

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

25¢

JUNE



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!

FEATURE STORY

● **THAT PISTOL PACKIN'
PILGRIM!**

by **THOMAS THOMPSON**



● **TENDERFOOT TROUBLE**
by **BRUCE CASSIDAY**

● **TOUGH AS A
MULESKINNER!**
by **GIFF CHESHIRE**

● **GRAY** ● **BLOODHART**
● **ROEMER** ● **NEWBURY**
● **ROBBINS** ● **HALDEMAN**
● **GILES**



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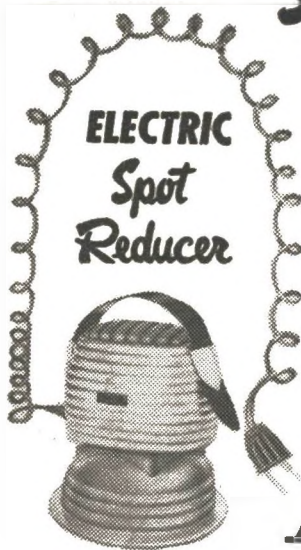
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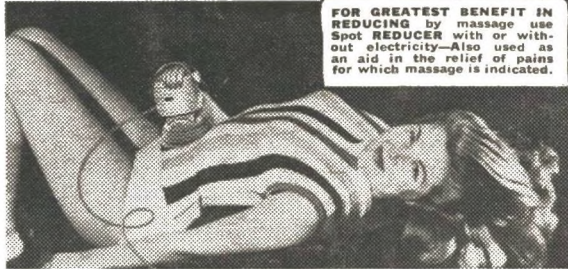
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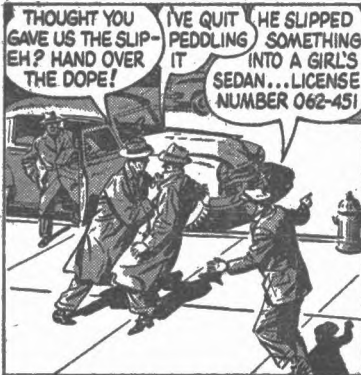
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REPORTER'S HUNCH PAYS OFF TWO WAYS...



THAT'S 'BENNY THE HOPHEAD'! WONDER WHAT'S UP? LICENSE 062-451!

MASQUERADING AS A "SKID ROW" CHARACTER TO GATHER FEATURE MATERIAL FOR HIS NEWSPAPER, BERT EVENS, FAMOUS REPORTER, WITNESSES A PECULIAR HAPPENING...



THOUGHT YOU GAVE US THE SLIP- EH? HAND OVER THE DOPE!

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GEORGE BLYTH THE BANKER- I'VE KNOWN HIM FOR YEARS! WOW, WHAT A STORY!

YES, HEADQUARTERS SAYS THAT'S HIS STATEMENT AT HEADQUARTERS

HEROIN! SORRY YOU'LL HAVE TO MAKE A STATEMENT AT HEADQUARTERS

IN MY CAR! WHAT A MESS! TELL THE BOSS I HAVE HER PICTURE - A BEAUT!



REVEALING HIS IDENTITY, BERT ACCOMPANIES THE NARCOTIC AGENTS ON THE TRAIL OF THE MISSING DOPE.



MY PAPER WANTS MISS BLYTH'S PICTURE. MAY I DROP IT OFF AND SEE YOU AT HEADQUARTERS?

OKAY, BUT HURRY. WE NEED YOUR STATEMENT TO CLEAR MISS BLYTH



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YEAH, I SURE NEED A SHAVE



SAY, I GO FOR THIS BLADE OF YOURS! FOUR DAYS' STUBBLE GONE LIKE MAGIC!

THIN GILLETTES ARE ALWAYS KEEN AND EASY SHAVING



MAY I RETURN YOUR PICTURE TOMORROW, MISS BLYTH?

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HE'S HANDSOME

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
PUBLISHED
JUNE 4TH



Combined With PECOS KID WESTERN

VOLUME 46

JUNE, 1952

NUMBER 1

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Copyright 1938 by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Recruit for the Bad Medicine Raiders."
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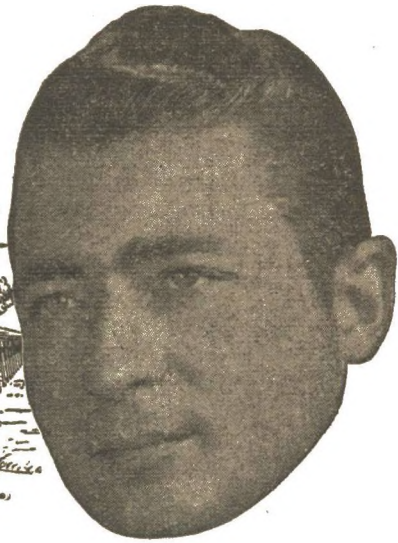
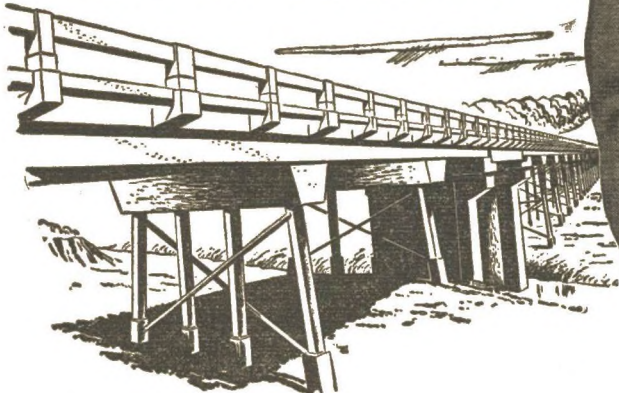
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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Published bi-monthly by Recreational Reading, Inc., an affiliate of Popular Publications, Inc., at 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President. John J. McVarish, Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Indiana. Copyright 1952, by Recreational Reading, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.50; other countries, 50c additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1125 E. Vaile Avenue, Kokomo, Indiana, or 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.

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COWPUNCHER COLLEGE

By **ALLAN K. ECHOLS**

Where the saddle was the seat of learning!

OLD Charlie Goodnight was a famous rancher in west Texas, but it is not so generally well known that he founded a college. At least they called them colleges in those days. Goodnight College was in Goodnight's town, which was called Goodnight, Texas.

An old timer, speaking about his experiences at Goodnight College, tells about his own education, which was typical of the way most of the boys got their learning. His father was a foreman on a big spread, and moved up and down the old Chisholm Trail pretty often. The kid was sent into a small cowtown where a bunch of the neighbors had chipped in and built a school about fourteen feet square. A man who could read and write, and who was saving money to go to medical school, volunteered to teach for a few dollars and a few head of cattle, which was duly paid. So half a dozen boys got about ninety days of learning every spring.

This boy's folks decided that he needed a higher education, so they sent him along with a few others to Goodnight College. The boys threw their trunks and saddles into a wagon and set out, driving a pair of

balky mules, and eventually found their way across the prairie to the seat of learning, where they studied five days a week and punched cattle for a dollar a day on week ends for Charlie Goodnight.

The pupils at Goodnight College ranged in age from fourteen to thirty-six years. One of them was a bald-headed man. Another was a whiskered range rider who rode up one day leading a pack mule and camping equipment and gave the college orders to educate him. They tried him on the first reader and he couldn't make the riffle; they tried him on the second reader and he still couldn't make out the words, but the third reader had pictures in it and he managed to get something out of it.

Most of the boys were seriously trying to master the rudiments of the education they had missed, and they would manage to get through reading and writing and arithmetic, but when it came to algebra, they often dropped out, being unable to see what practical use they could get out of learning that A plus B equaled C. As one of them put it, he didn't need algebra, what he needed was a good course in "trigger-nometry." ● ● ●



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THROW DOWN THE BOX!

*The last thing in the world a poor
hard-working road-agent expects
is rattlesnakes in the strongbox!*

**By BESS
RITTER**

AT THIS very minute there's \$150,000 worth of gold waiting in the Jackson Hole area of the State of Wyoming for the man who wants to find it. Not to mention the \$40,000 treasure that's stashed away on Trinity Mountain, California, along with other hidden hoards that were buried in the hills "temporarily" by bandits, a long time back in the 1870s.

Most of this wealth was stolen from express company stages that attempted to make their way eastward over the Emigrant Trail through Nevada, Idaho and Colorado, north into the Black Hills and south into Arizona. But lots of them got permanently separated from the cargo that they carried, to the tune of millions of dollars worth of precious metals.

Of course the driver was properly armed by his employer, and was accompanied by a man who was dubbed a "shotgun messenger." He lived up to the name by wearing a double-barreled weapon over his knees at all times. He kept a rifle handy, in addition, for long range work, and had a couple of revolvers near by, in reserve. And if he'd been with the company for any length of time, he also wore a watch with a neatly engraved back. This was a present from the firm, and expressed its thanks for faithful service rendered in the past.

But testimonial gifts of this kind didn't keep the coaches from being robbed with real lavishness: For in 1875, one firm alone—Wells Fargo—lost \$87,000 in thirty-four California holdups. And the sum total of thefted metals in that state from '70 to '74 amounted to a "mere" \$927,726.

The reason for this, however, wasn't due to a lack of courage on the part of the employees. They simply felt, instead, that it was only good sense to stand up and

deliver—didn't the express companies prosper thoroughly, anyway, via the five percent minimum charge to all customers? This enabled them to reap a nice profit even after making good all losses. And besides, wasn't there more gold where this last batch had come from?

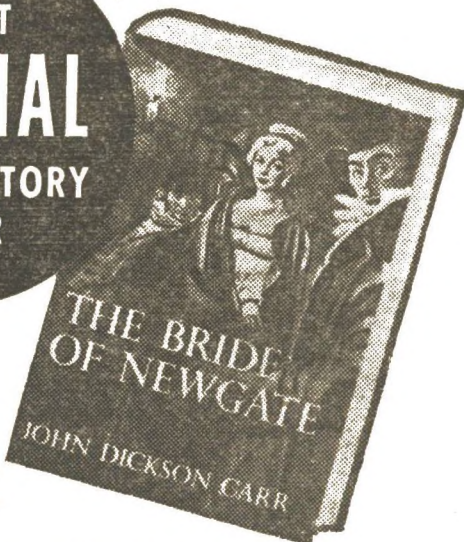
As a matter of fact, according to some rumors, stagecoach drivers automatically stopped at certain spots, where holdups were supposed to occur with great frequency. These places were generally on the outskirts of small towns, where "robbing the stage" had grown into a lucrative local industry, with city fathers playing the role of part-time bandits.

One stagecoach story concerns a driver named Baldy Green, who was robbed so regularly and thoroughly that a song was written about him. The chorus line ran, "Throw down that box, Baldy," which is exactly what he did, without arguing at all. Consequently, he became the thieves' favorite driver, and they tagged along behind, no matter which route he traveled.

But when a passenger was threatened with the loss of his own personal treasures, he tried a lot harder to hold on to it—naturally. And sometimes the methods that were used were very novel. Like a gold dust buyer who kept three live rattlesnakes packed in the strongbox, along with the metal. And then there was the affluent boss who was carrying a heavy load of payroll money for his employees. He stuffed the barrels of a large, old-fashioned bore shotgun with the greenbacks. And when the weapon was derisively tossed into the bushes by the holdup men, he said nothing, but calmly retrieved it and the cash after they'd galloped off—undoubtedly, to curse their bad luck, later. ● ● ●



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Dick Darwent, ex-fencing master, was waiting in a dark cell of Newgate Prison—waiting to be hanged. While Dick waited for the hangman, Lady Caroline Ross, rich, cold and beautiful, prepared a champagne breakfast to celebrate her marriage to him, a marriage which would cost her fifty pounds, and which would be ended an hour after it had begun.

OR

But a shot through a bathroom window, where a lovely lady sat in a tub of milk—a riot in the opera, led by champion pugilists—a pistol duel at dawn—and a mysterious coachman, whose cloak was shiny with graveyard mold changed everything! As did Napoleon Bonaparte!

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THAT PISTOL PACKIN' PILGRIM!

CHAPTER

Hell at his Heels

1

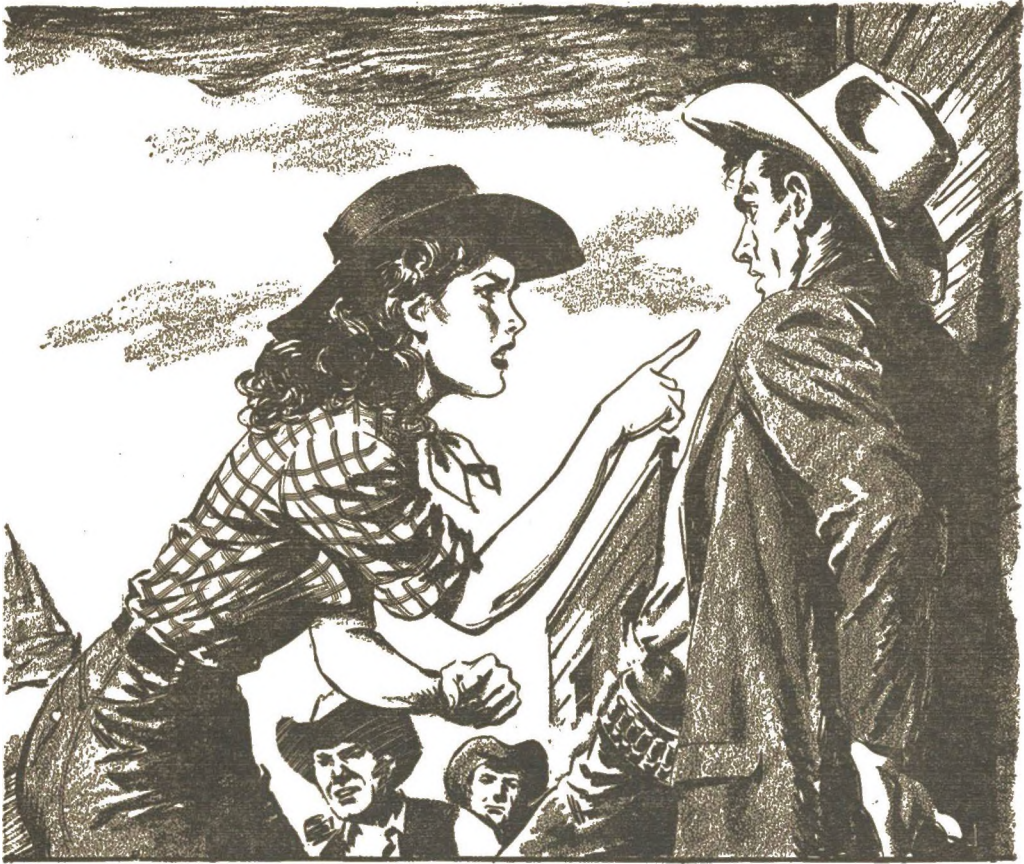
It looked like a cow town, simmering there on the floor of a typical California Coast Range valley. A small creek, lined with sycamores, watered some pastureland and a few patches of truck garden. After four days of hard riding with a posse snapping at his tail the place looked mighty inviting to the drifter called Windy McCloud. He was thirsty, he was tired, and he was, for practical reasons such as eating, broke.

Behind him lay the little matter of a very large hole in the wall of an adobe jail. Those connected with what passed for law enforcement in that oil-crazy town on the coast said Windy McCloud had made that hole. Windy hadn't stayed to argue.



By
**THOMAS
THOMPSON**





"You beast!" she screamed at Windy. "Remind me to kill you sometime!"

Step up, folks, and meet that human hurricane, that nonesuch of sixgun magic, Windy McCloud, who'll get peace and quiet if he has to shoot and bury every hardcase in booming Trimble City!



He had drifted fast and he had cut in and out of canyons and circled so much that he was no longer sure whether the posse was behind him or in front of him. The main thing was, they were out of sight and a man had to eat. He rode into the town and the eye of every inhabitant stared at him with open suspicion. *Hang it*, he thought, *I just imagine it. It's just because I've been running for four days.*

He saw a saloon.

The saloon was empty of customers, and that was just right. The less people he came in contact with the better, Windy figured. That sheriff was a determined cuss, and Windy had no assurance that he was out of danger yet.

He sauntered up to the bar, thumbed back his well worn hat and put on his most disarming grin. "Howdy, bartender," said Windy. "If a feller wanted to pick up a few days' work around here what advice would you give him?"

The bartender took his time about answering. Windy could see that this wasn't going to be a very friendly town. The bartender blew his breath against a glass and polished the glass with the tail of his apron. "My advice would be to keep right on ridin', stranger," the bartender said.

The grin ran out of Windy McCloud's eyes. His first thought was that the bartender had recognized him and if that were so it could only mean that the bloodhound sheriff had been here. He searched the bartender's face closely. No, Windy decided, the man didn't know anything about the jail break. He was just taking it on himself to ask drifters to move along.

That made Windy a little mad. In his drifting from the Pecos country where he was born to the Canadian border where he had nearly lost his life, the redhead had grown used to towns that took a dim view of saddle tramps. But he wasn't used to having bartenders invite him to move along.

"I'll make up my own mind about where I go and when I move along, bartender," Windy told him. "I asked you a question."

"As far as I'm concerned, cowboy," the bartender said, "you've had your answer. I'm trying to do you a favor. You look like an honest-to-gosh cow hand. There's only one cow outfit left in this country. There's

nothin' else in California but oil and politics. It's a matter of opinion which stinks the most."

"You say there's one cow outfit," Windy pressed. His stomach was getting pretty persistent. "You reckon they could use a hand?"

"The Triple T?" the bartender said. "Cowboy, the Trimble outfit could use a lot of things. Including a sack of beans and a side of bacon." The bartender shook his head. "No, cowboy, it's no use." He poured a free drink and meaningfully corked the bottle. "I hear tell they're pickin' apples up in Oregon. You might try there."

WINDY tossed off the drink. It warmed his stomach and accented his hunger. "Thanks, anyway," he said. "Reckon I'll have a look around."

He went outside into the brilliant California sunshine. It did seem a shame that this was no longer cow country. The rolling hills were deep with dry grass, the gentle canyons shady with live oak. A pleasant smell of tar weed and land rich with heat seeped into the town. Once, Windy knew, this entire length of California coastal hills had been owned by Spanish dons and dark eyed senioritas had danced at *bailes* and *fiestas*.

His mouth started to water. Doggone it, he had to have a job! Any kind of a job—A poster nailed to the wall of the hardware store attracted his attention. He hurried toward it, hopefully.

The poster had been printed on a letter press in fresh, black ink. It said:

TOWN MARSHAL WANTED
Experience preferred
but not required if
other qualifications
sufficient. Apply to
EPHRAIM MUELLER
MAYOR, CITY OF TRIMBLE

The name Ephraim Mueller stood out big and bold and important. Windy looked at the poster, his interest growing. Now *this* might be something. Windy had been a marshal a couple of times. And he had had a world of experience with marshals, one way or another.

But beyond that, suppose that beagle-nosed sheriff from the oil town got to sniffing

around here looking for Windy McCloud, jail-breaker. The last place he would look would be behind a law badge. Now if he could assume a name and hold the pose a few days until he got his stomach full . . .

Windy turned to a man who was passing by. "Say, stranger," Windy said, "can you tell me where I might find Mayor Ephraim Mueller?"

Any answer the man might have made was drowned out by a thunder of hooves as four riders swung down the main street coming at a full run. Windy had just time enough to see the big Triple T burned on the horses' right hips and then the riders were sliding to a stop right in front of him and one man, a wiry rooster with fire in his eyes, was out of the saddle and coming at Windy on a dead run.

He didn't stop running. He knocked Windy aside roughly, ripped the poster off the wall, rolled it into a ball and stood there glaring. "You wasn't fixin' to have anything to do with this poster, was you stranger?" the rooster said.

By this time the other three riders were up on the sidewalk. Two of them were middle-aged, tough-looking cowboys. The third was young, handsome and apparently confused. He kept holding up one hand as if he wanted to stop something. He was moving his lips but nothing came out.

The rooster punched Windy on the shoulder and forced him back against the wall. He thrust out the balled-up poster. "Well?" he demanded.

A quiet, deep temper stirred in Windy McCloud. The memory of days in that adobe jail on top of the very empty feeling in his stomach didn't keep him reasonable.

He stuck out his right arm and the heel of his hand caught under the rooster's nose. Windy pushed out and up. The rooster's head tilted way back and he finally lost his balance.

"In answer to your question," Windy said, "I hadn't quite made up my mind. But if I had of, it wouldn't be none of your damn business!"

WINDY wasn't quite sure of what happened next. Maybe the building fell on him. Or maybe these cowboys had six arms each. He had never seen quite so many fists in such a short time. The only thing he knew for sure was that he was

right smack in the middle of one devil of a fight, just as he had been in that oil town—and again it was not a fight of his making.

But that didn't make the fists any less hard. That little rooster was bouncing up and down, clawing and spurring. Windy hit him and the rooster bounced twice when he hit the sidewalk, and then the other two riders were coming at him. Windy got one of them around the neck and bashed his head against the porch post. The other one stepped back for a second, and Windy saw the young, good-looking, confused one.

The young, good-looking, confused one was standing there with his fists up in a John L. Sullivan pose. He was shuffling his feet, digging in. The kid's tongue protruded slightly from the corner of his mouth. Windy hit the kid once.

That left one man. This one came boring in, swinging with everything he had. Windy felt his nose splatter all over his face, and then the cowboy zigged when he should have zagged and Windy nailed him.

Windy stood there panting, blood-smeared and bruised, and there were four very still Triple T cowboys at his feet. A small crowd started to gather, and in that crowd was a little man with black sleeve guards. The little man smelled like a pill bottle. Just at that moment another rider swung into town on a full run.

The rider didn't slow for the crowd. People scattered in every direction, and the rider slid to a stop and was out of the saddle in one smooth motion. The rider said, "Who do you think you are?" and Windy felt his face being slapped hard.

He reached out and grabbed the hand that was slapping him, twisting the arm hard. That brought the slapper up close, pressed tightly against his own body, and it tilted the slapper's face to where it was only inches from Windy's face.

And that did it. At that particular second, Windy McCloud couldn't have told his own name. The face was oval-shaped and prettier than any face had a right to be. The eyes were violet blue with deep fires in them, and the lips were full and red and soft looking. The hair was black where it spilled out from under the flat brim hat, and the man's shirt didn't fit the way it would have on a man. The feet were small and trim in black half boots, but they hurt

like the devil when they landed against Windy McCloud's shins. He released his grip and stepped back, and the kicker came at him like a wildcat.

Windy McCloud wasn't a man who went around hitting beautiful young women. In fact, he generally stayed away from beautiful young women. Windy was forty years old. He was tall and lanky and red-headed and not beautiful. But this young woman made him forget all that. He stood there staring and took a couple of long scratches across the cheek and a couple of more kicks on the shins.

Then he reached out quickly, getting the young woman around the waist with his left arm. He brought up his knee, doubled her over it and started laying his right hand hard on a rounded and not too large expanse of blue jean cloth.

The girl squealed. She struggled. She fought. And then she started to cry. And at that point all the temper ran out of Windy McCloud and he felt like a fool. He put the girl down and stood there looking at her, and his knees went weak and wtery.

She was beautiful, even when she was crying.

The small man with the black sleeve guards stepped up alongside Windy, and the smell of pills was strong. The small man whinnied like a horse. "Your hoodlums started it, Miss Trimble," he said. "If it hadn't been for the bravery of this stranger, they would have wrecked the town again."

The girl stopped crying immediately. "Damn you, Ephraim Mueller," she gritted, "you've bit off more than you can chew this time, and I'll see you choke on it!"

The bartender came out of the saloon with a bucket of water in his hand. He looked at the four cowboys on the sidewalk and picked the young, good-looking one. The girl ran over and looked at the young, good-looking one too. Then she turned and looked at Windy. Her eyes were bright, and her lips were trembling.

"You beast!" she said, stamping her foot. "Remind me to kill you sometime!" With that she stalked off. It was a mighty attractive stalk, what with her head up high, her shoulders squared. Every stalk started at her high boot heels and traveled to the top of her hat.

The small man with the sleeve guards whinnied at Windy's elbow. "We owe you a debt of gratitude, stranger," the small man said. "I am Ephraim Mueller, Mayor of the City of Trimble. If there is anything we can do for you . . ." He stopped talking and stared hard at Windy McCloud. He let his eyes linger on Windy's bruised face, and then his eyes moved down Windy's lanky frame and stayed longest in the vicinity of the battered holster and well-used gun.

Mayor Ephraim Mueller whinnied hard, "At least have lunch with me," he suggested.

This, Windy decided, was the most sensible mayor he had ever met. "Why thank you, Mayor," he said, and he took the mayor's arm just so Ephraim Mueller wouldn't have a chance to change his mind. When he glanced back, the bartender was dolefully pouring water on the good-looking young man who lay on his back, his mouth open. Windy had to step around the young man. At that moment the young man sat up, saw Windy and tried to rise.

The bartender put his foot against the young man's chest. He pushed the young man down. "Lay down, son," the bartender said sadly, "so folks can recognize you." There were tears in the bartender's eyes. He looked up and stared hard at Windy. "That was nice fightin', cowboy," the bartender admitted. "I like to see fightin' like that."

The mayor whinnied and tugged at Windy's arm. "Yes indeed, yes indeed," said the mayor.

"It's a big apple crop," the bartender said hopefully. "You might like Oregon a lot."

It was a direct warning, Windy knew, but by now the juices of anticipation had descended to his stomach and the stomach was making the decisions. "A good steak, perhaps?" said Mayor Mueller. "With fried potatoes and plenty of black coffee?"

"How many men do I have to kill?" Windy McCloud asked him.

It was supposed to be a joke. For a few seconds he wasn't sure whether the mayor had taken it that way or not. The mayor's eyes were bright, his lips were pulled back from his yellow, horse teeth. The mayor said, "You and I are going to get along just fine. Yes indeed, just fine." The mayor

whinnied and rubbed his hands together. "Fate," said the mayor, "has sent me a marshal."

"Marshal?" Windy had nearly forgotten the poster that had started all the ruckus.

"Why yes. You wanted a job, didn't you?"

"I sure did," said Windy McCloud. "And now you was mentioning a steak and fried potatoes and . . ." His mouth was watering so bad he couldn't finish the sentence.

CHAPTER

Meet the Marshal

2

Mayor Ephraim Mueller kept his word. The steak hung over both edges of the platter. It was thick and juicy and the potatoes were golden brown. Windy wolfed down half of it and then took his time about enjoying the second half. It wasn't until then that he considered the fact that he was in the back room of a drug store and not in a restaurant. A Chinese cook, summoned by Ephraim Mueller, had brought the meal here.

Ephraim Mueller sat across the table, staring hard at Windy. There was another man in the room and Mueller hadn't even bothered to introduce him. The man was big and thick and stupid looking. His forehead sloped straight back from his eyes. His arms pulled at the seams of his coat. He was wearing a shoulder holster, Windy saw. With his stomach full, Windy began to get a little squeamish about this strange set-up. The mayor must have sensed it.

"Being mayor isn't a full time job," Ephraim Mueller said. "I own this drug store, and my living quarters here serve as a sort of unofficial city hall. This is Mr. Percival, our City Clerk and Treasurer," he said, indicating the big ugly man. "Mr. Percival, this is—"

"Jim Jones," said Windy quickly, remembering the posse and the hole in the adobe jail.

"Jim Jones, eh?" Mr. Percival leered. "What was your name before you changed it?"

Windy saw he wasn't going to like Mr. Percival. He leered back. "Maybe it was Percival," he said.

"Smart boy, eh?" Mr. Percival doubled

his fists and started moving toward Windy. Windy stood up.

"Now, boys," said Mayor Mueller soothingly, "let's just behave, shall we? As long as we are all going to be working together . . ."

The full stomach made reasoning a little easier. "Well now," Windy hedged, "I ain't so sure I can accept this job after all."

"Oh aren't you, Mr. Windy McCloud?" asked the mayor. He whinnied loud and long.

Windy choked on the unchewed piece of steak in his mouth. He had never heard his own name make so much noise. "My name is Jim Jones," he said weakly.

"Of course, Mr. Jones," the mayor grinned. "That name Windy McCloud just slipped out. "You see," he said, thrusting his horse teeth close to Windy's face, "the sheriff was just through here. He was looking for a man by the name of Windy McCloud. It seems this Windy McCloud got into a free-for-all fight in Oil City, beat up a couple of town policemen and finally landed in jail. And then," continued Mayor Mueller, clicking his tongue against his teeth, "this Windy McCloud continued to act up and he tore the whole wall out of the jail."

The mayor's eyes were hard and his face was inches from Windy's face. "Why I do believe they'd hang this Windy McCloud if they ever found him," he said. "Now, Mr. Jones, shall we discuss the position of Marshal of Trimble City?"

Windy swallowed hard. "I reckon we should at that," he admitted. "It seems to be just the kind of job I was after."

"That's better," said the mayor. "Now there's just a small formality. Mr. Percival, if you will swear in our new marshal . . ."

"You swear to behave yourself and take orders from your betters?" inquired City Clerk Percival. He had a gun in his hand, and it was pressed against Windy's chest.

"I swear," said Windy. The hair was standing up on the back of his neck, and the piece of steak was stuck in his throat. The mayor came over and pinned a badge on Windy's chest.

"That's fine," the mayor commented. "I think you'll make a fine marshal. A much better marshal than your predecessor, in fact." The mayor took some papers out of his coat pocket and thrust them into

Windy's hand. "These are John Doe warrants charging the owner and employees of the Triple T ranch with murder. "Go serve them."

The mayor smiled kindly. "It might be a nice gesture," the mayor said, "if you were to stop at the graveyard and put a few flowers on the former marshal's grave." He whinnied. "You'll recognize it, Mr. McCloud. It's the freshest one there. And now we must be about our civic duties, mustn't we?"

The city clerk motioned toward the door with the barrel of his gun. And Windy McCloud, Marshal of Trimble City, stumbled out into the blinding sun.

It had all happened too fast to make sense, but it was all perfectly clear. Windy was marshal; if he wanted to save his neck he had better *stay* marshal. The mayor hadn't been bluffing about the sheriff having been here. He knew too many facts. And that gun in the hand of City Clerk Percival wasn't any bluff, either.

To boil it all down, Windy McCloud was to take orders from Mayor Mueller. And Mayor Mueller was in a position to give orders. That brought Windy to the matter of the warrants Mueller had handed him.

John Doe warrants, the mayor had called them. As far as Windy knew, a John Doe warrant was issued when there were suspects but no proof. He looked at the warrants. They said John Doe, all right. But the mayor had supplied the names—the owner and employees of the Triple T.

Windy walked down the sidewalk in a haze of confusion. Men saw him, some smiled, three or four shook his hand. One apple-cheeked little fuddy-duddy clung to his hand and stared at him with honest blue eyes.

"It is such a comfort to have a marshal walking the streets," the fuddy-duddy said. "The indignities we have suffered at the hands of that outlaw Triple T outfit! I do hope, Marshal, that you will be able to subdue them."

"Well now, I'll do my best," drawled Windy. He hitched his gun belt and tugged his hat down to shade his ever-peeling nose. A little further down the street, he met a plump and not unattractive young woman.

The young woman was pink and white and full of giggles. She twisted the button on Windy's shirt front. "Oh Mr. Marshal,"

she breathed. "You were so brave. It makes poor ittise bittsie me feel so secure to have you around."

"Lady," said Windy McCloud, "don't you worry none. I'll make it my personal business to see you tucked in every night."

The pink and white young thing squealed with delight. "Oh marshal!" she said. "How perfectly *awful* of you!" Maybe this wasn't such a bad job after all. Maybe this town was in such a state that the mayor and city clerk had to take strong measures.

Windy squinted his eyes, squared his shoulders and strode into the bar where he had started. The bartender glared at him with hostile eyes. The good-looking young man who Windy had last seen stretched on the sidewalk was there, too. The good-looking young man paled a little, but he started across the floor toward Windy, his fists cocked.

"Take it easy now, boy," Windy drawled. "You a Triple T cowboy?"

"I am," the young man said, "and you are a no-good yellow skunk, and I am going to knock your head off."

"That's my boy," the bartender cheered. "Go get him, Elmer!"

"Now just hold on," said Windy.

"No man can spank my fiancée and live to brag about it! Reach for that gun, you son of a swine!"

"That's my son," yelled the bartender. "Mow him down, Elmer!"

ELMER stood with his feet wide-spread, his hands out from his side. His gun was belted awkwardly high. His chin was thrust forward. Windy hit him. Elmer went down hard and landed on his back. He lay there with his mouth open. The bartender came out from behind the bar with a bucket of water.

"This Elmer here," Windy asked, rubbing his fist. "You say he's your son?"

The bartender looked at the boy on the floor. "Yes," he said sadly, "that's my boy. For a minute there when he was going after you I wasn't sure. But I recognize him now." The bartender poured the water on his son. "You know," he continued drearily, "in the last six months I've poured enough water on this kid to keep his spokes tight for the rest of his life."

"I reckon I got a warrant for Elmer," said Marshal Windy McCloud. He

thumbed back his coat and showed the badge.

The bartender dropped the bucket. He stared at the badge and his face turned purple. "Why you dirty, low-down . . ." He backed toward the bar and reached down. Windy drew his gun.

"Now just leave that shotgun alone," Windy said soothingly. "I'm dedicated to law and order in this town, and some folks seem to think it's a mighty good idea."

"And some folks will think you're dedicated to an early grave," spat the bartender, "and I'm one of 'em. Get your filthy-smellin' carcass out of my saloon and don't come back!"

"I reckon I'll just take son Elmer along," said Windy. He kept the gun pointed in the general direction of the bartender, reached down and lifted Elmer to his feet. With Elmer's arm twisted behind him, he marched the young man out of the saloon.

A dozen people saw him. They all cheered. And up the street a ways, Windy saw Mayor Mueller smiling and rubbing his hands.

"I forgot to ask where my office is," said Windy McCloud.

A dozen pleased people obligingly pointed out the little two-cell jail. Windy marched his prisoner there, feeling a swell of civic pride.

He shoved Elmer into one of the cells, dusted his hands and came back to his office. Mayor Mueller was there. He seemed mighty happy. "Marshal McCloud," stated Mayor Mueller, "the City Council has just voted you a raise. Your salary will be two hundred and fifty a month and it will increase every time you bring in a Triple T outlaw. Your meals will be furnished by the city. Just eat what you want at Wo Tung's restaurant and charge it." Ephraim Mueller rubbed his hands and whinnied loud and long. "And now I suggest you ride out to the Triple T and corral the rest of the outlaws."

"I thought I was just a city marshal," said Windy.

Mayor Mueller seemed more than delighted. "The city council just voted to expand the city limits," he explained. "They now include the Triple T headquarters."

"Now just a darn minute," said Windy. "If there's anything crooked going on

here, I want you to know that I'm not—"

"The sheriff from Oil City is a savage sort of man." Ephraim Mueller mused out loud. "He told me if he ever saw this Windy McCloud person he would shoot him on sight."

"Which way is it to the Triple T?" asked Windy McCloud.

WINDY didn't go to the Triple T immediately. He was still hungry and the free meal part of his job seemed mighty appealing. In fact, it could be that he would use that part of his job for a few days and then just quietly disappear. The more he thought about it the better the idea seemed.

He locked his office door and sought out Wo Tung's restaurant. The same Chinese who had brought the steak to Ephraim Mueller's drug store was behind the counter. Otherwise the place was deserted, for it was halfway between dinner and supper time. "Steak," Windy ordered. "Fried potatoes and coffee."

"Aha!" the Chinese said. "You likee eat, eh?"

"I likee," Windy snapped. He didn't want conversation. He wanted to think.

He always found the same point of departure in his thinking. That beautiful girl he had spanked. Louise Trimble of the Triple T. It didn't please Windy at all, thinking about arresting her and her crew. But he had already arrested one of them, and people had seemed mighty pleased about it. He tried to think of Louise Trimble as an outlaw queen, and he decided that if she was he could sure understand why a man might forsake the law for the crooked trail.

"Say, Wo Tung," he asked the cook. "I hear tell there was a murder around here not too long ago."

"Oh yes," said Wo Tung. "Marshal he get kill bad. He number three dead marshal. Maybeso you number four, no?"

"No, I hope." Windy was thoughtful. "This must be a bad town."

"Oh no! Good town!" Wo Tung said emphatically. "By 'm by everybody be millionaire. Everybody eat plenty. By 'm by no more Triple T outlaw. Everybody gotta oil well. Oh too fine." Wo Tung ran to the door and glanced up and down the street. He came back, and from under his apron he took a roll of bills. "You tellee

Mayor Mueller, Wo Tung likee buy two more lots, see?"

Somewhere deep inside Windy McCloud's brain a dim light started to glow. "Whereabouts are these lots, Wo Tung?" he asked slowly.

"Triple T ranch," Wo Tung said. "Inside city limit. Trimble City belly fine city. Everybody buy city lot. Every city lot cathee oil well, see?"

"Yeh," Windy drawled. "I think I see." He wiped a finger under his hawk-beak nose. "These lots. You buy 'em from the city—through Mayor Mueller, right?"

"Oh yes," Wo Tung chuckled happily. "Belly fine. Everybody cathee millionaire. You cathee millionaire too, eh?"

"I think I cathee crook instead," said Windy. He hurried through his steak and signed for it.

As he hurried back down toward the jail, things were starting to make sense. He couldn't quite figure why Mayor Mueller was so insistent on having a marshal, but he could figure why city officials were so popular. The officials were expanding the city limits to where every man, woman and child in Trimble City could own a lot. And every lot was supposed to have an oil well on it.

He wondered about the name "Trimble City" and just how much of it had originally been Triple T range. And that brought up the question of whether the Triple T was an outlaw outfit at all, or had Ephraim Mueller sold so many city lots that he had forced himself to acquire more land? Windy figured he had best talk to Elmer. . . .

BUT Elmer proved to be uncooperative. He lay on his bunk, staring at the ceiling, muttering to himself. He seemed to be calling the wrath of several gods down on his own head.

Windy asked him about oil wells. He asked him about the Triple T and how the City of Trimble had gotten its name. He finally got around to asking Elmer about Louise Trimble, and for the first time he got a bit of response. "You even mention her name and I'll knock your block off," Elmer announced, getting to his feet and doubling his fists.

"Elmer," said Windy, "you might as well face up to it. You just ain't good at

this business of knocking off blocks."

The fight ran out of Elmer. "It's the truth," he sighed, sinking back to his bunk. "I'm not good at it. And since I'm not I might as well confess to the marshal's murder and let you hang me and get it over with. Life is not worth living without Louise, and Louise is gone."

Windy wanted to know where Louise had gone, but he held the question back. "Well," said Windy, "as long as you're ready to confess, I'll get a pen and paper and take it all down."

"Sure. You do that. I killed him. You can drop the charges against the rest of the Triple T crew."

Windy got the pen and paper. He wet the pen in his mouth without thinking, spit out the ink and scratched the date on the paper. He headed it "Confession" and said, "All right, Elmer. Let's begin at the beginning. Your full name?"

"Elmer Kelly," the kid told him. "And once I thought her name would be Louise Kelly."

"The murder," said Windy.

"Yes, the murder," said Elmer. "Marshal Frankoid was coming out to the Triple T to collect city taxes. I knew this was my last chance to make an impression on Louise if I wanted to hold her. She said if I got whipped once more she was through with me. I can't understand that girl! You'd think a man's muscles was the only thing there was to a man. I'm a nice fellow. I love her and I'd be kind to her. I went to college. I'm a fine geologist. I could give her everything if she'd listen to me, but she wants me to hit somebody on the nose—"

"The murder?" prompted Windy.

"Oh yes. Well, I went out and met Marshal Frankoid. I challenged him." Elmer jumped to his feet and started sparring. "Marshal Frankoid drew a gun. I slashed at him. I took the gun away from him." Elmer was dancing and punching wildly. "He rushed at me. I rushed at him. He drew a knife. I took the knife away from him—"

Windy crumpled the paper and tossed it into the corner of the cell. "You're a liar, Elmer."

The kid sat down on the bunk and held his head in his hands. "No, I'm not," he said. "It's just that I try so hard to fight

for her, and every time I do I get hit and I seem to go out faster than I come in."

"I think I could point out your trouble, Elmer," offered Windy. "That is, if you'd tell me what I want to know."

"Go ahead and hang me," said Elmer. "I don't want anything to do with anyone connected with Ephraim Mueller." He got to his feet and Windy looked at him, a tall, well-built, powerful kid with blond hair and a blocky chin and the weight of a lost love on his shoulders.

Windy was a sentimental cuss. He could see how losing a girl like Louise Trimble could whip a man. He felt pretty low himself, just thinking about how he had never had a girl like Louise.

"Elmer," said Windy, "suppose I tell you I'm not an Ephraim Mueller man?"

"Then I could call you a liar," Elmer replied promptly.

"You'd be wrong," said Windy.

"Then what are you doing with that badge on your shirt?"

"Damned if I rightly know," said Windy. "That's why I want to make a deal with you."

"No deal," Elmer stated flatly.

"Not even if I promised to show you how to knock out the next man you met?"

There was a wild flicker of interest in Elmer's eyes but he subdued it. "It's too late," he said. "I've already lost Louise. I told her I'd come in here and whip you for spanking her. And here I am. As soon as she finds out what happened to me, I'm through."

"If I was to let you break out of here," Windy observed, "she wouldn't need to know you didn't whip me."

"Now wait a minute," said Elmer. "It's bad enough for you bunch of robbers to take Triple T away from her. But if you think you're going to get those oil surveys away from me . . ."

"Oh?" Windy asked slowly—"you got some oil surveys?"

"You know I have."

"Elmer," said Windy, "I swear I don't know nothing. I drifted into this town needing a job bad. I got this job by accident, and it looks like most folks around here want me to keep it." He studied the kid carefully, remembering how Elmer had come at him there on the sidewalk and again in the saloon. Elmer had guts, Windy

decided. He just lacked enough know-how.

Windy stood up. "Watch this, Elmer," he called. He half turned, threw up his left shoulder and started making short jabs with his left fist, keeping his right cocked. "You fight too open, Elmer. You invite people to hit you. Here, throw one at me."

Elmer hesitated. He didn't want to get mixed up in any deals, but he did want to learn to fight more than anything else in the world. Windy had counted on that.

"Well, all right," Elmer said. "I'm going to hang anyway." He took his stance, his fists balled, his arms way out from his sides, chest high. He stuck out his tongue. He stuck out his chin.

Windy reached through the wide opening and gave Elmer an open-handed slap on the chin. "There, you see? Now try keeping your tongue in and try keeping your fists somewhere near your body."

"Well I'll be darned!" said Elmer.

THE kid got the hang of it fast. He got so excited that once he nearly floored Windy. The kid had shoulders like a bull and he was fast, once he got going. He just had the erroneous idea that he could stand there unprotected and take a minute or so to wind up while his opponent waited for him. So far no one ever had.

