay the new owner or I'll throw yuh in the hoosegow till yuh do."

"But of course we must have salt! How can we leeve weethout salt?" Gandara pleaded. Then he added, "But how can a poor peon pay w'en he have no monee?"

"Yuh can argue that with the judge," the sheriff said. Then, to his deputy: "Take the cart and the burros to the corral while I lock these birds up."

Juarez, quick to resent injustice, and fearful of never seeing his burros again, reached into the cart and whipped out a machete, defying the sheriff to touch him or his property. But the officers drew their guns and, under the menace of those muzzles Juarez allowed Gandara to placate and disarm him.

With his companion he went quietly enough to jail, but his eyes were smouldering pools of hate for the thieving gringos who rob the peons of their birthright.

Within the hour the reason for their incarceration was nosed throughout the Mexican section of the town and an angry mob gathered to demand their release. When these demands were refused, they stormed the jail, and overriding the resistance of the sheriff, carried Gandara and Juarez triumphantly on their shoulders to freedom.

Pandemonium swept San Elizario; excitement reached its peak when a movement was started to capture Charles Howard and Justice of the Peace Garcia and hang them for attempting to monopolize the salt basins.

The mob was feeling its power. It had defied the authorities successfully: had rescued friends from the law. Now it felt strong enough to avenge the wrong done by the scheming Howard.

Their numbers were increasing every hour and they were well armed. Nor was the crowd comprised only of Mexicans, for many Americans who had been offended by local political crooks now joined the avengers' ranks.



IT WAS at this tense moment that the civil authorities, fearful of consequent ruin should the rioters get beyond control, decided to put Howard and Garcia under protective custody. They were placed for safe-keeping in the very jail from which the Mexican salt-teamsters had been so lately delivered.

When the armed crowd again assembled in front of the jail—this time demanding the lives of Howard and Garcia as the price of peace—an influential and well-loved citizen, Don Louis Cardis, pleaded with them to disperse, promising that justice would be done and the matter settled amicably for all concerned.

In thus pleading, he took his life in his hands, for the mob was drunk with success and, like all mobs, was getting unreasonable. But he stood staunchly to his endeavor, and was bravely backed by the Reverend Pierre Bouregad, who besought his flock to abstain from killing. Finally this dauntless pair had its way.

In the end, the mob agreed to spare the lives of their enemies if Howard would relinquish all claim to the salt basins, and post bonds in the sum of twelve thousand dollars to prove his good faith. Garcia must resign his office as Justice of the Peace. Then, and then only, would they let them live.

From the avaricious Howard's point of view, the terms were stiff; but he hadn't much option, and eventually listened to the persuasions of Don Cardis, who warned him that in the event of strife, he, Howard, would have to bear the responsibility for any lives lost.

Charles Ellis and John Atkinson, prominent merchants of San Elizario, agreed to act as Howard's bondsmen, and the tumult ended when he left for New Mexico just before sunset.

From then on it looked as though San Elizario might return to its original status as a happy, sleepy little township, but

Howard was as ornery as he was tricky, and he planned otherwise.

He brooded over his losses and, oddly enough, seemed to harbor most of his ill-will against the man who had done everything to save him from the vengeance of the mob—the valiant Don Louis.

One day, when the black evil in his heart would brook no further delay, he took horse for San Elizario. Finding his loyal friend, Don Louis, enjoying the quiet indolence of a peaceful noon hour, he emptied his .44 into the good man's chest without a word of explanation and then spurred furiously north for the sanctuary of the New Mexico border.

The murder of Don Louis inflamed the minds of Mexican and American alike, for Cardis was every man's friend. Knowing this, it would seem that Howard would have had sense enough to kick the dust of San Elizario from his shoes.

But the canker worm of greed undermined his good judgment and hearing from one of his agents that the salt carts were busy again in the Guadalupe region, he decided to return once more to San Elizario and see what could be done about it.

With incredible effrontery, he wrote the commander of the Texas Rangers, demanding that a guard be provided for him while he was in that town, explaining that business rivals threatened his life. In view of the fact that he was a fugitive with a murder charge against him, it is equally incredible that his demand was granted. Nevertheless, Lieutenant J. B. Tays led the escort provided for Howard's safety.

Bad news travels fast, and before he rode again into the market place of San Elizario, four hundred Mexicans had heard of his impending visit, and, heavily armed, were waiting to give him a warm reception.



THE bondsmen, Atkinson and Ellis, together with Howard's agent, McBride, watched nervously as the trouble-maker, flanked by his Ranger guards, rode through the threatening mob straight to Ranger headquarters. Here Lieutenant Tays made ready for siege and posted double sentries.

After supper, Ellis looked carefully to the loading of his gun and, with an air of quiet resolve, left the shelter of the headquarters building to seek out the leaders of the insurgents and endeavor to pacify them. He went against the protests of Tays and his associates, but he would not be dissuaded, for he was a man who knew not the meaning of fear.

A Texas moon made the outdoors bright as day, as if the celestial body sought with its clean light to dispel the sinister shadows threatening the little town with man-made tragedy. It showed clearly the restless moving mass of armed men, with here and there a gesticulating speaker exhorting his fellows to steel themselves to destruction.

It showed, also, a brave man walking alone and unafraid to meet his doom, for he must have known that his was a forlorn hope. There was no faltering in his stride as he pressed onward, chin up and shoulders squared, a credit to his Anglo-Saxon heritage.

But he never reached his objective, for as he came to the middle of the market place, a caballero spurred his mount to meet him. A lariat snaked down around his shoulders and was jerked tight. Horrified watchers at Ranger headquarters saw their comrade bouncing and bumping on head and shoulders along the rough road as he was dragged out of sight behind the galloping pony. And that was the end of a very gallant man.

The act of violence was the spark which ignited what followed. The Ranger post was surrounded by three lines of infuriated men who opened fire on anyone who showed himself.

The ringleaders of the mob continued to appeal to their men to charge and get the job finished, and Lieutenant Tays knew it was only a question of time until their appeals would meet with frenzied response.

His position was precarious in the extreme, for he had only twenty able-bodied men to oppose four hundred. But he was a resolute officer, and occupied his time in placing his scanty garrison to the best advantage.

In John Clarke's house, next to headquarters, he placed three of his men in a favorable position on the left flank. With

these men went John Atkinson, who left for safe-keeping with Tays seven hundred dollars in cash stuffed into a leather portmanteau. Miguel Garcia, a Ranger kinsman of the ex-Justice of the Peace, took a squad of men to defend Ellis's store on Tays' right flank. Later he was reinforced by Ranger Kent and one other. Having thus disposed of his men at the most strategic points, Lieutenant Tays settled down to await the deluge of the opposition.

The night passed with only desultory shooting to warn the defenders that the death trap was closed; there was no escape.

With sun-up the anxious lieutenant and his comrades watched while reinforcements marched across the river to strengthen the already overwhelming odds against them. A messenger, bearing a white flag, approached the Rangers' fort and summoned Tays to hear the mob's ultimatum.

In three hours, the envoy said, Howard must be delivered up, or the whole garrison would be forced to pay the final penalty.

The lieutenant promptly refused the terms, and added a few warnings of his own which the messenger bore back to his leaders. And so, at nine o'clock in the morning of December 13th, the battle of San Elizario really began.

Rifles and sixguns opened their roaring chant of death, and because the defenders of Ellis's store seemed strangely quiet, Tays sent Sergeant Mortimer to discover if they had fallen.

The intrepid sergeant made the trip to the store in safety, and was returning with his report that Garcia and two of his men were still unhurt and full of fight, when a blast of slugs cut him down on the very threshold of the headquarters door.

Tays rushed out under a veritable hail of bullets and dragged Mortimer inside, but the man expired in the lieutenant's arms.

The attackers redoubled their efforts, and despite the withering volleys poured into their ranks, pushed in closer to the buildings, leaving a score of quiet figures sprawled in the dusty road as a tribute to Ranger marksmanship.

THE fighting continued throughout the day until about four o'clock in the afternoon, when the insurgents withdrew again to re-arrange their strategy.

The evening and the night of the second day dragged by in watchful weariness, while alternate members of the tiny garrison snatched scanty sleep against the rigors of the morrow.

At dawn the mob charged the Ranger corral, but were met by such a blistering barrage that they fled in disorder. Then back they came, roaring with rage and the excitement of blood lust. Back to the very posts of the corral, striving to climb this barrier and get at the straight-shooting Rangers who were mowing them down in heaps.

Over their own dead they crawled, and one died as he mounted the gate; a heavy slug tore through one ear and out the other and the man dropped forward suddenly over the top bar and hung suspended as if mocking the efforts of those inside to knock him off.

For thirty minutes this fight persisted, until the gun barrels of the Rangers blistered their fingers. Then, when they thought the sheer weight of the enemy must surely break through and roll them under, relief came in the blasts of gunfire directed from the roof of the headquarters building into the packed mass of charging peons.

It was more than flesh and blood could stand, and slowly the enemy recoiled again, carrying their dead and wounded with them.

But grief was also piling up for the Rangers. Kent slipped back into headquarters with the alarming advice that the enemy was cutting through the wall of Ellis's store despite Garcia's efforts.

Inside Ellis's store a battle royal was in progress. Earlier in the day, Ranger Garcia had heard a continued tapping on the outside of the adobe wall, but was unable to catch sight of what was going on there. It was not until an iron spike was driven through the wall and the shattered adobe started to crumble in lumps upon the floor, that he realized that the resourceful peons were literally breaching his impromptu fort.

After the spike had been withdrawn

the tapping resumed again, sometimes near where he stood, sometimes a little farther away. Then he knew they were outlining a rough circle which, when completed, could be pounded into an opening large enough to admit several men at once. He knew also that that would be his finish.

Suddenly the tapping ceased and a yell of triumph sounded as a heavy timber was swung against the weakened wall.

Garcia and his men waited until first one and then another chunk of tumbling dobe revealed the head and shoulders of the men handling the battering ram. Then they poured such a deadly volley into the enemy that those who could dropped the cumbersome pole and crawled safety around the back of the building.

Then men across the street sent a shower of death through the cavity of the wall, and when they had cut down the defending force to Garcia and one other Ranger, they came charging into the breach. In vain Garcia and his comrade hurled themselves forward.



RIFLES empty, they clubbed their weapons and beat at the growing mob of faces that leered in the breach.

Then, as the vanguard of the mob broke through the front door as well as the broken wall, Garcia and his remaining trooper retreated through the rear and dashed to Ranger headquarters.

During that night the Rangers could hear the victorious insurgents ransacking the store with howls of delight, and it was evident they had liquor.

In view of what happened later, it is only fair to state that up until this time the leaders of the insurgents had only one objective, the capture of Howard.

This is proven by the fact that as late as noon of December 15th, Chico Barella and Leo Granillo arranged a parley with Lieutenant Tays, at which they advised him that they had tunneled under his defenses and had filled said tunnel with powder.

"Therefore," they told him, "you must give us Charles Howard or we will blow you all up."

Barella added, "If Señor Howard will cease harming our people; if he will give up all claim to the salt basins which rightfully belong to the peons; if he will go away and never come back, then I swear by the Holy Cross that neither he nor any of your Rangers will suffer."

Now this Barella was a man of good faith and it is quite possible he could have averted the tragedy which followed, but Lieutenant Tays was ruled by the dictates of his honor, and refused to surrender the man who had been entrusted to his guardianship.

So back he went to headquarters and told Howard that any attempt at further parley would only end in disaster. And now, like a bright ray of sunshine breaking at length through the dreariness of a bleak day, there appeared in the somber nature of Howard a clean vein of unselfishness.

Cautioned by the lieutenant that certain death awaited him if he attempted to dicker with the insurgents, he insisted that it was the only way to save the men who had defended him, and that if the worst came to the worst he was willing to pay the price.

Then he shook hands with all the Rangers in turn and thanked them. Last of all he spoke cheerfully to his agent, McBride, giving him his valuables to keep against the time of his return.

Having done which, he left the shelter of the post to face whatever Fate held in store for him.

At his right hand went the gallant Tays, true to his trust, and on his left walked Atkinson the bondsman, going in the capacity of interpreter, for he was a good linguist.

And when they had come to the place where the conference was to be held, Granillo took Atkinson aside into another room, leaving Tays and Howard together under guard.

In a few moments the bondsman returned, obvious relief written all over his face as he explained that everything was satisfactory, but that he had to go and get McBride and arrange for him to leave town with Howard.

Within thirty minutes, to the surprise of the lieutenant and Howard, Atkinson came back with McBride, staggering un-

der the load of the portmanteau containing the gold carried between them.

And with them came the company of Rangers, disarmed and palpably suspicious. Tays roared out to know what damfoolishness had persuaded them to surrendered their guns, and when he was told that Atkinson had sworn that their leader ordered it, the lieutenant was loud in his denunciation of the bondsman.

But the die was cast and from that moment the gallant Rangers could only stand helpless and watch the swift-moving drama unfold.

Atkinson had promised Granillo the gold and the surrender of the garrison in exchange for his own preservation.

But his treachery gained him nothing, for in the adjoining room Granillo and his aides were taking a vote as to whom should go free and whom perish. And when they had finished their grim ballot, Howard, McBride and Atkinson were doomed men.

When Howard was led out to be executed, he said nothing. Grimly he marched with his captors; grimly he stood with his back to an adobe wall, bracing himself to meet the shock of sudden death.

Only when there was some slight confusion in the firing orders did he speak, and his voice was as steady as though he gave some commonplace direction.

"Present arms, amigos!" he called coldly. "Ready! Aim! Fire!"

With the last word the line of rifle muzzles rippled with flame and the body of the salt baron collapsed like a stricken steer.

McBride died also, caught in the blast of a well-directed volley, and when the smoke drifted slowly away was past all consciousness of pain.

Wherein he and Howard were lucky, a grim good fortune which was denied John Atkinson. For though the latter stood to his Fate like a brave and resolute man, he felt the sting of death three times before oblivion brought him peace.

It may have been that the blood-thirsty firing squad got nervous fingers, or flinched unconsciously from such gruesome and cold-blooded tasks.

It may have been that some among them remembered their target only as

the mild-mannered rather pleasant-spoken merchant who daily sold them goods across his counter; and remembering him thus, were loathe to cut him down.

Whatever the cause, the fact remains that their first ragged volley caught Atkinson in the stomach, causing the unfortunate man to reel and groan as he pressed his palms against the spurting wounds. He begged for another volley to put him out of his misery, imploring them for God's sake to shoot straight and get it over with. Two of the squad hastily reloaded and their bullets knocked him down, but still did not finish him off.

So that he lay there moaning feebly until one Desidero Apodaca performed the *coup de grace* by placing his revolver to the dying man's head and blowing his brains out.

* * *

Thus perished Charles Howard and his dream of riches built on the selfish theory that the many must suffer for the few to prosper. Thus perished also McBride and Atkinson, whose only crime was that they were Howard's friends. The Rangers were allowed to depart, but having obtained new weapons, returned to arrest those connected with the slayings.

Many peons, some guilty and some innocent, were hunted from cover to cover as the men of the law endeavored to bring the real culprits to justice.

Until finally the chase lagged for want of interest, for Time is a great healer, and the sorrows of yesteryear are forgotten in the hopes of tomorrow.

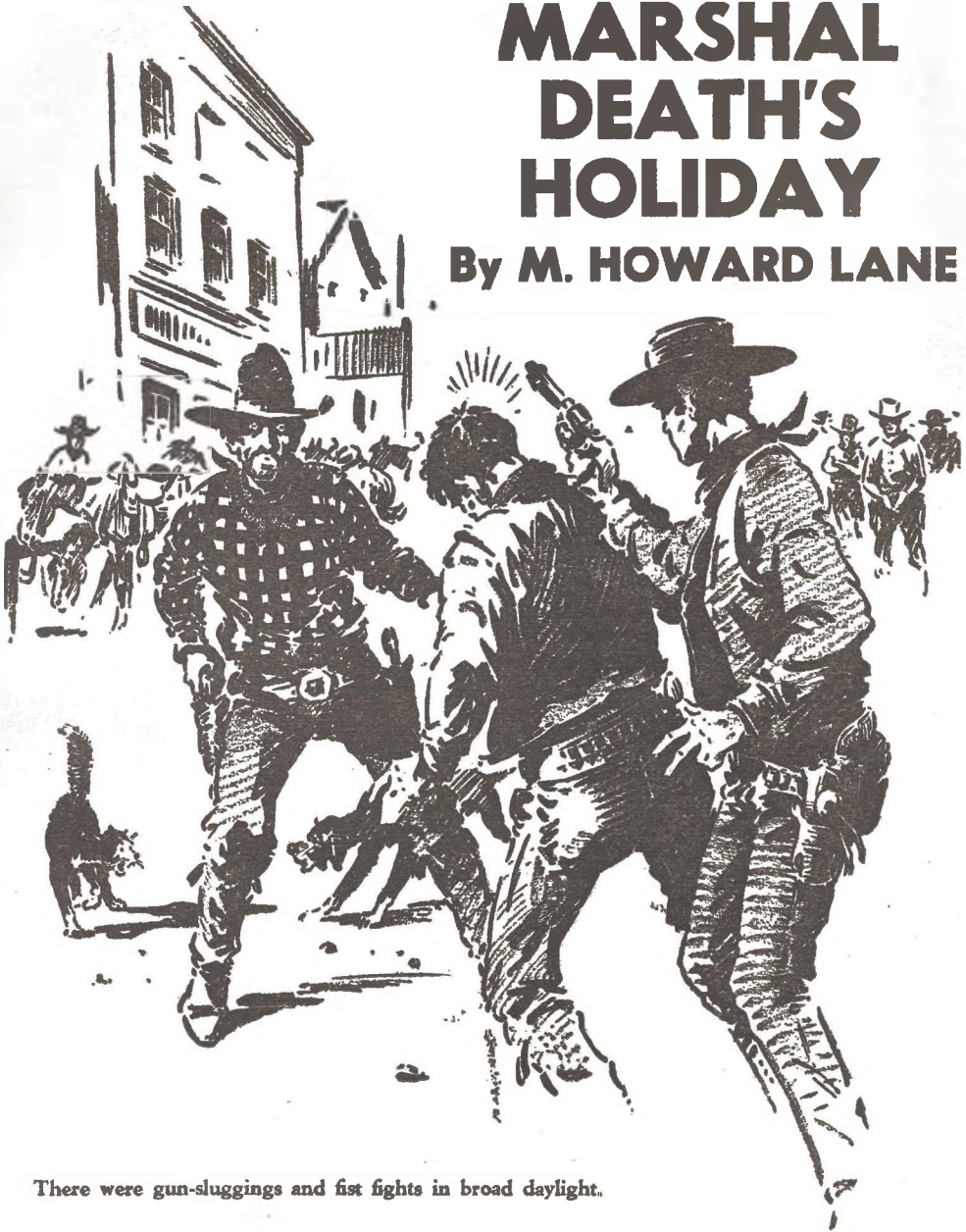
The road to the Guadalupe western slope is rutted deep by the wheels of many little carts journeying down the years to bring their invaluable salt loads to the people of the plains. It is still hot work loading salt into the conveyances, and often the drive home is hotter than the labor of loading.

