A DELL MAGAZINE

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# ZANE GREY'S WESTERN Magazine

MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT OF

## THE LOST WAGON TRAIN

By ZANE GREY

ALSO SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

Latch leveled his gun. "Let go that woman, Leighton!"

The Lost Wagon Train, Chap. 5

# ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 1, No. 5—July, 1947

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## THIS MONTH'S MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT

THE LOST WAGON TRAIN *has a panoramic sweep equaled by few even of Zane Grey's novels. It is the story of the strange and stirring events which flow from one potent stroke of evil—the capture and looting of a wagon train by an outlaw band of whites and Indians.*

*The tale abounds in diverse and picturesque characters, historic and fictitious, who stalk through its pages of marching prose and racing plot: Kit Carson, frontier scout, and Billy the Kid Bonney, desperado; Stephen Latch, whose band of Confederate guerrillas turns outlaw long before the end of the Civil War; Cynthia Bowden, golden-tressed Boston beauty who is the sole survivor of the lost wagon train; Estelle of the red-gold hair and matchless spirit, daughter of Stephen Latch and Cynthia Bowden; Lee Leighton, Latch's distant cousin and implacable enemy; Lester Cornwall, the Texas youth with the handsome face and wonderful eyes, ruthless but loyal to Latch; the young trail driver called "Slim Blue" who bears amazing resemblance to the tragically murdered Cornwall; Old Man Keetch, salt of the earth, and Latch's partner in both banditry and honest ranching; Satana, the fierce Kiowa chief whose braves ride in alliance with Latch's Band; and Hawk Eye, the red-skinned scout who never falters in his service to the master of Latch's Field.*

*These and many others—gunmen, soldiers, freighters, ranchers—make up an unusually rich contingent of characters in this novel which was published in book form in 1936, first appeared serially in 1932 in* Cosmopolitan, *and is here reprinted in an abridged magazine version.*

*Still, it is the tale itself which enthralls, abounding as it does in action, intrigue, and suspense.*

*Violence and villainy—grandeur and generosity—greed and gunplay—treachery, and love triumphant: truly a feast for Western fiction readers!*

# The Lost Wagon Train

By ZANE GREY

## Chapter One

### *Latch, Outlaw*

LATCH'S BAND of outlaws and savages hid in Spider Web Canyon awaiting the Kiowa scouts who were to fetch news of any caravans that were approaching.

It was a summer night in 1861. Spider Web Canyon lay up in the first range of mountains rising off the Great Plains. The rendezvous had been a secret hiding-place of Satana, a fierce and bloody chief of the Kiowas. He and Latch had formed a partnership—a strange relation growing out of an accidental joint attack upon a wagon train.

The altitude gave a cool touch to the misty rain which was falling. Camp fires burned under the great cottonwoods shining upon the bronze visages of the savages. A colossal wall of rock rose back of the camp, towering so high and bold that the rim could not be seen in the blackness of night. Across the canyon the opposite wall loomed dimly with a ragged spear-pointed fringe. Circles and groups of Kiowas sat silently, stoically, their dark faces and inscrutable eyes significant of an impassive destiny.

Satana, the chief, sat with the white men, next to Latch. He appeared to be of small stature, his stooped shoulders covered by a

blanket. His raven-black hair was parted in the middle and one braid showed over a fold of the blanket. His visage expressed a tremendous power. It was a pointed face, wedge-shaped, the forehead broad, the chin sharp. In the shadow no lines were discernible, yet that face belonged to a mature Indian with a record of blood and evil. The firelight showed the basilisk eyes, black, cold, with a glitter in their depths.

Stephen Latch's fine dark face betrayed the havoc of a wild period. He looked to be about 30 and was the son of a Louisiana planter, ruined at the inception of the war. Latch had not been accorded a commission in the Confederate army and, bitterly alienated, he had fought a duel with the officer who had forestalled him. With blood on his hands and with all the Rebel hatred for the North in his heart, he had set out to wage his own battle against the Northerners. From a guerrilla warfare it had speedily degenerated into border outlawry.

North from Texas had spread the deserters, the slackers, the criminals, the parasites that were to live off the vast traffic of the plains—pioneers traveling west, freighters hauling supplies to the forts and posts in New Mexico and Colorado, and gold-seekers bound for California. From the north and east had spread the adventurers and outlaws, the riffraff of the cities.

From these Latch had picked his band. He could read and rule men, and he set himself to develop a following upon which he could depend. There were men in his gang as strong as he, and far more reckless and fierce. With them he had played a far-sighted game, always knowing that those he could not win to loyalty he could kill.

Then had come the union with Satana. The Kiowas under this chief were implacable toward the buffalo hunters, the caravans, and the soldiers. Satana had been difficult to deal with, but gifts, and especially firewater, had brought him around. Latch's great weapon was rum, whole wagon loads of which he had stolen from a wagon train and hidden in Spider Web Canyon. Only Leighton, his lieutenant, a Southerner of distant kin, and two others knew where these kegs of liquor had been secreted.

"Steve, we want some whisky," Leighton had just said.

Latch concluded it was time to declare himself. "Lee, I'm chief of this band," he returned. "It would not be wise to inflame the Indians now. If any of you drank they would discover it."

"We'll put it to a vote," said Leighton.

"Who will?" demanded Latch.

"Some of us."

"You can name your supporters

right heah," said Latch. "We'll have this out."

"Sprall, Waldron, Mandrove, Creik, and Texas, to mention a few," snapped the younger man.

Satana's sudden intensity of gaze betrayed his knowledge of the white man's language.

"All right, I'll answer them as well as you, Lee," declared Latch. "I'm running this band. You will abide by my orders or get out."

"We might start a band of our own," said his kinsman.

"That's your privilege if you split heah and now. Otherwise you do as I say," replied the leader. "And I'll thank you to declare yourselves quickly."

Latch had by no means felt so sure of his position as his speech implied, but this was the moment to test his strength and he meant to see it through. He made his stand, realizing fully that if Leighton and his cronies took the liquor they could take Satana and his savages along with them. The situation was critical.

"What do you say, fellows?" queried Leighton.

Sprall, a wiry desperado, leered upon Leighton and Latch. "Wal, what I want is rum, an' I ain't carin' a hell of a lot how I git it."

Waldron, a bank defaulter and fugitive from New York, ran true to the character his weak face expressed. "It's between you and Latch."

Mandrove was a Rebel deserter, a sallow sandy-mustached young man with shifty gaze. "I'm on Leighton's side," he said.

Creik had been a slave-driver in the employ of Latch's father. "Whisky," was his trenchant reply.

This left one of the supporters Leighton had named—a gunman from the Rio Grande country who answered to the name "Texas."

"Wal, I'd take a shot at my own grandad if he kept me thirsty any longer," was his reply.

"Thanks for your prompt declarations, men," rejoined Latch. "You can saddle up and get out of heah."

"Steve, I know where you hid that liquor," spoke up Leighton.

"Yes, and by God you'll keep your mouth shut aboot it," flashed Latch.

"I didn't say I'd give it away," went on Leighton, "but I'm good and sore."

"Young fellar, let me have a word," spoke up Keetch, in deep persuasive voice. "I've been on this hyar border for twenty years. I've seen a heap of men come an' go. I've been in all the tough ootfits from the Brazos to the Platte. An' them thet fought among themselves never lasted long. If you-all git drunk an' git the redskins drunk, why, hell itself would be a church meetin' to what this hyar ootfit would become. The boss has a cool haid an' I say we-

all ought to listen to him."

"Hell! We're listening. What else is there to do, cooped up heah in this hole? I'm sick of it," replied Leighton. "I want action and I don't care a damn what kind."

"Leighton, you can get any kind of action you want," spoke up the latest acquisition to the band.

This individual, a stripling still in his teens, had followed Latch out of Fort Dodge a few weeks previously and without question or explanation, except to say that his name was Lester Cornwall, he had attached himself to the chief. Later Latch recalled that he had seen the boy in one of the gambling hells. His face was as fair as a girl's, his eyes were blue as blue ice, his hair shining between gold and silver. And beautiful as a beautiful girl he would have been except for his expression of supreme cruelty. He might have been a son of the god of evil.

"What?" bellowed Leighton.

Cornwall rose, his right hand sliding significantly inside his vest. "Guns or fists," he drawled, with the accent of a Carolinian.

Leighton leaped up with a curse, tearing at his weapon. Keetch grasped his arm.

"What'd I jest tell you, man?" he queried testily. "Hyar you air provin' the very thing I said."

"I won't have that white-face boy—"

"Wal, someone had to call you," interrupted Keetch.

Latch sharply called the belligerents to order. Leighton relaxed and sat down again.

"Colonel. I reckon I'm not the only one who's tired of Leighton's gab," said the youth coolly.

Latch suffered a twinge at the use of the title given him in private life, but denied him at the advent of war. This young fellow had known him or heard of him. Latch sensed a strange loyalty here, as well as a remarkable indifference to life. It moved him as nothing else had.

"Listen, men," he began, with eloquent passion, "Keetch put it right. If we fight among ourselves we are doomed. Let us fight *for* each other and not *with* each other. I guarantee the fortune of any and all of you who stick by me. But my word must be law. My aim is to organize the greatest band ever known on the frontier. We will wage an organized war on the caravans crossing the plains, both the wagon trains headed west with government supplies, gold, munitions, merchandise, and the wagon trains returning with the rich furs of the trappers. I have won over Satana to this deal. He controls five hundred Kiowas, half of whom are with us heah."

"What's your plan?" queried Leighton.

"Listen. Few caravans from now on will have soldier escorts.

The forts have sent all the soldiers they could spare into the war. Those caravans who do not band together in numbers for protection will be easy picking. We shall choose only small caravans, never over fifty wagons. We use our rum to inflame the Kiowas and send them against the damned Yankee freighters. We shall set Satana to kill every last man—and woman, too—of every caravan we attack. It will not be our way to stampede oxen and horses, or to burn wagons. We will make off with every single vestige of a caravan, so that it will simply vanish from the plains. Lost wagon trains! That's all. We can never be found heah, at least not by white men.

"Satana says we can drive the wagons right out on the high wall below heah and dump them over, where they will never be found. The Indians will take the stock for their pay, which leaves us the contents of the wagons. Last month one train left Independence with a hundred thousand dollars in gold alone. We can afford to work slowly and carefully for such treasure as that. But any wagon train will yield much in supplies and money.

"That's my plan, Lee, in the rough. The details can be worked out later. But I must have a united band and keep strict control. Now you and all can speak up."

"I'm for it, Steve," replied Leighton.

"Daid men tell no tales, huh?" mused Keetch. "So thet's your idee. It's big. But I don't like the complete massacre."

"Nor I. We might attack a wagon train that had women and children. No matter! The Kiowas will do the dirty work. We needn't see it. But we must stick to that plan. I'll call the roll. Answer yes or no!"

Among the group that Leighton had designated as being of a mind with him the only one to answer Latch in the negative was Waldron, the fugitive from the North.

"What is against your principles as a man doesn't concern me," added Latch curtly. "Either you go in with us or quit the band. Choose."

"I have no choice," rejoined Waldron gloomily. "I'll abide by your rule."

Black Hand and Nigger Jack, outlaws who had found in Latch's band a haven of refuge, were loud in their acceptance. Lone Wolf, a Texas cowboy of unknown past, let silence be his answer. Augustine, the Mexican *vaquero*, spoke softly in his own tongue, *"Si, señor."*

Keetch parleyed with the chief on the issue of possible murder of women and children. "Cain't we git around thet? It shore goes ag'in the grain."

"We've got to shut our eyes to that," said Latch.

"All right, I weaken. But I'll say one word. In the end *thet* will destroy us."

"How aboot you, Cornwall?" queried Latch.

"Whatever you say, Colonel," returned the youth nonchalantly. Again Latch was struck by the boy's lack of feeling.

"It's settled. Latch's band," he said, expelling a deep breath.

"Thirteen!" ejaculated Keetch. "How aboot new members? Some of us will git killed. An' in the very nature of our work on this frontier other men will gravitate to us."

"Sufficient to the day. The smaller our band the more profits to each. I don't look favorably on taking in drifters."

"Wal, thet's sense. But it'll not be easy," went on Keetch thoughtfully. "I've an idee, Latch. You remember, a day's ride below hyar, where this canyon opens out on the prairie? There's the wonderfulest valley I ever seen. We might locate there, range stock an' cattle, make a blind of ranchin'."

"That *is* a good idea," agreed Latch. "But isn't it too close to this hiding-place?"

"Close! Ain't it the hardest day's ride you ever took in yore life? I heerd you say so. It might as wal be a hundred miles as forty. An' rough! I never seen the beat of thet trail. Sand washes thet leave no tracks, water over hard rock bottom for miles, an' then a jumble of stones. We needn't fear bein' tracked in hyar, or even as fur as thet Paso Diablo, as Augustine called it."

"Pass of the devil! Very well, it is named," replied Latch. "We'll think about your idea of ranching the valley below. Later that land will be valuable."

"It's the finest grazin' an' plantin' field on the west slope of the plains."

"Field? You call it a field?"

"Shore. There's a hundred thousand acres level as a floor. An' a million more in pasture an' timber."

"Latch's Field," rejoined the leader dreamily. "I thought I had done with land—"

"Uggh!" interrupted the Kiowa chief, lifting his head. Three savages had stepped silently up to the edge of the circle. One spoke in guttural tones. Light thud of hoofs came from under the trees. Then lean wild riders entered the light of the camp fires. Wet bronze bodies glistened in the light.

The spokesman of the trio was known to Latch—a young brave named Hawk Eye, a matchless tracker and rider.

"Keetch, have a care to get all he says," spoke up Latch.

"Wal, he's shore bustin' with news. An' I reckon I wasn't captive among the Kiowas for nothin'," returned Keetch.

The lean warrior spoke as if

rendering an oration, making elaborate gestures which had to do with places and distances.

At the end of Hawk Eye's speech Satana let out a loud "Uggh!"

"Latch," said Keetch, "the gist of thet redskin's harangue is thet a train of fifty-three wagons without soldiers left Fort Dodge three days ago, headed for the Cimarron Crossin' an' the Dry Trail to Fort Union."

"Ah! What's the Dry Trail?" asked Latch.

"It's a cut-off of two hundred an' fifty miles. I've been over it a few times. Seldom traveled. Only old freighters an' plainsmen ever tackle the Dry Trail. Water off the trail an' hard to find. Feed scarce. Been some bad fights along thet road. Point of Rocks a favorite place for redskins to ambush freighters."

"How far?" went on Latch, moistening his lips.

"Two days' hard ridin'."

"Would that place us near this Point of Rocks?"

"No. We'd strike the trail this side of old Camp Nichols, an abandoned army post. The Cimarron runs along between Colorado an' New Mexico. Wildest kind of country. Looks like this deal was made to order."

Latch turned to address Satana. "Chief, we go at daylight."

"Good!" replied the Kiowa. "White chief give rum?"

"Yes. Plenty drink."

Whereupon Satana jabbered to his Indians, and they all trooped away toward their camp fires.

"Latch, how're we goin' to run this fight?" asked Keetch.

"I want time to think."

"Thet ain't a bad idee for all of us—an' mebbe Mandrove hyar can offer up a little prayer. Didn't you know Mandrove was a preacher before he turned outlaw, Latch?"

"I did not. Is that a fact, Mandrove?"

The Rebel deserter nodded. "I was forced into the army."

"Didn't you want to fight?"

"Killing was against my religion."

"So that's it. You told me you had deserted—to join Latch's band! Man, you made a bad choice! You'll *have* to fight now. But I would not hold you to your word."

"I am in the same boat with you, Latch," he retorted significantly. "And already a—a murderer."

"Misery loves company! If you failed as a preacher and a soldier, let us hope you succeed as a desperado."

Coarse mirth followed this crisp cold speech of the leader.

"Men, this is where we wipe out the past, those of us who have any to remember," declared Latch. "Honest lives have been denied us. But let's not be a common, thiev-

ing, treacherous gang. United we stand! And when the war is over—"

"Be rich an' can settle down," interrupted Keetch, as the leader hesitated.

"We'll ride down to this Dry Trail. Keetch, you can choose the place to attack the wagon train. We'll send out scouts to locate it. Then when all is ready we'll deal out rum to the Kiowas. Just enough to inflame them!"

"Don't forget a few drinks to ourselves," said Leighton.

"I second thet motion," declared Keetch.

"Carried," rejoined Latch, in a hard tone. "We'll be up at dawn. Lee, as soon as it's light enough to see we'll take two men with a pack horse and get the rum."

Latch turned away toward the dark wall. He found the shelf where he had left his saddle, pack, and bed, and soon made ready to rest if not to sleep.

In that hour he saw the naked truth. As sure as his ruin, so sure would be his death. But death was insignificant compared with what he had invited. His soul sickened, yet he had the strength to accept his lot, to fight his better self and kill conscience, memory of home, even the thought of the brief, hopeless love which had helped to bring him to this degradation.

How strange that in this devastating hour he should recall Cynthia Bowden! Yet not strange. Was this not the hour when all must pass in review before his tortured sight—for the last time? And Cynthia did come back, not soon to pass! That small regal head, with its crown of golden hair, the proud dark eyes, the red lips that had been surrendered to his—they came back to make him shudder.

All of his misfortune dated from the blunder of that one year of college in the North. Why had he gone the way of wild college youths, sowing a whirlwind that gave his jealous rivals and Cynthia's angered brother a weapon with which to disgrace and ruin him in her eyes? But for that would he be lying here in this Kiowa retreat, a consort of the bloodiest and cruelest of chieftains, self-placed at the head of a border band of cutthroat outlaws? The downward steps from that fatal hour were easy to retrace. And his bitter, passionate soul revolted.

Gradually the camp fires flickered and died out, leaving the canyon black as a cave. The trees were barely discernible. A mournful sighing wind breathed through them. Then the sharp cry of a wild beast pierced the silence.

The hours wore on, at last merciful to a spent spirit. And Latch slept. He awoke in the dim gray dawn, aware of a stir out under the trees. Where was he? Suddenly he remembered the place, the

meaning, and a terrible hatred of the dawn, of another day, pervaded his soul.

## Chapter Two

### *"Spare No One!"*

HARD on that sensation fell the bell-like voice of Lester Cornwall: "Mawnin', Colonel."

"It's hardly good morning, Lester," replied Latch, as he sat up. "Gray dawn of an evil day, I'd say."

"Evil if Leighton has his way, Colonel," rejoined the youth. "I don't trust that man."

"Did you hear anything?" demanded Latch, hurriedly pulling on his boots.

"It's enough to say now that I'm on your side," returned Cornwall deliberately.

"Thank you, Lester. I hope you will be justified. Did Leighton send you?"

"No. Nor did he like my snooping into this. I made up my mind last night I was going, and I was the first up. Leighton has Sprall and that Texas gunner with him. They're saddling a pack horse."

"Humph! And where did you come in?"

"That's what he asked. I told him I'd call you. He thinks you included me in this rum-getting. I'm not apologizing, Colonel. Take me or leave me—it's all one to me."

"Cornwall, I've an idea that whether we fight Indians or make friends with them, massacre caravans to turn honest, go to hell or not—it's all one to you."

"I'd stick to you, Colonel."

There was something about this young daredevil that appealed to Latch. "Heah's my hand, Cornwall," he said.

The younger man's grip closed like steel on the other's hand. Then the gruff voice of Leighton broke that handclasp. Latch buckled on his gun-belt.

Dark figures moved away in the gloom. Latch, with Cornwall beside him, followed them. The gray dawn had imperceptibly lightened.

They crossed a brawling brook and went on at a snail's pace. Latch had his special signs by which he had marked the cache in Spider Web Canyon. These were peculiarly formed crags on the rim, which at length he discerned. Straight into the tangle of trees and rocks he led, and found a crack in the wall.

"Sprall, you stay here with the horse," ordered Latch.

The outlaw demurred under his breath. Latch led into the crack, which was narrow and dark. He arrived finally at the point he sought. Feeling with his hands, he located little holes in the wall on the right side. Day had broken; there was light enough to see the

caverned walls.

"Heah, two of you help me on your shoulders. One foot on each —there!" Latch reached for a shelf above his head, and laboriously clambered upon it. The wide portal of a cave, unseen from under the shelf, opened in the wall. The cavern was full of kegs of rum.

"Throw up the rope," Latch called. When he had caught the rope, he tied it around a keg and lowered the rum, then pulled it up again for another. The men below packed their precious burden out to the horse. Then Latch got down and hurried out of the crack to the exit.

Already one keg had been looped securely upon the pack animal, and two of the men were holding up the other keg, while the third made it fast.

"Thar!" ejaculated the Texan, who had been responsible for the hitches.

Latch followed at the heels of his men, aware that Cornwall, ever vigilant, kept track of him. Clouds were breaking away to the eastward. Evidently the day would be favorable for traveling.

During Latch's absence the horses had been rounded up and fetched in, the score or more belonging to his band contrasting markedly with the several hundred lean mustangs of the Kiowas. Keetch, a capital camp cook, was dealing out breakfast to the men who had not accompanied Latch. At sight of the rum-laden pack horse they roared merry welcome.

The Kiowas' camp hummed like a beehive. The 250 half-naked savages were gorging meat before the raid.

"Latch, our red pards are aboot to move," called out Keetch. "It'll shore be hell keepin' up with them today."

"Pack light and rustle," was Latch's reply.

In half an hour Latch rode out with his men at the tail end of Satana's band. Just then the sun burst over the eastern rim of the canyon, transforming it to a magnificent valley of silver and gold iridescence.

Latch thought it a hideous dream that through this beauty and glory of nature he was riding to heap blood and death upon innocent people of his own color. He had not been intended for this devastating business. Strength must come from the past, from betrayed love and frustrated hope, from the poison that ran in his veins. To these he called with despairing passion.

Spider Web Canyon stepped down between narrowing rugged walls, silver reaches and green patches, vying with the groves as they all loped down toward a high irregular gap, black and mysterious, where the walls converged. On both sides myriad rents split the walls, giving them the appearance of colossal fences, with pick-

ets and spaces alternating. What singular contrast between this lower end of the canyon and the upper, where the walls were sheer.

The eastern wall was lower and perpendicular. Keetch had claimed there were places where a wagon could be driven right to the rim. This had given Latch an idea. Why not haul all their stolen wagons to this rim, if that were possible, lower the supplies on ropes, and topple the wagons over, never to be seen again by freighters or scouts of the plains? It was an absorbing thought.

The last red-skinned rider and his wild pony vanished in the green-choked apex that led out of the gap. Keetch, with the pack horses behind him, slowly approached the entrance to the pass. Latch brought up the rear. He took a farewell look around. The sweet, fresh, coolness of the morning, the glorious bright radiance on every tree, rock, bush, and plot of grass, the melody of innumerable birds—all these entered into him, and he felt that they were the last of good he would absorb in his life.

Then he rode on down the winding green lane, into the willows and at last into the brook. Here all signs of tracks and trails vanished. And that brook would be the road of travel for many hard miles. A corner of bronze cliff bulged out over him, and when he turned it he was in the pass, where the walls had begun to sheer up frowningly.

The brook flowed over smooth hard rock. As they rode on, the miles of canyon pass fell behind, and the walls grew closer, steeper, and higher until at last only a narrow belt of blue sky showed. Thereafter, the light failed perceptibly and the hour arrived when the walls were so close that only dusk, strange and wan, prevailed under them.

At length Latch could touch the wall on either side with half extended hand. Last came the deep water, where for long stretches the horses had to swim.

This constricted part seemed endless in length. But at last, far beyond midday, they got through the Paso Diablo and entered the widening canyon below. Here again the sun found them and Latch warmed to the golden rays.

At sunset the outlaws rode abruptly out of the rocky rent into a vast level valley the like of which Latch had never imagined. The Indians had pitched camp in groups under trees; fires were sending up columns of smoke; the mustangs grazed on the green grass. Far down this magnificent stretch, ragged black patches showed against the sunset gold.

"Wal, boss, hyar's your field," called out Keetch. "Look down thet range."

"Buffalo!" exclaimed Latch, sighting Indian riders in a chase.

"Shore. An' we'll have rump steak for supper," replied the outlaw scout.

Latch could not see the extent of this field, but it certainly contained thousands of acres. "No wonder the red man hated the white man!" he soliloquized. "To seek to rob him of this!"

"Colonel, heah's your ranch," spoke up young Cornwall. "And right heah I'm applying for the job of foreman."

"Right heah you get it. Lester," declared Latch. He knew the Kiowas would trade him this land for guns, trinkets, and rum. "Keetch, you called the trick, Latch's Field!" he exclaimed.

Before dark the Indian hunters returned to camp with buffalo meat, and soon the air was full of the appetizing odor of rump steak. Latch ate heartily, and after the meal he sought rest under the cottonwood where he had taken the precaution to put his saddle, bed, and pack with the kegs of rum.

Down here in the open he lost the sense of security furnished by Spider Web Canyon. This field lay at the edge of the plains. In the distance bands of wolves chased their quarry, with wild deep bays. Close at hand, bands of coyotes made the night hideous with their sharp yelps. Nevertheless, Latch slept soundly and awoke under the white stars of dawn, rested and himself again.

It was just break of day when Keetch called the men to their meal. "Fill up, you sons of guns, an' what you can't eat pack in your pockets. It'll be a long drill today an' no cookin' at the end of it, if I don't miss my guess."

The Kiowas led, taking a course straight north, and climbing out over the bluff to the uplands.

Latch presently joined Satana. "Chief, I want trade for land," he said, turning to sweep a hand toward the field behind them.

"Uggh. What give?" replied the cunning Kiowa.

"What do you want?" Latch's earlier deal with the savage called for a surrender of all oxen and horses captured in a caravan raid.

"Heap flour, beans, coffee, tobac'," began Satana.

"Yes."

"Wagons."

"No. All wagons are to be run over the cliffs and destroyed."

"Guns, powder, ball."

"Yes. Equal shares."

"Uggh! Good! Firewater?"

"Plenty for Satana. Little for Indian braves. Bad medicine."

"Satana trade. Him promise keep."

Latch gripped the Indian's extended hand and felt that Satana would deal with him as he was dealt by.

A sense of final committal fell upon Latch. He had chosen his hiding place, his burrow in the mountains, there to lie concealed until this or that raid had passed

into the history of the frontier. He had traded for his ranch land, where he could make a home. Home! He railed at his unreasonable dreams. Long before this war was over he would stop a freighter's bullet or be hanged to a cottonwood tree.

The Kiowas knew the country. They kept straight on, higher and higher across the uplands. The long line of Indian horsemen lengthened out until it covered miles. What travelers they were! Latch's outfit slowly fell behind.

Thus they rode on during the afternoon, hour by hour. Latch had a view now and then of the distant Rockies rising purple-peaked above the gray land. At sunset the Indians deviated from their straight course north, and turned west. Latch then noted that they had come out on the verge of a promontory.

Leighton and Keetch waited for the rest to catch up. Latch was the last to join the group, all of whom were facing intently what lay before and below them. Keetch was pointing and speaking.

Presently Latch rode out on the brim of the plateau. The Great Plains lay beneath him, far below, gray and barren.

"Wal, boss, hyar you are," said Keetch, coming to Latch's side. "Sort of staggerin', huh? You see thet meanderin' line? Thet's the Dry Trail. I wouldn't say it was a line of skulls an' bleached bones. But you'd see some if you rode it. I'm not shore, but I think thet ribbon fur out there is the Cimarron. Our wagon train ought to be past the river. The Cimarron Crossin' is where the Dry Trail begins. As I told you, it cuts off near three hundred miles. But it's bad goin'. Some grass. Little water, an' you gotta know how to find thet."

"Are the Kiowas going down to the trail?"

"Reckon only to a water hole. We'll camp there an' wait until the scouts locate the train. From what. I gathered, Hawk Eye reckons he'll smoke signal us day after tomorrer sometime. Thet'll mean the wagon train will be comin' along the trail, an' we'll be within strikin' distance of their camp thet night."

"Well, let's follow on down. I'm tired," rejoined Latch.

Camp that night was something to nauseate Latch. His men grumbled for rum. The Kiowas burned dim fires of buffalo chips and danced around them, working themselves into a warlike mood.

All next day he lounged in camp. The Kiowas rode out on the plains to hunt. Leighton's crowd gambled with their share of the expected raid, using pebbles as counters. Cornwall haunted the gamblers, a watching, indifferent, incomprehensible youth. Often he approached Latch, but seldom spoke.

"Colonel, that outfit is gambling away the contents of your wagon train," he said once.

"They're ambitious—and trusting. Some of them may be dead."

"Queer bunch. But I imagine we're all queer. I know I am, because I like this life. But not for that sort of thing."

"What for, Lester?" queried Latch.

"I don't know, unless it's the spell."

"Of blood and death just round the corner? I think I understand. It's got me, too. But it's not a wild freedom from all restraint. It's bitter defiance. . . . What do you make of Leighton's cronies?"

"That Texas gunman fascinates me," replied Cornwall. "He's the only one of the bunch I'd trust. He doesn't talk much. When Leighton taunted him about Lone Wolf, this other gun-thrower from Texas, why he didn't like it a bit. I guessed Leighton wanted Texas to pick a fight with Lone Wolf, just to see which would kill the other quickest. Waldron is a gloomy man, haunted by a bad conscience. Mandrove may have been a preacher, but he's pretty low-down now. Creik wants some slaves to beat. Sprall itches for fight He gives me the creeps. And Leighton—what do you think he wants most?"

"Perhaps to be chief of this band."

"No. He's just antagonistic to you. He doesn't want responsibility. I'm sure he has no great desire for power. Leighton is the kind who live for women."

"What?" demanded Latch, surprised.

"I've studied Leighton, watched him, listened to him. If he's a relative of yours you ought to know something about him."

"Very little. We're only distantly related—third cousins, I think. I believe I did hear something about love affairs—years ago. I forget."

The day passed, and the night. Latch suffered under the strain. He arose feeling like a chained tiger. Cornwall, always active, eager, curious, was the first to report that Satana's scouts were smoke-signaling from far-separated points. They had sighted the caravan.

The encampment became possessed of devils. Satana sent out riders, evidently to get reports from the scouts. He would not allow the white men, even Latch, to climb the hill. He permitted no cooking fires. Dozens of circles of savages were dancing their war dance.

Latch's men eagerly approached him for liquor, and being refused, grew sullen. With Keetch Latch planned an attack on the caravan, drawing maps on the ground, figuring every detail. Satana observed them, sometimes approving with an "Ugghl" but oftener

shaking his head.

"Boss, thet old bird has got a haid on him. What he's drivin' at is thet we can't plan the attack till we see where the wagon train camps. Let's put the brunt of the attack up to the Kiowas; let's keep back ourselves, an' do the sharpshootin' from cover."

"Well, tell Satana as soon as we locate the wagon-train camp we'll plan the attack. And he must plan the hour."

"Uhuh," replied Keetch, and conversed with the chief. Presently he turned again to Latch. "Satana wants to know when they drink the fire water."

"What's your advice, Keetch?"

"Hell! Parcel the rum out tonight. There's twenty gallons, an' a thimbleful of thet stuff will make a devil of any savage unused to likker."

The Kiowa scouts from the south rode in before sunset, reporting that the caravan was on the Dry Trail abreast of Satana's camp, and not far away. Just after dark the riders from the north rode in to report that 54 wagons had gone into camp.

"Tanner's Swale," asserted Keetch, after listening to the reports. "Thet's a water hole off the trail. Brushy with willow an' hackberry. Reckon the tenderfeet think they can hide. My Gawd! Wal, boss, it's set to order."

Latch stood erect, taut as a wire, with a strange ringing in his ears. "Keetch, ask Satana what his hour is for the attack," he said.

Satana understood; he made an imperious gesture.

"Dark—before day come."

"It is settled. Keetch, tell him we will follow his braves and fight with them. Spare no man, woman or—or—child! They are not to set fire to wagons or shoot the stock."

The interpreter made that clear to the chief.

"Good!" Satana grunted.

"Now, men, we can't be cowards and let the Indians do it all. But keep back, under cover, and withhold your fire until you see a *man* to shoot at. That's all. Fetch the rum. Cornwall, get the cups out of my saddlebag."

Presently, in the dim light of a buffalo-chip fire, Latch was witness to a scene he was never to forget. To each of his men, after portioning out the first to Satana, he allotted a full coffee-cup of rum. Then the liquor of one keg was poured out into buckets from which the small cupfuls were dispensed to the Indians. From the drinking they went to the war dance. But this night they made no sound, and the crouching steps appeared all the more sinister.

The second ten-gallon keg was tapped and again Latch allowed his men a drink. What heady stuff it was—how it gave rein to the evil in him! It seemed a kind of ceremony, this drinking bout, for it entailed silence and stilled mirth

## Chapter Three

### *The Wagon Train*

BOWDEN'S prairie schooner had come in for endless attention all along the trail from Independence.

Tullt and Co. had built it especially for John Bowden, and as the plainsman Pike Anderson averred, "it shore was a kind of cross between a boat an' a wagon." The ends came almost to a point, like the blunt bow and stern of a boat, and the sides were curved.

On the front end was painted in large red letters: TULLT and CO. NO. I A.

At Council Grove this wagon came in for more than ordinary attention. Bowden was pleased, for the schooner had been constructed after his own plans.

Fort Dodge was an important stop on the long trail. Here Bowden expected the soldier escort he had been promised from Fort Leavenworth. But calls for more soldiers at the front made it impossible for Colonel Bradley to oblige him.

"Better wait here until I can give you an escort," said the officer. "The Indians are getting bolder since the war started."

"How long would we have to lay over?"

"From three to six weeks."

"Impossible!" ejaculated Bowden. and turned away.

To his niece Cynthia he confided, "I really feel safer out on the prairie than here in these camps. Such a motley crew of men! And they all spot my wagon, just as if their gimlet eyes could pierce that false bottom where I have secreted the gold. Your gold, Cynthia."

"Uncle, it was terribly risky," replied the young woman. "Hauling gold all the way out to California."

"These are war times, my dear. We could not trust all this money to paper. It might depreciate. Gold is safe and I'm going to get this—"

"Careful, Uncle," interrupted Cynthia.

Pike Anderson, the scout whom Bowden had engaged at Independence, came up with a companion. "Boss, this is Jeff Stover, an' he wants to throw in with us far as Fort Union."

"All right with me. Glad to have another man," returned Bowden, shaking hands with the newcomer.

"Got my family an' two drivers," replied Stover. "From Missouri, an' due to meet a Texas wagon train at Cimarron Crossin'."

"That's interesting," spoke up Bowden. "What size train?"

"Sixty wagons. Some old plainsmen an' Injun-fighters with them. You'd be wise to join us. Reckon Blaisdal an' Cy Hunt will take the

Dry Trail."

"What's that?"

"It's a cut-off, savin' near three hundred miles between the Cimarron an' the Canadian River. Bad trail. Poor camps. Water scant an' hard to find. Particular pet stampin'-ground for Comanches an' Kiowas. But with Blaisdal an' Cy in charge I reckon we'll go through."

"Anderson, what do you think of this Dry Trail cut-off?" inquired Bowden.

"Damn little good," blurted out Anderson. "It's a cut-off all right. An' if we met Blaisdal's outfit, I'd say we might risk it."

"Stover, are you sure of your facts?"

"Betcha. The Texas outfit is due at the Cimarron about the ninth of this month. If you pull out tomorrer we could get to the Cimarron by the eighth."

"We'll go!" declared Bowden.

"It's foolhardy," cautioned Anderson.

"Have you been over this Dry Trail?"

"Onct, an' thet in early spring —which's the best time. I'd rather go around the old trail."

"Are you afraid of Indians and robbers?"

"Not for myself," returned Anderson. "But, Mr. Bowden, you've got wimmen an' kids in this wagon train. An' this hyar pretty niece of yourn. I'd shore hate to see thet golden haid all gory."

"My God, man! Stop such talk! All I've heard since I got to Independence was Indians, raids, burned wagon trains, scalped men, and girls carried off into captivity. And we haven't seen a hostile Indian."

"Wal, if you look around you'll see two, right hyar," returned Anderson.

Bowden turned. Two lean Indian riders stood near at hand. Neither, apparently, had any weapons. Their mustangs stood tethered to a hitching rail.

"Ha! Those Indian boys hostile?" scoffed Bowden.

"Kiowas. An' every Kiowa is hostile," certified the frontiersman.

"Anderson, will you continue in charge of my train?"

"Yes, sir. I had no idee of quittin'. Jest reckoned it my duty to tell you. An' last I'm shore advisin' you to leave Miss Bowden hyar till a train with a guard of soldiers comes along."

"Uncle John, let us wait for a safer caravan," the girl said, convinced by the scout's earnestness.

"Nonsense! Just think. We can be in California three weeks sooner."

"Mebbe you can. I shore hope so. I'll do my best," concluded Anderson, soberly, and he led Stover away. As he passed the two Kiowas he gave them a strong

scrutiny which apparently was unnoticed. Nevertheless, Bowden observed that as soon as the two men disappeared the Indians lounged in the direction they had taken.

Bowden's wagon train arrived at Cimarron Crossing at dusk on the evening of the ninth. No lights on either side of the wide pale belt of sand and water!

The night was sultry and warm. Sheet lightning flashed. An oppressive silence and melancholy pervaded the vast plain.

They went into camp, and as usual drove the 53 wagons, two abreast, in a close circle, leaving an opening for the stock. All oxen and horses were put to grazing under guard. Bundles of firewood had been hauled from the last camp. Cheery fire, deep voices of men, and the prattle of children, disrupted the solitude and loneliness of the Cimarron.

"Blaisdal an' Hunt shore ought to be hyar tomorrow or next day," Stover went around saying, as if to reassure himself.

Bowden observed that Pike Anderson kept out of his way, a silent, grim man who attended to innumerable tasks. The freighters and pioneers who were crossing the Great Plains for the first time appeared jovial and merry. The experienced had little to say. After supper the former prepared for a comfortable smoke and talk around the camp fires.

"All fires out!" ordered Anderson. "I want twenty men—volunteers to go on guard. Our stock will be driven inside."

"What the helll" exclaimed a farmer from Illinois. The others remained silent.

"Wal, if you won't volunteer, I'll have to pick you out," went on the trail boss. "Smith an' Hall. Dietrich an' Stover. Wallin' an' Bowden." Anderson went on until he had named ten couples. "Keep two together. Spread around the wagons. No smokin'. Watch an' listen. You'll be relieved at twelve o'clock."

Bowden strode up to his wagon, where Cynthia sat on the high seat. "That gloomy Anderson ordered me to do guard duty till mid-night, Cynthia."

"Uncle, all along I have felt something strange creeping upon me. And tonight it possesses me."

"Child, you've grown nervous from the talk of this crabby old plainsman." Bowden climbed up on the wagon to reach in for his rifle. It was a clumsy, heavy gun, a Colt revolving seven-shot arm used on the frontier. "Go to bed, Cynthia," he advised.

"Not yet. Oh, I have been so thrilled by this wonderful adventure!" she exclaimed. "But tonight I can't enjoy it."

Bowden gazed up at the fair face, at the wide violet eyes shining in the camp-fire light, at the wave of golden hair above the

broad high forehead and level brows; and all at once he seemed stricken with a realization that he was responsible for his niece's presence here in this wild country. He strode away with worry beginning to gnaw at his assurance.

Blaisdal's caravan did not show up the next day, which was the tenth. The following morning Anderson sent two men with a field glass to scout from the hilltops ten miles south. That was a wearing day on those left behind. Toward sunset the riders returned. Smith, the older of the two scouts, had been some years on the frontier.

"Nothin' comin' on thet trail to the south. I could see forty miles of it," he reported.

"What I expected," Anderson muttered.

"Then you saw nothing?" demanded Bowden.

"I didn't say thet," replied the scout.

Anderson laid a heavy hand on Smith's knee. "What'd you see?"

"Wal, for one thing I made out two Injun riders haidin' south. I watched them till they went out of sight."

"An' was thet all?"

"Nope. I seen what I reckoned was smoke risin' above a hill, forty, mebbe fifty miles beyond where I last seen the Injun riders."

"What kind of smoke?" queried Anderson gruffly.

"Wal, it come from a fire," rejoined Smith, with a short laugh.

"Was it a steady column of smoke—like from a camp fire?"

"Nope. Jest yellow puffs, few an' far between."

Anderson whirled abruptly to the leader of the caravan. "Bowden, I advise you not to take the Dry Trail."

"That's not new from you, Anderson. You've been against it all along."

"Thet was only caution. I'm advisin' you now," rejoined the plainsman.

"You want to turn back because Smith here saw a couple of Indians and some smoke?" queried Bowden scornfully.

"Thet's why," shot back Anderson.

"That does not please me," went on Bowden. "We are taking the Dry Trail."

Two days' travel across the dry undulating prairie, with the gray bluffs to the west imperceptibly rising clearer, convinced even Bowden that the rigors of this cutoff had not been exaggerated.

Anderson failed to find water at the second camp. Next day the caravan went on with horses and cattle wearing to bad shape. The sun shone hot. There was no breeze. No living creature appeared to Bowden's searching gaze. Heat lifted in shining veils. Hazy bluffs lifted their ramparts and seemed to raise a menacing obstacle to the progress of the wagon

train.

Before the sun set, Anderson, riding ahead to reconnoiter, found a water hole in a shallow rocky gully. At the head of it a bowl protected by rocks caught the trickle from the ledge. Here was drink for beast and man.

The weary freighters camped, slept, and guarded by turns, awoke and hitched up for the trail. Camp succeeded camp, meager in water and grass. If, on the morrow, after the longest and hardest pull, they did not find water at Tanner's Swale, they faced a catastrophe.

Nevertheless, after a cool night the stock started without distress. Anderson made the most of the early morning hours, then slowed up and at midday halted to rest. He had been silent for two days. While he drove Bowden's wagon at the front of the caravan he watched the gray mounting escarpment rising like a wall. Probably the trail ran along its base as it wound to the west.

Noon found them resting. As Anderson gave the word to start again, Smith approached him in haste.

"Pike, I seen smoke signals shore," he said in a low voice.

"What of it? I been seein' 'em all mawnin'."

Bowden heard this exchange of words, and his stubborn obtuseness gave way to apprehension.

Wearily the oxen and horses hauled off the miles. At midafternoon the caravan was still five miles from Tanner's Swale and perhaps half as far from the hill which ran parallel to the trail. At nearer view the bluff was a steep yellow hill with a ragged rim extending along the summit, broken in places.

The wagons creaked: the wheels rolled: the horses plodded: the drivers flicked listless whips.

"Ha! There they are!" suddenly shouted Anderson.

"Who? Where?" called Bowden, climbing out to the front seat.

Anderson halted his yoke of oxen. He pointed toward the top of the hill.

"Oh, Uncle! What is it?" cried Cynthia, emerging from the wagon.

"I can't see anything," rasped Bowden.

Anderson kept pointing until the foremost wagons behind rolled up to halt abreast, then he leaped to the ground. Smith, Hall, Dietrich, Walling, Hones, and other drivers viewed him with concern. Anderson's dark face had lost a shade of its bronze.

"Where's thet damned Stover?" he called.

"Laggin' behind. Not so damn keen as he was fust off," replied someone.

"What you see, Anderson?"

"Why're you holdin' us up?"

Smith answered all these queries with a violent start and a pierc-

ing cry: "By Gawd! Look at thet line of Injuns! I felt it in my bones!"

Everyone's gaze followed the direction indicated by Smith's rigid arm. Sharp eyes could discern a long line of moving objects darkly silhouetted against the pale blue sky. Bowden could make out the wild lean riders, and their wild long-maned ponies. Indian riders!

"*Turn back!*" he shouted involuntarily.

"Too late, boss," replied Anderson. "If thet bunch surrounds us out on the open prairie, we're gone goslin's."

"Are they—hostile?" faltered Bowden.

"Mr. Bowden, all these plains Indians are hostile—when they outnumber the whites," spoke up Smith.

"Outnumber?" echoed Bowden.

The last wagons came lumbering up to be halted by the wide barricade. Stover, with other teamsters, including his two men, came thumping forward.

"Do you see them Injuns?" asked Anderson.

"Hell, yes!" shouted Stover. "We got to be makin' tracks."

"Where?"

"Back along the trail."

"Say, I reckoned you knew Injuns."

"You bet I do."

"Wal, you ought to know thet if thet bunch surrounds us on the prairie they'll kill every damn soul of us."

"If we can rustle back across the Cimarron we—"

"You're drunk or crazy," retorted Anderson.

"Men, stop arguing," ordered Bowden. "What can we do?"

"Only one thing. Make Tanner's Swale," returned Anderson. "It's about five miles. Water there, an' cover. We can make a stand. I reckon we've time."

"Anderson, I'm goin' back with my men," spoke up Stover, dry-lipped. "Come on, Bill—Zeke."

"Stover, I'm curious aboot you," replied Anderson slowly. "I ain't so damn shore thet you're what you say you are. Man, you ain't goin' back! An' if you knowed the West you wouldn't want to try—unless you're a renegade pardner of them Injuns!"

"Anderson, I'll bore you," roared Stover, crooking his right arm. That move spurred the scout into action too swift for the eye. Spurt of red and bellow of gun accompanied it. Stover's wrench for his gun ceased and he fell forward.

"Thar!" rasped out Anderson, as he wheeled toward Stover's two

teamsters. "Drive your wagons out hyar ahaid. Rustle. Or so help me—"

The two men rushed back without a word and leaped upon their wagons.

"Search him, Smith," ordered Anderson. "Rest of you file out of hyar. We got time to make the Swale."

Bowden staggered to his own wagon to find Cynthia with her white face covered by her hands.

"Oh, Uncle! How—awful!" she cried.

"Cynthia! brace up," said Bowden huskily. "We've got to fight!" He climbed aboard and drew his niece within the canvas shelter.

The wagon lurched and rolled on. Anderson had resumed his seat and whip. There were wagons ahead and alongside. Soon they were rolling and careening. Bowden peered out. The gray bluff rose against the blue sky. He could see the long line of Indian riders. What was this that he had rushed into?

The wagon jolted over rough places. Dust rose in yellow clouds. Far ahead a black patch of timber marked the end of the open country. A gap showed between two sharp-banked ridges. The gray promontory loomed higher.

The sunset was a strange, sinister red. Bowden's wagon train had reached the coveted swale and had drawn the 53 wagons, two abreast, into a circle in the thick timber. High banks surrounded the swale. A stream ran through the middle of this oval hollow. Oxen and horses had been turned loose. Grass and willows grew abundantly.

Dusk that followed the sunset had likewise a deep red glow.

"Cook an' eat an' drink," had been Anderson's order.

Several fires burned brightly and men and women moved noiselessly around them. Children huddled in a silent group, watching the men. Before dark the three scouts returned.

"Nary sign or sound of them Injuns," reported one.

"Vamoosed. I reckon they didn't see us," said the second.

Smith, the last in, had been absent from camp since the caravan had arrived at the swale. His face was gray. "Step aside hyar, you fellars," he whispered huskily.

Those who heard him moved as one man.

"No sense lettin' the wimmin an' kids hear," he said, clearing his throat and surveying the still faces in a half-circle before him. "I've been hyar before—know the lay of land. Climbed thet hill. There's another swale down the other side. Old stampin'-ground for redskins.

"I heerd the devils before I seen them. Had to crawl a ways over the top—under the brush. Hyar's your field glass, Mr. Bowden. I shore wish I hadn't had it. Wal

I'll bet I seen three hundred ponies. Then, down in the swale, what 'peared like a thousand Kiowas. Some of them was war-dancin'. But farther down, where I seen most of the Injuns, it struck me kinda strange. What'n' hell was they doin', I says to myself? Then I remembered the glass. I spotted white men; they was dealin' out likker to the Injuns!"

"Some white renegades gittin' the redskins drunk!" ejaculated Anderson.

"Pike, wouldn't you reckon thet means they'll attack us soon?" queried Smith. "Injuns usually wait till just before daybreak."

"There's a white man's hand in this deal," replied Anderson ponderingly. "The moon's about full an' comin' up now. Soon as it clears thet bluff it'll be most as light as day. I reckon then we can expect hell to pop."

"Anderson, we can pop some hell ourselves," spoke up a brave man. "Kelly, Washburn, an' myself hev got three wagon loads of rifles an' ammunition. The rifles are the new Colt's revolvin' chamber. Seven shots in two minutes."

"Ahuh. Let's deal out aboot three of these guns an' plenty of ammunition to each man. Put the wimmin an' kids in the inside wagons. Then all of us, two men together, spread out all around under the wagons an' wait. It's a fight for your lives, men."

## Chapter Four

### *Massacre*

SOON after Anderson's last word the moon rose above the dark escarpment. Gradually all sounds ceased inside the circle. The freighters, on guard, lay behind the outside wheels of the first circle of wagons.

The night was close and warm. To the east, down across the plains, dark clouds lined the horizon and pale flares of lightning shone fitfully. The horses and oxen had grazed down the swale out of hearing. Not a leaf rustled on the trees. The song of insects died altogether. Nature herself seemed locked in suspense.

Before Auderson had placed his men in pairs around the circle, Bowden had approached him, haggard and drawn.

"Scout, if you get my niece and me safely through this night, I'll reward you handsomely."

"Bowden, rewards ain't appealin' to me none jest now—onless it's one in heaven," replied the plainsman wearily.

"There's a false bottom under my wagon—full of gold," whispered Bowden.

"Gold!" ejaculated Anderson.

"Yes, a fortune. I'll pay—"

"To hell with you an' your gold, Bowden," interrupted An-

derson. "Gold can't buy nothin' hyar."

Later, when the men were all in position, Anderson and Smith lay under the wagon in front of Bowden's. The latter had chosen to take his stand in the second line under his own wagon, no doubt under the gold so precious to him and so useless here. In the 53 men there necessarily had to be one without a partner. Bowden was that man.

A long silence ensued. Suddenly Anderson murmured, "Listen!"

"Scout. what'd you think you heerd?" whispered Smith.

"Stone rattlin' down."

"Wal, it's aboot time. Moon must be up a half-hour by now."

"More'n thet. An' I'm up a stump aboot this ambush. It ain't runnin' true to form."

"My turn to hear somethin'," whispered Smith tensely. "Listen."

From the opposite bank of the swale came the hoot of an owl.

"Uhuh. Damn nice done if it's a Kiowa. . . . Aha! Get that. Over on this hyar side. Smithy, you can gamble on two red owls around, anyhow."

Meanwhile the moon climbed and the silver radiance intensified. The solitude and loneliness of the Great Plains grew more pronounced.

"Wal, I wish somethin' would start," whispered Smith. Then he gave his companion a sharp tug. "*Look!*" he pointed up through an opening in the tree tops. Above the black rim of the bluff and sharp against the sky showed a lean form.

"Injun! But don't waste your powder. Thet's farther than it looks."

"I see another movin' along. There! Comin' down."

"Shore. Wal, it won't be long now."

An instant later Anderson heard a slight sound outside and to the right. That was the belt of cover which not only protected the freighters but also the besiegers. It was grass, brush, logs, and moonlit patches alternating with dense shade. Under the wagons, too, were both bright and dark spots. Bowden crouched on hands and knees under his wagon.

Anderson heard a slightly slithery sound. He lay flat on his stomach, rifle extended. Suddenly a red flash belched out of the shade. *Crash!* The heavy report of a buffalo gun almost cracked his eardrum. But swift as thought he shot toward the place whence that red flash had emerged. Simultaneously with this action pealed out a mortal cry. Bowden began to flop and thump around under his wagon like a beheaded turkey.

