



15¢

# 44 Western

MAGAZINE

DEC.

**TEXANS DON'T  
RIDE OUT ALIVE!**  
*by* **EVERETT WEBBER**



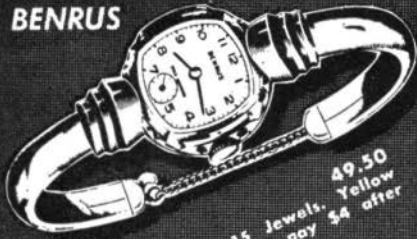
**LET'S SHOOT US  
A SHERIFF!**  
*SMASHING BOOMTOWN  
SAGA BY*  
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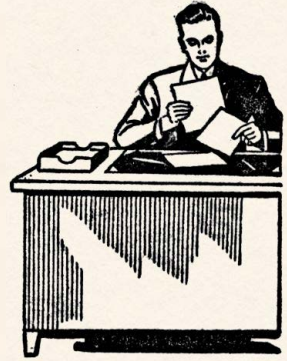
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Vol. 19

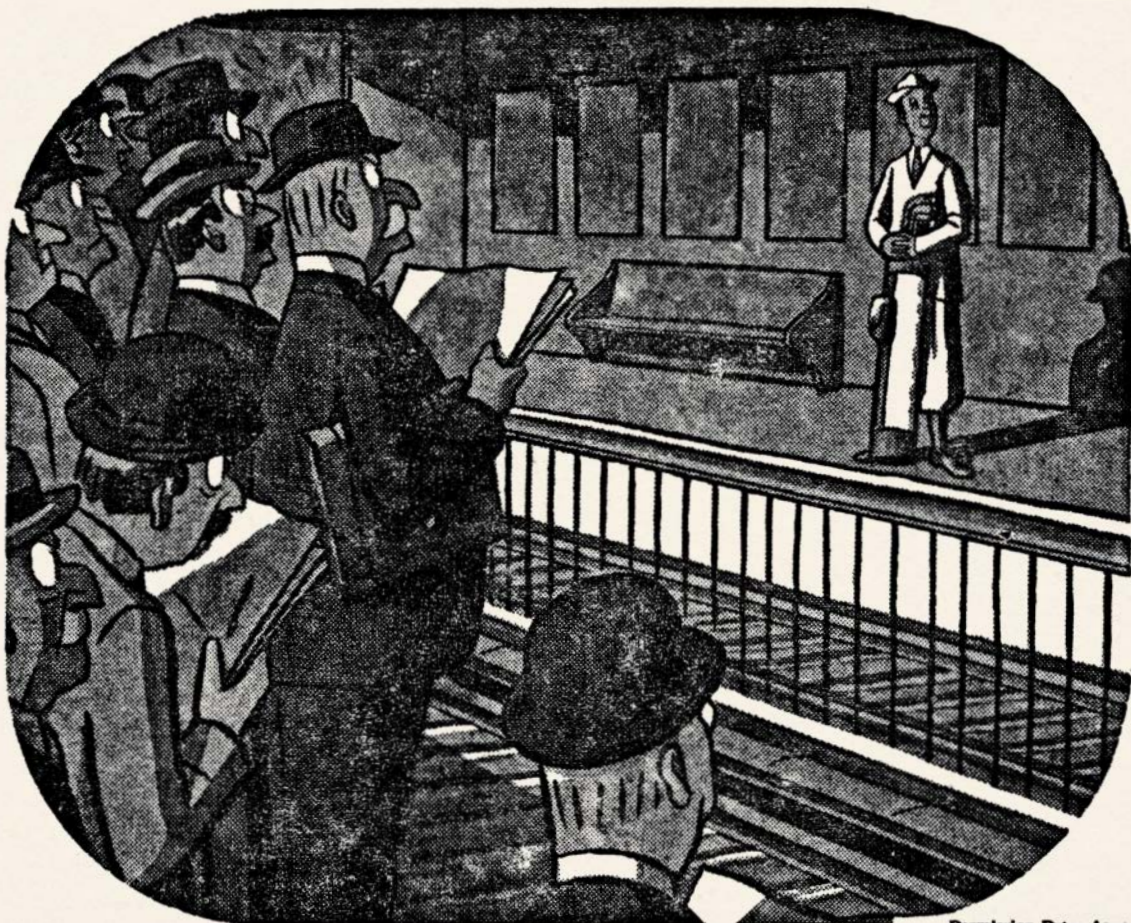
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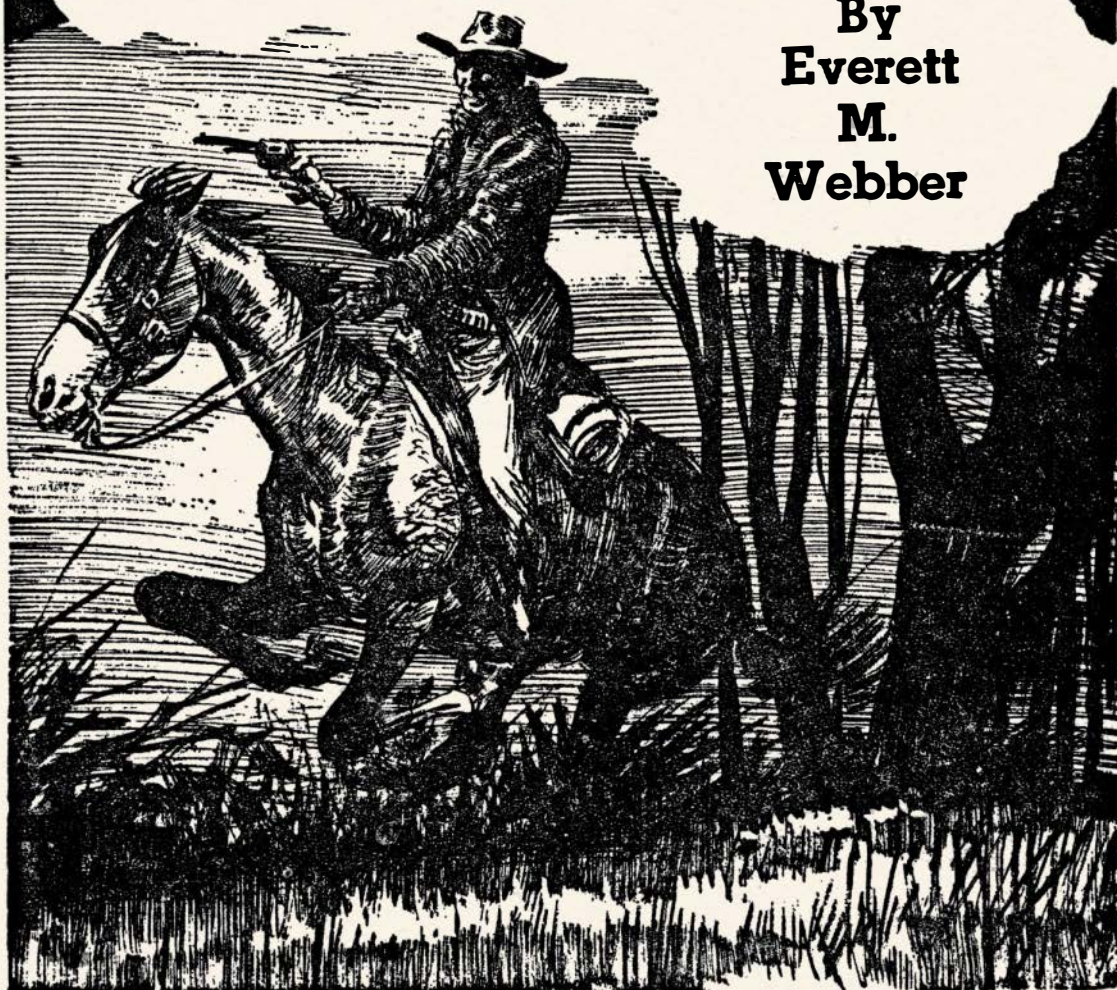
● ● Carter fired again and the man's  
gun exploded into the ground ● ●

**Bread returned from the waters brought John Carter from Texas to Montana to find his legal inheritance in the hands of a ruthless killer, and Carter slated to be a corpse before he could arise from the dead to face the gut-blasting sixguns of his coffin-makers!**

# Texans Don't Ride Out Alive!

Hell-Roaring Saga of Montana

By  
Everett  
M.  
Webber



## CHAPTER ONE

### Texan Hell for Montana

**A**LL THE WAY from Texas to Montana, Carter had felt nervous and wary, and he had never been gladder to see the rudiments of civilization than at this moment. His fagged horse was warm enough as the town loomed up in a fold of the broken hills three or four miles ahead, but Carter was pretty well frozen,

and he had gone through the nerve-shattering experience of having been shot at from ambush and driven off the road an hour and a half ago.

Doubly nerve-shattering, because it was only three days since he could mount a horse after being holed up in a cave an equal length of time from a more accurate dry-gulcher's bullet. That one had left a furrow across the top of his skull which still made him light headed if he stooped over or whirled around suddenly. If he had been

a half inch taller—or if his horse had not had the sense to run or keep running while he hung on like a man asleep—he would be dead now.

The town—Vane City, he reckoned—dropped from sight as his horse slid down a rough bank and picked his way along the foot of an overhanging red bluff. The concealment was welcome. Yet his attacker might have circled and be lying in wait ahead of him. He rode with pistol in a numb, gloved hand, ears keened—

The horse half shied, ears forward, and Carter threw a swift look toward the boulder ahead and at the brow of the bluff forty feet above him as he cocked the pistol. And then in the scattering of rocks before him he saw bones. Human bones still so fresh that he himself could catch a faint odor from them though they had been picked clean by the buzzards and crows that had strung them along the rocks for thirty or forty feet.

He edged the horse forward, surprised that there wasn't a boot or belt or scrap of clothing anywhere around. But not greatly surprised to see the three bullet holes in one of the shoulder blades. It was lying inward side up, and the holes were splintery. The bullets had taken the man in the back!

With a sudden crawling of his own back muscles, Carter threw a quick look behind and another above but there was neither sound nor movement. He urged the horse on past the bones, the shod hoofs making a clatter that could be heard over hell's half acre. It was good to be out of the freezing wind, but he still was glad when he came to sparsely grassed earth even though it took him into the wind again, for the hoofbeats were quieter now.

He urged the horse forward within the limits of mercy, and a few shaggy red cattle with Rocking Z brands looked up from their browsing around an old hay stack in a little swag. He was somber and depressed. This was a bad omen for a man coming to a new country. Shot at twice and then finding the bones of a man. He was not superstitious, but still . . .

Topping a rise, he presently got another glimpse of the town. A belly full of hot grub and coffee and twelve hours' sleep. And in the morning he would have to go back along the road to where he had ditched

his bedroll which contained his "thirty years' gathering." Maybe there was a lawman here who would like to go out to where he was shot, and also have a look at those bones. It wouldn't be much fun living around here with a back-shooter running loose, and the sheriff or marshal might have some ideas on the matter.

By this time tomorrow he should be at the DLC ranch and when he got there, he aimed first off to give a good cussing to Shorty Graves and Cal Emmet, his foreman and tophand. He had sent them up here three months ago to handle things while he was settling affairs in Texas. They had sworn to high heaven they would write him. Of course, he might have failed to connect with their letters on the road, but he privately imagined they just hadn't got around to it.

Carter came out of the broken country onto the road now, and presently he crossed a frost-rimmed creek bed and rode into the town. The rutted street had a crust of frozen mud which creaked and sagged with the horse. Smoke from several flues scudded down upon them as Carter headed for what appeared to be a dilapidated livery barn. Yes, it was a livery all right. A sheeted buckboard, tongue propped up, was before it, and horse tracks disappeared at the closed door.

Through stiff, stubbled lips, Carter yelled, "Hello the livery!"

Fog was wiped simultaneously from three spots on the grimy windows of the hotel next door and men peered out. One of them disappeared and a moment later the door opened and a man came out getting into a coat, grotesque with a dirty apron flapping about his legs. He cocked a quizical black eye at Carter and said, "Howdy, mister. Howdy. Wantin' livery room, huh?"

Carter got stiffly down, swallowing the reply he would have liked to make to such time-passing talk.

Jerking and dragging at the sagging door, the man said, "This old froze mud, hit's a caution to snakes how hard 'tis to get into the barn on account of it." He gave Carter another look. "Come far, mister?"

Carter was light headed and he stood a moment, steadying himself. "Pretty far," he said,



"That so? Well, 'tain't no fun, ridin' a day like this. I'd ruther be holed up by a good stove, but seems like I jist get settled down an' here comes somebody wantin' in the livery or wantin' to be showed to a room or wantin' an order of ham an' eggs or whatever. My woman, she's been down sick for three-four year, an' that leaves a heap for me to do—"

Carter hardly saw how the man could be so pestered by business. The town was about ghosted out. Practically all its dozen and a half buildings appeared to be empty. Four or five horses stood at a hitch-rack down the street. The two men in the hotel were peering at him through the window. There was no other sign of life.

The liveryman gave another heave at the door that got it over the frozen hump of mud, and Carter led the horse in. The man said, "There's the hay an' here's the oat bin. I got to get back to see is they anything burnin' on the stove. Wisht you'd shut the door as you come out."

He departed. Two other horses were in the creaking gloom of the barn—no, they were mules. Evidently they belonged with the buckboard. And now he saw a third animal. A horse breathing rather hard, and its back dark with sweat where a saddle had been.

CARTER stripped his horse and tended him. The liveryman had run his mouth so hard and fast that it was only now that he recollected he had forgotten to ask him if he knew anything about Shorty Graves and Cal Emmet.

You couldn't exactly say that Carter had inherited the DLC. In the old days his father had sent his Aunt Doris thousands of dollars which enabled her to keep the ranch going while fighting Indians and renegades after her husband was killed.

Lately, now that all such trouble was behind, she had made quite a good thing of it. The Army Remount got first pick of her horses and sometimes she supplied them with upwards of a hundred head a year, not counting draft stock and mules. And now, along with the land and stock and equipment, the Army contracts had come to Carter—partly as an inheritance, partly as bread returned from the waters. And there seemed something of the working of Providence in the matter, for he had just

seen himself set back near to ruination in the cattle business in Texas by hoof and mouth disease—

"Mr. Holden?"

Carter turned at the sound of a woman's voice. He saw her against the light of the doorway, peering back here. She had bundles in her arms.

"Sorry," he said. "Wrong party."

"Oh! Excuse me."

"I beg your pardon, lady—but could you tell me who's in town that owns a sorrel horse, white star, white stocking on left fore and right rear foot? And—" he sized it up, "fifteen hands high?"

She answered stiffly, "Really, I'm afraid I couldn't—"

Carter ignored her manner. "Somebody that's just rode in?"

"Why," she said, "it could be Sally Inness."

"Thanks." He didn't reckon Sally Inness had been shooting at him, whoever she was.

As he came out of the livery with rifle, empty grub sack, and saddle bags, the woman was putting her things into the buckboard. Carter gave a shove at the door and got enough momentum to send it half-way shut. Another wrench which threatened to snap off the hinges sent it the rest of the way.

He saw that the woman was eyeing him covertly as she stowed the things in the wagon. He reckoned she didn't see a lot: Five-foot-ten of plainsman pushing thirty, heavy boned, black hair shaggy, face stubbled. The trip up here had been a mean one but it should be obvious to her, he thought, that his clothes had once been expensive and well made. That he wasn't a bum. Probably, he thought wryly, she would take him for an outlaw—and one a long way from home if she recognized his Texas twang.

An odd brand was burned into the side of the wagon—a pair of horns with an irregularly shaped figure between. Like maybe a cowhide. He said, "That the Hide-and-Horns brand, lady? I've heard about it."

Apparently she was going to enter into no further conversation with a stranger, and a little on his dignity he said, "Well, I apologize. But after all, you spoke to me first."

She colored. She looked to be maybe

twenty years old—say in two years of that either way—and her grey eyes and the set of her mouth looked like she had quite a bit of sand.

"All right. It's the Hide-and-Horns," she admitted.

"Not very easy to change, I reckon," Carter observed. He could have added that his aunt had found the Hide-and-Horns owners as hard to change as brand-blotters found their mark to be. He added, "I guess that would make you one of the Haleys, wouldn't it?"

She said, "Honestly, I haven't the faintest desire to stand here freezing to death just talking to you. If you don't go away I shall have to be rude to you."

Carter had forgotten to be on his dignity. Raising one brow at her he drawled, "The hell-roaring Haleys. Well—my apologies, lady. I'll try to get a formal introduction later," he went on as she flushed again. "But right now I'm your new neighbor. John Carter."

She could drawl, too: "Oh? I'm so happy to know you. I'm the Queen of Sheba." She turned to put the rest of her things away.

CARTER stood there a moment somewhat taken aback and then with a shrug he headed for the hotel. What was she expecting him to look like? Well, she would feel silly enough when she learned for a fact that he was John Carter.

The two men quickly turned away from their foggy peepholes as he came even with the window and as he went into the hotel they stood silently smoking at the side of the room. The man in the dirty apron was punching up a fire in the stove. The heat felt mighty good to Carter. He could stand a lot of thawing out. He put his plunder on a chair and peeled off his woolen gloves. A lunch counter and a couple of rickety tables were at the far end of the room. The kitchen was visible through a door beyond and there was a smell of coffee and onions and ancient grease.

The host banged down the lid of the stove and as it roared afresh one of the other men cleared his throat ponderously and said, "What's the news, friend? Heard anything on ol' Brigham? He amin' to give up or not?"

He peered at Carter from small, pale eyes

for a moment and then studied his cigar as he raked the ashes off onto the floor with a little finger which had a couple of rings with red sets. Carter's glance moved from him to the other man to the host. They were eyeing him expectantly but their looks went swiftly elsewhere as he observed them.

Was the man just making conversation, or did he really want to know the news? Or, Carter asked himself, were these folks trying to find out if he came up from the southward maybe, up through Utah?

He said, "I was just fixing to ask you the same thing."

"Yeah?" The man's expression didn't change. "That so?"

Carter's face was beginning to thaw and his cheeks and the sides of his nose burned where wind had chapped him and his fingers itched. He looked again at the host. "Coffee?"

"Yes, sir! Shore got it. Hot and strong and plentiful. If I do say it myself, I make good coffee. Don't I, Mr. Fulton? Don't I, Mr. Bragg?"

The two men agreed that he did.

"Just give me a cup of it," Carter said. "I'm about frozen out."

The door opened and the girl from the buckboard said, "Mr. Holden, could I have my team now?"

"Yes, *ma'am!* Comin' right up, jist as soon as I get this gentleman a cup of coffee and my coat on. Come in and warm."

She said, "Thank you, I'd just have to get cold all over again." She closed the door, shutting herself out.

"Them was her mules in the livery," Holden explained.

Carter said, "I'll take that coffee black—no sugar or cream."

Holden took the hint and went to the kitchen and came back with a heavy mug in one hand and a grey granite coffee pot in the other. "She's biled down thick as six in a bed," he said, filling the cup at the counter. "Uh—you aimin' to take a room here?"

"Thought of it," Carter admitted.

"All right, then. I'll jist set the pot handy. You'll have to eat here too on account of they ain't anywhere else to eat, less'n you jist buy some junk at the store, and the way I figger it, if'n a customer fills up on coffee, he won't be so liable to eat a lot of grub—I'm a-comin'!" he shouted as

the girl tapped on the window, though Carter doubted if she could hear above the howling of the wind out there.

Holden lugged in sour-smelling cornbread and a bowl of cold beans and a plate and a spoon. "Uh—don't reckon you forgot to shut that barn door, did you, mister?" He struggled into his coat.

Carter wiped the grease off the spoon onto his neck scarf and said, "I shut it."

"Cuss it!" Holden growled querulously. "Wisht you hadn't. Now I got to open it all over again." He went out, still complaining to himself.

The coffee was about as bad as Carter had ever sampled but it was hot. He had his scarf and outer coat off and was on his second cup and his second plate of beans when Holden came in again. While the door was still open Carter saw the buckboard pulling out to the northwest—the opposite direction from which he had come into town. The Hide-and-Horns lay to the upper side of the road, as Carter remembered the roughly drawn map his aunt had sent of the country years ago when his father talked of coming up here for a look-see. The DLC buildings were also on the upper side and beyond the H-&H, but DLC range sprawled over to the south side of the road, too, and came jutting this way toward Vane City for eight or ten miles to join the Rocking Z. And it was Rocking Z cattle Carter had seen around that old hay stack near where he found the bones today. The Z was just a little one-gallus outfit tolerated by the H & H because the latter now handled only sheep and liked to have a place to get a little beef now and then, and tolerated by the DLC because the old man who owned it was a friend of his Aunt Doris's during her lifetime.

Carter finished and rose. The two men abruptly went outside with a soft jangling of rowels on the splintered floor and Holden said conversationally, "Come far, mister?"

"You asked me that once," Carter told him casually. His fingers and toes were beginning to burn as circulation picked up in them.

"Did I?"

Carter said, "Sign a register here?"

"Oh, I got one, if you're jist itchin to sign it. Some do an' some don't. I'll see can I find it—"

Carter said, "Well, skip it. I'll go to my

room, now. . . Uh—don't reckon you remember a couple of men who came through here three months ago? Shorty Graves and Cal Emmet—"

He was going to describe them but Holden said, "Graves? Why, now, they's a nester over on Little Rattlesnake name of Gravesend. Got nine kids. Don't reckon you mean him? Right up these stairs. I'll give you number 12, up over this room. Got a smoke drum up there f'm this stove that warms it up mighty nice."

Gathering up his gun and saddle bags, Carter said, "These are just a couple of punchers. Texas saddles, JC brand. Comin' up here to work for the DLC, but they mayn't of come through this town, and, of course, I guess the DLC's do their Saturday-nightin' at Saddle-Up."

"Why, not always," Holden said. "Mr. Carter, he buys lots of supplies here because they're freighted in f'm this direction an' that makes it cheaper—"

"Mr. Carter?" Carter asked.

"JOHN CARTER, that owns the DLC. Mighty nice feller. Mighty nice. He goes with that gal that was in here—Meridell Haley, her name is. Carter, he heired the DLC from his Aunt Doris—Doris Lackley Carter, her full name was, and by gum, she allus put the whole handle down on my register when she nighted here, meetin' hoss buyers. Raised hosses, she did. Mostly, that is. Few cattle for the table. What time she wasn't quarrelin' with ol' Hide-an-Horns Haley, I mean. I think that's what killed her. He died an' she never had nobody to quarrel with. Weren't no fun quarrelin' with Haley's daughter, I reckon. Jist drindled away an' died like an ol' cow that's off her feed for no special reason."

Carter stood there, still staring at the man, hardly hearing his words. So "John Carter" was here. He had "heired the property." Something was beginning to clear up in Carter's mind. Whoever was up here pretending to be himself—someone who knew of his aunt's death and of the disposition of her property—probably had had men watching the trails from Texas to here. Hanging around hotels, watching the registers, keeping their eyes and ears open, for the real John Carter of Texas. Men who would shoot to kill—and who, Carter

was certain now, had shot at him with that intent twice in the past week.

Holden cleared his throat and repeated, "Right up these stairs, mister—"

Carter decided not to call attention to himself by inquiring about a law officer here, or about any missing person. Not until he knew the lay of the land a little better. Then he remembered he had told that girl who he was. And now Holden said she was this "John Carter's" girl.

"Shore aimin' to turn cold," Holden gabbled on. Uh—what'd you say your name was?"

Because of the wind Carter had heard no sound of anyone's approaching the hotel, but now before he could answer the door was shoved open. Carter whirled, jumpier inside than he would have admitted. Beyond the man who was half turned to shut the door after himself, Carter could see the white horse he had noticed at the hitch rack down the street. Then the man turned this way. It was Shorty Graves.

Shorty's glance went idly past Carter. He said, "Mr. Holden, I wanted to ask you about them durn flapjacks. No matter what I do to 'em, they're tough, and Mr. Carter he raises hell."

"That so?" Holden said. And to Carter, "This here is the cook out to the DLC. Well, now, Nolesby, flapjacks is funny things. If you jist had eggs, 'twould be a heap simpler—"

Nolesby. That was Shorty's middle name.

"I ain't got no eggs," he said. He came forward to warm his hands. "Anyhow, I'll take a cup of coffee—"

Holden looked at Carter, "You mind if I get him a cup of coffee? Your room's jist above this'n. You can't miss it, if you want to go on up."

"Thanks," Carter said.

Holden departed. Shorty whispered, "Where'd you meet Cal?"

"Cal?"

"He lit out three weeks ago to warn you the roads south of here is being watched for you. He goes under the name of Cass Calhoun—"

"I never saw 'im."

Shorty said, "I don't see how you got through without him. This varmint who's dealt himself into the DLC with your name is tough. I can tell from his talk he's been

in Texas and he may have seen you personally. Don't come out to the ranch without changin' your face. He keeps four-five gunhands by his side all the time, or I'd have done shot him already. He's playin' for keeps—"

Holden was returning with the coffee, and Carter steadied his voice and said, "Yep, I reckon maybe it could snow." But a fear had brought the sweat out on him. Maybe those bones he had found were Cal's. No. Cal had a gold tooth. He would certainly have noticed that.

Shorty called, "How about fixin' me up a mess of ham an' eggs—real quick, because I got to be goin' back with the boys in a minute soon as they get them pack mules loaded. I'm so durn tired of eatin' my own cookin' I got to have a change."

Holden went back to the kitchen. Shorty whispered, "Only way I could get on out there was as cook. I had a hurt back and couldn't ride fit for nothin'—little fight me and Cal got in with some tin horns as we come through Fulton's Fist down in Idaho. Got our horses stoled there. This DLC maverick, he put Cal in the line camp on the top of Red Rock to keep the Hides-an'-Horns sheep herders from moochin' over onto him. Cal herdin' sheep herders, an' me herdin' the pots an' pans! Anyhow, Cal took out to warn you—"

Holden came back in. "Got the ham siz- zlin'," he said. "Done had it sliced. You want to come back to the kitchen? I'll show you about them flapjacks whilst your ham fries, Mr. Nolesby. I allus mix my breakfast ones up about this time of day anyhow. They got to work overnight—"

Carter saw there was no point in lingering here in the room unless he could get rid of Holden. About the most he could hope to accomplish by trying to carry on any further talk with Shorty would be to rouse Holden's suspicions, or at best, his curiosity.

Shorty exclaimed, "Oh, shucks! Cliff is wavin' at me from the store window over there. You eat that ham, Mr. Holden." He gulped the coffee, tossed a half dollar on the counter, and would have left without his change, but Holden said, "Ham ain't hurt. I'll jist fix it for the next feller. By the way—Salley Inness never mentioned it, Mr. Nolesby, but—what about you going by and takin' a message to ol' Zack?"

"Oh, shore—shore," Shorty said, "if you think it'd help."

"Well—jist tell him that Sally's a good girl. That she'd love to come home, an' that if he'd jist lift a finger to tell her he was sorry, she'd be right there."

Shorty said, "Well—I'll get a bawlin' out for my pains, but I'm willin'."

"Not that she ain't welcome to stay here, long as she wants to," Holden added quickly. "She's company for my woman. Sweeps an' makes beds an' does some of the cookin'."

Shorty said, "Well, I got to go—"

He escaped, and Holden said, "Sad case. Sad case. Ol' Zack Inness, he's proud as go-to-hell. Might-near-it blind. Cross as a grizzly in April. Poor as Job's churchmouse—or is it Job's turkey? That there is a funny sayin', I allus thought—" He shook his head. "Sad case, sad case. All the girl was tryin' to do was jist raise a little money. Yere—right thisaway—"

Carter was too weary and still too cold to ask any polite questions about a matter in which he hadn't the vaguest interest. He followed Holden upstairs. The man held his apron up to keep from tripping on it, and showed Carter into number twelve, and departed. Carter put his stuff on the bed and peeled off his gun belt and hung it on the rickety iron post.

Downstairs, Holden whistled and hummed snatches of Camptown Races and the sound was unusually loud. Surprised at the tone of it, Carter looked about him—and then he had it. The stove pipe picked it up and brought it up to the smoke drum—a tin contraption the size of a barrel—from which another pipe went through a square of tin in the ceiling.

The room wasn't as warm as the hall had been from the heat which came up the stairway. Carter opened the door again and as he peeled out a little further, having in mind to shave, he went over to the window to see if he could get a line on the men Shorty was with.

They had evidently loaded the mules behind the store at a warehouse room for he saw fifteen or twenty animals, strung on ropes and a couple of other riders leading them. And then he saw something else: The two men who had been downstairs here in the hotel were standing across the street looking at a "wanted" poster. The larger

one was gabbling at the other, and once he chucked a thumb over his shoulder toward the hotel.

Abruptly, Carter stepped to the bed and opened a saddle bag and got out his brass telescope. At the window he started to focus it at the poster, but on second thought he swung it toward the riders with Shorty while he still could.

It was a good glass. He had traded four prime steers for it in Dodge and it brought the men's faces up until he could see the blackheads on the nose of the red bearded one and a swollen sty with a dead hair in the center on the right eye of the swart one. The swart one's face suddenly contorted and he flung words over his shoulder at the mules he was leading.

They turned into the main street now so that Carter could no longer see their faces, and he switched the glass to the men across the street and ran the eye piece down to where it brought their heads leaping at him, with the poster showing between.

It bore not the usual conventional, smeary face made by a woodcut, but one that looked remarkably like Carter himself. Underneath were the words: "\$2500, Dead or Alive!" And under that: "The state of California will pay the above sum for one Tug Koll, aged about twenty-five to thirty, 5' 10", solid-build, wt. 170, dark hair and eyes, slight limp in right leg, scar on right cheek about two inches long. Alias James Koll, alias James Carter, alias John Kartner. This man is dangerous, will kill without warning if cornered or suspects he is about to be. Would be best to take him without warning if certain he is found . . ."

Carter's life-processes stopped for a moment. That was a perfect description of himself. He never read these wanted signs; he didn't doubt but that he had passed many just like this between here and Texas, cleverly put up by this impostor who had dreamed up this imaginary reward in order to get Carter killed. Maybe those who had shot at him had never even seen this man who had taken over the DLC! Maybe they were simply after that money—

Behind Carter a feminine voice drawled, "Put your hands up—and don't turn around."

He raised his hands, his pulse picking up. And then the voice said, "All right—turn, now."

## CHAPTER TWO

## Gun Trap for a Pilgrim

HE TURNED. He saw that she had the gun belt he had hung on the bedpost. Her dark eyes were level and determined, her mouth set. She wore whipcord riding trousers and a buckskin vest.

Carter said, "Hello—" What name had that Miss Haley called the girl who had owned the winded horse? Sally. Sally Inness. And Holden had talked of her too—her and her daddy, old Zack. "Hello, Sally."

Her face had paled with nervousness, but not so much that the coldness of riding in the wind didn't leave her cheekbones with color. Now she flushed, eyeing him sharply.

"Cousin Sally, maybe I should say," he added, "until we're better acquainted. How's Uncle Zack?"

Her eyes were uncertain, but the gun didn't waver. She said, "Who—are you?"

He wished now he had let Holden bore him with details concerning Zack and Sally.

He said, "Well, now that I see you, I guess I'm a pretty lucky hombre. Great snakes! I never thought you'd look like this . . ." He cocked his head. "Who did you think I was when you threw that gun on me?"

"Why—why—"

Carter said, "Uncle Zack's letter was kind of—oh, balled up. Didn't make right good sense. I thought I better have a look-see. He thinks that you've turned against him—that you don't love him."

The girl said, "Oh, he's wrong! He's wrong! I—we—needed money. The DLC ruined us. The new owner—a Mr. Carter—"

"Well, I gathered that—about the money, I mean—though he didn't say so in the letter. So you were going to catch yourself an outlaw and get the reward? How'd you plan to get me to California?" And when she made no answer he asked, "How much do you need? No, no—it's sort of an investment. It's been drawing interest many a long year. Don't you reckon Uncle Zack ever did anyone a favor?"

She said, "If I thought you were just making that up—to make it easy for me to take help—" Her voice was unsteady. "And another thing—my daddy can't write.

He never had any schooling, and he can't read even printig. How'd he write you a letter?"

Carter said, "Maybe he had somebody write for him."

She shook her head. "You're lying to me. I don't know just how, but you are. I can feel it."

Carter started to deny that, and then he said, "All right. I—" Abruptly something occurred to him. Maybe that smoke drum carried sound down as well as up. He lowered his voice. "Open that saddle bag with the conchas. You'll find letters and papers—"

She got his rifle from the bed. "You do it," she ordered, backing off. "And no tricks." She cocked the pistol, and when he had found the bundle he sought and opened it, she said, "Put them on the bed and face the wall."

He heard the rustling of the letters and documents and a murmured sound or two. And finally she said, "What is this? Some of those aliases on that 'wanted' poster are a lot like his name. Are you a black-sheep brother of his or something? Or are you just somebody who held him up on his way up here and took these papers."

He turned, hands still up. He said, "Sit down, and take it easy and let me talk. Doris Carter was my aunt—my daddy's brother's wife. You—"

"Oh! A new story! First you are my long lost cousin. Now you are Miss Doris's nephew—"

Carter said, "Look at it this way for a moment. Either I do have a right to those letters, and the DLC is mine, and this fellow who has aken it over is a fake or else I'm a fake. Right? Of course. Very well—does he act like a fake? Does he act like he's scared of something?"

"Why—he—does keep guards out. And he's armed his men, though there's been no trouble around here for years."

"And he's had me shot at twice in six days—" That brought him up with a jolt. "Or were you the one who threw that dry-gulch bullet at me today?"

She went back a step until the foot of the bed stopped her. "No!" And indignantly, "Do I look like a dry-gulcher—?"

"You'd been riding somewhere mighty hard. I saw your horse—"

"Looking for a friend," she said. "But I

guess you wouldn't understand that—"

The words lashed Carter and he demanded, "What right have you to guess that?"

"You've lied to me—tried to play on an imaginary kinship—anything to save your hide. Well, go on and save it. Get out of my sight. Get out of this town and keep going. I don't want any blood money after all. You call yourself a man. If my friend should come riding up now, you could see what a man looks and acts like. Maybe you'll run into him as you drift. His name is Cass Calhoun—"

Cass Calhoun. That was the name Shorty had said the vanished Cal Emmet was going by here. Carter decided to take a chance. If she and Cal were really friends, she'd know his real name. Yet, they apparently hadn't been friendly enough that Cal had told her what the real layout here was. Still—

He said, "His name, as you call it is not Cass Calhoun but Cal Emmet—"

Her eyes showed nothing but indignation.

Carter said, "Fellow about my height. Missouri cottonmouth drawl with a Texas influence. Tattooed—uh—lady on his right arm, though I expect he kept his sleeve down around you. Upper gold tooth in front. Ring on his right hand with a gold saddle on it and the stirrups hung over the horn. Had a fight at Fulton's Fist a few days before he got here, and may have been skinned up some, but I don't know. I haven't seen him—"

At last he saw he was hitting deep water. He had at least described someone she knew.

She said, "How did you know he had a fight if you hadn't seen him?"

"Saw his partner—the man he left my ranch in Texas with. Fellow who got on at the DLC as cookie. And whose life won't be worth a tin horn's promise if they tumble to who he is."

Sally Inness let down the hammer of her pistol and put it into the holster she wore. She said, "All right. You've told me so many things I don't know which—if any—to believe."

Carter had one more card to play and he flipped it out: "I'll make one last try—on Cal's account. Or Cass's, if you want to call him that. My daddy sent a picture of him-

self to Aunt Doris several years ago. A picture to hang on the wall—a big one. You must have seen it? Look me over. Do I look anything like it—that is, if I had a heavy gray mustache, would I?"

"Why—why—I—I believe so. Around your forehead—"

"And this other fellow?"

Abruptly she sagged upon a stool and rubbed the heels of her trembling hands in her eyes. She said, "I—I'm almost out of my mind. I don't know who looks like who. First I'm at outs with my father. And now I'm afraid something's happened to Cass. I thought Merridell Haley's shepherders had shot him. But if all this is true you're telling me, maybe this—this DLC fellow has found out who he really is and done away with him—"

"But he came to meet me—"

She shook her head. "He wouldn't have gone without seeing me."

The vanity of women! Carter said, "Well—maybe something came up that he couldn't see you. He can take care of himself."

But suddenly deep in his heart a small serpent of doubt began uncoiling. At the moment he had a crusted bullet furrow across the top of his head to show that he couldn't take care of himself—and he didn't figure Cal was any better man than he was. And some other poor devil who probably thought he could take care of himself had come to a harsh and terrible end out there in that canyon a few miles from here—

**T**HERE came a tapping in the smoke room. The rattle of the stove lid below, and a hollow voice that was recognizable as the hotel keeper said, "Better put a dally on that. Company's comin'—"

Carter said "Damn!" mentally. He guesst Holden could be trusted, but he didn't know. He stepped to the window and peered down through the ancient lace curtain which choked him with dust as his nose touched it. The two men who had been looking at the "Wanted" poster were crossing the street this way.

He said, "Here, quick, Miss Sally—"

She came to his side.

"Those hombres—they in with this guy who calls himself Carter?"

"Claim to be mining men. I don't know. They hang around here some and ride into

the hills some. They don't seem to do . . ."

Before they reached the door of the hotel they turned in their tracks, looking toward the direction from which Carter had ridden into town. By putting his eye close to the right hand side of the window, Carter could see a rider coming beyond the creek bed. Not fast, not slow. The breath whipped back whitely from man and beast.

But it was not Cal Emmet. The man rode on up as the two stood there. A lean, rangy man with weathered flesh above his sandy head, Carter saw as the brim of his old hat was turned up by the wind. He got down where the two men stood. The three were speaking at the same time. The newcomer made short, sharp gestures with his free hand.

"His name's Berger," Sally said. "He rides for Carter—that is, for the DLC."

"New hand?"

"Sure. All of Miss Doris's hands are gone. Carter cut wages by half and all the old hands quit, and then, of course, he raised them back up again for the hands he hired on."