But tomorrow they will be in town under the shade of friendly cottonwoods, drowning today's grief in many drinks of cool red wine.

So hasta mañana. Mañana . . . muchos vino . . . Bueno!

MARSHAL DEATH'S HOLIDAY

By M. HOWARD LANE



There were gun-sluggings and fist fights in broad daylight.

Would Dan Rivett—formerly Marshal Death, who feared no man—brand himself a coward so that his gun-innocent son would not fill an unmarked grave in roaring Virginia City's up-and-coming Boothill?

MOUNT DAVIDSON reared its barren bulk behind Virginia City, and a Washoe zephyr singing down from those high slopes brought with it the greedy sound of stamp mills and the whine of cables in shaft houses. This was the richest town on earth. The flow of its silver governed the destinies of empires far beyond American shores.

Into this town, and along its twisting,

climbing main street rode Big Dan Rivett. Ornate anomalies of what one might expect to find in this Silver Lode camp towered two and three stories high on either side of the thoroughfare. Men, and a sprinkling of women, thronged the boardwalks, going and coming from the houses of chance that were almost as great a lure as the fabulous silver river of wealth that poured from the mines.

Some of the men treading their way along this street were clay-stained muckers up from the steaming hell of shafts five thousand feet deep. Others were curb brokers and stock-riggers. Tinhorns and frock-coated gamblers had their place in this crowd too. Many were men who had seen other boomcamps come and go. Others had watched the rise and fall of Abilene and Dodge, at the end of the long cattle trails from Texas. These were men who remembered Big Dan Rivett as a ghost from their own past.

Some stopped to stare at the tall, somber figure astride the tall, black horse picking its way among the clutter of ore wagons that moved monotonously toward the mills beyond the city. The smooth line of Dan Rivett's coat was disturbed by the holstered Colts against his body. Rivett was dressed completely in black.

Many men who recognized Rivett were remembering other towns where his Colts had sung their song. Marshal Death, they had taken to calling the big, crag-faced man in one cattle-end metropolis after another.

There were men who had hated him then because he had brought order where wildness had lived before. There were men who had tried to kill him; his body still bore the mark of their bullets. At the last, some of those on the boardwalks were remembering that one man had almost succeeded where others had failed.

Show Tracy was the man's name. His hatred had started when Dan Rivett had proved him to be a blackleg gambler and chased him out of Abilene. But they had met again in Dodge, and there were those still willing to argue that Tracy's sleeve gun was faster than Dan Rivett's black Colts.

Slugs from Tracy's weapon had riddled Big Dan, and slugs from the Colts of Marshal Death had done the same to

Tracy. Enough lead had lodged in each before the duel was finished to kill ordinary men—but neither of them were ordinary.

California had called Big Dan Rivett after that, and there were gents here remembering that they'd heard he'd retired to a ranch in the Santa Clara Valley, where he could raise cattle and horses and his family without any thought of the Colts he had discarded.

And now Big Dan Rivett, with gray salting the black of his hair, was riding into Virginia City with his black Colts where they belonged. There were men on the boardwalks wondering why he was here.

In a way, Big Dan was wondering that himself.

It had started with a word overheard in a quiet bar back across the shining Sierras in distant San Jose. A San Francisco banker, pausing on his way home from an inspection of the Silver Lode, had said to an acquaintance, "Virginia City is the wildest, richest camp on earth, and some of the wildest men are there, skimming off the cream. The hottest spot in town is The Nevada, where I have seen fifty thousand dollars slip through a man's fingers in a dozen turns of the roulette wheel. The place is owned by a man with the biggest belly I have ever seen."

That comment had caught an edge of Rivett's consciousness, and sharpened his ear. There was only one man in all the West this banker could mean. Dan found his hunch right for the banker said:

"Matt Kassu is his name, and you have never seen anything like him. He must weigh three hundred pounds, and all the weight is in the middle. At one end of the bar, which is the most beautiful I have ever seen, they have built a special chair for him which is wide enough to fit his gut. He sits there most of the time like one of those heathen Buddahs with a smile on his face. And I guess he has a right to smile at that. They told me Matt Kassu's profits will run one hundred thousand dollars for every twenty-four hours!"

The friend had put in a jocular comment. "We are in the wrong business, Sam!"

And the banker had answered. "No.

Kassu's profits are tainted with blood, misery and death. I would want none of them. The Nevada has its man for breakfast every morning. But I will say this for Kassu. His games are the squarest in the city, and he serves the best liquor for the least money. Twelve look-outs with short-barreled shotguns across their knees are on duty day and night. They sit in high chairs that lift them above the crowd, guarding each of the big games, and, I suspect, watching the dealers as well as the players.

"The stakes are highest on the table where a gambler named Show Tracy spins the wheel. And yet—this will probably interest you—the lookout's chair behind this biggest of games is the one most often empty."

"How's that?" the friend had asked.

The banker had chuckled. "There's a legend in The Nevada that death always calls for the look-out occupying that chair. Even at five hundred a month, Kassu has trouble hiring a man to sit in it. He put on a new gun-guard for Show Tracy's game while I was there. A young fellow. Bart Rivett was his name. Kassu seemed mighty pleased to get him. He let the word spread around that this Rivett was the son of some old-time cowcamp lawman was was called Marshal Death."



SO BIG Dan Rivett had gone home, and he'd told his wife that he was going to take a little ride over to Virginia City to see what the boomtown looked like. He'd told her he would not be back for a month, likely, and he'd saddled the tall black he was riding now. He'd smuggled his old Colts in their black holsters and belts into his saddle-bags, for he'd promised Mary that he wouldn't wear them again.

Now the gray gunsmoke past came back

as he rode this Virginia City street, and saw men he had known in younger years, but he put thought of them out of his mind. Questions he had asked himself all the long way to Sacramento and on to Placerville, and on along the rutted road that had been opened across the Sierras to accommodate Virginia City traffic still haunted him.

The questions were something that would be answered here—if Bart was still alive. That fear had driven him and his black horse hard, for the big animal was gaunt, and he was thinner than on leaving the Santa Clara. Old wounds ached, and made him know his age; but they were not as important as his son.

Bart owned a ranch in Arizona that Dan had purchased for him. Bart was only twenty-four, and a damned good cattleman who had smelled his gunsmoke shooting coyotes instead of men. The kid had no business here in Virginia City, sitting in a dead man's chair. He had raised the boy tame, and given him all of a father's love and wisdom. The wildness, Big Dan thought, that had ruled his own destiny, was lacking in his son. Bart had the soft steadiness of his mother. That was why the word spoken in the quiet of a San Jose saloon had been such a shock.

Bart Rivett gun-guard for Show Tracy's game! Why? The question was like a small hammer beating ceaselessly inside his head.

The whole eager West had made a pilgrimage to Virginia City, and a cross-section of it was moving constantly through the wide gilt-framed doors of The Nevada. Riding to the hitchrack in front of the saloon, Rivett studied the flow of the crowd with inborn caution. Stilt-heeled cowpokes, with open, laughing faces, made up a part of it. Ranchers, growing rich by feeding beef into this town, were another part of the picture. Tinhorns and gamblers, and muckers and

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drunks was another. Yes, all of them were here.

The town was tough. There were gun-sluggings and fist fights in broad daylight. Men were done to death after dark and nobody gave a damn. For the ore kept coming.

Stiffness had gathered in his joints from the long ride he had made, and Big Dan paused when he stepped down to brush dust from his coat and trousers. Head above the majority of the crowd that jostled in and out of The Nevada, he then made his courteous way among them.

Recognition lay in some eyes, but it was well hidden. Marshal Death had never been a man to know well. His climb to fame had been a long and lonesome road and the memory of the few real friends he had made were the mile posts. Matt Kassu had been one of those friends; but he could be called friend no longer. A friend would not set a lamb to guard a wolf.

Matt Kassu was in The Nevada. No one entering could miss the vast white of the man's white shirt front with its diamond studs catching the light from crystal chandeliers that blazed amidst the smoke fog overhead. Big Dan saw him the moment he entered, but he delayed his approach until his eyes swept the room searchingly.

Chuck-a-luck, faro, roulette, poker, keno and fan-tan games circled the walls on three sides. There was a clear space in the center reserved for those who cared to dance with the ladies hired for that and nothing else.

All the games were steep. The Nevada was no place for pikers. Big Dan measured with an accurate eye the chips and gold and silver racked in front of dealers and players, and he knew that he had never seen a lay-out to equal this. Yes, Matt Kassu was adding a hundred thousand nightly to his fortune. Then in the center of the rear wall farthest from him, Big Dan saw one roulette table carefully shrouded by a green cloth. Behind it loomed a lookout's chair, solid and empty beneath the light of the candelabra overhead.

For the space of seconds that stretched like all the years behind him, Big Dan

stared at the chair. Then a voice spoke gently from beside his elbow.

"Come along to my office, Dan. It's quieter there."

Big Dan wheeled, and found Matt Kassu's brown eyes almost on a level with his black ones.

"Dead?" He spoke the one word harshly.

Kassu's hair was a silver mane that reached back to the collar of his impeccable coat. It stirred slightly as he shook his head. "No. That game is always closed until the sports arrive in the evening."

Big Dan breathed, and the air felt good in his chest. "I must be getting old," he murmured.

"No man before ever walked up on you like I have just done," Matt Kassu said. He turned with a lightness surprising in one so large, and moved along the mahogany bar where six busy keepers tended the wants of their patrons.

Big Dan followed him and he spoke across the saloonman's shoulder. "It is not that," he said slowly. "If I was not old, Matt, I would be hating you. I did on the long way here. It is not a happy thing for a man to bring out his guns, once he has shucked them for good."

"You refer to my hiring your son?" Matt Kassu kept moving along.

"Naturally!" Dan snapped the word. "Then you did not get the message I sent by special rider over the Sierra?"

"No!" Surprise, and a warmth that started to thaw the chill moved through Dan. So Matt Kassu had not betrayed his friendship. Yet, then, why had he set the lamb to guarding the wolf?"

Big Dan asked that question when they were settled behind thick doors, in a paneled room that matched the saloonman for size. Orientals glowed richly on the office floor, and drapes and tapestries worth more than a man could figure added their feeling of luxury to his office. The desk was dark wood, imported, likely, from Spain. The cigar, smouldering between his long, sensitive fingers, had come from Havana, and the whisky in the glass at his elbow from Scotland.

Big Dan found his lips unbending into a smile. "Wealth has its compensations, Matt."

"And headaches!" Matt Kassu's face was round and heavy with flesh, and three chins rolled down to his collar, but for all of that there was something handsome about him. He looked sourly at the tip of his big cigar without saying anything more.

Dan studied this old friend out of his past. They had parted in Dodge and not seen each other since, yet the bond between them was like something that had never been severed. He could see that Matt Kassu was a worried man.

"My son is a lamb," he said gently. "Show Tracy is a wolf, and a blackleg."

"Not a blackleg in The Nevada," the saloonman interrupted. "Tracy has changed."

"A zebra cannot change its stripes. Neither can a card-cheat," Dan Rivett told him quietly. "Why have you set my son to watching him?"

A diamond on the saloon man's fat, powerful fingers twinkled as he moved his hand. Irritation touched his deep voice. "Do you think I would have sent a rider over the Sierra to call you here if I knew the answer to that?"

Dan pressed his shoulders against the leather backing of the chair in which he was seated. This was not the reply he had expected. "Maybe," he said, "you had better explain that."

Matt Kassu pulled smoke from his cigar, and his eyes nested in folded flesh grew more worried. "The years," he said, "creep up on a man and turn him gray. But they do not hurt his memory. Sometimes I think the past is more alive than the present."

Dan's shoulders stirred against his chair. "I don't savvy that remark, either," he murmured.

"Neither do I," said the saloonman. "But it is a part of the reason for Bart's being here. I am sure of that. Dan, he came to me no more than a week after Show Tracy started banking the dead man's table. He told me that the calf crop had been light in Arizona, and that he needed a job and money to carry him through. He said he did not want to let you know of his troubles, which is a part of the Rivett pride, I believe. He told me he wanted to guard Show Tracy's table because he had heard that I have trouble

finding men for that chair. He told me that he would take no other job I had to offer."

Furrows had started to deepen the lines in Big Dan Rivett's brow. "Why would he say that?"

"Dan," the saloonman's voice was gentle, "I cannot find out. It is why I sent for you. I thought you might be able to learn that answer."

"Where is Bart staying?" Big Dan asked.

"At the Alta House. You passed it on the way up the street. Likely he is through with his sleep and dressing for the night."

Big Dan had made his decision. His craggy face looked hard as Washoe stone when he stood up. "I will go to the Alta," he said quietly. "And you'd better get a new guard for the night. Bart will not be here, and neither will I."

Faint surprise, not untinged with regret touched the saloonman's brown eyes. "Then you do not wish to meet Show again?"

"Tracy?" Big Dan shook his head. "No. I want my son out of here. That is all. Show and I fought our fight in Dodge. That past you mentioned a while ago is buried."



BUT the past had come alive again, at least a part of it, just during the time he had been in Matt Kassu's office. Big Dan sensed it immediately as he moved through The Nevada on his way outside. Men looked up from games to watch him pass. Others glanced from the bar with veiled interest. Marshal Death. That was the stormy name being bandied about this Washoe camp. There were a thousand men here wondering why he'd put in an appearance.

His macabre nickname was like a bitter echo following him down the steep street as he rode toward the Alta House, and Big Dan wondered bleakly if this town that lived on excitement was expecting him to start filling men with lead. The guns beneath his black coat were suddenly a distasteful load.

Tall in the saddle, he splashed through dusk that had fallen during his visit to

The Nevada. Coal oil flares were lighting the façade of The Alta as he dismounted before the two-story hotel.

Inside, even the clerk at the desk seemed to recognize him. Dan saw the man's eyes widen, and then his attention swung to a remembered straight-backed shape descending stairs to the right.

"Bart!" He had seen his son out of the corner of his eye, and now he made his swing, took two long strides, then stopped. The name he had spoken seemed to hang vibrant and alive in the lobby air, but Bart Rivett did not appear to hear.

A man able to look into a mirror and peer back at himself as he had been thirty years before would have recognized himself in Bart Rivett. Tall, spare, with a face clean-cut enough to show the shape of good bones beneath. He watched his son tramp toward the street entrance without a change of expression.

Big Dan heard something that was like a sigh come from lobby watchers, and he knew this happening would be all over Virginia City before the evening was an hour older.

A softly lighted entry-way across the lobby led into the hotel's small bar. Dan Rivett moved toward it without a glance to right or left, and oddly enough he felt a spring that hadn't been in his legs for years come into them now.

"Brandy," he told a barkeep. "Double!"

He looked into the back-bar mirror at his countenance, and wondered almost irritably why there was a sudden smile on his lips. And then he guessed the reason for it.

A Rivett had never failed to accept a challenge. Bart's Arizona calf-crop hadn't been bad. Another reason had brought him here to guard Show Tracy's game. A reason that would not stand the test of words spoken to an unexpected father.

"Why mebbe," Big Dan told his reflection, "I've got me a wolf instead of a lamb!"

He drank his brandy, and pondered long over a second, and then his eyes lifted to the attentive keep. "What time of night does Show Tracy open his game at The Nevada?"

The barkeep looked at a clock above the back-bar. The hands stood straight at

eight. "He's sitting down right now," the man told Rivett. "Tracy is always punctual."

Show Tracy had been punctual when they had met in Dodge, Dan remembered. His game had opened at eight there, too, and he had invited Dan Rivett to call. It had been a duel without seconds for the implications of his invitation had been plain.