Terrible moments ensued. The scout expected a roar of rifles, a hideous bursting of war-cries. But absolute silence prevailed. Smith squirmed closer.

"Gawd Almighty! Thet Bowden

should be first!"

"Keep your head down," whispered Anderson, fiercely. "Listen!"

A sound caught the scout's sensitive ear. He located it near the spot toward which he had fired. It resembled a convulsive shuddering contact of something with the earth. His bullet had found the life of one of the ambushers.

Anderson felt certain that this silence could not last. Bowden's train was surrounded, no doubt, by circle on circle of savages, backed up by sharp-shooting white men on the banks. What was holding the Indians from their onslaught?

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* Shots from ambush opened the engagement Anderson had expected. He heard the whistle and thud of bullets. One passed closely over his head; the others struck under the wagon. Then came the whizz of arrows and the peculiar quivering thud of their impact on wood. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* These shots from back in the timber indicated that whoever fired them was under cover. Flares of light showed, but no red spurts of flame. Anderson withheld his fire.

A volley burst from the other side of the circle, and intermingled with it were slighter reports. The battle had begun. Down the line ahead of Anderson a freighter opened up. Red flares showed against the black shadows. From high on the bluff pealed a prolonged yell, an Indian war-cry, hideous, piercing.

Anderson shot low. From his left then, beyond his partner, came the crack of pistols, the boom of rifles, a hollow yell and answering musket shots. The train was surrounded

"Pull thet arrer out of my shoulder," whispered Smith. "Right side—stickin' in my collarbone. God damn thet redskin!"

The scout laid down his rifle and got hold of his comrade. Indeed there was an arrow in him, and deep, at that. When Anderson wrenched it out Smith groaned.

"I'd better bind thet up," whispered Anderson, feeling for his scarf. "You're shore bleedin', man." Anderson got the scarf inside Smith's coat and under his arm. He then pulled it tight and knotted it above the shoulder.

"Zip—reckon thet one took a lock of my hair. Wal, the less in my scalp for some murderin' Kiowa."

"Kill thet—!" whispered Smith. "He's crawlin' up. There!"

Anderson drew a pistol and at its crack the bold savage appeared to sag, then melt into the ground. Anderson stretched out bloody hands for his rifle.

Flares of light, red spurts, gliding black forms across the silver aisles of moonlight, and incessant thudding of lead against the wheels, hubs and bodies of the

wagon attested to the swelling of the attack to a point where the inevitable rush was imminent. Anderson wasted no shots. As the savages grew bolder he waited until one came into the moonlight. Then the frontiersman sent a hot slug through his vitals. He alternated the buffalo gun with the seven-shot revolving Colt. And he kept the second Colt and his two pistols loaded, ready for the onslaught when it came.

Suddenly Smith sank back and down, and a slight tremor passed through his form. Raging and reckless now, Anderson peered out into the fire-spotted moonlit night.

He saw a dark round head protrude from behind a tree. It must have belonged to the Kiowa who had killed Smith. Swift as a flash Anderson aligned his buffalo gun with it and fired.

Then once more Anderson addressed all his faculties to what confronted him. Tongues of flame leaped out of the shade, out of the brush, out of the moon-blanched space. But he did not see any red gun-belchings from under the wagons to his left and right.

An almost unbroken roar hung over the swale. It must have come from four times 50 rifles. Certainly it ringed the circle of wagons.

The time came when the scout could no longer hear. He remembered a slight sensation, as if he had knocked his head against the wagon; he felt light and queer. Meanwhile he knew that another stage of the attack was under way. The Kiowas were running, darting, gliding along the side of the circle. He saw them flash by with incredible fleetness, firing under the wagons as they ran. He knew they were yelling now, though he could not hear a sound. What strange silence locked him within its walls! His hearing had gone. Then he felt warm blood creeping down his neck.

The devils raced to and fro, from black shadow to silver lane. Anderson cursed his clumsy aim. His hands felt thick and slow. But he fired as fast as he could. Most of the Indians were armed with bows and arrows. Anderson felt the wrench of an arrow as it tore through his coat. He became aware then that the increasing flashes of red came from the grass and brush, low down, and that the running lines of savages were back of the line of fire. If he had only guessed that sooner!

The dizziness persisted. Closer crept the red-spurting line. The Indians were crawling up on the wagons. The end seemed near. Anderson rallied his clouding faculties to meet it. He thought only to kill more of these ruthless foes. They were closing in.

The red flashes crept out of the shadow into the moonlit space between wagons and timber. Ander-

son emptied his Colt, and drew his six-barreled pistols and emptied them. That left him a seven-shot Colt fully loaded. While he fired this he felt hot lead in his flesh somewhere. But neither strength nor will was impaired.

Turning the heavy weapon, he seized the hot barrel and crawled out from under the wagon. Leaping erect he made at the dark rising figures and swung upon their shining skulls. But he seemed to have leaped against a wall. The moonlight strangely changed. Where was the clubbed rifle? His nerveless hands! A staggering shock! What? The moonlight failed—all black—night! . . .

Cynthia Bowden crawled under her cot inside Bowden's big canvas-covered wagon. She had just had sharp words with her uncle. Anderson and the men expected an attack from the Indians. Cynthia had been affronted and disgusted at Bowden's offer of gold to Anderson. He was a coward and these Westerners had recognized it. "To hell with yor an' your gold!" the scout had said in scorn. And now Bowden was crawling about under the wagon.

Cynthia lay there with her head near the foot of the wagon. What would become of her if the men were all killed? She knew what would happen to her if she were carried into captivity. Horrible! She would take her own life. There was a pistol in the wagon.

All silent outside! How formidable! Something awful was about to come.

Her waiting, surcharged faculties were prepared for a sudden bursting gunshot, almost under the wagon, then a second bang, and a strangled scream from Bowden. She lay stiff with horror.

What could she do? Why had she ever come on this mad journey? And into her consciousness flashed a thought of what might have been, a futile remorse which only her present misery could ever have wrenched from her. If she had only listened to Stephen when he had come to her, shamed with his guilt but manful enough to confess it, importuning her to elope with him, to trust him.

In this menacing moment Cynthia saw her brother in as evil a light as he had forced her to see Stephen Latch. If she had only listened to the voice of love. Had it been only two brief years since she had driven Stephen away? And here she, Cynthia Bowden, lay terror-stricken in a wagon out on the wild plains, surrounded by bloodthirsty savages!

Reports of guns sounded far away. They came closer and clearer. The attack had begun. How could a handful of white men hold out indefinitely against hundreds of savages? Cynthia heard the fire of guns increase, the ping of bullets, and the quivering thud

of something into the sides of the wagon. Forcing herself to face the dreadful issue, she decided that she must find her uncle's pistol and hold it in readiness to destroy herself when all hope failed. Whereupon she crawled out from under the cot.

She saw an Indian arrow sticking under one of the wooden hoops. This spurred her on to a frantic search for the gun. She could not find it and soon the tearing of missiles through canvas drove her back under the cot. Here she was reasonably protected, for the sides of the wagon were heavily boarded.

Then a hideous period of increasing terror followed until suddenly a calmness of despair settled over her. What avail all this torture of spirit? She crawled from her covert and sat upon the cot.

All at once the gunshots were drowned in a sound so terrible that she fell flat. This must be the war cry of the Indians.

Cynthia had the strength to peer out through the slit in the canvas door at the rear. The circle inclosed by the white-tented wagons appeared as light as day. Nimble dark forms were darting here, there, everywhere. Savages!

Cynthia saw everything at once. She was witness to a massacre. She could not move, nor even close her eyes. Every instant the number of moving figures increased within the circle. Fewer and fewer grew the red spurts of guns. The battle now had changed again. Bowden's men, those who were alive, were driven into the open, there to contend in a hand-to-hand struggle, a few against many.

From under the wagon next to hers, on the outside, had burst a continuous fire. Streaks of smoke kept shooting out from the wheels. Then through the narrow gap between the wagons a giant leaped into sight, swinging a gleaming object. Her stunned faculties still retained power of recognition. That giant was Anderson beating at a pack of savages. Then he ceased his gigantic swings, swayed and fell, to disappear under a swarm of wriggling Indians.

Suddenly Cynthia's hands were rudely wrenched from the flaps of canvas. They were spread wide. In the aperture appeared lean dark arms, dark nude shoulders, dark small head. The moonlight fell upon them and upon a barbaric visage—bronzed, cruel. The dark face blurred and faded. Cynthia lost her senses. . . .

When she recovered consciousness she heard and felt the familiar action of the wagon in motion. She opened her eyes. Where was she? What had happened? The canvas let in the sunlight; day had come! Glimpses of blue sky showed through rents and slits in that white canopy. She saw an Indian arrow sticking in one of the

hoop supports. Ah! All flashed into memory with almost stupefying vividness. The wagon train! The suspense! The murder of her uncle that initiated the attack of the savages! The infernal din—the massacre!

But she had escaped. She was alive. She lay on her cot, with feet and hands securely tied, and a scarf bound round her mouth. Captive! Worse than dead! But voices outside, from the driver's seat, suddenly dispelled her despair. Surely this was not the jargon of Indians. She listened, feeling her heart leap with hope

"Sprall, the chief planned and executed a great raid."

These words were undoubtedly spoken by an American, and the leisurely drawl proclaimed him a Southerner.

"Wal, he's got brains, shore, Leighton," replied the man called Sprall. "But I give most of the credit to old Satana—bloody devil that he is. We shore didn't git off without a scratch, as my own hurt testifies. An' there's Waldron an' Nigger Jack killed, Keetch crippled, Creik shot through the hand, Augustine packin' a bullet in his thigh, Cornwall hurt, Mandrove bad hurt, but he'll live; an' Black Hand nursin' a bullet hole. Let's see. Thet leaves only the boss an' you, Texas an' Lone Wolf, without a scratch. We got a pretty hard knock."

"Little enough for what we

earned," returned the other. "It's a rich haul. Three wagon loads of guns and ammunition. No end of flour, bacon, beans, sugar, coffee, tobacco! Hardware, house furnishings, bedding. And all that in less than a third of the wagons."

"How about money?"

"We got a pack of greenbacks, gold in money-belts, and silver off freighters. But no search of bags yet."

"Will thet money be divided?"

"Yes. Share and share alike."

"Ahuh. Wal, the boss is a man you can depend on. We'll go into hidin' at Spider Web till this blows over."

"Blows over! It will never be heard of. Just a lost wagon train!"

"Things have a queer way of comin' out, even murder. But it shore was a good job. Not a rag or a tin can left at Tanner's Swale! The boss's idea of haulin' everything away, daid men an' all, shows what a long haid he has. We've shore got a load of stiffs on these wagons. Sixty-some daid Kiowas, an' all the wagon-train outfit."

"Not all daid, Sprall," said Leighton. "I've a live girl inside this wagon."

"Yes, an' thet's the only bad move in this deal!" spoke up Sprall. "If the boss finds it out

he'll kill you. An' me, too, though I had nothin' to do with it."

"He won't find it out now."

"But man alive, air you oot of your haid?" protested Sprall. "If I got the boss's idee we're to drive these wagons with all they con tain across a short cut to the rim of Spider Web. All the stuff is to be lowered down on ropes. The hosses an' oxen go to Satana, as his share of the deal. An' the wagons air to be slid off the cliff where no tracks will ever show. So how'n hell can you hide this girl? She'll have to eat an' drink. An' soon as her mouth's untied she'll squall.

"I'll tell you, Leighton, it's a crazy idea. The boss's rule is to kill every last one of any wagon train so no one livin' can tell it. I'm givin' you a hunch. Take care. An' I'm not meanin' the boss He'll kill you. I'm meanin' m· ootfit They won't stand for this break of yours."

"Suppose I let them in the secret, and share the girl after—"

"No. It'd split our outfit wide open. Like as not Texas would take a shot at you for hintin' it. He's a Texan. Mandrove, Rebel deserter an' outcast that he is, once was a preacher. He'd shy at thet. Waldron is daid. Creik'd fall in with your idee. But thet leaves me, an' I won't."

"All the same I'll go through with it—alone!" declared Leighton.

## Chapter Five

### *Strange Reunion*

THE DAWN broke slowly and strangely over Tanner's Swale, as if nature were loath to let the light brighten again over the scene of the lost wagon train. No rosy glow suffused the east. Mist and smoke hung low like a curtain and the shadows persisted. The gray old bluff frowned forbiddingly down upon the monotonous melancholy prairie.

But the scene that morning was one of extraordinary activity and life. Latch's band and Satana's Kiowas were making away with their prize. Latch sat his horse on the ridge above the swale and watched, occasionally sending down an order by Cornwall. Satana was there, in the thick and press of the labors.

Since sunset of yesterday Latch had recourse to rum in a vain endeavor to drown something in him that had the lives of a hydra-headed dragon. The fiery liquor however, had only heightened his perceptions. Screams of anguish! They would peal in his ears forever. But it was over now. Death had stalked by moonlight. Dawn had broken. Life had to go on for him until. . . .

Latch watched the strenuous labors of the Indians and his men.

The oxen and horses had been driven up from the lower swale. One by one the covered wagons had been hitched to teams and drawn out into the open. Kiowa braves were filing over the ridge with their ponies. Latch watched the dead and crippled being put upon the wagons. Satana had paid a bloody price for this raid.

With his left arm in a sling, young Cornwall rode up for a last order. He was whistling. His face showed no pain or remorse. Latch marveled at him.

"Colonel, we're about ready to leave," he announced coolly. "The whole swale has been searched. No more found!"

"How many braves did Satana lose?" queried Latch.

"Sixty-nine. Some of the cripples will die. It's a bloody mess."

"How many—whites?" asked Latch huskily.

"We made no count."

"Tell Keetch to start when there's not a vestige left of the massacre," ordered Latch presently. "Not a rag, not a shell, not a stain of blood, not a track of wheel or boot or moccasin."

"All right, Colonel. We'll not leave a sign."

The oxen toiled up the long gray slope with the heavy wagons. Lines of Indian riders rode beside them. Far ahead a cortège of wagons drawn by horses led the way up the hill. The prairie schooners likewise hauled dead and wounded. In the rear rode the cripples who were able to straddle a horse.

There was no road, not even a trail. The wagons zigzagged up a gradual slope, bare patches of hard clay alternating with plots of thick grass. Antelope and deer watched the strange cavalcade drag by. A vague gray waste yawned far out and down—the prairie being left behind for the uplands. Purple domes of mountains stood up above the horizon.

Keetch, with the Kiowa scout, Hawk Eye, led the procession, and Latch brought up the rear. Lester Cornwall had dropped back to ride with his chief. Their companions were a dozen wounded Kiowas, sagging on their mustangs.

By midday Latch's band had surmounted the escarpment and were winding over level range or rolling downgrade. To Latch, that beckoning broken purple wilderness was an alluring haven of rest, where cool shade and running water meant assuagement of choking thirst.

At intervals Lester Cornwall addressed his chief. "Colonel, I have to report that I suspect Leighton," spoke up the youth, repeating himself deliberately.

The third time this statement fell upon Latch's dull ears its significance registered. He lifted his head. "Leighton? What do you

suspect, Lester?"

"He's driving a big prairie schooner, a grand sort of vehicle like a boat. It's new. There are big letters in red on the front. Tullt and Co. No. I A."

"Tullt and Co.? I know them. They have the largest establishment in Independence. Rich concern. Outfitters, freighters, fur-buyers."

"I think Leighton has got something in that wagon he's trying to hide." went on Cornwall.

"Why do you think that?" queried Latch, with dawning interest.

"It just struck me. Sprall is on the driver's seat with Leighton. I've been watching them. They talk too much."

"What's in this wagon?"

"I've no idea. It's a big one, fully loaded; it has a round canvas top. Look—Leighton is driving halfway between our men and the Kiowas."

"Maybe he and Sprall smelled rum."

"I'll find out and report to you before night, Colonel," replied Cornwall, and he spurred his horse to a trot.

Latch was left alone with his silent cripples. He realized that he was unfitted for the leadership he had enforced. His intelligence, his executive ability, his power to sway and will to command were enormously handicapped by his imagination, his tendency to poignant emotion. Between these forces he would be fettered to a sleepless and horrible remorse.

Ahead the white wagons wound over the gray waste. The hours and miles grew apace. A westering sun lost its heat

Before the magenta sun had sunk behind the black ramparts in the west, Latch, who had lagged far behind, rode over a cedared ridge to find the cavalcade had halted to camp in a wide low-walled amphitheater nestled between sparsely wooded hills. A brook bisected the level valley floor and shone ruddily under the sinking sun. Cottonwood trees, like stragglers from a herd, led down from the main grove.

Keetch had drawn up the smaller number of canvas-covered wagons across the brook just outside the thick grove. Satana and his followers selected the more open plot for their encampment. Probably they would bury their dead here.

Latch gave the Kiowas a wide berth and rode up the amphitheater to cross the brook above. After the exhausting day how restful the shade and the green!

He rode on slowly. He hated to face the men, his responsibility, and the irrevocable. But orders had to be given. He rode on under the trees, and presently sighted a boat-shaped wagon apart from the others. It had been drawn up under a huge spreading

walnut tree some distance from the camp. Under the adjoining walnut stood an old cabin with adobe roof partly washed away.

As Latch passed he heard voices on the other side of the big wagon. Leighton's high-pitched voice was unmistakable.

"Say, what the hell are you sneaking around heah again for?" he demanded of someone.

The reply was indistinguishable to Latch, but the tone was youthful, cool, provocative. Cornwall. Then Latch remembered. He resisted an impulse to ride by, noting, however, that the rear door of the big canvas-covered wagon pointed toward the cabin. Latch's sharp gaze next took in the red letters on the front—Tullt and Co. No. 1 A. Riding into camp, he dismounted, and throwing off saddle and bridle, he let his horse go.

The camp scene presented no bustle and cheer common to plains travelers at the end of a wearisome day. Men were moving about, but painfully, silently. Latch approached Keetch.

"How'd you make out?"

"Hard day, chief," responded Keetch. "An' makin' camp ain't no picnic for cripples. Cain't you see that Leighton an' Cornwall lend us a hand?"

"Yes, and I'll help myself."

"Our redskin pards will be better tomorrer, I reckon," went on Keetch.

"I gather they'll bury their dead here."

"Shore. An' we oughter do the same."

"Colonel, Leighton has a girl in his wagon," interposed Cornwall's ringing voice. "I saw him carry her out into that log cabin."

"A *girl!* — Alive?"

"Yes, and unhurt, to judge by the way she kicked."

"Where'd he get her?" queried Latch, conscious of a coalescing fury within.

"Tanner's Swale, of course. She must have been one the Kiowas missed. I saw Leighton drag her out of the wagon. He had a hand over her mouth. She had bright long hair which hung down. Colonel, she is a very beautiful girl."

Like a lion at bay, Latch eyed the seven of his band who had grouped behind Keetch. The man Latch sought was not present. On the moment, however, he emerged from between two wagons and came forward. His dark wizened face and beady eyes showed concern, but he meant to brazen it out.

"Sprall!" whipped out Latch.

"Yes, boss. I'm hyar. I been lookin' after Leighton's hosses."

"Did you ride with Leighton all day?"

"I did. Shore."

"You knew Leighton had a girl hidden in his wagon," asserted the leader.

Sprall was not prepared for such

revelation. "Boss, all day I been tryin' to show Leighton that he was crazy in the haid," he said, in hoarse haste. "But the man is mad about wimmen."

"How'd he come to have her in that wagon?"

"Jest aboot the end of the fight he saved the gurl from bein' scalped by an Injun. Shot him daid! It happened in the door of that big Tullt wagon. I was the onlucky fellar to see it. The gurl had lost her senses. Leighton pushed her back in the wagon, an' gittin' in he tied her up. An' he swore he'd kill me if I gave him away."

"Sprall, I'll kill you for not giving Leighton away," yelled Latch, and shot the man through the heart. Sprall fell without a sound. Latch gazed down upon the body, and then at the members of his band.

"That goes for every man who breaks my rule," he said, in cold, deadly passion.

"Boss—I, ler one, stand by you," replied Keetch, in a hard tone. But he was the only member of the band to speak.

Latch sheathed his gun and stalked out of the circle. When he got beyond the wagons he looked back. Some of the men were following, and he recognized Keetch and Cornwall in the lead.

It was some distance to the trees where Leighton had left his wagon. Latch quickened his pace. He strode around the wagon to face the dark open door of the dilapidated cabin. Here he drew his gun, to be ready if Leighton stepped out. Then he heard a woman's voice.

"Oh, my God, have pity on me!"

Strangely that voice tore at Latch's heartstrings. But he thought only of its low, anguished utterance. He stepped to the front door.

Last rays of the sun shone into the cabin. In their light Leighton stood revealed clasping a woman in his arms. A white arm hung limp. Her clothing was in torn shreds. Her long golden hair fell in a disheveled mass.

Latch leveled the gun.

"Damn you. Let go that woman, Leighton!"

The man turned, his expression of passion changing to one of anger. But he had no time to speak. Latch fired. The heavy bullet whirled Leighton around so that he fell toward the door. The girl collapsed against the wall.

Latch reached her in time to save her from falling. With the hand that still held the gun he sought to draw up her dress to hide her nudity.

Hearing steps and hoarse whispers, he wheeled to see Keetch and Cornwall peering through the door, with the others of his band trying to see over their shoulders. Leighton lay on his back, his face

bloody.

"Keetch, drag him out," ordered Latch. "Lester, guard the door. Keep them back."

Keetch stepped over the log portal to lay hold of Leighton. As he dragged him out, Cornwall backed against the door-post, a gun in each hand.

Latch sheathed his gun, but even then he could not rearrange the girl's torn clothing to cover her. He thought she had lost consciousness, but to his amazement she stirred; she rose from her knees, weakly swaying against the wall.

"Lady, I thought you'd fainted," spoke up Latch.

"Another—white man!" she whispered, scarcely audibly. "Oh, you shot—that beast—only to take me—yourself!"

"No. I'm not so bad as that," replied Latch bitterly.

A gasp broke from her and she sagged a little against the wall.

"You—don't mean to harm me—then murder me—as I heard that man—"

"I killed Leighton for breaking my rule," said Latch.

"Then you have saved me?" she cried.

The query brought Latch violently up against the monstrous situation. By his own decree every member of that wagon train had to die. He had shed blood of his own band for this girl, but if he kept his word he must mete out murder to her, also. All at once Latch found himself really seeing her as she leaned face to the wall. The luxuriant hair had a wave, a sheen that acted as a blade driven into his side. Did he know that hair? Horror began to edge into his realization.

"Yes, I have saved you for the present," he returned.

She trembled, then turned in a flash, disclosing her face. White as chalk it was, with strained dark eyes widening.

"Am I mad?—*Who are you?*" cried Latch, in a frenzy.

"*Stephen!* You—you! Oh, that you should be the one to save me!" She sank to her knees, clasping him with nerveless hands.

"*No!* It can't be! Not you!"

"Yes, it is I—Cynthia," she whispered.

Latch all but collapsed. Such a searing agony of spirit claimed him that he might have been in the throes of torture.

"I've prayed for merciful death," she whispered. "My faith in God almost failed. But that *you* should drop from heaven—Oh, God, forgive me! Oh, Stephen, forgive me!"

"Hush! Don't kneel—to me! Cynthia, you don't realize how awful—"

"It *was* awful! But I'm saved. By you! I meet you here in this wilderness of cutthroats. Who else could have saved me? I—I would come on this mad journey. Some-

thing lured me."

"Get up, please," he begged huskily.

"No, I belong here at your feet."

"Good God, woman, you're out of your mind!" He laid hold of her with shaking hands, but she resisted his efforts to draw her up. She lifted a supplicating face.

"Don't try to stop me. I *will* tell you," she went on. "I loved you—I loved you even when I deserted you."

Latch forgot where he was, forgot his lieutenant at the door, and the hounds of his band outside. Her eloquent eyes, her clasping arms, her incredible confession transformed him as if by a miracle. He was back in the hour when he had expected his dream to come true.

Lifting her swiftly, he held her to his breast. "Cynthia, you loved me then? Loved me when you cast me off? Let your brother—"

"Yes, yes! Oh, if I had only known!" she faltered. "But Howard found out about your affair with—that woman—they told me. They proved it—and, oh, it hurt so. I could have killed you."

"Cynthia, did they tell you that I never saw that woman again after I met you?" he asked gravely.

"No, they didn't. Is that true?"

"Absolutely!"

"But we heard—it was in the papers—your disgrace, your dismissal from the army—your duel—the death of Thorpe."

"Yes, my ruin was well advertised. But, Cynthia, I worshiped you. From the moment I met you I was a changed man. I should have told you of my wildness at college and all about that—that affair. But I didn't have the courage."

"So Howard lied," she burst out.

"Lied? Yes! He owed me thousands. Gambling debts. So he hatched that plan to ruin me. He and Thorpe hated me. He wanted Thorpe to marry you. It was all so despicable."

"Yes. Of me, as well as of them! But, Stephen, I was jealous of that woman! It warped my judgment. It made me believe my love had turned to hate—but it hadn't. I was just sick—furious."

"Ah, to learn all this too late!" cried Latch, remembering.

"Darling, it is never too late. Don't turn from me now. I was weak, yes. I failed you. I had to suffer to find myself. And even after I found out what you had done to Howard and that you shot Thorpe, I would have eloped with you, if you had come for me. But you did not."

Latch bowed his head over her, holding her close. "Too late," he said again.

"It is not too late—unless you do not want me, love me." There was fear in the girl's voice.

Latch released her. He had lived

one hour too long. If Leighton had only faced him then, there would have been a reversal of the tragedy.

*"Stand back!"* The raucous command startled Latch. He turned to see Cornwall backed against the door-post, his two guns extended.

"Cornwall, you ain't meanin' you'd fire on us jest for insistin' on seein' the boss?" That was Keetch's voice.

"Come one more step and see," taunted the youth.

Latch raised his voice. "Keetch, what do you want?"

"Latch, personal. I don't want anythin' but a little peace," boomed the old outlaw. "But your shootin' Sprall an' Leighton has upset the outfit. Who will you shoot next?"

"Any man who opposes me. Is Leighton dead?"

"No. But he's aboot as good as daid. An' Black Hand an' Augustine hev gone over to Leighton's side."

"How about Lone Wolf?"

"Wal, he'll stick. But we don't want to fight. An' they hev demands."

"All right, I'll listen. Give me five more minutes."

When Latch turned again to face Cynthia, to meet her eyes took all the manhood that was left in him.

"Cynthia, you've heard. I am the leader of Latch's Band," he said.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Outlaw Wedding*

SHE echoed his words with dry lips.

"Yes," went on Latch, hurriedly. "After killing Thorpe, I fled. I organized a band of desperados. At first we were guerrillas, fighting against the North. But soon we drifted into robbery. From that to crime—and lastly to massacre."

"My uncle's wagon train!" exclaimed Cynthia, in horror. "But those murderers were Indians. I saw them."

"Yes, Indians. My Indians! *I* was the leader, the instigator of that massacre. I, Stephen Latch, son of an old Southern family, once a lover of Cynthia Bowden. Now, an associate of outlaws and criminals. To this you have brought me!"

*"I!"*

"Surely. Your faithlessness. Your scorn," he replied bitterly.

"Better that the savage had killed me!" she whispered.

"Better indeed! The law of my band was to kill every soul. To leave no trace! And the horror of this situation is that I fear I cannot save your life."

"I don't want to live—now," she said brokenly. "But you will not let these men take me to—to—"

"They will have to kill me first,

Cynthia."

"But, Stephen, if death is the edict of your band—*you* kill me. I will welcome death at your hands. Swear you will save me that way—if—"

"*Kill you?* Cynthia, *how* could I? You don't know what you ask."

"But if it is the only way," she appealed. "Stephen, you say you love me still. Then you cannot see these men defile me."

"No!" he burst out, lifting his head. "I could not. I promise."

"Thank you," she whispered. "Stephen, I am ready to die, at last. To have met you once more, to find what I have done to you, to confess my faithlessness, my remorse, and the love nothing could change—oh, that makes it easy."

For a moment he held her close. Then he faced the door.

"Lester, bring them in," he called.

The youth beckoned carelessly with his guns, then stepped across the log threshold into the cabin. First to enter behind him was the lean sardonic gunman, Lone Wolf. The others followed quickly, a lame, bloody, ferocious band of men.

Lone Wolf turned significantly to back across the room and stand beside Latch. Cornwall came sidewise, still with his guns in hands.

"Keetch, are you with me or against me?" demanded Latch.

"Boss, I stand between. I wouldn't raise a hand ag'in' you or any of my pards. That's me."

"Very well. That satisfies me. So it's Cornwall an' Lone Wolf with me against the five of them. Who's going to do the talking?"

"Wal, I've been elected to that," replied Keetch.

"Get back from the door, so I can see you all," demanded Latch.

Keetch lined them up in a slant across the opposite corner. Latch's mind had swiftly evolved a plan, but if it did not succeed he meant to kill Cynthia before he let loose on the men.

"Now, Keetch, what do these men want?" demanded the leader.

"Wal, boss, they talked it over an' took a vote."

"On what?"

"They reckon you're no different from Leighton. You wanted the gurl, and so you took your law as excuse to kill your men. None of us doubts but thet you'll put her oot of the way when it suits you. But they—an' I mean this majority hyar—figger thet's as fair for them as for you. They want the gurl—to share her same as the money an' rum an' all thet we got there in them wagons."

"Well, men, under ordinary circumstances, your demand would be fair," said Latch. "In this case, however, it's absolutely impossible for me to give in to it."

"An' why?" queried Keetch. "Latch, you hardly need be told that you're on trial hyar by the majority of your band."

"On trial for what?" countered Latch.

"For killin' Sprall, an' shootin' Leighton."

"You have no right to try me for that," returned Latch forcefully. "I was absolutely true to my word. It is the law of our band. I killed Sprall on his own word that he knew Leighton had betrayed us. I shot Leighton in the act of maltreating this girl. But not for that. I shot him *because* he had brought her along with us—alive."

"Latch, you swear to thet?"

"Yes, I swear. I never looked at the girl until after Leighton fell."

"Wal, as fer thet, Cornwall told you she was beautiful. We all heerd him. But I'll take your word, Latch. Now, men, speak up: yes if you believe the boss, no if you don't. Texas, how aboot you?"

"Yes," replied the gunman.

"No, *señor*," replied the Mexican, Augustine.

"Yes," said Mandrove, the preacher.

Creik and Black Hand shouted in unison, "No!"

"Wal, boss, countin' me it's a daidlock. Three of us believe you and three don't. Thet's aboot as good as acquittal, accordin' to court rules. An' now we'll heah why you won't give the gurl up or share her with your men."

"I'm your leader, I know," rejoined Latch deliberately. "Satana and I are solely responsible for that raid last night. His Indians were drunk and you men were merely tools. My orders were to kill everyone, but I can't stand for violation of this girl—or any girl."

"Pards, I'm ag'in' Latch," drawled Texas. "But to kill this woman that way doesn't go with me."

"Put that to a vote," sang out Creik.

Keetch, evidently relieved at what seemed favorable to the leader, did as bidden. The vote went against Latch.

"Wal, Cornwall, we don't need your vote, but we'd like to heah it, anyway."

"I'd never vote to save any woman's honor," flashed the youth, with a terrible blaze in his eyes.

Latch was stunned. He felt betrayed by one he trusted.

"Latch, you lost this time," resumed Keetch.

"Can I buy her freedom?" queried the leader. "I'll turn over all money and goods—and the rum back in Spider Web for you to divide among yourselves."

The hot harangue that followed soon ended in a victory for Latch.

"All right, boss, you buy her freedom," said Keetch.

"What's he mean by freedom?" queried one.

"Why, her body—while she's livin'," replied another.

"I mean her life, too," rang out Latch.

"Latch, air you oot of your

haid?" queried Keetch, plaintively. "You cain't make a law for your band—set them to spill blood—and then break thet law yourself."

"If you'll let me explain—" began Latch.

But Lone Wolf interrupted with cold sarcastic speech directed at his rival gunman. "You never was born in Texas."

The gunman's face turned scarlet, then paled. "Hell you say!" he replied coolly, but his eyes gave forth a wicked light.

"Yes, the hell I say!"

Keetch interfered hurriedly. "Hyar, you gamecocks. This is a court, not a place for you gun-throwers to clash."

"Shet up," said Texas, curtly.

"Keep oot of this heah, you old geezer!" added Lone Wolf. "Texas, I'm callin' you. You're from some place where women air white trash. Not from Texas!"

"I heahed you," rejoined Texas malignantly. "An' I'm sayin' you'll swaller that—or you'll swaller lead."

They eyed each other. The thing between them was not of the moment. Each would have welcomed any excuse to meet on common ground.

Probably the gunmen saw in each other's eyes the lightning-like betrayal of thought, motive, stimulus to action. A convulsive wrestling sound ended in the simultaneous flash and bang of guns. Under the smoke Latch saw Wolf stagger and fall. When that smoke lifted it disclosed Texas on his face, smoking gun in hand, and still as stone.

Keetch uttered a hoarse cough. "Aggh! Wal, they always itched fer this. An' one time's as good as another so far's we're concerned. It changes nothin'."

Latch did not agree with Keetch's pronouncement. Few men were wholly impervious to sudden death.

"Men, listen," he said. "Circumstances alter cases. I feel justified in breaking my own law. I'm opposing you! And I'll fight till the last beat of my heart. Not one man of us will come out of this alive. Now I ask you, hear my reasons before it's too late."

"Wal, boss, speak up," said Keetch.

Before Latch could moisten his dry lips to give utterance Cynthia moved out from behind him. She stood erect, with little head uplifted.

"Please let me tell the story," she began in a voice that stilled them. "I am Cynthia Bowden, niece of John Bowden, whose wagon train you massacred last night. I—I am the sole survivor. I am twenty-three years old; I lived in Boston. When I was seventeen I knew Stephen Latch. I met him during his last year in college. He was a friend of my brother Howard Bowden.

"When Stephen went back home to Louisiana we were interested in each other. He came North frequently. The time came when we fell in love with each other My brother was a gambler. Stephen won a large sum from him, more than he could pay. And when Howard found out about the attachment between us he saw a way to ruin Stephen.

"He used and exaggerated a connection Stephen had had with a disreputable woman. He inflamed me with jealousy and hatred so that I openly scorned Stephen, drove him to his ruin. Stephen horsewhipped Howard in the lobby of the Boston Hotel.

"The war broke out. Stephen asked for a commission in the Confederate army. Meanwhile I had accepted the attentions of another Southerner, a friend of Howard's and rival of Stephen's. His name was Thorpe. He had received a commission as colonel. With Howard's connivance Thorpe disgraced Stephen, so that the commission was denied him. A duel followed. Stephen—killed Thorpe. And he fled—an outlaw."

She paused a moment as if to gather strength.

"All of you know how he organized this band, meaning to wage guerrilla warfare against the Northerners, how he fell into robbery, and then to horrible crime. It must have been a strange dispensation of God that I escaped that massacre, that I was carried away—to meet Stephen Latch face to face. I had failed him, deserted him. I am the cause of his degradation. Before God I must be responsible for his being an outcast—a murderer—that is my story. That is why he bought my freedom from you, why he seeks to save my life. But I am ready to die."

A long pause, which Keetch, with difficulty, broke. "Wal, by Gawd!" he rolled out. "Fellars, did you ever heah the like? Circumstances do alter cases. An' I'm fer lettin' her live."

"Wha-at! An' go oot to put the soldiers on our tracks?" ejaculated Creik.

"That gurl would never betray Latch."

"If we knowed she wouldn't, I'd say let her go."

These and other comments showed how Cynthia's beauty and tragic eloquence had swayed the outlaws. Keetch turned to her with something of deference.

"Lady, we might break our law an' let you live."

"I—I don't care to live. I have become alienated from my family—my uncle has been murdered—"

"Wal, it's shore tough," interrupted Keetch kindly. "But you're young. Life is sweet. Latch hyar won't always be a robber. Do you still love him?"

"I do love him. I always did."

"Wal, you can marry Latch,"

rejoined Keetch. "It's the only way to save your life. Will you?"

"Yes," she replied.

"You cain't ever go back there," said Keetch. his broad hand sweeping the east and north "You'll be an outlaw's wife You'll have to hide an' live in the loneliest canyon in this hyar West. Will you do that, too?"

"Yes—if Stephen wants me."

"Want you?" breathed Latch passionately. "That idea never came to me. Cynthia, if you'll marry me— Surely I'll not always be—"

"Yes," she whispered, as if dazed. "I said I'd follow you—to the end of the world."

Keetch spoke gleefully. "Boss, you win. An' you're a lucky dog. Fellars, drag oot these Texas roosters thet'd rather shoot than eat turkey. Mandrove, I reckon you can do the trick, huh?"

"Marry them?" queried the ex-preacher.

"Shore. Splice them proper an' bindin'?"

"Indeed I can. I've kept my Bible," replied Mandrove.

"Go fetch it an' somethin' you can write a marriage certificate on. If we haven't got nothin', we'll shore find it in this Bowden oot-fit."

Creik and Augustine had dragged the bodies of the dead men outside.

Mandrove limped out on his errand, and Cornwall, cold and strange, went to the door to gaze out. This affair did not have his approval. Keetch and Black Hand sat down to wait. Latch had stepped to Cynthia's side. Moments passed

The outcast minister returned with something beside his Bible—a change of mien, of look Even his voice, as he read the marriage service, seemed different.

In what seemed the longest and most poignant moment of Latch's life, Mandrove ended with, "I pronounce you man and wife." He knelt. "Let us pray."

## Chapter Seven

### *Kit Carson*

'RING came early at Fort Union that year of 1863. It had been an unusually mild winter in the mountains of Colorado and New Mexico. The great fur-trading business had passed its zenith years before; nevertheless, trapping was still done extensively by trappers who worked independently. This had been a favorable season for them, and a hundred or more had come down out of the hills with their pelts. Tullt and Company bought 100,000 pelts that spring.

By April tenth Fort Union was busier than it had been at any time since the beginning of the

Civil War. Two wagon trains had arrived that day, one of 174 wagons from Santa Fe, bound east, and the other of 86 wagons under escort from Fort Dodge by way of the Cimarron Crossing and the Dry Trail. This caravan was under Bill Burton, an old scout, and it had come in with some dead and many wounded to report a scrimmage with Comanches. But for the escort of dragoons they probably would have been wiped out.

What with the tents and shacks outside the stockade, Fort Union presented quite a settlement. Thousands of horses and cattle grazed out on the bleached grama grass of the range. The wide gate to the fort stood open and unguarded. Tullt and Company had their large store inside the stockade, where they kept on hand an immense stock of merchandise, from caravan wagons to candy.

The Indians presented a motley assemblage. The majority were dirty and shiftless. There were two-score and more of white men just as dirty and shiftless as the Indians. These were the riffraff of the frontier, a bane to all the forts.

Major Greer had charge of ten troops of dragoons. Fort Union was then a distributing point for all New Mexico, and owing to the increasing hostility of the Indians, the movement of freight and the escort of caravans had grown exceedingly difficult to manage.

It was cold enough to make a wood fire pleasant in the bare log-cabin-like office where Major Greer sat at his table. He looked the bluff red-faced plains soldier of the period.

"Captain," he spoke up, addressing the middle-aged officer who bent a rugged wrinkled face over a pile of letters, "where'd I hear of Bowden's wagon train before this?"

"Bowden? Let's see," replied Captain Massey. "Sounds familiar. There was an inquiry from Washington—"

"Hell! We get nothing but inquiries," interrupted the major testily. "Call Sergeant Riley."

Massey went out, to return presently with a hard-eyed square-jawed Irishman.

"Sergeant, do you remember Bowden's wagon train, or anything about it?" queried Major Greer.

"Yes, sor. It was a lost wagon train."

"Well, this letter informs me of that. Here's the gist of it," replied the officer, scanning the letter. "Over a year and a half ago John Bowden's wagon train left Independence, bound for California. He was traced to Fort Dodge. He left there with fifty-three wagons in charge of a scout named Anderson. They had no escort. They took the Dry Trail and have never been heard of since."

"Major, all we have a record of is that Bowden's train is one of the missin'," rejoined the sergeant.

"There have been many lost caravans since the war began," mused Greer. "According to headquarters, this Bowden was a man of means and family. His daughter—no, niece, a Miss Cynthia Bowden, accompanied him. It seems that she has been left a fortune. They were from Boston. Well, we are instructed to find out what became of Bowden's wagon train. Suppose we call in the scouts. Kit Carson is still here, isn't he?"

"Yes, sor. An' Dick Curtis, Baker, an' John Smith."

"Sergeant, ask them please to come in."

In short order the soldier ushered three plainsmen into Major Greer's office. "Major, I couldn't locate Baker an' Curtis," he announced.

"Howdy, Major," replied Kit Carson to the officer's greeting. The great guide and scout was clad in buckskin. He was past middle age then, but lithe and erect to form, clean-cut of face, with the eyes of an eagle. "You know Jack Smith. An' this is Beaver Adams, who knows a blame sight more about the 'plains than I do."

Greer shook hands with the scouts, and bidding them find seats, stated the inquiry about the lost wagon train.

"Never heard of it," said Carson bluntly. "But I've not been to Dodge for two or three years."

"Wal, I have, an' not so long ago," interposed Smith, a lean giant. "Last fall I dropped in at Old Bent's Fort. I heerd a man from Dodge tell aboot that Bowden train. He was talk in' to some new freighters, an' he named some caravans that has disappeared like jack-o'-lanterns."

"It appears pretty well established that there was a Bowden's wagon train that disappeared," added Greer.

"Wal, that's about all that ever will be established," spoke up Carson.

"Onless by accident," rejoined Beaver Adams. He was a trapper by calling, as his first name implied.

"How do you mean—by accident?"

"Wal, as I look back over my experience in the West I can recall many strange happenings an' stories. Bowden's outfit hit the Dry Trail in a bad summer for all travelers across the plains. Kiowas, Comanches, Apaches, Pawnees, all on the warpath. Bowden had a small force of men unaccustomed to the frontier. I knowed Pike Anderson. He could be trusted. But what would fifty-odd men, most of 'em tenderfeet, do against a big force of Injuns? They jest got massacred. The accident I hint of is jest one chance in a mil-

lion, thet some day some Injun will let the secret slip. Injuns like to brag. An' when they get a drink or two their tongues wag."

"Shore is only one chance in a million," agreed Carson pessimistically. "But that's an interestin' letter. They traced that big Tullt wagon to Dodge."

"Injuns seldom keep wagons," put in Jack Smith.

"What good would it do to find that wagon?" queried Kit Carson.

"Gentlemen, the idea I gather from this inquiry is the importance of establishing the death of a Miss Cynthia Bowden," went on Major Greer. "A fortune has been left her. Probably that will be tied up until her death is proved."

"If the wagon train was lost, then the girl was lost," declared Captain Massey.

"Shore, but she might *not* have been," interposed Carson. "I see Major Greer's point. I'd say the thing to do is gamble on Beaver Adams's hunch. That Dry Trail mentioned begins at the Crossin' of the Cimarron an' runs near three hundred miles west. Fact is it strikes the main trail again at Wagon Mount. Now we can find out if Bowden's caravan ever got that far. I'll gamble it never did. Fort Union is the stampin'-ground of the redskins an' outlaws from the Staked Plains to Raton Pass an' from the Panhandle to the Pecos. Right this minute there's a redskin out there or an outlaw who knows what became of Bowden's wagon train."

"Go on, Kit. It's a forlorn chance," said the major. "But I've been given a strict order. What do you suggest?"

"Major, don't let this inquiry go beyond all present here," continued Carson. "But I'll let Curtis an' Baker in on it. We'll begin a quiet search for clues. It'll take months, mebbe years, to get on the track of somethin'. But we might."

"I'll write the department and lay stress on the mystery that shrouds Bowden's lost wagon train. And that it will take time to find out, if that is ever possible."

"Major, it ought not be hard to find out what wagon train followed Bowden's over the Cimarron," said Carson thoughtfully. "Suppose you send word to Fort Dodge for that information. If we find out I'll hunt up the trail boss who had charge."

"He would have reported any sign of a fight, let alone massacre," returned Greer.

"Suppose that particular scout never got here. He might have turned off."

"Kit, I'm suspectin' the Kiowas," said Beaver Adams.

"Tell me why Satana is not heard of as he used to be?" queried Major Greer.

"By thunder!" ejaculated Carson, slapping his knee. "*Why?* He

shore was a bloody devil."

"Satock is a bigger Kiowa chief than Satana," declared Smith. "A bad Injun."

"Bad, yes. But Satock is not Satana's equal for sagacity an' bloodthirstiness," said Carson. "Strikes me queer that it's Satock we hear of now instead of Satana. I wonder if Satana has had anythin' to do with these lost wagon trains."

"Another thing before it slips my mind," said Greer. "Doctor McPherson dropped in an hour or so ago. Among his patients is one he considers worth meeting. Reminded him of Maxwell."

"What! My friend Maxwell?"

"Yes. This patient is a Southerner of parts. Educated man, handsome, fine type, evidently ruined by the war. His name is Latch. Stephen Latch. It appears that Latch has men here at the fort, or friends at least. Kit, you know everybody on the frontier. How about Latch?"

"Never heard of him."

"Any of you?" queried Greer, addressing the others.

"I've shore heard that name Latch," declared Beaver Adams. "But I can't place where or when."

"What of this Latch?" asked Carson.

"Nothing particular. I was just interested because Mac told me about him. As I get it Latch came here in a wagon train some weeks ago. He had been badly wounded and was laid up for a long time before he was brought here."

"What is he *now?*" queried Carson. "Freighter, trader, settler?"

"I'd say neither, from Doc's talk. He has plenty of money. He paid for his keep at the hospital."

"If he's a ruined Southerner, where does he get plenty of money?"

"Don't ask me. I'm interested, though, and think I'll call on him. Suppose you come along," returned Major Greer.

"Shore. I'd go far to meet any man like Maxwell," declared the scout.

Stephen Latch occupied one of the army tents in a corner of the stockade. Its isolation would have been significant to anyone who knew Latch. But except for several of his men, no one at the fort had ever seen him. Cornwall, now his inseparable companion, occupied this tent with him.

Latch and his band, about a year before, had found it expedient to throw in with a caravan eastbound for Independence. For the time being their intentions had been honest. When the train was attacked by Comanches near Point of Rocks, a noted ambush on the trail, Latch and his men fought with such courage that the scout in charge commended them to the commanding officer at Fort Larned.

Mandrove was killed, Keetch lost a leg, and all the others except Cornwall, who bore a charmed life, were wounded, Latch very badly. For months he lay between life and death. As soon as he was able to be moved he was taken to Fort Union. Here after several weeks he began to mend.

On this sunny April day, with chilly gusts of wind swooping down from the mountains, the little stove gave forth a cheerful crackling and warmth. An Indian girl brought their meals from the army cook's quarters.

"Lester, I'd sit up today if it wasn't so damn cold," said Latch.

"Colonel, you're doing fine," replied Cornwall. "Be patient. You'll be in the saddle in a month."

"Patient!" breathed Latch. "Have I not clung to life? How long is it, Lester?"

"Is what?" queried Cornwall, as he turned to Latch. The youth had passed from his face. Its beauty had suffered a blight But nothing save death could ever change those merciless blue eyes.

"Since we—we left Spider Web," whispered the leader. This was his first outspoken query as to the past. But how that had burned in memory!

"Nearly a year and a half. Time flies."

"When did I send Keetch back?"

"Last October. It was just after you were taken to Bent where we expected you to die. But you didn't. Something kept you alive. You had lucid hours and soon as Keetch recovered from losing a leg you sent him back."

"Yes, I remember. I gave him money to build cabins and corrals at the head of Latch's Field. Buy cattle: start my ranch. Propitiate the Kiowas."

"I hope the one-legged geezer didn't gamble an' drink the money up."

"No. Keetch is honest. I trust him as I trust you, Lester."

"And—soon you'll be riding back to our canyon—to your beautiful wife?" rejoined Cornwall jealously.

"Soon! It has been ages. I shall die waiting- Lester, you understand?"

The boy's silence seemed something not to violate. But Latch, stirred by memories, and always curious about this youth, surrendered to the moment.

"Lester, didn't you ever love a girl?"

Cornwall lifted a pale face with glittering, terrible eyes. "Any man but you—I'd kill—for reminding me!"

"Ah! So *that* is it? Forgive me, comrade! Tell me your story some day. You heard Cynthia tell mine that time when she saved me. But, Lester, have you no mother, no father, whom you love still? I ask

because I think we'll give up this game. I'll stake you to go home—begin life over. Or you can come back to my ranch and have a share in it."

"Yes, Colonel, I have a mother and a father—damn them!"

"Hush, son!" cried Latch, shocked.

"I hate them."

"Hate them! Why?"

"They hated me when I was born, because I came between them. I was her son—but not his!"

"Lord, how cruel life is! No sister to love, then; no brother?"

"Yes, I had a kid brother," replied the young man. "Corny I called him, because his hair was the color of ripe corn. Corny would be ten years old now. To think I'll never—see him again!"

After that tragic whisper Cornwall stalked out of the tent.

Latch gazed after him, a prey to conflicting emotions. "What a fine boy gone to hell! Ah, it's strange and unbelievable. Here we are, Cornwall and I, robbers, murderers. So help me God I'm going to end 'that for myself!"

He indulged in a dream which had grown to be an absorbing passion. He would buy his freedom from his band, go back to Cynthia, and bury the bloody past in honest ranching and unswerving devotion to his wife. He caught his breath in the twinge of agony that always returned when he thought of Spider Web Canyon, of Cynthia, and the lonely cabin where he had left her in charge of faithful attendants.

Having lost all, Cynthia Bowden had created happiness out of love. But during those blessed, lonely months while he hid in Spider Web Canyon she had never ceased trying to wean him from his union with these white desperados and with the red Satana. And she had won. But the very day of her victory, Indian riders arrived with urgent messages from Keetch and Satana. They had summoned him for a great raid. Latch swore it would be his last, and tearing himself away from the frantic girl he had ridden off. Eighteen months! Was it possible that hours, days, weeks could pass so swiftly? But they had been full of hard, perilous, thrilling life until he had been stricken in the fight at Point of Rocks. After that, oblivion for months—and then the slow dull awakening to poignant life again!

Cornwall returned to jar Latch out of his reveries. "Leighton wants to fetch in these new pards of his," announced the youth abruptly.

Latch cursed. "I wished I'd croaked him sure that day on the trail. He'll finish us yet."

"I'll walk out and kill him now," replied Cornwall. "Colonel, since you shot him to save Cynthia, Leighton hates you with a hate so great that to kill you

wouldn't satisfy him. He wants a horrible revenge. To put you on the rack! I know the man is playing a waiting game. This is aside from the bad impression he has made here at the fort. Major Greer and his officers have no use for Leighton's outfit. And these fox-nosed scouts! Don't let any of them find out Leighton is one of your men."

"Lester, you exaggerate," expostulated Latch, in concern. "You hate Leighton."

"No. I see through him, that's all. Better let me go kill him."

Latch wavered. An instinct of self-preservation warned him, yet he would not listen. "I'm against that for a number of reasons," he replied earnestly.

"All right. You're my boss. But before I give in let me tell you this. Leighton knows you have a big sum of money in your belt. He's always after money. The camp women get what he doesn't gamble and drink away."

"That's just why I have held out so much of his share of that September—deal," replied Latch. "I've ten thousand here yet that belongs to Leighton and the others. The rest I sent back with Keetch to be hidden."

