OCT.

A DELL MAGAZINE

DELL

35¢

# Zane Grey's WESTERN

complete novel

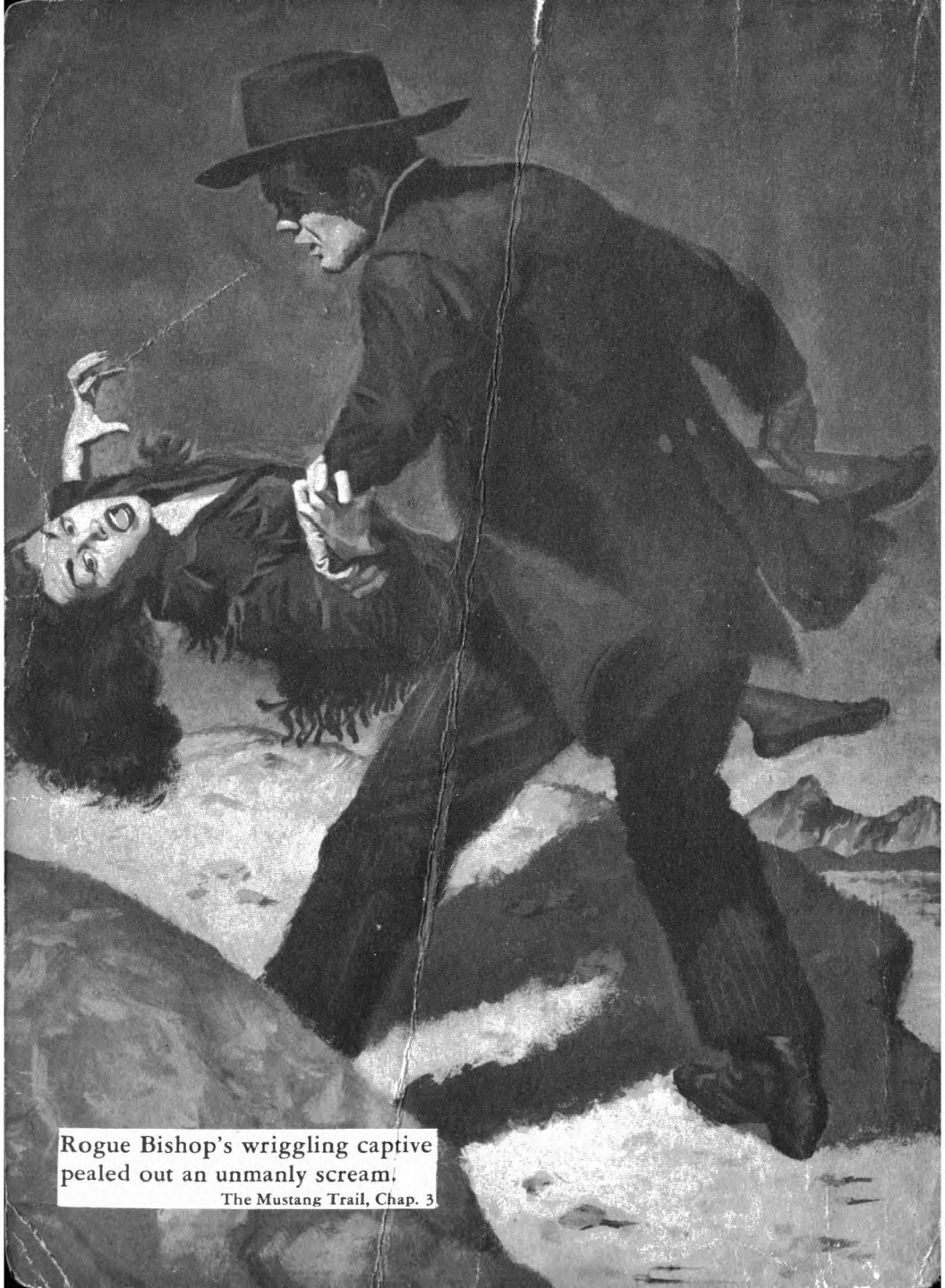
## THE MUSTANG TRAIL

L. L. FOREMAN

DAN CUSHMAN
JOHN E. KELLY
HAROLD PREECE
KENNETH FOWLER
MARVIN DeVRIES
B. M. BOWER


BORDERLAND novelette by GEORGE C. APPELL

DELL
Zane Grey's WESTERN
OCTOBER



Rogue Bishop's wriggling captive pealed out an unmanly scream.

The Mustang Trail, Chap. 3

a magazine
published monthly by
DELL PUBLISHING
COMPANY, INC.
261 Fifth Avenue
New York 16, N. Y.

George T. Delacorte, Jr.
*President*

•

Helen Meyer
*Vice-President*

•

Albert P. Delacorte
*Vice-President*

•

Dan Ward
*Editor*

•

R. Zane Grey
Stephen Slesinger
*Advisory Editors*

•

*by arrangement with THE HAWLEY PUBLICATIONS, INC. Re-entered as second class matter July 2, 1947, at the post office at New York, New York, under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional second class entry at the post office at Racine, Wisconsin. Printed in the U.S.A. Copyright, 1952, by The Hawley Publications, Inc. Address all subscriptions to Zane Grey's Western, 261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y., or to Zane Grey's Western, Poughkeepsie, New York. Address all manuscripts and editorial correspondence to Zane Grey's Western, Room 904, 200 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y. Single copy, 35c; yearly subscription (12 issues) $3.50 in U.S.A. and possessions, and in the countries of the Pan-American Union; $4.00 in Canada; $4.50 in foreign countries.*

designed and produced by
WESTERN PRINTING &
LITHOGRAPHING CO.

# Zane Grey's WESTERN

**Vol. 6, No. 8** **October, 1952**



Cover picture by Bill George—Frontispiece by Phil Marini—Black and white illustrations by Earl Sherwan and Bill Terry

THIS MONTH'S NOVEL: *THE MUSTANG TRAIL*, by L. L. FOREMAN

THE TOWN WAS CALLED HELL'S HUNDRED. *It was near Fort Griffin, overlooking the West Fork Trail that ran up the Texas Panhandle and on through the Cherokee Strip to railhead. It was following the defeats at the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn, and the army was screaming for mounts:*

Who's got a horse that meets army requirements? You need a clear title and a bill of sale—

Okay, soldier—can do! *Plenty of furtive strangers around able to use a pen. First get the horse . . . kill the owner . . . go through his pockets for extras. . . .*

*Here was a new source of revenue, grabbed at by penniless, desperate men. The West Fork got to be known as the Mustang Trail, haunted and watched and beset by horse thieves.*

*Rogue Bishop, top gambler and gun master though he was, should have known better than to mix in such company. But he was out of pocket as the result of a bottle-busting spree, so Rogue took a flyer in horseflesh. Trouble was his trade, Rogue figured—and trouble arrived, in large chunks and from all directions, when he tangled with a grafting officer, a suspicious horse raiser, a pretty gal who could use a rifle and was reputed to be a witch, and a slick-talking gun expert who nursed an abiding grudge against Rogue Bishop.*

*How Rogue juggled one against the other, playing both ends—and a couple of odd angles—against the middle, makes a story of sustained tension and mounting excitement. L. L. Foreman tells it in his customary flavorful style.*

---

In the November issue of

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN

A complete novel about a desert holdup, the kidnaping of a beautiful young bride, and a grim manhunt through the wastelands of the Southwest:

**TEN AGAINST CAESAR**

**by K. R. G. Granger**

*Also:* Marvin De Vries's long pioneer novelette—THE EASTER MUTINY
Another memorable story by Thomas Thompson—THE VIGILANTE
A fun-filled Omar Barker yarn

and many other features. Have your dealer save a copy for you! On sale about September 30.

# THE MUSTANG TRAIL

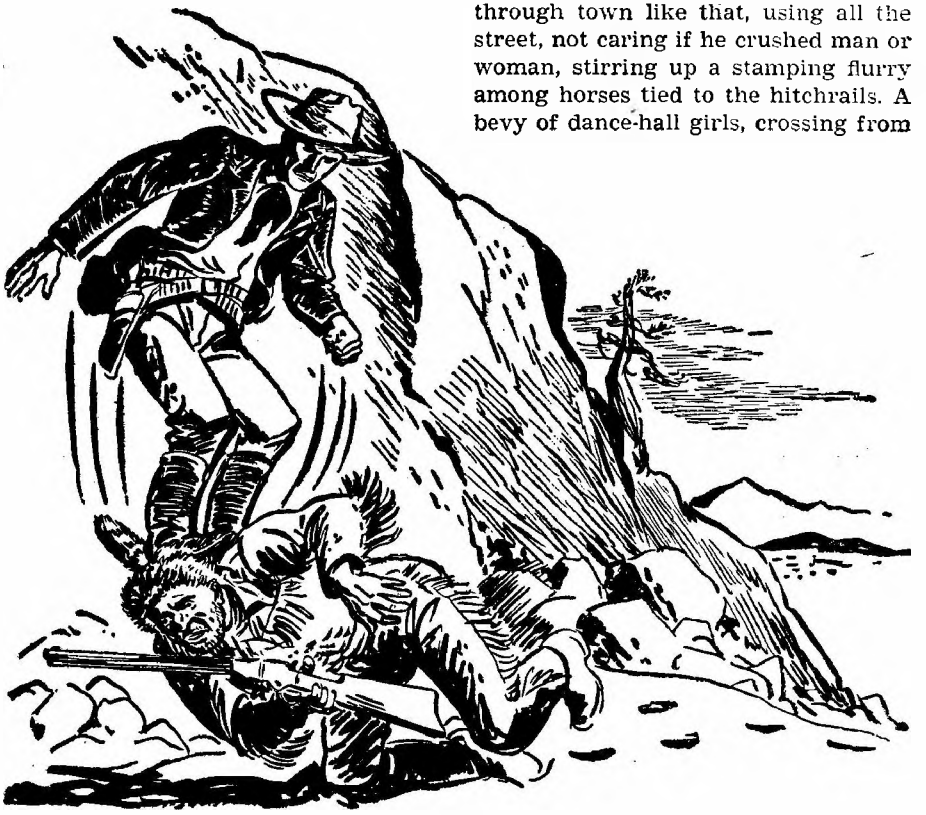
## A Complete Novel by L. L. Foreman

### CHAPTER ONE

*Hell's Hundred*

THE FOUR-HORSE WAGON came banging down the crooked street, wheels slewing crazily in and out of the dry ruts, scooping up storms of dust. It carried a load, canvas-covered and roped down. So did the driver carry a load, but less orderly. His filthy rags of buckskins showed him to be a buffalo tramp—one of the hideously depraved brush-thugs who, without trade, never recognized by any regular skinning crews at any time, called themselves buffalo hunters. His matted mane of coarse black hair proclaimed some Indian blood, most likely Tonkawa. Drink always thickened the heavy features of the Tonkawa strain.

He was just drunk enough to roar through town like that, using all the street, not caring if he crushed man or woman, stirring up a stamping flurry among horses tied to the hitchrails. A bevy of dance-hall girls, crossing from



the Shackelford House to the Bee Hive, scattered, uttering screams and more forceful equivalents. There were few children here below Fort Griffin, and no ladies to speak of.

Emerging from the Brazos Hotel, and also bound for the Bee Hive, Mr. Rogate Bishop glanced up from clipping the end of a fresh cigar with a razor-sharp clasp knife. The wagon rushed at him and he saw the tattered driver grinning like a madman.

Casually agile, Mr. Rogate Bishop jumped back, but not before stroking the knife in a reaching sweep and slicing the near lines clean through. Then, lighting his cigar, he calmly watched to see what would happen.

What happened was plenty, for the rambunctious driver. Being drunk and belligerent, he tried to haul in to fight over the matter. His off lines swerved the half-wild, racing team. His wagon sideswiped Murphy's Bar and crashed into the Star Hall at the bend, and he kited off headlong among the floundering horses. By the time he scrambled clear of that tangle, Murphy and the Star Hall proprietor were out demanding payment for damage—with sawed-off shotguns cocked for argument.

"That was neat!" one of the dance-hall girls called to Bishop, and the others sent him looks of warm approval.

But his mind was on poker. He touched the wide brim of his black Stetson to them and went on over into the Bee Hive. There, soon deep in the constructive enterprise of matching cards into profitable sequences, he forgot the matter.

It was only an incident. Should repercussions happen to follow, he would handle them as they came along. In a place like Fort Griffin it wasn't possible to avoid occasional trouble and still enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of fortune. Something was forever cropping up. All you had to do was be ready twenty-four hours of the day.

"One," Bishop murmured, dealing. He drew to three jacks and a kicker, and filled, not to his surprise.

This time, he mused, a loaded six might be needed to clinch the pot. The rusty-haired young Texan across the table, for one, was growing restless, running out of chips. And, come the six-gun debate, Rusty would have help on his side. Besides the three other ducks in the game, there were quite a few hard-faced boogers in the Bee Hive who bitterly resented Bishop's unbroken run of luck since his arrival some days back. And the local law, such as it was, definitely bent not in his favor.

Well, that was the way it generally ran. He had packed his winnings out of other tough towns.

THE FORT PROPER, and a big store, stood on a hill above the town and overlooked the West Fork Trail that ran up the Texas Panhandle and on through the Cherokee Strip to railhead. It had been built as an army outpost against reservation-shunning Indians. The town below had sprung up haphazardly as headquarters for the hunters engaged in exterminating the so-called Southern Herd of buffalo.

Since the wipe-out of the buffalo, the town had become a hellhole of buckskin tramps out to murder any man for a dollar, wild trail hands stopping over for a fast whirl, cattlemen fighting for the buffalo-cleared range, soldiers

swaggering on the prod. Freighters and teamsters, a knuckly crowd. And a dangerous sprinkling of badmen and outlaws, thieves and killers from everywhere. They had to drift and congregate wherever the law was loose, farther and farther down, staying a jump ahead of tracks scored on dark back trails.

Somebody once had named the town Hell's Hundred Acres. That soon was shortened to Hell's Hundred—meaning the number of dives and deadfalls. No man owning anything worth stealing went unarmed, or walked alone in the night.

To top it all, the fort on the hill now was buying horses, all it could get. There had been the lost battles of Powder River and the Rosebud, and the stunning disaster of the Little Big Horn. General Custer of the 7th Cavalry—George Armstrong Custer, the undefeatable Long Hair—was gone to glory with nigh three hundred troopers. The proudly victorious Sioux and Cheyenne were on the rampage.

Remounts urgently needed for the increased army! Bring on your mustangs! If they're fit for cavalrymen to ride against the hostiles—bring them on! Fort Griffin and a dozen more army posts of the West are buying horses to remount the broken and vengeful 7th, the 5th, the army in urgent haste to take to the field on combat campaign.

Here was a new source of revenue, badly needed by penniless and desperate men. Who's got a horse that meets army requirements? The army demands a clear title and bill of sale. Okay, soldier; can do. Plenty furtive strangers around able to use a pen. First get the horse. Kill the owner. Go through his pockets for extras.

The West Fork, in less than half a year, was already known as the Mustang Trail, haunted and watched and waylaid by horse thieves who could tell at a glance if a horse would meet army specifications: sixteen hands and solid color, good build, sound wind, gentled so it at least wouldn't hit the moon at the flap of a saddle blanket.

"RAISE TEN," said Bishop.

The red-topped Texan had just ten white chips left. "Call!"

Bishop spread his hand and leaned back. The others, two boss freighters and an ambitious tinhorn, had dropped out. The Texan scraped his chair and stood up, reading Bishop's full house. He was young and tough, too shabby-dressed to be bucking a no-limit game. He hadn't started with much—four hundred dollars, all gone.

He said, "Where I grew up they shoot men for doin' that!"

Bishop returned moderately, "Where you grew up they should learn not to bet into a one-card draw." And then he too came to his feet.

He was tall and severe. His black coat, unbuttoned, allowed sight of two belts studded with rows of brass cartridges. That was for kindly warning. His black hat, fingered down on the right side of the broad brim, gave a rakish hint to his austere air. He had a muscled face, strong and dark, from which a pair of slate-gray eyes glimmered cold query at the world.

Right now his eyes pinned on the Texan, yet there was the impression that they were missing nothing of what else went on in the crowded barroom. A man could never let down,

once he started this kind of life, and he had got started on it long ago and made enemies in many strange quarters.

The Texan finally jerked his lean shoulders and walked off. The game broke up then. Hungrily watched by hostile eyes, Bishop gathered his chips and cashed them in.

He was standing at the bar when the Texan ranged up alongside and admitted, "I didn't actually spot any flim-flam there on your deal. It was too fast for me."

"Luck's a fast lady," observed Bishop. "Surprising how she comes through, with a little—hum—encouragement."

The Texan inclined his head in polite agreement. "My name's Delaney. Friends call me Red, for some reason."

"Bishop, me. Rogate Bishop."

Red Delaney made a wry mouth. He turned away, and swung back again, sighing, "A town full o' poker tables—an' I buck 'Rogue' Bishop's game! What did I do to deserve that?"

"You only dropped four hundred," Bishop said. "If it hurts so bad, I'll loan it back to you."

"Mr. Bishop, those words are hard for me to swallow!"

"Wash 'em down with a drink."

"Thanks. You pay for it. As of now, I can't."

They drank together. Red Delaney set his emptied glass on the bar and said, "I've got a paying proposition for a man with some ready money."

Bishop nodded. "Hum!" These Texans—insulted by an offer of cash, but ready to trade you out of it!

"I'm dead broke," said Red, which to Bishop was needless and uninteresting information. "I started out from Refugio with horses to sell to the army, an' the first night out a gang o' stampeders got every one of 'em. I came on here to watch for 'em to show up. I had a few hundred dollars. Spent some. You cleaned up the rest."

"Offhand, I'd say you're in bad luck."

"Seems so, for a fact, this trip. But I don't put too much stock in luck, tell you the truth."

Neither did Bishop. Not too trustingly. Nerve and trained hands, plus a disregard for risky consequences, were more reliable, more faithfully productive of results. He had scuffed deep tracks, carelessly scored up a notorious reputation, and yet stayed always himself—a cool, remote kind of man with a private and peculiar sense of humor; essentially a lone wolf who bet straight on his own ability to boot fortune into line with his own desires.

Red asked him, "D'you happen to know of a place called the Sandhole, way down the trail at Guadalupe River? It's a low patch o' fine sand, hard-packed 'cept when the river rises an' flows over into it. Then the Sandhole becomes a quicksand. That's not often. A kind of mushroom-shaped rock sticks up on the far side. 'Bout ten years back some Indians—'Paches, I guess—used that for a trap."

Bishop motioned to a bartender to make free with the bottle, and paid for it. "What trap?" The subject didn't come near to touching his interest, but he had won money off this chump and guessed he owed him some slight consideration.

"Man trap," Red said. "An Indian girl would stand up on that rock, no clothes on, and entice a passing traveler to—uh—to sort of investigate. Well, a quicksand, you know how it is. Looks solid, till you step in it. When the man tried to struggle clear, these 'Paches

came out an' slipped an arrow into him an' let him sink. They saved his horse an' saddle. Got several that way, before the Sandhole dried out again. The Indian girl was a *chisera*—a witchwoman. The rock's been called Crazy Chisera Butte ever since."

"She wasn't so crazy," remarked Bishop. "But you are, if you fancy you're pretty enough to stand naked up on a rock like a siren enticin' the weary—"

"Whoa!" Red protested. "Listen! My uncle got caught there. He was heading back home, after selling a beef herd up at Dodge, an' the *chisera* waved to him an' he—"

"Old goat!"

"Well, maybe he thought she needed help," Red argued, with faint conviction. "He was a gentleman, my Uncle Wesley. Anyhow, down he sank in that quicksand with all his money on him. All right, the Sandhole's dry as a bone now. All we do is hire a crew to dig—"

"We what?" Bishop interrupted. "Why, you sacrilegious son!"

Red worked his jaw for a moment, chewing down a cud of temper. He said, after taking a drink, "I'd see to it that my Uncle Wesley, and any other bodies we found, got decent Christian burial. We'd split the money, fifty-fifty. I don't see anything wrong in that."

"My eyesight's too good," murmured Bishop. He hadn't any desire to invest his money in a grave, wet or dry. "Digging for corpses—no, grave-robbing is out o' my line."

Swallowing again, Red remarked, "I'm surprised you're more fussy than I am, considerin' who you are!"

Bishop rolled a broad shoulder. "I draw the line at—hum—ghouls!"

"And I," said Red in the softest of Texas drawls, "draw the line at you callin' me that!" He lashed a terrific punch for Bishop's jaw.

Cat-quick, Rogue Bishop fended it off with his left forearm, followed through with a driving thrust, and swung around for business. He wasted no motion.

Shoved back onto his worn-over high heels, Red for that instant was wide open to receive what was coming. He got it—Bishop's right fist, wickedly accurate, full between the eyes. The Texan hurtled rearward, spilling men and drinks half the length of the bar. While he lay goggling, the Bee Hive buzzed into action.

Setting off a riot in Hell's Hundred never called for much special effort, day or night, and here in the crowded Bee Hive were sharp-edged men with tempers easily jarred. Texas trail hands and soldiers nursed a mutual antipathy. Freighters, thundering lords of the road, were touchy when caught afoot. Buffalo tramps and half-breed Tonkawas, despised for their debauched poverty, were always eager to jab a knife into anybody. And the tinhorn sharks held a common grudge against Bishop.

Beginning with the upset customers, the free-for-all exploded, everybody savagely pitching in to knock off a score. Bishop got his back to the bar and struck out at all who charged within reach. It hadn't been any part of his intention to raise this frolic, but such spontaneous eruptions were too common to disconcert him. In a sardonic fashion he was appreciating the mad humor of it—until a tinhorn cheaply flung an empty bottle that just missed nailing him on the ear.

"Eh?" he growled, dodging another. "Bottles?" He had a thousand of them behind him, more or less. Full ones, at that.

Booting a bellowing muleskinner out of his way, he vaulted the bar. He helped himself from the tier of backshelves, and—while the bartender howled anguish—sent bottles flying to where they could do the most good. The crash of each bottle punctuated the uproar, and the swing-doors began banging, tamer souls hurriedly seeking the sunny street. He could keep this up as long as the supply lasted.

A big-hatted cowman, taking matters too seriously, dug out a Dragoon .44 and cocked it in Bishop's direction. Bishop took him up on that. He brushed his coat back and a blue gun barrel flashed dully, spurted brightly, and the big hat flipped. The cowman grabbed for it, and a second bullet cut the brim, an inch from his fingers, and he let it go. He knew when to quit fooling with a gun master. So did several others.

The doors creaked busily. That big devil behind the bar was getting a little severe. He tipped a shot at the pool table. The cue ball went wild and englished all over the baize. When it rolled hobblingly to rest, badly chipped, the Bee Hive was occupied mainly by some Texans and a few unconditioned unfortunates on the floor, including Red Delaney.

An army major appeared from somewhere, stared sternly around, and marched out, snapping, "No more of that, now!" Nobody took notice of him.

Bishop asked the Texans, "What'll you have, gents? I'm in the position to serve anything you want as long as it's whisky."

"Make it whisky," they grinned, and peace and good will returned to the Bee Hive.

The bartender took over the job of serving. Bishop inquired the amount of his bill, and the bartender did some rapid accounting in his head.

"Fifteen hundred dollars squares the damage."

"Okay, thief." Bishop paid. "Somebody hoist Mr. Delaney up to the bar so's he can join us in the next round."

He noticed, through a front window, that the major had halted outside and appeared to be waiting for somebody to come out of the saloon. The major fidgeted restlessly, darting impatient glances at the swing-doors. Bishop saw no possible connection between that and the brawl, though. He had no reason to believe he was the awaited one, either—until the major came close to the window, caught his eye, and beckoned to him.

BISHOP HAD ONE MORE DRINK and left the Bee Hive. The officer fell in step beside him.

"I am Major Jennisk," he stated in his thin, snapping voice.

"My name's Bishop."

"Yes." Major Jennisk nodded. He didn't offer his hand. "I am impressed by the way you handled that mob of ruffians in there. Considerably impressed. Let's go up the hill. I want to talk to you."

Bishop lighted a cigar and said nothing. At a glance he checked off Jennisk as a desk soldier. This soft-skinned man, with his pursy little mouth and piping voice, couldn't be imagined as a field officer leading hard-bitten cavalry, guidons proudly whipping, sabers aloft in the rush of a charge, bugle blaring. His polished boots were unmarked by any wear of stirrup straps. His blues and bright shoulder straps and campaign hat could not remove from him the look of a paunchy businessman.

No mistaking his kind. The Army of the West had a share of them and they

ran to type. Commissions won on the political field; fussy administrative jobs—while the rank and file fought to keep the trails open, fought the feathered tribesmen, trooped half-dead back to the post and rode doggedly out again, cleaned carbines loose in saddle-boots.

When well out of Hell's Hundred and walking slowly up the hill toward the fort, Major Jennisk spoke again. "A man of your caliber, Bishop—you're wasting your talents. There are better things than gambling."

Bishop removed his cigar and spat out a flake of tobacco. "Such as?"

"Such as obtaining horses for the army," Jennisk responded promptly. "A worthy and—ah—patriotic occupation, particularly now. The army badly needs them. I have an order to buy up to a thousand head, for General Crook, and Mackenzie, and Miles. Provided, of course, the horses meet requirements. I haven't been able to fill half the order so far, and I am in receipt of —ah—pressing communications in reference to the subject. Hem!"