"So you went to college to learn about rock inspectin' and that kind of stuff, did yuh?" Windy said, throwing a quick left. It landed solidly on Elmer's chin. Elmer went down, but he got up, grinning.

"Yeah. Dad didn't want me to follow the saloon business." Elmer bored in fast and Windy had to cover up. "So, what with the oil business starting to grow into such a big thing I figured that was a good field—Oo-oops! Sorry! I didn't mean to knock you down."

"That's all right, Elmer," Windy said, getting up off the floor. "But Louise Trimble wants to marry a fighting man, is that it?"

"That's it," Elmer admitted sadly, all the fight running out of him. "And I'm just not a fighter."

"Elmer, I don't believe it." Windy looked at the kid steadily. "It's beginning to look to me like I'm marshaling on the wrong side of the street. If I let you out of here will you take me out to the Triple T so I can talk to Louise?"

"Ha!" said Elmer. "So you can arrest the rest of the crew, you mean. Then Ephraim Mueller can legally call the basin abandoned land and expand the city limits to include it." Elmer shook his head. "No go," he said.

"Then I reckon I'll have to take you by force," Windy told him. "Because I'm not goin' out there alone and get myself shot up like the last marshal. Come on, Elmer." He drew his gun and prodded Elmer in the ribs.

With their scuffling and sparring neither of them had heard any sound from outside. They heard it now. Stepping out into the office Windy could see through the window. A crowd was forming in the street, and at the head of the crowd was Ephraim Mueller, the mayor. Windy opened the door and the crowd grew quiet. "What's up, Mayor?" he asked.

"We caught the rest of the Triple T outlaws," said Mueller. "We figure Miss Trimble will give herself up." The crowd parted and two men came through. They were holding another man between them. It was the little rooster who had first piled on Windy.

"Good Lord," moaned Elmer from behind Windy. "They've got our foreman, Wichita Sam! It's all over."

CHAPTER

3

Apache Style

Wichita Sam looked as if he had been put through a meat grinder, but there was still fight in him. He glared at Windy. Behind Wichita Sam were the two other Triple T riders, handcuffed together.

"Let's string 'em up now!" somebody yelled. "The Trimbles have run this country long enough. We know one of them killed the marshal. They're all outlaws!"

Windy was looking not at Wichita Sam nor at the Triple T riders. He was looking at the men who were herding those riders in. Unless he was badly mistaken—and he couldn't be after four days of dodging them—here was the sheriff and posse that had chased him out of Oil City. Windy saw the sheriff staring at him. He saw recognition come into the sheriff's eyes. He saw the savage satisfaction on the sheriff's face, and he felt his days as a free man running out.

Cold sweat trickled down Windy's back. The smile on Ephraim Mueller's face told plainly that whatever reason he had for hiring a marshal no longer existed. "Elmer," said Windy, "I got a feelin' I been doublecrossed. Do you reckon the Triple T would like its crew back?"

"She's the most wonderful girl in the world."

"Somehow I believe you," Windy said. "Let's take Wichita Sam and the boys and go see her."

Elmer's face was pale. He looked at the crowd. He saw the sheriff and the posse. He licked his lips. "It would make us outlaws for sure."

"Live outlaws," Windy reminded. "And Louise would love you for it."

"Let's go," said Elmer.

"And Elmer," said Windy.

"Yes, Windy?"

"For once in your life, please keep that guard up." He hurried through the desk drawers and found a loaded gun. He handed it to Elmer. "The long narrow end shoots," he said. "It's also good for slap-pin' folks on the jaw."

The element of surprise was their biggest asset. Together, Elmer and Windy came out of the office. Ephraim Mueller stared at Elmer. The sheriff stared at Windy. And while they were staring Windy hit the sheriff right on the point of the chin. There was a howl of delight from Elmer Kelly. "Windy!" the kid yelled. "It worked!" From the tail of his eye Windy saw Ephraim Mueller stretched out on the ground.

"Damn it," muttered Windy. "I wanted that one on his feet. Now I'll have to pack him." He stooped down and picked up the little mayor and tossed him across his shoulder. "Get those Triple T boys to give us a hand," he yelled. "We can't do it alone!"

By now the element of surprise was gone and a half dozen deputy sheriffs started yanking out guns. Windy saw Elmer lay his gun barrel alongside a man's head. The kid was wild with his newly-found power. "Give us a hand, Wichita!" Elmer belted. "Triple T let 'er buck!"

A deputy shoved a gun in Windy's face. A pair of handcuffs rose and fell and the deputy went down. The two handcuffed Triple T punchers ginned at each other

and started mowing a path through the crowd. Their hands lifted and fell, and each time they did somebody fell like a poled ax. Elmer and Wichita Sam fought a rear-guard action while Windy moved ahead, packing the mayor on his shoulder.

They fought across the street and Windy saw the bartender standing there with a bucket of water. The bartender's mouth was open. All of a sudden he gave a yell of pure joy. He plunged into the fight, swinging the bucket, yelling, "That's my boy!"

THE additional and unexpected help of the bartender sewed the fight up tight. Deputies, it seemed, were sprawled all over the street, and the townspeople, not wanting any part of this lethal crew that had terrorized them the past few months, started to scatter. There was even time to go back and pick the sheriff's pocket to find the key to the handcuffs. This Wichita Sam did with apparent relish.

The horses belonging to the sheriff and posse were tied there in front of the saloon. This was no time to argue the fine points of ethics, Windy figured. "Get into them saddles and let's get out of here," he yelled.

He boosted the limp body of Mayor Mueller across a saddle and swung up behind. Gripping the reins in his teeth and holding the mayor with his left hand, he jerked his gun with his right hand and fired a few harmless shots over the heads of the now retreating crowd. Elmer Kelly gave a rebel yell that rattled the windows and emptied his gun. The street emptied. Together, Windy McCloud and the Triple T outlaws thundered out of town, and no one followed them.

The Triple T headquarters was about two miles down the road. It had been a tremendous outfit once, Windy saw as they galloped up into the yard, but it had seen better days. The barns were sagging, the corral fences in a bad state of repair. Only the bunkhouse, designed to accommodate twenty men, and the long, rambling adobe ranch house showed any signs of care.

As the men slid their horses to a stop, Louise Trimble came out of the ranch house, a shotgun in her hand. She dropped the gun and her mouth flew open when she saw her crew, and even in that unbecoming attitude Windy had to admit that she was

even more beautiful than he had remembered her. He glanced at Elmer Kelly and wondered why the devil he had wanted this kid to get back in the good graces of Louise Trimble. After all, if she wanted a fighting man . . . Windy adjusted his neckerchief and turned his best profile.

Louise Trimble stared at Windy McCloud, obviously trying to figure out what this was all about. She saw the badge on Windy's shirt. The gun snapped up. "You long, lanky, ugly, red-headed drink of water," she began. "You good-for-nothing, low-down—"

"Just a minute, Louise," Elmer said. There was new strength in the kid's voice, and Louise seemed to sense it. "Windy here is all right. If it wasn't for him and me, the whole bunch of us would be locked up by now and we'd be hanging from a cottonwood by sundown."

"That's gospel, Miss Louise," Wichita Sam added. "This here redhead is a real he-man with fur on him. He dang near tore the sheriff's head off with one wallop, and there's deputies piled like cordwood right in the middle of the street." The other two Triple T hands chimed in with their praise and Windy stood there digging his boot toe in the ground, blushing and proud.

"Shucks, ma'am," he said, "it wasn't nothin'."

At that moment another rider came thundering down the lane. He was wearing a white apron. His arms were flapping, and the grin on his face threw a light across the entire barnyard. "Elmer, my son," the man yelled, "you were wonderful! Elmer, my boy, I have never seen such a fight!"

Hang that bartender. Windy thought, *I was doing just fine there for a minute.*

The bartender threw himself out of the saddle, puffing and blowing. "You should of seen it, Louise. You should of seen my Elmer! Why doggone it he was like a madman. I saw him knock down six men—"

"Seven, Dad," said Elmer modestly. "I got Ephraim Mueller first. You didn't see that."

Ephraim Mueller moaned and slid off the saddle. He lit on the ground hard, then sat up, blinking his eyes.

"Elmer!" Louise breathed, her eyes growing wide. "You didn't!"

"I did," said Elmer, "and what's more I'm tellin' you right now if you don't start behavin' yourself, I'm gonna turn you across my knee and give you what you need most!"

"Oh Elmer!" whispered Louise. Windy thought she was going to faint but she didn't. She just sort of swayed and landed right in Elmer's arms. Elmer held her close and stood there looking fierce and stern.

Windy McCloud sniffed and rubbed his nose. *What the devil*, he thought, *I'm too old to be settling down anyway.*

"Wait a minute," said Louise, pushing herself out of Elmer's embrace. "What are we all so happy about?"

"We escaped, didn't we?" Elmer pointed out. "We fought our way out—"

"So you did," said Louise, and now she was the boss again. "And you let this long, red-headed yahoo talk you right into a trap. I suppose it was his idea, wasn't it?"

"Why yes, it was," Elmer admitted, "but I don't see . . ."

WINDY started to sweat. He didn't like the way this girl was looking at him. She walked straight toward him, her hands on her hips. "Just what was the big idea, you Ephraim Mueller gunhand?" inquired Louise Trimble.

"I wanted to help, Ma'am," Windy explained.

"You sure did," said Louise bitterly. "Look at those horses. Look at that mayor. Look at yourselves." She stood there, her eyes blazing. "I should have known it," she said. "A murder charge wasn't enough for you, was it?" Her face was only inches from Windy's face, and Windy felt his knees getting watery. She held up her hands and counted off on her fingers. "Now we can be charged with horse stealing, kidnaping, assault and battery and jail break. Oh yes, Mr. Do-Gooder. You fixed things up just dandy, didn't you?"

There was a loud whinny from Ephraim Mueller who had regained consciousness and was on his feet. "I'm glad you see the seriousness of the situation and the utter hopelessness of trying to keep your ranch, Miss Trimble," the mayor said.

"You're a crook," Windy McCloud told him. "I brought you along to make you confess."

"Confess what, pray tell?" asked Ephraim Mueller.

"You was trying to get the city limits expanded to include the Trimble ranch," accused Windy. "You was workin' an oil well swindle!"

"Was I now?" said the mayor. His lips pulled back from his yellow teeth. "For your information, former Marshal Windy McCloud, wanted criminal and jail-breaker, it was a fully legal city council action that decided to expand the city limits. And you, McCloud, were the one who made that council action possible!"

"I knew it," wailed Louise Trimble. "A man who can fight like that is too good to be true."

"What the devil you talkin' about?" yelled Windy. "I didn't see no council!"

"You ate at Wo Tung's, didn't you?" simpered the mayor. "You signed for your food, didn't you? Were a court to examine the records, that would be proof enough that you were on the city payroll on the date in question."

"That still don't mean nothin'."

"It means," said Ephraim Mueller, "that all this afternoon the city council was at full and legal voting strength according to the city charter. You see," he said, his eyes growing owlsh, "it is important that we do everything legal. The sheriff is a very efficient man, as you will soon discover. I was quite sure he would want to examine our records in this matter. He did. He found them in absolute order."

"I had nothin' to do with it!" yelled Windy.

"For your information," said Mayor Mueller, completely sure of himself now, "the city marshal is a member of the city council, and the city council cannot vote on the acquisition of property without consent of the full council." The mayor whinnied. "And you, as marshal, made a full council."

"There you are. It ain't legal. I didn't vote!"

"Should the city marshal be absent on official business," quoted Mayor Mueller, "then the City Clerk shall have his proxy." You, Marshal Windy McCloud, were absent on the official business of putting Elmer Kelly in jail. City Clerk Percival voted in your absence. You," said Mayor Mueller, pointing his skinny forefinger, "voted to

annex this property to the City of Trimble.

The mayor whinnied loud and long. "And now, Miss Trimble," he continued, "since there is a city ordinance against raising livestock within the city limits you will kindly move your evil-smelling cows out of town immediately!"

"You dirty crook," yelled Windy. "You're in the business of selling city lots."

"Of course," said Ephraim Mueller. "Any law against it?"

"Misrepresentation!" howled Windy. "You're tellin' everybody there's oil on this land."

"Well, isn't there?" cooed the mayor.

"Of course not," Windy said smugly.

"Ask Elmer here. He's a college-trained rock inspector. He'd know if there was oil. There ain't oil, is there Elmer?"

Elmer Kelly had turned a little green. "We're standing on top of the biggest oil lake in California," said Elmer.

Mayor Mueller really whinnied. "Anything else, Mr. Jail-Breaker McCloud?" he said.

WINDY felt his muscles getting tight. He felt the anger growing into a hard knot in the pit of his stomach. He knew something was going to have to give. All this legal red tape was too much for him. A few years back if a situation like this had come up he could have settled it with a gun barrel.

The ex-marshal's eyes fell on Wichita Sam. Sam was around sixty. His face was red, his neck swelling. Sam was wishing for the old days too. "There's more here than meets the eye," said Windy, "and I aim to find out what it is."

"It's no use," Louise said. "He's got us whipped. This place is part of a land grant, and if criminal action is ever brought against one of the owners the place goes to the city school district."

"Exactly," smiled Ephraim Mueller.

The devil with it, thought Windy McCloud. Just because it's legal don't make it right.

He looked at Wichita Sam again. He could almost read Wichita's thoughts. Wichita Sam was as sick of this legal hocus-pocus as Windy was. The situation needed direct treatment. "Wichita," said Windy, "you ever had any experience with Injuns?"

"The kind that drives splinters under a man's fingernails?" said Wichita, glaring at Ephraim Mueller.

"Pitch splinters," said Windy. "Then sets 'em on fire."

Wichita Sam's face was glowing. A slow hope started growing in the eyes of the bartender, too. The bartender said, "Windy, I picked you for a man the first time I laid eyes on yuh. Like I said, the stink of oil and politics is gettin' fierce around here. What we need is some old-time religion."

"Confession is good for the soul," said Windy. "Mayor, we want to talk to you."

"Don't you touch me!" squealed the mayor.

"You'd best go in the house, ma'am," Windy said to Louise. "The smell of human flesh burnin' is an awful and sickening thing."

CHAPTER

Sheriff vs. Marshal

4

By the time the sheriff and his deputies had come to, found horses to ride and arrived at the Triple T ranch, Mayor Ephraim Mueller wanted to talk. Ephraim Mueller did not have a mark on him, except for the scars on his soul, and those did not show. Nevertheless he ran down the lane and met the sheriff and the people who had ridden out from town, and he was talking a blue streak.

Windy, the elder Kelly and Wichita Sam didn't hurt Ephraim Mueller a bit. In fact, they had pretty much ignored him. Of course they staked him out on the ground spread-eagled, just for security, but beyond that they didn't even speak to him.

The three men built a fire, and—as they waited for it to form a good bed of coals—they sat around and smoked and talked of the good old days when there was an Apache behind every bush. They talked mostly of the things they had learned from the Apaches. They whittled as they talked, making sharp, stout little sticks, and then they fell into an argument over whether a man could actually die from pain. Windy said a man couldn't; Wichita said he knew damned well a man could. The bartender said, "Well, we'll soon know."

After that they argued over methods of

preserving ears once they were removed from a man's head, and they regretted that there would be only two ears for souvenirs. They played odd man with coins, and Windy and Wichita won. The bartender said he'd rather have a scalp anyway.

They really got to fighting over whether a hot branding iron would skid on human flesh, or could you get a good brand. The concensus was that it was a matter of degrees of heat and the thing to do was try several irons at different temperatures.

Windy stirred up the fire while Wichita went to the barn and got three irons. One was a huge, Triple T stamp iron; the other two were running irons. The argurent continued while the irons heated.

Finally, Windy took the big stamp iron from the fire, just to see how hot it was. That's all he was going to do with it. He took it in his hand and walked over toward Ephraim Mueller and Ephraim Mueller passed out.

The bartender went over to the horse trough and got a bucket of water. As the bartender said, he had had more experience than any of them when it came to tossing water on a man. Ephraim Mueller came to, gagging and coughing. He felt the water trickling down his face and he screamed one word. "*Blood!*"

Windy spit on the branding iron. It sizzled.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," babbled Ephraim Mueller.

"Ugh," said Windy, holding the iron close.

"To hell with him," said Wichita Sam, sharpening his knife on the top of his boot. "I'm dang near out of practice. I don't *want* to hear anything he's got to say. Windy, old friend, I'm gonna prove to you that you can skin a man and tan his hide. Had a holster made out of manhide once." Wichita was thoughtful. "Always wondered what finally killed that man."

"Maybe he caught cold, runnin' around without his skin," Windy suggested.

"Could be," said Wichita, thinking it over carefully.

Ephraim Mueller strained at his bonds. "I'll make you all millionaires," he pleaded.

"I ain't interested in buyin' no town lots," said Windy. "You boys interested?"

"Nope," said Wichita. "Long as we're criminal outlaws anyway we might as well

have some fun." He went over and tested his knife by cutting off a lock of Mueller's hair.

Windy unbuttoned Ephraim Mueller's shirt and ripped it off. Then, with his knife, he neatly cut the top part out of Mueller's undershirt. "Damned iron got cold," Windy drawled disgustedly. "I'll have to heat it some more."

"I don't mean town lots," Mueller said. He whinnied wildly. "I'll cut you in with Mr. Percival and myself. We hold all the mineral rights. All those people have been buying is the land. Mr. Percival and I control all the oil. We'll cut you in on it. I swear we will!"

"What yuh think, Windy?" Wichita asked.

"Naw."

"Probably still accuse me of killin' Marshal Frankoid," Wichita agreed. "Anyway, this is more fun." Wichita went over and pulled off Ephraim Mueller's boots and socks. He took a stick that was just warm from the fire and laid it across the soles of Ephraim Mueller's feet.

Ephraim Mueller bellowed like a branded steer. "It was Mr. Percival killed Marshal Frankoid," he screamed for all to hear. "I'll tell them it was Mr. Percival. Marshal Frankoid wouldn't cooperate!"

"Wonder if he'd like to tell that to the sheriff?" Windy mused.

"Of course not!" Mueller said. "I'm trying to make a deal with you—"

"My iron's ready," Windy commented. "How about you boys?"

"Mine looks about right," the bartender said.

The three men took their irons from the fire. They stood there, their lips peeled back from their teeth, the irons held high. They started chanting in something that could have passed for Apache, and they advanced slowly toward Ephraim Mueller. "I'll talk!" Mueller screamed. "I'll confess! I'll tell the sheriff!"

"You reckon he would?" said Windy.

"He might forget," said Wichita.

"All right," said Windy. "Now!"

The three red-hot irons descended at one time. They moved straight toward Ephraim Mueller's bare chest, and they lingered long enough so that Ephraim Mueller could feel the heat. They then moved and hit the ropes that held Ephraim Mueller to the ground.

The smell of burning hemp filled the air. It trickled up Mueller's nostrils and was not unlike the smell of burning flesh. Ephraim Mueller screeched and tugged at his bonds. The burned ropes parted.

Mueller was on his feet before he knew what had happened. He started running. His upper torso was bare; he was without shoes and socks. He ran straight down the lane screaming that he would confess, slapping himself as if he were afire. He ran smack into the arms of the sheriff and his deputies and the folks from town—and he kept right on talking.

"Nervous sort, ain't he?" said Windy.

"Smart boy, eh?" a voice said at Windy's elbow. Windy, the bartender and Wichita Sam all turned. There stood Mr. Percival, the City Clerk. He had a cocked six-shooter in his hand.

WINDY, Wichita and the bartender all moved at the same time. The gun in Percival's hand exploded, and the bullet burned across the top of Windy's shoulder. All four men went down at once, and the gun blasted again. Then Windy had hold of the hot barrel, and he was twisting with his left hand, slugging with his right.

Percival was an absolute bull of a man. He threw off all three of them, but not until Windy had wrenched the gun loose and tossed it aside. Percival came charging in like a madman, and all of a sudden there was Elmer Kelly, right in the way. Elmer had come running out at the sound of the shots.

No one knew for sure just how it happened. Elmer Kelly braced his feet. He stuck out his fist. Mr. Percival ran into it. Mr. Percival went down hard, and he didn't move after he finished bouncing. Elmer stood there, staring at the prostrate Mr. Percival. He looked at Windy and at Wichita and at his dad. "You saw it, didn't you?" Elmer said. He sounded as if he weren't quite sure of himself.

"I saw it, son," the bartender told him with pride. "He whipped me and Windy and Wichita but you knocked him cold with one blow."

"Why couldn't Louise have seen it?" Elmer asked miserably. "She doesn't believe I've become a fighter."

"I'll tell her," said Windy.

By that time, the sheriff and his men

were in the yard. Ephraim Mueller was still naked to the waist, still barefoot, still talking, but he had handcuffs on. His words kept tumbling out. "I'll tell you anything and everything if you'll just save me from those demons," he wailed.

"You'll be safe from them for a long time," the sheriff said kindly. "You'll all be in separate cells."

"Yipes!" said Windy McCloud. In the press of excitement he had completely forgotten the hole in the adobe jail in Oil City. He remembered it now and started to run, but the sheriff put a fatherly hand on his shoulder. The hand held a gun and the barrel of the gun was pressed against Windy's temple.

"I'm really sorry, McCloud," the sheriff said, "after the way you cleaned up the dirty politics in Thimble City. But I'm a man who reads the law as it is written, and the harder I ride after a man the bigger the writin' gets. Now with you, I'd say the sentence should be hangin'." He smiled kindly. "But I want to help you, McCloud. I'll do my best to see you only get life."

"That's neighborly of you," said Windy.

"Now wait a minute," Wichita broke in. "This here Windy—"

"Anything you say will be used against you, Wichita," said the sheriff. "I want you on a charge of horse-stealing and assault. That goes for you, too, Kelly," he said to the bartender, "and for the rest of the Triple T crew. Except Elmer, that is. I want him for jail-breaking, also."

It was obvious that the sheriff meant business. Windy looked from one man to the other. He saw Louise Trimble come out of the house. He knew she had heard, and he saw the defeat in her eyes; and he realized that it was all because of him that these charges had come to pass. It hurt Windy right down where he lived. He said, "Wait a minute, Sheriff. You figger I'll sure enough get life?"

"At least that long," said the sheriff.

"All right," Windy nodded. "Then drop the charges against the rest of these men."

"Why?" asked the sheriff, smiling.

"Because they ain't guilty," said Windy. "I was the one stole the horses. I forced these men to ride with me at pistol point. And Elmer didn't break jail. I let him out the front door."

"How about the assault charges?"

"I was the only one hit anybody."

"Now wait a minute," protested Elmer. "I hit—"

"Ha ha," laughed Windy hollowly. "You hit what? The ground, maybe. Why there ain't a person in Trimble City don't know you couldn't hit a wall if you was locked inside a shed. Ain't that right, folks?"

There was a mumble of assent. "Only time I ever seen him before was on his back," an old man said, peering closely. "I didn't recognize him, standin' up."

"I knew it," wailed Louise Trimble. "Even that was too good to be true!"

The sheriff was scratching his head. He rather obviously didn't relish arresting everybody, and as long as he had one prisoner who would accept all charges . . . "All right, McCloud," he said, "I'll take your word for it. Of course you realize it will probably mean two life terms running consecutively."

"It's all right," stated Windy. "Just let me say good-bye to my friends."

"Sure, McCloud," the sheriff said, sniffing. "Go ahead while I tie up Mr. Percival. He's wanted for murder in six states."

Elmer Kelly grabbed Windy's arm. "Now you've done it," he whispered hoarsely. "You've convinced Louise that it was all a lie about me knocking out those men."

Windy looked at Louise. She looked more beautiful than ever. A man ought to be able to kiss a girl like that once before he went to prison for life, he figured. He said, "Tell you what, Elmer. If I was to go over and grab Louise and kiss her, why then you could pretend to be mad and you could rush in and poke me and I'd fall down and she could see you was a fighter."

"Say," said Elmer. "That's a swell idea!"

"Just pretend to hit me," said Windy.

"Just pretend to kiss her," said Elmer.

Windy walked right up to Louise Trimble. "Louise," he announced, "you are the most beautiful girl in the world." He reached out and took her in his arms. He lowered his lips to hers and kissed her, and all of a sudden the world started spinning around and everything went black—and Windy didn't give a hang whether he spent the rest of his life in jail or not. It was worth it.

Louise pushed away feebly. She stood there, still half in Windy's arms. Her eyes

were shining, her lips parted. "Oh, Windy!" she said, and it sounded like all the breath was out of her.

"Unhand the woman I love!" yelled Elmer Kelly.

Windy had forgotten Elmer. He had forgotten everything. Now he turned and he saw Elmer charging at him and he remembered the deal he had made. Windy put up his right fist. Too late, he saw his mistake. Elmer ran smack into Windy's fist. He went down hard, and he lay there on his back, his mouth wide open.

Now I've really done it, thought Windy McCloud, but he didn't much care. That kiss! The slap turned him half around. "You beast!" said Louise Trimble as she slapped him again.

When Windy regained his senses, Louise Trimble was on the ground. She had Elmer Kelly's head in her lap, and she was stroking his forehead. "Speak to me, my darling," begged Louise Trimble.

"Oh," said Elmer Kelly.

"Darling, darling," cried Louise. "I'll marry you today. I'll do anything you say. We'll start drilling for oil tomorrow if that's what you want."

"You'll marry me today," said Elmer. "We'll wait a week to start drilling for oil. I'll have other things to do."

"Come on, Sheriff," said Windy. "Lock me up before I hurt myself."

BY MIDNIGHT that night, Windy McCloud was a long ways north of Trimble City. Funny, he mused, but they just didn't seem to make jails very strong any more. The hole in the side of the Trimble City jail wasn't quite so big as the one in the Oil City jail, but it had served its purpose and been easy to make. Of course Kelly, the bartender, and Wichita Sam had helped a bit. . . .

Windy removed the marshal's badge from his shirt. Might as well keep it for a souvenir, he figured. He could look at it and think of Louise Trimble and Elmer Kelly rolling around in their oil money.

Wichita Sam had said there were cow outfits up around King City and Salinas. Maybe there were. Windy didn't know. He thought of the sheriff and the posse on his back trail, and he spurred his horse into a lope. At any rate, he thought, there were always those apples up in Oregon. ● ● ●

TENDERFOOT TROUBLE

By **BRUCE CASSIDAY**

Too bad that Bob Gibson's college education hadn't included the theory and practice of fighting a range war. For that college-trained greenhorn sure needed all the advice—and guns—that he could get!

SEATED on a packing case on the San Saba station platform, Ridgeway could hear the sound of the far-off locomotive down the tracks. The twin lines of glistening metal stretched into the distance, vanishing somewhere between the vast expanse of clear blue sky and the rolling mass of prairie. He saw one of the Cross Bow hands crossing the tracks below town, headed out toward the home spread, but he could not yet make out the puffing engine.

"She comes," murmured the dark-skinned Mexican at his side. "Like a sixty-year-old woman chasing chickens down the tracks—but she comes." Juan Madrone had obviously tried to find reassuring words to say about the arrival of Cross Bow's new boss, but had failed. Ridgeway was glad the subject had been left buried where it belonged for the present.

He lifted his half-finished cigarette, rolled it tight, licked it and sealed it shut. Thoughtfully, he got out a match, struck it along the seam of his compuncher's jeans, and got the wheatstraw going against the slow breeze sifting in from the flatlands.

He could see Madrone's sharp eyes on his face, probing gently, offering up a degree of sympathy, but he purposely avoided his segundo's eyes and continued staring down the railway, slitting his eyes against the sun's glare. It was useless to pretend that nothing was at stake. It was even more useless to worry before it became absolutely necessary. But he knew he couldn't help worrying about Cross Bow



"I don't want any trouble with you," the slender boy's voice trembled.

—even now when he might be able to do nothing to save it.

A rancher's high-heeled boots hit the wooden planking of the platform, walking heavily against it. Whoever it was had let his spurs out to the last hole, and they gouged chunks of wood out of the floor. That would be Harriman, Ridgeway thought wearily; Harriman, come to rub salt into the wound.

"New boss come in yet?" Harriman asked, his voice heavy with malicious anticipation. "You might not even recognize the kid now that he's all growed up, Ridgeway. And the kid—maybe he don't even know where San Saba's located no more. Could be they don't teach Western geography in them fancy colleges back East."

Harriman flipped out an ivory toothpick and began running it through his front teeth. His black, dirty eyes watched Ridgeway in amusement and then slid over to the stolid, expressionless face of Juan Madrone. Without a word, Harriman ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth and deliberately spat on the wooden platform in front of Madrone's polished riding boots. Then, grinning like a death's-head, he put the ivory toothpick back in his mouth and let it hang there from his wind-chapped lips.

Ridgeway stared at Harriman through a wall of blue smoke. He could hear the warning voice inside him saying: *Hold still, Sam. Your time will come. Don't go after Harriman now. Wait. Too much is at stake.*

Harriman sat down on one of the packing crates and stared out across the golden fields. "Mighty pleasant funeral you held for the Old Man last Monday, Ridgeway. I thought that was a real touching do . . . considering."

Poisonous and vibrating, the final word hung in the air. Its implication was obvious: *considering* the Old Man was a ruthless range hog and a black-hearted robber baron; *considering* the Old Man held the entire San Saba Basin in subjugation, winning for himself the undying hatred of every ranchman alive. These considerations were almost entirely original with Saul Harriman: they grew out of his resentment and jealousy of Big John Gibson.

Ridgeway nodded carefully, his eyes fixed on the cigarette smouldering in his hand. He watched the wisps of smoke curling and rising and thought of the anger inside him, curling and rising in the same way.

Harriman was swelled up with importance and conceit now. With Big John Gibson in his grave, Saul Harriman considered himself Number One man of the San Saba. And he would be that, if Big John's son permitted it. Unfortunately, the odds were high that Young Bob was considerably less than a chip off the old block. He might do just that.

Harriman took the ivory toothpick out of his mouth, wiped it, and put it carefully back in his shirt pocket. Then he turned in the direction of the approaching train. He began whistling a meaningless tune, vacantly watching the tracks.

"See you got the Old Man's fancy go-to-meeting rig parked out in the street there, waiting for Junior," he said finally. "Figured he couldn't stick on the back of a hoss, didn't you, Ridgeway? Sitting down so much on them stuffed easy chairs does make a man soft in the important places."

Ridgeway glanced up at Harriman, his eyes cold. "Why don't you range some place else, Harriman?"

Harriman looked back at Ridgeway, his grin twisted flatter. He saw that he had gotten to the Cross Bow ranrod, that he had hit him in a tender spot. He certainly wasn't going to let an advantage like that pass.

"It pleasures me to see you squirm, Ridgeway," Harriman laughed, leaning back on the packing crate. "Spooked a little about your new boss, ain't you? Skeered to death. And well you might be, Ridgeway," Harriman said softly, standing up. "Well you might be. I'm moving into Clover Canyon tomorrow. You ain't going to stop me, because you ain't got the authority. How do you like that news, Mr. Ramrod?"

Ridgeway came to his feet, his face inches from Harriman's. He could count the orange-colored bristles on Harriman's unshaven jaw. He could see the red veins in the coal-black eyes. He could see the thin layer of dust on the man's oily skin.

He felt his hands clench at his sides, felt his teeth grind together, felt the muscles along his jaw bunch up and push outward.

The hot flame of fury swept up in him, but he stood there wordless, powerless, helpless.

WHAT Harriman said was true: Ridgeway didn't have the authority; never would have. The Old Man had kept Harriman out of the disputed Clover Canyon pasture land. With the Old Man gone, and a new boss for Cross Bow, Harriman might be able to move his cows onto that rich slot of grass without a word of opposition. The Old Man had maintained rights to Clover Canyon by the strength of his good right arm; no law covered him. Cross Bow's new boss might not wish to use force to maintain his land; perhaps he didn't really have the strength to do so.

That was what had been bothering Ridgeway ever since the death of the Old Man. Would his son be able to fit into his father's shoes? They were big shoes—made for big feet. How would young Gibson act after eight years in the East, reading in books how to make money on cattle; studying in libraries how to work a ranch; learning in print how to be range boss of the biggest spread in the San Saba? How would Eastern theories stack up against the realities of the West?

Ridgeway turned from Harriman as the approaching train came chuffing into the station, belching great clouds of black smoke from its funnel-shaped smokestack. It jerked to a sliding stop along the length of the San Saba station.

Ridgeway came down off the packing crate, and Juan Madrone walked along with him. They watched carefully as the first passenger debarked. He was a check-coated man carrying a carpetbag. He was followed by a blue-jeaned farmer wearing a faded blue shirt and a tattered black suit coat. The third man got off the train, and Ridgeway felt the blood course up into his neck and ears.

The third man was tall and slender, with a face as pale as milk. His hair was slicked back on his head, almost as if he had plastered it down with bear grease. He wore a black coat and trousers. The trousers were cut tight to his ankles. His coat was split in the back, and it hung wide in front, over his shirt. The shirt itself was white, and it had three fancy rock-set studs holding it buttoned.

Around the dude's neck was a high, stiff collar, and from the collar dangled a four-in-hand necktie, stringy and black. From the ends of his coat sleeves hung huge white shirt cuffs. His shoes were patent leather protected by white spats.

Ridgeway's face turned fiery red. His hands went clammy. He recognized this miserable apparition. It was Young Bob Gibson, Big John's offspring. Sam Ridgeway turned his eyes to Juan Madrone's, and Juan shut his tight in answer, shrugging his shoulders in characteristic south-of-the-border resignation.

As the spruced-up Easterner stepped down onto the wooden platform, Ridgeway heard a loud bellow of derisive laughter. That was Harriman's blunt, wordless appraisal of Cross Bow's new boss. Ridgeway felt his ears flaming. He knew Harriman was right. Clover Canyon would be Harriman's without a struggle. Clover Canyon, then Milkweed Strip, then Bald Mountain, then Mesa Roja . . . someday all of the Cross Bow.

Ridgeway got a grip on himself, stuck out his hand, and walked across the platform to greet Bob Gibson. The thin man's face lighted up with recognition. "Sam, old boy," he said in a precise, clipped accent, grasping Ridgeway's hand. "I wasn't sure I'd recognize you, but I did. It's been eight years since I've been to San Saba, you know."

Ridgeway tried to smile. "Yeah, Bob. Welcome home. Sorry it had to be under these circumstances."

Bob's face sobered up. "It was a pity about dad, but then, he was getting along in years, Sam. He had lived a full life."

Stunned, Ridgeway realized suddenly that Young Bob was going to say no more about his father. Fury and disappointment flared up in him. For the biggest man in the state—for his own father—that was all Young Bob Gibson was going to say.

And then, unwillingly, it hit Ridgeway that there was really nothing more to be said at this spot and at this time. Young Bob had perhaps felt too much about his father's death to put it into words. And anyway, why should he express his personal grief to Sam Ridgeway? Feeling angry and contrite now, the Cross Bow ramrod groped blindly for words.

But young Bob grabbed his arm tightly

and walked across the platform, almost like a lost puppy hustling close to its master. Ridgeway fumed inwardly: right here in the station, for all the town to see, this weak man demonstrating his dependence on his ramrod. Ridgeway stared out of burning eyes at the townsfolk standing idly by, gazing in wonder at Young Bob's Eastern get-up. They were giving unveiled sympathy to Ridgeway. Harriman stood next to the station building, coldly eyeing the thin man with the black string tie, sizing him up with a calculating stare.

"That's Harriman," Bob said quietly, looking at the big man. "Is he still the same as ever?"

Ridgeway said, "More so. Tougher. Bigger."

"I remember him. Dad never liked him. I rather did."

Ridgeway turned in open-mouthed wonder, his eyes burning. He opened his mouth to give Young Bob the tongue-lashing of his life. No Gibson ever talked like that about Cross Bow's most dangerous enemy. And then Sam Ridgeway realized who he was, and who Young Bob was; he remembered who was the big boss and who was only range boss, and he bit his tongue and swallowed his words.

He stomped angrily along the wooden platform, almost hurling Bob down the steps toward the buckboard parked in the main street of town. Without another word, Ridgeway handed Young Bob up into the seat, extending the reins to him.

Young Bob looked down at his ramrod with surprise when Ridgeway made no effort to join him in the carriage. "Rode in on horseback, Bob," Ridgeway said glumly, in flat dismissal. "Juan's got your bags. He'll load them on. See you at the ranch."

He whirled away, his face tight with shame for the picture his boss had cut. He stood there with his back to the buckboard, waiting while Juan threw the bags in the flat baggage rack. Young Bob sat looking at Ridgeway's back in hurt puzzlement. Then when Juan had tossed the last bag in, Young Bob clucked to the horses and they started up.

Ridgeway turned and watched the buckboard get under way. As it drew away from the station, he saw Young Bob reach into his suit coat-pocket and draw something out.

At least he smokes segars, Ridgeway thought with relief. Then he saw what Young Bob held in his hand. Spectacles! Wire-rimmed spectacles! Stunned, he watched the boy clip them over his nose and adjust them. Young Bob looked about him with apparent interest at the town. He flicked the reins on the two bays, and the buckboard sped out of San Saba.

Ridgeway turned to Juan, a sick look on his face, despair in his heart. Juan put his hand on his shoulder. They turned and walked stiffly toward the hitch rack where their horses stood. As they passed Saul Harriman they saw him fingering his stubble, watching the buckboard with steady eyes, a thoughtful smile on his chapped lips. . . .

HE FOUND Young Bob in the Old Man's office. He walked into the room, hat in hand as he had entered it a thousand times before. Yet this time, he felt the difference the moment he passed through the doorway.

He stood there a moment, unable to shake off the feeling of gloom and despair that filled him. It would never be the same, he knew. Something had passed out of Cross Bow with the death of Old Man Gibson: maybe it was the heart and soul that held it together. And there had also passed any pride Ridgeway might feel in working for the outfit.

Young Bob sat at the Old Man's desk, leaning forward in the old cowhide and oak chair Ridgeway himself had built fifteen years ago. There were papers and documents scattered over the leather top of the desk; Young Bob was studying these carefully. The sight of him reading words on paper when outside the enemies of Cross Bow were preparing to destroy it, shook Ridgeway to the core. His fingers gripped the brim of his Stetson. He moved forward until his hands were within reach of the old desk top.

"Hello, Sam," said Young Bob casually, glancing up. He looked pale and scholarly and inept in his steel-rimmed spectacles, and Ridgeway sensed suddenly the awful fear that must be crawling through him at the realization of his job.

His resentment flared again at the Old Man for sending his son East for "education"; he would have done better to keep

the boy on the ranch and train him there himself. But the Old Man had been a believer in book learning and scholarship: he'd certainly never figured his own flesh and blood would turn out like this.

"I've been going over the reports, Sam," he said, smiling briefly. "I thought I'd get acquainted with the financial situation of Cross Bow before I began any innovations."

Innovations! Ridgeway almost snorted. What kind of innovations could send the wolves packing, now that they were camped on the doorstep? With an effort he held himself in check. "Things are beginning to shape up into a scrap, Bob," Ridgeway said quietly. "I'll put it straight: Harriman plans to move his cows into Clover Canyon. He claims he's occupying tomorrow. He's been waiting a long time for the chance to pull something like this."

The desk looked massive in front of Young Bob. The paneled walls towered above him. The cowhide and oak chair looked six sizes too big for its occupant. Ridgeway felt a twinge of pity for his employer, but at the same time a harsh, enjoyable feeling of self-righteousness. He'd been right, and the Old Man had been wrong.

Young Bob shoved the papers away from him. He folded his hands on the desk top. Ridgeway saw with a start that the boy's hands were white and thin, almost delicate. With two hands like that, how could a man hope to hold together a brawling, ram-bunctious outfit like Cross Bow? How could he fight off his enemies with those lily-white lady fingers?

"He has no right to Clover Canyon, Sam. That strip of land is still in litigation. Both father and Harriman have been arguing over it for years now. Nothing has been decided by the courts."

Ridgeway nodded. "Clover Canyon, Milkweed Strip, Bald Mountain, Mesa Roja. Same with all of them, Bob. It's up to you. Harriman's forcing the issue. Does he get them away from us—or do we fight to keep them?"

Young Bob stood up and walked to the window, thoughtful. He looked out over the rolling grassland at the rear of the ranchhouse, tugging at his lip with his fingers. Ridgeway stood quietly by the desk, boiling inwardly at the time con-

sumed by all this speculation. Ridgeway knew what the Old Man would have done. He'd have said, "*By God, grab up your saddle gun and let's powwow on Harriman land, Sam! We'll show him who's law, eh, boy?*"

Young Bob finally came away from the window, his face set. "I'll have to think about it, Sam. I don't want to antagonize Saul Harriman too much. I'm sure once he and I talk it over, we can work out something to our mutual satisfaction."

Ridgeway moved swiftly toward Young Bob. His face was flushed with anger, and his voice trembled.

"Harriman wants to break Cross Bow, Bob. He means to push us to the wall. Possession's nine points of the law back East—but out here it's all ten! Once he moves in, we can never shove him off. He wants palaver, Bob—so he can move in under cover of it."

Young Bob stared a moment at Ridgeway, and then he moved once again to the window. He held his hands clasped behind him. Ridgeway could see the indecision in him; his fear of meeting a man of Harriman's physical strength; his aversion to any form of violence. Finally he turned, and in his glance was an unvoiced dismissal.

"Don't worry about it, Sam. I'll take care of it."

Ridgeway's mouth fell open and he gaped at the boy. He'd take care of it? Without help from Ridgeway and Madrone and Hobbs and Albright? Without help from twenty or thirty first-rate ranch hands? Ridgeway knew how he'd take care of it: he'd let it slide, he'd let Harriman take over Clover Canyon; eventually he'd let him take Milkweed Strip; and Mesa Roja and all the rest. He'd handle it all right . . . by compromise. And compromise was surrender.

He started to put his opposition into words, but he could see the pitiful show of defiance in Young Bob's weak face. Perhaps the boy believed he was *muy hombre* after all. Sam Ridgeway remembered Harriman's loud raucous laughter, and shame and rage rose in him. But he shut his mouth hard on the angry words that had formed in his mind.

"And Sam," said Bob with a smile, "it's good to be back out here. I hope you and

the boys feel as glad to see me as I do to see you all."

With a shamefaced look, Ridgeway nodded helplessly and turned to leave. How does an old friend tell a boss that he doesn't measure up, that he just doesn't have the respect and the confidence of his men?

"Yeah, Bob," he said grimly, and stalked from the room. Young Bob stared after him a long moment, looked down at his white hands, turned them over once or twice, and gazed at the empty doorway. His face was white and drawn. . . .

RIDGEWAY was up at dawn, walking over from the bunkhouse to the ranchhouse. He'd seen Young Bob ride out toward San Saba after dinner the evening before, but he hadn't seen him return. He presumed Young Bob had gone in to visit Doc Lawford, the Old Man's attorney.

He banged on the back door. As he stood there waiting for an answer, he glanced around into the stable and saw that Bob's horse was missing. That meant he hadn't returned at all.