Berger took his horse into the livery, and as the two men followed, Carter said, "That's odd. I didn't see any horse in that barn for them. None but yours, and Miss Haely's mules."

"They use a barn behind one of those deserted buildings. Buy their feed over at a store."

The three men came out of the livery and into the hotel. And now a voice came up the stairway and rumbled in the smoke drum: "Coffee, Holden! and grub. I'm nigh froze out . . . I tell you I'm right, Berger. There's no argument about it—"

"That's Fulton," Sally whispered.

"Who's arguing?" Berger cried. "I tell you, I won't be pushed around."

Fulton said, "If I thought you was double-crossing me—"

Holden cried, "Look out!"

There came a crash of gun fire. Several shots which blended into one roar that trembled the floor. Then silence. And finally Fulton wheezed. "Well, he asked for it! He drew on me. You all saw him draw."

A woman called out feebly. That would be Mrs. Holden.

Holden said, "Get the hell out! Get him out of here and stay away from my place!"

Fulton said, "No use getting het up.

What did you want me to do—stand there and let him kill me?"

Sally said, "I'll go see Mrs. Holden—" "Get out," Holden repeated. "Take him with you. I know my rights."

As Sally left the room, Carter looked out the window to see the two men come out of the door below, carrying the body grotesquely by armpits and heels. The face was bloody. They crossed the street to the store and went in.

Thoughtfully Carter locked the door of his room and put a chair under the knob, then balanced the empty tin pitcher and wash pan on the chair. He took off his boots, put his weapons handy, and crawled into bed in his clothes.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Long-John Shoot-Out

A KNOCK awakened him. He lay there for what seemed to him to be hours with it penetrating his sleep. He knew it sounded like a knock. Yet, he thought he might just be dreaming it was one and that if he kept his eyes closed the dream would change to something else—

"Hello in there."

He opened his eyes. It was either twilight or dawn. He couldn't tell from his rocky, beaten out feeling whether he had slept three hours or fifteen.

"Hello in there—" Sally Inness's voice.

"Yeah? I mean, yes ma'am? Anything wrong?"

"It's eight o'clock. We were just wondering if you were all right—"

"Eight?" He looked toward the window. It was a raw grey day outside. Dark as it ought to be at six-thirty. "Thanks," he said.

He got up and worked his boots on and ran a dry hand over his stubble. Shivering, he took a look at himself in the mirror. He really looked hard.

A gust of wind struck him and now he saw that a pane of the window was broken out, glass scattered inside the room. And against the wall by the door was a rock with a paper tied around it.

He picked it up and worked the string off and unfolded the paper. He had to take it to the window to read it. It was in pencil, printed in rough letters: "Pretend to ride



out today for your bedroll but go to where you found the bones yesterday. Will have roll there for you. A friend."

This was the thing he must figure out for himself, so he did not mention the note to Sally. He explained the broken window by saying that someone had thrown a rock through it while he slept.

All she said was, "Well, that's odd."

A circuit preacher had ridden in during the night. He was occupied in converting the heathen—both white and red, he remarked facetiously as he ate breakfast with Carter. He seemed to be well known to Sally. She served them steak, biscuits, gravy, and molasses, and for butter you could have bacon grease to stir in the molasses if you wanted it.

Carter found out from the talk what the trouble between Sally and her father was: She had ridden in to Saddle-Up on pay night at the mines, and between bucking a wheel and playing poker with several cattlemen and miners had brought home thirty-eight hundred dollars with which to renew the lease on their government range. When her father, old Zack, found out the money was gambling money and that she had been in a deadfall, he went into a terrific rage and ordered her from the house.

He had let his lease lapse and the DLC had taken it up and was threatening to run all of Zack's Rocking Z cattle plumb to Canada if he wouldn't sell them to the DLC. Old Zack had countered by promising to shoot on sight any DLC man who stirred dust on his range.

Abruptly, judging from the widening of her dark eyes, the same thought seemed to strike Sally Inness that struck Carter: Perhaps the man who shot at him yesterday was old Zack. Maybe he had got trigger-happy and was shooting at all strangers. Carter ate the last half of his meal without tasting it.

**A**FTER breakfast he crossed the street to the store to get an extra suit of underwear, for it had turned colder in the night. Ancient lettering on the window said: Jacob Pringle, Gen'l Mdse. Harness, Hdwe. Furs, Hide, Wool Bought & Sold. Mining Prop'ty. Undertaking. Furniture."

Maybe it had been engaged in all those activities once, but now it was just another cluttered range-country store run by a

wispy little man whose skin was the same dead greyness as his wild spray of hair. He was polishing a smutty lamp chimney, but he stopped to get Carter the long-handles from a tumbled pile on the counter.

All morning Carter had been thinking of something: Maybe Merridell Haley was this impostor's sweetheart as Holden had said. But that wasn't necessarily against her in this land where men who would feel free to court a wealthy woman were scarce. No doubt the fellow put up a smooth, convincing front.

But something was wrong: Why by now hadn't the so-called "Carter" picked up the news from Merridell that someone was in town claiming to be the owner of the DLC? Obviously he hadn't picked up that news or he would have been here, snorting and prancing. Or—would he? Maybe he would just stand pat where he was and be more watchful. It could be that the girl had had time to do some thinking and hadn't said anything to the man. A woman who could handle the affairs of the Hide-and-Horns outfit might have sense enough to have put two and two together by the time she got home. To remember, perhaps, some things about this interloper that didn't make sense.

To the storekeeper Carter said, "Uh—reckton I better have a clean shirt, too, and a new neck scarf." If he went by to see Merridell he wanted to look a little better than yesterday.

The merchant got the things. Evidently he had never looked at that "Wanted" poster outside because he showed no nervousness whatever at Carter's presence.

Carter said, "Reckon I could change in that back room?"

"Cold in there, but suit yourself. And you'll have that dead man for company. He ain't been sent for."

"Reckon I can stand it if he can."

Several coffins were standing on end back there, but one, the lid closed, lay on a couple of saw horses. Carter was shivering as he got down to his cotton shirt and drawers over which he was going to wear the woolen underwear.

Just as he raised his foot to scoot it into a leg, above the creak of the building and the howl of the wind under the eaves he heard a sudden flurry of hoofs. As he peered through the door crack to have a look out front, half a dozen or more men,

muffled in heavy scarfs, tied their horses and stalked in with a jingling of cold spurs.

The foremost one said, "Howdy, Pringle. That drifter you sent out last night said my man Berger got gunned to death."

The store-keeper nodded apologetically. "Yes, sir, Mr. Carter, he did, I reckon. Best I got the story, him and those two mining men, Fulton and Bragg, had an argument, and Berger drew—"

Hot excitement beat through Carter there in the back room, and anger and apprehension struggled together in him as he tried to see the big fellow who was impersonating him. But the man had got out of his range of vision. His voice came through, rumbling and heavy. A voice Carter felt certain he had never heard: "The damn' fool!" He broke off, growling, "Here, open me a can of them peaches, Pringle. I'm hungry. That cook of ours would starve a man to death. What'd Berger draw on two men at once for?"

"I never heard," the merchant declared.

The six men with the boss each ordered a can of peaches. The glimpses Carter could get of them showed them to be about as capable a looking set as he had ever seen. Capable of taking care of themselves. At least three had their holsters tied down. They wore short sheepskin jackets—no coat-tails in their way.

Only one of them looked as if he might kill a man just for the fun of it, but the others gave the impression they could do the job if at all expedient. Evidently they were drawing shooting pay, for while their pants were sloppy, their boots were bench-made, their belts and holsters of the finest, and those hats had come from St. Louis at seventy or eighty dollars each.

Carter wished he was dressed. A man was in one hell of a fix without his pants on. He couldn't move about much or call attention to himself.

"Did you put Berger up nice?" the boss asked.

"Yes, sir. Nice as I could."

"What's it aimin' to cost me?"

"Well—I'd rightly ought to have fifty dollars, Mr. Carter."

The man known as Carter grunted. "All right. The dirty son had nearly that comin' to 'im. In the back room here? I'll have a look while you open them peaches. Boys—le's have a look at the damn' fool who

drawed on two men. It'll give us something to think about. Uh—here's an order of groceries, Pringle. You can send 'em out if those slow-pokes ever get here with the wagon for Berger. And I don't want no more buggy beans."

Carter knew they would shoot him like a dog back here. Hiding was beyond question even if he wanted to hide. The only defense was to attack.

He drew the pistol from the holster he had hung on the corner of a packing box there by the coffin and as the men clumped and jingled this way he opened the door wide and stepped into it, gun hammer drawn back under his thumb.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Ride the Devil's Range

THE MEN stopped in their tracks. The boss's big lean face was a study of amazement. He said, "What the hell is wrong with you?" Over his shoulder he cried, "Pringle, get this drunk out of the way."

Carter exclaimed, "Mr. Carter! What a laugh!" And taking a cue from the wanted poster out front, he added, "That's not what you used to call yourself."

The man warned, "Better put that gun down, you barefooted halfwit."

One of the gunmen wet his lips with a quick dart of his tongue. He said, "Hey, boss! Look at that guy—"

"Huh?" Slow recognition came into the boss's dark eyes. And as he cocked his big head on one side Carter had the fleeting impression that he had seen the man before. Probably in a Texas saloon.

Carter said, "You're pretty slick, fellow, but you're through. Raise your hands, all of you, and turn around."

The big man shook his head, his jaws solid. "No. And if you shoot me and these boys don't kill you—which they will—you'll be hung higher than Haman. I'm unarmed. We've got law here—"

The moment stretched and became intolerable. Carter said, "Get a gun from one of your sharks."

The man to the fellow's left—a short man with a drooping eyelid, said, "Boss, you can have mine."

He casually started for his gun as if to

hand it to his master and then his hand darted. As he tilted the holster to fire through the bottom, Carter flipped his thumb off his own hammer. The gunman's bullet slashed into the jamb by his elbow and, deafened by the explosions, Carter cried, "Don't do it—" through the black smoke as he dropped to a knee. But the man to his extreme right was drawing anyway. Carter fired again.

The others backed watchfully toward the door as the second man staggered in a sidling, overbalanced dancing step toward the first gunman who was on his hands and knees. He stumbled over him and they went to the floor in a heap as Carter moved out of the smoke.

He said, "Stop in your tracks."

But three of the men had their hands on their guns now. One said, "You better let us get out of here, cowboy. You can't get us all—"

"I want your boss who calls himself Carter! Carter! You dirty—" It was only then that he saw a woman through the glass of the door, just behind the fellow. She opened it. It was Sally Inness.

The boss gave one wild glance behind him—and probably decided Carter wouldn't shoot for fear of hitting Sally. He backed to the door, his men closing about him. He drawled, "Adios, amigo. Next time it will be different. Ah, Miss Inness! A lovely winter day!"

Carter fleetingly wished he had his pants. Yet, if Sally Inness had never seen a man in his underwear she wouldn't know what he was, and if she had, it wouldn't make any difference.

The men got past her even as Carter yelled for her to get out of the way. As they untied their bridles Carter fired through the front window and as the cold glass shattered, a man who had stepped in front of the impostor jerked and stumbled. The boss ducked behind his horse as Carter fired again, and then the men were on their horses and riding hard.

Carter ran to the door and threw the remaining shot in the pistol after them, but if he made a hit he didn't know it. One of the men whirled and Carter stepped back into the store before the sound of the fellow's gun rattled along the street.

"Got a rifle in here?" he cried.

The merchant said, "I'm not in this

fight! You got no right coming here like this and—"

Carter ran to the horses in front which belonged to the fallen men in the store. He drew a Winchester from the boot of the saddle on one of the shying animals. He fired it once and missed before he saw that the sight was set for extreme range. And then the men broke apart into dips at the sides of the road beyond the town. He could still hear them running.

He took a splinter an inch long from his right foot and the place pained him as he saddled up ten minutes later in the livery. Sally came running back from the hotel with his horse's bridle which she had taken in to warm so that the bits wouldn't peel the skin off the animal's tongue and mouth. His emotions were still mixed at the way she had broken into the fight. But perhaps it was for the best. At any rate, he was still alive, and otherwise he might not have been. He said, "Soon as they get a breather, some of them will be back while another rides for help. This is the show-down. I've got to get out of here and get some help of my own. Maybe see a U. S. marshal and tell him who I am while I still have a chance to speak my own piece. Where is the nearest one?"

"I don't know. There's never been one around here."

He fastened the throat latch of the bridle as she dumped a box of pistol cartridges into his right hand coat pocket and a box of .30-30's for his rifle into the other. She had already fastened a flour sack of grub and a tight roll of blankets encased in his slicker, behind the saddle while he was dressing over there in the back room with his ears full of the moanings of one of the men he had shot.

While the merchant and Holden ministered to the fellow, Carter had flung a yellow-backed bill on the counter to pay for his purchases and for the work of smooching a plate glass window from one of the abandoned buildings in the town and moving it up here to replace the one he had shattered.

Now he said to Sally, "Wish me luck, will you? I think I'll need a whole wagon load of it."

She said, "I do wish you luck."

He stood hesitantly. "Well—I'll be seeing you."

HE MOUNTED the horse and rode from the barn, head low, and out of town, watchful for his enemies. But after half a mile as the road fell into broken country he pulled off it and began circling. He had some fairly good bearings on the place where he had found those bones. There was this about it: Whoever had written him the note to come there didn't intend to ambush him, he thought. If they had, they would simply have lain in wait at his bed roll, or on the road to it, and got him there. Or—was that merely the line of reasoning they wished him to follow?

He left his horse a good mile from the bones, the best he could judge, when the dirt gave out and bare stone began ringing under foot. Rifle ready he moved on, keeping to low ground and what cover he could find. He had a good plan: He was now upwind of the place. When nearly there, he would light a cigarette and leave it burning, and then circle. And while whoever was waiting for him peered upwind for the approaching smoker, he would get a chance to see who it was.

Presently he halted and took off a glove to roll the cigarette. And just as he licked it he heard a rattle of shots ahead. And after a moment the ring of hoofs, fading into silence, and then rising and fading again.

He broke into a run now, and finally, his head throbbing, breath like a knife in his side, he came to a halt, deciding he had contrived to lose himself. Panting, heart athunder in his ears, he halted. He had unbuttoned his coat but now he drew it around him, holding his breath now and then to listen as he moved on. And presently he saw a streak on the bedrock that had been made by a slipping horse shoe. This was the right way, after all.

He moved along, watchful of the rim above him— He halted as at the bend he saw a bone. This was the place. Against the wall of the bluff he took another step, and another—and froze as the soles of a man's boots came into sight. Cautiously he moved ahead, watchful of rolling gravel. Frozen blood glittered brightly on the stones and on the dead man's coat.

Carter stepped swiftly toward him now and saw that it was Fulton. And ten feet farther on, sitting all slumped down with his back against a boulder, chin on his chest, one hand on Carter's bedroll, was Fulton's

partner, Bragg. The other hand had frozen blood all over it as he held it to his stomach.

Bragg opened his eyes. He looked at Carter vacantly, and then, with an obvious summoning of will, he said, "Carter?"

"Yeah."

"The—real—Carter?"

Carter dropped to one knee by him. "Who shot you?" he asked.

"Don't know. Fellow who has—your ranch—I guess. We're—U. S. deputy marshals. Berger—was, too. But he was—kind of crazy—lately. Thought we—plotted against him. Stuff like—that. It was him—shot at you—yesterday. Only he wasn't shooting at you. He was just—trying—to attract your attention. Wanted—to—talk—"

That bullet which had struck a boulder a few yards from Carter yesterday had attracted his attention all right. And it had come from a long distance away, judging from the length of time before he heard the crack of the gun. But it hadn't come from so far, he reckoned, that Berger couldn't have yelled at him—or at least have ridden up into yelling distance of his tired horse. And the second bullet was even closer. But this was no time to argue.

Bragg whispered, "This fellow—on your ranch—he—and—"

His breath faded away. His eyes closed. He opened them again and peered blankly at Carter. "Who—are you?" He made as if to rise and slumped against the rock. His head fell back and his blue eyes stared at the cold sky.

"My God!" Carter breathed.

He walked unsteadily back to Fulton and saw that he had been shot in the back. Left shoulder and arm. He shook his head, glancing about for any evidence the killer might have left. His sense of the terrible had been numbed by all that had happened this morning, but he got a fresh shock as he noticed the bleaching skull that lay with the scattered bones in the crevice of a rock. The upper jaw bone was broken and some of the teeth knocked away in front where Cal Emmet's gold tooth had been.

He went to it and knelt, not touching it. The cheek bones were wide and high, as Cal's had been, and a glance at an arm bone showed it to be long and thick, as Cal's arms had been.

"My God!" Carter breathed again.

And then, in a hollow of the rock, he saw six bullets where they had fallen from the flesh as it decomposed. He picked them up in a shaking hand. .45's. Somebody was really looking for trouble or wanting to deal it out, packing a cannon like that and with all six chambers loaded.

Carter's cousin, Colonel Jock Depew of the Texas Rangers, had a theory that you could look at two bullets with a magnifying glass and tell if they had been shot by the same gun, and he had forced a confession out of a murderer that way. And if there really was anything to the theory—

He turned back to Fulton. If he had one of the bullets out of him, now—

Some vagrant sound or some sixth sense warned him that he was not alone. Rifle ready, he dropped among the rocks, shooting glances upward and along the narrow canyon.

Sally called, "Mr. Carter—it's me—" and she came around the bend as he rose. Out of breath, she said, "I knew that rock was thrown through your window—must have had a note tied to it. I thought you might need some help—but you went so fast I kept losing you—"

She halted as she saw the carnage. She looked from the two men to Carter, and then her eyes went over the bones. The toughest part of all would be telling her about Cal.

Before Carter could speak, a rough, high voice called out, "What's this shootin' goin' on on my range?"

Whirling to look upward, Carter saw a wildly bearded old man on the bluff above, his eyes magnified into huge blurs by the thick spectacles he wore. He had a pistol in his hand. A .45. He said, "What you doin'

here with my daughter? What is this, Sally?"

Carter said, "A lot you must worry about your daughter, leaving her to shift for herself—"

Sally said, "Mr. Carter, I appreciate your attitude, but I'll thank you not to speak to my father like that—"

The old man seemed to shrink into himself. Dispiritedly, he said, "You're right, mister, whoever you are . . . I was comin' in to see you, baby. That pore ignorant drifter, Nolesby, that cooks for that buzzard who made us lose our lease come by last night and said—" His voice petered out, and after a moment he added, "Well, if 'twas to do over again, you fetchin' in that money, I'd do things different even if you did get it gamblin'. Who's this man you're out here with?"

SALLY was quiet, now, there by the rock mound that would serve as a temporary tomb for Cal Emmet's remains, and for the bodies of the other two men. There was no telegraph line in a hundred miles to send word to the outside world about the two deputies, and consequently no point in taking their bodies to town.

Old Zack Inness went after the horses while Sally and Carter stacked the rocks. Now she made a packet of the dead men's personal articles and credentials while with the charging tools from his bedroll Carter worked the slugs out of six of the .45 cartridges of the dead Fulton. He reloaded the brass with the slugs he had picked up from the rocks. The slugs that had killed Cal Emmet. He would take Fulton's gun and load it with these cartridges. He would find the man who had killed Cal, and with



... ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT!

the same bullets he would finish him.

He said, "You thought a lot of Cal—or Cass, as you knew him?"

"He was a good friend," Sally said.

Carter nodded. "A mighty good one. And if it hadn't been for me sending him up here ahead of me, he'd be alive now—"

"Maybe. And maybe if you hadn't sent him he would have been dead even quicker. There's no looking ahead for things like that."

There was some small comfort in that, but not much. Silently Carter polished off the lead of a couple of the newly-loaded cartridges so that they would slide freely into the chambers. Five he put in. The spare he pocketed, along with a slug which he had probed from Fulton's arm. When he had time he wanted to compare the two with a glass and see if they looked to have come from the same weapon.

Zack was coming back with the horses now, he guessed, for there came whinnies from the nearby draw where the mounts of the dead deputies were tethered.

Sally was relieved that she was going home with her father; yet, as she confessed to Carter, it would have been so much nicer if it could have happened while there was still time to keep the DLC from taking up their lease.

"You're forgetting one thing," Carter told her. "I'm the DLC. I'll make that right. I'll see that your cattle are replaced—"

She shook her head. "No. There's no call for you to straighten up another man's crimes. That's our problem."

"A criminal is everybody's problem, just like a range fire is everybody's fire," Carter countered. He cleared his throat. "Uh—you reckon this Merridell Haley—uh—what sort of an attitude do you suppose she'd take if I told her plain out about this fellow? The hotel keeper said he was courting her—that she was his girl. She doesn't seem like the kind of girl who'd be interested in him if she knew what he really is."

"Well—on the other hand, if you like someone, it might be hard for you just to take someone's word that that person isn't what he should be."

"Yes," he agreed, "but she seems like such a nice girl. I think I'll go over there."

Old Zack came in sight just then, and presently he and Sally were riding off home

together leading the spare horses and taking Carter's extra baggage.

He was somewhat disconcerted at Sally's quick interruption when her father suggested Carter have dinner with them. She had said, "Really, papa, we must not impose on Mr. Carter's time. He has food with him—and somewhere else that he wants to go."

IT WAS mid-afternoon when he came into sight of what he reckoned must be the main buildings of the Hide-and-Horns outfit. At least, the great corrals he had been passing for an hour had wool caught on the fences, and the range was pock-marked with sheep tracks. There was lots of cedar for windbreaks. Not a horse was in sight anywhere, though of course there might be some he couldn't see around the barns. A little smoke came out of a flue.

He rode on up, heart beating fast, and helloed. No answer. He went into the yard and onto the porch and knocked. Still no answer. At the back door he was able to rouse no one.

It was warm here in the sun and he sat down on the back steps to consider. Was that dust moving to the northwest? He took his telescope from his pocket and focused it on the cedars over there a mile or so away. Dust plume moving along, all right. He followed it with the glass. Something doing there. The sheep he picked up in his field of vision had stopped nipping frosted grass to look up and go running off. He could see their quick chewing stop, and then their mouths open as they blatted.

He picked up the rider then through a break in the cedars. Merridell Haley. She sat her black horse well as she came swiftly this way.

After a long time, Carter lost sight of her as the land dipped. He sat there, fingering the glass, and then he remembered something. From his pocket he took the slug he had removed from Fulton's arm and the cartridge he had loaded with one of the slugs which had killed Cal Emmet.

He loosened the stop on the eyepiece of his telescope and removed it, and focused the lens upon the two pieces of lead. Slowly he turned them in his hand and studied them. If his cousin's theory was correct that bullets shot from the same gun would show it, these evidently had been. They were marked the way a bullet always got

marked in shooting, and the marks seemed to be the same—

The back gate slammed, and Merridell said, "What have we here?" She smiled brightly at him.

Carter rose, stammering foolishly, his breath short. Lord, she was pretty.

She said, "If you're as cold as I am, you'd like to get by a fire. How would some coffee be?"

"Fine!" he declared.

And when they were in the bright, cheerful kitchen and their coats and gloves and scarfs off and the cookstove roaring, she said, "Do I remember correctly your introduction of yesterday?"

Carter said, "Yes'm, I expect you do. I got quite a bit of a jolt after that when I found out there's another fellow here on my Aunt Doris's DLC passing himself off as me. I hear he was sort of courting you, and I thought—well, of course, it's none of my business, but I thought you ought to know he's not what he claims to be—"

"Really?" she exclaimed with interest. "You seriously expect me to believe that?"

"I don't expect you to believe anything that I can't make you hear is the truth. Would you care to hear the truth?"

"Why—of course. But the charge is so monstrous—"

Briefly he outlined to her the play as he saw it and he showed her the bullets through his glass.

When he had finished she said, "It's fantastic! He seems like such a nice, sincere man, too." The kettle was beginning to sing, and as she reached for the Arbuckle can she said, "The only thing to do is to get the authorities in here with a gang of deputies big enough to handle this thing, and not to show our hand again until we've enough men to really accomplish something—"

Carter said, "Maybe. But if that fellow were out of the way, the rest of the layout would fall apart—"

"Of course," she said, "but who's going to bell the cat? You've warned him now that you know his game. He'll shoot you on sight. He'll double his watch for you—and stay under cover himself. Look—you better stable your horse, in case anyone should pass within sight of here, and I'll set us on a bite to eat."

His lunch, gobbled in the saddle, could

stand another lunch on top of it, and without much protest he agreed. As he came back from the barn he took off his coat again and hung the heavy gun belts on a chair.

"One thing that had me worried," he said, "I was afraid you might have seen this fellow last night and mentioned that I told you I was Carter, your new neighbor."

"Lucky I didn't see him," she declared, slicing a loaf of white bread, "or I guess I would've—though of course I thought you were joking. Raise the cellar door for me, will you, and I'll get us some wild plum preserves to go on this bread. My pulley rope broke and seems like I can't think to get another one."

He went to the corner of the kitchen where the heavy oaken door was located. "Used to be our storm and fruit cellar both till we built the kitchen on and took it in," she said. "It was made to turn a cyclone—"

Carter caught the lock hasp and grunted as he swung it up.

"Kind of spooky down there," Merridell said.

Carter smiled indulgently. "Whereabouts are the plums?"

"At the back, top shelf."

He went down—and as he reached for a jar the great door banged down and he heard the hasp go in place as he whirled and lunged toward the steps. He banged and heaved without effect, and a moment later he felt the house jar, apparently with the slamming of the outside door.

No faintest ray of light reached him as he berated himself for getting into this mess. Sally had been right: With Merridell liking this other fellow, anyone with any sense wouldn't have expected her to swallow a story like the one Carter had told her. And now she would bring the man here—

He explored the place with his hands. There was nothing but shelves of jars and a bin of potatoes. Carter found the shelf with the fewest jars on it and started setting them off. When that was done he heaved and twisted to get the planks loose. Something gave abruptly and he went backward, tearing out the whole tier of shelves, and they tumbled down upon him, along with jars of fruit as he crashed into the shelves on the other side. Jars on the shelves behind him were smashed and glass and fruit poured down upon him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## A Dead Man Makes His Play

**B**RUISED and sticky and sweating, he waded in the wreckage, twisting and heaving at the loosened bank of shelves until he broke them apart and obtained a battering ram.

Ten minutes work with it, beating blindly at the door in the darkness, brought him only bruised hands. Panting, he smeared a sleeve across his sweaty face, and got an application of pear preserves from it for his trouble.

He explored the door then with his hands, hunkering there on the steps. The hasp was held on by a bolt, with a nut on this side. It was caked with rust and immovable. With a sticky hand he got out his knife and opened the heavy square-pointed blade for drilling holes in harness straps. By the bolt he started drilling through the oak wood, the blade screeching and grating, his knuckles now and then rubbing the stone wall.

The time was interminable before the knife struck the hasp on the other side, and he started drilling a second hole. This time it came out at the edge of the hasp so that a blink of light showed. He scooted down into the cellar again and found his battering ram and started beating at the ray of light. Finally, he gave that up and bowed his back against the slanting door and pushed. The hasp snapped free with a splintering of wood. He shoved open the door and, panting and blowing, he wobbled up into the kitchen.

No one was in sight out the back way in the twilight. He took a couple of minutes to wash and dry the stickiness from his hands and face and to scrape a few stray peach fragments from his hat. He found the lard bucket and rubbed a bit of grease between his palms and then on his face to protect him from the freezing wind. Bucking on the guns, he got into his scarf and coats and gloves.

His alarm had settled now to a burning anger so deep that it made him ill. An anger at himself and at Merridell Haley and at this man who called himself Carter. The part that graveled him worst of all was that he had made a fool of himself, spouting off to this girl, letting his emotions get tan-

gled up with his brains, when a little common sense should have told him to play his cards close to his belly and to blow smoke in the eyes of anyone looking over his shoulder.

In the barn his horse, still saddled, was eating hay. He warmed the bits, putting them inside his coat and blowing his breath upon them, and bridled the animal. He had made a decision: The last place on earth this "Carter" would expect to see him was at the DLC—so that was the place to go. And when he found the man he would draw his gun and shoot him as he would a mad dog. Just draw and fire and be done with it. No heroics. No offering him an even break. In war, you didn't send the enemy notice that you were going to attack at daylight, and to be ready. This was war. The fellow had started the battle, picked the field. Now let him protect himself as best he might.

Evidently, he guessed, Merridell had had trouble locating the man or she would have been back with him by now, as it was only eight or nine miles to the DLC buildings, as he understood it. It would be foolish trying to cross the range after dark in strange country. Best to take the road. Find Shorty Graves and let him know about Cal's death, and settle down to wait the boss's return. No use running everywhere looking for a will-o'-the-wisp. The rat-trap didn't chase the rat. It sat and waited, and let the rat do all the exerting.

The road from the ranch house out to the main road was half a mile long, and fairly well shielded by cedar. At the main road, he turned to his right. It was all but dark, now, and cold with the stars low and bright. Not bright enough for shooting, but he held his pistol in his gloved hand just the same. After a couple of miles or so, as the horse dropped to a walk to pick its way through the rubble where a creek bed crossed the road, he thought he heard a noise ahead. He halted the animal, pulling his scarf away from his ear as he cocked his head. It was the unmistakable plop-plop of the hoofs of walking horses, mingled with the clatter and bump of a wagon. But whether it was coming or going, he couldn't tell. He—

"Boss?" a guarded voice called, downwind of the road. "That you—?"

And as he turned, a lantern was thrown open and a bull's eye of light darted around



to pick him up. He fired three times, cringing against the expected impact of lead as his horse leaped forward. One of the bullets struck the lantern, shattering the globe. The kerosene flared high and in the smoking blaze as it was dropped he saw a man wobbling on his feet. The man steadied himself against a tree, and tried to raise a sixgun. Carter fired again and the man's six exploded into the ground. Saw the man's head jerk and the bark fly as the lead passed through and grazed the tree.

Well, he had roused the whole countryside now, besides lighting a beacon to show just where the trouble was. He leaped down and ran back to where the man was threshing in the pool of fire and kicked sand and gravel over it. And when only the stinking fumes were left and the dead man's smouldering clothes extinguished, he caught his horse and led him into the brush, downwind from the road.

That wagon driver might come back. As he stood listening, he discerned that the wagon had halted. It was minutes later when his horse pricked up its ears. Carter had heard nor seen nothing, but a voice called softly:

"Columbus? Columbus—" It was not on the road, but out here in the brush.

Carter drifted silently away from his horse with the rifle from the boot in his hands. "Yeah?" he answered softly.

"Get him?"

"Winged him hard," Carter whispered. "He's out in here somewhere—"

"Uh? Well, let's get the hell out. This is spooky. Bad enough to go haulin' coffins around this time of night."

Carter saw the approaching man, now. He walked toward him, keeping to the blackest shadows as cedar limbs whipped his face.

Just as he stepped out into the patch of starlight, the man said, "Columbus—?" in a startled sort of way. Carter swung the gun barrel but the fellow jumped back, fending with a rifle of his own. Carter swung again as the man charged in, diving toward Carter's face with the end of the rifle barrel—

**T**HE ground under him was hard and cold, and a rock jammed itself into his head as he lay on his side. Jammed and jammed and jammed again, and a steady

clacking beat was in his ears. The beat of— He shook his head. He seemed to be moving. He was moving. The beat was the thumping back and forth of wagon wheels on their thimbles. But the stars had gone out. It was almighty black. He twisted, raising his tied hands and they struck something solid—

Even in that moment, he sensed where he was: In one of the coffins in the wagon the man had mentioned. With the body of one of the men he had shot in town this morning. Or Berger who was shot last night. He fought down the panic and revulsion that rose within him. Now he could make out the pressure of the stiffened corpse against his back. He raised his hands to press against the lid of the casket, but it was immovable. The man would take him to the DLC like the rat in the trap that he had been thinking about.

The wagon halted. He heard the plop of other hoofs, and the halting of them. A man said, "All right, boys. Tend your horses, all but Ferd and Rambo and Fatty—" It was the boss.

Above the thunder of his heart, Carter heard someone say, "What about the rest of us, boss? Hell, we're cold and hungry."

"You've got the rest of your lives to warm and feed yourselves," the boss said with the easy assurance of one who knows himself to be in full control. "We'll get the burying over tonight."

"But we just got one grave, boss, and three coffins—"

"You didn't let me finish. I was going to say we'd get part of it over tonight. Berger and this outlaw, Tug Roll, in the top coffin there—"

Carter started convulsively, banging his head. Somebody said, "Listen! He's alive —"

"Won't be long," the boss said. "Ain't a lot of air in there."

"But—you ain't—"

"Who says I ain't?"

"But why?"

"Because it suits me to. It'll make me feel good."

Another exclaimed, "But I caught him. He's worth twenty-five hundred in California—"

The boss laughed easily. "Now, cool off, fellow," he suggested. "I put those signs up in order to get the varmint killed before

he got up here, because he's a slick one." Convincingly he added: "He gave me lots of trouble in Texas, using my name and trying to beat me out of my property there, and so on. And as for burying him alive, why—uh—he—uh—buried three of my punchers alive one time. Roped them and threw them in a mine shaft and started a landslide. He's a devil. Burying alive is too good for him." And after a pause: "I'm glad Berger is out of the way, too. Somehow, I didn't trust that guy. And those two other fellows, I got them dead to rights this morning in the canyon where I blased that Cass Calhoun that was messing around with Sally Inness.

"Mining men! Huh! I figure Berger was another Federal if we knew the truth. Well—drive on. Let's get this over with. I want those fellows under ground and a brush pile burnt on the place before anyone comes snooping."

Somebody said, "Hell, boss—I can't sleep if we bury him still akickin'. Let me put a slug or two through there—"

The boss's voice changed: "Sure—if you want me to put one or two through you. Get going."

There on his side, Carter strained and twisted and kicked and buckled himself against the boards but to no avail. There was but little room with the body of Berger jammed in here on its side, too. He was horribly ill, and he was scared, and he made no bones of it to himself as he fought down panic. He had been in danger of his life before. He had ridden with danger as his saddle pard. But always he had been in the open where he had a chance.

The boss called mockingly, "How does that wooden overcoat fit, mister?"

Carter steeled himself to silence. To sudden immobility. He would not give the man the pleasure of hearing him struggle. And if he remained silent, the precious supply of air would last longer. Give him time to think. If he could do nothing to persuade this devil to release him, at least the man might think he had smothered and lose the satisfaction of believing he was in torment.

He lay there, gasping and sweating, with the unwashed smell of Berger's body in his nostrils. A momentary stab of hope came to him. Maybe Shorty up at the cookhouse would find out what was happening. But one against this bunch—

As he became still, he began to be aware of something. His left elbow, as he moved it slightly, rubbed over the cartridges in the dead man's belt. He turned a little. Something that felt like a pistol at his own side. His left side. The .45 he had loaded with the slugs that killed Cal Emmet!

Cords cutting into his flesh, numbing his hands, he strained and jerked trying to get hold of the weapon. A wheel hit a big rock, bouncing the coffin heavily, and then the wagon stopped.

The boss said, "All right, boys. Drag 'em out—eh? Who's that?"

"Somebody riding out from the house."

"Take it easy, boys. Have your guns ready and keep your mouths shut."

CARTER presently heard the hoofbeats and then the boss exclaimed, "Why, it's Miss Haley! Howdy there, Merridell. What you out about this time of night?"

"I've been riding the legs off this critter to find you," she told him. "I've been at your house for an hour or more. Some of your men who came in just now said I'd find you here. I—could I see you privately?"

"Fade, boys," the boss said. "Plumb over to the fence there."

As Carter kept trying to get the pistol he could hear only a word now and then: ". . . claims he's you. . . . Got him locked in my cellar—"

"Ah? Well, ain't you the smart one!"

Carter suddenly lay deathly still for fear the boss might do something to the girl if she discovered what had taken place and that he was now here alive in a coffin.

She said, "And now I guess that proves how I feel about you. I guess that shows—"

The boss said, "Look, Merridell. I told you I had my eye on somebody else—"

"She wouldn't have you, the way you've acted, buying up their lease."

"Oh, I don't know. By the time it's over, I wouldn't be surprised if she thinks I'm a pretty good fellow."

"Oh, wouldn't you? Well—"

"Listen," the boss warned flatly, "you try anything and I'll run you so far out of this country it'll take a year to send you a letter. You won't have a shred of character left—"

"You wouldn't dare tell—"

"Wouldn't I? Just remember to build

your fence next time before you plant your crop. And by a fence, I mean get a wedding ring—”

“You couldn't make nobody believe that! You—”

There came the crackling sound of a slap, and the boss swore and exclaimed, “Well, you asked for this, baby—”

A muffled cry was cut short in the middle.

Something approaching horror had welled in Carter as they talked. A feeling as if he had seen a pretty object and picked it up only to discover it was a snake. But now as she screamed he made one last lunge in the coffin in a futile, instinctive effort to go to her assistance.

Then the boss spoke in a subdued voice: “Come on, boys. Time's awastin'.”

Silence, except for the rattling of a chain as the end gate was removed. A man spoke then: “Count me out, boss. I didn't hire on to help fight women—or bury them.”

“She ain't dead. I just popped her under the jaw. I'll handle her. I'll make her damned glad to keep her trap shut. I'll make her leave the country. Get that coffin out and quit talking so much.”

Carter saw that quietness would avail him nothing now. He wouldn't beg. He would die like an Indian, as far as speech went, but he could still try for his gun even if it made a noise.

The boss growled, “Kick away, cowboy! It ain't for long!”

The coffin bumped and thumped as they dragged it from the wagon.

“Set it on the lowering ropes,” the boss ordered. “Here, now. All together. I'm cold. I want to get in—”

The coffin scraped and grated as it swung through space, and then it bumped heavily against the bottom of the grave, and the ropes were jerked free.

Frozen clods rattled on the coffin lid above Carter. He choked back the cry of protest that welled to his lips and gave a mighty surge that twisted him half over between Berger's body and the coffin lid. And then he discovered the .45 was wrenched within reach. He turned the end of the holster up against the lid of the coffin and got a thumb over the trigger and pulled it. Once—twice—three times—

Choking on the smoke, ears and head

bursting on the gunthunder, he shoved himself up against the lid—and then something hit the bulging upper side like a horse.

