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STAR WESTERN

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Perfume is one of the most exciting of feminine accessories! It can delight the senses enormously . . . be pleasing to you yourself, and make you appear lovelier to others. Because your particular perfume should be chosen with care, after wearing it and "living with it," this offer has been created to help you sample ten popular favorites. Try them one by one. Then choose as your own the one that best fits your personality.

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FIVE O'CLOCK by GOURIELLI

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TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

STAR WESTERN

BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST

VOLUME 51 APRIL, 1952 NUMBER 4

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★ ★ ★ ★ Four Thrilling Short Stories ★ ★ ★ ★

★ ★ Star Features ★ ★

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Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

Up the trail

AS MOST women who wear fur coats can testify, the days of the trapper are not yet over. Beaver and otter and possum are still sought in their old haunts, and of course every country boy has trapped rabbits and squirrels. But there's a difference between today's trapper who tours his trap line in a jeep, or possibly a motor boat, and your old-time trapper, who jostled with wolves in competing for the catch in his own traps, and fought Indians, and to whom civilization was a five-syllable word—just four syllables too many for his vocabulary.

The center of the fur trapper's world was the trading post, where he repaired every six months or so to turn in his furs and go on a glorious toot—during which he probably spent all the profits of the preceding months in the wilds.

For a picture of one such trading post, we are indebted to author Frederick James, who has written an account of Fort Union.

* * *

The Missouri River was the principle highway into the rich fur country of the western mountains and through its muddy waters keel boats and later, steamboats, ploughed laboriously northwestward during much of the nineteenth century. It was a tricky river, treacherous in the extreme, and those who fought its strong and dangerous currents swore that its course changed each time they made the trip. The soft mud banks that confined the water constantly crumbled and allowed the river to take another tack in its travels to the Gulf.

For the trapper, or perhaps the curious

(Continued on page 8)

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You build the modern Radio shown below as part of my Servicing Course. I send you speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, everything you see pictured and EVERYTHING you need to build this modern Radio Receiver. Use it to make many tests, get practical experience.

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Television is TODAY'S Good Job Maker

In 1946 only 6,000 TV sets sold. In 1950 over 5,000,000. By 1954, 25,000,000 TV sets will be in use, according to estimates. Over 100 TV Stations are operating in 35 states. Authorities predict there will be 1,000 TV Stations. This means new jobs, more jobs, good pay for qualified men.

Many Soon Make $10 A Week Extra in Spare Time

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE experimenting with circuits common to Radio and Television. Many students make $5, $10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. Special Booklets start teaching you the day you enroll.

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Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Get actual Servicing lesson. Also get my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Read what my graduates are doing, earning. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dpt. 2CR1, National Radio Institute, Washington 9. D. C. OUR 38TH YEAR.

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New, special TV kits furnished to build high-definition SCOPE . . . RF OSCILLATOR with flyback power supply . . . complete TV set . . . many other units. You see pulses, trapezoidal, saw-tooth waves forms. Get valuable PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE locating and correcting TV troubles. Mail coupon for facts, pictures and prices!

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Good for Both-FREE

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MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2CR1
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Mail me FREE Lesson and 64-page book. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....ZONE.....STATE.....

How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION

(Continued from page 6)

traveler, who moved in the direction of the beaver country the trip became extremely monotonous as signs of civilization disappeared. Day after day he looked out at an infinity of parched brown grass, or ahead at muddy, turgid water that swirled angrily as the patient vessel pushed onward. Just when it seemed apparent that the last trace of habitation had disappeared, Fort Union loomed up in the distance, standing out like a beacon of civilization in a sea of savagery.

Here, six and a half miles above the junction of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers, stood the American Fur Company's outpost and principal trading point on the Missouri River to the north. Commanding the "Fort," as all trading posts were called, was the hard-headed Kenneth McKenzie. Officially he was known as the "bourgeois" but to all who dealt with him he was called "King." And King he was in every sense of the word, for his command was law, and his desire, or even whim, was a mandate.

What sort of reception did the visitors receive from such a regal personage? If they were traders friendly to the American Fur Company, or perhaps travelers like the German Prince, Maximilian of Wien, or the famous American naturalist Audubon, they received a royal welcome. If they represented a company such as the hated Rocky Mountain Fur Company, they could expect short shrift from the King.

Those who were treated to McKenzie's hospitality were astounded at what they experienced. When dinner was called the guest proceeded to the dining room where the King took his place, dressed in his very best, at the head of the table. No one was allowed to sit at the table unless he wore a coat and more than one embarrassed traveler was obliged to borrow a coat from one of the clerks before he could join the rest of the diners.

When such formalities as the seating of guests according to their importance had been completed, the meal was served by two waiters who brought on buffalo meat, fresh butter, biscuits (which were rationed out, two to a customer), and fresh garden vegetables, as well as coffee and tea. This was not all; a pail of ice was set to one side and in it were placed bottles of fine Madeira and Port so that the meal might be enjoyed in style.

There were other evidences of regal splendor. James Hamilton, who was McKenzie's bookkeeper, was so fastidious in his dress that he almost outshone the King. Hamilton ordered all his clothes from London and watched anxiously for each river boat from St. Louis, for it would certainly bring him something new from the world of fashion. He wore ruffled shirtfronts and around his neck he carried a large gold chain. As the fur trader Larpenteur said, he was "always polished, scented, and oiled to the highest degree."

Some of the French Canadian fur traders told Larpenteur that they had it on the best authority that Hamilton wore a fresh shirt daily. There was even a rumor that he bathed daily, but this strained the credulity of the most gullible mountain men. They were amused at his attitude toward the Indians, whom he always referred to as "beasts," and to their great delight one day, when the clerk chanced to drop his silk handkerchief, and an Indian picked it up, Hamilton angrily snatched the article back and threw it into the fire.

IN THIS splendor surrounding him, the King could act in a manner as stern as it was grand. He ruled his domain with an iron hand and would brook no breaches of discipline. When, in November of 1883, there appeared at the fort a handsome young Frenchman by the name of Bourbonnais who was quite a ladies' man, McKenzie sensed trouble. When he found that Bourbonnais was interested in the

(Continued on page 10)

$100.00 A WEEK in CASH
PAID DIRECT TO YOU

FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

SAVE MONEY! There's a big advantage to buying this policy by mail. This method of selling is less costly for us—and that's another reason why we are able to offer so much protection for so little money.

Policy Pays for a Day, a Week, a Month, a Year—*just as long as necessary for you to be hospitalized!*

JUST LOOK
The Large Benefit This Low Cost Policy Provides!

The Service Life Family Hospital Plan covers you and your family for about everything—for every accident, and for all common and rare diseases after the policy has been in force 30 days or more. Very serious disease such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart disease, diseases involving female organs, sickness resulting in a surgical operation, hernia, lumbago and sacroiliac conditions originating after the policy is in force six months are all covered . . . Hospitalization caused by attempted suicide, use of intoxicants or narcotics, insanity, and venereal disease is naturally excluded.

The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your $1.00 a month!

TWO SPECIAL FEATURES

MATERNITY

Benefits At Small Extra Cost
Women who at some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays $50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

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Benefits At No Extra Cost
In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
For Hospital Bills, up to $500.00
For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to $500.00
For Orthopedic Appliances, up to $500.00
TOTAL OF $1,500.00

3¢ A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY
for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS $100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of $50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

This is What $100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

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Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

10 DAYS FREE EXAMINATION

You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and with policyholders in every state. SEND NO MONEY—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

REMEMBER—$100.00 A WEEK CASH BENEFIT IS ACTUALLY $14.25 PER DAY!

FREE INSPECTION . . . MAIL COUPON
The Actual Policy Will Come to You at Once Without Cost or Obligation

The Service Life Insurance Company
Hospital Department R-65, Omaha 2, Nebraska

Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

Name.....

Address.....

City or Town.....*State*.....

THE SERVICE LIFE FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
Assets of $13,188,604.16 as of January 1, 1951
Hospital Department R-65, Omaha 2, Nebraska

(Continued from page 8)

King's attractive Cree wife, he knew that his instincts had been right. Immediately one of the King's men was summoned and told to take care of the amorous Frenchman, which he did by putting a ball through his right breast—just a bit too high to prove fatal. Bourbonnais took the hint, and when he was able to travel he moved on downriver.

In another instance the King acted forcefully. Near the fort there lived a family of halfbreeds named Deschamp, who were given to murder and habitual theft. The King decided that they must go, so he ordered his men to burn their home and if any of the family tried to escape, to kill them. The orders were promptly carried out, and as a final vindication the elder Deschamp was desemboweled with a dirk. The action seemed to improve discipline at the fort.

Large or small, all opposition was fought to a standstill. When rival companies tried to get a foothold in the Upper Missouri country, McKenzie fought them with all the means at his disposal. His men shot it out with those who "trespassed," and when they could not be driven off by these means, the King summoned them before him and bought them out. He even fought the federal government. When it was decreed that no more liquor was to be brought upriver for use in the Indian trade, McKenzie set up his own still and made his own, claiming that he was not smuggling liquor —he was making it, in his own domain.

When King McKenzie took on the United States government he met his match. Complaints from Washington moved the directors of the American Fur Company to send orders up from St. Louis that the still must be destroyed and the law must be obeyed. Feeling that he could not continue his trade with the Indians without liquor as a medium of exchange, McKenzie gave up his job and moved to St. Louis where he entered the wholesale liquor business and followed it until his death in 1861.

When the King died, his beloved "castle" on the Upper Missouri still stood, but its days also were numbered. In 1865 a new military post, named Fort Buford, was built a few miles below Fort Union and two years later the federal government purchased the old fur-trading post. In August of 1867, Union's kitchen building was torn down and used as fuel for a steamboat. A few days later the troops began the task of demolishing the entire post, the lumber from which was used to enlarge Fort Buford.

So the King was dead, and his castle was gone. But the memory of lavish dinners and gracious conversation, at the center of a feudal domain almost as large as many European countries, no doubt lingered long in the minds of many a trapper who witnessed the only splendor he ever knew . . . at the court of the great King McKenzie.

WELL, *amigos*, we may mourn for those days, but there's no bringing them back—physical, that is. We can, of course, bring them back in the colorful stories of the Old West that *Star Western* specializes in. And for a brief few hours while we turn the pages of living memory, we can see again those old trappers paddling their bull boats down the river, fighting and howling, living out their roaring lives in a style few men have ever lived. And those frontier women—how good they must have looked to those women-starved men after their months in the wilderness!

We can see them now when we close our eyes—the big blondes, powerful and sharp-talking; the little Indian maids with their black eyes and straight black hair. . . . Yes, they were all part and parcel of the West—the West that *Star* brings you in every issue: exciting, dramatic and big as life. The next issue will be published March 26th. See you then, *amigos*.—*The Editor*.

6 MAGIC WORDS GIVE YOU DAILY CASH

KENDEX NYLONS ARE FREE UNLESS SATISFACTORY!

Amazing, but true! The most sensational offer ever made! Can you imagine how much money you could make writing orders for wonderful nylons that actually cost nothing unless satisfactory? Is there any woman who would hesitate to wear beautiful nylons at OUR risk? Nothing like this has ever been heard of in the hosiery industry. Never before was it possible for any man or woman, young or old, to earn a steady income so easily!

The leading Kendex full fashioned, sheer de luxe first quality nylons have just been reduced to only $.98 a pair INCLUDING your commission, bonus and even postage. This stocking is so finely made—gives so much wear, that KENDEX will refund the full $.98 purchase price if the hose do not give satisfactory wear within a period of ONE AND A HALF MONTHS! If the hose runs, snags or shows undue wear, the hose will cost the customer nothing!

We don't care if you are 18 or 80—whether you have one hour or 50 hours a week to spare. How can you help make a lot of money? Women buy two million pairs of nylons every day. Just say "Kendex nylons are FREE unless satisfactory" and practically every woman will be eager to give you an order.

There is nothing for you to buy or deliver. You don't risk a dime. Pay nothing now or later. Just mail the coupon, that's all. We'll send you FREE SAMPLE STOCKING and complete money-making outfit postage prepaid. You write orders. We deliver and collect. Advance cash plus huge cash bonus that increases your earnings by 40%. No obligation. If you don't make more money than you thought possible, throw the outfit away! Need we say more?

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Send me, absolutely free and postage prepaid, your complete money-making outfit including free sample stocking. It is understood I am under no obligation and if I am not satisfied with the money I make, I will throw away the whole outfit.

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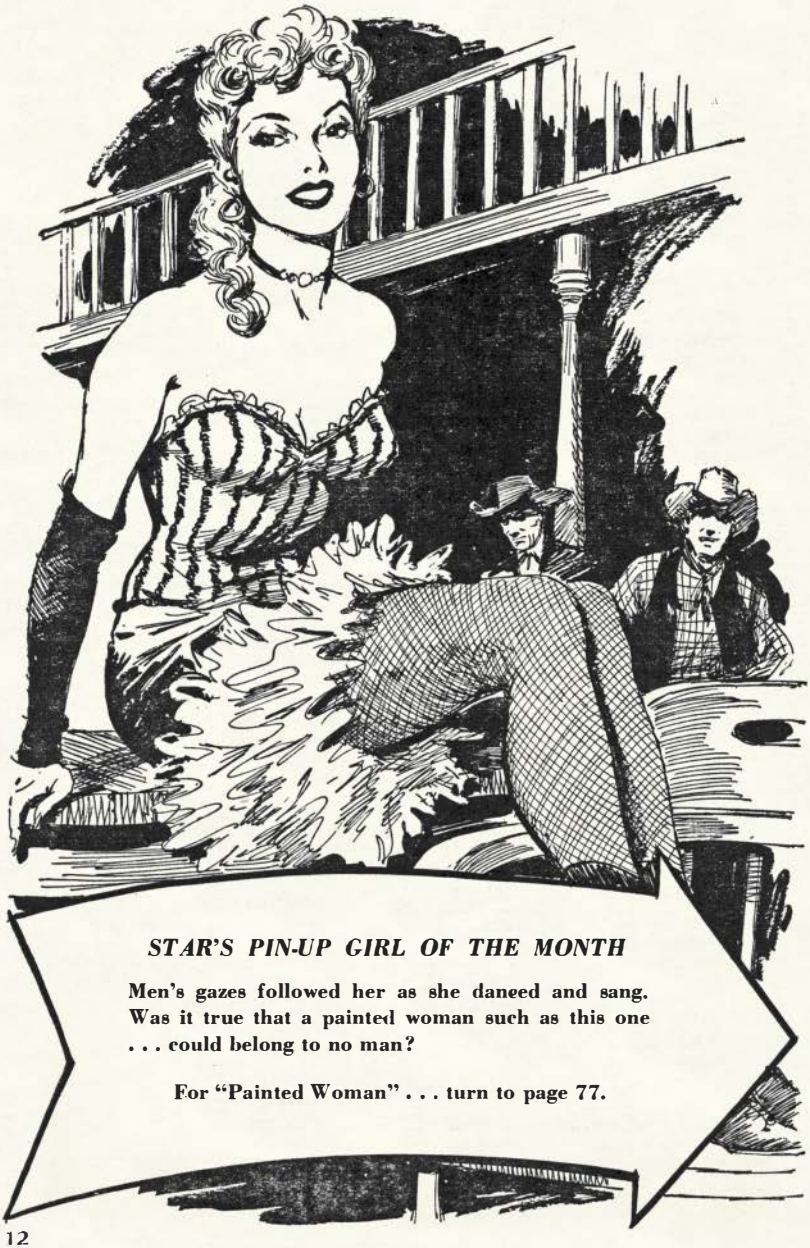

STAR'S PIN-UP GIRL OF THE MONTH

Men's gazes followed her as she daneed and sang. Was it true that a painted woman such as this one . . . could belong to no man?

For "Painted Woman" . . . turn to page 77.

NOW-Be a Fully Trained, Qualified RADIO TELEVISION TECHNICIAN IN JUST 10 MONTHS OR LESS!

I Send You 18 BIG KITS OF RADIO-TELEVISION EQUIPMENT

TRAIN AT HOME IN SPARE HOURS!

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Ross flung off his torn shirt angrily. "What's the idea, Billy?" he demanded. . . .

●

By Art Lawson

BILLY BOONE and Ross Caldwell glided around the last bend of the Smoky Fork in their battered bull boat, which was loaded so heavily with baled furs it had come mighty near to foundering more than once in the treacherous stream, named for the eternal haze that

A MOUNTAIN GIRL NEEDS KISSES!

●

Why should Ross Caldwell burden himself, on his long wilderness trek, with two lovely and useless girls who couldn't cook, tan skins or keep camp for him—and would only run him ragged with their eternal demands for his own brand of untamed buckskin kisses?

●

hung over its white-watered rapids. Billy Boone let go with a raucous cheer when they sighted the gleaming walls of Fort Beaver. But Ross Caldwell felt like bawling—an odd emotion for a barrel-chested, black-maned hombre who had once killed a grizzly bear with a Green River knife.

For Ross it was the end of a nightmare and dawn of a new day. Because all winter long, after they had gotten snowed in high in the Rockies, Ross had fought a constant battle to keep himself from murdering his partner.

"Yah-hoo" Billy Boone howled. "Watch

out, girls! Here comes old curly wolf, himself! Yah-hoo-hoo-hoo . . ."

Up in the prow of the bull boat, Billy's back still made a tempting target, as it had so often during the snowed-in time when he talked endlessly of girls. Food, drinking and making merry was his secondary subject, usually brought up when they were trying to down boiled beaver tail or were digging for roots that would help keep away the scurvy. Endless, lonesome nights of Billy dreaming out loud—and when Ross told him to shut up, for God's sake, Billy had never understood. He would sulk, or want to know what was ailing Ross, anyway; or he would just haul his head in under his blanket like a turtle and sleep all day. Sure, he did his share of the chores around camp—Billy Boone was never a loafer—but it was a miracle that he was living now.

The bull boat wallowed on. On the point of high land formed by the meeting of the Smoky Fork with the Green River, the square trading post stood with its two massive towers at diagonal corners, and on one side the heavy gate built with a closed balcony above it so defenders could fire straight down on any enemy who might try to attack.

The gates were open now to the spring breeze. Men who had been lounging around there drifted down to the beach to greet the passengers in the bull boat. A dozen or more Indian lodges were pitched on a flat place at the lee of the rolling hill. Beyond the fort a new corral had been built, and near that a half dozen covered wagons stood with their canvas tilts white as snow in the sunlight.

THOUGH the Oregoners were getting more bold than ever, Ross would not have thought that they could have come this far from the Missouri so early in the season. It was well into July before you expected wagon trains at Fort Beaver. As near as Ross could figure it, this was some time in late May, or maybe early June.

A man could not be sure of the day or week after spending the winter in a snow-covered wickiup with a partner he wanted to kill. So it was almost impossible to calculate back to the exact day when Ross first thought of killing Bill Boone. Sometime after Christmas it was. There had been a slight thaw that day, only in the sun, and the partners had crawled out of their hut to enjoy it. Ross could remember it very clearly, the two of them and the brilliant snow. They had painted their cheeks with charcoal to reduce the glare and save them from snow blindness. Ross was smoking a pipe loaded with kinnikinnick, a sort of home-made Indian tobacco consisting of bark and leaves.

The talk drifted around to Fort Beaver.

"Wonder if that Gillette girl's still there?" Billy wondered. Ross only grunted and puffed on his pipe. The Gillette girl had been deserted by an Oregon-bound party when they thought she had caught some deadly disease. She had been a servant, a child's nurse not worth taking a chance on, so they had dumped her and her tiny store of gear by the trailside and had scurried on without her. The guide had quit the train at Fort Beaver, where they picked up a new one. The girl had gotten over whatever it was that ailed her and had wandered into the fort where she had made herself useful around the place.

Ironically, the party that had deserted her had met up with a band of hostile Indians a few weeks later and been massacred.

She had been in Ross' mind that day high in the mountains, a girl with blue eyes and raven hair, kind of skinny if you're used to Indian girls fed on buffalo meat, and pale. And on this day around New Year's, Billy began to talk about her. As he talked, Ross got redder and redder with anger.

". . . like to have that little beauty right here now—boy!" Billy had licked his lips and rolled his eyes. "A couple more pounds

of meat added in the right places, and—"

"Shut up!" Ross snapped.

Billy, as usual, did not understand why Ross did not like this talk about so delectable a creature. He was surprised by the outburst, then laughed.

"You don't mean you're claiming trapping rights to that little wench—" he started.

Ross slapped his partner hard across the mouth—so hard, in fact, that Billy's lips were still split. Then Ross packed up half the outfit, logged upstream through the deep snow and made a camp of his own. Two weeks later they were together again, shaking hands, making big plans for spring—because even a man you want to murder is better company than no man at all.

NOW the nightmare was nearly over. With a twist of the paddle. Ross turned the bull boat toward shore. A committee had gathered on the gravel beach. Some were strangers, some were men Ross had known for most of his life. There were a couple of Indians, too—and Holly Gillette! She was standing apart from the rest of the small crowd, barefooted, her sleeves rolled high to reveal rounded arms. Beside her stood a willow basket of laundry. She had acquired those extra pounds Billy had dreamed for her, and they were perfectly placed.

Ross felt a fist grasp his heart. Billy whooped again and, jumping from the bull boat, dragged the rickety craft up onto the shale. Then he caught the girl under the arms to lift her high into the air.

"I swore I'd kiss the first female I seen," he said, "even if she was ugly as a speckled baboon. But—look what I got!"

He let her slip down into his arms and kissed her until his curly red beard made her sneeze. She kicked up her heels and laughed with him. Then he put her away at arm's length to have a better look at her.

"Prettier than a lonely man's dreams," he said.

The girl blushed brilliantly but did not try to escape him. Her bare toes curled in the gravel. In the bull boat Ross Caldwell's fingers moved over the haft of his Green River knife, and a wicked weapon it was with its long, slim blade which was always kept honed to extreme sharpness. Then all at once everyone began to shout.

"Ross, you ol' wild hoss . . ."

"We thought you was a goner . . ."

"Nothing'll ever kill off ol' Ross . . ."

Ross was home—as much a home as he could remember, anyway.

* * *

The mountain man felt crowded. This was fine—sure—it was wonderful to get back after that tough winter in the snow. Prime beaver still brought a good price and the pardners had made a good catch. It would bring enough hard cash to buy Ross the farm he thought he wanted, or a share in a trading post. Or he could sink it all in plenty of whiskey and one or two of the prettiest young squaws that his old friend Blue Buffalo always seemed to have on hand for a well-heeled trapper.

The rotgut whiskey slid smoothly down Ross Caldwell's parched throat. It whirled around in his belly like a spinning top. He felt like stomping around and hollering. He bought a couple more gallons to set up drinks for the boys who gathered about him, lounging against the front wall of the fort where they could look down on the river if they chose, or on the Indian camp, or down the long corridors of their wild pasts. Old compadres of Ross's like Frank Turner, newer men like the bull-built Sam Padget—men who knew the legend of Ross Caldwell but never had met him.

"Found a pond," Ross spun his tale. "Beaver so thick you could walk across their backs without getting your feet wet. Like a bridge. Six-eight of them would gang up on a tree and cut it down so quick you had to keep dodging all over the place.

Billy and me was taking in plews so fast we couldn't skin them. Then the blizzard hit us—and—"

Holly Gillette had finished her laundry and was coming up from the river with the setting sun behind her. Billy Boone carried her basket while her laughter chimed like silver bells in the evening. Her hips swung with unconscious rhythm as she walked, whipping the skirt about bare ankles. Frank Turner offered himself a drink and spoke up.

"Never figured you'd get lost in no blizzard, Ross," he said.

"Didn't." Ross was having trouble remembering what he had been talking about. Billy carried that heavy wash basket as if it were a child's toy. "I just . . ." Where was he? "We figgered it best to hole up for a couple of days, that's all. But when it quit snowing the snow was ten feet deep." Ross had lost interest in his story. "Millions of beaver—all under the snow."

THE girl and the younger man had stopped by the gate. Laughter had tinted Holly's fair skin pink and had put a sparkle in her eyes. She was all that Billy had described that nearly fateful day so long ago, and more. Her pink tongue licked at her ripe lips.

"Billy was telling me, Mr. Caldwell," she said in her husky voice, "how you ate so much stewed beaver tail you sometimes found yourself slapping about in the night."

A tall-tale teller ought to do better than that, Ross thought.

"Worse'n that," he said casually. "Billy took to eatin' aspen bark and grew such a fine pelt I even figgered on skinning him."

He flicked out his Green River knife. Light of the setting sun gave its blade a bloody tint. The girl's eyes were round as musket balls. Billy hung onto her with his free hand. He had shaved off his red beard while she had finished the laundry and Ross had been entertaining his old pals and new friends at the fort. Billy's cheeks were pink as the girl's, and he looked very young. Slowly Ross stood up, towering over both of them even though Billy was nearly six feet tall and as broad as an outhouse door. So this girl would call him "Mr. Caldwell," would she?

"Even considered curing his hams," Ross went on. "Ought to be tasty enough for a real hungry man!" Mr. Caldwell, indeed!

The girl hung onto Billy Boone with both hands now.

"Always the joker," Billy said uncertainly about Ross. "But he did sort of look at me kinda calculating a couple of times, Holly. He sure enough did."

Ross was half drunk and completely reckless.

"You'll never know, Billy . . . Hey!" His shaggy eyebrows lifted. He doffed his coonskin cap. His hair tumbled around his shoulders in black disarray. He bowed with as much dignity as he could manage. "And who is this Venus of the valley?" he asked "This Diana of the mountains?"

His description was surprisingly apt. A girl had come around the stockade, a golden-haired girl with dark eyes. Dressed in a well-worn doeskin shirt and leggings the rounded curves of body were subtly disclosed. She smiled at Ross, who was suddenly frightened, though he could not have told why. The smile was a friendly one, yet there was something challenging about it. It was as if she had said: "Here I am. What are you going to do about it?"

"Good evening, Apollo," she joked back. Then she laughed and added, "Though I must admit you more resemble Bacchus at the moment."

Ross had never been inside a school building in his life. The plains and mountains, the wanderers along the dim trails, had been his teachers. But he knew the ancient legends of the Greeks and Romans as well as those of the Sioux and Crows. He laughed with this striking blonde.

"Bacchus—God of wine! Right, ma'am? Reckon there's some left in the jug. Like a

snort? It'll make your hair grow fast."

"Maybe later," she said, and put out a hand to Ross, who took it in his big fist. He found her hand both soft and strong, warm and very exciting in its aliveness. Her eyes held his for a moment while his pulse began to gallop crazily. "I'm Carmen Stewart," she told him. "You must be Ross Caldwell. I heard you'd arrived."

Ross glimpsed the girl of his winter's dream still hanging onto Billy Boone and staring at him through her round, blue eyes

"Ma'am, I'm honored," Ross said, not relinquishing Carmen's hand.

She said, "I'd like to talk to you—alone!"

Alone? "The pleasure's all mine," Ross said.

"Not all!" Her laughter enveloped him like a cloud as, still holding his hand, she led him off. "Not by half!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Man's Woman

HAND in hand they wandered to the water's edge away from the Indian camp. Below, the placid river would eventually narrow down and rush for miles through black canyons and over treacherous rocks. But here it was a quiet, swirling stream, easy to ford and full of fish. Here the girl found a rock which she sat upon while drawing Ross down beside her.

She had kidnaped him, practically. She had brought him down to the river as dusk turned the hills to purple and gray and the sun disappeared behind the Rockies. He reckoned that she must have been down here before—and most likely with some other man since the spot was secluded from both the fort and the Indian village. Ross and the girl were quite alone by the purling river—a lovely girl and a trapper who had been without a woman for almost a year. It was a mighty dangerous combination.

"You're a bashful man," Carmen said suddenly to Ross. Her dark eyes searched him. "I'd have to be fighting off almost any other man in the fort by now."

Ross laughed. "I've been holed up all winter—just me and Billy Boone. Like it's a pore idea for a starving man to eat a big meal right off, I figure it's wise for me to take it easy for a couple of days until I get my bearings, so to speak. I wouldn't dare touch you."

His walk from the fort had sobered him. The heat of liquor was still in his belly, and some of the recklessness in his head, but he was sober enough to know what he was talking about. This had nothing to do with love or a winter's bad dreams. It was man and woman and nothing else, as it had been since Eden. But the girl was not convinced, and her dark eyes probed him.

"You don't want me," she said. "You want her, skinny as she is. Why didn't you take her away from him? You could if you tried."

"Her?" he said, though they both knew who the girl was they were talking about. He had wondered it, himself, while up there at the fort drinking. Why hadn't he taken Holly away from Billy? He had not known why then, nor did he have the answer now. "You bring me down here to ask me that?" he demanded.

"No," Carmen said frankly. "But why didn't you—if you want her so much?"

He shrugged broad shoulders. He told himself that Carmen meant nothing at all to him. She was a magnificent female, sure enough, with her fine body and rounded thighs. But at the moment he wanted no part of her—or of any other female.

"I pretty near killed Billy a couple of times last winter," he confessed. "I don't know what held my hand back then. Whatever it was, the same thing kept me from stepping in tonight."

"Oh?" She pondered this with lowered lids. Dark lashes lay against pale skin. Tawny-gold hair shielded her cheek. The rhythm of her breathing alternately tight-

ened and loosened the silky doeskin of her homemade shirt until he had to wrench his eyes away from her. "Maybe she doesn't mean as much to you as you think," Carmen finally said.

Ross said angrily, "All I know is I never felt like killing a man over a girl before."

He stood up, and the girl got up before him. Carmen was a good four or five inches taller than Holly, a bigger girl all around. Yet her waist was so slender it tended to emphasize the exciting fullness of the rest of her figure. She abruptly changed the subject.

"I just got in from Taos a couple of days ago," she said. "I'm Buckskin Stewart's daughter."

ROSS had begun to suspect that this girl was the daughter of his old friend. His sympathy was instantaneous. The wagon train that had thrown Holly Gillette out to die had broken up at Fort Beaver and reorganized into two trains, one to go to California and the other to Oregon. The Oregon-bound train had picked up Buckskin Stewart as a guide. Somewhere up near the Snake River they had been jumped by a bunch of renegade Indians and most of the train had been wiped out.

"I'm sorry about Buckskin," he said. "He was a good friend of mine."

"He used to talk about you—at home in Taos," she said. Taos was not far from here, down in the Mexican Territories where Kit Carson had married a rich Mexican woman and had settled down. Buckskin Stewart had married a Mexican girl, too, who in the course of events had presented him with Carmen, who had grown up into as fascinating a creature as one could ever hope to meet. The Scotch and Spanish had amalgamated into a truly exotic female. Her disturbing, dark eyes glistened. "He used to say that you could track the Devil through Hell and not get a hair singed."

"Done it often!" Ross boasted. "I remember one black night when old Beelzebub—" He cut it short. This was no trapper audience for him to spin a tale to. This was a mighty desirable girl slanting her eyes at him, buttering him up, getting set to make him do something he did not want to do. "Do you think your pa's not lost—maybe?"

Carmen reached up to put her hands on Ross's shoulders, something no white girl had ever done before to him. Her dark, depthless eyes held his, the lashes making a gossamer veil of mystery, and the scent of her golden hair was like lilies in the springtime.

"I want to find him," she said. "I want you to help me."

"But he's dead," Ross argued.

"Who knows for sure?" she insisted.

She flung herself on him then, her arms around his neck so tight he could not have shaken her loose. She burrowed her head against his whiskery chin. His mind became a blur and his pulse pounded so violently he felt as if he was being beaten by a hundred hammers. It would be a disaster to hit the trails with a girl like this.

"Please help me!" she begged.

"I'll think about it," he said hastily, panicked.

The girl's gratitude overwhelmed him. Expertly she burrowed under his beard and mustache to kiss him full on the mouth. If he had not been a very husky man he would have dropped dead on the spot. He had never known anything quite like that kiss before. More potent than ten tin kegs of trade whiskey before it was watered down. Sweeter than the wild rose in early summer, yet throbbing with the wild femininity of the girl.

When he struggled back to consciousness like a man recovering slowly from drowning, the girl had tucked her arm affectionately under his.

"With the beard off," she said, "I'll bet you're a mighty handsome man. I'll bet I couldn't resist you. . . ."

THAT evening Ross Caldwell examined his beard in a trade mirror and found it eminently satisfactory. As a matter of fact, he was not at all sure that he wanted to risk being irresistible to Çarmen Stewart, and if the beard would help keep her off, so much the better. Unfortunately it was rather hot for summer wear, so he compromised and had old Frenchie at the fort trim it for him. Frenchie also went to work on Ross' glossy black hair, which had absorbed enough bear grease during the winter to last for a couple of years.

"Don't chop it off too short," Ross warned. "If I ever get careless enough to let an Injun lift my hair I want him to have a scalp that'll do my memory proud."

"If my eyes been telling me the truth," Frenchy said slyly, "the Indians won't get a chance at it."

"No?"

"Seems like two young madamoiselles are getting fixed to fight for it!" Frenchie laughed at his own joke.

Ross rose to the ribbing without thought. "Neither one's going to get it," he said sourly. "And you can bet your shirt on that. Tell me, Frenchie, any chance that old Buckskin Stewart is still living?"

Frenchie had been a pal of Buckskin's for more years than he could tally.

"Never find his body," he said. Frenchie snipped with the scissors to even up Ross's luxuriant locks. "That Carmen want you to go look for him?"

"That's her notion," Ross admitted.

"Don't do it!" Frenchie warned. "It's the chase of the wild goose."

Later, after he had washed up and gotten some clean clothes, Ross dropped in on the fort's factor, or manager. This old-timer had come in with Ashley's men and knew the Indians as well as he knew the value of furs and trading goods. He gave Ross the same advice.

"They left all the other bodies lying around," he said. "But what they did with Buckskin I don't know. Indians are funny people. You can bank on it he's dead. I've told Carmen that half a dozen times. You'd be risking your scalp for nothing."

Ross felt the roots of his freshly shampooed hair tingle. The boss held his hands out before him, palms up in a gesture to indicate that he hid no tricks.

"I've got a job for you, Ross. Our furs are all ready to be sent to St. Louis. I want you to head up the train and bring back trade goods. You're my man, Ross."

Ross had no desire to go to St. Louis, but that was not what kept him from immediately accepting the factor's offer. After weathering the winter he was all set to ride pretty. But a girl's brooding eyes and sensuous arms had unbalanced his judgment.

"I gotta think about it," he said. "I gotta sleep on it."

"You'll sleep the hair right off your head," the factor said with disgust.

