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JUNE
25¢

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

A-2 C

FEATURING: **STAKED PLAINS SLAUGHTER**

A JIM HATFIELD ACTION NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

25¢ • BEST ACTION WESTERN STORIES • TEXAS RANGERS • JUNE 1953

Real Causes of TV Interference In This Area Revealed

A message to every TV set owner who is tired of paying $5-$10 for the same unnecessary service calls over and over again —and who is unfairly blaming his serviceman for something that is not his fault.

Have you ever wondered why your TV set can't be fixed—why your TV picture still gets aggravating wavy lines, streaks, distortions and zags — why high powered aerials, expensive new sets, even top flight servicemen often fail to stop this TV interference?

THE TRUTH ABOUT YOUR TV SET

It is a known fact that your TV antenna not only picks up the picture waves you see on your screen, but also picks up electric static waves that can ruin your picture.

THE REAL CAUSES OF TV INTERFERENCE

And the reason you or your repairman have never been able to block out this interference is because it does not come from within your TV set *but from sources outside your TV set!* These sources are the real cause of TV interference. These are what may cause your TV screen to flicker, flutter, streak or get hazy.

For instance, you yourself, realize that a doctor's diathermy machine up to 2½ miles from your home can ruin your TV viewing pleasure for hours on end.

But do you know that a car or truck passing your home can streak, distort your TV picture?

Do you know that nearby telephone lines or neon advertising signs, can make your screen flicker and flutter?

And do you know that any electrical appliance in your home—or your neighbor's home—can streak, distort and haze your TV picture for an entire evening?

ANY ONE OF THESE CAN CAUSE YOUR TV INTERFERENCE

Inside Your Home

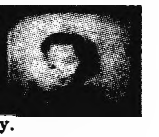
Electric toasters	Phonographs
Vacuum cleaners	Electric razors
Sewing machines	Refrigerators
Electric broilers	Oil burners
Ringing telephone	Door bells
	Radios

Outside Your Home

Cars	Streetcars
Busses	Trucks
Trains	Doctor's diathermy machine
Hospital machines	Subways
Electric cash register	FM Radio interference

WHICH OF THESE TV HEADACHES DO YOU WANT TO STOP—IN JUST 45 SECONDS!

STREAKS caused by cars, trains, subways, cash registers, electrical appliances can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON before it reaches your set.

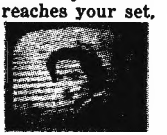


WEAK PICTURE—TELERON CLARIFIES weak signal. Helps to hold picture bright and steady.

WAVY LINES caused by "Hams," FM broadcast stations, other TV sets, antennas, can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON before it reaches your set.

FADED PICTURE due to weak, static ridden signals can be CLARIFIED by TELERON before it reaches your set.

BOREER EFFECT caused by doctor's diathermy machines, hospital machines, can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON before it reaches your set.



TV STATIC caused by telephone lines, neon signs, atmospheric conditions, can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON, before it reaches your set.

HOW TO STOP TV INTERFERENCE IN JUST 45 SECONDS!

The only way to eliminate TV interference is to BLOCK IT OUT, before it reaches your set —in exactly the same way sunlight glare is blocked out by sunglasses before it reaches your eyes.

1. You can install an antenna-filter to help reduce interference seeping through your antenna, BUT IT CANNOT STOP streaks, wavy lines or TV static due to interference pouring in through your wall socket.

2. Or you can fix your set yourself in just 45 seconds simply by clipping onto your set a new double protection filter circuit and power line plug that not only blocks out interference coming in through your antenna, but also blocks out interference coming through your wall socket. The name of this amazing invention is the TELERON INTERFERENCE TRAP which actually blocks out these interference waves before they reach your set.

PICTURE-CLEAR RECEPTION IN JUST 45 SECONDS

Simply clip the TELERON INTERFERENCE TRAP on to your set. It takes only 45 seconds —and fits every set made since 1947, regardless of make, model or year. See for yourself how this amazing invention gives you sharp, clear pictures how it can add new life to your picture even in fringe areas—even in weak reception zones—even on channels you could hardly pick up before!

ORDER TODAY AND SAVE $2

If you order your Teleron Interference Trap today, you do not pay the $6 you'd expect, but only $3.98 — on this amazing no-risk guarantee: If 45 seconds after you clip this amazing TELERON INTERFERENCE TRAP on your set, you are not getting perfect picture-clear reception—please return for full money back. You try it at our risk. So send today to: Hastings Products, Inc., Teleron Div., Dept. T-742, 141 Fifth Ave., New York 10, N. Y.

ORDER TODAY AND SAVE $2, MAIL COUPON NOW!

HASTINGS PRODUCTS INC., TELERON DIVISION, Dept. T-742
141 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, New York

Please send me the TV INTERFERENCE TRAP immediately, at $3.98, plus C.O.D. postage. I understand that satisfaction is guaranteed 100%, or my money is promptly refunded.

Name.....
(Please Print)

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

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Go to the Hospital for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer — your "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays Benefits just as long as you stay — *there's absolutely no time limit!* What blessed help! What's more, the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays off in cash direct to you — regardless of what you may collect from any other insurance policy for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. This is important — it means you can carry the low cost "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy IN ADDITION to any other insurance — then collect two ways in case of Hospital confinement.

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SO SUDDEN!

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If sickness or accident puts you in a Hospital bed — you'll look back and thank your lucky stars you were wise enough to take out the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy. It's the sensible, practical way to protect your own bank account against the onslaught of high Hospital costs. So ACT TODAY! Do it before trouble strikes.

YOU CAN GET MATERNITY
For slight extra cost husband and wife can have a MATERNITY RIDER attached to their regular Policy and this will entitle the couple to a liberal Benefit for childbirth confinement and care.

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We do business in all 48 states and U. S. possessions. Claims are paid promptly in strict accordance with Policy provisions.

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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 51, No. 1 JUNE, 1953

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

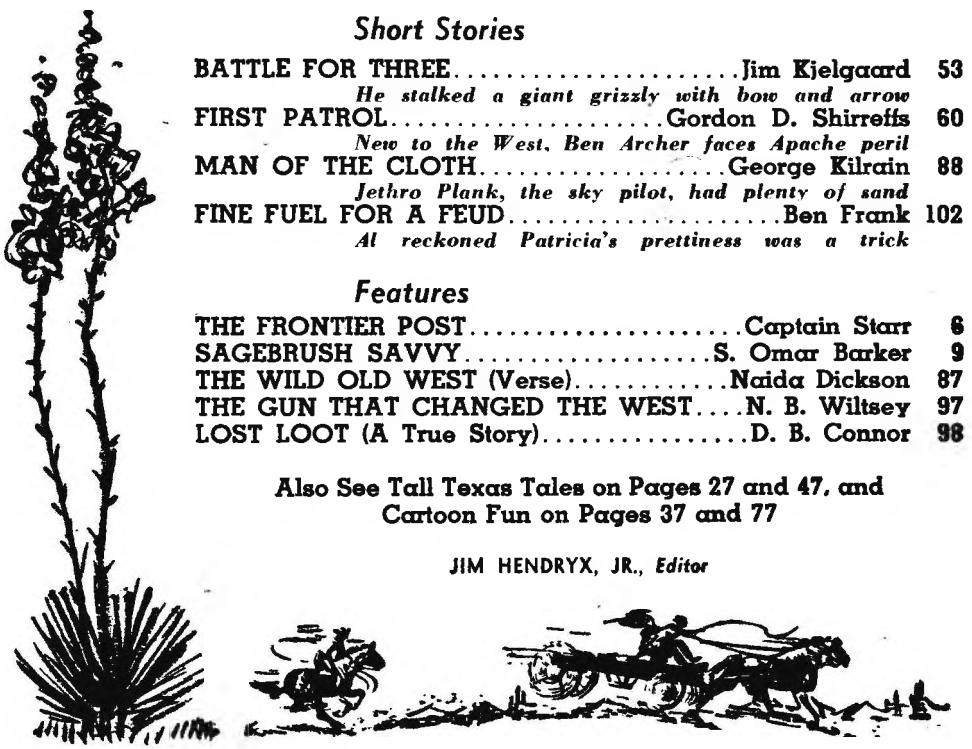
A Novelet

Short Stories

Features

Also See Tall Texas Tales on Pages 27 and 47, and Cartoon Fun on Pages 37 and 77

JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

the Fifty Thousand Dollar Minute

by Hillard Wilson

BILL RHODES was standing on the corner of 42nd and Fifth Avenue, a feeling of resentment rising within him.

"Why," he asked himself, "should I be forever struggling along on a small salary when so many other men have found wealth? They are only men, aren't they? What is the magic something that makes one man a success and the other a failure?"

Just then a car stopped in front of him and a strangely familiar voice called out —

"Bill Rhodes! Of all men! What are you doing here? Remember me? Jim Williams?"

Yes, Bill did remember him. Five years before they had worked together for the same company. They had been good pals. And here was Jim Williams in his own Cadillac! Had he found a gold mine? Had he struck oil?

Jim laughed. "Neither," he said, "but something a whole lot better. Step in the car and we'll ride about a bit."

Bill stepped in and eased back into the luxurious cushions. As they rode along, he told Jim with just a trace of sadness, how he was still working at the same old place and at almost the old salary.

Jim Williams listened attentively. "Bill," he said suddenly, "I want to tell you something. Five years ago when we were working together, we used to wish we could get ahead.

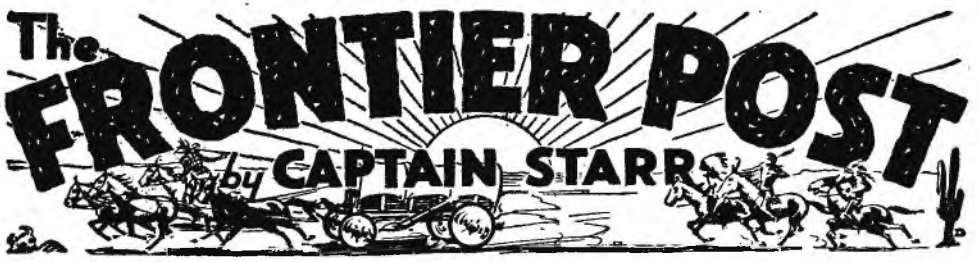
"And then one night I happened to see an advertisement in a magazine. It told about International Correspondence Schools and how they help men to success through spare-time study. Right there I decided that I would be one of these trained men.

"I remember telling you about sending in the coupon. And I remember how you laughed and said I was just wasting my time and my money. But I wasn't, Bill! It was the best investment I ever made.

"I found that the minute I spent in marking and mailing that coupon has been worth $50,000 to me. In other words, I have made just $50,000 more in the last five years than if I had stayed at the old job. And I say very frankly that I owe my advancement to I.C.S."

How much longer are you going to wait before taking the step that is bound to bring you advancement and more money?

The way is easy. Without cost, without obligation, mark and mail this coupon. It takes only a three-cent stamp and a $50,000 minute of your time, but it is the most important thing you can do today.



The Incredible Lieutenant

EDWARD F. BEALE was only an Army lieutenant. But he is one of the unforgettable great men in chronicles of the early West, while many a star-spangled general of his time is completely forgotten.

It was Beale, while swapping yarns with Kit Carson over a Death Valley campfire, who dreamed up the fantastic idea of using camel caravans to transport freight across the vast desert there. He put the scheme over with fair success, too, until various complications brought about by the Civil War ended that enterprise.

Young Whippersnapper

This perky shavetail, Beale, was a man of many talents and untiring energy. He was exerting his influence in many directions, while the average young officer of his rank was drilling on parade grounds or shagging after Indians. Just how he managed to get himself detailed to so many important assignments is the one unexplained mystery of his busy career.

His outstanding accomplishment was to organize the Indian Reservation system.

In doing this, Beale undoubtedly averted much useless bloodshed and saved the lives of many men, both red and white. For he was first to come up with the idea that it was not only more humane but cheaper to feed Indians than to fight them.

Like most other reformers, Beale got in hot water and acquired more enemies than friends. The entire U.S. Senate piled on his neck, hotly condemning him as a dangerous visionary, an impractical dreamer with entirely too much authority and a young upstart swelled up beyond his hat size.

This was in 1853. Beale, a fast and persuasive talker, had received permission to try out his reservation idea on an experimental scale. He went to work with his usual enthusiasm, and before Washington woke up to what he was doing Beale had made 18 treaties with 139 tribes and villages of California Indians. Not only that, he had handed over to them, among many other concessions, some of the most valuable valley lands in the state of California!

That raised a general rumpus. Ranchers yelled their heads off. Settlers went up in the air. Merchants and bankers raved.

Here was a fine howdy-do. That irresponsible young squirt Beale had given California back to the Indians!

And such Indians. Nothing like the noble redmen of the plains—the Sioux, the Comanches, Utes, Arapahoes and Blackfoots. They were not even warlike. Fish and rabbit Indians. Acorn gatherers and lizard eaters. Far from industrious crop growers like the pueblo tribes of the Southwest and their various racial offshoots, the California Indians were not known for any particularly outstanding talents.

Beale Bounces Back

When the protests reached the War Department and rumbled in the halls of Congress, "Beale's deal" was given the full treatment. His treaties went into the wastebasket. Beale was severely reprimanded. He would undoubtedly have been reduced in rank, except that there wasn't anything lower than a lieutenant.

Such a squelch would have put most do-gooders out of business plumb permanently, But not Ed Beale. There is good reason to believe that he considered himself a man of destiny, which is a notion that takes hold of aspiring men now and then—even Army lieutenants.

At West Point he had learned about Hanni-

bal crossing the Alps with elephants, and had topped that by crossing the desert with camels, and the great American desert was a heap more formidable than the Alps had ever been.

So instead of becoming a broken and defeated man, Beale turned up as Superintendent of California Indians, which was some political plum dished out by the State Legislature, at the same time hanging onto his Army Commission. At Fort Tejon, near the present city of Bakersfield, he established the first Indian Reservation in the United States.

All this was nearly a decade before the torn republic took up arms over the controversy of human slavery. "Beale's deal" was a stroke aimed at abolition, years before the Lincoln Proclamation. Because in those days, the meek and submissible California Indians were virtually slaves. It was a great shame that Helen Hunt Jackson struck at in her novel, "Ramona."

Indian Slavery

Here is how the Indian slave system was worked:

Handy means were furnished for large hunks of the Indian population to go on a big drunk—particularly at times when a labor pool was needed. Then they were rounded up, corraled in stockades and labor users got them out by paying their "fines". These so-called benefactors were in turn

rewarded by being allowed to put the Indians to work under the lash, until they were satisfied that the red offenders had sweated out the amounts of their respective fines.

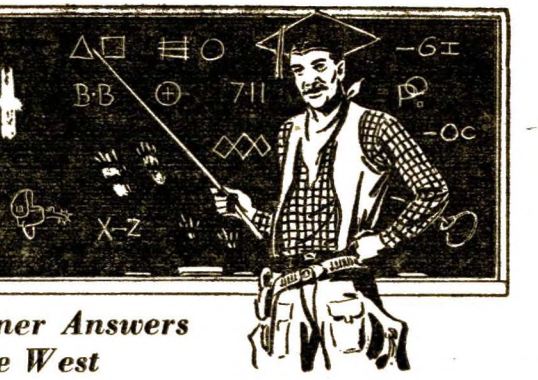
Then another drunk was arranged, another Indian roundup and another round of that hopeless existence.

Compared to this system, the South's slavery was gentle charity.

On the reservations, the Indians were safe from such exploitation. Thanks to our Lieutenant Beale, scout, explorer, trailblazer and maker of unratified treaties.

With more luck and less adversity, he might have come out of it a major general, with a whole boxcar full of medals.

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY



A Quiz Corral in Which a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

In last February's TEXAS RANGERS, H.B. (Pa.) asked: "Does any other state besides Texas have Rangers?" My answer was no. Now H.A.A. (Calif.) writes me: "I wonder what kind of Rangers H.B. was talking about, because in California we have plenty of Rangers in the National Park Service, State Park Service and State Division of Forestry. I think H.B.'s question was about the constabulary of Texas, known as Texas Rangers. Am I wrong or right?"

A.—Right. I took H.B.'s question to mean that he was referring to any constabulary or police force employed by a state and called "Rangers." So far as I know, no other state has them. But of course there are U. S. Forest Service and National Park Rangers *in* many states, and doubtless other states as well as California call certain employees in similar departments "Rangers," but they are not primarily law-enforcement officers as are the Texas Rangers. I should have made this point clear, and I thank H.A.A. for calling it to my attention.

Q.—Where and when was the first rodeo contest for prize money held?—Chas. McC. (Texas).

A.—That question will start an argument among cowboys most anywhere, and is hard for me to answer with complete certainty, because several Western cowtowns claim to have held the first rodeo—and I wasn't there, Sharlie, at any of 'em! But Foghorn Clancy, leading authority on rodeo history, believes that the first cash-prize rodeo was at Pecos, Texas, July 4, 1883, no admission being charged the spectators. And that the first prize-money rodeo where admission was charged was the Cowboy Tournament at Prescott, Ariz., July 4, 1888, in which Juan Levias won both bronc riding and steer roping. Foghorn figgers that the Frontier Days Rodeo at Cheyenne, Wyo., showing annually since 1897 is the oldest show that has never skipped a year.

Q.—What is loco weed?—E.N.B. (N.Y.).

A.—Loco or crazy weed is so called because eating a quantity of it over a period of time makes livestock act crazy, affecting their eyesight, nervous system and sense of balance and often finally killing them. Horses and cattle won't usually eat loco where there is plenty of good grass, but it is habit forming once an animal gets started eating it. There is little difference between purple loco and white loco except in the color of their pea-like flowers. A member of the milkvetch *(astragalus)* family, loco is a quick early spring grower, developing rapidly into clusters from a few inches to a foot or more high, and doesn't seem to give a durn about any sort of drouth.

Q.—Was New Mexico once a part of Arizona Territory, or the other way around?—S.D.L. (Okla.).

A.—Under original Spanish, and later Mexican, rule an area including all of the present Arizona and New Mexico as well as parts of Utah, Colorado and Texas, was called New Mexico (Nuevo Méjico). Under American rule, Arizona was part of the Territory of New Mexico from 1846 until 1863, when Congress made it a separate territory.

—*S. Omar Barker*

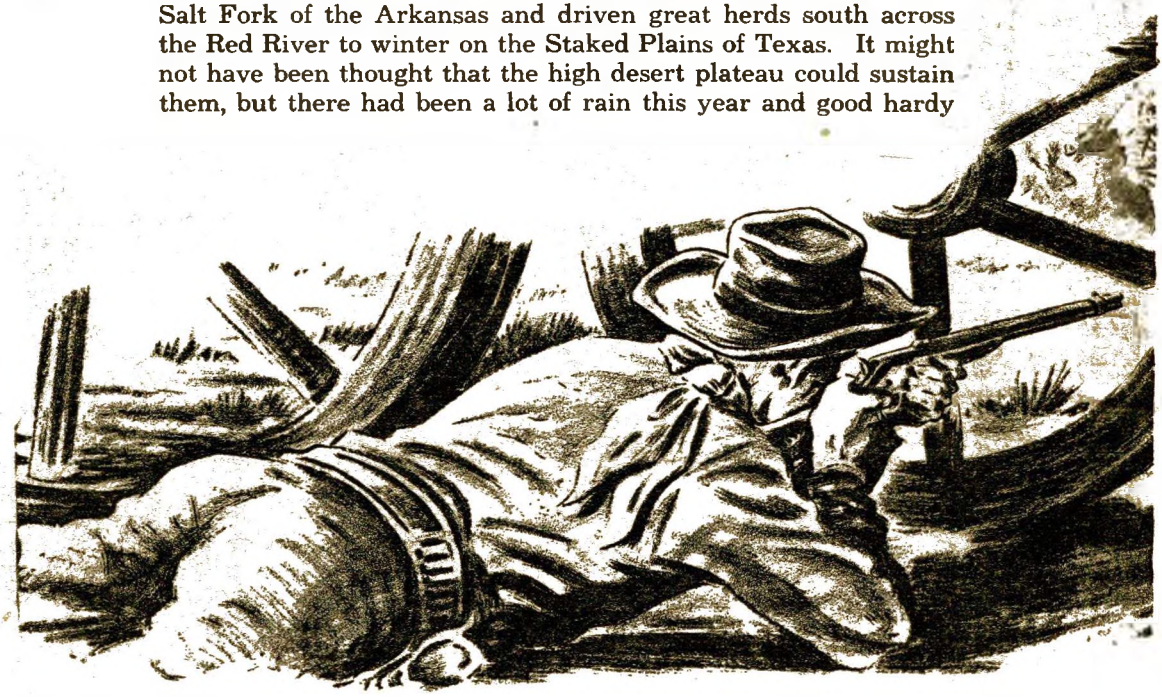
Terror swept the buffalo country, but the Lone Wolf figured the Comanches only partly to blame for the bloody wave of killings

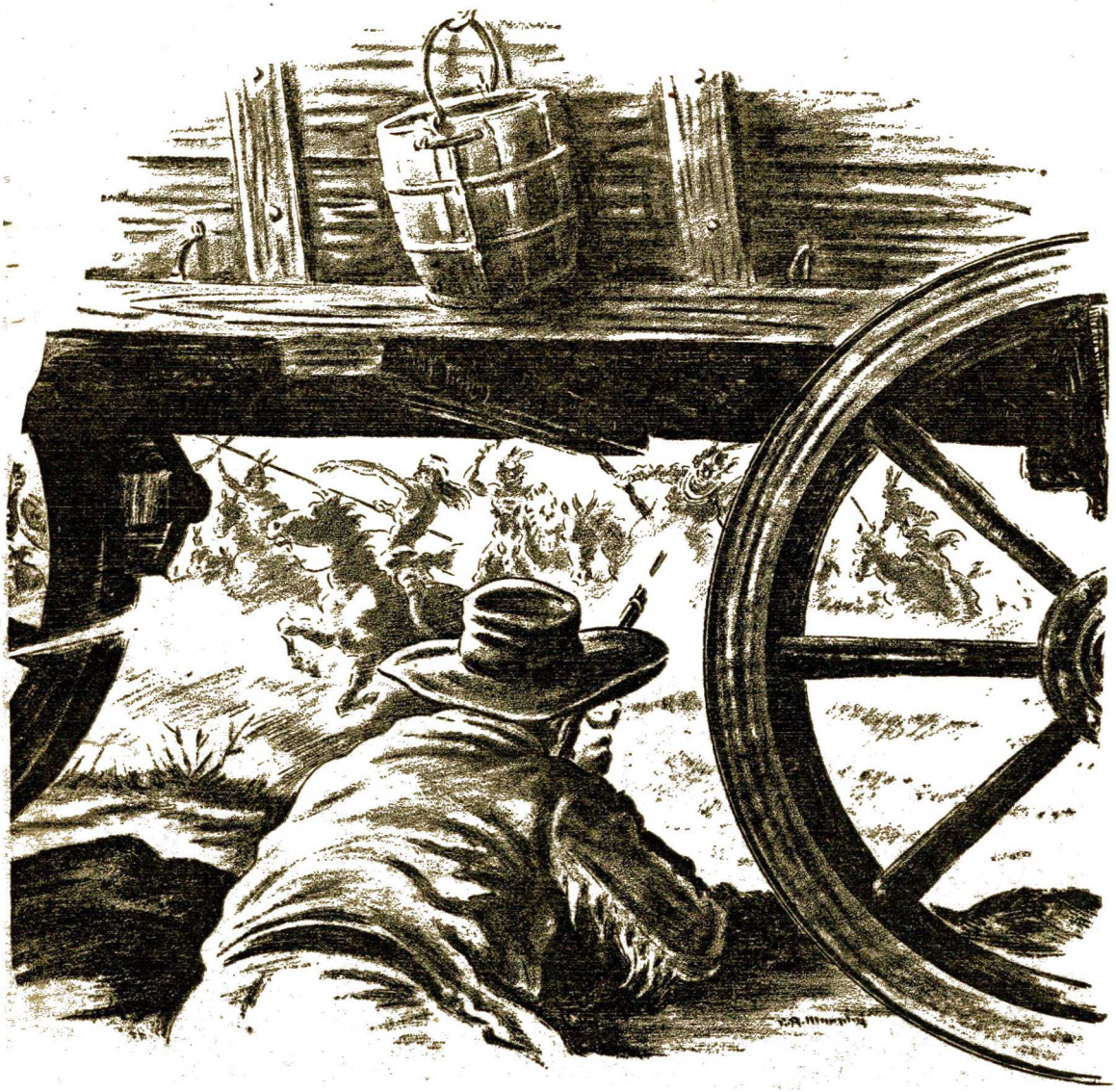
Staked Plains

CHAPTER I

Meeting in Kabbock

BUFFALO hunters had brought a boom to the frontier outpost of Kabbock, Ranger Jim Hatfield reflected, as he watched the swarming life of the settlement. Cold had struck the Salt Fork of the Arkansas and driven great herds south across the Red River to winter on the Staked Plains of Texas. It might not have been thought that the high desert plateau could sustain them, but there had been a lot of rain this year and good hardy





Slaughter

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

buffalo grass carpeted the tableland.

The hunters had followed the buffalo south. Hatfield had seen most of the top professionals come and go in this town. Men like Wyatt Earp, Charlie Bassett, Billy Tilghman, Bat Masterson, and Johnny Poe. Seemed as if he'd seen about everyone except the man he had come here to meet. Hatfield was beginning to get worried over Milt Travers. If he didn't show soon, Hatfield would have to move out and look for him.

In response to an urgent request from a hide-buyer named Gowan, Captain Bill McDowell of the Rangers had sent Travers on ahead, with Jim Hatfield following as soon as he was free for the assignment.

Buffalo hunting was a big business in the 1870's, and it was inevitable that there should be hide rustling. Whenever a business prospered greatly, there was always a concurrent growth of lawlessness.

Now Kabbock, on the headwaters of the Brazos at the foot of the steep-stepped escarpment that rose to the Llano Estacado, was the trading post and operations base for the hunters and hide-buyers — and hide-rustlers, no doubt.

Lounging against the upright of an overhang, dressed in worn buckskin, Jim Hatfield looked no different from the rest of the men on the street, which was as he wanted it. He wore but one holstered gun, and told people he was going out hunting as soon as his partner arrived.

Unusually tall, and with crisp dark hair, cool green eyes, and clean, strong features, he was a finer-looking man than most of those in the settlement, though there were many big, handsome men among the hunters. Quiet and well-mannered, reticent but pleasant, Hatfield gave no one any reason to suspect he was after anything here except buffalo.

AS HE lit a cigarette, Hatfield saw the strange foursome he had met in the hotel last night. One of them, who had introduced himself as Preacher Saul, a missionary to the Indians, was as tall as the Ranger, and a distinguished figure in well-cut black broadcloth. Set off by prematurely gray hair, his face was young, ruddy and glowing, carved in lines of classic nobility. In his deep, mournful black eyes was a strange mystic quality. He had the natural dignity and bearing of nobility also, and a rare personal magnetism. He reminded the Ranger of somebody he had encountered some place, some time, but just who it was, or where, he could not place.

The slim blonde girl beside Saul, his daughter Madeline, had a delicate loveliness, though her features also showed strength of character. And her tailored riding habit displayed her full-blown beauty to full advantage. Both the girl and her immaculate father, Hatfield thought, certainly must be well-to-do missionaries, and must be "quality," accustomed to elegance.

The two men who walked behind them struck a rather incongruous note. One of them, a man named Harry Kotter, was a suave, sleek and dapper individual, slim, and with a poised grace of movement and manner. He looked more like a well-bred rake and gambler than a member of a religious group. The other man, called Oak Herlocker, was a rough, burly brute in greasy buckskins. His coarse face was pockmarked, and small, sly eyes looked out from beneath craggy brows. He moved with a rolling swagger, as if proud of his prodigious size and power.

Approaching Hatfield, Preacher Saul lifted his hat and Madeline smiled. Hatfield raised his own hat, with a courtly bow for the girl.

"So your friend hasn't made his appearance?" Saul asked, in his deep-toned voice. "I was hoping you'd be ready to ride out with us this morning. Like to have you see our Sanctuary."

"I'd like to," Hatfield said. "My partner ought to be in tonight, for sure."

"I have faith in our bodyguards," Saul went on, "but there is even more safety in numbers, now that the Plains are infested with lawless killers. I understand the buffalo hunters and skin-buyers are being preyed upon atrociously by those

human vultures, who think nothing of taking a man's life for a few buffalo skins."

"Guess it is pretty bad out there," Hatfield agreed.

"Well, I trust no harm has befallen your comrade, Jimson," said Saul, using the name Hatfield had given them. Inclining his majestic gray head Saul passed on with his daughter whose blue eyes lingered a moment on Hatfield's bronzed profile.

Sauntering in their wake, Harry Kotter eyed the Ranger with light, contemptuous amusement, and said something to Oak Herlocker that made the giant guffaw. Hatfield's green eyes clouded to a smoky

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

gray with resentment, but he remained silent and motionless. There'd probably be enough fighting on this mission without engaging in any senseless brawl, and for some reason he wanted Madeline and her father to think well of him. The girl's evident liking for Hatfield had prompted a response in the Ranger.

Moving on down the street then, suddenly Hatfield knew a feeling of glad relief as he spotted a familiar, lanky figure riding along the street between the adobe and frame buildings. Hatfield flung up a hand and Ranger Milt Travers swung down from his blaze-faced black with a quick, boyish grin, to walk beside Jim toward the livery barn.

With no preliminary he reported at once what he had learned.

"It's as bad as that buyer Gowan told Cap'n Bill it was — or worse, Jim," he drawled. Travers was a long and loose-jointed man in stained buckskin shirt and breeches. Under his battered hat his hair shone like brass, and a bronze beard stubble glinted on his lean cheeks and jaws. "Looks like a well-organized outfit doing the stealing. They hit the buyers mostly, where they can get a bigger haul of hides, all packed and easy to carry. Don't bother the hunters too much. The hunters are too tough, and they don't keep enough hides on hand to bother with, anyway."

"Any leads?" inquired Hatfield.

MILT TRAVERS frowned and shook his head. "Nary a one, Jim. They strike and disappear lightning-fast. At first Gowan thought it was renegade Comanches and stray outlaws, but it's plain enough now that there's one big ring of them hide-rustlers, smart and smooth-working. They've got it all their own way, Jim. No law out there on the Staked Plains. The hunters don't give a damn, after they sell their skins. The buyers are scattered all over and not strong enough to amount to anything when it comes to protecting themselves or their property."

While Travers unsaddled and rubbed down his black, Hatfield fed his own mount, Goldy, some corn and stroked the silken mane of the great golden sorrel.

"Recognize any badmen out there, Milt?" he asked.

"None of our Texans, Jim. Some bad ones from up north came down with the

hunters. Dutch Henry and Hendry Brown and some others like 'em. But I couldn't pin anything on 'em. Somebody got suspicious of me, though. Tried to bushwhack me yesterday. That's what made me late."

"You get them?"

"No, but I reckon I'll know 'em next time I see 'em," Milt Travers said grimly. "You buy our wagon, horses and outfit, Jim? Good! We can roll in the morning. We'll work a two-man team the way Wyatt Earp does. Most of them hunters work in units of five, you know."

Jim Hatfield nodded. "What are hides going for now, Milt?"

"Three dollars mostly. And some of the experts are killing up to a hundred buffalo a day, Jim — with good stands and a lot of luck. But twenty or thirty head gives you a fair day's pay."

Travers grinned and Hatfield, understanding, grinned back. That could be a windfall for them, with their meager pay as Rangers. But both men were dedicated to the life and work of Rangers, and for them that was compensation enough.

"We'll hunt awhile, Milt," said Hatfield. "Then maybe we'll go to work for Emmett Gowan, or start buying hides ourselves. When they jump us we'll run 'em down, and get to the leaders. Been much killing yet?"

"Not a whole lot, considering the amount of hides stolen," Travers said. "Every time anybody gets killed it's made to look like Comanches did it. But I read signs that don't fit with any Comanches. Most of 'em have been pushed across the Pecos into the Guadalupe Mountains anyway."

"Hear anything about a missionary called Preacher Saul?"

"Some. He's got a place on Bluestone Butte, over near the Pecos. They say he makes mighty big medicine, and those Indians follow him around like sheep. But he'll wind up without his hair. Old Sam Houston's about the only white man that ever lasted long with Comanches."

"Saul's got a pretty nice daughter," Hatfield remarked off-handedly, and Travers laughed.

"Yeah, I heard more about her than I did about the Preacher. They still in town, Jim? I sure need something to rest my poor old eyes on. Let's get to the hotel so I can scrape these whiskers off and clean up a mite."

After supper Hatfield and Travers chatted for awhile with Saul and Madeline, agreeing to ride with them tomorrow. Then they drifted around to survey the night-life of Kabbock.

In the Brazos Ballroom, which had sprung up to accommodate the buffalo hunters, hilarious couples were drinking at the bar, whirling about the dance floor, and embracing in shadowy corners. Travers nudged Hatfield and nodded casually toward two men, who were standing apart with drinks in hand and cigars in teeth, watching the dancers.

"My drygulching amigos. Thought I had 'em tagged. The wide, bow-legged one in the red-and-black plaid shirt is Ed Calso. The long, stringy gent in the blue jumper is Snake Leach. They don't look so smart, Jim, but maybe we can learn something from 'em."

"Wait and see if they're leaving," Hatfield said. "If they don't go out, I'll drop around behind 'em and you walk up in front. Just to see how they act when they spot you, Milt. I'll keep 'em from drawing."

THE two suspected men showed no intention of departing, so Hatfield wandered idly through the throng until he was close to their backs, while Travers strolled across in front of them. The men were plainly agitated when they saw Travers, and tensed as he turned to face them, drawling:

"Like to ask you boys a few questions."

"Beat it, bucko," growled Ed Calso. "We don't know you, and we don't want to!"

"Who hired you boys to ambush me yesterday?" Travers asked carelessly.

Both killers were on the verge of drawing when Jim Hatfield spoke behind them:

"Don't do it. You haven't got a chance." Craning their necks they saw the Colt in Jim's hand. He said, "Eyes front and hands clear." Sheathing his own gun, he plucked theirs from the leather and held them lazily. "Outside now, and get some air."

This byplay had gone unnoticed in the milling crowd, but Calso's next move didn't, when suddenly he threw himself forward at Milt Travers. They met swinging, and slipped into a grappling clinch. Leach turned his reptilian head and sneered at the guns Hatfield was holding.

"You need them, mister? Put 'em down and we'll play, too."

He looked like a tall scrawny scarecrow, and Hatfield was smiling as he half-turned to lay the weapons on an empty table. But even as he moved Snake Leach whirled and struck with amazing speed and strength, jolting Hatfield's head back, with lights flashing behind his eyeballs. The post that slammed Jim between the shoulders was all that kept him from falling.

Leach was in like an elongated jungle cat, to slash him left and right. Hatfield got his hands and arms up barely in time to block those punches after two more had landed with numbing force. Driving forward then, the Ranger beat down those long, flailing arms and smashed the man flat on the floor, so hard that his head bounced and the air swooshed from his lungs. Leach lay there half-stunned and breathless, while Hatfield spat blood and shook his own ringing head.

Milt Travers was clubbing Calso's head against the hardwood when a bellowing voice ordered a halt. It was Overmile, the town marshal, with a gun in each hand.

"Get up off him!" he ordered Milt. "And you stand back!" he barked at Jim.

While he covered the two Rangers, Leach and Calso crawled into the surging spectators and broke for the door.

"Don't let them get away, Marshal!" Hatfield yelled. "They're bandits."

And he headed after them with Travers at his heels, leaving Overmile standing there staring stupidly at his own drawn guns.

The crowd split for them, and the batwings were still swinging from the passage of Leach and Calso when the two Rangers burst through them. Hatfield collided squarely with a huge, bulky man who cursed and grabbed at him as they went down in a rolling tangle. Travers tripped over them, bumped headlong into another man, and they fell in a thrashing sprawl on the board walk.

Striving to disengage himself from an angry giant, Hatfield saw that it was Oak Herlocker, who grumbled, "What the hell you trying to do, Jimson?" as they clambered upright together.

"Sorry," Hatfield said. "Had an argument with those two who came out just ahead of us. Which way'd they go?"

The massive Herlocker shrugged and spread his huge palms. Travers and Harry Kotter were getting up and brushing their clothes disgustedly. Kotter, fuming over his checked suit, was regarding Travers with decided distaste.

Ed Calso and Snake Leach had vanished, of course. Hatfield and Travers ransacked the town but found no trace of them. Then they had to talk Overmile out of arresting them, and finally managed it with some fluent assistance from Preacher Saul. Even to the local law Jim Hatfield did not wish to reveal that he and Travers were Rangers. Not this early in the game, at any rate.

CHAPTER II

Llano Estacado

IN THE grayness of early morning Preacher Saul's party and the two Rangers moved out of Kabbock, to climb the broken escarpment of the Staked Plains.

Saul's huge freighter, drawn by six mules, was driven by Oak Herlocker, with Harry Kotter riding his horse along-

side. Milt Travers was on the box of the four-horse wagon which Hatfield had bought and loaded with provisions, equipment, Sharps .50 buffalo guns and ammunition. Milt's black gelding was tied to the tail-gate of the wagon. Hatfield, astride his big sorrel, rode at the head of the small caravan with Madeline and Preacher Saul.

Once the scarps were left behind and below them, the vast sweeping tableland of Llano Estacado lay ahead, broken at wide intervals by canyons and arroyos and erosion buttes. Creek beds that Hatfield always before had seen dry now were filled with rushing water.

There was little vegetation except for the short buffalo grass, and the trees scattered along the watercourses, but there were plenty of buffalo chips here for campfires. In the rare hilly sections were scraggy oak and juniper, mesquite and scrub cedar.

Preacher Saul, with the avid curiosity of an intelligent, educated man, asked a great many questions. He seemed surprised and impressed by Hatfield's quiet, ready answers.

"The soil is so thin down around Kabbock," commented Saul. "How do you account for this red and brown loam here on the plateau, Jimson?"

"A lake was here back in the Neocene Era," Hatfield told him. "This is the sediment — still here."

Saul marveled a moment, then wanted to know about buffalo grass, and the habits of buffalo.

"There's a great strip of country, about five hundred miles wide and fifteen hundred miles long, running from our Colorado River here way up into Canada, and covered with buffalo grass," Hatfield explained easily in his mellow voice. "The grass, as you can see, seldom grows more than six inches high, and looks almost like moss, at a distance. Starts growing in early spring, cures on the stalk, and is sweetest and most nutritious in fall and winter. In spite of continuous grazing and the trampling of millions of hooves, it springs up year after year — nothing seems to stop it."

Saul studied him with thoughtful dark eyes. "You're a remarkable man to find riding this wilderness, Jimson," he remarked.

"No, I just read a lot when I'm not in the saddle," Hatfield said. "From that, rather than from much experience, I know that buffalo herds follow the grass north, to summer in the Dakotas, Montana and Canada. When the cold hits the northern plains, the buffalo start south, to winter in the valleys of the Republican, Arkansas, Cimarron and the Canadian, or down here on the Plains, or in the Brazos, and along the Colorado River. On their way south they grow winter coats, so their hides are more valuable from September to March than in the summer months."

"Interesting, Jimson," said Saul. "You're familiar with the technique of hunting them, I presume?"