There was another face to this new-found vigor coursing through him, Big Dan reflected. He had told Matt Kassu that he did not want to meet Show Tracy again, yet now he knew that he had spoken a lie. An honest man would have admitted that he did want to meet Tracy, but that he needed a good excuse to do it.

Bart had just given him that excuse. He could now, with all aplomb, follow his son back to The Nevada, for there was a showdown coming with that young man, too.

* * *

In the annals of Virginia City many nights wore their special name and cloak of fame that made talk long afterward around campfires and in saloons. And this night in the Washoe camp became known as Rivett's Raid.

For as he hit the street once again, Big Dan found a new word flashing by on wings of talk. "Matt Kassu is gun-guarding one of his own games tonight. Yep, the Dead Man's Table. And that Rivett is bucking the tiger. Why the hell he has been wastin' his time earnin' two-bit pay there is more'n a man can say. Why, I just heerd he's settin' in the game with a wad of gold that'd weight a horse!"

Big Dan straddled his black, and on this ride he did not pause courteously for ore wagons and rigs. At a run he cut in front of them, and around them, and he left cursing confusion behind.

A larger crowd than usual was milling around The Nevada's gilt entrance. There was a tension in the air that a man could almost smell. A feeling that all hell was on the way and ready to pop, for this was the first time in the saloon's history that Matt had hoisted his ponderous weight into the lookout's chair above one of his own games. There had to be a reason for that,

and every man that could wanted to be on hand to watch the play. Big Dan understood that, and he could not blame them. Their stake, this night, was not personal.

The thought jerked a ragged breath into his lungs, but his hands were steady, and his face showed no sign of inner turmoil as he swung down from the black's saddle, and tethered the animal. With a gesture as instinctive as walking, his quick hands swept back the wide flanges of his coat, and eased the black Colts against his thighs. The touch of the smooth stocks was a good, remembered feel.

He had to speak no word to the men crowding about The Nevada's wide door. They opened a path for Marshal Death, and he could read on their faces that some of them were actually thinking that death was walking by his side.

Beyond the doors, tension was like some white-hot light focussing all attention in one direction. Above the heads of smaller men, Big Dan saw the goal of their eyes was that table at the opposite end of the room where only one man now stood before the shining, spinning wheel, and another stood behind it, and Matt

Kassu rode his lookout chair with the impassiveness of a Buddah that San Jose banker had once likened him to.

He was the first of the three to see Big Dan, and Dan saw a diamond glint as his fingers tightened a little on the stock of the shotgun across his knees.



LANE opened right down the center of the room for Dan, and he stepped into it, with silence falling like a blanket behind his moving figure. No one in all this room but knew of that Dodge City duel, Dan knew, and the past was a sudden bright flame across his mind. Only one thing was changed. Bart hadn't been in that cow-camp saloon. But he was here now—and sudden insight gave Big Dan the answer to his presence.

Matt Kassu had answered the question in the privacy of his office that afternoon, only neither of them had realized it then. Matt had said, "The years creep up on a man and turn him gray. But they do not hurt his memory. Sometimes I think the past is more alive than the present."



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Somehow, young Bart Rivett had learned that bit of wisdom, and it had brought him here with the knowledge that only death could dim the bitter hate of flaming lead given and spent by one on another.

Young Bart had come here to kill Show Tracy! He had set the stage for it himself, Dan realized, by arriving in Virginia City. And now his presence in this room was like a crooked finger about a trigger. The thought lengthened his stride, and dropped his hands free at his gun-hung sides.

Show Tracy's head tipped up, and the narrowness of his face was the color of a whale-oil candle with his eyes like a pair of black shoe buttons bedded into it. He was older than he had been, and his hair was thinner at the temples. Save for these changes this might have been that other night when he had walked to meet the gambler, Dan realized.

Tracy's mouth was loosely smiling, and the slyness in his eyes was like a solid impact across the space still separating them. Tracy had always had courage and nerve, and the cunning of a coyote in the hills. That cunning was apparent now, for their was trickery in the mocking turn of his lips.

"Place your bets, mister," he droned at Bart. "Where the little ball falls, nobody knows."

Caught by the spell of silence in this room, Dan watched his son's eyes turn across his shoulder, and then Bart's fingers were attempting to spill the gold his hands had automatically picked up at the croupier's invitation.

That had been Tracy's trick, Dan saw now, for it gave him the edge he needed to bring twin-barreled derringers flicking from the sleeves of his coat. His own hands were forking down, then faltering, for Bart was still between them, directly in the line of fire!

But he had not been idle. Gold, a handful of shining coins, thrown straight forward, seemed to melt into the pale muzzle flame as one of the derringers coughed. The slug from it caught Bart high in the chest and flung him around and down like a heavy hand. That thrown gold against its muzzle wavered the derringer's aim,

for Dan felt the bullet intended for his head breathe past his ear.

There was nothing now but a crumpled son between himself and Tracy. Nothing but a past that was as alive as the night itself. Nothing now to slow the slickness of guns coming from the oiled leather of Marshal Death.

Tracy's other derringer was speaking and Dan felt his left arm go limp as that Colt cleared leather. His right gun, though, was rising, and speaking with a measured roll. One shot was all he spent. It doubled the gambler forward across his shining wheel, and his white hands seemed to unfold of their own accord from about the stocks of his guns.

Death was close to his lips when Dan reached him, but there was still sly spirit in his shoe-button eyes. "I guess I'm gettin' old, Marshal," he said painfully. "Can't eat as much as I could in Dodge —" He died that way with the loose smile still on his lips, and for a moment Dan kept looking at him. Death had closed this chapter of his past, and it was something a man might almost regret. Dan shook his head.

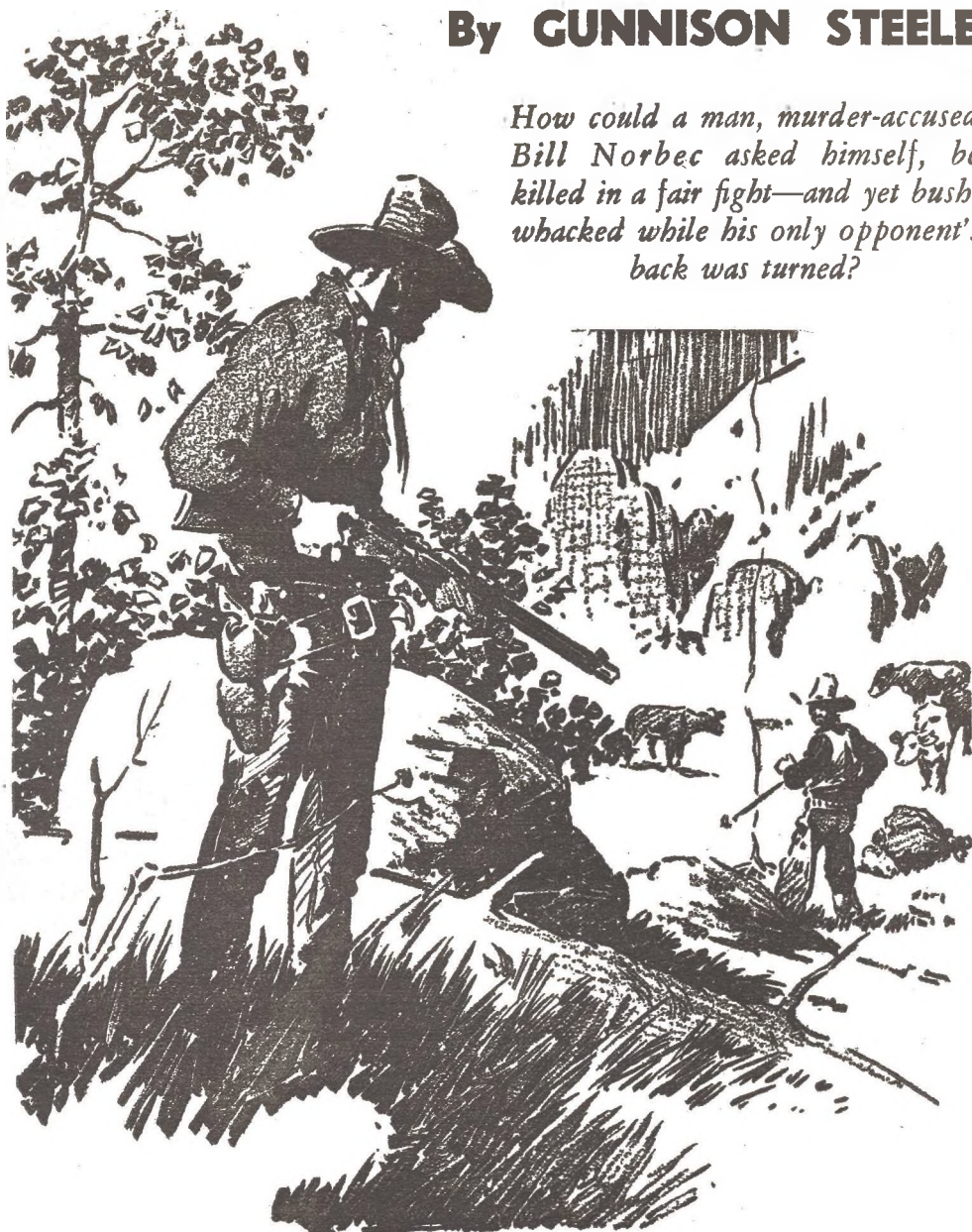
Matt Kassu, with grizzly-like agility, was already down from his gun-guard seat. They lifted Bart together, and the saloonman's eyes were snapping. "Put him on the table, to hell with the blood!" he growled. "Damn young fool, he came here to keep tab on Tracy, because a word spoken in Yuma had led him to believe that Show was going on from here to Santa Clara to finish that fight you ducks started in Dodge. He'd made up his mind to get Show before he could do that. Told me so tonight. That's why I took the chair. To see he got a fair deal."

His experienced eye studied the wound in Bart's bloody chest. "He'll live," he grunted. "Won't be good for much, though, for a while. You better take him back to Santa Clara and start a cripple's home!"

Bart's eyes had come open, and his hands moved to take Dan's. Rivett looked down and felt a father's pride. Then the irreverent thought came to him that he had indeed raised a wolf instead of lamb, but that Bart's mother would not like to hear it.

By **GUNNISON STEELE**

How could a man, murder-accused Bill Norbec asked himself, be killed in a fair fight—and yet bush-whacked while his only opponent's back was turned?



A rifleman found Rhett doing strange things with a branding iron. . . .

SIDEWINDER SAVVY

BILL NORBEC stood in front of his log cabin ranchhouse and watched the approaching rider, and inside him was the certain conviction that here was trouble. The rider was blocky, gray-mustached Sheriff Jess Drum, from Ute River. The sheriff came on slowly, his

gaze bent to the ground as if he hadn't seen Norbec, although Norbec knew that he had.

The sheriff rode up and stopped. He said, "Howdy, Norbec," and started rolling a smoke.

Bill Norbec nodded. "Light down?"

"Got no time, I reckon." Sheriff Drum put the quirkly between his lips and lit it. "Nice rain we had last week."

"Nice rain," Norbec said, and waited for the sheriff to state his business.

Drum said abruptly, "Ben Ventner was killed yesterday. Mebby you know it, mebby not. It happened on the south part of his range, close to the line fence between your place and his. One of Ventner's riders went out to look for him after dark, after Ventner's horse had come in. Ventner had been shot."

"And you think I killed him . . . is that right?"

The lawman said, "I just have to go by the evidence. What I think doesn't matter."

"Was Ventner bushwhacked?"

"No. Shot from in front, face to face," the lawman said.

"Ben Ventner was powerful fast with a gun, I hear."

"The fastest man on this range—except mebby you, Norbec. I went out and looked the ground over a little while ago. The signs were plain enough. There were Ventner's tracks in the soft ground, and the tracks of the man who killed him, as they faced each other, talkin'. Then there was the tracks of the other man as he turned and went to his horse and rode away after killing Ventner. That much was plain."

Tall, angular-faced Bill Norbec smiled, rolling a smoke himself. They might have been discussing the weather, or range conditions, instead of the deadly thing that Norbec knew this was leading up to.

"So that's it," Norbec murmured. "You know I rode the owlhoot once. I've made no secret of it since coming here. That's done, and paid for. I had a gun-quick reputation. I hardly ever wear a gun now. But when a man's killed—a man who was handy with a gun himself—I get the blame, because I'm the only gent here—abouts who might be fast enough to shade him. Is that your evidence, Sheriff?"

"Just part of it. There was bad blood between you and Ben Ventner. You'd quarreled over a line fence."

Norbec said thoughtfully, "That's true. But Ventner was an over-bearing man—there were others he'd quarreled with.

Sam Rhett, for instance, whose place joins Ventner's on the west. They hated each other. Rhett's not fast with a gun, though. In fact, he wears his gun in a shoulder holster, under his armpit.

"Nobody, so far as I know, ever saw Sam Rhett draw that gun. And nobody—least of all Rhett—could draw a shoulder gun quick enough to kill Ventner in a fair fight. Well, say I *did* quarrel with Ventner. That all your evidence?"

"No, it's not," Drum said slowly. "I tried to follow the killer's trail, but he was too slick, and after a couple of miles I lost it. But in a horse track, half a mile from where Ventner was killed, I found a piece of paper that looked like it might have been torn from a tally book. It had your name on it, Norbec."

Bill Norbec was silent a moment. He took a dog-eared notebook from his pocket, thumbed through it, and pieces of several pages were missing. He put the book back in his pocket. He looked up at the lawman, smiling twistedly.

"That makes it look bad. What you aim to do about it, Sheriff?"

Regretfully, Drum said, "Reckon I'll have to take you in, Norbec. A jury might not be too hard on you. From all signs, it was a plumb fair fight. Ventner hadn't touched his gun, but he was drilled from dead in front. I wouldn't have believed the man lived who could kill Ben Ventner before he touched his gun. Where you made your mistake, Norbec, was in not coming straight to me and reportin' the killing. Why didn't you?"

Norbec shrugged, still smiling wryly. "Men make mistakes. I made a mistake when, as a kid, I got in with the wrong bunch. I made another when I quarreled with Ben Ventner—but I didn't make the mistake of killing him."

The sheriff tossed his half-finished smoke to the ground and stared thoughtfully at it for a moment. "Then what about the piece of paper with your name on it beside the killer's trail?"

"I don't know," Norbec said. "Mebby it being there wasn't an accident. Look, Jess. Since coming here I've considered you my friend. If you want to jail me and charge me with killing Ventner, I won't resist. But first there's a favor I'd like to ask."

"Go ahead."

Bill Norbec talked for a minute or two. When he'd finished, the blocky old sheriff thought a while, then said, "I oughtn't do it, but I will. For your sake, Norbec, I hope it pans out. I sure do!"

◇ ◇ ◇

RED banners were streaming in the western sky when Bill Norbec rode up and stopped before Sam Rhett's shacklike ranchhouse that same day. The ranch buildings, in a sorry state of disrepair, were hemmed by thickets and underbrush. Rhett, a surly, quarrelsome man, had once been a tinhorn gambler, but his crookedness had driven him from his profession.

Even in this country Rhett had found trouble. A rifleman found him doing strange things with a branding iron on the wrong critters—and Rhett had almost died. But, somehow or other, he had gotten out of that scrape.

Norbec halloed, and Sam Rhett came and stood in the doorway of the shack. Rhett was a dark, slablike man, with shiny black eyes. He looked surprisedly, but without friendliness, at Norbec, although Norbec was sure the surprise was

faked. As Rhett stepped to the ground the ragged gray coat he wore swished aside, and Norbec glimpsed the butt of a heavy six-shooter under Rhett's left armpit.

After the brief exchange of greetings, Rhett said without warmth, "Kind of off your range, ain't you, Norbec?"

"Yes, I am," Bill Norbec admitted, and swung slowly to the ground. "I had something I wanted to talk over with you."

Rhett said warily, "What?"

"Ben Ventner was killed yesterday. I reckon you know that?"

"Yes, I know it. A Rafter T puncher stopped by and told me this mornin'. What of it?"

"You had some trouble with Ventner, a couple of months back, didn't you?"

"So did you, if I remember right. What're you gettin' at, Norbec?"

Norbec said flatly, "You don't like me, Rhett, and I don't like you. You know I didn't come here on a social call. So I'll speak quick and plain. I'm onto your skunky trick. I know you killed Ben Ventner, and tried to frame it onto me!"

Sam Rhett's eyes narrowed until they were only tiny pin-points of cold black flame. Then he laughed.

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"You're jokin', Norbec—or you're a fool! Ventner, accordin' to what I heard, was downed from in front—and Ventner was chain-lightning with a six-shooter. I just wear this gun to kill wolves, and crippled cows—a man like Ventner could draw twice before I could touch it. I wear it under my arm that way so it won't get in my way when I'm ridin'. Me beat Ben Ventner to the draw? That's a laugh, Norbec!"

Norbec had listened quietly. He said, "You won't laugh very long. I was fixin' fence yesterday, between my place and Ventner's, about the time Ventner was killed. I heard the shot. I didn't see you kill Ventner, but I saw you ride away from the spot. I followed you a little piece, just to make sure. I saw you take a piece of paper from your pocket and drop it to the ground, and when I picked it up I saw that it had my name on it. Then I knew you aimed to frame the killing onto me. That was the idea, wasn't it, Rhett?"

