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# STORIES

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An Action-Packed Novel  
of Wagon-Trains West  
*The Devil's  
Bull-Whackers*  
by William Heuman

*The One-And-Only Seniorita Scorpion  
in a Hell-For-Leather Novel  
Brand of the Gallows-Ghost*  
by LES SAVAGE JR.



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**Inside front cover**

**WINTER—1945**

**Nov.-Jan.**

20c per copy  
\$0.80 per year

**Vol. XVIII**  **52 No. 2**

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

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**THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE**



**ACTION STORIES:** Published quarterly by FICTION HOUSE, INC., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. Re-entered as second class matter January 26, 1937, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. This is a magazine of fiction. The characters named and incidents described do not refer to any actual person. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1945, by Fiction House, Inc. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. For advertising rates address THE NEWSSTAND FICTION UNIT, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City. Printed in U. S. A.

# The Devil's Bull-Whackers

*By William Heuman*

**Kern Rawton had accepted a challenge, and nothing could stop him now. "Drive 'em, bull-whackers!" He was fighting a man he hated. "We're riding the devil's own path to hell!" He was beating a trail, and topping a record . . . and breaking the girl he loved.**

**D**REW FREIGHTING covered six acres of land along the river's edge, with the office and the main warehouse fronting on Nebraska City's main street. In the vast courtyard sloping down toward the docks, Kern Rawton surveyed the dozens of big red-bottomed Murphy wagons, several rows of the latest Studebaker vehicles made in South Bend, Indiana, and another group of yellow-painted Espenshied models ranged in front of the stockyards.

"Kind o' new ain't it, Kern?" Tate Brady murmured.

Kern nodded. He stood in the entrance way, a big raw-boned man in black, claw-hammer coat and flat-crowned sombrero. He was clean-shaven, face lean, hawk-like, seeming very thin against the width of his shoulders. Cool blue eyes swept the big Drew Freighting yards, taking in the new warehouse, boards still unpainted; the new stockyards, and the unused freighting wagons.

"I reckon Drew Freighting is just startin' out in business," Brady said quietly. He was short, blocky, with a barrel-chest, rust-colored hair and hazel eyes. His hands protruding from the sleeves of the brown fustian coat were gnarled, powerful—the hands of a man accustomed to handling horses or oxen.

Kern Rawton stared at the new sign nailed against the wall of the warehouse. There was an arrow pointing to a door a short distance down the street. The door was labeled "Office."

In the center of the courtyard a slim, gray-haired man in blue flannel shirt worked with a pair of young Texas steers, dun-colored, trying to break them to the

yoke. The two animals were very powerful, and several times threatened to knock the veteran bull-whacker off his feet.

About to walk toward the office, Kern stopped and watched the proceedings curiously. He heard the old man yell shrilly, and then the two Texas steers bolted forward almost dragging the bull-whacker along the ground.

Tate Brady grinned. "That chap should know enough to work an experienced animal in with those two, Kern," he observed.

"I reckon they haven't got an experienced animal in the yards," Kern observed. He watched the old man regain his feet and start off again. The two steers were getting nasty now with the heavy wooden yoke across their shoulders. Several times one of them swung around and tried to get back at the slim old man with the whip.

"He's gonna get cut," Brady muttered. "Them steers move too fast for him, Kern."

Again, the old man was pulled to his knees as the duns jerked away suddenly. The long reins became entangled around his legs and he went down into the dirt.

Kern heard him yell as the steers cut across the courtyard, dragging him along the ground. Tate Brady was already running toward the scene, scooping up the whip which the old man had dropped.

The runaway steers swung to the right and then cut around in a circle. Brady tried to snatch at the trailing reins and missed. The old man's face was bleeding and he tried to yell as the steers plunged down toward the waiting Kern Rawton.

**K**ERN heard a door slam in the warehouse as he quietly slipped a .45 Colt from inside his coat, leveled it and squeezed





*Harran turned, threw his coat back to free his guns.*

the trigger. The left dun staggered as the slug tore through the white star on its chest. It plunged on for ten more yards, dropping within a half dozen yards of Kern's feet, dragging the second animal to the ground with it.

Tate Brady ran back to disentangle the old man just as a short, thick-set man with a black beard ran up, swearing loudly.

Kern waited for him, calmly ejecting the spent shell.

"What in hell's name!" the short man exploded. "Them duns cost near a thousand dollars!"

"Five hundred now," Kern murmured.

"You'll shell out," the short man growled, fists doubling. He was not as tall as Kern, but fully as heavy, with shoulders even wider than Tate Brady's. His eyes were slightly bloodshot, indicating that he'd been drinking heavily earlier in the day and was just getting over the jag.

Brady came up, leading the old man who was still weak and trembling.

"Better take care o' your man," Brady murmured. "He's kind o' done in, mister."

"Damn you, Baines," the bearded man roared. "You're fired."

"It wasn't his fault," Kern stated softly. "You should have given him an older animal yoked in with the duns."

"I asked him," Baines muttered. "He—"

**T**HE sentence was never finished. The black beard swung around, lashing out with a sledge-hammer fist, knocking the older man to the ground. He was stepping up to drive a boot into the ribs when Kern shoved him back.

Tate Brady's wide face cracked into a grin. He walked over to the fence, climbed up, and sat down.

The man with the black beard stared at the two, mouth open. Kern Rawton was slipping out of the claw-hammer coat. He wore a gray waistcoat beneath it with the forty-five in a holster under the left armpit. Slipping out of the holster, he handed it to Brady.

"Don't break your hands, Kern," the short man grinned.

Kern Rawton smiled.

Across the yard a man roared, "Fight!"

Kern turned around just as the black beard rushed him, trying to catch him offguard. Very easily, the taller man

eluded the rush, moving like a big panther, coming in from the other side and ramming home three punches before the black beard could get his hands up.

Quickly, a dozen men gathered around the two fighters as they circled each other.

"Get him, Durkin!" one of them howled. "Roll him on the ground."

Durkin lowered his head and charged, trying to ram Kern's stomach. Powerful ape-like arms sought Kern's waist. He wasn't there.

Leaping back, he made Durkin tumble forward off-balance. Then coming in swiftly he shot his left hand for the black beard's jaw, landing cleanly.

Durkin shook his head and then Kern stepped in fast, slashing twice to the face with left and right hands, both times cutting the flesh. As Durkin stumbled in again, blood streaming from his cut mouth, he shot a terrific blow to the black beard's stomach, doubling him up.

Durkin's head went down and Kern Rawton's right knee came up, catching the man on the bridge of the nose and breaking it cleanly. There was only one way to fight on the trail and Kern had discovered that years back.

Durkin screamed with anguish as the bone crackled. He raised both hands to his battered face, and then Kern plunged in for the finish. Head lowered, he shot home the punches into the black beard's stomach and face, driving him back to the fence where he sprawled, a battered, bleeding hulk.

The dozen bullwhackers and stablemen stared in silence as Kern retrieved his coat from Tate Brady.

"Durkin was beat!" one of them mumbled in awe.

Baines, the old drover, came up to where Kern and Brady were standing.

"Durkin ain't forgettin' this," the old man muttered. "Better be careful in this town, mister."

Kern nodded and smiled. "I'll know him the next time I see him," he said.

"By the patch on his nose," Brady chimed in.

Kern walked toward the street, stepping back as a carriage rattled past, splashing mud up on the walk. He looked up quickly. A woman was handling the reins. She was hatless, hair light-brown, reflecting the

afternoon sunshine. Even sitting down, Kern sensed the fact that she was very tall. He guessed her age at about twenty-three.

Her lips, well-curved, were clenched now, and her gray-blue eyes cold with hostility. Kern touched a finger to his hat. He still had it there as the girl cracked the whip to the back of the black mare up ahead. The carriage lurched forward.

Tate Brady laughed. "I reckon she don't like you, Kern," he murmured.

Kern smiled as he watched the carriage rattle down the street. "She makes mighty sudden decisions," he grinned. He'd never seen the girl in his life, and yet it was very evident she disliked him intensely!

The office of Drew Freighting was open and Kern walked in. A clerk at the desk came over and Kern handed him a letter.

"Mr. Drew in?" he asked.

The clerk, a tall, gangling man with spectacles, grinned. "Mr. Drew's busy," he simpered. "Come back tomorrow."

"I'm here today," Kern murmured. "Tell him."

The clerk was shaking his head when Kern grasped him by the shirt front and jerked him forward.

"Take the letter back," he grated.

The clerk gulped and then disappeared. He was back in a few minutes.

"Mr. Drew will see you," he scowled.

ALVIN DREW was a ponderous fat man with a florid complexion and very small green eyes. He had a bullet-shaped head with a fringe of brownish hair. Kern studied him leisurely. The first impression was of jovial good nature, which was immediately dispelled by his eyes, and the cut of his jaw. Alvin Drew was a strong man—a man accustomed to having his own will.

In contrast to his bulk, his voice was smooth, quiet, like the purr of a huge cat.

"You're a wagon master, Mr. Rawton?" he asked softly.

"You read the letter," Kern said. He nodded to Tate Brady. "The best teamster in the southwest."

Alvin Drew's pudgy fingers straightened out the letter. It was a recommendation from John Anderson of the Star Freighting Company, Denver.

"You worked for the Star eight years,"

Drew stated. "Anderson thinks well of you." He paused. "Why did you come north, Mr. Rawton?"

Kern shrugged. "I reckon I got kind of curious to see some more of the country," he reflected.

Drew smiled without mirth. "How do I know you won't get curious again?" he asked.

"You take that chance," Kern told him.

"When I'm running freight," Alvin Drew purred, "I run no risks. When I hire a wagon master I expect him to stay with me till I fire him."

Kern Rawton laughed aloud. "I reckon you're a new man in the freighting business, Drew," he grinned.

"I'm not new in other business," Alvin Drew observed.

The clerk came in and spoke softly to Drew while Kern strolled to the other side of the room and stared out the window. He saw the yellow-wheeled carriage hitched outside a store two blocks up the main street. Tate Brady sat in a chair in a corner of the room, obviously ill at ease.

When the clerk was gone, Drew spoke up, testily.

"You shot one of my high-grade steers," he stated. "They cost me five hundred apiece."

Kern Rawton came back from the window. "If I hadn't killed the steer," he murmured, "you'd have lost a drover."

"I can afford drovers," Alvin Drew said.

Kern reached over and picked up his letter. Folding it, he slid it back inside his coat pocket and walked toward the door without saying a word.

Drew leaned back in his chair, arms folded across his chest.

"You don't want the job?" he smiled coldly.

"The man I work for," Kern told him, "must have a heart. Yours must have gotten lost inside that fat belly."

Alvin Drew's face reddened slightly, and the green eyes narrowed.

"You know how to make enemies," Drew observed. "Stay around this town long enough and you'll be begging me for a drink." He snapped the next. "Now get out."

"I'll get out," Kern grinned, "because this is your property."

Tate Brady looked at him when they



had left the building and were out on the walk again.

"Now what?" the teamster muttered. "Anderson told us Drew Freighting was the biggest outfit in this town."

"We'll look around," Kern said easily. He noticed the carriage was gone and he wondered where her next stop had been.

Nebraska City was booming, with bull outfits leaving the yards every day bound for the western army posts, hauling thousands of tons of freight across the prairies and into the Black Hills.

A dozen big Murphy wagons rattled past them as they paused at the next intersection. There was a tie-up a little farther down where two outfits had tangled for the right of way. Kern Rawton listened to the swearing bull-whackers, striding up and down the line, blacksnake whips cracking.

"Denver and Little Falls ain't nuthin' to this," Tate Brady stated. "These fellers must be makin' the real money with the government contracts."

Kern nodded. Practically every freighting outfit in the west was dependent now upon government orders to haul freight to the army posts in the Indian territories. These posts were ranged all along the Bozeman Trail and into the Black Hills mining districts. Even farther south the freighting men had fought for those juicy United States Government contracts, and big outfits had stood or fallen depending upon the renewal or cancellation of these orders.

Once again Kern spotted the yellow-wheeled carriage trying to move in between the stalled outfits. A ponderous Murphy had lost a wheel and was sprawled halfway across the road.

The girl in the carriage was trying to get through the gap between the stalled wagon and the walk. Another bull outfit moving down the right side of the street, coming toward her, tried to push through first.

Kern saw the girl stand up in the carriage and flick the whip in the faces of the lead oxen. When they pulled up on the walk, she shot the black mare through the gap, with the drover of the first wagon running up, howling in anger.

Tate Brady was grinning. "She ain't takin' nuthin' from 'em," he chuckled in

delight. "I reckon I'm gonna like this town, Kern."

Kern Rawton watched the carriage disappear around a corner. He rubbed his lean jaw and then walked into the Red Lion Saloon, followed by Brady. The Red Lion was quite empty early in the afternoon. Kern's eyes moved over toward the roulette table and the monte lay-outs. He saw the pale-faced, neatly dressed gamblers lounging at the far end of the bar, waiting for the evening crowd to drift in.

Kern paused at the bar and ordered a drink. In every town, the bartender was the dispenser of information.

"Any outfits here need a wagon-master?" Kern asked easily.

The bartender, a fat, bald-headed man with blue eyes, looked at the ceiling and then down at the bar.

"Maybe Star Overland," he stated. "I ain't sure."

"Who runs the Star?" Kern wanted to know.

"Townsend," the bartender told him.

"Any other companies?" Kern went on, "or are they all filled up?"

The bartender wiped the counter with a rag. He grinned. "Pretty soon there won't be any other outfits in this town," he stated, "exceptin' Drew Freighting. When Alvin Drew starts rollin' his wagons the other boys are movin' to places where the competition won't be so stiff."

**K**ERN pushed the bottle toward Tate Brady. "We'll look up Star Overland," he murmured.

"This Drew's a pretty big man in Nebraska City," Tate muttered out on the street again.

"A man's as big as the people let him be," Kern Rawton stated. "Drew must have come in here with plenty of money and he has the other outfits crawling. They're afraid of him even before he begins to haul freight."

"Looks like this Townsend of Star Overland is the only company still in business," Tate murmured.

Kern saw a string of wagons coming down the street; they were riding high instead of settling in the dust, indicating that the load was not very heavy. On the hip of each animal was the letter "T"—probably for Townsend. The oxen were

scrawny, not to be compared with the sleek creatures in Alvin Drew's stockyards.

"It could be," Brady chuckled, "that Star Overland is on the rocks, too, Kern."

"We'll get there," Kern smiled, "before she goes under."

They found Star Overland at the eastern end of the town. The buildings were very old, unpainted. The wagons standing in the big yard were badly in need of paint and repairs.

"It don't look good," Brady said.

Kern went up the steps to the office and pushed in the door. The little room seemed to be deserted. Then he heard a woman humming in an anteroom to the left. Brady took off his hat and sat down. Kern Rawton kicked a chair to let the singer know they were in.

She came out a moment later. There had been a smile on her face, but it disappeared when she looked at Kern. It was the girl in the carriage.

"I reckon we're not welcome, ma'am," Kern grinned.

"You can state your business," she said grimly.

"We'll state it to Townsend," Kern told her. "Not his secretary." He saw the gray-blue eyes flash for a moment. Then she turned her back on them.

"Come in, gentlemen," she murmured, leading the way into the inner office.

There was a big rolled-top desk and a few chairs. Walking behind the desk, the girl sat down.

Kern grinned again. "I said I'm waiting," he stated quietly, "till Townsend comes in."

"I'm Townsend," the girl grated. "Now state your business and get out."

Kern Rawton blinked. He stared at Brady. The teamster was leaning forward in his chair, mouth open.

"I'm head of the Star Overland," the girl went on coldly, "founded by my father who died two years ago."

Dumbly, Kern handed her his letter of recommendation from John Anderson. She read it and tossed it back to him.

"We need a wagon master," she stated quietly, "but we don't want one of Alvin Drew's spies in here."

"Drew just turned us down for a job," Kern told her.

Miss Townsend laughed chilly. "That's

what the last one said," she snapped. "The next night we caught him trying to burn down one of our wagon sheds." She went over to the door and held it open for them. "Tell your boss," she said bitterly, "that I intend to haul freight until my oxen drop in the streets and my wagons fall apart, and I intend to hold that government contract if I have to carry the stuff on my back."

Kern Rawton grinned. "I reckon you got the wrong man, ma'am," he murmured. "I said I didn't work for Drew—"

"Get out," Miss Townsend grated.

Kern shrugged and walked through the door. Out on the street Brady said, "Regular spitfire."

"I don't like Drew's game," Kern murmured. "He plays his cards too close to the chest and he has them marked."

"This girl's buckin' him," Brady nodded admiringly, "an' I reckon she's the only one has the guts to do it."

THEY met Baines, the Drew teamster, outside the Red Lion Saloon on the way back. The slender old man was still a little shaky from his experience with the dun steers. His face was scratched from contact with the ground and he had a bandage around his left arm which had been scraped raw.

"Durkin fired me," he muttered.

Kern paused on the walk. "What's this fight between Drew and the Star Overland?" he asked.

Baines shook his head. "I'm afraid Miss Townsend has reached the end of her rope," he explained. "Drew is taking over all the contracts around here. When he gets the Fort Lane order, Star Overland is finished."

"How does Drew get the contracts?" Kern wanted to know.

Baines laughed bitterly. "He makes a trial run with his crack outfit handled by Durkin, an' he's supposed to be the best wagon master in Nebraska City. They got fifty head o' the best Texas steers in this part o' the country, an' they beat anybody's time on the run."

"The Fort Lane run?" Kern put in.

"It's twenty-three days to Fort Lane," Baines explained. "Durkin boasts he can make it in eighteen with the Drew wagons." The old man paused. "Drew Freighting

cut the time from Nebraska City to Langford by four days; they cut five days off the run from here to Red Creek in the Black Hills."

"If Drew Freighting can beat Star Overland's time to Fort Lane," Kern said slowly, "does that mean Drew gets the government contract to furnish fort supplies?"

Baines shrugged. "Old Jack Townsend, Julia's father, held that contract since the fort was built in '53. Colonel Dow at the Fort will give her a chance to hold it, but she'll have to put a fast outfit on the road."

"Can she beat Durkin?" Tate Brady wanted to know.

**B**AINES laughed. "She'll try, but she hasn't the wagons, the stock or the men to do it. Drew has a lot of pull in politics and he's been pushing Dow to make a test." The drover nodded toward a poster on the wall a few yards away. "That's it."

Kern went over to read. It was an announcement by Colonel Dow of Fort Lane, inviting any freighting outfit in town to participate in the trail run from Nebraska City to the Fort. The competitors would be allowed ten wagons to haul fifty ton of army freight. They could choose any route they wished; the freight would be inspected before leaving the town, and again when arriving in Fort Lane.

"Winning team to be awarded Fort Lane contract," Tate Brady read aloud. "I reckon that's what Durkin was breakin' in those new Texas steers for."

"Everybody's invited," Baines murmured, "but only Star Overland and Drew Freighting have signed up. The other chaps know they're out of it before they start." He paused. "Most of 'em realize when they sell out, Drew is the only man who'll buy them. If they run against him now, he'll turn 'em down later."

"Drew holds all the ace cards," Kern Rawton smiled. "He's in the seat and he's cracking the whip."

"Julia Townsend is the only one ain't jumpin'," Baines said. "She's goin' down with the ship, like her dad would want her."

"But she's goin' down," Tate Brady murmured, "from what I kin see."

Kern Rawton walked down the street quietly. Outside the Red Lion he paused

a moment and then went inside. Baines and Durkin stayed with him.

"Anybody here," Kern spoke to Baines, "who is selling out?"

Tate Brady blinked. "You ain't buyin' a freight outfit?" he gasped.

Baines stared around the room. It was still quite empty. "I reckon you better come back tonight, mister," he murmured. "You'll find Jeff Ambers here. He's itchin' to go back east only he won't take Drew's price."

"We'll come back tonight," Kern murmured. He grinned at Tate Brady. "How much money do you have, Tate?"

The teamster smiled wryly. "Five hundred, an' you got maybe eight."

"Thirteen hundred altogether," Kern said. "What does Ambers want for his outfit?"

"Five thousand," Baines told him.

"So we buck the gamblers," Tate Brady groaned, "an' go back to Denver on foot!"

"We haven't lost anything," Kern stated, "and we'll be playing for big stakes." He glanced back toward the office of Star Overland.

At ten o'clock that night the Red Lion was filled to capacity. Kern stood in the entrance way, peering through the clouds of heavy tobacco smoke. Every poker table was filled; there was a ring of men around the roulette wheel. From the room to the right of the bar he could hear the keno man calling his numbers in a tired voice.

"What'll it be?" Brady asked softly.

Kern extended his hand. "I'll take your money, Tate," he said.

It was nearly an hour later before he found a place at one of the poker tables. Baines, the teamster, had pointed out the table at which Jeff Ambers was playing. A man got up at Ambers' right. There were three other players in the game.

"You gentlemen mind?" Kern asked, sliding into the vacant chair.

Ambers, a small, light-haired man with a pinched face, shook his head. Tate Brady moved away to the bar.

"Any limit?" Kern asked pleasantly.

Ambers again shook his head. The other three men, a drummer in a checkered suit, and two Nebraska City men who appeared to be merchants, looked at Kern with little interest.

The stakes were comparatively low.



Kern dropped out of two pots and then picked up three hundred dollars with three queens.

"The ladies are on my side," he smiled.

At twelve o'clock he was in eight hundred dollars. Ambers ordered another bottle from a waiter. He'd been drinking fairly steadily since the start of the game, and had been losing.

The drummer dropped out, cashing his chips at the bar. Tate Brady leaned over Kern's shoulder.

"He's in," he said softly.

"Who?" Kern asked curiously.

"Drew," Brady murmured. "Durkin's with him."

Kern glanced toward the door. The bulky Alvin Drew waddled through the room, huge diamond stickpin glittering in his cravat; another one flashing from a finger on his right hand.

Durkin walked behind the big freighting man, a white plaster bandage across his broken nose, yellowish eyes gleaming. Durkin spotted their table first and Kern saw him whisper something to Alvin Drew.

A moment later Drew was standing in front of them, nodding toward the chair recently vacated by the drummer.

"Sit down," Ambers said flatly.

The two merchants looked at each other and got up.

"This game's too big for me," one of them grinned. Alvin Drew looked at Kern questioningly. There was a small, sneering smile around the corners of the big man's mouth.

"You cashing your chips, Rawton?" he asked.

"I reckon I'll stay in this," Kern smiled.

"I'd like to get that five hundred back for the steer you killed on me," Drew said.

"Why don't you have the law on me?" Kern asked easily.

Drew laughed. He stuck a long black cigar in his mouth. "I've never needed the law before," he smiled thinly. "I'm not asking for help at this stage."

**K**ERN passed up the first pot which Drew took when Ambers dropped out.

Tate Brady was breathing heavily over Kern's shoulder. Kern watched Ambers shuffling the cards. It was evident why Drew wanted to get in this game; the big

freight man was a plunger and he hoped to break Ambers, force him to put his equipment on the table.

Ambers had been holding himself about even most of the night. With Drew in the game he lost steadily. Drew stayed in every pot, backing up his hands whether they were good or bad.

Kern took in three thousand dollars once when Drew bluffed with an empty hand and Kern stayed in till the finish. On another occasion he dropped eight hundred when Drew forced him out. It took a tremendous amount of cash to stay in with the big man when he started to push up the bids.

Kern watched Ambers' pile of chips dwindle. He saw the fear come into the man's pale blue eyes. Drew smoked his cigar down to the end and then lit another one.

At two o'clock in the morning Ambers was broke. Kern had boosted his original thirteen hundred dollars to six thousand. Jeff Ambers placed both hands flat on the table.

"I have a freight company, gentleman," he said stiffly. "How much am I offered for it?"

Drew laughed. "You know my bid, Ambers," he said softly. "It still goes."

"How much you asking?" Kern murmured without looking up.

"Five thousand," Ambers spoke eagerly. "It's worth ten."

Casually, Kern pushed five thousand dollars worth of chips across the table.

"Give me a receipt," he stated. He heard Alvin Drew draw in his breath sharply.

"You figure on going into the freight business, Rawton?" the big man grated.

"It's a free country," Kern told him. "Deal the cards."

In another hour Ambers was cleaned of the five thousand with Drew the big winner. The fat man bid up every hand, and when Ambers thought he was bluffing, came up with a flush against Ambers' two pair.

Kern played cautiously after buying the freight company. He was still in fifteen hundred when Ambers stood up, shaking his head.

"I'm cleaned, gentlemen," he muttered. They watched him plodding toward the bar.

Kern began to pile his chips. Durkin

was standing behind Drew. Both men watched him grimly.

"I reckon I'm through, too," Kern smiled pleasantly. "Good evening."

"Wait," Drew snapped, "I'd like to buy that receipt."

Kern shook his head.

"Five thousand," Drew growled. "You can't run freight in this town."

"I can try," Kern told him.

"I'll make it six," Drew said coldly.

"It's not for sale," Kern Rawton murmured. "Good night, gentlemen."

"Let him go," Durkin said. "He can't handle a bull outfit by himself."

Kern stood up and leaned across the table. "I regret," he smiled coolly, "that you only have one nose to break."

Durkin drew back hastily. "There's not a teamster in Nebraska City will work for you if Drew tells him not to."

"I'll take my chances," Kern nodded. He picked up Brady at the door and they went out into the night with Drew and Durkin still standing by the table.

"So we got it," Brady grinned. "We're in business fer ourselves."

"Round up a crew in the morning," Kern ordered. "I'll go over Ambers' wagons and stock."

He found the Ambers yard at the other end of town. Jeff Ambers hadn't hauled any freight in months. His wagons were peeling paint; several of them, cumbersome Murphy vehicles, would require new wheels and axles. A stock tender showed him the small herd of aged steers.

"Sell them," Kern said. "We're picking up younger animals."

Later in the morning he found a Texan in town with a thousand young beef steers. He purchased sixty of them, making a small down payment, and giving a note for the rest.

Jeff Ambers had maintained a half dozen men in his yards, and Kern set them to work repairing ten of the wagons. At noon he went down to the U. S. Army office and registered for the trial run to Fort Lane.

Julia Townsend met him as he was coming out. He saw her mouth closed tightly.

"I hear you purchased the American Freighting," she said coldly.

"Still think I'm working for Drew?" Kern smiled.

"I don't know," the girl snapped.

"We can be friendly rivals," Kern told her, "inasmuch as neither of us have any use for Drew Freighting."

"I've never asked for aid in my life," Miss Townsend murmured. "All we ask from you is that you stay out of our way on the trail."

**K**ERN shrugged. He found Tate Brady at the wagon yard, staring at the young steers in the pen.

"Start breaking them," Kern ordered. "We have two weeks."

The teamster nodded. "Where in hell did you get the money?" he asked softly. "We'll be payin' fer these animals the rest of our lives."

"We'll pay off when we land that Fort Lane contract," Kern said grimly.

Tate nodded. "I figured that's what Miss Townsend is doin', too," he grinned. "She just bought ten new Studebaker wagons—special fer this trip."

Kern looked at him a moment before speaking. "Hire the teamsters?" he asked.

The short man's eyes were worried. "Durkin must o' got to 'em," he growled. "Everybody's steerin' clear o' me."

"None at all?" Kern asked.

"Baines will work fer us," Brady muttered. "But we'll need about eight more bull-whackers, along with a cook an' night herders."

"There must be plenty of men in this town looking for work," Kern stated flatly. "A half dozen companies went out of business when Drew came in."

"There's men," Brady said, "but they ain't signin' with American Freighting." He paused. "There's a chap named Harran's been followin' me around in all the saloons. He's supposed to be Drew's gun hand, an' he has all the bull-whackers scared stiff."

"Harran," Kern murmured. "Jay Harran?"

"You know him?" Brady asked curiously.

"I heard tell of him," Kern said. "He's from Texas—hired gun hand."

"Between Durkin and Harran," Brady explained, "these bull-whackers are afraid to make a move."

"We'll try it again tonight," Kern said. "Start working with these steers. I'm selling all the wagons except ten, and we're

putting them in order for the run to Fort Lane."

Tate Brady watched the big man quizzically. "If we lose out on this run," he said softly, "we'll be havin' on our hands a dead freight company an' a lot o' debts."

"We're not figuring on losing," Kern told him. During the afternoon he had the men take off every wheel on the ten wagons he'd selected. Axles were repaired or new ones fit in; tire irons were tightened; axles greased, and the wagons given a coat of new paint.

In the hot sun Tate Brady worked with the young steers, yoking them up with a veteran animal, driving them around the enclosure. Baines came in and helped with another set.

"They're good," Brady gasped once as he came past Kern, face covered with dust.

"They'll have to be good," Kern grinned. "We're facing the best bull outfit in the west." He added as an afterthought, "and we don't know how good Star Overland will be. Maybe Miss Townsend will spring a surprise on us."

"Funny thing," Brady said, "you buckin' up against a woman, Kern."

"I'm fighting Drew," Kern Rawton said quietly. "Drew Freighting."

"If you win this run," the teamster muttered, "you put her out of business also. She's gone over her head to prepare for this."

"Who's her wagon-master?" Kern asked suddenly.

"Chap named Burlman," Tate said. "Supposed to be near as good as Durkin himself."

A small pinch-faced man came down the street and stood in the entrance way. He nodded as Kern came over to him. It was Jeff Ambers, former owner of American Freighting.

"I hear you entered that government trial run," Ambers said quietly.

Kern nodded. "We're sprucing up," he stated. "We expect to make Durkin move."

"I'm leaving tonight," Ambers murmured. "Heading back east. Hope you beat Drew." He paused. "I'd advise you to watch for tricks."

"What do you mean?" Kern asked.

"Drew has to get this contract," Ambers told him. "I know. If he doesn't get it,

Drew Freighting will be washed up."

Kern stared. "I thought Drew had plenty," he breathed.

"Most of it's bluff," Ambers laughed coldly. "That's his way. He's sunk everything he has into his company, and he's borrowed heavily from banks back east, promising them that he was sure to land these big government orders. If he doesn't get this Fort Lane contract, they're going to crack down on him, and he knows it."

Kern Rawton shook his head. "So Drew's bluffed all the other freighting companies into folding up, and all the time he's had nothing behind it!"

"I tried to tell the others that," Ambers growled, "but they wouldn't believe me. Most of the wagons and the stock in the Drew yards aren't paid for, and Drew won't be able to pay for them unless he takes the government hauling contract."

Kern stared at Tate Brady running behind a pair of wildly pulling steers. The thing he had done on a small scale, Alvin Drew had risked in large proportions, and he was winning!

"He's buying up the other companies," Ambers scowled, "with notes. He has very little ready cash and that was one of the reasons he couldn't buy from me. I wanted cash on the line."

"So he has to win this trial run," Kern said softly.

"He'll go the limit to do it," Ambers advised. "He's had Durkin build up the fastest rolling bull outfit on the trail; they've made all kinds of records to scare other outfits out of the contest."

"We'll be ready for them," Kern Rawton said briefly. He watched Ambers move down the street toward the stage coach office.

AT nine o'clock that night he walked into the Red Lion with Tate Brady. The bar was filled already, with the usual crowds around the roulette wheel and gaming tables.

Brady nudged Kern, and then nodded to one of the poker tables across the room. Durkin sat with his broad back toward them. A slim, red-haired man with a peculiar wolfish face, low sloping forehead, and beady blue eyes, faced them.

"Harran," Brady said softly. "The red-head."



Jay Harran looked up as the two men strolled toward the bar. He was dressed in black with a black, flat-crowned sombrero and polka-dot shirt. He had the thin lips and small; ruthless mouth of a killer.

Kern picked up an empty bottle and hammered with it on the bar for attention. He stood with his back to the bar, thumbs in the pockets of his waistcoat.

"American Freighting needs eight teamsters," he said in a loud voice. "A cook and five night herders to make the run to Fort Lane."

Durkin didn't turn around but Kern saw him looking straight at Jay Harran. The gunman was pushing back his chair. His coat was open and the handle of a six-shooter swung clear.

"If American Freighting pays you a dollar a day," Durkin called, "Drew will make it a dollar and a half."

"American Freighting," Kern smiled, "will pay every man a special two-dollar a day price in cash for the run to Fort Lane." He looked around the room. "Sign up now."

Jay Harran walked past Durkin and came up to the bar. He was a frail man with thin shoulders, but his hands were long-fingered, the wrists wiry. He stood a few yards away from Kern, his back to the crowd, watching through the mirror.

A blue-shirted bull-whacker made a move to come forward, and then Harran threw back his coat and turned around. The bull-whacker, a bearded man with kinky black hair, grinned sheepishly, hesitated, and then walked back.

"That's damn good pay," a man called.

"It ain't worth a slug in the middle," the bearded bull-whacker retorted.

"Eight teamsters," Kern said again, his eyes roving over the crowd. "One cook, four night herders."

Durkin swung around his chair, crossed his legs, and grinned at Jay Harran.

"I reckon they ain't nobody comin', mister," Harran drawled softly.

Kern didn't look at him. He edged up closer along the bar, standing on the tops of his boots to see over the heads of the crowd close at hand.

"Anybody?" Kern shouted.

It happened very suddenly, and even Tate Brady was surprised. Kern swung his right fist without looking, but it con-

nected with Jay Harran's jaw, lifting him up off his feet. Iron fingers grasped his shirtfront and jerked him to the top of the bar. His body knocked over a row of glasses and bottles, crashing them to the floor.

As he wriggled to get loose, Kern yanked the six-shooter from the holster and tossed it to Tate Brady. Then, pinning Harran down with one hand, he scooped up another half-filled bottle of liquor and poured it over his face.

Jay Harran yelled as the burning liquid went into his eyes. Kern tightened his grip on the man and then with a heave slid him down along the top of the bar, knocking over more bottles and glasses.

Face livid with rage, the Texan scrambled to the floor and wiped the liquor from his face and clothes.

"I'm signing up eight bull-whackers," Kern smiled. "One cook and four night herders. Come fast, boys."

**T**HE bearded man, who had hesitated before, came up, spitting on his hands. Two others followed in short order.

"American Freighting guarantees the safety of all its employees," Kern Rawton smiled coldly. "Step fast, gentlemen."

Jay Harran picked up his hat, dusted himself, and went out without a word. Durkin followed him.

Tate Brady signed up his men in a few minutes.

"You'll have to watch that Harran," the teamster murmured when they were leaving the saloon. "I reckon he ain't likin' you from now on, Kern."

"It's not worrying me," Kern grinned, "either way."

Back at the wagon yard Baines was waiting for them.

"Burlman, Star Overland wagon-master, was here," the old man said. "He wants to know what trail we're takin' to Fort Lane."

"You know the roads," Kern said. "How many are there?"

Baines shrugged. "You can go up by way of Calve Creek; you can take the desert road across the White Flats, or you can follow the Little Bow all the way."

"Why does Burlman want to know?" Kern asked curiously.

"He says we probably won't all take

the same road," Baines explained, "and they got to know how many water barrels to take. The outfit that strikes over White Flats will need twice as many barrels as the other two."

Kern nodded. "Tell Burlman he can pick his own route," he said quietly.

"There's not much difference between 'em," Baines admitted. "Maybe White Flats will be ten miles shorter, but you might git stuck in the sand, and the goin' will be slower all the way." He grinned. "The chap who takes the Calve Creek route might hit high water at the fordin' place near Indian Rock."

"How about the Little Bow route?" Tate Brady wanted to know.

"It's the easiest," Baines acknowledged, "and the safest, but the longest. You don't usually strike any trouble, but you go maybe thirty miles more than the other chaps, followin' the stream."

**K**ERN went back to the hotel with Tate Brady at twelve o'clock that night. Two hours later Baines pounded up the rickety wood stairs and hammered on the door.

"Wagon shed's on fire!" the old man cried. "She's burnin' like tinder!"

Kern rolled out of bed and into his trousers. He remembered to pick up his gun and stick it in his belt before he raced down the stairs, Brady after him.

"Reckon this is some o' Drew's work," the teamster panted. "Damn him!"

Kern saw the glow and the flames down the street. Other people were running toward the fire, yelling for water buckets.

Dashing through the entrance way, they saw that Baines had already organized a brigade to haul the wagons out of the shed. Five of the ten had been inside the shed for repairs; the others having been lined up near the stock pens.

Baines came out with four men, dragging one of the wagons with him. The canvas had already started to burn.

"Here!" Kern yelled at two befuddled teamsters who had run out of a nearby saloon. They raced inside the burning building and managed to get another wagon rolling.

Blinded with the smoke, and with the tears streaming down their cheeks, they watched the shed crash in a few minutes

later. Three of the ten wagons were going up in flames.

"You got any more credit in this town?" Tate Brady growled. "I reckon you'll have to buy three more wagons, Kern."

Inside the stock pens, the young Texas steers were racing around wildly, frightened by the flames and the noise. Again and again, they crashed against the log walls, making them tremble.

"Here's Drew," Brady mumbled. "Comin' up to look at his handiwork."

Kern saw the fat man strolling through the entrance way. Durkin was with him, but not Harran. Alvin Drew puffed on a cigar as he watched the flames. He spoke once to Durkin and the wagon-master nodded.

Half the town had come out to watch the flames eat up the dry shed. Brigades were formed to wet down the nearest buildings so the flying sparks wouldn't catch and continue down the street.

A slim, thin-shouldered man came up and spoke to Alvin Drew. Kern Rawton watched him as he worked in one of the bucket lines. In the flickering light he thought he recognized Jay Harran, but wasn't sure.

The man with Drew drifted away into the shadows, and then Kern stepped out of the line.

"Close up, Tate," he said to the teamster.

"What—?" Brady began, but Kern was already gone, running toward the stock pens. He caught a glimpse of a man slinking along the wall of the pen, coming around the other side.

The big steers inside were bellowing in fear and milling around the corral as Kern trotted around the pen toward the gate. He stopped in the shadows and crouched down as a man came around the other way, and started to climb up the gate.

It was obvious that he intended to slip out the cross-bars and release the maddened animals. The wharf was only about fifteen yards distant from the corral, and if they were once out many of them would probably plunge off into the deep water.

Kern stood up, sliding the six-shooter from his belt. He could see the prowler's face now as he worked with the top bar. It was thin, wolfish, reddened by the glow from the burning building.

"Harran," Kern called sharply.

The gunman jerked his head around, dropping the bar back into position. He squirmed around on the top of the corral, right hand darting for his gun, face twisted with hatred.

Several of the powerful animals inside suddenly hit the wall of the corral, shaking it, causing Jay Harran to lose his grip with his legs. Kern saw his gun flame as the Texan fell backward. The slug went up into the air. Then Harran dropped inside the corral, screaming horribly.

Kern leaped up on the gate, firing his gun to frighten away the steers. It was too late. The herd swept around the walls and there was only a mess of blood rags on the ground. They went around again, with Kern Rawton emptying his gun to frighten them back. He felt sick as he climbed down a few moments later.

They got Harran's body out of the corral a half hour later when the steers were more quiet and the fire was out.

"I reckon there ain't no way to prove he was workin' for Drew," Brady growled, "but he's paid the hard way."

Kern stared into the glowing embers. The crowd had dispersed and they were alone. The seven remaining wagons were lined up at the east end of the yard, two of them scorched with the flames.

"We'll need three more wagons," he said quietly, "and I'm broke."

Tate Brady blinked. "We can't carry fifty ton of freight with seven wagons," he murmured. "Even five ton a load is plenty heavy."

Kern laughed coldly. "I'll have to see how good my credit is again, he scowled.

**I**N the morning Brady and Baines went back to breaking in the steers and Kern made the rounds of the town. He came back late in the afternoon.

"Get 'em?" Brady asked eagerly.

The big man shook his head. "Drew has practically every wagon in this town sewed up. He's even bought the ones we sold in the beginning."

The teamster rubbed his jaw. "There's Star Overland," he murmured. "I reckon Julia Townsend has some wagons Drew can't get hold of." He laughed shortly. "It would be kind o' askin' a lot to expect her to sell to us an' maybe lose that contract

with Colonel Dow an' her whole outfit with it."

Kern smiled. "I'll not ask," he said quietly.

He spent another day of futile search. There were new wagons to be purchased, but the salesmen from the big companies wanted straight cash from an unknown buyer.

"If it comes to the worst," Tate growled, "we can pile the stuff on some way."

"No," Kern told him. "With that weight we'd bog in the sand or the river and come in a month after the winner." He stood in the office looking out across the wagon yard. They were repainting the two scorched vehicles. Baines was working with two young steers, getting them accustomed to the yoke.

There was a knock on the door and then Julia Townsend came in. Kern blinked, and then quickly dusted off a seat.

"I've been waiting for you to come to me," the girl said coldly. "But evidently you're too stubborn."

"I'm not quite sure I understand," Kern smiled.

"You're trying to buy three wagons," Miss Townsend stated flatly, "and Drew has given orders not to sell to you. Why didn't you come to me? I have two dozen Murphy wagons you could put in repair."

"I thought—" Kern began.

"You thought," Julia Townsend snapped, "that I do business the same way Alvin Drew does. You're mistaken. I intend to beat both you and Drew to Fort Lane, but I'm doing it the right way." She paused. "You can come over to my yard and select your three wagons."

"There's the question of money," Kern told her. "I—"

"I'll take your note," Miss Townsend said. She walked stiffly toward the door and went out.

Tate Brady threw his hat down on the floor and kicked it against the wall. Kern walked to the street window and watched the owner of the Star Overland get into her carriage.

"Wish I could o' met her old man," Brady chuckled. "He must o' been a rip-snorter."

"The daughter," Kern Rawton murmured, "will suit me . . ."

Captain Grall of the Sixth United States



Cavalry stationed at Fort Lane, Indian Territory, stood behind a desk at his quarters in Nebraska City. Alvin Drew sat in a chair by the window, hands clasped over his stomach.

Julia Townsend sat on the other side of the room, very calm, but her face slightly paler than usual. Kern Rawton stood by the wall a few feet away from Drew.

Grall, a tall, thin man with a mustache and piercing black eyes, stared at a map on the desk before him.

"At Miss Townsend's suggestion," the Captain stated. "I understand you are to draw lots for the route you will take to the Fort." He looked up. "Are you all agreeable?"

Alvin Drew shrugged massive shoulders. He spoke around his cigar.

"My wagon-master doesn't care which route we take."

Grall looked at Kern, and the owner of the American Freighting nodded. He had requested at the beginning of the conference that Star Overland be given the choice of the route as a matter of courtesy, but Miss Townsend rejected his proposal.

Grall pointed to a fish bowl on the desk. There were three slips of paper lying on the bottom of the bowl. The Captain nodded to Miss Townsend.

"You may draw first," he invited.

Kern watched the girl walk up to the table and take out a slip.

She read, "Calve Creek route."

Grall nodded to Kern and the tall man picked out his slip. The words, "White Flat," were written on it.

"I reckon I'll need the water barrels," Kern drawled.

"You can load at the government wharf," Captain Grall stated, "and start at dawn tomorrow. I'll give the signal."

Kern walked down the street with the girl. "I want to thank you for those three wagons," he said quietly. "I wouldn't have been in this race if it hadn't been for you."

"I'd do the same for anyone," Miss Townsend told him. She repeated Drew's words. "See you in Fort Lane."

Kern stopped. "You're not going with the outfit?" he asked in surprise.

The girl smiled. "I often accompany my trains," she murmured, "and I wouldn't miss this trip."

"Is it true?" Kern asked, "that Star Overland goes out of business if it loses this government contract?"

Julia Townsend laughed. "It's true of the three companies," she murmured. "I know Drew's financial status, and I know yours."

Kern grinned. He held out his hand. "Good luck," he said simply.

**I**N the dim gray light of early morning, Captain Grall fired his army revolver and thirty wagons moved down the main street of Nebraska City. One hundred and eighty powerful oxen surged against the breastbands. Thirty braided rawhide bull whips cracked, buckskin poppers at the ends snapping like firecrackers. The thirty heavily-laden wagons creaked and rattled as they fell into line, bull-whackers walking along the left side of the wagons.

Star Overland's ten wagons were first in line as they moved out of town, her crew roaring the old Russell-Waddell-Majors song, "Roöt Hog or Die."

Kern listened to the words:

*I'll tell you how it is when  
You first get on the road,  
You have an awkward team and  
A very heavy load.*

*You have to whip and holler, but  
Swear upon the sly  
You're in for it then, boys,  
ROOT HOG, OR DIE!"*

Riding a big bay animal, Kern grinned at Tate Brady striding beside the lead American Freighting wagon. They had an "awkward team and a very heavy load," but the young steers were plenty strong and Brady had broken them nicely.

Julia Townsend trotted up ahead on a small, heavy-barreled black mare. She was dressed in a man's riding outfit, looking very trim in a buckskin shirt and soft black felt hat with wide brim.

American Freighting was second in line, with Drew's ten wagons bringing up the rear.

Tate Brady cracked his thirty-foot-long whip, touching the ear of his lead oxen.

"Drew's comin' along hisself," the teamster called to Kern.

The American Freighting wagon-master

nodded. He'd seen Alvin Drew coming out of the Drew yards on a giant sorrel stallion. Durkin strode along the left side of the first Drew wagon, resplendant in new red flannel shirt and new boots, a heavy six-shooter and a knife stuck in his belt.

The crowds lining both sides of the street cheered lustily. A rangy, flaxen-haired man with peculiar slanted eyes, rode past Kern on a wiry Indian pony.

Tate Brady pointed with the stock of his whip. "Burlman," he called.

Kern watched the Star Overland wagon-master trot up beside Julia Townsend. He spoke a few words and then galloped to the head of the column.

"We split at North Bend," Brady said. "Baines says we cross the Little Bow and cut across the flatlands. Drew follers the river on the east bank, an' Star Overland hits up Calve Creek to the west." He grinned. "That's the last we'll see of 'em till we're sittin' in Fort Lane waitin' for 'em to roll in."

North Bend was eight miles out of Nebraska City. As the Little Bow swung north, and then west in a sharp bend, Kern saw the ten Star Overland wagons branch off, following the tiny Calve Creek to the west.

Brady halted his wagon on the bank of the stream and waited for Kern to give the orders to cross. They'd already inspected the fording place and it was only a foot or so deep.

Drew Freighting wagons swung out of line, keeping along the east bank of the stream, Alvin Drew riding his big sorrel horse up in the front. Kern hesitated. He saw Julia Townsend turn in her saddle and stare back at him. Then, slowly, she raised her hand in salute.

Kern Rawton waved back and then nodded to Brady. The teamster flicked his whip and the lead oxen took the water. Kern watched the Star Overland wagons disappear behind a slope a mile away.

"Calve Creek and White Flat routes run parallel most o' the way," Baines had explained. "Even when we cut across the Flats we're not more than twenty miles away from the Star wagons."

"Where will Drew be?" Kern wanted to know.

"Little Bow route curves to the east most o' the time," Baines told him, "but a

man could ride over an' meet them in about six hours on a fast horse."

"Thinkin' o' checkin' up on the girl?" Brady asked with a grin. "I reckon you ain't so anxious to beat her, Kern."

The tall man shrugged. He watched the wagons rolling out of the water.

"I'm not anxious to see Drew beat her," he admitted.

"So you risk every cent you got," Brady murmured. "When it's over, you lose your stock, your wagons an' your company. What's in it, Kern?"

Kern Rawton smiled. "It's a good game, Tate," he said softly.

They made camp that night, seven miles up from North Bend, having covered sixteen miles during the day.

"When do we hit White Flats?" Kern asked Baines.

"Flats begin the last hundred miles to Fort Lane," the old man told him. "We'll have plenty o' time to fill our water barrels before we reach 'em."

Tate Brady nodded toward Kern's bay animal still saddled, and tied to one of the wagons nearby.

"Ain't you grazin' him, mister?" he asked.

"Not yet," Kern murmured. "We're riding." He paused. "Hobble all the cattle."

"Hobble?" Brady stared at him. "There's sixty of 'em," he muttered, "an' another dozen spare animals!"

"Hobble them," Kern ordered. He swung into the saddle after a meal of bacon, beans and sour-dough bread.

Tate Brady watched him riding back into camp two hours later. He'd gone south back over the trail they'd taken.

"See anything?" the teamster asked.

"Not yet," Kern said, "but we're still only sixteen miles from Nebraska City. We'll be within riding distance of town for a few days yet."

"That's why we hobble the cattle," Brady stated.

Kern nodded. "We'll hobble them every night," he ordered.

**T**HEY pushed north and west for three more days, averaging seventeen miles per day. The young Texas steers were being accustomed to their task now, and Tate Brady was completely satisfied.

On the fourth night Kern rode down the trail and came back before dusk.

"Every man on guard duty tonight," he said quietly. "There'll be no sleep."

The bull-whackers stared at him.

"We have four night herders with the stock," Brady pointed out.

"Issue the rifles," Kern said, and then get our your sleeping rolls."

Tate Brady stared in amazement as Kern directed the men to stuff their blankets with grass and place them around the big fire. He let the fire die down and then he stationed the fifteen odd men around the hobbled cattle.

"What did you see?" Brady asked curiously.

"A dozen riders," Kern stated, "camped in a dry gulch fifteen miles back."

"Comin' this way?" Brady asked.

"We'll find out," Kern told him. He climbed up on one of the wagons and sat down on top of the load. Down below he could see the dozen grass-filled blankets, looking like sleeping figures in the firelight. A hundred yards from the wagon corral he could hear the cattle lowing softly as they bedded down for the night.

"We're ready for 'em," Brady grinned. "You think it's some o' Drew's boys?"

"Drew doesn't want us to reach Fort Lane," Kern replied. "If we lose our stock, we're finished."