"Don't tell Leighton, and if you give him more money, do it in dribbles. Now what about the two men he's taken up?"

"Who and what are they?"

"Sam Blaise and Handy Something-or-other. Blaise is a towheaded lout that I wouldn't trust an inch. Handy is one of the quiet Westerners better left alone."

"Tell Leighton to wait until I'm able to get out. That'll be soon. Then I'll look these men over. I—"

"Sssh!" Cornwall peeped out between the flaps of the tent. Suddenly he jerked back. "Major Greer coming with a scout in buckskin. I think he's Kit Carson. Colonel, heah's where you think quick!"

Latch did think quickly. He called on all his faculties to meet an encounter that might be friendly, yet could not fail to be scrutinizing.

"Hello inside!" called an authoritative voice.

Cornwall spread wide the tent flaps. "Come right in," he said cordially.

Latch had seen the doughty little officer, but Kit Carson was a stranger, except in name and fame. The major greeted him and shook hands.

"This is Kit. Carson. You've probably been on the frontier long enough to hear of him. Ha! Ha! Doc McPherson spoke to me about you. Thought I'd drop in. Carson happened along."

"Mighty kind of you, gentlemen," replied Latch courteously. "Pray take a store-box seat. Lester, pass the cigars."

The visitors took both seats and

cigars, and faced Latch with interest.

"You've had a long siege, Mac says?" began Greer.

"Long! It seems years. I've been down since September." replied Latch.

"Bad shot up, I reckon?" said Carson.

"I've just pulled through and that's all," replied Latch. "Perhaps you heard about Melville's caravan being jumped by Comanches at Point of Rocks."

"Was you in that? Tell us about it," returned Carson, leaning forward.

Latch had reason to make a clean, straightforward, forceful narrative out of that fight, and he did it to the top of his bent.

"Nigger Horse, shore as the Lord made little apples!" declared Carson. "Major, that Comanche chief has been on the raid lately. If this Civil War keeps on much longer the redskins will run us off the plains."

"How's the war going, gentlemen?" queried Latch.

"Southerner, aren't you?" inquired Greer. "War's going against the South."

"Yes, but I did not gain the commission I sought."

"Huh. Reckon the war ruined you, like it did so many planters?" asked Carson.

"Ruined? Oh yes, though not financially," rejoined Latch. "Carson, I presume you hold with the Yankees."

"Yes. But I deplore this war. Not only has it laid waste the South, but told sorely on the West. An' if it lasts much longer no man can foresee what will happen out here."

"You mean a horde of scarecrows will be let loose upon this frontier?"

"Exactly. An' I predict the bloodiest years of the westward movement. My friend Maxwell claims the worst will come after the war."

"Maxwell of Maxwell Ranch fame?"

"Shore. There's only one Maxwell. Have you seen the Maxwell Ranch?"

"Once. And have been fired ever since to go do likewise," returned Latch warmly. "He is a wonderful man."

"Latch, you've got Maxwell right," replied Kit Carson. "If you have the means to ranch it on the Maxwell scale an' the will to treat red men an' white men the same you could do much toward peace on this frontier."

"You'd certainly help the soldiers' cause," added Greer heartily.

"Gentlemen, I have the means and the will," continued Latch. "What's more, I have found the place. It lies north of here, east of the mountains and the Canadian River, a wonderful range, a valley beyond compare."

"East of the Canadian?" mused

Carson. "That's Kiowa country, Latch."

"The only drawback," admitted Latch.

"Do you happen to know Satana?" asked the scout.

Latch met that query with all the strength and cunning engendered by the realization that Cynthia's happiness and his life were at stake.

"Wal, then how do you propose to propitiate Satana and that other devil, Satock?"

"I'm gathering a bunch of hard-riding, hard-shooting men with little regard for their status on the plains."

"A good idea, if you can run an outfit of these hard nuts. Like as not they'll kill you an' take everything you've got."

"I must take that chance, for some years, at least. Then I'll placate the Kiowas with gifts I'll keep open house as Maxwell does."

"Wal, it might work. You are a man of force. But take it slow. Did you ever hear of Jim Blackstone?"

"Blackstone? No, I can't say I recall the name," replied Latch, lying smoothly.

"Blackstone an' his gang holes somewhere up on the Purgatory River," explained Carson. "He's a man to steer clear of. Lately Blackstone has come under suspicion of holdin' up stages on the trail."

"Indeed? I shall look out for him. Thanks for the hunch. All the same, Carson, with Maxwell's way in mind, I'll keep open house for any and all comers."

"Safe enough if you last," concluded Carson, rising. "Wal, Latch, I'm glad to meet you an' shall keep tab on you."

"Do. And run up for a buffalo-hunt next fall," responded Latch heartily.

Major Greer also rose. "Hope you'll be up and around soon. If I can be of service to you, command me."

Kit Carson halted on the way out. "Latch, if you are wal-heeled you can double an investment pronto. Furs are pourin' down out of the hills in a regular rain. Never seen the like."

"Thanks. I could buy a wagon load of pelts. But how dispose of them?"

"Tullt will guarantee delivery by escorted train."

"Good. Will you buy a load for me? On commission, of course."

"I'd be glad to."

"Drop over tomorrow and I'll have the money for you. Speaking of money, I'd be willing to take wagon, team, and supplies from Tullt instead of cash."

"That's easy. But let me buy the pelts first," laughed Carson as he went out.

After the visitors had gone Latch and Cornwall gazed at each other.

"What do you make of that?" finally broke out Latch.

"Greer's a thick-haided Yank!" replied Cornwall, with scorn. "But that Kit Carson is all the West calls him. Colonel, I liked him plenty. My angle is Greer came in to look you over. But no man could have done better. Colonel, the Maxwell idea was a stroke. It hit Carson plumb center. And open house for every class on the frontier—that was another. But from this day you're a marked man."

"By God, yes!" ejaculated Latch. "I liked Carson, too—greatest of all these great Westerners! And I, Stephen Latch, at the other end—lowest, meanest, vilest of the West's outlaws!"

## Chapter Eight

### *A White Headstone*

LATCH walked about the fort leaning on Cornwall's arm. He was in exuberant spirits. Before very long he would be starting out for Spider Web Canyon.

Tullt's store was crowded with Indians and trappers. A new run of pelts had come in from the hills. Freight was piled high all around the store.

Latch wearied and had to sit down to rest. Cornwall left him to go on an errand. Indians, soldiers, freighters, trappers, and all the parasite types of the army camp passed in review.

Cornwall returned and Latch said he felt up to a walk outside of the fort. There were a few rude clapboard structures along the dusty street, and the one farthest appeared to rival Tullt's in bustle and noise. It was a store and saloon combined.

Among the Indians lounging outside, Latch recognized his scout Hawk Eye and another Kiowa brave. They might never have seen Latch before. Their business at the fort was to guide him back to Spider Web Canyon. Latch went on into the saloon with Cornwall. Smoke, noise, and the odor of tobacco and rum filled the place.

"Find me—a seat," panted Latch. "Soon as I've rested—we'll get out of this hell-hole."

But he remained an hour, which was far longer than he would have chosen. Black Hand and Augustine approached him, the former drunk and ugly. He bellowed out, "Howdy boss! Gimme a stake!"

When he persisted, Cornwall hit him over the head with the butt-end of a gun, which laid the ruffian out. No one paid any special attention. But Augustine showed his yellow teeth like a snarling wolf.

Next Leighton got up from a table where he had been gambling,

and motioning his comrades to stay back he stalked across the room to greet Latch. Leighton had changed markedly since Latch's shot had marred his once handsome features. The left side of Leighton's face bore a livid, triangular-shaped scar.

"Latch, my hunch is to rustle away from Fort Union at once," he said.

"What's your hurry?" asked Latch.

"These scouts are too interested in us."

"Well, the company you keep is responsible for that."

"You mean Blaise and Handy?"

"I do."

"They are no different from a dozen other hangers-on here. I've been gambling with them all. Latch, I think you are the man the scouts are interested in."

"What gave you that idea?"

"Handy just tipped me off."

"Call him over here."

Latch had to admit to himself that the stranger, Handy, gave an impression of sterling qualities. He had a fearless air and a straight glance. After a few casual questions Latch came right out: "What's your business on the border?"

"Aw, I'm a gentleman of leisure," replied Handy.

"Can you ride?"

"Shore. On a wagon seat. I began freightin' in 'fifty-five."

"Can you throw a lasso?"

"Hell, no."

"You wouldn't make much of a cowboy?"

"Not for work. But I'm handy with a gun."

"That where you get your handle, eh?"

"Wal, it wasn't no pick of mine."

"All right, Handy. I like your looks and your talk. What do you make of me?"

"I had you figgered before Leighton told me."

Latch became thoughtful. He wondered if Kit Carson and his associates had gauged him as keenly as had this outlaw. He felt convinced that the famous scout had not been hostile toward him. Carson, however, had not approached him regarding the deal in pelts.

Latch asked to meet Blaise, whom he found to be like many other frontier outcasts, dull, negative, indifferent.

"Any good around a ranch?" inquired Latch.

"Shore am. Was brought up with hosses an' cows. I'm a farmer. Good at graftin' fruit trees. Fair carpenter an' blacksmith, an' a good cook."

"Say, you're a whole outfit in yourself," said Latch dryly. "Can you shoot?"

"Fair to middlin' at deer an' buffalo. But I've no nerve for shootin' men."

"How'd you last so long on the

frontier?"

"Jest luck. An' I can dodge."

"He packs a gun with six notches cut on the handle," interrupted Leighton.

"Shore. They was on it when I stole the gun," agreed Blaise.

Latch came to a decision. "Suppose you throw in with us and take whatever comes along," he suggested to both men.

They agreed without question, whereupon Latch told them to get horses and packs in readiness.

"We have wagons, teams, supplies. I'm as weak as a sick cat. But if I can't sit up I'll ride lying down."

They planned to pack that day and leave in the morning with the wagon train bound east. When they got as far as they cared to have company, Latch could explain that he wanted to travel more slowly on account of his condition.

When he and Cornwall left the saloon Cornwall said, "Leighton has some good reason for wanting to pull out quick."

"I gathered that, Lester. Well, the sooner the better. It is not safe for me to have him hanging around these forts."

"As far as Leighton is concerned the only safe way to have him is dead."

"What a bloodthirsty boy you are!"

"Colonel, why don't you start giving up this life *now?*"

"I mean to. Will you come with me, Lester?"

"Yes. You'll need someone to help you live down what you've already done. So long as one of these outlaws remains above ground you will never be safe."

Latch was glad to reach his tent and to lie down again. He sent Cornwall to the Tullt store to complete purchase of supplies. Thereafter, while Latch was resting and dreaming, the hours passed until late afternoon, when Kit Carson called.

"Howdy, Latch," was his hearty greeting. "Glad to see you can walk about."

"I'm feeling fine. Weak yet. But restless for the trail. I'll be leaving in a day or two."

"So soon? Sorry to see you go. By the way, I slipped up on the deal for pelts. My Ute friends had sold out."

"Thanks just the same, Carson. Maybe it's as well. I'm going to get short of funds sooner or later."

"Latch, it'll be sooner if you hit the trail with that Leighton an' his outfit," declared Carson bluntly.

"You don't say! Well, I told you I was hiring a bunch of hard bor der men."

"Do you know this Leighton?"

"Not very well. He's a Southerner, foot-loose and—"

"Shore, I appreciate you'd rather have Rebels," interrupted Carson. "Leighton has been under

suspicion here. He is playin' a deep game, most likely against you. If you do take Leighton, be shore an' sleep with one eye open."

After Kit Carson's departure, Latch experienced both elation and misgiving. Carson's friendliness established the fact that Latch himself was still above suspicion. But never again could he give Leighton the benefit of a doubt.

Three days out of Fort Union the east-bound caravan under Scout Dave Prescott halted at Stinking Springs for camp. It was a big wagon train, with heavily loaded wagons drawn by oxen, and therefore made but slow progress. Prescott was strong for taking the Dry Trail at Wagon Mount. The caravan, under escort, had little to fear from Indians.

Latch had found riding in a wagon less of an ordeal than he had anticipated. To be sure, his second wagon had been fitted up with a comfortable bed.

Away from Fort Union a few days, and gradually working into trail travel, the men settled into comradeship. Latch passed for a convalescent rancher returning to his ranch.

"Wal, I don't know the country hyar aboots," said Prescott, who had taken to Latch, "but it runs in my mind thet's Kiowa country."

"It shore is, scout," drawled Latch.

"How'n hell do you keep from losin' all yore stock?" queried Prescott.

"By being a real friend to the redskins."

"Humph! Takin' a leaf oot of Maxwell's book, huh?"

"Not on such a grand scale. I'm just feeling my way now."

Other freighters joined Prescott around the camp fire where Latch sat propped in an easy chair.

"Speakin' of Kiowas," spoke up Prescott, "it struck me that Kit Carson, Beaver Adams, an' them other scouts at Union are particular keen this spring."

"How so?" queried Jim Waters, one of the freighters.

"Wal, I don't know," replied Prescott. "They damn near got me drunk before I knowed they was quizzin' me. Waters, did you ever hyar of Bowden's lost wagon train?"

"Shore. I've heahed aboot 'em all."

"Wal, it so happens that I was in charge of the wagon train follow'in' Bowden out of Dodge. Kit Carson asked me where Bowden camped last on the Dry Trail. An' I told him Tanner's Swale. Thet satisfied Carson, I reckon. But the other scouts talked me dizzy."

"So you was thet scout!" ejaculated Waters.

"Yes. An' I always was a little

testy aboot thet," admitted Prescott. "You see, I was in a hurry. You know how a fellar feels on thet Dry Trail. An' I didn't take no particular trouble aboot Bowden's campin' at Tanner's. How was I to know his wagon train got lost right there? But it shore did. I found no trace of Bowden. Reckoned it strange. Didn't bother my haid. So later at Independence, when I got called on the carpet aboot it, I wasn't any too damn pleased."

"Have you been by Tanner's since?"

"Nary time. An' I ain't keen aboot it this time."

Latch had felt a slow fire return to heat out the icy terror in his vitals. What a strained, fixed attention sat upon Leighton and Black Hand! Or was that in himself?

"What about this Bowden's lost wagon train? he asked casually. "Runs in my mind I've heard that name—Bowden."

Whereupon he was compelled to hear again the story of the famous lost wagon train. This time it had an intense interest because related by the scout who had followed Bowden on the Dry Trail. Prescott had more to say than had any other narrator of that tragic event. He had met Bowden in Fort Dodge and described him minutely. He remembered the golden-haired daughter—or was it niece?

That camp fire scene would live in Latch's memory: Hawk Eye watching the glowing embers with inscrutable eyes: Leighton sitting in shadow like a statue; Cornwall in the light, his face cold, serene; the vaquero smoking his cigarette, his sloe-black gaze on the storyteller; Black Hand dropping his shaggy head. Latch saw only these men who knew.

Next day Latch's outfit slowly climbed the plateau alone. Prescott's caravan already resembled a long white thread growing hazy far out and down on the Dry Trail. All that day Latch lay sick on his bed in the wagon. But he crawled out at sunset when camp was made.

Days later, when Hawk Eye led the small train down the stony range to the brink of Spider Web Canyon, Latch was the old Latch again. Strength and force had returned.

How well he remembered the place—this point was a day's ride from that part of the canyon where Latch had established his cabin—where Cynthia would be waiting! His hungry heart leaped. Would she be well, happy?

He yielded to thought of her kisses, her embraces. His remorse at the long separation followed in poignant sweeps. But he had prepared her for a possible long wait. She loved solitude, nature. She would never grow tired of Spider Web Canyon. Thus he soothed

the still small voice of conscience, thus he stilled the thunder of his rumbling heart, thus he clung rapturously to his fool's dream.

A possible wagon route from this camp on the rim of Spider Web down to Latch's Field drew the Kiowa guide back on the high plateau to the north. Only a few more days!

On the second day, late in the afternoon, Hawk Eye led out upon the edge of the sloping plateau to a point where the valley containing Latch's Field unrolled in magnificent panorama below. Dry camp was made on this slope. It would require another day to wind down the zigzag trail and cross to the head of the valley. Meanwhile Latch sought a point where he could see to advantage.

The head of the valley—the thousands of acres Latch had bought from the Kiowa chieftain—lay only 12 or 15 miles distant. The soft purple of the groves contrasted vividly with the open spaces of gold. What a lovely protected valley! It was going to be a home. And at its back door opened the secret canyon passage to Satana's hiding-place. Already Latch felt safe.

With his naked eye he could make out the dark ragged cleft in the notch of the bluff where Spider Web Creek emerged, the groves of cottonwood and walnut, and lastly the open range.

With the aid of his glass he saw the corrals and barns and ranch house Keetch had been instructed to start. Across the brook and farther down Latch made out log cabins, widely separated. With the cattle grazing around they had the appearance of being smaller ranches that certainly had not been there when last he had surveyed that scene. These occasioned him concern.

"Couldn't be settlers," soliloquized Latch. "But I'll not borrow trouble. I'll wait."

Nevertheless, the unexpected edged the first vague uneasiness into his joy.

The sun had gone down behind the bluffs next day when Latch's caravan of two wagons rolled to a halt under a great walnut at the head of the valley.

For the last hour Latch had sat out upon the driver's seat, his whole being vibrating like a strung wire.

Peeled logs and picked stones lay around in piles near the long rambling ranch house. He smelled smoke. Indians and ponies showed under the trees below. Latch spied a white man who stared at the wagons and then ran for a cabin. The atmosphere of the place seemed strange.

Keetch hobbled out on his crutch. "Wal, if it ain't the boss!" he boomed.

"Howdy, Keetch," replied Latch in a halting voice. "I'm glad—to

be home."

"Boss, it took you long to come. An' you shore look peaked."

"Man, I lay five months on my back, out of my head. And after that my recovery was slow. But I've pulled through, and here I am."

"Boss, it's a pity—" began Keetch hoarsely.

"No. I paid. And I'm glad," replied Latch, misunderstanding the other. "No more now. Tell me—how's Cynthia?"

"Latch, didn't you get my letter?"

"Letter! No."

"Wal, I sent one by an Injun rider to Fort Bent. You never got it?"

"When did you send it?"

"Last fall. Jest after—" Here Keetch drew Latch away from the rest of the outfit. "You see, I fetched your wife down hyar last fall. She was sick, an' it was best. Settler named Benson located across the crick. Good fellar, an' his woman advised—"

"Cynthia sick! You moved her!" demanded Latch incredulously.

"Boss, it ain't so easy!" panted the old outlaw. "I'm tryin' to tell you — aboot Cynthia — thet we couldn't save her—but we did save the—"

Latch scarcely heard. Savagely he ordered Keetch to take him to Cynthia.

"Boss, by Gawd, I'm sorry! She's gone—an' hyar's her grave," whispered Keetch huskily, then hobbled away in the dusk.

Stunned, Latch gazed down at that to which Keetch had directed his attention. A long mound, grassed over, with a white headstone! A grave! Then Cynthia *was* dead. With an awful cry, Latch flung himself upon that grave.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Death Strikes Again*

DURING the last year of the Civil War there was less travel across the Great Plains, and as a consequence fewer disasters to wagon trains. However, the caravans of another kind of adventurer, the pioneer, often left Independence in a spirit of irresistible call to the great West. These pioneers were really the men who built the West. They wheeled westward in ever-increasing numbers.

The Old Trail had three routes from Fort Dodge: the Mountain Trail, the Middle Trail along the Cimarron to Santa Fe, and the *Jornada de la Muerte* (Journey of Death) across the desert of the Cimarron. Despite the tragic stories that never failed to greet the ears of travelers passing through Independence, there were always men who pushed on, risking all for the sake of a few days

saved in heartbreaking toil across the plains. Many of these got across. Many suffered loss. And a few, like Bowden's lost wagon train, simply vanished.

But plains rumor kept on. Satana, the Kiowa chief, remained in his retreat, yielding the palm of deviltry to his brother chief, Satock, and to Nigger Horse and Soronto of the Comanches.

Old plainsmen talked with one another, when they met at watering places along the trail; and they had their doubts about Satana. The old rumor of his association with the Bowden tragedy, and with some mysterious dominating white man, did not down.

The end of the Civil War, however, let loose upon the West a flood of penniless, ruined, broken soldiers, many of whom naturally gravitated to wild and vicious life. The frontier bands of desperados became something to be reckoned with in the settling of the West.

At the close of 1865 the gun was might and right. Soon the forts and posts from Taos, New Mexico, to Council Grove, Kansas, were crowded with loot-loose men. Robbery of stagecoaches grew to be a common thing. The saloon, the dance hall, the gambling hall began their bloody era on the border.

Jim Blackstone's gang sprang from obscurity to prominence about this time. He was a huge black-bearded man, formerly one of Quantrell's guerrillas, who had turned robber, and now was the leader of a dozen or more outlaws.

Late in the '60's another era had its inception and tremendous advance—the era of the trail driver and his herds of longhorn cattle from Texas.

The war left Texas penniless and ruined except for the thousands of cattle that roamed her vast ranges. An intrepid Texas cattleman, John Chisholm by name, conceived an idea which, when put into execution, changed the fortunes of the Lone Star State. That idea was to drive great herds of cattle north to Dodge City and Abilene, Kansas. The Chisholm Trail soon marked its rut north over the rolling prairie once traveled only by the buffalo. A wonderful breed of young fighting riders was thus developed to take part in the empire-building of the West.

A continuous stream of longhorned cattle poured into Kansas. The driving of herds took from three to five months; and was accompanied by all the hazard that attended the freighters across the plains, in addition to the crossing of flooded rivers, the terrible electric storms, the stampedes by buffalo herds and the raids of the Comanches. But the herds kept coming in ever-increasing numbers.

Dodge City had a marvelous

mushroom growth. Almost overnight this frontier post whooped into the busiest, noisiest, bloodiest town that ever burst to fame on the border. It had an enormous floating population, owing the majority of its stress to the hundreds of thousands of cattle in the corrals and pastures outside the town.

It was a night in late October at Dodge. A cold raw wind blew from the north down the ranges. Stephen Latch and Lester Cornwall sat in the lobby of the Trail Driver's Hotel. The years of hard life sat lightly upon the handsome head of the younger man. But Latch had vastly changed. Maturity sat upon him in his graying hair, in the lines of his face, in his heavier frame.

They sat apart from other men in the lobby, and as ever, from long habit, they talked low.

"Colonel, let's hit for the South," said Cornwall. "It's been in my mind for days."

Latch shook his heavy head.

"What's the sense in this gambling night after night, all winter long?"

"No sense in it, I reckon."

"Is it to amass more money? Man, you've won thousands! You had a fortune hidden in Spider Web long ago. And if your Kiowa riders can be trusted they have safely hidden another fortune for you in that canyon."

"Hawk Eye can be trusted," replied Latch.

"I believe that," returned Cornwall. "But I was never sure of Keetch. And Leighton's return to Latch's Field—"

"Keetch is all right," interrupted Latch. "He likes the ranch life. His reports make me eager to see the field, when I dare think of—of — But Leighton is a snake in the grass. If he suspected that I was sending booty to be hidden in Spider Web he would search every nook and cranny of the canyon."

"Well, that's another reason for us to go back."

"You don't mean to go back—there?"

"I do. It's high time. That last raid of ours—the only failure we ever had—marked you on the frontier. It established your relation to Satana. Jim Waters *saw* you, Colonel."

"Yes. It was bad. I never wanted to tackle that caravan. But Satana was ugly. He had waited so long! So I gave in, to our misfortune. Still, Waters can't prove we were with the Indians."

"Humph! Don't you believe that. His word would go at any post. We've skated on thin ice for so many years. Colonel, this is going to break!"

"Why this right-about-face of yours? You used to laugh in the teeth of death."

"I can still laugh. But lately I've weakened or softened. I want to go back to our canyon, and spend

the rest of my life remembering. And besides, Colonel, I don't want to see you dangle at the end of a rope."

"Lester, you've been a true friend—a son to me. Without you I would have been gone long ago. I appreciate all this. You are all I have left in the world. Still, I'm afraid I can't go back—just yet."

"Why, Colonel? It's high time."

"This gambling life helps me to forget," returned Latch thickly.

"But, Colonel, after all these years it won't hurt you to remember. Let's go back to the lonely life. I'd like to live away from these vile rum holes."

"Suppose I refuse, Lester?"

Cornwall pondered a long moment. "I will never desert you," he replied finally.

"That decides me. We'll go, Lester," flashed Latch. "*Quien sabe?* You have guided me right many a time. And after all, I *am* tired of life. Perhaps Latch's Field — Come, we will buck the tiger a last time!"

The Palace of Chance, a drinking, dancing, gambling den, was not felicitously named except in its intimation of the uncertainty of life. It was one of the worst places in Dodge City, where they were all bad.

At midnight that November night Latch and Cornwall sat in a game of poker with a cattle buyer from St. Louis, a stranger from the East, a manager of one of the Tullt stores, and a lean-faced trail driver from Texas.

The stakes were low, considering the amount Latch usually played for, and most of them had gravitated to him.

"Wal, I'm cleaned," drawled the Texan coolly, as he sat back. "It's shore fleecin' lambs, the way you two gents grab all the coin."

"What do you mean by grab?" queried Cornwall, dropping his cards. His right hand quivered on the table. Latch saw it and interposed.

"Lester, he means we're good card-players—and lucky to boot."

"Shore I ain't insinuatin' nothin'," replied the Texan. "I was jest beefin' All my wages gone and not even a drink."

Latch tossed him a greenback. "Stay away from poker, son."

The game went on. Luck fluctuated for Cornwall and the other two players, but, as usual, it held for Latch. His winning at cards was phenomenal. Fortune heaped more money upon him, probably because he cared not at all whether he won or lost.

The game was waxing hot when one of the dance-hall girls came up behind Cornwall to place her hands on his shoulders.

The habitués of this dive called her Lily. She was young, pretty, and brazen. It had been her habit to accost Cornwall every time he visited the place, attract-

ed no doubt by his handsome face, his flashing blue eyes, his coldness.

"Come, Handsome, you've won or lost enough tonight." she said coaxingly.

Cornwall laid down his cards to remove her hands from his shoulders. "Pray don't interrupt my game," he said. "Our Texas friend on my right is out. Please devote your blandishments to him."

"Wal, lady, I'd be shore pleased," said the trail driver. "But they cleaned me out. except for this twenty the Colonel gave back. I can buy you a drink."

She thanked him and put her white hands under Cornwall's chin. "Darling boy! Cold iceberg. Blue-eyed baby, come and show me you're a man!"

Cornwall flung her hands away. A wave of scarlet crossed his pale face, to recede and leave it paler. For an instant Latch saw a flash of something far from hate or disgust in those blue eyes. He divined that the touch of the girl's arms had revived some poignant memory.

Cornwall picked up his cards. Latch observed that his fingers quivered. He also observed the leaping light in the girl's eyes.

"Listen, Handsome," she resumed, "I don't care a damn about you. really. But I made a bet with that French tart. She says, 'Ees a frozen—what you call eet? —turnip?' and I bet her fifty I could thaw you. Be a sport now and help me win."

"To what extent do you want me to be a sport?" queried Cornwall. arrested.

"Come with me—dance—make love to me," appealed the girl. "There's Frenchie now."

A striking, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl entered the gambling den. She was attended by a heavy man, of bold mien. They approached, walking arm in arm between the tables. Turning her back to the table Lily sat down on the arm of his chair and, face to face with him, she attempted a passionate embrace.

"Lay off me, slut!" he flashed, and repelled her so violently that she went sprawling upon the dirty floor.

Like a cat she leaped up, screaming with rage. She stood beside Cornwall, her clawed hands uplifted, as if about to rend him. Cold, imperturbable, he bent over his cards. Suddenly, before even Latch could move or speak, she snatched the Texan's gun from his belt and shot Cornwall in the head. Without cry or quiver his face drooped to the table. The startled observers, dumb for the instant, saw a dark thick stream obliterate the cards under Cornwall's nerveless fingers.

Gray dawn brightened the casement windows of the hotel room

where Latch had spent the last hours of that night. Oblivious of the cold, he sat there, smoking and thinking.

Always Latch had been prepared for death in any form for himself or his comrades. Yet Cornwall had seemed to bear a charmed life. He had seemed immune. No doubt a woman had ruined him; certainly a woman had murdered him. Latch took the blow hard. Cornwall's place could never be filled.

The sting of this tragedy awakened Latch's mind into something of its old introspective power. Stern probing of his gloom-pervaded brain discovered that he did not want to die at the end of a rope or as poor Lester had. With this fact established, he had to face the alternative. Wherefore, the loss of Cornwall turned him abruptly back upon the enterprise of rivaling Maxwell's Ranch. But the old ambition seemed dead.

Nevertheless, there was Latch's Field across the prairie, the ranch developed by Keetch, and the stock that had accrued since his trade with Satana. He counted the years—five, six, nearly seven years, and was incredulous.

An intense longing to rest and hide, and a curiosity to see his property, brought him to go back, as Cornwall had entreated. Too late for that strange, seemingly cold youth whose heart must have been a volcano!

A belated caravan, the last one of the year, left Dodge City the 1st of November, and Latch with two pack horses and a young *vaquero* rode out with it across the bleak prairie.

At the Cimarron Crossing the trail boss took the middle course along the famous river. For this reason Latch imagined he would be spared painful memories. But he was not. At Wagon Mount, where the Dry Trail again met the Old Trail, Latch left the caravan and headed south.

Jim Waters had been the scout and boss of that big west-bound caravan, a fact Latch had not been aware of until the start was made. Then it was too late. He sensed Waters's curiosity and suspicion. There was nothing for him to do but be frank and friendly with freighters and plainsmen. Nevertheless, Jim Waters kept aloof. At Wagon Mount, when Latch got in his saddle to ride after the *vaquero*, Waters strode up.

"Wal, Latch, you're off, eh?"

"Yes. Sorry to part company with such a fine caravan," returned Latch.

"Wild country south of hyar. You must be friendly with Satana?"

"I bought Latch's Field from him. So far he and his Kiowas have tolerated me."

"Ahuh," rejoined Waters bitingly. "Wal, I'll report at Fort Union thet thar's *one white man* the

bloody old devil tolerates."

Before Latch could retort the scout strode away. Other freighters had heard that parting shot. It was what Latch might have expected; nevertheless it was thought-provoking. Could he ever live down suspicion, obliterate the shadow upon his past? Could he ever forget the stealthy steps upon his trail?

To Latch's surprise and regret, he found a road of well-defined wheel tracks leading out of Wagon Mount in a southeasterly direction. He wondered if that road bisected Latch's Field.

Latch's desire for loneliness increased as he rode over the gray landscape. If the Kiowa Valley where he had located his ranch ever became populated, he could retire to Spider Web Canyon.

The first day away from Waters's caravan passed so swiftly that Latch was overtaken by sunset before he realized the passing of the hours. Camp was made near a brushy plot from which a meager quantity of firewood could be procured.

Dusk soon mantled the basin. Coyotes ranged about, yelping; the mourning of wolves emphasized the loneliness. Latch unconsciously made his bed and rolled in his blankets.

The *vaquero* awakened him. Day had come, cold and raw, yet welcome. Before sunrise they were on their way.

At once Latch's interest was roused. Deer and wild mustangs covered the bleached plain. When Latch topped a rise of ground to see dark blue domes of mountains to the southward he sustained a thrill. Somewhere along the base of that range sloped the plateau which Spider Web Canyon cut through.

He rode on eagerly, watching for other landmarks. Once he thought with a pang how he missed Cornwall! Henceforth all the rest of his life he must be alone. It struck him as impossible for a sane man to endure.

The third or fourth day from that camp, when the westering sun had gone down behind the purple range, the trail Latch rode with an ever-increasing impatience led out abruptly upon the rim of a high bluff.

A triangular-shaped valley, vast in extent, and wondrously beautiful with its silver and green parks and pastures, spread away from under him. It was Latch's Field. Violent pangs assailed his breast. He had come back.

Only the upper reaches of that lovely valley had been changed. The long gray-roofed ranch house with its barns and sheds was almost hidden in the velvety green. Fenced pastures of hundreds of acres stretched down to the open prairie. Across the stream, however, greater change riveted Latch's eye. Houses, cabins, shacks,

tents! Rage possessed him, and for a few moments he cursed Keetch and all who had come unasked into his lonely paradise. Soon it came to him that several miles separated the ranch house from this town. Keetch had preserved his field.

Latch rode down the zigzag trail, a prey to emotions. His disappointment seemed all the more intense because of his astonishment that he could care at all.

His first impulse to kill Keetch slowly faded. What a marvelous place! Latch rode on toward the house and the huge walnut and cottonwood trees which stood in front of it. A wide porch faced these great trees and a lawn as green and smooth as a well-tended park.

Halting before the porch, Latch hallooed. No answer! Latch called again.

This time a little girl with red-gold curls came running out to fix dark, wide eyes upon Latch.

## Chapter Ten

### *New Leaves*

A MEXICAN woman followed the child out on the porch. Latch was about to hail her when a white woman, pleasant of face and buxom of form, came to the door. She gave Latch a look, then disappeared within. Latch heard her call, and presently the thump of a crutch gave him expectation of his henchman, Keetch.

The man who appeared was indeed Keetch, gray and grizzled now, but no longer stern of face and hard of eye.

"My Gawd! if it ain't Latch!" he boomed, with incredulous delight.

Latch met Keetch at the steps, where they gripped hands and locked glances.

"Howdy, Keetch," was his greeting.

"Wal! I be'n lookin' for you every day these last two years. An' I shore am glad to see you, boss," replied Keetch, warmly. "Git down an' come in, chief. We've shore got some surprises fer you. Air you alone?"

"Yes, except for a Mexican. There he comes with my packs."

"Ahuh, I see. Wal, thet's good. We've got enough men hangin' around now."

"That so?" returned Latch easily. He bent penetrating gaze upon his trusted ally. "Wonderful house, Keetch. How'd you ever build it?"

Keetch beamed. "Wal, thet's shore a story. Mebbe you didn't know I was a carpenter before I became a gentleman rider of leisure. Haw! Haw! All the same I was. An' it come in handy hyar. Latch, I was nigh on three years on all the buildin'. An' thet

with plenty of help."

"You don't say! I'm amazed. Where did you get the lumber?"

"Floated it down from Spider Web durin' spring freshets. The walnut we cut hyar in the valley. Ripsawed every board! An' you gotta give Benson credit as much as me."

"Who's Benson?"

"Gosh! Didn't I tell you when you was hyar last? I guess not. Wal, Benson an' his wife rode in hyar—lemme see—seven years ago this last spring. They escaped a Comanche raid down on the Red River, got lost, an' wandered in hyar. I reckon without them I'd never have made a go of it. Mrs. Benson is shore a darn fine little woman. It was she who took care of your wife when—"

Latch had prepared himself for rending words and facts, but at the first wrench of the old wound he held up a hand. "Bensons, eh? So I owe them something. They have shared your work and lived with you?"

"Wal, I should smile. Made home out of this ranch. Why, man alive, you'll be knocked off your pins when I tell you all. But Benson, figgerin' on the future, staked out a ranch below an' works thet at odd times."

"Leighton?" queried Latch sharply.

At this juncture the *vaquero* rode up with Latch's pack animals. Keetch directed the Mexican to throw the packs on the porch and take the horses around to the corrals, then continued:

"Leighton rode in hyar a couple of years after you left. Wintered up Spider Web. Come back now an' then for a couple of years. An' seein' the drift of Latch's Field, he built himself a big place out hyar across the crick. An' he has been runnin' a saloon an' gamblin' hall. Leighton has his cronies—as bad a lot as we ever traded with," went on Keetch. "I'm wonderin' if you knowed Bruce Kennedy?"

Latch repeated the name. "It's familiar. But he was never in my outfit."

"Bad hombre! An' there's Smilin' Jacobs an' Wess Manley. These three are Leighton's bosom pards. Besides, some of your old hands are hyar. Jerry Bain, Seth Cole, Tumbler Johnson, Mizzouri, an' Plug Halstead."

"Good men and true, except Halstead. Mizzouri is the salt of the earth," mused Latch. "Who else, Keetch?"

"Aw, there's a score of men whose names I never ever heerd. An' across the ridge in the next valley Jim Blackstone is winterin' with his outfit."

"Hell you say! I don't like that," flashed Latch.

"Wal, it's so. You gotta make the best of it. I'm bound to admit they make no trouble for us. They're hidin' out, boss."

"Do these strangers know of Spider Web Canyon?"

"I reckon not. An' they wouldn't go up there if they did. Satana has been winterin' in Spider Web an' he has no use for strangers."

"Do they associate me in any way with the Kiowa?"

"Not at all. Leighton is close-mouthed where his own hide is concerned. It has jest gone out over the range that any man is welcome at Latch's Field."

"My own words!" ejaculated Latch.

"Shore. An' it's gonner be embarrassin'."

"Rather. Keetch, how many times has Hawk Eye come to you with packs and letters from me?"

"Six times. An', boss, every bag you sent is safe hid."

"In the secret cave in Spider Web?"

"No, by gosh! I couldn't risk that Leighton knows there's rum an' treasure hid in Spider Web He goes up there every spring an' fall To fish an' hunt, he says! Bah! At thet it may be to hunt But not for meat! So I couldn't risk Spider Web. Boss, I dug a secret cellar under this hyar house. An' all you sent is there I didn't trust even Hawk Eye."

"Old man, you're a good and faithful fellow," returned Latch feelingly. "So here I am, Keetch. Back for good! The great ranch and money to buy what I want—live as I choose. Go even Maxwell one better! But for one thing!"

"What's thet, Boss?" asked Keetch.

Latch whispered. "The shadow of Bowden's lost wagon train hangs over me. Keetch, the scouts and plainsmen look on me with suspicion."

"Thet's shore bad news. You gotta quit Satana!"

"I have quit that old deal. From now on there'll be a fight to live down the past. But let that go for the present. Who else drifted into Latch's Field besides our undesirable comrades?"

"Latch, you'll be glad to know there are fourteen honest settlers in the valley, all ranchin' it an' lookin' to the future."

"Honest men!" exclaimed Latch "Keetch, do these men *know* Latch's Field is a rendezvous for outlaws?"

"Wal, if they do, they ain't sayin' so. Benson knows, though I never told him But I reckon it wouldn't make a sight of difference to any of them. Thet is, up to now."

"Keetch, you intimate that Latch's Field Has a future."

"Boss, it shore has."

"To what do you attribute this trend?"

"Wal, since the war there's been a boom. It ain't only the broken-down soldiers who're emigratin'. Take this Chisholm Trail. Have you heerd of thet?"

"Rather. I just came from

Dodge City, the western terminus of the trail. From a sleepy freighting post, Dodge has leaped to a roaring metropolis. More hell in Dodge in one hour than any night sees in another Western town!"

"I can jest figger thet. Wal, the cattle herds comin' up the trail have had somethin' to do with the turrible growth of Latch's Field. You see, Boss, it's only around hundred an' fifty miles as a crow flies to where the Cimarron crosses the Chisholm Trail. An' mebbe another fifty miles down the trail to Camp Supply, an army post. The North Fork of the Canadian River crosses the Chisholm Trail there. A wagon road runs up the North Fork, right into our valley.

"Spider Web Creek is one of the heads of the North Fork Thet accounts for most of the travel up this way. Of course the caravans don't tackle it. But a lot of wagons come along. A few of these settlers have stuck. Webbe an' Bartlett air married to Injun squaws. Some of the other settlers have families. They're darn good fellars to have around us—*now*."

"One more question about them It's cattle, of course, these settlers expect to realize on?"

"Shore. An' it's good figgerin'. Cattle will dominate the West. Soon as the buffalo air killed off."

"Keetch, you've got a long head," replied Latch admiringly "I've forgotten my instructions about cattle, if I ever gave any. What stock have I?"

"Wal, I cain't say correct. Around ten thousand head of cattle an' mebbe a thousand of horses."

"So much! Well, I'm a rancher before I knew it. Who runs all this stock?"

"They don't need much runnin' in this valley. Not yet. Lord knows what'll be needed when the hoss an' cattle thieves come. Which they will! At present all our help except the Bensons is Mexican. They're cheap an' good."

"Keetch, all wonderful news! I won't attempt thanks now. And that'll do for the present. I'll be in presently, after I spend a little while—by Cynthia's grave. You've cared for it, of course?"

"Shore have, boss," returned Keetch hurriedly. "It's right there, under the first big walnut, all fenced in an' kep' green Flowers, too. No, boss, we never forgot. An' Mrs. Benson an'—an' Estie. Boss, wait—I—I got more to tell."

Latch waved him silent, and strode slowly toward the huge walnut tree. The sun was setting. Rays of gold filtered through the foliage upon the greensward Through the trim pickets of a little fenced inclosure the golden light shone upon a stone head piece.

Latch leaned against the brown barked tree and gazed down into the little inclosure. Narrow green

mound—a crude monument—blossoms smiling pale gold from the grass! His heart was oppressed. Cynthia! All the loveliness, all the atonement, all the passion she had given him, lay interred here.

His breast labored with a dull pang. This grave was the end of his journey. His tremendous will to go on found no impetus here. He had only to get back to Latch's Field to realize he had nothing left to live for. A long sigh of resignation escaped his lips.

At this moment something encircled his leg. He looked down to see the little girl who had run out upon the porch. Her head with its red-gold curls reached to his gun-sheath. She was looking up at him with her wide dark eyes.

"Little girl, please go away," he said kindly. "I wish to be alone."

"Daddy," she replied in a low voice.

"My child, I'm not your daddy."

"I'm Estie. Didn't Uncle Keetch ever tell about Estie?"

"No. Uncle Keetch never did. Please run away now, Estie. This is the grave—of one very dear to me."

"Oh, I know," she said wistfully.

"Child, what do you know?"

"I love her, too. Every day I come here."

"That's good of you, Estie. Thank you. I—I—But, child, why do you come here?"

"It's my mamma's grave. I'm Estie. Uncle Keetch sent me to tell you."

Latch's lips barely formed the hoarse whisper. "Estie—who?"

"Estie Latch. My name's Estelle, but Auntie Benson calls me Estie."

"God in heaven!" whispered Latch. He knelt to take the pretty face between his shaking hands. "Child, who—are—you?"

"Estie Latch," she replied softly. "I was born here. I'm nearly seven years old. This is my mother's grave. You've been so long coming home, Daddy."

Then the agony that gripped Latch seemed pierced by the almost incredible truth. A last slant of sunlight fell upon those red-gold curls. How like the hair that had once waved across his breast! Cynthia's violet eyes looked into his.

"Call me that again," he whispered.

"*Daddy!*" She put her arms around his neck.

Suddenly Latch snatched the child to his breast. Cynthia's child! There had been a baby. His baby! She had her arms around his neck. She had been taught to love her father—Stephen Latch, partner of Satana!

But little Estelle must never know. All the great evil of this unfortunate man burst into new fire to burn away anything or anyone that might destroy the hap-

piness of Cynthia's child. Holding her there, all his passions concentrated into the single one of living for Estelle, to save her, to atone to her for all that he had made her mother suffer.

Life would never hold another moment of peace for Latch. Not with that shadow on his name; that step on his trail! But he prayed for nothing except life, courage, cunning to meet all issues.

A thousand thoughts, ideas, plans, whirled through his mind. Cynthia's spirit seemed to call upon him to keep Estelle there in the purple land where she had been born of such a tragic and beautiful love. Estelle would be a flower of the West.

Latch sat with the Bensons in his big living-room. A bright fire blazed in the huge stone fireplace. Outside, the November wind moaned under the eaves with a portent of storm.

Latch had listened silently to Mrs. Benson's story of Estelle's birth and Cynthia's death. If he had not rushed away that night long ago, mad in his grief, he might have saved himself those years of vicious life. He would have had Cynthia's child to comfort him.

The part of the woman's story which troubled Latch most was her iteration of the fact that Cynthia had tried desperately to leave a message. But she had died trying. Letters—birthright—fortune! These disturbing words were all Mrs. Benson could distinguish. Latch put the thought-provoking words out of his mind for the present.

"I owe you much," he said to the couple. "My thanks must show in deeds, as your goodness has shown in service to me. Benson, if you came West to make your fortune, you can make it here with me. Take your place as superintendent of my ranch, and meanwhile develop ranch and cattle of your own. Will you accept?"

"Will I? Why, Mr. Latch, I'll be the happiest and luckiest man alive," returned Benson heartily.

"It's settled. You will live here with me. Later we will talk of plans to improve and develop the ranch," replied Latch, and then turned to the man's wife. "Mrs. Benson, your kindness to Cynthia can never be repaid. Nor your mothering of my little girl. But if you will go on with Estelle's education I'll repay you well."

"I would do all I can for nothing," rejoined Mrs. Benson, her blue eyes bright and warm. "I love Estie. I used to be a schoolteacher. I can answer for her up until she's ten or possibly twelve."

"That is splendid. When Estelle is twelve I'll send her South to school."

At a later hour Latch sat in his living-room with the men Keetch

had summoned. Strong drink went the rounds, and then cigars. Latch sat back and gazed at these outlaws who had at one time or another been members of his band.

Leighton, barring the deformity of his face, appeared to far better advantage than when Latch had seen him last. But more potent than ever was the man's inscrutable force—the dominant passion that radiated from him.

Jerry Bain, the merry little outlaw of whom no stranger would ever think evil; Seth Cole, big, bland, lazy, a man who had drifted into outlawry because it was the easiest way; Tumbler Johnson, the mulatto circus performer, a good friend and a dangerous enemy; Mizzouri, the cowman gone wrong; and lastly Plug Halstead, one to whom trouble had gravitated—these members of Latch's Band in the past had never failed him in the slightest.

"Men, I have a surprise for you," spoke up Latch, after an hour of talk. "Latch's Band is no more! It is ended—through. I am asking you to turn honest."

The amazement aroused by that request was depicted in the hard faces.

"The rest of my life will be honest," went on Latch. "Devoted to thinking, fighting, living down the past. The odds are against me. A shadow hangs over me. There is a step on my trail. Kit Carson, Dick Curtis, Beaver Adams, all

the scouts suspect me. The plainsmen and trail bosses like Jim Waters *know* I've been leagued with Satana. If I am found out you will be found out.

"So much for the past. We face the future. I can see the day when the West will not abide the outlaw. Maybe not in our day, but the empire-building era of the West has started. I call your attention to the movement. Not the finished result! None of us will live to see that. Now, speak up, each of you."

"Wal, Colonel," began Keetch sonorously, "I take it you mean this movement on the border will rub out the old outlaws pronto—if they keep on."

"Exactly."

"Thar's a lot in what you say, boss," said Mizzouri. "I've always been for you, an' if you're turnin' honest, so am I."

"Sho, Kurnel, I've always done expected to tumble on the end of a rope," spoke up the Negro.

"Latch, me an' Jerry Bain was talkin' thet very thing over not so long ago," added Seth Cole. "An' we agreed. The wust about turnin' honest is how'n hell are we goin' to make a livin'?"

"Colonel, you always knew that

bein' crooked was forced on me," said Plug Halstead.

This sally elicited a laugh. Leighton was now the only one left to speak.

"Latch, your idea is sound," he agreed. "As for me—I always intended to turn over a new leaf. Probably there couldn't be a better time for me to try it."

"Settled!" rang out Latch, rising to pace the floor. "Now for ways and means. This valley will graze half a million head of cattle—if we keep the buffalo out. The cattle era has begun. Fortunes are made in Dodge City. Trail drivers buy cattle for two and three dollars a head. Sell them at Dodge for fifteen! That price will go up and up. Men, we'll all get rich."

"My proposition to you all, except Leighton, is this: I'll start you with a ranch and cattle—say five hundred head each. A fine start! Also five thousand dollars each Throw up cabins, corrals, barns. Build homes. Get yourselves wives. Work. And live down the past."

Keetch made a great thump with his crutch as he got up to support his master. "Fellars, it's a grand idee. Any man of you can see the sense of Latch's plan, as wal as his generosity. Come! you can all have many years to live yet. Honest years!"

"Marse Latch, I done knowed you wuz a good man," said the Negro.

"Hell yes!" shouted Mizzouri.

Bain, Cole, and Halstead in quick succession acquiesced dramatically.

"Leighton, you don't need a start in ranching. You are already doing well, Keetch says. Are you with us?"

"Latch, I prefer to go my way alone," returned Leighton. "But I'm with you so far as the secrecy of our old band is concerned."

"You don't join us in this turn to honest living?" queried Latch.

"I will never join any band again," replied Leighton harshly. "But I approve of the plan. Only I'll make my own turn."

"Fair enough," interposed Keetch. "Let Leighton go his own way—so long's it's honest."

"I agree to that," added Latch.

"How do you propose to placate Satana?" queried Leighton. "The old chief is restless. It was our deals, you know, that kept him off the warpath. He'll be hard to handle."

"That will be my job and my expense," declared Latch.

"Here's a harder job. What to do about the—well, men of our old calling who come heah."

"They will be welcome. Outlaws, Indians, every kind and class of men will be welcome. We'll keep open house. We'll hide them, if necessary, feed them, be friends with them. *Only we have turned honest!*"

## Chapter Eleven

### *Ex-Trail Driver*

CORNY wrenched his gaze from the set eyes and twitching face of the prostrate trail driver. Suddenly sick and cold, he turned away from the sight.

"He forced you to draw, Corny," spoke up Weaver, the trail boss, in hoarse tones. "We all seen that. But he was Lanthorpe's favorite an' you know Lanthorpe was already sore at you. Fork your horse, boy, before he gits back."

"We air damn sorry, Corny," spoke up a lean-jawed rider. "None of us had any use for Pitch. He was an ornery hombre. An' he got what he always expected. But as Weav says, Lanthorpe was some kin or other to Pitch. You gotta rustle."

"Listen, cowboy," said Weaver. "We'll keep this from Lanthorpe as long as we can. You ride down along the river, back to town. There's a wagon train got in last night, an' it'll be leavin' this mawnin'. Fall in with it, Corny. Take my hunch an' hit for the West."

"Where?" queried Corny, as if intrigued by a new idea.

"Anywhere West. Even California Corny. you've spent six years up an' down this Chisholm Trail—huntin' for your brother. Forgive me, Corny, but this is straight talk—you'll *never* find him. So git off the trail where you've earned so bad a name for throwin' a gun Go where you've never been heerd of, an' begin all over."

"Corny, it's more than straight talk." added the other driver. "It's sound sense. An'—"

"You-all win," interposed Corny. "Don't rub it in. But where in hell will I go?"

"I was aboot to tell you," continued Weaver.

"Rustle, boss, I see Lanthorpe comin'," spoke up a driver in the background.

"Ride oot with thet caravan," went on Weaver hastily "They're travelin' west on thet Lyons wagon road. Go with them as far as the Canadian River, anyhow. Try your hand at buffalo huntin'. Or better, ride on to Latch's Field. Steve Latch is runnin' Chisholm a close second these days. They say Latch has a wonderful range up on the North Fork."

"Wal, I'm thankin' you-all," replied Corny, and made for his horse, just saddled for the day's drive. He led the horse away from camp, to the bank of the river, where a fringe of willows and cottonwoods soon hid him from sight. As he strode along he fought bitter nausea. Coming to a grove of cottonwoods, he halted to sit on a log and roll a cigarette.

"I wonder if Weav was right aboot Lester," he soliloquized. "I reckon. But all these years I hoped to find out what become of him. Wal, wal! That'll never be."

