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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

SECOND OCTOBER NUMBER

FEATURING

STRANGER ON THE PROD

by Barry Cord

GIRL OF THE HOME RANCH

by Ben Frank

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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there. Who knows, I might still be bumming Chesterfields instead of selling them.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., hack in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it *fast* or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my hell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics ineluded. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

Came week-end liberty, I studied. Came a holiday, I studied. Came the end of the six weeks, I was top man in the class. Within six weeks I had mastered two years of high school math, thanks to the training I'd gotten.

I.C.S. made the impossible—easy!

30th Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND OCTOBER NUMBER

October 22, 1954
Volume 188, No. 1

RANCH ROMANCES

CONTENTS

ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

HELEN TONO
Editor

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Lonely in Korea

Dear Folks:

I am sending my name and address to RANCH ROMANCES, in hope I will meet lots of friends by mail. I am in the service in Korea, and I don't get much mail. I will try very hard to answer every letter. I am 26, weigh 175 lbs., and stand 6′ 1″. I like some sports, such as boxing, hunting and fishing. So please write.

PVT. JOHN McCLAUEY, Jr.
US 52292203
HQ & Sve Co.
194th Engr C Bn.
APO 264 c/o PM
San Francisco, Calif., Box 126

More G.I.'s

Dear Sirs:

Just a couple of lonely G.I.'s in Korea. Mail situation is terrible in this part of the world. I would like to hear from girls and guys from 17 to 20. I have black hair and blue eyes, stand 5′ 6″, and weigh 130 lbs. Ray would like to hear from gals 25 to 30. He is 28, has brown hair, and weighs 165 lbs. He has served in W.W. II and in this one.

SGT. RAY McGERVEY 38193032
&
PVT. JOHN ZISSNER 26794381
HQ & HQ BTRY
75 FA BW APO 264
c/o PM, San Francisco, Calif.

A New Reader

Dear Editor:

I recently started reading your RANCH ROMANCES book and find it very interesting. I am 16, will be 17 August 27th. I'm 5′ 8″, have short black hair and brown eyes, and weigh 135 lbs. I would like to hear from servicemen. I love to write letters and really enjoy receiving them, so, boys and girls, I'm waiting for your letters.

VADA SHEPHERD

Means, Kentucky

Two Texans

Dear Editor:

We are two boys that would like to hear from girls aged 14 to 20. I'm 14, 5′ 11″, weigh 140 lbs. Kenneth is 18, 6′, and weighs 160 lbs. Both of us have black wavy hair. Both read every issue of RANCH ROMANCES. So come on all you gals, send us some mail.

RAY HODGES
KENNETH COOK

Route 3
Atlanta, Texas

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 29 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Tiny

Dear Editor:

I'm 13, have blue eyes and light brown hair, and stand 4′ 9½″ tall. I like horseback riding, swimming, singing, and piano playing. I have two other sisters and they also like to write. I will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

JUDY COLE

Box 142
Hidler, Oklahoma

Write to Her

Dear Editor:

I would like to have my name placed in Our Air Mail. I am 15, weigh 120 lbs., and have blonde hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are hillbilly music, dancing and sports. Come on, guys and gals, write to me, a lonely gal. I promise to answer.

ELOISE JAMBOR

Praque, Nebraska

Real Long Hair Stuff

Dear Sir:

I have tried several times to get into Our Air Mail. Hope I will this time. I'm 69 and all alone. I play the violin for a living. Won't someone please write to me? I am very lonely.

J. MUSGROVE

Route 3, Box 247
Concord, Texas

Short But Sweet

Dear Editor:

I'm 14½ years old, and would like some boy for a pen pal. I have blonde curly hair and blue eyes, and stand 5′ 2″ tall. You have no idea how much I would like a pen pal.

LINDA POWELL

532 Beythe
E. Gadsden, Florida

(Turn to page 129)

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by Ronald McKie

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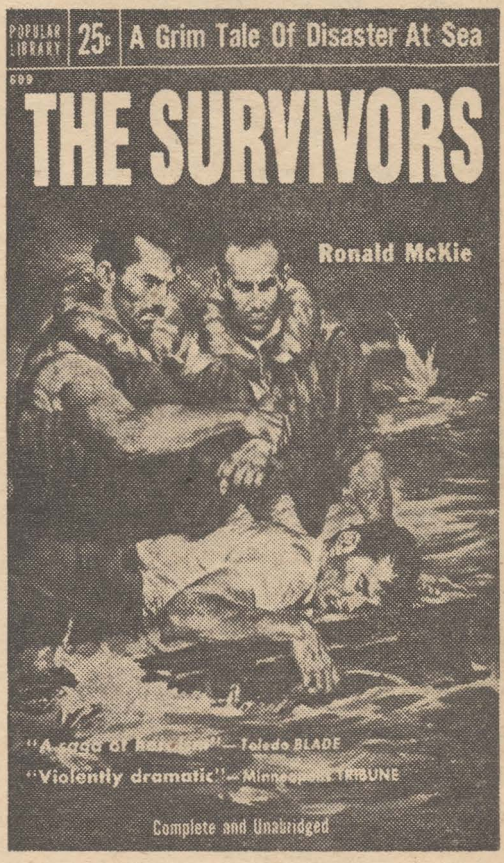

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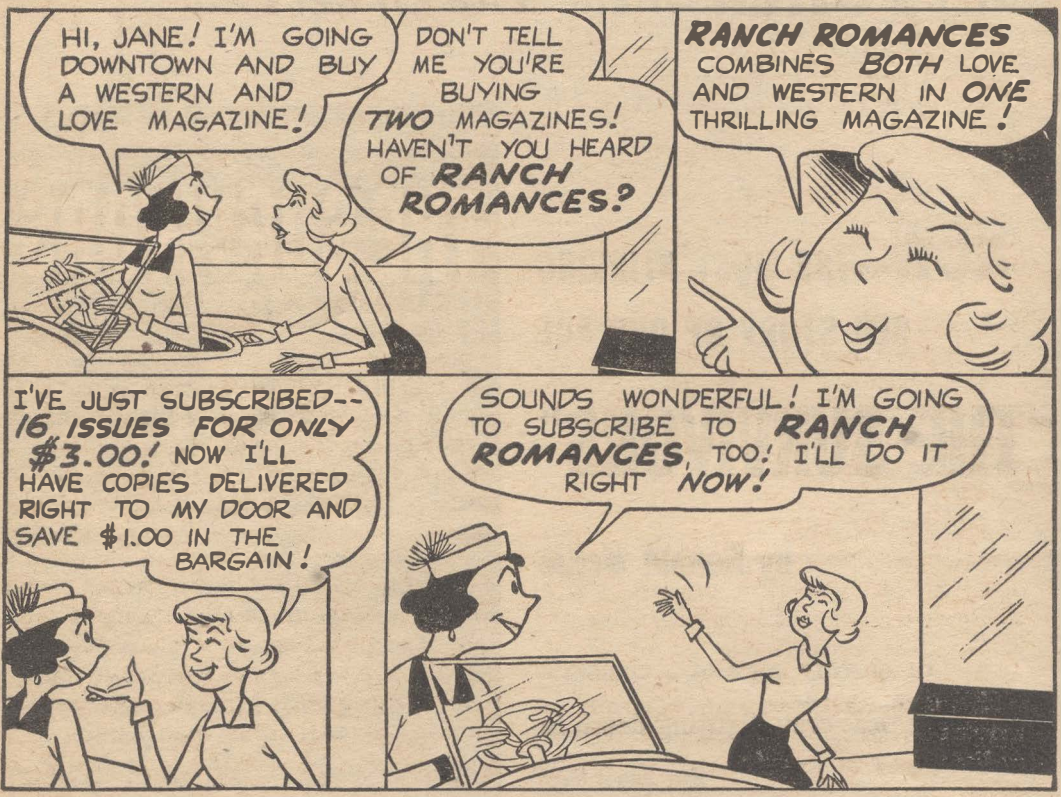

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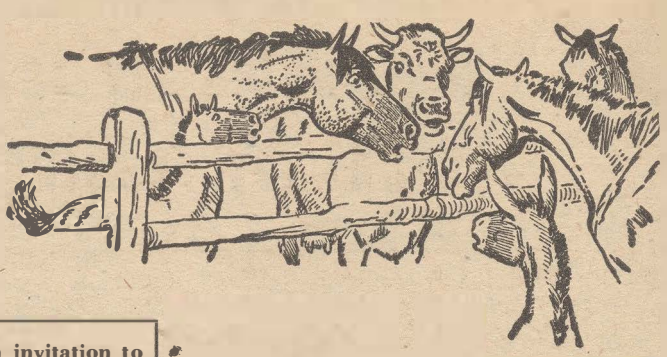


PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clipping to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

AN OMAHA, Neb., woman, shopping in a modernized department store, arrived breathless at the second floor. "They certainly make things hard," she panted. She had climbed *up* the steps of the "down" escalator.

A HOMEOWNER in Columbus, Ohio, didn't mind that a burglar broke into his house and stole a sack of groceries. What annoyed him was that the burglar took a bath and left a ring in the tub.

JUST AS AN insurance salesman in Berkeley, Calif., finished his sales talk to a prospective customer, a bullet broke through the customer's window, ricocheted off the wall, and landed at the customer's feet. The nervous prospect signed the policy. Later police explained that the bullet was fired by an unsuccessful suicide two doors down the street.

IN PHOENIX, Ariz., two cars met on a thoroughfare too narrow for both to pass. Both cars stopped, refusing to give way. Soon three young men hopped from one car. They lounged by the road, read, played cards. When, three and a half hours later, they reached for sleeping bags, the driver of the other car finally surrendered and let them pass.

A FORMER BASEBALL player and now high school physical education teacher in San Francisco, Calif., told his class, "Knowing how to jump and how to fall is important." Then he stepped back, tripped, fell and broke his arm.

IN BETHANY, Mo., a man breathed a sigh of relief when the state highway which went right by his house was re-routed. In the last five years his home had been hit 28 times by cars and trucks using the highway.

A DALLAS, Tex., cafe waiter who knows a bargain when he sees it was held up by a man who said, "Gimme $40. If you don't have $40, gimme $10." The waiter quietly handed over the ten dollars, and the thief went away.

A SCHOOL in Colville, Wash., received a letter containing a dime. The writer said she had taken a ruler belonging to the school, when she was a pupil there twenty years ago. The dime was in payment, she explained.

A PORTLAND, Ore., man was hospitalized for wounds inflicted by a deer —a mounted deer head which fell off the wall of the tavern where he worked.

A HOUSEWIFE in McAlester, Okla., learned that tidiness doesn't always pay. After giving a thorough cleaning to a house she had just leased, she discovered that she had cleaned the wrong vacant house—her new home was two blocks away.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

The Yellow Tomahawk

United Artists invade the wild country of Kenab, Utah for backgrounds to fit their rugged new Western

WE'LL give you one guess what the chief industry of Kenab, Utah, is—and we'll give you one hint. It's the same as the subject of these RANCH Flicker Talk columns.

Yes, believe it or not, Kenab specializes in Western movies. Its population is 1,300, nearly every one of whom can make himself useful around a location site. There are carpenters, electricians, stunt men, bit players, and nearly all of them belong to Hollywood unions and guilds.

No one has kept count of how many horse operas have been made in Kenab in the past 20 years, but it might be close to one hundred by now. In the scenery line the area has everything a producer could want, from forests to mountains. And it is so inaccessible—137 miles from the nearest railroad—that the country has stayed unspoiled by tourists and by those tell-tale signs of civilization like telephone poles and billboards.

Kenab doesn't even publicize the fact that it is a Western movie headquarters for fear that curiosity seekers will struggle over the mountains and through the forests to see what's going on. And that might drive the movie makers away to look for even more uncivilized locations.

The last movie made there was *The Yellow Tomahawk*, starring Rory Calhoun and Peggie Castle, and soon to be released by United Artists. It was all shot on a mesa, a mile-high plateau.

"We were really cut off from the world there," Rory told me when he got back to Hollywood. "It was easy to pretend that I was really an Indian scout, and that the only possible way to travel was on horseback. Then just as I was getting convinced that the twentieth century hadn't arrived yet, an airplane would drone overhead, or someone would get a call from Hollwood on our portable telephone."

He sounded almost regretful that these modern marvels exist, and he probably is. He much prefers life in the wilds to life in

the cities, and possibly, if he'd lived a hundred years ago, he *would* have been a Western scout.

Naturally he was enthusiastic about *The Yellow Tomahawk*, which is a story about Cheyennes on the warpath, seeking revenge against a cavalry officer they call, with good reason, "The Butcher." Adam, the scout Rory plays, is torn between his long friendship with the Indians and his loyalty to his own race.

"I suppose there's nothing very original about that story," Rory admitted, "but the rugged locations, photographed in color, make it seem different. And the characters are interesting enough to make an old story seem fresh."

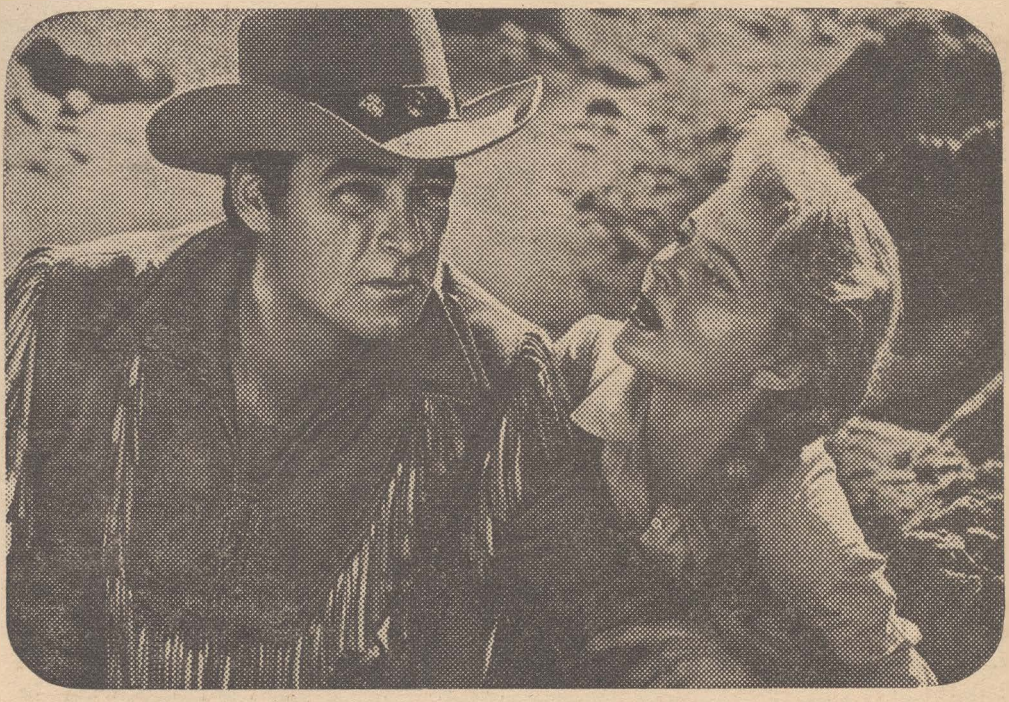
He said that no one in the story was too noble to be believable, including the hero and the heroine (Peggie Castle). The villain, however, (Warner Anderson) does just about hit bottom in treachery. The main Indian character, Fire Knife, (Lee Van Cleef) is like Adam, torn between friendship and loyalty. And to lighten all this exciting drama, there are two hilarious comedy characters, a Mexican named Tonio and an Indian girl named Honey Bear, played by Noah Beery and Rita Moreno.

And perhaps one reason the Indian-white man story never gets stale is that it happened so many times in real life.

Something like it happened to the original settlers in Kenab. They were Mormans, fleeing Indians on the warpath, when they arrived at this remote and isolated spot. The small band settled there and built their houses and raised their families.

The original settlers certainly never could have dreamed that their descendants would flee murderous Indians over and over again, and even get killed by them—over and over again.

What was once a life-and-death matter in Kenab is now a profitable employment, and the townspeople may well thank the Indians—first for sparing their ancestors, and second for providing the plot that nowadays means money in the bank.



Peggie Castle distracts Indian scout Rory Calhoun from his job

VAN JOHNSON
Serious Actor

RANCH FLICKER TALK

WHEN I think about a "serious actor," I get a mental picture of a Laurence Oliver type with a heroic face and a brooding expression. That description doesn't fit Van Johnson at all, and yet I believe he's the most serious actor I know.

He completely buries himself in whatever part he's playing. While he's working in the role, he's constantly inwardly stewing about the character.

And I believe that if Van weren't so serious about his work his career might be over by now. After all, a freckle-faced, boy-next-door type of actor can't go on forever, and that's just the way Van was established in everyone's mind when he first made his splash. That very boyish quality which brought him sudden success was what he had to overcome if he wanted his success to last.

And Van has done it—without concealing a single freckle. He's now generally accepted as one of the most versatile actors in Hollywood, playing everything from musicals to Westerns. His latest, by the way, falls in the Western category. It's *The Siege at Red River*, recently released by 20th Century-Fox.

Van is also one of the busiest actors in Hollywood—he's averaged four pictures a year since 1943.

But, as I said in the first place, Van doesn't seem serious. He's always friendly, casual, never too busy to say hello. But people who work with him notice that he always disappears at lunchtime, and never joins the rest of the company in the commissary.

He brings sandwiches with him from home, and at noon he always goes off alone to his dressing room, eats his solitary lunch, and then takes a nap.

"I need a break like that in the middle of the day," Van explained. "While I eat I think about the scenes I'm going to play in the afternoon. Then I put the whole thing out of my mind and take a snooze. That way I feel that I get off to two good starts a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon."

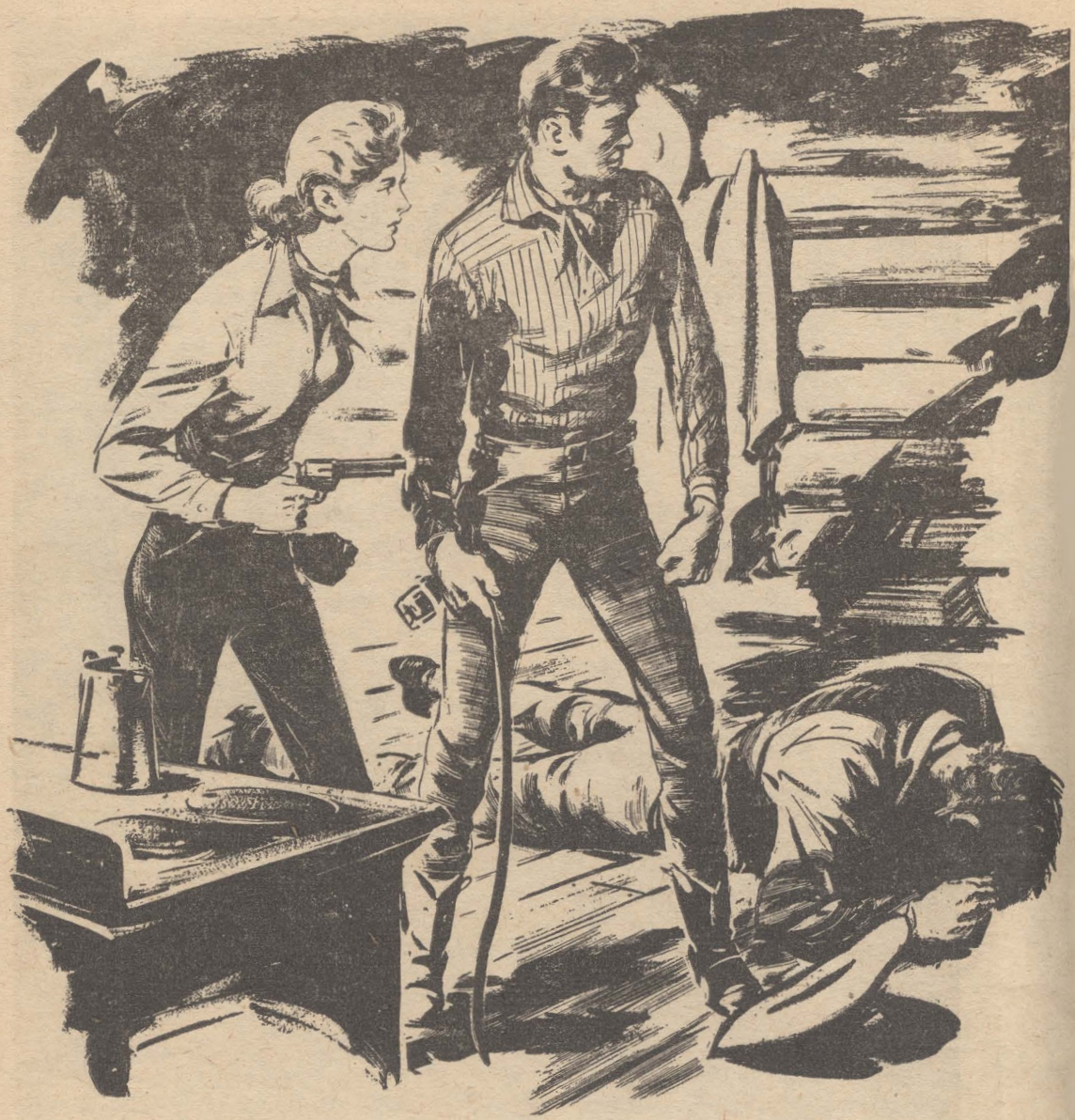
Maybe one reason Van believes so strongly in good starts is that he had a difficult time in his youth.

His childhood wasn't happy because his mother and father were divorced when he was very small. He was raised by his father, a kindly man but one who had no sympathy for his son's acting aspirations. And he lived then in Newport, R. I., where the line was sharply drawn between the fabulously wealthy summer colony and the year 'round town folks. Van decided that some day he'd get to the top and be one of the lucky ones. But once he got to the top he realized that there's more to happiness than fame and fortune. He had some personal problems of his own to untangle.

He fell in love with Evie Wynn and married her seven years ago, and by now all their difficulties are over, and their marriage is happy and serene. They have one child, Schuyler, now six.

As Van gets older he gets more happy-go-lucky, more like the uncomplicated lad he seemed to be on the surface ten years ago. In his spare time he putters around the house, and sometimes plays a few hot licks on his drums to a gramophone accompaniment. He loves to go to the beach, and he *always* gets sunburned to a rich lobster shade. And since he favors bright red socks, the effect is rather peculiar. He looks rare on the top and bottom, but well-done in the middle.

Van's boy-next-door look hasn't always helped his career



STRANGER

BRETT HAVOLIN RODE into town to learn how his friend had died . . . and found himself the next target

ALL the way into town Brett Havolin sat on his saddle in the back of the flat bed wagon and nursed his smouldering anger in morose silence. It was a ten-mile ride from where he had thumbed a lift and the morning coolness had given way to late summer heat, mixing dust and sweat into his blunt features.

He roused himself as the wagon's wheels whirred through the dust of River Road. Benton Wells, he observed sourly, was a sizeable cowtown sprawled in careless yet orderly pattern along the south bluffs of Taleback Creek.

ON THE PROD

by BARRY CORD

From what Tony had written, which had been meager in physical details. Havolin had expected to find a raw frontier settlement. This town had a placid atmosphere of buggies and children and lazy, peaceful afternoons. Even the women, he noted with cynically restrained appreciation, had that more comfortable and upholstered look one generally found in the bigger towns along the Mississippi.

The main thoroughfare was wide and tree shaded, dusty in the heat of late August.

The wagon wheels churned up a fine spray behind them.

"This will do fine, right here," Brett finally said. The rawboned farmer who had picked him up on the road early that morning hauled his bays in short and cast a close-mouthed look over his shoulder. Brett nodded briefly. "Thanks for the lift."

He dropped his saddle over the tailgate and jumped down beside it. The man clucked his team on.

Havolin remained in the middle of the street, unmindful of the curious stares that reached out to him. He was a snub-nosed, square-jawed man in his late twenties, two inches shy of six feet, and compactly put together. His reddish hair was cropped close, yet he let his sideburns grow midway down his cheeks. It was a humorous bet he had made with Tony, to let his sideburns grow if he lost, and though Tony was now dead Brett kept his end of the whimsical bargain in deference to the memory of his friend.

He thumbed his flat-crowned black felt hat back on his forehead and bent to pick up his saddle. He carried it easily, his dusty coat parting with his stride to give a glimpse of a walnut-handled Colt stuck in his belt.

He walked with a slight limp. The back of his left hand was skinned and bloody, and there was a discolored knob over his right eye.

Tony had written that his country was rough, but Brett had hardly expected to have his horse shot from under him less than an hour after his arrival.

THE weathered red-brick building across the street caught his eye, and he headed directly for it. Six-inch gilt lettering across the big glass show window read: BANK OF GIBRALTAR. Brett dropped his saddle by the door and stepped inside.

The interior of the bank was cool and empty, except for the girl standing before the teller's cage. Her voice was sharp and urgent. "Now don't stand there and tell me that Walter didn't leave word for me—"

She turned as Brett closed the door behind him. She was a vivid, blue-eyed blond, tall enough to look Brett in the eye, and woman enough to fill out her summer gingham with the right amount of padding. At the moment there was a high, disturbed flush in her cheeks, and the backlash of her temper reached out to him as she turned away from the poker-faced man behind the grillwork.

"You'd look a lot better with your mouth closed," she snapped at Brett as she walked past. She had long legs and a spirited way of walking. Brett turned and raised an eyebrow, following her out with an appreciative grin. Then he turned and walked up to the cage.

The man behind it wore a green eyeshade and a weary expression on a thin, sour face. He looked sharply at Brett, his pale gray eyes noting the dusty coat, the bruises, and he started to shake his head. "It's almost closing time, stranger," he said warily. "Come back in the morning."

Brett took a thick sheaf of bills from his coat pocket and pushed them under the grillework toward the man. "I want to open an account here," he said coldly. "I might not get back to town for a week."

The teller did a quick about-face. He bobbed his head several times, his eyes seemingly fascinated by the thick pile of banknotes. "I'm sure it can be arranged, Mister—"

"Brett Havolin."

The teller riffled through the money. "Five thousand dollars," he said. "That right, Mister Havolin?"

Brett nodded. The man added respectfully. "I'll post it to your account, sir,

and have your book ready in a few minutes."

Brett reached inside his pocket for the makings. He was half turned about, staring idly through the show window, when he saw the man and the girl ride past. The man was young, tall and well set up. Brett caught the flash of white teeth against a sunbrowned face as the rider smiled.

Havolin jammed the makings back into his pocket. "I'll be right back," he murmured to the man behind the grillwork.

The riders had turned in to the tierack fifty yards down the street, in front of a three-decker, double-galleried structure that advertised itself as THE TRAIL HOUSE. Brett crossed the street in a fast stride, ducked under the short cross pole under the noses of several tired animals, and came up just as the man and the girl were mounting the hotel steps.

He murmured, "Pardon me, ma'am," as he nudged the girl aside, and as the tall man turned Brett sank his fist into the man's flat stomach, scraping his knuckles on the man's big brass belt buckle.

The tall youngster said: "Aw-w-w-w!" and Brett whipped a left hook across that snapped the other's head back sharply. An expensive soft gray J.B. skittered off curly brown hair, and the man, falling loosely, sprawled over it.

Brett rubbed his slightly bleeding knuckles into his palm, glanced at the open-mouthed girl, and politely touched his hat brim. "He had it coming," he explained gently. "When he comes to, tell him I'll be around later—with a bill—for one wall-eyed roan, worth to me one hundred dollars."

COLOR rushed back to the girl's face. Even dressed in faded blue levis and a man's white cotton shirt, there was nothing masculine about her. Her face was lightly dusted with freckles, and these, along with a short, slightly uptilted nose, gave her a young and impudent look. But she was no naive girl, and she had a temper.

"You—you insolent, arrogant brute! Chet will—he'll kill you!"

"I won't lose any sleep over it," Brett grinned. He nudged his hat again as he turned away, leaving her spluttering in helpless, fuming rage on the hotel steps.

Brett walked jauntily back to the bank. He had not expected to meet so soon the man who had coldbloodedly shot his horse from under him. Why it had happened to him, a stranger to this part of the country, and who the tall youngster was, did not immediately concern him. He would find those things out later.

The teller was just coming back to the grillwork when Brett entered. "Here's your book, Mister Havolin." His tone held a restrained curiosity. "If the bank can be of any help—"

"It can," Brett said dryly. "I'd like to get in touch with an attorney named Leo Kinsman."

The teller pursed his thin lips. "Mr. Kinsman has an office above the harness shop, two blocks south. But I'd suggest you try the Dusty Hole, a bar on Coyote Street, just around the next corner."

Brett nodded. "Where did you say you were staying in town, Mister Havolin?" the teller asked.

"I'm not staying in town," Brett answered shortly. "I'll be at the Flying Club ranch on Piute Creek, just as soon as I see Kinsman."

The Dusty Hole evidently did a desultory business during the drowsy afternoon hours. Two men were teetering at the brass rail arguing over the state of the nation in the loud, indignant tones safely used only between friends.

The man with his back to Brett wore a long black frock coat and muttonchop whiskers. His string tie had come undone and trailed down over the front of his soiled white shirt. A black beaver hat, long gone out of style, was pushed back on his high, shiny forehead. He had the puffy face and the red-veined nose of the habitual drinker, and he was shaking a finger in the long, dour face of the man opposite him.

"I tell you free silver will put this country back on its feet. If I were among those knuckleheads in Washington—"

The bartender, leaning on an elbow, looked as though he had heard this argu-

ment many times in the recent past.

Brett walked up to the drinkers. "Lawyer Kinsman?"

The man in the frock coat swung around. "That's me, son."

"I want a word with you," Brett said.

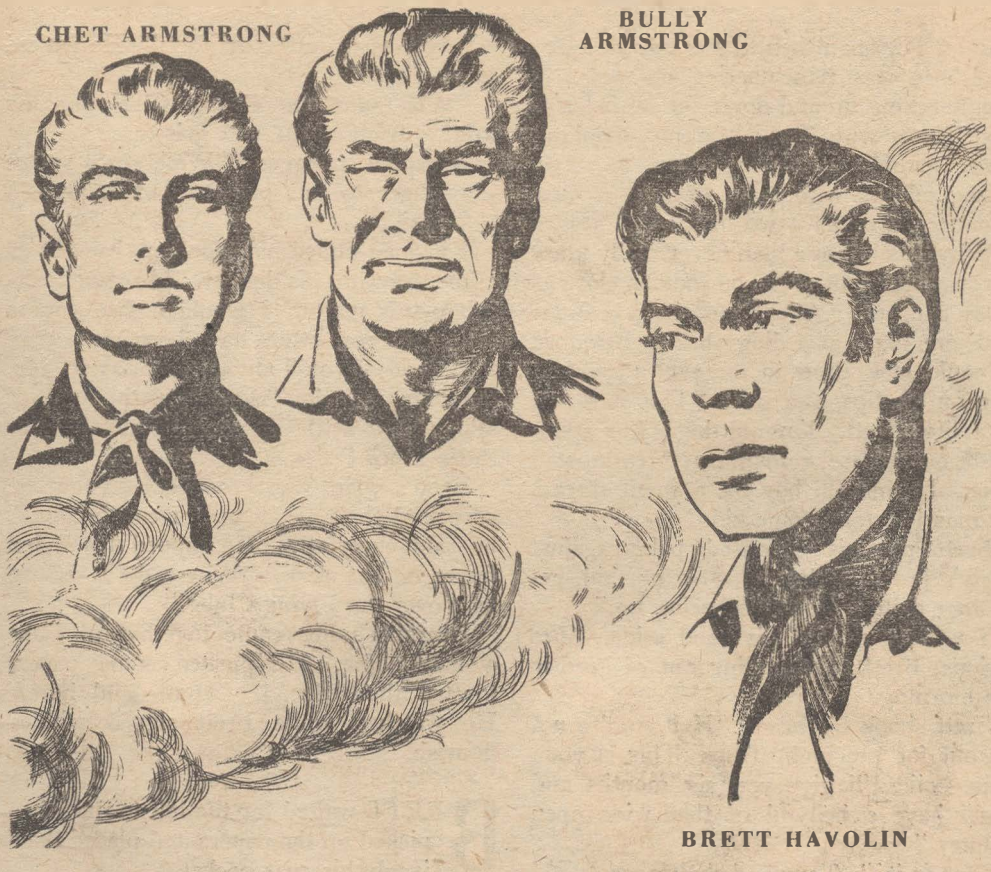
Kinsman waved him off. "Get yourself a glass of beer, son. I'll be with you as soon as I set this jackass straight on national finance—"

"The name's Brett Havolin," Brett cut in sharply. "Tony Mareno was a friend of mine."

Kinsman's voice trailed. The dour-faced man glanced at Brett. Kinsman turned quickly. His liquor-charged bluster seemed to evaporate in the shock of Havolin's idenity.

"Brett Havolin, eh?" He took the redhead by the arm and started for the door. "We'll talk in my office, son. Get much more privacy there."

They left the Dusty Hole and turned right on River Road. Kinsman walked quickly, as though he didn't want to be seen with this stranger to Benton Wells. Brett matched his stride, his lips thin with bleak amusement.



KINSMAN'S place of business was a long narrow room furnished with a dusty rolltop desk and an equally dusty bookcase holding a set of legal volumes that looked as though they were seldom used. The lawyer waved Brett to a stuffed chair and lowered himself into another by the desk. He began shuffling among an assortment of scattered papers and old envelopes on the desk and in the pigeonholes.

Suddenly he turned, frowning. "How do I know you're the man I wrote to?" he asked gruffly.

Brett reached inside his coat pocket and handed Kinsman a long envelope. Kinsman glanced at it, recognizing it as the one he had mailed two weeks before.

"I got a letter from Tony ten days before yours came," Brett said evenly, "I gathered from what he said that he was in good health. What did he die of?"

Kinsman leaned back, made a pyramid of his pudgy fingers. "The sheriff found Tony's body in Piute Creek, a hundred yards downstream from his cabin. It was wedged between rocks. His head was bashed in." The lawyer's reddish eyes met the frown in Brett's. He shrugged. "Both the sheriff and the coroner agreed it could have been an accident. There's white water for a stretch up there—"

Brett waited. Kinsman looked flustered. "You'd find out anyway," he muttered.

"Find out what?"

"There was a bullet in Tony, too. Two inches under his heart."

Brett said: "Aah!" softly. He took his

eyes off Kinsman then to stare at the blank wall. He was remembering six years of roughnecking up and down the oil fields of East Texas with Tony Mareno—drinking hard, gambling, chasing women. Two young fellows with a lot of hell in them that needed outlet—two of a kind.

Why was it that a man never really knew anyone else? Not even someone as close as Tony had been? What was there in Tony that, one night at a dingy bar in Beaufort, he could look Brett in the eye, a crooked grin on his lips, and say: "This is a hell of a life, Brett. I'm quitting. I'm going west, out where a man can breathe and think. I think I'll buy me a small spread, get married, raise some kids."

Brett put his calloused palm against Tony's jaw and shoved. "Go on, kid, get another drink. You're sobering up."

Tony had pushed his hand aside. "I'm serious, Brett. I'm pulling out of here in the morning."

Brett shook his head. "Hell, you're not cut out for ranching, Tony. This is your game—oil. I'll give you six months and you'll have a bellyful of that wide open country."

"Bet on it?" Tony had challenged.

"Sure. Even give you odds."

Tony shook his head. "Not money. If I stay six months and am making a go of it, will you come out and see me?"

Brett had taken the bet, confident that Tony would be back within six weeks. But it had been nine months since Tony had left, and he was the one who had welshed on his wager. Not welshed, really. He had intended to come.

But it had taken Kinsman's crisp, businesslike note to bring him to this corner of Texas. The attorney had written: "Request that you come to Benton Wells immediately. You have been bequeathed certain properties known as the Flying Club by Mr. Tony Mareno, recently deceased, and your presence here would expedite transfer of said properties."

Brett brought his attention back to Kinsman. The lawyer was ruffling through some papers again. "There have been several offers to buy," he said matter-of-factly. "Three, as a matter of fact." He looked up at Brett.

"Who said the Flying Club was for sale?" Brett's tone was grim.

Kinsman shrugged. "Well, since you're a stranger to this part of Texas, and—"

"Yes?"

Kinsman pulled his shoulders back in an effort to regain his dignity. "As your counsel in this matter, I would advise you to sell. All three offers have been more than fair. And, if you'll allow me to say so, Mr. Havolin, you don't look like the type of man who'll settle down on a two-by-four cattle ranch."

Brett's grin was crooked. "You'll be surprised the type of man I can become," he said cheerfully. He tapped his index finger on the desk. "Where do I sign to take over the Flying Club?"

Kinsman's lips came together to make a harsh line. He pushed some papers toward the redhead. "Here—and here." He watched while Brett signed with a flourish.

BRETT waited for the ink to dry, then picked up the papers and placed them inside his coat pocket.

"Out of curiosity," he said, easing back and sliding a cigar out of his breast pocket. "Who made the offers?"

Kinsman shifted in his chair. "One is Bully Armstrong—legal name, Frank. Owns the Big Diamond ranch west of town—range runs clear to the Ridge. The other is Jack Thompson. Jack owns the Palace Bar and the Trail House, and hates Armstrong's guts." Kinsman wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"The other?"

"Walter Baggett, president of the Bank of Gibraltar."

Brett nodded.

Kinsman made a tapping sound on his desk. "I should ride out with you to show you the place," he said. He wasn't eager.

"Don't bother. I got off the westbound at Luke's Crossing last night, bought a cayuse and rode out to the ranch. Tony had written directions in one of his letters." Brett saw the look of slow surprise wash

across Kinsman's face. "I didn't get a good look at the place," he added coldly. "A curly-headed character with a good eye shot the cayuse from under me. I thumbed a ride into town."

Kinsman settled back, a harsh grin sliding across his loose lips. "I still think you should sell," he said softly.

Brett got up, ignoring him. He was heading for the door when the lawyer's voice bit sharply: "That'll be two hundred dollars, Havolin."

Brett turned. "For what?"

"Attorney's fees." Kinsman's lips crinkled. "And if you've got any sense in that stubborn red head you'll sell. Clear out of this country, Havolin. Oil's your game, not cattle!"

Brett dug into a trouser pocket and peeled a hundred dollars from the now depleted roll, leaving himself with about seventy dollars in small bills.

"Since I'm not taking your advice," he pointed out dryly, "we'll cut that fee in half." He tossed the hundred down on the desk, took a cigar from his breast pocket and added it to the bills. "Your tip, Kinsman."

The lawyer took the cigar. He watched the redhead walk out. The glimpse of a walnut-handled Colt peeking almost coyly with the parting of Brett's coat annoyed him.

"Cocky, aren't you!" he muttered belligerently. "You'll wish you had taken my advice, young feller, in less than a week." Brett's departure roused courage in him, and he shook his fist at the door. "And danged if I won't be around to collect the other half of my fee when you get ready to leave!"

Heartened by his stand, and thirsty again, he picked up the bills, and crumpled them carelessly inside his vest pocket.

Grabbing his beaver hat, he went out.

HAVOLIN paused on the corner and lit a cigar. The afternoon had changed during the time he had spent with Kinsman. There was a closeness in the air that was almost breathless. Glancing southward, he saw that dark clouds had piled up like puff balls on the horizon.

He frowned as he thought of the eleven miles out to Tony's place—his place now.

The lawyer's grudging admission that Tony had been shot puzzled him. Kinsman had seemed less concerned with this than with Brett's selling the Flying Club.

Havolin stood undecided, not relishing the thought of riding back to the lonely shack Tony had staked his future on. He was used to people, to company, and he felt a momentary wonder that Tony should have stuck it out as long as he had.

He didn't really intend to stay here. But Tony had been killed, and he knew he couldn't leave without finding out who had killed him, and why.

He let his restless glance move up the street, to the two riders jogging toward him. Recognition alerted him. His right hand lifted to hook his thumb into his belt, and he waited, a cold smile lengthening his lips.

The man he had hit and the girl who had been with him jogged up. Small puffs of dust kicked up behind them. They saw him, and jogged on past. The girl's eyes ran over him, cool and judging, but without hostility. The youngster with her averted his gaze. His cheeks had a dark flush as he rode by.

Brett shrugged. The girl's partner was built like the boys in the physical culture ads he had seen in the Police Gazette, but he evidently lacked a salting of guts.

He turned to head up the street, and found himself looking into cornflower-blue eyes he had seen before, at the teller's window in the Bank of Gibraltar. Now those eyes held a lazy, provocative smile.

"Chet Armstrong's a big boy," the girl said, "but he's got a weak stomach. For a fight, that is," she amended.

Brett nodded slowly. "He's right handy with a Winchester at three hundred yards," he recalled dryly. His slow appraisal took in the round softness of this girl who would never see twenty again. Something in the nearness of her stirred his blood. His eyes came back to her face, and she caught the half-question in them.

"I'm Lorna Marlin, your nearest neighbor."

"Oh?" He was genuinely surprised, and then the familiarity of her name brought Tony back to mind. This girl, he remembered, had often been mentioned in Tony's letters.

He smiled broadly. "I'm a poor hand at conversation on an empty stomach," he said. "If you'll name the place, I'll buy your dinner. My name's Brett Havolin," he added carelessly.

Lorna's smile brightened. "Polly's will give you a man-sized meal, home-cooked style. I'll have coffee with you."

The small restaurant was across the street from the Trail House. A clean and quite place, it had red-checked tablecloths, and Polly did all the cooking herself. Brett looked across the table to the girl.

"I saw you hit Chet," she said. Her tone was half amused, lightly curious. "I had imagined you were a stranger to these parts, Mister Havolin?"

"I am." He nodded. "Never been west of San Antonio until this morning." His eyes met hers. "I was a friend of Tony Mareno's. You knew Tony?"

She made a small gesture with her shoulders. "Of course. Tony was a likeable boy."

Brett settled back in his chair. He was thinking with wry humor that Tony was probably turning over in his grave at this remark. It had been a long time since any woman had called Tony a boy.

HE WAITED until they had been served before remarking quietly: "I'm glad you're taking a neighborly interest in me, Lorna. But I've got a hunch there's something more than that on your mind. You didn't stop me just to say 'Hi, I'm your neighbor."

She dropped her eyes to her coffee, but not before Brett glimpsed a sultry darkening in her glance, a shading that was like the gathering storm.

"You are a perceptive man, Mister Havolin."

"Brett sounds better," he said. "Let's keep it informal."

"All right, Brett," she said impishly. "Call it a woman's curiosity. I did want to meet the man who, you might say, would be living next door to me." She made a small quick movement with her shoulders. "I checked with Bob, the bank teller, and he told me who you were."