Ross wandered out. The boys had built fires inside the fort's stockade where they squatted while tipping up the jug or roasting fresh buffalo hump. These men seemed able to live almost forever on buffalo meat, which they consumed in tremendous quantities. Old Frank Turner was pretty near drunk. But he'd be a good man on an expedition to find out what had actually happened to Buckskin Stewart. Frank knew most of the mountain dialects and had spent more than one winter in Indian villages. Sam Padget wouldn't scare, but Ross knew no more about him than that. Sam was a man who seldom talked, and never about himself. Ross helped himself to the jug when it was passed. As he elbowed it up, he found himself looking straight into the pale face of Holly Gillette who stood alone back in the shadows. Ross turned away.

IT WAS strange that she should be the only one left of that wagon train that had deserted her. With the whiskey roaring in him again, he left the men at the fire, sidestepped other groups, and backed Holly up against the inside of the stockade.

But when he got the girl where he wanted her, he suddenly lost heart. This was no way for a man to return from a snowbound hell. You could not get into Heaven by forcing yourself upon an angel. Ross reckoned he was going crazy thinking in such terms.

"Par'n me," he said thickly. "Looks like I got the wrong girl."

He thrust himself away from her. Surprisingly she tagged after him, clinging to his buckskin shirt so he could not get away. She followed him outside where the night was free and the smoke and stars were magic. The girl hung onto him.

"Mr. Caldwell—you've got to listen to me!" she cried.

The great man turned to look down upon her. If the winter had not been so terrible he might have been able to smile upon her then. But his lips only twitched as her lovely, beseeching face searched his for some sign of friendliness.

"Talk's cheap," he said gruffly.

He was beginning to feel crowded, pushed around. This girl was different from that creature who had invaded his dreams last winter and had nearly incited him to homicide He guessed now that he just hadn't had her rightly set in his mind. Holly was more robust, more real than the imagined girl. Passion stirred him. His big hands pinned her arms up against her ribs. He had expected her to scare, but she didn't. She smiled at him as if she had already won the tussle.

Ross lifted her clear of her feet. Kissing a girl was out of his line. You never kissed a squaw, no matter how young or pretty she might be. But white women always expected it—kisses and crazy words.

Ross did not know the words, so he concentrated on the kiss, and when he thought she would try to battle him she crept up close into his arms. The whole, lovely soft length of her vibrated against him. Her dark hair fell back so he had to dig his hand into it up against the round solidness of her head. She slumped in his arms as if all the strength had gone from her, and she smiled dreamily at him.

"Good Lord!" she sighed, her breast heaving tumultuously. "All winter I waited—hoping and praying."

That she might have gone through an experience something like his had not occurred to him. The word "praying" struck him like a sledge blow. He had never prayed for anybody in his life, yet he was deeply moved by her statement. If Carmen had made that remark, he might have laughed. With Holly, it made him feel cheap for kissing her as he had. Yet she had responded with more than casual enthusiasm.

"Your prayers worked out pretty good," he said. "You must of prayed for Billy, too. He came through."

"Oh—I prayed for him when I thought of him," Holly said lightly. "Maybe two or three times." Ross shuddered. Those two or three times could have been on the occasions when he had almost murdered his partner. She became deadly serious again. A bit of starch came into her back, but she still pressed herself against his arms so he had to hold her.

"Carmen told me you were going to look for that party I came west with," she said quickly. "I want to go with you."

Just as if it was a Sunday School picnic.

"No!" he said.

She refused his answer. "There were two little girls in the party. Their bodies were never found. They were the children I was hired to care for. I hated their father and mother. But the girls . . ." She sighed. "There's been rumors the Indians have held them captive."

Her arms crept around Ross Caldwell's neck again. Her lips were soft and hot on his mouth as his big hand curved over her soft shoulder.

"Can I go with you, Ross?"

What could a man say to a girl like that? Ross said it, but not with words. The

trap had been prettily baited, and Ross was caught. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

No Place to Hide

IN OLD Blue Buffalo's lodge. Ross finally felt at home. The chief's squaw served up some stewed dog which was as delicious as any stewed dog Ross could ever remember having eaten. At least he had not known this dog personally, nor had it ever retrieved a stick for him. Therefore it was better eating than many an Indian stew he had consumed in the past.

Old Blue Buffalo also trotted out a couple of young squaws for Ross to look over. As an old friend of Ross, Blue Buffalo would let him take either or both of these young ladies on approval. If he didn't like them he could turn them back. If either, or both, were agreeable to our big white friend of the black locks, then let's trade.

They were mighty nice-looking girls, Ross had to admit, though a good bath would improve them. But Blue Buffalo's squaws thought it unsanitary to bathe. Bear oil kept their skin supple and their hair shining. Why ruin the effect with soap?

"I like that one," Ross pointed to a squaw of about fifteen who giggled delightedly at being picked out by him. "And that one, too, oh my friend Blue Buffalo. But I am an old man and feeble—too dull for such lovely, lively girls."

The chief gave him a sound and lengthy argument. The chief's spies had reported the meeting of Ross and Carmen on the rock by the river, and had told how the lost girl of the wagon train had followed Ross from the stockade. The chief shrugged off his argument with his friend.

"One white squaw—good!" he said with as much enthusiasm as he might have shown if one of them was his. "But—two!" He drew his gnarled forefinger across his throat. Then his dark eyes lighted. "Indian girls always good. Two-three, even."

Absently, Ross nodded. He agreed with the chief, but had other matters on his mind.

"You heard anything about Buckskin Stewart?"

The chief's rugged face turned to a mask. The two girls, who did not understand the discussion and thought that Ross was bargaining for them, strutted around like wild things.

"He been dead long time," the chief finally said. "The daughter of Buckskin chases the wild goose."

Frenchie had used the same expression. The young squaws finally stopped wriggling around, and stepped back politely behind Blue Buffalo where they waited the white man's choice.

"There were two little girls with the wagons. . . ." Ross said slowly.

"Them dead, too!" the chief said shrilly. "Them dead smallpox." Then his sly old eyes shifted around the lodge from one girl to the other to Ross. "Blue Buffalo always friend of Ross Cold Well. Maybe these girls warm him up, huh?"

"Maybe," Ross said. He broke out tobacco and a flask of genuine whiskey. He had brought along some ribbon and a couple of trade mirrors. For the chief's own squaw he had a fine butcher knife of Sheffield steel. Ross had a present for the chief, too, since tobacco and whiskey could be considered only temporary gifts. He presented the chief with a stovepipe hat; and neither knew that such hats would soon ruin the beaver trade.

In the new hat the chief looked very much like a picture Ross had seen of the latest Congressman from Illinois. Abe Somebody-or-other.

Gravely they shook hands and Ross departed. He holed up halfway between the Indian camp and the fort. Not long after, he saw a young brave leave Blue Buffalo's lodge to trot north—up the trail toward Snake River.

He was traveling light but fast.

Ross stretched his long, aching muscles, and legged it for the fort. A light still glowed inside one of the canvas-topped wagons drawn up outside the main stockade. A shadow moved and dipped across the white duck. Ross swore bitterly to himself.

Golden hair and smoky eyes . . . skin like fine velvet . . . lips that tasted of honey and brimstone!

The guard at the massive gate hailed him.

"That you, Ross?"

"It's me, all right," Ross said.

"Then why in the devil are you wasting time, Ross?" the guard asked. "I got a jug here, boy!"

ROSS woke with a headache the general size and shape of the tin whiskey kegs that were designed for the mountain trade, one to fit on each side of a mule. After soaking his head in the river for a while he reckoned he could stand up straight again. He tried it and had to soak his head a while longer. When he shook back his black, dripping curls the second time, he found himself face to face with Carmen Stewart and Holly Gillette. For all he knew, the girls could have popped up out of the ground like mushrooms. They hadn't been there a moment before. Yet here they were.

With them, but trailing by several yards, was Billy Boone, clean-shaven and pink, looking apologetic. Ross didn't like it.

"Damn you, Billy," he cussed. "What do you want?"

"The girls ast me to come talk with you," Billy said.

"I'm stone deaf," Ross said, drawing himself to his tremendous height. "Always been deaf."

Right now Ross didn't feel like talking. He wanted another drink from that guard's jug. He needed it. But he couldn't even remember who the man was he had been drinking with.

"The girls want me to go along with you on this here expedition," Billy said doggedly.

"Now why in hell would they want that?" Ross snapped at all three of them.

"I dunno," Billy said, shrugging. "But I want to go just the same. Maybe I was more trouble than use this winter, Ross. But I've been thinking about it. I want to go along."

Ross knew why. Billy wanted to keep his eyes on the little black-haired minx who had caused the trouble last winter. Maybe he wanted to keep his hands on her, too. Ross told himself he no longer gave a damn. He shook his head so his brains rattled around like dried gourds in a pumpkin shell.

"There isn't any expedition," Ross finally said slowly. "The kids Holly was tending are dead. I got it on authority. Died of smallpox. Buckskin is dead. Where I'm going, I'm going alone, and I'm not lugging along any girl-crazy kid or a couple of flighty-minded females for luggage."

He squared his shoulders. They squared theirs. Lightning flashed back and forth from four pairs of eyes. Billy was growing a trace of pinkish stubble on his chin. He looked like a man who had grown up a little, lately. Holly had her chin and chest up, but her eyes were veiled. Ross hadn't dreamed that the girl packed so much passion in her slight body. His pictures of her had been of her sitting modestly before the hearth, darning socks, maybe, or tending the baby.

Beside her, Carmen was a good head taller, more robust, her feet planted solidly on the turf, the strong curves of her legs outlined beneath the soft-tanned doeskin leggings. A mountain girl, she was, and she would make as good a house pet as a cougar.

"Indians take their squaws with them," she said suddenly. "Why don't you dare to?"

He pondered that word "dare." He said,

"I don't happen to have any squaws—at the moment." Then he shrugged. Why not? If they were determined to travel the hell road, why not? "We'll leave tomorrow —at dawn. . . ."

ROSS stayed sober that night. He talked it all over with Frank Turner who had been up and down every dim trail within thousands of miles of Fort Beaver. Frank, who had lived among the Indians and knew the dialects, agreed to go along with Ross. "But I don't like taking those girls along," he said. He was deadly serious. "They'll make trouble."

"We'll ditch them at Fort Hall," Ross said.

Sam Padget came up while Frank and Ross were talking. Sam had a disconcerting tendency not to look at a man while he talked.

"Been thinking of your proposition, Ross." Ross had not known he had made any proposition to Sam. He waited for Sam to explain. "Figure I'll go along."

"That's fine," Ross said, though he could not remember asking Sam to come along. Yet Sam should make a fine man. He usually kept his mouth shut and definitely preferred Indian girls to whites. A man like Sam would help to balance the party. "Be going at dawn," Ross said. "I'm figuring on about three weeks. I'm going to take along that mountain howitzer those soldiers abandoned."

Sam's eyes bugged, and for a second met Ross's. Sam's eyes were a strange gray, like lava over which a thin sheet of water is running. Sam sort of settled into his massive shoulders.

"That's a weapon I like to be behind, Ross," he said. "I served a couple of hitches in the horse artillery. I can serve that gun right smart."

That was the first thing Sam had ever mentioned about his past. It should have reassured Ross, who didn't know much about howitzers. Yet it left him uneasy.

"I'll be ready at dawn, Ross," Sam said.

The factor was troublesome. At first he flatly refused to supply Ross. He hollered and cursed. He accused Ross of base ingratitude and absolute foolishness. He repeated his warning that Ross could not hope to find anybody or anything connected with the raided wagon train. Even most of the wagons' iron work would have disappeared by now, for the Indians had learned how to make arrowheads of the wagon tires and barrel hoops. Ross was crazy, moonstruck. The girls had unhinged his brain.

Ross only shrugged. "I'm not taking your wagons to St. Louis," he said. "I'm going up to the Snake. If you won't outfit me, Jim Bridger will."

The factor hated Jim Bridger more than he feared loosing Ross. But he made a shrewd deal.

"Shouldn't take you more than two-three weeks," he said. "You'll still have time to go to St. Louis and get back before snow."

Ross shook on it. "If I travel fast," he said.

"Carmen's got some good mules we could use," the factor said. "I'll talk to her."

So it was decided. Ross picked up nearly a dozen more men, some Mexican teamsters who had come up from Taos with Carmen, some 'breeds who were looking for excitement, a couple of trappers. They cleaned the howitzer that had been left behind by an Army scouting party two years back. It didn't shoot too straight, but it did make a fine, loud sound and the noise was very important when fighting Indians.

BUT they did not get away when they planned. It was a day later before Ross lined up his tiny army before the fort. The night before they left he had gone to Carmen's wagon.

"Carmen," he called. "Carmen!"

She answered quickly. "I wondered when you would come."

She crawled out onto the front seat and

jumped down to the ground. She was dressed in white, and her golden hair seemed white, too, under the starlight, while her dark eyes were like two black coals with a bit of the blaze still shining in them. Her scent wrapped him up and dizzied him. She stood before him, looking up at him, and in the darkness with only the faint glow of the lamp-lit canvas behind her, she seemed smaller somehow than she had before.

"Why'd you say you wondered when I'd come?" he asked.

"Because of Holly Gillette," she said promptly. "Remember? You almost killed Billy Boone because of that little minx. I wondered if you even remembered that I existed?"

This white shift that covered her completely still managed to suggest the lively young body within it. He had come to ask her to drop out of the expedition, to let the men handle it. Yet, before even speaking, he knew she would still insist on going along.

"Get back into the wagon," he said rather breathlessly.

That gave him away to the girl, who was quick to take advantage of him. Short, shuffling steps in her bare feet brought her up to him. She stood right before him where he could feel the radiant warmth of her. But she took care not to touch him.

"Am I so plain," she said, "that you prefer Holly to me? Am I so undesirable?"

The palms of his hands were sweating. A humming filled his ears as if a thousand wasps had built their nests in his long hair. His eyes filmed over.

"We're heading into trouble." His voice shook. "We're not going out to pick flowers for a daisy chain. You'd best stay home. You and Holly, both."

"That's what I wanted you to say." Her white teeth flashed, and her dark eyes became pools in which the stars sparkled. "Now—give me a kiss!"

Where could a man run? How could he hide? Carmen took the last, final step toward him as if gliding forward in some slow dance. She just tipped back her head, closed her eyes, and waited for the inevitable. Tonight she did not throw herself at him. She didn't have to, she reckoned, after she saw the wildness in his eyes and heard it in his voice. She knew he would not be able to resist her.

But when he finally kissed her sharply, rubbing his curly beard against her soft skin, she cried out in surprise and danced away, out of his eager clutches. Around the wagon she scurried, with Ross close on her heels.

Then she ducked under the wagon and popped inside over the tailgate, like a gopher heading for its hole. Safe up there where the canvas tilt was puckered up like a purse, she once again poked her head outside. Her golden hair gleamed in the faint light. Her eyes sparkled.

"You may kiss me again if you like!" she said to Ross.

"And you can go to the Devil," he growled.

CHAPTER FOUR

No Time for Courting

IT WAS a tight little army that left Fort Beaver the next morning. It was an army of a dozen men and two women, organized like an army, too, from the scouts who had been sent ahead to the commissary bringing up the rear. Not willing to take any dead cargo if he could avoid it, Ross had appointed the two girls as cooks and dishwashers. If they were not as useful as squaws, at least they could carry their own weight. Old Frank Turner was chief of scouts. Ross was general-in-charge, looking in on everything. Billy Boone took care of the stock—and on his own time rustled wood for the girls, hauled water, and generally saw to their comfort. Sam Padget was in love with the howitzer.

To the great surprise of Ross Caldwell, the expedition forged ahead smoothly. Each night they pitched camp as if they expected to be jumped any moment by hostile Indians. Billy Boone and one of the men watered the horses then close-herded them on the best pasturage they could find within short distance of camp. Meanwhile the girls set up their kitchen, and Sam Padget worked with a crew to assemble the howitzer so that it would be immediately ready for battle.

Other men dug shallow holes or erected rock barricades in case of emergency, and finally Ross reviewed the entire camp before supper was served. Within a few days the party moved with the efficiency of a well-trained company of cavalry.

Though this part of the trail was comparatively safe, Ross never let down; not because he was afraid of being attacked, but because he wanted defense to be second nature by the time they reached the dangerous badlands along the Snake River above Fort Hall. They traveled fast up the rich valley of Bear River, making three times the distance of a plodding wagon train each day. When they reached Beer Spring very early one afternoon, Ross called a halt because of the fine camping spot and the fact that one more day would take them to Fort Hall. After pitching their usual camp, the men not on duty went down to the river to swim. Carmen hiked up the creek with Frank Turner to look over the very curious Steamboat Spring; and Ross found himself alone with Holly Gillette for the first time since the trip had started.

She was mixing sourdough for biscuits and he had just finished dressing a deer he had shot earlier in the day. She must have sensed their aloneness at the same instant he did because, as he glanced down at her, she looked up at him. Her blue eyes were very penetrating. Kneeling as she was, the ash-gray doeskin trousers were snug over her hips and, since they were rather short, had left her knees and calves bare. The loose shirt fell in a soft drape exposing the white skin of her throat below the tanned V.

Instantly, when his glance caught hers, Holly turned back to her dough-mixing, kneading it unnecessarily while her ears gradually suffused with pink. Ross's gaze was straightforward, yet puzzled. He had not yet recovered from the kiss she had given him that night when he had finally agreed to search for the lost children. He had thought of her as the shy, backward type who might require a lot of wooing. Yet her kissing that night had been volcanic. He had been pretty nearly afraid to approach her since. Now he waited while she patted out the dough and put it into the Dutch oven. As he watched, excitement welled in him, bubbled through him like the gas in Beer Spring. Finally she stood up, brushing her hair back, and slanted a glance at him that only stoked the fires more.

WITH a hand on her shoulder he turned her toward him and tipped her head back so that she had to look straight at him.

"All last winter—" he said, and stopped. Ross had never talked love to a girl before. He didn't know how. As a matter of fact, he could hardly tell anybody what was really deep inside him. "What I mean is—ever since I first saw you at Fort Beaver—"

She helped him out. A faint smile twitched at her lips. Swaying toward him, she patted his cheek.

"I knew it all the time," she said. "A girl can tell those things. I don't know just how, but she can tell."

"Well—then—" he said.

Since he couldn't talk, he acted. She had initiated the love-play last time. It was his turn now. Rather clumsily, bearishly, he gathered her into his arms. His first attempt to kiss her mouth struck her forehead and slid off past one ear. She had sort of stiffened up in his arms, but he did not notice it since the fragrance of her and

the nearness of her small but lovely body had inflamed him from noticing anything else. He didn't mean to be rough. It was just because he was so big and so aroused by her. She cried out when he gave her another stormy kiss. but he had heard that all girls do that. Girls always holler loudest when they like it best, so he didn't stop. Even when she hauled off and whacked him on the ear, he hung onto her.

Like a chameleon, she was, flinging herself on him one night and fighting him off next time. Then he realized that someone had grabbed his collar and was yanking furiously at him. The buckskin shirt ripped down the back into two pieces. The girl fought free, and Ross wheeled to face the attack from the rear while he flung away his torn shirt.

Billy Boone was like a mastiff dog crouching there near Holly's fire. Ross had never seen this easy-going kid so furious After the first surprise, Ross laughed.

"Now, what's the idea, Billy?" he asked mildly.

Billy's answer was a charge like an enraged bull. Ross was not quite quick enough on his feet. Billy tackled him amidship, carried him like a half-filled grain sack for ten yards, and started to buck him off before Ross could get into action. With both feet off the ground, Ross jammed his knees into Billy's face, threw his arms around Billy's waist and shifted his weight to the rear. Billy tumbled over onto his head with Ross under him, still hanging on. Then Ross got his legs into place, shoved hard, and rolled Billy sharply backwards.

Ross whirled over onto his feet. Billy was still down. Standing spraddle-legged over him was Holly Gillette, her lovely little face contorted and strange.

"Leave him alone!" she screamed at Ross. Then blinking, as if waking from a dream, she turned suddenly to holler down at Billy. "You hear me? Leave Ross alone! I guess if he wants to kiss me that's his business—and mine!"

Billy muttered, "You were fighting him —and—"

"I was playing," Holly said.

She stepped over Billy and sidled up to the panting Ross. With an arm around him she poked her curly head up against his chin. Her small hand patted snugly upon his rugged ribs.

"You showed that oaf his what-for!" she cried.

Her lips were a seductive curve of moist redness. Like a beaten dog, Billy got up and shambled away. Then Ross heard Carmen's voice on the trail down from the spring, light and gay, yet somehow false. He suspected that she had seen some of this and was trying to act as if she had not.

Well, what the hell? Who cares? he thought.

Billy Boone had had that set-down coming to him for a long time.

CARMEN knew, all right, what had happened, and Ross had the uncomfortable feeling that she was laughing at him. She carried on quite shamelessly, waiting on Billy at mealtimes and patting his blond head when she passed, even though Ross seethed at this attention and the other men eyed her speculatively. But they reached Fort Hall the next day, and that helped lessen the tension. At Fort Hall, too, Ross found a couple of men who had been on the scene of the wagon train massacre only a few hours after the raid.

Almost the entire party had been killed, all wagons looted and burned, the stock driven off or killed. The mother and father of the kids Holly had been nursing before she was deserted had definitely been killed. When last seen, the two children were alive, howling like Indians, themselves. But though Buckskin Stewart's body had never been found, the few survivors were sure he was dead. It was rumored that the children still lived with the attacking Indians.

"So there you are," Ross told the girls. "No sense in you going any farther, Car-

men. And you might as well stay with her here, Holly. From now on this hunting party is going to be plenty rugged."

"I'm rugged enough," Carmen said, hardening up her bicep. "Feel! Go ahead, feel!"

Gingerly, Ross felt. Carmen's muscle was hard and smooth under the soft doeskin. A shiver ran up his fingers, tingling in his wrist, and shot along his arm into his chest. She was husky, sure enough, and scared of nothing, and . . . He hadn't realized he was looking at her *that* way. She laughed at him.

"I came this far," Holly said. "And I'll go the rest of the way. I always felt that it was my fault those children were taken by the Indians. I always felt if I had been there I could have saved them. I don't know how—but I'm sure I could have."

"But Holly, dear," Carmen reminded her. "You were sick, remember? And they deserted you. They left you behind to die."

Carmen's tone was mocking, her dark eyes teasing. Holly writhed a little under her gaze and the odd expression of Ross Caldwell. She hunched her shoulders forward.

"All right," she exploded. "I hated the father and mother of those children. They treated me like dirt. So I rubbed some alkali on my face and chest until I got a rash. Then I pretended I was dying. They did just what I knew they would. They threw me out." She had lost her breath in the fury of remembering. "How was I to know that the Indians were going to jump their train?" she cried. "I've got to get those kids back."

Ross felt his heart warm to this girl who puzzled him so. He would not have dreamed that she would have been able to fake illness in order to get out of a nasty job. Now her loyalty to the children had brought her into greater danger.

"We'll find those kids," Ross promised.

Anger darkened Holly's eyes again. "I don't care what happened to their father and mother. They had it coming to them," she said vengefully. She stood up and stretched like a cat. "I got to have some fresh air."

Ross and Carmen were left alone by the wagons.

"You have to admire a girl like that," Ross said.

"There's nobody like her," Carmen said, still mocking. Then she smiled a sort of soft smile, not her usual seductive smile. "You've been in the woods a long time, Ross. But you'll come out some day, I reckon." Her smile widened. She leaned toward him, canting her head back, lowering her eyelashes until her dark eyes were nearly hidden. "Do I always have to beg you to kiss me, Ross?"

"Now, listen . . ." Ross started to back away.

"Don't feel like listening," she said in her sultry tones. "Come on, Ross, honey. A feller doesn't get many chances to kiss a girl like me. Especially a feller with a scratchy beard."

Carmen sidled up against him. She wriggled into his arms, which obeyed their own impulses and ignored the danger signals shot down from his brain. His hands moved up her back to the soft solidness there and when her lips finally pressed against his he felt as if he had suddenly been struck by lightning.

But this would not do. Holly was the girl for Ross Caldwell. Carmen Stewart was just a wild wench who would ruin any man she could get her hands on. Resolutely he put her aside.

"We're on a manhunting expedition—" he started.

"Right!" Carmen agreed enthusiastically. "And—what a man!" Her arms crept around his neck.

"I mean—this is no time for courting . . ." Ross tried to explain.

"That's what you think," Carmen said, and eagerly pulled his bearded face down to hers. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Indian Dicker

THEY rode into the badlands the next morning, the terrible desert near Snake River, a desert made more awful because the clear water of the river could easily be seen from the canyon's edge, so far below it could not be reached by the thirsty emigrant. It was a tantalizing, mean, turbulent river that many a traveler had learned to hate as a living thing.

Now the party moved in regular military formation with the scouts out ahead and the main column tightly grouped. The first night out from Fort Hall, Ross took special precautions against attack. This stretch up here was tough not only because of the rugged terrain, but because of the renegades and hostiles that used the badlands as their special jumping-off place for raids on wagon trains.

Midafternoon of the second day brought them up over a small rise and down into a shallow depression covered with sagebrush and ringed with huge boulders that seemed to have been spilled there like giant marbles all set for play. This was the spot where the wagon train had been jumped—but on the day that Ross Caldwell's party reached it, the whole world about them was as still as death.

Smashed wagon wheels, bits of furniture that had been hauled all the way from the east, chunks of iron and burned hickory littered the depression. Human bones had been washed up from shallow graves, and the bleached bones of cattle and horses were strewn around everywhere. Altogether, it was the most desolate scene Ross had ever observed. Nausea clutched at his throat.

"Here we are," he said.

The girls had gathered close to him as if seeking protection. Carmen's eyes popped curiously with a fear he had not seen in them before. Her hands clung to his belt. Holly's blue glance shifted around as if reconstructing the fight that fate had kept her out of. Billy Boone, who had been sulking ever since the afternoon at Beer Spring, seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

Old Frank Turner came back from a look-see over toward Snake River.

"I don't like this, Ross, at all!" he said. "Can't put a finger on it, but I got a feeling we're expected."

Ross had that feeling, too. He had never told anyone about the runner Blue Buffalo had sent out. And, of course, since secrecy was impossible, the story that they were on the way had gone ahead of them.

Solid Sam Padget suggested that they assemble the mountain howitzer.

"Have her ready just in case," he said. "We won't be goin' fur from here. We can keep her ready and haul her along behind the mules instead of having them carry her."

Ross liked the idea. His spine was as crawly as if he had been lying in an ant's nest on a hot day. He signaled his people. "Load every gun you've got," he ordered. "Fresh prime all your weapons. Better make sure your knives are handy. I'm going to take a look around. Frank, you better take somebody with you and find a camping spot hereabouts. This one isn't safe."

The story of the tragedy was written here in the debris. But a winter had passed and the spring rains had fallen, so Ross learned nothing new. While Sam and his crew put the howitzer together, Ross climbed to the highest boulder. From the north a yellow dustcloud moved slowly over the vast, almost empty land.

The emigrants had not yet gotten this far west this year. It was unlikely that a band of trappers would be forking horses along the Snake, where travel was next to impossible and furs or friendly squaws nonexistent. Ross went back to the hollow to get his horse.

"Injuns," he said. "I'm going to talk to

then. Sam, shot up that howitzer with any scrap iron you can find here. Be ready to use it."

"Yes, sir," Sam said with surprising alacrity.

Ross swung a leg over the cantle. Carmen clung to the stirrup leather.

"Be careful," she begged.

"Ain't ever been an arrow made that will puncture this tough old hide."

"Not even Cupid's?" she joked.

"Nope!"

THEY were Indians, some of them, and some were breeds and renegade whites. They were a dirty, ugly, mean-looking outfit. When Ross waved his hand in the signal of peace, the main band stopped and a contingent of three rode out to parley.

Ross remembered having seen the younger buck hanging around Fort Beaver. Probably he was the one Blue Buffalo had sent out that night. The other two, a pair of hard-bitten oldsters, were strangers to him.

"Me Talking Man," the young buck said. "Me make dicker."

"Fine!" Ross said amiably. "That's what I came for."

"Buckskin Stewart dead," Talking Man said. "Much medicine man, Buckskin. He got throwed in river."

Ross knew that that was one way to keep Buckskin's ghost from haunting the people who had killed him. The other two Indians nodded grimly. Ross suspected that for the first time in their lives they were telling the truth.

"Two girl—they full beans. They too much trouble," Talking Man said. His partners nodded vigorously. "You Blue Buffalo friend. We no want fight friend of Blue Buffalo. So we make talk. We make dicker for girl."

"I appreciate that!" Ross nodded. Old Blue Buffalo figured to get a cut in this deal, somehow. You could not out-trade that Injun. "Let's dicker."

"Gold!" Talking Man surprised Ross. Indians usually did not want gold. Talking Man made sign with his arms indicating about a bushel of the precious metal. The white men in the motley band must have put these Indians up to it. "Gold!"

"There ain't that much gold in the world," Ross said.

Talking Man talked to his compatriots. He put his arms out to indicate half a bushel.

"Fine," Ross said. "But I got to see the girls first."

Talking Man held another conference. One of the three rode back to the main group. When he returned he was sided by a squaw and two very dirty, very blonde girls of about six and eight, ready to fight, claw or gouge, judging by their bold stares at Ross.

"I don't want to go," the oldest one said. "I won't go back to Ma or Pa."

"You don't have to," Ross said. He could tell them later that their parents were dead. He said to Talking Man, "But I don't know these girls. We have a white woman at camp who might know them. You know Holly?" he asked the older girl.

She remembered, all right. She dug her bare toes in the dirt.

"I hate her!"

Pleasant little critter, Ross thought.

"Wait. I'll call her!" He turned in the saddle. His entire party was staring at him from a quarter of a mile away behind the rocks. He talked sign language to Sam Padget. A moment later Holly, Carmen and Billy Boone rode out to join Ross. The two girls stared at Holly, who slipped from the saddle and held her arms out before her.

"Anne—Mary—are you both all right?"

"I won't go!" the older one sullenly repeated.

"Me, either," the smaller one said.

Ross wondered if he could grab them both and get back to the rocks and protection of the howitzer before the Indians

could mount an attack. The two older braves were armed only with knives and lances. Talking man carried a Hawken rifle, obviously rusty and dirty, possibly out of commission. It was worth the risk.

Ross began to talk. He began to dicker.

"So much gold," he said, making a sign for a small handful.

The Indians shook their stolid heads. Talking Man came down to about a peck

"So much for the friend of Talking Man and friend of Blue Buffalo."

Ross came up to a double handful. He reached down to scoop up enough dirt to show exactly what he meant.

"This much," he said sternly. "No more."

HE HAD managed to move his horse so that a straight-away plunge would take him between the three Indians and the squaw who was holding onto the squirming children. He would draw the fire, if any, away from Carmen and Holly, and give them a chance to get to safety. With his fast horse, he could make a wide sweep and get back to the camp, too.

"This much!" he said again.

Talking Man squatted down to scoop up a bigger handful of earth. He held it before him dramatically.

"This much for each girl."

Ross would never get another chance.

"Fine!" he said. "We have made a dicker."

He rolled his spurs to jump the horse straight at the squaw. At the same instant he flung the pebbles and earth into Talking Man's astonished face. The squaw fled screaming. The little girls, rooted in the dust, stared at Ross who scooped them up on his way past. The older one began to fight and claw, her little body as slippery as a fresh-caught fish. The gritty hands of Ross helped him keep his grip on her. The little one howled, wriggled and bit. A rifle crashed and a bullet whined past Ross' head. Ross kept on going, having to concentrate all his strength and attention on keeping hold of the girls. Behind him a whole flurry of shots burst out, and when Ross finally got a chance to look back he saw Talking Man riding hell-for-leather down the trail away from the renegades. Talking Man knew he'd have one mighty tough time explaining the loss of the captives that were to bring so much gold.

The squaw was still running while the two older Indians tried to dig into the ground and Billy Boone covered the retreat of Holly and Carmen with his carbine. Ross turned his horse toward the rocks and let her run.

Cutting in between two of the huge boulders, he glanced around. The main band of Indians was withdrawing to regroup. Undoubtedly they would make an all-out attack on the party that was still in the circled depression that formed a perfect trap. Carmen and Holly had gotten inside with Billy close behind them. With luck and the mountain howitzer they could retreat to Fort Hall and eventually to Fort Beaver.

Even as he struggled with the two fighting children, Ross laid out his strategy. In retreat they would stay close to the Snake River canyon, since the Indians could not approach them from its depths. With the howitzer always shotted and the ring of riflemen close around the women and girls, he had a pretty good chance of making it.

He rode into camp laughing, and dumped the children on the ground.

"They're all yours, Holly," he grinned.

"You mean they're all mine," Sam Padget said coldly. "Them kids is worth ten thousand dollars each to their gran'ma —and I aim to collect it."

Holly snapped at him, "I gave you a chance to split that, Sam. You didn't take me up. So the kids are mine."

Dumfounded at this switch, Ross gasped, "What's all this about? What's this ten thousand dollars?"

"I wrote their gran'ma about them," Holly said coldly. "She said she'd give ten thousand dollars apiece to get them back.

I offered Sam half if he'd help me find them. That was before you showed up, and Sam—"

Ross got it then. He'd been played for a sucker. The kiss in the starlight, the sudden change from shouting at him to hugging him when he fought Billy—these had been part of her design to cozen him into leading an expedition out to recapture the children.

"You mean"—Ross still could not believe completely that she was a calculating schemer—"you weren't worrying about these kids—"

She said, "Those brats!" and laughed scornfully. "I'd worry more about the Indians who captured them."

Sam laughed, too. Everyone there was at the mercy of his howitzer, which he had aimed at the bunched group.

"Come here, kids," he said. "I got lots of candy back home."

Yonder, beyond the boulders, the Indians whooped. The hoofs of their raggedy little broomtail horses thundered across the sage flats . . . .

ROSS reckoned he would rather die with a stomach full of scrap iron than with his scalp lifted. Besides—and he could almost laugh at the feeling of relief it gave him—if he could jump right in front of that howitzer so that his lanky body absorbed all the shot, he could save the lives of most of those who had come with him on this damn-fool chase. At least he would give them a chance to save themselves.

Ross would be a hero. Ross Caldwell, hero! Maybe somebody would put up a monument to him here. And his only regret was that too late he had discovered what Carmen meant to him. Pray for me, Carmen, he said under his breath. Pray for all of us!