"He's got to stop Star Overland also," Brady ventured. "Why ain't he tryin' to run off their stock?"

"Maybe," Kern said slowly, "he has other plans for them."

It was two o'clock in the morning when he spotted a dark form creeping toward the firelight. He thought he heard a horse stamp in the distance, but he wasn't sure.

"See it?" Brady whispered. "I kin pick him off from here, Kern."

"Wait," the wagon-master ordered.

**T**HE crawling figure stopped, and then started back again. Ten minutes later they heard the thud of horses' hoofs on the hard earth. The night was dark, but they could see the riders bobbing up and down in the saddles, shouting as they sped toward the hobbled cattle.

Kern's rifle kicked against his shoulder as he squeezed the trigger. A man screamed,

threw up his hands, and fell backward from the lead horse.

"Get 'em!" Tate Brady roared to the waiting bull-whackers in the tall grass.

Rifles cracked from all points, splashing sharp flame into the blackness of the night. Kern saw two more saddles emptied. The others swerved. A man cursed loudly, and then yelled, "Back!"

Another rider went down in the grass, and then the rest broke and fled in the direction from which they came.

"That's the end of 'em!" Brady yelled in satisfaction. "They got their bellies full."

With lighted torches they picked up the four men who had been shot. Three were dead and the other was dying—a hatchet-faced, long-nosed man with small pig-like eyes. He had a bullet through his lungs and his right arm was broken.

"Who sent you?" Kern asked as they wiped the foaming blood from his mouth. The man's number was up and he knew it.

"Little Alvin," the dying man grinned painfully. "He's a smart one. He got to Burlman too—he—"

Kern stood up. He looked at Brady.

"He's dead," the teamster muttered.

"Where would the Star wagons be?" Kern asked Baines.

The old man scratched his grizzled jaw. "Maybe eighteen miles due west," he replied. "Along Squaw Creek now."

Kern nodded and walked over to where he'd tied the bay. He threw the saddle on the horse's back. Brady came over to watch him.

"Keep them rolling," Kern told him. "Pick out your own camping grounds tomorrow. I'll catch up with you in the afternoon." He paused. "If I don't get back by nightfall, post a double-guard and keep going."

Brady's eyes were worried. "If Burlman's workin' for Drew," he pointed out, "he must have the whole crew on his payroll, too. It'll be fifteen to one, Kern."

"I'll take a look," Kern Rawton murmured.

Locating the North Star, he set a course across the open plains and then let the bay run. The horse swung into a long, ground-eating lope.

It was almost dawn when he hit the first piece of water, a small stream about fifteen

yards across. Squaw Creek was the only water in the vicinity, according to Baines, so there could be no mistake.

Dismounting, Kern let the horse drink. He loosened the cinches under the tired animal's belly and then sat down on a flat rock.

Gray mist hung over the little stream, so thick it was almost impossible to see across. When the sun dispelled the mist, Kern swung into the saddle again. He crossed the stream, expecting to cut the trail of the Star Overland wagons. There were no fresh wagon wheel tracks.

Re-crossing the stream he examined the banks on the other side to a distance of two hundred yards, but found nothing. Star Overland was behind schedule.

**H**E rode south for two hours without seeing any signs of the Star wagons. It was nearly noon, and twenty miles south of the place where the caravan should have been. He saw a thin column of smoke trickling up into the bright blue of the sky.

Making a detour, he came up behind a grove of willows a half-mile distant from the fire. Then, sighting the red and blue painted Murphys corralled in a circle on the edge of the grove, he trotted forward.

To his left he caught a glimpse of running water through the trees. Burlman, Star Overland wagon-master, had made camp on the north bank of a small stream, which Kern surmised was a tributary of Squaw Creek.

Approaching closer, he could see that one of the wagons was stuck in the mud on the opposite bank of the little stream. The rear wheels were down to the hub in the slime, and men were singing loudly from the campfire.

Kern's jaw tightened. He'd heard that kind of singing before and he had an idea what it meant. A bull outfit didn't usually carry liquor along with it, but the Star Overland teamsters were drunk—roaring drunk!

Julia Townsend walked out on the prairie as he came in. He saw her face—pale, hopeless with anger.

"What happened?" Kern asked grimly.

The girl shook her head. "Burlman says he doesn't know where they got the liquor, but there was a keg on one of the wagons. We were delayed here yesterday afternoon

when the last wagon stuck in the mud. We've been here ever since."

"Where's Burlman?" Kern rasped. "I've heard something about him. Something I don't like."

Julia Townsend laughed coldly. "You mean that he's working for Drew? I've suspected that the first day we left. Drew Freighting bought him out." She paused. "He went out with one of the herders to look for two of our stock."

"Can't we get the wagon out?" Kern asked, nodding toward the stalled vehicle.

"We've pulled them out of worse than that," the girl said. "But we were having a little trouble yesterday afternoon, and Burlman suggested that we wait till the morning. Then the keg of liquor turned up and the teamsters have been drunk ever since."

Kern walked his horse toward the group of bull-whackers around the fire. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw two riders approaching from the north.

"What are you going to do?" Miss Townsend asked hastily. "I don't want to get you in trouble."

"It's no trouble," Kern smiled. "This will be a pleasure."

They saw him coming, and one of them, a gigantic tow-headed man, held up a tin cup.

"Have one, mister?" he yelled.

Kern shook his head and grinned. He picked up a heavy bull-whip lying on a crate nearby. It had a three-foot stock, very heavy, with a twenty-five-foot coil of braided rawhide. He was examining the "popper" when Burlman rode up on his Indian mustang and dismounted.

"Having trouble?" Kern asked, nodding calmly toward the stranded wagon.

Burlman twisted his lips. He glanced at Julia Townsend out of his slanted, oriental eyes. They were very dark in color, in peculiar contrast to the yellow of his hair.

"Your business, Rawton?" the Star wagon-master snapped. "Worry about your own outfit."

"My outfit's doing well," Kern smiled. "Maybe it's because Alvin Drew isn't paying my men."

"What do you mean?" Burlman growled hoarsely. He was wearing a heavy army revolver strapped around his waist, and



his right hand was hooked down near the hickory butt.

"We just shot up Drew's cutthroats," Kern went on easily. "They tried to run off our stock. One of them tells me you sold out to Drew." He had uncoiled the bull-whip as he spoke and was standing with his feet braced.

Burlman's lips tightened across the front teeth. "That's a damned lie," he mumbled, "and you know it." The teamsters around the fire were listening stupidly, mouths open. Julia Townsend stood about ten feet away from Kern. Twice she opened her mouth to say something, but thought better of it.

"I wouldn't lie," Kern drawled, "to a sneaking coyote." He was ready for the next move, muscles tense.

Burlman's fingers hooked around the butt of the gun. He was lifting it from the holster when the bull-whip snapped out to him, three feet of it coiling around his neck like the coils of a snake. He screamed as the "popper" snapped into his right eye accidentally.

Kern jerked on the whip, knocking Burlman off his feet. He was in on top of the man before the wagon-master could recover. With his right boot, he kicked the gun from Burlman's hands, and then driving in close, smashed his fists into the man's face, knocking him to his knees.

Again, Burlman screamed as the iron fists opened the flesh on his cheeks and cut his mouth.

"No!" Julia Townsend cried. "That's enough."

Kern stepped back and picked up the gun. "Get on your horse," he said coldly.

Burlman staggered toward the pony and climbed weakly into the saddle. He held his hand over his right eye, the blood dripping from his chin.

"Tell Drew we're expecting him to do some of the dirty work himself the next time," Kern snapped. He slapped the flank of the pony and watched it trot away.

Then, turning to the bull-whackers, he pointed to the big tow-headed man who'd been sitting on a rock, empty tin cup in his hand, lower lip hanging in amazement.

"On your feet," Kern grated. "Quick." He knew these big, powerful-bodied men of the trail; he knew the thing they respected.

The bull-whacker dropped the tin cup. He looked at his comrades, a foolish grin on his face. Kern reached him in two great bounds, grasping the man's shirt front, and hoisting him to his feet with a terrific surge.

His right fist cracked, landing on the big bull-whacker's jaw and knocking him back toward the stream. As he teetered on the brink, Kern rushed him again, driving him into the water which was about three feet deep at the spot. The big man went under, and came up a few seconds later, spluttering, considerably more sober.

"GET hold of that wheel," Kern pointed to the stuck wagon. "Get your shoulder behind it." He didn't look to see whether the bull-whacker had obeyed his summons, but he turned to the others. "Everybody in the water," he barked. "All the way under." He had his six-shooter in his hand now and was directing it at the stomach of the nearest man.

They started to walk, but they didn't walk fast enough. The gun exploded and a bullet caromed off a flat rock at the feet of one thick-bearded man. It whined as it flew off at an angle.

"Jump," Kern shouted. "Everybody in."

They leaped off the little bank into the cold water. One man hesitated until Kern put a shot a foot over his head. He heard the bullet sing and then he jumped. There were ten bull-whackers and three herders splashing in the water, shaking it out of their eyes, grinning sheepishly.

The liquor keg was standing on a rock a dozen yards away. Kern steadied his gun and squeezed the trigger three times. The whiskey streamed out of three holes, flowing into the ground.

"Everybody on those wheels," Kern ordered. The thirteen half-sober men got their shoulders behind the Murphy, some gripping the spokes. It came out of the mud a moment later and stood clear on the stream bottom. "Yoke your oxen," Kern continued. "Drag it up on the bank and start rolling."

Julia Townsend watched him from a distance. She came up as the herders brought in the rest of the oxen and the bull-whackers hitched them to the wagons.

"Why did you do this?" she asked quietly.

"Why did you give me three wagons?" Kern countered.

She didn't say anything.

"What are you going to do about a wagon-master?" Kern asked her.

"I can handle them now," Julia murmured. "They're all old employees of my father, but that loose barrel of liquor Burlman had stowed on the wagon set them off. They'll be all right from now on."

"You're going to snake this outfit into Fort Lane yourself?" Kern murmured.

"I'll try," Julia said quietly. "Thanks again for your help."

Kern rode away. He reached his own outfit at dusk that night, coming up as they were eating the evening meal. Tate Brady unsaddled his horse and brought him a plate of flapjacks, beans and bacon, with a wedge of dried apple pie.

"We figured you'd be kind o' hungry," the teamster grinned. He listened to Kern's story while the wagon-master ate.

"She's bringing the outfit in alone," Kern finished.

Tate Brady shook his head. He watched Kern slyly. "From what I kin judge," he grinned, "she'll be gettin' help all along the way."

"We can't refuse," Kern Rawton said, "a lady in distress."

They were on the trail at three o'clock the next morning, starting an hour earlier than usual as Kern was desirous of reaching Cheyenne Springs before nightfall.

"We're ahead o' Drew now," Brady said. "He's makin' that detour followin' the Little Bow."

"He expects to catch up on us when we strike White Flats," Kern pointed out. "We'll need a few days on him when we go through the sand." Baines had explained that it was impossible for a wagon to make more than twelve miles per day through the sand." Baines had explained sands. Alvin Drew would be coming fast then, hitting the easiest part of his journey the last week into Fort Lane.

For a solid week they rolled over the prairie lands, making the crossing at Thompson's Ford, and then again wading a quarter of a mile through the foot-deep waters of Black River.

They refilled the water barrels in the Black River and prepared for the plunge into White Flats. Kern saw the low-lying

grayish hills in the distance, barren of vegetation, with the vultures wheeling in the vast dome of blue sky.

"Anybody ever try to run these Flats at night?" Kern asked Baines.

The old teamster shook his head. "Might work with men pullin' the wagons," he grinned. "Them steers do their sleepin' when the sun goes down."

Kern nodded. "We can try leaving two hours earlier in the morning, and camping two hours sooner at night. They'll get used to it, and we can cover more ground when it's cool."

They reached the sands the next afternoon, and Kern watched the wagon wheels sink into the ground. The oxen had to strain to keep the big, heavily-laden wagons moving. It took a lot out of them.

They camped at two o'clock in the afternoon and the oxen were taken out to graze as best they might on dried tufts of brown grass which sprang up miraculously on the Flats.

"We'll break camp at two o'clock tomorrow morning," Kern ordered. "Everybody turn in early." He wondered how Julia Townsend was making out with the Star Overland outfit."

COMING out of White Flats the next week their trail crossed that of the girl's, and both crews passed down the last fifteen miles of trail together. Alvin Drew would be coming from the east with his ten wagons.

With the stars twinkling overhead, they were on the trail the next morning, harnessing the oxen by firelight. Hours later when the sun came up they'd gone seven miles, half a day's journey.

"If we keep this up," Tate Brady grinned, "we'll be ten or fifteen miles ahead o' Drew when we come out o' the Flats."

"We're keeping it up," Kern murmured.

It went on another day, and then another. They refilled the water barrels at a sink hole half-way across the Flats. The oxen lost weight from the terrific strain; men plodded through the loose gray sand, mouths open, skin dry and brown as parchment.

"We go over the last stretch tomorrow," Bains said softly when they camped that night. "I reckon this is the fastest crossin' o' White Flats any outfit ever

made." He shook his head. "We're making fifteen miles a day!"

At two o'clock the next afternoon Kern rode his bay up on a sand ridge and stared toward the west. He caught a glimpse of shining water, and then green on the opposite bank. They'd reached the Little Bow again.

Tate Brady rumbled up with the lead wagon. Climbing to the top of his load, he searched the land to the east, the direction from which Drew would be coming.

"I reckon we beat him," Brady grinned.

Kern Rawton was laughing softly.

"You see anything?" Brady asked anxiously.

Kern pointed to the west. They saw a cloud of dust on the horizon.

"Star Overland!" Brady gasped. "That girl!"

**K**ERN nodded. "She must have straightened out her crew, and they're moving. They should be up with us in a half hour."

Brady shook his head. "Baines says it's eighteen miles to Fort Lane," he observed. "You figure on racin' her in, Kern?"

The wagon-master shrugged. "We'll just keep going," he stated. "We have a Government load and it must be taken into the Fort."

"First or second?" Tate Brady persisted.

Kern Rawton grinned. "We'll just roll," he said enigmatically.

When they camped that night, the Star Overland wagons corralled a mile away. Kern rode over to the camp. Star night herders were taking the oxen out to graze; the cook was busying himself around the big fire. Ten bull-whackers sweated as they worked with tar buckets, greasing axles, tightening loose tire irons.

Julia Townsend, brown, and thinner than she'd been the last time Kern had seen her, came out of a tarpaulin tent she'd rigged against one of the wagons.

"It looks like a dead heat," she smiled. "We should both be in Fort Lane by night-fall tomorrow."

"Had any more trouble?" Kern asked her.

She shook her head. "The boys have been good since you ducked them," she smiled. "We've been doing nearly eighteen miles per day; sometimes twenty, and once

twenty-three." She paused. "Have you seen Drew?" she asked.

"No sign of him," Kern told her. "We probably have a half day on him."

"We'll keep ahead," Julia smile. "Once we get through the Devil's Gorge it's only six miles to the Fort."

"Where is the Gorge?" Kern asked curiously.

Miss Townsend pointed toward the ridge of hills to the west. Kern saw the small gap between them.

"The Gorge is the only route through the hills," she explained. "All the bull outfits take it."

Kern went back to his own corral and spoke to Baines.

"Know anything about the Devil's Gorge?" he asked.

Baines scratched his head. "Good road leadin' through it," the old man said. "Hills on either side. Ain't really a gorge more than it is a pass."

"How wide?" Kern asked.

"Wide enough for the road," Baines told him. "Not much more."

"Any other way into the Fort?" Kern wanted to know.

Baines grinned. "You can go around the hills," he chuckled, "but it'll take you three more days."

Tate Brady had been listening in on the conversation. "Anything wrong, Kern?" he asked, when Baines went away.

"Not yet," the wagon-master said softly.

Star Overland got away first at dawn when one of Brady's wagons cracked an axle. It took time as they jacked up the wagon and slid in a new one.

"She'll be hittin' it up all the way to the Fort," Brady grinned. "You figure on catchin' up with her, Kern?"

"Roll the wagons," Kern Rawton said.

They were moving again, bull-whackers cracking whips, urging the big steers forward. It was high noon when Kern saw the Star Overland caravan push up a slope toward the gap in the hills. He rode ahead, studying the hills on either side of the pass.

When the first Star wagon was within a few hundred yards of the pass, a rifle cracked. The caravan halted. Other guns spoke and two of the oxen in the lead wagon, went down threshing in the harness.

Kern dug his spurs into the bay and shot

ahead. He heard Tate Brady yelling behind him.

The Star wagons wheeled and came back down the slope. Kern saw Julia Townsend riding with the second wagon. They'd cut the wounded oxen out of the traces and were pulling the lead wagon back out of range of the guns.

**T**HE girl's face was white with anger as Kern rode up.

"Drew's cutthroats," he murmured. He'd counted a dozen puffs of smoke from the hillsides, and there were probably again that many men hidden on the bluffs.

"They're cutting us off," Julia snapped, "while Durkin goes around the other way to the Fort."

"Wheel your wagons back toward us," Kern told her. "They won't follow you."

Tate Brady rolled up with his wagons and they formed a corral a half mile from the pass.

"We could make a run for it tonight," Julia said quietly. "It'll be better than waiting."

Kern nodded. "Whatever we do," he said, "we'll have to work together. You have fourteen men and I have sixteen. We might be able to force a breakthrough."

"Tonight?" Brady asked.

"Tonight," Kern said. "Unload one of the wagons."

Brady hesitated and then shrugged. He went away.

"If we're going to work together," Miss Townsend said flatly, "neither one of us can claim the Government contract. We'll split it by coming in together."

Kern Rawton grinned. "We'll talk about it," he said, "when we're through the pass."

"We'll talk about it now," Julia told him, "and put it in writing."

Kern smiled. "Draw up your contract," he nodded. "I'll sign it."

When she came back with the paper, Kern was chaining together the ten Star wagons, the lead oxen of each wagon being chained to the rear of the vehicle ahead of it.

"Wheel the empty wagon up to the front of the column," Kern told Brady. He felt Julia Townsend's eyes on him. "We can't bring all the wagons through," he told her quietly. "If we get ten past the blockade

and into the army fort we've beaten Drew."

"How do you figure on workin' it?" Brady wanted to know.

"Call the crews," Kern ordered. "I want every man here, including the cooks."

When the thirty odd men were gathered together, he revealed his plan. Brady's face cracking into a wide grin as he listened.

"Damn if that don't get us through," he chuckled.

It was near dusk when they were all ready.

"They're building large fires along the pass," Julia Townsend said quietly. "They must know we'll try to go through tonight."

Brady came up, riding Kern's bay horse. "I reckon we're all set," the teamster murmured. "I got my dozen men."

Kern nodded. "You strike first," he advised. "When we hear you open fire, we're going ahead."

They were all armed as they climbed into the empty Murphy wagon at the head of the column. One man stayed on the outside of the second wagon, leading the Star wagons. The canvas top was stretched across the empty vehicle, hiding the seventeen armed men inside.

"Ready?" Kern called. He watched Julia Townsend running up with a rifle in her hands. She climbed in through the back.

Bull-whip in hand, Kern Rawton leaped up on the seat. He had two pair of oxen hitched to the wagon.

Up in the pass the fires were blazing furiously, casting a flickering light over the trail.

They moved slowly until they were within two hundred yards of the first fire. Kern stopped the animals and waited. He could hear the men inside the wagon breathing heavily.

Then a gun barked and Kern stood up. The bull-whip cracked venomously and the frightened steers leaped forward. Again and again Kern lashed them with the whip until they were running badly.

Dropping the whip, Kern tumbled back inside the wagon just as a rifle bullet zipped through the canvas over his head.

Riders were spurring down the west side of the pass. He heard Tate Brady's wild yell. Then they were past the first fire, the four steers still on their feet.

Kern saw the men behind the firelight—men on foot with rifles. He caught a glimpse of Alvin Drew, and then Durkin roaring orders to his men.

"Now," Kern snapped.

The canvas top dropped down. Seventeen men and a girl crouched inside the big Murphy, rifles braced on the side.

"Fire!" Kern Rawton called.

The heavy volley knocked down a half dozen men. There was no time to reload the rifles. Six-shooters in hand, the roaring bull-whackers tumbled over the side of the wagon.

**H**ALF of Drew's force had turned to face Tate Brady's charge. They were caught between two fires now as Kern rushed them with the remaining men.

Durkin, the wagon-master, six-shooter in hand, opened fire, knocking down one of the teamsters. Kern plunged between two of the big fires, gun bucking in his hand. Durkin took a bullet through the chest and went down on his knees.

Tate Brady driving through on Kern's big bay, hit the man from the rear, unable to stop the frightened animal. Durkin went down, screaming.

The Drew outfit tried to make a stand on the side of the hill, but Brady's mounted night herders and bull-whackers, charged them, chasing them back.

Kern caught a glimpse of the ponderous Alvin Drew running down the hill toward the stalled wagons, burning torch in hand. He heard Julia Townsend cry out as Drew touched the firebrand to the first Star wagon, the dry canvas catching fire instantly.

He was running for the second vehicle when Kern came up behind. Drew dropped the torch and opened fire with a Colt revolver at a distance of ten yards. A slug tore through Kern's right leg, just above the knee. He went down on his face, squeezing the trigger and aiming at Alvin Drew's spacious stomach.

There were two shots left in the six-shooter and he got them both off before Drew could shoot again. Both bullets hit home, the force of them knocking Drew back against the wagon wheel.

Kern, lying on his stomach, the empty gun in his hand, watched the fat man stum-

ble back the entire length of the wagon and then drop to the ground. Tate Brady galloped up on the bay, sprang from the saddle and cut away the burning canvas from the first wagon.

He ran up as Kern climbed to his feet.

"You all right, Kern?" the teamster yelled anxiously.

"I'll live," the wagon-master grinned. Julia Townsend ran toward him, dropping the gun she held in her hand. Drew's men had broken ground and were scrambling back into the darkness, the bull-whackers still chasing them.

"You've been shot!" the girl cried as she came up.

"Not bad," Kern told her. "We'll be ready to roll again in an hour." He paused. "I reckon we got time to bring up the other wagons, Miss Townsend, and we'll go into Fort Lane together."

He was sitting on the wagon seat of the lead Star wagon when the sun came up. Behind him were nineteen heavily-laden vehicles rumbling through the dust.

"There it is," Julia Townsend murmured, pointing to the high walls of the Fort in the distance. "We'll be able to get an army surgeon for your leg."

"You've done pretty well," Kern smiled. The bull-whackers were breaking into song now.

Julia Townsend stared toward the distant fort. "I know now," she whispered, "why my father loved his business."

"Pretty hard thing for a woman to run," Kern observed. "Freighting is a man's business." He paused. "You should have a partner." She didn't speak so he went on. "We could combine Star Overland and American Freighting and have a real company; we could take over all of Drew's business and build something worth while."

"Are you suggesting a merger?" Miss Townsend wanted to know.

Kern Rawton grinned. "Where I come from," he chuckled, "I reckon they call it marriage, ma'am."

Julia Townsend smiled, face red. "I reckon, mister," she drawled, "they call it that here, too."

"The Colonel at the Fort," Kern said, "could make it legal—if the lady is willing."

"The lady," Miss Townsend whispered, "is willing."



# ONE BULLET FOR BAD-EYE

By Tom W. Blackburn

**The trail was dark with the blood of his friends, and he alone remained to avenge them. His woman said he would die. He shrugged. He knew what he must do. And yet—perhaps she was right. He had but one bullet . . . and the murderers were two.**

IT was very simple. Etienne Dubois knew exactly what he must do. He took down a pouch hanging from the central rafter of his cabin. It clinked with the metallic music of brass shells rattling together. He dumped the pouch on the bunk and counted his horde. The shells were not many. The last season had not been good in the Medicine Bows. He had been unable to buy new ammunition. These were cases from the previous year, carefully reloaded, and it was a long time yet until Etienne would make the long haul to the Tall Pine post for fresh supplies.

He must remember that he had need for many of these shells. A man should keep a few by in case Shoshones or Cheyennes, drunk or hungry, or plain out on deviltry, attacked him at his cabin or on his lines. More were needed for meat. And there must always be a few loads for the inevitable bear or lynx or wolverine snagged in a beaver set.

He must count out enough brass to kill a man and put the others by against these usual needs. Etienne smiled as he picked up one finger-length brass cylinder from the heap before him and dumped the rest back into the pouch.

His woman had been by the fire, watching him. She stirred, now. Etienne glanced at her. She was not the best woman he had had in his years in these hills, but *sacre!*, he was no longer young and a fetching devil, himself. This woman was a Crow, near as old as himself, but she understood the cooking of food a man could eat. She was neat and cleaner than her kind, and quiet. Etienne had grown fond of her the past half-dozen years. There was, he thought, fondness in her, too, though a man

could only guess at that in a Crow woman. They were born with stone faces.

She shuffled across the room.

"You go?"

Etienne dropped the single rifle shell in his hand into the outer pocket of his mackinaw. He nodded.

"You come back?"

Etienne nodded again. The woman, apparently satisfied, turned back to the fire. Etienne pulled on his fur winter boots and saw to his mittens and cap. There was a partly empty bottle of trade whiskey on a shelf. He was rummaging for it when the woman crossed soundless again, this time to touch his arm.

"You kill Bad-Eye?"

Etienne grinned.

"Plenty dead—"

The woman shrugged.

"Then only *maybe* you come back! Bad-Eye live a long time already. Maybe he live a long time more!"

Etienne laughed without humor.

"Maybe," he agreed. "Four days. If I'm not back in four days, bale what fur's on the rafters and start out for Tall Pine. You can't last out the winter here alone and, barring storm, you should be able to make the post."

The woman took her hand from his arm and opened the door. She stood beside it, blinking a little at the bright sun lancing up from the snow outside. Etienne stepped past her and the door closed at his back. He turned down slope across virgin snow, away from the trail winding up the ridge toward the head of his trap string, and he thought about the woman.

The Crow were a superstitious people. The wind and the timber and the moun-

tains themselves spoke to them. Their foreknowledge was uncanny. Etienne had seen Crow prophecies materialize too many times to doubt that at least part of the time some strange warning did let them see coming events. The Crow were also a silent people. But it was not necessary for Etienne's woman to talk to him. He knew what was in her mind. She believed she would not see him again.

The sun was bright. There was a softness overlying the crusted snow which told of a slight thaw. Etienne wore his best coat.

Still, he felt a chill. He was, maybe, a fool about this whole thing.

**L**UMPY BURDEAU was acting funny, furtive and uneasy, like he was expecting something not good to happen. And right in the middle of a nice piece of work, Rorhman swore and flung a huge hand at his companion, sending him staggering across the room. Lumpy was hunch-backed and unsteady on his feet. He tripped over the dead man lying in the center of the floor and fell heavily. He rose



*If a corpse could live, then Burdeau was a corpse.*

whimpering, face pale with anger and fear. "Lay off, Squint! What's eating you, anyway?"

"What's eating me?" Squint Rorhman growled. "What I want to know is, what's chewing on you! Of all the snivelling, bow-backed fools! You've seen dead men before. Not backing down, are you? What's a little blood for a bale of prime beaver like that in the corner. Get a holt on yourself!"

Lumpy rubbed the raw place on his cheek. He looked at the dead man again.

"We got more fur than we can carry hid down in the cache, now," he said. "We should have left Papa Boston be. We've killed five trappers since the big snow. Six might be too many!"

"Papa Boston," Rorhman said sibilantly, "was near the best trapper in the hills. His bales always go for near twice what some of the others get. I should pass them up just because his hair's white!"

Rorhman stopped. His blinded eye, motionless in its socket, seemed to burn through his companion.

"What's the odds how many bush-bearded buckskin men we dust off?" he went on. "Since when's there been a law in the Medicine Bow that'd count dead men or push a gent that had tallied a few?"

Lumpy twisted uneasily.

"Law!" he said with a scorn which equalled Rorhman's. "There ain't no law. I know that. Lumpy Burdeau wouldn't be in these hills any more'n you would be, Squint, if there was any law might run afool of us. I wasn't thinking of no badge-toter. Hill men are funny. Sometimes it don't need no law to see justice start prowlin' these slopes. Sometimes a dead man's friend or another trapper gets an idea things ain't right. When that happens, it's time to be moving!"

Rorhman hawked and spat his scorn for trappers. Lumpy shrugged.

Rorhman stepped over the body of the old man on the floor and began flinging the pelts in a corner into a stack. Lumpy followed and gave half-hearted help. Rorhman straightened. He didn't like these hills in Summer. In Winter they were next door to hell, as far as he was concerned. They were too quiet. It was too far from one place to the next. He was a man who liked company and talk and a bright fire at night. He had cut Lumpy Burdeau into this

scheme of pirating the trappers on the upper ridges because he didn't want to be alone. He didn't want to be alone, now. Loneliness made him jumpy.

He wondered if Lumpy was building up to a point of separation. Rorhman didn't like Lumpy, but he was company. He wanted to keep him—at least till they were almost outside and ready to peddle their stolen furs. Lumpy could get scary then. He could do most any damned thing. In the back of his mind, Rorhman had already decided he would plant Lumpy out along the trail somewhere close to Tall Pine. But he had to keep him close, now. Lumpy held back the quiet.

"Look," Rorhman said. "We've made a clean sweep. There's nothing between us and the top of the peaks. What woolly son is apt to track us or turn up any argument at all? Use sense, man! We're plumb in the clear and this ought to be our last job."

Lumpy was getting rawhide cord around the stacked furs. He looked briefly again at Papa Boston's head, staved in at the back where Rorhman had hit him with his rifle barrel. He was whining again.

"The hell there's nothing above us! You've forgot Dubois—"

"Dubois!" Squint Rorhman snorted. "The devil, that old squaw-keeper? Blast you, Lumpy, you've turned shaky as a cut tree. I told you we'd pass 'Tienne Dubois account the best season he ever had didn't bring in enough fur to make climbing to his place worth while. A man that'll live with an Indian—!"

Lumpy turned. A strange look was on his face. Rorhman was startled. The look came close to being sign of anger and he had not thought there was any fire in Lumpy's misshapen carcass. He took a forward step and the look vanished from Lumpy's face, but the hunchback spoke softly.

"My mother was a Cree," he said. "When you trail with me you trail with half an Indian—the bad half, at that. But I am not a fool, Squint. I know things. Perhaps because of my mother, perhaps because I was born in these hills. I'll tell you something. 'Tienne Dubois may be a squaw man. Maybe he has rotten luck with his lines. Maybe he does not catch the prime plew. But he is one of the old kind. He is a *coureur de bois*, one of the woods-

runners that came down out of the north."

"A Canuk renegade!" Rohrman scoffed. Lumpy shook his head stubbornly.

"More than that. The woods runners were big men, one time. The north woods belonged to them. They had pride. They stuck together. What was bad for the trade itself was bad for every man in it. 'Tienne Dubois will find Pepin or Devereaux or Big Jones or Papa Boston, here—one of the dead ones we have left behind. When he does, he will come after us. And woods-runners are good hunters. It will be a bad thing!"

Squint Rohrman scowled darkly, the lid pulling down over his blinded eye. Damn this hunchback and his scary talk! It fitted these hills. It got inside of a man. A man

might know it was all superstition and legend and the like—plain bosh—but it still got inside of him.

"To the devil with Dubois!" he growled. "Get that bale of fur up. We'll work down to the cache and load the canoe. We'll be at Feather Forks by night tomorrow. Next day'll see us down the Poudre to Tall Pine, and coin for our pockets. Get moving!"

**E**TIENNE DUBOIS spent the first night eighteen miles across the ridges at Lescoulie's cabin. What he had heard was true. A Crow, cousin to his woman, had stopped at Etienne's cabin at nightfall the previous day. The Crow had come by way of Lescoulie's. From the brush above the trapper's place he had seen a man cut



*The trail was red with the blood of Etienne's friends.*

Lescoulie down with his own axe. The Crow had marked only one thing about the man. It was contained in the name the Crow gave the killer—"Bad-Eye."

Lescoulie lay in his yard, the snow red about him from the great wound at the base of his neck. And his cabin was empty of fur. Etienne chipped rock from the creek bank with the stained axe left lying beside the dead man. With the rock he built a cairn over Lescoulie's body. He ate sparingly, slept heavily, and rose with the dawn.

Bad-Eye's tracks were plain for a little distance and Etienne saw the Crow had made a mistake. Bad-Eye was not alone. Another was with him. This was not good. One rifle shell was scant ammunition for one enemy, let alone two.

Yesterday's thawing crust thawed even more. It made going hard. It also ran tracks down into unreadable things. However a man did not need tracks to follow Bad-Eye. The man left his sign plain to read. Midday came and Etienne lost an hour building another cairn, in the dooryard of Devereaux's place. It was sad work. Lescoulie had been a newcomer, one of the young kind. But Devereaux had tracked these hills near as long as Etienne himself and could be counted a friend.

Before nightfall Etienne had buried yet another of the vanishing men of the old leather legion which had first opened these hills. To say he was angry would be a mistake. A man past a certain age owns no anger. Anger is a thing which uses energy and a man who has been long in the mountains learns to hoard his wind and his strength. He was not angry, but there was a grimness in him. Bad-Eye was striking at the trade. Every man in the trade, however remote his lines might be from his fellows, lived only because every other man in the trade was willing to fight for him if there was need. It was the old code, and this was Etienne Dubois' time to fight.

Leaving the third gutted cabin with its cairn in the yard, Etienne pushed on through the lowering night. He pushed rapidly, as though he hoped to could beat the hand of violence to the next cabin on the slopes, but he knew he was too late, long before he came to Papa Boston's place. Bad-Eye and his companion were yet still far ahead of him.

Papa Boston had been the good kind of

friend. He could always spare a stake, however thin his own luck. He could sing a little and he knew the old songs and stories. And his wise head was full of good counsel. Papa Boston did not make enemies and it was not right that he should die as he had died. Still, Etienne was not angry. He was, instead, only more grim.

Morning came, gray, heavy and sullen. There was no thaw. The edges of the night's freeze remained sharp and ragged. There was the sound of rushing wind on the high slopes. The mountains were talking. There would be snow. It was a time to hurry. No man could follow tracks in a mountain howler. No sane man would even attempt it. When the mountains talked, a wise man built his fire high and braced his door. But Etienne had an errand. He carried a single brass capsule of justice in his pocket and his rifle under his arm. That single shell must do its work.

He sat for an hour in the dooryard of Papa Boston's cabin, watching the storm build itself on the peaks above and he thought about Bad-Eye and his companion. He did not think of Bad-Eye's tracks. If a man could not follow them, it was a waste of time to give them thought.

Instead, with a dead man's blood on the floor behind him and a fresh grave in the snow before his eyes, he thought about Bad-Eye. He ceased being Etienne Dubois, who had come out of the north a long time ago and who had a Crow woman in his house. He became a lynx, a wolverine, a prowler and a killer and a thief. And he thought hard, planning what he would do, had he murdered for profit and had plunder he must turn to cash. He planned the details carefully, and when he was finished, he was certain he knew what Bad-Eye and his companion would do.

There were no more cabins on the lower slopes. Even if they didn't have enough plunder to satisfy them, they had been steadily moving toward lower ground and they would not turn back against the rising storm. They would go on. To Feather Forks, he thought. They would camp there. They would take the Poudre, then, riding water down the wide canyon to Tall Pine. And they would make a deal with the factor there.

This decided, Etienne shouldered his light pack and lifted his rifle and plodded



away from Papa Boston's cabin, heading down the slope and full into the first drifting flakes of the storm rolling down behind him.

**W**HEN Squint Rorhman and Lumpy Burdeau had started their round of violence, Rorhman had picked a little meadow on the east branch of the Poudre above Feather Forks for his cache. It was central, a good place to gather their take instead of lugging it around with them as they moved. He had liked the place. It was on water, a good place to leave the canoe, and not a single one of the gaunt rugged upper peaks whose austere grimness troubled Squint was visible from it.

However, by the time they had tracked down from Papa Boston's place, he did not like the looks of the meadow. The sunlight was gone, obscured by the dull overcast which was rolling down from above. A stiff wind was rushing down the Poudre and even Rorhman, who knew the flatlands better than the hills, realized bad weather was in the making. He drove his companion relentlessly. Lumpy had a hard time keeping the rough pace. Still, when he came to the edge of the meadow and the site of the cache was already in view, he did a peculiar thing. Instead of plunging out into the easy going of the open grass, straight for the cache, he veered and hugged the edge of the timber. Rorhman growled at him.

"What the hell now?" he wanted to know. "You gone crazy?"

The hunchback shook his head.

"If Tienne Dubois got the news of us quick, he's had time to close in. It takes only one bullet to kill a man. I should give him a clear shot at my back, walking across open like that—and right toward the place where we left the rest of the furs and the canoe!"

Rorhman swore, steadily and with feeling. Lumpy held on. Angry, Rorhman plunged off across the meadow. Lumpy paused to watch him. Rorhman could feel his eyes centering his shoulder blades. He thought he could feel other eyes, too. He wondered if it was true that a dirty-bearded old squaw man could have gotten down off the high mountain this quickly. He wondered if this Dubois was the kind that would shoot another in the back. By

the time he was half across the meadow, he was sweating and Lumpy Burdeau was still standing under the trees, watching.

However, there was no stir, no distant lash of a rifle, no buffeting of lead. Rorhman reached the cairn under which the furs were stacked beside the Poudre and he turned with heightening anger to watch his lame companion come on, still following the line of the trees. Rorhman figured Lumpy was sincere enough in his fears. That part was all right. If a man wanted to run a little yellow, that was his business. What got Rorhman, what made him seethe, was that there was something about the way Lumpy built up his fears that was catching, and Squint Rorhman did not like to be afraid—especially of shadows. He was, he thought grimly, about done with Lumpy—and small thanks in hell for his snivelling company.

Rorhman bent his big body to the task of dumping the stones off the hidden furs. He was well along with the task when Lumpy came up. The hunchback lifted the first bale without a word and carried it down to the canoe. Rorhman followed with another. It took a quarter hour to finish the portage and ready the canoe for the water.

The weather was steadily thickening. The chill on the wind had become downright cold, the kind of cold which rimmed a man's nostrils with the faint pull of forming ice and stabbed dull cramps into his muscles if he did not keep using them. The Poudre, a stream of laughing white water and eager spirit in the sun, had turned leaden and sullen and the chill water had become something sinister and threatening. A backwash pool beside the canoe was already filming with a thin tracery of ice. Rorhman had an idea. He knew how he'd pay Lumpy Burdeau back for the sweat in the meadow and his talk of the old Squawman tracking them down. He'd pay Lumpy back, and he'd be done with him, all at once.

The more Rorhman thought of it, the better he liked it. There was humor in it. It was better than a blow on the head or a shot from behind. Lumpy would last a little. And his little yellow soul would scream aloud before he died. Rorhman thought he would like that. He hated weak men but he liked to look upon their weakness. It made

him feel his own strength the more, and to feel his strength was rich pleasure.

The canoe was ready. Rohrman handed Lumpy a paddle and gestured him into the stern.

"Here, fend off that rock there and turn her as she slides out. I'll shove her off—"

A man that slipped a little might wet his feet, shoving off. Wet feet could be bad business in this kind of weather. Lumpy knew that. He was grateful. He climbed awkwardly to the stern and stood precariously there, paddle in hand, his eyes on the rock Rohrman had pointed out. Rohrman grinned and shoved. The canoe slid backward into the water.

Just before the bow left the sand of the bank, Rohrman rocked the craft sharply, as though he had lost his balance for a moment. He caught himself, then, swung up, and was into the craft, dry. Lumpy, however, shaken by that twist as Rohrman had known he would be, fought a losing fight for his balance, lost it, and plunged gracelessly over the side. Rohrman dipped his own paddle, wheeled the canoe about, and brought it close to his companion. One of Rohrman's big hands reached down and helped Lumpy haul himself aboard.

**T**HE hunchback was drenched. The chill of the wind stabbed into him like a knife. Rohrman saw him flinch. It was all right. Nobody could claim anything. It had been an accident. Crippled, Lumpy wasn't too good on his feet. He'd spilled, that was all.

However, the hunchback did not thank his companion as Rohrman had expected. He hunched down in the stern and his eyes fined down and queer lights burned in them. Finally he spoke.

"You tried to drown me, eh?"

Rohrman looked surprised.

"Drown you?" he grunted. "Hell, no! Why should I?"

Rohrman broke off, laughed, and dipped his paddle.

"You're hill-crazy!" he charged.

His companion hunched even lower, compressing his lips against the cold.

"If I am, it's because I was born in them!" he said softly.

Rohrman let this go. The weather and the wind and the cold would work fast now. Lumpy wouldn't last long; not in that wet

gear. There was no point to bickering with him. Lumpy was done.

The canoe slid down the east branch of the Poudre toward the Feather Forks. Rohrman knew he'd camp at the Forks with a dead man. He sang a little to himself, half in mockery. Lumpy said nothing.

Rohrman hummed and the canoe rode the sullen current and the snow began to fall. . . .

Two inches of powdery white lay on the ground when Etienne Dubois located a little meadow beside the easts branch of the Poudre where a canoe had been grounded and a rock-heaped cache had been torn open. The tracks of two men were pressed into the stiffening sands fringing the Poudre and the snow had not yet obliterated them.

Etienne stared at the tracks and the place where the canoe had been with heavy weariness. He had done well, this far. He had covered ground. He had come a long ways. He was tired. It had been his hope that his swiftness would be enough to bring him to this place in time. He had hoped to end his errand here.

Now his burden was doubly heavy. He must not only slog on ahead through the storm howling at his back. He must not only keep on the trail, but he must find greater speed in weary muscles. No longer was he tracking two men afoot like himself. From here he must race the river, and the Poudre was a swift messenger. If he was to fire the shell he had carried in his pocket down the mountains, he must reach Feather Forks before Bad-Eye and his companion broke their camp there and went on down the river to Tall Pine.

Skirting the river, with its roar now half the time obscured by the tumult of the storm, and with falling snow and driven snow whirling in spiral clouds, a thick white blanket before him, he trotted on, his stride stiff and occasionally broken, and wind hard to find in his chest.

The afternoon dragged away and was gone without his being able to mark any change in darkness to tell when it was gone and night had come. The cold increased steadily.

Etienne thought of the men dead on the mountain above him. Somewhere, according to the beliefs which had come out of the north woods with him and his kind, those

men were watching Etienne Dubois. They were making wagers. Would he make it? Would one brass cartridge cut down the men who had plundered their catches and spilled their blood?

He thought of the old Crow woman in his cabin on the peaks. She had never been beautiful, if a man remembered the French beauty of old Canada, but there was goodness and gentleness and a kind of faith which added up to more than beauty. He wished for her now, out in the storm. He laughed at the folly of the wish and lowered his head and kept on plowing. . . .

Misshapen as he was, Lumpy Burdeau was a man of iron. His clothes froze stiff as hickory on him, the ice breaking free only at the joints where motion flexed cloth and leather. His face pinched down and turned blue, overlaid with patches of white. His breath came and went in his lungs with a sound which grew hourly more terrible to hear. But he did not die. He sat in the stern working his paddle. It gave Rorhman the creeps.

A dozen times he turned to look at the hunchback. Each time, out of the tortured mask of Lumpy's face came a mocking, grimacing smile, but Lumpy said nothing. The storm grew terrible. Rorhman felt fear again, nameless still, but honest, now. Even a strong man can hang tail before angry weather.

The dark pall of premature night was down when Rorhman finally, with a kind of relieved desperation, drove the canoe ashore at the forks. Burdeau was still alive in the stern. Rorhman ignored him. He lashed the canoe tight, made sure its freight of furs were secure, and plunged on toward the base of the cliff where countless fires had blackened the rocks. With stiff fingers he kindled a blaze. The fire was roaring when a small sound jerked Rorhman about. Lumpy Burdeau, on hands and knees like a crushed animal, dragged himself into the firelight.

**L**UMPY was wheezing with grim effort now. Great rims of white showed at his eyes. If a corpse could live, then the hunchback was a corpse. Rorhman stared at him. Finally he snarled with sudden heat.

"You fool, why don't you die?"

His voice rose in spite of himself. He

swore. Lumpy looked at him, breathing hard. Finally the hunchback seemed to find a steady moment.

"Die?" he mimicked. "Not yet! Not yet! You did this to me. You spilled me into the water. You killed me like you did the others. I was your partner, but you killed me and you laughed under your beard—"

Lumpy coughed terribly and fell back limply. He rallied a moment later.

"I'm waiting. Tonight Tienne Dubois comes. I want to laugh, too!"

Raging, Rorhman kicked his companion into silence. There was only the slow, tortured wheezing after that—only the wheezing and Lumpy's eyes, steadily on him, Rorhman could avoid the eyes. He could look at the canoe, dim in the storm on the bank of the Poudre and gloat on the profit he'd change to gold at Tall Pine, but he could not shut out the wheezing. It was steady, insistent, and after a long time, Rorhman thought it took on a note of mocking laughter.

There was danger in that. Rorhman knew it. He drew his gun. Lumpy Burdeau could not breathe with a bullet through his head. But when Rorhman turned to level the piece, Lumpy's eyes were on him and a strange force held back the trigger of his piece so that he could not free the hammer. He tried. The eyes were steady. He shouted at Lumpy. The eyes still were steady and the wheezing continued.

The storm pressed in. Rorhman forgot the cold. It seemed only that Lumpy Burdeau had bored holes in his skull with that mocking stare. It seemed that the storm had entered his head, that snow whirled there, also. This was a night which would not end. Rorhman suddenly knew that. It would never end. It would go on forever, and the dying man beside the fire would never die. . . .

The storm blew itself out against the dawn. Half blinded, his eyes streaming and his face an agonized mask of frosted flesh, Etienne Dubois stumbled and fell over a snow-blanketed, laden canoe on the bank of the Poudre under the rock walls above Feather Forks. He lay collapsed over the obstacle and fought his dazed mind into motion. This was Bad-Eye's canoe. Bad-Eye's camp was at hand. He climbed clumsily to his feet, striving for caution.

He staggered toward the rock wall whose surface had been stained by the fires of many honest men. He staggered and peered ahead. The embers of a fire yet warm had fended away the snow. A man lay under a white blanket a pair of yards from the ashes—a white blanket which covered his face and lips which no longer reached for air. Peering with his unsteady attempt at caution, Etienne saw the lump on the man's shoulder and he knew him. This was the son of a Cree woman and old Pierre Burdeau, both long dead. The son was dead now, too.

Beyond the man in the snow, closer to the dead fire, with his back against a stumped tree, sat a bigger man. He sat with his eyes wide, staring out toward the place where Etienne weaved on his feet.

Relief slid through Etienne, almost unnerving him. He had found Bad-Eye's canoe and the stolen furs. He had found Bad-Eye's camp and his companion. Now he had found Bad-Eye. And there had been times through the night when he had thought he would not. Etienne broke the action of his gun to free it of ice. He left the chamber open and pulled a stiffened mitten from his fingers with his teeth and shoved his hand into his pocket for the brass coin he had come so far to deliver, but his fingers found only lint and empty lining. The shell was gone.

Etienne remembered painfully he had fallen many times. The shell was gone. It had fallen out. It was lost. He had come a long ways and yet he had failed. Even sitting, Bad-Eye was a big man. Etienne knew how little strength was left in his own body. Still, it was yet his errand and he must do what he could. Holding the rifle as a clumsy club, he ran unsteadily forward. He expected Bad-Eye to shift, to leap to his feet, to level a gun. Bad-Eye sat quietly, however. Then, when

Etienne was almost upon him, he understood.

Bad-Eye's gun was in his ungloved hands. Blue fingers were frozen to its butt. And its muzzle was pointed at Bad-Eye's own head. It was strange. A look of wild and reckless fear was on Bad-Eye's face, and there was a hole in Bad-Eye's forehead.

Etienne found twigs, thrust them into the embers of the fire, and coaxed fresh flames. He built the fire high and pulled at his bottle of trade whiskey and waited for a thin slice of venison steak from his pack to thaw before he skewered it to broil. He sucked in the heat of the blaze and tried reckoning how long it would take him to build up again for the trail and deliver the canoe of furs at Tall Pine for the friends dead on the mountain and so return to his own cabin.

He should, he thought, make it by the night of the fourth day. He had told the Crow woman four days. She would not yet be gone. He was glad of that. He wanted to tell her what he had found here. Still, it would not bring a cry of surprise. He knew that. He could hear the woman.

"You were fool to go after Bad-Eye. I told you that. You are mountain man. Papa Boston was mountain man. The mountains take care of their people. The mountains take care of Bad-Eye. I told you that, too. But you go. Now you are back and you are lucky the mountains were not angry at your stubbornness and let you live through the storm! Now—you catch plenty hungry, I bet. I make feed—"

He could see her shuffling across the floor toward the hearth. Etienne sat under the rock at Feather Fork and shook his head at this vision of his homecoming and grinned wryly. The Crow were a strange people. But they knew the mountains.



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# Shadow of a Fullback

By Ted Roemer

**The Indians were pleading for his old football magic, his power drives through the line. Couldn't they see he was washed up? That after three years of foxholes in far places he had outgrown this kid game?**

WHEN MATTY KANE had gone down the alley back of the Karbol Machine Works three years ago, he was headed for the train depot and the army. He had walked strongly, with hard leather heels clicking on the alley pavement. "The old Karbol pile-driver," the sports writers had called him. "A helluva good fullback."

Matty Kane was now walking back up the alley.

He had on good army shoes. They had very hard leather heels. But they didn't kick up any of the dirt between the paving cracks, as when he'd gone down three years ago. And they didn't give forth with that fine staccato sound of drive. And the funny part of it, Matty didn't notice the difference. He looked and walked tired. He was tired.