"Is that all?"

"More curiosity," she admitted. "Who are you planning to sell the Flying Club to?"

"Am I selling?"

"Aren't you?"

Stubbornness settled in him like an iron weight. This was the core of it, he was sure. This lay behind this girl's seeming friendliness, and he felt both irritated and challenged.

"I've had offers," he acknowledge, "but I haven't decided."

She finished her coffee. "When you do, will you consider me?"

He was surprised, and he showed it. "Why would you want to buy the Flying Club?"

Lorna's full lips parted slightly, as though she were debating an inner question. "It could be because my mother and I like the privacy we have," she said. "Does it really matter to you why I want to buy?"

He shrugged. "It might." He leaned across the table and caught her arm as she made a motion to get up. "Wait— don't go yet." He was curious about this woman, and intrigued. There was a pull to her that excited him. And he wanted to get inside her cool shell.

"Tony was your neighbor for close to nine months," he recalled. "Have you any idea who might have killed him?"

She arched her brows. "Was Tony killed? I thought he died of an accidental fall into Piute Creek."

Brett frowned. "A bullet isn't usually accidental," he growled.

She got up then, pulling on her gloves. "I see you've talked to Mister Kinsman," she smiled. "You'll find that he talks a great deal, even for a lawyer, Mister Havolin."

"Brett," he repeated stubbornly, watch-

ing her. He got to his feet and turned as he saw her glance lift past him and widen with amused expectancy.

A rangy man wearing a sheriff's star was threading his way among the diners, heading toward them. He didn't look friendly.

Lorna was smiling as the lawman joined them, his eyes raking Brett. "This pilgrim annoying you, Miss Marlin?"

Brett looked him over coldly. The sheriff was a rangy man in his early forties, four inches taller than Brett. He had a broad, weatherbeaten face in which pale gray eyes stood out sharply against the burnt coloring of his features. A long slab of a man, Brett judged, hard physically, soft emotionally, tied up inside when it came to dealing with a woman like Lorna.

The girl turned to him. "I wouldn't call it that, Ray," she purred. "But I think you can tell him what he wants to know. He's asking about Tony."

SHE was still smiling as she turned to Brett. "Remember me, Mister Havolin, when you decide to sell the Flying Club. Please."

"You get around *muy pronto,*" the sheriff growled. "Much too fast for a man who's just come into the territory."

Brett shrugged. "Sit down, sheriff. I aim to be around here for quite a spell."

"I don't think you will," the lawman countered flatly. "I think you'll be heading back where you came from in less than a week." His voice was as blunt as the finger he jabbed at Brett's wishbone. "I had a talk with Chet Armstrong, soon as I heard what had happened. He didn't say much except to admit he got what was coming to him. But I'm warning you, Havolin! You go around with that kind of chip on your shoulder an' I'll slam you into the cooler so hard you'll bounce for a week!"

He was big and he had a stubborn honesty that carried weight. But Brett sensed there was more to the ill-concealed hostility in this man's voice than was brought on by his punching Chet Armstrong. He remembered the look on the lawman's face as he regarded Lorna.

A jealous man, Havolin thought and too shy to open his mouth. The kind of a man a girl like Lorna could wrap around her finger and use.

"Tony Mareno was shot to death," Brett said coldly. "You handling that, sheriff?"

"I am," Ray Hogan snapped. He started to turn away, glanced down at the gun tucked inside Brett's belt. "You stow that hogleg in your saddlebag when you come to town," he ordered grimly. "Town ordinance."

Brett shrugged.

Something in the redhead's manner annoyed the sheriff. "I'll tell you once more," he said flatly. "Make up your mind about that two-bit spread you inherited. Make it up fast!"

"I might decide to settle out here," Brett said coolly.

"I don't think you will," the sheriff sneered. He reached out and plucked a cigar from Brett's breast pocket, passed it under his nose, and bit off an end. "Just to prove my point, I'll buy you a box of these if you last more than a week."

He turned, chewing on Brett's cigar, and walked out—a hard-fisted man who backed his talk. Brett watched him go, a stubborn smile building around his lips. So far he had learned one thing—no one here cared in the least that Tony Mareno had been murdered—not even the law.

He reached in his pocket for his last cigar and lit it, before heading for the cashier's cage to pay his bill.

Brett bought a rangy bay with a blaze face at the livery, remembered he had left his saddle in front of the bank, and went back for it. A buggy swirled dust over him as he started across the street again, and looking up he got a glimpse of Lorna Marlin sitting straight on the buggy seat, handling the reins. He stopped and watched her make the turn at the end of River Road where it became a wagon road angling west toward the low hills.

BENDING, he hitched the saddle up to his shoulder and crossed the road. He went into the livery stable and was saddling the bay when a slight, shifty-

eyed man with a pale blond mustache tapped him on the shoulder. Brett swung around fast, his shoulder jamming the man up against the stall side. The man grinned nervously.

"Sorry. Didn't know you were jumpy," the man apologized.

Brett scowled. "Next time make some noise." He looked past the man, seeing no one else. "Want something?"

The other shrugged. "Jack Thompson wants to see you," he said.

Brett considered this briefly. Who in hell was Thompson? Then he remembered that Kinsman had mentioned him as one of the buyers for the Flying Club.

He was about to tell this character that Thompson could come to see him, when he remembered that he had already received one direct offer so far; and he was curious to se what kind of man Thompson was. He was beginning to wonder why four people wanted the Flying Club, which by cattle standards was a two-by-four spread.

He led the bay out of the barn and mounted and followed the small man down the street. Sheriff Hogan was walking south on the opposite side of the road. He stopped and watched Brett and his companion, a thoughtful look darkening his pale eyes.

Brett tied the bay at the rack of the Palace Bar and went up the two steps behind the thin man. The Palace was a quiet-looking establishment, and the clientele lining the long cherrywood bar were sober townsmen taking a quick one before returning to their places of business.

A big, dark-headed man sat alone at a rear table playing a game of solitaire. He was neatly dressed, and his face was square and almost boyish from a distance. The illusion didn't stand up at close range. The lines around his eyes and his mouth were like the rings in a tree. They told Brett this man was close to fifty.

He stood up across the table, and the shifty-eyed man slid away from him, toward the bar.

"Sit down," Thompson said pleasantly. He had white, even teeth and a nice smile.

Brett said shortly: "I've got eleven miles to make before the storm breaks. I'll give you two minutes to get out what's on your mind."

Thompson's long fingers flipped a card face up. It was the ace of spades. He looked up into Brett's face. "If I were superstitious I'd say this card meant trouble for someone."

Brett moved his shoulders in an impatient gesture. "The name's Brett Havolin," he said meagerly.

Thompson nodded. "I know. You're the man Tony Mareno left the Flying Club to."

"I find that seems to have riled more than one of the local citizenry," Brett growled.

Thompson's brown eyes held a small amusement. "I also saw you come out of the bank, walk across the street, and drop Chet Armstrong in as smooth a one-two I've ever seen." He chuckled quietly. "A complete stranger, in town for the first

time, and you pick on the son of one of the toughest cattlemen in Texas!"

Thompson made a small gesture with his hand, stalling Brett's reply. "I wanted to get a good look at you."

"Is that the only reason you wanted to see me?"

"It is, now," the big man replied. "I wanted to buy the Flying Club. Still do," he added quickly, "but you don't look like the kind of man I expected. You don't strike me as a man who'd sell—not after finding out his friend was murdered!"

"Ah!" Brett said tightly. "You know that?"

Thompson shrugged. "Don't you?"

Brett shook his head. "Why do you want the Flying Club, a two-bit spread? You don't look like the kind to sweat a living out of a few cows."

"We have that in common," Thompson murmured. "You don't either."

"I might fool you," Bret said. "And you still haven't answered my question."

Thompson picked up his cards. "My reasons are personal," he said distantly. " A means to an end, that's all." He turned over a card, placed it, then met Brett's frowning regard. "I'll top any offer made by the Big Diamond spread," he said quietly. "Remember that, Havolin."

Brett shrugged. "I'll keep it in mind."

Armstrong's fist sent him reeling back against the wagon

He was turning away when Thompson said, "The drinks are on me, Havolin."

Brett looked back. "I'll take you up some other time." He was halfway across the room when the saloonman's voice reached him. "If you get into trouble, if you need anything, drop by. No strings, Brett."

There was a small smile on Thompson's face, but Brett got a feeling of sincerity in the man. Brett nodded, then turned and pushed his way out to the walk. Mounting the bay, he rode off, following the road that Lorna had taken a few minutes before.

CHET ARMSTRONG peeled his shirt from his muscled torso, dipped a handkerchief in the wash basin, and held it to his puffed lips. He kept his eyes on the mirror over the pump handle and his shoulders twitched as though every word uttered by the big man standing behind him were a bullet tearing through his back.

"Slammed into the dirt in front of the Trail House, by a man half a foot shorter!" The big man was breathing heavily through his nose. "Shoved around by a pilgrim half your size! What's the Big Diamond coming to!"

"Chet didn't see him," Carol Armstrong said angrily. She had come out of her room into the kitchen, and she was dressed as always, in a pair of faded blue levis, a checked gingham shirt and half boots.

"Don't you come around excusing him!" her father flared. "You wiped his nose for him when he was a button, you fought his battles for him in school. But he's supposed to be a man now—Big Frank Armstrong's boy!" He gagged as though the statement sickened him.

Lightning flickered through Carol's gray eyes. "If you'd leave him alone, quit riding him—"

Chet had turned. He put out a hard arm, checking his sister. A smile warped his swollen lips. "Take it easy, sis!"

She subsided reluctantly.

Bully Armstrong snorted. He was a big man, and he looked bigger in that room he had built himself, as he had built everything about the Big Diamond is twenty years of hard work. Heavy-framed, wide as a barn door and solid as an oak stump, he seemed as durable as the granite ledge behind the corral, and as unyielding. Gray grizzled his brown mane, but the heavy lines that furrowed his sun-browned face were markers the years had carved in him.

It took a strong man in this hard country to make what he wanted. He had come here when the Cheyennes still raided through War Bonnet Pass, and he had built this place with one hand on an ax and the other on a Sharps .50-40.

It was wild country, but he had forced his way on it. He had forced his way on everything he touched, but he couldn't shape his own family. His wife had withstood the tempests of his rage, the thrust of his will, yielding a little, bending, but never breaking. She had died with her personality intact, her pride still flying.

Carol Armstrong had inherited her mother's inner strength. A more robust edition of Ann Armstrong, she had the temper of her father. But her will was tempered by an acceptance of the land and of people, and a sensitivity her father had never possessed.

Bully Armstrong peered at her from under gray-shot bushy brows. "I heard Prel talking, over by the corrals. It'll be all over the Big Diamond by night!" He turned and reached for his hat on a peg by the door. "No one's been man enough to push an Armstrong around in twenty years, and no one's starting now! If my son hasn't got the guts to settle with this tinhorn I reckon I'll have to do it for him."

Carol whirled on him. "Haven't we bulled our way through the valley long enough, Dad? Chet admits he got what he deserved. He shot the man's horse, made him take a bad spill. He thought that would be warning enough to keep snoopers away from the Flying Club. He only did what you told him to!"

ARMSTRONG shook his shaggy head like a riled longhorn pawing the ground. "Right or wrong, that redheaded galoot hit at the Big Diamond when

he hit Chet. And I'm not being fooled by him, like I wasn't fooled by that other tinhorn Mareno. Thompson's behind the whole thing. He doesn't dare make an open bid for the Flying Club, because he knows I'd clean him out if he did. So he sent for Mareno first, and now this hotheaded stranger."

"Dad," Carol interrupted, "think a moment. You've always had your way around here, and you've made your troubles along with it. You're not really certain Tony was hired by Thompson, just like you're not sure about this newcomer. Mareno is dead. I heard he was shot to death." She looked soberly at her father. "Dad, even you won't be able to beat murder. Ray Hogan is a stubborn man, and an honest lawman. If Mareno was killed, then he's looking for his killer."

"Shut up!" her father growled.

Carol stood up to him, temper putting color in her cheeks. "You don't frighten me!" she snapped. "You never have!"

He lifted a broad, calloused hand and she whitened, her lips bloodless against her teeth. But she didn't flinch from him.

"Dad," she said slowly. "I told you what would happen if you ever hit me again."

He lowered his hand, scowling contemptuously at the stiff set of Chet's face. "Just the same," he growled, "this stranger needs a lesson. The sooner he leaves the section, the smarter he'll be."

Carol said sharply. "Let me handle him, Dad. Just once, let me handle this my way. Maybe I can talk him into leaving without trouble!"

Armstrong hesitated. Then he turned his head, hiding the sudden gleam that flickered through his eyes. "Go ahead," he said. "I'll give you the chance you've been crying for. If you want to make a fool of yourself—" He turned and stamped out, slamming the door behind him.

BRETT didn't see Lorna on the way up to the Flying Club. The first splatter of rain kicked up little brown craters in the dust on the road as he turned into the yard. He pulled his bay in, his eyes narrowing on the thin smoke curling out of the chimney. A sleek roan that put his stringy bay to shame stood in the shade of pecans which made a cool clump between house and corrals.

Brett eased out of saddle and nudged the butt of the Colt that lay snugged against his hard stomach.

He opened the door and slipped inside the big room that was both kitchen and living quarters. He stood quietly watching the levi-clad figure bending over the stove. The smell of ground coffee made a tang in the room.

She hadn't heard him enter and he stood there, trying to make this out. This was the girl who had been with Chet Armstrong. He slid his glance down the lines of her, his smile appreciating the contours of her shirt, the curve of her hips.

"Smells real good," he said casually.

The girl started. She turned, and he saw a smudge of wood ash on her cheek. A smile lifted the corners of her lips and he saw that her left cheek dimpled. "Hello," she said. "I didn't find you in when I got here, so I made coffee. Swept up a little, too."

He looked around, noticing now that things were cleaner than he had remembered this morning. He had given the place only a cursory examination then before starting for Benton Wells, only to have his horse shot from under him a few miles down the road.

"Thanks for the maid service," he said. He took his hat off, dropped it over a hook by the door. "What's the catch?"

She said: "I'm Carol Armstrong."

He walked to the stove, looked into the bubbling pot. "I'm Brett Havolin," he answered.

She walked to the cupboard and took down some cups, and he observed dryly: "You seem to know your way around here better than I do."

"Oh, I dropped in on Tony now and then," she said coolly. He raised an eyebrow at this and she colored. "He was a neighbor," she added defensively, "and a greenhorn in the cattle business."

"And you helped him out?"

Her chin firmed. "No," she said sharply. "My father owns the Big Diamond ranch. We run some of our cows this way. During the dry spells we depend some on the creek for water. Mareno's place cut us off, if he had wanted to be nasty about it."

"Well, isn't that too bad." Brett grinned. "Is that why your brother took a shot at me this morning, to keep me from getting nasty?"

"I'm not sure why Chet acted as he did," she answered coldly. Her tone had hardened. "Chet's big, but he isn't rough, not like Dad. My father keeps after him, bullying him. Maybe Chet thought he—" She shrugged. "Why Chet took a shot at you, I can't answer. But you humbled him in front of all Benton Wells and my father won't stand for it. That's why I came to see you first. I want to make amends, if I may."

There was a sincerity in her tone that almost reached Brett. Tony had been lucky, he thought dryly, to have two women as close neighbors. Or, he remembered grimly, had he?

"My account with your brother is settled," he answered levelly. "Except for the matter of a cayuse, which I shall expect payment for."

Carol smiled with evident relief. "I'll see that you get that horse, Mr. Havolin. And—" She stuck out a small, brown hand "I want to be friends."

He took it. The warmth sent a tingling up his arm. and he saw her eyes darken. They were a nice blue, but when they darkened like that he felt his blood respond. Her smile became uncertain; she pulled her hand away. "I must be riding back. I left my jacket in the other room—"

He said: "Have coffee with me, and I'll ride part way with you." She turned in the doorway, nodded. "Thank you." She disappeared into the bedroom and Brett eased. He took the pot off the stove and poured coffee through a strainer.

IT WAS homey in here, where he had expected only a bleak and lonely room He wasn't cut out to be a hermit, and he had not intended to stay here. But he realized now, for the first time, how a woman could change the atmosphere of a place, charge it with a warmth that kicked up longings in him he had not suspected.

The outside door slammed open as he was setting the pot back on the range.

He turned his head, and what he saw snapped the sentimental streak in him. He straightened slowly, his body stiffening to the plain threat of violence that emanated from the four men coming into the room.

The leader was a tall, wiry man of thirty, with a dark face. A puckered scar the size of a quarter twisted his left cheek. Dark insolent eyes made a slow, deliberate survey of the room, of Brett Havolin. The pearl handles of two single-action Colts showed in thonged-down holsters.

The men behind him glanced around the room. Carol came to the door then, a brush jacket pulled hastily over one arm. Her face was flushed, embarrassed.

"Prel!" she demanded harshly. "What are you doing here?"

Prel kept his eyes on Brett. "In this country, pilgrim," he rasped deliberately, "we horsewhip a man for a thing like this!"

Brett cocked an eyebrow at Carol, who was shrugging into her jacket. Her face had gone grim. "Prel! Did dad send you?"

Prel ignored her. He walked toward Brett and his hands came up, swiftly, his guns levelled at Havolin. He said softly: "Get rid of that Colt!"

Brett eased his Colt out of his waistband and let it fall to the floor. Prel toed it across the room. He was grinning, and his scar made his grin a gargoyle. He kept his dark eyes on Brett as he handed his guns to the man behind him. "You need a lesson, pilgrim!" he sneered. His fingers went down to his broad leather belt. He unbuckled it and slipped it free. He wrapped one end around his right fist, leaving 18 inches of leather. tipped with heavy brass buckle, swinging free.

"I'm gonna mark that pretty face of yours," he jeered, "so no other woman will ever want to look at it again!"

Carol started across the room. "Prel! If it's the last thing I do I'll make you account for this."

Prel shoved her into the hands of a smaller, silent man standing casually by the wall.

Brett was standing by the stove, feeling the heat from the cast iron plates work its way against his back. A neat bit of staging, he was thinking bitterly. A trap, baited by a woman!

Prel took a quick step forward and swung. Wrapping that belt around his fist was a mistake he regretted two seconds later. The leather cut through the air for Brett's face. Havolin stabbed up for the buckle, more in anticipation of stopping that cutting metal than anything else. He felt his palm go numb under the impact, then his fingers closed convulsively and he jerked his arm down.

Prel was yanked off balance. Brett clamped his right arm around Prel's neck and anger was behind his next move. He twisted the squirming Big Diamond foreman around and deliberately fell with him on the range.

He ground Prel's face onto the burning hot plates.

The foreman's scream was a wild, uncontrollable thing. His body squirmed convulsively, broke free. His hands raked for his hips, pain making him wild. Then he turned, clawing for the gun one of his men was handing to him.

Brett shouldered Prel roughly around, slammed a fist into Prel's unflexed stomach. He hit him again as the man gagged and started to bend in the middle and Prel, knocked completely out, fell over backward.

The quick violence of the incident held the other three men momentarily undecided. Carol slipped free of the open-mouthed man who had been holding her. She glanced down at Prel's unconscious figure, then up to the lanky man who was slowly, menacingly lifting his gun from holster.

"You fire that, Teal," she said grimly, "and I'll kill you!" She was holding the gun she had taken from the smaller man's holster, and her blue eyes had a dark, stormy cast.

Teal lowered his Colt.

CAROL'S eyes went to Brett, who smiled coldly. "Thanks," he said distantly. "Nice try."

She said miserably, "You think I arranged this, don't you?"

He looked at the men in the room. Big Diamond men. "You answer that," he suggested thinly.

She dropped her gaze. "You're an insolent fool," she grated. Then she turned. "Teal! You and Bates take Prel outside. Get him back to the ranch as fast as you can. You, Sawdust," she addressed the short, stumpy man who had held her, "ride down to Benton Wells and get Doctor Blakely. I think Prel is going to need medical attention."

Brett watched them haul the moaning Prel to his feet, carry him outside. The rain was pattering heavily against the sloping roof. But the warmth had gone out of the room and the coffee no longer invited.

Carol faced him. "Believe what you like," she said defiantly, "but I did come as a friend. Because there's been too much of Big Diamond power antagonizing peaceful people here. Because," her eyes softened, and a miserable look sneaked in, "I'm tired of being called Bully Armstrong's daughter—"

He said nothing, and her shoulders stiffened as she turned, walked out. Brett waited until he heard her cayuse move away. Then he rubbed his bruised knuckles across his chin and turned to his coffee. . . .

Brett lay awake a long time, listening to the steady beat of the rain. The roof leaked near the fieldstone chimney, and the steady dripping fed his gray mood.

Tony had lived here, alone, for almost nine months. Brett couldn't believe it. Not Tony, who worked hard and played harder—who had a woman in every town in east Texas, in every saloon in Beaumont.

Oil had been Tony's business, and his. They had been saving, that last year, for the time they'd wildcat on their own. A lease and a well—it was the dream of every man who mucked around the oilfields that were springing up around the Big Spindle well.

His thoughts drifted to Lorna and he remembered one of Tony's few letters. He tried, now, to analyze the restraint in it.

". . . found the girl, if she'll have me. Lives with her widowed mother across the creek. A nice neighbor. You'll like Lorna Marlin, Brett. She's not like the Palace girls—different from what you know."

Yet Lorna had not seemed to share Tony's hopes. She had barely acknowledged knowing him. Carol Armstrong had been franker, almost too frank. Brett frowned. Tony had never mentioned her. Why?

He got up and shuffled to the kitchen. His bare feet recoiled from the small runnel of water caused by the leak around the chimney. He reached for the coffee pot, decided against it.

Darn Tony, he thought peevishly. But he knew he couldn't leave without finding out who had killed him. Brett had that kind of stubbornness, and he and Tony had been as close as brothers.

Four people wanted the Flying Club—a small shack with a leaky roof, and a few acres of graze land.

Carol had made it plain why Bully Armstrong wanted it. But what about the others?

Lorna? She had evaded a direct answer.

Thompson? The gambler had kept his reasons to himself.

Walter Baggett, president of the bank? Maybe Baggett wanted to go into the cattle business. But why buy out the Flying Club?

He lit a cigaret and smoked. He turned in, finally, remembering Lorna's invitation to drop by sometime.

DAWN was a dismal grayness that spread across the wet sky. Havolin rose early, drew water from the pump well outside, and brought it back in an oaken bucket. He poured some into a tin pan, warmed it on the stove, and shaved. The bruise on his nose showed, and his upper lip was tender as he scraped the red stubble.

Afterward he walked to the door and looked out. The pecan trees dripped. The corrals were empty. He didn't know if the Flying Club had had any stock at the time of Tony's death; he would have to ask Kinsman about it. The yard edged out to the narrow road that angled off across a low hill, shutting off sight of Piute Creek. There was nothing in sight as far as he looked, and he shook is head, feeling the sharp loneliness of a man used to people and towns.

Turning back to the kitchen he stopped, unaccountably feeling again the presence of the slim figure bending over the stove, and the memory had the ability to bring back a bit of warmth to that bleak room.

He grinned crookedly as he walked to the range, reheated last night's coffee. He didn't cook breakfast, he didn't even look to see if there was food in the cupboard. He didn't intend to stay here longer than necessary, but he wasn't going to let anyone know he was leaving until he found out who had killed Tony Mareno and why.

Somehow he felt that was very important.

The coffee gave him a lift. He walked out to the barn, saddled the bay, and rode out of the yard. On the hill he looked across the creek, spotting the small curl of smoke rising from the Marlin place.

He made it in less than a half hour. The Marlin place was no bigger than the Flying Club, but there was a difference. There were curtains in the two windows facing the yard, flower beds in front of it. There was a neatness here that only women could impress on a place. A milk cow mooed from a small enclosed pasture and two staked-out goats turned to stare at him with whiskered dignity.

Brett rode into the yard and stepped out of saddle. He knocked on the door and a soft voice acknowledged him. He had his hat in his hand as he stepped inside.

The soft voice was not Lorna's. It belonged to a small, thin woman with gray hair and a motherly face. She was in a wheel chair, a shawl across her lap, her hands folded. The room had cloth rugs on the floor and a few pictures on the walls. It reminded Brett of his own home, which he had left more than eleven years ago.

"Good morning, son," the woman said. She had a soft, gentle voice, and her eyes

blinked behind her spectacles. Brett's glance shiftd momentarily to the Sharps rifle that hung on pegs above the fireplace. It seemed out of place in that room.

"You must be the young man Lorna spoke of," the woman said, "our new neighbor."

He nodded, feeling at ease. "Brett Havolin, ma'am."

"I'm Mady Marlin." She smiled tremulously. "I'm so glad you called, Mr. Havolin. We seldom have visitors. Lorna will be glad to see you."

He glanced toward a curtained doorway and Mrs. Marlin, catching the look, shook her head. "My daughter's an early riser, Brett. You'll find her down by the creek, by the jackpine grove yonder. Run along and fetch her. I'll have breakfast for you both when you return."

He fingered his hat. "Thank you," he murmured. He knew now why Tony liked it here. He closed the door and looked toward the creek. The sun was warming the wet land and the freshness in the air was like a tonic, making him hungry.

He walked toward the pine clump, found what looked like a path, and followed it. Piute Creek ran clear and cool here, tumbling over shallow sand bars. Brett ducked under a low branch and came upon a pair of levis draped over a small bough. A white silk shirt, a yellow silk neckerchief, wool socks and half boots lay on a flat rock nearby. He was staring at these when he heard the small splash and, straightening, he looked down a cutbank to the stream.

LORNA stood in the clear, slow current. Her body seemed foreshortened and wavering through the clear water, but she carried her head high, her breasts thrusting upward, just breaking the surface.

"Well," she said, quirking her full lips. "A gentleman would turn his back on a lady."

He looked long at her, feeling the hot flush redden his neck, the sudden sharp longing making his muscles quiver. In her eyes he saw a boldness and a challenge that he judged correctly.

[Turn page]

Slowly he turned his back. A bird chirped in the grove. Above the pounding pulse in his blood Brett had a momentarily unsettling thought: *"Mady Marlin must have known Lorna would be bathing!"*

He heard the drip of water as Lorna came up on the bank. Cloth whispered against the pine needles. He licked his lips. He could feel her nearness, like the warmth from a stove, raching into him.

"Well?" Her voice was soft, almost a whisper.

He turned. She was facing him in the small clearing, and her wet silk blouse was plastered to her body. Sunlight seeped through screening needles, glistening on the wetness of her hair that fell in a loose golden mass over her shoulders.

"Well?" she repeated.

He thought: "She was waiting for this—" And then he quit thinking. He took a quick step toward her, his hand curling behind her neck, tangling in that golden hair, and the pounding in his blood drowned out all thought. . . .

They walked back to the house, holding hands. Her face was flushed and pink. The sun was warm on the path, warm as the lazy stir in Brett's blood.

She stopped before they reached the house, on the small knoll on the edge of the pine clump. She nuzzled his shoulder, her voice warm and intimate. "I wanted you to sell the Flying Club to me. But now I'd rather you stayed in the valley."

"I'll think about it," he said. He ran his knuckles gently across her neck and pulled her up to him. Her lips were warm and eager.

"Mother is all I have," she said quickly, breaking away. "I don't want to hurt her." She looked toward the house and her eyes darkened. "My mother lives most of the time in dreams, Brett. The Ollivans, her maiden name before she married dad, were well-to-do people in North Carolina. She married dad—he was from Virginia—and came west with him. She had great hopes. But he died the year after he settled here. She had too much pride to go back home."

Brett nodded. But he felt slightly embarrassed as they walked to the house. Lorna opened the door and the smell of bacon crisping sharpened his dormant hunger.

He had breakfast with them, marveling at the way the slight, sharp-eyed woman talked, as though he were already an old trusted friend. Somehow it made him uncomfortable.

Mady Marlin often wandered off the subject at hand. She talked of beaus and dates and soft Carolina moons, and the transitions were sharp and without warning. Lorna's eyes, meeting his at these moments, would flash their warning.

"Please come again, Brett," Mrs. Marlin invited. "You're our nearest neighbor, you know, and it is often lonely here."

He nodded his acceptance. Lorna remained in the doorway, beside her mother, as he rode away.

HE CROSSED the creek and then, not relishing the prospect of returning to the dismal shack he had inherited, he took a wide swing westward. The Flying Club, he saw, lay in a natural flat ringed on the north and east by a sandstone formation. Beyond it the land faded to dry country of lonely buttes.

The Diamond spread lay behind his shack, its acres dominating the valley. He rode all morning, swinging in a wide arc about the main ranch buildings, avoiding the few riders he saw at a distance.

It was well past noon when he jogged his tired bay into the Flying Club ranchyard. Unsaddling in the small barn, he walked back to the house and saw that he had had visitors.

The note tacked to his door was bluntly worded: *"Get the hell out of this country, Havolin!"*

He tore the note down, crumpled it and tossed it aside. Then he went inside, hung his hat on a peg by the door. He rifled the cupboard and found a few meager cans. A small sack of flour had provided sustenance for rodents before it got mouldy. Potatoes had sprouted eyes and withered.

He cleaned out the cupboard, found coffee in a small earthenware jug protected by a cover, brought it to the stove,

and set water to boil. He felt hungry and a little baffled. He had never prepared his own food, and he didn't like the fact that he would have to learn to cook or ride eleven miles to town for a restaurant meal.

He wondered briefly how Tony had made out. Tony couldn't flip himself an egg before leaving Beaumont.

He was hacking open a can of peaches, the smell of coffee strong in the kitchen, when he heard the rider. He stepped away from the table and was ready when the rider opened the door.

Carol froze, staring at the gun in Brett's hand.

He said, not too pleasantly: "You sure make yourself at home here. I don't remember inviting you back."

She flushed. She was a quick-tempered girl ordinarily, but somehow his words, backed by truth, pushed her off balance.

"I had hoped you had cooled off by now," she said. "I came back to tell you that I had nothing to do with what happened yesterday. I didn't know that Prel and the others had followed me. Dad promised to let me handle it my way."

He grinned coldly. "So it wasn't a friendly visit, was it? Your dad sent you first, then his strong-arm men!"

Her cheeks reddened. "You are a bullhead, conceited fool!" she said angrily. "You're even more stubborn than my father, and maybe you'll deserve what you'll get."

Brett's anger rose to match hers. "Get what Tony got?" he asked harshly.

Somehow mention of Tony seemed to take the props from under her indignation. Her shoulders slumped. "I liked Tony. I want you to believe that. And I didn't know, until very recently, that he had been shot. I can't imagine who would want to kill him."

Brett sneered. "There have been four people interested in buying this place since I arrived here. Look around you, Miss Armstrong. What's so valuable about this property—a ramshackle log cabin, a barn. a corral. What's on it, gold?"

She answered quietly, "I don't know why anyone would want this place except to live here. It does have possibilities."

"For what?"

"For living!" Her eyes suddenly flashed. "Tony wanted that. He told me, once, that was why he had left East Texas. He said he thought he had found what he wanted out here."

"Tony told you that?" Brett asked, unbelieving. "Yet he never once mentioned you in his letters."

Carol's shoulder stiffened. "That was his privilege, Mister Havolin."

BRETT SHRUGGED. "It sure was," he said callously. "But in case you're interested, your father is the only one who has threatened me since I came to this section. And after what happened last night, you can hardly blame me for taking a rather dim view of the Big Diamond."

She shook her head. "I didn't come back to apologize for dad. He's run this valley so long he'll always consider it his private domain. But he would leave you alone if he were sure you weren't a Thompson man."

"I'll write him a letter," Brett snapped. He moved up to her, his face hard, his stubbornness dominating him. "Or won't that be enough? What proof does your father want?"

"I don't know!" Carol cried. "I—I only came to—to help." She dropped her hands to her sides in a hopeless gesture.

She looked small and tired and helpless and he felt her need in this moment, almost the need of a small child for reassurance. He put his hands on her shoulders and felt her tremble. Instinctively he pulled her to him. His lips went down to meet hers, and he found them unexpectedly soft and yielding and fresh.

She pulled away with a start, her eyes wide and startled. He made no move toward her and she whirled and ran for the door. Brett still tasted the sweetness of her lips as the sound of her departure faded into the afternoon stillness.

Slowly Brett walked back to the range, absently poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot. But the brew tasted bitter, and he felt restless and unsatisfied. He walked to the door, flung it open, and looked

past the pecans to the road that led to town.

Clouds moved like dirty cotton wads across the blue sky. The wind, coming up from the west, had a clean keen bite in his nostrils.

What the hell did a man do out here? he thought irritatedly. He looked around the place, trying to fathom what had decided Tony Mareno to settle here. Trying to understand what had kept him here, what he had done with his days.

He spotted the wagon under the small lean-to shed and curiosity drew him to it. A light spring wagon, it had recently been painted a medium green. A board in the wagonbed had been replaced. Harness hung on pegs on the walls.

Brett went into the barn. Several hens ran squawking from a small pile of hay stacked in a far corner. He stopped in the middle of the hard-packed earth floor and surveyed the double stalls at one end of the barn. His cayuse moved restlessly in one, turning his head to look at Brett. A short ladder led up to an open-fronted loft where more hay and several bags of grain were stored. Rodents had made inroads in one of the bags.

Brett shook his head. He still couldn't fit Tony Mareno into this picture.

He remembered the magazine on the small table in Tony's bedroom. He had given them only a cursory glance, but several of the titles came to mind now—*The Stockman's Gazette, The Breeder's Manual.*

He thought dismally, Tony must have been serious about all this.

He walked out of the barn and paused under the biggest of the pecans. Frayed lengths of old rope hung from a thick branch, almost brushing his face. The ground under his feet was scooped out in a shallow trench, and the thought came to him that there had been a swing here once, and children, possibly the children of the man Tony had bought the spread from.

The sun filtered through the whispering leaves, touching his face. What was it Carol Armstrong had said? *"I don't know why anyone would want this place—except to live here!"*

HE REACHED for the makings, unconsciously making a comparison between Carol and Lorna Marlin. Despite her air of self-reliance, the Armstrong girl was young and naive. All her hopes and her strength, her desires and her dreams were still locked in her, waiting for the right man to release them. There was that promise in her that Brett had sensed in the touch of her lips.

The other was a woman, a woman who knew her femininity, and who would use her sex to gain what she wanted. She was a woman who would give of herself only enough to get what she needed.

Tony had lived here nine months. He had known both Carol and Lorna. Slowly Brett scraped a match across his pants and brought the light up to the cigarette. That, too, was something about Tony he had not known. It seemed to him unbelievable that Tony Mareno had not made the same discovery.

He became aware then of the rider on the road from town. Brett straightened, shoving aside his brooding thoughts. He had not come to take the place of Tony Mareno here, but to find the man who had killed him.

The newcomer did not seem at home in his saddle. He rode somewhat stiff-backed, taking the small jolts badly. He was near enough now for Brett to see he was a slender, neatly-dressed man in a gray town suit, expensive pearl-gray Stetson, hand-stitched half boots.

The rider pulled up at the turn-in to the Flying Club and waved. Brett waited, not answering the greeting. He did not know the man, and now he wasn't sure that this man had been headed for the Flying Club. The wagon road kept on, he recalled, cutting through the thicket of scrub oak on the small hill and crossing the creek to the Marlin place.

The rider hesitated, then made a decision. He swung his big bay horse around and cantered toward Brett.

Havolin dropped his cigarette butt into the dust and slowly ground it beneath his heel. "Howdy, stranger," he greeted shortly.

The townsman reined in a few feet from Brett. He was a good looking man in his early thirties, clean-shaven and dark, with quick gray eyes. A touch of gray at his temples lent a dignified air to his bearing. His voice was soft and pleasant. It reminded Brett of the gambler, Jack Thompson.

"I'm Walter Baggett," he said, "of the Bank of Gibraltar in town." He relaxed, leaning over the horn, his smile friendly. "You're Brett Havolin?"

Brett nodded. "Light," he invited. "There's coffee on the fire."

The banker shook his head. "Thanks, anyway." He ran a brief glance over the house and outbuildings behind Havolin. "I'm on my way to visit the Marlins. Saw you standing here and dropped by to say hello."

Brett remembered Kinsman's list of prospective buyers. "I heard you wanted to buy the place. You still making an offer?"

Baggett shook his head. "I did tell Kinsman I would be interested," he admitted. He made a gesture with his hand. "Nice place for relaxation—perhaps some fishing. That's all I had in mind. However, I've since heard you've received several other offers, no doubt much more attractive than I could offer you." His smile was rueful. "I have no intention of going into the cattle business, Havolin."

"Neither have I."

The banker shrugged. "There's a rumor kicking around town that Tony's death wasn't accidental."

"It's a strong rumor," Brett admitted. "Your sheriff admitted Tony was shot to death."

BAGGETT shook his head. "Just goes to show you. Up to this morning I thought Tony's death was the result of an accidental tumble into Piute Creek, just above the white water." His glance roved curiously over the empty corral. "Are you planning to settle down here?"

"No."

"Stay long?"

"Long enough to find out who killed Tony."

The slender banker frowned. "But who would have wanted to kill him? He was a pleasant chap, I remember, and seemed well-liked in town. Of course, he had some trouble with the Big Diamond, but—" Baggett let his glance slide over the house and outbuildings again, as if trying to find something he might have overlooked. "Surely," he took up wonderingly, "there's not enough here to tempt anyone into murder.

Brett's voice was level. "I'm not so sure of that, Baggett."

The town man's eyes jerked back to meet his. They held a hard, expectant glint. "Ah! Perhaps you've found out something that would account for your other offers. Gold?"

"Maybe."

Baggett waited, and Brett sensed that he was tensed and eager. Then, when Brett remained silent, Baggett eased. "Well," he said politely, "I hope you have more luck with this place than Tony had."

Havolin watched the banker ride off. Maybe it is gold, he thought grimly. Whatever it is, you know what is here. And I think you're a liar about not wanting the place now.

There were too many people who wanted to buy the Flying Club, he reflected cynically, for diverse and seemingly innocent reasons.

He let his thoughts run on this thread, but reached no conclusive answers.

Someone had killed Tony either for personal reasons—which seemed unlikely from the general consensus of opinion about Tony which Brett had encountered here—or because someone had found something of value about the Flying Club and had hoped, with Tony's death, to take possession.

That was as far as Havolin got. Then, because he was an active man, not given to contemplation, he turned to the house. He was hungry, and though it seemed ridiculous to have to ride eleven miles to town for a meal, he saw no other alternative.

Tony's brush jacket was still hanging on a hook on the bedroom door. Brett took it down, remembering that he and Tony had much the same build and had often swapped clothes. Getting into Tony's

jacket was entirely natural and he gave it no further thought.

It was late afternoon when he rode into Benton Wells. He stopped by the general store first and bought a handful of cigars. The owner, a graying, spectacled man named Tobey Orrin. was affable. He knew who Brett was and he made a point of telling Havolin that Tony Mareno had traded here.

"An easy-going young man," he told Brett, counting out Brett's change. "Came here green as a fresh-skun hide, bought out Phil Rodman's place. Phil was pretty discouraged anyway. His wife was ailing. and when his oldest boy lost his leg in a hunting accident—" The storekeeper shook his head. "Phil was muleheaded, though. He could have sold out to Armstrong, but he claimed he wouldn't be strong-armed by any man. So he sold out to Tony, for less than what Armstrong would have paid him." He chuckled softly. "Sure riled old Bully Armstrong."

Brett nodded, cutting off the garrulous man. "Riled enough, perhaps, to take it out on the new owner, Tony?"

Orrin blinked. "Not that way, no sir," he said hastily. "Heard him say myself that Tony wasn't bothering him. In fact," he paused and licked his lips, "it was Armstrong's daughter who sent away for subscriptions to a bunch of cattle-raising magazines for Tony."

Brett grinned coldly. "Right neighborly," he admitted. He picked up his change and Orrin asked, "You coming to the dance Saturday night?"

"Dance?"

"Big Diamond shindig in the courthouse. Bully Armstrong treats every year." The storeman's voice was dry. "Biggest thing in Benton Wells, Mr. Havolin. More young-uns get hitched in the next week than in the rest of the year. Cause of more scandals, too—"

Brett cut him off. "I'll try to make it."

HE STARTED to leave, then remembered his empty larder at the Flying Club. He picked out a number of items, mostly canned goods, then added a slab of bacon and a jug of brown molasses.

"Put it in a flour sack," he said. "I'll be by later."

He rode down the street to the livery stable and turned his cayuse over to the hostler. He wanted to walk, burn up some of his restlessness. He was getting nowhere about Tony. Maybe the sheriff was right—it was the law's business. He couldn't help Tony now. If he had any sense he'd take the highest offer and head back for Beaumont.

But somehow that thought roused no interest. He stopped walking, lighted a cigar and tried to analyze his reluctance. You damn fool! he berated himself. You falling for Tony's sentimental streak? Next thing you know you'll be staying here, reading books on cattle raising!

"I'll wire Morrison now," he muttered. "Before I get a touch of brain fever."

He found the telegraph office combined with the stage station on the corner of River Road and Coyote Street. The telegrapher read the message back to Brett:

"Sam Morrison, care of Parker House, Beaumont, Texas. Decided to join you on Selwyn lease. Expect me in ten days. Brett Havolin."

Havolin paid for the message and went out, feeling better than he had since his arrival. He took another cigar from his pocket, lighted up, and was about to head up River Road for Polly's Restaurant when he saw Kinsman. The black-frocked attorney had just stepped out of the Dusty Hole Saloon and was teetering on his heels, obviously having trouble deciding which way to navigate.

Brett joined him before he made up his mind. The attorney swayed to windward, recovered his balance, and jabbed a forefinger against Brett's chest. "You owe me a hundred simoleons."

Havolin slipped a cigar between Kinsman's teeth. "Bite on this." He grinned. "You hear better with your mouth closed."

Kinsman spluttered indignantly, but he kept a firm bite on the cigar. "You're a high-handed cuss," he accused. "Should have known better than to deal with a red-

headed fool like you. Any man who'd tangle with that mean-faced Big Diamond foreman, Prel, hasn't got—"

"Whoa!" Brett said sharply. "Where'd you hear that?"

Kinsman grinned waggishly. "Isn't much goes on I don't hear," he said.

Brett took his arm and turned him in the direction of his office. "I want to talk to you."

The attorney held back. "Do I get my hundred simoleons?"

"When you earn it."