The lid cracked with a sharp snap. Apparently men had jumped down upon it with fresh, jarring force.

Faintly Carter heard their quick, hard voices. A man was sawing, “Shot—I'm shot—I'm shot—”

The weight lifted. Carter twisted his shoulder against the lid and as the wrecked boards flew aside he shot dizzily to his feet. The moon had risen now. All in a flash he saw a couple of men helping another toward the wagon. The boss was saying, “Who are those riders—”

And Shorty Graves' voice shouted, “Hold that, you varmints—” A rifle spoke by way of emphasis, making an orange streak in the night. Lead zinged on a wagon tire and buzzed away. And then another gun spoke from near the first, making an orange streak in the night. And then another gun spoke.

Carter ducked back into the grave from the fusillade. Evidently the boss didn't know he had broken free at last. Carter called to him, “Hey, you, turn around.”

The man had started to duck behind the wagon as his men deserted the wounded one. With a startled oath the boss whirled toward the grave, the pistol he had drawn still unfired. He said, “Where—” And then as he whipped up the pistol, Carter fired the gun that was held in his bound hands. Once, twice, again on the empty chamber.

\* \* \*

“Where in tunket did Miss Sally go?” Shorty Graves demanded.

Carter thought he saw her moving toward her horse. He was sure of it. He ran toward her.

“Sally—I mean—Miss Inness—”

She kept on going toward the horses. He came up to her there.

“Sally—”

Back by the wagon a little later, Shorty Graves said, “I vum, ain't he kissin' her?”

“Can't see,” old Zack growled, “but I wouldn't be surprised. Wouldn't nothin' much surprise me these days.”

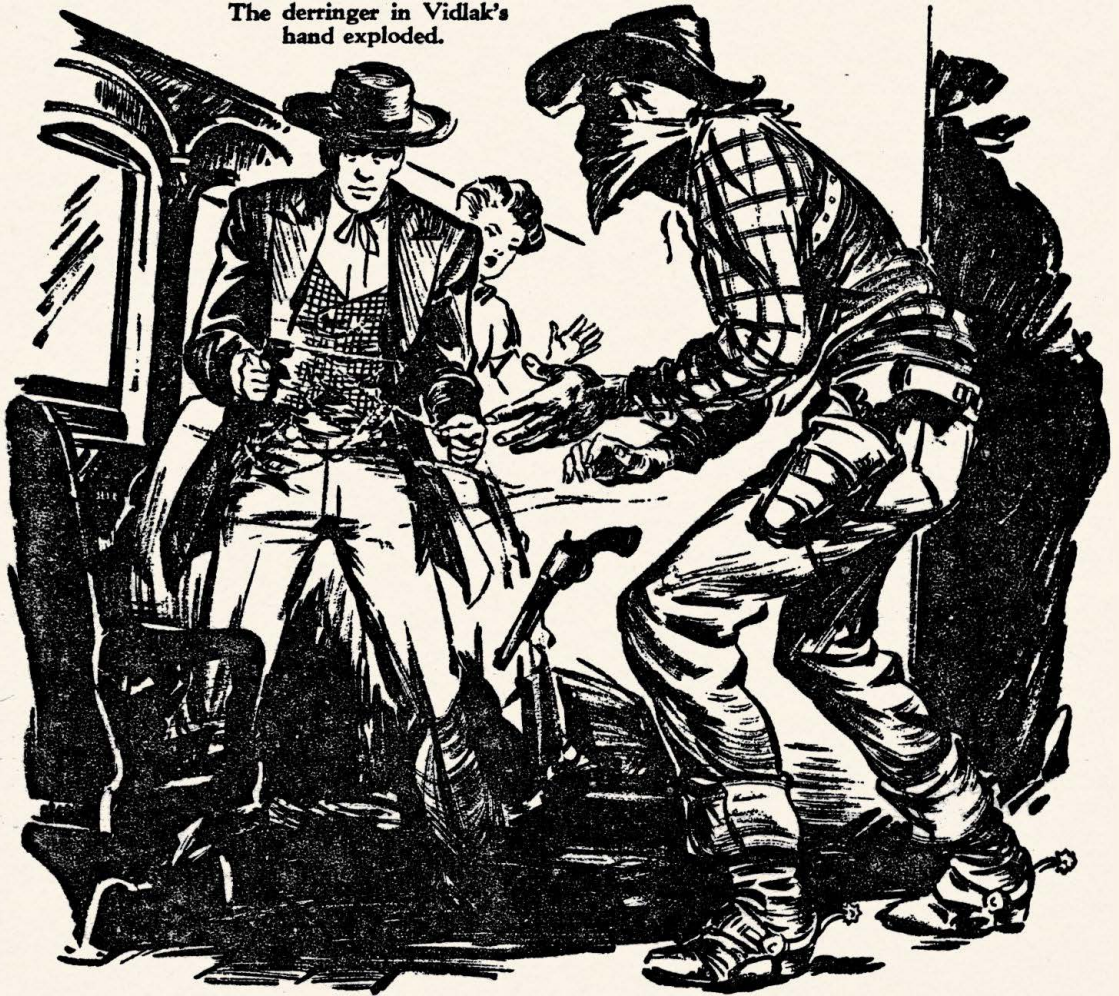
“Or else her kissin' him,” Shorty said. He sighed. “Well—it's high time somebody roped that maverick in.” He spat. “Women!” he said.

THE END

# Death Deals The Cards

By  
Ben Frank

The derringer in Vidlak's hand exploded.



**With the Doomsday express roaring around the curve, Watches Vidlak dealt himself a hand in a deadly cold-deck game to save a town—and insure himself a lower berth in that hell-bound iron horse!**

**T**HE SMOKE from Number Two, Grover Spears' crack passenger train, hung like a shroud in the clear sky above the glistening rails which twisted up Flagstone Mountain. The last coach, Grover Spears' private car, was a sleek,

luxurious affair of wood and steel. The coaches ahead held no luxuries and few comforts, and the crowded passengers were hot and dirty and tired. They watched the rocky scenery crawl by and wished for the end of the long climb and the beginning of speed which would follow once Number Two began to descend into the valley.

The door of the second coach from the rear swung open, letting in a swirl of smoke and a weasel-faced old man in a blue suit and a greasy billed cap. He staggered down the aisle, a basket swinging from one bony arm.

"Papers, candy, chewin' gum!" he bel-  
lowed. "Papers—"

The door swung open again, cutting him  
short, and two masked men crowded into  
the coach. The first held a sixgun, leveled  
and steady. The second carried a gunny  
sack.

"This is a stick-up!" the man with the  
sack rasped.

A man and a girl occupied the front seat.  
The girl's pretty face paled beneath her  
crown of lovely brown hair.

"Stand up an' start shellin' out," the  
bandit said harshly to the man.

The man stood up. He was tall and had  
young eyes set wide in a firm-fleshed face  
covered with brown skin as fine-textured  
as a child's. Tiny humorous wrinkles  
radiated outward from the corners of deep-  
blue eyes which were now as hard as steel.  
He shoved his pearl-gray Stetson back on  
his graying black hair and gave the bandit  
a thin, one-sided smile.

"Why, shore," he said with a slight  
Texas drawl.

Under his wide-set feet, he felt the quick-  
ening pulse of the wheels on the rail joints.  
Number Two had topped Flagstone Pass.  
He unbuttoned his long black coat.

"Which watch do yuh want first?" he  
drawled, letting the afternoon sun glitter  
on six heavy chains that stretched across  
his black velvet vest.

The bandit's eyes widened in amazement.  
He'd never seen a vest like this one. There  
was no other like it, with its six silk-lined  
pockets, three on either side of a row of six  
pearl buttons, from which solid gold watch  
chains ran to the pockets in gleaming arcs.

"Why in thunder," the bandit muttered,  
"do you carry six watches?"

Only a few people knew the answer to  
that question. But every gambler between  
Frisco and St. Louis had heard about this  
vest and the man who wore it: "Watches"  
John Vidlak. Honest gamblers considered  
it an honor to pit their skill against his,  
while crooked sharpers looked about un-  
easily at the mention of the great gambler's  
name and hoped they'd never meet him.

**J**OHAN VIDLAK'S long brown fingers  
toyed with the lower right-hand chain.  
"Shall I begin with this one?" he drawled.

His blue eyes slid past the man's shoulder  
to the one who held the gun. The twisted

grin thinned across his teeth as he tugged  
at the gold chain.

The chain tinkled musically, and an object  
fastened to the end of it glittered in the  
light. But it wasn't a watch. It was a small,  
gold-trimmed derringer. And it leaped  
into the long supple brown fingers with the  
speed of a striking rattler and spoke  
sharply.

The bandit with the sixgun screamed and  
grabbed at the bloody groove across his  
wrist. His gun struck the floor, and the  
weasel-faced news-butcher caught it up.

Vidlak slid the gold-trimmed derringer  
back into its silk-lined hide-out and winked  
at the news-butcher.

"I reckon everybody can relax now," he  
he drawled.

"I reckon so," the news-butcher grinned,  
and jerked the mask from the wounded  
bandit's face.

He was a good-looking hombre, little  
more than a kid. The girl who had been  
sitting beside Vidlak lifted horrified eyes  
to the young bandit's face.

"Luke!" she cried. "Luke Conway!"

The kid looked at her, and his face  
turned sick. Vidlak knew that his sickness  
wasn't from the wound on his wrist.

Watches John Vidlak had been sitting  
beside the girl less than twenty minutes but  
that had been long enough for him to learn  
that her name was Susan Conway, that she  
had come from the East to visit her younger  
brother, Luke Conway. Luke, along with  
a man by the name of Pete Baltz, owned a  
small ranch in the valley. Something in  
her brother's recent letters had led her to  
believe that he was in serious trouble, and  
she'd made this trip west without telling  
him about it. Now, Vidlak realized, she'd  
found her brother. Found him attempting  
to hold up Grover Spears' crack passenger  
train. The man with Luke evidently was  
the kid's partner, Pete Baltz.

The girl stared fixedly at her brother.  
"Luke," she choked, "why are you doing  
a thing like this?"

Luke Conway's young face turned bitter.

"Pete and me was robbed of our ranch,"  
he said. "So we figured we'd do a little  
robbin' to kind of break even."

The weasel-faced news-butcher, gun in  
hand, edged forward.

"How was you robbed, son?" he asked.

"Like everybody else in these parts," the

kid answered. "We lost cattle and had to borrow from the Mid-Valley Investment Company. Then when we couldn't pay, the company took our ranch for a song and dance!"

The rear door of the coach opened, and a heavy-set, bearded man in a neat gray suit stepped in. Vidlak eyed him with interest. He was Grove Spears, owner and president of the S & T Railroad.

This man, the gambler had heard, was a great poker player. Vidlak's one interest in life was playing poker against a skilled opponent for high stakes. To meet another great gambler, he would ride his high-strung black horse a thousand miles. Or take a much-hated trip by rail.

Right behind Grover Spears came a shifty-eyed, thin little man with long arms and narrow shoulders. He wore a loose-fitting blue coat and, studying him, Vidlak guessed that the bulges beneath that coat were made by guns.

Some of the passengers began to crowd around Vidlak, while one man told Spears about the attempted hold-up. An excited conductor and brakeman came in. The weasel-faced news-butcher handed Luke Conway's sixgun to the conductor, winked slyly at Vidlak and hurried out the way he had come.

Grover Spears strode along the aisle to where Vidlak stood, held out a big hand and smiled above his black beard.

"Many thanks, mister, for your quick work," he said.

Vidlak let his long black coat slide away from the six gold watch chains as he shook the man's soft hand.

Seeing the chains, Spears sucked in a quick breath.

"Watches John Vidlak!" he exclaimed.

"Glad to meet a man who, so I hear, plays a neat brand of poker," Vidlak said in an undertone.

The two men's eyes clashed and held. The train was picking up speed, and the gambler could feel the grind of the wheels against the curving rails.

Spears put his soft hand on the shoulder of his baggy-coated companion. "This is my secretary, Sid Brackett," he said. "Sid, meet Watches John Vidlak."

"Pleased tuh meetcha," the little man said.

Vidlak's many years in the gambling

halls of the West had made him a judge of men. Sid Brackett, he knew, carried the stamp of a trigger-quick killer. That meant the president of the S & T Railroad was afraid of something.

"Won't you step into my private car for a drink, Mr. Vidlak?" Spears asked cordially.

"Thanks," Vidlak answered. "I'll be glad to."

Grover Spears turned to the conductor. "Bring those two bandits into my car," he ordered. "Tie 'em up and throw 'em into those end compartments."

The conductor and brakeman prodded the two bandits to the rear door, across the platforms and into the private car. Vidlak, Spears and Brackett followed closely.

Once inside the private coach, Luke Conway's partner, Pete Baltz, turned on Sid Brackett.

"Ain't I seen you before?" he asked. "One time in—"

Brackett's long arm lashed out. His open hand caught Pete Baltz a stunning blow across the mouth.

"Don't talk to me, you crook!" he rasped.

The conductor shoved Baltz roughly into a small compartment at the front end of the coach. The brakeman took Luke Conway into a twin compartment across the narrow aisle.

Spears and Brackett exchanged sharp glances.

"I hate guys that shoot off their mouths," the little man said between clenched teeth.

**V**IDLAK had missed none of this. Neither did he miss noting the luxury about him. Here was dining car, bar, observation coach and private office all rolled into one. The fittings were of polished mahogany and gleaming silvered metal. Chairs, a plush-topped gaming table, a deep-piled rug underfoot—

"What'll you drink, Vidlak?" Spears asked sharply.

"Beer," the gambler replied quietly.

Sid Brackett went over to the bar. When he turned, his coat bagged open, exposing the bone handle of a sixgun. He came back from the bar with a bottle of beer. It was ice cold. And good.

Spears sat down at the plush-covered table and smiled above his black beard.

"We might play a few friendly hands," he said. "Nothing really big, you understand."

Vidlak understood. Spears wanted to try him out, learn what kind of poker he played. Smiling thinly, he sat down in the heavily upholstered chair opposite the man. Back of Spears stood a beautifully carved mahogany desk, the pigeonholes bulging with papers and documents.

Spears drew a wallet from his coat pocket and laid a number of small bills on the table. Vidlak drew the upper right-hand watch from his velvet vest, opened it and poured a few gleaming twenty-dollar gold-pieces on the table.

Spears chuckled deeply. "I suppose everyone of those watches are full of gold coins instead of wheels?"

Vidlak's only answer was his twisted smile.

They played a few hands. Outwardly both men appeared to show little interest in the game. Inwardly they both felt a great tension. Each was studying the other and realizing that he had met a formidable opponent.

As Vidlak gathered up the cards for his second deal, the rolling wheels beneath them began to scream.

Spears stood up. "Looks like we might be going to stop," he said. "Let's see what's the trouble."

Vidlak gathered up his twenty-dollar gold-pieces and returned them to the watch case. Even if he and Grover Spears had broken even, he'd learned what he'd wanted to know. Spears was a shrewd poker player. He played the brand of poker which Vidlak so passionately liked to play.

Number Two pulled to a grinding stop. Through the window Vidlak observed that they stood on a siding in a desolate spot far up on the side of Flagstone Mountain.

Spears glanced at Sid Brackett. "Coming?" he asked.

Brackett shook his head. "Guess I'd better finish writin' your letters," he said.

Spears smiled at Vidlak. "Sid's always thinking of his work," he said.

"That's right," Vidlak thought, "but writin' letters ain't his work."

Spears led the way to the rear platform and down the steps to the rocky ground. Curious passengers were climbing out all along the length of the train.

A brakeman came running down the middle of the main track, repeating, "Just a little trouble with the locomotive, folks. We'll have her fixed up in a few minutes."

The passengers crowded around the smiling railroad owner, and he began to soothe their impatience with a long, drawn-out funny story. Vidlak's eyes shifted about until they found the little weasel-faced news-butcher. He sidled up to the man and said softly, "A long time no see, Ban."

The little man's eyes whipped up wildly. "Shh," he whispered. "Meet me on t'other side of the train."

With that, he turned and hobbled toward the engine. Vidlak, smiling thinly, walked in the opposite direction. A few moments later, they met on the other side of Number Two. Alone.

Vidlak shook the little man's hand warmly. "Sure a surprise seeing yuh here, Ban."

The little man, Ban Brindle, United States Deputy Marshal and long-time friend of the gambler, grinned back and twisted at his black-billed cap. He said nothing.

Vidlak bit the end off a cigar, lit it. "What's up, Ban, if yuh don't mind tellin' me?"

"I don't mind," Brindle answered. "It begins with alot of folks like Luke Conway an' Pete Baltz goin' busted an' havin' to sell out cheap to the Mid-Valley Investment Company."

"Too many cattle gettin' away, huh?"

Brindle nodded grimly. "An' how in thunder they get outa this country is more'n I know for sure."

"A hard country to get out of?"

"There's just one way—this railroad. We sent a man here to investigate a couple of weeks ago. He was a good man, too."

"Was?"

Brindle's face tightened. "He got hit by this train six miles from no-place five days ago!"

"A man ought to know better'n to step in front of a train."

"Who said he stepped in front of it?"

Brindle snapped. He leaned close to Vidlak. "Watches, somethin' stinks on the S & T. Mebbe it's Grover Spears. Mebbe it ain't. Sometime I'm goin' to get a look at them papers he keeps stuck in his desk in that private car, an' then I'll know what stinks. That's why I'm peddlin' papers on this damned coal burner. I hope to get a chance

to—listen, Watches! Ain't that a train whistle?"

Vidlak had heard it, too.

"Number Two ain't stopped here because there's somethin' busted on the engine," the deputy marshal wheezed. "It's stoppin' to let a certain train go by!"

With that, he turned and ran toward the engine. Puzzled, Vidlak followed at some distance. When he rounded the panting engine, he saw Ban Brindle disappearing among the idling passengers at the side of the tracks.

**A** LONG TRAIN rounded the sloping curve, whistle blasting, smoke belching into the clear sky. Vidlak and the passengers crossed over to the far side of the main line. The onrushing train wheeled by, a cattle train, every car loaded with bawling cattle except three just ahead of the sway-ing caboose.

A voice hissed close to Vidlak's ear. It was old Ban Brindle's voice. "Three empties!" it said. "When we passed that train back at Freeman Junction, there wasn't one empty!"

"Maybe they picked up three empties along the way?"

"I doubt it," Brindle returned. "I counted the cars both times. The count was the same. That means—"

A piercing scream cut the deputy marshal short. People began to shout excitedly and run back toward the end of the passenger train. Vidlak, his long legs churning, broke away from Ban Brindle. He reached the suddenly hushed circle of white-faced people and pushed through it. What he saw made his lean jaw stiffen. Luke Conway's partner, Pete Baltz, lay beside the gleaming trails. He was mangled horribly. And very dead.

Grover Spears pushed forward, his heavy black beard waving, his eyes holding a strange glittering gleam. Sid Brackett, his narrow shoulders hunched, stood on the rear platform of Spears' private car, his long fingers curved about the iron railing.

"How'd this happen, Sid?" Spears asked hoarsely.

"Someway that bandit got out of the compartment we put him in," Brackett answered in his nasal twang. "First thing I knew, he was makin' a rush for the rear door. I couldn't stop him. That cattle train

was goin' by when he jumped down the steps. His foot slipped—an' that's that!"

Vidlak turned away, an angry light in his eyes. He wanted to find old Ban Brindle. He had an idea that the deputy marshal would be interested in knowing how Baltz had recognized Sid Brackett as a man he'd met before and that Sid had slapped Pete into silence. But before Vidlak could locate Brindle, the trainmen began to bellow "all aboard."

Vidlak leaped up the steps of the second coach and caught a glimpse of a blue-clad figure sliding through the door of Spears' private car. Since all the train crew wore blue, he thought little of the incident as he set out to find Brindle.

People were now crowding toward their seats, blocking the aisles and making Vidlak's progress slow. Just as he reached the head coach, the train jerked forward. He turned and started back through the long reach of coaches, searching for a glimpse of the deputy marshal in the news-butcher's uniform.

Halfway through the last passenger coach, he remembered his glimpse of the blue-clad figure he'd seen slipping into Spears' private car. That man, he suddenly knew, had been Ban Brindle, hoping for a chance to go through the private papers in Grover Spears' mahogany desk.

Vidlak crossed the air-whipped platforms between the two rocking coaches. The door to Spears' car was unlocked. He pushed it open, felt the wind suck it from his grasp. It slammed shut behind him. He stepped forward between the twin end compartments, letting his fingers fall on the knobs of each door. Both doors were locked.

When he stepped into the luxurious after-half of the coach, two pairs of cold eyes fixed on his face. One pair belonged to Grover Spears, who sat at the mahogany desk, re-arranging a litter of papers. The second pair belonged to Sid Brackett. He stood by the bar, a glass between thumb and fingers. He set the glass on the bar and slid his hands under his coat.

Old Ban Brindle wasn't in sight. That meant one of two things. He was either locked in the compartment where Pete Baltz had been. Or he was lying someplace back between the rails, murdered, but waiting for the next train to come along to make it look like accidental death.



"Thought we might go on with our poker game," Vidlak said.

Spears got to his feet. He smiled with his lips but his eyes didn't change.

"Sorry," he said. "Some other time."

The gambler knew he was covered by the guns under Brackett's too large coat. He remembered Pete Baltz mangled body. He shuddered inwardly but he met Grover Spears' hard, glittering eyes unflinchingly.

"Yuh wouldn't even have time to play fo' real money?" he asked scornfully.

"What do you mean, real money?" Spears asked softly.

Vidlak bit the end off a cigar, lit it with a steady hand. "Twenty, twenty-five thousand."

"Let's see your money."

Vidlak let the sweet smoke trickle through his straight nose. "Yo'll have to wait a couple of minutes," he said.

He turned and walked toward the door, carelessly, unhurriedly. They let him go. He opened the door and closed it and stood there in the blast of wind, feeling it carry away the clammy sweat that had come to his face while he'd turned his back on Brackett's guns to leave the car.

He tossed away his cigar, drew a gold watch from the second pocket on the right side of his vest and pressed the stem. The exquisitely carved lid flew open. There were no works in this case, only a mass of glittering stones in a nest of cotton. Carefully he poured the stones into a pocket of his long black coat; then returned the empty case to its silken pocket.

Smiling mirthlessly, he reached down and uncoupled Spears' private car from the train. Number Two was still on the long slope which led to the floor of the valley.

The uncoupled car lost none of its speed.

Still smiling, he went back into the private car. The owner-president sat at the plush-covered table. The little gunman stood beside the mahogany desk, his hands close to the gap in his unbuttoned coat. Vidlak dropped down in the overstuffed mahogany chair opposite the railroader.

"Well?" Spears murmured.

Vidlak's hand came out of the coat pocket. One at a time, he laid twenty perfect, sparkling diamonds in a neat row across the plush cloth.

"Every stone's worth a thousand, easy," he said quietly.

ONE AT a time, Vidlak pulled watch cases from his vest pockets, opened them and dumped twenty-dollar gold pieces on the table. He heard Spears and Brackett's deep breathing.

"Maybe a stake like this is worth yore time," he said.

The coach door opened, letting in the rattle of the wheels and a swirl of smoke and dust. The door slammed shut, and Susan Conway swayed into the room. She'd been crying. Now, her red-rimmed eyes moved about, searching for something.

"My—my brother?" she asked. "Could I see him? I—"

Grover Spears' eyes burned angrily. "This is a private car. Get out!"

The car swayed, and the girl clutched at the end of the compartment wall for support. She found her balance, gave the big man a frightened look, turned and fled.

Vidlak heard the door open and shut, and open again. The girl came back into the room, her eyes filled with terror.

"I can't leave this car," she said hoarse-



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ly, "because the train's gone on and left us!"

Grover Spears cursed and leaped to his feet. The little gunman ran to the door, shouted back, "We're cut loose!"

Vidlak smiled thinly. He knew that Number Two had moved out of the steep downward slope, and the uncoupled car was now losing speed.

"How about gettin' started with our game," he asked calmly.

Spears eyed him narrowly. He drew a watch from his pocket and glanced at it. His lips puffed out and in, making his heavy beard quiver.

"Number Six will be along in eight minutes," he said softly. "Cover Vidlak, Sid, while I set the brakes."

A bone-handled gun leaped into Sid Brackett's hand. Vidlak toyed with the deck of cards, the thin smile staying on his lips. He hadn't expected another train to follow so closely behind Number Two, but there was nothing about the set of his face that indicated surprise or worry.

Spears hurried to the back platform and set the hand brake. Steel ground against steel. The coach slowed and came to a stop. The big man came back into the room, his eyes glittering dangerously.

"Too bad," he said to Sid Brackett, "that Number Six will hit my private car and smash it. Too bad that the famous gambler, Watches John Vidlak, and this girl won't get out in time to keep from being killed."

"Them an' that little deputy marshal an' the girl's brother," Brackett added, grinning.

Vidlak drew the upper left-hand watch from its pocket. His thumb pressed the stem, and the lid flew wide, letting the light flash on the clear crystal. This was a watch.

"Two minutes of yore eight are up," he murmured. "If we don't get started on this game—"

Spears threw back his big head and laughed.

"Why play poker, Vidlak, when I can take your diamonds and gold by simply picking 'em up?"

Vidlak leaned back in his chair, drew a cigar from his pocket and lit it carefully.

"Wouldn't it be more fun to play poker?" he asked.

Spears laughed again, and Brackett

joined him. "Get his gun, Sid," the big man said.

Vidlak stood up, and the little gunman ran expert fingers over his black coat pockets and under his arm pits.

"Where's that gun you shot Conway with?" he demanded.

Vidlak's long fingers twisted around the gold chain that arced to the lower right-hand pocket of his velvet vest.

"Maybe," he drawled, "people was wrong about me shootin' Conway. Maybe it was the girl who did it."

For a split second, Brackett was off guard, and Vidlak's fingers tugged at the gold chain. The gleaming derringer leaped into the brown fist and spoke for a second time that day.

Brackett's arm went limp, and his bone-handled gun fell against the mahogany desk. The little man cursed and clutched his splintered elbow.

Vidlak's face had lost the twisted smile.

"The next time I shoot, it'll be through somebody's heart!" he said. He glanced hurriedly at his watch. "We still got five minutes," he went on. "Shuck yore guns an' let Ben Brindle and Luke Conway outa them compartments!"

Sid Brackett had the keys to the compartments, but with his splintered arm he was sick and helpless. Spears freed the two prisoners.

Brindle rubbed his swollen wrists and gave Vidlak a rueful grin. "Brackett caught me at that desk," he said, "an' got the drop on me. Found my deputy badge an' locked me up after hog-tyin' me hand an' foot."

The girl ran to her brother's side, and he put his good arm about her shoulders.

"Looks like I'm a flop at bein' a train robber," he said. "Maybe, sis, it'll make you feel better to know that this was the first time Pete and me ever tried to steal."

Vidlak ground out his cigar in a silver ashtray. "Ban," he said quietly, "yuh got a few minutes to look at them papers in that desk. Spears, set down at this table. Yuh an' me are goin' to have our poker game yet."

Spears wiped his clammy face, glanced at his watch and shook his head. Vidlak lifted the gold-trimmed derringer an inch, and the man sat down quickly.

Brindle grinned up from a handful of Spears' private papers.

"Whatta yuh know!" he exclaimed. "Grover Spears not only owns this railroad, but he also owns the Mid-Valley Investment Company! That's the outfit what's been takin' over the ranches up and down the railroad."

The deputy marshal laid a sheaf of Mid-Valley shares on the table between Vidlak and Spears.

Vidlak's thin lips twisted. "Spears," he said, "maybe you'd like to gamble that Mid-Valley stock against my diamonds an' gold? Draw poker. Joker good with aces, straights, an' flushes?"

SPEARS' had lowered in a slow nod. Vidlak laid his gold watch on the table beside the row of diamonds. Spears' glittering eyes fixed on the golden minute hand.

"Three minutes," he said huskily.

"If Number Six is on time," Vidlak drawled.

"My trains run on time," Spears returned.

Vidlak shrugged. "Cut, Spears."

Ban Brindle rattled a handful of papers.

"The stolen cattle was gettin' out like I suspected," he said. "Over Spears' railroad. He had a gang of rustlers workin' for him, picking up cattle all along the line. They'd shove the stolen stuff into cars with other cattle."

The railroad man's soft hands trembled so that he had difficulty cutting the cards. He won the deal, picked up the deck and shuffled awkwardly.

Spears' glittering eyes were on his cards. "I'll open for ten shares of stock," he said hoarsely. "That's equal to a thousand dollars of anybody's money."

Vidlak fanned out his hand. A deuce and seven of clubs, eight of hearts, nine and ten of spades. He shoved one of the perfect diamonds into the center of the table.

"One card," he said, discarding the deuce.

Spears gave him a card and took one for himself. In the nearing distance, Number Six whistled.

"Get out, Ban," Vidlak said quietly. "Take the girl an' her brother an' that killin' little rat, Brackett, with yuh. Spears an' me'll come when we finish this hand."

Vidlak looked at his draw card. It was a

Jack of clubs. Unhurriedly he moved the remaining fourteen diamonds and all the gold coins into the center of the table.

"Want to meet that, Spears?" he asked quietly.

The shriek of Number Six's whistle and the hard grind of the brakes filled the air. Spears' face under its mask of calmness was ashy white.

"I'll meet you," he shouted.

Both men laid their cards face up on the table. Spears held two pairs, aces high, but they were worthless against the gambler's straight.

Vidlak jerked the pearl-gray Stetson from his head and swept the diamonds, gold and Mid-Valley shares into the big hat and folded the brim around the contents.

"Let's get outa here!" he shouted and lunged for the door.

Just as he reached the door, he glanced back. Grover Spears hadn't followed. He'd moved to the bar and was pouring himself a drink.

Number Six stayed on the rails and ground to a stop a half-mile beyond the splintered wreckage of Grover Spears' private car. Later, the body of Grover Spears was dug from the wreckage.

\* \* \*

Two days later, Watcher John Vidlak rode his high-strung black horse into the little cowtown of Valley. Old Ban Brindle came hobbling out of the Cattleman's Hotel, grinning broadly.

"Looks like everything's cleaned up, Watches," he said. "Brackett confessed to throwing Pete Baltz under that cattle train. Didn't want Baltz tellin' that he'd recognized Brackett as one of a gang of rustlers. Also, it was Brackett who killed our government investigator by throwin' him in front of a train."

Vidlak swung his horse around. He felt a deep inward satisfaction because he had been able to help the Conways and their neighbors. As for himself, he'd had his game of poker. The stakes had been high, and he'd won.

At the top of a hill, he turned and waved to Brindle. His long black coat fell away from the velvet vest, and the sun glittered on the six gold watch chains.

# COME HELL OR HIGH WATER!

## CHAPTER ONE

### Hell and High Water

**I**N SPITE of the way he had trimmed Jared Giles' wick that afternoon, Rafe felt uneasy. The storm, scarcely broken for nearly a week now, was, if anything, worse tonight. Rain punched down out of the howling night to thump on his leaking roof. Frequently through the wailing wind he could hear the heavy slap of the

ferry hull, tossing on the swollen water at the nearby landing slip, and the creak of the taut cable.

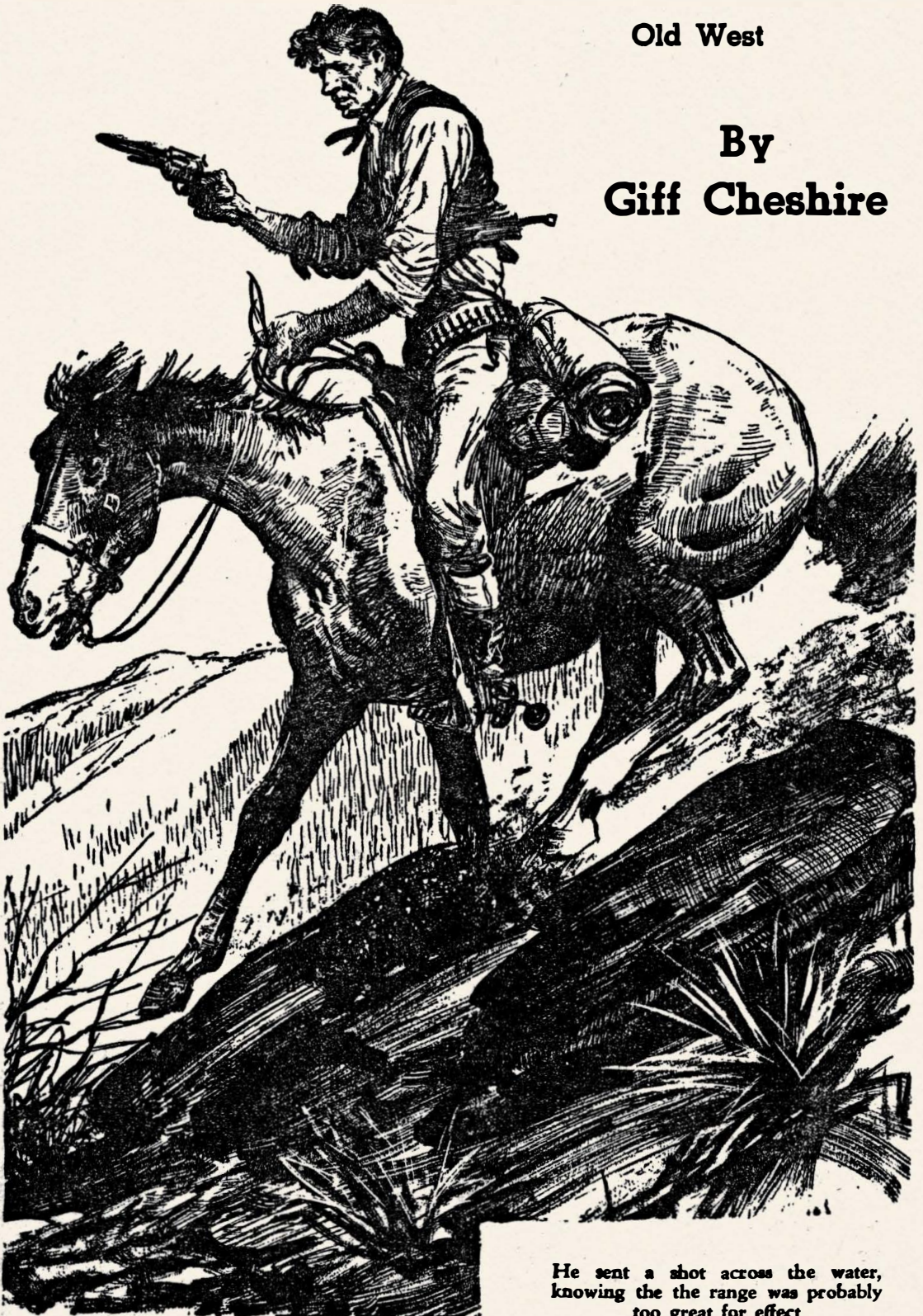
Fixing a late supper, Rafe turned his head to stare out the window. Rain ran down it in a darting black lustre. He turned back to stir the potatoes sizzling in the skillet, then looked out the window again.

**Across the turbulent water, gleaming yellow fortunes waited to be carried on the first stage of the journey to the Coast . . . and Rafe Lofgren swore that though every sidewinder from Fleck's Crossing to Lofgren's Ferry barred the way, he'd ferry that gold across—or deposit it along with his bullet-torn body deep on the river bottom!**



**Smashing Action Novel of the  
Old West**

**By  
Giff Cheshire**



**He sent a shot across the water,  
knowing the the range was probably  
too great for effect**

A heavy outfit was rumbling slowly down the long, rough grade from the Moonbow Brakes. Rafe Lofgren scowled. It was a hellish night for anybody to be out, and a worse one to make a river crossing.

He was a little grim for twenty-three, a tall, lean, dark lad whose brown eyes were large in a high-boned, saddle-tanned face. The grimness haunted only his strong, wide mouth, sharpened by an angular jaw, for his level eyes burned with steady elation this night. He wore a faded blue wool shirt and gray pants that were darkened by wetness around his boot tops from his long ride with Lindsay Worth, just concluded. The ride that had cinched things for Lofgren's Ferry, though it had required him to shut down the ferry for a couple of hours.

Worth, who was the managing partner of Worth and Elkton, the big freighting outfit that was starting its wagons on the long, tough haul to the new gold camps up in the Teclans, had ridden away from the ferry only an hour before, heading down to Fleck's Crossing, where he had a hotel room. Rafe pulled Worth's parting remarks into his mind to savor them again:

"You win, Lofgren. We'll use your ferry and the old military road to Pickaxe. You can hardly call it a road, but it's better than that pounded-out stretch through Fleck's Crossing. And six miles shorter. The first outfit'll be through here about the tenth." Then the blocky man's impersonal eyes had softened a trifle. "You're young, son. That man who runs the ferry down at Fleck's Crossing is some riled about you setting up in business here against him. When I tell him we're going to use your ferry, he'll likely blow his cork."

"I can handle Jared Giles," Rafe had said in his mild voice. "I can handle my ferry. I can take care of your business, Mr. North, and I sure appreciate it."

The man had dismissed the thanks, become impersonal again, and was gone. The tenth was only two weeks off. Rafe was certain he hadn't betrayed how Jared Giles had him worried, which probably accounted for the vague uneasiness in him tonight. Sooner or later he was going to have to tie into the big, mean devil, who didn't want any competition on this stretch of the Dunder. Fists or guns. Giles liked to make out he was right handy with both.

He would when he had to, for Worth and

Elkton's business would be the making of Lofgren's Ferry.

He was hungrier than a whelping wolf, but he wasn't going to get to eat just yet, for the wagon was just making the grade now. Rafe shoved the skillet to the back of the stove to join the blackened coffee pot and his kettle of boiled beef. He got his slicker and rain hat and donned them, then lighted a lantern and stepped out into the rain-drenched night.

It was a light wagon, with a single team. The driver sat huddled in the full beat of the storm. As the team pulled into the scope of his dim lantern, Rafe looked at the mud-spattered legs and barrels. Wagon sheets protected the load, and as Rafe swung his lantern he saw the driver make only a slight shape in the unprotected seat.