The children had stopped when they heard the Indians howling. Halfway to the howitzer, their bodies had tensed as they

glanced back. Sam urged them to come to him.

"Got cakes and pies and dollies—hundreds of them . . . ."

"Dolly?" the smaller said.

They were out of the line of fire now. Possibly they would be burned slightly by powder, but that was unlikely. But if Ross could block the first shot, Sam Padget would never get a second chance to turn that howitzer on anyone.

"Got a dolly with hair just like yours," Sam lied convincingly.

The little girl ran toward him. Ross screamed like a demented Apache and vaulted right over the head of his terrified horse to land on his hands and knees only inches from the howitzer. Sam yelled. Ross clambered up as fast as he could to block the muzzle of the wicked gun whose bronze barrel was as cold as death. Sam's eyes gleamed crazily. The match sputtered as Ross's long arm licked out and his hand slapped down over the touch hole. Screaming, Sam jabbed the punk against his skin. But Ross was on the way now and knocked it out of Sam's hand just as the powder began to sputter again. He could only guess what was happening behind him. Nothing at all at first. Then the party scattered and somebody snapped out of his coma long enough to shoot Sam Padget.

Ross collapsed right under the gun, grinning sillily, wondering how come he wasn't dead yet. No hero! No monument! There was still time to tell Carmen. All they had to do was fight off a hundred Indians and renegades who were howling their evil war cries as they charged between the boulders. Just fight off them Injuns—and nothing more!

A tell-tale sizzling warned Ross, and the gun that had held fire suddenly let go. The howitzer jumped back a good five feet as it spewed its lethal charge into the air. Fortunately the Ross party had gotten out of the way by then, so the chunks of metal whistled and squealed and ricocheted off the far rocks to smash into the charging hostiles. That gun alone drove back the first attack.

The men Sam Padget had trained to handle the gun hopped to their job so that the howitzer was loaded and ready when the Indians charged again. The toll it took was terrifying, though Ross hardly knew how to aim it. Carmen was hanging on to him, trying to tell him something that he could not hear because the first blast had been so close to him he was temporarily deafened.

"Hey?" he hollered like somebody's old granny.

She put her mouth right up against his ear and shouted, "You out of the woods, yet?"

Ross laughed. He put the match to the touch hole again and let the howitzer roar. Sure enough he was out of the woods; and out of the woods, too, was Billy Boone who skillfully lined up the party for its retreat to Fort Hall. The older of the two girls bit Holly savagely when the former nurse tried to take over. Ross had to laugh. The young lady who had seemed so pure, so innocent, would earn that twenty thousand dollars and more a long time before she collected it. The howitzer was loaded again, but for the moment there was no target to turn it loose on.

Ross took time out to slide his arm around the supple waist of Carmen Stewart. He knew now why lightning struck every time he touched her. It always would. Carmen reached for a rifle as the hostiles appeared again between the rocks, and the howitzer bellowed, sending a screaming charge of scrap metal at them.

It would be a running fight all the way back to Fort Hall, Ross knew, but they'd make it. He had to make it now with Carmen.

"Yep," he hollered to her. "I'm out of the woods."

She blew him a kiss—and a promise of very much more. . . . ★ ★ ★

By
Bob Obets

Cute Little Tomcat Tamer

To hell with a woman, said Marsh Campbell, who wouldn't trust him to work out his destiny—in another woman's arms!

"Now you will despise me," she said. . . .

HE WASN'T Sheriff Jeff's real son, but in many ways they were closer than father and son. Perhaps that explains to some extent why people who had loved and respected Jeff Campbell through the years—even Sue Beth Blake—were so quick and bitter in condemning young Marsh after the tragedy. Almost overnight he became an ingrate and a no-good, not fit to wear the Campbell name, much less the sheriff's star, which on old Jeff had been a symbol of integrity and uncompromising courage. And much else.

The story of Jeff and the kid was becoming a legend, though many of the men who had surrounded the rustlers' camp that long-ago morning still lived in and around Frio town. When the smoke had cleared, this kid came crawling from under the camp wagon. A solemn two-year-old in a man's shirt with bobbed sleeves, dragging a rusty six-shooter almost as long as his legs. Sheriff Jeff, a fine figure of a man then, in his prime, stepped from the shelter

of the live oaks, nodded gravely. "Mornin', Mister Gunhawk. Didn't know you was mixed in this fracas."

The kid, as it was told later, came back with something that sounded like, "The hell you say!" He tried to stand up and got tangled in his shirt-tail, sat down with a plop. The tight faces of the men watching him relaxed in grins. For pinned to the kid's shirt was a badge, some of the letters tarnished, so that it read: "Marsh . . . of El Paso."

"Maybe," Sheriff Jeff drawled. "I better wire old Buckey Wade. He's prob'ly wonderin' where his badge got to. Boys, you reckon that's Buckey's six-shooter, too?"

While the men chuckled, he swung the kid to his shoulder. "Come on, Marsh, it looks like you haven't got any mammy around here—thank God. We'll go to my house, see if one shows up."

TWENTY-TWO years ago, to be exact, and Marsh Campbell, his loves and his escapades, had furnished the good people of Frio, especially the women, with a lot of pleasure.

". . . Why, Grace, he won a hundred dollars from those Diamond D boys, and you know what he did? Gave it to that woman of Beau Silvers' and told her to buy a new dress, she sure needed more cover!"

". . . Oh, no, it was over Sue Beth Blake. Marsh knocked out two teeth—Les Fondren's teeth, mind you!—then swore he'd kill Les if he ever spoke her name again. Those Fondren brothers!" ". . . Gracious, you sure missed it at the box supper! Sheriff Jeff was auctioneer, and you remember that run-in he had with the Fondrens. Well, Marsh was drinking. Les and Roy ran the bid up on him to ten dollars on a box he thought was Sue Beth's, and it was fat old Mrs. Tompkins'. Marsh claimed all he got was a drumstick and he was saving it to use on Les and Roy. . . ."

Women, God bless 'em! But lately young Mr. Campbell had disappointed his flock. This morning, after a month down on the Chupadera, breaking horses at five dollars a round, he came riding back to Frio, burned as brown as any Indian and about as sober-faced as one. He failed to greet the town with a single whoop, and when he rode past Beau Silvers' without so much as a glance at the place, there were regretful sighs behind windows all along the street.

He tied his pinto in front of the bank, crossed the walk with purposeful strides. Sue Beth Blake came out of the bank and both of them stopped, the girl clean-limbed in a blue challis dress, not moving while Marsh removed his sombrero, his shoulder muscles rippling beneath his dusty shirt. It was an unexpected, breathless sort of meeting. Mrs. Latigo Parker, watching from the shop across the street, would have swapped a hand-stamped saddle for some sharper ears—then wanted the saddle back. For the conversation went like this:

"Hello, Sue-honey. You miss me?"

"I thought you'd left town. For good."

"It's an idea, but old Will Jenson's got a piece of range—lonesome as get-out for a bachelor, like me. But, say, for a gamble—"

"Gamble?" Her chin lifted. "I understand Beau Silvers is a gambling man, and then there's your friend Lolita. You might try them if Dad turns you down."

"I might, at that," he said, as she stepped past him. "I sure don't aim to get down on my knees!"

But Ike Blake, who was always "Buckshot" to Sheriff Jeff, surprised him. He let Marsh make his talk, then leaned back, half closed his eyes and suddenly chuckled. "Old Jeff never told you about his and my younger days, did he? Too damn dignified! Last big whizzer I ever got on, Comanche Campbell got me on it. Time I got my head out of the trough, Comanche was headin' for the next county. With my girl! Married her, too. She died just before we lead-poisoned that rustler outfit—before

you came along. About the prettiest thing I ever saw."

He blew his nose in a huge red bandanna, then sighed. "What I'm tryin' to say—don't hurt none to spread a few wild oats when you're young. Man without some hell and spizzerinctum never hold his own with that daughter of—with one these modern young tomcat tamers. Let's see now. Fifteen hundred down-payment, make it a ten-year . . . What in hinges has busted loose out there!"

THERE was a body in 'Soose Flores's wagon, long legs stretching almost to the tailboard, and a big sorrel behind the wagon on a lead rope, saddle still on him. "The horse, he nicker when I come by the mustanger *jacal* on this short-cut from my *rancho,*" 'Soose was explaining excitedly. "I esstop the *mulas* and find my *amigo* een the house. *Madre* Maria, who is do this for Sheriff Jeff!"

Suddenly everyone was watching Marsh. Beside him, Ike Blake blew his nose violently, then stepped close to the wagon, had his long, deliberate look at Comanche Campbell. "Take him over to the Parlor, 'Soose." Like that, his feelings now under tight control. He turned back and stared at Marsh.

"Shot twice. Through the back. That old *jacal* is just off the cutoff goes to Fondrens'. About daybreak, when I was having my mornin' toddy, I saw Jeff ride by in that direction. Marsh . . . But first we better make it legal. I'm still a county commissioner." He called the names of two more commissioners.

Marsh went with them, past Sue Beth, and never saw the compassion in her eyes. In the sheriff's office, Ike Blake said, "Raise your right hand and say after me . . ." They found a badge in a desk drawer that would have to do, because the one on Sheriff Jeff's vest was like a part of the man. This one, sadly tarnished, said: "Marsh . . . of El Paso." Ike pinned it in place, said, "Now it's in your hands—Mister Gunhawk," and went over to stare out a window.

Marsh, his world spinning, kept wondering, Why? Why would anyone murder a man like Sheriff Jeff? Presently he found himself back in front of the bank, where he had left his horse. He had his foot in stirrup when Sue Beth's hand caught his arm. She didn't ask where he was going. She said, "I'm going with you, Marsh." Her horse was saddled and waiting.

The old *jacal,* long ago abandoned, squatted in rank mesquite near a creek, perhaps five miles from town. The sun-baked clay outside the shack was too hard to show tracks. Inside, the earth floor was littered with tin cans, whiskey bottles, leavings of those who had camped here.

Sue Beth caught his arm. "Look! That's where . . ." She was staring at a dark stain on the packed earth in front of the fireplace. "They murdered him, Marsh. Those Fondrens. That woman Lolita must have been in it, too. Marsh, I was half awake. I heard someone ride by and looked, and it was Sheriff Jeff. I was dressing when the other horse went by, and I saw Lolita. I wondered if she was following Sheriff Jeff. Marsh . . ."

The brown-paper cigarette, forgotten between his fingers, had lost its fire. He pinched its tip without thinking, flipped the stub to the floor. There ought to be something here. It seemed unbelievable that any man could have come here and put two bullets into Sheriff Jeff and gone on his way, leaving no sign, leaving nothing behind him. Marsh stooped, picked up a shiny bit of green bottle glass. It reminded him of Lolita, of the emerald-green ear pieces she sometimes wore.

"Maybe you just thought it was Lolita," he said. "All that talk about her—"

"About Lolita and you, Marsh," she said. "Marsh, I *saw* her ride by. What are you going to do?"

"Talk to Lolita. But first it's the Fon-

drens, now. Come on Sue Beth. We've seen enough here."

They were halfway back to town when she said, "Marsh—that woman. She won't just *tell* you anything. You might have to—to play up to her. I'll understand. Whatever you have to do will be for Sheriff Jeff. I loved him, Marsh."

The numbness was wearing off, pain seeping clear to his bones. He said harshly, "What do you think I'll have to do—drop my boots under her bed?"

He reined in when they reached the Longhorn. He was down, tying his horse when two men came through the batwing doors.

LES FONDREN, bandy-legged, wasp-waisted, spoke without removing the corn-husk cigarette from his thin lips. "You looking for us, Campbell?"

Roy Fondren, enough like Les to be his twin, but a couple years younger, pulled up a few paces from Les and said, "Yeah. We heard you're looking for us, Campbell."

Les took a slow drag from his smoke. Roy grinned thinly, showing strong yellow teeth.

Sue Beth walked her sorrel a few paces, pulled the beast around and sat still in the saddle, watching Marsh and the Fondren boys. People all along the street were watching them, but no one would interfere. For this was a personal matter between Marsh and the men most people thought had murdered Sheriff Jeff.

The palms of Marsh's hands began to sweat, and he wished Old Jeff was here to give him some advice. The Fondrens were ready, waiting. But one mistake now and he might never know, for certain, who had killed Jeff Campbell. True, he'd had that little run-in with Les in the Longhorn; and Sheriff Jeff, not two months ago, had told the pair to their teeth they were cow thieves, going to wind up in his jail. But there was no real proof against them. What was it Sheriff Jeff used to say? "It's easy to be too quick when you're wearin' a star and packin' a gun."

"Suppose we step inside." Marsh said, "and talk this over. Somebody's been wolfing you boys."

Les Fondren looked honestly surprised. His pale eyes surveyed Marsh in a deliberate, contemptuous way from sombrero to boots. Then his yellowed fingers bent the corn-husk cigarette double, and flipped it into the dust at Marsh's feet. "Old Jeff." he said, "will cover his face in his grave. Come on, Roy."

"Yeah," Roy said, "cover his face in his grave. We respected old Jeff."

Marsh had to turn and look, and he saw Sue Beth, hands clenched on the saddle-horn, all the laughter, all the life gone from her eyes. She said, almost in a whisper, "Marsh, I'm ashamed of you." And she struck spurs to the sorrel and rode away.

"Don't let it sweat you, *amigo*," a cool, faintly sardonic voice said. Beau Silvers was moving toward him, a tall and handsome man wearing the flat-crowned sombrero and short jacket of a caballero. A devil-take-it sort of fellow, he put a careless arm across Marsh's shoulders and turned him toward the swinging doors. "I'll buy you a drink."

At a table inside, Beau Silvers lifted his glass. "To Sheriff Jeff. He was my idea of a real—"

He stopped that way, the shotglass arrested in his hand. Lolita had come down the stairs behind him. Her lips were full, given to a wonderful smiling; her hazel-green eyes contrasted sharply with the red sheen of her dark hair. She was a lovely creature, Marsh thought—not for the first time. He held a chair for her. He drank with them, although he did not feel like drinking. He put down his glass and said bluntly, "I want to talk to you, Lolita. Shall we do it here, or go some place more private?"

She gave Marsh a glance that reminded him of flashing blades. She said, "I think—

some place more private. What you think, Beau?"

The gambler's smile was sardonic and a little wary, Marsh thought. He wondered if Beau Silvers had ever displayed fear or anger or any deep emotion. He wondered what the man's real feelings were now.

Beau, as if he could read minds, was saying, "Do you really want to know, my dear? I think this business is out of my hands. Go rent a rig, Marsh. The lady has something worrying her, and I warn you—be careful."

Later, Marsh wished he hadn't put the bays, pulling the livery-stable buggy, up the main street. Then he decided that it didn't make much difference now. He didn't turn his head when Sue Beth and her father came out of the bank. Lolita murmured against his ear, "Now your reputation is gone, Marsh." And that was all there was to it.

HE TOOK the river road and stopped beneath an ancient liveoak; got out, went around and handed her down. They sat on a flat rock and in the clear water at their feet could see sunperch swimming. Marsh looked at her and thought she was infinitely lonely and lovely and sad. Silvers' woman, he thought, and anger rose in him. Mrs. Latigo Parker, who went to church every Sunday, would have been amazed if she could have read his mind. Perhaps she *was* Silvers' woman, but there was honesty in her, and courage, and what difference did it make whose woman she was?

An urge to comfort her, to protect her against gossip, came over him, and when he took her in his arms it was as if she were a hurt child. She had not expected kindness, and tears welled in her eyes—wonderful eyes, he thought, like deep green pools. He kissed her, and hadn't intended to do that, either. At first her lips were cool and unmoving. Then they warmed and quickened against his lips, and there was nothing of the child about her. Finally her hands against his shoulders pushed him away, and she shook her head, said huskily, "This could have been, Marsh—before Beau, but not now. Now you will despise me."

"No," he said. "You're fine. You're good. Nobody, nothing, could ever make me despise you."

She took a deep breath and she looked straight at him. She said, "I believe you, Marsh. No wonder Sheriff Jeff loved you. But I was there, Marsh, in that old *jacal*. I saw Sheriff Jeff on the floor—dead. It was to meet me he went there." From a pocket of the jacket she had slipped on over her dress she brought a crumpled note.

It said: "Meet me when the sun comes up at the jacal of the mustangers. It is most important." It was signed, "Lolita."

"I took this from his pocket, Marsh—after I found him. Before I reached the *jacal,* I heard two shots. But I saw nobody. Nobody was there."

"Why?" Marsh wanted to know, with strain in his voice. "Why did you want to meet him? What was so important?"

Despite himself, a little doubt must have shown in his eyes. She said, almost pityingly, "Don't you know? Beau is the most important thing in my life. Just as you were the most important thing in Sheriff Jeff's life."

Marsh shook his head. "I'm not smart, Lolita. You'll have to spell it out for me. What has Beau got to do with this?"

"Everything," she said soberly. "Marsh, you have heard of the terrible time, in New Mexico, when the sheepmen and the cattle ranchers went to war. Beau was on the side that lost. He owned a store and a saloon in Sacate. The cattlemen burned his place, and one he killed—a man most prominent. So we ran from there, Marsh. It was a fair fight, but they called it murder. If Beau is taken back to Sacate, he will not have a chance. *Can't you see, Marsh?"*

"Not where Sheriff Jeff fits in," Marsh said.

She stared at him intently. She caught his shoulders. "Yes, I will tell you, Marsh. You are like Sheriff Jeff. A fair man and kind. Sheriff Jeff got a telegram from Sacate with Beau's description, and it asked Sheriff Jeff to arrest Beau and hold him for extradition. This depot agent who brought the telegram from Pearsall is a friend, stopped by the Longhorn. When Sheriff Jeff came," she finished bitterly. "Beau was gone. What was there for him but to ride away from town?"

"He came back," Marsh said. "Right after Sheriff Jeff was dead. Maybe he was waitin' in the *jacal*. Maybe—"

"No! Marsh, do not think such a thing. Believe me, Marsh. If I could have talked to Sheriff Jeff, he never would have sent Beau back to die. That is why I sent the note by old Whiskey Jack—you know him. I was going to tell the whole story. I asked Sheriff Jeff to meet me in the old *jacal* because in town people might hear. Marsh, you must believe me!"

Marsh was remembering the Cooleys, down on the Retama, taken by smallpox. This girl, "Silvers' woman," had been the only woman in Frio with courage enough, whatever it took, to go there and help that shiftless, unfortunate tribe. He was remembering Pedro Gonzales, with his shack full of kids. After the horse fell with Pedro, broke his leg, Lolita had given money to Sheriff Jeff for more than one box of groceries. . . . "But please don't mention my name."

Cantina woman, Silvers' woman, whatever she was, there was good in her. She deserved a chance for happiness, and Sheriff Jeff would have given her that chance. Marsh guessed he could do no less, no matter what the cost to him. He remembered Sue Beth, in town, watching him and Lolita as they drove by, and pain struck through him. He remembered Sheriff Jeff, with two bullet holes through him, and the slow, bitter anger that had been building inside him flared into bright flame.

"I believe what you've told me is true, Lolita, so far as you know. But your Beau might have been the one. Whoever is guilty is going to pay. I hope to God I don't have to hurt you."

THE funeral was next morning. People came in from the far reaches of the county, so that the church could not hold them all, and the cemetery where they buried Sheriff Jeff, beside his wife, was crowded. Men stood with hats off, their faces rock hard. Men stood beside Jeff Campbell's grave and cried. Marsh Campbell felt like a stranger, like an outcast. He looked across once at Sue Beth and her eyes met his, and there was no warmth in them, no sympathy. But Lolita—she stood with Beau Silvers a little apart from the others. She bit her lip and gazed at Marsh with a message plainer than words in her face and in her eyes. She wanted to comfort him, to help him. She had known suffering. She understood how he felt now.

The service over, Marsh went directly to his horse. He didn't want to talk or to see anyone, but people passed him. Nels Hanson, the blacksmith, the Webbs from over on Turkey Track, Whiskey Jack, the town drunkard. Some of them seemed embarrassed, none were friendly. Jed Stuart, one of the county commissioners, gave Marsh a level, cold glance and went by without nodding. Marsh swung into saddle, his lips a white, thin line.

"One moment—Sheriff!" Ike Blake was there, with Sue Beth beside him. Marsh didn't look at her, but at Ike. Somehow, the banker reminded him of a small boy who had been hurt but who refused to cry.

"Marsh," Ike Blake said, "I thought something of you, was going to loan you money, was proud Sue Beth . . . But that's all over now. You drove by me with that woman, bold as brass. You let Les and Roy Fondren run their bluff on you, didn't lift a hand. Marsh, I never knew Comanche Campbell to go wrong on a man, but he did

on you. We wiped out the cow-thievin' bunch you came from, and maybe it would been better if we'd wiped you out, too. It must be something in your blood. It must —but the hell with that! Marsh, hand over that badge."

Marsh was watching Sue Beth now. He said quietly, "Is that how you want it, Sue?"

She gave her head a toss, so that her bright hair caught the sun. She said, each word distinct, "When I marry, I want a *man* for a husband."

Marsh nodded. He unpinned the badge that said: "Marsh . . . of El Paso." He flipped it at Ike Blake. Both of them, Ike and his daughter, were standing entirely still when Marsh rode away.

Marsh had lost every friend he ever had in this town. He had lost Sue Beth—but somehow, he wasn't quite sure now whether she was worth grieving for. He was certain of only one thing: He still had a chore to do. When that chore had been tended to, maybe he would leave this town. That, too, was unimportant, not worth grieving about.

The Longhorn had closed for the funeral, had just now reopened. Les and Roy Fondren, two or three loafers watching them, were at the bar having some fun with old Whiskey Jack.

The old man had dressed for the funeral in a rumpled, rusty serge suit set off by a celluloid collar and string tie. Les Fondren was making delicate dabs with a bandanna at the old fellow's coat front. "There now, Senator! Here, pour the senator a drink, Roy."

"Pour the senator a drink," Roy said, and lifted a full glass from the bar. When Whisky Jack reached for it, Roy tipped the shotglass and poured its contents down the old man's shirt front.

Whiskey Jack straightened himself with a queer dignity. "You no-account backshooters! You wouldn't fit them big britches if Sheriff Jeff—"

LES FONDREN was smoking one of his interminable corn-husk cigarettes. Without taking it from his lips, he caught the old man's shoulder and hauled him roughly around. Marsh said quietly, "That's enough, Fondren. Back-shooters—maybe Jack's right. Lolita sent a note to Sheriff Jeff. Old Jack took it to him. But in between the sendin' and the takin', somebody stopped Jack and read the note. Who was it, Jack?"

"Him!" Whiskey Jack cried. He pointed a shaky finger at Les Fondren. "He stopped me outside this place, and—"

Les Fondren took the cigarette from his lips, said softly, "You old drunk. Nobody will believe you. But just remember, this could be your neck." He bent the cigarette double, crushed it that way between forefinger and thumb; dropped it and was around cat-quick, saying to Marsh, "And I don't see no badge on your chest now. You walk easy! Roy, let's try the whiskey where they're more particular."

"More particular," Roy said, and chuckled. "You heard him, Campbell. You walk easy!"

Marsh watched them leave and was thinking, "Maybe. Just maybe it will work. It will work, or come to nothing, or end up with me dead."

To Tio, the brown-faced bartender, he said, "Tobacco and some corn shucks. A bottle and two glasses." He put his hand on Whiskey Jack's shoulder. "Old-timer, you're going to have what they call that last drink."

They sat at the table near the stairs. Marsh talked, Whiskey Jack shook his head. Marsh talked some more. Poured the second "last" drink, and the old man began to grin. He grinned like a coyote, smote the table with his fist. "By guddlins, I will! Skin me, but they can't eat me, boy!" He got up, headed for the door. Behind Marsh a voice spoke softly.

"It's no good, Marsh. They will kill you because they hate you. You won't

have proved anything about Sheriff Jeff."

Worry lay deep in Lolita's wonderful eyes. Up from his chair, Marsh looked at her and wanted her—no denying that. But Beau Silvers might be mixed in this, with the Fondrens, and she was Beau's woman. Marsh said harshly, "What do you care? I've got to play the string out, my way, alone."

"No, Marsh," she said. "Beau would help. That fine girl, Sue Beth, would help. Have you ever asked her to? Asked her to? Asked her father? No, you're too proud! They think that you have deserted them, betrayed Sheriff Jeff. You haven't given them a chance to think otherwise. I understand you, Marsh, because, perhaps from pity, you gave me the chance. Marsh—"

"I see what you mean, Lolita," Marsh said humbly. "Beau is a lucky man. Me, I guess I never grew up. I've always had Sheriff Jeff behind me. Now I'm a kid crying in the dark. Not smart. No Sheriff Jeff to chase the boogers away. But I'm going ahead, Lolita, and cry and wish for Sheriff Jeff to help me—and keep on trying."

She said softly, "It takes courage, Marsh, even to admit you can cry." But he never heard that. He was going toward the door.

THIS mesquite was lonesome. Marsh sat on his heels and watched the *jacal* wherein Sheriff Jeff had died and wished he had that solid and fearless man beside him. The shadows ran long, creek frogs began chirping; in the surrounding thicket nothing save rabbits and birds and creeping and crawling things moved.

He could see the mud-and-stick roof of the *jacal.* Nearer, a clump of blackbrush screened the shack's south window from his view. He saw in his mind a vivid picture: Sheriff Jeff, suspecting nothing, certainly not an ambush, stopping his horse on the far side of the *jacal,* calling Lolita's name, going inside. Then shadow shapes moving from brush clump to window. The sullen clap of gunshots. Sound of a body falling. Deep silence. . . .

So vivid, so poignant was the picture that Marsh shivered. Some thirty minutes earlier, he had acted out the scene, crouching behind the blackbrush, then going to the window, peering in and imagining he saw Sheriff Jeff, back toward him, inside. So filled was his mind with the scene, that at first, now, he thought the shape he saw between him and the blackbrush clump was only in his mind, imagined. Narrow shoulders topped by a sombrero. A glimpsed shape that dropped from sight.

It took him several moments, while his heart pounded, to realize that his eyes hadn't played him tricks. That shape was real. This was it. He rose and moved forward quietly, with a quivering between his shoulder blades.

The man was squatted in the shadow of the blackbrush, his hand making pecking motions. Roy Fondren, the parrot, the one not quite bright. Les Fondren would be close around, and ready, and Les was the smart one. Les was quick with a gun.

Time for Marsh seemed suspended, so that incidents of his past life were crowded together in his mind. That bronc crashing into a corral fence with him, breaking his leg—but that old throbbing leg was alive! Sue Beth Blake was alive; that first time he kissed her—the warmth of her lips was something to remember. A lot of things were worth remembering.

Marsh said quietly, "Easy, Roy. Up and around. I've got a gun on you."

Roy's hand made a motion, then stopped. He came off his heels slowly. He turned as if his legs were stiff. Marsh asked gently, "Did you find them all, Roy? Your brother Les must have been a little jumpy, waiting here to murder Sheriff Jeff. Smoked all those corn-husks, bent each one as if he hated the thing. Roy, did you ever see anyone but Les pinch out a cigarette that way? Kind of funny. A few miserable

cigarettes going to put a rope around your neck. Yours and Les's."

Marsh wasn't sure he heard movement behind him. Roy Fondren was glaring at him, mouthing.

"Damn Les and his cigarettes! Old Whiskey Jack—Les said he was just tryin' to get a free pint. Damn him, Les swore he never smoked none that mornin' we was waitin'. He smokes so much he forgets. But I found—"

"What you found," Marsh said gently, "I put there, Roy. Smoked those fags myself, bent them the way Les does, not thirty minutes ago. Sheriff Jeff always claimed a man with a guilty conscience is easy to stampede. He was right. Roy, where is Les?"

"Right behind you, Campbell. Drop your gun and turn around, slow. I want to be lookin' at you when you die."

WELL, here it was. Marsh drew in a great breath, and it was the sweetest air he'd ever breathed. He flung himself downward and around, glimpsed the distorted face of Les Fondren luridly illumined by gun flame. The ground came up and jarred against Marsh's ribs. He pushed up onto his left arm. The six-shooter bucked twice, the jolting of the heavy weapon running through his right arm. Les Fondren went down, and behind Marsh another gun was slamming. He set his teeth, was mildly surprised when the noise stopped and he felt no pain. He got to his feet and turned and saw the sardonic smile of Beau Silvers.

Beau held a six-shooter that still trailed smoke. Beau stood over the motionless shape of Roy Fondren. That was a sight surprising enough, but when Ike Blake and the two women came charging from the brush behind Beau, Marsh shook his head in wonderment.

The smaller of the women kept coming until she reached Marsh. She grabbed his arms, she patted him, she said, "Marsh, Marsh!" Are you hurt? Are you dead?"

It was a silly thing to say, so Marsh grinned. He said, "If I'm dead, it's not

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NEVER TURN BACK!

What had a tinhorn like Fenner to do with respectable folks? Let them take care of their own troubles, and their wars. And their women!

"I'm getting out of here," Fenner said. "You'll be better off without me. . . ."

By H. B. Hickey

THERE was a tightness about him, and that was the first thing Dill Fenner noticed. It was nothing tangible, nothing you could see, and only a man like Fenner would have caught it. But a certain momentary flicker of the eye betrayed it, and Fenner knew all about it because once

he himself had felt this kind of tightness.

It was the kind of feeling a watch spring would have if it could feel, and if it had been wound unbearably tight. And just as a touch would snap such a spring, so would this man explode into violence at a single word or glance.

He had come off the evening stagecoach. Now he stood at the edge of the walk, watching the few townspeople who were still on the street. He was tall, with wide, square shoulders, and when he turned at a sound his turning was like the movement of a cat.

Dill Fenner watched him, taking in the way twin guns hung low on the man's thighs, taking in the softness of the man's mouth and the twist that gave the mouth cruelty.

"Fenner," a voice said.

Fenner pushed his back away from the saloon wall and turned. It was Dave Calder, the sheriff. Calder was an old man now, and he had been around. He looked at the stranger and then looked back at Fenner.

"Yes," Fenner said, and he was surprised at the tiredness in his voice.

"Maybe he'll get back on that stage and keep going," Calder muttered.

"No, Dave. I'm afraid he won't."

Calder turned a wondering eye on Dill Fenner. "How old are you, Dill?"

"Thirty-five," Fenner said.

"When I was your age," Calder said, "I'd have started something to see how good he was. Ten years later I'd have gone up to him and told him to get back on that stage. Now—"

"Now?"

"Now I'd be almighty thankful if the good citizens of this town would take this tin star off my vest. And maybe pin it on yours."

In the gathering dusk Fenner's smile was barely visible.

"Why, Dave, I'm afraid the idea would shock the good citizens. I don't think they'd like having a professional gambler as their protector."

Calder still affected the long, curling mustachioes of the past decade. He wiped a gnarled finger across them, taking his time with the motion. Then he pushed himself away from the wall. It was a quick, jerky movement that showed a sudden burst of impatience.

"You don't know yourself as well as you think, Fenner," he said. "Good night."

FOR a while Dill Fenner stood there. The thought that Calder had seen something in him of which he himself had perhaps no inkling, was irritating. Maybe it was just a notion of Calder's.

But Dave Calder was no fool. He was long past the age when he could depend on his gun to keep order. Only his knowledge of men sustained him now, and for that knowledge Dill Fenner had great respect

Fenner shrugged and moved away from the wall. He came around the front and went past the saloon, not looking back at the stranger. The stage had begun to move now and for a while after it had passed him Fenner did not cross the street.

When the dust had settled, he crossed over, pausing on the other side to flick a handkerchief at his shoes. Straightening again, he saw Helen Bates coming toward him.

He would have continued on down the side street that opened in front of him, but it was too late. Instead, he stood there and waited. When she came even he lifted his hat and let his chin come down briefly.

She was a good-looking woman, supple and tall, and it had been her bad fortune to marry a man whom life had frustrated. Now Al Bates was trying to work off that frustration with drink and gambling.

It wouldn't work. And Helen Bates was not the woman to sit home alone. Suddenly Fenner realized that he either must move on or say something. She had slowed her walk perceptibly.

If he spoke to her that would be the beginning of something. And it would be the end of something else for Fenner. He'd never gone in for chasing other men's wives. Only this wouldn't be much of a chase, he thought wryly.

So he let his head come up to meet his hat and let her pass, her full lower lip suddenly caught between her teeth. Then he went on up the side street, hardly knowing what his intentions were until he found himself standing before a house.

There was no use trying to kid himself. This had been his destination all along. Fenner let out a sigh. There was a light in the front room and no excuse for turning back. He went up the stairs and knocked on the door.

Lois was a good deal shorter than he and he had to bend over to kiss her. Then, very gently, he said, "It's cool out here. We'd better go in."

He dropped his hat on the hall table and followed her into the living room. There was a book on his favorite chair and he watched her pick it up.

"Reading?" he asked.

"No. I just don't like anyone but you to sit there."

"You're a brazen hussy," Fenner said.

"All women are brazen hussies. Most of them don't let it show."

"Let's change the subject," Fenner grinned. "Have you seen Helen Bates' new hat?"

"You just think you've changed the subject," Lois said. "Has that woman been making eyes at you?"

"To be frank, I've never noticed her eyes." Then, suddenly annoyed, he blurted, "Why doesn't she get rid of Al Bates and get herself a man?"

"She needs Al," Lois said softly. "She needs someone to mother. It's too bad she couldn't find all the things she needs in one man. I feel sorry for her."

Lois got up and came and sat on the arm of his chair. She was a small girl, with fine features and clear dark eyes and black hair. She was wearing very short puffed sleeves and Fenner put his hand up to steady her. But a moment later, almost unwillingly, he had pulled her to him, his lips hot against hers. When he let her go her breath was coming in short gasps.

"Dill," she whispered.

"I'd better go," Dill said.

He got up and went into the hall and picked up his hat, feeling like a schoolboy. When he turned around again, Lois had regained her composure.

"That was my fault," she said. "I just don't know how to play for fun."

He could put his hat back on the table or he could put it on his head and keep going. Whatever he wanted was all right with her. Looking at himself for an instant in the hall mirror, Fenner wondered at that.

In a few years he would run to paunchiness, but right now he was just a big man. His features were heavy, his nose slightly bent where it had once been broken. His mouth was wide and might have been humorous if not for the tightness of restraint. In the faint light of the hall he could barely see the touch of silver at his temples.

"My God," he said, not realizing he spoke aloud. "I'm beginning to look like my father."

"What was your father like?" Lois wanted to know.

"He was a true gentleman," Fenner said.

"What was your mother like?"