Kinsman snorted, but followed Brett to the office, navigating the steep flight with Havolin's help. At the threshold he shrugged Brett's hand off, pushed the door open, and headed immediately for his desk. He pulled open the left top drawer and carefully lifted out a half-filled bottle of whisky. His groping fingers found a glass and he poured a generous two fingers, slopping a little on the desk top.

"For my client," he said, waving generously. "I'll use the bottle."

He tilted it to his lips, took a long pull, and withdrew the bottle with an audible sound of satisfaction.

"Now," he said, wiping his lips with the back of his sleeve, "what's on your mind, son?"

BRETT WALKED up to him, pushed him gently down into a chair, and took the bottle out of his hand.

"We'll start with the first thing," he said. "Tony wrote me he was doing some farming and some stock raising. He mentioned Herefords and Brahmans. I don't know what he was talking about, Kinsman. I'm not a cattle man." Havolin placed the bottle on the desk and made a gesture with his hands. "There's nothing up there now except an empty corral, a garden patch gone to weed, and some chickens. I want to know what happened to this stock Tony was raising."

Kinsman leaned back, pursed his thick lips. "Strayed, maybe," he mumbled. He added peevishly, "I was his lawyer, not his handyman. Sure, Tony had about forty head of good beef. He ranged them east of his place, on grass the Big Diamond claims is theirs. Might be that Bully Armstrong claimed them."

He straightened up at the look in Brett's face. "Now wait a minute, son," he growled. "Don't be a consarned idiot. I'm

The pounding of his blood drowned out all thought

not claiming the Big Diamond took them over. Armstrong's got a lot of faults, and he isn't much liked around here, but he's too big to fool around with stealing forty head."

"He seems big enough to do what he wants around here," Brett snapped.

Kinsman let that pass. "Tony had two saddle horses which he sometimes used for his wagon—both chestnuts, but one has a blaze-face. They're down at Baker's Livery Stable. You can claim them by paying the feed bill."

"Why didn't you tell me that yesterday?"

"You didn't ask me," Kinsman snapped, "and you were too blamed cocksure for a stranger who'd just blown into town."

Brett's smile was a little sheepish. "Reckon I was, at that," he admitted. He took another cigar from his pocket and tossed it on the desk. "On account," he said calmly. "You'll get your hundred later—the day I sell the Flying Club."

Kinsman blinked owlishly. "Decided to take my advice, eh?"

Brett shrugged. "Why not? It's too late to help Tony, and I wasn't cut out to be a farmer." He started to leave, stopped, looked back at Kinsman, who was reaching for his bottle. "By the way, Tony didn't know the right end of a skillet when I knew him. He couldn't have eaten all his meals in town."

Kinsman ran the tips of his fingers over his nose. "Tony was a likable young feller," he pointed out, "and the Marlins, I hear, are right neighborly people. From Virginia, I heard."

Brett nodded shortly. "I got you."

He went down the long flight of stairs and paused on the edge of the walk, still turning over in his mind Kinsman's last remark. The Marlins were neighborly all right. He had had a sample of their hospitality himself. He wondered if Lorna had used the same tactics on Tony, and for the same reasons.

Standing there, looking down the quiet, tree-shadowed street, Brett had the dissatisfying thought that he would never know why Tony had been killed. Sure, Tony had been-well-liked. Brett heard that everywhere. But his death seemed to have been forgotten too quickly. Brett had the feeling that people hereabouts wanted to avoid thinking about it.

The evening shadows were lengthening now across the road. The thought of eating dinner and then riding back to that empty cabin depressed him. He toyed with the thought of taking a room in the *Trail House.*

He ate in Polly's, and was surprised to find he was less hungry than he had thought. Coming out to the walk, he saw Sheriff Hogan stop across the street and look at him. A big, rangy man, he stood out among the passersby.

Brett waited. The sheriff's holstered Colt, a bone-handled Peacemaker, reflected a glint of light. It reminded Brett that he had left his gun at the spread. If Hogan wanted to check on him, he was welcome, he thought humorlesly.

HE TURNED away, more than half decided that he would stay in town tonight. He needed a drink or more than one. He wanted to feel a night crowd around him again, and to play a little poker maybe. He wasn't ready to settle down, not while Morrison was waiting for him in Beaumont, not while there was the chance of wildcatting a strike that would make him rich overnight.

He headed for the *Trail House.* A half-dozen horses he had noticed when he had ridden into town nosed the rail of the Tin Cup Saloon. A burst of raucous, demanding voices spilled through the batwings. Brett paused to make out the brand on the nearest cayuse, a sweaty gray. It was Big Diamond.

Impulse had its way with him. Big Diamond seemed to run things its way in this section. He was curious to see the man who was Big Diamond, the man known as Bully Armstrong.

He turned and stepped up to the shadowed veranda. Light splashed through the slatted doors, making its pattern on the boards. He was in this light when a shadowy figure queried softly, "Havolin?"

Brett turned to the sound. He glimpsed

the downward movement of the man's hand. Then the night exploded into a blaze of light that burned out to an inky blackness. . . .

A steady jolting hurt the back of Brett's head. The pain was his first awareness. He squeezed his eyes shut but the throbbing remained. After a while he opened his eyes, but he couldn't see a thing. Fear laid its hand on him then, overriding the throbbing pain. He tried to bring his hand to his eyes, and it was then he realized that his wrists were tied, and so were his feet.

Awareness came faster now. He was on his back with his hands under him. He must have been in this position for some time. There was little feeling in his arms. The jolting movement of whatever he was lying on finally identified itself as a wagon-bed. A canvas tarp had been pulled over him.

The wagon was not alone on its journey. Riders flanked it. Brett heard the soft scuffing of leather above the whirring wagon wheels, and an occasional clang of shod hoofs on imbedded rocks. One of the riders kept whistling "Johnny Reb" off key.

The wagon jolted sharply over a rock. The driver cursed, and someone riding flank laughed unsympathically.

A half hour later a heavy voice said: "Good enough, Teal!"

The wagon stopped. The driver fastened his reins, turned in his seat, and pulled the tarp from Brett. He looked down into Brett's blazing eyes, grunted, and called back over his shoulder, "He's awake, boss!"

"Get him out," the heavy voice ordered.

Teal took a clasp knife from his pants pocket, snapped the big blade open, and cut the rope around Brett's legs. Then he rolled Havolin on his face and sawed his hands free. Straightening, he closed his knife and slid it into his pocket.

"All right, buster," he growled. "This is where you get out."

Rage had been building up in Brett with the passing miles, a wild and heedless rage. He flexed his hands, feeling the blood come back into them, feeling the pinpoints of pain in his fingers. He drew his legs up under him, got his palms on the wagon bed, and came up fast. His shoulder piled into Teal's stomach, toppling the man over the side.

Teal's squawk of alarm was cut short as he landed heavily.

BRETT straightened, planting his feet wide. The wagon had stopped in a small clearing ringed by shadowy trees. A high-riding slice of moon provided enough light for Havolin to make out the half-dozen riders ringing him.

He saw Prel first, sitting slack in saddle. The foreman's dark face was swathed in bandages that gleamed sharply white against the shadows. Chet Armstrong was there, beside an enormously broad man who sat solidly in the sadle of a big blue roan. Brett didn't recognize the others.

"Still got a lot of fight in him," the broad man observed. He seemed amused.

Teal came to his feet, reaching for the knife in his pocket. Bully Armstrong's voice ordering him away from the wagon, stopped him. Then he looked up at Brett.

"Get down, Red."

Havolin didn't move. He slid his glance to the reins tied to the brake handle and wondered if he could make a break through those riders.

Armstrong eased his Colt out of its holster. "Get down!" he repeated.

Havolin climbed down. The effort started a heavy pounding in his head, and he felt his stomach turn over. He sagged against the wagon wheel.

Armstrong slid his Colt back into holster and started unbuckling his cartridge belt.

"For a stranger here, you've been right proddy," he said bluntly. "Five minutes in town and you're tangling with my son. Before the day is over you're getting free with my daughter—"

"Dad!" Chet's voice was harsh. "You know—"

"Shut up!" Bully Armstrong's voice was like a whip.

Havolin pushed away from the wheel. He stood slack-armed, facing the broad man, forcing insolence into his smile. "You forgot Prel," he said.

"I haven't forgotten anything," Armstrong snapped. He slid his cartridge belt free and handed it to his son. "I'm twice your age, Havolin, but I'm going to give you the beating of your life."

He stepped down from the roan, hooked his hat on the saddle horn, and turned to Brett. He spat on his horny palms and rubbed them in grim anticipation.

"What are you waiting for?" he jeered, shuffling forward. "Want me to—"

Havolin stepped in and hit Armstrong, smearing the broad man's mouth with blood. It rocked Armstrong backward, and Brett tried to follow through, but he was slow. The first blow he struck hurt him almost as much as it did Armstrong. He felt the jarring impact start the heavy, nauseating pounding in his head. The pain seemed to squeeze his eyes shut, and his left hand glanced off Armstrong's ear.

That was the last blow he struck.

Armstrong's left hand cuffed him aside. He was off balance when the Big Diamond boss's fist split his lips, sent him reeling back against the wagon. The wheel rim pressed against his back, helping to keep him up. The pain in his head was a blinding, unbearable thing. He put out his hands to ward off Armstrong's blows.

Deliberately the big man slugged him—head, shoulders, ribs, stomach. Havolin sagged, started to slide down. Armstrong's last blow caught him under the left ear, dropping him into a crumpled unconscious heap.

The Big Diamond boss stood over Brett, spitting blood from his mouth. He looked disappointed.

"Hell!" he growled. "I barely worked up a sweat."

No one in the silent group behind him commented. Armstrong walked back to his cayuse, jammed his hat on his head, and climbed into saddle. He held out a hand for his gunbelt and Chet handed it to him.

"Let's go home," Armstrong said roughly.

Chet said, "What about him?" He indicated Havolin.

"It's five miles to town," his father snapped. "If he's got the brains of a muley calf, he'll take the first stage back where he came from." He reached inside his hip pocket for a blue polka-dotted handkerchief and wiped blood from his lips. He took a last look at the unconscious redhead.

"Tough, eh? He wilted fastern'n last year's daisies!"

He moved across the clearing, the others falling in around the wagon. They rode west, across bumpy ground, the wagon jolting and lurching over the rough spots. When they finally hit the road to the Big Diamond, Prel reined aside.

"Going back to town," he said. "Just remembered I'm fresh out of the makings."

Armstrong grunted. He didn't look back at his foreman. The others kept on, flanking the wagon. Even before the Big Diamond foreman received the burns on his face he had been a hard man to get along with. Now he was intolerable. Most of them were glad to see him turn back, fade into the darkness.

But Chet Armstrong kept seeing Havolin's crumpled figure in the clearing. Slowly he let his mount fall back behind the others.

HAVOLIN rolled over and painfully pushed himself to his hands and knees. His whole body ached. He remained on his knees, his tongue probing his thick, cut lips.

The Big Diamond riders had gone, taking the wagon with them. At the moment he was too hurt to care. His head ached again, from the gun blow that had raised an egg-sized lump over his left ear.

He had been badly whipped by a man twice his age, and the humiliation touched off a grim and deadly anger inside him. Armstrong had run the valley for twenty years by such methods—by guns and fists. Whatever his reasons, he, Havolin, had been considered just another minor obstacle in Armstrong's way, an obstacle to be roughly shoved aside.

Deep inside Brett an insolent pride asserted itself. Ever since he had come to Benton Wells he had been advised, ordered and manhandled to get him to leave. And

the Big Diamond had been doing most of the ordering!

He pushed himself to his feet and stood swaying, fighting the sickness that clawed at his stomach. On rubbery legs he walked to a rock on the edge of the clearing and sat down. He bent forward, with his head between his knees. His dinner came up and he lost it.

The night wind was cool across his face, chilling the sweat on his brow. But he felt better, clearer headed. He got up, his mouth tightening against the pain that racked his body.

He didn't know how far he was from town, nor in which direction to walk. But he was a stubborn man, as Bully Armstrong would find out.

His hat made a black blob beside the wagon ruts. Havolin walked slowly to it, bent carefully, and picked it up. He was straightening up when he heard the horseman coming toward the clearing.

He turned to face the sound, hope flicking through him. It died almost at once as the shadowy rider emerged into the clearing and reined in.

For a moment there was only the silence of the night. Prel let the silence drag, relishing his moment. Then he drew his Colt. He palmed it without hurry, snicking the hammer back with his thumb.

"This is my score, Havolin," he said. His voice, partially muffled by the bandages, had a nasty edge. "But it'll have a Big Diamond tag. Another tally on the wrong side of Bully Armstrong's book."

Havolin's fists clenched. "I pegged you for a polecat, Prel," he said desperately, "but not yellow. Toss me a gun."

"Why?" Prel edged his cayuse around until he was almost broadside to Brett. "I came back to kill you, Havolin. Not—"

He jerked around, clearly surprised, as a rider broke through the shadows. His teeth showed in startled effort. He brought his gun hand across his chest and snapped a shot at the horseman breaking into the clearing. He thumbed another in desperate haste, and the return blast doubled him up. He fired his last shot blindly, almost in the ear of his panicky cayuse. The animal reared and screamed, and Prel fell loosely, hitting the ground like a sack of meal.

Havolin didn't move. He saw the man who had killed Prel ride slowly forward into the pale moonlight. *Chet Armstrong!*

It didn't make sense to him then. Nor did Chet's bitter voice help. "I owe you a cayuse, Havolin. Take Prel's. It's a Big Diamond animal. And get the hell out of the country!"

Havolin walked slowly forward. He stopped by Prel's body. The Big Diamond foreman's cayuse, a rangy steeldust, had stopped a few feet away. Frowning, Brett looked at Chet. "You speaking for yourself or Bully Armstrong?"

"For both." Chet edged his horse toward Brett, and now Havolin saw the spreading blotch staining the younger man's left coat sleeve. He saw that the gun that had killed Prel was still clenched tightly in Chet's right fist.

"I've taken a lot of pushing around from my old man, Havolin." Chet's voice was trembling. "But I won't take any more from you, nor from anyone else." His left cheek twitched, and Brett saw the misery in the man's eyes. He guessed at the hell this youngster must have lived through. Evidently Bully Thompson's roughshod methods were not confined only to outsiders.

He made a motion to the body. "He's dead. I reckon I owe you more than the price of a cayuse, Chet."

CHET ARMSTRONG shrugged. "He worked for the Big Diamond, but he was no good. I knew what he was heading for, Havolin." Chet took a deep breath. "My father may be all what the valley folk think he is, but he'd never shoot an unarmed man. Nor would he have one of his riders do it. I want you to know that, Havolin."

Brett ran his tongue over his puffed lips. "I only know one thing about your paw," he said bleakly. "He's got a licking coming to him—a licking he'll never forget!"

Chet grinned wryly. "You're a stubborn fool, Havolin." Under his breath he added, "But I see what Carol meant."

"What?"

"Nothing." Chet snapped. He holstered his Colt and indicated Prel. "Hoist him up here. He worked for the Big Diamond. The Big Diamond will bury him."

Brett shrugged. Setting his teeth, he lifted the body. With Chet's right arm helping, they got Prel across Chet's saddle front. A drop of bright blood, working down Chet's dangling arm, fell on the back of Brett's hand.

"Better come into town and let a doctor look at that arm," Brett suggested.

Chet shook his head. "Carol'll do a better job."

He waited until Brett walked to Prel's cayuse and climbed into saddle. "Follow the wagon ruts until you hit the main road. Then turn left. You're five miles from town."

Havolin nodded. "I figured you different," he said thickly. "Just goes to show." He made a short, casual gesture with his right hand. "Thanks."

Chet shrugged. He rode past Brett, heading into the shadows ringing the clearing. He didn't look back.

Fifteen minutes of riding brought Brett to the main road, and a short while later he picked up the light of Benton Wells against the night. The steady jolting racked his aching body.

He slowed the steeldust to a walk as he headed up River Road. When he saw the sign marking Thompson's Palace Bar he turned the steel dust to the rack and dismounted.

A half-dozen men lined the bar rail. Brett spotted the gambler at his table by the far wall. Thompson was sitting in a three-handed stud poker game. He was facing the door, so he saw Havolin come in and head for the bar. Thompson pushed his hand into the discards and got up.

Havolin turned as Thompson touched his shoulder. He said thickly, "I've come for that drink, Thompson."

"Sure, son." The gambler indicated the far end of the bar, away from the customers turning curious faces toward them. Havolin followed him. Thompson made a quick motion to the bartender, who came immediately. He set glasses and a bottle in front of them and moved away.

Thompson poured.

The liquor burned briefly in Havolin's battered mouth. He set the glass down, eyeing his battered features in the bar mirror. He looked worse than he felt, he thought grimly. The bruise over his left eye was a yellowish-green bulge that interfered with the movement of his eyelid. His lips were puffed to about twice their size. Dried blood stained his cheek and his chin, and spotted his jacket.

Thompson refilled his glass. "Need help, son?"

"No." Havolin thumbed his hat back on his red hair. His grin was lopsided. "A couple more of these under my belt and I'll amble on home."

The Palace doors swung hard, banging against the inner wall. The flow of talk ran out as men turned their attention to the tall, rangy lawman shouldering his way in.

The sheriff made a slow, deliberate survey of the bar. He had an unhurried dogged way about him that commanded respect. He saw Havolin at the end of the bar, turning slowly to face him, and he walked across the room, skirting the silent men at the near card tables.

THOMPSON frowned. He waited until the sheriff stopped, still several feet from the bar. Then he indicated the bottle. "On the house, Ray," he invited.

The sheriff shook his head. "Not tonight." He looked at Brett, his hard eyes taking in the bruises. "I saw you ride up the street on the steeldust tied outside. Earlier this evening I saw Prel ride out of town on that cayuse." His voice was short. "Now you tell me, Havolin."

"I could tell you to go to hell!" Brett said. The two drinks on an empty stomach were dulling the soreness of his body.

"You could," Hogan agreed sourly. He dropped the heel of his right hand to his Colt. "And then we'd take a little walk down the street, to my office."

Havolin nodded. "Prel's dead. The steel-

dust is mine. If you want the answers to that, ride up to the Big Diamond and ask Chet Armstrong why Havolin is riding a Big Diamond cayuse!"

The sheriff shook his head. "I'm asking you the questions, Havolin."

Brett stepped away from the bar, his voice edged. "I've taken one beating tonight, sheriff. Don't push me!"

Hogan's weatherbeaten face darkened. "I'm still asking."

Thompson stepped in front of Havolin. "You're pushing that star too hard, Ray," he suggested coldly. "You got something special against Havolin?"

Hogan frowned. "I'm doing my job," he growled. "This pilgrim—"

"Has been treated like he was some kind of polecat since he came here," the gambler snapped. "It's time someone showed him a little hospitality. I don't know how he got that cayuse, but if he says that animal is his I'm backing him, Ray."

Hogan weighed this. Thompson was a power in town. He pulled a lot of weight.

"All right, Havolin," he growled, "I'll ride up to the Big Diamond. But if I don't get the right answers, you better be out of the country when I come looking for you."

Havolin watched him turn and walk out of the room. He looked at Thompson. "Thanks," he said drily. "When I get ready to leave, you can have the Flying Club."

Disappointed flicked across Thompson's eyes. "You leaving?"

"When I settle a few scores," Brett said. He pushed his glass away from the bartender tilting the bottle. "Before I leave, I want to know why you want the spread."

Thompson turned to the bar, poured himself a drink. "I came to the valley a year after Frank Armstrong. I was two years married. I staked out my claim, built a one-room house, bought a hundred head. My wife had inherited some money." His voice took on a note of dry bitterness. "Armstrong was beginning to push out. He decided he wanted our land. When we wouldn't sell, he started to crowd us. He cut me off from water. I hung on until the night my wife died in childbirth." He lifted his head and looked at Brett. "I've hated Frank Armstrong since that day."

Brett nodded slowly. "You got company," he muttered.

ORRIN'S General Store remained open late on Friday night. Brett stopped by for his order.

"Add a bottle of liniment," he growled. He grinned at the look on Tobey's face. "Ran into a couple of doors," he said levelly. "But I'll be in tomorrow night for the Big Diamond shindig." He paid for the liniment and picked up the grocery sack. "Wouldn't miss that for the world," he murmured.

The warming effects of the liquor petered out before he reached the Flying Club. He was in a sour mood when he turned the steeldust into the barn, stripped the saddle from the animal, and dropped it on the floor outside the stall. He lugged the grocery sack into the house, dropped it on the table,

[*Turn page*]

and headed for the bedroom. He had just enough strength to kick off his boots and drop on the bed. He was asleep within the minute. . .

Sunlight crept across the floor, climbed the bed, and touched Brett's face. He turned and stifled a groan. He lay there, letting sleep wash out of him, feeling stiff and sore all over. Out by the barn a rooster, in high spirits, crowed lustily.

Finally he swung his feet over the bedside and sat up. He ran his fingers through his crisp hair, felt the lump over his ear. Last night's happenings came back to him, and he examined them coldly.

He got up and walked to the dresser and peered at himself in the mirror. He hadn't looked this bad since the night he and Tony had gotten into a free-swinging fight with a half-dozen muckers from a rival well in Beaumont's Gold Emporium.

He wagged a finger at the battered image. "Time to settle down, feller," he jeered at himself. "You have only so much wear and tear coming to you. Remember, you aren't twenty any more."

He walked out into the kitchen in his stocking feet and surveyed the woodbox behind the stove. His bag of groceries lay on the table where he had left it. Sunlight made a cheerful pattern in the room, and for the first time he caught a sense of peace, of quiet beauty, about the Flying Club. He walked to the door, flung it open, and took a deep breath.

The frayed lengths of rope that once had been a child's swing hung from the big pecan. And then Tony's quiet voice came back to haunt him: *"Buy me a small spread, get married, raise some kids. . . ."*

Brett turned away, his mouth hard. He walked back to the bedroom, got into his boots, found his hat where it had rolled off the bed, and went out again. He started a fire in the wood range and got water for the coffee pot and for shaving.

He finished shaving while the coffee boiled. The smell of it filled the room, reminding him of Carol Armstrong. He felt her presence here, the way he had first seen her, bending over the stove. He remembered the wonder he had felt at the way she had transformed the dismal kitchen by just being here.

"You're a fool," he said cynically, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "After the way you treated her she'll never come back here."

He drank the strong black coffee and settled back, feeling in his jacket pocket for a cigar. He felt paper crumple under his searching fingers. Frowning, he brought out a letter.

It was tobacco soiled and badly crumpled, but it was still sealed and it was addressed to him. For a moment Brett looked at it with blank stare. Then it came to him that he was still wearing Tony's brush jacket. Tony must have written the letter, put it in his pocket to mail, and forgotten it.

Brett opened it.

It was a single page, written on both sides with a pencil. Tony had never been much of a letter writer. He was as laconic on paper as he was voluble in conversation. But his last paragraph jarred Brett with its revelation.

> "Ran across something that's got me pretty excited—oil. Can you beat it? I left Beaumont to get away from rigs and guys like you. Wanted a piece of land where I could farm and raise some beef, and today I find an oil scout on my property. Did a little snooping, and found out he's from Consolidated. He's keeping his survey quiet, but I have a hunch he's making a copy of his report for Walter Baggett at the bank. What do you think of that? Maybe I'm sitting on a pool of oil and I don't know it. Me, an old oil man. What a laugh if it panned out that way!
>
> Brett, when are you coming out here? I won a bet, remember."

BRETT chewed on his unlighted cigarette. He thought bleakly, "You didn't have time to laugh, did you, Tony? Someone found out you knew and killed you!"

Who?

Walter Baggett, probably. But Bully Armstrong might have found out, too, and so might Jack Thompson. So might all of the people who were so anxious to get hold of the Flying Club.

He heard the rider come into the yard, and for a brief moment he thought it

might be Carol. He got up and walked to the door, crumpling the letter into his pocket.

Sheriff Hogan dismounted slowly. He faced Brett, his weathered face hard as granite. But his voice sounded tired.

"Just rode back from the Big Diamond," he said bluntly.

Brett waited, blocking the doorway. His eyes were unfriendly.

"I got my answers," the sheriff added heavily. "I don't give a damn about Prel. He got what he had coming to him. Just the same, Havolin, you'd be a smart man if you sold out and headed back to East Texas."

"Why?" Brett's tone was level.

Hogan's face darkened. He said thickly, "Because you've caused trouble since you came here. You listened to a windbag attorney say that Tony Mareno was shot—"

"Just who are you covering, Sheriff?" Brett interrupted grimly. He saw the question hit home, caught the sudden startled glint in the lawman's eyes. "You've been dogging me since I came here," Brett pressed, "waiting for me to make one wrong move, warning me to get out. Why, Hogan?"

The sheriff's lips pressed tight against his teeth. "Tony didn't belong here, Havolin," he rasped. "Neither do you. I don't like your kind. That answer your question?"

"Maybe." Brett made a quick sweep with his left hand. "Or is it because you found out there's oil here, Hogan? Is that the real reason?"

He saw the sheriff frown with sudden puzzlement. Hogan turned away, climbed into saddle again. He leaned over the horn, his hard face like moulded iron.

"You're a fool," he muttered. He turned his cayuse then and rode out of the yard, his shoulders square against the blue sky.

Brett watched him go. He had found the chink in the sheriff's armor. He knew now that Hogan knew who had killed Tony and he had known for a long time.

Brett glanced up at the sun. Past noon, he judged. He had a hunch that he'd know, too, before the day was over.

Late that afternoon Brett Havolin rode to the Marlin ranch.

Mady Marlin came to the door before he dismounted. She stood small and frail in the doorway, her eyes blinking at him from behind her spectacles. She was wearing a crisply-starched black dress, and her white hair was pinned up in a neat bun on her head. She lifted a thin, translucent hand to shade her eyes from the slanting sun.

"Why, Mister Havolin! Please come in. I've just made tea. Do you like tea?"

"I was weaned on black coffee," Brett interrupted gently. He looked toward the open-faced shed where he had noticed the red-wheeled buggy on his first visit here. It was gone.

"I came by to see Lorna," he said. "I have some good news for her."

"Oh!" Mrs. Marlin looked up at him, her eyes behind the glasses alert as a small bird's. "You have decided to sell, Mister Havolin?"

"No."

MADY MARLIN smiled somewhat uncertainly. "Lorna's gone to the dance in Benton Wells. Mr. Baggett—of the bank, you know—came for her." She added somewhat apologetically, "You know how young people are. I was like that myself, at her age. But I married early. A man who had no money." Her eyes seemed dark and withdrawn, as if she had slipped back into bitter years. "I would never allow Lorna to be so foolish, Mister Havolin."

Brett shrugged. "I'm sure you wouldn't," he said softly. "But, of course, you won't have to worry about money any more."

Mrs. Marlin blinked. "What are you saying?"

"Hasn't Mr. Baggett told you and Lorna about the oil?"

Mady Marlin's voice was almost a whisper. "I don't know what you're talking about, Brett."

Havolin leaned forward in saddle, his tone confidential. "Oil, Mrs. Marlin. There's been an oil scout from Consolidated making a survey. Looks like the Flying Club and this place have become

valuable property. If Consolidated's interested, they'll pay plenty for a lease." Brett smiled. "They may even want to buy your place, Mrs. Marlin. But I wouldn't sell. I'd hold out for a lease instead."

"You—you say Walter Baggett knew about this?" the older Marlin asked. Her voice was strained. "Walter knew about the oil survey?"

Brett nodded. "He must have known about it several months ago." He frowned. "No wonder Mr. Baggett wanted to buy the Flying Club. He knew how much it really was worth."

Mrs. Marlin didn't seem elated at the news. She said uncertainly: "I'm sure Lorna will be surprised when she hears about this."

Havolin settled back in his saddle. "Well—good day, Mrs. Marlin. I expect to see Lorna at the dance tonight. I'll tell her myself."

He turned away from the small yard. When he was across the creek he looked back. Mrs. Marlin was still in the doorway, a small, frail figure in the reddening rays of the sun.

THE courthouse assembly room, by day a scene of dignified emptiness, came to life every Saturday night. It was customary for the weekly dance to be held here, where the young folk could get in some courting and the older ones a bit of gallivanting, and where the gossip of the week made the rounds of the benches on which the older women were content to sit while they kept a watchful eye on their daughters.

But this Saturday night was special. This was the night of the Big Diamond shindig. This was the night when the celebration was on Bully Armstrong. Every saloon in town was holding open house, with the understanding that the night's bill would be paid by the Big Diamond.

The gigs, buggies and wagons were lined up on either side of the quiet, oakshaded street as far back as River Road, when Brett rode into town. He came in on a deserted main street, but he heard the sounds of laughter and wailing fiddles long before he turned the steeldust toward the courthouse.

He rode until he found a small break in the parked vehicles and left his cayuse there, tethered to the pole support for a wooden awning.

The street ended in a wide square, with the white clapboard courthouse facing it. A big tree shadowed the entrance from which came the contagious sounds of celebration.

Havolin started down the shadowed walk. He was less than twenty feet away when Sheriff Hogan's voice stopped him.

"This is Big Diamond's night, Havolin." Hogan's face was in shadow, but his voice was clear. "You come to celebrate?"

Havolin shrugged. He could barely make out the sheriff's tall figure under the big oak. The lawman was wearing a gun. Brett remembered then that he was wearing his.

"I've come to celebrate," he said levelly.

Hogan was silent a moment. "You'll find a coat closet to the left of the door when you go in," he said finally. "Old Tod will take your hat and your gun!"

"Fair enough," Brett said. He walked past the sheriff and up the three steps to the courthouse. The door was open and a little light came through. He hesitated in the hallway. At the end of the hallway, double walnut doors were folded back, giving him a view of the assembly room. Bright tapers decorated the big room, extended in swirls of color into the hallway. Several men, stiff in their Sunday suits, were clustered about the entrance.

Brett turned to the counter where an old, watery-eyed man took his hat and his gunbelt. "Plumb crowded tonight, stranger," he squeaked. He hefted Havolin's gunbelt and frowned disapprovingly. "Most folks hereabouts have quit wearing these to town. Hasn't been a gunfight in Benton Wells for more than three—nope, four—years." He turned to search among the crowded hooks for a place to hang Havolin's hat and belt. "They'll be right here, near the door."

"Why, hello, Havolin."

Brett turned to face Walter Baggett and

Lorna, who had come up to the door. Baggett was slickly groomed, poised, sure of himself. Lorna hung on his arm. She had on a pale blue dress which set off her mass of golden hair. Her eyes met Brett's with cool appraisal.

Baggett was saying affably, "Glad you decided to come." Then, "Good Lord!" he ejaculated. "What happened to your face?"

"Cut it shaving," Brett answered shortly.

The banker's eyes held an amused glint. "Well, we'll see you inside. Lorna found it stuffy. We're stepping outside for a few minutes."

Brett nodded. He watched them go out. Lorna's laughter rippled softly in the night.

HOW many men had Lorna Marlin had on the string? Tony, the sheriff, Baggett . . . What did Lorna Marlin want? Tony was dead now, but he must have been encouraged once. More than encouraged, Brett suspected, or Tony would not have written him about marriage.

Where did Ray Hogan fit in? Was it because Lorna Marlin liked the way she could twist him around her finger, liked to tease him with her physical nearness?

Walter Baggett he understood. Baggett could give her position, money, the things Mady Marlin wanted for her daughter.

What had she wanted of him? The Flying Club? But unless her mother had been lying, Lorna didn't know about the oil survey. Then why had she wanted it? Unless it was the banker's money behind it—Baggett's indirect attempt to get the ranch on Piute Creek.

Brett turned his thoughts to the dance. He hadn't lied when he had told Hogan he had come for the celebration. A private celebration, he thought grimly, strictly between Bully Armstrong and himself.

He paused at the entrance to the dance floor, his glance moving over the dancing couples. He glimpsed Carol Armstrong, looking cool in a white dress. She was dancing with a tall, gangly farm boy who was moving stiffly around the floor. Havolin's survey took in the crowded benches. He didn't see Thompson among the men against the side wall, which didn't surprise him. Nor did he see Chet Armstrong.

But most of Benton Wells was here, he judged. And the cynical observation came to him that though people probably hated the Armstrongs, they didn't seem to mind drinking their liquor.

He spotted Bully Armstrong finally, standing by the table with the big punch-bowl on it. The punch was obviously intended for the ladies, for they were the only ones who seemed to partake of it.

Havolin started to make his way along the edge of the floor toward Armstrong. He stepped carefully, avoiding the feet of the women on the benches. Two boys, young enough to be home in bed, came charging toward him. Havolin evaded them. He was in a partially clear section of the room when he heard Carol's surprised voice.

"Brett!"

He turned and faced the floor. Carol was coming toward him. Her partner was standing awkwardly, being nudged by the other dancers. He looked at Brett with an unfriendly stare.

Carol's eyes searched his face. "Chet told me about last night." Her voice was soft, uncertain, as was the look in her eyes. "I'm—I'm sorry."

"What for?" He saw her chin tremble slightly, and reached out with his forefinger to chuck it lightly. "Quit feeling sorry for everything your dad does, Carol. You're not responsible for him. Remember that." Brett put his fingers over her hand, his voice softening. "Save me the next dance."

"Where are you going?"

"To see your father." Brett's voice was suddenly flat. "He gave me a licking last night, Carol. I want to see if he can do it again."

"No." Carol's voice caused heads to turn, brought the gangly boy she had been dancing with to her side.

"He bothering you, Miss Carol?" he asked eagerly.

Brett pulled away from her. The girl stood looking after him, ignoring her dance partner's repeated question.

Brett was within ten feet of the Big Diamond boss when Armstrong noticed him. The rancher was listening to a buxom woman chattering in his ear. He glanced up to see Havolin coming toward him, and for a moment his eyes mirrored their sharp disbelief, Then a hard, grudging smile crinkled his lips.

Two Big Diamond hands saw Brett at the same time and moved up to take their place beside Armstrong.

Brett said levelly: "I wasn't in good form last night, Armstrong. I've come back to give you another chance."

Armstrong glanced to the door behind him. "There's an alley out there, son. You want to keep this private?"

Brett nodded.

The big rancher shrugged. He turned to the tall, straw-haired man at his left. "Keep the boys playing, Blake," he ordered shortly, "and don't let anyone come after us. I'll be back in three minutes."

THE Big Diamond hands stepped sullenly aside, letting Brett through. Havolin followed Armstrong through the side door into the coolness of the alley.

He closed the door behind him and leaned against it, letting his eyes accustom themselves to the dim light from the stars and a high-riding sliver of moon. Armstrong had moved into the alley and was shedding his coat. His voice was short: "Let's get this over with, Havolin."

Brett stepped away from the door. "You've had a real licking coming to you for twenty years," he said grimly. "Too bad someone didn't kick your teeth in before you got too big for your hat. It would have saved your son and your daughter a lot of grief."

Armstrong balled his big hands. "Let's quit the big talk, son," he growled. "I'm in a—"

Havolin hit him. His right fist smeared Armstrong's mouth with blood, straightened him. Brett's left whipped around as Armstrong gagged. He felt the shock of impact clear up his shoulder.

Armstrong's head twisted around under the blow. He brought up his hands to cover his face from the blows he had barely seen. He stumbled forward, spitting blood, an incredulous snarl twisting through his battered lips.

Brett's right hand sank three inches into Armstrong's unprotected stomach. The rancher's breath whooshed out. He stood stricken, his bloody mouth gaping, trying to suck in air.

Brett stepped in and contemptuously backhanded him across the mouth.

Bully Armstrong was sagging when the backhand reached him. He fell sideways, hitting the dirt with hard impact.

Brett stood over him, breathing easily. He had learned in a rough school that the man who struck the first blows usually gained an advantage that was hard to overcome. He waited now, feeling little pity for this big man pawing the ground at his feet.

Armstrong came to his feet slowly. He brought the back of his hand across his bloody mouth, his eyes still dazed.

Brett said thinly: "Before we finish this thing, Armstrong, I want to know one thing. When did you find out there was oil on the Flying Club?"

Bully Armstrong's head came up, and Brett saw the surprise in the rancher's eyes. "Oil?" Armstrong dragged in a deep breath. "What are you talking about?"

"The oil scout from Consolidated," Brett snapped. "He was up here, making a survey. Just before Tony was—"

The alley exploded behind Havolin. A red flare momentarily lightened the night, and in that brief lurid glare Havolin saw the shock in Armstrong's face. He knew Armstrong had been shot before the big man started to crumble.

His own surprise held him momentarily inactive. A hard object skittered along the ground and banged against his booted foot. Havolin turned, and the glint of the object caught his eye. He lunged for it, scooping the gun up, and recognition followed the familiar feel of the walnut butt in his palm. It was his own Colt he was holding! And the import of this grim scene suddenly hit him.

The music had stopped as though the shot had turned it off. He heard voices raise in alarm, heard the pound of feet toward the side door. Even before they reached it Havolin knew what those angry men would think, what Sheriff Hogan would think. The lawman was only waiting for a thing like this.

Havolin turned and ran.

CAROL knelt by her father. Armstrong was trying to sit up. The effort strained his neck muscles, distorted his bloody features. His shirt front was a dark, sticky mess.

Carol's voice was broken. "He said he was going to pay you back for last night. But I didn't dream he meant this way."

Armstrong's jaw bulged. "Young, red-headed fool . . . didn't do it. Shot came from behind . . . him. Up the alley . . ."

Sheriff Hogan pushed through the muttering crowd and stood over Carol. He snapped an order. "One of you men get the doc. Pronto!" He knelt beside the girl, his voice brusque. "Who shot you, Frank?"

Armstrong licked his lips. "Don't know. But it wasn't Havolin." He wagged his head slowly. "Damn fool thought I killed Tony. Said something about an oil scout from Consolidated—finding oil on the Flying Club. Reckon he thought I killed Mareno."

He clenched his teeth against a spasm of pain. Carol said sharply, "Where's the doctor? Someone get—"

Sheriff Hogan moved away as the doctor came hurrying up the alley. He heard the medico say quickly, "Bring him to my office. I can't work here."

Hogan didn't hurry. He walked out of the alley and into the square in front of the courthouse. He stood under the big oak and reached inside his pocket for a cigar He didn't light it. He thought of Havolin, and a grudging admiration came to him.

"Reckon I owe you a box of cigars," he said softly.

He walked up the street, a big and deliberate man, knowing what he had to do and not liking it. He stopped in at the corner bar and had a drink. The bartender was curious about the shot he had heard, but the look on Hogan's face stilled him.

The sheriff walked out. He turned in to the livery stable where he kept his horse, and saddled up. He took his time. When he rode out of Benton Wells, he headed west. For the Marlin place. . . .

The moon came out from behind a cloud and lightened the gloom in the small yard. Wind ruffled a puff of dust toward the open-faced shed where Brett Havolin waited.

He had been waiting twelve minutes, but it seemed a lot longer. He hunkered on his heels, his gun thrust in his waistband.

A lamp, turned low, cast its wan light against the windows of the Marlin house. He wondered briefly if Mady Marlin were awake, waiting for the return of her daughter.

The Marlin cow moved restlessly in its stall on the other side of the partition. The night was soft with late summer heat. The insect chorus made an undertone in the darkness.

Havolin had gone over all angles before coming here. He was still surprised at how easy he had circled, slipped back down the darkened street, and reached his mount. He was surprised, too, at the lack of pursuit.

But he knew one thing. Walter Baggett and Lorna would be showing up here soon. And Baggett had to be his man. By the simple process of elimination it had to be Baggett who had killed Tony, and who tonight had tried to frame him by killing Armstrong.

HE HEARD the buggy on the road before it splashed across the shallow water at the fording. A board creaked in the house, and Brett frowned. Was Mrs. Marlin still up?

The buggy wheeled into the yard, and in the dim moonlight Brett saw that Walter Baggett was driving. The banker pulled up by the door. Lorna Marlin hesitated.

She said worriedly. "Do you think they've caught him yet?"

Walter patted her bare arm. "That's not for us to worry about. We'll let Hogan do it for us."

"Do what?" Brett rasped drily. "Look for me?"

He came away from the darkness of the shed, into the light of the Marlin yard. "Is that what's worrying you, Lorna?"

The girl shivered. Baggett was still holding the reins. He ran his tongue over his lips. "We heard you had killed Frank Armstrong," he said stiffly. "Can't say that I blame you, after what he did to you."

"I didn't kill Armstrong," Brett said flatly.

The banker made a small motion with his shoulders. "I heard a shot. When I ran down the alley there was already a crowd of men around Armstrong. Someone said, 'Havolin shot Armstrong!'" Baggett tried a smile. "I thought I'd better take Lorna home."

The door opening cut his explanation short. Mady Marlin stood in the dim wash of lamplight. She was still wearing her black dress and her spectacles, but she didn't look small and frail—not the way she was holding the Sharps rifle in her hands.

Lorna gave a gasp of surprise. "Mother! I thought you'd be in bed!"

"I've been waiting for you," Mrs. Marlin said, "waiting for you and Mr. Baggett."

Lorna's voice tumbled out. "There was trouble at the dance. Walter took me home."

"I've been waiting," Mrs. Marlin continued. Her voice sounded indistinct, as though it were coming from a distance. She was looking up at Baggett, her eyes shielded by the spectacles. "Why didn't you tell me, Walter?"

The banker glanced at Brett, standing silent and watchful, waiting. His tone was sharp. "Tell you what, Mrs. Marlin?"

"About the oil."

Baggett started. "Oil?" His laughter was too quick. "What oil?"

"The oil on our property—mine and Mr. Havolin's. The oil Consolidated is interested in."

Baggett looked down at Brett's face. "What are you up to, Havolin? What have you been telling this crazy woman?"

Lorna grabbed his arm, pulling him around. Her voice was fierce. "Is it true, Walter?"

Brett answered for him. "It's true, Lorna. He's known about the oil for two months—before Tony was killed."

Lorna's fingers dug into the tight-mouthed banker's arm. "That's why you wanted me to play up to Havolin," she breathed. "Get him to sell, and then turn the ranch over to you! That's what you wanted, and I was willing to go along with it because you led me to believe you would marry me."

Baggett shoved her away. She sprawled over the side of the seat and he kicked her, his lips twisting back against his teeth. Lorna screamed and tried to hold on as the startled animals jerked against the traces.

Brett ran forward, sliding his Colt free. Lorna was falling. He twisted to catch her, and her weight staggered him. Over her shoulder he saw Baggett's hand dart inside his coat, emerge with a small caliber pistol.

The Sharps made a heavy sound in the night. Baggett fell backward over the seat as though he had been kicked in the face. The buggy lurched as the team lunged away. Baggett's body tumbled over the side and lay crumpled in the moonlight. Havolin set Lorna Marlin on her feet. He thrust his gun in his waistband as he walked to the slight woman slumped against the door. A rider was coming into the yard, but Havolin didn't turn around until he had taken the Sharps from Mrs. Marlin.