"A little," Hatfield confessed. "I know, as you probably do, that they are no longer shot from horseback. A mounted man'll spook a herd, where a man on foot won't. The way Cody and Comstock killed up North was mostly for show. This is strictly business down here. Today the hunters shoot from stands, with a heavy Sharps .50 on a shooting rest of crossed sticks. It's more like slaughtering than hunting, for the poor beasts almost wait to be shot."

"I should think the first shot would stampede the herd," the Preacher said thoughtfully.

"It doesn't, though," Hatfield said. "The animals don't pay much attention to gunshots or to their own dead, until the smell of blood gets strong enough to spook them. A man from Dodge named Tom Nixon once dropped a hundred and twenty of them without changing his stand for even one of his shots."

"What's the record for an entire season?"

"The best I've ever heard about was made by Billy Tilghman. He took thirty-three hundred hides from September to April."

SAUL whistled softly. "He made close to ten thousand dollars then!"

"Not after he'd paid his expenses and his helpers," Hatfield said, smiling a little. "Considerably less than half of that. These boys down here on the Plains hunt in style. They have four or five wagons like ours, and hire four helpers — driver, sticktender, watchman and cook, who also do the skinning. A real buffalo hunter wouldn't think of skinning his own game, but my pardner and I don't mind."

"Are the helpers on wages or shares?" asked Saul. He appeared to possess a practical mind, for a missionary.

Hatfield explained, "The hunter gets one half of the total from hides and meat and pays all expenses. The other half is divided among his helpers."

"I see — I see," Saul said, rather absently. "You are well informed, Jimson."

He fell into a sudden silence for which Hatfield was grateful, for it gave him a chance to talk to Madeline about something more pleasant as they traversed the Plains.

But Madeline had been listening, and had her own comments to make about buffalo hunting.

"It doesn't sound very sporting," she said musingly.

A wry smile touched Hatfield's lips. "It isn't. It's a bloody, dirty business. But it pays better than riding the chuckline, so — " He shrugged.

"A man like you should find something far better than either of those jobs," Madeline declared.

"Maybe," Hatfield conceded. "I've had chances — if I could stand being inside, chained to a desk. But I like to be outdoors, ma'am, and I like horses and guns and new places."

Madeline inclined her head. "I know. I like outdoor life myself. Yet sometimes I long for a permanent home."

"You should have one, too," the Ranger said flatly. "This frontier's no place for a girl like you. And the Comanches — they can change from being peaceful and rise like the wind."

"They worship Father, though," Madeline said. "He's done a wonderful job with them. He'd like to use them against those Staked Plains outlaws, to help Emmett Gowan — the hide-buyer, you know — and the others. But he's afraid if the Comanches once started on the warpath, even he couldn't control them."

"And he's right. Once they begin killing whites, they don't stop until they're dead or put down and disarmed." Hatfield glanced uneasily at the aloof, silent Saul. He seemed far away, remote from his surroundings.

"Don't mind Father's moods," Madeline said. "He has so much on his mind, and such a great, deep mind. He thinks too much and too intensely. Sometimes these moody trances of his frighten me, make me lonesome. But he's kind and gentle, generous and understanding. And he's really grown fond of you and your hunting partner."

"Glad of that, ma'am," said Hatfield.

"Please call me Madeline. What do they call you, except Mr. Jimson?"

"Just Jim."

"All right, Jim." Her smile was radiant. "I want us to be friends. I — I haven't met anyone like you out here. Or anywhere else, for that matter."

"Sure we'll be friends, Madeline," said Hatfield. "A pleasure, a privilege, and an honor."

"Are you coming to the Sanctuary with us, Jim?"

"Afraid it's out of our way, but I'd like to visit you there. What's it like, anyway?"

"Just an adobe on top of a mesa," Madeline said. "The Comanches come there, when Father isn't up in the Guadalupes with them. For people with the reputation of being such terrible warriors, they seem so childlike and innocent. And they *have* been treated shamefully, Jim. Why, these Plains and the buffalo all used to belong to them!"

"I know," Hatfield said somberly. "They have cause enough to hate whites. But I sure hope they don't break loose again to show it."

"Father won't let them, Jim," she as-

sured confidently. "He's making a peaceful, civilized people of them."

FOR the rest of the day Saul remained in his personalized isolation, and Hatfield became well-acquainted with Madeline. The warmth and liking between them from the first bloomed with the slow, plodding miles. Harry Kotter watched them with jealous anger, and plain hatred burned in his long-lashed eyes and proud, scornful face.

Jack-rabbits bounded through the shrubs, prairie dogs scurried in the grass and dirt, and bands of antelope moved like quicksilver in the sun-hazed distance. Horned toads squatted on the sand, and lizards slithered among the rocks. A far-away stampede of buffalo unfurled dust clouds that veiled the sun, and the rumble of hoofbeats was like distant thunder shaking the earth.

The second day out, Hatfield spelled Travers on the wagon seat, with Goldy tethered to the tail-gate.

"It's not that I want to bask in the sunshine of a woman's smile, Jim," drawled Travers. "I just want for a while to bear the brunt of Kotter's evil eye, which you would have felt boring into your spine all day yesterday, if you hadn't been in such a fog with the lovely Madeline."

"Thanks, Milt," Hatfield said dryly. "I appreciate your sacrifice."

It was true about Kotter, though, Hatfield saw now. For when Travers joined the girl ahead of the wagons, Harry Kotter stared at him with loathing and cold, uncontrolled fury. Saul paid no attention to them or to anyone else. He was still in his own world, isolated.

In mid-afternoon, Milt Travers dropped back beside the wagon Hatfield was driving.

"We better pull out of here, Jim," he suggested, "and cut over toward Gowan's and the buffalo ranges. We can take a look at Bluestone some other time."

Hatfield agreed, with some reluctance, and shortly they said their farewells. That even roused Saul from his reverie. Both he and his daughter were sorry to see the young buffalo hunters leave, but Kotter and Herlocker seemed relieved to be seeing the last of them.

"You'll come and see us, won't you, Jim?" asked Madeline, her blue eyes warm as they clung to Hatfield's grave, strong features. "We want both of you to come, any time you like."

"Oh, we'll get over there some time," Hatfield promised vaguely.

He was thoughtful as he watched the three riders and the big freight dray move on toward the Pecos River and the Guadalupe Mountains, the barrier dominated by the peak of *El Capitan.*

Milt Travers wagged his fair head with a boyish smile. "If I had your way with women, Jim Hatfield, I'd have me a whole harem. And you haven't even got *one* girl of your own!"

Hatfield grinned. "Been too busy, Milt. Never stop anywhere long enough to do any serious courting."

Travers just snorted, and they traveled on into the northwest. There buffalo were grazing on the short, close-curled blades of grass that spread like vines on the flat, sweeping table-top of the Llano Estacado.

CHAPTER III

The Hide-Buyer

EMMETT GOWAN had built up a good business on Caddos Creek. The first hide-buyer to move into the field, he had got the jump on his competitors, who were accustomed to staying in Kabbock and letting the hunters bring their hides to town. Of course others followed Gowan onto the Stakes Plains, but none had a layout the equal of his.

He had acquired that by planning, planning and gambling on his luck and his business ability and instinct. He had watched the summer rainfall, had seen the buffalo grass spreading and growing richer than he had ever seen it, and when

"This frontier's no place for a girl like you," he said

he had heard the rumor of an early winter expected up North he had taken a chance and put up these buildings on the Caddos.

He looked at them now, as he paced the grounds, with a mixture of pride and fear. The long, low adobe house, a store in one end, spacious living quarters for the family in the other. Behind it stood the barn, the brush corrals, and the big storehouse which held a fortune in hides, despite his recent losses.

He wife and his daughter, Alice, kept the house spick-and-span, and helped in the trading post and barn. His three sons drove the wagons to pick up hides from the hunters who were too busy or too lazy to pack them in to the post. The Gowan family, a close-knit unit, got great satisfaction from working and living in harmony.

But lately the boys had been returning with empty wagons, all too often the loads of hides having been stolen from them on the way home. This was one disadvantage of operating in the field, which Emmett Gowan had not foreseen. Buyers in town had the protection of the law, but there was no law on the Llano Estacado. He had written to Ranger headquarters in Austin for help, but hadn't seen any Rangers yet. Probably that thinly-spread force was too busy and short-handed to spare anybody for the remote Staked Plains, but everyone insisted that Roaring Bill McDowell did his damnedest to cover the whole enormous state.

Everything had gone so well at first that Emmett Gowan had thought his luck had finally taken a turn toward success, after a lifetime of frustration and failure in various enterprises. It had really looked as if he were on the uptrail at last — until the hide-stealing had started.

It had spread like a prairie fire, until now it seemed that the ill fortune which had dogged all his days was still dead set against him and his family. His wife wanted to give up and pull out before their sons were hurt or killed, but Emmett Gowan was reluctant to quit after such an excellent beginning in the trade.

He had ordered his boys not to make any foolhardy fight against impossible odds when they were held up, and so far they hadn't been harmed by the thieves. But deep inside, Gowan was as afraid as his wife.

Now, late in the afternoon with the sun lowering toward the far-off Guadalupes, he was waiting for the last two of his sons to come in with their wagons. Terence already had returned, his wagon empty again, and Emmett had put the angry, bitter lad to sorting and packing hides in the storehouse. The Gowans were fighters, and it galled the sons to take this licking without striking back, regardless of odds.

Emmett Gowan thought grimly. If the others lost their loads today, I won't send them out any more. Not for a while anyway. Let the damn hunters come here with their hides.

Then another thought chilled him. If he did that, the hide rustlers would raid his storehouse. Sooner or later they'd do it anyway, and that would be the final crushing blow.

Emmett Gowan, walking the front yard morbidly, was a broad, stumpy man of middle-age, head graying and balding, face weathered and seamed with deep, somber lines. His eyes were like brown velvet, mild and soft, calm, steady and level. He wore a holstered .44 and he could use it, but a man isn't so quick to slap leather and throw lead when he's got a wife and four kids depending on him.

Emmett scanned the flats for his other two wagons, but they were nowhere visible. If anyone had hurt Finley and young Pat, he'd go after them with a gun damn sudden.

TURNING into the store, he filled and lighted his pipe and poured whisky from a jug into a tin cup. It was near enough to sundown for his first drink of the day. He savored the strong burn of the liquor and the taste of tobacco smoke. The inside door opened, and his wife entered, her kind features drawn and gaunted with worry.

"It's no use, Em," she said wearily. "Fin and Pat'll come home empty too — if they come at all. Why don't we get out of here before we lose everything — including our lives?"

"We'll see, Ada," he said slowly. "Maybe the Rangers'll come yet. We'd never get those hides to Kabbock without some help anyway."

"We won't keep them here long either. Those rustlers will be coming after them, and they'd kill us all to get the pelts."

"This dobe's like a small fort and it covers the storehouse," Emmett Gowan said. "We've got four good shots in the family, with you and Alice to load for us. They won't find it easy to take the hides, Ada — unless they hit us with a whole army."

"Well, there must be an army of them, Em," his wife said hopelessly. "I don't like to cry and complain, Emmett, but I'm scared sick. Not for us, but the kids — they haven't even started living yet."

"Now you quit worrying, Ada," said Emmett. "If it gets too rough we'll move out." He strode to the window. "Somebody's coming — but no wagons."

His wife went back into the living quarters, and he watched three riders approach, their horses lathered and blowing hard. He recognized them then — a hunter named Dutch Henry, a gambler called Velvet Oppel, and a strange looking albino with the long white hair, pale weird eyes, and empty blank face known only as Alby. They had a few bundles of hides.

Loosening the Colt in its leather, Gowan went behind the counter and placed his sawed-off shotgun within easy reach. These fellows had bad faces and worse reputations. The albino, an idiot, was known to be a killer, all the more deadly because he was sub-human.

The three came into the store with deliberate insolence, flinging the hides on the counter. Emmett Gowan counted them, calculated their worth with an expert eye, and set his price.

Oppel said, "Alby," and jerked a thumb at the window, and the albino turned and

stood slackly, thumbs hooked in shell belt, staring outside.

"Maybe we ain't selling today — maybe we're buying," Dutch Henry said. He was a well-built and rather good-looking man in a hard, brazen way. His face now was sweaty, streaked with dirt and with darker stains that might have been gunpowder. "Buying you out, Gowan."

"No sale," Emmett said shortly.

"You aren't holding the cards to stay in this game, friend," Velvet Oppel said smoothly, his frozen pointed features grimacing, a cold smile that never reached his eyes. "If you don't sell out you'll lose out. Why not take a fair price, instead of nothing?"

"You want your money or the hides?" Emmett Gowan asked, disregarding the gambler.

Dutch Henry held out a grimy hand, and Emmett counted the money for the hides into it.

"You're a stubborn mule," Dutch said. "A man with a family ain't in a position to fight off outlaws. Think it over, old-timer. We'll be back."

"You see my boys anywhere?" asked the skin-buyer.

Dutch shook his head, but Oppel said, "Some day they won't come home, Gowan. Then you'll wish you'd listened to us and cleared out of here. Only a fool would bring his whole family into the Plains to do business."

Emmett Gowan's hand was almost on the shotgun he'd placed close by. "Save your breath, you —"

The albino, at the window, interrupted with an unintelligible gabble. Dutch Henry and Velvet Oppel saluted mockingly, and went out the door, the albino grinning foolishly as he followed.

After they had galloped off, Emmett heard wheels and hooves, and saw three wagons and two riders coming in along Caddos Creek. Two of them were his wagons. Thank God, Finley and Patrick were safe!

The wagons looked to be loaded, too. The third team and vehicle were hooked on behind the Gowan wagons.

HE DID not recognize the horsemen until they came closer. Then he saw that the lanky blond one was Milt Travers, a man who had been around here recently, and whom he liked. The other rider was a big, rangy, broad-shouldered fellow, a striking figure on a golden sorrel.

Gowan went outside to greet them, and Terry ran from the storehouse to stand, slim and dark, beside his father. The wagons *were* loaded, and Fin and Pat were grinning, elated over something.

"Almost lost 'em again, Pop," said Finley. "Would've if Milt and Jim here hadn't come along. The rustler bunch had held us up in Waco Canyon, about eight of 'em, when Milt and Jim started shooting from the rim. You should of seen 'em dust off, Pop!"

"Your boys did all right, too," said Travers, smiling. "Mr. Gowan, they had their guns going the minute the rustlers stopped covering 'em. We winged two or three of the lobos, all told."

"I hit one of 'em, Pop!" cried young Patrick, eyes and teeth shining in his youthful face. "I had a bead on him and I saw the dust fly off him, and he almost went out of the saddle!"

"Know any of them, boys?" inquired Emmett.

"Just Alby," said Finley. "They had masks on, but you could tell that albino a mile off."

The two riders stepped down, and Travers introduced Hatfield to Emmett Gowan. The hide-buyer felt better just to shake the hand of the big Ranger and look into his grave face. He had recognized the name and, like most Texans, he knew the prowess of the legendary Lone Wolf, and was thankful to Bill McDowell for sending the best man he had.

Hatfield smiled, and nodded. He liked the looks of this Emmett Gowan and his three sons.

"I'm a Ranger, too, Emmett," said Travers, grinning. "Not being famous, though, I can go under my own name around here, but Hatfield has to be called Jimson."

"I can identify two more of the raiders

for you," Emmett said. "Dutch Henry and Velvet Oppel were just here with Alby. Noticed their horses were all sweaty and tuckered out."

"That's a start," Jim Hatfield said. "Something to work on. But before we do anything else, Milt and I have got to set up as buffalo hunters. We've got to have a legitimate excuse for being on the range."

"They did get a few bunches of skins, Pop," said young Patrick, glumly.

"I know, Pat," said his father wryly. "I just bought them — again. Hope they're prime ones, seeing I paid for them twice. Now you boys unload and take care of all these horses, while Milt and Ranger Hatfield and I talk things over and maybe have a nip or two before supper."

CHAPTER IV

Hunting the Buffalo

JIM HATFIELD left Milt Travers behind with the wagon, and rode Goldy toward the stand he had chosen for the day's shooting. This was their third day on the range, and they had fifty-five skins pegged out.

They had already abandoned the heavy Sharps and rest-sticks, and were using the new Winchesters which had been issued to the Rangers. They shot one stand a day, and the kill was all that the two of them could skin.

As a rule, the buffalo wouldn't stampede until twenty-five or thirty had been shot down, which was enough for the Rangers. Professionals, with four skinners behind them, worked several stands a day and sometimes killed a hundred or thereabouts daily.

Leaving the sorrel behind the rise of ground he had selected, Hatfield climbed over the swell and advanced on foot. The buffalo were grazing in scattered bunches of from twenty to a couple of hundred, with fifty or a hundred yards between the bands, although they all belonged to the same herd. Without the big Sharps, Jim Hatfield had to work closer to the animals, cutting the range down to about fifty yards. It was safer to cease firing before the blood smell spooked the herd for then there would be no danger of being caught in a stampede.

The bunch Hatfield had picked numbered perhaps a hundred, and he moved in close without attracting anything beyond a few dull curious stares. A shaggy bull on the outer edge which appeared to be the leader was his first target. He aimed at a point just behind the foreleg, about a third of the way up the body, and squeezed off his shot.

The bull stumbled a few steps and dropped to earth. His companions went on grazing as if nothing had happened. Their lack of reaction always astonished Hatfield. It was if they were all deaf, dumb and blind.

Selecting one hairy humped beast after another on the fringe of the herd, Hatfield shot them down until his carbine was empty. With the dead rimmed halfway around them, the great brutes continued to crop the grass with stolid unbroken calm, while the hunter reloaded.

It was almost impossible to miss, and a marksman like Jim Hatfield could kill with every shot. There was no element of sport or excitement in it, except the threat of stampede. It was too easy to be any fun, and Hatfield sickened inside as he went on firing, swiftly and steadily.

When there were about twenty-five of the creatures down in the grass, Hatfield called it a day and whistled up Goldy. The sight and scent of the horse spooked the animals, and they lumbered off in the opposite direction, leaving their dead behind. They couldn't even smell blood, Jim decided, unless it was right under their noses, or strong enough to half-suffocate them.

He was filled with anger and disgust for the stupid monsters, and scorn for himself and for all buffalo hunters. It was nothing but slaughter, as he had told Preacher Saul.

Milt Travers brought up the wagon and they made ready for the long, hard, filthy job of skinning the kill. After two days of that, Hatfield could see why most of the veterans refused to touch a skinning knife.

"I'm glad it's your turn to shoot tomorrow, Milt," he said.

"I'm not," Travers said. "It's murder, Jim. There's no good feeling in it at all."

Hatfield smiled soberly. "I think we'll become hide-buyers sooner than we expected to."

Taking the carcasses one at a time, they worked together with the knives, slitting down the inside of each leg and along the belly from head to tail. Then the legs and a strip along either side of the central belly gash were skinned out cleanly, and the neck was skinned completely around. They did not take the skin of the head. The thick hide of the neck was bunched, looped with a rope, and the whole hide ripped off by a horse hitched to the other end of the rope.

They labored at their butcher job as rapidly as possible, plastered with blood and sweat and hair. From beginning to end it was a vile, messy job. They were nauseated at the thought of taking the tongues and hindquarters for meat — the regular practice.

BACK in camp after the long ordeal, they sprinkled the hides with poison to keep off insects, and pegged them out to dry, with the flesh side up. The skins cured quickly in this dry air, and after a few days of curing they were stacked in piles, the hair side up, ready for the buyers.

The two Rangers did their work well away from the main camps, but in the evenings they rode to join other hunters about friendly campfires, where jugs were passed around and fantastic tall tales told and elaborate lies swapped. They got to know many of the hunters. Later, some of these hunters were to become famous peace officers or notorious outlaws, but since the Rangers now could have no prescience of that, their liking was distributed indiscriminately — between men like Charlie Bassett and Jack Bridges, Bat Masterson and Johnny Poe, Billy Tilghman and long, lean Wyatt Earp.

All the men were indignant, aroused by the hide rustling that was going on, even though it was not hurting any of them directly. But all of them liked Emmett Gowan and his family, and disliked seeing him and other honest hide-buyers victimized. The only suspects Hatfield heard mentioned, however, were the same outlaws he and Travers had encountered briefly, and there was no actual evidence against them.

Ed Calso and Snake Leach hadn't been seen recently, and Dutch Henry, Velvet Oppel, and Hendry Brown also had dropped out of sight. Alby, the albino, had been seen here and there, but he was nothing more than a senseless tool in the hands of whoever his immediate companions chanced to be.

"But Saturday night is spree night in the big camp," Bat Masterson said, as the matter was being discussed one night while they sat around a campfire. "They'll all be around that day and evening. Snake Leach peddles whisky from a wagon, and Velvet Oppel will be on hand for the gambling. Maybe we can get a line on some of the others, too, come Saturday."

"I can't figure where they're taking the hides," Wyatt Earp said thoughtfully. His hair and mustache looked tawny in the firelight. "They aren't going to Kabbock, that's sure. Must have a big cache of them hidden somewhere." In action or repose, Earp was always the thinker.

On Friday it was Jim Hatfield's turn with the rifle again. Goldy was left in camp, so Milt Travers could straighten and tighten the shoe on the sorrel's left hind foot, and Hatfield rode Milt's black to his nearby stand overlooking a band of some hundred and fifty buffalo. But he had so little heart for the kill that he decided this would be the last day of it for him.

Once he and Travers became known as hide-buyers they could circulate around

at will, covering more territory and seeing more people than as hunters. All this shooting and skinning, besides being revolting, tied them down too much. Still, it had been logical to establish themselves as hunters. It required more time for buyers to become friendly with buffalo hunters.

Leaving the black horse in the lee of a low ridge of rimrock, Hatfield climbed the rise and stalked down the easy grade toward the foraging animals. The bunch he had selected was one of many on the grassland, a veritable sea of horned heads and hairy humped backs, broken by islands of flat, open turf. Picking his first victim, Jim pumped a bullet home and saw the shaggy beast slump down, dying without a struggle. It was less exciting, he thought, than target practice. The foolish critters seemed to welcome death, and their downfall meant nothing even to their nearest companions.

It was a crime to slaughter animals as stupid as these, unless the meat and skins were needed for the purpose the Indians once used them. Killing from horseback might give a man some thrill, but this commercial method turned him sick and sour. Still, there were hunters who enjoyed such wanton wholesale massacres, men who killed for the sake of killing. But the Ranger was not one of them.

HATFIELD had fired five times and knocked down four buffalo when horsemen appeared on the far side of this detached band, shouting and waving arms and ropes. Hatfield glimpsed the grinning face and flowing hair of Alby, and behind him was the lank, wiry Snake Leach and some other riders.

Mounted men always spooked a herd, and these men were doing that now with malice aforethought. They wanted Hatfield to be overrun and trampled into jelly under the hooves!

The buffalo surged forward, snorting and bawling as panic spread. And came stampeding straight at the Ranger!

Goldy wasn't there to come running at Hatfield's whistle, and he couldn't call the black like that, even if there'd been time. Nor was there a chance of reaching the ridge and leaping into saddle. He was caught helpless in the open before that thundering herd!

The Lone Wolf had known many close calls and narrow escapes in his lawman career but seldom, if ever, had he been so certain he was going to die. It wasn't a way he would have chosen, either — stomped and crushed to pulp beneath the hooves of such stupid brutes. But they were coming at him in a vast roaring avalanche. Dust stormed high to cloud the brassy sun, and the buffalo came on with rocketing speed, an overwhelming torrent that jarred the earth.

In utter panicky terror, Hatfield had an urge to turn and run, or just drop flat and wait for death, but he couldn't give up as long as there was a breath of life left in him. The great bull at the point was heading right for him, the bearded brute face, enormous horned head, and huge humped back looming larger and nearer. As tales of old hunters flashed through Hatfield's numb brain he knew there was only one thin chance for him. One in a thousand maybe; one in a million more likely.

Raising his Winchester, he began to fire into the on-rushing herd, as fast as he could work the trigger and lever, dropping buffalo on either side of the leader. The old bull was close when Hatfield emptied the carbine and let it fly spinning aside. He concentrated on that beast in the front, trying to forget the rest of the bunch. The heat and stench of them was in his face now, the ground shuddering under his boots. His one slim chance was going to take raw nerve, cold courage, perfect timing and coordination, flawless speed and strength. The slightest slip and he was doomed!

Hatfield waited in a half-crouch, eyes fixed on that first horned head, gauging momentum and distance, muscles coiled loosely for the tremendous and ultimate effort. When the bull was almost upon him, Hatfield dodged aside just enough

to evade the battering-ram impact. Turning and lunging in as that massive head rushed past, he reached out, caught the horns, and swung astride of the great hunched back, hands gripping the horns and thighs locked on the shaggy, heaving sides.

The leader went on in straightaway flight, oblivious to the man on his back, or to the herd hammering along after them. Once mounted, Hatfield was safe, as long as he could hang on. This had been done before, and it might be done again. The life-saving idea had come from an eye witness's account of a similar escape. But Hatfield hoped he'd never have to try it another time.

The runaway pace slackened gradually, and the stampede began to lose its impetus as the animals tired. A creek showed ahead, lined scantily with cottonwoods and willows, and the big bull made for the water. As the buffalo passed under a tree, Hatfield reached up and clawed onto a stout limb, swinging aloft into the safety of the cottonwood branches. For a long time he clung there, weak from the strain, the relief and reaction, even more afraid now than he had been while waiting in front of the herd.

The last of the buffalo were still wallowing in the creek when Jim Hatfield slid to the ground. The clumsy animals paid him no attention as he started walking back over the trampled grass toward camp. There was no sign of the men who had started the stampede. Sure of his death, they had ridden away at once.

Hatfield wondered why they wanted him dead. Did Snake Leach crave revenge for that fracas in Kabbock? Or did the outlaws suspect Hatfield and Travers of being Rangers?

MILT TRAVERS, having heard the stampede, was coming out to meet him now, riding his black and leading the golden sorrel.

"Found what was left of your rifle, Jim," he said as he rode up, face drawn taut. "Thought you were chopped to powder somewhere in the dirt. How'd you get out of it, anyway?"

"You're looking at the luckiest man in all of Texas," Hatfield said thankfully and told of his experience simply and briefly. "That's enough for me, Milt," he concluded. "We'll skin out the ones I shot and move into the main camp tonight."

"That sure suits me," agreed Travers.

They went about the butchering with even more distaste than before, and after a time Hatfield said:

"I've got an idea, Milt. When we hit the road you drive the wagon, and I'll ride in the back end, with our horses hitched on behind. Those killers think I'm dead, and they may figure on jumping you. If they do hold us up, you lift your hands and tip 'em back a little under the hood, so I can lay six-guns in them. Then I'll open up from under the canvas, and you can join in after they get too busy to keep you covered."

"Sounds all right, Jim," said Travers. "I hope they do jump us. Give us something to work on here. They must think we're some kind of lawmen, I reckon."

Hatfield nodded, with a somber smile. "Either that, Milt, or they just don't like our looks much."

CHAPTER V

Horsehead Rendezvous

THE two Rangers took the road that evening, after bathing in the creek and changing into fresh clothes, with Travers on the wagon seat driving the four-horse team, and Hatfield under the hood at his back. Their saddle horses were tied to the tail-gate. It was a relief to have the hunting finished, as far as they were concerned, and to start the grimmer and more purposeful business of running down and routing out the hide thieves of the Staked Plains.

It was a fine, clear night, the stars glittering with steel-point sharpness and a slender silver horn of a moon hanging

above *El Capitan* and the Guadalupes in the west. Peering out from beneath the canvas, Hatfield thought of Madeline and the strange, regal Preacher Saul. They were over there on Bluestone Butte somewhere in the distance, with their mismated bodyguards, Kotter and Herlocker, and a mission to which came Comanche braves and squaws. The guns of Kotter and Herlocker wouldn't amount to much, if the Indians ever took a notion to turn against the white medicine man and his beautiful blonde daughter.

Once more Hatfield groped back in memory, trying to recall the man whom Saul reminded him of. Somewhere he had seen another man as handsome and distinguished, a man with that same regal air and serene dignity. But who and where still eluded him. Some actor perhaps, he thought, for a stage and footlights seemed to be dimly associated with the personage the Ranger couldn't quite call to mind.

They were passing between two low tilted mesas when the challenge came. Five masked riders barred the way ahead, starshine glinting on gun-barrels. Milt Travers reined up at their command, setting the brake, wrapping the reins on it, and raising his hands high. Under the shadow of the hood, Jim Hatfield eased two gun butts into Milt's upturned palms, then lifted Milt's Winchester to his own shoulder.

Sighting at a checkered shirt that showed beneath the brush jacket of one horseman, Jim held his aim and waited, almost without breathing.

"Where's your pardner?" rasped a voice.

"He got tromped to death this afternoon under a herd of buffalo," Milt Travers said.

"Well, ain't that a shame!" jeered the same voice. "And now you're going to join him, sonny!"

Jim Hatfield squeezed the trigger then, sights on the man's right shoulder. Flame streaked out across the wagon box as the carbine butt slammed his shoulder. Checkered Shirt spun and pitched from saddle, his mount bolting. The other horses were plunged into bucking, milling confusion as Milt Travers brought the six-guns down flaming and blasting into the night.

Another rider rocked back in leather, but grabbed the horn in time to stick aboard, as his horse wheeled into a run after the riderless pony. Instantly the other three bandits were off in headlong flight, too, with Hatfield and Travers throwing shots after them until they vanished beyond the mesa. The echoes rolled and faded in the darkness, and silence washed back into the cut.

Milt Travers jumped down and walked toward the fallen man, guns in hand. Jim Hatfield crawled out over the seat and followed, carrying the big canteen.

"It's our old friend, Ed Calso," said Travers. "And I'm afraid he's going to live, Jim."

"I hope so, Milt," said Hatfield, pouring water over Calso's broad face. "Want to hear him talk a little."

Calso came to, but he wouldn't talk until Travers threatened to work on him with his gun-barrels. Then he didn't tell much, swearing he didn't know who was running the hide-stealing ring. His companions tonight had been Dutch Henry and Velvet Oppel, and two new men he didn't know by name. All of them were as ignorant of the identity of the leaders of the gang as he was himself.

Ed Calso became incoherent and lapsed back into unconsciousness.

With Travers holding a lantern, Hatfield extracted the slug from Calso's shoulder, washed, sterilized and plugged the wound, covering it with a neat firm bandage.

"Regular damn sawbones," murmured Milt Travers, shaking his head. "Never saw a man that could do so many different things as you, Jim, and do 'em pretty dang well, too."

Hatfield smiled faintly in the lantern-light. "Riding buffalo is my latest accomplishment, Milt. And one that I'm not going to pursue to any length, if I can help it. Let's dump this hide rustler in the back, and be on our way. . . ."

ON SATURDAY the main camp, a sprawling community of wagons, tents and lean-to shanties, rope corrals and stacked buffalo hides, was constantly growing on Horsehead Flats, as hundreds of hunters from outlying camps drifted in for spreeday. A holiday spirit prevailed, with whisky flowing freely and gambling starting early. It was, Jim Hatfield realized, something like the annual rendezvous of the old-time beaver trappers and mountain men in the Northwest, except that there were no Indian maidens here for the pleasure of the buffalo hunters.

Everyone was talking about the massacre of a family named Andrews over toward the Pecos. The scalped and mutilated bodies had been found in the smoldering ruins of Andrews' hide-buying outpost. The blame naturally fell on the Comanches from across the Pecos, yet some veteran plainsmen declared it didn't have the earmarks of being the handiwork of Indians.

"Maybe it ain't," another old-timer said. "But the Comanches are up and out. I seen 'em with my own eyes. Young bucks, stripped down for battle and wearing warpaint, no old men, no women or papooses. Full of white man's whisky and carrying white man's rifles. We'll have real Injun trouble before this season's over."

"Preacher Saul wouldn't let them Injuns take to the warpath," argued another man. "He's got 'em tamed down like puppies."

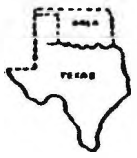
"For all you know," scoffed the first old-timer, "the Preacher's scalp is hanging from some brave's belt, and that yaller-headed gal's keeping house in a Comanche lodge by now."

Opinion was divided, but everyone agreed that bad trouble was building up on the Llano Estacado, either from Indians or outlaws — or both.

Hatfield and Travers had entered the camp unobtrusively late Friday night, with the wounded Ed Calso still unconscious in the body of the wagon. They had taken care of their stock, set up their

A TALL TEXAS TALE

HEARING OUT LOUD



ONE rainy day a bunch of us was setting around Mordecae Hickenlooper's general store when the radio flunked out and there was nothing left to do but shoot the breeze. What with the whoppers the boys began to tell, it was quite a spell before I was able to get a word in edgewise, but when I did I put 'em to shame with a true story about a couple fellers I knew when I lived in the big city.

One of these fellers I knew was plumb remarkable for the way he could see. Why this feller could look right into a pitch black room and see a black cat there plain as day. The other feller wasn't unusual hot on seeing but he had a way of hearing things that was plain uncanny. He could prove it by his own wife that he often heard words that were never even spoke.

Anyway, one day I was walking along the street with these two fellers when the one with the eyesight stops and says, "You see that skyscraper there, and that ledge up there on the sixty-fourth floor? Now look at the corner window just above the ledge. There's a fly walking along the top of the windowpane. See it?"

The feller with the ears looked and looked, and finally shook his head. "Nope, I can't see it," he admitted, "but I know she's there, all right, 'cause I can hear her dragging her feet acrost the glass."

Faced with a truth like that—which was stranger than friction, as they say—the boys in Hickenlooper's told no more windies that day. Just sat there staring at me, they did, like a prime mess of clams.

—*W. L. Hudson*

tent on the edge of the large encampment, and gone to sleep. In the morning they got breakfast over a fire of buffalo chips. Ed Calso woke up in fairly good shape, thanks to Hatfield's prompt attention, but he was sullen and silent.

"If we turn you over to the boys here, Calso," said Hatfield, "they'll string you up in short order. You'll either talk or hang right here."

"Told all I know," mumbled Calso. "We ain't done nothing to call for hanging."

"You tried to bushwhack Milt here on his way in to Kabbock, and you were going to murder him last night," Hatfield reminded. "Your friend Leach stampeded a bunch of buffalo at me yesterday afternoon. That's enough to put your necks in a noose."

"I can't tell what I don't know," Calso whined, and that was all they could get out of him.

Leaving Travers with the prisoner, Hatfield wandered through camp, wearing both guns now, and watching for Calso's companions. Hilarious reunions were taking place everywhere, and a few rough-and-tumble fights broke out as old enemies met again.

The smoke of many fires and the smell of drying hides polluted the bright morning air. The wagons of whisky-sellers and other peddlers were rumbling into the tent-and-wagon town, but Hatfield didn't see Snake Leach. Professional gamblers were on hand, in frock coats and fancy vests, but Velvet Oppel was not among them.

Hatfield finally located Wyatt Earp and his friends, and told them what had happened yesterday afternoon and last night. They agreed to keep Calso under cover in the wagon, and see if any of his associates showed up on Horsehead Flats.

On his return trip Hatfield was surprised to run into big Oak Herlocker and debonair Harry Kotter, but they greeted him with cool insolence.

"Where's Madeline and Saul?" asked Hatfield.

"Home on Bluestone," said Kotter. "We just dropped in to watch the fun and maybe play a little poker."

"Then it isn't true that the Comanches are out?"

Herlocker snorted and Kotter laughed, replying, "They aren't out and won't be out. The Preacher's got them under his thumb. That affair at the Andrews' station was the work of some of your own bad boys, masquerading as Indians."

"Well, I'll see you around," Jim Hatfield said, moving on.

"Yeah, we'll be around a spell," Oak Herlocker said, a vague mocking threat in his hoarse tones.

IT DIDN'T seem natural to Hatfield that those two would leave Madeline and Preacher Saul alone on Bluestone Butte, and come here for a fling with the hunters and gamblers. He wondered if Kotter and Herlocker could be double-crossing the Preacher and working with the outlaws. He hadn't liked or trusted those two from the start, but he had accepted them in deference to Saul and his daughter.

The tempo of the spree increased during the day, as the men relaxed from the monotonous grind of the long hunting season, and by evening the camp was roaring with drunken, riotous life. Poker and dice games went on everywhere in the garish firelight, along with straight drinking parties and garrulous gabfests. There were wrestling bouts and boxing matches, foot races and horse races, contests of strength, skill and nerve, as liquor inflamed these wild, reckless frontiersmen.

And still there was no sign of Velvet Oppel and Snake Leach, or Dutch Henry and another known outlaw he had seen with them, a tough character named Hendry Brown. They might be somewhere in the vast brawling area, but Hatfield and his comrades could not find them.

Marshal Overmile and Deputies Timm and Sarles from Kabbock appeared in the encampment that evening, and Hatfield drifted into conversation with them

over a jug of whisky. The sheriff's office, Overmile said, had been warned to look out for a notorious criminal from the North and East, known as King Creed. He was described as a big, handsome man with jet-black hair and walrus mustache, addicted to flashy clothing and jewels, and with a grand and pompous manner. He had been reported to be heading for northwest Texas.

"Could be the head of this hide-rustling outfit," Overmile said. "But nobody has seen a man answering to that description on the Staked Plains. Well, keep your eyes peeled, Jimson. We're going to make the rounds here, just for luck. The sheriff's too old and fat to get around much nowadays, so we're out doing his work for him. But when they come to elect a new sheriff, it most likely won't be me."

"That's the way it goes, Marshal," said Hatfield. "But if you could get this King Creed they'd probably vote you into office mighty quick."

Overmile grinned toothily. "If I get Creed I can retire! The rewards out for him are that big, Jimson. He's the most wanted man in the whole United States, I reckon."

"I might have a prisoner or two for you before the night's over," Hatfield said. He had just thought of a way to get rid of Calso.

"Fine and dandy," said Overmile. "The jailhouse has been pretty empty since the hunters moved out onto the range. You ever catch up with them two you tangled with in Kabbock?"

"Still on their trail, Marshal. Maybe land them tonight."

"You catch 'em and we'll run 'em in." Overmile waved and, with Sarles and Timm, headed for the raucous revelry of the firelit camp.

With Ed Calso trussed up in the wagon bed, Jim Hatfield roved around the grounds with Billy Tilghman, while Milt Travers and Johnny Poe made a watchful circuit of their own. Hatfield saw Kotter and Herlocker in a group playing poker on a blanket. Wyatt Earp, sober and quiet, stood among the spectators, nodding and smiling faintly as Jim and Billy passed by.

"Wyatt never takes a drink," Tilghman commented. "But he can sure gamble with the best of 'em. If he sets in that game he'll clean 'em out, sharpies and all."

They rounded a hooded wagon and almost bumped into tall, thin Snake Leach, who for a breath stared aghast at Hatfield, then reached for his holster. Jim moved with him, his gun clearing and rising well ahead of Leach's weapon.

Billy Tilghman struck the side of his hand across Leach's right arm, driving the gunhand downward, so Hatfield could step in and strike with the gun-barrel. Leach's small reptilian head bowed under the impact, his lank form sagging. They caught him before he fell.

Tilghman took Leach's guns and they hauled his limp arms around their shoulders. Supporting Leach's skinny frame between them they headed for the Rangers' wagon.

"Glad I didn't have to fire, Billy," said Hatfield. "We want these fellows able to talk."

"That's what I figured, Jim," said Tilghman.

THEY were nearing the wagon on the outskirts of the camp when Hatfield saw several dark, blurred figures break away from the rear of his wagon. They dropped Leach and whipped out their guns. Fire spurted from the running men and bullets whined hotly about them.

Hatfield and Tilghman blazed back, but the fleeting targets faded into the darkness among other wagons and tents. There was little use of trying to pursue them into the swarming camp.