The westernly sun slanted through the smoke of the great stacks. It hit the red and green paper roofs of the workmen's shacks along the winding alley. Matty's brown face twitched. He was back. It was September—football time. A million times over there he'd looked forward to coming back like this, but somehow his heart now wasn't in it. And, oddly, Matty didn't know why.

Then he heard a sound. He had heard it a million times. The dull short thump of a football shoe meeting the inflated pigskin. It came again and again. And Matty glanced at the watch on his thick, hairy wrist. The Karbol Indians were out for practice. Doc Dulane must be short of kickers this year; practicing punting this early in the afternoon. But Doc would build one. Doc always came through. Doc was a damned old driver, in the factory where he was the super and on the football gridiron where he was coach. Baldy Doc...

The thoughts ran through Matty's round brown head, bared to the cool autumn air, but they didn't hasten his footsteps toward the iron grill through which he knew he could watch the practice from the alley. He approached it with uninspired steps.

And then the four o'clock factory whistle let go. And Matty stopped, trembled. His brown eyes darted right, left, his body was crouched, shoulders hunched, almost cringing, and his stocky wide legs were settling for a leap. But—

*There was no foxhole to leap into!* And then the whistle drained away. Matty caught himself. "Damn," he muttered. "Making a fool of myself." He caught his underlip in his strong white teeth and moved forward toward the iron grill, but beads of sweat stood out on his face and the color had left his cheeks.

At the grill he paused. Curiosity didn't impel him; he just stopped because the practice field was green and the blue-clad gridders running out there had attracted his eye. He saw bald-headed Doc Dulane, skinnier than ever, down on the far side with the kickers—five of them. He saw linesmen on the old bucking machine, and a bevy of backs running like mad through an irregular path of wooden boxes. They were lifting their knees high, driving, driving . . .

The faintest quirk of a smile touched the lines that were at Matty's solid mouth-corners. A game. These kids were playing a game. It was after work hours and some of them weren't kids any more. A game. . . .

He moved on toward his Pop's house at the end of the grey shacks down near the river.

His Pop had just come home. He was washing off the factory grime by the kitchen sink, suspenders down, his thick,

heavy shoulders oddly stooped. That was because of Bud, Matty knew. Bud was his Pop's favorite and when Bud went down in a dogfight over Germany his Mom had written him about it.

Matty sniffed. Fresh bread. And then he saw Mom coming in from the back shed with her checkered apron full of railroad tie chips. At the sight of him she dropped the apron hem. The firewood flew.

"Matty!"

His arms closed about her.

Pop turned. His little eyes blinked twice underneath the water. Then he reached for the towel. He tried to remain calm, but his gnarled hand was trembling.

"Matty, my boy! Welcome home."

Matty thought a kid of twenty-two years old shouldn't bawl; he didn't, exactly. He just kept swallowing and grinning and

winking, and when they finally got to talking, everything was all right. And Mom and Pop were swell; they didn't mention a word about why he was back.

"Going back into the factory?" his Pop asked, shoving back from the supper table and pulling out his cob pipe.

"Lan' sakes! Let Matty have a time off," Mom exclaimed.

"Sure. Sure, but I was jus wonderin'."

"I think I'll go back, Pop," Matty said.

"Football? They just started last week."

Matty hesitated. A game . . . He knew his Pop was heart and soul in football. He lived for the Karbol Indians. He had gone plumb nuts when Matty and Bud, his two sons, had won the championship game against the Cranshaw Bulldogs with a sixty yard pass in the final minutes of the game. Matty had tossed it and fleet-footed



*Matty approached the field with uninspired steps.*

Bud . . . Matty didn't like to remember all those nice things about Bud; it hurt.

He said, looking out the window toward the yard gate: "I guess I will, Pop. Later." He couldn't tell him that football didn't mean much to him any more; not a thing. Kids played it. Guys who'd never grow up. Nothing seemed to matter a hell of a lot any more.

His mother said: "Mary will be glad you are home, Matty."

Matty understood. He arose. He had been going to take the towel and wipe the dishes, but he knew it would please Mom if he went down the street to Crosby's home. He shrugged into an old leather jacket and went out the door.

He didn't want to go down the street that way but his footsteps, indecisive, turned in that direction. He had thought of Mary often over there. He had thought of her quite intimately. He had hoped that some day when he was back she would give up her stenographic job and they'd be married. He'd step into that foremanship job that Doc Dulane had all-but-told-him would be waiting for him and then he'd be earning enough money for the both of them. It would be nice married to Mary, nice to have her close to him, warm, sweet—

Well, he was back now, but—

He saw a car before the neat, brown Crosby home. He hesitated at the white gate. She had company. He started past. There was a cry behind him.

"Matty! Matty Kane!" Mary's arms were around his neck. She was sobbing a little. "Matty, you're—you're back!"

For a moment he wanted to close his arms around her, bend her slender body to him, but he couldn't. There was a fierce hunger in him, but something held him back.

The scent of her soft chestnut hair was in his nostrils. She was warm and trembling. Then he saw the man behind her.

For the first time in months a spearing rush of anger went through Matty Kane and he had a definite idea of what he wanted to do. He wanted to hit Joe Percal in the middle of his white, smiling teeth. The army doc had said, "Do what you want. Get interested in something." Well, he wanted to hit Joe Percal now.

He started to put the girl aside, then the idea burned to ashes. He said, a lit-

tle lost suddenly, "It's good to see you, Mary."

She looked up quickly. Her long lashes became wet. She said softly, "And it's good to see you, Matty."

Joe Percal grinned again and said, "Hello, Kane," but Matty didn't even nod back. His eyes were wandering through the night.

And as the heat went out of Matty, he felt suddenly tired. It wasn't a physical tiredness, just a—a—he couldn't explain it. A car backfired down the street. He winced, and he knew she saw the flinch. He said quickly.

"I'll see you at the plant tomorrow, Mary. I want to walk awhile now. G'night." He didn't look at Percal. He turned and with big hands thrust into the pockets of the old leather jacket he moved on down the twi-lit street. Damn Joe Percal. Damn—everything.

The girl stood and watched him, tears growing in her wide dark eyes, a strange sadness shadowing her face.

**M**ATTY called on Doc Dulane the next morning. The "brains" of the Karbol Indians was also the head "think-tank" of this branch of the nation-wide concern, and Doc was all drive. "This new thing we're going on, after the government contracts are filled, will be the fastest-selling, hottest single-unit heater in the field. Look at these blueprints. We're changing over the entire plant. No. one line will take over the new storehouse. No. two—What's the matter, Matty?"

Doc had stopped his talking and was looking queerly at Matty.

Matty roused himself. He hadn't been interested in the new heaters Karbol was to put out or the new blueprints. His eyes had been on the slender form of Mary Crosby at the comptroller machine, but his thoughts even weren't on her. If asked, Matty couldn't have told exactly what he had been thinking of, but he knew it wasn't super-duper heaters, or plant make-over or even Mary Crosby's shapeliness.

A rusty caster out in the plant screeched on the cement floor and Matty instinctively pulled his head down into his shoulders and flicked his eyes aloft as if searching for the diving plane.

Doc Dulane's bright, pearly eyes saw it.

He folded the blueprints quietly. He changed the conversation.

"Coming out for football tonight, Matty?"

"Why, I—" Matty thought of the look in his Pop's eyes that would be there if he didn't report. He nodded. "Why, yes, I'll be out. I can pick up my work this afternoon at the plant if you want me."

"Skip the work for the time being. But come out and idle about on the field. We might need you this year—and badly."

Matty thought there was a peculiar insistence in Doc's words. He also thought Doc looked smaller and greyer, as if he were about to lose some of that drive that he was famous for. But it was as far as his thoughts went; he didn't try to go any farther. He was tired, not a physical weariness, but a sapping inertia within. He had no cause to wish, to go on, to do things.

He went out of the office, and Doc Du-lane touched his tongue thoughtfully to the center of his upper lip.

"Mary," he said finally, "that kid has lost it—his old drive."

The girl dropped her long lashes. They were wet. Last night she had seen the same thing. Matty Kane would never again be that "one helluva good fullback" of which the sports writers had written lovingly in the old days.

*A game, Matty thought. A game for kids and fellows who never grew up.* He pulled on the yellow football pants and squeezed the brown blocking pads down into the moleskins. He drew on the blue woolly jersey that had 65—his old number—on it and cinched the belt tight. The pads bulged underneath the jersey. He hitched them around. They fitted. Then he cocked one foot onto the bench and pulled on his cleats, first the right, then the left. It all came methodically. And his thoughts were: *A game for kids! But his pop wanted him to go out because of Bud and so he would.*

Men came in, glanced at him, dressed and went out. They went out on a jogging run. He didn't know many of them. Smith and Haley, he knew. They said hello. Jim Nails dropped a friendly hand to his shoulder. Jim was a quarterback, a little old now, but a heady player. Jim was over thirty.

Matty swung the blue-painted helmet by

the strap and caught it under his arm. He walked out.

Smith and Haley came behind him. They had a football. Haley yelled to him and tossed. Matty jogged for it, thrust out a big paw and the fast-moving ball stuck. It looked a minor miracle.

Matty brought it to his thick chest and yelled back. Haley raced across the green field.

Matty waited until the big, bony half-back was on the forty, then he let go. Haley crossed the fifty and the ball was there also. *Just as in the old days with Bud,* Matty thought, then he moved away from the two veteran halfbacks toward the punters.

Smith scratched his red head. "Ain't the old Matty Kane we used to know. Guess Percal is right."

Haley said, "He hasn't lost his football touch, but—" His unspoken words were eloquent.

The wind was right and Matty caught the words. He shrugged. He continued walking, unmoved.

AT the kickers, Matty paused. He looked down the line. None looked like punters. He could see Doc's touch, however, and the five guys were trying to follow Doc's pointers. Matty stepped forward to a hawk-nosed lad with sandy hair.

"Here. You're holding that ball too high an' close to your chest. Put it there. Drop it. Swing." There wasn't emphasis to his words, just plain talk, and a chunky man down the line, who didn't recognize Matty, scowled, "Suppose you show us, wise guy."

Matty didn't feel the old spurt of anger. He said, "Center for me, Sandy." The hawk-nosed lad dropped over the ball.

He drilled it back. Matty snapped it to him with his big hands, poised the ball that suddenly seemed small in his wide fingers, dropped it, and his thick leg came up and pointed skyward. The dull boom brought eyes from other groups. The eyes widened. The ball was small and working in lazy spirals up into the blue.

It hit sixty yards down the field.

The chunky kid's voice was awed. "Gee, mister, I didn't mean to be fresh."

Matty nodded. "No harm done. Try to do it as I did," and he passed on toward the group working at the tackling pits.

But Doc's voice stopped him and he turned. Doc *was* smaller and skinnier. He was nothing but a wisp. All that was left was the voice and the heart. Matty said, "What is it, Doc?"

"Come over and watch our first string run."

"Sure," Matty said. He didn't ask any questions. He didn't feel any curiosity. Doc's first team would be fast and smooth and tough babies and that would be that.

He was right. Doc had seven burlies on the front line and four good men back of it. Before he and Doc even got close Matty could see Doc had a team, the way they were whipping through plays and signals. But as he got closer, he frowned. He recognized the men.

Smith and Haley weren't at the halfback positions; both were playing end. He looked to the backs and with a start saw Joe Percal at the left half running slot. In Matty's old position was a yellow-headed giant of a kid, and another big youngster was at the blocking spot. Jim Nails was at quarter.

Matty said, "You've juggled them around a bit, Doc."

Doc nodded. "It might work better. Got more weight and power in the backfield now."

Matty didn't answer. He noticed in the huddle that Nails wasn't doing the talking; Percal was. His fleshy lips were moving in fast whispers. All the youngsters on the team nodded quickly and the eleven blue-clads fanned out.

They ran the play and it unfolded like a charm.

Matty said, "You're using the double wing formation now?" It was a question, tinged with surprise. Doc wrinkled up his thin nose.

"Gotta do something to surprise this league once in a while. They're onto my system. We missed out on the championship three years running now—ever since you left."

Matty rubbed his nose thoughtfully. Mom had written him about the team. Matty had thought they'd done pretty good for war conditions. Runner-up each time. Then Doc's words echoed in his mind.

"You say they're onto your system. Whose system is that?"

"Percal worked it out. He's the driver

now, Matty, and he seems to be doing a pretty good job. I think we can beat the Bulldogs next Saturday."

"The Bulldogs?" Matty frowned. "You open against them?"

"Yeah." There was worry in Doc's voice.

Matty watched the team spurting up the field in the flashy double wingback plays. The plays looked good; the team looked good. What was Doc worrying about?

He said, "I think you'll win." His eyes drifted from the practice field to the white clouds over the red and green house tops. The sun felt warm on his neck. *Football was merely a game*, he thought. *Why get serious about it. It never harmed anyone, particularly, or did anyone any special good.* He said absently, "You'll win, Doc."

Doc Dulane looked at Matty and his pearly-grey eyes took on an angry tinge.

Matty reported for work the next day. Oddly he couldn't remain still at home. There was a queer churning inside him that made him want to keep moving. And yet there was no particular drive to his movements. He lived in the room he and Bud had occupied together and he thought maybe that was the reason for his restlessness. He put all Bud's things in the closet, then went to work.

Doc seemed a changed man. He was curt. He didn't take him down to the plant personally but pressed a button. Percal showed up. Percal put him to the packing department at the end of Line 2. Matty felt the sting but it went away quickly, as it had the other night when he'd met Percal and Mary. In the office, he'd noticed, Mary hadn't given him a glance. And the night before, neither had told him Percal had his old job.

Work progressed swiftly. He knew all about the packing department. He easily kept up with the other men. He could have exceeded them, forced them to try and keep up to him, but he didn't have the urge. At the short three-thirty whistle, calling football men to practice, he flinched momentarily, then walked out with the other gridiron candidates.

They didn't notice his flinch. They didn't notice Matty Kane at all. And Matty felt the sting of that also, but it passed quickly. He was going out because of his

Pop and because of Bud. Let these guys think they were big pumpkins.

The tow-headed, young fullback was noisy in the locker room. He was pulling some horseplay on Jim Nails, when the latter would come in and open his locker. Haley and Smith, the two veterans, watched and said nothing. Matty saw that and thought it queer. The three were pretty good pals.

Then the other big youngster who had taken over Smith's blocking spot in the backfield, put some finishing touches to the trick, and even Joe Percal laughed loud. Matty frowned, but he continued dressing.

After a while Nails came in. He opened his locker and the can of water tumbled out and wet his socks and shoes. There was a roar of laughter, led by the tow-head. Nails' thin, freckled face didn't move. He looked around, then quietly took off his wet clothes and began dressing.

Matty thought that was the queerest thing he'd ever seen. Nails taking that.

This day he saw what a hold Percal and the tow-head and his pal had on the team. The three ruled the roost. They ripped through scrimmage, tearing the seconds line to pieces; they bossed loudly, ordering the veterans on the line to do this, take that man out, and "where the hell were you on that play?" stuff. Matty chewed his lip. The plays looked good. The team looked good. But—was Doc right in worrying a little?

Matty shrugged and kept on running through the plays he was learning with the scrubs.

He was standing outside the plant dressing room after practice with half an idea in his head to wait for Jim Nails when a car slid to the curb. Turning, he saw it was Percal's roadster. Then he frowned. Mary was driving it. She settled behind the wheel and waited.

Matty rubbed his jaw. She had passed him to park ahead. She had seen him, obviously, and yet— He looked at her small, pretty head, looking straight over the radiator cap, and he caught it. At the same moment Percal came from the dressing room, ash-blond hair nicely in place, a pretty smile on his fleshy lips. He saw Matty and said loudly, "Learn those signals, Kane, we might need you to give us

a rest a minute or two Saturday." Then Percal turned toward his car and the waiting girl.

Matty didn't wait for Nails. He moved down the street for his home, big fists deep in his jacket pockets. He thought, *what would Bud do about all this?* The thought went over and over in his mind until by its very repetition it lost its force and Matty turned into the yard gate, his brown eyes stolid and quite blank.

WHEN the Karbol Machine Works and the Cranshaw Company elevens met, it might as well have been declared a national holiday in that part of the state—everybody came for the blood-letting. The Indians and the Bulldogs were at it again!

Going into the locker room Saturday at one o'clock, Matty saw it hadn't changed. Cars—good cars and war wrecks—jammed every available space around the red-brick buildings, and even down into the streets of the grey shacks. The alley was packed. And still, people streamed toward the grid-iron with its wooden bleachers which Matty could see between the tall smoke stacks.

Matty dressed quickly. The big tow-head was talking loudly, telling what he was going to do today to Duke Farlan, the legendary fullback of the Bulldogs. Boisterously, Percal put in his oar, feeding the kid's ego. It was evident Percal thought it was a good morale-builder. Matty noted Jim Nails was saying nothing, and both Haley and Smith were quiet.

At the half hour Doc came in, spoke a few words and sent them out. That was unusual for Doc, and the conviction came over Matty that Doc *knew they were going to lose the game today!*

Matty felt badly for Doc. The little guy deserved a better break. But when the squad ran out, Matty was in the wake, trudging.

Matty knew what the Bulldogs would look like—like two-score guys hewn out of oak trees four feet in diameter. He was right. They wore bright red jerseys with big white numbers on chest and back. Their shoulder pads and hip pads stuck out making them look bigger than they were. Their bare legs were thick and bulging with unspent power. The Bulldogs looked like what the sportswriters



said of them—topkick in the Industrial League this year.

Matty jogged around, threw a few balls, caught a few. He heard the band play. He walked to the bench. A kid game . . .

Percal went to midfield. He flipped a coin with Duke Farlan. The big, sandy-haired visitor won. He elected to kick, and Percal shouted to his men. Matty thought Percal was always shouting.

He watched Farlan. The guy was big and tough and not above a little dirt in the pinches. He and Farlan had had many a stiff battle in the past. Matty moved his wide shoulders uneasily, then settled to a more comfortable position on the bench. Farlan was just another guy who had never grown up.

The kick-off went to the tow-headed kid who'd done all the talking in the locker room about what they were going to do to Farlan. His name, Matty had learned, was Whitey.

Farlan walked through the blue blockers and hit the kid. The kid didn't know what socked him.

When he came out of it, Percal began his shouting. Matty wondered if Doc had mistaken that Hitler-ranting for drive, and the thought grated on his nerves. He watched the Karbols line up in their fancy double wingback spread.

Haley made a nice hole at tackle, but Percal and Whitey didn't kick out of their fancy shuttling quick enough. Duke Farlan walked into them, pinned Percal down hard on the eight.

There was delay in the Karbol huddle. Matty saw Percal talking fast, then he saw Nails snap something, and Matty breathed an instinctive sigh of relief as he saw the chunky linesman he'd coached that first day drop back into the punting slot. Nails still had his guts, Matty decided, oddly relieved.

The ball tumbled sloppily to the fifty, where Smith, the veteran, pinned the Bulldog quarterback in his tracks. Matty hunched forward. He knew now the game was really going to begin.

It did. Farlan didn't waste any time on fancy shuttles. He put on the power, straight, sheer drive. He and a big husky, and the two moved through the Karbol line, through Whitey, and down the field in five-six-seven yard jaunts.

They were on the twenty. Percal was raving. Whitey was shouting and swinging his fists, close up back of the line. Matty saw Nails, Smith and Haley dig in silently and he felt for the veterans. They were doing the real fighting.

Then Farlan showed his craftiness and dropped a pass into Whitey's wide-open zone and the Bulldogs had a touchdown.

**F**ARLAN and his outfit had the ball again. It looked like a dull afternoon.

But Karbol held on the ten. Jim Nails sneaked a pass. On their forty Jim tried to get going but it was no dice. They punted. Farlan and his big running mate again. Matty shifted forward. It all looked so damned silly . . .

"Kane!" It was Doc's voice, sharp. "In there for Whitey."

Matty grimaced. He hadn't asked for any part of this. But he shrugged and pulled into his helmet. The stands roared at the sight of him walking out.

He stood back of his sweaty, panting line. Percal, Nails and a second stringer were in the backfield with him. He saw Farlan across. Farlan nodded with a grin and then came through center—without the grin.

Matty saw the hole and moved into it. He heard the crowd roaring his name and then Farlan hit. He hit like a cement tower.

But Matty's shoulders were wide. Just being in the hole did it. Farlan made but a yard.

Matty crawled to his feet. Farlan, he decided, hadn't lost any of his drive.

But Farlan didn't try the center any more. He had heard things about Matty Kane since the soldier had come back, but now there was respect in his eyes for the big, brown-eyed fellow with the impassive face.

He watched Matty's position and pulled a pass. It went into the second-stringer's territory and Nails downed the receiver on the Karbol twenty. First and ten. The crowd began the old chant to hold that line and Matty saw Haley and Smith look at him. Even Nails was looking at him. What the hell, he thought with an edge of anger. This wasn't his fight. Let Percal yell. Let that mouthy Whitey come in and shout, wave his big fists.

The blue-clads settled down, silently. Farlan and his juggernauts came on. They scored.

Matty saw Whitey and the other back coming out and he peeled his hot, wet helmet.

In the second quarter Duke Farlan had a field day. He made two twenty-yard runs, completed six passes and engineered his rampaging mates to eight first downs. Matty idly wondered how the loud-mouthed Percal and his two cocky halfbacks ever held them to one touchdown. It was Nails and Haley and Smith doing the real work in there, he knew.

And then the call came again, "Kane!" He got to his feet. Why couldn't Doc let him rest these last three minutes?

The whistle blew impatiently.

Percal was bleeding at the nose. He was white and panting but he said loudly, "Get in there, gang! Rub 'em down!" The men on the other team grinned. A halfback laughed. "You show up, mouthy." Matty worked his helmet on. Kid stuff . . .

He crouched back of the line and Farlan sent the talking halfback in. Matty flung himself. He was slow. The back ripped through for a first. The back got up, still laughing. He saw Matty.

"Say, ain't you the great Matty Kane? The pug I used to hear so much about?"

Matty said nothing. The guy chuckled. "We sure got your number, big boy. I was only a sub the last time you played against us, the time you and that lucky brother of yours beat us, but it's different now—eh, Kane?"

At the mention of Bud, Matty said huskily, "Play ball, kid."

The other thought the sudden whiteness was a sign of fear. The halfback yelled to Farlan, "Send me through there again."

The big sandy-haired captain said, "Shut up," and glanced at Matty, but the halfback kept it up. They ran a play around Smith. Again Matty was slow on the tackle. The halfback made six yards. He crowed, "Where's that lucky, pass-grabbing brother of yours now? He should be here so we could really pour it on."

Matty felt his jowls knot. Again Farlan snapped at the kid to shut up. A play came through tackle. Matty set his thick legs. Loud-mouth came skitting through. Matty hit him.

The kid got up. He had made nothing but he was cocky. "Trying to put me out, huh, Kane?" He said it ugly.

Matty worked his fingers into the canvas of his pants. The slow churning within him was coming into his throat. Mouthy kids on his team. A mouthy kid on the other side. Bragging, bossy Joe Percal running the Karbol's. Doc yelling at him . . . What the hell was wrong around here?

"Let me show him, Duke. The lucky Kanes, that's what we used to call 'em at Cranshaw!" The red halfback again.

MATTY'S anger was husking his throat. It was crawling into his mouth. It had passed the mark it had reached the first night he'd seen Percal with Mary. Or the time Percal had shouted to him outside the locker room with Mary waiting. It was a live, hot coil in his mouth and his teeth were suddenly set over it. His jaws were like steel traps holding it in. And it was coming up, trying to get out. Lucky Kanes! The guy was calling Bud names! That young punk!—A film of red came over his brown eyes. And it wasn't the haze of the red Bulldog jerseys. It was blinding, Matty Kane anger.

Loud-mouth was going around Smith's end. Smith lunged, missed. But a blue thunderbolt went over Smith's rump and hit the runner. Matty struck with everything he had.

The kid went down. He lay still a minute, then got up. The only thing that had saved him was that he was going in the direction of Matty's tackle. The kid looked at Matty. The kid's face was grey. Matty stared thin-eyed at him, face devoid of all expression. The kid turned away.

Farlan swore under his breath across the line. "Damn, now watch out. I told you, Spear, to shut your damned mouth."

At that second the gun went off.

MATTY walked into the dressing room. Whitey got up. "Listen, Kane, let me give you some advice. Play back from that—"

Matty hit him. A lineman stumbled up, blustering, "You can't—" He stopped. He had seen Matty's eyes. Percal came swiftly from the other end, and then Doc came into the room. Silence clamped the room.

Matty spoke, and he didn't recognize his own voice. "Doc, we'll play this second half the old way. Nails, Haley, Smith and myself in the backfield. Percal takes his old right end—"

"Like hell—"

"*Shut up!*" Doc's voice crackled. He glared at Percal. His grey, pearly eyes had new glint in them. "What's that, Kane?"

"Percal stays in there if he shows fight. That goes for every man starting this second half. We're using the old T, the old signals. We all know them; it's Doc's system."

Nails' quiet voice came, "Think we can change over this quick, Matty?"

Matty stared hard out the window. "I know every bit of football I ever learned. It's all just like yesterday. You men follow me."

The ball came twisting lazily out of the sky. Matty moved under it. He said without looking at Smith, "Going to the right, Smith. Follow me and watch for the lateral."

Duke Farlan had his eyes on Matty. Matty ran and gave ground. He dodged two red-clads, stiff-armed a third, and then Farlan made his bid.

The instant Farlan left his feet, Matty whirled, tossed to Smith. Matty took Farlan's smash on his hip. He rolled on Farlan, pinned the man, and fleet-footed Smith criss-crossed down field.

Touchdown.

Farlan got to his feet. "You won't do it again, Kane." Under his breath he cursed a halfback named Spear.

Matty said, "Let your mouthy pal bring back the kick-off." Matty trotted down field and he kicked the point. 21-7.

He put his leather to the kick-off ball with a cold, reasoning power. That man on the far right down there had called Bud lucky, had wanted Bud here to show him. Matty thinned his lips over his teeth. Well, Bud wasn't here and never would be back on this field, but there was another Kane here—Bud's older brother. Matty raced over the grass for the halfback taking in the pignskin.

Farlan saw Matty coming, saw his eyes. The big captain shoved out his jaw. He waited until Matty was almost on the mouthy kid, then Farlan lunged. But Matty knew all the tricks. He hammered

out both hands, rammed Farlan's nose into the dirt, and using Farlan's huge shoulders for a pivot, he swung his body over, vaulting. He hit the halfback upright, each face to face.

There was a wet, sodden smash. The man went down, Matty on top. Matty got up. He jerked the other to his feet. The man's nose was a crimson pulp.

Matty said harshly, "That wasn't a lucky Kane you hit, bub. That was a hard Kane."

Farlan was there. Farlan was losing his temper. "Pretty high tackling, Kane."

Matty snapped. "Don't go soft on me, Duke."

Farlan said to the man. "Stay in with me; we'll get this guy." The Bulldogs went to work.

Matty roved back of the line. He stopped three straight plunges. Farlan kicked. Matty ran back. He led Jim Nails on a ten yard run-back. Both Farlan and the other man ignored Jim and tried for Matty. Matty took them both out of the play, getting two knees in the hip for his trouble. He grimaced and got to his feet.

Nails, a new glint in his eye, called a cross-buck with Matty carrying through tackle. It was the old T formation. Matty took the pill from Haley's hands and ripped into the smashing forwards.

He felt backs hitting him one-two—and then Farlan. Matty kicked out two more yards and his nose shoveled dirt. He crawled to his feet.

He'd made eight yards.

Nails yipped. Haley and Smith grinned. They were all looking at him, all but Percal. Matty rammed center for the first. They were on the fifty. "Let's go!" Smith yelled.

Matty felt something creep up under that cold burning in his chest. He had anger for those men across the line, but now a new feeling was coming. Something Nails and Smith and Haley, by their looks toward him, were putting in his heart. He yelled back, "Call 'em out, Jim." And he didn't recognize his own voice.

In that instant the Karbol Machine Works eleven was fused. All but one, and he was Percal. On the next play Nails ripped out the signals and Haley and Smith spear-headed into the tackle spot, and Matty went lunging, tying himself on-

to their tail. He went flying over figures, one yard, two yards, five yards. . . . He was in the open! There was a blue Karbol man ahead of him and two red figures—Farlan and Spear.

Matty raced for the open side, yelling to his man, "Take the first one!" His man went at the first one, which was towering Farlan. Farlan showed his teeth, jerked back his fists. Matty's man flinched and went down in a groveling, shameful attempt at blocking.

Matty slowed, watched the men converge. The sideline pinched. At the last instant he gave Farlan a hand to the helmet and whirled, throwing his feet wide. He felt his jersey give way in the other's hand. He saw the mouthy kid try to lunge back for him. Matty showed him a fistful of knuckles and was running from them both. He went over and the Karbol stands were wild and screaming.

Cranshaw 21—Karbol 13!

Karbol lined up for the kick. Matty said, "Wait." He walked over to Percal. He said coldly, "Get off, Percal."

The man blustered, "What's the idea?"

Matty closed his fists. Percal dropped his eyes and went.

**A** MAN came from the bench. Matty started toward the kicking spot, then stopped. He stared. The end coming in was Whitey.

Matty said, "What are you doing out here?"

Whitey bit his bruised lip where Matty had hit him. But his eyes were steady. "Doc—I asked Doc to send me out. I played end in prep school. I—I can get along."

Humility, pleading, and yet a certain amount of pride were in big Whitey's voice, his eyes.

Matty looked. That wet, tousled hair . . . those blue eyes, so direct, so boyish . . . He felt his heart turn over, it suddenly was aching so hard. The big guy reminded him of Bud in that instant.

He said, "Okey, Whitey." And his throat hurt as he said it.

He kicked the goal. 21-14. He gathered in the kick-off. But they didn't fool Farlan this time. They tried an end run, a fake buck with a pass tied to it. Nothing

worked. Quarter time was fast approaching. Whitey, in the huddle, said, "Throw me one, Matty. Throw it fast and long as I saw you that first day."

Matty blinked. He hadn't known this kid had been watching. Why—and then the thought occurred to him that he had been something of a hero to this kid all the time. And he had been failing the kid.

Matty got the ball low, faked a spinner to Haley, and angled to the right. Two red linemen broke through. Nails dropped the first, but Smith's block was low on the other. The man vaulted.

Matty zigzagged backward. He had a glimpse of Whitey cutting like a blue thunderbolt in back of Farlan. Red linemen were taking pot shots at Matty now. He couldn't wait any longer. He pulled back his arm and let go. He went down under a wall of red.

He heard the crowd scream. He wriggled to an elbow. He saw Whitey going over the goal line like a deer, all alone. 21-20.

Matty half lay there. He heard his name rolling over and over that field and then back. He saw the green grass, the men's jerseys, blue and red. The sun glinted warm and yellow. Smoke from the great stacks drifted over the field . . . What the hell? A hero . . . the kid looked like Bud. . . .

"A game," he murmured. "Just a game, but—*what a game.*"

He got up and he ran down the grass-ripped gridiron to his mates. His eyes were bright and his rocky, brown face was a beautiful, bleeding picture.

Drive? Sure, that's what they wanted, were looking for. Doc, Mary, Jim Nails—all of them. Hell, if that's what they wanted . . . .

That night the *Karbol City Times* said in its lead story: "Today the Karbol Blue Indians blasted the Cranshaw Bulldogs off the gridiron and out of the Industrial League championship race with a mighty, stunning 42-21 upset, and Matty Kane, that old pile driving . . ."

But Matty wasn't reading it. He was visiting at a neat brown cottage. He was doing as the army doc had told him, "Do what you want. Get interested in something."

# GUN-TALK SERENADE

*By William R. Cox*

**Gun-swift men. Fight talk. Range War. Bull Petty wanted control of the valley. Rim Logan defied him. The thunder clouds gathered . . . and a tide of fate swept Rim to a meeting with death.**

**R**IM LOGAN said, "The trouble with you is that you're always in trouble. Why don't you lay off the red-eye this trip?"

Owgie Decker said, "I ain't thinkin' about likker. It's Bull Petty. It's his outfit, from Cal Timmins to old Blackie. You better be thinkin' about 'em, too. Bull as much as told you to take his offer for the ranch or get out."

Rim Logan looked ahead on the dusty road to where the buildings of Sunset clustered under the hot sun. He was a rawboned man, with sandy hair and freckles and pale-blue eyes. His cheekbones were prominent, his long nose strong, his mouth mobile on occasion. He said, "Bull Petty just talks thataway. He's been runnin' the Valley for so long he thinks he owns it. The rest of us ain't as big as Bull and we all came after he was well started. But Bull won't start a war."

Owgie said, "He better stop clutterin' up the French girls' shop. He ain't buyin' dresses fer his outfit. There's no women on the Box B fer him to order hats."

Rim laughed gently. "You're just jealous. Clara's mad at you fer gettin' drunk and gamblin' with Poker Dan and you imagine Bull Petty's beatin' your time. Trouble is, Owgie, you got a wild streak. You been tryin' hard to down it, workin' with me. I give you credit, partner. But it's in you and you got to fight it all the time. Don't start anything with Bull, make your peace with Clara and let's get in and outa town without trouble."

Owgie said, "I know you're right, Rim. If I could get a start, somehow, and marry Clara. . . ."

He was scarcely more than a boy and he had never saved a dollar of his meager puncher's pay. He had pink cheeks and brown eyes which shone innocently and people sometimes tried to take advantage of his deceptive gullibility. Owgie could fight like a wildcat and was a mean hand at poker, but unlucky. He had been a problem of the Valley country, a wild orphan, when Rim Logan took him out to his small Currycomb spread and practically made him a partner in the budding cattle ranch.

It was part of Rim's philosophy to run with his whims—and he had seen something in Owgie that he liked. Rim was a worker, without prejudice, without trimmings, a cattleman who had striven hard to get together his little herd on Currycomb. . . .

The Valley was really a plain, split by the Blue River. It was vast, fertile country, but the farmers had not yet come to plow the grassy land. The ranchers still held the Valley, first Bull Petty, with his big Box B, then Rim Logan, then Gene Doheny with Timber, Tom Messner with Lazy M, Rod Rake of Deadline, nearest the river. There were others, on the northern edge of the Valley, but these were not in Bull Petty's domain.

For it was true that big Bull dominated the Valley, Rim thought, riding into Sunset. Owgie might fret, the others might growl in their beards, but Rim faced it with equanimity. Bull had the herds, he had the money. He was a loud-voiced, boisterous, too-plain-spoken rip-snorter. But he had the power and his dozen tough riders were not to be crossed with impunity.



*The man had waited there for a shot at him.*

Yet, Rim shrugged, hitching his grey horse to the rack outside the Poker Bar, the Valley got along all right. If Bull wanted to buy him out, Rim might even sell. His ranch, closest to the Box B, kept Bull from spreading westward, and Bull needed grazing ground. There had been no open infringing by anyone in the Valley. There was no reason for concern. He would see Bull this afternoon and talk it over peacefully. There was a ranch

farther north, on the New Mexico road, a nice little place Rim could buy with the money from Bull. . . .

**T**HE Poker Bar, presided over by the white-haired Poker Dan, was full. The ranchers were all there. Gene Doheny, a quiet, stocky man, held Rim by the arm. He said, "I hear you're sellin' out. Sorry, Rim."

Tom Messner, father of eight children,



was leaving to help his wife with the shopping. He paused and said, "Nobody likes to see you leave, Rim."

Rod Rake came close to where Gene and Rim stood and said, "Bull couldn't run me off thataway." Rake had narrow-set eyes and always needed a haircut and his wife and kids needed shoes. His Deadline was in some ways the best land in the Valley, but he was a shiftless man, and a ready victim of Poker Dan.

Rim said calmly, "Have a drink, Rod . . . I ain't sold out yet."

"Faugh!" spat Rod. "Bull allows as how he's takin' over Currycomb. That's good enough fer me."

A faint annoyance raised its head within Rim. He drank his whiskey and Gene said, "Let's haul outa here."

They pushed through the crowd. Poker Dan waylaid them at the door. He was the tallest man in the Valley and his white thatch was thick and wavy. He had a hawk nose and shrewd eyes. He said in a low voice, "Bull and seven of his men are in town. Hear him tell it, he's already got Currycomb. I don't like it, Rim. Bull's gettin' too big fer his pants. Ought to be taken down a peg."

Rim nodded. "Thanks, Dan. I'll see you later."

On the one street of tiny Sunset—two saloons, one store, a dozen houses, a smithy, the bank and the French girls' millinery shop—Gene said, "I'm next to you. Bull will want me soon."

"I don't look at it that way," said Rim mildly. "That Carter place up country will do me. It's as good as the Valley and I'm thinkin' about Herefords. The longhorns are about done. . . ."

"Why should Bull take the Valley?" demanded Gene. "You and me—we're the only ones ain't married and got kids. If Bull gets us out, he c'n run the rest ragged and get 'em fer nothin'. Sure he'll pay us good prices. But they'll be shoved around."

"No skin off our ears, is it, Gene?" said Rim. "Well, mebbe it is. Mebbe Tom and Rod should be talked to. . . ."

Gene said, "If you sell, I'll sell. Then Bull's got 'em."

Tom Messner's kids certainly were cute. Rascals, most of them, but they were a happy crowd, like steps, and stout Mrs.

Messner controlled them pretty good, piling them into the wagon. Rim watched them, waved at them, saw that Tom had remained in town.

The Palace House, which was the other saloon, was run by Peg-leg Calloway. It was Bull Petty's favorite place and most of the other ranchers let him and his men have it. The Box B horses were at the rail, heads down, patiently waiting for their masters. Down the street Ownie Decker, shaven and powdered, self-conscious but determined, was entering the shop run by the two pretty French girls, the town's beauties, whose parents had been killed by Comanches years before Rim had come to the Valley.

Clara was a pert young piece, always flirting. She and Ownie were going through a wild courtship. Lou French, the elder sister, was about twenty-three, quiet, dark, serious. Everyone chased Clara. Only Rim seemed interested in Lou. . . .

Not that the town even knew that. They had met on the road, by chance last year. Since then they had ridden together a lot, until Lou knew the Currycomb and the hills behind it as well as Rim.

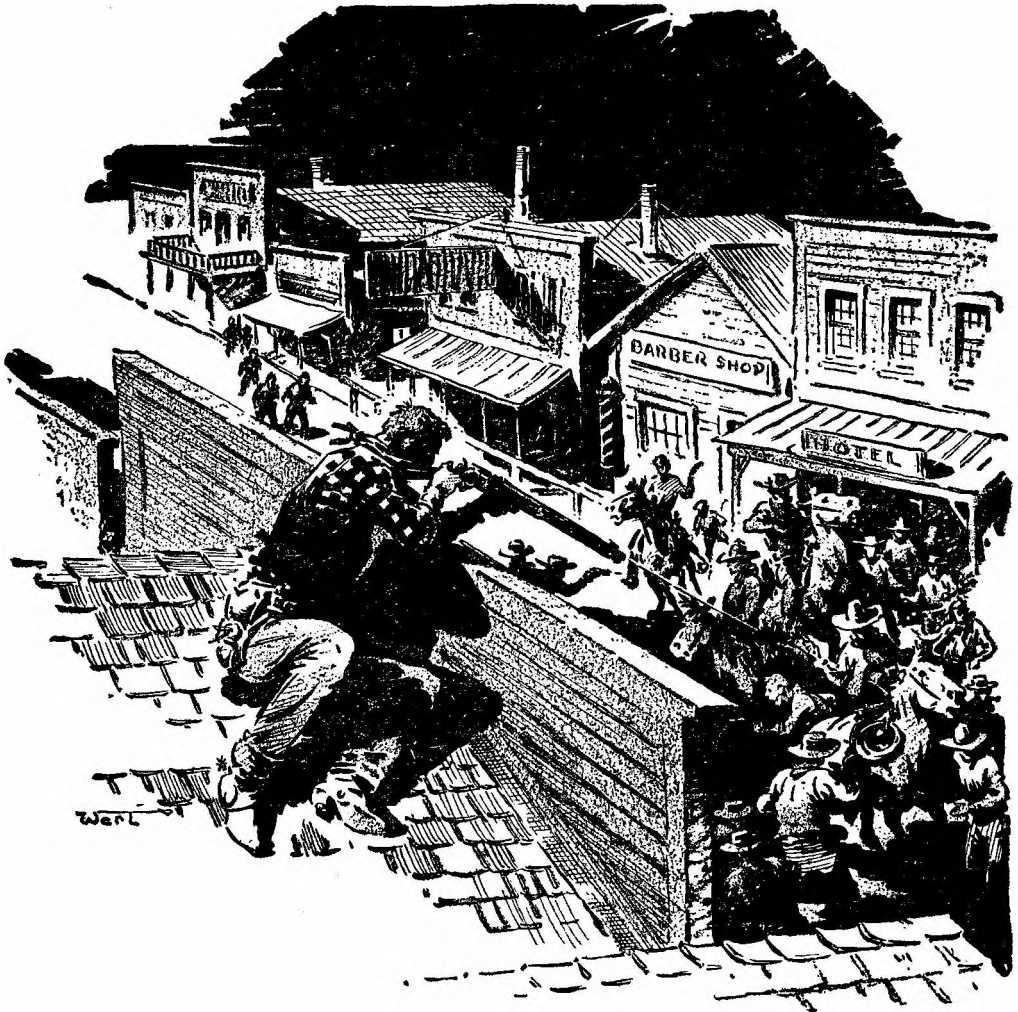
Ownie came out with Clara, looking relieved. She had a shopping bag and they headed for the store, laughing together, whispering and showing their happiness to the world.

Gene said, "Ownie won't want to leave Sunset until he gits Clara to say 'yes.' What you gonna do about Ownie?"

Rim said impatiently, "I haven't said I'd sell yet, have I?"

"Bull says you will," said Gene grimly. He was a solid, short man, with a round, firm jaw. He was a good friend to have, Rim knew.

Bull Petty came out of the Palace and swaggered down the street, but not toward Gene and Rim. People waved at him and called his name, grinning, and Bull waved back, making expansive gestures with his big fists. He had a round, brick-red face and bowed legs, but he was a powerful, thick-chested man. He had a commanding way of moving, his slightest gesture was belligerent. Yet he had a good-natured, egotistic, but friendly manner which drew people. Three kids came along and he stopped to dispense coins for



candy sticks at the store. . . .

He went into the millinery shop. Rim watched gravely, waiting for him to miss Clara and come out, irate, and go on a search which would surely get Ownie into trouble again.

Bull Petty did not come out of the shop. Gene was talking about the Valley and what it meant to people who had raised families there, and how pleasant it was, and how the water was better than any place he had ever been. "Bull wants the Blue for the water. He's talkin' about piping it to his place. He's bought a lot of lumber and glass and stuff. All of a sudden he's expandin' all over the place," Gene said. "Like he's got an itch, or somethin'."

Rim started walking without words. Gene stared at him. Rim was always polite. Quiet, but interested in what a

man said. Now he walked right away from Gene, leaving him standing there. He walked slowly, down the boardwalk of Main Street, past the square box which was the French girls' shop and home. . . . Gene shrugged and went back to the Poker for another drink.

**R**IM'S head swivelled as he passed the low window which showed one frivolous bonnet and a limp, frilled garment. There was a small counter upon which Lou did the cutting. Bull Petty had his leg slung over the edge of it. His sombrero was in his hand and one booted leg swung. Bull was very much at home.

Lou French was bent over some sewing. Bull's heavy voice came through the open window, "An' I got a line on a pianny! Gonna have the biggest, finest ranch in

Texas, afore I git through. Land and ranch houses! I'm pipin' water from the Blue. . . ."

Rim kept on going and lost the rest. He had seen Lou raise her head and smile at Bull Petty. There had been a soft look on her face like . . . like the time they had come upwind upon the doe and its fawn, out near the Blue, and the two animals had frozen, staring comically and beautifully at the two people, making such a lovely picture that Lou had spoken out, scaring them into wonderful, swift flight. Then she had got that soft look on her face and Rim almost popped the question at her, only he hadn't sold his cattle yet and his house was only a rough cabin and he was far from sure of himself.

He walked down to the Chink's and somehow ate something which he did not even recognize. He wanted to be alone for then, and he was alone. He was a man who used his mind, slowly, but surely, a careful man. There was no violence in him, except for great cause. He was a worker and he was willing to take his time. These had seemed virtues in a rough and tough frontier. He had forged ahead slowly, but he had got his own spread with his own hands. Of the small ranchers in the Valley, he was the strongest and the smartest and he had been content with that.

Now, in the light of Bull Petty's riches and the soft look on Lou French's face, all was ashes. He finished his meal, stubbornly, because he had paid for it and knew he would be hungry later if he did not eat. He got up and went out on Main Street and toward the Poker Bar.

Cal Timmins, lank and ugly, stoop-shouldered and slightly drunk, with a nasty gleam in his eye, came out of the Palace. Behind him were Pinky, Walleye, Big Jeff and Little Jeff, Miguel and Blackie . . . all Box B riders, all proud Bull Petty men. Timmins shouted, "Hiya, Rim! Leave me that iron stove, huh? Gonna use your shack for the line riders. When yuh leavin', Rim?"

The others looked at him as though he were a hound dog or a cayuse which had been sold and was to pass from ken. That is, with some slight interest, but no emotion. Cal said, "Mebbe I'll buy a couple of your broke-down ponies, if yuh

ain't gonna need 'em no more."

Bull Petty strode out of the French girls' shop. He boomed, "Here I am, Rim. Didn't mean t' keep yuh waitin'. I'm ready to do business."

Across the street Gene Doheny stopped in the door of the Poker, his shoulders squared. Rod Rake slipped behind the Palace and in the back way and listened from behind the door. Rim looked about at Sunset. The sun had sunk a bit in the west, softening the outlines of the bare, gaunt buildings. This was the town he had lived by, if not in, for five years. Here he had proudly banked the money from his first sale of yearlings. . . .

He turned and looked at Bull Petty. The man was big, all right. Taller than Rim, who was six feet in his stocking feet. Wider and heavier and richer. A man who could take Rim's ranch away from him whether or not he liked it.

Rim said clearly, "No use, Bull. I'm not sellin'."

**S**ILENCE fell. The faces of the riders from Box B turned from disinterest to amazement, then went cautiously solemn and expressionless.

Rim did not wait to bandy words. He managed to grin coolly at Bull, nod and cross the street to where Gene's face had lighted amazingly. Ownie walked Clara from the store, still deep in her nearness, head down, not noticing anything about him.

Ownie bumped heavily into Cal Timmins, who had turned to watch Rim cross the street. Cal jerked around, cursing.

Rim froze and Gene Doheny said, "Hell! That's hard luck!"

Then many things happened, but worst of all, Rim began to run across the street, hampered by his riding boots, lurching, as fast as possible. . . .

There was a circle and Rim was in the middle of it. Ownie had blood on his face where Cal had hit him. Clara had been whisked away to her sister by Bull Petty the moment hostilities started.

Rim said steadily, "Lay off, Cal. You can fight him, but haul your men off."

Cal came silently, with a rush. Ownie buckled down to it. The Box B men crowded in. Rim called, "Back off!"

There was commotion on the outskirts

of the crowd. Gene Doheny plunged through, his round head sunk into his shoulders, siding Rim, growling, "Make it a fair fight!"

It was silly as hell, Rim thought, but here it was. Small ranchers aligned against big, all through a slight accident, a careless word. He watched Ownie, whose fists were clever, cut Cal's face until it bled far worse than Ownie's lip. Cal was giving ground.

It would be better, Rim thought lugubriously, if Cal landed a lucky punch and knocked out Ownie. It wouldn't hurt the tough youngster much and Box B would feel vindicated and things would calm down. But Ownie had struck the first blow, at the swear word which had sullied Clara's ears, and there was nothing Rim could do.

Except he had to watch the Box B men. They were clannish and could be very hard customers when aroused. Big Jeff and Little Jeff were the worst after Cal Timmins. The giant and the ugly little wry-neck were ornery. . . .

Ownie, stylish like a professional, left-handed Cal's bullish rush to nothingness, then crossed a beautiful right. Cal caught it on the nose and gore was all over his shirt. Bull Petty's big voice roared from down the street.

"Stop thet fight!"

**T**HE two Jeffs surged forward. Each seized one of Ownie's arms. Cal grinned through the blood, hauled back and started a haymaker from the ground.

Gene and Rim struck together. Rim chose Big Jeff and rammed his bony fist almost down the giant's throat. Gene knocked Little Jeff clean out of the circle of men. Cal missed his punch and fell into a ripping blow from Ownie which up-ended him in the dust.

Then Pinky, Walleye and Miguel fell to with a vengeance. Rim had expected it and doggedly tried to take the brunt of it. Gene had chipped in, but it was the Currycomb's fight. Ownie had struck the first blow and Gene had to be protected. He tried to get in front of the stocky man and Miguel hit him across the temple with a riding crop.

He stumbled and then the three were

in the middle of hammering fists and flying boots. Rim covered his face with his left hand and swung his right. Someone tried to gouge his eye. It was Big Jeff, and Rim sunk his teeth into the giant's thumb. Big Jeff howled and retreated. Gene knocked Miguel loose from his crop and tramped on him.

It was too unequal. Ownie was tired from his exertions and Pinky kicked his feet from under him. Rim got astride and forgot everything but throwing punches. He had a loose-limbed, swinging rhythm and for a moment a space cleared. Then the Box B men swung in as a unit, flailing away. Gene rolled on the ground as two of them slugged him at once. Walleye jumped on Rim's back. Blackie dove under his feet.