SHERIFF HOGAN pulled up by Baggett's body, glanced down at it before levelling his gaze on Brett.

Mady Marlin mumbled softly, "Always wanted everything for Lorna—things I never had. That's why I killed Tony. He was a nice boy, but he had nothing. I didn't want Lorna to marry him."

Hogan climbed down from his saddle. "I thought Lorna had killed him," he said. His voice was tired. "Tony was killed by

a heavy caliber slug. A Sharps 60-45." He was looking at Brett, explaining. "There's only one gun like that in the valley. I thought it was Lorna who killed him. I didn't know why. I didn't want to find out."

Havolin shrugged. Lorna Marlin was crying softly, her shoulders slumped. "I didn't shoot Armstrong," he said levelly. The sheriff made a small gesture of dismissal. "It doesn't matter," he muttered.

Lorna's face was white in the moonlight. "Walter shot Armstrong," she said harshly. "He had me talk to Tod while he took Brett's gun. He went outside and down the alley. He thought he had killed Armstrong. He wanted to blame Brett."

Hogan walked to her. "It's all right," he said. His voice was low, waiting.

Havolin shrugged. "You want me, Hogan?"

The sheriff didn't even look at him. "No."

Brett turned away. He started to walk toward the shadows behind the shed where he had left the steeldust.

Mady Marlin's low broken voice followed him. "Killed Tony because he had nothing. And all the time there was oil here, enough oil to make him rich."

Brett looked back once. Lorna's face was buried in Hogan's shirt. The sheriff was standing tall, his hand smoothing her golden hair, and that hand trembled.

Brett shrugged. He didn't envy the rangy lawman.

It was noon, a week later, when Brett rode into the yard of the Flying Club. He had gone to town to send Morrison a wire that he was not coming back to Beaumont.

He saw the roan in the shade of the pecans, and when he rode up he smelled bacon frying. He dismounted and walked to the door, holding his eagerness in check.

Carol turned from the stove at his step. She had a smudge on her cheek and her eyes were bright, but she looked at him with a dubious smile as though not quite sure of her reception.

"Hello," she said.

Brett grinned. "Hello."

"Just wanted to be neighborly," Carol volunteered uncertainly. "Dad's out of bed and doesn't need me any more. Now that he's better he's more like his old self—hard to live with. He and Chet sit on the veranda and growl at each other."

Brett started for her. "About time you showed up," he said. "I was getting tired of eating out of cans."

Carol's smile was tremulous. "I hope you don't think—"

She didn't finish. Brett's arms went around her, and she turned her face up to him, all her doubts and anxiety leaving her. "Oh, Brett!" she said softly.

JODE MORGAN was not at all certain what caused him to ride over to the line cabin before he went on into town. It was true that a curl of smoke twisted out of the chimney and wasted itself in the October sunshine amid the smell of the pines, and it was true that Jode Morgan had given no one permission to use the cabin. But it was the custom of the country to permit a passing rider a meal and a night's sleep, provided only that the cabin was cleaned and readied for the next traveler. There was no reason for Jode to suspect trouble.

But he reined in his big black gelding with a firm hand, and Dido, his foreman, stopped beside him. The two were riding together. Jode said suddenly, "You go on into town and meet me at the hardware. I aim to drift up there and see who's in that cabin."

Dido said easily, "Mebbe I better ride up there with you, boss, just in case."

Jode furrowed thick black brows at him. "You think there might be something I can't handle?"

He saw the expression in the foreman's eyes, and felt a kind of pleasure. He saw Dido's eyes were seeing the huge, powerful bulk of his body, and the dark face and the broken nose that had removed all appearance of cordiality from Jode's face. The foreman's answer came back with neither affection nor fear.

"I reckon there's nothing anywhere you couldn't handle. There's no joke intended when they call you the toughest man in the valley. I just thought . . . "

"Ride on into town and meet me at the hardware," Jode told him. Jode sat the black horse quietly, watching his foreman ride away. Then he turned his big body and urged the black mount toward the cabin among the pines.

October and the smell of the pines did something to him that he did not understand. He had fought and whipped a hard land. From the time his nose had been broken in a children's fight he had looked tough enough so that man and nature had tested him. He had risen to be the biggest rancher in the valley, and reputation marked him as the hardest man.

The RUSTLER'S

He was shocked to see there was a baby here

WOMAN

By V. E. THIESSEN

JODE MORGAN had been the most feared, most prosperous rancher in the valley—until now. . . .

Yet there was something about October that touched some inner chord. The cabin had been only an excuse, though he refused to face the fact. What he really wanted was to be alone with the colors of fall, and the smell of the approaching winter.

And then, near the cabin, he saw something that turned him hard again, and a controlled temper began to surge up inside of him. A garden hoe lay against the cabin wall.

He spoke to the horse, "A squatter, by thunder! A damned, dirt-stirring squatter!" He rounded the corner of the cabin.

There he saw the rest of it. There were curtains at the cabin windows—flour sack curtains, but ruffled and starched into a kind of prettiness.

HE STOPPED, and his brows wrinkled above the harsh line of that broken nose. A woman too! Well, woman and all, this family would have to go. He was angry at himself for the way those curtains had stabbed momentarily through his defenses. He swung off his horse and knocked on the cabin door.

The woman opened the door, and he studied her. She was full-bodied, past girlhood and into the ripeness of maturity. Her hair was almost the rust color of autumn leaves, and she had knotted it onto the back of her neck. Again something stirred him, touching the place that October and the lace curtains had touched. He asked flatly, "Your husband home?"

She said, "My husband's dead."

Shock held him transfixed for a moment. She said suddenly, "Sit down, won't you?" And then she turned and fled from him.

He sank into a chair, surprised, and then he saw her stop at the oven of the stove, and he realized that she hadn't been thinking of him at all, but of her biscuits. She was taking them out of the oven, and they would have burned in another moment, but now they were all white and copper brown. They had a wonderful smell.

He said harshly, "I'm Jode Morgan. I own this cabin you're making so free with."

He saw her swing toward him, neither angry nor afraid. "I knew who you were. Will you try the biscuits? And I can make coffee."

Anger ran higher in Jode, and he held it leashed because this was something he could not understand. Did she think he wouldn't run her off because she was a woman? Hadn't she heard that Jode Morgan was the hardest, toughest man in town? He stood up with a harsh suddenness of movement, and he made his voice harsh too.

"No coffee, and no biscuits. This ain't a friendly call. I built this cabin for my riders, and I aim to use it for that."

"You won't let me stay here?"

And now anger flared out of him in one short, explosive yelp. "Why'n hell should I?"

She looked at him again, with that strangeness in her eyes. She said, "Maybe because you killed my husband. I'm Maggie Larsen."

The shock of that was like a clubbed fist. He gripped the table's edge. An infant's wail drifted out of the back room. There was a baby here too! He crumpled back out onto the chair.

He said uneasily, "Ma'am, I wasn't even there when they hung him."

She had glanced toward the room with the crying child, but the sound had stopped, so she looked at him again. She said, still in that strange way, "They were your cattle he stole, and your men that hanged him."

Jode's mind flashed back. The foreman, Dido, and several of his men had caught a rustler dead to rights. They'd expected to catch Walter Ives, the valley's chief suspect, but had found Larsen instead, and they'd given him the rope, after the custom of the land. There was no other penalty for rustling in this valley. Jode stared at the woman.

"You admit he stole the cattle?"

"I admit he was a thief. But he fed me and clothed me and took care of me in his way. Now he's gone because of you."

Jode climbed stiffly back to his feet. This was no time for sentiment. He said, "I figure maybe I owe you something at that. You can stay here a week while you make up your mind where to go. After that you move out."

He whirled, and stalked angrily out of the cabin. But he was aware as he swung up onto the black gelding that she had come out the cabin door. He looked down at her. "A week," he said inflexibly.

"A week!" she echoed it soberly, still not smiling, but not afraid. "A week. And you needn't be so unfriendly. Catch!" She tossed something at him, and then went back into the house.

He grabbed at the object, and it was warm and soft in his hands. It was one of those biscuits, and he raised it to throw it angrily into the door after her. She thought he was going to go soft, did she? Didn't she know he was the hardest man in the valley?

And then another thought hit him. Pretend to be taken in by her wiles. Eat the biscuit and throw her out anyway. That would be what a hard man would do.

He clucked to the horse, turning it toward town, munching the biscuit as he rode down through the pines. It was damned good.

THROUGH the week that followed he didn't let himself think about what he was going to do if she hadn't moved on. He would have liked to dismiss the thought of her entirely, but the knowledge of her husband's death, and his part in it, even though indirect and wholly justified, would not let him keep the incident out of his mind. When a week had passed he saddled up, buckled on his guns in case she'd planned some trouble for him, and rode back toward the line cabin. He hadn't said much about the experience to his foreman, other than that the inhabitant had been a fool woman and he'd given her a week to clear out.

Again the day was perfect, and he had the sudden timeless sense that events had become stuck in a pattern, like an old man in the October sunshine, telling the same story in the same way that he had told it a hundred times before. The curtains were still at the window, but before he could knock the door flew open, and the red-haired woman was hurrying toward him.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said. "I'm so glad to see anyone, just anyone."

Jode did not understand this, but put it into his mind as another example of woman's foolishness. He supposed a rustler's woman wouldn't be exactly like other people anyway.

"You were to be gone today," he said. "I'll hitch your wagon and help you load up."

"The baby's sick. Been sick for three days, and I can't be moved."

He stared at her suspiciously. He recalled that although he had heard the child wail he hadn't seen it. "I'll take a look," he said. He followed her into the cabin, into the second room. It was a fancier cabin than most, having this second room. But then Jode did things right when he did them.

She drew back the covers that were ragged but as clean as sun and soap could make them. He saw the baby, its face still flushed. He put a finger against its cheek. It seemed maybe a bit hot. "Boy or girl?" he asked.

"Boy." The child awoke, and her hands were quick and soothing. The baby gurgled at her and she smiled up at Jode then. "He's better today."

"You had a doctor?"

"No. I tried to hitch up and the horse ran away. I was afraid to leave the baby for long, and I had no money. I thought someone would come by. I was sure worried, but I guess it will be all right now."

She straightened from the crib, and he could see the smooth ripple of her back muscles, under her dress. She looked at him, suddenly uneasy. He stared back.

"Maybe tomorrow," she whispered. "Maybe tomorrow he'll be well enough to move. And I'm sorry about using your flour and things like that from the cabin."

"Three days more," he said. "Let the

kid get all right. But by Sunday morning you be out of here."

She nodded soberly. Then, "I've got a pie fresh baked. I could make coffee."

He shook his head. Now that the kid was better, she was trying to trick him again, put him under obligation, like she had when she'd mentioned her husband's death.

"You be out of here Sunday," he said firmly, and turned his back on her. He stalked out of the house, swung onto his horse, and told himself that he needed a drink bad. He kicked the black toward Two Forks, and he made one stop in town before he went over to the saloon to get that drink. He stopped at Doc Palmer's office.

PALMER was a thin, gray-headed man with an age of experience behind him. He'd delivered babies in this town, seen them grow up to their first gunfight, patched them, even buried them, and all this showed in his face.

Palmer said, "Morning, Jode. Glad you're wearing your guns today. Ives is lookin' for you. He's over at the saloon now. Seems on the prod about something."

"Ives?" Jode turned the possibilities in his mind.

"Walter Ives. Used to buddy with that Mort Larsen your boys strung up."

Jode nodded. "I know Ives. I'll look him up." He touched the guns in his holsters, easing them with a careful hand. Then he said, "Take a run up to my line cabin, Doc. Maggie Larsen, Mort's widow, is up there with a sick baby."

Palmer looked at him in the slow way that marked him. He said, "I always thought you had a soft spot underneath. I'm glad to know I was right."

Jode said, "The fool woman moved in on me. I've given her till Sunday morning to get out. I want that kid fit to travel."

Palmer nodded. His face had frozen again. He said, "Sunday, huh? You'd put her out on the Lord's Day?"

"It's as good a day as any for traveling." Jode left and headed for the saloon.

He saw Walter Ives the moment he went in. Ives, short and squat and panther-smooth, was drinking at the bar. Jode walked up and said coldly, "Hear you've been looking for me, Ives."

Ives whirled toward him, his face dark with surprise for an instant. He said, "Yeah. I thought I had a bone to pick with you. Mort Larsen was my friend before he got strung up. But I found out you wasn't there when it happened." Ives stared at him a moment and turned back to the bar. He had, Jode knew, offered a truce in the matter.

Jode drove his voice at Ives. "You better get it straight, Ives. He was a damned rustler, running an iron on my cow. He was caught by my men, and strung up by my standing orders. If I'd been there it wouldn't have been a bit different, only quicker. Now, do you want to make something out of it?"

Ives had turned back before him, and now his eyes were darkened and his face tight. For a moment he hung on the balance of motion, and then he shrugged. "I'll let you know, tough guy," he said, and turned to his drink. He tossed the whisky down his throat and gave Jode a view of his back as he strolled out in the catlike, compact way that marked all his movements.

The bartender said, "A man can be too tough, Mr. Morgan. I wouldn't have crossed him like that. You're gonna have a gunfight now, sometime, someplace."

"I never run from fights," Jode told him. He spun a dollar on the bar and went out.

WHEN HE FINISHED his other business in town he stopped back to see if Doc Palmer had left, figuring that he might not be sure of the trail to the line cabin, but the doctor was already gone. Jode bought flour and coffee and beans and put them in his saddlebags. Then he rode back. He was nearing the line cabin when he met Doc Palmer coming back. He flagged the Doc with an upraised hand.

"Will the kid be ready to move Sunday?"

The Doc nodded. "Kids get sick quick, get well quick," he said evenly. His eyes flickered over Jode with no warmth.

"Good," Jode said. He kicked the horse and started to ride past the doctor. The doctor put a hand out. His eyes had a funny look. "Flour in those saddlebags, Jode?" he asked.

"I keep flour in that line cabin in case

"Darling, will you marry me?"

I have to use it. The damned woman has almost cleaned me out."

Doc said, "Oh?" in a strange voice. He put his hand out in a sudden gesture and touched Jode's arm. "You big, damned fake," he said. And then he kicked his horse as if the gesture had betrayed him, and clatttered away, not looking back, though Jode stared after him, wondering what had been in his mind.

Then Jode went on up to the cabin. He knocked, and heard the woman call, "Come in."

The instant he entered she began to bustle. While he blinked, half of a hot apple pie and a mug of coffee appeared before him as if by magic. The woman's voice had some of the strangeness that the doctor's voice had carried.

"Thanks for sending the doctor out."

He said, "I want that kid able to move." He jabbed a fork into the pie. The doctor and the rustler's woman were a pair of fools. They both thought he was soft. The pie was good, damned good, and he found himself watching the woman as she moved about the cabin, wondering how she had married Mort Larsen, thinking that it couldn't have been good, being married to a man like that.

And then he perceived that such thinking was soft too. The woman was just trying to fool him. A dancehall girl, maybe, what she was didn't matter. What did matter was that she likely had made up her mind to stay here in spite of his ultimatum.

He nodded gently. If she was a good woman there was a way to drive her off. And if she was a tramp—well, no telling what would happen then.

He got up and moved until he stood beside her. She swung toward him with a question in her eyes.

He said, "Maybe I been a mite hasty. Maybe it would be handy to have a good looking widow woman like you around the place." He reached for her roughly, while the surprise was still in her eyes. He gathered her up insolently, and mashed his lips to the warm red blur of hers. He felt her rigid as steel under his hands for a moment, fighting him savagely for a moment, and it pleased him that this had made her angry. And then she subsided, and her lips were quiet under his. Not giving, not taking, just quiet. He backed off and grinned at her, trying to look like a man with wicked ideas.

She said, "You're a damned big fake, Jode Morgan. You want me to think that you're the kind that would keep a widow woman out here for his pleasure. You think that'll maybe scare me into leaving because you aren't sure you'll have the guts to throw me out when Sunday comes." She studied him, her eyes alight with thought. "I'll get out Sunday, I promise you that, and make no trouble, if you'll do one thing for me."

"What's that?"

"Just . . ." She stopped, sank down in a chair, turned her face away, and blushed. "Nothing," she finished. "It was a crazy idea."

"I'll tell you if it's crazy. What was it?"

SHE SWUNG toward him with a strange dignity. She said, "It wasn't easy, hiding out in the hills with Mort Larsen—keeping back so he wouldn't be seen, going to town only once or twice a year for staples. Mort fed me and he clothed me, and he made the other men keep their hands off me, though one or two of them tried it. And they sure didn't handle me like you just did. That's how I knew you were a fake."

Jode said suddenly, "The dance Saturday night. You was thinking of that?"

"It was a crazy idea. Forget it."

"Yeah. Crazy. But if I take you to the dance you'll get out of here, permanent, with no fuss or trouble?"

She nodded.

He said, "It's a deal. I'll pick you up in the buggy about six."

She said eagerly, "I could fix supper and . . ."

But he cut her off short. "This is a deal," he told her. "Don't try to make anything else out of it." He whirled away from the hurt look on her face and strode out of the cabin. He was pleased with himself as he swung up on the horse and headed for home. He'd put her under an obligation, and she couldn't make any more trouble about it. He was thinking about that when he rode up to the ranch house and met Dido, the foreman.

Jode nodded at his foreman. "Sunday morning," he ordered, "you get a couple of the boys and go down to the line cabin. Pack that widow woman's things, and put her on the road. Sick or well, no matter what excuse she makes, put her on the road."

Dido nodded. Jode began to talk about the day's problems here at the ranch. He could forget the rustler's woman until Saturday.

Saturday evening he drove the buggy up to the cabin after her. When he opened the door it was obvious she wasn't ready, and that made him speak sharply. He said, "Better get in a hustle. It's time we was leaving." He saw the young Bailey girl in the room beyond, playing with the baby.

"I'm not going," the widow told him.

He stared at her. He said bleakly, "A deal is a deal. You're gonna go through with it if I have to tie you into that buggy."

Her eyes met his in that grave way. She said, "People are going to talk if I show up with you. My clothes aren't good and the talk would shame you."

He stared at her. He sure couldn't figure this female out. She wanted to go to the dance, and then she didn't, because she might shame him. It didn't make sense. She wouldn't shame him, yet she'd eat his grub and sleep in his line cabin. He guessed maybe even that was for the baby's sake.

He spoke gently, "The way you spoke about Mort Larsen I reckon you didn't love him. How come you married him and stuck with him?"

"I was pretty young, and Mort could be nice. After that, after I found out he was stealing, the baby was on the way and there wasn't much I could do. A person has to play the cards the way life deals them."

He frowned at her. He said heavily, "Right now they're dealt so you have to go to the dance. Get ready."

She nodded and went back into the other room. After a time she came out. He puckered up his lips and whistled. It might be the women would laugh at her dress, and the thin cheap material from which it was made. But it was skillfully sewn, with a lot of feminine ruffles. The men sure wouldn't be laughing. He grinned at her and said, "Mount up."

DRIVING in to the dance they didn't talk much, but he could feel the suppressed excitement inside her. The smell of the winter had sharpened, the evenings were crisp and chill now. The dance had already started when they arrived, and

long before they arrived at Macafee's barn they could hear the tangy voices of the fiddlers.

He had the thought that the evening was going to be a pleasure, and a sort of relaxation that was new to him had taken over his body. Maggie was light on her feet, and if she was a little unfamiliar with the dances, she learned like a flash. Jode had always been shy with girls, but with her there was no unease—since this was just a deal between them. The evening rushed on to a too-quick close.

It was just at the last number that he saw Walter Ives staring at him from the crowd at the edge of the barn, and recognized the raw fury in Ives' eyes. He turned away to think about that, and felt Maggie's body stiffen. She too had seen Ives.

He said, "Ives was your husband's friend, they say. Is he one of the men that tried to—" He looked at her and left the question unfinished. He could read the answer in her eyes.

She said, "Don't cause any trouble, Jode. If Ives finds out where I've been staying it won't matter. I'll be leaving tomorrow."

"Yeah," Jode said slowly. "Yeah. But wait here." He slid away from her, over to Ives. He stood squarely in front of the shorter man, and murmured, "You got something in your mind, Ives?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking thoughts about a man who hangs another so he could carouse with the widow."

Jode said gently, "Outside, Ives."

They went outside. Ives said, "All right now, you son—" and came in like a cougar cat. Jode felt the bone shock of the other's fists in his ribs and staggered, as his own fists bounced off Ives' shoulder. Breath wheezed out of him as Ives pumped both hands into his stomach. He gulped air, and caught the side of Ives's head with a looping right that drove the shorter man back and gave him a breather. Dimly he sensed a crowd gathering, and then all was a blur of red pain of blows given and received, and the haze in which Ives's face danced.

Jode lost track of the times he got up off the floor. He was dimly aware of the crowd's mutter at his toughness, and he knew through the pain and shock that Ives must have fought in the ring somewhere, sometime. But he knew too that Ives was fleshy, and he could hear Ives's breath coming harder. He staggered up again, and threw a left at Ives, and it tagged him this time. He knew Ives was slower now, and he moved in and slugged with arms that were heavy as bales of hay, until at last Ives fell and lay looking at him.

Jode said through swollen lips, "There's been talk that you're running your brand on other folk's cattle, like your friend did. I won't wait to catch you. Get out of the valley, Ives. Get out, or walk out in the morning on main street. I'll walk down the main street at eight o'clock in the morning. If you're not out of the valley, be there on the street."

Ives came to his feet with the hatred naked in his eyes. He nodded at Jode, and said, "Eight o'clock," and vanished in a crowd that parted as he passed and then began to drift back to the dance.

Jode felt Maggie's touch. She said, "We better get back."

He nodded. He was silent all the way back. When they reached the line cabin she said, "It would have been better if I had refused to go that dance."

He said flatly, "It wasn't your choosing. We made a deal." He went around the buggy to help her down, and he could feel the tautness in her body. She said, "I'll pack up the first thing in the morning, Jode. And you be careful." She bent forward, quickly, impulsively, "Thanks," she said. Her lips brushed his cheek, and then she was gone into the cabin.

He turned the buggy back toward town. A room in the hotel would be best, if he was to meet Ives on the street in the morning. In his mind he had the feeling that Ives would run, but he couldn't be sure.

JODE GOT UP too early on Sunday morning, too taut, something inside him driving him beyond his understanding. At eight o'clock he came out onto the street and began a slow stroll

down the board walk. Eyes peeped at him from behind windows, so that he knew that no one in town had missed the news. He made the tour of the main street twice, and then he sat on the porch of the hotel and waited. By nine o'clock he knew that Ives was not coming.

Then he got into the buggy and started home. He was at the cut-off to the line cabin when he remembered the instructions he had given Dido to help the woman load her wagon, and he swung the buggy and headed to the cabin.

He saw the wagon hitched and half-loaded in front of the cabin, and he saw Dido and one of his riders coming out of the cabin carrying a battered trunk, under Maggie Larsen's supervision. As he came closer he could see that her color was high, and perceived the reason.

Walter Ives stood by the wagon!

He smirked at Jode. He said, "I'm leaving the valley, like you said. Judging by this it's an honor to be run out."

Jode said sharply, "Dido, come here!" When the foreman came he whispered in his ear. Dido nodded and got on his horse. Dido beckoned to his helper. They mounted up and clattered away.

Jode swung down from the buggy. "I'll help you finish," he suggested, looking at Maggie.

"I'm all packed." Her glance met his. "You might bring the baby out."

He carried out the box that served as a crib. Walter Ives grinned at him, then at Maggie. He said, "You want me to drive, honey?"

Jode saw Maggie's eyes come around and look at him, and he read the thought in them— "What else can I do?" Then a light showed and she said, "One last favor, Jode. Lend me one of your guns."

Jode handed one walnut-butted Colt, still watching her. She tilted the gun at Walter Ives and said, "Get moving, mister. If you're here when I count ten, I'll use this."

Walter Ives swung onto his horse and wheeled away from them. Jode said softly, "I better ride aways with you." He climbed up on the buckboard.

"Look out! Jode!"

Jode heard two shots, and felt a jerk on his left arm and the tug of the shirt where a bullet had gone through the fold, then he heard Maggie's gun, the one he had given her, and he grabbed his remaining gun and whirled it toward Walter Ives. Ives was leveling down for another shot, disturbed by Maggie's yell and shot. Jode shot Ives coldly.

Then he turned to Maggie and said, "I reckon you saved my life." He reached across the seat and touched her. She dropped the gun and sat very still. He said, "I figure you better move in the ranch house with me, and stop this kind of trouble. We can get a preacher."

Her eyes flashed at him. "Because I saved your life? That's what put you in mind of this. You'd pay a debt to me."

He said, "Not exactly. I'd already sent Dido to rustle up the preacher." He clucked to the horses, not looking at her, not waiting for an answer, and began to urge the horses toward the ranch house. He said, "I been needing a woman who was a good cook, and that kid of yours needs a home to grow up in so he'll turn out better'n his pa."

She was looking at him with a funny look in her eyes. Her hands came out and touched his arm. She said gently, "How long can you keep from saying it, Jode?"

"Saying what?"

"That you love me."

He swung to face her.

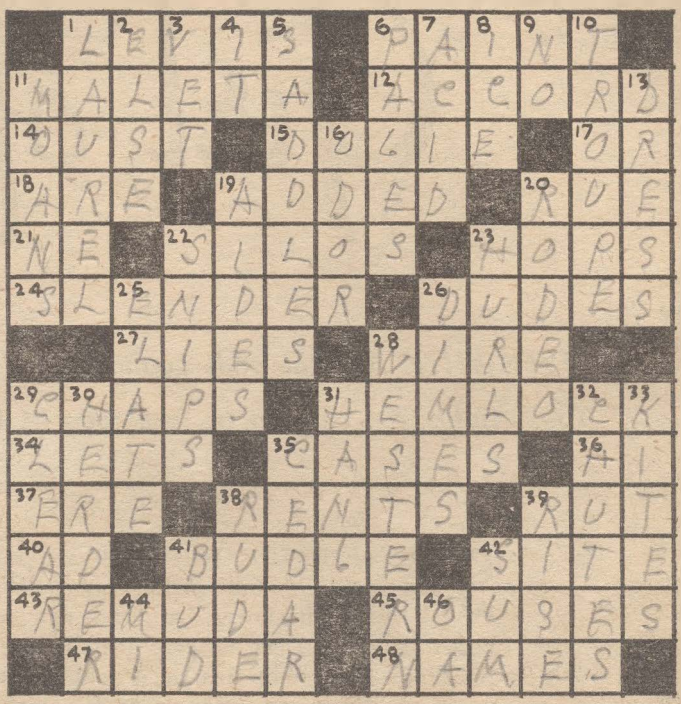
"Oh, hell," he said, "not long enough."

She was smiling, but now she sobered. "There'll be some harsh talk. Your men killing my husband, and now your having to shoot Ives."

"Sure," Jode said. "They'll say I had my eye on you from the first. They'll say I planned it that way, like I plan everything." He grinned at her. "It doesn't matter. Like always, they'll say I'm the toughest man in the valley."

He clucked to the horses, and they moved ahead.

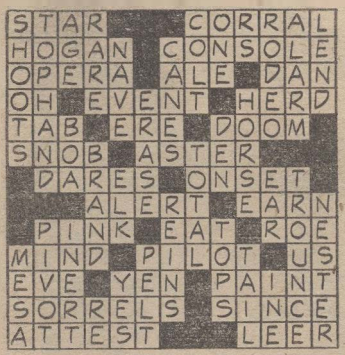
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Blue denim trousers
6 Calico horse
11 Saddle bag
12 To concede
14 To evict
15 Motherless calf
17 Either
18 Have being
19 Summed up
20 To regret
21 Northeast (abbr.)
22 Fodder towers
23 Jumps
24 Slim
26 Easterners on a western ranch
27 Falsehoods
28 Metal thread
29 Cowboy garment
31 Evergreen tree
34 Allows
35 Lawsuits
36 Hello!
37 Before
38 Leases
39 Wheel track
40 Paid notice (colloq.)
41 To move
42 Location
43 Group of saddle horses
45 Wakens
47 Horseman
48 Titles



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1 Bay tree
2 Otherwise
3 Ex-soldier
4 The thing
5 Horsemen's seats
6 Parts of a book
7 Sour substance
8 Hard water
9 Negative reply
10 Company of actors
11 Groans
13 Woman's garment
16 Scent
19 Military assistants
20 Wild West show
22 Clips suddenly
23 Throws
25 To gladden
26 Ten-cent coins
28 Cowboy story
29 Not cloudy
30 Herdsman
31 To dangle
32 Rodeo enclosures
33 Flying toys
35 Fragrant wood
38 Impolite
39 To get up
41 Unopened flower
42 Total
44 3rd musical note
46 On account (abbr.)

Girl of the

EVEN WITH ALL the odds against her, Judy meant to fight . . . as long as love rode at her side

SOME of the facts Judy Cushman knew before she went to talk with banker Warner in Weston. She knew that years ago her grandfather had sold Deer River Valley to the farmers. She knew that since then he'd sold the south and north ranges of the Triangle to El Hartung. But that still left the land that lay between South and North Fork Creeks, which was the best part of the old home ranch. She had believed she could take over where the old man had left off when he died. But now, sitting there in the banker's private office

Home Ranch

by BEN FRANK

and mulling over the things he had told her, she wasn't so sure.

And in Deer River Valley the farmers had gathered in old Abe Dennison's barn. There were seven of them, if you didn't count three or four half-grown boys. They knew the score and were frightened by it.

"Andy," Abe said, "you've had more ranch experience than the rest of us. What do you say?"

Andy Delaney was twenty-three. He sat with his long, lean back against the log wall, staring at his big hands. Slowly he lifted his head, and a streak of sunlight drifted across his yellow, uncombed hair. He fished a small mouth harp from a pocket and began to play.

The men waited. They knew how it was. Andy Delaney figured things out faster and better when he was playing a tune on his harp.

"I'd want Gill Clark with me," he said, breaking off in the middle of his tune. "Gill can rope and ride. And Joe Hull. Joe knows cattle and horses. Besides, he's handy with tools and a .44."

He shoved to his feet and went outside. In his heart there was a feeling of emptiness, and his eyes, which were as blue as the sky overhead, were deeply troubled.

"I reckon I'm not sure who scares me most," he thought, a faint grin twisting at his big mouth, "Judy Mae Cushman, or Jack Hartung."

Again he fished out the harp and began to blow a sad little melody.

AS SHE sat in the big leather-covered chair in front of old Joyce Warner's desk, Judy Cushman looked like a small tired child. Actually she was twenty-one, a medium-tall girl with an abundance of light-brown hair, and hazel eyes that were wide-set and very steady. And she wasn't tired, just discouraged.

"So you think I should take El Hartung's offer for the Triangle," she asked, "even if he's practically stealing it?"

"I've merely shown you the facts," the banker said, nodding toward the papers on his desk. "Your grandfather let things drift these last few years, as you know. Also, he was caught in a price squeeze, a bad winter or two, and some dry summers. On top of that he had some cattle picked up by rustlers. And back in the days when he had money he spent it too freely. Like building that big house and all those barns and—"

"And like sending me East to school."

Warner smiled. "School has made you into a very attractive young woman, Judy. Certainly Robert thinks so."

She stood quickly, the low sun touching her face and tinting it, along with the sudden rush of blood to her cheeks.

"And all the time I hated school. I wanted to live on the Triangle. To help. No, Mr. Warner, I believe I'll hang on a little longer—till October, at least, when these notes come due."

Frowning, the banker shoved to his feet.

"No one else will likely care to buy the Triangle, the way it's located between Hartung's two ranches," he said, "and his offer may be lower by October."

Judy said nothing.

"If you're thinking of running cattle on the Triangle this summer, Judy, you're up against a stone wall. No help left but old Trued Tucker. What Triangle cattle there are left are scattered all over the foothills. A lot of them are not branded. The bank doesn't dare to get in any deeper."

"Thank you for giving me so much of your time, Mr. Warner." She held out her hand. "Perhaps if you understood how much the old ranch means to me— I was born there, you know. I lived there the first seventeen years of my life, in that big old house. And my mother and father and Grandfather Cushman are buried there."

Suddenly afraid to trust her voice, she turned and hurried from the office.

The bank had been closed for more than an hour, but young Robert Warner stood by the outside door, waiting for her. Looking into her eyes, he understood something of her distress.

"It's a shame, Judy," he said. "You don't deserve a bad deal like this."

His voice told her that he meant it.

"I have a horse saddled and ready to

go," he went on. "If you don't mind, I'd like to ride part way home with you. I'd go all the way, but Dad's called a directors' meeting."

She looked at him again—a compact, square-shouldered man in his late twenties. She knew that he was in love with her, even if he hadn't as yet told her so. They stepped out into the quiet street and walked to their mounts.

BOB WARNER had tied his sleek bay beside her spotted Indian pony. They swung into the creaking saddles, followed the street to the west, and were soon out of town. The low April sun was a red disk above a ridge of purple mountains. The beginning of the night's chill was slowly creeping across the new grass. A few clouds in the sky had become frozen tongues of reds and golds.

Judy's eyes moved over the scene, drinking in the beauty of the evening. "It's my country, and I love it," she thought almost savagely. "I'll never leave it—never give it up!"

"Getting back for that directors' meeting is going to rush what I want to say, Judy," Bob said abruptly.

She looked at him in some surprise. Busy with her own thoughts, she'd almost forgotten him.

"Judy," he said, "I think I understand how much the old home ranch means to you. That big house—with some repairs it could be pretty fine once again, and—What I'm trying to say is, perhaps you and I can work things out together."

They were alone now, with only the flight of a soaring eagle for company. He was riding very close to her, his knee almost touching hers.

"What do you mean?" she asked, genuinely puzzled.

"You know what I mean," he answered. "You know how I feel about you. Marry me, Judy, and we'll manage to keep the old ranch. Someday, perhaps, we can move out there."

He caught her hand and pulled her close. She felt the pressure of his arm about her shoulders, the quick hard touch of his lips against hers. She stiffened, partly because it was awkward to be kissed like this when riding, partly because his action had taken her by surprise.

"What's wrong?" he asked, releasing her a little angrily. "Maybe I'm not the right man, after all."

She thought, "He's spoiled. He's always had things too easy."

"Is there someone else?" he demanded.

"There's no one else," she answered, but suddenly wasn't sure she'd spoken the truth.

They sat in silence for a time, watching the sunset.

"I've simply got to get back to town," he said, glancing at his watch. His anger was gone now. "If there isn't anyone else, Judy, please don't say no until you've thought it over."

Turning his bay, he rode rapidly away. Watching him, the girl frowned and yet her mouth smiled faintly.

Marying Robert Warner would no doubt make life safe and easy for her. But didn't she want more out of life than security and ease? And wouldn't it always be like this, a sudden flash of anger because her response didn't quite satisfy his demands, his rushing away to attend to business or to obey some whim of his father's? And for some reason she was remembering back to the boy who had pulled her pigtails, frightened her with a snake, taught her to play a mouth harp, made crowns of wild flowers for her hair, and had given her her first kiss. But all that had happened a long time ago. The boy was a man now, and she was a woman.

SMILING wistfully at her memories, she rode on. She came to the top of a rocky ridge and saw the juncture of South and North Fork Creeks, like the upper half of a giant Y, combining to make Deer River. She saw Deer River Valley above the juncture. A few scattered lights twinkled from the settlers' cabins. One of those lights, she knew, might be in the boy's home, where he lived alone, now that both his father and mother were gone.

She followed the dusty trail that led to

the bridge across North Fork Creek. Glancing back, she saw the beginning of the moon. Now, to her right lay the east edge of the great wedge of land her grandfather had sold to El Hartung. This north part of the Rocking H was run by old Hartung's nephew, Jack Hartung. Her frown deepened. Something in the way he always looked at her made her wary of him. She sometimes wondered if—

A sound startled her. It came from the direction of the bridge, the plaintive cry of a mouth harp. The tune—she wasn't sure. Suddenly her heart was beating furiously. Only one boy played like that, making up a little melody of his own to express his mood. Andy Delaney!

She rode rapidly on. Coming over a ridge she saw the old plank bridge that her grandfather had built before the railroad had come to Weston.

The harp music came clearly now. Then she saw him. He sat on the sagging bannister at the bridge's approach, a long, lean shape, the breeze and moonlight tangling with his yellow hair. Seeing her, he stopped playing and stood. Again her heart was pounding furiously.

"Hello, Andy." Looking down at him, she could see the faint grin on his mouth, and yet she detected a troubled expression on his face. "Haven't seen much of you since I came back home."

"Maybe you'll see me too often from now on," he said. "All depends."

"What do you mean?"

"All depends on what you aim to do with the Triangle."

"I still don't understand."

"Whether you hang on or sell to El Hartung."

"Andy," she said quietly, "you've known me a long time. You know I want to hang on to the Triangle. Now, stop talking in riddles and tell me what you're getting at."

He grinned up at her. "Just this. I'm here to offer to help you and old Trued Tucker get the ranch back on its feet."

She stared at him in surprise. "Andy, you mean—but how about your farm and your own work?"

"The valley folks will look after my place for me."

DROPPING to the ground, she went close to him, trying to make out the expression on his face.

"Why, Andy, why?"

"Hartung," he answered shortly. "If the Triangle falls to Hartung, all us farmers will be squeezed out of our valley."

"But," she protested, "you have deeds to your land."

"What good are deeds if your fences are knocked down, your crops destroyed?" His voice had turned bitter. "We've already had some trouble with the Rocking H. The only thing that's saved us so far is the fact that the valley cuts a chunk off your grandfather's Triangle, not Hartung's ranch."

She stared at him again. "But Hartung doesn't seem like the kind who'd—"

"El Hartung is a sick old man whose days are numbered," Andy cut in. "It's Jack Hartung we're afraid of. He'll inherit the Rocking H—maybe soon, maybe not so soon, but it's in the cards."

She still felt some uncertainty and doubt. "There hasn't been a count made of Triangle Cattle for almost two years. Perhaps we can't even stock the ranch."

"The valley folks will back you," he said. "We'll see to it that your range is stocked."

She turned and gazed off across the peaceful grasslands, thinking over these things he had said to her.

"Hanging on will mean trouble of one kind or another," he said, breaking the silence. "If you don't want trouble, Judy, you'd better sell."

"No," she said, facing him. "I won't sell."

She looked up into his lean face, wondering if he remembered the time he'd taken her in his arms and kissed her. If he remembered he gave no sign. He folded his arms and leaned back against the bridge railing.

"Okay, Judy," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

His words were a dismissal, and she

"One rode up and shot Gill in the back," Sandy cried

swung up into the saddle, a flash of anger running through her. But she wasn't quite ready to leave him.

"Remember when you taught me to play a tune on a harp?" she asked smilingly. "Bet you thought I was dumb."

"I was the dumb one, Judy," he said. "I had an idea—"

With a little shrug, he let it go at that, and began to play a lonesome tune that seemed to shut him away from her.

She listened for a few moments, then rode slowly away, until the music dimmed to silence. After that she spurred the spotted pony into a gallop. Her anger was gone now, leaving her with a feeling of unhappiness.

EXCEPT for a light in the kitchen the big old Triangle house was dark. Judy slid to the ground and walked into the kitchen without knocking.

Old Trued Tucker, who had been foreman of the Triangle for over thirty years, sat on one side of the kitchen table, his knotted fingers nursing a steaming cup of coffee. Across from him sat Jack Hartung.

Hartung stood quickly, and swept his big hat from his thick black hair. Big shouldered, deep chested, a bear of a man, he smiled pleasantly at the startled girl.

"Hello, Judy. Don't tell me you had to ride home alone on a moonlight night like this?"

She studied his face—the wide jaw, the big nose, the high cheekbones, the dark squinting eyes.

"Why not?" she countered smilingly.

"What's the matter with young Warner?"

"A directors' meeting."

Chuckling, Jack Hartung swung a chair around to the table for her. She sat down and watched him fill a cup with coffee and shove it toward her.

"The old man's riding days are about over, I reckon," he said after Trued had gone out to see about Judy's pony.

"Almost," she answered unhappily.

"So are old El's. I was cutting across from his side of the Rocking H tonight and thought I'd stop by. Wondered if you'd decided to take the old man's offer for the Triangle."

She tasted the coffee. Trued always made good coffee.

"I've decided to operate the Triangle myself."

Watching him, she thought she saw a tiny muscle in his jaw tighten. But he grinned, and slowly shook his head.

"Don't believe you can swing it Judy. But here's luck!"

He lifted his cup and drank the scalding coffee as if it were a cool glass of water. Then, smiling, he leaned against the table, and the pocket of his hand-embroidered shirt sagged with the weight of a watch.

"Only hope you don't have too much trouble with rustlers."

"What rustlers?"

"Night riders. Likely the same coyotes who put your granddad on the skids. They've hurt us some lately."

She felt a return of her worry and despair. She thought of the cattle that had strayed into the foothills, and wondered if any of them were left.

"I thought maybe if you sold to El—" The man met her gaze boldly, and smiled again. "Well, Judy, I know the old home ranch means a lot to you. Don't blame you for feeling the way you do about it. It's a fine old house, and there's good grass and water. What I want to say is that if El took over the Triangle, I figured I'd move here and really make something of the place. You know, spend some real money on the house and buildings. Then after El dies it'll all be mine. Ours, I should say. I'd want you to help me and—" His narrowed eyes moved over her, finishing the sentence he'd left unspoken.

She had not expected anything like this from Jack Hartung, and was shocked and repelled by his words. Evidently he understood her reaction for, laughing shortly, he towered to his feet.

"Of course, I'm no lily-fingered banker, but I'm pretty much of a man. I'd treat you right, too. If you'll say the word—"

"Thanks, Jack," she said, "but the answer is no."

She saw his face change, and suddenly

knew that here was a man in whom there was no middle ground. He either wanted something or he wouldn't have it as a gift. He loved or he hated, and he could do either with equal ease and savageness.

"Okay, if that's the way you feel about it," he said, and went stamping out into the darkness.

She stood and stared at her chalk-white face in the mirror. Her heart was pounding high up her throat. Andy Delaney was right—Jack Hartung was a man to be feared.

PRESENTLY old Trued Tucker came back into the kitchen. Far into the night the girl and the old foreman sat in the big dingy room of the old empty house, weighing their chances for survival. At last the old man sighed wearily and ran knotted fingers through his shaggy white hair.

"Why don't you do it the easy way, honey? Marry Bob Warner."