Sam Ridgeway got an empty, lost feeling in his stomach. Young Bob had turned tail and run. He hadn't gone in to see Doc Lawford at all; he'd gone in to hide out from the violence that was sure to come. The thought of Bob's cowardice sickened Ridgeway. Sending the boy back East had been a terrible mistake on the part of the Old Man. It had made a yellow-belly of a potential fighting leader.

He jammed his hat on his head and stumbled down the back steps. How could he tell the boys that the boss had crawled to Harriman? How could he inform them that the battle was off? How could he tell them to shuck their guns and forget?

If Harriman moved onto Clover Canyon, without one shot fired, Ridgeway knew it was the beginning of the end. Sooner or later, most of the crew would find some excuse to draw their time and drift on. A man had to have pride in his outfit . . . no matter how big or how small it was.

There'd always been pride before in the Cross Bow, up to the death of the Old Man. But now there was a stigma of shame attached to the brand. There was a new aroma around Cross Bow: the stench of fear.

Juan Madrone was leaning against the corner of the bunkhouse smoking a Mexican cigarette and watching Ridgeway with his dark liquid eyes. His brows went up a trifle as the range boss came toward him. Juan had his pearl-handled revolvers in the hand-tooled holsters buckled on his waist. Ridgeway noted this with interest.

Juan flicked his expressive eyes down toward Ridgeway's own guns, buckled crosswise on his waist, and grinned. Ridgeway grinned back. Silently the two men headed for the stable to saddle up their horses. Without expressing it aloud, they both knew they were performing one last chore for the Old Man; they were showing the outside world that Cross Bow had been the best spread in the world.

And the two of them knew something else, too; they knew that as soon as they had done this one service for the memory of the man who had been their personal god, they would both ride off and leave Cross Bow to the wolves. For what's the good of working for a spread where there's neither heart nor guts left? What's the good of serving a man who doesn't know the meaning of pride?

Mounted, they rode quietly through the rich, dew-laden grass, heading to the south for Clover Canyon. The sun had just topped the eastern rim of the valley, but mists still clung in the hollows. Ridgeway glanced sideways once at his Mexican segundo and saw the sparkle of excitement in his dark eyes. Juan felt his glance, and turned to grin and nod reassuringly. *For the Old Man*, his gesture said. For the Old Man. *Muy hombre, el jefe*.

Clover Canyon lay fresh and deep in grass. They crossed it at a gentle lope. As yet no one had appeared on the ridge beyond: the ridge where Old Man Gibson had built his drift fence. The drift fence followed the ridge and entered a clump of oak trees halfway up. A horse trail cut through the oaks leading from Cross Bow to Flying H land: Harriman's spread. At the point the horse trail intersected the drift fence, Old Man Gibson had built a swinging barbed wire gate. This was the spot Ridgeway figured Harriman would bring his cattle through.

From where they rode now, Ridgeway and Juan could see beyond the drift fence onto Harriman's land. And across Harri-

man's grassy pasture they saw three riders moving toward them. One was Harriman: Ridgeway could tell by the way he slouched heavily and indolently in the saddle. Harriman and his two hands were crossing the wet grass, heading directly for the gate in the drift fence.

Ridgeway spurred his horse and Juan followed. They cut down through Clover Canyon and headed for the cluster of oak. When they dropped down in the draw, Harriman and his riders were out of sight. Ridgeway headed for the spot the trail hit the oak motte.

The moment the two of them entered the trees, they pulled up in surprise. A man was standing at the gate of the drift fence—a lone man who stood stiff and taut, as if he were waiting for the world to blow apart in front of his eyes. Ridgeway exchanged an astonished look with his *segundo*, and the two of them alighted soundlessly.

Ridgeway wound his reins around the branch of a tree, and Juan did likewise. They moved slowly through the oaks to get a better view of the barbed wire gate. As Ridgeway walked along, he let his hands drop to his guns, touching them lightly to be sure they were ready and willing.

Harriman and his two men appeared suddenly over a sharp rise, galloping up to the gate. His quick dark eyes flicked to the lone man standing there. A surprised, amused look came to his eyes. He drew up and waved his two men to a halt. He stiffened in the saddle and grinned, raking the lone man up and down with a contemptuous look.

The man was Bob Gibson, looking strange and awkward in his new blue jeans and heavy wool shirt. The clothes had not yet taken their wearer's shape, and they rode him stiff and new-bought. The six-gun—one of the Old Man's—looked alien and out of place strapped on his waist. The only thing that seemed to fit him easily was the pair of spectacles.

Sam Ridgeway and Juan Madrone had ducked out of sight the moment Harriman and his crew reached the gate. Young Bob had apparently been so intent on the approaching riders from the Flying H that he had not heard his *ramrod* and *segundo* come up.

Young Bob raised his hand in greeting. Harriman, stiff in the saddle, craned his

neck down at the slender young man, standing there on the land he craved. Then he turned and glanced at the two men with him, giving an unvoiced command. The two riders nudged their horses and fanned out. Their guns at their waists were very evident.

Harriman climbed out of the saddle and approached the gate on foot. His boot heels sank noiselessly into the wet grass.

"Didn't think you'd be here to welcome me, Bob. Kind of risky getting up with the dew, ain't it? Might catch the croup."

Bob smiled pleasantly. "I heard you might be here this morning, Saul, and I thought we'd best talk."

"No use talking, Bob. I'm a man of action. I don't talk about moving into Clover Canyon—I move. Here I be."

Bob thought that over for a moment, nodded, and then spoke up. "Well, I don't see why you want to do that, Saul. You've got plenty of land back there on your side of the fence, haven't you? No need coming onto Clover grass."

In the clump of oaks behind Young Bob, Ridgeway could feel the blood rising hotly in his neck and face: blood of anger, blood of shame. Here was a scene the like of which he had never dreamed he'd see: the Cross Bow boss, dickering with his worst enemy. The Old Man must be turning over in his grave. Certainly this was the lowest a man could sink. Fighting with words . . . when guns were called for.

Harriman was grinning, rubbing his unshaven face with his fingers. "I need land, Gibson. Hear that? If me spreading out hurts anybody, what are they going to do about it?"

Bob smiled affably. "Up here's Gibson land, Saul. I'm sure once you consider that, you'll forget about trying to move in."

Harriman stood there with his hands on his hips, grinning through the barbed wire gate at his slender, pale-faced adversary. His hands adjusted the gunbelt at his waist, and then he rubbed his chin bristles with his thumb, letting out a harsh chuckle of amusement.

"The banty rooster crowing. Hear that noise, boys? Ain't that the laughingest thing this side of St. Looie?"

Harriman turned half around to check the positions of his two riders. When he saw their guns were at the ready, he advanced

to the gate. In the oaks behind Young Bob, Ridgeway and Juan slowly drew their guns out of their holsters. It occurred to Ridgeway in a sickening instant that Bob would surely die: for even if Juan and he could down the two outriders, Harriman would go for Bob Gibson.

Harriman put out a hand and lifted the gate latch, his eyes steadily on Young Bob's face. "Here I come. What do you plan to do?" His hand pulled the gate back. The gate was wide open and that was the end of Cross Bow. No man would have dared open that gate while the Old Man was alive.

THE slender boy straightened, his back stiff and tight. "I don't want any trouble with you, Harriman," he said quietly. His voice trembled, it was that high and quivery. "I'm telling you right now not to run through any cattle. That's my final say-so."

Harriman laughed, his tobacco-stained teeth tiny and ferret-like in his wide mouth. "And if I don't, runt? What then?"

Bob Gibson walked forward and grasped the open gate. With a jerk he pulled it toward him. Instantly Harriman's face clouded over. His eyes shifted and he got a surprised look. He realized his bluff had been called by a man who had no fear of his two armed riders. Only a fool would face down three armed men, and Harriman knew the time had come to make his play. Cross Bow was so close now; only a slender man with a scared face stood between him and the biggest ranch in the state.

Harriman's hand plunged toward the gun strapped at his waist. But even as his muscles obeyed his brain and his hammy hand dropped, his face turned gray. His hand froze as it brushed his gun-butt.

As if by magic, Young Bob Gibson held his father's sixgun in his right hand, held it leveled at Saul Harriman's rather prominent guts. A gasp came from the two riders fanned out from Harriman.

"He's got me covered, boys!" Harriman barked. "Don't shoot!"

Bob Gibson tugged the gate shut with his left hand. "Don't let's go through this ordeal every day, Saul," he said gently. "I can always beat you. Did you think all I studied back East was reading and writing?"

Saul Harriman's face turned red as a beet, and behind him the eyes of one of the cowhands glistened with a disloyal spark of amusement.

"There's a lesson you learn in college, Saul," Bob continued, a smile beginning to form on his lips. "When in Rome, you do as the Romans do. I guess you kind of bring out the gladiator in me, Saul." His voice went tight and flat. "Now ride—and forget about Clover Canyon."

Bob Gibson's smile was hard. Saul Harriman, blustering about, realized finally that he had never had the initiative at all in this badly-planned encounter, and rage and fury boiled up in him. The inborn caution and wariness that had brought him through a score of scrapes alive told him that he had lost this one hands down, for always.

"I'll get you yet, Gibson!" he thundered. "Drat your greenhorn hide, I'll get you yet!"

Harriman lumbered back to his horse and climbed up. The two Flying H hands looked at him blankly.

"Get that dad-ratted dumb look off'n your face, Henley. Come on, let's get back to the ranch house. Wasting time fanning air out here!"

The three of them loped off down the slope and disappeared from sight. Not until they were gone did Sam Ridgeway and Juan Madrone appear from the oak cluster. Young Bob started when he heard them, whirling quickly, his eyes sharp and bright as he swung the gun.

He saw Ridgeway and Juan, and his face relaxed. It was pale as wax, but his eyes were shining. He holstered his father's gun and heaved a sigh that lifted the stiff woolen shirt. He tried a grin.

"I guess we don't need to worry about Saul anymore."

Sam Ridgeway swallowed hard, rubbing his hands on his hip pockets, wiping the sweat off them. He strode toward his boss and stuck out his hand.

"Son, we don't need to worry about anything, anymore."

As he shook hands with the slender, white-faced boy, he could feel the strong grip underneath the weak outer flesh. But it wouldn't take long to toughen up that loose layer. What mattered was what lay *inside* the skin of a man. ● ● ●

Next

10 STORY
WESTERN
MAGAZINE

Issue

Published

June 4th

Howdy, pard. A hard-hitting stagecoach story by Marvin De Vries will be headlined in our next issue. Gold-runner Nevada Kell didn't cotton to the way some greedy folk in Camptown were trying to drive the Chinese prospectors away from their hard-found claims along the creek. Then, just as he was about to figure out who was boss bushwhacker . . .



He received a note from the Camptown Committee for Law and Order, signed with a death's-head. It meant he had to take the first stage out of town with his deadliest enemies as fellow-passengers—or have his neck stretched pronto.

Much to everyone's surprise, including a pretty female faro dealer by the name of Jenny Dallas, he pulled stakes. So did Jenny—on the same coach. But when the driver keeled over on the way out . . .



Nevada had to grab the reins and drive a coachful of gunnies thirsting for his blood. Worse yet, they were warned that the half-breed Utah Ball and his band were out on a massacring spree in their direction. . . .

And while the whole strange crew hid out in a dry wash, Nevada worked out the answer to his problems with a blazing sixgun. . . . The complete story, "DRIVER OF THE BUSHWHACK RUN", will appear in the next issue.

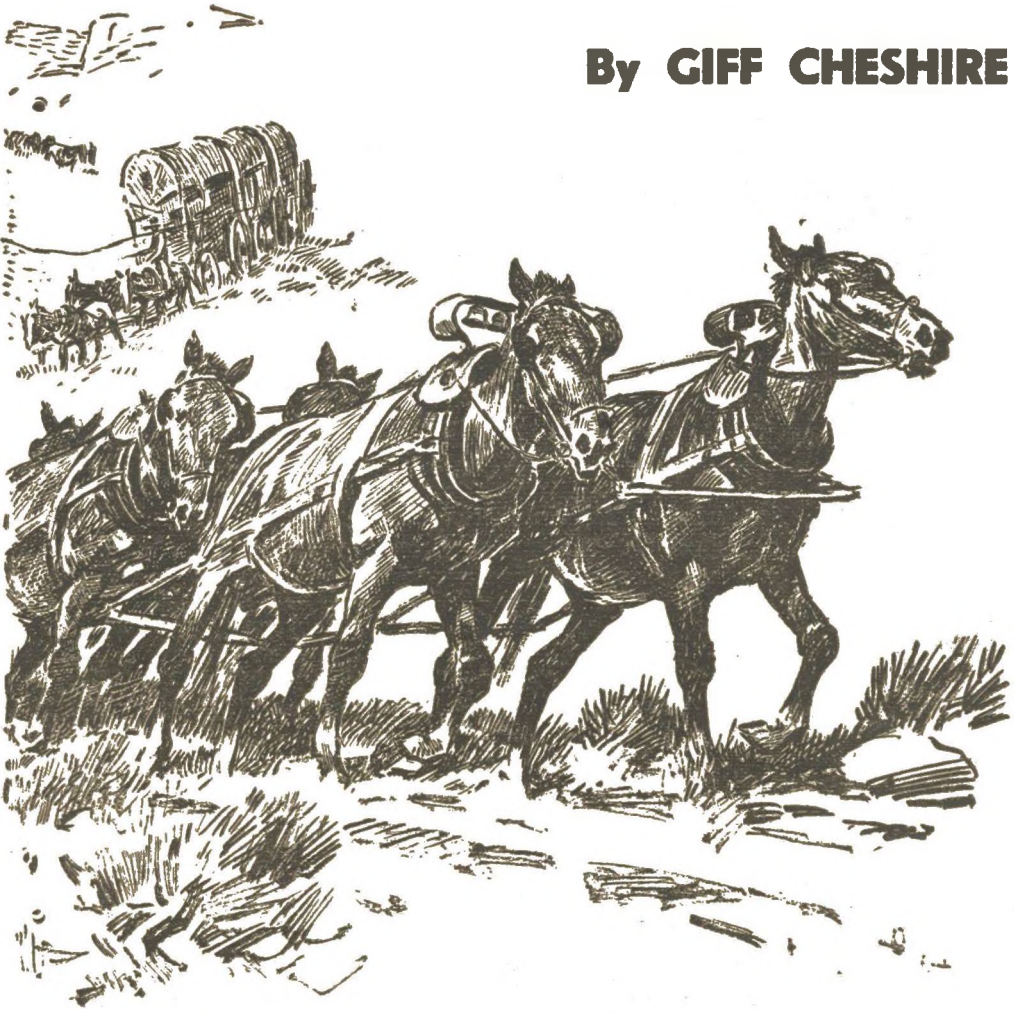


"You have those wagons across the Blues by dark, or I'm going to play shinny with a few boneheads!"

TOUGH AS A MULESKINNER!

An Action Novelette of the Northwest

By GIFF CHESHIRE



Callahan had to bet his whole future on a top-heavy cargo, a treacherous mountain trail and a crew of mad, drunken muleskinners, who'd rather pile up their wagons than lose that murderous race to the Virtue Mine!

CHAPTER

Jerkliners' Jitters

1

There was sweat on Trace Callahan's face and butterflies in his stomach so that he had to make a dive for the outdoors. In another minute he would have been bleating like a new-weaned calf, which might seem odd in the toughest jerkline 'skinner working out of Umatilla Landing.

Trace bolted out through the kitchen into the back yard. He nearly knocked himself out on a clothesline, but recovered his

balance and staggered on into the privacy of the grape arbor. In that concealment he gave way to the shakes, and a sizable case he had of them. It was the small, piping cry that had unnerved him, that and the slap of the doctor's hand jolting Trace, Junior, into life. In that moment Trace had become a father for the first time. Man he knew had eleven young ones and said it never got any easier on a fellow.

For the last month Trace had secretly hoped that himself and jerkline outfit would be sent to Salt Lake or San Francisco just before it happened, even while know-

ing he couldn't stand to be away from Becky when her time had come. But now he had a son—

Wait a minute, Trace told himself. *You don't know what you've got in there.*

He was a big, handsome man with big, hardfleshed shoulders, a lean waist and slim, muscular hips. His legs were long and, except when limp of knee as now, had the spring of steel. His head was leonine, his hair fine and black. A fine figure of a man was required to win a girl like Becky, a tough one was needed to freight out of Umatilla on the desert trails, and a better one than Trace was necessary to go through childbirth without batting an eye.

You've got to go back in there, he thought. *You've got to go back in that house.*

His jaw thrust forward, his shoulders hunched. He started back for the kitchen steps.

To his surprise, Molly Shoe was in the kitchen building a fire to start breakfast. She was the Umatilla Indian woman Trace had hired to help Becky with the housework in recent months, overriding his wife's protests that she was as fit as ever and twice as happy. Molly Shoe's English was limited, but she had eloquent hands. She had been in there with the medico and Becky. Now she made a motion that embarrassed Trace but informed him that it was a boy. Then her hands spread apart to show that young Trace was a whopper.

"But how's Becky?" Trace croaked, and Molly Shoe just beamed. Molly Shoe had fallen in love with Becky, exactly as everyone did who came within a mile of her. The shakes started in Trace again, but they were the jitters of relief and happiness. He had been up all night, as had Molly Shoe and the doctor. Trace didn't want Becky to see what he had been through for fear she would hesitate about having more young ones.

Stepping back out to the porch, he tipped water into a wash pan and scrubbed his hot, whiskery face. He dampened his long black hair, combed it carefully and wondered if he hadn't ought to shave. Again he squared his shoulders and went back into the house.

He went on through to the living room.

Doc Regan was there, getting into his coat. During the long night, Trace had conceived a boundless affection for the man. There was nothing cold and impersonal about this sawbones. Man would think he was having that baby himself, or was at least its father. It being Becky's first, she had had trouble. Doc Regan had been competent, comforting, but a man could tell he had thrown a human heart into the pot with the rest of them.

"Well, Trace," said Doc Regan, "the missus did right by you. She's wonderful. You get in there and tell her so."

"You bet," Trace said. He swallowed hard, tried to grin at the doctor and only succeeded in blinking his eyes fast. He stumbled on into the bedroom, and there Becky was. Man would have thought she was still a school kid, she looked so small and young and sweet there in the bed. But her eyes said different to that. Pain had been in them, and its ghost still lurked behind elation and fulfillment. She didn't point out the bundle next to her but waited for Trace's gaze to find it. Trace did and was certain that calf bleat was going to bust out of him.

But he managed a born freighter's half-rolling swagger as he walked over to the bed. He said, "I'll boot Molly Shoe one. He ain't half as big as she claimed."

"Thank Heaven," Becky breathed. "Trace, get that mule-head down close to your family."

He didn't care a hoot then who saw him gone as soft as custard pudding. He dropped to his knees and buried his face in her hair. . . .

Trace emerged presently to eat the big breakfast Molly Shoe had prepared for him. The doctor was gone. Molly had the passivity of her race, but every time she looked at Trace her deep brown eyes warmed.

She said, "Ketchum papoose. By and by ketchum—"

"Not right off," Trace said. "Molly Shoe, I'm going to have to be out of town. You let anything happen to them two while I'm gone, and I'll make a rug outta your hide."

"Hokay," said Molly Shoe.

TRACE departed for work, after looking in and seeing that Becky had fallen sound asleep.

Umatilla Landing was a boom town on the Columbia River. Three years previously there had been nothing here but a flat of sand, rock and sagebrush. Then the gold strikes on the Powder and Boise rivers had started a stampede that had turned the desert wilderness into a human ant-hill. The boom brought steamboats to the river, and within six months over a hundred buildings flanked the landing's one long and dusty street.

Trace Callahan walked that street in buoyant strides. Sol Duckworth's freight yard stood at the east end, a large enclosure with a slab fence and immense, jerrybuilt barn. Short of the place, Trace remembered his manners and hauled around, retracing his course as far as the Sternwheeler Saloon. There he purchased a box of the best cigars to be had. With them tucked under his arm, he again headed for the wagonyard.

He was a little late, but nonetheless was surprised at the industry of the place. He strode through the gate to see two wagon outfits being hitched up, the big ones. Each consisted of three short-coupled wagons with a total hauling capacity of nine tons, and each had a pull chain with loop-and-hook accommodations for a ten-up of Duckworth's fine big teams. A dozen men, skimmers, swampers and yard hands, were bustling about. But they all seemed to see Trace come in late, or at least they detected the cigars under his arm.

"What do you know?" somebody yelled. "Trace is a papa!"

Whoops went up, then Trace was shaking hands all around and passing out the treats. Finally he broke away and walked over to the office of Sol Duckworth, a packing-box affair tacked on the front of the barn.

Hot as it was this time of year, Duckworth stood with his back to a cold pot-bellied stove. He was a high, skinny man with a gaunt face. Winter and summer he wore a long frock coat and a high stove-pipe hat. He looked like a sudden wind would knock him sprawling, but there wasn't a tougher turkey in the freighting business.

"Look like you been pulled through a knot hole," Sol said. "And come out hind end to."

"I ain't had it easy," Trace admitted. "Have a cigar, Sol. Got me a boy."

"Another muleskinner!" Sol snorted. "Country's getting lousy with 'em. What we need around here is more good-lookin' girls."

"If there weren't any muleskinners," Trace demanded, "who'd make you the fat cat you are in this town?"

"Let your hackles down," Sol said. "I'm glad you finally got here. I got a job that'll make me a singed cat if you don't pull it off."

"Ain't that the way of it?" Trace howled. "Always it's me who's got to keep you out of the poor house! What have you gone and contracted for now, man? To move the river out on the desert so them squatters can irrigate?"

"Nice, easy work," Sol said. "Would have told you when you got in yesterday but I could see you had a mind full already. I just picked up a piece of business to give a man like you a nice workout."

Trace groaned, recognizing the approach. Wasn't a thing Duckworth wouldn't undertake to haul and no place he wouldn't agree to haul it. Trouble was, the accomplishment of such commitments fell strictly on the shoulders of Trace Callahan, wagon boss, trail boss and freighter extraordinary. Man couldn't quit Duckworth, not when each new challenge was a bug that got in his blood.

"It's sort of like this," Sol went on in the casual way Trace had learned to dread. "This trip you got to go all the way to the Virtue mine. If you do, it'll be a regular thing. All their freight."

"All?" Trace gasped. "What about Jape Ewing? He's had a monopoly on Virtue business since before my time."

"Maybe he still has," Sol said, studying his fingernails. "Depends on if you turn out to be a better freighter than Jape Ewing. That was the question the Virtue people raised when they come to see me yesterday. Claimed it was their suspicion Ewing's wagons could cut figure eights around your'n on any trail."

"They did, did they?" Trace bellowed. "Man, Jape Ewing can strip to the running gears, and I'll beat him with a load of quicksilver!"

"Fine," Sol said. "Now you're ready to listen."

Then Sol Duckworth took the time to light his cigar. He inhaled, looked pleased and said, "Smooth as silk, Trace. Where'd you find cigars like that in this town? Tastes like real tobacco. Now, Andy Denis was down from the Virtue. Steamboats have brought in a lot of mining machinery. Big stuff, I guess. Jape Ewing claimed it couldn't be hauled on wagons. But that was only Jape's sly way. Then he agreed to try it for double rates and no liability. So Denis come over here."

"And," Trace said, "we're hauling it at regular rates and assuming liability."

"It's not just this one piece of business," Sol said earnestly. "We'll lose money on it, and maybe we'll lose my shirt. But if we cut it, there's profits to put in the till. That's what I had my eye on."

"Plus the chance to twist Ewing's tail. He know what you agreed to?"

Sol nodded. "He laughed his head off when Denis told him he'd changed freighters pro tem. But you know how Jape laughs. Feels like somebody filin' your tail bone. Well, I done my part, Trace, and it's yours from here out. Just remember I'm pretty old to start over in life. But whatever you do, I'll back you to the limit."

DUCKWORTH would, Trace knew. Tough as he frequently made it for his outfit, he gave it a free hand and backed it with his last nickel and then his life's blood. That was why there wasn't a man on the payroll who would consider working for anybody else.

Trace walked out and took a look at the machinery, which was already loaded on the wagons and under canvas sheets. The pieces were big but, one way or another, had been jacked and prized into the wagon beds. The trouble, Trace knew at a glance, was the weight. He didn't have to be told that every wagon in the outfit was overloaded by half. Moreover, each one was top-heavy because of the shape of the machinery and high center of gravity. A fine load to be hauling over Jape Ewing's prize route!

There were better freighters than Ewing but none meaner. In that department, Trace Callahan took off his hat to the man.

Though Sol Duckworth had stepped in and got the wagons loaded during the night he kept out of it now. Trace walked around

the wagons a couple of times, figuring it out. The wagons were the heaviest the company owned, with wide-rimmed wheels, and he knew without asking that each had been carefully inspected and greased.

Not necessarily congratulating himself on the birth of his son, Trace lighted a cigar. The best insurance he could have on the haul was a set of spare wagons and horses. And the additional men to handle them. And some guns. He would take along a complete empty outfit. . . .

They were ready to roll within the hour. Sol Duckworth didn't so much as emerge from his office until Trace stepped in again to take leave.

There was a pleased look on the man's bony face, and Sol said, "You cut this caper, Trace, and there's a five-hundred-dollar start in life for that boy of yours. Now, get going and see you cut it."

Trace walked out, grinning from ear to ear. Sol hadn't seemed very excited about the new life that had appeared in Umatilla Landing. But Trace had known that before long something very nice would come from the man by way of acknowledgment. Five hundred for young Trace! For that Trace Callahan would pack that machinery to the Virtue on his back. His long fingers balled into fists as he tramped out.

He saw his own excitement reflected in his outfit. None of them were new fathers; it was the haul that had them heated. They were the best in the country. They had to be to work for Trace Callahan. Better yet, none of them bore any love for Jape Ewing, who would knock a hired hand cold—then dock his time till he came to again.

Trace swung aboard his horse bawling, "Roll your wheels, boys! Let's get ourselves to Baker City!"

A hundred fifty miles away, that was, with the Virtue still a piece east of there. Across the sage hills to the Blues, then over the mountains and on down the Powder River Valley. An old trail already, the historic Oregon Trail of the emigrants, its traffic now reversed by the gold stampede. The big teams pulled the overburdened wagons with steady ease as they headed up the Umatilla.

Yet as he settled in the saddle and got used to the heavily boiling dust, Trace found a strange quality of uneasiness with-

in himself. It struck him that he had done none of the things he had figured on doing when young Trace showed up. He hadn't blown the lid off Umatilla; he hadn't let out a whoop to inform the world of his manly powers. He felt fine and good, but humble and—well . . . sort of dignified.

And worried. There was no sense denying it. He had a boy to bring up and this was a tough trail, and Jape Ewing knew every dirty trick in the book and a few too foul to reach print. He was going to have to trim his own wick a little, cut out some of the chances he had always taken. What would Becky do if she were left alone? How would young Trace ever get his proper chance in the world with his mother ruining her lovely hands in wash water all day long?

But there was the five hundred Sol Duckworth had promised as a bonus if this haul went through and nailed down the Virtue business. Trace squared his shoulders and shoved his chin forward. There were still a hundred forty-eight miles left of the trail. The five hundred was farther off than that, for somewhere along the trail Ewing was bound to rear his ugly head.

Three miles out of the landing Trace pulled straight in the saddle. He hit his thigh a whack, bawled, "I'll catch up!" to the nearest teamster and whirled his horse about. Digging in the spurs, he lifted the stout animal to a pounding run, heading back for the river town.

His pounding and unpredicted reappearance electrified the Duckworth wagon-yard. Stablehands halted in their tracks to stare at him. Sol Duckworth popped out of his office looking sick with apprehension.

Pointing a finger at the old stablehand standing in the barn door, Trace bawled, "Hickory, I plumb forgot to ask you. How about quittin' that lousy barn bunk of yours a few days and sleepin' in my woodshed till I get back? There's a cot there, and Molly Shoe'll give you supper and breakfast."

"Why in tunket should I?" Hickory Ames demanded.

"They need a man around!" Trace thundered impatiently. "In case they need a doctor in the night or the house catches on fire or there's burglars! Don't ask silly questions, man! You do that, or I'll nail

your ears to the fence soon's I get back!"

"She's as good as done," Hickory drawled, and now he was grinning along with his yardmates and even Sol Duckworth. But Trace was already on his way back to the job.

CHAPTER *Brass Knuckle Trail*

2

Two hours later Trace caught up with the train, which was rolling right along. They were in the Umatilla Highlands now, sage country that cattlemen were turning into range and where a few doughty dirt farmers were trying out wheat. The deep rutted trail wound through deep ravines or flung itself again across a high and wide plateau. The enormous weight in the wagons told in the sweat climbing on the horses under draft, while those drawing the empty wagon spares minced along in sheer comfort. Every so often a wheel smashing into a rock reminded Trace unpleasantly of the top-heaviness of his load. There were plenty of places ahead where either the weight or the high center of gravity could spell ruin.

But Trace had a tough and efficient crew. They actually had little need of a wagon master to see that the wagons kept their pace and a carefully spaced distance between each rig. The tough, swearing jerk-liner astride each nigh wheeler knew for himself how to keep his horses in their collars, each lead bar even and the chain tight, how to pop the rosebud tip of his blacksnake on the sharp bends and get leaders and swing horses to step smartly over the chain and pull at a tangent from the others with the wagons evenly rolling. They knew how to double up the steep grades of the trail, how to come down them hell a-hiking without busting off the grade or flattening the spans.

The true need for Trace Callahan on the mad hauls Sol Duckworth was forever contracting was that of strategist, leader and inspiration. He could out-pop, out-curse, out-fight or out-drink any other freighter on the desert trails. Legend helped him as much as the facts of his career. But he was worried, heavily weighted by what had all the earmarks of a first-rate premonition. Somewhere in the

past twenty-four hours he had ceased to be his own man. He belonged to a squalling, new-born, red-faced mite. And somewhere in the next four or five days he was going to meet his fate.

The sun climbed, its heat mixing with the desert dust to render men and animals uncomfortable. Then at noon they came to the ford of Joseph Creek where Trace called a halt for noon. The heavy load was exacting a murderous toll from the horses, and the afternoon's heat promised to be fierce. Willows and cottonwood shaded the creek, so Trace figured to lay over through the worst of it then keep rolling through the long summer evening.

The horses were unhooked, watered and graced with their nosebags. Then the crew fished into jury boxes for their own lunch pails.

Trace had taken only one bite out of a sandwich when a swamper pricked up his ears.

"Somebody's comin'," he said. "Horsebackers in a hurry."

Trace got up and walked out where he could see. Leading a rolling cloud of dust in the rearward distance, a party of five men were coming on. Trace scowled, planting his hands on his hips. The rider in the lead was Jape Ewing. They were surely hiking for somewhere. Trace felt apprehension crawl up his back.

Yet it wasn't likely that Ewing would make trouble so close to home base. Unlike Sol Duckworth, he spent a great deal of time in the field and was probably going somewhere now on legitimate business. But Trace's own men had set their lunch buckets off their laps and loosened their shoulders and felt of their guns. If Ewing wanted trouble he was calling at the right address.

Ewing lifted a hand in an inoffensive salute as he rode up, his men pulling down behind him. He was a big man with whiskery cheeks now plastered with sweat and dust.

"Howdy, Trace," Ewing said. "Never figured on running into you, but I'm glad I did. If you can spare a moment, there's something I've got to say to you."

"Say it," Trace invited coolly.

"It's private, Trace."

With a shrug, Trace turned and walked down the creek. Leaving his horse, Jape

Ewing followed him. When they were beyond earshot of the temporary freighter camp, Trace swung around and hooked his thumbs in his wide belt.

"This private enough?" he asked.

Ewing nodded. He was still suspiciously amiable. "Trace," he began in a thoughtful drawl, "it's about your boy."

Alarm jolted through Trace. "Anything wrong, Jape?"

"Why, not that I know of." Ewing said, looking surprised. "Man, you're jumpier'n a bridegroom. Looks like this married stuff takes it out of a man. That's what I sort of figured, though. With a family to raise, you'll need more money than Sol Duckworth will ever pry outta his purse. Trace, how'd you like to knock off a thousand dollars for that boy? All profit and no strings attached."

"How?" Trace asked tightly.

"Don't act so dumb. Everybody knows Sol'd ruin hisself save for you. Specially on this here haul to the Virtue. Now, nobody could blame you personally if—"

That was as far as Jape Ewing got.

TRACE'S balled fist had connected with Ewing's jaw. The man threw up his arms and staggered backward. Trace never let him regain his balance, hammering him along the creek bank, following relentlessly, driving him back into the freighter camp. It was a totally hushed group that watched. Ewing tried to fight and kept to his feet. He'd stand and belt out and land a couple that jolted Trace's brain. And always he had to give ground.

But the wheedling had gone completely from Jape Ewing. He was roaring as he made his groggy stand. Trace kept boring in. This man had possessed the gall to suggest that he betray Sol Duckworth, that he start young Trace out in life with tainted money. He smashed Ewing's nose to streaming blood. He closed one of the man's eyes and set to work on the other. Then he sent in the punch he could have uncorked anywhere. It lifted Jape Ewing onto his toes. And Trace had landed another jolt on the same point before Ewing folded up on the ground.

"Throw him across his saddle," Trace panted to Ewing's companions. "Then get him the hell outta here. Tell him when he comes to that the next time I see him I

might really get mad. He'd better play hard to find."

The glowering looks on the faces of the Duckworth men lent cogency to Trace's orders. Ewing's limp body was thrown across his saddle, hanging limply there. But, before mounting, one of his men paused a moment to look at Trace.

"Don't know just what happened," he murmured. "But I can guess. It was out of the kindness of his heart that Jape offered you a chance. Suits him if you don't want any. Now he can settle down to business the way he likes to do it."

"By the time he's able," Trace grunted, "this here machinery will be turnin' out gold eagles for the Virtue."

The party rode out, retracing its course, going back toward Umatilla Landing.

"Well, anyhow," a swamper said, "I'd rather have 'em behind than ahead somewheres on the trail."

"I reckon," Trace said, but he wasn't so sure of that. He knew he owed his men an explanation, though he didn't want to say it was the implied insult to young Trace that had really set him off. "Man figured he could buy himself a little help," he added. That seemed to satisfy the boys.

At four o'clock, with the worst of the day's heat behind, the big, over-burdened Duckworth outfit again hit the trail. The rest had perked up the horses and for a long while the going was good. Trace figured to keep going until they hit Pendleton, on the Umatilla, and to spend the night there.

Well past dark, the freight trail, following the Umatilla as it curved in and out among the hills, brought them into the town. Rises lifted ruggedly on the north side, stepping up more gradually to the south. Bright though it was, the waxy yellow light of the lamps was paled by the flaming sweep of stars above. Raw and wild, this was a drawing point for buckaroos, stampeders and freighters alike. And just before the big Duckworth wagons started down the last long slant to the place, Trace Callahan spoke flatly to his men.

"This time we'll camp on up the river a piece," he announced. "I don't give a hoot if your throats're dusty enough to grow wheat. We turn into mountain goats tomorrow when we hit the Blues. I don't want any thick heads or shaky nerves."

That wasn't like Trace, and he knew it stunned his staunch freighters. The big wagons ran on whiskey, and if a man could tap it out of somebody else's barrel in his load, that was all to the good. But no mule skinner minded buying his own in a gally-hooting town like this.

"Lord A'mighty!" a voice exploded in the darkness. "We're haulin' machinery this trip, Trace! There ain't a keg in the whole shebang."

"No whiskey," Trace said. "And I'll be sleeping with one ear open if anybody tries to sneak out of camp."

The ruling wasn't popular, but Trace didn't aim to change his mind. The nine big wagons ground through the town and left it behind. Trace refused to give the order to halt till they were three miles up the river, too far for a tired freighter to walk. Then camp was made and the horses cared for. Afterward, by lantern light, the men greased and inspected their wagons carefully.

Trace began to feel a quiet satisfaction. They were doing all right so far and, if anything, were ahead of the regular schedule for this trail.

But the Blue Mountains were close ahead now and, leaving Jape Ewing out of it, they would be the real test. They weren't bad as mountains went, but they didn't have to get very bad to raise hob with wagons loaded like these. From Deadman Pass almost to the Grande Ronde, Trace Callahan would have both hands and his pockets full. He wanted his men to be at their best—that's why he didn't mind the moody looks the firelight showed him on most of the faces about him.

AT DAWN the next morning, Trace rolled out his men. The big horses were in harness and breakfast had been eaten by the time full light came. And he had a sullen crew, Trace realized. Save for the little village of La Grande, nothing lay between here and far Baker City but tough and desolate trail. But Trace knew how to handle men in this mood: his answer being to act a little tougher than they did. So he roared the order to trail out, and the big wagons rolled again.

With as many miles put behind as possible, Trace meant to halt wherever noon came upon them and once more lay over

during the heat of the day, thereafter starting the long climb into the Blues in the shank of the afternoon and through the evening light.

They were farther along than he had hoped for when midday came. The signs sure looked good, Trace reflected incredulously. Not a wagon had broken down or developed a creaking wheel or thrown a tire. Though they were getting a workout, none of the horses had galled a shoulder or sprung a tendon. Trace ordered the halt and felt so optimistic that he promised his disgruntled men a case of whiskey when they got back to Baker City after making the delivery to the Virtue mine.

The outfit was still unhooking and picketing the horses when a vehicle pulled into sight down the trail. It was a light hack behind a fast-stepping team of horses, and it quickly came up to the camp. The driver sat in it alone. He was a mild-looking man, though at the moment he appeared anxious.

The driver looked around, then said, "One of you Trace Callahan?"

"That's me," Trace said, frowning.

The man swallowed and said, "I was hoping you were, sir. I was going through to Baker City and Sol Duckworth asked me to give you a message, saying I was bound to pass you before long. He said to tell you to drop everything and get home as fast as you can."

"Man, what're you saying?" Trace bawled. "Something—tell me, is something wrong?"

"He said something about a baby choking, sir. He was pretty wrought up. All that he said clearly was to tell you to come a-smoking."

Trace swung around. He had unsaddled his horse, but he caught up the kak and had it cinched on almost before it had settled on the animal's back again. He vaulted into the saddle.

He stopped at the campfire just long enough to say, "You boys'll have to get this stuff through on your own hook. Don't know if I'll get back, but don't you let Sol down."

"Get going, Trace," a man said gruffly and waved him into motion.

Trace didn't need any urging. His only worry was about his horse and whether it could stand the pounding he meant to give

it until he got a chance to swap for a fresh one.

He had no idea what had happened at home but had heard of many disasters befalling a brand-new baby. Choking, the man had said. Trace couldn't even bear to think about it. But it was bad, plenty bad, or Sol wouldn't have pulled him off this all-important haul.

A long, hard-pounding hour had passed when Trace's brain began to thaw out. It was a mild curiosity that hit him first. How come Sol to send a message so important by a chance passerby? How come he hadn't written a note, anyhow, explaining? Trace's cheeks began to stiffen. Wild as he was with alarm, he could still entertain suspicion. Jape Ewing had commented on his jumpiness about the baby.

Trace kept riding but with suspicion fighting a father's concern. He was confronted with the hardest decision a man could ever face. That mild little cuss on the hack seat had looked innocent as a lamb. But who had really given him that message for Trace Callahan? More he thought of it, the more convinced Trace became that Sol would have written him a note, authorizing him to desert the freight wagons. Or sent one of the yard hands off on horseback. Or come himself.

For a while after that Trace was convinced that it was a trick, but there was still the off chance that the baby had had trouble, that Becky needed her husband. What did a man do in a case like that? The answer came hard, but it was that a smart man wouldn't go gallyhooting off an important job because of an alarm brought in vaguely by a complete stranger. Not when Jape Ewing aimed to tack Sol Duckworth's hide high on the wall with Trace Callahan's above it. Reluctantly, because he could be wrong, Trace turned his horse around.

The animal was almost gone by then, and Trace lacked the heart to crowd it any longer. From here on, however, he had to assume that he had been tricked into deserting his train. The critical part of the haul lay just ahead, through the Blues. That was where Ewing would start to deal from the bottom of the deck, and he had wanted Trace Callahan out of the way. So Trace was anxious to get back to camp before the wagons rolled out, and the jaded horse just *had* to make it.

CHAPTER

Mountain Melee

3

He reached his destination just as his crew was stirring forth to hook up. His reappearance shocked them no more than they did him. Trace rode in on a lame horse to sit his saddle a long moment and stare. Most of the men had seen him and pulled themselves to a wobbling erectness. But an unaltered swamper had chosen that moment to empty a bottle and smash it against a wagon wheel.

"Where'd you get the whiskey?" Trace roared.

The swamper hauled around, grinned, then swallowed hard. "You sure got back quick," he reflected.

"Where'd that booze come from?" Trace bawled, swinging to the ground. He saw other broken bottles about now, enough of them to account for the fact that every man in his crew was tighter than a tick.

"Well, that drummer," the man said. "He left a few samples. About a case. Us boys were kind of dry and just round-sidin' here and—"

"*What* drummer?" Trace bellowed.

"The whiskey drummer. Fellow who brought word from Sol."

"Ah," Trace breathed. He was relieved enough almost to find forgiveness in his heart for this open disobedience of his orders. Definitely that message from Duckworth had been a fake, and as definitely Trace Callahan had the Blue Mountains ahead of him with a crew all but ready to take wing.

"Unhook," Trace said. "We ain't rolling a wheel till you're sober. Meanwhile, I'll take what whiskey samples you mulebrains have got stashed. I bust a mean bottle myself."

"Aw, Trace," a man began, and fell silent as he looked into Trace's eyes.

The additional layover meant the loss of precious time, which probably had been the design in this neat caper of Jape Ewing's. But Trace wasn't hitting the pike with a roaring-drunk crew. Let anything go wrong under such conditions, and the Virtue people would be more than justified in writing off Duckworth Freight as dissolute and unreliable.

Trace made his men dig the remaining bottles out of various places of concealment,

and he broke them all. Trouble was that he was in considerable need of a drink, himself. He was ninety-nine per cent convinced that the alarming news from home had been faked to get him to desert his crew at a crucial point on the trail. But a man could be that close to absolutely sure and *still* do a lot of private worrying.

He was a hard man to get along with the rest of that day and a rough one when he hazed his outfit onto the trail two hours before summer's early dawn. "You jeebos lost the time," he told them. "Now let's see you make it up. We're going to forget it gets hot in the middle of the afternoon. We're going to have kind of a friendly little contest. You have these wagons across the Blues safe and sound by dark, and I'll let you make camp. Fall short . . . and I'm going to play shimmy with a few boneheads."

They were contrite, and they showed Trace through that long, hot and dusty morning that they meant to make up for their breach of trust. The trail began to twist, pointing toward Deadman Pass and Emigrant Hill. The Blues drew ever closer, softly purpled eminences painted against a cloudless sky. Steadily Duckworth Freight wormed its way through the wrinkled hills. The bends grew sharper. At each such turn the pointers had to cross the chain and pull at a tangent to the following horses, holding the wagons to the grade. Blacksnakes and cuss-words and deft hands on the brake pulls kept the wagons rolling.