He went down, kicking, fighting, silent, his bony face spotted from the blows, but grim, lips clenched. They clouted him a dozen times as he got mixed up with Gene and Ownie and couldn't find purchase to kick them away. In a moment heel and spur would get him and Doc Summer would have a time stitching him together, if he lived. Still he fought and his blue eyes began to blaze.

He had actually got to his knees, throwing them off one by one. He was prodigiously strong and quick when the fire burned in his blue eyes. They would get him, but he had marked a couple of them for victims before superior weight and numbers crushed him. He reached for Miguel, who never fought fair, intending to throttle him. . . .

A whirlwind hit the melee. It scattered. Bull Petty backhanded Miguel out of Rim's reach. He roared like thunder from the hills which edged the Valley, "Stop it, dammit!"

Box B quit fighting. Cal Timmins wiped blood from his face and was soberly calm. He said, "I guess we give 'em what fur."

Rim got to his feet unsteadily, picked up Ownie. Gene crouched at bay, his round jaw hard as rock. For a moment no one spoke. Down the street the French girls stood together in the door of their shop, eyes shaded, watching Bull Petty stop the disgraceful brawling. Other bystanders muttered, complimenting Bull.

Bull said, "Ownie started it . . . but Cal

shouldn't of swore in front of Clara." He nodded smugly, calmly, administering justice. "I guess we kin call it even an' no hard feelin's."

Gene said harshly, "Miguel pulled his whip on Rim. There was three of us agin eight. Me, I got hard feelin's!"

Bull said, "Now wait, Gene. We don't want no trouble in the Valley." Everyone in town could hear his booming accents. "My men don't want no war . . . I say forget it!"

In the doorway of the Palace, Rod Rake's thin face looked haunted for a moment, then settled into sly lines. The French girls waited. Poker Dan moved in the crowd, scowling. The people of Sunset were mostly with Bull.

Rim braced himself. The fire had died from his eyes, but he was cold inside. He said stiffly, "So far as the fight's concerned, it's over. You got tough riders, Bull. They fight tough. But there was likker in Cal an' Ownie was hasty not givin' him time to apologize. . . ."

Bull said, "Cal! Go make yer manners t' Miss Clara!"

The raw-hide tough foreman did not hesitate. He stalked immediately down to the French girls. Ramrod stiff, but sincere, he apologized handsomely. It was the West and he was of the West. Women were respected, even glorified. They were scarce . . . precious.

Rim said, "Okay, Bull. Break it up."

He led Gene and Ownie over to Poker Dan's. The white-haired gambler stood watching them. Bull called, "Don't fergit thet business talk, Rim."

Rim stopped dead. Before all the town he looked across the street at Bull. He said in a quiet voice that somehow had all the carrying qualities of Bull's gusty accents, "No need for it, Bull. I've already answered you. I'm not selling."

He watched Bull scowl. He saw the big shoulders brace themselves. He saw Bull's fists clenched. He seized advantage of Bull's disgruntlement and said, "And watch your line riders, Bull. I wouldn't want any trouble over boundaries. There's no fence in the Valley yet. But I can buy bob-wire!"

At the hated word, Bull went turkey red. He bawled, "You try stringin' bob-wire in the Valley and I'll run you clear

to the Territory at gun's point, damn you!"

Rim could smile then. He said politely, "Now you'll have to apologize to the French sisters. They're listenin' to that frog voice of yours . . . as who can help it?"

For a moment it seemed as though Bull would swell up and burst. The town held its collective breath. Rim stood waiting. He fully expected Bull to resume the fisticuffs which he had so lordly interrupted.

But Bull did not take the bait. Beneath his bombast was real brain. He wheeled, realizing he was losing control of the situation, and stalked into the Palace. Rim had a glimpse of Rod Rake shrinking back, then the Box B outfit was indoors, crowding to the bar, and their voices were subdued, but angry, like the buzzing of bees.

Poker Dan said, "Lemme fix yer cuts. Doc Summer's busy with a cow havin' trouble over to Aunt Milly's. I reckon ye know what ye've started."

## II

OWNIE and Gene and Rim sat around a table. Poker Dan was deft with clean cloths and his own antiseptics, crude but efficient. Rim felt the excitement dying in him. He said dully, "Yeah, I know. In a half hour we've wiped out the peace of the Valley."

Gene said, "It hadda come. Bull's bound on runnin' us all out. We couldn't be run out."

Ownie said hotly, "I'll kill any Box B rider I find tryin' tricks on our range."

"We tried beatin' Box B just now," said Rim dryly. "Did a pretty good job, for three against a crowd, too. But if Bull hadn't stopped it, we'd of been skunked."

Ownie said, "Lemme get my guns, I'll take on two, three of them. Guns is great equalizers. . . ."

Rim said, "Yeah . . . Guns and sudden death. I'm a peaceful man. I never toted a hog-leg in my life."

"There's nothin' you can do about it," said Gene, his face settling into harsh lines. "I seen this comin' long ago. Me, I'd have had to sell out if Rim had. I

only got Jake, just like you two run your place alone. But now I figger we got the land, we know every damn hunk of it, we kin figger out what they're gonna do and stop 'em . . . with bullets if we got to. Mebbe you're no gun-slinger, Rim, but I seen you shoot with a rifle."

"I don't like this talk," said Rim restlessly. Across the street there was a thunder of hoofs. Box B was riding out. "I aim to prevent war, not start it."

He got up and left the two firebrands talking. He ignored the curious glances of the townsfolk and walked along to the little white house with the display window. He went inside and stood, one stop over the threshold, hat curling in his hand.

Clara was youth and fire and curves and color. Lou was tall and quiet, with ivory skin and strength around her pleasant mouth. Clara bounced, but Lou moved like a steady flame, with grace, but gently. She looked at Rim and said, "You're hurt."

"No," he said. "Just bruised a little. I wanted to apologize, too, just fer gettin' into a fight on your street and in your presence. . . ."

Clara said hotly, "Ownie had to hit him."

"Mebbe," nodded Rim. "Ownie's brave and quick. It was one of them things. . . ."

Clara said, "Ownie could have whipped him if the others. . . ."

Her sister sighed and interrupted, "There's much fight talk, isn't there, Rim? You won't sell out, will you?"

He said, "Of course not. I couldn't, now."

"Pride?" she asked.

He shuffled, looking down at his hat. He couldn't explain it. He had been ready to sell, all right. He couldn't say now whether it was Bull's presence, at ease, in the shop that afternoon, or Gene's talking, or Rod Rake's sneaky insinuations, or Poker Dan's abjuration, or Ownie's quarrel with Cal, or Bull's unreasonable arrogation of power, or because he wanted to stay in the Valley. He thought of Tom Messner's cute kids . . . but even if he had been able to tell which it was, he certainly couldn't have said it. He was not that articulate.

So he said, "Call it that. Anything you want." His words were stiff and he felt her drawing away and was panic-stricken.

He said, "I dunno, Lou. Things ain't the same, are they? I'm powerful sorry. I guess I just want my lil' ole place on the Blue, and a chance to get ahead. Bull wants it all. Both of us got a right to try and have. . . ."

She said, "If you sold out, there would not be war in the Valley, that's all I know."

That was not true, but he did not know how to tell her. If he accused Bull of wanting Gene next, then Tom Messner's Lazy M, she would think he was making up stories on Bull. He grew more solemn and stiff. It was not going well. He was grateful when Clara exclaimed, "Let's have some tea and cakes. Beer for you, Rim. Is Ownie's face cut bad?"

Ownie came in while they were talking about nothing in light voices. Rim stood up and was unhappy to feel relieved. He tried to take Lou's hand, to regain the warmth of her by touch, but it was no good. Her skin was cool and her fingers lifeless. He said, "Ridin' out tomorra?" where the others could not hear.

She answered, "There'll be bullets flying where we rode before."

HE went out and it was dark and he had no desire to eat at the Chink's. Ownie lingered to spark alone with Clara and Rim rode on ahead. He saw Poker Dan waving at him and drew in before the bar. The tall, white-haired man came out and held to his stirrup, looking up.

"Rod Rake," said Dan, "figgers to get in with Bull and keep his place. Or get a job with the Box B."

Rim shrugged, "I wouldn't want the man on my side."

"Sunset's agin you," scowled Poker Dan. "'Ceptin' me."

Rim said, "I already learned that."

The oldtime gambler sighed. "Rod took a rifle from the Palace. I should say it'd be that knoll right beyond Buzzard's Roost."

Rim was shocked. "He wouldn't!"

Dan said, "You go home the reg'lar road and see. I'll bury ye, Rim." He went back into his bar, shaking his white head. There were stories about the lugubrious Dan. It was said that his thick white hair covered a scar which had affected his brain and made him always

cry calamity when things got tight. Dan had been a great figure once, long ago, in the wild western towns, following the booms with his clever hands and quick guns. Now he was buried in Sunset and limited to two-bit games which he played as though for thousands. But he had always been Rim's and Ownie's friend, even as he took their money at poker.

So Rim rode the open country to the south of Buzzard's Roost. He came over that flat land to the cottonwoods which had given its name to the glade which dipped between the knoll on the west and the arroyo on the east, through which Rim came silently on the little grey pony. He kept thinking of Bull Petty and Lou French.

It was funny, in a way, that Ownie should have thought that Bull was after Clara. Bull was looking for a mistress for the new Box B, and that would be quiet Lou. Rim should have known that at once. But he had not, and the shock of seeing Bull in the shop with Lou had certainly upset him. He wondered if he would have handled the fight any different if he had not been unbalanced by that business. . . .

He decided wryly that he would not have acted differently, but that he would have felt differently about it. He rode carefully into Buzzard's Roost and tied the grey to a cottonwood.

He took his carbine from the boot. He did not wear a revolver because he was adept with the short-barrelled carbine, and never in his life had he shot at anything but snakes and loco steers and horses and an occasional prowling redskin. He thought now that he would have to wear one. He scowled, stalking the knoll beyond Buzzard's Roost. He was perfectly calm.

He saw the figure behind the round, large rock. The man was smoking a cigaret. Settling down, estimating in the darkness the range and slight wind deflection, Rim chuckled, lifting the carbine. It was a temptation to aim at the burning end of the cigaret, but Rim was not that kind of shot . . . nor neither was anyone else, he added to himself.

The man stood, and Rim could see the dim outline of a rifle barrel. He fired then.

The tip of the man's conical sombrero

jerked. The hat flew off. "A trifle low," muttered Rim. "Mighta killed him!"

The man was running, not even making a stand. His back was bent and he went down the far side of the hill. It could have been Rod Rake, all right.

But it could have been any one of the Box B men, Rim thought discouragedly. He went back to the grey, started to slide the carbine into the boot, decided to hold it across the pommel. He rode carefully, all the way home, knowing his habits must be careful from then on. It was not a way he wanted to live.

### III

THE next day he thought about that, sitting in the door of his cabin. The shack was only two rooms, one for his bunk and Ownie's, the other for cooking and eating, but it was sturdily built and out back the branding corral was his especial pride, and he had built the best barn in the Valley. He was proud of his horses, and the corral was twice what he needed now. He had been content to house himself Spartan fashion, but for his animals he always demanded the best.

Ownie was out riding the line, looking for Box B strays, which he would run back to Box B range. They had been coming over more and more as Box B grew, and hitherto Cal and his men had been fair enough about helping to herd them back. Ownie was carrying a Remington and wearing a pistol on his hip. Rim sighed. He did not like it at all.

He also had to think about Rod Rake. The shiftless man had a faded young wife and two slatternly brats. His ranch was the other side of Gene Doheny's place, facing Messner's Lazy M. Rod never worked very hard, leaving everything to his Negro, Ham, but he always had cattle enough to sell. . . . No one had ever openly said where they thought he got his longhorns, but it was well known that he ran a quick iron. . . .

Rod was not a bad man, Rim tried to think. He was just lazy and jealous and restless and no-account. He had always hung around Bull Petty whenever the big man had allowed him. But Rim had taken a shot in Rod's direction last night to save himself from bushwhacking. It



was certainly a bad thing.

A horse loped into Rim's yard. Tom Messner got down stiffly. Tom wasn't young any more. He had a hooked nose and a flat mouth and was genuinely honest. He said, "Bull's after me t' sell. Offered me a good price."

Rim nodded. "You oughta sell. You got those younguns and it looks like trouble in the Valley." It was excellent strategy for Bull to buy the Lazy M. With Rod Rake siding him, he would then own property both sides of Gene and Rim.

Messner raked his finger over the broken brim of his old flat-topped hat. He shook his head. "I stayed in town last evenin'. . . . Stayed outa sight and outa the fight, 'cause I ain't no good at that sorta thing. But I watched an' listened. Rod Rake's gone over to Bull. Poker Dan's messin' into everybody's business, looks like. Rest of the town thinks us small men are plumb crazy. If I pulled out, you'd be in the middle, you an' Gene. I got no other friends."

Rim said, "You and your family's got plenty friends."

"Not that would fight fer me," said Messner. "I know you was ready t' sell. Gene told me. I know you stayed here because yuh didn't want t' let Bull force us out. Rod don't count, 'cause he's with the winner, either way. I'd a had t' git, if you went and Gene got pushed out."

Rim shook his head. "Sell and buy the place I had in mind, on the road north. Me and Gene may have to git, after all. How can we fight Box B?"

Messner spat at a dragon fly. "We cain't. We'll git licked. But I been licked afore. The thing is, we ain't runnin'. A man has troubles . . . seems like there's allus another lil ole Messner t' feed or take to the doc. Ma sometimes gets the misery. Had two cows broke their legs, somehow. Hoss died o' colic. . . . But a man kin face trouble. Fact is, he's gotta face it. Never run from it. Figger this-away, Rim: If a man's gotta fight, is there anything better'n his home to fight fur?"

Rim said, "I'm bein' shoved into this, Tom. I don't wanta fight. I'm a peaceable critter. A coward, mebbe."

Tom laughed. "I seen you bashin' the Box B riders. I was behind Rod Rake. If

he'd chipped in, there's one man I can handle." He paused and added dryly, "When it comes to that, Rim, there was a time I handled six-shooters. On'y I'm too stove up fer fist fightin'. I ain't sellin'. Thought I'd let ya know."

He got back on his horse, a middle-aged man with a squint. He adjusted the broken hat brim.

Rim said, "I'll have plans . . . or some-thin'. I'll be over."

HE sat awhile longer. He thought about Lou French. She was against him because she was against violence and it shocked him that she did not understand that he, too, hated turmoil and striving against his fellow-men and that this was something he could not avoid. Resentment stirred in him at her easy belief that he was at fault.

Then he grew limp, knowing he could not hold anger against her, that she was more to him than he had been willing to admit before, that his life would always be incomplete without her.

He got up abruptly and went to the corral. The grey horse was his favorite and came at his whistle. He saddled up and rode briskly off behind Tom Messner, to the west.

He turned off at Timber, but Gene and Jake, his gangling young hand, were off somewheres. He scribbled a note on Gene's pad, "Am seeing Rod today. Might as well get straight from the start."

He went on down the road and cut over the field where the shaky chimney of Rake's house showed through the trees. He rode in and Mrs. Rake was hanging out clothes which were pitifully shabby. Averting his eyes he asked her where her husband was. She said dully. "Said he was goin' over to Box M. Some business or other."

The two children peeped from the house, frightened. Rim looked at their sad eyes and said, "Tell him I'd admire to see him."

He rode on. He saw Tom Messner going into the lane which led to his house. He cut back by Timber, intending now to wait and consult with Gene. He fed the grey, left him in the shade and entered the house.

The note was gone from the table. Rim

frowned. He went outside and checked around. Gene had not been there, he could see at a glance. The same horses were in the corral, there was no saddle nor other sign of Gene, nor Jake.

He picked up a trail at once. It was a single horse and the rider had dismounted and walked to Gene's door. The man had a broken heel on his left boot. He had walked back, remounted an unshod horse with a splayed hind hoof . . . the left. Man with left bad boot, horse with left bad foot. . . .

Rim rolled a cigaret and took his rifle from the scabbard and went and sat inside Gene's house, the weapon across his knees. After awhile he got up and went outdoors, uneasy. He untied the grey and put him in a stall in Gene's stable. He went over to an alder bush which was on a slight rise of ground and waited there, out of sight, like a criminal. But today it wasn't so much against his grain. He was getting used to this way of living already.

#### IV

THE Box B was a rambling nest of sturdy buildings in the middle of Bull Petty's large holdings, like a fortress in the center of a duchy, a proud place, white with the brush work of unwilling cowboys, rigidly clean and orderly. Cal Timmins could make the men do work that they hated, picking things up, keeping them in order. Cal was a good man and he loved the Box B almost as much as did Bull.

Bull sat on his verandah going over accounts and scowled as Rod Rake rode in. He had no use for the sloppy, careless Rake. Yet he maintained his peace, waiting. Rod clattered up on the porch, his rundown boots squeaking and said, "Howdy, Bull."

"Why don't you get your hair cut sometime?" asked Bull.

"Got other things on my mind 'sides my hair," said Rod smugly. He was feeling important today. It was so seldom that he could get this high, queer, wonderful feeling that it took a lot to puncture his temporary self-esteem.

Bull said, "What about Messner?"

"He lit a shuck right over t' Logan," said Rod. "Then Logan ran for Doheny's. Left a note. Here 'tis."

Bull glanced at it. He said coldly, "You stole it? You and those broke-heeled boots and that splay-footed nag? That any but-ton could trail, let alone men like Doheny or Logan?"

Rod whined, "He's lookin' fer me! All you got t' do is stache out some men at my place. He comes in, makin' a try fer me . . . you git him. On my land. No skin off you nor any one 'ceptin' me, and I kin say he jumped me. . . ."

Bull roared, "Cal!"

The foreman's voice came from behind the corral, "Comin'!"

Rod felt himself slipping. He said hastily, "I laid fer him last night. I woulda had him, on'y some fool started shootin' in the dark. I figgered to git him fer you and you'd have the Valley cold. I'm on'y tryin' t' help, Bull!"

Timmins came striding, cold-faced. He had wanted to start right after the Currycomb and Timber that morning and Bull had made him stay home. He was angry.

Bull said, "I tried to use this fool. I tried to have him keep an eye on things fer us. He's got hisself shot at and caught fer a thief. If he ever comes on our ground again, Cal, shoot him like a coyote! He's pizen to us, his kind!"

Rod was backing off, pale. His face pinched down, and for a moment he looked like a trapped wildcat. He said, "Take it easy, Cal. Don't make no try for me!" He wore his gun tied down, the man noticed for the first time. He crouched a little, alongside his sorry nag. He said, "Mebbe I'm poor and shif'less and you're too damn big for me. But don't start nothin' yuh can't finish!"

Bull said nothing. Cal Timmins hesitated. Rod Rake swung on his horse like a monkey, slapped in spurs. His chin was on his shoulder as he rode out, and his hand on his gun. He came to the turn in the lane and shouted, "Yuh'll be cursed sorry."

He was gone. Bull Petty said slowly, "Yuh see what I mean, Cal? Yuh see how things kin go wrong? Now he's put Rim Logan in the right, tryin' t' bushwhack him. Like's not Rim got wind of it and took a pot at him. Now, if we let Rake hang around, Rim and Gene'll be on to everything we do."

Cal said, "You're smart, Bull. But I'd

hit them two hombres and hit 'em fast."

"I've waited some time," said Bull. "I got people on my side. We've got to have their land and everyone knows it and expects us t' git it. I tried to buy at fair prices an' everyone knows that. Now, if we kin make Rim and Gene start somethin', we can stall the Sheriff or anybuddy else if they git burnt."

Cal said, "Rim's a cool head. Gene Doheny is tough. If Messner don't sell, it's got t' be war . . . no matter who starts it."

"Messner won't sell," said Bull. "He's chucked in with Rim. Went over there pronto, thet chuckle-head Rake said. It's war, all right, but they gotta start it."

"They won't," said Cal. "They know what's good fer 'em."

Bull arose and stretched his immense arms. "I'm goin' t' town, Cal. You stick on the place, you hear?"

"You was to town yesterday," said Cal.

"Yeah, but I'm goin' agin," said Bull. "There is lots of ways of doin' things, Cal. I don't allus tell you, not that I don't trust you, cause I do, plenty. But I'm gonna stir up things fer Rim Logan. If I can start him, cool as he's known to be, then people'll believe we're right all the way through."

Cal said, "I'd rather just hit 'em. Ownie ran our herd off their west pasture this mornin'. Had words with Blackie. I want another shot at that Ownie, and me sober."

"Shouldn't be so tough when you're drunk," chided Bull. He went indoors, dismissing his foreman. He changed his clothing, washing himself thoroughly, all over. He slicked back his thin hair and mounted the showy part-Morgan stallion, Bee, and rode eastward to Sunset. . . .

Everyone saw him enter. Everyone saw him tie his horse before the Palace. But he did not enter the bar. He swaggered down Main Street, nodding right and left at acquaintances. He went into the little millinery shop and came out fifteen minutes later with Miss Lou on his arm.

They dined in splendor at the Chink's. Then the owner of Box B hired a carriage and they rode, the tall, quiet girl and the flamboyant rich man, out toward the west.

## V

THERE was a clatter of horse's feet on the main road. By standing on tip-toe, Rim could see through the alders. Rod Rake was going westward, plying quirt and spurs, driving his thin horse to exhaustion. A weak man in a puny rage, Rim thought. Nevertheless he walked down to the road and stared at the tracks of Rod's horse.

The left hind hoof was splayed. Rod had been wearing broken boots for months now. He had been riding from eastward, which meant Box B. So he had taken the note to Bull, whining for help if Rim jumped him. It was all clear and added fuel to the fire beneath the pot of trouble.

Rim went thoughtfully back. Gene hallooed and bashful young Jake grinned and went to rustle some grub. Gene got down from a lathered horse and said, "I saw Ownie. He had a lil trouble with Box B, but Cal wasn't with them. Ran off a few head from your land. Jake and me are ridin' your line for a few days. . . . Case anything drastic comes up."

"Thanks, Gene," said Rim. "Rod Rake's been here and gone home. He's tied in with Bull, all right." He related what he had seen and divined. He told Gene about Tom Messner.

Gene said solemnly, "The lines are bein' drawn. We'll watch out for Rod, too. . . . Rim, how would it do to hit the Box B? They'd never expect that. If we all got tough and hit them and broke them up."

Rim shook his head. "People wouldn't stand for it. Bull'd bring in a tougher crew and wipe us out."

"I was thinkin' of Bull," said Gene in a hard voice. "I was thinkin' it's him or us. I'd take him on, in fair fight. . . ."

"No!" said Rim. "We got to let him start it, then beat him at his own game. We got to live here afterwards, Gene."

"Mebbe," said Gene. "Mebbe we'll live. But not if they hit us first and hard. They got the heavy artillery on their side, as my pappy said about the Yanks in the War."

A buggy wheel squealed. The two men stared at the hired rig from Sunset, pulled by a pair of small ponies. Poker Dan was driving. Rim called, "Paley give you his second best rig for your Sunday outin', Dan?"

The white-haired man stopped the equipage and said dryly, "Bull's got the surrey. Takin' a lady out for a ride."

Rim froze, sitting there. Gene said easily, "I've been noticin' him sparkin' Miss Lou. What else you know, Dan?"

The tall gambler held the reins loosely in his hands, staring at the drooping ears of the ponies. "He's got the town. Looks like you're gonna be put in the wrong. No matter what. I was you, I'd smack at Box B. Ketch 'em on your land and start in."

Gene said, "Why you so interested in smackin' Box B, Dan?"

The old man rubbed the ancient scar on his skull. He said, "Once I tried collectin' all the money in the world. I found out it was wrong. I hurt other people. They turned and hurt me. If Bull was my friend, I'd advise him t' quit. Bull don't like me. I don't want him to run the Valley."

Gene said, "He's never goin' to run me."

Rim did not speak. He thought of the gross, heavy-handed, loud-mouthed Bull with the quiescent, agreeable Lou. He fought down his rage. He could not go to war over a buggy ride.

Poker Dan said, "I'm goin' to see Messner. He owes me a lil bill fer gamblin'. I wanta tell him to ferget it. And I wanta see how Miz Rake's doin', poor gal. Rod ain't worth shucks. . . ."

Gene watched the retreating buggy. He said, "There goes a queer man. Takes money from cowboys, wild uns like Ownie, you or me . . . and gives it to Miz Rake and the Messner kids."

Rim said, "No use tryin' to figure out old Dan. I better get home and check with Ownie. Meet you tomorrow on my place?"

Gene nodded. Rim caught up his horse and rode back to the ranch. That Lou French would go out riding with Bull made him uneasy. He wondered what any girl could see in the gross, loud man. He would not believe that it was Bull's money. Lou must have had some reason. . . .

**H**E came to the home ranch and the cabin looked shabby and stark and bare. He saw Ownie's horse, saddled, at the gate of the corral and stripped the animal

and let him in with the grey. He threw the hull over the fence and went to the house.

Ownie was sitting on a straight chair. His arm was rudely bandaged and there was blood on his shirt and he was pale, but bright-eyed. He said, "Bushwhackers already. Got me as I came in. I ran Blackie off and someone plugged at me from cover on the Box B stretch above the Blue."

Rim said, "When?"

"Hour and a half ago," said Ownie. "Backie was awful mad. I chivvied him and his cayuse clean off the flats, after I run the cattle. It's war, Rim!"

Rim said, "You didn't get a squint at who it was?"

"I was hit. I run for it," said Ownie frankly. "Might have been a half dozen of Blackie's gang."

"Not and only fired one shot." Rim shook his head. "It don't make sense, Ownie. Blackie's an old head . . . and a damned good shot. If you were on the stretch, Blackie couldn't miss you. . . . Nor none of the other Box B crack shots."

Ownie tapped his bandaged left arm. "They got me, didn't they? I'm goin' to town and see Doc. Then I'm comin' back with my guns loose."

"I'll saddle a horse," said Rim shortly. He went into the yard. He had sensed the coolness in Ownie's voice. The youngster believed that he was temporizing, reluctant to back him. He put Ownie's saddle on an easy-gaited black.

Ownie came out. He mounted with difficulty, but he was angry all the way through. He looked down at Rim and said, "You'd wait 'til they kill us all. It ain't right, Rim."

"Go to Doc, cool off," said Rim. "Stay overnight."

Ownie said, "If I see a damn Box B man, I'll know what to do."

There was no use talking to Ownie. Rim let him go. When the black horse was out of sight he returned to the cabin and busied himself straightening the place. Then he made a sudden decision, caught up a mount and rode out along the Blue. The river was placid and blue and pleasant and birds sang in the bushes which lined it. He crossed at the ford and rode onto Box B land, among the trees.

He came out on the stretch above the

river. He circled, his eyes on the ground. He sighted across the river to Currycomb land, where Ownie must have been riding when he was shot. He deduced where the assailant must have lain to get cover and narrowed his circle.

He found blurred tracks. He studied them for a half hour, squatting on his heels where they were plainest, moving like a hound dog with his nose to the ground. Someone had dragged a heavy branch over the trail. He found the broken branch.

He shrugged. He was fairly certain, but the tracks were too obscured to be sure. He stood up. He looked into the drawn gun of Cal Timmins.

**R**IM said mildly, "What's the idea, Cal?"

The foreman said, "You're on Box B land."

"Your longhorns were on Currycomb this morning. Ownie ran 'em off and someone took a shot at him. Does that mean war?"

Cal said, "You're to keep off Box B land. You and Ownie and your cows. You know that. You won't sell, so stay on your own ground."

"Cows will stray," said Rim. He kept his hands still. He saw Pinky, Walleey, Blackie, riding from the trees.

Cal said, "I ought to gun you down and get it over with." He bit his lips, remembering Bull's orders. He dropped the muzzle of the revolver, stepping back.

Rim moved forward. His left hand seized the gun. His right crossed over on the jaw of the lean foreman. Cal went down as though he were shot. The horse-men whooped and spurred.

Rim jumped, caught his horse. He whipped the rifle from the boot and slid aboard. The horse set sail for home. Rim turned and aimed carefully. He shot low, and Blackie's mustang dove forward on its knees. Blackie described a parabola and landed hard on his butt. The Box B men spread and slowed, remembering Rim's prowess with a long gun.

The Blue River splashed about the horse's legs and Rim was on home grounds. He waited a moment, listening for pursuit. None came and he rode along the river toward home.

Thus did range wars start. A word, an

incident, a bluff not made good. Cal Timmins aching for a fight but restrained for some reason, trying to run Rim into begging. If their tempers had been high enough, they might have beaten him. Once Rim had seen a cowboy flogged with leather belts, tied to a tree. . . .

He came down to the ranch and for the third time that day put his mount in the corral, but this time he saddled the grey. He went to the house and got out an extra cartridge belt. He examined Cal's gun, which was hung on a hair and smooth as silk. Shrugging, he tucked it into a holster, tried it for smoothness on the draw. His draw was slower than molasses in January. He made a wry face and cleaned his rifle, which was a .44 and luckily matched the caliber of Cal's pistol.

Even while he was preparing for war, he knew that it was not right. He rode down to Gene's place. It was growing dusk now, but he had to tell Gene, to prepare the stocky man. Box B would take Timber along with Currycomb, once started.

The old carriage came from the west, the gaunt nags running wild, the wheels careening. Rim wheeled, suddenly alarmed. He rode them down in twenty yards, his iron hand yanking the beasts to a weary halt. They had to be terribly spooked, he thought, to run like that.

The carriage was empty. Rim tied the team from Sunset's livery stable and rode fast along the road, looking for Poker Dan. It occurred to him that he had not seen the other team, the fine surrey which Bull had hired that day, although he had been up and down the road quite often.

He came to a place where the tracks were straight, before the horses had bolted. He swung down from the saddle. There were two sets of buggy-wheel tracks, all right.

He heard a faint noise and wheeled, drawing Cal's revolver. Then he was running for a declivity beside the road. He had spotted a lock of white hair. He bent over the man in the depression and said clearly, "Who did it, Dan?"

Poker Dan had played his last pair of deuces pat. He was hit through the chest, on the left side and it was amazing that he was alive, that he had dragged himself this far from the road. He looked at Rim,

shook his head. He grinned with the pain and some other emotion and whispered, "I was . . . ridin' home. . . . It's gettin' awful dark, Rim . . . Poor lil kids . . . Rod Rake . . . Shouldn't let 'em get so puny. . . ."

Rim said urgently, "Did Bull gun you?" It occurred to him that Lou was with Bull, that she would tell the truth.

Dan said sleepily, "Allus liked . . . kids. Never had one. . . ."

That was all. Dan was gone. With reluctant hands Rim searched him, for it was necessary to preserve the wad of cash he always carried for whatever heirs might turn up.

Dan was cleaned. The killer had also stolen from him. Rim squatted a moment, trying to read sign. It was all pretty confused, but the tracks of the vehicle going east were plain enough.

He lifted the old man tenderly, as though he were still alive. He went down and got the buggy and drove it back and picked Dan from beside the road and placed him within. He hitched the grey behind and drove to Sunset.

At the livery stable he said curtly, "When did Bull come in with the surrey?"

The boy gaped at the dead man. "Lil while ago. Mebbe half an hour."

The darkness was closing in on Sunset and on Rim's soul. He said, "See you remember what time."

**H**E walked to Doc Summer's office. Doc told him that Ownie was over eating at the Chink's, that his wound was superficial. Rim said, "Poker Dan's got one that wasn't. He's dead."

He started Doc towards the livery stable and went down to the Palace Bar. Bull was inside, drinking. Bee, the stallion, was hitched in front.

Rim went on down the street. He knocked at the door of the French house. Clara opened and said, "Oh! Lou's not feeling well, Rim. She's gone to bed."

Rim said, "I've got to see her." Clara stared at his harshness, retreated. Rim stood within the shop, closed for Sunday.

Lou came through the door from the rear, pale and erect. She said, "Yes, Rim?"

"Poker Dan's been killed," said Rim.

Her hands went out to the counter,

steadied her. She said, "Where? How?"

Rim said, "The tracks of the surrey and of Dan's hired buggy came together on the road. There was no other sign. I thought you might want to say if Bull did it."

"I—why—" She leaned heavily on her hands, so that they became white-streaked. "I was riding with Bull all afternoon. We never saw Poker Dan. We rode out beyond Rod Rake's and back. We went the back route, going out, past Buzzard's Roost. We returned on the road."

Rim said, "You're willin' to swear?"

She said, "I'm upset, Rim. Don't press me. I've—the afternoon was too much for me. . . ."

He stood a long moment. Then he said gently, "All right, Lou. Excuse me for botherin' you."

He turned and went out, leaving her staring after him as though he had been a ghost. He went directly to Doc Summer, at the stable, and said, "You'll be notifyin' the Sheriff. He'd better come to Sunset."

He saw Bull Petty come out of the Palace and mount Bee. He waited in the shadows, watching Bull go for home. He thought about Poker Dan, who had lived out his wild life and come to Sunset to be kind through his declining years. Dan had said it was not good for a man like Bull to run the Valley. Dan was dead. . . .

Ownie was talking in Poker Dan's bar. "I tell you people Bull Petty was on that road with Lou French, ridin' in the surrey. Dan had been sayin' that he didn't want Bull to run the Valley. What the hell less can we do than ask Miss Lou about it?"

Men listened, but shook their heads. Ownie drank whiskey and kept hammering away, but he was getting no place. Pretty soon Ownie was drunk. He had been irate when he began to drink and belligerency settled on him like a blanket.

He went out in the street and tried to buttonhole people and tell them that Bull Petty had killed Poker Dan. They shrugged him off, advised him to go and get some sleep. He grew angrier and angrier as Sunday night waned. The town was quiet on Sunday night, usually, but the excitement of the murder and robbery had stirred everyone.

Miguel had come to town on some er-



rand of his own. He stood in the door of the Palace and heard Ownie raving. He went quietly out back and got on his cayuse and fogged it out to the Box B. Bull had not unsaddled when Miguel told his story.

Cal Timmins said, "Now will yuh believe me, Bull? Rim, Ownie and Gene Doheny are out to get ye."

Bull went into the house and took off his pearl grey hat and fancy shirt. He pulled on range clothing and buckled his belt about him. He wore two guns when on the warpath, not because he could shoot with either hand, but for show and to have an extra loaded weapon if the fight lasted that long. He said casually, "Rim started a fight with you. Accused us of shootin' Ownie. Started the story about Poker Dan in town. I got reasons to fight him, now."

"Don't fight him!" said Cal. "Leave us ride in and take him."

Bull shook his head. "I'm doin' this my way." He was black as a thundercloud and Cal made no further effort to stop him.

Bull got astride of Bee and said, "You better go over and check on Gene. Then come inta town. But keep outa my fight."

He wheeled the big horse and went down the lane.

Cal said, "Come on, you guys! We'll look at Gene, all right."

Meantime, Rim Logan had left town silently and was riding. He passed the road to Box B, he passed his own road. He came into Timber and yelled. Gene came out and said, "Jake's been takin' a look. Everything's quiet over your way."

Rim said, "Ownie's started makin' a fool of himself in town. How about comin' over to Tom's?"

Gene was ready. They hit Messner's in short order. Tom said, "Rod's left for town. His wife's with him, in the wagon, an' the kids. Funny he should go to town on Sunday."

"Yeah," said Rim. "Feel like ridin' in?"

Tom absently rubbed his broken hat-brim. "Yop."

## VI

**T**HEY cantered slowly, each thick with thought. Tom was wearing an ancient Frontier Model in a worn holster. Gene

had his Colt's strapped to his thigh. Rim wore Cal's gun, but he kept the rifle under his touch all the way in.

Sunset lay simmering in mid-evening, buzzing with Ownie's wild talk, with speculations as to the truth of Poker Dan's death. The saloonkeeper had friends and enemies in town, but most people knew of his charities and respected him. When the three small ranchers entered the Poker, all talk stopped.

Rim drank silently. Someone said Ownie was over in the Palace, waiting for Box B men, and that Ownie was drunk. Rim put down his glass and went across the street.

Ownie's jaw was loose and his lips curled back. He was orating to a Mexican and two renegade Mescaleros. The barkeep was nodding, ignoring him. Ownie saw Rim and raved, "If yuh don't kill Bull Petty . . . dammit I will!"

The barkeep opened one eye and said, "Take him out, Rim."

Rim took Ownie by the arm. The younger man struggled. Rim said sternly, "Get over to the Poker. Gene and Tom are there and you've got to sober up."

Ownie said, "I'll fight 'em alone."

Rim took him by the arm and forced him across the street. Gene and Tom had a bucket of water which they grimly gave to him, full in the face. Ownie sputtered, swung his fists, but they crowded him and he began to lose the wild light in his eyes.

Rim said, "This ain't funny. Box B will be in looking for trouble. Has anyone seen Rod Rake and his family?"

The Poker was empty save for the ranchers. The customers had retired. There was no regular bartender, and the man who had been filling in had left his apron hanging on the hook. Gene said, "We're pariah in Sunset. Everyone knows Box B is after us."

Tom said, "You better look up Rod. Somethin' awful funny about him comin' to town tonight."

Rim said, "Doc Summer got a wire from the Sheriff. He can't get down here until Tuesday."

"Just in time for the funerals," nodded Tom. "You got anything to do, Rim? I can hold this down. Me and Ownie."

Rim said, "Yeah. I'll be back." He hated to do it, but he had to see Lou

French again. He walked twice around the house. No lights showed. He wondered if Clara knew that Ownie had been drunk around town . . . sure would give Ownie fits if she did, he grinned to himself. Ownie was all right, though . . . young, wild, but staunch.

He stalled as long as he dared, then threw pebbles at her window and she came at once, so that he knew she had not been asleep. He said, "I'm sorry, Lou. But people think Bull mighta killed Poker Dan. Mebbe you better come downtown. I wouldn't want anything to go wrong about that deal."

She said, "He didn't. But you believe me, don't you? I'll come, Rim. I'll be right down."

He smoked until she came, dressed in black, her face pale. He walked her silently to the hotel. There was a mean, close little waiting room. She sat on a chair and said, "Bring them here, any of them, and I'll come out and speak to them. Bull wouldn't murder."

Rim said, "You're fond of him, ain't you, Lou?"

She repeated, "He wouldn't murder . . . and run."

Rim said, "I'll be back."

Gene was at the Poker. Ownie was fighting to get sober, swallowing huge draughts of spring water, still hopping mad. Tom Messner had stopped drinking and was standing with his elbows hooked on the bar, patient, waiting.

Gene said, "Rod's in town. The whole family is eating at the Chink's. Where'd he get the money? He was broke yestiddy."

Rim said flatly, "Rod's playin' a desperate game. I'm positive he took that shot at Ownie . . . knowin' we'd think it was Box B men. We got to question Rod about this afternoon. It won't be nice, him with his wife and kids in town. Dan was stripped of his poke . . . you all know that leather bag of his. I found tracks. . . . it could have been Rod."

"Not Bull?" Ownie said thickly.

"Look at it this way," said Rim. "Bull wants us out of the Valley, sure. But he wants to put us in the wrong. Rod's been actin' like a crazy man, lay' up at Buz-zard's Roost for me, shootin' at Ownie, leavin' tracks all over. Bull wouldn't be

that dumb." He paused, then said, "Bull wouldn't murder Dan and expect Lou French to cover him. She was with him and says he didn't do it."

Ownie said, "Get Rod."

They looked at one another. It was distasteful. They were not lawmen. But the Sheriff was absent and a friend had been killed and robbed. And it was, Rim knew, important that Bull be cleared. No man should stand under a false murder charge.

Tom Messner came away from the bar. He said, "I'm a fambly man myself. Gene, you come along. We'll bring Rod back here."

They went out. Ownie muttered, "I been makin' a damn fool of myself. You looked for tracks. I just shot off my mouth."

"A man's got to be careful," said Rim slowly. "Bull's tryin' to run us out. Mebbe Cal Timmins should be cured of actin' so mean. But murder's another thing."

Outside a horse came swinging into town, stopped across the street before the Palace. Rim looked over the swinging doors. Bull Petty dismounted, stood with his legs spraddled, his thick shoulders hunched, tugging at his heavy belt with the two revolvers. Then he started for the Poker.

Ownie said, "Oh, Lawdy! This is bad! He'll butt in."

**T**HE doors banged wide. Bull's heavy accents came like bullets at Rim. "You accusin' me of somethin'?"

"No," said Rim. "I'm tryin' to get the truth."

Bull did not even glance at Ownie. "I can get the truth without your help."

Rim said, "Poker Dan was killed and robbed. I looked over the tracks. Ownie was shot from your land this mornin'. I took a look there, too."

"Brawlin' with my foreman!" snapped Bull.

"He pulled a gun on me," said Rim. "Mebe you'd like to do the same. I'd advise you not to."

Again the doors rattled on their hinges. Bull turned sideways, moving smoothly and swiftly, hands on the butts of his guns. Rod Rake came in, pale-faced, his assured

demeanor evaporated. Gene was a step behind him, gun in hand. Tom had evidently stayed with Mrs. Rake and the two kids.

Bull Petty said, "If this ranny is in it, the whole thing's rotten. I fired him off my place yesterday."

"But he brought you a note I had written," said Rim.

"You think I asked him fer it?" roared Bull. He was on the defensive now. "He's nothin' t' me, I tell ya!"

Rod Rake stood alone, terribly alone, in the midst of his neighbors. His pinched features were drained of blood. Tom Messner stomped in and dropped something on the bar.

It was Poker Dan's leather pouch. Tom said in a low voice, "This was in his wagon. Looks like he was afraid t' dump it. He's packed t' leave town."

Rim said, "Did you kill Poker Dan, Rod?"

The man did not break. "It was a fair fight. I shouldn't a taken the money. But it was a fair fight. He come in and run me down and called me names. Said he wished he could take my kids away. He had a gun."

"Then you stole it," said Rim harshly.

Rod Rake did not budge, did not change expression. Tom Messner came in, wiping sweat from his drawn face. Ownie shifted uneasily, cradling his wounded arm.

Bull Petty said, "There y' are. Watcha waitin' for? We got to hang him."

"The Sheriff'll be here Tuesday," said Rim.

Bull said virtuously, "Hang him, I say. Save the state a job. He's no account anyway. Shootin' people from my land!"

There was a swirl of noise outdoors. Jake's voice whooped, "Gene! Gene!"

Bull stepped back, withdrawing himself from the limelight completely. Rim watched and listened. Gene went to the door and his cowboy yelled, "Cal Timmins and the Box B just hit us! I got clean away. They burned the house!"

**R**IM watched Bull Petty. The big man's face was a study in mingled emotions, hopes and speculations. Gene said, "They after you, Jake?"

"Comin' down the road now," said Jake. "I got me my rifle."

Bull Petty yanked at his gun. Rim did the only thing he could. He kicked Rod Rake's feet from under him, yelled at Gene and dived over the bar.

Tom Messner was out of position, but his hand dropped for his holster. Gene, turning, got in his way. Bull Petty kicked out a window and leaped through, too hurried to fire a single shot. Box B rode into town and Jake turned loose on them from the street with the rifle, cursing them.

Bull Petty's gun lifted. He hesitated for a moment. His face was flushed, his eyes grim. Then a Box B horse went down and the rider spilled as Jake scored.

Bull said, "Okay, Jake. Over here."

The enraged cowboy turned, swinging his gun muzzle. Bull shot him carefully through the heart.

Rim slid along behind the bar. Gene called to him, "Bull just downed Jake."

Rim said, "They're comin' in. The war's on, only it ain't out where it belongs, on the range."

Tom said, "I think I'd a had him. He ain't so awful fast. I think I'd of got him."

The night was dark. Gene had shot out the lights in the Poker and here they were, the five of them. Rod Rake leaned against the rear wall and was sullen, but not frightened.

Rim said, "Rod, are you in this?"

"No!" he said stubbornly.

"Okay," said Rim. "Gene'll just keep your gun. Let's get out, fellas."

He went to the rear door and opened it cautiously. A bullet ripped into the jamb. He slammed back into the Poker. Gene said drily, "There's no way out. Bull's got the street covered."

Five measured shots drilled through the flimsy front of the structure. The ranchers hit the floor as one. Ownie swore at his sore arm and answered with two shots.

Rim muttered, "He got mad. Cal got mad. They made their mistake when they burned your place, Gene. But nobody knows they did it. Jake's gone. If they kill us, they can auger with folks afterwards that we was wrong. They can even say we were in with Rod on the Poker Dan deal.

Gene said, "We're in the cut, all right. Next thing's to figger a way out. What about it, Rim?"

HE sat on the floor with Cal's revolver in his hand and thought it out. He saw Rod lying still against the wall and crawled over. He put his hand on Rod's chest and there was no motion. His fingers became sticky and he wiped them off on the blue shirt of the rancher. He said, "They got Rod with that first volley. Now that's a strange thing. They haven't fired again. They musta spotted Rod, the way he was standin' there. And I wonder if Rod bothered to duck. He had a noose around his neck if we lived."

Tom said, "His wife won't cry too much. She's got a black eye right now. He gave it to her."

"We got to do somethin'," fretted Gene.

"If I could get out there with my hog-leg," Tom mourned.

Rim said, "I tried everything I knew to prevent this. Well, we're into it. Now let's start somethin'."

He began piling chairs and tables one atop the other. Gene, watching at the window, said, "Look out!" and he dropped to the floor. It became a sort of game, then. He would put a table atop another and the shots would come. He would go down, get up. He would move more furniture into position.

Owgie said, "I see one of 'em. Draw their fire again!"

Rim made a nimble leap. He landed on the first table, climbed quickly to the chair on the one beside it. The guns sounded and lead swept the Poker, but at the level of a man's middle. Rim was perched above the fire.

Owgie fired three times through the broken glass, dropped back and rolled over. There was a yell from outdoors. "Got one right on the hotel porch!" Owgie said triumphantly.

Lou was at the hotel and the bullets would be flying. Rim pulled up another chair and managed to get onto it, shaking a little, but balancing himself. This couldn't go on, with stray lead threatening everyone in Sunset. Lou might get hurt.

He could now get his hands on the studs which supported the corrugated tin roof of the Poker. The roof slanted to the rear. He took another chair in his strong arms, pried off a leg. He worked it between the stud and the tin.

It was slow work. Now and then bullets

clipped splinters from the precarious platform he had built and one a direct hit almost dropped him into the midst of a fusillade. But the tin gave where it had been lapped on a rafter.

Once the hole was opened he made better progress. He used up two chairs, then got his head and shoulders through. He looked up at the stars and wished the moon would come out. He pulled himself up and got onto the roof on his hands and knees.

His plan was very simple. It had to do with Lou, and Bull, and with Poker Dan who had been his friend, and with Jake who had died loyally in the street. He just wanted a shot at Bull.

He was no marksman with a revolver and his rifle was probably in Box B hands by now, if they had stripped his grey cayuse. Bull and his men were all better shots with the short gun. But he wanted to get down among them and fight it out and give Gene and Tom and Owgie a chance.

Down below the guns exploded. It was peaceful on the roof. Rim could look across the street at the hotel and knew that Lou was there awaiting the outcome of the battle. Clara must be up and worrying about Owgie by now, too.

Owgie deserved to have his Clara. Tom's family deserved to have Tom to care for them. Gene, who had wanted to fight Bull from the first, deserved his chance to hold Timber.

But Rim had hesitated, tried to forestall trouble. In so doing he had forfeited his right, he thought to the Valley and a place therein. Lou French had gone riding with Bull and the world had gone upside down.

He worked his way across the roof. He could see Miguel, holed up in the smithy shop with a rifle. He could not see any of the others at first, because the light was bad and they were pretty well hidden. But he saw Miguel, the Mexican.

He wanted to get down on the wooden awning which stretched across the sidewalk before the Poker. He slipped a little on the roof and heard Gene saying something to Tom below, heard Owgie's high-pitched voice.

He was flattened out, ready to make a drop for it and then to take his chances. He paused only to try and locate Bull. He

wanted his chance at Bull, because he felt that the others would not fight very long after their boss was gone. Cal Timmins might, and some of the men, but the heart would be out of them.

He could see up and down Main Street now and the Chink had put up shutters, to preserve his windows. There was a small light in the French girls' house. He wondered if Lou had returned home.

He drew Cal's gun and waited to hear Bull's voice or catch sight of the big man. He thought about the ranch and how his plans had been the most important thing in the world a month ago, before Bull had started his expansion scheme. Somehow he could not be angry with Bull. The man was big and he took what he could get. If Rim had a right to want to build his place bigger, Bull had a right to want more range for his growing herds.

Of course, there was no excuse for burning Gene's house. But the war had been started, in the minds of Bull and Cal, at any rate, and they had known Gene would be dangerous. Bull, Rim thought, had come to town to settle it with Rim man for man before he ever sent Cal to keep Gene out of it.

Well, they had missed Gene and now they were all in it. And Tom had eight kids at home.

He heard Bull's voice then. He saw him, coming from the hotel, keeping in the shadows. He saw the tall girl who kept close to him. His heart turned over once, then went like lead to his boots.

He dropped down on the porch roof. Amazingly, no one saw him. They were all watching the saloon below, where Ownie and Gene and Tom were peppering away. There wouldn't be much more ammunition in their belts, Rim knew. They had caught onto his scheme and were keeping up a steady fire to draw attention.

He crouched there, waiting for Bull to come opposite the Poker. It seemed an age before the big man and the tall girl got close enough.

And then he saw that Bull walked a step ahead. That was strange. He crouched, puzzled, watching. The firing lulled for a moment.