"She was a true lady, married to a true gentleman. They hated each other, but both of them were too refined to say so."

Fenner looked squarely at the girl.

"Why don't you marry me, Dill?" she said quietly.

Fenner grinned. "You're forgetting I live on the other side of Main Street. I don't think I'd fit in with the *respectable* people on this side."

She'd heard him use the word in that tone before. But now she understood what

lay behind it, all the twisted, angry emotion.

"I don't think you fit in with the people on the other side either," she said.

"But the point," Fenner said, smiling, "is that nobody *has* to fit on that side."

HE THOUGHT about that while he walked back to the saloon. There was no reason why Dill Fenner had to fit in anywhere. He was content to remain on the outside. He knew how to avoid trouble, and he knew how to handle it when he couldn't avoid it. That was enough.

Or was it?

The doubt was small but it stuck in his mind, rolling around like a pebble in a shoe. By the time he got to the saloon he was in no mood to play poker.

Al Bates was there, a few drinks ahead of everyone else and already a few dollars behind them. The stranger was there, too. Fenner took a good look at him.

He was a good-looking young fellow, blond, bland and seeming pretty sure of himself. But his eyes had a way of dilating when a joke was passed, as though he were always afraid the joke was on him.

"Join in, Fenner?" Bates asked.

Fenner shook his head and thought how strange it was that men who had known him for a year still could not bring themselves to call him by his first name.

On that thought he treated himself to a drink at the bar. He treated himself to more drinks than usual.

But the drinking didn't help. It didn't make him drunk, either. If anything, it served only to heighten his perception, so that he knew instantly when trouble began to brew at the poker table.

It wasn't anything yet. Only a sharper edge to a voice here and there. But given a little time it was going to build nicely.

Fenner turned around to watch the game. The stranger was doing all right for himself. Yet Fenner could tell that inside he was tighter than a drum. And he wasn't drinking.

That was the worst omen of all—a man who didn't drink but who somehow gave the impression that he would have liked to. And across him a man like Al Bates who didn't like to drink but forced himself to it.

That was when Dave Calder came in. The sheriff was acting relaxed and genial. His smile covered all of them.

After the first instant Fenner wasn't watching Calder. He had his eyes on the stranger. For just a second the stranger had come a little more erect in his chair. Then a faint sneer slid across his lips. Calder was too old for him to worry about.

"Hello, men," the sheriff said. He let his gaze fall lightly on the stranger.

"Ah, a stranger in our midst, I see. Welcome, friend. I'm Dave Calder. Anything I can do to make your stay more pleasant, why, just let me know."

"Yeah, sure." There was a pause. "My name's Winch. Ed Winch."

Calder smiled down at him, looked across the table at Al Bates.

"Oh, Al. Helen's out in front. Wants to talk to you about something."

"I don't want to talk to her," Bates said drunkenly.

Calder started a reply but did not finish. The doors had swung open again and Helen Bates was on her way in.

Most of the men got their hats off in a hurry. And most of them kept their eyes discreetly down, although it was a difficult thing to do. Fenner hadn't noticed before how snugly her dress fit. He felt sorry for Bates.

She knew how to carry a thing like this off. There was no sign of embarrassment as she walked to the table.

"Al," she said quietly.

He looked up at her. "What do you want?"

"That fellow is here from Three Forks. He wants to know if you'll sell him the stuff."

"Well, why don't he come down here and ask me himself?"

"I thought I might save some time if I came."

Fenner felt a flush of anger at Bates. And at the same time he felt a great deal of admiration for this woman. Al was dealing her every card off the bottom of the deck.

"Tell him I'll sell," Al muttered at last. "Tell him I'll ride over to see him tomorrow."

Helen straightened and met the eyes of the man who stood across from her husband. Winch was smiling faintly, his glance bold and appraising. For just a moment they remained that way, and then the woman dropped her eyes again. She walked out fast, holding herself very erect.

Fenner felt someone slide alongside him at the bar. It was Calder.

"Did you see that?"

"Pretty hard to miss," Fenner grunted.

"Two drinks less and even Al wouldn't have missed it."

A sudden urgency gripped Calder and his hand was tight on Dill Fenner's arm. Fenner looked at him questioningly.

"This is going to wind up bad," Calder said.

"Yeah."

"You're missing the point, Fenner. If it was one of these others, I wouldn't give a hang. But Al Bates is basically a decent guy. He's just lost, that's all."

"We're all lost." Fenner said. "Good night, Dave."

IN HIS room at the hotel, Fenner lay awake for a long time, thinking. He wished Dave Calder had left him alone. As far as he was concerned the whole thing was no affair of his.

Sudden, unreasonable rage shook Dill Fenner. It was the first time in many years that he had allowed himself to become very angry at anything. And the worst of this was that he didn't know what he was so angry about.

Swearing silently into the darkness did no good either. He felt like a man who was up against a stacked deck and yet couldn't get out of the game.

Except for one thing, Fenner thought grimly. This was one game he could get out of any time he chose. There had been other towns before. One more town wouldn't be hard to find.

"Damn," he said aloud.

He got up off the hard bed and put his clothes on again and went down the creaky hotel stairs and out onto the street. The town looked like any other town he'd ever been in. He hadn't belonged in any of them.

But until now there had been a feeling of superiority in not belonging; there had been a certain satisfaction in holding himself aloof. Well, this was the price a man paid, Fenner thought. You missed out on the roses, but you didn't pick up any thorns, either.

Across the street the lights of the saloon were inviting. Against his will Fenner crossed over and went in. . . .

Morning was always a bad time for Fenner, somehow, and this morning was worse than most. He shaved slowly, nicking himself several times. That was an unusual thing for him.

By the time he had gulped down several cups of the hotel's bad coffee he was feeling slightly steadier. He ate alone, as always. Most of the townspeople had had their breakfast several hours ago.

When he went out he found Dave Calder prowling in front of the hotel. Calder looked at him sharply but said nothing.

"Well?" Fenner said.

"I thought you weren't interested."

"Let's just say I'm curious."

"You know," Calder said slowly. "I'm beginning to hate your guts. You're a pretty cold fish."

Without giving Fenner a chance to say anything he turned on his heel and walked away. Fenner felt the rage of the night before returning now, and he had the need of some kind of action to relieve him.

Getting his horse from the livery stable, he rode out of town. Within a half hour he was up on the ridge that lay to the west, the hard ride having worked off some of his anger.

From where he sat now the town lay spread below him. How long had he lived here? Only a year, but it seemed somehow longer than that. And for all but one day of that time it had pleased Fenner to think that while he knew a good deal about most of the people who lived here, they knew no more about him than they had on the day he arrived.

Except for two people, he corrected himself.

Dave Calder seemed to think he had found something in Dill Fenner. And Lois Mann had apparently found something, too. Fenner laughed soundlessly and mirthlessly. He had a hunch that his next move was going to surprise both of them.

Down below he saw a pair of horses come out of a thin stretch of timber. The sun glinted on the silken fabric of a dress and Fenner's eyes narrowed. A sudden burst of woman's laughter, high pitched, drifted up to him.

So that was what had Calder all upset! He must have seen Winch and Helen Bates riding out together. Well, it was too late now to do anything about it. The thing would have to run its course.

FEELING that he was spying, Fenner swung his horse around and went up and over the top of the ridge. He stuck to an old trail for a mile or two, and then came back to the other side and rode down into the rolling range.

His riding was purposeful now. He had a destination and a reason, and there was no use in holding this thing off. The sooner he saw Lois and got it over with, the better.

Her father had died not long before Fenner had come to town, and Lois had inherited the Mann ranch. Unmarried, she preferred to live in town and ride out each day. It had been on one of those daily rides that Dill Fenner had met her.

She knew who he was and what he was, and yet it had meant nothing to her. He still wondered at that.

Then he came around a clump of trees and there was the Mann place before him. Lois was in the yard, talking to her foreman. They looked up at the sound of hoofs and Fenner saw the glint of fear in the girl's eyes as she saw who it was. This was the first time Fenner had come out to the ranch itself.

"I'll talk to you about this later," she said to the man beside her, then turned to watch Fenner as he rode up.

"I'm sorry I inerrupted you," Fenner said.

"Don't talk nonsense."

"Well . . ." Now that the moment had come he didn't know how to say it.

"What is it, Dill?"

"I'm getting out of here," Fenner said.

He watched the blood drain out of her face. Inside himself he knew that she had somehow expected this. But it wasn't making it easier to take.

"Just like that?" she said softly.

"Just like that." His voice gentled. "I'm sorry, but you'll be better off with me out of here."

"All right. If that's the way you want it, Dill. There's one thing, though."

"Yes." Fenner waited.

"Don't tell me I'll be better off. I won't be, and you know it."

"Listen," Fenner said. "This thing won't work. That's all there is to it."

"You like to make things nice and simple, don't you? And when they won't stay that way you run out."

"I don't intend to spend my life on the sunny side of Main Street," Fenner said angrily. His voice sounded strange in his own ears.

"Because the people there remind you too much of your father and mother?"

"What have they got to do with this?"

"Maybe more than you think. Somewhere along the line you got twisted up, Dill. Maybe if things had been different there, you would have seen life from another angle, as more than a set of rules that kept a man and woman together even when they hated each other."

"Who's talking nonsense now?"

She shook her head. "No. It's very good sense. Everyone has to belong somewhere, and you just don't belong with a bunch of gamblers and gunfighters. You can't run away from yourself, Dill. And that's what you're trying to do. That's the thing that won't work."

There was a long silence then, a silence that drew itself unbearably taut. Fenner had dropped his hands to the pommel of his saddle and he held them there until his thoughts regrouped themselves.

"I'll be leaving on the evening stage," he said slowly. "Will you come down to see me off?"

Both her lips were between her teeth as she fought to hold back the tears. Not trusting herself to speak, she merely shook her head in the negative. Fenner nodded and swung around.

A thought struck him and he turned back momentarily.

"You're on pretty good terms with Helen Bates, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I think it might be an idea if you asked her to come out here for a while to stay with you."

"Oh. Are things that bad?"

"No, but they will be soon." He paused. "It's a rotten deal for a woman."

"Yes, isn't it? All right, I'll ask her."

"Well," Fenner said. "I guess that's all."

"For a man who isn't interested in others, you can be pretty observant," Lois said "And surprisingly kind."

"None of us is all bad," Fenner said sourly.

"Nor all good. So that means we're all the same and nothing matters. Is that it?"

But Fenner wasn't going to start around that circle again. He kept going this time, not even pausing to look back.

HE WOULD have given much not to see Dave Calder again. But his luck was running against him, for Calder seemed to have taken up a permanent post on the hotel porch. Surprisingly enough, he looked amiable.

"Nice ride?" he asked as Fenner dismounted.

"No." Fenner said shortly.

"Too bad. It's a good day for riding."

"Listen," Fenner said, "I'm leaving tonight."

"Wish I could do the same. Well, it don't matter much anyway. To tell the truth, I'm a little fed up with worrying about the likes of Al Bates."

Fenner stared at him wonderingly and the sheriff went on.

"Seems he forgot all about that fella he was supposed to see today. And it musta been pretty important or Helen wouldn't have come into the saloon last night."

"Once you get off on the wrong foot it's hard to get back in step again," Fenner said.

"Yeah. Ain't it the truth?"

Fenner left him sitting there and went into the hotel and paid his bill. Then he climbed the stairs to his room and began to pack.

He had surprisingly few possessions. It had always been a case of travel light and travel fast for Dill Fenner. When he reached the bottom of the commode drawer his bag was still half empty.

At the very bottom of the drawer lay his gunbelt and holster. He had not worn them in months. Now he buckled them on, made sure his gun was loaded and in good working order, and slid it into the holster. With the methodical movements of long practice he assured himself that his coat would not

interfere with his draw, pulling it down and loosening it.

It had never been a very fast draw at its best, Fenner remembered. Of course, not even the good draws were as fast as they were cracked up to be. His had been just good enough to get by on, about on a level with his poker.

After he was finished with his packing, there was nothing left to do but have his dinner. The stage would be in within a few hours, and in less than an hour after that Dill Fenner would be riding it out of town. The thought gave him little pleasure.

* * *

"Twenty minutes," the driver was saying, his voice directed at the handful of people waiting inside the hotel.

Fenner looked up, startled. The time had gone fast. He drew a cigar from his pocket and lit it, knowing that when it was half smoked twenty minutes would have passed.

He was alone when that moment came. The driver stuck his head in the door and Fenner nodded. The bag lay at Fenner's feet. He stooped, picked it up and carried it out onto the hotel porch. Coming down the stairs, the driver took the bag from Fenner and tossed it up to the top of the coach along with the rest of the baggage.

The other passengers were already inside when Fenner clambered aboard. He nodded to the men, removed his hat in deference to the ladies, and settled back into his seat.

Above them the driver said, "Hey!" There was the crack of the whip as it snaked out over the horses' heads.

"Wait!" Fenner called sharply.

But by now they were rolling and the driver could not hear him. Yanking open the door, Fenner got a foot onto the step and jumped. He landed running, with the dust kicking up at him from behind the wheels. Then the stage was gone and he was standing alone in the street.

Now that the moment was over he felt foolish. The thing had happened so swiftly and automatically that he could recall no conscious thought directing him. Well, the bag would be safe enough. It would be dropped off at the first stop, and he could pick it up when he took the morning stage.

Then he looked back for the first time. Across the street and opposite the hotel stood Lois Mann and Helen Bates. Fenner knew they could see him, but neither made a move. After a moment he shrugged. It had been a crazy impulse that had made him jump. No use complicating things any further, though. Better let matters stand as they were.

Somehow, getting a drink was the only thing he could think of at the moment. It seemed as good an idea as any.

THERE was a faint stir of surprise when he came into the saloon. Some of these men had seen him get on the stage. But no one spoke, and again Dill Fenner felt that lack of familiarity.

But when he got to the bar he found Calder there. The older man looked at him and said nothing. His mind was plainly on something else. It was Dill Fenner who broke the long silence.

"I guess I couldn't leave without seeing how this hand turned out."

"Purely professional interest, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I wonder about that," Calder said mildly. "Happens I stopped at the livery stable just before the stage pulled out. Your horse was still there. Didn't seem to me as how a fella who was pulling up stakes would be leaving a valuable piece of property like that just lyin' around."

Fenner gasped. He had forgotten all about the horse. Or at least one part of his mind had forgotten it. But there was another part that had not forgotten at all. It was the same part that had given him the impulse to jump off the stage at the last minute.

(Continued on page 111)

THE ROSE OF BOOTHILL

CHAPTER ONE

Prairie Newcomer

THE train conductor extended his large, fatherly hand bearing a Masonic ring, and said to Abigail Paxton, "Well, here you at at Dust, lady!"

The name of the station sounded just like Pete Carson. He *would* live near some depot with an outlandish name like that! A smile came to her lips. She stooped to gather her wide skirts, and stepped down from the high coach steps. With her foot stretched forth, a bright expectancy filled her face. Her whole life raced through her mind. "This," she thought, "is the beginning of my story! All my life I've waited for this moment! Nothing until now has ever really mattered!"

So thinking, she stepped from the shadows of the railroad coach out into the beating glare of the sun. For that instant, she paused to find her vision. With her fash-

"You make the coffee, Abby," Pete said. "Star here will see to the sprain. . . ."

BASIN

By Thomas Calvert

In the midst of desolation and ruin, all Carson asked of her was . . . that she be a woman.

ionable and ridiculous little parasol twirling against the sun, the motion of her young body was caught and held, and a shy eagerness was aglow upon her face. Standing that way, she looked precisely what she was: a high-blooded and rebellious little beauty, raised in Eastern luxury, who had kicked the traces and come west to marry the man of her own choice.

"Don't see his dust yet," the conductor said. "But we can wait a spell."

"His dust?" she repeated, not understanding. Then her vision cleared. Bitter humiliation scalded through her veins. He was not there to meet her!

"Sometimes a man gets a mite delayed in this country," the conductor went on. "But don't you fret, Miss Paxton, he'll be along!"

"Of course!" she said. As if it were nothing unexpected. As if there must be a very good reason for the slightest thing Pete Carson did, or did not do. As if she were so much a part of him, and of his life, that this was no different than being late herself. And as if suddenly the whole bright golden bubble of her life had not burst, and left her heart torn and quaking.

"A little different country from St. Louis," the conductor said conversationally. "Recollect when my missus first came out . . ." His voice faded to a murmur behind the crushing deadness of her thoughts.

SHE held her back straight and her chin high, the smile set upon her face. She stilled her wild, inward trembling and forced herself to look about. For hours she had watched this country running by, but now for the first time she was really seeing it, and feeling the significance of what she saw.

Flat and drab under the glaring light, the bare, desolate land slipped off into that endless shimmering sea of heat. The smoke from the engine puffed in fantastic shapes against the yellow sky, and then was suddenly held motionless and dead, as if the savage spirit of the llano had jumped upon it and sucked out its life.

She shivered uncontrollably at the gaunt, harsh loneliness of the land, and looked back at the conductor.

"There he comes!" he boomed cheerfully. "And I reckon you won't want an audience for your meeting." He grinned with an elderly man's sly memories, tipped his hat, flagged the engine and swung aboard. The train pulled off into the blazing heat.

Abigail watched the llano with a sudden panic of utter loneliness. It was a trick! There wasn't a living thing in miles! Her long-gloved hand flashed to her mouth to stifle the scream that wanted to come out of her throat.

Then she saw him, a rapidly advancing cloud of rose-tinted dust. He was driving a dollie-shaded buckboard behind a span of gaunt, half-wild pintos. He swept in a circle, and was down in front of her before the rearing horses stopped.

"Pete!" she sobbed, and running, threw herself into his arms. For this instant, she was a frightened and pathetic little girl, running to the strength and protection of her man. There was no humiliation, no hurt, no restraint. Nothing stood between them.

He held her tight, one strong arm patting her shoulder gently, and his deep voice was quick with understanding in her ear. "Abby! Abby girl! There's nothing out here to be afraid of!"

The engineer picked that moment to send back a friendly whistle from the train.

They sprang apart, suddenly aware of themselves and of each other, and separated by a self-conscious restraint. They laughed awkwardly. Then he said, "Prettier than ever!"

She made a face, part of relief, part humor, part hurt. "Aside from a few wrinkles and gray hairs I got from waiting for you!"

"Oh," he said, his mind switching to

something serious. "I got to apologize straight out for that. I had to water me some cows, and didn't get off right smart this morning."

"Some cows?" she repeated, a jerky little smile coming to her lips. He was fooling, of course!

THEN, slowly, the smile slipped from her face. He *wasn't* fooling! He hadn't even dressed to come and meet her! His chaps were thick with dust, and the smell of sweating horses and steaming cows, and leather that had recently been wet. He had worked strenuously in the shirt he wore. He had not shaved since yesterday.

Indignation was seething in her. "Careful!" she warned herself. "This isn't the beginning you expected, Abby! But don't make it worse with stubborn pride!"

"I don't suppose the cows could have waited?" she asked.

"Why, mebbe," he said vaguely. He shot her a sudden grin, tinged with distant thoughts. "You'll understand these things when you get to know the country."

She gave a rather stiff nod. "I can see it's a good deal different from St. Louis!"

"A good deal!" he repeated in a peculiar tone. He turned to get her luggage roped on back of the buckboard, and helped her to the seat. Then they rode quite a way in silence.

They dropped down a precarious sliding trail along the sandy wall of a hackberry strangled wash. Suddenly they passed out of the garish light into soft gray shadows. He said then, as if he had been trying to find the best way to frame the thought, "You'll find things pretty rough and raw out here, right at the moment, Abby."

Impulsively, she stretched out a hand suddenly gone chill, and laid it on the corded muscles of his arm. Her teeth raked across a corner of her lower lip. Then she looked around at him. "Pete," she said, "you can send me back, if I'm unwanted!"

"Unwanted?" he repeated. He turned and looked at her with amazement on his face. Then he threw back his head and his laughter welled up to the brassy skies. "A spring in the middle of a burnin' desert, and you think *that!*"

She dropped her eyes to hide the fears and uncertainties and hurts that filled them. "Well, your letters . . . Maybe I was remembering that last night in St. Louis . . ." She compressed her lips hard to hold back the fullness that crowded to her throat.

He put his hand atop hers and squeezed it fondly. "It's nothing like that, Abby," he said. "But we're facing the worst drought we ever had. It's not the best time to see a new country."

"Oh!" she breathed. Relief was such that her eyes flooded with tears, and she turned her head away.

"You see," he murmured, "it's tough to take even when you're used to it. And not being used to it—well, I wouldn't want Star to think you . . ." He broke off. A dark crimson wave stained down his neck.

"Star?" she said. "That girl?"

He nodded. "Star Beltner. She owns the next ranch up the valley. We're doubling up herds and men to fight the drought, so she's likely to be around the house some."

Abby said nothing. She sat in a sudden stricken daze. She felt as if the heat had caught her, and was drying out of her all the light and soft and laughing feelings that were a woman's right. She stared straight ahead at the harsh, burned land. She felt herself being carried by this savage land away from the smooth flow of the Mississippi and the lanterns along the levies, and the magnolia-scented nights out on broad plantation lawns. Ahead lay something raw and stark and filled with hardness and with fight.

She spoke from some vast distance, barely recognizing her own voice. "Star Beltner was your boyhood sweetheart, wasn't she?"

He gave an uneasy laugh. "That's over! We're friends, now."

They climbed a coulee and jogged along a trail that skirted a dead-grassed mesa. The grass had a scorched tinder look, as if the malicious spirit of the country had caught it in its full lush spring, and slowly twisted and stifled it to death.

She thought dully, "So it isn't over, that boyhood flame!" Maybe he thought it was. But it wasn't. The woman in her knew. She gave a sharp, ironic laugh. "So this," she thought with bitter humor, "is my story! I've broken a life I can't go back to. I've come to marry a man who still loves somebody else!"

They crossed a finger of sterile, blistering desert, and threaded a maze of Joshua-dotted hills. They straddled a long crest and then dropped swiftly into a wild gulch of grotesquely twisted trees. Suddenly the white adobe and red-tiled roof of the hacienda sprawled beneath them. The house nestled in a green oasis of gardens behind high outer walls.

So unexpected was it that it jarred her from her somber mood. "Pete!" she murmured. "It's lovely!"

He squeezed her hand. "It'll be better yet with you in it!"

He said that from his heart. She could have wept.

A mestizo girl was waiting at the door. "The Señorita Beltner is here, señor."

The man darkned and muttered something under his breath. A husky voice called out, "Here with bells on, darling!" Then another girl appeared in the shadowed doorway and gasped, "Oh, I'm *sorry!* I didn't know Miss Paxton was coming today!"

"Not much!" Pete said under his breath. He introduced the two with a hard edge to his voice.

They moved into the cool interior, the two girls talking innocent trivialities, all sweetness and friendship, with sharp barbs beneath the surface. The ranch girl was bold lined and compact, with the sleek, rhythmic movements of a fast, wild mare. Now, as she took in Abby's cool, eastern freshness and youth and style, her eyes fired beneath black lashes, like twin suns burning behind the heavy clouds across the Mescalero.

"You're catching us at the worst time you could," Star said smoothly. There was the slightest accent on the word *us*.

Abby smiled. "It's best to know the worst things first, don't you think?"

Star gave a rich, purring laugh. "Why yes, if you can take 'em!" She let her gaze linger intentionally on Abby's soft, white hands. "She may find the Mescalero a mite violent, Pete," she added.

CHAPTER TWO

Outcast Tenderfoot

THE man moved nervously and shot her a dark, glowering look. Abby watched that. It took a lot of fondness for a man to be angered that much by a woman! He said quickly, "A mite of violent soap and water is probably what Abby wants right now!" He signaled the mestizo girl. "Show Miss Paxton to her room."

"It's quite the nicest room in the house," Star said, a devilish twinkle in her eyes. "I always tried to get Pete to give it to me when I stopped over."

"Did he do it?" Abby asked crisply.

The assured smile went off Star's face, leaving it angered and determined and dangerous. "No," she said flatly.

Abby used her sweetest smile, and turned and followed the mestizo girl upstairs. She faced the room with a little gasp of amazement. It was full of flowers. She stood in the doorway and looked curiously about.

The mestizo girl said, "Señor Carson fix it himself."

Abby sat down on the bed, sudden laughter drying the tears in her heart. "The dar-

ling!" she thought. "He fixed every flower here himself! It looks like a funeral!"

She bathed, and the water was a balm to her frayed nerves. Relaxing in the funny little portable tub, she thought, "If I have to fight for him, I can do it! If only I can find out how she'll attack."

She was dressing by the window when she heard the murmur of their voices in the patio below. She heard the murmur of their voices in the patio below. She heard Star say, "Why shouldn't I stop by and see what she's like? You're not ashamed of her, are you, Pete?"

"Ashamed?" Pete said. "Why should I be?"

There was a little silence, as if Star had given a woman's expressive shrug. "Why, no reason. She looks very sweet and pretty. I can't exactly see her stringing cows or cleaning out an armful of gangrene, but a gal can't have everything!"

"She's a thoroughbred!" Pete growled. "She'll do what has to be done!"

Star's laughter held a feline note. She said, "Pete, I don't pretend to love her like a sister! But I'm another woman, and I know. She'll never stick. She'll quit on you some tough day just when you need her, and ride clean off the Mescalero!"

"Not Abby!" he snapped. But there was an anxious note to his voice.

Abby drummed her carefully tended nails against her comb, then studied herself in her mirror. She put extra care into her dressing now. She came down into the patio serenely sure of herself, cool and dazzling and golden. She saw Pete's startled look of admiration. Star's eyes snapped jealously. He poured her some cool tea from a pottery jug, and there was an awkward pause.

She moved with her lithe, undulating step beside a blood-red yucca, and stood with an oblique shaft of reddish light just touching her corn-ripe hair. She looked out at the sunset horizon. "It's beautiful," she said. "I never saw one like it back east."

Star laughed abruptly. "You likely didn't! Those sunsets are costing the ranchers in this valley twenty thousand dollars a day!"

Abby turned and looked across at Pete. "We're a mite short on water," he explained. "Those purty reds and purples and golds you're admiring are dust. When you see a sunset like that, you know there's not much water around."

Star looked up at him with a thin, contemplative gaze. "In fact," she said, "there's so little water that most of the ranchers haven't washed a dish lately! You're an honored guest, Miss Paxton. You're likely the only person in the valley who's had a real bath for a month!"

"Not bathe!" Abby uttered, with an uncertain little laugh. "Surely, it can't be that bad!"

Pete rolled a cigarette. "Don't mind Star," he said. "She's a judgment day John! We've still got water here."

Spurs jangled through the house. A heavily built, hard-bodied man with a black scowl came through, beating a cloud of dust from his chaps with his hat. He gave a brief nod at the introduction to Abby, then ignored her. He took a mouthful of water, swashed it around, and spewed it carelessly over a yacqui plant. The smell of leather and dust and sweat beat off of him in waves.

THE man was Tex Graham, Pete's foreman. He stood with his rope-hardened fists on his hips, a sullen, explosive savagery in his black eyes. "Well," he said, "we got it where it hurts!"

Pete Carson's jaw tightened. "Where?"

"First the Black Rocks, then the Trumpet, then Skeleton Creek. All dried within eight hours! And I mean dry, boss! That water was sucked off like it was pumped!"

"How many steers we got there?"

"Four hundred," Graham blurted.

"Bellowin', white-eyed, loco with thirst and ready to stampede over to Pizen Water. Half of 'em will be dead by mornin'. There ain't no water we can get 'em to!"

"How about the Sink?" Carson asked.

Tex took a savage chew of tobacco. His voice came thick with fury. "Filled to the brim with alkali! The whole damned state's driftin' here in dust!"

Abby said, "Couldn't you drive the steers in here?"

Tex glared at her. Star's lips curled a little. Pete threw her a distant smile that said plainer than words. "Don't bother your head, child. These are things you don't understand."

Abby colored, clear down her neck. A dry, burning lump was suddenly in her throat. They didn't even care that she wanted to be interested. She was left out of this . . . a child, a stranger.

Pete Carson studied the thick, dusty tinting of the sky. "There'll be wind tomorrow," he said finally. "Like the blast of a furnace!" He kicked viciously at a pebble. "We can cut out some of those critters on the mesa and drive them across to the mesquite range."

"How?" Tex barked. "There's twenty miles of alkali and badlands. They haven't had a decent drink for a week. There's a wind blowin' through Larrope Gulch would burn a griddle. Two men can't do it!"

"Three men could do it," Pete stated.

Tex shrugged. "I got all the boys can still crawl bending theirselves double already!"

Star flexed her strong, horsewoman's hands. She said, "When you boys get through hollerin', you can count heads again and see you got three riders here."

"It's no job for a woman," Graham said, firmly.

Star stood up. "I'm only a woman on party nights!" she said. "Let's hit leather and get them dogies rollin'!"

A slow, keen light came into Pete's eyes as he looked at her. He nodded. "Good girl, Star, if you don't mind gettin' mussed up!"

"You haven't got the beef can muss this lady up!" Star allowed. The three of them looked at each other and grinned. That grin left Abby completely out of things. She might not have been there at all. The slight was a raw, burning wound, as if they had poured on salt.

Star, Pete and Tex turned into the house, and shortly Pete came back out alone. He wore a heavy brushpopping jacket. He carried two heavy bull whips under his arms, his guns strapped on, and he was snapping on brass-studded gauntlets.

He said somberly, "It's a heck of a first night, Abby. But our time will have to wait."

Bitter tumult was crowding up in her breast. But she wouldn't show that. She turned him a smiling face. "Cows and beef first in this country!" she said humorously. "Isn't that it, Pete?"

He gave a hard smile. "No beef means no us, Abby!"

She went to him and snapped his gauntlet. "Is there anything I can do?"

For a moment he looked undecided. Then: "No. Just keep beautiful. But don't take too many baths!" He stood a moment looking at her with dark conjecture in his eyes, then forced a tight grin and wheeled out through the house.

She waited until she heard them gallop away, then sank into a bamboo chair. He hadn't known, but his rowels had gouged right into her heart. He left her trembling and aching and uncertain of herself. . . . And thinking of Star, who could ride and rope and drive a herd with men.

"But he loves me!" she cried miserably to herself. "I won't let that foreman, and that—that woman make me quit!"

The wall of the patio followed the steep line of the hill. Above it, the rim of the gulch was a rolling line against the bright pastel fan of sunset. For a moment, the figures of the three riders were silhouetted

upon the rim, then they vanished into the evening sky.

THE day was passing, but now the land was letting go its soaked-up heat. The terrible silence of the desert country crowded in upon her, stealthy and malicious and frightening. The air turned violet and then purple and then black. Suddenly, out of that darkness beyond the wall, broke the chilling screams of a mountain cat.

Abby came erect like a released spring. A cry ripped from her throat. The mestizo girl moved from the shadows across the pebbled earth. "It is nothing, señorita," she said. "It cannot get in.

Abigail wheeled upon her. The girl stood in the deep shadows, her face an impassive blob against the deeper darkness beyond. But her eyes were glowing with amusement. Abigail stood trembling, unable even to answer angrily.

The girl said, "Supper is on the table, señorita."

Abigail's teeth were deep in her lip. She was an outsider, a cause for amusement, even to the house girl! She felt alone and afraid, and suddenly her pounding heart cried out for the strength of Pete's arms, and the nearness and softness of his voice.

She said, "No dinner!" and turned toward the other door.

She could almost hear the smile in the girl's voice. The girl said, "Dinner is at mid-day here, señorita!"

Abigail's hands clenched, and a bitter retort was on her lips. She strangled it down, and passed quickly to her room, bolting herself in, and eyeing a rifle she would be afraid to use. She walked the floor with a distracted, nervous stride. Once she stopped at her dressing table to run a finger across the gold and ivory boxes she had set out there. A film of gritty gray dust had drifted over them in less than an hour.

She felt sticky and dirty and full of temper, and thought a cool bath would calm her. Then she remembered the look on Star's face wehn she mentioned water. She threw herself onto her bed, the tears rushing from her eyes, and cried herself into a terrible, troubled slumber. She dreamed of being lost in vast, gaunt lava beds under a blistering sun. And on a high, cool mesa rim that she could see, but could not shout to, Star was riding alongside Pete. . . .

Dawn was a thick and dirty gray. The sun came up and crawled like a hot penny across the boiling sky. The heat rolled against the hacienda, smashing over into the patio so that even the cacti looked wilted in the baking shade.

A rider came galloping up in mid-afternoon, looking for Pete Carson. "He—he hasn't come home," Abby said with tearful jerkiness, thinking of Star.

"He'll be damned lucky if he gets back!" the man said. "I'm Ed Crandall from Devil's Gulch. Tell him the road's closed over, the south pass is blocked. Our wells are dry and our springs running salt. Tell him a wind's startin' up the Mescalero, and pickin' up alkali by the carloads off the flats!"

Abby gasped at the bitterness of the man's tone. "Oh! That sounds terrible!" she cried.

Crandall laughed savagely. "Don't waste sympathy, lady; you'll be needin' it for yourselves right fast! But tell that bull-headed maverick that if he pulls through he can send back a few hundred acres of my ground next year!"

There was another harsh laugh, and he turned and rode off.

Abby went slowly back to the patio and sat watching her cream-smooth flesh dry and darken and mottle with tiny cracks just from sheer heat. Her cornflower-blue eyes suddenly focused on a potted rose bush. From it had come some of the flowers Pete had so earnestly set upon her table. The heat was wilting the flowers, turning the stems dry and dark. This

struck with odd poignancy into her heart. She moved the plant to a cooler place, and tenderly gave its parched roots a glass of water.

The sound of hoofbeats drew her again to the front of the house. A man came riding in, and almost fell out of the saddle. He was covered with a solid layer of fine gray dust that gave off a choking, pungent scent. His chaps were ripped, an ugly welt was festering on his neck. His hand lay open to the bone. The wound was an unhealthy black that showed through the gray dust. His wrist was swelling badly.

Abby let out a little cry, and ran to help him to the shadows of the portale that ran the full width of the house. He whispered through his dust-choked mouth, "Don't bother, lady!"

"But you can't walk!" she cried.

"Feet," he explained. "Alkali burns. I got a notion there's gangrene in that left."

She stooped, trying desperately to yank off his boot. She couldn't budge it. She stood up with tears glistening in her eyes, her hands making wild and futile little gestures. The mestizo girl was standing there, a bucket of water in her hand. Her eyes were on Abigail with faintly mocking lights.

She said, "It will not look very nice, señorita. It would be best to let me."