The long-lost brother was to become only a memory. Corny experienced a relief at the actual abandoning of a search that was hopeless He felt glad, too, that the Chisholm Trail had seen the last of him. He had been a trail driver since he was 16. It had suited his wild nature, this roaring cattle drive from the Rio Grande to the markets in Abilene and Dodge.

The constant action, the romance and magic of the greatest movement of cattle the West was ever to know—these had filled out Corny's restless, unhappy life. He loved Texas. It hurt terribly to give it up. But on the other hand it was well that Dodge and Abilene and Hays City were to see him no more. "Corny barks too often with his gun!" an old trail boss had averred. Corny confessed it.

He smoked another cigarette and then mounted his horse to ride up on the bank where he could see. Lanthorpe's big herd was crossing the river above. Soon a moving bridge of longhorns spanned the space from bank to bank.

"Wal, Weav will shore miss me when it comes to drivin' the drags," said Corny, with pride. He was proud of his reputation as the best rear-end driver on the trail. Corny gazed once more. This was his farewell to the Chisholm Trail.

A dull thud of hoof on soft ground caught his ear. There was a horse moving down in the willow brake under the bank. Presently he espied the sombrero of a rider. One of the drivers was trailing him. Corny rode back to meet him.

"What you countin' my tracks for, Jeff?"

"Jest wanted to say good-by an' hand you this," returned the other, handing Corny a roll of greenbacks.

Corny stared at the money and then at Jeff, who watched him appealingly.

"Gosh blast it, pard! That was Weav's idea. He knowed you hadn't a dollar. An' he said we'd all chip in. Didn't want you to start a new trail without some money. Only don't hit the bottle, Corny. An' Weav says for you shore to write him home at Santone, an' he'll let us all know how you air."

This kind thought of Weaver's, the gift from all his trail comrades, broke down Corny's reserve and he bowed his head over his saddle

"My Gawd! An' I never cared for—nobody—but *him!*"

"Shore. We understood, Corny," replied the other softly. "Good-

by, old man. Weav says to go straight. I needn't tell you to shoot straight."

Jeff wheeled his horse, and piled over the bank so quickly that when Corny looked up he was gone.

"Tell Weav I will," called Corny hoarsely. "Good-by, Jeff."

Corny rode away from the river bank across the flat toward the post. The sun was well up now and warm. Soon he saw blue columns of smoke and then the outlying gray shacks of Findlay. A stench of buffalo hides assailed his nostrils. Huge bales of the shaggy pelts lay scattered around. Freighters were busy packing. Corny passed them. He rode on to a camp on the outskirts of Findlay and inquired if a wagon train bound west had passed.

"Left before daybreak," replied a red-whiskered hide-hunter. "Didn't I see you with Weaver's trail herd?"

"You might of. Mawnin', friend," drawled Corny, and turned west on the dusty road.

The caravan was hours ahead of him. Corny decided to travel leisurely so that he would not catch up with the train before camp that night. A long day on the lonely road in which to think! He faced the vast purple rangeland with strange relief. Something beyond the dim bold hills called him.

Midday found Corny topping a high ridge from which he saw dust clouds rising far ahead and also behind. The wagon train he was tracking no doubt accounted for the former, but who was raising dust in the rear? Lanthorpe was quite capable of sending a posse in pursuit of him.

Corny rode on down the long slope to a pleasant valley bottomland, where groves and patches of prairie grass bright with flowers bordered a meandering brook. Shade invited a rest. Corny let his horse drink and then led him across the brook into a grove some rods from the road. Then Corny retraced his steps and found a shady covert where he proposed to wait until whoever was raising the dust should pass.

In less than a half-hour, however, he heard the clip-clop of two horses on the hard road. His position was such that any riders happening along must pass before he could see them. Presently two men, astride bay horses, came into sight.

Dismounting at the brook, they watered their horses, then led them back of the thicket where Corny lay concealed. Too close for comfort!

Corny guessed that other riders and perhaps a belated wagon belonging to the caravan were coming along. These two men in hiding were highwaymen. Robbery along the roads of Texas in that day was a frequent occurrence.

Keen as Corny was, however, he had not prepared himself for the rolling sound of a stagecoach, evidently slowing up at this point for water.

At this juncture, scrape of boots and jingle of spurs made Corny aware that the two ambushers were coming round in front of the thicket.

"Steve Latch would pay handsome to git thet gal of his back alive," said one gruffly.

"I'm leary of the idee. Let's see how they're heeled before riskin' any more'n a holdup," returned the other.

They passed on out of hearing. Corny was taut with excitement. He crawled noiselessly to the edge of the thicket. The two men would presently leap out to hold up the stagecoach. Corny pulled one of his guns. Fine chance he had of avoiding gun-play!

"*—Hands up thar!*" pealed out a stentorian command.

A girl's scream, pound of hoofs, startled voices, and scrape of wheels attested to a halt. Corny crawled out of the thicket, ran with light steps, halted for a deep breath—then leaped.

This action brought him near the two robbers, standing with backs toward him, their guns slanting up at the driver and his companion on the seat of the stagecoach. The victims' hands were high above their heads and the driver still held the reins of the restive horses.

"*Heah!*" yelled Corny.

The robbers wheeled with wide sweep of guns. Corny's two shots broke that action. One of the highwaymen discharged his weapon as he fell. The other merely sank like an empty sack released.

"Whoa! Whoa!" bawled the stage driver to the plunging horses.

As Corny ran alongside the coach he caught a glimpse of three white-faced girls and a Negro woman. One of the lead horses on the left side still plunged in fright. Corny dragged him down.

"Driver, was you goin' to water heah?" queried Corny.

"You bored them hombres, cowboy!" blurted out the driver. "You shore bored 'em! Yes, I was intendin' to water hyar. S'pose you lead thet haid team for me."

Corny took hold of a bit strap in each hand and backed into the shade. Here the driver leaped down.

"Put her thar, cowboy," he burst out, extending an eager hand. "What might yore name be?"

"Wal, it might be Jeff Davis, only it ain't," replied Corny.

"Ahuh. Mine is Bill Simpson, driver for Latch of Latch's Field."

"Howdy. I reckon you're a powerful careless driver to work for Mr. Latch."

"Careless? My Gawd yes! Wuss than careless. But it's Miss Estie's fault, cowboy, an' you can believe

me," declared Simpson, beginning to unhitch. "Pile off, Moze, an' help hyar. You see, stranger, it was this way. I'm drivin' Latch's daughter an' two of her friends from New Orleans to Latch's Field. We'd never been alone a mite of the way till this mawnin'. We was to start out with Bridgeman's wagon train. But the girls wouldn't get up in time, an' later Miss Estie said we'd hurry on an' catch up. That is what I was doin' when them hombres busted out of the brush."

"Wal, lucky I happened to be restin' in the shade," said Corny.

"Lucky for us. An', say, cowboy, lucky for you if you ever drop into Latch's Field. Soon as I water the horses we'll go back an' have a look at them hombres. Yes, Miss Estie, we're all right now, thanks to this cowboy."

"Please wet my scarf. Marce fainted," replied the same musical voice that had called Simpson.

Corny leaped to take the scarf from the gloved hand extending from the window of the coach. He ran to the brook, and saturating the scarf he hurried back with it to the stagecoach. The same small hand received it, ungloved this time. Its owner bent over a pale face lying on the lap of the Negress. The third girl sat back limp as a rag. The one Corny took for Miss Latch had red-gold hair.

"Dar, she's sho comin' to, Mis' Estie," spoke up the Negress.

"Marce, you're all right. You fainted," said Miss Latch.

"I did? How silly! Oh, you've drowned me. What happened to those men?"

Simpson approached to take a peep in. "Aw, Miss Marce, I'm shore sorry you had a scare. But all along you've wanted somethin' to happen. It did. An' it could have been wuss. Meet our cowboy friend, hyar—who says his name might be Jeff Davis, only it ain't."

The young ladies appeared on the moment too perturbed to be aware of strangers or introductions. Whereupon Simpson and Corny went out to where the robbers lay.

"Simpson, you search them hombres an' identify them, if you can, while I let their horses go," said Corny.

Freeing the two horses of bridles and saddles, Corny left them to roll. Then he went across the brook to fetch his own horse. Returning, Corny found Simpson hitching up the teams.

"Wal, I'll ride along behind you 'til we catch up with the wagon train," announced Corny.

"Please come here, sir," called a rather imperious youthful voice.

Corny seemed forewarned of a stupendous event, but not forearmed. Owing to the tragedy of his brother's life—wholly on account of a girl—Corny feared girls and distrusted them. Removing his sombrero, he approached the stage-

coach. If he had ever seen a lovely face before, this pale sweet one, with its violet eyes and red lips, eclipsed the memory.

"Sir, you saved us from being robbed, if not worse," she said gravely. "Robbery would have been bad enough We are carrying home a considerable sum of money for my father, Stephen Latch of Latch's Field. I am Estelle Latch. And these are my friends Miss Marcella Lee and Miss Elizabeth Proctor."

Corny bowed. "I shore am glad to meet you-all," he drawled.

"To whom are we indebted for this rescue?" spoke up Miss Lee weakly. "I want to thank you."

"Aw, lady, don't thank me."

"But we do thank you," said Miss Latch gravely. "And we want to know who you are."

"I'm only a no-good trail driver that lost his job this mawnin' an' I happened to be restin' heah."

"Are those bandits dead?" she queried.

"Wal, I didn't see," drawled Corny. "Looks like they was takin' a siesta."

"Mr. Trail Driver, you are being facetious. Which is certainly not what you were when you jumped out of that thicket."

"I reckon I did 'pear sudden," replied Corny. "Wal, the fact is, lady, I heahed one of them say your dad would pay handsome to get you back alive. So I wasn't actin' with much compunction."

"How awful!" exclaimed Miss Latch. "Girls, did you hear? Those ruffians meant more than robbery. My father must hear about this, sir."

"Wal, I've no objection to your tellin' him, lady. Only don't rub it on thick."

"You are a very strange young man," declared the girl. "Don't you know my dad would reward you—give you a job—for this service to me and my friends?"

"I reckon he would, lady. An' that's why I'll not ride to Latch's Field."

"Mr. Trail Driver, we must catch Bridgeman's caravan for camp tonight. Will you accompany us?"

"Wal, I'll ride along behind if you want me."

"Please do. We shall feel safer. And please come to me in camp. I —I would like to speak with you again."

"Wal, it's a turrible risk, Miss Latch, but I'll do it," drawled Corny.

"Risk of what? Is there a sheriff after you?"

"No, the risk I meant is more turrible than trailin' sheriffs."

"Indeed!" replied Miss Latch, her color mounting in a wave. "Pray let us see if you can dare such terrible risk as bravely as you faced these bandits."

Corny turned to mount his horse. And when he got up the stagecoach was in motion. He fell

in behind.

It was some time before he realized that no other adventure of his life had affected him as this one had. When he discovered that for miles he had not had a thought of anything but this violet-eyed Latch girl he was amused, then chagrined, and finally he was bewildered.

Corny tried to recall all that he had ever heard about Latch's Field and the man who had made it noted on the border. What kind of man was this Latch? Another Maxwell, no doubt.

The sun was westering low over the bold uneven horizon when Corny espied the caravan wheeling off the road to make camp. The stagecoach rolled off the road down a slight grade, to halt at the first wagons. Corny followed, but dismounted near a big prairie schooner.

"Howdy, rider," greeted a towheaded emigrant. "Was you with that coach?"

"I was scoutin' behind. But I can eat with you if you ask me," replied Corny.

"Haw! Haw! You're welcome, cowboy. Throw your saddle an' grab the ax."

Straightway Corny found himself an object of interest to a family named Prescott, consisting of father, mother, grown son, a dark-eyed daughter about 18 and a lad of ten. They were plain folk bound West to win a livelihood out of the soil.

The father had been late with his chores and was washing his hands at the wagon when another member of the caravan strode up.

"Bill, that stagecoach was held up by bandits back a ways on the road," he declared. "Two men follered the coach which was tryin' to catch up with us. They was both shot by a cowboy. Accordin' to the driver, thet cowboy come along with him. He must be heah somewheres. Bridgeman wants him."

"Ahuh. I reckon your cowboy is eatin' with us."

Corny heard it all and slowly rose to meet the messenger.

"Are you the rider who came along with the Latch coach?"

Corny nodded coolly.

"Boss wants to see you."

"What about?"

"Didn't say. I reckon he wants a report of that holdup."

Corny allowed himself to be led toward a semicircle of wagons. Latch's stagecoach stood at one side under a tree.

"Heah's your cowboy, Bridgeman," spoke up Corny's companion as they entered the circle to encounter several men.

Corny's glance never got any farther than the foremost—a tall rugged Texan. Corny recognized him, but had never known his name was Bridgeman.

"Dad-gast my soul!" whooped out the caravan leader with a

warm smile. "If it ain't Corny! I shore am glad to see you, cowboy. How come you're so far off the trail an' the drags?"

"So your name's Bridgeman?" drawled Corny. "Dog-gone! I've heahed of you. An' all the time I knew you! Shore glad to see you again, old-timer. An' I might ask what're you're doin' so far off the Old Trail?"

"I sold out, an' I'm goin' West to grow up with the country. Corny, we all heahed aboot the little service you did for Miss Latch an' her school friends."

"Yeah? Somehow a fellow cain't fork his hawse or doff his sombrero to a lady without it travelin' up an' down the range," replied Corny nonchalantly.

"Folks, if I wasn't afraid of embarrassing this cowboy I'd tell you aboot him. It's enough to say thet he happened around for *me* once, or I wouldn't be heah." Bridgeman turned to the girls edging into the circle. "Miss Latch, the hero of your little experience down the road is an old friend of mine," he said. "I'm sorry, though, I cain't introduce him by name. All I ever heahed him called was Corny. Cowboy, meet Miss Estelle Latch an' her friends."

"Good evening, Mr. Corny Trail Driver," spoke up the violet-eyed girl.

"Evenin', Miss Latch—an' you-all," he said, bowing to the three. "I'm right glad you're safe with my friend, Mr. Bridgeman. Funny how neither of us knew the other's name."

"Indeed, it is very funny how some men forget their names," returned Miss Latch. "But my dad always said that names don't count for much west of the big river. It's what you *do* and *are* that counts."

"Wal, sometimes what you do an' are make it good you have forgotten your name."

"Will you walk with us a little?" she asked sweetly. "We are cramped from sitting all day."

"Shore be glad to."

They strolled under the trees and along the brook. The Latch girl talked about the caravan and the band of Kiowas, friendly with her father, that was to meet them at Adobe Walls and escort them to Latch's Field.

"The ride from Adobe Walls to Long's Road, where we branch off, is about like this. But from there on it grows wilder and rougher. My valley is the most wonderful place in the world."

They had come to a glade where there was a brook, bordered by high grass and flowers. The water glided smoothly on, flushed rose by the sunset glow.

"Marce, you rest here with Elizabeth," said Miss Latch demurely. "Mr. Corny and I will walk to the big log yonder."

Elizabeth giggled. "So that's why you took us walking!"

## Chapter Twelve

### *Gun Services Refused*

CORNY walked beside her as one in a dream. A huge cottonwood tree had blown down to make a bridge across the brook.

"Lift me up," said Miss Latch.

Corny put a hand to each side of her slim waist and tossed her aloft. She looked down upon him, as he leaned against the log. She was pale and earnest.

"Can you imagine this is an unusual proceeding for Estelle Latch?" she asked.

"Wal, no, I can't. But it's shore unusual for me!"

"A trail driver is not used to girls—like me?"

"This heah trail driver is not used to any girls," he flashed.

"So you are not really a no-good trail driver who has lost his job?" she asked, after a pause.

"Wal," he laughed, "I've shore lost my job, all right."

"I saw Mr. Bridgeman when he greeted you. I heard him. He must have a very high opinion of you."

"Aw, he overrates a little service I was lucky enough to do for him."

"How did you come to lose your job?"

"Wal, there was a driver who had a grudge against me. An'—I couldn't keep out of his way forever."

"You fought?"

He let silence be his answer.

"Mr. Corny, you hint you're very bad."

"I reckon I am, dog-gone-it!"

"Do you gamble and drink?"

"Wal, I used to—some," he confessed, "till I got sick of it."

"I imagine from one thing you said—that you never ran after the dance-hall girls."

"No. I never run after them—or *any* girls," he replied.

"Then—are you a rustler and a horse thief?"

"My Gawd, no! Lady, I'm not that kind of bad."

"I knew you weren't. Listen. You know who I am. My dad is Stephen Latch. I am sixteen years old. I was born in Spider Web Canyon, the loneliest and most beautiful place on earth, I think. All I know about my mother is that she came from the East and belonged to a rich and cultured family. There's a secret about her—she died at my birth—which Dad promises to tell me when I'm eighteen. Until I was ten years old I never was away from Latch's Field. Mrs. Benson brought me up—taught me. When I was eleven Dad sent me to school in New Orleans. But I'm going home now for good. Dad doesn't know that yet. Now, Mr. Cowboy, will you tell me as much about yourself?"

"Awl It's awful nice an' kind

of you, Miss, givin' confidence to a stranger," he burst out. "I shore appreciate it. But I cain't understand why you did—or why you want to know about me."

"Because I'm going to persuade you to come to Latch's Field and ride for my dad," she declared. "I think you can help him—and make my home happier."

"Lady, you're payin' me too high a compliment. But what about your dad?"

"Last summer I found out that Dad had enemies. There's a man at Latch's Field—his name is Leighton. I *know* he is my Dad's greatest enemy."

"Shore. On this border any big man will have enemies. Go on."

"Then, just before time for me to go away to school something dreadful happened. Strangers are always coming to Latch's Field This one wanted money—threatened Dad with something, I don't know what. And Dad shot him! I saw that man fall. It made me sick. Dad was shot, too, but not seriously. Well, I had to go to school again. Only two letters from Dad all this winter. I'm worried."

"Wal, I reckon you're borrowin' a lot of trouble, Miss Latch," replied Corny.

"Since last summer I've felt a shadow hanging over me. Now, Mr. Corny, I've told you my story and asked you to come to Latch's Field. Will you?"

"Just why do you want me, Miss?"

"I—I don't know, unless it was what Mr. Bridgeman said."

"Like as not your dad wouldn't hire me. I have no recommendation."

"You have mine," she retorted. "*I* will promise you a job. I trust you without knowing even your name."

"Shore. An' you're a dog-gone little fool. Suppose I turned out to be no good?"

"Every word you say strengthens whatever it was that prompted me to ask you. But I cannot go beyond asking."

"You make me ashamed, Miss Latch. Fact is, I was only thinkin' about sparin' you. I'm an unlucky cuss. Things always hunt me up. Still, that doesn't prove I cain't help your dad. So, I'll come."

"Thank you," she replied radiantly, extending her hand. "Shake on that."

He squeezed her little hand, without boldness or intent retaining it in his own. "I'll come, provided you don't tell your dad anythin' about me atall."

"Oh, it's only fair he should know of the holdup, at least. Bill will tell. The girls couldn't keep it."

"I'll take care of Bill an' you keep your friends from ravin' about me. Then maybe Latch might take me—on my merits as a trail driver."

"Very well. Mr. Cowboy, you are still holding my hand," she said.

"Wal, so I am," drawled Corny. "You forgot about that turrible risk."

"You said *you* would run that," she retorted, pulling her hand free. "We must go. But first—who are you?"

"My name's Cornwall. I'm twenty-two. Born in Santone. My father run a string of stagecoaches before the war. I—I had a brother—Lester. He was much older, but we were playmates. Went to school together. Then somethin' turrible happened. Lester was in love with the prettiest girl in Santone. She was part Spanish.

"Wal, she ruined Lester—betrayed him with his best friend. Lester did somethin' awful. An' he ran away. Mother died. An' Father went to war. I never heahed from him again. I worked on ranches till I was fifteen. Then I took to trail drivin'. I was six years riding the Chisholm Trail. Always I was huntin' for Lester. But I never got any trace of him. Reckon he's gone—long ago.

"Wal, trail drivin' suited me. An' so, Miss Latch, I grew quick with guns. I reckon not all trail drivers will speak so fair of me as Bridgeman. Finally it had to be good-by to the Old Trail. An' heah I am, Miss Latch, lucky at last, an' swearin' you will never regret your faith in me."

"I shall not. Oh, what a sad story! But it is almost dark. Help me down. Mr. Corny, I declare if you are not holding my hand again."

"Dog-gone! I'm shore absent-minded," drawled Corny.

Corny camped with the family from Georgia and made himself useful during the four days' ride to Long's Road.

He saw little of Miss Latch and her friends. On the fifth day, however, when the wagon train went on, leaving the Latch stagecoach and occupants to the escort of Kiowas, Corny learned a little more about the complex nature of girls.

"Good mawnin'," drawled Miss Latch, imitating him as he led his horse by the coach. "We thought you had gone with the caravan—and the big-eyed girl from Georgia."

Corny was as one thunderstruck. Miss Latch's face appeared a lovely mask. Astounded, bewildered, he could only resort to the nonchalance of a trail driver.

"Mawnin', Miss Latch. Shore I'll catch up with them soon—"

A little later, while fumbling over his saddle-cinch, he was confronted by an entirely different Miss Latch.

"You don't mean it? You're not going with that caravan?" she demanded.

"Wha-what?" he stammered.

"You couldn't be so—so unkind.

Such a liar! Oh, I've watched you night after night talking to that Prescott girl. She's very pretty. I don't blame you. But to desert me now—after promising to come help me and Dad—oh! that would be despicable! For a country girl with red hands and big feet! Oh, I wondered about you!"

"Yeah. So you wondered about me, Estelle?" drawled Corny, thrown suddenly into a blissful paradise.

"Yes, I did," she cried, nodding her bright head until the red-gold curls danced. Her eyes burned dark reproach. "All that blarney of yours about so little knowledge of girls! Oh, I'll bet you have been a devil with women."

As Corny looked across his saddle at the lovely betraying face, something like a bursting comet scintillated in his mind. "Estelle, a fellow can fall so turrible in love with one girl that he runs ravin' to another," he said deliberately.

*"Oh!"* she breathed. "I—you—" she gasped. The purple flame vanished from eyes that grew wide and round in wonder, and suddenly fell as a tide of crimson flooded up from her neck to cheek and brow. Then she fled.

Corny rode out in front with the Kiowa guides, one of whom, a magnificent Indian, surprised him by saying, "How, cowboy. Me see you Dodge. Me Hawk Eye."

"Wal, howdy yourself, Hawk Eye, old scout." replied Corny.

Hawk Eye had been well named, so far as his eyes were concerned. His bronzed lineaments appeared to mask wonderful experience and cunning. Corny decided to cultivate Hawk Eye.

These Kiowas were travelers. They kept their ponies on a trot. They made upwards of 40 miles, Corny calculated, as they halted for camp early, in a sheltered oval between hills. Some of the Indians rode off to hunt meat. Corny unsaddled and hobbled his horse, then presented himself to Simpson for camp duty.

"Any good as a camp cook?" queried the driver.

"Turrible," replied Corny.

"Never seen a cowboy who wasn't. Rustle wood, build fires, an' pack water."

The young ladies appeared to be having the time of their lives. Miss Latch avoided looking in his direction.

Corny ate his supper standing at the camp fire, while Bill waited upon the young ladies. They had a merry meal.

Darkness came on, with the Indians smoking round the camp fire. Coyotes began their thrilling chorus. The girls were entranced with it all. Bill coaxed them to go to bed, pleading a start at dawn next day.

Another day came and passed, and four more days. Still Corny kept aloof from the girls.

The long succession of ridges seemed but waves of the prairie climbing to the foothills. The morning arrived when Hawk Eye led around their base to a vast tableland, green and blue and yellow. Black patches out there meant herds of buffalo.

Next morning as Corny rode out with the Kiowas he saw a strip of purple land rising above the prairie straight north. This was the northern prong of the bluff that formed one of the boundaries of Latch's triangular valley.

That afternoon Corny saw cattle, and camp that night was made near the first ranch in the valley.

Before sunrise next morning the stagecoach was hitched up and loaded, with Bill at the reins and the girls gayly excited. Latch's Field only 30 miles! Bill cracked his long whip. The coach groaned and the wheels rolled. Then Corny discovered Estelle giving him her eyes for the first time since the upheaval at Long's Road. What a strange wondering glance!

Late that afternoon Corny rode alone on the last few miles into Latch's Field. The Indians had gone on ahead.

Green squares attracted Corny's speculative eyes; groves of cottonwoods and walnut trees marched across to the opposite wall; meadows like parks of golden grass shone against the sunset.

Soon he made out Latch's ranch. For the first time in his life Corny saw a place where he would like to stay.

Near the town of Latch's Field were a number of substantial ranch houses perhaps a half mile or less apart. When Corny entered the town he saw that Latch's Field was like other Western towns in isolated districts.

In the center of the more pretentious section he espied a big signboard upon which shone in large letters the single word "Leighton's." The place was huge. A porch ran along the whole front. "Ahuh, Mr. Leighton runs a whole show," Corny muttered. And by that he meant store, hotel, trading post, and a saloon with its accessories.

Some minutes later Corny rode down a lane into Latch's ranch. Inquiry brought him to a huge courtyard surrounded by corrals and barns.

A long slant up to the wide-open entrance of the barn led Corny's gaze to rest upon riders with horses, and several men. He rode toward them, rolling a cigarette on the way. If the tall man in black sombrero and high-top boots was Mr. Latch, as Corny guessed, this moment was most auspicious. A bearded man leaning on a crutch and a bowlegged cowboy directed the tall man's attention to Corny's approach.

In another moment Corny did not need to be told which was Stephen Latch. Reining in, he

shifted a leg over the pommel, always a sign of friendly intent, and addressed the trio.

"Howdy." Corny looked from the cripple to the cowboy, and then to the man in black. He saw a handsome face which was a mask of fine lines, a record of havoc, and eyes of piercing fire.

"Howdy, yourself," retorted the rancher.

Corny felt at ease. His rescue of Miss Latch and her companions. had not been divulged. "I'm lookin' for a job."

"Talk to Keetch, here. He's my foreman."

"Excuse me, sir. Are you Latch?"

"Of course I'm Latch," rejoined the rancher.

"Wal, if you don't mind, I'll talk to you," drawled Corny.

Latch laughed at his impudence "Fire away, son. But you can't fool me. You saw the stagecoach come in."

"Ump-umm," declared Corny. "I shore didn't see no stagecoach come in. But I heahed some hombre in Leighton's say, 'Latch's trouble is heah,' so I reckoned I'd come over to offer you a handy boy."

"Leighton's!" Latch might have been stung. "Thanks, cowboy. But we don't need any riders."

"Aw, you'll always need a boy like me on this heah ranch," returned Corny coolly.

"Why do you think that?"

"Wal. I see you have a lot of redskin hunters to pack meat in, an' greaser farm hands to dig fence-post holes, an' you shore have some riders judgin' from this heah bowlaigged chap. So I just thought you ought to take me on."

"Cowboy, you've got nerve. Make yourself at home. Stay to supper with the men. But don't bother me any more."

"Sorry, boss, to bother you," drawled Corny. "But this is serious for me. I heahed down on the trail that you never turned a rider away from Latch's Field."

"Didn't I ask you to stay to supper?"

"Shore. An' thanks. But I want a job."

"What kind of a job?" demanded Latch, his keen eyes studying the rider.

"Aw, I can do most anythin' about a ranch that isn't hard work. But my specialty is heah," drawled Corny, and then, in a flash, there he was extending a gun by the barrel.

"Oh, I savvy," declared the rancher, slowly taking the gun. His mobile hand closed over the butt and Corny knew that he felt the notches there. Then he returned the gun. "Are you drunk, son, that you brag of gun-play?"

"Nope. I'm not the bottle-lovin' kind, Mr. Latch. I just had a hunch you might need a handy hombre like me."

"I'm sorry, son," returned

Latch, "but despite your nerve and your estimate of your worth and my needs—I don't want you."

"No offense, I'm sure," replied Corny, shifting his leg back over the pommel, and turning his horse away. When he got a few paces distant he heard the foreman say to Latch:

"Boss, let me call that cowboy back. Thar's somethin'—"

Corny distinguished no more. He rode out satisfied that he had gauged Latch correctly. If the rancher had not really been in trouble he would have reacted differently to Corny's cryptic proposal. "Good!" soliloquized Corny. "He shore needs me, but wouldn't take me on. That'll give me a chance to size up this heah town. Wal, wal! An' what'll Estelle say about this? Dog-gone! If I don't miss my guess she'll raise hell with Dad."

## Chapter Thirteen

### *"Slim Blue"*

LATCH'S joy at the return of Estelle minimized the multiplicity of troubles assailing him. With Cynthia's daughter in the house, it was impossible for him not to be happy. Yet Latch lived in fear that Estelle would find him out. And he would die to keep his secret.

"Dad, I'm home—home to *stay!*" she cried, her arms around his neck. "I'm not going back to school. I want to stay home, to help you, to share your troubles."

"Why, child, I have no troubles!"

"I suspect you are an awful liar."

"Estelle!"

"Let's not argue now."

Always her slightest wish had been law to Latch. All he thought of was to make her happy. To atone in some measure for the tragedy he had brought upon her mother!

"Very well. You shall stay home," he said. "For me it will be glorious. But, Estie, what will you do after the novelty of being home wears off?"

"It never will. Anyway, I'll ride all the horses, boss your *vaqueros,* run the house—and look round for a husband."

"Husband!" The word was a blade piercing his heart. "Where will you find him?"

"Where do you think, you goose? Shall I go to Boston to look for one, or back to New Orleans? Not much! I want a big sombrero and a pair of high boots with spurs. Don't look so shocked, darling Daddy. It will probably take me some time. Because he must be like *you!*"

Latch burned under the fire of that innocent expression. "In that case I will try to possess my soul until such dire event comes to

pass."

That conversation occurred the very hour of her arrival.

After dinner, which on this occasion of Estelle's home-coming had been shared only by the Bensons and Keetch, they sat before the glowing logs.

"Boss, did you tell the gurls aboot thet young rooster who wanted a job so bad?" queried Keetch, as he settled comfortably for a smoke.

"No, Keetch, I forgot it."

"What young rooster?" inquired Estelle.

"Some cowboy who rode in this afternoon. Impudent rascal. He declared I needed him whether I wanted him or not," replied Latch.

"How interesting!" exclaimed Estelle.

The other girls evinced something more than interest. Latch wondered if they knew anything about this young man.

"Keetch, you tell them," said Latch.

"Wal, jest before sundown a young fellar rode into the court," began Keetch. "He came up, said howdy an' throwed his leg across his hoss. I've seen a sight of riders in my day, but never only one thet beat him. Boss, do you remember who I'm thinkin' aboot? Wal, he was straight as an Injun. Handsome, too, gurls. You-all shore would have liked him."

"I think we would," agreed Elizabeth Proctor demurely. Marcella giggled, while Estelle sat straight and tense, anticipating Keetch's conclusion to this long preamble.

"He packed two guns. Did you notice thet, boss?" went on Keetch. "An' darn me if he didn't flap oot one as a callin'-caird. Fact is he struck me like one of them trail-drivin' *vaqueros*. Salt of the earth! Wal, this boy wanted a job bad. He was kinda testy aboot it, an' I reckon gave yore dad a poor idee of—"

"Not at all," interposed Latch. "He struck me most favorably. I sent him away because he reminded me of that other boy, Keetch."

"Ahuh. I shore pondered aboot thet. Fust rider you ever refused, boss. Wal, anyway, he rode back the way he come."

"Dad, is *this* boy really the first rider you ever refused to help?" asked Estelle.

"If Keetch says so it's so," rejoined Latch. "I'm sorry."

"He reminded you of some other boy?"

"Yes, dear, indeed he did. One I loved greatly and owed much."

"Oh, Dad, you've *told* me about him. How strange!" her eyes dilated with thought. "Dad, it is too bad you didn't hire him."

"Why so?" inquired Latch.

"Because you will now have to hunt up this cowboy and give him the job he asked for," declared his daughter.

"Child, I can't do that."

"If you don't hunt up this cowboy and give him a job, I will!"

"Estelle, if you think I was unjust, I will reconsider," declared Latch hastily. "Certainly I would not permit you to ask him. That would make him a marked rider. But why are you so insistent?"

"Dad, if it hadn't been for this cowboy, I wouldn't be home tonight. I'd be out on the range somewhere, kidnapped by two ruffians, held for ransom, because one of them said, 'Latch will pay handsome for his girl back alive!' "

Latch got up to face his daughter. "Estelle, what have you kept from me?"

She turned pale. "Father, at Findlay we slept late, missed Bridgeman's caravan. Bill was wild. But I made him drive out to overtake the caravan. Well, we were held up by two bandits. No sooner had Bill stopped the horses when we heard a yell, *'Heah!'* The bandits whirled around with guns aloft. The brush crashed—a man leaped out.

"Oh, Dad! He killed them! It was dreadfull He just happened to be resting there. He saved all your money, Dad, and *me*. He said he was only a no-good trail driver out of a job. I told him we'd feel safer if he rode with us. He did so. And I asked him to ride for us."

"Estelle! You kept this from me?"

"Yes, I—I didn't want to distress you the very first thing," she faltered. "Besides, he said he wouldn't ask you for a job if I told you. Wanted you to take him for himself. I had a time persuading Bill not to tell you."

"You should have told me at once," said Latch. "I understand the boy. But now I dare say he won't work for me."

"I can get him to," replied Estelle.

"Oh, I dare say, Maybe you had him in mind when you made that —er, remarkable statement today."

"Daddy!" she cried, blushing. "It was only in fun."

"We'll make amends somehow. Now you girls run off to bed. You're fagged out."

Estelle kissed him goodnight, glad to run off with the girls.

Latch stared into the fire. "Gimme a cigar, you damned old outlaw!"

"Don't care if I have one myself. Boss, ain't she a little wildcat? An', my Gawd! how sweet!"

They smoked and gazed into the fire.

"All for the gurl, Colonel. I seen thet long ago," said Keetch.

"All for her, old-timer," replied Latch sadly. "But shall we be able to—to—"

"So help us Gawd! Boss, thar's only one man livin' now who can *prove*—Kit Carson is daid. Jim Waters is daid Blackstone an' his gang, Charley Bent, the white-

livered renegade. Satana an' his red divils, *all* wiped out last year in thet turrible fight with Buff Belmet's caravan at Point of Rocks. All daid but Leighton—all who could *prove*—"

"How do we know, Keetch?" queried Latch. "It's not possible that Leighton has not told."

"Ahuh. We agree. Colonel, what struck you aboot this trail driver today?"

"He looked like Cornwall. How it hurt! That boy so like a son to me!"

"Wal, thet struck me, too."

"Keetch, did I ever tell you Cornwall had a younger brother?"

"Wal, you don't say. A brother? Reckon we'll never find oot."

Next morning Latch rode to town alone. Hitching his horse, he went down the familiar street, stopping in at the stores, peeping in the saloons, except Leighton's, which he always gave a wide berth, but he did not find the man he was looking for. Whereupon Latch made a visit to his rancher allies, old members of his outlaw gang, who with him had turned honest.

Each had been true to that vow. And all were living except Plug Halstead, who had been killed in Leighton's gambling den the preceding year. They were prosperous ranchers now. Tumbler Johnson was the only Negro on the border known to be a squaw-man. Mizzouri had a wife and two children. Latch spent the morning with these old friends, invited them to the party he was giving Estelle on her 16th birthday, and rode away, as always warmed by the happiness he had brought to these men who at one time lived in the shadow of the noose.

Upon riding into town again, Latch espied his quarry lounging in front of Rankin's store. "Come here, cowboy," he called, as he dismounted.

The cowboy leisurely advanced to meet Latch. "Howdy, Mr. Latch. I see you've looked me up," drawled the cowboy.

"Howdy. I'm sorry I can't take credit all myself for looking you up."

"I'm sorry too. I reckon I wouldn't take a job now."

"But listen, boy. You just can't refuse," protested Latch. "You're the first rider ever turned away in all these years. It was because you reminded me of a boy who was more than a son to me."

"Hell you say! Why are you askin' me now?"

"Well, as I'm being honest it's because I'm in bad with Estelle. She said if I didn't give you a job she would."

"Dog-gone!" ejaculated the trail driver, visibly disturbed. "Did she

tell you the—the story I told her?"

"Not a word. She told only about the holdup."

"Latch, you cain't let this girl of yours come offerin' me jobs. Folks will talk."

"Of course I can't. That's why I hunted you up."

"Wal, you tell her you did ask me an' I said no," replied the young man. "An' you reckon I'm a no-good trail driver."

"I'll not tell Estelle that, because I don't believe it. What's your game, boy?"

"Wal, Latch, I'm not sayin' much about myself."

"Yes, I get that. And I think you're wrong. You befriended me. You saved me ten thousand dollars—the last money I have, confidentially. You saved Estelle, who means more to me than all the money in the world. Why shouldn't you let me make some return?"

"Pride, man, pride. She's the wonderfulest girl I ever seen. A little lady—sweet an' innocent. Full of fire an' romance. Why, she'd turn my haid. But that wouldn't faze me. Suppose she took a shine to *me?* A gun-throwin' trail driver!"

"Now you've got me in deeper. I won't take no for an answer. I'll take a chance on Estelle. And I'll take one on you. Come out to the ranch."

"Damn it, man! When I talk straight out to you!"

"Straight talk always goes far with me. Besides, you haven't said that you were no good."

"Latch, how'n hell can I say so when I reckon I'm as good as anybody?" demanded the cowboy. "But you know what I mean? I'm a tramp rider. I'm poor, uneducated, alone. An' I'll never risk makin' any girl ashamed or unhappy."

"Son, then why did you ask me for the job?" queried Latch.

"I knew I could ask so you'd refuse."

"The boot's on the other foot now. I'll gamble on you. Come."

"Wal, dog-gone!" drawled the cowboy, facing Latch with all fire and hostility and aloofness gone. He seemed very young then and singularly winning. "You an' your daughter are shore chips from the same block. You win, Latch. But, heah's my condition. I'll come to you presently, an' work faithful an' true. Only there's somethin' I want to do heah first. You gotta trust me. Meanwhile tell your daughter I am no good at all. But you're not to believe that or anythin' you heah aboot me. Is that clear?"

"No. It's not. But I'll agree and I'll gamble on you, whatever you do."

They shook hands without more words and Latch mounted his horse to turn thoughtfully homeward.

"Wait, boss. I forgot—I shore forgot," drawled the cowboy. "When I first went trail drivin' they called me Slim Blue."

Latch had been too generous with gifts of money, cattle, land. He had staked more men than he could remember, in the heyday of his prosperity, in 1875, when the number of cattle marketed at Dodge City had grown exceedingly large. Latch believed his business would increase for years, and hence spent and gave prodigally.

But the years following had been increasingly evil. Leighton put on the screws in his demands for money. Satana was easy to appease until all the rum stored in Spider Web Canyon was gone. Latch had to buy more and freight it in at enormous expense.

Then the advent of the buffalo hunters on the range brought a most disastrous period. Most of the great cattle barons were located on accessible ranges where cattle rustling did not become wholesale. But Latch was hard hit. Among these hunters were many rustlers who profited by the opportunity. Latch felt that he would be reduced to grazing small herds on close ranges patrolled by *vaqueros*. This would not half pay his expenses.

His calls on Mizzouri, Seth Cole, Bain, and Johnson increased his suspicion that someone in Latch's Field was co-operating with the fraudulent hide-hunters or else was rustling on his own hook. He formulated a plan of combining forces with his old comrades to make a stand against this evil. But he abandoned it when he became convinced that it would bring ruin to all of them. The amazing fact was that neither Bain, Cole, Johnson, nor Mizzouri was losing any stock. This revelation added to Latch's problem.

A year or more before he had banked $10,000 in New Orleans for the purpose of making a cherished cattle deal and driving a new herd up from Texas. He had abandoned this, sent word and papers for Estelle to fetch the money, which he thought he had better use to pay long-standing debts.

Lastly, and more disturbing than all else, of late he had observed a coolness in the attitude of Rankin, the blacksmith, and in Jud Smith, trader and storekeeper, both honest men who had chosen to settle in Latch's Field. This meant to Latch that the old suspicion formed at Fort Bent and Fort Union had now taken root in the very town which he himself had founded.

The old specter had never vanished. For himself, he cared little about ruin, disgrace, or death. It was for Estelle that he minded. He must retrench, gird up his loins again, and beat these foes for the sake of Cynthia's child.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Corny Watches and Listens*

THAT a shadow of the range hovered over Stephen Latch, Corny had sensed in Estelle's vague dread. With it returned gossip of the Old Trail. Rumor of Latch's Field as a rendezvous for outlaws had drifted from camp to camp. Corny's interest leaped on behalf of Estelle Latch. Just one shadow in her violet eyes was enough to start the flame smoldering in his breast.

Corny wanted time to probe into the dens of Latch's Field, into the dark minds of those inimical to the happiness of the Latches. He wanted to give substance to some intangible thing he felt.

What stranger thing could have come to pass, what stronger proof of his foreboding, than the moment he entered the Hall of Chance that night to encounter Leighton, to see the disfigured face, the brooding eyes of a passion-driven soul. As he halted he became aware of the familiar searching gaze hard men at a hard period bent upon strangers.

"Howdy, cowboy. Just ride in?" greeted Leighton. His eyes rested on Corny's gun.

"Yeah. Dog-gone tired, too," drawled Corny lazily.

"Looking for anyone?"

"Nope. Not if nobody's lookin' for me. Any sheriffs about this heah Latchfield?"

"That's a good one, Bruce," said Leighton, turning to one of his comrades. "Latchfield! Cowboy, you've made a start by naming this town. And you can rest easy. No sheriff nearer than Dodge."

"Dog-gone! I shore am glad," replied Corny, with his good-natured grin. He knew his part. It was to represent any of a hundred trail drivers he had known.

"Where from?" queried Bruce, Leighton's vulture-beaked companion.

"Hell! Where do I look from?"

"Hard to say. You got Red River mud on your boots."

"Shore. I forded the old Red—a last time, I reckon. From Findlay I rode with Bridgeman's caravan."

"Ahuh. Cut off at Long's Road with the Kiowas escorting Latch's stage?"

"Nope. I trailed that Indian outfit heah."

"Have a drink."

"Wal, thanks. Don't care if I do."

"You look broke. But you might be heeled. What say?" returned Leighton, as he poured out drinks.

"Wal, I don't need to be grubstaked. Heah's to Latchfield!"

"Stranger, excuse a personal question. We're not inquisitive heah. But I've a reason outside of

curiosity. Is your name Cornwall?"

Corny hid his amazement. "Nope, my name is Slim Blue."

"Sorry. You look like a boy I knew years ago."

"Where?" queried Corny.

"I forget. You just reminded me. Make yourself at home, Blue. We provide entertainment heah for any pocket."

That had been Corny's introduction to Leighton and to the settlement he dominated. Corny strolled and lounged around; he sat for hours doing nothing; he listened and waited. His part was that of another outlaw passing time. Boys, men, girls, everyone with whom he came in contact, gravitated to him in friendliness. One of Leighton's dance-hall girls subjected him to embarrassment by her advances. But by being shy, he piqued her vanity, and so began to learn the undercurrent of outlaw life in Latchfield.

He would drop into Smith's store and spend hours over a purchase that both Smith and his pretty daughter believed was but a ruse to bask in the light of her eyes. He frequented other stores, always building up his part. He stopped Webb's runaway team and made the acquaintance of Bartlett through a kindness.

Corny seemed to have an uncanny power to distinguish the honest from the dishonest inhabitants of Latchfield. He began to dig into the origin of this settlement. Infrequently Corny ran into Hawk Eye. That Indian was something to Latch and nothing to Leighton, a fact Corny pondered over.

All through these summer days Corny did not fail to observe the comings and goings of the Latches and their guests. He watched from afar. Once he ran into Latch, who said, "You damn' loafer! What kind of a deal did you give me?" And Corny had drawled, "Howdy boss. Don't you never think I stacked the cards?"

Then the momentous time Corny had prepared for rushed upon him so suddenly that it left him breathless. Estelle confronted him in Smith's store.

Without any formality of greeting she said in a guarded voice: "You have failed me."

"Wal! How-do, lady," he drawled, removing his sombrero. "About that job. I'm sorry. But I hate work these hot days."

"Dad told me you wouldn't come," she went on, her face pale. "He said you were no good! Oh, I was so sick, so furious. But I hear things about you. How handsome, how nice, how friendly you are! This Elsie Smith girl is crazy about you. They say what a pity you are only another hiding outlaw!"

"Dog-gone! I didn't dream I was so popular. I shore like that Smith girl. If I wasn't such a no-

good hombre I'd shine up to her."

"According to gossip you have done so. And the Smith girl's not the only one."

"Who else, lady? I'm turrible curious."

"That Fanny Hand!"

"Wal, what of it? Poor kid! She shore needs a friend. Leighton fetched her heah, promisin' her Gawd only knows what, an' makes a dance-hall hussy out of her."

"I don't want to hear," replied Miss Latch hastily, her chin up. "I want to say this. I told Dad it wasn't true that you were no good. I tell you that you're a liar."

"Wal, that's short an' sweet, Miss Latch," retorted Corny, stung.

"You get this straight, now," she went on. "You promised to help me. My Dad *is* in trouble. You would not come. I've waited. To all appearances you are a drinking, gambling, flirting young outlaw, hiding away. But I don't believe it. I shall go on disbelieving it."

"Thank you. How long?" queried Corny huskily.

"I never will believe that."

"Wal! Do you remember what I said to you—over my saddle that day?"

"I'm ashamed to say I couldn't forget."

"It's true. An' that's partly why I've taken the wrong road heah in Latchfield. My other reason was to help your dad. To find out who his enemies are; what they are doin'. An' I'm on the trail."

"Oh, Corny, forgive me!" she faltered.

"Forgive nothin'," he returned abruptly, fighting a mad desire to clasp her to his heart. "Your friends are waitin'. Run along."

"Will you come to my party?" she asked. "Dad has invited everybody except you. Swears he will throw you out. Come. Call his bluff. Will you?"

"Yes, on one condition. I cain't dance much. But I'll come if you'll slip outdoors so I can talk to you."

"What have you to tell me? Is it something about Dad?"

"Wal, yes. But that's not all."

"Yes, I will. I'll meet you tonight," she retorted, staggering him with flashing dark eyes, wide and wild.

"Tonight?"

"Yes. I couldn't wait. It'll be moonlight," she whispered. "Nine o'clock! Out in the walnut grove. *Adios.*"

She was gone. Corny, standing motionless, aghast at his folly, amazed at this reversal of his original intention, watched Estelle as she left the store with her friends. If that girl really cared for him!

Corny had a room on the second floor at the back of Leighton's hall. He climbed the outside stairway, went into his room, and sat down beside the small open window. There he sat until dusk,

a prey to thoughts and emotions he had never before known. At nine o'clock he had a rendezvous with the sweetest, loveliest, proudest little lady in all the land—at her wish! Latch would kill him, and deservedly.

Footsteps in the hall passed his door and started down the stairs. That stairway descended directly under Corny's window. Corny could not see, but he could hear. Leighton had rooms on the same floor, in the front.

"Sho—sho I knows dat. But what's he a-goin' to do if I'se found out?" Corny heard the words distinctly.

"Tumbler, you won't be found out," came the quick low reply. "What in hell could Latch do if he did find out?"

"He could shoot. I knows dat man, Kennedy. But Leighton's done got me ober a barrel. If I don't risk dis drive he'll squeal about de udders."

"Nonsense, Johnson," returned Kennedy. "This drive will clean Latch out of cattle. Then Leighton will close in on him. Leighton is close-mouthed. But I've a hunch ruin an' death for Latch wouldn't be enough for Leighton."

"He sho hates de boss. I wasn't dere when he got dat brand on his face. But I knows de brander. I sho does."

"So thet's it!" ejaculated Kennedy. "Latch shot him! What for, Tumbler?"

"About a woman. But I'se been loose-lipped enough. I'se gwine home now."

"Wait! I've been your friend. An' if Leighton has you over a barrel, let's wait till he plays his deal, then put him over one. We can do it."

"Wha-what? We double-cross Leighton same as he's double-crossin' de boss?"

"Exactly. We'll get rich on it. Believe me, Tumbler, Leighton won't ever come through this alive. Tell me, quick, about the woman in the case."

"Man, I ain't swarin' it's de truff, but I got it from Black Hand, a mulatto who rode wid de boss when he was massacreein' wagon trains with Satana. Dat was years ago. I nursed Black Hand when he was dyin'. He tole me. Back durin' de war Latch an' Satana raided Bowden's wagon train. Dey was to massacree everyone. But Leighton stole a woman an' fetched her along in a big Tullt an' Company wagon.

"Latch ketched him wid de woman an' shot him. Latch was married to dat gurl by a member of his own band. He fetched her to Spider Web Canyon, where dey all used to hole up. Dis chile of Latch's, Miss Estie, she was borned dere. Once years ago I heerd Keetch an' Leighton arguin'. Leighton was heah when dat chile was borned. He stole letters—proofs ob de chile's heritage. Dat's

what Leighton had on Keetch. Dis chile growed up now doan know her dad was boss of de bloodiest band ever on de border. But she's gonna know, I kin gamble on dat. 'Cause Leighton will tell her some day."

"So thet's what Leighton has on Latch," gasped Kennedy. "Partner of Satana! Bowden's lost wagon train! Come on, Tumbler. We need another swig."

The two men passed on down the stairway, leaving Corny crouched on his knees. The tragedy of Latch's life stood out like letters of lightning. Murderer! Consort of the bloodthirsty Kiowas! Real love and honest life too late! The havoc in Latch's face, the burning in his eyes—all so clear now! Remorse, torture—finally horror at the fear of Estelle's finding him out, shrinking from him.

Corny sat up to let the cool night breeze fan his hot face. It was dark and still at the back of the house. Music and voices came from the front.

"Wal, he's a game old rooster," soliloquized Corny. "Fightin' for years to hide his past from the girl! It'd kill her. Poor kid! She has reason to worry about her dad. But she has no idea of the truth. An' so help me Gawd she never will!"

Corny could not eat. He was to meet Estelle at nine o'clock—meet her with the tremendous weight of this revelation on his mind. But no inkling of it must reach her.

Long before a pale light brightened above the bold bluff, heralding the rising moon, Corny paced to and fro under the great, spreading, walnut tree. Never in all his life had he waited for a girl. Fate was giving him maddening initiation into the mystery of romance and love.

A silver disk of moon tipped the dark ragged bluff and almost imperceptibly the valley underwent some magical change. Coyotes were wailing out on the range. The night wind stirred the walnut leaves. Corny faced the ranch house. At once his eye caught a dark bar crossing the lamplight. She was coming.

He strode out into the open. The moon glided higher. A white radiance moved toward him from across the valley.

"Oh, you're here!" she panted. "I was scared. It's new to me—meeting handsome *vaqueros*—out on the range."

"Wal, girl, you've got nerve," he replied as he took her hand. "I'm scared too. Latch would kill me for this."

"Corny! It was easy. We're safe. I told the girls I was meeting you. They'll watch. And Dad is in the living-room with Benson, Keetch, Mizzouri and some others. Something amiss, cowboy."

"Ahuh. Come in the shadow.

Heah, set down now, an' tell me what's amiss."

"Lift me up on *this* tree—like you did on *that* one," she said.

Corny did as he was bidden. That left him head and shoulders below her, as he leaned on the huge branch. She sat partly in the moonlight, and if more were needed for his undoing it came with the ray of silver which caught her face.

"Thrilling to meet like this, isn't it?" she questioned, fathomless eyes upon him.

