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A GUN FOR SATAN'S RANGE

by WILL
COOK

FERBER
POWELL



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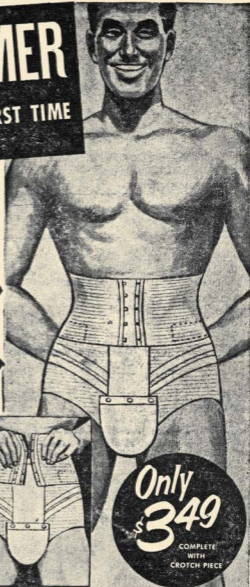
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Combined with **ACE-HIGH WESTERN STORIES**

Vol. 31

Contents for May, 1954

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NEXT ISSUE OUT APRIL 16th!

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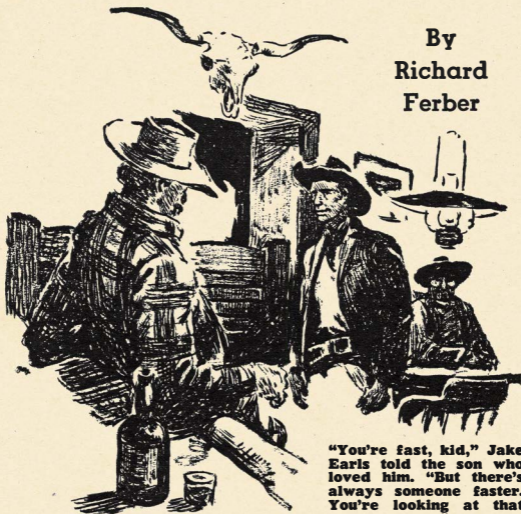
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The Long Riders

By
Richard
Ferber



"You're fast, kid," Jake Earls told the son who loved him. "But there's always someone faster. You're looking at that man."

COMING over the ridge, Jake Earls reined in the buckskin. Night had begun to spread over the long pine stands before him, and beyond the distant rim of the mountains a thin moon crept upward. Behind him somewhere a coyote barked twice, then let out an echoing wail.

The coldness worked under the collar of his mackinaw, and Earls rolled a cigarette. Below, in the little valley, a light glowed warmly from the window of a ranch house.

He watched it as his fingers rolled the delicate paper, shifted his tall body on the leather, and hooked a long leg around the saddle horn. He was somewhere past forty, with dark hair and stubble beard streaked with gray. His nose was long and hard-shaped above the thick, tight-held mouth. He snapped the match alight, brought it up to the cigarette, squinting, so that the skin crinkled at the corner of his eyes.

(Continued on page 8)

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Still watching the ranch house, he wondered again why he had come this way. It had been fifteen years since he had last passed here; only then he had taken the fork that ran down into the darkness of the valley. Well, he wouldn't take it tonight. It was only, he told himself, that he had just drifted this way, that no curiosity had drawn him here. In fifteen years a man saw a lot of places, and some he saw twice. And one town was like the next, even if it held certain memories, memories that were long dead. Or so he thought.

Watching the light from the window now, he tried to imagine what she would look like now. She would be older, as he was older, perhaps with the same grayness in her hair. But she'd still be pretty. And the boy. Fifteen years. . . . He tried to remember. He'd be about twenty now, he supposed, but he couldn't guess what the kid would look like. It didn't matter. He had ridden here because a man had to ride somewhere; tomorrow it would be somewhere else. He snuffed out the cigarette between the hard leather of his fingers and looked back. The trail was behind him, far back perhaps, but always there. He couldn't remember when it hadn't been. The smile worked into a frown, and he clucked to the buckskin mare. She moved forward, and the fork of the trail fell off behind him, and in a moment the light from the ranch house was gone.

The trail coursed downward through the darkness and came out onto the narrow flats. As he turned from it and struck the wagon road. Earls unbuttoned the mackinaw and felt at the gun at his side. After fifteen years, no one should remember him, but there was always a chance. Ahead of him, the lights of Corson's Wells sifted through the river willows and cast a dancing reflection on the stream. He crossed the shallows, riding at a walk, and turned into the main street. The buildings rose up tall and shadowy and seemingly unchanged.

A lamp glowed faintly in the doorway of the old livery. On the hotel porch a man sat hunched on the bench with the moths sweeping in wide circles over his head. At the hitch rack in front of the Fandango a few ponies stood three-footed, and Earls drew rein there and dismounted. He paused on the sidewalk, taking a long, casual look at the street. Then he pushed open the batwings of the saloon and stepped inside.

The Fandango was almost empty. A couple of men lounged at the bar, and three more sat at one of the tables grouped along the wall. Earls walked to the plank and took his survey of the room as the barkeep put up the bottle and glass. The place was small. It had grown no larger since he'd been there last. He poured a drink, took it down in a quick gulp, and studied the men at the table. They were playing poker. The one with his back to him hadn't turned around. When he finally did, he showed Earls a smile, thin and unfriendly, and let his eyes run up and down the man. He was only a kid, Earls saw, not much more than twenty, with dark hair and a smooth, handsome face. His fingers, drumming on the hard table-top, were long and supple, and he kept watching Earls with amused eyes.

Earls started to turn away, and then something suddenly stopped him. Perhaps it was the kid's eyes, or the darkness of the hair, or the tall, lanky body; he didn't know. He studied the kid for a long minute, then motioned to the barkeep.

"The kid," he said, low-toned. "What's his name?"

The barkeep's glance went to the kid, and back again, and he shook his head. "Ask him."

Earls shrugged and lifted the bottle. The kid stood up and came over. His spurs made a clinking sound above the tapping of his boot-heels. He wore a gun low on his hip, tied down with a leather thong to the pant leg. He stopped next to Earls and leaned

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down on the bar. "You're pretty nosey, stranger," he said quietly.

EARLS smiled and nodded without looking at the kid. The kid waved to the barkeep, and he brought up another glass and put it down. The kid poured from Earls' bottle and swallowed the drink. "Tell him my name, Sheely," he said.

"Earls," Sheely said. "Bob Earls."

The words caused Jake Earls to straighten a little at the bar. He made a slow turn, the smile still lingering, and looked full in the kid's face. I should have known it right off, he thought. It was all there, the woman's eyes and hair, and perhaps his own height. He started to put out a hand, but something halted him. His mind fumbled for a name, and he said, "Mine's Wilson. Tom Wilson."

"I didn't ask," the kid answered curtly. He poured another drink and looked at Earls defiantly, waiting for the protest. None came, and he said, "You're a stranger here, mister. A nosey stranger."

"That's right," Earls said. He smiled now to himself. The kid was hell on two feet, he could see that, and for a moment a feeling of pride flooded over him. He shook it off, but he watched the kid intently in the mirror.

The kid took his elbows off the bar and hooked both thumbs in the gun belt. He was looking for a fight, that was obvious. He took a step forward and stared down at Earls. "The name Earls mean anything to you, mister?" he asked.

Earls rubbed his chin. His eyes dropped down to his glass. "I don't know," he said.

The kid hesitated, then the tenseness went from his eyes. "All right," he said in a menacing tone. "Just make sure it never does. And next time don't be askin' questions."

Earls let out a sigh and straightened up. The smile was gone now, and the wrinkles had come to the corner of his eyes. He met

the kid's bold and unfriendly stare. He's some tough, Earls thought, and he said aloud, "All right, kid, I won't."

The kid smiled a little and waited until Earls turned away. Then he went over to the table again and sat down. He kept his back to Earls and ruffled the deck and paid no more attention to him. Earls poured one more drink and left two silver dollars on the bar and walked out.

In the livery the stable man was asleep, his body propped against the back of an empty stall. Earls unsaddled the mare and tossed her a forkful of hay. The man didn't wake up, and he went to the doorway, pausing a moment to build a fresh cigarette. The lights from the Fandango edged out into the street, but he could see nothing through the dusty windows. Thinking of the kid, he wondered why he hadn't told the kid his name. After all, he was the boy's father. And he had that right, even if it was fifteen years since he had seen him last. Still, there was plenty of time. He finished the smoke and ground it under his boot, then moved through the darkness of the sidewalk toward the hotel.

It was mid-morning when he came out into the street again. He had bought a cigar, lighted it, and sat down on the porch bench. The town was quiet, even with the sparse morning activity. A wagon passed slowly along the plaza. Now and then a man came by him, watching him out of the corner of his eye. No one recognized him, he knew. The man sitting next to him on the bench had his eyes half-closed, squinting sleepily into the sun.

The cigar finally went out in his mouth, and he stood up, turning toward the livery. He saddled the mare, watered her, and, swinging to the leather, turned her west from the town. The trail pulled upward again, past the oaks and the stands of pine. The sun filtered through the trees, heatless against the brisk fall air. He found the fork of the trail and moved down it until

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(Continued from page 10)

he came to the wagon road. He let the buckskin out to a high-rack then, and she was blowing a little by the time he reined up at the ranch house and dismounted.

He tied her at the hitching rail and gazed for a moment at the house. It was still neat and white-painted. A picket fence bordered it, enclosing the flower garden and the withered, sagging rows of corn. Beyond it the barn stood hard against the hillside, and a few steers grazed on the open slope. Watching it, he could see that the place had changed little; in a way, it was as though he had never left it.

He opened the gate and closed it behind him, and, as he did so, he heard the creaking of the screen door. He looked up and saw the woman there, and for an instant he stood hesitating. Then he moved slowly toward her, his eyes fixed on her, until he was at the bottom of the steps.

Martha Earls held the screen door half-open and looked down at him. She was a tall woman, with a fuller body now, and a grayness of hair that he had expected. But the prettiness was still there, and the warm, brooding eyes, and he could see where the kid had gotten his good looks. He took off his hat and held it loosely at his side. There was no shade here against the slanting sunlight and he began to feel warm under the heavy mackinaw. He put his foot on the bottom step and said, "Hello, Martha," uncertainly.

For a moment she didn't answer. Her eyes searched his face, as though she was trying to remember him. Then her shoulders fell a little and she said, "Hello, Jake. I was expecting you."

"Oh?" he said.

"Sooner or later." There was no friendliness in her tone, and he thought he detected a note of resignation. She moved back, holding the door open for him, and he went inside. Without speaking she turned toward the kitchen and he followed her.

"Sit down," she said, motioning toward the table.

He sat down. She set two cups on the table and poured coffee into them and took a chair opposite him. She looked at him, fixing him with a curious stare, and he let his eyes drop under it.

"I'm sorry you came back," she said.

A smile twisted Earls' face. "I figured you would be. But I'm only passin' through."

SHE sighed a little then and seemed to relax. Earls glanced around the kitchen. There was a new stove, and a pump handle at the sink. Nothing that he could remember. He picked up the coffee cup and held the hot edge of it to his mouth. He tried to make his voice sound casual. "I reckon you're married again, Marty?"

"No. Not yet."

He raised his eyebrows questioningly. "You're going to?"

"Yes." She said it coldly, almost with defiance. "Barnard Miles. He's the marshal at Corson's Wells."

"Oh?" He chuckled deep in his throat, but stopped quickly. "It's quite a contrast," he said.

She found nothing humorous in it. The coffee cups were empty, and she pushed hers aside and scraped back the chair. He looked up and saw that she wanted him to leave. Her eyes were cold, and her mouth set into a firm line. But something held him there, perhaps the warm sunlight slanting through the windows, or perhaps the warmth that he still felt in the woman's presence. He spread his hand out slowly on the table and studied the long, stained fingers. "You want me to go?" he said.

"Yes."

"It's been a long time," he said. "Fifteen years."

"You were expecting a welcome?"

"No. Not from you. But the boy. . . ."

"Yes, the boy," she interrupted him. "I

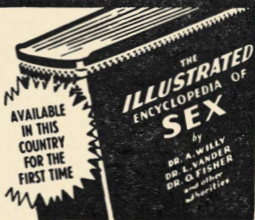
(Continued on page 14)

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(Continued from page 12)

knew you'd come back someday for that. And you'll be pleased with what you see. He's like you, Jake; you don't have to worry. He doesn't remember you, but he's heard enough. Everybody's heard of Jake Earls, and Bob doesn't let them forget. Sometimes. . . ." She put her elbow on the table and her hand clenched against her face. She brought it down and let it fall limply on the table. "Sometimes, when he comes swaggering in with that gun on his hip, I can see you, Jake. And I can see the blood on your hands."

Earls built a cigarette; he kept his eyes on the woman's face. "He's all right," he said. "He's just young, and full of hell."

"I know, Jake." She twisted in her chair and gazed out the window. On the slope a steer bawled, and a jay dropped out of the pinons and sailed toward the river willows. "And last month he shot a man, Jake; his first one, and it wasn't his fault that he didn't kill him. But it was self-defense, like it was always self-defense with you. And then I can hear him outside, practicing with tin cans, getting ready for the next one."

Earls said nothing. He let his glance drift away from the woman to the bright oil-cloth of the table top. He spun the empty cup slowly in his hand.

Martha stood up and went to the stove. She came back with the coffee pot and poured into the two cups. She sat down again and her voice had grown tired now. "I don't know what I'm going to do, Jake. Miles tries to look after him, but it doesn't do any good. He hates Miles because Miles is the law, and he thinks the law is only a gun. And when he sees you. . . ."

"He doesn't have to. I saw him last night, and he didn't know who I was."

"And were you proud of him?" she asked bitterly.

"I don't know."

Martha leaned across the table and her hand settled on his. He could see the pleading in her eyes, and hear it in her voice, and

she said, "Jake, please, will you go away? If he finds you're here, there'll be no end to it. He'll kill a man, Jake, and then he'll be running, and he'll never stop. It was that way with you."

Earls nodded his head slowly. "And there's nothing I can do?"

"No. Except go away. Will you go away, Jake?"

He stood up, taking his hat. "I don't know," he said. "It's been a long time."

Still sitting, she watched him move across the room. At the door of the kitchen he stopped, looking back at her, and tried to smile. Her eyes seemed warmer now, and the sunlight flooded the room and glistened brightly on her hair. And he remembered how she had looked that morning, fifteen years ago, when he had come in with the gun barrel still warm in the holster and the tired pony waiting outside. And for a moment nothing seemed changed to him. . . .

He lifted the hat and gave it a quick twirl in his hand; then he turned and moved through the door away from her. He walked quietly, hoping to hear her speak again, but the banging of the screen door was the only sound that interrupted the silence. Outside, he climbed to the saddle and swung the buckskin off from the rack. For a moment he paused there, watching the house and thinking of the woman sitting in the warm, sunlighted kitchen; then he swung the mare about and heeled her into an easy trot up the wagon road."

AN HOUR later, when he rode into the street, he could hear the noise from the Fandango Saloon. He drew rein and dismounted and went inside. It was Saturday, and the place was full, the men standing shoulder to shoulder at the bar. He crowded through and paid for a bottle and carried it to a table in the corner of the room.

He saw the kid, and the kid looked at him, bleary-eyed and unfriendly. He stood

(Continued on page 84)

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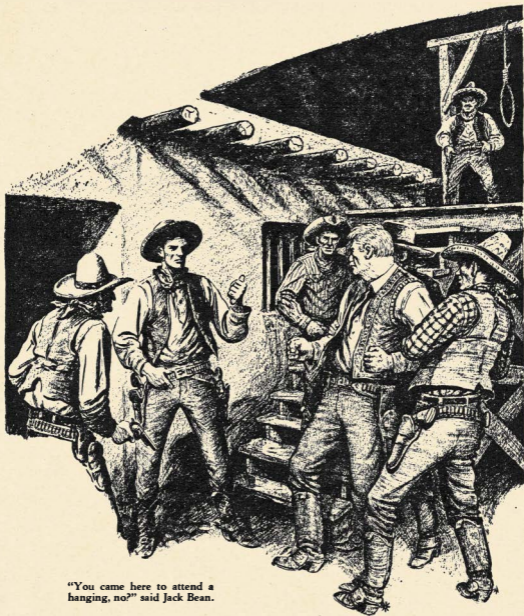
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"You came here to attend a hanging, no?" said Jack Bean.

THEY were building the gallows upon which to hang Jack Bean. The day was hot, there in the little Mexican town, and the men working on the scaffold moved lazily. Their boss, a grizzled old Mexican with an ugly scar in place of one eye, was half drunk on mescal, and, as he hammered spikes with gnarled fists swinging a heavy hammer, he sang ribald

verses from that marching song of Pancho Villa, *Cucaracha*.

Jack Bean watched them from his barred window, trading bits of talk with the workmen, especially the evil-looking old rascal in charge of the grisly job.

"If that scaffold is no better than your song, you old buzzard, it will cave in before I get to the top step."



SATAN'S SADDLE MATES

By Walt Coburn

When the clouds of war were thickest, one gringo gunman learned of a new kind of courage greater even than his own—the bravery of a beaten man, and the courage of a fighting woman!

"It will hold," retorted the old Mexican, taking a drink of the mescal that lost none of its fiery taste for having been left in the sun. "It will hold, my *Senor Frijole*. From it you make your last jump when the time comes, all because you are that much loco in the head that you must be hung instead of being shot by the firing squad. I should be at Magdalena right now, drinking good

wine and eating fiesta meat and listening to music. But no, you must go around stealing cattle from honest men and shooting the belly off the honest owner of those cattle. *Caramba*, it is an evil world!"

He went on with his hammering. The Mexican helpers and the *cuartel* guards were enjoying Jack's baiting the old man who had once been a captain under Villa.

"I'll bet ten pesos," called Jack Bean, "that you don't even know how to tie a hangman's knot, old Cockroach."

"The noose will hold that neck of yours, young rooster. Other things may fail. Once when the man was heavy, the rope snapped, and we had it all to do over. There was another, a fat one. His neck was weak in the middle, and, when he hit the end of the rope,—*pouff!* His damned head came off, like the head chopped off a rooster. His blood spattered all over my best clothes."

"Now that was helk, wasn't it, old *Cucaracha*," Jack Bean said. Those steps only tally twelve to me. I want my thirteen. Count 'em, old *borrachon*, if you are sober enough to see out of that lonesome eye of yours."

THE Mexicans in the *cuartel* yard winked and grinned all the more. Twice already since morning the prisoner had tricked the old carpenter into counting the scaffold steps.

Jack Bean rolled and smoked a cigarette. All in all it was not unpleasant in the *cuartel*. He'd lived in worse places. The only drawback was that he was to hang as soon as the governor returned from Mexico City on a business trip. Jack Bean wanted to live longer, wanted to ride and dance at fiestas and get a little drunk sometimes. He wanted more of life than he'd had so far.

They said of him, there along the Border, that he was the most dangerous man who rode back and forth across the Line, dodging those who wanted to collect the price on his head. It was that jumping over the Border that had won him the nickname of the Jumping Bean.

No man knew just where he came from or why he made a business of rustling cattle. He seemed to have no desire for money because he was too free-handed with what he had. He bought clothes when he needed them, or a new saddle or spurs or a head-

stall. When he wanted a good horse, he would steal one from some big *hacienda*. He rode his way in and out of trouble, shooting his way through, when crowded too hard. Men liked him. Women wanted him.

But now Jack Bean was waiting to be hanged for shooting Don Hermano Pico—the swaggering *caballero* nephew of the governor, who was hated by the *peons* and *vaqueros* who worked on the huge *hacienda* known as the Pico Grant.

Jack Bean had no desire to die. But he was not afraid of death. The bad luck of a horse shot from under him and a fall that knocked him unconscious had landed him here in the *cuartel* at Los Altos. That had been a real fight, that running battle in the darkness when he and his men, less than half a dozen, had been cut off by Don Hermano and thirty or forty fighting men commandeered and hand-picked from the Army. He and Pico had come face to face in the fighting, there in the moonlight. Jack Bean had shot Pico out of the saddle, only to be brought down and captured. He wondered how many of his handful of men had made a getaway. Most of all he hoped that Pelon had gotten away to the mountains. Little, weakened, wicked-hearted Pelon. Hairless, even to his lack of eyebrows. Pelon, the Bald One. Pelon, the wicked-eyed little old Yaqui who was worth a dozen men in a fight.

No man quite understood the bond between Jack Bean and Pelon. There was a part of that old standing comradeship that even Jack Bean did not know. All he knew was that he had been raised by this fierce-hearted, hairless little Yaqui whose eyes would sometimes lose their wicked lights when he spoke vaguely of Jack Bean's father and mother. Mostly, though, Pelon's friendship had taken the form of a fierce sort of loyalty.

Pelon had taught the young boy many things, and he had ridden with him in the fastness of the rough mountains with the

war-like Yaquis. He hoped that they had not shot Pelon. The little man was like a father to him, and loved him with the fierceness of a cougar for its whelp.

IN THE twilight of another day the scaffold was finished. The trap had been tested, the hangman's noose fashioned and hung over the crossbeam. For the last time the tipsy old Cucaracha had counted the steps. Thirteen of them led from the dusty ground of the *cuartel* yard to the platform above.

"Thirteen," he chuckled as he finished his bottle.

"You'll be sober enough, you reckon, to work the trap?" Jack Bean asked.

"I could be dead drunk on my back, gringo," the Mexican growled at him, "and still have the strength to work the trap that will send to hell the gringo dog who killed my patron, Don Hermano Pico. When I have cut you down, I will spit in your dead face. It will be black and all screwed out of shape. I will spit into your eyeballs."

"You sure can think of cheerful things, old Cockroach." Jack Bean laughed behind the bars. "Be plumb certain I'm dead, though. I might come alive and hang you on your own gallows."

"Pouff! The governor will be here tonight. The execution is to be at sunrise."

"Don't forget to be on hand."

A bugle sounded for the guards to change. Its liquid notes came through the first shadows of twilight.

Across yonder, through the desert haze, the last rays of the setting sun tinted the peaks with a purple glow that showed above the level stretch of mesa and desert. Jack Bean, alone in his cell, stared out through the bars at the hills where he had spent most of his years. That was the Yaqui country, home of the fierce-hearted warriors he had known since early boyhood. He knew them, spoke their tongue, understood their hearts. He had lived with them, yonder there in the shadowed hills

where few men save a Yaqui had ever ridden. Those ragged mountains, untamed as the Yaquis who dwelt there, were his home. He was looking out towards them now for the last time, a terrible longing gripping his heart as he watched the last rosy tint fade to shadow on the highest peaks. Sunset was turning to dusk. Darkness would settle down in a little while. Was this to be the sundown of life?

At sunrise he was to be hung. Well, he'd asked for the rope. It was a harder task to hang than to be shot by a firing squad. Yet he had asked to be hung. He wanted to show the governor how a white man could die. He had chosen the harder death. Chosen it because he hated this robber of the poor who was in power as governor. He hated him as he had hated Hermano Pico. His hatred was that of the Yaqui, taught him by that able tutor Pelon.

The shadows crept across the bleak mountains he loved. As he gripped the bars a lump came into his throat, and his hard eyes misted.

Then suddenly he tensed. From out of the dusk came the sharp notes of the bugle. Then the thud of hoofs. And down the street rode the governor, a former general, with his military escort. They rode past the cell window on down the street to the big adobe house that had been made ready for the governor's coming. Jack Bean watched him through the bars, a twisted grin on his mouth, a glitter of intense hatred in his black, gray-flecked eyes. He gripped the cell bars until his knuckles whitened under the tanned skin.

Long after the cavalcade had passed, he stood there, brooding hatred stirring every fiber of his being. So tense had he become that at first he did not hear that which was meant for his ears alone.

It was a song—a little song sung in the darkness under the stars by a girl's voice. It was one of those countless little songs composed by the poor people of Old Mexico. But it was not a song of the Mexican

people. It was a song of the Yaquis, sung in the language of those people—a camp song that belonged to those mountains he had watched in the twilight.

To the guards or any others who might hear it, the song with its few words meant nothing. But to Jack Bean they had a strange significance that he alone understood.

Pelon, so the song told him, had reached the mountains. Tonight he would ride here with his Yaquis. . . .

The little song ended as quickly as it had come. The song and its singer were gone in the night.

Jack Bean's heart pounded against his ribs. Pelon was alive. Pelon was coming, bringing his Yaquis!

Against the light of the rising moon stood the clear silhouette of the gallows. Jack Bean grinned at it and touched a cupped match flame to his cigarette. . . .

THE wild Yaqui yell tore the night apart. The Indians came from every direction, spurring their horses to a run, shooting as they filled the streets. From the barracks sounded the call of a bugle. But the bugle call broke in two, silenced by gunfire.

An officer at the *cuartel* barked a sharp command, trying to rally his frightened soldiers. Then a bullet caught him in the mouth, and he went down fighting. His soldiers in their ill-fitting khaki uniforms ran for cover, scattered like quail—while the Yaquis rode down the street, swarming around the *cuartel*. . . .

Pelon, bald, shriveled, hatred in his black eyes, led his Yaquis in a concentrated rush inside the prison doors. Their wild yell filled the place as they broke into the cells and set free the prisoners.

The hairless Pelon made his way down the row of cells. He had a bunch of keys in one hand, a smoking six-shooter in the other. Jack Bean greeted him with a shout. "You never looked handsomer, you old renegade!"

Now they were outside. Jack Bean had a horse under him, a gun in his hand.

Down the street came a swarm of Yaquis on foot. In their midst was a big man with coarse, iron-gray hair, a square-jawed face adorned by a heavy, bristling mustache. There was blood on his face and clothes, and he was struggling with all his powerful strength to free himself from the grip of the big, steel-muscled Yaquis who held him, dragging him along as he cursed and fought. They came to a halt at the *cuartel* where Jack Bean and Pelon sat their horses.

Jack Bean greeted the big man with a mocking salute and a thin, twisted grin. "It is not often," he said in Mexican, "that I have the great honor of talking to the governor. I am glad to see you. More glad, perhaps, than you are to see me."

The governor growled something and stood there, breathing hard, blood trickling down his heavy jaw from an ugly cut across his cheek. Cruel, brutal, ruthless, oppressor of the poor and defenseless. This big man who had been a general in the federal army and later had taken part in the rebellion that had put a new president in power, was all that and more. Robber of the weak, despoiler of women, a murderer, yes—but no coward. No fear showed in his slitted black eyes as he faced Jack Bean and Pelon, and the fierce Yaquis who hated him with the venom of rattlesnakes in their blood.

"What do you want of me, gringo son of a dog?" he growled through bleeding lips.

"You came here to attend a hanging, no?" replied Jack Bean in the Mexican tongue. "You shall not be disappointed. There is the gallows. It is a good piece of carpenter work. Your one-eyed Cucaracha understands his hanging scaffold and his hangman's knots. You were wise in sending to the Pico Grant to have him do the work. There it stands, the platform with its thirteen steps and its trap and its rope. You see it there in the moonlight."

"*Por Dios*, get done with this loco nonsense, gringo," the governor said. "I am the governor of this state, appointed by the president. *Madre de Dios*, you will pay for this rough handling. No gringo cattle thief can do this to me."

"Perhaps not, *Senor*," the gringo smiled in answer. "You are the governor, yes. You are likewise a thief and a butcher. Do you have to be lifted and dragged up those thirteen steps or have you the courage to walk up there to get the rope around your thick neck?"

"*Por Dios*, gringo, you can't do this to the governor of the state, a friend of the *presidente*!"

"No?" Jack Bean shrugged his broad shoulders. "Pelon, drag him up the steps. The great general of the wars lacks the courage to walk up."

The big, heavy-set Mexican governor straightened, his slitted eyes blazing. "I am no coward," he said. "I will walk. Tell these dogs to take their filthy paws off me. I will show you, my gringo, how a soldier of Mexico knows how to die. Even if I am to die on a gallows erected to hang a thief."

"Let him go, my Yaquis," Jack Bean ordered. "Let the butcher climb the thirteen steps to the rope."

FREE, the big Mexican walked with straight back towards the gallows. The crowd of Yaquis gave way, forming a human lane to let him pass. Much as they hated him, they admired his nerve.

The governor halted to face Jack Bean. There was defiance in his carriage, in the lift of his head. Contempt showed in his voice when he spoke.

"You will fix the noose, gringo, and spring the trap?" he asked.

Jack Bean grinned faintly and shook his head. "I am no hangman. That pleasant job is for the one-eyed Cucaracha. He has been bragging how he has hung many men. He will now have the honor to spring the trap once more. The Cockroach will put

the rope around your neck and hang you."

"The one you call the Cockroach, gringo, once served under me as sergeant." The governor stood straight. He knew the loyalty of his men. "He would rather die than put a hangman's rope around my neck."

"Pelon," grinned Jack Bean, "send some men out to find the one-eyed Cucaracha. They'll find him drunk in some *cantina* or in a dirty alley with the pigs and dogs."

"I always have the *cabron*," replied the wrinkled little Yaqui, his wicked eyes glittering under his battered sombrero. "When he hangs this butcher, then I will hang him with my own hands. I cut an eye from his buzzard's head once. It will make me glad to place a rope around his skinny neck and drop him to hell."

A couple of Yaquis dragged the drunken, somewhat battered one-eyed Cockroach from the shadows. He stood there, steady on his feet despite the fact that he was drunk. His one eye, bloodshot, glittering, looked at the governor who stood at the foot of the gallows. He saluted stiffly.

The governor returned the salute, then his eyes turned to Jack Bean who was watching the drama with cold-eyed amusement.

"*Senor* gringo," he said, his voice low-pitched, steady, "for myself I ask nothing. Hang me or let your Yaquis torture me, and I will not beg for mercy. But I will get on my knees to you and let you spit on me if you will spare this man you call the one-eyed Cockroach. Do not ask him to spring the trap."

"Then," said Jack Bean, "get on your knees, *Senor* Governor. Get on your knees and beg like a dog for a mouldy bone. Pelon will spit in your face."

A harsh, almost animal cry burst from the skinny throat of the one-eyed Cucaracha as the governor who had been his general bent to his knees. The one-eyed old warrior leaped forward, coming at Jack Bean with a knife. The barrel of Pelon's **gun** knocked the old scaffold-builder senseless.

Two giant Yaquis grabbed the governor who made a desperate lunge at Pelon.

Coldly, without any outward sign of emotion, Jack Bean stood looking at the governor. "You were going to get down on your knees in the dirt, *senor*," he said flatly.

"I will keep my word. Let your Yaquis turn me loose."

"Turn him loose," said Jack Bean.

With the Yaquis looking on stolidly, the man who was governor of the state got down on his knees. The governor of the state who had been a general in the army, a man who had many times faced death, knelt there, his bleeding face fouled by the insults of his enemies. Beneath the blood and swarthy skin showed a whiteness. The man's eyes were terrible in their hatred. The muscles of his face were taut, and his hands were clenched. Yet he did not flinch.

It was a strange sight, there in the moonlight. That proud don of Old Mexico on his knees in the dust, suffering without cringing from that which must have been more torturing than a twisted knife blade in his bowels. Those Yaquis, in spite of their bitter hatred of the man, sensed the bravery of his act. They fell back. All save Pelon who stood there, his wicked eyes hating the man who knelt at the foot of the scaffold.

"Get up," said Jack Bean tonelessly. "Get up. Get your horse and ride back to the City of Mexico or somewhere beyond the reach of these Yaquis who hate you. Get off your knees and ride home."

The governor got to his feet. He stood there, his face twitching with pent-up emotion, his whole body quivering as if he had been lashed to the bone.

"Better for you, gringo," he said, his voice tense, shaking with a terrible anger, "if you hang me now. Because no man can do what you have done to me tonight without paying for it. Better for you if you let me walk up those steps."

"The Yaquis have spit on you," Jack

Bean said coldly. "Get away from here. Take your one-eyed Cockroach with you. Tell your drunken *politicos* how you have let us spit on you. Ride on."

Far more cruel than any torture a Yaqui could inflict was that humiliation that this proud Mexican must carry with him. Far better to die than to live on with the torture of the memory that would ride with him on all his trails and haunt his slumber at night. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Padre's Wine

AT THE old, old Franciscan Mission two brown-clad *padres* sat in the candle light. It was a barren room with white-washed adobe walls undecorated save for the ancient hand-carved images, crudely cut and painted by the Indians, in niches made in adobe walls that were three feet thick. The flickering light of the hand-made candles lighted the two faces of the brown-cowled *padres*. Their faces were startling in the contrast.

The red, round, jovial face of the short, heavy-paunched *Padre* Diego was one given to ready laughter that shook his rotund frame. A man given to mirth, rather than sorrow, was this jovial *padre* whom the Indians loved. He had christened and baptized countless children from those hills where the Yaquis lived. It was his practice to line up the older children and, with a rough cloth and warm water, wash their hands and faces before they entered the mission. They followed him like so many puppies, their shrill voices echoing his hearty laughter as he showed them where to find the ripe fruit and the grapes. His good nature found its reflection in the dark faces of the war-like people who came here to worship, in their half-barbaric way, the *Senor Dios* and their beloved San Francisco. To them the moon-faced *Padre* Diego was more than a priest. He was a

man who understood, with a sly wink and a heavy chuckle, their occasional childish escapades told in open confessional. He heard their sins and gave them bits of advice. His punishments were invariably softened by a smile and the touch of a hand that made them understand things he could not tell them in words.

Padre Geronimo was tall, leathery of visage, with the sorrows of the world im-pooled in his black eyes, his lean, fleshless face etched with stern lines made there by the reflected suffering of all mankind. The small Indian children feared him. The older ones gave him an obedience and respect that they never gave *Padre* Diego.

So these two men of the brown cloth of the Franciscans sat on opposite sides of a hand-hewn table. *Padre* Diego's hand was close to the wine jug. *Padre* Geronimo's long, calloused, sinewy hands were folded in the thread-bare sleeves of his robe.

His voice, as parched as his leathery skin, fell with a flat sound across the table in the barren room.

"You are too lenient," he told *Padre* Diego. "The Church cannot condone such crimes as he commits. I grant you he has his virtues, but they are hidden by his crimes of theft and murder. This last escape of his, this forcing of the governor to kneel in the dust at the foot of the scaffold while the Indians spat on him, is the worst of his escapades. With Mexico growing more dangerous to us each day as an enemy of the Church. . . ."

"I talked to Jack," *Padre* Diego answered quietly. "He himself told me it was one of the bravest things he ever saw a man do—a proud man like that don getting on his knees in the dirt for the sake of a one-eyed old scoundrel who comes from the worst of the worst in all Mexico. It wiped something of the bitterness from the heart of Jack Bean, that act of humility made by the man he hated. As for his robbery and killing, Jack robs only those who have stolen from the poor. He has killed only

when he had to, as a soldier might kill." *Padre* Diego hesitated for a moment. Then he said, "But you wouldn't understand. Even my sweetest wine sours in your mouth."