She gave a dipper of water to the man. Then she took his leg, and standing backward, drew it between her knees. With a sharp knife, she deftly cut away the boot. The man groaned and cursed. The boot came off carrying strips of skin.

CHAPTER THREE

A Man's Woman

ABIGAIL blanched. She was studdenly swept with weakness and with nausea, and staggered inside where she could not see. Desperately she wanted to help. But she could not control the terrible feelings that assailed her. Ashamed, she sneaked back into the patio, and sobbed her grief out to the potted rose.

Other men came drifting in as the day wore on. She watched them ride in, appalled by this terrible, brutal thing that was the llano, and the cruel way it beat these men. Dimly now, she could comprehend the nature of the country. Her resentment against it gave her steel to quell her squeamishness, and seek to help. She marched out determinedly to the bunkhouse to be of use.

A man looked up respectfully, with burning eyes in his head. He said thickly, "We're powerful appreciatin', ma'am, but there ain't nothin' here a woman should be seein'."

Her mouth set in a rigid line. "I'm no different from Miss Beltner, and I'll bet if she were here she'd help, and no mistake about it!"

"Oh, Miss Star," he said. "Well, she's different, ma'am. It ain't that we don't take your offer right kindly . . ."

She didn't hear the rest. She looked squarely at him. What she saw before he dropped his eyes was that they didn't want her meddling. She was still a dude, and with that simple apology, they shut her out. She turned, and her shoulders dropped a little. She went back to the house, and stood with her beautiful white hands resting on the pot that held the rose . .

It was nearly evening when Pete's rowels dragged across the portale. He turned quickly into the hacienda. His body was big and weary and shadowed against the other door, and he came across the room with the stiff, heavy motions of a man nearly spent.

She cried, "Pete!" and went to him as he slumped down on a cowhide couch. She threw herself beside him on the floor. The woman in her ached to nurse and comfort him, and the light in her eyes flowed at him, careless of pride. "You're hurt!" she cried. "What can I do?"

He forced a grin to heat-cracked lips. "You might make a pot of coffee," he said wearily.

"But about you!" she said. "Your back's hurt! I know it!"

His big hand squeezed hers fondly. "You make the coffee, Abby. Star will see to the sprain."

Her breath was a little anguished gasp. Then she looked up to where Star stood in the doorway. Dust-streaked and battered like Pete. But with the sureness of her womanhood upon her, and with the fire of possession in her eyes.

Star dusted off, tossed her gloves and hat upon a table and moved across the room. She stopped with one hand resting upon Pete's forehead, her eyes glowing upon the kneeling girl. She said finally, "He could use some water. Both hot and cold." For all its softness, her voice was like a lash of contempt at Abby's waiting.

"You—you can't . . ." Abby flared.

Star simply looked at her and waited.

Abby came to her feet, suddenly smashed with the numbing impact of her defeat. She wouldn't know what to do for Pete even if Star left him to her! Filled with a kind of futile tumult, she turned to th kitchen. Even the house girl was helping the other men. But she was relegated to carrying water and making coffee! It was Star who stripped him above the waist, Star who washed and strapped up his back, and Star at whom he swore when she rubbed in the horse liniment too hard. For Abby, he held that gentle smile. But that smile might have been for a little girl.

THAT night he rode back out to the range. And Star rode with him. The two of them rode up over the black rim of the gulch and out under a blood-red moon. With all that had to be done, there was nothing that Abby could do. She was shut out from the very problem of survival,

left with nothing to do, except to care for the rose.

On the fourth day, Pete rode in alone, a blackened, dusty ghost of the grinning man she knew. His clothes were tattered, his knuckles raw. The muscles of his shoulders and chest were knotted from exhaustion, and he held his hand to his side where a cedar branch had rammed him at full gallop. He was gaunt and lined and his eyes burned like fires in red-lidded, hollow sockets.

"Pete!" she cried desperately. "I've got to help in some way! You've got to tell me what to do!"

He gave a grim half smile, and pulled her close as he half tumbled on the couch. "You could sing," he said.

Yes, she could sing! She sang then, as she had never sung before, as she would sing to a baby. Dead weary, he fell asleep instantly, a tired smile on his broad lips.

She pulled him out on the couch, loosening his clothes and jerking off his boots. Gently, and filled with maternal longing, she bathed his wrists and neck and tired, hot head. Tenderly she pillowed his head upon her breast. She sat there, singing low and softly through the night, filled with a shining happiness that she was helping, for when she stopped singing he moved distractedly, restlessly, in his slumbers.

Star Beltner came at dawn, taking in the scene with one sweeping glance. She stopped dead in the center of the room and stared at Abby. "How long's he been in?"

"Since supper. He slept straight through," Abby told her. There was both pride and defiance in her voice.

"And you let him? Sleeping there like that?" Star strode over and looked down at him with a touch of wonder that he was alive.

"What's better than sleep?" Abby demanded.

"Better?" Star snapped. And then she made a woman's gesture. "Don't you know he's covered with alkali and cuts, and likely burnin' up?" She stared hotly at Abby. "No," she finally said. "You wouldn't know! Help me strip this mustang down and see what's left of him. No, never mind, go fetch a bucket o' water."

The days passed on, hotter, dustier. The skies went darker each day. First darkening yellows, then browns, then angry, metallic brownish-grays. The sun moved like the heart of a volcano through the sky. It sapped their strength, and singed their flesh, and dried the blood in their very veins.

When Pete came in, he seldom spoke. He bolted food at any hour, and threw himself onto the couch. He spoke in monosyllables to Star and Tex when they were there. For Abby, there was the quiet, restrained strength of his hand on her neck, or her arm, or her fingers. But only that. She was pushed out of this grim struggle. She was not even allowed to understand it. She was cut off from the man she loved. Her presence was no more important than a puppy's.

PETE CARSON was dead to the world, a sleeping giant worn of his last ounce of spare flesh, on the day when Tex came in, his face black as char with burn, and swollen to an angry purple where it was not raw.

He shook Pete away without ceremony, and handed him the coffee pot to drink from. He waited until his boss was awake and then snapped. "The big creek is plumb dry. The south herd's eatin' prickly, and got that so chewed off they're takin' to thorns. You can follow their blood leakin' all over the range."

Pete said, "Bad, eh?"

"Bad!" Tex snorted. "Boss, you ain't goin' to have a cow left, 'less you start movin' 'em for Wyomin'!"

Carson's gaunt face turned to iron. "Tex," he said, "I'll lick this on my own range—or bust!"

"Don't ask me my opinion!" Tex

growled. "It'll be suicide, stayin' here!"

"Get some sleep," Pete said. "I'll wake you."

He watched Tex hobble out. Something savage and sullen and grim had come to life in him. He stood with his legs wide, watching Abby pouring water on the rose bush.

He snapped, "In case you don't know it, that's a day's ration of water for a man you're wastin' there!"

She went scarlet, and her shoulders dropped. There were no tears left in her any more. She said miserably, "I reckon I'm not much use around a ranch, Pete."

Instantly he looked contrite. He crossed to her and put his hand on her neck and shook her gently. "Heat's makin' a regular Gila monster of me!" he said. He looked at the rose, and suddenly a great spring of freshness welled up into his gaunt, worn features. He chuckled gently and tipped up her chin. "Our rose?" he asked.

She nodded, biting her lips, and refusing to look him in the eye. "Yes. But I—I won't waste any more—"

He laughed then, and suddenly drew her against his chest. He said, "That rose gets its water ration with every man! That's your job, pardner!"

He squeezed her fiercely. Suddenly her lips were up to his. The weeks of hurt and misery and loneliness were consumed in the fierceness of their kiss. After a long moment, their lips drew apart. She murmured breathlessly in his ear, "Pete, why can't we leave this awful place? Take me back east where the grass is green, and flowers grow, and there's water, and everything isn't full of hurt and fight!"

She felt his body stiffen. With it, the quick setting of his stubborn pride. He stepped back a half pace, but he didn't look at her. He stood looking down at his boots. He said slowly, "Flowers will grow here, too, Abby. If they've got it in 'em."

He looked up then with a burning determination in his eyes. And something else she could not fathom, some uncertainty that haunted him and stalked through the caverns of his soul. Then he squeezed her shoulder, wheeled and passed out of the house.

She stood where he left her, her head bowed, her whole lonely being filled with the bitter realization that the thing that haunted him was uncertainty of her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Until Death

SHE stood there with shining eyes and repeated in a whisper to herself, "Flowers will grow here, too. If they've got it in 'em." Then she looked bitterly at the way the heat was burning and cracking her once soft and white skin. "But what if they haven't got it?" she asked herself softly.

The carefully tended rose answered that. Despite all she could do, it had begun to wilt. The heat had burned the last moisture out of the air and ground, and sucked it up from wherever it was with a blasting breath.

The sun came up now with a strange chrome-orange hue that turned quickly into a red-gray smudge and quickly lost its shape in the simmering molten sky. When the wind blew, the sky went black, a hot and burning black that was filled with fire and scorched the flesh and stung the eyes.

The dust grew terrible and thick, spreading in endless layers upon the walls and ceilings, and heaping in little furrows along the flowers. It got under clothes, and ground into flesh, and was a constant taste and smell, so that there was no way to get away from it. It even filled her sleep.

Abby thought of her clean, pleasant home back East, where the air was cool and moist, and there was plenty of water to scrub a body clean. And she thought that the heat and dust and raw violence of this country could kill a person, just as it was killing the rose bush and the grasses and the cows. They said it could actually burn

a human being crazy. And already, the ranchers down the valley were moving out in droves.

Star was the last to call it quits. She rode in with the boys, driving the last of her gaunt herd ahead of her. She came in silently this day, and sat down to supper. Then she looked up and said abruptly, "Pete, I'm moving out."

Carson lifted his burning eyes and looked at her. *"You, Star?"*

She nodded. "Not a damp spot left on all my place. I'm taking what I got left north and startin' over."

He looked somehow shaken. He stared at his plate. He said, "My last men are quittin' tomorrow."

Star flicked Abby with a burning, contemptuous gaze. "Won't leave you much help, Pete. You better take the lickin', and throw in with me and move. This place will be buried, come another week. The whole desert's walkin'."

He looked stubborn. "I've still got some water here. And Tex."

Tex scowled from the end of the table. "Boss, I'm no quitter," he growled. "But this drought is lickin' men bigger than me. I'm for movin' north a spell. You can always come back."

"To what?" Carson snapped. "To find nesters moved in, tying up your own place with red tape?"

Star's eyes went to Abby's soft hands. She stared at them a long time. She said finally, "You can't go it alone, Pete. I'll stick until your big ditch begins to fill. That's the last water in the country, and if you got the sense of a gopher, you'll move along with me then."

He said, "No. Not even then. I'll still have—" He stopped dead and looked up sharply at Abby. He looked at her soft white hands and the shadows under her cornflower-blue eyes. He watched her drop her eyes, and he knew what that meant. She wanted to say, "I'll stick!" But she couldn't.

For a moment, his lips twisted with a bitter understanding smile. He said with sudden weariness, "Well, we'll see."

TEX and Star drifted outside to talk. Abby and Pete sat silent in the shadows, the smell and the feel and the taste of dust heavy in the killing heat. He said suddenly, "That rose bush died today, Abby."

For all the heat, a chill of anticipation ran through her. She made a little gesture with her lovely hands, and gave a jerky, hollow laugh. "I couldn't even do that job, Pete!"

"No," he said, "it isn't that. Sometimes there's things bigger than a person." He took a deep breath. The muscles along his jaw bulged in the smoky yellow light of a single lamp. "You'll go home tomorrow."

"How?" The word was a dry whisper in her throat.

"They're sending an emergency train out the spur," he said. "Two miles beyond our ditch it will pick you up. Tex will take you over."

A quiet hopelessness ran through her, like the dry, burning winds of the llano. What had she to offer a man in his shoes? She did not possess the things he needed. All she could give him was her love. And that was no good to fight a drought with. Her heart was filled with the burning anguish of her loss. But even in this there was no violence now. It was as if the heat had burned and parched it, as it had the rose.

It blew that night. A terrible, burning wind that choked the air with heat and dust and sucked the breath right out anything alive. The bawl of cattle was a voice of death out on the black hills. She lay in bed, dazed with heat and with the failure that would be the last page of her story. This was the end for her, just as it was for the range. Somehow, the drought had gotten into her heart, drying it and covering it with heat and dust.

"Dear God!" she thought. "I love him so! But a woman's got to do more than love—she's got to be of some use!"

He was waiting downstairs in the smudgy light of dawn. His features were dark slices of shadows in that light.

He said, "There are things that a man doesn't even feel clearly himself. He just knows, without being able to puzzle them out."

"There's no hurt pride in me, Pete," she said. "After the weeks of this drought, even a useless woman sees the foolishness of pride."

He scowled. "It's something I can't figure. The drought did it, just like it killed my ranch. Another year, and the drought couldn't have licked me, Abby. And it couldn't have come between us."

Everything in her was choked with feelings, and the feelings were like the gritty dust that filled the land outside. Nothing but soft and endless rain could wash it back to life. She could not speak. She could only smile, and put out her hand.

He said deep in his throat, "Like a last drink of water!"

She had to say something. But none of the chaotic things she felt would form into words. She smiled. "You've got Star," she said slowly.

He looked at her a second with a peculiar shine in his eyes. Then he took her hand and squeezed it and led her out to a horse. He tied a bandanna around her nose. Then he squeezed her arm and lifted his hand and watched them off.

Dimly she realized that it was not first dawn but already day, and that this was the quality of the light. It was thick with shadows as a mist. Tex rode in front, drawing her horse with a halter lead. They rode a fence line through the gloom, sucking for air in the suffocating light. Tex put her aboard the train, already packed with grim-faced, harsh-joking ranchers.

"I'll hand it to you, Miss Abby," Graham said. "The boss is loco on stickin' this out. It ain't your fault. You was last to quit."

She looked at him with puzzled questions in her eyes. But he touched his hat, and went back to the horses, and the conductor called, "All aboard!"

SHE made her way into the car, and seemed to be falling into a bottomless, numbing void. The train jerked along. A crew had to clear the tracks every few hundred yards. They stopped for other refugees, and a few cattle. The cough of a baby, the low sobbing of a woman, the cursing of men, came dimly to her mind.

Then a gruff voice was saying, "Sure she cleared out this mawnin'! Smart gal, Star. Took what she had left and loaded it aboard the fust cattle train and shipped it nawth!"

"Wal, she knew it was the end. There's Carson's Ditch, and look at it! What Pete figures by stayin' on . . ."

The voices faded into the hubbub. She looked out into the thick, eerie gray light. A steady veil of dust was trailing along the ground, drifting a great ditch full. That ditch ran straight across to Pete's home range.

"Hell, he won't stick now!" the gruff voice boomed back into her consciousness. "Not even a crazy man can stick it out alone!"

Like a sharp gong, Tex's words echoed back through her. "It ain't your fault. You was last to quit."

And Star had moved out that morning!

Suddenly Abby was on her feet and fighting her way through the crowded aisle to the door. On the platform a man tried to grab her. But she wriggled by and leaped into the ditch. Stumbling, struggling, falling, half blind and choking with dust, she kicked on into the frightening gray light, and the long black shadow of that ditch that lay ahead. Whipped and beaten by the heat and dust, she finally crawled up the end of the ditch, and looked over at the hacienda.

The long shaft of yellow light still fell outward from the door. With a tremulous little cry she staggered across the rough land, and went in the door.

There was no sound, no sign of Pete in the house. She closed her eyes and leaned against the couch. He must have gone; checked out right after her. Maybe she was the last person left in that drought-hit country.

On the threshold of the patio she stopped. Pete was standing there, slowly pouring water on the rose. He upended the glass and turned slowly. Then his head snapped up. He looked at her, and saw the signs that told how she was there, and flaming lights came into his wide, weary eyes.

But what he said was, "It isn't quite dead, after all!"

She smiled, and looked at him with a wide and level gaze. She said, "I came back to stick it out with you, Pete—if you want me."

"If I want you!" he whispered huskily. "In all my life, all I ever wanted was you, and the ranch."

"The ranch," she corrected, "and me!" But she smiled and her eyes were bright, and suddenly he crossed the space and swept her into his great arms, and squeezed her like a lost child. The worries had gone from his face now. He looked young and eager and ready to fight a dozen droughts.

He put her down and, looking sheepish, kicked a war bag by his feet. He said, "I was gettin' ready to tail out of here."

"And now, Pete?" she asked.

"In three, four hours," he said, "we'll be landlocked. There isn't one chance in fifty of riding this drought out alive." He gave her a sidewise look. "You know what that means, Abby?"

She said, "I know what you meant that first day about the country, Pete. You lick this country or it licks you."

"The land's doin' right well," he told her.

Tears of happiness were in her voice, and she shook her head. "I don't care, Pete. I've got *you!* That's all I want."

"Hell of a thing," he grinned. "You're right liable to die alone in a house with a man you ain't even married yet!"

He picked her up and carried her to a wide siesta seat. They sat close together, silent and staring out at the gray country, but no longer caring for the dust and heat.

Once he said, "When the wind starts, that's the finish."

She smiled and pressed his hand.

TIME passed, but it had no meaning. It was hotter, and darker. The day came and went with only a changing of the dim gradings of gray light. Her body was alive with fever, her lungs aching with their fullness of dust. But there was golden music in her heart, and a great, deep happiness flowed through her veins.

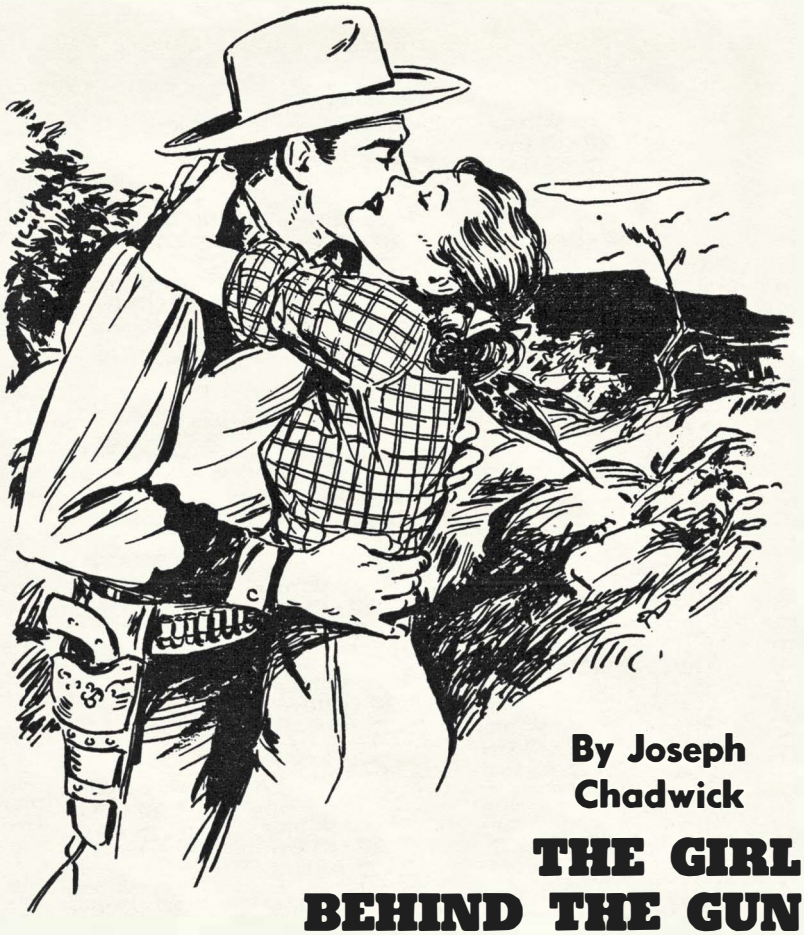
She had dozed, sitting there holding his hand, with their shoulders and heads just touching. Now she opened her eyes and listened. There was a singing far across the hills, that unworldly sound of a great body of wind approaching.

She turned and put her arms around his neck. She thought that it was fine to have found and loved a man like this, and to be completely part of him, and of his country, even for that short time. She murmured into his ear, "Listen . . . the wind! We'll be buried in dust soon!"

His arms came around her and held her close. "It's wind," he agreed. "But it's driving rain. Can't you smell it?"

The curve of his lips brushed hers, and clung, and she didn't care about wind or rain or anything in the whole world but him. And her lovely hands dug up into his thick hair and tousled it, and she thought with riotous happiness: "This is my story! And it's just beginning!"

And she knew then that perhaps the greatest gift a woman could ever bring a man such as this was simply that she'd stick and be there smiling, so that he could lick the country. ★ ★ ★



By Joseph Chadwick

THE GIRL BEHIND THE GUN

There was only one woman Garnett had ever wanted. He would have her only when her husband came home—tied head down across his saddle. . . .

CONTRARY to popular notions, a bachelor is more likely to be a creature of dull routine than a married man. Especially a bachelor like John Garnett who, at forty, was settled in his ways and, with a certain position in life to maintain, could not pal around with the "boys."

Between nine and ten o'clock each night, Garnett sat by the fire in the parlor

of his big log-and-stone ranch house, indulging in his one drink of the day and a final cigar. By then he was the only person still awake at Diamond G headquarters. The ranch hands had turned in, and the bunkhouse was dark. Charlie Wong, the Chinese house servant, was abed.

The night of the shooting over at Crescent Valley, Garnett was following his usual routine. A hard drumming of hoofs aroused him. He went out onto the porch, saw that the rider reining in by the stone steps was Deputy Sheriff Juan Aragon. "What's the trouble, Juan?" he asked.

Aragon was excited and out of breath. "One of the Bartons was killed early this evening, Mr. Garnett. Luke Barton. He was shot by that dude the Bartons keep having trouble with, Bert Fenton. We haven't got Fenton yet, but the sheriff got a posse together and went after him. The sheriff thought you'd want to know about it."

"Yeah. Sure."

"You want to ride along, Mr. Garnett?"

"Fenton shouldn't be hard to take. I guess you don't need me."

"Well, we'll let you know when we catch him."

"Sure, Juan. And thanks for stopping by."

Aragon nodded, swung his blowing horse about, and crossed the ranch yard. He headed north across Diamond range, vanishing almost at once in the darkness. Garnett remained there on the porch, taking a long, hard draw on his cigar and thinking of Bert Fenton and, even more intently, of Fenton's wife.

A frown gathered on his face as he wondered if Aragon's bringing the news of the trouble to Diamond G might have been due to people's knowing of how he felt about Fenton's woman. Logic told him instantly that it wasn't likely. He kept his feelings and his thoughts to himself, and not even Valerie Fenton herself knew. No, there was no ulterior motive in Aragon's having brought word to Diamond G. It was the custom for John Garnett to be informed when anything of importance occurred. He was the county's biggest and most prosperous rancher, and that fact gave him a measure of influence. Sheriff Milt Cole was a politician, and, being that, he felt that he was playing his cards right by keeping John Garnett informed.

He turned back into the house where he finished his drink, then, breaking long habit, poured another. He was lost in thought over this second drink, wondering if Fenton's going to the gallows or being shot trying to escape would have any meaning for him, when another rider came into the ranch yard. His name wasn't shouted this time. The rider dismounted, came onto the porch, knocked on the door. Garnett put down his glass, went to answer. He was jolted to the core when he opened the door and saw her, but he managed to keep his voice steady as he said, "Come in, Mrs. Fenton."

She entered without speaking, and he felt the churning excitement in her as she moved past him. His own feelings were erratic as he closed the door and urged her to go into the parlor; he did not try to analyze them. She halted just inside the parlor doorway, gazing about the room, woman fashion, despite the pressure within her. It was a large room, comfortable as a man could make it and wholly lacking a woman's touch. Indeed, no woman had ever entered it before.

IT SEEMED to Garnett, halting behind Valerie Fenton, that it was only proper, because of how he felt about her, that she should be the one woman to discover how he lived. It seemed too that she brought beauty to the room, and warmth and color.

She was a tall young woman, wearing tonight a dark green dress that had once been stylish but now, because the Fentons had come upon hard times, was shabby from much wear. She was exquisitely

formed, yet nothing about her suggested fragility. There was strength to her. She glowed with health. And her life with Bert Fenton had not dulled her zest for living. Her hair was auburn. Tonight it was a soft tousled mass, brightly burnished in the lamplight of Garnett's room.

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Fenton?"

She turned to him, her eyes bright with her excitement and her lips parted because of her hurried breathing. She ignored his question, asked instead, "You've heard?"

"Yes. Just a few minutes ago."

"It's not true, what Jess Barton told the sheriff."

"I only know that Luke Barton was shot and Bert Fenton is being hunted as the killer," he said. "What did Jess tell Sheriff Cole?"

She had full control of herself, even under the pressure of excitement. "Jess Barton claims that he was riding the Barton range when he heard a shot," she said evenly. "And that he went to investigate. He says that he saw Bert riding away, running, and that his brother lay dying on the road where Bert ambushed him. He told the sheriff that Luke hadn't even drawn his gun."

"What really happened?"

"The two of them stopped Bert on his way home from town," Valerie said. "Bert had been drinking, but he wasn't drunk. They began to argue with him, about water rights. They threatened him. Luke got off his horse and pulled Bert from the saddle, and began to rough him up. Bert's face is badly beaten. He isn't strong, and —and he's never been able to hold his own against rougher men. Luke Barton kept hitting him—and laughing at him. Bert could never stand to be hurt. He hates to be laughed at. Somehow he managed to get hold of Luke's gun. The gun went off, and Luke fell. That's how it really was, Mr. Garnett."

"You saw it?"

"No. Bert told me."

"He could have lied to you."

Valerie flinched. Hurt showed in her eyes. Then she said defiantly, "He has lied to me often. He didn't this time. He owns only one gun, and it was at home. When he came riding in, he had a gun in his hand —Luke Barton's gun."

"If Jess was there, why did he let Bert get away?" Garnett asked. "It's not like him."

"He dismounted and ran to his brother," she said. "That gave Bert a chance to get away. He must have been rattled. He couldn't have expected anything like that to happen—a man like Bert Fenton killing a man like Luke Barton. When he came to his senses, he saw how he could make it appear a cold-blooded killing—murder. So he went to Sheriff Cole and lied."

"Did you tell Cole what really happened?"

"He wouldn't listen. He came to the house with a bunch of men and bullied me —tried to make me tell where Bert had gone."

"Yes. . . . That's like Cole."

GARNETT forgot that he had smoked his quota of cigars for the day. He lighted another, eyeing Valerie wonderingly. Then: "Why have you come to me, Mrs. Fenton?"

"Sheriff Cole will listen to you," she told him. "You can make him believe the truth, in spite of Jess Barton. They'll listen to you. They can't shut you up by shouting at you, as they did me."

"I don't know. I make it a point never to interfere with the law."

"That's not what I've heard. People say John Garnett *is* the law on this range."

"People talk too much, Mrs. Fenton," Garnett said. "If I believed all the gossip, I would say your husband isn't worth saving." He studied her a moment, seeing the beginning of anger in her eyes. "I'll say it, anyway," he continued. "Not going by gossip, but judging the man by what

I know of him. He's shiftless and no-account. He hasn't done a day's work since he inherited his ranch six months ago. He's a drunkard. He hasn't the courage to fight another man, yet he does beat his wife. He spends nights away from home in the company of—"

Her anger came. Her eyes were bright with fury, her face suddenly pale. She broke in, "I know what my husband is. I don't need to be told. He's all you can say—and more. But I married him for better or for worse. And when's he's in trouble, I can't turn my back on him." She kept her voice low and even, despite her anger, but there was a cutting edge to it. "I've been married to him for five years," she continued. "That's long enough for a woman to learn about men, for one man isn't much different from another. You asked me why I've come to you. Well, it's because I know you through having learned about men from Bert Fenton. Do you want to hear what I know about you, John Garnett?"

He did not answer.

She regarded him bitterly. "You want me," she said.

Garnett did not deny it.

She went on. "I saw it in your eyes, stronger each time you looked at me. You want me, and I know it—and that's why I've come to you. I'm asking you to save my husband from the gallows, or from being shot down by a brutal bunch of men. You'll do it because of how you feel about me. I know—" She broke off, gazing at him with eyes suddenly widening in astonishment. Then she said thickly, shakenly, "No. . . . I'm wrong. I don't know that you'll do it."

Garnett was still silent.

Valerie still looked at him in that shocked way. "I don't know as much about men as I thought," she said. "I didn't know about you—until this moment. But you knew about me. You know that if anything happens to my husband, you can do something about your wanting me. You know that if it weren't for Bert that I might . . ."

"Be attracted to me?" Garnett finished for her. "No, I didn't know that." He turned from her, walked to the fireplace. He flung his cigar into the crackling log fire. "We'll ignore my wanting you," he said. "Outside of that, I can't see that Bert Fenton is worth saving. No matter how it happened, he killed a good man—a far better man than himself. He made his own trouble with the Bartons. He baited them. He tried to pull a holdup on them by fencing them away from their water supply and trying to make them pay a fortune to get water for their thirsty cattle. I've seen him stupid drunk. I've seen him with cheap women. I've seen bruises on your face, where he hit you. If you never take another man, you'll be better off without him. This range will be well rid of him."

"What a fine, charitable man you are," Valerie said, her voice sharp with sarcasm. "You'll let him die wretchedly to make my life better and to make this range a better place. You're as low as Jess Barton!"

She whirled, went to the hall doorway, then faced him from there. Her face was stiff with passion. "I'll be what you want me to be after he's dead," she said fiercely. "I can't help myself in that. I won't lie and say that I'll hate you forever. But when you have me, John Garnett, I'll remind you every time you take me in your arms that Bert Fenton never murdered anyone—but that you let him be murdered. Yes, I'll be your conscience—as well as your woman!"

She turned and ran from the house.

Garnett moved to follow her, then checked himself.

He stood there listening to the drumming of hoofs as she rode away.

GARNETT rolled and tossed in his bed, his mind busy. In the dark room he could see nothing at all, but with his

mind's eye. . . . It had never seen more clearly than now!

He could see Bert Fenton for what he was, and Valerie. The Barton brothers. Sheriff Cole and his deputy, Juan Aragon, and the posse with those two, a bunch of petty-minded men who thought a manhunt was sport. They would get Fenton, that bunch. They would gun him down when they saw him, or they would take him in for trial, for the gallows. The crowd would have its fun, and Sheriff Cole would be helped politically—doing his duty.

And Jess Barton had lied.

An honest man, Jess Barton—so Garnett had always thought. Rough, tough, but honest. Luke, too. Maybe they weren't to be blamed, neither of them. Bert Fenton had made his own trouble with him. He'd reaped what he'd sowed.

There was Valerie.

Strong-willed, intelligent, beautiful, married to a weakling and worse. Paying for a mistake she had made, in having once loved Bert Fenton. No man could touch her so long as Fenton was her husband, and he'd be that so long as he lived. If Valerie believed in divorce, she would have left him long ago. She had grounds and to spare.

Fenton had failed her. So now she had a need for a man without weakness, with a strength to match her strength and to make her feel herself to be the woman she was. She knew that, and she knew, too, somehow, that it was fated that John Garnett should be that man.

But she would be his conscience, if he let Fenton die; she had told him that. And every time he looked at her, he would remember Fenton's end.

Garnett swore bitterly and sat up in bed. He reached out to the bedside table, struck a match, lighted the lamp. It was ten minutes past three by his watch. . . . Five hours since Valerie had ridden away. Five hours cut from what little time Bert Fenton had left.

Garnett reached for his clothes.

IT WAS gray dawn when John Garnett broke from the timber in the Squaw Hills and looked down on Crescent Valley. The valley ran east and west, and the Barton brothers—Jess Barton alone, now—owned by far the larger part of it. The Barton Double B Ranch had good graze, but lacked an adequate year-round water supply. Garnett could see the Double B headquarters, about three miles to the east.

Bert Fenton's Lazy H Ranch was at the western extremity of the valley. He'd inherited the spread from an uncle, old Mike Harper, who hadn't been much of a cowman. Old Mike had never owned more than five or six hundred cattle at any one time. But he'd been a decent sort, and he and the Barton brothers had been good neighbors. There'd never been any barbwire strung between their ranges—until Bert Fenton took over the Lazy H. Mike Harper's cattle had grazed on the Barton brothers' range, his own being a hard-scrabble range, and the Bartons had had free use of the water on Harper's Lazy H.

There was a small lake on Lazy H., Crescent Lake, and it was fed by springs and small streams in the rock hills to the west. The lake had looked like a gold mine to Bert Fenton. He had hired a couple of cowhands to gather his Lazy H stock off the Barton range, and to shove what Double B stock was on his spread off it. Then he'd brought in a contractor and had a drift fence built between the two spreads. When Jess and Luke Barton showed up and wanted to know what was going on, Bert Fenton had told them to buy him out if they needed the water in Crescent Lake. His price for the Lazy H was twenty-five thousand dollars, plus twenty dollars a head for his cattle.

The Bartons didn't have that kind of money, and they had been squabbling with Fenton ever since—until now Luke was

dead and Fenton was wanted for murder.

Garnett quartered downslope, swung west, came shortly to Fenton's drift fence. He rode along the fence to the far side of the valley where a road ran back to the Lazy H headquarters. There was a gate in the fence at the road. Garnett opened the gate, rode through. It was rigged with pulleys and weights, and swung closed behind him. Ten minutes later, riding at an easy lope, he reached Lazy H headquarters. A man stepped from the barn with a shotgun in the crook of his arm. It was the dusky-skinned Juan Aragon, Cole's deputy.

Garnett reined in, said sourly, "Juan, what are you doing here?"

Aragon shrugged. "The sheriff told me to squat here, Mr. Garnett, just in case Fenton took it into his head to come back. Ed Morley's with me. He's inside, getting some sleep. Me, I've been wondering about breakfast." He glanced across the ranch yard toward the ramshackle ranchhouse.

"You didn't expect Fenton's wife to feed you, did you?"

"No. . . . I guess not."

"I don't want anybody bothering her, Juan."

"Nobody will, Mr. Garnett."

Garnett swung toward the shack, thinking that it wasn't fit for a squaw, let alone a woman like Valerie. She appeared at the door, a wary look in her eyes. She wore a faded blue calico dress, but somehow she made it seem fetching. On most women it would have been merely a rag; on Valerie, it was not unattractive. She was pale. There were blue shadows beneath her eyes. Garnett wondered if she were still in love with Fenton. Then he knew that couldn't be. She was tormented by anxiety for him, out of loyalty. And her loyalty was not to the man himself so much as to a marriage vow. Garnett did not dismount.