Sam Rhett's bony face was pale and still. "What else?"

"Why, I didn't say anything about what I'd seen. I don't give a damn about Ben Ventner, and I don't care how you killed him. The point is, Rhett, I don't give a damn about you, either. I just plain don't like you. But I like this place of yours. With decent care it could be made into a sweet little outfit."

Rhett licked his lips, and said, "I hope you don't think I'm fool enough to swallow that hogwash, Norbec. I—what did you mean by that last?"

"What I said." Bill Norbec smiled slowly, contemptuously. "I've got you cold, Rhett, and don't think I don't aim to squeeze you dry! You're pullin' out, Rhett—but before you do it, you're writin' me a bill-of-sale for this outfit and everything on it."

Sam Rhett didn't move or speak for a moment, and the savage battle raging inside him was plain in his inky eyes. Murderous hate and rage battled with caution. Bill Norbec was fast with a gun—faster, even, than the dead Ventner had been.

"What if I won't do it?"

"Why, then I'd go to Sheriff Jess Drum and tell him what I know. It'd be plenty to hang you. It's your choice, and you've

got just ten seconds to make up your mind. What'll it be?"

Rhett started to speak, then closed his lips. He lowered his eyes, his shoulders slumped, and Norbec knew he'd finally won.

"I—I'll do it," Rhett said. "I'll go into the house and get a pencil and some paper."

Abruptly, Sam Rhett turned his back on Norbec and took a step toward the doorway. A sharp bulge appeared suddenly at the back of his coat, just below the left armpit, there was a blasting roar, and flame and smoke lashed out.

But Bill Norbec had leaped to one side, his hand stabbing downward, and up. His own gun blazed and roared. Rhett's skinny body jerked convulsively, and then he fell forward on his face. He lay there, and smoke still curled from the scorched hole in the back of his coat. And Sam Rhett was very dead.

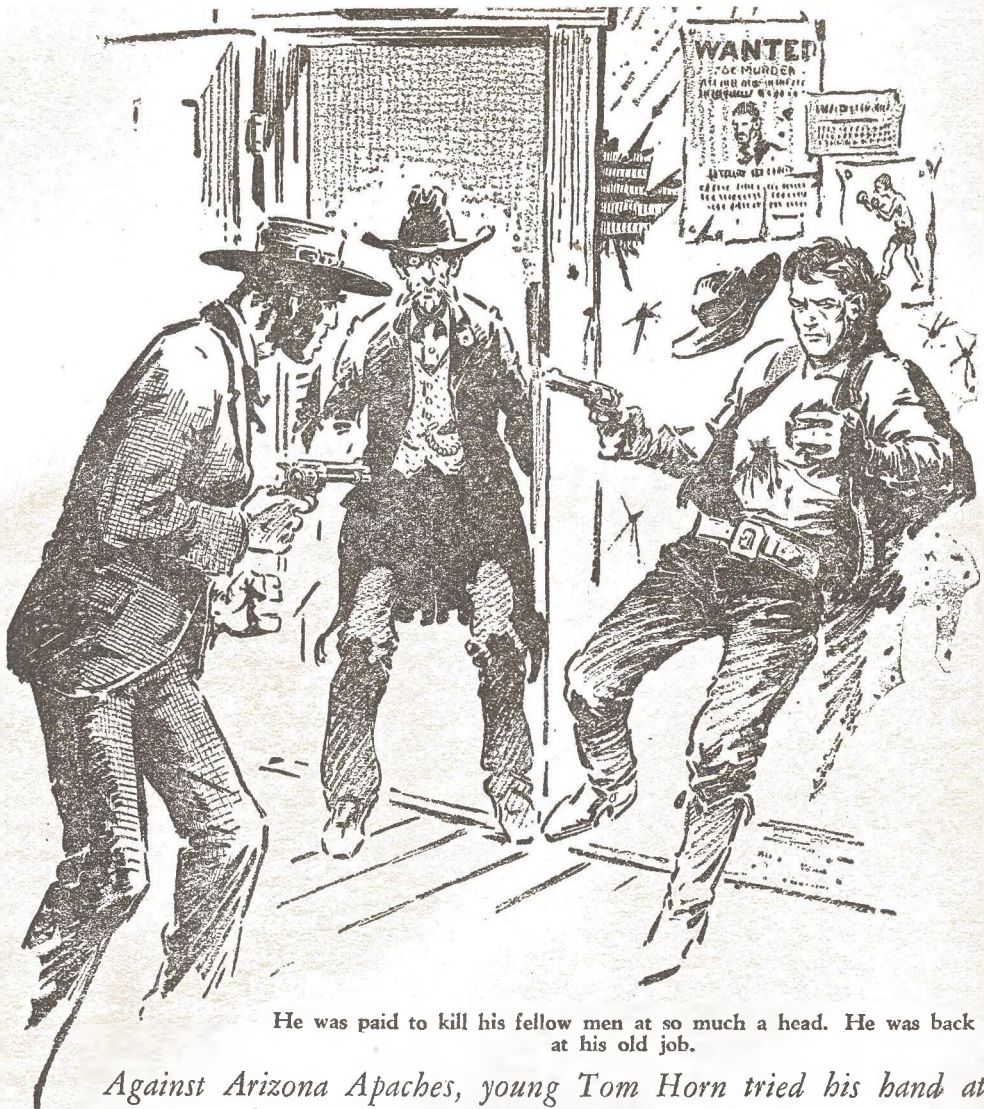
Sheriff Jess Drum came running from a thicket nearby. "By gosh, it worked!" he said excitedly. "It beats me how you knew it happened like that. It beats me to hell."

"I didn't, exactly," Norbec said slowly. "Most of it was bluff. But, in spite of what you told me, I knew that Ventner hadn't been killed in a fair fight. Somehow, he'd been tricked. I rode the long trails for a while, you remember, and I learned human snakes and their ways. Once, up in Utah, I knew a ratty little killer named Tonk Lager. Lager wore his gun in a shoulder holster. He'd pick a quarrel, then turn and start walkin' away, throwin' the other fellow off-guard, and then he'd shoot through the back of his coat. He hardly ever missed."

"I sabe," said the old sheriff. "Remembering that, you thought of Sam Rhett and his shoulder gun."

Bill Norbec nodded, holstering his still-smoking gun. There was a faint smile on his face.

"That's right. Rhett was pretty good, too. He killed Ben Ventner that way, and he tried to kill me, because he thought I had the deadwood on him. Well, men make mistakes. One thing, though, about killers like Rhett—they never make the same mistake twice!"



He was paid to kill his fellow men at so much a head. He was back at his old job.

Against Arizona Apaches, young Tom Horn tried his hand at killing for hire, and found it to his liking.

TOM HORN, HIRED KILLER

By **BRETT AUSTIN**

THEY WERE hanging Tom Horn for the murder of a fourteen-year-old nester boy. Tom's hands were tied behind him as they led him out on the scaffold. They fitted the noose around his neck and dropped the trapdoor lever.

But, strangely, the trapdoor did not open. "Drop it again," the sheriff told the hangman.

The hangman did, and this time the trapdoor opened. Tom Horn sagged to the rope's end, and died.

Thus ended the life of one of the West's most enigmatic gunmen. Nobody, not even Tom Horn himself knew how many men had died under his guns. To some who knew him, he was a brave and admirable man; to others, he was a hated killer.

He was born in Missouri. At fifteen, he was driving stage out of Prescott, Arizona. At sixteen, he was an Army scout.

He knew the Apache tongue. He fought against his friend, the great Chief Geronimo, six feet of fighting man, cool and fearless.

The Apaches were making a liquor called *tizwin*. Tom Horn was commissioned by the United States government to keep them from making this drink. He went into the Apache war a common, run-of-the-mill Westerner—he came out an experienced man-hunter and killer.

He joined up with the Pinkerton Detective Agency. Now it became his regular job to hunt down and kill men. But his wages were not high enough. So he went into business on his own.

The Coon Hole gang, in Wyoming, was rustling cattle and stealing horses. Horn was hired to break up the combine. He would get so much a head for each man he killed.

First, he was to kill Matt Rash, a white man, and Isham Dart, a giant Negro. For Rash and Dart were stealing cattle from a Wyoming spread, the Lazy B.

He gained the confidence of the Coon Hole gang. Luck was with him here. These gang members were tight-lipped, ever suspicious. But Fate stepped in. Tom Horn got a break.

He was a bronc rider. And the Coon Hole gang had a bad horse that none of them could ride. One day, in a Wyoming town, Tom Horn rode the bronc to a standstill. He rode the beast until it stopped bucking and stood spraddle-legged, winded and sweaty, beaten into submission.

Horn bought the drinks. He was a heavy drinker himself, and soon he was rip-roaringly drunk. But, drunk or sober, he knew how to hold his tongue. Soon the whole gang was drunk, and when Tom Horn regained sobriety, he was in Coon Hole, a member of the nefarious outfit.

Sober, the immensity of his task appalled him. He had hired out to kill six

of these men, six hard gunmen. Now these men accepted him as a fellow outlaw, and he was masquerading under their good graces.

They were killers, certainly. For the most part, they were cold-blooded, hard-hearted men who'd kill at the drop of a sweaty saddleblanket. But they had a definite code. And one tenet of this code was to never betray a fellow outlaw.

Here Tom was, an accepted member of the gang, but actually he was in their midst with the sole purpose of killing certain of its members. Maybe that thought rubbed against the grain of his self-respect. Anyway, he did not kill any of the gang-members immediately.

He rode with them on rustling forays, helped them trail stolen cattle and horses south into Colorado, helped them steal cattle in that state and drive them into Wyoming. He shared the booty of these raids. He shared the blankets of men he had hired out to murder.

But the men who had hired him to kill these outlaws made him live up to his promise. If he didn't live up to his part of the bargain, he'd get no pay. And money was what Tom Horn was after. He would put friendship into the discard when money entered the picture. He was that type.

He did it cleverly. He took seven cigarette papers and, on each, he scrawled a warning. He put one of the papers on each of the six outlaws' beds in the bunkhouse. The seventh warning he put on his own bed.

That night the outlaws came in and saw the warnings. All suspicion was diverted from Tom Horn because he, too, had received a warning.

A few days passed, and the mysterious warnings were almost forgotten. Then Rash's riderless horse came into Coon Hole trailing its bridle reins. Longriders backtracked the horse and found Rash dead, drilled through with a .30-30 rifle.

Then the Coon Hole reign of terror started.

Dart, the Negro, was the second to die. They found him in a coulee, the top of his head shot off, and he had also been killed by a .30-30 rifle bullet. Outlaws began to eye one another suspiciously.

Then the third man was killed, and the

fourth, and the fifth. All, so the outlaws found out, had been shot with a .30-30. But not one member of the gang carried a .30-30.

Tom Horn was careful to keep his rifle hidden. He did not kill the sixth man. He shot him from a distance and the man, desperately wounded, rode into the outlaw camp.

That was enough. The longriders abandoned Coon Hole. Today it is a trackless, lonely spot.

Word got out among the remaining members of the gang that Tom Horn, one of their saddlemates, had been behind the killings. Maybe that was why Horn left the West and joined the United States Army. For the Spanish-American war was in progress.



A STRANGE man, this Tom Horn. Always, it seemed, he had to be in a killing. Now he was in a war. He was Chief Pack Master. Now, too, he was Colonel Horn.

At San Juan Hill he was in the thick of the fighting. For, whatever may be said of him, whether bad or good, no one can claim that Tom Horn was a coward.

He contracted Cuban fever and was mustered out. Again, because he lived by his gun, and because his gun was useless in the East, he turned toward the Western plains.

Here, too, enters the darkest chapter of his life. At that time Wyoming was writhing in growing pains. Wyoming, once all cattle, was becoming a sheep territory. Also, nesters were coming in.

And, by these tokens, the cowmen read their doom.

Accordingly, they hired gunmen to kill the sheepmen and nesters. And Tom Horn was one of the hirelings.

Nobody knows how many men died under Tom Horn's rifle and six-shooter. Horn himself once set the number at twenty-six. Whenever he killed a man he would place a stone under the man's head as a pillow. That, people learned, was his mark.

He was a feared man. Many had reason to hate him, but because they feared him he was allowed to live. Then, one day, a farmer came into town, his face white with rage and his hands trembling.

"I'm killin' Tom Horn," he said.

Somebody reminded him that Horn was a swift gunman, a professional killer. He was asked what Horn had done.

"He's killed my fourteen-year-old boy, men."

"How do you know Horn did it?"

"I foun' my boy on a hill. He's out there now, dead, an' there's a rock under his head, like he was layin' on a pillow."

Men looked at one another, amazement in their eyes. Gradually, as their tempers rose, this look of amazement gave way to one of anger. The farmer told the rest.

A few days before, Tom Horn had ridden up to the farmer's house and ordered the nester off his homestead. The man was given three days to leave. But he did not go.

On the fourth day the farmer's son had dressed in his father's clothing and had ridden away from the house, probably going to ride into the hills. Whoever had killed him probably had mistaken him for his father.

The finger of suspicion pointed at Tom Horn. He was captured, taken into town, and tried for murder. He insisted he was innocent. Despite his claims, he was sentenced to hang.

The cattlemen who had hired him now deserted him to save their own necks. But Tom Horn, to their amazement, did not give away their identities.

He escaped from jail once. But before he could arm himself he was captured and returned. Then came the fateful day of his hanging.

Silently, he went to the gallows. Without speaking, he looked down at the faces below him. What were his thoughts at this last moment?

No man knows. For Tom Horn never told. His was a dark, silent nature, and his words and thoughts and tongue were his own. His gun had always done the talking. And now his gun had placed a hangman's knot against his ear.

THE OWLHOOT RIDES TO WAR

A smashing novelette of rustlers on the kill

By **MORGAN LEWIS**

CHAPTER ONE

Hangnose for Ranchers

THEY drew rein in a narrow divide and the steam from their horses melted into the rain and mist. Chet Lasser looked at his two older brothers

and shivered. Under the tattered oilskin, his wiry, eighteen-year-old frame was cold and clammy.

Ed Lasser, the eldest, turned to look at Jack, and water sloshed from his hat-



Chet Lasser's promise to redeem the ranch two men had died for made him ride in the shadow of the hangope.

brim to form a transient curtain before his blunt-jawed face. He spoke with the gravity of his thirty years.

"We're in a bad tight and it'll be touch and go if we get out."

Jack nodded and looked back over the trail, trying to force his vision through the enveloping gray vapor. There was no smile on his lean, dark face now; instead there was a taut alertness as he listened for the tell-tale ring of horse-shoes on rock.

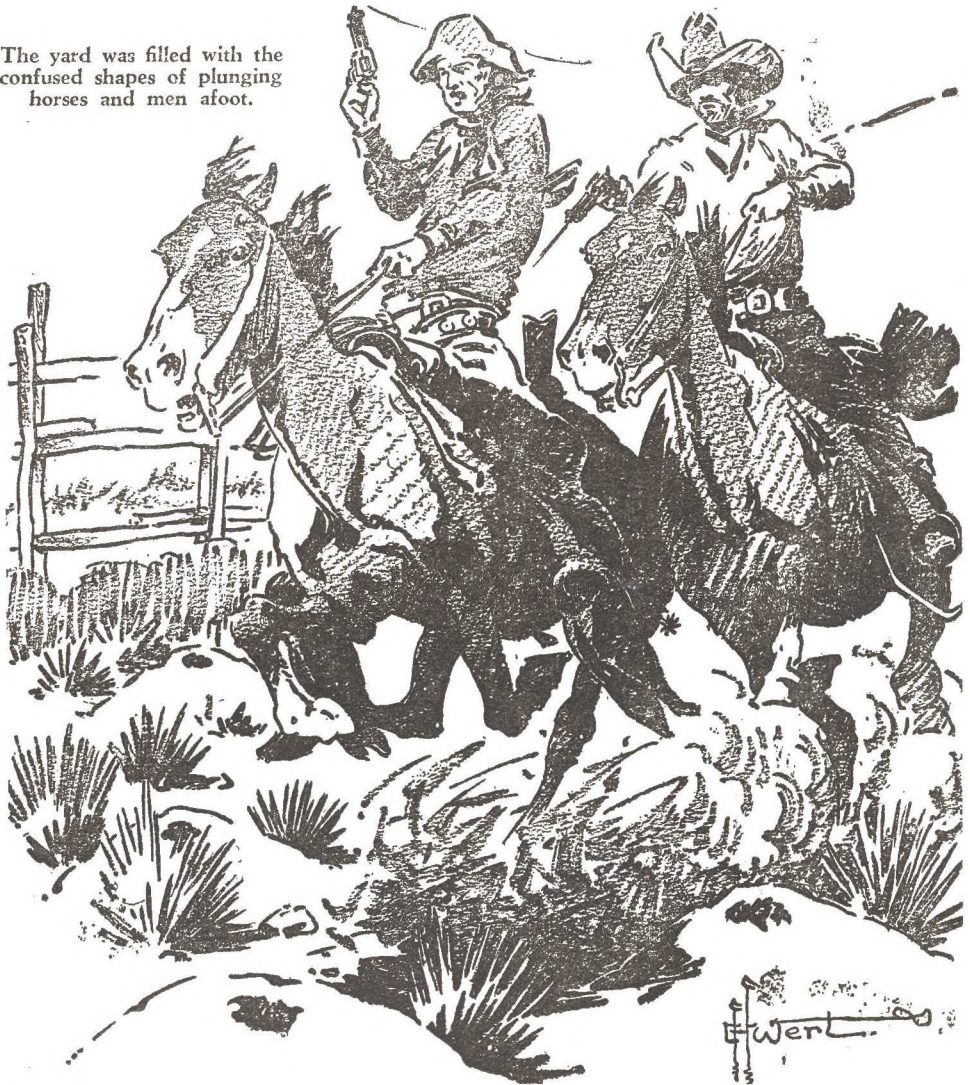
But there was no sound save the muffled

drip of rain and the distant rush of wind in the wooded hills above. He turned to Chet. "Stay here a minute, Bub. Ed and me want to talk."