Again Bishop kept silent, inwardly speculating as to where this was leading.

Jennisk frowned irritably. In a moment he said, "A man came to me a few days ago, saying his crew was camped far down the trail with three hundred good horses. He had come on up to see into the selling prospects. From the way he went about it, I judged he didn't have a clear title to them. But in the light of the army's need, I—ah—decided to stretch a point."

He paused. His sharp round eyes swept sidelong over Bishop's impassively hard face. He cleared his throat and went on, "I offered to buy his horses. I offered him twenty-five dollars a head."

"What's the regular price for army remounts?" inquired Bishop. He knew the answer. His speculations were reaching to conclusions.

Hesitantly, Jennisk replied, "Hundred and twenty-five."

Bishop did some mental figuring. He quirked a dark eyebrow at the result. "Hum! Three hundred horses, that price, cost the army thirty-seven thousand an' five hundred dollars. Right? But at twenty-five a head it comes to seven thousand five hundred. Who'd get the thirty thousand? You? Man, there *are* better things than poker! Graft, for one!"

Something distasteful puckered Jennisk's small, loose lips. "I call it business! The army would get its horses, paying no more than the regular price. That fellow would have done well to sell his stolen horses at twenty-five a head." His eyes narrowed. "Damned rascal cursed me and walked out! He'll pay for that!"

"Know his name?"

"Oh—Smith, he said. False, of course." Jennisk brought his eyes around again to Bishop. He declared with slow emphasis, "My offer is still open. Twenty-five dollars a head for those horses. And I don't care who delivers them!"

Bishop shook his head. "Not enough. I'd need to hire a fighting crew—"

"No," Jennisk broke in. "Your crew is already hired. At my expense. They're captained by a buffalo hunter named Hump. They're camped near a place called the Sandhole. Hump is a tough dog, but crazy like most of his breed. I can't rely on him. But I'll have to, unless you go down there and take charge. The job calls for a good man, a man who can handle a bad mob." He gnawed his lower lip and said reluctantly, "Thirty a head."

Bishop reconsidered. Raiding a horse-thief camp didn't clash with his broad-minded principles, and his pockets were light since paying for the Bee Hive damage.

"Forty," he said. "I've got to take along some horse-wise jigger who knows that country down there. Got the right boy in mind, but he's a damned Texan an' I'll have to offer him more'n a few dimes."

"Thirty-five!"

"Major, you've bought three hundred horses for the Army of the United States of America—a worthy an' patriotic occupation!"

## Chapter Two

### *Crazed Allies*

RIDING south down the last stretch of Plum Creek to the Guadalupe River, Red Delaney remarked to Bishop that they would soon be reaching the Sandhole. Red said it wistfully. He had not given up the idea of excavating Uncle Wesley and various other defuncts, and giving them all decent burial. With profit.

But the Sandhole held no interest for Bishop. Its corpses could forever lie undisturbed, as far as he was concerned. Their cash value was speculative, probably nil. He dealt as a rule in ventures more positive of results, such as drawing to three jacks and a kicker, himself dealing. Still, the Sandhole meant meeting up soon with the Hump gang. He allowed himself to become interested to that extent, meantime deploring his dwindling stock of cigars.

Along here the trail grooved an immensely wide and shallow ditch, a dry brown scar cut by northbound Texas herds. Skulls and ribbed skeletons of cows and horses, toothed bare by coyotes, marked this road of march. At day's-travel spaces were the great bare patches of the bedding grounds with their broken monuments of abandoned wagons—stripped of ironware by Indians—where the Texas longhorn outfits had camped for a night.

"It wouldn't be much work," Red said, deep in his thoughts, "to get 'em out. Plain diggin', that's all. Uncle Wesley, I bet, was weighed down with all o' fifty thousand—"

"To hell with your uncle!" growled Bishop. Four days in the saddle and he had enough of this affair. He was cogitating ways to better it. Jennisk would go to forty. Fifty. Sixty? Jennisk had to fill his order. Jennisk was hungry for his graft. Seventy or eighty? Hell, no man owed any loyalty to a shifty jasper like Jennisk. That toad.

Red grinned and said, "Okay, friend! But I know what I'll do with this stake, if I get it." He broke that off. "Strangers ahead!" he warned—unnecessarily, Bishop having already noted, counted, and sized up the riders coming forth to meet them.

A down-at-heel crew, this. They wore blackened tatters of buckskins and rode rib-raw Indian ponies. But all carried a shining new Henry repeating rifle slung across the saddle, and a belted pistol and long skinning knife. Frowzy and unwashed, most of them wore dirty head-rags to hold back their unkempt hair.

"Phew!" Red breathed. "What hell's door did this pack o' wolves break out of?"

Bishop said, a cold detachment in his voice, "Hump's crew, I guess." And then in irony, "If that big duck in

front is Hump, your luck's still out! I croppered him in Hell's Hundred, an' I doubt he's ready to overlook it."

"Your luck, too, Mr. Bishop, seems to have slipped!"

"On this deal, Mr. Delaney, I didn't shuffle the cards."

Bishop's tone carried no hint of worry, but his eyes glimmered like tarnished silver wiped across by a reflection of flame. This was a bad break. By their looks the oncoming rabble had been getting in some hard drinking lately.

They met on the cattle-carved trail and pulled to a stand, without a word or sign of greeting. Into Hump's gross face washed a look of recognition, swiftly followed by scowling rage. His right hand slid down, while he wrenched his pony broadside, and by that motion he made clear his intention. It was a drunken maneuver.

Bishop drawled harshly, "Wup—snub it!" And he brushed back his coat. He watched until that groping paw slowly came up empty, and he drew out a folded paper. "This is for you, if you're Hump. And if you can read."

Hump could read, after a fashion. His thick lips worked on the words of Jennisk's brief message. He raised a wildly bitter glare.

"Says you're cap'n!" Intolerable resentment gusted a curse from him. His cutthroat gang leaned forward, glowering, catching his temper, without comprehension of its cause. "*You!*"

"Right!" said Bishop, and he too leaned forward in his saddle. A startlingly satanic smile creased his dark face. "Me!" He knew the breed of badman he had to deal with, and was gambling for prompt dominance. Nothing less would do. "You don't like it? If that's the case, we'll iron your objections out right now!"

Red Delaney held his breath. Hump's gang numbered seventeen; well armed, made into savages by barbarous living and drink and natural bent. Brush-thugs. And there sat Rogue Bishop, smiling his devil's smile, throwing arrogant challenge at their leader. It was enough to make the imps of chance weep.

And yet, his crazed glare dimming, Hump sighed heavily and looked away from Bishop's eyes. The fury banked for the time, he muttered raggedly, "I don't like it, but if the major says so—"

Bishop demanded at once, "Where's the horse-thief outfit?"

Hump pointed his chin downriver. "This side, a rifle shot b'low Sandhole, 'bout. They don't know yet we're here."

"They'll know tonight!"

"What? Not till I git more men. That's a border outfit. Tough. They know their business."

"So do I," said Bishop. He stared out the black, bloodshot eyes. "I'm giving orders, Hump. First we'll take a look at their camp. Push on!"

Riding with Bishop behind the shabby desperadoes, Red exclaimed hushedly, "Man, oh, man! The pick of a thorny crop! An' we work with 'em? I'd as lief prance barefoot in a nest o' rattlers! Notice the new rifles?"

Bishop nodded, thinking of Hump's wagon rocking down through the street of Hell's Hundred. Without doubt, its canvas-covered load had been firearms and whisky, supplied by Jennisk, probably at government expense.

Hump's venom spread out and settled into the brute minds of his followers. They kept fiddling with those new .44 Henry rifles and peering back at Bishop and Red—behavior most impolite in Western country. Bishop began

building up a definite dislike for Jennisk.

As for Red, he tugged his holster forward, yanked his battered Stetson down firmly, and mumbled something about if only Uncle Wesley could see him now. So they passed the Sandhole and the mushroom-shaped rock called Crazy Chisera Butte, and drifted carefully in under the cottonwoods along the Guadalupe River.

THE SMITH HORSE-THIEF outfit had picked a good site for a camp. It was a long clear meadow running up over a rise at the next bend of the river, flanked by thick brush. The men didn't need to spend much time keeping the band of horses from straying.

They appeared to be unhurriedly packing up, preparing to break camp. They were big-hatted, lean men, and moved with that languid agility of riders of the border country where heat imposed economy of action. They would hit the trail *mañana*. No rush. *Poco tiempo*—you lived longer.

Bishop watched for a minute from the cottonwoods, then told Hump, "Take your mob and circle wide around. Time it so you edge in at sundown. The moon will come up 'bout an hour later. In that hour, while it's dark, we get those horses. I'll fire twice, for signal. You all sing out like the law, and shoot high, but stay in cover. Those hombres are way off their home range, and it's a fair bet they'll scoot if they think you're Rangers or a posse o' deputies. So don't let 'em see you, or they won't be fooled worth a damn!"

Hump lifted a corner of his upper lip. "An' what'll you two be doin'?"

"We'll be way forward on the bottom slope o' that meadow," said Bishop, "ready to turn back any who might head north to give us trouble later on the trail. Now get goin'—an' don't botch the trick!"

His cool presumption, necessary and dangerous, lighted a repetition of the wild glare. Hump sucked in a noisy breath. His fingers spoked out and stiffly clawed air. Then he whirled around and grunted to the listening group, and he and they drifted off, Apache-quiet.

When they were gone, like malevolent ghosts, Red muttered, "And after this—then what? They'll knife us, first chance!"

"If we give 'em the chance," agreed Bishop. "We'll try not to do that."

There were hours to wait before dark. They rode part way back to the Sandhole, picketed their horses and aired the saddles, and ate scraps of dried beef. No coffee. A fire was out of the question. They sneaked a smoke, though, squatting on their heels tiredly after the long trek down from Fort Griffin. On that trek Red had come to know the gunfighter's long silences and to respect them, and he didn't speak.

At last Bishop crushed an inch of burning cigar into the earth, thoroughly, and murmured, "Let's go, Red."

That casually natural use of his nickname was quietly pleasing to Red. He realized the caliber of company he was in. It meant something to have this self-contained lone wolf of a man call him Red without thinking of it.

Red responded, rising, "Okay." Then, feeling that this was not enough: "I'm ready, Rogue."

They left their horses on picket and went afoot to the spot where Hump

had parted from them, and from there crawled forward to the bottom of the sloping meadow. A patch of dwarf willows tempted them on farther, and they crept in, and waited. Voices came down to them, and they heard somebody breaking deadwood. Those sounds sank to comfortable murmuring around a cookfire torched against the graying sundown. The western glow faded swiftly toward the brief twilight that in twenty minutes would be blackness.

Twenty minutes to go. Red glanced at Bishop for some sign of strain, and saw only a calm meditation. Chewing on a fresh cigar, unlighted, Bishop was passing the time in trimming a broken fingernail with his clasp knife.

Red rolled his shoulders restlessly. Horses were his line. He could take care of himself, but trouble was not his trade, as it was with Bishop. This hawk-faced gun master simply accepted peril as a normal part of his life; a gambling hazard.

With the light yet a deep blue-gray, Bishop was still scraping his fingernail when mischief broke loose. At the first shuddering yell he sprang up—and saw disaster. It caught him unready; yet he could not blame himself for that. All logical prophecy had to be predicated upon sanity, and the keenest intelligence could not predict the actions of a whisky-sodden maniac.

Mounted men—Hump's ragged riders—dashed out at the horse herd. Yelling, waving blankets, they streamed against the sky line. For one moment they were howling demons bursting through the gloom, all the startled horses strained up and point-eared. Then abruptly the mad confusion: the whole horse herd thundering downhill in panic, men running from the cookfire. The horses smashed through the camp and came charging on, the roar of them drowning the yells, shouts, shots. They formed a hurtling mass calculated to trample to shreds any live thing in their path.

Bishop and Red turned and ran, their only thought to reach their picketed mounts ahead of the oncoming horde. It was a forlorn bet. They heard the hoofs crash through the dwarf willows behind them, and they both spun around. Red squalled, waving his arms, while Bishop blazed two guns empty over the bobbing wave of heads.

The stampeded band split and passed them, came together again, and boomed on. Their dust fouled the air. Half blinded, coughing and choking, the two men pushed on in the wake of it, knowing what to expect from this insane catastrophe. There was no hope of finding their horses waiting. Soon, Red's desperate laugh and flinging gesture put the final stamp on it.

Where they had picketed there was nothing but hoof-scuffed emptiness. Their mounts had snapped ropes and gone bolting off when the frenzied bunch came slamming through the dusk. Far up ahead the drumming fell to a splashing rattle. The horses had struck the river somewhere and were churning across, in nightmare fear of the howling spooks.

With the decline of that racket the descending night grew relatively quiet. Bishop and Red stood listening. Scattered shots carried the news that the border men had not fled far. The firing suddenly increased, and now there intruded the rocking thump of riders tearing down the open meadow. Hump's rabble or the border men, it made little difference.

Bishop strode off fast. There were times when a man hunted cover, if he

had any sense, and this was one of them. Red shared that unspoken opinion.

They hurried to the Sandhole and crunched across it to the big mushroomed finger of rock. The fringe of the horse herd had swerved this way and broken the surface crust. Boot tracks in the pounded sand would be hard to pick out in the near-darkness. They clambered up onto the top of Crazy Chisera Butte, lay flat with guns drawn, and Red whispered wryly that this would be a handy time for the river to overflow and sink those coming riders.

The riders were some of Hump's gang. They hauled in close to the rock, and one of them got down to examine the sand. But it was too dark now for him to read anything from the track, and he cursed and remounted. After some muttering indecision they rode back toward the sound of gunfire.

Red wiped his face on his sleeve. "Guess they'll wait for moonlight, eh? Or maybe till morning, if that Smith outfit keeps 'em busy tonight. Man, did those horses run! Just like they knew exactly where they were going. Well—it's farewell to *that* stake! You sure took on a sweet bargain, mah fren'! Don't you reckon, now, just between us, that diggin' sand might've been easier?"

Bishop's eyes glinted in the dark. "One more reference to your lamented uncle, an' you'll join him in peace everlasting!" The gun master wasn't in a good humor. This rampaging night wrecked the promise of profit. Worse, he was set afoot—a shameful bobble for a man with self-respect. "Let's get off this damn rock an' hunt our horses."

Red brought up a remark concerning the hunting of needles in a haystack. "They're miles off in any direction 'cept up, an' still going! Our saddles have slipped under their bellies, an'—"

"You got a brighter idea?" Bishop growled.

Red hadn't, so they climbed off the rock and headed in the direction taken by the runaway horse herd, saying no more because their tempers wouldn't stand anything like argument. The moon crept up and laid long shadows while they trudged, and at last they met the river where it bent the trail.

Here the low bank was freshly tramped to mud. On the far side reared a barrier of flat-topped cliffs sheering a plateau. In the slanted moonlight the curve of the river ran a great silver bow, disciplined by the cliffs and the contour of the land. It spread wide, and for that reason could be judged shallow. The horses had forded it.

Bishop and Red unbuckled gun belts and neck-slung them and started wading. There was a chance that the horses had been brought to halt somewhere along the foot of the cliffs yonder.

Against the moon-silvered surface of the river the two men threshed blackly like bears in brittle-bush. A rifle spanged sharply down at them, twice. Two bullets sprayed water just before them. While the echoes of the shots rattled up and down the river, Red floundered back to the muddy bank, talking half-aloud to himself. There, breathing hard, he looked around at Bishop.

Standing waist-deep in water, Bishop held the cliffs under dour inspection. He splashed onward a couple of steps. The rifle lashed a third shot that plonked narrowly to his left. He backed, joined Red in the mud. They exchanged stiff glances. They had to get hold of horses before morning.

Bishop said, "I got him spotted!"—and his voice was low and wicked. "You keep him busy till I get him!"

He slipped off and vanished, leaving Red alone. A fresh outburst of gunfire crackled from the direction of the meadow. Hump and his raiders had stirred up hell there with their mad prank. Those soft-spoken men from the Rio Grande had elected to stick around and make a fight of it. The browned and sun-baked *vaqueros* didn't scare so easily, and had most likely managed to save some of the saddle mounts of their remuda. Tomorrow they or the buffalo tramps, whichever crew won out, would be hard on the trail of that runaway fortune in horses.

## Chapter Three

### *Chisera*

BELOW the bend Bishop gave a minute to search the night around him with his eyes and ears. The gunfire was receding, falling to a muffled spatter, and he judged that the fight had shifted out of the open meadow and deep into the brush. One crew, then, was retreating south, the other in pursuit.

Red's gun blared, upriver, promptly answered by a rifle shot and the screech of a bullet. Satisfied that the sharpshooter had not changed position, Bishop eased into the river and worked quietly over toward the shadow-blackened wall of cliffs. The cliffs, he found, did not reach to the water's edge as had appeared from the other side, nor were they as sheer. Along here they shelved brokenly and were veined with narrow arroyos, and at the foot ran a beach of stony gravel so low that most of it was wet.

He tugged off his boots and up-ended them, and for a while he sat there on the wet gravel, letting them drain. Red paid out another shell, and right on time the rifle chipped in.

Soaked to the chest, Bishop began to grow chilled in the night's slow breeze. He wrung some water from his clothes and put his boots on. His discomfort hardened his intentions against that high-placed sharpshooter. Buckling on his gun belts, he straightway set out to tackle the cliff. No doubt there was somewhere a handier route, but he hadn't time to waste looking for it.

The arroyos were what made a possible task of scaling the cliff. They bent and angled, one into another, but always they webbed upward. At last he crawled out on top and considered taking off his boots again. Climbing in wet boots was brutal on a lifelong horseman. He scowled, predicting blisters. Dammit, Achilles, that jigger with only one vulnerable heel, didn't know when he was well off.

The plateau spread out before him, an immense grass-furred plain, its eastern limits lost in a moonlit mystery of space. These river-edged cliffs were an escarpment, a giant step onto a higher level of ground. Bishop sent a searching stare along the rim. He could pick out nothing worth special notice, and had to wait till Red got off a blind shot. Then he spied the flash of the answering rifle and he marked that spot.

He prowled a wide half-circle to bring him around to it. The sun-cured little seed-stems of grama grass swished whisperingly on his boots, for he walked upright on the approach. So he stepped high and gently, and came up in silence behind a figure lying flat

over a leveled rifle.

A small figure, this. But size meant nothing. Some of the deadliest killers were little men. Possession of a good gun, plus ability in using it, made them big. This one wore buckskins and beaded moccasins, and a cattleman's big hat. Likely a half-breed, brush-raised and snaky, hungering to kill somebody for the gloating satisfaction of it.

Bishop stooped noiselessly over the prone figure. With considerable satisfaction of his own he snapped a sinewy grip on an ankle. As if tailing a calf, he jerked upright and whirled the shooter upside-down. It fetched a terror-stricken yelp. The rifle went sliding over the edge of the cliff to a long drop down.

"Okay, runt!" he rasped, catching the other kicking foot. "Sing up when you hit the river—so I'll know you got there all right!" He started a swinging motion, his long legs braced.

His wriggling captive pealed an unmanly scream. The tone of it caused him to lessen the swinging. He took the trouble to tip his head and bend a frowning inspection to the screamer.

The big hat had fallen off and followed the rifle a thousand feet down. Long hair swept the ground, unusual only for its fair color. And, besides the face, there were a couple of other physical conformations indicating positively that this was not a man.

Bishop released both ankles on the back-swing, muttering irritably, "All that damn climbin' to catch a bit of a girl!"

The girl sort of rolled to a half-sitting position, her arms stretched out behind her, staring up into his forbidding face. She began edging off, but froze motionless when he lowered a glance at her. He was annoyed. He showed it. His feet hurt—the only tender parts of his tough anatomy.

Red had heard and glimpsed something of that encounter on the cliff. He shouted, "Hey, Rogue, did you get the son of a gun?"

"It's no son!" Bishop called down shortly.

"What? Sun?" Red was confused. "Well, the moon's as bright as— Say, you all right? Seen anything o' the horses?"

"Just a filly! But it's a beginnin'!"

"Huh? Hey, I better come up! You sure you're all right?"

Ignoring the question, Bishop sat down. He got his boots off. He lighted a cigar. The girl looked on. She was pulling herself together. But she failed to respond when he—the wire of his temper relaxing under the soothing influence of foot comfort and strong tobacco—commented that moccasins maybe had their good points. He would wear moccasins if ever he made a habit of wading wet rivers and climbing cliffs, which Lord forbid.

About the time the cigar was a stub and the unlovely feet re-shod, Red showed up. Red came hurrying along the rim of the cliff, all wet and dirty and in a foul humor, and at once he snarled at the person who sat facing Bishop, "Durn you, I'll whip your—" and then, seeing closer—"H'm?"

The girl leaped up. In the moonlight she was a sudden flare of color, her hair a flung-back stream of polished bronze, her clear eyes blazing, taut dignity in every line of her firmly rounded little figure.

"You will *what?*" She actually advanced on Red. "Why, you dirty horse thief—get off my ranch!"

She hadn't talked like that to Bishop, who had all but flung her into the river.

Taking upon himself the role of kindly umpire, Bishop chided Red gravely, "Watch your language, man! This young lady is—well—a lady. Not the kind you're used to." To the girl he said confidentially, "Just a roughneck. Doesn't know any better. I give you my personal guarantee I won't let him come near you."

Inasmuch as Red was now shying off like an abashed stripling at his first box-lunch social, the guarantee wasn't necessary; but it rang a chivalrous note of fine old Southern gallantry. Rogue Bishop was no more a Southern gentleman than he was a Chinese, but he knew the rules.

Red gulped, "Sorry! Beg pardon, ma'am! I—I sure didn't expect to find any lady around here!"

"You didn't, Red," Bishop assured him. "I did."

"B—But what's the lady doing here, Rogue?"

"That's an intimate question that I haven't been so bold as to ask. But now you've brought it up—" Bishop bowed his head to the girl—"my name is Bishop. That busted mustanger calls himself Delaney, which may be his right name for all I know. We are looking for our horses, Miss—ah—Miss—?"

"Donavon," she supplied. Something in the big man's tone, or his courtesy, brought her to add, "Sera Donavon."

"Sarah?" Red took it up brightly, anxious to redeem himself. "Well, now, that was the name of my Uncle Wesley's favorite wife. My favorite, I mean. His third wife. She was the cutest little button." He was about to splice that fact into a happy knot of mutual regard, but the girl cut him off.

"No," she said coldly. "Not Sarah. I don't like that name. My name is Sera. S-e-r-a. Can you spell? Mr. Bishop can, I'm sure. Please explain it to your man, Mr. Bishop, will you?"

"I don't know that I can get it through his thick head," said Bishop. "He's ignorant. He doesn't know Spanish names."

"My name isn't Spanish," she said. "Sera is short for Chisera."

"Uh?" Red blurted. "*Chisera!*"

THE BLANK SILENCE that followed was broken by Bishop. "My illiterate *segundo* is thinking you're up on the wrong rock," he explained tolerantly to the girl. "Also, you're not—uh—dressed according to specifications. He's got a single-track mind. Prob'ly takes after his uncle."

Sera Donavon evidently knew the lurid legend of Crazy Chisera Butte. Her face crimsoned. She said with great distinctness, "My parents didn't know the meaning of the name, when they gave it to me. They thought it a pretty name. I shortened it after I learned it was Indian for 'witch.'"

"And so," Bishop suggested, "that left you only a little bit of a witch!" The glint of humor in his eyes made the remark acceptable. He asked in the same moderate and slightly ironic tone, "Do you gen'rally shoot at folks you don't know? We're hunting our runaway horses, is all. Those were scare-off shots you banged off at us. Wouldn't surprise me if you could have hit us, if you'd tried."

"I can shoot," she agreed quietly. "My father taught me, after we settled here. I thought you were from an outlaw gang of buffalo tramps who passed by today. If your horses are with the others that came on over a while ago, they won't stray far. What was all that shooting I heard down the river? That was what brought me out on guard.

Did Mr. Smith have trouble with that gang?"

Bishop said, "Some," and sent Red a rapid glance and changed the subject. "What kind o' ranch have you got here?"

"Didn't Mr. Smith tell you?" The girl showed some surprise.

"Mr. Smith didn't get much chance to talk with us before the stampede—and even less after it started."

"Oh. Why, this is a horse ranch. My father and I came here from Valverde, after my mother died. Almost any trail-herd outfit, by the time it has traveled up this far, will have a few sick horses in the remuda. Dad traded for them. Some he sold, after he got them into sound shape. But he kept the best. He worked very hard. Pretty soon, he said, there would be a high demand for army remounts."

"Smart head!" commended Red heartily. "What I did, though, I crossed good stock to picked broncs and got—"

"Snub it!" interrupted Bishop. To him a horse was a handy means of getting from here to yonder when such getting was called for. He wasn't a bit interested in the breeding and training of the beast. It required hard work and patience—two details of no compelling value in his fast life. He asked the girl, "Where's your dad?"

She answered, "Thieves ambushed him last fall when he was taking some horses up the trail to sell. They killed him. He was a good man."

Bishop inclined his head and touched his hat, generously willing to grant that the unlucky Mr. Donavon had been a good man within his scope. "So your folks have passed on to a better world," he observed, thinking of horses at $125 per head, delivered. "You got a crew?"