"One of them looked like the albino," Hatfield said.

"I thought I saw Henry and Oppel and Brown," said Tilghman. "But I couldn't swear to it. We'll get them in due time anyway, Jim."

Jim Hatfield walked to the tail-gate and peered into the wagon, suspecting

what he would find there even before he saw the gashed throat and grotesquely lolling head of Ed Calso. Those men might have come to rescue Calso, but they had cut his throat when they heard the approaching footsteps. That was much simpler and easier than lugging a wounded man away with them, and it served the same purpose.

"They sure fixed Calso so he won't do any talking," Hatfield remarked, turning from the gruesome spectacle. "But maybe we can get it out of Leach, Billy."

Billy Tilghman was crouching beside the long sprawled body of Snake Leach. He looked up and wagged his head slowly.

"Afraid not, Jim. They stopped Snake's tongue, too. One of them put a slug right through his skull."

Jim Hatfield nodded dully. "So all we've got is a couple of corpses," he murmured. "That cuts down their numbers a little, but it doesn't lead us anywhere."

"Maybe we can round up some of them other coyotes alive," Tilghman said. "These two we don't have to worry about any more, until it comes time to put 'em under."

"We'll take a look anyway, Billy," said Hatfield, but he had little hope of finding the fugitives in this seething Horsehead Flats.

The shooting had gone almost unnoticed in the general uproar, but it brought Travers and Poe on the run. After a drink, they dragged the bodies of Calso and Leach away from the wagon and tent, and alerted some other friends to join in the search — Bassett and Bridges, Masterson and Earp. Dividing the camp into sections and prowling those sections in pairs, they scoured the grounds thoroughly, but not a trace of the outlaws was to be found.

When they got back to the poker game in which Wyatt Earp had finally taken a hand until they pulled him away, Hatfield noticed that Harry Kotter and Oak Herlocker were no longer among the players.

Although some of the men had drunk themselves into a stupor by midnight, the spree went on into the morning hours. It was still going strong when Hatfield and Travers finally rolled into their blankets in the tent. The last thing they heard was a hoarse rollicking chorus of drunken voices, singing:

Oh, we ate buffalo hump and iron wedge bread,
All we had to sleep on was a buffalo robe bed.

CHAPTER VI

Blood and Firewater

AT DAWN the Comanches came, silent shadows at first, slipping in through gray mists to the outer rim of wagons and tents, knifing, lancing, tomahawking and scalping, until the first screams went up and the first gunshots blasted. Then they came on their fleet ponies, yipping and howling like maniacs as they slashed in and out, circled and feinted and slashed in again.

The finest horsemen and fiercest warriors of the Southwest Plains, good revolvers and repeating rifles ablaze in their hands, then lances and knives and hatchets flashing when they got in close. It was a hideous — and in some cases brief — awakening for the buffalo hunters at the Horsehead Flats rendezvous.

Some instinct, some subconscious sense of danger, roused Jim Hatfield from sleep before any sound came. He rolled over and touched Milt Travers' shoulder, picking up his guns and kicking off blankets.

Even as he leaped to his feet a steel blade sliced the canvas wall of the tent on his side. Hatfield fired at the invisible form behind that knife and heard a body tumble to earth. Travers' gun roared in the opposite direction, and other shots broke out through a horrible shrieking.

A full-scale attack! Hatfield realized it then, knew instantly that this was no isolated attempt on the lives of the buffalo men.

Creeping to the closed end of the tent, he lifted the canvas and peeped underneath it at a blur of naked brown legs and buckskin leggins.

He thought, with cold horror, the camp's already overrun with Comanches!

Elevating his gun-barrel, he fired at the bodies above those legs. A thrown lance pierced the canvas above his head, and a tomahawk gashed through and fell spinning behind him. Bullets ripped the tent with a vicious sound, and Hatfield heard the grunting and gabbling of Indian voices as he emptied his Colt.

Milt Travers was shooting from beneath his side of the canvas, but now the raiders were running as the camp came awake and began to fight back. There would be no more easy killing and scalping.

At a slight sound Hatfield turned his head, in time to see a brave with hatchet poised to throw through the front flaps. Firing left-handed with his other gun, he cut the Comanche down in the entrance.

"Come on, Milt — to the wagon!" he shouted. Picking up his shell belts he was longing for the Winchester that had been ruined under the hooves of the stampeding buffalo.

He lunged out of the tent, with Travers close behind him, and they ran for the shelter of the wagon to dig out the Sharps .50's and more ammunition. All around them men were rallying to defend the camp, the wounded screaming in pain, and those not wounded groaning from hangovers. Thank heaven, Hatfield thought, he hadn't drunk much last night — he never did — and that it was natural for him to come wide awake with a clear head.

The warriors on foot had withdrawn, hauling their dead and wounded, if possible, and now the mounted assault was beginning. Lying under the wagon with their Colts reloaded, and with their other weapons and shells beside them, Hatfield and Travers set themselves to meet it.

The Comanches came sweeping in on horseback, their weird war cries nerve-shattering in the gray of dawn. Their drive toward the Rangers carried as far as the tent, which went down under the rampaging ponies. Travers and Hatfield helped to check it there, and turn it back, Milt working his Winchester while Jim used a Sharps until they were close enough to turn loose with his Colts.

All around the blazing perimeter of the encampment, the Indians struck and fell back and charged again. But these buffalo hunters could shoot, even with blinding hangovers, and the red warriors suffered severe losses. Most of the bodies of the braves were borne away, tied to their horses, but a few dropped loose, and some of the ponies fell under the wicked scything rifle fire.

THE attackers withdrew, temporarily at least, and the defenders shifted to better positions and improvised hasty barricades. Wyatt Earp and Charlie Bassett and their friends came out to join the Rangers at the outer line, fearful that Hatfield and Travers might have fallen early in their exposed outpost. Tipping over the wagon, the men contrived a barrier from behind which they could all stand and shoot.

Johnny Poe and Billy Tilghman actually were joking and laughing, much to the disgust of Jack Bridges and Bat Masterson, who were troubled with headaches this wan gray morning.

"They sure picked a nice morning for it," Masterson grumbled. "You'd almost think somebody had tipped them off we were celebrating all night."

"Maybe somebody did," Charlie Bassett said, broad face solemn and heavy shoulders hunched. "I could almost swear I saw some white men out there directing the show."

"Well, the Injuns have been boozing, too," Johnny Poe declared. "I stumbled over one buck who smelled like he'd been swimming in whisky. Had a brand-new Henry and Colt on him, too."

"How could you smell him, Johnny?" jeered Tilghman. "After all that snake juice you swallowed last evening!"

"They must be drunk," Wyatt Earp observed, "to come at us like this. Here they come again, boys!"

The Comanches came hurtling in once more, driving like madmen almost into the muzzles of the white men before the onslaught was finally stopped, broken, and smashed backward into the swirling white mists and reeking powder smoke. Standing in a row behind that upturned wagon bed, the two Rangers and their comrades poured their fire into those savage ranks in almost solid sheets of flame. Ponies reared and floundered, trumpeting in agony, or curved off into flight, with many of the Comanche riders hanging wounded or lifeless in the thongs.

"They won't be back again," Jim Hatfield declared then, sleeving sweat and powder stains from his grave face.

"I sure hope not," moaned Jack Bridges. "I got to get me a drink, if I'm going to live much longer."

"Here you are, Jack." Bat Masterson handed him a flask. "Didn't want to waste it on you, in case you got killed here. But I reckon they're beaten off for good this trip, so we'll consider you survived."

When the sun rose soon afterward, the only Comanches in sight on Horsehead Flats were dead ones. They had been drinking firewater all right; the stench of it lingered even in death. And some of them were armed with new Henry repeaters and Colt revolvers. It looked as if the attack *had* been incited and planned by white renegades.

Jim Hatfield thought at once of Harry Kotter and Oak Herlocker. Had they killed Madeline and Preacher Saul, too? Or were they holding them captives?

He spoke to Travers. "I think maybe we ought to ride over Bluestone Butte way, after we help clean up this mess here."

"I been thinking along the same lines, Jim," agreed Travers.

But there was a lot of work to be done in camp before they rode out anywhere. While other men buried the dead and restored order and made repairs, Hatfield was busy probing for bullets, setting bones, sewing up cuts, cleansing, dressing and bandaging wounds. There was plenty of whisky left for antiseptic and anesthetic use. The hunters called him Doc Jimson, and looked up at him with respect and gratitude.

It made Jim Hatfield glad that he had spent the time he had acquiring some knowledge and skill in the field of medicine.

No lifetime was long enough for a man to learn all he wanted to know, but Hatfield had tried to pick up all he possibly could along the way. It made it worthwhile if he could ease suffering, save limbs and lives, and comfort people in their moments of pain and need.

It was mid-afternoon before all the wounded were attended to, and arrangements made to transport them into Kabbock. Hatfield and Travers washed up in the creek, and prepared for their ride toward the Pecos River and Bluestone Butte. . . .

ANOTHER day was breaking when they came within sight of the mesa, against its background of Guadalupe Mountains. They had ridden most of the night, stopping only to snatch a few hours sleep, two riders diminished to insignificance on the broad boundless wastelands.

The sun, rising at their backs now, cast long level beams of red light across the Llano Estacado, crimsoning the brown earth and staining the buffalo grass. Its warmth was welcome through the buckskin.

Bluestone Butte rose brooding and sinister above the Plains, a shattered mass of dark purplish rock that resembled the ruins of a great castle or fortress. The main approach, a wagon road winding upward between jagged walls, lay before them.

There were probably other more obscure and more difficult ascents, but they decided to take the front entrance. After all, they had been invited here. If Preacher Saul and Madeline were alive,

they'd be welcome at the Sanctuary. And after considerable pondering, Jim Hatfield had concluded that they would find Saul and the golden-haired girl unharmed.

If Kotter and Herlocker were using the Comanches for their own diabolical purposes, they needed the Preacher. Because only through him could they control the savages. The Ranger felt fairly certain that Madeline and her father were safe and well.

They mounted the crooked trail with eyes alert and hands ready, Hatfield big and dark on his sorrel, and Travers slim and tawny blond on the black gelding. Both wore two holstered guns, and had rifles in their saddle boots. Hatfield had taken one of the Henrys and ammunition from a dead warrior on Horsehead Flats.

At every turn they expected a challenge, but none came from the walls. A hushed stillness was on the mesa. The chopping hoofs of their horses, the creak of leather and clank of metal seemed unduly loud in the early morning silence.

"A few good riflemen could hold this pass against a regiment," Hatfield commented after awhile.

"Must be the Preacher don't need any riflemen," Travers said.

They reached the summit and crossed the barren tabletop toward a cluster of adobe structures, surrounded by stunted cedars and junipers, sparse bunchgrass, vines and shrubs, for there was water on Bluestone, a freak spring or a well, which made it a sanctuary indeed in this arid country.

The place looked empty and lifeless, except for the horses in a brush corral. The freight wagon stood near it, and Hatfield recalled how heavily loaded it had been on the trip out. If Kotter and Herlocker were doublecrossing Saul, they probably had smuggled in rifles, shells and liquor for the Comanches. For all of Saul's brains, it wouldn't be too difficult to deceive him, since he was so often remote from everyone around him when he retired into that trancelike state of thought.

The horses in the corral were all draft animals, except the buckskin Madeline had ridden. That might indicate that she had been left here alone. It seemed unlikely, yet Hatfield hoped it was true. An opportunity to search the premises unhindered was better than he had dared anticipate.

The riders dismounted and tied up at the hitch-rail in front of the main adobe. Hatfield called out, and they stood waiting uneasily. There was something unreal and eerie about the entire layout that caught at both of them.

Footsteps sounded inside and Madeline appeared in the doorway, her gleaming gold hair loose about her shoulders, and her cheeks flushed from sleep, her blue eyes drowsy. She wore a dark blue robe over a nightgown, and stared at them as if unable to credit their presence.

"Why, hello," she said at last. "It's such a surprise, I — please come in. I'll get you some breakfast."

"It is pretty early for a call," Hatfield said, as they followed her into the dim cool interior. "Are the men all away?"

"Yes, Father's in the mountains, and Harry and Oak rode in to Kabbock."

"They leave you all alone here, Madeline?" asked Hatfield.

"Well, not quite. I have a maid here, and there's a stableboy and a hostler sleeping in the barn."

"Not much protection."

Madeline laughed. "Protection from what? The Comanches are my friends."

MILT TRAVERS gestured in a wide arc. "There's some pretty rough hombres hunting buffalo out there, ma'am. Not to mention the hide rustlers."

"They don't bother us. They never come near here. No one comes but the Indians."

"Maybe they're your protection, Madeline," said Hatfield. "Maybe the Comanches keep the others away from Bluestone."

"Perhaps. I've never given it much thought. Now what would you like for breakfast? Not just coffee. I want to

show you how well I cook — I hope." Madeline laughed nervously. "I'm so happy to see you I'm all flustered, I guess."

"Why don't we wash up and look the place over, while you're getting breakfast?" suggested Hatfield.

"Go right ahead, boys," she said, in some relief. "I'll probably do better without spectators. Here are towels. You'll find a trough beside the barn."

After scrubbing and toweling their hands and faces, the two Rangers wandered among the sheds and outbuildings. There was a kind of chapel, furnished only with a crude altar. But Comanches preferred to squat on the floor, of course.

What particularly struck the Rangers as of interest was another building — a large adobe storehouse, securely padlocked and windowless, except for high narrow slits in the walls.

"What we want's probably in there, Jim," said Travers.

"Could be," admitted Hatfield. "The Preacher never does any manual labor himself, I reckon. They might have the contraband stuff hidden right here in his mission under the other stores."

"Well, it'll take dynamite to break in that place," Travers said ruefully. "Unless we can get a key from Madeline."

"If we tell her what we think Kotter and Herlocker are doing to her father, we'll get the key," Hatfield said confidently.

They told her at the breakfast table. Madeline was incredulous, but she brought out the key and unlocked the storehouse door herself. There was nothing incriminating on the main floor and walls of the adobe, but they discovered a trap-door leading into a secret cellar, adobe-lined, and as large as the structure itself.

A familiar odor assailed their nostrils the moment the trap-door was lifted. Hatfield and Travers exchanged grave glances. There was no mistaking that smell.

There was no need to descend into the basement. Lanternlight revealed stack on stack of buffalo hides, as well as crated rifles and cartridges and whisky barrels. The cache of the hide stealers, the arsenal that armed the Comanches, the liquor that fired them up to attack!

The answer to the whole vile business was buried beneath Preacher Saul's Sanctuary!

Madeline moaned softly. "This will kill my father, Jim!"

"Don't tell him about it — until it's all over," Hatfield said. "*They'll* kill him, the minute they think he knows it. Wait'll we take care of Kotter and Herlocker."

"Let's get out of here," Madeline said brokenly. "No telling when they'll get back here."

"Let's hope they come before your father does," Hatfield said, his green eyes blending into the stormy gray, that always indicated trouble — for the hunted. And the fine strong bone structure of his face was standing out under his bronzed skin. . . .

Harry Kotter and Oak Herlocker did arrive first, but not alone. Madeline had sent the Indian stableboy to watch from the rimrock at the head of the pass, and when he reported on the run, she looked at Hatfield with wide, fearful eyes.

"They're coming — with a party of Comanches!" she cried. "You'll have to ride for it."

"Will you be all right here?" Hatfield asked anxiously.

"Of course!" she said impatiently. "I always have been, and I always will be. Hurry, please hurry! There's a narrow back way down the cliff." She pointed out the direction. "You can't miss it. Mount and ride *now*, Jim!"

"We'll be back," Hatfield promised. "Just sit tight, Mad, and don't tell your father anything. Leave it all to us."

In the saddle they fled across the sunbright surface of Bluestone Butte, and descended the steep switchback trail that zigzagged from the rim down the ledges to the bottom of the mesa. They were well away before the renegades and their party could have reached the top on the other side of the tableland, and were lin-

ing back eastward into the morning sun.

Now that they knew where to strike, Jim Hatfield wanted to make Horsehead Flats and raise a fighting force as soon as possible. And perhaps make a stop at the Gowan place on Caddos Creek, to see that they were all right, before moving against Kotter and Herlocker on Bluestone.

CHAPTER VII

Fort Up and Fight

GOWAN was in his dobe storehouse in the waning afternoon when he heard the wagon coming lickety-split. He stepped outside and moved to the front yard, wide and stocky, with pipe in teeth and fear on his square blunt face. Only one wagon when there should be three.

The boys were going to meet and come home together today. The rustlers hadn't been molesting them lately, but something must have happened on this trip. The mother of the boys was in the doorway of the house, arm around sober-faced young Alice, despair in her own tired, kindly face.

The lone hooded wagon came careening along in its dust cloud, the horses lunging and foaming in the traces. There were two figures on the seat of the rocking, swaying vehicle, crouched and stark with rifles at hand. Terence and Finley, Emmett saw as they hurtled nearer. Young Patrick was missing!

Mother of God, not young Pat! the father prayed silently. Not any of our boys, but never the little fellow.

But he knew, even as he prayed, that Pat was dead, and somehow it was as if he had known it was going to happen all the time. Standing there in final utter failure and defeat, Emmett Gowan would have welcomed death himself. Everything he had done all his life had been wrong, futile, no-account. The deck had been stacked against him. He couldn't win; he was marked for a loser.

The wagon slewed into the backyard, and Emmett turned to meet it, waving his wife and daughter back inside the house. Terence was reining down the lathered, blown horses, and Finley jumped to the ground with the carbines. Their boyish faces were powder-blackened and masked with sweat and dirt. The canvas hood was torn and riddled with bullet holes, the load of hides still intact. As if that mattered now!

"Patrick?" he asked hopelessly.

Finley shook his head, eyes downcast. "They got Pat, Pop. They would've got us all if some hunters hadn't come along. Pat's in the back here."

"Who was it?" Emmett demanded, numb and cold and hollow.

"Comanches and whites both. Some of the same ones that hit the camp on Horsehead Flats this morning, I reckon."

Terence climbed down over the wheel. "They jumped us right after we met, Pop. Pat never had a chance, and I don't know how we got out. We fought them, Pop, the best we could."

"I know you did, boys," Emmett Gowan said huskily. "Who did for Patrick? Could you tell?"

"Albino and Velvet Oppel were in on him," Terrence said. "Then the Comanches struck. Don't let Ma and Alice see him, Pop. The Indians took his scalp and chopped him some."

Emmett's teeth ground gratingly. "He died quick, though? He was dead when they —"

"The first volley caught him, Pop," said Finley. "He couldn't feel anything when the Comanches got to him. They cut down my horses and we fought from this wagon. About done when the hunters showed and drove 'em off."

"Will they come here, boys?"

Fin and Terry shrugged. "Don't know, Pop. Reckon they might."

"Well, we're moving out anyway," Emmett Gowan said. "This does it, boys. We're through on Caddos Creek. Should've gone sooner, like your mother said."

"Where are those Rangers?" he thought bitterly. But they can't be everywhere at once, of course. What can two men do anyway against hordes of outlaws and Comanches? Even men like the Lone Wolf and Milt Travers.

"Have to get some more horses and wagons, Pop," said Terry.

"We'll try to. If we can't we'll go with one wagon. If we have to leave most of the hides, we'll leave 'em. What good are hides and money to the dead?"

The boys didn't approve of this. "We can't leave the hide, Pop," protested Finley. "Not after all we went through to get 'em."

"All right, all right," Emmett Gowan said. "We'll take the damn hides. We'll rig a travois if we have to. We'll pack 'em in some way. Unharness the horses and put them up, Fin, while Terry and I get Pat out and dig a grave for him."

A MAN couldn't give up, no matter who died, Emmett realized. A man had to keep on fighting for his family and himself, whatever the odds were against him. He couldn't quit, regardless of how hurt and sick and hopeless he felt. He had to carry on, keep plugging and trying and fighting with all that was in him.

Maybe that's all life was — a test. Or a series of tests. To see how much a man could take, and still go on bucking upstream against the current. Little Patrick was gone, dead at sixteen, yet Emmett Gowan owed it to him, as well as the living, to keep battling onward up that endless ever-steepening hill that had been his way in life. . . .

Supper over, the dishes washed, the family settled down in quiet, undemonstrative grief for the evening. The mutilated body of their youngest was buried on the bench over Caddos Creek. Patrick had been the gayest and liveliest of the Gowan children, and with him gone there was a great aching emptiness.

Mrs. Gowan was busy as usual with her sewing, blinking her eyes to clear her vision now and then, the silent anguish rending and tearing inside her. Alice pretended to be absorbed in frayed old copies of *Godey's Lady's Book*, the first American magazine for women. Terence was cleaning and oiling guns, while Finley worked on the rope he was braiding.

Emmett brooded behind blue smoke-clouds from his pipe, wondering why fortune smiled on some folks and frowned forever on others. It wasn't based on honesty and goodness and right. It all seemed haphazard, without any fair basis for discrimination.

Emmett Gowan had been honest and hard-working, good and generous, kind, sympathetic, and decent-living. And where were the rewards? Although it seemed like pure bad luck, he searched for flaws and weaknesses in himself. He must be at least partly to blame somehow. Some of the fault must lie within himself.

It was nearly bedtime for the family when the call came from outside:

"Halloo-oo, the house! Come on out, Gowan! We want to talk business to you."

"It's them," Emmett said simply. "Put out the lamps and keep away from the windows."

With the house in darkness, he buckled on his Colt and took his sixteen-shot Henry from the rack. Then he raised his voice:

"Who are you? And what do you want?"

"The place is surrounded, Gowan!" came the answering shout. "Step outside or we'll open up on you."

"Don't you do it, Em," said Ada. "They'll just kill you. We'll fight from in here."

"That's right, Pop," said Terence. He was creeping toward a windowsill with his rifle, while Finley crouched at a window at the rear. "You can't trust 'em. Step out and they'll shoot you down!"

"What's your business?" Emmett yelled, barring the door and sliding to the deep-silled window beside it. So it has come to this, he thought. We fort up and fight — and die together, in our own home.

Glass crashed and sprayed the dark in-

terior, the precious glass they had freighted in at such cost and with such care, as rifles flared from all about the adobe. Emmett and his sons fired back at those flashes, and Mrs. Gowan and Alice picked up weapons for themselves. Like true women of the frontier, they knew how to handle guns and shoot.

"Fin, you come with me to the store end," Emmett Gowan said. "Terry, you stay here with the women. And be careful, all of you. We've got plenty of guns and shells. They can't get in here. If we hold out long enough, help will come."

"No radio, no telephone? . . . Goodness, how do you ever *win* anything?"

Thank God it's adobe and not wood, Emmett thought, as he went through to the trading-post end with Finley. They can't burn us out anyway. And they can't rush us without losing heavy. It'll have to be a sniping duel, unless they want to throw away a lot of lives.

In the store they broke out extra rifles and boxes of shells. Emmett took a back window, while Finley covered the front.

EMMETT lined his Henry on a flitting shadow near the storehouse, and through the gunshot echoes beating back and forth between adobe walls, heard a man scream and fall. Finley spotted a bent-over form creeping in close beneath his sill, and smashed the bandit's back with a down-angled blast from his carbine.

That should check them for a while. They couldn't afford to lose men that fast, no matter how many they had out there. But slugs still were slashing in through windows and ricocheting from ceiling and walls, making the air murky with powdered adobe and streaked by glittering glass fragments.

In the living quarters Terence had taken a rear window, since the back yard offered more shelter to the raiders. Alice was at the front, and their mother was in a bedroom covering that end of the house. Terry saw an outlaw dodging between sheds and hammered a shot at him, feeling a sharp exultation as the man went down, threshing in the shadows. Terry wished the women were somewhere safe out of this. He could enjoy it, if his mother and sister weren't involved. There was a savage pleasure in lashing back at these outlaws who had killed Pat and victimized them all for so long.

Bullets broke through window panes and screeched off inner walls and ceiling, splintering furniture, smashing dishes and glassware, filling the dark with adobe dust and flying particles. Mrs. Gowan's rifle roared in the bedroom, and Alice fired across a forward sill. Terence raked the back area with swift shots, driving the raiders back and keeping them pinned down among the outbuildings.

During a lull in the gunplay at the store end of the adobe, Emmett Gowan poured whisky into tin cups for his second son and himself.

"If you're old enough to fight, you're old enough to have a drink, Fin," he said, and Finley accepted with thanks, feeling

proud and flattered and grown-up.

"They can't get into the storehouse," Emmett said grimly. "The door's right under our guns, and there's no other way into it. They'll find out they're in for quite a siege, Fin. But we've got to have help before too long. They may get lucky enough to hit some of us in here. Ricochets are the worst danger, I reckon. If only some of those hunters from Horsehead would drift by, or those two Rangers would ride along. Tell me what you heard about the Comanches hitting the camp on the Flats, Fin."

Finley told his father, and Emmett sighed.

"It was too good to last. I figured Preacher Saul had those Indians tamed, but you can't keep Comanches down for long. They don't like to see their old hunting grounds overrun by whites, and I don't know as I blame them. But Comanches on the warpath are sure enough hellfire under a headwind."

"How can white men side Indians against their own kind, Pop?" asked Finley.

"There are white men low enough to do just about anything, I'm sorry to admit, son," said Emmett Gowan. "And there's one of 'em now!" He fired quickly across the glass-sharded sill, the flame jetting out at the storehouse. "Missed him," Emmett muttered. "But he'll keep his head down for a few minutes, because he sure must've felt the wind of that one."

"I wonder if they're all right in the other side, Pop?" said Finley.

"Go and see, Fin," said his father gently. "Take a drink for Terry and some extra shells for all of them. And tell 'em to hang on and keep up their courage, because everything's going to turn out fine."

One way or the other, he thought, after Finley had gone. Either we'll be dead with young Patrick, or somebody'll come along in time to pry these stinking polecats off our necks. One way or the other, which ever way the cards happen to fall. Either you live or you die, and sometimes I wonder if it matters much. But it isn't fair to these kids of ours. Ada and I've had our lives and they weren't too bad, even if we didn't have a whole lot, but our young ones are just beginning. Pat lost his life, but the other three ought to have a chance to live theirs.

Pat, dead and buried at sixteen. Emmett's eyes burned and his throat filled up tight, and fury and hatred rose until it was like rank acid on his dry tongue.

CHAPTER VIII

Campaign on the Caddos

WHEN Hatfield and Travers arrived at the encampment on Horsehead Flats, they learned about the holdup of the Gowan wagons and the killing of young Patrick Gowan. And the hunters feared that the hide-buying depot on Caddos Creek might also be attacked. So with the Wyatt Earp contingent as a nucleus, Jim Hatfield had no trouble raising a force of fighting men. Bluestone Butte could wait awhile. Their first consideration now was the Gowan outpost.

The two Rangers told their closest comrades what they had discovered at Preacher Saul's Sanctuary, and the men agreed to join them in a move against that place on Bluestone as soon as matters were settled on the Caddos. Everybody was glad enough to know, finally, where to strike. From the first appearance of Kotter and Herlocker among the buffalo hunters the Preacher's bodyguards had been disliked and mistrusted. But the hunters, like the Rangers, had tolerated the two out of respect for Preacher Saul and his daughter.

With twenty-five picked men at their backs, Jim Hatfield and Milt Travers rode out of camp in the early darkness, Goldy and the black still strong and tireless. Near the head of the column were those famous plainsmen who, in another day, were to become fighting marshals in the toughest of railhead towns during trail-driving days — Wyatt Earp and Bat Mas-

terson and Charlie Bassett; Jack Bridges and Billy Tilghman and Johnny Poe.

To replace the Gowan horses and wagons lost to the outlaws, the reinforcements were bringing the wagon the Rangers had purchased, and another that had belonged to a hunter who had been slain in the Comanche attack on the Horsehead bivouac.

Toward midnight they heard the sound of sporadic gunfire ahead, as they approached Gowan's station. That signaled that the bandits had the layout under siege! Halting the column, Hatfield and Travers went forward to reconnoiter. When the outpost came into view they studied the moonlit terrain and the gun flames winking between the outbuildings and the main adobe.

"About fifteen attackers, I'd say," Hatfield murmured. "And five rifles answering from the house, so the Gowans are all on the job so far. Can't see where the horses of the outlaws are being held. Most of the attackers are in the back yard. We can move in along the creek and hit them from behind, Milt."

Travers nodded. "With a few flankers in front of the house, huh, to pick them off when they start running?"

"Right, Milt," said Hatfield, and they returned to report to their recruits.

"The buzzards!" gritted big Charlie Bassett, his rugged face bleak and rocklike. "Fifteen of 'em picking on an old man and woman and three kids, one of them a girl!"

Blazing mad, some of those fighting men wanted to sweep right in with a mounted frontal assault, but cooler and more restrained leaders like Hatfield and Earp persuaded them it was better to lead their horses along the Caddos, screened by trees and brush and boulders.

Leaving the wagons behind, they slanted into the river bottom and filed quietly under the cottonwoods, willows and salt cedars. Dismounting at Hatfield's signal, they led their mounts as far as feasible, and left them picketed in a sheltered spot where the river banks had been gouged wide and high by freshets.

Nobody wanted to remain with the horses, but it was necessary to station at least two guards there. Wyatt Earp produced a deck of cards to cut for it, the low man to stay behind, and after several rounds of cutting the detail went to a pair of disgusted and griping hunters.

"Cheer up, boys," Johnny Poe said. "If they run this way, you'll have plenty of shooting to do."

"If anybody runs this way it'll probably be you, Poe," growled one of the horse-holders. "And I'll plug you right in the gut, Johnny."

"Bring the horses up fast, boys, when we call for 'em," Jim Hatfield told them.

Bassett and Tilghman had taken three other mounted men off at a tangent to serve as flankers and cover the front side of the layout. The main party slipped along the waterway, hidden by the bank and the trees, moving with the soft-footed stealth of Indian scouts.

REACHING a point behind the hide depot, they fanned out and crept toward the rear of the barn and sheds. Flickering muzzle lights marked the enemy positions from time to time. As the firing increased, Hatfield saw that there were more than fifteen of the raiders. They seemed to have a force the equal of his own; perhaps more men.

An outguard whirled to face the oncoming hunters and give the alarm, but a swift knife slashed and silenced him forever. Another bandit wheeled to fire, but a rifle butt crushed his skull before he could trigger. Then gunshots stabbed out toward the creek, and the crew of reinforcements unleashed their own rifles and raced forward.

Men toppled, cursing and groaning, among the outbuildings and along the corrals. Hatfield fired his Henry from the hip until the range closed. Then leaning the rifle against a shed, he drew his right-hand Colt for the close-in gun work.

For vicious blazing minutes the two skirmish lines were interlocked in scattered individual battles. Men shot it out at point-blank range, and others grappled in hand-to-hand combat. Gun blasts

lashed back and forth in the shadows, and slugs shrieked off adobe walls. Knives ripped wicked gleams in the darkness, and gun-barrels flashed down in cruel arcs. Men fell with strangled screams as lead or steel bit into their vitals. Apparent corpses came to life, shooting or stabbing upward at opponents hurtling over them. Flaming guns etched stark, lurid pictures that would remain in the mind for a lifetime. Concussions beat upon the eardrums, and powder smoke swirled, choking thick, on the night air.

A buffalo hunter, his face shot away, dropped twisting on his back at Hatfield's feet, and the Ranger threw down and drilled the renegade whose shot had torn that face to ruins. Wyatt Earp walked straight and fearless at roaring muzzles, and men broke and fled before his flaring Colts. Jack Bridges clubbed a foe to death on the corral rails. Johnny Poe ducked a flailing rifle butt and buried his bowie knife in the wielder's belly. Bat Masterson spun smoothly and shot an outlaw off the back of Travers and Milt gun-whipped a knife-user who was lunging at Bat.

Rounding the corner of the barn, Jim Hatfield tripped over a body and went down, rolling, an explosion blinding and searing his eyes as he pitched forward. Velvet Oppel stood there, sharp features frozen and pale, bringing his barrel down to bear again on the big Ranger. From the ground Hatfield thumbed his hammer, but it clicked on a spent shell.

Oppel grinned and triggered, but his pistol also was empty. He reached left-handed then, and Hatfield flung himself aside on the turf and clawed out his own left-hand Colt, firing upward a breath before Oppel's weapon blared downward. Dirt spouted into Hatfield's face as he came to his knees and let go another shot, beating Oppel backward and down inside the broad open arch of the barn.

Ducking into the barn, Hatfield made sure that Velvet Oppel was finished, and reloaded his right-hand gun. When he stepped outside again the surviving bandits had broken into flight all along the line, and hunters were yelling for their horses to be brought up from Caddos Creek.

Milt Travers caught the albino at the storehouse corner, just as Alby was stooping to chop in a wounded hunter's face. Milt's bullet lifted Alby erect and backward, his long white hair spreading on the 'dobe. With an idiot laugh Alby strained to raise his guns, but Milt's Colt was blazing again, smashing the albino against the cornice, dropping him into a disjointed huddle at the edge of the structure.

The living renegades who were able to run had reached their mounts, out beyond the storehouse. The hammer of hoofbeats floated back in a stillness that seemed strange and empty after all that thundering gunfire.

AS HATFIELD went back to find his Henry, the darkness was rent by the moaning and whimpering of wounded men. The horse-holders came up with the hunters' mounts, but the Ranger said:

"Turn 'em into the corral for now, boys. We've got wounded to tend to, and the Gowans to see to. We can pick up the outlaw tracks later."

The brief grumbling ceased when Hatfield added that Emmett Gowan had a good supply of whisky inside.

"Gather up our wounded, and check for dead," Jim Hatfield said. "Bring the wounded into the store and I'll look at them there."

"You want their wounded, too, Jim?" inquired a hunter. "We ought to let 'em lay and suffer."

"Bring them all in, boys, whether they deserve it or not," Hatfield said. "That's one thing that makes us different from them, you see."

Lamps were once more lighted in the main adobe. Jim Hatfield went into the store and shook hands with Emmett Gowan and his two remaining sons, thankful that the family had come through the siege unscathed. Hatfield gratefully accepted a cup of whisky.

"We got Oppel and the albino and a lot more, Emmett," he said. "Not too many

of them got away. Don't know how bad our losses were yet."

"We got a few of 'em before you came, sir," Finley said proudly.

Hatfield nodded gravely. "You put up a great fight here. Emmett, you've got a family to be proud of, and no mistake."

"And I'm moving them out of here as soon as I can!"

"You won't have to now," said Hatfield. "The hide rustlers are pretty well broken up, and we're going after the big ones next. There'll be no more stealing, and you'll get most of your stolen hides back." He told them what he and Travers had found on Bluestone Butte. "So there's no reason why you can't stay here and get along fine, Emmett. We brought wagons and horses to replace those you lost."

"Maybe we *can* stay then," said Gowan. "Thanks to you and Milt and your buffalo hunters."

They were carrying in the wounded now, and Emmett was pouring whisky for all hands. Someone had gone back after the wagons, and Milt Travers brought in the tally as Hatfield scrubbed up in preparation for his surgical duties.

"Three of ours dead, and seven shot and cut up some, Jim," said Travers, naming the dead sorrowfully. "About a dozen dead outlaws, and almost that many wounded. Busy night ahead, Doc."

"Only about six of 'em got away," Charlie Bassett reported. "Dutch Henry and Hendry Brown among 'em. We had a crack at them, too, but we couldn't knock 'em down. The light was bad at that range."

"Well, we'll find them at Bluestone, Charlie," assured Hatfield. "They'll all be there for the last roundup, I reckon."

Mrs. Gowan and Alice brought in hot water, towels and bandages, and offered their services as nurses. Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson volunteered to help Hatfield with the heavier work. It was more assistance than he generally received in such work, and he was relieved and pleased.

The other men withdrew to the living quarters with their whisky jugs and cups, and the trading post was converted into a field hospital. The Gowan women made excellent nurses, and Earp and Masterson were a lot handier and more helpful than most plainsmen in such an emergency. With the counters cleared and the lamps turned up high, Jim Hatfield went to work with his keen green eyes and his strong gentle hands.

"This doc character's in a rut, Wyatt," Bat Masterson said dryly. "Goes around shooting men down and then patching them up. How does he ever expect to get ahead in the world? It's like riding a whirligig or walking a treadmill."

"What they call a vicious circle, Bat," agreed Wyatt Earp, with equal dryness. "Uses his guns just to give himself a chance to practice on his poor victims. Without a license, too. Maybe we ought to turn him in, Bat."

"Let's wait'll he practices on Kotter and Herlocker, Wyatt," said Masterson, pouring himself another cupful of whisky.

"Save some of that for our patients, Bat," said Hatfield, sweating in the lamplight, and not looking up from his task. "As for practicing on that pair you just mentioned, I hope a shovel will be the only instrument needed, after we catch up with them."

CHAPTER IX

Flight for Sanctuary

MEN and horses being badly in need of rest and sleep, the men who had come to the rescue of the Gowans spent the rest of the night at the post. At sunup they picked up the trail of the outlaws. As had been expected, the tracks led toward Bluestone Butte.

Three of the hunters volunteered to stay on Caddos Creek to help care for the wounded and protect the Gowan family. This left only twelve men to ride with Hatfield and Travers and fourteen was too small a force to move against that rene-

gade stronghold. Jack Bridges and Johnny Poe were dispatched to raise reinforcements at Horsehead Flats, and bring them to rendezvous with the vanguard this side of Bluestone.

It was hardly necessary to follow the trace of the six bandits, for obviously they were fleeing for Preacher Saul's Sanctuary. But Jim Hatfield constantly read sign from the saddle, in case any of the rustlers should drop out or double back toward Gowan's station.

Even at a forced march, it was an all-day ride from the Caddos to Bluestone Butte, but for their purpose it was best to arrive in darkness. A direct frontal attack would never carry that main entrance. Alerted by the survivors from Caddos Creek, Kotter and Herlocker would have their Comanches holding the front passage, so a small contingent would have to climb the narrow back trail and strike the defenders from the rear. Then the main assault could move up the wagon road. Hatfield formulated the plan of attack as he rode along on the smooth-gaited, powerful sorrel which carried his big, rangy frame.

Shortly after noon, Hatfield saw from the tracks that two of the horses of the bandits had begun to give out, were limping and floundering. In another mile those two diverged southward from the rest. After some debate, Hatfield decided to follow. It didn't appear that those two horses could go much farther without foundering.

He was correct in that surmise, for only a couple of miles away the fugitives were lying in cover on a cedar ridge. When they saw the posse coming, they roused their jaded mounts and made a run for it, as hopeless as an attempt to fight would have been. Storming over the low ridge top, the hunters saw their quarry laboring across open prairie like a reddish-brown ocean under the sun.

Hatfield and Travers moved ahead of the pack, none of the other mounts being able to run with Goldy and the black, and quickly overtook the limping wind-broken horses ridden by the bandits. Firing back from the saddle, the hide thieves emptied their guns to no avail, the lead whistling wildly overhead or ripping up streamers of reddish dirt. Holding their own fire and letting their horses out, Hatfield and Travers bore down on the two outlaws, shaking out loops in their ropes as the gap closed between them.

As the two rode in different directions, Hatfield took after one rider, a rather slender, well-built man, while Travers veered off behind the bulkier horseman. With Goldy flattened out at full speed, Hatfield gauged the distance, twirled his loop, and sent the lariat snaking through bright space. It settled cleanly and tightened about the man's body, as the golden sorrel braked instantly to a sliding dust-smoking halt.

The renegade was jerked into the air as his mount went reeling onward, to land bouncing and rolling on the sod. Glancing back, Hatfield saw that Travers had roped and thrown his man also, and was reeling him in like a huge fish.