"You and your wine!" *Padre* Geronimo said sourly. "Your vineyards mean more to you than the souls of the heathen. I tell you, the church is in grave danger. The new *presidente* is against all churches, so it is said, and especially against the Mother Church. This last action of Jack Bean's might precipitate great trouble. It needs but something of that sort to touch off the powder magazine. The governor's nephew killed, the governor humiliated—and you sit there and talk of wine while the mission topples about our ears. Jack Bean is a menace."

"Hermano Pico was a robber and a murderer. The governor is worse." As for the *presidente*. . . . I tell you. . . ."

"Quiet, in God's name, quiet!" *Padre* Geronimo cut in sharply. "We are not alone. I heard the sound of spurs outside."

They sat there, listening. There was the ghost of a smile on the round, red face of *Padre* Diego. *Padre* Geronimo's sinewy brown hands gripped his crucifix.

OUTSIDE, out in the shadows of the night, there sounded the faint music of spur rowels. Then the sound of galloping hoofs. And after the vanishing thud of hoofbeats, there was only the silence of the Mexican night.

Padre Diego sipped the wine. The tall frame of *Padre* Geronimo lifted from the hard bench. He walked out into the garden, and a few moments later he was back in the room. In his hand he held a leather sack. His dark, sunken eyes looked accusingly from their shadowy sockets. He dropped the heavy sack on the table, directly in front of *Padre* Diego who unfastened the thongs and put a fleshy hand into the gaping mouth of the bag. The hand came out, filled with gold pieces.

"Again we have a gift from the mysterious night rider. Like a miracle come these strange donations."

"A shipment of gold was intercepted but a few days ago," replied *Padre* Geronimo sternly. "Perhaps you heard of it. A pack train of gold was intercepted in the pass that leads to the north. The gold belonged to the Mexican government and was being sent to pay the soldiers. The military escort was put to flight. The gold was stolen, pack mules and all. Jack Bean and that wicked Pelon and their Yaqui bandits were the robbers. On this leather bag is the stamp of the Mexican Government. The gold is . . ."

"Is stamped with the same seal," beamed *Padre* Diego, chuckling as he reached for the wine jug. The poor have need of much gold. It would be advisable, I think, to destroy the leather sack."

"Have you no shame?"

The jovial smile left the round face of *Padre* Diego. The merriment clouded in his eyes.

"Where the people of Mexico are concerned, no."

Padre Geronimo nodded. Without a word he picked up the sack of gold and went through a small door into a room beyond. The door, made of heavy, hand-hewn timbers, swung shut. *Padre* Diego, alone now, twisted the stem of his wine goblet and drank a silent toast. Then he got out the chessboard and chessmen and lighted two fresh candles.

Padres Geronimo and Diego were in the midst of their game an hour later when the pounding of hoofs sounded again outside. The two *padres* looked at each other, understanding in their brief glance. They did not rise as the door burst open and soldiers, dust-powdered, weary-eyed, crowded in behind a scowling officer.

The officer was a man in his early thirties, tall, wide of shoulder, and trim-waisted. There was an arrogant lift to his head, and his eyes, bloodshot from dust

and sun, were hard, penetrating. His tailored uniform was dust-covered.

He glared at the two *padres*. "This time," he snapped, his hand on the gun, "there will be no more lies and nonsense. We've trailed the gringo to the very doors of your mission. Where is he?"

"So," chuckled *Padre* Diego, "you are still riding good horses to death trying to catch the Jumping Bean?"

"He came here. None of your tipsy lying. *Padre*. I have no quarrel with the church but when it shelters murderers from the law, then it is time something were done about it. Twice now, when I was almost on top of him, I let myself be tricked by your lies. But this time I will not be tricked. Where have you hidden him?"

"In the wine jug, perhaps," replied the jovial *Padre* Diego. "Take a look but beware that he does not pop out and scare you away. Captain Pico, the regrettable death of your cousin Hermano must have been a sore blow. Especially since your older brother becomes the owner of the Pico Grant, and you will share the profits. I feel confident that you will carry on in the same praiseworthy manner practiced by Don Hermano."

"No more of your damned nonsense, you fat fool!" the officer roared. "Where have you hidden the gringo?"

"I am told," came the easy reply of the corpulent *padre*, "that there is a secret passage under the mission and in the walls. Perhaps you have heard of it. Only the Yaquis know the secret of that passage, it is said, for the Indians built the place. Ask some Yaqui to tell you the secret. Then come back and look through the passage until you come upon the gringo. For that is the only place where he could be hidden. You are welcome to search everywhere."

"When you mock me, you pot-bellied wine sot," gritted the officer, "you insult the Republic of Mexico!"

"Aye, my young friend. And when you insult the brown cloth I wear, you insult

that Man there on the wall—the Man nailed to the cross." *Padre* Diego's smile was gone. His eyes were bright with anger. He was a man of temper, this jovial *padre*—a man of courage.

"Peace!" spoke *Padre* Geronimo. "We harbor no gringo, Captain Pico. By the cross, I swear it. If his tracks led here, then they went on past."

"You lie, old bone pile," the officer growled. "Liars, both of you. But you have lied for the last time to Captain Pico. I'll tear your damned place down and burn every *santo* in it. I'll . . ."

Padre Diego was on his sandaled feet now, his face purple with anger. The red wine shot into the face of the officer.

With an oath, Captain Pico jerked his gun. The soldiers crowded *Padre* Geronimo back against the wall, knocking the crucifix from his hand as he held it aloft.

Then from outside there came the thudding of shod hoofs—a man's hoarse cry!

"Yaquis! The Yaquis! Hundreds of them! They are coming this way. *Dios*, I am wounded, dying! They shot at me a thousand times! The Yaquis are taking Mexico!"

Captain Pico seemed to forget his blasphemous threat. Swearing, shouting orders, the red wine on his face and clothes, he led his men outside again. And then they were gone in the night as swiftly as they had come.

The two brown-frocked *padres* were alone again in the bare-walled room. *Padre* Geronimo picked the pieces of his broken crucifix from the worn, tiled floor.

"Only because of me," said *Padre* Diego, "and my loss of temper, this would not have happened."

Padre Geronimo looked from the broken crucifix in his hand, and his eyes softened. What might have been a smile passed across his fleshless face, for a moment softening it.

"Your wine," he said gently, "never served a better purpose."

IN THE glow of a crimson dawn cattle were being counted as they strung through a narrow pass on the United States side of the Border. The cows were gaunt-flanked, showing the dust and slobber-string signs of a long drive. Some white-face, some off-colored, black and dun and spotted with long horns and lean hips, their brands were Mexican brands that belonged below the Border on the vast acreage known now as the Pico Grant. Pelon, his wicked eyes bloodshot, his hairless face grimy with trail dust, a battered old sombrero slanted across his hairless head, rode up on the point. The swing men and the two *vaqueros* bringing up the drags were hard-bitten Yaquis, all armed with six-shooters and saddle guns. There were half a dozen of them, counting Pelon. Their faces showed no sign of fatigue, though they had not slept for forty-eight hours, and their horses were gaunt, streaked white with dried sweat.

At the north end of the rocky pass Jack Bean and another man sat their horses, tallying the cattle that passed through between the rocks.

The man with Jack Bean was a tall, raw-boned man with light blue eyes and graying hair. His face was deeply tanned, seamed with countless tiny, criss-crossed lines. The back of his neck was like old leather that had lain long in the weather. His mouth was lipless, unsmiling; there was nothing but hardness in the man's face and bearing.

"Tally six hundred," he said in a Texas drawl, and his lipless gash of a mouth hardly opened as he spoke. "Tally six hundred with that one-horned dun steer."

"I make it six hundred and three with that steer, mister," said Jack Bean shortly.

"I didn't tally three of them runty dogies," the Texan said shortly. "Ain't a-buyin' no poddies. When I want to go in fer wind-bellied dogies I'll do my own stealin'."

"You're as good as stealin' this bunch

of cattle as it is," said Jack Bean dryly, tying a tally knot in his bridle rein, never losing count of the cattle that were shuffling past on weary legs. "But if that's the way you feel about it, we tally six hundred even with the one-horned dun steer. I got to get rid of this bunch of cattle in a hurry and you know it. Tally six hundred with your dun steer, mister."

Zang Braille nodded, and a faint grin pulled at one corner of his lipless mouth. He liked to pride himself that he was the shrewdest dealer in wet cattle this side of the Mexican Border. He drove hard, merciless bargains with men like Jack Bean who brought stolen cattle out of Mexico.

Later, when the last critter had passed, the herd tallied out eight hundred and forty head according to Zang Braille's tally, although Jack Bean had delivered eight hundred and fifty head. Zang had refused to pay for ten head that he called wind-bellied dogies. He had bought the wet cattle at a low figure, knowing that the law was pressing the Jumping Bean hard and Jack could not waste time dickering. He paid cash money there at the pass, and the deal was sealed with a drink of tequila.

"Fetch me some more when you git around to it," said Zang Braille as he passed the bottle.

Jack Bean made no reply as he pocketed the money for the cattle. He had lost three men gathering those steers—three hard-riding, gun-fighting men. And Zang Braille had paid about half what the cattle were worth.

"You sure work short-handed, Bean," said the cowman. "Half a dozen men ain't much of a crew."

"Mebby not," Jack Bean snapped. "We managed to make delivery on the cattle, though, didn't we?"

Pelon and the other Yaquis rode up, and Jack Bean passed the bottle around. They drank the peppery liquor as if it were water, emptying the bottle. Then Jack Bean and his crew rode back towards the Mexi-

can Border, headed for the mountain pass to the south.

Zang Braille watched them out of sight, a look of triumph in his hard eyes. He had driven a real bargain. . . .

THERE was the right kind of a moon, just light enough to work by if one is engaged in rustling. And that was the nature of the business that Jack Bean and his Yaquis were now engaged in, there on the Zang Braille range just north of the Border.

"To steal from a damned cheap thief like Braille," Jack Bean said to Pelon as they saddled fresh horses they had roped out of the remuda they had just stolen from the ZB horse pasture, "is no crime. Eh, old Pelon?"

Pelon jerked his saddle cinch tight. "No harm to steal a good horse from any gringo," he grunted.

Jack Bean grinned. Old Pelon had a hatred for all gringos. And especially for Border cattlemen like Zang Braille.

"A hundred head of good horses, Pelon. That will be a lesson to that Tejano. He cheated us out of ten head of Mexican cattle. So we take a hundred head of his top horses. They are all shod. He starts his round-up in a day or so, he told me. That was his calculation, but we just naturally set the outfit afoot. This is Zang's top horse I'm screwing this hull down on. Grain fed. So is that sorrel I caught for you. There's more grain-fed geldin's in the remuda. Man, it would be worth something, to be around when Zang finds his horse pasture empty in the mornin'."

"We need good horses down below," Pelon said.

"And we sure got 'em. Got 'em fair and square, Pelon. In a trade. We traded ten head of long-horned steers for this savvy of ZB horses. If Zang Braille got beat on the dicker it's because he ain't a smart enough trader. Er, old onion head?"

They swung into their saddles. Jack

Bean's stolen mount, a big stocking-legged, bald-faced black, dropped his head and did a good job of pitching. Jack rode him easily, without trying to pull his head up. Old Pelon looked on, the light of great pride in his wicked black eyes, glorying in Jack Bean's ability as a bronc rider. When the horse had quit bucking, the rustler leader swung around the horses and in ahead of them. Pelon rode beside him, and they set a fast pace. The Yaquis hazed the remuda along at the same long trot.

It was ten miles to the Border—ten long, dangerous miles across the ZB range. There was a good chance of getting across the range without running into any of the Zang Braille cowboys—but there was always the possibility of meeting some of them because the Texan kept his range patrolled by riders who rode with saddle guns to cut down rustlers. Zang had a few neighbors who didn't like the taste of their own beef, and came over to try some of Zang's. But Zang and his men were tough hands, fast with a gun and always willing to shoot it out without calling in the law to help. There had been a few killings. Zang Braille had always boasted that he owned the best saddle horses and hired the toughest men along the Border.

Keen-eyed and quick-witted as Jack Bean, old Pelon first sighted the danger when it came, about two miles from the Border at the edge of the ZB range. Time had not dimmed the eyes of the little old bald-headed Yaqui. Jack Bean was won't to brag that Pelon could see around mountains even on the darkest night.

Pelon barked a sharp warning. His voice popped like a pistol shot as he jerked his saddle gun.

"Gringos! Gringos!"

Then Jack Bean made out that which the old Yaqui had first seen with his glittering eyes that could, so he claimed, see in the dark. A group of hard-riding horsemen were coming straight towards them from the direction of the Border.

The Yaquis needed no signal, no shouted orders. They each knew what to do in a sudden tight like this. They swung around on the sides of the bunch of horses, leaving only one man to keep up the drags. They knew that no ZB men would shoot into that stolen remuda and this gave them the advantage. Keeping the horses close-bunched, they had the remuda on the run, keeping close alongside and lying low along the necks of their horses. The thunder of shod hoofs shook the ground like an earthquake. Their hair-raising Yaqui yell was punctuated by the crack of their guns.

The ZB night riders, returning from a raid on a neighboring outfit, perhaps, heard the Yaqui yell, felt the danger ahead as bullets droned past their heads, realized in a second what was happening and what they were up against. They scattered, shouting to each other as they broke for cover under that wicked gunfire. Tough men, but wise in the ways of fighting, they were helpless. Their one bet was to scatter, let the Yaqui rustlers and the stolen remuda pass, then trail them in hopes of evening the odds when daylight came.

They could not make out a single rider in the darkness. Jack Bean and his Yaquis, lying along the necks of their horses, were not skylighted. They were a part of the stolen remuda, a part of that swift moving-blot that thundered past in the night. . . .

The ZB cowboys cursed as they spurred for the cover of rocks and brush. Out of the night came that fierce Yaqui yell. Shots echoed sharply over the heavy rumble of shod hoofs. And above it all came the mocking cowboy yell of Jack Bean.

"Tell Zang we closed the trade!" he shouted. "Swapped him ten wind-bellied dogies for his remuda! Tell Zang that and give him Jack Bean's regards. Trail us, you sons of snakes, and you'll be buzzard bait in the mornin'!"

Jack Bean, his Yaquis and the stolen remuda, thundered on in the night, Mexico bound.

SUNRISE found the rustlers far below the Border, safe in the fastnesses of their mountains. They made camp and wolfed half-cooked beef before they lay down on the ground to sleep like dead men while old Pelon and Jack Bean stood first guard.

"Some day, Pelon," Jack said, twisting a cigarette into shape, "I reckon I'll be crowded into killin' Zang Braille."

"What is the life of such a gringo, my son?"

"*Padre* Geronimo wouldn't look at it thataway," Jack answered softly.

"The sack of gold you left at the mission was not given back to that Captain Pico," Pelon said. "It was *Padre* Geronimo who hid it. I was hid in the secret passage and watched it all. I saw what happened after you left the money and rode away. I heard every word that was said. I tell you, my son, the bark of *Padre* Geronimo is worse than his bite. In his own way he is as much a friend to the Yaqui and to the peon as the fat *Padre* Diego with his wine and his laughing. He is a brave man, I tell you, and a good man. Just as good as *Padre* Diego, even if he does look like a skeleton from the grave. You should have seen him standing there with the cross in his two hands. Aye, there was something to see."

"I'd like to have been there," Jack Bean told his friend. "I'd like to have seen that bunch of 'dobe soldiers and their great *caballero*, Captain Pico, when they coyoted. And I'd like to have seen that moustache-twirlin' Pico when he got the real news that there wasn't a Yaqui within ten miles of the mission that night. That is, except the ones that were hid with you in that secret passage—and the one dressed in uniform and smeared with steer blood that fetched the news of the Yaquis that were takin' Mexico." Jack Bean grinned at the wicked-eyed Pelon who never smiled.

"You should have hung the governor when you had the chance," he grunted. "Like *Padre* Geronimo says, there will be

trouble. Trouble too big even for the Yaquis to stop. We are only a handful of people, after all. We cannot fight all the soldiers in Mexico. The day is not far away when there will be trouble between the government and the church."

"There will be a revolution then, Pelon, that will make bunch-quitters out of the president and the governor and Captain Pico and the other robbers. Hell, one Yaqui in a torn uniform smeared with beef blood scared a troop of Pico's cavalry."

Old Pelon made no reply. Perhaps he could see into the future, even as his wicked eyes could see in the dark. And what he foresaw could not have been pleasant, for he frowned through the smoke of his husk cigarette. His hatred for this present government was terrible in its intensity. His Yaqui people were warriors. Warriors of such merit and bravery that the government paid them to keep peace in Mexico. But the many battles throughout the years had taken a terrific toll on the number of their fighting men. They were, as Pelon said, but a handful. Revolution was coming soon. If the rest of the rebels were as brave and staunch and unflinching as the Yaquis, the victory would be assured. But the Mexican rebels were not made of Yaqui stuff. They would run. And the revolution would fail. Things would be worse than ever. . . .

Yaqui blood would again stain the soil of Old Mexico in vain spilling for a hopeless cause. Weakened in numbers, they would return to their ragged mountains, unbroken in spirit, more bitter than ever in their hatred, but still defeated.

"The revolution, my son," Pelon said as if speaking to himself, "will fail."

"If it does, Pelon, what then?"

There were times when Jack Bean teased old Pelon and called him an old onion. Other times like this he listened gravely, as he had listened as a boy, to what the bald-headed old Yaqui might have to say. Pelon was always his teacher.

"What then, Pelon?" he repeated after a long silence following his question.

"Dios knows. But this much is certain. The church will be thrown out of Mexico. We will lose *Padre Diego* and *Padre Geronimo*. The Yaquis will lose those two good friends."

CHAPTER THREE

The Gringo's Ears

THE payroll of a gringo mine was on its way from the railroad to the mountains. Every precaution was being used to insure its safe delivery because, through an agreement with the multi-millionaire mine owners and the Mexican government, the latter was responsible for the safe delivery of the payrolls and transportation of gold bullion out of Mexico.

Captain Pico, sullen, brooding, smarting under the humiliation of his last encounter with the hated gringo, Jack Bean, had made a special request to the governor that he and his soldiers serve as escort for the payroll that amounted to a fat sum of money in silver pesos and currency of Mexico and the United States.

"To meet that gringo face to face," he said stiffly, "I would give all I own."

"Even your life?" The voice of the governor was a shade sarcastic. He had grown weary of listening to the alibis of this swaggering Captain Pico who had brought back to his barracks nothing but failures and excuses from these chases after the elusive Jumping Bean.

"If I could take him into death with me, *senor*, the sacrifice of my own life would be a pleasure and an honor."

"Then I give you the opportunity to attain that pleasure and honor. Kill that troublesome gringo. Bring me his head, *Senor Capitan*, and you will not go unrewarded. Let that payroll get out of your hands and you will wish to god you had never asked to guard it!"

More bitter than ever, hating Jack Bean as only Captain Pico knew how to hate, he had hand-picked a troop of his best fighting cavalymen and given them brief orders.

"Our job is to bring back the head of this damned gringo, Jack Bean, and the bald head of his Pelon," he told them. "Word has come that they are preparing an attack on the payroll. If any man of you is afraid of those Yaquis, let him drop out of ranks and make tortillas with the women. Is any man of you afraid to die?"

When none dropped out of ranks, the captain smiled and twisted his moustache. Stiff-backed, looking to neither right nor left despite the waving of the dark-eyed *senoritas* who had come outside to watch, Captain Pico rode down the dusty street at the head of his hard-bitten troop of picked cavalry. He led them out of town and into the broken hills spotted with *suhvaro* cacti and palo verde bushes.

To the black-haired, dark-eyed Linda who sang and danced at the *cantina*, he had promised the ears of the Jumping Bean. For months he had spent his available evenings in the *cantina*, sipping his drink watching Linda dance, listening to her songs. To all his advances she replied with smiling lips and half-promises. And often she teased him about his failure to capture Jack Bean.

"There, my captain," she would mock him, "is a *caballero* to fall in love with. Any girl in all Mexico would be glad to give her heart to such a brave one."

"Bah!" the captain would snort. "He is a gringo thief and outlaw who lives with the Indians and runs like a coyote for his hills."

"He is brave. They make up songs about him. Shall I sing one of them for you?"

"*Madre de Dios*, no!"

"He is a very handsome *caballero*," Linda had baited him further, rolling her large brown eyes.

"You have seen him, then?"

"When they brought him into town a prisoner."

"If I had been the one to capture him he would not have looked so handsome," Captain Pico boasted, "unless you call dead men handsome. They would never have had need to waste time building a gallows."

"But you did not capture him."

"I have promised to bring back his head to the governor. To you I shall give his gringo ears."

Captain Pico did not know that the night before, as on every night when her work at the *cantina* was done, she would go to her room and kneel sometimes until sunrise, before the *santo* of the Blessed Virgin in its niche, burning candles and praying for the safety of Jack Bean. Captain Pico might have been quite put out if he had known about that. Also he would have talked differently had he known that the voice of his beautiful Linda had sung a little Yaqui song one night to the prisoner who had watched his gallows grow and waited for death in his cell at the *cuartel*.

And Captain Pico would not have been at all pleased to know that many secrets whispered into the ears of Linda by himself and others connected with the government were passed on to Jack Bean and the Yaquis in the mountains. Captain Pico did not know that this dark-eyed little dancer was a Yaqui. . . .

STOUT horses, good guns and ammunition, and brave men, old onion," said Jack Bean, "those are the things that count."

Pelon grunted and smoked for some minutes. From all parts of the mountains the Yaquis were trickling in small groups to the meeting place, Pelon's eyes watched them as they sat on their heels filling cartridge belts and cleaning guns.

"A wise leader also counts, my son," he finally said. "I am not so sure you are being wise now."

"You croak like an old bald-headed

crow," Jack Bean chided him. "That payroll will pay the gun runners for things we need. Anyhow, I want a crack at that damned high-chinned Pico."

"Because he has been making love again to Linda?" Pelon asked.

Jack Bean grinned, his ears reddening. "Old onion, sometimes you talk loco."

"Loco? Perhaps. But when a man rides a hundred miles to hear songs in the moonlight, I suppose that is not at all loco. Risking his neck and mine—making an old man who needs his sleep spend the night in the saddle and cool his heels in the bushes while he waits for a young idiot in love. Who is loco, eh?"

"She had news," Jack Bean defended his night ride. "Anyhow, I did not want you along. It was you who saddled up after I had left camp and caught up with me. If I did get to make love, then you were in the way. Three is a crowd."

"Old Pelon and his guns would not have been unwelcome, young game cock, if Pico and his soldiers had found you there at Linda's house. Three a crowd?" He blew tobacco smoke through his wide, flat nostrils and grunted.

"Linda," spoke Jack Bean after a silence, "has to quit the *cantina* and leave town. I told her so."

"Captain Pico is running you too close a race, no?"

"You know damn well that ain't it!" Jack Bean said. "In the first place, I have no right to any woman's love. I am an outlaw, leading a coyote's life. In the second place she hates Pico. The reason she has to pull out of there is that she may get found out. If the governor ever discovers she is a Yaqui spy, he'll have her tortured to death. Either that or he'll give her to his soldiers for a plaything. She would not be the first good-looking girl to be fed to those lousy, unbathed soldiers. Linda's game is too dangerous. She has to quit."

"What did she say when you told her that?"

"Laughed at me. Then she asked me if I had forgotten that her father and brother had been tortured to death by the Picos. She reminded me that her two sisters had met a fate worse than death, there on the Pico Grant. And she told me again of the oath she had taken to fight in her own way for the Yaquis. She has a will of her own. But there are other ways, less dangerous ways that she can help us."

"Bring her into the mountains, then. Marry her and let her have children," said old Pelon bluntly. "Put it to her that way and she will change her dancing slippers for moccasins and raise your children. She will come if you put it like that."

PELON got to his feet and walked away, leaving Jack Bean sitting alone. The bald-headed old Yaqui had been right about his feelings towards Linda. And more than once he had seen a light in Linda's eyes that made his pulse quicken. Perhaps Pelon was right, too, in saying that she would agree to come into the mountains where she had been born and make a home for him.

But he knew that Linda did not care for the crude life of the Yaquis. Her mother had been a Mexican dancer. A Yaqui chief had captured her on one of his raids. And she had fallen in love with him. *Padre* Diego had married them at the mission. The tall, bold-featured Yaqui had forsaken his mountains to take up cattle ranching in the valley below. There, for the most part, he had lived a life of peace with his family and his horses and cattle.

Linda's mother had taught her to dance and sing and play the guitar. And when she was old enough, she had been sent to a convent in the United States. It was good to be with other girls. She took naturally to the studies they gave her.

Then the governor had, upon orders from the president, confiscated the land that was to be the Pico Grant. Linda's father had fought back—fought against hopeless odds. He and his son had died defending

their women and their property. And when dying, they had been tortured and their women had been given to the drunken sailors.

Padre Diego, as kindly as he could put it in a letter, had broken the news to Linda. He had sent her money and advised her to remain in the States. But a week later a tall, slender girl in the black garb the women of old Mexico wear when they go in mourning for their dead, showed up at the Franciscan mission. Fat *Padre* Diego did not recognize in this extraordinarily beautiful *senorita* the awkward youngster he had sent away a few years ago to the convent. He saw only a tall, lovely girl who looked at him with eyes made more darkly beautiful by unshed tears.

"I am Linda," she said in a low, clear voice. "I received your letter. I have returned to Mexico."

"Why, my child? Mexico for you is but a place of sorrow and sad memories. Why have you come back?"

Her head lifted proudly. "I have come back because I am now a real Yaqui."

Jack Bean had met her at the mission that night of her return. Paying one of his secret night visits there, he had found her in the garden talking to *Padre* Diego. In that moonlit garden, heavy with the scent of flowers, her face white, madonna-like against the black of her mantilla, she looked too beautiful to be real. In that first breathtaking glimpse of her, she had taken her place in his heart.

"This young lady," *Padre* Diego had said, "will not listen to my advice. She wants to go to the mountains, to her father's people. Her father was Chief Julio. You have heard about him."

"All there is to know, padre," Jack had answered softly.

"She insists on going to the mountains. I know of no safer escort than you, my son."

"I have never had a more desirable job. But, *Dios*, those mountains, they are no place for. . . ."

"You forget, *senor*," she interrupted, her dark eyes flashing, "that I am the daughter of Chief Julio who was a Yaqui."

In those weeks that followed, Jack Bean had seen this convent bred girl try to brave it out. He watched her as she tried not to flinch at the crude life she was forced to lead at the camp of her father's relatives. She had changed her beautiful black dress for the rough garb of the Yaqui squaw. Moccasins replaced the high-heeled little slippers. Her slender legs were bare of the black silk stockings. But still she was, to Jack Bean, as beautiful and desirable as ever. He talked to her whenever possible, trying to make life easier for her.

"I do not want pity, *senor*," she told him once. "Only revenge. No use denying I am not happy here. But there can be no place in my life now for happiness."

"But you can't help matters by living like a squaw. Let me take you back to *Padre Diego*."

"Not to *Padre Diego*. To Magdalena. I have a plan to try out. A plan that *Padre Diego* would not approve of. Take me to Magdalena after dark. Leave me there. But keep in touch with me."

"You in Magdalena alone?" He was incredulous.

"Not alone. My mother's sister lives there, and my cousins. I will stay with them while I work out my plan. Keep in touch with me. Promise me that."

Jack Bean had smiled at her. "Easiest and greatest promise I was ever asked to keep. Better wear the squaw clothes you have on and make a bundle of your own town clothes. It'll be a hard, dusty ride."

"And you will be risking your life, *senor*," she said. "I am not forgetting that. I shall always pray each night for your safety."

And now, when he was thinking of it all again he realized that he couldn't let Linda return to the Yaqui camps and live like a squaw. But still he could not let her stay on at the *cantina* . . .

THE Yaquis made little sound as they rode into the night. Each knew the country and how to act when the time came. Meanwhile they rode in scattered formation, talking in low tones, smoking, but for the most part silent. There was the crunch of their horses' hoofs, the creak of saddle leather, the music of bell-metal spurs. Because there was little moonlight, there was no way of counting them. There might have been twenty or two hundred.

"If I had my way," said old Pelon, the flare of a match in his cupped hands showing his wicked eyes as he lit his cigarette, "I'd trap them in the Pass to the North. You take half the men and ride to the north end. I'll wait with the other men until they are well in the pass. Then we can shoot them down like trapped rabbits. We would not leave one man of them to take back the story of it to the governor. *Dios*, that is the way to do it!"

"It's the money we want, old onion head," Jack Bean answered. "No use killing for the fun of it. You're as bloodthirsty as that old one-eyed Cockroach."

"Some day," growled old Pelon, momentarily forgetting his bloody method of getting the gringo payroll, "I'll cut the gizzard out of that old one-eyed devil."

"And eat it, I reckon."

"One bite of his carcass would poison a wolf. His meat would make good bait to kill coyotes."

"It would be too tough to chew, Pelon, you old cut-throat. His meat wouldn't have to be hung in the sun to make jerky."

"My knife is whetted for its toughness," Pelon said.

"He'll be riding with Captain Pico."

"Eh?"

"There are parts of the country Pico is not sure of," Jack Bean explained. "The Cockroach is his guide and scout."

Pelon ran a calloused thumb along the blade of his machete—his eyes glittering in the moonlight as they rode along.

"We'll let 'em get through the Pass to the

North," Jack Bean broke a long silence. "Once he has gone through the pass without bein' attacked, he'll think he's fooled us. He bragged to Linda that he would trick us. He's sending another troop of cavalry by way of Eagle Pass. That's to throw us off the track. The information that came to me from the mine was that the payroll would be taken through Eagle Pass. That information was given out to fool me. It had me fooled until Linda got the real dope from Pico.

"We will let them get through the pass. He'll begin to get careless then as he swings toward the east where the mine is located. And when he starts through the chopped hills where the trail twists like a snake through the catclaw and mesquite, he'll be singing love songs to himself and nibblin' at his tequilla. He'll be thinking of Linda and the music at the *cantina* and his soldiers will be half asleep. It will be about daybreak when he reaches those chopped hills and the men will be as tired as their horses. When we come at 'em from all sides they'll think every Yaqui in Mexico is chargin' 'em. Pass the word to the men that they're not to kill any more than they have to. And Captain Pico is not to be hurt. I want him alive."

"The man you so hate, you want not to be hurt?" Pelon raised his hairless brows. "*Caramba*, have you gone loco? Has love made you chicken-hearted?"

Jack Bean grinned. "Captain Pico dead would no longer suffer. I want him to live long enough so that his wine will taste like quinine and gall in his mouth. I want to break his spirit so that he'll hunt the alleys instead of strutting like a damned rooster down the street, jingling his spurs. I want to pull his tail feathers and cut his rooster's comb—take away his gamecock's spurs and make him look like a setting hen."

OLD PELON growled deep in his chest. If he hated a man, he killed him. If he hated him bad enough, he might torture

him. But this talk of Jack Bean's irritated him.

"Soon you will be herding goats and talking to yourself and making up poems. And always I taught you to hate men like Pico. Love makes you soft. Now me, when I come up against that damned one-eyed Cucaracha, I'll . . ."

"Cut out his gizzard and eat it with salt and pepper," chuckled Jack Bean, "and wash it down with mescal. I hate in my own way, old onion head."

"Get married and raise goats and babies," growled the baldheaded old Yaqui, "and when you meet that Pico on the street, tip your hat like a peon."

They rode hard through the night to lay their ambush in the broken, brush-strewn hills. Their course let northward, just a few miles below the Border. The mine itself was a scant twenty miles south of the Border, but due to its location, the payroll must come from the south.

Rough, broken, brushy country. Wild cattle roamed there. Pumas, coyotes, and lions fattened on their meat. Here also lived outlaws of all colors, the scum and dregs of the Border renegades. Honest men never rode alone here. It was a no-man's land that sheltered only wild animals and renegades. And to the north lay the range that belonged to Zang Braille, the cowman who obeyed no law. Some claimed that he spent part of his time in these chopped hills, drinking and carousing with the renegades who dwelt there with the women they stole from the Mexican ranches and small villages. Zang had a fondness for Mexican girls and tequila.

It was into these hills that Jack Bean now rode with his Yaquis. He had no fear of the renegades who haunted the region. Rather, they feared him and the Indians who trailed with him. A few pitched battles had convinced them that Jack Bean was a good man to let alone. So well instilled in them was this fear that, more than once, Jack and Pelon had ridden without their

Yaquis into the very heart of the hills.

It was a couple of hours before daylight when Jack Bean called a halt and scattered his Yaquis into the hills. Saddle cinches were loosened, and cigarettes glowed in the darkness that precedes the dawn. Some slept while others talked, and some sat in silence, smoking, waiting. Waiting for Captain Pico and his soldiers and the pack train that carried the silver and gold money that was the payroll for the gringo mine.

Jack Bean rubbed down the big, grain-fed ZB horse that had once been Zang Braille's top mount. In an hour or two these hills would be echoing the sound of gunfire. Men would be wounded and killed. Perhaps he would be numbered among the dead. Perhaps Captain Pico would make good that promise to make Linda a present of his ears. *Quien sabe?*

A streak of red in a slow, gray dawn, like a knife wound on dead flesh. The thud of hoofs and the clank of machete blades against metal. The sound of voices. A snatch of a song. In the dim light a column of cavalry came on, led by the weary-eyed Captain Pico.

Pico, who had come with his men and his laden pack mules through the dangerous pass, relaxed in his saddle and lit a fresh cigarette. A few miles more and the gold and silver would be delivered at the mine. He'd have a day's rest there, then head back to town and Linda. He would not be fetching the ears of Jack Bean, perhaps, but he would nevertheless—

A shot came out of the dawn. Then the whole world around seemed to be filled with that wild Yaqui war cry.

Jerking his pistol, Captain Pico barked a sharp command. His soldiers swung their horses to form a hollow square. Then the hills tossed back and forth the din of rifle fire as the Yaquis charged.

Captain Pico and his sergeants barked commands, curses, advice to the soldiers who had been startled into confusion by the unexpected suddenness of the attack. Pico

cursed his luck as he sat his horse, a cocked gun in his hand. How many of those cursed and ten-times-cursed Yaquis? Would his men hold fast? *Madre de Dios!* And he sprinkled his curses with inner prayers to the God he had cursed and derided within the sacred walls of the old San Francisco Mission. He had mocked the *Senor Dios* he now asked for victory. And in his ears was the rattle of gunfire and the wild yell of the hard-riding Yaquis.

One of the soldiers, suddenly gripped by fear, cried at the top of his lungs for mercy as he started to desert that grim square of fighting cavalry. Captain Pico shot the poor devil from his saddle. As the man toppled, screaming hoarsely, his foot caught in the stirrup and the fear-maddened horse stampeded, dragging his twisting, wounded body, kicking him to pieces.