Chet nodded and the two men walked their horses a score of steps up the trail. He knew what they were figuring: a way to get him out of here with a whole skin, and his smooth jaw tightened rebelliously.

He sat and watched the water slide over the smooth shoulder of his buckskin while his ears strained for the sounds

The yard was filled with the confused shapes of plunging horses and men afoot.



of pursuit. Back there in the gray depths, big Murch Halliday and his crew from the Box H were trailing them and it was only a question of time before they caught up.

Chet Lasser's mind was still a little dazed, things had happened so swiftly. He and his two brothers had come upon a dead Box H steer, a steer from which a hind quarter had been cut, and it was on their range. Ed had swung down to examine it when lead had whined over their heads and Murch Halliday's voice had roared, "There they are! Don't let 'em get way!" Then men and horses had come charging out of the mist and rain.

"Time to go," Ed had said as he swung back into the saddle and led the way out on a dead run, with bullets screaming wickedly after them.

There hadn't been much time to pick a direction. The divide had spread out before them, invitingly close, and they had pounded hell-for-leather between its narrowing walls. They might have stayed and argued it out, Chet thought, seeing they were in the right, but it's hard to be convincing with a bullet between your teeth.

Now, they had temporarily shaken the pursuit, but it wouldn't be for long, Chet knew. Murch Halliday was like a bulldog; once he sank his teeth into something he hung on. Chet waited and wondered how that butchered steer had come to be on their range.

The buckskin lifted his head now, ears pricked forward, and the boy tensed. He strained his ears but no sound came from that empty gray void. He swung down and laid an ear on the hard rock bottom—and was back in the saddle in a flash. Horses were coming up the trail.

Chet whistled softly and headed for his brothers. They turned their horses back to him. "They're comin'," Chet said.

"Bub," Ed said, "this is a blind gulch. I remember bein' over here once before. It peters out against a rock wall you can't climb."

He paused and looked at the boy intently. "There's just one chance," he resumed when Chet remained silent. "Up ahead is a sort of pocket that runs off to the right a ways. You hole up in there

and Jack and me will pull 'em past. Then you hightail it outa here and rustle us some help."

Chet wanted to answer but there was a constriction in his chest that wouldn't let him, so he nodded. Things must be pretty bad. These two brothers of his had raised him since he was a button, ever since his mother and dad had died. And now they were going to pull Murch Halliday and his crew after them so he would have a chance to get away.

They weren't fooling him any; there was no help he could get and, when he got back, they would both be dead. So he nodded and followed them into the gray mist while from behind came the sound of horses on their trail.

Let them think he was going to play it their way—Chet knew he wasn't. He'd go into the pocket all right, but, when the fight started, he'd come out and take that hard-eyed crew in the rear. When it came to a finish fight, Chet Lasser wasn't running out on his brothers.

Ed halted so abruptly that Chet's horse bumped him. "There you are, Bub!" He pointed to an opening in the rock wall.

Jack reined in beside him and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Soon as they're past," he said, "you light out of here and ride like hell!"

Chet wanted to protest, to say that he didn't want to live if they couldn't, but instead he just clamped his jaw. "All right," he muttered, "lots of luck."

The pursuit sounded so close that momentarily he expected to see them driving through the gray veil, so he shoved his horse into the pocket, guiding him carefully around the fallen boulders.

Ed and Jack watched him until he turned a corner, but still they made no motion to leave. Then Chet heard a shout from down-trail and a sudden clatter as his brothers sent their horses on between the ever narrowing walls. He sat his horse beyond the curve and heard the pound and rattle as Murch and his crew swept past. Then, after a long moment, he heard gunfire. The sound came down the coulee in long, drumming rolls between the rocky walls.

Chet urged his buckskin out to the trail, his mouth dry and a hot rage in his breast at these Box H killers. He drove

around a bend in the trail and saw shadowy shapes ahead. He roweled the buckskin with his spurs and raced for them, his sixgun jumping against his palm. There was a shout, somewhere ahead in the mist, and figures turned and sent lead screaming at him. Something hit him alongside the head with a jarring impact that shook him down to his very toes. He slumped forward over the horse's neck while men and mist and rocks dissolved in a rushing tide of blackness. Chet never knew when he hit the ground.



LATER, he felt himself lifted to his feet and his hands yanked behind his back, and tied. The pain of the rope biting into his wrists aroused him. He opened his eyes and reality came sickeningly back as he saw Ed and Jack standing beside him, their hands also bound. There was a red stain on Ed's shirt. Chet saw that blood was dripping down from high up under his coat.

Jack turned to him. "Why didn't you run?"

"And leave you?" Chet demanded.

Jack's face was grim but there was a look of affectionate pride in his eyes.

Murch Halliday stepped in front of them. "You've killed your last Box H cow," he said grimly.

Chet got a good look at the big cattleman for the first time. He had seen him before from a distance but had never observed him closely, and what he saw now made his heart sink.

Halliday's black eyes were as hard and glittering as obsidian and his mouth, under the hooked nose, was thin-lipped and harsh, with the corners drawn down. His face wasn't bronzed like Ed's and Jack's but was a granite gray with deep lines cut slantwise from nose to mouth corners.

Ed spoke, a little wearily, as though the bullet within him had drained his vitality. "We didn't kill that cow—it was there when we come up."

"Don't lie to me!" Halliday snapped, and struck him across the mouth. He stepped back. "Put 'em on their horses! We'll ride 'til we find a tree strong enough to hold 'em."

The three brothers were boosted to their saddles and the horses started back down the trail, men riding in front and behind them.

Through the despairing misery that filled him, Chet heard Jack's soft voice. "If you get outa this, high-tail it outa the country. Halliday will brand us as rustlers to save his own skin, and it won't be healthy if you're found around these parts."

Chet didn't answer. It didn't seem possible that Halliday would actually hang them. Maybe he was just doing this to throw a scare into them.

They reached the mouth of the coulee and turned left across the level plain, and rode on, the hills marching beside them. At a dead pine that thrust stark branches against the gray sky, they halted.

"This is as good as any," Halliday said.

They took the ropes from the Lasser boys' saddles and hung them over a projecting limb. Hutch Alden, Halliday's ramrod, went from rope to rope, tying nooses and testing them.

Ed spoke up. "I always knowed you was hard, Halliday, but I never figured you was crooked." His tone became almost musing. "I know you want our spread and it looks like this is your way of gettin' it."

An angry red seeped into Halliday's face.

"Just for that," he said thinly, "you'll go first." He grabbed the bridle of Ed's horse and led him beneath the tree. Hutch rode over and adjusted the noose around his neck.

There was a wild horror in Chet's eyes as he watched Murch step back, swing a heavy quilt. It cracked across the horse's hind quarters and the animal leaped forward. Ed was jerked from the saddle and swung at the end of the rope as the limb creaked. Chet saw the agony in his eyes as the noose bit into his neck. Ed's face purpled, his feet beat the air in a frenzied tempo and gradually slowed. They kicked once, spasmodically, and then were still.

Chet went completely crazy. The sight of his brother hanging limply at the end of the rope drove him berserk. He threw a leg over the horse's neck and slid to the ground. When he hit he was running. His head took the unsuspecting Halliday

in the midriff and butted him clear off his feet. When the Box H boss hit the ground, Chet's boots were kicking wildly at his face.

Two waddies grabbed him and slammed him back. Murch got up, the blood running from his split lips, and reached for his gun. He half pulled it and checked himself.

"That would be too easy," he rasped. "Take him next!"

They forced the hysterical kid back to his horse and boosted him into the saddle. Hutch led him beneath the rope next to Ed. Halliday grasped his quirt and stepped behind the horse and Hutch lifted the noose.

He stopped with his hands in mid-air, at the sounds of a sudden scuffle. Chet jerked his head around and saw Jack going into action. Somehow, he had worked his hands free and now one wiry arm was wrapped around the neck of the waddie in front of him, and his right hand was snatching the gun from the man's holster. He laid the barrel over the man's head in one flashing motion, then swung it on Halliday.

"Ride!" he yelled.

Hutch fell back and Jack's gun boomed, sending a bullet burning across the rump of Chet's horse. The buckskin squealed shrilly and exploded into a dead run. The first jump almost unseated Chet, but his sinewy legs held their grip and he stayed in the saddle.

He got one glimpse of Jack's gun spouting red, then he was beyond and swallowed up in the gray mist and rain while other guns roared into action. Most of the men had dismounted, and Jack's action had caught them flatfooted. The buckskin tore on as though pursued by the devil, and Chet, his hands tied, could only sit and let him run.

The wet coolness against his face gradually stilled the fever in his shocked brain and allowed a return of sanity. His first and only impulse had been to return and die with Ed and Jack, taking with him as many Box H men as possible, but as he cooled, other thoughts came to him. Ed and Jack had virtually given their lives to get him away. They were both dead now and he was the only Lasser left. Unless their deaths had been useless and

of no avail, he had to live—so Murch Halliday would die.

He knew that even now those tough Box H hands were on his trail, led by Hutch Alden, if Jack's bullets hadn't downed him; Hutch, who could track a man down as well as an Indian. So Chet guided the buckskin by knee pressure toward the hills. Up in their bleak and somber fastness he might have a chance of eluding them; down on the flat tableland his trail was plain for all to read.

His chances of getting away were slim. Murch Halliday could never rest easy in possession of the Lasser's ranch while one of the family was still alive; therefore, Chet knew he would be hunted relentlessly.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Rides in Pursuit

THE buckskin had dropped from his headlong running into a swinging loop when he reached the first outcropping of wooded slope. Chet sent him up, ducking low to avoid the whipping branches. His hands had grown numb from the rope's pressure and his arms ached from the unnatural position.

He stopped at a sharp ledge of rock and, taking the reins in his teeth, stepped from the saddle. It didn't take long to fray the rope on the flinty edges and then he was back in the saddle, beating his hands and rubbing them to restore the circulation.

At intervals he paused to listen, but the mist and rain were like heavy cotton batting, muffling and deadening all sound. Murch and his crew might be close behind and he wouldn't know it.

The buckskin was already lathered, but Chet pushed him on, climbing ever higher into that vast, up-tilted country of dark shadows and treacherous drops. A wild, unknown country where the grizzly and the cougar, the mountain sheep and the black tailed deer lived. He struck a shallow mountain stream and walked the horse in its bed until it became too steep to climb.

He reached the top of the first fold of mountain and turned left, traveling along its rocky ridge, trusting to the fog to

conceal him from men below. A couple of miles farther on he swung right and went down hill. He crossed a narrow, wooded valley and again the weary climb began.

Chet rode in a daze, his mind numbed by the swift completeness of the disaster. He could still feel the spot on his shoulder where Jack had clapped his hand for the last time. Jack . . . Ed . . . he'd never see them again. A sob wrenched at his chest. He'd never felt lonely before—Jack and Ed had seen to that—but now the solitude pressed down on him until he felt utterly lost and alone.

He couldn't go back to the ranch, and by tomorrow Murch would have spread the news that he was a rustler, and men would be on the lookout for him. He could only drive deeper into the mountains, hoping to escape detection like the rest of the hunted creatures that inhabited these desolate wilds.

It had been mid-morning when Murch and his crew had jumped them; it was getting dark when Chet finally halted his weary horse. The buckskin had climbed gamely, but Chet could see he was about all in. He tied him and back-tracked a few hundred feet to a clear view of the way he had come. They had taken his six-gun, but the saddle gun had been left in its holster. Chet rested it on his knees and crouched in the brush until the pines ceased to stand out and the whole world became a vast sea of darkness. Then he went back to his horse, satisfied that they would trail him no more that night.

He had stopped by a sheer cliff of rock and, in a deep cleft he started a fire with pine needles and dry, rotted wood from a stump. A towering pine spread sheltering branches to keep its glow from the sky.

Chet used his rope to picket the buckskin in a patch of grass and came back to the fire to lay off his oilskin and get the chill from his weary bones.

The bottom had fallen out of his world with devastating suddenness. Dry-eyed, he crouched over the blaze while his still dazed mind tried to piece out the future. He recalled Ed's last words to Halliday, "You want our spread and this is your way of gettin' it," and Jack's warning that he would be branded a rustler by Halliday.

The Lasser ranch was barred to him; Murch and his crew would take possession. Furthermore, once the word had spread, the entire territory stretching from the Big Horns to the badlands would be unsafe for him. Even if the surrounding ranchers were not actually hostile, they would not want to incur the enmity of the powerful Box H by befriending him. He had only his horse and gun left, and if he stayed in these parts, the chances were that he wouldn't outlive tomorrow.

The warmth drove the cold from him and made him drowsy. He dozed, only to have the picture of Ed's agonized face tear a scream from his throat and bring him wide awake.

It cleared during the night and when the first fingers of dawn touched the peaks, he was on his way. He crossed another ridge and went down-grade until he struck a pine belt. Here he turned south, trusting to the thick carpet of needles to blot his trail.

The ground fell away before him in a gradual slope and soon he was traveling along the bottom of a narrow, wooded valley. He kept moving until the shadows began to drip from the peaks on his right to form pools of dusk farther down.

A bear cub ambled across an open glade and Chet knocked it over with a shot from his saddle gun. He cut off a haunch and a strip along the back and pushed on until it got too dark to travel.

He found a sheltered spot and built a fire, over which he broiled strips of bear meat. It was the first food to pass his lips in some thirty-six hours, and with his belly full of hot meat he didn't feel so all in. He slept better that night, but still dreams of Ed came to haunt



THE sun was straight overhead the next day when the valley widened out into a broad, treeless meadow. He checked the buckskin and scanned it warily. He saw no living thing and rode boldly out. The hills still ranged high and dark at his right, but on the left they had dwindled to a low ridge.

A good-sized stream meandered down the valley's length, flowing straight enough in the main but occasionally

switching from one side to the other. Later in the day, Chet had occasion to cross it, and found it to be much wider and deeper than it had been at the valley's head. He guessed it to be a feeder branch of the Powder River and from there on moved more cautiously.

He was getting into the hilly, broken country at the southern end of the Big Horns. Farther on was Satan's Hole, and word had come up-trail that it was being used as a rustler hideout. The valley began twisting and turning as it wound deeper into the hills and Chet slowed the buckskin to a walk.

He began to have the feeling that he was caught between two fires. Behind him lay Murch Halliday and the hangman's noose; ahead was a strip of wild, lawless country dominated by rustlers.

The range he had just left was wild enough, but there were a certain number of honest ranchers, and if a man kept his hands off other men's cattle he was reasonably safe. The country ahead knew only the law of the sixgun. The rustlers, who preyed on the trail herds being driven up from the south, hunted in packs and were as merciless and predatory as wolves.

He thought it over and decided to keep going. Maybe he could take to the hills farther down and circle around the rustler hideout. Once he got clear of this section of country, he could find himself a job with one of the cattle outfits.

As he went on down the valley, Chet was not aware of the change that had come over him, but the two days and nights of dodging death had left their mark. He now rode with a tight awareness and there was a grim, alert set to his jaw that had been lacking in happier days. His gray eyes were wary and there were little, new creases at their corners.

The sun was dipping behind the western hills when Chet rounded a bend and a bullet whistled close over his head, followed by the sharp crack of a rifle, close by. He wheeled to run when a nasal voice twanged, "Stay where yuh are, sonny, or I'll shore have ter drill yuh!" There was menace in those tones and Chet raised his hands and faced about.

A lean, angular looking gent with a hard red face stepped from behind a bulge of rock and came forward. His rifle point-

ed straight at Chet. He reached the horse and pulled the saddle gun from its holster. He looked for Chet's revolver and saw it was missing.

"Git down!" he snapped. Chet stepped from the saddle and the stranger slapped him around the body for a hideout gun. He found none and stepped back. "Jest where was yuh headin'?"

Chet put his hands down. "I was just ridin' through," he said, "lookin' for a job."

"There ain't no jobs 'round here," the man said, keeping his pale eyes on Chet's face. "I reckon I'll have ter tote yuh into camp an' see what the boss wants ter do with yuh." He disappeared behind the rock bulge and emerged riding a blue roan. "Git on yore hoss," he ordered, "but don't try no tricks!"

Chet swung into the saddle and they rode down the valley in silence, Chet mentally cursing himself. He had a strong hunch that the red-faced stranger was a rustler, and if that was so he was in a tight spot—and no mistake.

They swung around a bend in the growing dusk and ahead of them was the blaze of a fire. For an instant, Chet had a wild thought of making a run for it but the red-faced man was riding close beside him, his hand not far from his gun.

They came into the rim of firelight. One man was busy above it while others stood about or sprawled on the ground. A voice called, "What yuh got there, Baldy?"