"You told me the truth last night?" he asked.

"I wouldn't lie to you," she said tonelessly.

"You're sure it all happened as your husband told you?"

"Yes. His gun was here in the house. It still is. The gun he brought with him was Luke Barton's, and he took it away with him." She was silent a moment, studying Garnett. Then: "I don't know much about such things. But Bert's gun is a .32. The one he took from Luke Barton was a bigger gun—a .45, I think. If the slug was taken from Luke's body—well, it would prove something, wouldn't it?"

Garnett nodded. "It should prove something. I'm going after Sheriff Cole. I'll get him to call off his manhunt."

Valerie nodded. "I hoped that you would," she said, still no feeling in her voice. "I prayed that you would. That's the better side of my nature, John. The worst side didn't want you to—well, to make this decision."

"It means that I'm losing you."

"I was never yours to lose."

"Then you didn't mean what you told me last night?"

She avoided his gaze. "I meant it. I still mean it. I want some good out of life, some security, some happiness. Or maybe I don't care much about that, really. Maybe all I want is to be loved." She looked at him again, her eyes misty. "But sometimes a person has to do the decent thing."

"A divorce, Valerie?"

"No. . . . I'm married to him until death."

"Words. People make too much of words."

"Vows, John. They're not to be broken."

Garnett was silent a moment, then said heavily, "He'll have no friends on this ranch if he lives to be a hundred. And I don't want you living here. I'll pay him what he wants for this ranch. It's not worth one fifth what he's asking, but I'll pay it.

The only condition is that the two of you leave this part of the country. You understand?"

Valerie nodded, biting her lower lip to keep from crying. She could not stop the tears that flowed down her cheeks.

Garnett took a last look at her and turned back across the ranch yard. To Juan Aragon, he said, "Where can I find Sheriff Cole, Juan?"

IT WAS high noon when Garnett came up with the sheriff and his posse, deep in the rocky uplifts called the Barren Hills. Juan Aragon had told him that the posse had followed Fenton's tracks west from the Lazy H, and he had cut the posse's sign and followed it into and through the jumbled hills. The occasional crack of a rifle led him directly to them finally. They were in Lost Wagon Canyon, a deep gorge where there'd once been some mining done and a few abandoned shacks remained. There were nine men with Sheriff Cole, one of them Jess Barton. They were a tired, edgy-looking bunch. They had a fire going and grub cooking. Cole had sent one of his possemen over to the mining town of Prospectville for some provisions and a few cooking utensils.

Cole came over to Garnett at once, a pauchy man with a florid complexion. He was two parts politician and one part lawman. He looked in a bad humor now, the manhunt having turned out to be more difficult than he had anticipated. As Garnett dismounted, Cole growled, "Glad you showed up, John. We're having one hell of a time digging Fenton out. For a dude, he's sure good at this kind of game."

The rifle cracked again.

Jess Barton was over in some rocks, shooting up at a mine tunnel entrance midway up the sloping canyon wall. Garnett couldn't see anybody up there; he doubted that Jess Barton saw Fenton. Barton fired another shot, then glanced around and saw Garnett. He rose from behind the rock over which his rifle was leveled as he fired from a crouch, and came toward Garnett and the sheriff. He was a stocky man in his middle thirties, black of hair and black of eyes. His face was bristly with stubble, and streaked with dust and sweat. He looked like a man under a strain. His eyes were feverishly bright.

Cole was saying, "We found his horse back in the hills at daybreak. It had fallen, broke its leg. We put a bullet through its head. It was easy to follow him, once he was afoot. One thing, he didn't know where he was going. We caught up with him here. He's somewhere on that slope, and he fired a couple of shots at us when we tried to get up there."

"Well, you can't blame him for putting up a fight."

"Sure," Jess Barton growled. "It's one way of committing suicide, and suicide is easier than getting hanged. The ornery son wants us to shoot him."

Garnett eyed the man, frowning. He didn't like what he had to do. He had always been friendly with Jess Barton. He liked and respected the man. He took out and lighted a cigar, then knew that he had to stop stalling. He looked at Cole. "Sheriff, did you visit the scene of the shooting?"

Cole looked surprised. "Sure. Why?"

"Luke's body was still there?"

"Yeah. Jess had'nt moved it then yet."

"There was a gun in Luke's holster?"

Cole nodded. "There was. And it hadn't been fired."

GARNETT puffed on his cigar, feeling suddenly uneasy. He could be wrong. Fenton could have lied to his wife. The man could have gotten that .45 revolver from someone other than Luke Barton. Looking at Jess Barton, seeing a tight look on the man's face and worry in his eyes, Garnett knew that he wasn't wrong. He said, "Jess told you, Sheriff, that he wasn't present when his brother was killed?"

"He did. He heard the shot from about a half mile off," Cole said. "John, what are you getting at?"

"Did you take a close look at the gun?"

"Not after I saw that it hadn't been fired."

"Luke carried a Frontier-model Colt with walnut butt plates," Garnett said. "I never saw him carry any other. He had his initials carved into the right-hand plate. Was that the gun you took from his holster to see if it had been fired, Sheriff?"

Cole frowned, thoughtful for a moment. "No, it was a newish gun," he said. "Still had its store shine. Yeah, and it was pearl-handled. Damn it, John—what's this all about?"

Garnett looked at Jess Barton. "Want to make a clean breast of it, Jess?"

"You making out that I pulled something tricky, Garnett?"

"Will you tell the sheriff about it, or shall I?"

A look of wildness came into Barton's eyes. "I won't take that off any man!" he said savagely. "My brother was murdered and I—"

"Jess, I'm not letting you get away with it," Garnett broke in. "You'd never rest easy once it was done."

"The hell I wouldn't!" Barton shouted. "It's going to be done if I have to do it alone!"

He whirled, started running.

Garnett called, "Jess, you fool! You'll get yourself killed!"

Barton's running stride never faltered. He began to climb the sloping canyon wall, cursing like a crazy man, an easy target for the man hiding up there by the old diggings. Garnett flung his cigar away, went after him. He was older than Jess Barton, but lean and wiry and carrying less weight, and he cut down the infuriated man's lead with every step. They went scrambling up the rough slope, rocks breaking away beneath their pounding boots and small landslides starting after they passed. Barton's loud cursing was winding him. His blind rage had him stumbling. A gunshot crashed somewhere above, but Jess Barton seemed unaware of it. Garnett gasped, "Jess, for God's sake!"

He was close now, grabbing at the man.

Barton half turned, swinging his rifle like a club. Garnett ducked, took the blow across his back, then got hold of Barton's leg. Barton fell on top of him, losing his rifle, but beating at Garnett with his fists. Rolling away from him, Garnett picked himself up and readied a blow. He hit Jess Barton as hard as he could, solidly on the chin. The man fell backwards, his arms flailing the air. He landed on his back, ten feet downslope from Garnett, unconscious.

Sheriff Cole came laboring up the slope with some of the possemen.

Garnett said, "Sheriff, take his gun and put handcuffs on him. Until he calms down. He's apt to try to kill me when he comes to."

Cole obeyed, and ordered the possemen to carry Barton down to where they had the cook fire going. Then he turned back to Garnett. "This needs some explaining, John."

GARNETT nodded heavily. "Jess was there when Luke got killed," he said. "He got rattled, let Fenton ride away. He could have gone after Fenton and settled it, but he got the idea of covering up for Luke and making it look worse for Fenton. Luke was giving Fenton a beating, and Fenton grabbed Luke's gun, shot him. Jess put his own gun in Luke's holster; then, on his way to town, he stopped at Double B headquarters and armed himself with a spare gun. In town, he told you that Fenton had killed Luke from ambush."

"Why? It doesn't make sense."

"It made sense to Jess. He didn't want it known that Luke had been at fault. He hated Fenton before it happened, and he hated him more afterward. He wasn't

satisfied to hunt Fenton down on his own, and have an ordinary revenge. He didn't want to have to explain to the law, and maybe stand trial. It had to be murder to satisfy Jess, and that's how he rigged it."

Sheriff Cole looked doubtful.

Garnett said, "The only gun Fenton owns is a .32. There's a .45 slug in Luke. And if the .45 Fenton has with him is Luke's gun—well, it'll be easy to prove."

"But Jess should have known we'd recognize Luke's gun."

"Maybe he didn't think that far ahead. Maybe he thought Fenton would lose it, throw it away. Maybe he hoped to be the one to pick it up—so he could hide it from the rest of you."

"Then Fenton killed Luke in self-defense."

"It wasn't a deliberate murder, anyway."

Cole glanced uneasily up at the mine. "Let's get out of here before he starts shooting again. We've got to figure this thing out."

They descended to where the others were gathered. The handcuffed Jess Barton lay on the ground, conscious but no longer berserk. A rider was coming down the canyon toward them, a woman riding side-saddle. Valerie. They turned and watched her come up, all but Jess Barton. She looked at Garnett when she reined in.

"You've told them!" she said thickly. "You've made them believe the truth?"

He nodded heavily, his face showing nothing of the bleak feeling in him. He was giving her husband back to her. She would go on being Bert Fenton's wife, submitting to his indignities and his unfaithfulness and the blows of his fists. She would go on letting Fenton make her life a torment. But that was how she was, not out of weakness but because of her moral strength; and, John Garnett suddenly realized, that was as he wanted her. If she were not that sort of woman, he would never have found her desirable.

"Yes, Mrs. Fenton," he said. "Sheriff Cole now knows what really happened."

"Where is my husband?"

"Up at that old mine," Garnett said. "I don't suppose he'll come down for us, but you—well, we'll leave you here to tell him that he's safe now."

They got the sullen Jess Barton onto his horse. The other possemen rode with him. Garnett helped Valerie dismount. She said softly, "Thanks, John. Thanks!" She

crossed to the rough canyon slope, began to climb slowly, calling out her husband's name.

Garnett and Cole watched her for a time, then mounted their horses and started out of the canyon. Her scream came before they had gone far. They swung back, stared up at the mine. Valerie screamed again, "Bert—don't!"

Fenton was in the open now, standing by an old shack near the mine tunnel. He had a gun in his hand—Luke Fenton's gun—and it was pointed at Valerie. Even at that distance, Garnett and Cole could see that Bert Fenton had lost his reason to an even great degree than had Jess Barton. Garnett cursed bitterly. "And I let her go up there!"

He dropped from the saddle, started toward the slope afoot. He could no longer hear Valerie's voice, but he knew that she was trying to reason with Fenton. Trying to make him understand that he was safe. But Fenton was beyond reasoning with. He saw Garnett, and fired at him. Valerie started toward him again. Fenton swung the gun toward her, but it didn't fire. He'd used up the five cartridges Luke Barton had kept in the weapon. With an insane cry, Fenton threw the empty gun at his wife. Then he turned in panicky flight.

ALONG the face of the slope there was an embankment that carried a track running from inside the mine tunnel. Several rusting ore cars stood upon the rails. At one place along the track, ore had been dumped from the cars into wagons for the haul to a stamp mill. Farther along the embankment was the place where tailings were dumped downslope. Fenton's flight carried him past the ore cars, along the track. He ran as only a fear-crazed man can run. He came to a portion of the track where it sagged, the gravel of the embankment having been washed away by heavy rains. Fenton was in mid-stride when he began to fall.

A terrified scream tore from him as he dropped from the track, his body somersaulting as it went hurtling downwards. He landed loosely in the eroded cutaway of the embankment; then, before he could scramble up, the gravel and mine tailings all about him began to heave and shift. The landslide seemed to move slowly at first, but Fenton still hadn't moved before it beat down upon him. There was a great rumble and roar, a blinding cloud of dust. Countless tons of earth and rock swept down upon Bert Fenton's inert figure, burying him. . . .

SHE stood rigid, a stricken look on her face. She stared at the rising dust out along the slope where the landslide still made a thunderous din.

Garnett touched her arm. "Steady," he said. "It couldn't be helped."

She didn't look at him. She continued to stare at the place where her husband's life had been blotted out. "He wouldn't believe me," she said tonelessly. "He said that I was trying to trick him!"

"He knew that he couldn't be trusted," Garnett said. "So he didn't believe that anyone else — even his wife — could be trusted."

Valerie covered her face with her hands, fell to her knees, sobbing painfully.

Sheriff Cole came up and said anxiously, "What shall we do with her?"

Garnett said, "Let her cry it out. She'll be all right, afterwards."

He looked down at her heaving shoulders, at her bowed head, at her tousled hair so bright in the sunlight. She was crying not because Bert Fenton had died; her husband had been dead for her years ago. She was crying for the man he should have been, for the man she had believed him to be when she married him.

Garnett added, more to himself than to Cole, "Yes, she'll be all right."

Valerie would never have reason to cry again. He would see to that. ★ ★ ★

Painted Woman

Some things a man must learn the hard way—the way Donaghue learned: Never judge a man's gun-speed by his appearance; never judge a woman by her powder and paint. . . .

"You dumb galoot!" she said. "Don't you know yet that I'm not Hughie Kincaid's woman?"

By Robert Turner

DONAGHUE stood in front of the door several moments before opening it. He was surprised that he wasn't sweating much. Just a moistness on the forehead and upper lip. Usually, in moments of crisis, the stuff rolled from him. Back in the days when he used to make his living with a brace of sixguns, his clothes

would get drenched even at the smell of danger. Yet now, in this instant that was worse than any gunsmoke showdown, there was nothing but a chilled hollowness in his guts.

There was no sound from the other side of the door. At least nothing that carried over the noises from the saloon downstairs, the laughter and loud voices, the clanking of Inky's piano. But that was silly, he told himself. What kind of sounds did he expect to hear? A man and a woman dining alone aren't likely to set up much of a rumpus.

He took a long breath and held it. His big, bony hand turned the brass knob of the door, pushed. Nothing happened. The realization that they'd locked themselves in, sent roaring through him. He stepped back and put his full long, lean one hundred eighty-five pounds behind his shoulder as it struck the door. There was a splintering sound as the wood around the lock gave way. The door went hurtling in, slammed against the wall inside and bounced halfway closed again. Donaghue half fell into the room.

She was there. That was the first thing he saw. She was wearing a gown he'd never seen before. On any other woman it would have looked brazen, too low-cut around the neck, with nothing over the shoulders and the devil only knew what held it up. The screaming red silken cloth of it fitted sheath-like to the hips. It even took Donaghue's breath away for an instant. And yet the soft, sweet features of Claire, the doe-soft and innocent eyes, even after two years of marriage and the ruggedness of ranch life, counterbalanced the sensual gaudiness of that outfit. She still looked young and guileless as a school girl. For seconds, Donaghue was almost taken in, felt like a suspicious fool. He felt himself thinking: There is an explanation. Nothing is what it seems. I'm wrong. Not Claire, not ever . . .

Then his eyes cut to Hughie Kincaid and he noticed all the little things that blasted his attempts at rationalizing. Kincaid, who used to pay for the hire of Donaghue's guns, who owned the saloon and half the other buildings in town. Kincaid, beefily handsome in his gray, hand-stitched shirt with the flowing sleeves and the little black silk tie at the full, soft collar. A man with the dinero to buy a woman lots of pretty gewgaws. A man with the surface glitter and veneer to appeal to a woman schooled in the East and used to such things. Especially if the woman had seen too much of roughness and dirt and the near poverty and hard work of trying to build and make a go of a new spread the past couple of years.

HE SAW the little things, like the way some strands of Claire's rich, honey-colored hair were out of place, the flush of too-high color on her cheek-bones, the faint smear of lip rouge around Kincaid's mouth. The way Kincaid's eyes swept to Donaghue's hips, making sure they weren't gun-slung, then moved reassuringly to his own bone-handled, silver-mounted Colt on the table, with the empty dinner dishes, the bottle of wine and the half-full cut glassware.

Kincaid grinned ruefully. "Doors are expensive things, Ben," he said. "Wouldn't it have been easier to knock."

"It would have been easier to open if it wasn't locked," Donaghue answered. "I don't like locked doors. Not when my wife's on the other side of them, with a human coyote." He fought to cover the raggedness of his voice. "Don't let's try to make any gentlemanly palaver, Hughie, or I might change my mind about the way I've decided to handle this thing." He swung his eyes to Claire. "You. Go somewhere and shuck that outfit and put back on the duds you wore into town. Be quick about it. We're headin' home."

Claire grew paler and the color spots on her cheekbones brightened. Her eyes got very wide and lovely. "You—you've been to Mrs. Meade's, the seamstress's house, haven't you, Ben?"

"What do you think?"

She tilted her chin, that small, very feminine and helpless-looking little chin. "So you must know the truth, Ben. You know that I haven't seen Mrs. Meade in months, that I—I didn't really stay with her when I came here to town the past six months to make the mortgage payments. You know I've really been coming here—like tonight. Why did you check on me tonight, Ben? What made you suspicious so sudden-like?"

"The heifer got sick," he said. "I came in for medicine. Then—then I went to Mrs. Meades. . . . Then I came here. Get up and do as I told you."

She stood and looked down at Kincaid, hesitantly. He smiled. "Go ahead and tell him, baby. Don't be afraid. What can he do?"

Her voice was pitched a little high and she sounded like a petulant girl defying her teacher. "I'm not goin' back with you, Ben. I—I don't love you any more, and I hate that ranch, that damned ranch and all the hard work and no money. So, you see, I'm glad you found out. I was going to tell you this time, anyhow. But you've saved me the trouble. Hughie's lawyer is goin' to fix up the papers for an annulment. He says it won't be too difficult because I was only seventeen when we were married. That—that's all, Ben. You'd better go now."

Donaghue felt as though he'd been hamstrung. He could hardly keep his knees from giving. An aching, feverish sickness was all through him. He hadn't figured on this. He had planned to take Claire home and beat some sense into her head and she would be sorry and realize what a little idiot she had been, and then with time he'd maybe forget and it would be all over. He hadn't any possible idea that she felt like this, that she was really . . .

His thoughts exploded into anger. He started toward her, controlling the inclination of his legs to buckle. He roared, "You little tramp, you don't know what you're sayin'! You *are* comin' home with me if I have to tote you like a bag of oats. I—"

He stopped, seeing Kincaid pick up the Colt. "Ben," Kincaid said, "you'd better go somewhere and cool off before we discuss this any more. You hear? Don't come any closer."

Their eyes locked and it seemed to Donaghue's sickened gaze that the other man's head seemed to swell, to look like a Halloween pumpkin, all big grinning teeth and fire-lighted eyes. Donaghue didn't even look at the pointing muzzle of the Colt. He strode once more toward his wife.

He felt the slug pick at his right arm and felt the surge of pain like streaking fire before the thunder of the shot echoed in the room. His eyes drifted from the smoke wisping from the Colt to the black hole in the forearm of his blue workshirt and the small red stain beginning to widen around the hole.

"They wouldn't take to my killing an unarmed man in this town," Kincaid said levelly, the smug smile still on his handsome face. "Especially under the—uh—circumstances. So you can say thanks to that for your life. But the next one won't be through the arm."

DONAGHUE looked down stupidly at his wounded arm, lifted it, but the movement was slow and stiff, painful. He dropped it limply again. He looked at Claire. Her red lips were curled in horror as she watched the blood soak his sleeve, but there was no pity in her face, he saw, no feeling for him at all. It was as though she were looking at an animal that had just been shot. It was then that he knew it was really over; there was no use hoorawing himself about it. She'd told the truth, and it wasn't just bravado and the wine she'd drunk up here with Kincaid.

"All right, Hughie," he said dully. "But I'll be waiting for you downstairs. At least I'll have that."

He turned and went out, down the second-floor hallway, down the only stairs

that led onto a balcony and then down another flight into the saloon. The sound and the stink and the smoke-filled air of the place rolled over him. He saw Inky, the little humpbacked piano player, plunking out a tin-canny version of the *Cowhand's Lament,* his long, coffee-colored fingers dancing over the broken keys, his eyes squinted against smoke from the brown paper quirly in the corner of his pinched mouth. Donaghue wondered vaguely why the rattling jigger of rotgut that was always on top of the piano never spilled or jounced off while Inky was playing.

He saw Bebe Jacques, Kincaid's entertainer, moving between tables, singing in that sad, throaty way she had that made drunks cry in their drinks, not letting Inky's off-key notes bother her. He saw Bebe reach out a hand and caress the bald head of a leathery-faced old mule skinner. He saw her slap a duded-up tinhorn who reached for her amorously as she swivel-hipped by. Bebe's brass-gold hair glinted in the glow from the imitation-crystal chandelier overhead. Her bare arms and shoulders were powdered and white and inviting in the soft light. She turned and saw Donaghue, then, and her over-ripe, painted mouth smiled in recognition as she went on singing.

Donaghue remembered when once he'd thought he was in love with Bebe, had briefly considered marrying her, just before Claire came along, when he was so desperate to get away from all this, put away his sixes and settle down somewhere on a nice little spread of his own, that he would have married almost anyone. Many a time since, he'd thought how lucky he'd been to get a girl like Claire instead of a bold, hardened saloon entertainer like Bebe. Been thankful he hadn't made that mistake, had gotten someone sweet, clean and untarnished, like Claire.

He shook the thought out of his head, grunted against the knotting of his stomach that came on with thinking things like that, now. He made his way between tables, ignoring the questions and comments about his blood-soaked sleeve, from men he knew here. Out through the batwings he pushed, and into the Saturday-night-crowded street. The gunsmith's place was half a block down from the saloon and Donaghue had trouble getting the man up out of bed, down to the store. But in a few minutes he was heading back for the saloon again, and the feel of the creaking new leather around his hips and the heavy banging of the holstered .44's he'd bought was strange and yet at the same time familiar.

He stood out in the semi-darkness of the verandah before entering the saloon again and drew the guns from their leather, broke them open, rechecked the mechanism. Though it hurt his wounded right arm, he found that he could still draw with it, only a trifle slower than with his left. He wondered just how much gunswift he'd lost in the two years he'd been a settled, married-down, peace-loving ranchman.

At first, his reappearance in Kincaid's place caused no noticeable stir. Then a few men noticed the hardware he was lugging and the word spread fast and the laughter and loud talk lulled. Inky didn't stop playing the piano, but he kept hitting the same chords over and over for several moments. In the faces that looked up at him, then quickly away again, Donaghue glimpsed understanding and sympathy, and he knew that Claire's visits here hadn't gone unnoticed, no matter how careful she and Kincaid had been. And he knew the things, the half pitying, half contemptuous, almost gloating things, that must have been said around town the past few months. The anger that had been lumped and concentrated in him now spread to a white heat that coursed through every inch of his body.

THERE was an empty table against one wall and halfway to the back, that faced the stairs coming down from the balcony. Donaghue beat a couple of swaying, bottle-

hugging cowpokes to it, murmured, "Sorry, gents. I need this spot."

They stared at him, bleary-eyed, started to protest, then got a good look at the white ridges of his lean jaws, his clenched mouth and the raw flatness of his blue gaze, and left to hunt another table.

Donaghue sat there with his hands folded in front of him, his eyes on the stairway. All around him, the hubbub picked up again, but now the good-humored bantering, arguing and drunken song had a forced, strained note. Donaghue wondered how long he'd have to wait. He had a notion Kincaid would not be in any hurry. Even awareness of Donaghue's two-year layoff from gunplay wouldn't make the saloon owner too anxious to cross guns with him. And Kincaid would figure for the waiting to unravel Donaghu'e nerves some more, make him unsteady, over-anxious, when the time came.

Someone slid into the seat across the table from Donaghue. He looked into the paint-and-powder, doll-like beauty of Bebe Jacques. His eyes caught at the full-blown loveliness revealed as she leaned across the table toward him. Her hand touched his blood-soaked arm, already beginning to stiffen now that the bleeding had stopped. He saw that she didn't flinch and recoil from the mess. He noticed, too, with some surprise that Bebe no longer wore the long, catlike, scarlet-painted nails she'd once affected. Her fingers were blunt-tipped and capable looking.

"You better get out of here pronto, Ben," she said. "Please. You won't stand a chance. You're armed now, Ben, challenging him, so there's nothing to stop him from killing you. Get going from here, Ben."

He looked at Bebe's eyes. They somehow didn't go with the rest of her face, never had. They weren't the vacant baby-blue they should have been. They were deep and dark and had a disconcerting way of holding levelly with a man's gaze. Before tonight he might have thought there was sincerity in those eyes. But now he could only sneer.

"Go upstairs and tell Hughie Kincaid it didn't work," he told her. His lips hardly moved and the words came tightly through his teeth. "He's some hombre, Hughie, I'll give him that! Gets one of his women to front for him, sweet-talk him out of a fight with the husband of another gal."

Hot anger flashed across her eyes and crimson showed through the layer of powder on her face. "You dumb galoot!" she said. "Don't you know yet that I'm not Hughie Kincaid's woman, never was! I stay here because he pays me more than I could get anywhere else, and he pays because his customers like the way I sing and dance. For no other reason."

"Once, you almost had me sold." He grinned a little, in spite of himself, at her fire. "I *used* to reason like a button. But not any more, not after tonight. Listen, Bebe, a gent like Hughie, with the morals of a muskrat, couldn't stand having a woman like you around, unless . . ." He let the words trail off uncomfortably, spread out his hands and hunched his shoulders.

"A woman like me!" she repeated. She shook her blonde head stormily. "Even tonight didn't teach you anything, did it? That a person's looks don't mean anything; that you can't judge a woman by the war-paint she wears, nor by the wide-eyed innocence of her little-girlie eyes. You had the last part of that jammed down your craw, tonight, Ben! Why can't you smarten up to the other, too?"

He frowned, remembering with a strange warmth the way it had been with him and this Bebe Jacques, the first few months he'd come here to work for Hughie Kincaid. The way she'd cried and cursed him when he'd broken it up, because of the things Kincaid had knowingly, smilingly implied and said about her. But then her fingers dug into his wounded arm and the flash of pain tore all that away from him and brought him back to the present, the thing

that had happened tonight, the reason he was here, now.

"You're wasting your time, Bebe," he said. "Vamoose. I don't fell like jawing. Go up and tell Hughie to get down here and let's get this over with."

SHE didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes moved over his face, so that he could almost feel their burning touch. "I've got to make you know, now, at this time, Ben, don't you see? When I've done that, I'll leave. Why should I try to fool you now? You've got to believe me. Hughie Kincaid has never touched me, Ben. Never. I wouldn't let him. I haven't been any angel, Ben Donaghue, but I never loved a man before you came here. After that it was different. And it'll always be different no matter what happens tonight. With some gals it's like that."

He looked at her and wondered fleetingly if there could be truth in the things she was saying, or in anything any more. Then his face hardened again, remembering the sweet laughing innocence of Claire, the way, the past few months, she'd seemed no different, acted as though everything was the same between them.

"Get out of here, Bebe!" he said. "You're talkin' mule-mush!"

She didn't say any more for a moment, just sat there and he could feel her fingers, cool over the backs of his hands on the table. Then he heard her say softly, "This is going to hurt, Ben, but you've got to hear it. You didn't lose much tonight. She never loved you, really. She came here when her father died and she was very young and pretty and helpless and alone, because the old guy died broke. She'd thought he was still rich. She was scared, didn't know what to do. You were glamorous, the hard-eyed, paid gunhawk, the killer, to an Eastern school kid like that. She was flattered, dazzled, when you began to fall all over her. And you were strong, someone to lean on, a way out of her aloneness and helplessness. But that was only for a while. You lost your shine when you shucked your guns and fancy duds and became just another cowherder. And she found that the hardness of ranch life wasn't what she wanted. That was all. That's all that happened, Ben!"

He pulled his hand from under hers, but he still didn't say anything. He tried not to let them, but the things she was saying hit home. He remembered how he'd rushed Claire off her feet after the funeral, how she'd seemed dazed, seemed hardly to know what she was doing. The shallowness and helplessness that had first annoyed him later came to intrigue him, though it was a hindrance to a man trying to win a home and a livelihood out of the tough open range.

"Don't get killed tonight for that, Ben!" Bebe went on. "Get out of here while you have the chance."

"No!" He shouted it at her so hard that it sliced through the noise of the room for everybody to hear. "I told you it wasn't workin'. Now, get away from me!"

She stood up, and tears studded her thick lashes. "All right, then!" she cried. "The stupid male pride runs deep and thick, doesn't it? Do you think Kincaid will fight you fair? Did he steal your wife fair-and-square, according to the rules? He'll outsmart you, Ben! You won't stand a chance! So get yourself killed! Go ahead. They'd both like that. It'll make it easier for 'em!"

She flounced away from the table and every man in the place swiveled his head to watch the rhythmic swinging of her long dancer's legs beneath the brief, flaring skirt of her costume as she headed toward the stairs. Donaghue felt a tinge of satisfaction as he saw the direction of her flight . . . and a tinge of disappointment. For men like Kincaid, they'd do anything, women would . . . .

Donaghue didn't have long to wait after that. He kept moving his wounded arm up and down off of the table, trying to stall off the stiffness fast setting in. The numb-

ness and aching had crept to his shoulder now. He knew that, in part, Bebe Jacques had spoken the truth. Kincaid might try some trickery. Donahue let his eyes roam the room, looking for Luke Smithers, who had taken his place as Kincaid's hired gun. But there was no sign of the man. Then Donaghue noted a letdown in the noise of the saloon, and his eyes swung to the balcony, saw Hughie Kincaid there.

KINCAID leaned over the balcony railing, his gaze drifting until it found Donaghue. Then he straightened and headed for the stairs. Donaghue watched people at the tables near the stairs hurriedly arising, clearing to some other part of the room. By the time Kincaid had reached the bottom of the stairs, started leisurely toward Donaghue, the silver Colt in a white buckskin holster against his right thigh, there were only empty tables around him.

Donaghue kicked back his chair and stood up. Without moving, he watched Kincaid come toward him. Some twenty feet away, Kincaid stopped, his feet apart, leaning forward slightly from the waist.

"You wanted to see me about something, Ben?" Kincaid said. "If not, clear out of my place. We don't cater to trouble-makers here. Besides, you'd better get that arm tended to."

"You already tended to it," Donaghue said. The fingertips of his left hand lightly touched the cold butt of the .44, and the old familiar tingling sensitiveness seemed to set into them. He could feel the tendons in his wrist pulling, tightening.

"What I want to see you about," Donaghue said, "you have some property that was mine. I don't want it back. It's no good to me now. I reckon the only thing I can do is try to kill the thief. And I'm giving you a better deal than you gave me. You're armed and I'm facing you, telling you what I'm going to do."

Painfully, Donaghue dragged his right hand toward the gun at his right hip. He could feel all of his weight on the balls of his feet and his eyes hurt from watching Kincaid's hands, hooked into his own gunbelt.

One thing he had to give Kincaid—if there was fear in him, he wasn't showing it. The grin stayed set on his heavily handsome features. He said softly, "I hate to do this to an old friend—an ex-employee. But in front of all these people—you leave me no choice. It's too bad, Ben!"

Kincaid's hand flashed toward his thigh, and lamplight glinted on the silver-mounted Colt. Then there was the good, solid feel of the .44 in Donaghue's own left hand, the buck of it against the heel of his palm and the ear-splitting crack of two shots, so close together as to be almost one. Kincaid's silvery Colt fell to the floor, and the big man grasped his bleeding right hand with his left. But, surprisingly, no powder-smoke drifted from the Colt on the floor. At the same second something had driven into Donaghue's right shoulder, half wheeled him around.

He stood numbly, his bad right hand trying to claw the other .44 from its holster. He saw others looking toward the balcony, above and beyond Kincaid, and his eyes swung there just in time to see squat, swarthy Luke Smithers, a sixgun spilling from his fingers, tumble over the balcony railing, crash down onto the top of an empty table, turn it over, slither to the floor. On the balcony, behind where Smithers had stood to back up his boss's shooting in case it was too slow, Bebe Jacques stood with an empty whiskey bottle in her hand.

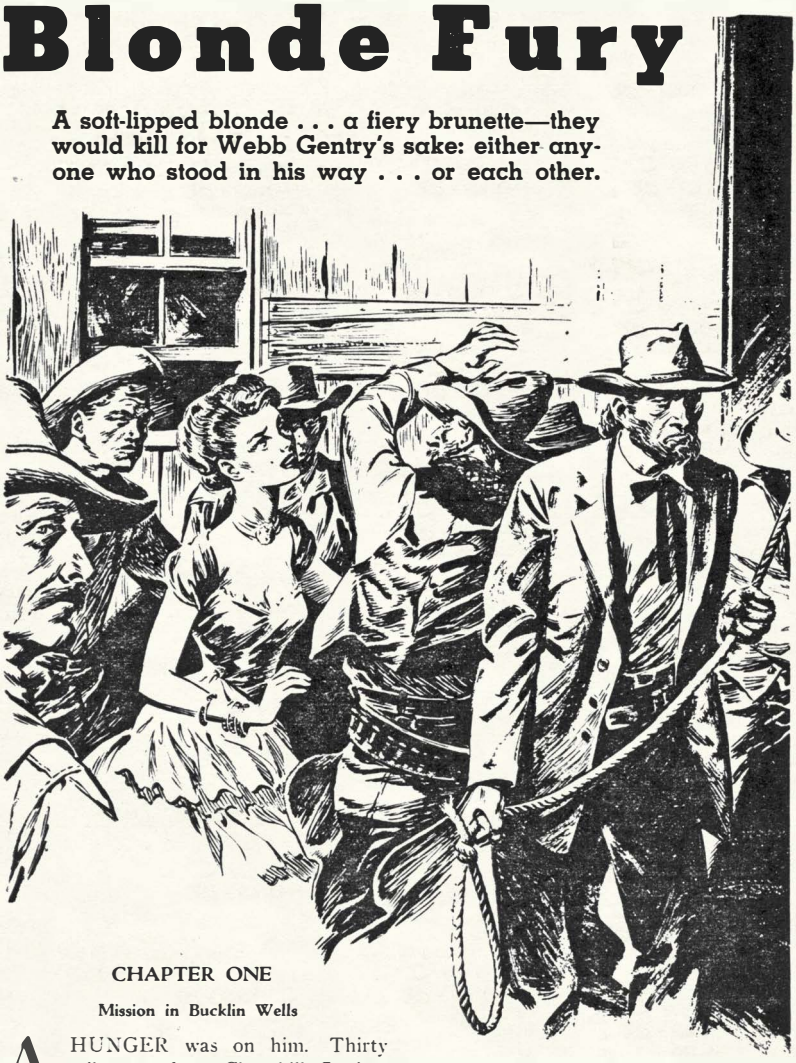
Donaghue turned his gaze to Hughie Kincaid again. There was fear in the big man's face and it seemed to age and sag. But he tried to grin. He half pushed his injured right hand out toward Donaghue, said, "Thanks, Ben! You could have killed me!"