With the fighting soldiers was the one-eyed, evil-tongued Cucaracha. There was no fear in that hate-shriveled heart. He took no advantage of the shelter offered by the brush, but sat his horse, shooting and cursing and challenging old Pelon to come out in the open and fight.

Pelon cursed him and would have charged at the soldiers had not Jack Bean dragged him back by sheer force.

The Yaquis had made a short, wild charge, then had ridden to shelter. Save for the stern commands of Jack Bean, they would have poured down on the hollow square like an avalanche of death. Jack's voice held them.

"We have them corraled. They can't get away," Jack Bean said. "Wait till daylight and we will send them in all directions like coyotes, their tails between their legs. Don't let any of them get away till daylight. And you, Pelon, save your cussin' and your bullets till we can watch you get your Cockroach meat. Hold 'em where they are, my Yaquis. That gringo gold will be ours in half an hour. Gold and silver to spend in the *cantinas* and to buy new hats and *tequila*. Let the little soldiers run like rabbits after

we make them lay down their guns. Let them take back to their *cantinas* and to their *senoritas* the story of how the Yaquis have made rabbits of them. Do as I tell you, my Yaquis, and we will make a *fiesta* that will last a week.

"Keep them corralled, and we will watch the Cucaracha and Pelon fight with knives as they once fought when they were young, when Pelon carved an eye out of the Cockroach. Aye, and they fought over a *cantina* girl. Hear that? This hairless onion and that foul-tongued old buzzard. Can you see them, fighting with knives in a *cantina* over a *senorita* who had red hair? Red hair, aye. She came from somewhere in Mexico. A red-headed Indio. And because it was the first red-headed woman they had ever seen, they must fight over her. And while Pelon was carving an eye out of the Cucaracha she slipped out the back door and ran away to Texas with a gringo cattle thief."

The fighting on both sides had almost ceased as Jack Bean called out his story in a tone loud enough to carry to the soldiers under Pico. They could hear the cursing of old Cucaracha.

Perhaps Jack Bean was merely fabricating. Perhaps not. At any rate the story found favor with the Yaquis. And though not given to mirth, there was a grim smile on more than one dark, war-like face as they held their gunfire and listened, their black eyes narrowing with humor as they watched old Pelon squirm under Jack Bean's banter.

Captain Pico did not smile. He knew that Jack Bean was running no bluff. From all sides Yaqui guns bristled.

As Jack Bean talked to the Yaquis, making old Pelon the target for his barbs of ridicule that only the Yaqui and other Indians can appreciate, the dawn spread across the sky. It was time to make the attack. Every Yaqui knew that. They no longer smiled. Their eyes, hatred in their black, opaque depths, were on the soldiers caught in a dry wash between two ridges.

They waited for the signal to ride down on them, butcher them. Saddle cinches were pulled tighter. The red dawn was reflected like blood on the wide, sharp-edged blades of machetes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Yaqui Death

THEN Jack Bean tied a white rag to the barrel of his carbine and stood up in plain view. It was a foolhardy thing for a man with a large reward on his head to do. Especially foolish for the sworn enemy of Captain Pico.

But Captain Pico was not a man to be outdone in bravery. He quit his shelter and walked out. Tall, arrogant, stiff-backed.

"We have you surrounded, Pico," called Jack Bean. "My Yaquis outnumber your men two to one. I give your men the chance to lay down their guns and ammunition belts and ride home. Unless you want them all killed, you'd better send them home."

"We are not afraid of you and your Yaquis, gringo thief," Captain Pico said coldly. "You are an outlaw. Captain Pico does not take orders from outlaws. That is all I have to say."

Captain Pico turned and strode back to his men hidden in the brush. His staccato orders could be heard by every Yaqui. Brisk, brief words.

"Prepare to fight, my *hombrecitos!* Fire at will. Shoot for the belly. Make every bullet kill a Yaqui. Myself, I will take care of the gringo, Jack Bean. Fire at will!"

"*Viva la Pico!*" shouted the one-eyed Cucaracha, tipsy with mescal. "*Viva la Mejico! Viva Pico!*"

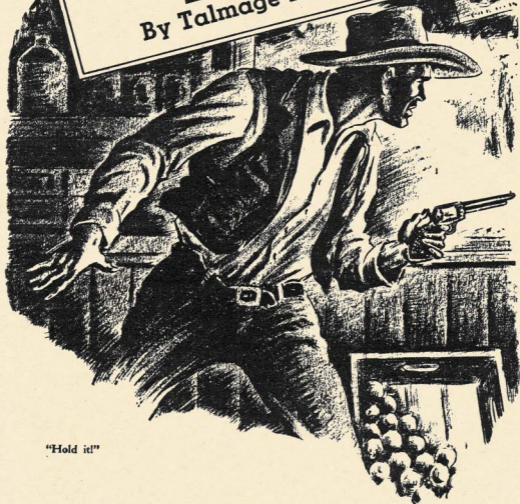
"I'll 'viva' you, you one-eyed old Cucaracha!" called out Pelon.

The Mexican soldiers laughed. Many of the Yaquis smiled. Laughter before death, in a blood-red dawn. Buzzards swung in the dead air, black against the red sky.

(Continued on page 88)

DEATH WAITS HERE

By Talmage Powell



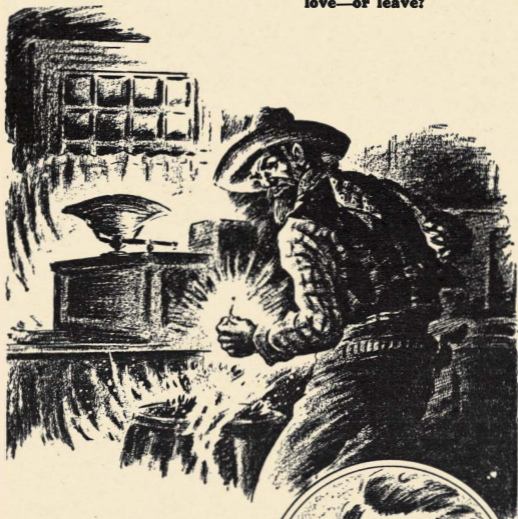
"Hold it!"

AFTER ten minutes of waiting, there was still no sign of the storekeeper. Pace Jernigan shrugged, cut himself a slice of cheese, reached across the scarred plank counter for a can of sardines, and dipped his hand into the cracker barrel.

A solitary bluebottle fly played him a buzzing lullaby for dinner music.

Pace leaned against the counter and ate slowly, a tall young man in faded jeans and trail-dusty checkered shirt. His well-worn, wide-brimmed hat was pushed back

**Why should a drifter stranger risk his
neck for a girl he had sworn never to
love—or leave?**



on his head, exposing sandy hair, a tanned, creased forehead, and blue eyes with crinkles at their corners that offset the baiting light in their depths. His face was heavy boned, and his hands were large with long, sensitive fingers and callouses on the palms.

As he finished eating, he looked through the open front door of the barn-like general store and studied Fairfax town. It lay, a cluster of buildings, at a wide bend where the road swung with the creek. At this late afternoon hour, the town was indolent; even the dust seemed reluctant to stir where the road widened to accommodate the village, only to narrow again to twin ruts as it wandered to the open country westward.

Pace dusted his hands together, used the back of the left one for a napkin, and decided to locate the storekeeper and pay up.

He stepped through the double doors in front, took a few steps down the plank sidewalk. In back of the store was a long, low, rambling building, emitting the sounds of machinery. A single wagon was drawn up before the building, and a man was dozing on the seat. Pace noted the millrace and the huge, slowly-turning wooden wheel at the far end of the building. A grist mill.

He strolled back, entered the dusky gloom of the mill, where the air was moist and sweet with the smell of corn freshly rendered to meal. A fine coating of powdery meal lay over everything and the floor vibrated with the clash and grind of the great millstones.

He saw a boy draped over a plank bin, an arm reaching up rhythmically to drop ears of corn into an adjoining bin. Pace walked over, pinched the bottom of the stretched blue jeans. "Say, bud, know where I can find . . ."

The figure straightened. The shoulders and head came out of the bin, and a small, hard hand left stinging fingerprints across Pace's cheek. All in one motion.

Pace retreated a step, holding his cheek and looking at a small and very angry face. It wasn't what Pace thought of as a pretty face. The nose was too snub, the mouth a trifle too wide and generous. The whole was framed in dark brown hair, cut short and bleached in spots by the sun to a lighter brown.

"You," Pace conceded, "have a very good right. With a left jab to match it . . ."

"The left is adequate enough," the girl said. "But I'd advise you not to try anymore of that pinching business to find out."

"Might be worth it," Pace grinned, a little abashed at his own nerve. Weather, hard work, or physical mayhem had never frightened him, but women had always put him on the defensive. Some women he was downright afraid of, the kind that looked at a man as if measuring him mentally for halter size. Others made him feel awkward, but this girl somehow or other caused him merely to want to put his best foot forward.

He took off his hat and bowed. "Ma'am, I'm afraid we have got off on the wrong foot, and I'd like to start over again. My name is Pace Jernigan. I'm Texas born and twenty-six years of age. When called on, I can do the work of three hands, though I'm not much good at riding night herd, as my voice fails to quieten edgy cattle when I sing to them, but has the opposite effect. I come to Fairfax town a hungry stranger, who has partaken of vittles in the store yonder. Now I am looking for the storekeeper to pay him my just debt."

The girl was regarding him with her head tilted to one side. She laughed suddenly. "I guess the glibness is natural since you come from Texas."

"Never spoke as many words at once to a lady in my life," Pace declared.

The girl sidled a glance at him at that, and put her tongue in cheek. "If you say so, I guess it must be true, Texas. Anyway, I'm the storekeeper, and if you'll tell me what you had, I'll accept your money."

Pace's brows went up. "You run this store and mill alone, ma'am?"

"I do," she said in quick, defensive warmth. She glanced toward the hopper, wrestled with a hundred pound sack of shelled corn, picking it up with surprising strength.

Pace sprang to help her.

"It's quite all right," she said. "This

isn't the first one I've ever handled."

She dumped the corn in the hopper, dropped lightly to the plank flooring again, and said, "Your supplies, Mr. Jernigan?"

He quit staring at the empty sack and told her what he'd eaten. She priced it, and he paid.

AS HE put the leather draw-string bag back in his pocket, she said, "About empty, isn't it?"

"Matter of fact, yes."

"Corn for your horse?"

"Got him grazing by the creek."

"A good horse needs grain fuel to travel."

"I know that, ma'am. He ate grain at midday. It was my turn this evening. He's a fine horse. He don't mind sharing and sharing alike."

She studied him a moment. She looked suddenly tired, with fine lines about her eyes and mouth. She leaned back against a bin, resting her elbows on its lip. The stance was totally unassuming, natural, but it made Pace aware that, despite her small size, she was a powerful lot of woman.

"Would you like to earn a night's lodging and breakfast tomorrow morning, Mr. Jernigan?"

"The prospect would brighten the immediate future."

"All right, I'll tell you what to do in here. I've got to finish cleaning the store, a job I was doing when the man outside brought his corn."

Pace looked about the mill with misgiving. "You'll have to tell me like a greenhorn, never having done mill work before."

"I will. It's nothing complicated. Mostly watching the hopper and loading. Incidentally, I'm Nancy Dinsmore."

Not incidentally, Pace thought, not by a long shot.

He unbuttoned his cuffs, started rolling up his sleeves. At that moment, a sharp explosion sounded. The building rocked. The girl staggered against him, and he caught her shoulders. A new, screeching

note came from the wooden millwheel housing.

With a cry choked off in her throat, the girl leaped up on a low timber, tore at the housing, swung it back. The huge, white, stone wheels were cracked, pieces of them blown away. The rumble shook the entire building as the wheels tore themselves to pieces.

"Grab that lever, Texas!" Nancy shouted.

Pace sprang and grabbed. He pulled until the muscles of his back stood out against his shirt, but the lever seemed to have been frozen by the explosion.

The girl dropped beside him and added her strength. Slowly, the lever moved back. Overhead, the hickory teeth of wooden gears moved apart, disengaging the machinery from the ponderously powerful millwheel outside. The machinery ground to a halt.

Nancy turned to survey the damage. Pace saw tears come to her eyes. Then her mouth set, her chin came up, and the tears magnified the flash of her eyes.

"Only one thing could have done that," she stated. "A dynamite cap dropped in the shelled corn. When the wheels crushed it—"

"Whose corn?"

"The man's outside."

Together they ran to the front of the mill. The wagon was gone.

Pace started forward, but her hand restrained him. "He'll be burning leather out of town. Anyway, it isn't your fight."

"He was sitting here dozing when I came in."

"Yes, with one hawk eye open to make sure I emptied the right sack in the hopper. As soon as he saw me do that, I'll bet he moved fast. Too bad I didn't substitute a sack of my own corn."

Nancy turned to look back into the mill, and she looked small and dismal to Pace.

"The only pair of millstones west of the river," she said.

"You know," Pace said, "that dynamite cap might have blown my head off. I'd like to speak to the gent about that. If you'll give me his name . . ."

"Thanks, Texas, but he was a stranger to me." Nancy moved to swing the wide, wooden door closed. She dropped a bar across it. Pace shortened his stride to match hers as they moved toward the store.

"I don't get a lot of this," Pace said. "An outfit this size ought to be able to afford a helper."

"I had some help," Nancy said, "but it was scared off."

Pace glanced at her. She looked straight ahead. She had already shed the dismal look the cracked millstones had given her. Not one to indulge in self pity or stay in a low mood long, Pace thought.

"By the same gent who sent the corn over?" Pace asked.

"Look, Texas, it isn't your fight. I'm able to take care of myself."

"Don't doubt it. But if there's a job in offing, I ought to know what I'm getting into."

She met his grin with a deep look in her eyes. He sensed that grim, lonely days were behind her. Then she shook her head. "After I rake together money for new millstones, there won't be enough left to hire help. Sorry, Texas."

She turned quickly, and Pace watched her go, pushing his hat forward and scratching the back of his head.

SHE didn't go into the store. She marched across the wide, dusty street, and at each step, her back stiffened and her chin tilted higher.

Pace whistled softly to himself. She was carrying trouble to somebody, he decided. He angled across the street, moving with apparent slowness, but narrowing the distance between them.

She turned in an office with the words, "Gar Testerman, Cattle Buyer," lettered on the door.

Pace ventured a look through the window. He saw an office furnished with leather chairs, filing cabinets, a gleaming, new rolltop desk. At the sound of Nancy's entry, a man was swinging his swivel chair around at the desk to face her.

He was a big, bluff-looking man with a shock of iron gray hair, a mustache of the same color, and gray eyes beneath beetling brows.

"Gar Testerman," Nancy announced, "you owe me for a pair of millstones—not that I hope to collect. But I want you to know you haven't run me out of business with that dynamite cap trick."

The cattle buyer stood up. He was a good six two, and would tip at least two hundred, Pace guessed. He dwarfed the girl, a fearsome-looking man with those brows and stern face. But he failed to overawe the girl. She had worked up too much of a mad.

Testerman smoothed his expensive do-colored frock coat, lighted a cigar, and said flatly, "Girl, you're crazy!"

"Of course you'd deny it."

"Deny anything I don't know about." He took her by the arm, leading her toward the door. "Now don't come back in here bothering me with a lot of tomfoolery."

Testerman and girl both drew up as Pace's shadow fell across them from the doorway.

Pace grabbed Gar's wrist in a hard grip. The cattle buyer was so surprised he released Nancy's arm. Pace pushed the girl toward the front of the office, turned to follow her.

Testerman cursed in erupting rage, caught Pace's shoulder, whirled him, and swung.

Pace blocked the blow. He retreated, keeping himself between Testerman and the girl. The big man moved with surprising speed. His second punch landed high on Pace's cheek. Pace decided it was high time to hit back, even if he was on another man's premises. He threw a hard right.

Testerman laughed, danced away, and his huge fist seemd to come from nowhere.

Pace felt as if his nose was splattered all over his face. He hit the floor with a crash. This was going to be tougher than he'd thought, decidedly. He rolled to one side, started to get to his feet, and Testerman hit him with a chair.

At least the fight was over, Pace thought as his senses swooped into the black nothingness of unconsciousness.

Pace returned to the land of the living with a groan and the distinct feeling that his throbbing nose was larger than his head. He raised a hand as his senses cleared, touched the nose, and flinched. It didn't seem to be broken, but Pace guessed he'd be without a sense of smell for a week or two.

He opened his eyes and sat up. He hadn't been out long. It was not yet fully dark, and in the dusky light he got his vision into focus enough to see that he was in a narrow, hot jail cell.

He tried to collect his thoughts and take stock of his situation. He heard voices, and then footsteps approached the cell. Nancy came first, looking at him with concern.

He managed a faint grin. "Didn't make such a good showing, did I?"

"You did fine, Texas. But I feel terrible, knowing it was because of me."

"Gar Testerman have me put in here?"

She nodded, biting her lips. "I think we're going to get you out. I—I told the sheriff you work for me and took full responsibility."

"Thanks."

"Could I do any less?" Her eyes flashed suddenly. "But I wish you'd stayed out of it. Haven't I got enough trouble already?"

Two men came out of the front office, stopping before the cell. The first was Gar Testerman, smoking a fresh cigar and looking completely unruffled. The second was a portly man dressed in woolen pants stuffed into runover boots, a blue shirt that

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stretched across his ample paunch, and a leather vest which hung open and was decorated with a tin star. He had a large, dew-lapped, whisky-veined face and merry blue eyes.

Even his present stern demeanor failed to quench completely the lurking humor of the sheriff's eyes. "Young feller, next time tackle a less experienced man. Why, before he came west, Gar Testerman once went ten rounds with the great John L. Sullivan himself."

"Somebody should have told me," Pace said. "Who's going to look after my horse, and what's the charge?"

"The charge is trespassing—but Mr. Testerman will drop it, the girl being held legally accountable for any actions of yours in the immediate future. So you can look after your own horse."

"Thanks."

The sheriff unlocked the cell. Pace stepped out. Gar Testerman drew his beet-

ling brows together. "Never lead with your right, son."

"Thanks for nothing. I owe you a punch in the nose."

"Hear him now, Bigby?" Testerman said.

"I do," the sheriff said. "You want to go back in that cell?"

"The best thing he can do," Testerman said, "is get out of town."

It was a flat warning, and, having made it, Gar turned and walked from the jail.

Pace, Nancy, and the sheriff walked to the front office, where the sheriff returned property he'd taken from Pace's pockets.

"Now let's go over and see if we can find any clues as to who did that mill-wrecking."

Pace watched the sheriff at work. The sheriff's full name was Bigby Barnes, Pace learned. He also learned and suspected much more from the lackadaisical way Bigby inspected the millwheel housing and tracks outside, grunting now and then. A few sympathetic clucks of the tongue was about the ultimate of Bigby's proficiency.

He leaned against the wall of the mill finally, rubbing the sweatband of his hat with a bandanna. "Downright sorry it happened, Nancy, but I don't see a thing here to work on. Your description of the man who brought the corn might fit any of half a dozen people. If anything else turns up, let me know." He replaced his hat. "Wish there was something I could do, but the law has to have proof. Well, I'll give it a good think."

He waddled off, Nancy staring after him bitterly. "Proof! He's too easy going and lazy to hunt for proof, exactly the kind of law Gar Testerman wants in this town. All he does is sit in Oliver Frady's saloon and play pinochle."

She walked toward the rear of the store; then stopped, turned back and said, "Come on, Texas. You look like you need something done for that nose. I owe you that much certainly."

CHAPTER TWO

The Saboteurs

HE FOLLOWED her through a rear door and found himself in clean, neat, comfortable living quarters behind the store. There was mohair furniture in the living room, snowy lace curtains, and pictures in walnut frames on the walls. The kitchen was spacious, with a cupboard, a big stove gleaming with black polish, and a small hand pump to draw water at the sink.

She started to build a fire, and Pace took over the chore. When he turned from the stove, she had slipped into a gingham apron. He watched her as she filled a pot with water and set it on the stove.

He rolled a cigarette, smoked quietly for a few moments, and said, "Why don't you tell me about it?"

"There isn't much to tell."

"What makes you think Gar Testerman sent that man with the corn today? Why would he try to drive you out of business?"

She moved to a chair at the kitchen table near him, sat down, and studied her small, trim hands. She looked up at him after a time, and, try as she might to keep up a hard-boiled front, she just wasn't cut out for it. This girl was alone, and frightened, and grateful suddenly for the presence of a fellow human being.

"My father started the store a long time ago," she said. "He died and left it to my brother and me. My brother—Kyle is his name, Kyle Dinsmore—ran the store for awhile. Then he went away—on a trip East. He was planning to be gone for quite awhile, but I saw no reason why I couldn't handle things here.

"I hired an elderly man to help, and things went along smoothly enough, until the nesters came."

She paused to take a breath. "They were a starving lot by the time they got out here in the Territory. They'd had Indian trouble crossing the plains. Their guide had quit

them. They'd got snowbound in the mountains passes and almost froze to death. By the time they got here, their stock was depleted, their stomachs and pockets empty. But their troubles were just beginning.

"They filed on the government land north of here. It's always been considered grazing land, and the cattlemen have used it for years. There were some threats, a little night riding, but the nesters didn't scare off. When people have reached the point of desperation, they don't scare easily. There was nothing the homesteaders could do but stay grimly on their claims with their backs to the wall."

The teakettle began singing. Nancy got up to take it from the stove. She put a few drops of medicine in a bowl, added water, tore a white cloth into strips, and began washing the blood from Pace's nose. He flinched and his eyes smarted with pain.

"Keep talking," he said; "and it might take my mind some from this torture."

"Well, the nesters sold off a few of their remaining possessions to get seed. They put crops in—and that's where the store enters the picture. I'd agreed to give them credit until harvest time, and it looked finally like they might make the grade.

"My first hint of trouble was in my hired hand quitting. He said two men had broke into his room in the middle of the night, rolled him tight in his quilt, and given him a hard slapping. They'd warned him that it was unhealthy to work for a store that did business with nesters. I hired a second and third man. Each stayed less than a week. The third was found beaten to a pulp behind the saloon. The next morning there was a note tacked to the door of the store, telling me to cut off the nesters' credit. After that, it was too unlucky for anybody to work here.

"Next thing, two men came into the store. They called themselves Alec Searcy and Jack Penick. They made small purchases and said it was sure tough luck I'd been having, and pointed out how much

worse it could get—like a fire, or poison dumped in the flour barrel maybe some night."

"You go to the sheriff with that?"

"Yes, but it didn't do much good. He claimed he made a thorough search, but he didn't find the men and could find no one they worked for. But I'm not sure just what the sheriff meant when he used the word *thorough*."

"That dynamite cap the first thing of that kind?"

Nancy nodded. "It proves they're playing for keeps, doesn't it? Once the nesters' supplies are cut off, they'll have to push on, live off the land, starve their way on to California where they could find work in the mines or in a city."

"They might be better off," Pace suggested.

It seemed Nancy was suddenly rough with his nose. "Mr. Jernigan, those are farming people, families, women and children. They came here to make homes and good citizens. They've got a right to the land."

"Well, all right!" Pace said. "But what makes you think Gar Testerman is behind the trouble?"

"A remark Searcy and Penick made in here that day causes me to believe someone in town hired them. And I'll bet they're still around, waiting undercover until their boss needs them."

"They didn't name Testerman?"

"Noooo . . . But who else could it be? Testerman heads the local cattleman's organization. He's got an interest in two or three ranches. He controls the transport and most of the buying. If a rancher fails to sell through Testerman, he finds himself undersold until he has to come around. But if homesteaders begin pouring in here, it's going to change the picture."

Nancy finished her medicinal operations, stepped back to survey the results. She could still manage a smile at Pace's appearance.

HE TOUCHED the tender balloon on his face. "I see what you mean about Testerman being the kind to beat down opposition." He walked to a wall mirror, looked at himself. "But why don't the settlers simply sell their claims, go to a healthier climate, and buy land? If Testerman's smart as you say, he'd make a deal."

"They wouldn't get enough to buy again. They've all borrowed on the claims from Oliver Frady. Nope, Texas, this store is the only thing standing between those people and ruin."

He studied her face for a moment, and knew she felt honor-bound to fulfill her commitment to the nesters. They had put out crops, depending on the store. The trouble in her small, attractive face gave Pace the loco urge to gather her in his arms, cradle her head against his chest, and gnash his teeth at the forces besetting her.

He took a breath in and out to ease the tension in his chest. "You could sell out. Even the nesters couldn't blame you for that."

"Can you think of a buyer?"

"I guess not," he shook his head. "Well,"—he found words coming hard—"thanks for everything."

She shook hands with him. "My thanks to you, Texas."

She followed him out of the living quarters, out through the front of the store. At the door he paused. "I wouldn't ask for high wages."

An aching desire for human company in her lonely struggle fought for possession of Nancy's face. Then she shook her head. "If they'll put a dynamite cap in a girl's mill, they wouldn't be above killing a man. I wouldn't want that to happen to you, Texas."

She turned quickly before he could say more. Pace fumbled with his hat, put it on, and stepped outside. Dismal twilight was giving way to a dark night as he crossed the road and headed for the creek where he had tethered his tired and hungry horse.

He was dreaming of a brown-haired girl with worry gone from her eyes and laughter claiming her lips, when he came awake in sudden pain. He thrashed in his worn blanket, and the hand gripping his hair smashed his head against the earth. He tried to bring his eyes in focus. Spilled moonlight etched the clearing beside the creek where he had made camp. It revealed a man bending over him and another standing nearby. Pace relaxed. The man released his hair and stood up. Pace's fingers inched to his saddle, which he'd been using for a pillow, but his gun was gone.

"You're Pace Jernigan, the Texan who went to work for Nancy Dinsmore today?" the nearest man said.

"Could be," Pace admitted. "You must be Searcy and Penick."

The two men exchanged glances and laughed. The nearest man said, "Now ain't you the bright boy?" He hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt. "I'm Penick, and that's Searcy all right."

Jack Penick was short, but built with bull-like power; a brush of red beard covered his face. Alec Searcy was not much taller, but wiry, compact, the quicker of the two men. His face was slender, with a pugnacious chin. The cocksure way he lounged on his feet was enough to make Pace want to take him down a peg or two.

"Since the girl has already told you about us," Searcy said, "no need explaining we play for keeps."

"We got a little game in mind," Penick added, scratching his red beard, "called Texan, Texan, who can find the Texan. In other words, saddle and ride."

Blind anger took possession of Pace. He bent, but instead of picking up his saddle, his fingers closed over a length of sapling. He laid one on Penick, and stabbed at Searcy before either man could move.

Penick jumped on his back, and Pace jack-knifed him off. Searcy came darting in, gun gleaming in the moonlight. Pace dodged the blow of the gun barrel, knocked

Searcy down with a wild swing of the sapling.

The young tree trunk was proving a highly efficient weapon, Pace thought in exultation as he danced toward Penick. He was reasonably sure neither man would pull a trigger. They were too close to town, and gunfire would wake the good burghers. Murder was too serious a business to use as a solution to their chore. If they'd intended to kill, they would have done it silently, while he slept.

He wiped to the bleeding quick a spot of Penick's red bush, and the man tumbled. Then Searcy came in fast. At close quarters, the sapling wasn't much good. And Pace's free fist was no match for Searcy's whipping gun. The first blow raked Pace's head. He stumbled, and Penick rejoined the fray.

The whistling sapling kept them at bay another few moments; then the agile Searcy got beneath the club again, tripped Pace, and they fell together.

PENICK'S bootheel ground against Pace's hand, and the sapling fell away. Then Penick used the toe of the boot against Pace's jaw. The blow paralyzed his senses. Pace knew what was going on, but he couldn't do anything about it. They used him for a punching bag, and it seemed considerable time passed before the blessing of unconsciousness wiped away the pain.

With the advent of the morning sun, a dusty, blood-caked caricature of a man maintained his precarious, rolling position astride a dun horse by holding the saddle horn. The man managed to knee-rein the horse around to the rear of the Fairfax town general store; then the man came loose from the saddle and staggered toward the rear. Before he could knock, the door was jerked open.

Nancy Dinsmore stared with wide eyes. "Pace! What happened to you?"

"Met your loco mavericks, Penick and Searcy."

She caught his arm, helped him inside. "They thought I was working for you," he said.

Her lips thinned. "Testerman again. I had to say that yesterday in the sheriff's office."

"It looks like you're right. Testerman—or somebody who heard from him or the sheriff that you had a new hand."

The talk spent him. He was content to do nothing but groan into a chair and let the girl bring hot coffee to his lips.

"Texas," she said, a sudden break in her voice, "why'd you have to be unlucky enough to stop here?"

He looked at her and a grin came to his stiff lips. "Luckiest man alive," he said, "hearing that concern in your voice."

She turned her face. "Don't go courting me, Texas."

"Any law against it?"

"No, but there are things you don't know about me."

He touched her chin, turned her face toward his. "Not married?"

"No."

"Ain't got a fellow?"

"No."

"Then I'm a candidate. And I know all I need to about you, so let's leave the matter there."

She bit her lower lip, and for the second time in twenty-four hours her fingers were gentle as she doctored his face.

Sleep is nature's own medicine, Pace thought, awakening in early afternoon. He was still stiff and sore in spots, but confidence and a clarity of mind had returned. He dressed in the bedroom Nancy told him had been Kyle Dinsmore's.

Out in the kitchen, he found that she had left food for him in the stove warmer. As he ate, he heard someone enter the store, a man's voice, then, Nancy's.

Pace slid over to the door that opened into the store. It was slightly open, and he saw Nancy's caller, though she was beyond his line of vision.

From her greeting, Pace knew the man was Oliver Frady, the saloon owner she'd mentioned. Oliver was a big man, the kind who looked sloppy no matter what the cost of his clothes. He was short, fat, and bald, and sweating like a greased pig. Pace guessed that the heat always bothered Frady.

Oliver wiped his face with practiced motions of a bandanna. He was speaking earnestly: "I heard your mill got ruined. Wanted to come over, but haven't had the chance. Busy in the saloon. Girl, why don't you sell this place?"

From Nancy's silence, Pace guessed the prospect was attractive.

Oliver stuffed his bandanna in his pocket and lighted a thin pantella. The smoke wreathed about his head. "You know you can't go on here, girl. Not and give those nesters credit."

"I can't go on and refuse them either, Oliver."

He nodded. "I know you feel that way. And I don't blame you for refusing to let a bunch of toughs dictate how to run your business and interfere in your life. But there's even more than just you and the nesters at stake. There's Oliver Frady himself. I've loaned those people money on their claims. If you get burnt out here or shut up, the nesters move on. No crops, no money, no pay mortgages."

PACE studied the man. Instinctively, he distrusted the small eyes in the fat face, the quick shifting of the small, restless hands. But Pace told himself you couldn't always judge a man as if you were sitting across a gambling table from him.

Nancy walked around the counter into view. As her gaze was turned away, Oliver's eyes narrowed on her back, and a thin smile touched his thick lips.

He let his face become gelid once more as she faced him.

"Who'd buy the store, Oliver?" she asked.

"I would."

"The store means a lot to me. My father's sweat and dreams went into this place."

"All the more reason you should sell. A lone girl can't win, Nancy. But a man could do a different job. If I buy the place and keep the nesters in credit for awhile, I'll get my money back. Otherwise, I'll have a pile of mortgages to foreclose, and I'm not one to try to farm that land or run cattle on it."

That made sense, Pace conceded to himself. But something about Oliver's offer made him wary. The man was pressing too hard. As store owner, he'd really have the nesters where it hurt.

"I'll have to think about it, Oliver," Nancy said slowly.

"What is there to think about, girl? You may not be in business here another week. I can't wait until there's nothing left but foundation stones. It seems to me—"

Pace walked out into the store. Oliver and Nancy turned to look at him.

Nancy asked how he was feeling. "Much better," Pace said.

Nancy introduced him to Oliver. Pace took the soft, sweating hand in his. Oliver clucked his tongue. "Get caught in Nancy's corn grinder?" he asked with an attempt of humor to cover his irritation at having his conversation with Nancy interrupted.

Oliver picked up a floppy hat from the counter, placed it on his head. "Think over what I said, Nancy. Glad to have met you, Jernigan."

Frady went out, moving with surprising speed and firmness of stride for so fat a man.

Pace watched Oliver cross the street, enter the false-fronted building that bore the legend: *The Even Chance, Beer and Liquors*.

"You've known Frady long?"

"Several years," Nancy said, "since he opened here."

"You don't exactly trust him."

Nancy looked at him quickly. He said "The store is dear to you. You hate to think of it falling into his hands. Why?"

She shrugged. "Just something he did sometime ago in partnership with another man."

"Ever think he might be bossing Searcy and Penick?"

She looked at him quickly.

"One of your helpers," Pace reminded, "was found beaten behind his saloon. Could it have happened there and someone come along before they'd had a chance to move the man? And you mentioned that Sheriff Bigby Barnes plays a lot of pinochle over there. Men talk in pastime card games, especially the sheriff's type. Could be that Frady thought I was working for you because Barnes mentioned it after I was jailed yesterday. Then Frady sends out Searcy and Penick to send me on my way."

Nancy shook her head slowly. "But why would Oliver want the nesters gone? True, he'd get the land on foreclosure, but he doesn't want that. He wants the interest on his money."

"Maybe you're right. But I think Frady and Gar Testerman both bear watching."

"Meantime, Texas, we've got a grocery order to get together."

"Nester supplies?"

She nodded.

"Then I'll start work by riding with you." He grinned. "Craziest job I ever heard of—riding shotgun guard on a sack of groceries."

Bigby Barnes strolled up as Pace finished loading the wagon. The sheriff watched a few minutes. "Figure to use that shotgun?"

"If I have to. Any objections?"

"Don't like trouble in my bailiwick."

"There's one way of stopping it."

"Yeah?"

"Get some proof on that mill explosion. Find two men named Alec Searcy and Jack Penick. Jail them on charges of assault."

"They did that to you?" Bigby nodded

toward Pace's puffed cheek and gashed jaw.

"I'll sign the warrants," Pace nodded.

"Well," Bigby sighed, "I'll scout around. Didn't much believe there was any two such men. Not natives around here."

Pace felt high impatience with the sheriff. Luckily, such men were few and far between, in law enforcement. The sheriff was too lazy, too filled with the indolent man's good humor to take his job seriously. Anything that's done, Pace thought, we'll have to do ourselves.