Lou's voice carried clearly, the length of Main Street. She said, "Cal Timmins! I've got a gun on Bull."

TIMMINS from the Palace across the street, said, "You done what, Miss Lou?"

Bull said agonizedly, "She yanked my own gun on me!"

Lou said, "Bring your men out, Cal. Bring them all where I can see them. I know each of them, Cal. Don't try anything, or I'll shoot Bull in the back!"

The way she said it, everyone heard and knew it was true, knew she would go through with it. Rim had never heard more determined accents. Bull said, "Come out, boys! She's got me."

Inside the Poker, Ownie laughed loud and long. The Box B men came straggling. Cal led them, then Pinky, Wall-eye, Big Jeff and Little Jeff. Blackie was limping. There was no sign of Doney, until Rim saw him at the hotel porch very quiet.

Lou said sharply, "Miguel! Come out here."

Rim held the revolver steady on the roof, across a joist. The Mexican moved in the smithy. Rim could not take a chance. He knew it was bad, knew everything might go to pot the moment he did it. But Miguel was not coming out.

He fired twice, to make sure. He saw Miguel drop the rifle. Then he jumped from the awning. He landed in the middle of the street, facing the astounded Box B men, crouched, the gun in his hand.

Bull leaped and shouted, "I got her! Turn it loose! I got her!"

Lou was struggling unequally in the big man's grasp. Rim did not have time to think any more. A red curtain came down at the sight of Lou in Bull's hands.

He got Little Jeff and Pinky bad enough to render them helpless. He thus made a path to where Bull still wrestled for his gun.

Behind him guns thundered. He heard Ownie yell, "Look at that Tom Messner shoot!"

The three were outside the Poker, on the walk. Tom's steady Colts leaped with each shot, pulsating like a machine. Box B men stumbled about in acrid smoke under the deadly attack.

Lead tore at Rim's shirt, at his belt, lifted his hat from his head and whisked it away. He put down his head and

plunged. He saw Cal Timmins in the way and fired his last bullet.

Cal spun about. The shot was high, in the right shoulder. Cal changed hands on his gun and fired pointblank at Rim. The bullet missed completely and Cal cursed.

Tom Messner said quietly, "Here y' are, Cal. Try this!"

Cal faced him, snapping the gun. Tom sidestepped, gunman-fashion and whipped le.d with amazing speed. Cal went down, still swearing, still fighting.

Rim saw the girl go back against the Palace. He saw Bull wheel with the gun. He threw his empty weapon hard. It hit Bull and checked him momentarily.

Rim dove under, came up with his skull, butting. He felt Bull go backward. He kept moving, keeping close. Bull tried to pistol-whip him.

Rim got an elbow in Bull's throat. The big man tried to tear him loose. Rim took blows without feeling them. He snatched and got the left hand gun from Bull's holster.

He threw the bigger man away from him, then. He panted, "All right, Bull. I tried not to get into this. Now you can finish it."

He saw Bull snap the first shot, saw the flame, heard the report. The bullet cut the walk beneath his feet.

He looked straight at Bull and the moon came out. All the sound of battle faded from his consciousness and he could not have told you who lived or died behind him. He only saw Bull now, a big man who had tried to grow bigger, a man who made war to get what he wanted. He saw the big man pull the trigger too hastily, saw the second shot go wild.

His gun spoke deeply, as though growling. Bull Petty took a step forward, thrusting his own weapon out before him. Rim stood there, stony-faced, watching. In another moment he might be blasted to eternity, but he wanted to see the doubt in Bull's eyes.

It came. The gun dropped to the ground and in the silence which had come suddenly upon Sunset the noise was distinct in everyone's ears. Bull put both hands over the buckle of his trousers belt. He said thickly, "I guess . . . yuh proved

. . . yer point . . . Rim . . . I guess you win . . . easy."

Rim said stolidly, "I'm sorry. I didn't want it."

"I know," said Bull. "I know." He jerked his head at the girl who stood so straight against the Palace Bar building. "She made . . . fool play . . . but it . . . paid off. . . ."

He doubled over, groaned once. He toppled, a heavy man, falling hard, like a sack of wheat, boneless, dying.

**D**OC SUMMER was already among them, now that the shooting had stopped, phlegmatically binding wounds. No Box B man was unwounded. Gene had a leg wound. Tom was untouched. Ownie's old wound was bleeding, but he was grinning cheerfully. Clara was running toward him, tears streaming down her cheeks, arms wide.

Rim took Lou by the arm. He said, "You saved me, sure enough. I was just comin' down to tackle Bull and give the others the chance they had comin'."

She said, "I knew you would do something like that."

They walked to where the small light gleamed in the window of her house. He said, "Lou, I didn't want the war."

"I found that out," she said. "On the buggy ride. Bull showed me the boundaries he meant to make for the Box B. Rod's place, Tom's place. He wanted them all."

"You refused him," Rim said, not asking, stating a fact.

They went into the house. Rim said, "I got some little plans, Lou. Mostly to fix up the house."

She looked at him. She said, "Any time, Rim. I'm ready."

He sighed. He said, "We'll all have to chip in and help Miz Rake run her place. We won't grow too big. But we'll get along with our neighbors."

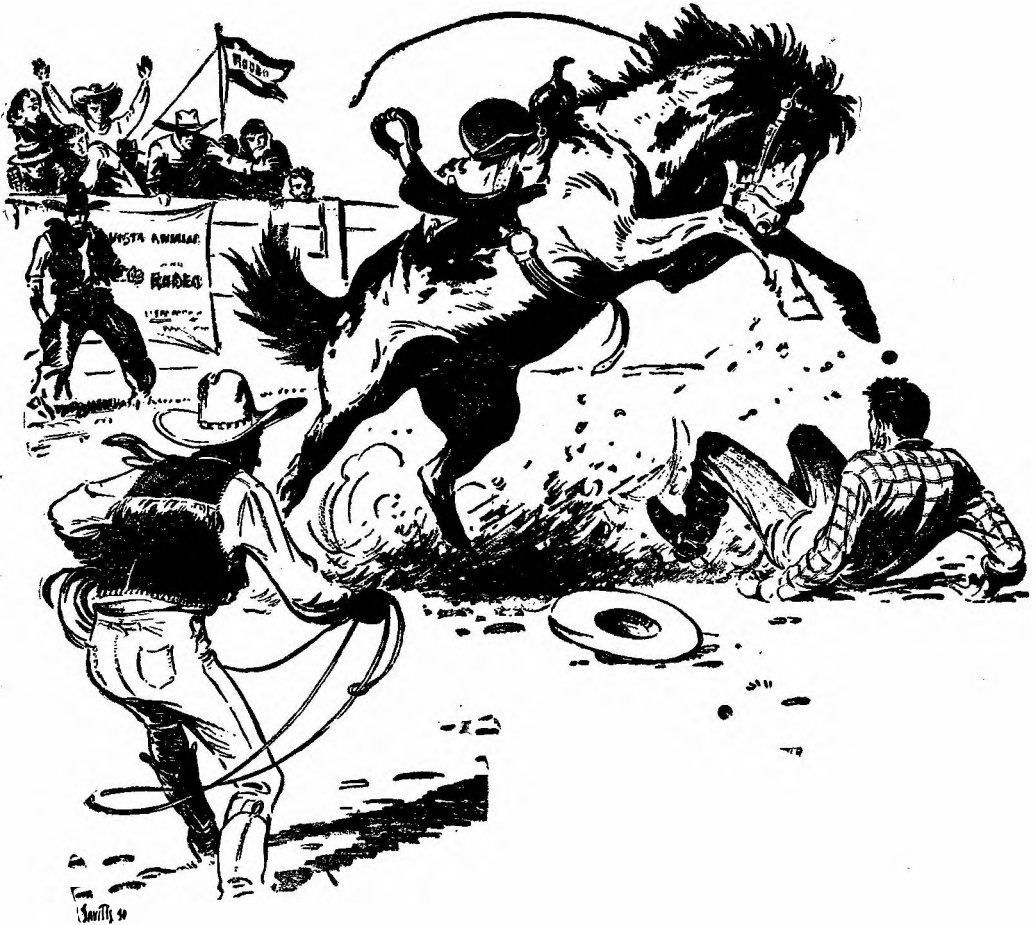
She said, "That's it, Rim. That's why I love you."

He blinked. It was hard to say it. He was not a man for fancy speeches. But he managed it pretty well, and then she was in his arms, where she had never been before, but seemed to fit very well, any durned fool knew what to do then. . . .

# BRAHMAS ARE MURDER

*By Noel Loomis*

Champion bareback rider of the world? What a laugh! Ted Frost hadn't finished a ride in six weeks, and he hadn't been thrown — he'd jumped! Everybody knew what was wrong; even his kid was saying it: "Frosty's lost his guts."



**A** VOICE rolled from the loudspeaker: "Coming out of chute number three — Ted Frost, last year's champion bareback rider of the world, on Purple Sage! Pour 'em out, down there!"

The big crowd held its breath while Ted Frost straddled the top of the bucking chute, watched the big horse beneath him, waited until it should stop throwing itself against the boards for an instant. He would have to do it then. His throat was dry and tight, his lips were quivering.

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He looked up and across the arena, saw dusty turf with little patches of grass clinging by the roots; a fence with one rail on top; an oval race-track; the grandstand beyond, packed with twenty thousand persons who in a moment would be on their feet to see last year's champion make his ride. They were still now, waiting for the gate to swing open.

"Cr-riminy, Frost!" The handler was disgusted. "Why don't you ride? I've had 'im in place a dozen times."

Ted Frost sucked in his breath; he knew



he couldn't put it off any longer. He reached for the surcingle, hooked his lean brown fingers in the ring, closed his eyes, and dropped. He couldn't tell the handler to open the gate; he was holding his breath.

The gate swung wide and the big purple horse pivoted on bunched hoofs and lunged into the arena in a mighty, straining leap. Twenty thousand people in the grandstand surged to their feet. Their roar swelled out across the dust and the smell of arena, to a spot where a man sat astride a purple volcano, swinging his hat high above his head, raking shoulders and flanks with big spurs—a champion in action.

But Ted Frost wasn't raking. His hat was gone; he'd dropped it and grabbed the surcingle with both hands; his spurs were hooked under the strap on the horse's belly, and he was hanging on desperately, his face white, head snapping with the horse's lunges.

He had disqualified himself half a dozen times, but he didn't want to ride out the gun that way; he might as well be thrown; maybe it would look better to the grandstand.

He turned loose and sailed away. He lit rolling, came to his feet and started to run wildly, blindly, anywhere to get away from the purple horse that was after him with bared teeth and pounding hoofs.

"Hold it!" his pickup man yelled through the dust. "That hoss never chased anybody yet."

Frosty got control of himself with a tremendous effort. He forced his shaking legs to stop. "That's right," he mumbled. "I forgot."

He hated to go back to the bucking chutes. He knew what they were saying: "Frosty wasn't throwed—he jumped!" "Frosty hasn't finished in the money in six weeks." "Frosty's plumb rode out." "Frosty's lost his guts."

HE pushed through the fringe of handlers inside the arena, mounted the fence with big spurs jingling. He wished they wouldn't jingle so loud. He got off the fence as fast as he could and walked stiffly away.

A small boy came running. "Gee Christopher, Frosty, he was tough!" He said it defiantly.

"I should have rode him," muttered Frosty, forcing himself to look at the boy. Bennie was short and solid, with heavy bones and plenty of muscle. His face was covered with freckles until you couldn't see much of his skin under his tall hat.

You couldn't look a boy like that in the eye and lie to him, so Frosty turned away. Bennie had been around the chutes most of his ten years, and Bennie saw everything.

"Anyhow," Bennie said confidently, "you'll win the steer-ridin', Frosty. They never keep you out of the money when it comes to them critters."

Frosty took a deep breath and put his hands on Bennie's small, hard shoulders. "I guess not," he said gently. "I ain't entered in the steer-ridin'. The bareback contest took our last five bucks for an entry fee."

"How much is it for steer-ridin'?"

"Two and a half," said Frosty.

"I thought," said Bennie, speaking with all the directness of ten years, "you had another five put away."

"Mike Gordon made me fork that over for our grub this week."

"Th' heck he did!" Bennie's freckled hand reached toward his hip. "I'll drill the hoot owl!"

"Take it easy," said Frosty, and he smiled a little. "Don't ever pull a gun unless you have to—and unless you've got one."

"He's comin' now," said Bennie, looking toward the chutes. "Ridin' along the fence. I s'pose he's glad you got throwed, the big—"

"Mosey on," Frosty ordered. "I want to talk to him." He wanted Bennie to be out of hearing.

The big man on the sorrel horse turned in his saddle and watched the boy stride away, his oversize chaps dragging the dust. "You won't have him long," he said to Frosty. "You're washed up."

Frosty stiffened. "It's none of your business about the boy."

"I'm makin' it my business," said Mike Gordon. His voice turned scornful. "Let a locoed horse paw you a little and now you're all to pieces. Lost your nerve."

Frosty knew that. He'd thought about it plenty in the hospital, but that didn't help any. New he dug a hole with the toe

of his boot and said in a tired but stubborn voice:

"You're a damn' buzzard, Mike. You can't stand to see a man or a critter lookin' good. You want to take it out on Bennie because his mother didn't pick a sneakin' coyote to be his father."

Gordon's face went black. He vaulted off his horse. "I'll break your neck for that," he growled.

Frosty dodged, but he hardly realized that Mike had swung at him. He was thinking that he had to find a job of some kind and get Bennie and himself fed up and get some decent clothes for the kid.

Mike's big fist bounced off his cheek and stung him wide awake. He stepped back and then in. He caught Mike coming forward and slugged him twice in the nose before the big man wrapped his arms around him. He heaved Frosty to the ground, but Ted Frost was tall and he squirmed one arm loose, hit Mike again in the face.

The big man spit blood and bellowed, "I'll kill you!"

And for the first time in weeks Frosty showed a wide grin. He hit Mike again and enjoyed it. The feel of combat rolled through his veins. He raised his knees to kick free. Then there was an impact at the top of his skull. His knees straightened out, his arms went limp.

Mike shoved his six-shooter back in the holster and battered Frosty up considerable before he let him up.

Frosty got up slowly. He spit out a tooth, made his way to a water faucet and washed off the blood. There was dirt ground in under his skin and the raw places burned where the water hit, but it didn't matter.

A hand clapped him on the neck, and he looked up sidewise, with his head still under the faucet.

"Pretty warm today, eh, Frosty," said Slim Jim Jones, manager of the rodeo. He grinned. He could see only the water dripping from Frosty's brick-red hair. "Listen, Frosty, we're short of riders for the Brahmas. Chance to win a hundred."

"I didn't enter," said Frosty.

"I told the other boys how it was, and it's all right with them. You can enter now."

He might as well have said they weren't

afraid Frosty would win anything. Frosty hesitated a moment. "Will you trust me for the fee?" he asked hopefully.

SLIM JIM shook his head. "Can't do that. You're ten bucks into me from last week. You'll have to put up two and a half."

Frosty dug down in his levis. "Two bits is all I've got."

Slim Jim nodded. "Borrow it from somebody. You've got half an hour." He left.

Frosty kept his head under the running water. A lean cowhand sitting on the top rail of the fence spoke to him. "Who'd be crazy enough to pay two and a half to get murdered by one of them foreign cow-brutes?"

Frosty shook the water out of his hair and straightened up. If he got lucky, he might ride into the money—if he could keep his nerve.

He hung on the fence to watch the calf-roping. The third calf out was roped by Mike Gordon in thirteen and three-fifths. "Looks like money-time today," said the loudspeaker.

Frosty felt a tug at the sleeve of his faded green shirt. He looked around into Bennie's freckled face.

"Hey, Frosty, gimme a quarter, will you?"

"Sure," said Frosty. He pulled out the coin and ropped it into Bennie's cupped hand. "Crap game?" he asked.

"Naw," said Bennie. "That's stud."



"Watch your hole-card," said Frosty.

"Don't worry about me." Bennie winked wisely. "I play 'em close to my belt—always."

He disappeared in the crowd, and Frosty grinned once more. Their last quarter was gone, but it didn't matter.

A new sound of the crowd came to him across the turf. Not a full-throated roar, but a lighter sound, with shrill laughs and scattered yells. That would be the calf-riding.

He climbed up on the arena fence. On the other side, in front of the grandstand, they were running the calves on the race-track. The fence between the race-track and the arena on that side was a single rail laid on top of the posts.

There was an argument among the starters. A boy demanded in a shrill voice: "Gimme that big one." The sound was familiar. "I can ride 'im."

There was a moment's delay, then the handlers gave up the argument. They twisted a rope on the calf's belly, set a kid on top. Frosty knew what they were saying: "Got a chaw in your mouth? You can't ride without a chaw." He even saw the kid throw back his head and open his mouth to show them. Then a cowhand smacked the calf on the rump and it exploded down the track.

"Doggone," muttered Frosty. "That calf's a young steer—and a Brahma, at that."

But the boy was making a ride. He was raking the critter with his heels. The big gray calf reached for the ceiling and came down, but the boy stayed on. He snatched off his big hat and brought it down on the calf's flanks.

"Powder River!" he yelled shrilly. "Let 'er buck!"

Frosty knew then. The kid was Bennie, riding like Frosty himself—not as Frosty had ridden today, but a year, ten years ago. Ten years ago Ted Frost had won first prize money, a dollar, for riding a calf at the county fair.

The big calf weighed three hundred pounds. He went up the track in a series of jerky jumps, after the manner of a grown Brahma steer. Bennie quit scratching, but he was still riding. The calf reached the turn in the track, saw the handlers waiting, got scared, and doubled

back. Bennie rolled, but he stuck to the rope and hung on as the calf whirled around. Then they headed back up the track, racing for the Brahma pen.

Frosty held his breath. Why didn't Bennie jump? He'd made his ride . . . now get off!

The boy's face was a white blotch through the dust. He wasn't riding any more; he was hanging on. The calf ran in close to the single-rail fence and Frosty breathed easier. The calf would jump the fence and Bennie would fall off and be out of danger.

But the calf swerved. It didn't try to jump the fence. It flattened a little and went under the single rail.

The laughs and yells changed suddenly to hoarse cries. Bennie lay in a still huddle under the fence. The calf gone. Handlers running across the track. A pickup man spurring his horse across the arena at a hard run.

FROSTY uttered a strange cry and leaped heavily from the fence, ran through the dust with his chaps flopping. He got there as the doctor looked up. Bennie's forehead was split open and blood was all over his face.

Frosty went through the group and stopped at Bennie's side, his jaw hardening into knots. He went down stiffly on his knees. He spoke to the doctor but his eyes never left Bennie's white face.

"What's the answer, Doc?"

"It's a bad blow. The two-by-six caught him square. Might be a concussion."

Frosty's lean brown hand covered Bennie's. "Look, Bennie—"

The boy's eyes opened wide. "Hey, Frosty, I oughta won first money on that calf. He was the toughest critter I could get. It's two bucks and a half, an' you can get into the steer-ridin' now." He pulled Frosty's ear down to his mouth and whispered, "They told me you was afraid to ride the steers, Frosty, but I knew it was because you was broke."

Frosty choked.

He left. Eyes followed him, some scornful. He found that Bennie had won easily, but it took all his nerve to ask for the prize money. He hunted up Slim Jim Jones. "I'm in," he said. "I'll ride them foreign cow-brutes horns drop off."

Slim Jim pocketed the money. "You get Number Four. He'll give you a good ride."

"Who's got Number One?" asked Frosty.

"That Number One," said Slim Jim, "has gone plumb loco in the last couple of weeks. We're not lettin' anybody ride him. Them Brahmas are vicious enough when they're happy. A haywire one'd likely kill a man."

Frosty went over to the chute and waited for *No. 4*. The first two men out were thrown. Their pickup men were riding close behind and snatched them up. The big gray steers hesitated and then loped off, turning to the right. One stopped at the corral-gate. The other vaulted the six-foot fence without touching a hair.

The next man made a ride. The fourth man lost his balance and was tossed over the Brahma's head. The steer was at him with its horns, moving its head in quick, nervous jerks, grinding the limp figure into the ground. Up high on a bucking chute, Frosty heard bones crack when the steer got the man between its forelegs.

The pickup man finally drove the animal off. Two white-coated attendants were running across the arena with a stretcher. The crowd was silent for a moment.

The fifth man made a ride. "Just fair," muttered Frosty. A good ride now would win. He straddled the chute and looked at the broad back under him.

"Number Four looks bigger than he used to," he noted.

"They don't git bigger. They git meaner."

Up to now Frosty had kept his mind on riding. His emotions were of Bennie and there was no room for fear. But the loud-speaker blared:

"Ted Frost, last year's champion bare-back rider of the world, coming out of chute Number One. All right, men, pour 'em out!"

The old fear surged in him then as it had done a hundred times at the sound of those mocking words. His knees trembled and his knuckles tightened where he held the sides of the chute. He hung over the steer but he didn't drop. The rope was twisted and the handler look up at Frosty. "All set," he said.

But Frosty went panicky. He shook his head and said in a queer voice, "No. No, I can't—"

The steer twisted and shoved his great head into the boards with a lunge that jarred the chute. Frosty, hanging above, saw the steer's side curve, saw the painted number four—and something else! He saw yellow paint smeared on the boards. He saw the figure four. The straight-up part was old paint, cracked and worn thin on the steer's hide. But the other two strokes were fresh!

Frosty knew what had happened. Mike Gordon, doing everything he could to get rid of Frosty, had changed a figure one to a figure four. The big steer in the chute now was the loocoed Brahma. Gordon wanted Frosty out of the way so he could get at Bennie.

And Frosty thought of Bennie, telling the cowhands that Frosty would ride if he had the money.

Frosty dropped onto the steer's back and grabbed the rope with his left hand.

"Open 'em up!" he roared. "We're comin' out!"

The gate swung back, but before it was open the big steer bunched himself and made a mighty lunge at it. He cracked it with his head and the upright board splintered. A flying two-by-six scraped Frosty's elbow and he felt the blood spurt out, but he slashed the steer's rump with his hat.

"POWDER RIVER!" he cried. "An inch deep and a mile wide! Give us what you got!"

The steer made two jumps, and then, almost within arm's length of the fence, drew up with its forelegs plowing the turf. The hangers-on had fled before it. Across the oval dustiness of the arena, the crowd rose to its feet, recognizing in the way the big steer came out that here was that accident of the arena—an animal with a personal hate of the rider. Twenty thousand persons sucked in their breath.

There was nothing any one on earth could do to help Ted Frost. He was up there by himself. The fence was close. His pickup man had started for the center of the arena and was out of reach. Frosty's life depended on himself alone.

Frosty knew that. Eight seconds to the

gun. Two seconds less than a bronc. But eight seconds could be a long time. He recognized the silence that gripped the stands, but he didn't mind. He sat on top of the big body, holding the rope, swinging his spurs in rhythm.

The steer was bucking stiff-legged, two feet at a time, raising first its shoulders and then its rump, rocking forward, and then backward with clumsy but swift movements that became jarring thuds when its feet hit the ground. And at every leap its great head snapped back and those long, sharp horns swept within inches of Frosty's face.

Frosty leaned back to dodge a horn, and felt himself losing balance. He leaned to the other side and got straightened up, but the mountainous back caught him with explosive force. He heard the timer's pistol at the same moment. He hung on to the rope and came back down. The steer was changing ends, and Frosty hung on for a chance to get down. But he showed a little daylight when the steer twisted, and then the big back caught him in the air with all its power and threw him as high as the top of the chutes.

He came down between the steer and the fence. The steer had gone past. Frosty lit, facing the opposite direction. He started to roll to his feet, heard the roar of the crowd change to a gasp. A chill went through him. He knew what that meant. He twisted, sitting in the dirt, back to the fence, saw the big Brahma charging.

Its head was down. Frosty squirmed to one side, threw out one hand and seized a horn, held on while the steer tossed its head and uttered a strange, vicious bel-low. Frosty was tossed clear. He landed on his knees, started to his feet. It wouldn't help to run, and this was one time they wouldn't say Frosty had showed white.

The steer was wheeling, but a rope settled over its neck, drew instantly taut, and turned the steer end for end.

Frosty put one hand on the fence. He climbed it slowly. He wasn't afraid any more. Then he came face to face with Mike Gordon. Mike was sore. "Too damn bad you have to send Bennie out to do your ridin'," said Mike.

Frosty took his hand off the fence. He walked up to Mike as if he was measuring him for a suit, then his battered face tightened and his long arm moved like the loaded tip of a bullwhip. Mike swore and tried to close in, but Frosty was cool. He stepped aside and rocked the big man's jaw, took a blow under the eye, said nothing, struck again and again. . . .

**M**IKE went down. Frosty's face was bloody and he was deadly serious. "You got enough?" he asked. "You reckon you can mind your own—"

Mike crouched on his feet. He was all primitive now. A gun was in his hand, pointed at Frosty's heart. His eyes narrowed and Frosty knew it was coming. There wasn't a thing he could do. The man was mad like a Brahma steer.

But a shrill voice commanded:

"Drop that shootin'-iron, mister, or I'll drill you full of holes!"

Bennie was behind Mike Gordon. His head was covered with gauze, but his feet were planted firmly and with both hands he held a big six-shooter aimed at Gordon's back. Mike's gun slid to the ground and his hands went up slowly.

Frosty started forward.

"Git back!" Bennie ordered him. "Stay outa the way so I can shoot the son-of-a-gun."

"Where'd you get that six-shooter?" asked Frosty.

"I bet a dumb cowhand my hat against this gun that you'd win first money on the Brahmas."

"You give him odds," said Frosty. "That there's a fifteen-dollar hat."

"I'm playin' these cards," said Bennie. "You keep out."

"Give me that cannon!" Frosty ordered.

"I ain't gonna do it." The boy turned abruptly and ran straight across the arena. Frosty started after him, but he didn't have a chance.

"When I git hold of you," he yelled, "I'll wallop you for monkeyin' with them Brahma calves."

Bennie turned his freckled face for an instant. He grinned and thumbed his nose.

# GRUBHOE GUNNY

*By William J. Glynn*

It was Matt Radison's move. He'd had his warning: "Give up your land or die." Okay. It was his choice now. Let 'em come —



*"You set off this hayland, Radison," the rider said curtly.*

**M**ATT RADISON tooled his team down into the coulee and along the edge of the grassland fanning out into Big Bone Valley. If he hurried, he was thinking, he could rake the hay

he'd cut that morning into windrows, finish by dark. Then he'd be that much nearer making the stake that would see Ellen and himself through the coming winter. If Clint Boyd didn't like it, he could

go whistle. Boyd might run the valley, but this was one stretch of land he wouldn't have.

At the end of the last swath, where he had left his mower, Matt pulled to a halt. Hipping around on his Bradley rake, he looped his lines over the trip lever and eased his lean frame to the sod.

Matt's blue eyes had suddenly lost their twinkle. The mower was gone. It wasn't much of a job to read the story in the trampled grass. Someone had hooked a team to the eveners and pulled out!

Matt pushed his flop-brimmed hat back on his bleached-out hair and hitched up his faded bib overalls. He was six feet and over in his grass-smoothed brogans; six feet of work-tempered bone and slab-muscle. His lips stretched tight beneath his gaunt, high-boned cheeks. His was the face of a man to whom nothing had ever come as a gift.

He leaned against the high wheel of his rake, rolling a smoke, carefully hoarding the extra flakes of tobacco and pouring them back into the all but empty sack. His gaze was frigid, lifting to the low hills cupping the valley. If they thought they were going to scare him off without a fight, they'd have to guess again. But without a mower to finish the job by the end of the month, as he'd promised Kozlof, he would be licked.

His throat choked with the lump that was gathering there in spite of his efforts to keep it down. For the tenth time that day he fished out the lone silver dollar that stood between him and five months of Dakota winter.

Matt stood there, tense, listening, as though he were waiting for something.

Lighting the cigarette, he got his answer. A heavy growl of a voice rumbled out from a clump of silverberry at the edge of the coulee.

A tall rider, in high-crowned Stetson and batwings, rode into sight on a big bay quarter horse. He had a pair of six-guns slanted about his slim waist and in his right hand he gripped a Winchester carbine.

"You get off this hayland, Radison," the rider said curtly, lifting the barrel of the rifle. "I've told yuh before an' yuh wouldn't listen. This is the last time. Savvy?"

MATT tore the cigarette from his mouth, crumpled it and threw it into the prairie breeze lacing into the valley from the higher rangeland above. The wind stirred the yellow fly nets on his sweat-streaked team of blacks, carried the sweet odor of the new-cut hay. A door slammed a mile down valley, at Ivan Kozlof's sod house. Matt saw the Russian blue of the brightly painted dirt walls over Clint Boyd's hulking shoulders. The scene was like a painting of Charlie Russell's he'd seen above a saloon bar somewheres.

"I paid Kozlof rent for this hayland," Matt said, his speech brittle as old ice. "I'm cuttin'. You wheel outa here. Yeah, an' I want my mower back, or the price for it."

The rider spurred close to Matt's rig. He didn't say anything, but hate gleamed in his grass-green eyes as he fitted the carbine to his shoulder and sighted down the short barrel.

Matt saw Boyd's finger seek and tighten on the trigger. He wanted to shout, to cry out, to lash his team into motion. But there wasn't time for anything. His hands slapped down to his gunless thighs, then he stood stock still, frozen with horror.

Boyd's carbine cracked, sent lead and powder flame stabbing at Matt's nigh black. The horse reared, pawing at the neck yoke, screaming in agony. Then he toppled and fell, almost pulling his team mate down in his death plunge.

Clint Boyd's harsh laugh rang out. "Next time it'll be you, grubhoe. An' I didn't take your damn mower."

Matt watched Boyd ride off over the hill and wished he had a six-gun in his hand instead of in his camp over on Dead Indian Creek. Bitterly, he cursed the big Rolling C owner. A shiver of rage racked his body, and then he was ripping the harness from his other horse and leaping up on the broad back.

Ivan Kozlof's big high-box wagon was pulled up near the door of his smooth-walled house. Matt slid to hard-packed farm yard and clumped to the door to pound on it with his bony fist.

Slowly, it came open and Ivan Kozlof stepped outside, heavy cowhide boots splaying out under his heavy, paunchy form. He was a huge man, a bearded bear of a giant, with murky little dark eyes that



seemed to smolder like coals in their deep sockets. He moved close to Matt, his long arms swinging with the roll of his barrel walk. His face was broad and flat. Only the eyes told of the anger that choused around under his unruly thatch of black hair.

"So, now you believe me, Radison?" the big farmer rumbled, coming to a stop a scant three feet from Matt. "You can't cut that hay. I saw Boyd kill your horse. You keep on with your hard-headed fight against that cowman and he will kill you. Anyway, this land is mine and I don't want any fight with Boyd. Now you get off or I will have the Rolling C crew riding me down like a bunch of Cossacks. I don't want that kind of trouble."

"You let Clint Boyd scare you off this land, Ivan, and you don't deserve to have it," Matt said sharply. "But you rented that hayland to me. I paid you the first payment of fifty dollars—promised the hay to Joe Pingree for his feed store in town. Joe's the one loaned me the money to pay you, so I've gotta cut."

"No," Kozlof growled. "Our deal was over the samovar and a hand-shake. You haven't a tie on me, and as for the fifty dollars, I'll pay you back next spring. Boyd will run me out of the country if I don't let him have that hay."

Kozlof's big hands clenched. He glanced at the sun, slanting down in the hills far to the west.

"Then you're figgerin' on losin' the rent money I was goin' to pay you, Ivan?" Matt felt despair cool the hot blood pounding through him. If he lost out on this deal, he and his wife would face a poverty and homelessness that he didn't want to think of.

"I said get out!" Kozlof roared.

"If you play along with them salty Rolling C jaspers, they'll give you a hay ride to hell, Ivan—drive you off your farm, too."

Hot blood splashed red in the big farmer's broad face. He stepped in close to Matt, and with a growl of rage lunged forward, his huge fist swinging up in a roundhouse.

Matt saw the blow coming and ducked to one side, but his shoes, slick from walking in the grass, slipped out from under him and Kozlof's ham-wide palm landed

flush on Matt's jaw, sent him spinning to the ground.

Kozlof stood over him, his eyes burning. "Now you get!" he roared. "I don't want no trouble—that's why I come to this country, and I won't have you starting something I will have to finish."

Matt got to his feet, his cheek red and burning where the farmer had hit him. Without a word, he strode to his gelding and rode out of the yard.

IT WAS almost dark when he neared his camp on Dead Indian Creek. A tall cottonwood marked the spot, but he didn't need the tree to tell him where it was this evening.

His anger had been steaming during the afternoon, and now it reached the boiling point. His tent was flat on the ground and the rest of his camp gear was scattered over a half-acre.

Matt found his wife slumped on the seat of their old second-hand buggy. In the flare of a sulphur match Matt saw the wild grief in her dark eyes, the trembling of her shoulders.

"Matt," she cried, and grasped him in her arms, sobbing.

Radison's eyes were cold slits surveying the damage of the little camp. He cursed slowly, bitterly, looking at the overturned barrel of groceries and supplies, the torn and scattered bedding. Rage spilled into his throat and choked him, cut off the words of sympathy and endearment that he wanted to say.

"It's—it's all right, Ellen," he managed, finally. "We'll get by somehow. I'll take you into town and we'll put up at the hotel for tonight, anyhow. I'll see Boyd about—this," he added grimly.

Ellen Radison shook her head, wiped the tears from her eyes. "It wasn't Boyd, Matt. I'm sure of that. I—"

Matt got down from the buggy, kicked through their scattered belongings, stooped down suddenly and picked up a .45 Colt and a holstered belt. He strapped it about his slim hips and backed his gelding into the shafts on the buggy, got the light harness from the boot and hitched up.

"Easy, girl," he told his wife, sitting down beside her in the seat and slapping life into the black, "we're goin' to town, an' I don't mean just to sleep in a hotel."

Matt was silent driving over the dark prairie to town. Conflicting thoughts raced through his brain. Who was it could do a trick like that—trying to wipe him out? But it wasn't Boyd. Ellen had said so, and she had watched the whole thing. Matt couldn't make himself believe Ivan Kozlof could be back of a low deal like that, even if he did want Matt out of his hayland in order to keep peace with Boyd.

It was past supper time when they rattled down into Twin Lodge. Matt drove through the dark, dusty main street and stopped in front of the hotel. The clerk hesitated, eyeing Matt coldly when he threw down his lone silver dollar.

"That'll be two dollars, in advance, when you ain't carryin' no luggage, feller."

"I got luggage," Matt said, laying his six-gun on the desk. "Reckon this cutter's worth a buck until tomorrow."

The clerk's eyes widened a trifle and he reached out for the .45. But Matt picked it up again and held it loosely in his hand, the muzzle bobbing within a foot of the clerk's snub nose.

"But I figger I'll be obliged to borrow it back for the night," Matt grinned.

Later, out on the boardwalk, Matt turned and walked up the street toward Pingree's.

Gil Pingree was sitting out front on a sack of oats, smoking an evening cigar. He was a thin, hawk-nosed little man, with eyes that were like a weasel's, and about as close-set in his narrow face. He had a sharp tongue and a sharper nature. The tongue was working overtime even before Matt had got within speaking distance.

"Radison, by dang," Pingree shrilled, "I been wonderin' what happened to you. From what I heard norated about Twin Lodge, Boyd an' that Kozlof feller tangled. I been a thinkin'—"

"How you could get back that fifty dollars you loaned me, I'll bet a new sack of Bull," Matt leveled. "Reckon you never played nothin' wasn't a sure thing, Pingree." He leaned against the hitch-rack, watching the little store man's excited gestures and listening to the magpie flow of shrill speech. Ever since leaving his wrecked camp, Matt had been pondering over an idea that had come to him, and now hearing the feed man's greedy nature come out in his talk, he suddenly decided to try a shot in the dark.

"SINCE when did you have to send 'em out them gun-hung town dogs to knock down my camp on Dead Injun," he said slowly. "You'd a got your money, an' plenty besides. That was a skunk trick, Gil Pingree, if you was back of it."

Pingree jerked to his feet. His bald head glistened in the yellow light seeping out from his store. His thin lips were drawn in an ugly line, and for once they were still.

"Wasn't it?" Matt prodded, his face dark with anger now.

"Why—they didn't do nothin' of the kind," Pingree spluttered. "They didn't wreck your camp. I jest told 'em to snake back my buck rake an' the mower I loaned you, so's to cover my investment, but—"

"Like hell they didn't," Matt snapped, and reaching out he grasped the store man by the shirt front and drew him up within six inches of his grim face. "You wanta know what them gun-dogs did, you come down to the hotel. My wife'll tell you what they did, you damned old pinch-penny. I'm cleaned out, understand? Ain't got a cent—facin' a cold winter without no job nor home. I wanta know what's the idee back of you actin' that way. If it was Clint Boyd threw the scare into you, say so."

Pingree's frightened eyes darted over the young farmer, saw the big .45 on his hip. "Wait, Matt," he quavered, "I didn't know them jasper'd do that, honest injun. An' Boyd did warn me to pull my irons—said if I bought any of your hay he'd run me outa town on a rail. Now you lemme down!"

Matt shook the man, threw him down on the sacked oats and stamped off up street.

Matt's thoughts were roiling around like the Big Muddy in Spring thaw as he stepped into the Roundup Saloon. There were not over half-dozen men inside. They were all bellied to the bar. One of them, a big, lean man, duded up in puncher clothing stepped away from the bar when he spotted Matt. The fellow was as thin as a peeled corral pole, with a pair of legs that wouldn't have held back a full-grown shot.

"Hi, soddy," he shouted drunkenly, weaving toward Matt. "Reckon you took the hint an' pulled off the creek, huh?"

"What you drivin' at?" Matt said, his voice brittle as broken glass.

"Why, hell man," the puncher laughed, "ever'body knows you farmers has gotta git off this range. Clint Boyd was in here just a while back, said you was cleaned out over on Dead Injun. You're jest too gutless to protect yourself, that's all that's wrong with you soddies."

"What do you know about my camp? Yeah, an' where at did you get that hat?" Matt snatched the black Stetson from the puncher's head, stared at the sweat band. "Mine, just like I thought. You're one of the low-downs that bear-hunted my camp."

"What if I did?" the puncher sneered.

Matt unwound like a coil of loosened barbwire. His bony right fist smacked into the man's twisted mouth sent him crow-hopping back on his spike heels. Matt's left came in fast with a short jab over the heart and the puncher went down like a shot critter.

"Any the rest of you takin' orders from Boyd—step up," Matt invited, rubbing his knuckles.

For a moment there wasn't a sound in the saloon. The barkeep's bulgy eyes looked like a pair of fried eggs in a plate of catchup.

"Lis'en, feller, you can't come in here an' fight. That was Slim Needham you just knocked out. Slim's just got his papers from over to the county seat—as deputy sheriff. Clint Boyd helped put him in. If you figger on ever eatin' another breakfast, you better high-tail outa this town, an' I mean pronto!"

"You're lickin' Clint's boots just like the rest?"

"Hell no, I ain't," the barman gruffed, "but I damn well know when I'm well off. There's plenty in this town'd like to see Clint get what's comin' to him, but that ain't healthy thinkin', if you savvy what I'm shootin' at."

"WHERE'S Boyd?" Matt demanded. "Left a while back for his spread. He's movin' into that Rooshian's hayfield with his crew tonight.

Needham stirred on the floor, raised up on his hands, a wild cursing ripping from his battered mouth.

Then he saw Matt still standing there,

and flashed a hand for the six-gun in his belt.

Matt's big brogan caught the gun as it cleared leather and sent it spinning into a corner.

"Nab that sodbuster," roared the deputy, struggling to get to his feet.

But Matt was outside, running up the dark street to where he had left his horse and buggy.

Clint Boyd's hay camp spread out in Big Bone Valley, just inside the deeper ravine that led in from the higher rangeland above. A big moon heeling up in the east threw yellow light on the layout, brought into bold focus the two white cars on wheels; the Rolling C's bunk and cook cars. They were long, narrow, box-like affairs, built on heavy wagon beds, portable living and eating quarters. A four-horse team could snake them over the gently rolling plains as easily as a prairie schooner.

Matt sat his tired black in the dark shadow of a clump of Saskatoon, his eyes searching out the details of Boyd's camp. To one side of the pole hitch rail for the dozen or so teams, was a tall, bare-ribbed hay stacker. A line of mowers and buck rakes were drawn up in a ragged row beside the bunk car.

Through the lighted windows of the cook car, Matt saw the long narrow table down the center of the car, filled on both sides with Clint's hay crew. At two-fifty a day and keep, they had a good thing. Even the cowpunchers riding for Boyd could safely forget their objection to hard labor and pitch into the work until time for Fall beef gather at those wages.

Matt eased his gelding in closer to the camp, got down near the cook car. Gun in hand, he stepped carefully up the steps of the cook car and slipped inside. The clatter of the tin dishes and the rattle of knives and forks, as the hungry crew swarmed to the hot food, drowned any noise he might have made.

The Chinese cook was the first to see him. He stood there, poised over the hot range, a big serving spoon upraised in his hand. His beady eyes traveled over the gaunt, rawboned farmer.

"No gottee extla glub, tlap," the cook shouted, in a high-pitched sing-song. "You lide, chop-chop!" He hit the big wreck

pan with his spoon, brought every head jerking up from the food-piled table to stare at Matt.

"Clint Boyd," Matt said, "I wanta see Boyd." His gaze drifted down table.

The man nearest Matt, a sad-faced Swede with a sweeping walrus mustache that dripped black coffee, lifted his china-blue eyes to stare at Matt and his long barreled six-gun. He suddenly snapped out of his supper-time hunch as though he'd swallowed a bone.

"Sit still, all of you, and you won't get hurt," Matt ordered. "Boyd's the one I want."

Clint Boyd, at his place near the far end of the table, got to his feet. His green eyes blazed out at Matt from the leathery folds of his face. A sneer deepened the wings of the wishbone lines cutting down from his beak nose.

"Grubhoe gunny!" the rancher scoffed. "Reckon you better watch your step, boys," he added. "That cutter he's got might get unsteady-like, an' take a notion to go off."

"It'll shoot," Matt agreed. "Don't take no gun-dog to pull a trigger."

"Yeah," snarled Boyd, "an' while you're doin' that little thing I'll have both hog-legs out an' talkin'. What you tryin' to do, soddy—play Bill Bonnie, or mebbe Tom Horn? Either one, you're coyote bait the second you dog back that hammer. I told you I was gonna cut this hay."

**M**ATT'S six-gun flamed, bucked in his hand. Boyd's big hat jerked on the thong that held it slung over his shoulders. Fire blazed in the rancher's eyes and his fingers laxed, slipped away from the walnut stocks of his twin six-guns. He stepped back over the bench to face Matt.

"You asked for it, soddy," he said, an ugly grin spreading his wide mouth. Tell him, Spearfish."

"Put 'er down, farmer," a gruff voice growled at Matt.

The screen door banged shut and something hard poked into Matt's back. He turned around, slowly raised his hands over his head.

"Now you're gettin' smart, hoeman. You make another move at that cutter an' I'll blow you to hell." Spearfish Thompson was a tall, rawboned gunman, grizzled and

tough looking as old saddle leather. His one eye was the color of a frozen trout's. Where the other eye had been was an uncovered empty socket, as red as raw beef. His misshapen nose twisted down over gross lips.

"Where you want him, Clint?" Spearfish asked, prodding Matt out of the car and down the steps.

On the ground, Boyd took Matt's six-gun and tossed it under the car. He yelled back into the cook car:

"You shikepokes finish your grub and hit the soogans. I ain't payin' none of you gun-wages, 'cept Spearfish here."

"Wouldn't want your hay hands an' farmers to get ideas, would you, Boyd?" Matt said.

The rancher's fist came up out of the dark, smashed into Matt's jaw and shoved him reeling to the ground. "Now, mebbe you'll keep a hush-mouth, feller," the rancher grated. "You, Spearfish, hook them buckskins to the democrat. We're goin' callin'."

"Too late to drive into town, Clint. How about stringin' this nosey gent to the stacker."

"An' have all the farmers on this range lookin' fer us by mornin'? Nope, I got a better plan. We're makin' a quiet little call, us three, down to that Kozlof's place. I figger we can plug the Russian and Radison. Then we'll hang a fresh hide over Kozlof's fence. Get it? Slow elkin' my beef, see? The soddies are movin' in fast hereabouts, but they'll take that kinda evidence, especially since I got Slim Needham his star-packin' job. He'll throw 'em to our way of thinkin'."

Boyd pulled his team to a halt in the shadow of Ivan Kozlof's barn. "Look there, Spearfish. That dang grubhoe's place is lit up like a school-house dance."

Spearfish, sitting in the wagon box, his six-gun digging into Matt's back, twisted around with a grunt of surprise, his one pale eye squinting over the farm yard.

"Yeah, Clint, an' see that there rig and them hosses tied out front of that mud house. You reckon we're crashin' a party?"

"It'll be a necktie party for you two coyotes," Matt growled.

"Mebbe we just better plug this ringy gent an' go on back to camp, Clint," Spearfish drawled. "Mixin' with them soddies,

once they get riled is like fightin' a bobcat bare-hand."

"Spearfish, the fearless outlaw," sneered Clint Boyd. "Lis'en, I come after that bush-faced Kozlof, an' I'm gettin' him. Savvy? Radison, you jump down an' mosey up to the house. Tell Kozlof you want to see him, you want to talk to him outside. Don't you say nothin' else, an' don't try no tricks. Me' an' Spearfish'll be right behind you, with a couple of .45s notched where your overall straps cross, understand?"

Matt got out of the wagon, walked slowly toward the farmer's house. He stopped at the gate.

"Go on!" hissed Boyd.

There was nothing else Matt could do at the moment. A feeling of defeat welled up in him, as with dragging feet he arrived at the front of the house and pounded on the door.

Matt heard Boyd and his gunman come up behind him and fan out to either side, saw them flatten out in the dark shadow of the eaves. This wasn't going to be easy, but Matt thought there might be a chance of some sort if he could get Kozlof outside and somehow tip him off to the danger. He heard a jangle of talk inside, and suddenly the door opened. Kozlof was framed in the doorway.

"Who is it?" growled the big farmer, yellow lamp light streaming out around his huge form.

"IT'S me, Radison," Matt said. He saw Boyd's tall frame move in toward the door, caught the gleam of the Colt in the rancher's hand. "Come on out, Ivan. I—I want to talk to you." Matt tried to see into the room. He wanted to shout out a warning. But there was no time for that. Spearfish moved in from the left, jabbed his six-gun into Matt's ribs.

"Yeah, Kozlof," Boyd said, stepping up beside Matt, "we want to talk. You come on out here, an' keep them paws where I can see 'em. You make one move to go back in there, or holler an' I'll bore you center."

The Russian grunted, closed the door behind him and stepped out into the moonlit farm yard. "What you want?" he growled.

"You," Boyd snapped. "Get movin', over to my rig there."

"Wait," Kozlof said.

"Wait nothin'," Boyd said, pushing his six-gun into the farmer's broad back. "Step out!"

Matt and the farmer, side by side, with the two cowmen behind them, walked toward the wagon.

Then a plan flashed through Matt's racing brain—a dangerous and mighty slim chance it was, but it came full born, and with the desperation of a drowning man, he seized upon it and put it into quick action.

"Kozlof," Matt began, "what you tryin' to buck Clint for? Why don't you tie in with him like I'm doin'? You can't fight a feller with his power."

Ivan Kozlof stopped in mid stride, his eyes bulging.

"Get on you," ordered Boyd.

But the farmer didn't move. "You are a snake, Radison," he boomed out. "Six hours ago you were ready to shoot this—this Boyd. Yes," Kozlof's eyes swiveled to Spearfish—to the gunman's .45 boring into Matt's back, "and if you are friends with Boyd, why do they hold a gun in your back?"

"Say," snarled Boyd, "what you tryin' to pull. Radison, you climb in that wagon!"

It all hinged now on whether Matt could make his plan look like the real thing. He twisted his mouth down, turned to the Russian. "You're yellow, Kozlof. You're afraid, that's what you are. You're waiting for the right time, then you'll try and take Boyd's ranch, just like you've been stealing his beef. You're a big mule-head, Ivan Kozlof!"

The Russian's roar of anger could be heard a mile. "You—you," he shouted, and then the words choked off in his throat. He lunged at Matt, carrying the younger man to the ground and falling on him heavily.

Spearfish backed away, watched, his one eye wide. The two men rolled, cursing and flailing with arms and legs.

"Shall I plug 'em both where they are, Clint?"

"Hold it, Spearfish," Boyd ordered. "You prod 'em apart. I'll get the wagon an' we'll load 'em in and pull out of here. No tellin' how many soddies there are in

that house. We can tend to these two hammer-heads later."

Matt grabbed Kozlof by the beard, pulled his head close. "Quick," he whispered, "I was just stallin' for time, Ivan. Get up, throw me again' Boyd. I'll get his gun. It's our only chance."

The Russian grunted like a badger under a grannery floor. A huge grin split his hairy face. The next second he had pulled Matt up and shoved him with a sweep of his long arms at the rancher running toward the democrat.

Matt hit the ground rolling, crashed into Boyd's legs and they both went down in a tangle. Matt's clutching fingers closed over the rancher's six-gun, wrenched it from his grasp. Clubbing down with the stock, he felt the gun thud on the rancher's skull. Boyd sagged down with a groan and Matt whirled around to see the orange flame of Spearfish's six-gun stabbing through the darkness.

Pain, like a hot awl, ripped into Matt's shoulder. He spun half around with the force of the gunman's lead. But he didn't fall. Lifting the .45, he squeezed trigger.