"I had five good Cherokee riders," Sera Donavon told him, "but there was no money to pay them, so I let them go." She added ruefully, "I'm not the horse trader my dad was. He could always raise some money." Then brightening, "But I have a fortune in fine horses, if I can get them up to Fort Griffin."

Red burst out, "Lord, girl! You mean you're all alone here?"

She looked at him. Crisply, she retorted, "Being alone is better than having unwelcome visitors!"

"An' that means you, son!" murmured Bishop to Red. "Button up your unwelcome mug, will you? I'll handle this!"

The expression on Red's face betrayed his burning indignation. Red was brought up on the Texas tradition of punctilious respect toward all women. It galled him to play bad dog-in-leash to a notorious hardcase whose designs, he darkly suspected, were as sinister as those of a lobo stalking a lamb. There wasn't a thing he could do about it now, either. Rogue Bishop had won the inside track and was playing it for all it was worth.

Under Bishop's deceptively idle questioning Sera Donavon let it be known that the Donavon horse ranch was blessed with a perfect location. Down the river there was a passable road leading up onto the grassed plateau. The river there ran deep. You had to cross hereabouts at the ford, then follow down the strip of gravel bank, if you knew the way. The Donavon house stood at the top of that hidden road.

Sera's father had known what he wanted, and he had found it—dependable grass and water, the range so located that it could be easily guarded from the tramps and outlaws and

brush-thugs who roamed the trail. About the only thing he had failed to provide against was his own sudden death.

"My man and I will see you safe home," Bishop told Sera courteously. "Those buffalo beauties are too busy to ford the river tonight. I'll appreciate, if you insist, some hot coffee and a fire to dry by. I'll take the coffee black. With a dash of whisky, please, for the sake of my chest."

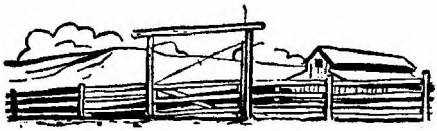
Red wanted the same. But he would have waited for a proper invitation, if it meant shivering all night. Where he was raised men just didn't move in like that on a young lady. He eyed Bishop askance, searching him for nefarious intentions. Red could get along with a badman, and even get to liking him, but the presence of a girl–with horses–canceled out any such masculine friendship. He had no illusions about Rogue Bishop.

And Bishop, quite aware of the trend Red's mind was on, drew his wide lips straighter and said ever so gently, "Come on, Red, if you want."

Two meanings edged his offer. He, more blindingly sudden than Red, could revoke a friendship as soon as it began to sour, and dissolve it in gunsmoke if necessary. He recognized the challenge and distrust in Red's eyes, and it was his way to meet aggression head-on for prompt settlement.

Under the pale, cold stare, Red tightened up visibly. He glanced at Sera, to catch her reaction to the veteran longrider's cool presumption.

Evidently sensing the undercurrent of sharp discord, Sera murmured a hurried invitation and set off at once south along the rim of the cliff. The two men followed, pacing well apart, each in meditative silence.



As SERA HAD DESCRIBED, the Donavon house crowned the crest of a road that ran up a deep pass crookedly splitting the cliff. It was large and comfortable, log-built. As well as guarding the pass, it commanded a view of the high plateau. Farther back were some outbuildings–barn, bunkhouse, stables–and beyond them the horse corrals. The only difference between this and a going concern was the unnatural hush, like that of a ghost town not yet in decay.

Bishop built a roaring fire in the main room, and while he and Red spread out to steam, Sera busied herself in the kitchen. Moving over to peer in at the girl after a while, Bishop nodded approval. She was preparing not only coffee but a hot meal. She was okay. Strikingly pretty and attractive, too, although rather on the small side. A man could search long and do much worse. And she surely did need a good man to take her in hand and keep her out of trouble. A girl like that, foolishly trying to go it alone–damned shame. Time something was done about it.

Returning to the fire, Bishop found Red watching him. He grunted a blunt "Well–?"

Red made no response. But from his look Bishop guessed that Red, too, was growing more than casually interested in Sera's present and future welfare. These Texans certainly did take an earnest stand on such matters. It might become desirable, Bishop mused, to toss Red down the cliff before this thing got really serious.

Then Sera came in from the kitchen

to serve the food, and Bishop took his thoughts off trivialities.

### Chapter Four

*Loot on the Hoof*

THE morning brought a change of affairs. It started with Red's finding of a razor, that had belonged to Mr. Donavon, and scraping off his rusty bristle. The instant Bishop laid eyes on him, at breakfast, he knew that he had underestimated the Texan's crafty resourcefulness. He, master of bland guile, had been dirtily double-crossed by an amateur, while he slept.

Besides shaving practically to the bone, Red had washed and scrubbed himself pink. He had cleaned the mud from his clothes. He had combed his hair. In the morning's bright light he flaunted a slick freshness. Not handsome, the dog, but definitely clean and wholesome. Anything but a frowzy roughneck.

With darting energy and fine examples of Southern chivalry, Red swooped forward and drew out Sera's chair for her, and alertly helped her to coffee and everything else on the table before she knew she wanted it. Astonished, Sera thanked him and kept glancing at him all through breakfast.

Blasted caperings, Bishop thought dourly. By contrast, in the pure light of morning he looked what he was—a tough gunslinging gambler seasoned with faithless cynicism and biting violence. Any day was wrong for him that didn't begin with a bracer compounded of black coffee fortified with 100-proof bourbon, followed by six inches of cigar, preferably Mexican.

This new day, bereft of bourbon, out of cigars, Rogue Bishop was not at his best. The insolent sunlight picked out pitilessly the furrows from beaked nostrils to mouth—the leather skin, deep-set eyes, lean jaw—hard features that the moonlight last night had kindly softened.

He didn't eat much breakfast. It was nourishing food, he supposed, but who wanted to astound his innards this early? Finding a cigar butt in his breast pocket, he clamped it between strong teeth, heaved back his chair and growled a word, and stalked outside, leaving Sera and Red in an animated discussion that had something to do with horse-breeding and related subjects.

"Oh, but look, Red!" Already she was calling him Red—that busted horse nurse. "When you mate a Morgan to a mustang—"

Where in hell did a girl pick up such talk? This young upstart crop knew more than was good for them. Chewing on the cigar butt, Bishop inspected the outside scenery. He judged it inferior to most that he had known. Not one roadhouse saloon in sight. A forsaken stretch of wilderness, this, barren of anything in the way of decent civilized trappings except for this empty-handed Donavon ranch.

After some time Red came out of the house. He went walking brightly around, finally heading over to the corrals. He didn't appear so spright and perk when he came back.

Confronting Bishop in the yard, Red muttered harriedly, "Hey, something's not right here!"

Something, Bishop agreed, wasn't. He eyed Red pointedly. Red, however, was not referring to himself.

"Rogue, they's a couple hundred

horses grazing loose, beyond the corrals. They're all colors. Duns, bays, what-all. Our two are with 'em. Still got the saddles on."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's awful strange how that stampeding bunch found the way straight here. But that's not all. In the corrals are about three hundred head more. All sorrels, those, with white stockings, and all the same brand—small D on the left flank."

Bishop shrugged. "The Donavon brand, I guess."

"No," Red said. "The Delaney brand —*my* brand! I told you how I was cleaned out by stampeders. I told you I was hanging round Fort Griffin watching for those stampeders to show up someday with my horses. Remember?"

Bishop remembered, and coupled it to another remembrance. He heard Red whisper dismally to himself, "Chisera! Could it be, after all, that she's really—?"

"About the time your much-married uncle was allegedly lured to his grave by an undraped woman," observed Bishop, "this girl was maybe ten years old. Still," he conceded after a moment of reflection, "she might now be sort of followin' the example o' that Indian witchwoman, in a big way. The witch only got a horse or two at a time. Maybe our Sera likes to get 'em by the bunch."

"No, it's not possible!" Red argued. He wasn't happy, for a man who had found his stolen horse herd. "She's straight, I could swear. Besides, she's Donavon's daughter, and—"

"So she says!" Bishop shook his head. "Where's the proof? For all you know, she might've come here an' stood up an' dazzled Donavon an' his crew into diving off the cliff!"

That, Red's bemused look conveyed, was not impossible.

"She's acquainted with that boss horse thief who calls himself Smith," Bishop pursued, privately enjoying a measure of sardonic amusement at Red's expense. "It was the mixed bunch of horses he was holding. Strange, all right, how they ran straight for this range. How d'you figure your stolen herd of sorrels got penned up here on a hidden ranch where strangers ain't welcome?"

"Don't know," Red admitted.

Neither did Bishop know, exactly. But he took a broad-minded view of the circumstance. They weren't his horses.

Sera came out to the front door and called, "Did you find your horses with Mr. Smith's?"

Transferring his regard to a lone cloud in the blue sky, Bishop left it to Red to grapple with that question and get himself in bad. It was remarkable what advantages a man often gained by simply keeping his trap shut at the right time. Out of a corner of his eye Bishop watched Red tramp slowly to the house.

There went a Texan whose plain-speaking tongue was about to land him in a stew. Any girl able to lie up on a cliff, alone, planting bullets accurately within splashing distance of unwelcome strangers, could certainly be counted on to light a fire under a man rash enough to try outtalking her. There went a cooked duck.

"Red! Is something wrong?" She could tell from Red's face that something was way out of kilter. Bishop couldn't credit her with any amazing feminine intuition on that score. Red's expression was a plain giveaway to a

blind mule.

Red halted before her, at lower level than the doorstep—his first error. Right away he hung his foot in his mouth by demanding, "How did my stolen sorrels get penned up here on a hidden ranch where strangers ain't—uh—h'm?"

"H'm?" said Sera.

Letting the lone cloud go its way, Bishop scratched and touched a match to his cigar butt. This was a promising start. Now let the fireworks explode. Let sizzling hostility's smoke becloud the underhanded trick of shaving before breakfast.

Doggedly, Red said to Sera, "Our two horses are with the loose bunch, yes. The mixed bunch that stampeded last night and ran straight here. Yes, ma'am." He was trying painfully hard to strike a middle course, to be neutral, logical. And he wasn't succeeding, because his words lacked the trim of subtlety. "But what I want to know is, how did those D-brand sorrels get there?"

The girl stiffened immediately. Her small figure filled the soft buckskin shirt. "Those are my horses," she answered, quietly and distinctly. Red's question was out of line, one that could rouse trouble among men.

Red would have known better, had Sera been a man. He would have dropped a careful hint, kept his right hand dangling, and given room for compromise. Such rules of armed etiquette, however, did not apply to a girl. Rattled, Red stuck his foot in deeper.

"Where'd you get them, please?"

Sera's eyes gained a steady blaze. "I traded for them."

Somebody on horseback was ascending the steep road up from the river. The crooked pass hid him, but the quick-climbing hoofs rolled stones and a champed bridle-bit clinked faintly. Bishop crossed to a patch of *chamiso* brush on the edge of the yard, fronting the house, and sank to his heels to wait for whoever might crop up. Red was too flustered to hear those slight sounds on the road, and it seemed a pity to distract him from the splendid job he was doing of skinning himself.

"Who did you trade 'em off?" Red asked, after a miserable pause. "That Smith horse-thief outfit?" It was a sorry way to couch the query.

He began a stammering scramble for words that were less offensive, but Sera didn't allow him time to arrange them. The little mistress of the Donavon ranch was thoroughly angry, brutally stripped of her softened feeling for this busted Texas horse raiser.

From where she stood in the doorway of the house, Sera Donavon could see down into the pass. She gazed beyond Red at the man now riding into sight around the last bend, and said icily, "Mr. Smith will answer you for me!"

And behind the gold bloom of *chamiso* Bishop brushed a hand under his coat, muttering, "Well, by Jupiter—his name *is* Smith!"

He recognized that oncoming rider; knew him as one of the many half-forgotten ghosts of wild old days when youth flared a brilliant flame and reckless daring spat in the face of death. A frolicking time of fortune, that, till law and the army trooped in. The survivors still at large were now mostly bartenders, livery flunks, taciturn drunks, and drifters—here and there a hardbitten gambler, a gunslinger too wise to trap, or an out-and-out badman not yet caught and hanged.

Of the old wild-bunch breed, few could lay claim to a tougher record

than Mr. Smith—Angelito Smith. Below the Rio Grande his name was pronounced *An-hell-eeto Smeet.* Above, it was just Smith. On both sides, and his blood came from both, the mention of "Little Angel" identified him. It was the name that appeared on most of the dodger bills, in bold print at the top.

Up the Donavon pass he rode, the neat little man. He was slim, wiry, a dandy in dapper silk shirt—white, with pearl buttons—tight pants of fawn twill, black pony-skin jacket, and a tall Mexican sombrero heavily brocaded in silver scrolls. A pair of bone-handled guns, laced down in a broad buscadero belt containing two rows of looped shells, bobbed gently as he rode up to the house. He was a dude from the original chip. Even his boots bore the hand-stitched decoration of the Mexican eagle and the Texas Lone Star.

"The son of a witch!" muttered Bishop behind the *chamiso.* "Looks like he's doin' even better'n me!"

Mr. Smith reined in his fine black horse before the house. He swept off his sombrero and bowed low in the saddle to Sera, his dark eyes meantime measuring Red Delaney, the stranger.

"Good morning, Miss Donavon—and such a beautiful morning!" he intoned. His voice was a caress, deep and sincere, with a mere tinge of accent. He lowered long lashes over glowing eyes, in tribute to a loved princess.

He was the same as ever, Bishop thought. The same low-down, conniving coyote. The same whip-brained little cuss who could dazzle any woman and outwit most men. It was no wonder that Sera, so desperately alone, referred to him as though he represented shining virtue in a bad world. Mr. Smith had evidently not yet bared his claws, for some reason.

He asked her, holding his sombrero to his chest, "Did the horses come up here last night? I hope you were not too disturbed. We had some trouble at the camp."

"Yes, they're here, Mr. Smith," Sera told him. "They came running right back to their old range. But this—" she hesitated— "this gentleman is asking questions about the sorrels you traded to me for them."

"Questions? He insults you—*you,* Miss Donavon—with questions?" Smith bent a stern look at Red. "Who are you?"

Red said, "My name's Delaney an' I'm from Refugio. That mean anything to you?"

Smith shrugged. "It means nothing," he replied. But the shrug served a purpose, executed with the lightning deftness of a sleight-of-hand artist. The gun was gone from his right holster. It was in his hand, covered by the sombrero. Red didn't see it, nor did the girl. Bishop, behind the *chamiso* and rearward of Smith, did, and grinned in recollection of that border trick.

Unaware of blundering straight to suicide, Red said, "The sorrels carry my brand. I didn't sell or trade 'em off. They were stolen from me an' my crew, on a dark night, by some unknown gang of stampeders who all we saw of 'em was big Mexkin hats—like yours!"

Smith glanced down at his sombrero, held against his chest. His thumb was easing back the hammer of the hidden gun.

"For such a very serious charge," he stated, "you should produce proof, Mr. —ah—Delay!"

Red snorted, "I can! Everybody down in Refugio knows a Delaney horse. I bred up that strain. My brand's registered. In my pocket I've got the

registry papers on every sorrel horse in those corrals! That's where you slipped, when you stole 'em!"

"In your pocket? Ah!" Smith's cough covered the final click of the hammer. He would not shoot a hole through the expensive sombrero. He was about to show his claws.

Bishop rose up from the *chamiso*, drawling, "What size hat do you wear these days, Smeet? That'n looks pretty big from here."

Smith twisted around swiftly in his saddle. His dark eyes stabbed at Bishop, strolling across the yard, coat thrown open and hands resting on his hips. With recognition of that tall figure, Smith exclaimed incredulously:

"*Por Dios!* Begod, it's you, Rogue!"

"Me it is," assented Bishop. "Long time no see, Smeet. Got a cigar on you?"

For a short spell Smith watched him coming forward. A dark anticipation rippled over his face, and vanished. To meet Bishop on even terms required reining his horse around; Bishop would not allow that, if the hands on hips. With recognition of that tall figgun back into its holster and flashed a smile. He and Bishop had not always got along too well, but it was best to wait for a likelier opportunity to dig up old scores.

"*Hola, amigo!* My hat? Big, yes, but it fits me fine. Cigar? Certainly! Here, take two."

"*Gracias*," said Bishop, taking four from Smith's handful and a fifth to light up. "You a horse trader now?"

They didn't shake hands. Each valued his fingers too highly.

"Oh, I deal in horses once in a while, Rogue."

"How's business?"

Smith started a shrug, and stopped it. He carefully replaced the sombrero on his head. "Fair. Just fair. I make a living."

"You should do better," Bishop said meditatively, "considering you never paid cash for a horse in your life. Or for anything else, if you could help it. What's the deal here, Smitty?"

Red, for once, was smart enough to keep quiet and listen. Sera looked ready to spring loyally to the defense of the maligned Mr. Smith, the gentleman whose manners were so faultless and charming. The girl's wrathful eyes said that her fervent hope was that Mr. Smith could hold his own in this uncouth company.

Mr. Smith could. By guile and gunsmoke he had got out of more fantastic jams than Sera dreamed existed. He chose guile now for a beginning.

"You insult me, my friend!" he protested painedly. "You judge me by yourself! In my past I have had to stoop to deal with ruffians like you, but I remain a man of honesty and honor and—"

"Snub it, Smeet!" Bishop interrupted rudely. "Hell, I know the deal. You stole horses you found you couldn't sell, an' traded 'em off for horses you *could* sell! The old switch!" He turned to Sera. "And you fell for it! Why?"

The girl blazed at him, "You don't know what you're talking about! I traded my two hundred horses for Mr. Smith's three hundred."

"Why?" Bishop repeated. "Why did he trade at a loss?"

"Because," retorted Sera, "his sorrels all have white stockings, and he's heard that the army will buy only solid-color horses."

Red spoke. "White stockings don't count against solid color, with the army. Any horse dealer knows that."

"I know it," Sera flung at him. "I told Mr. Smith. But he was sure he was right, so we made the trade."

Bishop wagged his head. "Smeet, that's low. I'm ashamed to smoke your cigars!" He puffed contentedly. "You traded her three hundred horses, without title—or an awful flimsy title—for two hundred that you could sell on a good sale-bill. The old switch! On a poor little lone gal, Smeet, that's cheating!"

Furiously, Smith spat, "Rogue, who are you to—"

"It's a shame!" continued Bishop. "You'd sell her horses. Then, if I know you, back you'd come for those sorrels—and for her! You border buzzard, you'll never learn that honesty is the best policy."

"Have you learned that?" Smith inquired surprisedly.

"We-ell, not so far," Bishop admitted. "But I've heard about it, an' I've been thinking of giving it a whirl. Kindly hold your horse still, will you?"

### Chapter Five

### *Badman's Bid*

SMITH tight-reined his restive black horse, and said to Sera, "Dear lady, I am sure your regard for me is not lessened by the foul accusations of low scoundrels." He had the gift of fluent speech, and his air of injured innocence matched that of a martyr at the stake. "Would I trade off horses to you that weren't honestly mine?"

"You sure would!" Bishop put in. "An' did! But the deal is hereby revoked! Those horses stay right where they are. Beat it! Don't come back, or you'll have a fight on your hands!"

"Right!" Red seconded. "Those sorrels are mine. The others belong to Miss Donavon. That's how it is, an' it stays that way!"

Smith split a thoughtful look between them. One of the few sins he had never been charged with was lack of nerve. But he wasn't in a winning position for a showdown with Bishop. And there was Red to consider.

"There is a connection, I think," Smith murmured, "between this and last night's stampede. Friend Rogue, I do not like you for sending those brush-thugs to raid my camp! You, too, are in the horse-trading game, eh? I might have known it! Wherever quick money can be made, there you'll find Rogue Bishop!"

"And Little Angel!" said Bishop.

Their eyes locked, and between them shuttled the same thought. Five hundred good horses at $125 a head, on this isolated ranch that was like a derelict ship without a crew. Owners—a slip of a girl and one penniless Texan, who had no means of getting the horses up to the Fort Griffin market. High stakes.

And more than that. Above all, there was the challenge, the hard pride of two gamblers, each out to beat the other. The steady stare between Bishop and Smith silently promised a cut-throat game to the last chip.

Red saw what was up and his face went gaunt, for he knew what happened to lesser players when lobos of the rawhide clan met and clashed. The prospect of a fight seemed to create a complete change in such men. They could be easy-going, soft-voiced men, comfortable to get along with—then, all of a sudden, smiling a cold, sinister savagery that was blind to everything

but the consecration to kill a particular man who by some sign, unnoticed by others, had flashed a challenge.

Smith turned back to Sera. "Miss Donavon, am I to be robbed of my horses? This is your ranch. I appeal to you. Let me prove that the sorrels I traded to you were honestly mine."

And Sera, the unwitting umpire in a deadly game, said, "Of course, Mr. Smith! These two men—they don't belong here! They're strangers to me." She sent Red a scorching glance. "Insolent, insulting riffraff!"

Smith bowed his full agreement. He dismounted. "Then let us go to the corrals. May I offer you my horse? He's quite gentle."

"Thank you." She took the reins and let him help her into the silver-mounted saddle. Docile as a pet pony, the black horse circled around and high-stepped daintily under Sera's touch, Smith pacing alongside, Bishop and Red following.

At their approach, the sorrels pricked ears and stamped nervously. They were not yet accustomed to this place, and were penned in the corrals to keep them from straying off. Farther on, the mixed bunch grazed out loosely, although restlessly alert after last night's scare.

Bishop inquired of Smith, "What's your proof? I doubt if even you can talk these horses into signing an affidavit."

Smith climbed into the biggest corral. "Wait and see!" he retorted superiorly, yanking his sombrero down firmly and tightening the chin-strings. "My horses will always obey me and nobody else, friend Rogue, and that's proof enough!"

Bishop watched curiously. He remembered that Smith was a wizard with horses and could transform an outlaw bronc into an amiable pie-eater without breaking its spirit. There were men who possessed that uncanny power. Even Red, his eyes on Smith, grew professionally interested. Sera, seated on the splendid black, simply displayed a smooth-browed belief in Mr. Smith's integrity.

As Smith stepped across the corral the sorrel horses crowded uneasily out of his way. They didn't appear to know him from any other two-legged freak. They split into two packs and danced around the corral, and came together near the gate, where they snuffed comments and inspected him suspiciously. So far, no good.

Smith pursed his lips and keened a thin whistle. The sorrels took no notice of that, except to spear their ears a little sharper.

It was the black that answered to the command. It lunged forward, cleared the gate effortlessly with inches to spare, and landed among the astounded sorrels. The black was a jumper, and a king among horses. It knew its royal rights, and shouldered the sorrels aside. The sorrels scampered off on a round-the-clock whirl, raising dust. The black, with Sera still hanging on, trotted to Smith, obedient as a well-trained hunting dog.

Smith whipped up into the saddle behind Sera. The dust of the running horses all but obscured him. He sang out blithely, "You see, friend Rogue?" Then the black jumped the far fence, with its light burden of Little Angel and little Sera.

As a clever stunt in horsemanship it was superb, but as a tactical trick it seemed merely mischievous. Sera, apparently more astonished than alarmed, didn't even cry out or attempt to

struggle. Smith had reached around her and taken the reins.

The black swung sharply to the right and followed along the outside of the fence, on a course that would bring it back around the corrals. Red, swearing, ran to meet it. But the black passed behind the stables, then the barn. In full stride, it raced straight on across the yard.

Smith's intention became clear, and was made clearer by his mocking laugh at Red. This was no flashy, purposeless stunt. Running, Red dragged out his gun. Because of the fearful risk of hitting the girl, he fired high.

Smith's laugh rang out again. What Sera thought of the escapade grew plain when she began struggling. Her chances of breaking loose were slimmer than those of a dove in a hawk's talons. Smith had been known to outwrestle big Indian bucks, on a bet. The black flashed by the house and went clattering down the pass. Red ran hopelessly on.

Bishop rejected the notion of entering himself in any footrace with a horse. His annoyance at Smith was considerable, but his feet had done enough work last night to last them a long time. There were plenty of horses here, and a catch-rope coiled over a post of the drop-pole gate. The loose ones, his and Red's among them, couldn't be handily caught afoot, but the sorrels were penned.

He took the rope and climbed into the corral, and after some tagging around with the sorrels he got the rope on one. The horse at once stood fast, showing good training, and let him lead it out of the corral and replace the drop-poles.

With the rope Bishop fashioned and fitted a hackamore. No doubt there were saddles somewhere on the benighted place. He considered searching the stables. On the other hand, urgent haste demanded precedence.

Red came sprinting back. "She screamed!" he gasped, out of breath. "I heard her!" He snatched the rope from Bishop, leaped onto the sorrel, and took off bareback without a word of by-your-leave. The headlong way he dashed down the pass, with only a single hackamore, raised 5-to-3 odds that he would break his neck.

"Why, cremate his gall!" Bishop scowled, picking rope-fiber from his fingers. From where he stood he caught a glimpse of the black horse, far below, Smith and Sera still aboard, streaking southward down an open stretch of the trail. Smith had a sure-win start, and that black was a lot of horse.

No pushing rush, then. You broke yourself, barging bullheaded into the other man's play. Going after Smith called for wary care. Smith knew what he was doing, the slippery little cuss.