"Turrible thrillin', child," he replied. "An' for me—dangerous."

"You don't look scared."

"Wal, I am, though. I'm courtin' death. But I shore don't want to die heah. I've got important work on hand."

"Cowboy, you can't frighten me, now I've got you. But before I tell you anything, *you* tell me if it's really true what you said—over your saddle that day."

"Yes, Estelle—it's true," he replied.

"Corny, I—I've doubted you," she went on. "That Smith girl said you were 'one of them cowboy lady-killers.'"

"Wal, reckon it's news to me if I am," drawled Corny. "I been buyin' stuff in Smith's. An' naturally I talked to her."

"You didn't make love to her?"

"No."

"She gave me a different impression. And Corny, I've been told you have paid a good deal of attention to one of Leighton's dancers. Is that true?"

"Wal, I'm afraid it is, little girl. I've been findin' out things in Latchfield."

"Corny! All the time I've been miserable. I—I've despised myself because I was so jealous. Because in my heart I knew you wouldn't lie to me. Yet I—I doubted. And all the time you've been working for my dad!"

"You bet I have, Estelle," replied Corny, helpless in the current. He had meant deliberately to damn his character in her eyes. And here he was proud to tell her the truth.

"Forgive me, Corny," she entreated, and then with hands on his shoulders she lowered her lips to a level with his.

Corny's response had the simplicity of her invitation. He kissed her without realizing the inevitableness of this moment. But the instant she shyly withdrew her cool sweet lips he knew.

"My Gawd, little girl!" he whispered. "Am I drunk, or out of my haid?"

"That's not flattering, Corny. I gave you my first kiss. Honest!"

"But you couldn't do that unless—"

"Of course I couldn't," she interrupted quickly. "But never mind about *that* now. I—I'm a little scared myself. You see, we're not very well acquainted. That's

*my* fault, Corny Cornwall."

"Listen, wonderful little lady. No one but you heah knows my real name. I'm Slim Blue. Savvy?"

"Slim Blue! Where did you get that pretty name?"

"That's my trail name, Estelle."

"I think I like it. But Corny, we're wasting time. I can't stay long. Corny, there's something dreadfully wrong with Dad. But I can't find out what it is. Dad walks the floor at night. I hear men come and go at late hours. I've listened shamelessly. But I could never make out what was said. Once I heard Leighton's name. I looked in Dad's desk and discovered that most of the ten thousand dollars I brought home is gone. Gone! and not one of the many bills paid. I can't understand it, Corny."

"Wal, it's easy to understand about the bills. He's hard up."

"But where has all that money gone? I'd like to know *who* is getting it. Corny, Dad looks old, broken, harassed. But when he sees *me,* he's all smiles. He is my old Daddy again. It's only when I spy on him that I can see the havoc. Corny, what does it mean?"

"Go on, little girl, if you have any more to tell," replied Corny.

"There's more. The worst. I'm so ashamed. We are losing caste in Latchfield! My own home. The town Daddy built! Corny, today when I spoke to Edith Rankin about my party she said she guessed none of the Rankins would be there. I was dumbfounded. And terribly hurt. How do you explain all this?"

"Simple as A B C, darlin'." rejoined Corny. Then he had to catch his breath at her response to his unwitting term of endearment. "Estie! Am I loco?"

"We're both loco. But go on."

"Wal, your father is on the verge of ruin. He has given away prodigally. He has not saved. He is land-poor. Thousands of haid of cattle have been rustled. Leighton is his worst enemy. There's an old grudge, datin' back years. An old gamblin' debt—an' gun-play about it. Your dad gave Leighton that ugly bullet mark. Wal, Leighton is at the haid of this rustlin'. He has a gang. There's a deal on now to steal all the rest of your dad's stock. That would about ruin him. An' the plan is, of course, to force him off his ranch."

"Good heavens! Is it possible, Corny?"

"No. It shore isn't. But Leighton doesn't know that. I reckon there's only one man who does."

*"You!"*

"I hate to brag, Estelle, but I reckon I'm the little hombre. Leighton's plan is to ruin your dad financially. He'll end by holdin' all these debts. An' if he cain't drive your dad off the land, he'll kill him an' take possession after."

"Murder!" gasped Estelle. "How awful! So *that* is the secret? Poor

Dad! Fighting to conceal his trouble from me."

"That's the whole story, Estelle."

"Oh, I feared I—I know not what!"

"Latch is one of the West's great men. Great as Maxwell or Chisholm or St. Vrain or Carson—any of them. Generous, fine, noble, a grand friend, a bad foe, hard in his early days because he had to be hard to survive. But honest, clean, good as gold! He has made enemies, not *all* of whom he has killed, worse luck! An' now his worst enemy has plotted all this ruin. Estelle, don't ever have another doubt of your dad."

"Never! Slim Blue, I love you," she whispered, and slipped off the branch into his arms.

Corny held her off her feet, aware of clinging arms, of kisses, of sweet fire.

"There! Let me down. Our love-making can wait. Corny, you have given me back something precious. I am no longer frightened. Don't let thought of me hamper you. I'm western, Corny. I was born up that black canyon."

"Wal, it shore was lucky—for me."

"I must go now. I'll see you soon. At my party? You'll come?"

"Yes, Estelle, I'll come. Now you run back an' leave me heah to moon."

"Good night—Slim," she whispered, and made as if to lift her lips again. But she suddenly wheeled and fled out into the moonlight.

## Chapter Fifteen

### *Open House*

LATCH had long been aware of the growing estrangement between him and his two best friends in the valley, Webb and Bartlett. He met them in town on the day before Estelle's party and thought it a good opportunity to learn his exact status.

"Bart, you're coming to my girl's party?" he queried heartily.

"Wal, I wasn't, Steve," replied the blunt rancher.

"Why not? I'd take it as a personal insult if you didn't. And that goes for your wife and daughter. Estelle is fond of Wilda."

"Damn it all, Sam," rejoined Bartlett, turning to Webb. "Thet's true. An' I'm gonna stick by Latch, talk or no talk."

Webb's blue eyes held a penetrating suspicion as he spoke. "Sorry, Latch. My family is not coming."

"Oh! May I inquire why?"

"I'll be glad to tell you," returned Webb. "It's this talk of Leighton's. There's been strange whispers for a long time, Latch. But only lately could they be

traced. Your past has always been sort of shady. You settled this valley and kept open house to all. *I* certainly didn't know Latchfield had been a rendezvous for desperados or I'd never have located here. Leighton is spreading this poison. But some of us are concerned, I don't mind telling you."

"You must be concerned, to mention this to my face," replied Latch. "I can only take it that you believe my enemies."

"Latch, I wouldn't go so far," said Webb nervously. "It's just that I don't like it."

"I understand, Webb," responded Latch. "I've no hard feelings yet. But if you and your family don't come to Estelle's party I'll know on which side of the fence you sit. And in that case you can go for your gun when next we meet. Good day. Bart, I'm thanking you for your faith in me," returned Latch.

Whereupon Webb blurted out, "Why in hell don't you go for your gun—if this man Leighton is a liar?"

Latch strode on down the street, with that retort ringing like a bell in his ears. He had reached the hitching rail where he had tied his horse when he encountered the young trail driver, Slim Blue. He sustained a violent shock. In the mood under which he labored, weighed upon by dread, to be so suddenly reminded of Cornwall and the bloody past was enough to make Latch furious. And this youth looked at him with Cornwall's flashing blue eyes.

Latch had loved his strange boy lieutenant, and this trail driver seemed to exercise the same baffling fascination. Another youth gone wrong! Another daredevil of the times! Then it suddenly flashed into Latch's memory that Slim Blue had followed up his service to Estelle by vague hints of the same to her father. Cowboy blarney! Only another bitter drop to Latch's overflowing cup of disappointment!

"Howdy, boss," drawled the youth. "I heahed that last crack of Webb's about why you didn't draw on Leighton. Well, heah's another hunch. Stay away from your old pards down the valley road, 'specially Johnson! Stay away from town! Stay away from the corrals. Better—stay indoors! Do you savvy, boss?"

"Hell's fire! I heah you, but I don't understand."

"Wal, you can figure it out. But don't never look for an even break in Latchfield. Not with Leighton holdin' the cards!"

"Thanks, Blue. Naturally your association with that outfit would result in your hearing things. Am I to assume *that* is why you spend your time in Leighton's?"

"Latch, you can think what you like about me."

"All right. And it'll be no good. I'll thank you to stay away from

Estelle's party."

"Ump-umm, boss. You invited everybody in this heah valley. Good an' bad! An', by golly, I wouldn't miss it."

"Blue, if you come I'll throw you out."

"Aw, boss, you just couldn't do that. Miss Estelle her own self would say that'd be strange Southern hospitality."

"You conceited loafer! Do you dare insinuate my daughter would think at all about what concerned you?"

"Shore. I'll gamble on it."

"All right, Blue. You come, and see what happens," concluded Latch as he mounted his horse.

"Anyways, boss, you'll need me turrible bad when Leighton's outfit—"

Latch heard no more. He rode away at a trot, wholly dissatisfied with himself. What could he do? To whom could he turn? He rode toward the corrals at his wits' end.

Half a dozen dusty riders had just come in. Weary pack horses attested to long and arduous travel. Keetch and Simmons, with the *vaqueros* looking on, were talking to the arrivals. When Latch's horse turned into the court all faces looked his way. Keetch headed toward him.

"Billy the Kid's ootfit," he said in a swift undertone. "I know Charley Boudre. They're all right when you're friendly. I advise you to make good on your old rule."

Latch rode up to the group, his gaze centering upon the man he intuitively took to be the young desperado. "Howdy, men. Get down and come in," he greeted them cordially. "Keetch will take care of you."

"Much obliged. We're shore fagged," replied the youth who was another manifestation of the extreme of character, of wild life, developed at a wild time.

"I don't need to ask if you've come far," went on Latch.

"You bet we've come far, Mr. Latch," replied the outlaw. "Sixty miles today, I reckon. An' all to see you."

"Well, that's complimentary, I hope," said Latch easily. "I still keep open house for all riders."

"So we heard. But we didn't come to try your well-known hospitality."

"No? What for, then?"

"We took a bunch of Chisholm's cattle down the Pecos an' across at Horsehead, round to the north of the Staked Plains. Sold to a trail driver at Red River. Well, on our way up the Canadian we run plum into an outfit drivin' a big herd of longhorns wearin' your brand. It may strike you funny that we steal one rancher's cattle, then ride out of our way to squeal on an outfit who's stealin' yours. But I, for one, didn't want this last laid onto me."

"Hal Hal Funny? Sure, it strikes me funny—Keetch, what do you

know about it?"

"News to me, boss," returned Keetch. "An' if it's true we're cleared oot proper."

"You can gamble on my word, Mr. Latch," returned Billy the Kid. "We didn't know the cattle were yours until a settler told us yesterday. So we rode up pronto. That's all I can say, Mr. Latch. An' if your invite still holds we'll be only too glad to stay an' rest up a couple of days. I've long heard of Latch's Field."

"You're welcome, and thanks for the tip. Drop over after supper, you and Boudre, and smoke a cigar with me."

Latch left his horse, and telling Keetch to come up as soon as the visitors had been made comfortable, he wended his way toward the ranch house, muttering to himself, "The plot thickens. Last of my stock. Leighton back of this. It ruins me!"

He found Estelle and her friends in the living-room, so gay and merry that he transformed his gloomy face as if by magic. He would deceive his daughter to the last moment. But he had to tell her something.

"Girls, we have a visitor—one of the most infamous of Western outlaws. No less than Billy the Kid."

"Billy the Kid?" questioned Estelle. "Dad, could we ask him to my party?"

"Certainly. It will be something to tell your grandchildren some day."

Estelle blushed and the girls launched into gay badinage.

"I think Billy just happened along here," went on Latch, "but usually visits of his to any town result in excitement."

Estelle's violet eyes took on a troubled expression. She had heard something. Latch left the room with brutal blows knocking at his heart. Were all his years of remorse, of travail, of fight to go for naught? Must he see this lovely innocent lass plunged into blackest misery? He went to his room, and barred himself in. "Wages of sin!" he whispered. "Oh, God, burn me in hell forever—but save Estelle!"

Keetch sought him presently; he came with slow thumps up the stairs and knocked reluctantly.

"Come in," called Latch.

The crippled old outlaw entered and Latch motioned him to a seat.

"Did your *vaqueros* substantiate Billy the Kid's claim about my herd?"

"Aggh! No riders in from down the valley. Reckon they've been shot or druv off. I've been worried like hell for two days. Boss, the Kid didn't lie. You can gamble we're cleaned of our last stock."

"Sold out to a trail driver! Keetch, is there no redress?"

"Hell! If we could prove who done it there'd be redress all right. But we only know thet rid-

ers strange to us stole our cattle an' sold them to strangers on the Old Trail. Before we could ride to Dodge or Abilene they'll be gone. You're oot forty-five thousand dollars, an' we're ruined."

"Financially, yes. But that is nothing, Keetch."

"Man alive! You're broke. You're deep in debt. An' Leighton has got hold of all yore papers. He will take your ranch away from you."

"Over my dead body!"

"Wal, Leighton has been layin' for sixteen years to see yore daid body. But he'll ruin you fust, disgrace you, blacken your name. An' last, old pard, I know he has some hellish idee of torturin' you through Estie."

"How do you know?"

"I heerd him say so, last time I seen him. You see, he gave me a chance to swing over to him."

"Keetch, what hold has Leighton on you?"

"I double-crossed you years ago. The honor among thieves didn't work with me then. But it has been a thorn in my flesh. If I had my life to live over again I'd not do it."

"Ah! Keetch, how did you double-cross me?"

"No need to tell now, boss. You'll know after I'm daid An I've a bloomy leelin' thet won't be long."

"You should have told me before. I'd have forgiven then. I do now. You have been most loyal to me. I see only one thing to do. Face Leighton in his den!"

"Jest throwin' yore life away."

"But I *might* kill him," rasped Latch, his face haggard.

Yet on the morrow, when the first guests began to arrive from down the valley, Latch had never been more the courteous Southern gentleman, hospitable to friend and foe alike.

His invitations had gone far beyond the limits of Latch's Field. Some of the arrivals had been three days on the trip. Cowboys rode in from Findlay. By noon, to Latch's amazement, Soronto, the fiercest of Comanche chiefs, came with a full force of his wild-riding braves, brilliant and colorful in their beaded buckskins and eagle plumes Hawk Eye, now a chief of the Kiowas, with many braves Latch remembered only too well, rode down from Spider Web Canyon. A caravan from Texas rolled in under Scout Hennesy. By mid-afternoon the wide level park in front of the ranch house resembled a great encampment, and festival was in the air. All the Mexicans in the valley were employed in getting ready the sumptuous feast which was to be held outdoors for the many. Latch's long dining table was reserved for guests of prominence. It seemed a singular coincidence that Black Jack's gang of outlaws made Latchfield that same day.

All of Latch's old allies except Tumbler Johnson were in attendance. The Webb family preceded the guests from town. Leighton rode over, surrounded by his dark-garbed men. Latch's kinsman looked the dandy of the age in his flat-crowned sombrero, his long black frock coat, flowered vest, and flowing tie. But the hideous disfiguration of his face made him unpleasant to gaze upon.

Billy the Kid and Boudre, with their men trailing behind, rode out to the picnic grounds. The famous boy desperado of the frontier looked like any other smiling boy. It was indeed a unique social gathering.

In the big living-room, plates were laid for 70. At sunset all were called to supper. Outside, hostile Comanche and honest rancher, or wild cowboy and murdering desperado, sat side by side.

And at this moment Estelle came running out to be presented by her father. She wore white and her lovely flushed face beamed upon all. Latch saw her violet eyes sweep the circle, linger over the cowboys, as if she were looking for someone. It was the same when he led her into the great dining-room. Whom did the girl miss? Latch felt his heart contract. Slim Blue!

Latch bade his guests be seated while he remained standing. "Neighbors, friends, enemies, chiefs and outlaws, strangers within my gates, be welcome at my daughter's party. This is her birthday. She is sixteen. She belongs to the West. Eat, drink, and be merry."

All through the wonderful meal Latch had assurance that Estelle still expected a late guest. Her dark eyes continually sought the door. Only he, perhaps, could read the disappointment in them. For all, then, except father and daughter, the sumptuous feast was a huge success. Then when chairs and table were moved out to make room for the dancers, and the fiddlers had begun to tune up, a slim, strikingly handsome youth entered. It was Slim Blue. A blush dyed Estelle's cheek.

Slim was easy, graceful, cool when he greeted Estelle, and she presented him to her friends.

Latch strode across the great room to face them. "Blue, I told you not to come."

"Shore, Mr. Latch, I wasn't likely to forget. An' fact is I came to see you."

"Bah! You can't soft-soap us, cowboy. Now you rustle or I'll throw you out."

*"Father!"* cried Estelle.

Blue sustained a subtle change. Latch had seen eyes like those before—eyes that veiled cold thought of death.

"See heah, Latch, you can't insult me like that," said the trail driver. "I told you I came to see you."

"Get out!"

Estelle confronted Latch with white face and blazing eyes. "Father, have you forgotten that this boy saved my life?"

"No. I offered to reward Blue. But I will not have him here."

The trail driver dropped his head and turned to the door. Estelle caught his arm and led him out upon the porch. Latch stood petrified at the significance of that action. A terrible fear assailed him. Could his beloved child have become seriously interested in this handsome youth? She returned almost immediately.

"Father, all my life you have said yes to me," she announced. "It's too late in the day to start with no."

"But, Estie dear, listen!" he burst out.

She pierced him to the heart with Cynthia's eyes, proud and dark and grieved, and joined her friends.

The young folk began to respond to the fiddlers. Latch sought the crowded porch, where he could watch unseen.

A gay, dancing, crowded hour had passed when the sharp-eyed Latch saw Estelle slip out through the throng on the porch and flit down the shaded path. He followed.

Estelle glided along until she came to the edge of the first pond. Here she halted.

Latch tortured himself with the query: Had she made a rendezvous with Blue? Preposterous! Yet she was Cynthia Bowden's daughter. And Cynthia Bowden had loved a renegade. Latch had to prove his suspicions. Estelle's form dimmed into the shadows.

Latch went around the pond, following her to a nook under a large oak. Suddenly he froze in his tracks, there stood Estelle wrapped in Blue's embrace.

"Oh, darling, I thought I'd missed you," she said, low and poignantly. "Or that you'd left in a huff."

"No, sweetheart, I came heah an' I'd have staved heah till mawnin," replied Blue despondently, " 'cause I reckon it's the last time."

"No! No! Slim Blue, have you made me love you only to desert me?"

"You child! I didn't make you love me an' I'm turrible scared 'cause you do."

"You *did* make me love you. I mean so—oh, like this—and this!"

The soft contact of lips accentuated that speech.

"Dog-gone it, darlin'! I cain't help myself. I love you turrible. But Estie, I've got idees of honor."

"Honor! Well, I guess you have. Boy, don't mind Dad's insult. Oh, he was a beast. But it was nothing to make you desert us."

"No, I reckon not. But I'm deceivin' him right heah. Makin' myself out just what he believes I am. An' I cain't do it any more."

"Dearest, am *I* not deceiving

him, too? My daddy! Oh, he'll kill me when I tell him we're engaged."

"Estie! You cain't mean that?"

"Don't you love me? Didn't you say it'd be heaven you'd never dreamed of—to h-have me your wife?"

"Of course I did, but that was only dream-talkin'."

"I took it you asked me to be your wife. Didn't you?"

"No! Why, Estie, I never dared think about that really. Your father would never consent to us marryin'."

"Well, I'll marry you without it. I'll elope with you. He'll forgive us."

"Estie, all this is fool talk. It'll only make it harder for you. An' shake my nerve, darlin'! Think what I've got to do! An' my nerve mustn't be shook!"

"Listen, you wild trail driver," she responded. "Once settle this—this affair of ours, and then I'll give you all the nerve any man might need. Listen. You saved my life—more than life. You helped me to be brave. You gave me back my faith in *him*. You made me love you. And you could never have done *that* if you hadn't loved me first. You come from a fine Southern family, but you imagine you're not good enough for me. Well, you are. And you had better prove the respect you swore you had for me."

"Awl Estie, if—if I ever come out of this mess, will you—marry me?"

"Yes. And you will come out of it. Dad seemed a stranger tonight."

"Lass, don't ever think nothin' but that Steve Latch is the biggest an' finest man in the West."

"Indeed, darling, that old conviction has come back. Tonight he hurt me, but it's only his care of me. And he believes you a no-good trail driver. Oh, when he learns the truth!"

"Wal, Estie, it's been hard for me—settin' in my room, hour after hour, night after night, waitin' for a chance."

"Think of me while you wait. Now, darling, take all the kisses you need for all the nerve you need— Oh!"

Her arms closed round his neck as Blue clasped her.

"There, Estie. Forgive me," he whispered huskily. "I'm a new man, an' yours—whatever comes. Run back home now, an' dance your pretty haid off."

"*Adios,* Slim Blue. I love that name. To think I never can be Mrs. Slim Blue!"

She laughed happily and slipped away from him. Corny watched until she was out of sight, then strode away toward town.

Latch sank down. This revelation was the end for him. The last catastrophe! It broke his heart, yet left him free. He passed over the many puzzling remarks that had been exchanged between Blue

and Estelle. He had no way to divine their meaning, except to realize that the youth must be worthy, else he never could have won Estelle's devotion.

She would not be left alone now. That young man could protect her, else Latch's years of judgment on the border had gone for naught. Estelle would love so deeply and passionately that life would still be worth living, even if ruin and disgrace befell her.

Against these Latch girded up his loins for a last battle. All agony, it seemed, had been his, except the agony of having his daughter learn of his infamy and turn from him in loathing. That would be too much for human endurance. He must forestall it; and freed from the terror of leaving Estelle alone, he rose like an old battle-scarred lion, ready for a last charge.

## Chapter Sixteen

### *Fire and Gun-Flame*

IN THE gray dawn the ranch house was dark and quiet. A pale moon, yielding to the break of day, hung over the bluff. Fires still smoldered in the encampment of the Indians. The last group of riders filed out upon the trail to the north.

Latch sat by his open window where he had lingered for hours. When the sun tipped the prairie horizon he would be on his way to execute the tragic plan that had evolved from his travail. Leighton and his inseparables, after a night of drinking, would be asleep. Latch meant to force entrance to the room he had located long ago and kill his arch enemy and the others. He had accepted his own death as the cost of this deliverance.

Soon a red rim of sun peeped over the purple land. Buckling on a heavy belt weighted with two guns and a ring of shells Latch left his room, stole down the back stairs and out into the yard. He picked up a double-edged ax from the woodshed. Then he cut across the orchard into the meadow, and thence to the lane that led into Leighton's place.

The gate was open. He saw the stairway leading up the back of the big structure. An open door—dark, inviting! He started up stealthily, reached the landing and stepped into the hall.

Suddenly he saw a man's head and shoulders lying across the threshold of the last door on the left. Leighton's room! Latch rested the ax against the wall, and drawing a gun he leaped forward. One swift glance showed the room was empty. Then Latch looked down. He straddled a dead Mexican—one Juarez, long attached to Leighton. His skull had been split.

Next Latch saw the smashed door, the scattered articles of clothing on the floor, bureau drawers thrown to the right and left, and in a corner a demolished trunk. An old-fashioned trunk of French make—that had surely come from New Orleans! It had been forced open and rifled. A ruthless and powerful hand had preceded Latch. Someone had robbed Leighton.

Latch rushed out and down the stairs, his thoughts in a whirl. He went back the way he had come and hid in a clump of willows. From passion to reasoning was in this hour a slow process. But in the end he achieved it.

Latchfield had been full of outlaws the preceding night. It was logical to suppose that one of them had killed Leighton's man and ransacked the room. Yet the idea did not hold in Latch's consciousness. He began to conceive that the slaying, the robbery, the evidence of tangible hostility to the powerful Leighton, bore some strange relation to himself.

"Slim Blue!" muttered Latch. "What did he mean by waiting? Waiting!"

He heard horses go down the road at a gallop and others trot by in the opposite direction. Latch emerged from his hiding-place and walked toward town. But halfway there, a knot of men, suddenly disintegrating in excitement to run back out of sight, pistol shots coming from somewhere, gave him pause.

As he faced about to return to the ranch he saw the long line of canvas-covered wagons and yokes of oxen. The caravan was on the road to Fort Union with its escort of soldiers. Then Latch remembered that Estelle's friends were to travel with this caravan as far as the fort, and then transfer to a south-bound caravan. No doubt one of the riders alongside the wagons was Estelle, who had promised Marcella and Elizabeth that she would ride to the top of the hill with them.

Latch felt relieved that he need not expect to face her at once. He plodded on toward the ranch. Presently he smelled smoke. Again he heard horses, this time on a furious run. He hurried toward the house, and when he got out in the lane espied Simmons running toward him.

"Boss, I been—huntin'—you all over!" gasped Simmons.

"What's up, man?" queried Latch.

"Hell-to-pay at the corrals. Come."

Latch lined up beside the cowman and waited.

"Boss, I was sleepin' in the barn. Was woke up about seven by loud talkin'. Somebody razzin' Keetch. I peeped out an' seen Keetch standin' ag'in' the corral fence facin' half a dozen men. Didn't recognize nobody till' I

heard Leighton's voice. Seen him then—only one on foot. He was wavin' a gun. I couldn't git the drift of the talk. But I understood Keetch, all right."

"'Leighton, you're drunk,' says Keetch. 'I jest got oot of bed. Slept in my clothes.'

"'You're a damned liar,' bawled Leighton. 'You sneaked over to my room last night when we were all makin' merry. You brained José an' robbed me. No money gone—nothin' but thet leather wallet which only you knew about. You dig it up pronto, or I'll shoot yore guts out!'

"'Sorry I cain't oblige you. I was asleep till you rousted me oot.'

"Then Kennedy chipped in: 'Lee, you're wastin' time. Thet job was done too swift for a man on a crutch.'

"'It *had* to be Keetch who stole my wallet,' roared Leighton. 'There wasn't any money. Only he knew those papers an' letters were worth a million to me. I'll give you ten thousand dollars for my wallet.'

"'Say, Leighton, if I'd knowed it was so valuable I'd stole it myself long ago,' replied Keetch, cool as a cucumber. 'But git over the idee no other man knowed you had it.'

"'Who?' screamed Leighton.

"'Wal, I ain't tellin',' laughed Keetch.

"'Latch! I'll burn the secret out of him with a brandin'-iron!'

"'Nope, not my boss. I was feared to tell him.'

"'Did you tell any man?'

"'Haw! Haw! Leighton, you're barkin' up the wrong tree. You've waited too long with your deal. An' I've kept my mouth shet too long.'

"'Then, by hell! you'll never open it *to him,*' yelled Leighton, an' he turned thet big Colt loose on Keetch. When Keetch slid down Leighton piled on his hoss an' all of them rid away. I run out, yellin'. Keetch was all in. But he made me understand he had somethin' important to tell you. So I run after you—an' I've been huntin' ever since."

"Simmons, you should have taken Keetch's statement, then come for me," declared Latch grimly. He ran to the corrals, crossed the court to the great barn where a group of *vaqueros* had congregated. Keetch lay inside the door, covered with a blanket. Simmons drew it back to expose the old outlaw's face.

At this juncture Benson rode into the court. He scattered the riders and leaped off, his blue eyes gleaming. "Latch, your party last night upset Latchfield," he began hurriedly, and then, espying the dead man, he gave a start and gaped. *"Keetch!* Who shot him, boss?"

"Leighton. Did you see him in town?"

"Ha! I reckon. An' if I'd been blind I'd have heard him," declared Benson. "He's a ravin' lunatic. Somebody set fire to his house."

"Fire!"

"Gosh! I should say so! Where have you been? Leighton was burned clean. Also half the block on his side of the street. But that isn't all by a jugful. It appears there's been shootin' since early mornin'. One of Billy the Kid's outfit shot a member of Black Jack's gang. Both outlaw gangs sloped pronto. I met Mizzouri, an' he had a heap to say about the killin' of Johnson. He said—"

"Johnson!" ejaculated Latch. "More of Leightons work?"

"I guess not. Mizzouri said thet trail-drivin' cowboy, Slim Blue, was crazy drunk an' runnin' amuck early this mornin' He was with Johnson an' they'd stopped at the Smith store. They had a hoss hitched there, an' also a buckboard. Blue came slouchin' along, wild-eyed. 'Howdy, niggah!' he yelled. 'Throw thet gun you're packin', so my borin' you won't look so bad.' Johnson tried to reason with the cowboy. But it didn't do no good. Mizzouri said Blue went close to Johnson an' whispered somethin' nobody else could hear. But half a dozen men swore they seen Johnson go for his gun. He never even got it out.

"Blue staggered on down the sidewalk, an' finally disappeared, accordin' to Mizzouri. Well, thet's all from him. But listen to this from me. When I rode into town my hoss had thrown a shoe an' had gone lame I went to Martinez, the greaser who has a shop back of Leighton's. An' while I was there I seen Slim Blue come ridin' up the alley. I had a good look at him, an' if he was drunk, so am I right this minute. Martinez was bendin' over his job, so didn't see Blue. A little later I seen smoke rollin' up from the back of Leighton's house. In half an hour Leighton's place an' four other houses were burned flat."

Latch kept his deductions to himself. They were bewildering. He divined that he must speedily anticipate a thunderbolt in shape of Leighton's next move. Instead of hunting down his enemy, Latch now waited to be hunted. And similarly he must look for paralleling action from the mysterious Slim Blue. Too late Latch realized his blind attitude toward that youth. If Blue turned up again, as seemed inevitable, Latch would know beyond doubt that through Estelle he had gained an ally.

"Simmons, saddle a fast horse and ride at once up to the house," he said suddenly. "I want you to take a note to Estelle. You should intercept her on the way home. You will see that she goes on with the caravan to Fort Union."

"Yes, sir," replied the foreman, and ran into the barn.

Latch was about to give orders to Benson when new arrivals across the court gave him pause. The riders were Mizzouri, Seth Cole, and Jerry Bain. Latch watched them approach. At last the old guard had proved true to the past.

"Howdy, Steve," drawled Mizzouri, as he reined in. "Mebbe we're a little late in the day, but hyar we air."

"Thanks, Mizzouri, I appreciate it, late or no. But what sent you?"

"Wal, it was thet Blue fellar. Boss, we never knowed Johnson was rustlin' yore stock till Blue proved it to us after he shot the nigger. Leighton an' Kennedy engineered thet last raid, an' Johnson pulled it. Soon as we heerd that an' figgered what was to foller, we come pronto."

"Mizzouri, if you lined up with me, wouldn't that lend weight to claims Leighton might make?"

"Hell, yes. But daid men tell no tales, boss," returned the little outlaw.

"No, they don't. All the same, I'll jeopardize your lives and reputations. It cheers me to see you here. But go back home. Don't fear for me."

"Wal, have it yore way, Steve, old man."

Latch, with a wave of farewell, plunged away out of hearing. He did not care to have his men see how deeply stirred he was. He rushed to the house and hurriedly penned a note to Estelle, inclosing in it the last money he possessed. The clatter of Simmons's fast-moving horse greeted his ears.

"I seen riders top the hill, boss. Must be Miss Estie an' the *vaquero*. I'm off," called Simmons, and was gone.

## Chapter Seventeen

### *More Gun-Flame*

SLIM BLUE rode his horse Brazos at full speed to Spider Web Creek, where he halted on a high wooded bank and gazed back at the conflagration he had started. "Wal, I reckoned that loose hay would come in handy," he drawled as he reloaded the two empty chambers of his gun. "That hombre I winged was Kennedy, I'm almost shore. It's a safe bet he knew who was shootin', so the cat's out of the bag now."

Blue had come to the end of his long vigil. He had played his part. This day would mark him as Latch's ally and an enemy to the Leighton gang.

The treasure Leighton had guarded with such unremitting care was a wallet containing letters, marriage certificate, papers, pictures, and jewelry that had been the property of Estelle's mother. Blue had not had time for anything save a hurried scan

ning of the contents, but that had been enough to establish Cynthia Bowden's relation to Stephen Latch and the child Estelle.

"Wal. I've forced Leighton's hand," went on Blue grimly. "He had the cards stacked on Latch An' I spoiled his deal. Johnson daid, Juarez daid, the wallet gone, the saloon burned, an' Kennedy nursin' a bullet hole! Now what?"

Action had to be prompt. That very day Leighton must do his worst. He must beard the old lion in his den. Bruce Kennedy, Smiling Jacobs, and Manley were Leighton's accomplices. And of these Bruce Kennedy was a traitor. In all probability Leighton would use these three men in his conflict with Latch. The rest Leighton would surely put on the trail of Slim Blue.

"Latch, poor devil, has shore got his back to the wall," mused Slim as he watched the roads leading out of the town. "Game, I'd say! An' all to save the kid's happiness! Wal, it's Leighton's turn to deal cards, with me holdin' these aces up my sleeve, one of them bein' Hawk Eye."

That ended his soliloquy. An hour passed, and before the end of another much would have happened. Hawk Eye was watching Leighton.

The first rider to catch Blue's quick eye was one leaving the ranch on the road toward the hill. He was mounted on a fast horse, a sorrel which Simmons always rode. Latch had sent his foreman out on some errand. What?

Estelle had told Blue she was going to ride out with the caravan No doubt Latch was concerned about her now and had dispatched the rider to advise Estelle to go on with the caravan

Six horsemen in a bunch turned down the road toward Latch's ranch. They were ranchers, evidently, and the one mounted on the big white horse was Seth Cole. Their calling upon Latch at this 11th hour held a significance not lost upon Slim Blue.

In less than a quarter of an hour they reappeared! And about the same time Blue became aware of another horseman riding a mustang across the meadow toward the creek. Its rider was the Kiowa.

Slim stepped out into an open space where Hawk Eye espied him. The Kiowa had important information to which he gave brief utterance. Leighton had killed Keetch and had dispatched Jacobs and Manley to intercept Estelle on her way back to the ranch. Blue made two queries and Hawk Eye replied that Leighton's two men had left just after the caravan, and that the wound Slim had given Kennedy was in the left shoulder and had not seriously incapacitated him.

"You are one good Injun, Hawk Eye," declared Blue. "Go back. Watch Leighton."

The trail driver made fast time to the mouth of the narrow canyon Its dark portal seemed to call him. Once on top of the cedared escarpment Blue kept off the road and out of sight back in the trees He calculated that Leighton's men would take ambush at a likely place and waylay Estelle upon her return.

Blue had not traveled more than a couple of miles up the gentle slope when he sighted a saddled, riderless horse tied under a cedar. He dismounted to halter Brazos in a thick clump of trees. Then keeping behind brush and rocks, he advanced with extreme caution toward the road. That sorrel horse belonged to Simmons. If Blue did not miss his guess, Simmons had been shot from its back. But Blue could not find the foreman's body.

Presently, however, the trail driver located two other horses hidden among the cedars. A rocky eminence, half concealed by trees and brush, stood on the right of the road. Jacobs and Manley would never go far from their horses. They would be concealed in the brush under that flat rock.

Blue went back to his horse, and divesting himself of scarf, vest, and boots, he hurried far down on that side of the road, and made a wide detour to come up behind the rock, crawling under cover all the way to the ledge.

On hands and knees he soon crossed the last hundred yards or more to his objective. That side of the little hill afforded a view of the road. Even as his sweeping gaze met the horizon two riders topped the line to show black against the sky—Estelle and her *vaquero*. Long before they came within sight or sound of that rock he would have the unpleasant business settled.

Wherefore he listened and heard low voices. He decided it would be safer to go up the ledge instead of around. Pulling a gun he crawled like a snake up to the flat top.

"Smiley, I heard something," Manley said. "Come back hyar."

Footsteps rustled below Blue.

"Ground squirrel," replied Smiley contemptuously. "Gawd, you're a skeery cuss. Hyar comes our party. Take a peep round the rock."

Manley whistled low. "Smiley, I've an idee. Leighton gives us a lot of dirty jobs. Let's make him pay handsome for this one. Instead of takin' the girl to Spider Web, let's hide her somewhere else. Then you brace Leighton an' ask for ten thousand. He'll pay."

"What? He'd kill me!"

"Nope. Not while we got the girl."

"I wouldn't double-cross Leighton."

"Why not? He'll leave you holdin' a sack in the end."

"I've a hunch none of us will

hold anythin' very long with thet cowboy runnin' amuck."

Slim wormed his way to the edge of the rock and peeped down. Shoving his gun over the rim he called sardonically, "Howdy, men."

Jacobs stiffened as if steel rods had been shot through him. Manley froze in his tracks. Then Jacobs looked up warily to see Blue above, with only head, arm, and shoulder exposed.

"Howdy, Blue," he replied coolly. "I was jest tellin' my pard to expect you."

"Don't bat an eyelash down there," said Blue. "Smiley, will you talk?"

"Nix," retorted Jacobs.

"How about you, Manley?'

"Yes, I'll talk," returned Manley.

"What's Leighton's idee sendin' you with the Latch girl to Spider Web?"

"He says he'll use her to lure Latch into a trap. Promisin' to free her if Latch makes over his ranch holdin's. But I know Leighton means—"

Jacobs suddenly spun round like a top, throwing a gun. As Blue fired, the outlaw appeared flattened by a battering ram. Blue's second shot knocked Manley into the brush, which upheld him as he swung his gun into action. Blue ducked back and rolled over twice on the ledge. Then he lay flat a moment, listening to the bang of Manley's gun and the *spang* of lead off rock. Blue waited. Threshing of brush, gasping breaths, a quivering jingle of spurs—then silence!

Rising guardedly to his feet, Blue peeped over again, to make sure his work was done, then turned to locate the riders up the road. When he saw they were still a mile or more distant, he made his way to the ambushers' horses. He removed saddles and bridles to turn the horses loose. Both saddles bore a small pack and a blanket.

Possessing himself of one of these, Blue hurried up to Simmons's horse, slipped the bridle and gave the horse a cut on the flank that sent him tearing down the road. Blue searched for Simmons's body, but in vain. Then he ran back to Brazos.

He pulled on his boots and donning vest and scarf, and mounted to ride out into the open. He wanted to intercept Estelle at some point beyond the ledge of rock. Latch's *vaquero* had sharp eyes and Blue did not want him to discover any sign of what had happened.

Estelle was in sight, and Blue cantered on. She reined in her horse.

"Mawnin', sweetheart," he drawled, and doffed his sombrero.

"It's afternoon. Did you ride out to meet me? Are you all right? And Daddy?"

"Wal, outside of a turrible

yearnin' to see my promised wife I reckon I'm tolerable," he drawled. adding, "Your dad was fine an' chipper when I seen him a couple of hours back."

"Then you rode out because you wanted to see me?" she asked

"Wal, to be honest. sweetheart, part reason was 'cause I didn't want you runnin' right into trouble at home."

"I *knew* something was wrong the instant I laid eyes on you. Oh, Slim!"

"It's nothin' much, Estie. Leighton has picked out today to throw your dad off his ranch an' take possession. I reckon thet may lead to some arguin'."

"Arguing? Slim, it means guns —and yours!"

"Wal, darlin', I haven't a lot of time to argue with you My idea was for you to catch up with the caravan, go on to Fort Union with your friends, an' have a good time till this darned mess is settled."

"I won't do it," she flashed. "I won't go back to the caravan. My play days are over, Corny And the sooner you and Dad realize that the better for all of us."

"Yeah? Wal, I'm glad you woke up. If you marry me, lady—"

"Not if—*when*."

"All right. When you marry me you'll have to work."

"I'm not afraid to work. It is very evident, Mr. Cornwall, that you do not expect to marry an heiress, which means that you expect Dad to lose all."

"Estie, if you're talkin' about property he's already lost all. Leighton has done some crooked work."

"Can you prove it?" queried Estelle eagerly.

"Yeah."

"Oh, Corny, all my trust and hope is in you!" she murmured.

"Wal, Estie, thet can't be calculated to shake my nerve. You won't trust me an' go back to the caravan?"

"It's not a question of trust. You want to spare me fright or pain. I won't go."

"All right Then will you do this? Let me take you down to the Bradleys' They'll make you comfortable."

"Slim, you want to *hide* me until it's—over?" she queried, aghast.

"Wal, yes, if you want to call it that"

"Why?"

"Aw, I'd just feel better able to help your dad if I knew you were safe hid."

"You are afraid Leighton will kidnap me to get even with Dad."

"Say, who put that idee in your haid?"

"Keetch. What's more, Keetch told me never to ride out alone."

"That old son-of-a-gun! Wal, then, how about my takin' you to Bradleys'?"

"I will go, my lord and master. But are you quite sure you ap-

preciate what a tremendous sacrifice this is for me?"

"I reckon."

"I must have clothes and my things. May I send Lopez for them?"

"Yes. Come now, Estie. Let's ride."

Lopez went ahead, and Blue and Estelle rode hand in hand to the hilltop. To his relief, no smoke marked the recent fire in the town. They rode down to the level, where Blue asked Estelle to send the *vaquero* in with news that she was safe and would soon be home.

Estelle complied after giving Lopez instructions about what to bring her, and presently she and the trail driver were riding down the north side of the valley, under the rugged bluff. It happened that Bradley was in town, but Blue left Estelle with his Indian wife and was about to bid her farewell when he remembered Leighton's wallet.

"Estie, will you promise to keep this by you till I come back?"

"I promise. What's in it? Money?"

"Somethin' more precious than gold. But you're not to open it."

"Oh! Good-by, Slim. Be careful."

Blue waved to her as he raced across the valley. He wondered what had happened in town and at Latch's ranch since he had parted with Hawk Eye, and he decided it would be wise to see Hawk Eye before making another move.

## Chapter Eighteen

### *Heiress to the Bowden Estate*

BRAZOS ran the several miles to Latch's in short order. There Blue tied the horse in the willows and made his way to the barn, where he found a crack to peep through. He was prepared to see Leighton's outfit in control of the ranch, and to force the issue if he could surprise them.

Blue put his eye to the aperture. At the far end of the barn he espied a group of men. Beyond them two prairie schooners stood with their unhitched horses feeding on hay. Strangers had arrived, perhaps members of a caravan. Blue's survey took in two dusty men, heavily booted. A tall, lank man, whose lean face appeared familiar, stood talking to Benson, and another whose garb proclaimed him a traveler. Several *vaqueros* were also present.

Blue did not know what to make of this. Three of these newcomers packed guns. He strode along the wall of the barn and around the far corner. All the men turned. Blue halted, right hand on hip.

"By gad, it's Blue!" exclaimed Benson. His tone, his look, be-

trayed two things—an acquaintance with at least one of the trail driver's feats of the morning, and that sight of him was welcome.

"Howdy, Benson," said Blue, relaxing.

"Where's Latch?" blurted out Benson.

"I was about to ask you that."

"Don't you know?"

"Shore don't. But I bet I can make a guess. Leighton's outfit has got him corralled."

"I don't think so," replied Benson. "I rode with the boss an' Pedro as far as the mouth of Spider Web Creek, less than an hour ago. Latch was in a hurry. He did not want anyone to see where he was headed. He got away unobserved, I'm sure—and I've been riding all over to find you. My instructions were to fetch half a dozen men back to the ranch to hold Leighton off. Bradley is coming with two of his riders. I met Mizzouri, and he swore he'd come. These freighters from Independence will set in with us. Simmons ought to be back soon. Then with you—"

"Simmons won't be back, Benson. He's daid."

"Dead? How—who?" ejaculated Benson, horrified.

"Some more of Leighton's deal."

"Blue, the boss sent Simmons to catch the caravan and tell Miss Estelle to go on with it to Fort Union If Simmons is dead he never got that far. We must ride out to meet her."

"Come heah, Benson," replied Blue. And taking the other man aside, he said, "Estelle is safe. I left her at Bradleys' to keep hid till whatever comes is over. Bradley wasn't home. I don't want him to tell her what's happened. Savvy?"

"Bradley ought to be here now."

"Wal, if I don't stay you tell him. I gotta see Hawk Eye pronto. But what the hell did Latch ride off for?"

"Blue, the boss sure was het up," declared Benson. "No wonder! Listen to this. Some time before noon these freighters from Independence drove in to town with this stranger. His name is Bowden. He's a lawyer from Boston. His business with Latch was to find out some clue as to what happened to Cynthia Bowden, supposedly lost years ago with Bowden's lost wagon train. It seems a lot of money has been left to Cynthia Bowden. And the object of this lawyer's trip West is to find her, if possible, and whether or not she left a child. Latch saved Cynthia Bowden's life and married her. Estelle is her child. All that money will come to Estiel It's great news! At this time when Latch is ruined. Talk about providence!"

Slim Blue gaped in mute astonishment.

"Well, Latch has to show some

kind of proof," went on Benson. "Bowden has been months on the quest. He found out that Cynthia left Independence with her uncle in a prairie schooner especially built for Bowden. It was a magnificent boat on wheels, built by Tullt and Company. The Indians drove all the caravan wagons over a canyon wall. Latch said he thought he might find that wagonhead as proof that he saved Cynthia Bowden from the Indians an' married her! The lawyer says he will accept it as proof. No wonder Latch rode off like mad! Bowden believed him, but he had to have tangible proof—"

"Wal," interrupted Blue, his voice like a bell, "tell your lawyer man that there are written an' printed proofs of Estelle Latch's parentage. Jewelry, pictures, marriage certificate, too! Fact, but I can't explain heah an' now. I gotta stop Leighton before he scents this deal out."

"Blue! It'd be terrible if Leighton trailed Latch up Spider Web!" exclaimed Benson. "Here comes Bradley now. And Mizzouri."

"Rustle up to the ranch house an' hold Leighton's outfit off—if it comes. No fear of them destroying property. Leighton wants the ranch."

"Blue, you shouldn't brace that gang--alone," replied Benson.

"Wal, I won't walk up on them careless-like. Watch sharp now, Benson."

Blue wheeled to hurry back the way he had come. He could not plan what to do until he had established Leighton's whereabouts. At last he got back to his horse and headed for the creek, where he soon espied Hawk Eye.

"Ugghl" grunted the redman. "Latch go Spider Web. Leighton see; track um."

Blue swore. "Hawk Eye, how many men with Leighton?"

The Indian held up two fingers. "Keeneedy one. Dog-face man two."

"Kennedy, shore. But thet slinky Breese!" muttered Blue, thinking fast. Leighton was putting his own head in a noose. "Hawk Eye, Latch went up Spider Web to find the caravan wagons run over canyon wall years ago. Can you find those wagons?"

"No go water trail. Me climb, go round, find way down."

"Pack some meat an' bread, Hawk Eye. Meet me heah after dark. We go."

They parted. Blue went sweeping away across the creek and over the flat. The sun was setting red over the black domes in the west. Estelle would come into her own, whatever happened to her father. The disgrace and ruin that had imperiled her happiness would be hidden forever up that mysterious Spider Web Canyon where she had been born.

Blue rode straight for Bradley's ranch, and as he drew near he

caught sight of Estelle. The sweetness of the moment confounded him. Her hair gleamed red-gold in the last rays of the setting sun. Long before he reined Brazos before the cabin he saw that Estelle had changed her riding garb to a gray dress. This meant, of course, that one of the *vaqueros* had come from the ranch.

"Oh, you dear boy, to come so soon," she cried gayly. "If there were no one to see I—I'd kiss you."

"Evenin', Mrs. Cornwall," drawled Blue as he took her hand. "Estie, I'm hungry an' so is Brazos."

Blue had always found a welcome at the Bradleys'. The rancher's wife and daughter came out to greet him.

"Wal, I'm shore a tough-lookin' hombre to call on a lady," he said as he made for the wash-bench.

"Slim, I'll see about your supper."

In a few moments Estelle brought his supper out on the porch The long twilight was slowly darkening.

"Did you see Dad?" she queried.

"No. But I saw Benson."

"Corny, you have bad news."

"Wal, it could be worse. Before tellin' you, though, I'd like to ask you somethin' turrible intimate. Air you goin' to persist in your engagement to a no-good trail driver?"

"Yes. I shall persist—unless you—"

"Could you be happy on a little ranch like this? Keep house an' mend my socks—when I had any—milk the cows an' all such pioneer woman's work—while I raised a herd of cattle?"

"Corny, I could be perfectly happy with you anywhere."

"Darlin', you've been used to comfort and luxury. You think you could stand just ranchin' it all the time? 'Course I love you as I reckon no wild hombre ever loved a girl before."

"Corny, that would make up for everything else in the world," she replied softly.

"I cain't see how. An' you could marry any man you wanted."

"Very well. It's settled. I want you."

Slim sat silent a moment. The gods of fate had certainly uplifted him to a love infinitely beyond his merits. But since they had!—He looked into her eyes, dark and loving in the dusk.

"Let's get my horse. Then you can walk with me to the big tree yonder."

It was Estelle who led Brazos. Presently she said, "Corny, I gather from your seriousness that Dad has lost all."

"Wal, I didn't mean that. I was just supposin'. You see, sweetheart, you happen to be worth about a million. An' it worried me."

She faced him, let the bridle fall, sought his arms. "Worth a million! You must be out of your

head, darling."

"About you, shore. But not about the million. You are heiress to a million dollars from the Bowden estate, down East."

"Bowden? That was my mother's name. Corny, what has happened?"

"Wal, heah. Lawyer from Boston rode in today Name's Bowden Some kin of your mother's He had clues that brought him to Latchfield Your dad, you know, saved your mother from the Indians. Married her. Bowden heahed it somewhere. Wal, your dad told the lawyer that he saved Cynthia Bowden an' had married her, that you was her child.

"The lawyer had to have some substantial proof Latch reckoned he could find that very wagon your mother crossed the plains in. The Indians had dumped it over a canyon wall west of heah. Bowden, the lawyer, agreed to accept that as proof So your dad packed an' rode off with Pedro."

"How wonderful!" she cried. "But, Corny, it seems absurd to expect to find that wagon. After all these years. For his sake, I hope he finds the proof But I can stand the disappointment, Corny."

"Wal, listen, Big Eyes! Your dad don't need that wagon-haid to prove you are Cynthia Bowden's daughter an' heiress to this fortune. If I could only have seen him before he left! But I didn't. An' I reckon it'll turn out best this way. Estie, thet wallet I gave you for safe-keepin' contains proof of your parentage."

"What?" she whispered.

"Letters, papers, pictures jewelry, marriage certificate. They belonged to your mother. Latch never saw or heahed of them; he was absent when you was born. Leighton stole them. Your mother died An' Latch never came back for five years Wal, I got on to Leighton's plan to ruin your dad Revengel An' I spied on Leighton, heahed him speak about these proofs An' as I once told you, I hid in my room for weeks, waitin' for a chance to steal them. That chance came the night of your party I had to muss things up a bit. But I got them."

"You can prove I'm Estelle Bowden Latch?"

"I should smile. When you go back to the cabin, look in that wallet."

She flung her arms around his neck "Oh, it's so unbelievable."

"Wal, it shore is. You can't never be a poor homesteader's wife now."

"Oh, Slim, you won't go back on me because I'm rich," she entreated, and fell to kissing him

"Reckon I didn't mean it that way," he replied unsteadily. "Now, Estie, listen. I'm leavin' at once with an Indian to trail your dad I reckon Leighton might get a hunch an' follow. You stay heah till I come back. An' don't worry,

Estie."

She could only gaze up at him with darkly distended eyes and hang on to him with tight little hands. He kissed her a last time, leaped on Brazos and rode swiftly off into the gathering darkness.

Hawk Eye waited in the melancholy gloom. He bestrode one mustang and held the halter of another that carried a pack.