CHAPTER THREE

Renegade Reckoning

PACE rode his dun alongside the wagon. Town dropped behind, and the country became rolling, green-touched hills that echoed a potential promise of paradise. Good country, a land waiting for people. And some of the people were here. After their first stop or two to drop supplies at new, rough cabins, Pace saw why Nancy wanted the people to stay. The nesters were without exception thrifty, clean, slow spoken, polite folks. The weaklings had already been weeded out.

Pace relaxed and found himself talking to Nancy. He told her of his boyhood in Texas, the way his dad had got caught miles from home in a howling norther and never returned. Pace found himself looking at his life with a new perspective. A drifting cowpoke, enjoying life, working when he needed to—that's mostly what he'd been. But he hoped that Nancy sensed that wasn't enough now. He hadn't known this girl long, but he wished he could have met her, with a good job and money in his jeans. And he wished he did not have to omit that one chapter in his life he didn't like to think about. She'd mentioned something in her own past that she hadn't told him. Well, he couldn't bring himself to tell her all the truth about himself right now, either.

He met Mitch Crowder at the next stop. Crowder, Nancy said, had emerged as the natural leader of the farmers. He lived in a snug cabin in a small cove. He was a lean, raw-boned man in his forties, with a neck as red as a dominecker's. His wife was a small woman, with the quick movements of a squirrel. There was a passel of children underfoot, and Pace noted that, to them, he was more welcome than Santa Claus, the groceries more precious than Christmas toys. The children carried the supplies tenderly and cautiously into the house.

Mitch Crowder stood by the wagon a moment before it left. "We'll not let you down, Miss Dinsmore. If necessary we'll stand guard over our fields. Nothing can stop us, as long as the store gets supplies to us." He looked over his plowed fields, where green shoots were beginning to appear. "Gar Testerman and two men rode over this morning."

"A stocky, red-bearded man and a wirier one who looked as if they'd been in a fight?" Pace asked.

"No, these were two cowpunchers from the Bar-J. Said the cattlemen might consider buying us out. They know we're going to lick 'em in the end. We haven't scared and bolted, and they don't don't go further with physical violence. We're filed here legal and proper, and the United States government might have something to say about serious night riding. The government would talk with a cavalry detail, and the cattlemen know that."

"Which makes our spot hotter than ever," Pace said.

"I reckon that's true," Crowder said. "Cutting our supply line is their last hope. Say, you mentioning them two men is a funny thing. My oldest boy saw a pair like that up near a line shack on the creek. The boy was out hunting and figured to spend the night in the shack, thinking it abandoned. But when he saw these two men, he just moseyed on, strangers being unfriendly as they are in this country."

Pace felt his breath quicken. "How do you get to the place?"

"Straight up the creek about two miles."

Pace mounted the dun. "You want supplies in the future, arm your oldest boy and send him with this wagon."

"I'll do more than that," Crowder said. "I'll ride guard myself."

Nancy climbed on the wagon seat. Her eyes were worried, and she was white about the lips. Pace guessed every fiber of her wanted to beg him not to go to the cabin. He watched her stiffen her back. "Good hunting, Texas."

Her courage warmed him. "I can't miss," he said.

He left the dun ground-tied behind a knoll and approached the line shack on foot, taking his time. He sighted the shack; it looked empty. Then as he moved, changing his angle of vision, he saw a single horse hobbled near the creek. He felt the afternoon sun beating on the tenderness of his cheek and jaw, and his eyes slitted. The flesh of his face tightened, making the bones stark and ugly. He checked the shotgun, then pulled the revolver he'd thrust into his waistband before leaving the store. He broke the gun, spun the cylinder, to see the weapon had picked up no dust or dirt.

A line of brush afforded cover enough for him to get close to the shack. He removed his spurs to avoid their tinkling, and crossed the intervening thirty feet to the wall of the shack, running on tiptoe.

He edged along the wall, mounted the sagging front porch, and heard a man snoring inside. A single board creaked as Pace entered, but the sound did not awaken the man. A near-empty whisky bottle stood on the rickety table in the center of the room. The man sighed, stirred on the burlap-and-brush mattressed bunk. He was facing outward, beginning to snore again, light falling on his face. He was not Penick or Searcy, but the face was familiar. Then Pace remembered. This was the man who'd brought the corn to be ground.

PACE crossed the room. The man on the bunk was long, loose-jointed, sallow-faced, and lantern-jawed. A day's growth of dark beard matted his cheeks.

Pace pointed the pistol at the man's face, reached out with his other hand, and shook the sleeper's shoulder.

The man's eyes flicked open. He did not appear normally cross-eyed, but as he snapped soberly awake, each eye fastened itself to the yawning gun bore inches from his nose.

He shivered, cowered back on the bunk, the brush rustling beneath him. "Who are you?" he said, "and what do you want?"

"The name is Pace Jernigan—and, since you seem to like making little stones out of big ones, I figure we can fix you up with such a job, about five years of it."

By moonrise, Pace was replete with a hot supper and a day of accomplishment. Nancy smiled as she washed dishes and handed them to him to dry.

"We didn't get much out of the prisoner," he admitted. "His name is Ellis Callaway. He denied putting the dynamite cap in the corn all the way back to town, and even after Bigby Barnes jailed him. But I think our testimony'll stand up in court. The corn definitely came from his wagon, and, as soon as the grain went in the hopper, he got out of there."

"Bigby didn't find out who hired him?"

"Bigby didn't find out anything. He locked the man up and hurried back to his pinochle game."

Pace dried the last dish, hung the towel on the rack over the sink. "It's my hunch somebody's going to be bad worried with Callaway in jail, fearing the man just might talk. Tomorrow morning I'm going to speak to Crowder about setting up a chain of guards along the supply route."

Nancy studied him a moment. He colored faintly. "What's the matter?"

"Ever have a thought come unbidden to your mind, Pace?"

"Plenty of times."

"I can't help it. I'm wondering why you, a stranger, are doing all this, conceivably risking your neck."

"You trust me?"

"Of course. But you must admit it seems odd."

"Not if you knew me better, Nancy. Sometimes I make on-the-spot decisions. Like this one." His hands touched her shoulders. He drew her toward him and kissed her. She surrendered to the kiss momentarily, then she pushed away with a sob in her throat.

"Since you're bullheaded enough to stick in Fairfax town, Texas, you're going to learn that I've got a brother in the penitentiary. I lied to you when I said Kyle had gone East. He's doing time on a Federal charge. After Dad died, Kyle wanted money faster than the store could earn it. He was young, and foolish. Not inherently bad, just too impatient. There was corn meal in plenty, and he could buy all the sugar he wanted without arousing suspicion."

She shook her head as if remembering a bad dream. "The Federal men began watching him, though he didn't know it of course. Maybe somebody with a grudge tipped them off. They caught Kyle red-handed, making illegal liquor. To make it worse, he got panicky and tried to fight his way out. He drew a stiff sentence."

Pace moved toward her. "You think it makes any difference to me?"

Her lips quivered. "But you don't understand. I shielded him. Even after I suspected what he was doing, followed him one night and found out for sure. I tried to protect him. I'm as guilty as Kyle, Texas."

"No," he said, "you're not—and you've let this thing prey on your mind too much. The law of family survival is stronger than any man-made law. You were doing just what any sister would do."

"Thanks, Texas," she said. "You always seem to do and say the right thing at the

right time. But don't say anything more to me now, something you might be sorry for later, after you've had time to think about a convict in the family. Kyle has matured, I can tell from his letters. Merciless as it sounds, I'm glad prison stopped him from something worse. He was drifting, but I believe he'll have his feet on the ground when he comes out."

"Sure he will," Pace said, coaxing the words to his lips. Now is the time to tell her, he thought, don't miss this chance.

Then the door closed behind her, and the chance was gone.

Pace slept fitfully, bunking on a cot in the rear of the store with a shotgun nearby. Though she hadn't said it, Pace added to Nancy's story a previous remark she'd made about Oliver Frady. The saloon would have been a natural outlet for Kyle Dinsmore's untaxed liquor. A young, foolish Kyle would have felt loyally bound not to squeal on his partner, leaving Frady free. Was it Frady, after all, who wanted the Dinsmores gone from here for good, for a reason deeper than the presence of the nesters?

ABOUT ten o'clock Pace heard a group of horsemen ride out of town. Pace rose, fully dressed except for boots. He slipped these on and walked to the window. He saw the dust cloud in the moonlight; from the size of it, he guessed most of Fairfax had hit the trail for some reason.

He stepped quietly out of the store, crossed the street to the saloon, where the only lights were visible.

Oliver Frady was alone, turning off the lights as Pace entered. "The customers all went with the sheriff."

"Trouble?"

"That Ellis Callaway turned out to be a hand, newly hired, on the Bar-J, one of the ranches Gar Testerman has an interest in. Somebody slugged the sheriff and busted Callaway out of jail not twenty minutes ago. Soon as the sheriff came to, he got a

posse together and lit out after Callaway."

Pace let his shoulders relax. So it was Testerman after all. With the sheriff, it was logical to assume that he'd round up every available townsman to go after Callaway. He wouldn't do the job alone. Which might mean that the breaking out of Callaway had been for the simple and express purpose of taking most of the able-bodied men out of town. Callaway's capture had shown that Pace, Nancy, and the farmers weren't fooling. Given time, they would win. But in a suddenly deserted town, anything might happen to the store or to Nancy.

Pace tried to keep from running as he headed back toward the store. He slipped inside as he heard a muffled scream. He grabbed a brace of revolvers from the rack behind the counter and cursed the moment lost in loading them in the dark.

A door opened and closed. The shadow of a man moved. Coal oil splashed, spreading its pungent odor into the store. Pace laid the second revolver down quietly, not having time to load it. The shadowy man struck a match. Pace recognized the heavy bush of red beard.

"Hold it!"

Instead of obeying, Jack Penick dropped the blazing match and grabbed for his gun. Pace fired. Penick choked and fell. Flames were already racing over the pool of coal oil. Pace vaulted the counter, dragged the man away. From the bullet crease along the temple, Penick would not be conscious for quite awhile. Pace shoved Penick through the front door; then skirted the spreading fire toward the living quarters in back.

He saw Nancy pulling herself to her feet with the aid of a chair in the middle of the room. "Alec Searcy, Pace," she said. "The shot warned him. It gave me a chance to break away, and he lunged outside. Watch it, Pace, he'll shoot you in the back!"

He slid through the rear door. A gun went off almost in his face. The bullet sang by his ear. He fired back and saw Alec Searcy break from the corner of the

building. Pace held the trigger and began fanning the gun. He was shouting crazy words without realizing it.

His knees went limp as he saw Searcy stumble and fall. He walked over to Searcy, who was whistling breath out through a hole in his chest. Searcy had dropped his gun and was trying to crawl toward it. Pace kicked the gun away.

He stood looking down on the fallen man, moonlight giving his face an icy look. "You weren't above burning out a girl, Searcy, risking the chance of killing her. Now you're dying. Do one decent thing. Who hired you?"

"Oliver Frady," Searcy said after a moment.

"He wants the land?"

"Yes. Trip to Denver. He found the railroad's figuring to come this way. Made a deal with one of the officials to deliver the land in one lump, cheaper than the road could buy it piecemeal from the farmers. In return the official promised to use his power to give Frady time. Official crooked gent . . ."

"Thanks, Searcy."

But the man had stopped breathing.

Pace moved down alongside the building. He reached the front of the saloon, eeled through the door. The saloon appeared to be empty. Then Pace heard a sound behind the bar and knew it was Frady, warned by the shooting across the street.

"Frady," Pace said. "You're going to help fight some fire—with this gun on you every minute. And you're paying for every dime damage she's suffered."

When the posse returned with a bedraggled prisoner in tow, they found a girl and a Texan standing guard over a smoke-blackened, blistered saloon owner who slumped on the edge of the boardwalk, face in hands, sobbing for breath, one gunman, dead, and a second hired hoodlum moaning with a bullet crease along his scalp.

Sheriff Bigby dismounted. Gar Testerman slid off his mount beside him. The

two men approached him, coming along the boardwalk.

"Looks like you been right-busy here," Testerman said. "We got the skunk that sneaked on the Bar-J payroll."

"And we got the one who had him do it," Pace said. "You'd better screen your hands. Frady might have found it convenient to slip several in here and there. A prime way of keeping them close to call and point suspicion the other way in case they were caught."

"We'll do that," Testerman said. He started to turn away, then paused. "I tried for twenty-one and busted the hand."

Pace watched the posse gather in its fresh prisoners and move down the street. The night was quiet, studded with stars.

A soft voice touched the night with added beauty: "You're wonderful, Texas."

"No—not so much so," he said. His limbs felt suddenly heavy, his throat dry. "You had your secret. I got mine. You don't think I came here by accident, do you? I was a little young, fiddle-footed, and crazy once myself, like Kyle Dinsmore. I thought it was high adventure to smuggle some wet cattle across the border, but the Feds waiting on this side didn't agree. I had to share their opinion when I had time to think it over—in company with Kyle Dinsmore.

"He wanted me to tell you he's fine, Nancy. And he is. Fine as they come. He saved my life in a prison riot once. So you see, a beating couldn't drive me away when I promised him I'd look in on you when I was released. He suspected things were tough, even though you did try to keep your letters cheerful."

He touched lips that felt parched with his tongue. "Well, I guess that's it, Nancy."

He started to turn away; then she spoke, and he turned back, and she was suddenly in his arms.

She had said only one word: "Texas!" But the way she'd said it told him all he needed to know. ■ ■ ■

A GUN FOR SATAN'S RANGE

By Will Cook

Ranger Jim Priest had to maintain law and order throughout a hundred and fifty square miles of Texas wilderness—including a flaxen-haired girl who was ready to put a bullet in his heart!





Jim Priest grabbed the man's wrist and twisted savagely....

JIM PRIEST waited until darkness fell around the rainy day before nudging his friend awake for their crossing of the Brazos River. This was Texas in the year 1853, and it was a land best traveled by night.

Priest was a thin man, thirty some, with a drooping mustache and hair that grew thick and bunchy along his collar. He wore a buckskin shirt and tight Spanish trousers with rosettes along the seam. On his hip

rested a .44 Dragoon Colt with accouterments: a Bowie knife was sheathed on the other side. His rifle was a paper cartridge Sharps, long barreled, stubby of breech, but in his hands, deadly to a half mile. Priest's habits were Texas habits, deeply ingrained. He talked little and moved slowly, but always arrived at his point a little ahead of the next mail. "Bring the horses off picket, Jeff," he said and began to roll his blankets.

Jeff Garvey threw aside his tarp and stood erect, spending a few minutes digging at the beggar lice that plagued him. Rain tumbled from his hat and elk-hide coat. He said, "You'd think that with all this damn rain that a man'd wash clean." Garvey was shorter than Priest, more inclined to movement and talk. They made a strange pair. Garvey peered off into the gathering gloom. "Wonder how much farther it is. I could do with some hot grub."

Priest said nothing, and Garvey took his long rifle and moved away. His cursing came thin and warped by the wind a few minutes later as he brought the mounts in from the pickets. Priest fastened his soggy blankets behind the saddle and began to wipe out all sign around the camp.

"Dannned if you can't think of more to do," Garvey complained. "Hell, let the dangd rain wash it out, Jim."

"Sometimes stops raining," Priest said and pulled himself into the saddle. Priest had a tarp with a hole cut in it. This he placed over his shoulders and let drape on both sides of the saddle. This gave him some measure of warmth but, more important, held the water away from his weapons. His hat was high peaked and wide brimmed; water funneled from the front in a steady stream.

"Keep an eye peeled," Priest said. "Kio-was."

Garvey grunted. "Man ought to have a hole to crawl into on a night like this."

"Get careless and you might," Priest said quietly. "Six feet of it."

This drew a frown from Jeff Garvey, but the man held to silence until they raised the lights of Oldfield's Settlement three hours later. Priest halted his horse in the blackness and said, "Keep your mouth closed when we get there. We're not playing favorites."

"Is that what I do?" Garvey's voice had an edge to it.

"Yes," Priest said, quite bluntly. Garvey declined to take up the stick, so Priest

rapped his horse with his heels, and they moved on.

Oldfield's Settlement was like every other frontier outpost in Texas, raw, new, hurriedly erected, but built well. Five buildings made up this town, and horse traffic had reduced the area fronting these structures to a sea of churned mud. The largest building was the fort and trading post with an upper floor partitioned off into crude rooms for any traveler touching this remote land. Stout cottonwood logs chinked with mud and buffalo grass was the building material; rawhide hinges hung the doors and acted as window panes.

At the far end of the street there was a three-walled stable and blacksmith shop. Next to it stood a government survey office, the stage and freight barns, along with two outbuildings and a cabin belonging to a resident of Oldfield's Settlement.

Rain gutted from the sod roof, drenching the walls and making a thick puddle before the hitch rail. Stopping before the trading post, Priest dismounted. The trading post was really three buildings: the hotel, the bar, and the store.

Priest went into the bar. This was a bare room with the minimum of furniture. The bar was split planks pegged to two stumps. A few benches sat along one wall. An arched doorway separated the bar from the store, and, seeing no one, Priest went into the store, Garvey at his heels. The storekeeper sat on the end of a beer barrel. He raised his eyes briefly, and Priest asked, "Where can I find Oldfield. I'm Jim Priest, Texas Frontier Battalion. This is Garvey, also a Ranger."

The man jerked a thumb toward the stairs. "First door to your left."

PRIEST nodded and took the stairs. A rap on the panel bought an immediate response and Jim swept off his hat when he saw the girl. She was short, coming only to his chin. Flaxen hair glistened in the candlelight.

She stepped aside, and the two rangers entered.

Oldfield was a bear of a man, white haired, wrinkle faced. He offered his hand briefly as though Priest and Garvey were necessary evils to be tolerated, and for as little time as possible.

A pine bed sat in one corner; the girl now sat on the edge of it. A makeshift dresser was against the far wall with a polished gold pan for a mirror. Two willow chairs with a laced rawhide bottom completed the furniture. Priest and Garvey sat down while Oldfield leaned against the dresser. "I sent for Rangers," Oldfield said, "because I hate to kill a man when I don't have to."

"What's the trouble?" Priest asked.

"Land trouble," Oldfield bellowed. "A man gets along fine until he gets a neighbor with an all-fired greed."

"I heard that there's been some shooting up around here," Priest murmured. He glanced at Garvey and found the man studying the girl. Garvey was like that, bold and pushing when he saw something that interested him. Priest nudged him with his knee, and Garvey swung his attention around to the old man.

"Lawyer is making a claim on land that belongs to me," Oldfield said firmly. "You see how the river bends here. I mean for that land to go to farmers—people who will settle this country. Lawyer and I have had some strong talk over that section. The man's been hiring men—Esqueda for one."

Some interest came into Priest's face. "Heard of him. Have you been taking on men?" He asked the question smoothly, coupling it with a bland look. Priest's face was very deceiving. His eyes were dark and friendly, and he smiled easily. Now, with his week-old whiskers, sagging mustache, and wrinkled brows, he looked harmless, and that was the way he preferred it.

"Thunderation!" Oldfield stormed. "What am I supposed to do? Stand still

and let him run over me like a herd of buffalo?"

"We'll get it settled," Priest stated, and Oldfield puckered his lips in doubt.

"I was kind of hopin' an older man would come," Oldfield said. "I got no hankering for a land fight—well, I mean no offense, but are you sure you can take care of this?"

Garvey was the one with a quick pride, and Oldfield's remark stung. He half raised out of his chair, and Jim Priest pushed him back without so much as even a glance. "Where can I find Lawyer? I'd like to talk to the man."

"What for?" the girl asked suddenly. "Isn't an Oldfield word good enough for you?"

Jim Priest looked at her and was glad of the opportunity. She was a pretty girl wearing a homespun dress and mule-ear boots. Her face was oval and heavily tanned, and her lips were full. A stubborn mouth, he decided. Probably got it from her father.

Placing his hat squarely on his head, Priest said, "Miss Oldfield, Garvey and I have a hundred and fifty square miles of Texas to maintain law and order in. That includes everything from cattle stealing to hanging a murderer. You'll have to forgive me, but I'll hear Lawyer's side before we reach a decision."

"He's a crook," Jane Oldfield said hotly, and from the light in her eyes Priest surmised that she had told Lawyer that much to his face.

"Then give me credit for having enough judgment to see it too," he said and smiled. Garvey opened the door, and Priest went out. Garvey closed it behind them.

Going down the stairs and into the saloon they took their Joe Gideon barrel whisky with a minimum of choking. A man lounged at the far end of the plank, and Priest turned his head.

Esqueda was a dandy, but a dangerous one. He wore a fine-fitting suit of velvet,

tight trousers, and a short jacket. His revolvers were the latest model Dragoons, ornate with pearl handles. Esqueda smiled and said, "*Senor*, rangers—I can buy you a drink?"

"Another round," Priest said and leaned on one elbow. "You've come up, Esqueda. Last year you were a second-rate horse thief."

"Such strong talk," the Mexican said softly. "Now it is different. Maybe you not talk so big later, no?"

"Got a pusher for a boss now, I hear," Garvey said. Esqueda looked at him, and the boldness, the brashness in Garvey's face caused a smile to appear on the Mexican's thin lips. "Where's Lawyer?"

ESKUEDA'S shoulders rose and fell. "Down the street, maybe. Next door—who knows."

"Go get him," Garvey said. "We'll wait here."

Esqueda stiffened, then grinned. "The tone I will ignore, Texan." He turned and went out in the rain. Priest blew out his breath and leaned against the bar, listening to the pelt and slam at the weather as it husked across the land. He glanced at Garvey and found the young man studying the whisky in his cup. "You in a hurry?" Priest asked mildly.

"What's the use of hanging around." Garvey said. "I'd just as soon be on the move."

"This may not be so easy," Priest pointed out. "Esqueda don't scare, and it's my guess that Lawyer won't either."

Garvey's pride read something behind the words, for he flared, "You think I do?"

"Come off the boil—" Priest said as the front door opened and let a gust of driving wind dim the candles.

Lawyer was short and dark, his heavy beard covering the second button of his fringed shirt. The man wore two Walker Colts in the waistband of his pants. Law-

yer came up to Priest and tilted his head back for a good look at the ranger.

"I'm Lawyer. Esqueda tells me you're burning to settle this little quarrel between me and Oldfield."

"Aren't you?" Priest asked this quickly. "Frankly I don't give a good damn," Lawyer admitted. "I see what I want, and I take it. Who's to stop me? You?" He tipped back his head and laughed.

Priest reached out lazily and lifted his tincup of whisky; he tilted the cup and poured it in Lawyer's face. It hit the man like a blow between the eyes, and Priest said softly, "If you have any idea of bullying me or my partner, then get it out of your head before I have to take it out for you. Don't play tough with me, Lawyer. You aren't heavy enough."

The bearded man wiped the whisky away with his hand, but his eyes had turned round and mean. He was on the verge of a fight, and Priest waited for him to teeter either way. Lawyer finally relaxed and said, "The land doesn't belong to Oldfield. Let the strongest man hold it."

Glancing at Garvey, Lawyer's eyes sized up the younger ranger, then whipped back to Priest. "I want that land, ranger." He nodded toward the store. "Let's go somewhere where we can sit down."

Priest and Garvey followed him into the store. Lawyer hoisted the tail of his ragged buffalo coat and sat on the counter. Esqueda moved away, but Priest noticed the man took a station by the stairs so that they would not be interrupted. Garvey saw the box containing the horn cheese and took off the lid. He carved a generous slice and popped it into his mouth.

"Get out of there, Jeff," Priest said mildly, and Garvey put the lid back on.

Lawyer's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and he murmured, "You know, I hate to shoot the old goat, but dammit, I've got rights too. I want to run cattle along the Brazos. Oldfield wants to invite the farmers in here and build his damn town." He

CHAPTER TWO

Pearl Handles

turned to Garvey suddenly and asked, "They don't pay you much I'd guess, do they?"

"Not much," Garvey said, and his attention sharpened.

Lawyer dipped a hand inside his coat and came up with a small poke. He hefted it and murmured, "One of my boys found this the other day. Never could find out who it belongs to, but it's been a worry to me, I'd be obliged if you took charge of it for me." He smiled.

Garvey mentally weighed it, rolled his tongue around in his cheek, and glanced at Priest, who shook his head. "Don't pull that one on me, Lawyer. I settle things by the law."

Some of the pleasure left Lawyer's face. "What happens when that law of yours don't work?"

"I use a gun," Priest stated and stared the man down. "Come up to Oldfield's room and we'll get something done there. I think it can be hashed out without any more trouble."

Lawyer considered it for a moment, then shrugged. "What have I got to lose. If you don't play my way I'll take it anyway after you've gone."

Priest took him by the collar and pulled the man around to face him. "Lawyer, get this straight. I'll settle it my way, and you'll mind like a good dog or you'll be dead when I leave here."

Vising his jaws, Lawyer let a full temper sway him, then said, "Esqueda can take care of you any time, friend—any time."

"Not now he won't," Garvey said, and Lawyer flipped his head. Esqueda was standing against the wall, hands flat and away from his body. Garvey had his .44 Dragoon centered on the Mexican's sturdy chest.

The starch seemed to run out of Lawyer. "All right," he said. "Let's go and see Oldfield."

"Keep Esqueda occupied, Jeff," Priest said and followed Lawyer up the stairs.

JANE OLDFIELD answered Priest's knock, and she frowned when she saw Lawyer. Her father reared up from his seat and bellowed, "I'll not stay in the same room with this carrion!"

"Simmer down," Priest cautioned. "We want to put out the fire, not add fuel."

"This is my settlement," Oldfield fumed. "My hotel. By god I want this man out of my room. Either you take him out or I'll put him out—permanent."

Jim Priest toed a chair around and straddled it. He motioned for Jane to sit down, then murmured. "The bone is the land in the river's curve. Once we decide who belongs to it, then there should be no more fighting."

Oldfield pointed to Lawyer. "If he gets it, there'll be plenty of fighting."

"I told you what I meant downstairs," Lawyer said and stood against the wall.

Rubbing his face, Priest suddenly looked tired and near the end of his patience. "Oldfield, Lawyer, get this—if I tell a man to stay off, he'll stay. Texas has enough trouble without her sons fighting for the lion's share. One man has been killed, and we can't bring him back, but we can see that no more follow him. Do you agree to that, Oldfield?"

The big man glanced at Lawyer and stated, "In principle—yes, but this man's greed is a thing to worry about. He's a hog and won't be satisfied until he's swallowed up my settlement. There's not room enough on the plains for both of us."

Because he was playing a careful game, Lawyer retained his temper, although some of it broke through to glitter in his eyes. Priest took a corn cob pipe from his pocket, crushed some twist tobacco, and lighted it from the candle. Outside, the wind increased in fury, and rain pelted the build-

(Continued on page 101)

TEXANS



He extended his hand slowly
toward the gun. . . .

DIE HARD

By T. C. McClary

**When a Texan seems completely
licked—he's just begun to fight!**



HE HAD twelve hundred miles of tough trail callousing his backside, and six months wages, quadrupled by a little luck, stoking up his arrogance. He was young, and Texan, and he had new silver spurs that jangled and a new ivory-handled gun. He had all the time in the

world, and all Wyoming in front of him.

Late that morning he topped a plum-colored ridge and dropped directly on a creek that twinkled gold and copper. A girl was rock-trapped in a buggy with a broken hame strap fretting up her pony. She had on a party dress, and it was clear that she

was worried that she'd get all spattered.

He rode out beside her and touched his hat.

She said with relief, "If you can get me out of here without busting a wheel or getting me soaked, you're a man, cowboy! This creek's licked me for half an hour."

"Nothing licks a Texan, ma'am," he told her modestly. "Now if you'll just let me tote you over. . . ."

She was a damned pretty package, and his not entirely shy thoughts showed upon his face. She quieted her pony and looked at him afresh. She had wide, knowing, almond-shaped eyes that crinkled at the corners. She asked with amusement, "You take a college course in how to save young ladies, or is that natural down in Texas?"

"Well, ma'am," he told her, "it's kind of natural. But then it broadens a man to travel. There was a little gal down on the Platte in about the same fix. . . ."

"But she misunderstood your offer," she interjected.

He grinned. "Ma'am, I think you took that college course. But I ain't licked. On account of we haven't met formal yet."

She laughed and stood in the buggy, and he sidled his pony over. He was leaning to clasp her when a gruff voice barked from the bank, "Don't touch that lady, stranger!" and a big man on a big horse splashed into the ford.

The girl drew back and said, "Why, Larne, this man's only trying to help me!"

"I'll do what helping needs doing!" he told her. "You ain't trapped so bad you need toting."

She colored, and her mouth went tight, but she sat down and took the reins. The Texan backed off a few steps and sat by with a wooden expression.

The man named Larne shot him a glare and moved to the girl's bridle. He tried to make the fretted pony pull. He failed, and, angered by the Texan's soft laugh, quirked it. The pony jumped the buggy out of the rock trap with a splash that put a sheet of

water right up across the dashboard.

The girl sat on the far side of the crossing with her mouth compressed and her eyes flashing. The big man was beet red and breathing hard. He glared at the Texan. "You could see the angle of the pull!" he said. "Why didn't you holler?"

"Why, I didn't figure a man like you needed to be told anything," the Texan drawled.

The big man's look was hostile. "Stick around this country a spell and maybe I'll tell you a few things!" he said. He turned to the girl. "I'm sorry, Cheri. I'll ride you home while you change."

"Just don't try helping me any more!" she said.

The Texan swept off his hat. "To a better meeting, ma'am," he grinned. "With a formal introduction."

She didn't answer, but the briefest twinkle broke the anger of her eyes. The buggy clattered across the creek. The big man looked daggers at the Texan. The Texan chuckled and ran a finger under his tight bandanna. "I don't like your smell, friend," he murmured. "But you did me a good turn only you don't have sense enough to know it."

He touched his pony and rode on, humming a tune. The sound of the girl's voice lingered in him. He wondered about the big man. Man who acted like that should just make her a little readier for fun.

It was Saturday, and the town was filling up. Wagons, buggies, carriages, buckboards, and riders lifted a thick ochre dust smoke through the street. He didn't quite savvy the number of driving rigs. The men didn't look like nesters, but where in hell would all those wagons come from in a cow country? Prosperous-looking people, prosperous-looking town, lot of womenfolk, lot of kids. Looked like a place to have a good respectable time. The town rang with greetings and good-natured rawhiding, but there was an undercurrent he couldn't quite catch.

He racked and bought a cigar and spur dragged down to the noisiest saloon he saw. He dropped a silver dollar in the big slot machine, and the whole jackpot spilled out at him. He filled his hat with silver dollars. A square-faced man with a fringe of blond-red beard turned from a conversation to notice him and grinned.

TEX flipped a silver dollar and said, "Don't you Wyoming folks know you can't lick a Texan?"

The man said, "We've got some middling good boys around here at one thing another."

"Glad to meet them," Tex answered. "Might get up a little contest or two."

The man's eyes sparked, but his friend murmured, "Cinch it, Rogue! We've got things to do."

The man named Rogue nodded briefly and said, "We can probably oblige you if you're around a spell."

"You'll find me," Tex told him, "wherever you see my blazed chestnut quarter-bred."

He spur dragged off to cash in his silver, smiling to himself. He'd mentioned that pony by intention. It was a chunky-looking little beast, and all cowpony, but it was lightning for a mile stretch. He gave the barkeep a five-dollar tip, and the man's eyes bugged, and he said, "Thank you, stranger!" with respect. It was pretty clear this crowd didn't splurge.

He stood there having a drink and soaking in the feelings of the place. He picked up the signs that told the story. "If Coulter throws in with Larne Desmond," a voice said, "we're stranded come dry weather! Sampson will have to go along with them or get stuck in the middle betwixt us and them. And the three of them can cut us off from water."

"Can't cut me off!" a stocky rancher growled. "I been grazing my water holes since I first come here!"

"You think that means anything to a

man like Desmond? He's hungry, and he's crowded his own graze, and he needs elbow room."

The stocky man growled, "There're enough of us to give them hell!"

"Dan, you talk like a fool! We got work to do day by day, and it splits us up. And they got money enough to pull in extra armies."

"I don't think Coulter would go for that," another said. "Fact is, I don't think he cottons too much to Desmond."

"He'll cotton to where his interests lie," he was told. "He ain't the rancher his pa was and he knows it. He may need Desmond, and he sure can't afford to fight him."

Same old story, Tex thought to himself. Same old tune. He only meant to have some fun and drift along. He wondered if the girl's full name was Cheri Coulter.

He went out and stabled his pony, got a scrub and a shave, and bought a new shirt, drifted around town seeing the sights. He found a friendly rope match going on at the blacksmith's. The man named Rogue was cutting some fancy loops.

Rogue flicked him with challenge and allowed, "Course we ain't no match for the champeens from Texas."

Tex swelled his chest and hitched his belts and teetered on his heels. "You ain't bad at all," he allowed. "But we might make up a little real contest at ten dollars a man."

A small rancher muttered critically.

"Where I come from," Tex grunted, "a man is willing to back his savvy."

The rancher darkened. Rogue quieted the bunch down with a look. He said, "I'll tell you, I'll put up fifty against your ten, Texan, and you lick five of us."

Tex eyed him. "Including saddle roping?"

Rogue grunted affirmatively.

Tex spat and considered. "Outsiders don't always get a good break in a local contest," he pointed out.

Rogue said, "You'll get fair judging!" Tex told them. "I'll fetch my pony and rope."

He could hear the hostile muttering after he'd turned. He didn't give a damn. He'd meant it, and he meant to prove his boast. They were waiting with ponies and went down to the stock pens in a bunch. The word had gone out, and riders were dusting after them from all over town.

Col. Sampson and Judge Ritter and a small rancher named Black were introduced as judges—men of clear integrity and importance. Waddies lined the top bar of the corral, and the six entrants began the contest. Horse work first, ground work second, then fancy looping, regular rodeo heats, and judging.

By the fancy heat, one man and Rogue were left with Tex. The odd man was eliminated. Rogue sat across the corral flickering his rope, watching Tex with faint surprise that he'd lasted, but a mocking smile on his mouth. Col. Sampson pointed at Tex to lead off. Tex gave an arrogant grunt and went out with his loop spinning, up and down over horse and man, at a walk, a trot, a full gallop. Then the final windup trick . . . up and down and under the pony's hoofs and back up over his head, the loop still spinning.

There was a grudging mutter of respect from the crowd, and Tex drew off and built a smoke, a smug assurance of winning on his face. Rogue came out and duplicated his trick effortlessly. He couldn't better Tex's score, but his handling was smoother. It brought whooping cheers, and Tex muttered sneeringly, "The local hero!" but Rogue had shown better, and it galled him.