Bishop investigated the stables, and carried out a saddle and bridle and a rope. He caught another sorrel and laced the saddle on and hit the pass at an easy canter. Meantime, he heard what sounded like an angry shout far down the river, and a couple of shots. Then a faint scream, and silence.

Red, he guessed, must have caught up with Smith—and got the worst of it. Too bad. Kind of a middling-decent jigger, Red. No discretion, though, where a pretty girl was involved. He wasn't the first, and he came by it honestly: his Uncle Wesley—

Bishop forded the river and headed south, but shunned the open trail. Putting himself mentally into Smith's place, he foresaw that Smith—and his

border riders—would be on watch for him. That shrewd half-pint had sized up the deal fairly close. The girl was the key, the queen bee. Carry her off, and the stingers came droning after her.

"That was smart, Smeet!" Bishop muttered, riding the sorrel fifty yards clear of the trail. "That was damn' smart. But I'll outsmart you, you short-size son!"

He passed the Sandhole, off to his right, and guided the sorrel gently on into the cottonwoods. Up ahead lay the long strip of grassed meadow, the empty remains of the destroyed camp where nothing moved.

He was not deceived by the silence. About here, he judged, Red had charged into a jackpot. Here were eager eyes probing for him. He could feel the stealing search of them, from the brush on both sides of the meadow.

He halted and considered the prospect. Most men were right-handed. On the right, then, most of them would be, rifles nestled in crotches of the brush. He reined the sorrel to the right,

to skirt wide and come up behind them.

A furred cap bobbed up from behind a woodbine-wound dwarf oak; the cap of a buffalo tramp. And the round eye of a Springfield repeater. Bishop drew and fired. There was nothing else for it. The cap jumped, and immediately the thicket was full of brush-thugs. Up the meadow, rifles cracked and lashed the brush.

Bishop heeled the sorrel hard. He knew what he had got into—a creeping attack by Hump's renegade rangers. They weren't licked, by a long shot. Hump had gathered fresh recruits from the scavengers of the brush. Guns blammed from the tangled low barberry and currant bush, and the sorrel jumped.

The sorrel took it from there. Scared wild, it smashed through the brush and broke out onto the meadow. No hand on the reins, however strong, could stop it. Bishop bent low in the saddle and let the horse use its own best judgment. This was no time to argue, and often a horse knew best. Maybe the east side of the meadow was safer, at that.

He heard the solid thump of horses behind him, and he hipped around, gun in hand to cut down any ambitious duck who thought to clip him. But the riders were Smith's border men, getting out of that ambush as fast as they could. Among them was Red, lolling senseless, his head gashed, supported by a horseman on each side. And Sera on the black, Smith up behind her.

Bishop split the brush on the east side of the meadow, and wrenched the sorrel to a shivering halt. Smith crashed in near by, and Bishop sang out to him, "Hell of a caper! Damn you, can't you ever learn to watch your rear?"

"I thought we ran them out of the

country, last night!" Smith snarled back at him. "They weren't more than a dozen or so. Now—hell's initials—forty of them! Aren't they your men? Why did they shoot at you?"

"They shot at me," Bishop answered, "because they're not my men. No, *amigo*—they're out to get me as well as you!"

Smith stared at him. He murmured, "I *sabe!* When rascals fall out—"

"Then," said Bishop, "honest men get their just deserts. Yeah. It's a shame there's not an honest man hereabouts."

"You never spoke a truer word!"

Gunfire from Hump's thugs, on the far side of the meadow, hailed into the brush. There was cover here, but no protection. One of the border men, standing by his horse, bent over. His smile was small and blighted as he fell on his face. His horse snorted uneasily and another man caught its reins. Smith glanced without sentiment at the fallen man. He had seen death too many times to be deeply touched by it, but this threatened to become wholesale slaughter, catastrophe.

Bishop said to him, "We got to get out o' here, Smitty!"

The old friendly name brought a stiff grin to Smith's face. He and Bishop were now a pair of hard-pressed longriders caught in the same jam. Grudges were dropped by mutual consent, though only for the time being.

"The river, eh, Rogue?"

"Sure. And over to the ranch, quick, before they get the same idea. It's likely they don't know yet where the horses went, but it won't take 'em long to scout out. We can stand 'em off from up there."

"If we get there!" growled a leathery *Tejano* whose blood-soaked shirt gave the reason for his morose pessimism. "That long stretch 'tween the cottonwoods an' the river—*ay de mi!* They'll shoot into the bunch of us there an' wipe us out!"

"We won't be in a bunch," Bishop said. "Just a couple at a time, on a hard run. The rest blaze away an' cover for 'em. I'll start it, to see how it goes. Let the girl have that dead man's horse. I'll take her along."

"Now, Rogue, not so fast!" drawled Smith. His daredevil grin perked wickedly. "Miss Donavon is my responsibility. She will ride my good black, in charge of two men—you, Isidro, and you, Joe. Be sure she reaches the river safely! Two others will bring along Mr. Delaney. I take poor Nick's horse."

He slid off the black, leaving Sera in the saddle, and mounted the dead man's buckskin. Isidro and Joe nudged their horses up alongside the black. Isidro was all Mexican; he touched his hat to the girl and murmured a polite phrase. Joe, a solemn individual who didn't hold with any such fiddle-faddle, took the black's reins in his fist.

Smith's look at Bishop was brightly inquiring. "Ready, Rogue? Shall we start out and—as you said—see how it goes?"

What Bishop thought of that setup he didn't bother to say, and his expression showed nothing. But when, at his curt nod of assent, Smith chuckled, a baleful glint flickered in Rogue's eyes. Mr. Angelito Smith, backed by his tough border crew, was being too blasted smart for his fine britches.

Bent low, they forced their horses through the brush slowly to where it thinned out toward the cottonwoods. The trees afforded them some further cover. At the fringe, though, there before them lay the long stretch to the

river. Much of it could be seen by Hump's crowd in the brush up along the high west side of the meadow, and those rifles had to be taken into account.

Bishop and Smith halted to look it over, inspecting every rock, bush, and hollow for its possible value on their course.

"Looks like a better'n even chance to me," Bishop said. "I'm going to hit for that bed o' rocks way down yonder."

Smith nodded approval. "Once past there, we can keep out of sight till we're out of range."

"We?" Bishop frowned. "Pick your own route!"

"There's room for us both. I'll stay behind you." Smith chuckled again, tightening his chin-strings. "Well—luck to us, eh?"

"To me, anyhow! Here goes!"

## Chapter Six

### *Fallen Ange!*

THEY plunged out of the cottonwoods onto the open terrain, lashing their horses, Bishop first, Smith hard behind him. Within a few seconds a shouting uproar raised the signal that they were seen. The firing had not slackened, ripping back and forth across the meadow, and now it struck furiously from the thickets in a solid wall of sound.

A bullet smacked the dished cantle of Bishop's saddle and droned off. He heard the whispering screech of others, and he bent close over the sorrel's neck and swerved sharply, twice, to throw the shooters off their aim. Smith, following on the buckskin, sang out an oath. Bishop twisted to see what was his trouble. Smith had an eye cocked up at the bullet-torn brim of his fine sombrero; that was all.

As they drew close to the bed of rocks the buckskin took an extra spurt and came almost abreast of the sorrel, crowding it over, so that Bishop would have to swing wide around the rocks and give Smith the inside track.

Bishop rasped, "Stay back o' me!"

"I thought you could ride!" Smith jeered. "Watch where you're going!"

That did it. Bishop reined the sorrel hard over back onto its original course close by the rocks, banging broadside into the buckskin and knocking it offstride. Both horses stumbled, and Smith swore. A protruding shoulder of rock loomed up directly ahead. Bishop, barely grazing by it, called out:

"Watch where *you're* goin', Smeet!"

Either the buckskin was running too fast and disorganized, or Smith was too proud to pull back until too late. The horse did as well as it could. It clattered sort of sidewise up the sloping shoulder nearly to the top. There, on a slick spot, its hoofs abruptly shot out from under it. Momentum carried Smith on over the top while the buckskin rolled back to earth.

Bishop glanced rearward, mainly to make sure that he was out of sight of the shooters. He saw the buckskin go rocking off, empty stirrups slapping, in a westerly direction. He saw Smith tumbling down this side of the rock, and from the manner of the fall he judged that Smith had landed on his sombrero at the first bounce. His diagnosis proved correct. Reaching bottom, Smith lay spraddled, motionless.

"If his neck's broke," Bishop muttered, "he's swindled some hangman

out o' forty bucks!"

Yet a tragic quality touched that sprawled, lifeless little figure. In its torn and rumpled finery it represented a gay elegance, a lawless scorn of dull conformity. It seemed a shame to leave it lying there for thieves to plunder and buzzards to pick, and coyotes to crunch the bones at night. It was easy to forgive rascality after the rascal was brought low.

Bishop circled back and reined in under cover of the rock. He reached down and grabbed Smith by his jacket, hoisted him up over the sorrel, and set off again for the river.

Smith hung limply, arms and legs dangling, like a dead man. Then he groaned an oath as his head bobbed in unison with the sorrel's swinging lope. He was only knocked out, and Bishop scowlingly contemplated heaving him off for fooling him.

By the time the ford was reached, Smith was making feeble attempts to ease his position. Bishop dumped him below the riverbank, in an agreeably soft couch of mud, and waited for Isidro and Joe to bring Sera along. That was a situation he intended to alter, promptly, to one more in line with his liking.

According to all the noises, two or three parties were staging their dash out of that hot spot in the brush. They weren't all following the same route. Isidro and Joe had orders to start as soon as Bishop and Smith tested the getaway.

First to arrive, though, were the two men with Red Delaney. They came slapping and slithering along the muddy bank, having hit the river farther down. Red gave them no trouble. He sat bowed, clutching the saddle horn with both hands, in a fog of slowly returning consciousness. At that, he was better off than Smith, who lay groaning in the mud. It took the two men a little while to recognize their dapper chief in that bedraggled blob. They asked questions while picking him up.

"He mishapped on a circumstance beyond his control," said Bishop. "How're the others doing?"

"They're comin'."

"H'm!"

They arrived two and three at a time, by various routes, till most of the crew were gathered at the ford. Here and there a bullet-tagged man cursed, binding up his wound. Talk ran sparely to those who hadn't made the getaway, who had got dropped.

"Cal got it soon's he quit them cottonwoods."

"My *primo*—Eloy—no get much more far."

"Hey! Them *ladinos* are comin'! Let's git!"

"Hold it!" Bishop said. One last rider was rounding in, on a stumbling horse whose head threshed low in dying protest.

It was Isidro. His mount floundered down the bank, and he fell clear, rolling helplessly in the mud. He wheezed, "They're comin'!" and caused a general move to cross the river.

Bishop got to him swiftly. "Where's the girl?"

Isidro's neck and chest ran blood. "Back there—some big rocks! That black horse got hit. Joe, damn fool, 'fore we start he tied her hands to the horn, see? Then Joe get kill'. I try go help her. No good! They shoot me pret' bad, huh?"

"I think they've finished you, *hombrecito*," Bishop told him straight.

"I t'ink so too," said Isidro.

The men were splashing across the

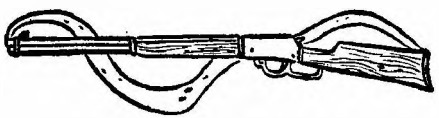
ford, taking Smith and Red with them. Two of them turned back and looked down at Isidro and then at Bishop, inquiringly.

Bishop said, "Yeah, you might's well," and they legged off and picked up Isidro.

Bishop vaulted aboard his sorrel. "When Little Angel gets his head to work," he said to them—and his eyes were chips of ice—"you tell him from me he's a stinkin' *ladrone* and I'll fix him some day for this bobble!"

He was gone then in a hoofed spatter of mud, not over the river, but away from it, pounding toward the bed of rocks.

He was alone, and that suited him best, as always. A lone wolf was hampered by company. He recalled, not for the first time, words heard or read somewhere along the scarred path of his life: ***Down to Gehenna, or up to the Throne—he travels the fastest who travels alone.***



HUMP'S THUGS were everywhere. They had broken from cover and were combing every bush and hollow, like hungry wolves sniffing out the dead and injured. They were advancing between Bishop and the bed of rocks. Those cursed rifles, so much more effective and authoritative than six-guns, in open country. And the tramps knew it, knew how to use them.

Bishop, his run blocked, angled off to skirt that ragged line of hunters. Somebody spied him, raised a whoop, and he heeled the sorrel to a dead run. No use; they were after him. From his course they would strain their brute brains for the answer to what it was that he was desperately seeking, and would find it first. Diversion, then, was the next card. He raced westward, leading the pursuers away from his goal.

The sorrel, breathing as though barbwire sawed its throat, blundered into soft footing and all but threw a header. This was the Sandhole. Bishop leaped off. He let the winded horse go and ran to the mushroom-shaped rock of Crazy Chisera Butte. He scrambled up the rock and lay panting atop it, his heavy guns drawn and ready.

A bunch of skin-clad riders swirled around the Sandhole. One of them yelled a word that was ignored, and turned in. That one was smarter than the rest. He got off his pony and nosed the ground. Following tracks, he came up under the overlapping lip of the lonely rock.

Bishop jumped him. It was about twenty feet down, but the thug was large and broke his fall. His boot heels hit at the nape of the inquisitive thug's neck.

The pony ran off. The brush-thug buried his face in the sand and didn't breathe any more. Bishop stripped him of his rifle and bandoleer of cartridges, and carried him around the rock. He tossed the body into a patch of greasewood, and climbed back up Crazy Chisera Butte. He now had a rifle and about fifty rounds for it—enough to last out for a spell.

From up here he could look out over much of the land. He searched it carefully, located the bed of rocks, the black horse lying dead, a small figure huddled against it. The distance was within range of the rifle.

To her credit, Sera wasn't treating herself to any woman-foolish hysterics, as far as could be seen. Or perhaps the

spill had knocked her out. Anyhow, she didn't tug and struggle to free her tied hands from the saddle horn. It would have attracted the eager attention of the buffalo tramps and won her a bullet or—if they detected it was a girl—capture. They would get around to her soon enough as it was, for the dead black's saddle and any other petty plunder worth the taking.

Fortunately, the horse had taken a dying leap in among the rocks, and it and the girl lay where they could be seen only from higher ground. Still, that was thin security. There was plenty of higher ground hereabouts, besides the butte and the cliffs across the river.

Most of Hump's gang were congregating at the ford and exchanging a lively fire with the border men up on the cliffs. It was an undisciplined mob, for stragglers kept slouching by the Sandhole, some on foot, quarreling over bits of gear stripped from the dead.

One hairy scarecrow came limping along in frayed moccasins, from the meadow. Peering sharply around, he made directly for the bed of rocks at a shambling trot. He had spied out a prize and meant to keep it secret to himself.

Bishop tried out the rifle. It was satisfactory, one shot sufficient. With detached observation and no compunction he watched the limping man jerk up his head and hands and pitch forward.

Bishop nodded, blew the smoke away, and cocked on the next shell. There were bound to be others. Too bad the thug fell so straight, head to the rocks. It could provide a hint for an inquiring mind. The rifle was almost too good, and these blunt-nosed .44 slugs hit like a sledge hammer. Next time he would aim off-center.

He did, and had to do it fast, twice, on a pair who turned aside to inspect that body for possibles. They searched it, shrugged, and might have passed on unharmed if one of them hadn't paused to scan the dead man's tracks and position. He called to his partner and gestured, and so Bishop got off two shots.

The sound of the rifle couldn't fail to be heard. The salvation was that it would scarcely be noticed, much less located, as long as other rifles exactly like it kept thudding the same note along the river and raising echoes.

Trouble was, a harvest of defunct hoodlums could be expected to attract notice and some speculation. It might be thought they were corpsed by miraculous sharpshooting from up on the cliffs, but that left open the puzzle of why Smith's men should reach so far when so many other prospects were closer to hand, at the ford.

In an hour Bishop added two more to the gather, after which that spot became warily avoided for a long time. He guessed the word had gone out that the place was unlucky.

In the afternoon he detected Sera moving, straining to free her hands, and he supposed sympathetically that her nerve had cracked and let in panic. Then he saw a shaggy, rag-bound head edge up slowly above a rock, not more than ten feet beyond her, and that explained her wild struggling: she had heard that creeping prowler.

He took careful aim, waited, let the head rise another inch or two, and fired a shade low to make dead sure. A tiny puff of scored rock exploded. The shattered face lifted for an instant, gaping, and fell away.

Bishop thumbed up another shell,

ready for the next, his mood cold and heavy. It was plain they had at last come to the suspicion that something or somebody in the rocks was under long-range protection; must therefore be of value. They had the craft and cunning of predatory beasts, more dangerous by far than true intelligence. The more guarded a thing, said cunning, the more valuable. Material and intrinsic worth was the only standard they knew. To the support of that shabby banner they could call up an animal courage fiercer than the deliberate bravery of intelligence.

During the down-sweep of the sun's great arc Bishop flayed the scalp of another crawler. The firing at the ford sank to occasional sniping. They had not been able to cross the river, and were holding their patience till darkness.

Sullen great thunderheads roiled the eastern sky, promising a black night, a cloaked moon. Now came the long waiting, the sun diving into the west.

Bishop's searching eyes kept reverting to Sera; he kept thinking of the good rifle in his hands and how one careful shot could sledge-hammer a person right out of existence, in a wink. No pain, probably, hit square.

His hard face was deeply lined as the sun met the horizon. He looked and felt very old, and he sighed like a tired old man as sundown streaked purple shadows and gold clefts across the land. Quickly the sun bowed out and left the brief after-blaze in the sky, the earth in deepening veils of jet, and then the rifle was useless.

He laid the rifle aside, and the bandoleer. He slid down off the butte and Indian-crept toward the bed of rocks. Nothing like a set plan occupied his mind. The dominant objective was to reach Sera ahead of the prowlers, because leaving her there alone and alive —well, it wouldn't do. The memory of it wouldn't do to take along.

## Chapter Seven

### *A Match for Satan*

ON THE darkening ground the dead thugs lay in curiously lifelike attitudes, as if relaxing around a nonexistent campfire at the end of a day's honest work. For a short spell Bishop relaxed among them, listening and getting his bearings. Their presence didn't bother him. Dead dogs couldn't bite.

What did bother him was the silence everywhere. No sound came from the ford. For some time now not a shot had echoed anywhere along the river, nor from the cliffs. Even an ear pressed to earth failed to pick up any rumor of horses moving about. He distrusted the silence, reading from it a calculated design and a creeping purpose. A trained instinct clanged warning of unseen danger closing in around him.

He slid on to the rocks, eased in among them, and paused to listen again. Dammit, they *were* coming near. Those faint, indefinite rustlings were not conjured up by over-sharp senses too eager to corroborate intuition. He went forward, drawing a gun with slow care, hooking his thumb over the hammer.

Before him, a dozen yards off, bulked the rounded black shape of the dead horse. And Sera, a lighter shape beside it. She was working her bound hands, doggedly, like a man trying to saw through an iron bar with a two-inch

file. She didn't at once see Bishop, and the length of his glance at her was no more than enough to assure him that she was alive. His eyes were caught by two rocks, close to his right, which he was positive did not belong in the mental picture he kept of this place from his day-long vigil.

Sera saw him then, a crouched shadow, motionless. She began a frantic struggle. The two rocks shifted, making a faint, dry rustling. Fearing the girl might scream, Bishop sent her a hushed murmur: "Keep still!"

She did. So did the two rocks. Bishop held his gun on them, till one whispered, "That you, Bishop? This is Red!"

"Who's that with you?"

"Smith!"

"Well, I'll be damned!"

They crawled forward, draped in mud-daubed tarpaulins. Their heads peeked out from under, giving them the arch appearance of shy turtles rather than two desperate men on a suicidal venture. Bishop wanted to know what made the rustling, and Red explained that the tarps were stuffed up with straw to accord them the rounded look of rocks.

Smith, coldly bitter, told Bishop he was fortunate. "You didn't have to crawl down a cliff like this and float across a river, and fool forty cutthroats! No! You got out of that, with your cursed trickery!"

He didn't mean it in that vein, and Bishop knew it and asked him, "Who made you turn into a rollin' stone?" He received no answer. He didn't need one. Nobody had made Smith do it.

From the far distance of the cliffs Smith and Red, with the border vaqueros, had watched thugs get bowled over when prowling near Sera, and knew it was Bishop's work. They weren't doing any good up there, so they started down as the time seemed right and they could cook up a chance to get there to Sera.

Bishop could guess at that picture, and he wasn't too surprised to find Smith here. Angelito was a no-account little catamount, slippery as they came, but he hadn't yet sloughed off the old code. A matter of personal pride, maybe. And the girl was young and pretty. That helped.

"Will you two quit scrappin'?" Red protested. "This sure ain't the time an' place for it!" He turtled on cumbrously and murmured to Sera. A hand and knife wiggled out weirdly from where his head had been and cut free her wrists.

Smith's poking head twisted, and he started after him. Red was not to be allowed to hog the credit. It had to be made clear to the girl that she was saved by virtue of the inspired gallantry and brilliant leadership of Angelito Smith—not by an inferior underling who, taking cheap advantage of a pause for discussion, got there first with a dollar pocketknife.

Above the rustle of Smith's straw-stuffed tarp Bishop caught a muted medley of other sounds. "Hang up, Smeet!" he muttered.

Smith's head came around, inquiring

irritably, "What?"

"Shut up an' listen!"

When the straw was still the sounds came clearer, instantly recognizable. Now that it was dark Hump's hooligans evidently felt that the bed of rocks could be investigated without risk. They compromised with caution by taking long, creeping steps, and not talking above the pitch of a mountain lion's courting grumble. Their progress probably couldn't be detected from rifle-shot range, but from here they were within a stone's throw.

Red was an unmoving rock huddled protectingly beside Sera, who couldn't huddle closer to him than the mud on his masquerade.

Equally hampered, unable to dig out a gun for fear of rustling his straw, Smith hissed urgently to Bishop, "Do something! This cursed canvas—we had to tie them on! I can't get out without raising a noise! Do something!"

"What? Hell, here they come!" Bishop cocked his drawn gun and dug for the other. "Do what?"

Smith breathed a soft Spanish oath, which contained a strong statement regarding Bishop's parentage. "Do anything! You can match Satan when you have to! I know it! Quick—do something!"

"Match?" muttered Bishop. "Why, sure—sure—!"

He fished out a match. He thrust it under Smith's tarp and scratched it alight with his thumbnail, and withdrew his hand. "You better ki-yi for the river pretty quick now," he advised Smith.

The results came fast. There was a sizzling crackle and a puff of flame. Smith let out an astounded yelp. He leaped up like a kerosened stallion and ran, a pillar of flame, the tarp flapping out behind him. Fire, the best friend and worst enemy of man, diligently torched the tar-soaked tarp and singed its wearer.

Smith kept on running, tearing at the burning embrace. There could exist nothing like fire to set a man's best foot forward. Smith simply bounded on a few high spots, smashed through brush that would have balked a burro, and sailed on.

At that moment Sera or Red, or both, leaned on the dead black horse to see what in hell had happened. The carcass vented a loud and sepulchral grunt.

It was amazing what darkness and the unknown could wreak among the ignorant. Bishop had often noted it in some Indians who were not too townbroke. These more or less white savages had been absent from town a long, long time. Living without law like wild animals had sharpened their muscular reactions and brute instincts, but dulled their thinking faculties. Confronted by anything unusual, their brains broncoed.

A fiery apparition, springing up out of the ground and darting through the night, was a novelty. Some of them ran howling after it. Others, of a more Indian cast, ran elsewhere. None dallied to cogitate on the meaning of that unearthly grunt. Pretty soon there came a splash, a hiss, and the fire went out.

Bishop banged into Red in the dark and yanked Sera to her feet. "Come on—quick!" He rushed her off, half carrying her along to keep up with his long-legged strides. Red tore loose from his trappings and overhauled them near the river.

"There's a better place to cross, where Smith and I floated over. More hidden. Deep in the middle, though.

Can you swim, Sera?"

"Lead on, Red—never mind the questions!" Bishop told him. "We'll get across! Damwell got to!" As far as he could recall, Smith wasn't much shakes at swimming, in spite of all the times he had crossed the Rio Grande, usually in a hurry. Smith would be hunting a shallow place, if he could still get around. Well, that was his problem. "Step lively! There goes Hump singin' out!"

Upstream, Hump was loudly cursing and calling his mob together. Men were snarling at one another, each vowing he would have caught that blazing booger if only he'd had a little help.

Red said, "Here we are! Right over there's where Smith and I got down the cliff. It's not too tough. Sera, let me—"

Bishop tripped him and barged straightway into the river, with Sera in his arms. Toward midstream the footing dropped away, embarrassingly, and he had to use his arms for swimming.

Red splashed up alongside, anxiously reaching out to help Sera, and sinking himself every time he tried it. Like most riders of the Southwest, where a yard-wide trickle counts as a river, neither Red nor Bishop could dog-paddle six strokes without going down for a fresh start from bottom. They called it swimming.

Sera, a lithe fish, went down for Red and helped him ashore, and rippled back for Bishop, who had decided to hold his breath and walk. On the east bank both men sat down, spent and puffing, while Sera—not a bit out of breath—inquired concernedly, "Are you all right now?"

"Cert-huh-'nly!" gasped Red, and Bishop mentioned that he was glad to have been on hand to get Sera across. No trouble at all.