True to his threat, Trace ignored the noon hour. It was hard on the men and harder yet on the horses. Well, the men had it coming, and the horses had to suffer for the weaknesses of the humans who mastered them. But Trace had figured on it growing cooler as they climbed. It did. And slowly the lost time was recouped.

The scent of yellow pine, fir and hemlock became pleasant. The summit of Emigrant Hill shut off the last of the open country. Still the clumsy, overloaded wagons gave no trouble, not because the load was less fearsome than figured, but because the crew was coming through with the best it had. So maybe, Trace reflected, Jape Ewing had done him a favor by giving these mulebrains a sense of guilt to erase. Once across the mountains, nothing short of an outright attack on the train could keep it from mak-

ing the delivery to the mine on schedule.

When they crossed the summit around three o'clock, Trace figured he had it made. The eastward trail dropped down to the gorge of the Grande Ronde, and twenty miles of downhill going would put them to the village of La Grande, with valley from there on out. Trouble was that the elevation fell away fifteen hundred feet between the summit and the village.

Trace halted the outfit before it started the descent. "Three o'clock already!" he roared at his sweating muleskinners. "I asked you for a little driving, and you all go to sleep in the saddle! Ought to have broke this hump at noon. But now that we've finally got here, I wish this could look more like a freight outfit. Like to at least hit the river by dark. Only way to do it is knock out the brake blocks and get off this mountain. But you barflies can't do it and keep right side up."

They knew what he was asking, and they had it on tap. None but the type of teamster who could stay on the Duckworth payroll could drive wagons as heavy as these down the mountains with only skilled driving and deft braking to keep them true on the rough, narrow road. Trace was coaxing them to drive down the mountains instead of sliding and slithering with locked wheels the way instinct dictated, and if they cut it successfully, Sol Duckworth would be the biggest freighter on this trail.

Trace dropped into the dusty drag because he could see how things went better from there. They went fast. The green forest softened and returned the roaring of skimmers' voices, the rumble of the wagons, the occasional squall of a delicately pulled brake. The outfit rolled, and the teams all but dissolved in the dust, but the wagons moved steadily and under a fine control.

Proud as punch of his jehus, Trace grinned.

THE only warning of trouble he had was an unbelievably loud crash. He heard the howl of brakes ahead, the explosion of vitriolic profanity as, jolted forty below by the unexpectedness of it, he dug in his spurs and drove forward down the trail.

What followed was sheer catastrophe. Far down, the lead wagon had keeled and caromed into the inside bank with a scarping crash, then had gone over on a tilt to

rest motionless against the sharply rising mountainside. The uppermost wheels still turned. The horses were down and threshing wildly, jerked off their feet as if by a giant hand. The next outfit in line, brakes screaming, was barreling down upon the first.

It wasn't going to get stopped in time. As he pounded closer Trace could see that, and a constriction at his throat shut off his breath. The teamster astride the nigh wheeler was standing in the stirrups, his long whip sailing, swinging the leaders toward the outer edge of the road in hopes of saving the animals and perhaps scraping the wagons past. He got the horses by, but the two outfits of three wagons each tangled together, and the second batch of horses went down in a heap.

But the last loaded outfit and the empty one bringing up the rear had managed to pull down in time. Trace rode up to the interlocked mess of six wagons. He couldn't even squeeze his saddlehorse past. There was enough swearing on beyond to suggest that both the teamsters involved in the smashup were still alive and in a reasonably healthy state of volubility.

"I've druv this trail a hundred times!" a voice raged. "And there ain't no rock where I seen the rock I hit!"

Trace shut his eyes, for the second time on this drag realizing that he thought less shrewdly and less swiftly than Jape Ewing. Whiskey to upset the schedule and render the chances two to one that Trace Callahan would come down this mountain hell a-hauling.

"All I know!" one dumped man beyond the wreckage was telling the other, "is that there was a kind of a little thump, then a twist, and I was scallyhootin'! A damned rock, right there in the rut, where there ain't ever been no rock before! And the whole works went over like a tail-thrown horse, Bill! I'm tellin' you it's a mighty unnatural feeling."

Trace swung down. It didn't take much effort to find the rock referred to, and he agreed with his man that it was a mighty unorthodox situation. The rock, or boulder, was somewhat like an iceberg: nine-tenths submerged with enough above the surface to raise hob. The earth about the obstruction was soft and fresh. But Nature hadn't surfaced it since the last time the Duck-

worth outfit passed here. Somebody had buried the thing in the outer rut very, very recently. It had furnished just enough of a flip to send a heavy, fast-moving set of wagons with a high center of gravity careening toward the inside bank.

But why not an outside one, Trace wondered, where machinery and all would have plummeted down into the deep canyon?

The men on his side of the blockage had now gathered about him. Trace gave them a discouraged look. "If anybody wants to start a mine here," he drawled, "there's the machinery, all delivered."

"That whiskey drummer done it, likely," a swamper said.

"I done it," Trace said. "I had no damned business telling you to barrel it the way Jape Ewing figured I'd tell you."

He made his way around, over and through the wreckage. The two teamsters on the downgrade side were unhurt. They had the horses up, none damaged, and were trying to untangle harness. Trace walked down past the animals, looking them over. It had grown quiet enough so that a sudden distant racket could catch his ears. He swung to face downtrail, listening carefully.

"Wagons coming up," he grunted, "and how in thunder are they going to get past?"

He hated to think of the weight of the machinery that had to be moved somehow even to clear the road. Down at the steamboat landing they had had rollers and inclined planes, prizes and block-and-tackle. Here they had their good, strong backs, which weren't enough.

THEN suddenly a horse and rider came around the bend below. Trace smashed balled fists onto his hips, staring. It was Jape Ewing himself, riding along and enjoying the scenery. Then he saw Ewing stare ahead and hurry his horse. The man looked right shocked as he came up to Trace.

"You had trouble," Ewing said, shaking his head. "I was afraid them loads of your'n were too top-heavy, Trace." The man's face still showed what Trace's fists had done to it, but there was enjoyment in Ewing's eyes nonetheless.

"How in tunket did you get ahead?" Trace howled.

"Why," Ewing said, "I took a Injun trail I know that saves a man some riding. I

come and go, Trace, and it's lucky that happens to be my outfit coming behind me. Looks like I might give you a helping hand."

"Such as taking this stuff on to the Virtue?" Trace inquired silkily.

"Why not?" Ewing asked. "We're competitors, of course, but when we get into trouble, Trace, I figure it's only Christian to help each other out. I got some empty wagons, and it just happens I got some cable and sheaves along, to boot. I'll take the machinery on to the Virtue, apologize for you and tell 'em you just couldn't make it."

"You sure chanced along complete with what it takes," Trace commented.

"Make it a rule," Ewing said piously, "to be ready to play the good Samaritan any way it befalls me to play it."

"There's a lot of people in this country, Jape," Trace said, "who ain't got sense enough to appreciate you. See now that you're all wool and a yard wide and just act like a skunk to hide your heart from the world. Joker, too. That was quite a prank you pulled about my boy. Us jittery new dads are some comical, I reckon."

"Figured you'd see through it before you'd been put out any," Jape said uneasily.

A thousand pounds lifted off Trace's shoulders at that. With real assurance that everything was all right at home, he felt like freighting again but good. He felt like picking off the five hundred Sol Duckworth had promised young Trace. Moreover, he felt like letting Jape Ewing help him do it, seeing how full of charity the man's heart really was.

"Tell you what, Jape," Trace said amiably. "I only got one outfit too busted to travel. I think we can get the second untangled from it."

"If I take any of that machinery to the Virtue," Ewing said cautiously, "I take it all."

"Sure," Trace agreed. "That's the bargain. But we'll have to untangle the pile-up to get at the worst of it. We've got lots of horse power and your tackle and both our crews. We'll clear the trail so your empties can go on up and turn around and come back. Then we'll see what luck we have shifting that machinery leanin' on the bank."

"Won't be hard," Ewing said. "Hap-

pens I've got some rollers, too." He sounded cagey but confident.

The Ewing outfit pulled up. Trace held back, letting Jape Ewing take charge of salvage operations. The man had come fully prepared for them. There were plenty of horses to hook onto the hind end of the second outfit and pull it back upgrade until it came free. Trace had refrained from mentioning a little foresight on his own part which had prompted him to bring along a complete spare outfit, empty. So far Ewing had been too busy to notice it.

Trace still refrained from mentioning this item while tackle was rigged to a tree below the trail and the horses were hooked on to right the tilted outfit. Ewing really put his heart into the undertaking, as did his men. Trace sort of stood around looking helpless and privately noting that the terrific collision with the bank had all but dished the inside wheels, rendering these wagons useless. But the others were all fit to trail.

When Ewing waved one of his empty outfits into place so the machinery could be shifted, Trace spoke up finally.

"Wait a minute, Jape," he said. "No need to put you boys out any farther. I got enough wagons to handle it. If you'll give me the loan of your rollers and tackle, you boys can be getting on."

"How you going to handle it?" Ewing gasped.

Trace made an idle pointing motion up the trail. "That last outfit's empty. I decided to bring it along before I found out how good-natured you really are."

"This is salvage!" Ewing howled. "You were helpless and blocking a public road! You sacrificed your rights and she's mine from here on!"

"Boys," Trace said to the Duckworth men about, "this man got the idea we're helpless."

"He did?" one bawled, and the melee started.

Trace didn't try to keep track of it because he had picked Jape Ewing for himself. But he drew Ewing and one other, for the man didn't mean to be licked a second time. Trace had his hands full, a man on his back every time he tied into one in front. He took the hardest mauling of his life but concentrated on doing damage. Finally, by whirling quickly and launching out with a wicked, overhand punch, he got rid of the complication. Thereafter he stalked Jape Ewing through the swirling dust, until once more he had stretched the man out flat.

He discovered that, handicapped, he had been a little slower than the other Duckworth men. Jape Ewing's tough freighters were laid out up and down the trail.

"Let's get loaded, boys," Trace said. "Man owes us for a wagon outfit, so we'll just keep all the nice equipment he brought out to help us."

It went like clockwork after that. The machinery was transferred to the spare wagons and lashed securely. One by one, the Ewing freighters recovered and quietly proceeded up the trail. Jape Ewing had taken a beating and was still lying in the dust when the Duckworth wagons left.

But Trace wrote a note and left it between the man's inert fingers: "You show up again before I get to the Virtue and I'll slit your ears and run your legs through them. I got a boy to raise, and I can't have any big-hearted nitwit playing jokes."

Then he rode out to catch his wagons. That was the last there would be of Ewing, and when it came to plain freighting nothing could keep him and the boys from rolling into the Virtue on the exact tick of the clock. And there would be the five hundred for young Trace.

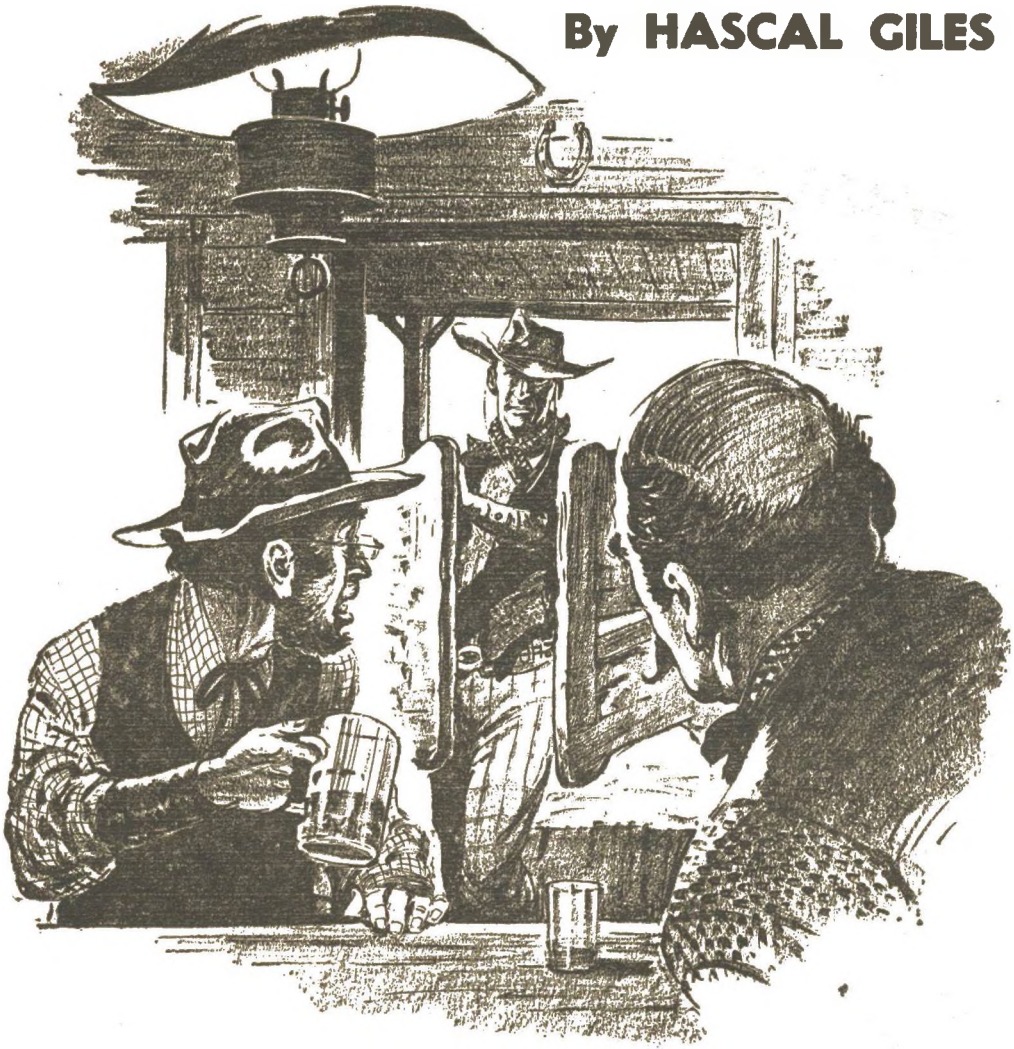
He was almost ashamed to take it from Sol for a lead-pipe cinch like this. ● ● ●

CRITTERS IN THE CRATER

When the great earthquake of 1811 struck Madrid, Missouri, the settlers there were handed a different sort of shock when a newly opened hole revealed a number of huge bones. The bones were so big that the onlookers stood in awe as their imaginations pictured the mammoth size of the living things that had lived there, where the settlers stood, many thousands of years back in the dimness of the past.

—J. W. Q.

By **HASCAL GILES**



We both watched the door, staring bug-eyed.

DEAD MEN ALWAYS LOOK UP!

JUST knowing he would show up sooner or later put a mixture of cold dread and hope in my belly. You hear all the stories and legends about a gunfighter like Clint Cahill, and you begin to wonder what kind of man it is who has stood up behind a smoking gun so many times and

It was almost as deadly to tell a professional gunfighter like Clint Cahill that his brother had been shot down, as it was to be the fool who'd pulled the trigger. . . .

watched another fall down dead before him. How black is his heart, and what is the coldness that ices his conscience and allows him to go on with his grisly chores?

I saw him ride into Sky High that day and step off his tired sorrel into the hoof-trod alkali of the street. While he fastened the horse's reins around the hitching rail in front of my place, he read the sign above the door which says: **FIRST STOP SALOON, JEB STRAPP, PROP.** When he started inside, little chill bumps started crawling up my back and I reached across the bar and nudged Adam Clanton, who was the only customer I had at the time.

Adam put his drink down and looked around. He swore softly when he recognized the face which we'd seen in the territory's newspapers more than once.

"I said he'd come, Jeb," Adam breathed. "He had to come. It was our only hope."

"He ain't doing it for us, Adam, mind you. Horatio wasn't lying. Clint Cahill's his brother, all right. He's heard the news at last and he's here to kill Tasker Modine."

Adam didn't say anything. We both watched the door, staring bug-eyed, and then we tried to act nonchalant when the flaps parted and Clint Cahill stepped inside.

He saw us giving him the once-over, but he didn't pay it any mind. He walked up to the bar and stopped beside Adam, who looked like he was all drawed up inside and wanted to slide over a little, but was afraid to.

Cahill was medium-sized with a good bit of weight in his shoulders, but his face was slender and flat-planed, almost gaunted. Plain-looking was about the only thing you could say about him. He was wearing ordinary levis and a gray flannel shirt, and the slanting gun belt which held his black-butted Colt .44 had only four cartridges in the loops. But there was something in his squinted gray eyes that told you he was here on business, and he was anxious to get it done.

He didn't ask questions, and I was beholden to him for that. He didn't want to get me mixed up in this thing by asking me to tell him what I'd seen there in front of the First Stop bar a month ago. Anyway, if I'd been man enough to buck Tasker Modine I would have done it already, and there'd be no cause for Clint Cahill to be here. Like everyone else in Sky High who

had forgotten what a boom town it once was and now was satisfied to settle down and make a home here, I had a personal grudge against Modine. That's why the killing of Horatio Cahill had disturbed everybody. It was more than the death of a man; it was plain evidence that Tasker Modine was killing our town, too.

Most of us had come to Sky High for the same reason after a wizened old prospector named Shorty Ganlon had staggered down out of the Funeral Range one day two years ago with his hands full of gold-bearing ore. We had come to make ourselves a hundred million dollars, but by the time Shorty Ganlon had mysteriously disappeared with the only knowledge of the location of the mother lode, a few of us had sunk our roots too deep to move again.

We were perched up there on the top of Faraway Mountain, a stone's throw from Death Valley and near the only year-round spring within a hundred miles. We could trade with the gold hunters for another fifty years. Besides me and Adam Clanton, who ran the Outfitters' Store, there were a dozen men or so who owned claims that were still getting out profitable ore. Nothing like Shorty Ganlon had found, but enough color to make a good living. But everything looked hopeless with Tasker Modine around. He was out to bleed us all dry. That's why it was that Adam Clanton spoke of Clint Cahill's arrival as if it was the answer to a prayer.

ADAM was watching Cahill out of the corner of his eye now while the gunman fumbled in his pocket for a coin, and ordered a drink. Adam looked like he was disappointed in the man's appearance. We'd both seen Hickock and Earp a few times, but this man didn't have any of the swagger and derring-do which made them stand out, though his reputation was about the same. You could tell he wasn't stuck on himself, because he didn't have the idea that everyone who saw him was supposed to know him. He dawdled with his drink a while, and then introduced himself.

"I reckon you'd be Jeb Strapp," he said, looking across at me. "Well, I'm Clint Cahill. Used to be town marshal down Paso way, and for a while in Prescott." He explained his connections as if he had a guilty conscience. Nearly everybody knew Cahill

had done his gunslinging while he was wearing a badge, but no matter how legal it is a man gets the reputation as a killer after so long a time.

He turned around and hooked his elbows on the bar, holding his drink and looking out into the glaring sunshine of the street. "This looks like a fine place to live. Up above the world, pretty nigh. A man with a stake could build a big hotel here and keep it filled with them eastern dudes who like to get up on a mountainside and just look. I reckon old-timers like you ain't got much hankering to move."

"That's right," Adam Clanton said. Adam loosened up a little now, and introduced himself. Cahill looked at him for a few seconds and then back at his drink.

"You must be Jim Clanton's brother, then. I read in Arizona Gazette about him getting killed. Too bad nothing could be found out about that. I been reading a lot about Sky High," he added as an afterthought. "I've had sort of a personal interest in this place."

My nerves tightened up inside when he said this, and I grabbed a towel and moved away to polish some glasses. It looked like he was working around to asking about his brother, Horatio Cahill, and I didn't want to be a part of the discussion.

Suppose Tasker Modine proved to be Cahill's match—there's one for every man somewhere—and was still alive when this affair was over. If he stayed alive, and I did the wrong kind of talking now, then I'd be dead. A man doesn't have to be a coward not to want to commit suicide. Besides being dangerous, talking would be unethical. A saloonkeeper in a town like Sky High is supposed to see nothing but the color of a man's money when he pays for his drink.

But I was wasting my worry. When Cahill mentioned Jim Clanton, Adam's eyes squinted behind his rimless glasses and his bony-face grew knotty and pale with anger.

"Everybody in Sky High knows who killed Jim," Adam said hotly. "Nobody had any reason to kill him but Tasker Modine. We're trying to do something with this town, keep it alive and make us a home here. To do that we have to keep people here who ain't afraid they're going to be shot down every time they start into town with a poke of dust. Since Modine quit prospecting the mountains, three men have

been backshot at their claims and their pokes taken. There's no law up here, so we decided to have some. Me'n Jeb Strapp here, and Lev Stacy and some more of us



If Acid Indigestion comes
And tries to rock the boat
Settle it with Alka-Seltzer
Before it gets your goat

First Aid For **ACID**
INDIGESTION

Your
BEST BET
Is a Glass of Sparkling,
Refreshing

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Fast Acting
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NOT A LAXATIVE

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subscribed a fund to elect a town marshal. Jim was a candidate for the job. That's why he was killed."

Cahill nodded. "Who are the other candidates?"

"There ain't but one other," Adam told him. "Tasker Modine. He came to Jim and told him to drop out of the race or there'd be trouble. Jim laughed at him. The next day we found Jim at his claim—backshot."

"When's the election?"

Adam downed the last of his liquor angrily. "Tomorrow. Modine's been making his own law up here, and with a badge to hide behind he'll get worse. And we'll be paying him our money to do it! Soon's he's able to make it legal, he'll be shooting anybody that looks crossways at him, just like he did poor Horatio Cahill. Why—"

Adam broke off with a sharp intake of breath, and I felt sweat popping out of my bald spot. He'd swung the door wide open now, and we were getting ourselves tangled up in Tasker Modine's business.

But we underestimated Clint Cahill. He didn't bat an eye when Adam stopped talking, and he didn't press for any more information. Instead, he set his empty glass down and asked for a deck of cards.

I handed him a deck from the shelf beside the cash box, and he went over to a table in the corner and sat down. As Cahill laid out a hand of solitaire, Adam looked at me and sighed with relief. Then he went on over to his store, but not until he had stood a moment in the doorway to study the dark-haired man who seemed interested only in the card game.

THERE was a lot of whispering around the First Stop bar as most of my regulars stopped by for a drink some time during the day. Clint Cahill knew what we were talking about, but he didn't seem to mind. Each time the doors flapped behind a new customer, he looked up from his table, studied the face for a fleeting second, and then went back to his solitaire game.

A man like Cahill has sharp instincts. He *has* to have or he wouldn't live long. I didn't know whether he'd ever seen Tasker Modine or not, but I knew he'd recognize the man when he came. And Tasker would come. He never missed a day. Sometime around sundown he'd show up. He'd play poker if anybody would play with him, and

if they wouldn't he'd get roaring drunk and insult a lot of people, and then ride back to his place up the draw. Today he would probably do some boasting about his job as town marshal. If he only got one vote—even his own—he'd be elected tomorrow.

We must have rehashed the killing of Horatio Cahill twenty times during that day in muffled voices while the gunman in the corner ignored us. Along about supper-time, Big Lev Stacy, the blacksmith, brought up a point which hadn't occurred to any of us.

"What if he ain't Horatio's brother a-tall?" Lev asked. He rubbed a massive fist along his leathery cheek and studied Cahill. "Just looking at him over there, it don't look likely. He's tough, that hombre, and he looks like he growed up in a saddle. Not many like him have a brother like Horatio. I've met many a man in my time name of Stacy who I never seen before or after. Names don't mean anything. Cahill could be in trouble and hiding out here a spell. It's a good place for it. I shore hope he does more than just say howdy to Tasker Modine."

Lev wiped his mouth on his red shirt sleeve and left. There was no one in the saloon then but Cahill and me, and I was so upset over Lev's doubts that I wanted to walk right over to the table and ask the taciturn man what he meant to do. I pushed the thought out of my head, though, and shivered at my own weakness. That kind of behavior was exactly what had brought on a killing in the First Stop a month ago. Tasker Modine had been curious about Horatio Cahill, and when he couldn't find out what he wanted to know, he killed him.

Some said Tasker Modine was crazy from tramping around under the burning sun so long without ever making a strike, and others said he was plain Apache mean. But we all agreed he didn't have much cause for killing Horatio Cahill.

It was strange how everybody was on Horatio's side. We didn't know anything about him or where he had come from. We just woke up one morning and Horatio was in Sky High. He had moved into a deserted dugout at the edge of town, and he spent most of the days rambling around the barren draws and ridges of the mountain.

The first time I saw him was when he came into the saloon one day just at dusk

and ordered a schooner of beer. He was a small-boned little man in his thirties with a long-chinned face and sad blue eyes; and even when the sun turned the jagged rocks and gritty sand of the country into an oven, Horatio always wore his same shiny black suit and narrow-brimmed derby hat.

And he always carried a small leather satchel which he held up under his armpit like it contained all the treasures of the world.

Tasker Modine started in on Horatio by making fun of his clothes, and then he noticed the leather satchel. After that first meeting there was a strange look in Tasker's eyes every time he saw Horatio Cahill.

It became a habit with Horatio to drink his schooner of beer every evening, and on his fifth visit Tasker Modine could control himself no longer.

Tasker walked right up to the bar where Horatio was drinking and pointed to the leather bag. "You've been luggin' that case around here for days, pilgrim, and I want to know what's so special about it. Are you a drummer or somethin'?"

Horatio stopped drinking and looked straight into Tasker's eyes. "I consider that a rather personal question, sir." Then Horatio hugged the satchel up under his arm and hurried away.

Afterward, I heard Tasker ask about the satchel at least ten times, and each time Horatio put him off without answering. Some of the boys who prospected the hills said they saw Tasker trailing Horatio after that, but the little man in the derby must have given him the slip every time. Tasker didn't know what was in the case until the day Horatio died.

THERE had been a poker game the night before. Tasker finally had bluffed Horatio into a game with him, and he cleaned the little man in the derby hat. When Horatio lost his last chip, Tasker pointed at the satchel.

"I'll stake a hundred against your bag," Tasker said.

Horatio shook his head and stood up. "That would be cheating you, sir."

Lev Stacy got worried about Horatio later, for he'd seen the look on Tasker Modine's face. Lev rode out to tell him to be on guard for a bushwhacking, but Horatio wasn't in his dugout. He was that smart,

at least. Whatever that might be worth.

Up to that time, no one had even associated Horatio's name with the famous gunman, Clint Cahill. The connection wasn't brought out until Horatio met Tasker Modine in the First Stop Saloon the next evening.

The killing had been building up, and I dreaded it. I tried to warn Horatio he ought to stay away from the saloon, but he looked at me like I was crazy.

"Why, I'm a free man, Jeb," he said. "I don't have to cower and hide from people like Tasker Modine. He would never dare kill me because I refuse to open my belongings to him."

"You're wrong, Horatio," I said. "I've heard Tasker talk, and I know him. He always figured Shorty Ganlon made a map of the big vein he found in Sky High. He figures Shorty sent that map to somebody. I don't know what's in your satchel, but I know what he thinks might be in it. If it ain't the map, then show him what it is. It might save your life."

Horatio looked at me with his sad eyes and smiled oddly. "Then he would want me to change my clothes and dress as he does. Then he might want me to drink his kind of whiskey and eat his kind of food. You can't give up a principle and recover it, Jeb. That's what has happened to Tasker Modine. Once we have principles, we must keep them or be like him."

Tasker Modine came in just as Horatio quit talking. He walked up to him and stopped with his legs widespread, his chin thrust out.

"Give me that bag," Tasker said tightly. His breath was coming fast out of his nostrils, and his hands were shaking. "Give it to me, pilgrim, or I'll take it away from you."

Horatio knew the showdown had come at last, and, as Lev Stacy had pointed out, it could have been the bluff of a man who saw death staring him in the face. But he said softly: "Don't try it, sir, or you'll be killed. I've never asked my brother to fight my battles, but if you harm me you will answer to Clint Cahill."

The name didn't need any further identification. Tasker Modine had heard it, and he knew the legends of dazzling gun-speed and cold nerve surrounding it. But his only reaction was a dry laugh.

"I ain't here to listen to bedtime stories, pilgrim. Clint Cahill couldn't be whelped from the same litter as you. He's a man who walks in the open. He wouldn't claim kin to a sniveling little weasel who goes around hiding things."

Tasker Modine took a step forward, his fists knotted and anger burning his face blood-red.

Horatio still held on to his satchel, and he saw the fight coming. He had no gun, so he used the only weapon at hand—the satchel. He swung the bag with surprising force, catching Modine on the side of the head. Modine stumbled back off balance, hit the edge of a table and fell on his side.

He shot from the floor. As I ducked behind the bar, I saw Horatio crumple down over the black satchel with blood streaming out of his face. By the time I stood up and saw Horatio was dead, Modine already had the bag open. He turned it upside down, dumping the contents on the floor. Then he stood there with an empty look on his face, the expression of a man who has found the end of a rainbow, but no pot of gold.

"What is it, Modine?" I was surprised at the sound of my own voice.

"Pictures," he said dully. He held up a sheaf of papers, crumpling them in his fist. "Nothin' but a bunch of damn' pictures. He's been tramping around out there in the hills drawing pictures of antelope and lizards and scorpions. And a book," Tasker added numbly, digging the volume out from the clutter of materials. He read the title: *Wildlife in the Dakotas*, by Horatio Cahill.

Tasker Modine threw the book down and looked at me, shaking his head. "He ought to have told me that."

That was the only excuse Tasker offered before he shrugged his shoulders and walked outside. A dozen pair of hate-filled eyes, those of the customers who had scattered along the walls, stared at his back; but no one said anything.

BUSINESS wasn't as good that evening as usual. Nearly everybody in Sky High had heard Clint Cahill was there, and, though they wanted to see what would happen, their good sense told them to stay away until they saw how the land lay. But Lev Stacy and Adam Clanton showed up. Lev had an aggravating curiosity which made him want to see whether the gunman

was really Horatio's brother or not, and Adam had a better reason for wanting to see Tasker Modine dead than any of us.

Lev got the answer to his question right away. Clint Cahill got up from his table when I started lighting the lanterns around the place, and went over to the bar and waited until I had finished. He asked me to fix him something to eat, and started back to his table. Then he turned around and said: "Did Horatio leave any personal effects here?"

"Only his drawing case," I said. He came back to the bar and I handed him the leather satchel which I had kept under the counter since the shooting.

"Thanks," he said. "Them book publishing people might want to see what he did here."

After that we didn't have any questions which needed answering except how Clint Cahill would go about squaring things. Since none of us knew the man, we all had different ideas about it. As far as Adam Clanton was concerned, Cahill was only a necessary evil in Sky High. Adam frowned on violence, and he wouldn't give an ounce of credit to a man who lived by his gun. He wasn't conceding anything to Cahill except cold blood and a deathly skill. Adam figured he'd just stand up there in the corner and yell out his challenge and then start shooting.

Lev Stacy thought there would be an argument first, so it would look like any ordinary saloon brawl in which a man shot in self-defense. I didn't have any definite opinion, but I couldn't go along with Adam or Lev. Something about the quiet man who had whiled away the day playing solitaire told me he wouldn't simply stand up and gun a man down. That would be like any ordinary killer, and I had already decided Clint Cahill would make this something special.

I was picking up the dishes from Cahill's table when Tasker Modine arrived. At the sound of the batwing doors scraping together, Cahill looked up like he had done every time someone entered, only this time he kept looking. Horatio's drawing case was lying on the table in front of him, and he picked it up and slid it out of sight under his chair. Then he reached in his shirt pocket for tobacco and papers, and slowly rolled a cigarette.

I hurried back to the bar and set out a bottle for Modine. He had the same arrogant smirk on his face and the same smug stance at the bar, and I knew nobody had done him the favor of telling him Clint Cahill was in town.

Modine slid the bottle a few feet along the bar after he'd filled his glass, and said: "It's on me, Clanton. Let's drink to my election tomorrow."

Adam tapped his own glass on the bar. "Got one."

"Me, too," Lev Stacy said.

Tasker Modine laughed as if he'd made a big joke. He was a burly, slick-faced man with watery blue eyes and white eyebrows that had been his since birth. He didn't weather like other men, but came out each day with a new sunburn and a peeling skin. Lev Stacy said one time he looked like a poison lizard who had just been scared from beneath a rock and was trying to sting somebody to get even. The description fit pretty well. There was plenty of sting, too, in the matched pearl-handled guns he carried low on his thighs in cutaway holsters.

Tasker poured his second drink and looked around the empty tables of the First Stop until he saw Clint Cahill sitting in the corner. But he didn't ask Cahill to drink with him. Instead he looked back at me and shook his head disgustedly.

"Not even a poker crowd on election night, Jeb. You goin' out of business?"

Tasker laughed again, but this time Cahill's twangy drawl cut into the rasping chuckle.

"Two-handed stud beats solitaire," said Cahill. "Come over and have a seat."

Tasker looked undecided for a moment, but presently he picked up the bottle and joined Cahill at the table. I took them some chips, getting Cahill's deposit in double eagles and Modine's in gold dust. Then I went back to the bar and started hatching out one set of goose pimples after another. Lev Stacy and Adam Clanton exchanged glances, and took a seat in front of the bar where they were out of the line of fire.

MODINE took the deal. Cahill didn't seem particularly interested in the game. As soon as Modine laid down the hole card, Cahill became interested in something on the ceiling directly above Modine's head. He kept his eyes fastened up there

except when Modine would say quietly, "Yours," and then he'd glance at his cards and make his bet. He'd make his ante and go right back to staring at the ceiling.

Even when the deal changed, Cahill didn't watch Modine's face or his own hand, and he lost three in a row. The first thing I knew I'd forgotten the poker game myself, and was staring at the ceiling like I expected a thunderbolt to come crashing through it any minute. I looked across at Adam Clanton and Lev Stacy, and they were doing the same thing.

Right in the middle of one deal, I saw Tasker Modine pause long enough to look up, and then glance uneasily at Clint Cahill.

"What is it?" Modine asked.

Cahill tapped his dwindling stack of chips. "What's what?"

Modine jerked a thumb impatiently at the roof. "Up there."

"Nothing," Cahill said.

But as Modine laid out the next hand, Cahill continued to stare above him. Me and Lev and Adam stared, too, but we couldn't see a thing. I watched Tasker Modine for a while. He was beginning to fidget and the back of his neck was fiery.

"Keep your eyes on the table," Modine said shortly, but Cahill grinned tightly and kept looking. It got on Modine's nerves, and he told Cahill if he wasn't interested in the game they'd call it quits.

"You're winning," Cahill pointed out.

"Do you care?"

"Not especially," Cahill said, and Modine's hands started shaking with fury.

When Modine dealt the cards this time, he slapped them down angrily, stopping every minute or two to follow Cahill's gaze to the ceiling. Once he leaned far back in his chair and looked all around.

"You must see somethin'," Modine said impatiently. "What is it?"

"Nothing," said Cahill.

Tasker Modine suddenly kicked his chair back with a loud clatter and stood up. "Quit lyin' to me, mister. What are you lookin' at? Somethin' ain't right here!"

Cahill had kept his seat, but his hands were out of sight, and his lean jaws were working together tightly. His hands came back in sight with Horatio's leather satchel which he laid on the table in front of him.

Tasker Modine knew where he stood

• (Please continue on page 112)

— PARDNERS —

By CLARK
GRAY



Sally smiled. "I've
been waiting for you."

Ben Caldwell had to learn it the hard way: A woman—even one as pretty as Sally—is only a woman, but good steel—in a pardner or a gun—is something to count on when the going gets really rough.

THE screen door whacked shut as Caldwell stepped from the feed store with a sack of scratch grain on his shoulder. Pausing in the warm shade of the wooden awning, he blinked at the sunlit brilliance of the little town of Tensmoke and decided that the holiday crowd out there was finally breaking up.

To his left, a group of spurred, big-hatted stockmen pushed past a row of saddled horses and entered the saloon. In the street, bonnetted women led tired children toward the ranked wagons in the courthouse square. Dogs nosed picnic remnants in the gutters. And over by the schoolhouse flagpole, the distinguished state senator still shook hands

with a few lingering voters, his leonine white head glistening in the bronze desert sunshine.

Caldwell said softly, "The boozier," and humped his shoulder under the scratch grain and moved off the porch into heat that was like a wall. Slowly he crossed the street, bootheels dragging sand. He was a big, weather-burned man, wearing a gun. His blue levis had faded almost white from a hundred scrubbings. He reached the opposite boardwalk, turned right toward his wagon, and abruptly stopped short, staring. His mouth went dry as cottonwood fluff.

Sally Henchley waited beside his wagon, tapping her foot. She twirled a tiny silken parasol, her eyes on the great man up at the schoolhouse. Caldwell said, "Now, what the hell!" and realized he was talking to himself again. He shrugged under the grain and trudged on with sudden nervous hands. At the wagon he dumped the grain into the warped wooden bed.

"Howdy, Mrs. Henchley."

Sally said, "Oh!" and wheeled. She wore a lavender dress of some rustly material, with puffy sleeves. She used scent, a strange, clean, piney perfume. The scent, and the incredible bloneness of her in this country of suntan and freckles, caught Caldwell like a blow in the short ribs. He knew then that it wasn't over yet.

Sally smiled. "Hello, Ben. I've been waiting for you."

Caldwell made some pointless gesture. "With the great man in town? Sal, I'm flattered bowlegged."

His tone lifted her blue-eyed glance to his face.

"You don't like the senator, Ben?"

Caldwell said, "Do I have to?"

She flushed. She looked away from him, frowning. Caldwell put his calloused palms on the wagon bed and waited, thinking of that other summer when he'd been smashed by a falling horse. The memory of adhesive tape around his ribs and Sally's scent were inextricably mingled now into a twisted, dry, sweet image of the time they'd been engaged. Sally turned back and nudged the sack of scratch grain with an interest that was obviously pretended. Her husband's diamond sparked on her finger.

"Store feed? For a rancher?"

"It's kaffir," Caldwell said. "I traded Mart Brewer an eatin' calf for a hundred

pullets. Man cooks for himself needs lots of eggs, Sal."

She laughed. It was the same laugh. A sound as pretty as a church bell. "Mart got the better of the deal, I bet."

"Maybe." Caldwell wiped sweat from his face. "Sal, you didn't leave Thorndyke to them pap-suckers just to talk to me."

Her blue eyes unfocused a little. She fiddled with the parasol. Caldwell remembered then that abrupt shifts in conversation had always disconcerted her. At length she smiled.

"But I did, Ben. Look. Will you come up to my suite?"

Caldwell raised his eyebrows. "To your suite?"

Her cheeks went bright red. "I'm having a reception for the senator later. I—want to ask you something."

"All right." He grinned. "Four years ago, I'd've been shocked at that kind of invite, Sal."

HE FOLLOWED her through the hotel lobby, with its green-tarnished brass cuspidors, its cracked leather furniture, its stink of cigar smoke and sweat: all old and masculine things that spoke of the frontier not too long vanished. He heard his own spurs jangle. Sally's hips swayed in the tight taffeta gown. Climbing the stairs, she lifted her skirts above trim ankles. He reminded himself sharply that she was married now—to another man.

Upstairs in a large, hot room, an aproned maid laid silver and cut glass on a white tablecloth with a big crystal punchbowl. A dusty green paper blind flapped at the open window. Sally nodded at the maid, "I'll call you, Hilda."

The maid left the room. Caldwell scratched a match on his bootheel.

"Some tea party, Sal."

She glanced at him sharply as he lit his cigarette. She walked over and closed the door. When she came back, her lips were pressed together.

"Ben, I need help."

Caldwell let smoke dribble through his nose. He understood her well. He had every reason to be contemptuous of her.

She said, "Jack won't come. He's down at the shipping pens, helping load out a bunch of steers."

Caldwell nodded and moved over to sit

in the open window. Down on the street, the great state senator moved away from the schoolhouse, surrounded by women and a few men. Caldwell recognized bald-headed, simpering Charley Fusie, a hard-up newspaperman who wanted a job in the state capitol.

He said, "The great man's nose is red, Sal."

"Ben," she said, "don't you be that way."

Caldwell grinned. "You can ignore a man's liking for drink, Sal. But it's still there."

Sally picked up a teacup. Two stubborn spots of red glowed in her cheekbones.

"Ben," she said. "Get Jack up here for me. Please. It won't look right not to have my husband here. I've tried so hard to— to be nice to the senator."

Caldwell asked gravely, "Why, Sal? What's the senator to you?"

She backed against the table. Her fingernails holding the teacup whitened. "Ben," she said quietly. "I expected you to understand."

Caldwell said, "Did you? I suppose I always have." He stared at the cigarette in his blunt, tobacco-stained fingers, then mashed it against the window sill and flipped the stub into the street. There was a rough spot in his throat. "Trouble is, understanding never helped me any, Sal."

Sally bit her lip. She set the teacup down very gently on the white tablecloth, and once more her eyes dilated in that slightly unfocused look. Caldwell could read that look well enough by now. It meant that Sally was stopping to visualize herself before she acted. She was studying her role.

Then she straightened and lifted her head, and the corners of her mouth sweetened.

"Ben," she whispered. "What can I say?"

Even now, she irritated him. He clenched his fingers. "You could say you loved me once, damn it. Better than you ever loved Jack."

She shook her head. She was completely sure of herself.

"What good would it do?"

"All right," Caldwell said wearily. "None, Sal. I know it. Relax."

Sally smiled. She came toward him with rustling skirts. She rested a hand on his

knee, and her diamond caught a glint of sunlight.

"Ben," she said. "Please get Jack up here. It—means so much to me."

Caldwell said sourly, "Sal, you don't know what you're asking. Jack hates Thorndyke worse'n I do."

Sally let out her breath in a little gesture of annoyance. She paced across the room. "I try so hard," she said. "I could be somebody in this town. But you—you and Jack—"

"All right," Caldwell said. "Lay off the dramatics, Sal. I'll talk to him."

Sally sighed with relief. Her smile brightened her whole face. "Thank you, Ben." She stood on tiptoe and rewarded him with a chaste kiss on the cheek. "Good old Ben," she said and squeezed his arm.

Caldwell grinned painfully, and the harsh spot in his throat thickened, and he said hoarsely, "Sal—"

She wasn't listening. She stood beside him with her lip prettily between her teeth, a hand to her hair.

"Ben," she said. "Tell me. Shouldn't I offer the senator a drink? I mean—I know his weakness, but isn't it a kind of insult not to—to—"

Caldwell caught the groan before he uttered it.

"Hell," he said dryly. "Get him potted, Sal. If you really want to make an impression, that's the way."

HE LEFT the hotel and stood on the sun-baked boardwalk, hatbrim pulled low. The great man and his coterie of admirers crossed the street toward him. Bald Charlie Fusie had the senator by the elbow, speaking into his ear.

Caldwell leaned against the plate glass window and twisted together a fresh cigarette.

As the senator stepped up on the boardwalk, his glance fell on Caldwell. He murmured something to Charley Fusie and pulled away from the little group.

"Hello, Ben."