"Good," grunted the Kiowa at sight of Blue, and led away toward the west.

Blue followed, his eyes seeking to penetrate the gloom ahead. As the hours of the night flew by, he felt no impatience Something of the Kiowa's impassiveness seemed added to his own iron calm.

## Chapter Nineteen

### *A Blade Drives Home*

GRAY dawn streaked the east By its light Slim Blue began to discern the dark confines of a ragged canyon along the rim of which he had been following Hawk Eye. It was a desolate region.

Hawk Eye swerved to the right, away from the rim. Halting at a point where the rocky slant resembled a millrace cut in stone, he said. "Wagons go down"

Blue gazed, grasping the significance of the Kiowa's assertion. Here, then, was the place where Latch and Satana had disposed of the stolen prairie schooners. The canyon yawned like a bottomless pit.

The Indian led on. Blue followed. The sun rose. Wilder and rougher grew the traveling. At last the Kiowa led down into a steep crack which opened into a narrow canyon as tortuous as a crawling snake The walls were rugged, cavernedHours passed. Blue wearied in spite of his tremendous incentive How long? Noonday had come and passed. Soon Leighton would have had time to overtake Latch. Then when Blue seemed on the verge of desperation Hawk Eye led out of a crack into a green canyon valley, magnificently inclosed by walls like pictures. Far below a white waterfall fell like rising smoke over cliffs.

"Spider Web," said Hawk Eye gruffly. And indicating that Blue should look to the horses and wait there, he vanished among the spruce trees. Blue tied the horses in the shade He took off spurs, chaps boots, vest, and sombrero. Then he drank from a crystal spring and lay back on the moss

This was the notorious Spider Web Canyon, hiding place for outlaws and savages. Latch was below somewhere, with Leighton on his trail. The hour had almost come. Blue drew his guns, added a shell

to the empty chamber in each.

The Kiowa reappeared. "Good," he said. "Me find wagons. Latch there Leighton ketch um; tie um up. You come me. Like snake. Me go close. Leighton heap loco. Watch Keeneedy—clog-face man."

"How far, scout?" queried Blue.

The Kiowa pointed to a notched section of rim and indicated that Latch was at the base of the cliff.

"How close we get?"

"Heap close." The Kiowa made signs that Blue construed to mean the grass was deep and soft, the brush thick, and they could shoot and not be seen.

"All right, Hawk Eye. Go slow An' don't shoot till I yell."

The Kiowa glided away in among the spruces with Blue at his heels. The grass gave forth no sound. Slower went the Indian, until at last he got down on hands and knees. They were drawing close. A raucous laugh—Leighton's—made Blue's blood leap.

Inch by inch the Kiowa wormed his way under the low-branching foliage. Voices grew distinct. Blue, cold and sure now, made certain that he did not stir a leaf or snap a twig.

The green canopy overhead brightened. Blue looked up to see that Hawk Eye was crawling into an open glade toward a narrow strip of thicket. Voices beyond this point indicated the whereabouts of the outlaws. Wood smoke came from a camp fire. To the left a yellow curving wall sheered up so high that Blue could not see its rim. Under the wall lay an enormous gray and russet pile that at first glance Blue had taken for a slope of talus from the cliff above.

But a second glance petrified him. The enormous pile, which extended beyond his line of vision, consisted of ruins of wagons. Wheels! Wheels! Wheels! Rusty tires, broken hubs, spokes, wagon-tongues, every part of hundreds of prairie schooners, made up this enormous pile of wreckage.

Gray ghastly ruin of caravans! How many lives sacrificed to the bloody greed of the border? Blue sank down shudderingly sick. He had seen the work of Satana and Latch. Bloody devils! This was the secret of Spider Web Canyon, this the shadow on Latch's past, this the end of Bowden's lost wagon train.

Blue felt only hatred for Latch in that moment. He repudiated his stern resolve of rescue. Let Leighton work his will on his enemy. Let Latch take his due. Then into Blue's righteous wrath flashed thought of Estelle. His Estelle, with her innocence and sweetness, was this border murderer's daughter. A storm of conflicting emotion shook Blue.

At the moment he felt the Indian's moccasined foot upon his outstretched hand. Hawk Eye made a warning gesture. Blue crawled silently in his wake.

This last tedious approach ended in a little covert on the very edge of the thicket. Blue took his cue from the Indian, who cautiously rose on one knee to peep out through a hole. Only then did Blue give attention to the voices beyond the green screen.

"Ho! Ho! and a bottle of rum!"

That was Leighton's voice, vibrant with an exultant ring. Then followed a clinking crash that nonplussed Blue.

"Listen to that music, Bruce. What ho! Gold! Gold! Gold!"

The metallic tinkle ending in a ringing crash came indeed from gold. Blue was astounded. Gold here in Spider Web Canyon? It had to do with that pile of wagon wreckage. Rising on one knee, he found a slit between leaves.

Less than 50 feet away, against the colorful background of the open sunny canyon, he espied Leighton, nude from the waist up, in the act of lifting a double handful of gold coins from a basin which lay upon a flat rock, to let them slide out in a glinting stream back into the sounding tin. A number of canvas sacks lay on that flat rock. They told an incredible story. Latch, adventuring back to this canyon for the proof he required, had found gold in the wagons.

Blue had to force his gaze away from Leighton. The second spectacle to rivet it was the headboard of a prairie schooner, leaning against a sapling. It appeared to be in a remarkably good state of preservation. Red letters on a background of green were legible. *Tullt & Co. No. 1 A.* Latch had found the proof he had sought and a fortune in gold besides. Leighton, tracking him to his lair, had surprised and captured him.

Farther on a few steps, Breese was puttering round the camp fire. He still wore his heavy gun-belt; the rapt Leighton had dispensed with his.

Hawk Eye nudged Blue and directed his attention to another peephole in the foliage. Through this he espied Bruce Kennedy, sitting on a rock, with inscrutable eyes on Leighton. A few steps to his right appeared Latch, bound upright to a spruce tree, a picture of abject despair.

Blue's next move was to find a longer slit in the foliage through which he could have all the men in sight at once. He knelt on one knee, gun in hand, and peered stealthily out. Once more he lent keen ears to the talk of the outlaws.

"He never knew the gold was in that wagon," declared Leighton, evidently addressing Kennedy. "When I slipped up on Latch he was digging the bags out of that old wagon bed. There's all of fifty thousand dollars in them. To think that gold was hid in the bottom of the big schooner all the time!"

"Your idee is to stay hyar awhile?" asked Breese.

"I should smile."

"It's a no-good idee. You left thet damned trail driver alive back there to muss up your plans."

"Lee, I'm agreein' with that," interposed Kennedy. "We shouldn't stay in here too long."

"Hell, man! With Manley and Jacobs bringing the—" Leighton choked off the end of that ejaculation.

"Wal, *you* reckon they are. But *I* don't," rejoined Breese significantly.

"Get your deal with Latch over," suggested Kennedy. "Then talk turkey to us. What do we get?"

"Bruce, I don't like your tone."

"An' I don't like your slow deal. It's revenge you want. You don't care a damn for land an' stock an' money. But Sam an' I do. Moreover, this unexpected gold-fall makes a difference."

"I'll divide that with you," said Leighton grandly.

If he expected his two allies to exhibit rapture over this generosity he was disappointed. Kennedy was not impressed.

"All right with me, if Bruce is satisfied," said Breese.

"Say you're both dammed uppish all of a sudden. Well, how'd you like this? Soon as Manley and Jacobs come you can all take charge of the ranch for me."

"I'll think that over," returned Kennedy.

Leighton stood up. "Cousin Steve, are you ready now to talk terms?"

Latch lifted a haggard face, and fastened dull eyes upon his captor. Blue concluded that Latch had been knocked senseless and was just recovering.

"I have all your papers," went on Leighton, waving a hand toward his saddle and pack. "Every debt you contracted in Latchfield you owe me. Same in Dodge City and Abilene."

"Suppose you have?" replied Latch hoarsely. "I can't pay now."

"You will sign over your ranch property to me."

"No, you rustler!" flamed Latch. "You stole my cattle, stole the herds I sold!"

"You can't prove that, Latch."

"I know a cowboy who can."

"Blue?" rasped Leighton violently.

"I'm not saying."

"You needn't say, Latch. We know. We're on to your slick trail rider. Another Lester Cornwall. He fooled us all."

"Listen! I heerd somethin'," cracked out Breese.

Startled, they all kept quiet a moment.

"Might have been a horse. Jacobs and Manley ought to be here," returned Leighton, gazing down the canyon.

Silence ensued. After a while the men relaxed. Leighton went to his

saddlebag, from which he carefully extracted parcels wrapped in an oiled skin. The contents of these proved to be papers with pen and ink.

"I've everything ready, Latch. All you do is sign. Bruce, when he gives in untie his hands and get something flat for him to write on. The wagon board! Just the thing. Latch, why in the hell did you risk all to come up heah after that old Tullt headboard?"

Latch made no reply to this. "What is your deal, Leighton?" he queried.

"Sign over all your holdings."

"And if I don't?"

"I'll force you off," flashed Leighton. "And I'll betray you to your daughter and the range."

"Betray me how?"

"I'll give away your partnership with Satana. I'll prove your complicity in the massacre of Bowden's lost wagon train and of other caravans."

"You can't—prove—" panted Latch.

"Hell! Look at that pile of wagons there. If I needed more proof they would be enough. But I can prove it in other ways. I've got you at last, Latch. I will prove to your daughter that you were boss of Satana's murderers, that you built Latchfield with bloody money."

"Leighton, if I agree to sign, what guarantee have I that you never will betray me?"

"You'll have to take my word, Cousin Steve," declared Leighton. "But the fact is I'd be easier in mind if the truth about you is never told."

"How many men know that truth?"

"Not many, Steve. Outside of me there's Manley, Jacobs, Bruce heah, and Breese. Also that old Kiowa scout of yours, Hawk Eye. Mizzouri and the other members of our band will never squeal. So with our lips shut you're safe."

"I'll—sign," said Latch.

Leighton strode to the rock and gathered up a legal-looking document. Breese had fetched the wagon board while Kennedy, armed with a Bowie knife, stood ready to cut Latch's bonds.

"Sam, brace the board against him," said Leighton. "Bruce, don't cut the rope; we may need it. Untie his hands."

In another moment Latch was rubbing his wrists. He bent over the board, his tragic face white, and studied the paper Leighton held under his eyes.

"Sign heah," ordered Leighton.

Latch wrote with a steady hand. When he dropped the pen Leighton snatched up the paper and read the signature gloatingly.

"Bruce, tie his hands again," he ordered, presently, as he put the deed carefully away in his saddlebag.

"I heerd thet damn noise again," muttered Breese. "Reckon

this canyon is haunted."

Leighton leaped up, suddenly transfigured.

"It will be haunted, by God!" he cried, and with giant strides he went back to Latch. "You squared one debt. But there are two more."

Latch shrank against the tree.

The dignity of great passion sat upon Leighton's brow. In that moment a terrible sincerity shone from his face. He placed a quivering finger upon the livid scar that marked temple and cheek.

"Steve Latch, you will pay for this with your life," he rang out. "But not until you've paid the other debt. You stole Cynthia Bowden from me." Leighton almost screamed the words. "Latch, you'll live to see me take her daughter—heah—before this day ends!"

"Leighton, you could not be so vile! Kill me! Don't debase that innocent girl!"

"Burning you alive wouldn't satisfy me. I know your weakness. Jacobs and Manley are fetching her heah!"

No human being could have doubted Leighton. Certainly Latch did not. He grew old while Blue watched. Torture visibly racked him. Whatever had been his crimes, he paid in full measure for them in this hour of retribution.

"Listen!" called out Breese. "I heerd thet noise again."

"Horses comin'," jerked out Kennedy.

"Horses!" Leighton fairly screamed the word. He ran out into the open.

Suddenly Kennedy leaped in front of Latch, and shook him violently.

"Latch, wake up," he said. "Leighton will do as he swore. He's got your girl. Jacobs an' Manley went out on the road to waylay her, fetch her here. It's too dirty a job for Sam an' me. . . . If I cut you loose, leave this knife in your hands, will you make thet same ranch deal with us?"

Latch strangled over a rumbling consent.

Kennedy leaped around behind Latch, moved swiftly, bent low, and straightened again. Blue saw the tight ropes loosen.

"Drop your haid," flashed Breese. "He's comin'."

Leighton appeared. He marched straight for the flat rock, and snatching up his gun he confronted his men. "No horses coming. You both lied. Something funnier than a noise heah!"

"Aboot as funny as death, Leighton," taunted Kennedy.

Latch lunged from the tree, the wicked blade high. Leighton heard and wheeled. His wild scream mingled with Latch's terrible roar. He shot as the knife descended. But up went the knife aloft, dripping blood, and on the instant Leighton seized the arm

that held the knife while Latch gripped Leighton's gun hand.

Latch jerked Leighton off his feet and fell with him, to roll and thump over the ground. Suddenly the gun went flying. Latch had thrust his blade into Leighton's gun arm. Blood streamed down it over the naked shoulder.

Leighton screamed like a madman. Here, instead of satiation of a lifelong lust, loomed death. He fought mightily, but he was in the hands of a superman to whom life meant nothing. Latch dragged him off the ground, and suddenly reaching up with his left hand he seized the knife out of his right. The blade gleamed down. Flashed up! It caught Leighton low in the abdomen, flung him to his knees.

With a shrill yell Blue sprang out of his ambush, his gun shoved forward. Breese whirled, his gun describing a half-circle, and at Blue's shot he buckled, firing into the ground. Kennedy was slower in turning. He sank under Blue's fire.

Blue strode over to Leighton, now prostrate. Latch joined him.

Leighton was conscious as he looked up. Where were his driving passions now? He was in the shadow and felt it.

"Leighton, I'm tellin' you thet Jacobs an' Manley never got the girl," said Blue.

The outlaw understood, but the failure of his great coup mattered little now. His unfathomable eyes swerved from Blue to Latch, then rolled and set.

## Chapter Twenty

### *Trail's End*

NEAR sunset next day Latch saw his home again, as a man in a dream sees the scene of his boyhood.

Blue and Hawk Eye had packed him down out of Spider Web Canyon. Benson, Mizzouri, the lawyer Bowden, the freighters, Bradley and *vaqueros,* flocked from house and corrals. They carried Latch to his room and laid him on the bed near the big west window.

"Blue, am I going to cash?" he asked.

"Dog-gone if I know, boss," replied the trail driver. "Benson, call your wife. Get his boots an' clothes off. Dress his wound. Shave him an' spruce him up. Rest of you men rustle. You'll heah all about it in the mawnin'."

"Blue, look!" whispered Latch, indicating with weak hand a great pillar of smoke rising far away to obscure the sunset.

"Awful pretty. That's a big fire, boss," said the trail driver, peering out.

"You set fire to the wagon pile?"

"Shore did. Lot of dry wood there. Been no rain for weeks. Thet fire'll be so hot it'll melt

every bit of iron. Nothin' left but a patch of ashes an' thet'll soon grow over."

"The last—trace destroyed!"

"Yes, boss, an' your last enemy daid," rejoined Blue. "You're a lucky hombre."

"God did not forsake—her!"

"Wal, I don't know about Gawd," drawled Blue.

"Blue, I misjudged you."

"Natural. Let's never speak of that again. I'll go now to fetch Estelle. See that you are her old dad!"

Latch lay quiet, watching the far-distant rolling clouds of smoke. He was happy. At the last he had asked only one thing of life—to spare his daughter. But he had been granted many things.

Dusk had mantled the valley scene and the plateau to the west when, an hour later, Mrs. Benson lighted the lamps and propped Latch up on pillows.

"I hear horses," she said suddenly.

The sound of swift hoofs grew louder; came to a stop. Rapid footsteps pattered up the stairs. Then a lovely face, pale but radiant, flashed in the doorway.

"Estie! My girl—my girl!"

"Oh, Dad!" she cried, and rushed to the bed to embrace him.

When Blue clinked up the stairs a little later Latch was holding Estelle's hand as she sat beside him.

"Wal, how about it?" he drawled.

"Slim, darling, I was afraid you had lied—again," she replied. "But if you did, Dad swears to it."

"'Slim, darling'?" asked Latch with a show of surprise.

"Yes, Dad," she answered with a vivid blush. "That is something *he* must explain when you are well again."

"Oh, I see."

"Boss, nothin' much to explain," interposed Blue. "That very first day I went crazy about her. It fetched me heah an' kept me heah."

"No explanation is necessary, Blue. The Latch family owes you more than it can ever repay."

"Aw! Say, but my name's not Blue."

"No, Dad, it's not. I just liked the name he gave himself here."

"Well, then, if I give my consent, what will your name be instead of Mrs. Blue?"

"If! Daddy, you couldn't refuse."

"Estie, I couldn't indeed. But I'm happy to give you my consent and blessing. I have never known a boy—except one—to whom I would have given you as willingly as I give you to Blue."

"Except one!" exclaimed Estelle. "I never guessed that. Who was this wonderful boy, Dad?"

"He was like a son to me. Saved my life more than once. Blue reminds me of him. He, too, was a

Texan. His name was Lester Cornwall."

"My Gawd! Boss, what you sayin'?" burst out the trail driver, his lean face turning pale.

*"Daddy!"* cried Estelle. "Slim's name is Cornwall, too. And *he* had a brother called Lester."

"Shore, boss, I'm Lester's kid brother," interposed Blue huskily. "Years ago I took the trail—huntin' for him. An' I never stopped huntin' until I met your daughter. That changed my life. If you can tell me anythin' about Lester—"

"Son, Lester came to me during the war. He joined my band of Rebel guerrillas. He was the coldest, most reckless boy I have ever met on the plains. After the war I drifted. Lester stuck to me. He did not care to settle down. But when at last I decided to develop Latch's Field into a great ranch, he agreed to come with me. Alas! that was never to be—he was killed."

"Would you mind tellin' me how, boss?" asked Cornwall.

Latch caught himself in time. He saw again that gaming hall in Dodge, the girl with the eyes of a hawk, the scornful Lester.

"Son, he died as so many Westerners have died," replied Latch. "Back to the wall—a gun in each hand. In my defense!"

"Wal, now, I'm glad to heah—at last," quavered Cornwall.

"Oh, Dad, you've seen such terrible times—I do hope they're over. . . . Corny, don't grieve. He was brave."

"Estie, go to my closet," directed Latch. "In that old leather valise are two belts. One holds two guns. Fetch them out."

When Estelle came forth carrying the belts, Latch resumed:

"Give them to him. There, son, is all I saved of Lester's outfit. One belt contains money. It has never been opened. Take it and the guns. I'm glad to have these keepsakes for you. Happy that the boy who loved me like a father was the brother of the boy who is to be my son."

Latch was out and around in a few days, walking with a cane. "Corny, what's your idea about running this ranch?" Latch inquired, returning from the corrals to find the trail driver and Estelle on the porch.

"Wal, I shore got a good idee," drawled Corny.

"What is it, son?"

"Wal, you say Estie an' I have to go East to corral this dog-gone inheritance of hers. Suppose we ketch the caravan bound south in a few days. At Santone I'll pick the best trail drivers I ever trailed with—Bim Weaver, Gawd bless him! an' Reddy Westfall an' Long Tim Archer an' Fox Huggins. I'll send them heah with the five thousand haid of longhorns you wanted."

"I like your idea," declared

Latch.

"They're a wild lot. But, boss, we'll need 'em. Rustlin' has just come into its own. Cattle-stealin' as a business has got to be contended with. Wal, Estie an' I will come back quick—"

"We will not," interrupted that young lady spiritedly. "Let Dad and your wild outfit run the ranch. This trip is our honeymoon, Mister Cornwall. And I'm going to make the most of it. You should be thrilled, instead of wanting to hurry back here to shoot rustlers."

"Estie, I'm shore thrilled, but also scared stiff," replied Corny.

"Dad, have you ever been to Boston?" asked the girl.

"Yes, lass. That is where I met your mother and fell in love with her."

"Oh! But I thought you saved mother from Indians."

"Indeed I did. But I'd met her before."

"You must tell me all about her some day. Are there lots of beautiful girls in Boston?"

"Thick as hops."

"Corny is such a fickle, no-good trail driver," she said. "Do you think I can hold him, Daddy? *After* we're married, I mean."

"Lass, I rather think so."

"Then perhaps we'd better settle it—and *him*," she went on, her eyes bright, her cheeks rosy "We'll ride south with that caravan. Get married in San Antonio. Go to New Orleans. Take the boat up the Mississippi to St. Louis. Then the train to Boston. Corral that dog-gone inheritance! Then try to spend it all in New York before starting west again. How's that idea, Dad?"

"Great!" ejaculated Latch.

"Wal, Lady, I don't know about you," said Cornwall, his eyes flashing their light upon her. "But whatever you want goes with me."

THE END

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# The Passing of Buckshot Roberts

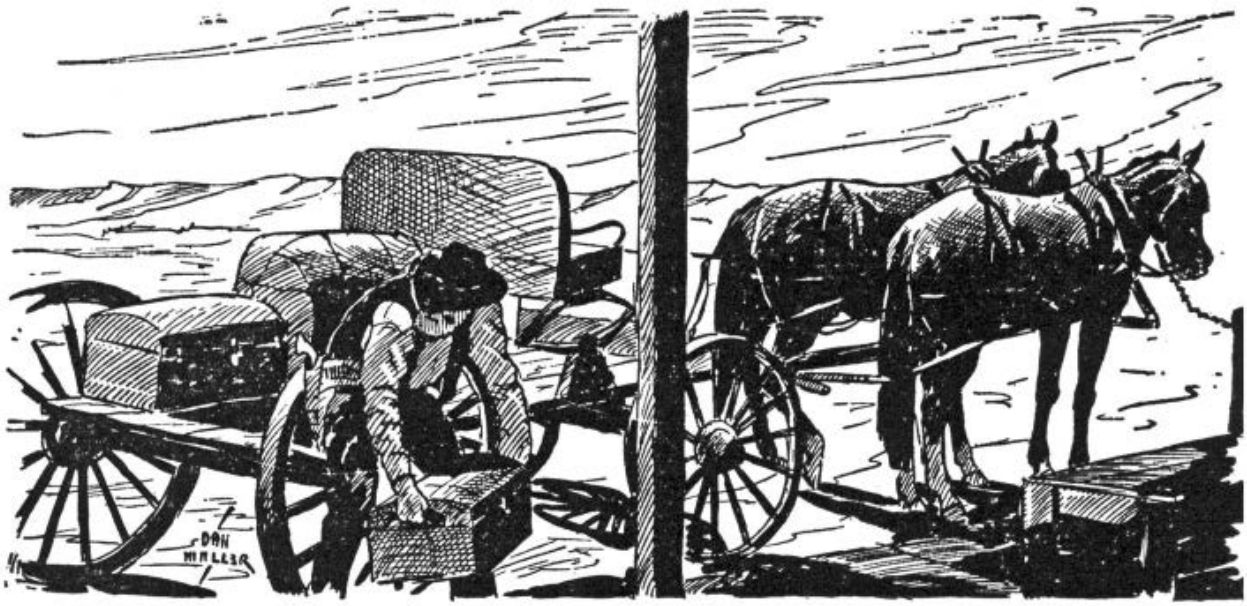
*Story by* **CARL SMITH** *Pictures by* **DAN MULLER**

THE FAMOUS *Lincoln County war was raging in New Mexico when, in 1878, there occurred the episode described in this picture-story. Billy the Kid, a notorious killer though not yet 20, leads his squad of McSween-faction followers against Blazer's Mill to get Buckshot Roberts—but the tough old fellow with the crippled shoulder proves a match for all 13 of them!*

On a modest little ranch in New Mexico's beautiful Ruidoso Valley, at the time the bloody Lincoln County War broke out, lived a grizzled veteran of earlier frontier days known as Buckshot Roberts. The cattlemen's feud flared into full-scale fighting all around, but he said he'd seen enough gun-play in his day, and stayed out of it.

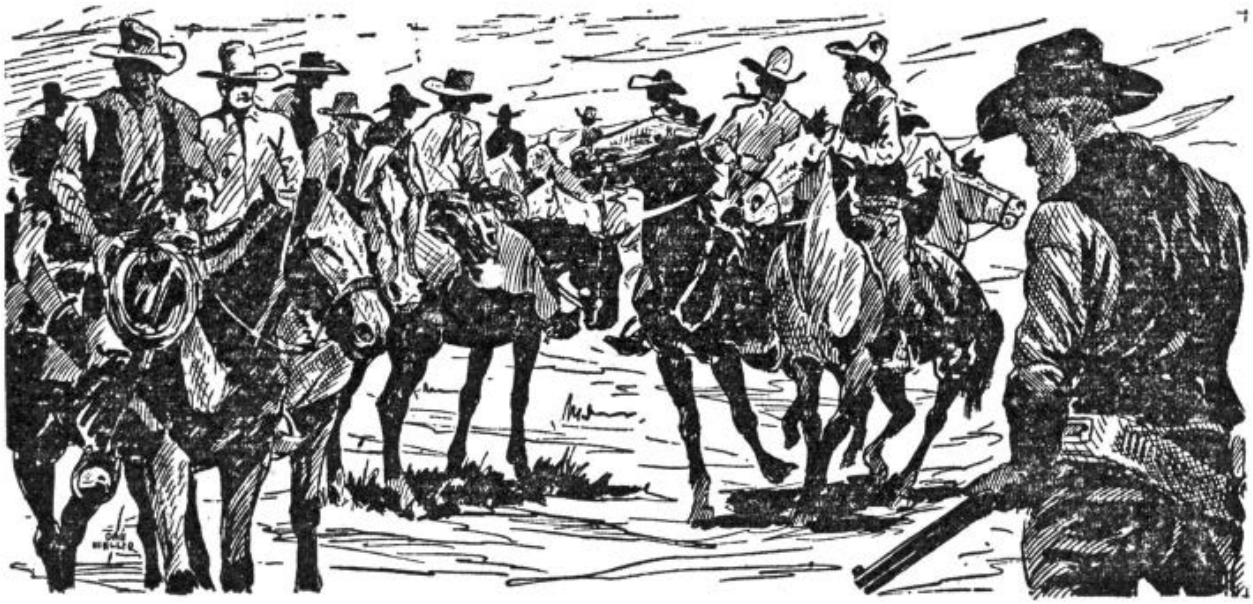
Ex-Ranger, former Indian-fighter, he had one arm so loaded with buckshot he couldn't raise a rifle to his shoulder. People said, "Buckshot's got so much lead in his carcass he dassent swim his horse—they'd both sink like a rock."


But one of the hired gunmen roaming the Valley wouldn't stand for Buckshot's neutrality. Billy the Kid, chief lead-slinger for one of the warring factions, publicly announced his intention to kill Roberts.

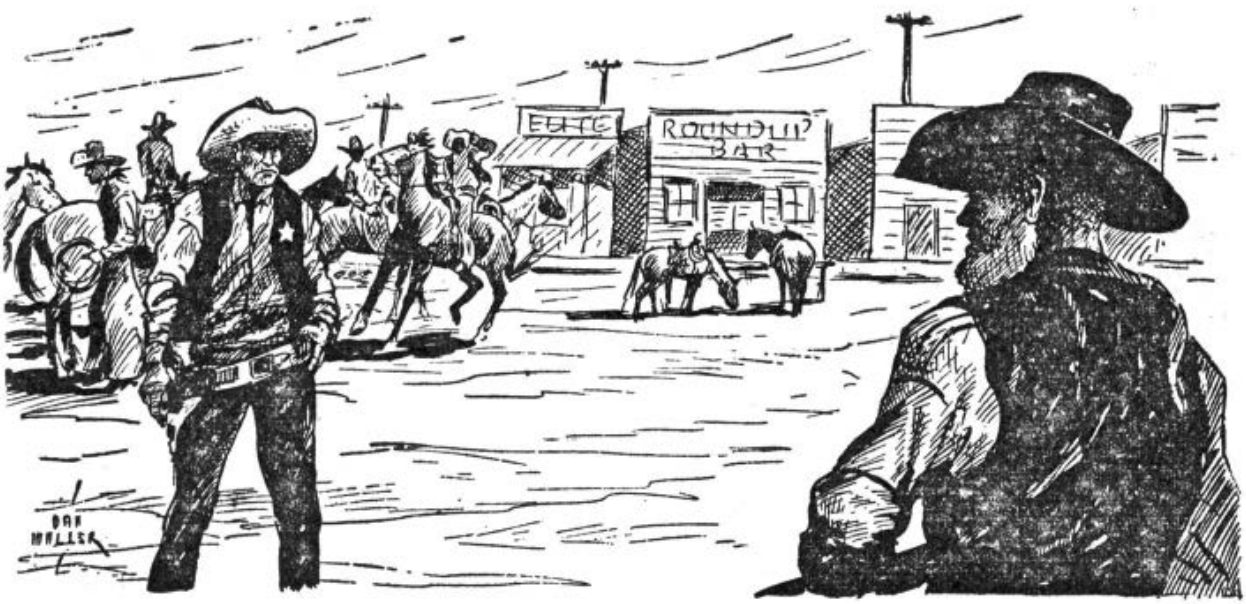


Roberts was no coward, but when word of Billy the Kid's threat reached him, he stuck to his contention that he'd had enough fighting to last him the rest of his life. Buckshot prepared to leave the Valley until the war was over.


But when he heard that a friend, wounded in a skirmish, had taken refuge at Blazer's Mill, Buckshot changed his mind. He saddled his horse, stuck a Winchester in the scabbard and a six-shooter in his belt, and lit out for the mill.

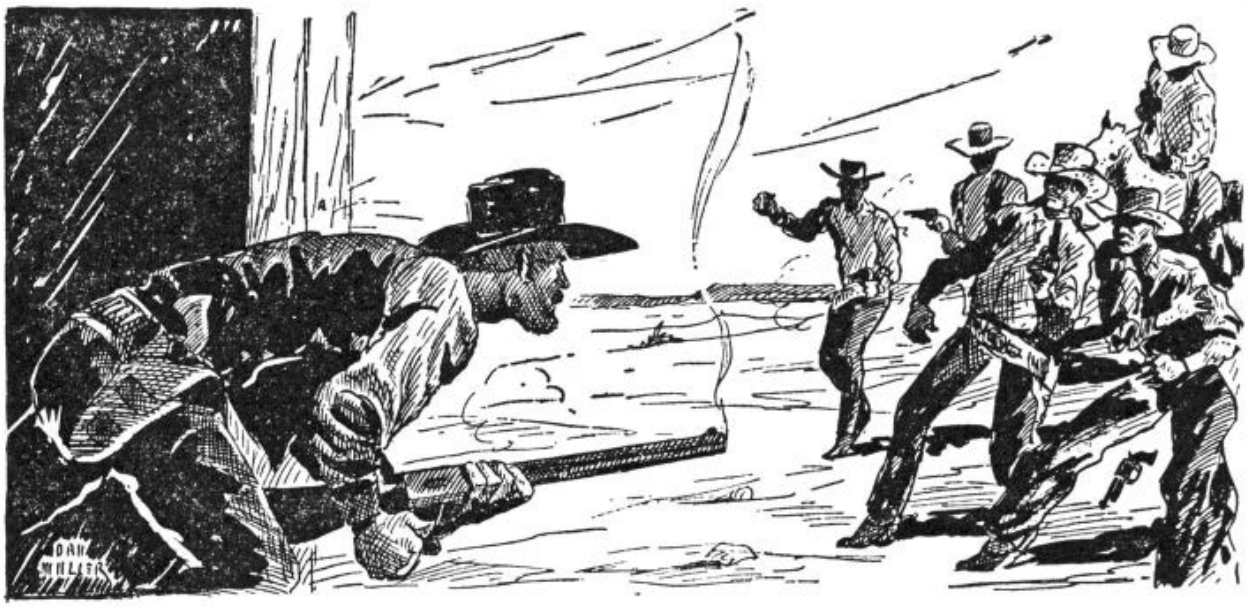


Roberts arrived at the mill just ahead of Billy the Kid. As he dismounted, a drum of hoofs in the distance warned him that a large group of riders was approaching. Buckshot stood in the doorway of the mill awaiting them, rifle at his side.




As they rode up, he recognized Billy the Kid, Dirty Steve, and others of Billy's gang—13 in all. One of them had gotten himself deputized—easy enough, considering conditions in the county—and the gang claimed to be a "posse."

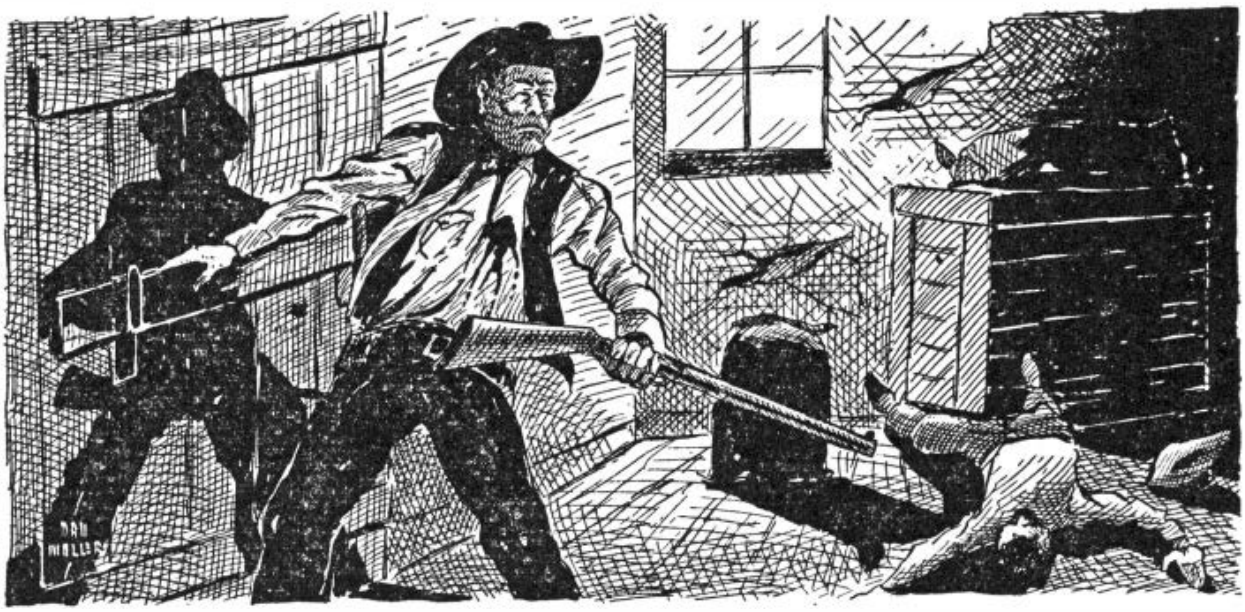
When the "deputy" called upon him to give himself up and surrender his weapons, Robert laughed at him. He knew he'd be "killed while trying to escape" if he should surrender. So the gang rushed him as he stood in the door.



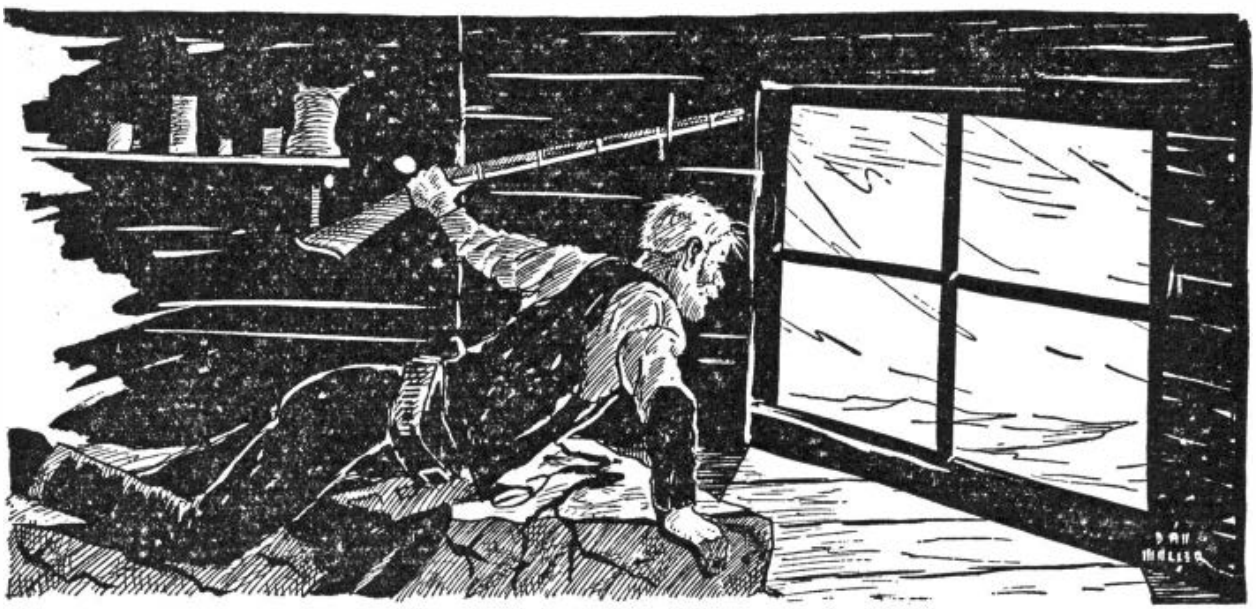
Prevented from getting rifle to shoulder by his stiff arm, Buckshot held it at hip level with one hand and worked the lever with the other. It wasn't the most accurate way in the world to fire a rifle—but he had 13 targets before him.

One of his bullets neatly clipped a finger off one of the gang. Another gunman narrowly missed death when a shot cut his belt in two. Roberts levered a shell into the chamber, jammed his rifle against Billy's stomach—and pulled trigger.

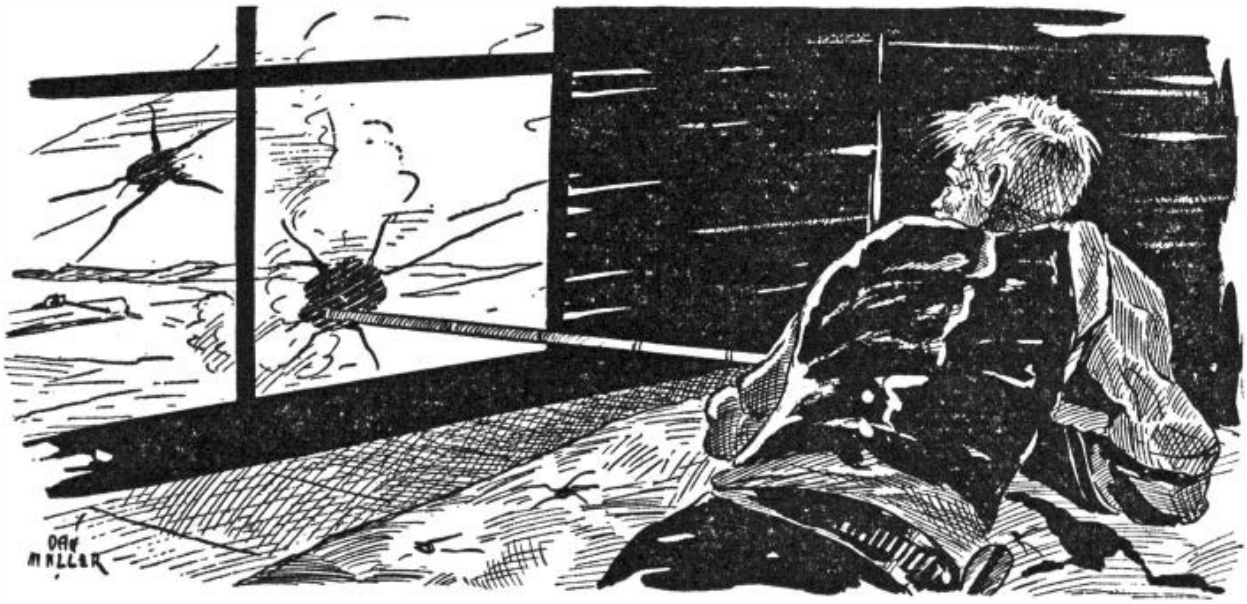
The shell missed fire—another instance of the charmed life which the smiling little killer seemed to bear. Although a .44 slug had drilled a hole through his chest, Buckshot continued to pump away at his gun.



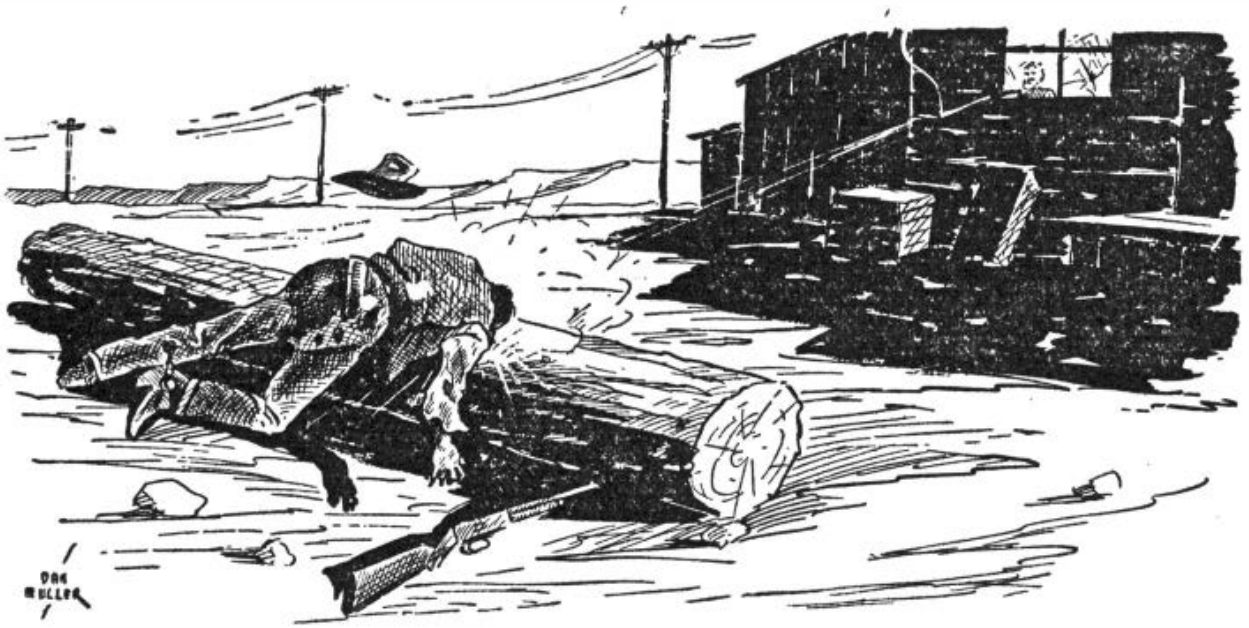
He gave the murderous bunch more than they could take. At last they withdrew, dragging two wounded men with them. Staggering into the mill, Buckshot barred the door. He had saved his wounded friend, but the fight was not over.



The desperadoes, carefully taking well-protected positions, surrounded the mill. Buckshot found an old buffalo gun and a supply of ammunition in a corner. Although he was badly wounded, he dragged a mattress to a low window.



With no chance to take care of his wounds, Roberts lay bleeding on the mattress. He poked the muzzle of the powerful old buffalo gun over the window sill. More than 100 yards away a man cautiously raised his head from behind a log.



Roberts had to shoot at a target about the size of a man's hand. It was a snap shot, since he had to expose himself to fire. He was painfully wounded, and the gun was an unfamiliar one. Still, Buckshot drilled his man cleanly between the eyes.


It was the last shot fired in that battle of the Lincoln County war. Showing the white feather, the Kid and his gang crawled away, mounted, and vanished. However, it was also the last shot Buckshot Roberts ever fired. By the time some of his friends arrived he was beyond their aid. In 36 hours his life ebbed away, leaving in its place another legend of our frontier—another story of the indomitable courage of the men who made the Old West.

# Grandpap's Gold Bricks

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

*GRANDPAP BENDIRE DAYES was a freebooting old rascal in his day, and one way and another he built up a considerable fortune. But his prize deal was the purchase of a wagonload of gold bricks—which was what killed him in the end. Years later, little Ben Dayes goes back to the old homestead to explore around. He dreams he sees his grandfather—and what he does see when he wakes up is as big a shock as the one that killed Grandpap. This story is first published here.*

THE prestige of Grandpap Bendire Dayes began when he rode hell-bent with Quantrell's guerrillas, rampaging, raiding, and warring, and as regards his wartime fellow fighters, not even Grandmaw had any luck managing him. Another thing, he was no man to squander a three-cent silver piece. That way he built up and kept reins on the family fortune; and it was a fortune, covering timber lands, farms, city block properties, cash and such papers as mortgages, bank stocks, bonds and company shares.

The cash he kept "located," as he called it. Nobody knew where he cached his money, but the company knew he had traded a little gold for a lot of greenbacks, even if the government was in the hands of damn' Yankees. Even if

he was a Johnny Reb, when he was licked he admitted it, although he never turned down anyone who was unreconstructed.

After the war, Bendire Dayes hadn't lost or mislaid any of his loot. Even while he was riding with Jesse James on one side and Frank James on the other, with Quantrell before and Youngers after, he retained his sound financial judgment. Grandmaw Dayes said his riding-mates were unmitigated scamps, unfit for Grandpap's companionship. Her folks had been Union, John Brown, and patriot. Nevertheless, when Grandpap asked for snacks, she'd fill bags with corn, ham, bacon, sugar and a jug of blackstrap molasses —but protesting such extravagance would raise 100 market hogs, instead of feeding outlaws.

Still, it wasn't any use trying to keep Grandpap from such associations and liberalities. In a moment of rare but emphatic objection to having Grandmaw boss him, he'd up and said if'n he couldn't feed 'em when they came by, by jimps, he'd go ride with them, even if they were outlaws chased by Pinkertons from up the Missouri to down the Mississippi.

So Grandpap Dayes enforced his regard for his old timers, even when they turned raiders, bank robbers, and rewarded outlaws. When a pair of sneaking, treacherous, despicable deputy sheriffs kept tabs on Grandpap, charging in on him and certain fly-by-nights he was entertaining, they just vanished, and $30,000 in reward money remained uncollected. The deputies had told beforehand they expected to get enough money to set themselves up in horse and mule trading. Instead, their disappearance became a Bald Knob and Ozark mountain mystery.

The Black Hills gold excitement broke out in a far-flung rash. Men that Grandpap had traveled with to war came riding by, heading for the Dakota Hills. Three men, in particular, begged him to ride out like a man, or sneak out, like a man-afraid-of-his-wife. Grandpap withstood their arguments for three days, for Grandmaw had argued with him 15 minutes—well, not really argued, but said her say.

She told him he was too old; she said he was crazy; she declared he was feeling the lead he'd packed around since Jayhawker and subsequent days; and, anyhow, sleeping out in deserts, Indian country, and snake nests, he'd catch rheumatism, die of tomahawking, or get eaten by ants.

Grandpap stayed home, but he moped around, his gumption about gone, and nothing to do but take advantage of hard times, panics, abandoned farms, and bargain opportunities. From the Black Hills came rumors, pieces, and scientific accounts in newspapers and magazines—sickening

stories of success! One story was how miners loaded $9,000,000 into flatboats and floated from the Hills down into the Missouri. Sioux Indians waylaid 15 or 20 shantyboats, loaded down with gold nuggets; every man had been killed; and all the barges sunk in mud and quicksand.

Grandpap shook his head steadily, day after day, knowing what he was missing. Then one evening in the middle '70's, an owl hoot came. Grandmaw woke up, bristling. She knew that call! She lay hoping Grandpap was deaf enough not to hear it, but at the second hoot, he jumped up before he was half awake—dreaming of the call to arms back in the Civil War riding days. Darned outlaws —but Grandpap headed for the door, pulling on his pants, boots under his arm, whistling his answer like a tree frog.

"Darned scalawags!" Grandmaw sighed, getting up to bake cornbread and shove yeast white bread impatiently into a bag, along with ham, sowbelly and cold barbecue. Nope! She didn't fall for Grandpap's friends, not a bit! She just made sure that something was left after those scamps had gone.

The three men had come back from the Black Hills. Mudhen, Buckshot, and Skeeter were worn to a frazzle. They'd started with a wagonload of gold, they said, with 14 draft horses. They'd fought Indians, left outlaws dead along the trail, but one by one their horses died, and now they were thinned down to three. The load was killing them—a fourteen horse load hauled by three horses!

"Well, hell, I got horses you can have!" Grandpap declared, and he'd actually been willing to give them a rolling-fat five-horse team!

They'd been out for years. Their whiskers had grown two feet long. If it wasn't for that damned gold, they'd sure hop the Cairo trail! If they only had paper money—light to carry! A man never knew how heavy gold was till he'd transported a wagonload across country. They showed Grandpap a brick, and when he reached with one hand, it slapped right down to the ground, kerslap—30 pounds!

Gold bricks! Dozens of them! Cast, the old Quantrell riders said, back in the Black Hills. Gold nuggets and dust had been melted with charcoal and molded in forms. If they could only change that scoundrel stuff into negotiable papers!

Grandpap brought out his steelyards, which would weigh up from one ounce to ten pounds on the short lever, and one pound to 50 on the long, heavy end. They hooked the balance on a solid, gambrel beam, where razorbacks were hung to cool, and they went at it. The bricks weighed along tolerably even, some an ounce or

two under, some five or six ounces over. The three called it 30 pounds, average; being such good fellows they wouldn't let Grandpap count in the surplus ounces, though in the wagonload the ounces ran into a pound, every four or five bricks.

Grandpap brought out negotiables, greenbacks that were back to par, and gilt-edged securities. He paid over all his loose assets, practically all his profits and savings. The three miners thanked him for saving their lives. They rode away on three of Grandpap's best horses, carrying an outfit on a pack mule. They left their high-wheel wagon and three thinned-down horses, one of which lay down and died, sighing, just plumb worn out from hauling gold.

Grandpap ran the wagon back to a limestone gorge out from a bald knob. Toting a 30-pound gold brick under each arm, he headed back into the ravine, and came back light. He exulted, grinning and rubbing his hands, perking around, bragging he never expected to wear himself out, toting so much gold!

Naturally, he hadn't taken Grandmaw into his confidences, but she managed to piece bits of information together, and she'd recognized all three of those Civil-War-day scalawags. She started to talk, but for once Grandpap's dander was up and his independence promoted, flag a-flying.

"Now yo' listen, Grandmaw!" Grandpap spoke militarily: " 'Ten-shun! Yo' had yo' say eveh sinct war times. I said I'd settle down, if'n it killed me, providin' yo' married me. Yo' got my word ag'in my freedom of self-possession and activities. Yo've held me to my word. But nothin' in our prenuptuals said I shouldn't exercise my natural abilities, swappin', tradin', buyin', an' sellin'! In fact, yo' always said yo' liked my profits, callin' 'em honest an' natural. So I didn't go to them Black Hills after free gold. But that gold jes' natur'ly gravitated to me, account of my friendships. So I ain't kickin' none, specially, but yo' ain't got a damned word to say, providin' I keep within hearin' of yo' hog-callin'—and them's my sentiments!"

Grandmaw Dayes wasn't any hand to speak her pieces unless she knew them so well she could say them backwards or both ways from the middle. So, all according, she let Grandpap Bendire chuckle and brag, play merry fiddle music, and mind his own business. She looked after the household and he took care of the providing. He raised some cows, he traded raw materials for moonshine stock, and he kept himself busy. He estimated that he had just about doubled his capital stock, as he called it, relieving those boys of their big load.