"That's not hard to answer," she said, smiling faintly. "I don't happen to love him, Uncle Truedy."

That was her childhood name for him. Grinning, knowing that her years in the East hadn't changed her much, the old man lighted a second lamp and went hobbling off through an echoing hallway and up a great curving stairway to the room he occupied.

Later, the girl took the other lamp, crossed the long hallway, and went into a downstairs bedroom furnished with fine old furniture. It had been her father's and mother's room. She could scarcely remember them, they had died when she had been so very small. Their handsome young faces smiled down at her from a large picture above a marble-topped fireplace.

Suddenly she gave way to her fright and uncertainty of the future. She dropped down on the edge of the big four-poster bed, buried her face in her arms and wept. . . .

Early the next morning Andy Delaney and his helpers arrived. They came in an old lumber wagon drawn by a pair of tired-looking mules driven by Joe Hull.

"Here we are," Andy called, grinning a foot wide. "A new crew for the Triangle."

Young Gill Clark leaped down from the high wagon. He was just a kid, eighteen or nineteen, but full grown and quick moving. He lifted a worn saddle and a sixgun from the wagon.

"Brought along my tools," he said, grinning.

Joe Hull had wrapped the lines around the brake handle and was helping Amy, his wife, to alight.

"My wife couldn't see any sense in staying home alone," he said, "so here she is."

Judy flung her arms about the woman. She'd known Amy Hull for a long time. "I'm so glad you came, Amy," she said.

Amy Hull was a plump, motherly woman, with some streaks of gray in her dark hair. Life hadn't been easy for her. She'd lost her only baby to diphtheria, and once night riders had burned her home. But all her troubles had merely given her a greater strength and understanding.

"The devil himself couldn't have kept me home," she said, chuckling. "Wanted to keep an eye on my old man."

Grinning, Joe hitched up the old .44 strapped to his scrawny waist, and Judy remembered that in his younger days he'd been something of a whirlwind with a gun.

Andy had alighted and was stretching the kinks out of his long arms and legs. His blue eyes swept over the broken and unpainted fences, the weedy yards, the big barns with their sagging doors and glassless windows, the big faded old house—its high-columned front porch rotted and sagging—and the gabled roof with its curled and broken shingles.

WATCHING the frown pulling at his face, the sadness in his eyes, Judy wondered if he were remembering back to the proud days of the Triangle. Her eyes suddenly blurring, she walked with Amy Hull toward the kitchen door.

That day they made the old tin-roofed bunkhouse livable, and Andy, Gill and Trued moved into it. Amy and Joe took over Trued's room in the big house, which

was the only livable room upstairs. That night, after they'd had supper, Judy stood on the back steps, watching the cheerful glow of a lamp shining from the bunkhouse. She could hear Andy's harp, hear the clatter of young Gill's boots on the bare floor as he danced a jig to the music. Suddenly it was almost like the old days of the Triangle's greatness.

Smiling at her memories, the girl stepped out into the moonlight and walked as far as the silent windmill. The music ended abruptly and Andy came out of the bunkhouse. Seeing her, he sauntered to where she stood.

"A swell night," he said. "But don't you need a jacket?"

"No," she answered. Then, lifting her face, "Andy, we're going to win. We've got to!"

"Sure," he said. "Sure thing."

He stood looking down at her, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. Again she had a feeling that he was deliberately shutting her away from him, and she couldn't understand it.

"Remember that time you scared me with a snake?" She grinned up at him. "Someday I'll get even with you."

He had his hat tipped back on his yellow hair and she could see his face plainly. It looked old and tired.

"That was a heck of a thing for a big overgrown kid to do, scare you with a snake."

He walked on toward one of the big barns and disappeared in deep shadows.

She remembered how she and Andy had laughed and shouted together when they were kids. At round-up time his dad had sometimes worked on the Triangle. "Funny," she thought unhappily, "how growing up can make so much difference."

The next day Trued Tucker, Andy, and Gill struck out for an old line camp near the base of the foothills. Joe stayed at the ranch with Amy and Judy. He had brought along his old carpenter tools and now set about making necessary repairs on the buildings and the windmill.

The men were gone two weeks, combing the slopes, hills and hollows for Triangle strays and mavericks. They came back to the big house on a Saturday afternoon.

"It isn't good, but it could be worse," the old foreman reported. "We picked up some branded stock and put the iron on those that weren't branded. We brought 'em back as far as Hog-back Ridge."

Judy studied the men's tired faces a little anxiously. "Any trouble from night riders?"

Trued shook his head, and climbed stiffly from the chuck wagon.

"To be honest about it," Andy said, grinning faintly, "you never saw a meaner-looking herd of cattle. Kind of smallish, too, for a place like the Triangle. But by mid-October I figure we'll have something worth putting on the market."

"If nothing goes wrong," Trued added.

"What could go wrong now?" Judy asked.

Trued scowled. "A time or two, we had a hunch we were being watched. Since we don't have anything hardly worth stealing we don't worry too much about it. But, in this business, anything could happen."

He went hobbling on to the bunkhouse.

Andy said, "What he means is that the Rocking H would much rather take over after we've worked our heads off all summer and have built up something worth taking over."

Watching him walk away, Judy again felt a touch of despair.

THAT SAME evening Andy and Gill saddled fresh mounts and rode to Dear Creek Valley—Gill to spend Sunday with his folks, Andy to report the condition of the Triangle cattle and to arrange with the farmers for money and credit to buy feeders to add to the small herd.

Monday morning Judy and Trued headed for Weston in the buckboard. It was a warm spring day, with the threat of a thunder storm in the southwest.

They arrived in Weston shortly before noon. Seeing them, Andy and Abe Dennison came out of the general store and crossed the dusty street to where Trued had halted the buckboard.

"Everything's fixed up for you at the

bank, Judy," Abe said. "All you have to do is sign some papers."

She followed the boardwalk past Tracey's feed store and Palmer's harness shop. She saw a Rocking H buggy in front of Doc Terrill's office but gave little thought to it. Before going into the bank she glanced at the sky, and noted that the storm clouds were about to cover the sun.

Robert Warner stood behind the cashier's window. "Hello, Judy," he said, his eyes lighting up at sight of her. "Dad's in his office. He's expecting you."

She went on. Coming to a window, she glanced out and saw with a little start that Jack Hartung had ridden into the street on a big black. Beside him rode Slim Graber, young Hartung's foreman. Two other Rocking H men trailed. A feeling of uneasiness fiddling through her, she went on into Joyce Warner's private office.

The banker stood and motioned her to a chair. "So you and the farmers have decided to buck the Rocking H?" He said it as if he were a little frightened for her.

"If trying to get the Triangle back on its feet is bucking Hartung, then that's what we're doing," she returned quietly.

Warner started to say something more, but caution kept him silent. He shoved papers at her to sign.

"Even if you win out this year, there'll be other years," he said. "The struggle could go on for a long time."

She began to sign "Judith Mae Cushman" to the stack of papers. The banker said nothing more until she had finished.

"The stakes are high," he murmured. "Don't take too many chances, Judy."

Later, when she crossed the foyer of the bank, Bob Warner was busy with a customer. She went on out to the street. The sun half-blinded her, so she didn't see Jack Hartung until he spoke.

"Hear you've taken on new hands," he said, grinning.

He stepped up close, towering over her, his dark eyes smouldering above the grin. She saw then that Slim Graber stood with his back against a barber pole, the thumbs of his long-fingered hands hooked under his gunbelt. The two Rocking H men squatted in the shade of the barbershop, their eyes alert on the narrow street.

"Farmers!" Hartung said, spitting. "What the hell do farmers know about ranching?"

Startled and frightened, she drew back. He laughed and caught her by the wrist.

"Listen to me. You're—"

"Leave her alone, Hartung!"

Andy Delaney had stepped around the end of a freight wagon, his face white with anger.

Hartung turned. "No damned farmer is giving me orders," he said, and swung at Andy.

JUDY stumbled back against the side of the bank building. Heart hammering, she saw Andy slide away from the terrific blow. He was unarmed, she noticed. He was smaller than Hartung and lighter, but there wasn't an ounce of fat on his lean, hard body. He swung and hit the rancher, staggering him back a step.

Hartung pulled his gun, but somehow he remembered in time that shooting an unarmed man was murder. Turning. he handed the gun to Slim Graber. He unbuttoned his shirt pocket, took out the thin gold watch, and also gave that to Graber to hold. Then he faced Andy again.

"Delaney," he said, "I'm going to break you in two!"

He rocked forward, swinging. Again the lighter man slid away from the blows. Then Andy came around and up and put all his drive into his right. It caught Hartung in the face. It smashed his nose. Blinded with pain, he stumbled back against the boardwalk and sat down. Some boards splintered under his great weight. Breathing hard, Andy waited.

Graber had moved away from the barber pole. The two Hartung men shoved to their feet. Then Gill Clark slanted the barrel of his sixgun along the big rear wheel of the freighter and said, "Nobody better get any funny ideas." The Rocking H crew froze.

Wiping a torn sleeve over his bloody face, Hartung got to his feet. Watching, Judy knew he held all the aces but one in a fight like this. He lacked Andy's cool-

headedness. Cursing furiously, the big man pressed after the smaller man.

Circling, Andy gave ground. Hartung fought with some caution now, waiting for a chance to make the kill. Andy's breath began to come in gasps. He'd been hit hard once or twice. He took a glancing blow that skinned his cheek. He took a second blow, shook his head dazedly and staggered back.

To Hartung this looked like what he'd been waiting for. He lunged recklessly and let go with a right, left, right. But Andy wasn't there. He'd slid to the big man's left, and before Hartung could square around, Andy's fist exploded at the base of the man's wide jaw.

Jack Hartung went up on his toes and fell back. He fell in a stumbling arc without catching himself, and lay still, his glazed eyes partly open. A door slammed violently and, turning, Judy saw old El Hartung step from the doctor's office.

She felt a sudden shock. She hadn't seen the old man since she'd returned from the East. She knew now what Andy had meant when he'd said El Hartung's days were numbered. His wasted face was a pasty gray, his eyes were sunk deep in his bony skull, his breath came in short, wheezing gasps.

He tottered out into the street and stood for a moment, staring down at his nephew. Then he swung around to face the men who rode for Jack Hartung.

"Pick him up and get out of town," he rasped.

Sheriff Les Rogers had come hurrying up, a boot-licking expression on his round, flabby face. "Mr. Hartung, you want to make any charges?"

The old man gave him a flinty stare, then for an answer walked back into the doctor's office and slammed the door.

Rogers squared his round shoulders. He felt as if he ought to do something, but he wasn't sure what. He saw the gun in Gill Clark's hand.

"Put that thing up, kid, before you hurt somebody."

Turning, he hurried back into his office.

Later, Judy and Trued climbed into the buckboard and drove out of town. Andy and Gill followed on their ponies. No one had much to say about the fight.

"I wish it hadn't happened," Andy said, as they rattled onto the bridge. He found his shiny old mouth harp and began to blow a plaintive tune of his own invention. His knuckles, Judy saw, were raw and bloody, and his left eye was almost swollen shut. Then she felt something cold against her cheeks. It had begun to rain.

THE DAY the shipped-in feeders arrived in Weston, Judy and Amy were alone at the big house. In the afternoon the girl saddled her spotted pony and rode southwest toward the massive outcropping of granite known as Hog-back Ridge. The sun was hot, the ground spongy and steamy from a recent rain. When she came to the ridge she pulled up and gazed about uncertainly.

It had been a long time since she'd ridden out here, and now she wasn't sure of the best trail through the hog-back. At last she turned the pony toward a slit in the granite wall, and rode into it. It zig-zagged through the ridge.

Coming out of the slit, she stared across the grasslands stretching to the south, dotted with the cattle that had been rounded up in the foothills. In the distance, hazy with the humidity and heat, lay a line of trees that marked the wandering course of South Fork Creek. She rode forward, the pony's footfalls cushioned by the wet earth. Rounding an outcropping of gray stone, she saw the two riders. But before she could turn back they had seen her too. It was Jack Hartung, his dark face battered and bruised, and Slim Graber, an ugly twist to his thin-lipped mouth. They stared at her in surprise, and Judy returned their gazes steadily.

"Don't let them know you're afraid," she told herself.

"Well, well," Graber said. "Look who's here."

"What are you two doing on Triangle land?" she asked coldly.

"Just cutting across from the old man's side of the Rocking H," young Hartung

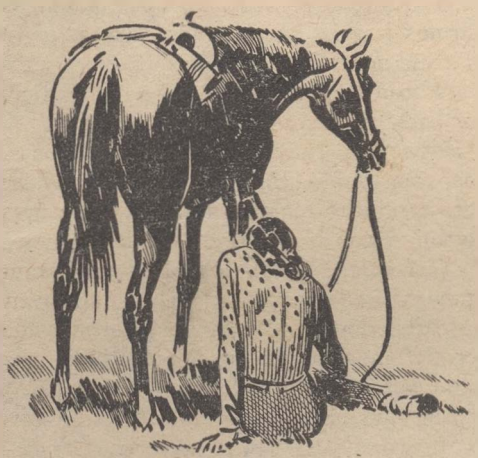
answered. His smouldering eyes moved over her slowly, flickered toward Graber. "Come on, Slim."

They rode on, following the hog-back to the northwest, and were soon lost from sight.

Judy's heartbeat slowly returned to normal, but she had lost all desire to ride down into the meadows for a closer look at her cattle. Wheeling her pony, she rode back through the slit and headed homeward.

On the surface Hartung had seemed civil enough. He had made no move to frighten or molest her. But his eyes had told her that whatever attraction she had once had for him meant nothing to him now.

She came in sight of the ranch house



Judy dropped to the group in a hopeless heap

just as the sun began to dip behind the purple line of mountains. To the east rose a haze of gray dust that told her the men had the new herd safely on Triangle land. Feeling her fears vanish, she hurried into the house to help Amy prepare supper for the hungry crew.

Gill's kid brother, Sandy, had ridden back with the men. Fifteen, an impish grin on his freckled face, the boy tagged Gill around as if Gill were a big tin god. After the men had washed up in the tubs behind the bunkhouse, they came stamping and laughing into the big kitchen.

The drive had gone without a hitch, so they were feeling fine. There was a lot of story telling and joking as they ate the thick steaks, potatoes, biscuits and gravy.

"This wet-eared kid doesn't make a bad cowhand," Andy said, giving Sandy a dig in the ribs. "Maybe we ought to hire him."

"Only trouble," Gill spoke up, "he eats too much. We'd have to charge him board to break even on his work."

Anything Andy and Gill said was all right with Sandy Clark. Grinning, he went right ahead with his eating and said he would stay on at the Triangle and make things hum, only he had to get back to help his pa with the corn. Shortly after supper he mounted the pride and joy of his young life, an ugly old hammerhead, and rode to his home in Deer River Valley.

OLD EL HARTUNG died. He got up from his sickbed one hot afternoon in late August when no one was watching him, staggered out to the cool shade of the horse barn, and sat down on an old bale of hay. What his thoughts were it's hard to say. Maybe he thought of the ranching empire he'd dreamed of but hadn't quite managed to acquire because old Jeff Cushman's granddaughter had been a stubborn little fool. Anyway, he sat there, gasping for breath, until a faintness hit him and he toppled forward to the straw-littered floor. His Mexican housekeeper found him an hour or so later.

Sandy Clark brought the news to the Triangle. The kid stood in the shade of the big ranch house, barefooted, dressed in patched but clean overalls and an old shirt, his battered straw hat tipped back on his reddish hair.

"Pa thought you'd like to know, Miss Judy," he finished.

All through the busy spring and summer, Judy and Andy had wondered at the lack of interference from the Rocking H.

"They're just biding their time," Andy had said. "Wait till we get the Triangle steers ready for market, and then see what happens."

"No," she'd declared, "El Hartung is still boss of the Rocking H. He may be

hard and grasping, but he obeys the law."

Now, Judy knew, they would soon know what the old man's death would mean to Triangle. A few minutes later she was on her way to carry the news to Andy and Trued.

As the grass had given out on the home range the men had moved the herd deeper and deeper into the hill country. By the latter part of August they had moved as far as an old camp in the big springs district.

Judy arrived at sundown. Gill Clark was out with the cattle. Trued was cooking supper while Andy worked over a stack of broken gear. They listened quietly as she told them about the death of old El Hartung. Then Andy pulled his harp from a pocket and played a short, troubled melody.

"It's getting about time for Jack Hartung to go to work on us, anyway," he said. "But El's death may hurry things up some."

The men turned the old cabin over to Judy for the night, and they slept under the stars. They were up at daybreak. Gill Clark, his young face drawn from lack of sleep, had ridden in for breakfast and a few hours' rest.

"I'd swear I saw somebody light up a smoke out there in the hills," he said. "Tried to find some tracks or something this morning but didn't have any luck."

Andy and Trued exchanged worried glances, but said nothing.

Shortly after sun-up Judy rode back to the home ranch. Joe had gone to Weston for provisions, leaving Amy alone. Judy found the woman worried and frightened.

"Two riders topped that east ridge about noon," she said, "and sat there quite awhile, watching the house. But when I went outside they rode back to the south."

"Did you recognize them?" Judy asked.

Amy shook her head.

JOE HULL returned in the late afternoon. With him, riding the big black, was Jack Hartung. He pulled his fancy hat from his coal-black hair and gave Judy and Amy a hearty hello. Their surprise at seeing him seemed to amuse him.

"Met Joe over by the bridge," he said, grinning. "I was on my way to the south range, so I thought I'd stop by." He frowned. "Figured you'd like to know that rustlers are busy again—night riders. They sneak down out of the foothills, pick up a few strays, and disappear. Reckon you'll want to watch your cattle a little closer from now on."

"Thanks," Judy said. "Any notion who they are?"

"Likely the same coyotes I told you about before." Jack glanced at his gold watch. "Got to hurry along. See you again."

He set spurs to the black and rode rapidly southward.

"What do you make of it, Joe?" Judy asked.

"I figure he's lying through his teeth," Joe answered. "The safest way for him to hurt us is send some of his crew at night to pick up Triangle strays, so he wants word to get around that those old rustlers are back on the job."

Frowning, Judy went into the house. Joe was right. Jack Hartung would be very careful to make it appear that he was not mixed up in whatever trouble came to the Triangle. Win or lose, he would want to be a free man after it was all over. Thinking of the odds against keeping the herd from straying in the foothills, she again felt a wave of despair.

Ten days later Joe Hull took provisions to the camp. When he returned he reported cattle losses.

"Not many so far," he said, "but it's the beginning. And Trued's talking about moving back this way."

The next morning Sandy Clark rode up to the big house on the ugly old hammerhead.

"Sam Turner's barn burned last night," he informed them. "No idea how the fire started. but Sam found some horse tracks around his water tank. He farms with mules, you know."

"So this is the way it's going to be," Judy thought despairingly. "striking under cover of darkness at both the valley and the hill country."

Again the girl saddled her pony and rode

to the camp. When she arrived she found Gill Clark beginning to stir around after an afternoon's sleep. Hearing about the burning of Sam Turner's barn, an angry glint came into his eyes.

"I was afraid something like that might happen," he muttered.

She made some supper for him, and then they rode across the rolling hills to a deep valley where most of the herd was grazing. Andy and Trued were sitting around a small fire drinking coffee.

"Want to go down for a closer look?" Andy asked.

Judy nodded. They mounted and rode down a rocky slope, crossed a narrow spring-fed stream. She told him about the fire in Deer River Valley.

"It figures," he said, tapping the mouth harp angrily on the palm of his hand. "A fire or two will keep everybody at home in the valley. Jack doesn't want the farmers coming up here to help us if we decide to get out in a hurry."

They rode around a drift of sleek, fat steers, and Andy said, "If we could only keep 'em here another month—"

"We could if we had more men," she said.

"Yeah," Andy agreed, "men with guns."

"I could talk to Sheriff Rogers."

Andy shook his head. "Rogers is a pretty shrewd politician. He likes his job, so he'd stall you, Judy. He'd find a dozen excuses to dodge the issue until he found out which way the wind is going to blow for sure."

She knew Andy was right, and said nothing.

"I guess it's time to listen to Trued," he went on. "Start back for the home range, like he says, and get this stuff on the market, even if a few more weeks would give us a better price."

THE SUN had dipped behind the mountains, and the early September chill had moved about them. They turned back toward the camp. She glanced at him—the lean brown face, the troubled squint about his blue eyes, the tired sag of his shoulders. She remembered his old easy laughter and teasing jokes. Sighing, she thought how the years had changed him.

Again they turned the cabin over to Judy for the night. It was some time after midnight when the shooting awoke her. She heard a series of quick blasts off across the dark rolling hills. By the time she got outside, Andy was in the saddle and on his way toward the herd. Trued had waited for her.

"Rustlers, Uncle Truedy?" she asked in a frightened voice.

"Maybe," he answered flatly.

They met Andy and Gill at the top of a rocky slope. Gill sat slumped in the saddle, gripping the horn with both hands. Even in the darkness Judy could tell that he was hurt, and a feeling of numbness seemed to settle over her.

"Gill took after a couple of riders who tried to sneak off some strays," Andy said grimly. "Horse stumbled and threw him. Maybe we have a broken ankle on our hands."

"I'm all right," Gill said, between clenched teeth.

At the cabin, they cut away his boot, and Andy made a careful examination of the swollen ankle.

"No bones broken," he said finally. "But you won't do any riding for a few days."

"That's what you think," Gill gritted, mopping the clammy sweat from his white face. "By night I'll be as good as new."

Streaks of light were filtering in from the east. Andy shoved up on his long legs. His eyes were angry.

"One thing's for sure," he said, "we need more men now that the fireworks have begun."

"I'll send Joe," Judy said. "I'll ride to the valley and ask Abe Dennison to send some help."

"We'll start moving out of here today," Trued said. "Get word to Weston, Judy, that we'll need those cattle cars by the end of the week." Then, wearily, "Sometimes I get a feeling we won't need any cattle cars."

Andy went out with the girl to where she'd left the spotted pony. He tested the cinch strap.

"Keep your eyes open, Judy," he said grimly. "You see any riders, duck out in a hurry."

He reached out and touched her hand. For a moment she thought he might take her in his arms, and suddenly her heart was beating hard and fast. But he drew back.

She swung into the saddle and rode to the east. Two hours later she came out of the breaks and cut into the more gently rolling country. The line of timber that hugged South Fork appeared on her right. The spotted pony knew he was headed homeward and sawed at the bit for a free rein, but the girl held him back. She didn't want a tired horse under her if she ran into trouble.

Some time later, coming up out of a narrow depression, she saw two riders top a distant ridge. They swung in after her. Frightened, she turned toward the timber, and lost them from view till they came up over a hill. Then she saw them clearly, but failed to recognize either one of them.

Suddenly the man in the lead lifted a gun. She saw the puff of smoke, but the wind whipped away the sound of the shot. Terrified now, she raced on.

Her third glimpse of the men told her that their horses were tired, that she was leaving them behind. Wondering if these were the two that Gill had encountered during the night, she rode into the timber along the creek, and turned downstream. When she came out of the timber she saw nothing more of her pursuers.

WARILY she cut back toward the home ranch, taking a roundabout route. Before she reached the last rise she saw the gray smoke clouding the red setting sun. Topping the rise, she halted and stared down out of stricken eyes.

Smoke moved restlessly in the wind from the smoldering ruins of the big barns and the old ranch house. Only one building had escaped—the low, narrow bunkhouse.

The big trees that had shaded the house stood black and leafless. A brick chimney had toppled against the base of the windmill, buckling the steel frame. The corrals and fences that Joe Hull had worked so hard to repair were a shambles. Suddenly feeling too tired to sit in a saddle, Judy Cushman dropped to the ground in a small, hopeless heap, and buried her face in her arms. But at first she could not even find the strength to weep.

Some time later, the sound of approaching horses roused her. Lifting her face, she saw Joe, Sandy Clark, and a farmer named Ed Gregory.

"What happened, Joe?" she asked, stumbling to her feet.

Joe's eyes were red rimmed, his mouth grim. "The horses woke Amy and me. When we went outside we saw the roof of the house had caught from the barns."

"The bunkhouse didn't burn," she said hollowly.

"A trick of the wind and that tin roof, Judy."

"How do you think the fire started?"

"It was set. It has to be that way. Both barns was burning from the inside out, so we know one didn't catch from the other."

"Where's Amy?" Judy asked wearily.

"Back home in the valley. And that's where you're to go. Sandy and Ed are going with me to help with the cattle. We figured they'd want to start the drive to Weston soon."

"Gill's hurt," she said. "Couldn't more men go to help?"

"There are only four men and two boys left in the valley as it is," he answered flatly.

A few minutes later the men rode on. Judy took one last glance at the smoking ruins, and then began the long ride to Deer River Valley. Black despair rode with her.

She could not see any way to stand against this last catastrophe, even if the men managed to drive the herd to Weston. She had no home. There would be no money left for building one. She reached the Hull cabin at midnight, so exhausted that Amy had to undress her and put her to bed.

Five days after the fire, Sandy Clark rode into Deer River Valley. The Triangle

cattle had been brought down out of the hill country without many losses. But instead of driving toward the bridge across North Fork, the men had moved the herd down along South Fork.

"Andy doesn't figure it would be smart to cross the bridge," the boy explained. "He says that's where the Rocking H will try to scatter the herd. And once they get scattered in those breaks along the Rocking H side of North Fork we'll never be able to round 'em up again before snow flies."

"What are Andy's plans?" Abe Dennison asked.

"To drive through the valley and swim 'em across at the forks. That means knocking down some fences."

Shoulders sagging, Abe stood for a brief moment, staring off across his rich fields of corn, cane and alfalfa.

"Tell Andy the fences will all be down," he said, lifting his white head.

THE DUST rose high against the low sun, turning it into a sickly yellow globe. Judy Cushman had ridden to a rim of rock at the south edge of the valley. The Triangle cattle had been moved into the valley along the low bank of the creek. Now it was hard to keep the animals moving through the fields.

On her left, Andy Delaney broke out of the dust cloud. He saw her and waved his big hat. She waved and rode toward him. They met in Abe Dennison's ruined corn field.

Andy's face was a mask of dust, all but his blue eyes and his lips. His grin made her think of a circus clown.

"So far, so good," he said. "But I'll feel a lot easier once we get 'em across the creek."

"Now what do you think about Jack Hartung?"

"I don't know. Maybe we've fooled him by coming this way. Or maybe he's waiting for darkness. I reckon we'll find out, sooner or later."

Presently he circled back toward the bawling cattle and was again swallowed up by the thick dust.

Judy trailed the herd toward the forks, cutting in after some stragglers, now and then, and turning them back. Sometimes she rode with Andy, occassionally with one of the others, or, more often, alone. Always there was that frightening feeling of urgency, a feeling that time was running out on them.

Darkness caught up with them, and the going became slower. They passed Abe Dennison's home. They skirted a line of timber and crossed Ed Gregory's field of alfalfa. They pushed on through the night and the choking dust, and at last swung down into the lowlands at the forks.

In spite of the dust-filled darkness, Andy found her again and rode beside her. "We got 'em started across the creek," he shouted. "Looks like we'll make—"

A burst of gunfire to their left cut him short. His arm flashed out, swept her out of the saddle to the ground. The weeds were rank and tall around the trunk of a fallen cottonwood. He shoved her down against the big tree.

Suddenly she was alone in the inky, choking blackness. She lifted her head to listen. The shooting had moved on toward the crossing. But abruptly it changed direction and moved toward her.

Heart hammering, she crouched against the log, the rough bark scratching her arms and face. A scattering of cattle thundered by. A man cursed, a gun blasted. Then the shooting drifted away and stopped altogether.

Lifting her head, she saw a red glow in the sky behind her, and felt a sudden great surge of anger. That, she knew, was the Gregory house or barn burning.

A rider broke from the timber. "Judy," he called.

She stumbled to her feet and ran toward Andy. He swept her up in front of him and rode down toward the creek.

Trued, Joe, and Abe Dennison were steadily driving cattle into the water. The others were picking up strays and returning them to the flats along the creek.

Andy turned his horse into the water. "Hang on, Judy," he said. "I'll swim along behind."

They crossed over to the right of the bawling, plunging cattle. On the far side, some boys had built up a roaring bonfire, and Andy left her there to dry herself by the fire, while he returned to help with the drive.

SHE SAT near the fire a long time, soaking up the heat and watching the cattle struggle up out of the cold water. But finally the last animal was across, and the men began to gather around the fire. Someone had put a big tin pot of coffee on the coals. The coffee smell suddenly made Judy feel famished.

"Those riders all got away," Trued said tiredly. "That means we still have no way to prove anything on—"

A shout made them turn. A small figure came running up from the creek. He was Sandy Clark, his wet clothes clinging to his thin body. He stumbled and fell, and rolled toward the fire. Then Judy saw his face. It was twisted with a terrible crying.

"They killed Gill!" he sobbed. "Gill caught up with one of 'em and pulled him from his horse. Another one rode up and shot Gill in the back, then helped the other man up, and they rode away on the same horse."

"Where is he, Sandy?" Andy asked huskily.

"Over by that ridge north of the forks." His young face filled with a sudden hate, Sandy shoved to his feet and pulled a six-gun from under his shirt. "I took Gill's gun," he said. "Someday I'll find out who killed him."

They waited until morning to drive on to Weston. It was open country all the way, and they covered the miles quickly and without further trouble. They reached the town by mid-afternoon and began the tedious job of loading before sundown.

Judy had come into town during the night and had taken a room at the Weston Hotel. Bathed, rested and dressed in clean clothes that she'd bought only that morning, she mounted her spotted pony and rode down to the railroad. Watching the loading, she knew she had won only a poor and temporary victory.

She could hold on to the old home ranch another year, but the big house and barns were gone. And fresh in her mind was the destruction the herd had brought about in Deer River Valley. Besides, she could never forget Gill Clark's death.

She and the farmers had paid a terrific price for what little they had won, and Jack Hartung and his Rocking H were as strong as ever. Turning to look along the narrow street, she saw the man, Slim Graber, and the two strangers who had tried to catch her the day of the big fire.

Fear shot through her. Then she told herself there was nothing to fear. There were people everywhere. She saw the sheriff step from his office and come trotting along the street. But she had begun to shiver with fear anyway. Swinging her pony around, she rode rapidly to warn Andy, who was working at the loading chute.

BUT HE had already seen the Rocking H men. The prod pole still in his big hands, he had dropped to the ground. He had left off his gunbelt and gun, she saw, and there was no time to get them from the chuck wagon.

"Better duck, Judy," he warned tightly. But she ignored his warning.

Her glance swept the others—Joe, Ed, Trued, and Abe. They had not expected any trouble here in Weston. They too had left off their guns while loading the cattle. Now some of the cattle were fighting their way back down the chute, but no one bothered to stop them.

His gun swinging against his hip, Hartung dropped to the ground. "Delaney," he said, "you've been talking around that I've rustled Triangle cattle. I've come to settle the score once and for all. Give him a gun, Slim."

Slim Graber reached into the wagon, picked up a gun, and tossed it at Andy's feet.

Face pale, the girl stared at that gun, and suddenly felt sick. Jack Hartung had lost his first round with the Triangle, and he'd lost his first fight with Andy Delaney. But as long as he lived he would never give

up. The destruction of the Triangle might have to wait until another year, but he had come to destroy Andy now, before them all. He wanted witnesses who would have to admit it was a fair fight.

Her eyes moved from the gun to Sheriff Les Rogers's flabby face. She knew by his expression that he wouldn't act.

"Pick it up, farmer!" Hartung said.

A gun blast cut him short, and a bullet screamed past his face. Young Sandy Clark stumbled around the end of a cattle car, his brother's smoking gun in hand.

"Sandy!" Judy cried involuntarily.

The boy turned to look at her. Suddenly his face went slack with crying, and the gun slipped from his fingers.

"He killed Gill last night," he sobbed.

"The kid's crazy!" Hartung rasped.

"A big man did it," the boy broke in. His hand came up with something that glittered in the late sunlight—a thin gold watch. "I found this out there this morning where Gill was shot."

"Crazy damned kid!" Hartung screamed, pulling his gun. He was beyond reasoning.

In that split second before his finger tightened on the trigger, Andy flung the prod pole. Hartung saw the pole overending toward him. He ducked as he fired, and missed Sandy.

Hartung straightened. He turned his gun toward Andy and triggered.

The bullet slapped harmlessly into the loading chute. He'd overswung his mark and, with a hoarse curse, he brought the big sixgun around for a third shot. But he never fired it.

Andy had scooped the gun from the dust at his feet. He knew what he had to do, and he did it. He felt the gun buck in his hand, and watched Hartung stagger back against the wagon, slide to the ground, and die almost instantly.

"Looks like this is no place for us, men," Graber said hoarsely.

They rode out of town to the east, their guns unleathered. But no one thought about trying to stop them.

Sheriff Les Rogers tore his eyes from the dead man. Glancing about at the grim faces, he knew without doubt which way the wind was going to blow from now on.

"Nice shooting, Andy," he said.

THE NIGHT Andy Delaney came to the Weston Hotel, Judy had just about given up hope of ever seeing him again.

"A nice night to go for a ride," he said.

She didn't question. She just went.

They crossed the bridge, the old planks rattling under the horses' hoofs. They didn't talk much. Once he pulled the shiny harp from his pocket, but couldn't seem to think of a proper tune to play. Then they came to the last ridge and stopped to look down at the place where the big house and the barns had once stood so proudly.

It was almost as light as day, with the full moon high in the sky. She saw that the rubble had been cleared away, that the windmill had been straightened. Then she noticed the light shining through the bunkhouse window. They dismounted.

"Trued and Sandy are there, looking after things till you're ready to take over," he said.

She stood there, saying nothing.

"We've been pretty busy all week," Andy went on, his voice not quite steady. "Amy, Joe, the Dennisons, the whole pack of us. It's not like the big house, Judy, but it's cozy and nice, and we're right proud of the way we turned a bunkhouse into a home for you."

She began to cry. She couldn't help it. The sudden happiness and gratitude in her heart had to come out some way.

"The old house was too big, anyway," she blubbered.

"Another thing about that big house," he said, grinning faintly, "it had me scared. As soon as I was old enough to have some sense, I figured I was crazy to dream that a girl who had a big, fine home like that could ever fall for a boy like me. Even if she was afraid of snakes and let me kiss her and—what I mean is—"

"I know what you mean," she said, and moved into his waiting arms.

Why did Mark insist on living way up here in the mountains?

LETTER to MY LOVE

By Lee Priestley

SUSAN SAUNDERS, looking for Mark Tolliver at the loading pens, did not see the horses until she was among them. How could she? Whenever she looked up from skirting the puddles left from an earlier rain, she eyed the lightning-flushed clouds. Susan was afraid of storms. So when the startled animals shied at her parasol, splashing her with muddy water, Susan shrieked in mingled fright and exasperation.

The horses jerked and reared. One lashed out against his neighbor. In seconds the pen seethed with neighing, kicking horses and the *whap!* of landing hoofs.

Then a voice that Susan recognized even in her fright roared behind her. ". . . out of there! Before your silly head's kicked smack off your shoulders!"

A hand between her shoulders propelled Susan rudely. She skated through one puddle. Then, she sat squishily in another.

Mark didn't even glance in her direction! Cold water seeped through Susan's skirt; cold fury mounted in her mind.

SUSAN found it downright insulting to be expected to play second fiddle to a horse

She got to her feet as the horses plunged and clattered up a loading ramp into the car waiting on the siding. When the doors were closed upon them, Mark turned to look at the girl who had interrupted the loading of his first car-sized sale.

Her hat gone—it floated upon the puddle she had sat in—Susan's red curls sprayed out angrily. Her gray eyes sparked with blue-green glints and her small rounded figure was tense with her rage. But if she hadn't been so furious, Susan might have laughed at the ludicrous surprise on Mark's face.

"So nice that you're glad to see me," she said tartly. "Such a hearty welcome!"

"Susan! Susan, I didn't dream—" Mark's voice trailed off as he smoothed his rumpled black hair and relaxed the lines that had tightened his brown face to stern frowning.

"No dream about it," Susan said. "More like a nightmare!"

Mark stuttered in his surprise. "But Susan—why . . . why did you come?"

"I thought you'd be glad to see me." Susan made her eyes reproachful. "And to hear the good news I've brought."

"Of course I'm glad to see you. But I didn't expect to find you under the feet of my carload shipment—not after your father practically kicked me out of your house last week."

"Papa always roars at my beaux," Susan said. "Then he does something sweet to make it up to me. That's the good news, darling. Oh, Mark, it's wonderful!"

MARK looked puzzled as he piloted Susan out of the yards, but he said nothing.

"Papa has always threatened to retire from the law to live on a farm," Susan went on, "but every year he tries more cases than the last. Until now. Now he's actually bought the farm, a big showplace just outside Denver. And you're to run it for him, Mark! Isn't that marvelous? When we're married we can get a good hired man and spend most of our time in town—"

"You won't need two."

"Two? Two what?"

"Two hired men," Mark said shortly.

He left Susan on the platform and went to poke his head in at the station window. "All right to use your buckboard, Ed?" he called. "Be back in a little bit."

Then he came to turn Susan toward the vehicle. "Get in, Sue. I'll take you to Ma Peterson's. She lives at the town end of the canyon. She takes in a boarder now and then, so she'll keep you until you can catch the stage back to Denver."

Susan winced at the chill of her wet skirt as she sat. "But I'm not going back until you can come too, Mark. Oh, darling, ask me now to marry you! Soon! So we can settle in at Papa's farm."

Again Mark said nothing. This time Susan noticed his silence. She looked up into his set, unsmiling face. "You don't seem exactly overcome with joy," she reproached him.

"Maybe I'm just overcome."

Susan laughed. "I suppose it is a surprise, when you told me good-by forever only last week! I knew different all the time."

Still there was no smile on Mark Tolliver's handsome face.

"Mark . . ." Susan said uncertainly, "Mark, you do want to marry me?"

"More than anything else in the world," Mark said huskily.

With the words, Mark dropped the reins and caught her into hungry arms. Mark's lips hard against her mouth rocked the world beneath Susan's feet, and woke the blood in her veins to a sweet urgent song. Then Mark released her abruptly and reined the team back into the middle of the road.

"Nothing's really changed, Susan." As she stared at him uncomprehendingly, Mark went on, "A week ago you wouldn't marry me because I live at 'the back door of nowhere' on a quarter horse ranch. Well, I still live there. I don't see myself as your father's hired hand on a fancy plaything farm."

"You don't love me! You don't want to marry me! Some smelly old horses are more important—"

Mark's hand caught her arm, but there was little tenderness in his grasp. "I do love you; I do want to marry you. But I've just barely got sense enough to know it wouldn't work on your terms. You won't live out here. I won't trade my ranch and my independence for a setup your father would expect me to be grateful for."

HE BRAKED the buckboard beside a small gate. "This is Ma's place. Tell her I sent you. Then you catch the next stage back, honey. That way it will be easier for us both."

Susan was bundled out and watching the buckboard disappear the way it had come before she could close her mouth. Finally she opened the gate and walked up to the door of the house. She rearranged her plans as she went—plans in which a return to Denver on the next stage had no part.

She saw the edge of a curtain drop into place, then the door opened to her knock. In the doorway a small wirey woman with the bright inquisitive eyes of a terrier looked Susan over.

"I couldn't quite catch what you two were quarreling about," she said accusingly. "People that's fighting ought to think about other folks and give out with loud hollers. Nothing's more aggravating than hearing half of a ruckus. Are you Mark's girl?"

Susan considered the question. "Yes . . . and no. He's got a silly idea he'd rather stay out here on a one-horse ranch than manage my father's stock farm. Of all the unreasonable, pigheaded—"

"Well, come on in." Ma Peterson picked up a battered hat and a leather mailpouch. "I got to go carry mail, but just make yourself to home." She waved a hand vaguely at the rooms opening off the hall, then went back to more interesting topics. "I dunno as I'd call Mark more than common pigheaded."

"Isn't it unreasonable to expect me to bury myself here when we could live just outside of Denver?"

Ma pursed her lips. "Right often there's precious little reasonableness about the things a body feels the deepest about. Take me. At my age, carryin' the mail up and down the canyon ain't very sensible. But I said I would and, by gollies, I will!"

Susan stared at the indomitable old woman. "In bad weather? All winter? When it wouldn't make any difference if most of the letters weren't delivered at all?"

" 'Tain't my business to say whether the mail's important or not. I just said I'd deliver it. And I will, if I don't bust a tug." She clapped on the old hat and slid a ring to tighten its rawhide thongs under her chin. "See you later."

The door slammed behind her. Susan had picked up her valise, when the door flew open again. Ma poked her head out.

"Hey, can you cook? There's a chicken ready for the pan in the cool box and half a layer cake in the pantry. There's a easy-gaited little horse out in the corral, too. If I were you, I'd fry that chicken and pack a good picnic lunch. Then I'd go to Mark's place—at the end of this same road—and patch things up before he's had time to get stubborn. Mark's a good boy. Only thing is, he doesn't wrap easy around anybody's finger."

THAT time the door stayed closed. Susan chose a room that had an unlived-in look. By the time she stepped out of her wet skirt she had decided that Ma's suggestion was a good one. In the kitchen, with a tea towel tied around her slim waist, she fried the chicken and found the other ingredients for a picnic lunch.

Almost lighthearted again, she saddled the little horse and mounted with the basket. Mark just couldn't mean what he had said. When she got him softened up a little, he would see that it would be selfish to want her to live here when they were married.

The road climbed to a shelf above the brawling small stream that tumbled down the canyon floor. On the rim above, where pockets of soil gave them anchorage, junipers and piñons were living green against the ochre and iron-streaked rock. Occasionally another trail meandered off around

(Please turn to page 84)

WHAT IS RUSSIA'S MASTER PLAN

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a mailbox wedged into a cairn of stones. One of Ma's mail customers lived back there, Susan supposed. How did they stand it?

The canyon widened as she climbed. Now strips of rich dark soil bordered the little stream. The cliffs lowered to rocky palisades, studded with trees that thickened to forest further up the mountain side. Everywhere the contrast of color delighted Susan's eyes—chocolate-brown loam; rocky ledges tinted in a thousand subtle reds and browns and grays; even the green of the trees brightened with the yellowish globes of some plant growing on the branches; the little river tumbling past silver willow and pink-tipped salt cedar, reflecting the deep blue of the sky. As the canyon widened still more, the rocky palisades subsided into ledges that in turn became only outcrops in grassy meadows.

Then Susan rode beside a fenced pasture where mares lifted graceful heads to watch her. A shining bay came to follow the fence beside her, then skimmed away. Susan saw the brand; an M over a T. These were Mark's horses, the Tolliver strain that his father had bred and that Mark himself was fanatic about.