Rogue said, "Okay, Texan, tie this, and maybe you'll be a local hero too."

HE PUT his pony into motion. He took the loop from right to left and back again, the loop spinning upright, circling horse and rider. At a walk, a trot, and a full gallop, and clear around the ring. He

ended spinning a figure eight and making it stand in the air like it was drawn.

The boys went wild. Tex just stared. His face was gray, and his jaws angled. He said gruffly, "That's special rodeo stuff! That's no ordinary cowboy roping!"

Rogue grinned with his tongue in his cheek. He asked with quiet mockery, "Anybody ask any questions about who was who?"

"Well, who are you?" Tex demanded.

The crowd guffawed. Judge Ritter chuckled, "Stranger, he's just champion roper of the whole northwest! You figure you can tie him?"

"Hell, no!" Tex said. "I ain't no trick performer for rodeos. I'm a cowboy."

He was taking his beating badly, and it didn't sit well with crowd. He might have gotten a cheer and respect for what he had done, but the crowd went dead silent, and the judge's eyes hardened. Tex jerked his pony's bridle and rode off angrily, not even contesting.

Somebody jeered, "Nothing ever licks a Texan!"

But Rogue grunted, "That's all right. He handles that rope. Too bad he's swell headed."

It showed a decent, fair streak in Rogue, but Tex thought, Swell headed, huh? I'll show them before I'm through! By gawdamighty, if he was a regular cowboy, I'd have beat the pants off him!

He had a few drinks, and some of the easier-going men forgot his burst of temper and complimented him on what he'd done. The four other losers drifted in, grinning and bought him drinks, so he simmered down and after a spell felt pretty good again. It had been a tricked-up challenge, and the town took it as a joke and, outside of that, admitted that he had shown some good roping. And it had given him a chance to show his blazed chestnut, and the pony won real compliments.

By evening, his vanity was smoothed, and he'd heard about the social at the picnic

grove. He drifted there to watch the young bucks getting some free thrills lifting the girls aloft to light the Japanese lanterns. He leaned against a tree smoking a cigar, knowing he was watched and talked about, but not stooping to notice it.

He noticed something different, though, from the barbecues back home. It was a country of married men and families. They weren't hungry for women the way they were in Texas. Most of them were ranch owners or business men or share workers, even if they were small. They had the content and self-assurance of owners. It made for a quieter, easier-going community.

Of course, for himself, he'd take the wild and wooly. But he could see they had an easier life here. The grass was green, the mountains cool. They might be poor, but they weren't sweating their lives away at twenty dollars a month for some big owner. Even some of Sampson's and Coulter's waddies were married, so he'd heard. But not Desmond's. Within hours, he'd been able to pick out the Desmond riders around town—hatchet faced, arrogant, contemptuous of others: the kind of riders that he knew.

He flipped a light for his dead stogey with his thumbnail and then, across the flame, saw the girl. She'd been home and changed, and she was over her frayed mood. She was sitting at a table surrounded by seven men.

She cut a picture there with the last long crimson rays of sundown light upon her. She wore a big hat that framed her face. She had long, tapering hands unmarred by heavy work, and she rested her elbows on the table and laced her fingers, forming a rest for her chin while she laughed. Her back was straight and her head high, even when she was tilted forward.

But she was a blue-blooded little flirt, he thought, and he didn't blame her one damn bit, but she was hungry for adventure. She must be with that wide, laughing mouth, with that big, humorless, heavy-handed

Larne Desmond watching over her like a bulldog.

Rogue was at her table, laughing, at ease, sure of himself with his damned roping championship and likely boasting of what a sucker he'd made of the Texan. His easy self-assurance roiled Tex. But mostly his mind was on the girl, and he stood there soaking her in with the match burning in his fingers.

She felt his attention and lifted her face to him. She did not stop laughing, but her expression froze. She looked straight at him, caught with her defences down, and he knew her breath held suspended. He had frozen her as a stallion sometimes freezes a filly.

He smiled with a touch of arrogant conceit. At that moment, the match burned between his fingers and stuck there smoldering. He cursed and snapped it free, sucking at the burn.

When he glanced back at the girl, she had regained her self-possession. Mockery was in her eyes, and she was laughing, outright, straight at him. She must have thought the incident hilarious. She turned and spoke to the men, and all looked his way and grinned, except Larne Desmond.

Warmth spread into his face, and his jaws tightened. He didn't see anything funny about it. It was inevitable that she'd make a joke out of him with other men. Okay, sister, he thought, we'll see how long you laugh when you get kissed!

He got inviting looks from other girls, but he wouldn't stoop to notice them. He stood to himself, proud and aloof, with arrogance lining the sharp mould of his jaws. He watched the girl steadily, with fires smoldering in his eyes. He never let her forget he was looking at her.

Her cool self-possession took it for a time, but then little by little he could see the pull of his force upon her. Puzzlement and curiosity began to break through her cool detachment. He caught her darting him glances at turns of the dance.

AT THE end of the square, she left her partner and joined a group of women-folk near by him. That was clear enough sign, and he moved around the chattering group. When the next dance started, he touched her elbow.

He said, "Miss Cheri, can I take that laugh you had' as formal introduction?"

She turned with a look of surprise, but she'd known who it was when he first touched her. She studied him a moment, her head a little tilted. She was a cool one, and her face showed little, but he could read the excitement of her breathing. Then she gave a half apologetic laugh, a low, deep chuckle, as if at her own feelings, smiled, and took his arm abruptly, said, "Okay, Tex, we've met formal. I'll blame Rogue for telling me you're quite some roper."

He looked for hidden humor but found none. He wondered how in hell Rogue had come to give him the compliment. It just showed that a man with the guts to back his boasts got respect, even from champions. He swept the girl into the dance feeling damned jaunty, damned important.

She had a vital body. She had things in her that were wilder and more violent than just warmth. She's been stall fed and pastured, he thought, but she's just itching to bust out and run the desert. And man, will I run her fast!

They circled by her table, and he felt the hard grasp of Larne Desmond's hand. The man was powerful, but the grip held things beyond that. There was a self-assertive authority to him. He was a big owner, and he didn't let you forget it. He meant to lord this range, and he was already acting and thinking the part.

Tex gave him a flat stare, and Larne said, "I've had words with you before today about Miss Cheri!"

Tex's mouth compressed, but the girl beat him to the draw. Cold as ice, she said, "Larne, behave yourself or I will take it as personal offense!"

"You don't know this drifter," he said

scathingly. "How does he happen to be dancing with you?"

"Possibly," she suggested, "because he asked and I said, yes! When I need protection, I've got brothers I can call on."

They spoke low. Nobody else noticed they were arguing. But the tone she used was like a whip. "I want something understood clearly, Larne," she added. "I'm not engaged to you, yet! When and if I am, I'll regard your rights. Until then, you regard mine, or I'll make them clear myself to the whole range!"

The rancher's face turned gray, and the vein pounded in his temple. His mouth drew together like a misshapen button. Vindictive promise was in his close-set eyes, but he managed to control himself. He said to Tex, "I take this from her, but I don't take smartness from any man!" he warned.

"Neither do I!" Tex drawled. "But right now I'm dancing."

He swept the girl off, leaving the argument a stalemate. He chuckled and squeezed the girl. He said, "You've got a tongue when you want to use it, Cheri! That going to make trouble for you?"

She tossed her head and sniffed. "You think I mean anything to him as a woman? If I were eighty, but owned more graze, he'd want me!"

The thought dispelled her momentary somberness. She laughed, and the matter was forgotten, except for the common experience and the intimacy it had given.

He timed the tune and, at the end of it, had her at the far side of the dance square. She was flushed and breathless, and she flicked him with a glance of fresh appraisal rising out of her surprise at his light-footed dancing. She sank back against a table in shadow, fanning herself with her kerchief. He asked for supper favor, and she said she was promised, but she'd have a glass of punch with him.

He took her elbow and guided her through tables back into the shadows of the trees.

Midway to the punch table, he stopped her. She stood swirling slowly, still fanning herself, looking off into moon-streaked shadows, but he could sense the musing smile upon her mouth.

He slipped his arm around her waist and turned her. For a moment, she hung back with indecision, then turned of herself full into his arms, and her body came against him like a burst of desert wind.

"I knew Texas was big, but I didn't know it was fast too!" she murmured. Her body was supple and eager, and there was excitement in the lift of her lips.

He took her readiness to kiss with arrogance, as a sign of victory. It did not occur to him that she had a mind of her own in this. He figured he had stormed her and taken her, and she was his to do what he wanted with. His kiss was hard, raw, brute-hungry. He crushed her with the brute power of his hands.

The warmth and softness went out of her mouth. She drew back her head and stared at him with surprise and outrage, and then her slap barked like a pistol shot upon his face.

HE FLUNG her off and stood back, his hand at his cheek. "What the hell was that for?" he demanded. "You wanted to be kissed!"

She looked at him with blazing contempt. She said, "Pa always said, 'Don't mix with the broomtails,' but I thought you rode a quarterbred."

She pivoted from him wiping her lips hard with the back of her hand.

He said, "You'll eat those words, Cheri, and one of these days you'll come asking for that kiss!"

"No," she murmured, "not that one!" She composed herself and moved off into the square of colored light.

What the hell did she expect, he asked himself. But he knew he'd been wrong, and now he was damned sorry he'd messed things up. Her words had stung. Man

who rode a quarterbred should act like one.

He stood breathing hard, then swung off through the trees and headed for the saloon. Some of the rougher range riders were hanging around, but they gave him room. He'd had five or six drinks when a good-looking young buck he'd seen at Cheri's table came in and over his drink regarded Tex with rough mockery.

He said, "You've had a tough day, Texan. First you lose a boast, then burn your fingers, and then Cheri has to crop your horns."

Tex wheeled, flaming. He felt rough and raw and was looking for the chance to blow off steam. "What the hell you mean mentioning a lady's name in a saloon?" he barked.

The man stepped out a little from the bar. His eyes went hard. He said, "Seems like you Texans get licked enough, but just don't learn it! That chivalry coming from a drifting tinhorn cowprod is one for the book."

"Why, gol damn you, you'll eat those words with sawdust!" Tex told him and flung a glass of whisky in his face.

The man never blinked nor wiped his face. He struck Tex before Tex had put the glass down. He punched him fast and hard and punched him again. Tex gave a bellow and blew and rushed him, hot with anger. The man backed off under the rush, sparring, but when he struck, his fist held the impact of a mule kick.

Tex kept rushing, murderous with fury. But he couldn't corner the man, and he couldn't get him to stand, and, in twenty minutes, Tex found himself blinded with blood and cut up wickedly. The man knocked him down, and Tex sprawled on the floor and cleared the blood from his eyes and looked up and cursed him.

"You ain't licked yet?" the man demanded.

"Hell, I ain't even started to fight!" Tex hollered.

Rough humor touched the corners of the

man's mouth, and he shook his head. The owner came out from behind the bar with an ice bat. The owner said, "Ty, you were right about Texans. Now boys, I figure you've busted my place up enough."

The man over Tex nodded and said, "I'll just wash up in your kitchen, Coons."

Tex clawed and staggered to his feet. "See there?" he rasped. "He don't want to fight me no more!"

Coons looked at him studiously and asked, "You know who that man is?"

"He's a yellow bellied, crawling, coyote!" Tex declared. "Outside of that, who is he?"

"His name is Ty Coulter," Coon remarked. "He is the best middle-weight fighter in these hills. He has a brother Rogue who licked you another way this afternoon. And he has a sister whom he mentioned."

Tex clung to the bar and gave a groan. The anger dumped out of him, and he felt plumb awful. He wheezed for a double drink, and it went down his throat like raw fire.

Ty Coulter came from the kitchen looking fresh, except for a small cut over his lip and a black spot swelling on his forehead. He stood down bar drinking and occasionally looked at Tex and grinned.

Tex thought what he ought to do was dust out fast before he made a worse damn fool of himself. But the vital feel of the girl's body was still in him, and the way she'd made the chance for him to know her, and that note of regret that even broke her anger. Damn it, that was a lot to miss! And just then, somebody came in laughing and called, "Ty, you better go cool down Larne! He's fit to be tied and claims he's going to ride that stranger out of town on a rail, if he don't crawl out first!"

Tex's head came up like he'd been stung. "By gawdamighty, if he means me—!" he hollered.

Ty Coulter and Coons glanced at each other and laughed. Ty came down bar and

said, "I reckon it's you I'd best cool down. You can stop bellowing like a longhorn long enough, I'll stand drinks."

Tex stared at him open mouthed. "You'd drink with a man you done fought over your sister?"

Coulter's mouth hardened a little. "My sister doesn't need us to fight for her. I think you learned that? I fought you because you needed a fight." He felt the bump on his head and added grudgingly, "And next time I'll watch out for that left mule-kick of yours."

Tex moved in his boots and hitched at his belts. He said, "Mr. Coulter, you're a right-square hombre and I'm right sorry your sister had to dress me down a mite. Anyway I could make things right with her, I'd do it."

"Well, you might start by letting that Texas storm blow out of you," Coulter suggested. "Man can ride the way you did today's got no need for crowing."

"Shucks, that wasn't nothing," Tex grunted. "You ought to see me—" He felt Coulter looking at him, broke off, and swallowed. "Like you was saying, that pony of mine is pretty darned well trained, Mr. Coulter."

Coulter guffawed and slapped him on the back and poured their drinks. He said, "You're all right, Tex. You just need to be spread-eagled in a sandstorm to take some of them rough edges off!" He waved his glass and drank. "You break and train that pony?"

Tex told him with respect, "She was bad broke to start and a no-good killer. That's how come I was able to buy her. I gentled her and broke her over and trained her like you saw, and she's so gentle now a baby could ride her."

Coulter smiled at some inward thought. He said, "We've got some bad ones on our place need proper gentling. And an unbroke palomino you might like to break. That is, you might if you ain't above working?"

TEX darkened and fought with his pride. If he said yes, he became nothing but another common cow hand. If he said no, he'd likely never get the chance to make things right with Miss Cheri.

"I'll tell you," he said finally, "I'll do it on contract. I need me a little string of ponies of my own. I'll take my pay in mustangs, but do the work off your place."

"Where you going to take 'em?" Coulter asked.

"I'll locate," Tex grunted, making plans faster than he could quite keep up with them. He looked in the mirror and saw some of Larne Desmond's Diamond L riders watching him with considerations. His mouth slatted in a puffed and broken-lipped grin. "Fact is, I'll locate near to Mr. Desmond's graze as I can!"

Coulter's cool eyes splintered humor, and he said, "I think you got yourself a contract, Tex. Stop by tomorrow at the ranch."

The extra bucks and some of the married men began to gather from the social. Coulter stood another drink and left. Tex went to the back yard pump and washed down from his fight. When he returned, Desmond's riders had moved up to the bar. One of them had fetched in a couple of piggin strings and was ratching a small loop in front of him. The top Diamond L rider looked at Tex and allowed, "Now here's the man can show you!"

Tex felt the rough play in them, but breasted it. "Show you what?" he asked.

"Why, there was a little trick of walking in and out of the loop you did today," the waddy with the piggin string said. "I can't quite get it."

The top rider picked up the extra string and handed it to Tex. "Why, Tex here will show you in no time!" he boomed, and he watched Tex with laughing challenge.

Tex took the string and tested it. The waddy kept his loop going close to the floor. A mixed crowd of cowboys and small ranchers gathered in a circle. Tex set his

loop spinning and stepped in and out of it.

"That's it," the waddy grunted. "Just do that a few more times so I can see."

The waddy kept his own loop going and made mock attempts to imitate Tex. It was no trick at all, and Tex knew he could do it, and the Diamond L boys all had a grin creasing their hard mouths. He watched the waddy's hand while stepping in and out of his own loop automatically.

"Why, now I see it!" the waddy boomed suddenly and made a fresh mock effort to shuffle, but his hand twitched his loop so that it snaked under Tex's lifted boot.

Tex grunted innocently, "But this trick's better," and jumped from his other foot.

The waddy had timed himself to loop Tex's heel and now he twitched his loop upward to where Tex heel should have been and yanked back. He went off balance with the lack of pull and stuck out a leg to catch himself. Tex's loop snagged his boot, and Tex landed and tripped back a step. The waddy spilled with a hard crash.

"Why now, how in hell did you get into my loop?" Tex asked him.

The waddy scrambled up cursing. His top rider wasn't smiling now. He glared at Tex and barked out, "You did that a-purpose?"

The growly little rancher of the afternoon demanded, "What do you mean, he did it special? Your man put his boot right into that stranger's loop."

The top rider swung and glared. "Who asked for your two cents, Hawkins?" he demanded.

HAWKINS was a short man with a cannonball middle and fists like iron sledges. He stared at the top rider. He said bluntly, "Johnson, don't start needling owners on this range!"

There was a growl of assent from all.

Johnson glared, but the remark made its impact. He said, "Don't try lording it, then, Hawkins. You ain't much bigger than a nester, you can remember."

"I'm glad you said bigger . . . not better!" Hawkins declared.

Col. Sampson and Judge Ritter came through the door. Judge Ritter boomed judicially, "What seems to be the argument, boys?"

"This overgrown cowprod," Hawkins growled, standing his full five feet and two and looking straight up Johnson like a man looking up a tall pine, "has got ideas that because he'd a Desmond rider, he can speak up like Desmond!"

"He's sticking his nose into private business, judge!" Johnson said.

"Nothing private about it," Hawkins stated. "He accused this stranger of looping and throwing his man on purpose. We were all watching. That rider there with the piggin string went out of balance trying a trick and stuck his boot square into that Texan's loop."

Col. Sampson looked severe and said with authority, "Looks like that would end the matter then, Johnson. You Desmond L boys wanted to show your rope savvy, you should have entered the contest this afternoon."

Johnson scowled but didn't dare speak up to a man he knew his own boss wanted to side him. He shot Tex a vindictive look. "Sometime mebbe we'll try this where there's some open space," he grunted. "Wide open . . . without a lot of outsiders cluttering it up," he said. He looked at his men and jerked his head, and they clumped out, a big, lean, raw-boned, rough-faced lot.

Tex glanced at Hawkins, and Hawkins winked.

Col. Sampson said to Tex, "Hear you aim to settle a spell and do some horse breaking?"

Tex said, "Man has to make a living."

Judge Ritter nodded approvingly. He said, "Tell the court clerk to show you what land's open for filing." In public, his interests were always with the small ranchers. They had the votes.

The bar settled down to chuckles and

talk. Hawkins stood in to buy Tex a drink. Some other ranchers joined him to learn about this horse breaking. Only decent wranglers around there were with the big ranchers. They were all interested in getting proper broken mustangs. They weren't forgetting that he had shown some wild freshness that day, but they liked his spirit. They were willing to accept him long enough to test him.

He went to the hotel feeling perky but puzzled. How in hell did I talk myself into all this? he wondered. He sat on the side of the squeaky iron bed and yanked off his boots. The respectable womenfolk had gone home, leaving the town free for the bachelor buckaroos and a few stray husbands, and Saturday night's wild sound floated in like the yap of coyotes off in the hills.

He listened to the sounds, and he thought that was his life—the deep-chested boasts and rough rawhiding and cruel hazing and quick violence of the trail and trail saloons. He wasn't setting himself up exactly as an owner, but a contract man took on responsibilities. He fenced himself and his behavior within the tight code of caste. He was no longer a free lance who could run loose and boast and brawl and howl. His actions were saddled.

"Yessir," he told himself, "this morning I was free as a north wind, and now I've done talked myself into a halter for no reason!"

He thought of the girl, but his pride wouldn't accept that. It was too probable that after tonight, she wouldn't give him much chance to make amends. More than that, her brothers, in a way, had shown friendship. At least they hadn't come and knocked hell out of him, which they could have. That changed things. It changed the way he'd have to figure on the girl. You didn't go too far with a friend's sister without serious intentions. He didn't have serious intentions, and he didn't think she was free to accept them even if he did, and even if her brothers would accept him. He

figured that, in a showdown, Larne Desmond held the whip on this range. He was still conniving, still laying out his fence lines, but in a pinch, he was the ruthless one, and he'd have ways of putting on pressure. And it was clear he wanted Cheri Coulter. She had more class than anything else on the range that he'd seen, and it would give him an unbreakable alliance with the Coulters, and maybe she had some grass of her own.

No, he couldn't root here for the girl, and anyway, he didn't want to root. What he ought to do was just drift along at dawn. At least they couldn't say that he was yellow. But that's just what an hombre like Larne Desmond would say. He'd claim the Texan had been scared off by a little hazing, or when he got to thinking of what would come of his affront to Desmond. That big, over-grown pig would end up allowing that it was what he'd said himself to Tex that had sent him crawling before the town was up. He'd use the incident to intimidate other smaller men, and he'd probably use it for excuse to turn his pack loose on Hawkins.

No sir, he had to stay just to show Desmond up.

That suited him. That was Texas talk. And maybe the girl wasn't so sore at that. If she had been, she'd have put things different to her brothers. They sure wouldn't have offered him business and bought him drinks.

CHAPTER TWO

Spitfire

HE RODE out to the ranch next morning. It was a big place, kept neat as a pin. But there were signs here and there that the ranching end of it was slipping. It was clear that the Coulters were better at some things than at the actual business of ranching.

That's where Desmond's got them

pinched, he thought. And maybe he owns some loans and mortgages he's letting slide until he can squeeze them.

He rode up to the main house, and Coulton hailed him from the barn. Three tall horses were in, all of them blooded. Hunters, Coulton told him. They were beauties, but Tex didn't see why you needed a special horse for hunting. But they sure weren't any good for cow work. There was a wild palomino out in the back pasture. They rode out to see it, as near as they could get. That was a long-legged horse too, but strong as a bull and smart as a whip. That pony won Tex's heart at first sight.

"I'd begin on that one today," Tex allowed.

"No, he can wait," Coulter said. "We need rough stock for fall work first."

He made it on the level, but it was excuse. They weren't accepting Tex whole hog. They were going to watch him prove up first. It roiled him, but then there was the angle of how come they were accepting him at all. He'd insulted the man who might be their brother-in-law, affronted their sister, thrown bad temper at Rogue, and thrown whisky and fists at Ty. Come to think of it, maybe he hadn't started off so well. He guessed he'd have to prove that a Texan was entitled to his arrogance.

They rode on out to range through stock that was downgrading. Give-Em-Hell Charley, the old foreman, was growing blind and deaf, Coulter said, but didn't know it. He'd built this ranch with their father. They'd have to keep him foreman as long as he could sit his saddle. They wound up through tangled brush country, and from atop a ridge, Coulter pointed.

"There some of 'em," he said. "We need about sixty ponies, and you've got about three hundred to pick from."

Tex knew this stuff. He didn't need to talk big or boast. He pointed out where they could build a trap corral and how they'd drive the mustangs in. He'd rough

break them out here and then take them over to his place when he located.

Business done, they rode back through the softening jonquil light of evening. Coulter invited him onto the stoop for refreshments. A table was already set for them—strawberry shortcake, pie, sandwiches, redhot java and cold lemonade. Fancy dishes and real silver and little napkins Tex wasn't quite sure what to do with. A cigar box out, and tobacco for the makings.

But no sign of the girl.

Tex sat on the edge of his chair, trying to talk, after he'd stocked up. He wanted to see the girl, but he was breaking out in sweats with fear she'd show, and fear she wouldn't show. Rogue came in and jammed down sandwiches, and they had a fresh smoke and long drinks. He thought both men's eyes were twinkling with humor, but he couldn't be quite sure. They didn't mention their sister.

He got up finally and made a few final arrangements and rode through the long, oblique rays of sundown. The farther he got from the house, the sorer he got that she hadn't shown. Damn it, if her brothers could overlook a little mistake, she ought to be able to. Mater of fact, it had probably been good for her!

He got back to town and went into the saloon, but dawdled over his drink. A good-looking girl came over and leaned on his shoulder. She smelled nice, but it wasn't the nice smell of Cheri. He bought her a drink and chased her off. He went down to the hotel and had supper.

He found Hawkins on the stoop afterward and had a cigar with him. He was a pugnacious little man who approved thoroughly of everything Tex had done except that he hadn't done it more so. Desmond needed a pin stuck in him, his riders needed crowding. Rogue needed his ears pinned back, Ty needed a good walloping for once, and Cheri—by golly, even Cheri could stand a good spanking. In fact, it seemed

there wasn't anybody on that range who didn't need some sort of roughshod treatment but him, Hawkins, and, if somebody would put a little dynamite under him, maybe he'd stop jabbering and get to doing some of these things.

That off his mind, the cannon-ball rancher gave Tex the lowdown on available homesteads. Judge Ritter joined them for a cigar, and Hawkins browbeat the judge into admitting open filings that the judge had conveniently forgotten. There was one right smack on Desmond's line, but it was short of good graze and water and surrounded by private grass or barrens. But there was a piece back of that, a whole section, that could be bought for taxes.

THE judge grew perturbed and drummed the arm of his chair. "Now Hawkins," he allowed, "this man's had a falling out with Larne already, and that place is plumb in the middle of open range that Desmond's using. Fact is, Desmond's using that graze too."

"He ain't bought it up," Hawkins challenged.

"Well, now," the judge rumbled, "I think he would but there's been no reason."

Hawkins got to his feet and stood in front of the judge, bent from the knees and poking his nose right into the judge's face. "And he ain't going to know there's a reason," he growled. "And if he does before this man gets a chance to see it and file, there's going to be something heard about it at elections, Judge!"

The judge watted and made turkey noises and then assured Hawkins that his position was impartial and this was just friendly advise.

Tex rode out to the place with Hawkins in the morning, and only because of it was he able to cross Desmond graze unseen. It was eaten off some, but perfect range for horses. There was an old shack there and oddly a big stout corral and a sizable pasture

still tight-fenced except for random holes. The water was good.

"And it's good all summer!" Hawkins cackled and rubbed his horny hands. "So good it's going to make Larne mighty green every time he looks over at a new owner."

Tex grinned, "That's for me!" and they rode back to town.

They had trouble finding the clerk. Somebody had an idea he'd taken the afternoon off. The judge had taken the day off too.

"Now ain't that a coincidence?" Hawkins asked.

But the back door was open, and Hawkins knew where the proper blank papers were, and he knew just how to make them out and every detail to fill in. The taxes and costs were two hundred and fourteen dollars, and, as the property had been offered at auction and nobody bid it in, there was no legal necessity of another public sale.

Hawkins got a pen and bottle of ink from the General Notions, and they climbed back aboard their ponies and went searching. They found the clerk and the judge under a bridge hooking at lazy, disinterested catfish.

The judge blew and snorted and gave excuses in legal Latin, but no excuse would stand up under the withering voting figure that Hawkins rattled off. The judge duly signed, and the clerk rode back with them to affix the seal and give a receipt.

Tex could have corralled the sheriff to establish him, but he chose to take possession alone. The way he went was quite circuitous. He rode around and straight in Desmond's lane.

Desmond came out of his house and recognized him and turned purple. His close set eyes grew ugly as a mad pig's. "What in hell are you doing on my property?" he demanded.

Tex said amiably, "Well, could be, I come looking for a job."

He let Desmond work up a little blood

pressure, then added softly, "Or it could be I come to warn you off my property."

"How's that?" Desmond wheezed, so outraged he could barely squeak.

Tex nodded. "You got cows all over my private property, and you've got hired hands herding them there. I want them off by sundown."

He showed Desmond his title.

The rancher looked ready to explode. Then he remembered his lordly position. He snapped arrogantly, "I couldn't get them rounded up if I wanted, and I don't want! I'll get them off when I'm ready."

Tex shrugged negligently. "Bring some wagons," he suggested.

Desmond looked at him hard. "What for?"

"I'm going to begin shooting cows at sunup," Tex drawled.

"You touch a cow of mine and I'll have the law on you so damn fast you won't know what hit you!" the rancher barked.

Tex grinned. He said, "I done found out about the law. It ain't neighborly, but it's legal. Down in Texas, we shoot the riders, but the way the law reads up here, you can only shoot the cows."

Desmond's whole body throbbed, but he faced a situation that needed time to settle. He said finally with deadly malevolence, "You aren't going to be happy on that place, Texan!"

Tex grinned broadly. "Neighbor, I'm going to be happier than I'd be in heaven!" he told him.

He rode back to town, and he rode back out at sunup and there wasn't a cow on his place, or if there were, they were damned few. He swept out the house and burned the trash out front. It made a heavy black column of smoke. He messed around the yard in open view, and then took a leisurely departure down his overgrown lane.

Immediately beyond the bend of the trail he spurred his pony and put it into a long run, circling back and up onto a hill. He

took his carbine and snaked over the crest and screened himself in brush below the rim. Before long, he saw riders converging on the long slope of Desmond's graze. They came toward his shack at a menacing trot. They halted, and the top rider sang out, and, getting no answer, they rode in.

They hit dirt and examined his shack and caved in sheds, and then busied themselves at the smouldering bonfire making torches. Tex put his carbine to his shoulder and plugged a glittering can of kerosene they were using for their torches. It spilled out into the fire, and a blaze of flame threw the riders back. Tex grinned and systematically pumped shots in the neighborhood. He could hear cursing, and see them searching for him. He pinked some hombre in the leg and heard him yell, and then the riders were bolting for their ponies and hightailing fast.

He patted his gun and rode back to town. He bought a second-hand wagon and tools and supplies, and an old tarpaulin. He bought the hardware clean out of ammunition. He thought that word would get around fast. It did.

BUT by morning he began to feel the heel of Desmond's power. He couldn't buy fencing, he couldn't buy lumber, the bank wouldn't give him a mortgage, and he couldn't find men to hire out to him. He needed help worse than anything, and he spent three days trying to find some with no success. He was feeling pretty grim at sundown when he racked at the saloon to slake his thirst.

He found the place crowded for mid-week with small ranchers, curiosity beating out of him like the sound of a bell. Hawkins was there, scowling at the door without an pretense.

He asked straight out, "You find hired hands?"

Tex's lips compressed, and he shook his head.

Hawkins thumped the bar. "I don't

know how many others you'll get, but I'll volunteer giving you a hand to get your fences and corrals set, and I reckon I can raise a few more."

There was dead silence and a grim friendliness in the air while Tex made figures with the wetness of his glass. He looked up then and said, "Hawkins, that is a right generous offer, but mebbe you figure me for one of you. The fact is my big business will come from the big ranches."

The suck of their breaths was like the suck of a strong wind. Then there was dead silence again, but this time, not friendly. Hawkins scowled at the bar, and then nodded. "Well, that is square, at least, and come to think of it, I don't blame you for not pitching in with us! If we had the guts of horned toads, we wouldn't always be in a mess with the big ranches!"

Low, muttering talk broke out, but nobody stood to drink with him except Hawkins. Some were hostile, some disgusted, some simply left him alone to be damned.

But Hawkins drank with him in heavy silence until he finally slammed the bar again and allowed, "I will tell you what. I will make a trade with you to get your corrals in at least. I'll lend a hand in return for you breaking two mustangs to harness for me."

"A deal," Tex agreed and put out his hand.

Tex marked out the trap corral and trap wings on Coulter's land, and he had no more immediate physical trouble out of Desmond. With Hawkins help, he enlarged his corrals and cleared the pond, and Hawkins raised him enough wire somewhere to double the size of his pasture. Then the trap was built at Coulter's, and he held the first mustang drive with Coulter's men.

He took his tarpaulin and bedroll over and camped out on Coulter's range. He was up at first dawn working out the ponies. He wouldn't quit until sundown, and he was one tired and pommeled buckaroo. He

was four miles from the house, but the stable boy brought out his dinner every noon. It wasn't chuck-line cooking, and he knew it, but there was never a sign of the girl, or any slightest thing he might take as personal.

Except for the dinners, she might have been non-existent, even when he went to the main house. That is, until the day when he found a fairly well-worn trail made by shod hoofs, and a boulder nest that looked down on the breaking corral.

He cut careful sign and made sure it was her horse that had left the prints, and he didn't have to be an Indian to see that she'd even brought out lunch and sat there eating it while she watched him.

He chuckled at first and then he began to roil. Come to think of it, she had one hell of a nerve, coming out there to watch him get beaten up and half crippled, without even the common decency to show her face or call out!

The more he thought about it, the madder he got. So he got aboard his pony and rode down to the big house. It was not yet mid-morning, and he rode straight around to the kitchen, and she looked out smiling as she set a pie upon the window.

Then she saw who it was, and her face froze, and her eyes flashed something close to lightning. She said sharply, "I think it's decent enough that my brothers gave you some work! Don't take it for privilege to come around the house."

He glowered at her from his saddle. He growled, "You're a fresh little miss, Cheri, who needs her panties fanned! You've got nerve enough to come out to see me break my neck, but you ain't even got the honest guts to do it straight out!"

She flamed and turned her head, but she didn't move from the window. "What I ought to do is haul you out by the hair and make you break a mustang yourself!" he told her. "Of all the lowdown, sneaking, conniving, females I've ever known, you're the tops!"

He heard her snifle. He knew it was phoney, but he couldn't help it. He softened.

He said finally, "Aw, stop the bawling! All I come to say was, if you want to see me sweat and break my neck, you come out where I can see you the same. You're going to make my dinner every day, you bring it out yourself on occasion. Or else, don't come and don't make my vittles."

He made his speech and turned away. He heard her muffled call, but he didn't stop.

SHE didn't appear next day, and neither did his dinner. He fretted about it all afternoon. By the end of the week he was simmering. Then she came, dressed in a bottle-green riding costume, pretty as a queen and bringing a roast chicken. She waved from the pass and rode up as if she'd come here every day.

He leaned on a corral bar and scowled at her. He said, "For all you give a damn, I could starve to death out here!"

She made a face and looked tearful. "You said some very cruel things," she sniffed.

"I meant 'em!" he told her. "You ought to hear some of the things I been thinking since!" He took an apple out of the basket and cut it up for the ponies.

"If you'd ever treated me as gentle, we wouldn't have fallen out to begin with," she complained.

"If I ever had the chance again, I'd do just what I did, but do it better!" he told her savagely. He broke the chicken in his hands and gnawed a leg and shook it at her. "You want to be friends now, okay, but no more flirting! I got more important business than worrying about some spoiled, rich biddy."

She looked at him abjectly from under her long lashes. "Did you really think I was flirting that night, Tex?" she murmured.

"You know damned well you were!" he growled. "Likely just to steam Desmond up!"

The talk went on like that almost every day for two weeks. When he'd start to simmer down, she'd flare up. She'd remind him he was a big blow and a Texas ruffian, and he'd come pretty close to some insulting names. It was running war, but it was hell when they had to part. He'd lean on the corral and look at where her dust was settling in the pass. And she'd circle around to the boulder nest and watch him half until evening.