Kozlof wasn't idle. With a growl of rage that was more animal than human, he leaped at Thompson's back, his great arms encircling the man's neck.

Spearfish screamed and dropped his .45 as the huge Russian bent his head back on his shoulders. There was a sharp crack and the gunman wilted in Kozlof's arms, his head rolling grotesquely on his broken neck.

**T**HE roar of gun-thunder brought Matt staggering around to see Boyd on one knee, thumbing his left-hand Colt.

Gun flame blossomed in the night and a blow that felt like a bronc's kick brought Matt down, stumbling, striving to hold his six-gun steady. Boyd's second shot fanned past his side, plucked at his shirt and whined out into the dark.

Matt raised himself on his elbows, held

the gun, suddenly seeming to weigh a ton instead of three and a half pounds, until the sight steadied. The hammer dropped on a blast. Boyd grunted, clawed at his chest and sank down to roll and thrash out his life.

A great dark void claimed Matt after that. He remembered nothing until he came to in Kozlof's farm house. There was a soft buzz of talk, and Matt made out the big Russian standing at the foot of the big, four-poster bed. Kozlof's flat face was cracked in a wide-mouthed grin and a rumble of foreign sounding words gathered in his bushy beard.

Ellen was there. Matt grinned, weakly. "Reckon we lost out on that hotel room—with our last—dollar," he said.

Ellen smiled, her dark eyes wide and suddenly strangely moist. "No, Matt," she said gently, "we didn't lose that dollar." She touched his shirt, pulled up the deputy's star that was pinned there so he could see it. "You've got a job, Matt. When you left me there in the hotel, I—I didn't go up to the room. It's Saturday night, remember? All the farmers and their wives were coming into town for the weekly shopping. I went down to the general store and I told our story. They formed a posse, and after they had taken Slim Needham's star away from him some of them came here. I came with them and—you know the rest."

"So," Kozlof beamed, "you and me, Matt Radison—we will cut the hay—partners, huh?"

"Grubhoe gunny," laughed Matt, and wondered at the lightness in his heart and the smile that was growing deep down in his raw-boned frame.

"Not a gunman, Matt," Ellen said. "The farmer's sheriff. We'll have the cutest little place to live, in the back of the jail in Twin Lodge.

Matt gripped his wife's hand. "I figured I'd mebbe spend the winter in jail, girl—but not behind no star-packer's desk."

# LAWMEN DIE HARD

*By John Y. Quayle Jr.*

Gunsmoke shrouded the valley. Rustlers milked it dry. Irate townsmen railed at Pop Wilkes. "Too old," they grumbled. "Need a younger man." Pop had to act and act fast — or turn in his star.



*Horton pulled his six-gun and casually pointed it at the banker.*

**A**S soon as the posse topped the ridge and came down the road to town, I could tell by the sag of Sheriff "Pop" Wilkes' shoulders that they hadn't had any luck.

I was thankful for one thing—I wouldn't be the jigger to tell him that while he was gone two gunmen stuck up Nolan, owner of Gunsight's general store, and rode off with a thousand dollars.



The men who would do the telling were waiting in Pop's office. There was James J. McQuade, the banker—a little, strutting cuss with a big voice; Paul Horton, big and bald, who owned the Lucky Dollar Saloon, and Nolan, himself.

They ran Gunsight; owned it lock, stock and barrel, almost. And they were on the prod for Pop, saying he was too old to handle things. They sat safe and smug talking against him, while Pop rode the legs off his horse trying to catch the rustlers who had been hitting the valley herds lately.

At the thought of them, I spit into the dust of the road at my feet.

The same dust lay heavy on Pop's old sombrero when he reined in his tired horse before our adobe jail and sheriff's office. It powdered his already gray mustache and was thick on his clothes and boots.

"Howdy, Dave," he said, grinning at me like he always did.

I grinned back, but my heart wasn't in it. "They gave you the slip?" I asked.

"Yeh," said Pop wryly. "We trailed 'em almost to the Bar M. Then their tracks got lost among some stock and we never did cut 'em again."

"Huh," snorted Bob Clayton, one of the riders in Pop's posse. "Same old story. Now, if you'd listened to me . . ."

"You'd catch 'em, I reckon," I said hotly.

Bob was one hombre I had no use for, a slender, wiry man with mean eyes in a florid face. When he was a deputy in Socorro, he'd killed three men and never let you forget it, wearing two ivory-handled Colts all the time and his hair down to his shoulders like Wild Bill Hickock.

One of the men he'd killed had been a friend of mine, a cowhand on a spree who should have been jailed to sleep it off instead of gunned by a man out to make a rep. Besides, I didn't like the way Bob spoke to Pop.

"You're damned right I'd catch 'em," Bob retorted.

"An' shoot em in the back if you did," I said.

Bob's face got beet red and for a minute I thought he was going to start something, but Pop shoved his horse between us, saying:

"There's no call for you two to start quarrelin'. Bob, you an' the rest o' the boys can go. I'll call you if I need you again."

Bob yanked his horse around and dug in the spurs hard. He took off down the road, the others following him. Pop got heavily down from his saddle and handed the reins to me. He patted his horse on its sweat-flecked neck and told me: "Give him a good feed an' rub down, son."

"In a minute, Pop," I answered. I sure hated to tell him, but I just couldn't let him go in and face those men in his office cold. "McQuade, Horton an' Nolan are waiting to see you. They're hoppin' mad—as usual."

"What about this time?" Pop sounded mighty tired.

"Nolan was knocked out an' robbed last night," I said. "There were two men, masked. That's all he knows. I ain't been able to find out a thing."

"Well—" Pop said, "might as well get it over with."

**WE** walked into the office together. I stand almost six feet, but Pop was a couple of inches taller. Before his hair got gray, it must have been about the same sandy brown as mine. I'd wanted to go on the posse with him, but he'd told me to stay in Gunsight and keep an eye on things. A fine mess I'd made of it.

Pop said "Howdy" to the men waiting in the office, walked over to the water bucket and drank a full dipper without stopping. Then he wiped off his mustache and sat down behind his desk. McQuade and Horton sat on the bench and Nolan had the only other chair, so I leaned against the wall beside the door and rolled myself a smoke.

Nolan, tall and thin and dried up, hemmed and cleared his throat. He looked at bald Horton and then they each looked at McQuade, sort of electing him spokesman. He swelled out his chest like a play actor I once saw down in San Antone.

"Wilkes," he said to Pop, "I'm a plain man, a business man. We have a fine little town here, a town with a future, but unless this lawlessness is stopped, it will be ruined."

Horton nodded solemnly. McQuade pointed toward Nolan, who had a bandage around his head.

"Last night," McQuade continued, "Nolan here, one of our leading citizens, was robbed."

"Dave told me about it," Pop said mildly. He turned to Nolan, saying: "Said he hasn't got the men yet, but we will."

McQuade gave me a sour look and he acted peeved at the interruption when Nolan said, "I hope so, Sheriff. They got close to a thousand dollars."

"That's a lot o' money," Pop said.

"This robbery is just the latest crime, Sheriff," McQuade declared. "Our ranchers are losing cattle. There was that miner killed last week. The malefactors are going scot free and that is bad for business. The point is, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm doin' the best I can," Pop said.

"That's just it, Wilkes," McQuade said. "Your best apparently isn't good enough."

The cocky way he said it was like a slap in the face. Horton grunted his approval, but Nolan shifted uneasily in his chair and looked away from Pop.

"I got my ways," Pop said mildly.

"And we don't like them," McQuade snapped. He wheeled on his bench and glared at me. "Speaking plainly, we don't like you having a jail bird for deputy."

I felt the back of my neck getting red. 'All right, so I had been in state prison. I'd served my time and when I came back to Gunsight, Pop was the only one who would give me a job. He trusted me when others wouldn't and I never let him down.

"Leave Dave out of this," Pop said. His voice was still quiet, but it had a ring of authority and I noticed the sag had gone from his shoulders.

"We came here for a showdown, Wilkes," McQuade asserted. "We want you to fire Dave Newhall, get a reliable man as your deputy and clean up Gunsight—or you won't be sheriff after the next election."

I could take the remarks about me, but the way McQuade was riding Pop got under my skin. I stepped forward and said:

"Maybe you got a better man than Pop!"

"We have," McQuade answered shortly. "Bob Clayton."

"That fourflusher . . ." I began, but Pop cut me off short.

"Quiet, Dave," he commanded, and turned to McQuade, saying: "Now you listen to me, Mr. Banker. As long as I'm sheriff, I'll hire who I please. Dave stays. Now you get out of my office!"

McQuade stood up, slapped on his hat and stamped out the door, Horton following and looming over the little banker like a bear. Nolan stood, too, and shuffled his feet nervously.

"I'm sorry about this, Wilkes," he said. "But you—we're none of us as young as we used to be. . . ."

"I'm still young enough for this job," Pop said.

"Well—" Nolan hesitated, then turned toward the door. "So long."

"So long," Pop said.

I closed the door behind Nolan and walked over beside Pop's desk. It seemed to me there was only one thing for me to do, so I did it. I unpinned the badge from my vest and handed it to Pop.

"What's this for, Dave?" he asked.

"You heard 'em," I said. "If you won't fire me, I'm quitting."

Pop looked tired again. "I never figured you for a quitter, Dave," he said sadly.

"I'm not, Pop," I said. "An' I'm mighty grateful to you. But I'm a bad luck guy—bad luck to myself an' bad luck to you. With me gone, they won't be so dead set on getting your job."

"YOU blockheaded, ornery fool . . ." Pop flared. "I told McQuade and his crowd that you stay an' you're stayin'. Want to make me out a liar?"

"No, Pop," I said and laughed. "I wouldn't want that."

He laughed, too, and it sounded good to me. He breathed on the deputy's badge and made a great show of polishing it on his sleeve before he handed it back to me.

"We'll lick those coyotes yet, Dave," he said.

"Got any ideas how?" I asked, as I pinned on the badge.

"What ideas have you, Dave?"

"Just a hunch," I said. "Seems funny to me that when you're in town, rustlers raid a far-out ranch, an' . . ."

He finished the thought, "An' when I'm out on the range, they stick up Nolan in town, eh?"

"It just seems funny," I said, sitting on the edge of his desk.

"You think they could be getting orders from here in town?" Pop asked.

"Maybe," I answered.

"When I was a younker huntin' quail back home," Pop said meditatively, "I learned that you've got to flush yore birds before you can shoot 'em. An' before you can flush 'em, you've got to find 'em. Dave, how'd you like to be a bird dog?"

"Meanin' what, Pop?"

"Meanin' that you take a *pasear* around town an' see what you can see."

"*Seguro*," I said. "Sure, Pop."

It was dark outside. October nights are cold in New Mexico after the sun goes down, so I put on a coat. As I started down the street, I saw that the night was clear with the stars bright as diamonds and the air keen and sharp to breathe.

I crossed the plaza and turned down First Street. My boots scuffed in the dust and I tried to put two and two together and come out with an answer that made sense. The only thing that seemed obvious to me was that there must be a well-organized gang operating.

Then I thought of Nolan. The way he'd been robbed had a mighty familiar sound to me. I'd been sent to jail for just such a stick-up—and I hadn't had hand in it. That had been a year before when I was playing around with some tough young jiggers.

Two men had knocked out an old miner with a pistol butt and robbed him of a couple of hundred dollars. I didn't know it, but Joe Gates, a friend of mine, was one of the men. The law caught us walking together and Joe tried to make a fight of it and was killed.

They arrested me and found some of the miner's money on me. I'd won it from Joe playing poker, but the law claimed I'd helped Joe, and it was enough to send me to prison for eight months. I always hoped I could clear myself.

I was thinking of that as I walked, and not paying much attention to the

tinny music blaring from the honkytonks along the street or to the clamor from the saloons. I bumped against a man and was mumbling an apology when he gripped my arm.

"Dave," he drawled. "Sure good to see you, kid."

It was Texas Slim, an owlhooter I'd known in jail. He was about as skinny as they come but as tough as rawhide, with a bristling beard, rusty red like his hair, and narrow green eyes.

"Howdy, Slim," I said. "What brings you here?"

"Big things, kid," he answered. "Big things. I'm pleased most to death findin' you like this. We need another hombre we can count on."

"Look, Slim . . ." I said, intending to put him straight about me being a deputy. Then I thought of Pop and the tight he was in and decided to keep my mouth closed. Maybe Slim was the lead we needed. The coat was hiding my badge and I buttoned it so it wouldn't swing open and show the star.

"Let's mosey along to my room, Dave," Slim said, falling in step beside me.

WE walked past Horton's Lucky Dollar Saloon and turned down the alley beside it. It was a big two-story adobe building with a porch running around the second floor. There were stairs in the alley leading to the porch and we went up.

I did a mental buck as we climbed the stairs. If Slim was holed up in Horton's, that might mean that the saloon owner wasn't such a law-and-order man as he let on. I had to see it through now.

Our boots plunked hollowly on the wooden planks of the porch. Light streaked from under a door at the end of the gallery and we walked toward it.

"Must be a pow-wow on," Texas Slim said.

"Who?" I asked.

"You'll meet 'em soon enough," Slim replied.

I felt tense and tried to lag back a little to let Slim enter the room first. But he opened the door and pushed me ahead of him into the room, calling out:

"Heah's an' old compadre of mine."

As I stepped inside the door and the light from the coal-oil lamp hit my

face, the talk stopped short as if cut off with a knife.

Right across from me sat McQuade, bolt upright in a straight-backed chair. In another chair tilted against the wall was Horton, the light gleaming on his bald head. The third hombre in the room was Bob Clayton. He was perched on the edge of a cot and sprang to his feet, both hands streaking for his guns.

"You damn fool!" Bob shouted at Slim. "Bringin' a deputy here!"

I went for my gun but the skirts of the buttoned coat slowed me. Bob had his out and I was just jerking mine clear when Slim piled a fist against the side of my head. I went down on the floor, getting my gun free and swinging it up at Bob.

Slim stepped across my body and kicked the gun from my hand. It went spinning across the floor into a corner. I could see a wild light in Bob's eyes. He brought his right-hand gun down to bear on me.

"I'll kill the son . . ." he snarled.

"Not in here," Horton asserted.

The big saloon keeper came out of his chair and grabbed Bob's wrists. Bob jerked his arms trying to break Horton's grip, cursing the big man and pleading for a shot at me.

"Not here," Horton insisted. "You want to bring the whole town in on us?"

McQuade watched them struggle. Bob Clayton was like a crazy man. Finally he got quiet and Horton turned him loose. Bob pushed his guns gack in the holsters, brushed back his hair with a shaking hand and sat down on the cot again. I began to breath a little easier.

Slim's saddle was lying in a corner. He took his rope off it and tied my hands behind my back, threw a couple of half hitches around my ankles, yanked my legs up and lashed them to my wrists. He wasn't easy about it and from the hard look in his green eyes I knew the fact that I was a lawman had turned his friendship to hate.

"Now," Slim said, "let's have a little explainin'."

"You've got some explaining to do yourself," said Horton.

He picked his chair from the floor, sat down and tilted back against the wall again. Slim walked across the room and

sat down on the cot next to Bob Slayton.

"How come you brought Newhall up here?" Horton asked.

"I knew him in jail," Slim explained. "I thought he was all right an' we could use him."

"Maybe we can," said Horton, "but not the way you thought."

"We'll have to clear out," McQuade blurted, a quaver in his voice. "Newhall will talk when we turn him loose."

"Get hold of yourself, man," Horton declared. "He won't do any talkin' when we're through with him."

"Let me take care of th' skunk," Bob Clayton said thickly.

I knew how he'd take care of me, all right. For that matter, I didn't reckon I'd get anything but a bullet from Horton or Slim. McQuade was the weak sister in that bunch. But how could I use him to get clear?

"You'll get your chance," Horton told Clayton. "Now let me think. We've got to change our plans."

"Yes," agreed McQuade. "We have to plan. . . ."

**I** THOUGHT he was going to say more, but Horton gave him a cold stare and Slim looked at him contemptuously. McQuade's voice died down and he turned his eyes away from them. I figured he'd just been a front for Horton all along.

"Newhall has to be rubbed out," Horton murmured. "An' we've got to make it look good for us an' bad for the sheriff. Now, if Newhall were killed while stickin' up a bank. . . ." Horton pointed a thick finger at McQuade. "Your bank."

"No," McQuade objected.

"Shut up," Horton said calmly. "We were goin' to do it anyway when Shorty an' Jeff got back with the dinero from that last herd. We'll just have to do it now an' without 'em, that's all."

"Yore talk is pleasin' to the ears, boss," Slim said.

"With Newhall on our hands, we've got to move pronto," Horton said, and I didn't like the sound of his voice. "We can't wait, because Wilkes will be lookin' for his pet deputy come mornin'. That means we move tonight. Slim, you can handle that safe okeh?"

"Like rollin' off a log," Slim answered.

"Bob heah can give me all the help I need."

"I'll hold the horses," Horton said. "We'll need four—one for Bob, Jim an' me, an' one for Newhall, which he won't be usin', but we've got to make it look good."

"How about me?" asked McQuade.

"You live right across the street from the bank," Horton explained. "What would be more natural than for you to come bustin' out when you hear the explosion an' shoot one of the bandits?"

McQuade reared up. "I've never killed a man, Horton, and I won't now!"

"Pull in your horns," Horton advised, while Slim sneered at the banker. "You won't have to get your pretty hands dirty. Bob'll do the killin'."

"**Y**EH," said Bob. He meant it, and I didn't like the rattlesnake look he gave me.

"It'll just look like you did it," Horton told McQuade. "All you've got to do is say you did it. You can rig up a story about how you saw Newhall comin' out of the bank an' gunned him. That ought to be easy enough for you."

"This whole scheme is too risky," McQuade objected. "Suppose some one sees us? And how about the sheriff? I think. . . ."

He never finished the sentence because Horton pulled a snub-nosed .45 out from under his coat and casually pointed it at the banker. I never saw a man cool off so quick.

"We can't take all the risks, McQuade," Horton said. "You're in this as deep as the rest of us an' you're goin' to do what I say. That right?"

"Yes." McQuade gulped. "Yes, that's right."

Horton slid the gun back into its arm-pit holster under his coat. McQuade pulled a silk handkerchief out of his breast pocket and mopped his face. Slim and Bob Clayton grinned.

"Slim, how long you reckon it will take you an' Bob inside the bank?" Horton asked.

"After she's blown—an' we don't have to worry before then—should take us about a minute to clean out that little ole tin can McQuade calls a safe," Slim

replied. "An' then another minute or so to reach the horses."

"Then we ride to the Rio an' double back here to my place before a posse is organized," Horton said.

"She'll go slick, boss," Slim said approvingly.

"Why we might even have time to join that posse," Horton laughed. "An' with Newhall dead an' bringin' disgrace on Wilkes, it'll be a cinch to elect Bob sheriff. We'll have this town eatin' out of our hands."

Tied up there on the floor, with the ropes cutting into my wrists and ankles, I spent a bad two hours while they waited for Gunsight to finish its howling for the night and go to sleep.

A bad luck guy, that was me. I'd not only gotten myself in a hole, I was pulling Pop Wilkes into it, too. I knew Bob Clayton would just as soon put a bullet in me as in an old tomato can. I'd never get a chance to clear my name and Pop would lose the election.

He'd sent me out to find the birds. I had, all right, but I'd never flush them. I'd be dead. That was a hard thought to take and the idea of that bunch of cut-throats running Gunsight didn't make it sit easier for me.

I struggled with the ropes a bit, but Slim hadn't made any mistakes when he hogtied me. I couldn't budge them. Besides, he and Bob sat there in the room sharing a bottle of whisky Horton brought in. I didn't know what I could do against them if I did get free, but I tried.

About an hour before dawn, I heard the scuffling of horses' hoofs in the dust of the alley outside. Horton, and McQuade, who had no strut at all in him now, came in. Slim untied my ankles and pulled me to my feet. Horton opened the door to the gallery and he and McQuade went out first. Slim pushed me out after them and he and Bob brought up the rear.

Down in the alley, they hoisted me on a horse. Horton, Slim and Clayton mounted, too, and McQuade walked along with us while we rode slowly to the bank. There wasn't a soul in the streets and I didn't see a light anywhere. My hands were still tied and they had me ringed in so I couldn't make a run for it. But

I felt better just being out in the open. All I wanted was a break.

It didn't look like I was going to get one. We halted before the bank and they pulled me from the saddle. McQuade's face was white and he kept casting nervous, apprehensive glances around. Horton, Clayton and Slim masked their faces with neckerchiefs and Horton tied one on me.

"Got to make it look right," he whispered.

He had my gun stuck in the waistband of his pants. He handed McQuade his own short-barreled .45 and told Slim to untie my hands.

"If Newhall so much as moves a finger, ventilate him," Horton told McQuade.

The little banker stood a couple of steps away from me with the gun pointed right at my belt buckle. He was so nervous I was almost afraid to breath. I'd have felt better if it were Slim, or even Bob Clayton, holding the gun on me. I'd have known better what they'd do.

"How we goin' to get in theah?" Slim asked, motioning toward the bank.

"McQuade's got the keys, hasn't he?" said Bob.

"No," Horton said. "I tell you we got to make this look good. You'll have to get in through a window."

Bob and Slim cat-footed up the steps to the bank and started trying the windows on either side of the door. Horton was holding the reins of the horses about

six feet away on the side where he could keep an eye on us all.

"We'll have to break one," Slim called softly.

"Get on with it then," Horton said.

**S**LIM took the old sombrero from his red head and used it to cushion his fist. He swung at the window. The glass broke with a noise that seemed loud enough to me to wake the whole town. McQuade winced at the sound and I could see Horton letting out his breath when he was sure no one had heard it.

Slim put the hat back on his head, reached inside the window through the hole in the pane, undid the latch and pulled it open. He and Bob disappeared through it into the blackness of the bank. Seconds later there was a dim glow inside and I guessed Bob was holding a shrouded lantern while Slim got set to blow the safe.

McQuade, with the gun still trained on me, had his back to the squat bank building. It wouldn't be long now, I figured. Against four, I didn't have a chance. But with them split I might make it against two. I had to make my break while Slim and Bob were inside, and I figured on the explosion to help. I got set and tense.

There was a dull boom inside the bank. McQuade jerked his head around to look and I went for him in a low hard drive. I knocked his gun aside with my left hand and smashed into his stomach with my shoulder.



The gun went off like the blast of a cannon in my ear and then McQuade was down on the ground with me on top. I slammed him twice on the chin and drove my knee into his groin.

McQuade was out.

A bullet threw dust up in my face. Horton was swearing steadily while he cocked my gun for another shot. I saw the snub-nosed revolver lying a few feet away and scrambled for it. Horton shot again and his bullet seared the flesh on my shoulder.

I grabbed the revolver and was swinging it up for a quick shot when I heard the deep-throated whoom of Pop's old .45-70 Winchester rifle. The gun fell from Horton's hand and he clawed at his chest. Red smeared his fingers and he keeled over in the street.

Pop was whooping his Comanche yell. I didn't even have time to wonder how he got there so fast before Slim was out of the bank window. He had a heavy feed sack in his left hand and his gun in his right. He shot as he ran doubled over toward the horses, but the running spoiled his aim. Bullets snapped around me, but I wasn't hit. Pop's rifle went off again and Slim skidded forward on his face. Then he raised up and began to drag himself to the horses. Pop shot again and Slim lay still.

Bob Clayton was half out of the window and firing at me. I threw a quick shot at him that ricocheted off the 'dobe wall and whined into the bank. Bob jerked his leg back inside and went on shooting wildly from the shelter of the window ledge.

I ran up the steps and hugged the wall of the building where he couldn't see me. Pop shot steadily at the window while I worked my way along the wall toward it. Bob shot back three more times and then his six-shooters were silent.

I was right beside the window and figured he was either hit or reloading. I yelled to Pop to hold off and swung through the window, my gun before me.

I hit the floor running, went a couple of steps and whirled toward where Clay-

ton had been standing and shooting. In the dim light from the lantern, I saw him fumbling at the loops of his cartridge belt for fresh ammunition. The long hair was wild about his face. I aimed at him and started pulling the trigger. I had a score to settle with Bob Clayton.

"No, Dave. No!" he cried. "Don't kill me, Dave." He began to blubber. "You can't shoot me, Dave. No!"

He wasn't the tough killer any longer. Horton and Slim were twice the men he was, for all his rep and swagger. I was looking at a coward and he disgusted me. I couldn't kill him and didn't want to any longer, but I kept the gun on him.

"Talk then," I said. "An' talk plenty. You stuck up Nolan, didn't you?"

"Yeh," Bob said. "But don't shoot, Dave."

"An' a year ago—you were with Joe Gates an' helped rob that miner in that job I got sent to jail for."

"Yeh," he answered, nodding his head dumbly.

"That sort o' gives you a clean bill o' health, son," Pop said from the window. "I heard every word this coyote said."

He smiled at me and I grinned back.

"What are yuh goin' to do with me?" whined Bob.

"Nothin' like what you deserve," Pop said. "I reckon a nice long stretch in prison will cool you off some, though."

I had a lot to tell Pop, but first I had to get the straight of one thing myself. "How come you got here so fast when the shootin' started?" I asked.

"Because I was right behind you all the time, Davey," he answered, chuckling at my dumbfounded look.

"Right after I sent you out," he said, "I recollected that a hunter always backs up his bird dog, so I trailed along after you. I was right puzzled when I saw you go into Horton's, but I stayed put until I saw you comin' out with yore hands tied. Then I began to see the light. Well, son, you shore found the birds—an' flushed and gunned 'em, too!"

"I sure did," I said, "only, damned if I play bird dog again."



# Company For The Corpse

By RICHARD BRISTER

**Benson had picked the back room of a little beer joint as the spot for the rub-out. Lefco would be there alone. There really wasn't nothin' much to worry about.**

**W**HITEY and me'd been sent east from Chicago to rub out this guy for Big Bill Benson, who was a friend of Monty Cahill, and a big guy in quite a few rackets. It seems Big Bill had got careless, some time back, and this Lefco got something on him, and was shaking him down for a whole lot of folding money.

Benson arranged for a payoff with Lefco, the meeting place to be in a back room at some little East Side beer joint, and the play was for Monty and me to turn up to meet Lefco, like we was making the payoff from Benson. Only the real payoff was going to be in bullets, and no one the wiser, as me and Whitey'd hop the next rattler for Chicago.

"I don't figure you'll have much trouble, boys," Benson told us, that morning. "Lefco'll be there about nine, right after the joint opens. You oughta have the joint to yourselves, that soon after the doors open, and—well, I reckon you boys know your business,"



"One thing," Whitey said. "About the payoff. If we're hoppin' the rattler right after this job, how—"

"Monty Cahill will take care of you," Big Bill Benson said. "I got it all fixed up with him. A grand for each of you, and if it's a nice clean job, with no complications, I'll throw in an extra five C's apiece for a kind of bonus."

"Fair enough," Whitey said. "You can kiss your pal Lefco goodbye, as of this mornin'." He turned toward me, and grunted. "Okay, Sammy. Let's get goin'."

In the cab going over, we mapped it out, as much as we could. We finally figured Monty'd go in alone—it'd look better that way to Lefco—and I'd follow, after they'd gone into the back room that Benson had picked as the spot. My job would be to stand at the bar and keep the bartender busy while Monty pulled off the killing in

the back room. And, of course, to nail Lefco in case Monty muffed the job, and Lefco come out of that murder room instead of Monty. Which there wasn't much chance of, knowin' Monty.

Well, we watched the joint from half a block down the street, and we saw Lefco amble in about five after the hour. He was a seedy-looking little guy with furtive black eyes and a kind of a scared look about him. Monty went in about two minutes later, and I told myself we didn't have nothin' much to worry about, not on this job.

I ambled in about five minutes later. The bartender was a big beefy-faced gazebo with an overtime tongue, and he started wagging it at me a mile a minute right after I went in.

"Howdy. What're you drinkin'? New customer, ain't you?" He had a pair of bright brown eyes, sort of restless looking. He leaned over the bar and stuck his face close to mine, whispering tensely. "You see them two fellers came in ahead of you, did you?"

I shook my head. "Rye and beer chaser. No, and what about them?"

"Nothing." He was pouring my drink, and his hand shook, spilling some of the liquor. "Only they looked kind of funny, is all. I pride myself on being able to size up a man pretty quick, and them fellows—well, I didn't exactly like the looks of either of them."

"No." I gulped my drink. "Why not?" This guy was just a loquacious punk, the way I figured. Bartenders have so much time on their hands, especially in this kind of joint, that they turn kind of balmy; they're apt to let their imaginations run away with them.

"You may think it sounds silly," the bald head told me tonelessly, "but those guys sure looked like the gangster type to me. Let me ask you: what's their business in here at nine in the morning? An' another thing, why the back room, if it's all on the level? They didn't even know each other, to begin with, and I didn't like the way the big guy followed the little one back there. Like he almost had murder in his mind or something."

"Yeah?" I said. "You're nuts, bud. You seen too many Bogart movies. That stuff went out of style in the twenties." But it

had my goat, the way he'd hit the nail on the head so quick. Sometimes one of these big dumb clucks'll do that, when you'd least expect it. And come to think of it, he didn't look as dumb to me now as he did when I'd first glommed him.

I was about to order another drink, but just then the door of the back room opened and Monte stuck his head out, yelling for a fresh round of drinks. He looked at me blandly, without any sign of recognition. That was Monty, making sure I was there, before he turned the heat on his victim. But if he was so damn clever, I thought, how come he had to look like a guy with murder inside him? He'd tipped his hand to this big cluck in back of the bar, and my respect for him went down a notch from this moment.

WELL, the guy took their drinks in, and in my mind's eye I could see Monty inside there, shooting a hot line with his victim, drinking with him, setting him up for the knocking over. It made me nervous, especially since the cluck back of the bar still looked mighty excited and suspicious about what goes on in there.

"Gimme another," I said, and shot a nervous eye at the street, wondering how soon Monty would get down to work in there.

"The thing about me," the bald guy in back of the bar was rattling away, "is I don't often have this kind of hunches. When they do come, I feel more certain about 'em than say, most guys who let themselves all the time jump to conclusions. Consequence is: I'm willing to do something about it, when I get that kind of ideas."

I jerked my mind back to what he was saying. "Yeah?" I was all attention, now. "Like, for instance?" If he planned to do something about his little notion that everything was not as it should be in there, I had other ideas. "A man could make an awful damn fool of himself, if he was wrong about a thing like that," I suggested flatly.

He laughed. "Oh, I ain't done nothing. But I'd be willing to bet you there's gonna be some kind of violence before them two come out of there. His flat face was thoughtful. "That big guy sure looked nasty. Give you even odds—"

"Taken." I pulled a fin from my pocket

and slapped it down on the bar. I was in no mood for this kind of crazy business, but it would at least keep the baldy's mind busy, while we both waited.

Next thing, if I didn't keep him happy, he'd be thinking of calling the bulls in or something.

Well, it came about five minutes later. Monty always took his good time, on a job of killing. You could just make out the report of his gun. It had a silencer on it, naturally, and to our ears it sounded like a firecracker.

Baldy jumped like he'd been stung by a hornet. "What'd I tell you?" he hollered. "Come on!" He went racing back there, around the end of the bar. I followed, meaning to keep him covered, at least till Monty showed up. I followed him right into that back room, and inside, my eyes started popping.

Monty had done his job, all right. The little guy, that Lefco, was splayed out all over the floor with a big hole in his shirt front, and there was blood all over him. What got me, though, was Monty.

He was propped against the table, holding on with both hands, and he looked sick as a chicken. His face was white as chalk, and he was swaying, losing his balance.

I went over and grabbed him. "What's the story?"

"I—I dunno," he said weakly. "I feel—kinda sick or somethin'."

Then he keeled over, flat on his face. I felt my knees knocking, and wondered what to do next. This was the first time I ever saw Monty go chicken on the job, much less pass out at the sight of a little gore. It was a fine spot he'd left me in.

Baldy was breathing like a bellows, on fire with excitement. "I told you," he hollered. "I told you there was somethin' fishy goin' on here." His eyes went crafty. "Sa-a-y, you wouldn't just happen to know something about this, would you, fella?" He waved his fat hand at the unconscious Monty. "This guy looked like he recognized you."

I took exactly ten seconds figuring out the answer to that question. If Monty was going to go soft on the job, that wasn't my worry. I'd never get out of the joint, try-

ing to tote him. It was time to look out for number one. "Me?" I said. "Hell, now, what give you the idea I know him? Look, I'm goin' for the cops.

I turned toward the door. Once outside in the main room, I turned the heat on. But something got wrong with my legs, about ten yards from the entrance, I got all tangled up in my own feet. I felt my head spinning like crazy, and the next thing I knew I was flat on my belly, trying to swim through that doorway.

My head was going cloudy, but fast. I finally figured it out, but by that time I was too weak to do anything but turn and glare foolishly at Baldy. "You big ox, you. You fed us all mickeys!" I was trying to reach for my gun, but I couldn't move my hand.

Baldy stood grinning foolishly at me. "That's right. I told you when I get these strong hunches I ain't afraid to do something about 'em. Them two in there looked like murder. I figured if one was goin' to be made a corpse of, the other'd better just stick around. The cops might like to see him. The cops done me some favors, back in prohibition, and this time I returned one. This is one murder case that won't need no solving. The murderer never left the scene of the crime, much less returned to it."

He held his sides, laughing hugely at the irony of it.

"But, you big dumb cluck," I rasped at him, fighting to keep myself conscious. "Why feed me knockout drops? I got nothing to do with—"

And then I knew I'd had him pegged right from the very beginning. Dumb as a doornail. He said, "I'm sorry I had to do that, mister. But I knew you'd pull a powder the minute you seen what the play was, inside there. I had to keep you around. You're a material witness. But you got nothing to worry about, as long as you got a clean record."

The big dumb cluck, I thought. I was drifting down into the blackness, and as I felt myself drifting out, I was almost crying. The big dumb cluck!

As long as I had a clean record. Wouldn't it kill you?

# Brand of the GALLOWS-GHOST

By Les Savage Jr.

A spectre rode the sage. Men died, with the *Rubrica de Penasco* gashed on their cheeks . . . the brand of a man who long ago had been hung on a gallows. That curse-mark was a warning—"Get out, *Señorita Scorpion*, while there is still time. You ride a bad road—a road that leads to hell and don't ever come back."

IT WAS some nameless little Mexican town on the border. Sleeping adobe hovels threw lazy shadows across the dusty ruts of the wagon road that passed for the main street. Men reacted the same way men would have reacted in any town from the Rio Grande to the Red River. A short, squat peon in shiny mitaja leggings came out of a shop advertised on a dirty sign as *Masomenos' Tienda*. The peon was halfway across the street before he stopped, turning slightly as he stared. Elgera Douglas licked her dry, cracked lips and kept right on walking up the middle of the street, limping painfully now because she had come a long way on high heels.

The peon said something softly, and another man came out of the *Tienda*, carrying his sizable paunch in a red sash so broad it hid the bottom half of his white shirt and the upper half of his dirty pantaloons. The fat man leaned forward and squinted. "*Sacramento*," he said. "*Señorita Scorpion!*"

The other man stiffened suddenly, and then turned to run on across the street and into the adobe building called *Cojo's Cueva*. The door shut behind him with a hollow bang, raising echoes along the adobe walls, and then the echoes died, and for a moment, Elgera was walking in silence once more. She had known it would be something like this, and she was breathing a little harder now, and it wasn't from the hike. Then, through the physical weight of the afternoon heat, it was other sounds, closing in around her; she turned to see a pair of young *vaqueros* in tattered *serapes* moving through the shadows on the east side of the street, moving parallel with her. One of them was fingering the rusty old Remington in his belt. Someone was behind her,

too. She could hear his boots scraping the earth. As she neared the fat man in the red sash, he began to back up with little, mincing steps. Then another man was stepping out of the *Tienda*.

Perhaps the first thing was the size of his head. He was over six feet tall, and carried his shoulders in an arrogant swagger that displayed their singular breadth, and his neck was like a muscular brown tree trunk, and still his head looked too large. His thick black hair fell long down the back, as some of the Indians still wore it in these archaic communities, and Elgera Douglas realized he must be the full-blooded Indian of Mexico they knew as a Quill. He wore a short leather charro jacket that might have covered half the huge barrel of his torso, flapping open in front to reveal the network of scars patterning the heavy muscles of his chest and belly.

"Ah, *Señorita*," he said thickly, and she saw how bloodshot his eyes were, "am I lost in the bibulous dreams of *peyote*, or do I really see a white woman coming down the street of our blessed *pueblo*?"

The fat man tried to catch him by the arm. "Bighead, don't be a *pendejo*, don't be a fool. Can't you see who it is—Don't you—"

"*Masomenos*," said Bighead, yanking away from the other, "all I see is a gorgeous creature with hair as blonde as a palomino's mane and lips as red as nopal after a spring rain, and eyes so blue I think I'm looking at heaven on a clear day. Isn't that what you see?"

"*Mas o' menos*," shrugged the fat man, "more or less. *Pues—*"

"*Pues* nothing," said Cabezón, and lurched toward Elgera, "but nothing. If



*"Texas! Texas!" she yelled as she cracked down on the vaquero.*

you see what I see, then it must be real. And look at the way those charro pants fit her. So tight all those roses sewn down the seams would pop off if she bent over."

Elgera had stopped, standing there with the spike heels of her basket stamped Hyers spread wide in the street. "Up where I come from a man doesn't talk that way to a lady. You hadn't better come any closer."

Maybe it was the tone of her voice that stopped him, or the flash in her eye. He straightened up slightly, one big hand still held out in front of him, and she could mark the subtle degeneracy drawing its lines deep in his heavy-fleshed face. Without having to see it, she knew the other men had closed in around her, and a constriction was growing in her chest. Bighead laughed suddenly.

"Ah, a *gata*," he said, "a wildcat, too. And just where do you come from? It isn't every *dia* a white woman comes walking into our *pueblo* alone."

"Maybe I came to see a man about a horse," she said.

Masomenas grabbed Bighead again. "Please, Bighead, you don't know who she is. Let El Cojo handle this. Tico went to get him—"

"*Basta*," shouted Bighead, throwing out the arm Masomenas held in a sudden violent gesture, "I'll handle anything The Lame One can," and it hurled the gross man in the red sash back against the wall so hard his legs went out from under him, and the ristras of red chile were knocked from their viga pole above to drape themselves around his fat neck where he sat on the ground. "You want to see a man about a *caballo, rosa mia?*" Cabezon shouted at Elgera, lurching toward her again. "I'll show you *caballos*. I'll show you all the horses in *Mejico*—"

She heard the scuffling movement of the men around her spreading away, and her thick, tawny brows arched in a sudden wild way as she leaned forward a little and she didn't move. "Don't put your hands on me, Bighead!"

He laughed uproariously, and the fetid odor of his unwashed body swept her as he took the last step that brought him close enough to grab her, and his huge hands fell hot and heavy against her shoulders. Elgera's whole body stiffened,

but whatever she would have done was circumvented by the sibilant words from behind Bighead.

"That will do, Bighead. Take your hands off."

Bighead's hands tightened on her shoulders with such a terrible grip that she almost cried out with the pain, but there was something spasmodic about it that held her from any action; he stood there, towering above her, and then something crossed his dissipated face, and his hands relaxed, and he stepped back.

The man behind Bighead was dwarfed by the giant Quill without actually seeming small. His lean, dark face was filled with a brooding, mordant intelligence, and his black eyes, meeting Elgera's, seemed to glow with some inner fever. He wore his abundance of black hair in a queue which seemed incongruous with his faultlessly tailored blue cutaway and pin-striped trousers. His thin lips moved over his white teeth in a careful, deliberate enunciation that hinted at his foreign origin, though the words held no discernible accent.

"This *pueblo* was an unfortunate choice for your visit, *Señorita*, but let me extend a welcome anyway. You are standing on the main *calle* of Oro Peso, and if you want a horse, you had better discuss it with me, because I am El Cojo, and I own Oro Peso."

THE inside of *Cojo's Cueva* belied the dilapidated exterior. A gleaming mahogany bar stretched the twenty-foot length of one wall, an expensive, gold-framed mirror as long as the bar hanging over the shelves of bottles, portraits of Santa Ana and Porfirio Diaz suspended regally above the mirror. There was a faro layout and a roulette wheel on the other side, toward the rear, and a scattering of heavy mahogany deal tables near the windowless front wall. Elgera had never known a lean bartender, and this one was as short and square as the bottle of Kentucky he was polishing, and he had a gotched ear that only added to the ugly iniquity of his face. The peon in the shiny mitaja leggings who had come in to get El Cojo was standing near the door with several other seedy-looking customers in dirty white pantaloons, and they watched Elgera all the way back to the rear door which led in to a

sumptuous office. El Cojo closed the heavy brass-bound portal softly, motioning toward an overstuffed Queen Anne to one side of the ponderous hand-carved *escritorio*. She ignored the armchair, taking a breath of the faint odor of expensive whiskey before she spoke.

"What's wrong with your town, anyway? It looked like an armed camp."

EL COJO shrugged, limping to the hand-carved desk, placing his thumb and forefinger on the edges of the lid to an ebony box and opening it. "If you won't sit down, at least have a *cigarito*. I smoke cheroots, myself, but these come from Mexico City. As Bighead told you, it is not often a woman comes—"

"It was more than that. They were like a bunch of dogs ready to jump a cat."

His thin lips formed a faint, ironic smile as she shook her head at the cigarettes. "I have heard that Señorita Scorpion always has a singular effect on men."

"You know it wasn't that."

He shrugged tailored shoulders. "Very well. I told you this was an unfortunate town for a visit. You come from the Big Bend, you must have heard it up there. It is said that Penasco is riding again."

She made an impatient gesture with her hand. "The rurales hung him in 'Eighty-one."

"Did you see the dead body?"

"Of course not."

"I have never met anyone who has." He ran a finger across his black hair. "He is almost a legendary figure now. Many stories have grown up around him. Some say he escaped the rurales, so wounded that he would never sit on a horse again, escaped into the Chisos mountains. Others say his spirit has returned to ride his giant black horse, El Morzillo, once more when the moon is full."

She took a weary breath. "Those stories have been in circulation for ten years, just like the ones about Billy the Kid; I've never seen a border town affected by them like this."

"But it is no longer stories." El Cojo poured a drink from a cut-glass decanter, but she waved it away. His ironic smile grew. "A month or so ago, Parque Guerrero, a big *ranchero* near Castellan north of the Rio, was found murdered in the



Elgera Douglas

road, and on his cheek was stamped the *Rubrica de Penasco*—"

She drew in her breath. "Penasco's brand?"

"Yes," he smiled. "You know the story. Penasco was descended from the ancient Moorish family in Spain whose brand was called a rubrica. This rubrica was inscribed in the ring, and they sealed their letters with it instead of signing their name, pressing the seal into hot wax and stamping it onto the paper. They also used it to brand their possessions, and the ring was handed down from eldest son to eldest son, passing from Spain to Mexico when Real Penasco's grandfather came to the New World, eventually coming to Real, himself. The House of Penasco had the misfortune to sympathize with Maxmillian when the French sent him to rule Mexico, and when Juarez overthrew Maxmillian, the estate of the Penascos' was confiscated by the new government in a rather bloody manner which left only Real alive. He was only about fourteen, and he fled to the hills and swore vengeance on all those responsible for the death of his family and the ruin of his house." Cojo sipped at the drink, studying her with those glowing eyes, and she sensed something behind his easy talk. "It has come out that this Guerrero who was murdered near Castellan once held a high position under Juarez. Does that ex-



plain the tension in our little *pueblo*?"

"Does it?" she said.

He shrugged, as if he had done all he could. "*Pues, Señorita*, there are still many hereabouts who were loyal supporters of Juarez. You can understand their apprehension, if Penasco is abroad. I for one would not want to be on his list. Why did you come to Oro Peso?"

The abrupt change took her offguard, and he must have seen it because he laughed softly, and she realized it was what he had intended. "I—" she hesitated, then, wondering if it would be a mistake to tell him what she had really been doing this near the border. Wide-eyed she met his glance—"I was coming back from buying cattle at Santa Helena. I lost my horse somewhere near Castellan."

"*Buying* cattle, at the border." The way he said it held a disbelief, but his shrug was an acceptance. "I'm surprised such a rider as you let her horse escape her."

"I was in a hurry and took a short cut ahead of my crew. Got off to water my horse crossing the Rio. Sidewinder must have spooked it. I've been footing it most of the day now, and Oro Peso's the first place I hit, and I'd like to get another horse. I'll sign your check or leave an I.O.U., anything you like."

"Ah—" his surprised look didn't convince her, somehow—"you have no money."

"You know me here; you know I'll be good for it."

"We know of you, *Señorita*. The Scorpion? I don't wonder they call you that. I wager you would have bitten Bighead in another moment, if I hadn't come out there, and I fully believe he would have died of the bite." His smile was deprecating. "Yes, we know of you. But the thing which have come to our ears are hardly a bond for the price of a horse."

SHE flushed. "Perhaps I'd better see someone else."

"Who?" He toyed with his cheroot. "No one would sell you a horse in this town without my permission—" she had made a move to the door, and he held out his hand, tilting his head to one side—"and if you are thinking of another way, I would advise against it. They treat a horse thief the same way here as they do

in Texas, whether they're man or woman."

"But I'm stranded here—"

"There are other forms of payment."

He caught the flash in her eye, and waved it away with his hand. "Don't misunderstand me. What I mean is, I have a nice little place here where all the *vaqueros* from miles around like to gather. I have a Mexican dancer for attraction, and good liquor, but my house gamblers are all inferior *hombres*. I myself have some skill with cards, but I can't spend much time at the tables. Now, if I had a *faro* banker, for instance, who had never been known to lose at the game, and who provided the added attraction of being one of the most beautiful and famous women in Texas, I'll lay you *deuces* to aces we'd have *vaqueros* coming up here from as far south as Mexico City—"

"Don't be a fool!"

She saw the blood rise to his dark face, and it was a long moment before his voice came, hardly audible at first. "Few have called me a fool with impunity, *Señorita*." He waited a moment, studying her, then went on carefully. "I am a business man, making you a business proposition. If you banked my *faro* game for one week, I would make more money than I do at the present sitting in six months. As you say, we've heard of you. I guess there isn't a horse made you can't ride, is there? Or a gun holstered you can't get out quicker than any man in Texas. Or a deck of cards you can't turn into four aces every hand."

"I never touched a marked card—"

"I never marked a card—" he smiled suddenly—"perhaps that is why I don't make money off my layouts. At any rate, you would be playing a straight game. *Faro*, *chusa*, poker, whatever you chose. Do it for a week and I'll give you a horse that would even outmatch that palomino of yours."

She wondered why he really wanted her to stay. "You'd put your house behind me in a straight game—?"

"And still win with every hand. *Si*." He eyed her shrewdly. "Or are you afraid, with men coming in from so far to play at your table, are you afraid you would finally meet someone who could take your hand?"

She stiffened, and her long blonde hair caught a ripple of light as she tossed her

head. "I'll accept your proposition."

"I thought that would touch your gambler's spirit. Never afraid to take a chance with the cards, eh, or a horse . . . or a gun? He limped to open the door, ushering her out. "Now, you must want to clean up after that long walk. I will have the best meal in all the border waiting when you're ready. I'm sure you won't mind sharing Lupita's room. She's the dancer I mentioned. Out, just now, but you'll meet her this evening."

The door behind the bar opened on a narrow hall that led between cool brown adobe walls to chambers behind El Cojo's office. Lupita's quarters were small, but reflected the same surprising sumptuousness as the office, a Brussels carpet replacing the usual Navajo rugs found in border houses, a huge double bedstead of mahogany with a Louis Seize curved top inlaid with tuya wood.

"You'll find a second bed in the other room, and I'll have my Indian bring in a big tub and warm water if you want to wash all over," said The Lame one. He stopped a moment at the door, meeting her eyes, and then, with that faint, sardonic smile, turned to go out. She tested the bed, sinking into the rich damask coverlet, and then rose with a grimace. There was something voluptuous about the whole room that left a bad taste in her mouth.

"Perhaps you are more used to the hard leather of a saddle, *Señorita*."

He stood in the doorway leading to the second room, swaying slightly, the tight leather vest pulled open across the front to reveal the pattern of scars across his thickly-muscled torso. She stood rigid by the bed, realizing she had grabbed one of the carved posts only when her hand began to ache with the force of her grip. She relaxed slightly.

"I was waiting for Lupita," said Bighead, moving unsteadily into the room. "But I think I like you better. You are staying with us a while?"

"You're drunk!"

"I usually am. It makes life so much happier that way. What do you say we finish what I started out in the street?"

"YOU aren't finishing anything," *Elgera* said tensely, and the damask whispered against her charro leggins as she



Chisos Owens

slid down the side of the bed toward the knee-hole dressing table. "You'd better get out, Bighead. You'd better not try to put your hands on me again."

"*Sacramento*," he laughed, catching at the bedpost as he lurched around the foot toward her, "*Señorita* Scorpion in all her glory. I like a wildcat. Fight me all you want, *sancha mia*, it makes me want you that much more—"

He stumbled forward, big hands reaching for her. She had it in her fist now. It was a heavy, long-necked perfume bottle of cut-glass, and it made a dull, cracking sound against his head.