With a stout resurgence of energy Red led the way up the cliff. This, he explained, required knowledge, experience, and an excellent memory. Sera agreed that it was so; for she had taken this short cut many times and it was marvelous of Red to have discovered it. She stayed behind till Red clambered astray the fourth time, and then she scampered on ahead and led them up onto the cliff.

The border vaqueros, tightly on the alert, informed them that the *ladrones* down there were up to something. Had they seen that strange streak of flame? Yes, they had. It was certainly most mysterious. Smith had not come back. Had they seen him? Yes; Smith was engaging himself in important matters, said Bishop, and would show up presently. Meantime, watch the river. Don't let those filthy *ladrones* come over, or surely they would find the hidden road and perhaps storm the ranch.

*Verdad.* This was true. Unfortunately, the thunderheads kept piling up, obscuring the moon, so that the river below the cliffs was a sleazy ribbon difficult to see. The brush-thugs could cross it tonight without a witness.

"We'll guard the road," Bishop ordered, "and watch for cliff climbers. Put spit on your gunsights."

And then Smith came along.

Smith presented a sad sight. He was scorched, nearly drowned, and exhausted from climbing. His rage sustained him. At sight of Bishop, he grated, "You hell-spawned traitor! You—you—!"

"Now, *amigo*, what's bitin' you?" Bishop queried. "We all made it, didn't we? What's the beef?" His hands were thrust under his coat.

Smith saw that. He whipped a narrow stare to his men. "Watch him!" he snapped. "He's no friend of mine!" And in a brittle tone: "What's here?" He wanted to know who the devil Bishop thought he was, to be calmly usurping command, and he tongue-lashed his crew up and down for taking orders from anybody but himself.

Considering that he hadn't been around to give any orders lately, his recriminations were not entirely reasonable, and some of the border men told him so to his face, angrily. These men were a thorny lot, full of independence and self-esteem. Recent events had stretched their high tempers. It wasn't safe for anybody, even Smith, to cuss them out as if they were humble peons and sheepherders.

It was a promising start for a bad row, a mutiny. Smith knew it. He turned it off, saying, "String out and watch the cliffs, some of you. The rest guard the road."

That, they informed him caustically, was what they had been about to do when he showed up. It made Smith madder than ever, but he had to hold the lid on or risk complete loss of control over them.

Bishop tried pouring more fuel on his fire by suggesting kindly, "You rest a spell, Smeet, an' let us handle it, huh? You look kind o' done up. You're not yourself."

He recognized Smith's trouble, and relished it. In the ordinary course Smith wasn't really a bad loser when a trick got turned against him. What he couldn't stand was being made to look ridiculous. It knocked away all his sense of humor. Also, being a confirmed dandy, he hated having his elegant garb ruined.

Ignoring Bishop's barbed suggestion, Smith nodded to his crew and spoke to them with forced friendliness. They moved off to take up their stations, saying no more. He had created a resentment among them, though, that would take some time to erase. Worse, there now existed a spark of doubt that might flare up and destroy all their confidence in him. It was difficult to retain complete respect for a leader who let himself be made a fool of and then pawed the hole deeper. He could not afford another mistake.

Red, passing up a chance to keep quiet, said, "Ought to turn my sorrels out an' let 'em graze with Sera's bunch. They're not much likely to drift."

Smith turned on him with savage joy. He needed badly an excuse to relieve his feelings, and here was one all set up for him.

"Your sorrels? And the others you call Sera's, eh?" He spoke almost caressingly. "That about takes care of all the horses on the place! How do you go about it?"

"She and I own 'em," Red answered simply. "The brands are in our names. We can both show the registry papers to prove it any time at Fort Griffin or anywhere else."

"Ah, yes! But the horses will be sold by me!"

"How do *you* go about it?"

"Like this!" A gun spiked from Smith's hand.

"Y'know, Smeet," casually put in Bishop, "it won't do much good to shoot him for his papers. They're in his name. They're no use to anybody else, without a bill of sale."

Smith frowned. He disliked all documents, regarding them as unnecessary, and his knowledge of them was hazy. Larceny was becoming complicated.

"Thanks for mentioning it," he ac-

knowledged, sarcasm edging his tone. "All right—he'll write out a bill of sale to me."

Bishop wagged his head. "You could haul a wagonload of bills of sale, all signed over in your name—an' still you'd run into trouble trying to sell horses up in Fort Griffin! You cussed out Major Jennisk and got him sore. He's an unforgiving kind o' sour critter. He's posted you as a horse thief. He doesn't like you personally a little bit. No, you don't sell horses to Jennisk. Not you, Smeet!"

In his wrathful dismay Smith appeared tempted to go ahead and shoot Red and then take a crack at Bishop. Off-tracked by a new thought, he demanded, "How do you know all that? Do you have any connection with Jennisk?"

"Yeah." Bishop's nod was matter-of-fact. "I contracted with him to deliver some horses, on a kickback deal that would pay us both a profit. Your horses. That is, the horses you stole off Red. At the time I didn't know it was you, nor where the horses were stole. Country's full o' Smiths an' horses." He sucked a tooth reflectively. "Not that it would've made any difference."

"So!" grated Smith. "So! I knew it! These mangy buffalo tramps—"

"Don't pop your skull," Bishop advised him. "It'll get you in trouble someday. The point is, you can't sell horses to Jennisk at any price—but I can! Think it over! What's that scorched smell? Oh, sure—your clothes. Thought for a minute it was you."

He watched Smith go stamping off. He turned to pass a remark to Red, and decided it would be lost.

Red, staring hard at him, said, "I figger your game, Bishop! You're aiming to tie into a trade with that damned bandit, for a split in the loot! Well, I lost those sorrels once an' I can lose 'em again. But how about Sera's horses? How about Sera, herself?"

"The subject," responded Bishop, "has its place in my mind."

"That answer's not good enough!" Red said, and now a taut string of wildness rang in his voice. "I've watched Smith, how he looks at her! He's after her!"

Bishop nodded. "So are you."

"And you're after her, too! By the Lord, I'll kill—!"

Then a man sang out that Hump's mob was coming up the road, and conversation broke off.

## Chapter Eight

### *Trickery Traders*

THE rabble pack came up like a sudden storm. They had left their skinny ponies and eeled across the river in the cloud-densed darkness, and found the pass and the road. Their attack was as simple as a wild bull's charge. A grunted word from Hump, and the pattering rush.

Yet it had the merit of surprise. Nobody on the high ground dreamed that they had already massed on the road and were creeping up it. What betrayed them was Hump's grunt, and the patter of moccasins. They must have forgotten that sound travels upward, especially up a deep pass. And they didn't know the bends of the road. Their minds clung hungrily to the thought of the dazzling prize—hundreds of saleable horses—and the thought left no room for cautious considerations.

There were so many of them. They

outnumbered Smith's remaining crew four or five to one. The narrow pass was a funnel of gunfire, most of it blind shooting in the dark. An evening breeze cruised along on schedule and blew into the pass and rolled gunsmoke up into the faces of the high-ground men, who sneezed, coughed, cursed, and fired blinder than ever.

The raiders slowly backed down, and the air cleared. Bishop discovered Smith beside him, when he took time out to wipe his eyes. The glance that ran between them was impersonal, professional.

"They'll take a real whack at the cliffs next, don't you reckon? This mesa is okay against riders, but those tramps don't mind crawlin'—an' they're good at it."

"Yes. They won't quit now. Damn it, wish I had more men! Men like the old San Carlos crowd."

"That was a crew, all right. I looked for you to come up governor o' Chihuahua, that time. What went bad?"

"Lost my temper and shot a general. He was a cousin of the *presidente*." Smith shrugged. "Time we strung back along the cliffs. You watch the road, eh?"

The assault up the arroyo-gashed bluffs was a silent affair, till Hump's bellow rang out, startlingly near, ordering his mob to the final scrambling dash. They had crept up the arroyos in the dark—not a hard trick for them. Smith's men knew they were coming, could hear their slight sounds, but couldn't catch a glimpse of them. Then the bellow, and suddenly dim figures bobbed up like a troop of clawing, clambering apes.

Thin spurts of flame lashed down from the rim. The attackers fired at the flashes, and for a minute it was a blazing battle at short range. Few as they were, the border men had the advantage of lying prone for steady aim and exposing only their heads. The climbers, when hit, had a long way to fall. Some of them screamed as they tumbled down.

Again the attack folded, more and more of the figures flopping back flat into arroyos and crevices, till the great bluffs became a black nothingness as before, yet alive with noise. The descent was harder to do, but they had no further need of silence.

After a while Smith returned to the road. With him were Red and Sera. They found Bishop enjoying a cigar, its lighted end shielded under his coat. Guarding the road was an essential job. The fact that it had turned out to be a soft snap, while Smith and his *valientes* banged away for their lives on the cliff, did not ruffle Bishop.

"Three more men killed," Smith told him, "and we're low on shells. We can't stand off another attack like that. So we're pulling out of here!"

"Where to?"

"East. I'm told—" Smith motioned at Sera—"it's a very bad route, no water, and that we'll never get the horses through. But it's either that, or sit here hoping those devils won't try us again. I think they will!"

"So do I," agreed Bishop. "That's no reason we should go off cockeyed into any hellacious desert, though, with five hundred horses. You been too busy to use your head, Smeet. I haven't. The thing to do is let three or four of your boys keep on the move, back and forth along the cliff, shooting. Hump's just bright enough to figure we expect another attack there. So he'll fool us. He'll rush the pass again. Most likely that's what he intends to do, anyhow, but we

want to make sure of it."

Smith blinked rapidly. "Have you gone loco? Here we are, low on shells, three men dead, and you talk about—why, that mob will wipe us out! What are you thinking of, man?"

"I'm thinking of how they ran two hundred horses at me an' Red last night," Bishop said. "I'm thinking it's a fair shake to run horses right back at 'em tonight! An' five hundred horses should do a better job, h'm?"

He watched Smith's eyes change expression, and went on: "If we do it right—charge slam through 'em on a downhill start—then we're clear! They'll be too banged around an' disorganized to trail after us. Besides, their ponies can't be far off. The ruckus will spook 'em."

"And if we can keep the horses bunched," Smith put in, "we'll be far up the trail to Fort Griffin by morning. *Bueno!* I would have thought of this, of course, only—as you said—I've been too busy."

"Of course." Bishop trimmed the chewed end of his cigar. "Which reminds me. When we reach Fort Griffin you better lie low. I'll sell Jennisk the horses. As for how the money's to be split up—well, we can argue that out on the way."

Smith shook his head. "Let's not leave room for argument," he urged gently. His eyes glinted. He laughed and half turned away as if to ponder on the matter. "I like your plan very well," he admitted. "That is, up to a point. And that point, friend Rogue, is where you speak of selling the horses. And of splitting the money! I've got a better idea."

He swung back, his left hand out in gesture, the way a man would when about to offer an explanation. But as he came fully around, a gun showed in his right hand; and Bishop bit down hard on his cigar and murmured:

"What idea is this, Smeet?"

"No split!" said Smith. His eyes were brilliant now.

"No sale!" said Bishop, and raised his eyes from the gun. Its muzzle waved lazily between him and Red. "You'll get nothing."

Smith laughed again, a soft sound like bells of triumph muted by distance. "I get everything! May I tell you about my idea?"

"You've got the floor."

"*Gracias!* You are going to help drive the horses up to Fort Griffin, friend Rogue. Red and Sera will make out to you the bills of sale, and the rest of that paper nuisance. You will sell the horses to Jennisk and hand me the money—and *I* shall decide about any splitting of it!"

Bishop said reasonably, "It's a long time to hold a gun. I'll jump you long before that."

Smith let the muzzle droop. "You won't, and I won't need a gun, after I explain my idea. Friend Rogue, you think something of Sera. So does Red. So do I, for that matter." He shrugged. "But I'm in command here. These are my men. They know this thing has gone bad. If I tell them we've got to scamp out—they'll scamp, believe me! East to the desert! You could follow us or stay here."

Red spoke up, watching Smith's gun. "Do you mean you'd take Sera along on such a trip?" he asked, and Sera moved up closer to him and he put an arm around her shoulders.

"What a question!" Smith snapped impatiently. "You fool, do you think I would abandon her to those devils? Of course I'll take her along! And I'll

gamble I can get through that desert with most of the horses, and sell them to ranchers down the Sabine, no questions asked! Well, friend Rogue, what d'you want to do?"

"Wring your neck! But it can wait." Bishop slanted a look at Sera, then at Red. "Better hit the pass, huh?"

And that was his admission that Smith had him up a stump. They nodded. The loss was theirs, but anything was better than Smith's alternative.

Bishop stabbed out his cigar, dourly thinking ahead. It seemed likely that a high price was to be paid for having made a flaming fool of Smith, and not entirely in money. Smith could be lavishly generous at times, but to his mind this thing was a contest between himself and Bishop. Sera was an interesting side bet, and Red didn't count. The main objective was to beat Bishop, skin him mercilessly and salt him down and rub it in.

"All right, Smeet, let's get it goin'."

Smith's chuckle was high-throated, nasal, a dirty snicker. "First, please, let me have your guns!"

For a moment they only stared at each other. Then Smith said, with a slight catch in his voice, "It's that–or I shoot, and go east, with my crew, and the horses, and Sera! Be careful! If you pull on me, we'll both go under! Then what?"

Bishop remained utterly still. Smith said quietly, "Damn it, Rogue, don't look at me like that! I'll shoot, I tell you!"

At last, slowly, as if under tremendous effort, Bishop spread his coat and lifted out his pair of guns. He stooped, placed them on the ground, and straightened up.

Smith's small sigh of relief was audible. "Manuel–come here!" he sang out, and reaction from strain put a high lilt into his voice. "Pick up Mr. Bishop's guns and take care of them for him! Ah, good, good! Now we can start, eh, Rogue?"

THREE MEN SCUTTLED busily along the cliffs, sliding from one place to another and raising a hullabaloo of shooting. They set up a convincing performance that gave the effect of ten men nervously expecting another attack there at any minute, and suffering an epidemic of false alarms.

Another man won the job of catfooting down the pass to listen for invaders. He took his boots off, for quietness and speed, and gave his solemn oath not to fall asleep down there.

Smith and the rest, including Bishop, Red, and Sera, hurried to the corrals. The first necessity was for everybody to get a good saddle mount under him, and for several of them that wasn't simple. There were spare saddles at hand, to be picked over and chosen, but catching horses for them in the dark was something else.

Bishop climbed in among the sorrels and roped a puff of wind. Sera generously offered him the horse she caught. He went on roping, so she turned it over to Red and dabbed another.

Eventually they were all respectably horsed. Then came the task of rounding in the mixed horses from pasture, soothing the disturbed sorrels out of corral, and introducing the two bunches together, praying that they wouldn't suddenly elect to take off into the wide world.

"Peter's Gates, don't let 'em run!"

said a vaquero; and Red muttered, "Shut it off! Give 'em a chance to get acquainted, will you?"

Red knew horses. So did Sera. They circled slowly around the two horse herds, crooning nonsense to them, and everybody else drew off and let them work on it. Maybe they knew the language.

The horses mingled, snuffed one another curiously, and with one accord raised expectant heads and ears. "Well?" they seemed to be asking. "Where do we go?"

Red and Sera pushed in gently, urging them on, still talking gibberish to them. The riders closed in, helping, making no abrupt sound or movement. This wasn't a cattle herd. These were good horses, high-spirited, intelligent, faster on their feet than mounted men. They could dash off in a wink and flip their tails farewell, if they took the notion.

The riders coaxed them on to the yard, there held them bunched and temporarily contented in striking up snorting acquaintance. The sorrels appeared to have the edge in the social concourse; they formed cliques and sniffed at horses of different breeding. But on the whole they got along.

After a while the barefoot scout came sprinting up the road, whispering oaths at sand-spurs in his toes. "They come!" he gasped in Spanish. "*Ay*, a hundred! They come!"

Smith glanced at Bishop. "Now?"

Bishop sat stonily on his horse. "Wait!" his bleak growl commanded. "Let 'em come up!" In a minute he said, "Now!" And then his command harshly broke the subdued night. "Run the horses down the pass—pronto, you knotheaded buzzards! Now!"

It was a low trick on the horses, after wheedling their confidence, to shout roughly at them and smite them with quirts and rope ends. More indignant than scared, the whole herd curved in a ramming riot down the pass. Dust behind them was a choking fog and the roar boomed like a prolonged explosion. It was as if an avalanche crashed into the pass. There came a tiny, flatted popping of shots down below, and cracked shreds of howls; some whinnying squeals.

The riders hurtled through the blinding ruck of dust and the darkness, clamped hard in their saddles, their mounts shivering in every muscle from fear of the uproar, fear of the unseen road dropping steeply away under racing hoofs.

Then they were bursting out of the narrow funnel, wheeling sharply and gouging gravel; churning across the river and stringing out to bunch the horse herd and head it north. Some ribby Indian ponies slashed leanly across their path, and whirled about in wild confusion and dashed off.

Back in the pass a few voices cried out the dragging oaths of beaten and broken men, and somewhere on a faraway hill a coyote yapped an insistent summons to its pack.

## Chapter Nine

### *A Sale of Horses*

A HERD of trail horses, requiring much the same handling as a trail herd of cattle, soon fell into a daily routine. They covered less than twenty miles a day on the average, grazed along the way, and had to be bedded down at night—except that, un-

like cows, horses didn't need to lie down very often. They grazed twice between midnight and sunup, usually, and if their noses were pointed in the right direction they made another mile or two, which was all to the good. In the morning, around four, there was the hasty breakfast, if any, and the catch-up with the herd. The wrangler followed closely with fresh mounts ready for instant notice—or he didn't hold his job long.

This was a horseback outfit. No wagons. No cook. They chewed jerky. Or shot a stray cow and roasted the beef on sticks, over a fire. Hardest on the dispositions of the vaqueros was the lack of coffee.

However, spirits perked up as they neared Fort Griffin, and grins of anticipation broke out when the fort loomed up distantly on its hill. Bishop remained bleakly taciturn. Red and Sera hadn't much to say, either.

The only one of the outfit who had kept in a good humor all the trip was Angelito Smith. He rode jauntily along, his ruined sombrero cocked at a dashing angle. By means of extravagantly elegant manners he rose superior to his scorched garb, which had split here and there, and when he wasn't whistling he was making irritatingly cheerful remarks. Whenever he looked at Bishop's dour face he chuckled. His attitude toward Sera was that of a knight to a captive princess: scrupulously courteous—and proprietary, Bishop noticed.

Although it was still morning, Smith called a halt on the Clear Fork and issued crisp commands. "You will go on alone to the fort, friend Rogue, and talk horses with that crooked major! If all seems well, tell him to send out a troop to meet the herd and take it in. That way, he won't see me. And my men are shy about going to the fort. Their appearance is against them, and —er—they're all on the wanted list!"

"They look it!" said Bishop. "How 'bout Sera? An' Red?"

For reply Smith called out four names. "You," he told the four men, "will camp here with Miss Donavon and Mr. Delaney, while the rest drift the horses on up the trail. Keep a sharp lookout! If you see the slightest sign of this thing going bad, shoot Mr. Delaney at once! Then make for the old Sabine hangout, with Miss Donavon!" He spoke to the others. "As soon as you turn the horses over to the soldiers, come straight back here. Well, Rogue?"

Bishop said, "How 'bout my guns? Plenty ducks in Hell's Hundred don't like me!"

Smith sadly shrugged. "Sorry. I can't take that chance, now all the chips are in. You see, Rogue, I'll be right on hand when you come out of the fort with the money, and I wouldn't want a row over it! I don't think you'd hold out on the money, because of Sera. But you're a tricky devil, and I've got to make sure!"

Without another word Bishop swung aboard his horse and set off for the fort. There was nothing else for it. Smith had the game figured out to the last move, like a master chess player, and nothing could prevent the ultimate checkmate, outside of kicking the board over.

Because of his vulnerable gunless state, Bishop skirted around Hell's Hundred. His empty holsters were hidden under his severely respectable long black coat, but men of violence—and tinhorn gamblers—often possessed a kind of sixth sense about such things; they smelled out in a minute whether

you were armed or not.

Bishop's roundabout course brought him up north of the hill and the fort. The gates of the fort faced south, but he came to a door on the north side, and, being in a satanic mood, he booted on it.

A large woman opened the door and bellowed at him, "This is Laundress Row, no callers 'thout post commander's p'mission an' who d'you think ye are, ye civilian?"

She was Irish and army from way back and probably knew trumpet calls better than the trumpeters. Being on Laundress Row, she would naturally be the wife of a sergeant.

Immediately, Bishop doffed his broad-brimmed hat. He bowed in the saddle. "Forgive me, Madam—or Miss? I banged for a soldier, I having an interview due with the major, and it's private. How could I know that I knocked on the door of sweet femininity? It was unbeknownst to me, I swear. Still, I'm not now regrettin' me error, for at its worst, which is best, I have seen a fair face. Now slam the door on me, dear lady, an' I go my lonesome way with memories to last me for many nights to come!"

The broad, sunburned face of the large woman softened. "Yer talk don't kid me, but the words are nice," she sighed, and threw open the door. "Come in, ye big black rascal! I think ye're nothin' but a gamblin' man, but—ah, well. The major's office is yonder."

"I thank you, Miss."

"It's Mrs. I'm Mrs. Ser-rgeant Malloy."

"It's my tragedy I must always be too late, dear lady," said Bishop, walking his horse through.

"Ah, go along," she said. "I know ye're no good. Go 'long!"

He went along to the adjutant's office. It was a bare plank building like all the rest, raised off the ground so that it had an equally bare and dismal porch. Bishop mounted to the porch and shoved open a door, and instantly he was in a quiet office. Men wearing stripes wrote on long sheets of paper, glanced up at him incuriously, and went on writing.

He spoke to a man who wore two stripes and a bunch of foreign decorations, some having crosswise bars. "Major Jennisk, please. My name's Bishop."

The German from the Imperial Guards stood up and marched to a closed door. He received a reply, spoke, received another reply, and beckoned quickly to Bishop. The Army of the West was full of old soldiers from the old countries, on the jump; and tough young Irish punks; and battered adventurers from everywhere, particularly from the South since the defeat of the Confederacy.

Bishop ducked through that door and stood in the Presence. He heeled shut the door behind him, and said to Jennisk, "I've got over five hundred good horses to sell. You still buying?"

Major Jennisk's sharp round eyes widened. "*Five* hundred?" he exclaimed in his piping voice. A pleased look replaced his previous harried expression. As before, he made no move to shake hands. Nor did he offer friendly greetings and a chair. "That fellow Smith said three hundred."

"We picked up a second bunch," Bishop murmured. "Want 'em?"

Jennisk nodded quickly. "Yes. They'll fill my order. I've been worrying—" He stopped that, and grew cagey. "I'll take any that pass requirements."

Bishop helped himself to a cigar

from a heavy brass humidor on the desk. "They'll pass. And I've got clean papers for 'em, from the original owners."

"You do a thorough job!" Jennisk's pursy little mouth quirked a knowing skepticism. "I won't look too hard at the papers. Where are the horses?"

"Comin', couple miles down the trail." Bishop fired a match for the cigar. "Might be better to send some soldiers to bring 'em in, h'm?"

"That's right." Jennisk heaved his paunchy shape up out of the chair, with a flabby man's grunt. "Wouldn't look well for Hump's ruffians to be seen coming here—especially with those rifles!"

"No, it wouldn't."

Bishop listened to Jennisk clipping orders in the outer office, and an orderly's snappy "Yessir," and the bang of a door. He gazed musingly at the brass humidor. Its lid was heavily embossed with the Stars and Stripes, the Eagle, and the crossed-sabers cavalry insignia. A patriotic cigar box. He strolled out of the major's office, deep in thought.

TROOP C BROUGHT THE HORSES up to the fort and held them for count into the corrals. A lieutenant, acting as inspecting line officer, called, "Five hundred and thirty-four, I make it," and looked questioningly to Bishop, who nodded.

Jennisk asked the veterinary what he thought of them. "Good!" was the answer. "Of course, we'll have to test them for wind and so forth, but—"

"If they weren't sound," said Bishop, "they wouldn't be here. They've come a long way." He lowered his voice to Jennisk. "I don't have time. Call it five hundred straight, an' take the odd thirty-four to allow for possible rejections."

Jennisk made some kind of sign to the vet, who grinned and nodded. He jerked his head then to Bishop and left the shade of the stable wall, and Bishop walked with him. They entered the adjutant's office, where Jennisk parted from Bishop and spoke quietly to a thin-faced sergeant at a desk. He rejoined Bishop and they went into his office.

Seating himself behind his desk, Jennisk attempted a measure of affability. He pushed forward the brass humidor. "Have another cigar, Bishop. I'm having bank drafts made out, government-stamped. Cashable at any bank, you know, without question. That's for my protection as well as yours. All right?"

Bishop nodded. "Good as gold."

The thin-faced sergeant knocked and came in. He laid two papers on the desk and withdrew, closing the door. Jennisk scanned them with care, before dipping a pen in an inkwell and signing both. He slid them over to Bishop and held out the pen.

"This one is yours. The other you endorse—that's mine."

Bishop scanned the figures. "Five hundred horses at thirty-five dollars a head, which was the price you agreed on, adds up to more'n ten thousand, Major!"