Hatfield's victim was half-conscious when the Ranger swung down beside him. He heard Travers' call:

"I got Hendry Brown here, Jim. Reckon the one you landed must be Dutch Henry."

The buffalo hunters rode up shortly and confirmed the identification, arguing good-naturedly about what to do with the rascals. The general idea was that shooting was too good for them. Dutch Henry recovered enough to talk, and in his precarious position quite willingly told everything he knew.

DUTCH panted, "We was wrong, awful wrong, boys! But we was just hired hands, working for Harry Kotter and Oak Herlocker. The whole thing was their idea, their deal, and all we done was take orders." He looked beseechingly at Earp. "Wyatt, you've rode and hunted with me before, with me and Brown both. You know we ain't all bad. Don't let 'em hang us, Wyatt! Shoot us if you want, but don't let 'em string us up!"

"They deserve to die and they don't

deserve anything better than hanging," Wyatt Earp said to the other hunters, slow and thoughtful. "But I don't like to kill in cold blood, and I don't like to kill men I've hunted and camped and played cards with. Maybe it's a mistake, but I say let's take their guns and turn 'em loose with their half-dead horses. That way they've got some chance of pulling through. Let nature kill 'em, if their number's up."

"That's all right with me," Jim Hatfield said. He was in fact relieved that the hunters weren't one hundred per cent for executing the renegades. "It may be a mistake to let 'em live, as you say, Wyatt, but they *were* only tools for Kotter and Herlocker. And there might be some good in them somewhere — if it could be dug out."

Some of the hunters still insisted on death for the prisoners, but the argument wasn't too serious or prolonged. All finally agreed to set Dutch Henry and Brown free, unarmed and practically on foot in this great desert wilderness. If they survived, they'd suffer enough to pay for their crimes; in part, at least.

Of course Jim Hatfield had no crystal ball to tell him that in years to come Dutch Henry's exploits would make him notorious as one of the worst cattle and horse rustlers in the West, and that Hendry Brown would end up as a vicious accomplice of Billy the Kid. Had the Ranger been able to foresee this he would have regretted the decision he made this day, realizing it was an error to spare the lives of these two men. But right now it seemed the fair, decent, and human thing to do.

Leaving Dutch and Brown on the prairie, the Rangers and the buffalo hunters rode on through the afternoon toward the Pecos River.

When the sun sank behind *El Capitan* and the Guadalupe barrier, painting the western horizon with extravagant and fabulous colors, they were before Bluestone Butte waiting for Bridges and Poe to join them with more hunters from Horsehead.

The rendezvous was made at dusk. The plan of campaign was laid out as the men in greasy campfire-smoked buckskins chewed on cold jerky and hard biscuits, washed down with canteen water or whisky. With the main force under Bridges and Poe deployed here in front of the mesa, the original small party of fourteen would circle and scale the western side of the butte. When they struck from behind and engaged the defenders on the rimrock at the head of the pass, the main attack of fifty-odd mounted buffalo hunters would be on the wagon road; ready for an assault on the principal eastern entrance.

The strategy was as simple as that, and should be effective if everything worked out according to plan. But there were a lot of "ifs," and no one knew better than Jim Hatfield what a difference that could make in such an offensive.

If, for instance, those western heights were guarded, they would never reach the table-top. They'd be blown off the wall like flies by rifle fire from above.

"I wonder how Kotter and Herlocker could work all this, without Preacher Saul knowing about it," Wyatt Earp said, ruminatively, as they moved out to swing widely around the huge dark mesa.

"The Preacher lives in a dream-world of his own most of the time, Wyatt," Jim Hatfield told him. "He's so lost in lofty thinking he isn't aware of what's going on around him. That's the only way I can explain it."

"Still he's smart and shrewd, sensible and practical, at times," Earp said. "A mightly odd man, the Preacher."

"He is that," Hatfield agreed. "I wish I could place the man he reminds me of so much. . . ."

IN DARKNESS filtered with frail light from the star-dazzled sky, men in buckskin toiled upward in single file on the narrow shelf of rock across the western cliff of Bluestone Butte. At the head of the line, Jim Hatfield dismounted to lead his sorrel, his action followed by the rest. Goldy could have made the climb without being led, but Hatfield was afraid some

of the other horses might panic and lose their footing, with disastrous results.

Mounting the slender ledge, clinging to the wall against the outward and downward pull of gravity, Hatfield waited for gunfire to burst down at them from the rim overhead. They'd be like fish in a barrel under the rifles of sharpshooters up there. Their only chance was that this back trail was unguarded since it was considered to be a secret passage unknown to outsiders.

Evidently no guards had been stationed for no challenges or shots came from the summit. If the mesa was defended tonight, the riflemen were concentrated on the eastern rim. An assault of any size must come from that direction.

It required a long time for just fourteen men to make the western ascent. A large force would never attempt it. Reaching the top at last, relieved to find the way open, Hatfield and Travers stood by their horses and waited for their comrades.

The broad broken table-top was quiet in the night. A few lamps glimmered from the adobe buildings, a few campfires burned in orange triangles along the eastern edge. Scanning the terrain, Hatfield suggested a course to follow in skirting the Sanctuary and reaching the rimrock above the main pass. Digging field glasses out of the saddle-bag, he focused them on the campfires.

"Comanches and whites both," he announced. "About thirty-five or forty, not counting the sentries along the wagon road below."

"They'll be exposed from the rear," Bat Masterson said. "We can find cover in the mesquite and rocks this side of them."

"You and Wyatt lead the boys over there, Bat," said Hatfield. "Milt and I'll go after Kotter and Herlocker in the Sanctuary."

Wyatt Earp nodded, regarding the adobe cluster with interest. "That mission was built by the Spaniards, they say. It dates 'way back. Long ago the Comanches wiped them all out."

"Don't let anybody break through to the mission, until we've had time to handle Kotter and Herlocker," warned Hatfield.

"Nobody's going to break through at all, Jim," growled big Charlie Bassett. "They're all going to die there on the rim between us and the boys that Jack and Johnny are bringing up the front way."

The buffalo hunters strung off behind Earp and Masterson into the shadows, and disappeared into a dark fold of the uneven tableland. Hatfield and Travers moved carefully toward the adobes at the center of the mesa.

"They'll pop out when the shooting starts, Milt," cautioned Hatfield. "I'll take Kotter, and you can have Herlocker."

Travers nodded. "Come to think of it, Jim, that was no accident that night in Kabbock, when those two bumped into us outside the dancehall like they did, and let Calso and Leach get away. I just happened to remember it."

"No accident, Milt," agreed Hatfield. "But we didn't suspect anything at the time, on account of Kotter and Herlocker being with Preacher Saul and Madeline."

"They sure kept the blinders on the Preacher and that girl," Travers remarked. "A couple of slippery customers, Kotter and Herlocker."

Leaving their horses behind an outcropping of rock, the Rangers pressed forward, utilizing the cover of the broken landscape, the sharp outthrusts and shadow-filled depressions.

"We're lucky to have such good men on our side," Hatfield murmured.

"We sure are," Travers said. "They don't grow 'em any better, Jim, even in Texas."

They went on to the first outlying structure. After what seemed like an interminable wait, suddenly Indian dogs barked in the east and gunfire crashed out — and the battle for Bluestone Butte was on! Shooting with deadly precision and speed, the buffalo hunters mowed down the Comanches and renegade whites. Fighting on the rimrock drew the outguards from the wagon road, and Johnny Poe and Jack Bridges led their

irregular cavalry from Horsehead Flats up the winding trail to the crest in a flame-tipped thundering torrent. Caught between the blazing jaws of a trap, the renegades were being chewed to pieces, riddled and shot down, smashed and trampled under. But it was a long bloody business, for the warriors and outlaws were fighting for their lives, battling to the last tortured gasp.

AT THE first burst of gunfire, the two Rangers had advanced among the adobe buildings, watching the door of the main house, with Hatfield slightly in advance of Travers. As Milt paused at the corner of the barn, shooting started. A brawny arm hooked around Travers' neck from behind, locking under his chin and yanking him backyard with sudden spine-snapping force.

Caught in the stable without his guns, it was the giant Oak Herlocker who had reached out to clamp on that stranglehold. Hatfield, hearing nothing but the distant gunfire, paced on toward the house.

Milt Travers tried to claw out a gun, but the pressure on his throat choked and almost paralyzed him. Driving himself backward with high heels digging deep, he upset Herlocker and landed on top of him, shoulders against the man's massive chest, but could not break that terrible hold. Silently they heaved and strained on the ground, neither of them able to reach the Ranger's holstered guns. But Travers' neck was being twisted to the breaking point, his breath was shut off entirely, and buck and squirm as he might he couldn't loosen that crushing grip on his throat.

In final desperation he jerked forward, stamped his heels into the earth, arched his wiry back, and heaved backward, butting his head into that brutal pocked face with a tremendous wrenching effort. As Oak Herlocker's hold slackened, Travers burst free with explosive strength, his left-hand Colt dropping into the dirt as he and Oak threshed about and rolled apart.

Herlocker lunged headlong to grasp the gun on the ground and swing it at the Ranger, as Milt Travers rolled again to clear his right holster and rake out the .45. As he thumbed the hammer, flame leaped straight into Herlocker's craggy, pitted features, rocking the giant back. His shot — too late — streaked skyward as his great bulk settled ponderously in the bunchgrass. Travers collapsed nearby, sobbing painfully for air, too exhausted to stir as he stared at Herlocker's upturned and ruined face.

Travers closed his aching eyes, but he could still see that ghastly countenance, as if the vision were pasted to his quivering eyelids. In horror, he wondered if he would always see it.

CHAPTER X

Blood on Bluestone

HATFIELD heard those shots behind him, but it was too late to turn back, for Harry Kotter was just emerging from the front door of the adobe house, trim and dapper, with that insolent, superior smile curving his lips. Calmly and without surprise, he swiveled out of the light from the doorway to face the big Ranger.

"So, Jimson? It's about time you died."

Kotter's hand was a smooth blur of speed against the shadowy background, but his bullet scorched past Hatfield's cheek.

The Ranger had matched his draw, but lined his barrel with more deliberate care. His slug struck Kotter with a clublike impact. Driven back on his heels, Kotter's second shot went high and whanged off adobe as Hatfield let go another blast. Harry Kotter lurched drunkenly and fell against an upright of the brush ramada, but he was still on his feet and struggling to bring his weapon into line.

It was too heavy, and the lead tore up dirt midway between him and Hatfield. Instantly Hatfield hammered home a final

shot, and Harry Kotter bounced forward from the post on spraddled legs, and fell full length with his arms outflung and his face in the dark soil of this strange Sanctuary.

Hatfield turned back then to help Milt Travers and as he got his Ranger partner to his feet he glanced briefly at Herlocker's shattered face and picked up the gun from beside that monstrous hulk. As together the Rangers headed back toward the house, they could hear the battle still raging on the east rim.

Hatfield said, "Well, I guess it's about over, Milt."

"Not quite, gentlemen," said a deep sonorous voice.

In pure amazement they saw Preacher Saul standing in front of the doorway with a double-barreled shotgun trained on them! He was an entirely different man from the one they had known, his face all evil and malevolence now, and his black eyes shining with a wicked madness.

"Drop your belts and guns," he ordered. "This thing I'm holding will blow you to pieces at this distance. It's double-loaded with buckshot — no, gentlemen, it isn't over yet. You have to die first. And I have to run away, I suppose, to live and fight another day. You did quite a job here, but you failed to reckon with me — and that is invariably fatal to you lawdogs!"

They dropped their gun-belts, under those menacing twin muzzles.

So the noble and distinguished Preacher Saul was the outlaw king-pin, the chief renegade of them all! More than likely he also was the notorious King Creed whom Marshal Overmile had mentioned, without the dyed hair and mustache and jewels. Now Hatfield remembered the man Saul had reminded him of from the first. A half-crazed hypnotist and magician on a stage lighted by kerosene footlamps, a charlatan and fakir who called himself the Great Something — was it Zandeen? And that hypnotist might have been this same man before them now!

"Were you ever known as the Great Zandeen, Preacher?" Hatfield blurted.

"I have been many things," Saul said. "And known as many more. At the moment I am about to play the role of executioner, which will afford me rare pleasure, in this instance."

"It's hard to believe Madeline is your accomplice," Hatfield said.

"She is, naturally — though unwittingly. This may shatter some illusions for her, since she has always loved and respected me as a good daughter should, even though she's an adopted child." In Saul's soft laugh was amusement. "No doubt we shall be married some day. A handsome couple, don't you think?"

"Very handsome," drawled Hatfield.

"Don't mock me, you backwoods lout!" snarled Saul. "Are you ready to die?"

"Not exactly," Hatfield said. "Is there any other way, Preacher?"

"No!"

"Why don't you call Madeline out to watch, Preacher?"

Saul was cocking both barrels of the shotgun when Madeline appeared in the doorway at his back, her face strained and agonized, a stubby revolver firm in her hand.

"Drop that gun," she ordered him hoarsely. "Drop it — or I'll kill you!"

SAUL turned his regal gray head, his noble features showing that he was stunned and unbelieving.

"Madeline!" he cried, in low, intense protest. "What are you thinking of, girl? You want these men to ruin me — your father?"

"Put that gun down and go away from here — fast!" Madeline said, with taut harshness. "You're no father of mine, and no friend. But I'll give you the chance to ride. You'd better hurry, though. It sounds as if your Comanches were being massacred."

"But Madeline, my little girl —"

"Put it down and get out!" she repeated bleakly. "I'll count to three, and then I'll fire. One — two — "

Saul let the hammers down gently, laid the shotgun against the wall, and strode

away to the barn, without a glance at the bodies of Kotter and Herlocker. The Rangers buckled on their guns, Hatfield picked up the shotgun, and they stepped inside the adobe with Madeline, to watch from the doorway. In a few minutes Saul came out on horseback and clattered away in the direction of the back trail off Bluestone.

"Would you have shot him, Madeline?" Hatfield then asked.

"Yes, I would have," she said firmly. "I should have let you kill him, but I couldn't, as long as he hadn't hurt you." She came into Hatfield's arms, simply and naturally, and he held her as a big brother would hold his hurt young sister, trying to soothe and comfort her. "He'd always been so good to me, so kind and devoted," Madeline choked. "It's so hard, so awfully hard to believe, but there's no doubt about his guilt, of course."

"It's all going to be all right, Madeline," said Hatfield, stroking her hair. "You've had a shock. It'll take some time — but we'll look after you, Madeline. We'll take you to Kabbock, when this is over."

It seemed to be about over now on the eastern rimrock, for the fire was fading and dying out except for occasional shots: There wouldn't be any wounded renegades to care for tonight. The buffalo hunters were not taking any prisoners this time.

Hatfield and Travers sat down wearily, and Madeline brought them some excellent brandy which they gratefully drank as they waited for their comrades to come in from the field of battle.

"How'll that cache of stolen hides be divided, Jim?" inquired Travers.

"I don't know for sure, Milt. But I believe the buyers all had some identifying marks of their own."

"Hope the Gowans get all theirs back. A real nice family there."

"A fine family," Jim Hatfield agreed, somewhat absently.

He was feeling dissatisfied, disgusted because he had made no attempt to keep Preacher Saul from getting away, but he couldn't throw down on the man after Madeline had saved their lives and granted Saul his freedom. He decided, though, that the next time he set eyes on Saul he'd either take him or shoot him down.

"And I thought he was the soul of goodness and honesty and decency," Madeline murmured desolately.

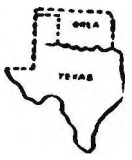
"He'd fool anybody, Madeline," Hatfield comforted her. "Milt and I never even suspected him until he showed that scattergun."

Travers smiled, trying to cheer the girl. "That's right, Madeline. He fooled me and old Doc Hatfield here, which is practically impossible for anybody to do. But maybe it was on account of you're so beautiful —"

"I'll never feel beautiful again," the girl

A TALL TEXAS TALE

CONFIDENTIALLY SPEAKING



TO SATISFY a whim many years ago, a Texas farmer grew a crop of flax on a piece of land he had no particular use for. Later on, he had the largest tablecloth a manufacturer could produce made out of the flax.

The farmer was the bragging story-telling type of fellow, and one time, while a woman guest from the city was admiring the tablecloth, he remarked real seriouslike, "I want you to know that I grew this tablecloth myself."

"Did you really?" exclaimed the gullible city guest. "How in the world did you ever do it?"

Seeing it was plain the woman had no idea how tablecloths were produced, the boasting Texan lowered his voice mysteriously, and replied, "I'll tell you if you'll promise to keep it a secret. I wouldn't want it gossiped about and encourage competition."

The guest promised faithfully.

"Well," said the farmer in a low impressive voice, "I planted a napkin."

—*Al Spong*

said in despair. "I'll never even feel clean."

"Sure you will," said Travers. "Looking the way you do, you just can't help it, Madeline."

"You're Rangers, aren't you?" she asked suddenly, blinking moisture from her blue eyes. "I don't know why I didn't guess that before. I should have known you are something more than buffalo hunters."

Travers laughed, with a toss of his tawny blond head. "Don't say anything against buffalo hunters, Madeline. If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't have got anywhere on the Staked Plains."

"Oh, I don't mean to disparage the hunters. But I knew *you* were something out of the ordinary — both of you."

"Thank you, ma'am," Milt Travers smiled. "Reckon that calls for another drink."

Jim Hatfield sat there withdrawn and silent, green eyes and strong features somber in the lamplight. For only too well he knew that their job here wasn't finished. It would not be, as long as Preacher Saul was alive and free.

CHAPTER XI

In Godlike Guise

BEHIND the two Rangers and the golden-haired girl now, as they rode eastward in the direction of Kabbock, were the Sanctuary on Bluestone Butte, the camp on Horsehead Flats, and the hide-buying post on Caddos Creek.

They had said good-by to the buffalo hunters — to Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson and Charlie Bassett, to Billy Tilghman, Johnny Poe, Jack Bridges, and the rest of those tough, fighting plainsmen. They had said farewell to Emmett Gowan and his family, and received their sincere and heartfelt thanks.

The hides recovered from that vault on Bluestone Butte were to be returned to the buyers whose trademarks they bore. The whisky and most of the Henry rifles and ammunition had been confiscated by the hunters, small enough pay for the services they had rendered, Jim Hatfield declared. And the wealth in the money-belts taken from Harry Kotter and Oak Herlocker guaranteed Madeline a secure future.

At the rim of the great escarpment, Hatfield and Travers and the girl reined up and looked back over the vast sweep of the Llano Estacado. It was late afternoon, with a cold, raw wind tearing at them, and far in the west the sun was a ball of dark red fire sinking toward *El Capitan* and the other Guadalupe peaks.

The hide rustlers had been smashed, the Comanches put down, and outlaw chieftains like Kotter and Herlocker, Oppel and Albino, Calso and Leach, were dead, as were many others both bad and good, red-skinned and white. But Preacher Saul was still alive somewhere, a fiend incarnate in godlike guise.

"What'll you do now, Madeline?" asked Milt Travers, as Hatfield continued to stare across the Staked Plains.

"I don't know," she said. "I have some friends up North. I'll probably visit them for a while."

Her blue eyes flickered at Hatfield's stern, weather-darkened profile. She had hoped that he might want to take her back to Austin with him, but Travers had told her, "Jim's all wrapped up in his work, Madeline. It doesn't leave him any time for any home life. Ranger work keeps us on the move and in the saddle. Texas is a mighty big state."

"Some Rangers marry, don't they?" Madeline had asked.

"Sure, most of them do — in time. Sooner or later Jim and I'll probably settle down, also, but I wouldn't want to say when."

"Lots of girls must have wanted you to — both of you."

Travers had smiled boyishly. "There've been a few who have kind of liked me, I reckon. Lots for Jim. He treats 'em

nice and polite, but he never goes overboard."

"He's a gentleman," she had sighed. "You're both gentlemen. Well, a woman always dreams and hopes, I suppose."

Travers had nodded. "We Rangers have our dreams and hopes too, Madeline. But mostly we're too busy to follow them up."

Now as Hatfield turned his high broad back on the Plains, they began threading their way down the steep, ragged scarps toward the bottomlands of Kabbock and the headwaters of the Brazos.

Dusk had come early on the lowlands, and the sage was already dark purple in the waning light. In Kabbock, the lamps of the settlement bloomed from the false fronts and board awnings of adobe, frame and log buildings. The streets seemed unduly hushed, quiet and deserted, even for the supper hour. Horses and rigs lined the hitch-racks of Main Street, but traffic was at a standstill, the plank sidewalks empty of pedestrians. No music blared from the Brazos Ballroom, no hoarse, laughing voices issued from the saloons and gambling halls. A blight of silence was on Kabbock, and the stillness was eerie and ominous.

"What's happened to this town?" Travers asked the stableman as they dismounted at the livery barn. "Somebody dead, old-timer?"

"Several," said the gnarled, gray-whiskered old fellow. "Several dead, son."

"Who?"

THE hostler said bitterly, "All the law in Kabbock. Marshal Overmile and Deputies Timm and Sarles. The old sheriff and one of his deputies down wounded."

"Who did it?" demanded Hatfield.

"That critter they call Preacher Saul's gone plumb loco and got the whole town treed," the old man said, wagging his grizzled head in the flickering lantern-light. "He shot 'em all, and he'll shoot a sight more before he's done. Nobody dares lift a hand against him, and I ain't blamin' 'em much. He's crazier'n a coot, on a mad-dog killing spree. A one-man army, that Preacher."

"Where is he?" asked Jim Hatfield.

"Took over the Hunters' Saloon the last I heard. Drove everybody out and was in there all alone, guzzling whisky like so much water. Wearing two six-guns and toting a sawed-off scattergun. Blew poor Overmile 'most in half with that shotgun. Killed Timm and Sarles with his Colt. Warned everybody off the street and promised to kill anybody he saw with a gun. Looks like a white-haired saint, and he's hell-fire, dynamite and damnation — begging your pardon, ma'am."

Jim Hatfield shifted his shell belt and settled the holsters into place on his long thighs. "Stay with Madeline, Milt," he said casually. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"You aren't going alone, Jim?" protested Travers.

"I'm going alone, Milt." Hatfield's voice was quiet but firm. "He won't shoot from cover. He'll come out and face me. He's got that kind of pride. You stay with Madeline."

"Is that an order?"

Hatfield nodded his dark head. "It's an order, Milt."

"Let me cover your back, at least," Travers pleaded.

"You can do that from the corner out there," Hatfield said gently. His green eyes flicked to the girl, and she saw that they were turning a cold, smoky gray, like ice with fire underneath it. "Sorry, Madeline. But it's my job." He bent and unhooked the spurs from his boots.

"I'll never forgive myself for not letting you kill him the other night!" she said, choked with tension and fear. "If anything happens to you — "

"I'll be all right," Hatfield said.

Touching his hatbrim he turned toward the street, moving with easy flowing grace and assurance, big and rangy as he was. A fine, tall figure in worn, dirty buckskin, big hands swinging lightly near his low-slung guns.

Travers looked at Madeline. "You'd

better stay here," he told her.

"No, I'm coming with you," she said firmly.

They walked out to the corner of Main Street, Madeline and Travers and the old stableman, and watched Hatfield stride up the wide empty thoroughfare toward the lighted sign of the Hunters' Saloon.

"There goes a lot of man, Madeline," Travers said softly. "They don't make many like him, even in Texas."

As Jim Hatfield passed, people watched fearfully from windows and doorways, but no one moved out of the buildings along the way. A funereal stillness prevailed, and fear was so rank on the air it could almost be smelled and tasted — terror and horror that had been created by one madman with delusions of grandeur and greed for power.

Preacher Saul, King Creed, or the Great Zandeen, they were virtually identical, one and the same. Evil, cruel egomaniacs behind a noble, handsome façade. Smashed on Bluestone Butte, his organization wiped out and his rule of the buffalo range ended, Saul had come here to perpetuate a one-man reign of terror and dominate the entire town.

The pressure increased as Hatfield walked through shadow-striped lamplight in the dirt of mid-street. Tension was a tangible thing in the hushed evening. He felt it all through him, yet his strides remained free and easy, his muscles loose and relaxed in his towering, clean-limbed frame.

Signs creaked in the breeze, wastepaper rustled across slat walks, and dogs barked in the distance. Curious faces crowded windowpanes and open doors, and peered from alleys and side streets.

HATFIELD thought with irony, nothing like an audience when you go out to die. Give the folks a good show now, all free in the town of Kabbock. Three men have died already here, and at least one more is going under. This is the feature attraction, ladies and gentlemen. The Great Zandeen and the Lone Wolf, to a finish!

Hatfield tried his Colts in their oiled leather sheaths. An old, old story, yet it was always new and different, and a man never faced up to it without dread, apprehension, and deep, desolate loneliness. It had to be done over and over again. Was there never an end to it? Yes, when a man grew tired and his luck wore thin, and somewhere a bullet awaited him.

The batwing doors of the Hunters' Saloon bellied out and Preacher Saul came through, bare head shining silvery white in the lamp glow, the sawed-off Greener in his hand. A magnificent and terrible figure in frock coat and striped trousers and varnished boots, a black string tie in his white collar. Well over six feet and superbly built, with a kind of archangel beauty in his proud regal features and a fanatical light in his hypnotic dark eyes.

"Get off the street, you fool!" he commanded. "Do you want to die, too? I warned everybody off this street, and I insist on obedience."

Hatfield paced on toward him, watching those hands on the shotgun, ready to draw and fire at the first flicker of tensing muscles. He was about a hundred feet away when Saul recognized him, with a laugh of delight.

"Ah, it's you, my friend!" Saul said, in pulpit tones. "You dare to stand up against me, Jimson — or whatever your name is?"

"The shotgun gives you an advantage, Preacher," said Hatfield.

"I don't need any advantage, man," declared Saul. Stepping out he leaned the shotgun against a hitch-rail. "I prefer hand guns, having enjoyed a lifetime's practice with them. Evidently you are supposed to be something of a gunfighter. Watch closely then, for you'll never see a better draw." The Preacher laughed with deep-throated pleasure. "You'll never see anything else, for that matter. Do you wish to move first, mister?"

"I don't suppose you'd drop your guns, Preacher?"

Saul laughed again. "Don't be absurd, boy! Or are you trying to crawl out of this?"

"I didn't come to crawl."

"You'll crawl when you're in the dirt gutshot," Saul said. "Is the range satisfactory?"

"All right with me, Preacher," said Hatfield.

They had halted with some sixty feet of shadow-patterned street between them, the dull gleam of oil street lamps giving fair light. Saul made his move and he *was* fast, even faster than Harry Kotter had been.

But Jim Hatfield more than matched it with his own fluid speed. Fire torched from the Ranger's gun-barrel, and the shock of his lead jarred the Preacher's gunhand out of line, his shot roaring wide, ripping wood in the background.

Hatfield brought his kicking Colt down and thumbed the hammer again. The gun sprang against his palm, and dust puffed from Saul's frock coat as the slug slammed the madman backward. But the Preacher held his feet and triggered again, and Hatfield felt the searing tug of this one on his buckskin-sleeved left arm. He threw level and lined another blast, the reports blending into a thunderous sound that echoed along the false-fronted structures.

Driven back by this third smashing impact, Preacher Saul turned in a jerk-legged running stagger and caught the hitch-rail to save himself from falling. Hanging there broken and gasping, his wide back to the Ranger and his knees sagging heavily, he heaved himself around, clutched the shotgun, and tried to swing the sawed-off barrels onto the target.

Jim Hatfield fired once more, the flame blossoming, and the bullet flung Saul back upon the hitch-rail. The shotgun exploded skyward with a tremendous bellowing roar. Rearing tall and stark off the rack, Preacher Saul stumbled forward on stiff, twitching legs, to topple at last like a great chopped tree. His noble face was rooted deep in the soft thick dirt, his splendid body was shattered and

[*Turn page*]

lifeless, with dust clouding slowly around it.

JIM HATFIELD wheeled and walked back down the street, a street now suddenly alive and swarming with men, women and children, all staring at the big Ranger. Many tried to touch him as he strode past, before they went on to cluster awe-stricken about the riddled corpse of Preacher Saul.

Heedless of them all, Hatfield went on his high lone way, the gun still hanging loosely in his strong right hand. Madeline and Travers came to meet him on the run.

"He sure took a lot of killing, Jim," drawled Travers.

"He died hard — and game," Hatfield said, his voice sounding strange and remote in his own ears.

Madeline clung to him, silent except for her dry sobbing, and Hatfield held her comfortingly.

"It had to be, that's all," he told her gently. "It's all over now, Madeline. Like I told you, everything's going to be all right. Everything's going to be just fine."

"I could stand a drink about now," Travers drawled. "Rather fight myself than stand back and watch one like that — with you in it, Jim. I was tighter'n a fiddle string ready to bust. And Madeline — I couldn't make her stand back or turn away."

"Forget it," Hatfield said kindly. "It's done with, all over. Another hand played out."

"If Overmile was right, Jim, you've got plenty of reward money coming to you. If the Preacher *was* King Creed — and I got a notion he was."

Hatfield shrugged his broad shoulders. "If there's any reward money it's coming to both of us, Milt, but — "

"I didn't have any part in downing the Preacher."

"You were with me all the way. You were here first, as a matter of fact. We're pardners, but" — a slow smile crossed his face — "what I was going to say, Milt, is I've never taken blood money yet. Even if Rangers do get paid in pennies. I don't think it's a right good time to start now."

Travers looked at him steadily for a moment, then his face stretched in a wide grin. "You and me both," he said. "You and me both." After a moment he turned his eyes away and gazed longingly at the saloons on either side of the street. "I could still use a drink or two, pardner."

"We'll get a couple of bottles at the hotel," Hatfield said. "You get the saddlebags, Milt, and I'll get the whisky and a room. I'd rather do my drinking in private tonight."

"If there's no law left here, we'll have to take over, Jim," Travers reminded.

"Time enough for that," said Hatfield. "We've earned a rest and a few drinks I reckon."

Travers turned back toward the livery stable, and Madeline smiled bravely up at Hatfield through her tears. "I think I'll drink with you this time, if you don't mind, Jim," she said.

"It'll be our pleasure and our privilege, Madeline," said Jim Hatfield, with quaint old-world courtesy.

Towering above her, he led her on toward the hotel where they had first met. A few days, or a lifetime ago?

By JIM KJELGAARD

BATTLE FOR THREE

THE wide meadow was flanked on one side by brooding, green-black spruces, and on the other by one of the almost perpendicular rock mountains which had been spread in a careless, zig-zag line across this wild upland country.

In the center of the meadow, John Martin slipped a little clumsily from his brown horse. He unfastened the case that held his five-and-a-half-foot, fifty-five-pound bow. Then he took a quiver of broadhead arrows and his shoulder pack containing food and utensils from the horse and laid them carefully to one side. At once he felt better.

He stretched his legs, feeling the

Here in the high country, stalking a mammoth grizzly with a bow and arrow, John Martin meets more than he'd bargained for

springy smoothness of the green meadow grass through the tough moccasins he wore, and it was a good feeling. He was a walking man, not a horseman, and from this point on he would walk.

John Martin patted the brown horse, then stripped the saddle and bridle from his mount and set the animal free. Martin supposed it would work its own way back to the Circle 20 Ranch. That was thirty-one miles, but when the time came to go back Martin would rather walk than ride those miles. He had borrowed the horse only because a horse would get him this far more quickly.

The brown horse shook himself, snorted, and walked a little way into the meadow to lower his head and start cropping the rich grass. Martin took the lariat from the saddle, and hung the saddle and bridle to the limb of a lone spruce that grew in the meadow.

That done, he retrieved his bow and uncased it. For a moment, as though it were alive in his hands, he stood fondling the finely wrought, beautifully polished yew bow. Expertly he strung the bow, and fitted one of the perfectly balanced broadheads to it. He unstrung the bow, and stood gazing toward the snow-capped peaks in the distance.

A thrill that he knew was partly fear, and partly anticipation, bubbled like a tiny water course within him. Up here, he hoped, he would finally find an answer to the question that had plagued his life.

SOME of the Circle 20's extensive sheep herds grazed in these wild uplands, and a week ago an immense grizzly had emerged from his savage haunts to attack one of those herds. When the herder, José Rivas, had tried to protect his flock, the grizzly had not hesitated to attack him. Somehow the mauled herder had managed to catch and mount his horse and, leaving the sheep in charge of his three dogs, had ridden what must have been endless miles to the Circle 20.

There he had reported the attack, and told of the size of the attacker. José Rivas knew his grizzlies, but never had he seen one so large or so fierce. Three crack shots had immediately been sent to guard what remained of the sheep.

John Martin shouldered his pack and gripped his bow a little more tightly as he started walking toward the distant peaks. He had been about to hunt elk with his bow and arrow, and had happened to come into the Circle 20 the day after the three men had departed. And he had recognized the opportunity he was seeking.

A nagging torment that was never quiet had driven him around the earth in search of big game. He had faced the biggest and most savage beasts of four continents — but always with a rifle in his hands and a retinue at his back. And he had discovered to his own satisfaction that when the beasts pitted themselves against a properly equipped and expert rifleman, they always died.

What if a man equipped himself with Stone Age weapons, a bow and arrows, and went forth in search of fierce game? Martin knew that it had already been done, and that almost every species of big game had been killed with the bow.

But weren't those who did it always backed by men with rifles? No, Alexander Reittman, that genius of the bow who had finally done murder with it, then seemingly dissolved into thin air, had claimed that his lions and grizzlies were killed with no rifleman protecting him. Reittman, however, had only his own word as proof.

Not that that made too much difference, and Martin did not care whether he had witnesses or not. He wished only to prove to himself whether or not he dared do what he had set out to do.

He continued up the trail that marked the course taken by Circle 20 herders when they brought their sheep into these rich mountain meadows, and an hour later he smelled wood smoke. Ten minutes after the first acrid scent tickled his nostrils he walked into the sheep camp.

The dirty-gray sheep, with blacks and browns among them, grazed in a meadow. To the right a small treeless ridge rose

and broke into another valley, and a man with a rifle sat on an outjutting rock there. Far to the left, near where the line of trees began, sat another rifleman. The third man, also with a rifle in his hands, stood near the sheep and directed the dogs controlling the flock. Martin approached him.

"Howdy," he said.

"Howdy," the herder answered.

"I came to hunt that grizzly."

The herder looked at the bow, and the quiver of arrows. He flicked a thumb toward them. "With that?"

"With that."

"You're crazy."

"They told me the same down at the Circle Twenty," Martin said. "Have you seen anything more of the bear?"

"Only his tracks, and they're bigger'n the brim of your hat. You'll find 'em four miles up. We moved the herd."

"Thanks a lot," Martin said.

He started up the valley and, as though it were an afterthought, the herder called after him:

"Good luck."

MARTIN stood in the meadow where the grizzly had emerged from the forest, and with practiced eye he looked around. To the south was the long succession of meadows, broken only by thin belts of trees extending across the valley. To the east and west were forest and steep little ridges. North was a series of rocky little crags and canyons that seemed to extend clear back into the snow peaks. It was a wild and broken country, the sort which grizzlies might be expected to haunt, so probably the grizzly had come from the north.

A rushing little stream surged out of the forest to wind across the meadow. Martin walked to the stream, looking for grizzly tracks in the soft mud where too much water had killed the grass. He raised his head, and again the cold little tingle rippled down his spine. He lifted the bow, as though he would tighten the slack string, then lowered it, smiling at his own fears. The grizzly would not stay around here.

A little way from him a huge boulder with moss-and-lichen-encrusted sides lay half-buried in the meadow. Martin climbed to the top of the boulder where he had a much wider and better sweep of the meadow. Presently he saw that a little way north, near the stream, lay what remained of several dead sheep.

Martin scrambled down from the boulder and made his way to them. Obviously the sheep had been drinking when the grizzly had attacked, and just as plainly it had been a surprise sortie. Not even the sheep dogs had known he was there until he had begun killing, and by the time they could give the alarm the grizzly had slain several sheep.

José Rivas, the herder, must have been excited when he shot at that grizzly. At any rate, he had missed. Martin walked carefully along the grass beside the stream, and presently he stopped, to whistle in surprise.

Plain for all to see, the grizzly had left its track in the soft creek mud. The track was old now, and the mud around its edges was crumbling, but it was bigger than any track Martin had ever seen, much bigger than he thought such tracks could be.

Martin got down on his hands and knees, searching in the grass for more tracks. He found them, but they had been overrun by sheep and were indistinct. Then, farther up the creek, he found where the bear had walked in the mud for about fifteen feet.

Carefully Martin studied those tracks, and when he straightened up he knew that this bear had been marked. The beast had a fault — perhaps an old bullet wound — in the left front foot, and that paw toed in slightly.

Martin looked to the north, and bit his lip thoughtfully. It would be difficult to find this grizzly in that tangled wilderness, but he would know him if he did find him. And he had to have *this* grizzly. There were others, but to get a satisfactory answer to the question that troubled him he had to have a bear that had proved

itself unafraid of man. Any beast could run when a man approached, and most of them would. This grizzly would not.

Martin walked into the forest to the north and swung down a small canyon. From now on he would have to use all the grizzly lore at his command, as well as that instinct for game which is developed by every good hunter. Again the little thrill which he knew was partly fear and partly anticipation coursed through him. He had always played his hunches, and he had a strong hunch that somewhere in here he must meet the grizzly.

That night he camped in a small meadow, ate pemmican and hard biscuits and drank tea from his pack, and slept near a fire. In spite of the fact that he knew he was safe — no grizzly would come near a fire — he was wakeful and kept rising to add more wood to his dying blaze. He had an odd feeling, and one which he could not explain, of being watched.

When morning finally broke he rose thankfully, and ate more pemmican. He could get along for a week or more on what he carried in his pack, and of course he might supplement the rations he carried with game and fish. If worst came to the worst he could always go back to the sheepherder's camp for food.

HE WENT on, marveling at the sweep and depth of the country in which he found himself. If there was such a thing as virgin wilderness, then this most certainly was it. All about was forest, and wild canyons, and rocky cliffs. Probably since the beginning of time no more than half a dozen men had set foot in here.

They would not come to hunt game because game was just as plentiful in more accessible places. Nor was there any other lure to bring a man in here. The country was useless for farming and there was no evidence of minerals. Even the sheepherders must stay where there was grazing for their flocks, and there was no grazing here.

The third day after he left the last meadow, Martin found evidence of presence of the grizzly he sought.

A rushing little stream, filled with huge trout, bubbled down to a confluence with tamer waters. Both banks were lined with big spruces that waved green branches over the stream and in places almost met, as though the trees on either side were reaching out to shake hands. No man had ever interfered with this stream, and as a result its waters varied scarcely six inches throughout the year.

Those six inches had still left their mark. In the spring, when the deep snows on the peaks melted, the stream claimed for its own the six inches of bank where its bed was high. When the bed was shallow the stream overspread many feet, leaving mud and dead trees as a memento that it had been there. On one of those mud banks Martin found the grizzly's tracks.

There could be no mistaking them. It was hardly possible that there could be two bears of that size which could leave tracks so huge, and the left front paw of this track toed in. This was the grizzly Martin wanted, and the tracks had been imprinted within the hour!

Martin glanced nervously around, hearing the pound of his heart, then returned his attention to the tracks. The grizzly had been traveling upstream, and beyond a doubt was hunting the huge trout that swam it.

Martin cut into the forest, running through the spruces along the stream. Twenty minutes later he went back to the stream, and knew he was right. The grizzly's tracks were there in the mud, so fresh that water was still seeping back into them. Martin followed more cautiously.