Caldwell slipped his cigarette into his mouth and regarded Thorndyke coldly. The great man was sixty now, Caldwell judged. He'd become an orator famous throughout the state. On the rostrum—any rostrum—he spoke glowingly of free trade, the Monroe Doctrine, a fair wage for labor, an

honest profit for business, old-time religion, and the sanctity of the American home. Newspapers reprinted his speeches. He was prominently mentioned in the high councils of his party as the next gubernatorial nominee. In his rumpled white linen coat, he looked like a mild old man who loved to pamper children. He had a hesitant, almost shy smile, which he used on Caldwell now. But the slight reddening of his nostrils betrayed him, and the way he looked at Caldwell's shoulder, not into his eyes.

Caldwell said, "Howdy. Back in town, eh, Thorndyke?"

The senator peered at a button on Caldwell's shirt and pulled down his rumpled coat. "Yes, Ben—"

"It's all right," Caldwell said. "Old man Henchley can't run you out again. He died five years ago."

The senator compressed his lips. He smelled faintly of whisky.

"Ben, all that was a long time—"

"Yeah," Caldwell said. "Remember Jack Henchley, Thorndyke? He was the old man's son. The other one." Caldwell struck a match on the board siding of the hotel and held it to his cigarette and looked at the great man over the flame. "Jack was only ten, when you got lit and killed his big brother in that card game."

He sucked flame into his cigarette. The great man's cheekbones gradually lost their color. Thorndyke touched his lips with his tongue.

"I'd forgotten him."

"Uh-huh." Caldwell nodded. "But he hasn't forgotten you."

The great man made a sudden gesture with his hand. "Look, Ben. You know I don't want that ancient history dredged up. I came here to dedicate a schoolhouse, nothing more. I'm leaving town by suppertime. But I'm the senior senator from this district. I'll not have some two-bit cow-nurse—"

Caldwell interrupted, his voice suddenly flat. "Better stay sober, then. It never was pretty, when you got drunk."

He turned and stalked into the street, anger foaming in him. He crossed stolidly to the shaded awning of the feed store. When he looked back, Thorndyke and his little group were entering the hotel.

Sally stood in the hotel entrance, shaking hands with the senator. Excitement flushed

her face pink; she held her skirts gracefully in her left hand; and she looked so beautiful and so happy it pulled something loose in Caldwell's chest.

HE FOUND Jack at the shipping pens, squatting in the shade of the big double loading chute beside the railroad spur. The cattle train had gone. The great pole pens lay silent in the sunlight. But Caldwell smelled the settling dust and the cow scent. He grinned at Jack and dropped beside him under the heavy, slanting timbers of the chute.

"Get loaded?"

Jack nodded and lit a cigarette. Jack was dumpy and dark, with a creased face. His heavy jaws were blue; he hadn't shaved this morning. He was worth perhaps a half million dollars, cattle and land, Caldwell thought. And he looked as if he didn't own a second pair of pants.

"Thirty carloads," Jack said. "Beats trailin' 'em, Ben."

Caldwell grunted. "We're gettin' soft. Cotton cake and barbed wire and railroads. We'll be puttin' sofa pillows on saddles, next."

Jack laughed and stretched his legs. "Hell, it's better this way. The wild days were fun, but we're producin' twice as much beef now, acre for acre. Tame grass and good blood."

Caldwell nodded. He glanced at the railroad spur, the small cheap ties laid on ungraded sod with grass thrusting between them. Back at Tensmoke, the roofs of the shabby frame buildings, the new brick schoolhouse, the saloons, pushed bleak teeth against the copper sky. It was a drab, lonely, bitter country, and it was Caldwell's.

He said, "Sal wants you at the hotel."

Jack didn't answer. Watching, Caldwell saw Jack's thumb and finger pinch down on his cigarette, squeezing tobacco out of it like toothpaste out of a tube. Jack threw the cigarette away.

"Ben," Jack said. "We never talked about Sal."

Caldwell blinked. He shook his head. "We never needed to."

"Did you ever hold it against me?" Jack said.

Caldwell bent forward and pulled a blade of grass. He felt a sudden need for honesty. "Why, Jack, I reckon I was kind of sore.

Sure. Who wouldn't be? But it didn't do me any good. I dropped it."

Jack nodded. "That's about how I figured."

"Hell," Caldwell said. "After all, it was up to her."

Jack nodded again. He turned his hands over and looked at his calloused palms. He touched a rope burn on one finger.

"I don't suit her," Jack said. His voice was a little froggy. "Cow dabs on my boots and hay in my hair, I reckon."

Caldwell felt his heart slug against his chest. He twisted his grass blade into a knot. He said, "Jack—"

"She knows I don't like Thorndyke. Still she had to have her damned reception."

Caldwell said, "A woman—"

"She wants to make a big splash," Jack said. "God knows why!"

Caldwell stood up, almost bumping his head on the under side of the loading chute. He adjusted his hat and grinned at Jack.

"Come on. Snub a loop on that. Let's drink a cup of fruit punch and shake the great man's hand, Jack. Then we can go off someplace and throw up."

Jack grinned a little. But the grin died, and Caldwell saw he was thinking of Thorndyke now, saw the old deadly hate filter into his eyes. That hate had embittered Jack's father at the end, and although Caldwell understood it, he didn't think it healthy.

Jack said, "The rotten cur!"

Patiently Caldwell shook his head. "Jack, you can't blame a boozer for what he does."

Jack's chin jerked up quickly, and his eyes glittered.

"I can still remember my brother's funeral. It was snowin'. After it was over, my pa ran Thorndyke out of town. There wasn't no trial, you know. Thorndyke claimed Bud had a marked deck, and he was a lawyer. He knew the damned loopholes. So Pa did the best he could. He scared Thorndyke yaller and shooed him off. Thorndyke rode a mule, them days. I remember he wore a sheepskin coat, with the hair turned out."

Caldwell said, "He's a state senator now, Jack."

Jack said, "I'd've liked my brother for a partner, Ben. But because a damned drunken lawyer can't take a beatin' at cards—"

Caldwell said, "Snub it off!"

"All right, Ben," Jack said, and he quieted. He crawled out from under the loading chute and stood up. The corners of his mouth turned down. "Funny what you'll do for a woman, just because the law says she's your wife. Come on."

THE hotel room was jammed. Women's dresses sprinkled the crowd with slabs of gay color. Grooved-faced stockmen sweated in starched shirts and neckties. Caldwell caught a vague impression of high-pitched voices, a welter of perfume, the clink of glassware. His shirt collar began to wilt in the stifling heat.

The distinguished visitor stood by the punch bowl with a teacup in his hand, talking with great animation to Charley Fusie, who grinned and nodded his bald head. Caldwell noted that the great man's nose was very red.

Then Sally threaded toward them, serene and lithe in the lavender dress. Smiling, she thanked Caldwell with her eyes and took Jack's hands.

"Hello, darling," she said gently. "Have you spoken to the senator?"

Jack's dark face looked rigid. He said, "All right, Sal," and lifted his gun from holster and handed it butt foremost to Caldwell. "Keep this for me, Ben."

Caldwell took the gun and stuck it in his belt. He was aware the exchange had attracted attention. Women turned; voices hushed. Jack stalked across the room.

Caldwell said quietly, "Sal," and watched her turn toward him. Her eyes hunted over his face.

"Yes, Ben."

"Has the senator had a drink?"

She nodded, lips twisting a little. "Quite a few. He—he didn't wait for me to offer. He asked if I had any."

Caldwell said, "Little girl, you want to watch it. Methinks there'll be some hell to pay."

Sally wrinkled her nose. "Shakespeare?"

"Caldwell," Caldwell said, grinning, and he lit a cigarette. He leaned against the wall and looked at Sally's hair. The lights glinted on her hair, and the faint ebb of her breathing rustled down through him, clear to his bones. He felt the old familiar dryness in his mouth, and Sally, staring at him, smiled.

"Quit it, Ben," she said softly. "People are looking."

Caldwell broke out of it. He blinked and put his cigarette into his mouth and turned his shoulder away from Sally. He walked across the room toward Jack, aware of Jack's gun prodding ominously under his vest.

Jack and the senator stood by the punch bowl, face to face. Jack's lips moved soundlessly. His round, dark face was the color of putty.

"Thorndyke," Jack said, "lay off."

The distinguished visitor took a drink out of his teacup. A lock of white hair had fallen over his forehead. Red threads ran through the whites of his eyes.

Thorndyke said, "Your old man thought he run me out, eh? Hell, I left when I was ready, and I came back when I was ready."

Jack's hands began to shake at his sides. He fist-ed them. He said, "Lay off."

The great man smiled. The senior senator of the district, the next governor, the people's choice, Caldwell thought. Thorndyke smiled and looked into his teacup.

"A real hayseed! Thinking he run me off, account of a cheatin' kid—"

Jack hit him.

Jack hit him on the mouth, jerking Thorndyke's head back. The teacup flew sideways and scattered a thin sheet of reddish liquor. Thorndyke stumbled against the table that held the punch bowl, knock-

ing it over, landing hard on his back.

Caldwell bellowed, "Watch it, Jack!" but it was too late.

Thorndyke's hand dipped into his coat. A tiny gun appeared, spat flame. Jack staggered backwards with fingers clenched to his shoulder and his dark face whitening. Caldwell saw these things in brief, intuitive flashes as he lunged forward. He booted the derringer from Thorndyke's fingers. The little gun spun across the room and clicked against the opposite wall.

Caldwell wheeled to Jack, then, hearing muffled screams, seeing Charley Fusie gallop across the room to the senator's side.

Caldwell tore at the shirt and felt slick stuff on his hands. In another part of his mind, vaguely, he became aware of Sally, clenching her skirts beside Charley Fusie. Sally looked from Thorndyke to her husband and back to Thorndyke again, desperately chewing the corner of her lip.

Caldwell read her, at that moment. His fingers were busy ripping at the buttons of Jack's shirt, but he read every thought that Sally had.

Sally didn't know what to do. She looked at the ring of frightened faces. Charley Fusie helped the great man to his feet. Charley's long, horsey features twisted with anxiety. The women who stood round pop-eyed were white and shocked.

And Sally Henschley stared back and forth. At the women, at Charley Fusie.

DESTINATION PITTSBURGH

When it comes to maintaining America's industrial potential, which of our many carriers is easily the most important? The vast Pennsylvania? Or the road with the most route mileage, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe? Wrong—this road ranks about 91st in length, though in 1950 it hauled 20 million tons of iron ore to the steel mills of Pittsburgh. Only one railroad answers that description, you say—the Bessemer & Lake Erie. True, but do you really know the inside story on this hard-working pike? If you don't, then you won't want to miss **DESTINATION PITTSBURGH**, the mile-by-mile, ton-by-ton story of one of the most important railroad operations in the U. S. A. It's in your May **RAILROAD**, now on your newsstand, or send 35¢ to



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Chewing her lip, she glanced again at Thorndyke, who rubbed his jaw tenderly now. A little girl, Caldwell realized, caught in something too grown up. At length Sally said:

"Senator, I'm so sorry. Are you hurt?"

DOCTOR JONAS PETTIGREW was an old cow-country doctor who knew the ways of stockmen and whisky. Consequently, having heard the shot, he arrived within three minutes, his white hair flying and his little bag clutched in a freckled fist.

Jack's wound proved to be clean and uncomplicated, entering just below the collarbone and emerging at the back of the shoulder. Caldwell breathed for the first time when he saw that; he pushed out of the crowd and found a half-empty cup of spiked punch and drank it. As he lowered the cup, he saw Charley Fusie and Thorndyke conversing earnestly in the corner. He thought with wry amusement that Charley would likely get his statehouse job now. And the *Tensmoke Courier* would be curiously silent about Sal Henschley's tea party. The power of the press, Caldwell thought wryly. The senator's reputation would be safe.

He shrugged and steered a couple of frightened, but curious, women with him as he left the hotel.

Outside, the sun had dipped behind the two-story peak of the hotel, and the first faint evening's breeze chilled the sweat on his face. He pulled back his shoulders as he walked toward his team and wagon.

He unhitched and watered the team in the big town horse tank, taking his time. Oddly, letting his mind uncoil, he experienced pleasure in hearing the horses noisily suck in water. Suddenly he was hungry.

Passing the hotel again on the way to the Chink restaurant, Caldwell almost bumped into Jack emerging. Jack's arm hung in a white sling; his face looked bloodless against the blue whiskers. Soberly Caldwell pulled Jack's gun from his belt.

"Here, bucko. But don't use it on Thorndyke. I got a hunch he'll be out of town inside an hour."

Jack took the gun in his good hand and awkwardly dropped it in his holster. He eased his shoulder against the hotel wall, his eyes gravely on Caldwell's face.

"Roll me a smoke, Ben?"

Caldwell said, "Sure," and drew out the

makings and shook tobacco into paper. He felt Jack's eyes.

"Why didn't you let Thorndyke kill me?" Jack asked. "He was trying."

Caldwell folded paper over tobacco. He touched his tongue to the gummed edge, creased it, twisted the ends.

"Jack," he said, "you damned fool—"

"She never loved me," Jack said. "With me gone, you could've had her in a minute."

Caldwell said, "Listen, you chucklehead! You think I'd want her that way? Take your smoke."

He stuck the cigarette between Jack's lips. He wiped a match on the hotel wall and put the flame to the twisted end.

Jack inhaled deeply, then removed the cigarette with his left hand.

"Ben," Jack said. "I'm leaving her."

Very slowly, Caldwell nudged his arm against the hotel wall alongside Jack. He rubbed his jaw, where Sally had given him that chaste kiss an hour ago.

He said, "Think it over first, Jack."

"I've thought it over. Months, now. She doesn't love me, Ben. Or anybody, but herself. She's a little girl, playing games. Having tea parties." Jack's lips moved his cigarette to the other side of his mouth. "You saw her—when I was down. She didn't know what to do."

Ben said, "Yes."

Jack said, "I'll pay her keep. Till she marries again."

Ben said, "Jack?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think I want her, either."

Jack took his cigarette out of his mouth.

"Ben, you don't need to feel—any obligation—"

Ben shook his head. "No. It's just—hell, I can see things, too."

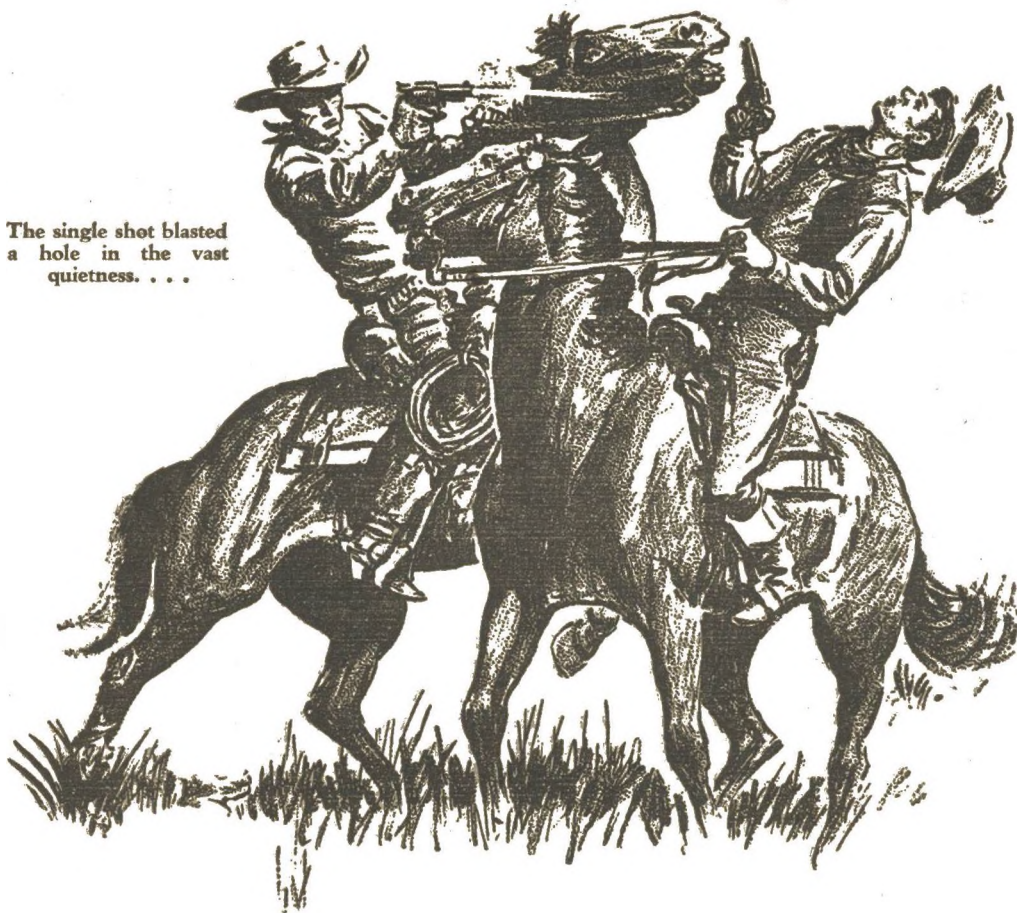
Jack nodded. He didn't say anything for a second. Over at the newspaper office, Charley Fusie and the great man emerged, strode quickly to two saddled horses at the hitchrail. The great man carried saddlebags over his arms.

Then Jack said, "Poor Sal."

"She'll make out," Caldwell said. "The play-actors always do."

He straightened and grinned and took Jack's good arm. "I got a hundred pullets from Mart Brewer. Lemme give you half. We'll both be needin' eggs." ● ● ●

The single shot blasted
a hole in the vast
quietness. . . .



THE GUN IN THE MIDDLE

By JACK BLOODHART

*Carson's life was hard, his risks great,
his pay in peanuts. Then why not deal
himself in for a real stake—and to
hell with his law-badge!*

FOR the better part of an hour, Carson squatted on his haunches on a hill above Apache Flats, smoking moodily and studying the town as a careful poker player studies the cards he's dealt and the faces of his opponents.

Then, as dusk purpled the hills and the first few lights winked on in the town below,

he straightened, flipped away his cigarette and swung aboard his waiting horse.

In the saddle, he twisted around, surveyed his back trail briefly, and, with what seemed almost like reluctance, headed down the sketchy trail that lead into Apache Flats.

The old man's orders had been explicit. "This is your last chance, Carson. Bring Corrigan in. Dead or alive, don't matter which. But bring him in. If you don't, you're through."

Or dead, Carson thought, a possibility that probably wouldn't bother Miller or the Association too much. Still, he couldn't blame Miller for the ultimatum. The Association, restless and angry under the blows delivered against its herds by Corrigan's long-rope artists, felt Carson had fallen down badly in his job.

The Association president's face softened a little as he looked at Carson. "What's got into you, Jim? Time was when a short-iron mob was as good as done when you went after 'em. Like the time you cleaned Spook Calhoun's bunch outta the Unknown Hills damn near single-handed." He looked at Carson quizzically. "You ain't been worth a damn to the Association lately, Jim. You know that, well as I do. Why?"

He knew it, all right. Well, why? You didn't tell a man like Miller you were tired, your nerve going—guts, too, maybe—that the loneliness, the killing, playing the hunter and the hunted, had taken their toll, and inside there was a drying up, and a fear that pretty soon only a shell would be left. Or that you were broke, and the money you'd made protecting other men's property had slipped through your fingers—Bess's long illness and death had finally cleaned it all out—and that the combination of all these things was building up a tide of bitterness and fear that sapped strength and will, and made you wonder sometimes if you'd made a mistake being on the right side of the fence. . . .

He let Miller's question lay there. "That all, Joe? If it is, I'll be gone."

The Association man tightened up, angry at the rebuff. *Damn it, he liked Carson. wanted to help him, but if the fool was going to act like this—*

"Yeah, that's all. Just remember what I said. The boys are mighty restless, but I made 'em agree to one more chance for you."

His sentence ended against the blank wall of Carson's back.

FULL dark had come by the time Carson reached the first decrepit shack that marked the outskirts of Apache Flats, a sun-baked little hell-hole devoid of law, and Slash Corrigan's headquarters.

He rode slowly, getting the feel of the place, savoring it through his nose and his eyes and his ears, an automatic reaction with him that even the insidious drying up of his own spirit could not destroy. He had ridden into a dozen towns like it, and they were all alike, and all different—but in each one death had held out a welcoming hand. He had flouted her up to now, done his job, collected his few bucks and gone on to the next task.

Well, that was a while back, when he cared more, and Bess was waiting for him at the end of it, and it seemed a little more than just a job protecting the Association members' seventy-five dollar hand-made boots and foxed gabardine pants. *Don't be unfair*, he told himself. *Your own scuffed boots and shapeless hat are your own fault, and death doesn't care how you're dressed.* Funny, up to lately those things hadn't mattered, but when you got to thinking about it, it didn't seem quite right. Even the owlhooters you warred against did better than you, the man in the middle. . . .

They were waiting for him in Apache Flats, as he figured they would be, as they always were, tipped off by a spy system of which he was well aware, and usually ignored.

In front of the only local saloon, a joint unimaginatively called Dave's Place, he swung down, twisted the reins around the hitching post and stepped up to the boardwalk. The watchers in the shadows saw a lean and sinewy man, with an easy gait, hat pushed back from a craggy face, armed with a single worn-butted gun that hung loosely but with a strange alertness in the worn, open-tipped holster at his side.

"One minute, friend."

Except for the voice of the man who came out of the shadows and the murmur of sound from within the saloon, Apache Flats was quiet. The pattern was familiar, Carson thought, and sighed inwardly, because for the first time the start of the game brought no quickening of his pulse.

His challenger stepped into the yellow light coming out of the saloon. Carson saw a thin, fox-faced man with a sharp nose and almost lidless eyes. *I could break him in two*, Carson thought, *and maybe some day I will, because he's a threat to the Association and its hand-made boots.* . . . The thought trailed off, unfinished, leaving a vacant space in his mind he dared not fill.

"The boss heard you was comin'." Fox-face said. "He'd like to see you."

Carson regarded him soberly. "Nice of him. Give him my regards. Right now I got business with Dave."

"The boss don't like to be kept waitin'," Fox-face said darkly. "Duke, tell the man the boss don't like to be kept waitin'."

From behind him, a voice told Carson, "Let's go, detective. Like Spider says, the boss don't like to be kept waitin'."

Carson knew, without turning, that Duke had a gun on him. Well, no matter how you felt about things, it made no sense to buck these odds . . . yet. His fingers itched momentarily, as the thought of feeding Spider a mouthful of knuckles went through his mind, but he forgot it. There *had* been a time, though—

MORE often than not they didn't look like thieves and killers, Carson thought, but of course you couldn't see into their heads and read the things that went on there. No, outwardly Corrigan might have been he himself, Jim Carson, and it might be Carson sitting there fingering the solid gold watch chain and gazing bleakly at his visitor. The thought interested Carson for an instant but he wiped it carefully from his mind.

Slash Corrigan was a big man; not fat, just big, with hard gray eyes and a strong mouth. He was dressed expensively but carelessly, and exuded an air of confidence that somehow mocked the range detective.

"You're smarter'n this, Carson," Corrigan said, a shade of puzzlement behind his eyes. "Much smarter."

Carson regarded him levelly. There had been a time when, without conceit, he could agree to what Corrigan had said. Now . . . well, just how smart was the man in the middle, anyhow? The Association members had theirs, and meant to keep it; Corrigan, too, had his, and meant to get more. It

didn't take many brains to figure who stood the best chance of getting nothing but a bullet lodged neatly in a vital spot.

"My orders were to bring you in, Corrigan. Dead or alive. So I came in after you." He might have added that he was getting too old to be hopping around in the mesquite like a skulking red Injun on trail of its prey; that when your nerves were going back on you, direct action—however foolhardy—might be the only cure.

Corrigan studied him, not without a hint of admiration in his eyes. Behind Carson, Spider and Duke lounged in the doorway, looking bored, thumbs hooked over their gunbelts. The room above Dave's Place to which they brought him was quiet except for the sound that seeped into it from the saloon below.

"I like a man with guts, Carson. But this time you weren't smart. You ain't takin' me in—" he smiled a little "—and there's a doubt in my mind that you'll be gettin' out."

There had always been that doubt, on every job. Carson felt suddenly weary; he'd been a fool, and now a corroding tiredness swept over him. They had taken his gun, but a leap across the table at Corrigan and the two behind him would end things neatly and quickly.

Corrigan said, suddenly, "How much do they pay you, Carson?"

The question caught him off guard. "I get along."

"Not enough, then. I could use a man like you, Carson." He brought his hands up, laying them flat on the table. "Yes. A man like you. Me an' my boys are gettin' rich, Carson. Will Joe Miller and the rest of that Association bunch make you rich?"

"You don't want a man who can be bought off, Corrigan," he said, but he wasn't thinking that.

The remembered voice of Miller was in his mind, saying, *This is your last chance, Carson. Bring Corrigan in, or you're through*, and the remembered things: the loneliness, the cold camps, the danger and the fighting, and at the end of it, thanks from the Association for the job he'd done, and a few bucks . . . Well, you'd never get rich, but you had things to remember, and you could live with yourself. Still—

"Nuts to that." Corrigan leaned forward across the table. "About through, eh, Car-

son? They told you that. Bring Corrigan in or get out. Generous bunch, ain't they? I know," Corrigan leaned back ruminatively. "Yeah, I *know*. Difference was, I smartened up." He seemed to be talking to himself now. "Yeah, they're all alike; but me, I didn't wait around."

Behind Carson one of the gunhands yawned loudly, and Corrigan shot him a sharp look, not saying anything. His eyes turned to Carson.

"Well, detective? I made you a proposition."

"I didn't hear it."

Corrigan waved his hand impatiently, but before he could say anything, Spider spoke up.

"What're we foolin' around for, boss? Duke an' me kin handle this son."

Corrigan smiled. "I know you can, boys." He looked at Carson, hunching his shoulders a little. "You see how it is, Carson."

Sure, he could see all right. He'd had propositions before, but that was a long time ago, and of the two who'd made them, one was dead and one was sitting out his folly behind bars somewhere. And there had been Bess then, and her understanding of what he had to do, and her hand a steady influence on his shoulder. But things change, and now no one gave a damn . . .

"All right, Corrigan. You can deal me in."

The outlaw stood up, smiling. "Now you're gettin' smart, Carson."

"My gun," Carson said, and Corrigan motioned at Duke, who with Spider stood unsmiling in the background.

"Sure. Why not, now?"

Carson holstered the gun while Duke said, "I don't like it, boss. I don't trust him."

"Okay, Duke, okay," Corrigan's voice was hard. "I'm runnin' this show. Carson's joined up. That's enough for me—and for him! Eh, Carson?"

"Let's talk business," Carson said flatly. "You got any plans?"

"Plenty. I figger in about sixty days we'll be cleaned up here, an' ready to move on, with a nice stake. Now here's where you come in. . . ."

IT WAS a day's ride back to Dry Wells, where the Association had its headquarters. Carson headed that way now, the

morning after he'd joined up with Corrigan. It was a fine morning, the climbing sun already hot, and the warm wind that blew over this endless range land carried a heady scent. Here and there the land was broken by towering outcroppings of rock, by buttes and mesas purple in the morning haze.

Above, unheeded by the rider below, vultures wheeled lazily against the great domed vault of sky. There was a silence on the land, broken only by the occasional ring of his horse's shod hoof against a rock. The thought habits of a lifetime are hard to break, and as he rode Carson felt again the things he had felt when awareness of this land first came upon him, so long ago.

Here in these vast spaces, presided over only by sun and wind, and once in a while a cowpoke riding herd, a man could live and breathe and grow according to his will. This seeming barrenness teemed with life a casual observer could not see; in the spring its dusty brown became a riot of color as the cacti bloomed; storied buttes reared their multicolored shoulders to the sky, and mesas the top of which no man had ever seen brooded over the land below, over canyons slashed into the unwilling earth as with a jagged knife, over chaparral and piñon, over rich range and desert waste.

Here came men, honest men, to carve out their lives and destinies; here came also thieves and killers like Corrigan to prey upon the fruits of other men's toil. . . .

Carson's open hand came down upon the pommel. "They got theirs," he said aloud. "Why shouldn't I get mine? They got plenty; it's time I got paid off!"

He laid his thoughts on Miller and the rest of the Association, then; prosperous and well-fed, crying because a few of their cows had been rustled, ready to destroy him and the work of a lifetime with never a remembrance of what he had done for them. So now he had his chance to get his, a pitiful cut that they would never miss, but which might mean security for him, the security that they had denied him.

Corrigan and Carson. He'd show 'em. Sixty days, and a stake would be his, and then they'd clear out and go on to other ranges. Corrigan, Carson and Co., Short-Iron Specialists. Corrigan chuckled. And all he had to do was see Miller, give him some cock-and-bull story about being close

to Corrigan, get the exact location of the various Association members' herds, and any plans they had for moving them. He'd heard Corrigan planned to go into action, he'd say, and knowing herd locations would help him head it off. He'd report back to his new boss. . . .

In the end it was no good, though. It became no good about noon, when he stopped for a cold lunch out of his saddle bags, and glancing casually back, caught movement on a hill above and behind him.

So they'd followed him.

He chewed mechanically, not tasting the food, knowing that what he was, he was, and that he'd never be anything else, that he'd hired on a long time ago to protect the fruits of other men's toil, and that the stake Corrigan held out to him was no stake at all, but a one-way ticket to damnation. . . .

Washing down the last of his lunch with a swig of water, Carson remounted, loosened the gun at his hip and turned back along the trail he had just covered. He had gone only a few hundred yards, and was about opposite the hill, when Duke came down out of a dry wash and sat astride the trail, blocking it, holding his horse in check with one hand while the other hovered near his holstered gun.

"You're goin' the wrong way, Carson," he said.

Carson regarded him levelly. "No, Duke, this is the right way. And I don't like bein' trailed. Makes me nervous. Don't you trust me, Duke?"

Duke's face was set in hard lines, his eyes dangerous. "I don't trust nobody. Least of all you, Carson. You bought too easy!"

"Right, Duke—I bought too easy."

"Yuh don't say," Duke mocked. "So what do you plan to do about it, lawman?"

"What I started out to do. I'm goin' back after your boss."

"No," Duke said. "No. You ain't. The boss won't want to be bothered with you." His hand crept nearer his gun. "I think we can settle this right now, Carson."

The single shot blasted a hole in the vast quietness, echoed briefly through the hills and died away as suddenly as it had come.

Jim Carson reholstered his gun slowly, watching speculatively as the man Duke crumpled in the saddle, gun dropping from his nerveless fingers. His body followed it a moment later to the ground.

Carson sighed, dismounted, lifted Duke's body and tossed it over the dead man's own saddle. He lashed it there, and catching up the reins of Duke's horse, headed back.

THE town lay quiet in the gathering dusk as Carson rode in, Duke's horse with its lifeless burden plodding behind him. Few were abroad; those who were, stopped momentarily, staring, but then hurried on, as though they didn't want to know too much about this funeral cortege. But at Dave's Place a little knot of men had gathered, and in their forefront stood Spider.

Carson pulled up and dismounted, said to Spider, "Corrigan in?"

Spider nodded, his face a tight mask, started to say something and then suddenly stopped. He had looked straight into Carson's eyes, and what he saw there backed him down.

Carson pushed past them, mounted the flight of stairs running up the outside.

Corrigan sat at the table, dealing himself a hand of solitaire by the light of a single wavering lamp. He looked up sharply when Carson came in, stared a moment, then dropped the deck to the table and stood up.

Before Corrigan could say anything, Carson said easily, "Seems Duke didn't trust me. But he wasn't quite fast enough."

Corrigan nodded. "No. He didn't trust you, lawman. Looks like he had good reason."

"He did; but he got a fair shake. You'll get one, too, Corrigan." Carson smiled faintly. "Seems like when the chips were down, I couldn't play the hand with you."

Corrigan stared at him. "You fool," he said tightly. "You poor bloody fool." Then, suddenly, he was shouting, "Get him, Spider!" and from behind Carson a shot crashed, the lead smashing into his back, just below the shoulder blade, driving him forward a split second before his own gun boomed.

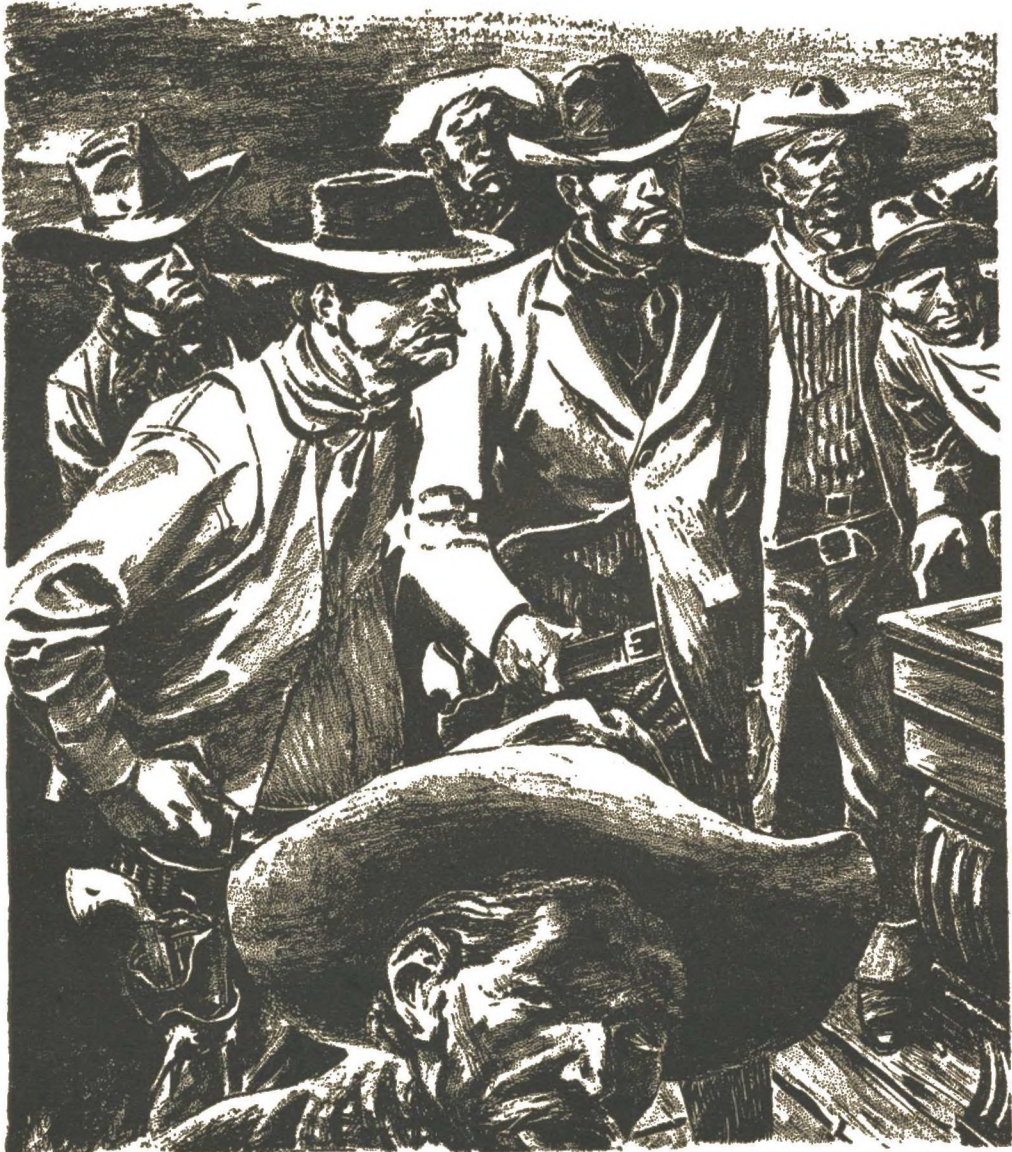
The lamp on the table shattered from his shot, plunging the room into darkness as Carson fell, twisting away from Spider's gun, snapping two fast shots at the spot where Corrigan had stood. The outlaw's harsh shriek died in a gurgle, and Carson heard his body hit the floor. *Lucky, Carson thought, lucky shot. . . .*

Spider's gun boomed again and again,
(Please continue on page 113)

SONS OF THE SMOKY BREED

By HENRY HALDEMAN

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An Outlaw Saga

Bill Breen was either mad enough to believe himself bullet-proof, or he was bent on committing suicide . . . for he rode alone into the outlaws' death trap—to make his last fight beside his wild, doomed brother.



Breen cursed himself for not having worn his guns.

CHAPTER

The Busted Parole

1

Bill Breen's trigger finger was hooked in the handle of his coffee cup. His elbow rested on the table in the eating-

house window and the hot coffee was half way to his lips while he gazed unseeingly into Bowring's empty street. Limpy Collopy, sitting a-straddle of a chair was doing some heavy talking.

"I see how it is, Bill. Lon is young and full of vinegar, and all this waitin' rubs him raw. You jest got to close-herd him till his pardon comes. And you can't tell; it's like religion—or a cloudburst. It might come today—it might be six months afore anything happens—"

Right then, a great deal seemed to happen. And it was more like a cloudburst than religion.

A rattling smash of gunfire filled the street. Across the dusty thoroughfare a few patrons of the Happy Days Saloon flocked outside at the first alarm; then flocked back again in a hurry. From the south, against the midday sun, both plank sidewalks were being methodically raked with lead.

Breen and Limpy Collopy came slowly to their feet. Breen took a long swallow of his coffee.

"It's at the bank," Collopy breathed. "It's a holdup, by gravy!"

Two or three sixguns nosed out from the Happy Days, firing diagonally across toward the bank corner. Several doors nearer the bank, in a four-foot space between a store building and the harness shop, old Johnny Pearl, the harness man, popped into view with a rifle.

He slammed its lever and rapped out two quick shots. Then he dropped the rifle, clapped both hands to his breast and fell backward.

Behind the harnessmaker, Breen caught one glimpse of a big hat, then a pair of arms which caught Johnny Pearl and eased him back out of sight.

"Damn!" cried Collopy. "They've shot Johnny! Come on, cowboy—hell, Breen, what's the matter? You scairt?"

Breen was taking his coffee in short, tasty gulps.

"Yeah. Collopy, you see anything o' Lon?" Breen's gaze held to that crack where Johnny's rifle lay.

Collopy backed off from him. "Where's your guns, Breen? Damn it, you ain't even got boots on! Where's your boots! You're the dangest cuss—a earthquake wouldn't move you!"

Limpy Collopy had been a top cowpoke

once. Now he ran a place to feed cowpokes who had two good legs.

"Johnny's putting new soles on my boots," Breen said dully. "That is, he *was*. I come across here in my sock feet—" He broke off while both men listened.

"Hell," said Collopy in disgust. "Show's over!"

A sudden storm of hoofs pounded a fast getaway, after a final burst of shots and defiant yells.

"My guns are to home, Collopy. Lon ain't allowed to wear guns, so we both rode in without 'em. I ain't sorry. If a Breen was to shoot a bank bandit, he'd turn out to be a pet stockholder or somethin'. Come on, Collopy. I'm scaired for Lon; I left the kid with Johnny, too. Collopy, did you see who it was caught Johnny when he fell?"

"Huh? I didn't see no one but Johnny."

They pushed outside. Bill Breen, built straight up and down, moved with a slow, heavy liteness. His hair was tow-colored; his smoky-blue eyes glowered from under thick, bulging brows.

THE street was suddenly full of people running toward the bank corner, none of them looking back. But Breen looked back. He saw a single rider quietly crossing the street at the first corner. The rider was facing his way, eyeing the excited crowd, yet he rode coldly on.

His horse walked with a slight lurch. From the set of the animal's ears, Breen knew that bay horse had a slug in its rump, and a curse in its heart for the human race.

He remembered a sound, one which hung in his ears from a moment ago: That bay horse had just been ridden through the livery stable, its hoofs had pounded distinctly on the wood floor. The livery stable stood directly back of the Happy Days, facing on the farther street.

Breen followed Collopy, cat-footing in his sock feet over the sharp gravel. Sprawled in the street lay an unshaven bandit, a black hole near the center of his forehead.

"One of Durk's gang," said Collopy. "Johnny always could shoot!"

"Yeah . . . Durk," said Breen. "Shucks, I wonder am I soft—I couldn't crack a man down that way. Specially, not since Lon . . . Come on, Collopy, I got to find that kid!"

They turned back toward Johnny's harness shop.

"Funny he ain't showed up," Collopy mused. "Say, Breen wouldn't it be just your brand of hard luck if Johnny had only got the old soles tore off your boots, when—"

They had brought old Johnny Pearl inside. He lay on a table, his head on one of the fine saddles he had carved. Johnny wouldn't carve any more leather. He had been dead when they picked him up, shot through the breast. Collopy joined the clustered, angry group.

Breen took one look, turned his head and went on into Johnny's workshop.

Collopy had about said it. One of Breen's boots had a new sole on it; the other was on the last with the old sole torn off. Breen got into them, just as they were.

Johnny's pipe lay beside his work seat. It was still warm. On another seat close by, Bill had left his brother Lon, when he went across to Collopy's for coffee. Lon had sat there visiting while he reported to Johnny Pearl. Johnny was the "west end" deputy and, since the cowtown of Bowring was much nearer than the county seat, it had been arranged for Lon to report once every month to Johnny.

But where was Lon now? Had he stayed with Johnny?

On the floor near Lon's chair were two cigarette butts. Bill's face lighted. Yes, Lon had stayed right here; it must have been Lon he had seen catch Johnny. This was Lon's last day to make his final report and Bill had been worried.

He was still worried. If anything slipped, if Lon's mettlesome disposition got him in bad, he might easily be sent back to prison for years.

THERE were too many against him, and too few who believed Lon had been framed in the killing of young Charlie Tower two years ago. The killing had occurred during a brawl in the Mexican quarter. Lon had been paroled after serving a year of his sentence, only because the witnesses were none too responsible, even when sober.

The brothers had tied their horses on the cross street, half a block from the bank corner, had cut through the block and entered Johnny's shop by the back door.

Almost at a run, Bill now retraced their course.

Their horses were gone—both horses. Then Breen saw Lon's bridle reins dangling empty, still tied to the hitch rail. The black mare had broken loose, scared, apparently by the shooting. She would do that! As Breen stood considering this, U-Bar Pethoud slewed around the far corner in a buckboard.

Breen signaled for him to stop. U-Bar scowled, ill-disposed to check his impatient, half-wild, plunging span. Breen ran, caught the seat bracket, set one foot on the smooth, spinning wheel-hub and hit the seat beside U-Bar. The ranchman had to catch himself sharply as Breen's two-hundred-odd pounds jumped the springs.

"You seen Lon?" Breen shouted.

"Him? Hell, no!"

U-Bar cursed bitterly, got his horses in hand, turned them at the bank corner. He forced them snorting, past the dead bandit, then reined them down cruelly.

Dust and powdersmoke hung in the air. Men were hurrying about, some with rifles, all eager for action. Where in hell were any horses?

U-Bar lifted a hand, shouting. "Was it Durk's gang? I can keep the blasted sons in sight with this rig. Scatter the word. I'll head back towards town on horseback!" And his team hit their collars.

Pethoud was a big man in the valley, and a good deal of a grandstander, Breen often figured.