"Bad night to be out," commented Rafe, staring into the blackness.

"Can you take me across?" It was a weary, stolid, anxious voice, but it wasn't these qualities that caused Rafe to stare. He heeled around and looked full at the girl who had just spoken.

"Why, ma'am, you got no business being out in this wild country on a night like this!" he blurted.

"Please, I'm in a hurry. Will you take me over?" The girl turned her head to look at his shack, and Rafe saw that the wind had blown the door open. "Food—" the girl added, almost too low for him to hear. "Real hot, food!"

The situation had Rafe clung-tongued and hot with embarrassment, for he was never much of a hand with girls. So he just let the words spill out of him. "Why ma'am, if you're hungry I'd be right glad to have you eat."

"Oh, I couldn't," the girl said. "I've got to get to Pickaxe to spend the night. I'd have made it before dark but the bay broke a tug on that mucky hill way back there. How far is it from here to Placer City?"

"You headed for Placer City, Miss—?"

"Begg. Temperance Begg. And I'm heading for Placer City."

"But it's the worst camp of the lot up there, Miss Begg. They say they got six thousand men in it. It's no place for a woman."

"I'm not going there as a woman," snapped Temperance Begg, with a toss of

the head. "I'm going there as a storekeeper. I've got my stock on this wagon. I aim to trade team and wagon for a place and some fixtures. I won't need to do my own hauling. Worth and Elkton're starting freight service."

"I know it, miss," said Rafe, pride touching his voice. "They aim to use my ferry."

"Well, could I use it in the meantime?" asked Temperance, in sudden impatience.

**R**AFE shut the shack door and swung down ahead of the team so the lantern would show her where to drive. She wouldn't have spoken so sharply if she knew what all he was going to build here. He glanced ahead at the benighted river. The Dunder was flooded now, and he didn't like a night crossing. But he had built his ferry to equal it, and there wasn't a better ferryman than Rafe Lofgren anywhere in the West.

And if she wanted to take herself and low warm voice and stock of store goods to a hell-hole new mining camp like Placer City it was no business of his. As she had just conveyed to him.

He saw that the ferry was still bowed cleanly to the slip and walked to the far end and turned. Temperance Begg knew how to handle horses, and she drove the wagon onto the scow expertly. Rafe went to put up the guard chains and cast off. A wild, impossible thought was in his mind. It would be a right nice thing if a girl with a voice like that was to decide to start her store at Lofgren's Ferry rather than a rough, transient gold camp. The ferry was bound to grow to a real town; Rafe Lofgren would see to that. Bigger even than Fleck's Crossing, three miles down the Dunder, and no gouging trap for helpless wayfarers, either. Why didn't he have the courage to tell her about it and see how she took to it?

The road was busy now because of the gold camps but the camps don't last forever. Rafe had sighted a long way into the future before he picked the location of the town that was to bear his name. The gold camp business through it was fine. It would give the Ferry a robust start. But there was an older cattle industry between here and the Teclans, and a lot of good land being occupied more and more by nesters.

In Rafe's lights, these were the things a

healthy town needed for support, not a thing as flimsy and passing as a gold boom. That was why he meant to treat everybody right instead of milking and gouging for all he was worth, as Jared Giles and Hosea Fleck were doing down at Flecks' Crossing. He daren't speak to this Temperance Begg of these things; she had already put him in his place.

He hooked up the guard chain on the slip, tramped to the rail and shoved down the leeboard. He felt the scow's quick, rough canting as the underwater fin bit in, then a slip and easy jerk as the slings tightened and the traveler sheave slid riverward on the overhead cable. Rain flecked the swollen Dunder with a frying sound, and through its dancing curtain he could make out the faint guttering of the lantern left at night on the far bank. He fixed his gaze upon it and stood with a foot on the handle of the leeboard. It gave him an odd feeling of melancholy to let this store get away from him.

As he felt the bank slip away behind, his recently buried uneasiness returned to Rafe. There was a moaning in the storm's racket and, since he kept his traveler greased liberally, it would have to come from the split of wind on the cable, or the strain on the heavy scow produced by the load and the river's rush.

He hooked down the leeboard handle and stepped forward, staring up. Rain splintered on his cheeks, and he could see nothing. Then he heard a raveled sound from the far bank. He scowled and went back to his control.

They were two-thirds across when the scow made its dancing little side-step downstream. Fast enough that Rip was shoved roughly against the railing, then swung in-to balance again when the side-slip stopped. He turned his head and saw Temperance straightening herself on the wagon seat. The horses stirred, their heavy bodies weaving.

The river bit into the side of the scow, water rushing across the deck. Something was terribly wrong. The next impression was a loud clear ping. Rafe heard it and cold terror rose in his. In the next split second, the scow swung half about, pointing downstream, making a rush that Rafe knew was free or partly free on the turgid current.

He understood nothing, thinking only from moment to moment while a cold knot of apprehension formed in his stomach. He plunged forward, shoving and balancing himself by the rail. Unbelievably, impossibly, his cable had parted on the far bank. He heard its sharp slap into water, and the block and sling fell with a splash. The scow was floating free, dipping and bucking and crashing downstream.

The horses reared now, and the girl was on her feet, sawing at the reins. There was rougher water yet below, rock-studded, swirling. "Get down!" Rafe roared, and the words were blasted back into his mouth by the wind. Yet she looked at him and understood his motion. She dropped the lines and jumped toward him.

Even as he caught her, Rafe could feel the scow shoving his hips up into his sides. He felt the deck canting over, and he clung to the girl. Then the scow busted out on the freed end of the cable like a plunging-roped steer, for the spliced eye on the end would not run through the sheave.

The wagon rolled, first, skidding with the rear wheels lifting. The horses piled up, then team and wagon alike crashed into the railing, hung an instant and rolled off the violently canted barge.

The deck kept pushing up at Rafe, until at last he slipped and fell with the girl on top of him. Then a great hand seemed to flip them both into the darkness. Water crashed around Rafe's ears, but he kept hold of the girl while he clawed with one hand toward the surface.

When he gained it, he had but one immediate thought, which was to make shore with Temperance. To his small relief, when they broke water, she didn't try to fight. Choking and heaving, she was washed against him, and at last she gasped, "Take care of yourself! I can swim!"

"Shuck out of your slicker!" Rafe choked back. "Then hold onto my shoulder."

It was hard to get his bearings, hard to make anything at all out in this welter of noise and wetness. As they worked out of the encumbering rain coats, he felt the current's shove and knew they were traveling downstream fast. Then they were lined out, Temperance clinging to him by one hand and swimming with the other. He tried for the west bank, though it was

farther away, because his shack with its shelter and heat were that way.

He fought down panic and bewilderment and outrage and got his strong young body to working for them, using the current to conserve his strength. Once they came within an inch of crashing against a boulder, which told him they were making progress. Then at long last he let down his feet and touched bottom and began to fight the tugging water along the river edge.

They lay there on the bank in the pounding rain for a long while before Temperance Begg caught breath enough to moan, "My team—my store—everything I had. Everything . . ."

Rafe stared into the darkness. He had thought only of their lives, at first, and then of his ferry. Blind anger at her and at the turn of events surged up in him. He shoved to his feet.

The girl sagged against him when Rafe helped her to her feet and her teeth chattered. He could feel her trembling violently.

He said, "We'd better get up to my place, miss, so we can get warm."

Temperance accompanied him obediently, not speaking, stumbling along the dark, soggy river bank. Generosity, buried by the shock of events, came up in Rafe, and he realized that her store in Placer City had meant as much to her as had his river bank town to himself. All gone, and now memories from recent weeks reeled through his mind.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Cable

HE HAD ridden into this section of the Dunder six months before with big plans up his sleeve about which he had kept quiet as long as possible. For the previous six years he had lived with old Dutch Minton and worked for him on his ferry on the coastward Willamette and saved himself some money. Dutch had chuckled and called it plain itchy feet when Rafe had finally left. But it had been a whale of a lot more than that. Even on the coast they were talking about the widespread gold strikes back in the Teclans, and men were pouring that way.

There had risen in young Rafe a burning need to follow, a desire to build something



for himself. Not to pick gold out of mountain gulches; that was for lesser men.

It was the old military road that led Rafe to the site he finally picked for Lofgren's Ferry, the road used by the Army to supply forts east of the Dunder in the early Indian campaigns. There was a gravel bottom where it crossed the river that made a ford in summer low water, a deep and dangerous ford, for the Dunder was deeply gouged, canyon-walled and rampant.

Later, the plains west of the river, to the south, had begun to fill with nesters so that a road had gradually developed on down that way. Then Hosea Fleck had started his town, and Jared Giles his ferry, three miles below the old Army crossing where the river was deeper in summer and narrower the year around. The town had been a sink of iniquity from the start. Then the gold stampede had made it boom.

That was why Giles and Fleck didn't want any ferry at the old Army crossing.

The old military road, its tracks scarcely more than traces now through the sage and rabbit brush, had, from military expedience, struck the straightest line to the early cowtown of Pickaxe, on the long road to the Teclans. It saved some six miles which would be attractive to the slogging stampedees, to say nothing of packers and freighters and staggers now growing interested in the gold camp business.

Rafe sighted the dim lights of his shack now, and spoke comfortingly to Temperance. "Just a little farther, miss. You can anyhow get that supper. And some dry clothes, if you won't get lost in mine."

Her voice was calm again, low and self-controlled. "I'm sorry I was angry. It wasn't your fault. What was the trouble?"

"Mebbe I know, miss," Rafe said bitterly, "and mebbe I don't. But I sure aim to find out."

He listened a moment, thinking he had heard horseback travel up on the road from the Moonbow Brakes, but whatever it was the wind had washed it out. As they trudged the last weary steps, Rafe's mind went vividly back to the day Fleck's Crossing had discovered his intentions to build a rival town. At the crossing, besides the ferry, there were two saloons and a store, now given over to outfitting eastbound stampedees, and a hotel for them to stop the night in. All were dedicated to the single purpose of gouging the transients for all they had, for Hosea Fleck owned everything save the ferry, which belonged to Jared Giles.

Rafe had stayed at the hotel until he got his ferry permit and had staked and claimed the land he needed to build his town. He had already built his shack and a shed for a stable. When his intentions no longer could be hidden, Fleck and Giles had visited Rafe's hotel room one night.

Jared Giles was a big man with pale, watery gray eyes that strongly suggested a vindictive cruelty. Yet he was flabby, and he had a slack, twisting mouth over a chopped-off, lumpy jaw. Belaying his obvious prosperity, his clothes were rag-tag and shabby. He needed a shave, and he habitually wore a gun.

He had taken the lead. "So you're fixing to start a ferry at the old crossing!" he snarled. "So you want to throw your money into the crick!"

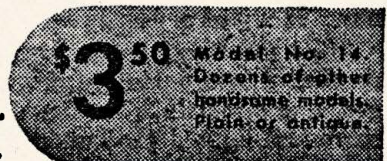
"Don't aim so," Rafe said calmly. "Aim to make money. Aim to build me a town." He had looked mildly at Hosea Fleck, a



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dark taciturn man with hard eyes and grim lips. "A better town than your stink-hole, Fleck. I aim to charge a decent toll for ferrying, and I figure somebody'll come along and put up a store." In spite of his uneasiness, a dreamy quality had come into Rafe's brown eyes. "Then somebody'll start a hotel, likely, and other things. Because I aim to be in business when this stampede's over, Fleck, and the way you been treating this country, I got an idea you won't be."

"That," snapped Fleck, "is exactly what we're talking about. What do you want for your claim and them cheese-box buildings? And I'll buy the timbers and plank-ing I hear you're having hauled in to build a scow."

"You'll buy 'em if I sell, you mean," corrected Rafe, grinning.

"Ever ferried any?" asked Giles.

"Enough."

"Well, if it ain't been on the Dunder, you got things to learn, bucko. You got plenty to learn. You'll dump somebody in the river and drowned 'em. Then see how much business you'll get. You'll plumb disgrace yourself, and that'll be the end of you." The pair had left then, scowling but empty-handed. The scene came back to Rafe now in all its menace. He and Temperance had reached the shack, and he opened the door and stepped aside to let the girl go ahead of him. He followed her into the warmth of the interior and strode to the stove to feed more wood to the dying fire. He got a spare shirt and extra pants and put them on a chair. He motioned toward the stove.

"When you get yourself dry and warm, you better eat."

He saw now that Temperance Begg was small and shapely, with blonde hair plastered tight by the river and wet gingham clinging to her slim body. Her eyes were level and blue, and her small mouth was generous but at the same time stubborn. He liked the solid set of her slender shoulders.

She looked at him uncertainly. "Aren't you going to change? I'll go out while—" A certain serenity had manifested itself now. He liked a woman with bounce.

"Got something to do first, miss." Rafe reached a spare lantern from the corner, got a dry match from the shelf over the stove and lighted the lantern.

"You'd better get dried out before you go outside again." Temperance said, sharply and womanlike. "You'll catch your death!"

"Only get wet again," said Rafe, and he stepped through the door, pulling it shut behind him. Maybe he was going to catch his death but he meant to find out a thing or two.

SWINGING the lantern in the slashing rain, he went to the open shed that stabled his horse, a short distance up the river bank from the shack. Carrying oarlocks and a pair of oars, he came back and crossed the muddy road, turning down toward the ferry slip. His clothes were sodden, his feet squashing in his boots, and cold knifed into him. But it didn't matter. He came to the tall pole, guyed by a dead-man buried back of it, and glanced up anxiously.

The line was still taut, creaking as it played slightly to and fro, the weight at its end keeping it stretched high above his head. He went to the overturned skiff on the bank above the landing slip, righted and slid it into the lashing, racing water. The feeble lantern light built an aura of slanting rain and muddy water about the skiff as he rowed out presently. He trailed an oar, the other up and feathered, trying to drift along under the line. The skiff was skittish, but he handled it expertly, and in a couple of minutes the line slanted enough so that he could reach up and grab it.

After that, he boated oars and let himself slip along the line. He could make out a purling of water, below in the more general racket, where it would be cutting and lipping together again around the still captive scow. He let himself down to it swiftly. He held up the lantern, tipping it, trying to cast its light ahead. The scow was bottom up, as he had expected to find it after that big spill.

But the slings still held, the spliced eye on the overhead cable where it had been affixed to the far pole, was still fouled in the sheave fortunately. A start of hope took a fraction of the chill from Rafe. The scow was playing on the river surface like a kite in a high wind. If he could work it in-shore somehow and tie it up, he might warp it back into place before the first Worth and Elkton freight wagons came lumbering down the Moonbow grade.

His first move was to examine the sheave, where sling and cable were luckily tangled. Standing in the skiff and reaching, he got his hands on it, for the weight kept it pulled above the water, holding the boat precariously in place with stiffened legs. He got his fingers onto the eye he had spliced into the end of the cable before it had been looped in a rough half-hitch at the top of the pole.

His lips twisted in a bitter grin. He had known it but this was proof. His splice had not given way, was still as solid as the day he had made it. The break was at the end of the loop, in the section that had been twisted around the pole. It was not frayed, as it would have been if the strong pull of the river had snapped it, but only partly so—only a strand or even less. The rest was clean, blunt. It had been cut with an axe or cold chisel, all but a single strand. It had held through the light crossing, with Lindsay Worth and their horses. It had been calculated not to go out except under a real load.

Anger shook Rafe, and recklessness rose in him. Somebody needed killing, and no mistake.

They had got their chance while he had been off with Worth, looking over the old military road toward Pickaxe. They had probably ridden up the east side of the river. So Giles and Fleck had realized that Worth was tempted to turn his business through Lofgren's Ferry, for it must have been done before Worth had told them definitely.

Rafe knew it was dangerous mounting the scow, but he risked it after securing the skiff to the slings. Water rushed against the scow's upper edge, spilling over in a growling wash, making it impossible to stand. He was drenched anew as he positioned himself, holding an oar in one hand.

If he could get a twist on the left sling and shorten it a trifle, the scow would shove that way, just as it responded to one or the other leeboards in normal operations. Disdaining danger and with jaws clamped tight, Rafe edged his weight out along the line, balanced precariously. The line slackened a little from time to time when varying stresses against the capsized hull moved in. Watching this closely by the light of the lantern still in the skiff, Rafe tried time after time to form a loop around the oar

handle and failed. He tried again.

He had lost track of time and place in his concentration when something caused him to lift his head and stare up the river. It was no conscious perception but some strange, intuitive awareness of new danger. He could see nothing but a curtain of blinding rain falling into a narrow circle of lighted brown water. Then it came to him. Mixed with the splash of running water and chugging rain was an odd chunking sound. He had heard that, and now it came again, once, twice—half a dozen times. Like the chunking of an axe in the distance.

But Rafe was driving now for the skiff, wanting only to get off the scow. Before he could make it he heard the loud, ominous whine in the night, felt the surge of motion under his feet. Bucking and dipping, the scow lined out anew on the current.

**HIS FIRST** spasm of fear left Rafe as he fought to draw the skiff in by its light painter. By clinging to the heaving and pounding scow, he was probably only going to get himself drowned. But suddenly he meant to ride it, for if it floated miles down country he might never get it back. And he wanted to get his hands on that cable, deliberately cut twice now. It was the only proof he had of what had really happened here.

They knew that. They not only wanted him to have no scow when Worth and Elton's first wagons reached his ferry landing; they didn't want him to have the cable and its damaging implications. Then the scow hit something with a tremendous, brain-jolting smash, and Rafe was tossed light as a pebble into thin, rainswept space again. He hit the water with a crash, and for the second time that night was floundering in its dark and savage depths.

Yet the bitter and killing rage in him inured him against the cold shock. He fought coolly to the surface again, and once more struck off doggedly toward the bank.

When he reached earshot of the landing Rafe could hear Temperance's voice rising above the steady racket of the storm. He ran, striking the road and wheeling up toward the shack, and he could see her figure highlighted in the door. He watched her sag against the frame as he drew into view, and he bounded on.

"Some men!" Temperance gasped. "I

heard something and tried to stop them! But one of them held me while the other chopped the cable. Oh, I was afraid they'd drowned you for sure!"

Rafe's face was black with rage as he followed her inside. The warmth of the shack hit him and took the last strength from his knees. He dropped heavily onto a chair and began to shake. He tried to start a filled, sodden boot but couldn't hold onto it. Temperance turned industrious then, speaking no more and helping him to get the boots off. Then she said gravely, "I'll turn my back while you get into dry clothes."

Still shaking, Rafe scared up a change and got into it, while Temperance fussed at the stove. She must have noticed that he had not eaten, for she had kept things warm, and now she began to take up food. The clock on the shelf said ten, he saw. The evening would just be starting down at Fleck's Crossing.

He had no hunger in him but only a black, consuming rage and despair. He recalled the horsebackers he had thought he heard coming down the Moonbow grade, earlier. "What'd they look like?" he asked, when he was in dry clothes again.

Temperance turned, shaking her head. In his shirt and pants and spare boots she was accorded and bulky, but cute. "They both were slickers and had beards. The one who held me tried to kiss me before he let go, and the other told him they were getting paid for work, not fun. They were surprised to find me here, or anybody at all. I guess they'd figured they had drowned you the first time."

"Scum hired by Giles and Fleck," said Rafe. He told her about it, then, how Worth and Elkton had decided to use his ferry, how this was going to help him to build himself a town, how they had cut the cable so that it would go out under the first real weight and disgrace him for good. And finally, how they had had to go down to Fleck's Crossing to cross and return on this side to make certain the tell-tale cable was on the bottom of the river. "They can put the lie on anything you and I can claim but the cable'd back us up." Rafe scowled darkly then. "Reckon I'll have to trouble you for my spare boots, miss."

Worry stirred in her eyes. "What're you going to do, Rafe?"

"I'm going to see how they like gun-smoke."

"Oh, no, Rafe!" Temperance turned toward him anxiously.

"I'll trouble you for my boots."

She studied him for a moment, and when she spoke her voice had softened. "Rafe, you think you're whipped and disgraced and run out of business here for keeps. Well, there's only one thing that can really disgrace you—your pride. What they did to you is not your shame. What you might do to them could be."

"What I do to them'll be plenty!" Rafe roared. "Do I have to take my boots off you, woman?"

"Don't go after them with a gun! Beat them! Build your town and put your name on it! Only, keep that name proud!"

Rafe scowled at her. "How?" Yet he hesitated. After all, he wasn't certain where the scow was going to wind up. Dragging the cable and sling it might foul before it had traveled a hundred yards. Or it might run for miles. Yet it had smashed into something when it had pitched him off. He stared at Temperance. "My boots, miss!"

"Rafe, if you try to gun them—"

"Gunning can wait. I'm going to look for my scow."

Temperance smiled then in relief and turned him around. "You sit down there and get some hot food in you! And rest till morning!"

"If it hangs up, and they find it, they'll just turn it loose again!"

"They can't find it till morning, any more than you can. And, Rafe, you're going to need your strength."

That was right. After a moment, Rafe sat down at the table, hungry now. He watched her speculatively. He liked a woman with a head on her. He shoveled food into him, and suddenly a vast stupor descended on him. Before he knew it, his head had sagged forward onto his arms, and he was asleep. . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

### Fight at Fleck's Crossing

**T**HE FIRST daylight spilling through the window wakened him. Temperance had thrown a blanket over his shoulders. She was on the bed now, asleep, but the

room was still warm, and he saw that she had been up and down keeping the fire going. He was surprised at how different she made his bare little shack seem, somehow cozy and comfortable in spite of his troubles. She looked like a little girl as she lay there, one hand under her cheek.

He was stiff, sore and still weary but he threw it off even as he stood up. There was still hot coffee in the pot, and he poured himself a cup and drank it. It was then that he noticed it had stopped raining. Moving too quietly to waken Temperance, Rafe got his boots on. He buckled on his gun, then shrugged into his sheepskin coat. Pulling on his hat, he stepped lightly outside and shut the door carefully behind him.

He hurried along the river bank, studded now by an empty pole with its equally empty mate on the opposite bank. Saddling, he swung onto his horse and headed down the river. It was rough going, for he clung to the river bank instead of the Moonbow road, which would swing him off into the canyons where he could not see anything.

He had a definite place to search, which was Horseshoe Bend, about halfway down to Fleck's Crossing. If his scow had hung it, it would likely be there or short of there, for beyond there was a straight, clear shot to the crossing. He picked a slow course, his pony plunging across sodden slides, and he came to rock outcrops where he had to back-track and climb around. The river twisted, and reach after reach he found empty.

Rafe sat his saddle stolidly, pulling patience over a vast impatience, the pride of the young unvanquished squaring his shoulders. He thought of the gloating that must have been on the faces of Jared Giles and


Hosea Fleck after their night's work, and anger painted his own lean, set features. He thought of Giles' ramshackle, gouging ferry, and the fact that Lindsay Worth had turned it down in favor of Lofgren's. This made him pull his shoulders higher, and he hurried his horse.

After a mile and a half of labored progress, Rafe was halted at a point where the canyon walls dropped sheer to the muddy, swollen water of the Dunder. He swung down scowling, for he figured he was just short of Horseshoe Bend. Impatiently, he pulled the horse around and swung up. He back-tracked for a quarter-mile, then dismounted again and led the pony up a sharp ravine. The bare earth was rainsoaked, and both he and the animal slipped and fell and climbed only by toeing in and lifting with effort.

After some five minutes of this, he reached a ridge. He mounted again and rode down to come out on a bald face above the river. In that moment he saw the full sweep of Horseshoe Bend and was standing in the stirrups.

There was a flat at the apex of the river's broad turn, with brush and willows on the far side that were flooded now. The trailing cable had fouled, and there was his scow. More than his scow, for two men were working down there desperately. Rafe saw in that instant that Giles' handy men had likewise stirred out in the dawn, worried about that cut cable and beating him here, for the point was closer to Fleck's Crossing than to his own place.

And they were trying to turn the scow loose again. Rafe hipped around, despair smashing down. There was no way to get down there, and on top of that they were



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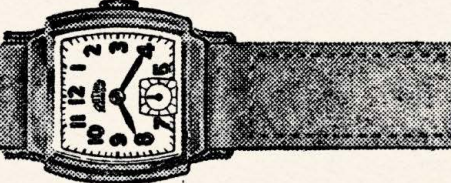
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on the far side of the river. Yet he put his horse into fast, skidding motion, turning it back along the ridge and desperately hunting a dip down to the river.

He slid down on another bald slope, presently directly across from them, and he had his gun in his hand. He sent a shot across the water, knowing that the range was probably too great for effect. But he saw them straighten and wheel around.

Two saddle horses were on the bank just beyond the capsized scow. One man whirled and made the bank in a long jump, but the other energized into work again. Rafe understood then. They had found it no small chore to detach the cable. He had spliced his sling ends into strong eye lags, sunken deep in the timbers, and these were underwater, on the submerged side. The second man was worrying at it.

Then Rafe was clambering back up the slope face to get his horse out of danger. For the man who had sprung ashore had jerked a saddle gun from the boot. Rafe heard the crack of a rifle, and mud and rock kicked up close to his horse's heels. With the animal pulled out of danger, Rafe dropped onto his belly and crawled back to the rim. He drew a bead on the man still in the scow and sent another slug punching through the grind of the river.

He saw a flick in the water, short of the man but close enough to worry him. The rifleman fired again, but now the man on the scow gave up his job and leaped for the bank. He picked up something there, and Rafe saw it was a short-handled axe. Wheeling down to the water again, he went to work with the axe, abandoning hope of getting hold of the tell-tale cable. He chopped it in two where it touched the bole of a big willow.

In a spasm of rage at seeing the scow slip from his hands for the second time, Rafe emptied his gun. Then the cable parted, over there, the scow shooting into the channel and both men plunging for their horses.

At the same time Rafe was on his feet and running for his own pony. Temperance Begg and her advice be damned! Killing was too good for these people. The Dunder was fairly clear from here on to Fleck's Crossing. If the scow got that far or beyond, they would never let him get his hands on it again. He swung into saddle and

sent the horse scrambling along the slippery high ridge.

He headed due west to get to the wagon road in the shortest possible time, sliding into ravines and crawling out. All the released pressures in him were rampant now. Then horse and rider half rolled down a long slant of crumbled shale and he was on the road to the crossing. His heaving animal lined out as Rafe spurred. It was only a mile now to the crossing, and Rafe held his breath. He whipped down the long grade that led to the river at Fleck's Crossing, and the next moment was pounding down the cut in the bank to the ferry slip.

**H**E DISMOUNTED in a muddy skid. He saw that luck was partly with him, for the ferry was on this bank, empty except for the slack-jawed operator who relieved Jared Giles at night. Rafe recalled that it was still early morning and that Giles was probably still in the hay. He pulled his gun as he ran across the landing onto the ferry.

The operator got off a nail keg, staring at him and gulping. "What's this?" he yammered.

Rafe had no time or intention to explain. Bounding forward, he seized the man by the front of the shirt. His gun whipped back, its barrel laying a dull thud against the operator's head. The man went down in a dead drop. Rafe left him lie wheeling for the landing stage. He cast off and pounded to the stern leeboard and shoved it down.

Watching both banks, he raised it presently. Tugging its overhead sling and the cable into a flat X at the middle of the river, the scow floated to a stop, and he adjusted the leeboard to hold it motionless. There was the merest bend in the river a couple of hundred yards upstream, and Rafe could see nothing but swollen and muddy water.

He had no exact estimate of the river's speed, but he had doubtless outdistanced it in his thundering ride. He aimed to stop his scow when it got here, and he aimed to do it by using Jared Giles' ferry, if the rigging would hold up under the collision. He was glad that Fleck's Crossing, on the far bank, seemed to be still asleep. Yet he recalled that the two men who had done all the dirty work had pounded out on horseback at the same time he had.

Rafe broke his gun, ejected the empty shells and shoved in fresh loads, hoping his scow would reach this point before the trouble started. Yet nothing showed itself around the upriver bend, which was not sharp enough to halt it. There was nothing in the entire reach below Horseshoe, as far as Rafe could remember, that would be apt to stop it since it was no longer dragging an entangling line.

Then all hell broke loose over in the town. Riders came pounding along the street to pull up at the bank and spill down. Rafe sent a couple of shots that way to drive them back to the cover of the river-hugging buildings. They obeyed, scrambling back to fort at the building corners. Then guns began to crack over there and lead to fear into the scanty superstructure of the ferry. The exchange exploded the town.

Flung flat on the splintered decking where he could still hold the ferry in mid-stream by the stern leeboard. Rafe peered out under the upriver railing to see half-dressed men begin to appear at various protected points on the town side. Still nothing came down the river, and each second twisted Rafe's nerves tighter. Then he saw Jared Giles, dressed only in boots and pants and red undershirt, take a look from the rear corner of Fleck's saloon, which was the building closest at hand. His men had made their report.

Rafe snapped a shot that way. Giles disappeared, and in a moment lead was smashing into the ferry from half a dozen points. Rafe clamped his jaw tight. If he had to stand up under this all morning to catch his scow, he was going to catch it. Then an awful thought struck him. What if it had beaten him and already passed on down? All he could do under this plague of hot lead was to wait and see.

Then Rafe made out Hosea Fleck, shooting from the upstairs window of his saloon. The elevation nullified Rafe's meager protection, and a big splinter kicked up in the deck close to his head. Rafe sent a shot that way that knocked out the raised upper half of the window sash. Fleck jerked back out of sight and thereafter contented himself with quick snap-shots.

When he could, Rafe scanned the upriver stretch, hope draining out of him. He glanced nervously at the prostrate night operator, and saw that the man was still

motionless. But pretty soon he was going to make another problem. Rafe was debating giving him another tap on the head for insurance when he saw his scow drift idly around the bend, hugging the west bank, swinging end for end.

A desperate energy came to Rafe. He would likely have to maneuver a little to be certain of heading it off, which would make a risky business. He had to watch the approaching scow, letting his harassers on the bank have their own way for the moment. They realized his divided attention. A couple of men ran boldly into the open, a little upstream, and tried to shove a skiff into the water. Rafe dropped one of them.

The second bent low and kept on, getting the skiff afloat. Another man ran out to take the fallen one's place. They meant to board the ferry to keep him from letting his own scow smash into it. Rafe emptied his gun at them, and paused to load again.

Then his attention was riveted to the oncoming scow, which, after it had made the bend, had floated out into the stream and was now coming steadily on. He had probably spotted himself too far out, Rafe saw with a groan. He should have kept closer to the west bank, ready to shoot out when he saw where he had ought to be. He was going to have to do it the opposite, stationing himself at the exposed forward leeboard long enough to get back a distance toward the west bank.

Holding his breath, he made it, with lead pocking the deck all around him. He thought he was going to get away with it, then something slammed into him, putting only a strange numbness into his right arm. The men in the skiff were rowing madly toward him but Rafe was too busy to worry about them.

The approaching scow now was just above, traveling fast. Rafe slithered to the opposite end of the ferry, grabbed the leeboard handle with his good left hand, and watched like a dog ready to pounce on a passing rabbit. Then he shoved the handle down. Giles' scow shot fast now into the current, and the timing was such that it barely cut in ahead of the free-plunging hull.

Rafe felt the jar of the collision in the deck under him even as he watched. The two scows made a shivering T as they

joined. Giles' cut on its side, then there was a violent jerk, the rigging singing in the sudden heavy strain. A last spasm of gunfire came from the bank. Then Giles' Ferry settled slowly into the water again, with Rafe's scow captured above it.

To Rafe's astonishment, a great yell rose from the town that was not dismay nor rage nor bitter despair. It was cheering. Rafe saw men pile down the bank from the town's single street, and there was gunfire afresh. It took him a moment to understand it. The town was full of transients, tough, adventurous men heading for the gold fields, who had paid double and triple for their lodgings and whisky. Their jubilation came from the outcome on the river.

The firing died out quickly, and men were fighting toe-to-toe over there.

**S**TRUGGLING to his feet, Rafe lashed the two scows together, then moved the cumbersome rig slowly to the town side. His right hand was bloody, the arm above his elbow thawing out and hurting like blazes. He held his gun in his left fist as he staggered up the landing, his business far from finished. He saw all kinds of rough-looking men grinning at him as he strode up the town's street.

Ahead stood a knot of them, mostly half-dressed prospectors, surrounding a group of thoroughly battered, thoroughly cowed men. Among the latter were Jared Giles and Hosea Fleck. A huge, red-bearded miner seemed to have taken the lead in revolt against Fleck's Crossing.

"Son, that was the dangdest show of fighting guts I ever seen. Only thing that's got us boys a little puzzled is, what the devil's the ruckus about?"

Rafe told them, starting with how he and Temperance had been thrown into the river. There was still a piece of cut cable attached to his scow to prove it. They didn't need proof. Part of the audience began to scowl and stare at Giles and Fleck while Rafe talked.

When Rafe had finished, the red-bearded miner flung a wicked look at Hosea Fleck. He turned then to look back at the gathered, frowning miners.

"Boys, I reckon this Rafe Lofgren can take care of himself. But I claim a pair of skunks as would do that to girl ought to be

strung up here and now, and mebbe with their toenails pulled off."

"Get your rope, Red!" a voice responded with enthusiasm. A yell of approval followed.

Hosea Fleck had turned white. He swallowed and got his mouth open with difficulty.

"Listen, boys," he choked, "I'll make it good. I'll pay the girl for what she lost."

"There's a lot more to it than that!" snapped Redbeard. "Me, I aim to see this lad's ferry put back where it belongs."

"I—I'll put it back!" Fleck promised, swallowing rapidly.

Redbeard grinned at him. "Mister, your word ain't any better than your intentions. Us boys is right anxious to get up to the diggings but we aim to wait right here till you do put it back. Get busy, because we don't want to spend another night in your stinking, hold-up town!"

It was midmorning the following day before Lofgren's Ferry was again ready to operate, to serve the public decently and to grow into a town. Hosea Fleck's sweating men had labored through the night, hitching to trees and boulders along the rough banks of the Dunder and toiling with block and tackle. Hosea Fleck supplied a new cable, and every time he seemed about to falter, the big handful of miners prodded his conscience.

Temperance had changed back to her own clothes when he got back to the shack.

"Well," said Temperance, and it seemed to Rafe that she sighed. "I hope you don't have any more trouble with Fleck's Crossing."

Rafe squared his shoulders. "Fleck's Crossing'll die on the vine," he told her stoutly. Then he frowned. "Well, you learned enough to go home to your folks, or you still bent on starting a store in Placer City?"

Temperance dropped her glance. "I haven't any folks, Rafe. As to the store, I've—well, I've been thinking some of Lofgren's Ferry. It looks to me like an up-and-coming town."

Rafe's right arm was bandaged, and he was sore and rocky. It took a moment to pick this to pieces and see what she meant. Then a grin started, spreading wide on his face.

THE END



# DEPUTY WANTED— DEAD OR ALIVE!

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**Twenty paces down the dim trail an orange and red flare ripped the night, and the one man who could spill the beans on that back-trail killer was fixing to meet his Maker. . . . Then Sheriff Bailey knew that his deputy was on the side of back-shoot justice!**

*Venters stiffened in the saddle, indecision in his face.*

SHERIFF DAN BAILEY stood by the window, staring out into the sun-beaten street of Palos Duros, only half listening to Tom Linton's words.

" . . . time you retired, Dan. Riordan'll make a good sheriff. He's your top deputy.

Rough and almighty fast with a gun—"

Impatience swung the sheriff around to face the paunchy, prosperous lawyer sprawling in a chair of the office. He had never liked the shrewd, florid-faced attorney, nor the way Linton had oiled his way to power in Shotgun Valley, and the man's smug statements stung.

"Maybe yo're right about Riordan," he snapped. "But it takes more than a fast gun hand to make a good lawman. There are other things that count. Like good

judgment and an understanding of folk. A little compassion would help, too."

Tom smiled indulgently. "You're getting old, Dan. You wouldn't have talked like that twenty years ago. Not even ten."

"Maybe I've learned something since then," Dan growled. "Somethin' a man like Riordan will have to learn the hard way."

Tom shook his head, the motion spilled cigar ash over him. He was a smart lawyer who knew his Blackstone backwards and forwards, and although he was a newcomer to Palos Duros, comparatively speaking, he was fast picking up political weight. He was careless about his clothes, favoring a much-rumpled gray suit, but he was careful about his friends. He had sought Dan out when he had been an unknown attorney, filling in idle time in the law office with shrewd chatter over a checkerboard.

He had grown big in five years—big physically and politically. Gene Easton, owner of the Three Deuces, the largest and richest ranch in the valley, had retained him to handle all his business. The ranch had fallen into Easton's hands when his father died; he had had no part in making it what it was. A spoiled, handsome man with a preference for women and a good time rather than work, Easton had been glad to let Linton do his thinking for him.

Gene Easton had a lot of friends, Tom Linton's kind, Dan remembered. Obsequious gents, bowing to the influence of the big rancher, fawning around him for favors.

It had been a shock to all of them when Easton was murdered. Riordan had picked up Larry Venters, owner of a one-cow spread up in Hog Hollow and brought him in, charged with the killing. A taciturn, cold-eyed youngster, Larry had denied killing Easton. But his admittance that he had ridden out to the Three Deuces in a jealous rage, following Easton and Irene Galloway, had been pretty damning.

Riordan had handled it from start to finish. He had Venters in jail when Dan had come back from a trip to Garrettsville. The sheriff tried to get something out of Venters, but the kid clammed up in sullen silence.

The third day Venters was in jail, someone slipped him a gun through the barred, rear window. Venters held up the jailer with it, forced him to open the door,

slugged the man, and made his getaway on a big bay stud conveniently hitched at the rail.

That was the way things stood now, with redheaded, dour, chunky Bill Riordan following Venters. And Linton, leaning back in his chair, said: "There's only one way to deal with a killer like Larry Venters. The way Bill Riordan will handle it. And he'll be saving the county the expense of a trial."

Dan shrugged, turning back to the window. He was fifty-one years old, spare and straight and he still walked like a young man. But he was tired. He wanted to retire to his ranch in the valley and sit in the sun, shooting the breeze with his friends. He had wanted this; but now that Tom Linton, who was on the county board, had come to ask him to resign in favor of a younger man, he felt a bit put out.