Then he moved his first half-broke cavvy over to his own place. There wasn't need, and it was a harder place to work, but it gave him his self respect and status. He was an independent trainer. He wasn't anybody's man.

He worked the ponies two weeks more, and not once did she come near him. It wasn't a long ride, cross country, from her place, and he knew the reason. She'd have to cross Desmond grass. She might be seen by Desmond, or one of his flint-faced riders.

It roiled him and made him boil. He hated Desmond, and, at the same time, it reminded him that women were still a thing a man bought in one way or another. That was fresh fuel for a new war when he delivered the first cavvy of broken ponies and went back to work on Coulter grass.

The brothers were satisfied with the ponies, and he could feel the easing of their suspended judgement and the rise of their respect. He knew they'd liked him, but thought he might turn out all harum scarum. But now, by thunder, he wasn't giving them just rough-string stock. He was giving them cow ponies.

His work went faster this time. He'd gotten the routine down, and he wasn't slowed by so many sprains and falls. The girl brought his dinner each day, and they'd sit eating in grim silence, or else exploding into mutual insult. It was quite a courtship, the Coulter brothers noted from a ridge, using their binoculars.

Summer's heat built up, and the water

began to vanish and get low. The simmering sun singed the range, the patches of hard-baked earth began to spread. The graze pinched, and the trouble started. Everybody needed grass and water. The big outfits spread their fence lines and grabbed it.

Tex was back on his spread and not meeting any water problem. He wasn't bothered by graze because he'd had to bring in hay to keep the cavvy in the one fenced pasture. He hadn't been to town since he started breaking, and he was working so hard he failed to notice the ordinary signs that tell the story of what is happening on a range. Beyond that he was sore. Sore with strain and battering and overwork. Sore at the girl. Sore at himself for selling himself into a rooted job he didn't need for no reason that he could see except to break his back for another's benefit.

But the trouble had started. The big ranchers stood to lose their shirts if real drought set in. They'd all grown crusty, truculent, aggressive, harsh, ironing all softness out of themselves that might be their undoing in the end. There was still water aplenty in places on the open range that the smaller ranchers also used, and it did the big ranchers no good to hog it at this time. They couldn't save the extra water. When the holes sank, they simply sank. But even Coulter was crowding, riding his herds into water, driving off other brands, running them intentionally across baking dry country, thirsted so that they'd remember and not drift back again for more.

The Coulters were fair. They didn't like doing it. But possession was nine points of the law. If they didn't establish their sole right to that water now, the time would come when it was needed desperately, and men's tempers were running hot and cruel, and they'd have one hell of a time clearing the small ranch herds off their preemption of public domain.

THAT was the situation when Tex delivered his second cavy back to Coulter. The Coulter brothers paid more attention to him this time than to the horseflesh. He was hard as a rock, but showing the signs of wear and tear. The average tough rider gaunts out in a three week roundup. Tex had been working longer hours, single handed, at harder work, all summer. He showed it. There wasn't a smile left in him. There wasn't a high-handed boast. There was nothing but fight and anger and determination. It was the determination that they studied. Would it outweigh the driving need of his body to get away from the grueling work? Would it leash his temper and brash impatience and fiddle-footed past? Lastly, where did he stand in the growing troubles? He was an open friend of Hawkins. Hawkins was the firebrand of the small ranchers. In the long run, the small ranchers would make the real business for Tex. When the real pinch came, where would Tex throw his hat?

Tex gave them small answer. He was worn, and they were worried, and there was scarce civility in conversation. Their sister took him out his dinners as she had, and they watched from a ridge, nothing but nothing seemed to have eased between the two. Sometimes she walked around with her back to Tex while he ate, her head high with pride and her motions stiff with fury. She kept going only because she was in the same mood about Tex that he was about his job. It was something that she had set herself to do. She'd stick it out come hell and high water. Call her what he wanted, he'd never be able to say she'd quit.

Then Desmond began to pinch the Coulters. He needed a call loan paid at a bad time for them. He made it easy as he said he could, putting them under obligation. Some of his herds were gradually tangling in with theirs and crowding their graze. Their own riders weren't ramrodded hard

enough to turn the strays back, and Desmond's riders had heavier problems, he said, on far parts of the range. It showed the wisdom, though, of tying the two ranches together. One big outfit could operate systematically. It could shift big herds at shorter periods. It could schedule water holes over the whole range according to how much each supplied and how late the water lasted.

He mentioned the fact that it would be an easy thing to join the ranches. They knew how he stood about Cheri.

They didn't rebuff him. They couldn't. But they stalemated him for the time because they also knew how she felt about Desmond. They liked their sister; she'd been more of a partner than a woman to them. They'd given her her own way when they wanted to beat in Tex's head. They'd given him the chance to prove he wasn't all freshness and blow and empty arrogance. She hadn't told exactly what happened, but they'd guessed it. But she'd said maybe it was her fault, and they'd let it go at that in respect to her.

• She was still a woman, though, and she was the means that might join them up with Desmond, if things grew that bad. They didn't make it that definite, but they stopped her taking out Tex's dinners.

He got no explanation that stood solid with him. He got excuses, and they exploded in his face when Hawkins stopped by to pick up his harness-broken team and let it slip that she'd been in town regularly to the socials in company with Desmond.

CHAPTER THREE

Cheri's Garter

TEX simmered about it. He wanted to have it out. It was crowding his thoughts and his expression when he delivered Coulter their last cavy. She didn't show, and Ty said nothing about her. Tex sucked a long breath through his teeth and

said straight out, "I want to see Cheri."

Coulter's face hardened. He said, "I don't think you better, Tex."

Tex put a flat look at him. "I thought we were friends?"

Ty nodded. "We are. But we're friends of Desmond also, and Desmond was courting Cheri until you almost stampeded things."

Tex looked at the dust between his boots and spit. He said moltenly, "I get it. The ranch comes first and to hell with Cheri's feelings."

Ty said sternly, "No, she does as she wants. But she's still part of the ranch same as we are. Part of it is hers."

Tex looked at him with red-streaked eyes and didn't even nod. He said, "You've got your ponies now, and they're smooth broke and primer trained. I don't reckon a drought time like this you'll want that palomino broken."

Ty said, "No, that can wait." He pulled out a roll and paid Tex up for hay and extras. "It was a good breaking job," he told him. "You got your own mustangs."

Tex grunted, "Yeah. I'm well paid. Best pay I ever made. I learned something."

They looked flatly at each other. They didn't put out their hands. They nodded briefly, and Tex climbed into leather and turned out the lane. He was stuck with a damned rough string of his own now that he didn't want. He didn't mean to stay.

He rode over and looked up Hawkins. He said, "I've got ponies I can finish off for the small ranchers. Who needs them?"

Hawkins looked odd and looked out at the simmering scorched horizon. "Ain't the best time in the world for you to try and sell 'em," he advised.

"Why not?" Tex demanded, then caught the meaning of Hawkins words and barked, "For me to try and sell?"

Hawkins cleared his leathery throat and grumbled. He said, "I know different on this, Tex. Leastwise, I know whatever you did would be in the open. I don't figure

you'd be squeezed into any man's corner. But we've got cattle thirsting and trouble building."

"Get to it straight!" Tex rasped harshly.

"Well," Hawkins said. "Mebbe you been too busy to notice. Larne Desmond's been gathering outside riders. Hard faced, but they ain't got very hard hands. Some of 'em wear two guns."

"What's that got to do with me?" Tex snapped.

Hawkins spread his hands, then exploded. He tore off his hat and banged it down into the dust. He roared, "Ain't nothing except that little men are little minded. They see range trouble coming, and they figure you've thrown in with the big fellows. Even was you to give them ponies for free, they'd still suspect you while they're wrought up and milling this-away."

Tex jaws ground. He looked at his heavy calloused, scarred and knotted fists. "Then I got the whole year's work gone for nothing but a lesson," he grated. He looked up savagely. "I'll take that back. At least I made a good friend out of this!"

Hawkins growled, "Yeah, but I ain't king cheese with my bunch of booted mice! They ain't got the guts to come and fight, but they're scared of any one else who has. They ain't no easier on me. They're scared I'll lead 'em into trouble, and they're scared I won't be with 'em if trouble comes."

"You'd be with 'em all right!" Tex said.

"Well, I guess they know that when they get cool enough to think." Hawkins grunted. "But you—you're still a stranger, and way they see it, you've made a point to stay so. You ain't been into town this summer even for supplies. You done bought through Coulter. You ain't had the trouble was expected with Desmond. There's some think mebbe you come to a working armistice."

Tex kicked at the dust and looked grim. He said, "That leaves me nowhere. I got no side here, and no business. I got no friends but you."

Hawkins looked at him sharply. "You fall out with Coulter?"

"No," Tex admitted grudgingly. "We just finished up our business. I've done what I said I'd do and I'm through. You want to use my place, you're free to. I'm going to take my little cavy and drift."

Hawkins said huskily, "I don't like to hear that, but this ain't your mix. You come and you went is all, and outside of mebbe Desmond, no man can bear you grudge."

"You use the place," Tex repeated.

Hawkins gave a raw laugh. "You know how long I'd last over by Desmond?"

Tex looked at him and forgot his own troubles and for the first time caught the seriousness of the building trouble. "Desmond and Coulter," he thought. "That will squeeze in Sampson. They'll put a nut cracker on the open range. And if they have to dig the holes, they'll find a way to trap whatever water's running in the river. Behind the scenes, they own the judge and sheriff, and Desmond's got a rawhide crew to start with and he's bringing in gunslingers."

Hawkins saw the line of his thinking. He said, "This ain't your mix," and then he said, "Fact is, Tex, your help wouldn't be appreciated. The boys ain't thinking clear. They'd think your friendliness come mighty sudden."

Tex blasted a sound of anger, then clapped Hawkins on the back. "Leastwise, we'll have a few drinks together before I drift! We'll blow the lid off the town this Saturday, pardner!"

THEY rode in together Saturday. Trouble hung over the town like a raw smell. Gleeson, the grizzled rancher, reported two cows dead of thirst out in a dry trap he couldn't figure they'd drift into. Gleeson bordered some open range that Desmond used. The small ranchers muttered, but they weren't all of the same mind. Times like these, vindictiveness and old

bad blood cropped up, and things weren't always what they seemed. Gleeson had a few old enemies who might like to do him harm and lay it off on Desmond. You could feel suspicions and wicked hopes and old hates rise and fall, spread and contract, form and reform. Men fell together into tightening cliques. They weren't only afraid of the big ranchers. They were afraid of each other.

Tex and Hawkins stood drinking together, but few joined them for long, and then only to look Tex over with veiled suspicion and sound him out on this and that. Whatever they asked was somber, grim. Tex got tired of it. He wanted a last good time with Hawkins. And Hawkins needed a chance to forget his troubles.

Tex turned and leaned with his elbows on the bar finally, and said loudly to a prying questioner, "Look, this trouble ain't my mix. I'll sell broke and half-trained horseflesh to any man who wants it, big or little. I aim to drift."

Silence gripped the room. They suspected his feud with Desmond because he'd had no trouble, but, at the same time, he'd acted as a buffer. If he really drifted, Desmond would gobble his graze and water quick. It would give him a few more miles to spread his lines. It would bring him smack over on quite a few who'd been walled off from Diamond L.

On the other hand, he'd had a quick and wicked temper, they recollected, and he wasn't so far from the cut of Desmond's riders. It might be a blind set-up to let Desmond stretch his horns. Maybe Tex meant to circle and come back in and ride for the big ranches. He'd learned a heap about certain parts of that range, hunting down his wild mustangs.

He could feel the suspicion and doubt of him spread out through them. His statement hadn't meant a thing. He hit the bar savagely and barked, "You damned nester ranchers make a man sick! You can ride and shoot. You got enough guns among

you to lord your lands. And you're all scared sick and ready to be pushed around by the first two-bit hardcase who breasts you!"

He turned away from the crowd and let it mutter. Hawkins declared stoutly, "My own sentiments!" The crowd took it from Hawkins, but they didn't take it from Tex. His contempt lashed them. They figured that was big rancher talk. It branded him, and he could feel their resentment roll against his back.

He nudged Hawkins and grunted, "Let's change saloons."

Hawkins frowned at him then grinned. "All right, we'll drink with the enemy. Leastwise we'll be left to ourselves."

He rolled out and tapped up line to the hotel. That was the bigger owner's and townsman's saloon. They were regarded frostily. But Col. Sampson was there, and the colonel came over. He said crisply, "Tex, I hear you want to sell that cavvy."

Tex said, "News travels fast."

Sampson's eyes sparked. He said, "Everything travels fast at times like this. Making your own plans that way, aren't you?"

The barest thread of contempt was in the colonel's tone. Tex flamed. "How about you?" he asked.

The colonel stared at him bleakly. "What do you mean by that?"

"Ain't it a fast move for you to buy?"

It was the colonel's turn to flush. "I didn't know you had extra ponies," he said. But that wasn't the story, and Tex knew it. The story was that he'd thrown in with Desmond and Coulter, and they were going to need extra horses. Not just for extra riders, but for extra-hard riding. They were getting ready to move.

Tex looked at Hawkins, his eyes bothered and his mouth tight. Hawkins sucked a long breath through his teeth and then stated raspingly, "You couldn't do business with a fairer man than Colonel Sampson."

The colonel bowed stiffly. He said, "From you, Hawkins, I value the opinion. Gentlemen, I would like to buy a drink."

They accepted. The hostile looks aimed at them were subdued. They had their drink and made their deal. Tex rode out with a bunch of Sampson riders and tallied and turned over the ponies. He kept his own, and one for pack. His pack didn't take long. He put a match to the shack and rode off a ways and watched it blaze. Then he rode back to town.

The social was getting under way at the picnic grove. Tense, but well attended. Each social they held now might be the last one, and soon the attendance might be at funerals. The Coulters were in the hotel saloon along with Desmond.

Desmond shot Tex a wicked look and said derisively, "Hear you've quit, and I know for a fact you ain't had any trouble yet."

"Not yet," Tex agreed. "Maybe because I had Coulter ponies on the place. I just saved you some trouble, though. I burned the shack."

Desmond's eyes flamed and his mouth buttoned. He said, "Damned shame to put you loose on the world with that freshness still on you!"

"You want to scrape it off?" Tex asked.

Desmond stared at him and erupted a blow of scathing contempt. "Dirty my hands with a two-bit, drifting tinhorn? Get back in the brush where you belong, Texan."

Tex started to move, but Hawkins grabbed his arm. He made the slightest backward movement of his head. Tex looked in the mirror and saw Johnson standing against the wall watching him. Two men stood with Johnson. Both had bleak, rock-hard faces. Both wore two guns low along the leg.

TEX turned and glared at the Coulters. They looked half shamed of themselves, but half touched with contempt that he'd

quit. He looked on past at Sampson. The colonel stood straight as a ramrod, watching things directly. He didn't approve of Desmond's ways, but he'd taken his stand, and he met the accusation of Tex glare without wavering.

Tex cursed and sloshed his drink on the bar and told Hawkins "Let's get out of here where there's fresh air!"

They went outside. The stoops here and across the street were both heavy with lounging Desmond riders. A lot more riders than he'd had. Lean, unsmiling hardcases.

Somebody was fiddling down at the picnic grove, and Hawkins took Tex's arm and grunted, "Let's take a look at something fresh and pretty."

"By gawdamighty, I want a last look!" Tex said savagely.

They drifted down line, rolling and knocking elbows. Mostly, there were just womenfolk at the grove so far, but the boys were beginning to drift in. He saw Cheri, standing in an apron with a long fork in her hand. He glared at her. She stiffened and flamed, but there was the barest curl of scorn to the corners of her mouth.

He muttered a curse and walked straight toward her. She read the wildness of his look, spoke hurriedly to an older woman, and, putting down her fork, moved off into the shadowed grove. She didn't want a public scene, but she was ready to have things out. She stood on the far side of the grove, on the rim of a low bluff, looking out over the drybed of the river at the blood red sundown.

He came up behind her and stood with his boots spaced and his hands locked behind his back. She was on guard and quick. She got in the first word. "So you've sold out and quit?" she mocked him stridently.

He snorted. "That's a fine one coming from a girl wouldn't even see a man to break things off!"

He took her shoulder and whirled her around. "Why the hell do you think I stayed at all?"

Wild things streaked across her eyes. "You really did, Tex?" she murmured, and her tone was suddenly soft and vital as a spring breeze. "You'd have stayed on in spite of all the trouble there's going to be, and the bad blood you've got with Desmond?"

"Trouble?" he repeated with amazement. "I eat trouble! What in hell does trouble mean to me?"

The stiffness went out of her. She put the back of her hand to her forehead and teetered for a moment. He thought it was an act, and snorted.

"Who's going to build the trouble?" he demanded. "Just Desmond? Hell, no! The Coulters are mixing the soup too! You along with 'em. I wasn't big enough, so you hid behind a curtain and your brothers and made a bargain with Desmond!"

She closed her eyes and bit her lip and shook her head.

"Don't give me an act!" he said. "You're bad as Desmond—worse for selling out to him! You'll have the same blood on your hands, and dirty blood, when this is over, Cheri. This isn't a war between lone wildcats and hired gun-hands. This is going to be hired gun-hands riding down and burning out and killing off men with women and children!"

A sob ripped out of her and she couldn't speak. He cut the air with the side of his hand violently. "I'm well shucked of you!" he told her savagely. "I've met girls in a honkytonk were straighter. You're an owner, but you still need another name. Yeah, I'll say I'm sorry I kissed you that way that day. I'm sorry I kissed you at all. I feel plumb dirty for it."

He saw the spring of her body, and he smiled wickedly. He'd hurt her. Good! Except that she was a woman, he'd beat her down and make her crawl through stable muck.

"I guess the Coulters got what they wanted," he rasped. "They got good ponies, better than any rough string they ever had, and got 'em dirt cheap. It cost you feed and few ropes. It cost me plenty for near to a year's sweating. But I figure I learned cheap. I guess I wanted to marry you, Cheri. That would have cost a little more, learning I was married to a blue-blood bum!"

She stood with her eyes squeezed and her face white and her mouth a torn, cruel hurt oval. Her arms were rigid and her fists locked tight, and every muscle in her body trembling.

He gave a fierce nod of satisfaction, and said, "Now I'll drift over to some town with a honkytonk and buy the smiles of some gal who ain't cheating!"

He pivoted from her and stalked away, his steps so hard that his spurs jarred without jangling. At the edge of the grove he caught the harsh, torn suck of her breath. "Tex!" she called. "When you get to remembering today, just remember I wasn't wearing an engagement ring!"

For a moment, it stopped him dead. It stunned him. If there was one thing above all others Desmond needed at this time, it was the Coulters unbreakably bound to him by blood ties.

He started to look back, but he didn't look. He couldn't let her see the abject, groveling, shame and apology on his face. He moved forward leadenly, his steps suddenly slow, heavy, lifeless. When he came out across the grove, his face was gray.

Women stared, and Hawkins rushed over and grabbed his arm. "Good god, man, come have a drink and get out of sight!" he said hoarsely. He kept hold of Tex's arm and led him.

Tex moved like a thing without will of its own, but he was thinking. Thinking that men with women and children would be wiped out. Thinking that men like Hawkins would be gunned down mercilessly. Thinking that fair ranchers like

Coulter and Sampson would have murder spilled over the rest of their lives. Thinking that sooner or later, Cheri would have to take that bloody ring.

He stopped suddenly and said hoarsely, almost a whisper, like a man in fever, "Hawkins, how can I crowd a personal fight at Desmond?"

Hawkins stared at him with rising worry. "Good lord, man, shuck off that idea!" he blurted. "You think he's a fool? You think he didn't see that might come and cover himself with what he said today?"

"He didn't wear a gun himself," Tex muttered.

Hawkins grated a mirthless laugh. "You can be damned sure he won't until this trouble's over! He lets others do his dirty work."

"He weighs three hundred pounds, and it's solid," Tex muttered. He looked down at his hands and spread the fingers out like curved talons. "But I still think I could choke him if I could make him fight. Choke him until he spit up his apple and his own gore strangled him. That's what I want. That's what he's got coming!"

Hawkins turned him into a deadfall that hadn't yet picked up its night trade. A greasy-faced barkeep brought them a bottle and went back to swatting flies. There were no other customers. They sat crouched over a table, the spokes of a blood red sundown coming through a grimy window, putting its crimson light on the hell-torn mask of Tex face.

Hawkins poured full tumblers of whiskey, and forced one into Tex's hand. "There isn't a way, man!" he told Tex hoarsely. "Don't you think I've thought of it? But there isn't a way you could get at him. Johnson's watching out for him like a hawk, and he's bad enough. But those two gun killers he's brought in are pure lightning. I know some of them. There's one who backed Hickock into a standoff."

"There's always a way," Tex rasped.

"Nothing licks a Texan!" Then his eyes cleared, and his expression turned just plain savage human. "I think Desmond's yellow when he's spilled open! He's big, and he's brute, but he's yellow. If he weren't, he'd be wearing his gun. He'd be leading the trouble."

HAWKINS shook his head. "Don't try nothing, Tex! You'll never get a throw down on him. You'll be riddled, and he'll just laugh it off with the claim that you were a no-account berserk wildcat."

"I'll make him fight or I'll show he's yellow!" Tex growled. "I'll whip him and make him crawl slobbering right off this range!"

He drank his whisky at a gulp. He stood up, and he looked fierce. He said, "I'll drive this trouble to a showdown and end it single handed!"

Hawkins stumbled up and grabbed his arm again. But Tex's arm felt like iron. He'd made his decision, he'd found his way.

"Give me your gun," Tex said. "Go tell the Coulters their sister told me she wore no ring. Tell them I've got a little private business to have out with Desmond and to stand clear. Tell them not to believe all they see."

"You're loco!" Hawkins wheezed. "Man, they've thrown in with him! They need him!"

"They won't need him if he ain't here," Tex said. "And they're square. And there'd be range aplenty if Desmond weren't purposely crowding." He broke off and drilled Hawkins with eyes like coals. "Give me your gun, friend, and do what I ask."

Hawkins handed him his gun. Tex stuck it in his gun belt. He pivoted and walked out into the last bleeding light of sundown. He went back to the grove and crossed the open space without stopping and passed on through the shadows of the trees. He found her beyond, just where he had left her, except that she was crumpled

in the broad pool of her skirts, sobbing.

He walked quietly, and he stooped and put a gentle hand upon her hair. "Cheri," he said, "I'm sorry."

Her sobs stilled, and she looked up at him slowly. Then she threw her arms around his neck and clutched him fiercely. "Don't go, Tex!" she cried into his ear. "I don't care what you think of me or do. Just stay and hold me!"

He swallowed hard, thinking of the things he'd said, thinking of the pride she had to eat to cry this. "One way or another," he murmured, "I'll stay here for life. It is going to be dirty, Cheri. It is going to dirty you. But it won't be as dirty as what will happen if I leave."

She drew off from him and looked at him with torn happiness. "Whatever you do, Tex, it's all right with me," she told him. "If it's all right with me, it will be all right with my brothers. If it is all right with them, it will be with many others. Do what you have to do, Tex."

No slightest doubt of him was in her. No single reservation. There was no least rancor of the things he'd said. Whatever was right for him was right for her. She did not even question what the dirt was.

He smiled gravely and nodded with a man's heartfelt appreciation. "Give me one of your garters," he said.

Surprise flicked her, and she looked at him wide eyed. Then she gave a jerky little laugh.

He started to turn away his face. She leaned to him and kissed his ear and said, "If you aim to wear it, why then take it as it should be taken."

He started and colored and grew flustered as she uncoiled her legs from under her. She had to lift her skirts herself. He couldn't even do that. He fumbled the garter down her leg with his face burning.

"So wild and wooley!" she mocked him. "I hope you never made a boast on taking lady's garters!"

"No," he told her, "but I aim to. I aim to make it before the whole range, Cheri."

She looked at him curiously, but there was no slightest denial of his right in her. "Whatever you do, it's all right, Tex," she repeated.

He slipped the garter up over his sleeve. It was pink and had a circle of lace on it that carried her initials. She pulled the laced circle into shape, so that the initials stood out plain. She patted it and smiled at him and gave a little giggle.

"You'd better stay and marry me!" she told him.

He gave her a hard-bitten smile and felt strong as ten bulls. He touched her cheek with his finger tips, then went back off through the grove. He walked straight to the hotel, and men coming toward the grove saw his walk and turned and followed. He moved with unbroken tread into the saloon, and suddenly the saloon was silent.

From the tail of his eye, he saw Johnson's nostrils pinch and saw him mutter something to the two-gun men at his side as he moved a pace out from the wall. He saw Hawkins change position so that he was clear to draw, and he saw the Coulters stare at him and stare at the garter and go white with anger, but then Ty Coulter recollected the message, and pulled his brother away from Desmond.

Tex moved straight on Desmond and stopped three paces from him. Tex's eyes were pools of liquid flame, and his mouth was hard.

Desmond read the tally, and his heavy jaws edged with gray, but he was a man who played a driving game of poker, and he made his bet right off. He turned with his left elbow on the bar and looked steadily at Tex with angry arrogance.

"We got trouble with you again?" he rasped. "I gave you warning to dust off."

"You didn't warn me hard enough," Tex told him.

Desmond jerked a nod. "We'll do it better this time," he growled, and started to

turn a look in the direction of Johnson.

"You'll do it yourself, single handed," Tex said. "You'll see something on my left arm may interest you, Desmond. It's got initials on it. The initials of the girl you been allowing is your woman!"

Desmond's breath broke in a bark. His pig eyes stared and bulged, and the centers pulled to pinpoints. His jowls trembled, and his face turned crimson. He had to swallow and lick his mouth to speak. "You see what I see, Coulters?" he tried to boom, but his voice came out a wheeze.

Ty Coulter said, "We'll do our settling later. Right now, this is strictly your concern, Larne."

Desmond straightened and stood out from the bar and spread his powerful hands. "I'm not toting a gun!" he quavered. "What in hell would expect me to have to fight with common drifter trash?"

Desmond looked at the crowd for support and found none. Faces were grave, taut, watchful. The big men of the community held their allegiance aloof. This was personal, man to man. The code of the cow country was inflexible.

Desmond piped, "I've got a hernia! But when I get my gun on, I'll shoot you like a rat!"

TEX moved his hand slowly to his waist. He clamped his hand over Hawkin's gun so that the movement could not be misunderstood. He pulled the gun clear and slipped it slowly along the bar. His eyes never left Desmond's quivering face.

"There's a gun," he grated. "It's loaded. Look at it. Step up to that gun and put your hand on the grip and I won't move until then!"

Desmond wet his lips. He moved by inches, slow and ponderous. Sweat broke from his forehead and dumped down the creases of his face in rivulets. He kept having to swallow.

He extended his hand slowly toward the gun. His arm froze on him, and he tried

to force it, and the effort shook his whole body. He drew his arm back and flexed his muscular fingers. Tex was smiling a wicked smile, his lips flattened against his teeth, his eyes unwavering. His enormous body shook. He forced his hand right over the gun, and then it froze. He made a last effort like a man trying to lift a wagon he cannot budge.

"I can't!" he whispered hoarsely. "Men, I can't kill a man! You know it!"

Somebody snorted their derision through the silence.

Tex said slowly, "But I can, Desmond. There's your gun and there's your chance. I'll count ten. One—"

The sound of his voice was dull, emotionless, and flat. His count fell into the taut silence like the ticking of a clock. "Eight!" he counted, and a violent shiver began at Desmond's knees and raced up over his whole body. His mouth fell open, and his eyes stared, and his breathing was a heart tearing rasp. He leaned forward, trying by weight to force his hand down upon the gun.

"Nine!" Tex counted.

Desmond's head snapped back, and his whole face went to pieces like a clay bank being cut out by a floodhead. "Get him, Johnson!" he shrielled, and Johnson, ready, moved to draw, but Hawkins, readier, drilled him in the forehead. Sampson and the two Coulters snapped out their guns and beaded on the two-gun strangers.

The gunhands looked at Johnson as he pitched. They lifted their bleak hard eyes and looked at Desmond with contempt. They lifted their hands, palms out. Desmond stared at his dead foreman who had not even twitched. He looked from face to face clean down the room. Then his breathing broke into wild whining sobs, and he sank down into the slops and sawdust slobbering.

"Now crawl," Tex ordered. "Crawl clean out of this saloon!"

Desmond gave a wild sound and made

a flopping gesture of inability. Tex drew, and his shot jumped a spittoon slopping over Desmond's face. Desmond jerked and howled and began to crawl. Three hundred pounds of whimpering, slobbering beef and muscle pulling itself across that filthy floor.

He pulled to the doors and cried out to his own riders to help him. Not a single rider moved. They let him crawl out and pull himself up by a post, and no man said a word as he sobbed and stumbled from the stoop.

The sheriff came in and put a throwdown on the gunsicks. He took their guns and jerked his head at various citizens to form a posse. He told the gunsicks, "We'll just see you gents and your friends down the trail a piece."

The picked posse drew and went out to round up the others. The Coulters and Sampson holstered their guns. Sampson drew a long breath and announced, "Well, it was for the best. It's saved us from something we would have deeply regretted."

The Coulters grinned and moved toward Tex. Rogue Coulter said, "Guess you just can't lick a Texan at that!"

Tex scowled at them. He didn't grin. He said, "That's right, and I've still got to prove that to both of you in person!"

The Coulters stopped grinning and their eyes hardened. Then Ty began to guffaw. "All right, if that's the way you want it, Texan!" he choked. "We'll give you your contests—but after the wedding." He touched the garter on Tex's arm. "And that wedding's going to be tomorrow."

Hawkins came up, jaunty and half challenging. He said, "Tex, there's one thing I'd like for you to do. I'd like for you to invite in all the small ranchers, the whole county, to this kettle banding."

Tex looked at the Coulters. Ty Coulter said, "Hell, yes, boys! And we'll lighten the range some with Diamond L cattle for our barbecue!"



(Continued from page 14)

in the middle of the bar, with a group around him, and it was obvious that he was drunk. He had a bottle in his hand, and he tilted it. The beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He brought the bottle down again, glancing at it thoughtfully, and suddenly threw it out from him. It rolled halfway across the floor before the kid jerked the gun out and fired. The explosion jarred the close air of the room, drowning out the sound of the shattered glass. The kid smiled and lifted the gun. Someone laughed, and Sheely, the barkeep, came up and said, "My god, Bob, my god," in an uncertain voice.

The kid turned to him. "What's the matter, Sheely? You don't see shootin' like that every day."

"Sure. Sure," Sheely answered, nodding quickly. "But. . . ."

"Another bottle, Sheely," the kid laughed.

Sheely shook his head. He backed away a little, trying to smile.

"Another bottle," the kid said again, and this time the humour was gone from his voice. The crowd quieted and watched Sheely. The little man made a slow turn and picked up a half-empty bottle from the back-bar. He put it in front of the kid, and the kid took it and stepped aside. He looked at the faces of the men, smiling again, and then threw it in the air. He fired and the bottle burst, and beyond it a window glass tinkled.

"My god," Sheely repeated, but he said it in a soft voice.

The kid twirled the gun and let it slip into the holster. He took another bottle and drank from it and stood holding it in his hands. "Anybody want to try?" he said thickly.

No one in the crowd spoke. A man started to laugh and quieted quickly. Sitting at the table, Earls could hear the flies buzzing in the shaft of sunlight near the front windows. He kept his eyes on the kid, and

then shifted them to the door and saw the bat-wings move. The man stepped inside and stood peering calmly around him. He was under six feet, with a thick body and a pair of soft blue eyes that picked out the kid and held steadily on him. He wore a star on the faded vest, and he shook his head a little as he moved forward. He stopped in front of the kid, standing close, and looked up at him.

"All right, Bob," he said. "You'd better come with me." His voice was kind, but there was a cool sternness behind it.

The kid laughed. "Just havin' a little fun, Marshal," he said, laying emphasis on the last word.

"I know," Miles said. "And you came skin close to hittin' a man on the far side-walk."

"Just a little fun," the kid said again. He stood straightbacked, one thumb hooked in the gun belt, looking down at the man.

"Sure," Miles told him. "But we don't want any trouble. We'll just give you a little time to cool off." He put a hand on the kid's shoulder.

The kid brushed it off. "No," he said threateningly. "You're not taking me in." He brought his hand away from the belt and held it poised over the gun. His eyes cleared into a hard, bitter defiance.

Miles' expression didn't change. He returned the hand to the kid's shoulder and said gently, "I told you, Bob, I don't want any trouble. Not from you." He started to lead the kid forward, and the kid's hand shot to the gun. He had it half-way clear of the holster when Miles slammed against him and sent it spinning away.

"Bob, don't be a fool," Miles said. He backed up as the kid lunged drunkenly toward him. He caught the kid with a hard right hand and sent him crumpling to his knees. The kid got to his feet, his eyes wild and reddened, and came at him again. The second blow stopped him in his tracks, and he sat down on the floor. He put his hands behind him and made an effort to

push up, but this time he couldn't. He sat there, with his body limp, one hand rubbing at the soreness on the side of his face.

Miles looked down at the kid, his fingers working at the knuckles of his right hand. Somebody picked up the gun and put it gingerly on the bar. Miles said, "I'm sorry, Bob. I didn't want to do that."

"No," the kid said. His eyes were black behind the narrowed lids. "No, you're not sorry yet. But you'd better throw the key away, 'cause I'll kill yuh when I get out."

Miles' face went white and his mouth fell open a little. "Don't be a fool, Bob," he said.

The kid shook his head. "No, I'm telling you, Miles. I'm gonna kill you."

THE marshal tried to smile. Along the bar the men moved their feet nervously, not speaking. Sheely took the gun timidly from the bar and put it out of sight. At the table Earls held the glass of whisky half-way to his mouth, watching.

Miles bent over the kid and hoisted him to his feet. He said nothing as he led the kid across the room and pushed open the bat-wings. Once they had disappeared along the sidewalk the talk started up again, but lower now, and without laughter. Earls listened to it and poured another drink.

The sun drifted from the windows and the flies stopped buzzing in the corner. Now and then a man left the Fandango, so that by the time the darkness had settled in the street the saloon was almost empty. The clock over the bar gave off a metallic clicking in the stillness, and Sheely's rag made a swishing sound along the plank. A man stood at one end of the bar, and at one of the other tables another man sat with his head dropped loosely on his chest. At the table next to him Earls looked at the clock and lifted the near-full bottle of whisky. He set it down again and spun the glass slowly in his fingers. A sense of restlessness had come over him, and he twisted uncomfortably, but he still didn't move from the

chair. Glancing around the saloon, he saw the loneliness of the place, now that the men had left. He had expected something different, coming back after those fifteen years. But it had changed, and the people had changed . . . or forgotten him. He remembered the place when they all were his friends and he was no older than the kid. . . .