It went along that way for quite a few years. A pretty hard class lived in those parts. Grandpap was left to mind his own business after he'd busted down four-five fellers that thought they could depend on his peaceableness if only they could get the drop on him; but he was one of those fast and rapid shooters, and if he made any mistakes, shooting too quick—why, he had lots of places where he could cover errors up.

"Sometime you'll drap somebody they'll miss!" Grandmaw told him, worrying the way women will, adding, "Then you'll go long riding!"

Of course, the James and Younger boys, and some of the Arkansas hell-raisers and rough settlers out around the Bald Knobs were mostly friendly and sided with Grandpap. Lots of them said they wished they'd been as saving and thrifty, as forehanded as he was. They suspicioned he had a big pile hidden out somewhere, but nobody knew for certain. Moreover, he was tolerably land-poor, according to local ideas, having picked up many acres and made use of them by importing a sawmill and selling lumber around, saving home-builders a lot of hewing and hauling.

Probably ten years went by and Grandpap had learned to read real well, Grandmaw having nagged at his ignorance till he was sick of it. Now he took lots of comfort reading newspapers, having subscribed for two, one the County Court Informer and the other that St. Louis What's-its-name?, because he had quite a lot of friends over there and they printed all the news about Jesse James, Frank, the Youngers, and so on. Grandmaw hated his taste in violent and disgraceful news, but he told her to subscribe for something according to her female ideas and he would stand for it. So she had religious and fashion periodicals and sniffed audibly at his reading while enjoying her own.

Sometime after Jesse James was killed foul, Grandpap opened up his St. Louis paper to see how the rewardings were being spread. Down in the middle of the front page was a piece he read, breathing heavier and heavier. Grandmaw saw him stiffening and surging up out of his big arm rocker all excited, and turning red-faced going on purple. He was gasping. He turned to Grandmaw, drumming his paper with his hand like a dying turkey flapping in the dry oak leaves. He started to say something: "Br-r-r-a—" and then keeled over, hitting the edge of the fireplace stone apron ker-bang with the top of his head.

Dead! Skull busted. Grandmaw saw him go. She called in the boys and the girl, who were out somewhere around. They ran in, bounding. Grandmaw picked up

the paper to see what was in it to blast Grandpap down like that, as if a bullet'd hit him fair. There in the middle of the paper a piece said:

GOLD BRICKS TURN TO BRASS!

The news piece said three smart fellows had come to town and drove to the Fur Buyer House, where they stopped their covered wagon and one of the men stumbled in and told the men in the lobby his partners was plumb wore out, sick and hungry, but they had some gold to sell cheap. It was just a modest little brick, about five or six pounds, of low-grade Black Hills gold, but worth $15 an ounce. But the way things were, on account of his partners being took bad and the banks being shut up over Sunday and the two assayers being away, $800 would be a godsend to them for five pounds at $15. On the scales it weighed 5 lbs 2 oz., avoirdupois, so three men chipped in $800 quick, and the poor prospectors drove on—which was a joke, because the brick weighed 82 ounces avoirdupois, instead of 60 ounces troy, or about $1200 instead of $800, troy-pound figures.

*As usual in such cases,* the paper said, *the buyers found they had invested in brass worth 16 cents a pound, instead of gold at $15 an ounce.*

So all of a heap it had struck Grandpap Bendire Dayes that he had invested his war-time booty and good-luck profitings in a scandalous swindle. For years he had swelled out his chest, having a four-horse wagonload of Black Hills gold, making him the richest Bald Knobber. He'd staggered to his feet, given one squawky whoop, and fainted, his surprise and disappointment killing him as dead as a spoiled egg.

"An' I neveh did tell him what I thought of his foolishness!" Grandmaw wept bitterly.

Grandpap's investment of an armful of government bonds, greenbacks and securities in gold bricks was the family sore-spot. He'd hidden them in a cave up a hollow where Grandmaw hid out during war-time raidings. Jesse-Bob and Myrine Dayes never married, but worked the old place for Grandmaw till she died. Then they dug up better than $25,000 in papers, all that was left of Grandpap's fortune, including a commissary store, gristmill and sawmill. They left the old place in the Bald Knobs, and moved out to Trammel Creek near the going property.

Bendire, named after his dad, married and the third Bendire was born consequently. Little Ben was watched and worried about, fearing he'd grow up, reckless, bullheaded and independent, like his Grandpap. However, they inveigled him through college, and hoped to marry him off and set-

tle him down before he developed his natural instincts. But he shied off from girls and his restlessness sure looked ominous.

Then a skinny, sharp-featured, horse-jockey-like man came to the Dayes hardware store. He wanted to buy the old Bald Knobber place, and offered $10 an acre for it, which seemed to be a big price. Ben wouldn't sell, being sentimental about antiques. Little Ben, having a rifle, had killed his first wild turkey, a deer, gray squirrels, raccoons, and other game; now he kept nagging the family to let him go to the Bald Knobs and visit that old farm and find out if it was worth paying taxes on, or even the $10 an acre. Little Ben wanted experiences, and now from the way things had quieted down all over the Ozarks, from Red River to the Missouri, it seemed to him as if he had been born 20 years too late. Now why did that stranger, noseying around, want to buy that abandoned farm back there in the Bald Knobs?

The Bendires had kept the taxes paid up on the old place, just for sentimentality. But the skinned lands were growing up to tall timber, the orchard had run wild, the fields were covered with second growth. From the looks of the place it was a wonder anybody had ever made a living there, much less gotten to be as rich as Old Grandpap Bendire Dayes!

The grandson had been there to the funeral of Grandmaw. He was now man-grown. He'd stayed with the hardware store steadily and honorable, but his folks all knew his discontent. If he'd inherited a trifle more of Grandpap's spirit he'd never stuck to his job, but the habit of behaving is sure hard to break. Now he tore loose, his excuse being to visit the old farm and see if oil had been discovered, or other opportunity found.

Ben risked the rough going from US 66, climbing back on the old trace. Happily, nobody had ever improved that Hide-out Trail. He came at last to the old place.

The Old Home! Built of black-walnut logs, shingled with thick puncheons, all the timber hewn, and curtains of spider webs dangling over doors and windows—bats down the chimney and snakes lopping around over the timber railings, and a blue racer ten feet long bounding along like an animated coil spring, black eyes shining balefully in its head.

Ben just remembered the long-gone funeral day, and the place seemed desolate, but a wild turkey gobbled, a gray squirrel barked, and a mockingbird sang a rollicking lay. He remembered killings, Bald Knobber traditions, stories of the best shots on the Ozark frontier. Somehow, he suddenly belonged. He slept in his car-bunk that night, dreamed lustily. In the morning he shot a wild

gobbler, and roasted it, covered with clay, in a hole. Then he explored the old house.

In the attic were the old spinning-wheel, the weaving-beam, and even a flintlock rifle six feet long with which an ancestor had killed bears, deer, buffalo, wild turkeys, Indians, cougars, wolves and such game. When he wiped off the caked venison tallow and dried-out bear grease, he found it bright outside and smooth inside, ready for business.

He began house-cleaning in one corner and with the methodical patience of his breed, he swept out the dust and debris, shucks of nuts left by squirrels, fallen swallow nests; he shooed out the bats and evicted a family of raccoons. The old pioneer claim had been hidden deep in the Bald Knobs, where Indians perhaps couldn't find it, off the main trails. The outlaws of the post-Civil-War days had come back there, but apparently their descendants had forgotten the old river-pirate trail where old furniture, old cowhide and buffalo skin chests, old clothes, skin blankets, robes, and relics had been stowed and forgotten.

There was even a suit of buckskin clothes that remained soft and strong as heavy silk; and shirt, breeches, and moccasins that fitted him! He found two tight canisters of black powder, a bag of lead ore and bullet molds, and a squirrel-hide bag of bullet patches for the rifle! Methodically he cleaned out the rifle, loaded it, packed powder into the touchhole, and resting the long barrel against a door jamb, he knocked down a fox squirrel from a hickory tree 70 yards away!

Close by he saw the bare dome of Marble Knob, standing high and glistening in the light of the setting sun. Feeling the urge to climb it, he slipped furtively through the timber, getting the old-time sense of watchfulness, growing tense, cool, his eyes searching, taking his bearings and scrambling up the convolutions of the bald knob—careful not to stand on top where he'd be silhouetted against the sky and visible for miles.

There were other bare tops of knobs, strange and beautiful, far and near, landmarks if one knew them, now strangely chill, grim and impersonal. He scrambled back down into the timber, out of sight. No telling who or what might be lurking about!

Just over yonder was a sink, the cave ravine which small boys kept away from and even big boys entered only in bravado, bold against snakes, ghosts, robber caves and barbed briers. Even after the farm clearings in the Ozarks had been abandoned because little could be raised on them and markets were too far away to buy the products, the descendants of those long-gone pioneer settlers

remembered in traditions the lurking "dreads" in those dismal, murky hollows.

Now Ben Dayes braved the noisome, musky-smelling, evil-looking hole in the up-back of the old place. He prowled up into the narrows. He stumbled and dragged his feet, and somehow his heels and toes found an old footpath arched over by sawgrass, ferns, vines, and weeds. The trail led him to a downfall of climber vines, swinging down like a curtain from the overhanging limestone cliff.

The curtain reached down in a thick sheet, but behind it was a hollow through which a man could walk, if he dared, behind the curtain. Ben's electric flash lighted the way. He could see the smooth stone. Thus he came to a dry cave, a breather exuding a draft of sweet, fresh, dry air. And when Ben crept into that small entrance, he came to a widening, arched overhead, level under foot, walls benched and convoluted.

It was furnished for living. A fireplace blackened by smoke and gum, the chimney a 'coon-climb up the back. On a ledge were brass and cast-iron kettles, pots and pans, candlesticks and candles hung high out of reach of squirrels and mice, old French *biches,* grease cups with a twist of wick to burn and give light. Trammels, andirons, and a snap-back 'Leven-Rod 57-caliber rifle and 100 rimfire copper shells for itl Cap-and-ball revolvers, blacksmith-wrought axes, home-made knives heavy enough to chop wood, flint and steel to strike fire, a stone dais bunk, cedar boughs, buffalo hide, brain-tanned robes for bedding hung on rawhide rope.

Only Dayes had ever known of this hole in limestone walls. The grandson reckoned he had dreamed the way to it. He knew the traditon.

A pile of firewood had been brought in, and never used. Ben built a fire of the chunks and knots. The light of the flames flickered about on the bulges and walls, and shone into the recesses here and there. On one stone shelf were books, a handful that had helped pass the time for a hid-out woman 50 years or so beforel The fire smoke drew into the chimney and by its light Ben glanced through pages of Ticknor & Fields print, and a thin volume of Poe's detective stories, the first ever printed.

He wondered about Old Grandpap's gold bricks. The old man had toted them back into this gorge, a wagonload of them, in 30-pound bricksl Even brass was worth 10 or 12 cents a pound, a 30-pound chunk a good $3! The tradition was the load weighed nearly a ton. That would be 2000 pounds—say $200! Ben had a streak of thrift in him. It would be a nice vacation, if he

carried out $200 worth of brass salvage! It would mean expenses and wages for the trip back to the old place He needed the $200 to make up for the taxes he'd been paying, ever since he inherited the place!

Growing hungry, Ben noticed particularly a number of chunks and slabs dangling from rawhide ropes. When he investigated closely, sure enough, there were hams. Arkansas turkey—sowbelly bacon —and jerky! The smoke-dried venison was crumbling, but it tasted good. Bacon toasted at the fire sizzled and was fragrant. Jerky and bacon, for a hungry man, were sure satisfying. Ben ate enough: he went back to the spring he heard gurgling—an underground stream—and quenched his thirst.

Afterward, he stretched out on a buffalo robe and thought of his discovery here. Before he knew it, he was asleep. He slept well, but at times he dreamed—dreamed that his old Grandpap Bendire Dayes was there, sitting on a rock ledge, smoking a Missouri clay meerschaum pipe with a cane-root stem two feet long, talking away in garrulous recollection. Dreams, night horses, rattling and clamoring—sleep went into a dozen strange adventures! Up and down the cave-ravine trooped the outlaws and pioneers hiding from Indian raiders who gave the caves a wide berth.

"Heh-heh-heh!" Old Grandpap cackled, blowing thick smoke and motioning with his pipe stem, which teetered up and down, springy. "An old ba'r had this cave, an' Grandmaw, she cleaned it out, slick's a buckskin! Buff'loes masted on the acorns an' nuts! Roasted turkeys till we was sick of the sight of 'em. Sold a thousand b'ar hides—got my start fur-trappin'! Took a flatboat load of skins through overflow t' the main Mississipp'—minks, beavers, otters, all them slick pelts! If'n I got a dollar I hung to hit!"

The old boy waved his whiskers about, wriggling into snaky curves, cackling and chuckling. "And them gold bricks!" he burst into a louder laugh, and in his sleep Ben heard the sound go back into the cavern and come roaring out again into the anteroom where Grandmaw Dayes'd lived, hiding out. "Look'm up—brass—huh! Good money's good money!"

It was day when Ben awakened, feeling sore and little rested by the flurries of excitement he had dreamed through. The buckskin suit he had found and worn had become wet and clammy, and he knew his discomfort had led to dreams, a thousand mingled traditions stirred into fantastic imaginations. But the buckskin dried out, still soft, though when damp it was clammy, slimy, and cold.

The cavern stretched back, none ever knew how far. Ben

knew that men had been lost in it. Perhaps some had never found their way out. On this point traditions were doubtful, silent. Nevertheless, Ben cautiously ventured out of sight of the flickering of the flames. His flash lighted the gloom, showed the narrow ways, revealed the stalactites that dangled from the roofs. Folds like fabrics, lumps like grease heaps, strange slick reflections in color—this was dark and dubious ground! Ben didn't like the feeling—worried lest an earthquake come and shatter the stone down on him! He turned back, but stopped short when he discovered loose slabs and cobbles stacked up in a wall where they didn't belong.

He gazed at the structure, back in its recess. When he tried it, he found the stones were beginning to stick together, as if the limestone were softened into a cement. Prying away the rocks, rolling them down the slope he'd climbed, right behind the wall was a dark rectangle built up of regular shapes, blackened with age and metallic, not stony to the feel. These blocks were about eight by two by two inches, yet come to lift one, it was sure heavy, right close to 30 pounds each.

"Why, that's all according to tradition!" Ben exclaimed. "Dog-gone but solid metal is sure heavy!"

There were Grandpap's "gold bricks," 68 by actual count. At 30 pounds each that was a short ton, plus 40 pounds, or 2,040 pounds! Even brass at 12 cents a pound counted up, especially heavy cast brass! Ben blinked. Here was enough to pay the costs of his trip and wages for his time! But come to look, there wasn't any green amid the black stain.

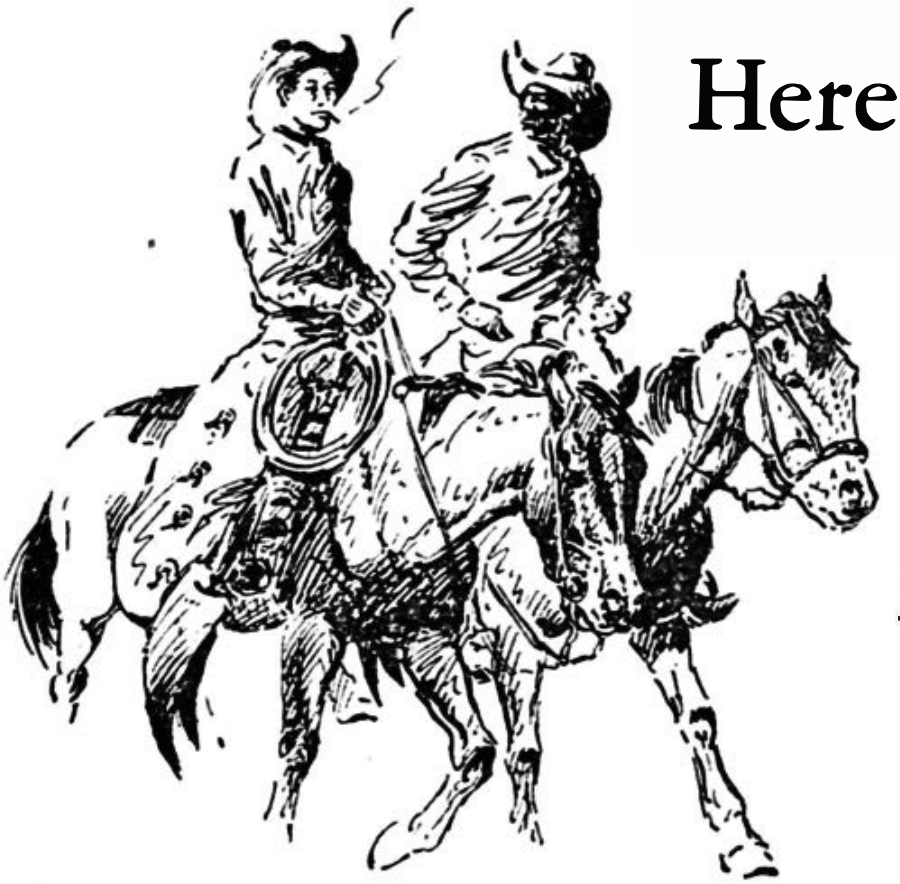
Ben had worked all his spare time in that plaguey hardware store. When he lifted a dark brick, where the contacts were it was yellow, dull, reddish, surprising. He knew iron, steel, zinc, lead, tin, brass, nickel, solder, and such!

Ben scraped the metal with his knife point, and smelled it. He felt faint and disbelieving, and this darned stuff had killed Old Grandpap—when he read about the gold-brick swindle.

Ben Dayes III had been brought up on that old tradition, and it was sure hard to get over the notion that this stuff was brass, but there it was, tradition fighting science! The excitement stunned Ben, weakened him, made him sit down suddenly. This stuff was black, not green, and had no smell. There was the bright gleam of the knife-point scratch.

"It cain't be!" Ben shook himself. "Grandmaw always declared—Grandpap always laughed till that day he read about the gold-brick swindle—why, shu-ul it cain't be!"

But sure 'nough, there it was—a wagonload of Black Hills gold!



# Here's Mud in Yore Eye

By
WALKER A.
TOMPKINS

*JUSTIN O. SMITH, dubbed the "Paintin' Pistoleer" by the inhabitants of Apache, gets on the trail of big Red Graw pronto when Sheriff Rimfire Cudd breaks the news of the Wells-Fargo holdup. He does it in his own peculiar way, however, so that Cudd is mighty surprised when Smith turns up with another piece of right smart detecting. Justin O. establishes himself more solidly than ever in his fellow townsmen's regard in this story now published for the first time.*

JUSTIN OTHER SMITH, this young artist feller they call the Paintin' Pistoleer around Apache, was setting up the boys to a round of Blue Bagpipe Scotch whisky when this red-whiskered stranger come stomping into the Bloated Goat Saloon.

He was tall and tough and had a chip on his shoulder as big as a sawlog. There was alkali dust on his Stetson and bluish-green mud dried to his spurred cowboots, and he looked saddle-ganted the way a man does after a long ride acrost the desert.

The boys say howdy but he ig-

nores 'em, hooking a muddy boot over the brass rail and staring down at the bottle of Blue Bagpipe what he seen Justin O. Smith was treating the boys to. Smith, he always drinks buttermilk, the same as he was doing now.

"Give me a dram o' that," the stranger says. "Raw."

Well, Curly Bill Grane, the barkeep, he explains polite as pie how this Blue Bagpipe was a rare brand which this artist feller had shipped from Scotland, and it was up to Justin O. Smith whether he wanted the stranger to have a shot of it.

"A tinhorn sport, huh?" bellers the stranger, sizing Smith up and down in the backbar glass like he would a horny toad.

Smith had come out West for his health a year or two back, and while he was as tough as whangleather now, he was only five two and weighed about a third what this boogery stranger weighed.

"Well," the bully says, "when Red Graw orders a special brand o' likker, he don't ask permission from no milk-swiggin' runt!" With which this Red Graw hombre shoves aside Sol Fishman, who runs the O.K. Mercantile acrost the street, and Jim Groot, the banker, and that brings him face to face with Justin O. Smith.

"Ordinary, I'd say you was welcome to my Blue Bagpipe," the Paintin' Pistoleer says, looking up at Graw without batting an eyelash. "But your domineerin' attitude rubs my fur the wrong way, Graw. I got a strong dislike to bein' called a runt, especially a milk-swiggin' runt."

Graw grins like a cat with a mouse under its paw. He gives his big gun harness a hitch. Then, without warnin', he sticks a muddy boot between Smith's ankles, pushes him in the face with a palm, and the Paintin' Pistoleer trips sprawling at the feet of Rimfire Cudd, who happens to be the sheriff.

Before Cudd could help Smith to his feet, Graw grabs the bottle of Blue Bagpipe offn the bar, spins on his heel and heads for the door, guffawing to himself.

Sheriff Cudd don't make a move, although Graw had committed assault and battery and petty larceny right in front of his eyes. Not because Rimfire was yaller, but he reckoned Smith could take care of the situation better than he could.

Graw was just pushing through the batwings when Justin O. reaches for his gun, a Colt .32 on a .45 frame. Nobody seen his draw, it was so swift, but the next instant the bottle exploded into a hundred pieces in Mister Red Graw's fist, and whisky sprayed in all directions.

Graw stopped. He stared down at the jagged bottle neck in his hand. He sniffs the fumes of that

precious stuff that had come all the way from Glasgow just to be spattered over the sawdust floor of the Bloated Goat Saloon. And then he looked around to where Justin O. Smith was settin' on the floor.

"I reckon I made a mistake," Graw says, chucking the busted bottle neck into a sand box. "I made the mistake of turnin' my back on a gun-toter. Next time I cut your sign, Runt, you won't be able to get offn the floor." With which Red Graw spins on his heel again, and starts through the door a second time.

Without appearing to aim his six-gun, the Paintin' Pistoleer squeezes off another shot, and nicks the lobe of Graw's left ear as neat as you please, just enough to draw a little drop of blood.

"You forgot to pay for that likker," Justin O. reminds him, reasonable enough. "Blue Bagpipe sets Curly Bill back twelve bucks a quart, wholesale. I figger you owe him a sawbuck."

Well, Graw scratches his bleedin' ear, and then he sees the tin star on Rimfire Cudd's vest, and he decides not to copper Smith's bet. That law badge made him pull in his horns pronto.

"My dinero is out in my saddle pouch," he grumbles. "I'll ante a double sawbuck to the kitty and be driftin' yonderward."

Curly Bill Grane decides it's about time he dealt himself in, so he comes out behind the bar counter with his sawed-off buckshot gun, and escorts Graw out of the Bloated Goat. A lathered-up pony is hitched to the rack out front, and Grane stands by while Graw unbuckles an alforka bag and reaches a hairy paw inside.

He fishes out a 20-dollar bill, so new and crisp that Curly Bill holds it up to the sun, thinking it might be counterfeit. But it's the McCoy, and the smallest Graw's got. Curly Bill forces him to take eleven bucks change, and the last Apache sees of Mister Graw, he's lopin' off into the desert, still thirsty.

Justin O. Smith polished off his glass of buttermilk like nothing had happened, dusted his pants off, and goes back to what he calls his studio, upstairs over the Longhorn Saddle Shop, where he paints the pictures he sells to calendars and catalogues.

Fact is, Smith was used to handling bullies bigger'n him, being the baby in a family of 13 back in Alabama. His ma had named him Justin Other after the doc had complained about having to deliver "just another Smith" in the middle of a cold night.

Well, a couple hours later, Sheriff Rimfire Cudd rattles his hocks up to where the Paintin' Pistoleer was busy daubing away at a canvas on his easel, painting an ocotillo in full bloom.

"Looky at this here wire that

Lew Pirtle just got offn the Overland Telegraph!" Cudd hollers, shoving a piece of paper under Smith's nose. "Wouldn't that set your cork to bobbin'?"

This message was from the sheriff of the next county over east. It said that the Wells-Fargo stagecoach from Tucson had been held up last night by three masked bandits, who had vamoosed for parts unknown with a strongbox containing an even $5000 in brand-new 20-dollar bills, said dinero being consigned to a big mining outfit up in Nuggetville.

"You savvy what I do?" Cudd pants out. "That red-whiskered skunk who tried to bully you in the Bloated Goat this afternoon was one of them stage robbers! New twenty-dollar bills, it says. And Curly Bill allows this Red Graw had a saddlebag full of 'em!"

Justin O. Smith wipes his hands on a turpentined rag and pulls his lower lip, in a habit he's got when he's thinking hard.

"Just what," he asks, "do you want me to do about it?"

That takes the wind out of Cudd's sails. Ever since young Smith figgered out who robbed the Stockman's Bank here in Apache, the sheriff sort of looked up to him as a detective or something.

"Well," Cudd says sheepishly, "I reckon I ought to light out after this Red Graw galoot. But with that wind whippin' acrost the desert, his trail is colder'n a polar bear's rump by now."

The sheriff bowlegs his way downstairs. Through his window, the Paintin' Pistoleer watches Cudd fork his saddler and ride out of town, heading west, looking plumb dejected.

After the sheriff was gone, Justin O. Smith got to scratching his head. Finally he goes over to a kind of cupboard where he keeps a lot of his old canvases and sketchbooks and what-not. He scrabbles around through the trash awhile, and comes out with a charcoal sketch he'd made over in the Sacatone badlands a year or so ago, when he was curing himself of some lung trouble.

Justin O. Smith had built up his reppitation by painting country nobody else had ever painted before, country nobody but owlhooters and Injuns had even traveled in, for that matter.

This here rough sketch he'd dug up was one of them pictures, that he'd just blocked in, as he called it, and aimed to finish from memory later on. It showed a canyon full of willowbrake and scrub cottonwoods, with Thunderbird Peak in the background, and a lot of crags and buttes and gulches in the distance. Smith had writ in with pencil the right colors to use on the cliffs and such, and the location of this scene—20 mile north of Wagonwheel Springs.

Well, after considerable cogitating, the Paintin' Pistoleer tucks the roll of canvas under his arm and takes a pasear over to the Bloated Goat. A bunch of the boys was in there roundsiding about this stage robber drifting through town. when Justin O. Smith ambles in.

"Curly," he says anxious-like to the bartender, "I hope you ain't swamped out the barroom recently."

Curly Bill Grane eyes him reproachfully and scowls. "Are you criticisin' the housekeeping I do in the Bloated Goat?" he asks, his feelings hurt.

But Justin O. Smith ignores the question, and walks over to where Red Graw had tripped him off his feet. He squats down and pokes around in the sawdust and quirly stubs there for a spell, and finally he comes up with a little chunk of bluish-green mud, the size of your little fingernail.

"This mud," he says, very much pleased, "fell offn that stage robber's spur. You got any objections to me taking it?"

Curly Bill reaches for his jug of buttermilk and pours the Paintin' Pistoleer a brimming glass. "On the house," he says. "And you are welcome to all my sweepin's any day of the week, friend," he says. Curly Bill still feels indebted for that big masterpiece of Chief Sittin' Bull that the Paintin' Pistoleer made for him in exchange for a measly week's board and room, when Smith first come to town.

Smith gulps down the buttermilk, and then he tucks the hunk of bluish-green mud carefully in his pocket, and unrolls his sketch and studies it a spell, without offering no comments.

Then, imitating Red Graw, he spins on his heel and walks out. He goes over to the livery barn and saddles up Skeeter, his prize palomino, and straps on a bedroll and his painting gear and a gunnysack of grub, and the next thing people know, the Paintin' Pistoleer is riding out of town. That ain't onusual, though, because Smith is always taking a notion to go out into the desert for days at a time, hunting for pictures you see later on calendars and magazine covers.

There was a sand storm blowing acrost the desert, whipping up so much dust it blinded Smith, but he knowed the general direction of Thunderbird Peak and he steered thataway, giving the palomino his head.

He camped that night in the edge of the Sacatone foothills, and during the night the storm blowed itself out. He set off toward Wagonwheel Springs, and around noon he spies a smudge of dust a few miles south.

Using a pair of field glasses he carried slung around his saddle horn, Justin O. Smith made out

that it was Sheriff Rimfire Cudd, heading back toward Apache. He didn't have no prisoner in tow, either. The way he sat his saddle, the sheriff looked like he had the burden of the world's woes on his shoulders.

The Paintin' Pistoleer decided against riding back to head off Cudd, preferring to travel solo anyhow. He camped that night at Wagonwheel Springs, and he found fresh sign where somebody had dunked a campfire with coffee grounds. That might have been the sheriff, but Justin O. had his doubts, on account of Rimfire Cudd had lit a shuck out of Apache without taking no vittles with him. He figgered Red Graw had camped here.

It was pretty rough going through the lava country, so Smith only covered about 15 miles before it got dark. He was heading north toward Thunderbird Peak.

Next morning, though, he was in familiar country. He passed a spot where he had camped a week to paint Thunderbird, a picture that was spread all over the country on the back of an almanac now—country that an ordinary man wouldn't ever see.

A couple hours later he was gigging the palomino down a hogback toward the mouth of a twisting canyon where green stuff was growing. The palomino had already sniffed the water that lay ahead and broke into a canter, when Smith seen two riders heading in his direction, from the north and quite a ways off yet. Through the glasses, the Paintin' Pistoleer seen that they was hard-looking cases, a half-breed and a feller who looked like he might be a Navajo Injun. They was armed to the teeth and their horses was limping like they'd been ridden hard and far.

Justin O. Smith looked around for cover but didn't see any. So he piled out of his saddle and quick-like set up his folding easel, and stretched out the unfinished canvas he'd sketched of this same canyon mouth more'n a year ago, at about this spot.

He was busy smearing paint when the two riders spotted him, on their way into the canyon. They swung their broncs around and come beating up the ridge toward him, the sun flashing off the Winchesters they had unlimbered from their saddle boots.

Smith, he was painting for all he was worth when the two riders galloped up and reined in. They took a gander at the picture Smith was working on, and couldn't make much out of it.

"How long you been here, feller?" asks the breed, finally.

The Paintin' Pistoleer was wearing an affair he calls a smock, all splotched up like a rainbow with different colored paints, and he unbuttoned it so he could

reach his .32 when he seen that the Navajo Injun was working his horse around behind him. It looked like these riders was fixing to get him between them, which wasn't a healthy sign a-tall.

"Oh, three-four hours," Smith says, meek as milk. "I'm painting a picture of that mountain peak. Perty, ain't it?"

The breed and the Injun scratch their heads, puzzled. and finally the breed speaks up:

"You're squattin' on private property, stranger," he says. "You gather up your gear and go back to wherever you come from."

Smith's hands started shaking like he had a touch of palsy, and he began throwing his gear back into the paint box in a hurry.

"I d-didn't know this land belonged to n-nobody," he stammers, apologetic as all hell. "I'll get out pronto."

He rolled up his canvas and folded up his easel and the two hard cases sat their saddles, watching while he packed his smock in a saddlebag, and then fixed to mount.

Then the Injun shook his head. He had had his eye on Smith's palomino hoss ever since he rode up.

"Me take-um cayuse," the Injun says. "We make-um trade."

The Paintin' Pistoleer yelped like he had been stung by a yallerjacket at that, because to him the palomino was people, and he had trained that pony until it was almost human.

But the redskin levered a shell into his .30-.30 and pointed the bore down Smith's throat, practically, so there wasn't a thing he could do but strip his kack-saddle off the palomino and swap Skeeter for the broken-down fleabait pony the Injun was forking.

"Now, keep ridin', tenderfoot!" orders the breed, when Smith was astraddle the Injun pony. "If we ketch you grazin' on this range ag'in, Sleepin' Beaver here will lift yore scalp."

They'd tooken him for a dude, and Smith acted out the part, trying to play scared when he was really boiling mad over having a mangy Navajo buck steal the best palomino in Arizona right out from under him.

He coaxed the Injun's cayuse into motion and headed back toward Wagonwheel Springs as fast as he could make the spavined, string-halted critter go, which wasn't much more than a trot. When he had put a couple of ridges between him and the hoss-thieves he made himself a dry camp and ate some cold bait just to keep his strength up for the job he aimed to do as soon as it got dark. No flea-bitten redskin, especially one with a name like Sleeping Beaver, was going to get away with his hoss, he'd be teetotally danged if he was.

The Injun's cayuse was too

stove up to be much good, so he decided to picket him out and pick him up later. As soon as the moon come up, Justin O. Smith started on foot back toward the canyon he had been painting, taking his field glasses with him. The badlands looked so ghostly beautiful under the moonlight that the pilgrim's fingers got to itching for his paints and brushes, but that would have to wait.

Around midnight he had worked his way to the mouth of the canyon, with Thunderbird Peak out of sight beyond the rimrocks. He jacked open his .32 Colt and made sure all the chambers was loaded, and then headed into the willowbrakes and dwarf cottonwoods that grew in the canyon.

Around a bend he come in sight of a campfire. It was plumb late at night for anybody to be up and stirring, but through his glasses, Smith seen three men moving around the fire, saddling up their horses. The three hombres was what he called silhouetted against the fire so he couldn't exactly tell who they was, but he knew he was on the right track when he recognized his Skeeter hoss picketed with the other two.

The three campers was getting ready to hit the breeze, but Smith remembered from his last trip that this canyon ended in a blind box, so they would have to pass him coming out. He hid himself in some quaking aspen scrub and scrooched down in the mud, the whole bottom of the canyon being a sort of swampy ground from a spring that was dribbling out of the cliff farther up.

Pretty soon the campers doused their fire and started riding three abreast out of the canyon. When they rid out of the shadow of the cliffs, Smith seen that the Injun wasn't riding his palomino. A strapping giant of a man was astraddle of Skeeter, and in the moonlight Smith recognized his red whiskers.

It was Red Graw, all right, and it showed Justin O. Smith that he had figgered plumb correct before he pulled out of Apache and headed for this canyon. The breed and Sleeping Beaver was flanking Graw's stirrups.

Down on his hands and knees in the black thicket, the painter waited until the three riders was right opposite him, talking low between theirselves. Then he put his fingers in his mouth and give a loud whistle.

Skeeter pricked up his ears, and before Red Graw had a chance to pull leather, that palomino arched his back like a busting clock spring and swapped ends, like Smith had trained him to do when he got the whistle signal. Graw went flying tail-over-tincup to crash into a patch of prickly pear cactus.

The Paintin' Pistoleer had his .32 ready before the other two

riders knowed what had happened. He took aim a little more careful than usual, and triggered a bullet at the spot where Sleeping Beaver's eagle feather was stuck into his hair.

The Navajo hoss-thief slid from his pony like a coat dropping off a hook. His hair had a part in it where there hadn't been a part before. He was a Sleeping Beaver for sure when he lit flat on his belly in the mud.

Justin O. Smith come scuttling out of the quakers with his gun spitting lead so close to the half-breed's ears that it discouraged the breed from finishing the job of hauling his Winchester out of its scabbard

Red Graw was picking hissell groggily out of the cactus when Smith charged up and clouted him one acrost the noggin with his Colt. The breed had his arms up and was hollering for mercy, but Smith just unbuckled Graw's shell belts and chucked the artillery over into the cactus out of reach.

Then he made the breed hog-tie Graw's arms behind his back with the Mexican *reata* he carried, and likewise for the Injun, who was still taking his mud bath without knowing same. Smith whacked off what was left of the lass'-rope and took care of snubbing down the breed his own self.

It was around four o'clock the next afternoon when Sheriff Rimfire Cudd looked up from where he was whittlin' a stick in the shade of the jailhouse in Apache, and seen four horsemen coming down the main stem like something out of the Apocalypse. He blinked his eyes.

It was Justin O. Smith, riding herd on Red Graw, the half-breed, and Sleeping Beaver.

"Here's your Wells-Fargo money, Sheriff," the Paintin' Pistoleer sings out wearily, tossing Rimfire a pair of saddlebags. "It's all there, except that sawbuck Graw squandered on Blue Bagpipe booze the other day."

Well, Cudd locked up the three stage robbers pronto, and got Lew Pirtle to telegraph the sheriff in the next county that the bandits and the Nuggetville syndicate's dinero was in his jail, not mentioning that he hadn't had much to do with same. Then Cudd lit a shuck over to the Bloated Goat Saloon, to get in on what the Paintin' Pistoleer was explaining to Curly Bill and Sol Fishman and the other boys.

"Seems those robbers separated to confuse their trailers after the holdup," Smith was saying, "all agreeing to meet at their secret camp over in the Sacatones. Graw carried the loot, and he cut acrost the desert, aiming to stop at Apache for a snort of rotgut. If he hadn't hoorawed me about being a milk-swiggin' runt, he

wouldn't have been forced into shelling up one of those new twenty-dollar bills that give him away."

Rimfire Cudd realized he looked mighty foolish, after coming back empty-handed from a round trip to the Sacatones thataway. "But how in thunderation," he wants to know, "did you know exactly what spot in all that country to find Graw's camp?"

The Paintin' Pistoleer feels in his shirt pocket and draws out the little gob of blue-green mud he found on the floor of the Bloated Goat.

"I've only run acrost one spot in Arizona with dirt this particular shade of color," he says. "Any artist would recognize it as being plumb distinctive. It comes from a canyon over Thunderbird Peak way, where a spring has washed out this peculiar bluish-green mineral.

"When I remembered seeing that funny color on Graw's boots, it set me to thinkin'. I'd made me a sketch of that canyon a year ago, when I was over in that country, and after I dug it out of my files, I seen enough landmarks was on my sketch to guide me back there."

The boys seen, then, where Justin O. Smith's boots were caked with this same bluish-green mud, the same as Sleeping Beaver seemed to have wallowed in from head to foot.

"It shore beats the bugs a-fightin'," Sheriff Rimrock Cudd says, scratching his bald head, "what Smith can accomplish with only a little bitty chunk of mud to go on."

Curly Bill reaches under the bar and hauls out a bottle of Blue Bagpipe Scotch. "This here calls for something more nourishin' than buttermilk," he grins. "Belly up, folks—the drinks are on the house!"

The Paintin' Pistoleer flips the little gob of dried mud into a spittoon, and hoists his dram of Scotch for a toast.

"Well," he says in that soft Alabama drawl of his, "here's mud in yore eye!"

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Two coast Indians stood watching the lighthouse near their reservation one foggy night.

"Ugh," grunted the older redskin. "Light shine, bell ding-dong, horn whoo-whoo—fog come in just same."

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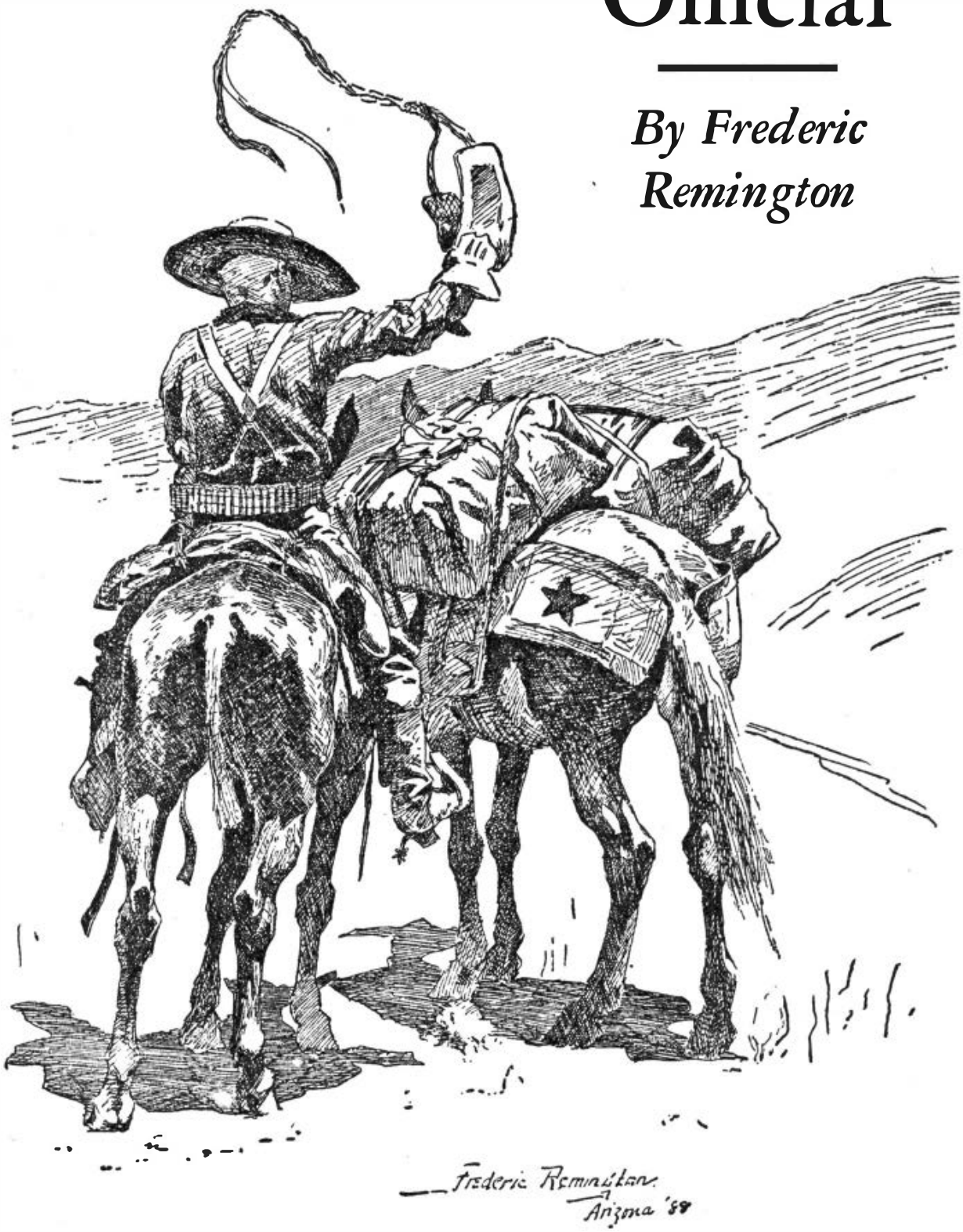
The newly arrived gambler from the East was feeling expansive on his first day in the gold-mining camp. He walked into the Silver Dollar Restaurant, sat at a table, and beamed at the dirty-aproned waiter.

"Bring me your ten-dollar dinner, boy."

"On white or rye, pardner?"

# When a Document Is Official

*By Frederic Remington*



# *A Western Classic*

WHEN HE *stops in a frontier tavern to celebrate the advent of his long-sought commission, Cavalryman Billy Burling nearly loses the highly important official document he bears. Grimly, he regains it, and leaves—his destination the juncture of Old Woman's Fork and Lightning Creek, his route through Indian-infested country— This unpretentious, somber little drama is taken from Remington's book,* Men with the Bark On.

WILLIAM or "Billy" Burling had for these last four years worn three yellow stripes on his coat-sleeves with credit to the insignia. Leading up to this distinction were two years when he had worn only two, and back of that were yet other annums when his blue blouse had been severely plain save for five brass buttons down the front. This matter was of no consequence in all the world to anyone except Burling, but the nine freezing, grilling, famishing years which he had so successfully contributed to the cavalry service of the United States were the "clean-up" of his assets.

He had gained distinction in several pounding finishes with the Indians; he was liked in barracks and respected on the line; and he had wrestled so sturdily with the books that when his name came up for promotion to an officer's commission he had passed the examinations. On the very morning of which I speak, a lieutenant of his company had quietly said to him: "You need not say anything about it, but I heard this morning that your commission had been signed and is now on the way from Washington. I want to congratulate you."

"Thank you," replied William Burling as the officer passed on. The sergeant sat down on his bunk and said mentally, *It was a damn' long time coming.*

There is nothing so strong in human nature as the observance of custom, especially when all humanity practices it, and the best men in America and Europe, living or dead, have approved of this one. It has, in cases like the sergeant's, been called "wetting a new commission." I suppose in Mohammedan Asia they buy a new wife. Something outrageous must be done when a military man celebrates his "step"; but be that as it may, William Burling was oppressed by a desire to blow

off steam. Here is where the four years of the three stripes stood by this hesitating mortal and overpowered the exposed human nature Discipline had nearly throttled custom, and before this last could catch its breath again the orderly came in to tell Burling that the colonel wanted him up at headquarters.

It was early winter at Fort Adobe, and the lonely plains were white with a new snow. It certainly looked lonely enough out beyond the last buildings, but in those days one could not trust the plains to be as lonely as they looked. Mr. Sitting-Bull or Mr. Crazy-Horse might pop out of any coulee with a goodly following, and then life would not be worth living for a wayfarer.

Some of these high-flavored romanticists had but lately removed the hair from sundry buffalo hunters in Adobe's vicinity, and troops were out in the field trying to "kill, capture, or destroy" them, according to the ancient and honorable form. All this was well known to Sergeant Burling when he stiffened up before the colonel.

"Sergeant, all my scouts are out with the commands, and I am short of officers in post. I have an order here for Captain Morestead, whom I suppose to be at the juncture of Old Woman's Fork and Lightning Creek, and I want you to deliver it. You can easily find their trail. The order is important, and must go through. How many men do you want?"

Burling had not put in nine years on the plains without knowing a scout's answer to that question. "Colonel, I prefer to go alone." There was yet another reason than "he travels the fastest who travels alone" in Burling's mind. He knew it would be a very desirable thing if he could take that new commission into the officers' mess with the prestige of soldierly devotion upon it. Then, too, nothing short of 25 men could hope to stand off a band of Indians.

Burling had flipped a mental coin. It came down heads for him, for the colonel said, "All right, sergeant. Dress warm and travel nights. There is a moon. Destroy that order if you have bad luck. Understand?"

"Very well, sir," and he took the order from the colonel's hand.

The old man noticed the figure of the young cavalryman, and felt proud to command such a man. He knew Burling was an officer, and he thought he knew that Burling did not know it. He did not like to send him out in such weather through such a country, but needs must.

As a man Burling was at the ripe age of 30, which is the middle distance of usefulness for one who rides a government horse. He was a light man, trim in his figure, quiet in manner, serious in mind.

His nose, eyes, and mouth denoted strong character, and also that there had been little laughter in his life. He had a mustache, and beyond this nothing can be said, because cavalrymen are primitive men, weighing no more than 160 pounds. The horse is responsible for this, because he cannot carry more, and that weight even then must be pretty much on the same ancient lines. You never see long, short, or odd curves on top of a cavalry horse—not with nine years of field service.

Marching down to the stables, he gave his good bay horse quite as many oats as were good for him. Then going to his quarters, he dressed himself warmly in buffalo coat, buffalo moccasins, fur cap and gloves, and he made one saddle pocket bulge with coffee, sugar, crackers, and bacon, intending to fill the opposite side with grain for his horse. Borrowing an extra six-shooter from Sergeant McAvoy, he returned to the stables and saddled up. He felt all over his person for a place to put the precious order, but the regulations are dead set against pockets in soldiers' clothes. He concluded that the upper side of the saddlebags, where the extra horseshoes go, was a fit place. Strapping it down, he mounted, waved his hand at his fellow soldiers, and trotted off up the road.

It was getting toward evening, there was a fine brisk air, and his horse was going strong and free. There was no danger until he passed the Frenchman's ranch where the buffalo hunters lived, and he had timed to leave there after dark and be well out before the moon should discover him to any Indians who might be viewing that log house with little schemes of murder in expectance.

He got there in the failing light, and tying his horse to the rail in front of the long log house, he entered the big room where the buffalo hunters ate, drank, and exchanged the results of their hard labor with each other as the pasteboards should indicate. There were about 15 men in the room, some inviting the bar, but mostly at various tables guessing at cards.

The room was hot, full of tobacco smoke and many democratic smells, while the voices of the men were as hard as the pounding of two boards together. What they said, for the most part, can never be put in your library, neither would it interest if it was. Men with the bark on do not say things in their lighter moods which go for much; but when these were behind a sagebrush handling a Sharps, or skimming among the tailing buffaloes on a strong pony, what grunts were got out of them had meaning!

Buffalo hunters were men of iron endeavor for gain. They were adventurers; they were not nice. Three buckets of blood was four

dollars to them. They had thews, strong-smelling bodies, and eager minds. Life was red on the buffalo range in its day. There was an intellectual life—a scientific turn—but it related to flying lead, wolfish knowledge of animals, and methods of hide-stripping.

The sergeant knew many of them, and was greeted accordingly. He was feeling well. The new commission, the dangerous errand, the fine air, and the ride had set his blood bounding through a healthy frame. A young man with an increased heart action is going to do something besides standing on one foot leaning against a wall; nature arranged that long ago.

Without saying what he meant, which was "let us wet the new commission," he sang out, "Have a drink on the army. Kem up, all you hide-jerkers," and they rallied around the young soldier and "wet." He talked with them a few minutes, and then stepped out into the air—partly to look at his horse, and partly to escape the encores which were sure to follow. The horse stood quietly. Instinctively he started to unbuckle the saddle pocket. He wanted to see how the "official document" was riding, that being the only thing that oppressed Burling's mind. But the pocket was unbuckled, and a glance showed that the paper was gone.

His bowels were in tremolo. His heart lost three beats, and then, as though to adjust matters, it sent a gust of blood into his head. He pawed at his saddlebags; he unbuttoned his coat and searched with nervous fingers everywhere through his clothes; and then he stood still, looking with fixed eyes at the nigh front foot of the cavalry horse.

He did not stand mooning long; but he thought through those nine years, every day of them, every minute of them; he thought of the disgrace both at home and in the army; he thought of the lost commission, which would only go back the same route it came. He took off his overcoat and threw it across the saddle. He untied his horse and threw the loose rein over a post. He tugged at a big sheath-knife until it came from the back side of his belt to the front side, then he drew two big army revolvers and looked at the cylinders—they were full of gray lead.

He cocked both, laid them across his left arm, and stepped quickly to the door of the Frenchman's log house. As he backed into the room he turned the key in the lock and put it under his belt. Raising the revolvers breast-high in front of him, he shouted, "Attention," after the loud, harsh habit of the army. An officer might talk to a battalion on parade that way.

No one had paid any attention to him as he entered. They had

not noticed him, in the preoccupation of the room, but everyone quickly turned at the strange word.

"Throw up your hands instantly, every man in the room!" and with added vigor, "Don't move!"

Slowly, in a surprised way, each man began to elevate his hands—some more slowly than others. In settled communities this order would make men act like a covey of quail, but at that time at Fort Adobe the six-shooter was understood both in theory and in practice.

"You there, bartender, be quick! I'm watching you." And the bartender exalted his hands like a practiced saint.

"Now, gentlemen," began the soldier, "the first man that bats an eye or twitches a finger or moves a boot in this room will get shot just that second. *Sabe?*"

"What's the matter, Mr. Soldier? Be you loco?" sang out one.

"No, I am not loco. I'll tell you why I am not." Turning one gun slightly to the left, he went on: "You fellow with the long red hair there, you sit still if you are not hunting for what's in this gun. I rode up to this shack, tied my horse outside the door, came in here, and bought the drinks. While I was in here, someone stepped out and stole a paper—official document—from my saddle pockets, and unless that paper is returned to me, I am going to turn both of these guns loose on this crowd. I know you will kill me, but unless I get that paper I want to be killed. So, gentlemen, you keep your hands up. You can talk it over; but remember, if that paper is not handed me in a few minutes, I shall begin to shoot." Thus having delivered himself, the sergeant stood by the door with his guns leveled. A hum of voices filled the room.