Dan tried to pin down his annoyance. It wasn't that he had anything against Riordan. The deputy took orders without comment and carried them out. He would have been a top man to have around during the early Shotgun Valley era when the Jake Breed boys hung out in the hills and robbed throughout the valley. But Shotgun Valley had shaken down. . . .

"I don't think Riordan'll catch up with Venters," he said, turning again. "He can follow a plain trail an' he don't give up easy. But there's more to trailin' a man than just followin' tracks—"

Tom heaved his heavy bulk out of the chair and brushed the ash off his coat front. "Riordan will bring him in," he said confidently.

The flat assurance in the lawyer's tone nettled. "Wait a minute," Dan said coldly. "I was going to turn in my badge this weekend. But I'm going to prove something to you, Tom. I'm going to prove there's more to a good lawman than the ability to thumb the hammer of a Colt. When Riordan comes in *without Venters*, I want a week to prove it."

Tom was headed for the door, but he stopped and turned back, his round face bunching up in a frown. "You're very sure Riordan won't be bringing Venters back."

"I know Larry Venters," Dan said.

Tom looked at the sheriff, trying to get behind the sheriff's flat statement. "All

right," he said, shrugging. "We'll give you a week. But I don't think you'll have to prove anything, Dan. I'm betting Riordan brings the kid in—dead!"

Dan walked to the door and watched the lawyer go up the street to his office. He stood in the doorway, looking down the dusty street to the vista of the Mogollons, sharp against the sky. He had grown up with Shotgun Valley, and he was proud to have had a hand in keeping the law—glad to see it shake down eventually to a peaceful existence.

He wished the board would appoint Joe Hooker, his other deputy, in his place. Joe was away on law business right now. Joe would make a better sheriff, he thought—not so fast as Riordan with a gun, but more understanding.

A thing like that counted with Dan Bailey.

**B**ILL RIORDAN rode into town the next morning, dusty and alone. He unsaddled and turned his cayuse loose in the corral behind the law office and stamped up to the door, a hard man with tight lips and narrow, gray-green eyes that never told anything.

The sheriff uncorked his legs from the desk top. "Where'd you lose him?"

"Up by the Sinks." The deputy pushed his hat up from his eyes and walked to the desk and took a bottle out of a lower drawer. He tilted it up for a long swallow and set it down on the desk. "Guess he's clear down to the Border by now."

He turned and headed for the door. If he was disappointed he didn't show it.

Bailey said: "Where you goin'?"

"To get some sleep," Riordan answered. He turned, his cold glance holding the sheriff. "You want somethin'?"

Bailey shook his head. He got up as Riordan stamped out and walked to the wall where he had hung his gun belt. He took it down and tightened it about his spare waist, liking the weight of the .44 against his thigh.

Riordan was stopped in front of Lawyer Linton's office when Bailey got to the door. The deputy shook his head at some question the pudgy attorney asked, shrugged, looked back at Bailey. Then he turned and kept going, turning in at Kipple's Hotel.

Bailey stepped out and stopped by the

corral. Riordan's mount, a rangy gray stud was in the open stall at the far end. He pushed open the gate and closed it behind him.

The gray stood still while he ran a hand over its back, browning slightly. He bent and examined its forelegs and when he straightened the frown made a deep crease between his light brows.

Twenty-five years as a lawman had taught Dan Bailey a lot of things. He got so that he didn't follow what was in front of his nose, but learned to look under things to find what held them up.

Take the whole Venters affair, for instance. Larry Venters and his brother Charley had been running a shoestring spread for years over east of Shotgun Valley. Two tough independent kids who had been orphaned during a cholera epidemic and brought themselves up, taking nothing from no one.

The big Three Deuces spread claimed range as far as Hog Hollow, and Gene Easton had several times tried to buy them out. Failing, he had tried to run them out.

Hot-headed Charley had finally gotten into an argument with Nels Jorgeson, Easton's foreman, and had killed him. It had happened in the Two-Spot Saloon, at the north end of town, and Charley hit the trail before Jorgeson's body hit the plank floor. He had cleared out of the valley without stopping to say goodbye to his brother. . . .

Gene Easton had it in for Larry Venters after that. He knew that Larry was interested in Irene Galloway, a waitress in Santana's Lunch Room, and the night of the Fourth of July dance he cut in and paid a lot of attention to Irene. Gene was fifteen years older than Irene, but he was a handsome man and he owned the biggest ranch in the county. It would have turned any girl's head, and Irene was no exception. Just before the celebration ended, he talked Irene into his buggy and they drove off. Larry left a half hour later.

Easton's Chinese cook, Lee Bell, heard two shots break the quiet of the ranchyard. He scrambled out of his bunk into his underwear and found Gene dead, slumped across the buggy seat. Irene was leaning weakly against the buggy, a bruise on her left cheek. A rider was a dim shadow, cutting across the creek past the adobe wall of

the yard. Lee Bell swore it was Larry Venters.

Venters denied the killing. He had started out after Easton, but his jealousy cooled, and he had changed his mind, and had gone straight home instead, he said. Irene's story was vague. Easton had stopped the buggy in the yard and had tried to kiss her. She had resisted. Easton had slapped her, and was standing over her when the shots killed him. Falling, his body had knocked her off the buggy, and she had been stunned. She hadn't seen the man who had killed Easton.

The evidence against Larry was purely circumstantial. But his sullen silence when jailed did not help him. A tough kid, with no friends in the valley, he kept pacing his cell, refusing to talk.

Yet someone had liked Venters well enough to risk getting caught and had slipped him a gun. With it Venters had made his escape.

That was three days ago. If what Riordan had said was true, Larry was following his brother across the Mexican border. But Bailey had a hunch that Larry was still in Shotgun Valley.

If he was, there was one person in Palos Duros who would know it.

He walked back across the corral and out into the street, stopping inside the office for his pipe. Concord Avenue dozed in the hot morning sunlight. He walked up the road and turned at the first corner, passing through the doorway of *Santana's*.

Manuel came to him as he settled his long body on the counter stool.

The sheriff glanced along the counter. "Where's Irene?"

Manuel threw up his hands. "She quiet. Yesterday. I theenk she ees leaving town, shereef. *Caramba!*" the lunchroom owner exclaimed, shaking his head dolefully. "Now I'll lose mucho beesness."

"Too bad," Bailey said unsympathetically.

"Coffee? Pie?" Manuel asked hopefully.

The sheriff shook his head. "Some other time." He went out and saw Tom Linton standing under the wooden awning in front of his office, watching him. He turned away from the man and walked at a slant across the narrow street, stopping to let a wagon by. The driver yelled a greeting and Bailey waved shortly.

The Valley House where Irene Galloway lived was a cheap lodging structure on the edge of the Mexican quarter. He walked upstairs, turned down a narrow hallway, and knocked on her door.

A girl's voice, after some hesitation, said: "Who is it?"

"The sheriff," he answered, and turned the knob.

The door was unlocked. He walked into the room, his hat in his hand. His eyes were gentle. "Heard you were leaving Palos Duros," he said, "so I came up to say goodbye."

She turned to him, flushing. She was standing by a cheap iron bed, packing things into a cheap suitcase. She was old Saul's daughter—he had seen her grow up in Palos Duros. Old Saul had been a drunkard, working occasionally in the livery stable next door, but mostly being supported by his daughter. He was drunk the night a fidgety horse had kicked him in the head. The sheriff thought of this as he looked at her, judging her in the light of her past. Irene was tall and blonde, but she had always had a rough time of it and it showed in the tightness around her mouth and the hardness of her gray eyes.

"Thanks," she said. She saw that he meant it and her lips loosened in a smile that changed the moody hardness of her long features.

"You should smile oftener," Bailey said. "Yo're pretty."

She flashed him a look and the smile left her face. "What do you want, Dan?"

The sheriff moved his shoulders. "I'm curious about what happened the night Easton was killed," he said casually.

The girl's face whitened. "I told you all I know," she said bleakly. "I didn't see who killed him."

Bailey's glance moved to the suitcase. "I guess things have been pretty bad with you . . ."

"Bad!" Irene sneered. "Since that night I've been cut by my friends, avoided as though I were one of Tony Mark's painted entertainers. Why do you think I'm leaving Palos Duros?"

The sheriff nodded sympathetically. "You goin' to Bisbee?"

The girl shrugged, her anger receding. "I have an aunt in Bisbee. I should have gone there when dad died."

"Well, good-bye and good luck," Bailey said gravely. He put his hand on the knob and turned, his blue eyes unsmiling. "You passed that gun through to Larry Venters, didn't you?"

She had turned to the bed and was putting a skirt in the suitcase. . . . Bailey saw the lines of her back go rigid. But when she turned, she was relaxed. "No," she said harshly. "I didn't."

He shrugged. "Larry had no friends in town, except yoreself," he said. He smiled and went out, drawing the door shut, cutting out the sight of the girl standing by the bed, staring at him.

**T**HE BISBEE STAGE left at noon.

Bailey saw Irene get inside and waited until the stage went out of sight down the valley road. Then he mounted his saddled black and loped leisurely out of town.

He kept the stage in sight at intervals, paralleling it and keeping to the cover of the foothills and by sunset he had dismounted and was watching the corrals and buildings of Indian Joe's place, a trail stop for the Bisbee stage.

The yellow coach rocked into the yard a half hour later. The passengers got out to stretch their legs and have supper in the log house while hostlers changed teams. Bailey kept his field glasses on Irene. She talked briefly with Indian Joe, and together they went toward the corral where Joe roped a buckskin horse and flung a saddle on it. The girl passed something to the stationmaster, then mounted and rode back to the stage. The driver, smoking by the rear wheel, nodded and pulled her bag down from the luggage space.

He helped her tie the suitcase to her saddle, watched her mount and ride away. Indian Joe joined him and they stared after her as she cut across the road and headed for the darkening hills.

Bailey went back to the draw where he had picketed his cayuse and got aboard. Lying there, the chill evening wind had stiffened him. He felt bones in his legs creak and he grinned. "Time you was sent to pasture," he told himself.

Saul's daughter knew how to ride, and she had grown up in Shotgun Valley. A sliver of moon, rising over the Mogollons, did little to help the cool stars and he knew he'd have to risk being seen if he wanted to

follow. Few men could follow a trail at night—he was not one of them.

But Irene Galloway rode as if she had a destination and Bailey, noting her direction, hazarded a guess she was headed for the Venters place in Hog Hollow. He had to guess and make his choice. He had not expected Irene to ride at night and by morning, when he could pick up her trail again, she might have too much of a start.

He swung the black south, cutting an arc around a low hogback and pushed the stocky animal, driving it to gain time. Once he stopped, feeling someone behind him, following. But impatience thrust the feeling aside. "Imagining things," he thought. "Now I know I'm gettin' old."

The mare was blowing heavily three hours later when he topped a low ridge and looked down into Hog Hollow.

"Have to hoof it from here," he thought. He staked the black on a long rope and left it in a draw, not easily seen by anyone coming down the ridge. Then he went down, working the stiffness from his lean shanks.

\* \* \*

The Venters place was a sturdy one-room log house with an outside stone chimney the Venters boys had put up themselves. There was a small corral, strongly built, but if it had held animals at one time, they were no longer there. The gate was open.

Bailey moved cautiously, easing himself down the wooded slope flanking the cabin. He made no noise but a bay horse picketed in front of the door pulled tautly at its tether and whinnied.

Bailey froze.

A shadow moved out of the cabin, pausing by the alarmed animal. A faint glint winked and faded against the indistinctness of the shadow—it might have been the reflection of a drawn Colt or merely the light from the man's belt buckle.

Bailey eased his Colt into his left hand. He was ambidextrous, and in tight quarters he liked to keep his right hand free.

Something moved in the shadow past the cabin, off the faintly visible trail leading up from the valley.

The shadowy figure moved away from the bay and starlight etched a long, lean body and showed plainly the heavy Colt in Larry Venters' hand. He was staring

watchfully down the trail, and Bailey realized the ticklishness of the situation. Venters would turn and shoot at the slightest movement. . . .

The sound of a jogging horse was a faint vibration in the stillness. It grew rapidly louder and Venters faded back into the shadows around the cabin.

A few minutes later Irene Galloway rode up to the cabin and called: "Larry!"

Venters came out of the shadows, sheathing his Colt. "Irene!" He reached up, his fingers closing on her arm, and pulled her toward him. She straightened after a moment. "We've got to ride, Larry. No time for this now. Not until we cross the line into Sonora."

Bailey took advantage of the moment to come down into the clearing. Larry was swinging up into the saddle of his bay when he said: "It's too far to make it tonight. An' don't squeeze that trigger, Venters. I'll kill you before you do."

Venters stiffened in saddle, indecision in his face. Irene said: "Dan Bailey! So that was why you—"

Twenty paces down the dim trail an orange red flare ripped the night. Venters groaned, fell sideways out of his saddle.

Bailey jerked around. A chunky figure paced toward them, a sixgun held low. "Shoot first, sheriff—that's my motto," Riordan said coldly. "You should know better than to palaver with a killer."

Bailey watched Riordan's face. So he had been followed, and by his deputy, who had ostensibly been tired out from a three-day manhunt. Bill Riordan, Lawyer Linton's choice for sheriff.

Things were beginning to fall into place.

The deputy was sliding forward, hiding his murderous intent behind a screen of words. "You did some mighty good guessin', Dan. Good thing I followed you. Never trust a killer like—"

The sheriff jumped sideways a split second before Riordan's gun splashed fire. He shot twice from a crouch and watched Riordan lurch around, a startled look on his hard face. And then Irene Galloway, fighting a frightened horse, rode the animal over the deputy.

Bailey caught the buckskin's reins, holding the plunging animal, pulling it away from the deputy's trampled body. Irene slid out of saddle and ran toward Venters,

a still dark blot on the ground beside the bay.

Bailey bent over Riordan. The deputy was dead. He straightened, and was turning toward the cabin, when the girl said fiercely: "Don't come near him, Dan! He didn't kill Easton!" She was holding Venters' Colt in her hand, trying to keep the muzzle up. "I'm not going to let you bring him in! You hear, Dan?" Her voice broke. "They won't—give him—a chance—"

"Put that gun away," Bailey said. He walked up to her while she wavered and took it from her. Then he knelt down beside Venters.

Riordan's shot had been high, just below Larry's right collarbone. The shock had stunned the kid, but he was coming to, breathing heavily. "You'll be all right," Bailey said. "Yo're too tough to let a thing like this do for you."

Venters sneered.

"I want the truth," Bailey said. "Who gave you that gun in jail?"

"You won't believe it," the kid said. His lips pulled back against his teeth in a hard grin. "Tom Linton!"

Bailey nodded. "Think you can stand the ride back to Palos Duros tonight?"

Venters shrugged.

**D**AWN MADE A FAINT gray crack over the desert, barely lightening the sleeping town of Palos Duros. The sheriff drew up on the edge of the arroyo a quarter of a mile from town. Riordan's body was draped across the front of his saddle.

Irene Galloway and Larry Venters flanked him. The kid was slumped over his saddle, his shirt front caked over the rough bandage Irene had wrapped around his wound.

"Here's the key," the sheriff said, passing it over to the girl. "Remember, I'll be ridin' in an hour after sunup." He looked across to Venters. "I'm gonna be bankin' on you, kid. Don't pass out on me."

Venters grinned. "I won't."

The sheriff watched them ride like gray shadows across the dark flatlands, heading for the rear of the sheriff's office. There was a chance some early riser might spot Venters and the girl before they reached the sanctuary of his office, and he did not relax until they had disappeared from view through the back door.

The town was stirring, beginning to go about its morning activities when Dan Bailey jogged down Concord Avenue with Riordan across his saddle. He rode at a lope, his face hard and unmindful of the questions yelled after him.

He saw Tom Linton's face against his office window as he passed—saw him out of the corner of his eyes. A small crowd trailed him to the office.

He dismounted, pulling Riordan down, hiding the dead man's face from the men hurrying up. "Someone get Doc Tabor," he yelled. He pushed open the door and closed it behind him.

Irene Galloway rose quickly from beside the blanket-covered figure on the cot past the desk.

"Stay here, out of sight," he whispered sharply. "I'll take care of things from now on."

Tom Linton and Harry Small, mayor of Palos Duros, were on the steps outside. Bailey let them in.

Tom Linton said: "We saw you ride in with Riordan." He glanced at the figure that moved slightly under the blanket. "What happened, Bailey? Who shot Riordan?"

Bailey shrugged. "I did!"

The lawyer stiffened. Mayor Small bristled. "You shot Riordan?"

Bailey said: "It isn't as bad as it sounds, Harry. He'll live long enough to talk."

He smiled. "I've sent for the doc. In the meantime Bill will talk. To save his own skin."

Mayor Small frowned. "Talk? What about?"

"Gene Easton," Dan said. "Riordan knows who killed Easton."

The mayor of Palos Duros was a small, energetic man and nobody's fool. "You've got proof of this, Dan?"

Dan nodded. He reached under his coat for the gun he had taken from Irene Galloway—the gun Venters had used to break jail. "Ever see this Smith & Wesson before, Harry? Pearl handles?"

The mayor shook his head. Linton's eyes were black beads.

"That's the gun Larry Venters used to break jail." Bailey turned to the lawyer. "That's yore gun, ain't it, Tom?"

"You're crazy!" Linton snapped. "I never saw that gun before."

"I did," Bailey said calmly. "You used to keep it in your desk. I guess others have seen it, too. You gave it to Larry Venters to break jail. You expected the kid to head for the border in a hurry, like his brother did."

"Riordan was your man," Bailey continued. "He was my deputy, but he worked for you. He made a show of hunting Venters down. He didn't ride far. I took a look at his horse when he came back. He didn't ride fifteen miles on that animal."

"What does that mean?" Linton sneered. He mopped his brow again and glanced at the man on the cot. "What does that prove?"

"That you didn't want Larry Venters to come to trial. Someone might have dug up the truth. You killed Easton, didn't you?"

The color went out of Linton's face. "That's a lie!" He mopped his face again.

"Damn you, Bailey!" he snarled. "I—"

He jerked around as the back door opened and Irene Galloway came out. He shot wildly, and Mayor Small knocked the gun out of his hand. Bailey came across the floor, kicking the .38 out of the way. Linton backed away under the cold threat of Bailey's gun.

"You were handlin' Easton's affairs, takin' more than your legal fee, I reckon," Bailey said. "Gene was a fool, but not that kind of a fool. You knew he'd get wind of it sooner or later an' crack down. So you followed him home the night of the dance, trailing behind Larry Venters, and killed Gene."

Bailey smiled. "All right, Larry," he said.

The figure on the cot sat up, discarding the shielding blanket. Mayor Small gasped: "Venters!" He turned to Bailey, shaking his head. "Dan—I saw you ride down the avenue with Riordan. I couldn't have been that blind!"

"Riordan's in there, Harry," Bailey said, jerking a thumb toward the back room. "Dead!"

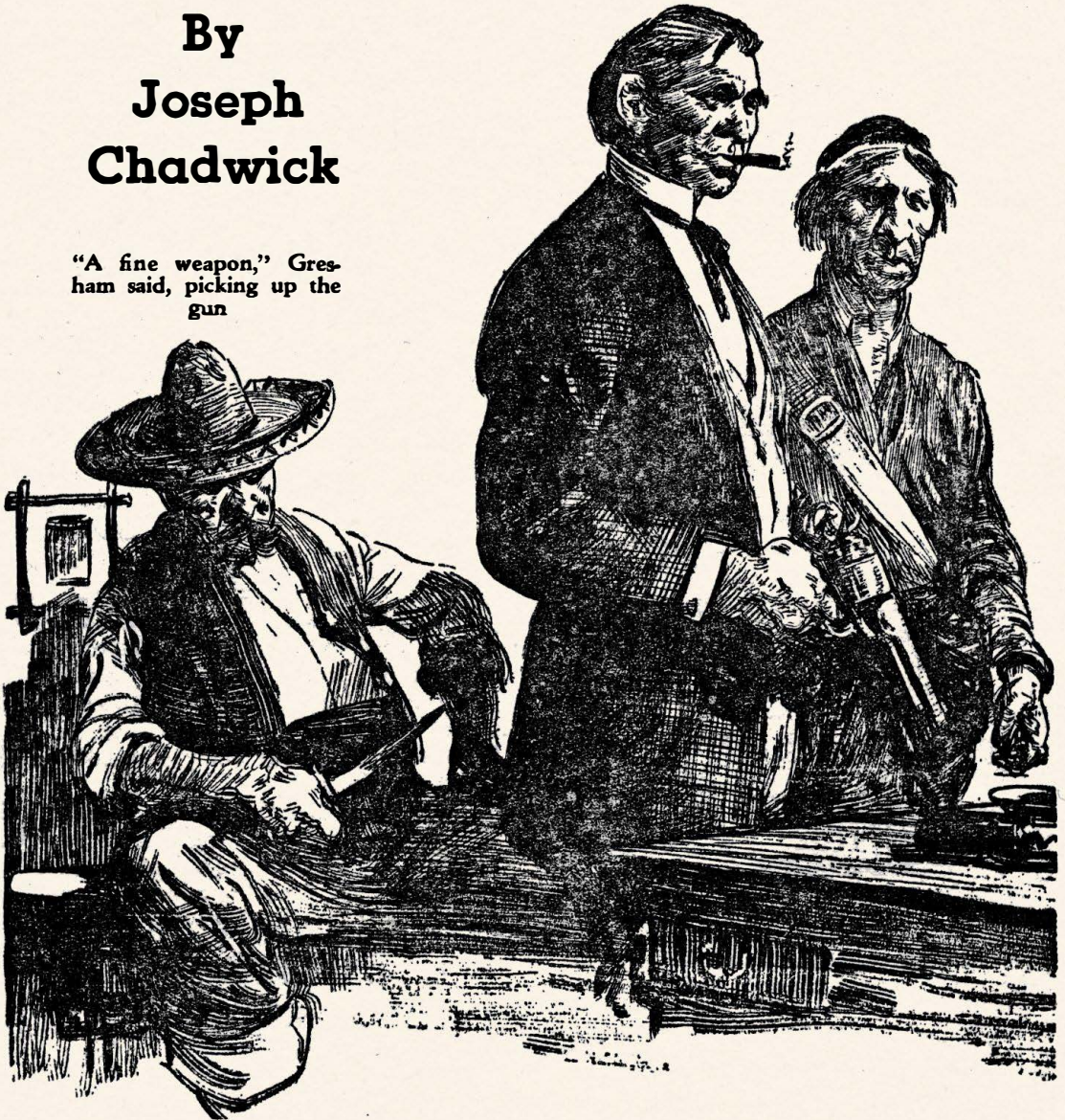
Linton leaned weakly against the door. Venters got to his feet and Irene joined him. "Guess we'll be goin', Sheriff," he said. "Unless you need me."

Bailey shook his head. "I've proved my point, kid."

# • LOS COBRADORES

By  
Joseph  
Chadwick

"A fine weapon," Gresham said, picking up the gun



**In one last desperate effort to save what was left of Johan Sutter's California Empire, Jonathan Blake, armed with the only Sam Colt in California, rode out to buck the play of the gold-mad, power-thirsty Matt Gresham, the man who had usurped Sutter's kingdom, had substituted murder for justice, and Winchester wisdom for Solomon's judgment.**



# MEAN DEATH!

Thrilling Saga of Early California



## CHAPTER ONE

### Hell at Sutter's Mill

**I**T WAS still a land, this California, where a man needed to know a few words of Spanish. He must understand, for example, the warning cry: "*Los cobradores! Los cobradores de impuestos!*" If it rang out in time, a man with such understanding could flee to the brush. For

those tax-collectors were, of a truth, sons of the devil.

They rode only on the darkest night, on fast horses, so that they could lose themselves if a hue and cry was raised. They went armed and masked, for a hang-rope awaited any overpowered or identified.

The Mexicans and the newly arrived Peruvians and Chileans were cowed by these *cobradores*, but the *Americanos*, a short tempered breed, were apt to resist with guns. But in Spanish tongue or Eng-

lish, the night riders were cursed as thieves—for why should a tax be levied on gold found upon land that no longer had an owner?

"So they call us *ladrones*, eh—thieves?"

There was sharp-edged humor in the speaker's voice, but his metallic eyes were unamused. The flickering glow of the campfire, by which he was hunkered, gave his face a ruddy hue. It was a young face with an embittered expression. His broad-brimmed California hat was pushed back from his brow, and a shock of unruly straw-colored hair lay above his steely eyes. Even in a squatting position, Jonathan Blake gave the impression of great size and immense strength. His knife cut savagely at the chunk of mutton that was his supper, as though it were an enemy.

"So now the thieves call honest men that," he said angrily.

Four other men like Jonathan, *cobradores* all, were circled about the fire munching greasy mutton and sipping wine. Their horses were picketed beyond the firelight, amid a stand of scrub pines. The camp was in the foothills, by the American River, upon land that, until short months ago, had been a part of Johan Sutter's great domain, New Helvetia. These five were Sutter's employes still, loyal to a king who had been dethroned. They ate and drank greedily, like doomed men at a last supper. Some or all of them might not enjoy another meal. There was tax to be collected tonight.

"They're calling us thieves, all right," muttered one of Jonathan's companions. He was a man of perhaps fifty, black-bearded. He was not so tall as Jonathan, but his body was as thick and solid as a tree trunk. His name was Les Harper, and he had been, until disaster struck, blacksmith at the Fort. "I'm just back from a trip up-river," he went on. "Pretending to be a prospector. There's ugly talk, and the tax will never be paid willingly."

"And, *senores*," put in Don Pablo Jiminez, "my people will slit the throat of the first of us they catch." He had been owner of a ranch, of half a league of California land. But like Captain Sutter, he had been despoiled by the horde of gold-seekers. His cattle had been slaughtered, his orchards ruined, his crops pulled up for the gold particles at their roots. A rowdy band had squatted in his *casa*, and now Don

Pablo had only a campfire for a home. He spoke mildly, but hatred was in his voice. "Cold steel is poor payment," he said, "for what a man has lost."

A silence fell.

Don Pablo's words had made them all uneasy.

JONATHAN flung aside his meat. Hunger was not yet satisfied, but appetite was gone. He searched the faces of his *compadres* for signs of fear that would bring on desertion. There was none on the blunt, bewhiskered countenance of Les Harper. Don Pablo's gaunt face was fatalistic. Neither of them were quitters. Jonathan shifted his probing gaze to Sam Garrett, who had been a carpenter for Sutter, and Garrett, reading that look, answered it with a half smile. Eli Warren, then. . . . a little man with a fringe of gray whiskers about his undistinguished face. Eli was loyal to the hilt. He had been with Johan Sutter since the founding of New Helvetia in '39, as a clerk. Eli had kept the colony's journals, and worried over its owner's eternal debts. Jonathan might as well have doubted his own loyalty.

He said, "We're risking our lives, but that's not saying we'll lose them. We've done all right, so far. We'll go on trying to collect ten per-cent of the gold these boomers find. Except what we need for provisions, guns and horses, we'll turn it over to Captain Sutter. Except. . . ." he looked at Don Pablo—"that you, *amigo*, will get a fair share."

Don Pablo murmured, "*Gracias*," in an empty voice. He was a man of land and cattle, caring little for gold.

Eli Warren said precisely, "Captain Sutter doesn't wholly approve. He doesn't want the few men loyal to him to lose their lives. Nor does he like the idea of collecting the tax at gun-point. . . ." He went on to admit that it had been Sutter's idea to collect a ten per-cent tax of all the gold found on his land about the Sacramento, American and Feather Rivers, but, on finding that the boomers wouldn't pay willingly, he had abandoned the scheme. Now the Swiss adventurer, driven from his Fort, was a sick and brooding man at the only place left him, his farm up north on the Feather. Eli Warren was his only liaison with his few loyal employes. The clerk

ended up, "The Captain is thinking of a trip to Washington, to appeal to the Government to help him get back his lands."

"There's hope in that?" Jonathan asked.

"A poor one," Eli replied. "Captain Sutter became a Mexican citizen, but not an American. He has no friends with political influence."

"He'll need money for the trip," Jonathan said. "We'll get it for him. He doesn't need to know how we get it."

He rose and strode to the horses among the trees, and returned with a pair of well-filled saddle-bags. He lay them beside Eli Warren, saying with a faint smile upon his youthful face, "Tax collected during the past two weeks. Tell Johan it was willingly paid."

Eli scratched at his fringe of whiskers, returned the smile. He stood up and hefted the saddle-bags. They were heavy for his frail strength. He said, "Well, you have my thanks—and the Captain's best wishes. I don't like to leave you bad news in exchange for this gold, but—well, you should be warned."

"What's this, Eli?" Jonathan asked.

"I stopped by the Fort to look things over," Eli said. "I talked with Russ Kahler, who's turned the place into a bazaar. Kahler is partners with Matthew Gresham—"

"That traitor!" Jonathan exclaimed, and cursed the name.

"Kahler suspected I was coming upriver to meet you *cobrades*," Eli went on, "and he gave me a warning. Matthew Gresham has posted a bounty offer of a thousand dollars in gold for the first man caught in the act of tax-collecting."

"Dead or alive, eh?"

"Just alive," Eli stated. "For some reason, Gresham wants one of you alive."

"So he can make that one talk," Jonathan muttered, "and name the rest. Damn it; Matthew Gresham is the worst of them all. He was the man Captain Sutter trusted most, and he was the first to betray him." He looked at the three men still squatting at the fire. "Friends," he said, "it's time Matthew Gresham pays some tax!"

the darkness. He had a small boat waiting for him at a hidden place down-river. It was manned by a couple of Captain Sutter's Kanakas, some of those natives he had brought from the Sandwich Islands, and would take him up the Sacramento to the Feather. . . . Jonathan and the other three headed north, riding without further talk. It had been decided. Tonight Matthew Gresham would make payment on his overdue taxes.

Thought of Gresham filled Jonathan with hatred.

He blamed Matthew Gresham for the disaster that had befallen New Helvetia, for the man had been Sutter's most trusted lieutenant at the time word had leaked out that Jim Marshal had found gold while building a sawmill. Sutter had tried to keep the discovery secret, but news of it had spread like wildfire. There had been pandemonium. All hell had broken loose in California.

Within a few weeks, two thousand men were swarming over Sutter's land. They came from San Francisco and the few other coast settlements. A little later three times that many had come in from Mexico and Central and South America. They lived off Sutter's beef and crops, slaughtering and foraging whenever hungry. They crowded into the Fort, and now Russ Kahler, a shrewd fat man from San Francisco, was operating it as a hotel. Johan Sutter still believed the swarm couldn't have been kept out, but he was a kindly man—too kind-hearted for his own good. Jonathan would always believe differently, and that was why he blamed Matthew Gresham.

It had been Gresham who was charged with maintaining discipline at the Fort. He drilled the Indian soldiers, and was responsible for the armory. . . . At the time, Sutter's Fort had been well equipped to withstand an invasion. Its walls were two and a half feet thick, the bastions five, and were mounted with the cannon Sutter had acquired when he purchased Fort Ross from the Russians. There had been sufficient guns, including many Napoleonic muskets from Ross. All the post buildings were inside the fort, and there had been plenty of provisions. But Matthew Gresham, though no peace-loving man like his employer, had let the place fall without a shot being fired.

Matthew Gresham had turned traitor,

**T**HE fire was scattered, the horses brought out and mounted. Farewells were spoken, and Eli Warren rode off into

because he too wanted to get a share of the precious metal that seemed to be wherever the ground was turned or a creek was panned. Gersham hadn't turned out his trained Indian-soldiers. He had had Jonathan thrown into one of the prison cells beneath the Fort's bastions because he had tried to organize a defense. Jonathan's loyalty couldn't be swayed by any amount of gold.

He had come to California in '47, traveling with the Mormon Battalion after Santa Fe had been taken by Kearny's Army of the West. Jonathan had been a Missouri Volunteer who hadn't wanted to return to Missouri. He had arrived in California without money. He had been hungry, and the benevolent owner of New Helvetia had given him a job when there were already too many employes. Loyalty was due such a man, especially when his fortunes failed. *Tonight, Jonathan told himself, we'll give Matthew Gresham a lesson in loyalty!*

A whisper came from Don Pablo, "A light ahead!"

"It's the Brownell place," Les Harper said. "We stopping, Jon?"

"No," Jonathan said, then thought better of it. There was a girl at the Brownell's little ranch. She was promised to Jonathan, and one day, when things were more settled, she would become his wife. It would be best to stop and see Susan, for a man who rode dangerous trails. . . . Despite himself, Jonathan shuddered. He was young, only twenty-four, and he did not like to think of death. He said, "Yes, we'll stop—for five minutes, only."

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Cobradores Ride

**H**ANK BROWNELL had a pack of savage dogs guarding his place, and they came loping out to the attack, snarling viciously, until Jonathan shouted his name and Hank called off the beasts. So far, the rancher had managed to keep the boomers off his land. He was fortunate in being situated well back from the beaten path. And in being a man ready to fight for his own. He'd come from Missouri in '41, with an immigrant outfit that had lost its wagons in the Great Basin. No man to work for hire, Hank raised crops and a few

cattle. He was married to a Mexican woman, and the Brownells had taken in Susan Wyler—given her a good home.

Susan was a dark-haired, grave-eyed girl of eighteen, an orphan. Her parents had died in the Sierra Nevadas, the winter of '46, and Susan was one of the few survivors of the tragic Donner party. She and the others had been rescued by men from Sutter's Fort, and taken to that place which was then a refuge for the unfortunate. Susan was just learning how to smile again. . . . It was a shy smile she gave Jonathan. He had her to himself, in the parlor, while Brownell had his buxom Maria talked with the other three riders in the kitchen.

Susan had been busy with some needlework, for her hope chest, but now her hands lay idle. She rocked gently, and watched Jonathan with timid eyes. Jonathan himself felt awkward. He saw her too seldom; they were still like strangers. He rummaged for words.

"You're still happy here, Susan?"

"Of course. Hank and Maria treat me—well, like a daughter," she replied. Then added, with downcast eyes: "But a woman belongs in a home of her own."

"Yes, I know. . . ."

"I keep wondering when it will be, Jon."

"Soon, I hope," Jonathan told her. He was suddenly very uncomfortable. "When I've done a good job for Captain Sutter, I'll start looking out for myself—for the two of us."

"But why does Captain Sutter need you, now?" Susan asked. "He's lost everything but his Feather River farm. Hank was saying just the other day that it's strange. . . . Your being so busy, he meant. I think he feels it's odd that you haven't started building a house for—for us."

That was boldness for Susan.

Jonathan knew that he was being rebuked. He didn't know what to say. He'd never given Susan or the Brownells any hint of what he was doing these days, but he'd taken it for granted that Hank suspected.

Eyes still downcast, Susan said, "You're sure that you want me for your wife, Jonathan?" Her hands were clasped now, and tightly. "If you've had a change of mind, you—well, I'll not hold you to any promise."

"Don't talk like that, Susan," he said, squirming. "You'll have your own house. I won't make you wait much longer.

"Just how much longer?" Susan said. "Or have I no right to ask?"

Jonathan frowned.

She was trying to pin him down to a definite date. Perhaps she was eager to have her own home, and had grown anxious because of the delay. But Jonathan was sure that it was more a matter of pride, born of Hank Brownell's talk about this being a strange work that kept Jonathan from completing his own plans. A seed of doubt must have been sewn. . . . And Jonathan dared not tell Susan why they must wait. The truth would frighten her, for certainly she had heard of the *cobradores*. Too, if Susan knew, she would certainly plead with him to quit Captain Sutter. She would not understand that there was a debt to be paid.

"Give me a little time," he said. "Say, one month longer."

"Yes, Jonathan."

"No longer, I promise," he told her.

He rose and said that he must be going. Her frown was faint, but behind it was real displeasure. Susan had spirit. Jonathan stood turning his hat around and around in his hands. He loomed big in the little parlor. Finally he moved jerkily to Susan, bent over her. With no apparent movement, Susan managed to present not her lips but her cheek for his peck of a kiss. There was a chill in the Brownell parlor.

"One month, Susan," Jonathan said.

"Yes, I know," she replied. "Goodby, Jonathan."

Jonathan muttered, "Goodby," and strode from the house. He knew that Susan's displeasure was close to anger. And somehow he could not blame her. It was hard for someone to wait, when the necessity for that waiting was unexplained.

\* \* \*

They rode on through the night, heading for Vaquero Creek where many of the gold-boomers were concentrated. Matthew Gresham was operating in this section, having set up his headquarters on the Vaquero. Gresham was not a man to bend his back or soil his hands, even for gold. He made use of some of Sutter's Indian workers;

they dug or panned the precious metal for Gresham, and he supplied them with food and the few necessities they were accustomed to. Half a dozen armed white men acted as overseers—and guards. Gresham and his men were quick to seize, by bluff or by force, any land that looked promising. And no man, not even the most lawless of the gold-seekers, dared stand up to them.

Jonathan Blake hadn't seen Gresham since that day months ago when they had fallen out over the defense of the Fort. But he had heard talk of the man's high-handed methods. Matthew Gresham was rapidly replacing Johan Sutter as the power of Sacramento Valley—and the change was far from a good one. Jonathan thought grimly, *A rope about that blackleg's neck would save the country a lot of grief.*

It was midnight when Jonathan and his companions reined in amid a stand of timber. They were atop a ridge overlooking a valley between low hills. Vaquero Creek glistened darkly, a twisting ribbon through the valley. Dying campfires red-speckled the darkness.

Don Pablo said, low-voiced, "Gresham's camp is on the north side. There is a building where he and his *compadres* sleep. His Indians have some huts nearby. Some of my people have diggings on the south side."

"We'll hit Gresham's camp," Jonathan said. "It will be enough for one night. We'll break into the building and try to keep Gresham and his men from grabbing their guns."

"Supposing they get their guns?" Les Harper asked.

"We'll pull out," Jonathan replied, "and come back another time."