"*Madre Dios*—" he screamed, and the bed gave beneath his ponderous weight falling over onto it. He struggled to get back on his feet, sinking his hands into the damask as if for help, grunting like a wounded animal. Even through his pain, he must have heard the crash of glass. He turned his head slightly, still against the coverlet, and saw her standing there with the broken bottle in her hand. She had knocked the bottom off against the table, spilling the perfume in an amber flood over her charro trousers and the chintz hangings of the dresser. In the cloying scent that filled the room, he pushed himself off the bed, clutching for the post again to keep from falling as he backed away.

"No—" he held out his hand, pawing at

the air, "*Dios, no— Madre Dios—*" "Then get out," she said bitterly, holding the broken end of the bottle toward him. "Get out or I'll put this in your face."

Still dazed from the blow, he lurched backward, grabbing wildly for the door handle. He jerked the heavy portal open, and then braced himself against the frame that last moment, shaking his head.

"All right. All right. But this doesn't end it. You'll be sorry you came here. I'm not talking about me, now. I'll get you sometime when there aren't any glass bottles, or any El Cojos. But I'm not talking about that now. You don't know what you stepped into here at Oro Peso. You wanted a horse? You're on one right now. You got on one the minute you hit this town. It only goes one way, and that's straight to hell, and it don't ever come back!"

## II

THE wind whined mordantly out of the Chisos Mountains to rattle through the pipestem cactus here in the basin south of the footslopes and raise a haze of alkali that turned the mesquite into a ghostly pattern of clawing fingers against the faint illumination of the moon. The big dun mare leaned against the blow with head down, and Chisos Owens hunched forward in the heavy Porter saddle, one rope-scarred hand holding a tattered bandana across his nose and mouth to shield him from the acrid dust. He was watching his horse for some sign, because animals could usually sense a presence quicker than a man, and he had his own head cocked at the same time, listening for it again.

Finally he stepped out of the big roping rig and dropped the rawhide reins over his horse's head. Then he turned to pull his sixteen-shot Henry from the saddle-scabard.

"Leave the rifle where it is, *Señor*, if you please." Chisos stiffened to the sibilant voice coming somewhere from the mesquite, then dropped his hand off the Henry's battered butt. "And step away from the *caballo* and very carefully pull out your revolver and drop it."

Chisos complied, and then turned slightly to the rattle of the brush as the men moved into the open. One of them was tall and

heavy-shouldered in a gaudy charro coat trimmed with gilt and a tremendous glazed sombrero heavy with silver embroidery, moving in a bow-legged, saddle-bound walk that swung his upper body from side to side and kept the fancy serape flapping at the empty holster thonged down around his tight buckskin chivarra leggings. He stopped just free of the mesquite, and the second figure stepped around him. He was the man with the gun. It loomed big in his sinewy hand, and Chisos Owens caught the dull gleam in his hair beneath a hat, as white as the Alkali sifting up from beneath their feet.

"You must be pretty spooky, Zaragosa," said Chisos. "Hide that way every time a hossbacker bulges out?"

The white-haired man came closer, lean and straight as a whip-stock in the dark military uniform of the Rurales. He peered at Chisos, and the drawn, haggard lines of his face accentuated its apparent age.

"Chisos Owens!" he said, reached out to grip Chisos' hand. "I might have known it. Who else would ride alone these nights. Forgive me, amigo, but an old fox gets to looking for a hound behind every bush, and in the darkness I did not recognize you. It has been too long since we shared the mescal together at your Smoky Blue rancho, eh?" He waved his Colt at the handcuffed man. "This is Tequilla. I am escorting him to Durango for a bit of cattle appropriation he has been carrying on both above and below the border."

The other man laughed heartily. "*Si*, it has been sort of a race between the Texas rangers and the Mexican Rurales to see whose hospitality I would enjoy. In a way, I'm glad it has finally been decided."

"Don't be a hypocrite," said Captain Zaragosa. "You know you'd jump at the chance to shed those manacles. Our camp is deeper within the mogote, *Señor* Chisos. You heard our horses whinney? That must have been when we decided to see who was out here. There is coffee on, if you'd join an old friend."

Chisos had been in the saddle all day, and he was glad enough to follow them through the thicket of mesquite and agrito to the small clearing where a fire crackled, hidden in a ditch formed by erosion. The captain looked at Chisos again, taking in the solid heft of his figure, almost as wide

through the waist as the shoulders without any indication of fat.

"What are you doing this far south of your Chisos Mountains?"

Chisos had difficulty getting his mackinaw off the bulk of his shoulders. "Hunting Elgera Douglas."

"The one they call *Señorita Scorpion*?"

"I don't know why they ever tacked that on her," said Chisos, dropping his mackinaw and hunkering over the blaze.

"I understand it fits her," said Tequilla. He had sat cross-legged on the other side of the fire, and the flickering light cast his pock-marked face into bizarre shadows, revealing a deep, gruesome gash across the bridge of his great beaked nose.

"Oh, it fits her good enough," Chisos spat disgustedly. "But whoever heard of calling a girl that?"

"There was Calamity Jane," said Zaragoza, pouring the coffee.

"All right, all right," shrugged Chisos, glancing at their unsaddled horses, picketed back in the brush. "You haven't seen a palomino around here these past few days, have you?"

"*La Rubia*?" said Tequilla.

CHISOS looked up at the man, his eyes tightening till a network of wrinkles spread away from them through the grime covering his face. "You saw it?"

"No," laughed Tequilla, "but I guess everybody down here has heard just as much about the Scorpion's horse as they have about the Scorpion herself."

"Let's just call her Elgera Douglas," said Chisos, wearily. He accepted the tin cup of coffee Zaragoza handed him. "You couldn't miss The Blonde if you saw it. Prettiest palomino in Texas. Hide like a gold piece just minted and a mane as blonde as Elgera's own hair, and so long it keeps her fetlocks clean."

"But why the horse?" said he captain.

"Some cattle was run off Elgera's Santiago spread last week, and she and her two brothers followed them as far as the Rio Grande before they lost the trail," said Chisos. "They were hunting tracks across the Rio, and the girl got separated from her brothers in the dark. Come morning, they hunted around, but couldn't find her, and figured she had thought they went on back home. She wasn't at the Santiago



El Cojo

when they got there. That was three days ago. I thought if her horse had thrown her, somebody might have spotted the animal, even if they didn't see her."

"I didn't think she *could* be thrown," said Tequilla.

Chisos shifted irritably, disliking the speculative gleam in the man's black eyes. He rubbed one big fist down his worn batwing chaps, looking from Tequilla to the rurale. Zaragoza was frowning into the fire, tapping his cup with a lean brown finger.

"I hate to say this," he muttered finally, "but it might as well be taken into consideration. The Penasco story has started again."

"I've heard that before," said Chisos.

"But this time it has some foundation," said the white-headed captain. "Parque Guerrero was found murdered on the road to Castellan sometime ago, his face stamped with the *Rubrica de Penasco*."

Chisos reached for his mackinaw, feeling cold suddenly, and then he realized it wasn't the night. "You mean she—"

"Is it any less logical than to think *Señorita Scorpion* was thrown by her horse?" said Captain Zaragoza.

"That's why you were so spooky," said Chisos.

"Penasco?" Zaragoza nodded, indicating his white hair. "Ordinary hombres have cause enough to be nervous when Penasco

is abroad, but I have a sort of special reason. I have been in the rurales a long time, *Señor Chisos*. It was my dubious honor to command the men who captured Real Penasco in 'Eighty-one."

"Then you, of all people, should know whether he's dead or not."

The haggard lines of Zaragosa's face seemed to deepen. "Penasco was shot up pretty badly, many bullets in his legs and body, and we were afraid to try and reach Mexico City with him for fear his followers would effect his release as they had so many times before. Thus we took him to Manalca. I wired the capital for authority to hang him and got it. I saw Penasco hung, and I heard the doctor pronounce him dead. We could get none of the peons to dig the grave for us and had to do it ourselves. While we were thus engaged, the body disappeared from the jacal in which we had deposited it. The people say they saw him riding away on El Morzillo, his black horse. I thought at first he had been carried off by some of the peons. I could have sworn he was dead, and I had the doctor's testimony to back me up. Yet the doctor was a peon, and the peons were Penasco's friends." Zaragosa shook his head, "I don't know, I don't know . . ."

Chisos was staring into the fire, and the story gave him an eerie feeling, somehow. "This Penasco—at least you know what he looked like."

Zaragosa shrugged apologetically. "It may seem strange to you, *Señor*, but I could not tell you what he looked like. It was night when we caught him, and we hung him before morning. We identified him by the guns he wore, the *Rubrica de Penasco* carved into their ivory handles; no other man would have dared possess such weapons. We had firelight, but a man only gains impressions by that, and not the full appearance—"

"Quit rationalizing, *Capitan*," laughed Tequilla. "You were a young scrub of a *cabo* so afraid of the *gato* you'd captured you didn't even stop to look at him good."

"*Si*, we did rush him to Manalca as soon as we got the manacles on him," said Zaragosa. Then he turned to stare at the other. "How did you know I was a corporal then?"

"I know you were a *cabo* then, I know you rode a sorrel gelding with a whey belly

that dragged the ground when it walked," said Tequilla. "I know many things, *Capitan*. Maybe even what Real Penasco looks like."

ZARAGOSA had stiffened. "You were a *pendejo*. Nobody really knows what he looked like. Not even those who were his friends."

"You mean nobody who knew ever told what he looks like," said Tequilla. His grin tilted his eyes upward in a puckish, oriental slyness. "What would you give me for an accurate description, *Capitan*?"

"You can't describe him any more than I can."

Tequilla laughed. "He is a big man, *señores*, with shoulders like the *toros* they used to breed for the bull-rings, and he is never without his short, blue *capuz*. He was in the smallpox epidemic at Hermosillo in 'Sixty-seven, and he is badly marked about the face, and the saber of a rurale almost severed his nose, leaving a deep, ugly gash across the bridge which—"

"*Punta en boca!*" shouted Zaragosa, leaping erect, "shut your trap!" and he stood there leaning toward Tequilla, his fists clenched, lean body trembling perceptibly. Finally he turned to Chisos, the muscles contracted about his mouth till there was a deep white groove on either side. He waved a frustrated hand at Tequilla. "You see what I have to put up with all the time? He thinks it is his sense of humor."

Tequilla threw his head back to laugh, and the firelight caught the gruesome pocks covering his face. Then he stopped laughing, and the grin which remained seemed to hold little mirth. "Perhaps I am not joking, Zaragosa. Did you ever think of that? I could be Penasco just as much as anybody else."

Zaragosa spat it out. "A coyote could be Penasco before you."

Tequilla turned to Chisos, inclining his head toward the captain. "Zaragosa is rather touchy about Penasco, no? I would be too, if I had been the one who hung him."

"If you say anything more, I will give you a pistol whipping that will remove any evidence of smallpox on your face," said Zaragosa venomously, and then turned to Chisos with some effort. "Are you spend-

ing the night here with us, *Señor Chisos*?"

He had not liked the sly look in Tequilla's eyes. Chisos lay in his tattered, fetid sougan, thinking that. He had not liked the sly look. A hooty owl mourned softly somewhere in the footslopes beyond this stretch of brush, and a scud of clouds lazed across the moon's yellow face. In the new darkness cast by the clouds, Chisos shifted restlessly. He could hear Zaragosa breathing quietly across the fire. Then another sound impinged itself on his consciousness. He turned his head toward it carefully, light-colored hair falling tousled over his grimy brow, and his hand sought the Bisley .44 beneath the blankets. He relaxed abruptly, a wry smile catching at his strong lips. The horses. Damn you, Chisos, getting as spooky as Zaragosa.

He worked down into the blankets, reaching for sleep. Then it was Elgera, coming through the drowsiness that settled over him. She was never out of his mind, really. Sleeping or waking, the picture of her was with him. He wondered how many other men felt that way about her. Every *hombre* from the Red River to Mexico City, they said. Yet, he felt it was different with him, somehow. Even her feeling toward him was different than toward other men. That wry grin came again. Every other man probably told himself the same thing.

Chisos drew taut again beneath his blankets. Not the horses this time. He turned his head again so he could see where Tequilla lay across the fire, his hands above his head, chained to the thick trunk of a mesquite by the manacles. The steady rise and fall of the man's breathing seemed natural enough. Chisos watched him a long time before he put his head back. Again it was Elgera, touching his mind with soft fingers, and finally he must have dozed.

At first he thought it was still in his sleep. It was a sharp, thudding noise, and he took a heavy breath and rolled over in his sougan. Then he was wide awake, and turned so he could stare directly at the tall figure bent over Capitan Zaragosa's body. Chisos tried to haul himself from the blankets, pulling out his gun with a yank, but his body was still pinned in there when Tequilla jumped him, manacled hands raised above his head. Chisos tried to roll

away and get his gun on out. The Mexican's body came down with a stunning weight, and all the air left Chisos in a sick grunt.

He had his gun free finally, twisting the heavy Bisley up. Tequilla knocked it aside as it exploded, grabbing the weapon in both hands. Chisos yelled with the pain of a twisted wrist, but his big rope-scarred fist was like a vise on the gun. Tequilla yanked at it again, with no more success, and then, to stop Chisos from fighting out from beneath him, the Mexican released his grip on the gun and brought his manacled hands back over his head that way once more. Chisos knew what was coming, and tried to jerk aside; but the man was straddling him, pinning him down, and he was helpless to escape it. He managed to pull his gun in line again, and squeeze the trigger, and the roar of the shot was simultaneous with the crashing agony of those heavy manacles coming down across his face.

HE heard someone groaning and realized it was himself, and there were other dim, unreal sounds coming through the pain. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, he felt full consciousness returning. He managed to sit up, and it caused him more pain to shake his head. The Bisley was still gripped in one fist. He pawed at his face and felt the mashed flesh, and his hand came away covered with thick, viscid blood.

"Chisos," mumbled Zaragosa, trying to gain his feet over there. His face was bloody too, and Chisos realized Tequilla must have knocked him out the same way. "I had him chained to that mesquite. The devil dug it out roots and all."

Chisos remembered then the sounds he had heard, and saw the uprooted bush, and the hole where it had stood in the sandy loam. Finally the big man got to his own feet and stumbled over to where the horses had stood. He found the marks leading into the mesquite and plunged after them.

"Don't be a *pendejo*," cried Zaragosa, coming after him, "don't be a fool. You can't catch him on horseback."

"If he's not riding my dun, he won't be able to drive it far," shouted Chisos hoarsely. "It's a smart hoss, and it'll break free of him as soon as it gets the

chance. I'll be there when it does."

It was heavy going in his high-heeled boots, and his head was swimming with pain from the blow. Bisley gripped in his tense fist; he followed the trail through the brush, sometimes by the hoof marks in the soft ground, sometimes by the holes ripped in the thick mogotes by the horses passing through. His chest was heaving, and he had lost all passage of time when he came across the dun. It was grazing on some curly red mesquite grass, and it shied away from him as soon as he broke into the open.

"*Diablo*," called Chisos angrily, but the horse continued to back away, watching him cunningly. He snaked off his belt, and again started forward. The horse turned broadside to him as it whirled to dance on away, and he threw the belt. It fell across the dun's broad back. The animal halted, even though the belt slid on off, and remained there till Chisos reached it. He was using his belt and bandana to knot a hackamore around the dun's lower jaw as Zaragosa came up.

"*Sacramento*," panted the captain. "You have the smart *caballo*."

"He thought the belt was my rope," said Chisos. "Must have been trained to the rope by some hand who hadn't ever heard about gentling a horse. Devil's so skeery of the clothesline you don't have to put your loop on him. Throw the string across his back and he's yours. Now, how about *Tequilla*?"

He had finished the hackamore and was about to mount, when Zaragosa caught his arm with a hissing, indrawn breath. Chisos turned to look where the captain was pointing with his other trembling hand. They were standing in the last cluster of mesquite before the rising footslopes of the Chisos Mountains. The clouds had swept past the moon now, and in the new light, the man was plain enough, sitting his horse on the first crest.

"*El Morzillo*," said Zaragosa in a hushed voice. "*Penasco*!"

"*You're loco*," Chisos told him sharply, "that's *Tequilla* on your black nag—"

"No," Zaragosa tore free as Chisos tried to grab him, "no," and his face held a pale terror, "*no*!" and he crashed away from Chisos into the brush like a frenzied animal.

"Zaragosa!" Chisos whirled to his animal, the hackamore in one hand, his other hand slapping onto its withers as he jumped up scissoring his legs over its back, turning the horse after the captain. The animal had some steel dust in its blocky quarters, and when he let it out like this, it got its cold mouth on the bit, and he had all he could do to keep the horse from running itself to death. Now, with only the hackamore for control, it was a constant battle through the brush, and he had lost the captain within a few hundred yards. He finally managed to haul the dun down, dismounting to head it back and find the trail again.

"You're a good hoss," he told Devil under his breath, "but I wish to hell you wouldn't try and run away with me every time I get on your back."

He found the place they had started from and hunted for some mark that would put him on the trail again; but he had made such a mess popping through the brush after Zaragosa that any decent sign had been obliterated. He stared at the ridge again, rising black and empty now, beneath the moon. The shot startled him, coming clear on the night air. It was not far away, and he found a dense thicket and tied the horse in there with the backamore; then he began making his way toward the ridge. It had come from up there somewhere. He was still in the mesquite when he found where Zaragosa had gone.

CHISOS hunkered down with his gun out, breathing silently. He stayed there a long time, raking the far brush with his glance, listening. Then he began to circle the clearing, slowly, patiently, stopping to listen and look every few feet. Had had completed the circle within half an hour. Finally he moved out into the open and squatted down beside Zaragosa's body. The bullet hole was faintly visible in the blood which had leaked out across his chest. The fear was still stamped in the gaunt rurale's face. But there was something else stamped there. Chisos bent closer, squinting at the man's right cheek to make sure, and his blunt finger traced the design on the skin, and finally his lips formed the words without sound.

"*El Rubrica de Penasco*."

Brand of the Gallows Ghost.



III

LUPITA TOVAR'S face had been pitted deeply with smallpox, and she had a husky, rasping voice, and Elgera Douglas found herself wondering why El Cojo had ever chosen the girl for an entertainer. Lupita stood at the foot of the heavy Louis Seize bed, a black velvet basque tightly laced down the slim line of her body, a red silk skirt flaring out beneath, with a dark petticoat showing under that. She had been watching Elgera pin a scarlet rose in her blonde hair, preparatory to taking over her faro table outside.

"You will look very beautiful to El Cojo this evening, *Señorita* Scorpion." The way she said the name made Elgera turn from the knee-hole dressing table. "What do you think of The Lame One by now?"

Elgera smiled faintly, studying the other woman's pocked face. "El Cojo is a strange person. So unlike any man I've known before."

"He is a gentleman."

"Oh." Elgera nodded, pursing her lips.

Lupita bent forward slightly, and her big black eyes were the only attractive thing about her face, and a new intensity had entered them. "You will leave, won't you? When this agreement between you and Cojo is over, you'll take the horse he gives you and leave."

"I'm borrowing your perfume again." Elgera had turned back to the dresser, lifting the glass stopper out of the new bottle to touch her hair. Her voice became sober. "Don't worry about Cojo. Everything will be all right."

Lupita's skirt whispered sibilantly behind Elgera, and the movement had brought the Mexican girl around beside the dresser. "Don't try to tell me that. I've seen the way Cojo looks at you. I've seen the way all of them look at you. I know what you are, *Señorita* Scorpion—" she almost spat it out this time, and her small bosom was rising and falling more rapidly—"I've heard all about you."

"I can't help how he looks at me," Elgera said.

"You'll go." Lupita's veined hand was on the edge of the dresser, gripping it till the bones gleamed whitely through the dark flesh. "You'll go, or you'll wish you never saw Oro Peso!"

Elgera turned to study her face. "Do you want me to leave just because of Cojo—or something else?"

Lupita lifted her hand off the dresser in an involuntary way and looked as if she were going to step back. Then she seemed to recover herself. "What do you mean?"

"Yes," said El Cojo from the doorway, "what do you mean?"

Both women turned toward him sharply, and he limped in, that soft, ironic smile revealing his teeth in a faint shadowed line, his strange, glowing eyes settling on Elgera. He waved a ringed hand at Lupita.

"It is time for your number, *sancha mia*."

"Cojo—"

"I said it is time for your number." He had not raised his voice, but the velvet tone had grown more intense. Elgera saw the perceptible diminution of color in Lupita's pocked cheeks; then the Mexican dancer bit her underlip, and her skirts hissed past Cojo. He went over to the bed, running his sensitive fingers delicately over the gilt tracery on the post, waiting till Lupita was gone.

"Don't mind her," he said. "Naturally she's jealous. She's the daughter of old friends, and I gave her the job out of—" he shrugged, motioning vaguely toward his face—"you know."

"Are you sure that's all, Cojo. There isn't more?"

His surprise was just mild enough. "How do you mean?"

"You know." She had turned back to the mirror, but he could see her face reflected in the glass, and the faint smile.

He laughed abruptly, as if it had just come to him, and shrugged that way again. "Well, perhaps Lupita is a bit impetuous. A racial attribute—"

"All I mean is, I don't think Lupita would take it passively when she discovered someone she thought had been dealing from the top was really pulling the cards off the bottom."

"When you first came here," he said, "I told you this house backed a straight game. Whatever Lupita gave you to think lies between her and myself is strictly her own interpretation."

Elgera turned to study his face, and oddly enough, she believed him, now. There was something sardonic in its narrow, satanic caste, but there was something

brooding, too, something almost sad, and it touched her.

"You're a strang man, Cojo."

"You mean because I am the only one who has not made advances toward you?" he asked, unsmiling.

At first, she took that for egotism and turned back to the mirror with an impatient toss of her head, anger replacing that other emotion. Then she realized it wasn't the egotism which angered her, but the fact that he had struck home. She smiled abruptly at him in the mirror despite herself, and he returned the smile, faintly.

"Perhaps I have a different approach," he said.

"Perhaps you make a mistake in telling me."

"Do I?" The inveterate gambler, he always had a pack of cards, and they were in his hands now. "I will cut you for a kiss. High card wins."

The abruptness of that caught her off guard. "I'm rather disappointed in you," she said.

"Perhaps it is not as crude as it appears," he said. "Are you afraid?"

"I won't dignify that with an answer."

"Oh." He studied the cards, a soft smile playing about his strong, thin lips. "I had heard you were a gambler. Horses, men, cards, it did not matter. But I guess you're just a woman, after all."

**H**ER blonde hair rippled with the toss of her head, and her voice had a tight, goaded sound. "Shuffle them."

His laugh was sibilant. "Was it so crude, now? He shuffled the cards, held them out to her. "Cut?"

Again she could not help smiling. Tucking her lower lip beneath her teeth, she cut the deck. She had a momentary impulse to run her finger along the top edge for nail marks and then looked up at him, and was sorry for it, somehow. He let her draw first. She turned a king of spades face up on the dresser. He licked his slender forefinger and turned a four of clubs.

"How unfortunate. Perhaps the next time, no?" His laugh was easy, then he dismissed it with a shrug, inclining his dark head toward the door. "I imagine the gentlemen at the faro layout are getting impatient."

She moved after him, wondering if that was all it had meant to him. "You say I'm a gambler, Cojo, yet you put me at a faro layout."

The smoky sounds from the outer room swept against her as he opened the door. "What's wrong with the faro layout?"

"All I do is sit and deal—"

"That's it. Poker, you'd get the deal once out of every four or five times. Faro, the cards are in the house's hands all the time. The mathematical probabilities are with us that way. My games are straight, but I've got to make some profit. What's wrong with faro anyway? You have a fifty-fifty chance. What gambler could ask better odds?"

"There's a little skill connected with poker," she said, petulantly.

That seemed to amuse him, and he started to laugh softly, when a shuffling sound in the hall behind turned them toward the rear door, leading onto the rear alley. Lupita was drawing a tall man in a huge sombrero into the short hallway, his broad shoulders towering over her dark head. She saw Elgera and Cojo and kept turned halfway toward the man behind her, holding her hands down in a strange stiff way so that her flaring skirt blocked off the lower part of his body.

"Cojo," she said. "Cojo—"

Cojo took a look at the man's face, glanced at Elgera, then back again at the others. "All right, all right, in my office," he said swiftly and waved his hand absently at Elgera. "You go on. I'll be out in a minute."

Before she left the end of the hall, Elgera looked back once more. Cojo was almost to the office door, and Lupita was pushing the tall man through. Light from inside the office fell across his face, covered with smallpox scars, the great beaked nose gashed gruesomely across its bridge from some old wound. And in that moment, his hands were out in front of him, not hidden by Lupita's skirts. They were manacled.

Elgera moved into the front saloon slowly, a speculative frown drawing her tawny brows together. Then she forgot about the handcuffed man. There was another man; he stood at the bar, big without being tall, maybe half again as broad as the other figures around him, turned even

larger by the bulky old mackinaw he wore, his batwing chaps the worse for wear. Gotch had just flipped a jigger of whiskey to him, and he took it in a heavy, scarred hand, licking dry lips as he glanced idly around the room. With a distinct effort, Elgera turned toward the faro layout at the other side of the saloon.

"*Señorita Scorpion.*" The voice was muffled, coming from the crowd around the bar and tables, and it was taken up, farther away and nearer, and the shift of men was toward this side of the room. A slim Mexican *vaquero* in a fancy serape slipped the plush-bottomed chair from beneath the table by the dealer's box, bowing for Elgera to be seated, shoving it in when she was down. She looked up at the ring of sweating faces surrounding the table, turned hazy now and then by rising clouds of tobacco smoke, and she did not try to deny the excitement in her. Even if there was not as much skill in faro as in poker, as Cojo said, the element of chance was still there, and it caught at her.

THE drunk *vaquero* on her right was from Durango, and this was the third night straight he had spent at the layout, and he smashed a dirty brown fist down on the enameled cloth. "Take a turn, *Señorita*, take a turn—"

Maybe it was the scarred fingers on his shoulder that stopped him. Something like pain was in the grimace he made. He turned partway about, jerking his shoulder to get away, but that was futile. The fingers were indented so deeply his shirt was drawn into a pucker of wrinkles around each one.

"*Caramba,*" he gasped abruptly, "*que hace, tu bribon—*"

Elgera lost the rest of it as he was swung away into the crowd, and the man in the old mackinaw was there, one hand still up in the air where he had let go of the *vaquero's* shoulder. Elgera stared up at his squinted eyes, and her lips formed his name without sound.

"Chisos."

Then she shook her head almost imperceptibly from side to side. His eyes widened a little as he interpreted her meaning. The men began to shove against him, calling for Elgera to take a turn. She wanted to smile suddenly, as she saw how

little effect their movement had on his square, granitic bulk, and she shuffled the deck and cut and placed it in the dealing box. The men shoved their bets onto the suit of spades enameled in the cloth. High bet was on king and ace.

She waved one hand. "All bets down."

Soda was the exposed, top card of the deck, which did not count, and she slipped it through the slit in the side of the dealer's box, and then slipped the other card of the turn through the slit, placing the face up on the table. The second card was ten of hearts. She raked in the house winnings and put the two cards of the turn on the case. After the third turn, Elgera saw Bighead towering above all the others, moving through the outer ring of men. He stopped behind Chisos, watching a couple more turns.

"A lot of *hombres* come in just to watch *Señorita Scorpion,*" he said finally, "but they do their looking from the bar. If you want to stand this close, *señor,* you'd better do some betting."

Elgera saw the stiffening of Chisos' body. Then he turned, without looking directly at Bighead, and let the crowd close around in front of him. Elgera could see him no more, but she guessed he had gone to buy some chips. Lupita had begun to sing from somewhere across the room. The rasping huskiness of her voice held a certain sensuous attraction, and she knew how to stir the blood with the swift backbeat of her guitar, but the men about the faro layout payed no attention. Beneath the music, Elgera could hear the shuffle of Lupita's feet as she crossed the floor, dancing as she sang. Elgera dealt the twenty-fifth turn. The last card left in the box was hoc, and did not count. She slipped it out and shuffled the deck again. The drunk *vaquero* from Durango was back again, reeling over the table, plunking a stack of chips on the ace of spades.

"*Señorita Scorpion.*" Maybe it was the way he said the name. "*Señorita Scorpion,* you better deal it straight this time. I got my eye on the box this time. Slip one out of the bottom and it'll be the last card you turn."

"Rodriguez," she told him. "I don't think you'd better play any more till you're sober."

"I'll play this table—" he hitched his

gun around in front—"I'll play this table drunk or sober, and you can't stop me. Now take a turn, take a turn!"

She looked around for Bighead. He was standing at the edge of the crowd again. She tilted her blonde head toward Rodriguez. Bighead leered, nodding, but did not move inwards. Elgera frowned, tilting her head more sharply toward the drunk man. Bighead nodded again, his flushed face still holding that leer, and still did not move. There was a sudden wildness in the way Elgera's tawny brow arched. All right, she thought, all right, don't back me up. Make me handle it? All right. Maybe you think I can't. Maybe you think—

"Take a turn, take a turn—"

She jerked soda out of the box, and the next card, slapping them down on the table, and before the second one was down, Rodriguez let out a wild whoop. "*El as, el as—*"

"You're looking at soda," Elgera told him. "The turn was the queen."

She started to rake in his chips, but he caught the rake, shouting. "I told you to deal it straight. You pulled that soda off the bottom. It was the turn. The turn was the ace!"

**E**LGERA threw a last glance at Bighead. He was still standing outside the crowd. Rodriguez jerked the rake off the chips and started to gather them in. Elgera's chair made a sharp scrape as she shoved it back, but she had not risen when that same scarred hand fell on Rodriguez. This time it was on his wrist instead of his shoulder, and he cried out with the pain.

"*Señorita* Scorpion never took a card from the bottom in her life," said Chisos Owens. "I think you'd better apologize."

"*Maldito,*" shouted Rodriguez, and threw his free left arm across his body to grab his gun. Chisos let go the man's other wrist and twisted aside slightly to pull his own arm across his body, and when he came back in, his elbow caught Rodriguez in the belly. The Mexican bent forward with a sick sound and forgot about his gun.

It was only then that Bighead moved in, grabbing Chisos by the arm and spinning him around. "The house will take care of things like that, *Señor.*"

"It didn't look like you were doing it," said Chisos.

Elgera was on her feet then, and the crowd spread away from Chisos and Bighead, hiding this enough so only those at the faro table were aware of what had happened, and the twang of the guitar still came from farther out. Bighead leaned forward slightly, towering above Chisos, and the way his face was flushed, Elgera knew he had some liquor in him.

"Bighead," she said.

"You better cash in your chips and leave, *Señor,*" said Bighead.

Elgera saw the way Chisos Owens' shoulders bunched up beneath his heavy mackinaw, and she knew his voice would have a flat sound. "I don't want to."

Rodriguez had recovered from the blow enough to straighten up, his face a sick gray color. "Get the dirty gringo out of here, Bighead, or I'll do it for you."

"Are you going to cash in your chips?" said Bighead.

"I haven't used them yet," said Chisos.

"Bighead," cried Elgera, and then, "Chisos, look out—"

Rodriguez had gone for his gun again. Chisos whirled around and grabbed the *vaquero's* arm just as Rodriguez got his weapon free and hauled it upward, gun and all. The six-shooter exploded toward the ceiling as Chisos levered Rodriguez backward with that arm, throwing him across the table. With the man bent over the layout like that, Chisos raised one huge fist and struck with it as he would with a hammer, hitting Rodriguez full in the face. The table trembled beneath the blow, and Rodriguez slid off without a sound.

"*Barrachon,*" roared Bighead, "*gringo barrachon,*" and was on Chisos' back. Chisos whirled beneath the attack, warding off Bighead's first blow with his upflung left arm so that the man's arm went over his shoulder, and Bighead himself crashed into Chisos. Elgera saw Chisos draw back his right fist and swing with the blow. It was as deadly as it was short, and Bighead's air left him with an exploding gasp. Elgera saw Chisos get set to follow it up with one to the face, but then the other men were swarming in.

"Gringos, gringos," they were shouting, and whatever happened between Bighead and Chisos after that was lost to Elgera

as the mob inundated the two men.

She knew how it would be now, with everyone in it, and she jumped to her chair, yelling, "Texas, Texas," and then was on top of the table, "Texas, Texas. . . ."

Still calling, she tried to pick a man who was directly on top of Chisos and kicked him in the head with her spike-heeled Hyer. He reeled away, clapping his hand to a bloody ear, and she caught another man by the hair, spinning him around till he was faced toward her and then slamming his face down into the table with all her strength. All the resistance of his body collapsed beneath her, and she released his hair to let him slide off the table.

"Texas, Texas—"

Already she could see them answering her shout, two men at first, then three, forming a little knot as they moved across the room, then four, gaining momentum, then five, charging now through the mob of Mexicans between the bar and the faro layout, then seven, and eight, big wild-eyed six-footers with ten gallon hats instead of sombreros and barrel-leg chaps instead of chivarras, ploughing a path through the smaller Mexicans like a cut of longhorn Texas steers ramming through a bunch of scrubby Mexican blackhorns.

CHISOS was no longer in close to the table. Elgera did not see him, first; she saw the sudden hole appear in the crowd as the men spread back from a wild, slugging, yelling figure in their center, and when it had grown enough, she could see him fully. Bighead lay on his face at Chisos' feet, and another man sat against the legs of a third, his face twisted, holding a patently broken arm. A pair tried to get Chisos from the back, and he whirled to catch the first one and slung him bodily back against the second, and the both of them crashed into the first ranks of the crowd.

"Come on," bellowed Chisos, "I thought you were going to throw me out. Come on."

Another man reeled back into the crowd. He fell into someone, and the man caught him to keep from being knocked on back, and then dropped him aside to step into the open. He was no shorter than Chisos, but his slimness made him appear smaller,

and his lopsided walk took off some of his actual height.

"Come on," bellowed Chisos, filled with the fighting rage Elgera knew so well, "come on—"

"I'm coming," said the slim man, limping past the Mexican, who sat on the floor holding his broken arm, "I'm coming, Señor."

"Cojo," cried Elgera, "don't. He'll kill you."

"*Que esta,*" shouted one of the men on the outside of the ring. "What is it, compadres?"

"El Cojo," said another, and the name passed through the crowd softly, and as if by tacit agreement, the Texans and the Mexicans stopped fighting at the end of the table, spreading away from the two men on the other side of the layout. Elgera jumped off the table, grabbing a gun from one of the Texan's holsters. She could not see the two men in the center of the crowd now, but as she fought her way through the press of fetid bodies, she heard Cojo's voice, saying something unintelligible, and Chisos' answer, and then a sudden shuffle of feet. A shout went up from the crowd, drowning the other sounds.

"Cojo," she panted, "Cojo, he'll kill you—"

Then she had broken through, and could see them. It was one of the few times she had ever seen Chisos Owens down. He lay on his back, staring up at the lame man, and there was more surprise on his face than pain. It was not what Elgera had expected, and for that moment, she was at a loss. Shaking his head, Chisos got up on one elbow, watching Cojo narrowly. Cojo stood moveless, that faint, sardonic smile on his face. Finally Chisos got to his feet, a great square block of a man with his solid legs spread wide beneath his torso and his shoulders thrust forward. He shrugged out of the mackinaw, and his dirty white shirt clung damp with sweat to the roll of muscle that bunched up around his neck line like a range bull's. With an abrupt, hoarse sound, he moved in.

"Chisos," said Elgera, and raised the gun halfway, "Cojo," and then stopped, because she did not know which one it was, now, and way down inside her, though she tried to deny it at first, the desire was

growing to see just which man would win if she left it alone.

There was no subterfuge in Chisos. He was waiting for something this time, and he did not rush Cojo, but he moved in steadily without feinting or stalling, and when he got close enough, he threw his punch. Cojo ducked it and his feet made a shuffle on the floor, and he moved so fast Elgera could not follow it. But it must have been what Chisos was waiting for. He let his first punch go on over Cojo's head without trying to recover it and followed through with his other fist. Both blows must have landed about the same time. Chisos grunted and bent forward with Cojo's fist sinking like a rapier into his unprotected belly. Cojo's head snapped back as Chisos' fist hit him in the face.

It was the quicker man, then. Both of them had been equally staggered, and it was the quicker man. With his body up against Chisos, and both Chisos' arms outflung, Cojo grabbed upward blindly, catching the bigger man by the wrist. Chisos had recovered by then and tried to pull away, and then saw that would be a mistake and tried to strike with his free fist, but he was too late. Holding Chisos' arm out stiff, Cojo spun him halfway around and kicked both feet out from beneath him with a sideswipe of his leg, and let go the arm to hit him behind the neck as he went down.

Only now could Elgera see how Chisos' blow had taken Cojo. The lame man's face was bleeding down one side, and he passed his hand across his eyes, shaking his head dully. His breath had a torn sound, and he started to say something to Gotch. Then he stopped, because Chisos was getting up again. Once more Elgera had the impulse to try and stop this, and once more that nameless restraint held her back. Chisos rose to his hands and knees.

"Señor," said El Cojo, "don't be a fool. Even an animal knows when to quit. I do not want to kill you." Chisos got to one knee, put his hand on his other knee, drawing a heavy breath. Cojo's voice grew sharper. "Señor, I warn you. Don't be a fool. I am past doing it prettily. If you get up again—"

Chisos got up again. He turned with his arms out and went for Cojo that way.

Cojo waited for him and again it was that movement too fast for Elgera to see, drawing a swift, sighing sound from the crowd, and Chisos' gasp as Cojo struck. Cojo backed and knocked Chisos' arm down and struck again. Chisos took it, jerking spasmodically, and kept on going with his other arm out. Cojo knocked that one down and struck once more, crouching in with his shoulder behind the blow, his arm darting in like a blade. Chisos jerked to that one, too, and caught Cojo's arm while it was still in there. Face a set, white mask of pain, Chisos pulled Cojo into him. His blow was with the arm on the other side of his body, so that all Elgera could see was his elbow, bobbing out behind him and then disappearing forward again, but a sick wave of nausea swept her as she heard the dull, fleshy sound it made, and saw Cojo stiffen spasmodically, because she knew what Chisos could do to a man that way.

In that moment, Cojo was rigid against Chisos, and holding him in there, Chisos drew back his fist to strike again. Then Cojo's weight went backward, and hanging on to him, Chisos was pulled after. Cojo had enough consciousness left for this, and he hit with his legs jack-knifing up between him and Chisos, and his feet striking Chisos' chest, rolling the heavy man on over his head as they went down. Sucking his breath in with a hoarse gasp, Cojo turned over on his side and got to his feet somehow, and jumped at Chisos while the bigger man was still down.

"I told you," he panted, grabbing Chisos by the hair, "I was through doing it prettily," and he lifted Chisos' head and slammed it back against the floor so hard Elgera felt the boards tremble beneath her. Then Cojo straightened, holding his side with one hand, and watched for any sign from Chisos. After a moment, the lame man turned to Gotch. "I guess you can take him out now."

#### IV

THE moonlight dropped hesitant yellow fingers into the mysterious depths of Santa Helena Canyon, and the rock walls echoed to the incessant roar of the rapids in the Rio Grande flowing through the narrow bottom of the gorge. A game trail

was the only passage along the northern cliffs, and Elgera moved slowly down its narrow incline, trying to discern movement in the shadows that pooled the hollows. Finally the game track met the old Smuggler's Trail which had been used for centuries by Indians and Mexicans, broadening out to a hoofprinted way. Oro Peso lay at the southern end of the gorge, and she was only a mile from the town when the trail dropped onto the sandy beach of the ford. Here she stopped a moment, looking on into the dark chasm, deafened by the ceaseless roar of the rapids farther up. There were some willows drooping near the water, where a man might make his camp, and she moved toward them parting the first shoots hesitantly.

He had risen and was holding a gun, down in a hollow which the willows concealed, and his voice was barely audible. "Elgera!"

"I didn't think you were in any condition to travel very far," she said, dropping into the gully. "I heard they dropped you at the edge of town."

Patently he was not thinking of that, as he dropped the Bisley back into the holster, moving toward her in an awkward eagerness, opening his mouth to say something, then closing it. He had always been this way, so potent among men, yet so inadequate with women, so inarticulate when it came to expressing his emotions.

"Elgera," he said finally, "when I thought something had happened to you down here—"

"I know, Chisos—" she caught his hand—"I know. I felt the same way when Cojo did that to you." She bit her lip, looking at the mess it had made of one side of his face where Cojo had slammed it against the floor. Then she couldn't help the wry little smile. "You know, that's the first time I've ever seen a man whip you."

The first irritation was in his voice. "Is that why you didn't stop it?"

"Did you want me to?"

"You know what I'd have done to you if you had stopped it." He couldn't help the grin, then he sobered. "That isn't the point. You were calling to both of us. Do I figure that wrong?"

She turned away from him, knowing what he meant. "What do you mean?"

"Cojo is good-looking, in his way."

Elgera met his eyes again. "Chisos, it isn't that."

"Isn't it?" he said. "Why have you staked your horse in his pasture, then?"

"Something's going on down here," she said.

"That's what I'm saying."

She stamped her foot. "I don't mean that. Why do you keep twisting what I say?"

"Maybe it's already twisted."

She was driven to it. "All right, so maybe I like Cojo. Is that what you want to hear? Maybe he's been nice to me, or interesting, or fascinating. Maybe I've never met anybody quite like him. Maybe that's why I didn't try to stop the fight. Maybe I wanted to see how he matched you."

Chisos was suddenly contrite, holding out his hand that way again. "Elgera—"

"No!" She was kept going by her anger now. "You threw this dally. I don't blame you for being jealous. Cojo's a handsome man. Any woman would find him interesting. Maybe he is the reason I'm staying down here."

"Elgera, don't be like this." He was flushing. "It's not that. I didn't mean to say it that way. I've just been so knotted up inside, thinking maybe you were . . . were . . ."

"All right," she said sullenly. "Let's drop it. There is something beside Cojo keeping me here. I was trying to tell you that."

"THE cattle?" he said hopefully. "That's how I found you were missing. I dropped over to your outfit about the time your brother got back from chousing after those rustled cattle and found out you hadn't come in. I took right out after you."

"Natividad and I followed about fifty head of our Circulo S cattle as far as Rustler's Crossing," she said. "Then we lost the trail and got separated trying to find it again south of the Rio. My brother must have figured I'd gone back to the Santiago; we'd agreed on that if we got separated. But I'd found the trail again and staked my horse when I thought I was nearing the rustled cattle. I missed on that, and when I got back to where my



horse had been, it was gone. It took me most of the day to reach Oro Peso."

"Go any leads?"

She shook her head. "It isn't the cattle, now. That trail's too cold. You know I couldn't get anything out of the Mexicans if they knew I was after my Circulo S steers. Staying around the Rio wouldn't do any good. It's not that. I told you, something's going on down here."

"Penasco?"

Maybe it was the way he said it that brought her head up sharply. "What do you know?"

"I saw a dead man marked with his rubrica. Is that why you didn't want to know me at Cojo's?"

She shrugged. "I thought it would be better if they didn't know our connection. Cojo trusts me, I think, to a certain extent."

"He's mixed up in it?"

She studied her feet, shuffling them in the sand. "I don't know."

"Or don't want to know?"

Her eyes flashed. "Chisos, don't start that again. If Cojo's mixed up in it—"

The willows sighed behind her, and she was already whirling toward that as Chisos went for his Bisley. But he had never been a flash with a gun, and it would not have mattered much, anyway, since the man standing above them on the bank of the gully already had his gold-chased Remington in his hand. Elgera's voice sounded muffled, even to her, against the roar of the river.

"Bighead," she said.

It was south of the Rio Grande about half a mile, in a copse of cottonwoods sheltered by a low red ridge. Masomenos got up from the fire with some effort as the three of them came through the trees, coughing a little in the dust raised by the nervous cattle milling around in the alkali flat past the grove.

"Put on some *café*, Masomenos," said Bighead mockingly, "can't you see we have vistors?"

Masomenos clapped a fat hand to his head, rocking backward. "*Ay, caramba*, I knew it, I knew it. I told you we would have trouble if you didn't quit fooling around with *Señorita* Scorpion, Bighead."

"They were following us," said Bighead. "I found them at Rustler's Crossing." He

saw how Elgera kept looking out toward the cattle, and laughed. "Is that what you were looking for, *Señorita*? They are not your cattle. They are ours—"

"*Mas o menos*," said the fat man.

"Si," grinned Bighead. "More or less. At least they are more ours now than they are the man's who used to own them, and less his now than they were at one time."

"I thought you worked for Cojo," said Elgera.

"Many people make that mistake," said Bighead, and he was watching Chisos, and he was no longer grinning. "I think I owe you something, *Señor*—ah—*Señor*—"

"*Señor* Chisos Owens," supplied the man standing outside the firelight, and then he moved in so they could see him.

"Tequilla!" said Chisos.

Elgera saw the strange pocks marking his face, and her first thought was Lupita, and then she saw the deep, gruesome gash through the bridge of his arrogant nose, and she remembered it, and looked at his hands. He caught the glance, and a sardonic amusement was in his smile.

"*Si, Señorita*, the manacles are gone now." He looked toward Chisos. "It is unfortunate I could not be there to identify you in Oro Peso, but I was, ah, attending to other matters, eh? I understand you weren't recognized; they just carried you out of town and dumped you like they would any *barrachon* who had crossed El Cojo. Perhaps things would have come out differently if you had been known. Perhaps what we have to do now would have been taken care of."

"**C**OMPADRES," said Masomenos uncomfortably. "Is it absolutely *necesario*? Maybe if we just ask them to go home. After all, they didn't actually see whose cattle—"

"*Punta en boca*," snarled Bighead. "Shut your mouth, and tie this Chisos up. I owe him something for this evening."

"Don't be foolish," said Tequilla. "There's no use doing anything before."

"Before what?" said Elgera.

Tequilla inclined his head toward her. "I thought you understood, *Señorita*."

Suddenly she did understand, fully, for the first time. He saw it in her face, and smiled faintly. She waved her hand at the milling cattle out on the flats.

"Just for a bunch of cattle?"

"No, not just for a bunch of cattle," said Bighead. "Our necks enter into it. You did not stay down here because you liked the scenery."

"Cojo made me a proposition," she said hotly.

Bighead grinned evilly. "I'm not surprised. And it fitted in nicely with your plans, no? Did you think you could find out who got your cattle wet by sticking around the Rio?"

"I found out, didn't I?"

"And now you think you'll go back and identify us?" said Bighead. "I have been in the business a long time, *Señorita*, and I still wear a nice soft collar around my neck. Nobody's going to put a rope there."

Chisos must have understood now, too, because he bent forward, his voice intense. "But she's a woman."

"Some of the Mexicans don't think so," grinned Tequilla. "They think she's a wildcat. Or a scorpion?"

"Don't be a fool. You can't do that. Not to a woman. Not just over a bunch of cattle, like this, to a woman."

"It is like Bighead says," murmured Tequilla. "There are a number of parties—quite a number—who would like to exchange our nice soft collars for a rope, if they had something definite on which to act. It was due to somebody's loose mouth that I fell into Capitan Zaragosa's hands the other night, and I would be kicking my heels ten feet above the Plaza Militar in Mexico City right now if fortune had not favored me. I don't want it to happen again."

Chisos' eyes had grown narrow as the man spoke. "Or maybe it isn't for just a bunch of cattle."

"*Que esta?*" said Tequilla.

"Real Penasco," said Chisos.

A hush dropped after his words, and the sudden snapping of the fire caused Masomenos to jump. "*Dios*," he said. "Don't say it like that. What about Penasco?"

"You know what about Penasco," Chisos told him.

"*Mas o menos*," said the fat man, "more or less."

"Masomenos means what about Penasco, specifically," said Tequilla, his eyes glittering with a new interest.

"Specifically," said Chisos, "you did a nice job on Capitan Zaragosa, the other night, Real."

"What about Zaragosa—?" Tequilla started to say, and then checked himself. He stood there a moment, staring at Chisos. "Oh," he said finally, almost inaudibly. "Oh."

"What job on Zaragosa?" said Bighead angrily. "What are you talking about?"

Chisos looked at Tequilla's hairy hand. "You know what he's talking about. Ask him where his ring is."

Tequilla threw back his head to laugh. "A big man, *señoras*, with shoulders like the *toros* they used to breed for the bull rings, and he is never without his short blue capuz, and he was in the smallpox epidemic at Hermosillo in Sixty-seven—"

"Tequilla," shouted Bighead. "What are you talking about?"

"*Nada, compadre, nada*," said Tequilla, his laughter stopping. "A little joke between *Señor* Chisos and I, that's all. We have had the pleasure of meeting before, you see. He was telling me of what happened after we parted."

Bighead's eyes widened. "You mean Zaragosa—"

"Has been honored with the *Rubica de Penasco*," said Tequilla, and he looked at Bighead, and something passed between them. Masomenos put a fat hand over his mouth, staring wide-eyed at them. Finally Bighead jerked his Remington at Chisos.

"I told you to tie him up, Masomenos," he growled.

"And I told you there wasn't any use tying him up," said Tequilla.

"No man does that to me," said Bighead. "Tie him up, Masomenos. I'm going to give him a pistol-whipping he'll remember when he reaches hell."

"Cojo said he never saw anybody else whip you," said Elgera.

She saw Chisos' big frame draw taut for a moment, and then he must have understood her intent, for he took the cue. "Yeah," he said. "And now you have to tie me up."

"Cojo was right," said Bighead. "Nobody ever whipped me. And I don't have to tie you up. I'll—"

"Bighead," said Tequilla. "You won't do anything. You won't do anything but get rid of them right here and right now."

"And from Mexico City to the Red River they'll be able to say Chisos Owens whipped Bighead," said Elgera.

"Nobody will ever say that," growled Bighead and tossed his gun to Masomenos and moved toward Chisos. "And I don't have to tie you up, either."