Jennisk's eyes were suddenly ugly. "Take it or leave it! The horses are here in the corrals. They're stolen horses, and we both know it and to hell with your papers!"

"This—" Bishop tapped the other bank draft—"gives you a cut of, let's see—" He peered at it. "Fifty-two thousand, five hundred dollars! I sign that over to you?"

"Yes!" Jennisk whispered. "Or would you rather be thrown into the guardhouse and wait there for trial and the warrants that are out for you?"

"You're out to get dirty rich, seems to me!"

"It's better than retiring on half pay! I'm not in this damned army for glory! Endorse that draft! Sign it!"

Bishop signed. He flirted the draft across the desk and picked up the other one, shrugging. The paper skimmed past Jennisk to the floor. Jennisk swung in his chair and reached down for it. Bishop picked up the patriotic humidor. He turned it in his fist, and glanced at it, and with one long strike he imprinted the brass Star Spangled Banner on Jennisk's thinning scalp. Jennisk bowed down to the floor and stayed there.

Bishop took a few cigars from the humidor and retrieved both bank drafts. For a moment he looked down dispassionately at the ungraceful figure on the floor. Maybe he had killed Jennisk; in that case there would be the notice: *Died in the line of duty.* And the grim chase after the killer.

He said, closing the door, leaving, "Major, it's been a pleasure. No, don't bother; I know the way. 'By!" He nodded pleasantly to the thin-faced sergeant at his desk, to the German corporal, the orderly, all the rest. He gave the corporal a cigar.

He held his horse to a walk through the parade ground and back along Laundress Row. On the porch of one of the line of little houses Mrs. Malloy inclined her head to him, discreetly. A burly sergeant sat beside her on the porch, smoking a pipe, his boots off, his red-brown face settled in the phlegmatic reverie of an old soldier taking his ease.

Bishop reined in before the porch. "Sergeant Malloy?" he inquired, and got an affirmative nod. From his pocket he drew two gold double-eagles and clinked them together. "I'd appreciate a small favor. There's a scorched little man waiting somewhere down the hill not far from the main gates. Could you send a trooper out to him with a message?" He spun the twenties over the porch rail.

The sergeant caught them nimbly. Just as nimbly, his wife plucked one from his hand. "What's the message, sir?"

"Just—'Bishop has started north.' That's all. I thank you."

He touched his hat and passed on through the small door. Once outside, he heeled his horse to a dead run along a wider and more roundabout course, using all the cover he could find.

At the camp on the Clear Fork he pulled to a sliding halt and stared somberly at the border men. They were all there, standing alertly by their horses, reading his haste as a sign of trouble.

"Where's Smith?" some of them sang out. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Bishop rasped at them. "Why, you are, if you're waitin' for him to come back an' pay off! I guarantee he won't! The little cuss is headed north, fast as he can ride!"

"What? A double cross! Is this true?"

"Double cross is right!" answered Bishop. "You can wait here if you want to. He won't show up! If he was going to, he'd be here by now, wouldn't he? As for me—Manuel, give me my guns, *por favor.* I'll need 'em if I catch up with him!"

They hit into their saddles so fast their horses danced. The resentment of Smith's hot-tempered insults had not died out; it served as a ready fire-start-

er and flared up into raging oaths of vengeance.

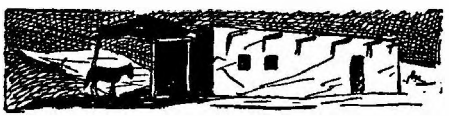
Manuel, tossing Bishop his guns, snarled, "You? *We* will catch up with him! Left us guarding those two, like fools, while he—!"

They whirled off, none of them giving any further thought to Sera and Red. Those two meant nothing now. Their minds were on money, on catching Smith and turning him inside out. It wasn't only Bishop's word that convinced them. It was also the fact that he had returned to the camp and Smith had not. They could see most of the road to the fort and Smith wasn't anywhere on it.

Red exclaimed to Sera, "Let's get out of here before they come back!"

"They won't," Bishop murmured. "They'll spot him soon after they pass the fort. He'll be dusting north, all right—lookin' for me! And if he gets out o' that mess, he'll be lookin' for me all the harder! We better mosey, though. There's trouble in that fort, an' they just might connect me with it."

He looked at Sera a moment, then briefly at Red. "Here's something for you. It's endorsed. Good as gold, they tell me. I won't be going your way."



THEY CAUGHT EACH OTHER in Santa Fe, over in New Mexico, in the old Bank Bar near the plaza. It was an even catch, a stand-off. From a poker table Bishop saw Smith enter, and Smith spotted him in the same instant and stood stock-still. Because of heavy law around Santa Fe, each studied the other for his intentions.

Bishop cashed his chips and got up from the game. They came slowly face to face.

"Drink, Smeet?"

Smith nodded stiffly. He looked poor and tired. They stood up to the bar and drank in silence, till Smith said, "A hell of a trick!"

"Trick? Which one?" Bishop poured again. "Oh—that! I put a dent in that major's skull, an' had to duck out fast. Didn't you get my message?"

"Yes—and I raced north after you! Where did you go?"

"I cut back to camp, on—hum—an afterthought. To see Red and Sera about something."

Smith sighed faintly. "And to send my crew after me, eh? I've been on the run from them ever since! Who got the money for the horses?"

"Red an' Sera," Bishop admitted. "I held out ten thousand for myself, as commission—a horse dealer's cut. Those two went off together. To raise more horses. Or maybe to rob a grave, for all I know."

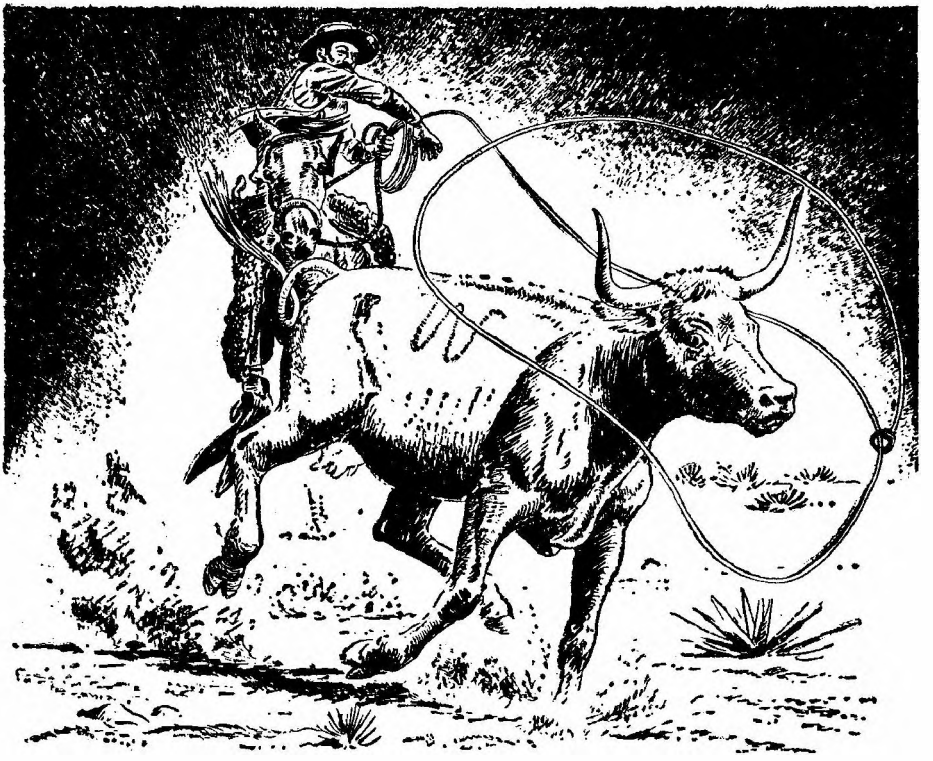
"I thought you were after that girl. No?"

"No," Bishop lied. "She could do too many things too damned well. Shoot, swim, climb, handle horses, an' what-all. About the only thing I could do better was shoot—an' somehow I just couldn't see that as a basis for matrimony."

Smith shook his head. "My crew think I've got that money. They hunt me out everywhere I go. And I'm dead broke. Hah! I still say—a hell of a trick!"

"Tough," agreed Bishop. He drank again, thought it over, and at last growled, "All right, damn it, I'll stake you to a thousand, Smitty."

THE END

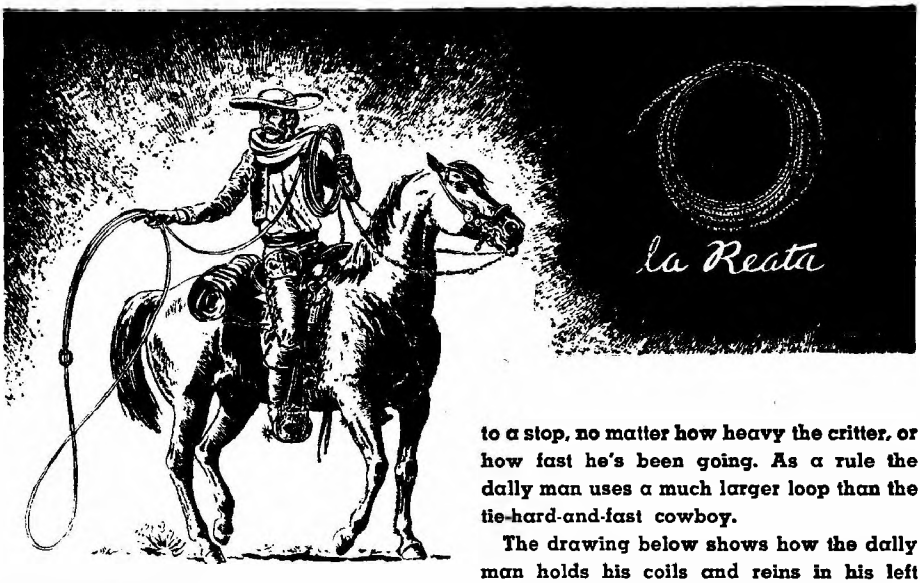


# DALLY MAN

*Story and Pictures by Randy Steffen*

The buckaroo from the great Sunshine state has long been known as a skin string, dressed fit-to-kill, centerfire dally man —all of which might sound a bit uncomplimentary to the reader who's not familiar with cow camp lingo, but which is really a literal description of his ways and equipment.

The skin string is cowboy slang for the Californian's rawhide *reata;* his clothes and horse gear always have been a little more ornate than his Texas cousin's, hence the reference to his dress. His saddle has, for the most part, always been centerfire-rigged —and until recently the skilled California *vaquero* was the world's best with the long




rawhide saddle rope.

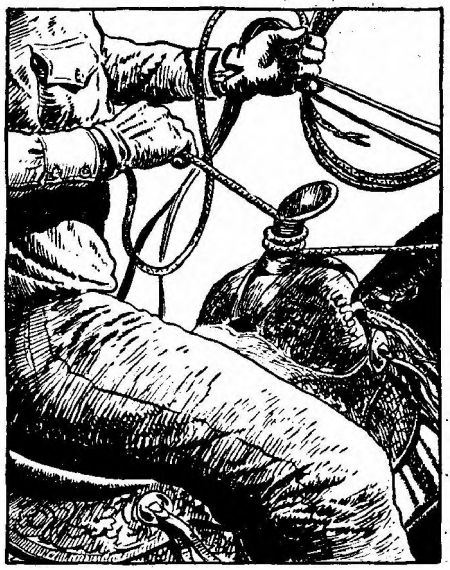
In contrast to his *companeros* from Texas, who tie their ropes hard-and-fast to their saddles, the Californian dallies the end of his *reata*, or takes a couple of turns around the horn and plays catch like a fisherman.

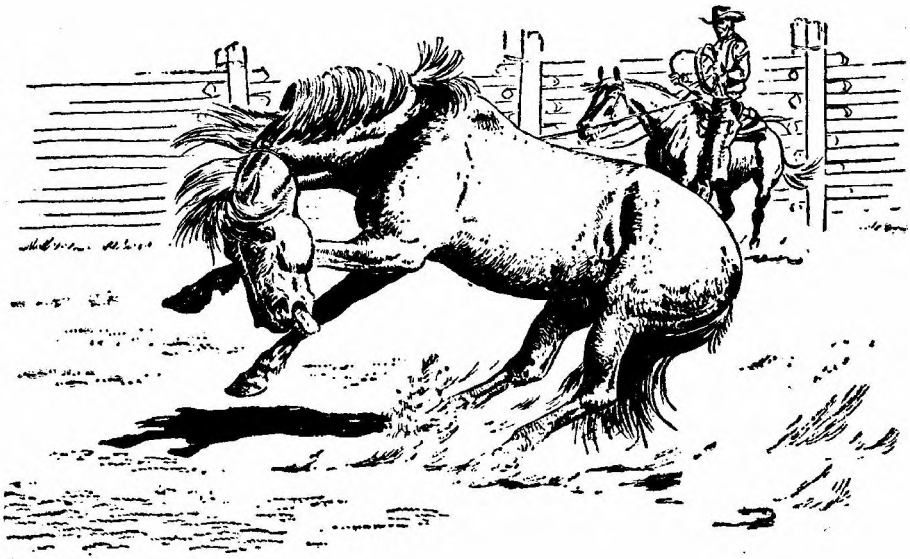
The expression "dally" comes from the Spanish *dale vuelta*, which means "take a turn." The skill at dallying has been handed down from generation to generation until it has become something the California top hand is justly proud of.

The rawhide *reatas* used by the Californians, and their brothers in Nevada and Oregon, are masterpieces of craftsmanship and, in the hands of the unskilled, snaky, treacherous coils almost impossible to manage.

I've seen *reata* experts make catches in high winds clear to the ends of their sixty- to eighty-foot rawhide ropes. Believe me, it's a pleasure to watch them pick up any foot of a running horse or cow they choose, and then take their turns to bring the animal to a stop, no matter how heavy the critter, or how fast he's been going. As a rule the dally man uses a much larger loop than the tie-hard-and-fast cowboy.

The drawing below shows how the dally man holds his coils and reins in his left hand, and takes his wraps around the horn with his right. Much skill is necessary to be able to handle the sixty or seventy feet of





coils, and still control the horse without jerking his head off with the spade bit so many of them still use.

I've seen a good many dally experts whose right hands were shy a thumb or one or more fingers—lost in the wraps!

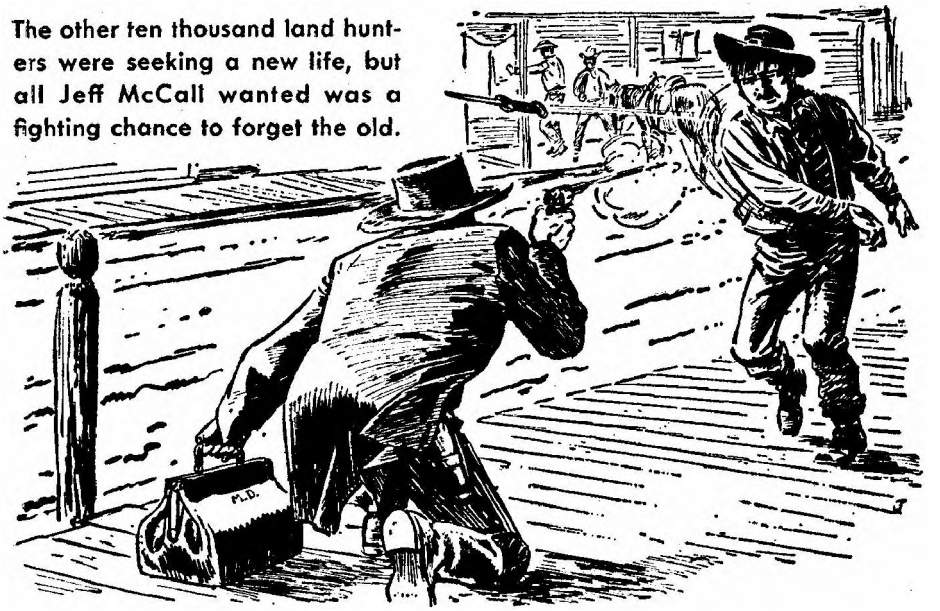
While the Californian is admittedly the master of the dally, it becomes necessary at times for all ropers to dally during part of their work. This is especially true in working unbroken horses in a corral. A rope tied hard-and-fast in doing this kind of work might mean injury to the roper, by being wound up in the rope, or to the horse, or both.

A horse that has never been handled is deathly afraid of anything that touches him, and he'll fight a rope until the breath is choked from his body, if the roper can't or doesn't give him slack before he blacks out.

A few years ago three of us caught a bunch of wild horses in the Panamint range on the west side of Death Valley. These were all big, stout broncs, and each had to be roped and haltered in a small and mighty rough corral where they were caught. My partner was a top dally man, and he caught them by the head while I forefooted them. Believe me, it was a pleasure to watch Tom give and take slack on those fighting wild 'uns. He used a rope that was a good sixty-footer, but that huge wad of coils didn't bother him any more than my short thirty-foot one worried me.

With the exception of a few rodeos on the West Coast, where a dally team-roping event is part of the program, the dally man has little chance to perform in professional contests. Unfortunately, it seems the day of the rawhide *reata* dally man is past. Of course, there'll be use for the dally method of roping as long as man works cattle from the back of a horse, but the real experts are about gone—they've passed away with the Old West!

**The other ten thousand land hunters were seeking a new life, but all Jeff McCall wanted was a fighting chance to forget the old.**



# Borderland

## *A Novelette*

## By GEORGE C. APPELL

### Chapter One

*Fresh Horizons*

DR. JEFFERSON JOHN McCALL was trying to pass the wagon ahead; had, in truth, been trying to pass it all morning. But the trail through the lush summer grass was bumpy and soft and he couldn't risk turning off and bogging down.

The wagon ahead was, like McCall's, only one of many that were rolling west toward Comanche Wells during that week in 1889, all seeking the yonder border of the Cherokee Strip where additional claims were going to be raffled by the government. Ahead rose the high dust of the earlier wagons and to south and north in the distances other lines of lumbering wagons stirred up immense gray veils of dust.

McCall didn't want to pass the other wagon in order to reach the Wells before it did; he had until sunset to file and the town was already in sight—a scatter of hard-angled frame buildings whose windows caught the nooning sun and held its fire. McCall wanted to pass that wagon because a young woman was in it, and his need for a woman was bone-deep in him, gnawing and sharp and persistent.

Not an alley woman: he didn't want that kind. His yearning came from bitter tears and lonely desperation, from the memory of a young wife dead in the years behind him. He wanted to grasp reality again—the reality of a voice, of welcoming eyes. Of ears waiting for his footfall at day's end. Those were the things that he needed, nothing more.

And so he drove, shaking the ribbons

and talking up the team, hoping that she would notice him. But she didn't, she was busy under the hood with dinner utensils. In front of her on the seat was a gray-haired couple whom McCall assumed were her parents.

Twice did he catch a full glimpse of her as the breeze of the wagon's passing lifted the flap of the hood and held it a moment: yellow corduroy skirt, white shirtwaist, a wide straw hat. Wheaten hair matching the skirt, and a female frown of concentration.

Jefferson McCall felt a slight depression sulk through him, not for the future but for the past. He had a consciousness of living beyond his time, of too many people having passed in his footsteps, leaving him to go on alone without them. Thirty-six years old only, but with sorrow and failure and death at his back—all of it dissolving into a rickety wagon, his chest of surgical instruments, and a hog-backed trunk with his clothing and gear. And hope.

He reached under the seat, took out a dusty bottle, and swallowed a mighty draft.

You can always hope, when there is a new border ahead, a fresh horizon. He was hoping now, as he neared Comanche Wells, though he knew that he should not.

He put hope into his mind to cover the bright image of that girl in the wagon ahead, because you cannot have a young woman's face in front of your eyes for seven hours and let the memory of it linger. She did not in the least resemble McCall's wife, except perhaps for the straight carriage of her head.

He wondered what her name might be.

Then she glanced up and saw him coming through the wind-sucked dust of her own wake, and she smiled. Immediately the smile left her lips, like a blown candle in the ancient defense of womanhood. The dust thickened between them—or seemed to.

They rolled closer to the Wells, thrashing aside grass that stood close and rich from a thousand years' fallowing. McCall thought, *There must be ten thousand people aiming to file for the raffle, and there are only five hundred sections to be drawn. Twenty-to-one odds.*

Comanche Wells squatted on the prairie in huddled embarrassment at having changed overnight from an obscure sutler's post to a focal point for traffic. A tent city sprawled away into the afternoon, a patched canvas community of land seekers.

The town itself was solidly jammed with horses and wagons and a confusion of people. You couldn't get into a store, they all were packed; you had to stand eight-deep at a bar in order to get a drink.

The wagon ahead of McCall pushed into the crowded street, its big Percherons jogging heavily and opening a way. McCall followed it into a side street that angled toward the tent city.

The two wagons rolled out of the side street and past the tent city and past a creek where women knelt, laundering; and onto the next clear space beyond. A shot sounded from the direction of town, and a man screamed. Then the steady humming of many people in a small place washed over the echoes. Dr. McCall imagined that he might do a little business here.

The gray-haired man from the wagon ahead was chaining his wheels. The girl climbed carefully through the flap and hesitated, not wanting to jump

down until she had collected her corduroy skirt about her. And in that moment McCall was under her, reaching up.

"Permit me, miss."

She saw a lean man with a wind-burned face and twinkling eyes. Once he had been neat but now his linen was travel-soiled and his broadcloth was dust-eaten and his boots were red with prairie silt. But he had shaved that day, and his teeth were white.

She said, "Thank you," and fell. He let her down easily and stood back, for the gray-haired man was coming around the tailgate with anger on his broad face.

Quickly she said, "That's my father, Mr. Elliman."

The doctor extended a hand. "My name's McCall, sir."

"Kind've prompt, aren't you?"

"I've been following you all day." He turned and touched his hat to the plump woman who was approaching from the forewheels. "This would be Mrs. Elliman?" And he introduced himself again.

Elliman returned to his chaining. His wife said, "Priss, we'd better get in line to file for the drawing. I've heard fifty thousand people want three hundred sections." She shook her head wearily.

McCall didn't correct her. He said, "Will you come with me?"

Elliman looked up from the wheel. "That'd be right nice of you. Priscilla's not quite twenty-one, and she can't file. But if you'd take her and her ma up to the land office, she could file my name."

They walked slowly, travel-stiff and momentarily unaccustomed to using their legs. Mrs. Elliman said that it'd be a pity not to win a section, after all this work.

"We got to win," she said forcefully. "We jus' got to!"

"There's other land beyond, if you're not lucky here," McCall said.

"Not free land," she blurted. "This land's free. All you do is pay the gov'ment two dollars a month after you've lived on it for eighteen months."

They joined one of the on-creeping registration lines that were edging slowly toward the counter. Harried land agents sweated over paperwork. Hands were raised, oaths were mumbled, and men moved on.

A man was saying, "They draw in two days. The first five hundred names pulled out've the bowl win the sections. I got a Bible in my wagon, an' I think tonight I'll—"

Excitement pulsed through the late afternoon. A piano struck out with a lilting tune from a saloon on East Street. Other people arrived to lengthen the line, eyeing the sunset and murmuring hopefully. McCall was aware of a woman sobbing ahead of him, head bent, with two other women supporting her—all of them with sad little clutches of prairie flowers in hand.

"We cain't go back, we got to draw—" Drab women, worn with families and work, grim-lipped and gnarled of limb, but on a solemn mission that for most of them would be their last in life. So they called attention to it solemnly, in the way women call attention to their militant piety when they go to church.

Priscilla Elliman asked, "Are you a gambler?"

McCall's impulse was to laugh. But he didn't, he couldn't. He gazed down at her for the slow count of ten before he answered, gazing at her mere twenty years of living, at her newness.

He had been sixteen when she was born; and when he had been twenty-

four and starting a practice with a girl wife and nothing but hope and tinned tomatoes, she was eight and still a child in pigtails and bowknots. She still seemed like a child. He was sorry that he had not passed her during the morning, so he could have had this thing over with.

"I am a doctor of medicine," he told her.

"Oh?" She edged on, and he followed, one of his hands in her mother's elbow.

His eye was taken by a tall woman in the line ahead. He could only see half of her face, but his eye stayed on her for a while.

In the next line, toward the end, a young couple in crisp, Eastern clothes held hands as they shuffled toward the counter. Obviously they had changed from travel garb to Sunday wear for the occasion of registering. A thick-set youngster with a jacket buttoned over a blue woolen sweater stood behind them, aloof and worldly. McCall blinked at the sweater and made out the faded white letter Y on it.

The sun dropped in a last explosion of flame, and twilight started to descend on the land. Dusty windows turned yellow. There was a shot from the direction of town, and uneasiness whispered through the shortening lines at the counters.

A little old woman said "Lan' sakes," and looked around for her husband. He was immediately behind her. He patted her shoulder once or twice.

McCall recognized the tune the piano was playing, and started to sing it softly:

*"Fond of fun as fond can be*
*When it's on the strict q.t.;*
*Whirl a girl 'cause she's my pearl*
*And dance 'til—"*

He stopped when he saw Priscilla's puzzled expression. She said, "That's surprising. You don't seem like a very happy man."