"Damned ef I know," Baldy answered. "He ain't much more'n a button; claims he's jest passin' through." He stepped to the ground and the crew ranged forward to stare at Chet. They were a hard-case lot; even the warm firelight could not mellow the hard glint in their eyes. A big-bellied man with a thick, surly, tobacco-stained mouth pushed to the front.

"Git down," he ordered gustily, "so's we kin git a look at yuh!"

As Chet swung down a big man came in from the outer circle of darkness and pushed through the semi-circle of men in time to hear the big-bellied one growl, "Button, hell! He's old enough to know his way around. Why didn't yuh knock 'im off, Baldy?"

"I was follerin' the boss's orders,"

Baldy said. "He can't do no harm."

The other cursed wheezily. "He's got eyes in his head, ain't he? How do yuh know he ain't been sent to git a line on us?" He took a step backward and his hand fell to his gun-butt. "I don't aim to have no sneakin' spy around that might git *my* neck stretched." His face was flushed from something stronger than water and his dark eyes glittered damply. There was no mistaking the menace in his tones and Chet froze.

"Tryin' to run things again, Jake?" The voice was low and even. The big-bellied man called Jake snapped his head around and, as he did so, the tall man who had just entered drove a hard fist against his thick lips. "We ain't taken to shootin' kids, yet," he said.

Blood splattered and Jake went down. He rolled on his side clawing for his gun—and looked into the black hole of a .44. "Don't try it!" the tall man warned.

Jake took his hand from his gun and got up. He dragged his sleeve across his bloody mouth and shook his head. "I reckon I spoke outa turn," he wheezed, and turned away.

The tall man turned his back on him with a fine disregard.

"Have you et yet?" he asked Chet.

"Not since mornin'."

"I reckon there's beans left in the pot, and maybe a slab of meat," the tall man said. "You can talk later."

He led the way to the fire and Chet squatted down and went to work on the food. Some of the crew sprawled nearby and others rolled into their blankets. He saw Jake across the fire, watching him with his damp black eyes.

As he ate he had time to observe the tall man who sat near the fire. He was about fifty, Chet judged, as the flames lighted his big, lined, leathery face and brought out the brown flecks in his gray eyes. His mouth was wide and thin-lipped and his wide-bridged nose jutted decisively. The whole face gave an impression of cool steadiness, but something, possibly the strange quirk at the corners of his mouth, hinted that a wild recklessness might lie beneath.

He turned as Chet fished up the last bean and put aside his tin plate. "Just what's your business," he asked, and a

slight hardness had crept into his even voice.

"Mister," Chet said, "I'm lookin' for an honest job of cowpunchin'. I was figgerin' on takin' to the hills so as to circle around Satan's Hole and maybe tie up with one of them big outfits farther south."

The man digested this bit of information. "Where you from?"

"Up north!" Chet jerked his head.

A hint of a smile appeared on the other's face. "What's your handle, Bub?"

Chet hesitated an instant. "Bill . . . Bill Jones."

The smile spread broadly over the man's face. "Took you too long to think that one up," he drawled. "Looks to me like you're just hidin' out, the same as us." He stretched and stood up. "You can turn in now. I reckon you'll have to string along with this outfit 'til we get further south. Then we'll turn you loose."

Chet fetched his slicker from his saddle and spread it near the fire. The tall man squatted nearby and tossed him a blanket. "It's a heap warmer and closer than the sky," he said.

"Thanks," Chet said, and wrapped up. Later, as he was dozing off, he saw the big man still staring into the fire, tobacco smoke trailing before his face.

CHAPTER THREE

Friend or Devil?

CHET slept soundly at first and then dreams of Ed and Jack came to haunt him. He saw again Ed's agonized face as the rope cut into his neck, and saw the cruel torment in his eyes. It was almost as though he could feel the rope around his own neck; he awoke, choking and gasping Ed's name.

He shivered and turned his head. The big outlaw leader was propped on an elbow in his blankets regarding him steadily. "What's your name, Bub?" he asked suddenly.

Chet's mind was drugged with sleep and he was shaking and unnerved by the dream. He answered without thinking, "Chet Lasser."

A heavy silence lay over the camp and the sleeping men. It was almost as though

Chet's answer had been lost in that huge void for any sign the man gave. Then the breath went from him in a long sigh.

"And this Ed," he said softly. "You just called his name?"

"My brother . . ." Chet said, and hesitated. He realized suddenly that he had told a lot more than he had intended. But the secret he had carried locked within his head had been so burned into his brain that he felt if he didn't relieve the strain by talking he would go crazy.

And the long figure in the blankets next to him inspired confidence. "They hung him," he blurted out and, as though the words had removed a plug, the whole gruesome story ran out of him.

He finished and his voice trailed away into silence. The man had listened intently, his body rigid in the faint glow of embers. Now he threw off his blankets and, going over to the fire, put on fresh wood. As it took hold, Chet thought he had never seen a face so hard and cold. It was as though all the lines of humor and tolerance had been wiped out, leaving only the hard, bony structure beneath to show through.

He turned to Chet. "Did them brothers of yorn ever do any rustlin'?"

Chet sat up in his blankets. "Mister," he said levelly, "Ed and Jack never put a rope over another man's cow 'less it was at roundup or they was cuttin' out. . . ." He broke off and stared at Jake, rolled in blankets on the other side of the fire. Something in the expression of the man's face made Chet think he wasn't asleep. The big man's eyes followed the direction of his gaze. His jaw hardened.

"You better get some sleep," he said softly. "I aim to set up a while."

Chet lay back. He felt tired, but the incessant, grinding pressure inside his head was gone, as though some of it had slipped out with the words. For the first time since Ed had been hung he slept without dreams to drag him back to wakefulness. . . .

He awoke to the clatter and noise of eating men. He got up and went to the river to clean himself. He came back and, while he ate, the men were catching up their horses and slinging their bedrolls behind the saddles.

Baldy squatted beside him and there

was a marked friendliness in his grin. "Ain't we pretty close to Satan's Hole?" Chet asked.

"Nope," Baldy said. "'Bout two days hard ridin'. We don't often git up this far."

There were about a dozen men in camp, and in the early morning light they looked even harder than on the previous night. Jake's split lips were swollen and he looked surly.

"We headin' that way?" Chet wanted to know.

The tall man who had slept beside him came over. Baldy looked up. "Jim," he said to the outlaw leader, "the younker wants ter know if we're headin' fer the hideout," he said.

Jim looked down at them. The hard, cold anger of the night before had left his face; now it wore a look of purpose, as though he had come to some decision during his long vigil at the fire. He shook his head.

"We're ridin' north; the boys have already been told."

Chet got swiftly to his feet. "You're ridin' north! How far?" His voice was sharp.

Jim's face gave no sign of his thoughts. "We'll see," he said slowly. "Now you better get your hoss." He turned away.

Chet looked at Baldy, but he was busy building a cigarette. He went after the buckskin while suspicion rose within him in a strong tide. He had been a fool to tell his business. There were between two and three thousand head of stock on the Lasser spread. Halliday could spare only a few men to take care of them. It was an ideal spot for a bunch of rustlers to ease in—a perfect set-up.

He caught the buckskin and cinched on his centrefire rig. He had been too busy thinking about Ed and Jack to devote much thought to the ranch, but he knew now that he had still looked upon the Lasser spread as being his—that he had never consciously abandoned hope of reclaiming it.

The outfit was in the saddle, so Chet swung up and fell into line. Jim led the way, traveling at a steady, ground-covering pace. He didn't go by the way that Chet had come but headed for a break in the eastern line of hills. Dawn had turned

into bright day by the time they were through the gap and out on the open range. Jim swung north, traveling with certainty.

He must have been this way before, Chet thought, and swore softly. What good would the ranch do him if it was stripped of stock? Two, three thousand head of cattle wasn't much for a rancher but would be a nice haul for rustlers.

They traveled hard all day, stopping only for a cold bite at noon. When they made camp at night, Jim squatted, silent and uncommunicative at the fire while the others turned in.

Chet rolled in his blanket and mused. They were heading for his ranch, sure enough, and at this rate they'd reach there

his horse's neck. "I couldn't rightly say," he said. "Jim ain't given ter talkin' over his plans."

Chet realized it had been a foolish question and dropped back. By late afternoon they were in sight of the ranch as it lay in a slight depression surrounded by low, rounded hills.

Jim came back to Chet. He shoved the saddle gun back in its holster and handed the boy a big, black-handled Colt. "You might need this," he said.

Chet shoved the gun into the empty holster and felt better. Jack had taught him how to draw and had made him practice until he had got it down to a split second. "Now what?" he asked.

"First thing," the big man said, "we'll

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by tomorrow. He studied the lines of Jim's face in the glow from the fire, noting how the white hairs were creeping into the black at the temples. He felt that he should hate this boss rustler but somehow he couldn't. Instead there was a warm, friendly feeling as though he had known this man a long time.

Pa would be just about that old, he thought, if he was living, but he wasn't. Ed and Jack had told him how his father had gone down under the trampling hoofs of a stampede, when Chet was about six years old. He was trying to puzzle out his feelings when sleep came.



THEY got an early start in the morning and by noon were on ground familiar to Chet. They stopped to eat and, when they were again in the saddle, Jim swung away from the hills in a direct line for the ranch.

Chet ranged alongside Baldy. "What does he aim to do up here?" he asked.

Baldy glanced to one side and spat over

run them Box H waddies off the place."

And after that, Chet thought, they'll take the steers, but he didn't say it.

"You kinda hang back and let me open the ball," Jim said, and rode up to the front. The band swung forward at a faster clip, down the slope, across the flat land at the bottom and pulled up sharply at the corral with a flurry of hoofs and swirls of dust.

Three cowpokes came from the bunkhouse on the run. The leader went for his gun and stopped as Jim threw down on him with his big Colt. "Back up," Jim said, "and keep your hands in the air! Your fun is over."

The Box H waddie raised his hands and swore. "What the hell is goin' on here?"

"Time to talk later," Jim said. "Baldy, get their shootin' irons!"

Chet had been at the tail end of the drive and now he unobtrusively swung the buckskin around. He hadn't seen anything of Hutch, the Box H ramrod, or Halliday. There was a chance that one or both might be up at the ranchhouse and

Chet didn't aim to have anyone get there ahead of him.

Jim and his crew were busy with the three cowpokes as the pony covered the fifty yards to the house. Chet stepped down and left him ground-hitched. He went up on the shallow porch in one bound and slammed open the door, pulling the black-handled Colt as he went in. He halted inside. The room was empty, but there was the sound of movement from the kitchen. A figure appeared in the doorway. Chet's gun centered on it—and slowly dropped. A slim girl, with a big apron over her riding clothes, was standing there.

Her eyes widened. "What do you want in here?" she demanded.

Even in his surprise, Chet noticed that she was pretty.

"I'm lookin' for Murch Halliday or Hutch," he said.

She looked from the gun to his tense face and her own paled. "They're not here," she said. "Hutch and Dad are both at the Box H."

Chet looked at her narrowly. "I didn't know Halliday had a daughter."

"I've been away at school."

Feet thudded on the porch and Jim and Baldy came in. "What did you give us the slip for?" Jim demanded. He saw the girl. "Who's she?"

The girl stepped forward. "I'm Ann Halliday," she said. "What do you want of my father?"

No one spoke, and in the silence she went to the window and saw the crew herding the three Box H men into a small shack beyond the bunkhouse.

She turned, her blue eyes flashing. "I know! You're rustlers. You're going to steal our cattle!" she accused.

"Your cattle?" Chet said. "Lazy L brand don't look much like Box H."

"My father just bought this place," Ann Halliday said fiercely.

"With a length of hemp rope!"

Her face paled at the bitterness in his voice. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean," Chet said brutally, "that he hung my brother Ed."

Horror filled the girl's clear eyes. "Dad would never do a thing like that," she said desperately.

"I reckon he did, miss," Jim said with

quiet finality. He turned to Chet. "We'll bunk here for tonight." He jerked his head at Ann. "See that she don't get away." He went out, followed by Baldy.

The girl came close to Chet and he could read the fearful doubt in her eyes. "Why—why would he do such a thing?"

He sensed what this knowledge would cost her and felt a twinge of pity, but he couldn't back out. "Your old man has always wanted this range," he said doggedly. "He rigged this rustler set-up so's he'd have a reason for wipin' us out."

The girl turned from him, convinced by the pain in his voice. "I used to love this western country," she said. "But now I hate it! It's big and empty and cruel! There's a wildness that gets into men's blood and turns them into killers!"

"It ain't the country," Chet said, "it's men who bring the wildness into it." He took a step toward her. "I'll have to tie you up, 'less you promise to stay here."

She faced around to him. "Are you going after my father?" she asked.

Chet didn't speak, but she could read the answer in his face. She took a step backward and leaped for the door. Chet had been watching and grabbed her wrist.

"I don't like to do this," he said.

Suddenly her body sagged as the fight went from her. "All right," she agreed wearily. "I'll promise."

Chet released her and she slumped into a chair. The desolation in her face touched him as he went out. This killing is a dreary business, he thought. Then his mind touched on Ed and Jack and the hot hate for Halliday came back to him.

And now this rustler band would strip the ranch of stock and ride off, leaving him to face Halliday alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunsmoke Settlement

SHADOWS had spilled down from the Big Horns and flooded the plains with dusk. He saw the big figure of Jim moving about by the corral and a sudden resolve came upon him. He was through with running, with being chased, and an urgent desire to have done with the whole rotten business gripped him. If he had to die he'd go out with his gun

smoking, the way Ed and Jack would've wanted him to.

In the full tide of his anger he strode over to the rustler boss. Jim turned at the sound of his feet. Chet couldn't make out his face very well in the cool twilight but he could see plenty well to shoot.

"Jim," he said in a taut voice, "I reckon you're fixin' to run off my stock. I'll likely get killed tryin' to stop it, but at least I'll kill you. *Fill your hand!*"

Chet's hand swept down and up in that fast draw that Jack had taught him until his sixgun pointed straight at Jim's heart. His finger tightened on the trigger—and turned to stone. Jim hadn't moved!

All of Chet's reasoning, all the logical workings of his mind told him to shoot; to kill this rustler boss while he had the chance. But another force, something quite independent of his brain, froze his finger on the trigger. His arm fell.

"I couldn't shoot," he whispered. "I couldn't pull the trigger."

The tenseness went from Jim's big figure and he stepped over to the boy. He put his hand on Chet's shoulder and there was deep warmth in his voice.

"I reckon, Bub," he said, "there's a heap of things we can't understand, that we got to take on faith, just like you got to believe I ain't a goin' to steal your stock."

Chet shook his head. He didn't understand how it had come to pass, but he knew now what his instinct had told him long before—this man was not his enemy.

He holstered his gun. "Why did you come up here?" he asked wonderingly.

There was a minute of silence before Jim spoke. "Let's say I wanted to see you get a square deal," he said slowly. "I've led a pretty rough life but I never held with stringin' up honest ranchers. Mebbe," he continued slowly, "it's a debt I owe, a straightenin' of accounts that has got to be done."

His hand tightened on Chet's shoulder. "Now we'll get some shuteye. Tomorrow, 'bout dusk, we'll ride over and pay a little visit to Murch Halliday."

* * *

Snores were reverberating through the bunkhouse when Chet turned in. Jake

was asleep in the bunk next to him and his face, before Jim turned out the lamp, looked puffy and unhealthy.

As he was slipping off to sleep he thought of the girl up there alone in the ranchhouse with a feeling of tenderness and pity—and wondered. By all rights he should hate anyone of the Halliday blood. If only she wasn't Murch Halliday's daughter, he thought, maybe . . . he wasn't too young to start in double harness, he reasoned. His dad had married when he was only eighteen and his mother barely seventeen. Chet would be nineteen next month and the girl couldn't be more than a year younger. He sighed; as he got older life became more complicated. . . .

A thin slice of moonlight came through the bunkhouse window. Chet stared at the bunk next to him for a long time before he realized that it was empty. The knowledge brought him completely awake. He got up softly and carried his boots outside. The night air was cold in his nostrils and its chill struck through his shirt. He pulled on his boots and hung back irresolutely. Thin moonlight was scattered over the buildings. He looked at the shack where the three Box H men were locked up and saw the open door.

He crossed swiftly to it and went inside. He lighted a match and its golden flare showed him the place was empty. The flame bit his fingers and he swore. Jake must have sneaked out and set them loose.

He went outside. The moon was already beginning to pale as grayness appeared in the east. He was wondering how long they had been gone when he heard it, the confused drum of horses running far out on the plain.

"Jim! Baldy!" he cried. "Wake up! They're comin'!"

His voice had scarcely ceased to vibrate before the bunkhouse came alive as men rolled from their bunks.

"Who's comin'?" Jim roared.

"I reckon it's Halliday," Chet said hurriedly. "Jake and the three Box H cowpokes are gone."

Baldy cursed. The room seethed with bustle and confusion as men jostled one another in their haste to arm.

Jim's voice cut through the din. "No time for hosses. Scatter and fight 'em a-foot!"

CHET was stumbling around by his bunk trying to locate his gunbelt. Men streamed past him, spurs clanking. They rammed through the open door and were lost in the morning's grayness. He found his belt as the rock and roll of hoofs filled the yard.

Chet reached the doorway and lunged out. The yard was filled with the confused shapes of plunging horses and men afoot. Red flashes cut through the early morning.