Donaghue dropped the .44 from his left hand. His mouth tasted as dry as though

(Continued on page 109)

Blonde Fury

A soft-lipped blonde . . . a fiery brunette—they would kill for Webb Gentry's sake: either anyone who stood in his way . . . or each other.



CHAPTER ONE

Mission in Bucklin Wells

A HUNGER was on him. Thirty miles out from Churchill Station, Webb Gentry reined in on the crest of a hummock, a lean man with black hair and pale eyes that could stare into the Nevada sun. Alkali dust coated his shoulders and the thighs of his rough denims. A muscular hand patted the roan's mane. "There she blows, boy."

Far down on the hot flats, Carson Sink Station squatted like a prairie dog panting

"Webb didn't do it, Papa," she said softly. "He couldn't have —because we were together. All night."

By C. Hall Thompson

in the sun. Gentry told himself he was halting for a meal. He tried to ignore the quickening of his pulse now that he was only ten miles from a town called Bucklin Wells. Putting the roan downhill, he didn't glance westward to the trail beyond the station.

The hell with Bucklin Wells, he thought.

You're heading there to do a job for the Pony Express. Nothing but a job. If the going gets rugged, you quit. You come out with a whole skin and four hundred in gold. That's all that counts.

He tied in under the willow-branch awning, turning a faint frown on the coyote dun hitched near the water trough. Then he shrugged and stepped across the doorsill.

The floor was packed dirt slicked over with sawdust and linseed oil. Bright chili strings festooned the sweating walls. Gentry eyed the table in one dim corner, the big man in a pony-skin vest, his chair tilted back against the mud blocks. A gray slouch hat covered his face and a mop of blond hair. He could have been asleep.

The barkeep said, "Hot."

Gentry nodded. "I could eat some. *And* wash up."

"Basin's outside."

Outdoors, Gentry stripped to the waist and doused. He entered again to a smell of chili and frijoles. At another rough-hewn table, the barkeep had set up the meal. Gentry sat with his back to the blond boy.

The barkeep hooked a boot on a chair rung. "You're with the Express Company?"

Gentry nodded, listening to the rough breathing of the blond man.

"You're the one aims to set up a relay station at Bucklin Wells."

Gentry ate.

"I know. Mum's the word. But, mister, you men're doing a damn fine job."

"Yeah." Just that, Gentry thought. In spite of all the fancy words, just a job.

"That Express line from Saint Jo to Sacramento'll mean a new world out here. And when the railroad comes through . . . I tell you, it takes guts and vision to—"

"Sure." A vision of four hundred in gold. A vision of Webb Gentry rolling in clover.

Abruptly, a chair came down on all fours. Gentry didn't turn. The barkeep looked over his head.

"Something more?"

"I had enough." The big blond had a big voice.

Spurs chinked over the strike of boots. Neither Gentry nor the barkeep spoke till hoofbeats swung away along the trail beyond Carson Sink.

The barman brought a bottle from the counter. Slowly, Gentry built a cigarette. His fingers weren't steady. Somehow, he could still hear that harsh breathing behind him. The barkeeper drank.

"It won't be no snap, mister, setting up that station at Bucklin Wells."

"Yeah?" Gentry eased back, a long man, loose-limbed in black shirts and jeans. He could have used a drink. There was a tightness in his chest. Nothing showed in his quiet, waiting eyes.

The barkeep said, "It'll be tough, fighting a man as big as Saul Bucklin. You heard of old Saul?"

"Maybe."

"Him and his blondie-haired daughter Cassandra and that young Rand, his stepson, living out on the big ranch like royalty. Owns nigh all the country thereabouts. Old Saul *is* Bucklin Wells. He won't take to nobody horning in—not even the Pony Express."

Gentry crushed the cigarette against a bootsole, laid a coin on the table and didn't wait for change.

Out across the alkali bottoms, a thirsty wind played with burnished dust. The sun was a molten gold-piece pasted in the yellow sky.

Gentry hit for the hills. Under the stir of the roan's hoofs, he saw the trace of another pony cutting westward from the Sink. But he wasn't thinking of traces. He was wishing the tightness in his chest would ease.

A SHADOW rode his shoulder, whispering, "It won't be no snap, mister." He cursed the late-noon wind that needled his face with sand, and the water at Quaking Aspen Creek didn't ease the dry ache of his

throat, or relax the tension in him.

The stories were true, he thought. As far east as Virginia City, old Saul was legend: Saul Bucklin, quiet and bullwhip sharp, come out of the Midwest to cut a little empire from the Nevada desert. Bucklin and the orphan boy he'd adopted; Bucklin Wells with Bucklin's General Store, the Emmiline Bucklin Church, the Big Buck Hotel; the small fair girl called Cassandra . . . .

The flats were behind Gentry now, the spur of hills lifted on either hand. Sheer above him, rocktips were stained with the blood of the sun. He had forgotten the barkeep's warning, forgotten a broad figure in a pony-skin vest, asleep in a tilted chair.

Cassandra. The name had music in it, music that went with white skin and the pale curls over a girl's ear that smelled of sweet lavender. Cassandra with the rich father. Gentry smiled. A man could do worse. A man had to look out for himself, Express or no . . .

The tiny avalanche of shale pocked the dust a few yards ahead. Gentry's chin arched up, body tensing. He saw the glitter of long blue rifle steel nestled in a rock crotch. An outcropping of brush shuddered and the shot was big thunder in the pass.

A crease of pain burned along Gentry's left forearm. He let himself go sideways, kicking free the stirrup, dropped to the ground. He lay dead still. Grit swirled and settled around him. The bushwhacker didn't fire again.

Stilling his breath, Gentry bit his lip against pain. He felt blood filling the shallow trough dug across his arm, draining down into the white sand. He waited, listening. The bushwhacker would come down to make sure.

Shadows had deepened. The pass was a blue haze. Gentry heard the cautious crunch of shale. Spurs made a hesitant jingling, closer now, just by his knee . . . .

He struck like a cottonmouth, his good arm hooking out for one tooled half-boot. Above him, a voice cursed. Gentry's fist clawed a hold on gunbelt leather, hauling him up. He saw the blur of a face, the pale mane of wild, tossing hair. Then the Colt barrel came down along his right temple.

He went numb and his grip broke, but he didn't go out. In reeling darkness, he heard the retreat of boots, the rustle of brush, the hoofbeats, and in his mind, a giant shadow called Saul Bucklin laughed. They were all laughing. Especially the big blond boy . . . .

The arm still bled. His temple burned and pounded. Gentry twisted a neckerchief around the arm. He sat very still in the dusk, watching the slowing drip of red into the sand.

You were paid to do a job, he thought. Nobody paid you to get killed. Hit the saddle and the hell with four hundred in gold.

But he kept seeing a pony-skin vest and blond hair and dun tracks headed west toward the Wells where a big man lived—a man who hated trespassers. His mouth set.

"Here, boy."

The roan hadn't hightailed. By stirrup and horn, Gentry swung to the saddle and reined west. The tourniquet had stopped the bleeding, but not the pain. He wanted to halt, to rest.

He rode.

BUCKLIN WELLS was a pale oasis in the night. Sounds hung on the close air—bought laughter of saloon girls, wrangling saloon pianos, the choir-practice music at the Emmiline Bucklin Church.

Gentry took it slow. The bad arm was numb now, hanging at his side. His head swam. Midway along the main drag, he pulled in and slid down.

The saloon was gaudy with stained-glass inlays in the swinging doors. Gold-leaf letters spelled "Gilded Lily Gambling Emporium" across the window and a sign said,

"Welcome Stranger." Gentry let out a dry laugh. "To Bucklin's town?"

The heat and brazen laughter smacked him in the face. The dizziness got worse. Through a filter of smoke, he saw the glittering chandelier, the swaying coal-oil lamps, the girls in too many frills singing too loudly that Heaven would protect the working girl.

The piano jangle was thunder in Gentry's head. Belt and Colt dragged at his narrow hips. Somehow he made the bar. People were watching. A dancing girl saw the red stains of his left sleeve. She screamed. The piano dribbled to silence and by the curved central staircase Gentry saw a dream of blue-black hair and eyes to match, soft dark skin above the decolette bodice of a sequinned gown.

"Help you, mister?"

The drinkers had edged back. Gentry pulled himself to order.

"Want to see the boss.

The bartender said, "You need a drink."

Gentry caught at the bar. "Yeah. I guess . . ."

He saw the barkeep grab for his sleeve and the brunette dream take one step toward him. That was all he saw.

* * *

His arm burned. Bandages held it in a vise. He started to move. A face came between him and the cupid-embossed ceiling.

Dark eyes, rich bronze throat, the supple movement of an arm spoke of Apache and Spanish blood. Her voice was warm and low.

"Rest, *poco*."

A squat man with tufted eyebrows frowned at Gentry. "Lucky you got ten fingers to count, Buster."

"Thanks, Doc."

"He could use a drink, Miss Raquel."

The girl went away.

Gentry eyed the room—a roll-top desk, fancy daguerrotypes on the walls and a man leaning against the doorjamb. He was high and square. He had a loose vest and a drooping, sandy mustache.

"Billy Garret. Sheriff," the man said around a pipe stem.

Gentry grinned wrily. "Webb Gentry. Pony Express."

Raquel quit pouring whiskey. The doctor clapped on his derby, suddenly uneasy. "Mind that arm, Buster."

Garret let the doctor out. Raquel was small, still in her twenties, but there was the quiet sureness of a mature woman about her. Her arm was firm under Gentry's head. He drank. Billy Garret eyed the bandages.

"Who gave you the forget-me-not?"

"I was ambushed."

"Who?"

Gentry's lips thinned. "I'll know him when we meet."

Raquel frowned at the empty glass.

Garret said, "No gunplay, Gentry. This is a peaceable town."

"What makes you think I'll find him here?"

Teeth clamped the pipe stem. "I'm not thinking. I'm saying—no gunplay."

Raquel set down the glass. "The *poco* needs sleep, Billy."

Garret stood pat for a moment. Her smile melted him.

"I'll check again in the morning."

He left. Raquel didn't look at Gentry. She brought a Mescalero blanket from the closet. "Sleep will make you feel better."

Gentry followed the line of her neck, the curve of dark lashes and full lips. "We could talk a while."

"I do not think."

"I wanted to see the boss. I figure he can help me."

She smiled. "I am the boss, Webb Gentry."

He stared, then laughed. "How do I get in touch with Saul Bucklin?"

She sat on the couch edge, looking at her hands. "I hate to see a nice boy get

hurt, *poco,*" she said softly. "The Pony Express could pass through another town."

"The Express likes Bucklin Wells."

"So does Saul Bucklin."

"And you?"

"I like it."

"In spite of Bucklin?"

"We get along. I am no threat to him. I run only the Gilded Lily. He owns the town."

Gentry watched her. "It's a funny business for a girl."

"It is a business. I started as a fandango dancer. I smiled at the fat, greasy faces, the busy hands. I saved and came north. I managed, *poco.*"

Gentry smiled. "Beauty always manages."

"You make pretty words. You are clever. Clever enough to go away."

"And forget my job? Forget a lowdown ambush . . ."

She rose abruptly. Gentry said, "You still haven't answered me. How do I get to see Bucklin?"

Their eyes held. Raquel made a small Spanish shrug, but concern still shadowed her eyes.

"First, you see Ben Riles, Bucklin's ramrod. He makes all appointments."

"Riles is here?"

"Every night. He plays poker. In a private room down the hall."

Gentry smiled. "I'm obliged."

She touched his sleeve. "You are a nice boy. Truly. Take care."

His hand covered hers. "You're a nice girl. Truly."

CHAPTER TWO

Playing with Death

RAQUEL'S office opened onto the staircase, overlooking the brassy hijinks of the Gilded Lily. Gentry turned down the hall to a door at the far end. His arm pulsed with dull pain. His throat had begun to ache again with nervous tension. He knocked.

"It's open."

The room was tiny. A kerosene lamp made a puddle of light over cards and chips. The player facing the door looked up. For a moment, off guard, gray eyes widened on Gentry. Then expression went out of them.

Gentry's gaze didn't leave the broad face under the blond hair, or the rumpled pony-skin vest.

"I'm looking for Ben Riles."

Nobody spoke. The other players turned to look at the blond man.

"Riles?" Gentry said.

"Right."

"I want a word with you. Alone."

Square jowls hardened. Finally Riles nodded. A man's shoulder brushed the lampshade. Light and shadow danced crazily. The three players cleared out. Riles sat back, hands out of view below the table. Back to the door, Gentry hooked a thumb in his cartridge belt.

"Drink, mister?"

"Gentry's the name."

Riles started to pour. "Stranger in town?"

"To some, maybe."

Riles set down the bottle. "I don't recollect meeting—"

"Maybe if I turned. After all, you aimed at my back."

Abruptly Riles stood up. In shadow above the lampshade, his eyes glittered.

"Why did you do it?" Gentry said. "Was it your own idea? Or Bucklin's? Was it meant to scare me off?"

"I never saw you in my life."

"You were at Carson Sink today."

"It'd be tough to prove."

"You waited in the hills. With a rifle."

Gentry's fist grabbed at the pony-skin vest, but loss of blood hadn't helped. Knuckles bunched into Gentry's mouth. He stumbled back, the bandaged arm crushed against the wall. Riles came around the

table. Then the door slammed open. Riles stopped short.

Fighting back pain, Gentry watched light fire the sequin dress, turn smoky deep in Raquel's eyes. "I do not permit brawls, Mr. Riles."

The big blond turned from Raquel and the tall shadow of Billy Garret. Garret looked at Gentry.

"I told you no trouble."

Gentry squared away from the wall. "And I told you I'd recognize that bushwhacker."

Raquel made a small, surprised sound.

Garret said, "Well, Ben?"

"I was on the spread all day."

"Witnesses?"

Flatly, Riles said, "I was working with Mr. Bucklin."

Some of the starch went out of Garret. Awkwardly, he turned.

"There's been a mistake."

"Sure." Gentry made a stiff smile. "A mistake." Then: "Take a message, Riles. I aim to see Bucklin in the morning."

Riles frowned, but he kept quiet. Finally he left. Garret followed.

The room was quiet. Gentry sat down heavily. "Old Saul really has it sewed up."

Raquel set a drink at his elbow. "Pony Express. It means so much to you?"

"Express be damned." Gentry's good hand lashed out. The whiskey glass shattered against a wall. "Four hundred in gold. *That* means a lot to me. Getting shot at and booted around. That means a *hell* of a lot."

His rage ebbed then and he saw the dark eyes gentle on him. He touched her cheek.

"Sometimes it is better not to fight, *poco*."

His eyes stopped smiling. "I made an appointment. I'll keep it."

THE ride was long. A night of sleep at the hotel had helped, but the jogging saddle didn't. He tried not to think of the worry in Raquel's eyes, of Billy Garret lounging in the shade, watching him head out. He tried to feel calm and sure with the thonged Colt against his thigh.

The Bucklin place was big, with rolling grassland and cool out-buildings and the main house white and Georgian under sad willows and aspen. Gentry saw the blunt figure blocking his path. He didn't rein in.

Riles stood waiting. By the white-pillared porch, a row of ranch hands leaned, watchful and silent. They were all armed.

The roan shied and would have skirted Riles. The ramrod dropped one hand to a loosened gunbutt. Gentry halted.

"Where's Bucklin?"

Riles shook his head. "He's too busy."

High in the willows a morning lark sang. Deliberately, Gentry stepped down. Men edged forward. Riles tensed.

"I told you once—"

"Never mind, Riles."

It was a young voice, but flat and certain. The kid came down the gravel path, short and thin with the build of the saddle-born. Riles flushed. "Your pa won't like—"

"I'll handle this." Rand Bucklin's glance held Gentry. "I reckon Pa expects you."

They went up the walk shoulder to shoulder. The circle of hands broke before them. At an upper window, lace curtains stirred. Gentry glimpsed hair like flowing sunlight and a woman's lips half smiling. Then the face was gone.

The inner hall was high and cool with paintings on the wall.

Drily, Gentry said, "You don't take orders from old Saul?"

The smile had a tinge of anger. "We all *take* orders. We don't all agree with them."

They went through the rear door into a square, dim study. The mahogany desk fronted a long, draped window. Saul Bucklin didn't rise. He didn't look up. His quill pen scratched across a ledger, precise and calm.

He was six-three and bone thin, his large head strongly-molded, the brow jutting, the lantern jaw darkly bearded. Lifting to

Gentry, the eyes were strangely restless, unsure in the trained sureness of the face.

"Well, sir?"

Gentry thought: This is the one who hires bushwhackers. He kept his tone level.

"The Pony Express wants a way station in Bucklin Wells, ready by mid-April when the ponies make the first run to the West Coast. They sent me to—"

"I know why they sent you. And I don't like it."

"A lot of things we don't like. I don't like playing clay pigeon to paid killers."

Very slowly, Bucklin rose, his tall shadow black against the curtained window. Young Rand's breathing wasn't even. The old man leaned forward, palms flat on the desk.

"Mr. Gentry, I own ninety percent of Bucklin Wells. You might say I own a hundred percent of its people." Thin lips bent in the graying beard. "If I choose to say no to the Express—"

"Pa."

Restless eyes flicked to Rand. He met the hard stare.

"The Express would mean a bigger, richer country, Pa. Once the ponies prove a route, railroads'll follow—"

"Railroads!" A vein bulged in Bucklin's high temple. His whole body tensed. "Listen, boy. I knew a man back east. A poor man, built a farm with the sweat of his back. The railroads took his land for pennies. He died in a county poorhouse. He was my father and I never forgot him. I quit the country that ruined him. I brought a wife west and I built us a life. I watched my Emmy die in childbed. I was mother and father to the girl she left me. It wasn't easy. But I made a world for my daughter. Cassandra will never want as I did; nobody's going to spoil her world or change it. No so-called progress—"

Gentry said, "You're afraid, then."

Deliberately, Bucklin came around the desk. Gentry didn't step back. Quietly, he said, "Scared to gamble your tinhorn empire for a better world, not just for you and a precious daughter but for the whole—"

"Get out!"

Rand stopped him. "Gentry, we're not all afraid. I want to ride for the Express."

The bony hand struck brutally. Pale fingerwelts turned red along Rand's jaw. Tightly, Saul Bucklin said, "Ungrateful little . . . I took you out of the gutter, adopted you, cared for you—and now . . ." He fought to control his fury. "Go to your room, Rand."

"I'm telling you—"

"Go to your room!"

The kid swayed a second, eyes bright with angry tears. He brushed past Gentry through the door. Color had drained from Saul Bucklin's cheeks. At the library table, back to Gentry, he uncorked a rum decanter.

"I think our talk is ended, sir."

Evenly, Gentry said, "The Express pays me to do a job, Bucklin. I figure to do it."

Coolly, the old man lifted his glass and drank.

GENTRY walked down to where the roan chomped grass under a weeping willow. His foot reached the stirrup.

"Three cheers."

It was a light voice, sweet with laughter. Gentry turned to the bench that circled the thick three trunk like a hoopskirt. He recalled the face at the upper window. Now, in leaf-shade, the pale skin looked even softer. Long, taffy-yellow curls fell to smooth white shoulders. Her blue eyes were at once wild and timid.

"You're Cassandra."

She laughed and patted the seat. "Here, sit down."

Closer, he saw the slight pinch of nostrils, the high, maverick flare of her glance. A feverish hand touched his.

"You were wonderful, Mr. Gentry, the way you stood up to Papa. I like a man who speaks his mind."

Her hand was restless. Uneasiness

nudged Gentry as her hand moved to his.

"I ought to be riding, Miss—"

Her hand stopped him, covering his. He could see the firm throat, the powdered curve of bosom. "You're handling this badly. The way to Saul Bucklin's heart is through his daughter. Papa will do anything I—"

"Cassandra."

The girl rose quickly. Gentry stood beside her, watching Saul Bucklin stride down the path.

"It's 'most time for dinner, my dear," Bucklin said stiffly.

Cassandra ran up the path, graceful skirts sweeping the gravel. Bucklin stood there.

"I ought to warn you. It won't help to make up to my daughter." The eyes were steel-hard. "It might even be dangerous."

Gentry turned and mounted. He stared down at Bucklin.

"I never hide behind skirts."

* * *

It was easy to sound confident. But now, on the road back to Bucklin Wells, he felt tired and finished. He thought of an Express office that didn't exist without a building to house it; a pony relay that died without riders to hire. He thought of risking his hide for a job. He thought of Cassandra.

It would be so simple to answer her smile, so easy to resign the Express and ride the wind in favor of Bucklin. Old Saul's son-in-law would be a big man in the Wells, a man with money and a pretty child-wife. . . .

"*You are a nice boy, poco.*"

Gentry frowned. Crazy to remember that now, with a ruch plum at his hand just begging to be plucked. Crazy to remember dark eyes and a soft voice. . . .

He reined in quickly, a mile east of the Bucklin place, to watch a rider close in and pull his gelding alongside. Rand kept pace with the roan.

"I meant what I said."

Gentry smiled. "Pa won't like it."

"Maybe it's time I quit caring. Time I forgot to belong to a man because he fed me, tried to make me a spoiled little slave like Cassandra. . . . When do I start work?"

Gentry's smile went crooked. "Without a way station?"

"Miss Raquel owns a property in town. A store with a backyard for corral."

Frowning, Gentry rode a spell in silence. Things slipped away—the memory of yellow hair and a soft berth for life. He thought of laughing in Saul Bucklin's face.

His spurs nudged the roan's belly.

I DO not know, *poco.*"

Raquel didn't look at them. Leaning forward on the horse-hair love-seat, she stirred tea in a crockery pot.

"You own the place," Gentry said.

"*Si.*"

"Miss Raquel, it'd make a fine station. . . ."

Rand's voice trailed off before the gentle dark stare. Raquel turned to Gentry. "I am respected here. I have made a place for myself. I could lose it if I crossed Bucklin."

Again her eyes fell away. Gentry's tone had an edge.

"Straight down the line. Everybody clinging to his little corner, stone blind to something finer. Too selfish. . . ."

She looked up quickly. His face gentled. "I'm sorry."

"I suppose it is true, *poco.*"

"Then, why not change it?" Rand said quickly. "Why not—"

"Never mind, Rand," Gentry said. "Let's go."

Outside, his mind struggled futilely with the problem. There had to be an answer somewhere. But a weariness was on him. Walking downstreet, ignoring the vacant store alongside the bank, he smothered a cigarette and turned in at the hotel.

His room was second floor front. He turned the key and the doorknob and took three steps before the gunbarrel came down

flat along his neck, sending him sprawling.

The two men worked fast and almost without sound. His bad arm was twisted back and up; a low moan jarred from his lungs. He tried to haul free. The half-boot swung back and followed through to his jaw. He sagged, heard the voice say, "Get out, Gentry. Stay out."

They were gone.

Pain was a wave pounding at his brain. Somehow he reached the window. The blind rattled up. He leaned there, breathing hard. Footsteps beat along the hallway. Young Rand burst in with a smile ready.

"Gentry, listen . . ."

He halted. Behind him, Raquel made a low, hurt sound. "Webb!"

Gentry didn't speak. He sagged onto the bed.

Rand said, "We came to tell you. Miss Raquel changed her mind. She's willing to risk—"

Gentry's laugh was too loud and ragged.

Raquel said, "Riles?"

Gentry nodded. "They were convincing."

He pulled a deep breath and got up From a bureau drawer he got ink and hotel stationery. Raquel didn't say a word. Gentry pulled a chair to the bedside table.

"You're resigning?" Rand asked.

Hard eyes came around. "I do a job. I don't die for it."

Rand stared. Suddenly, he laughed. "So, *this* is the preacher!"

Gentry's face went rigid.

"The preacher," Rand laughed. "Accusing old Saul of letting selfish fear block—"

"You said enough, kid."

"All right. Be afraid. Maybe you *like* being Saul Bucklin."

Gentry hauled back his right.

"No, *poco* . . ."

He let the fist fall. Rand turned to the door. Dark, questioning eyes touched Gentry. He looked at the girl.

"Wait," Gentry said softly.

Rand waited.

A slow smile bent Gentry's lips. Raquel smiled back. So did Rand.

CHAPTER THREE

The Hangrope Parade

THE week was longer than seven days and nights of work and waiting. Gentry and Rand whipped the dusty, flat-roofed store into a way station, mended the pole-fence corral in the rear yard. In the early spring evening, Raquel watched them nail up a new sign marked "Pony Express." Nobody interfered.

But the town was too quiet. Business had gone stale at the Gilded Lily and when Saul Bucklin toured the main drag in his landau, folks quit talking to stare uneasily at the new Station.

On the eighth afternoon, Gentry hit east for Carson Sink and brought back three halfbreed California mustangs, the fastest, toughest horsehide the company could buy. In the cool station, Rand swung a leg over the desk corner and waited for the news.

"First rider left Saint Jo on schedule," Gentry said. "The pouches should reach Churchill Station by eight tonight."

Rand smiled through a sigh. "So this is it."

"You know your orders?"

"Ride east for Churchill, pick up the mail and double back. Switch mounts at the Sink. Get back here around two in the morning."

Gentry grinned. "It's a rough ride."

"Have to eat in the saddle, but . . ."

It stopped. Rand's mouth set at the strike of boots on the outer walk. Without turning he said, "Him?"

Gentry nodded shortly.

"I been waiting for this."

"Easy, kid."

Rand faced the figure in the doorway. Saul Bucklin flicked a rawhide crop against a polished boot-top.

"I've thought it over, Rand. Give up this

tomfoolery and we'll forget the whole—"

"Who asked for another chance?"

Color burned the lined cheeks. "You can't be serious, boy. Let go all you had for a job that pays pennies . . .?"

"For a job." Rand nodded. "Money enough to get Cassy out of that prison you call a home. We're in love, Pa. We aim to marry."

"You're only children."

"Because you kept us children, spoiling us, making us weak and selfish so we could never leave your hidebound little world. Now we're going to be free, Pa. Free to grow up."

Gentry saw the whiphand sweep back. He caught Bucklin's wrist and wrenched down. Numbed fingers let go of the crop. Bucklin's breath rasped.

"I've had my say, Gentry. Only one thing more." The hard eyes were too glassy. "The Express will never go through."

He walked out. The station was quiet. Finally Gentry said, "It's you and Cassy, then?"

"Since we were knee-high."

Gentry frowned, then brushed the frown aside. "You head out soon. I'll saddle a pony."

But out in the yard, in the smell of mash and horse nitrogen, the frown came back. Rand and the girl. It sounded fine. Only Gentry remembered the hot touch of a hand, and eyes that didn't think of Rand. . . .

"Hello, Webb."

She stood just beyond the shade of the stall roof, the sun a halo for yellow hair. The dress was cut low and lace-trimmed. A frilled parasol shielded bare shoulders from the glare.

WITHOUT answering, Gentry tightened the cinches and let down the stirrup.

"You're a most retiring man."

"Your pa and me—we're not exactly on visiting terms."

"You could visit *me*."

"I was busy."

"You're a liar." She toyed with the parasol. "I could help you, Webb. I could do anything for you."

"Did you tell that to Rand, too?"

The soft glance faded. "Rand's only a boy. A boy with false pride." The smile stole back. "I'm a wild filly, Webb. I always get what I want and it takes a real man to checkrein me. I thought you were a man. Man enough to forget false pride—"

"And take favors from a woman."

"Take whatever a woman offers." Parted lips lifted. "But you're not. You're scared, just like . . ."

He caught her hard around the waist, and she came to him willingly, drawing his mouth down to hers. Then he let her go. He stood watching the boy's thin shadow by the stall.

Rand didn't look at the girl. "What is this, Gentry?"

"Now, listen . . ."

"I figured you were straight. But maybe you aimed at a quick double-cross to get rich overnight."

"You're wrong."

"Am I? You didn't know she was spoken for? Well, hear this, mister. She's *my* girl. Keep your dirty hands—"

"Rand Bucklin, you mind your own business!"

It was a pettish, little-girl cry. Rand stared at her. His mouth warped with hurt. He lashed out blindly, hammering. Gentry let one go from the hip. Slamming into an upright, Rand lurched to one side and sat down. A thin line of red seeped between his lips.

Cassandra's cheeks were flushed. The light in her eyes was excitement, not concern. Gentry looked away.

"You better go."

She started toward him.

"I said, get out."

The annoyed flouncing of her skirts died away. He hauled Rand gently upright. The

boy shook his head. Their eyes met. Rand pulled free.

"Think you can ride, kid?"

"I warn you, Webb. Stay away from her."

Gentry said, "I'll go up and sign your papers."

He crossed the dusty corral. In the dim office doorway, a shadow moved. A tightness cramped the pit of his belly. Raquel didn't look up when he came in.

"I heard Rand would be riding. I came to wish him luck."

"You saw?"

She made no answer.

"I didn't want to hit him."

She was silent.

"You think as he does."

Raquel made that tiny Spanish shrug. Her dark eyes were soft. "It is not strange that a man looks for an easier way to better himself. She is very pretty."

Abruptly, he turned his back. He concentrated on the signing of Rand's identity papers, the careful wrapping in oilskin.

"Webb."

She came to him at the door.

"Webb, *poco* . . ."

He made a smile. "We're all on edge. Once this first run's made, everything will be fine."

He took the papers out to where Rand waited, silent in the saddle.

SLEEP went away. In the station office, Gentry lay listening. The town was dead. Even the falsetto laughter and fiddle music had gone silent. His pocket watch said ten of three.

Late. Why should Rand be late?

The watch ticked. A cold sweat broke out along Gentry's forehead. He jammed into his boots. Out back, the roan was saddled. Gentry swung east along the main street. The Gilded Lily was dark, but in the upper window a lamp shone. Night lights burned in the hotel lobby. Gentry thought a shadow stirred on the porch. He rode on and the town vanished behind him.

The trail was moonwashed and still. Far out on the flats, a coyote fretted the moon. Gentry shifted, making sure the low-slung holster was free. He had reached the east hills when he saw the riderless pony.

Mail pouches still looped on the saddlehorn, the mustang stood cropping grass in a rock-walled clearing. Gentry stepped down and went to one knee. Rand lay like a boy sleeping. The bullet had drilled into the base of his skull and torn out through the left eye.

Gentry stared. For a dream. Because a kid believed in a dream, he'd give so much. . . .

"Stand up."

They had come on foot, almost without sound. Gentry's hands did not lift. His eyes turned from Riles to Garret.

"I thought I spotted somebody on the hotel porch."

Garret looked at the body. "Did you have to gun him from behind?"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

Riles said, "You and the kid fought over Miss Cassy." A square hand hung too ready. "Some men kill for a woman. 'Specially a rich woman."

Gentry took a sudden step. The big hand dropped and came up full.

Garret drew more slowly, but anger was deep in his eyes. "I'd as soon take you in dead as alive."

Gentry unbuckled the gunbelt. He mounted the mustang and let his wrists be thonged to the horn. They got Rand across the saddle, shoulders and dangling feet lashed under the roan's middle.

They rode slowly. Gentry watched the limp sad roll of the body. Against his own knees, the mail pouches rubbed gently.

For a dream, he thought.

* * *

Bucklin Wells was crawling with people.

Riles had ridden ahead with the news. By angry torchlight, men and women jostled along the main drag.

Garret pulled up at the sheriff's office. From the lighted doorway, Saul Bucklin went directly to the roan. A gentle hand touched the body; his stony mouth quivered. If it was an act, it was a good one.

"Webb!"

Raquel had to shoulder her way through.

"It's all right. There's been a mistake. Rand was late. Missy. I rode out to meet him. They think—"

"Think!" Saul Bucklin wheeled. "Not think, Gentry. Know!"

They could see him struggling for restraint. Two grangers were unstrapping the body, heading for the funeral parlor. Bucklin turned to the mob, his voice dead calm now.

"He never gave my boy a chance."

The crowd roared. Hands snagged Gentry's shirt. A Bucklin rider shoved forward, a long coil of rope raised, the noose already fashioned. Gentry spun to the townfolk.

"You're playing into Bucklin's hands. He wants to finish me. Me *and* the Express. You got to . . ."

Riles let go a sidearm blow that caught Gentry across the teeth. He stumbled back into the grip of the crowd. Raquel screamed "No!" but rough hands hauled her aside. Men herded Gentry upstreet to the livery stable. Boots milled under the jutting hayloft boom. Saul Bucklin held the rope now. Quick hands flung hemp over the boom. Riles cinched the loose end to a crossbeam. Bucklin swung to Gentry.

"*Papa.*"

It was not loud, but the sound of it stilled the mob. Raquel quit fighting the man who held her. Heads swiveled. Cassandra halted the gelding at the edge of the crowd. Horse and riding habit were grayed with the dust of a long trail, but she sat easy, self-assured.

"Webb didn't do it, Papa."

Gentry's eyes narrowed. A low mutter troubled the townfolk. Saul Bucklin stood holding the noose.

"We were together, Papa. All night."

Bucklin looked as if he had been hit. Faces stiff with shock turned from Gentry to the girl. Bucklin said, "You're lying. No daughter of mine would . . ."

Torchglow silvered Cassandra's pale curls. "I was with Webb at the station. We rode out to meet Rand."

"They found Gentry alone."

"He had sent me home. We saw the body from a distance. Webb went on to see if he could help."

The street was too silent. Slowly, the crowd splintered, edging away, mumbling.

"You can't listen to this. You can't believe—"

People paused. A granger eyed Bucklin stolidly.

"Calling your own daughter a liar?"

Bucklin's hand dropped to his side. The noose fell free in the dust.

"Go home, Cassandra."

She didn't argue. She turned the pony downstreet.

Billy Garret untied Gentry. Without looking at him, Bucklin said, "You have till sundown, Gentry. Get out or I'll kill you."

He walked straight and stiff toward the sheriff's office. Riles and Garret trailed after.

No one was holding Raquel now. She didn't come to Gentry. Across the deserted street, their eyes held. She turned and headed for the Gilded Lily. Gentry caught up with her.

"You believe what she said."

Raquel kept quiet. In the dark, sawdust-smelling bar, she poured him a drink. Her Mexican-black gaze burned.

His hand closed on her arm. "She wasn't with me at all."

"Then, why did she say—"

"I don't know."

"Please, Webb. There is no need to lie."

"You crazy little . . . don't you know . . ."

He gave up words. He put his lips on hers gently and then strongly, feeling her kiss answering his. Finally, unwillingly, he let her go.