He came to a beaver meadow, a two-hundred-yard-wide opening with snags of trees fighting valiantly to retain their roots, and other trees that had given up the fight lying prone. Almost unconsciously Martin drew the nocked broadhead a little tighter, because now the grizzly could not be more than ten minutes ahead of him. The beast might be

here in this meadow, and Martin knew it would charge when it saw him.

Suddenly he shrank back. He had been warned of peril by some deep-seated sense, but nothing had prepared him for the broadhead that sang through the air, passed an inch from his throat, and quivered in a dead spruce ten feet beyond him!

Martin ducked behind a dead spruce, peered around the tree — and gasped.

Three-quarters of the way across the meadow, beside another dead spruce, stood a man. He was a tall man, wearing whipcord breeches and hunting shirt, and his beard was as carefully Vandyked as if he had just stepped out of a barber shop. In his hands was a bow to which he was already fitting another arrow, and across his back was a quiver from which the feathered tips of more broadheads protruded.

John Martin had seen pictures of this man, had avidly perused his writings, and he knew that in a moment of rage this man had killed two others with the broadheads he knew so well how to use. But it was impossible to find Alexander Reittman here!

Martin's excitement swelled like a great bubble, but the bubble burst suddenly, leaving him calm and completely in possession of himself. He even felt a rising happiness and assurance, for now it seemed that the all-important question had answered itself.

Now he was facing danger infinitely greater than any which could be threatened by the most savage beast, and he was not afraid!

CALMLY he analyzed the situation. He had been overwhelmed to find Alexander Reittman here, but he should not have been so surprised. Reittman, in one sense, was not a man but a sub human thing — a lonely, brooding thing who preferred the wild places into which he was always venturing to the companionship of his own kind and the luxuries of civilization. And he was as keen and cold as one of the broadheads that tipped his own shafts.

It was only logical, when he knew he would die for murder if apprehended, that he seek some place such as this. Somehow — and his clothing and gear were proof of this — he had either managed to bring an adequate outfit and clothing with him or he had some source of obtaining what he could not find here.

To Reittman, any man coming in here must be an officer of the law bent on taking him back to face the justice he deserved. And he never would be taken alive. Nor would he ever let any man who discovered him escape to report that discovery.

Martin nocked a broadhead, held it loosely in his bow, and prepared for the battle that must come now.

It would not be a swift battle. The death of either himself or Reittman would come only after hours of stalking and

[*Turn page*]

maneuvering on the part of each. Both knew that the other could kill from a distance, and that the most cunning would win.

Reittman disappeared as suddenly and uncannily as he had come into sight, and Martin tried to deduce exactly what he was doing. In a short moment of recurrent panic, Martin again knew cold fear. Forcibly he fought it down; it would be fatal to turn and run. Reittman would stalk him, exactly as he would stalk an elk or a buck, and kill him from some hidden place. The only possible course was some kind of offensive.

Reittman's appearance and disappearance had been unreal, as though it were possible for the man to materialize, then disappear at will. Martin could not disperse completely that illusion of unreality, but brought logic to his aid.

Beyond any doubt Reittman had merely hidden himself behind a tree, or was crawling away to carry out some plan. When Martin got a hint of what that plan was he would be able to combat it. He withdrew behind his own tree while he tried to map out strategy of his own.

The topography of the beaver meadow was imprinted on his mind, and Martin closed his eyes the better to see that meadow. In the center was the little creek, and on each side of the creek were dead trees. To the left was a rocky little knob shaped like a dragon's head, and that knob was covered only with sparse brush. Suddenly Martin knew what he must do.

From the top of that knob he could overlook the entire meadow, and see everything that moved in it, while he himself remained unseen. Only he must wait until night before he began his ascent. Reittman could be anywhere, and a moving quarry would betray itself.

Twilight fell, and deepening shadows floated slowly together to merge into black night. With a nocked arrow in his bow, Martin arose. He felt huge, unwieldly, as though he would be visible from anywhere in the meadow. Glancing up at the frosty stars, he bent his head and resumed his study of the meadow. Again reason came to his aid. He couldn't see more than a few feet in any direction himself, therefore it was impossible for him to be seen.

A cautious step at a time, feeling with his foot before he let that foot fall, Martin started across the meadow. Twenty feet from where he had started he stopped, waiting for that tiny rustle or sound which would tell him he was being hunted. There was nothing, and he went on. After four hours of painstaking travel, and stopping to wait, he was across the meadow and starting up the knob. A quarter of the way up he stopped again, halted by doubt and fear.

WHAT if Reittman had had the same idea, and was already on top of the knob? It seemed logical that he should be there, waiting with nocked broadhead. Even now he might be lying alert, to drive that broadhead through an enemy.

Martin shivered. Reittman was perfectly capable of shooting at a sound, and hitting whatever made that sound. Certanly Reittman would not miss a second time. With a trembling hand Martin gripped the tree, but at once regrasped his bow with both hands.

He knew now that he could not go on tonight. He would climb through the knee-high brush as soon as it was light enough to see.

Finally, after what seemed ages, the mournful dawn broke. Martin walked erect, his bow nocked and ready. If Reittman was on the knob he would have to rise to one knee before he could shoot, and Martin would see him get up. Tense, quivering, Martin almost let his nocked broadhead fly at a shadow, but he controlled himself.

His mind and reason told him that Reittman could not be far away, but people who had seen Reittman shoot, and who had hunted with him, had assured Martin that, though he was a superb archer, he was not infallible. He was capable of error. In fact, he had already missed once here.

The thought buoyed John Martin. Far from being lost, the duel was not yet fairly begun. He advanced at a slow walk, the arrow ready to shoot instantly. At the same time he had an intuitive feeling that he was in deadly danger; he was being stalked by some terrible thing which he could not possibly conquer, no matter what measures he took.

But now there could be no thought of turning back. That would be to invite Reittman's shaft. Martin took another step forward.

Suddenly he was face to face with the grizzly!

It appeared like a phantom, a ghost creature which one second was not there, and the next was the only thing real. Huge, shaggy, its great bulk seemed to blot out all else. Though it must have been hiding in the brush, now it dwarfed the crooked little bushes. The grizzly's head was low, tongue protruding slightly. A leathery black nose was wrinkled, and wrinkled jowls exposed ivory tushes. The grizzly surged forward.

John Martin reacted instantly. He raised the bow, his broadhead sang out to meet the charging bear, and he saw the arrow bury itself to the feathers in the brute's chest. At once he reached for and nocked another arrow, then stared incredulously.

For the grizzly was down. It slapped once, feebly, at the imbedded arrow, then collapsed like a slowly deflating balloon. John Martin remained rooted to the spot, waiting to shoot again. Then he walked slowly forward.

He saw an arrow that was not his own buried in the grizzly's neck, and a blood trail where the bear had quartered down the knob. With his bow strung, he followed the trail.

On top of the knob, Martin gazed down at the battered thing that had been Alexander Reittman. . . .

Three days later John Martin walked back into the sheep camp. The herders were dispersed as before, with the taciturn member in direct charge of the sheep. Martin approached him, and the herder looked at the bow.

"Find the bear?" he greeted.

"Yes."

"Kill him?"

"No, I didn't. But he's dead."

"Hm-m. Guess José must have hit him after all."

"I guess he must have," agreed Martin.

He turned to look in the direction from which he had come, and knew that the answer to his question lay in the shallow, rock-heaped grave in which he had lain all that remained of Alexander Reittman.

Let it stay there.

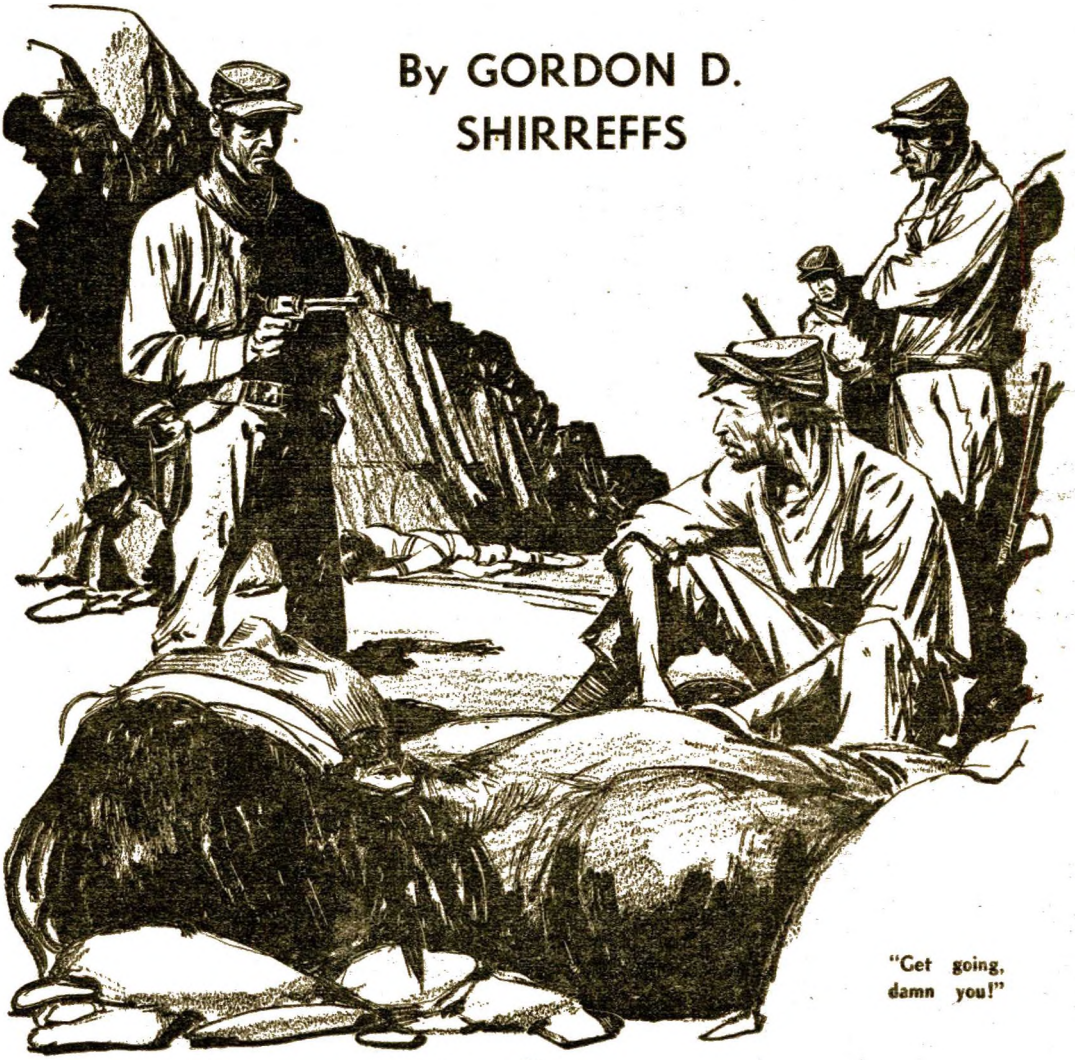
New to the West, his only experienced noncom killed, Lieutenant Ben Archer is set afoot in Apache country on his very . .

FIRST PATROL

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

SERGEANT SHATTUCK was dying. His breathing was thick and irregular in his throat. His seamed face seemed to have shrunk. Lieutenant Ben Archer tipped his canteen and, with the last few drops of water, dampened his bandanna and wiped Shattuck's lips.

The lieutenant jumped involuntarily as a carbine cracked flatly behind him—Trooper Allen was finishing off Shattuck's horse. In the fall from the trail the gray had broken both forelegs, then had



"Get going, damn you!"

thrashed over on the sergeant, pinning him on the rocky ground.

Allen flipped open the breech of his carbine. The empty brass hull tinkled on the ground. The rest of the patrol stood silently about the gray, watching the thick purple blood well from the raw and painful wound.

Sergeant Shattuck gripped the young lieutenant's wrist with surprising strength. "I'm going, sir. I'm all smashed up. I'm sorry to leave you like this on your first patrol. But you've got to get these men back to Fort Clymer! They're green. It'll be tough on you, Mr. Archer."

Archer insisted, "You'll live, Shattuck. We'll get you out of here somehow."

The sergeant shook his head. His sun-faded gray eyes lifted to look at the steep walls of the box canyon.

"No. I've seen too many men die in the last twenty years. I know. Seems funny in a way, doesn't it, sir? After fighting the Johnny Rebs for four years, tangling with Crazy Horse and with Geronimo and half a dozen other chiefs that John Shattuck should have to die in a stupid accident like this."

Shattuck shifted a little. Sweat burst out on his forehead.

"You're forty miles from Fort Clymer," he went on, and gestured feebly to the west. "Those Chiricahuas are still on our trail. They won't give up. They've a score to settle for the loss of ten of their warriors at Dragoon Wells last fall. They have at least forty men. You have eight. They know the country—you don't. Don't try to cut your way out of here, Lieutenant. They'll cut you to ribbons."

Shattuck was delirious now, thought Archer. There was no way out of this box canyon. They must go back.

"I know what you're thinking, sir," Shattuck said. "But you can't go back. Kill the horses and take off up over the canyon brim."

The canyon wall reared above them, almost sheer, a rough wall of yellow rock stippled with scrub oak and mesquite. The wall seemed to sway and shimmer in the blasting heat.

THE sergeant coughed harshly. "Bonito knows the way across country. It will be hell, but you have no choice. It's a helluva fix for an officer green to this country to be in. You've got the makings of a good Indian fighter, sir. It's no disgrace to run away. Bring in your men—that's the important thing. You'll be forgiven for losing the horses, but never for losing the men. You'll get another crack at the Chiricahuas. They'll see to that. You'll do as I ask, Mr. Archer?"

Archer nodded. Shattuck drew him close. "Watch Birdeck. He's a troublemaker." Shattuck closed his eyes.

Ordway, the lieutenant's striker, who was rigging a shelter with some wisps of ocotillo and a scrap of canvas suddenly knelt beside the sergeant. He looked up. "He's gone, sir."

Ben Archer turned away. A spade began clinking against the hard earth.

Later he watched the troopers place the last rocks on top of the mound. Suddenly, in a gesture that surprised him by its simplicity, they pulled off their battered campaign hats and stepped back. Archer placed a gaily striated stone on the grave and said a short prayer.

"We'll be back, Shattuck," he said quietly. He turned to the men. "Bonito, come here. Allen, see that the horses are killed."

Birdeck, a lean trooper with pale gray eyes, looked at him quickly. "What was that, sir?"

"I was not aware that I must account to you for my orders, Birdeck."

Birdeck's eyes narrowed. Give him an inch and he'll take a mile, thought Ben. Birdeck was a snowbird, one of the breed who enlist for a winter's service to get food and shelter, then fly off in the spring, well-nourished and looking for trouble.

Bonito padded up. He was a Government scout—a Tonto. His face was expressionless.

"Do you know the way over the canyon rim to Fort Clymer, Bonito?" the lieutenant asked.

Bonito shrugged. He knelt and sketched rapidly with the tip of his knife on the hard earth.

"Canyon." he said, pointing to a deep scratch. "We here. Climb wall. Hard climb. Up. Up. Up. Beyond canyon big mesa. Mala Tierra. Bad Lands. Cut up. Deep canyons. High mountains. Water maybe. Maybe not."

"Can you guide us?"

Bonito stabbed the knife hard at the mouth of the deep scratch depicting the box canyon. "Chiricahua here maybe. Close. Must go soon."

Trooper Allen's carbine cracked. Swiftly shots from the Springfields of the other troopers followed. The horses went down, thrashing. The troopers slung canteens and haversacks from their backs and filled their pockets with extra revolver and carbine cartridges.

"Take your picket ropes!" called Archer. He started for the canyon wall and began the climb. It was hard going. His boots slid in the loose talus and sweat prickled out over his body. His hands stung from nettles, and burned from the heated rocks. He did not look back but heard the clatter of boots, the clash of falling rock, and the harsh breathing of the men behind him.

WHEN he was halfway up the slope he dug in his boots and sat down for a smoke. The men struggled up beside him. He called a mental roll.

Allen, short, dark, capable, a former Illinois farmer. Ordway, a thin Ohioan, who should have stayed at his clerk's desk in Cincinnati. Martin, an elderly trooper who had once ridden with Jeb Stuart; his nose was mottled with purple veins because of his frequent bouts with John Barleycorn. Stein, a dark-visaged New Yorker, who had never been far from the Bowery until for some obscure reason he had enlisted; he was helping Martin up the rough spots. Pelley, a kid, scared to death, was behind Stein. Bonito and Esposito came next.

The Tonto climbed easily, giving a hand now and then to the stocky Italian. None of them had been out from Jefferson Barracks for more than three months.

Birdeck was the worst of the lot. His loud mouth spouted curses as he climbed, and the lieutenant was sure he heard his name mentioned.

ALLEN dropped beside Archer and accepted the makings. He rolled a cigarette deftly and drew the smoke deep into his lungs. He jerked a thumb at the canyon floor.

"One hundred and thirty-two dollars and fifty cents apiece. We've rung up quite a bill for those horses, sir."

Archer nodded. He looked out over the heated terrain. "Dante's Inferno," he said.

"And without Virgil to guide us, Mr. Archer."

"We have Bonito."

"Yes." Allen glanced at the scout.

"You don't trust him?"

Allen shrugged. "Maybe I do. He's a Tonto, and deathly afraid of the Chiricahuas. Look for him to light out if the going gets any tougher, sir."

The men dropped one by one, breathing harshly. Birdeck looked at the young officer. "Any water up here, Mr. Archer?"

Archer looked at Bonito. The Tonto nodded. "Spring not far away."

Birdeck snorted. His foot slipped, sending a cascade of stones down beside the scout. "Listen to him. How far away, Apache?"

Bonito scowled. The lieutenant remembered one of Shattuck's lessons. Shattuck had said, "There is no such word in their language as Apache. It's a name given to them by their enemies, meaning The Enemy. They don't like it."

"That's enough, Birdeck," said Archer.

Birdeck grinned. "As you say, sir."

"How far *is* the spring, Bonito?" asked the lieutenant.

Bonito spread his hands palms upward. "Ten mile. Maybe more. Not sure. Maybe dry."

The eyes of the men went wide in their dirty faces. Hands furtively touched canteens. There was not a gallon of water between the nine of them. Ben Archer got up and flipped away his cigarette.

"Come on," he said. He began to climb.

Long shadows were creeping down the mountainsides when he drew himself up

over the canyon rim. He resisted an impulse to drop, and looked down upon his struggling men. One by one they heaved themselves up beside him and dropped flat. The knees of their trousers were shredded, exposing the scratched flesh beneath.

Archer shoved back his hat. The drops of perspiration stung his heated face. He looked out over the landscape, and his heart sank. To the west rolled a gigantic land. A land of giants. Tier after tier of rugged ridges and jagged peaks loomed up against the evening sky. They were split by deep canyons already filled with shadow.

Allen coughed. "Look," he said quietly, and pointed to the east. Three puffs of smoke bellied up from a peak.

Bonito stared at them. "Chiricahua," he said, and pointed to the south. The wind was whipping a puff of smoke to shreds above a rounded butte. "Gathering. They know we up here." He pointed to the west. "See smoke signal there—bad. We cut off. Must move fast."

The lieutenant resisted an impulse to strike off at once to the west for his men were worn to a thin edge. "Bivouac here," he said.

"Bivouac here," repeated Birdeck. He laughed. . . .

Lieutenant Archer lay on his back staring at the icy stars. There was nothing in the text books at West Point to cover his situation. Forty miles from Clymer; a mountain range to cross; a handful of recruits as his command; the Chiricahuas weaving an invisible net about them; a frightened Tonto as his only guide.

Major Dortmund had sent Archer out as his last resort. The Grindstone patrol was dangerous, but it had to be made and there had been no experienced officer available. Dortmund had buttressed the weak patrol with the veteran Shattuck.

But Dortmund had not foreseen the rolling stone beneath the hoof of Shattuck's gray. He had not foreseen the fatal fall and he had not foreseen Bonito's mistake in leading the patrol into the box canyon. The grim result was a patrol of recruits led by a green officer, wandering waterless in the wildest county south of the Mogollons.

Ben Archer had to get them out. He told himself, I'm damned if I do, and damned if I don't. He closed his eyes.

THE scrabble of feet awoke him. He dragged out his Colt and cocked it as he sat up. Two shadowy figures were locked in a struggle at the edge of the canyon. One of them smashed the other to the earth and kicked him hard. Archer leaped to his feet and ran forward.

"Birdeck!" he shouted.

The trooper stood over the fallen Tonto. Bonito's calabash canteen was in Birdeck's hands. He drank swiftly and wiped his mouth. Allen darted in beside the lieutenant with carbine ready. Bonito's eyes were filled with hate as he got to his feet and felt for his knife.

"What happened?" asked Archer.

"Steal water," said Bonito slowly as he drew his knife. "Hit Bonito."

Allen's carbine swung to cover the Tonto. The hammer clicked back.

Birdeck dropped the canteen. "He's not like us. He's like a Gila monster. His canteen is nearly full. He don't get dry like us."

"You'll stand charges for this," said Lieutenant Archer.

Birdeck laughed. "Where, Mr. Archer? And when?"

Ben Archer turned away. The man sickened him. "Bonito! Sleep beside me. Who was on guard?"

"I was," said Martin, the elderly trooper.

"Didn't you see what was going on?"

Birdeck shot a glance at Martin. The alcoholic looked away. "No, sir."

The lieutenant shrugged. "Get some sleep, men. We march at dawn."

Bonito lay down beside the officer's place. He closed his eyes. Archer sat down close to the Tonto and shook his head. It was getting worse.

At dawn a hard hand shook him awake. It was Allen.

"Bonito lit out, sir."

An icy hand seemed to close on the pit

of Archer's stomach. He pulled on his boots and stood up. His Colt was missing. The Tonto had taken it. Allen handed the lieutenant Shattuck's Springfield and Colt.

"I carried these along yesterday, sir. You'll need them before we get out of this mess."

The men watched as Archer slung the carbine and holstered the Colt. Waiting for him to break.

"Come on," he said, and struck off to the west.

All that day he set a steady pace. He used a blunt peak, far to the west as his guide. It looked familiar. Something like a peak he had seen near Fort Clymer. But all peaks showed different aspects from different directions.

The patrol slid down steep slopes into deep canyons, sending cascades of stones and earth before them. They struggled across canyon floors, blasted by heat. By mid-afternoon they were working their way along a narrow ledge that followed the side of a huge peak.

Archer stopped to look back. Ordway had halted beside the trail, staring toward the west. As he caught Archer's gaze he pointed to the west. A tendril of smoke wavered up from a ridge not a mile from them. Chiricahuas ahead of them. There was no doubt about it.

The men dropped beside the trail and stared at the smoke with lackluster eyes.

"They must have water," Archer told them. "We have none. We attack."

Allen nodded.

"You game to try, Allen?" asked Archer.

"It's that or die of thirst, sir."

The young officer kept the patrol there until the shadows began to fill the canyons. He motioned Allen forward and the two of them followed the trail. Archer crept up on a shoulder of rock and looked down. A dozen Apaches were squatted about a fire. He studied the terrain. There was a knife-edged ridge behind the camp.

"Apaches fear surprise," he said, as though to himself. "Allen, you will lead Birdeck, Ordway and Martin here. I'll take Stein, Pelley and Esposito up behind that ridge. When we open fire you do the same. Range two hundred yards. Pick your man and keep those carbines hot. Can you handle it?"

Allen blew his nose hard. "Yes, sir."

"You will be acting corporal."

"Quick promotion, Mr. Archer."

Archer slapped his shoulder. "Come on then."

LATER, as he looked up the side of the ridge he was not so sure. "Link those picket lines together," he said over his shoulder.

Stein passed the long line to the lieutenant. He slung his carbine from his shoulder and tied the line to his belt. He felt for toe holds on the walls and worked his way up.

Foot by foot he climbed, hanging at times by his toes and fingers. A broken leg would mean they would have to leave him there alone with one chance in a thousand they would ever find him again if they did win through to the fort. But he reached a ledge a hundred yards above the trail that seemed to lead in the general direction of the ridge he wanted to reach.

He made the line fast and squatted, looking down. The men came up slowly, Esposito first, then Pelley, his face looking like a fish belly. Stein brought up the rear and coiled the line. Archer leaned over the edge and signaled to Allen. Allen led his men forward along the lower trail.

Lieutenant Archer worked along the ledge and ran into a gap in the mountainside. Ten feet across and a sheer drop of two hundred yards shrouded in shadow. He leaped across without a word, hung for a tense moment, scrabbling desperately for a hold, then clung to the wall. He turned slowly.

"Heave over that line, Stein."

The line whipped about his neck. He grabbed it, slowly made it fast to a projecting rock, then worked himself to a shallow hollow on the rock face and signaled to Esposito. The Italian wiped his hands on his breeches and leaped, clawed

for a hold, and grinned.

"Come on, Pelley!" called Archer.

The kid looked about and shook his head.

"Come on, son," said Archer. "You can't stay there!"

Pelley leaped wildly. Esposito clamped a bearlike hug about the young trooper's neck and hung on. Stein leaped without hesitation. His dark eyes held his officer's.

"No going back, sir."

Archer nodded. He worked his way along the ledge and to a flat area where a great slide had occurred. He walked slowly along the flat area, climbed a slope, and looked down. The fire guttered two hundred yards below him, sending fantastic shadows against the rock walls. The Apaches were lolling about the fire. One of them was industriously sewing at a moccasin sole. Another was polishing a repeater. Two others were playing the stick game.

Ben Archer spat. They were so damned sure of themselves!

The three troopers came up beside him. Pelley looked down at the Apaches, then at the lieutenant.

"It's easy," said Archer. "Just like the musketry course at Jefferson Barracks. Pick a man. Shoot low. It's downhill. Check your carbines, men."

His eyes studied the encampment. A thin trickle of water seeped from a slit in the rocks. His tongue seemed to swell up. He slid his carbine forward and sighted on the Apache who was sewing.

"Wait for the word," he said quietly.

Carbine hammers double-clicked back. Unshaven cheeks were nestled against worn walnut stocks. Allen should be in position by now. God help them if he wasn't!

Archer's sights swam about and lined up. He let out half of his breath and squeezed off. The crash of the carbine was followed by three more shots. Smoke billowed about them. Archer reloaded before he looked down.

The sewing Apache lay flat on his back with the moccasin in one hand and the thorn needle in the other. Still another was staring up at the ridge, holding his left arm. Blood shone in the light from the fire.

"Fire at will!" said Archer.

Suddenly carbines rattled from the other trail. The warriors scuttled for cover as the 45-70 slugs rapped about them. Smoke settled along the ridge. Warrior went down and lay still.

Ben Archer poured out the shots in hi Colt and swiftly reloaded. "Come on!" he said, and slid down the ridge.

His Colt ripped the life from a squa' buck who fired at him. Stein fired quickly and dropped a young warrior. Suddenly it was all over. Esposito's Colt cracked twice. sending two wounded bucks to Apache heaven.

Archer was leaning on his carbine as Allen trotted up. Allen snatched up a long greasy tube. "Apache canteen," he said cheerfully."Horse gut.We did it, sir!'

Archer turned. "Esposito—Stein, watch the trail. Martin, climb to that ridge and keep your eyes open this time! The rest of you men fill canteens. Get food. Smash those Apache rifles."

He sat down. The Apaches had been scattered like chaff in the rocky bowl. It had been a damned good attack. But they weren't out of the mountains yet.

Birdeck tore ravenously at a piece of dried beef. Ordway sat with his head in his hands. Pelley looked at Ben Archer. Suddenly he retched violently.

The lieutenant drank deeply from his canteen and refilled it. "Come on," he said.

Birdeck spat. "What's wrong with this place? We need rest. We have water here, and food. What's wrong with this place?"

The men looked up at Archer. It was in their eyes. They thought Birdeck was right.

Archer drew his Colt slowly, and cocked it. "Get going, damn you! Move!"

"Like hell!" said Birdeck.

He turned to rummage through an Apache warbag. Archer crossed the gap between them with short strides. His Colt swung hard. The barrel smacked against Birdeck's skull. The lean trooper went

down and lay still.

"Anyone else?" asked Archer.

The men silently picked up their gear and slung it on their bodies.

"Take those moccasins off those Indians," ordered Archer. "We may need new footgear before we get out of here."

Allen poured a canteen full of water over Birdeck. Birdeck gasped and pawed at his face. He opened his eyes and staggered to his feet.

"You skunk!" he said thickly.

Archer waved him on with his Colt. "Get on," he said harshly.

They camped late that night on a trail that clung to a steep slope. The men dropped without a word. Birdeck leaned back against a rock. His bandanna made a dirty patch about his head. His eyes never left Ben Archer.

The next day and the next they worked their way through canyons that were like great troughs designed to hold all the blasting heat poured down by a merciless sun. Lieutenant Archer led the way, carrying Pelley's carbine as well as his own. Allen tramped doggedly along, carrying Martin's gear. Martin was sick, his pale face lined with fatigue.

Birdeck slogged along, now and then wavering fifty feet from the trail but always coming back under the lieutenant's tongue lashings. He hated Ben Archer with a hate that could be felt as well as the beating sun. Archer had noticed each night that Allen always slept between him and Birdeck. Twice in one night he had awakened to see Allen sitting up with cradled carbine, watching Birdeck.

The second night they kept going long after the usual stopping hour. They could not be far from the fort. A pale moon lit the sandy floor of the great canyon they were in.

Archer did not explain his reason for going on, but he had seen smoke signals all day to the south of them, and in the late afternoon puffs had blossomed up from a peak to the north and in line with their route. The Chiricahuas had traveled like demons, trying to cut them off. They must have found their dead at the spring. Their leaders called to them to take vengeance.

Archer eyed the blunt peak he had been using as a landmark. It looked so familiar, and still he wasn't sure. Their water was low again and he had no way of knowing how many miles it was to more.

He turned up a narrow slot of a canyon that cut into the big canyon. He looked back. The men were still slogging along. Two hours later he dropped beside the trail and waited for them. They sprawled flat on the earth. He counted them, and stood up.

"Where's Birdeck?" he asked.

THE men looked at each other.

Allen said, "He drank the last of his water hours ago. I'll backtrail for him, sir."

Archer shook his head. His legs were weak with strain, but he forced himself to walk slowly back down the canyon. The moonlight played queer tricks amongst the cactus.

"Birdeck!" he called.

He went on and rounded a bend in the canyon. Birdeck sat with his head in his hands.

"Come on, Birdeck," said Archer.

"To hell with you! You're lost. Let me alone. You've led us to our deaths."

"Come on!"

Birdeck shook his head. Archer crossed to him and gripped his shoulder. Birdeck suddenly stood up. His right fist lashed out. Archer went down with blood flooding his mouth. Birdeck's boots crashed against his ribs. For a second he lay there. He could not get up.

Birdeck laughed and tossed back his long hair. "You scum!" he said between his teeth. "You filthy shavetail! You don't have your watchdog Allen here now. Get up and fight it out."

The lieutenant got to his feet and backed off as Birdeck came in swinging his long arms. Archer's left smacked against Birdeck's mouth. His right sank into the trooper's midriff. Birdeck went down, but then leaped to his feet and closed with the officer.

The sour smell of his sweat-soaked shirt filled Archer's nostrils as he threw the man back and brought up a knee in his groin.

Birdeck gasped and clawed at his Colt. Archer swung a looping right and connected solidly. Birdeck went down flat on his back. Archer's moccasined foot pinned the gun wrist to the earth. He reached down and dragged Birdeck up by the shirtfront, slapped him hard across the face twice, then threw him back.

Birdeck turned and ran, but hate filled Ben Archer like a seething fire. His right foot shot out and connected with Birdeck's rump. The trooper gasped and staggered forward as the officer's left foot lifted him along his way. Again and again Archer booted the snowbird along the canyon until the hate left him.

The men looked up wearily as Birdeck shambled up to where they were resting. Allen looked at Birdeck, then at the lieutenant. He grinned and rolled over on his side.

A little later as Archer scooped out a place in the sand for his hips he glanced at Birdeck. The trooper was fast asleep, his swollen face upturned.

Archer told himself, I'll get every one of them back, or wear out these moccasins trying.

At noon the next day Trooper Allen stood beside the lieutenant and indicated two low hills side by side, and another not far from them.

"Tres Cabezas, sir—Three Heads. I'll swear that's not a mile from the Fort Clymer-Salt Wells road."

Archer ran a dirty hand across his bristling chin and surveyed his patrol. The men were worn to a fine edge, but their weapons were bright.

Hours later they tumbled out of the teamster's wagon that had picked them up on the road. The sentry at the gate of Fort Clymer snapped a salute.

"Major Dortmund has given you up for lost, Mr. Archer."

Archer grinned and turned to his men. "Report to First Sergeant Mehaffey, then get cleaned up."

He winked at Allen, who came forward. He pulled something from his haversack. It was a wad of buckskin.

"I took this off the Apache you killed at the first shot, sir. Might ease your report to the major."

Ben stood by the headquarters door and watched his men shamble to their quarters. He opened the wad of buckskin. It was a battle shirt decorated with symbols of the sun, moon, stars and water spider.

When he entered headquarters, Major Dortmund looked at the battle shirt. "This is Nokay's," the major said. "I'll swear to that. I've seen him wear it in battle many a time. It is great medicine for him."

"*Was*, sir," corrected Lieutenant Archer.

Dortmund got up and stood by the window looking out at the Grindstones.

"So Shattuck is gone," he said at last. "He taught me the ropes out here. You lost your horses. That's bad, Mr. Archer. But you brought a patrol clear across unmapped country and did not lose a man. You fought and licked Nokay. That's good, Mr. Archer. Take a few days' rest, sir."

Archer came up beside the major. He pointed to a wisp of smoke high above a needle peak.

"I'd like to go back in there, sir, and smoke out the rest of them."

Dortmund grinned. "You will. What do you think of your first patrol, Archer?"

Ben Archer looked at the encircling mountains. "I had a tough old man for a grandfather, sir. I couldn't learn to swim. He took me out to his farm for a week and asked me if I really wanted to learn. When I said yes he picked me up and threw me, clothes and all, into the mill pond. He turned and walked away with never a backward glance."

"And?"

"I got to shore somehow. I'm a good swimmer now. Seems to me I learned the same way this past week."

Dortmund nodded. He looked at the young officer. "Is he still alive?"

"As chipper as ever!"

Dortmund handed Archer the battle shirt. "Send him this then, and tell him you've learned to swim all over again." ●

HALFWAY to HADES

A Novelet by ROE RICHMOND

CHAPTER I

One-Man Escort

FLINT CRARY had heard there were Sioux east of the Missouri, but he hadn't believed it until now. Especially this far east of Fargo. They came yapping down the slope from that northern ridge, about twenty young bucks on fleet, wiry ponies, hurtling at the westbound stagecoach. They had rifles and bows and lances, and some of the rifles were repeaters.

Liquored up, the Indians had spilled blood somewhere and were lusting for more. This was why driver Teed Boylan had handed two carbines into the Concord before they left Corapolis. At the time, Crary had smiled tolerantly.

He glanced at the blonde girl beside him. In spite of the heat and dust, the cramped discomfort, Sue Carvell still looked fresh and clean. Fear hadn't started making its inroads on her beauty as yet. Beyond her the darkly handsome and immaculate John Trent sat straight and easy as ever, smiling coolly back at Crary, checking the revolver from his shoulder holster.

But the fat frock-coated man on the front seat was beginning to go to pieces,

Crary crashed the pillow at him and then drew and fired the .44

Under threat of a Sioux massacre, all the loves,

hates and fears within the walls of

a lonely stage stop come boiling to the surface

jowls sagging, bloated face crumbling eyes bulging. The Honorable Horace J Brampton from Washington.

"An outrage!" he bleated. "These savages overrunning the country. Where's the Army anyway?" Brampton glared accusingly at Crary. "Loafing in Fort Lincoln, no doubt!"

"It's a big country, Senator," said Crary, smiling as he picked up one of the new Winchesters.

First Lieutenant Flint Crary of A Company, Seventh Cavalry, returning from furlough in the East. A plain-faced, broad-shouldered, mild-mannered young man with somber gray eyes and a pleasant smile, dressed in well-cut civilian clothes.

He wondered why the Army didn't issue these new Winchester repeaters, instead of the old single-shot Springfields. But a drastic change like that would take years, of course. Meanwhile they fought an enemy that often had weapons superior to their own.

Crary rose, crouching, and swung his carbine through the open window. Boylan had the stage rocketing at a terrific rate, and the Sioux had miscalculated their distances and speeds. Instead of cutting off the coach, they were going to come in behind it, for which Flint Crary was duly grateful.

Arrows were thudding home and bullets crackled at the panels, as Crary opened fire from the bouncing, swaying Concord. He dropped one pinto, but the brave survived the fall. The next shot he scored lifted a sleek-muscled copper body from its bare-backed perch. But it was difficult shooting with the coach bucking, yawing wildly, jarring him to the eye-teeth.

THE rifle emptied, Crary passed it back to Trent to reload, and took up the second Winchester. Sue had hidden her face against Trent's shoulder, and Senator Brampton was wheezing in futile fury:

"Custer'll hear about this, and so will the President! Our citizens are entitled to some protection out here!"

Crary smiled, lean brown cheek against the smooth stock, as he squeezed off another careful shot. Then came a strangled scream, a dark flying shadow on the other side of the coach and Crary turned in time to see the spread-eagled guard plunge earthward past the window.

The Sioux were falling behind now, but somebody had to get up on top to fight them off properly. And that meant Lieutenant Crary.

Sinking back into his seat, with Sue Carvell's perfume faint and sweet through the powder reek, Crary spilled shells into his pockets and looked narrowly at John Trent.

"I'm going topside," he said. "Hand me the loaded carbine when I get up there. You know what to do if they — "

"Yes, I know," Trent said calmly. "And I'll do what I can from these windows."

Crary nodded. "Don't let 'em pull alongside, John." He touched the girl's trembling shoulder. "We'll be out of this in a few minutes. Teed'll pull right away from them." He grinned at the fat man. "Hold on, Senator. It won't last much longer."

Crary wiggled out the window, twisting to catch the edge of the top and haul himself up until he could get a firm grip on the rail. Then he was hanging outside in the wind, feet on the door, lead whining and arrows swishing about him. A spring of the knees, a mighty heave of the arms and shoulders, a quick scramble at the brink of the roof, and Crary was sprawling amid lashed-down luggage on the deck, reaching for the rifle Trent held up to him.

Teed Boylan turned with a tobacco-warped grin, yelling, "Show 'em some shooting, Soldier!" and reverted at once to the reins and whip and his six-horse team.

Teed Boylan, a flamboyant figure crouched in the boot, handling the ribbons as few men ever did, a swaggering young driver of the old school.

The Indians were strung out in the road

behind the coach now, eating the dust rolled up by the rattling wheels. Flat on the jolting wood that threatened to break in his ribs and tear off his kneecaps, toes hooked securely into baggage straps, Flint Crary opened fire from the topside. Trigger and lever, squeeze off and slam another shell into the chamber, the solid deck flailing and bruising and beating him.

The Sioux were riding right into his bullets, going down spinning and screaming in dusty welters, ponies and braves threshing and rolling in the raw red dirt. One of them, two, a third flying end over end! And the rest faltering, slowing, dropping back in the billowing dust clouds.

Come on, come on up, you red sons of Satan! The more we kill now, the less we'll have to kill when the Seventh marches in the spring!

Flint Crary was snarling, grinning, teeth on edge, dry lips skinned tautly back. But the Sioux were giving up, falling back to gather up their dead and wounded, sobered and chastened, their blood lust cooled for the time being.