They donned their neckscarf masks, checked their rifles and pistols. Only Jonathan was armed with one of the new six-shot revolvers. He had come by the long-barreled Colt, which he carried in his waistband, at Santa Fe. He had been on patrol one night with a squad of Missouri Volunteers, and a suspicious acting Mexican had been captured. Jonathan had disarmed the man of the revolver. It was the first such weapon he had seen, though he had heard that some of General Zachary Taylor's men on the Texas border were so armed. . . . Jonathan could only guess how the Mexican *peon* had come by it; but now

it was his as war booty, and serving a good cause.

The Colt in his hand, Jonathan said, "Let's get it over with," and led the way toward Gresham's gold camp.

**T**HEY dismounted by a tangled clump of chaparral, and Sam Garrett stayed with the horses. Jonathan, Don Pablo, and the black-bearded Les Harper went on afoot. They could make out the building now, a squat log house with a door on the creek side. The embers of a cookfire glowed a dull red before a neighboring lean-to shelter.

Jonathan saw a wagon-wheel rim of iron hanging from the limb of a dead tree; evidently it served as a gong to rouse the camp in the morning and to bring the men in from the diggings for meals. The lean-to was the cook shack. Farther along the creek were the Indian-workers' huts. No guards appeared.

This was to be close work, so the rifles had been left in their saddle scabbards. Jonathan and the other two *cobradores* reached the log building with their hand guns cocked. Don Pablo had picked up a stem of brush, ignited it in the fire embers, and it flamed as a torch.

Jonathan kicked open the door, leapt into the place. Les Harper and Don Pablo crowded close after him. The brush torch threw a flare of light about the room. Jonathan's shout, "Wake up, you!" brought two startled men from the bunks. He was surprised that there were but two. He had expected half a dozen, at least.

A candle in a bottle stood on the table, and Don Pablo lighted it with his rapidly dying torch. The two men, in bare feet and underwear, held their empty hands high. One whispered, "*Los cobradores!*" He was a swarthy faced man with fear in his eyes. His fellow was a red-faced, paunchy sort who showed more anger than alarm. Jonathan knew the red-faced man as Jeb Mitchell; before the scramble for gold, Mitchell had run the leather tannery at the Fort.

"Where's Gresham?" Jonathan demanded, uneasily wondering if Mitchell would recognize him despite his mask. "Where are the others?"

"Gresham's down-river," Mitchell said grudgingly. "You'll find out where the

rest of the crew are, before you get away from here."

"Whereabouts down-river did Gresham go?"

"To the Fort—damn you!"

Jonathan didn't like Mitchell's manner. It might be mere bravado, and it could be something more. It was strange that but two men were in the building. He told Les Harper to keep the two covered and Don Pablo to guard the door. Jonathan saw a big wooden chest standing by one wall. He crossed and lifted the lid. The chest was partially filled with leather pouches heavy with dust.

"We'll take one-tenth," Jonathan said, to the Gresham men.

Mitchell cursed him. The swarthy man remained silent, tried to make himself small before Les Harper's levelled pistol. Jonathan told Don Pablo to whistle for the horses, and shortly Sam Garrett came leading them. Don Pablo fetched the saddlebags, and Jonathan filled them with pokes from the chest. It was a fine haul, perhaps seven or eight thousand dollars. Jonathan could have taken it all, of course, but he was content with a tenth share. That was as much as Johan Sutter had ever asked of the boomers who ruined him. The heavy saddle bags were carried out and placed on the horses.

Jonathan returned to the building, relieved Harper.

"I'll guard these two until you're riding out," he said.

He waited until the other three were mounted and heading out, then he backed out and swung to the saddle of his big black gelding. Jeb Mitchell followed to the doorway, and said, "Friend, you won't get away with this."

"Tell Gresham we were here," Jonathan said. "Tell him we'll be back again—soon."

He swung the black about, used his spurs to lift it into a hard run. He could see his three companions racing for the hills. Then behind a loud clanging broke out. Jonathan muttered an oath. Jeb Mitchell was sounding an alarm by beating the gong with an iron bar. It could only mean that the rest of the Gresham crew was somewhere in the neighborhood. Suddenly gunshots rang out up ahead. Rifles and single-shot pistol fire mixed with the yells of Jonathan's guard.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Bushwhack Bait

ANOTHER minute, and they would have made good their escape. Jonathan blamed himself. He should have left Mitchell and his companion trussed up. But a man couldn't think of everything. There had been no way of knowing that Matthew Gresham had anticipated that the *cobradores* would visit his camp—and had his men posted about the valley diggings. But there was still a chance.

Jonathan saw that two of his companions had gotten past the blazing guns. The third, Sam Garrett, was hit but clung to his racing horse. It was up to Jonathan now, but the Gresham men were running to head him off. He counted three of them, then two more coming from across the creek. They were reloading their rifles and pistols as they closed in. Jonathan jabbed spurs to the black. He swung his Colt gun up.

A rifle cracked, the flash of powder flame bright in the darkness.

Jonathan's revolver roared. The riflemen went down.

There was bedlam now. The Mexican diggings were aroused, and Spanish yells rang out. The shout, *Los Cobradores!* lifted and was echoed. Jonathan missed his second shot, but his third brought a scream from a Gresham man. A pistol blazed, and its ball ripped through Jonathan's buckskin jacket. But he was in the clear. Almost in the clear. The two from across the creek fired after him. One missed. The other targetted Jonathan's horse.

The hit animal went down in a thrashing heap, throwing Jonathan over its head. He struck the ground hard, on left shoulder and head. The jolting pain left him breathless. He was stunned, but tried to pick himself up. He got to his knees, but his brain was reeling. He slumped down. They were upon him, then, one beating him around the head with a clubbed pistol and another booting him in the body. Chattering Mexicans swarmed over the creek, shouting for a hanging.

"Stand back, dammit!" a man bellowed. "Stand back, or I'll crack some skulls!"

Jeb Mitchell came up, a pistol in one hand and a lantern in the other. The still growing crowd fell partly back. Mitchell

growled, "Pull off his mask. We'll have a look at the dirty son."

The mask was ripped from Jonathan's face.

Mitchell swore, then laughed with mocking amusement. "So it's you, Blake. This'll be something for Matt Gresham to hear about!"

"We hanging him, Jeb?" another Gresham man asked.

"Hang, nothing," growled Mitchell. "He's worth a thousand dollars of Matt Gesham's gold—alive. We're taking him down-river, to the Fort." He paused, chuckled again. "Maybe there'll be a hanging down there. Boys, this looks like the end of the *cobradores!*"

A clammy sweat broke out on Jonathan. Only a fool would not have known fear at such a time. Jonathan's fear was no easier to bear when he thought of Susan.

IT WAS sundown of the day following Jonathan's capture when they reached the five acres Johan Sutter had walled with adobe. Jonathan was heavily guarded. Jeb Mitchell was taking no chances of any *cobradores* taking his prisoner away from him. With the burly Mitchell were two other white men and four Mission Indians who once had been members of the Fort's garrison. Jonathan rode with his hands tied to the pommel. His mount was led by one of the Indians, who never let go of its reins. The party had been in the saddle since early morning, and now it reached the Fort's main gate.

This was Jonathan's first visit since the place had fallen, and it hurt him to see the changes. Once it had been a beehive of industry, but now its workshops were idle. The tannery was shut down, and the flour mill had been converted into a store of shoddy merchandise. The bakery was now a grubby eating-place. A barracks that once had quartered the Indian soldiers was now a saloon, with a crowd of men in various stages of drunkenness, crowded about it. Horses were stabled in the blacksmith shop. The adobe houses were occupied by Mexican and Indian women of the sort who followed every gathering of rowdy men. Sutter's big adobe building was now Russ Kahler's hotel. As Eli Warren had reported, Sutter's Fort was turned into a bazaar. There no longer was any discipline.

The arrival of a prisoner under guard of seven armed riders drew a crowd. As soon as the word, *cobradore*, was mentioned, an angry muttering rose. Some of these men worked diggings up-river and had been victims of the tax-collectors. The others were hostile because of a belief that they might become such victims. They cursed Jonathan. Some flung rocks and clods of earth at him until one missile hit Jeb Mitchell and he drew his pistol and made loud threats.

They swung over to the hotel and reined in. Matthew Gresham came out with the fat hotelman, Russ Kahler. Gresham's thin lips curled with a mirthless grin as he recognized Jonathan Blake. "So you're one of them?" he said. "I should have guessed that."

He was a bulky man, though not in the flabby way of his partner, Kahler. Gresham had solid brawn, and he carried himself with the swagger of a man aware of his strength and good appearance. He had a distinguished look, his hair being shot through with silver and his features boldly chiseled. A man of about forty-five, Matthew Gresham had held responsible Government office before a scandal forced him to leave Washington. He had reached California in '42, coming ashore from a whaling ship, and almost at once became trusting Johan Sutter's right-hand man. . . . No charity was in his dark eyes as he stared at Jonathan Blake. Matthew Gresham was known as a ruthless man.

"I was expecting you *cobradores* to visit my camp," he said flatly. "That's why my men had a trap all set. They'd been waiting for weeks, Blake. You were slow in falling into it."

Jonathan remained silent. He knew that nothing he could say would save him.

"How many were with him?" Gresham asked of Jeb Mitchell.

"Three, that I saw," Mitchell said. "The others got away. We'd have hanged this one, only you said he was worth a thousand dollars to you alive."

"You'll get your money," Gresham told him. "You bring Blake inside. Have the rest of your men stand guard and keep this rabble. . . ." He gestured toward the crowd—"outside."

Jonathan was taken off his horse, and his hands were bound behind him. Mitchell

gave him a needless shove, and he followed Gresham and Kahler into the building. Mitchell came close on his heels. They entered a room furnished only with a writing-table and chairs. Jeb Mitchell lay Jonathan's Colt revolver on the table, saying, "They're well armed, Matt."

"A fine weapon," Gresham said, picking up the gun. "But they're not all armed like that. Blake brought this gun with him when he came from Santa Fe."

He opened the table drawer, placed the Colt in it. He took out and lighted a cheroot, then seated himself at the table. He lay out a sheet of paper, dipped pen to inkwell, placed it by the paper.

"You'll write down the names of your bandit-friends, Blake," he said. "It's the only way to save yourself from hanging."

"I'll hang if I talk and if I don't talk," Jonathan muttered. "I've got nothing to say or write down."

Gresham scowled, puffed hard on his cheroot.

Russ Kahler said, "He'll never give away his friends, Matt."

"He will—now or later," Gresham said sourly. "And it would be easier for him and for us, if it's now." He looked back at Jonathan who stood taller than any of them. "Maybe you'll have to be convinced that I'm in earnest," Gresham went on. "I'm playing for big stakes, Blake. When word reaches the East that we've found gold here, people will come by the thousands. I'm getting ready for that. I'm going to sell them the lands they'll want and the goods they'll need. Maybe I'll do some tax-collecting on my own. Johan Sutter is done, and I'm taking his place. My word will be law, and the only power the boomers will fear will be mine—backed by my armed men. I can't have any Sutter men calling themselves *cobradores* and preying on the gold-seekers. By smashing your band, I'll establish my power—my authority—here in California. You see, Blake? I won't let any group of men stand in my way."

"I'm convinced," Jonathan said. "But you'll never learn the names of my friends from me."

Gresham banged the table with his fist, in sudden rage.

Jeb Mitchell had a quirt dangling from his right wrist. He swung it up and down, lashing Jonathan hard across the face. The



pain was intense. It blinded Jonathan momentarily. He reeled back against the wall. Mitchell followed him up, striking him time and time again. The leather cut like a knife, and Jonathan's face grew bloody. He strained at his bonds, but they held. He suddenly doubled up, lunged forward, ramming his head into Mitchell. The man cursed, drove his knee into Jonathan's face. Jonathan lost his balance, fell sprawling.

Russ Kahler was squeamish and looked sick. "I told you he'll never talk," he muttered.

"He'll talk, all right," Gresham said flatly. "Once he's hungry and thirsty enough. Mitchell, lock him up in one of the bastion cells!"

JOHAN SUTTER had enforced discipline with a threat of imprisonment, and his prisons had been built beneath the fort's thick bastions. Jonathan was thrown into one of these underground cells. It was like a dungeon, dark and all but airless, and the only window was a small barred one in the heavy iron-banded door. The cell was bare. It was escape proof. Jonathan could see little from the door opening—a flight of beaten earth stairs and the boots of the sentry patrolling back and forth above. Only the sentry's boots, and sometimes, when he stopped pacing to rest, the stock of his rifle.

Why Matthew Gresham saw fit to place a guard over a prisoner without hope of escape, Jonathan did not know, unless it was because the traitor was a man who took minute precautions. Jonathan was astounded by Gresham's ambitious plans. He had believed the man wanted nothing more than gold. But Matthew Gresham was after power, as well.

The night was an eternity.

Sounds reached Jonathan dimly. Occasionally there came the sound of a Mexican woman laughing in abandonment, and the harsher laughter of drunken men. Once Jonathan heard curses, shouts, gunshots, an agonized scream. He told himself that Johan Sutter was well gone from this place, as it had become. . . . He tried to sleep, but could not. He lay thinking of Susan, torturing himself with the knowledge that he would not see her again. He had left her displeased that night, angry. But when she

heard of what had happened to him, she would be heartbroken. Susan would be a widow before she was ever a bride. . . . Jonathan had no hope, at all. Gresham and his men would either kill him in an attempt to make him talk or hang him. There was no escape.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Only One Day More

IT WAS Jonathan's second day of imprisonment. He'd had no bite of food or sip of water since coming to the Fort. Hunger made him weak, and thirst was a torment.

When the door was unbarred, pulled open, the paunchy, red-faced Jeb Mitchell stepped into the cell. He gave Jonathan, who was slumped in a loose sitting position against the adobe wall, a wicked grin and slapped his quirt against the palm of his left hand.

Behind Jeb Mitchell came Matthew Gresham, puffing on a cheroot. Two other white men followed, treacherous looking brutes, and then two Mission Indians. The group spread out in a semi-circle, stared down at Jonathan. Jeb Mitchell kept grinning, continued to toy with his whip.

"We're both men of above average intelligence, Blake," Gresham said, carefully picking his words. "It's foolish for us to buck each other. I'm willing to reason with you—to give you a chance. If you'd be willing to renounce Sutter, we could work together. I could make use of you—and carry you up with me."

He paused, waited, but Jonathan said nothing.

"I want to know how many *cobrades* there are. And their names," Gresham went on. "I'll be lenient. My men will round them up, and I'll imprison them for a reasonable length of time—say, six months. Then if they're willing to stop their banditry, I'll pardon them. They'll be freed to take up any peaceful occupation they wish."

Again Gresham waited.

He was convincing, so long as he talked. But Jonathan looked into his dark eyes, and knew the man was lying. He would hang every *cobradore* who was captured, for that was a simple and, for Matthew Gresh-

ham, an inexpensive way of establishing his authority over the gold country. Jonathan could see his own death warrant in those murky eyes.

He said, "You're wasting your time," in the hollowest of tones.

Gresham swore and bit down hard on his cheroot.

Jeb Mitchell muttered, "I told you, Matt. Your way's no good." He gestured with his quirt, and the two hardcases leapt at Jonathan.

He came up onto wobbly legs, met their rush with arms that lacked strength. He floored one with a lucky blow, but the man got his arms about Jonathan's legs. The other hardcase leapt upon Jonathan's back. They felled him. One of the Indians came with a length of rawhide, the other with a rope. Jonathan was weighted down, made helpless.

There was an iron ring fixed into the ceiling timbers, and the rope was run through it. The rope's other end was looped about Jonathan's already bound hands. His arms were hauled over his head, stretched until his weight was on tip-toe, then the rope was tied to another iron ring which was fitted into the adobe wall. Jonathan hung stretched, his muscles straining. Jeb Mitchell began to lash out with his quirt . . . It took a long time for unconsciousness to come and give Jonathan relief.

Even then they would not let up.

One of the Indians brought a gourd of water and splashed it over the torture victim, bringing him to. Gresham said, "Change your mind, Blake?" Jonathan tried to curse him, but his voice uttered only an incoherent grunt. They knew it was refusal, however, and Mitchell, his heavy face dull red with rage, slammed a fist into Jonathan's stomach. . . .

**J**ONATHAN had other dull flashes of consciousness, but it was night again when his mind wholly cleared. He found himself alone, sprawled out on the rammed-earth floor. He moved a little and every part of his big body hurt. His head throbbed with its pain, and he was weaker than ever. Every fibre of his body ached for water. His lungs pained for lack of air. He crawled, dragged himself, to the door. He worked himself up and pressed his face against the barred square. The cool night

air was curing medicine, and he gulped it in.

Neither pain nor weakness left him, but gradually he became steadier. It was brightly moonlight outside. Jonathan could clearly see the marching boots of his guard. Every a minute or so, the sentry passed Jonathan's limited range of vision. The man was merely a pair of boots, to Jonathan, but suddenly he was a voice too. A woman's voice replied to whatever the sentry had said. She spoke in low-voiced Spanish. She giggled. A moment later a pair of small bare feet and the hem of a skirt—the short skirt worn by Mexican women—joined the pair of boots. There was more talk, chuckles and giggles. In a little while the woman went away.

The boots came nearer, descended the steps, and Jonathan saw the sentry's bearded face. The man whispered, "Blake, I've got food and water for you. One of the Mex women fetched it. You swear you'll not tell Gresham I passed it on to you?"

Jonathan thought, *A Mexican woman?* He said, "I'll never tell Gresham anything. You know that. Hand it through!"

He took the gourd of water first, and drained it greedily.

The food was wrapped in a cloth. There was a big chunk of cold beef and half a dozen biscuits. Jonathan started wolfing it, then caught himself up and ate sparingly. He was afraid too much food all at once would sicken him. *I'll eat the rest before daybreak*, he told himself. He re-wrapped it in the cloth, and wondered, *Why would a Mexican woman send food and water to me?*

He told himself it might have been Hank Brownell's wife, Maria, and denied it the same instant. No man would send his woman on such a mission. Hank wouldn't let his Maria venture to the Fort nowadays. Jonathan wondered if Don Pablo, good friend that he was, had sent some woman of his acquaintance. Somehow he didn't think that was the answer. Some woman who was a Fort hanger-on, one of those in the adobe houses . . . ? That didn't seem likely.

Jonathan gave it up. His mind was in no shape to wrestle with riddles. He peered out the narrow opening in the door. His sentry friend was pacing to and fro, and refused to heed Jonathan's call.

Jonathan slept half the night, woke hungrier than ever, and ate the remainder of the food. He wished for more water, much more, but that was out of the question. The cloth he folded and tucked away inside his shirt. He stretched out and slept again, until a bit of sunlight filtered through the barred window. He went and looked out. The night sentry had been relieved. Jonathan could tell by the boots. These were harder worn and more patched than the others. . . . He took out the cloth and studied in the thin shaft of light.

It was a square of faded red calico of a floral design.

Jonathan knew then. Susan often wore an apron of this material; the patch he held had been torn from that apron, and it had been Susan's way of communicating with him. Masquerading as one of the Fort's Mexican women, she hadn't dared call out to him. Sudden panic came. Susan inside this place, asking questions, mingling with the rabble? Jonathan was more frightened for her now than for himself.

He groaned.

Those Spanish words, that Mexican accent, the señorita giggle—it wasn't like Susan. She had picked all that up from Maria Brownell, of course, but—*damn Hank for letting her leave the ranch!* Jonathan began pacing, like a wild animal in a cage.

Late in the afternoon Matthew Gresham came to the door and peered in, and Jonathan simulated a badly beaten man by lying sprawled. Gresham said flatly, "A hard way to die, Blake. Be reasonable, save yourself."

Jonathan muttered an oath.

Gresham's patience was running out. "I'll give you one more day!" he shouted. "One day, Blake—and then you'll hang! One man or a dozen, it'll show that mine's the only authority in the gold country!"

He went away.

Jonathan grinned with his battered lips. Matthew Gresham was worried, not knowing how many or how few *cobradores* there were. But a doomed man's amusement was a shallow thing. In Jonathan, despair replaced it.

At least he had peace that day. No torturers came to the cell. The sentry was changed at noon and again at sundown. Last night's guard was on duty again;

Jonathan recognized his boots. Jonathan kept watch at the door, expecting Susan—wanting to see her, yet hoping she would not come. It was perhaps two hours after nightfall that she came. Jonathan saw at least the small bare feet. He had difficulty believing that Susan would go like that, in the way of the overly bold Mexican women. He heard again the sentry's low words and chuckle, and the Mexican accent and señorita giggle. . . . It was Susan's voice!

They talked long this time, and then it was the girl who descended to the cell. She brought food and water. Jonathan hardly knew her. Her hair was naturally dark, but her skin was almost as fair as his own. She had done something to her complexion. Jonathan remembered a Missouri Volunteer who had entered Santa Fe before its fall to Kearny's army; he had known what happened to spies, so he had disguised himself by dressing like a peon and darkening his skin with a dye made from the shells of certain nuts. . . . Susan must have hit upon the same idea.

She was at the door, she whispered, "Jon—Oh, Jon!" Then her voice became steadier. "Listen, Jon. . . . I have only a minute. I flirted with the guard so he would let me come here, but he's frightened and may make me leave. Jon, we're trying to find a way to free you!"

"You and Hank?"

"Yes. And the others. Les Harper, Sam Garrett and Don Pablo," the girl said. Jonathan only half heard; he was enchanted by her. Her crimson skirt clung to her slim figure, and her chemise exposed much of her smooth shoulders and her full bosom. Her *rebozo*, about her head and lying loosely over the otherwise bare shoulders, was fetching. Without a doubt Mexican women knew how to dress to catch men's eyes. . . . Susan was saying, with a rush of words, "We're trying to find others to help, but we don't know who to trust. Think, Jon! Do you know of anything your friends can do?"

"Susan, get away from here," he said. "Go back to the Brownells!"

"Think, Jon!"

He knew that she would not heed him. Susan had changed her nature when she donned those clothes and stained her skin. He tried to think, but decided only that it was hopeless. Four men and a girl couldn't

save him. He said, "It can't be done, Susan. Gresham has too many men here. There must be a couple hundred. It would take an army, unless a way could be found to draw most of them away from the Fort."

He hesitated, caught up by an idea.

"Listen, Susan. . . . Only one thing would get Gresham and his men away from here," he said. "A new gold strike. If a man could show up with a nugget and claim he found a bonanza not far off. . . ."

Susan grasped the idea. "A fake strike, Jonathan!"

He nodded jerkily, "It'd have to be tomorrow. Gresham's giving me only one day longer."

Susan cried, "Oh, no!" The sentry called out nervously. Susan thrust the food and water gourd through to Jonathan, then whirled about. She talked with the guard a little while, then went away. Jonathan stood by the door, the food and water he held forgotten. He had a small hope now, yet he was afraid of it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Sam Colt for California

JONATHAN ate his food and drank the water before daybreak, then, as the sun rose, he told himself, *This is the day*. His hope was a dismal one now. He kept thinking that Susan might not have gotten away, that some of the Fort's rabble might have seized her. He didn't want to dwell upon that, yet he couldn't down the fear. Too, he was sure that his crazy scheme would not work even if Susan had gotten back to wherever Hank Brownell were waiting. His friends could find a nugget of gold that would set the rabble wild; Jonathan knew that Hank had some fine ore specimens. But it would take some doing to bait the crowd away from the Fort in one day's time. . . . And which for the four men would risk bringing that nugget in with a story of a newly located bonanza? Jonathan knew that would take a brave man with a glib tongue. . . . He could only wait.

It was in the middle afternoon when the monstrously fat Russ Kahler came down to the cell door. The hotelman was nervous, and his flabby face was sweat-beaded. He was even afraid of a man behind a barred door.

"Gresham sent me, Blake," he muttered. "But I was glad to come. I don't like violence, and I'd hate to see a hanging here. He's willing to bargain with you. Give him the names of the *cobradores* and save yourself. Join up with him, and forget Sutter."

Jonathan kept silent.

Kahler's loose mouth worked. He did seem eager to avoid a hanging and convinced that Gresham would free the prisoner. "If you turn me down," he said, "he'll hang you before dark tonight."

"I won't talk, Kahler," Jonathan said.

Kahler sighed, turned, labored up the prison steps.

An hour later, Jonathan heard a commotion. He was at the door at once, straining to hear. The guard called out a question to someone, and Jonathan's spirits sank as he heard the reply: "A big bunch of gold-hunters just coming in—from Oregon." He had hoped that Hank or one of the *cobradores* was there spreading word of the false gold strike.

His hope flared again as the sun lowered. There was another outbreak of shouts. This time the excitement lasted. Guns were shot off and there was a sound of horses being ridden to and fro. It kept up for an hour, and the cell began to grow dark. Suddenly Jonathan missed the marching boots. The sentry was gone!

The noise diminished, finally died away entirely, and Jonathan no longer doubted. His scheme had been tried, and it had worked, and the rowdy Fort crowd had rushed away in the hope of sharing a new strike. A pair of boots appeared. A shadowy figure hustled down the steps, said low-voiced, "Jonathan, you there?" It was Hank Brownell.

The bar was lifted from its sockets, cast aside, and the door pulled open. Jonathan leapt out and flung his arms about the rancher.

"You pulled it off, eh, Hank?"

"A friend of mine baited the riff-raff out to Irish Bar," Hank said. "It was your scheme, yours and Susan's, and my friend—Mike Burton—took the risk. I only supplied a chunk of gold quartz." He turned grave. "Come on. We've got to clear out. Gresham and a few others didn't swallow the bait!"

He thrust a pistol into Jonathan's hand.

They climbed the steps in a hurry.

Les Harper loomed from the shadows of the adobe wall, grinning through his beard. "Don Pablo and Sam Garrett are waiting with the horses over by the blacksmith shop," he said. "We'll head for there."

They had to cross an open space, a wide stretch of moonlight, and when they were in the middle of it a yell lifted from Kahler's hotel: "By damn; that's Blake!" The yell became a howl, "Blake's loose!"

It was the hardcased Jeb Mitchell yelling.

Jonathan gasped, "Let's run for it!"

They started out, but Mitchell's gun blasted and Les Harper cried out and stumbled, nearly going down. Hank Brownell grabbed him, kept him on his feet. Jonathan fired his pistol's one load, and missed. He flung it away, wished he had back his six-shot Colt. Gresham and some others came from the hotel to join Jeb Mitchell. More shots rang out. Jonathan sprinted after Brownell and Harper, took the wounded man's pistol. They made it to the blacksmith shop where five horses were being held by Don Pablo and Sam Garrett. Gresham's men were coming on, closing in. It took precious seconds to get Les Harper, who was wounded in the thigh, onto his horse. But finally they were mounted. Gresham's men had slowed up, some to reload their guns and some out of timidity. Jonathan and the vengeful Don Pablo led the escape.

One man went down as Jonathan fired Les Harper's gun. Another was just ahead. Jonathan leaned from the saddle, clubbed down with the pistol, and his victim dropped under the blow. Don Pablo toppled a third. Two others fled. Jonathan swung his horse at the bulky red-faced Jeb Mitchell, who was aiming a pistol. Mitchell fired, but the ball went wide. The man tried to jump aside, and jumped the wrong way. He went down under the hoofs of Jonathan's horse, and Jonathan's blood curdled at the sound of shoe-iron against flesh.

They were in the clear now, with no one between them and the gateway. But Jonathan saw Matthew Gresham, who hadn't led or followed his men in the attack, backing through the hotel doorway. He swung

his mount toward the big adobe, leapt from it as Gresham started to shut the door. He threw his weight against it, flung it wide. Gresham darted away, and Jonathan ran after him. They reached the room where Jonathan had been questioned the first night, and Gresham reached the writing table.

He jerked open the drawer, grabbed out the Colt revolver.

Jonathan stopped dead. The gun swung up, levelled at him, and Gresham cocked it. Gresham was desperate, panicky, and wild with rage.

"Now—damn you!" he yelled.

Jonathan heaved his empty pistol. The Colt roared, but Gresham had ducked the thrown weapon and his aim was off. Jonathan leapt against the table, shoving it against the man. Gresham reeled back, slammed against the wall. He tried to fire again, but Jonathan had leapt over the table and lunged against him. Gresham clubbed at him with the Colt. Jonathan took the blow on the shoulder. He got his hands on the man's throat, drove his knee into his groin. Gresham went limp with pain, collapsed, dragged Jonathan down with him. The gun went off, with Gresham atop it, and the roar was muffled. Jonathan felt the life go out of the man. Matthew Gresham had been killed by a gun in his own hand.

Jonathan released his throat hold, rose, turned the body over and took up the weapon.

They rode from Sutter's Fort, Jonathan and his four companions. Les Harper's wound was painful but not serious. Luck was with him, as it had been with Sam Garrett the night of the visit to the Gresham camp up-river when he had received a minor shoulder wound. Now they were beyond the high adobe walls, and Jonathan said, "Where's Susan? I've got to see her?"

He had to tell her that now he would begin building their future.

Hank Brownell told him, "You'll see her in an hour. She's out at our camp back in the hills, safe with Maria. . . . And what a girl she is!"

Jonathan smiled but said nothing. He knew that Susan was all that a man could hope to find in a woman.

THE END

# WAR-CRY OF THE WILDERNESS KING

By  
Harold F.  
Cruickshank



The wolf pack closed in on the fallen colt.

**All the wiles of the puny man-creature were to no avail against the deadly hoofs and fangs of that killer-combine, Okimow, king stallion and Keko, wolf monarch, in their battle against the ruthless invaders of their wilderness domain.**

**K**EKO, the king wolf, snarled as he whipped about his beautiful golden collie mate, Iskwa. Not yet, for all their years of matehood, had Iskwa, the domestic blood collie, assimilated fully the sharper wild traits and instincts of her lordling timber wolf mate. She seemed unaware of the danger which caused his hackles to rise and his lips to peel back as his sharp

nose searched the wind for man sign.

Iskwa snarled throatily but she made no attempt to snap back at her mate.

On the dawn wind had come an alien scent, and already Keko could hear the sharp drumfire of heavy hoofs. He suddenly stretched his body into a loping run leaving Iskwa alone on the flat, broad slab of rock near her den.

Keko bounded easily up and over a hog-back ridge to streak across a narrow valley. At the crest of the next ridge he came to a sudden halt, freezing as he watched on a valley below a band of wild horses and, nearby, the magnificent form of Okimow, the stallion protector of the band.

Okimow, the big gray stallion, stood head high, his nostrils flared and red as he faced the wind. His silver mane pennanted out in the breeze as he stomped his heavy hoofs as his alarm grew. Suddenly he reared and whirled to whinny throatily to an old mare whose lathered body quivered close by. She was old Lat, Okimow's chief consort. It was she, when Okimow sounded danger warnings, who led the band off to safety, while the great savage gray chieftain brought up the rear.

The stallion had been well named, Okimow, by the Indians, for Okimow meant "chief," and truly he was a chieftain of power, of speed, of cunning and savagery.

Not often did he bring his band down to the range of Keko and Iskwa. A recent fire had driven the band down, but now a new danger threatened, a danger which, too, would menace Keko and his kindred.

**K**EKO'S nostrils quivered as he picked up man scent mingled with the scent of dog creatures.

More than once Keko had been called upon to defend himself, his mate and his kindred against sharp attacks by dogs. Not only that, but these creatures which belonged to man had more than once lured Iskwa, the golden one, herself of domestic dog blood, away from her wild mate.

Keko wheeled and bounded to the highest point of land. He thrust up his strong muzzle to pour out a long, high-pitched cry of warning.

There was no mistaking it. Back at her den, Iskwa's every nerve fiber grew taut as she trembled at the call of warning from her mate. In her den were seven whelpings—handsomely marked and vigorous young creatures soon to be brought to the sunlight outside to receive their first training. But now a danger threatened. Suddenly Iskwa whipped about. A light crack of broken windfall scrub brush had startled her. Before she could bound off to escape, she was face to face with a man creature. She peeled back her lips and her guttural

snarls became horrible voice sounds as her hackles and mane bristled.

The man's voice was soft and identifiable, for he was Dan Martin, the nearby homesteader. Martin it was who had brought Keko, the orphan whelping, to his cabin at which was a litter of collie pups. Iskwa had been raised with Keko, and at maturity she had escaped to become his mate. Many times since she had had contact with Martin and his wife and young son. But now at her back, in the den, were her young.

Martin was quick to realize this and wisely backed off, talking softly, reassuringly, as he moved. He was glad to have again seen Iskwa so close up. At the moment he was scouting for building log timber in the stand.

As he topped a rise he halted sharply, freezing as he glimpsed Keko in all his silver-gray magnificence. Then suddenly Dan's brows lifted as, in half turning left, he saw the wild horse band with Okimow standing like some carved sentinel.

"Trouble in the wind," Dan told himself. "Maybe a silvertip or a couple of cougars." These were both possibilities since the fire. Driven down here by the red tide, these ruthless predators were a dangerous new menace.

Now Okimow reared and pounded along close to the flank of Lat. He snuffed hoarsely. The mare tossed her head and bounded off at the head of the band of mares and scrubby colts and fillies.

Almost simultaneously there came, out of the west, a deep baying.

Running dogs came into view and Martin took a two-handed hold on his Winchester.

"Dogs!" he said sharply, realizing that dogs meant a stranger had struck the range and any man who let his dogs run free was not welcome.

Having lived for some years on the wild range of Keko, Martin, with his wife Betty, had kept an eye on the wildlings of Keko's brood. He had protected them against marauders, both human and beast. More than once, hiding out from the arm of the law, men had come to the Upper Smoky range to bring threat to the wildlings and to the homesteaders.

At one time in his early days of frontier life here on Keko's range, Dan Martin had nursed the hope of one day capturing the

handsome gray stallion, Okimow, but his wife, Betty, had persuaded her husband that Okimow belonged with his wild band which, without his protection, would quickly suffer complete extermination.

Martin moved on and shortly came across a likely stand of spruce which had escaped the fire, situated as it was on a high "island" surrounded by sedgy muskeg.

As he turned and mounted a rolling ridge along the home trail he searched for a glimpse of the running dogs, but he searched in vain. He looked for Keko and for Okimow, but all creatures seemed to have vanished.

As he swung in to skirt the lair zone of Iskwa, he fetched up sharply in his tracks. Hideous battle snarls sounded.

"The—dogs!" he gasped, levering a cartridge into the breech of his Winchester. He moved cautiously in through a choke-cherry thicket, parting the brush. Suddenly his mouth gaped, his brows flicked up as he glimpsed Iskwa, alone, backed on to her haunches by two huge, part-wolf dogs. These were probably sled dogs, Dan thought.

Never had Martin witnessed in any creature such a demonstration of expressed savagery as that which glowed in Iskwa's eyes, in her peeled-back lips and bristled mane and hackles. There was blood on her handsome white mane, and silently Dan eased back the hammer of his rifle. He was lifting it to his shoulder when suddenly, almost silently, the great form of Keko cut grass.

Keko struck as he leaped in. A heavily-muscled malamute yelped as Keko laid his shoulder hide open. He whirled to counter-attack, but the king wolf whipped clear, only to turn again and slash—slash and tear. . . .

AS DAN watched, he became more and more conscious of the great sagacity of Keko. Keko seemed instinctively to know that his beautiful mate was in no condition for sharp or prolonged battle against such powerful brutes as the two mongrels.

He exerted all his cunning and speed as he struck, wheeled and countered, giving the watching man no sure target of a dog at which to shoot. In fact, Dan Martin was so overwhelmed by the lightning maneuvers of the big wolf it didn't occur to him that

by merely pulling his trigger, he would frighten off the wolf-dogs. A shot would surely have sent the strange beasts scurrying to cover.

Keko was slowly but surely drawing the marauders away from his mate and now, utterly exhausted, Iskwa lay panting, while the blood continued to redden her rich white mane.

Now Keko bounded on through a thicket, his enemies hard on his trail, but in a small clearing beyond he whirled to make a stand, and half-crouched, he waited for the attack of the creatures.

This was a moment Dan Martin had hoped for. He was raising his rifle to his shoulder when suddenly he froze. Brush had cracked at his back. A heavy, throaty man's voice sounded.

"I wouldn't do that, mister," the voice said. "You hurt one of my dogs an' I'll tear you apart—mebbeso kill you."

Martin lowered his rifle. Now, slowly, he turned, to face a heavy-set man who carried a high-powered rifle.

Dan's eyes were shot with flame as he glared into the smouldering black eyes of the stranger. For a long moment neither spoke, then the stranger stepped forward, cocking the hammer of his Savage.

"Drop your rifle," he ordered. "I ain't foolin', mister. That's better. Now turn around an' h'ist your hands."

Dan turned and reached. The other moved in and emptied Dan's Winchester of its ammunition. Dan listened to the continued snarls of battle, but Keko and the dogs were now beyond his line of vision. He had great fears for the king wolf now, since he faced the two powerful animals alone and must have expended much of his reserve energy in the past half-hour.

Suddenly a wild series of yelps and howls sounded. Martin heard the man at his back bellow. He heard him crash by. There was a sharp rifle shot and Dan's heart skipped a beat or two.

Martin almost lost control. He was poised to leap in when the man creature spun, snarling and cursing.

"Missed him clean!" he roared. "But, there'll be another time. I'll git him for what he's done to my dogs. I'll turn the whole sled outfit loose on him."

Dan started. So there were more dogs, probably three more at least. But now the



stranger was coming in on him, his heavy mouth parted in a grin Dan didn't like.

"Now mebbeso you can tell me how come you was so interested in that big wolf, mister," he said.

Dan lowered his aching arms without invitation.

"Sure, stranger," he answered. "I raised that big wolf from a little whelp, him and his collie mate. He—" Dan broke off as he saw the man's reaction at his mention of a collie mate for the king wolf.

"What was that ag'in? You mean the wolf's mated to a—uh—collie?"

Dan made no reply. Instead, he asked, "What's your business on this range, stranger? Mostly, when trappers come, they call on me. I examine their permits. You got some special business here. Figure on trapping? Got a permit?"

The man made a raucous throat sound and stepped in a bit closer.

"What's it to you?" he asked. "You a gover'ment man?"