They *were* beautiful, Susan conceded. Now the mare had infected the others with her excitement. The band swooped and raced and wheeled in motion fluid as wind or water.

"If you must play second fiddle to a filly," Susan told herself wryly, "be glad it's such a beauty!"

When the shining bay raced back to the fence, eyes rolling and head tossing playfully, Susan slid from the saddle to tempt her with an apple from the basket. The mare's nostrils flared as she came close enough to reach for the fruit. Then she trotted away, looking back over her shoulder.

"You can't have it unless you come to me, you beautiful rascal," Susan said aloud.

If she went inside the gate Susan thought she might stroke the red satin of the mare's neck. So she tied her mount and opened the gate. She drew it shut behind her, expecting it to stay closed.

THE mare minced daintily closer, lip lifting to nip up the fruit. Champing it, she evaded Susan. Then, in a flurry of heels, she went through the gate that had swung open. Before Susan could reach it two other mares escaped, disappearing on the mountain side among the small trees studded with the curious yellowish globes.

Susan stamped in exasperation. She wouldn't be able to get the mares back into the pasture herself. Mark would just have to send a man. What was so enticing on the slope anyway? Why would the silly things leave their lush pasture for the parched and dry grass up there?

Around the curve of the pasture fence Susan came upon the Tolliver ranch. The low rambling house, the barns and the corrals lay secure in a cove protected by the mountain rising behind. When Susan tied her horse to the rack she gasped with the impact of the view before her. She stood at the top of the visible world. In canyon, precipice, and slope, the whole mountain range fell away into blue distance. It was beautiful beyond expression.

"Hey," said Mark's voice, "can't you see me for my view?"

Mark swung from his saddle and caught Susan to him, the grimness of the morning gone now. "Wouldn't you say it's worth living at the 'back door of nowhere' to see that view any time you looked out?" Mark's eyes came back to her then. "But you didn't come for the scenery, did you?"

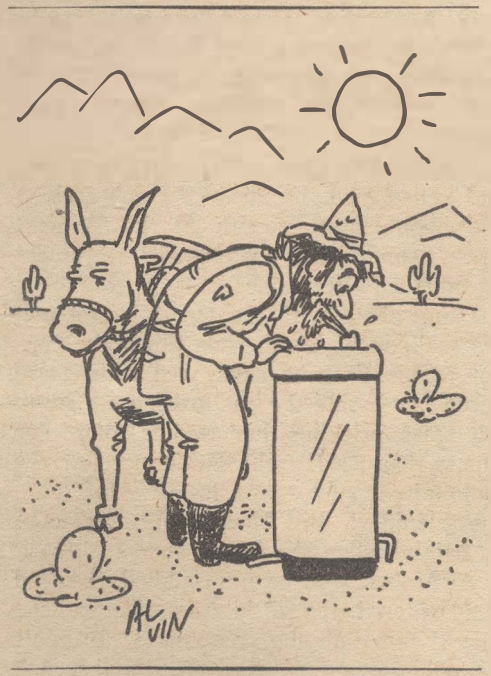
He kissed Susan with a thoroughness that drove everything else from her mind. She clung to him dizzily, breath and plans all gone. To be together . . . but when she pushed Mark's arms away finally, she was thinking they could be together on Papa's stock farm outside of Denver just as well as here at the back door of nowhere.

"I'm sorry about this morning," Mark said. "When I cooled off I knew you'd like my country if you gave it a chance." He kissed her again.

Susan's hands went to her tousled hair, and she laughed shakily. "Anyone in the house certainly had a clear view . . . of us!" She pointed to the wide bank of windows.

Mark tucked her hand under his arm. "Nobody home. Sofia, who keeps house for me, went to Rio Vado this morning when word came that her newest grandbaby was on the way. Come see the house, honey. My mother designed it. It's not bad."

The house was more than "not bad." The long living room was serene and uncluttered, with the titanic view filling the window wall. There were many rooms,



fitted with native furniture and colorful with Indian textiles and pottery; an adequate kitchen; even baths. It was a wonderful house.

In the living room again, Susan remembered the picnic basket. "I brought fried chicken and chocolate cake," she said. "Let's eat at that table in front of the windows."

Mark rubbed his hands with anticipation. "And me thinking I'd have to warm up the pot of *frijoles!*"

SPREADING the fringed cloth and setting out the food, Susan told Mark about her ride up the canyon. "Beautiful and strange. Things like blue lizards and Christmas trees in the summer—"

"Christmas trees?"

Susan laughed. "Decorated, too. Smallish evergreens hung all over with yellowish-green balls of something that looked like holiday trimmings."

"That was mountain mistletoe," Mark said. "A gaudy pest. Dangerous, too, because it contains considerable ergot, which is bad business for any mare that eats it."

That reminded Susan. "I saw your horses in the pasture and—"

Mark interrupted. "My brood mares, you mean? Beautiful ladies, all in an interesting condition! Did you notice a bay, saucy and devilish?"

"She came up to the fence. And, Mark, I must tell you—"

"That's Redheaded Hussy," Mark said. "The best mare we've ever raised. She's bred to Flash-in-the-Pan, so her foal should be the fastest thing in these mountains. I'll be glad when that foal's born. Hussy is getting flighty."

"Mark, I—"

But Mark went right on talking. "My dad and I bred up a mighty good working strain for cutting horses, but I'm depending on the foal to add the speed strain we need. How'd she look? I haven't seen her since early morning."

"Mark, I've been trying to tell you! She got out."

Mark stopped chewing, the chicken leg halfway to his mouth.

"I opened the gate to give her an apple and away she went! Two other mares followed her. They went up the slope into those trees I was talking about, that you said were covered with mountain mistletoe."

Mark's chair went over with a crash as he shoved away from the table. "If a mare eats mountain mistletoe, the ergot in it may cause her to lose her foal before full term!"

The last of his words flew over Mark's shoulder as he ran out of the room. Through the window Susan saw him fling himself into the saddle and pound down the road. Alone with the scarcely tasted food, she planted her elbows on the table and cradled her chin in her fists.

"Well, dear," she told herself aloud, "you flattered yourself about playing second fiddle to a filly. You don't even play in the same band!"

A hand reached over Susan's shoulder to the plate of chicken. "What caused the ruckus this time?" Ma Peterson asked.

Susan whirled to stare at her. "Where did *you* come from?"

"I always take the right branch of the canyon coming up. There's three mailboxes along it. When the right branch tops out I cross over here and go down this road home." Ma shifted the piece of chicken to her left hand and pulled out two letters from the pouch. "Two letters for Mark today. This one looks like business—likely somebody wanting to buy some stock—but this one is a gal's handwriting. You aren't the only one trying to get a lead strap on Mark!"

MA CUT a piece of cake and went on talking with her mouth full. "Musta been something sizeable you fought about this time, or Mark wouldn't have flung off without eating."

"By accident, I let three mares out of the pasture. Mark nearly had a fit," Susan said resentfully. "Of course I wouldn't want any harm to come to them, but they're just horses!"

Ma shook her tousled gray head. "A horse ain't just a horse to a Tolliver. I doubt Mark thinks as much of any human being as he does of that Hussy mare."

"She was one that got out."

"You sure don't get into trouble by halves," Ma said, licking her fingers. "Well, I'll go out in the kitchen and chin with Sofia a minute. Then we'll go home."

Dull with her own misery, Susan packed the food into the basket and folded the fringed cloth on top. Ma came back then.

"Did Mary say where Sofia was? I can't raise her."

Susan remembered with an effort. "He said she'd gone. Something about a new baby."

Ma's tousled alertness was that of a terrier at a rat hole. "New baby? Why, it's not time for Chico's wife, nor yet for Soledad." Ma counted on her fingers. "Seven months for Soledad. It's bound to be her, and having trouble, too!" Ma thrust the mailpouch at Susan. "Here, you take this back. You ain't scared to stay one night by yourself, are you?"

One night? Susan shook her head. She would be spending all her nights alone. . . .

"I'll go from here to Rio Vado," Ma said. "If things aren't going right, Sofia's apt to get flustered. I'll be home by morning, sure. Look now. I shut the two calves in the pasture before I left. You turn 'em in with their ma's when you get home. That'll take care of the milking. Don't forget now!"

Outside, Ma slung a leg over her saddle and yelled back to Susan, "Don't feel so bad about fighting with Mark. A man doesn't stay mad at a pretty girl . . . unless he finds a prettier one!"

Hung about with the picnic basket and the mailpouch, Susan rode down the canyon. This time no saucy red satin mare paced her beside the pasture fence. Susan felt tears prickling her eyelids, more for Hussy than for herself. If the mare ate the mountain mistletoe and lost her foal . . . Susan sniffled. But Mark didn't need to be so hateful when she felt so sorry!

At Ma's barn, Susan unsaddled, then fed and watered the little horse before she turned him into the pole corral. In Ma's silent house, she put away food and basket before she flopped on her bed and gave way to tears. Papa had been right. She would never make a rancher's wife, even if Mark would have her.

AFTER the tears were spent, Susan slept, a woeful heap on Ma's log-cabin quilt, wet lashes curling on wet cheeks. Neither the lowing of cows nor the bawling of calves wakened her.

But the odd shuffling sound, repeated along the hall, did. When Susan opened her eyes, puzzled by morning sun and finding herself huddled in her clothes on a strange bed, she heard Mark's voice in the hall. She got stiffly to her feet and went to the door.

Mark, holding one end of a shed door

while a man at the other end maneuvered around a corner, had spoken to Ma, who lay on the makeshift stretcher, her head pillowed on Mark's folded coat, her face as gray with pain as her tousled hair.

"*Ma!* Mark—what happened to her?" Susan gasped.

Mark did not look at her as he shuffled ahead. "You should ask!" he said bitterly. "When Ma came back sometime in the night she went to tend the critters you neglected. She either got knocked down or fell. Her leg's broken. She was unconscious when I found her."

Susan's hand flew to her mouth. Oh, *no!* Ma had said something about turning the cows or the calves in or out . . . she had been sunk so deep in her own misery . . . Susan lifted stricken eyes to Mark's grim face.

Edging around the door into Ma's bedroom, Susan snatched off the counterpane and had the bed turned down when the men carefully shifted Ma into it. Bringing a towel and a basin, Susan pushed back the tousled hair and sponged Ma's gray face.

"I'll go bring your sister," Mark was saying when the dulled eyes opened again.

"Mark, I can take care of her," Susan began eagerly. "I took care of Aunt May. Oh, Ma, if you can forgive me—" Susan stopped, for Ma's eyes had closed again and her forehead glistened with the cold dew of pain.

"I reckon she'll forgive you," Mark said, "but trusting herself to your care is something else again. You just don't know the meaning of responsibility, Susan." Mark got to his feet. "I'll go get Miss Lollie, Doc."

In the hall he turned to Susan, who had followed him. "You don't fit out here in rough country," Mark said seriously. "You've been too spoiled, too sheltered. But you'll never know how sorry I am."

Then Mark was gone. Susan dashed the tears from her eyes and went back to help the gruff old man. Except for a surprised first glance the doctor took her assistance for granted. When the leg was set and Ma was sleeping, Susan went back to her room.

She changed to a travel suit and packed her valise. She was tightening its straps when she saw the mailpouch where she had dropped it last night. Almost without thought, she began a last letter to Mark:

> "You were right, Mark, in saying I don't know the meaning of responsibility. I have been sheltered and spoiled. But I could toughen up and learn to be unselfish. I know I could! If you only loved me enough to be patient while I learned. . . ."

There wasn't much more than that. She placed the letter in the pouch and hung it in the hall under Ma's hat. Mark would get the letter after she was gone.

FROM the window she saw the thunderheads piled in the sky over the mountains, threatening rain, as her tears threatened to fall. Hearing sounds of bustling, clucking arrival, Susan knew Ma's sister had come. She would go now.

She had set her valise down to open the front door, when she saw the mailpouch again. No one had remembered Ma's precious mail route! The route that Ma would deliver "if she didn't bust a tug." And now the tug was busted. Susan stared at the leather pouch for a long moment. . . .

In the corral she saddled the little horse and, hitching up her skirt, mounted him. She rode up the canyon trail into the gloom of the threatening storm. When lightning probed the clouds, Susan shivered with fear. Papa always came home to stay with her when it stormed, but Mark said she had been too sheltered—Thunder muttered ominously and big rain drops spattered down. The trail grew wet and slick as she climbed. She was catching up with the storm.

In the right branch of the canyon, as she matched the addresses on letters to the numbers on the few mailboxes, the lightning flickered continuously. There remained only one more letter and her note to Mark, when a bolt shattered a tree just ahead.

The heartstopping crash and the seering flame paralysed both Susan and the pony for a moment. Then the little horse bolted.

They were half a mile back down the trail before Susan regained control. It was almost as hard to turn the frightened animal as it was to make herself go back.

Approaching the blasted tree again, the little horse reared and danced. Susan's mouth was dry and tasting of coppery ozone as she forced him forward. Then the riven tree was behind them, and the last mailbox and the head of the canyon lay before.

At the Tolliver ranch gate Susan placed her letter in Mark's box. Why had she come after all? What had she proved even to herself? That she could ruin a good suit by delivering mail in a storm? That lightning was infinitely more frightening when she risked being struck by it?

Then Susan's gaze went to Mark's magnificent view. She caught her breath. Far below, the canyons, the slopes, the peaks, were submerged in a surging turbulent sea of stormy clouds. It was awful, like the lightning—and unutterably beautiful. Susan's pounding heart slowed and her fright gave way to a paradoxical peace. Such beauty could not be terrifying.

After a time she started back down the main canyon. As she neared the mare's pasture, she found herself sniffing. The haze she had vaguely noticed earlier was thickening . . . it was smoke!

The mountain slope was afire! Licking tongues of flame ran through the dry grass and on into the underbrush. Then Susan saw the blasted tree that had smashed the pasture gate and started the fire ringing outward. More lightning.

She pulled up the reluctant horse and strained to see through the smoke. There was no skimming band of mares in the pasture. The watery sunlight, growing stronger as the clouds lightened, did not glint from satiny coats. The mares were out.

UP THE slope the flames darted through the grass to threaten the piñons. It wasn't a big fire, but it was big enough to drive the mares higher —up where the dangerous mistletoe grew!

But she couldn't go after them. Fire was more terrifying than lightning. She couldn't! But even while the refusal was reechoing in her mind, Susan's hands were urging the little horse up the slope.

They raced through the blackened grass, still smoking and leading to a crimson line of fire. Yelling, Susan drove her heels into the pony's flanks, and jumped him over the fringe of flame before either of them had time to panic. Then they raced among the trees looking for the mares.

There was Hussy, her mane blowing like a banner as she led the mares up the slope. Susan sighed with relief. Mark had found her in time yesterday, for the gentle roundness was still apparent. Susan and the pony tore after the mares. She would drive them on to the mountain top and into Mark's corrals. She didn't even think about not being able to do it.

Now they rode through a sudden downpour of rain. Hussy threw up her head and bolted away from the band. Yelling again, Susan snatched off the wreck of her hat and, coming alongside the mare, swatted her to turn her back. Then she turned the band to the mountain top.

They were pounding up the trail when a horseman came toward them, slipping and sliding as he rode dangerously fast. Susan yelled at him, too.

"Get out of the way!"

The horseman was Mark. Susan caught a ludicrous glimpse of his astonished face as the mares flashed past him. Then she lifted the pony to a gallop and passed him herself.

But Mark was at the gates when Susan delivered the mares. Susan tumbled off her horse to help close the gate.

"Oh, Mark, I was never so scared! Lightning, and a fire, and a tree smashed the gate—"

"That's where the mares come in?"

"That was where they came out! So I went after them to keep them out of that mistletoe. Mark, is Hussy all right?"

"Hussy?" Mark made an effort to remember. "The mare? She's all right. Susan, in that letter you wrote—that you must have delivered yourself—"

There was amusement in Mark's face

as he looked at the substitute mail carrier. Susan's wrecked suit was rain-plastered to every round curve; her face was splashed with mud; the hat she had swatted Hussy with crowned rain-tightened curls.

"You needn't laugh!" Susan flared at him.

"Ma takes this mailroute seriously. I couldn't let the letters stay there undelivered. She would feel bad."

"And I said you didn't know the meaning of responsibility! Susan, can *you* be patient with *me?* While I learn to appreciate you?"

Susan lifted her face to tell him she could be patient about anything so long as they were together. But Mark's arms caught her to him and Mark's mouth hard upon her own made the actual words unnecessary.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Chaco Canyon National Monument preserves the largest prehistoric pueblo Indian ruins in the United States—in what state?

2. What does the Spanish word *Tejano* mean, and how should it be pronounced?

3. Is the sidewinder rattlesnake so called because it strikes sidewise or because it travels sidewise?

4. In bridling a horse, does the cowboy stand to the left, to the right or straight in front of the horse's head?

5. What popular saddle rifle first came into general use in the cow country West in 1894?

6. If you heard a *vaquero* promise the boss to go look after a certain bunch of cattle *poco tiempo*, what would he mean?

7. F.F.A. rodeos, featuring teen-age cowboys and cowgals, are becoming popular in the west. What do the initials F.F.A. stand for?

8. The golden trout *(salmo aguabonita)* is native only to the Kern River and its tributaries—in what far western mountain range?

9. The old open range cowcamp practically never saw any canned foods except what four—and those none too often?

10. What waterfall in what state takes the longest jump of any in the United States?

—Rattlesnake Robert.

You will find the answers to these questions on page 110. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

"Don't crowd your luck," Ed said grimly

Jailbird's Daughter

By Cy Kees

SMALL and seemingly defenseless in the outsized office chair, Patty Hendricks did look sincere and contrite. But Sheriff Ed Lacey kept a tight rein on his hopes. Too often in the past he had been fooled by that little-girl look. Peace and quiet while Pat Hendricks was submissive, he had found, was like the waiting pause for a dynamite fuse to burn. Hell broke loose shortly afterward.

But Ed decided to give her the benefit of whatever doubt he could salvage in her favor. From behind his office desk he smiled down at her.

"It isn't that the law doesn't appreciate the *spirit* of what you're trying to do," he

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SHERIFF ED LACEY knew his job . . . but handling a headstrong girl was a little out of his line. . . .

said gently. "It's like you said, lawbreakers are human beings and should be treated like it. I know you don't care about their money." He sighed. "But you know, lawabiding people are human too. They ought to be allowed to keep what they earn honestly. And the men you've been helping won't let them do it."

Pat nodded, her brown eyes earnest. Absently she ran slender, tanned fingers through the dark crown of her hair. "I know you're right, Ed," she said solemnly. "But every time I think of the way Dad was treated by the law, I . . . I guess I forget." There was a hint of accusation in her level look. "You know what a raw deal he got."

"Yeah, I know." It was true that her old man Hub Hendricks had been imprisoned five years for a crime he hadn't committed. But it was just as true that old Hub had deserved twice that much sentence for other lawbreaking that the law had never been able to pin on him. His non-participation in the crime for which he had been convicted stemmed from a lack of opportunity rather than any innocence in his character. "He's got a chance to make something for himself now if he wants to," Ed added lamely.

"After being locked up that long, he doesn't care any more," Pat said sadly. "He doesn't trust the law either, and I don't blame him."

HUB'S contempt for the law had been made obvious long before he'd ever been locked up, but Ed didn't comment. As far as reforming Hub Hendricks was concerned, he had no hopes anyhow. Hub had spent too many years in the shadows to reform now.

But Pat Hendricks was another story, another life. Young and beautiful and warmhearted, she would have a glorious future if she were given a start in the right direction. Ed sighed. It was sure getting to be a chore to keep her headed on the right trail. He studied her, wondering as he had so often how much he could influence her.

"I guess you know why Hub bought that worthless horse ranch out on the breaks," he said slowly. "I know he uses it to protect men wanted by the law. It's a perfect gate for escape to the canyon country, and I think you know it."

Flushing a little, Pat Hendricks refused to answer.

"Sooner or later Hub and I are bound to lock horns over that," he told her, bleakness settling through him at the thought. If he hurt or imprisoned Hub, it would mean the end of the dreams he'd never dared mention to her—the beautiful dreams of one day taking care of her himself. "What Hub does he'll have to answer for," Ed went on, "but you don't have to get mixed up in it. I talked to J. L. at the bank about you yesterday. He wants you to work for him, learn how to help with his bookkeeping."

Without considering it, Pat shook her head no. "Dad says there's a bunch of broomtails up in higher timber that he wants to corral," she said quickly. "He'll need my help."

"Why doesn't he get some of those hellions to help him out?" Ed asked, rankled. "Or do they pay straight cash?"

"As far I know, nobody who's stayed at our place has even paid anything," she said stubbornly. "And I didn't even know they were wanted men . . . at first."

"You couldn't have missed the skunk smell of the last two I trailed through there," Ed said flatly. "And I know Hub ain't helping them out of the kindness of his heart." He took a deep breath to get a snub on his fast-fading patience. "Damn, Pat, if you won't listen to reason any other way, start thinking of yourself, and what you are. Some day one of those skunks is going to get the idea he wants you, and Hub and you together won't be able to stop—"

"That's enough of that," she cut in. Her voice was level, but her face flamed crimson. "Every man who's ever been to our place has been decent and respectful to me."

"That doesn't mean you have to crowd your luck," he said grimly. "I've been dealing with lawbreakers for five years

now, and I know their makeup. A man who breaks the rules in every other way isn't very apt to stop and ask you whether you're decent. If Hub weren't so busy feeling sorry for himself he'd know that." His voice shook with fury. "I hope you'll find it out before it's too late."

"If things get tough, don't worry that I'll come crying to you for help." Her soft chin squared at him. "If you'd talk to Dad like a friend instead of always bossing him, he might settle down, even if he did get a dirty deal from the law. But you won't. You don't like him and he knows it."

Sighing, Ed remembered all the times he had caught Hub Hendricks alone and tried to interest him in some line of honest work. He'd even offered to stake Hub in some kind of business. It had done less good than talking to a fence post. Hub had made it plain that if there were any honest work done in the county, he would be long miles away from it. Her brown eyes blazing, Pat Hendricks whirled and strode out of his office.

KNOWING he had failed with her again, Ed hurried out after her, wondering how he could apologize. Her slender figure angrily erect, Pat untied her horse from the hitchrail and left town in a furious cloud of dust.

The midmorning sun shone brightly, but he couldn't enjoy its warmth like he usually did. He walked slowly down the plank walk, past weatherbeaten business houses, deeply depressed by the drabness of the cattle town. He'd always taken a quiet pride in being a good lawman, in providing security and justice for the people who lived here. Now his efforts seemed strangely futile, empty. Scowling, Ed leaned against the leather goods store, pulling his hat brim down against the bright rays of the sun.

With Pat Hendricks against him, no job would seem worthwhile. Inwardly he cursed himself for not having asked her to marry him before Hub was released from jail. But he had shied away from the question, never quite able to believe that she really wanted him. Only one moment had seemed right, the time he had taken her home from the dance and kissed her good night.

Looking down into Pat's warm, glowing eyes, he thought he saw the answer to the question that had burned in him ever since he had known her—whether she would return the love he felt for her. The mere hope had made him feel overgrown, homely. And he had missed his chance of knowing. Ed scowled at the sun. If he cared to remember, he'd made some dumb remark about how nice the night was.

Before he could date her again, Hub had come home and the trouble had started. And it was going to get a lot worse before he could hope it would be better. Word spread fast along the dim trails where a wanted man could find sanctuary, and that was exactly what Hub Hendricks was offering them on his desolate horse ranch.

A rider slipped into town and tied his horse at a hitchrail down near the end of the street. Ed glanced at him briefly and would have ignored him if the rider hadn't been so furtive. His interest aroused, Ed watched the rider from under the low brim of his hat. After a long stare up the street the man dismounted and slipped into the Broken Horn Saloon.

"Scared of the shadow he makes," Ed muttered. The Broken Horn Saloon was the rattiest dive in town, catering to customers who weren't wanted anyplace else. The situation called for a look over. Hitching his .44 Frontier Colt to the right position on his thigh, Ed wandered down to the saloon.

His alert ears caught the low warning voice inside as he neared the saloon's batwings. Owner Gus had let the rider know he was coming, Ed thought. It was too late to walk in casually and surprise the stranger. Not trying to hide his interest, Ed walked over and studied the lathered horse. It was a mean-eyed roan, unbranded.

When he started to turn back, the bulging saddlebags caught his eye. Hesitating, he walked closer, talking in a soothing tone. His voice and soft hand quieted the nervous animal. Flies buzzed around vicious spur gashes on the flank of the roan, and Ed

cursed softly. No wonder it was afraid. It had been hard used by a thoughtless rider.

The bulging saddlebags aroused his curiosity, but he didn't have the right to look into them. Besides, they would be watching him from the murky interior of the saloon. Ducking under the hitchrail, he strode through the batwings.

INSIDE, he paused, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light. Liquor, smoke and sweat smells hit his nose, all three flat in the dead air of the place. His florid face blank, Gus stared at him from behind the bar. The stranger stood at the bar, and Ed gave him a quick appraisal. A two-gun man, big but young, his face covered with sparse patches of soft blond whiskers. A shot of whisky in front of him, the stranger studied him covertly from half-closed, light blue eyes. Gus waddled up behind the bar.

"Morning, Sheriff," he said, his tone neutral. "Anything I can do for you?"

Ed shook his head no, and drew closer to the blond youth, who shifted restlessly. "New in town, aren't you?" he asked. The stranger ignored the question and Ed stepped still closer. "Is that your roan out at the rail?"

"You saw me ride in, you know it is." The stranger's lips were thinned flat and hostility glittered in the cold blue eyes. "You saying I thieved it?"

"No, I'm saying you abused it," Ed said softly. He clenched both fists hard, controlling his fast fury. But it gained on him, and he had to fight to keep from smashing a fist into the sneering mouth. The blond stranger laughed mirthlessly.

"It's my horse and there's no law to say how I'll use it. Find somebody else to work off your morning mad on, Sheriff." He chuckled. "I'm not in the mood for it."

Ed whirled, knowing he had to get out of there fast. If he stayed he'd do some fighting he wasn't paid to do. Still fuming, he studied the drooping roan, noticed again the way flies swarmed over the animal's bloody flanks.

"There must be some law to cover that," he muttered furiously. Moving with slow steps, he sidled up to the roan. Like he'd thought, the saddle was cinched tight. That on top of the rest decided him. Stripping the saddle, he threw it over the hitchrail. Let the smart-mouthed stranger carry it up to the livery where his horse would be. Again he noted the stuffed saddlebags, but he ignored them, untying the lines to lead the roan to the stable. Gus's hoarse cry warned him.

Crouching, Ed wheeled, clawing for the Colt at his side. The blond stranger's guns were both out and leveled at him. Dimly he was aware of their deafening crash, then a searing sledge hit his head and he went down.

Hot pain hammered through his head, and he squirmed in the dirt, trying to get his legs under him. Desperately he clawed for his gun, but it wasn't in his holster, and not in his hand. Then he heard hoofbeats getting dimmer down the road, and he knew the blond stranger was gone. He lay still a moment, eyes pressed shut against the blinding pain, while hot blood slipped down his face.

Finding the solid hitchrail with his hand, he pulled himself slowly to a sitting position. Then Gus was at his side, peering at his face, a half-filled whisky bottle in his hand.

"I didn't see what he was about till it was too late," he said, sounding scared. "I tried to yell at you, but it was too late."

"Yeah, I heard," Ed mumbled, exploring the raw welt on the side of his head. He took a long pull out of the bottle, grimacing at the taste of the harsh, raw rotgut. He stood up and the dizziness passed. "I'll be all right now, Gus. Obliged." Retrieving his Colt out of the dust where he'd dropped it, he staggered off to find Doc Bates.

"Wrap a patch around there pronto," he told the gray-haired medico. "I got some fast miles to travel."

"Be a lot better if you'd rest easy today," Bates said worriedly. "Might get a concussion. You get a wallop and bleed like that, there's bound to be some shock."

"Won't be half as shocked as one bucko'll

be as soon as I catch up with him," Ed said grimly, gritting his teeth at the raw pain in the wound. "I sure didn't have a chance to duck this one."

JAMMING his hat over the white bandage, he made a quick trip to his office to get his rifle. He opened the telegram he found on his desk, and whistled softly.

A bank had been held up in Whitewood, it said, and the robber was believed heading his way. After surrendering the money the bank clerk had been brutally pistol whipped, and was critically hurt. The robber had been recognized as Rex Barton, already a fugitive for robbing an express. In every detail, right down to the blond pup beard, the description tallied with the big stranger he had locked horns with less than an hour before. Extreme caution was urged in apprehending the robber.

"And he had the loot in those saddlebags," Ed muttered, cursing himself now for not overriding the law a little and taking a look in them. "I'll use caution all right. I'll wring his neck." Grabbing his Winchester, he found spare shells, and then hurried for his horse.

Starting at the hitchrail, he managed to single out the roan's hoofprints. But there was nothing unusual about the shod marks. Except for the direction the blond stranger had taken, there was no way of knowing where the desperado was heading. Then Ed got a hunch. He went back into the Broken Horn Saloon. Gus eyed him warily from behind the deserted bar.

"I guess I know already what you want, Ed," he said, with a spare smile. "Generally I don't let anything like that out. Hurts business. But I don't like the way that polecat threw down on you without giving you a chance. So I'll tell you anything I can, this time."

"You know what I want. Where's he headed?"

Gus looked uncomfortable. "You know the boys I get here wouldn't like it if they knew I helped you out. You got to promise you won't say anything about it. You know, a man's got to make a living."

"Nobody'll know but you and me. Where's he headed?"

"Didn't say, Ed, and that's a fact." Gus hesitated, wiping the bar with his towel. "But he did seem right interested in knowing the whereabouts of Hub Hendricks's layout."

Ed stiffened. "Anything else?"

"Well, just from the way he talked about it, he seemed to think he'd get help there. Course I don't really know that, but I told him where to find it."

"Thanks, Gus." Fear started eating at him, and Ed turned to go. "Nobody'll find out you said anything. Don't fret about that."

"Don't usually do it," Gus mumbled, as he went out the door. "But I don't like a man to go at another from the back." His tone got more venomous. "And I didn't like his sneering cusses about how bad my whisky was."

In spite of his worry, Ed grinned while he went for his horse. The remarks about the grade of whisky probably had more to do with Gus's cooperation than any outrage of the law. With the Winchester in the scabbard under his saddle, Ed rode out of town.

He lost the trail quickly in the welter of tracks on the main road. But that didn't matter. Having gotten word of Hub Hendricks's aid station for lawbreakers, the blond Barton would head for the desolate, rundown horse ranch. And dark-haired Pat Hendricks would be there, after her quarrel with him this morning.

HIS mount's gallop was smooth and strong under him, but the miles seemed to drag by. The dim trail led into rougher country. Then he spotted the horse ranch, squalid and ugly, huddled near the breaks of Wind River's wild canyons.

Keeping behind cover, Ed slipped in as near to the ranch as he dared ride. He tied his horse and slipped the Winchester out of its scabbard. With the rifle ready to fire at an instant's notice, he sneaked in closer, crouching behind the cover of scrub pine and fir.

There were no movements around the weatherbeaten cabin, but smoke drifted from the chimney, going straight up in the still noon air. Three horses stood hipshot, switching flies in the newly repaired corrals in back. Barton's roan wasn't there, and Ed studied them, wondering if the blond rider had decided not to come here after all. But now that he was here, he thought, it was sure worth a look over.

Stealthily he crept across the clearing in front of the cabin. A stovelid rattled inside, and then he was at the door. Unleathering his Colt, he leaned the rifle noiselessly against the cabin wall and then pushed boldly through the door, sixgun cocked and ready.

Instantly his eyes had taken in the scene, and he had it under control. Pat Hendricks stood at the black range, staring at him, her brown eyes flared wide in fear. In the corner bunk Barton lay sleeping, his two gunbelts hanging on a bedpost near his right hand. Pat's full red lips trembled.

"Ed . . . what're you doing here?"

"Don't wake him," Ed said, very low-toned, his eyes on the relaxed Barton. "If he goes for those guns I'll kill him."

Pat gasped and kept very quiet. While he tiptoed across the floor he could hear her tense, hurried breathing, the only sound in the deathly-silent cabin.

Although he moved without a sound, some animal sense seemed to warn Barton. He stiffened on the bed and his eyes blinked open. Two quick steps and Ed had the twin gunbelts. He swung them away from Barton's frantic grab, and let the blond man get a long look at the scaring end of his Frontier .44.

"Lay just as still as you know how, Barton," he said flatly. "You're under arrest."

Barton's milky blue eyes beaded like a cornered animal's, but he said nothing. His lips curled in a defiant sneer, but Ed wasn't fooled. The thinned lips were quivering with fear, and Barton swallowed hard. He was scared. Unmoved, Ed took a piece of old halter rope hanging from the cabin wall. "Roll over on your belly," he ordered.

"Go to hell, you—" Barton looked at his eyes then, and his voice choked off while he rolled over. Pinning him to the bed, Ed crossed his wrists behind him and tied them so that they would stay tied. Then he holstered his Colt and went back to confront Pat Hendricks.

The color was high in her cheeks. She went on working at the stove, refusing to face him. "As I remember, you made a promise this morning," he said quietly.

"I didn't break it."

"You said you wouldn't give a hand to any more lawbreakers."

"I haven't." Her voice was low, dejected.

A big black pan was sizzling toward the back of the stove. Ed flipped the lid off, sent it clattering to the floor. The pan was full of frying meat. "Did you plan to eat that all yourself?"

Her color deepened. "I didn't know he was wanted by the law." She faced him for the first time then. Her brown eyes were glistening with tears, and very miserable. "Gee, Ed, he's so young and—"

Smart Cowgal

By LIMERICK LUKE

A buckaroo seeking romance
Fell hard for a gal at a dance.
When he asked her to wed,
She bodaciously said:
"Why not? You might be my last chance!"

"We'd better see that he gets back to his mother, then, if he can't act like a man," Ed said bruskly. "Where's Hub?"

She hesitated. "He went into town for supplies."

"Funny, I didn't see him on the way out."

"He . . . he might have taken the short cut through the pass."

"I'll talk to him later. This time he's going to have to answer for what he's done."

Her eyes still wet with tears, Pat Hendricks followed him across the room. "Rex said he was framed for a crime he didn't commit, Ed. Just like Dad was. Honestly."

PAT'S soft brown eyes were on Rex Barton when she said it. Trussed on the bed, his thin lips drooping, the robber was a sorry sight. Most of them were, once they were caught, Ed thought. They could look as pathetic as a mammyless calf one minute, but give them the bulge for a second and they were all primed for the kill. But he could understand why Barton had aroused Pat's ready sympathy.

"Just to save your tears, this overgrown maverick shot me in the head this morning, when my back was turned. If you got any other doubts about how guilty he is, go take a look at his saddlebags."

Staring at him a moment, Pat wandered toward the door. She hesitated, as if knowing he was telling the truth but not wanting to believe it. Then she went on out.

Grabbing one of Barton's arms, Ed swung him to his feet. Barton's milky blue eyes darted around, searching for a way to escape. "My head aches powerful bad," Ed warned quietly. "I'd just about as soon shoot you as take you in. Remember that if you take a notion to run."

Barton cursed hoarsely, but he seemed to lose his ambition to try to escape. Her dark head lowered, Pat came back into the room. She didn't look up.

"Are . . . are you sure he didn't get all that money honestly, Ed? It seems like you could at least ask him."

She was only being stubborn now, and her lack of spirit showed it. Ed smiled grimly. "Of course he wouldn't think of lying to me about it, him being so young and innocent."

"I guess you're right, Ed," she admitted then. Suddenly she looked up, and her brown eyes flared with fear again. "I . . . I fibbed when I said Dad had gone to town. He went to hide Rex's horse." She turned to look fearfully at the door. "You better get out of here before he comes back."

"Too late for that, Patty," said a mocking voice from behind them. Chilling, Ed whirled, plunging his right hand downward toward his Colt. Then he saw it was too late.

Grinning, Hub Hendricks was looking through the open cabin window, and his pointed rifle rested on the sill. "I'm in too deep now to care, Sheriff," he added, his voice ominously blunt. "If you give me trouble I'll drop you. Patty, get a knife and cut the boy loose." She hesitated a long moment in the sudden stillness of the cabin.

"No," she said, moaning. "No, I won't do it."

"You'll do as I say," Hub snarled, "and get a move on about it."

But Pat Hendricks refused to move, her dark eyes very troubled. Cursing, Rex Barton brought his right foot up and kicked Ed's gun out of its holster. Another kick sent it flying far across the cabin. His wrists still bound tightly behind him, Barton went outside. Seeing no way out, Ed waited, and he heard their voices outside.

"Didn't think you'd ever get back, Hendricks," Barton mumbled. "Get your knife out and cut me loose. Then I'm going to make one damned sick lawdog in that cabin."

Ed chilled at the naked venom of his tone. Her soft features very earnest now, Pat Hendricks slipped over to his side. "Don't worry, Ed," she whispered. "Dad won't let him get rough."

"Hub won't have a say about it," Ed said urgently. One glance showed Hub's black eyes still watching him vigilantly, the rifle muzzle pointed squarely at his chest. "My rifle's leaning against the wall outside," Ed whispered. "Get it fast, and—"

REX BARTON burst through the front door of the cabin. Ed saw his own rifle in Barton's hand, and his last hope was gone. There was no hangdog look about the blond youth now. His light eyes glittered with triumph, and his thin lips curled in an ugly sneer.

"Come on in, Hendricks," he said to Hub at the window. "I've got him now." Quickly, Barton swung the twin gunbelts around his middle. Then, while Ed met his gaze squarely, Barton came up close, one sixgun upraised like a club.

"Shoe's on the other foot now," he snarled. "Let's see how you like it."

Thinking furiously, Ed remembered the telegram he had received. The helpless clerk had been critically hurt by Barton's pistol whipping. Better to go down fighting with a slug in him then to stand and let Barton cave his skull in. Step by step, Ed retreated from the upraised gun barrel, until his back pressed against a cabin wall.

"Now I've got you," Barton said, grinning with anticipation. Grinding his teeth, he lashed with the gun barrel.

Desperately, Ed ducked under and ripped his right fist savagely into Barton's exposed middle. The gun barrel rasped his neck. But Barton broke under his blow and staggered back, trying to line the gun. Lunging, Ed smashed him in the mouth with another hard right fist, and Barton whimpered with sudden fear. Quick steps sounded behind him, and Ed glimpsed Hub's rifle barrel coming down, a second before it rapped solidly against his head.

Pain exploded in front of his eyes and he went down, fighting furiously to shake the sickening dizziness in his head. Dimly he could see Rex Barton snarling like a mad animal, sixgun cocked, and Hub Hendricks backing him across the cabin.

"You done enough damage, you damned snotnose," Hub roared, his voice furious. "If you can't use any sense I'll have to knock some into you."

"You get tough with me and you won't get a dollar of the money," Barton said. But he backed down from the threat of Hub's rifle, and holstered his gun. "There's no need of our fighting, Hendricks," he said then. "All I want out of you is your end of the deal we made." His lips curled. "You talked to your gal yet about going with me?"

"Yeah, but she said nothing doing to you or your money. Can't figure that female out. She's got her head set on marrying that worthless lawdog there."

At those words, Ed's vision cleared fast. Despite his pounding, bleeding head, he felt slow joy seep through him. No matter how much Pat had fought with him, she wanted to marry him!

Somehow, knowing her feelings gave him new hope, fresh strength. If Pat Hendricks wanted him, there wasn't any combination of lawbreakers in the world who could stop them. Cursing, Rex Barton headed for the door.

"I'll pound some sense in her pretty head if you can't."

"You lay off her," Hub warned, a dark scowl on his face. "Crazy or not, she can do the way she likes."

But his voice was lost on Barton, who stomped through the door. In a few minutes he was back, pushing Pat Hendricks ahead of him, her arm twisted behind her back. Tears ran down her cheeks, and her face was twisted with pain. Growling, Hub started toward them.

"Don't go off half-cocked," Barton snarled, his sixgun out again. "You wait and hear what this back-stabbing female did. She hid all my money!"

"And you won't get a cent of it back till you let Ed loose," Pat blazed defiantly. "I don't care what you do to me, I won't tell you where I hid it till you turn him loose."

"We'll see about that." Lips curled, Barton twisted her slender arm higher up on her back, and Pat screamed.

CURSING, Hub Hendricks brought his rifle up. Watching him through narrowed eyes, Barton dropped hammer on his sixgun. The gun crashed hellishly loud in the closed cabin. Barton's slug hit the stock of Hub's rifle, twisting it viciously out of his grasp.

"That'll show you who's boss here," Barton snapped.

Unnoticed by all three of them, Ed crouched, fighting dizziness, getting his feet solidly under him. With a quick lunge he grabbed Barton's gun arm and twisted savagely.

Groaning, Barton let go of Pat's wrist. Ed was waiting for that. With another lunge, he bowled Barton to the floor. Pinning him, Ed pounded his blond head methodically on the cabin's plank floor until Barton went limp.

"Good work, Sheriff, but stay right there," Hub Hendricks said. He had retrieved his rifle, and his tone warned even more ominously than his words. "I don't aim to spend any more time in jail. You can have Barton, and good riddance, but I'm getting out of here. Patty, you go saddle my black and throw those saddlebags on."

"I'll get your horse, but that money doesn't belong to you," Pat Hendricks said dully, her slender shoulders slumped as she stared from the unconscious Barton to her father. "I'm keeping it hidden till you're gone."

Almost an hour of Hub's pleas, curses, arguments and threats didn't budge her an inch. Still sitting where he could watch Rex Barton, Ed grinned wryly. He almost felt sorry for old Hub. He'd argued with Pat Hendricks himself and knew how futile it could be.

Finally, surly and growling, Hub mounted and took off into the canyon wilds. It was best this way, Ed decided. Hub would know better than to come back, and there were plenty of lawbreakers for him to fight without chasing an embittered old man.

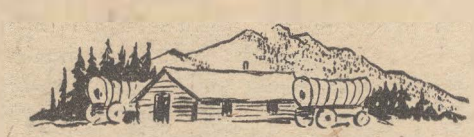
With old Hub gone the cabin was very silent again until Pat Hendricks came in, looking terribly weary and downhearted. But when Ed smiled at her, she brightened and hurried over to his side. Hesitating briefly, she knelt down close beside him.

"What'll we do now, Ed?"

Ed let out a great breath of relief. "First we'll lock this punk up and start the money back where it belongs." He grinned. "Then I'm going to put you in the strongest cell I've got."