Crary raised himself into a sitting position, to ease his raw knees and elbows, battered chest and loins, letting his laugh ride with the breeze.

How's that, Senator, for a one-man escort? Tell Custer and Grant about that!

Breath, balance and sanity restored, Crary crawled forward and onto the box beside Boylan. Accepting the driver's tobacco plug he bit off a chew and spat happily aside into the wind.

BOYLAN said, easing the runaway pace now, "Not bad, Soldier, not bad. Had to make the Halfway House tonight, on account of Alma, the prettiest widow west of Chicago. Sure hate to lose my hair on my way to see Alma."

"I hope Dill was dead when he hit the ground," Crary said, thinking of the guard.

"Must of been, Flint. He took two plumb in the chest, it looked like. I tried to grab him, but he went over too quick."

"Good job of driving, Teed."

"I knew we was all right when they had to come in back of us. If they'd cut us off, it'd been some different story, Soldier."

Crary nodded. "We wouldn't have had a chance."

"How was the gal standing it?"

"Pretty good." Crary smiled. "But Horace J. was acting up and making speeches and threatening everybody from Fort Lincoln to Washington."

"And the dude?"

"He was all right. John Trent's got nerve and courage."

"Something about him I don't like though," Teed said.

"Too pretty, maybe. Too much of a ladies' man, Teed."

"Maybe." Boylan laughed, tossing his auburn head. "Maybe I want all the good-looking gals in the world for myself, Flint. That's what one of 'em told me once. But wait'll you see this Alma Miller."

Crary gestured wearily. "I'm tired, Teed. I just want to sleep."

"Lots of women at Halfway. A soldier never ought to be too tired for girls." He regarded Crary with some alarm. "You *like* girls, don't you?"

"Not the kind they have at the Halfway House."

"Alma ain't like the rest of 'em, Flint. Don't forget that. She runs the joint, and she's a lady."

"Sure, Teed. But you've got the inside track there."

Boylan nodded, grinning. "Well, you like to gamble, I reckon. This'll be a big night for that. Silk Karston's supposed to be there."

"After ninety days' leave, where would I get enough money to gamble with?" Crary said, smiling wryly, and spreading his palms.

Teed Boylan shook his head sorrowfully. "Reckon you're right, Flint. You better just go to bed and sleep, Soldier

Unless you want to borrow some money off me?"

"No thanks, Teed."

"Welcome if you want it, boy," Boylan said, shifting his chew. "I sure hope that Silk Karston can suck Horace J. Brampton into some kind of game. Get some of them public funds Horace has been grubbing back into circulation."

CHAPTER II

Halfway House

IN ALL that seared barren waste of Dakota prairie, these were the only buildings in sight. A large ramshackle two-story house, unpainted, weather-beaten and ugly, with a barn and sheds at the rear, and a crude pole corral. A faded sign over the sagging front porch said:

HALFWAY HOUSE

The place looked as if it had been dropped from the sky and forgotten, there on that empty rolling brown landscape. It slumbered through the daylight and came raucously awake and alive at night. It was a stage station and hotel, a saloon, gambling joint and dance hall, a general store and trading post. And people sometimes called it by less complimentary names.

An amazing number of customers appeared there nightly, from the lonely ranches, farms and homesteads scattered about the area. Business was good, where it looked as if there'd be no business at all. A man named Earl Miller had established the Halfway House, and operated it until his premature and violent death three years ago. His young widow, Alma, now ran it — and hated every minute of it.

The afternoon was dying with a yellow flare in the west, when Alma Miller came out on the veranda, glancing briefly at the sunset then staring intently eastward along the wagon road. She was a tall woman, deep-bosomed, strong-hipped, and curved with grace; her keen features striking in a sad, melancholy way.

The mark of loneliness and suffering was in wide, dark eyes, but her head was high and proudly poised with its wealth of shimmering black hair. Her mouth was wide, full and gracious, above a firm chin. A woman who commanded attention and interest. And under a protective shell of hardness, essential to her business, were depths of sympathy, understanding and tenderness.

After a few minutes, a big burly man emerged and stood casually at her side. Port Hauser, her manager, bouncer and bodyguard, a crop-headed crag-faced brute of a man. Tough and ruthless, easy and sure of himself, controlled power in every line of his giant frame, every smooth catlike motion.

"Worried about the stage, Al?" he inquired.

"Well, it's late, Port. And some of the Sioux that jumped the reservation are said to be east of the river."

"Boylan will bring her through."

"I thought you didn't like Teed," she said, smiling faintly.

"I don't," Hauser said soberly. "But he can drive a stage through hell and high water and Dakota blizzards. Give the boy his due."

"I wonder if there'll be any interesting passengers?"

Hauser snorted softly. "There never are, Al. Why should there be this trip?"

Alma sighed. "Do you think Silk will come tonight?"

"Said he would. Silk Karston's word's as good as his touch for cards."

"And Cody Ludeke, I suppose?"

"That bronc twister'll be here. They'll all be here, all the wild ones." Hauser laughed quietly. "Some night this place'll bust wide open right under our eyes, Alma."

She lifted her dark head, the fine jaws and high cheek-bones standing out under the golden-brown skin. "I've got to get away, Port. I've been here too long, al-

together too long."

"You must have money enough. What's holding you here?"

"I don't know. No incentive to move, I guess. No place to go really."

"There's the whole wide world, Al," said Hauser. "For a handsome woman with money."

"Not alone, Port. I wouldn't like it alone." Alma looked down unhappily at the reddish amber earth.

HAUSER stuck a cigar in his teeth and held a match to it. "Too bad I'm so rough and homely, Al." He exhaled blue smoke slowly.

She looked at him straight. "You're a man, Port. All man."

"Reckon I'm that." He shrugged massively. "But that ain't always enough. Not for a woman like you."

"I'm a fool, Port. Purely and simply a fool."

"I wouldn't say so." Hauser grinned. "No more'n any average female is — There's the stage, Alma." He nodded toward a dust cloud unfurling in the twilight. "I'll go in and rout out that lazy, loafing Mott and see how supper's coming."

Alma smiled at him gratefully. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Port." She meant it sincerely.

Hauser laughed shortly. "Oh, I'm handy. Just a handy hombre to have around."

The screen door slammed behind his great bulk and Alma turned back to watch and wait for the stage-coach coming through the thickening murky dusk.

Silk Karston rode up before the Concord arrived, racking his glossy black gelding at the side and coming around front to bow gracefully over Alma's hand. A slender, elegant figure, his fancy vest alleviating the black broadcloth, white linen, and black string tie. Sleek and polished, cold and courtly, Karston had a pale, refined face, almost colorless eyes, and beautiful, well-kept hands.

"You're looking lovelier than ever, Alma," he said in his suave, well-bred voice. "Have you come to your senses and decided to accept my perennial proposal?"

"Not quite, Silk." She smiled. "But I'm weakening gradually."

"Useless to struggle against it, my dear," declared the gambler. "If you'll excuse me now, I have a minor thirst to quench at your well-stocked bar." He bowed and walked inside with his habitual dignity.

When the stage rolled into the yard, Alma saw that it was bristling with feathered shafts, and star-splintered with bullet holes, and a rugged, personable young stranger rode in Dill's place on the box beside Teed Boylan who brought the Concord in with his usual flourish.

There was something military about the young stranger, and something else that struck a quick, warming interest in Alma Miller and dimmed the luster of the lean, fiery Boylan. The young man wasn't nearly as handsome as the tall, dark one who stepped out of the coach and handed down a pretty golden-haired girl, but for Alma he had something better.

An enormously fat and angry man followed puffingly from the Concord, a pompous man with all the earmarks of being a politician. The young man who had so interested Alma was back on the deck, picking out the luggage the travelers required and tossing it down to the handsome dark man, while Teed Boylan dropped the reins to squat, sullen, sleepy-eyed Ed Mott, and swung lightly to earth himself. Teed's reckless smile flashed as he moved with elastic grace toward the woman waiting on the gallery.

"You had trouble, Teed?" she asked anxiously.

The driver's auburn head nodded. "A bunch of young Sioux bucks hit us, and we lost Dill. But we had the dog-faced cavalry to replace him. Between his shooting and my driving we came out all right. It'd take more than Injuns to keep me away from you, Alma."

"Ah, Teed!" She smiled, shaking her head. "It's my money you want, and

nothing else, you rascal."

Boylan drew himself up with mock dignity. "Money's good for nothing but spending, ma'am. I'll have you know I'm a man of honor and high scruples." He laughed and took both her hands and pulled her close, his amber eyes drinking in the sight of her. "How are you, Al? I've missed you, darling."

"Go get your whisky, Teed," she said. "What will these folks think of their hostess?"

Laughing gaily, Boylan called out, "Come on, Flint, I'm buying! A drink for every Sioux you downed."

WHEN Crary passed Alma Miller with a shy, boyish grin and nod, she smiled at him warmly. "The Seventh, Lieutenant?" she asked. "Welcome to Halfway."

"Why, yes," he said, surprised, really seeing her for the first time and paying tribute with his clear gray eyes as he bared his tawny brown head. "But how — I didn't know it showed that much, ma'am."

Crary went on with Boylan, leaving Alma to greet the other three passengers.

The fat man surveyed the house with obvious distaste. "Not much of a place, but I suppose there's no choice. I'll want the best room you've got, madam."

"For the young lady?" Alma inquired, with slight malice.

The Senator glared and blew out his flabby lips. "For myself. I'm Horace J. Brampton, of Washington."

"Certainly, Senator," said Alma, smiling as he stamped on into the house. She turned her attention to the young couple "You must have had a trying experience on the road!"

"Rather." Sue Carvell regarded her haughtily and swept past, drawing her skirts aside as if to avoid contamination But John Trent gave her the appreciation he had for all attractive women.

"I trust you have a room for Miss Carvell that will be safe and not too noisy tonight." Trent evidently recognized at once what kind of an establishment Halfway House was.

"Indeed I have," Alma Miller told him quietly. "Rest assured that no one will bother you here."

At a discreet distance, she trailed them into the large front lobby, with a ladies' parlor on the right. A stairway ascended to the second floor, splitting the two front rooms. To the rear, the house was divided into distinct halves — a dining room and kitchen on the right, the saloon and gambling hall at the left.

After a couple of quick ones at the bar, Flint Crary and Teed Boylan went to the back porch, stripped to the waist and washed up.

"Some joint, Teed," remarked Crary, spraying water from his lips. "And your Alma is quite a woman."

"Yeah, but I got enough competition without you, Soldier." Boylan grinned. "Silk Karston's here and Port Hauser lives here — the big man you saw inside. And that crazy Cody Ludeke'll be riding in before long. There's plenty other gals here, Flint, if you're getting over being so tired."

"Why are all the men after Alma then?" Crary asked innocently.

"Damned if I know," Boylan replied seriously. "Unless it's because she's a lady, and nobody can really get to her at all."

Crary laughed through the rough towel. "Not even Teed Boylan?"

Teed splashed water furiously. "Not even the great Boylan," he admitted sadly.

"No use in my making a play then."

"I don't know. Maybe she likes soldiers. Maybe you ought to put on the uniform, Flint."

Flint Crary laughed softly. "I'll be in that uniform long enough after I hit Lincoln."

"The Seventh really going out after 'em next spring?"

"Rumor says so, and Custer certainly wants to," Crary said. "Unless Horace J. pulls us back East to guard the stage

lines for him."

Their laughter joined and ran merrily into the growing darkness. More riders seemed to spring out of the empty prairie and drift in toward the lights of Halfway.

"A big man like him ought to have a company at least in escort," Boylan said. "The Army ought to wake up."

"He had Crary," said Flint. "That's enough for any hogfat politician."

"Crary *and* Boylan," added Teed. "Not a bad team, Flint. Let's get back inside and see if you drink as good as you shoot, Soldier."

SUPPER was something of an ordeal for the transient guests of Halfway House. At the long main table, Port Hauser presided over a motley collection of regulars, with Silk Karston at his right and looking out of place with that wild, unruly lot — women with dyed hair, rouged cheeks and painted lips, in soiled finery and blatant perfume, and men booted, spurred, belted with one or two guns, hard of eye, face and tongue, unshaven, be-mustached, or full-bearded.

They were all already half-drunk, and only the gigantic Hauser's presence kept them in any semblance of order. Fortunately these people wasted little time over the meal.

Senator Brampton shared a corner table with Sue Carvell and John Trent. But their appetites were dulled and their nerves frayed by the noisy, ribald crowd at the main board. Boylan and Crary had a small table in the opposite corner. Alma Miller did not appear in the dining room.

The waitresses, prematurely aged and haglike, went about their duties in surly, sodden indifference. They had once been entertainers themselves, and now they hated anyone younger and better looking, enjoying the life that had passed them by. Several times the waitresses seemed on the verge of smashing dishes over the bright, bleached heads of girls at the long table, and they eyed Sue Carvell with loathing.

Before the meal was over Cody Ludeke sauntered in with an impish grin. Thin, wiry, and tough in colorful range garb, his bright blue eyes and the insolent curve of his lips mocked the world. Under a leather vest, he wore a lavender shirt checked in purple, and a purple neckpiece. The shell belt on his slim flanks sagged with two Colts in low-slung tied-down holsters. Striped California pants were tucked into expensive half-boots, ornamented with heavy stitching and inlaid silver. Cody Ludeke walked as if he owned the universe and held it in contempt.

"He thinks," whispered Boylan, "that no horse can throw him, no man can beat him to the draw, and no woman can resist loving him. In other words, Cody thinks he's pretty good."

"I can see that," Flint Crary said. "And I imagine he is pretty good."

CHAPTER III

A Wild Night

HAILED by girls and men alike, Cody Ludeke sat down and tipped back in one of the abandoned chairs at the long table, slapping the broad stern of a passing waitress and laughing in sheer self-delight.

"The ball can begin now," he said. "The top hand's here. I got an idea it's going to be a big night. Where's Alma? I knew something was missing."

Restlessly he rose and swaggered into the kitchen in search of the proprietress, ignoring Hauser's look of warning, and the resentment of the working women.

"Where's your gun, Flint?" asked Boylan, loosening his own in the leather.

"In my bag."

"Get it out, Soldier," advised Boylan. "In a few hours they'll be too drunk to notice whether a man's armed or not."

Crary nodded. "This nest needs cleaning out, Teed. I wish I had some of the boys from A Company along."

"You might clean it," Boylan said drily, "but not without casualties."

They had finished supper, were smoking cigars in the lobby, and Crary had his .44 Colt in his waistband when Sue Carvell and Trent came through. John Trent acted displeased and impatient at having the girl pause and speak to them.

"I haven't had a chance to thank you both," she said. "You were splendid this afternoon!"

Her clear violet eyes lingered on Crary. There was a dewy freshness, a sparkling purity about Sue Carvell, and her body had the full flowing curves of youth in its prime.

"It was nothing," Crary said, stirred in spite of himself.

"All in the day's work, ma'am." Teed Boylan grinned.

Trent took her arm and they went outside to stroll in the misty light of a yellow sickle moon. As Crary and Boylan settled back into their chairs, Horace J. Brampton entered, patting his swollen belly with a flabby, ringed hand.

"Terrible food and worse company," he complained. "My digestion will be completely ruined before this trip is over. What kind of a madhouse is this, anyway?"

"How'd you like a friendly little game of cards, Senator?" inquired Boylan. "Pass the time and forget your troubles."

Brampton frowned importantly. "Too much on my mind. This is no pleasure trip for me, you understand. I have to report in detail on the situation out here. A lot of ears are going to burn when I get back to the Capitol, and possibly a few heads will roll." He glared balefully at Crary.

"Don't condemn the Army until you've seen Fort Abraham Lincoln, Senator," suggested Crary.

"I know exactly what I'm going to find there. Laziness, sloth, and gross neglect of duty. Take this afternoon, for example. We might all have been slaughtered and scalped back there on the plains. Crary here's the only soldier I've seen, and he's off duty and out of uniform. I don't call that patrolling the West."

Flint Crary sighed and gave up. It was senseless to try and argue with Brampton, no matter how wrong the man might be.

The racket in the barroom was getting louder by the minute, the hysterical laughter of women rising above the rough male voices. Scowling and pouting, the Senator labored upstairs toward the dubious sanctuary of his room.

Outside, the young couple walked along the road, watching the crescent moon and the swarming glitter of stars, but they were no longer close and happy together. Engaged to be married, they were going to Bismarck so Trent could meet Sue's father, who conducted a large and prosperous freighting business there.

Independently rich himself, John Trent had spent most of his life traveling. He knew enough about women to know what had come between him and Sue today.

BACK East, Sue Carvell could see no one but him, and now out here on the frontier John Trent seemed a lesser man than Boylan and Crary and some others. She had been disappointed in him this afternoon during the brush with the Sioux. It would have surprised Sue to learn that Lieutenant Crary considered that John Trent had handled himself well in that encounter. As she saw it, John had been weak, ineffectual and futile. Crary and Boylan had been the whole show, and she was particularly impressed by the lieutenant.

Though aware of the trend of her thoughts, Trent didn't know how to combat it. After several attempts at conversation, he lapsed into a moody silence that matched her own. Even the weird howling of distant coyotes did not drive her into his arms.

Finally Trent said, "We might as well turn back, I guess."

"Yes, I think we should." Sue was as remote as the yellow moon, or the farthest star.

"Perhaps I'm not enough of a hero for you, Sue," he said.

"Perhaps not."

His cleft chin jutted. "All right — we'll go in. I feel like doing a little drinking anyway."

"You'd better be careful. That's a rough crowd in there, Johnny."

Trent's dark eyes narrowed and shone. "I can take care of myself all right."

"In the East perhaps. Not in this country, Johnny."

He hated to be called Johnny, and she knew it. She was doing it deliberately, making an insult of it.

"Anywhere," he said grimly. "We've been seeing too much of one another, Sue. Apparently we don't wear well together. A good thing we found it out — in time."

"Yes, it is," Sue Carvell agreed maddeningly. "Very fortunate."

"You go to bed, and I'll go get drunk."

Sue laughed lightly. "Do whatever you wish, and I'll go to bed when I'm ready. Did it ever occur to you that I might crave excitement, too?"

"Find it then!" Trent said, with bitter fury. "There's plenty of it around the Halfway House."

"Don't worry, Johnny, I'll find it."

"You're liable to get someone hurt — or killed. A woman like you, in your present mood, can cause a lot of trouble."

"Tex, there's something I think I should tell you!"

Her laugh was scornful. "You wouldn't be foolish enough to fight Flint Crary or Teed Boylan, would you? Or that gambler and that cowboy?"

"I'll fight anybody I have to," John Trent said. "I've done my share of fighting. I'll face any man alive."

"You're contemplating suicide then," mocked the girl. "These men are professionals. What chance would a rich, soft idler have against them, Johnny?"

"You may find out before the night's over!"

"Don't try to be tough, Johnny. It's out of character and utterly ridiculous."

"You think so?" Trent's handsome features were set hard, carved out of stone.

They were nearly back to the front veranda now, and the uproar from the rear of the house surged out to meet them. It sounded like a den of wild animals, and Sue Carvell couldn't control her sudden shuddering. But John Trent was smiling, a bleak grimace in contrast to his usual charming smile.

"I might surprise you, Sue," he said. "You and all the rest of them."

"Don't do anything rash, John," she protested, relenting somewhat. "Please, John, I don't want you hurt."

But he was beyond being pacified. "Once inside that door, you go your way and I'll go mine."

"All right, if you want it that way. A change might do both of us good." Sue lifted her blonde head and stubborn, rounded chin.

John Trent looked at her with disgust. "The woman who runs this hell-hole is more of a lady than you are, Sue."

"Go find her then, Johnny."

"Maybe I will."

"Do you think she'd want *you?*" Sue Carvell demanded.

"Why not?" Trent laughed harshly, standing tall and straight. "A lot of women have. Women all over the world."

"Go right ahead, Johnny," said Sue. "I imagine I'll be well taken care of. . . ."

AN HOUR later the Eastern dude was drinking with quiet purposeful intensity at the bar, watched curiously by some of the Westerners. John Trent had made his bid for Alma Miller and failed. The other girls were beneath his consideration. There was nothing left to do but get drunk. Alma had been pleasant, gentle, but firm, in turning him away.

"A lovers' quarrel," she said. "You don't want to do anything you'll regret. In the morning everything will be all right again with you and Miss Carvell. And besides, I'm not in the market for a man. Not even for a gentleman as well-favored as you, Mr. Trent."

She had made him feel like a naughty, pretentious little boy, and John Trent had flung away from her with ears on fire.

There was dancing to the music of a battered piano, and a big poker game was going on in a far corner, with Silk Karston and Cody Ludeke among the players. Cowhands and miners lined the bar, waiting for their turn to dance with the women, and watching John Trent's steady progress toward inebriation.

He was deaf to the jangling music and giddy laughter, blind to his associates at the long counter, concentrating fiercely on bottle and glass. Big Port Hauser observed him with some concern, and shook his head. A premonition of trouble had been growing in Hauser all evening.

Upstairs in his room, bent uncomfortably over his notebook, Horace J. Brampton tried in vain to shut out the jungle beat of noise from the first floor. Against his will, strange desires were flickering through his gross flesh. For once he wished he were a man of less eminence and responsibility, a nobody like those younger nonentities downstairs.

His mind wandered from the report he was sweating over and he strove to devise a plan whereby he could get one of those voluptuous girls up to his room, unbeknown to his fellow stage-coach passengers.

Teed Boylan had joined Alma in the dimness of the empty dining room, but all was not going well for him. Alma was detached and preoccupied, withdrawn and aloof, unresponsive to his gay jesting and his earnest compliments. There was more than the dining room table keeping them apart.

After a time, Boylan fell silent and addressed himself to the whisky bottle she had brought him. Women, he thought, were unpredictable critters, but liquor was something a man could count on.

Sue Carvell and Flint Crary were walking outside in the cool, clean night, and their simplest phrases seemed to have in-

timate meaning. Sue was infatuated, and Crary felt flattered. Five years ago, he might have fallen in love with her, but now this was just an incident in a long, wearisome journey, mildly gratifying to a man's vanity, but insignificant. His natural courtesy, however, prevented Sue from knowing this.

Wandering back toward the house, her shoulder and arm brushing his and her fragrance wafted around him, they paused by the stage-coach in the yard. Fingering one of the arrow shafts imbedded in the rear, Sue said:

"I'd like this for a souvenir, Lieutenant. Could you cut it out for me?"

"Sure." Crary got out his clasp knife and went to work, glad of something to do with his hands.

Her eyes were intent on him, her pure profile worshipful. "What you did this afternoon, Lieutenant Crary, was the finest, bravest thing I ever saw."

"Routine for a soldier," said Crary. "My job is fighting Indians."

"You were magnificent!" she insisted. "Men of action, like you and Teed Boylan, make the others seem so worthless and trivial."

Crary laughed softly. "You mean Horace J. Brampton?"

"Yes. And John Trent, too."

"I wouldn't include John, Miss Carvell. John conducted himself like an officer and a gentleman in that skirmish. Far better than most civilians from the East would have. You aren't giving John the credit he deserves.

"But he didn't *do* anything," Sue protested.

Crary told her frankly and earnestly, "He did what he could. He didn't panic. He stayed calm and cool, reloaded quickly, and surprised me with his courage." He handed her the barbed and feathered shaft. "Here you are, Sue."

"Thank you. But I still can't see where John did so well."

"The Sioux struck on my side, that's all. When they dropped behind, the top was the only place to get a good shot at them. I've often thought they should put rifle slits in the back end of these coaches."

"You're just covering up for him, Lieutenant. You're gallant."

"No, I'm telling the truth in all fairness."

"Well, it doesn't matter, anyway," Sue said. "John and I just aren't mated. My father would have seen that at once. Do you know my father in Bismarck?"

"I've seen his freight yard and his wagons."

"He'd like you, Flint. He'd approve of you. He's got a great deal of respect for the Army."

Crary smiled. "I hope he gets to talk to Senator Brampton then — it's getting cold, Miss Carvell. Shall we go inside?"

"I wasn't shivering from the cold," she said, demurely and archly. "Will you kiss me?" Her face was breathtakingly lovely in the moonlight, as she lifted it and moved nearer to him.

Crary's arms went around her with gentle strength, and he lowered his lips on hers, firm and clean but without passion. Her lips came on fire, full and soft, sweet and clinging. Her arms clasped him with startling power, the arrow shaft in her hand digging deep into his shoulder, and her body crushed vibrantly against his.

Crary tried to raise his head, but her lips held him fused in flame, her arms locked him tight. Hunger hardened his grip on the girl, and increased the pressure of his own lips. Sue Carvell was no child in this moment; she was all woman. It required all of his resolve to break away from her at last.

"Did the arrow — hurt you?" she asked, breathless.

"It was — beginning to," Crary panted. "We'd better go in."

"What are you afraid of, Lieutenant?"

He grinned slowly. "You, I guess."

"A little girl like me?" Sue laughed. "You thought I was a little girl, didn't you?"

"I take it all back," Crary said. "I know better now."

She laughed happily. "I think I'll stay in Bismarck. Will you come and see me?"

"What about John Trent?"

"I'm sending him back East where he belongs."

"You're making a mistake. John's a good man."

"He's all right in his own environment," Sue said carelessly. "You will call on me in Bismarck, won't you?"

"I'd be a fool not to," Flint Crary said. "You don't know how monotonous a military post can get."

"You aren't very complimentary, Lieutenant."

"I can be," said Crary, as they strolled arm in arm toward the gaunt, ungainly, light-blooming house. "When I have a clear field."

CHAPTER IV

Primitive Fury

IN THE Halfway, Teed Boylan had left Alma in the dining room and sauntered into the saloon. Cody Ludeke, tired of losing at poker, had dropped out of the game and was amusing himself by baiting John Trent at the bar. It had reached the point when Boylan arrived that he was just in time to step between them and shoulder Ludeke away from the Easterner, to avoid a clash.

"Leave the boy alone, Cody," he said, standing slim and easy.

"Pull in your horns, you two-bit stage driver!" rasped Ludeke. He fell into a crouch, with his elbows out and his hands spread-fingered.

"No gunplay here!" Port Hauser moved in, towering above them. "Don't reach, Cody. If you boys want it with knuckles, go right ahead."

They were swinging before he spoke the last word, lunging in head to head, and lashing out with their fists. Knuckles as hard and sharp as steel laid open weathered flesh and scattered bright blood, as they surged around in a grunting circle.

Disdaining to clinch and grapple, they slashed and tore at faces and heads, slugged at each other's bodies. In the first minute both men were bruised, cut and bleeding.

Awed by the primitive fury of it, John Trent shrank back against the bar, wincing at the sound of swift smashing impacts of toughened fists upon flesh and bone.

Teed Boylan belted his cowboy opponent back across the room, tipping over tables and chairs. Bouncing off the wall, Cody Ludeke got the jump and drove Teed back, the driver's auburn head snapping under the wicked blows. Boylan made a stand and knocked Ludeke halfway over the bar. Rushing in to finish him, Boylan caught two pistoned high-heeled boots squarely in the chest. With the air beaten from his lungs, Teed tottered off at a tangent. Cody came springing off the counter and clipped him left and right. Teed rolled loosely on the floor. But when the cowboy tried to put the boots to him, Hauser hurled Ludeke back against the bar.

Boylan was up in time to meet Cody chest to chest in another slugging match. By now their shirts were torn to tatters and drenched with sweat and blood. Arm-weary and sobbing for breath they became entangled, whirling and heaving with interlocked arms, crashing to the planks and wrestling like tired wildcats, first one on top and then the other.

Teed Boylan finally wound up on the top, riding Ludeke as if he were a wind-broken bronco. Pinning the cowhand to the floor with his left hand on the man's throat, Boylan ripped rights into that ruined crimson face until Port Hauser hauled him off and declared an end to the vicious battle.

Some of the boys took Teed Boylan into the kitchen to wash and patch him up, while others dragged Cody Ludeke to the water trough out back of the building.

Hauser knew Cody would be in a killing mood when he came to, which meant that Port would have to redouble his vigilance.

Angrily the big manager wondered why he didn't let them kill one another and be done with it. This fight had been building up for a long, long time. Sooner or later it would flare up again, and the next time it would be a fight to the death.

Hauser wished he could make Alma love him, so they could go away from here together. This life was sapping even his great vitality, and wearing on his iron nerves.

Hauser advised John Trent to go to bed, and John told him to go to hell. Port Hauser hit him once, hard and clean on that cleft chin, catching the Easterner as his legs folded under him. Slinging him over one shoulder, Hauser carried John Trent upstairs and dumped him on the bed in the room assigned to him.

On her way to her own room, Sue Carvell observed this with ironic satisfaction and quiet, contemptuous laughter.

Voices issued from Senator Brampton's room, and Hauser wondered idly who was with the pot-bellied lawmaker. But he only shrugged and went on down the front stairs.

In the darkened parlor off the lobby he glimpsed a woman and a man — Alma, with that cavalryman, Flint Crary. Hauser's craggy features tautened and his great hands knotted, ridging his tremendous arms and shoulders with ropes of muscle. But he went on back toward the barroom, without hesitating or saying a word.

PORT HAUSER had enough on his hands, keeping Cody Ludeke and Teed Boylan from killing each other, and breaking up other fights that were bound to come before the night was over. And it all seemed so senseless and pointless.

Hauser thought glumly, if I had an ounce of brains I'd draw my pay and saddle up and ride out of here, hell-and-gone out of this lost and forgotten sinkhole.

He reached the back room just as a shag-headed, orange-bearded prospector tried to pull a gun on Silk Karston. Silk shot him through the wrist of the gun-hand, without moving from the card table. The miner stumbled off, groaning and cursing, and clasping his shattered wrist. Port Hauser swore with profound disgust.

"Shoot to kill next time, Silk," he said bitterly. "It's easier to bury 'em than it is to tend to their wounds. I ain't no damn doctor, you know, and the girls here ain't nurses."

"Anything to oblige, Port," said Karston, in his cultured tones. . . .

And, oblivious to all this, to everything that was going on anywhere else in the Halfway House, although a girl had rushed breathlessly in to tell about the fracas, in the dim parlor Alma Miller was speaking frankly and hurriedly to the soldier with her.

"There isn't much time," she was saying, "so I'm going to be straight-forward. You may call it bold. But you interested me the minute I saw you on the stage. The first man in a long while who has, Lieutenant."

Crary shifted uneasily on the rawhide sofa. "That makes a man feel good, Alma. But how about Teed Boylan and some of these others?"

"I like Teed well enough, and at times I enjoy his company. But he's a wild, reckless rakehell who has never grown up, and never will. Cody Ludeke is somewhat the same, only much worse. There's a mean, evil streak in Cody. He's a killer."

"Those two had quite a brawl, I guess."

"I'm glad Teed whipped Cody. I shouldn't say it, but I wish Teed had killed him, because Cody Ludeke won't rest now until he's put Teed under the ground."

"There are others," suggested Crary.

This was a strange night in the middle of the Dakota wastelands, one that was making him wonder at his own surprising experiences. He never had been a ladies' man, and now in a short space two lovely women had made advances to him, all but

throwing themselves at him. Crary couldn't understand it. Maybe he had missed out on a lot because he had not considered himself especially attractive to girls.

"Yes, there are others," Alma admitted. "There's Silk Karston — a renegade gentleman. A black sheep from some fine family, destined to die at the card table. How could I even consider him, realizing that? I lost one husband, Flint."

"Well, a soldier's life isn't exactly secure, either. Particularly under Custer — how did your husband die, Alma?"

"Shot to death. Out in the barn. A fair fight apparently. Earl — my husband — had a gun in his hand. One shot had been fired from it."

"You don't know who did it?"

"Not for certain," Alma said. "But I'll always believe Cody Ludeke killed him. And he's been trying to court me ever since!"

"What does Hauser think?"

"Port Hauser is perhaps the best man of the whole lot. If I had any sense I'd be satisfied with him, I suppose. Port feels that Cody Ludeke shot Earl, too. Some time Port will kill that show-off gunman with his bare hands, Flint Crary."

CRARY nodded, a growing dislike for Ludeke inside him. "He seems to need killing all right."

"But I didn't intend to talk about that, Flint. I meant to make this more personal. My feeling's strong enough to overcome my shame, you see. Do you plan to remain in the service, Lieutenant?"

"It's all I know. All I'm trained for, and all I like. I see nothing in civilian life to tempt me."

"What about marriage? You must have contemplated that, Flint?"

"Now and then," Crary confessed. "A man gets lonesome. But a lieutenant has no right to marry and inflict garrison life on a woman. It's either that or live apart, and the quarters in Officers' Row are anything but cozy, comfortable and homelike."

"A woman in love will endure anything to be with her husband."

"For awhile. But it isn't fair to her. And the pay isn't enough."

"In my case money is of no consequence, Flint," said Alma. "I happen to have a lot of it. Enough to last a lifetime, if handled correctly. But it's no good to me — alone."

She sensed his withdrawal, and knew she was overplaying her hand. A man likes to consider himself the hunter, not the hunted, even though it's self-deception on his part. She was driving this man away from her.

In desperation she moved closer on the leather lounge until her shoulder, hip and thigh were warm and firm against him, and the clean fragrance of her was in his nostrils.

"I'm sorry, Flint. I know what you must think of me. I've never done anything like this before, and that's the absolute truth."

"I believe you, Alma," said Crary, slowly and kindly. "If things were different, if I wasn't pledged to A Company and the Seventh — but under the circumstances, I have nothing to offer."

"Yourself, Flint. That's all a woman would ask for."

"It wouldn't work," he said with dull finality. He wished he was out in the barroom with Teed Boylan. Or back in Officers' Row with Culpepper and Trewellen and Lattimer.

"All right, I won't hound you any more," Alma Miller murmured. "But we *could* have tonight."

She was urgent as she looked at him, her lips full and ripe and slightly parted, her dark eyes shining, her perfume heady. Flint Crary couldn't have resisted if he wanted to.

He took her into his arms, full-bodied and warm, feeling her arms wrap and tighten about him, her lips lift against his, and rapture flood through him like sweet, shimmering fire. In this woman's embrace, Crary realized that Sue Carvell *was* still a child and that most of the

girls he had known were vapid and meaningless, simple and shallow. In that instant Crary was lost, helpless and uncaring and willingly enslaved. For never in his life had he known such exalted heights and unfathomable depths as those to which Alma Miller transported him. Time ceased to exist, space was limitless, and the night was filled with flame and music and unbounded wonder.

Then the door slammed open and Cody Ludeke stood outside it, coiled whiplike in a half-crouch, hawk-face fiercely arrogant in spite of its gashes, its bruises and swelling, and his blackened eyes were wild and searching.

The two on the couch moved apart suddenly cold, feeling hollow. Cody Ludeke spotted them there and stalked into the dim shadowy room, elbows wide, hands clawed, and lean, welted features starkly ferocious. His purple and lavender shirt hung in tatters and his tousled hair glistened damply.

"Get up and take it like a man!" he said gratingly through his bared teeth to Crary.

Alma rose swifty and stepped forward. "Now, Cody — there's no call for this. I won't have it!"

He laughed and thrust her aside. "On your feet, soldier boy! I hate to shoot a man that's setting down. Specially on that love-seat!"

"I'll call Port," warned Alma.

"And get him shot, too?" sneered Ludeke. "Go on, call him. Call all of 'em." He gestured at Crary. "Rise and shine, tin soldier!"

"I'm no gunfighter," Crary said.

Ludeke swore furiously. "You're in the Army, ain't you? What's the Army for, if it ain't fighting? Crawl up on your hind legs!"

Still seated on the sofa, Crary was gauging his chances, finding them pretty thin. "What's this all about, cowboy?" he stalled.

"Get up or take it setting down!" snarled Cody Ludeke.

He wasn't going to wait much longer. The spring was ready to snap and recoil. That flare in Cody's eyes was the light of madness, the lust for murder!

CHAPTER V

Not All Heroes Are Soldiers

FLINT CRARY rose in one lithe smooth motion, a sofa pillow in his left hand, his right hand flicking to the Colt in his waistband. Cody Ludeke leaped into his two-handed draw, as Crary lashed the pillow at his misshapen face with a whipping left-handed motion of blinding speed.

The .44 came clear and lined in Crary's right hand, blazing and springing upward with a deafening blast as Ludeke blundered backward with the pillow across his eyes. Even so he completed the double draw, his guns roaring a breath after Crary's, and Flint felt the hot tearing tug of lead on either side of himself. Window glass shattered and cascaded with a jangling crash.

But Crary's bullet was in Ludeke, jolting him back against the door jamb. Crary hammered another slug home while Cody was hanging there, straining to bring his guns up again. The impact doubled Ludeke in a shuddering frenzy, his guns exploding aimlessly into the floor boards. Jerking upright and falling back, Cody Ludeke swayed, spun off the door on splayed twitching legs, took three crazy lunging strides into the lobby, and fell flat on his face.

"Dead," his bloody mouth was drooling against the floor, shocked disbelief and disgust in his failing voice. "Killed by — a tinhorn soldier. Ain't that — a helluva note?"

"You killed Earl, didn't you, Cody?" asked Alma Miller.

"Sure. I killed — everybody." Cody Ludeke's laugh came out a ghastly retching sob. "And a toy soldier — killed Cody. Ain't that — pure hell?"

Blood gushed, and his breath rattled

and Cody Ludeke was still and dead, with his face against the crimsoned planks.

Alma whirled, with a small choked cry, and fell into Crary's arms. He was holding her tenderly, with the gun smoking at her back, when Port Hauser, Teed Boylan and the rest came running, to stop short, gaping incredulously at the powder-blurred scene.

"You took Cody Ludeke, Soldier?" muttered Boylan, wagging his battered red head and peering from between puffed blue eyelids.

"I had a lot of luck, Teed," said Crary. "And a sofa pillow."

"You took a chore off my hands, mister," Port Hauser said. "I can't say I'm glad, and I can't say I'm sorry, either." He turned to his assistant, Mott. "Drag him outside, Ed, and throw something over him. Halfway House is going to be a lot quieter and peacefuller with that cowboy dead."

With a quick final hug, Alma left Crary and walked away with Port Hauser, her fine dark head bowed against his massive shoulder. Teed Boylan handed Crary a bottle of whisky.

"If anybody ever earned a drink, Flint, it's you."

Crary took a long pull at the bottle, then another, grateful for the quick-spreading warmth inside him.

"I'm having too much luck, Teed," he said gravely. "When we take the field in the spring, it's liable to turn bad all of a sudden." And in his mind he visualized a scene of horror that would come to living and dying reality another June along the Little Bighorn.

Upstairs a woman burst screaming from the room of Horace J. Brampton, and fled screeching along the corridor, as if pursued by fiends and demons. Boylan and Crary exchanged amused glances, and Flint raised the bottle in mock salute.

"I hope the Senator puts that in his report," he said, and drank deeply once more, before yielding the whisky to its laughing owner.

"If he gets too rough on the Army, we can use that to blackmail him," Teed Boylan said happily. . . .

THE Sioux, their ranks swollen to twice yesterday's total and now numbering about forty, attacked sleeping Halfway House in the grayness of early morning, flitting like dark mounted wraiths through the swirling, shifting vapors that whitened the dewy earth. Slipping in silently on unshod ponies, they had the main building ringed, and a dozen windows shot out before Halfway was roused from heavy slumber.

Flint Crary wakened to a nightmare of gunfire and crashing glass and savage screams, echoed by the frantic screeching of women. He thought, they must be crazy drunk to hit a place like this. The Senator will really have something to write into his report — if he lives through this one.