"That's right, in a way," Dan replied. "I'm paid by the government to keep an eye on animal life here and to check trappers and—other men. You let your dogs run free on deer and moose and you'll find out how much of a government man I am."

Despite the threat of that rifle muzzle, Dan was not afraid. Actually, Dan had no government authority to stop any man runnings his dogs free. The most Dan could have done would have been to advise the MOUNTY at the nearest post.

"I saw your dogs running the wild horse band," he went on. "You'd best watch 'em, savvy?"

The stranger spat contemptuously. Yet he seemed to have lost some of his bravado.

"I'll be on my way, feller," he growled. "You've dished out your warnin'; now let me give you one. Don't stick your face too close to me or my business an' don't harm any o' my dogs. Get that?"

A slow smile twisted Dan's mouth corners. He stood and watched the man lumber off into the brush and he still wondered—wondered just what his mission was here on the wild hinterland range of Keko. If he were not a bona fide trapper, there was no object in his being here at all unless he had selected the Upper Smoky range as a temporary hide-out.

Dan shrugged. He stooped, picked up

his rifle and what cartridges he could find. Reloading the Winchester he moved back toward the lair zone of Iskwa.

Suddenly he halted, freezing as through a port in the chokecherry thicket near the den he saw them, Keko and Iskwa. The king wolf's coat was stained a dirty brown, but his long tongue was laving the wounds of his mate.

Deep furrows were plowed into Martin's forehead. The peace of the ruggedly beautiful wild range was again disturbed.

Slowly backing off, he moved along a shallow draw toward the homeyard beyond the creek. He would have to tell Betty about his meeting with the wild-eyed stranger. It wasn't many months ago since she had sided her husband, day after day, night after night, as they fought fire which had swept the range from the west. Following the fire, they had looked forward to some peace and quiet in this country they loved so deeply.

As Dan neared the creek a little blooded mare whinnied from the pasture. Dan started. Her call had brought sharply to his mind further thought of Okimow and the wild horse band. Okimow could cause trouble at the horse pasture.

Now, a long howl sounded in the distance.

Dan turned sharply at the long penetrating cry of Keko. A smile returned to the homesteader's face, for that wild call seemed to proclaim to all creatures of the hinterland that the great Keko was still king.

Keko's cry was reassuring and Dan Martin moved on at a sharper pace satisfied that while Keko and Iskwa lived, the threat of serious trouble from those part-wolf sled dogs would in some measure be reduced. Keko was alert. He had the double responsibility for the protection of his mate and their young. He was filled with a great cunning and if ever one dog alone should venture to run a trail, Keko, the king, would swiftly bring an end to his hunting. Later, when the whelps were weaned and Iskwa's strength and fighting condition returned, she would side her great mate in battle, a terrible fighter in her own right.

**L**ATER in the summer, Dan Martin came across sign that disturbed him. He found a pair of freshly killed mule deer fawns not far from his home pasture, a sign

that the running dogs had begun their ruthless plundering. No meat had been eaten or taken; the fawns had been killed from a sheer lust for blood-letting.

Close to early autumn Martin was awakened one night by a disturbance at one of his corrals. He quickly snatched down his rifle and hurried on out of doors. Too late he jerked up his Winchester as three shadowy forms leaped the corral fence to crash to cover in the brush.

Inside the corral, a little bull calf was down—dead, his windpipe and jugular severed. This was a creature Dan was saving to butcher for winter veal. The sign was bad and now Martin intended to do something about it. He would hunt up the man creature and give him one more warning; then if that failed, he intended to take the law into his own hands.

Apart from the killing of the calf, these free-running half-breed killers could, before winter, run every deer and moose out of the country, causing sharp famine for Keko and his kindred.

But Dan was ever conscious of a threat from the owner of the dogs, as daily he cat-footed through the breaks and timber belt, hunting for man sign.

This evening, at sundown, he was some miles from his homestead when suddenly he was startled by a wild scream from Okimow, the wild stallion. Dan's heart began to thump sharply. He pushed on, climbing rough country at the craglands. From a small plateau he now looked down, off to the right, and then he glimpsed the cause of Okimow's agitation. In a small box canyon, a smart little mare threshed frenziedly in a cleverly constructed pole trap. Her entire body was soapy with lather and in places bloodstained lather.

"Decoy!" Dan told himself. "He's trapped a mare, figuring on getting Okimow." A low throat sound escaped Dan. To him, these wild creatures belonging in their wild native range and environment. And none was more entitled to such freedom than Okimow.

With great caution, his rifle slung, Dan moved on down, alert for any sign of the stranger man, or of his dogs.

Now he paused. Brush crashed off right and Okimow stomped, snuffing, to within a couple of rods of the trap. Never had Dan caught such a splendid close-up of

such pent-up animal savagery. The big stallion's flared nostrils were blood-red and his eyes were like glowing coals whose color changed by quick flashes.

Stertorous snuffles came from the big gray's nostrils. Then, with a suddenness that almost caused Martin to leap and give his position away, Okimow charged in, swapped ends and drove battering, smashing blows at the aspen poles.

Blood showed on Okimow's dirty gray fetlocks as in vain he continued his battering.

Martin thought fast. He must take a hand now before the man creature came up. Dan was sure the man could not be very far from the trap.

Stealing in, so that in an instant he could leap to safety, he suddenly exposed himself, flailing his arms.

Screaming, Okimow whirled. He reared and lunged toward the man in a terrible attack but Martin was able to leap to the safety of the upper trap rails.

He unslung his rifle and fired a shot. Okimow wheeled and with the tang of powder fumes in his nostrils, went crashing into the scrub brush.

Now Martin worked swiftly. That shot would most certainly bring the man creature up, perhaps with his dogs. He swung around to cut loose the fastenings of the trip gate of the trap. The poles down, Dan shifted to the back of the trap and yelled to the little mare. In a wild frenzy she reared and lunged, striking toward him but he had dropped down out of reach of a forehoof.

It was the wild call of Okimow that brought the mare whipping about. Shrilling an answer to the big gray, she broke for the open gateway, and at her back, Martin grinned with satisfaction.

He was still watching the thicket through which the wild ones had crashed when he was startled by a guttural animal snarl. He whirled about to see a huge black-and-tan dog.

Lips peeled back, hackles up, the half-breed malamute crept forward. Dan's rifle was still where he had placed it a few moments ago—leaning against the trap poles. Any move now to turn and retrieve it might trip the killer mechanism in that bunched, snarling dog creature.

Dan froze. He was thus poised when a

piece of windfall wood struck him a glancing blow at the nape of the neck, sending him whirling, reeling hard against the trap poles where he almost sagged to his knees.

And then the lumbering stranger man hurtled in.

**T**HE MAN had kicked the snarling dog out of his path as he bore down on Martin. Dan could only dimly see his attacker but by sheer instinct he realized that a heavily booted foot was swinging up at his groin and he took a glancing blow in the hip. The stranger was thrown temporarily off balance and in that instant, Martin whirled and struck. He dived forward, rocking the other back with a terrific headbutt attack to the chest. They dropped together.

Snarling animal-like throat sounds, the stranger used every ounce of strength he possessed, together with terrible rough-house tactics. A knee came up hard into Dan's groin and for a moment he was forced to sag limply. His greater weight alone saved him from serious injury. Now two thumbs struck up at his eyes. One partly connected with a painful sidewise jab. It seemed to bring Dan sharply out of a fog, inflaming him to exert himself to the utmost. At the backs of the scuffling men, not more than a rod distant, the ugly malamute snarled.

Lips tightened, his one bad eye batting fiercely, Dan began to exert the strength of his good physical condition. His one hundred and ninety pounds of fighting fury lashed into action. When a strong hand gripped his throat, Dan thrust his face down and sank his teeth into an ear lobe. With a howl of pain, the other relinquished his throat hold and for a few moments following fought with the fury of a trapped cougar.

Slowly, steadily, taking plenty of punishment, Dan pounded his attacker into limp unconsciousness. They had rolled within reach of Dan's Winchester and before he staggered to his feet he grabbed at the rifle. In the nick of time, unable to shoot, he clubbed the rushing dog with the barrel, sending him crashing back into the thicket. Before Dan could cock the Winchester's hammer, the brute had gone howling into cover.

Dan, leaning against the trap poles,

watched his attacker half-roll. The man mumbled thickly and now he stared up through his puffy eyes, blinking vacantly until at last recognition of Dan Martin came.

"So—it's you ag'in," he said huskily. "You bested me."

Breathing hard, Dan leaped in, but the man covered his face with his arms.

"Who else?" Dan said. "I should have killed you. I will yet, so help me, if you haven't cleared off the range right soon. Now, onto your feet and if you want some more fight, you'll get it. I'll shuck this rifle and give you plenty."

The man staggered to his feet and hung swaying dizzily for some time, rocking back against the small corral for support. He sneezed blood from his nostrils and wiped blood from his swollen lips. Now his mouth parted as he glared at Martin.

"I—I ain't done with you yet, homesteader," he said. "Nobody can manhandle Musher Bailey an' git away with it. I come here a-purpose to trap the wild stallion. Heard about him, an' I figure to git him, one way or another."

"Why?" Dan asked. "What good is he to you?" He was curious to probe this creature's mind which he knew was partly warped.

A strange chuckle escaped Bailey. He shot shifty glances about him, cunningly attempting to divert Dan's attention, but Dan was wisely alert. Sure that Bailey was "shacked" he wasn't taking a single chance with him. There was no reason why a man of his position, his nature would want Okimow, save for the sheer lust for capturing a wild creature and abusing it in an effort to tame it.

"You'll leave this range pronto, Bailey," Dan said with sharp meaning. "If I catch you around again, I'll—" He broke off as the other cut in snarling.

"Yeah? You'll what, homesteader?"

"I'll take you right apart next time, feller," Dan answered, taking a sharp step forward. "I'll kill your dogs on sight and—if I have to—I'll kill you, too. You've given me excuse for that already. Now git!"

The man turned, swearing thickly as he lurched toward the brush. Dan followed, watching the man closely until he vanished into a timber belt in a lower valley.

As he moved on along his back trail filled with misgiving, Dan came to a halt. In a small valley bowl fringed by multi-tinted aspens and birches, he glimpsed the entire band of Okimow. The mares and young stock grazed contentedly. Dan watched them a long moment or so, then swinging left, he glimpsed the gray stallion standing alone, aloof, head high in defiant, alert majesty. Dan shook his head slowly. He was afraid for the future safety of Okimow and the band. Bailey, he was sure, would attempt to exact a form of vengeance on Okimow—or on Martin himself.

Shrugging, he turned and moved on to the nearest creek, where he bathed his throbbing eye with cold water.

**N**OT IN the next two weeks, which saw the trees denuded of their richly colored foliage, and the winds grow keen and the ice form on the creek and lake edges, did Dan glimpse a single sign of Bailey or his dogs. He was too preoccupied with the last of his fall work for any scouting of the range.

The Canada geese winged high overhead, honking raucously on their flight to the far south. Martin watched for the coming of the first snows, and he had not long to wait.

The big snows came whooping down and for a time the hinterland was muted to a strange and awesome silence when, it seemed, all its creatures had become a part of a great exodus.

When at last the storm abated and the sun attempted to strike through the heavy pall of subsequent frost fog, Martin snowshoed out toward the northeast to start his log cutting.

At sundown, ready to leave the timber area, he was surprised to catch a glimpse of Okimow, and more surprised when he saw Keko, Iskwa and the entire brood. It was seldom at this season of the year that Keko and Iskwa held their matured young with them as a pack. They usually hunted as a pair, save when necessary to call the pack in.

Dan had not long to wait for a solution to this extraordinary behavior on the part of the king wolf.

A deep baying sounded. Dan whirled, glimpsed three of Bailey's dogs running hard, coming over the crest of a hogback ridge. He watched Keko and his family

belly down in the snow, all ears pricked sharply forward.

Okimow shrilled a sharp cry to his band and whirled to go plunging into a shallow draw down which he pounded, the band strung out behind.

But suddenly Okimow skidded to a sharp halt, sending snow spume gouting high as, running ahead of a snowshoing man creature came the other two dogs.

a sharp desire to shoot to kill possessed Martin. Bailey came in with his rifle at the ready. Now, above the sounds of snorting horses, Dan could hear the man yelling to his dogs.

A big malamute suddenly sprang for Okimow's muzzle. Okimow squealed as he reared and struck. The dog toppled back, but was unhurt. Before Martin could jerk his rifle into action and take a hand all was chaos at the draw bottom. The three dogs at the rear of the band lunged forward. A young filly went down screaming, hamstringed.

Bailey fired, and old Lat, the lead mare flanking Okimow, fell dead.

Angry breath escaped Martin. But even though he started to align his rifle sights, he was forced to hold his fire because of the plunging Okimow and the stock which crowded him from the rear.

All at once the powerful, lightning-like forehoofs of the big stallion struck down. A dog howled, its ribs stove in. Bailey bellowed an oath and fired.

Screaming, blood squirting to stain his beautiful silver mane, Okimow reared and lunged forward. This was a counter move Bailey had not expected. He was levering another cartridge into the breech of his Savage, when suddenly he staggered to one side, then started to pitch forward as those terrible stallion hoofs struck down.

Dan Martin closed his eyes as Okimow reared and stomped, reared and stomped. The snow was a dirty red-brown now, and no longer was the form of Bailey visible.

All at once, Martin was brought sharply about by a wild battle cry from Keko.

At the draw, the attacking dogs whirled. They had heard the battle challenge. In that moment of respite Okimow swung and plunged on up the draw to safety, his band members stringing along behind.

Now, scarcely daring to breathe, Dan Martin watched the brood of Keko fan out

at his flanks as he came in to battle the malamutes.

The biggest of Bailey's dogs rushed to meet Iskwa, smashing the collie back on her haunches. His great fangs were cutting through her white mane when Keko whirled and struck.

With the inherited savagery of their great sire, the young wolves leaped and struck, warding off attackers while Keko cut the throat of Iskwa's murderous wild attacker.

Now clear, Iskwa again snarled as she hurricaned into action, striking sharply at the hamstring of a malamute which stood toe-to-toe in locked jaw engagement with one of her sons.

Dan Martin wiped cold sweat from his forehead. More than once he had seen Keko and Iskwa and members of their brood in battle action, but never had he witnessed anything quite as savage as this climactic battle. These dog creatures were a menace to the safety of all creatures of the hinterland and Keko whirled and spun, slashing, lashing, pressing until suddenly his great jaws snapped and held—sinking, sinking his fangs closed over a malamute's jugular.

The last of the dogs lay quivering in death, and Dan Martin stepped back a pace, relieved, as he exhaled a long breath. Now he watched Keko climb up over the bank

of a draw to mince proudly up on to a knoll.

For a moment, as he posed himself, he licked his bloodied chops, then suddenly thrust his muzzle high. Head well back, he poured out a long and terrible wail of victory.

The echoes of the penetrating cry had scarcely faded when Martin started, a soft smile gathering at his mouth corners as he heard, from the distance, the wild bugling call of Okimow.

"Wild range—allies!" Dan breathed to himself.

He stepped back through the thicket and snowshoes on toward home, satisfied that now the range was rid of all threat. Tomorrow, he would have to mush out to the nearest settlement and inform the resident member of the Mounted Police of the death of Musher Bailey.

He had barely reached his frozen creek, when he halted. Out of the northeast came another call from Keko, and Dan realized that this call was a call to the feast. Up at the draw there was much good food for all the brood of Keko and Iskwa. Two or three dead horses and the dogs.

Smiling, the homesteader moved on to take the news to his wife. The range was going to have peace once more, and, Dan mused, life in the great wild places would be happy for all concerned.



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# LET'S SHOOT US

## CHAPTER ONE

### Turncoat Lawman?

WHEN Tomahawk Burke, first sheriff of Huisache County, pinned the marshal's star on Bill May, the young lawman's expectancy of a long life expired automatically. For twelve hours a day thereafter his job in Junction City was never wholly free of danger, never free of the violence of a Western boomtown in the '80's. For two years he survived the hazards of his hard, uncertain life, living from day to day, from hour to hour; and few men dared call him friend.

The railroad brought the boom to Junction City; and it brought trouble to the silent men who patrolled its cross-hatch pattern of narrow streets, its saloons and deadfalls, its shadowed alleys and rubbish-

Mercantile and president of the Frontier Bank.

The struggle for power in Junction City concerned these two influential men. Miskin was a clever politician, the unscrupulous operator of shady enterprises. Stribling was a man of morals and abundant respect among his followers. When Bill May first walked the streets with badge and gun, Miskin was reaching avidly for more power; Dan Stribling was fighting, through the Committee For Better Government, to oust the saloonman and his clique from the town. The two factions faced each other across the rutted main drag, and the town had become a boiling caldron.

A crowd is like a harp upon whose strings a strong man can play a tune. What happened in Junction City at the end of Marshal Bill May's first term was the outcome of Miskin's handling of a crowd.

**Gutty Marshal Bill May wanted the job of sheriff in that dry-gulch, double-damned town built on the bleached bones of bushwhacked suckers, but to win it, he must send down to a red-hot hell the one man he'd give his life to fight beside. . . .**

littered lots that lay behind the shouldering false-fronts.

Each train that stopped at the small, mustard-colored depot on the square left its cargo of potential grief for the marshal and his constables. New faces appeared daily in the bars and gambling dives. Some of these men became famous years later, while a few lived their brief moment and then were lost in the town's Boothill.

This was the raw town Bill May helped rule with a handful of hardy constables while Tomahawk Burke, the man who had brought law and order to the country, succumbed to the lure of easy money and dealt with the crooks he had once despised.

The south side of town, called the Strip, belonged to the saloonmen and was bossed by Sid Miskin, owner of the community's largest and noisiest casino, the Iron Front.

The north side, contemptuously dubbed "Deacons Row" by Miskin and his friends, held the shops and stores and was ruled by Dan Stribling, a wealthy, cautious reformer. Stribling was also proprietor of the Sierra

It was a few minutes past eight o'clock on a cool October night when May saw the gunman, John Glanton, ride in off the hills and tie his pony in front of the Cattle King Hotel. Glanton was Miskin's friend and Bill had run him out of town a year before as a menace to law and order.

Election Day was two weeks off, and May knew Glanton's arrival had been timed to that event. The gunman had been sent for by the Boss of the Strip.

Beth Lamson, Tomahawk Burke's pretty niece, whom Bill was walking home to the sheriff's cottage on Cedar Street, saw Glanton, too, but did not comment. She had been talking about something that concerned her more vitally than the outlaw's arrival.

"Bill, I can't understand Uncle Tom's bitterness toward you," she said, matching her pace with his along the wooden walk. "He always said you'd be sheriff when he retired, and now, because the Better Government Committee has put you up to run against him, he talks like he hated you."

# A SHERIFF!

Smashing Frontier Novelette

By

Rod

Patterson



A tall shape moved at  
him; a gun glittered

**T**HINKING about Glanton, May said, "It's a reflection on Tomahawk's rep, Beth. And he didn't want the nomination till he heard Stribling's crowd had asked me to run. He's a stubborn old war horse and—" He wondered if Beth had begun to hear the gossip that was mushrooming in both Row and Strip and was involving Burke in Miskin's plot to grab town control. "Why, Beth," he added, with an attempt at levity, "your uncle don't speak to me since the *Gazette* came out with the story about me runnin' against him! Me, the man he made marshal!"

She looked up at him, dark eyes troubled. She saw a tall, lean-faced man of thirty-two with a thin, determined mouth and blue eyes. They had reached the front gate of the sheriff's cottage on a side street.

Beth said, "I wish I knew how it would end." She stopped with a sigh. "I'm beginning to get afraid."

He kissed her and rubbed his jaw lightly against her soft cheek. "Don't worry, Beth. Tomahawk's my best friend. He'll probably poll the most votes Election Day, and that'll salve up his pride." He spoke cheerfully enough, but his thoughts were grim, for he knew if the sheriff was reelected the town would be thrown wide open to the crooks. Junction City would be back where it was when the first big trail drives came up the Butterworth Route in the wild days.

Beth's eyes held sudden demure brightness. "Good night, Mr. Marshal." At the porch of the cottage, with lamplight shining on her chestnut hair through the open door, she called softly, "I'm a traitor, but I hope it'll be Mr. Sheriff after Election Day!"

When Beth had gone, when he heard the door latch click, his grin vanished. His jaw turned stiff; his blue eyes hardened and grew thin. He swung around and strode swiftly back toward the business district. As he walked he checked the loads in his revolver; he gave the cylinder a spin and replaced the gun in its holster beneath the skirt of his black coat. Presently he faced the length of Main Street, with the Strip on his right, the Row on his left.

The center of the street was marked by a narrow park of locust trees and these thin-foliaged trees were the deadline between respectability and the town's rowdy side. Four blocks long, the Strip held the up-and-down false fronts of six saloons and as

many dance halls and gambling dives. The Iron Front was midway in this line-up, a double-storied building with an upper and lower gallery and three sets of batwing doors. Oil flares flickered smokily from the lower gallery posts and from the walls of the other saloons farther on.

The stores and shops on the Row were in darkness, shutters drawn, doors barred. Only one structure on this side had lights; this was the jail and courthouse on the corner of Main and Dawson's Alley. The jail was in the basement, the sheriff's office and court hall on the first floor. The lights shone from the two windows in Tomahawk Burke's office facing the street.

Bill made his way up the steps and down the darkened corridor, entering the sheriff's office without the formality of a knock. A lanky man with a seamy gray face and piercing, stone-colored eyes swung around in a swivel chair and put his back to a paper-littered desk. A cone of yellow light from a chain-hung lamp fell on his balding head.

Burke had once been an Indian-fighter with Custer, and at sixty-two still possessed the aggressive manner of his younger days. He glared at Bill and snapped, "What do you want?"

Bill wandered toward the old man, leisurely moving his long legs, his hands buried in his coat pockets, his eyes blandly fixed on the sheriff. "Johnny Glanton's back in town," he said slowly and distinctly, the watched the effect.

Burke stood up, tall, stoop-shouldered, cold-eyed. "What of it?" His voice had the rustling sound of dry sheets of paper rubbed together. "He's been in town afore, ain't he?"

"Last time he was," Bill said, "there was a hold-up in the Cattle King. I warned Miskin I'd run Glanton out if he ever came back!"

"What's Miskin got to do with it?" Tomahawk's tone turned harsh.

"He's Miskin's friend," the marshal retorted. "And I'm takin' no chances this time. Stribling's got a big beef deposit at the bank. I aim to make sure that money goes out on Monday morning's train and not in Glanton's saddle bags!"

The sheriff chopped a hand down savagely. "You've got no proof it was Glanton pulled that hold-up. Leave him be. I won't stand for nobody bein' chased out of town



on anybody's damned hearsay! Understand!"

Bill May looked at the old man a long time before he said, "I suspicion Miskin sent for him to make trouble and put me in a bad light. I'm givin' you a chance to get rid of him because it's your range, too. Glanton crossed the county line to get here."

"I'll have nuthin' to do with it," the sheriff snapped. "And you better stay away from the Iron Front!"

"You gone loco, Tomahawk?" Bill's tone turned thin with pleading. "The whole burg's goin' to get wise you've hooked up with Miskin's dirty deals. Think about your wife and Beth if you don't care about yourself! Why d'you suppose Stribling got the committee to back me? He already knows how deep you've got, that's why. Hell, Tomahawk, I don't want your job! All I want is to stop you before it's too late!"

There was a deep, burning resentment in the sheriff's pale eyes. "I don't know what you're raving about!" He raised a bony fist and shook it at the marshal. "Stay out of my way—stay away from Beth! I'll say no more!"

Bill eyed him a moment. Then: "All right, Tomahawk," and wheeled and left the office.

## CHAPTER TWO

### \$5,000 — On the House!

**T**HE lights from the saloons along the Strip fell on the dusty street and packed sidewalks, now empty except for ponies, patient and small-looking under their wide, high-cantled saddles, and for the dim figures wandering and swaying along beneath the wooden arcades.

Inside the Iron Front dancehall girls in high button shoes and dingy taffeta whirled with their partners. A sallow man with oiled black hair was stabbing the keys of an old piano with nimble fingers. The bar was lined three-deep; against the walls were tables at which sat men in derby hats and dark, short coats, men in cowmen's chaps, in miners' shirts and jeans, men in gamblers' black broadcloth and embroidered waistcoats.

There was a crowd near the batwings through which Bill May made his way. "One side!" he said, and rammed toward

the bar. Ugly mutterings met him.

He halted near the end of the mahogany and scanned the long line of faces in the bright explosion of light from the back-bar mirror. Ten bartenders worked behind the counter and the smell of beer and whisky was a taint in the smoky air.

Bill sent his flashing glance from face to face. It stopped on the dark, stubble-bearded features of a man of medium height wearing trail garb and big-rimmed hat. Bill moved along the bar and touched him on the shoulder. "Glanton," he said quietly, "I'll take you outside to get your horse."

The gunman swung about. His dark face got nasty. "I ain't botherin' nobuddy," he said sullenly. "Jest rode in for a few snorts and—"

"Get movin'," May said, drawing him gently away from the bar. "I warned you about comin' back here."

Glanton's gaze turned cool and deadly. "Keep your hooks off me, Marshal!" It was said in a loud, grating tone.

A silence came down on the saloon. Men stared at May and Glanton. Between the center of the barn-like room and the doors through which Bill had entered was a solid mass of men. May shoved Glanton toward the crowd. Its pressure stopped the gunman dead in his tracks. He looked around at Bill and said harshly, "I won't wrastle my way out of here! You go first!"

Bill saw a brightness flare in the eyes of the nearest men and knew a break was coming; he had to arrest trouble before it started. He hesitated, and in that pause, a new voice said behind him, "Take it easy, Marshal. That man's a friend of mine."

Bill moved his head in a half turn and saw Sid Miskin. The saloonman had just come out of his office at the rear of the hall, a short, barrel-chested man in his fifties with a bald head and flabby pink jowls that hung over his white collar like a dog's dewlaps. He was massive and cumbersome, his legs stumpy as piles, and he was dressed in a too-tight suit that was wrinkled and stained. His eyes were black and small, like beads sunk in moist pockets of flesh.

Bill said blandly, "I don't care whose friend he is. Glanton's leavin' town."

"Don't get excited, friend," Miskin said with a pallid smile. Then he waved at the crowd. "Hit the bar, boys. Drinks're on the house." To Bill he said in a wheedling

tone, "Come in my office a minute. I got something to tell you. Bring Johnny along if you're afraid he'll get away."

Bill looked at Glanton. "Finish your drink and then vamoose. Don't let me find you at this bar when I come back." He turned and followed Miskin to his private office. With the door shut behind he faced the surprise of seeing Tomahawk Burke standing near a second door that led into an alley beside the saloon. The sheriff looked uneasy. His gray face wore an almost hangdog look.

Miskin went around and lowered his fat body into a chair behind his desk. He leaned back in it and fixed his sharp black eyes on the marshal.

"Bill," he said in an unctious tone, "how much you want to step out of the election? I like you but I got other plans for this town and—"

Bill shook his head. With his gaze partially on the sheriff, he said, "No sale, Miskin. Besides, you ain't got dinero enough to buy a promise from me!"

"I'll double my first offer," the saloonman said. "Five thousand—cash on the barrel head. Tonight!"

Bill looked at Tomahawk and said, "To hell with both of you boys!"

"Wait!" Burke's face was desperate as he took a step toward Bill. He opened his mouth, then closed it.

"A good try," Bill said, and wheeled out of the office. Over his shoulder he warned, "Take care of yourself, Sheriff!"

**T**HE crowd in the bar fell silent as he passed through toward the doors. The piano started up and music poured into the silence. He felt the hatred and distrust of the crowd like a scorching heat. The sensation remained even after he had reached the street.

John Glanton's roan pony had disappeared from the hitch rack in front of the Cattle King Hotel, but this did not fool him. The outlaw might be within a hundred yards of him at this moment, watching from some alley or some saloon window. Trouble had telegraphed itself through the town. A face peered at him from the shadows of the nearest arcade. Another man stood farther up the street, smoking. The glow of the cigarette was like a slowly winking red eye.

Two riders cantered into town, their dust thickening the street's dim light. Other men left adjoining saloons as though summoned and stood along the walk. All the riot and revel had gone out of the Strip. Now it held menace. It was as though this was a moment the whole town had been waiting for—the bartenders, the dancehall girls, the faro-dealers, the gunmen, since the day two years ago when he had pinned on the marshal's ball-pointed star.

In older days he had ridden the desert and searched the hills as a cowpuncher. The memory of that freedom and fiddle-footed ease came to him suddenly as a strong breath of clean mountain air. He had not really known until this moment of crossing Main toward the courthouse in the flickering lights and shadows how utterly Junction City had imprisoned him.

In the front of the courthouse he met Constable Ed Finney. Finney was a lean young man, new on the force.

"What's goin' on Marshal?" he asked in a worried voice.

Bill motioned toward the line of stores along Deacon's Row, an up-and-down pattern of false fronts, galleries and darkened, shuttered windows and doors. "Keep your eyes open," he told Finney. "Find Henchler and Barton and tell 'em to watch for Glanton. I think he's still in town."

Finney nodded, his pale eyes puckered in the shadow of his Stetson's brim. Bill walked down the steps into the dimly lighted jail. He paced the length of the cell block, scanning his prisoners: three drunks and a cowboy who had shot a man the day before.

Back in his cubby-hole office on the street side of the jail, he sat at his desk, scanning the reports of his four constables. There had been a fist fight at the Dream Dance Hall that afternoon, another at a shooting gallery; one man had lost his poke at the Red Dog Saloon. These were routine disturbances and, like pebbles dropped from a boiling pot, scarcely made a ripple in the great confusion of the town.

Within the hour, May rose and put on his hat, moving out to the street once more. He turned north and paced along under the arcades toward Stribling's Mercantile, toward the Frontier Bank which occupied the second floor of a building near the end of Main.

The Strip was going full blast by now, the crowds gathered for the night in the Iron Front and the other dives. Few people remained abroad; the only movement was the long double line of saddle horses facing the sidewalks.

Bill's boots made hollow sounds as he strolled the boards. No lights showed in the end of the main drag toward which he walked, nor was there sign of Ed Finney and the other patrolmen.

He reached the building that housed the bank, his feeling of tension growing. The doorway was in front of him, a recess buried in shadow. A man was standing in there. May saw the brassy glitter of what might have been a badge. Briskly then, on his long legs, he bounced across the walk and into the doorway.

The man swung toward him with a startled grunt. It was Finney! "What's the matter here? Bill demanded.

There was enough light to make out the constable's face—a young face, strained and savage about the eyes. His mouth was twisted out of shape, his right hand flicking up with a gun in it, jerkily moving from under his coat, then stopping, rigid, at Bill's swift words.

Six weeks on the force, Finney didn't have the self-control he would have later on. He let a breath gust out of him and said, softly, harshly, "There's some men upstairs! I seen one slide out that alley and duck through the door! Just now I heard boots on the floor up there!"

"Two?"

Finney looked at him anxiously, then turned and glanced up the darkened stairway. "Maybe two. Maybe more. Henchler's out back. We're waitin' for 'em to come down."

"Stay here!" Bill's face looked ugly; two harsh lines deepened about the corners of his mouth. His thought was that Johnny Glanton was one of those men upstairs in the Frontier Bank. I'll go up there and get 'em!"

Finney started to protest but Bill shut him up with a curt, "Stop anybody that comes down these stairs—shoot to kill if they try a break!" Then he was moving into the hallway, feeling his way toward the balustrade. He climbed slowly, cautiously, holding his lank frame close to the wall and sliding upward a step at a time.

A SMALL window on the second floor landing filtered a bluish luminosity into the stairwell; it showed Bill that the door into the bank office three yards away from him was ajar; there was no light behind it. There was no sound; only a faint draft of cold air blowing through that crack in the door.

He moved forward with a cat-footed tread, his hand settling on the familiar bone grip of his gun. He came to the door and listened with bent head, face averted; he pushed softly aside.

He saw two windows against the side wall of the office; he saw the hulking shadow of a safe, and the formless dark bulk of the cashier's desk. Nothing moved.

"Johnny!" somebody yelled almost in his ear. "Look out!"

The voice sounded from behind the desk. A tall shape moved at him; a gun glittered.

Bill May fired from the hip.

The bullet stopped the shadow an arm's length away; then the shadow was choking and coughing and sinking to the floor . . .

Other shadows were jumping between May and the windows. He held his fire, powdersmoke a stench in the room. Then he sprang against the side wall, his gun lifted and ready. A door slapped back with a man's weight hurled against it; a body fell to the floor and sprang up. Boots went kicking down the hallway.

Bill remained flattened against the wall, listening to the sound of those boots beating down the back stairs that led to the rear compound. Henchler would be waiting down there and—

Bill heard other boots coming up from the front hallway. Those boots belonged to Finney; Bill had known that the moment he heard them.

"Watch it, Ed!" he called. Then the shots came from the rear yard—one—two—three—and afterward silence and Finney gasping from the hall doorway, "Marshal! For God's sake—"

"In here," Bill said quietly. "Take it easy!"

He struck a match and found the overhead lamp above the cashier's desk. Yellow light sputtered and flamed. The light sprayed out over the room and its upset chairs, on the motionless figure of a man stretched face down on the floor.

Finney was bending over the man. "It's

nobody—" He broke off as though a hand had choked off his wind. His pale face swung around and up and he stared at Bill who had come back from the rear door, gun still gripped in his hand.

"Who is it?" Bill asked. Johnny Glanton?"

Finney straightened up. "No," he said hoarsely. "It's the sheriff!"

"Tomahawk?" Bill stared down dully, his gun loose in his hand. "What was he doin'—"

"He's dead," Finney muttered, his eyes frightened and sick. Who—fired that shot I heard?"

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Self-made Hell

THE stillness in the office was deep, profound, a great soft weight wrapped thick around Bill May's heart and over his lungs. He said, "I killed him, Ed," then stared down at the gray face of Tomahawk Burke. "I—" He didn't finish but stood still, trying to think, trying to reason, only vaguely hearing the crash of boots coming up the stairs from the street.

He stood that way, his gun held down against his leg. He heard Henschler's hoarse voice. "There was two of 'em. I winged one but they got away."

Now they were waiting. For what, Bill didn't know and didn't care. There came the trample of feet in the hall, and then Dan Stribling entered the office, a big man with a florid face and worried eyes. The merchant had several town councilmen with him and the hall was packed with other men off the street. Doc Riding pushed his fat bulk past the knot of men in the door and bent on one knee beside the dead sheriff.

Stribling faced Bill, saying, "What happened, Marshal?"

Bill said very little after telling him: ". . . and Tomahawk must've come up ahead of me. Finney saw somebody duck in downstairs but didn't know who it was. In the dark I couldn't see him and he couldn't see me."

A man said, "They got some money out of the safe."

There was a stir at the door and men clustered in, filling the room. Presently a woman and a girl came and knelt beside the

dead man. Bill didn't look at Martha Burke and Beth Lamson. Some of the men formed a circle around Bill as if to guard him. Their voices murmured but were incomprehensible in his ears. He stared and saw the sheriff's wife sobbing but couldn't hear any sound. Beth was bent forward, her face in her hands, her shoulders twitching.

Bill wanted to go to the women, wanted to explain how it had happened, but he couldn't tell them, couldn't tell anyone, the most important thought in his mind: that Burke had turned thief and had come here to help someone else rob the bank. His brain was stunned by the realization he had killed his best friend, even though it had been a mistake. A mistake, that was it. It had happened so fast—the shadows in the room, that voice yelling, "Johnny, watch out!"

More boots pounded up the stairs and Miskin shouldered into the room. He was sweating; moisture beaded his forehead and trickled down through the fat of his cheeks and chins. He was breathing hard as he said, "Well, what're you standin' around here for? Why don't you put him in jail? It's clear enough. May saw his chance to put Tomahawk out of the way and—"

Everyone in the room tried to speak at once. But Stribling's voice boomed the loudest. "It was an accident. You can't hold a man for murder when it's plain it was an accident!"

Then they were taking Bill out of the room, down the hall, down the stairs to the street. He felt Finney's hand on his right arm, Henschler's on his left. But they were helping him, not pushing him. Henschler, a chunky man with an anxious pair of eyes, was saying, "Hell, you couldn't help it, Bill!" Burke had no business buttin' in—if that's what he was doin'!"

That last crack got through Bill's dazed mind. He had to stop any talk that might drag Martha Burke and Beth Lamson into scandal.

"It was an accident," he said thickly.

"It could happen to anybody," Finney said.

"Sure, it could," Henschler agreed.

"An accident . . ." Bill mumbled.

THEY walked him to his room in the Cattle King Hotel and left him there to stare at the walls until the dawn. When

he heard the town awaken finally he was still slumped on his bed, his brown hair tousled, his eyes haggard. He had killed Burke! It was strange the way his thoughts kept stopping on that idea. He tried to argue with himself, tried to see that facts as they actually existed excused him from blame. But always that picture of Martha and Beth interposed and he floundered sickeningly, in the conviction that nothing mattered except the truth that his bullet had ended the sheriff's life.

If Stribling still chose to back him in the forthcoming election, he could be the new sheriff of Huisache County. He could fill Tomahawk's boots and wear his star. But he wanted no part of that now. He was through, finished, washed up. . . .

Next day he didn't go to his courthouse office. He didn't shave, didn't have breakfast in the hotel dining room. Instead he went down to Mulvaney's Livery and saddled up his road horse. He mounted and left town quietly. He didn't ride along Main but put the horse down a narrow lane behind the livery. Something over which he had no control drew him in a circle around the town. He halted his horse at the dead end of Cedar Street and sat staring toward the sheriff's cottage midway on the block.

Beth and Martha were inside somewhere together, silent in their grief—thinking there of what? Of a man named Bill May, and what he had done to them, hating him no matter how deep they had it hidden from view, no matter how mute they kept the damning words within them.

He turned the horse and rode aimlessly into the nearby hills. The passage of time meant nothing, and it was noon before he finally returned to town. Stores and shops were filled, the streets showed a steady movement of men, horses and vehicles. He felt the stares upon him and saw the whispering groups along the walks. The sickness inside him increased.