His fingers stopped moving on the glass, and he looked down at them. The kid. Yes, he'd been no older than the kid then, and in many ways like him. And perhaps what Martha had said was true; perhaps the kid would kill his first man, and after that there would be no end to it. He had seen it before, lived it himself on the long rides and the dark trails. And always there was a man somewhere behind him. . . . and ahead, a man who was faster. And it would be the same way for the kid, only it would be Bob Earls instead of Jake Earls, a bigger man, maybe, and a bigger name.

The bat-wings creaked, and he glanced quickly up. The kid stood in the doorway, his hair loose over his forehead, a dark swelling at the side of his face. He was sober now, and the gun holster hung empty on his hip. He walked to the bar without paying any attention to Earls, and the other men and motioned for a bottle. Sheely put one in front of him and backed away.

"And the gun," the kid said. He pressed the bottle to his lips and took a long drink. Then he put his elbows down on the bar and stared hard into the mirror.

Sheely laid the gun gently on the bar and pushed it toward him. He sidled away again and stood with his eyes averted. The kid picked up the gun and checked the roll of the cylinder and slipped it into the holster. He drank once more and grimaced at the raw taste of the whisky. Without turning he said, "Charley, Miles is down at the jail. Tell him I'm up here, waitin' for him. Tell him it's Bob Earls."

The old man at the table rubbed his eyes and started to get up. The barkeep

moved closer to the kid. "Now, Bob," he said, "you just left that jail. You don't want to go back."

The kid made a hoarse chuckle deep in his throat. "You hear me, Charley?" he asked quietly.

The old man stood up, nodding, and moved uncertainly toward the door. He hesitated there, looking back, and Sheely said, "Now listen, Bob. . . ."

"Shut up," the kid snapped.

The barkeep had one hand in the air, and he let it fall back to his side. He moved away again, watching the kid from the corner of his eye, his hands working clumsily at the sink. The old man pushed through the doors and went outside, and his boots sounded loudly on the sidewalk and then faded out. Along the street it was darker now and the lights had gone on in a few store windows.

Jake Earls stood up from the table. He was shaking a little, and a tightness had come into his stomach. He watched the kid's back for a minute and finally his breath escaped in a great sigh. Then he picked up the bottle and glass and went over to where the kid was standing.

The kid didn't turn to look at him. He kept his eyes on the mirror, studying his own face. Earls poured himself a drink and took it down and leaned one elbow on the bar. "You say your name's Earls?" he asked softly.

"Yes," the kid answered curtly. He picked the bottle up and drank from it again, his gaze held steadily in front of him. There was a slight quivering in his hand. "Why?"

"Seems like I heard that name," Earls said slowly.

The kid turned to look at him. "You told me before."

"Back in Dodge, maybe," Earls went on. He rubbed his hand thoughtfully against the stubble of beard. "Or Hays. I don't know."

The kid held his gaze on him now. Only

the clock's ticking broke the silence, and the creaking of the batwings in the gentle wind. "Jake Earls," the kid said, leaning forward.

EARLS slapped the top of the bar. "That's it. Jake Earls." He looked away from the kid and began turning the bottle of whisky in his hand. "Shot a man in Tucson. I remember it. Got him in the back. They hung him the same day. He was cryin' like a baby when they put the noose around his neck."

The kid straightened up, his face darkening. "That's a goddammed lie," he half-shouted.

Earls turned about to face him. "He a relation of yours?" he asked mildly.

"You're a goddammed liar," the kid said again, his tone lower. He pushed himself away from the bar, and his hand dropped near the holstered gun.

Earls let his glance fall and come up again. He pushed the bottle clear of his elbow and stepped back. The man behind him left the bar hurriedly and stood crouching in the deep shadows at the end of the room.

"You're talkin' to the wrong man, son," Earls said tonelessly.

"I'm talkin' to you, mister," the kid said. The fury sent a quivering into his voice. "There was gonna be one man dead in this town tonight. Now there's gonna be two."

"No, kid," Earls said calmly. The skin began to crinkle at the corners of his eyes. "You're fast, kid, but there's always somebody faster. You're looking at that man."

The kid brought his breath in with a jerk. His hand went for the gun, and Earls drew and shot him in the side. The kid staggered, and his mouth fell open, and his eyes grew wide and frightened. He lost his balance and toppled against the bar and the gun fell at his feet. He tottered there, looking down, his hands pressed to his side. Then he dropped slowly to his knees.

"Get a doc," Earls said.

The man left the shadows and ran through the doorway. Earls propped the kid back in the chair so that his legs spread out loosely in front of him. He opened the shirt and studied the wound. Blood oozed from it and spread in a thick mess from the back, but he saw that the slug had gone through the fleshy part above the kid's hip. "I meant it to go there," he said, almost aloud. "I meant it to go there," but he was shaking again, and there was a dryness around his mouth. He stood up. The kid's eyes opened a little and stared up at him. Miles rushed in, a man in a black coat behind him. Miles stopped, staring, and the man went past him and bent over the kid. He said nothing, but his eyes kept moving from Earls to the crouched figure of the doctor. Finally the man got to his feet.

"He's all right," he said gruffly. "Tore up the flesh some."

Miles nodded. He turned to Earls. "You can come with me now, mister," he said. He waved the gun toward the door.

Earls stepped in ahead of him. Near the chair he stopped again and stood looking down at the kid. He smiled, and the kid's eyes rolled up to him, still frightened, and the fear had put a warmth in them that he hadn't seen before. "Remember, kid," he said softly. "There's always somebody faster."

The kid closed his eyes. Earls crossed the room slowly, shoving through the crowd.

"Get your horse," Miles said. "And thanks, Earls," he added.

Earls studied him questioningly. "For what?" he asked.

Miles moved to the edge of the sidewalk and turned back to him again. "For helpin' with the kid," he said evenly. "Martha told me you were back, but she wasn't figuring on this. She'll be glad when she hears about it."

Earls stepped off the sidewalk and climbed to the leather. He looked once at the man and kicked the mare into a trot

up the darkened street. When he twisted in the saddle the man was still standing on the sidewalk. He rode through the creek and past the willows and turned the buckskin onto the climbing trail. At the top he could see down into the valley, and he saw the dim lights of the ranch. Looking back, he watched them for a long time, and then he was only watching the trail, and it was still empty behind him. ■ ■ ■

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(Continued from page 35)

Jack Bean gave Pelon his orders, orders that were passed from mouth to ear around the deadly circle of fighting Yaquis who surrounded the soldiers there in the wash.

"Ride like hell. Shoot fast. Swing back to shelter and wait for the signal for the next attack. Kill as few as possible. Get ready. Fight, my Yaquis!"

Jack Bean's six-shooter cracked. That was the signal. He led that madly galloping charge through brush and cacti, the wild yell of the Yaqui breaking from his sun-cracked lips. It was a swift, twisting charge that circled the soldiers who squatted behind the brush while their carbines cracked.

Now each man had to look out for himself, there in that mad charge—twisting through brush, horses spurred to a run, guns spitting fire. Now and then a Yaqui was shot from his horse, shooting even as he fell. Soldiers crumpled in quivering heaps and blood stained their wrinkled sand-colored uniforms. Yaqui guns were taking quick toll.

Out of the tail of his eye Jack Bean saw Pelon, hatless, his bald head red in the scarlet dawn, riding to meet Cucaracha.

Even as the blades clashed, the Cockroach's horse, was shot from under him, and he was thrown. Pelon pulled up, looked down at the motionless, crumpled figure of his enemy, then whirled his horse to join Jack.

Captain Pico, on a sweat-marked black horse, his spurs marking red the animal's ribs, rode without fear, back and forth among his men, his saber glittering in the first rays of the sun.

Jack Bean rode towards him, only to be cut off by a barricade of cacti and thorny brush high as the back of a horse. They each saw one another but neither fired. Between them was a bond of hatred that each understood. Let their men fight it out—after that, a duel to the death. No words were necessary between them to complete that understanding.

Pelon would have taken a shot at Pico, but Jack Bean knocked aside the gun barrel. "Take care of your Cucaracha, old onion. Pico's my meat!" he called to the hairless old Yaqui.

Now, as suddenly, as swiftly as they had charged, the Yaquis rode back, leaving death in their wake. Here and there a Yaqui leaned from his saddle and lifted a fallen comrade from the ground. They hated to leave behind their dead and wounded.

Riderless horses were running wild, bewildered. Groans and curses and prayers of wounded men, the screams of wounded horse, the sharp, brittle commands of Captain Pico all rose over the battlefield like a song of death.

And in the midst of it all, the one-eyed old Cucaracha, swearing and with blood on his scarred face, crawled to his feet and limped back to shelter, shouting profane defiance at Pelon. Even some of the wounded soldiers smiled at the spectacle of the old one-eyed rascal, waving his machete, hurling challenges at Pelon who stood in full view, bald, ludicrous, wicked eyes glittering as he threw back caustic replies.

"And all, old onion head, on account of an Indio with red hair," grinned Jack Bean, when he dragged the old warrior back out of danger.

AGAIN the Yaquis charged, yelling, shooting. Their machetes cut through the barricade in places as they fought hand to hand with the now desperate soldiers, who were getting a terrific beating. Game, they fought with their last bit of strength, and courage against the ferocious Yaquis who showed no mercy, asked no quarter.

One tall Yaqui had been thrown as his horse was shot from under him. With six-shooter in one hand, heavy machete in the other, he cut through the barricade of brush and cacti and stood inside, naked to the waist, his machete red with blood, swinging

right and left, his gun cracking. His huge frame dwarfed the soldiers as if he were a giant among pygmies. He must have killed half a dozen of them before he went down fighting, the Yaqui yell in his throat even as he dropped, gun empty, his two bloodsmear hands still swinging the machete.

Again Jack Bean and Pico met, separated only by the high barricade. Their bloodshot eyes glared at one another.

"You asked for it, Pico. Next charge wipes you out to the last soldier. I'll wait for the white flag."

"Then wait for it in hell, gringo!"

Jack reined his horse, then rode with his men for shelter. A bullet had nicked his thigh, and the blood was thick in his boot. Another bullet had clipped off the top of one ear and the blood from it smeared his face and neck. The brush had torn his shirt to ribbons despite the protection of his short denim jumper, and his chest and face and hands were ripped by the catclaw bush.

Pelón and the one-eyed Cockroach staged another brief duel, and Pelón came back with an ugly gash in his shoulder. "Only that I was trying to cut out his other eye," he excused his wound, "I would never have been touched by the blade of that drunken *cabron*. I missed his eye by an inch, no more."

Jack poured tequila into the raw cut despite the protests of the old Yaqui that tequila was meant for drinking, not wasting on a wound.

"The next time," he grunted, as he took a drink, "I'll split his head down through his brisket."

The wounded were cared for as well as possible. The Yaquis had lost but a few in the fighting. The giant who had gone inside the barricade was the brother of Chief Julio, Linda's father. He had done his part to settle the score against the hated Mexicans.

Horses stood in the shelter, sweating, sides heaving, cinches loosened. Jack Bean

tore away part of his shirt and used it to rub down his horse.

Minutes passed, but there was no sign of Pico's white flag. The Yaquis were preparing for a last bloody charge that would wipe out the soldiers to a man. The bloodthirsty Pelón, disregarding whatever pain he might be feeling from his deep shoulder wound, was whetting the already sharp blade of his machete, muttering to himself, his bloodshot wicked eyes filled with hatred.

The sun crawled higher, a brassy, merciless ball of fire in a cloudless sky. Heat waves distorted the distant mountains. Men and horses were suffering from thirst. Dying soldiers called in pitiful tones for water. Captain Pico, wounded in one arm, stripped to his undershirt, did his best to cheer his men. Much as he wanted a drink, he denied himself and doled out swallows of tequila from his flask to the men who most needed it. Some choked on the stuff, for the silver flask had grown hot to the touch and the liquor inside was liquid fire.

DESPITE his words of encouragement, his promises of a *fiesta* and double pay if they fought on, he could read in their eyes a mute pleading that they were too brave and loyal to put into words.

Madre de Dios, were they not as good as dead already? Those Yaqui devils were too strong for them, too skilled in this sort of warfare. The next rush would smash down the barricade. The soldiers would go down, chopped to pieces by the heavy blades of the Yaqui machetes. They had only a few minutes more of life. And some of them were muttering prayers through parched lips while the groans of the dying pounded in their ears. Surely they had fought enough.

They knew that if Jack Bean gave his word to spare them, that promise would be kept. They could make their way back to their sweethearts, their wives, their children. They would live on to attend more *fiestas*, more bailies. They would eat

frijoles and *carne* again and wash it down with red wine. They would get drunk and dance and sing their songs and talk of fighting this battle. *Por Dios*, was their captain going to let them be murdered?

That is what Captain Pico read in the eyes of the soldiers who were too proud to voice their fears. For all his vanity, his cruelty, his ruthlessness, this Pico was a real soldier, fit for a command. His eyes were bloodshot, sunken, dark with pity for the suffering of his troopers. He moved among them, trying to cheer them. For, with one exception, they were in sore need of encouragement.

That one exception was the one-eyed Cucaracha. He squatted on his heels, apart from the others, his one bloodshot eye a ball of black fire, his croaking voice going on and on as he cursed the hairless Pelon. Now and then he stole a drink from a bottle he had buried in the hot sand. But he was careful not to let Captain Pico see him. Pico would take it and share it among those soldiers, even as he had emptied his own flask down their throats. And the Cucaracha worshipped mescal as some men might worship their god.

There was no thought of surrender in the shriveled, murderous old heart of the Cockroach, who loved to watch men die.

So it was that his lower jaw sagged open with dismay and he almost dropped his precious whetstone as he saw Captain Pico ride out from the barricade, a white rag tied to the end of his saber. . . .

JACK BEAN rode to meet him. They made an odd pair, those two leaders of fighting men, as they rode slowly towards one another across a small clearing.

There in the center of the clearing the two men met. There was a grin on Jack Bean's grimy face, but only desperate grimness on the darker face of the Mexican captain.

"I ride out under this white flag, gringo, to beg for the lives of my men. If I tell them

to ride home in peace, taking their dead and wounded with them, will you let them go?"

"I give you the word of a gringo thief," said Jack Bean, his grin twisting, "that my men will not harm them. You could have saved the lives of those poor dead devils if you had listened to reason in the first place. All I want is that gold and silver."

"That will belong to you, naturally," the captain answered. "Let my soldiers keep their arms and ammunition, I beg you. They have a long ways to go and they might be attacked by enemies other than your Yaquis."

"They can keep their guns and ammunition. But their trail must be straight back home. And Pico, you don't go with 'em."

"I did not intend to go with them, gringo. I have lost to you again. This will be the last time. Is it too much to ask of you the satisfaction of a duel?"

"The pleasure, Pico, will be all mine. Ride back and send your men home. You might tell 'em I said they put up a hell of a game fight. Tell 'em that."

Something of the bitter hatred and deep sorrow left the sunken eyes of the defeated captain. "I will tell them that, *senor*. And I will add that the words come from a brave man and generous enemy. In their behalf I thank you for their lives."

"We'll be kissin' each other if you don't get back there, Pico," Jack Bean broke in. "Directly they've pulled out, I'll lock horns with you."

Captain Pico rode back to his barricade. Jack Bean returned to his Yaquis. He spoke to Pelon and the others. "Rest your horses for an hour. Unsaddle and rub 'em down the best you can. Get the pack mules ready. Pico's mules are too leg-weary to travel fast and we must hurry. We won't be safe until we get back in the mountains. We got a hard ride ahead. In the kiack boxes of our mules is tequila. A bottle to each man as long as it lasts. Them without can drink from them that has it."

From a higher point Jack Bean watched the activities below through his field glasses. He watched the semi-orderly confusion as the soldiers prepared for their homeward trip. Litters were made for the badly wounded who were unable to ride, and dead men were roped to the saddles they had once ridden as live troopers. Captain Pico on his sweat-marked black horse directed the details.

They lined up now. Pico spoke to them for a few minutes. Then, at his command, they rode away, a broken, ragged, rag-tag line that had, but a few days before, been the crack cavalry troop of the garrison. They were returning home now, defeated, smashed, to straggle under the cover of darkness down the dusty street to the barracks they had left so proudly.

Pico's sword saluted them. Their machetes returned the salute he held until the last man had filed past and was gone. Captain Pico was left alone—left alone to taste the gall of defeat.

ALONE? Alone save for one. The one-eyed Cucaracha who squatted in the inadequate shade of a mesquite tree, rubbing his whetstone down the heavy blade of his machete, all the time mouthing foul threats concerning Pelon.

To the one-eyed Cucaracha defeat meant but little, so long as he was still alive to fight again. He had been in too many battles to let a little matter like defeat bother him. Captain Pico, thought the old Cockroach, took his fighting too seriously. One side was bound to win in the end. He had refused to return with the soldiers. What of that? He had a matter to settle between himself and that hairless Pelon. Besides, he told himself, he was not a dog to be sent home with his tail between his legs. He was not admitting, even to himself, that he was also staying because of a queer sort of loyalty to Captain Pico. No mention of such a soft sentiment was woven into the verses of his Cucaracha as he croaked it half

drunkenly while Captain Pico sat his horse, watching the ribbon of dust fade in the distance.

Cucaracha dug his half empty bottle of mescal from the sand and drank deeply, not even making a grimace as the stuff, hot as fire, went down his leathery throat. He offered a drink to Captain Pico when he rode up. Pico smiled faintly and shook his head. The Cockroach took another drink and mounted his horse.

"There is but little chance that either of us will live another hour," said Pico. "You have still time to ride away."

"And leave that hairless son of a wild pig to brag that he has chased me home?" He broke off into a string of obscenity.

"You are a brave man. *Andale!*"

Side by side they rode into the clearing. Jack Bean stepped up on his horse. Pelon, muttering, eyes narrowed, machete in his hand, was already in his saddle.

The Yaquis watched. This was something that appealed to their war-like nature. They would be watching such a fight as they had never before witnessed.

"Well, old onion-head," grinned Jack Bean, "get your cockroach meat. I'll take care of Pico."

"What will you fight with?"

"I'm no knife man. I'll take him on with six-shooters or by hand. Those overgrown butcher knives never was to my likin'. I'll see what Pico says about it. I hope he makes it guns. I've never killed a man with my two hands. . . ." Then he grinned. "Nope, guns is out. I want that son alive. I want to deliver him on the hoof to the governor. I'll make it just plain. . . . Let's go, old onion. Good luck. Cut his ears off."

"Good luck to you, son."

They rode out at a trot. Down in the valley they pulled up a few feet from their enemies. There was a grin on Jack Bean's face as he spoke to Pico: "While Pelon and that ugly old Cockroach is whittlin' on one another," he said "you and me, Pico, will step down and fight 'er out. We'll use

our fists. If you win, you won't be hurt when you ride away. The same goes for that *barrachon* of a Cucaracha. I hear you have promised my head to the governor and my ears to Linda at the *cantina*. If you're man enough to kill me with your hands, you're welcome to my head."

"I am no prize-fighter, gringo," the proud captain answered. "The sword is the weapon of a soldier. A steel blade is the weapon of a gentleman."

"Get off your horse. The sword is barred, but I'll let you keep that fancy dagger you pack. I'll spot you that much odds."

"Loco!" growled Pelon. "That devil is fast with a knife. I saw him kill two Mexicans with that knife at a *cantina* in Magdalena. Make him shoot it out."

"He couldn't hit the side of a mountain with a gun," Jack Bean replied. "It would be plumb murder, Pelon, to make him fight with guns. I'd shoot his trick moustache off, then his ears, before he could cock his six-shooter. You get your Cockroach cut down to where you want him. I'll take care of this spur-jingler. Step down with your pig sticker, Pico, and we'll have at 'er."

Captain Pico stepped down off his horse and hung his belt and its clanking saber on his saddle. Jack Bean did the same with his guns.

Pelon and the one-eyed Cucaracha wheeled their horses, trotted off ten or fifteen feet, then rode at one another with a rush. Pelon's Yaqui yell filled the air. The battle was on.

CHAPTER FIVE

Courage of the Beaten

PICO'S knife blade glittered in the sunlight as it darted at the hard-hitting Jack Bean. Jack felt the blade graze his ribs. With a mirthless grin he hooked a hard left into Pico's face, jolted him with a looping right to the belly, then rushed the staggering Mexican backwards, smashing at his

eyes and nose. Blood spurted. That swift battering had broken Pico's nose and momentarily blurred his vision. He slashed blindly with his knife, but Jack Bean tripped him up and then stepped back.

A swift glance gave him a look at Pelon and the Cockroach. They had just come together and the ring of steel against steel was loud. They broke away, whirled their horses, charged again.

But Jack Bean had no time to look. Pico, half blinded, his face a mask of dripping blood, was coming at him cautiously now, circling him, crouching as he came, his knife ready to stab or slash with its two-edged blade.

Jack Bean had learned enough of boxing to take care of himself. Naturally quick on his feet, with the shoulders and arms of a trained athlete, he watched the Mexican's every move. In that split second before Pico sprang, he had known what was coming. A quick leap sideways. The blade slid along his side, drawing blood. Before Pico could regain his balance and strike again, Jack Bean was at him, battering him backwards, laughing at him as he ripped his hard fists into the once handsome face. He wrenched the dagger from the Mexican's grip and tossed it into the brush. Then he deliberately went at him, taking what punishment Pico could hand him as he beat the captain's face to a bloody, shapeless pulp. Pico went down, but Jack Bean jerked him back to his feet and knocked him down again. Finally the once-swaggering officer lay there on the ground, his battered face buried in his arms, his body quivering with gasping, choking, agonizing sobs.

"Had enough, Pico?" grinned Bean.

"Enough. . . gringo." Pico lay there, his blood wetting the sand. Captain Pico was beaten.

At the other side of the clearing Pelon and the one-eyed Cucaracha were still slashing at one another. Their horses were tired. Each had been wounded, but they fought

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on. The song of the tipsy Cucaracha mingled with Pelon's yell.

Jack Bean watched the machete duel between the two old enemies. They were evenly matched, hatred giving them extra strength and ferocity. They did not heed the heat of the blazing sun. Their one aim was to hack one another to pieces. They were fighting to the death.

Jack Bean wiped the blood and dirt and sweat from his face and watched. At his feet lay the quivering, broken Captain Pico. His face would from now on be a battered, ugly mask. His spur jingling days were over. He lay there, quivering like some peon who had been whipped with rawhide whips until he can stand no more. Captain Pico, with his own hands, had wielded those terrible whips of rawhide that cut like knives into a man's flesh. Now he lay there in the dirt, even as those poor, defenseless peons and Indians had lain, quivering, suffering. But these peons had not suffered as Pico now suffered, because more than his flesh had been beaten. His pride, his swaggering pride was now shattered.

Jack Bean looked down at the man, trying not to pity him. Trying not to feel sorry for this man who had murdered and tortured and defiled girlhood and mocked God.

Then a shouted warning from the Yaquis. "Gringos!" Gringos!"

Jack Bean stiffened, his eyes sweeping the broken skyline which was dotted with riders coming at a swift pace.

He hauled Pico to his feet. Pico, blinded, staggering, half limp.

"Grab holt of yourself, Pico. Another scrap a-comin' up. Looks like my old *amigo* Zang Braille. Come on and fight."

He half lifted Captain Pico on his horse. Then he shouted to the Yaquis to change the packs to the fresh mules.

Heedless of all the shouting, Pelon and the one-eyed Cucaracha fought on.



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JACK BEAN, back on his horse, had to separate the two old enemies. Cursing them both, he finally drew their attention to the approaching riders. "Zang Braille and his renegades. It's a fight, you two old roosters. Cut out this damn nonsense. Braille's after that payroll. By god, he'll have to fight for it. *Andale!*"

"Zang Braille!" snarled the blood-visaged Cucaracha who had, indeed, lost an ear in the combat. "*Por Dios*, that gringo *cabron!* You hairless son of a toad, he belongs to me."

"Take him then," Pelon answered. "I do not want him. What is Zang Braille to me?"

"Is there no kind of a brain in that gourd of a head of yours? You mean you do not know he is the one who ran away with the red-haired little Indio for whom we fought? While you were cutting out of me my best eye, that gringo Zang Braille runs away with her."

"Then, *Por Dios*, the *Tejano cabron* is my meat. old Cucaracha!"

"No, thou gourd-headed son of a hairless monkey!"

"Come on, you two old gamecocks," Jack Bean cut them short. "Talk later after one of you has the right to brag. Cucaracha, tend to the pack mules. Pelon, scatter your men. Pick ten who have the fastest horses. You will go with the gold to the mountains while we hold these gringos back. Pronto!"

They rode away together, spurring hard. The one-eyed Cucaracha was remembering his half-emptied bottle of mescal hidden in the sand. There was a mate to that bottle buried near the pack mules. It might get trampled on and broken. . . .

Pelon and his one-eyed enemy raced for the barricade. Even in the excitement of it all Pelon's wicked eyes took note of the bulging pockets of the Cucaracha. He watched those pockets. He had not long to wait to be rewarded for his quick eyesight. A gold coin spilled out. Then another.

"You thief, you are losing your money."

Cucaracha handed over enough to lessen the strain on his bulging pockets. He had, so he explained with much cursing, taken the gold in case he was able to make a getaway from the Yaquis. He had taken all he could carry. Then he mentioned the buried mescal. They both grinned and spurred their way through the brush to the barricade.

And just then the Yaqui guns began cracking, sending the Zang Braille renegades to shelter.

Even today it is remembered as the battle of the chopped hills, that fight between Zang Braille and his motley bunch of renegades, and Jack Bean and his Yaquis. Zang Braille had come down in the renegade country to get hold of the gold and silver that was the mine payroll, to kill Jack Bean, and to recover his stolen horses. But even as his men topped the skyline they were spotted, and, from the time the first shot was fired, it was a battle to the death.

In the confusion of it all, Pelon and Cucaracha, with a dozen Yaquis, slipped through the brush with the laden pack mules. Cunning, crafty, well-mounted, well-armed, they twisted their way through cactus and brush, following no trail, keeping well out of sight. By the time the fighting had reached its white heat, they were miles away, pushing hard for the mountains; and the two enemies were drinking from the same bottle. The time had been when these two had fought side by side under Pancho Villa. In him they had a common hero.

Back in the chopped hills the fighting grew hotter. Pico, armed with a carbine and six-shooter, did his share of the shooting. He hated these Border renegades who preyed upon the Mexican towns and ranches. So, battered and bruised as he was, he fought for the first time with the hated Yaquis against a common foe. And he did a splendid job of it.

Throughout the long day and into the sunset the fighting continued. Jack Bean

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had held off the Braille gunmen for those hours to give the pack train time to reach the mountains. He reckoned that, by now, Pelon and the gold were safely into the Yaqui country.

"So we'll begin to show Zang Braille the difference between foolin' and fightin'," he said. "Git at 'em, Yaquis!"

Again the chopped hills echoed with that blood-curdling Yaqui yell. It seemed that every brush parch spewed forth Yaqui riders—shooting, yelling, swinging their heavy machetes.

The sudden attack coming after hours of monotonous brush fighting, stampeded the motley gang of renegades. Some of them who were tough enough to fight crumpled under the Yaqui bullets and glittering steel blades of the machetes. But for the most part the craven in them topped their small amount of courage, and they took to flight. These renegades, the scum of the Border, the mixed-blood dregs of both sides of the line, were no match for the fighting Yaquis.

Jack Bean saw Zang Braille spur his horse to a run, dropping into a long wash. Jack took a short cut, and the two almost collided as they rounded a brush patch.

Zang Braille, his leathery face set in hard lines and his cold eyes bloodshot, bared his lips in a twisted grin. His .45 roared. But Jack Bean's gun had spewed flame a second before. Then as Braille was thrown heavily to the ground by his swerving horse, Jack was out of the saddle, bending over him. He turned Zang over on his back. The man was dying.

"You was one of that bunch that wiped out Chief Julio and his family, Braille."

"You're damned right I was," the dying man boasted. "Got paid for it in money. And I showed that damned little Mex heifer that she couldn't treat me like she'd done. That youngest 'un. Purty as hell fer a Mex. Figgered she was too good fer me, a Texan. Well, I got 'er. Damn you, what's it to you?"

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Jack Bean jerked him to a sitting position and handed him the gun he had dropped when he was thrown.

"Use it, Braille. I'm givin' you a chance."

Their guns roared. Zang Braille slid sideways, his smoking gun in his hand, a bullet-hole between his glazing eyes. Then that outlaw known as the Mexican Jumping Bean reloaded his gun, mounted, and rode to his Yaquis.

He found them at the brush barricade, waiting for him. Pico was nowhere in sight. At Jack Bean's inquiry, one of them pointed towards a patch of brush. Jack quit his horse. In a few long strides he was around the brush patch. Pico sat with his back against a tree. He had a six-shooter in his hand. He was muttering something that might have been a prayer and from his bloody, battered face. He had not heard anyone come up behind him. As he raised the six-shooter to his head, Jack Bean leaped, knocking the weapon from his hand.

"You're too good a soldier, Pico, to take that way out," he told the Mexican who made a feeble effort to fight him. "Take 'er easy."

Pico stood on his feet. A little unsteadily, but stiffbacked. His bloodshot eyes were unpleasant to look into.

"I will go with you, gringo," he said slowly. "I am no coward."

YAQUI signal fires burned in the mountains, fires that meant nothing to the prisoner Pico—but to Jack Bean and the Yaquis those fires meant a great deal. They talked among themselves excitedly. Jack Bean's eyes glittered strangely.

The traveling was slow because most of the horses were leg-weary, taking back the wounded and dead.

Jack Bean talked in low tones to the Yaqui leaders. Then he took his prisoner, Pico, and struck out at a long trot for the mountains. Some time during the night they came to the main camp. There were over a thousand Yaquis gathered there.

More were coming. All were heavily armed. A tall, wide-shouldered, black-bearded man in the uniform of a Mexican general was talking to them. At sight of him Captain Pico stiffened in his saddle, but whatever he started to say he kept to himself, breaking off in the middle of a word. Jack Bean grinned.

Pelon sat with the other Yaquis with old Cucaracha and his bottle beside him.

Jack Bean and Pico dismounted. Shirtless, both of them, and caked with dirt and dried blood, they stood back in the shadow, until the bearded officer had finished speaking. Then Jack Bean stepped into the firelight. The bearded giant scowled at him, then white teeth showed in a smile of welcome. He stepped forward and held out his hand. When they had gripped each other's hand the general spoke. Jack Bean listened.

"You will hold the rank of colonel," the general said. "Take what men you need. You are too badly used up tonight to make the attack."

"A bath and a stiff drink, general, and I could ride to hell."

"*Sta bueno*. You have the steel of a soldier in you, colonel," the general complimented him. "A night attack is much easier. Fewer lives lost if they are surprised. We need that town. That is a strategic point. Besides it is overstocked with munitions and guns. No man has done more for the cause than you, sir. Only for you we could not possibly take this state. You and the Yaquis are true patriots."

"The Mission and the *padres* there?"

"Will stay on, I swear it. They need have no more fear of being driven out. And your peons and Yaquis will benefit, I give you my word. I am part Yaqui, as you know. These are my people. When can you start?"

"In half an hour. Pelon will pick the men I need." He saluted and was about to turn away when he grinned and spoke again. "I have a prisoner. A Captain Pico."

The general frowned. "Captain Pico, eh?"

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He'll never come over to our cause. He'll have to be shot."

"Would you let me attend to Pico, personally?"

"Very well. But don't trust him."

Jack Bean walked over to Pelon. Pelon was scowling. Jack Bean grinned at him.

"Get what men we need to take the town below. We are going to pay a visit to the governor. When we come back, you can finish your drunk with Cucaracha. Or fetch him along if he's sober enough to ride. He likes fightin'. He can look on while we take the town. But keep his hands and feet tied to the saddle. Feed him a drink when he wants one. Yeah, we shouldn't leave such a good friend of the governor's behind. I'm lettin' Pico in on the show."

He whistled softly as he cleaned up as best he could and shared his bathing and bandaging with the now sullen-eyed Pico. Pico did not seem to relish the liquor and food Jack Bean gave him. His heart was too filled with the gall of defeat. And he, a prisoner, must witness the capture of his garrison and the capture of his governor. He had heard enough of the general's speech to know that the revolution was breaking at midnight tonight. If one could believe the words of that bearded general, two thirds of all Mexico would be in the hands of the rebels within twelve hours. And he knew that this general, commander-in-chief of all the Yaquis, was not a liar or a braggart. For years this revolt had been simmering. It was now at the boiling point.

"Better, gringo," Pico said, "if you had let me kill myself back there."

"Don't take it so hard, Pico. Today we win, tomorrow we lose. All the way the dice roll. No president after Diaz ever stayed on the ruling chair long enough to wear out the seat of his pants. Take another drink. Here's a shirt and underwear. If a bullet hits you, you'll want clean clothes on, I reckon."

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SILENTLY, under the cover of darkness, the Yaquis slipped into town. A town that, save for the few *casllons* and *continns*, was asleep. But as Jack Bean and Captain Pico rode down the dusty street to its far end they could see light behind the drawn shades of the governor's palace. At the door they heard voices.

One was the heavy, commanding voice of the governor. The other was a voice that sent Jack Bean's pulse into his throat. The night was warm and the windows had been opened against the heat. Only the drawn blinds were between the listeners and the voices.

"The proof of it is here, my sweet one," the governor was saying. "You are a Yaqui, the daughter of Chief Julio. Through you has leaked out much valuable information that has cost my government much money and many brave lives. You, with your woman's wiles, have made fools of officers like Captain Pico. Through you that payroll was lost and the money is now undoubtedly in the Yaqui stronghold. Pico, when he returns, will be shot by a firing squad. You have done your work well, my pretty one. Tonight you shall commence paying. When I am done with you, I will turn you over to the soldiers. The punishment will be rather drawn out. You will use marijuana and other drugs to deaden the pain and shame. You will sink lower and lower. You will wish ten million times that you were dead. And some day you will go mad. That, my sweet one, will be your end."

"No matter what happens to me, you butcher, you robber of the poor, you black-souled thief, I will be avenged," Linda defied the governor. "There will be one who will make you pay!"

"Your gringo lover?" the governor jeered. "That one they call the Mexican Jumping Bean? Puff! I'll let you witness his hanging. The mark of the gallows is already on his neck."