Chet squatted down behind an upright barrel and swung his Colt into action. The rustlers were outnumbered, but they were tough and they had the advantage of partial cover.

His barrel gave off deep, low booms as bullets hit it. He emptied his Colt and paused to reload. Two riderless horses stormed past and a third lay in the yard, trying to rise.

He finished loading and cut down on a rider going past. The man swayed backward and rolled off. It seemed to Chet that men were falling all about the yard. The action was too close, too deadly.

A slim figure dodged through the melee and as it came close, Chet lunged out. His arm went around a waist and he hauled Ann Halliday down beside him. It was a miracle that she had not been hit.

"Let me go!" she cried.

"Be still!" Chet said. "You can't do anything! Your dad has come back to finish the job."

A horseman swirled out of the grayness and Chet dimly saw the heavy, snarling face of Jake. The renegade rode straight at the barrel. Chet stood up and his gun kicked twice. The horse swerved and Jake pitched off and landed heavily—and lay still.

As more men went out of the fight the firing became intermittent. The light was a little better now and Chet saw a big figure coming at him afoot. He held his fire until he recognized the hawklike face of Murch Halliday. He released his hold on Ann and stepped to the other side of the barrel so that it was between them.

Halliday's gun swept up.

"Don't, Dad! Don't!" Ann's voice was high with fear.

Halliday gave no sign that he heard. Chet's hammer clicked on a dead cartridge

as the cattleman's gun exploded. A heavy slug took Chet in the left shoulder, slamming him part-way around.

Sick with the burning pain, he heard a shout and saw Halliday whirl. Jim came leaping at him, a big, black-handled Colt in his fist. It roared twice and Halliday swayed as though a strong wind had hit him. Chet saw the hawklike look pass from his face and his eyes dull. The gun slipped from his fingers and he fell full-length.

Jim looked down at him, the smoking gun in his hand. Halliday lay without moving. Jim lifted his head to Chet—and went backwards with an expression of agony on his big face. A hole suddenly gaped in the front of his shirt. Chet saw Hutch running across the yard at them. Jim dropped his gun and Chet threw himself at it in a swift dive. He got it as Jim sagged across his back, pressing him to the ground. He twisted his head and saw Hutch close to him, saw Jim, with the last of his strength, trying to push himself up on his hands to get his weight from Chet.

Hutch's face was wild with grief and rage. His bullet kicked dirt into Chet's face and then he came in close, as though he wanted to exactly place his next shot in the head.

Chet's arm flashed up until the muzzle of Jim's big Colt was pressed against the Box H foreman's belly. He pulled the trigger twice. Hutch's gun roared and Chet was blasted into darkness.

* * *

The thing that struck Chet most forcibly was the silence. He opened his eyes and saw Baldy sitting beside him in the bunkhouse. He tried to move his injured arm and discovered it was bandaged. Something was also wrapped tightly about his head.

Baldy's glance went across him. "I reckon he'll be all right," he said. Chet turned his head and saw Ann. Her face was pale and drawn and her eyes looked as though she had been crying.

Chet struggled up. "Jim . . ."

Baldy leaned forward. "Jim is over in the corner," he said in a low voice. "He ain't got long ter live an' there's some-

thin' yuh oughta know. Jim's yore pa."

Chet stared at him, wide-eyed and many things became plain to him. He knew now why he hadn't been able to shoot and why he had felt so warm and friendly toward the big man. He started to rise but Baldy stopped him.

"Yuh mustn't let him know," he said. "Yore pa has led a pretty rough life. When he got hitched he bought this place an' tried ter settle down, but the old wild ways kept a-pullin' at 'im. Yore ma seen how it was and just afore she died she made 'im promise not ter git yuh an' Ed an' Jack mixed up in rustlin'."

"Jim couldn't stand it around here no more after she was gone, so he lit out. Ed an' Jack was plenty big enough ter handle things an' he made up the story about him bein' killed in a stampede an' made 'em swear not ter tell yuh no different. He's done fer now so I reckon they ain't no harm in tellin' yuh."

Chet arose and walked painfully to the corner bunk. Jim lay there with his eyes closed, an unnatural grayness stealing into the bronze of his face.

He opened his eyes as Chet sat down beside him and his gaze took a while to focus, as though he had been a long way off. A faint smile touched his lips.

"I reckon you won't have no more trouble, Bub," he said. "What's left of

the Box H hands has hightailed it outa the country and I sent the rest of my crew packin' for the hideout."

Chet touched his hand. "How do you feel . . . Jim?" His throat felt as though wire bands were constricting it and his voice forced through in an unnatural croak.

"I reckon I've had my last ride, Bub . . . anyway, it don't hurt no more." He seemed to be speaking with more of an effort and he moistened his lips with his tongue. "If I'm lucky enough to get to the same place as Ed and Jack is . . . I'll tell 'em your . . ."

His voice trailed off and his eyes closed. His chest gave one great heave and time changed to eternity for Jim Lasser.

Chet looked down on the still form and then turned blindly to Ann and felt her arms go around him.

At the other side of the room Baldy blew his nose violently.

"Don't yuh feel too bad, son," he said. "It takes sweat an' blood an' tears ter build a country. Jim went out the way he allus wanted ter."

Chet straightened up with his good arm around Ann. "What are you going to do, Baldy?"

"Why," said Baldy, "I'm gittin' too old fer these night rides, so I reckon I'll camp right here an' help yuh two youngkers build the Lasser spread into a real outfit."

THE END

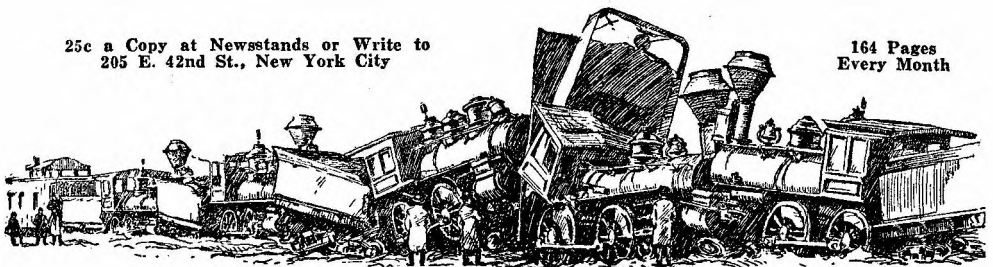
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He lay flat on his back, not moving at all.



By MILES HOWARD

OUTLAW SAMARITAN

A nose for trouble sidetracked Bowie Bill McBride on the way to Grizzly Gulch when, to save the whelp of a gold-field road agent, he challenged the law of Old California—with a rawhide bullwhip!

THE word was buzzing about Grizzly Gulch that Bowie Bill McBride was on his way to town, and there were some who thought that was fine. But there were others who thought it wasn't so fine.

There were many men and some women in the American River gold camp ready to swear that Bowie Bill McBride was

the ugliest, orneriest critter that the good Lord had ever put on earth. Others as stoutly claimed that he was just one step short of being a saint sent here to help the down-trodden.

A brawny man in a red shirt slightly less violent in color than his complexion and hair, Bowie Bill McBride was known from San Francisco to the Sierras. Wherever Argonauts found gold, Bowie Bill was likely to show up. Some said he had never made an honest dollar in his life. Others vowed they'd give their last pinch of dust to him for the asking. Many were the '49'ers who had heard of his prowess with the twelve-inch Bowie he carried in all its naked, glistening grandeur through the belt about his big middle. The bone handle, it was said, had been notched so often that there wasn't room on it for him to carve a single other memento to remind him of the men he'd sent over the long trail to Hell.

Rumor aside, however, it was agreed that Bowie Bill McBride could bring more ripsnorting excitement into a camp than any man alive. So, with its mingled emotions, Grizzly Gulch awaited the arrival of the Sierra Wildcat, as Bowie Bill insisted on calling himself in moments of stress.

Bowie Bill was still some eight miles away from Grizzly Gulch, but he was heading toward as fast as his big gray mule, Nero, could carry him. Hitched to his wide rawhide belt was a poke of honest gold he'd washed from one of the American's nameless tributaries, and in his big belly beneath the belt was a thirst that nothing but a quantity of barrel-head whiskey could satisfy.

At least that was what Bowie thought as Nero stepped spryly along a pine-needle carpeted trail high above the American. But suddenly, as the giant yellow pines spread to give him a view of what lay to one side, he lost his interest in barrel-head and devilment.

"Whoa up, you jug-nobbed son of Satan!" he ejaculated, and his powerful left hand pulled the mule to a halt.

Agate brown eyes squinting, he peered downward through the break in the tall pines. A half mile away as a crow might fly, was a narrow, twisting dry-wash. One of a thousand in these labyrinthine moun-

tains, Bowie Bill knew that ordinarily he wouldn't have given the gulch a second glance, but something was going on down there now that made him forget his long anticipated visit to Grizzly Gulch.

"The wust vice you got, you lop-eared old heller," he told himself aloud, "is pokin' your red nose into things that don't consarn you in the least. Jiggle Nero's reins and git on about your bizness."

But Bowie Bill knew he was just talking. The afternoon light was so crystal clear that he could make out details plainly, and the details were interesting.

A man in a cone-peaked sombrero was down on his hands and knees in the gravelly bottom of the wash. He had what appeared to be a mortar, pestle, and gold pan with him. Bowie watched the man scoop a handful of gravel into the mortar and crush it with the pestle, and then patiently sift it through his fingers, all the while blowing the dust away. The residue landed in the gold pan.

If the cone-peaked sombrero wasn't enough, this system of dry-mining made identification simple. The man in the wash was a Californio. Only the Mexican natives had the patience and knack to dry-mine a gulch, Bowie Bill knew. The paisano down there below him was pretty clever at it too, but he wasn't clever enough to know that a pair of mighty suspicious looking hombres was watching him work.

From his place above them, Bowie Bill could see the threesome, and it was his reason for halting. The two men watching the Californio were astride broncs, and they were sheltered behind a granite outcrop in the gulch a hundred yards back of the dry-miner. Just why they were watching that Mexican, Bowie Bill didn't know.

"But I'm likely to find out," he comforted himself, "if I set here a while."

The Californio left his place and moved forward a half dozen paces. Bowie watched him scoop more gravel into his mortar, patiently grind it to powder, sift it through his fingers, and study the results reaching his gold pan. After a minute or two he moved forward again and repeated the laborious process.

"Dang fool," Bowie muttered. "If he'd set still and dig down a ways he might

have some luck. Gold ain't on the surface. It's heavy and it sinks when the winter rains start rolling things around."

Bowie Bill watched the Californio move forward for the fourth time, and repeat his operations. It was about the most mystifying business the Sierra Wildcat had ever observed. Thoughtfully, he ran a big, calloused thumb along the smooth steel of the knife thrust through his belt, and then his fingers stilled themselves.

Things were starting to happen down there in the gulch. The queer-acting paisano had evidently grown aware of the stealthy pair behind him, for Bowie Bill saw the man drop his mortar and pestle and head toward the brushy side wall of the wash.

With a whoop that came winging faintly to him, Bowie watched the two horsemen break from their concealment and race recklessly forward. One of the men was uncoiling a riata as he rode. Bowie saw it snake out as the Californio made one last despairing lunge for the brush. Neatly the rope snagged the paisano about the shoulders, and dragged him off his feet. He lay flat on his back, not moving at all.

That much was all right, but when the roper started hauling the helpless paisano back over the rocks to where he had dropped his outfit a growl came into Bowie Bill McBride's throat.

"Blasted meanness," he muttered. "Ain't fitten for men to be drug like calves to a brandin' fire. I got a feelin' them hombres need their manners mended."



A FEW minutes later the Sierra Wildcat was even more certain of it. The pair had yanked their victim back to the place he had dropped his mortar and pestle. From the way their arms were waving, Bowie guessed that they were ordering the paisano back to work, and the Californio was telling them to head for the hot place. Bowie saw one of the pair lift a bullwhip from the nub of his saddle. The man's arm moved and the whip snaked out. As it struck the Californio his wail came thinly upward.

Bowie Bill started to rumble like an aroused grizzly. "Now I know them cusses are going to get a lesson," he

growled. "Nero, shake your bones. This ride is going to be hard on you, but it won't be half as tough as what them hellers are doing to that pore little paisano, or what I'm going to do to them."

The route down to the dry wash was dangerously steep, and at any moment Nero was likely to turn a somersault that would break both their necks, but Bowie Bill had never yet stopped to count odds when he made up his mind to do a thing. Like a boulder rolling downhill, the big gray mule plummeted toward that gulch. With the wind of their ride whipping about his ears, Bowie Bill had time to wonder again just what in Tophet those two ornery hombres were after. Certainly it wasn't the few grains of gold the paisano could recover with his crude dry-mining methods.

"It's got me," he grunted, "and I'm goin' to get them. Blast it, this is more sport than swilling Grizzly Gulch rotgut, if I do say so myself."

With a sense of direction that much wilderness riding had made infallible, the red-headed Sierra Wildcat brought Nero into the wash exactly opposite that threesome in the center of its bed.

They had seen him coming for the last fifty yards, a bounding, hell-roaring devil on a giant mule that seemed to have eyes in its hoofs. The very audacity of his approach froze the threesome momentarily. Canny cuss that he was, Bowie Bill had counted on surprise favoring him. He was into the wash, heading straight for the two hombres, who were still astride their mounts, before either of them quite realized what was happening. By the time comprehension came to them it was too late.

The one with the rope let out a feeble squawk. "Jack, get a-movin'! It's that damned McBride!"

"The Sierra Wildcat, to you!" Bowie Bill yelled. "And I'm comin' a-clawin'!"

The blond-bearded hombre who had spoken loosed his grip on the rope and made a stab for his holstered Colt. His fingers had no more than touched the weapon when a streak of brightness came at him with the speed of lightning. It was Bowie Bill's long knife, and it sliced through his wrist with the neat dispatch of a surgeon's scalpel.

Bowie Bill had kicked his feet from the stirrups and dropped the reins along Nero's neck. The gray mule knew what to do, because he'd done it before. At a gravel-spraying gallop, he thrust himself between the mounted pair, and Bowie's long arms reached sideward. One wrapped around each of the men, and he let their weight drag him from the saddle. Then all three of them were down on the ground, and Bowie Bill had managed somehow to get his victims beneath him. Three hundred pounds of red-headed fury, he proceeded to rub their faces into the rough gravel bed of the wash.

"If gold's what you want, try eatin' some," he shouted at them gleefully. "If a taste of damnation is yore order, climb up on your hind laigs and fight!"

As he spoke, Bowie got up off the pair and with all the deceptively clumsy grace of a big grizzly. The bullwhip that the black-bearded member of the duo had dropped caught his eye, and he snatched it up with another whoop as the bloody-nosed couple scrambled to their feet.

Bowie watched terror light their eyes as they realized what was coming, and he grinned with relish. This was the kind of sport he enjoyed. There were some, of course, who claimed that he'd beat a man half to death just to watch him squirm. But Bowie Bill's conscience was clean. He'd never yet punished a man who didn't deserve it, and in his opinion this pair certainly merited what they were going to get.

"P'int yore britches outa here," he rumbled at the duo, "and don't make the mistake of tryin' to come back. Go on, git around."



THEY were both sullen-looking devils in miners' clothes. The one whose wrist had been slit was tall, and his scraggly blond beard looked like a mask to hide a weak chin. The other was stocky, his black-bearded face as mean looking as that of a bear just out of hibernation.

"Kinda high-handed, ain't you, Mc-Bride?" the taller of the duo growled. "Ain't no skin off yore nose what we're doin' to the Mex. If the word ever gits

around the camps that you've took to sidin' greasers ag'in white men Californy won't be big enough to hold you."

Bowie Bill's patience was just about reaching the snapping point. "I'm givin' you gents one minute to make up yore minds." His rumbling voice had turned dangerously calm. "No more, no less. As fer yonder paisano, he's a danged sight whiter than either of you buzzards. And it's about time some other folks learned it, too. This here state belonged to him and his people when yore granddads was still wearin' three-cornered pants. Gold gits discovered here, and white trash like you steal their land and women, and kick 'em around like dogs. By hell, you two had better get movin' afore I git really mad and initial yore gizzards! If there's one thing I like to see it's justice for all, and right now I'm going to give you yores!"

The whip licked out like black lightning. A hissing, slashing, living thing in the Sierra Wildcat's hands, it turned that bloody-nosed duo back the way they had come. And once the seats of their pants were exposed, the rawhide popper on the end of the whip started pecking at their britches. With a lurch and yell the two were off, running, stumbling, falling as that whip pursued them.

Bowie Bill kept after them until they were a good hundred yards down the gulch, until he was satisfied that they couldn't sit saddle even if they were able to recapture their runaway mounts. As he watched them go on, a pair of whimpering caricatures of men, he chuckled, and swiped at the sweat trickling down his face.

"And thar goes two more hombres who'll claim to their dyin' day that hangin', hoss-whipping, and gut-shootin' ain't half good enough for Bowie Bill McBride. Won't be surprised if they have a reception committee waitin' for me and Nero in Grizzly Gulch."

However, Bowie Bill wasn't going to let that worry him. He'd met such committees before. He took another swipe at his face, hitched his corduroys a little higher on his broad hips, and turned back to see what he could do for the Californio.