He put his horse in the livery and walked across to his courthouse office. He found Finney waiting. "Where in hell you been, Marshal? Stribling's been lookin' all over for you!"

Bill ignored the man, seating himself at his desk and reaching for pen and paper. presently, moving deliberately, he arose and went outside. He took his badge off and

pinned a paper to the bulletin board with it, afterward quietly reading what he had written:

**TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:**

I HEREBY RESIGN AS MARSHAL OF JUNCTION CITY AND WITHDRAW MY NAME AS CANDIDATE FOR SHERIFF OF HUISACHE COUNTY.

*W. J. May*

Over his shoulder Finney's shocked voice said, "Bill, you can't do that! Miskin'll bust hell a mile and blow the lid right off this town!"

"To hell with the town!" Bill snapped and swung off toward his hotel room.

He spent the afternoon locked in his room, refusing to open to repeated knockings. It was nightfall before he ventured back to the street. Except for the courthouse, which blazed with lights, the stores and shops on the Row had closed, and all those wood-fronted buildings made a black bulwark. But along the Strip the oil flares flickered and smoked in greater numbers. Lights broke in shivering beams and fan-shaped bursts from the windows and doors of the Iron Front and other saloons.

He entered the Red Dog and found a place against the bar deep in shadow where he hoped no one would notice him. No one did, but he heard the voices in the crowded saloon, the scornful, contemptuous voices that talked about the marshal who murdered an old man. Drinking whisky, gulping it down in big doses, he couldn't seem to drown those jeering voices. When he was drunk at last, toward midnight, men began pushing him around. He fought back, and found himself in the street, groveling in the dust, blood mixed with the whisky stench in his mouth.

He staggered to another saloon and bought three bottles, lugging them to his hotel room. He finished one before unconsciousness smothered him. All night people kept pounding on his door. Along toward dawn Stribling and Finney broke in and tried to shake him into sensibility.

Huddled on the bed, his head buried in his hands, he heard the roar of men's voices outside the hotel. Stribling kept shaking him. The merchant's face was gray with strain, his eyes those of a badly frightened man. Ed Finney stood at the window, star-

ing down in the street with slitted eyes. "For God's sake," Stribling was pleading, "come out of this! Miskin's got the mob behind him! They're goin' to take over the town—take over the courthouse and the jail! You can stop 'em, Bill! You're the only man they're afraid of—"

Bill waved it away, groaning, "I don't care if they wreck the town! Leave me alone and get out of here!"

Stribling bent closer, frantic. "Come out of it, Bill! I know what Tomahawk was up to! He went bad and—"

Bill brought his head up, his eyes red-rimmed and hot with fury. He grabbed for Stribling's throat, but the merchant ducked back and plunged for the door. Bill reached for a chair and sent it crashing after the man. It hit the wall and shattered, and Ed Finney went out, stampeded by fear of his own life. Bill went over and slammed the door, then wheeled and looked for the two bottles he had left on the floor near his bed. They were not there!

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Good Lawmen Never Die

HE LURCHED to the window, staring downward. The street boiled with men; the building roar of their voices was like wind and rain. Stribling had taken the whisky . . . Bill heard a soft knock on his door. He swung around and at the same moment saw the two bottles in the corner. He staggered toward the corner. Then the door opened and Beth Lamson was walking toward him.

He halted, swaying, shame burning through him, then anger. "Get out!" he yelled.

But she kept coming, her dark eyes searching his haggard, beard-stubbed face. "Hello, Bill," she whispered.

He looked beyond her and saw Martha Burke in the doorway. Then he sagged down on the bed and sank his face in his hands.

They stood over him, waiting. Finally he raised his head, but kept it in shadow so they could not see his eyes. "Go 'way," he choked. "Don't bother me!"

Beth was speaking. "Don't say that, Bill. I—we know what happened. Aunt Martha and I found something in Uncle

Tom's desk at home. It—was an agreement he made with Miskin. Don't you see how foolish you're behaving now, with the town needing you more than ever? Bill, please!"

Bill tried to keep his body from shaking along with his arms and hands. It was suddenly as if the words Beth had just said to him were the words he had been awaiting a thousand years, the only words that could calm his mind. "I killed him," he choked. "I should've held my fire."

"Step raving, Bill!" It was Martha Burke with her hand on his shoulder, gripping him hard, her thin face almost fierce. "Tom was your friend. He always set a store by you. You didn't kill him, Bill! He killed himself! They got at him—that Miskin and his crowd! Oh, I don't know what changed him but I saw it coming and—"

"Don't lie, Martha," he said harshly. He took her arm; his fingers must have hurt because she went tight-lipped. "You hate me, don't you?" It wasn't a question but a dogged statement. "Don't you?"

"No, Bill. I don't hate you. It's hurt you worse than him—worse than it's hurt me. I pity you, Bill. And I'll tell the truth to the town if you don't go out there and take that crowd in hand!"

Bill saw what shone in her eyes; he saw the anxiety in Beth's the pleading, the urgency. Something happened inside of him then; calmness came and the tension relaxed in his muscles and his nerves. He stood up from the bed and walked to the front window. Silence was in the room but not in the town.

He stared down into Main Street. Daylight was beginning in the east but the moon and stars still stood above the town. There was a throng on the sidewalk and in the street in front of Miskin's casino. The rumble of a hundred voices echoed upward and out over the roofs of the town. The faces of all those men were formless and vague in the gray light but the mob seethed like boiling water in a canyon.

That mob was waiting for something. For a moment Bill was puzzled. Then he knew what they waited for—Sid Miskin! Somewhere inside the Iron Front the boss of the Strip was letting the mob build up its fury. When the right time came he would appear and give the order to seize the town.

There would be a riot, wild disorder. Stores would be looted by the drunken crowd. The courthouse would be seized and held and out of that turmoil and destruction Miskin would emerge as a power in Junction City. The respectable citizens would retreat or bow to the lawless element.

Bill turned toward the two women who waited tensely and anxiously watched his face, his narrowed eyes. He did not speak, but walked over and lifted his gun belt from the bed where he had hurled it earlier. With steady hands he wrapped the leather around his hips and belted it tight. In his shirt sleeves he wheeled and left the room, traveling down the corridor, down the creaking stairs and into the hotel lobby.

**T**HE rumble of the mob struck him like wind as he emerged into the street. Out of the shadows of an alley a man ducked toward him. It was Ed Finney, frightened, uncertain. He gasped, "Miskin and Glanton are in the saloon! They got five or six of Miskin's gunmen in the office and they're holdin' Stribling as a hostage!"

Bill moved against the back edge of the crowd. The mob faced the Iron Front. Inside the building, the lamps on the chandeliers and brackets had been turned low and the bar had been closed.

All the other saloons along the Strip still still blazed with lights and men still passed in and out through the swing doors of red-and-green inlaid glass. Finney followed the marshal along the edge of the crowd, keeping his hatbrim low over his eyes. May thought that if he managed to get inside the Iron Front and face Miskin and his bunch, no bullets, nothing, could stop him!

He reached the yonder side of the mob and saw an opening in the alleyway beside the saloon. No one was standing near it, and he traveled toward the dark hole, Finney still crowding his heels.

"Where the hell you headin', Marshal?" the constable demanded above the mob's uproar.

Bill slid into the alleyway's darkness. He came to a descending stairway that led to the Iron Front's basement. It was cool and dank-smelling down there among a welter of empty beer kegs and broken packing cases.

Bill looked around at Finney. "I'm goin' down here and up into the saloon. Go back

to the crowd and find Henchler and the others. I may need you to handle the street when the time comes."

Finney started to argue, but May left him abruptly and dropped down the stairway into the low-beamed cellar. He had to bend forward at the hips to move now. His boots collided with unseen objects on the earth and rubbish-littered floor. His head struck a beam and he ducked, in a crouch, his right hand grabbing the handle of his holstered gun.

He kept feeling with his free hand for a door or another stairway, and not finding either. Presently he struck a match and found he was far back in a huge, earth-walled room that stank of stale beer and green mold. He saw a small passageway, scarcely four feet high and not over two feet wide. In darkness that seemed to press against his eyeballs like black cotton, he advanced to that narrow slot, dropping on hands and knees, crawling forward slowly, cautiously.

His fingers slid through a cold slime which was drainage from the bar above. His head butted a wall. He felt for and struck another match. On his right was a trap door. Light came through a crack in the scuttle from above. He set his shoulders against the scuttle and lifted. The trap gave with a groan.

He pulled himself into a hallway lighted by a single oil lamp turned low in its wall bracket. The corridor ran back into darkness toward the rear of the building. Voices mumbled behind the wail. He moved along the hall, and then he saw another crack of light beneath another door.

He paused with a hand on the knob. He felt all right, solid and sure with his gun out and cocked, his fingers knotted about the bone butt. Slowly he turned the door-knob and eased the panel inward on silent hinges. . . .

He took one swift look at four men in the room. Sid Miskin, behind his desk, immediately identified the place as the saloonman's private office. Johnny Glanton stood near the desk, his back turned to Bill. The other two men Bill didn't know, but both were armed with sixguns. They carried Winchesters in their hands.

Miskin saw Bill and gave a warning yell and was on his way to the floor behind his desk. Glanton whipped around, his gun

out; Bill let one shot go at the gunman and saw him stagger back. The two riflemen tried to bring their weapons into play, but Bill fired twice. One toppled like a man clubbed. The other fired haphazardly and Bill felt the slug whang by and smack the wall.

Miskin was firing a pistol from under his desk. His first shot took Bill in the left forearm and spun him backward. The room shook with the thunder of the shots. Johnny Glanton, hard hit, was crawling toward the shelter of Miskin's desk.

Miskin fired again from behind the desk. Bill saw the flash and let go with his fifth shot. Miskin's scream went up and then was cut off.

The rifleman Bill had downed lay motionless on the floor. His companion had backed against the wall, both hands clawing high. "I ain't in this!" he hollered.

Now Glanton was turning, aiming from the floor. Bill's left arm hung limp, blood tricking from the wrist, but his gun-arm straightened to shoulder-height and he drove his last shot into the outlaw's chest. Glanton slumped down and did not move again.

Outside the saloon the rumble of the crowd had provided a harsh undertone to the din in Miskin's office. Now it boomed louder; a volley of shots clattered in the street. Bill kept the rifleman against the wall covered with his empty gun, and moved crab-wise toward Miskin's desk. The saloonman's body was a lukish shape on the floor behind the mahogany, his eyes staring sightlessly.

**B**ILL stumbled toward the door leading into the saloon proper. He was in time to see Finney coming toward him from the swing doors across the sawdust-covered floor. The constable's gun was out, and sweat was streaming off his chin. His eyes popped when he saw the wounded marshal in the doorway.

Bill said, "There's one man left in here! Grab him!"

He went out to the saloon gallery where the mob was suddenly silent. What they saw before them was not the boss of the Strip, Sid Miskin, the man they were waiting for. They were seeing a tall gaunt man with a black-stubbed face and blood-

shot eyes, a man with a crippled arm, a gun gripped in his right hand; a man who needed no badge on his bloody shirt to give him the nerve to quiet a mob.

Bill May halted and spread his legs apart. He hurled his words at the crowd: "Break this up! Miskin's dead! So's Glanton! And I'm closin' the Strip till after Election Day!"

The crowd seemed to sway before the lash of his voice. May started down the steps, his blue eyes savage. "Break it up!"

A jagged channel formed in the packed mass of men on the dust-choked street, and down this opening walked the marshal of Junction City, in command of himself and of the town once more.

Bill walked toward the courthouse and men stared. Up to this point he had acted without the authority of a star, and if he reached the courthouse unmolested, it would be a miracle. In a cooler moment, a man in his shoes might have had cause to hesitate; in a saner one he might have feared the threat of all those staring, bitter eyes. But he went on, doggedly, stubbornly, fearlessly; and his face was grim and steadfastly turned on the courthouse' high facade where a weathered motto said, JUSTICE TO ALL. FAVOR TO NONE.

\* \* \*

Bill May took Beth home that morning through peaceful streets and pools of sunlight and shadow. They stopped for a time, as they always did, at the sheriff's small white gate.

"Uncle Tom paid the price of his mistake," Beth said gravely. "He must have known how wrong it was, but he'd gone too far with Miskin to turn back."

"We found the money they took from the bank in Miskin's safe," Bill said.

"Was it much?"

"Ten thousand," he said. "Stribling paid two thousand dollars as a reward. He deposited it in your aunt's name at the bank."

"And you'll be the next sheriff, Bill?"

He looked at her, unsmilingly. "If it's what the people of the county want," he told her evenly. "If it's what *you* want—"

She didn't answer that; she didn't have to. He could see it all there in her eyes.

THE END



# Drygulch—Made to Order!

By  
G. C. Ogle



**The mist-shrouded firs bowed down to form a dead man's arch for sodbuster Ansel Turner as he drove slowly along, waiting for the searing lead in his back that, alone, could save him from going to a plow-pusher's glory.**

**A**NSEL TURNER realized that the cold, dead hand that thrust stiffly up out of the ploughed ground could hang him. The gold ring on its fourth finger winked back balefully at him as his straining team reached the end of the furrow. There the moving island of light the lantern

He stared, transfixed, at the protruding hand.

strapped to his plough's beam made in the clammy morning fog became stationary.

Ansel cursed as he leaned down over his plough's handle and stared bitterly at the hand. It was so close he could have touched it, thrusting up out of the next to last furrow—the one he should have turned when he made his last round yesterday.

But it couldn't have been there then. For the big hand, square-fingered, with tufts of coarse black hair on the third joints and large-knuckled, powerful wrist, be-

longed to Dan Slade. The hairs were beaded with mist.

Ansel shivered in the raw air. But not with cold. For only last evening he'd had words with the dead man. Hot with rage, he had threatened to kill Slade if he ever set foot on his homestead again.

It had happened right in front of his shack. The big, arrogant man had come bothering Libby again, wanting her to go back to his Silver Dollar dance hall in Burned Wagons. He'd hinted that he'd marry her if she would. She had flushed and run inside.

Lem Parker, his simple brother, Stubby, and Tor Englund, the big Icelander who lived with the Parkers, had been present when he threatened Slade. That was bad. For Lem didn't like Ansel.

The fifty-year-old, childless widower was letting his hungry eyes linger on Libby each time he rode past. A big, strong young woman would come in right handy in his shack to do the chores and all. And Ansel was the first homesteader in the valley.

Lem didn't like that. He considered the Big Squaw creek valley his private run. Next thing, a whole flock of nesters would come crowding in, and his cattle would be driven back into the breaks.

But he was a sly one. He'd never gunned a man openly. Still, those who crossed him often disappeared mysteriously. So Ansel realized the old heller would be mighty pleased to testify against him if he came to trial for drowning Slade.

But Ansel couldn't come to trial. He couldn't risk losing Libby. He'd have to hide the body of the man that he knew lay there under the freshly turned earth. It didn't make any difference right now who had put him there. That would come later.

Right now, he had to get Slade's body out. It would soon be daylight. Somebody who knew what was under that turned furrow would come. Likely get there just about the time Ansel usually started to plough—around seven these late fall days, just when good daylight came.

He'd lurk back in the fog and watch Ansel, try to catch him when he bent down to examine the dead man's hand. If he was digging around the body a jury would believe he was burying it instead of getting it out. No. Ansel couldn't let that happen. He had to get Slade out before daylight.

He had to hurry. For dawn hinted, its grayness beginning to seep into the fog's clammy folds. And over on the ridge the mother coyote and her pups yapped their farewell to night, before slinking into their burrow.

**A**NSEL stepped from behind the plough and dropped to his knees in the black loam. His work-stiffened fingers started clawing away the turned sod there where it humped up, on past the dead hand.

The lantern's pale yellow glare washed over his craggy face, glinting back from somber dark eyes and accentuating the hollows in his stubble-sown cheeks. He worked feverishly. Soon his questing fingers met woolen cloth.

Ansel's wide mouth, set between a stubborn chin and humped nose, hardened in resolve as he distastefully grabbed the dead man's uncovered arm and dragged him up out of the dirt. It showered away from the well-cut, expensive clothes. But it clotted in an ugly mess over the heavy-joweled, yet handsome face, and over a spot on the back of the head.

Ansel figured the slug had entered there from the smallness of the hole. But it was plenty big where it came out. No matter. He remembered exactly how Dan Slade had looked in life. He'd hated the fellow then. And he still hated him. He was glad he was dead. But he sure wished he'd been gunned somewhere else.

There had been a time when he was afraid of Slade. Afraid he'd take Libby away from him. For a homesteader has mighty little to offer a woman in the way of luxuries. And Slade could give her those, silks and satins and a carriage.

All Ansel could give her was his name and a bare living at first. And a lifetime of devotion. He didn't expect her to know that. But she must have sensed it. For now, after a month in his shack, her blue eyes were meeting his unafraid, and she was singing about her work.

Now they were getting married. Today. That was why he was out in the fog ploughing before daylight. He had to get his sod busted for the fall planting. He'd unhook the two plough horses and he and Libby would ride them into Burned Wagon to stand before the parson.

It was twenty miles there and back. They'd just have time to do a little shopping and make it home by dark. But Ansel wouldn't, if Slade's body was found on his homestead. He'd be lucky if he ever got home!

Slade was as stiff as a board—probably had been there all night. He must have been gunned somewhere close. Ansel dragged him over onto the unploughed ground where tall brown grass wilted down limply, its stems waterlogged.

Then he hurried back and clawed the hole full of dirt and smoothed it down. It didn't look good. Anybody who knew fresh ploughed sod would know something had dug in it if he examined it more than casually. But it would have to do.

Ansel grabbed the dead man's legs and stood him up. Then he crouched down to balance him over his shoulder. Then he wondered. Had Slade worn a hat? He dropped him quick . . . started digging again. If somebody who knew where to look found a hat—but nobody would. Again Ansel smoothed the dirt hurriedly, snugged the Stetson down over Slade's bullet poll.

Slade was a big man. He'd weigh over two hundred. Ansel was a gangling six-three, narrow-shouldered, but gauntly powerful. He got the dead man on his shoulder and levered up, started across the sod toward his fenced pasture. Maybe a furlong beyond the fence an arroyo gullied down the slope. He could drop Slade in it and claw the sliding earth over him.

That would hide him for now. Tonight, he'd dig a hole so deep in the gully's bottom that no prowling varmint would ever disturb the corpse with the piled rocks on top of it. Soon the rains would come and flood the watercourse. Then let the searchers look for Slade where they would!

Ansel stumbled on toward the fence. It seemed a long way with that dreadful weight on his shoulder. Two hunting owls drifted by, formless blobs in the thinning fog. The smothered beat of their wings so close above was weirdly uncanny.

He shivered with a nameless dread. He involuntarily tipped his head to look up, and a tripping bramble dragged him down. He fell heavily, with Slade's crushing weight driving his face deep into the grass. A groan was wrenched from between his clenched teeth as the wind was driven out

of him. He gasped, then rolled Slade off and scrambled to his feet.

Once again Ansel got the dead man on his shoulder and stumbled doggedly on through the tall wet grass that dragged at his cowhide boots. Then he broke into a hurried, shambling run!

For behind him, down the trail that led from the Parker homestead along the section line that bounded Ansel's plough land, he caught the thud of ponies' hoofs! The sound was jumbled, muted by the fog. But he thought three ponies were moving leisurely down the trail. It could be casual travelers. Or the Parkers could be riding early for Burned Wagons.

Or they could be paying Ansel an unannounced visit. For there was a gate at the field's back end that opened onto the trail. If they intended to sneak in and wait for him—

But he had to concentrate on hiding Slade in a hurry. The fence was close now. So he ran on, the sweat popping out all over him from the terrific exertion and excitement. It streamed down his face and stung his eyes. No time now to wipe it off.

His hound dog started baying at the shack. Then he came galloping up the field. Libby must have turned him loose. The horsemen halted at the gate. The hound clamored at them, and Lem Parker cursed him viciously in his hoarse, rasping voice. The simple Stubby tittered nervously, and Tor Englund chuckled.

"Open the gate, Tor!" Lem commanded preemptorily. The Parkers were making an early call—too early for Ansel.

He had maybe three minutes to hide Slade's body and get back to his plough. But where? He could never get to the gully and return without being seen. If he was, it would only be a matter of time before the dead man was found.

He could start running, disappear into the fog and try to get out of the country. No. He wouldn't run. He wouldn't give Libby up. There must be a place to hide Slade. But not there in the open field in the dank grass. A man on horseback would easily spot it lying there as day came and the fog thinned.

**T**HE GATE screeched open. Ponies were crowding through; then they were out in his sod field. No use getting panicky and

losing his head . . . concentrate . . . hide Slade and get back to his plough and bluff it out. Let them stare at the clawed ground and ask their questions! Ansel would face up to them and pretend to know nothing.

The big Icelander wasn't too smart. And Stubby was simple.

It was the crafty Lem he'd have to watch. The old devil would ask his sly questions and go sniffing about. For he must know what to look for. And where to look.

Ansel's heart leaped. That jag of hay on the sled. He'd hauled it out this morning for his two milk cows in the fenced pasture where the graze was short. Libby milked them as they munched on the hay, saving the trouble of driving them to the corral. They had their heads through the wire, tearing out mouthfuls.

It wasn't a very big jag, because Ansel had been in a hurry. He wished Libby would come so he could warn her. And he wished there was more hay on the sled. The cows would soon sweep it clean.

But Ansel could do something about that. He dropped Slade and pulled the sled away from the fence. Then he swept the hay off and laid the dead man on the boards, hurriedly piled the stuff back on the corpse, made sure a foot or hand didn't show. He was in a desperate hurry. But he made certain about that.

Libby wasn't in sight when he went lumbering back to the plough. He chirped to his team, rounded the new land he'd laid out yesterday, and headed back down the furrow. And still his hound bayed desultorily at his visitors lurking back in the fog.

Ansel didn't want to get too far down the furrow away from where Slade had lain. For already he was planning to counter the killer. The fellow would be mighty surprised when he found Slade gone. Maybe he could turn it to his advantage. He could dimly make out the sled off to the right. The cows leaned through the wire, but they couldn't reach the hay. A man on foot approached cautiously, and he yelled in simulated surprise:

"Whoa! What the hell goes on here?" and grinned sourly as he listened to the man on foot double back, running hard.

Came the creak of leather and the thud of hooves galloping along the unploughed headland. Three ponies slid to a halt and

their riders stared down at Ansel, bent over the plough beam and tightening the clevis pin unconcernedly!

He straightened, greeted them matter-of-factly: "Why, good morning, Lem. You're out early. Morning, Stubby . . . morning, Tor."

The three still craned down wordlessly, the mist curling ragged streamers around their hats. Lem's rat-trap mouth snapped shut and the muscles bunched up on his lantern jaws. His slaty eyes, close-set to a long, thin, pointed nose, narrowed, as they rested on Ansel. Then they swiveled, to closely scan the clawed ground on the other side of the narrow, ploughed strip . . . came back to the tall man on foot staring up at him.

"I reckon we are up early. Had a reason. Still have!"

As Ansel looked his question, Stubby tittered shrilly, his round, hairless face a nest of tiny wrinkles. Big, blond Tor sat his pony in silence, combing his yellow beard with his fingers. And Libby emerged from the fog, headed for the sled. She carried a bucket and three-legged stool. The hound frisked to meet her.

The silence held around the plough. Ansel was determined to make Lem disclose why he was there. But the rancher was in no hurry. He just sat and stared at the scratched ground and at Ansel, with his slaty, puzzled eyes occasionally cutting at Libby.

Then Ansel got a jolt. Libby would sweep the hay off the sled for the cows! He'd forgotten that. She was close to the sled. She put the bucket and stool through the fence and approached the hay.

He could think of no way to warn her. He didn't dare to watch her too closely. Lem was a suspicious man—and cunning. Let him pick up a lead.

Libby was sure to see Slade if she pulled the hay off the sled. She'd almost certainly touch him. Would she flinch? Maybe scream? That dead man staring up at her out of that dark clotted mess that had once been a face would be a fearful jolt to her nerves.

Lem was watching her closer now. Did he suspect something? Ansel wished he had his double-barreled scattergun. It would be a sodbuster's salvation if it was found. He knew that if he had it, he'd gun the three

who sat their ponies in his field to escape going on trial for his life. Without a qualm. He figured they deserved to die. He'd dig the hole in the arroyo big enough for four.

But the muzzle-loader was in the barn, both barrels stuffed with buckshot. He'd been hoping to get a crack at that old she-coyote next time she came slinking around his hen roost.

He couldn't do much against the three with his bare hands. For Lem and Tor both wore holstered .45's. But he intended to try if it came to a showdown. Might as well be downed in a hopeless fight as hanged for a killing he didn't do. Maybe if he could get a singletree off . . . It would crush a man's skull. Best start getting it off.

ANSEL dropped the off horse's traces casually. But he was watching Libby. His heart stood still as she thrust her arms deep in the hay. She must have touched that cold, dead body. But she gave no sign, came up with an armful of hay, carelessly let part drop back, tossed the rest in front of the wire.

The watching Lem licked his lips. The peering intentness in his eyes faded as they swung back to Ansel, now hooking up the off horse again. He wouldn't need that singletree. Best crowd Lem a little—make him talk.

"Well, I guess I'll get on with my ploughing," he said casually. "If I can do anything for you, let me know." He stepped between the plough handles.

Lem commanded brusquely, "Don't be in a hurry, sodbuster. How come you're out ploughing before daylight? And how come the ground's all clawed up over there? Been digging for something?"

Lem had his head turned away from Libby now. So he didn't see the hound sniffing the sled and his hackles rising. In another instant he'd start to bark excitedly and dig in the hay. That would be bad. As bad as if Slade's body had been found in the furrow.

Ansel saw the hound. He couldn't do a thing but sweat it out, wait for what must come. He'd been in a hurry to get that off nag hooked up. It wouldn't do to unhook again.

If Libby hadn't already crawled through the wire—but she had. Ansel saw she'd noticed the sniffing hound. But even if she

understood the danger she couldn't get back in time to lead him away.

Then Ansel's tension relaxed. For the woman had picked up a stick and thrown it out into the pasture, crying, "Fetch, Duke!" and the big black-and-tan hound ran off to retrieve it. That and bawling at passersby, was his only accomplishment. Libby kept him showing off until she finished milking.

Her quick thinking had given Ansel another break. He'd get out of this jam. Sure, Lem would skulk around and watch for days, unless he did something about that. Ansel had the answer for skulkers. It was in the barn, both barrels stuffed with buckshot.

But maybe Lem wouldn't do much skulking. Was he entirely certain the finger of suspicion would never point at him for Slade's death? He'd hung around Libby persistently before she left the Silver Dollar. And it was hinted that he owed Slade money. If Ansel could get the rancher on the anxious seat, start him wondering. . . .

So he jeered, "What's the fuss about, Lem? Did you bury something here?"

His knowing grin infuriated the rancher, who snarled, "What the hell do you think I buried here, you sodbusting fool?"

"I wouldn't care to say," Ansel replied. "But I'm going to find out. Somebody's been digging here since I quit ploughing last night!"

The three climbed down from their ponies when Ansel walked across the narrow strip of ploughed land, dropped to his knees and for the third time started clawing away the dirt with his fingers. They craned down, watching, with their ground-tied ponies cropping grass. Furtive fear showed in Lem's eyes. Stubby tittered, "Spose the sheriff will *really* be int'rested in what he finds? Like you thought, Lem?" "Hold your tongue, you blasted fool!" Lem snarled.

Big, blond Tor grinned amiably and said, "Guess Lem had one too many snorts last night. Did you and Slade kill that jug on the way to town after you left home?"

"Get the hell back home and get started on that fence!" Lem snarled. "Always pestering me with fool questions!"

Tor's mouth dropped open in surprise. He turned away but stopped to stare at the scratching Ansel. Now Lem's anxious

look was gone. For the homesteader had burrowed on past where Slade's body had been. Lem leaned down close and sneered, "Stop pretending, sodbuster. You know there's nothing there now. But I'll find what I'm looking for. And when I do—"

"You can start looking right away," Ansel said briskly, still playing his hunch. "Nobody will stop you. For when I get to the end of this furrow and have a bite, I'm leaving for Burned Wagons!"

Day was coming. But the clammy fog held, its cottony folds pressing down on the group huddled in the field. Libby's form was still a blur as she crawled between the wires and started toward Ansel. The big hound gallumped along ahead of her, barking at the grazing ponies. They lifted their heads, prick-eared, and snorted. Then the hound got ambitious. He circled the ponies, darted in, and nipped the heels of Lem's mount. The outraged brute instantly humped himself and his heels lashed out. But they whistled harmlessly over the low-crouched hound's skull.

Then the three ponies bolted. The hound was after them, bawling delightedly. The Parker clan were left afoot. For their mounts disappeared in the fog. Then they were outside the open gate, slamming up the trail for home.

Angry blood had washed Lem's face when Ansel declared he was leaving for Burned Wagons. His big fists clenched, and he snarled in Ansel's ear, "Who are you seeing there?"

"Maybe the sheriff," Ansel replied. Then he was on his feet, yelling at the hound. Presently Duke galloped back, proud of himself, his tongue lolling happily.

"I'll kill that blasted brute!" Lem foamed, and as the hound passed him, he kicked him brutally in the ribs.

Duke yelped in pain and fled yipping to Libby for protection. Ansel saw red. Duke was a no-good potlicker, but Libby was fond of him. So he instantly put his head down and charged Lem, wind-milling his fists and bellowing his fury.

The rancher had time to get set and meet him head on. Both were tall, lanky men. Lem was broader, but older by twenty years. However, he'd never hurt himself with hard work. He was still catty, the veteran of a hundred barroom brawls. Ansel was more powerful, but he was work-

stiffened and had avoided fights. Now he had a consuming desire to beat the rancher's ears off.

**T**HE TWO met in a flurry of hammering fists. A few of them landed solidly. Ansel felt his knuckles crunch against flesh a couple of times and glimpsed Lem staggering back through a red haze. For he'd receipted for an overhanded touser on his humped nose that made his knees buckle. It landed squarely between eyes that would be black for a month. Right now they were brimming with pain tears, and his bashed nose was bleeding.

But he bounced back fighting, madder than ever, flailing away with both hands. He caught Lem a swing on the mouth and the rancher spat blood as he hammered back. Ansel felt the jar as the blow landed. But there was no pain.

He was on top. But he didn't stay there. Lem's long legs came up and clamped around his middle and Ansel went rolling under and came up again by main strength and awkwardness, pushing and clawing, and taking more punishment from Lem's busy fists.

That leg scissors was squeezing the breath from Ansel's body. He was on the bottom again. Lem's teeth snapped shut on his fingers that were trying to push the rancher off and he slugged the defenseless face below him twice before Ansel snapped his poll up and butted him sideways to get on top again briefly.

Lem's fingers drove up and clutched Ansel's throat. His head started pounding and his sight reeled as they made another revolution in the ploughed ground. And still that crushing leg scissors was squeezing in, driving the wind from his belly and threatening to crack his ribs.

In sheer blind agony he reached down and grabbed Lem's toe, wrenched savagely with the last of his strength. He didn't know he had a toe-hold. But he heard the rancher scream in agony and tear himself loose. That was all right with Ansel.

He was busy sucking wind into his tortured belly. Then the blackness washed away, and he remembered he had unfinished business. He scrambled to his feet. Lem was hopping about on one foot and cursing. So he put his head down again and windmilled his fists.

**DRYGULCH—MADE TO ORDER!**

Ansel's right knocked Lem sprawling. He kept going, hoping to clout him another one. Then he was down, his nose rooting through the dirt. For the wretched Duke had gamboled in front of him. His head cracked against the plough, and blackness claimed him.

An instant later he reeled up. He heard Libby sobbing, "You beast! You would try to stomp a helpless man! Leave this instant! All of you!"

A flood of warm milk still gushed down Lem's clothes. It leaked out of his shirt sleeves and pockets and dribbled out of his lank hair.

Stubby's inane giggle blended with Tor's booming laughter as Libby stamped her foot imperiously. Lem was backing away, cursing obscenely, fingering the lump on his head. He backed faster, then broke into a limping run as Ansel tore after him.

There are some men good fighters instinctively know they can't lick. The fools just don't know when they are beat. Lem reckoned the homesteader was one of these. And his leg sure hurt.

He was wearing a holstered .45. But he wasn't one to down a man on his own homestead before witnesses. There were more inviting places. Lem knew one. It was a couple of hundred yards down the trail from Ansel's shack where brushy firs crowded close to form a leafy tunnel. The homesteader would have to pass through that tunnel on his way to Burned Wagons.

Ansel also knew about that tunnel. He was certain now that Lem had downed Slade without the help of Stubby and Tor. He'd merely intended to use them as witnesses. The rancher was a killer. And he was desperate. So it would be a risk getting through that tunnel with Slade's body. There wouldn't be witnesses as there had been in the field.

But Ansel decided his best bet was to let the sheriff know at once. Lem had lost the element of surprise. And what with the unguarded words Stubby and Tor had dropped, the circumstantial evidence pointed strongly to the rancher.

There was a ranch a mile down the trail where it joined the Burned Wagon's county road. It was all open country except for that short stretch through the firs just be-

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yond Ansel's shack where the creek crowded the trail close to the ridge.

But the quicker Ansel got Slade's body down, the better it would look. He decided to chance the tunnel. He could leave Slade behind and ford the creek higher up. But that would give Lem a chance to find the body and hide it. He didn't want that to happen.

**T**HE tall, full-bosomed, young woman with the shining braid of copper-colored hair coiled around her wide, white brow, watched Ansel with gray eyes that were misty with tenderness. Her full red lips trembled as she asked, "Are—are you hurt badly, Ansel?"

Never a word about the dead man on the sled or why the Parkers came calling before daylight. He would tell her when the time came. And she knew she'd go on loving him, no matter what the truth was.

"No, Libby," Ansel replied. "Not bad. I'm all right now. You know Slade's body is on the sled?"

"Yes. And I knew you didn't want the Parkers to know."

"You probably saved me from going on trial for murder, Libby. But I didn't kill Slade. It was just that it would look bad."

"I'm glad he's dead, Ansel! He lied to me! I thought I was getting a wonderful opportunity when he paid my expenses out here, that I would sing in a theater. But it was a dance hall. And all the wages I got was the silver the customers threw on the platform. Oh, I know I could have danced with the men and let them buy me drink on a percentage as the other girls did. But I wouldn't. I guess I'd have had to stay there forever if you hadn't lent me the hundred dollars to pay Slade what I owed him."

"You didn't have to pay him back, Libby."

"But I did!" she flared. "My father always paid his debts. And so do I. I will pay you back too, Ansel, by being a good wife to you."

Her convincing answer was to put her strong arms around his neck and tilt back her head for his kiss on her full red lips. And in her eyes was the unclouded light of stars.

The matter settled to his satisfaction, he



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said, "I'm taking Slade's body down to the forks on my sled. We're not starting life together with a secret hid from the law. I'll go right now, while you get breakfast ready. I should be back in an hour."

"I'm glad it's to be this way," Libby said.

She walked proudly away as Ansel hooked his team from the plough and hitched them to the sled. Best hurry. The fog's drifting folds still wrapped the land with its clammy curtain. But the coming sun would burn it away fast. Still, it should be densely piled under the firs for another half-hour.

He lingered at the barn a little while. There were necessary things to do. He finished them and chained Duke up. Then he went to the shack to kiss Libby good-bye.

She'd hear the shooting in the firs. He decided to reassure her, and said, "I'm taking my gun. Might get a shot at that coyote. If you hear it boom twice, you'll know I got him."

She shuddered, knowing in her heart who the coyote was that lurked in the firs. She asked God to send Ansel back to her. Then she closed the door and waited for the stabbing roar of Lem's .45. And she prayed again that she'd hear the deep boom of Ansel's muzzle-loader replying to it.

Ansel threw a clod at the team and yelled to keep them moving. No point in trying to



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sneak through the tunnel. Lem was either waiting for him—or he wasn't. Ansel knew in his heart that he was. The rancher was that kind of a man. So be it!

The team strained ahead briskly. Their hoofs clumped on the ground and clicked against the flinty rocks. Ansel's nostrils flared with excitement and his breath whistled through them. He carried the scattergun at the ready.

It wasn't far through the tunnel. Not more than a hundred yards. The team had already covered fifty. They plodded on another ten . . . twenty . . . thirty. Soon they'd emerge. Ansel could perceive a lighter patch at the end.

If he could get past that clump near the end—there, where the firs were thickest—then he'd be safe. That was the spot Lem would probably chose.

The team plodded on, passed the spot where Ansel was sure Lem would be crouched. Then why didn't he fire, end it?

Ansel's nerves were as tight as a fiddle's strings.

If Ansel only knew for certain where he was crouched in the brush—

Ah! That rustle! In the brush at the right! Behind the sled, though! Then came the click of a sixgun's hammer earing back! No! Ansel hadn't been mistaken! Lem intended to silence his mouth forever!

Ansel was near suffocating with excitement. The roar of Lem's .45 came as a blessed relief. Again and again orange flame stabbed the blackness. The startled team lunged ahead, and the form on the sled tumbled off backward as Ansel jerked the rope around its middle from twenty feet back.

But Lem never knew it was only a few slats nailed together and dressed in Ansel's clothes with his battered Stetson on top! Blinded by the flame of his sixgun, he came clawing out of the brush, snarling in triumph.

That snarl didn't last long. For Ansel's scattergun boomed. Twice. Once was enough. The second shot was to let Libby know he'd downed that slinking coyote. He turned back then his sobduster's salvation cradled under his arm. For he heard Libby's flying feet on the trail. There were things he didn't want her to see.

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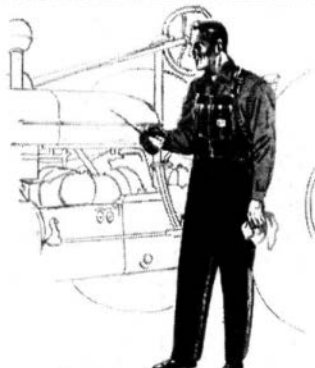
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