He kept his seat. Since Lon's mare had broken loose, Lon must have jumped on Bill's horse to catch her. She would head for home, and Breen was glad of this chance for a quick ride in the same direction.

U-Bar's mood was ugly, but this was nothing new. Pethoud was friendly with the Towers, and most of the Towers' friends were cold toward the Breens, in view of the Tower killing. Especially since Lon's release from prison.

The bandits had fled eastward, but had then veered north. Pethoud's big U-Bar ranch was north and, once clear of the town, he lashed his horses into a run.

"Hell of a note!" he said. "That's the second bank holdup in six years."

"U-Bar—you ain't aimin' to catch them riders!" Breen shouted. "You'll kill your

nags. Everybody knows Durk's gang'll head for Scanlon's roost."

U-Bar spat his sodden cigar over the wheels. "Everybody *don't* know," he said shortly. "Mebbe you do."

Breen kept still. He even smiled grimly.

TWENTY minutes of the same stiff pace, and the road became suddenly blurred with the tracks of hard-pushed horses. Here the bandits had taken boldly to the wagon trail.

After another three miles, U-Bar cried, "There they are!" He pointed far to the left, where a yellow dust-mist fogged against the fuzzy blue of Bad Medicine Ridge.

"Yeah," Breen said dryly. "I been watchin' 'em. You almost run over 'em, U-Bar."

"They're on your range," U-Bar leered accusingly.

"So are we," said Breen.

The two men were driving inside of a great letter A, headed north toward its apex. The Breen range on the left, with Tower's on the right, formed the cross bar of the A. Above them, Pethoud's brand controlled the upper point of the A. Below them, the valley widened toward Bowring, embracing many small ranches.

As U-Bar urged his lathered horses toward home, Breen saw that he was in no mood to swing off at the Breen road-fork. This suited Breen, yet just before they reached the road-fork, Breen exploded with action.

"Hey, U-Bar, you're losin' them devils!" he cried. Then bent and grabbed the lines ahead of U-Bar's hands. Pethoud was a big man, but Breen bore him aside, wrenched the broncs from the road and swung them sharply westward. He rose up, one knee bearing on U-Bar's lap like a pinch lever. The broncs saw him above their blinders and stretched out like a pair of rabbits. He yelled, riding the careening vehicle like a buckaroo.

At the crest of the first swell, he brought the team to a blowing halt, dropped back to his seat.

"Y'see, U-Bar? They're headin' on up Bad Medicine—not leaving no skunk smell on Breen range. You get that, U-Bar?"

Breen swung the team north, cut his own road-fork and stopped. Laughing mirth-

lessly, he returned the reins to U-Bar and vaulted over the wheel.

"Yuh damned smart aleck," Pethoud fumed. "Now I'll tell *you* something. I'm a director in the Stockmen's Bank, if you ain't forgot. I don't know how much them bandits got, but the bank is hard hit. You got a couple notes with us. They're past due, and you better be lookin' round. The bank is goin' to have to crowd you. . . . You can tell that to that outlawed brother o' yours!"

There was laughter on Breen's face as he watched Pethoud drive on, but there was blue smoke in his eyes and bitterness in his heart. He was noticing several green cowhides and a half a hay-bale in the back of Pethoud's buckboard. One of the cowhides had jolted out. Breen opened it out, noted the familiar U-Bar brand on the left ribs, then did it up again and left it by the trail where U-Bar would find it the next time he came by.

Pethoud's words kept ringing in his ears. If the bank started crowding him, if they must have their money now. . . . Well, Garv Durk and his outlaw gang could pust as well have stolen the Breen ranch, lock, stock and barrel. It looked just like that to Breen. Old Ute Bill, Breen's father, had wrested that ranch from the Indians. Breen blood had soaked into it and new Breen blood had grown out of it. Bill and Lon had their roots deep in Ute Bill's old spread.

It was only a mile to the Breen buildings. As Bill strode toward them, he kept watching. He felt a mighty relief when he saw Lon there.

But Lon seemed ready to leave again. He was full rigged now, on a fresh horse, with lasso rope, chaps, and—he was wearing his guns!

"Where to, Lon?"

Lon met Bill's eyes only for an instant, then looked down. "Johnny only got one sole on your boots, I see. Why, say, Bill, that black mare, she done busted loose durin' the shootin'. I grabbed your horse and chased her, but she herded in with them danged outlaws. I overhauled 'em easy enough, but there was no rope on your saddle, and them polecats started throwin' lead at me."

Lon was bitter; but now, as his hands slid to his two holsters, he grinned.

"It would be too bad," Bill said, "if the boss sheriff was to see you with them guns on. You know what that would mean, Lon? Did Johnny sign your paper, showin' you'd reported to him?"

Lon looked hard at his saddle horn, shook his head. He brought a small object from his pocket and handed it to Bill.

"I reckon Johnny was dead when they got to him," Lon said. "He was still breathing when I laid him down."

The small object had been a leaden bullet, plainly enough; only now it held oddly a short piece of bright, very stiff wire. The wire was S-shaped, one hook being driven deeply into the lead, the other drawn out nearly straight, obviously by the plowing action of the newly fired bullet.

"Then it was you, Lon, I seen catch Johnny?"

"Yeah. But I never did no fightin'. Found that darned slug in my coat-lining when I changed clothes just now.

"Bill, you'll find a bag horse in the yard with a bad wound in its rump. Must be Shag Ledeau's mount. Shag got away on my black mare and left his crow-bait for me. The mare's got my ninety-dollar saddle on. This is Shag's old hull I'm in now. I'll tell him his nag is waitin' here for him."

"Lon! You—you ain't tailin' that gang into Bad Medicine?"

"Sure. They're friendly—to me."

Lon was tense; yet he tried to dismiss the subject casually. He remembered the man he had seen on the wounded horse—Shag Ledeau, Lon said. And he had just been telling U-Bar Pethoud that the bandits had left no skunk smell on his place! He'd been plenty wrong!

Old Ute Bill had always steadily held a policy of friendship with all the denizens of Bad Medicine. He had had to, as a matter of self-protection. But Ute Bill had been a remarkable man, an older man, and he had known where to draw the line.

"Good God, Lon!" Bill cried. "You can't do that, right on the heels of that robbery! It would ruin you, ruin both of us. Sit tight till your pardon comes—"

"Pardon!" Lon scoffed. The subject was a raw sore. "You know why they killed Johnny? 'Cause Johnny was chasing down evidence that Garv Durk killed Charlie Tower, and that somebody paid him to

frame it onto me. Johnny as good as told me that. I tell you, Bill, that mare and saddle ain't all. But it is just the excuse I been needing to visit Scanlon's roost. Young Tug Scanlon was the only state witness who knew the truth. By God, I'll drag it out of Tug if it takes a month!"

"You're plumb insane, Lon! Durk would block your play, kill you. Nobody'd understand. Everybody is lookin' slant-eyed at us now!"

"You said it." Lon had his horse dancing now. "Well, I can't stop it. Would a pardon take away that murder stink? I reckon I got too much Breen in me!"

"Hold it!" Bill seized Lon's saddle horn. "Breens don't go joshin' outlaws. You go mixin' with them skunks and you're a branded man."

Lon touched spurs to his horse. Bill rode after him a dozen jumps until Lon reined up. With a low curse, he wrenched Bill's fingers from the saddle horn.

"Don't Lon," Bill panted. "Don't be a fool—"

"I'd rather be a fool!"

That was Lon's last word. He spurred away. Bill watched until the foothills of Bad Medicine folded him in. He need not have watched, for he knew Lon wouldn't come back—probably ever.

Bill Breen thought he had tasted hell before. Ute Bill's old guns were his now. He could use them with a weird wizardry, yet never had he aimed them at a man. He couldn't. This was what Lon had meant and—he'd rather be a fool. . . !

CHAPTER

Trail to Hell

2

Bill Breen sat in the eating-house window, his trigger finger hooked in the handle of a coffee cup. Again Collopy straddled a chair and did some talking.

Saddle horses now stood thick along the hitch rails. The robbery had cleaned the Stockmen's Bank of forty thousand dollars. It had been not merely a holdup, but a defiant show of lawless force.

Nearly the same thing had happened six years before. At that time, the bank, caught short of funds, had had to call their loans. Several ranchmen had been sold out and ruined.

Did this mean another such calamity? Inside the Happy Days a crowd of grim and angry men were asking that question, determined to recover the loot at any cost. Cad Tussel, who owned the saloon, was setting out free drinks. Originally starting with only the livery stable, Tussel was now part owner of the bank, as well as the saloon.

In the rear of the room, Cass Bitts, the boss sheriff, sat at a poker table. The grim session had run through half the forenoon.

Chuck Tower had talked twice and now he stood up again. "Boys, I don't aim to put money in the bank just to fatten a flock of thieves. Always, they's been a gang of some sort holed up in that old packtrail pass on top of Medicine Ridge. They never have been smoked out yet. Looks like we got it to do sometime, and might as well be now. But it'll take the best we can muster, men. Me, I wouldn't miss the ruckus for a setter pup. Count me in, Sheriff."

"Thanks, Tower," said Cass Bitts. "One more point, men. You say the trail up the other side the Ridge is fairly fixed. Y'know, I'm sorta new in here. I'm darn sorry what you tell me about these Breen boys. Down home, all the old-timers told me to get hold of Ute Bill's oldest boy, first thing." Cass Bitts lifted his voice. "Any of you men know anybody besides Bill Breen who could lead a raid up this side?"

Silence, and a deal of neck craning, but nobody spoke.

"That's hell," said Bitts, "but we'll make out. Let's have it, men. All in favor of going after that den of snakes, say aye!"

There was one mighty, determined shout of assent.

The sheriff grinned. "Fine, boys! That ought to spell the finish of Scanlon's roost. I sure thank you."

U-Bar Pethoud stepped toward him from the bar, standing before the crowd with a whiskey glass in his hand. "I'll be a good loser, boys," he grinned. "I talked agin' it because I didn't think you'd hang together. But now I'm for it. I'll throw in my whole crew—but, by heaven, I'm tyin' one string onto it. Chuck Tower, nobody knows better than you how the law can miscarry. Excuse me, but I'm referring to the killer of your boy. Men, I say let's make it a clean sweep—" and here Pethoud raised his whiskey glass high up—"let's wipe out

Scanlon's roost to the last sidewinder!"

The room cheered—all but Cass Bitts. He wasn't thanking Pethoud for that. That was going a point beyond the law.

A quick silence fell; all eyes turned toward the front door. Bill Breen stood there, just in time to hear Pethoud's toast promising a bloody wipe-out to Scanlon's roost.

WITH a stony face, he traveled down the bar. He ordered beer, but Cad Tussel only glowered at him. Behind him there was a quick whisper. He turned, caught the sheriff's eye.

"Set down, Breen," Bits said; "I want to talk with you."

In deep silence Breen sat, and the sheriff went on. "Breen, they tell me you're the best trailer in these parts. They say you know Bad Medicine like your own doorway."

"I was drug up alongside of it," Breen admitted.

"They tell me you're the best gunshot, too, but that you can't pull down on anything with two legs."

The ghost of a smile touched Breen's lips. "Well, my old pappy allus said I shot a Injun once. But I reckon I was too young to remember it."

"Huh? Good God! Too young to—huh! Mebbe that's it. You was spooked whilst you was still on milk. Gun-shy! Reckon your brother, Lon—he never shot no Injun!"

"No." Breen frowned. "Lon never shot nobody!"

"But Lon rode with Durk's gang yesterday. They killed Johnny Pearl, my deputy."

Breen held the sheriff in a long, steady look. "Yes," he said, "I just been hearin' about that talk. I heard, too, that when they undressed Johnny Pearl, they found he was wearin' a chain vest under his shirt. Is that so?"

Bitts nodded impatiently. "Yes, Johnny figured some Mex knife tosser was layin' for him."

"Sheriff," Breen said clearly, "Lon Breen was with Johnny for a full hour, right up to the minute he was shot. Lon stood back of Johnny, and caught him when he fell. Lon's mare busted loose, and she joined the bandits—that's a fact. Lon jumped my bronc and took after her."

There was a burst of mocking jeers.

"Then where's Lon now?" Bitts demanded. "You say he was with Johnny. Twenty men saw him with Durk's gang."

Breen's face thrust toward the sheriff. He looked ready to snap; wolf fashion. Bitts shrank from him. "They're blind-eyed liars, Sheriff. Most of the town knows better. Somebody's gettin' paid to make that talk!"

Cad Tussel eased himself around the bar and said suavely, "Breen, I ain't found a man in town that see your brother any place 'cept with them bandits. I seen him myself!"

"How's it come, Tussel," Breen stormed, "that your old barkeep, Shag Ledeau, was ridin' with Durk? What was he doin' in your livery stable half a minute after the robbery, ridin' out on a shot-up horse? You seen that too, mebbe?"

Cad Tussel seemed to cock himself like a gun. The sheriff pinned a look on him. Breen ignored both.

"U-Bar Pethoud," he charged on, "you was in Tussel's livery. Mebbe you seen Ledeau? You drove out the front just after Ledeau rode out the back—"

Clamor broke out. Pethoud bulled in as if to gore Breen. Cad Tussel glided behind the bar again, where Breen saw his right hand dip below the bar. Bitts jumped up, stopped Pethoud.

Breen rose. "Sheriff," he challenged, "I haven't finished yet."

"Shut up! This ain't a court, and I'm only a sheriff. You're tryin' to raise a fog, Breen. I'll not take your word against the whole town's. Anyway, Lon has broke parole. Yesterday was his last day to report, and there's no record that he done so. He's outlawed, wherever he is."

EVEN now Lon was on Medicine Ridge. Breen knew that the truth would ruin him, yet he insisted doggedly, "He did report. He reported and he's got a record of it."

"Got Johnny's signature on his paper?" The sheriff lifted stolid brows.

"The same thing. The slug that killed Johnny, hit Lon—the same slug! Lon's got it now, found it in his clothes. It's got a link of Johnny's chain vest smashed into it. I'll call that signature enough for any sheriff."

"If Lon was here," Bitts said patiently, "and if he had that slug that *would* be enough. But all we've got is your say-so. Breen, we're bringing out that den of snakes to face the law, or we're burning them out before another day. I'll take you say-so just this far—I'll still use you to steer the raid up this side of Bad Medicine."

There was a storm of protest, and U-Bar Pethoud's voice shouted above it. "Set easy, gents, he won't dast do it, for his own kid brother is up there!"

Breen's eyes fastened on the crowd; his words came slowly. "Will I steer you blind-eyed fools into certain slaughter? Well, I reckon I ought. Only I got to find Lon—him and that slug. I'm bringing them in; I'm provin' my words, if it's the last thing I do!"

Breen cursed himself for not having worn his guns. He had to get out of here, had to get to Lon—now!

"Lon'll keep," the sheriff barked. "If you ain't with us, you're agin' us. Out with it, Breen—will you do it?"

"No."

Pethoud's hand was on his gun. The crowd was a solid dam in front of Breen. Tussel spoke in a spitting whisper.

"Git him now, Sheriff, or you'll have one more outlaw to fight on the Ridge."

Cass Bitts stared at the saloon man, torn with doubt.

Breen moved out, thrust a wolfish face at Tussel. Tussel shrank. Hell was smoking in Breen's eyes as he turned them on Pethoud.

Pethoud backed up.

Thus, a step at a time into that human dam, Breen moved. Then Ute Bill's boy stood clear, stalked without a word down the room and out the door. . . .

High up the breast of Medicine Ridge, Bill Breen stopped once to look back. Below him lay the Breen range, like a map. Farther out, he could see dust plumes moving here and there across the open valley. Riders; messengers. The raid was brewing. He came into a narrow, rockbound defile which opened again only in Gabe Scanlon's dooryard.

Without warning, a rifle bullet smacked a flat rock and screamed-dismally away into the distance.

Breen set up a strong-lunged hail. It

rolled into dusky coverts and was flung back by flat rock faces. Then came an answer—another rifle bullet.

"*Hel-loo!*" he called again. "This is Bill Breen. Wanting to connect with Lon. Pull in your horns, will you?"

There came another shot. This one was not fired for musical effect, but cut the air a foot from Breen's head.

He quickly reined about. Hidden from the concealed rifleman above, he stopped. "All right, feller," he muttered. "You've had your say."

He openly jogged his horse back down the trail, but in five minutes was lost from view again. He left the trail, rode well back into a murky, grassy covering.

He stripped his horse and cached his riding gear, chaps, and hat beneath a bush. He had a picket rope, but he let his horse go free. Too many horses had been left to starve on the end of a rope by riders who never came back.

Bill Breen sat and chewed grass stems until the great bulk of Bad Medicine became outlined by a sky red as blood. Then he got moving. He went swiftly along faint game trails, scudded under brush and around the necks of mossy boulders. Two cartridge belts crossed his abdomen, fully loaded, reefed high for easy footwork. In the age-darkened holsters, were the two old single-action Colts. One belt held Ute Bill's sheathed bowie knife.

Not only did Breen follow the darkness upward—he was a living part of the darkness. Now and then his nostrils lifted to comb the air currents. Once he caught horse-scent but could not trace it. At last he caught something else—the tang of a cigarette. He traced that. After a half hour's going, he came out on one of a series of rock terraces.

On the next terrace below, the trail sentry lay.

Without the faintest warning, Breen's feet hit the rock on either side of the sentry; his wrists were pinioned before he could flex a muscle.

The trail guard was Tug Scanlon.

"Damn you, Tug, you fired on me. How come?"

"Orders, Bill." Young Scanlon stopped struggling.

Though old Gabe's renegade son was stunted and soured, rated below the pettiest

thief on the range, he had boasted a friendship with Lon Breen. Here was luck, Breen thought.

"I see," he said, "that you're all on the prod. Tug, Lon started up here yesterday."

"Yeah. Bill, Durk'll never let Lon come down again!"

Bill's jaw set. "Tug," Breen said, "you been watchin' the valley; you hardly need tellin'. None of your crowd is likely to eat another dinner this side of hell. But I can save *you*, Tug."

"I—I think I get you, Bill."

"Sure you do. You go bring Lon down with you. He'll take you home, hide you at the ranch. I got to wait here to steer the sheriff when he comes along."

Tug's reply was more than Breen hoped for right now. "I couldn't ask more, Bill. I allus felt dirty to do Lon like I done. It was Garv Durk shot Charlie Tower. I seen him. Durk would have killed me if I'd told. Here's my chance to get it back at Durk."

Breen lifted one leg across Tug's prone shape. Tug was raising himself when he suddenly stiffened, staring past Breen.

Breen heard a sound and whirled. But he had not whirled far when his brain burst into a mighty thunder. The dim light went jet black, shot with jagged lightning. . . .

HIS own groans, like those of a wounded ox, were the next thing Breen heard. Then he was hearing a voice, nasal and sweetly sardonic. "Hold it, feller, hold it—so! Cripes but you're a whale! You're so damn set on hornin' in here, I'll help you do the job complete."

Breen felt binding cords on his wrists and ankles; slowly it came to him that he was flung across a saddle. The horse got into motion. There was another blank interval, then he knew that the horse had stopped. By lifting his eyes he could see, in the light of a thin silver moon, the outlines of a longish, squat cabin. A door opened and in it a tall figure emerged.

"Hi, Gabe! See what I brung in. F'God sake, make a light and throw some grub together. I got to eat."

"Hi, Durk; it's you!" Gabe Scanlon echoed suspiciously. "Who's it you brung?"

"Bill Breen."

"Good God! You'd better a-brung a catamount—two catamounts with their tails tied together."

A queer, moth-eaten figure was Gabe Scanlon. With a mind for horseflesh, the old dog-wolf had brought in a blooded stallion or so; now and then he sold a choice saddle animal to some gent with ready cash and a yen to ride fast. He was a good cook and always kept a loyal renegade or so to chore for him while he mixed the grub. Such a one was Jock Lennox, known as Scanlon's wrangler.

As Garv Durk closed the door after him, he lifted Breen's gunbelts from his arm and tossed them into a dark shelving back of the door. A prodding sixgun guided Breen to the far end of the table.

The outlaw leader was in a specious mood. His pitch-colored hair lent a bleached look to his fair skin. A big Roman nose gave an almost pleasing look to his face, but it was the obsidian-black eyes that marked Durk for the ugly killer he was. He had not kept Breen bound; it seemed to delight him hugely to see how this tortured old Gabe.

Bat Stull was Durk's right-hand man, his ace gun-hawk. His nickname may have come from that swift, winged mammal, whose build and movement he certainly possessed.

Bat perched himself on a high stool, his Colt naked in his lap. Gabe dealt a couple of plates onto the table.

"Where's Tug?" Gabe queried.

"I'll get around to Tug," Durk said. "I was headin' down to relieve Tug when I met Breen."

Breen did not miss the wording of that statement. He had noted that, when Durk tossed the two gunbelts aside, Ute Bill's old bowie knife had been missing from its sheath.

Gabe put food on the table. It seemed clear that Durk craved to know what was doing down in the valley. Presently the outlaw lifted his glinting eyes.

"You played the fool, Breen. I'd not a thing agin' you."

Breen put a slice of bread down and methodically knifed the crusts from its edges, a habit he had formed in boyhood. He slapped the bread in his gravy and pushed it back and forth.

"I don't get you, Durk," he parried.

"Soon as I see Lon a minute, him and me are slopping down the hill and out."

Durk chuckled. "Guess again, Breen. I been watching the valley. They just *might* be aiming, down there, to stop us from eating another dinner this side o' hell."

Breen perceived the mocking repetition of his own words to Tug. Durk was letting him know, privately, that he had heard what had passed between him and Tug on the rock terrace.

"Breen, I'm doing you one better than your crowd is aiming to do by us: I'm givin' you *your* dinner *first*. An' you ain't seein' Lon."

"I come after Lon," said Breen, "and I'm glad I did. My old pappy used to say that blood is thicker than water."

"Yeah? But he never told you that it ain't thicker than gunsmoke!"

Breen decided then to duck down, heave the table at Stull. He measured the steps to where his guns lay, but Durk read his mind, leered and caught Stull's eye.

An idea struck like a hornet into Breen's brain. He spoke, laying his words down carefully.

"Durk, you went too far when you killed Johnny Pearl. The whole valley is out to get you. That includes U-Bar Pethoud. U-Bar is throwing in his whole crew. But he's doing so, only on condition that you and your gang be wiped out—to the last man!"

Breen was watching. He saw Durk's eyes narrow, his chest heave in fury. Durk had plenty of questions, but would not ask them where Gabe could hear.

A black scowl on his face, he kicked back his chair and stood up. "But, you go call the boys. And mind, you two—not a word of this." He indicated Breen, then said to Scanlon, "Gabe, your smokehouse keys; and grab your old Betsy! Move, boys!"

Gabe's old Betsy, a thick, sawed-off shotgun, was in his hands instantly. He cocked both hammers eagerly, thrust the slaughter-gun's snout into Breen's kidneys. With the lantern, Durk lighted their way across the bare, windswept yard.

A massive, split-log door met the light. Durk swung it back, Scanlon thrust the prisoner through, and the door slammed. A heavy bar ground into place, a chain grated and a padlock snapped sharply shut. . . .

CHAPTER

Thicker 'n Gunsmoke

3

The devilish ingenuity of old Gabe was here shown at its best. A deep, natural cleft in the face of the low cliff had been laboriously notched at its mouth, then walled up with bevel-pointed logs. The door was midway in the wall. Poles overhead supported strings of jerked beef; some barrels at the far end held salt pork. The black walls gave off a strong smoke odor. Scanlon's smokehouse was bearproof; stronger than most frontier jails.

Dimly, Breen heard the outlaws gathering at Gabe's cabin in response to Durk's call. In the high, rare atmosphere of the pass, their conversation could be heard.

"Let the damn grangers come," a voice cried. "They'll soon enough get sick of shootin' at hot lead."

He did not believe the ranchers could take the pass, for Gabe's stronghold was like a dish-shaped crater, with only two narrow gates for entrance. Ramparts of boulders at the base of the circling cliffs flanked both gates.

Fully an hour passed. Then came a sound at the door. Were they opening it, or were they further barricading it for the night? A heavy timber seemed slipping under the present bar. With a long shank of beef in his hand, hard and heavy as oak, Breen stood ready by the door.

There was a creak, a sudden strain; then the door bar broke with a crash. A shout came from Gabe's cabin. The door opened a little and caught. Gabe's shotgun roared. A couple of pistol guns joined in and a gust of lead hit the wall. The door opened farther; a figure crowded through. . . .

"Down, Bill! God, they got me!"

It was Lon!

Bill caught him, eased his fall, felt one of his thighs bend in the middle, his muscles jump and quiver with lead shock. Chinking from the logs rained over them as they hugged the floor.

"See—Tug." Lon was choking. "Tug can give me—us—a clean bill. . . ."

"Lon! Buck up! We can make it out!"

"No—use, Bill. You run for it. . . . Huh? Sure, I knew you was here. Saw—where you'd et. Ain't another man in the world—cuts the crusts off his bread. Run

for it, Bill. You can't do me no good. I'm—I'm. . . ."

"Where you hit, Lon?"

Lon's head pulled back, his shoulders flexed with pain. In answer, his hands moved to his breast. Bill took hold of them and they were slippery—wet there in the dark.

"Lon!" He shouted again, but Lon wasn't hearing him. He felt the fine young body grow limp in his arms. His head bent down and one terrible sob shook Bill Breen. "I ain't runnin', Lon. I'm makin' 'em pay! I'll clog hell's portals with Durk and his gang!"

BREEN took the gunbelts from Lon's waist and buckled them on. He wormed through the bar-tangled door.

But for a line of small boulders, tailing out from the main deposit farther along the cliff, he would instantly have been cut to pieces. More bandits came running toward Gabe's cabin, their calls mingled with hoots and laughter and gusts of lead.

Snaking along this tailing glacial drift, Breen gained the rock ledge. There, bellied down and hanging on the brink, he emptied his Colt at the outlaws as they crept toward him through the rocks.

He reached the point where he could stand upright, fully shielded. With clenched hands, he looked up at the sky.

"Hello, Ute Bill! I'm comin', Bill. I'm catchin' up with Lon! I'll be seein' you, Bill!"

After that, Breen was hardly human. His veins open in a half dozen places from Gabe's buckshot at sixty yards, he had the plunging madness of a grizzly bear. As he skittered among the boulders, the bandits' laughter turned into bewildered calls. They were gathering in front of Gabe's cabin.

Breen's rush ended among the boulders back of it. Breen crouched and charged straight for the cabin. At the first corner, he encountered a slight figure running to cut him off—a Mexican. The dusky bandit flashed a hand toward a knife-sheath. Breen's fist struck his face, his head rapped the cabin logs like a maul.

Breen leaped on over the collapsing body, planted a cushioned foot inside an open window. He whipped through and then stood erect inside the cabin. He was in Gabe's bedroom. He could look straight

through to the outside door of the kitchen, dark save for the cookstove's faint glow. Old Gabe stood with his gun in the open door, intent on the shouting outside.

In a flash, Breen was behind him.

"Drop the gun, Gabe."

Gabe froze, cursing in a low, driveling voice as he dropped the sawed-off.

"Your kid, Gabe? Tug ain't come home. He was tellin' me that Durk killed Charlie Tower. Durk heard him. Durk slugged me down, just then, and I see the knife is gone from my belt. Guess what he done with that knife, Gabe!"

"Yuh lie," Scanlon snarled. He shouted at Durk, but it was a shout of alarm. It was half out when Breen's gunbarrel slapped him above the ear. His stifled gurgle told the rest as he rolled down into the trail like a rotten log.

As Breen slammed the door, a rifle slug furrowed it. He rummaged in the dark shelving, found his gunbelts. He buckled them on. Two other loaded belts were there, and he looped these across his shoulder. His feet bumped something on the floor and Breen remembered a five gallon transport tin of kerosene he had seen there.

He caught it up, ran into Gabe's room and heaved it onto the bed. He slammed two shots into it and tossed a lighted match down among the blankets. Instantly the little room was a bursting inferno. The flame beat Breen back from the open window; then a burst of shots came through it. He went to his knees for air just as they passed over him.

He came to his feet in the kitchen, saw the door splintering from the outside attack. He ran back into the one remaining room of Gabe's doomed dwelling. As he knocked glass from a window, he saw that the attacker was Shag Ledeau.

Breen bellowed. Ledeau spun and took Breen's first shot deep in the left temple. He went down like a man on a ladder.

BREEN hurled himself through the window in a ball, sash and all. On the ground his feet fouled with the luckless Mexican. He stooped, caught the stunned man by the ankle and dragged him clear of the burning building. As he sped on toward the boulder coverts, a burst of shots followed him and he went down, stung afresh with lead, a jolt like the kick of a

mule between his shoulders. A shot had struck the cartridges strung across his shoulder, exploding one of them.

He rose again and reached the boulders, hearing Durk's voice ringing in a fury of chagrin. Breen was reeling dizzily when he saw two bandits break into a run for the nearest cover—Gabe's smokehouse.

Breen roared—that was holy ground now!—and strength ran again in his veins. He set himself for a long shot, triggering steadily. The foremost outlaw stopped, stiffened, fell like a stone. The other turned tail and ran back. The fellow was Jock Lennox. Breen could easily have swamped him with lead; but, caught and helpless as the man was, he let him go.

Then he heard Lennox yelling that Scanlon would roast alive, lying stunned near the burning cabin.

"To hell with him!" Durk raged. "Let the fool roast!"

But the heat must have brought Scanlon to, for his dazed voice lifted and he stalked unsteadily into that bullet-ridden yard. A gaunt, bewildered old lobo, he still clutched his blunt shotgun, though he seemed hardly aware of it.

"Durk," Scanlon rasped. "I want Garv Durk!"

"Spit it out," Durk barked. "I'm here!"

Durk was in a clump of pine-shrouded boulders, just across the narrow trail from Scanlon.

"Where's Tug? Where's my boy? Damn you, Durk, you put a knife in Tug. You hell-spawned lizard, see what you done, packin' that war-whoopin' Breen up here!"

"He's outa his head, boys," Durk said acridly.

"Jock," Scanlon's voice lifted plaintively. "Jock Lennox! Fetch me a horse, Jock. I'm going to see about Tug—"

"Shut up, Gabe," Durk spat. "You ain't goin' nowheres!"

A deliberate pistol shot barked, aimed at the butt of Gabe's shotgun. The gun whirled like an Indian club, but Gabe still held to its muzzle end. He whipped the stock to his shoulder and blasted both barrels into the dark covert.

A black-bearded outlaw lunged out, hands pawing crazily after the mad gunner. Gabe had bagged the wrong man. Durk's sixguns spat and Gabe, too, flung his gun,

grabbing air. The two forms crossed like scissor blades and struck the trail together.

During this tragic truce, both Breen and his attackers had emerged to watch. For a moment, Durk stood in the full firelight; then he shrugged, recorked his holsters and took to his covert again. Presently he was calling.

"Oh, Shag—Shag Ledeau! Stull! Mex! Where in hell you at?"

Not one of them answered. Breen licked his lips. "In hell, is right, Durk. Keep hollerin'. You'll meet 'em soon enough." And he heard Durk's blasphemy float back across the open.

"Damn you, Breen; I should have hung you out for the buzzards. I'll do it now!"

BREEN had stretched a point when he taunted Durk with the loss of Stull. He knew why Stull did not answer. At that moment, the batlike gunman was stalking among the boulders on Breen's side of the trail, aiming to strike in the dark.

The sheriff had placed the number at Scanlon's roost at a round dozen men. Breen could check this count. He reckoned with a shock that only three were left on their legs in the pass: Bat Stull, Garv Durk and Gabe's wrangler, Jock Lennock.

Lennock was with Durk now; Breen could hear them in sharp argument. They reached an agreement, for presently he saw them dragging back from the light. By circling eastward, they could get across the trail unseen, and thus join Stull. Stull would know this, would be watching for them.

Breen retreated to a point near the smokehouse, bent on making his stand near Lon. The night went quiet, save for the crackling of the fire. Log after log chugged down in the burning cabin and only one trifling sound, like the roll of a pebble told that death lurked along the cliff.

Daylight began to give form to the bandits' distant, deserted cabins. Breen was noting this when a .44 slug caromed on a rock before his face. He flung up both guns, firing fast, partially blinded by flying grit.

He was driven down, bleeding anew. From a new position, with one eye open, he flung a few futile shots and took a crippling hit high in one shoulder. Bat Stull was on his right; on his left Durk kept pop-

ping into view. They held him in a cross-fire. In the center, farther back, Lennock's gun chimed in.

A new worry pounded Breen's dizzy senses with Durk's voice: "You don't dare git me, Breen—you don't dare if you could. I left your knife stuck in Tug Scanlon—but I'm the only man this side of hell that knows you didn't kill him. Nobody's left who saw me do for the Tower kid. Kill me, and Lon goes back to jail, sure as sin!"

Breen had no concern about that knife. And they couldn't put Lon in jail—not now. Yet now there was more reason than ever why Lon's name should be cleared. Shooting at Durk was like shooting away Lon's good name.

Breen tried for Stull. He got him in the right arm, and saw Stull's gun fall from that hand. But at the same time Breen reeled back, his scalp combed with broken lead. Stull recklessly dashed in, got Breen in a position where it was just a choice whose lead he took. He shielded himself from Durk, heard shots in Stull's direction. . . . Had Stull gone blind? Breen looked, saw Stull draped like a rag doll over a boulder.

With a gasp of relief, he turned only to see Durk above him, standing out, fully exposed on a high rock. Breen triggered for a low body shot, heard the hammer click on a spent cartridge.

Durk laughed, delayed his own shot for the joy of it, watching Breen look in vain for cover. Durk's gunhand steadied and tightened; then a spasmodic shock ran through him.

His chin jutted, his neck corded, his eyes shut with agony. The gun fell from his limp hand.

"Take it, ye dom' snake! That's for Gabe Scanlon!" It was Jock Lennock shouting. "An' it's for Tug, too, ye low-down, double-crossin' scum. Ye'll knife Tug, will ye!"

Durk collapsed, rolled down off the rock out of sight.

"Hi, Bill Breen, ye fightin' son! Lift your ears. Ye heard the shootin' down the yon trail? The law has r-rolled up the yon guard. Tell the sheriff I done for Durk, Bill, and ye and me is square. Ye're a mon for not pottin' me there agin the smokehouse. So long, and gud luck. . . ."

Dazed, Breen crawled toward the smoke-

house. He paused, staring, holding himself on an elbow. Who could have dragged Lon outside?

No! Lon was propped against a rock, holding himself. A gun was just slipping from his fingers. And then his eyelids lifted slowly to his brother.

"I—I got Stull for you, Bill."

Bill hitched forward again, still dumb.

"Yeah, I know," Lon grinned. "You thought I was dead. I fooled you, Bill. Thought I could get you to—to save yourself, but oh, Lord! Well, I really did pass out. . . ."

And then Lon slumped down again.

Lon had a broken leg. Otherwise he was better off than Bill. Bill could hear Garv Durk, raving and begging for a gun with which to end his pain. . . .

SHERIFF CASS BITTS was first to find them. He had come through the yard, reading there the story of flame and screeching lead, another epic of greed and lust, and vengeance; yes, and of devotion, too.

Breen grinned up at him, muttered cryptically: "Thicker'n water, Sheriff. Breen blood don't run at all, seems like."

Then he fumbled in Lon's pocket, handed the sheriff a leaden slug with a piece of wire still embedded in it.

Bitts took it, nodding gravely.

"God in heaven! Breen, I more'n half believed you. I knew it meant something when you had the guts to walk out the way you did. But you done that guidin' job something handsome. That beacon fire fetched the whole gol-danged country up here."

The crowd of raiders gathered in—more than a hundred—and they were eager to listen now.

"Hello, Chuck Tower." Breen greeted. "You fellers needn't look so beat. You'll get some fightin' yet, if you don't mind your eyes. But you won't be fightin' the Breens, Chuck. We got to stick together. That bank job was a fake robbery, a scheme to wipe us out. The boss outlaws of this valley ain't been touched—"

He broke off suddenly.

U-Bar Pethoud elbowed in beside the sheriff. "I don't like the smell of this, Sheriff," he shouted. "What's come of that bank money, supposed to be up here?"

Here's a house burned down, lots of men been killed and only them Breens left alive!"

"Shut up, U-Bar," Breen said. "You're wrong—Garv Durk is still alive. That's him you hear beggin' to be shot. He's one that didn't get wiped out, as I told him you wanted. He'd already bragged to me that he killed Charlie Tower, and you paid him for it! You're turnin' kinda green, U-Bar!"

"Tower, you recollect that other bank robbery, six years back? How them little ranches above ours was sold out right after? Who got them ranches in the end? Ute Bill pointed them things out to me . . . I'm about talked dry, men. . . . I tried to tell you in town how I see Cad Tussel's old barkeep, Shag Ledeau, comin' out of Tussel's livery on a shot-up horse. U-Bar Pethoud drives out right after, and he makes out he's *chasin'* them bandits. Like a fool, I hop in with him. . . . Hold your breath, U-Bar. This'll be a mite hard for a man like you to take, but I can still work my trigger finger. . . ."

Breen held a gun in both hands, covering U-Bar.

"I wonder you didn't catch on, U-Bar, when I took them lines away from you. He had a half a haybale in the buckboard, then, which I see was considerable doctored. I aimed to jolt it out, drivin' over the roughs, mebbe bust it open, to see if it was all hay or part bank loot. You mind, Tower, U-Bar owns them little ranches now. He stages another fake holdup, aimin' to get our'n, promisin' protection for Durk—"

"Skunk!" Tower snarled at U-Bar. "You and Cad Tussel been thicker'n thieves. We've all been a passel of rip-roarin' fools around here. We might a-knowed—"

"It's a lie!" Pethoud clawed for his gun; but his face showed his guilt. Cass Bitts caught his wrist.

Doc Ben Fenton stood up. His patience blew up at this point. "Shut up, all of you, and get out! The Breen boys need attention. The young one is just comin' 'round."

"Thanks, Doc," said Bill Breen. "Let 'em go listen to Durk awhile. Durk is damning Pethoud right now for double-crossing him!"



He saw the robber: a tall ghost, hooded with a sack. . . .

By

DE WITT NEWBURY

BULLET-PROOF BADMAN

After he'd killed Black Bart, Pack Galloway felt, it was plumb unnatural to be held up again by . . . Black Bart!

THE Sacramento stage made a late start from Marysville that day. Pack Galloway found it standing empty in the stable yard.

Pack didn't mind. Tired from tramping all night, he pulled open the leather-cur-

tained door and climbed in. With a grunt of satisfaction he sank down in the right rear corner.

One thing more to do—no, two. He felt under his buckskin shirt and made sure that the heavy little bag was safe. He drew the

long Colt revolver from his belt, spun the cylinder, inspected the caps. All correct! He thrust the gun back and stretched his long legs. . . .

He roused when the other passengers began to arrive.

The first, a small man with a leathery face, nodded and huddled on the opposite seat. The next was a town merchant in straw hat and floppy linen coat, who sat beside Pack. The third was a whiskered and booted miner; he sat with the little man.

"Time we were moving," the storekeeper said.

"They're hitchin' up now," the miner answered. A clatter of hoofs and a burst of swearing had come from the barn.

The storekeeper rolled up a leather window-curtain. "Look a-there!" he whistled. "We're going to have swell company."

Pack leaned to look. He saw a stately figure coming from the station, a stout man in blue broadcloth and stove-pipe hat. A smaller figure clung to his arm.

A lady! A real lady! She was all in black; little black bonnet, black dress buttoned trimly over her slim body. But a glow of brightness—yellow curls—showed under the bonnet.

"That puff-chested turkey," the storekeeper was explaining, "he's a big lawyer from Sacramento. The gal's kin to Mud Norcott, that owned the Bully Boy Saloon."

The miner exclaimed. "Ye don't say! Feller that was shot in a ruckus, a while back?"

"The same. He lingered along and might 'a' pulled through, only he filled himself too full of whisky. He just simply drowned."

"Died happy, anyway," the miner said.

"That's so. And the Judge sold the Bully Boy for a damn' good price, all in dust and nuggets. Yes, sir, the little lady's rich."

They crowded back as the couple neared. The storekeeper changed to the front seat. Pack watched the door swing open, saw the girl step up, helped by her partner's pudgy hand. He saw blue eyes under the yellow curls; a red mouth, freckle-peppered cheeks. She bowed a little and sat down.

Sat down—actually—beside Pack!

His heart thumped under his buckskin

shirt, giving him a scared, pleased feeling. He heard himself say, "Beg pardon, ma'am, but won't ye sit by the winder? You'll get more air."

"More dust, too," she murmured. "Thank you, no."

Pack squeezed his wide shoulders into the corner, to give her room. The lawyer had plumped into the far seat, hat held on his fat knees.

Now the mules were being harnessed to the coach. Baggage was lashed on top, mail sacks in back. The express box was passed up to the driver's seat. The guard climbed to his place; then the driver came to the door, pulling on leather gloves.

"Respects, ma'am." He grinned under a tobacco-stained mustache. "Everybody set? We'll git through in jig time . . . unless we meet up with Black Bart." He turned away.

The lawyer looked around uneasily. "Black Bart! Why, he can't be in these parts. He held up the Sonora stage, I hear, only a few days ago. 'Way south of here!"

"Wouldn't be too sure," the miner said. "He moves fast, that galoot. Aims a double shotgun. 'Throw down the box!' he says, and they throw it down."

"I don't understand it!" the fat man complained. "There are armed guards on the stages, yet they never shoot him."

Here Pack joined the talk. "Can't blame 'em. 'Tain't *their* gold. And a double load o' buck is a powerful argument, if a feller has the drop."

The girl beside him turned quickly. Looked at his brown face, long brown hair and brown beard. At his buckskin shirt and corduroy trousers, stuffed into worn boots.

That blue glance made him dizzy. Was it a glance of scorn? He gulped and added, "There's the passengers to think of, too. They might get hurt if shootin' started."

The stage swung into the road, with rumbling of wheels and drumming of hoofs, with yells and cracks of the long whip. But there was silence inside for a while.

Everybody was thinking of that mysterious road-agent. The tall robber whose eyes glared through holes cut in a concealing sack, and whose deep voice uttered only one command. The specter who was here, there and everywhere. Who snatched the express box into the woods or brush, and broke it open with amazing skill.

And when a sheriff's posse or gang of vigilantes went after him, they found nothing but the empty box. Empty, that is, except for a scrap of paper with insulting rhymes scrawled on it.

AT FIRST, the jolting was pretty bad. Then the track smoothed out, away from town, and talk began again.

The storekeeper spoke first. "Funny cuss, for a hold-up! Ever read any of the poetry? Wonder who he really is?"

"Wells-Fargo would like to know, you bet!" the miner chuckled. "Their men are snoopin' the whole country. Sure, I've read the stuff. 'Twas printed in the newspapers."

The girl stiffened. "He must be a low person. Some of his words are not very polite."

"Doesn't rob passengers, anyway," Pack said. "Only the express."