He started to reply, but he didn't. His eye was drawn by a lanky young man who was behind the college boy in the next line. He didn't seem to be much older than Y-sweater in years, but in experience he was aged. He was not a college boy, nor had he ever been one; nor had he come from the East. His narrow legs and arms were held in the dignified assurance that comes from many emergencies met and conquered, many quick decisions, much trouble settled. His slitted eyes were on Priscilla, not greedily or with lust, but respectfully.

McCall thought that he himself had doubtless worn much the same expression that morning.

He never knew why he did it, the doctor; but then, he could not account for many of his impulses. He beckoned the cowpuncher, for such he was, to come forward out of the other line.

"Take my place, Tex. I won't win anything; only have to plow it if I did."

The lanky young puncher measured McCall with his old eyes. "I don't get it, mister." His voice was deep and smooth, like a voice that isn't used much, but that's thrown in the right direction when it is.

"This isn't a badger act. Take my place."

A smile formed on the puncher's lips. "My name's Killenroe. Jim Killenroe." The smile broke wide. "How'd you know where I was from?"

"You've got the big bend of the Brazos in your legs. No offense. This is Miss Elliman, and her mother. Ladies, I'll keep an eye out for you, and take

you back to the wagon when you've registered."

Killenroe took McCall's place behind the two women. "Nobody'll hurt 'em." Suddenly: "Who're you?"

"McCall's the last name. The first is Jeff, or Jock, or Doc. You get a choice, Killenroe."

He slouched away toward the busy streets, a heaviness draining his strength and dragging his boots. He had lost again, but it didn't cut him deeply. He had lost before—in that town, in the other place, here and there. It was a dull ache in him now, as inseparable from himself as his heart or his skill or his lonesomeness. He ambled through the crowds with his eyes high, and people stepped aside for him as he went.

Jim Killenroe said, "He was 'strodinarily nice to do that. I won't forget it."

Priscilla saw fair skin burned to gunstock-brown by the sun. And she saw something else, though she could not define it. It was horizons—limitless distances, vast dreams all settled comfortably into Killenroe's eyes.

The pink afterwash of the gone sun was smearing the western sky, but still did the land agents labor. Sunset was the arbitrary time for closing the books, but sunset was where you found it. The head agent, looking at the lines with pity, passed the word to his assistants to pretend that they were a hundred miles farther west.

A thick-featured man reached forward and tapped Killenroe's arm. A black hat cut its shadow across luminous, burning eyes; the mouth was a quarrelsome streak across the unshaven face.

"That's not your place, kid. Step out of line." The man was reaching around two people—a bonneted little woman carrying a Bible, and her bewhiskered husband.

A pale flash of anger lighted Killenroe's eyes for an instant, like heat lightning reflected on a dark horizon. He said quietly, "Pull in your hand."

"You lost your place when you left the other line. Go back to the end of it. A man left this one, so this one closes up."

Killenroe shook off the man's hand. "Don't start trouble here."

The man withdrew his arm. "I hang out at the Boomer House." He studied Killenroe with secret anger.

"I'll see you there." Killenroe drew the makings from his shirt pocket and rolled a smoke. Matchlight burst against his cheekbones, and he inhaled with relish and was at ease again.

The line shuffled forward.

Mrs. Elliman finally faced the counter, coughed nervously, swore her intentions; bent over the book and signed. Priscilla followed her, then Jim Killenroe.

"Yes, from Trinity, Texas— What d'you mean, 'United States citizen?' Texas started the whole idea in the first place."

It got a laugh. The agent offered the pen, and Jim signed. Then he escorted Priscilla and her mother back toward the tent city. They met Elliman in the dark.

He said, "McCall?"

"No, Killenroe."

"Jim," Priscilla said.

Elliman sighed. "Seems all we do is unlimber, an' Priss has not one but two—"

"Jim's having supper with us, Pa."

THE MAN IN THE BLACK HAT—Matt Varner—walked in the direction those three

had taken. There was the odor of stale linen to him—that, and the thin brown of gun oil. He met another man at the foot of East Street, and they lit cigarettes.

This end of town was silent now, because the registration counters were closed and people were drifting away. All the noise was upstreet, and would be upstreet for two more days.

Varner said, "I got an account to close, Poncho."

Poncho was a red-lipped, big-boned 'breed. "Tha' young fella?"

"Yes, him an' the girl. I'd like to meet her out on the prairie some fine night—"

Jim Killenroe drifted up on soft boots and faced them.

"Came back to get my horse so's I can ride to supper. What's this about a prairie?"

Varner's eyes were bone-white under his hat brim. "It's big."

"No, it's small. Too small for the both of us."

Varner drew brightly on his cigarette and flicked a hand to his holster.

Killenroe threw a swift punch at his stomach and doubled him over. He smashed him on the side of the head and seized him by the neck and hurled him against Poncho. They went down in a tangle of thrashing limbs. Killenroe pounced on them, snagged Varner's gun, and pitched it deep into the darkness.

He told the half-stunned 'breed, "You draw, I'll blow your lower jaw off. Hear? You'd look funny with only half a face—no platform for your beard in your old age!"

He moved easily away toward the tie-rail by the land office. He smiled to himself, and was pleased. His appetite was sharp.

## Chapter Two

### *Shining Blade*

JEFFERSON JOHN McCALL, M.D., tramped past the Sunflower, past the Star, past Smeed's Gen'l Store. He stood in the shadow of a darkened doorway, fingering his jaws—he needed a shave again—and pondered what to do.

Always did it seem that he was fretting, without plan or purpose or definable cause. He seemed to be suspended between two lives, one of them gone forever in the faint memory of a dying woman's wan smile, the other lying in disordered confusion somewhere in the outer darkness of his future.

His nerves were drawn thin, like stretched wire, and the need of a drink howled through him. He didn't brood much, but at times in towns he searched unconsciously for his loneliness, for a girl's shoulders carried just so. For the whip of a skirt. For a head held high and the flash of a smile.

Soft hands touched his mind for a moment, and an agony he had denied himself for months came back in all its lost terror. The dusky heat of Comanche Wells was the red fever of his wife's last illness—the blasphemous flame that had broiled the life from her body. That was when the madness had come upon him, and for a long time he traded that agony for whisky, until he was no good for his grief and no good for his profession.

Those months of madness had almost cost him his license, because he refused to explain his grief or rationalize his inner devilment. Because his pride refused apology to the musty little men

who comprised the Medical Board. And so he'd drifted. And here he was with a chest of instruments, a hog-backed locker, and hope. There is always hope, on the borderland.

He searched himself for a cigar. That child—what was her name? Priscilla. Sweet and new, fresh and vibrant. But not for him, not for the doctor. For young Killenroe, maybe. Killenroe had a future for the taking.

McCall was lighting his cigar with trembling fingers when over his cupped hands he saw a woman—a tall woman in her mid-thirties—coming slowly through the crowd. Her handsome features were set in an expression of distaste.

The doctor had seen that face before, when he'd been standing in line with the Ellimans. He'd seen it from the rear—the back of her head and the profile of her cheek, actually. But there was no mistaking the proud throat, the assured carry of the smooth chin.

McCall saw her haughty expression change to one of anger as some roisterers trooped in front of her, blocking her way. He went toward her and hip-checked a coming man and broke the mass in two.

The woman's lips moved in a word of impersonal thanks.

McCall said, "May I clear the way for you?"

She didn't look like any woman he could remember having seen before. It wasn't even what she looked like that made him stare. It was the way she looked at him—as if she had been completely occupied with her own business and then suddenly had seen him emerge from her past.

The feeling was on both of them that they had known each other before, which they had not. Whatever it was, it passed between them and they both felt it momentarily with a mutuality that is embarrassing to strangers.

She said, "I'm not going far, thank you."

He could take that as an invitation, or a refusal. He said, "I saw you in line today."

The man that McCall had hip-checked was rising, brushing dust from his trousers, glowering. McCall turned on him so savagely that he grabbed his hat and sprinted into the Sunflower.

There was the scent of jasmine on her as they walked. She glanced swiftly at him. "I saw you, too. Was that your daughter with you?"

He dropped his cigar, and trod on it. "No, a friend." He had to hold the laughter down inside him; it would be bitter if it came.

She said, "I have a shanty ahead. A tarpaper shack. It's the best I could find in this mushrooming metropolis."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

She was giving him half-interested attention. There was an air of suppressed elegance about her, the mark of something bittersweet remembered and rejected.

She said, "My name is Mrs. Terry."

"Mine is Dr. McCall."

"Of the Gospel?"

He took her elbow to guide her across the last cross street. "No, medicine."

"I imagine you can find plenty to do here."

He smiled. "I'd better find something to do, because I didn't file this afternoon. I said the devil with it. My hands are not for the plow."

"So I noticed." She led him down a rutted path to a dreary-looking shack. "What made you come?" She put her

hand on the door latch, but she did not go in. She was estimating him in the darkness.

"I don't know." His hands were trembling again. "I just—don't know."

"I have a bottle of sour mash. You need a drink, and I need some coffee." Her estimation had run in his favor.

Inside, he stoked up the stove while she set out water. He started a lamp, and she opened the bottle.

"Help yourself, Doctor."

"Thank you—?"

She smiled at him for the first time. "Theresa."

"Theresa Terry." The mash tasted good. It hit his stomach and rebounded into his brain and tore his weariness away and calmed his nerves. "Mine's Jeff." He lit another cigar.

She knew her men, did Theresa Terry. She had read this one in a glance. "What was it—a woman?"

He tried not to appear startled. "Why, yes. My wife, as a matter of fact. And then—this." He held up his glass and swashed the mash around. Then he swigged it off.

"You'd better have another. The coffee isn't ready yet."

"You're very kind." He meant, *lonely, like me.* But of course he couldn't say that.

"I'm not kind," she told him. "I'm just practical. I wanted somebody to talk to. This isn't the life for a lone woman—until she can get settled."

"What will you do, if you win a section?" McCall knew from his few years of practice that there is a desperation that haunts women and a defeat that lurks just beyond their hopes in youth. And that's why most of them are made for the long haul, to carry on forever, win, lose, or draw.

She raised a hand to her hair and flattened the fluffy wings in front. They were tawny, and shot through with wisps of silver.

"Open a decent hotel, I guess." That, or a restaurant, or a school. She could do all of them well. She felt that she could do anything here on this unbroken frontier. It was like being born again.

"Did you run a hotel before?" He tasted his second drink.

She added coffee to the bubbling water on the stove. "I might be the widow of an army officer who was killed by Indians. Or I might be an heiress seeking the thrill that one somehow never finds in the East. Or again"—she smiled quickly—"I might be a lady gambler with the knowing of men my greatest asset." She poured.

"Which one, then?"

"The last." She added sugar and stirred. "Not a wheel, or cards." Her eyes were full on him as she said, "Those were upstairs. Downstairs, where I presided, there was food and music and wine. The customers, when they were hazy enough, were sent upstairs, where the girls tickled their vanity into spending money on such things as *chemin de fer* and roulette."

She shrugged, and sipped her coffee. "Unfortunately, I believed I'd fallen in love. I married him. He was not greatly unlike you."

McCall finished his drink, and refused a third. He was steady, he'd be all right for a while. "What happened to him?"

"I killed him." She put down her cup and shrugged again. "He tried to kill me one night, to get at the wall safe. I shot him with a derringer, intending only to wound him. But he died."

"They'll do that sometimes."

"The local judge owed money to the

roulette game, so the coroner's inquest was quick. Self-defense—but leave town." Theresa Terry passed a hand across her eyes impatiently. "Perhaps it was just as well." She stood up. "Now that the history class is over, we'd better say good night."

McCall took his hat. "I'm in the wagon park beyond the tents. If any roughs try to annoy you— Better still, I'll drop by tomorrow."

"I'd like that, Jeff."

"Good night, Theresa."

He walked back into town with an entirely new feeling in him. He could see reality again at last—not too clearly, but clearly enough to get a grip on it and pull himself forward.

The saloons were remaining open all night, and he turned into one and bought a pint of mash. Coming out, he passed two young girls who were hanging onto the arms of a big, comfortable-looking man who could have been anybody's rich uncle. The girls were twins, and they were dressed alike in bell-pleated blue skirts, orange sweaters and saucy little straw hats with trailing ribbons.

One was saying, "Here's our hotel—isn't it simply awful?"

"Can you imagine anyone from Philadelphia seeing us now?"

The man said, "It won't be for long," and they went in.

McCall trudged down the side street that led to the tent city. He wondered how Killenroe was making out. He thought, *Maybe I should be a fatalist instead of a back-slid Baptist. I led Priscilla to the registration line, where I first saw Theresa— Oh hell, Jeff—cut it!*

He reached the end of the street. He reached for the pint bottle and emptied half of it in a rapid swallow, then slung it far out into the grass. He stood with his feet braced, feeling the wind move against him. Moonlight lay full on the prairie beyond and the grass rippled outward, like a sea.

He trudged on past the tents, past the orange sides of canvas that one by one were turning gray as lamps were blown out. A dog barked from somewhere, drawn to wakefulness by the huge yellow moon. He came to his wagon.

A shadowy figure approached. McCall started for his gun. The figure stopped.

"You the doctor?" It was a young boy talking.

"I'm a doctor."

"Could you come to Cleveland Square"—the name that had been given to a thirty-wagon circle—"an' look't Gramps?"

"Wait until I get my bag."

The man was old. He was lying on a straw-matted wagonbed in the light of four hissing lamps, gasping and snuffling. McCall peeled back the stained blanket and saw the leg. It had been slit from hip to knee by a very sharp instrument.

The boy was saying hurriedly, "He was comin' back from a walk when he got jumped. A 'breed, wasn't it, Gramps?"

The old man's voice was thin and nasal. "Big—red-lipped—gent."

The boy's words hurried on: "He aimed his knife at Gramps's back, an' hit his leg instead. Then he run off."

The thigh was puffed up and darkening with inflammation, and the swelling made the lower leg look shrunken and small. McCall's fingers explored carefully. He tried not to show on his face what he found out.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Yancey."

McCall kept talking to him while he

analyzed a course of procedure. "Come from Nebraska, so? . . . Going to stake out here for keeps, are you? . . . Sure you'll win a section. How many in the family—eight? Sure you will."

If he could operate right away, here—and he thought that he could—he would perform Vermale's operation, with lateral flaps for the stump, the point of the scalpel being inserted in the center of the thigh three inches from the upper border of the patella. If he waited for daylight, he would have to perform the anterior-posterior flap operation, cutting higher and using Mr. Luke's technique for stump cushion.

"Boil me some water. Get the womenfolk out of the wagon."

Unaccountably his mind was stripped of its old agonies and devilments, leaving the blade of what it had once been, shining clean again. He would save this man's life—his first patient on the borderland. His fee would be one dinner a year, preferably during Christmas season.

"Hand me that bag, boy."

The lamps hissed steadily on.

## Chapter Three

### *Flat World*

MATT VARNER stood in the doorway of the Boomer House next morning, sniffing and trying to pretend that he was not accompanied by Poncho. The 'breed was all right at night, when there was work to be done and nobody could see him; but in daylight, with the girls passing by, he was an embarrassment.

Varner told him, "Run over to the Star and see if they've got those antelope steaks in yet."

"Not yet."

The 'breed's eyes narrowed on a livery rig that was rolling down the street with a man and a woman on the seat. The man was the doctor who was a friend of the young Texan's, the puncher who had threatened to blow off the 'breed's jaw the evening before.

Matt Varner saw McCall too, and stepped back into the doorway. The doctor, he knew, had attended to the old man whom Poncho had knifed last night in a try for his wallet. There had been an amputation, Varner heard; old Yancey would never sit a horse again, but he would live. Matt Varner wondered if Yancy would be able to identify his assailant.

"Go ahead, Ponch', before that rig gets past."

Maybe Yancey had already described Poncho to the doctor, and the doctor—seeing the breed in broad daylight—would snag him and turn him over to the soldiers who were coming up from Fort Sill. "Go on—run!" It would be a good way to get rid of Poncho.

But Jefferson McCall only saw a dark figure dart past his bits, and he reined sideways, half-braked; then straightened out and rolled on.

He was saying to Theresa, "I'm glad I could get this rig. It's the last one in town."

"I'm glad, too. This sounds like fun."

They rolled out to the wagon park and stopped for the Ellimans and Jim Killenroe. Jim passed the lunch baskets up to McCall, and the doctor introduced Theresa all around.

"I'm going to see my patient. It won't take long."

Priscilla said, "I'm glad we thought of this. I'd like to see what we're going

to win."

Her mother fixed a cold eye on her. "Don't press your luck, Priss. Luck's a sensitive thing."

McCall came back from Cleveland Square. "Gramps is all right, he'll be able to get around just fine."

Theresa looked at him with overt respect. He was becoming more and more unlike the man she had believed she had loved, and increasingly like the man she had always wanted to love. This, she reflected, was a strange new frontier indeed.

The endless grassy prairie lay yellow in the sunlight. Ahead, canvas tops moved slowly, other wagons and rigs rolling out to the sections. Occasionally a horseman slashed past and waved, and they all waved back. The twin girls and their uncle jounced past in a buckboard driven by the college boy. Uncle was hanging on tight.

"They don't know yet," Killenroe said. "Homesteadin's no picnic."

"They'll find out." McCall popped his whip over the lunging team. "The boys will go home and the men will stay, no matter who wins what. The acquiring of a section of land is just the beginning."

Elliman asked, "Have you ever acquired land before, Doctor?"

McCall swung his whip again. "Only once." He sat forward an inch. Theresa's hand touched his knee and as quickly withdrew, and suddenly he was at peace. He put the whip in its socket and sat back, having received some of the sympathy that his parched soul needed.

The world was flat, with blue edges dropping off into a void. Sagebrush and grass and baked earth and horses and harness were the dominant smells. Yellow and blue blossoms gave life to the gray soil.

Killenroe went on, "We'll have to irrigate." He was talking to Priscilla more than to the others. "It'll need water. The dry seasons'll burn the top off it. In winter, we'll have to haul wood—lots of it. A prairie blizzard shuts you off like you were on an island. And this soil's heavy; it'll take a three-team plow to break it."

He grinned then—a white sickle across his tan. "But it'll be worth it!"

Toward noon they pulled up at a wire fence that stretched into space until the eye would have no more of it. Beyond the fence were white stakes thrusting up at evenly spaced intervals to mark the corners of each section.

They sat in the rig without speaking. Theresa saw hope rise into each face and brighten each set of eyes. Somehow she felt grateful, though she didn't know why. She reached toward McCall's knee again, then thought better of it. She raised her hands and adjusted her traveling-veil.

Finally Elliman said, "There it is."

McCall turned the team into hub-deep grass, and Priscilla and Theresa spread the lunch in the shadow of the rig. Sweet earth smells rose to them, warm and reassuring; people came steadily out from Comanche Wells and tracked away into the limitless grass and became small shapes and were gone.

"We've got to win!" Mrs. Elliman made her fists and shut her eyes.

"Now, Ma, don't get excited. We've got two claims filed in our family alone. The chances are good."

Priscilla said, "There's one family of eight. The Yanceys." She turned to McCall. "Almost seven, 'til the doctor came along."

McCall shook his head. "Gramps is

healthy, that's all. He was built to last."

Elliman said, "You'd have thought the Cherokee Strip was all the land people could use, but the gov'ment opens up another five hundred sections —an' look!"

Theresa Terry dabbed at her lips with a kerchief, touching at sandwich crumbs. "I guess it's because there'll always be more men than boys. Coffee, anyone?"

Midafternoon's drowse lay heavy on them. Reluctantly, McCall rose and yawned. "I've got a patient to look at." It came to him that he hadn't had a drink all day.

They reached the Wells at sunset, when the sky was one great burst of flame. McCall went to Cleveland Square and saw Gramps Yancey. He seemed better than he had been, though some of the surgical shock was still on him.

He asked, "You think I'll—pull through, Doc?"

McCall said gently, "I've done all I can. Now it's up to you. You want to live, don't you?"

"Hell yes, I surely do. I ain't seen—this country—yet." He winced, and picked at the blanket.

"You'll see plenty of it. I'll drive you around it myself."

"Doc? They found who that gent was that stuck me?" The old man's voice grew stronger; his eyes seemed to harden and swell.

"No, but we will." McCall put out some pills. "Take two of these this evening, and two in the morning. I want you to rest."

"It's a wonderful world, Doc, if a man wants to make it so."

"He's got to be a man first, Gramps. You're a man."

McCall believed that sincerely; it was not bedside prattle. Gramps Yancey had far fewer years left to live than he had lived already, and when that knowledge hits a man's mind, he can break easily. But Gramps was a solid character who would face those few remaining years without flinching, and go into them with steady courage, all the way to the Door. The Yancey bloodstock would be good for this country.

One of the Yancey boys stepped up. "Doc? It's Missus Hebble on the other side the Square. She's po'ly, she says. She cain't sleep. An' well—folks seem to ask for you."

Mrs. Hebble was suffering from an acute case of fear. She was afraid that she wouldn't win a section, afraid that Indians would attack; afraid that if she did win a section, she and her husband wouldn't be able to make it go. Afraid that if they did make it go, the Indians would destroy it.

McCall listened gravely, took her pulse, rolled her lids, and looked at her tongue. Then he diagnosed a mythical liver ailment and told her that she must by all means concentrate on the cure and forget everything else. He mixed some crystal powders, frowned with Olympian omniscience, and poured a cupful down her throat. When he climbed out of her wagon, she was snoring.

JIM KILLENROE RODE BACK to town with Theresa and the doctor. He waited until they were rolling up East Street before he said, "There's a little something both of you ought to know."

"'A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing'," McCall said. He was feeling fine, better than he had felt in years.

But Jim was serious. "This'll be a dangerous thing if you don't watch

out. It's about Matt Varner and that 'breed who works for him—or who does his dirty work."

"Yes?" McCall guided the team through the brawling crowds. He had already heard of Matt Varner.

"They're after my scalp, and I got a hunch that they've connected you and me. So be careful, Doc." Jim's glance went to Theresa. He swung a leg out to the step. "Here's where I get off. See you tomorrow, I hope."

## Chapter Four

### *Drawing Day*

T DAYBREAK the town lay exhausted. Floormen from the saloons stacked the drunks like cordwood in the back lots. Early customers pushed through the slatted doors and asked for bracers. Today was drawing day.

McCall, awakening in his wagon with the taste of Theresa's lips still on his, rose quickly and scrubbed down and shaved. Then he went to see Gramps Yancey; and after that, Mrs. Hebble. She said she'd never slept better, despite her liver. The doctor told her to take care of it for the rest of her life, to the exclusion of all other worries. He mixed more of the innocuous crystals, then went into town.

Jim Killenroe motioned to him from the alley next to the Boomer House. The Texan lay a finger to his lips, then hooked a thumb upward. The doctor understood. He slid a hand to his gun and jiggled it in the holster. It was a Colt '73—the Peacemaker Model.

He went to the Star and had antelope steak for breakfast. The proprietor said that the steaks had just come in, you could still smell the gunpowder on 'em. McCall drank his black coffee and lighted a cigar.

The town was stirring now. The twins from Philadelphia and their uncle met the college boy on the plank-walk, and proceeded to the Sunflower, which had benches for ladies. A little bonneted woman and her bewhiskered husband came into town from the tent city to be on hand early for the drawings. The woman carried a Bible, and McCall remembered having seen her two days before in the registration line.

He stuck his cigar in his side teeth and crossed to the Boomer House. Matt Varner was in the vestibule, scratching his grimy weskit and yawning.

Jim Killenroe greeted McCall with a wink. "They had a jamboree last night —Varner and the 'breed. Somethin' about which one'd have title to the section if Poncho wins. Seems Varner claimed that Poncho was an employee of his, an' therefore would be actin' for him at the drawing."

"Not a very pretty picture."

Killenroe said, "Be careful, Doc. I'm goin' over to collect the Ellimans. I'll see you at the raffle." The Texan left the alley by its back end.

Comanche Wells was wide awake. Traffic was ceaseless on East Street. Surreys, buggies, buckboards, Concord wagons—all rolled toward the land office at the edge of town. Stores opened, saloons filled. A piano's tremolo threaded through the noise in racing rhythms. The slow shuffle of ponies became audible as some men rode their luck to the drawing.

The stuttering brass rip of a trumpet echoed across it all and whickered away over the prairie. That would be

the cavalry detail from Fort Sill, sent to keep law and order and maintain the sovereign dignity of the United States.

McCall, standing in the alley, smiled through cigar smoke. Law and order, in the Wells, was something as elusive as a zephyr, as ephemeral as an old love.

Theresa Terry came past, and McCall lifted his hat to her.

"You should have thrown me out earlier," he said.

"You didn't bother me. When you're asleep, you look very young and calm, Jeff."

He saw a stir of light in her eyes. "As long as I didn't bother you."

"I'm not a child."

"All right, woman. Get some breakfast. I'll join you later."

He finished his cigar. At his elbow, the flimsy wall of the Boomer House trembled as late risers clumped hurriedly downstairs for coffee or a drink before going out to the drawing.

Then McCall felt the weight of a presence behind him and he stiffened. He unbuttoned his coat, eased his gun up in his holster, and turned.

Poncho was standing spraddle-legged, his swarthy face bloated with drink. He took a step forward, then another. And another. He was a dozen feet away.

He muttered thickly, "Yancey tell you somethin'?"

The doctor's silent contempt lashed out at the man. He despised stupidity and he hated filth. "He might have. Why?"