"M-me?"

"Yeah, you," Ed said, reaching out to gather her into his arms. "It'll take me four-five hours to get a marrying man over from Twin Forks." He held her slender warmth close against his chest. "Till then, I'm going to make blamed sure you stay out of trouble."



Coming up in the next issue

WAR DRUMS AT SABER BUTTE

Benton's greed was turning the Indians hostile . . . but could Matt Farraday prove it in time to stop a bloody uprising?

A Magazine-Length Novel

By HANLON CARROLL

DOUBLE-CROSS WOMAN

Claire Marlin was the only girl Jim had ever loved . . . but from the moment he met her he knew she couldn't be trusted

An Exciting Novelette

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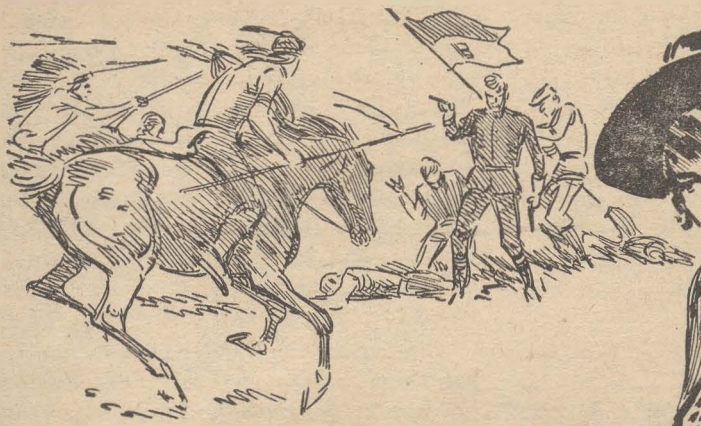


Orphan of Custer's Last Stand

IRRITABLY the rider pressed heels to the sides of the winded roan and forced it into the ice-clogged North Platte River. The horse whinnied faintly in protest and plunged into the freezing waters. It sucked in its breath as the drifting ice swirled around its belly. Then it dropped off the ledge and into the swift channel and both horse and rider were sucked into the frigid waters.

As the animal labored up the north bank a shiver racked the rider's slim body. The fierce north wind fingered through soggy clothing and soon the buckskin trousers, boots and mackinaw were a sheen of ice. The

a true story by

Ruel McDaniel

forming ice crackled as the rider moved hands or shoulders.

On into the gathering night the rider pushed—night without stars, night with a rising wind out of the regions of the Arctic. And on into the dismal morning without benefit of warming sun, the rider pressed; and until noon and beyond.

Then under a doeskin shirt caked with ice, fever enveloped the body of the rider.

At an overnight camp far in the western part of Dakota Territory, soldiers heaped brush and wood chunks upon their fires and gathered near to drive the cold from their bones. Far out from the circle of fires, a sentry yelled, "Halt! Who goes there?"

The rider mumbled, "Message for General Custer!" Then the slim form tumbled from the saddle.

The sentry summoned aid and two soldiers bore the unconscious form toward the circle of fire. The sentry double-timed to the headquarters of General Custer, bearing the message.

At the dispensary, the captain yanked the sombrero, the mackinaw and the boots from the rider's body. "Holy smoke!" he exclaimed. "A woman!"

An old sergeant strode to the cot where the form lay. He glanced at the blue-pink face. "It's Calamity Jane!"

Martha Jane Canary—known throughout the West as Calamity Jane, as a result of once having saved an Army captain from the "calamity" of death by scalping at the hands of the Sioux—had been given a dispatch from General Crook, in command of a combined drive in 1876 to try to put an end for all time to the warring Sioux of Dakota, Montana and Wyoming Territories.

It was an urgent message from General Cook to Brevet General George Custer, who already had stirred up some of the segments of the ever growing horde of Sioux warriors under the banner of Sitting Bull.

Calamity Jane had been scouting for both generals all winter, and she knew the nature of the campaign and the urgency of the dispatch.

THOUGH the bitterness of the cold had chilled her to the bone after swimming the North Platte, and though the chill turned to fever, she knew the importance of that message, and only one thing remained in her mind. She must get the message through at all costs. For the last several hours, she had ridden in a delirious stupor, but so intent was she to deliver the message that even delirium failed to halt her short of her goal.

The captain said she had pneumonia—both lungs were congested. She remained unconscious for days, and during her irrationalizing, she lived over again her scouting days. . . . She rode with Custer and Wild Bill Hickok and General Miles. She cried out to her mount for more speed. She tossed and fretted, in her delirious mind, still fighting the cold current of the Platte and the howling north wind.

It was the first time in her life that Calamity Jane had ever been sick. After hovering between life and death for days, she passed the crisis and the doctor said she would recover if there were no complications. She was moved back to the base hospital at Fort Lincoln.

She ranted under the yoke of discipline. She had been ordered by General Crook to remain with Custer as an advance scout in the great campaign that was slowly but inexorably shaping up to trap the Sioux and Sitting Bull. George Custer was a man of action, and she cursed her luck and the restraining hand of the medical men because she could not rejoin him before the final showdown.

But she mended slowly. It was weeks before she was able to be out of bed. Then additional dreary weeks dragged by before she was able to take the trail again.

In the meantime, the battle had been joined. Custer met Sitting Bull on the Little Big Horn River. The disaster went down in history as Custer's Last Stand. Not a man of the two hundred seventy-six with Custer's regiment escaped.

Calamity Jane would have made it two hundred seventy-six men and one woman, but for the only illness she had in her life.

"Want to take some fresh beans home?" Marcy asked

Go the LIMIT

By Jeanne Williams

MARCY'S MIND warned her not to marry a lazy man . . . but her heart knew better

MARCY ROGERS, in spite of a slim, soft-molded form and black-lashed eyes the color of October gentians, was known in Salt Springs as a business woman, clever at trading as any man. In the winter she sold eggs and chickens, and in the summer she kept the town supplied with fresh vegetables. She had about five hundred dollars in the bank and she never seemed to stop working.

If all she had for supper was a cup of coffee, she wouldn't go to bed till that cup was washed and dried and put up.

Crabby? Old-maidish? Maybe in most girls it would have been. But Marcy—shucks, she was sweet and pretty and ready to help anyone in trouble. When Mrs. Crawford broke her leg, Marcy took care of the four kids and did all the Crawfords' washing and mending and cooking.

Thing was, Marcy had reasons for thinking a person had to work like a buzz saw. Her father, Luke, had played the fiddle, but had done precious little else. Marcy's mother had died while Marcy was a baby. The girl just grew up getting sick to her

stomach at her father's shiftlessness. By the time she was thirteen she was the best cook and neatest housekeeper in Salt Springs. By the time she was fifteen, Luke yawned extra hard one afternoon and died of pure, sheer laziness.

Marcy lived alone in the rickety house. She worked harder than ever, and raised enough garden stuff to sell to the store downtown. She got prettier and more determined each time the sun rose, and what she was determined about was that a man who didn't work steady must be like her father, plain lazy and no-good, and that she would never, ever marry a shiftless man.

That was why, a few weeks after her eighteenth birthday, she was arguing so much with Whit Baird as they drove home from the big pie supper up the valley a ways.

"Why, you shouldn't have paid so much for my pie!" she scolded, sitting well over to her side of the buggy. "You—you wasted enough to pay back part of that loan you owe the bank!"

He grinned, but there was a warning gleam in his smoky eyes. "Shucks, Marcy, you think I'm going to let that Tace Medders eat with you as long as I've got a nickel in my pocket?"

"But—fifty dollars!" she wailed. "For a pie! Oh, Whit, aren't you ever going to stop being reckless?"

"Sure—when I die. Unless I turn banker like Tace. Would you like that, Marcy?"

DISGUSTED wonder was in his voice. He wouldn't even try to understand! Marcy clenched her hands. She was close, terribly close to loving Whit. But he was like one of those wild horses he raised and sold on his ranch up the valley—reckless and wild and doing what he wanted to, instead of what he ought to be doing to get ahead. She stared at him.

The moonlight left silver glints in the deep waves of his black hair, made the clean angles of his face stand out from the shadows. Being so close to him sent a kind of warm melting through her. But then, remembering her father, she hardened her heart.

Luke had probably been just this sort of handsome, free, impetuous young man, doing only what he took a notion to. Hadn't she put up with enough of that?

"No one expects you to be a banker, Whit." She kept her voice even with a struggle. "It's just that when a person owes money, it ought to be paid back before he bids so high on a pie box. With your precious Rajah up as security on your note, I'd think you'd pay that loan as fast as you could!"

"It's not due till the end of the month," Whit said with an irritating shrug.

So what she thought didn't matter! Marcy braced her toes against the floorboard to keep from stamping. They drove in silence to her place at the edge of town. Her garden stretched whitely in the moonlight, rows of beans and peas and tomatoes.

Whit turned to her with a let's-forget-and-make-up grin. "When you and me get married, honey, we ought to have plenty of vegetables to eat. I'm getting skinny living on beefsteak."

"*If* you and I get married," she said grimly, "you'll be helping weed the garden once in a while instead of being forever out chasing horses!"

Whit swung out of the buggy, came around and lifted her down. "I make my living out of horses—just like you do with your garden, just like Tace Medders does with his notes and loans and keeping books. What's wrong with that?"

His hands, warm and strong on her shoulders, threatened to dissolve her desperate convictions. Stiffly, she moved back, putting his arms away.

"Whit, can't you understand? Horses—you're crazy about them, it's not really a business, *work!* If you don't have to have money, you just loaf and hunt till the army post or someone orders another herd."

"Which they have," broke in Whit. "I've contracted to deliver a hundred horses to Fort Dowd by the first of the month. That'll pay off my note at the bank." He added harshly, "And any time

you think horse ranching is just playing, try staying on a bucking horse till your nose bleeds. Or try to walk down a wild horse, and catch him without killing him! Fun, my eye!"

"That's it! It's a fight—a contest! Exciting, always a big thrill!"

His mouth choked off the rest of her words in a long kiss. "Like you," he chuckled, when he finally let her go.

HE wouldn't listen, he wouldn't understand. Marcy denied the leaping race of her blood, spun away from him with a swish of her perfectly-ironed organdy skirts.

"If you're going to laugh at me, I'm going in! Goodnight!"

Whit took a stride that put him in front of her. "Now, Marcy, wait a minute!"

Chin high, she marched past him. "I," she said coldly, "have work to do tomorrow whether you do or not! It's a long way to your place. I'd advise you to start." Whit rocked back on his heels.

"Hmmm. Should I wring your neck or wait for you to get good sense? You talk like my old-maid aunt, Marcy—the one who's gone to church every Sunday for the past twenty years, but never with a man."

Marcy halted on the top step. "That's a lot better," she said with a toss of her head, "than standing at the altar with the wrong man! Goodnight, Whit."

She slipped inside and shut the door fast, holding her breath till she heard his footsteps going back to the street. She was sure she was right, but not sure enough to withstand Whit's arguments, arguments which had nothing at all to do with her brain and caution and security. As long as both of them felt the way they did, they could only make each other miserable.

Fighting back that moment of sweet melting in Whit's protective arms, Marcy undressed, hung her dress up with precise neatness, and blew out the lamp.

She'd promised Mr. Walters, the grocer, a big basket of green beans next day. To get them to his store by noon, she'd have to get up and start picking as soon as the dew was gone off the vines.

Very businesslike thoughts; but underneath was a guilty pleasure that Whit had wanted to eat with her enough to pay an outrageous sum for her pie.

In a broad-brimmed straw hat and old cotton dress, Marcy was bent over the bean patch next morning when she heard hoofbeats drum up and stop in front of her place.

Her heart jumped. She straightened, pushing back her damp-curling hair. Whit? Could he have ridden over from his ranch to talk about last night? Or just to talk, in that headlong, crazy way he had, till she wondered how she was ever going to keep from marrying him?

It was Tace, though, who came in from in front, his well-cut clothes scarcely rumpled from his ride. Black string tie meticulous, boots polished to ice-brightness, he looked like an ultra-successful gambler or an enterprising business man.

"Good morning, Tace," Marcy smiled, stifling her disappointment that he wasn't Whit. After all, didn't she want Whit to settle to his work insead of spending most of his energy courting her? "Want to take a kettle of fresh beans to your landlady? These are very nice!"

"Lord, no!" gasped Tace, with a laugh that showed either too little or too much self-confidence. "It's bad enough for you to work like that, without my making you pick more."

NOW Marcy was proud of her garden and she didn't like Tace's patronizing concern. Honest work was nothing to be ashamed of.

Deliberately, she bent over a vine and snapped off a crisp green pod. Tace had been furious last night when Whit had overbid him. Now, with malice, Marcy glanced up and said, "Nice pie supper last night. It rasied lots of money for the school district."

Tace flushed. "Yeah. Most of it came from that horse ranching friend of yours.

Wonder where he got that much cash? He hasn't paid up his note at my bank."

Marcey scolded Whit herself, but she wouldn't stand hearing him criticized behind his back. "He gave the auctioneer the money," she said sharply, "that's all that was anyone's business but his!"

"I reckon," Tace drawled, his white teeth edged in a smile, "that it makes a girl feel pretty good to have a man make a fool of himself over her in public."

Marcy slung down her basket so the bean pods jumped. "Whit's no more a fool than you are! You were up there bidding right with him!"

Tace smiled tightly, but his black eyes were watchful and calculating. "To a certain point, Marcy. To a point."

He said it like a carefully-thought-out mandate. Snared by curiosity, Marcy stared at him.

"What do you mean, Tace? To a certain point—?"

Gold-and-onyx cufflinks glittered as he stripped off the band of a cigar. "Mind?" he asked with a lifted black eyebrow. When she shook her head, he lit his smoke, ground out the match.

"I meant just that—to a point. Long ago, Marcy, I made a rule. A man like me wants a lot of things; he has to pay for them, one way or another—working, worrying, with money. Some things cost a hell of a lot. So my rule is: set a limit on what you'll give for what you want, and stop when you reach that limit." He stopped, drew on the cigar, and flicked off the ash with a fine, elegantly-manicured finger.

"I still don't see—" began Marcy.

He laughed sardonically. "Don't you? Well, my dear, last night, though I wasn't your escort, I wanted to share the meal with you. I decided that I'd give forty dollars for that pleasure, and not a dime more. As you'll remember, that was my last bid."

Of all the cold-blooded, scheming—! Marcy flushed, whirled, and sank down to pick beans again.

"I suppose," she flared, "that you have everything all figured out. What you'll give for a wife, even!"

"I do," he said cheerfully, "because, though you appeal to me immensely, Marcy, you're not the only desirable woman in the world." Marcy flung back her head.

"You—you conceited fool!"

Easily, with no sign of effort at all, he had hold of her wrists, drawing her to her feet. His eyes were full of a cold blaze and she was powerless to move.

"You shouldn't be angry," he said huskily. "I've set a very high limit for you!"

HIS kiss was cruel, expert. The compelling strength of his arms drew her tight, and it seemed incredible that this dark beginning should take place in the daylight, out in her garden. It frightened and outraged her that he should kiss her like that. She remembered Whit had taken a kiss, too, but his hadn't been somehow—shameful. She pushed away from Tace.

"You don't believe in asking me how I feel, do you?"

He took her hands and held them flat to his chest. The heavy pounding of his heart seemed to drum against her palms, spread its sound through her veins up to her whirling mind. It was like being hypnotized. She couldn't turn from his probing gaze, which held her mercilessly.

"All right, Marcy—how *do* you feel?"

Funny; mixed-up but I wish you weren't so—so. "Do you have to ask me as if you were considering an investment?" she snapped.

"But I am!" He laughed outright, but he released her hands. "So you aren't always a tough-minded little business woman, Marcy? You charm me more than ever." He straightened his hat, turning to go. "Well, then, think it over. And to me, marriage is a high price, darling. See you soon."

He was gone back around the house. Staring after his tall figure, Marcy whirled suddenly, knelt and started picking beans with a violence that tore off several stalks before she could force herself to control.

First Whit and then, this morning, Tace, had made her stop thinking about mar-

riage as a thought-out, planned bargain, something to work at. They had made her realize that whichever one she married, it would be a thing of living completely and closely with him, sharing thoughts and physical caresses.

Bending low, Marcy started to blush, and couldn't stop. Whit—oh, yes, she could imagine a life like that with him—laughter, warmth, his clean young love. But Tace—. She pressed her hands against her blazing cheeks.

Tace wasn't lazy or careless. He knew what he wanted and he knew what he would pay for it. Loss of one goal wouldn't disappoint him much—he'd just pick something else in its place. Hadn't he said he wanted a lot of things? Success, money, prestige. Marcy was just one of his wants.

Whit—. Marcy caught in her breath, surprised at the relief with which her mind went back to him. Her release dimmed, though, at the firm remindings of her brain.

Free and easy as the prairie wind, Whit lived in his sprawling house on the ranch at the end of the valley, catching and breaking wild horses, selling them to the army post, playing polo with the young officers sometimes in a yelling, furious, helter-skelter wildness. He loved that life, the life which Marcy feared because of its freedom, the leeway it gave a man to loaf, to be undisciplined and shiftless—like her father.

Tears stung at Marcy's eyes. She blinked hard, knowing with pain, but a sort of joy, too, that Whit loved her, that she wasn't another pleasant prize to him but the only thing he didn't have that he actually wanted.

Biting her lip, Marcy knew that she was awfully close to loving Whit. But if he wouldn't understand, what could she do? Be an old maid or marry Tace?

Her basket was full. Lifting it, Marcy set her chin and left the garden.

SHE was tying tomato vines to stick supports, two days later when Whit came. He was riding his black stallion, Rajah, and leading the bright palomino Marcy had ridden a few times. He hitched the horses in the street and came back to her.

"Ride out to my place and see the herd I have ready to take to the army," he called cheerily.

Marcy shook her head, denying the quick leap of her heart as he strode up and smiled down at her, his gray eyes dancing. "Can't," she said. "I've got to tie up these vines before the tomatoes spoil from lying on the ground."

"Huh!" Whit snorted. "For a girl who worries about my owing the bank, you're darned unimpressed by the chance to see that I'm able to pay it off! Just think, a hundred head of mane-floating, high-stepping horses! Come on, honey!"

He could almost talk her into his own horse-loving fever. That was the trouble. Marcy kept doggedly at her work. "I'm glad you've got the herd," she said, "but this garden is my living."

"Doesn't have to be," growled Whit. Then, with a sudden chuckle, he reached for the twine and set to work at a vine. "All right, Miss Stubborn, we'll fix your old tomatoes! Two can work twice as quick as one. And since I'm saving you a couple of hours, you can darned well spend the afternoon with me, understand?"

There was no resisting his laughing high spirits. They were through in an hour and a half. Marcy had some cold fried chicken and half an apple pie in the wellhouse, so they had a quick lunch. While Marcy changed into a fresh blouse and skirt Whit watered the horses and tightened the girths. It was only a little past noon when they rode out of town north towards Whit's.

Like a sort of holiday, it lightened Marcy's heart. It was fun to be out like this, feeling the wind toss her hair back, the sun clearly warm on her face. Whit caught her mood.

"Race you for a kiss," he challenged.

Marcy laughed in answer, leaned forward and let the palomino run. The mare was fast. For a few minutes they stayed ahead of Whit and the heavier, more powerful Rajah. Then the stallion got into

stride. Slowly but certainly, the black head and shoulders drew alongside; then in a whirl he was past, leading the race.

When they finally drew up, holding in the eager horses, Rajah was flecked with sweat and the mare was trembling. "I think they'd run on forever," Marcy cried, "right on to the end of the world!"

"Would you?" smiled Whit, getting off Rajah and coming over to her. "Just you and me and the horses—it ought to be fun!" He reached up and lifted her down, stopping her halfway from the ground with her mouth near his. "I won that race," he murmured, and kissed her.

The abandon of the wild run had gotten into Marcy. She forgot about sanity and hard work and everything but how wonderfully safe and loved and thrilling it was to be in Whit's arms. She put her hands back of his head and gave him back his kiss till both of them were shaken.

"Marcy—," he whispered when finally they drew apart, "You will marry me, won't you?"

THE words shocked her back to realization that there was more to loving and marriage than being kissed on the sunny prairie till your lungs felt like bursting at the joy of being young and alive. There was more to it than the hunger of the heart for someone to be utterly your own.

For marriage was a thing of years, and people grew older and had children who suffered for their parents' faults. "You know," went on Whit with teasing tenderness, "I think after I sell that herd and pay the bank, I'll still have enough for a wedding ring."

"And that's about all!" Marcy heard herself saying harshly, swiftly, before that foolish, unwise heart of hers could plunge her into going into Whit's arms and telling him, of course she'd marry him, of course she loved him, and to heck with the future.

Whit's breath came in a sharp gasping. His hands closed on her arms. "Marcy, you—you don't mean that. Money can't be that important to you."

So he thought she was mercenary—a gold-digger! Marcy wrenched back from him, though something inside her ached at the bitter hurt in his gray eyes.

"It's not the money, it's the—the ideal of being responsible, steady. It's the fact that a man oughtn't to spend his life chasing horses and doing exactly as he pleases!"

"Oh," scoffed Whit, "you mean I should get a job in a bank, or settle to grubbing in the ground like you do! I make a living, don't I?"

"Do you?" she scorned, hating herself, but too far gone now in destruction to stop. "I don't call it that, when you're in debt. I may 'grub' in the ground, but anyway I don't owe money!"

She flung around, blind angry. Whit caught her shoulder. "For heaven's sake, why pay a loan before it's due? Aw, Marcy—I'm not running down your gardening, honey, I just want you to stop being so hardheaded."

Marcy snatched up the mare's reins. "I heard you the first time, Whit Baird! You think my ideas are silly. Well—I think yours are wild and crazy!" She was in the saddle, ready to swing the palomino toward town, when Whit stepped over and checked the mare with his hand on the headstall.

"No matter what you think of my work," he said with quiet dignity, "you kissed me like you meant it. Marcy, a woman who's scared to marry the man she loves on account of money is—is like a butterfly that won't come out of its nice, safe cocoon. It'd rather be a worm than something free and lovely. I didn't know you were a coward, Marcy."

His voice was condemning and disappointed. Oh, what was the use of talking, they'd never agree! And she would never marry a man who though she was a coward. Marcy looped the mare around.

"Since I'm only a—a scared worm," she said in a shaking rush, "you needn't see me home. I'll leave your horse in town."

"But you haven't seen my herd," he appealed.

"After what's happened. I can't really think they're any concern of mine. Good-by, Whit."

He rode along behind her, anyway, all the way to her home, but neither of them said a word. When he helped her dismount, his hands tightened on her waist for a second. She thought he was going to say something, but she pushed at him and he set her down. Then he tipped his hat, and left, leading the palomino.

SHE watched him go and tried to tell herself that was the way it had to be, that since they couldn't do anything but fight it was better to break off now. But it hurt. It left her feeling empty and withered, like a shell. Or a cocoon?

Chokingly she laughed, but the thought hung on and tortured her. Sure, a butterfly lives only a few days, but those are bright, sunlit days with flowers and beauty. She shrugged.

She and Whit weren't butterflies, they were people, with duties and obligations. No amount of talking or loving could change that.

With a queer sense of loss, she remembered that she hadn't even wished Whit luck with his herd. And then, curling her lip at her weakness, she thought that he didn't, now, care whether she wished him well or not. He'd pretty well shown what he felt.

Her neat, clean house seemed a prison the next few weeks. She worked harder than ever, till at night she slept from sheer exhaustion. She heard nothing of Whit.

A few times she went for drives with Tace. He was charming and attentive, but didn't try to repeat that ruthless kiss he'd given her that day in the garden. Whit's bank loan fell due in a few days. Marcy wanted terribly to ask Tace if Whit had already made his drive to the army post and paid off the note, but Tace never mentioned Whit and she couldn't bring herself to do it. It was none of her business, she kept telling herself. Whit would go living the careless life he wanted to, and she'd have to get over him.

That was the direction of her thoughts the night that Tace drove up in front of her home. They had been to a dance and it was late. A heavy orange moon was just rising wearily over the eastern edge of the prairie.

Without hate he turned and took her hands. "Well, Marcy? You've had plenty of time to think. Would I make a passable husband?"

She looked at him, seeing his dark good looks, the assured set of his shoulders. He was attractive, he was a thorough businessman, and he was just about everything logic and reason could desire in a husband.

Life with him wouldn't be a tumultous race to the end of some impossible rainbow, but it would be respectable and safe. The warmth of his hands seemed to be drawing the will out of her.

"I—I—. Yes. Yes, I will!"

She flung the words out and leaned forward to Tace's kiss, trying desperately, frantically to shove back forever the memory of Whit—Whit as wild and careless as his own black Rajah.

"I guess I should maybe congratulate you two," came Whit's tightly-controlled voice, "only if Tace can get his mind back to business a minute, I've got a favor to ask."

Tace let Marcy go. She stared past him at Whit, sitting on Rajah, the reins taut in his hands. Oh, this really did it—Whit would despise her forever. Then, reminding herself that she was marrying Tace, that Whit must mean nothing to her now, she smoothed her hair and lifted her chin defiantly. Whit had called her a coward. Now that she'd proved it, maybe he'd be real proud!

WHAT do you want, Baird?" Tace demanded. He added with a sneer, "Is it a hobby of yours to sneak up on people?"

"No sneaking to it," Whit grated. "You weren't at your house. I naturally figured this was the next best place to look. I'm not spying on you, I have to talk business."

Tace straightened his starched cuffs.

Foolishly, Marcy noticed that he wasn't wearing his favorite onyx-and-gold links, but a plain silver pair. "Start talking, then," he snapped.

Whit's gaze caught Marcy's. She saw him take a deep breath. "I want you to extend the time on my loan."

"Oh?" Tace's eyebrow quirked. "Thought you were making a big sale to the army post."

"I was. But the herd got stampeded night before last, and me and the boys only rounded up a dozen or so. I ought to have another bunch gathered in a month. Give me till then."

Leaning back, Tace clasped his hands around one knee. "Sorry, Baird. Can't run the bank like that. Guess I'd better start looking for a buyer for that black stallion of yours."

Whit and Rajah could have made a statue, poised there so still with the yellow moon behind them. Marcy caught in her breath. It—why, it'd be a crime to separate Whit and the horse he loved!

"Tace, you can give him a month! He'll pay you!"

"You bet he will," drawled Tace, "with that black horse. I'm not chancing his fooling around and losing another herd."

Marcy jerked back from Tace. "Don't you talk that way about Whit!" she flashed. "Don't you dare! How much money have I got in your old bank?" Tace spun around and stared at her.

"Why, about five hundred dollars. But—!"

"Then take it!" Marcy blazed. "That covers Whit's note! And—and I won't marry you, either, not ever!"

She caught up her skirts and jumped down from the buggy, whirling toward the house.

But Whit caught her before she got to her door, caught her wrist and pulled her back with him to Tace.

"That was my limit!" Tace ground out, picking up his whip. "All right, Marcy, pay your lover's bad debt! Be a fool!"

"Hold on," ordered Whit, releasing Marcy. He drew a wad of bills out of his pocket. "One little thing I forgot to tell you. Troopers from the army post rounded up most of the horses I couldn't catch. Here's your money, and I'll be at the bank with it first thing in the morning, so you be there! Now crawl down from there—I've got something for you!"

DAZEDLY, Tace got out. He couldn't seem to believe what was happening. "What—?"

Black and gold flashed as Whit tossed two glittering things toward Tace; they fell in the street. Tace's elegant cufflinks.

"These," said Whit, "were found close to where the stampede took place. Guess you rolled up your sleeves, didn't you, to set off the stampede?"

Tace stood as if frozen, then his hand snaked toward his coat. But Whit had already sprung forward. His doubled fist lifted and toppled the banker. Tace fell in a crumpled heap.

"If he wants to finish this argument," said Whit, "he can do it tomorrow—in jail. Now I want to talk to you, young lady!"

"I—," gulped Marcy, backing up. Whit caught her shoulders.

"Listen, you know why I borrowed that darn money in the first place? To fix up the ranch house for you—pump in the kitchen, pretty linoleum, all that stuff. Even got a garden out in back! I'll have things nice for my wife if it takes every horse in the brush."

Marcy's head was whirling. "Well, why didn't you tell me so? You—were you just acting lazy on purpose?"

"No." Whit sobered and tilted her face back. "Honey, I didn't want you to marry me because I was a good risk. I wanted you to do it because you loved me. That's why I put on the act tonight. If you were as darn bent on security as you act, you'd have let Tace have Rajah."

"But—," protested Marcy.

"I'm tired of talking," Whit laughed, and his kiss sent all thoughts away.

a fact story by

Robert Stephens

Pothook Potentate

In the Old West, the Cook Was King

THE cowhand of the Western range took pride in his reputation as the most independent critter that ever walked the earth, but three times a day he found himself walking softly, hat in hand, in the presence of the true king of the range.

The important personage was the chuck-wagon cook, a leathery, ornery specimen whose word was law at roundup or on the trail. The cook was the most important man in any outfit, and nobody was allowed to forget it.

The shrewd rancher knew that the efficiency and even the loyalty of his men depended on plenty of good food. An

investment in a first rate cook paid for itself in many ways. Well-fed men work better and can be depended on in a crisis. Equally important, an outfit known for the quality of its food could attract and keep the top hands.

The difficult art of cooking under trail conditions was not easily mastered, and the demand for cooks always exceeded the supply. As a result, the cook rapidly acquired the high and mighty ways of a Roman emperor.

IRRITATING as such behavior might be to the hardworking puncher, all hands had to put up with the "coosie" or be invited by the boss to seek work elsewhere. Good hands were a dime a dozen; good cooks were like precious jewels. The average cook knew his value, and drank deep of the heady wine of power. He laid down his own laws for chuckwagon behavior, and they were observed by everybody from the boss on down.

Rules varied with the whim of each cook, but in general they were the same. No man could start eating before the cook announced the meal with the traditional "Come and get it or I'll spit in the skillet." No man could disturb the contents of the sacred wagon, nor even think of such a thing as tying his horse to a wheel. Each man must put his own dishes in the "wreck pan." A rider must approach the wagon from the downwind side while food was being prepared.

A hand who violated these rules once might get a verbal hiding from the cook, who was always the most accomplished cusser in the outfit. The second offense would drive the cook to more drastic measures, such as a "chapping." The offender would be placed over a barrel and whacked vigorously with leather chaps wielded by his fellow cowhands.

All hands participated in the chapping. Each man knew the offender had to be punished to the cook's satisfaction, or that grease-spattered tyrant would apply his most dreaded tactics. He might leave gravel in the beans, undercook the biscuits, and otherwise spoil the food, till life wasn't worth living for the tired, hungry crew.

Good-natured joshing of the cook was permitted, but it was perilous to risk having an unhappy man preparing the food. In return for having his own way the cook would do his best for the boys.

His sourdough biscuits would come light and brown from the Dutch ovens, and he might even make a steamed fruit pudding or, best of all, "bear sign"—range slang for doughnuts.

Most hands admitted that a good cook was entitled to his cantankerous ways.

Cooking for twenty to thirty men was a man's job under the best of conditions, and the chuckwagon cook's job was complicated by dust storms, driving rains, scarcity of fuel and limited provisions. He knew that the morale and health of the outfit depended on his skill. He had to be a teamster, and was often called upon to act as a doctor.

Rank has its privileges, and the cook made the most of it. He developed into the most stubborn and independent human under the sun.

His ways were immortalized in the range proverb: "Never argue with a skunk, a mule, or a cook."

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 89)

1. New Mexico.

2. Texan, pronounced Tay-HAH-no, sometimes corrupted to "Tehanner" by some oldtimers.

3. Because it travels sidewise in a looping or winding motion.

4. To the left.

5. The Winchester .30-30 carbine.

6. Pretty soon or after a while.

7. Future Farmers of America.

8. Sierra, Nevada.

9. Canned corn, tomatoes, peaches and milk. Cowboys often bought canned sardines in town, but chuckwagons rarely if ever stocked them.

10. Yosemite Falls in California.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

ONCE you choose rodeo as a career you can count on the fact that some time or other you're going to get hurt—just as surely as a fisherman will someday get wet, or a fireman will someday get burned.

But what no one can predict is how an injury will affect an individual. One man may get a simple fracture and never rodeo successfully again; another may crack his skull, break his neck, dislocate his shoulder, smash his arm, bust his hip, and so on down to his smallest toe, and bounce right back up to the top of the point score standings again.

Sometimes a top-hand will be eager enough to get back into the rodeo ring after an injury, and then find he's lost his knack. Something like that happened to Barney Willis, except that we *have* heard of him again. Five years ago Barney was burning up the circuit. He was runner-up for the IRA All-Around Championship in 1948; he won the bull-dogging that year too. You were always seeing his name among the big money winners. Then toward the end of the '49 season Barney broke his leg. He did some competing afterward, but the peak of his rodeo career was past.

Barney was smart enough to know it. He'd been a rancher before, and he went right back to it.

He's the kind of guy who is missed around the rodeo circuit. He's a shy but friendly fellow, and a terrific story teller, especially when the joke is on himself. It was practically impossible to find out anything about him because he never took a question seriously.

You might ask him, for instance, how he got started in rodeo.

"Well," he'd say, "I just kept donating my entry fees at one show after another. I'd been in thirty or forty of 'em before I ever found out you could get some money back."

Or you might ask him why he ended up in second place in that All-Star Cowboy race, when he'd been in first place most of the season.

Barney would groan. "There was a disaster!"

"What was it?"

"Gene Rambo!"

He always made fun of his misfortunes. If you asked him about injuries—and he'd had a few, including a horn through the calf of his leg—he'd shrug and point out that none of his accidents had turned out to be fatal.

There was one that might easily have been, and this was one of Barney's most hilarious stories. He was 'dogging a bull, and as he leaped from the saddle and grabbed the critter's horns, his left foot got caught in the stirrup. The bull and the horse went charging down the arena with Barney swinging between them, strung up like a hammock in a tornado.

"I wondered," he said, "what would happen if they took off in opposite directions. How far do you suppose I'd stretch?"

He couldn't extricate his foot, and he couldn't let go of the horns or he'd have been dragged along, upside down, with his head plowing a furrow in the dirt. He was, of course, rescued by the pick-up man before his elasticity was tested and just before his head hit the dirt.

For all his kidding, Barney is a serious student of bulldogging, though he doesn't compete in it much now. He pointed out the difference in style of a couple of the best

bulldoggers of his day, Homer Pettigrew and Dave Campbell.

"Homer dives at his animal, but Dave scoops. I always used the dive, because that way there's more force behind your hands when you grab the horns. You have your horse running alongside, and then he cuts away a little, so you have a longer leap.

"In the scoop system, you're as close as possible when you reach for the horns, but you twist as you grab, and some people think that gets the steer down faster."

Barney's best time was four seconds flat at Ogden, Utah, but he's prouder of the time he downed a beast in 4.2 at Pocatello, because the stock was much tougher. He doesn't believe in speed records.

"Time alone is meaningless," he says, "because too much depends on the animal. You show me a fellow dogging a steer in under four seconds and I'll show you a real nice tame old steer."

Like all cowboys, Barney gives full credit to his horse. His favorite was named Bugs, a horse of many adventures, the most remarkable of which happened outside the rodeo arena.

One time Barney was driving to the Tucson rodeo and Bugs was installed in a trailer behind—or so Barney thought.

As he streamed along at about 70, another car came along and the driver hollered that the trailer door was open. Barney slowed down very gently to avoid throwing Bugs out.

But after he'd stopped and gone back to lock up the trailer gate, he discovered the horse was gone.

He retraced his route for thirty miles. without finding a trace of Bugs.

"Finally," says Barney, "I stopped and told the nearest sheriff what had happened, though naturally I never expected to see Bugs again—not alive anyway."

On he went to the Tucson show and competed (not very successfully without Bugs). Four days later, while heading back home over the same route, he stopped in to see the sheriff—and there was Bugs, happily munching oats in a nearby barn.

"He was scratched up some, but nothing serious. And I never found out where I'd lost him. Bugs just turned up at the sheriff's office, as if he knew that was the sensible place to wait for me. Now that was a real smart horse."

Barney's other adventure with Bugs was not so strange, but much funnier. It started off grimly, though, when Barney, returning from collecting some prize money at the Caldwell, Ida., show, discovered that Bugs had been stolen.

This time he went straight to the nearest lawman. He turned over his papers so that the police could advertise for the horse and identify it if they found it.

And sure enough, they did find it. A youngster a few miles out of town went up to a rancher and asked if he could stable his horse there for the night. The rancher got suspicious, called the cops, and soon afterward Barney and Bugs were both heading for home, which was then in White Salmon, Wash. Barney was in a hurry because he wanted to enter the local rodeo the next day.

In his rush, Barney had forgotten to pick up his papers, and he soon found that the whole countryside was alerted that a horse had been stolen.

Before he reached home he had been flagged down by a total of three sheriffs and two traffic cops, and in each case he was asked to show his ownership papers. It took fast and eloquent talking to persuade each of them that he did not belong in the local pokey.

The drive, with its interruptions, lasted all night, and when Barney and Bugs finally reached White Salmon, neither one of them was in any condition to win any rodeo purses.

Life is a lot calmer for Barney these days, but he still can make it sound like fun. He gets enough rodeoing right around home, and he enjoys not having to take so many chances.

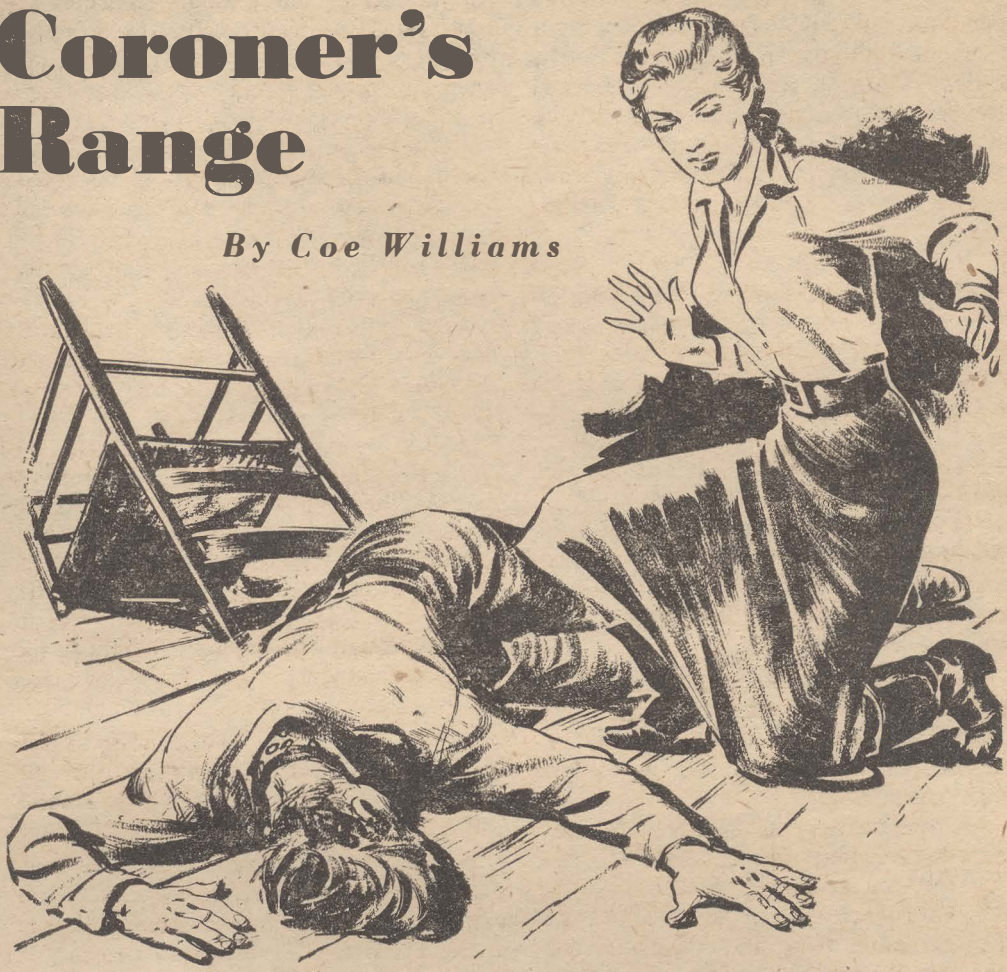
"I figure," he says, "that the bulls were right all along. Every one I ever tangled with tried to persuade me to retire from rodeo."

Adios,

THE EDITORS.

Coroner's Range

By Coe Williams



Pity rushed through Ellen as she looked down at him

THE STORY SO FAR: Small rancher MORGAN LETHAM hunts for his best friend, WHIT KERSHNER, who has not returned from a peace mission to sheepman WARD GRAFTON. With him is STEVE McKENNA, big rancher who had instigated the peace move. When Kershner is found murdered, Letham airs his suspicions against Grafton, and is baited into a public fight with Grafton in which Letham is beaten. The fight is stopped by ELLEN McCLOUD, who says she has taken over Grafton's ranch. ANN KERSHNER, Whit's daughter, tries to persuade Letham to sell out and go away with her, but he refuses to let Whit's death go unpunished. Later, Letham is grabbed by one of Grafton's men, NEWT REARDON, who holds him while Grafton beats him up, and GIL LARKIN, Grafton's gunman, stands by.

PART TWO

HE CAME awake in cloudy yellow lamplight, with many faces hanging in space above him. He tried to hit them but he couldn't get his arms up. A liquid heat was in his throat, and he swallowed, choking.

A voice said, "Not so fast, Charley, or he'll heave."

He tasted whisky again, feeling the slow burn of it through his throat and into his stomach. His vision was starting to clear but still he had trouble with those

faces above him. Charley Lake's he could recognize, but not the others. He wondered where the rest of Charley was, for he couldn't see the man's body. It seemed funny to look at the face of an old friend, suspended in space with nothing visible below it. He giggled.

"Plumb out of his head," some man said.

The face of Charley Lake came closer, saying, "What happened, Morg?"

Morgan Letham blinked owlishly at the man. "H'lo, Charley."

"Listen to me, Morg. Can you hear me?"

"Sure. Fine. Jus' fine."

"You've been in another fight," Charley said. "In case you don't know it, you've had the living hell beat out of you."

"I know it. Damn right I know it. My head hurts like sin, Charley."

"Another drink would help that."

"No," muttered Letham, and shook his head. "Not any, Charley."

His voice was slow and thick, and he was having trouble with his lips. His mouth was a loose, numb area that refused to give the right shape to his words.

"How'd I get here?"