Kicking off the bed clothes and cursing with a tongue thickened to leather and lips parched dry from liquor, Crary pulled on his pants and boots. He thrust the Colt under his belt, and picked up the Winchester he had brought to his room for safekeeping. As he crouched toward the window, a bullet smashed it into brilliant flying fragments and showered him with broken glass.

Swearing harder, Crary cleared the jagged shards from the frame with the carbine barrel and looked for a target. The warriors were circling, slashing in and out, yipping like a mad dog pack as they poured lead into the house.

Crary fired and missed, reviling himself for a no-good drunkard. His second shot blew a coppery body from a black-and-white pinto, but the Sioux were in close now, terrifyingly close. Some of the more daring were leaving their horses and catapulting through the first-floor windows.

Those inside would have to be taken care of first, and again that looked like a job for Lieutenant Crary. He abandoned his window after another missed shot, and slammed out the door into the hall. The

ominous crunching thud of a battering-ram came up from the main entrance, and at the head of the stairs Crary glanced through an opened window onto the roof of the front porch. A man was already out there, crawling toward the edge, with bullets ripping up sprays of splinters around him.

It was John Trent, naked to the waist, black hair awry above his fine aristocratic face, a Navy Colt in his right hand. A few Indians had drawn back to target on him, but Trent crept steadily onward into the hailing lead and whipping arrows. It sounded as if the front door was giving under that relentless battering, when John reached the rim and leaned over to open fire on the porch. It was suicide, it was folly, and no man could survive it. But it also was the only way to strip those savage brown bodies off that ram and keep the entrance barred.

Crary thought with irony, his girl ought to love him for this. She'll love him all right, but that won't bring a dead hero back to life.

But Flint Crary had work of his own to do, and he wheeled to sight down the stairway. Guns were blasting from the stairwell at the rear, and he figured that Port Hauser and Teed Boylan were getting in their licks at the invaders.

A clay-daubed buck started up the stairs, and Crary turned loose his carbine, spilling him across the banister onto the lobby floor. Fire tongued upward and bullets breathed close about him, but Crary stood firmly crouched and poured lead downstairs until the Winchester was empty and two more red-skinned corpses littered the planks where Cody Ludeke had died last night. The Halfway was becoming a charnel house, reeking of blood and death and black powder.

The lobby momentarily cleared of living Indians, Crary started downstairs with the empty carbine in his left hand and the loaded Colt in his right. The front door was sprung on its hinges and splintered, but the sledging on the outside had ceased. John Trent had done his job to perfection. On the veranda bronze bodies lay alongside the stilled battering-ram.

But more braves were streaming in through first-floor windows, and Crary cut loose with his Colt .44 as they came fleetingly into view.

A BULLET wrenched the rifle from his left hand. As it clattered to the bottom steps other bullets scored the rail and wall and split the treads beneath the lieutenant's boots. But he was making his own shots count, firing in cold, grim controlled anger. There were six dead Sioux in the lower front room when his hammer clicked on a spent shell.

Reloading quickly with loose cartridges from his trousers pocket, he heard the shooting taper off and die at the back of the building, and from outside, came the rapid diminishing drum of hoofbeats. The red survivors of the mad onslaught were fleeing into the morning fog.

They would have plenty of spare ponies the rest of the way. For Halfway was encircled and choked with Sioux dead.

Flint Crary needed a drink, but more than that he wanted to see what had happened to the handsome young man on the porch roof. He climbed the stairs on numb, quivering legs, shaken with terror now that the action was over, and dreading to find the riddled body of John Trent.

Turning from the stairway head to the front window, he was astonished to see John crawling in over the sill, with a faint, sick smile trembling about his sensitive mouth. There were bullet burns and arrow scratches on John Trent's bare torso, and he had left part of one trouser leg nailed to the wood by a flint arrowhead, but miraculously he had not been hit. Crary hurried to give him a hand. They stood grinning rather foolishly at one another.

"Do you need a drink as bad as I do?" Crary asked.

"Worse," confessed Trent. "Although I'm still drunk, Flint, or I never would have gone out there."

"A good thing you did, boy. If they'd

busted in that door, they could have overrun the place and massacred us all."

"You're giving me too much credit, Lieutenant."

"That I wouldn't and couldn't do, John Trent," said Crary. "Let's get downstairs before Teed drinks all the whisky in the house."

They found Teed Boylan and Port Hauser and half a dozen other blear-eyed powder-grimed men gulping whisky at the bar.

"It's all on the house," Hauser said. "You two boys took mighty good care of the front end."

"John did the heavy duty," Crary told them. "He mowed down the bucks on the battering-ram."

"I didn't have anything to do with those six dead ones in the lobby, though," said Trent, smiling with a wisp of his old charm.

Port Hauser held out a huge paw to him. "Sorry I hit you last night, Trent."

"It was a good thing," John Trent said. "The best thing you could have done for me."

"Drink up, men," Teed Boylan said, grinning painfully with his lacerated lips. "It ain't every day you get free liquor in a joint like this."

"We better move them bodies out before the womenfolks get up and around," suggested Hauser.

"I wish Horace J. Brampton could see those dead Sioux," Flint Crary said wistfully. "He really should, in order to incorporate this in his report to Congress."

"It'd take a block-and-tackle to get the Senator out from under that bed of his," Teed Boylan said, grinning again.

A few drinks later, the strained, fearful voice of Sue Carvell floated down the stairs:

"John! John Trent! Are you all right, John?"

He left somewhat sheepishly to answer the call, not forgetting to carry a glassful of whisky along with him.

Alma Miller walked into the barroom. Her dark eyes, fixed on Port Hauser, lighted up thankfully as she saw that he was unwounded.

"Thank God you're all right, Port. And the rest of you men, too."

She and Hauser moved away together, and Crary knew they had found one another at last, after all the years of not seeing and not understanding.

CRARY and Boylan turned back to the bar, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the amber liquid in their glasses.

"Women," said Teed Boylan. "You see how it is, Soldier? In the end galoots like us always get left. Leaning on some bar with a drink in our fists."

"A good place to be left, anyway," Crary remarked cheerfully. That's as it should be, Teed. We aren't the marrying kind, and after a while the girls get to know it and give up on us."

"Yeah, I reckon that's about the size of it. You're tied to the Army, and I'm hitched to a stage-coach. There ain't any room for a woman. Leastwise not permanent."

"Would you have it any different, Teed?" inquired Crary.

Boylan pondered briefly. "Not by a damn sight!" he said then, his devil-may-care smile flashing, his hand on Crary's wide shoulder. "Let's get organized, Soldier, and roll that stage out of here on time. And take some of this whisky, which we ain't able to hang around and drink on the premises."

Flint Crary laughed like a boy. "Now you're talking, Teed. Now you're really in the saddle and riding with the wind!"

Teed Boylan nodded with pleasure. "Me on the ribbons, and you on shotgun. Some team, son! There ain't enough Sioux west or east of the Missouri to hold us up, once we get a-rolling."

When the stage pulled out of Halfway on schedule that morning, the sun was rising blood-red over the low eastern skyline behind it, staining the sweep of sere prairies with a ruddy glow. In the back seat of the coach, Sue Carvell was snuggled close to John Trent, her golden

head on his shoulder, violet eyes lifted proudly, possessively, and adoringly to his clear-cut profile. Facing them from the front seat, Horace J. Brampton looked ill, much like a bloated catfish long out of water.

Watching from the battle-scarred front porch, Alma Miller and big Port Hauser stood relaxed and easy with their arms around each other.

Aloft on the box with their eating tobacco and bottled goods and the wind in their faces, Boylan and Crary were not discontented, and felt only the mildest regrets. The years might make them old and lonely, providing they lived through enough of them, but living dangerously and forever on the brink of disaster had taught them not to fret about the future.

Men such as they were took each day as it came and in stride. Boylan was happy with the reins and whip in hand, and six fresh horses racing before him. Crary wanted to get back to his company and the regiment at the fort across the muddy yellow Missouri. Meanwhile he meant to enjoy this journey in the wind-torn sunshine and dust of Dakota.

So they talked and sang and laughed into the breeze as they rocked along the bleached plains, uncorking a bottle at long intervals to keep their spirits high and their mood even and merry.

For Lieutenant Flint Crary knew that his luck was due to change in 1876, and Teed Boylan didn't care much what happened, as long as the horses and the whisky held out.

The Wild Old West

Dead-Eye Dugan
Shot up the town;
Hot-Lead Benny
Shot Dugan down.

Dugan's pal, Preeble
Mowed down Ben;
Local vigilantes
Strung 'im up, then.

Folks died, fast-like—
Didn't have a prayer.
Makes good readin',
But 'm glad I wuzn't there!

—Naida Dickson

"Stay where you are, parson!" Larrimore snapped

Man of the Cloth

By GEORGE KILRAIN

THE Reverend Jethro Plank carefully slipped the little package of black thread and needles into the pocket of his black broadcloth suit, and stepped outside into the hot sunshine.

The needle and thread were not for the suit he had on this afternoon, which was a trifle too small for him, and which had been given to him by the rector of his own church back in Indiana. The previous Sunday morning in the middle of his hour-

A deadly gunman and a wall of convention stood between Jethro Plank and the saloonkeeper's daughter, but he was a sky pilot with sand . . .

long sermon he'd heard a faint ripping sound at the right shoulder blade of his good suit, and when the sermon was over he'd gone down the side aisle instead of the center one, which was his usual custom, and as he shook hands with his congregation he'd managed to keep his back to the wall.

At four o'clock in the afternoon the Arizona cowtown of Red Buttes waited for the sun to go down before waking up. A dog lay in the shade of the doorway outside the Emporium Dry Goods store where the Reverend Plank had purchased his needle and thread. A buckboard with a pair of dapple grays basked in the sunshine a few rods down from the store, the horses whisking their tails idly at the flies.

Outside the Pleasant Hour Saloon, Old Man Jenkins sat on an upturned beer barrel, head down on his chest, the flies buzzing around his nearly bald head. The only scene of animation in town was presented at the Wells Fargo stage office where an eastbound coach was loading up, preparing to move out.

Jethro Plank glanced idly at the few passengers waiting on the walk, ready to continue their journey, then headed up Fremont Street in the direction of his church and parsonage. If he'd had a wife, he thought, he could have stayed in the shade of the cottonwood behind the parsonage, working on next Sunday's sermon. She would do the shopping and mend his clothes.

At the age of twenty-three, the good people of Red Buttes figured a minister should be thinking of settling down. Besides, the parsonage, with its six rooms, was much too large for a bachelor.

At the corner of Fremont and Greene, the Reverend spotted the Misses Phipps, one of whom his congregation had tentatively decided he would marry. Even at a distance of fifty yards Jethro Plank shuddered a little, fancying he heard the sisters giggling. Miss Ada Phipps played the pump organ in the church, while Miss Sylvia sang high soprano which grated upon Jethro Plank's nerves like the rasp of a saw when he was trying to meditate before going into his sermon.

LIKE the Reverend Plank, the two Misses Phipps were long overdue as far as matrimony was concerned, and the gossip at the Ladies Aid Society consisted largely upon the choice Jethro Plank would make between the two. They were not particularly bad-looking girls if one did not mind long faces, sharp noses and thin lips. The faces Jethro could stand, but the simpering he could not.

Head down, as if lost in thought, he suddenly swerved around the corner into Greene Street, hoping they had not seen him. If they had, he'd little doubt they'd waylay him as he emerged on Grant two blocks beyond.

The saloonkeeper, Charlie Bartlett, stood in the side doorway of his establishment on the cool side of the street, a half-smoked cigar in his mouth, chubby hands hooked in his sagging pants belt. Bartlett was a fat man with a round head, hardly any neck, and a pudgy nose which seemed as if it had been stuck to his face with a bit of glue. He had small, bright blue eyes, rather merry.

As the Reverend Plank came up, Bartlett said, "Howdy, Parson."

Jethro Plank nodded in greeting. Charlie Bartlett was not one of his flock, but he fervently wished that he were, not only because he would have liked everyone in Red Buttes to join his church, but because Charlie Bartlett was the father of golden-haired Hester, the schoolteacher. Hester was a member of the church, and regular in attendance, but not too highly esteemed among the ladies because of her father's occupation.

The Reverend Plank slowed down. He said, "A warm afternoon, Mr. Bartlett." He knew that he should not stop here and chat with the portly saloonkeeper because Bartlett, a purveyor of the demon rum, was looked upon with disfavor by all good church people. There would be a wagging of tongues.

Charlie Bartlett rolled the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. Then he took the cigar from his mouth, looked as if he wanted to spit, changed his mind, and said, "Be cooling up fairly early this year, Parson."

Looking at him, Jethro Plank wondered how it was possible this man could have sired the beautiful Hester. It was said, though, that Mrs. Bartlett had been a fine-looking woman, and Hester undoubtedly had taken after her.

Plank said evenly, "We would be considerably pleased, Mr. Bartlett, to have you accompany your daughter to church some Sunday morning."

Bartlett's blue eyes twinkled. "Would you?" he murmured. "That might happen some day, Parson. Thank you kindly."

Jethro walked on down the street, having the satisfaction of having extended an invitation to the saloonkeeper. Though he realized what a shock it would be to his placid congregation if Bartlett suddenly walked in through the door some Sunday morning.

At the next corner the Reverend Plank stopped. The ironic thought came to him that as he'd been driven off the main street by the Phipps sisters he'd unconsciously headed in the direction of Hester Bartlett. Up the grade across the road was the schoolhouse on a barren patch of ground, scuffed by many feet. An unpainted pine pole with a flag dangling from it lifted above the schoolhouse, a one-story frame structure which had been painted white once, but most of the paint had peeled off now.

The door was open, which meant that Miss Bartlett was still there even though the children had gone for the day. Jethro rubbed his lean jaw, hesitated, then crossed the dirt road and started up the grade. He was a tall, gaunt young man, his reddish hair protruding from beneath his clergyman's black hat. His big, long-fingered hands stuck out from the too-short coat like the hands of a scarecrow. His face was freckled, and his nose was rather too large, but his eyes were gray and tender, and they made up for other deficiences.

HESTER BARTLETT was seated behind her desk, head bent over some papers, when Jethro Plank appeared in the doorway, his big frame filling it. He had his hat off and his rust-colored hair stuck up a little.

He said apologetically, "I saw your door open, Miss Bartlett, so I knew you were still here."

Hester's eyes were a deep violet. She was wearing a plain blue dress with touches of white in it, the blue of the dress accentuating the color of her eyes. She smiled at him — she did not simper — and when she smiled Jethro Plank felt his heart skip a beat. He turned his hat around and around in his hands.

Hester Bartlett said, "Won't you come in, Reverend?"

He came through the door. "Much cooler in here," he said. It wasn't, but it was something to say, and now that he was here he was considerably embarrassed. He'd never called on Miss Bartlett before, knowing how tongues would wag.

The room was hot and stuffy, even with the window open, but Hester looked cool as she sat behind the desk, a pencil in her hand.

She said, "I'll be finished in a moment, Reverend. You may close the windows if you wish. I'll be locking up now."

Glad to do something, the Reverend Plank complied with so much haste that one of the windows nearly broke as it came loose suddenly and slid down with a bang. Hester looked up and smiled.

She was putting her papers away when Jethro closed the last of the four windows. He waited at the door for her, and watched her put on a straw bonnet trimmed with blue ribbon.

Resentment began to crowd into the Reverend Plank's heart as he watched her come toward him. His congregation had decided to marry him off to one of the

faithful Phipps sisters. Already there had been much maneuvering, and even occasional pointed remarks by the older women of the Ladies Aid. The church was paying him his salary, and they'd given him a place in which to live, but they didn't own him, and they had no right to pick out his lifemate for him.

Jethro fell in step with the schoolteacher as they started down the grade back to town. He walked resolutely, knowing that when he entered town with Hester Bartlett at his side, dozen of pairs of eyes would be watching them.

The Bartletts lived in a frame house two blocks from the saloon, and they could have reached it by way of the back street. Hester seemed to have that route in mind because she started to edge over when they approached the street which paralleled Fremont.

The Reverend Plank stubbornly kept on straight ahead, moving toward Fremont, and he thought he heard Hester catch her breath a little. It was as if she realized he'd made a decision, a big one. She was silent as they neared the saloon.

Charlie Bartlett still stood in his doorway, the cigar a stub now. He rubbed his fat chin as they came up, and his blue eyes flicked.

But all he said to his daughter was, "Children good today?"

"No worse than usual, Father," Hester told him. "I'm afraid I'll have to thrash the O'Leary boy sooner or later, though."

Jethro Plank couldn't imagine her thrashing anyone, and wondered how she would look in righteous anger.

Charlie Bartlett said, "Joe Billings is bringing a few steaks up from his shop. You might ask the Reverend to supper some night. That is," he added slyly, "if the Reverend don't mind eating with sinners and publicans."

"I would consider it an honor," Jethro said evenly, and wondered if the church board would ask for his resignation because he'd had supper with a saloonkeeper and his daughter, even though the daughter was regular in attendance at church.

Hester just smiled and said nothing. There was a little flush to her cheeks, though, as they swung into Fremont Street and the bright sunshine.

THE Reverend Plank walked on the outside, keeping his long strides measured to hers. Across the road and above Barney Conner's saddle shop he saw a shade go up. Mrs. Heffingway, the president of the Ladies Aid, lived there.

Curtains moved slightly as he passed other homes. Old Man Jenkins awoke as they went past the Pleasant Hour Saloon. He stared at them stupidly.

As they came up to the Plains Saloon on the next block, the batwing doors opened soundlessly and a man came out. Quite distinctly this time Jethro Plank heard Hester Bartlett catch her breath, and she slowed down almost to the point of stopping.

The man who'd come out of the saloon was in his early twenties, tall, black-haired — a handsome young man with dark eyes, but with a rather sullen mouth as if he had been spoiled. He leaned against one of the uprights supporting the overhead awning, and grinned, revealing beautiful white teeth. It was a cold grin, though, and when he looked at the Reverend Plank contempt was in his eyes.

He said, "How are you, Hester?"

"Very well," Hester said formally.

Jethro Plank noticed the gun on the black-haired man's hip. It was a pearl-handled affair, a blue-barreled Colt, and the holster was black, oily. It was an ominous-looking gun.

Completely at ease, the black-haired man kept looking at the Reverend Plank, looking at Hester with those brazen black eyes. Jethro Plank did not like the way he looked at Miss Bartlett.

That contemptuous smile was still on the man's face as they passed on, and the Reverend Plank clearly heard his soft, sardonic laugh.

Hester said quietly, "That was Mr. Case Larrimore. He — he used to live here in town before you arrived."

Jethro nodded. He was sure that there was more to it than that. This Case Larrimore must have paid quite a bit of attention to Hester Bartlett when he'd lived in Red Buttes, and he probably expected to be paying more attention to her now that he was back.

"What does Mr. Larrimore do?" he asked.

"Do?" Hester glanced at him curiously.

"What does he work at?" Jethro asked.

Hester shook her head vaguely. "I don't believe he's ever worked at anything for long. He rode for one of the ranchers a while back."

He wasn't a rider now, Jethro Plank thought, not in those clothes. Case Larrimore had been wearing fawn-colored pants, and his boots had been new, polished, of the best leather. His stetson, too, was the best that money could buy.

The Reverend Plank had heard rumors of young men riding around this part of the country with money to burn, and no apparent way to account for it. It was known, though, that the Wells Fargo treasure boxes were frequently confiscated by road agents along lonely stretches of road between the various towns.

Jethro tried not to think too severely of Case Larrimore without knowing the facts, but he had to admit he didn't particularly like Mr. Larrimore, nor the way the man had looked at Hester.

They parted in front of Hester's house, a plain, plank-board building, one-story high, set back a little from the street, with a fence in front of it.

Jethro said, "I trust you'll be in church Sunday morning, Miss Bartlett."

"I never miss church services," she told him. "My mother taught me that."

"Then your mother was a good woman." The Reverend Plank nodded.

"My father," Hester said, "is a good man."

It was almost a challenge, and she waited as if giving him the opportunity to disagree with her. But he only inclined his head as if to imply that he was making no judgments.

WALKING slowly back to the parsonage, he passed the Phipps sisters coming out of Simmons's General Store. He nodded to them absently, touching his hat, and received a rather stony greeting in return. They'd undoubtedly seen him going up the street with Hester.

Jethro told himself he didn't care. He had to make his stand sooner or later, and the sooner his congregation discovered they couldn't regulate his social life, the better.

In the cool of the little yard behind the parsonage he went to work on his sermon again, but it was difficult now. Hester Bartlett kept intervening, and he could not put her aside. He wondered about Case Larrimore, too. The fellow was a handsome specimen with a certain dash which most girls would find irresistible. He hoped fervently that Hester had not found this so when Larrimore had lived in Red Buttes. . . .

On Sunday morning Hester sat in her accustomed place in the fourth row on the right side of the meeting house. From the pulpit Jethro Plank could see the cold, almost hostile looks the other women directed at her. She sat quietly, serenely, looking up at him, and in that moment the Reverend Plank knew he loved her, and would never love another.

He preached with all his power that morning, and when the sermon was over he walked to the door and shook hands with his people as they left. When he shook Hester Bartlett's hand an electric thrill went through him.

He heard her saying as if through a fog, "If you haven't made arrangements for your Sunday dinner, Reverend, Father and I would like to have you eat with us."

Every Sunday some member of the congregation invited the bachelor pastor for Sunday dinner. This morning none of them had, as yet.

"I'd be delighted," Jethro Plank murmured. He knew that his congregation would not be delighted when they learned he was having dinner with a saloonkeeper.

As Hester passed on, smiling, he looked

through the door and saw Case Larrimore standing across the street, leaning against a wall, hands in his pockets, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. Larrimore had that same cool smile on his face, and Jethro Plank had his first foreboding of trouble.

He had to refuse several other invitations, and the entire congregation knew before anybody sat down to Sunday dinner that day with whom the Reverend Plank was having his meal. And his acceptance of Hester's invitation did not meet with whole-hearted approval.

When the congregation had dispersed, and Deacon Caldwell was locking the church door, Jethro put on his hat and walked down the street in the bright noonday sunshine.

The saloons were closed till early evening on Sunday and it was quiet on the street. The tie-racks were empty; all the stores were closed. Even Old Man Jenkins had vacated his usual spot in front of the Pleasant Hour Saloon.

Case Larrimore stood in the shade of the doorway of the saloon, hands hooked in his gunbelt, a toothpick in his mouth. As the Reverend Plank came up, Larrimore said:

"Afternoon, Parson."

Plank slowed down. That cold, sardonic smile was on Larrimore's handsome face. He spat the toothpick out and said:

"Having dinner with the Bartletts, Parson?"

"I have been invited," Jethro Plank told him civilly. "I believe you are Mr. Larrimore?"

"Case Larrimore," the young tough told him, as if the name meant something.

"Case Larrimore," Jethro Plank repeated thoughtfully. Then he said, "You are new in town, Mr. Larrimore. I have not seen you in church."

Case Larrimore gulped, then recovered. "You ain't seeing me in church, either, mister," he said tersely.

"No?" Reverend Plank murmured.

"And I'm not liking it too much seeing you having your meals with Hester Bartlett, either," Larrimore snapped.

Jethro looked at him steadily. "I have been invited to the Bartletts for dinner today," he stated. "I do not believe that is your affair, sir."

"Reckon I might make it my affair," Larrimore told him thinly, "Gospel-sharp or not."

"You may take whatever steps you think advisable," the Reverend Plank said slowly, and walked on, wondering what those steps would be.

IT WAS not an enviable position. As a minister of the Gospel he could not fight Case Larrimore, and he wasn't equipped to fight with Larrimore's weapons. He'd already discovered that when men had differences in this part of the country they settled the differences with sixguns. Since coming to Red Buttes he'd buried two men who'd been on the short end of gun arguments. Such fighting could not possibly be for him.

Hester greeted him at the door, and looked at him curiously, immediately noting the detached expression on his face.

She said slowly, "Did you meet anyone on the way here, Reverend?"

Jethro moistened his lips. "Your friend, Mr. Larrimore, spoke to me."

Hester didn't ask what Larrimore had said. She just nodded, but her face was pale as she led him into the house.

Charlie Bartlett greeted him pleasantly. Dressed in his Sunday clothes, he looked different. Jethro Plank had seen him only with his bartender's apron around his waist.

"Glad to have you, Parson," Mr. Bartlett said, and smiled. "You're the first man of the cloth ever to enter this house."

"I am honored," Jethro Plank murmured.

It was a good meal, one of the best he'd had since coming to Red Buttes. He wished he could have enjoyed it more. Thinking of Case Larrimore and his threat, he found it difficult to concentrate on food. It wasn't that he was afraid of Larrimore, or afraid of dying, but an af-

fair like this was not good for the church nor the ministry. He did not know how far Larrimore would go, and it was possible the man was only bluffing, hoping to scare the man he considered a rival away.

After dinner was over Charlie Bartlett retired to the back porch with his cigar, and Jethro had an opportunity to talk with Hester alone. She was still considerably worried. Clearing the dishes from the table she said, "Did Case Larrimore make any reference to me?"

Jethro frowned. He wanted to avoid this topic, but Hester evidently was determined to know.

He said slowly, "Mr. Larrimore seemed to take exception to the fact that I was to have dinner with you and your father."

"Then he made a threat," Hester said slowly.

Jethro shrugged. "You might call it a threat," he agreed, "but this is a civilized town, Miss Bartlett. I am not worried."

"If he gets drunk," Hester murmured, "he'll make trouble. I know him. He wouldn't dare when he's sober, but if he starts to drink — "

"The demon rum." The Reverend Plank nodded solemnly. "I'll be careful, Miss Bartlett."

She was worried about him, and it gave him a warm feeling. For a moment he was almost glad Case Larrimore had threatened him. . . .

The saloons opened at six and Red Buttes came alive after a long, quiet afternoon. Riders drifted in from the ranches; the tie-racks began to fill.

Jethro Plank, sitting in his living room a little after nine, heard a piano begin to tinkle from a nearby saloon. He'd conducted evening services, and the congregation had been dismissed a short while before.

He would have liked to escort Hester Bartlett to her home, but had thought better of it. In a minister of the Gospel it did not look well to show too much interest in a woman in one day. He knew that already he'd antagonized many because of his interest in Miss Bartlett, and that would have to simmer down. Also he had his supporters in the church, for some of the women members did not take too kindly to the Phipps sisters' assaults against him.

IT WAS warm and uncomfortable in the house, and he found it difficult to concentrate on reading. After awhile he put on his hat and stepped outside. Walking up past some of the saloons he noted that they were crowded.

Through a window of the Pleasant Hour he spotted Case Larrimore at the bar, drinking with two other men, and remembered Hester Bartlett's warning that if Larrimore got drunk there would be trouble. He wondered if that trouble would come tonight and what form it would take. Larrimore evidently was a gunfighter, and the Reverend Plank had never had a gun in his hand in his life.

Passing out beyond the town Jethro Plank walked up into the hills. It was cooler when out of the town. The night sky was full of stars. He walked for nearly an hour, enjoying the night air, and when he headed back for Red Buttes he was more relaxed, much calmer than he'd been when he'd left.

Crowds were standing outside the saloons as he went by, and he had to walk around them to get by. He could smell the liquor on men. Faces were flushed and eyes were shining.

Although there were none of his congregation among the drinkers who'd assembled outside the saloons, many other men recognized the tall, silent young man in black. Some nodded to him.

Jethro Plank was walking around one group in front of the Comanche Saloon when he nearly bumped full into Case Larrimore. He'd passed the Pleasant Hour where he'd seen Larrimore earlier, and had assumed Larrimore was still there. Evidently, the man had moved to the Comanche, and had deliberately stepped off the porch in front of Jethro as he'd come down the boardwalk.

Larrimore's face had a high shine to it, and his black eyes seemed to sparkle. The Reverend Plank smelled the liquor on him, strong.

Larrimore said tersely, "Been visiting the Bartletts again, Parson?"

Men turned to look at them, and Jethro Plank felt his face getting red. He said briefly, "No. Will you step aside, Mr. Larrimore?"

It was impossible to get past the man without stepping into the road, and Jethro Plank did not feel that by giving ground here he would accomplish anything. Larrimore wanted to make trouble, and he would use any pretense.

Larrimore said thinly, deliberately, "Reckon you're a liar, Parson."

Silence fell over the group of a half-dozen men who'd been talking in front of the saloon. They looked at the parson uneasily.

One man said, "Don't make any trouble, Larrimore. You'll have Sheriff Onslow after you when he gets back from Winfield."

"I'm not worried about Onslow." Larrimore grinned coldly. He stood directly in front of Jethro Plank, swaying a little, hands in his gunbelt.

The Reverend Plank said slowly, "I speak the truth, Mr. Larrimore, at all times."

"You're a liar," Larrimore told him again, and that was when Jethro Plank hit him.

Never in his life, as far back as he could remember, had he hit another man in anger. He lashed out now without thinking, striking at Larrimore's smooth-shaven face, with all the force in his gaunt frame.

Case Larrimore had not been expecting anything so sudden or so drastic. There was a shocked expression on his face as the fist collided with his jaw and he staggered back against the wall of the building, slowly sliding down to a sitting position.

Jethro looked at him for a moment, his face pale, then he swung around and started back toward the parsonage. Already, a crowd was gathering and he could hear the hum of excitement.

He knew definitely as he turned in at the gate of the parsonage that he wasn't through with Case Larrimore for this evening. Still shaking a little with emotion, he closed the door behind him and stood in the darkened room for a moment, astonished that he'd struck a man. He prayed for forgiveness.

IT WAS an hour later when he heard the crowd coming toward the parsonage. He was sitting in front of his desk, his Bible open before him. Then he heard Larrimore's voice at the front gate, thick with anger.

"Come outside, Parson."

Closing the Bible, he moved to the door and opened it. Larrimore stood just outside the gate, the crowd swarming behind him. It seemed as if the entire town had gathered to see the outcome of the affair.

The yellow lamplight from the parsonage hall fell full across Larrimore standing by the gate. He was drunk, but ugly now, too. His pride had been hurt, and he must have satisfaction tonight.

Jethro Plank looked down at him calmly. He said, "What do you want, Mr. Larrimore?"

"You knocked me down," Case Larrimore snarled. "Try it again, Parson." Hand on his gun, he waited grimly.

A man in the crowd called, "The Reverend ain't got a gun, Larrimore! You can't shoot an unarmed man."

Larrimore had the answer to that. He had a second gun inside his gunbelt, and he slipped it out, stepped forward and slid it across the little porch floor at Jethro Plank's feet.

He said shortly, "Pick it up and use it, Parson."

The Reverend Plank looked down at the gun. It looked big and deadly lying there at his feet. The crowd behind Larrimore parted hastily, not sure

whether the Reverend Plank would use the gun or not. Larrimore stepped back from the gate.

Plank stood in front of the door, breathing heavily, the whole town watching him, waiting. He could not kill this man, and he could not run away. Before he was a minister he was a man, and a man did not crawl from a challenge. And for the rest of his life the people of this town would remember him as the man Case Larrimore had bluffed, if he didn't pick up that gun.

He was staring straight at Larrimore on the walk, his eyes steady, unblinking. Then he took a step forward, thrusting the gun aside with the tip of his shoe. He went down the first step, and Larrimore snarled, "Pick up the gun, Parson."

The Reverend Plank took another step, the dry wood squeaking under his weight. His eyes never left Larrimore's face, and he kept coming, down the last step to the short walk which led from the steps to the gate. Larrimore stood just inside the gate now, about ten feet away.

"Reckon that's far enough, Parson," Larrimore snapped. "Stay where you are."

Jethro Plank kept coming. He saw Larrimore's face suddenly tighten, his mouth become hard, then orange flame leaped from the muzzle of the gun. There was a roar, and the Reverend felt the breath of the bullet as it grazed his right side, gouging into the wood of the steps. He kept walking, slowly, steadily, no expression on his face, his eyes fixed steadily on Case Larrimore.

"Stop!" Larrimore half-screamed. He retreated two steps, back through the gate, smoke curling from the muzzle of his gun, the weapon steady now on Jethro Plank's chest. And the Reverend Plank kept walking.

The crowd behind Larrimore parted, giving him room. He backed up, face twisting, a kind of startled expression in his eyes.

"I'll shoot," he snarled. "You hear me, Parson? I'll put a bullet through you!"

The hammer of the gun was drawn back again, and sweat was breaking out on Larrimore's handsome face, trickling down his cheeks and chin. His eyes were wild, confused, and he continued to retreat, all the way to the road, stepping off the boardwalk as the Reverend Plank walked calmly toward him.

Hester Bartlett had run up now. Jethro caught a glimpse of her white face in the crowd as he continued this slow, persistent walk toward his man.

"Enough!" Case Larrimore choked.

Jethro was three feet from him now. The gun was shaking in Larrimore's hand. Then the Reverend Plank reached out, his long fingers twining around the barrel of the gun. Calmly he turned the muzzle of the gun toward the ground, taking it from Larrimore's fingers as a father would take a dangerous weapon from a small boy.

LARRIMORE was staring at him, his mouth working. Then suddenly he swung around and plunged through the crowd. Someone laughed, a high-pitched, nervous laugh, and that laugh would drive Case Larrimore out of town. Jethro Plank knew that. The man had lost face in Red Buttes, and this could no longer be his town. He would bother no one here any more.

Walking back to the porch, the Reverend Plank picked up the other gun, then he handed both weapons to the silent Charlie Bartlett, who had been watching calmly from the front ranks of the crowd.

The Parson said, "Would you be kind enough to return these to Mr. Larrimore at your leisure, Mr. Bartlett?"

"My pleasure." The saloonkeeper smiled. "Reckon he won't be using 'em too much any more, Reverend, at least not around this part of the country."

The crowd started to disperse, all except Hester. She remained where she was, a few feet from the gate. Jethro went over to her.

He said, "I presume I was fortunate that he didn't shoot me."

"I am glad he didn't shoot you," Hester said slowly. "I am very glad, Reverend Plank."

"I believe," he murmured, "that it would not be amiss for you to start calling me Jethro, Miss Bartlett."

She smiled at him, then said softly, "It is a nice name — Jethro."

Jethro Plank had never heard it said quite like that before. It made him feel happy inside. This had been a profitable night on the whole — a very profitable night. He was almost glad that Case Larrimore had come over to see him. He bore no ill will toward Larrimore. He bore no ill will toward anyone. As a matter of fact he loved everyone, as a minister of the Gospel should.

He did admit, though, that he regarded one more highly than the others. That was a normal observation even for the Reverend Jethro Plank of Red Buttes, a very normal and decidedly agreeable observation.

THE GUN THAT CHANGED THE WEST

ON THE first day of June, 1844, a new era dawned on the Texas plains. On that bright June morning more than a century ago, Sam Colt's new-fangled revolving pistol went into full-scale action for the first time against the Comanches. Sixteen Texas Rangers, armed with the deadly new weapon, met sixty-five Comanche warriors and whipped them soundly.

The little band of Rangers, on patrol from their headquarters at San Antone, were camped on a wooded creek fifty miles above Seguin when three Comanches rode out of the timber behind them and tried the ancient Indian decoy trick to lure the Rangers into the woods. No dice—Captain John C. Hays wasn't buying any of that.

He ordered his men to saddle their horses, mount and stand ready to fight on the open prairie. Hays shrewdly suspected that the heavy underbrush was crawling with Comanche braves, and his hunch was correct. After making three or four unsuccessful attempts to sucker the Rangers into the woods, the three decoys signaled for the attack. Sixty-two warriors came boiling out into the open at full gallop—and Captain Hays ordered his fifteen men to charge!

Following their old strategy that had proved effective so many times before, the Comanches quickly fanned out to receive the charge and to await the fire of the Ranger rifles and pistols before charging in turn. At the first boom of the Colts, the Indians whooped their scalp-cry and came tearing in with their ponies on a dead run to encounter the most shocking surprise of their lives.

The short "thunder sticks" of the hated whites were not empty after that first volley but kept right on shooting and killing Indians. And when the running battle ended, three miles west of prairie were strewn with dead and wounded Comanches. The Indians lost twenty warriors killed and between twenty and thirty wounded, while the Rangers' casualties amounted to but a single man killed and four wounded.

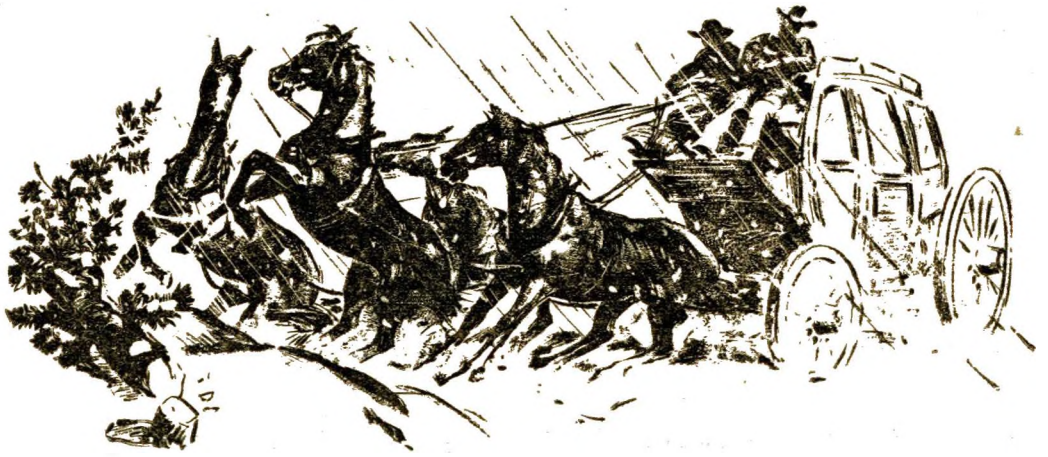
Reloading his Colt at the close of the fight, Captain Hays looked after the fleeing Comanche survivors and said grimly to his men: "We've got them now, boys. We've knocked hell out of 'em! They'll never be the same again!"

And they never were.

—Norman B. Wiltsey

LOST LOOT

A True Story by D. B. CONNOR



Somewhere near the headwaters of Elk Creek, Colorado, a fortune in outlaw loot still lies buried

YESSIREE, these storms sure hit hard and fast up here on the pass, and time of the year, too, but we'll be out of this and eating a good, hot supper at the Kenosha House before dark."

The man on the boot beside the driver didn't take up the stagedriver's bid for conversation. He turned up the collar of his greatcoat against the chill wind and contented himself with thoughts of the high living he was going to enjoy in Denver for the few days he had before returning to the mines. He surveyed the scene before him with dissatisfied eyes — the wind-whipped snow and shreds of low-hanging clouds were made all the more ghostly in the early dusk brought on by the late afternoon storm.

The lead team of horses on the Buckskin Coach suddenly snorted in fright and tried to turn off the road, then nearly sat down on their haunches in an effort to stop. The wheel team crowded right up on the leaders in trying to stop, and the stagedriver tromped on his brake, managing to bring his outfit to a halt just short of the large spruce which lay across the road.

"The wind must have blown it down."

"No, it was chopped down. See the chips? Someone used an ax on that tree."

"You are right," a quiet voice said. "We cut it down to stop you. Get down off that coach and make no trouble if you value your life."

The surprised stagedriver and his passenger lost no time in doing what they were told. They turned around to confront the unknown voice and found themselves looking into the muzzles of guns held by eight, hardbitten men who were wearing the gray uniforms of the Confederate Army. Another man had already quieted the horses and was unhitching them. The stagedriver was the first to recover his wits, and he asked, "Where

did you come from?"