"No!" Tequilla's voice turned Bighead toward him. The pock-marked man had drawn his Colt, and it was pointed at Bighead.

**E**LGERA saw Chisos take the breath, and was moving even as he jumped for Bighead. She caught Masomenos by the arm and spun him around, throwing him off-balance as Chisos threw himself at Bighead, catching the huge Quill about the waist and heaving him at Tequilla. Tequilla tried to jump backward and fire at Chisos all at once, but Bighead was in between them, hurtling toward Tequilla, and the bullet went wide. Then the Quill hit Tequilla and they both staggered a few steps across the ground, trying to keep from falling, and then went down. Elgera had caught at Bighead's Remington in Masomenos' fat hand, trying to twist it free.

"No, *Señorita*, no," squealed the fat man, throwing his bulk backward. She was still hanging onto the Remington and was pulled off her feet, falling against Masomenos. Then he grunted above her, with the thud of a weight crashing into him, and she cried out with his gross body coming down on top of her. Breath knocked from her, she heard Masomenos cry out to a blow, and his hand relaxed around the gun butt. She managed to squeeze from beneath him with the Remington. Chisos Owens was straddling Masomenos, his great fist brought back for another blow. Tequilla had rolled from beneath Bighead and was sprawled on his belly with his Colt held across one forearm. Holding the Remington in both hands, Elgera fired. She saw the slug kick dirt into Tequilla's face, and he reared up to his knees, swearing bitterly as he pawed the acrid alkali from his eyes. From the herd, riders were coming, and Bighead rolled toward the saddles piled beyond the fire where Elgera caught several saddle boots sticking out from under the mound of gear.

"Chisos," she cried, snapping a shot at Bighead and then shifting the gun to one hand so she could grab Chisos Owens. He came off Masomenos with his head jerking from side to side, and she knew he was looking for a gun. Bighead had reached the gear, snaking a Winchester from one of the boots, and the riders coming in began firing, and Elgera shoved Chisos toward the cottonwoods climbing the ridge. He was a stubborn man, but he must have realized the futility of trying to stay and fight all of them, and he crashed into the timber alongside of her as Bighead began levering the .30-30. The bullets made a whinnying rattle through the foliage, and beneath the bang of the gun, Tequilla was shouting something. Then, abruptly, the noise behind them ceased. It was Chisos who halted Elgera, his fingers digging painfully into her arm. Behind them they could hear a faint movement, then silence again.

"Little slower now," muttered Chisos. hoot owl began calling from higher up.

It was painful, moving that slow, but they made little sound. After a while a hoot owl began calling from higher up. They reached the ridgetop and looked for the fire on the Santa Helena Flats below, and could not see it. A shroud of night covered the land.

"Must have doused it," growled the big man, crouching beside her. "They'll expect us to head for Santa Helena canyon. Let's take the opposite direction a piece."

They moved southward along the shoulder of the ridge so as not to be skylighted. Whenever they stopped to listen, he stood close enough for the heat of his body to warm her, and she caught the vagrant smell of tobacco and sage and sweaty leather emanating from him and liked the familiarity of it, somehow. Finally he sensed her looking up at his face, and turned. She touched his arm.

"Chisos—"

Whatever else she would have said was stopped by the silhouette on the ridgetop. It appeared from nowhere, apparently, without discernible sound, standing motionless. Chisos turned back, following the direction of her glance, and even in the darkness, she saw the blood leave his sun-darkened face, turning the cheeks an odd, puffy color.

"El Morzillo," he almost whispered, "Penasco," and then, with a low, muffled sound in his throat, he scrambled upward. Elgera's thumb caught at the big single action hammer on the Remington as she jumped after him. The rider was silhouetted for another instant up there, a black man on a black horse, his short cloak whipping in the breeze. Then he was gone, and it was Chisos Owens' bulk surging up against the sky. Mesquite ripped at Elgera's charro leggins as she stumbled up behind him, seeing Chisos' silhouette drop behind the sombre bulk of the ridge. She reached the top panting heavily, hesitating a moment before skylighting herself. The shot came as she crossed the crest, and she dropped into a pocket on the other side, the adobe hard against her stomach. Lying there with the cocked Remington held in both hands, she tried to hear any other sound. It was an old Comanche trick, holding the mouth open to improve the hearing, but it did no good.

"Chisos," she sobbed, and began stumbling down the slope in a crouch, rattling through mesquite and stabbing herself on the hidden malignance of horsemainer, desperately seeking something tangible to battle, the moonlight catching the spasmodic jerk of her blonde head from one side to the other as she sought him. She was halfway down the slope before she came across Chisos. A suffocation filled her as she knelt beside his big frame, sprawled out in a clump of brush. He lay on his back with his right cheek turned upward. She put her hand flat on his chest; it was still warm, but there was no movement of breathing. And all the while she was staring at his cheek. The warm, thick blood from the bullet hole in his chest seeped through her fingers, and still she crouched their motionless, looking at his cheek. Finally she took a heavy, broken breath, and her eyes moved away from Chisos' face until they were turned blankly toward the sky. She was crying softly, and the tears were salty in her mouth, and the lump in her throat and breast was something that would be there always.

"Penasco," she said, and it was hardly audible, "you think you've sworn vengeance, then hear mine. I won't rest, I won't stop I won't die—until I've found you."

V

THE whole thing was unfortunate. Standing there at the bar, he couldn't help thinking that, over and over. The whole thing. If only she had not come. He twirled the jigger of expensive bourbon idly in his long supple fingers, studying the amber liquid. There had been enough other women. He squinted his eyes, trying to remember the first one. Maria? Si, Maria, with hair like midnight across the Sierras and eyes like the banked coals of a fire, and he had told her so, and that had been that. Quartil? Had she been next? Or Barranca, in Durango? It did not matter much. It did not matter whether they were black-haired or red, or black-eyed or blue, they had been with him a while, or he had been with them, and he had enjoyed them, or they had enjoyed him, and that was about all that mattered, and he had considered none of it unfortunate, because when the time came to part, it had always been easy enough. He set the glass down with an abrupt thud. Why, then, should this be different? There had been blondes before. There had been blondes with eyes like this, and a mouth like this, and a figure like this. Then he was looking at himself in the mirror, unable to stop the wry smile on his lips. But not quite like this, eh? The smile turned to a small laugh. No, not quite like this, not ever quite like this.

He knew the vagrant wish that he had met her sooner. Perhaps things could have been different. Five years ago, or six. Then he closed his hand angrily around the drink, tossing it off. Things could never have been different.

"Cojo." The call turned him, and he saw Lupita standing in the short hallway, still wearing her black velvet basque beneath a short leather riding jacket, her skirt replaced by a split riding habit. He limped along the bar toward her and inclined his head toward his office door behind where she stood. Shutting the heavy portal after they were inside the room, he glanced at the alkali on her boots.

"I was down at Uncle Parco's," she said nervously, turning to study his face. Then she came closer. "Cojo, you've got to help me with Tequilla."

"He's in trouble again?"

"No, no," she said swiftly, not meeting his eyes. "But if you could only keep him here a few days. Get that blonde out of my room and he could stay there."

"You mean hide him?" said Cojo. He turned to the desk, taking a cheroot from the box, trying to hide the anger in him. "I told you I was through when I had Gotch file those manacles off Tequilla. I'm getting tired of your cattle rustling brother, Lupita. Bighead causes me enough trouble with his constant drinking. I told you it was the last time I would help Tequilla. If he's in trouble again, it's his own fault."

"He isn't in trouble, Cojo," she said desperately. "I swear it. I only want you to keep him here so he *won't* get into it. I'll promise you he won't cause you any trouble, Cojo."

He bit off the end of the cheroot, noticing the slight tremor already in his hand. Damn this girl. He looked at her pock-marked face. What had he ever seen in her? A certain sensuous attraction, he had told himself, that other men missed because they only saw the scars? It almost made him laugh, now. Damn her!

"You were down to your Uncle Parco's," he said, looking at the alkali on her boots again. "I didn't think you had to cross Santa Helena Flats to reach his *jacal*."

"I took the long way round." She came closer, trying to catch his hand. "Please, Cojo—"

"You're lying," he said softly, controlling the growing anger in him with an effort now. "You were with your brother. Tequilla's been running wet cattle down the Smuggler's Trail again, and you've been with him."

"No, no," she threw herself on him, twining her arms around his neck, "please, Cojo, for me, take Tequilla in here for a few days, you'd do it for me—"

"Let go," he hissed, jerking his mouth off her wet lips, getting his arm between their bodies and twisting around as he levered her away, thrusting her back so hard she stumbled across the room and brought up against the wall. She stood there with her palms flat against the adobe, small breasts heaving, her eyes smoldering at him.

"You used to like my kisses," she panted.

"Get out." There was a terrible restraint to the shaking intensity of his voice.

"It's that woman," she said, almost inaudibly. "*Señorita* Scorpion."

"Get out." His whole body was trembling now, and the rage was turning that strange glow in his eyes to a burning flame.

"I'm right, then." Her voice was louder now. "It is that woman."

"Get out," he said and could hardly hear it himself, and it was the last time he would say it.

"Do you think you can get rid of me that easy? Just because of a little blonde—"

HER words cut off in a scream as he leaped toward her, catching her with one hand about the neck, flinging her toward the door. She spun around once before she struck the portal, flailing with her arms to try and keep her balance, and the door shuddered with her weight going into it, and she slid helplessly down it onto the floor.

"I told you," he shouted, standing over her, his eyes blazing, his whole body shaking violently. "I told you, I told you . . ."

She started up at him, sobbing brokenly. There was pain in her face, but more, there was fear, for it was the first time he had revealed this side of himself to her. She tried to speak, and choked on her words. She got to her knees, and then rose against the door, hands clawing the carved panels for support, staring fascinated into his burning eyes. Finally she got the words out.

"Yes, I'll go, but not before I tell you. Your blonde sweetheart ran out on you last night. The *hombre* you beat up is Chisos Owens. He's her man. Why do you think he was here in the first place? She's gone to him now, and you'll never see her again—"

With a broken, animal sound, he caught her, both hands on her neck this time. "No," he shouted, that rage sweeping all sane thought from his head, "you're lying, you're lying, you're lying—"

With her head thrown back, she clawed at his hands, her face twisting from side to side, the words blurring out in a strangled sob. "You can see easy—enough. You can see. Look in—her room. See—if I'm lying. See, see—"

He stood there a moment longer, holding

her like that. Then he released her, his breath making a harsh, terrible sound. She clutched at her neck, gasping for air, crying with the agony. He opened the door and crossed the hall, hearing her rise and follow him, coughing and crying. Ran out on him? He flung the bedroom door open. That was what he got for letting himself dream of a blonde with eyes that flashed like—

"What is it, Cojo?"

Elgera raised her head off the pillow, blinking sleepily, her hair tumbling in a shimmering, tousled cascade about her pinky flushed face, and for that moment, the beauty of her held him speechless.

"What is it?" she repeated, putting a white arm out over the cover.

"Nothing," he spoke thin-lipped, "just get dressed. I want to see you."

He turned around to see Lupita standing pale and wide-eyed in the door of his office, staring past him into the bedroom. "But I thought . . ." she muttered, "Tequilla told me . . ."

"Tequilla told you?" he said. "Tequilla told you what? Is this the way you were planning to get rid of Elgera?" He drew in a heavy breath, his rage under control now, lacerating himself for having let her see it. "I'm not going to ask you again, Lupita. Get out."

She stared a moment, mouth open, then, with a wild little cry, flung herself to her knees, clutching him about the knees. "No, Cojo, don't," she sobbed hopelessly, "please Cojo, I'll do anything for you, be anything, your slave, Cojo, your slave, anything, *Madre de Dios*, please, please for God's sake . . ."

He stood rigidly, filled with disgust, letting her go on until she realized how utterly silent he was. Finally she trailed off, staring up at the implacable will in his face. She must have understood the futility of any more display. Her leather skirt rustled dimly as she drew away from him, and her face was dead white.

"I guess I knew it would be this way from the first. I guess I knew what you were. I couldn't help it. I knew you were bad, and I couldn't help it. All bad, Cojo. You never had a friend in your life, man or woman. You never loved a woman in your life, me or Elgera or any other wo-

man." There was something terrible about her dry whisper, as she backed down the hall. "You're all bad, and I knew it from the first and I couldn't help it, and I can't help it now, and you're not through with me yet. If I can't have you, no other woman can. You're not through with me yet!"

ONE of Cojo's *criados* had cleaned Elgera's charro suit, and the roses sewn down the seam of the trouser leg caught bright red in the light as she stepped into Cojo's office. He took a last pull on the cheroot and ground its butt into a hammered silver ash tray on the *escritorio*.

"What was that in the hall?" she said.

He shrugged, studying her eyes, seeing the faint redness of the lids. "Lupita was having one of her spells. She gets them every time I look at another woman."

"Oh?" She tilted her head to one side, smiling quizzically.

He looked at her a long moment, drawing his lips in. He would have done this for no other woman, he realized. For a moment he was filled with a poignance he had never known. Just standing there, looking at her. Perhaps it was foolish, perhaps what Lupita had claimed was not all lies. It did not matter now. It would matter later. He knew that. If Lupita were right, it would matter. That was why it had to be done now. While he was filled with it and blind to anything else.

"Something out in the corral for you," he said.

The corrals behind *Cojo's Cueva* were more extensive than usually found backing one of these border structures. There were several covered sheds housing a row of stalls. The horse in the stall at the end stood in deep shadow, and Elgera apparently did not see its true color till they were almost there. Then he saw the surprised widening of her eyes, and the smile breaking over her face, and he felt pain at her pleasure, for it meant that she was happy at being free to leave.

"*La Rubia*," she cried, and the palomino in the shed suddenly tried to back out of its headstall, kicking and squealing excitedly.

"One of my men picked it up a couple of days ago south on the Rio," said Cojo as the girl moved in and unhitched the

animal. "It had been grazing free, I guess, since you lost it."

Elgera had the palomino backed out now, running her fingers through its silky blonde mane to clean out the burrs and thorns matted there, and she frowned across its back at Cojo. "A couple of days ago?"

He moved up against the horse so he would be that close to her, meeting her eyes across its withers. "I know that wasn't very fair, Elgera, but I couldn't help it. That's the way I feel. I knew you would leave the minute you got your horse. It's been here two days now, but I couldn't help it." He stopped, that confusion in him again, because he had never told a woman this before in sincerity; he had told them enough times before, because that's the kind he was, but he had never meant it, really, and now that he did mean it, for the first time, he could not find the words. He took a breath, running his hand across the horse's golden coat, and then let the breath out in a frustrated way, unwilling to meet her eyes, and then took another breath, and spoke. "I thought maybe you felt the same way. Sometimes when you looked at me. If I hadn't thought that, I would have told you when we first found the horse. But there *were* times." He raised his glance helplessly to her. "I mean . . ."

Her hand was warm on his across the horse's back. "I think I know what you mean, Cojo."

For that moment, meeting her eyes, he felt an exaltation. Whatever he had done or been before had no significance, and whatever he would do again. Only this moment. He stepped back from the horse, one of his rare smiles lighting his face.

"Maybe you'd like to try it out, after so many days," he said. "The saddle's in the stall."

He did not make the mistake of helping her put the rig on, knowing the insult that would have held. She heaved the big hand-stamped Porter down off the bars and slung it on the palomino with a casual skill, cinching up the latigos in swift tugs. By that time Cojo had gotten a sorrel from one of the open corrals and put a Mexican-tree kack on it. He saw the joy in her as Elgera swung aboard the palomino, reining it out of the corrals. Cojo

headed them down an alley that led between the outlying hovels of Oro Peso and into the foothills north of town. Riding beside her with the wind fluttering her long blonde hair, Cojo thought the spring had never smelled so sweet. The scent of whitebrush in a draw came to him like honey on the breeze, and every hoofbeat kicked up rich brown earth beneath them, and a pair of Sonora deer flushed from a gully and bounded across in front of them and made the girl laugh. This was the way it felt, then, this was the way it affected a man. For forty years he had thought he'd been living, and he had not lived at all. And now that it had come to him—

HE stopped her on the crest of the foothills, watching the rise and fall of her breasts beneath the slick shirt as she breathed heavily from the hard ride, raising his eyes to her face as the deck of cards appeared in his hands. "Cut you?"

She looked surprised. "This is becoming a bad habit. Anyway, they aren't fair odds. Once would give me an even break. If you keep it up like this, you're bound to win, sooner or later. I'd be playing against myself."

"Don't you understand?" he said, "this is the last time."

Something darkened her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Cut it?" he said. Still watching him, she cut the deck in his palm, then drew a card at his nod. He took one, and they turned them face up. She had a ten of clubs to his three of diamonds. "*Suerte*," he shrugged, "fate," and put the cards back into his pocket. "I was sort of hoping it would be my high card this time. I would really have liked a kiss before we said *adios*."

"*Adios*?" The understanding was in her face now. "But you said . . . you said . . ."

"What did I say?"

"The way you felt," she muttered, staring at him. "You told me you didn't let me know when you first found the horse because of the way you felt."

He nodded. "*Si*."

"Then why now," she said, a heat entering her voice. "If you didn't want me to leave then, why do you want me to go now? You said you thought maybe I felt



the same way. Maybe I do, Cojo. Maybe I don't want to go."

He pulled his sorrel over against her palomino, the softness of her leg pressing into his. He tried to find any guile in her eyes, and there was none. For a moment, the weakness swept him like a flood and all his resolve was gone.

"Maybe you feel the same way?" he said, almost inaudibly.

Her voice was hardly louder. "I've never known anyone like you, Cojo. Only cowhands and ranchers and farmers. When they put their hands on a woman, it's like they were bulldogging a steer. It's different . . . when you touch a woman." She stopped a moment, and up close like this he could see the little lines of strain about her mouth. It did not detract from her beauty, but it caused him a moment's wonder. Then she brought her face closer, almost whispering it. "You wouldn't have to cut me for that kiss now, and it wouldn't necessarily have to be *adios*."

He had never wanted anything so much in his life, but he pulled his horse away abruptly, forcing his voice to be hard. "No. The Chisos Mountains are just ahead. Past them is your Santiago. Your saddlebags contains enough tortillas and cured carne to see you through."

She stiffened in her saddle, and he realized she was staring past him down the road. He heard the horses coming then, and his Mexican-tree rig creaked with his turning. They had ridden hard, Tequilla and Bighead, and they drew their lathered animals to a halt with vicious tugs on the cruel spade bits.

"Where did you find her?" said Bighead thickly.

"Find her?" Cojo saw the man was drunk, as usual.

Bighead leaned forward in his saddle, his short leather jacket flapping away to reveal the scars on the musculature of his chest. "You got back to Oro Peso pretty quick, *Señorita*. I guess you didn't get much sleep."

Cojo glanced involuntarily at the girl's eyes, and then the alkali on Bighead's wooden-heeled Mexican boots caught his glance. Bighead reeled back in the saddle, sensuous mouth twisting defiantly.

"Sure I was down at Santa Helena Flats. To hell with you. We ran a bunch of

Big Box steers from north of the Rio. I told you I wasn't going to stop handling cattle just because you wanted me to, Cojo. I been running *genados* across the Rio since I was ten years old and no lame *hombre* is going to keep me from making a living. And no blonde *señorita* either. She was down at the flats last night with that Chisos Owens, and she saw the cattle we were running. I'm not letting her go back to the Big Box and tell them who borrowed a few of their *genados*."

"Lupita saw you?" said Cojo.

"This morning," growled Bighead. "She was coming from her Uncle Parco's."

"And you told her about Elgera?"

"Tequilla did," said Bighead. "Now let's have the blonde."

"Nobody is taking Elgera anywhere," said Cojo. "She's going home."

"The hell," shouted Bighead, spurring his horse to try and get around Cojo. "We're taking her."

"No," said Cojo, putting a boot into the sorrel's kidney that made it jump between Bighead and the girl. "Ride, Elgera!"

"No, Cojo, I can't—"

"I'm giving you this chance. Ride, I tell you, ride—" and then he saw Bighead's shoulder rise, and kicked his feet out of the stirrups so he would be freed completely, and jumped. All the rest was a confused action to him, his attention fixed on Bighead's thick arm as he grabbed it the instant his body struck the man, both of them going on over Bighead's horse. Bighead's Remington exploded, but it was pointing downward due to Cojo's grip on his arm. Then they struck the ground with Bighead beneath, and Cojo tried to pull Bighead's gun from his hand as he rolled free. He sensed the movement behind him, and took it for the horses, and then heard the creak of saddle leather, and the girl's cry, and knew the movement was more than the animals, and then the blow on his head blotted out any perception, and there was no movement about him any more, or sound, or anything.

VI

THERE were vague mutterings somewhere above Chisos Owens, and the scent of woodsmoke in his nostrils, and a heavy pain beating in his chest. If I'm

dead, he thought, this sure is hell, because it hurts that much. Then he opened his eyes and saw the viga poles above him and knew it wasn't hell because they didn't build their houses with adobe down there. He tried to sit up, but something was holding him down. Or somebody.

"Señor Chisos?" said the girl with her hand against his head.

"Yeah," he said. "What's left of me."

"You were shot in the chest," said the woman. "Parco said it was not a lung or you would be coughing blood."

"The blonde *señorita* left you here," said an old man's voice, and Chisos guessed that must be Parco. "She thought you were dead. She was filled with grief, but there seemed to be some reason she could not wait and see us bury you. It was after she left we found you were not *muerto*. No, *señor*, you must not move—"

But Chisos had already sat up on the *felpudo* of straw and blankets, shaking his head groggily. The girl on her knees beside him had a pock-marked face, and there was a strange, driven light in her eyes as she stared at him. He had seen her before.

"You dance at *Cojo's Cueva*?" he said.

"Sí," she muttered. "I am Lupita. I was there the night Cojo whipped you. Parco here is my *tio*, my uncle." Her small bosom began to rise and fall more swiftly, and that strange light grew brighter in her eyes. "*Señorita* Scorpion is your *amorata*?"

"Not exactly," he grunted, passing his hand tentatively across his throbbing chest, feeling the thick softness of cotton bandage there. "She knows well enough how I feel about her, but she never said right out how she felt about me. Sometimes I think she does, and sometimes—"

"It doesn't matter what she feels," said Lupita swiftly, almost angrily. "If you love her, you aren't going to sit here and let her get killed."

The stiffening of his body brought fresh pain. "Killed!"

"Sí, sí," said Lupita, grabbing him by the shoulder, "she is trying to find Real Penasco, isn't she? That's what she stayed here for. She came down because of some cattle, but she stayed to find Real Penasco."

"No," he said, "no . . ."

"Never mind," Lupita told him. "Don't try to deny it. I know." Something savage

entered her voice. "Would you like to know who Real Penasco is?"

"I already know," he said.

"Do you? Then you'd better reach him before he kills Elgera Douglas!"

Chisos tried to get up, but the old man caught at him. "Lupita, why are you exciting him like this? He cannot be moved."

"Leggo," muttered Chisos hazily. "What about Penasco?" He grabbed the girl abruptly, his big hands drawing a cry of pain from her. "If you know where Penasco is you'd better tell me, you'd better tell me—"

"I will, I will," she gasped, and he got the idea it was not him making her do it. "There is an old cave in the walls of Santa Helena Canyon. There are a lot of caves there. The Indians say it was the home of a vanished race who used the *atl-atl* instead of bows and arrows—"

"I don't care about that," he almost shouted. "What about Elgera?"

"Señor, let her go, please," quavered the old man. "Lupita, what are you doing? You don't know anything of Penasco."

"But I do, I do, panted Lupita.

"Tell me," roared Chisos, shaking her.

"In this cave, Penasco keeps his horse, El Morzillo, named after the black war horse of Cortez. Whenever he has found another of the men who betrayed him, he goes to the cave for his horse and cape and ring."

"What good does that do?" he said bitterly, his breathing hoarse with the pain in him. "I just go there and wait till he comes? The hell—"

"No, no—" she was almost incoherent now—"he'll be there. You've got to hurry."

"How do you know he'll be there?"

"He will, I tell you, he will. If you don't stop him, Elgera will be killed!"

"Let her go," the old man was still pawing at Chisos, "let her go . . ."

CHISOS released Lupita and turned on him. "Have you got a horse?"

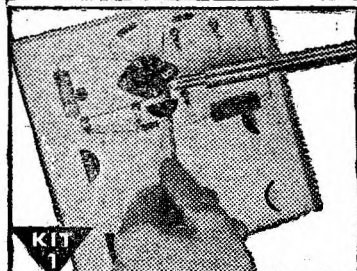
"Somewhat of a horse," said Parco weakly. "But it is all I possess."

"Take mine," Lupita told him in a last passionate burst, "out front," and as he stumbled out the door, she collapsed onto the floor, sobbing hopelessly, and dully he



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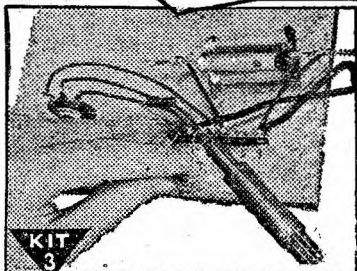
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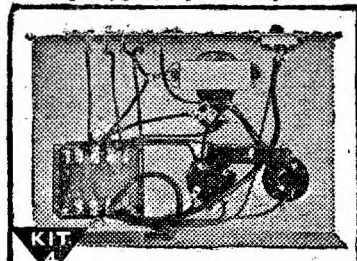
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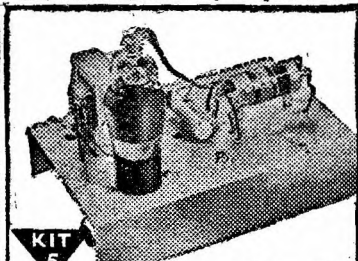
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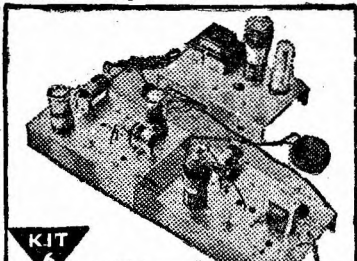
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wondered what had driven her to this. It was a wiry little claybank with half a dozen brands scarring its body, some of them blotted out, one noticeably altered. He had trouble mounting, and when he finally got his big frame into the saddle, he leaned over the slick horn and retched with the agony. They really put one through me, he thought, giddap little horse, and booted its kidneys, they really put one through me. The claybank had a hard gallop that was sheer hell all the way to the Rio Grande. He passed Santa Helena Flats and the ridge they had climbed the night before and realized Parco's hovel must have been visible from the ridge for Elgera to take him there. He forded the river to the old trail extending down the wall of Santa Helena Canyon, the gorge filled with the deafening thunder of the rapids. The trail rose from the sandy shelf constituting the bank, passing the first caves crumbling in the side of the escarpment. A foam rose from below, damp and chill and foreboding, somehow. He was halfway up the side of the frowning cliff when he rounded an eroded formation and saw the movement from one of the potholes that passed for a cave ahead. The roaring river below covered whatever sound his horse made, so he did not dismount. They had left his Bisley in its holster, and he got the big gun out as he urged the claybank on up the trail. The trail broadened into a small grassed-over plateau, and Chisos had reached the near edge of this when the man in the blue capuz came fully from the cave across the plateau, leading a black stallion. He must have seen Chisos as he swung aboard the black, for he turned the animal to face Chisos before he had his right foot into the stirrup. Since the night Zaragosa had been killed, Chisos had retained an idea of Penasco's true identity, and this came as a distinct shock that robbed him of all reaction.

"El Cojo!" he said. . . .

Her hands were sweating on the reins. The breeze swept up off the river, but her hands were sweating on the reins. Elgera sat stiff and pale on *La Rubia*, riding between Bighead and Tequilla. When Elgera had seen Tequilla strike Cojo from behind and had realized it was the only thing which would divert them from killing him, she had spurred her horse by Bighead,

racing down the road toward town. Where the road crossed the Old Smuggler's Trail, she had met Masomenos; he was forking a scrawny mule and must have fallen behind Bighead and Tequilla, and he drove the mule head on into Elgera, unhorsing them both. By the time she had collected her wits, Bighead and Tequilla drew their blowing animals to a halt above her, and that was all. Now they were trotting down the Smuggler's Trail toward the gorge of the river.

"I don't see how you missed Cojo," said Bighead. "I thought you hit him harder than that."

Bighead had held Elgera at the fork in the road while Tequilla and Masomenos went back for Cojo, and Tequilla's anger was plain in his pock-marked face. "I hit him plenty hard," he said acridly.

"He was gone when we got there," said Masomenos. "We found his sorrel halfway down the road to us, but he was gone when we got there."

"Oh, shut up," said Tequilla.

"At least let's get rid of this girl before she causes us any more trouble," snarled Bighead.

"Why did *El Dios* give you such a big *cabeza* if he did not mean to put any brains in it?" said Tequilla. "Kill the girl right on the road and leave her lying here, I suppose."

"We could dump her in the river," said Bighead.

"And have maybe a hundred peons see us carrying her dead body from here to the river," Tequilla told him. "I'm getting tired of this, Bighead. We will take her alive to the gorge of Santa Helena Canyon and push her over. If someone ever does get down in those rapids to find her there will be no bullet holes, no nothing. She just went too close to the edge, see."

"**H**OW can you talk like this about the *pobrecita*," said Masomenos weakly from the rear. "After all, she is a *señorita*, *amigos*. Even you I have never seen kill a girl before."

"She saw us with those cattle," said Bighead. "Nobody ever saw me with wet cattle and lived to tell. How do you think I've kept my neck out of a rope this long? By advertising my work? *Punta en boca!*"

Masomenos shut his mouth, and the dust

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rose white around them as they increased their pace down the river road toward the gorge. They topped a rise and could look westward toward Oro Peso drowsing brown and ancient in the sun, and then dropped down the other slope, and the milky mist of the rapids shredded above the gorge ahead. Elgera licked her lips, unable to keep her eyes from dropping to the big Remington at Bighead's hip. He hitched at it, grinning drunkenly.

"Not this time, *Señorita Scorpion*," and it was the way he said the name.

She could feel her legs begin to tremble against the saddle skirt from sheer tension, and a small, twitching pain caught beneath her shoulder blades. She tried to relax, but it was no good. The terrain was growing rugged here, uplifts thrusting up brokenly, limestone and lava poking through grassed-over slopes. The road wound down toward the upper end of the Old Smuggler's Trail where it wound tortuously down into the gorge. They reached the lip of the escarpment, and Bighead got his gun out, dismounting. He waved the Remington for the girl to get off *La Rubia*. Tequilla's saddle creaked faintly as he swung down, a sardonic grin crossing his pock-marked face. The dull roar of the rapids came up to them, and Elgera could barely hear Masomenos behind her.

"Please, *amigos*, please, if you could only do it some other way. A *señorita*, a woman. I don't like it . . ."

Bighead raised his voice to be heard clearly. "Will you walk over the edge yourself, *Señorita Scorpion*—" and again it was the way he said the name—"or do we have to help you?"

She looked down the black bore of his .44 and could sense Tequilla's impatient movement to her side, and she was trembling once more, and it was no tension now. She tried to move, but was held rigid by her own infinite sense of helplessness. Bighead shrugged, began moving toward her with the gun. Elgera's head turned, looking desperately for a way out. Only Tequilla there, a gun in his hand too, now, grinning that way, no mirth left in it, forced a little now. Elgera felt pain in her hands and realized her fists had clamped shut so tight her nails were drawing blood. Maybe it was Masomenos. Elgera did not know, exactly. Somebody said it. Somebody said

it when that figure appeared on the limestone uplift behind them, silhouetted for that moment against the sky, a man in a swirling cape sitting straight and tall on a black horse.

"*Madre Dios. El Morzillo. Penasco!*"

Bighead turned, shouting something Elgera could not distinguish, and Tequilla whirled that way, too. The first to recover, Elgera threw herself in among the horses while the three men were still staring at the rider. Tequilla twitched toward her, snapping a shot, but she was already behind his dun, and the shot caught the horse instead. The animal reared up, whinneying shrilly, and plunged forward in a blind frenzy of pain. Tequilla had to jump out of the way as it charged past him. Trying to keep the other two horses between her and the men, Elgera went in a stumbling run up the rocky hill. It was straight toward Penasco, but it was the only way out. Then, with her head turned upward, she realized the rider was no longer atop the uplift. There was more firing down below, and someone shouting in pain, and she flung herself over the crest and down the other side. She tripped and fell and rolled down the rocky slope, ripping her silk shirt and her flesh alike, crackling through a spread of creosote, wet berries showering her face as she rolled through a clump of strawberry cactus, crying out as the spines stabbed her. She struck bottom and stumbled to her feet, shaking her head dazedly, tears streaming from her eyes with the stunned pain. The haze in this gully was thick and damp, and she groped blindly down the stony bottom of the cut. Someone had crossed the uplift before her. She saw him lying huddled ahead, one hand caught up in the branches of a mesquite bush he must have grabbed at when he fell. Masomenos.

She was still crouching there by the fat man, staring at his dead, brown cheek, when she sensed the movement behind her. Tequilla stood there with his gun in his hand.

"**D**ID you think I wouldn't follow you over the hill?" he said. Then he saw Masomenos. "Did you kill him?" She stared up at Tequilla without answering, her mouth open slightly, that strained look on her pale face. He came closer,



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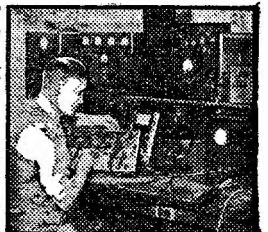
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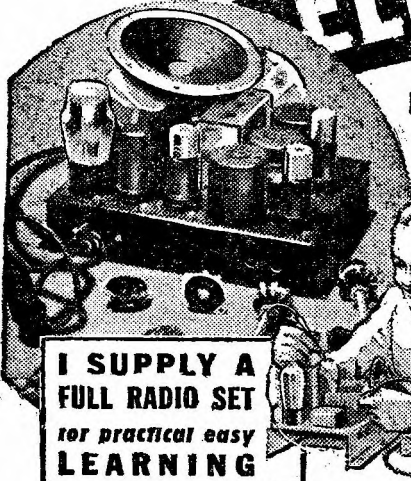
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frowning in a puzzled way. Then he was near enough to see what was stamped on Masomenos' cheek, and his voice came out in a husky whisper. "*La Rubrica de Penasco.*" His chest began to rise and fall perceptibly. "But we were never hooked-up with Juarez. Hell, I was a little boy when it happened. And Masomenos. Why? We never crossed Penasco. We never even saw him." For the first time she saw fear in Tequilla. All the sardonic humor was gone, and his voice took on a shrill babble. "He only kills those he was sworn vengeance on. Zaragoza, Guerrero. Not us. Not Masomenos. Not me—"

She had recovered from the shock of it herself now, and she took that chance, while he was still shouting. Without rising from where she crouched, she shifted her weight to her left leg and kicked out with her other foot. It threw her over on her back, but the boot caught Tequilla's wrist, knocking it upward. He cried out with the pain, his big Colt dropping from his fingers. She rolled over on the ground, clawing for the gun. Tequilla's weight came down on top of Elgera with a force that knocked the breath from her in an exploding gasp. He caught her hand on the gun, striving to tear it free. She jerked out of his grasp, and in a final desperation, swung her arm, releasing the gun to fly in an arc over the body of Masomenos and land with a metallic clang on the stones, skidding across them down the gully. Elgera got over on her back and brought a knee into Tequilla's groin, hearing his gasp of pain. For that instant his weight was limp on her, and she squirmed free, rising to her feet. He tried to catch at her feet, but she kicked free. Then she saw what made the haze so thick here. This gully opened out onto the escarpment forming the lip of the gorge too, and the foam rising from the rapids below hung over the uplifts viscid and milky. In their struggle, they had rolled past Masomenos and the gun, and as Tequilla scrambled to his feet, he came after Elgera without trying to find the weapon, anger stamped into his sweating face. She ran toward the open end of the gully, stumbling through torch cactus, kicking stones from beneath her high heels, turning to see Tequilla gaining on her. He must not have realized how near they were to the edge or perhaps his

anger blinded him to anything but getting his hands on her. With a garbled curse, he threw himself at Elgera. His body big and blurred before her, she let herself drop like a sack to one side. His foot caught her head as he went on over her.

"*Madre Dios,*" he screamed, and then she could not hear him any more or see him.

She didn't look at the edge of the gorge as she got up; she didn't want to. She was barely on her feet when the other man came on the run out of the gully, and then slowed down as he saw her there, and then stopped.

"We won't make any mistakes about it this time," said Bighead, raising his gun, "we won't try to push you over," and she saw his thumb draw the hammer back, "you just stand right where you are and I'll shoot you over!"

HE had not wanted it this way. He had done the thing intelligently up to now. He had been El Cojo and had run his *Cueva* in Oro Peso and he waited patiently to hear of each man he owed a debt to. Guerrero, Zaragoza, all the others before them, and the others who would come after. Maybe there would be no others after now. He could not help it. It was no longer intelligence or cunning. It was the way he felt about the girl.

Cojo worked his way down through the crumbling stratas of limestones, his capuz torn by the torch cactus above, carrying one of the ivory-handled Frontier Colts with his rubrica stamped into its butt, the other gun still holstered at his side. The ring of the Penascos was on his finger, the rubrica itself wrought in steel with a fine cutting edge that would leave its mark irrevocably in the flesh of a man's face. Masomenos already bore that mark, lying dead back there in the mist.

In the confusion, Cojo had seen the fat man run blindly over the ridge, followed by the girl, and had dismounted from El Morzillo to go after them, finding Masomenos in the bottom of the gully. Cojo was possessed with the blinding rage which was so much a part of him, and he made no distinction. All he knew was they were going to kill Elgera and Masomenos was with them. Rarely did that rage control him; mostly it lay dormant in his scarred,

twisted body, held down by the terrible grip of his will. But it was always there, black and malevolent, seething to erupt and consume him.

When he had found Parque Guerrero, for instance, on the Castellan Road, and all the old memories had come flooding up, the sight of his brother writhing on the lanzas of Guerrero's troops when they had come to confiscate the Penasco property for supporting Maxmillian, the sight of his father falling dead before Guerrero's flaming *pistole*. It had been so easy to exact his vengeance.

And when he had found Zaragosa in the flats south of the Chisos Mountains, and all the old pains had come flooding up, so vivid they made his bullet-riddled legs ache again where Zaragosa's slugs had smashed into them, so real he felt the rope around his neck where Zaragosa had placed it with his own hands. It had been so easy to exact his vengeance.

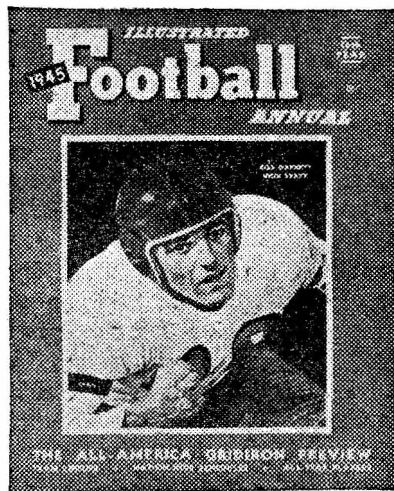
And so it was now. All he knew was they were going to kill the girl, and that rage gripped him till he was trembling with it, and he had been able to kill Masomenos without the least compunction and stamp the rubrica into his flesh for all to see what happened to those who crossed Real Penasco. After Masomenos, he moved up the gully away from the gorge, thinking the girl had gone that way. When out of sight of the dead fat man, he had heard the sounds of struggle down there and had turned back. He was passing Masomenos again, hardly aware of him, going toward the gorge. Abruptly, out of the mist at the end of the gully, he heard someone shout—

*"Sacramento—"*

Stumbling across the stony bottom, Cojo burst from the end of the gully with his gun held out in front of him, and the dim figure standing at the edge of the gorge was Elgera. But the pale blot of her face did not turn directly toward him, even as he appeared, and he whirled to one side, as the gun crashed from there. His short blue capuz twitched with the slug going through.

Then he had the hammer of his Frontier dropped, and the gun bucked in his hand, and he saw Bighead take a step backward up the slope, surprise stamped onto his face, and then take a step forward,

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pain replacing the surprise, and then fall, and roll a little, and stop.

Cojo did not turn back to the girl, for there was another man coming up from the Old Rustler's Trail. He had dismounted by now, Chisos Owens, and he came in a heavy, purposeful walk that left no doubts as to his intent. He had that big Bisley in one fist, and his head raised a little when he saw Cojo.

"Chisos," called the girl, and the rising roar of the rapids below so muffled her voice that Cojo himself could hardly distinguish the words. "Chisos, don't. It's Cojo, can't you see? He gave me the chance to get away, Chisos, he was only trying to stop Bighead and Tequilla. Please, Chisos . . ."

But the big man had not heard her, and his steady walk carried him on toward Cojo inexorably. Cojo felt the muscles of his legs growing rigid beneath him, because he had fought this man before, and knew how much it would take to stop him. The girl was starting to run toward them from the lip of the gorge, and Cojo saw she meant to throw herself in front of him. Chisos shouted something at Elgera, and then broke into a run himself. Cojo spread his legs a little, and fired. Through the mist, he saw Chisos stagger slightly to one side, then reach out with his free left hand to grasp his gun, holding it in both hands, coming on.

"CHISOS," screamed Elgera, and threw herself in front of Cojo, holding onto his shoulders, her head twisted around toward the other man. But Chisos kept on coming with his gun held out in both hands, and knowing a sudden fear for the girl, Cojo swept her aside, jumping out in front of her. He was jerking his gun into line again, when he saw the Bisley in Chisos' two big fists flame. It was like a hammer hitting Cojo's chest, and he knew why Bighead had taken that step back, as he himself stumbled backward, tripping over the girl's legs where he had thrown her to the ground, and he had known the same kind of pain when Zaragoza's bullets had swept his legs from beneath him, only this was a greater pain, and different, and lying there on his back, he knew how different . . .

When Elgera realized Cojo was down,

she got to her knees and crawled toward him. "Oh, Chisos, Chisos," she began to sob, "he wasn't going to kill me, don't you know that, he wasn't."

Chisos Owens had dropped his gun, now that it was all over, and he stumbled toward them, gripping his wounded right shoulder. "He's Penasco, isn't he?"

"Yes, but he wasn't going to kill me . . ."

"Never mind, *chequita*," said Cojo wearily. "He is right. I am Penasco, and he would have killed me wherever we met, whether I meant you harm or not. It is like Lupita said. I have been mostly bad. It is rather ironic, no, that my downfall should come as the result of what was probably the only good thing I ever did in my life. But at least I kept them from killing you."

"What happened to you?" she said. "When Tequilla went back with the fat man, you were gone."

"My horse had run off when I came to," he said. "I figured Bighead and Tequilla would come across the river with you; I didn't know they meant to kill you here. I knew I could not catch them without a horse once they got across the Rio, and the cave where I kept El Morzillo was closer than Oro Peso. I cut straight through the hills and must have passed you and the men while they were fooling around coming back to get me. Chisos was coming up the Smuggler's Trail when I got El Morzillo out, and forced me back up. It was then I topped the rise at the upper end of the trail and saw you and Tequilla and Bighead." Cojo looked up at Chisos Owens. "You seemed surprised to see me, *senor*. I thought you recognized me last night on the ridge above Santa Helena Flats."

"Is that why you tried to kill me?" said Chisos.

Cojo nodded. "You can understand I did not want anyone to recognize me as Penasco."

"Your bullet missed my lung," said Chisos. "Elgera took me to Lupita's uncle down there below the ridge."

"I thought you were dead, Chisos," Elgera was biting her lip, eyes wet. "I saw the Parco's house from the ridge and took you there. I wouldn't have left you, even then, but I had to get back to Oro Peso before daylight. I swore I'd get Penasco

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for killing you, and I knew the only way I could have an inside track was for Cojo to keep trusting me. I didn't know he was Penasco then. I only knew everybody came to his *Cueva* sooner or later—"

"*Si, si—*" Cojo tried to laugh, but choked on it, and could not speak for a moment—"everybody comes to the *Cueva* sooner or later. That's why I was El Cojo. Oro Peso is the crossroads between Mexico and Texas, and sooner or later, I would hear of every man I had sworn vengeance on. I heard Zaragoza had caught Tequilla and was bringing him across the border by the Chisos foothills, and I found him that night just after Tequilla had escaped."

"But Lupita must have known you were Penasco," said Chisos. "She came to her uncle's jacal and told me how to find where you kept El Morzillo."

Faint surprise showed in Cojo's dulling eyes. "Perhaps she followed me one night," he said finally, and then looked up at Chisos. "So she betrayed me." He shrugged. "That is a woman, *señores*. *Pues*, she was the only one who knew. Bighead and Tequilla and the rest thought I was just El Cojo, The Lame One, running my *cueva* for their nightly carousals and helping them with a little rurale trouble now and then because a man who runs a cantina on the border lasts longer if he does not antagonize the local bad boys." He was looking at Elgera now. "You see why I wanted you to go. Before you found out about me. While it was still clean and sweet between us, like the smell of spring grass. It was the only clean thing that ever happened to me, the only decent thing, and I wanted to keep it that way." He started to cough thickly again and fumbled beneath his capuz. "How about once more, Elgera. *Pronto*, eh? It has to be that way. Just once more. Cut me?"

HE had taken the deck of cards out, and Elgera saw how little time there was left. "I'll shuffle," she said, taking the deck from his hands. Trying to see the cards through her tear-filled eyes, she spotted a two of clubs as it fluttered through her fingers and let her thumb nail catch at its top edge. He was watching her

face, rather than her hands, and she slipped the deck into his hands for him to cut. He cut it and held it out to her. She let her sensitive index finger run across the edge of the deck, and the card she drew did not come from the top. Then he took one, turning it face up.

"Ten of hearts," he said faintly.

She turned hers face up. "Two of clubs."

"*Bueno*," he murmured, "*bueno*," and she bent her face to touch his smiling lips with hers.

After they had drawn the blue capuz across his somber face, Chisos and Elgera stood there, the big man trembling now with weakness and reaction from his wounds. She held out her arms to support him, only now appreciating the incredible drive it must have taken to bring him out like this with a bullet wound that had through his ribs.

"How did you really feel about Cojo?" he asked huskily.

"I don't know," she said, trying not to cry again. "I guess I won't know for a long time, Chisos. Maybe never. He wasn't all bad. He couldn't have been. He was decent to me. He was a murderer, and there's no justification for that, but who's to say we wouldn't do the same thing under circumstances like that, seeing our family killed, our land taken?" She looked up at him. "Do you think it was wrong?"

He frowned in a puzzled way, then he must have understood, for a faint smile caught at his lips. "The kiss? I don't think anybody would blame you. He saved your life, and it's like you say, he was just a poor tortured devil, all twisted up inside and out by what happened to him. I don't think anybody would blame you."

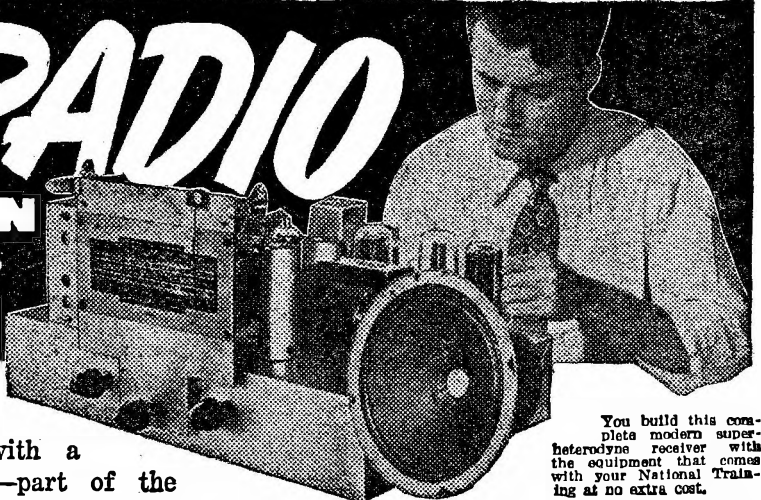
"I don't know, I don't know," she said wearily. "It's all so mixed up inside of me. I still can't hate him or condemn him. I thought I hated Penasco when it looked like you were dead, but even that's gone now. I guess there's only one thing I do know."

There was a new tenderness in his hands on her. "One thing?"

"Yes," she said tiredly, "that's the first time in my life I ever cheated at cards."

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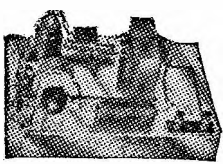
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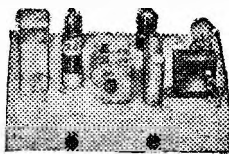
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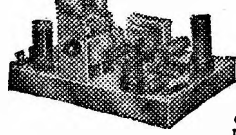
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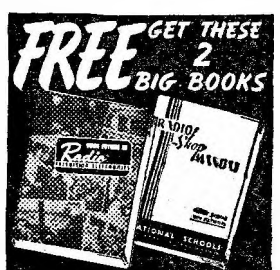
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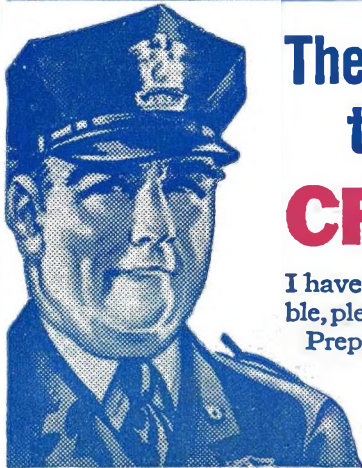
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