"We heard a ruckus outside, and found you out cold in the alley. Who gave you this working over, Morg?"

He made no attempt to answer that. He gazed around him, a little stupidly. His head was a great roaring hurt, tormenting him without mercy. But the faces around him had bodies now, became friends and old neighbors crouching around where he lay on the saloon floor. Cass Carroll and McDonogh . . . Ben Wiggam, Abel Case, Cap Earnshaw, Steve McKenna and his crew of Rocking Chair hands. Sheriff Rybolt was watching from one side, his gaze one of pleased malice as he met Letham's eyes.

LETHAM tried to find a grin for his battered lips. "Doesn't seem to make you feel very bad, Clyde, seeing the beating I was just handed."

Rybolt stiffened, the thrust of his voice a flat, impassive sound. "I'll be honest with you, Letham. You roweled me pretty rough today, and without reason. It makes no never mind to me how often or how bad you get beat up. You seem to have an appetite for brawling, and what you got you probably asked for."

He pushed a man aside, moving closer. He held his head high, his shoulders rigidly back, a look of rankled outrage coming into his eyes. He knew all the gestures and posturing of a lawman whose entire being was grooved to the duties of his office, and now he wore them openly, for all eyes to see.

"What I told you was my own personal opinion, Letham," he said flatly. "But I happen to wear the badge of the law in this town, and I'm fed up with your prowling around and pawing up the dust. What Grafton handed you this afternoon was one thing. You had it coming, and you got it. But this brawl tonight is too much for me to stomach. I'll stand for no more of your bulling around in Longbow. You walk easy from now on, or I'll put you in a place that will keep you cool. You hear me?"

"Plain enough, Sheriff." Letham got his hands under him, pushed up steadily from the floor. He slowly straightened. It was not easy to stand. He reached behind him and gripped the high mahogany bar for support.

Gazing sardonically at the lawman, he spoke thickly. "That was your talk to me, Sheriff. But what about the other side of this working over I was just handed?"

"I'm a fair man," said Rybolt in his solid, full-toned way. "There's nothing one-sided about Longbow law. You name the other fellow and I'll read the same sermon to him."

Letham smiled meagerly. "Ward Grafton was one of them."

Silence abruptly clamped down on the room. Rybolt's eyes rounded. "*One* of them?" he echoed.

Letham said bleakly, "That hungry one, Gil Larkin, was on hand with that fancy gun of his to help keep me in line."

No man spoke.

Letham's tone turned to thin brass. "And it was Newt Reardon who held me while Grafton worked me over. So you've

got three to read your little sermon to, Rybolt."

The silence of the room no longer held any friendliness. It had suddenly turned sour.

CAP EARNSHAW made no attempt at all to conceal his skepticism. "That's laying it on pretty thick, Morg," he grunted.

Letham stared from man to man, and deep in him stirred a slow blaze of anger. They didn't believe him. Not one of those men, friend or neighbor, placed any credence in what he had told them, and to him this was the greatest shame of all. He heard Clyde Rybolt's rankled snort of derision.

"You just won't lay off Ward Grafton, will you?"

Letham did not even look at the man. There was no longer any will in him to fight back. He had taken two beatings in one short day, and this was the final blow There was a limit to how much any man could stand, and he had at last reached his.

He heard Ben Wiggam's weary grumble, "We were your friends, Morg. I don't know why you had to lie to us. Grafton whipped you fair and square this afternoon, and all of us saw how easy he did it. If he did it once he could do it again. So why did you have to try to smear him by saying he had two men along to hold you while he worked you over out there in the alley? That's just too much for us to swallow. Morg."

Letham stood alone at the saloon's bar, feeling the sting of the eyes of those men A moment ago he had been among friends, but now he was not. He felt the silent scorn that was in their stares, and the thinning contempt. This was a thing he could not stand. and he turned abruptly away.

It was not easy for him to walk, or even stay on his feet. There was a great pulsating roaring in his head, and the brutality of Grafton's blows had left his balance unsteady and his vision distorted.

He missed the door entirely in his slack-kneed, off-keel walking. He had to stop and orient himself again. Finally he located the door, but did not push through it. The resenting spite of a prideful man reared up inside him. He turned on legs that threatened to buckle under him, and found that crowd of men again with his eyes.

That moment he hated them all more than he had ever before hated a man. But beyond that hate he pitied them.

He used his voice on them with scornful malice, wanting to strike back and hurt them as they had hurt him.

"The day will soon come when you'll believe what I told you tonight. When that day comes you're going to learn how to cry, because you are going to be hurt by Ward Grafton worse than he ever hurt me, and it will be your women and kids who will go down with you."

His sardonic smile at them was a gargoyle grimace, as he bent his head in mocking salute.

"Gentlemen, how," he said, and turned and went out of the saloon.

HIS strength lasted only as long as his bitter pride and angry defiance. Outside the saloon the flame burned out of him and left him empty. He took a step away from the batwing doors and all but fell.

He pushed himself erect again, leaning his long frame against the saloon's wall for support. It was the throbbing, roaring agony between his temples that distorted his vision and kept the street rocking under him at sickening angles.

He took another stride and the plank walk lurched out from under him, dropping him to hands and knees. He found it easier in this position to hold the earth steady under him. He started crawling. Then a sudden irrational anger burst through him, and he shoved up once more to his feet. muttering thickly under his breath.

"Anybody yanks the street out from under me again gets punched," he grunted harshly, and glared savagely around him. But there was no other man on the street.

He was aware of himself as he was, and alarm dug into him. He had taken too

many of Grafton's blows on his temples and under his ears, and it took an effort of will to hang onto his reasoning.

It occurred to him that he ought to have Doc Jessup look him over, but his pride was too unbending for that, remembering that the Doc had been one of the first to defend Ward Grafton's right to the sheep graze on Mogul plateau.

"Hell with the Doc," he muttered, and that thorny anger helped steady his thinking.

He raised his eyes, looking across the street toward the Empire Hotel where Ann Kershner always stayed when she was in town.

I'm hurt, Ann. You've got to help me. The thought was a deep, aching voice crying out in him, as he stood alone in the darkness of the street. A man always needed a woman when he was hurt and beaten, and now he needed Ann more than he had ever needed anyone.

She was like a flame standing in the deepening darkness of his mind, and he wanted to go to her and tell her that he was hurt. Ann would know what to do. She was a range girl, with all the knowledge and skill her life had given her. Her hands would be soft and tender on the bruises that tormented him.

Listen to me, Ann. Newt Reardon held me while Grafton gave me another beating.

But his friends and neighbors had not believed him, and he knew Ann would not either.

You love me, Ann, and I love you. I'm badly hurt. There's something wrong in my head, Ann, and I need you. If you don't help me, no one will.

But in a bleak and bitter corner of his mind he knew Ann no longer loved him. Nor would she help him if he went to her. She was no longer the same girl he had known and loved—hate had changed her. She was steel now, cold and tempered. Ann would not help him.

SLACK-KNEED, he made his way along the plank walk, and when he reached the mouth of Murphy's Alley he palmed his gun. But the alley was empty, as he had known it would be.

Ward Grafton was no fool. In laying for Letham and giving him a second beating he had proved that, for in this one ruthless act he had made a liar out of Morg Letham and cleared himself of suspicion in Whit Kershner's murder.

He paused on the gallery of the Traveler's House, drawing strength into him to carry him the rest of the way to his room. He could see the lighted windows of the Bella Union and all those other saloons flanking the street, but he had never seen the town so strangely dark.

He turned and went into the hotel's lobby, wondering at the dimness of the big room. The bracket lamps, he saw, were still burning, but to his distorted vision they were like small candles glowing in a deeping darkness.

The walls seemed to be fading away from him, and over the stairway he could barely see the mounted head of the Texas steer with its massive sweep of curved horns. A great weakness was growing in him, and he was suddenly afraid of it. Got to get to my room before I pass out, he thought.

He fell as he went up the stairs. He got back to his feet, grunting a soft protest at the pain raging in his head. As he groped along the hallway a door opened abruptly in front of him. Unable to check himself, he banged into it. He heard a girl's quick startled cry.

She was standing in the light that streamed through the open door, a vision of unbelievable beauty. Letham raised his head to look at her more closely.

"Why, ma'am," he murmured. "I sure am sorry . . ."

Such beauty as hers seldom came to a lonely man, and when it did he found it hard to believe. Without thinking, he reached out his hand to touch her, to prove to himself that she was real.

It was at that moment that all resistance buckled and went out of him, and he fell.

At first Ellen McCloud thought the man was drunk, and in her mind as he reached out for her rushed a swift, chilling panic.

His reaching hand touched her shoulder and then, as though all strength had suddenly drained out of him, he pitched forward against her and fell.

The weight of his body carried her down to the floor with him, and even then her emotion was more of outraged fury than of fear. He was not the first drunken cowhand she had had to deal with.

She twisted out from under him and struck him angrily with her open hand. She thrust him away from her, and struck him furiously again. She rolled away from him and got swiftly to her feet, her face white with anger.

"A drunken fool like you . . ."

THE flame of anger suddenly died in her as she stared down at him. This man was not drunk. She stared at the battered wreckage of his face, and knew then that he had intended no offense in reaching out to her. He had not known what he was doing, for she realized that even then all consciousness had been rushing out of him.

Recognition came swiftly to her; the man was that Squaw Creek rancher, Morgan Letham. And all at once she understood the reason for the smashed and battered ruins of his face, for from the window of her room overlooking the alley she had witness that brief but brutal attack.

The night's darkness had hidden the identity of those men from her, and she had seen only the cruel fury of the onslaught. Now she realized that Morgan Letham had been the victim. Seeing the wreckage of his face, there could be no other answer. He had been the one dragged into the alley below her window and held powerless while some other man slugged him mercilessly, doing this brutal damage.

A feeling of melting pity rushed through Ellen McCloud as she looked down at him. She had no reason to like this Morgan Letham, but she had witnessed his fight with Ward Grafton and remembered his unyielding courage.

He had been beaten, but he had not been defeated. This was a quality she had to admire, whether she liked him or not. An indomitable man, this Morgan Letham—proud, defiant, rash in his temper, but a man who would never admit defeat.

She could not leave him lying there on the floor unconscious. How badly he had been hurt she had no idea. But the way he had reeled unsteadily before her, a dull glaze of agony in his eyes, indicated the vertigo of concussion, and the fear of this brought quick decision into Ellen McCloud's mind. Whoever he was, whatever breed of man he was, she knew she had to do what she could to help him.

She was trying to lift his dead weight up from the floor when Hamp Clelling, who was her ranch foreman, came tramping up the stairs and along the hallway. He drew to an abrupt halt, staring down at the unconscious man with a stolid lack of pity.

"So this is where that fellow came," he remarked in a dour, uncaring way.

Ellen raised her eyes to him. "He's been badly beaten, Hamp."

"He sure as sin has, and I've never seen a neater job of work. Or one that was more overdue, I reckon. I was in the Special when this bucko tried to tack the blame on Ward Grafton and a pair of his men."

Ellen had nothing to say to this. Here was a man seriously hurt, and for the moment that was all that mattered.

"He must have been trying to get to his room, Hamp. He got this far, then collapsed. We've got to help him."

HAMP CLELLING was a gaunt, graying man who had had more than his share of grief from cattlemen, and the tone of his voice was one of completely rankled disregard.

"Don't rightly see how this cow lover is any worry of ours."

"But he's badly hurt, Hamp!"

"What he got he asked for," Clelling answered implacably. Then he saw the sharp rise of stubbornness in Ellen's eyes, and wagged his head wearily. He had learned a few things in the more than twenty years he had worked for the McClouds. Like father, like daughter, he thought sourly. Let this girl get her mind set, and

she could be as bullheaded as old Dave had been. It was easier to untangle a sheep-smother than to change a McCloud's mind.

"All right," he grunted. "I'll pack him to his own room and leave him for one of his own kind to look after."

"I'll go get Doctor Jessup."

Clelling shook his head. "Doc's out of town. Saw him leave a couple hours ago."

He saw worry rise up in the girl's eyes, and lifted his calloused hands in a gesture of frazzled patience. "What bother is he of ours?" he demanded. "There's nothing wrong with this hot-head that a little rest won't cure."

"He needs someone to look after him, Hamp."

"You're always fretting about some stray," said Clelling irritably. "You do this one a favor, and when he's healed up he'll come howling for your scalp. You mind what I'm telling you. I know a few things about cowmen."

"At least you can get some of his friends to take care of him," the girl insisted.

Hamp Clelling shook his head at this, giving her his flinty smile. "Letham tried to saddle Grafton and a couple of others with this beating he got, but his lie was too big for even his own kind to swallow. Right now this bucko is fresh out of friends."

"Then we'll take him out to his own place," said the girl definitely. "We can't leave him here alone."

"Now you look here, Ellen . . ."

"You carry him down, Hamp. I'll get the buckboard."

THEY traveled steadily through the night, following a road that curved along Squaw Creek's bending channel. At Ute Rock it veered westerly toward the foot of Mogul Plateau's massive wedge, making a wide swing across Steve McKenna's vast Rocking Chair range.

This was Ellen McCloud's contact with the valley itself, and she viewed it with a range girl's keen appreciation for good graze and dependable water. Under the moon's pale light the valley reached its width toward a towering spine of mountains that she had not yet heard named, far to the east; it stretched off and away to the north, a vast range that was a paradise for cattle or for sheep.

She studied this lush land with real envy, thinking of the sparse graze of her own range a full three thousand feet above the floor of the valley. Yesterday's storm had left patches of snow along the rim of the plateau, where winter came early, but down here the air still held the pleasant sharpness of late autumn.

After yesterday's storm she had stood on the plateau's rim, boot deep in new snow. Gazing down into these depths, she had seen the rich green of grass and the gaudy colors of cottonwoods and aspens along the creek bottoms.

Why was it, she thought, that it was always the lot of sheep outfits to have the scrawny, rock-toothed land when cattlemen laid claim to the rich graze?

Yet if there were any bitterness of envy in this question, Ellen McCloud was also honest and fair enough to know its eternal answer.

On this land grass was life, and once it was gone no man could survive. Sheep cropped the grass closer to the earth than cattle, and if they ranged a land too long their sharp hooves could destroy the grass.

Ellen knew this, and she also knew there were sheep outfits greedy enough to ravage a good range and then scheme to take over another, unless halted by threats and violence.

This was the hub of all wars between sheepers and cattlemen. It was the echo of Arizona's Pleasant Valley and the dark shadows of battle lines being drawn up in Wyoming's Johnson County. And it was the memory of that year of unrelenting hate and bloodshed that had ended down in New Mexico at her father's grave.

Now, here again, that same brutal tide of suspicion and malice was rising up around her again, and for a moment a sense of crushing hopelessness came down on her.

Maybe I was wrong to try to build another ranch. But out of that despairing

thought rose the flame of angry defiance that had stood so bright and shining in her the day her father was buried. She was Ellen McCloud. She was Big Dave McCloud's daughter, and in her were the same strong pressures that had ruled him.

ONE man could love sheep as another could love working with cattle. Mutton and wool were as necessary as beef and cow hides. Sheep had been her father's way of life, and in them she had rooted her own hopes for the future.

She did not covet any man's graze, nor were there any restless ambitions for greatness goading her toward a new and richer range. She wanted only to live in peace in her own small way. Growth and expansion she would leave for the hungry ones to whom guns and the open grave were tools of their trade.

The road curved away from Mogul's gaunt flank; it came to a fork, and Hamp Clelling hauled the buckboard to a halt.

"Which way?" he grunted, wanting the girl behind him in the flatbed to know how thoroughly disgusted he was with this fool's play she had ordered.

Ellen raised her head, studying the pattern of the land. She had but little knowledge of the valley, for Ward Grafton had not given much information about the cattlemen who claimed the range below the plateau.

She tried to recall the few details he had given her. Ben Wiggam had a small outfit up against Cache Mountain, with Steve McKenna's giant Rocking Chair brand claiming most of the valley's eastern graze.

Cass Carroll's Singletree layout was somewhere in the darkness behind her, in the direction of the mouth of the valley and the town of Longbow. She could recall no details to give certainty to her thinking.

To the best of her memory, only Whit Kershner's ranch and Morgan Letham's shoestring outfit were along this end of the road. Beyond that, she knew nothing at all about the location of Letham's cabin. She mentally flipped a coin, and told Clelling to try the right fork.

"Playing nurse to a cowman who hates you, and trying to take him to a cabin you don't even know how to find," Clelling said savagely. "When are you going to start using the brains the good Lord gave you, girl?"

"Don't be cross, Hamp."

"I feel like being cross," the foreman snapped sourly. "I don't like doctoring a man who will most likely be throwing bullets at me as soon as he gets well."

Clelling slapped the team into movement again, making no effort at all to avoid the moonlighted ruts of the road. The way slanted gradually downward through the grass, and they splashed through the shallows of Squaw Creek. Just ahead, up-slope, they saw the raw outlines of a cabin. Clelling hallooed the place, but they got no reply.

"That will be this wolf's den, like as not," said Hamp Clelling, and swung his team around to a halt.

Ellen turned and bent again to the unconscious man. Moonlight lay pale and revealing against the wreckage of Morgan Letham's features, and there was sickness in her as she saw all those wickedly-swollen discolorations where he had been so brutally beaten.

It came to her with a chilling shock that not once during this long rough ride had he stirred or showed even the slightest sign of returning consciousness. This, more than anything else, proved how seriously he was hurt. She knew then that she could not leave him alone in his cabin, untended.

She straightened and looked around at Hamp Clelling, her lips firm with decision.

"Carry him inside, Hamp," she told him quietly. "And please don't put up any fuss. I am going to stay here and do what I can for him until he's out of danger."

IT WAS the damnedest thing. It seemed he was on some remote and incredibly high place, and that he could look down into the valley and even into the cabin where the bruised and battered man lay on the corner-built bunk.

Fellow looks familiar, he thought. But he couldn't remember who the man was.

Nor could he remember the girl who had worked so long and anxiously over the man on the bunk. He couldn't remember the name of the girl or where he had seen her before, but it did not seem to matter much.

He was on this remote, high place, and below him the valley was deep with rich graze. There were cattle browsing out on the range, and on their flanks he could read a boxed ML brand. The ML brand was vaguely familiar to him. Probably the initials of the man who owned that two-bit outfit, he decided. But somehow it did not matter what name those initials stood for.

It did not even matter who he, himself, was—not now, not yet.

He raised his eyes, and it seemed he could see to the farthest corners of the land, across mountains and endless desert, even so far away as that distant pocket in the Texas *brasada* where another crude cabin stood, with a miserly pole-and-brush corral out back.

He could see the careworn face of the woman standing in the doorway, calling out to the boy who was climbing into the saddle of a slack-eared grulla. From across that vast reach of time and distance he could hear their voices against the silence of the Texas morning.

"Where you going, Morgan?"

"To try to chouse out that cow and heifer I spotted in the brush yesterday, ma."

"You watch out for yourself, son, and don't be late coming home."

"All right, Ma."

It was odd, he thought, how he could look out across that vast distance and see things so clearly. It was like looking at photographs etched into the screen of the mind. Yet he had no distinct memory of those things happening to him.

He saw the boy come back to the cabin late that afternoon, bringing with him the wall-eyed cow and the tick-infested heifer. He watched the boy look down at the body of his mother and at the wreckage all around, that the raiding Comanches had left behind them.

The name of that boy, he somehow knew, was Morgan Letham. And back in the echoing caverns of his mind, in the trackless tunnels that led to no open space, a voice cried out in near panic, "But who am I?"

FROM THIS high, remote place, it was like watching the boy's life unfold before him. He saw the years add height and weight to the lank frame, changing that thin face to one that was burned dark by weather, and held a rebel look in the eyes and the set of the jaw.

He could look out across time and space and follow Morgan Letham across a hundred lonely trails: into those border towns, getting drunk for his first time; trailing north behind a herd of Charley Goodnight's longhorns, and all but losing his life one storm-lashed night on the Red; joining one of Billy Dixon's crew of buffalo hunters, and hearing the deafening concussions of heavy-bore Sharps rifles that long day at Adobe Walls.

The trail drifted across Texas and into New Mexico; it bent north through Lincoln county where that buck-toothed hellion they called Billy the Kid was emptying so many saddles.

And then the trail led to the town of Longbow, and into this broad green valley, and to that cabin down there. It led to the man lying on that corner-built bunk, with the girl working so anxiously over him.

He was on this high, faraway place, and as he looked down at the man in the cabin a thought struck sharp and knowing into his mind. That man is the boy from Texas. He is Morgan Letham.

And then through the thundering caverns of his mind, through that dark and trackless emptiness, his voice screamed out at him, "I am Morgan Letham!"

He opened his eyes, and felt them jarred by the brilliance of sunlight slanting through the window over his bunk. Turning his head, he saw the girl standing over him, a look of startled fright trapped in her face.

He said slowly, feeling for his words, "I guess I must have yelled out."

He saw her relieved smile. "I've never been more scared."

"Sorry." He had a little trouble draw-

ing his mind into focus. "You're the girl who bought Ward Grafton's sheep outfit—Ellen Mc-something or other?"

"Ellen McCloud. How do you feel?"

"Like a dull toothache, all over."

"I can pick out half a dozen different colors. You look like a rainbow, Morgan Letham."

"Ah, then that *is* my name!"

The worry came back to her eyes. "Don't you remember?"

"Only too well," he grunted, and grinned wryly. "Guess that's why I yelled out that way. Just couldn't stand the shock of remembering I'm the bucko so many folks in this valley have learned to hate."

THERE had been a current of humor and easy friendliness, but now that current had reached its end. Without being able to identify it, he saw change come to Ellen McCloud's eyes. What it was—suspicion or remembering rancor—he did not know, but it turned him moody with his own thorny memories.

She had her own critical appraisal of him, and said quietly, "Maybe it's because your temper is quicker than your judgment."

"Maybe," he told her thinly, "it's because there are too many sheepers on this range, females included."

She straightened from over his bunk, anger in her gaze. But it was a mature anger, and after a moment she dismissed it with a faint shrug of her shoulders.

"I didn't nurse you these last two days and nights just to quarrel when you came to," she said quietly, and turned away.

Letham watched her moodily as she went across the room, and in him was deep shame for the way he had treated her.

I didn't ask her for help, he thought savagely. But that only sharpened his sense of shame. He was scarcely more than a stranger to her, and yet she had spent two nights and days with him in his cabin, nursing him through a tough time.

Like as not, she had a good reason all her own. But even as that thought came he could not make himself believe it. There

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were greater depths than that to this girl. She had helped him because she had wanted to, because he had needed it. Realizing that, his thoughts turned inward, bitterly measuring his own position in this range war flaring up around him.

Whit Kershner had been murdered while riding either to or from the Mogul plateau sheep outfit which this girl owned. In his mind he was bleakly certain Ward Grafton had committed that murder, or ordered one of his men to do it. It did not seem possible that this Ellen McCloud could be guilty of such a crime.

But in Letham's mind the real blame lay far deeper than Ward Grafton's deadly schemings. Sheep were the core of this valley's troubles, and the fact that this girl had bought out Grafton's Mogul range changed nothing at all. Until sheep were driven off Mogul there would be no peace in this valley. The issue was as simple and inexorable as that in Morgan Letham's mind.

He watched the neat efficiency of the girl as she worked. She stirred up the coals in the iron cook range. then fed in lengths of firewood. He recalled the scanty stock of wood he had left the morning he had ridden up on Mogul to search for Whit Kershner, and knew that this girl had been forced to chop her own supply.

It rankled him, knowing this, for he didn't want to feel beholden to any sheeper Yet he knew he owed many other debts to this Ellen McCloud. She had brought him here from Longbow, and she had not had much rest while taking care of him. Tiny lines of weariness were etched around her mouth, and there were shadowed hollows beneath her eyes.

He said irritably, "Why did you trouble to do this—nurse me?"

She turned slowly away from the stove. "Because you were hurt and there didn't seem to be anyone else to look after you."

He was unaccountably rankled by the quiet sincerity of her reply, and spoke shortly. "I could have managed."

She smiled patiently. "My, but you're cranky! Are you hungry?"

"I can fix for myself."

HER SMILE, he thought savagely, held the same amused tolerance she would show to a cross-tempered child. Anger burst through his flinty pride, and he lowered his feet to the floor and started to rise. He felt as though he had been kicked by a steer. Pain and vertigo hit him, dropping him back to the straw ticking.

Watching him, a faint look of tart satisfaction showed itself for the first time in her gaze. "Now maybe you will act a little more sensible."

She had made son-of-a-gun stew, rich with meat and gravy, and he had never tasted better. When she had brought him a second helping he thanked her with a curtness that brought the stinging shame back into him. And it brought the first flare of real resentment into Ellen McCloud's eyes.

"Must you always try so hard to act tough, Morgan Letham?"

And when he refused to answer that, her voice thinned out in anger. "You're spiteful, ungrateful. I've tried to think it was because you're hurt that you act this way, but I'm beginning to see that it's your nature to be nasty."

"Didn't ask for your help."

"I don't think I like you very much, Morgan Letham."

"That's just fine," he said curtly. "It'll make it easier for us to be enemies."

Her eyes slowly rounded. "You hate me that much?"

"I'm a cowman. I hate sheep and sheepers."

He waited for her temper to flare back at him, but it did not. Instead she eyed him with cold derision as she reached for her coat and put it on.

"I believe you were right, Mr. Letham. You could have managed without any help from me. A rattlesnake never dies from its own poison. I've been told."

He said stonily, "I'll give you some advice, lady. This is cow range, and that's how it's going to stay. I'm obliged for what you did for me, but that doesn't change anything. Move off Mogul or you're going to have trouble on your hands."

"Are you warning me against a war?" she asked flatly.

"Should be plain enough what I mean."

"Very plain, Mr. Letham. And I'll be just as plain with you. I've learned a few things about fighting, even if I am a girl. I bought Mogul range and I intend to stay there. And I have men who will fight to keep me there."

"Strong talk, for a female."

"I'll make it stronger, then. If you want war, mister, you've just got yourself one."

She turned rigidly away. At the door she swung back to face him again, her eyes coldly mocking.

"So you hate sheep, do you?" she told him scornfully. "But you seemed to enjoy the food I fixed for you. Last night while I was playing nurse to you a gang of raiders slaughtered thirty head of my sheep. Since your grub box was empty, I had to provide for myself. It might interest you to know that the meat in that stew you were wolfing down was mutton. Sheep meat, Mr. Letham!"

RIDING steadily through the chill gray of early dawn, Ward Grafton topped the ridge behind Letham's cabin before the light of day had yet reached fully to the floor of the valley.

Being a man who seldom left any uncalculated risks behind him, Grafton carefully tied the reins of his horse to a scrub jackpine a short distance away, before making his way on foot to the rim of the ridge. A man who played the sharp, grave-edge games did not prosper for long by taking a fool's gamble on his horse spooking and leaving him afoot.

Picking his way through the rimrocks, he found a place that suited his needs, and bellied down to wait for the haze of ground fog to drift away from the cabin. The ground was cold under him, but he could stand that.

He was hungry for a smoke, but after thoughtful consideration decided against the pleasure of a cigarette. Morgan Letham was no man's fool; he had been tough-

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ened by other range troubles, and had learned a few things about rimrock fighting.

A steady breeze, chilled by the snow on the upper levels of Cache Mountain, was picking up along the valley. As the fog haze thinned out, Grafton narrowly calculated the range to the cabin. Got to hold low, shooting down hill, he thought.

He saw a thin blue feather of smoke rise out of the cabin's chimney, thickening steadily. He grinned, and jacked a shell into his Winchester. As he lined up the sights, it occurred to him that he might be wasting an opportunity that would never come to him again.

Morgan Lethan was tough, a hard man to stop. You could beat him down with your fists and leave him all but dead, but still he wouldn't quit. A man like Letham was dangerous and to be feared. More than that, he was the breed of man who could stir up the small ranchers of the valley, and organize them into a force to be reckoned with.

Maybe I ought to kill him while I've got this chance. But this thought took a new and sharper turn in Ward Grafton's mind. The killing of Whit Kershner had been a planned necessity, but only a fool pushed his luck too far with a second murder. Ward Grafton did not consider himself a fool.

Dropping the Winchester's sights into line, he sent his first bullet plowing through the cabin's wall just above the probable location of Letham's cook stove. Jacking a reload into the rifle, he drilled his second slug through the window, hearing the far-below shatter of glass as the bullet hit it. Afterward he settled down to the chore of methodically raking the cabin from wall to wall with his shots, grinning bleakly as he considered the rough time he was giving the man down there.

His rifle empty, he rolled backward below the rim of the ridge, and went to his horse at a run. He jerked the reins free, swung into the saddle, and sent the animal plunging down slope through the pines, knowing that this morning's job of work was one that would split this valley wide open.

THE STRONG grip of habit had brought Cass Carroll awake as early dawn was only beginning to fade the night stars out of the sky. He was a man who wore his habits without complaint, and it never occurred to him that now in his advancing years he might have permitted himself the luxury of occasionally sleeping late. All his life, as rancher, trooper, trail-driver, and cowman again, he had rolled out of his blankets early, and if he thought of it at all it was with a kind of crusty pride. A man was getting old when he couldn't beat the sun up. At close to sixty, Cass Carroll did not consider himself old.

Getting out of bed, he immediately shoved his feet into chill-stiffened boots, and then put on his hat. Afterward he pulled on his shirt, and lastly his pants.

Moving quietly so that he wouldn't disturb his wife, he went into the kitchen and built a blaze in the cook stove. He fetched his bottle of whiskey from the cupboard and had his one drink for the day. If he filled his glass a little fuller than usual, he blamed it on the cold. A man needed a little extra these days to take the cramps out of his bones. Winters, Cass Carroll had often said of late, were coming sooner than they had in the old days.

He wasn't hungry, so he didn't bother with the fuss of fixing himself something to eat. He sat down at the table, dawdling over stale coffee that left a rank, bitter taste in his mouth.

He decided broodingly that he had been in a hell of a mood these last few days. It seemed that everything which had once been good and rich with living had spoiled and turned sour. It irritated him to be sitting alone in the kitchen, and it provoked him to think of his wife and ranch hands still being asleep.

Everything started going sour the night Morg Letham had lied about Grafton and a couple of others bushwhacking him in the alley and beating him up, he thought bitterly. He could date his own on-edge moodiness from that time.

It still galled him to think of Letham trying to put the blame of that beating on

Ward Grafton. He felt oddly cheated. He had always liked Morg Letham as a man who would do to ride any river with. He had never seemed like one who would lie about another in order to cover up his own weakness.

He was badly hurt that night, Cass Carroll thought; maybe he didn't know what he was saying.

The thoughts kept piling up in Carroll's mind, and he knew he would never have any peace until he gave Letham a chance to square himself. He knew that he, himself, had not been very fair with the man. He should have given more concern to Letham's hurts that night, rather than passing such quick judgment on the fellow. And it was a deep, condemning shame to know that it was a sheeper—that girl, Ellen McCloud—who had given Letham the attention he had needed that night.

The sense of restlessness and guilt kept eating away at Cass Carroll until he knew he had to do something about it. He got up from his chair, thinking that he would spare Vinnie some worry if he woke her up and told her where he was going. But his wife had been ailing lately, and he wanted her to get all the rest she could.

He put on his coat and let himself quietly out of the kitchen.

IN THE dim half-light of first dawn he went tramping past the bunkhouse, hearing the nasal snoring of big Walt Eccles.

He grinned at a thought. Ever since Eccles had tangled with that tough sheephand, Newt Reardon, he had been able to knock over a man at twenty paces with his snoring. Maybe Walt ought to take on Reardon again and get a new shape for his nose.

He roped and saddled his favorite pony and pointed out across the valley, riding at a steady lope. His gaze drifted restlessly, seeing the vastness of the valley, the high line of Mogul's rim, the faraway spine of the ridge that towered behind Morg Letham's cabin.

Once this had been a range big enough

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for all men to live and prosper in peace. Now all that was changed, with sheep threatening to spill down from Mogul's overgrazed range, and rumors about Steve McKenna being hungry for more grass.

It was the oddest thing about a man and his son, Cass Carroll thought broodingly. Now old Matt McKenna had been an honest-to-gosh man. Matt had owned the biggest chunk of graze in the valley, but he had always been generous and tolerant with his neighbors.

Matt's son, though, was harder to figure. Always preaching for peace and understanding, Steve was, and yet he had gathered around him on Rocking Chair a crew of hard-cases that could make Ward Grafton's toughs walk in their shadow.

It occurred to Carroll that Steve McKenna had been one of the first to argue Grafton's right to graze sheep on Mogul plateau. It was something Cass Carroll had never been able to comprehend, for Steve had grown up in the cattle business and knew what sheep could do to a good range.

Looking back, it seemed to Cass Carroll that the entire valley had started turning inside out the day old Matt McKenna had died. Sheepers getting a hold on Mogul and threatening to break down into cow range; Steve McKenna talking Whit Kershner into making the ride that had ended with Whit dead in a bloody saddle, two bullets in his back; and Steve McKenna, who resembled his mother more than his father, gathering around him the toughest crew in the valley.

"Maybe young McKenna has the right ticket after all," Carroll muttered moodily. "Preach for peace, but keep the fastest guns on your payroll."

He was angling along the flank of the ridge, when somewhere above him a rifle slammed its harsh concussions through the early morning silence. He drew sharply in, alarmed, and gripped by an almost overpowering impulse to turn his mount and ride clear of this corner of the range.

Some of that Mogul sheep outfit sniping at Morg Letham! He tried to tell himself that this shooting was none of his affair, that a man who wanted peace never borrowed another's troubles.

He was at once shamed by his willingness to compromise a harsh and bitter situation. He was a cowman, just as Morg Letham was. He had a stake in this fight against sheep. Decision hardened his mind. He swung his horse back to the trail and kicked it into a run.

HALF a mile further on, the ridge elbowed sharply to the west, and as Carroll rounded the shoulder of land he saw Ward Grafton waiting where the trail forked off toward Mogul plateau.

Cass Carroll drew rein, a wary uncertainty crowding through him as he looked at the big man. He felt a little better when he saw Grafton's slow grin.

"You're riding in a mighty big rush for so early in the morning, Cass. You hear some shooting a while ago?"

Some of the pressure eased out of Carroll. Grafton's smile and the slant of his gaze seemed friendly enough. Yet he wasn't sure. There was something about the man's eyes, some tension coiled beneath the smile.

"Sounded like it came from up on the ridge," Carroll said, and a taut dryness was in his throat.

"That's what I thought," said Grafton in an easy drawl. "I was coming down the trail when the shooting broke loose. Didn't see anyone, though. Did you, Cass?"

Carroll shook his head, a growing numbness creeping through him. His gaze drifted, not wanting to see what was there so plain for him to see. Both forks of the trail behind Grafton were across open range, and he could not escape what his eyes showed him.

Grafton had said he was riding one of those open trails when the shooting broke loose, yet there were small twigs of piñon snagged in his saddle trappings. And there were dust and dry pine needles on his shirt, where a man would get them when he was bellied down on the ground behind a rifle. These things Cass Carroll saw, and came face to face with his first fear.

Grafton's eyes rounded ever so slightly; his smile widened. He reached down and

pulled the piñon twigs from his saddle gear. He brushed the dust and pine needles from his shirt and pants.

"You've got good eyes, Cass."

Carroll's voice was a thick hoarseness. "Now, Mr. Grafton, I don't rightly know."

There was movement at one side. He turned his head with a strained, jerky motion, and saw riders coming out of the yonder pines, half a dozen of them. He recognized Newt Reardon, Jascoe, Torveen, Jess Selby, and that gun-quick devil they called Gil Larkin. He snapped his eyes back to Grafton, and the man was laughing softly.

"Very good eyes for an old man," Grafton said, and reached swiftly for his gun.

THE BULLET came crashing through the shake roof, ranging downward and narrowly missing Morg Letham.

Instinct threw him backward, and he hit the floor in a hard roll as the second slug splintered the window and thunked into the plank flooring. He kept rolling away, but there was no sure escape from the random shots that were making a shambles of his cabin. There was no pattern to the shooting, and only luck would carry him through it.

Flat against the floor, he saw a bullet tear a great gaping hole through the stove pipe. Another left its gray-white smear across the side of the stove. The coffee pot leaped under the impact of a glancing slug, hitting the floor and sloshing wide its steaming water.

Cursing in a flat, flinty way, Letham rose to his knees with one savage thought in mind: to grab a gun and make a break out into the open, where he could answer that rifleman up on the rim of the ridge.

A bullet plowing through the wall dangerously close above his head instantly throttled that rakehell impulse, flattening him out on the floor again. He saw the oil lamp bounce off the wall shelf and shatter on the floor across the room. His molasses jug cracked open, gushing out its thick dark ooze. The iron cook range

[*Turn page*]

clanged viciously under another hit, a fragment of the splintered slug bringing a salty warmth to Letham's mouth.

The shooting abruptly broke off. He hurled to his feet and went plunging across the room, a great towering anger roaring through him. He grabbed up his wall-propped rifle as he went out the door. He veered around the cabin and came to a crouching halt, raking the rim-line of the ridge above him.

Nothing moved up there, nothing.

Hit and run! All right, damn you, let's see if you can put enough tracks behind you, he raged inwardly.

He made for the corral with all the speed his blazing temper could put into him, saddled up, and sent his horse out of the compound at a full run.

If it were one of the Mogul sheepers, he would make for the nearest trail.

He went plunging through a thicket of willows, heading for the north end of the ridge and the trail that forked there toward Mogul plateau. Halfway along the ridge he heard the slam of another shot, that far-away sound muffled by the drumming of his horse's hoofs.

It was in his mind that he could cut off the rifleman if he had any luck at all, and this hope reared a streaky fury into his mind. He came to another file of cotton-woods and tore his way through them.

Now he was out in the open again, with the gunsight notch between the ridge and Mogul plateau just ahead. He didn't slow his horse until he was in the gap, and one glance at the dust of the trail told him that the gunman had not reached this place ahead of him, at least by this route.

HE SLOWED his mount to a walk, angling warily around the yonder flank of the ridge, searching the meadows and probing the silence for some sound of the gunman's passage. He saw nothing, heard nothing. He rode on.

He saw the riderless horse as he reached the bend of the ridge, and then he saw the downed man. A sudden chill fanned through him, like the touch of a winter wind. The man, he saw, was Cass Carroll.

Cass was not dead, not yet. He lay face up on the ground, his eyes dull and vacant with shock. His coat had fallen open, and a great redness was spreading across his shirt, low on his chest. Kneeling over the man, Letham saw the eyes slowly turn to him, reflecting the dimmest hint of recognition.

Cass tried to smile.

"Well, Morg . . ." he murmured.

A bitter harshness was in Letham's voice. "Who did this, Cass? Who was it shot you?"

He couldn't seem to reach the man with his words. Another thought was working in Cass Carroll's eyes, and he was making a desperate effort to bring it to voice.

"I'm sory, Morg . . . damned sorry."

"Tell me who did this, Cass."

The man drew in a slow, sighing breath. His smile became more pronounced, as though in some odd way he was no longer troubled by the agony in him. Yet Letham's question had not registered on him.

"You were badly hurt, and I let you down. Didn't offer to help you. A friend and good neighbor, and I wouldn't give you a hand when you needed one, wouldn't believe what you told us. Same as called you a liar, Morg, and I've been . . . been sick of myself ever since."

The sound of a running horse was on the trail. Letham jerked his eyes up and saw that it was Ann Kershner riding in, her face pale with alarm. She swung out of saddle and kent at once beside Cass Carroll, her question reaching fearfully to Letham.

"How did it happen, Morgan?"

"I'm trying to find out, Ann." He took off his coat and put it under the cowman's head. "Can you hear me, Cass?"

"Sure. Fine, Morg."

"You've got to tell us who shot you."

Carroll drew a slow, ragged breath. "Grafton . . . Ward Grafton did it."

Letham never heard the approach of the rider on the trail behind him, only the flat and brittle command of the voice.

"All right, damn you! Stand up and turn around, Letham. I want to see your face when I put my bullet in you!"

(To be continued in the next issue)

OUR AIR MAIL

(Continued from Page 6)

Try, Try, Again

Dear Editor:

If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again. Well, here I am again to have my plea put in Our Air Mail. Do hope I'll have better luck this time. I am 33, about 5' 5" tall, and weigh 130 lbs. Have dark brown hair and eyes. I love dancing, movies and writing letters. Like to receive letters too. I'll exchange snaps. Are there any folks who would care to write to a gal in the Windy City?

FRIEDA REINSTSEN

1902 N. Mozart St.
Chicago, Illinois

Another Second Try

Dear Editor:

This is my second try to get into Our Air Mail and I sure hope I succeed this time. I'm 17, with red hair and blue eyes, and stand 5' 5" tall. I love to dance and I prefer hillbilly music to any other kind. I would like very much to hear from people all over the world. Will try to answer all letters.

CAROL SORESON

R. R. 1
Oxford, Wisconsin

Can't Get Enough

Dear Editor:

I enjoy RANCH ROMANCES very much. I hope you will publish my plea for pen pals. I have written to a lot of girls in your magazine, but I just can't write to enough of them. I hope to hear from anyone from 6 to 60. I'm 5' 6" and weigh 125 lbs. I have black hair and blue eyes, and am 13 years old.

LESTER ALBERTS, JR.

R.F.D. 1
Marion, Michigan

Must Take It Easy

Dear Editor:

I'm a newlywed, and the doctors tell me I must take it easy, as I have a bad heart. I've worked every minute of my life, and now at 28 have to stay home. It's very lonely after working so long. I have black hair and green eyes. I'm 5' 6½" tall and love pets. My husband and I go fishing almost every weekend. I'd love to hear from some pen pals. I will answer all letters.

BOBBY BESSOIR

3717 W. 108 St.
Inglewood, Calif.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

MAN OF LIBRA
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FROM October 8 to 11, 1871, flames devoured the city of Chicago. When this tragic news reached Newton, Kansas, the Sign of Libra was ascendant in the heavens. Newton was the dusty headquarters for the men who sent their herds along the Chisholm Trail. Anxious to help the stricken city where so much of their stock found a market, the cattlemen rushed a trainload of beef from the Pecos, Brazos and Red River Valleys to the desperate Chicagoans. This was the first relief to reach the starving city.

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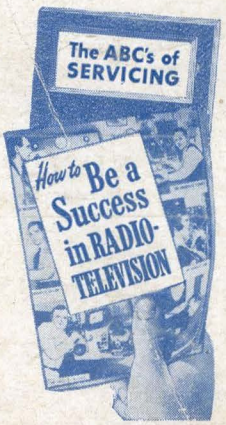

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