The little leathery man spoke for the first time. "Well, I ain't a-scared of him. I'm nigh broke."

"I carry my swag right with me," the miner boasted. "I'm heeled, too." He showed the bone-plated butt of a pistol.

"Me too," Pack laughed. "My poke ain't in the box, either."

Once more the girl gave him that quick, searching glance. "And the bandit doesn't rob passengers!" she said.

What did she mean by that? Pack wondered uneasily. She was mighty pretty, he thought, with the bluest eyes he had ever seen. But her nose sure looked snippety when she turned it up.

There was silence again, broken by a small sobbing sound. Now this girl was wiping her eyes with a tiny handkerchief. Crying! Pack felt hurt and bewildered. He wasn't used to girls, yet was sure he hadn't said anything to make her cry.

The lawyer patted her shoulder. "Don't take on, Miss Amy! You're thinking of your poor uncle. All flesh is grass, liable to be cut down in its bloom."

She answered brokenly. "Uncle Horace was so good! Paid for my schooling, and always seemed such a gentleman when he came to see me. I never dreamed that he kept a—a *saloon!*"

The storekeeper ventured a word of comfort. "It was a high-toned place. The gamblin' was high, wide and handsome."

Miss Amy sniffed. "And people called

him *Mud!* A disgusting name for a man."

"Just a nickname. Because when he took a drink he always said, 'Mud in your eye!' Every single time!"

She leaned back and closed her own wet eyes.

Nobody knew what to say next. The whip cracked overhead, the stage rumbled. The windows showed a passing vista of long, sun-scorched slopes, crowned with pines, and let in clouds of dust. It eddied in the air, settled on clothes and faces.

At last the storekeeper coughed. "Feller travelers, I guess some introductions are in order. I'm Lucas J. Smith, General Merchandise, going to buy stock." He nodded politely. "I know you, Judge Byfield, and I gather that the lady is Miss Norcott."

She sat up, perfectly composed again. "Yes, I am Amy Norcott. I teach dancing and genteel deportment at Madam Beau-gard's Select Female Academy in San Francisco."

The leathery man gaped at her, impressed. "I ain't nobody," he said bitterly. "Was second mate of a clipper, until the talk o' gold made me quit ship. Now I'm headin' back for salt water."

"Shouldn't git discouraged," the miner advised. "I been both broke an' rich. So I'm scootin' to the big town, to have a high old spree and git broke agin. Yours truly, Bill Bowers!"

That left only one who hadn't spoken up. Miss Amy turned her blue glance on him, and he shuffled his booted feet. Consarn the girl, why was she always looking at him?

"Reckon my business is no secret," he said. "Got a claim at High Camp, and I'm off to stow my takings in Wells-Fargo's bank. Then I'm comin' back for more. Oh, I forgot to say! My name's Pack Gallo-way."

"Pack?" Her silky eyebrows arched up. "Is that another nickname?"

"Short for Packhorse. Ye see, when I first come to the diggin's I was totin' an outrageous big outfit—my shoulders hold a lot. So some feller sings out, 'Hi, Pack-horse, where's your lead-rope?' The name sort of stuck."

Miss Amy sank back wearily. Byfield mopped his fat face with a huge bandanna. The small man shrank into his corner. Smith began to nod, then to snore. Bowers

chewed tobacco and spit out of the window.

The stage rolled on, up long hills and down. Pack grew sleepier and sleepier, in spite of the swaying motion. He let his bearded chin sag on his chest.

He felt the slant and strain as the coach pulled up a hill. Then the ground leveled off, and he woke with a start. The stage had stopped.

Had they reached Higgstown Station, where they were to eat? No, it was too soon. And the hilltop was an empty saddle, rocks on the right and a wooded slope on the left.

But the hilltop wasn't empty! A shout sounded, out there to the front and left. A loud, hoarse shout.

"Throw down the box!"

A STREAM of oaths came from the driver above. They were held up! Of course the guard had been surprised and unready; his gun uncocked, because of the jolting.

The passengers were all awake now, startled and confused. Miss Amy sat still. Byfield spluttered, Smith squawked, the little man shrank smaller. Bowers said, "Hell, it's him!"

Pack leaned forward. Through the left front window he saw the robber; a tall ghost, hooded with a sack, who held a double-barreled gun. He saw the express box hurtle to the ground with a thud and a spurt of dust.

He dodged back. Byfield was fumbling inside his coat. Before Pack could grab him, he had pulled a stubby pistol. Had poked it through the window and fired.

Then everything happened at once! Pack slid an arm around the girl and thrust her to the floor, covering her with his bulk. A shotgun roared twice. Buckshot shattered window and door frames, showering splinters. Smoke seethed in the air.

The mules bolted. Over the top and down the hill, running like devils. The coach rocked and bounced. It tipped on two wheels, seemed to jump like a jackrabbit.

Somehow it didn't upset. Pack held Miss Amy tight—the only girl he'd ever hugged—to keep her from rattling around. He braced himself, there on the floor. Sometimes the other passengers were all over him, sometimes not. They were gasping, yelling, cursing.

The mules finally ran themselves out, down in the valley. Slowed and stopped.

Now the mess in the stage could sort itself out. Smith and Bowers were back on their seat, clutching each other. The lawyer was jammed in his corner; there was a hole in the blue cloth of his left sleeve.

The little man lay sprawling forward, face resting on Byfield's knees and the smashed beaver hat. His shabby back was riddled and red. He didn't move, only settled slackly.

Pack spoke savagely. "That was a fool thing to do! Snap a popgun at a yahoo with a real gun! And miss! You've caused murder."

The lawyer groaned. "It was my duty. All my client's gold was in that box!"

Unwinding himself, Pack opened the right door and lifted the girl out. "Don't look," he said. "The little feller ain't pretty."

She wriggled out of his arms. "I will!" she panted. "He needs help." And she ran around and tugged at the other, the shot-shattered door. It stuck.

Pack followed. The driver was already down on the road, stamping and swearing. "What addle-headed damn' blatherskite done that?" he bawled. "Who fired an' raised hell?"

"The Judge," Pack said. "He got winged, himself."

"Sorry he warn't kilt! I stopped a couple, too. Ain't crippled, but Hank is hit bad. All I could do was hang onto him, keep him from fallin', and let the critters run. Gi' me a hand!"

They lifed the wounded guard down and laid him in the shade of an oak. Then they took the poor riddled body out of the coach. Smith and Bowers stood around, muttering helplessly. Byfield sat down.

Miss Amy went to work. In a minute she had the blue coat off and his arm bound with his big bandanna.

"Just went through the fat, I reckon," the driver sneered. "No, ma'am, I'll do for a while—I know about shot-holes. But Hank, now, we'll tie him up tight with strips of hoss-blanket, stow him inside. You can steady him as we roll."

He called Smith and Bowers. The girl turned aside with white cheeks and quivering lips. Her eyes met Pack's; she suddenly flushed red and as suddenly paled again.

Remembers how I hugged her, Pack thought. "Godamighty, she felt soft! And now she's lost her gold."

She certainly wasn't rich without it. Her dress looked stylish, but it was cheap stuff. Already there was a tear on one shoulder. The small bonnet had fallen back, letting loose her clustered curls.

Her teaching job sounded important, but he guessed it didn't pay much beyond her keep.

An idea had been in the back of his head, and now he made up his mind. He dug inside his shirt. "Keep this for me, Miss Amy," he said. "It's yours if I don't come back."

She stood speechless, the heavy little gold-poke weighing down her hands.

The driver was giving orders. "Load up, we got to roll! Got to find the doc at Higgstown, git a posse out and send word to Wells-Fargo. Somebody help me drive, 'cause I'm weakenin'." He looked at Pack.

"Let Bill Bowers do it," Pack said. "I got other business." He had pulled his long Colt revolver.

The driver stared. "Other what? Goin' after Black Bart? With a hand gun? Man are ye crazy?"

"Maybe," Pack grinned, "he's forgot to load up that shotgun." He turned and trotted up the road.

HE WAS taking a long chance, he knew. He'd find the empty box, all right, in the woods near the road. This bandit always cached tools near the scene of a planned hold-up. He always opened the box in jig time, rifled it and made himself scarce.

Pack would have to track him. And he never left any tracks!

He was like a ghost. But it was time somebody unspooked him, when he took to robbing a nice young lady. Miss Amy was nice and good, and sweet as pie, even if she was a bit snippy.

Running and walking by turns, Pack reached the place. He found the prints of planted hoofs, the marks of suddenly braked wheels. And there was the dent in the roadside dust where the box had been flung down. It had been carried away, but not far; it was too heavy.

Panting, Pack dropped to the ground. He'd have to get back his wind.

He didn't rest long, though. His heaving chest had just begun to ease, when he lurched to his feet. He had heard a sound from somewhere up the wooded eastern slope. A sharp, whacking sound.

It came again and again. Somebody was at work. "Thunderation!" he mumbled, "The yahoo is havin' trouble with the box. He's up there still—and not very far away, either."

Pack started up the hillside, going as quietly as he could. He slipped between the straight pine trees and stepped over windfalls. That fellow wasn't so slick, after all! The prints of big booted feet were trodden into the pine litter.

The hammering had stopped. Pack topped the rise and dopped into a hollow, going too fast. Suddenly, right ahead, he saw a hooded shape. Tall and ghostly, it rose from a stoop.

It rose with shotgun ready! Loaded, capped and cocked!

Pack fell on his face as both barrels belowered. Buckshot tore over him, whistling, cracking into the trees. Smoke spurted in a reeking puff. Then he was up again, Navy Colt in hand.

The robber had dropped the shotgun and clawed out a hand gun. Its barrel glinted blue as it rose. Pack straightened his arm and fired twice.

The smoke eddied away amongst the trees. And now the hooded man was lying flat on his back. He kicked one leg and was still.

Whooping, Pack ran forward. He had laid the ghost, nailed the road-agent who had fooled them all! He had saved the express and better still, he had saved Miss Amy's gold!

First he pulled the sack from the dead man's head. He saw a shock of dark hair and a broad, swarthy face. Wide-open eyes that stared up dully. "Ugly customer," he grunted. "Never seen him before, but he's black, all right."

Next, he turned to the box. The top had been broken off; a blunted axe lay beside it. The contents hadn't been disturbed.

It was partly filled with canvas and leather gold-bags, each tagged with a name. He knelt and pawed through them. Yes, here it was! Miss Amy's bag.

He was still kneeling when a voice spoke behind him. A deep voice with a ring to it.

"Drop that gun, friend, and lift your hands! I've got you cold. Now get up . . . *slow*. Don't turn around."

For a moment Pack squatted there, puzzled. What was this? Some mistake, of course. He had to obey, though; nothing else to do. He let his pistol fall and unlimbered himself, still holding the goldbag in his left hand.

The voice spoke again. "So I caught you at it!"

"At it, hell!" Pack was losing his temper. "Black Bart done it! I just shot him."

There was a low laugh. "No, you didn't."

"I did so! Looky, there he lays with his reg'lar outfit. Damn' eye-holed sack, shotgun and all!"

"So he does," the voice growled, "and deserved to lie there. But you're wrong, just the same. *Because I'm Black Bart.*"

Risking death, Pack whirled around. He saw a second ghost! Another tall, hooded figure with another shotgun!

He stood goggling. No, this one wasn't the twin of the first. He was slimmer. By thunder, he was wearing a high hat under the sack—that's what made him look so tall! And he talked like a gentleman.

The gentlemanly ghost talked some more. "You're wondering how I got here. Very simple! I was waiting for the stage down below in the brush, just about where it stopped. I listened and learned."

Pack understood, partly. "And when I run, you follered?"

"Through the woods. It took me a little longer."

"Then who the devil is he?" Pack nodded backward.

"That rascal," Black Bart declared, "was a rank impostor who tried to profit by my reputation. He stole my character, my tactics and my game. And now, friend, stand over against that tree. Drop the poke you're holding."

Backing against the tree, Pack clutched the poke tighter. "See here, Mister Bart," he said, "are you low-down enough to rob a lady? A nice, blue-eyed young gal? This here is hers. I come after it, and I'll hang onto it until ye blast me!"

The road-agent seemed to consider. "I noticed the young lady. Well, you did me a good turn, and I don't want your blood. D'ye promise to stand quiet? And not to trail me?"

Pack nodded. Miss Amy's fortune was all that mattered.

HE STOOD watching curiously as the other pulled a folded sack from under his belt and shook it out. The same sort as he used for a mask, only this had no holes. He held the shotgun against his right shoulder, finger still on the trigger, while he worked with his left hand.

The man was no yahoo. His movements were quick, smooth and sure. His hands were long and slender, his feet small and well-booted. Those shoddy clothes—jean jumper and overalls—were only part of his disguise.

He stowed the remaining gold-bags away, paused to drop a scrap of paper into the empty box. Then he shouldered the weighty sack and . . . vanished. He moved fast, and like a sure-enough haunt, he didn't leave any tracks.

Now was Pack's chance, if he wanted to take it. He could have picked up his pistol and run after the vanisher. Could have caught up with him, maybe, plugged him in the back. But a promise was a promise.

After a while he went to the box. Yes, sir, there was poetry scribbled on that paper. Pretty short, this time.

*Once more I win!
It is a sin,
But I can grin.*

Pack had to grin, himself. He put the paper back and wondered what to do now.

Might as well wait here, he decided, get some of the sleep he needed. The coach would have gone on to Higgstown, and a posse would be along by and by. He recovered his gun and sat down against a pine trunk, nursing Miss Amy's poke. . . .

The racket woke him. The thunder of galloping horses, the yelling and loud talk of men dismounting in the road. A little later they came stamping down into the hollow. A dozen; stablemen from Higgstown station, the blacksmith, some miners, a couple of stray *vaqueros*. A sheriff's deputy was in the lead.

They looked and whooped. "By glory, he done it!"

"Nailed Black Bart!"

"Good an' proper, too! Right in the giz-zard!"

"'Tain't him!" Pack protested; but they paid no attention.

They inspected the dead robber, then came and slapped Pack on the back, punched his ribs. "Won't Wells-Fargo be tickled!"

"Yay, an' pay out a whackin' big reward!"

"*Hombre*, ye'll be a reg'lar high-grade heero!"

Suddenly they quieted, sensing something wrong. The deputy was standing by the express box, rubbing his chin. He was a tough, stumpy fellow with bristly sideburns.

"Hey!" he said. "Where's the gold?"

Pack showed the poke in his hand. "This is all. I been tryin' to tell ye! That galoot ain't the real thing."

"Ain't what?"

"He's a make-believe! He was slow bustin' the box—that's why I caught him. We exchanged compliments and I downed him. And then the sure-nough Black Bart showed up and got the drop on me!"

The deputy rubbed his chin harder. "I hear what ye say, but it don't make sense. Just answer plain. Where's the gold?"

"Over the hill," Pack said, "in Black Bart's sack."

"Hell an' gravy!" the deputy swore. "What for are you tryin' to run such a game? You'll come in for a lot o' credit and a fat reward. Yet ye grab the boodle and make up a tale!"

"It's so!" Pack insisted. "The real feller—"

"Slumgullion! He's over yonder, mask, shotgun an' ev'rything. Why, he even left his damn poetry in the box."

"That was the other one," Pack told him.

"No sign of any other."

"The spooky cuss don't leave no tracks!"

The deputy spat disgustedly. "Maybe not, but how come you got that hefty poke?"

Pack told the truth again. "Because he let me keep it. Belongs to Miss Amy Norcott; her name's on the tag."

"Don't sound likely," the deputy scowled. "Anyway, I'll take care of it. Your gun too. Boys, two of ye hold onto this gazabo. The rest scater and root for the stuff. He's cached it somewheres."

The men searched the hollow, clawing through vines and brush, kicking up the

pine needles, turning over the stones. They found no hidden loot. So at last they gathered up the broken box, the dead robber, and Pack Galloway. And off they went.

It seemed a sort of bad dream, looking back on it. To argue and argue with men who wouldn't believe him. Then the night at Higgstown, under guard. The horseback haul to Sacramento, escorted by riders bristling with weapons. And when he found himself locked in the calaboose, that was the worse nightmare of all.

He wasn't uncomfortable. He had a Spanish bed, corded with rawhide, and the jailer brought him coffee, bacon and flapjacks. But he was in the solitary cell, a cage of iron bars. He felt trapped.

"Am I the worst customer?" he asked.

The turnkey nodded; he was a solemn codger named Jake. "Hosthieves are gen'ally lynched afore they reach here, and killers gets out on bail. Hold-ups are hard to catch."

"Bail!" Pack hadn't thought of that. "Could I get bailed out?"

"Likely," Jake nodded again. "If you have the dust or friends to put it up."

He had the dust; or at least Miss Amy had it. She must be his friend, too, after what he had done for her. Surely she'd come to help him! Or maybe she'd send Judge Byfield.

The following day was confusing, though. The jail was mobbed by people curious to see him, see the fellow who had killed the famous road-agent. They made a lot of hullabaloo; and special deputies had to go on duty, Jake said, "just in case."

Later the sheriff and a Wells-Fargo agent talked to Peck. The one was tall, lean-jawed and gray-mustached; the other stocky, with a bulldog chin. Pack told the truth again. And again was disbelieved.

They wanted the missing gold.

The newspapers had the story by now. Jake brought a copy of the *Sacramento Union* in to Pack. He read it and was flabbergasted. It said he was doubtless the outlaw's confederate, and had slain his partner in crime in a quarrel over the ill-gotten gains . . .

Time went by, and still Miss Amy didn't come. Pack had been hoping for days now that she'd thank him for saving her fortune. And that she'd bring him the poke of dust he needed so badly.

INSTEAD, his next visitor was Bill Bowers, kindly admitted by old Jake. He shoved a bottle into the cage and crowed, "Open her up! Le's drink to y'r health, ole boss! You're plumb, damn' famous, even if they do hang ye!"

"Hang me!" Pack swore long and bitterly.

Bill stuck his whiskered face between the bars. "If they don't," he whispered, "I'm your pardner, ain't I? Was on the stage an' all. How 'bout givin' me a leetle share?"

"How about bailin' me out?" Pack countered.

"Sorry, I'm busted a'ready," Bill hiccupped.

"Get out o' here!" Pack raged, and threw the bottle. It broke against the bars.

Another, more important visitor came after Bill. Judge Byfield, as stately as ever, except that his left arm was in a sling.

"Come to bail me?" Pack asked eagerly.

Byfield looked surprised. "Er . . . not exactly, Mister Galloway, but I'm here on business." He coughed, coming close to the cage. "You'll need counsel. Legal services are expensive, sir—expensive. However, I understand that you possess a valuable claim."

Pack nodded sulkily, eyeing the shiny hat cocked on the bald head.

"Also, there is considerable public sentiment in your favor. You have a good chance

if the case is handled well. And later, perhaps, the . . . er . . . mislaid property may come into your hands."

Pack opened his mouth to swear, then closed it. What was the use? "Needn't worry about me bein' broke," he said. "Miss Amy's got a poke o' mine, keepin' it for me. That'll see me through."

The lawyer frowned. "Indeed! I was not aware of any such transaction. My client should have informed me, before returning to San Francisco."

Waving the Judge away, Pack sat down on his bed. Gone to San Francisco! She'd gone off home, forgetting him, but taking his dust along. The dust he needed. Well, after all, he couldn't blame her. He'd said it was hers if he didn't come back. And he hadn't.

After a long, black, sleepless night, he didn't feel like getting up to eat. He did roll out, though, just to please old Jake.

As soon as Jake had taken the tin plate and cup away, he got to work. Tested every bar in the cage, pulling, pushing and shaking. He found them all solid.

Then he tried the heavy chain and padlock that held the grated door. Got out his Barlow jack-knife to pry at the lock; he could reach it through the bars.

The blade broke.

He was waked from an afternoon doze by a murmuring, buzzing sound. It grew into a roar, and he sat up to listen. A lot



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25c

STAR WESTERN

of men were hooting outside the jail! Like before, only louder and angrier. There were pistol shots.

Some excitement or other. He wished for a window to look out of.

Just then a heavy blow cracked against the outer wall. Another and another. They were heaving rocks at the calaboose!

Old Jake came running from the front of the building, worried and flustered. "By grab!" he yelled, "Looks like all the roughs in town is swarmin' around! They're shootin' in the air now, but they'll be shootin' for blood pretty soon. And only three deputies to stand 'em off!"

"What's up?" Pack wondered.

"Up! All the roughs is up, meanin' to bust the place and let you loose! It's that friend o' yourn, dang him! Bill Bowers. He's been jawin' to riffraff in the saloons."

Shots, yells, hammering against the walls. An axe chopping away somewhere. The prisoners in the main section began to howl, too, and rampage in their cells.

"What a mess!" Jake moaned. "If they let all the jailbirds out!"

Pack was on his feet now, feeling pleased. "They'll have to take a file," he said, "or a hacksaw to these bars. Or no—they'll take your key."

The jailer unlimbered his gun and aimed it through the bars. "No, sir! They'll never git you out! Not alive!"

"Now, Jake!" Pack scolded, "Is that a friendly way to act? And you cook such good flapjacks, too!"

"Can't help it! Got to hold ye, livin' or dead. If that gang busts in, you're dead!"

He meant what he said; and Pack stood utterly defenseless in the bare cage. He might dodge the first bullet, not all six.

Outside the rioters grew uglier and noisier. Inside, the other prisoners were howling like wolves. Jake's finger tightened on the trigger.

But suddenly he jerked the gun back and turned his head. Something new was happening out there! The uproar died down, then ceased abruptly. One voice began to shout. A voice like a brass trumpet.

"Praise be!" Jake quavered. "It's Sheriff Ben Dorn, come in the nick o' time. Maybe he'll handle 'em! He scuttled away.

Pack slumped on his bed, gloomy when he should have been glad. The riot was over and he hadn't been freed. Yet, on the

other hand, Jake hadn't shot him. Old Jake, the fellow who was so friendly . . .

Friendly, sure enough! The next thing he knew, the jailer was back. Pounding the bars with his key and whooping. Pack looked up; and saw that the grated door stood open.

"You're loose!" Jake whooped. "And if you ain't the lucky devil, I'll lock myself up! There's a surprise waitin for ye in the office!"

Pack hardly knew how he got out front. He stopped short, just inside the office, blinking and confused. The sheriff and the Wells-Fargo man were there, neither looking happy.

He hardly noticed them. Some one else was there, too, and she did look happy.

She ran to him, blue eyes shining. "I've been trying and trying," she said in a rush, "but I couldn't do anything! I didn't know you were in prison until I read the newspaper. Then I'd already put your gold in the bank, in your name, because that was what you wanted.

"I couldn't get it out again! Or get my own, either; they said it was impounded for evidence. So I went to the law officers and made a fuss. But nothing did any good until . . . guess what happened!"

He shook his head.

"That bandit! He held up the Placerville stage, and guess what he left in the box!"

Pack could have made a guess, but didn't try.

"All the empty gold-bags from our stage, with the names on! And he left this!"

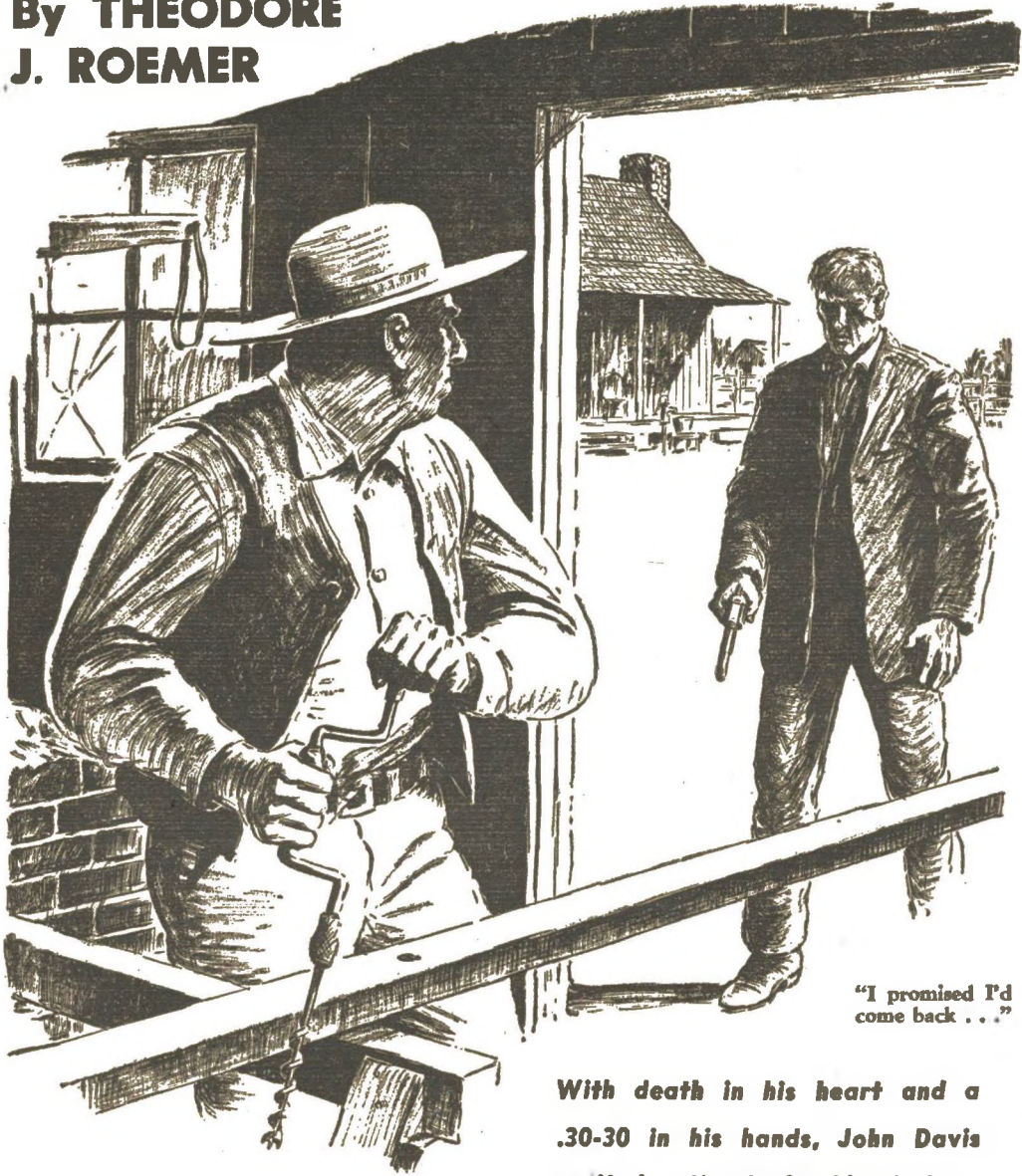
Dumbly Pack took the bit of crumpled paper, smoothed it and read.

*You have the wrong man in your jail,
And imitators always fail.
The other only played a part,
For I'm the genuine BLACK BART!*

"He proved he was still alive," the girl went on, "and had taken everything for himself. So you couldn't have shot him nor taken any of the gold. Just as soon as it was known, I made these men let me bring you the news."

Pack grabbed both her hands, and she didn't pull them away. "It's sure good news, Miss Amy," he said. "But the best thing of all is—that you brung it!"

By **THEODORE
J. ROEMER**



*"I promised I'd
come back . . ."*

*With death in his heart and a
.30-30 in his hands, John Davis
waited patiently for his victim—
the best friend he'd ever have!*

JOHN DAVIS sat just inside his cabin doorway. He kept away from the sun-side so that he could not be seen from the down-trail. Across his short, blocky knees he held his old .30-30 Winchester, the muzzle of which kept a grim and determined vigil down through the south cottonwoods.

It was mid-morning. A meadowlark trilled across the eastern hayfield, and the drone of his wife's hand-pumped washing

A MAN TO KILL...

machine came steadily from the lean-to at the rear of the cabin.

John Davis was a stumpy, thick-shouldered rancher with a slight curl to his heavy underlip and a determined little-man thrust to a nose that was big and covered by three warts. He was balding, but the ring of gray hair didn't make him look like Saint Peter. He watched his south yard-gate with unwinking eyes.

The lean-to door opened and his wife came into the four-room cabin, saw him and, closing the door, she put her wet hands on her hips.

"You're a fool, John Davis."

"Go back to your washing, woman."

"Ruby can finish up. I came to talk to you."

"Don't argue fer her an' him again." He spat out the doorway.

She came around and stood in front of him. She was taller than her husband and a much better looking woman than he was a man, although the years of ranching had taken a toll from the gold of her hair and the smoothness of her long face.

"Listen to me, John Davis. If he is in love with our Ruby, let them get married. Lor' knows she's crazy enough about him, weepin' her eyes red back there until I don't know whether she's washin' in soap water or her tears."

"I don't want no daughter of mine to have truck with a Matson. They're all a wild bunch, them's that live on the benches up in them rock canyons, a whiskey-drinking, horse-yipping crowd that'd rather be shooting guns than do an honest day's work in a hayfield. They're a starved tribe, I tell you, Sarah. That youngest Matson boy couldn't support an acorn-chewin' hawg in the middle of the woods."

His wife shook her head slowly, desperately, as if she were trying to say *no!* to death. "That isn't why you're against him. You know she's been seeing him for over a year now every time we drive in to Stockton. It's your pride that's hurt. Just because some tattle-tale told you Tom Matson bragged he was riding into John Davis' front yard next Monday morning and getting his daughter to marry her. You don't think it's fitten somebody should say that about John Davis who's got the best and biggest ranch in the valley. About the

man who's head of the grangers and who's president of the school board. It's hurt your pride, and you think the valley's laughing. Now, isn't that the truth, John Davis?"

He didn't say anything. He kept watching the south cottonwoods. She hitched up her damp wash shirt then wagged a finger.

"And how do you know young Tom even said that? Every time I saw him he was a nice, slim, well-mannered young fellow."

John Davis spat. "Ruff Edwards tole me. Said he'd heard it said around. I believe Ruff."

"Fiddlesticks, somebody started a wild story and they told you to make fun of you."

Red crept into John Davis' round, weathered cheeks. He held his stubborn silence.

"As far as starvin', how much did *we* have when we began? You didn't even come in the daytime to get me; we sneaked away at night because my pa didn't like you and swore he'd never let me marry you."

THE red was heavy in John Davis' jowls now; he'd never forgiven his father-in-law for calling him The Runt. Maybe it was a good thing the man died shortly afterwards and they'd never met again. But the appellation had stung to the quick and his wife's remark needed his pride, under the thick stubbornness.

"Look around you, woman. Look at the stock, the fields. Look at the barn, the sheds, this house. What would your father say now?"

"Your father leaving you that money gave you the start. If Tom Matson's father gave him money to get going—"

"Tom Matson's father?" John Davis' big nose gave a snort. "What has that red-headed whiskey-drinking deadbeat got to give? Maybe a rifle, or a Colt with some notches on the handle, or some good wishes from eight older kids. Hank Matson! Huh! I still figure he was as guilty as that outlaw George Studer in those horse-stealin' raids around here." He spat again, and continued proudly, "We got that Studer locked away fer good anyway, even iff'n we didn't get any proof on Hank Matson."

"You mean *you* sent George Studer to jail. You led the ranchers with your big mouth and not too much evidence."

"Enough of that, woman!"

She knew by the tone of his voice she'd gone far enough. She changed her own tone. "John, listen. I'm sure young Tommy Matson didn't say that about riding in here and taking Ruby away right under your nose. But the story did get around; we know that, and likely he's heard it and those Matson's got pride too, the kids are stuck full of it, and I reckon he thinks if he *doesn't* come now everybody will call him a yellow-striper. John, John, take *that* into consideration." She was pleading now. "You've always said hello nice to him before. Sure they like to shoot and ride, but he'll make Ruby a fine husband. We could help them. We've got plenty."

It was the wrong turn to take. That is, with John Davis. His neck ruffled up; the grey hair around the bald pate bristled pride and conquest. He was master of all he surveyed.

"I let word around Stockton an' up in the Benches, plain an' loud, a 30-30 bullet would be waiting for young Matson iff'n he set foot inside my yard. I'm stayin' by my word."

"John Davis, that would be murder!"

"Ain't no murder killin' a Matson."

"You can't fight the county."

"I warned him. He's trespassing." Stubbornly.

She said, "Don't you do it, John Davis," and went out the door and back into the lean-to.

HE SAT motionless a long instant, weighing the measured coldness of her words, then he saw a movement down amongst the cottonwoods and his little round jaw came up hard again. He lifted the gun swiftly to his shoulder, sighted, then stayed his thick forefinger on the trigger. He put down the gun quickly. It was that dang, fence-busting steer from the north pasture. He'd have to put a board halter around that wandering critter to hold it in.

He took out his red handkerchief and wiped his brown forehead. Almost killed one of his best steers!

The morning hours droned around. When the brass living-room clock bonged

out eleven strokes, his wife came back into the house, went into the kitchen and began preparing the noon meal. She didn't say anything to him and he stubbornly kept his back toward the kitchen door. He knew Ruby usually did the cooking on wash day, and now his wife wanted to spare the girl the sight of her father sitting there in the front door with a rifle across his knees.

John Davis measuredly took out his plug tobacco. He'd show people around here who was the Big Wheel. Hadn't he already proved it to the valley a dozen times? These young sprouts like Cliff Matson forgot those things, or just brashly closed their eyes to them and tried to ride rough-shod over older folk.

John Davis stood up to stretch. He stretched hard, as if trying to lengthen his five-foot five-inch body, then he sat down grimly once more and waited.

When the clock sent out twelve brassy notes, he got up and with an air of one who'd done a dutiful turn at sentry, he put the battered .30-30 on the deer foot rack above the fireplace and walked into the kitchen, stomping.

His wife didn't look up. The table was set. She put her head out the window and called to their daughter who was hanging out the clothes in the back yard, and in a minute Jenn Davis saw his daughter come in, brush her hair swiftly at the mirror by the wash pump, then come, red-eyed and pale of face, and sit down opposite her father.

She favored her mother in looks. She was going on eighteen, a slender, well-rounded creature with corn-yellow hair and grey-blue eyes that had a child-like beauty. She didn't look at her father, and John Davis took one glance at his daughter then paid attention to his plate.

The meal was eaten in silence.

When it was over, John Davis was in the habit of lying down a few minutes on the horse-hair sofa before returning to work; but this afternoon, in the heavy silence of the kitchen, he rose abruptly, pulled on his work hat and went out of the house.

He stood irresolute a moment on the rear stoop, then remembered the broken reach on his second-best wagon and he turned his steps toward the blacksmith

shop. Well, he'd called Tom Matson's bluff. And he'd let the whole valley know he had.

He was boring the second hole for the reach pin into the white ash two-by-four when he thought he'd heard a sound behind him. He didn't turn at once, and then he decided to look around.

The bit and brace in his gnarled hands grew motionless.

The man was hatless and dusty, and he stood in the wide blacksmith doorway in the faintest semblance of a half crouch. It made his skinny body look smaller and gave the narrow dark face a sinister cast. He held his right hand loosely in the pocket of the black store coat that was several sizes too large for him. The butt of the gun showed beneath his fingers.

"Surprised, John Davis?" The man said it softly. His black eyes, like oil, were steady on John Davis' shocked face.

"George Studer!"

"That's right. Remember I promised when I got out I'd come back and kill you?"

"How did you get out?" John Davis hardly knew his own voice. Studer had been sent up for life for shooting Ed Burger at his horse-stealing trial. Burger and John Davis had been the two main witnesses.

Studer smiled. "Never mind that, John. It's just important that I'm here. I pay my debts." He took out the gun. It was a black Colt .45, John Davis saw. He'd probably stolen it from some bunkhouse in his trek across the country. And John Davis thought of his own .45 on the kitchen shelf, and the .30-30 on the deer foot rack, and with bleak grayness he knew he was facing death.

He had never figured he was a coward. His pride, he'd long since decided, was too thick. But now staring into the step-off that would be final, he felt his belly turn upward and he had no strength in his legs or arms. Death could be so final, and all he'd worked for, his ranch, his horses, his wife, yes, and his daughter, Ruby . . .

He just stood and held the bit and brace limply.

Studer's mouth twisted. "You ain't so big-mouth now, John Davis. You ain't up on no stand shoutin' an' ravin' that you saw me at Ed Burger's place that night.

Say something, you high-an'-mighty runt who thinks he's king of the valley! Let's hear you bleat." Studer gave a low laugh and moved over in front of the forge, blocking the side door as an exit.

John Davis couldn't move; he felt as if he were standing in a vacuum. The forge fire was a ruby glow; it touched their eyes. Studer's body grew smaller—his twisted face contained an evil from which John Davis knew there was no escaping. The sun dropped low, washing its yellow light into the wide doorway. Studer was lifting his gun—

A SHADOW, and Cliff Matson stood there. Both men were so surprised, neither moved. Then Studer said from the side of his flat lips. "Keep out of this Matson."

"Hello, Studer," Cliff Matson said. He was a reed-like, saddle-shaped youngster, and by the sweaty press of his levis John Davis knew he'd just stepped off his horse. For the first time in three minutes, John Davis did something physical. He swallowed. But neither of the two paid him any attention. They were regarding each other with leveled, weighing eyes.

"I said, Matson, you ain't got no piece of this."

"What right you figger you got to kill him?"

"He sent me to jail."

"You was up for rustlin' horses. If you hadn't shot Ed Burger, mebbe they couldn't have made the charge stick."

"John Davis told everybody he'd seen me at Ed Burger's spread that night."

Matson shrugged. "That prove anything? His word ag'in yours you weren't there. He didn't see you stealin' horses."

"He shouted it loud. He thinks he's a big wheel in this valley. Maybe they'd believe him an' not me."

"Mebbe, an' mebbe not."

"He put me in jail to rot. It stinks in there. I hated it. I almost went crazy in there."

"Still, you shot Ed Burger, not him. You put yourself in jail, the way I figger it, Studer." Young Matson's voice was cool and even, so casual that John Davis began to feel some awe. Studer's voice was low and snarling; Matson answered back in quiet tones, and in the hot stillness of

the blacksmith shop John Davis got the feeling that here was court; here were judge and jury; here were two lawyers arguing the case. Each had justices at his side; Matson's was snuggled down in a holster: Studer's was in his hand hanging downward.

Both men were Benchers, having come from the hills. They had a code up there, John Davis knew—does a man deserve killing? If he does, no pity, no quarter, no further retribution to the killer.

Their words went back and forth, and flies buzzed in the sunlight and shadow on the board floor, and Matson's voice contained a patience in his arguing, and rebellion stiffened Studer's legs. And after a while John Davis, looking upon the scene, began to realize that neither man would give in.

Suddenly there was no more said. The windmill creaked as a vagrant wind turned it, then stillness. John Davis' work-blunted fingers gripped the bit and brace until he felt them no more. The two men having guns had grown utterly motionless, and John Davis knew that the end of it would come in one more moment.

Young Matson had to draw before he could fire; all Studer had to do was lift his arm. John Davis felt small and useless in the moment.

Studer's black eyes suddenly became steadily bright, and watching. That was when Matson made his try.

Both men's movements were concerted. Sound clapped back and forth in the confines of the blacksmith shop. A leather strap holding up a dividing pole was severed almost miraculously above Matson's head. The end of the pole thudded to the floor.

Something slammed Studer back against the forge. He screamed an oath and yanked up his gun hand with his left, raking at the hammer. Matson's gun, held rock-steady, hip-high, smoked. His lean thumb was pulling back the hammer.

"Don't, Studer!"

Studer clawed the gun into cocked position, his black coat steadily growing darkly wet at the shoulder.

"Don't, Studer—"

There was no doubt who got in the first shot this time. John Davis saw Matson's gun buck, then its roar was echoed by

Studer's weapon. A wooden splinter a foot long spanked upward from the plank floor at Matson's boots, the lead pinging somewhere into the wall, while Matson's lead had found home. George Studer was knocked from the forge. He struck the anvil on the way down. He sprawled among the litter of hoof shavings, bits of iron and coal cinders.

Twenty-year-old Cliff Matson walked over. He turned Studer's face with the toe of his dusty boot.



John Davis had waited . . .

"He shouldn't have asked for that last one. I give him a chance." He said it aloud, but John Davis knew he was not speaking to him. He was merely thinking in words. He was a quiet one, this young Matson, a cool, grown-up youngster. John Davis remembered the argument, the straight thought-out logic of this young Bencher, the unhesitating way he'd acted—for him, who that morning . . .

And in that moment, John Davis, who had the biggest ranch in the valley, who knew stubbornness and pride with no bounds, who all his life had spoken loud and tried to look bigger than his five foot five would permit him, in that moment John Davis became a different man.

He put down the bit and brace. He said, "We'll go up to the house. I'll ride down and tell the sheriff."

Cliff Matson turned. His blue eyes were direct. "I couldn't make it this morning. One of our cows got caught in a well an' I had to help pa pull 'er out."

John Davis knew the boy was trying to tell him he wasn't afraid. John Davis laughed huskily. He saw the man underneath. What a son-in-law to have! He didn't deserve it. No siree, he, John Davis, certainly didn't deserve it. That is, up to now!

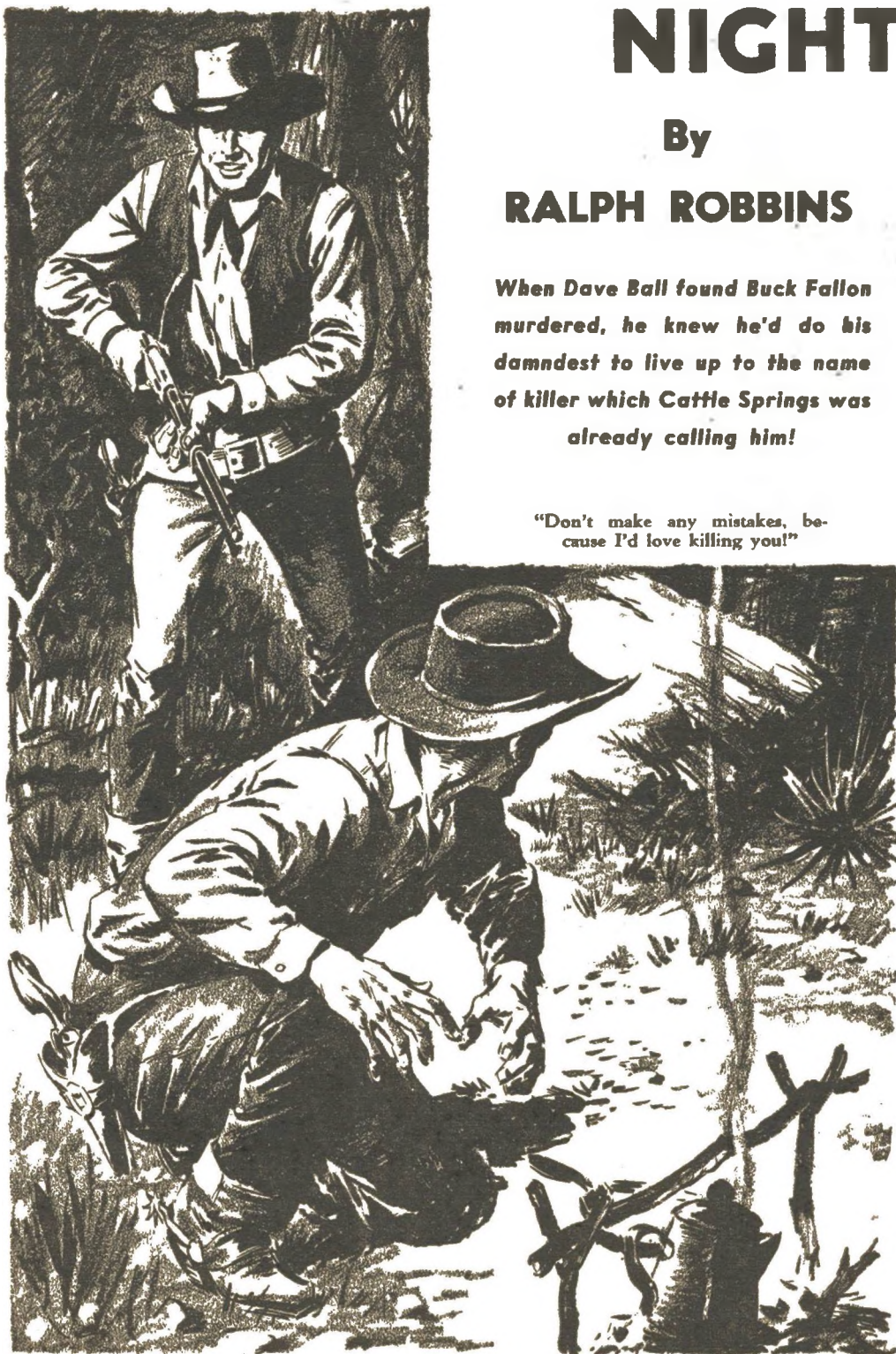
NIGHT

By

RALPH ROBBINS

When Dave Ball found Buck Fallon murdered, he knew he'd do his damndest to live up to the name of killer which Cattle Springs was already calling him!