Noiselessly Jack Bean pushed open the

door. He had a sixshooter in each hand. One of the guns was nudging Pico's back.

On one side of the wide, polished mahogany desk with its papers, its silver tray of bottles and glasses, sat the governor, dressed in his general's uniform. He was sipping a tall drink.

Across the desk stood Linda, still in her dancing costume. Straight-backed, head held high, her face a little pale but her dark eyes blazing defiance, she stood with clenched fists. So tense was she that she did not notice the entrance of Jack Bean and his prisoner. Her back was to them and the jingle of Jack's spurs meant nothing. Then she saw the startled look on the square-jawed face of the governor. She saw him start to rise—slump back in his chair. Then, at the sound of Bean's voice, she whirled.

"Sit quiet, governor," Jack Bean was saying, "or I'll let this itchin' trigger finger of mine send your black soul to hell. Linda, stand over by the wall, out of range. Pronto. Pico, walk around the desk and stand where the governor can see you. Sit still, you damned old butcher, or I'll kill you."

"What . . . what's the meaning of this?"

"It means, mister, that you're about to lose your job. The firin' squad takes care of you. The town belongs to the Yaquis."

"You lie, you gringo thief!"

"Ask Pico."

"The revolution is on, sir," Pico, his hands tied behind him, spoke through his blood-smeared lips.

"Traitor!" roared the general. "Liar! This is a bluff!"

"Think so?" grinned Jack Bean. He backed to the window. Without taking his eyes from the governor, he shoved one of his six-shooters out the open window and pulled the trigger three times.

Those in the room waited. Save for the grinning Jack Bean, their attitude was rigid, nerves tense. The echoes of the three shots died away.

Then, like a great wave, rising, falling,

SATAN'S SADDLE MATES

rolling through the night and filling it, came the wild Yaqui yell. The sound of it filled the room. Linda, back stiff against the wall, eyes wide, lips parted, did not move. A yellowish pallor crossed the heavy face of the governor as he gripped the arms of his chair.

Jack Bean's six-shooter still covered the governor. He sat in his chair, rigid, his black eyes narrowed as if he were staring into the hollow eyes of death. He was still sitting there when Pelon and the Yaquis swarmed in.

"Take me with him," said Captain Pico flatly. And as they led him out, his eyes met those of Linda for the fraction of a second. He smiled.

"*Adios, senorita,*" he said. "I have no regrets. You are a brave woman."

"*Adios,* my captain Pico. It is . . . war. You are brave and generous. *Adios.*"

Their trial would be brief, the trial of the governor and Captain Pico. There would be the adobe wall and a firing squad.

"*Adios,* Pico."

"*Adios,* gringo."

Then they led him away to the *cuartel*.

When the room was empty save for the two of them, Jack Bean took Linda in his arms. Regardless of his bruised, unwashed lips, she kissed him over and over, clinging to him like a hurt child.

AGAIN, in the candle light *Padre* Diego and *Padre* Geronimo talked. *Padre* Diego's red face was a shade the redder from the wedding wine he had imbibed after the ceremony that had united Linda and Jack Bean.

"Never," said *Padre* Diego, "have I been happier in joining two people in marriage. My two wayward ones. They will be a great team. Each will balance the other. The *Senor Dios* meant them for one another. Now I will cease to worry about them. Their lives are no longer in danger. They will settle down and raise

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a family. I will baptize their children." He filled his goblet.

"The revolution is not over," said *Padre* Geronimo. "Pelon still claims it is doomed to failure. And he should know."

"Pelon was drunk. He and that one-eyed old Cucaracha. Two wicked old rascals if ever a pair lived."

"But they both know Mexico," *Padre* Geronimo said. "They know about wars. They agree the revolution will fail."

"Even so, some good has come of it. The marriage of a brave man and a still braver little woman."

What might have been a smile creased the parched skin of *Padre* Geronimo's fleshless face. He sipped his wine slowly.

"They are whispering," he said over his wine goblet, "that it was Linda, with the aid of Pelon and the one-eyed Cucaracha, who managed the escape of Captain Pico." His sunken eyes watched the face of the beaming *Padre* Diego.

Padre Diego, who had heard Linda's

confession before she was married—and that was after the escape of Captain Pico—said nothing. He pretended he was mending a break in his brown robe. Presently he lifted his eyes. Dark, reddish brown they were, there in the candle light. They were the eyes of a man who loves the sunlight, the songs of birds, the smell of flowers, and the laughter of children. Kindly eyes with tiny lights of the mischievous.

"Let us drink to the happiness of a most brave man and a very, very brave woman."

They drank, draining their goblets, there in the little room with its white walls and its mended crucifix, the shadows of the candle light crossing their faces.

From the distance came the laughter and music of the wedding *fiesta*. . . .

In the deeper shadows beyond the campfires, two old soldiers of the wars talked of battles and bloodshed. Pelon and the one-eyed Cucaracha had no time for dancing and music and love making. ■ ■ ■

LADIES NOT SO FAIR

by Zeta Rothschild

By and large women in the pioneer days got away with murder. But there was one act that brought upon them the retribution handed out to men. And that was cattle-rustling. And quite a few women were hanged for stealing or buying cattle they knew had been taken from other herds. In eastern Wyoming these women were known as Cattle Kates, a name inherited from one Kate Maxwell who with her man was lynched for welcoming stolen cattle.

Jim Averill, Kate's boy friend, had a small saloon and store which catered to the roughest cowboys in the neighborhood. Nearby Kate had a ranch. And her herd of cattle increased beyond the capacity of the cows to procreate. It was generally held by

neighboring ranchmen that the cowboys dated up Kate and in return for her favors brought her stolen cattle. And with the cooperation of Averill, the supply of cowboys and cattle supplied Kate's ranch so generously that finally the ranchers decided to take action. They hanged Averill and Kate from the same cottonwood tree.

Other Cattle Kates flourished temporarily in other sections of the west. Most of these women were hard-boiled, leather-skinned bag-shaped elderly women. But in Colorado was a handsome Cattle Kate known to her contemporaries as Queen Anne. It is said she died of poisoning administered by her neighbors who got tired of losing cattle to her.

A GUN FOR SATAN'S RANGE

(Continued from page 57)

ing. Lawyer let the silence stretch thin before he broke it. "I need that land along the Brazos. I need this building for a fort if I'm to expand a cattle empire. The land belongs to no one man. It goes to the man big enough to take it and hold it." He shook his finger at Jim Priest. "Ranger, you just find me a law that says that ain't so." Swinging around to Oldfield, Lawyer touched on a sore spot. "You yelp about me stealing from you. Hell, you killed the Comanches and drove the rest off to claim what you got."

Oldfield pounded the dresser with his fist. "I know you, Lawyer. A damned renegade that's thrown in with the Mexicans. Hire your shooters then! I'll get me shooters too!"

"Ease off," Priest warned. "We'll never agree this way."

"There'll be no agreement," Oldfield stated flatly. "Lawyer wouldn't keep it anyway"

The stubby man had had enough. He shoved himself away from the wall, his hand curled around the butt of his gun. "I'll have satisfaction for that remark, sir!"

"Sit down," Priest said softly, and Lawyer looked at him for a long moment. Gone was the softness in Priest's face. His eyes were hard now, and there was little humor in the long lips half hidden beneath the drooping mustache. The candlelight flickered as the wind found small entrances and danced long shadows on the wall. "I said sit down," Priest repeated.

The room grew quiet. "Both of you will have to give," Priest said at last. "When I came here I thought I could decide and let it go at that, but I can't. Oldfield, you're a hard head. You want your way and no one else's. Lawyer, I'm not sure what you really want, but Texas can do without you if you decide to make trouble. Whatever I say we'll all stick to—is that understood?"

"I'll stick to nothing!" Oldfield said.

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"I don't like a man to push anything down my throat," Lawyer said. "You and your friend only add up to two. How far do you think you can get?"

"Anywhere we want to go," Priest said firmly.

Oldfield didn't like the way things were going and said so. "By golly I asked for the law to help, and all I get is talk. If you want to help a man, then run him out of the country!" He pointed a damning finger at Lawyer.

The burly man muttered and made to leave his seat, but Priest closed with him and pulled him over backward onto the floor. When he stood erect he had Lawyer's guns and threw them under the bed. Lawyer looked like a man ready to go after Priest with his knuckles, but the tall ranger waited with a calmness that made him dangerous.

Leaving his place by the dresser, Oldfield said, "I always wanted to meet this rooster without his spurs."

"Throw your gun on the bed," Priest suggested, and, when Oldfield hesitated a second longer than the ranger thought necessary, Priest jerked it free of Oldfield's belt, and it followed Lawyer's weapons.

This wrung a bellow from the old man, and he made a wild swing at Priest's head, but the ranger slid under it and bore Oldfield back into the pine dresser. It went over with a crash, carrying Oldfield into the log wall.

Jim Priest walked to the door and called, "Garvey? Come up here a minute."

MOCCASINS shuffled in the hall, and the door opened. Garvey's eyes grew round when he saw the smashed dresser and Oldfield rubbing a knot on the back of his head. "Been busy, haven't you?" he said.

"Take Oldfield down to the storeroom and lock him up," Priest said. Garvey motioned for the old man to get to his feet and Oldfield complied.

"What kind of law are you?" Jane snapped. "Lock *him* up! He started the whole thing." She pointed to Lawyer.

"This old hothead is going to stay where he can't get into trouble," Priest stated flatly. "Take him down, Jeff."

"I'll settle this with you some time," Oldfield promised and went out without a fuss.

Lawyer had watched this without comment. A large grin spread across his face and he murmured, "By god, ranger—you're all right."

Jane shot him a withering glance and turned her temper on Priest. She slapped him a stinging blow that left a red mark through his whiskers. "Rangers!" She spit on the floor. "You want to know why I think Pa was locked up? You were paid off—that's why."

Lawyer chuckled. "You see what I got to put up with, Priest?"

"Get out of here," the ranger said, and Lawyer went out the door.

Priest stood in the doorway and watched him until the man joined Esqueda, then toed the door closed, and leaned against it. Jane sat down suddenly and stared at the dirty floor. "What are you going to do with my father?"

"Keep him alive," Priest said very gently and blew out his breath. He sat down then and weariness leaned on him. When he ran his hand over his cheeks, the whiskers whispered above the sound of the rain. He looked at the girl and found her studying him. "You were right. Lawyer offered us a sack full of dust. That's all the man thinks of—money."

"And you took it!"

He shook his head slowly from side to side. "Believe what you want, but I have a job to do. I'll do it too." He leaned forward and rubbed his hands together. "Ten years from now things will be different, believe me, but right now Texas is young and licking her wounds. She needs time to grow and strong people to

A GUN FOR SATAN'S RANGE

grow in her. When I make the choice, it won't be on who's right, but who's best for Texas. Do you understand?"

She studied him in the flickering light. "What kind of a man are you to make those kind of decisions?"

"A tired man," he murmured. "A ranger is Texas law, and he don't have a judge handy to turn his cases over to. There's no thanks for it—just a short life—but it's a great one."

He stood up then and walked to the door, throwing it open. Down below in the store, the keeper was talking to Jeff Garvey. Snatches of their conversation floated up above the beat of the weather.

Jane stood up, the rustle of her homespun dress a sharp whisper to his awareness. She listened to the voices for a moment, then said, "Your friend is not like you at all."

"No. He's different."

"And it worries you?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes. Like a man worries about his horse stepping into a hole on a dark night. Not that it would be the horse's fault—" he let the rest trail off. "Could we put up here?"

"Take the last room at the end of the hall," she said, and he went downstairs.

Lawyer and Esqueda were waiting in the bar. Jeff Garvey drew Priest's attention to this with a nod and followed Priest in, his spurs trailing along the floor.

Before Lawyer could get an argument under way, Jim Priest said, "Disband your shooters, Lawyer, or else keep them out of this settlement. Oldfield will not take up a gun against you. I'll hear out the case tomorrow and settle it once and for all."

Lawyer considered for a moment, then asked, "What if I refuse?"

"Then I'll assume that you're warlike and run your tail into the ground."

"That might make a big chore before you got through. You think you can?"

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"There's little doubt in my mind," Priest said and waited for the man's decision. With a sigh, Lawyer turned away, nodded to Esqueda, and left the building. Garvey walked to the front door and stood there as the two men pounded away into the rain.

Priest was leaning heavily against the plank bar when Garvey turned back; he ordered two whiskies and they stood there in silence. Garvey took a neat swallow, washed it around in his mouth, then said, "I got a good look at Lawyer's poke. Let's not be fools about this thing, Jim."

"What happens to Oldfield then?"

Garvey gave a little snort of disgust. "Hell, you can't wipe everybody's nose, Jim. He'd make out somewhere else."

"He's old," Jim said. "He won't last long." He tipped the cup up and drained it then set it down. "We got a room at the end of the hall. I'll see you there."

FROM the storekeeper, Priest took the key to the back storeroom and opened it. Oldfield had a candle thrust in a knot hole and lay back on some grain sacks. Priest sat down and said, "Get cooled off yet?"

"That dog makes me see red," Oldfield said. "You going to let me out of here?"

"Tomorrow morning," Priest told him. "Garvey and I'll decide how this thing will be settled."

"I wish I had a chew," Oldfield said. Garvey handed him some twist, then pocketed it after Oldfield bit off a generous chew. "I been here for nearly twenty years," he said. "All of this I build with my own hands. Seven sons I lost to the Comanches. Jane, she's all I got left now."

"Except a dream," Priest said softly.

Oldfield's head came up and he looked at the ranger with a burning intensity. "You know?"

"Every man knows," Jim said, "Every man has one—that is, if he's worth anything."

"Your friend's different," Oldfield said bluntly. "He don't see it."

Jim Priest let out a long breath. "No, he don't see it. There's always hope though."

"Not for some men," Oldfield said. "I was worried. I didn't know how much sway Garvey had over you. I don't worry none now." Priest went to stand up, but Oldfield grabbed him by the sleeve. "Wait! If you know Garvey that well, why do you put up with him?"

"You don't shoot a horse because you *think* he's bad, do you?" He went out and locked the door.

As he passed Jane Oldfield's door, Priest saw the light under the gap between panel and floor, and he paused, then passed on. Garvey had promoted a tub of hot water and was finishing a bath when Priest entered. Drying himself, Garvey put his long-handled underwear back on and stretched out on the bed. From the shelves below he had helped himself to the cigars and now lighted one. He blew a few smoke rings then said, "I feel sorry for a man like Oldfield."

"Why?"

"Must be hell to be old."

Priest smiled. "When you're old, you're smart. That's reward enough."

Garvey disagreed. "Lawyer's not too old, and he's smart. I like him. He's different."

"How different?"

Garvey shrugged. "Oldfield thinks about building, but he's through. Lawyer likes money. Give me a man who likes money, and I'll show you a man who will go places."

Priest set the candle on the dresser and filled a pan of water to shave. For a mirror, a polished gold pan hung against the logs. The scrape of the razor was loud in the room. Priest wiped a gob of lather on the rim of the pan and asked. "Why do you stick with the Rangers, Jeff? There's no money in it."

A GUN FOR SATAN'S RANGE

"I don't know," Garvey admitted. "Maybe it's a feeling I get—of being someone. I can go into a town and get a free meal or a free kiss. I like things that are free, Jim. You never did."

"No," Priest admitted. "I never did. Man always has to pay up sooner or later, and I figured it was easier to do it as he went along."

Garvey laughed and lay back to stare at the ceiling beams. "You irk me sometimes, Jim. I can't figure you out. I run and run, trying to get ahead of you, but when I get where I'm going I always find you waiting for me."

PRIEST finished his shave and wiped his face, turning when the door panel rattled beneath a fist. Garvey raised himself to his elbows and snaked his .44 free of the scabbard.

Jim Priest opened the door.

Jose Esqueda leaned against the frame, a thin smile on his dark face and a cigar between his even teeth. Priest said, "What do you want?"

"Leetle talk," Esqueda said and entered the room. He was shorter than Priest, but he had a lithe strength.

Garvey swung his feet to the floor and waited with his attention honed. He held the Dragoon carelessly in his lap. Esqueda eyed the gun and smiled thinly.

"Make your talk and get out," Priest said.

"So unfriendly—but never mind." He walked over to the rough chair and sat down. "Senors, you are going to make the decision on the land, no? Good." From his jacket pocket he drew Lawyer's poke and tossed it on the floor. "Fate hangs in the balance, senors. A careful decision is one of value, is it not?"

Priest's face settled, and his eyes turned brittle. "Get out!"

The Mexican's hand went out in an appealing gesture. "You are angry—such a

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shame. Who would know of this little transaction?"

"I would," Priest said. "Every time I shaved I'd know it." He took a step toward the swarthy man.

Esqueda lost his sense of humor, and his eyes grew mean. "Do not try the heavy hand with me, *senor* ranger. I am not—how you say—easy?"

"Let's see," Priest said and slapped him heavily in the face.

Garvey said, "What the hell, Jim," and stood up.

Reacting like an explosion, Esqueda leaped to his feet and drew his ornate revolver. Jim Priest seized the man's wrist and twisted savagely, causing Esqueda to drop the gun and curse. Priest hit him then with a closed fist, a short, meaty blow that raised blood on Esqueda's cheek. The Mexican cascaded backward, pawing for balance, then hit the door solidly. Priest was on him like a catamount, hammering at his face and body with carooming blows.

Esqueda dimly remembered that he had another gun and tried to pick it free, but Priest beat him to it and threw it in the corner. Priest sledged him between the eyes, and Esqueda lost control of himself, sagging as though he were suddenly tired.

Throwing open the door, Priest said, "Take this pig downstairs and see that he gets on his horse." Stooping, he tossed the poke to Garvey. "Give him that back too."

A moment later Priest heard Esqueda thumping down the stairs as Jeff Garvey dragged him to the street level. Righting what little furniture was in the room, Priest picked Esqueda's guns off the floor and looked at them. He removed his own from the holster and compared them. Rusted from long exposure and infrequent cleaning, second hand when he bought it, Priest put it in his saddle bag, along with one of Esqueda's Dragoons. The other he slipped in his scabbard. It was like that. The cheaper the man, the fancier his wea-

pon. Pearl handles. Chased silver—Priest felt a moment's self consciousness at wearing it.

He glanced up then and found Jane Oldfield standing in the open doorway. "To the victor go the spoils—is that it?"

"Mine was wore out," he said. "What are you doing up?"

"I heard the fight," she said.

"Better go back to bed," he said and pushed her gently from the room. He stood there while she shuffled down the hall in her bare feet, then Garvey came back up the steps, and Priest closed the door, shooting the bolt.

"Esqueda's sore," Garvey said then whistled when he saw the gun in Priest's holster. "What about me?"

"You whip the next one," Priest said and blew out the candle.

The straw tick had a musty, wet smell, but he lay back and listened to the rain pound at the walls. This satisfied him, a man who asked for little. He was warm now, and dry, and nothing else mattered for the moment. Tomorrow was over the hill yet, and, to Priest, it was too far away to worry about.

He fell into a dreamless sleep

CHAPTER THREE

Law Dies Hard

AWAKING to the pelt of rain against the rawhide window, Priest rose and dressed. Garvey was already up and tramping down the stairs. Priest called down after him. "Let Oldfield out of the storeroom." Jane and her father were in the bar room eating when Priest came down. Garvey said, "Nothing but Tortillas and beans." Priest shrugged and took his plate.

Oldfield wiped his plate then licked his fingers. "Heard you and that Mexican had a tussle last night."

"Somewhat," Priest admitted and let the conversation lag.

A GUN FOR SATAN'S RANGE

Worry made deep tracks in Oldfield's forehead. "Priest, I have faith in you—doing the right thing, I mean, but how are you going to make Lawyer toe the line?"

"How would I make you toe the line if I gave the land to Lawyer?" Priest asked.

Oldfield stared at the ranger for a moment, then lowered his head. "That is a good question, ain't it?"

Jeff Garvey got up and walked to the front door, throwing it open. The light outside was a dull gray and water fell in slanting sheets. "Damn the rain," he said, goaded by a deep restlessness. "All we've had now is rain."

"Make the grass grow," Priest told him and smiled at Garvey's disgusted expression.

"I don't understand how you're going to settle this," Oldfield said, unable to get his mind off it.

"It all depends on what you and Lawyer want the land for," Jim told him. "Garvey and I will decide."

"Lawyer is coming in then?" Jane asked.

"Any time now," Priest said and took his tin plate to the bar.

Garvey waited by the door for fifteen minutes, then said, "Here he comes, Jim. Esqueda's with him, and he has another gun."

"Can't you give me my pistol back?"

"No guns," Priest said and waited.

Lawyer came in first and removed the canvas he had wrapped around him. He beat his hat against his leg to remove the water and took off his heavy coat. Priest said, "Just lay your revolver on the bar. You too, Esqueda."

The Mexican's face was swollen and mottled with bruises, and Priest was coked for trouble, but both men shed their guns without protest. Both took a cup of liquid at the bar, then indicated that they were ready for the hearing.



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Priest got up and walked the length of the room, his hands behind him. Garvey stayed at the table, a nervous man who had a hard time finding things to do with his hands. Oldfield and his daughter waited with a stolid patience. "There's no question that Oldfield was here first," Priest said. "The important thing is, which one of you is going to develop the land to the betterment of Texas?" He gave each of them a long glance. "Lawyer, you say that you want to build a vast empire. Oldfield, you make a claim that you need land for the growth of Texas. All right, here's my decision. To the man I give the land to, I want his promise that he'll turn fifty percent of his holdings over to farmers—settlers who will build homes and raise towns. Oldfield, will you do this?"

The man's heavy face pulled into a mat of wrinkles. "Yes, I'd give my word to that. If they were honest folks."

Priest speared Lawyer with a glance. "And you. Would you pledge your word?"

"What the hell is this?" Lawyer asked with considerable heat. "I fought Comanches and Mexicans alike for my land. I give none of it up." He pointed a finger at Garvey. "What the hell's the matter with your tongue? Don't you have some say in this?"

Garvey's smile was wide and wicked. "Jim can have his own way as far as I'm concerned. I'm satisfied."

Esqueda pounded the bar with his hand, and Lawyer whirled on him, trying to cool him off, but the Mexican hit Lawyer and faced Garvey. "Filthy gringo pig!" He shouted. "Your promises are worthless! You took the gold and said you would give us the land."

Esqueda remembered his gun on the bar and made a long dive for it.

Having been waiting for this, Jeff Garvey shot from beneath the table; his gun had been out and ready. Esqueda threw up his hands and tumbled backward against the bar, very dead.

Oldfield swore in his deep booming voice and charged Lawyer, trying to break the man with his two hands.

Whirling, Priest came at Garvey, but the man tipped the table over and made the doorway in one driving leap. He paused there with his gun in his hand and said, "Sorry, Jim. Don't be a fool now and try to stop me from leaving."

He turned and ran up the stairs.

Priest whirled and tried to separate the fighting men. Oldfield had Lawyer on the floor and already the smaller man's face was a deep color. Pulling at Oldfield was trying to dislodge a boulder, so Priest rapped the man along the ear with the barrel of his gun. Oldfield wilted and Lawyer moaned softly to himself.

NOT being able to trust the girl, Priest threw both guns out into the mud in front of the building, then turned toward the stairs. Jane gave him a withering glance, and said, "Your ranger friend was not even an honest crook. He leaves us worse now than we were before you came here."

"I'll take care of Garvey," Priest said. "No trouble until I get back." He saw the words run off her and knew that he had no argument. In one stroke, Garvey's duplicity had ruined his chances for any kind of a peace. He turned then and ran for the stairs.

Jeff Garvey opened the door as Priest was halfway up; they shot together. Garvey's bullet screamed off the wall while Priest's chipped wood from the doorframe by Garvey's head. He slammed the door and retreated into the room.

Through the panel, Priest called, "Jeff! Throw down the gun and come out. You're under arrest."

Garvey laughed. "Why should I do that, Jim. I can spot you one and beat you to the pull every time. We've had fun, Jim. Let's let it go at that. I don't want to kill you."

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"Then throw down your gun and submit to proper authority."

Garvey laughed again and shot. A long splinter ripped off the panel and sailed out into the store below. "Did I get you, Jim? Jim?"

Priest stepped back and jolted the panel with a kick. There was some give to it, and he hit it again, drawing another shot that missed him narrowly. "Jim!" Garvey called. "Don't make me do this, Jim."

"Too late now," Priest called and rammed it with his shoulder. The latch split, dumping him into the room.

Garvey worked his gun with a frantic haste, as did Priest, and the room filled with acrid powder and the wicked flash of flame. Jeff Garvey stopped shooting and sat down suddenly, his gun slipping from his lax hand. Priest inspected a bullet-creased shoulder, then crossed to where Garvey sat against the wall.

The man's wind was coming in a bubbly sigh, the bullet having taken him high in the left breast. Priest brushed Garvey's gun away and said, "Sorry, old horse, but you knew how I was."

Garvey tried to grin. "You were always the steady one, Jim. Always the tough one." He slid down then.

Jim Priest saw that he was dead.


When he came downstairs he saw that Oldfield and Lawyer were both gone. Only Jane Oldfield remained. He spent a few minutes loading his pearl-handled gun, then said, "Two dead men for a damn sack of gold. It isn't worth it."

"You knew Garvey a long time?"

"Too long and too well," Priest stated. He went behind the bar and poured himself a drink, then took it to the table where he sat for a long moment. "Where's your father and Lawyer?"

"Gone," Jane said. "They went home to get guns. They'll hire men now. Men like Esqueda and your friend who are only interested in gold."

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"I'll have to stop them," Priest said.

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Can you? It's good that you believe in yourself because my father wouldn't."

Priest raised his head and stared at her. "Is that the way you feel? Do you think I knew of Garvey taking Lawyer's gold?"

"No, Jim—I don't. But father does. He thinks you betrayed Lawyer and will do the same with him." The girl reached across the table and touched his hand. "Why do you keep this job, Jim? For the adventure? I don't think so. You're a builder, Jim, only you don't stop long enough to really build."

"Tried it," Priest said. "There's something in me, Jane, but not enough to make it alone. Maybe that's why I put up with Jeff Garvey, because I never wanted to be alone." He reached across the table and took her arm. She didn't pull away from him. "I'll take you home," he said gently.

"It isn't necessary, Jim."

Priest smiled faintly and murmured. "Permit a man one pleasure in life."

"Oh," she murmured and grew quiet.

Esqueda still lay where Garvey's bullet had thrown him, and the storekeeper came in then, moving his hands nervously. He nodded to the room upstairs and said, "You going to leave him there?"

"Bury them both out in back," Priest said and steered the girl to the door.

Since Garvey would have no more use for his horse, Priest lifted her into the saddle and they rode from the settlement. Rain continued to pelt them, and he took the blanket from behind Garvey's saddle and threw it around her. With the settlement behind them it seemed as though they had dropped off into nothingness for this land knew no break in its monotony. There was no sign of life.

IN AN hour they raised the wooden block house that was Oldfield's headquarters. The old man threw open the door and let the rain drench him as Priest helped the girl down.

The bottom floor was one large room with sleeping quarters in the loft. A blackened fireplace bracketed a roaring fire, and Priest backed against it to dry out. A huge table sat in the center of the room with a hollow gouged out of the middle. In a land where pots and bowls were scarce, this served as a central dish which the eater ladled out of.

A few sticks of willow furniture filled out the room's bareness.

Oldfield stood away from Priest, his wrinkled face firm and intolerant. Priest shot him a glance and asked, "Are you willing to listen to reason or not?"

"I listened once," Oldfield pointed out. "Garvey showed plain enough where you and him stood."

"Garvey's dead," Priest said flatly. "I give you and Lawyer a decision, and it'll stick."

Patting his gun, Oldfield said, "This is a decision that sticks. Lawyer is through—I told him so at the settlement. If the man gets in my way again, I'll kill him out sight."

"The night I got here you said you called in the law to prevent killing. Esqueda and Garvey are dead now because you two couldn't take no for an answer. I say it now—the first man that lifts a gun will answer to me. Remember that, Oldfield."

Oldfield swayed forward, ready to take up the fight, but Jane's voice cut into the old man and he relaxed. "I've had enough!" she said. "All my life it's been fighting. First one thing then another. What are you going to gain by being stubborn? What good are you to me when you're dead?" She turned away suddenly, and Oldfield stared at her.

"You'll die," she said. "And Priest will go away." She gave Jim Priest a quick glance and color appeared in her cheeks.

"Ah," Oldfield said softly. "I see."

Lawyer came into the yard cautiously, then seemed relieved when Oldfield faced him. Water poured off the man's poncho and the muzzle of a Sharps thrust out from

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the folds. Lawyer remained mounted but a flicker of surprise crossed his dark face when Priest came and stood beside Oldfield.

"I have no quarrel with you," Lawyer said and pointed to the ranger.

"Say your say and get out," Oldfield said tightly.

"All right," Lawyer said. "You've lived too long. If I see you around the settlement again, I'll shoot you."

"There'll be no shooting," Priest insisted in his soft voice.

"Very well," Lawyer said. "I'll save a bullet for you then." He wheeled the horse.

Oldfield shook his huge fist at the departing man. "I built that settlement with my own two hands! You'll not turn it into a robber's roost, Lawyer! I'll see you in hell first." The big man whirled and found Priest blocking his path. "Out of my way. I'd not like to smash you, man, but I can no longer trust you."

"I'll take care of Lawyer," Priest insisted and held his ground.

"That's my job," he said. "Take care not to get in my way or you'll go with him." He brushed Priest aside and went to the corral to catch his horse.

Jane Oldfield bit her lip and tears appeared in her eyes. "Can't you keep them apart, Jim? Lawyer is a shooter."

"I'll stop them," Priest said.

Her eyes grew round as understanding touched her. "With a gun!"

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"How do I know?" he snapped.

Jane Oldfield grabbed Priest by the lapels of his shirt and held him. "Would you shoot my father, Jim?"

"Depends on him. Will he let Lawyer go alive now? Or will he insist on killing the man? It's up to him, not me." Priest left the doorway and stepped into the saddle.

"I'm going with you," Jane said, but Priest didn't wait for her. Oldfield had already caught up a horse and was disappearing in the rain. Priest trotted from the yard, and, when he looked back, Jane was mounting with a long-barreled rifle.

Priest saw Oldfield's horse in the stable when he came to the muddy front and flung off. Entering the saloon, he saw Oldfield at a table, the long-barreled rifle before him. Priest said nothing, just stood in the open doorway facing the street, blocking the opening. Jane Oldfield came into the settlement and went immediately to the stables. She dismounted and stood there cradling her caplock rifle.

FOR an hour Priest waited, then he saw a horse coming out of the murk and recognized Lawyer. Priest waited until Lawyer stepped and swung off, then stepped down into the mud. The burly man gave Priest a hard look and shifted the rifle he carried.

"Get out of my way," Lawyer said.

"You're leaving now," Priest said and waited. He heard a movement behind him and called back, "Stay still, Oldfield. Interfere and I'll take a pistol to you!"

"I don't want to kill a ranger," Lawyer said stubbornly.

"You're not going to kill anyone," Priest said and drew his .44 Colt. The click of the hammer was loud in this silence. "There'll be no fighting."

"Death is the only thing he understands," Oldfield said. "He wouldn't leave us alone."

Priest felt this thing saw at him and placed the weight on Lawyer. "Throw your

rifle in the mud, Lawyer. Your Bowie knife too." The man hesitated, then the rifle hit the mud. The knife followed it.

Oldfield stepped past Priest then, and the ranger said, "Lay your arms down to. That's a final warning."

Stubbornness was a deep-seated thing in Oldfield. Without it he would have been unable to cling to this wild land, fighting savages and bandits to build. Priest understood that and knew that he was pushing the old man about as far as he could be pushed. Oldfield said, "When I cock my rifle, Lawyer is a dead man."

"The man is unarmed," Priest said.

Lawyer made a sideways dive, clawing in the folds of his coat. His hand came free with a single shot pistol, and he flung the ball at Oldfield, missing by a scant inch. Lawyer wheeled to run, and Priest shot low, dropping him into the mud. The man was not dying and tried to drag himself to his horse.

The old man had his weapon shouldered and centered between Lawyer's eyes. The downed man's mouth was working noiselessly as he tried to plead for his life. Like figures in a wax museum they waited there.

"Touch it off," Priest said softly, "and I'll shoot you. Let him go now, Oldfield. He's wounded, and he knows he's through."

"I'll go," Lawyer said hurriedly. "I'm done! I'm beat!"

"I can no longer believe what you say," Oldfield said, and his hand tightened.

Lawyer let out a frightened bleat that was drowned in the husking report of a rifle. Jim Priest felt a hand strike him and slam him flat in the mud. He clung to his gun and consciousness, and he heard Jane Oldfield calling to her father, her voice twisted by pain and the wind.

Her boots splashed through the mud, and she bent, taking the .44 from Priest's hand. Oldfield stared at her, but he still held the rifle on Lawyer. Jane pointed Jim Priest's gun at her father and said, "We've had enough, Pa. Drop the rifle!"

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He stared at her for a long moment, then asked, "You'd shoot me? Your own father." He pointed to Lawyer who clutched his bullet-bored leg and worried. "For him?"

"Not for him," she said, shooting a glance at Priest. "Are you hit bad?"

He tried to move his shoulder and found that it was broken. The pain made him feel faint, but he said, "You ought to know. You aimed the damned gun."

Oldfield understood then, for he put the rifle down. Jane sobbed and knelt in the mud, lifting Priest. "I couldn't let you kill him. You can see that, can't you."

"I guess," Priest murmured.

"You can build now, Jim—there's nothing to stop you." She brushed at the mud clinging to his face.

"I told you once that I didn't like to do anything alone." He pawed at the ooze. "Get me out of this mud hole."

Oldfield came around to the other side and lifted Priest in his massive arms. He carried him upstairs and into the front room.

With three cups of Joe Gideon whisky in him, Priest found that he could stand the probing without yelling like an Indian.

Jane fashioned a bandage and propped him to a half sitting position. Oldfield sat in the crude chair studying the ranger. "My daughter's taken a fancy to you," he said bluntly.

"Maybe I won't be alone after all," Jim murmured, and when, he looked at her, she didn't avert her eyes.

Oldfield puffed his pipe for a moment, then asked, "How much do they pay you for this?"

"Twenty a month," Priest said.

"It ain't enough," Oldfield insisted.

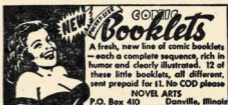
"This time it is," Jim insisted and shocked Oldfield when he pulled the girl against him and kissed her.

Oldfield closed the door after him when he went out. ■ ■ ■

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