"The soldier is right," said someone.

"Don't point that gun at me; I hain't got any paper, pardner. I can't even read paper, pard. Take it off: you might git narvous."

"That sojer's out fer blood. Don't hold his paper out on him."

"Yes, give him the paper," answered others. "The man what took that paper wants to fork it over. This soldier means business. Be quick."

"Who's got the paper?" sang a dozen voices.

The bartender expostulated with the determined man—argued a mistake—but from the compressed lips of desperation came the word "Remember!"

From a near table a big man with a gray beard said, "Sergeant, I am going to stand up and make a speech. Don't shoot. I am with you." And he rose quietly, keeping an inquisitive eye on the Burling guns, and began:

"This soldier is going to kill a

bunch of people here; anyone can see that. That paper ain't of no account. Whatever did any fool want to steal it for? I have been a soldier myself, and I know what an officer's paper means to a dispatch-bearer. Now, men, I say, after we get through with this mess, what men is alive ought to take the doggone paper-thief, stake the feller out, and build a slow fire on him, if he can be ridden down. If the man what took the paper will hand it up, we all agree not to do anything about it. Is that agreed?"

"Yes, yes, that's agreed," sang the chorus.

"Say, boss, can't I put my arms down?" asked a man who had become weary.

"If you do, it will be forever," came the simple reply.

Said one man, who had assembled his logistics, "There was some stompin' around yar after we had that drink on the sojer. Whoever went out that door is the feller what got yer document, and ef he'd a-tooken yer horse, I wouldn't think much—I'd be lookin' fer that play, stranger. But to go *cincha* a piece of paper! Well, I think you must be plumb loco to shoot up a lot of men like we be fer that yar."

"Say," remarked a natural observer—one of those minds which would in other places have been a head waiter or some other highly sensitive plant—"I reckon that Injun over thar went out of this room. I seen him go out."

A little French half-breed on Burling's right said, "Maybe as you keel de man what 'ave 'and you de *papier*—hey?"

"No, on my word I will not," was the promise, and with that the half-breed continued, "Well, de *papier* ees een ma pocket. Don't shoot."

The sergeant walked over to the abomination of a man, and putting one pistol to his left ear, said, "Give it up to me with one fist only—mind, now!"

But the half-breed had no need to be admonished, and he handed the paper to Burling, who gathered it into the grip of his pistol hand, crushing it against the butt.

Sidling to the door, the soldier said, "Now I am going out, and I will shoot anyone who follows me." He returned one gun to its holster, and while covering the crowd, fumbled for the keyhole, which he found. He backed out into the night, keeping one gun at the crack of the door until the last, when with a quick spring he dodged to the right, slamming the door.

The room was filled with a thunderous roar, and a dozen balls crashed through the door.

He untied his horse, mounted quickly with the overcoat underneath him, and galloped away. The hoofbeats reassured the buffalo hunters; they ran outside and

blazed and popped away at the fast-receding horseman, but to no purpose. Then there was a scurrying for ponies, and a pursuit was instituted, but the grain-fed cavalry horse was soon lost in the darkness. And this was the real end of Sergeant William Burling.

The buffalo hunters followed the trail next day. All night long galloped and trotted the trooper over the crunching snow, and there was no sound except when the moon-stricken wolves barked at his horse from the gray distance.

The sergeant thought of the recent occurrence. The reaction weakened him. His face flushed with disgrace; but he knew the commission was safe, and did not worry about the vengeance of the buffalo hunters, which was sure to come

At daylight he rested in a thick-timbered bottom, near a cut bank, which in plains strategy was a proper place to make a fight. He fed himself and his horse, and tried to straighten and smooth the crumpled order on his knee, and wondered if the people at Adobe would hear of the unfortunate occurrence.

His mind troubled him as he sat gazing at the official envelope; he was in a brown study. He could not get the little sleep he needed, even after three hours' halt. Being thus preoccupied, he did not notice that his picketed horse from time to time raised his head and pricked his ears toward his back track. But finally, with a start and a loud snort, the horse stood eagerly watching the bushes across the little opening through which he had come.

Burling got on his feet, and untying his lariat, led his horse directly under the cut bank into some thick brush. As he was in the act of crawling up the bank to have a look at the flat plains, a couple of rifles cracked and a ball passed through the soldier's hips. He dropped and rolled down the bank and then dragged himself into the brush.

From all sides apparently came Indians' "Ki-yis" and "covote yells." The cavalry horse trembled and stood snorting, but did not know which way to turn. A great silence settled over the snow, lasting for minutes. The Sioux crawled closer, and presently saw a bright little flare of fire from the courier's position, and they poured in their bullets, and again there was quiet. This the buffalo hunters knew later by the "sign" on the trail. To an old hunter there is no book so plain to read as footprints in the snow.

And long afterward, in telling about it, an old Indian declared to me that when they reached the dead body they found the ashes of some paper which the soldier had burned, and which had revealed his position. "Was it his

medicine which had gone back on him?"

"No," I explained, "it wasn't his medicine, but the great medicine of the white man, which bothered the soldier so."

"Hump! The great Washington medicine maybeso. It make dam fool of soldiers lots of time I know 'bout," concluded "Bear-in-the-Night," as he hitched up his blanket around his waist.

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# FAMOUS WESTERN BADMEN

## *A Quiz*

IF YOU know your Old West history, you should be able to identify most of the notorious characters described in the left-hand column by matching them with their names as listed in the right-hand column. When you've done your best, turn to page 189, check your answers, and see how good your best was. A score of 6 is passing; 7 is fair; 8, good; 9, excellent; and 10 means your best is *the* best.

1. A member of his own gang killed him. —Curly Bill Brocius
2. Claimed he fooled Wild Bill Hickok with the "road-agent's spin." —Sam Bass
3. Son of a pious Mormon, he was the leader of the Wild Bunch. —John Ringo
4. Gained renown in the Lincoln County War. —Jesse James
5. Gun drawn, he forced a minister to preach a sermon. —Bill Doolin
6. Wyatt Earp refused his invitation to a gun-duel. —Jack Hardin
7. Led an outlaw gang while he was the sheriff of Alder Gulch. —Boone Helm
8. Captured in a bath house by Uncle Billy Tilghman. —Billy the Kid
9. A ruthless killer who admitted he had committed cannibalism. —Henry Plummer
10. An honest cowboy when he left Texas, he returned from Nebraska a famous outlaw. —Butch Cassidy

NESTER *Bige Tavenir's big blood-bay turns up missing one snowy morning, so Bige cleans and loads his battered carbine and sets out after old Prince on foot. The two Bar O Bar hands convince him they haven't seen old Prince, but they are a little concerned about what may happen when the nester catches up with those two riders from the Jicarilla country. This flavorful Grinstead tale was first published some 20 years ago.*

# Trailing Old Prince

## By J. E. GRINSTEAD

BIGE TAVENIR'S home was a thing to puzzle one not familiar with the West. There was a makeshift crib that contained a modicum of feed, and on the south side of it a crazy shed. The barnyard was fenced with three strands of wire, hung loosely on leaning, dejected posts.

A biting northeast wind was sweeping across the open prairie. The wind was not only cold, but it had a touch of dampness in it, and it was a country where there was little enough dampness.

In the exposed little barnyard there stood a ramshackle old wagon. A horse and a mule were lipping the bottom of the wagon body, striving for the last atom of the feed that had been given them. When it was eaten, the two animals would crowd close together under the crazy shed and shiver until morning, when another meager feed would be given them.

The horse was old Prince, and a prince among horses he really was. If he had been a human prince, he probably would have killed the mule and eaten the whole feed himself, for it was

barely a good feed for one animal, and the mule was greedy. Prince was a deep blood-bay, and his black mane and tail were naturally wavy. Aside from his unusual physical perfection, the horse had a character and was the friend and mainstay of his master.

Bige Tavenir was in his late thirties, perhaps, but he looked much older than that. He was tall and lank, and his hair and beard were scraggly. His shoulders were stooped from hard labor and vicissitude, but there was evidence of strength and stamina in his movements.

While the wind was whipping his rough clothing and his whiskers, it was also picking out single strands of Prince's tail and blowing them apart from the mass in the way that country folks said was an indication of bad weather.

Just now Bige Tavenir was fastening the crib door with a piece of baling wire. Two nights before, the mule had pulled the pin with its teeth and opened the door. Then the two animals had spent the remainder of the night with their heads in the door, getting a real feed.

This peculiar home was on the open, wind-swept prairie, at the head of a great draw that led away to the westward. Bige could have built the stable under the bank, in the head of the draw, but he hadn't thought of it. His only thought was that one day he would build a house not far from the stable, and he wanted it on high ground so that he could see his field that would lie in the valley to the west.

Where Bige sheltered himself from the biting winds would have been a mystery to the uninitiated. When the door was made fast against the cunning of the mule, and half a dozen scraggy chickens had run under the crib to get out of the wind, Mr. Tavenir considered things snug for the night. With the possible exception of what appeared to be a corrugated iron barrel sticking out of the ground near the bank, where the ground broke down to the draw, there seemed no place for the man to hide himself.

Bige didn't crawl into the upended drum. He scrambled down the bank, as if he knew very well where he was going. A tattered old wagon sheet hung against the perpendicular bank, and not far from it lay a stingy pile of wood that had been hauled a great distance.

Tavenir paused and looked down the draw. A great pool of water lay glistening in the gathering gloom. It was fed by an immense spring that broke forth from the very head of the draw. He always looked at that scene when he came down the bank. It was his very own. He had homesteaded it, and one day he would irrigate the land with water from the big spring and grow wonder-

ful crops.

Without knocking — because there was nothing to knock on, for one reason—Bige pulled aside the worn canvas and disclosed a crude door that led into a dugout. A smoky lantern was doing its best to penetrate the gloom of the place. A woman in slatternly garments was cooking at the open fireplace that used the corrugated drum for a chimney. There was a cry of "Daddy!" as Bige entered, and two children, a boy and a girl, appeared from the shadows.

The woman looked up from her labors, her face red from the heat of the fire. "Thought hit were about time for you to be comin' in," she remarked. "Did you git right smart of wood, Bige?"

"Not a powerful lot, Letty. It's right skace."

Bige sat down in the one good chair, and the two children climbed to his lap. Letty put the food on the makeshift table, and they ate in silence.

"Them men was here again today," the wife said when Bige finished and pushed back his tin platter.

"Talk any?"

"Yes. They said you couldn't have this land. 'Lowed this was cow kentry, and that the Big Spring was their mainest waterin' hole for stock. Said we better move out 'thout no trouble, 'cause they'd be a lot of trouble if we stayed."

"Just—tryin'—to skeer—somebody," said Bige, between puffs of his pipe, which he had just lighted by picking up a live coal in his bare hand.

"I dunno. They looked mean."

"Yes, I reck'n fellers like them would look mean, and like as not they air mean. This here's my land. I got it from the Gov'ment, paid the filin' fees on it all reg'lar, and I 'low to stay on it. It's just the same as always. Pap said some folks talked to him thataway when he settled back yender on Ellum Branch, where I was borned. Grandpap said they talked thataway to him still furder back, where pap was borned."

"Them men shore talked masterful and mean, Bige. I wouldn't want you should tangle up in trouble with 'em."

"No, and I wouldn't want to tangle none with 'em, Letty. The Tavenirs have mostly owned more or less land, and they've mostly got it from the Gov'ment, just like I got this. I ain't never heard of none of 'em runnin' off and leavin' no land, after they got it, 'cause somebody talked rough and masterful."

Letty went on washing up the tin plates and cups. Bige knocked the ashes out of his pipe, pulled the green box out from under one of the bunks, and began playing "My Old Kentucky Home" on his accordion. After a bit the children nodded and Letty put them

to bed, then went to bed herself. Bige put his favorite instrument back in the green marbled box and lit his pipe again. Wood was too scarce to have a real fire, but he stirred the embers and sat smoking and thinking.

The Tavenirs had been pioneers for generations. It seemed that they were social Ishmaelites and were always moving farther west. They all had wanted land, and none of them ever had thought of getting it in any other way than from the Government. There always had been someone to try to bluff them, but so far as known they had never been bluffed. Bige was a peaceful man. He asked little of the world of humanity. He didn't want trouble. and he hoped there'd be none. When the fire was out he, too, went to bed.

When Bige Tavenir woke at daylight, as was his custom, there seemed to be a strange stillness over the world. He put on his boots, pulled the canvas curtain aside in order to ascertain what the day promised, which was also his custom, then blinked his eyes. His valley was a sheet of snow, and the great pool of water looked black in the midst of it.

"Snowed last night," he said.

"I 'lowed it might," yawned Letty. "I seen the hens throwin' straws over their backs yistiddy."

Bige built a fire, then went up to the stable to feed his team. When he came back there was a high pucker above his eyes.

"'Smatter, Bige?" asked Letty, as she poured the coffee.

"They got old Prince last night," replied Bige, in a peculiar, whimpering tone.

"Got old Prince! Why—don't you reck'n he just busted out'n the lot and went down under the bank to git out'n the storm?"

"He wouldn't leave the mule." There were almost tears in Bige's voice. "Besides that, the fence wasn't broke."

"That do settle it," his wife stated. "We can't git away from here now."

"I wasn't aimin' to leave," said Bige dully.

He picked up his old, battered .38 Winchester carbine, ran the greasy rag through the barrel and began shoving cartridges through the loading gate.

"What you aimin' to do, Bige?" asked Letty.

"Goin' after old Prince, I reck'n."

"Goin' to ride the mule?"

"No. It ain't never been rid. Reck'n I'll just take it afoot."

"Bige, it don't look like them cow people would come out in a storm like last night to steal one horse, many horses as they got."

"I ain't claimin' they did. I don't know who got him, but he's gone, and I aim to find him and bring him back."

Bige ate his breakfast of fried bacon, swimming in grease, bak-

ing-powder bread, and black coffee. Then he took his old gun under his arm. "Be back some time," he said, and swung away down the valley, blinking at the snow.

Letty stood in the door, shading her eyes with her hand against the glare as she watched him.

"Pore old Bige," she murmured. "They ain't no better man than him, but he's shore sot in his ways. Just like his pap and his grandpap. He's took them for the plumb rule and guide of his life. We'd orter have went from here before the winter set in. He ain't got a chance in the world of finding that hawss, and him afoot thataway."

With a weary sigh she turned back into the dugout, to prepare breakfast for the children.

Bige possessed the wisdom of the great out-of-doors that had been accumulated by generations of Tavenirs. As pioneers they had battled against the elements, against Indians, and against overbearing, wilful neighbors. There was little danger that he would become confused and lose his way. He knew the Bar O Bar ranch was 15 miles to the northwest of his claim. Though he had been away from home on both occasions when the cowmen had called to warn him, he knew of no other ranch in that part of the country, nor was there any settler nearer that he knew of. So he set his course for the Bar O Bar and trudged on across the country.

The snow wouldn't have been more than two inches deep if there had been no wind. As it was, great stretches of ground were almost bare of snow, while in hollows and low places the snow had drifted to a depth of several inches. Bige had looked for tracks about his stable but had found none. That was evidence that the horse had been taken before the snow fell, but he had no idea at what time the snow fell. He had gone several miles, when in a deep hollow, where the snow had drifted, he saw the tracks of two horses. It had been snowing when these tracks were made, and they were partly filled. He followed on doggedly. The winding trail indicated that on account of the driving snow the thief had had a hard time keeping his course, but the tracks led in the general direction of the Bar O Bar.

Noon found him within a mile or two of the cattle ranch. He was so sure, that the tracks led to the ranch that he had quit trying to follow the winding trail and struck out directly toward the ranch. He could now see a wind mill in the distance and knew that he was in sight of the ranch house. So he gripped his gun and hastened his step. They might be rough, but they couldn't take old Prince, his friend and fellow laborer, and get away with it. If they wanted him to leave the

country, that was no way to go about it. The light from the snow hurt his eyes, and his legs were getting weary. He bent his head against the glare and plodded on. The sound of hoofs aroused him from a reverie of hatred for horse thieves. A rider was almost upon him.

"Hello, pardner!" greeted the rider. "What y'all doin' afootback, out in this blizzard?"

"Lookin' for a horse," replied Bige. "Do you belong at that Bar O Bar ranch?"

"Shore do. Me and another pore devil has been sentenced to stay there all winter."

"Just two of you?"

"Yep. Just two of us, but we're a right smart crowd sometimes, when we get riled real good. Where do you live?"

"I got a claim over to the Big Spring water hole."

"Oh, you're that feller. I heard of you."

"Yes, I reck'n you have. You and that pardner of yo'n have been there twicet, ain't you?"

"Nary a twicet, nor a oncet either." grinned the puncher.

"Two cow fellers has been there. I old my wife they reck'n we'd have to move on." There was a tone of doubt in Bige's voice as he continued, "Last night, somebody steals old Prince, and—"

"Who is this old gent you call Prince?"

"He's my hawss."

"I see."

"Yes, and as I was sayin', I tracked him on this way, and the tracks lead to this Bar O Bar ranch, and—"

"I reck'n it wouldn't be polite for you to say much more," drawled the cowboy. "You couldn't go much further 'thout accusin' me and Texas of stealin' yo' braunk, and that wouldn't be neighborly. What kinder lookin' fellers was them cow people that comes to yo' place and talks about you movin' on thataway?"

"I wasn't at home. My wife said they was just cow people and talked kinder mean and masterful like."

"I see. I reck'n cow people do look right smart alike, all of 'em livin' on beef the way they do. I don't blame you much for being suspicious. I reck'n if I was bereft of my braunk and had to hoof it across the prairie in weather like this, I'd be thataway, too, but we didn't get yo' braunk."

"The tracks come this way," persisted Bige.

"That shore looks bad. Show me them tracks."

"Why—er—I ain't seen 'em for a ways. They wound about a whole lot. Seemed like the fellow couldn't keep his course very good in the storm, but they was always headin' this way. When I seen that, I just quit the trail and come straight across the country."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do.

You come on to the ranch with me and get a mess of something to eat. Then you can look around, and if you find anything that looks like we stole yo' stock, I'll help you hang Texas—he ought to be hung anyhow—and then you can shoot me. That's fair, ain't it?"

"Seems like it orter be," and Bige grinned for the first time since he missed old Prince.

They went on to the ranch, looking all along for tracks and finding none. The house and pens were in a protected place, and the snow was even on the ground. They circled the place, but found no tracks, other than those of the puncher's horse.

"Don't look like we purloined yo' pinto, do it?" said the cowboy.

"No. I reck'n I must of lost the tracks, back a ways," Bige said.

"Well, come on to the house and eat up something, anyway."

The Bar O Bar was quite an extensive place. There were several substantial log and 'dobe buildings, a lot of pens, and all the paraphernalia of a big outfit. The fact was that the cattle had been moved to lower range for the winter, and the two men were merely staying there to take care of the place and to look after such stock as had been left on the range in gathering.

They were met at the door by a lanky, leather-faced puncher, who looked Tavenir over. "Gosh, Pickles!" he exclaimed. "Stuff must be drifting like hell before that blizzard for a human to get away out here. Where'd you find this one?"

"Wild loose on the range," grinned Pickles. "He's Mr. Tavenir, that lives over to Big Springs water hole. Somebody annexted his braunk last night. He's like the feller that lost his silk handkerchief at the picnic and said, 'Some son of a female kioty wolf has stole my handkerchief—any you gentlemen got it?' "

"Oh, he's thataway! Thought maybe we had stole his stake rope and dragged his braunk off accidental, did he?" A broad grin spread over the good-natured face of Texas. "Well, pardner, I ain't stole nothin'—yet. But if I have to stay holed up here all winter with this Pickles person, I'll probably be a thief by spring. He's awful depravin' society. Come on in and eat it before it evaporates."

A good, hot meal of beef, beans, bread and coffee revived Bige perceptibly. He filled his old pipe and took a few puffs in the comfort of repletion, but the main event was still on his mind, so he picked up his gun. "Well, I'm beholden to you gentlemen, but I got to get on after old Prince," he announced. "Is they anybody else living in this section?"

"Not a dang soul in thirty mile but us and you. They's an old line-rider's cabin back in the hills

to the east of here, but nobody ain't lived there since when."

They insisted on Bige spending the night with them, but he told them no, he had to get on after old Prince, and trudged doggedly back to where he had lost the trail in the snow.

"You recollect them two fellers that et dinner with us one day? Said they was punchers from the Box J, back in the Jicarilla country," said Texas, in a musing tone, after Bige had departed.

"Shore, I recollect 'em. It was yesterday that they et here," snorted Pickles.

"That's so; it was. I'll go crazy and forget everything before spring," laughed Texas. "You don't reck'n them dang crooked punchers from the Box J took a notion to masquerade as respectable hawss thieves, do you?"

"You can't tell nothin' about what a Box J puncher'll do. It must of been them that went to the Big Spring water hole and told Tavenir's wife they'd have to move. I'd hate like hell for that old nester to find me associating with old Prince."

"Yes," drawled Texas, "I wouldn't wonder he'd dang nigh insult a feller."

Bige trudged on back to where he had lost the trail. The air had thickened, and snow was falling again. He struck the trail, followed a little way, and found that it turned into the hills to the north. He plugged on, and by the time the trail had led him into a deep gorge in the hills the tracks had disappeared entirely. It was snowing hard by this time, and the soft flakes had covered the trail over smoothly. The gorge was deep, and the horses must have followed it, so Bige fought on through the blizzard. It was almost night. He had walked 25 miles since morning, and now the going was getting pretty bad. He hated to give up, but soon it would be dark. and there was no trail to follow. Whatever he did would be just a random guess in the dark. He rounded a bend in the gorge, and there within 100 yards of him stood a cabin, perched in a little valley by the side of the draw. Three horses were tied to trees in front of the cabin, and one of them was old Prince!

Obviously there was someone in the cabin, for there was smoke coming from the chimney. It was now dusk, and bitterly cold. Bige stopped within 50 yards of his horse. He was debating whether he should hide in the brush and after dark steal his own horse, when the door opened suddenly and two men stepped out. It was too late for him to hide, now. There was nothing for it but to face the music.

"What the hell do you want?" snarled one of the men.

"Why, I come after my horse," whimpered Tavenir, his voice

trembling more with the cold than anything else.

"Oh, you did? Well, you'll play hell getting any horse from this outfit," and both men's hands went to their pistols.

At the same instant, Bige's battered old gun snapped to his shoulder.

Far into the night, after battling the snowstorm for hours, Bige Tavenir turned old Prince in the lot with the mule. Unfastening the wire with his numbed hands, he spread a liberal feed in the old wagon body and watched until the two animals fell on it ravenously. Then he closed the crib door and took his way down the bank, slipping and sliding in the snow as he went. At the tattered curtain he shook the snow from his hair and whiskers, then pulled aside the hanging and entered.

Letty was sitting by a smoldering fire. "'Lowed you'd be comin' in pretty soon," said Letty. "Set down. The things is all warm, and the coffee hot."

She dished up the steaming, homely food, and poured a big tin cup full of boiling coffee. Bige fell to while his wife stood mutely watching him devour the food. His eyes were even more sunken than usual, with the fatigue of the day and night in the storm, but his hand was steady as he lifted the coffee cup.

"Find old Prince?" Letty asked, when he was beginning to slow up on the food.

"Yes, I found him."

"Where was he?"

"Back in the hills a ways."

"Driftin' from the storm, don't you reck'n?"

"Yes, I reck'n."

"We kin git away from here now 'thout them cow people makin' us leave."

"Ain't aimin' to leave here," said Bige, as he stuffed his old pipe and lit it.

Spring had come again. The cow people were coming alive, after the winter's hibernation. The owner of the Bar O Bar had come up from the lower ranges, to prepare for the coming of his cattle back to the ranch. Among other orders he gave, he told Texas and Pickles to ride over to the Big Spring water hole and tell that nester to *vamose, pronto.*

The partners rode east from the ranch, into the hills, intending to strike the open country and pay their visit to Tavenir later in the day. They struck the head of a long draw after a while, and followed the trail that led down it to the open country. This trail passed the old line-rider's cabin.

"Whoal Wait a minute," Texas yelled as they approached it. "Let's see who's here."

"Nobody, of course," said Pickles.

"May be so yes, may be so no.

There's two braunks right close."

"Dead ones, though."

"Yes, but they still got the ropes on they necks that they were tied to the trees with, and—"

"Sufferin' salamanders!" cried Pickles. "Look over there on the ground, at the cabin door!"

"Right dead, ain't they?" drawled Texas. "That's them two hombres that said they was from the Box J, over in the Jicarilla country. Wonder if—"

"Yes, I guess so. He looked like he would, that day he et dinner with us."

"I said he'd probably get plumb insulting if he found anybody 'sociating with old Prince. I reck'n he did—almost."

"Likely he did," mused Pickles. "We'd ought to bury what's left of them fellers, but we ain't got no tools."

"Shore. Ain't got time now, no way," and Texas grinned broadly. "We got to ride on over to the Big Spring water hole and tell Mr. Tavenir his room is a whole lot better than his company in this cow country."

"You tell him!" snapped Pickles. "I'll put flowers on yo' grave, but I want a good start before you begin to talk."

"Oh, he don't look so bad. Let's ride over and see if he got old Prince, anyway."

Bige Tavenir was plowing a little field near the water hole and was working old Prince and the mule to his plow, when the partners rode up. The first peculiar thing they noticed was a scabbard lashed to one of the plow handles and the battered old carbine roosting in it.

"Hello, Mr. Tavenir," greeted Texas, as Bige stopped his team and rested against the plow.

"Howdy, gents," returned Bige.

"Did you ever find old Prince that day?" asked Pickles.

"That's him," and Bige pointed a thumb at the beautiful big bay.

"Where all was he?"

"Back in the hills a ways."

"Found him at the old line-rider's cabin, didn't you?"

"He was in that draw."

The partners talked a while, then rode on toward the ranch. They had gone a mile before either of them spoke.

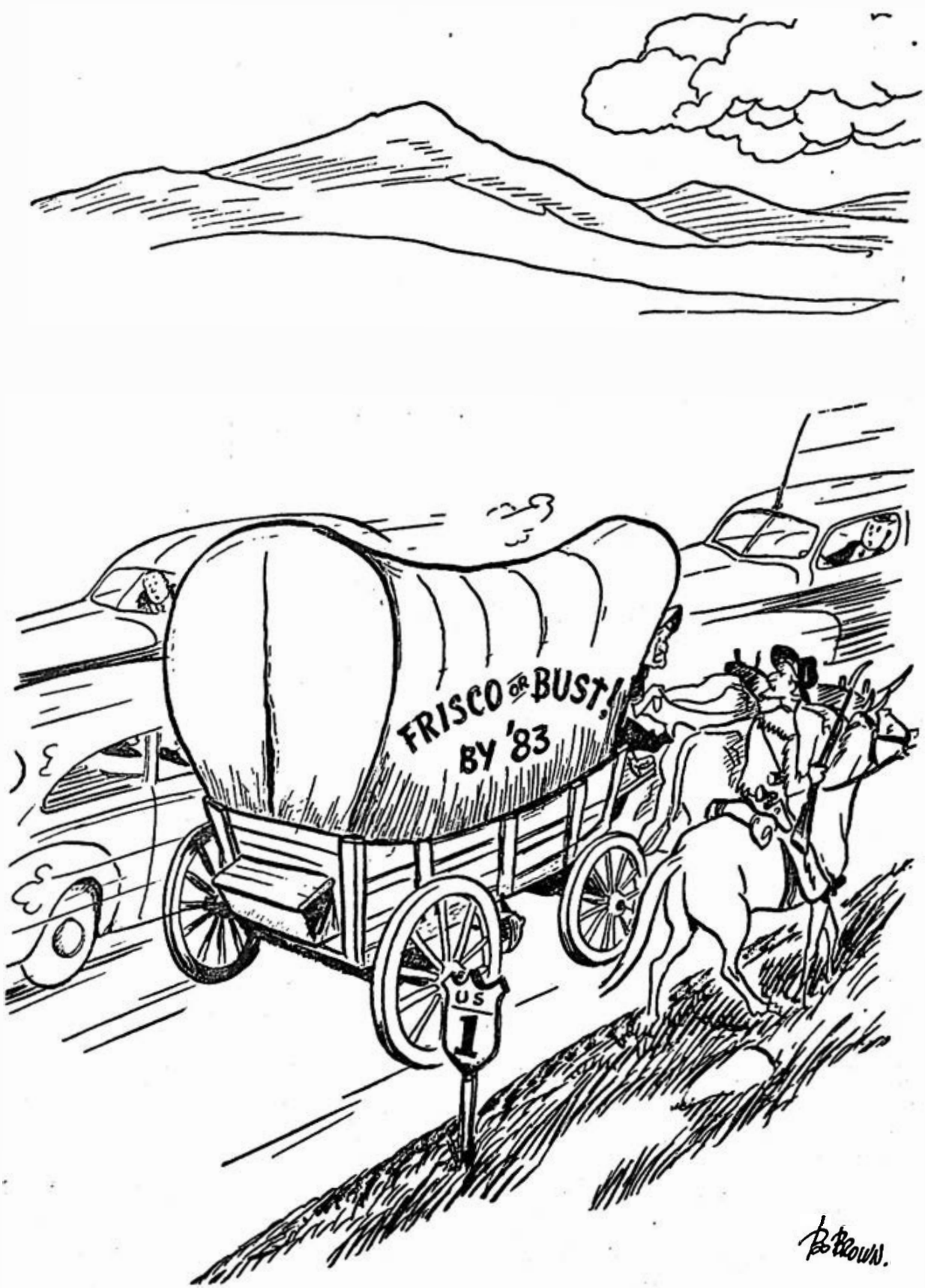
"If the old man wants that hombre notified that he's guilty of onlawful entry and detainer under the laws of the cow country, I reck'n he'll have to tell it himself," Texas said then. "I'm afraid Mr. Tavenir wouldn't understand me good."

"Who was them men?" asked Letty, when Bige went back to the dugout.

"Coupla cow people."

"Did they say we'd have to leave here?"

"Nope. Just passed the time of day and rode on. I ain't aimin' to leave here."




*"I told you we were stopping off too long at Kansas City."*

# MOUNTAIN MEN

By

ERIC THANE

*JOHN COLTER, famous for having outrun a band of Blackfeet, after being stripped naked, was just one of that wild, tough mob of "mountain men" who made frontier history a century ago. This colorful account of some of the lusty breed is taken from the author's book,* High Border Country.

THE "mountain men" were trappers fundamentally, but they were traders, too, and thieves, criminals, sharpers, with but one purpose in mind—quick riches that the fur of the beaver made possible. They stormed into the High Border land, into Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, even to the confluence of the Spokane and Columbia Rivers in Washington. John Colter was representative of them, though more honest than the average; his great adventure with the Blackfeet gave evidence of the dangers that beset these mountain men and made them hard.

These trappers followed no law, worshiped no god, knew they would probably die with their moccasins on and hoped it would be from tsarvation of arrows rather than from the torture of the Blackfeet, but really did not care. They lived life while they had it, they drank by the gallons whisky strong enough to rot the insides of most men, they gorged on vast meals when they had them, they cursed with every oath known to man, they raped Indian women by the dozens and began a strain of red-white heritage that comes down to the present day. They are mountain and prairie dust now, but in the 1820's and '30's and '40's they were the wildest, toughest, most treacherous, and murderous mob of men that has ever existed anywhere.

All for the soft, sleek hide of

the beaver.

John Colter, along the Wyoming-Montana border, was paddling downstream in company with one Potts, another veteran of the Lewis and Clark expedition, when suddenly he froze on his paddle, fixed his eyes on shore, and cleared tobacco juice from his throat long enough to ejaculate three words, "Them pesky Blackfeet!"

Potts turned to look. He never saw a warrior, for arrows feathered him as thickly as quills on a porcupine. Colter dived overboard, but the Blackfeet were swift swimmers and they presently hauled him, cursing and blowing, up onto the bank.

He stared around at the menacing faces of his captors, and cursed his Maker long and loudly in preparation for death. But this particular band had sporting blood in them; instead of burning their captive at the stake or otherwise ridding themselves of him as painfully as possible, they stripped him and turned him loose. They gave him a hundred yards' start. Briefly, the chief gave directions, "Run'um fast!"

Colter darted off. The lack of moccasins hindered him, but not too much. He was tough as wire rope and had the endurance of a strip of elk whang. He began to outdistance the band. Except for three warriors, who closed in on him stride by stride, until they were too close for comfort.

Colter began to conclude that he was, in the language of the mountain men, a "gone duck," but he dragged his wearying steps into a fresh heat and two of the warriors became also-rans. The third, evidently a champion footracer of his tribe, now also blew into his second wind. He overhauled Colter. He cocked back his right hand—not a formidable gesture, in itself. But there was a lance in it, and Colter's broad back was not far ahead.

Colter plowed to a sudden stop, swung to face the warrior, and before the redskin could control himself, let him have it right between the eyes with his tobacco, in the approved manner of wild-west fiction. Then he snatched the lance and drove it through the racer's heart, in a gesture familiar enough to him because he had done it before, except that upon other occasions the red man's back

had been turned.

The rest of the band, trailing far behind, was maddened by the defeat of their best runner, and set up a howl. They redoubled their efforts. Colter knew his chances of escape were pretty slim and, sighting a huge trash jam in the river, he dived headlong under it. He came up between an overhanging V of logs, where he clung until dark, regretting the loss of his tobacco and fervently hoping that the Blackfeet, who ran as thickly as crickets over the logs, would not discover him.

The Colter luck held, and the dark of midnight presently forced the redskins to give up their search. Colter waited until all was clear, then thoroughly chilled by the icy mountain water and appalled at the prospects of a hundred-mile jaunt naked and without weapons to the nearest civilization, the trading fort of Manuel Lisa, he set out.

In time, the mountain men at Lisa's Fort at the junction of the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers were treated to the sight of the original High Border nudist reeling into camp. They gave him a gallon of trade whisky and as an afterthought a broiled half-quarter of buffalo, and listened to his story which had less to do with his escape from the pesky Blackfeet than with the region he had been forced to cross in order to reach Lisa's Fort.

"Yes, sir, I'm tellin' you there wasn't no water in that-there country, not a single spring of it! Jest bubblin' springs of mud! When I did find water it was jest bilin' hot, an' cross my lungs an' liver, if some of them-there hot water springs didn't go a-shootin' away up in the air, jest as reg'lar as nothin'—"

He gulped down another half-pint of trade alcohol, belched a fiery breath that singed the bark of the log wall along which he squatted, and went on devouring the half-quarter of buffalo.

"There was a fall of water higher'n any mounting I ever seed, an' there's a lake that's a sight bigger'n any durn water I ever paddled onto! There's a sight of bubblin' pots plumb full of mud jest the color of the noses of some of you trappers—an' blue as them corpses yuh run across in the spring—"

"A hell of a country!" a listener said, winking at his friend.

"Colter's hell!" the friend returned.

And so it became Colter's Hell. Later decades found he had not lied, and today the "Hell" bears the more dignified but less descriptive title of Yellowstone National Park.

The majority of the river men, who seldom penetrated beyond the three-forks of the Missouri, were French-Canadians, but the mountain men were a motley lot—

Canadians, half-breeds without sympathy for their red brothers-under-the-skin, Scotsmen, a few Irishmen, Englishmen, Iroquois from the Atlantic coast, Scots-Irishmen from Virginia, Carolinians, and even a few Hawaiians. The Coriacan Defile, more usually known as O'Keefe Canyon, through which the main highway runs north from Missoula, Montana, is named after Koriaka, a Sandwich Islander who left his soft life for the hardships of the High Border—and died there from the thrust of Blackfeet arrows.

The beaver quest was not allowed to remain long in the hands of the free-traders and trappers who dealt with the Hudson Bay Company of Canada and its rival outfit, the Northwest. Neither the Northwest nor the Hudson's Bay —so ancient a company that the initials H.B.C. on its buildings led trappers to identify them as "Here Before Christ!"—attempted to invade the High Border country. But other traders and trading companies did enforce monopolies by blood, murder, and price-cutting. First was Manuel Lisa of Lisa's Fort fame.

Lisa organized the Missouri Fur Company with the intention of cornering all the beaver in the Rocky Mountains. If it had not been for the general unrest of the Indians following the War of 1812 and, specifically, the hostility of the Blackfeet, he might have succeeded. As it was, this organized pursuit of the beaver failed, and it was not until 1822 that a powerful organization did succeed. The Rocky Mountain Fur Company it was, based in St. Louis and headed by William H. Ashley, Andrew Henry, and Jedediah Smith.

They secured the services of a number of promising, tough young men among whom were Thomas Fitzpatrick, Milton Sublette, Henry Fraeb, Jean Baptiste, and Jim Bridger. The company was an instant success. It established no trading posts, but organized a rendezvous each year to which the mountain men brought their furs for purpose of trade. The great rendezvous was on the Green River in western Wyoming. Here Ashley sent trains of trade goods, whisky, and ammunition—trains that months later returned to St. Louis, coasting down the Missouri in boats laden to the gunwales with beaver purchased for a song.

Rendezvous. Here came mountain men who had not seen a white face for a year. They trailed in from far and near, to camp in the valley. Dozens of them, then scores and more scores. Indians from all the High Border land flocked in, with their squaws and papooses and the furs which the mountain men had been unable to get either by trade or robbery. Even the sullen Blackfeet came down from the north, seeking the white man's powder and firewater and chewing

tobacco.

Where had been only a lonely valley there was, in the early summer of 1825 and during subsequent decades, the greatest assemblage of lawless men the West has ever seen.

One Bill Williams, a roamer of the whole mountain country between the high border of Canada and the low border of Mexico, was there. Kit Carson may have been there. Jim Bridger certainly was, as was John Colter. And many, many others.

Mountain men all—bearded, unshorn, covered with vermin-infested buckskins. They charged into the rendezvous from their headquarters a few miles or a hundred miles away. They made camp, they piled their skins before the sharpers who commanded the trading wagons. Beaver passed in exchange for powder and shot and sugar and salt and Boston-man clothes and trinkets—and whisky stronger than sin, for sin was the usual thing with the mountain men, and tobacco so hard you had to chew it a day to moisten it and even then it was like a sledge-hammer in your head.

The Indians, lodges pitched beyond the white men's section, swarmed around the wagons too, and were easy prey for the traders. Half a tincup of whisky would deaden a brave's senses to the point where a single red bead—or another drink of whisky—seemed fair payment for one beaver. Deliberately the traders saturated the Indians with alcohol, and half the time when the redskins were dead to the world the traders deliberately stole the furs.

Velvety nights of Wyoming descended, but they were never peaceful and silent nights during a rendezvous. For the mountain men had been without companionship and whisky and tobacco for months, and this was their time to howl. And howl they did. Latter-day cowboys, riding into border towns to paint them red, were pikers compared with the mountain men. Amateurs. Their pint drinks of whisky were mere sips compared with the drinks of Green-River Jones, who used to tilt a gallon jug of trade alcohol and let it pour down his throat.

Then and there began the thirst which has made citizens of High Border states, especially Montana, the greatest consumers of liquor per capita in the United States. Green-River Jones, legitimately speaking, had no children—though in many an Indian lodge throughout the mountains there were light-skinned papooses—but he gave a heritage to the High Border land. He gave alcoholic thirst.

Green-River Jones, soaked to his toes in alcohol, brought up a hand to rub his bare head—bare in the sense that it had no scalp. A Blackfoot had lifted his hair a

couple of years back, but Jones was too tough to die from such a minor operation. He had sworn to "get" the amateur surgeon and, lacking knowledge of this particular redskin's identity, he got as many of the tribe as he could. Maybe 15, maybe 20, he could not tell. He had lost count. Tonight, scratching his scalpless head, he decided the time was ripe for fun. Reeling to his feet, he charged down among the Indians. A score of mountain men raced at his heels, for they were both sympathetic and intent upon an evening of celebration—in the mountain man's way.

They cut, slashed, shot, strangled. When the Indian bucks were dead, they attacked the squaws. In the dawn they reeled back to their cold fires and a fresh jug, several of them missing but the rest satisfied that this had indeed been a large night.

The wagon tenders, the traders who remained sober, went out to their wagons in the dawn, dismissed the guards, and uncovered their goods. They looked down into the Indian encampment; they saw three smoking heaps where lodges had been; they saw a couple of mountain men lying stiffly, and a dozen or more Indian bucks; squaws, who had been battered unconscious, roused to the hot thrust of the sun and crawled away to the lodges of their relatives. A mountain man, hair untouched by water so long that it coiled out from his head like the snakes of Medusa, reeled by, hiccuping a song, "We shoot our Injuns one by one! We do it all jest fer the fun!"

He tottered, then screeched out, "Hi! Ho! The wild Miz-zou-ryel" and as if the effort had finished him, huddled down into the dust, snorting like a steamboat. One tender spat casually and turned to a companion.

"Right quiet last night, wasn't it? But things'll pick up an' we'll have real celebratin' before this rendezvous is over with!"

## Answers to "Famous Western Badmen" Quiz on page 172

1. Jesse James
2. Jack Hardin
3. Butch Cassidy
4. Billy the Kid
5. Curly Bill Brocius
6. John Ringo
7. Henry Plummer
8. Bill Doolin
9. Boone Helm
10. Sam Bass

# Free-for-All

WITH this issue, ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE begins monthly publication. Please note that the next issue will be available in about 30 days, instead of the 60 which you have been accustomed to waiting. This new policy will enable you to enjoy *every month* ZGWM's varied assortment of outstanding Western stories, articles, verse, pictures, and other features. (By the way, what *do* you like best in ZGWM?)

● The long train of emigrant wagons—dubbed "prairie schooners" by some imaginative frontiersman—like the one which comes to such a tragic end in Zane Grey's story, "The Lost Wagon Train," played a vital role in the great human drama of the opening of the West. With lines of oxen, mules, and sometimes horses, furnishing the motive power, these lumbering vehicles bore the human freight which, in the final analysis, was and always will be America's greatest natural resource. Men and women and children, urged on by dire necessity, aftermath of the financial panics of 1837, 1857, 1873, desire for gain, love of adventure, and faith in the future, pushed west by the thousands, and nothing could stop them—not the elements, not the hunger or hardships of the trail, not even the dangers offered by Indians and outlaw whites such as Stephen Latch or Satana and all their hardened crews. Theirs was the venture, theirs the peril, theirs the struggle and achievement—theirs the ultimate victory. And theirs must be our never-ending respect and gratitude.

● Raymond S. Spears's yarn, "Grandpap's Gold Bricks," is the leading original story in this issue. Like his "Pasture in the Abandoned Placers," it is an off-trail

yarn such as few authors other than Ray ever turn out. He's been at this writing game for better than 40 years—and still going strong, praise be. Knowing most of this country intimately from years of extensive traveling, during which he collected data avidly, he dips down into a batch of fact-material and works it into a story. Did we say *a* story? He'd sold 360 of 'em when, years ago, he stopped counting. His own favorite? Maybe "Were-Cougar" in *Adventure,* he says. Want to see a reprint of it in ZGWM?

● "Here's Mud in Yore Eye" is the second in Walker A. Tompkins's series about Justin Other Smith and his buddies in Apache. There's another in the offing, and —we hope—more in the wind.

● Frederic Remington, whose short piece, "When a Document Is Official," is reprinted as a Western classic, was known primarily for his great drawings, paintings, and sculpturings of Western subjects. Most of his writing was less worthy of note, but there were exceptions, and "When a Document Is Official" is one of them. It was recently included by William Targ in his excellent anthology. *The American West.* The Remington drawing was originally published in *Century* magazine.

● In connection with our republication of "Mountain Men," from Eric Thane's book, *High Border Country,* we want to call our readers' attention to a notable series of books called the "American Folkways" series, in which Thane's volume appears. Under the general editorship of Erskine Caldwell, and published by Duell, Sloan & Pearce, "American Folkways" includes several books dealing with various regions of the West by such leading writers as Edwin Corle, Wallace Stegner, Haniel Long, Stanley Vestal, Gertrude Atherton, and Cary McWilliams. They are well worth inspection by any reader interested in our West.

● "Trailing Old Prince" is ZGWM's second venture in reproducing some of the work of that grand old Western-fiction writer, J. E. Grinstead. Using basic material which is always strictly authentic—Grinstead, for example, participated in the opening of the Oklahoma territory in '89—he has produced many a tale which will bear a second reading. There will be more to come.

● A word about "Sam Bass," the "badman ballad" on the inside back cover—it is not, of course, history, nor is it intended to be. It does, however, bear considerable resemblance to the true facts of Sam Bass's wild career, and while the editors do not pretend it is classic literature, it is an interesting bit of regional ballad-making. Incidentally, a future issue of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE will contain a picture-story about

Sam Bass and his untimely—or timely, according to the viewpoint—end.

●This month's picture-story was written by Carl Smith, a Chicago free-lance writer: the illustrations were drawn by Dan Muller, one of America's favorite cowboy-artists. Dan also created the striking Indian-head painting, "Blackfoot Sage," featured on the back cover.

●Earl Sherwan painted the colorful front cover, and the frontispiece illustration for the Zane Grey story is the work of Al Kortner, whose pictures have appeared in many popular magazines.

*To be featured in the August Issue:*

Leading off the next issue of ZGWM will be our magazine abridgment of Zane Grey's Western romance, "Thunder Mountain," considered by critics and reading public alike as one of his best. No Grey fan will want to miss this one!

Among the new stories will be Victor Rousseau's "The Branded Man," a story of the overland trails. Joseph F. Hook writes another readable yarn, this time about mining—title: "The Ghost Walks." We also come up with another Bret Harte story, "Brown of Calaveras." An episode from the two-gun career of Marshal Wyatt Earp, written by Walter Noble Burns, will be a featured fact article, and there'll be a poem by S. Omar Barker. The picture-story will take a new turn, being a light-hearted treatment of several episodes from the life of that famous old frontier character, Roy Bean.

THE EDITORS

*A Badman Ballad*

# SAM BASS

Sam Bass was born in Indiana, it was his native home,
But at the age of seventeen young Sam began to roam.
He first came out to Texas a cowboy for to be,
And a kinder-hearted fellow you would never see.

Sam had a favored saddle horse, one called the Denton mare;
He matched her in scrub races and took her to the Fair.
Sam used to coin the money and he spent it very free;
He always drank good whisky wherever he might be.

Sam left the Collins ranch in the merry month of May
With a herd of Texas cattle, the Black Hills for to see.
He sold out in Custer City and then went on a spree—
A harder lot of cowboys you seldom ever see.

On the way home to Texas they robbed a U.P. train,
And then split up in couples and started out again.
Joe Collins and his partner were overtaken soon,
And with their hard-earned money they went to meet their doom.

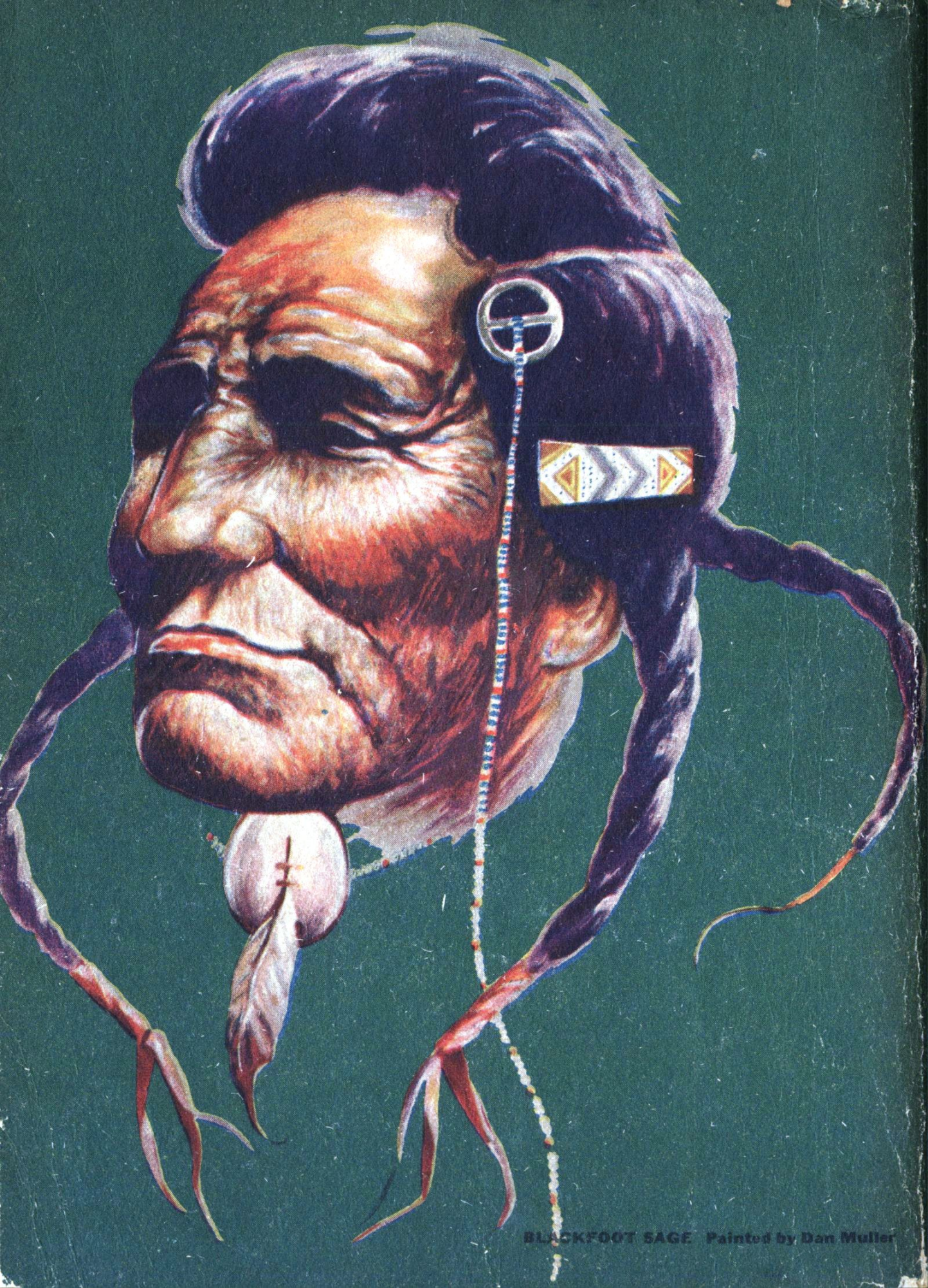
Sam made it back to Texas all right side up with care,
And rode into Denton city with all his friends to share.
Sam's life was short in Texas—three robberies did he do;
He robbed all the passenger trains, mail and express cars too.

Jim Murphy was arrested, then got released on bail;
He jumped his bond at Tyler and took the train for Terrell;
But Major Jones had posted Jim and that was all a stall—
'Twas only a plan to capture Sam before the coming fall.

Sam met his fate at Round Rock July the twenty-first;
They filled poor Sam with rifle balls and emptied out his purse.
Poor Sam he is a corpse now, and six feet under clay,
And Jackson's in the bushes trying to get away.

Jim Murphy borrowed Sam's good gold and didn't want to pay;
He thought the only thing to do was give poor Sam away.
He sold out Sam and Barnes and left their friends to mourn—
Oh, what a scorching Jim will get when Gabriel blows his horn!

Jim Murphy sold out Sam and Barnes and left their friends to mourn;
Oh, what a scorching Jim will get when Gabriel blows his horn!
Perhaps he's got to heaven—there's none of us can say,
But if I'm right in my surmise he's gone the other way.



BLACKFOOT SAGE Painted by Dan Muller