One man, obviously the leader, took a step forward and smiled. "That is a fair question, my friend. We come from Texas." Without taking his eyes off the two prisoners, he said to his men. "Take everything of any value."

In a few minutes, the strongbox, the mail pouch and the two helpless victims had been stripped of all valuables, and the loot put into saddlebags. The stagedriver had protested being robbed personally. He said that it was against unwritten law to rob him, but that got him nowhere, and he grudgingly donated his purse containing fifteen cents to the small fortune that had been taken.

"Sergeant Singletray, get the ax and destroy this coach." Then turning back to the now angry driver and his companion, he said. "Allow me to introduce myself, gentlemen. I am Captain Reynolds of the Texas Volunteers. We are the advance party of a large Texas army, which by now has reached Denver and burned it to the ground. In a few weeks all of Colorado Territory will belong to Texas and the Confederacy."

AFTER chopping the wheels of the stagecoach to pieces and turning the horses loose, the nine men in gray slipped away into the darkness of the storm as silently as they had appeared.

It would seem that for a stagecoach bandit, Captain Reynolds was a talkative man. As it turned out, his boasting caused the failure of his plan to do big things in Colorado Territory for the Confederates.

Captain Reynolds had a hatred for Denver, and especially the Denver jail. He wanted his revenge. He spent the first two years of the Civil War in the jail at Denver, for inciting riots against the United States Government. Upon being released, he left at once for Texas, vowing to come back and burn the city.

Back in Texas, James Reynolds wrangled a captain's commission in the Texas Irregulars. He lost no time in obtaining permission to call for volunteers who would join him in recruiting Confederate sympathizers in the gold mining camps of Colorado, and whipping them into an effective military force. His call for volunteers netted him only forty men, but lack of men didn't stop him, and the small detachment of Texans passed through their own lines and headed north to Colorado.

Reynolds and his men were not more than a few days from Texas when they attacked and captured a Mexican pack train. Most of the loot, which was reported to be considerable, was buried, except for fifteen thousand dollars in silver which Captain Reynolds kept, saying it would be used to recruit and outfit new men when they got to Colorado. The captured mules and supplies were taken along for their own use. The fate of the Mexican packers is not recorded.

Dissension among the men arose when Captain Reynolds refused to divide up the spoils, and more than half the men deserted and went back to Texas.

The little band of Confederate soldiers eventually reached the gold camps of Colorado Territory, but they weren't successful in finding anyone who supported the Confederate cause enough to fight for it. In fact, more of his men, dissatisfied and lured by gold fever, drifted away leaving him only eight men.

The Reynolds gang, as they came to be known, hung around the gold camps in the vicinity of Fairplay, Colorado, watching and waiting for a chance to make a fortune without working for it. It is safe to assume that Captain Reynolds had ambitions of becoming a guerilla and raider on the same scale as Quantrill and his gang.

They must have found the amount of gold being sent from Fairplay to Denver by the Buckskin Coach very inviting, for on windswept Kenosha Pass, during a snowstorm, they held up the stage to Denver. But Captain Reynolds' fictitious boasts, instead of frightening the miners, stirred up the whole area. The next day

bands of armed miners were out searching for the Reynolds gang.

Ignorant of the fact that the whole countryside was aroused, the Reynolds gang retreated to their hideout far up Geneva Gulch. Not long afterwards they emerged from their hideout and held up another stagecoach at McNassar's Crossing, now the present site of Bailey, Colorado. They made off with loot valued at sixteen thousand dollars in gold dust, three thousand dollars in currency, and three cans of gold being sent to Denver for assaying.

But Reynolds and his men were not successful in making a clean getaway this time. A posse, quickly organized and led by a lawman who happened to be nearby, started out soon after the holdup took place to track down the Reynolds gang.

BACK at their hideout, the outlaws felt they were secure, and no guard was posted to watch the only trail leading to their camp. But Captain Reynolds must have had some fears for their safety, for that night he and his brother, John, slipped away from camp with all the loot. Going across the rough, mountain terrain, they came to a point somewhere between the headwaters of Deer and Elk Creeks. They buried their silver, gold dust and currency — all in cans — in an old prospect hole. Captain Reynolds marked the spot by driving a knife into a tree and breaking off the handle. It was daybreak by the time the two outlaws got back to their camp. There they found the rest of the gang considerably riled about their absence.

Captain Reynolds and his brother stepped down off their horses, and sensing the hostility, Reynolds, with his ready smile said, "How about some grub first, boys. Then we'll have a little talk."

Owen Singletray said, "No grub, Captain. The talk comes first. We want to know where you've taken the gold, and how come we haven't got our share? You promised a lot of things, and we think it's about time for a showdown." Several of the men nodded in agreement and ranged closer around Singletray.

Captain Reynolds smiled again and walked over to the campfire. He filled up a tin plate with beans and pork from the kettle sitting in the coals. Then he sat down on a rock to eat and motioned for his brother to do the same. Military discipline was still making itself felt, even though they were far away from all things military.

His hunger satisfied, Reynolds tossed his plate down, walked over to the stream a few feet away, and took a long drink of the cold, mountain water.

Coming back to the fire, he faced his men. "There is a reason for everything we've done. John and I took all the gold and silver and put it away in a safe place.

"We haven't killed anyone, we haven't stolen any horses, and we haven't harmed any women — we haven't done anything that is a hanging crime. If we are caught, and that is likely with the whole country out looking for us now, we can spend our time in jail and then come back to get our treasure. But if we keep it around here, or divide it up and we are caught, then we lose everything. I'm not trying to put anything over on you, but am just looking out for all of us."

No one knows just what Captain Reynolds really had in mind when he and his brother buried their gang's loot. But he was persuasive and the men accepted his explanation. Unknown to the Reynolds gang however, the posse which had been tracking them was silently surrounding the outlaws' hideout during the confab that was going on there.

The outlaws were loafing around the fire in front of their rough cabin. Captain Reynolds was busily engaged in digging gold out of one of the cans from the last holdup when he stopped and listened intently. Perhaps some sixth sense was trying to warn him of the danger closing in on them. He turned to Singletray, "Owen, why don't you take a look around? We should have someone watching the trail."

Sergeant Singletray stood up, hitched up his gunbelt, and fell to the ground, instantly killed by a bullet between the eyes.

THE outlaws were not given a chance to surrender. Bullets from the posse's rifles plowed up the dirt and buzzed like angry hornets around them. Captain Reynolds shouted, "Take cover — and fight back!" Then he was knocked into the fire with a rifle ball in his shoulder. Leaping up, he dived head first into the underbrush behind the cabin. Close by, the other outlaws had taken cover behind rocks and fallen trees, and they were returning the posse's fire.

John crawled over to his brother and put a crude bandage on his wound. "What do you think, Jim? Think we can hold them off?"

"Near as I can figure we're outnumbered and surrounded. Our only chance is to break out of here and get clean away from these parts." Captain Reynolds was silent for a minute, and he grimaced with pain as he tried to move his arm. "Now listen to me, John. Pass the word around. When I fire my gun we'll fight our way out right through here and on up higher in the hills. Then we'll separate and meet in Denver in a couple of weeks."

Even with the odds against their chances for escape, every man got away. The posse searched the area for the outlaw loot, but in vain. They rounded up the outlaws' horses, and as conclusive proof of their battle with the Reynolds gang, members of the posse decapitated the body of luckless Singletray.

Captain Reynolds and five of his men were captured singly during the next few days. They were taken to Denver where they were tried for their crimes by military authorities, but that is another story. Suffice to say that they were eventually executed, and Captain Reynolds never disclosed the location of the treasure.

John Reynolds and Brown made good their escape by not trying to get down to Denver, but instead, made tracks for Texas.

Although they eluded capture from those who caught their fellow outlaws, another avenger was on their trail. Death caught up to John Reynolds when he and Brown attempted to dig the cache of silver from the packtrain holdup.

There were Mexicans in the vicinity waiting for someone to show up around the place where the ambush had taken place nearly a year before. A running gun battle followed the discovery of their presence by the Mexicans, and John Reynolds was mortally wounded in the fight.

Brown got possession of a crude map that John Reynolds had made showing the location of the treasure cache on Elk Creek. Some two years later Brown put in an appearance in the high country around Fairplay, but he spent considerable time in various jails, and it is known that he didn't find the treasure.

By the turn of the century, estimates of the treasure had reached one hundred thousand dollars and up, but a conservative and more accurate estimate would put the value from twenty thousand to thirty-five thousand dollars, most of it consisting of gold dust and silver. In recent years, there have been as many as two hundred attempts to find the treasure, but the outlaw loot is still here.

The facts and clues about its hiding place prove that it is the simplicity rather than the difficulty, which has prevented the discovery of the treasure. As you know, man will often overlook the most obvious clue in unraveling a puzzle.

The treasure is buried at the headwaters of Elk Creek. The clue to the exact spot of the treasure is a knife blade driven deep into a tree. Not far from this location are the remains of a small cabin, a corral, and a man-made stone barricade. It is true that the years, nearly a hundred of them, will have taken their toll, but these clues are still there to be seen and read by the man who hopes to find the treasure on Elk Creek, that is still in its hiding place waiting for someone. ●

"I'll brain the first one who starts a fight," she declared

Fine Fuel for a Feud

By BEN FRANK

The way Patricia had growed up prettier'n a wagonload of tulips was likely just another of the Nelson' sneaky tricks, Al figured

AT TWENTY-FOUR, Albert Ainsworth Atkins, the Third, was owner of the Lazy A and commonly called Al for short. He was a long, lean young man with close-cut yellow hair, a big mouth and a sense of humor, although at the moment he was scowling somewhat fierce-

ly. Of course, he didn't know about the mistake somebody had made.

"I don't believe it," he said doggedly.

Now ordinarily you think of a mistake as causing trouble. But thanks to the gent who dumped Patricia Nelson's truck off the train at the wrong town, a number of folks likely lived longer than they would have if that trunk had come straight through with Pat.

But to get back to Al, who didn't believe the latest news. It was Kansas Kent, a gaunt, dark-faced bag of bones, who had brought the news to the Lazy A ranch.

"It's the gosh-awful truth!" he declared, spitting gushily. "Pat Nelson has got herself educated and has come back to ramrod the Pine Hill School."

Al Atkins suddenly lost his frown, threw back his yellow head and haw-hawed fit to bust his buttons.

"That homely r e d - h e a d e d squirt a school-ma'am!" he gasped. "Why, I bet the kids run her out in less than a month."

Kansas bit off a fresh chew of eatin' tobacco and didn't say nothing one way or another. The truth is, while riding by the schoolhouse at recess time, he had got a good look at Pat Nelson and he still felt somewhat faint.

"Let's see now," Panhandle Peck spoke up, "she left right after her grandpa died. Five, six years ago. That makes her about twenty, don't it?"

Mug-ear Murphy, the fourth member of the Lazy A crew and a gent who loved a fight like a hog loves corn, lifted his thick shoulders. "Sooner or later," he rumbled, "we're goin' to have to lick Gus Nelson's Flying N outfit."

Suddenly Al's bony, sunburned face darkened again.

"Gus Nelson," he said, referring to the owner of the Flying N, "is a mangy, horse-stealin' coyote!"

"Runs in his family," Panhandle muttered. Panhandle was a sawed-off, whiskery old coot who had worked on the Lazy A when Al's grandpa, Albert Ainsworth Atkins, the First, had owned it. "Never will forget how old Ham Nelson, Gus' granddad, tried to cheat your granddad in that there checker game, blast his hide!"

Cussing, Panhandle hobbled into the kitchen to finish supper.

Al couldn't remember that fateful checker game, although he'd heard plenty about it. But he remembered that old Ham Nelson had been Pat Nelson's grandfather and that Pat and Gus were cousins. Scowling, he turned to Kansas.

"I," Al said stonily, "hope them kids run that skinny Nelson brat out just because she is a Nelson!"

Kansas shifted his scant weight uneasily. "Well," he said, "I don't think they will. She's — "

"Come an' get it!" old Panhandle bawled from the kitchen door, putting an end to the unpleasant subject of the Lazy A's bitter enemies.

The next morning, Mug-ear Murphy discovered that the south windmill had gone haywire. Upon making an investigation, he found that a bolt had come loose, wedged between two gear wheels and ripped a dozen cogs out of one.

" 'Course, that pin could have come out accidental," he muttered. "But to me it looks like a trick one of the Nelson outfit is in the habit of pullin'."

Al and Kansas stood scowling at the broken wheel.

"Them danged ornery skunks!" Kansas exploded. "I've a good mind to sneak over to the Flying N and salt one of their wells."

"Yeah, and get a hole in your head," Al said darkly. "No, sir! You boys keep off the Flying N. This trouble's between me and Gus. One of these days, he'll go one step too far. Then I'll pin his ears back myself!"

WELL, there wasn't anything for Al to do but hitch his bays to the buckboard and head for town to get another gear. Coming to Pine Creek, he found a stray Flying N steer on his side of the stream. Snorting and cussing, he shooed the critter across the water to the Flying

N side. Driving on, he reviewed the aggravating little pranks the Flying N outfit had pulled on the Lazy A during the past fifteen months. By the time he came to the Pine Hill School, he was in a dangerous mood.

He pulled up and gazed at the schoolhouse, listening hopefully for a sound of rebellion coming from within. But all seemed quiet. Well, he thought, give the kids a few weeks and things will be different.

The door slammed open — it was noon — and the kids piled out with their lunchpails. Trailing them, her full skirt swirling about her slim, neat ankles, the wind tossing her bright hair, came Patricia Nelson. And Albert Ainsworth Atkins, the Third, liked to toppled off the sagging spring seat of his wagon.

Five years had sure changed the Nelson brat, all right. She wasn't no longer a skinny, flat-chested imp. No, sir! She had some shape to her. She was the kind of a girl who looks "whooeee!" in a snug sweater. And that wasn't all.

She lifted her face, saw Al, and her soft red mouth puckered into a surprised O. She had gray-blue eyes, wide-set; and Al saw that her freckles were gone and that she was prettier than a wagonload of tulips.

"Al," she said, smiling, "it's nice to see you again!"

Al felt as groggy as a kid on a runaway merry-go-round, but instinctively he pulled his big hat off his yellow hair.

"Howdy, Pat," he managed somewhat huskily.

She came over, put a slim-fingered hand on the front wheel of the wagon and Al caught a whiff of her perfume.

"Gosh," he gurgled, "you've sure changed!"

"So have you," she said, letting her warm, friendly eyes sweep over him in a way that made him all goosepimply. "But I knew you the moment I saw you."

Al got a grip on himself. After all, she was a Nelson.

"Got to be going," he said. "Ain't had my dinner yet."

"Eat a sandwich with me," she invited. "That'll hold you until you get to town."

"So long," Al said in a frightened voice.

"What's the matter?" she asked, her blue-gray eyes laughing at him. "Afraid that because I'm a Nelson, I'll poison you?"

That did it. Al swung a long leg over the seat and hit the ground with a great thud.

"Bring on your sandwich," he said grimly.

She chuckled. It was a nice chuckle. It tingled through Al like sunlight breaking through storm clouds, and he found himself grinning down at her. They sat in the shade on a corner of the porch, and she opened her lunch box and handed him a sandwich.

"I've been wanting to talk to you, Al," she said.

"Glo gloop goo," Al said, his mouth full of bread and beef.

"About this feud between you and Gus," Pat said, frowning. "It seems crazy. Just because Grandpa Nelson and your grandpa got into a wrangle over a checker game twenty years ago — "

"Haw!" Al snorted, scattering crumbs all over the place. "Just when Grandpa Atkins was about to skunk him, your granddad upset the checker board and — "

"It was an accident!" she flared.

"How do you know?" Al retorted hotly. "You weren't there!"

"Neither were you!" Then Pat smiled sweetly and put a hand over his. "Let's not quarrel, Al. There's already too much bad blood between the Nelsons and the Atkinses."

That kind of cooled Al down, but he'd lost his appetite.

"Ever since I came back," Pat went on, "all I've heard from Gus is how mean the Lazy A outfit is. Letting your cattle drift over on the Flying N. Watering your stock — "

"Haw!" Al exploded again. He put down his unfinished sandwich and got to his feet. "You've got things in reverse,

sister. It's the Flying N that lets cattle drift and hogs water. Just last night, one of your outfit wrecked a windmill for us, and — "

"I don't believe it!" Pat cut in.

Al didn't bother to argue with her. He stalked to his buckboard, swung up to the seat and drove away with a clatter.

Shoulders slumped, Pat sat there, watching him. And deep in her heart was a terrible empty feeling.

FUNNY thing, ever since she could remember, she'd been crazy about Al Atkins. She used to dream how one day she and Al would run away and get married, thus ending the feud, and everybody would live happily from then on. Even after she grew old enough to have better sense, she still dreamed about Al. And when Gus had written to tell her she could have the Pine Hill School — well, how was she to know that the old feud had suddenly flared up again?

She sighed dismally and shoved to her feet. Might as well have stayed in the East with Auntie, she thought, and maybe married some office drudge, instead of coming back here.

"Pat," Cousin Gus had told her the day she arrived, "Al Atkins is going to keep fooling around until he makes me so cussed mad I can't see straight. Then, look out!"

One of these days, something would happen to blow off the lid, and then somebody would get hurt. Al, Gus — maybe both. And in either case, Al would be lost to her forever.

As for Al, by the time he'd driven over the first hill, he'd cooled off enough to feel ashamed of himself.

"Me and my big mouth!" he mumbled. "Maybe I ought to go back and apologize, or — "

At that moment, Knobby Knight came riding up from a grove of tall pines.

Knobby was a newcomer to this part of the country. He owned the Triangle ranch, a small outfit which lay to the north of the Lazy A and the Flying N. A thin, stooped little man, he rode up beside the buckboard and grinned pleasantly.

"Al," he observed, "you look as mad as a bull with his tail caught in a barn door. What's eatin' you, boy?"

Al kind of liked Knobby. In the couple years he'd owned the Triangle, he hadn't tried to hog range or use more than his share of water. He was the kind of a gent who went about his own business, trying to build up his herd in a quiet, peaceable way.

"I'm burned to a crisp," Al said. He went on to tell about the windmill and about finding a Flying N steer on his side of the creek.

"Don't blame you for being burned up," Knobby said sympathetically. "Just between you and me, I figure that Nelson outfit is out to get you, boy. If I was in your shoes, I'd try to get the jump on the Flying N."

Knobby rode on toward the Triangle, and Al drove to town. He had forgotten all about returning to the school to apologize.

Thursday was an unbusy day in Knothole, and Al just about had the town to himself. He got the gear wheel, bought a list of groceries for Panhandle and was about ready to depart when Ed Cooley, the depot agent, cornered him.

"Al," Ed said, "Patricia Nelson's trunk got waylaid and came just this morning. She's been hollering her head off for that thing for two weeks. Since you got plenty of room in your wagon, maybe you'd haul it out to her."

For a second, Al was tempted to yell something about not being a dray for any Nelson. But on second thought, he still felt kind of ashamed the way he'd lost his temper with Pat.

"I guess I could take it as far as the school," he said.

That was agreeable with Ed. After all, Ed hadn't expected him to tote it to the Flying N, which was several miles out of Al's way, besides being in enemy territory.

Al drove down to the depot and loaded

the trunk. It was a big black affair, and weighed close to a ton, Al reckoned.

"Whew!" he said, wiping his sweaty face. "What in heck has she got in it? Horseshoes?"

"Mostly books and things for the school, so she said," Ed told him.

Al didn't reach the schoolhouse until almost five. By then, Pat had locked up and gone.

Scowling at the big trunk, Al scratched his yellow head in puzzlement. He couldn't very well leave it out here in the open and he wasn't going to drive to the Flying N and likely get shot at. It never occurred to him that Pat was staying at Joe Barton's place, which was only a half-mile away. He snorted and cussed, trying to make up his mind, and finally wrote a note and stuck it under the door.

The note said: "Pat — brought your trunk, but since you're not here, am taking it on to the Lazy A. Maybe you can send someone for it. Al."

THE Lazy A boys didn't like the looks of that trunk, no two ways from heck was a pup. No, sir! Anything that belonged to a Nelson was poison. Al had lugged the trunk into the bare front room of the ranch house, and now the boys stood around, eyeing it with deep suspicion.

"Maybe something will explode," Kansas allowed.

"Likely full of bedbugs," said Mug-ear Murphy.

Panhandle Peck got close enough to sniff at it. "Can't smell nothin' dangerous," he muttered. "But I figure it would be safer to have it in the bunkhouse."

"Not on your life!" Kansas and Mug-ear yelled, for they slept in the bunkhouse.

"Take it easy, boys," Al said, although he too was kind of suspicious of the trunk. "It won't be here long."

But no one came for the trunk the next day. Or Saturday morning. In fact, no one showed up until Saturday afternoon. Then when the boys were getting so nervous thy could hardly roll themselves a smoke, Pat rode up on a Flying N pony.

At the time, the Lazy A crew was in the barn. They watched Pat in silence as she hurried to the front door and knocked. Getting no response, she opened the door and walked in.

"We better go see she don't burn the house down, or somethin'," Panhandle growled.

Faces somewhat pale, the boys headed for the house, with Al trailing. They eased in and found Pat standing in the middle of the front room, staring about in a shocked way at the bare walls and the curtainless windows.

"How can you stand it?" she said with a slight shudder.

The boys didn't like her attitude, but they waited for Al to make the first move. Al, however, seemed at a loss for words.

"How do you expect to tote that trunk hoss-back?" Kansas asked, breaking the uneasy silence.

Pat looked them over coolly. She was used to cowboys of all sizes and shapes, so the ornery-looking Lazy A outfit didn't faze her. Suddenly she smiled like a burst of sunshine and swung back her bright hair.

"Don't expect to tote it anywhere," she said pleasantly.

In stunned silence, the boys watched her fish a key from her jacket pocket, unlock the trunk and swing the lid up. They half expected to see the devil himself pop out of that trunk. But nothing happened.

"What do you mean, not tote it anywhere?" Al asked hoarsely.

"I'm staying at Joe Barton's," she said. "The Bartons are pretty crowded; no place to put a big trunk like this. Anyway, there's not much here I need. Just books and curtains and things I brought for the school. But since the school already has — "

She let it go at that and began to dig into the trunk.

"You have plenty of room here, Al," she said, dumping an armload of books on a chair. "Whenever I need something,

I can ride over and get it."

"Now wait a minute," Kansas began, but she stopped him with a wide-eyed hurt expression. Then she smiled.

"I remember the school like it was when we went there," she said. "Wouldn't have brought these things if I'd known they'd fixed it up so nice. Humm. These curtains might fit your windows. Have some nice pictures, too. Here's my favorite — a little girl and her big collie. Let's get busy, boys."

The next thing the Lazy A crew knew, they were putting up curtains and hanging pictures. Al, too stunned to protest, found himself rearranging the furniture to suit Pat's fancy.

"Well," she said at last, "this looks more like a home. But there's still plenty to be done, so I'll come back tomorrow."

She put on her jacket, tucked her red curls under her hat and departed. Speechless, the boys stood at the windows and watched her out of sight.

"It's a trick!" Panhandle said hoarsely. "A low-down Nelson trick to spy on us."

"Hey!" Kansas yipped. "Here's a book I read once when I was a kid. *Treasure Island.*"

Everybody crowded around the shelf of books.

"Dang my hide!" Mug-ear exploded. *"The Three Musketeers!"*

They got so busy reading, they liked to never went to bed.

The next day, Pat arrived in time for dinner. She praised Panhandle's cooking until he had to take off his hat or bust the band. The others followed his example and ate bareheaded for a change.

All in all, Pat decided as she rode away from the ranch that afternoon, the day had been a success. A few more visits to the ranch, she figured, and she'd have the whole outfit, including Al, on her side. Yes, the late arrival of the trunk had turned the trick.

A dreamy expression in her eyes, she was so busy thinking about Al that she didn't see Knobby Knight until he rode up beside her.

"You certainly look happy, Miss Nelson," he observed.

Pat laughed softly. "That's putting it mildly, Mr. Knight." And she told him about the trunk.

AS FOR Al and his boys, they sat around the library, as they now called the front room, and talked things over.

"Well," Al said at last, getting red in the face, "she seems mighty nice for a Nelson."

A few days later Pat rode to the Lazy A to get a book for the kids to read at school. Right away, Panhandle got busy mixing up a batch of biscuits. Naturally, by the time supper was over, it was too dark for Pat to ride alone back to the Bartons' place so Al saddled his white-footed roan and rode with her.

"My, isn't it a lovely night!" Pat said.

Al had been so busy looking at her that he hadn't noticed the night. Now he looked around. A full moon; the scattered pines looked as though they were made of silver. There was a chill wind out of the north, but he never noticed that. He tried to think of something suitable to say but couldn't, so he settled for holding her hand. She didn't seem to mind.

They came to the Barton place, and he helped her unsaddle her horse.

"I've enjoyed every moment of the evening," Pat said, "and it was so nice of you to see me safely home."

She tipped her face up expectantly. But all she got from Al was, "Gosh, you're pretty." Then he turned and ran.

Sighing, she went into the house. Oh, well, she couldn't expect too much all at once. But it was nice to know that Al hadn't noticed she'd forgotten to bring along the book she'd come for.

Time moved along. Pat made a number of trips to the Lazy A, and of course Al had to see her safely home each time. Naturally a thing like this couldn't go on forever without people nodding their

heads wisely and talking. Eventually the gossip reached Gus Nelson's ears.

Gus was a whopping big cuss with fiery red hair and a loud hoot of a laugh when he was in a laughing mood. But on a certain morning when he visited the Pine Hill School, he wasn't in a laughing mood.

"What's this I hear about you mixin' with them Lazy A sidewinders?" he demanded.

Meeting his gaze, Pat told him about the trunk.

"We'll fix that," Gus said. "I'll hire Joe Barton or Knobby Knight or somebody to get that trunk for you."

"You'll leave that trunk where it is," she told him firmly.

"What!" Gus yelled. "You plumb loco or somethin'?" He ran his hand through his hair. "Grandpa Nelson would turn over in his grave if he knew you visited them coyotes. Besides, it ain't safe."

"You've got Al and his boys all wrong, Gus," she said quietly. "And if you must know the truth, I've always admired Al. Way back when I was a kid, I — "

"There's nothin' that outfit won't do to cause me trouble!" Gus broke in furiously. "Punch holes in water tanks. Drive their cows over on my grass. Run off with — "

"I don't believe it," she said.

"Ask Al," Gus said. "He'll probably lie out of it, but ask him just the same. I'd like to know what he has to say."

Face white, Pat watched Gus ride away. Again she had that scared, sickish feeling in the pit of her stomach.

In spite of the threat of snow that evening, Pat rode over to the Lazy A. Pleased to see her, the boys ushered her into the library and pulled the best chair up to the fire for her.

"Fresh honey and biscuits," Panhandle said. "How's that sound, Miss Pat?"

"Wonderful!" she said smiling.

Al stood with a shoulder against a door jam, looking down at her and feeling his heart doing flip-flops. She was something, sitting there with the glow of the fire on her cheeks. She was — man, she was — He gave up trying to find the right word for it.

Supper was a huge success, although the boys did notice that Pat didn't seem very hungry. She didn't joke or laugh as much as usual, either. Likely had a hard day at school, they thought, and let it go at that.

Al saddled his roan and rode home with her. He was filled with such a warm glow that he never noticed the biting cold and the threat of snow in the air.

"Al," Pat said abruptly, "Gus stopped in at the school this morning. We had quite a row over my visiting the Lazy A."

All the warm glow left Al. He shivered slightly and pulled the collar of his sheepskin up about his neck.

"There should be some way for you and Gus to patch up your differences," Pat said, reaching out and touching his arm.

Al didn't say yes and he didn't say no. Inside, he felt tighter than a drum.

"Gus is going to town tomorrow," Pat went on desperately, even if she wasn't getting any place fast. "Why couldn't you casually meet him on the street and say, 'Gus, let's bury the hatchet. Let's talk things over.' "

But Al wasn't listening. His eyes were fixed on a red glow in the western sky.

"Hey!" he cut in hoarsely. "I got a couple haystacks down in that meadow!" And he whirled his horse and raced toward the red glow.

FRIGHTENED, Pat followed him. They came up over a ridge and saw the blazing haystacks. And they caught a glimpse of something else — a rider racing away into the darkness toward the Flying N.

"Yeah," Al said bleakly, "reckon I will meet Gus in town tomorrow."

He spurred his horse on toward the fire; but this time, Pat didn't follow. Suddenly she was shivering with cold. She whirled her mount and rode at a fast clip toward the Barton place. She was too frightened to think clearly, but one thing

she knew for sure. She had to beat Gus and Al to town tomorrow and talk with Sheriff Wedge. He had to know that the lid had been blown off, that anything could happen now.

There wasn't a thing Al could do about the fire. Cursing softly, he rode back toward the ridge. Not finding Pat, he guessed that she had gone on home and knew that it was just as well that she had. Face grim, he rode back to the Lazy A.

"Let's saddle up, ride over to the Flying N and bust them bums wide-open!" Mug-ear Murphy said furiously.

Al shook his head. "When you get right down to it, this thing is between me and Gus. Tomorrow, I'll see him in town. I'll call his hand and knock the bloody hell out of him!"

Kansas didn't like that. "The whole danged outfit may be with him," he said. "We'll go with you, Al, just in case."

"We'll take our guns," Panhandle said.

"No guns," Al said. "We don't want to get ourselves hung. We just want to teach them Flying N coyotes a thing or two."

With this, Mug-ear agreed heartily. He was a fists and boots fighter, anyway.

"Al's right," Kansas said. "We don't want to get hung."

There wasn't nothing for Panhandle to do but let the majority rule. But he did mumble something about how in the good old days this business would have been settled with shootin' irons.

On the Flying N, another conference was being held that night. Awful Oberg, Gus' right-hand man, had found one of the Flying N hound dogs deader than a door nail. Upon investigating, he had discovered some poison pellets, used to kill coyotes, scattered not far from the Flying N outbuildings.

Now that hound was a no-good, toothless old critter that might have died a natural death at any moment, and likely did, so he was no loss to anybody. But it was the principle of the thing that aroused the Flying N's fighting blood.

"Them Lazy A grasshoppers have got to be learned a lesson," Bullet-head Byers said grimly.

"Yeah." Pig-eye Page nodded. "First thing you know, they'll be butcherin' our beef right under our noses."

"You boys keep your shirts on," Gus said. "This trouble's between me and Al. I'll probably run across him in town tomorrow. If I do, I'll wham the daylights out of him."

Shouts of protest went up all over the place.

"Why," Awful Oberg yelled — he hadn't had a right good fight for over a year — "why, that whole sneakin' outfit will gang you, boss! You wouldn't have a chance. We'll go along just to see that it's a fair fight."

Outnumbered three to one, Gus conceded reluctantly.

Saturday morning, the little town of Knothole, covered with a thin crust of snow and sparkling under a cold bright sun, looked as peaceful as a Christmas post card. But to Sheriff Wedge, the scene made him think of the coming of doomsday. And the sweat streamed down his round pink face in spite of the cold.

"Boys," he said to his deputies, "we got a bigger chew than we can swaller."

Pat had warned him, all right, that Gus and Al were likely to have it out today, so he'd sworn in an extra deputy. But when he had seen the whole Lazy A crew ride into town from the south and at the same time, had received word that the entire Flying N had arrived from the north, he knew he'd missed the boat. And at heart, he was a peace-loving, unbloodthirsty soul.

"One good thing," a pale-faced deputy observed in a shaky voice, "neither outfit's packin' guns."

Feeling slightly cheered by that information, Sheriff Wedge did the wise thing. He pulled down the shades, found a deck of cards and told the boys to draw up chairs.

"We'll have us a pitch game," he said, "and let nature take its course."

THE two crews met in the middle of an empty and hushed Main Street. They sat in their saddles and glared at each other waiting for someone to start the ball rolling.

Al made the first move. The truth is, the longer he looked at the red-headed Gus, the madder he got.

"Gus," he said, "I've taken a lot off you. But burnin' them two haystacks last night is something I can't let pass. Not that I ain't got plenty of hay left to do me over, but — "

"Al," Gus cut in, his voice deadly, "you're a sneaking, dog-poisoning hyena! And if I was going to set fire to anything, it would be you!"

"Haw!" Al gritted, leaping from the saddle. "Now's your chance to see how much fire you can set!"

Cussing, Gus dismounted, took off his coat and balled his big fists. Then for a moment it looked as if Gus and Al would settle accounts single-handed.

But Mug-ear Murphy couldn't miss a chance like this. Grinning happily, he allowed that Awful Oberg reminded him of a cross between a jackass and a pig wallow. Then Bullet-head Byers said that if he himself was as bony and bow-legged as Kansas Kent, he would go shoot himself. With that, both crews piled from their horses and went to work on each other.

There's still considerable argument as to which side won that fight. However, most observers agree that it would have been a draw if it hadn't been for Sheriff Wedge.

The sheriff let on as if he didn't know there was a fight until after all the boys, including Gus and Al, were so battered and tuckered out they were falling all over their own feet. Then he and his two deputies quit playing pitch and rushed bravely forth to end the fray. Those who could walk were herded into the sheriff's office. Those who couldn't walk were carried to the sawbones' place of business. It cost Al and Gus a hundred dollars each to get themselves and their

men released.

Al and his boys arrived home about dark. They were a sorry looking lot, with more black eyes, bruises and bandages than you could shake a stick at.

"Anyway," Mug-ear said happily, "it was a danged good fight."

"Anybody home?" a voice bellowed, and limping to the door, Al saw Knobby Knight who had driven up in an old springwagon.

"Miss Nelson hired me to come for her trunk and things," Knobby said cheerfully. "Seems she's mighty peeved at you boys for fighting her cousin and his cowhands. Said she never wanted to speak to you again, Al, as long as she lives."

"That's fine," Al said. "That's fine and dandy! I'll pack the trunk, and you tell her I hope she lets the lid fall on her fingers!"

He went into the front room, ripped down the curtains and flung them into the trunk. He tore the pictures from the walls and threw them on the curtains. Then he gathered up books, slammed them into the trunk and banged down the lid. Five minutes later, Knobby and the trunk were gone.

That evening, the boys ate a silent and glum supper. Sunday came, cold, snowy and dismal. The Lazy A hands wandered into the bare front room and stood around, not knowing what to do with themselves and not saying much.

"Dang it all!" Kansas Kent muttered. "I never did finish readin' *Treasure Island.*"

"Sure miss them pictures," Panhandle complained. "Especially the one of that little girl and her dog."

"My ma always had curtains on the windows back home," Mug-ear said, rubbing a big bruise on his forehead.

Snorting with disgust, Al stalked out into the cold. He was burned up plenty, hearing the boys talk like that, but suddenly he felt so downright lonely and miserable himself that he didn't know what to do.

[*Turn page*]

BY THE third day, the Lazy A hands had become so restless and no-account that they weren't worth shucks. So there was nothing else he could do, Al told himself, but go see if he could buy that trunkful of stuff from Pat. Not that he was going to be friendly with a Nelson dame. No, sir! This was purely a business proposition to get things back on an even keel at the Lazy A.

By the time he reached the schoolhouse that afternoon, he was so nervous it never occurred to him that Pat wouldn't be alone. He shook the snow off his hat, opened the door and walked right in. The first thing he saw was the big black trunk. And standing beside it was Gus Nelson, looking meaner than a grizzly with one foot in a bear trap.

"Look who's here!" Gus yelled, clenching his fists.

"Haw!" Al said, heading straight for Gus.

Eyes blazing, red hair flying dangerously, Pat grabbed up a heavy brass bell and ran between them. "I'll brain the first one who starts a fight in my schoolhouse!" she said.

That stopped Al and Gus flat-footed, for that bell looked as though it meant business.

"Now," Pat said when she saw she had control of the situation, "what did you come here for, Al?"

Al shifted uneasily under her burning gaze. "It's like this," he began hoarsely. "The boys miss that trunk with all them things — "

"Then why did you send it to me?" Pat cut in.

"I didn't send it," Al yelled. "You hired Knobby Knight to come for it, so I loaded up everything and — "

"You're batty!" Pat yelled back at him. "I didn't hire Knobby. You hired him yourself. He told me so. And he told me you never wanted to see me again as long as — "

Her voice choked off, and the bell slipped from her fingers and went crashing to the floor.

"Oh, oh!" she said hoarsely. "Good

heavens, boys! How dumb can we be?"

"Dumb?" Al and Gus blinked foolishly at her.

"If you two boys keep on fighting until you run each other out of business, who would be ready to take over? Knobby Knight, of course. With your range and water — don't you see? He's been playing these sneaking little tricks on you two, letting you believe that you were doing them to each other because your grandfathers got into a row years ago."

"Why, that ornery little maverick!" Gus roared, suddenly seeing the light. "Honest to Pete, Al, me and the boys haven't set foot on your place in the last year."

"That holds true for me and my boys," Al said. "Good gosh, Gus, we've been took!"

"Which," Pat said calmly, "just goes to show what a fast-thinking crook like Mr. Knight can make out of an old quarrel and two hard-headed cowboys. And just to make sure that you and I, Al, also carried on the feud, he pulled this trunk trick — and overplayed his hand."

Grinning sheepishly, Al and Gus shook hands. . . .

They had the wedding in the Flying N ranch house. Afterwards, everybody went over to the Lazy A where they had a big wedding feed and a dance. Everybody, except Knobby Knight.

Knobby didn't show up at either place. The sad truth is, he had sold out and moved to another part of the world the minute he heard that Albert Ainsworth Atkins, the Third, and Patricia Nelson were getting hitched.

"Which merely proves," Patricia told her fond and loving husband, "that Mr. Knight is nobody's fool."

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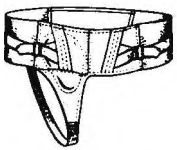

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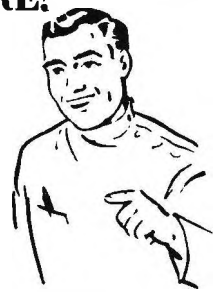

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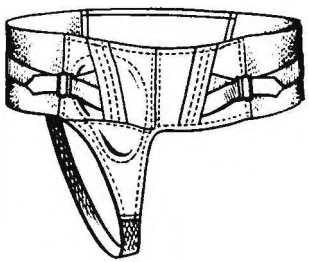

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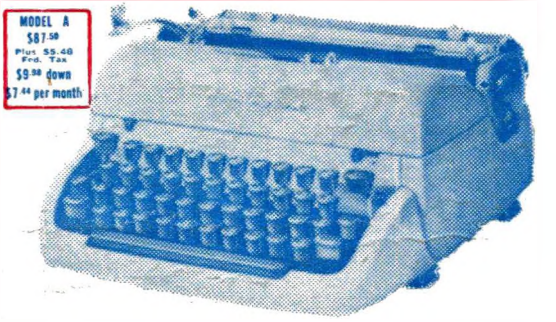

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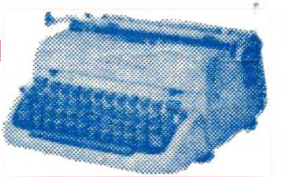

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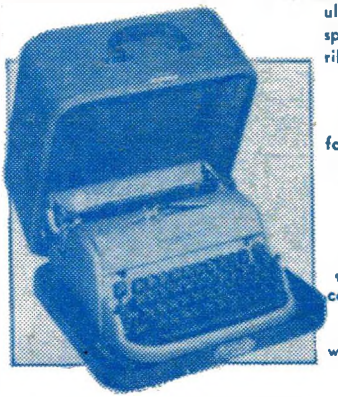

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