"Don't make any mistakes, because I'd love killing you!"



OF THE GUN-WOLVES

CHAPTER *Gun Prodigals Return*

1

It was late afternoon in the fall of 1898 when Dave Ball crossed the last lava bench and came out on the north rim of the Crowder Sink. He paused a moment on that high, bold place while his eyes ran on into the vast depth of country ahead.

To the east and west, the rims thrust out for eighty miles like two great arms guarding the plain which fell away south until distance blurred its detail and fused its junction with the tangled buttes and ramparts of the White Horse Range. In a few twisting bottoms, yellow aspens flagged the

promise of water, but it was late fall and all the green was gone from the range; fall's haze was in the air.

Cattle Springs had just two lines of buildings to frame its single street. Dave Ball rode between them. But before he had gone half the length of that street, his nerves were edged with danger.

The faces he saw were not the faces he had seen when last he rode that way. They were all strangers who idled along the board walks and they watched him with hard, hostile eyes. Some horses at a hitch rail wore brands that were new to him.

When he came to the livery stable, Ball rode in and swung down. He stayed to

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watch the feeding himself, then went out and across the street to the Owl Saloon. There was no one in the place except one big man behind the bar and he was arranging bottles against the back mirror.

Dave's boots sounded loud as he went down the room. When he came up close his eyes met the other man's in the glass and he said: "Howdy, Lew."

LEW MARQUETTE had a bottle in each hand, and for an instant he didn't move at all. He just stood with his heavy shoulders a little hunched and his eyes staring back at Dave Ball from the mirror. Then he set the bottles down very carefully and swung around to lay both open hands on the bar.

"Howdy," he said. His voice was high for a man so large, and it held no welcome at all.

Dave's edging nerves tightened a little more, but his tension didn't show in his voice. "Set 'em up, Lew. We'll grease the skids."

Marquette put out a bottle and a single glass. Then because the hostility of that act called for something, he said flatly: "I ain't using the stuff."

Dave Ball looked straight into the man's liquor-reddened eyes. "Reform's a wonderful thing," he said deliberately. "It's a wonderful thing, and it strikes in the damndest places. Well here's how!" He poured a drink and tossed it off.

The words whipped the blood up into Marquette's neck, but he didn't say anything. He just waited until Dave set his glass down before he took the bottle, shoved in its cork and set it with the rest along the rack.

Dave stood a moment while he dealt with his anger and then said drily, "Well, it looks as though the welcoming ceremony was over."

"Yes, it's over," Lew Marquette said and a little confidence built in his eyes. "You've had your drink, and it's on the house, and that will be all. I don't want you here."

"Now, *why*?" Dave said and his voice held a dangerous softness that wrenched the fresh confidence of Marquette's eyes again.

"Because I don't want no trouble, and you being here don't mean one damn thing

but trouble!" The big man licked his lips.

"What kind of trouble?" Ball's voice hadn't changed.

"You know what kind," Marquette said, and his eyes fell away from the search of Dave's. "You know what kind and I don't want no part of it. My God, what did you want to come back here for?"

Dave let the silence run on for a moment, then said, "My glass is empty, Lew."

Marquette couldn't meet his eyes so he set the bottle out again. His hand shook a little with fury at giving in, but his fear of a stronger man held him back.

"You were always a rabbit-gutted guy," Dave told him as he poured a drink. "I can't tell whether you're just drunk or know something I don't. But if it's the last, you'd lie anyway, so I won't bother to slap it out of you. There's one thing you might tell me, though. Have you seen a friend of mine in town today?"

"Listen," Marquette said desperately, "listen—you know you got no friends here. You know that!"

"I just figured he might have come into town to meet me," Dave said, giving no heed to the words. "Is he here?"

Marquette took in a long ragged breath. "Yes, he's here. Buck Fallon is here all right."

"Now that's better," Dave said gently. "That's just fine. Where do you reckon I'll find him? Have they got a new gin-mill in this town?"

THE man behind the bar mopped his brow with a bar rag and all the color was gone from his face.

"You go down the street until you pass a big, red barn," he said thinly. "You pass that last barn on the left and you'll find Buck Fallon there."

Dave Ball leaned a little toward him across the bar. His eyes were very hard. "Would you be trying to tell me that they've got Buck locked in jail?"

"No," Marquette said. "I ain't trying to tell you nothing!" He closed his white lips.

"All right," Dave told him. "But you'd better get rid of some of your exclusive ideas. Buck and I'll likely come back here to have us some celebrations." He put a dollar on the bar and went out.

In the street, the sun had gone down and

the fall's early evening chill was in the air.

Ball swung left. He moved swiftly, and after a little he passed the jail which had once been the last building out. But the town had grown since his memory and there were some new buildings beyond it now, the last one a big, red barn.

Eagerness quickened his stride as he went by the front of that barn. His mind was seeking some blunt phrase to hide his gladness.

"The ornery little runt," he said half aloud. "I'll—" Then he stopped, his breath held still in his lungs.

Beyond the red barn there was no cabin or any other building. There was just a rickety picket fence that stood between the street and a lonesome scattering of unkept graves. The nearest of these was the newest; dug and filled since the earth was summer dry. At its head was a board that said only:

BUCK FALLON
1869—1898

Dave Ball said, "Oh, my God!" in a shocked whisper. After that, he just stood for a long time looking over the fence.

At first, his mind refused to accept the deadening finality of the thing he had found. Seven good years of partnership built the habits of thinking deep in a man and the plans of a lifetime cannot be shaken away all at once.

Even when war had been declared with Spain and they had decided that their ranch would permit only one to go, separation had seemed only a temporary thing.

They had flipped a coin to decide it, and then after Dave Ball had won, they had ridden to town together for a farewell spree before he went to join Teddy's Rough Riders. Now, he had come home to this.

Dave pulled himself back to the moment at last. With his hat in his hand, he went through the fence and knelt down by the grave. "Buck," he said softly, "Buck Fallon. . . ."

AN HOUR had run by and full dark had settled under the rims when Dave started back toward the center of town. The spring that had been in his stride was gone, but he moved with a deliberate driving purpose and his thoughts were

grimly clear. He knew what he had to do.

As he came to the first building beyond the barn he heard a horse strike into a gallop somewhere up ahead, and a moment later he saw its dark shape against lighted windows.

It was coming toward him and coming fast, but he gave it no heed except to draw a little closer to the wall as he came to the next house.

The rider was close then, sweeping up and going by all in a rush. Ball could make out no details there but some vaguely-seen movement warned him, and he flung himself flat an instant before the orange lance of two shots flamed in the night.

He had his own gun out before he hit the dirt and he spun around on his knees, swinging it up. Darkness had already swallowed the other man, and Ball rested there a moment, listening to the hoofs running out toward the desert.

"Now what the hell was the good in that?" he grunted. "The man must have been a fool—or he was trying to make one of me."

The last idea raised some live possibilities, so he got up and went swiftly across the street. He circled to the back door of the livery stable.

The hostler was coming in from the front, and Dave said impatiently, "Where the hell were you?"

"I was looking for the shooting," the boy said. "But I guess it was just a drunk sounding off. Sorry if I kept you."

"It's no matter," Dave said. "You saddle up while I go across and have me a drink." He gave the hostler an extra half dollar and went over to the Owl Saloon.

Two men were watching him from the front of a lunchroom three doors away. He knew they were watching him, because they managed to be very busy twisting smokes and didn't lift their heads at all.

Dave Ball's lips tightened a little when he saw that the saloon was empty again. Marquette was gone and a thin bald man was behind the rail.

"Where's Lew?" Dave said.

The man shrugged. "He goes off duty at seven."

Dave Ball turned sidewise against the bar in time to watch the two men come through the lunchroom door. One of them bumped the other and said, "Excuse me,"

the way a stranger would do. They split and came up to the rail separately, one on each side of him.

"Whiskey," Dave said, and he turned around so he could watch both the men in the mirror. He was watching there when the door kicked open and a third man came in.

CHAPTER

On the Dodge

2

By the time the third man was half way across the room, Dave recognized him as Joe Powell, a deputy sheriff. From the quick look exchanged by the first pair, he knew that Powell's coming was no part of their plan to take him, and sensed that it would alter the run of events.

Acting on a swift decision, Dave Ball decided that he would have to ride his chances with the bartender. He swung all the way around to face the deputy and said, "Howdy, Joe?"

Powell's surprise at the move was plain in his face, but he didn't have the type of mind that could move swiftly, so he spoke the obvious words that were already formed in his mind.

"I want to see you, Ball."

Dave had never held any regard for Joe Powell, but he said civilly, "All right. Will you do it over a drink of whiskey?"

Powell came a step nearer, and his eyes showed Dave that he was nervous about something he had to do. He sucked in his breath and said bluntly: "No, I won't drink with you and I won't waste words, either. I came to tell you to get out of town and get out now!"

Dave just looked at him for a moment and then said, "You're wasting words, Joe. Neither you nor Sheriff Hyde is quite damn fool enough to think I can be run out of town until I'm ready to go."

"Never mind us being fools," Powell said, anger moving him now. "You be gone out of town by morning. You've had your look at Buck Fallon's grave and there's nothing for you here except the trouble he started!"

"We'll leave Buck out of this," Dave Ball said and his voice was cold. "And as for there being nothing here—since when did four thousand acres of good grazing land get knocked down into the nothing

class, along with wearing that tin star?"

For an instant Dave thought that Powell was going to turn and go, but the man down the bar to the right snickered just loud enough to be heard, and the deputy blew up.

"By God, I tell you it is nothing! You don't control an acre of ground in this state! Buck Fallon sold you out cold a month before he was killed, and now all the hell you can raise won't break the deal. And as for Fallon—"

"I thought I told you to leave Buck Fallon out of this," Ball said in thin fury. He moved forward and struck the deputy a vicious, open-handed blow across the mouth.

When the man went for his gun, Ball knocked it from his hand. After that, he caught him by the front of the coat and flung him around against the bar.

He held him there while he struck him again and again with a hard, flat hand. He slapped him until his head flopped helplessly and consciousness was nearly gone. Then he flung him down and turned harshly to him and the other three men in the room.

"All right. Get moving now and pass the word. Pass the word around that Dave Ball is back and that he aims to stay until he's hung the guts of this country up to dry!"

The short temper of the youngest man at the bar cracked under the strain. His teeth bared as his hand swept back over his hip, but Dave Ball had the first gun to be bared.

The man who had snickered cried, "No! No, Ed!" his voice a desperate urge.

A hard smile twisted Dave Ball's lips. "For gents that drink separate, you've got a nice use of first names," he said, and backed toward the door.

He saw something in the eyes of the older gunman that gave him a swift warning, but things were already too tight for delay, so he faded on to the door. When he felt it behind him, he paused a single second and then sprang out into the night.

His first backward leap carried him to the middle of the board walk. He landed half turned and running but he struck full against another body there and the impact wrecked his balance. He would have gone down then, but he got his left arm crooked around that other body and squared up as he lifted his gun to strike. But before he brought the weapon down, a muffled cry

broke from the face pressed against his shoulder. Dave Ball let go, his breath exploding in surprise.

The girl staggered an instant when he released her, but she didn't go down. The light that came over the saloon doors showed Dave the flashing fury of her eyes.

"Oh! You—"

But there was no time for apologies then. She stood directly before that entrance and Dave Ball's order drowned her out.

"Back! Get back!"

The girl's chin went a little higher but her words were killed by a crash of shots from inside the Owl.

DAVE BALL fired his own gun into the board walk as a warning, and went for the girl in a flying tackle. His shoulder caught her across the hips and his left arm locked her tight again as they went sprawling down away from the door. He heard the guns again inside, and somewhere down the street a man was yelling.

The girl was crying out desperately but he gave her no heed in the rush of things. Still on his knees he rolled her flat against the wall. He fired another shot into the walk to hold the men inside and after that there was an instant's stillness, except for the girl's shocked breathing.

"Listen," Ball said grimly. "This ain't personal—you just stay here flat and away from those doors until this thing is over!"

Down the street he heard shouting again and men's boots pounding as they ran. There was a little light there against the wall, and Dave saw that the girl had heard him.

"All right," she said. "But you'd better go."

Ball grinned at her swift comprehension. "Good girl," he said and left her.

He crossed the street in a dozen long bounds and went into the stable.

The hostler was nowhere to be seen, but the big horse was ready to go and Dave sprang into the saddle. He took the back door at a run and headed south toward the desert, the night air whipping his face.

After two fast miles, Dave Ball hauled up to listen, but there was no sound of pursuit behind him. When he went on, he took an easy, ground-eating trot, angling off to the west. He used the stars to guide him and an hour and a half later, the huge,

dark shape of the rimrock loomed ahead.

He rode along under its shelter for another hour before he found an opening draw that would take him out on top.

When he had climbed through that dark place and came at last onto the summit of the rim, he dismounted and sat for a long time listening and watching. The lights of Cattle Springs winked faintly off to the north but there was nothing moving down below. When he was satisfied that there was no danger, he mounted and rode on again.

After that, he traveled through broken lava country. His way twisted into a tangled maze of pots and canyons, but held steadily toward higher ground. The chill grew as the night wore on, and when he came into the country where the junipers grew, there was a spring where he unsaddled and lay down to sleep until day.

Cold awakened Dave Ball once, and he shifted his position on the hard earth, dozing off again. But the next time it was the warning of his nerves that drove sleep away. He came sharply up on his elbow to listen.

The thin moon was over into the west and the stars had already begun to pale. Dave caught no hint of the thing that had alarmed him, but he could see that his picketed horse was listening, too, with ears pointed down the gulch, so he wasted no further time. He threw his blanket back, took his Winchester and moved swiftly up into the junipers above the spring.

He crouched there a long time, the cold steel of the gun numbing his hands. Off in the brakes to the west, a coyote yammered at the coming light. Then at last, Dave Ball caught the sound that had broken his sleep. It was the punching of a horse's hoofs coming up toward the spring. The ring of a steel shoe told him that it was no wild mustang coming in to water.

Ball moved a little closer against the bole of a tree and thumbed the rifle's hammer back. It was still too dark for lining sights but he could see a rider's outline showing close on.

Then all the breath exploded from his lungs and he sprang to his feet as a dog bayed and a querulous voice said:

"Shut up, Regret, you old fool! Just because you've smelt him out don't mean that you've got to yell it all over the state!"

"Ord!" Dave cried and went out of the trees.

A big hound rushed up to greet him with whines of joy and the man on the horse said peevishly, "Well, who the hell did you think it would be?"

DAVE grinned as Old Man Ordway climbed stiffly down. He found comfort in the man's handshake and said honestly, "God, but I'm glad to see you. How are you, Ord?"

"How would I be, after riding all night through these damn canyons?" the old man grunted. "I'm half froze, that's how I am. Get a fire going and build some coffee. There's nobody behind me."

The daylight was strengthening fast. Dave got a fire started and set the coffee on.

"I didn't know you were in the country," he said when Ordway came back from unsaddling. "How'd you know where to find me?"

The old man hunkered down and spread his thin hands to warm before the flame. "I come down from Idaho about two weeks ago, but I didn't expect you for some days yet or I'd have been in Cattle Springs to meet you. When I got back to town tonight you had been gone about an hour. It warn't hard to figure where you'd head, because there was only one place you could go. With nobody to give you straight answers in town, I knew you'd be seeking out your Indian friends on Sunk Creek, so I just brought my dog down the rim until he picked up your trail."

Dave nodded. "That's right. Bill and Pete worked a long time for Buck and me, and I figured they'd give me the straight story of what's been going on in this damn country."

Ordway watched the fire a moment in silence before he said, "Well, I guess they would if you could find 'em, but they ain't over on Sunk Creek any more. That's one reason I figured I'd better find you tonight."

"All right," Dave said grimly. "I guess you know there's only one question I want answered right now. Who did it? Who killed Buck?"

The lines of the old man's face showed leop and weary in the thin light. "I've been asking that question for two weeks, son.

I've been asking it night and day, but about all I can tell you is what the sheriff claims. Hyde claims that your Modoc Indians done it. He's got a reward posted for Bill and Pete!"

Ball lifted to his feet and flung out both hands. "Oh, for God's sake! That man's crazy! You know he ain't got brains enough to beat sand in a prairie-dog hole!"

"I know he's dumb," Ordway agreed. "But in a way, his case looks pretty good and it saves his face. Look—Buck Fallon was killed about midnight on the tenth of August. He was shot down in the street at Cattle Springs. Those two Indians were the first to get to him and they took charge of things; buried him that same night. But when the sheriff got in from Bartlett the next day, they had pulled out. There hasn't been anybody sen hide or hair of 'em since—and folks claim that Buck Fallon was packing twenty thousand dollars in cash!"

"Twenty thousand!" Dave exploded. "Where the hell would Buck get it?"

"I was coming to that," Ordway said slowly. "It's the first question that came to my mind, and I went to see the county records. They show that Buck sold your partnership holdings just nine days before he was killed!"

"Don't try to tell me that Buck would do that while I was gone!" Dave Ball said. "I heard some of that in town!"

"I ain't telling you what I think," the old man said shortly. "I'm just telling you how things are stacked up to look on the books. You've got to know all this if we're going to get anywhere!"

"We'll get somewhere, all right," Dave said and his hand dropped unconsciously to the butt of his gun. "What is there to do except hunt up the coyote that claims title to our outfit?"

"Now you wait a minute," Old Man Ordway warned. "I've been on the ground a couple of weeks, and I've gathered up a few hunches that you haven't got. The man you mean is named Martin Worth—but there's better than even chance he ain't the gent we want."

BALL watched him for a moment before he said, "I don't see what you're getting at, but you were never one for loose talk, Ord. Go on."

"I mean just this, son. I happen to know

that Buck had been gone for about a month before he was killed. Suppose some smart gent knew that and ran a fake Fallon in on some strangers who wanted to buy. If they worked it, about all they had to do was make sure that Buck never got back home! They could kill him when he came through town, just make sure that the buyers never saw their faked man again."

"Good Lord!" Dave said softly. Then he shook his head protesting, "That's pretty wild, Ord."

"It sounds wild now," Ordway admitted. "But it won't sound so wild when I tell you the main reason for my riding out to find you tonight. Dave, the sheriff has posted a reward for you. You're charged with the murder of Joe Powell, the deputy sheriff. And you're also wanted on the charge of kidnaping the daughter of the man who bought your range—Martin Worth's girl!"

"Powell!" Dave grunted. "Listen, I slapped him a few times but—" his voice bit off and a furious gleam burned in his eye.

"Damn me!" he said. "Damn me for a slow-thinking fool. I knew there was something I missed when I went out of that saloon. That deputy's busting in made a perfect frame-up play for those two gunhawks!" Briefly he told Ordway of that affair.

"Well, that explains the kidnaping part," Ordway said grimly. "Even if you did knock the Worth girl down and use her sort of rough, she could still make a witness to the fact that there were no shots fired before you came out, and that you let yours go into the ground afterward. They must have snatched her out of there before your echoes were dead."

"It still seems pretty wild," Dave grunted. "But, by golly, it seems to fit together. When we find who hands out those gunslinger's pay we ought to have something!"

"That's just it," Ord told him. "We've got a damn slim chance of finding that out. There's been a lot of changes in this country since you left it, and all of 'em bad. Rustlers have bled it dry—there's been killings a-plenty, and a heap of ranchers have been wiped out. Nobody knows who works for who any more. Folks would be scared to whisper it if they did. And that worth-

less sheriff ain't got guts enough to clean it up."

The coffee came to a boil and Dave pulled it off. He sat considering a moment while it settled and then surprised Ordway by saying: "That girl took her mauling with her chin up—and I seem to have pitched her into a hell of a mess."

Ord gave him a quick appraising look, but he said nothing except, "We'd best make us some breakfast to go with that coffee, son."

BOTH men were silent with their own thoughts as they prepared and ate a quick meal. When they were through and the dog had been fed, Dave brought his horse in.

"Well, I see you've made up your mind to something," Ord said over the last of the duffle packing.

"The ranch," Ball said briefly. "If Worth is square, he needs us and we need him. If he ain't—I want to know it now. With the sheriff turning the whole country out to hunt me down, this ain't no time for frittering!"

Ordway ran a bony hand across the stubble of his jaw. "It ain't no time for frittering," he agreed. "But it ain't no time for overlooking angles, either."

"Such as—?"

"Such as them two Modocs, Bill and Pete," Ord said earnestly. "I still think those Indians will turn out to be about the biggest thing in this case."

The younger man shrugged. "Maybe so," he admitted. "But how can they figure in, when you can't find 'em?"

"You mean when I haven't found 'em yet," Old Man Ordway grunted. "Listen—I've spent eight days working the country for those two, and when Regret and I work it, it's been worked. The only place we ain't tried is Eagle Flat and we're going there now. I've got one each of their old boots to get the dog started and if either one of them lads has put a foot down across the Flats, we'll find him!"

"All right," Dave said and slung his saddle on. "You go have your look at Eagle Flats. When you're through there, come on down as far as One Gallon Spring. I'll calculate to meet you around dark and we can see what we've got by then."

"Well, you watch yourself," the old man

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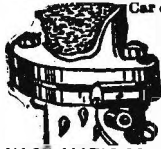


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warned. "Don't let your hair down for no strangers, and I'll meet you around dark."

"One Gallon Spring," Dave said swinging up. "And you keep your own hair up." He grinned at Ordway and rode out of the gulch.

CHAPTER "Who Killed Fallon?"

3

Dave Ball's destination lay fourteen miles east of Cattle Springs and beyond the high rim. The shortest way in was through town and across the open Sink, but that main trail was closed to him. He held to the rough country and away from the high ridges where he could be seen.

Ball didn't crowd his horse but he kept a steady pace, moving at a lope when the terrain permitted. After two hours, he crossed the trail that had brought him into Cattle Springs the night before and noted that his own tracks were the last ones in.

"No posess yet," he said aloud. "They're slow these days."

Beyond the Cattle Springs trail the going became steadily rougher and it was after mid-day when he came into the familiar country where his own cows had once run. There was good dry feed in those hills, but he saw no stock or sign of them. He was wondering a little at that when he came down into a steep-walled canyon and found a thing that at once set his nerves on edge.

Two shod horses had passed that way going up the gulch. They had been through sometime in the night, and something about those tracks set a vague unrest to stirring in Dave Ball.

He sat a moment considering. He knew that there was fall water around another bend of that canyon, for he and Buck Fallon had dug a cattle-drink once there in the old days.

"Now what the hell?" he said softly, then he jerked suddenly erect as he recognized the disturbing thing about those tracks. They were side by side even where the trail was narrow.

As clearly as if he had seen it, Dave Ball knew that one of those horses had been led by a rope that was too short to allow single file. And at the same instant that he understood that meaning, some small down-

NIGHT OF THE GUN-WOLVES

draught of wind brought him a faint whiff of woodsmoke.

There wasn't any doubt at all in Dave's mind as to what he had found. He shoved his own horse quickly on across the bottom and drew up in a juniper clump. Dismounting, he made the animal fast and drew his Winchester from its boot.

By the canyon's turn where the deep water seeped down, aspens filled the bottom, and Dave went into their thick shelter. The scent of smoke was stronger there.

After a hundred yards he was around the bend and lifted his head for a careful look.

There were two saddled horses tied to a tree where a side draw ran down into the main canyon. They were stamping restlessly at the pestering flies the way horses do when they have stood a long time.

Off to the left where the dug spring was, Dave could see a curl of blue smoke lifting up, but the trees hid the people there.

A tight little smile touched Dave's lips as he picked his way ahead. He kept low to the ground, dropping to his hands and knees for the final fifty feet. The leaves of the aspens were burned yellow with night frosts, but they still held to the limbs and gave him shelter to come close.

There was a man hunkered by the fire. He had his back to Dave but even so, Dave recognized him as the youngest gun-slinger from the saloon.

The Worth girl sat against a boulder beyond him, her wrists lashed roughly together with rope. She had her eyes closed in weariness and her face looked drawn.

DAVE BALL held the rifle's trigger down so there might be no warning click as he thumbed the hammer back and rose to his feet.

"If you move, you're done," he said.

The girl swung her head around with a gasp. The man let a frying pan slip from his fingers into the fire but he didn't move.

Dave went forward, moving warily on the balls of his feet. He held the cocked rifle in one hand while he pulled the heavy Colt from the man's hip and stepped back.

"You get out in the open and lie down with your face in the dirt. Don't make any mistakes, because I'd love killing you!"

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The man turned his head to give him one vicious, hate-filled look before he obeyed. He went across to the girl and his deep concern showed in the harshness of his voice.

"Did that skunk harm you in the night?"

She gave him a quick, bright smile. "No harm but a cursing."

As Dave took the cutting ropes away, he saw that even a night of sleepless terror hadn't taken the blue fire from her eyes.

"Cussing a tied-up lady is about his speed," Dave said in heavy contempt. "But I hope he has his tongue all limbered up, because I aim to work a few facts out of him before we leave this place."

"You can get some for me, too," the girl said rubbing the circulation back into her wrists. "Except that I got knocked down in the street, I don't know why they brought me here. I—"

Then she paused and recognition lighted her face. "Oh! You're the man that threw me down!"

"I am," Dave admitted. "I'd misjudged their play and figured they'd be gunning me through those doors instead of pouring their lead into a deputy sheriff."

"But I don't see—"

"They were framing me," Dave said grimly. "Folks don't want witnesses to shows like that." He hesitated a moment and then added, "My name is Dave Ball."

He was watching her eyes closely but there was no flicker to show that the name meant anything to her when she said simply: "I guess you know that I'm Anne Worth. Your coming makes us more than square for last night, and if I can help as a witness, I will. Even though you kept me bouncing around so fast I didn't see much."

"That'll come later," Dave Ball said. He handed her the captured man's gun. "For right now, I think I'll get started working my answers out of this jasper."

He leaned his Winchester against the rock where Anne Worth had been and went across to his captive. "Get up!" he said harshly.

THE man obeyed, his face pinched with the fury that was in him.

"As I call it to mind, your drygulching pal called you Ed," Dave told him. "If you

NIGHT OF THE GUN-WOLVES

want to keep on using that name you'll tell me a few things."

"You go to hell!" the man said hoarsely. "I'll tell you nothing!"

Dave's hand rested on the butt of his side-gun and his smile was so cold that it took all the color from Ed's face.

"You'll talk," he said. "You'll talk or I'll pistol-whip you to death right now! Who gave you your orders last night?"

The man licked his lips, the dust-dry rasp of Ball's voice leaving him no doubt of his end. "Good God, if you—"

Ball pulled him back to the question with a single word.

"Who?"

"The big boss gave the orders." He paused but when the deadly, questioning silence had run on a moment he added thinly, "Lew Marquette."

Dave Ball let no surprise show in his expression, but his next question was not a good thing to hear.

"Who killed Buck Fallon?"

Terror dilated the pupils of the man's eyes. He said, "Marquette."

Ball stood dead still for a moment after he had taken that word. His mind ran back, comprehending the thing that had puzzled him when he had first seen the saloon-man's eyes in the mirror. It was fear he had seen; fear and guilt, and he knew that this shivering hulk before him had given him the truth.

Dave shook himself back to the moment with an effort. "All right. We'll—"

But the girl's sharp cry broke him off.

"Look! Down the gulch!"

Spinning half around, he saw a man moving there in the aspens. At the same instant a shot crashed out from a ledge two hundred yards down the canyon wall, its bullet tearing wickedly through the ashes of the fire.

With Anne's first word, Ed sprang by Dave toward the rifles, but Ball cut him down with a lash of his pistol barrel. With the same movement, he threw two quick shots toward the man in the trees.

The rifle on the ledge crashed again and another joined in from across the canyon to the right, one bullet jerking at the fabric of his sleeve and the other squirting up dust from his feet.

"Behind the rocks! Take the rifle!"

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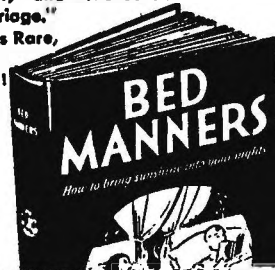
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CHAPTER

4

Gun Trails End

Dave's order snapped the girl into action and he fired again into the trees to hold back the gun that had started to thunder there. Bending down, he twisted his fingers in the collar of Ed's coat, took a half dozen running steps, and flung the flopping body after the girl into the shelter of the boulders.

The guns were going hard behind him and hot lead seared across his neck as he dived to cover. He landed on his shoulder, swearing bitterly.

"I've been a fool again! He was waiting for them, of course, and they'd spotted my horse!"

Grimly then, Dave Ball took stock.

His extra rifle shells were on his saddle and there were just four left in his gun. His pistol belt was full and so was Ed's, but short guns were no good against that fire from the bluffs and it was only a question of a few moments until the flank men of the attackers would reach the rim's top and work around behind his breastwork. The end would come quickly then.

Behind him, the man he had slugged groaned with returning consciousness and Ball knew then what he must do.

He spun swiftly around and yanked Ed up against the rocks. "Water! Quick!" he said to Anne.

She had it for him swiftly, bailing it up in the crown of her hat, and Dave knew a quick gratitude for her unquestioning action when time was so precious.

Propping his man up against a boulder, he dashed the water in his face, then held his head upright by the hair while he slapped him back to his senses.

When Ed's eyes came to a focus at last, he held him with a hard hand and said harshly: "Now listen, because you've got just one chance to live!"

Ed started to let his head sag but he brought it up again when Ball snarled: "If you pass out again I'll gut-shoot you!"

Down the gulch Lew Marquette was yelling orders to the men on the bluffs, and a steady hail of lead was raking the boulders.

"Now you get this straight, because I'm only going to tell you once," Dave Ball told Ed, and even a dazed man couldn't miss the

NIGHT OF THE GUN-WOLVES

threat of death. "You are going to stand up waving my empty rifle and yell out that the girl and I are surrendering! I'll be right under you with a sixgun in your back, so you better make it sound right! After that, the two of us will get up and you'll walk us across toward those horses. You are going to stay about ten feet behind us and I'm going to be watching you all the time from the tail of my eye. There'll be my Colt tucked into the belt of my pants to leave my holster empty, and if you give even one little sign, I'll drop you before I fire another shot!"

For a moment he thought the man was actually going to faint from sheer terror and he struck him a stinging blow.

With hands stiff with fright, Ed took the Winchester and turned over onto his knees. Dave Ball took the extra gun from Anne, shook the shells out, and thrust it into Ed's empty sheath.

The man with the rifle hesitated an instant while he gave one whimpering sob of fear, then he sprang to his feet waving the gun over his head and bellowing hoarsely: "Hold it! Hold your fire! I've got 'em! They give up!"

With his last words Dave got to his feet, hands in the air. The girl, Anne, was close beside him in the same position.

The thunder of shots broke off and Lew Marquette's voice came shrilling up the gulch. "Good going, Ed! Good going!"

Dave Ball saw half a dozen men appear along the walls and bottom of the gulch, and he said grimly to Ed: "All right, mister. You know your part!"

Ed swung around to face them, holding the gun in both hands, and with Anne beside him, Dave went swiftly out from behind the rocks.

When they were still thirty feet from their goal, Dave heard Marquette yell and he pushed Anne to a run.

Marquette bellowed, "Get him, Ed! Drop him!"

Dave swung around to put his body between Anne and the lower gulch. He whipped a knife from his pocket.

They had reached the horses and he was slashing at the ropes before the first shots crashed out from behind.

"Get going!" he barked to Anne, throwing the reins over her animal's rearing head.



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But she held in, shielding him with the horse's body while he got his own free and flung into the saddle. He swung around to get between her and the galloping posse, heading for the high rocks.

A bullet cut through the flesh over his ribs, but it was only a short run to a bend in the side canyon. For an instant, Dave thought they were going to make it. Then he saw the girl's horse go sprawling down and felt his own break its stride and shudder from the impact of a bullet.

He flung to the ground before his mount fell and pumped three fast shots back to force the men to cover. In the instant it gained them, he jerked the girl to his feet and made the shelter of the canyon's sheer wall.

He took time to thumb fresh shells into his gun then. It was only when he had finished that, that the full force of their desperation struck him. Since he had last traveled that canyon, a cloudburst had broken there to undermine the west wall and spill it down. It left the end blocked by a straight wall of lava that showed only one narrow way up.

He wheeled to face the girl and said harshly: "You get going! Work your way up that ledge while I hold 'em here."

He saw a refusal building in her eyes and grabbed her roughly by the shoulder. "Get going, I say! We've got time if you go now. I'll slam some slugs down this gulch and then pull back! They won't risk coming on if they think I'm still here, and we've got until they make the top to get out."

A little smile touched the girl's lips.

"If that bluff will work for one, it will work for two," she said evenly. "I'll take my chances with you, Dave."

"Listen," he said. "Listen—"

His words were bitten off by a sudden thunder of shots that filled the little canyon with screaming lead. Marquette's shrill voice rose, urging on the charge.

Dave Ball said gravely, "Here they come. It's too late for the cliff now, so you lie flat here while I shoot this thing out."

THERE were too many for any one man and that knowledge was plain in the girl's eyes, but there was no hesitation in her voice. "Even a thin chance is a good

NIGHT OF THE GUN-WOLVES

one with you," she said and smiled straight and fearlessly into his eyes.

"Thanks, Anne," Dave Ball said quietly, and stepped out to make his stand.

There were six men fanned out across the canyon and their guns made a steady belch of smoke.

"Here's for Buck," Dave Ball said between his teeth and brought his gun down on the rushing bulk of Lew Marquette. He waited a full second to be sure and then let the hammer go. He saw the big man spin around and fall.

At the same instant that Ball's gun jumped in his hand, there was a sudden bellowing crash that sounded like a single shot from above. Four of the charging men spilled down as though pulled by wires!

Before the last echo of guns had died away a wild exultant yell came floating down from the high rim. Old Man Ordway's figure appeared there.

"Come on up," he roared.

Fifteen minutes later they came up to Old Ord where he sat on a lava slab puffing at a smoke. "How many times have I told you to stay up high when you want to keep out of trouble?" he accused peevishly.

Dave Ball grinned at him. "Your ugly old mug looks good to me, Ord, but where's the rest of your army? You never did that much shooting alone."

Old Man Ordway dropped his cigarette and rubbed out its fire with the toe of his boot. "They're over here a piece," he said. "I suppose we may as well go along over and let you use your manners. You'll find he's a heller for that, Miss Worth."

The three of them went back a little from the rim and around a lava spill. Ordway was first, with the girl next and Dave coming at her heels. And when Dave Ball came around the lava and saw what was before him, he stopped dead in his tracks.

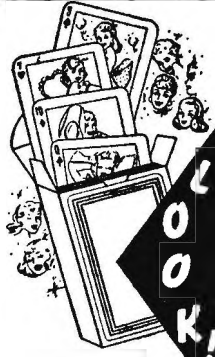
Standing guard over two bound prisoners stood a pair of lanky, leather-skinned Indians, their round faces wreathed in toothy smiles. And sitting nonchalantly on a rock, nursing the last inch of a brown-paper cigarette, was a bandy-legged little man.

"Buck!" Dave Ball said. "Fallon!"

"Oh, hello, Dave," the little man said. "How are you and how was the war?"

"It was a pretty good war," Ball said, getting the emotion out of his voice. "We

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had a nice time. What the hell happened to you? You're supposed to be dead."

Fallon grinned and snapped away the butt of his smoke.

"I would have been if it hadn't been for these no-good Modocs here. There was a little life left in me when they found me in Kettle Springs and they got the idea that I'd get a chance to live longer if nobody know I was trying. So they took me over onto Eagle Flats. I had a fine time until this old maverick, Ord, come over."

Ball turned a hard eye on old Ordway. "Listen," he said. "Listen, did you know—about him? That he wasn't in that grave?"

The old man shrugged. "Well, I didn't rightly know—just one of them hunches I was muttering about. The reason I spent so much time looking, was because my dog lay right down and went to sleep on that grave. He wouldn't have done that if it had been occupied. He has a careful nose, that dog."

"Here now," Buck Fallon told Ordway testily. "I don't aim to have you running down either me or my grave in front of Dave's lady!"

DEAD MEN ALWAYS LOOK UP!

(Continued from page 55)

then. He let out a wild scream and drove both hands at his guns. You couldn't watch the flash of those hands, but you could hear the echoing explosions right behind the blur of movement and hear the thud of bullets. But the slugs were just chipping ragged holes in the wall. Clint Cahill was lying on his side on the floor, his gun steadied calmly across his left wrist. His single shot roared close behind the others, and Tasker Modine tottered back dead.

Clint Cahill arose and dusted himself off. He walked over and looked down into Tasker Modine's dead, staring eyes and then up at the ceiling.

"I think he sees it now," he said.

A lot of questions I'd had in my mind about a gunman like Clint Cahill were answered that day in the First Stop Saloon. But a fellow from the east who came out to write a book about Sky High's new town marshal answered them a lot better. He said there were two artists born into the Cahill family, but they worked in different mediums.

THE GUN IN THE MIDDLE

(Continued from page 67)

and Carson felt a sharp sting as a bullet got him in the fleshy part of his leg.

Good I reloaded after gettin' Duke, he thought, rolling and twisting away from Spider's gun. *Now I still got three*. He threw one, heard a gasp from Spider, snapped a second shot at the sound of the gasp.

One more, Carson thought; he was getting weak, the room swayed. *One more, gotta be good . . .* Spider's gun winked at him, missing, and Carson shot at the wink. Spider groaned, crumpled in the darkness.

Staggering, Carson got to his feet, fumbling in his cartridge belt. He got as far as the door, leaned weakly against the jamb while he painfully punched shells into his empty guns. He was hurt, hurt bad.

Gotta get out of here, gotta tell Miller his seventy-five dollar boots and foxed gabardine pants are safe for a while . . .

He got out on the landing at the head of the stairs, gun still in his hand, and started down. His head swam, and the whole back of him was warm and sticky with his own blood. Halfway down he crumpled, fell, rolling down until he hit bottom. Men were gathered there, as he got slowly to his feet, swaying with pain and nausea. . . .


Gun still at the ready, he looked at the crowd through a red mist; then started toward his horse. No one moved to stop him; let a dead man go in peace, they felt.

He noted, irrelevantly, that the horse carrying Duke's body was gone. *See you in hell, Duke*. He found his own mount, holstered the gun, and for a moment leaned against the horse's flank, breathing hard. His knees started to buckle, but with a giant effort he straightened, and while pain played a screaming accompaniment, pulled himself into the saddle.

Bess won't like this, he thought, *no, she sure won't*. He raised his head, looked at the knot of men on the boardwalk. They swam in his vision, like figures in a dream, and he raised his arm to them slowly.

"So long, boys," his voice croaked ghost-like in his own ears. "Been a nice party . . . Gotta report in, now. . . ."

From somewhere there came a little reserve strength, and with it Carson pulled on the reins and headed his horse out of town, toward Dry Wells. . . .



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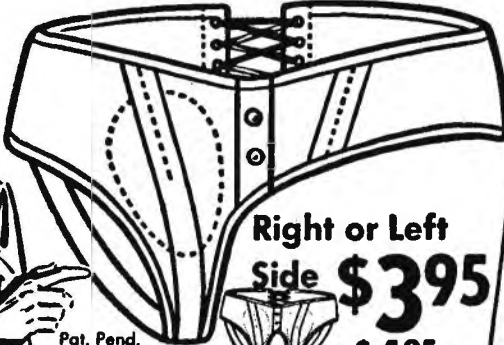
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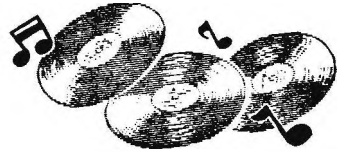
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Undecided
Cold, Cold Heart
Because Of You
It's No Sin
Down Yonder
I Get Ideas
Slow Poke
Cry
Just One More
Chance



Tell Me Why
Turn Back The
Hands Of Time
The Little White
Cloud That Cried
Charmaine
Anytime
Jealousy
Shrimp Boats
Be My Life's
Companion

18 HILL BILLY HITS

It Is No Secret
May The Good Lord
Bless and Keep
You
Mr. Moon
Give Me More,
More, More
Music Makin' Mama
From Memphis
Baby We're Really
In Love
I Wanna Play House
With You
Hey, Good Lookin'



Alabama Jubilee
Let's Live a Little
Always Late
Cryin' Heart Blues
Cold, Cold Heart
Somebody's Been
Beatin' My Time
Slow Poke
Let Old Mother Na-
ture Have Her
Way
Crazy Heart
Mom and Dad's
Waltz

18 MOST LOVED HYMNS

The Lord's Prayer
Onward, Christian
Soldiers
What a Friend We
Have In Jesus
Church In The
Wildwood
In The Garden
Faith Of Our
Fathers
There is Power In
The Blood
Leaning On The
Everlasting Arm
Since Jesus Came
Into My Heart



Trust On Me
Jesus Keep Me Near
The Cross
Softly And Tenderly
Dear Lord And Father
Of Mankind
A Mighty Fortress
Sun Of My Soul
Just A Closer Walk
With Thee
It Is No Secret
What God Can Do
May The Good Lord
Bless And Keep
You

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