The paisano was crouched like a frightened rabbit. Nero was standing a little

to one side, switching his excuse for a tail and regarding the Californio pensively. Bowie noticed the mule's actions with something like surprise. Nero, he had often avowed, was a better judge of human nature than most people. And for some reason, that knob-headed critter didn't seem to be taking much of a fancy to the man they'd rescued.

The Californio was a pretty miserable looking hombre. His body was thin, where it showed through rents in his torn clothing. He didn't appear to be much over nineteen or twenty, and he was shivering like a man caught with a chill.

"Buck up, son," Bowie told him gruffly, as he reached the Californio's side. "Ain't nothin' ever as bad as it seems. Them gents who were mauling you around won't be back no more. I'll lay yuh that!"

"Ah, señor—" the youth scrambled to shaky feet—"I am not so sure. Those *pelados are muy maldito*, very bad, señor."

Bowie could see that the youngster's nerves were still shaken, and in his own rough way he tried to help the Californio calm down. "Hell, son, everybody cain't be good. Me, I'm just an old rip myself."

"Ah, no, señor!" The paisano's teeth sparkled white against the brown of his face as he smiled. "You are *muy valiente*. *Es verdad!*"

Praise in any form had always made Bowie Bill feel uncomfortable. "I ain't brave or nothin' else, younk. I just always do what I figure needs doin', which same will include seein' that you ain't pestered no more by that pair. Come to think of it—" he added with elaborate casualness—"jest why have they got it in for you, anyway? You don't need to tell me if you don't want to," he went on hastily, "but I shore am a-hankerin' to know why you're dry-washin' this particular gulch, when there's plenty of wet diggin's where a man can pan his quill a day."

"Ah, señor—" there was a suspicion of moisture in the paisano's eyes—"I will tell you. What those *cabrones* have done to me is nothing. But *mi padre*—" He seemed to choke up.

"And what did they do to your dad?" Bowie asked him.

"Nothing, señor, except hang heem."

"Hang him?" Surprise made Bowie Bill roar out the words.

The youth winced at the noise. "*Si*," he said softly. "Our name is Catalina. Me, I am Jose. *Mi padre* was Juan Catalina, a highwayman *par excellence*, señor, until thees gringo law stretched him to a tree by the neck."

Surprise was piling on surprise for Bowie Bill McBride, and he wasn't exactly certain that he liked it. "Now, look, Catalina," he growled slowly, "I ain't overly quick in the head, so let's keep things straight as we go along. You say your dad was a hold-up man, and that he got himself caught and strung up. Why, blast it, what in Tophet did he expect? Robberies and killin's got to be stopped in this state. I suppose now you're goin' to tell me that he warn't guilty and didn't deserve hangin'?"

"Oh, no, señor, he was guilty," Jose Catalina agreed readily, "but he was double-cross' by thees hanging. Those two *cabrones* you chase from me, are how you say, *muy* important hombres in Greezly Gulch. The wan with the yellow-color hair on his face ees Señor Bert Tracy, the mayor of Greezly Gulch. And the other wan ees Señor Black Jack Parsons, the town marshal."



BOWIE BILL groaned. "And I larruped the pants off both of them. Dang it, I'll probably have to whip the whole town now afore I can even buy a drink! Go on, go on," he added impatiently. "Yore story is gittin' better by the minute."

"*Si*, señor," the youth said dutifully. "Eet wée! get better yet, too, I theenk. These two *cabrones* they came *con cuidado*, very quietly, to our *casa* wan night last week. And they talk to *mi padre* and tell him that the *carroza*, the coach that travels between Greezly Gulch and Hangtown will be carrying mucho gold when it leaves the next morning. They tell *mi padre* that if he will steal it for them, they will give him a share which will be enough for us to go to Baja California, where our people are more welcome. Eef he does not do thees, they say we will be chased out of our *casa*."

"So your dad took 'em up on the deal—" Bowie nodded his shaggy red head

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“—and held up the stage and got the gold. Only about the time he saw all that *dinero* he got to figgerin’ that there warn’t no sense in splittin’ it with anybody.”

Jose Catalina’s dark eyes had grown wider. “*Madre di dios*,” he whispered, “are you a reader of minds, señor?”

Bowie grunted. “I just know what I would have done in the same case. Go on. Mebbe I ain’t so sorry I blistered those gents, at that.”

“*Mi padre*,” the boy continued, “took the box filled with many sacks of *oro* and, instead of breenging it to our *casa*, he hid it well somewhere here about us.” His graceful gesture encompassed some five thousand square acres of the wild landscape.

Bowie Bill McBride felt his interest quickening. He didn’t exactly believe in spending stolen gold himself, but there had been times in the past when he had been able to put it to good use.

“Son,” he drawled, “yuh interest me. Keep a-talkin’. Your dad hid this *oro*—”

“And to mark eets location,” the boy continued in his liquid, soft voice, “he took one of the many leetle pokes and

sprinkled its dust in the gravels of thees gulch. He made, how you say, a trail of gold to the treasure he had hidden. Only wan of my people would know how to dry-mine thees gulch, and so follow the trail. Ah, *mi padre* was wan *muy ingenioso* hombre!”

“Yeah, your dad was smart all right, but he got hung just the same,” Bowie pointed out. “Just how did that happen?”

“He left thees trail,” Jose Catalina continued, “and then he came to our *casa* for to fetch me here where we would get all the *oro* and ride fast to the south.”

“But before you could pack up and git away, this Marshal Black Jack Parsons and Bert Tracy showed up with a posse.”

“*Si*, señor, that ees what happen’. *Mi padre* made the mistake of leaving the bronco team in its traces, and that *muy malo* driver freed one of the *caballos* and rode pronto back to Greezly Gulch.”

“And so, to save their faces, our good marshal had to git a posse together and come for yore dad,” Bowie nodded. “After they hung him and found none of the gold, they rightly figured he’d told you where he’d hid it, and so they been keepin’

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an eye on you since. That's how-come they follered you up here today. That's also how-come I watched you moseyin' along the gulch from one spot to another. Danged if this ain't the queerest bit of business I've been tangled in yet. That there Marshal Black Jack and Tracy ain't dummies," he added thoughtfully. "So they'll know you were follerin' a trail to the gold yore dad hid."

"Si si." Catalina nodded his dark head violently. "That ees right, señor. And I tell you that even with the sore seats they weel be back, and when they come there will be plenty of them to keel you queek, like the flash, no?"

Bowie Bill McBride had been doing some quick thinking. "No," he grunted. "Fust off, I take quite some killin'. Secondly, they ain't comin' back."

"But how can you be so sure?" the Californio asked.

"On account of I'm goin' to keep 'em so busy around Grizzly Gulch that even Black Jack will forget about yuh. Howsomever, I won't forget you, son." Bowie's thick sandy brows drew together as he fastened a somber stare on the Mexican youth. "Jest for the record, what you aimin' to do with that oro when you find it at the end of this gold trail?"

The Californio lifted his thin face piously toward the heavens. "Ah, Señor McBride," he exclaimed passionately, "I want none of that gold. No, *verdad!* All I weesh is for to have *mi padre* stand before the good Dios with a name that is unstained."

Bowie Bill licked his wide, crooked lips like a cat seeing a dish of cream withdrawn from its reach. "Yo're aimin' to give the gold back to the stage company?" he asked hoarsely.

"Si!" The Californio nodded violently. "You would not have me keep any of it, señor?"

"No, no, hell no!" Bowie Bill said emphatically.

"And you, my *muy valiente amigo*, would not care to touch thees stolen oro."

"Me?" Bowie Bill blinked his brown eyes. "Why, hell, no! I wouldn't touch a poke of that gold with a pole. Probably it belongs to leetle two-bit merchants and miners who figgered it would be safer in

OUTLAW SAMARITAN

the bank at Hangtown than in a rough, tough camp like Grizzly Gulch. This here robbery probably plumb busted their hearts. No, I wouldn't touch the gold, and that crooked marshal, Black Jack Parsons, ain't goin' to either.

"Tell you what," he went on. "You keep follerin' this trail to its end. I'll ride to Grizzly Gulch and see what I can stir up to keep folks amused. You git the gold, and wait here for me. I'll be back tonight. Then we'll ride in together and turn it over to the stage agent. If he should give us a leetle reward for bringing back his dinero, why, we could take that all right, don't you figger, Jose?"

"Oh, *si, señor!* That will be *muy bien!*"



GRIZZLY GULCH was already roaring with early evening fervor when the Sierra Wildcat jogged his old mule down the gold camp's single street. Lighted pitch barrels, in front of the various emporiums of amusement, were already sending their smoky banners of invitation high, and the nasal voices of barkers extolling the attractions of their particular bailiwicks were doing their best to lure customers inside. These barkers were a breed of men for which Bowie Bill McBride had never had any use.

"Might as well start on one of 'em, Nero," he addressed the big mule.

A thought equalled action in McBride's language. He swung his mount toward the board walk in front of the flimsy, raw-board and tent-roofed Tinsel Palace.

On his stand beside the doorway, a red-faced, paunch-bellied, garish barker was calling for customers.

"Right this way, gents," his leather-lunged bellow reached out for patrons. "Right this way. Twenty, count 'em, twenty Tinsel beauties dance nightly for yuh here. See their can-can number. It'll take your breath away, boys, I promise yuh, or my name ain't Diamond Ben Hawkey!"

"Yore name was Slippery Sam Sneed when I saw yuh in Sacramento," Bowie Bill bawled from the edge of the milling crowd of Gulch miners listening to the barker's speel.

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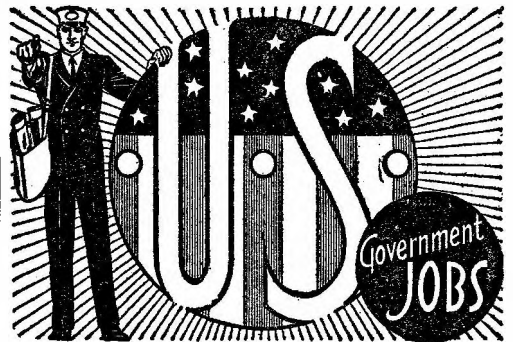
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

"McBride," somebody in the crowd yelled. "Bowie Bill—"

Bowie answered without turning his head. "I'm the Sierra Wildcat," he trumpeted, "and this is my night to scratch and yowl! Clear the way! I got a hankering to have Slippery Sam escort me and Nero inside fer a drink—"

Straight across the board walk, with a laughing, ribald crowd of miners forming behind him, Bowie Bill put the big mule.

Diamond Ben Hawkey tried to wriggle his fat body from behind his podium.

"Stand yore hand," Bowie roared, "or I'll initial yore gizzard!"

"Help! Help! For Gawd's sake, where's Marshal Black Jack?" the barker started bleating.

Nero had already reached the flimsy porch, and his gray body blocked the door of the Tinsel Palace. With a sadistic desire of his own, he reached forward and nipped playfully at the tight seat of Diamond Ben Hawkey's pants.

Like a shot from a gun, the barker went past the other end of his stand. Bowie Bill yelled again for the man to halt.

But Diamond Ben was already in the street, coattails flying out behind him. He headed up the street, yelping for the marshal at every jump. A twitch of the reins, and Nero was flying after him with Bowie Bill howling like the wildcat he claimed to be. He was very careful not to get too close to the fleeing barker, for he had a hunch that Slippery Sam Sneed would quickly lead him to Parsons.

Caught by the spirit of excitement that always seemed to attend the arrival of Bowie Bill McBride, a half dozen miners were already joyfully swinging their fists at anything within reach, and yelling, "Hooray for the Sierra Wildcat!" Another faction was yelling, "To hell with Bowie Bill McBride," equally loud.

The fun had started. Grizzly Gulch would have a wild night. It always seemed to happen, Bowie reflected, when he came to town.

A couple of men with scratched faces and queerly lurching gait came stomping from the Calaveras Saloon just ahead of the bleating barker. Bowie recognized the mayor and marshal, and let out a stentorian roar.

OUTLAW SAMARITAN

"Black Jack!" he yelled. "What the tarnal you doin' here? Figgered you and that Tracy thar would be headin' for Sacramento to spend the gold you recovered this afternoon out where yore pard, Juan Catalina, buried it. Damme, though, yuh ought to be ashamed of yore-selves, a-hanging the pore devil instead of giving him his cut!"

The marshal had suffered rudely that afternoon, and his nerves were still very much shaken. An ordinarily cool man, there was some excuse for the startled reply jarred from his lips. "We didn't get that *oro*, and you know it."

A grim quiet, so intense that a man could almost feel it, had blanketed the street at Bowie Bill's pronouncement. And through it the marshal's reply came audibly to many of the miners.

A pleased grin twisted the Sierra Wildcat's lips. "That's the way I like my law," he proclaimed. "Ain't nothin' like having honest marshals and mayors that admit it when they cook up a stunt to rob stages of the gold they're sworn to protect."

Marshal Black Jack Parsons had had time to collect himself and realize the admission he'd made, and he also realized that there was just one way to save his face. That was to stop the Sierra Wildcat's blabbing tongue.

"Yo're lyin', and know it—" the marshal's hands were flicking toward his belt as he mouthed the words.

Bowie Bill had been hoping that the lawman would go for his guns. California needed honest law, not the kind Black Jack Parsons had brought.

There were those in the crowd who saw the rise of Bill's bowie from his belt, but there were none with eyes quick enough to follow its flight through the air. There were men, though, close enough to the marshal to hear the sickening sound of cold steel slicing through the lawman's heart.

Observing the correctness of his judgment of the weak-chinned mayor, Bowie Bill watched that worthy gentleman make an attempt to scuttle back into the Calaveras. Rude hands caught him before he'd gone ten steps, and men who were no particular friends of Bowie Bill McBride were handing the Sierra Wildcat a com-

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pliment. "We don't like that cussed McBride, Tracy," one of them was growling, "but, by dab, I've never heerd him speak a false word. You've got some questions to answer."

Without even dismounting, Bowie swooped down from the saddle and retrieved his bloody knife. With complete disregard for his clothes, he wiped the blade on his faded corduroys, rein-slapped the mule and pounded out of the camp, disdainful of the questions shouted after him. Those questions, he told himself, would have to wait until he and young Jose Catalina brought the recovered gold chest back to town.



THE light of a small fire guided Bowie Bill McBride back along the twisting dry-wash to the end of the gold trail. The fire glowed like a fallen star at the head of the gulch. Reaching it was a climb stiff enough to make Nero grunt plaintively.

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OUTLAW SAMARITAN

"Keep hoppin' right along," Bowie Bill told the mule. "We got a job to do, and we're goin' to do 'er. 'Course, I've always claimed that work deserves pay, and I figger that mebber if we sorta help ourselves to a couple of pokes afore returning that oro, it won't matter much. Me, I've always been kinda skeered of the generosity of folks when you do 'em a good turn. That cussed agent in Grizzly Gulch might not figger we rate a reward. If he don't we'll take it!"

The fire's flickering flames cast shadows on the dry, gravelly walls at either side. Shadows that seemed to dance in a peculiarly mocking way. Bowie Bill blinked as he rode into the circle of light.

"Jose!" he yelled, when he saw no sign of the Californio. "Jose, where in hell are you?"

The echoes of his call were as mocking as the dancing shadows, and then the Sierra Wildcat saw the hole which had been opened near the fire. He also saw a délapidated mortar, pestle, gold pan and broken-handled shovel beside the pit.

Something white was anchored by the pestle. With a spring Bowie Bill was out of Nero's saddle. An unexpected bray that had the ring of sardonic laughter issued from the mule's throat.

Bowie yanked the piece of paper from beneath the pestle, and a few bright flakes of gold spilled from it. Turning to get the firelight on the note, he read the words penciled there:

Señor, after mucho thought I decide the good Dios would forgive mi padre without the necessity of returning the oro he stole. So I am taking it with me to Baja California—as I fear you would have done if your hands had found it before mine. Adios, señor.

Your servant,
Jose Catalina.

Bowie Bill McBride read the note, and reread it, and he felt like cursing that cussed paisano, only he just didn't have the heart. It wasn't often that a nineteen-year-old younker outsmarted the Sierra Wildcat.

Bowie Bill contented himself with a hearty belly laugh at his own expense, and it sounded very little different from the sardonic bray Nero had uttered.

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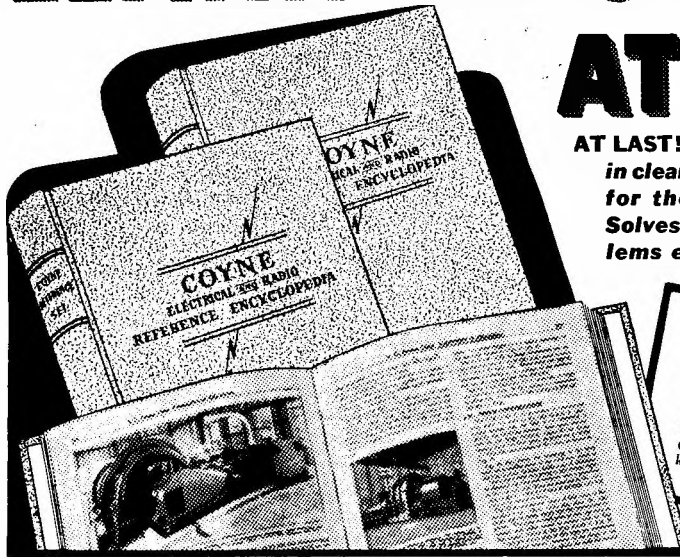
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