"There's not much time, Missy."

"Time?"

"The pouches are due in Sand Springs before eight."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Bushwhackers

IT WASN'T the best way. Even a fresh mustang, used to the featherweight pony boys, would weary fast under the extra heft of Gentry. He didn't like the dead-empty desert stretch of twenty-odd miles to Sand Springs. He didn't like the fact that Riles had dropped out of sight.

He looped the pouches across the horn and led the mustang onto the open street. Raquel held close under the circle of his arm.

"I am afraid, *poco*. Bucklin will stop at nothing."

Gentry's face hardened. A man could worry about his own safety—until he saw a boy spread-eagled in the brush, bled white because he had found something worth dying for. But now . . .

He rode out at five-thirty. The sky was still black. Behind the drawn blind of Garret's office, a lamp burned. Two ponies nodded at the hitchrail. Ben Riles' gray was missing.

Gentry nosed the California into open land and laid in the spurs. He didn't like the thoughts in his mind. What made a girl ruin her own reputation? Where had Cassy ridden to pick up so much alkali dust? And Saul Bucklin—no matter how much he wanted to blackball the Express, a man couldn't kill his own adopted son.

Dawn mist seeped in the rump-high wallows. He broke onto steaming flats again and, toward seven, forded a bend in the Humboldt. Once, the mustang lost footing. Marsh mud nearly swallowed the pouches It was all time lost.

The horse was coughing for wind now. Gentry had to walk a spell then ride at a trot. Close onto eight, he raised the last sand hills and heard the screaming.

Gentry's glance swung past the rise to a black billow of smoke. The wails were already dying to a final trumpeting of tortured horseflesh, a thunder of crashing, splintering wood. Dust and smoke mushroomed higher.

Hauling up at the corral fence, Gentry stepped out of the stirrup on the run. Fire had gutted the stable of the Sand Springs sttaion; the stall roof had buckled in; not one horse had escaped Idle flames licked at the charred logs.

Beard and hair scorched to raw patches, the station-master squatted by a rainbarrel. A young boy sat nursing a broken leg.

"A-purpose, they done it. Pinned me down and used the anvil . . ."

Gentry stared at the crushed knee. This pony boy would never ride again.

"When did it happen?"

Dully, the station-master looked up. "They rode in while we slept. They held me and worked on the boy . . ."

"Who?"

"Local pokes, mostly. But the one as give the orders—"

"Big," Gentry said. "Blond."

The scorched head nodded. Gentry swore.

"Listen to me. Can you care for the boy?"

Glazed eyes fixed on Gentry. "Where you . . .?"

"Through to Cold Creek."

"Fifteen miles? On that mustang? You can't . . ."

Gentry wet down the pony, careful not to let it drink too fully. He swung up and out, away from the burned-out station.

The desert was a burning trap. The pony snorted through baked, burning nostrils. Alkali needles pocked Gentry's face. His

arm had healed, but crawling sweat stung the scar tissue. He could barely see.

Slow sand ran out at their heels. The sun was halfway to noon when Gentry spotted the clump of cottonwood and brush, green on the lip of a spring, circled by high shoulders of rock.

He was too beat and dry to think. He slid to the ground and started to lead the mustang in. A rifle cracked and lead smacked saddle leather. The pony reared Gentry went flat in a thicket of alder. A second shot sliced down from the cathedral rocks. The pony spilled sideway in a cloud of grit. Then all Gentry could hear was the laughter from the sump.

He thumbed back the Colt hammer and lay still. A minute passed.

"Ben!"

Gentry stiffened.

"You get him, Ben?"

GENTRY saw the high notching of the walls, the three shadows, gathering like buzzards. The men walked down, rifles at the ready. Gentry ignored the two that flanked Riles. He drew bead high on the pony-skin vest.

Midway down the steep, the slug hit Riles. The two men lunged for cover and Riles cocked back, teetering; shale caught at his stumbling boots. A flailing roll carried him to the edge of the spring. He sprawled, unmoving, close to Gentry.

The rifle had fallen with him. In a running leap, Gentry clawed it up and went belly flat in tall grass. High in the heat-bleached stones, nothing stirred. Gentry smiled tightly.

"Take your time, boys! I got water right to hand!"

They caught the drift. He was holed up in a perfect ambush to pick them off on sight. Maybe they had two canteens between them. It wasn't enough.

Finally he caught the rattle of shale on the far drop, the shuttle and dying rhythm of hoofs.

Gentry moved to where Riles lay. He hauled the stocky frame to a sitting position, ripped open the rawhide shirt. The wound was a clean round hole in the shoulder. He probed out the bullet. then bandaged the wound.

Gentry waited until the harsh breathing eased, then brought water. Riles gulped and coughed. Without looking up, he said, "Obliged."

Gentry screwed on the canteen top. "I want the whole story now."

Blond brows pulled together.

"Bucklin set up the fire at Sand Springs," Gentry said. "He worked out this ambush."

Riles kept quiet.

"You think Bucklin'll save you. But you're in too deep. He'll throw you to the law dogs."

"Maybe you're all right, Gentry. The way you helped me . . . But . . ."

"Use your head, man. Talk."

"I been with Saul Bucklin ten years. He never done me dirt."

"Then, it *was* Bucklin."

"I didn't say that!"

Gentry straightened. "The boys probably shooed your horse away, too. It's a stretch to Cold Creek."

Riles frowned. "With this shoulder? I can't . . ."

Gentry flung the mail pouches over a shoulder and lifted the Spencer. His face was rough-cut granite.

"Long walks have been known to loosen the tongue."

GENTRY waited. Trailing a stride behind, he watched Riles plod through the shallow alkali drifts. Time and again, the big figure stumbled, spilled face down with a jar that split the drying shoulder wound. Without a word, Riles walked the four miles to Cold Creek.

In the dirt-walled shade of the station, Gentry sat at an old desk and wrote for a long spell. Riles heard the quill scratching.

He smoked the cigarette Gentry had built for him, with unsteady hands.

The paper stated that Saul Bucklin had engineered the Sand Springs burnout, the attempt on Gentry's life, even the killing of a greenhorn kid. Riles flung the paper aside.

"I don't sign anything."

"When you face Bucklin, when you see him double-cross you to save his own name—"

"You're loco."

Stolidly, he had watched as Gentry's mail sacks were slung across a fresh mustang, seen the Express light out on the last leg of the Sacramento trail. Stolidly, now, he mounted with Gentry and pulled east for Bucklin Wells.

The sun was two hours past its peak. Shadows grew tall before them and thirst parched their throats. Gentry rode with a Spencer free across the pommel. He watched Riles' square shoulders, the thick neck swiveling left and right, the slitted, searching eyes.

About five, they picked up Sand Springs. There was no sign of life in the open, dark doorway. Gentry tooled in through the corral gate, past the skeleton of a discarded supply wagon. The yard was ominously quiet.

"I don't like . . ."

Then he saw Riles smiling. He saw the snake-quick movement of a shadow beyond the window, and he slid to the left as the horse shied before the rattle of rifle fire. Hugging the Spencer, Gentry rolled clear and came up in a cascade of blinding dust. His blinking, sand-burned eyes saw the pony-skin vest closing in.

Hands caught the rifle barrel, levering up and back. Gentry's hold broke. Another fist tore his Colt free and flung it far out into the dust. He crouched against a wagon wheel, waiting for his sight to clear. Wild shots made tiny craters in the earth beyond the wagonbed shield.

He saw the blue-black barrel trained on his midriff. Through a crooked smile, Riles said, "Lie still."

Gentry didn't argue. The firing had ceased. Riles waited, head cocked. At last, high and thin, a voice came.

"Ben? You all right?"

The grin widened. "All right, Jack!"

Late wind stirred the feeble crabgrass.

"Come on out. We'll cover you."

"This is where I get off, Gentry."

"You're making a mistake."

Riles laughed. "The mail's gone through, Riles. Killing me now would be useless. But gunning *you*—"

"Shut your face."

"You know too much. Bucklin can't let you run loose with the law like to ask questions . . ."

Riles laughed and stood up. He circled the wagon. "It's me, Jack. I'm coming out!"

Gentry watched the pinch-shouldered gunman in the station doorway, Colt hanging in one fist. He wasn't eager. The Colt came up, slow and shining in the sun.

Riles stopped dead. He lifted a hand and shook his head. "No, Jack." The first slug slammed into his middle. He buckled, cheek scraping the dirt, fingers clawing the Spencer up. The boy lowered his sights and fired again. And again. Riles quit moving.

The doorway was empty now. Seconds passed. Gentry let out a slow string of curses. He heard the wrangle of gear and stirrups. The two men pulled east from the station backyard, riding hard.

In a crouch, Gentry edged forward. Riles was heavy to turn. He was bleeding from the mouth. Glazed eyes tried to focus. His voice was a sticky rattle.

"The house."

"You better not . . ."

"Into the house." Choking fury strengthened the words.

He was a dead weight, dragging on Gentry's shoulder. Inside, powdersmoke burned the nostrils. The rider with the crushed knee lay unconscious in a wall bunk. Bound

ankle to wrist, the station-master cringed in a corner.

Gentry got Riles to the swivel chair. Big shoulders sagged over the desk. Riles smeared a clumsy palm along stained lips.

"That paper . . ."

Gentry got out the yellow sheet and spread it flat. A square fist closed on the quill, almost upturned the inkpot.

"All . . . but this . . ."

The pen scratched through the line that read, "the murder of one Rand Bucklin to throw discredit on the Pony Express." Gentry frowned.

"Then, who . . .?"

No answer came. Dogged, blunt fingers drove the quill through a smudge of damp blood, formed the square letters of "Ben Riles," then faltered and slowly unclenched. The feather fell with a faint tapping sound.

CHAPTER FIVE

Deadly Secret

SUDDEN thunderheads turned purple-black over the hills east of Bucklin Wells and a clammy heat smothered the bottoms. The last sun glow blurred along the horizon. Darkness came, and rain.

The riders seemed not to notice. Slowly they crossed the flats, the lean man in black shirt and Stetson leading the second horse with its rider upright but slumped, chin to chest, head and broad frame hidden by slouch hat and poncho. Raindrops made a mournful tattoo on the black slicker.

Bucklin Wells was a huddle of blurred lights and dribbling wooden awnings. On the hotel portico, ranchers fell quiet to watch the riders pass. Somebody nodded toward Garret's office. A man set off, half running.

Raquel was waiting, black hair lustrous with the chandelier light behind her, a hand lifted to parted lips. *"Poco."* Then he was on the sidewalk, holding her against him.

He saw her glance reaching past him. "Webb . . . who . . .?"

"Ben Riles."

She stared at the figure hunched in the saddle, lit by yellow glare that spilled through the swinging doors. "Is he badly—"

Billy Garret's boots struck echoes from the boards. "Well, Gentry. You made it."

"Sorry to disappoint, Sheriff."

The hearty grin faded. "Now, look, mister, it's time—"

"To set a lot of things straight." Gentry faced him squarely. "You sided Bucklin because you thought he was right, the Express was wrong. All right. But I don't reckon you wanted any part of murder."

Garret's teeth clamped the pipe stem. "Strong words, Gentry. They want proving."

Gentry looked at Raquel. "Bucklin?"

"Inside, *poco*."

The gaudy bar was rocking at full tilt. Pianola discord jangled over the dice-dance of chuckaluck and the bartenders needed four hands to keep up with the business.

Saul Bucklin stood alone at the far end, a jigger of rye between long white fingers. Calmly, he took a black cheroot from his lips.

The pianola dribbled to a finish. In the stillness, Gentry crossed to the bar. Poker games were forgotten. By the batwing doors, Raquel and Garret watched and waited. With great care, Bucklin lifted his glass and drank. Gentry halted within reach of him.

"I figured to find you celebrating."

Bucklin set down the jigger.

"Celebrating the end of a dangerous witness," Gentry said.

Dry lips went rigid.

"Trying to kill Riles was a mistake, you know. He would have hung before he talked. But once he knew you'd gun him to silence . . ."

Gentry probed under his cartridge belt.

The paper crackled with unfolding. "Riles signed this after your gunhand left him for dead. Jack wasn't very thorough, Mr. Bucklin."

Bucklin's face was webbed with lines that quivered nervously. He watched the sheriff read the confession. The staring crowd was motionless.

Finally, stiffly, Garret said, "Maybe you can explain, Mr. Bucklin."

"I explain nothing. This is an obvious trick. Gentry's not satisfied with establishing the Express. He wants to take over the whole town. The town *I* built!" His lips thinned. "I have my story. I'll stick to it. I never had Ben Riles killed. . . ."

"I didn't say he was killed."

GENTRY'S words struck across the careful silence of the room. A nerve twitched under Bucklin's right eye. Gentry turned to the sheriff.

"Better call the doc, Sheriff. We'll get Riles to bed. . . ."

He started for the swinging doors. A thick voice said, "It's a lie."

Gentry swerved steady eyes to Bucklin. "I told you. Jack was a little hasty. He left Riles alive to swear to that confession."

"It's a lie. It can't be . . ."

That was when Gentry flung open the doors. Outside stood the rain-drenched horse, the rider shrouded in dripping poncho and Stetson.

Uncertain eyes fixed on the mounted shadow, Saul Bucklin made for the door. His legs weren't steady. The gaunt head shook numbly.

"He's dead. Jack told me. Jack swore. . . . Damn it, he's got to be dead!"

The lunge hurled Bucklin across the sidewalk. Long hands clawed at the wet slicker. Then he screamed like a woman. The saloon mob saw the huddled frame of Riles lurch sidewise, jolting down against Bucklin. The poncho fluttered aside, exposing the thongs Gentry had used to lash the body erect. Hanging now, the square head lolled; rain fell on the open, dead eyes.

Uneasiness shuddered through the watchers. Men saw the twist of Bucklin's mouth, the brilliant, blinking eyes. They heard laughter bubble in his barrel chest and heave up through a choked windpipe.

"Didn't I tell you! All a trick to ruin me! To steal my town!"

Nobody answered. The laughter died. Bucklin drew himself straight, swaying a little. A bony finger stabbed at Gentry.

"I want this man arrested. He murdered Ben Riles and forged that confession!"

Garret said, "You spoke different a minute ago."

Bucklin's jaw quivered. Sharp eyes shifted from face to stony face. "This is outrageous! I *own* this town! Nobody questions my word. I'll have your badge, Garret. You'll all pay for daring to doubt—"

"You better come with me, Mr. Bucklin."

Garret took a step, then abruptly swerved to the right. Bucklin's gunhand had dropped and come up, firing as it lifted. The bullet slashed upward, splintering through the crystal tears of the chandelier.

"Stay back!" Bucklin said.

For a minute, nobody moved. Then, carefully, Gentry stood erect, his hard lean face expressionless.

"You never do your own dirty work, Bucklin. You use hired killers. I reckon you never had the guts for gunplay."

Gentry's spurs chinked. Bucklin backed, one step, two.

"That's why you won't fire now."

"I will! I swear!"

Rain dripped softly from the eaves. Gentry kept moving in. "You're afraid, Bucklin. You're . . ."

Bucklin reeled back, pulling the Colt high. Abruptly, his shoulder brushed the stiff hulk of Riles hanging in the saddle. He screamed and stumbled away from the

contact. Gentry went in under the shining barrel, shoving the gunhand high, feeling the jar of the explosion through wrist and shoulder.

HEELING, Bucklin rolled wildly. His knee came up hard. Gentry tasted the salt of blood and buried a left in the flowered vest front. Bucklin grunted and fell back, crashing against the broad window. The gold letters of the Gilded Lily fell away in glittering shards. Bucklin's face was ragged; bright red streaks ran into his beard. He tried to lift the Colt. A boot slammed brutally, pinning his wrist to the wall. The gun clattered from his fingers.

Gentry's fist locked in the linsey-woolsey shirt. Bucklin wasn't hitting any more. He was just taking it. Gentry chopped down with a left and drove a straight one to the sagging jaw. Bucklin staggered on wobbling heels and pitched backward over the water trough. Once, he stirred in the rain-pocked mud. Then he lay still.

Faces poked past the unhinged doors. Racquel was in Gentry's arms, head pressed close under his chin, lips whispering against his chest. He held her.

They watched deputies drag Saul Bucklin away. Men led Riles' pony downstreet to the funeral parlor. Under the dripping awning. Billy Garret sipped his pipe, reflectively.

"Crazy, how far fear can push a man. Even to killing a boy that was like his own son. . . ."

Relief should have eased Gentry, then. But he kept thinking of a line drawn through certain words.

Through the smoke, Garret eyed him. "Somebody ought to tell Miss Cassy."

Quietly, Gentry said, "That's my job."

He felt the slight tensing of Raquel's shoulders. Then she drew out of his arms. "Why, *poco*?"

He shook his head. His lips set. "I'll be back."

He could see the tears now; he could hear them in her voice.

"Will you, *poco*?"

THE Bucklin house was a white mass in the darkness. On the empty porch an empty rocker swayed to and fro with the wind. Shadows passed the windows of distant bunkhouses. Packing to leave, Gentry thought. Every hand would clear out now. And the girl with the taffy-yellow curls would be alone. He frowned.

The front door was open. Light spilled down the wide stairwell, casting a cobweb shadow of banister-rungs across the wall. His boots were stilled by the stair carpet. He reached the tall white door at the end of the upper hall. Before his hand pushed it wide, he knew she was there.

She sat in a high wing chair. Light from a butterfly-globed oil lamp burnished her hair. She stared at nothing.

"Come in, Webb."

Gentry took off his hat, a hand rolling the wide brim. "You know?"

"One of the boys rode out to tell me."

She rose, moving toward him. He could see the lines of her body against the ruffled gown. He could smell her fragrance.

"I want to cry, Webb. It would be better if I could cry."

"Yes."

It was quiet. Something more than grief touched Cassandra's face; something like fear. Out in the ranch yard, hoofs sounded, beating away. Temper edged her voice.

"They're quitting. They're all leaving me."

"That includes me."

Shock twisted her mouth. "No!" A hand caught his sleeve. "I've been through so much, Webb. I need you, to help me forget. . . . To think that father would even kill Rand . . ."

Gentry's shoulders went stiff. He freed his arm. "It'd be nice if I believed that, Cassy."

She stared up at him and went back a step. "The townfolk believe it. Billy Garret thinks Papa—"

"It doesn't matter. Bucklin'll hang for the murder of Riles, anyway.

"Rand was in the way, Cassy. Not Bucklin's way. Yours."

Her breathing was uneven. A nerve pulled her upper lip crooked.

"Rand wanted you, Cassy. But *you* thought you wanted me. And, like Bucklin, you were afraid of losing anything you wanted. You had to have me. Why? Because you had to win out over Raquel? Or just to satisfy a whim?"

Dark pupils dilated. Her small hands clenched.

"You rode out. You met Rand. He probably thought you wanted to make up for that rotten little scene in the stalls. It must've been easy. He trusted you. I reckon he never knew you had the gun."

"Stop it!"

"Sure. I'll stop now. I'm finished."

He would have turned, but abruptly her fingers locked in his shirt.

"Webb, I did it for you! Didn't I give you an alibi when they thought you shot Rand? Listen to me. You can have everything you ever wanted. The whole ranch is mine now. It could be ours. . . ."

Slowly, she let go. She backed away.

"All right! Look at me that way! But it was your fault. You made me a bad girl. You made me want you enough to kill!"

Gentry walked to the door.

"You're going to turn me in."

"The town thinks Bucklin murdered the kid. He'll let them, to protect you." His eyes were flint-hard. "No, I won't talk. I'm going away. With Raquel."

"Webb, no!"

"I'm going and you're staying. You'll die for what you did to Rand. But not all at once. You'll die a little every day of your life. I hope you live a long time, Cassy."

He heard her screaming. He didn't stop. He went down the long stairwell and out into the rain.

GENTRY rode with his Stetson tilted against the stinging drops. He tried to think of a warm fireplace and a smell of good food and a dark-eyed girl who'd look better in aprons than in sequinned gowns.

A half mile out, Gentry spotted the rider. A horse and figure, half blurred by slanting rain cut north of the town road, straight for the Bucklin place. Just one of the boys, out to collect his gear and hightail for safer territory, Gentry thought. Forget it. There's a girl waiting for you. A girl . . .

He reined in sharply. He knew now what had troubled him about that galloping silhouette. It wasn't a man. It was a girl, riding side-saddle with a skirted knee hooked over the pommel. "Good Lord!" The roan answered Gentry's hand, wheeling violently. He buried the spurs deep.

It was a mistake. They didn't get far. On the rolling breast of the next rise, Gentry felt the roan lurch to the right as its forelegs came down in the reach of a gallop. Hoofs slogged sidewise in the treacherous muck. Trumpeting terror, the pony scrambled and caught footing, but it wasn't running any more. Even its own weight made it limp.

Gentry had to walk and lead. His eyes strained north against wind and rain. It was a long spell before he sighted the Bucklin house. Words muttered deep in his throat. They sounded more like a prayer than a curse.

A winded pinto was laced to the hitchrack. The front door was still ajar. Gentry pushed into the hall. A soft glow of lamplight puddled on the floor by the study door. Gentry froze on the sill.

Neither woman saw him. Raquel stood motionless, rain still shimmering on hair and lashes, the drenched cape limp across

her shoulders. Even touched with fear, her face seemed soft and lovely.

There was no beauty left in Cassandra Bucklin. White skin seemed parchment-tight across her cheekbones, under the strain of tears. Her hair hung lank with sweat and her eyes were glassy bright. Her hands clutched a heavy colt.

Softly, Raquel said, "You are out of your mind."

Lips pulled back from Cassandra's teeth. It was meant to be a smile.

"You say that because you want Webb. You want to take him from me the way he stole the town from Papa." The little head perked, birdlike, strangely listening. "But Papa won't let you. Nobody can hurt me. Papa won't let . . ."

The muzzle lifted. Gentry went in fast, hearing Raquel's cry, seeing the swirl of Cassandra's gown as she tried to pivot. The brittle wrist was in his grasp. Her finger jolted the trigger; fire burned into the trick rug. Cassandra sagged against a chair, sobbing.

Gentry palmed the Colt and caught Raquel swaying against him.

"Easy, Missy . . . it's all right. . . ."

Behind, he heard strange, sing-song laughter. "You want to turn me in for Rand's murder. But Papa won't allow it, Webb. Papa takes care of me. Papa . . ."

The strangled sobs lifted crazily. Cassandra lunged for the door. Gentry ran. He saw her white gown drifting through the open front entrance. He raced the length of the hall.

"Cassy!"

"Papaaaa!"

He saw her swing a bare foot into the stirrup.

"For God's sake, not the roan!"

It was no use. He saw the rearing plunge that answered the bit, the first crippled stride and the fall. Horse and woman screamed. The roan's full weight heaved

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 104)

across the girl's body. Her limbs twisted at a crazy angle and then the pony had rolled clear, lying on its side, coughing for wind.

IT TOOK a long time. The shot had brought hands running from the bunkhouse. They watched Gentry carry the girl into the house and up to her canopied bed. They listened. He told the story, quietly and without trimmings. A man rode into Bucklin Wells to rout out Garret and the undertaker. They waited. It was daylight before Gentry borrowed the Buckin gig and headed for town.

The rain had let up. A glittering mist slowly vanished before the rising warmth of the sun. Raquel's hand moved under Gentry's arm and nested in his palm.

"I had to ride out, Webb. I had to be sure it wasn't . . . you and her!"

His fingers pressed hers. He smiled. "A man doesn't mind being loved that much."

They found an Express rider waiting in the office, damp and bearded with the long trip east from Carson City. He made a wide grin.

"Clear to Sacramento and back, Webb. Right on schedule!"

Gentry shook his head. "You look beat." Half frowning, he turned to the smiling, dark-haired girl.

"I know, *poco,* I know. You want to ride relief."

The laughter was good between them.

The pony boy headed off for the hotel. Gentry took a deep breath. There was a smell of sage and rain, the clean scent of a woman's hair. His arm circled her slim waist.

"It's a good town, Missy. A town a man could grow with—a man and his wife and his children."

Gentry kissed her hair. "It's not a long hitch to Reed's Station. I'll be back."

Raquel's lips found his and held them. Softly, she said, "I know." ★ ★ ★

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(Continued from page 43)

bad. Not bad at all! Sue, how come you're here? I thought you despised me. I thought—"

She pulled herself straight. She acted as if she wanted to stamp her foot. She said, "You're a fool, Marsh Campbell! Why didn't you tell Dad about this crazy scheme? You might have been killed! If Lolita hadn't told Dad—"

"Tomcat tamer," Ike Blake said peevishly. "I told you, Marsh." He looked at Marsh, then looked at a tarnished badge he held in his hand. "Which is it going to be, you young Comanche? Scratchin' and sweatin' and tryin' to make that ranch go you was talking about? Or stay on as sheriff of the county?"

Marsh reached for the badge. "Pretty," he said, "mighty pretty—but some aren't cut out for sheriffin'. I done enough of it the last five minutes to do me a lifetime!"

He went over and pinned the badge on Beau Silvers. "What was that name you went by in Sacate, Beau? Jones, or was it Smith? Well, as sheriff here, you have investigated. No such hombre around. In fact, he was killed in a brawl down in Mexico. Uh-huh, considering what you've done tonight, I'll bet my future father-in-law, there, will get you appointed for the rest of the term. From there, you take it on your own."

He looked at Lolita, into her wonderful eyes, and that old feeling came over him strong. His days as a free man were numbered, and he wanted to kiss her just once more. His arms started to lift.

"Marsh!" Sue Beth said. "You go get the horses!"

Marsh turned slowly, looked at old Ike and sighed. "You said it! From now on, I doubt if you'll even hear me meow—except maybe on Saturday nights. Some women in Frio are sure gonna be disappointed." ★ ★ ★

(Continued from page 83)

he'd just swabbed it with alum as he said, "She needs you. I'm giving you back to her. In a few minutes . . ."

He stepped toward Kincaid, swung his balled left fist from the hip toward Kincaid's face. The other man half turned and the blow glanced off his cheek. He let out a strangled cry and reached up his own good hand to fasten it around Donaghue's throat. Donaghue got his elbow up and slammed it into Kincaid's face and the hand fell away from his throat.

IT DIDN'T last long. Men don't fight well with the use of only one arm. For a few moments as Kincaid plowed three hard punches in a row into his face, Donaghue wondered if he was going to turn out to be a fool right to the end. But then he got one in to Kincaid's soft belly and it was over. He followed through with a whipping uppercut. With his bad right hand, he managed to grab Kincaid by the shirtfront to keep him from falling and then he pistoned the left into Kincaid's face again and again, with each punch thinking how this man would look to Claire for the next few weeks. Then he let Kincaid sag slowly to the floor.

"Take him back upstairs to his woman," he said then to nobody in particular.

He turned and walked stiffly from the saloon. He had some trouble mounting the big gray hitched outside, but he finally got forked into the saddle, wheeled the critter and headed down Main Street. Just outside, on the trail south, the cold night air, sweeping up from the desert, began to chill him, set him to shaking like a hound pup in the rain. Every few seconds he'd catch himself going away from everything, slipping sideways from the saddle, and he knew he would never make the twenty-mile ride back to his spread.

Then there was the rumble of wheels, the pounds of hoofs behind him, and a buck-

board drew alongside. A woman was driving it. Her brassy hair looked softer, more golden, in the moonlight, especially the way she was wearing it softly, loosely about her shoulders now. She was wearing a crisply ironed, red-checked calico dress and her face was scrubbed clean and shiny of all makeup.

"You'll never make it on your own," Bebe Jacques said. "I'll help you onto the buckboard. There are some old quilts and blankets back there."

Donaghue didn't say anything. He was beyond speaking. He was weak as a fool and practically had to let her lift him into the back of the wagon. He was surprised by her strength. She made him comfortable, pulled a quilt up under his chin and as she looked down on him the moonglow touched one side of her face.

"Much obliged, Bebe," he said, grinning against the pain working all through him now. "You swing a mean bottle to a man's head."

She smiled. "You just don't know me very well. I make a good nurse to get a sick man well, too. And you never knew it, but I was brought up as a kid on a little spread like that one you got, only the old man didn't run it so well. What I mean is, I know my way around a cow place. I do a lot of things right well besides dance and sing."

The shadows and highlights were having a fine time with her features, well-cut, now that the layers of makeup had been removed. "I know," Donaghue said. "You look beautiful, Bebe. If my arm and shoulder weren't so—"

She gently held him down under the quilts and laughed teasingly at him. "I'd say you won't take so long getting well," she said, and left him, climbed back up onto the driving seat.

He felt the pitch and toss of the wagon, listened to the soft throatiness of her singing and went easily to sleep. ★ ★ ★

(Continued from page 51)

"Why . . ." he murmured. "Why, I guess I never really meant to leave in the first place!"

The thought hit him with such suddenness that he was left bewildered. For a moment confusion made his mind reel. When he was able to see clearly again, he found Calder smiling up at him.

Fenner burst into laughter. It was crazy, idiotic, but it made a strange kind of sense. For the first time since he was a boy the lines of restraint around his mouth loosened and he laughed. He found Calder laughing with him.

In their laughter, neither of them noticed that Al Bates had come into the place and was walking toward the table where a man called Winch sat. And by that time it was too late.

Bates was drunk, even drunker than usual, but he somehow walked with a certain dignity. Winch was on his feet now, tension pulling his face tight. Inside he was working himself up, and yet through it all the smile stayed on his face.

"Get out of town," Al Bates said. "You hear me? Get out of town."

"Al!" Dave Calder yelled. "Al!"

Neither of the men paid any attention to him. On Winch's face the smile was fading, but it had been replaced by a strange eagerness as he saw how this was going to develop.

"You've got one job you're not man enough to handle," he said softly. "Don't take on another one."

Dill Fenner saw how the whole thing was going to happen and inside himself he felt sick. The rest of the room had frozen into a single unit of tension.

He heard Al Bates cursing, and then Winch leaned forward abruptly, not moving his hands and not saying anything. But it was the abruptness of Winch's movement that took Bates off guard. He instinctively reached for his gun.

Winch let him get halfway through his fumbling draw before he made his move. His own draw was amazingly swift, swifter than any Fenner had ever seen. It was also wild and unaiming, as such a draw would have to be, but at a distance of less than five feet the wildness didn't matter.

Winch's first shot hit Bates in the shoulder and the second caught him high on the chest and knocked him back onto the floor. There was no answering fire.

Al Bates was going fast as Dill Fenner bent over him. His eyes were open but unrecognizing, and with each breath a spurt of blood came from his nostrils.

"It hurts," Bates said, his voice high and childlike. Faintly and with a note of astonishment he said again, "It hurts."

Someone pushed Fenner aside, almost toppling him. It was Helen Bates. Beside her was Lois.

"We saw him go in. And then—" Lois left the sentence unfinished.

They remained silent, staring down at the man who lay on the floor. Helen Bates had her husband's head on her lap. His face had undergone a strange transformation, the lines of dissipation eradicated so that he looked very young and very lonely for the moment before he died.

Why, Dill Fenner thought, we're all of us children. We're all of us lonely and afraid to be alone and afraid of the hurts we can't escape.

His eyes came up and a terrible rage gripped him at the sight of the man who could kill Al Bates for the sheer pleasure of killing. Winch stood now, his guns holstered again, and that faint smile on his face again. But it was Lois, not Dill Fenner, who reached him first.

"He drew first," Winch said easily in the knowledge that legally he was in the clear.

The girl's hand spatted against his face, knocking his head back. His own reaction was instantaneous, the back of his hand

spinning her around as it cracked against her cheek.

FENNER hit him then, the blow driving Winch across the room until his back touched the far wall. His hands darted to his guns.

Dill Fenner caught himself up short, breaking his rush. At a distance he had a chance. His own draw was painfully slow but he would not let himself be hurried.

A finger of lead plucked at his sleeve, another lifted his hat off and grazed his head. But until the upswinging barrel of his gun was level with the buckle of Winch's belt he did not fire. Through a haze of gunsmoke he saw the killer topple.

There was a moment of unsteadiness then, but that was over quickly. Fenner turned, shaking his head. Lois was all right, he could see that. And Helen Bates still sat on the floor, Al's head in her lap.

"Don't let him lie there like that," Fenner said wearily. "It isn't right. Take him home, where he belongs."

With Helen walking beside her husband's body, and Lois and himself behind, they went out of the saloon and crossed the street. This time, Dill Fenner knew, he could neither look back, nor would he ever turn back. ★ ★ ★

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—Continued from Back Cover

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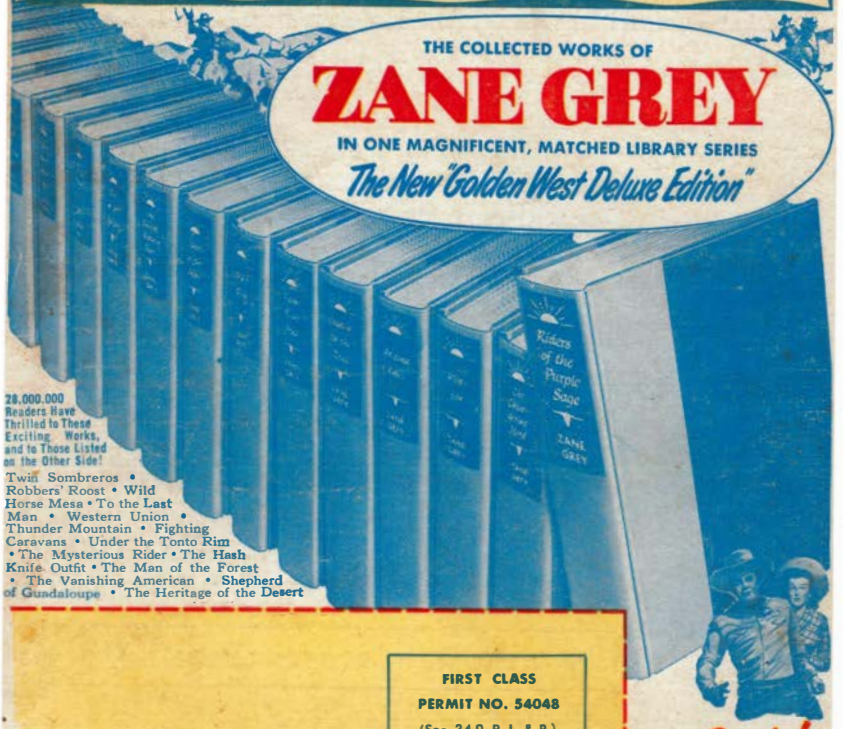

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