The 'breed was not yet full angry, he was too unsure of himself for that. He muttered, "It don' do much good to talk a lot." His fingers were crabbing slowly into his shirt.

McCall took careful note of the red lips, the big frame.

"You made one mistake with a knife. Don't make another."

The 'breed's elbow jerked and his hand twitched and the silver flash of the blade dazzled McCall's eyes. He convulsively dropped to one knee and the knife tore through his hat crown and yanked it off. He fired only once.

The echo of the shot was smothered by the street noises. The 'breed lay on his back, his shock-opened mouth a craw through which the last breath of his life rasped out.

McCall walked out of the alley, picked up his hat and put it on. Some small boys were admiring the knife, and the doctor let them keep it. He walked down East Street and joined the crowd.

Jim Killenroe had built a crude bench out of packing-cases for the Ellimans, and Theresa was sharing it with them. Faces—a broad, endless phalanx of faces, all turned toward the land office. Parasols and Stetsons, bonnets and shawls. A towhead. And beyond them, far out, blue-dusty and erect, cavalrymen.

The registrations were in a huge zinc tub on one of the counters, and a man was mixing them with a garden rake.

Killenroe stepped over to McCall and asked a question with his eyes.

McCall whispered behind his hand, "The 'breed is out of the picture."

Quick admiration flew across the Texan's face.

"Varner won't have to worry about who wins, then."

"That," said the doctor, "is up to Varner." He cut and lit another cigar.

The head agent was beckoning to a little towheaded girl in gingham. She walked forward and squinted at him.

He knelt and spoke to her, and the vast crowd started to *sh-sh* itself.

Theresa turned and saw the massed faces, some somber and brooding, others light and excited. It seemed to her that many of them were praying; a few of the men had removed their hats. A woman in front kept touching her eyes with a handkerchief.

Suddenly there wasn't a sound. Not a single sound. The little girl walked to the zinc tub, reached in, and drew out an envelope. It crackled in the stillness as she gave it to the agent. He cut it open with his thumb, read the card and held it toward them.

"Numba-air One! Carl D. Hagstrom, Charleston, South—"

A violent yell came from the rear, and the crowd yelled with him. The little girl, smiling and blushing, returned to her mother. For the rest of her life, and for the lives of her children and grandchildren, she would be known as the girl who opened the Comanche Reserve.

Priscilla Elliman and Jim Killenroe were holding hands on the bench. So were the two older Ellimans. Jefferson McCall let himself down next to Theresa, and their knees touched.

The doctor glanced frontward and saw the little bonneted woman with the Bible. He knew her name to be Pennoyer. Her face was dreaming and intent, as if she were holding the bright flame of faith before her.

All of these people, the doctor knew, were waiting humbly for a chance at a way of life that seemed important to them. For some it would be the beginning; for others, the end.

The agent's voice droned on. The sharpness left it as morning wore toward noon. Number Sixty-seven was J. Killenroe, from Trinity, Texas. All the strength seemed to go out of Jim; he hung his head and shook it a few times. Priscilla slung an arm around his shoulders and kissed his ear. When he raised his head, his eyes were moist.

"Numba-air Seventy-eight! Orville Wishman, Clarion County, Mizzoura! Numba-a-ir Seventy-nine! Bertha Gates Addison, Meadville, Maryland!"

The winners were leaving, grinning and allowing their hands to be pumped up and down. The crowd closed in toward the front. The midday sun grew hotter.

Theresa didn't recognize her name until she saw McCall's face and felt his nudge. Then she cried, "Here!" and thrilled to the spatter of applause that followed.

Mrs. Elliman smiled at her, nodding acceptingly. Theresa Terry wasn't a great lady—but which among them was? Mrs. Elliman brushed away an odd tear.

Jefferson McCall covered Theresa's hands with one of his.

"Numba-a-ir One hundred and four! Matthew Varner, Comanche Wells!"

It was past noon, and the drawing was only in the upper two hundreds. All around them, the prairie lay empty and yellow, blue heat haze stirring softly on it. Posed eternally in those limitless spaces was an invitation to come and clash with it, best it, and use it.

"Numba-air Three hundred and sixteen! Joshua Hebble, Hardin County, Kentucky!"

The sun slid west, and people began to detach themselves from the crowd. The Ellimans sat dumbly, their shoulders sagging, their hands loose. Jim Killenroe and Priscilla were gone.

Near five o'clock, the voice of the agent croaked to silence. The raffle was

over.

The twins in blue were relieved that they hadn't won, but their uncle was muttering to himself and kicking at grass tufts. "Oil here, I'd swear. And the government gives you the land." One of the twins was saying, "Now we can go back to Philadelphia, thank the Lord." The college boy said something that made them laugh, and they took his arms and skipped away.

Little Mr. and Mrs. Pennoyer stood in unbelieving silence. This was the end of the road for them, there was no going back; there was no place for them to go.

Mrs. Elliman rose and hung onto her husband's arm. "Perhaps we hoped too much, Pa." All their plans had been built on winning; they had no other plans. They held their faces down as they walked, so that none could see how bad it was. But everybody knew.

Jim and Priscilla came back, hand-in-hand and laughing. She said, "We've just had our first fight. Jim wanted to give his whole section to you, and I said half would be plenty. I won. You get half."

The Ellimans stopped short, moving their heads from one to the other. Elliman started to protest, but Jim interrupted sternly.

"How many cows can a man herd on three hundred an' forty acres? Well, I haven't even got a cow! Besides, I'll need you to help me build, an' you'll need me."

The sun died, and twilight came. McCall lighted a cigar; match flame flashed against his eyes. He guided Theresa into East Street, walking slowly.

She said, "Jeff, I don't want my claim."

He said boldly, "I figured we'd live in town, to be nearer things. There'll be plenty of room for a while, but someday there's going to be a pharmacy here, and a hospital."

"And churches and—schools." She squeezed his arm.

## Chapter Five

### *A New Life in the Morning*

BY NOON next day, the tent city was breaking up and the wagons were rolling. In the devastated area where Cleveland Square had stood, the Yanceys had a small fire going.

One of the boys told McCall, "We ain't told him yet. It'd kill him."

"How's he feeling?"

"Peart—so far."

McCall glanced at Theresa. "Well, I made a promise to him. I promised him I'd drive him all around this country someday. Tell me, how can a doctor hope to maintain a practice if he breaks his promises?"

Nobody knew.

McCall went on, "I've got a prescription here that'll keep Gramps alive for years." He handed Theresa's deed to the boy. "A lady signed this over to you. She says she doesn't know one end of a plow from the other."

The doctor buttoned his coat. "She doesn't, either." He turned away. "Come on, Theresa. We're due at Section Sixty-seven for supper."

JIM KILLENROE HAD RIDDEN beside the Ellimans' Percherons as the wagon had rumbled south toward Section Sixty-seven and home. All across the prairie wagons were moving, dark gray against the sun-struck grass.

The afternoon mellowed; the prairie

flowed on and on into the distance, bright gold under a last flash of sunlight. The western sky burst into violent flame and grew cold; the land turned to silver and campfires bloomed and the smell of woodsmoke drifted with the wind.

They made camp on their claim, and supper was started. Deep grass rustled, and the fragrance of the earth was everywhere. Somewhere a coyote sobbed to the moon. Closer, voices filtered thinly down the darkness, rollicking and confident.

The shadow of a horse and rider moved toward the fire, and Matt Varner called, "Evenin'."

Jim Killenroe sprang to his feet. "What're you doin' here?"

"Why, my land's only about three miles south. We're practically neighbors. Step out here a minute, Killenroe."

Jim went forward with his right hand near his holster.

Varner put his weight into his near stirrup and leaned down. "Where's McCall?"

"Why?"

"Because I want to know why. He scragged my 'breed this mornin'."

"You sure?"

Matt Varner drew a deep, lung-cracking breath.

"Look, kid. We've had one tussle, an' I don't want another. Now tell me where he is!"

Jim Killenroe snatched the man's arm and wrenched him off the saddle and whirled him up and over and outward. Varner hit, bounced bootily, and lay still. Then he was up, quick as a cat. His right hand blurred to his gun. Killenroe leaped forward and seized Varner's arm and twisted it sharp backward, then belted his jaw and rocked his head.

"We don't want any more killin', Varner. Move on."

Varner's left arm crossed his body in one smooth motion and brought his gun around. He and Killenroe fired together. Killenroe's sleeve was ripped and his tricep burned from the creased flesh wound. Varner collapsed into the trampled grasses.

Priscilla and her father came running. She reached Jim first, and he took her shoulder with one strong hand. Night's scent sweetened on her face; grass glowed under the moon.

Then he lowered his chin and kissed her on the forehead. She slipped her arms around his wide shoulders and held him.

They were still standing like that when a livery rig appeared from the ground mists and braked. Jefferson McCall scrambled out, helped Theresa down, and viewed the picture.

"Very pretty," he said. "You girls get back to the fire. Jim, help me pack this out to the prairie. We'll take his deed before we plant him."

They lugged Matt Varner's body into the darkness.

Afterward, Killenroe rolled a smoke. Matchlight brightened his square cheeks and McCall saw his glance hold steady on him as long as the light remained.

"What happens to his land? And to his horse?"

"I don't know about his horse, but his land reverts for sale to the highest bidder." The doctor fished for a cigar, found one, and lighted it. He paced Killenroe back toward camp. "I'm the highest bidder, so the bidding is hereby closed."

Killenroe glanced sharply at him. "Thought you didn't want any land."

"I don't, but I know two fine people who do. Their name is Pennoyer. I'm going to hock my future practice and secure that section for them."

Smoke trailed behind him as he walked. "That's perhaps questionable procedure, but by the time the papers reach Washington and get lost and get found and get in the dead file, then get out here again, it'll be too late to change anything."

The appetizing tang of frying chops came to them on the breeze.

McCall continued, "Besides, that head agent from the land office will have a throat that'll be quinsy by tomorrow, after all the talking he did today. There's no reason why I can't talk business to him while he's talking business to me. Come on, I'll dress your arm."

The campfires were dying, smuttering to coals. A few voices echoed in the distance, but the prairie was becoming still. Here on this borderland more than a thousand people would awake to a new life in the morning.

Mrs. Elliman's hands were clasped and her head was bowed, and her five people fell reverently silent for a minute before they sat down to supper.

THE END

## PUREBRED BULLS AND LONGHORN COWS

THE COMBINATION of free grass and cheap Texas cattle attracted vast sums of Eastern money in the '70s and '80s of the last century. Most of these syndicate investments depended upon the savvy of a real cowman to yield the profits that the absentee owners quickly came to regard as normal.

One of the West's classic stories concerns such a group of Easterners who decided that they could make more money from their Western investment if they improved the quality of their cattle. Accordingly, they sent a shipment of purebred bulls to their ranch with detailed instructions to their foreman about the merits of improved stock. The foreman was long in the tooth with a bone-deep tan and wrinkles in his neck that would hide a cigar. He looked at the bulls, shook his head, and turned them out on the range to let Nature take its course.

The next year, several members of the syndicate ventured out to their ranch to see the results of their experiment in livestock improvement. All they saw were cat-hammed longhorns, with shoulders to split a hailstone, in every color of the rainbow except green. There were no evidences of their purebred bulls and they demanded an explanation from the foreman.

"I'm right sorry 'bout them bulls," he said. "I turned 'em out on the range and I watched 'em real careful but they all died."

The owners looked at him blankly.

"Yessir," he went on, "them ol' longhorn cows jus' nacher'lly walked them bulls t' death."

—OLD HUTCH

**Anyone—even a sourdough miner—is apt to get the lonesomes, but for real companionship you can't beat a friendly pack rat!**

# THE FEMININE TOUCH

## By DAN CUSHMAN

WILLIAM HICKORY GUPSWORTH was fifty-nine or thereabouts, and for the past twenty of those years he had done pretty much the same thing every morning—he had arisen at sunup, fried sourdough flapjacks and salt pork, and he had climbed the barren side of Wilsail Mountain to the portal of his mine, the U. S. Mint.

But this morning was different.

This morning Gupp did not lie abed until such an hour as sunup. He was out of his bed before the sun was even a rosy streak above the horizon. He swept out his log cabin, blackened those parts of the Prospector's Friend cookstove that were commonly visible, and dusted the ore specimens along the windowsills. Then, carefully strapping the old straight-edge razor that Teddy Roosevelt had given him with his own hands, he shaved off a four-day growth of whiskers, leaving his face smooth and pinkish.

"Ah!" said Gupp, looking at himself in the oblong of rusty mirror that was fastened with bent-over nails above the wash dish. There was no doubt he could pass for forty-nine. He might even pass for forty. But forty-nine was what he'd said in the letter and forty-nine was what it would be!

By the time he had tallowed his boots and donned his new green and red

flannel shirt it was breakfast time. He built a quick fire of sagebrush stalks, fried his usual pancakes and salt pork, and started to eat. Then he stopped. He laughed and talked to himself out loud, the way so many solitary men get to doing.

"Well, by jingos, this has gone and changed my life already. Here if I didn't forget all about Herschel."

He smeared a pancake with sorghum, rolled it around a strip of salt pork, and getting down from his chair a little whistled a chorus of *Buffalo Gals*. Soon, obedient to the sound, there came a rustling through some dry stuff beneath the cabin floor and a sleek, well-fed pack rat emerged through one of the broken boards. He waited until Gupp put down the food, then he scurried up and sat like a squirrel with his chin moving up and down munching it.

"Well, this is the day, the one I been telling you of," Gupp said. He sounded pleased, chuckling and chewing all at the same time. "Didn't come close onto me this morning, did you, Herschel? Might' nigh didn't know me, shaved and slicked this way. Well, a man shouldn't let himself get runover at the bootheels. Sign of getting old. Oldness and lonesomeness. But the lonesomeness is all over now."

Gupp, first wiping the salt pork off his fingers on the dish towel, went to the cupboard and tenderly got down a photograph. He leaned it against a table leg on the floor where Herschel could see. It was a woman of thirty or so holding a plump boy with ringlets.

"There she is, Herschel. The future Mrs. Gupsworth and child. Oh, this'll be a fine place for that boy to grow up. Plenty of fresh air, plenty sunshine, plenty hills to climb. I been thinking some of buying him a pony and cart when he's old enough to drive. Animals, that's what a boy needs. Oh, you'll have great times with him, Herschel. It'll change our lives some but it'll be all for the best."

The woman was Mrs. Josephine Fedwick, whom Gupp had contacted through the Pike's Peak Home and Happiness Society in Denver. Two weeks ago their correspondence had culminated in a proposal of marriage from Gupp and a prompt acceptance from Mrs. Fedwick, then a letter from Gupp enclosing $22 railroad fare, and now she and her son were due to arrive in Galena City on the Limited that very afternoon.

Herschel finished his meal and departed, leaving some pancake crumbs which Gupp carefully swept through the hole in the floor. He tidied the breakfast things and went outside to look at the sun. He guessed it to be eight o'clock so he had plenty of time to hitch Dolly, his mule, and drive the buggy down to Galena. He had just started out with a currycomb to get the burrs out of Dolly's tail when he heard the scrape and rattle of coach wheels and knew it was Steve Kegg making his daily round trip to Whitetail, a slowly crumbling mining camp eight miles farther back in the hills.

Gupp listened, expecting the stage to roll on, but this morning its sounds grew steadily until it came into view across the uphill hump of sage, juniper, and buffalo grass to Gupp's cabin. It was the mudwagon, drawn by two span of mules, with Steve in the driver's seat and some bags of Mormon spuds roped to the hurricane behind him.

Generally Steve loaded the freight inside on the floor and in the seats, letting the passengers, when there were

any, ride outside as best they could, but today things had changed—the freight was on top and inside were a man and woman.

Steve brought his outfit around, lurching over rocks and gopher mounds to Gupp's cabin where he dribbled tobacco juice discreetly over the side, wiped his whiskers on the back of his hands, and said:

"Gupp, this yere lady and her boy blew in this morning on the skidoo and I guess maybe you was expecting 'em."

Gupp's circulation halted momentarily at his first glimpse of her. She was and she wasn't the woman in the picture. The woman in the picture was slim and old-fashioned while this one was horsy and middle-aged. And this was no baby boy with her but instead a hulking fellow of twenty-one with pale eyes and a flat, obstinate face.

"What say?" said Gupp, stalling for time.

"Of course he's expecting us," the woman said with an aggressive grasp of the situation. She gave Gupp a determined smile. "You *are* Mr. Gupsworth?"

Gupp did not deny it. He retreated a little as the woman emerged through the coach door stern first, pawing one oversized leg for the ground. The boy followed and the old mudwagon groaned to be rid of them.

The woman turned, giggling with a faded girlishness and got her hat to a better position on her head. It was a purple hat with pink plumes.

"I'm Josephine," she said. "You know—*Josie*. You always called me Josie in your letters." When Gupp merely stared at her she said, "Well, I must say, Mr. Gupsworth, you don't seem to be splitting yourself to make us welcome."

"Guess I was surprised," Gupp managed to say. "You were younger in your picture."

"Oh, *that*. I told you it wasn't a real recent picture, remember?"

"But the little boy—"

"Teddy. He *has* grown a bit, hasn't he? But boys will be boys. And now, Mr. Gupsworth, if you will lend a hand with the luggage. There's my bags, and Teddy's trunk, and a box of things that the storekeeper sent."

Gupp wrestled the things from inside and from the boot. While he was getting his breath Steve Kegg said, "That'll be four dollars fare. The lad said you'd pay."

Gupp gave him the four silver dollars and stood helpless to stop the coach as it rolled away toward Whitetail. Mrs. Fedwick had gone inside the cabin to sniff around. When he started to follow her he was blocked by Teddy, who towered over him with his shoulders thrown back.

"What do you do for amusement around here?" Teddy asked.

"Amusement?"

"Yes, the light fantastic."

"Well, mostly I just work in the mine."

"What mine?"

"Why, up the hill yonder."

"That there?" Teddy studied it. "Why, that's just a hole in the hill with some broken rock heaped in front of it."

"What the blazes did you think a mine looked like?" Gupp snapped, wanting to get inside where the woman was hauling stuff out of the cupboard. He had his assay chemicals there, the lead carbonate and potassium cyanide where they'd be sure and not get mixed up with the baking powder, and he wanted to show her how things had to

be. "Maybe you think I should of dug the mine inside out so you could look at it stretched out on the ground."

"Mr. Gupsworth!" Josephine said, standing straight with the baking powder in one hand and the cyanide in the other. "Well now, is that any way to speak to your stepson?"

"Why's he ask so many foolish questions?"

"The only way a boy can learn is by asking questions. Anyway, you'd better be careful how you talk to Teddy. He's stronger than he looks. Bend a horseshoe for him, Teddy."

Teddy looked around and said, "Get me one, will you?"

"Give me those cans," Gupp said, grabbing the baking powder and cyanide.

Teddy said, "I took the course in muscular development from Lionel Strongfort."

Gupp was trying to remember which can was which. He knew then it was the old battered one. He carried them back to the cupboard.

"Now, this one," he said, "has to go here; and this one has to go there. Otherwise likely you'll have an accident."

"I know baking powder when I see it," said Mrs. Fedwick.

"That's just the point, *this* one ain't baking powder."

"What is it?"

"Cyanide."

Mrs. Fedwick screamed, grabbed both cans, and ran out the door with them. She came back wiping her hands on her dress.

"What'd you do that for?" asked Gupp. "That was my assay stuff."

"I'll not have poison in my cupboard."

"But you always know it—it's in the old can."

"Not—in—my—cupboard," said Mrs. Fedwick, drawing out the words.

Teddy said, "All I could tear up was one pack of cards before I took the course, but now I can tear up two. How many packs can you tear up?"

Gupp said, "I don't know. I never tried." He rescued the cyanide and carried it to the shed which was built over his forge and anvil.

Mrs. Fedwick said to Gupp, "And now you can put that big box of groceries in here on the floor."

Gupp had a hard time struggling it inside. He had never seen so many groceries in his life. Getting it over the step would have been too much for him had not Teddy stood at a distance telling him to pull it this way and that.

"Whew!" said Gupp. "It looks like we're going to eat mighty fancy."

Mrs. Fedwick had now sniffed in all the corners, including the tiny bedroom. She said, "Well, Mr. Gupsworth, you said in your letters not to expect a mansion and I must say that we didn't find one."

"She's small but she's snug," Gupp said defensively.

"Well, I guess it will have to serve until you can build another one."

"Now hold on—"

"Surely you didn't intend this for a permanent arrangement." She looked back inside the bedroom. "We'll fix that up for Teddy. He can put his pennants on that wall, his exercisers over there, and I suppose there'll be room for his rowing machine if we buy a smaller bed."

Mrs. Fedwick took a big breath. "Well, I guess I'd better get my working things on. Up to a new wife to be useful, I say."

Gupp was lifting groceries from the

packing-case. "What's this?" he asked, shaking a red and white box.

"Bran flakes," said Teddy.

"I eat oatmeal."

"The storekeeper wanted to send oatmeal but we had him send flakes. Oatmeal ain't fortified. It's gone out. Old-fashioned. In the big cities everybody eats flakes these days."

Gupp didn't say anything. He dug deeper into the box, lifting out prepared waffle flour, prepared biscuit mix, prepared gingerbread mix, cans of ripe olives.

Mrs. Fedwick said, "Now if you'll move those old tools I think I'll put my clothes right there. Will you bring my suitcases in so I can unpack?"

Gupp thought of something and said, "You ain't aiming to just stay?"

"Well, now! If that isn't—"

"But we ain't married."

"Oh, that!" She laughed in relief. "That's all been taken care of. When I was in town I saw that Gospel John person, and he promised to drive out tonight and marry us."

She listened to a *crunch-crunch* sound emerging from the grocery carton She tiptoed over and peered inside. Then she screamed.

"A rat! An awful rat!"

The broom was handy. She tipped the carton over, frightened the rat into flight, swung the broom high. It came down but Gupp deflected it.

"Hold on!" said Gupp. "That's Herschel!"

Mrs. Fedwick brushed Gupp aside and pursued the fleeing rodent around the house swinging the broom, but he made the hole in the floor and disappeared.

"I hate rats," said Mrs. Fedwick.

"Well," said Gupp, "I always say they's good and bad in everything. I've known some mules I wouldn't sold for wolf bait, but I don't take that as an excuse to go around killing all the mules I see. Now a rat, if you got to know him—"

"Me get to know a rat?"

"Well, just for the sake of argument, say—"

"I got better things to do than argue about a silly thing like that. If there's anything I detest it's a filthy, sneaking rat. Are you much troubled by them, Mr. Gupsworth?"

"No'm."

"Well, I'll have this one before many hours are spent. I do wish I'd have put in a trap. I don't suppose you have a trap here. Well, I'll keep the broom handy."

"Just a stray, likely. If you forget about him I'll mend that hole in the floor and—"

"A rat'll stay wherever there's food. Only way is to kill them."

"I'll get a club, Ma," said Teddy. "I'll stay here by the hole and bop him."

"I'm mending that hole right now," said Gupp.

"Mr. Gupsworth, if Teddy—"

"I'm mending the hole."

Teddy glowered down on Gupp while he got the hammer, saw, and a length of wood and went about mending the hole where Herschel was wont to come through the floor.

"Ma'd of got that rat if you hadn't pawed at her," Teddy said.

"You mind your rowing machine and I'll mind mine," said Gupp.

Mrs. Fedwick was now in the process of carrying everything outside. Chairs, utensils, bedding, tools, everything was stacked in the bright sunshine outside. Each time she carried something outside she would scrutinize it and say "Humph!" before returning.

Gupp kept moving here and there, watching her, and keeping his eye on Teddy, too, for Teddy still was armed with the club.

"What's this?" Mrs. Fedwick asked, looking with revulsion at the flapjack can.

This ancient, thickly encrusted household essential Gupp had kept sitting winter and summer in exactly the right spot in relation to the cookstove so it would maintain the correct temperature for fermentation. The sourdough maker's art is like that of cook and wine maker's combined and Gupp had kept his starter going like Olympic fire for the past twenty years.

"Hold on," said Gupp, "that's my flapjack batter."

"It's all spoiled."

"No it ain't—" He was unable to stop her. She hurled it across the yard.

Gupp lurked in the house, keeping watch of his other valuables, and keeping watch of Teddy and his club. He chewed tobacco, and from time to time he carefully aimed tobacco juice through a crack where two of the floor boards failed to join.

"The floor will have to be repaired there, too," said Mrs. Fedwick.

"That's my spittin' hole."

"Well, I must say I was in hopes you wouldn't be a chewer but if you can't manage to break yourself of the habit you'll have to buy one of those little china cuspidors and carry that around with you, then each time you use it you can take it outside and clean it.

"What are those old rocks doing here?" Mrs. Fedwick now asked, indicating the ore specimens.

"Those are my ore specimens."

"They'll have to go out."

"I'll throw 'em out, Ma," said Teddy. "I like to throw things."

"Keep your hands off'n my minerals!"

The two men faced each other and Gupp commenced gathering the specimens up, stuffing them in his pockets and loading his arms. With the most treasured of them he started for the door when the air was rent by the woman's scream.

"The rat! The rat again!"

"I'll get him, Ma," Teddy was shouting, charging around with his club.

"Stop it!" cried Gupp, dropping the specimens. "That's not a rat, that's Herschel."

"It's a rat!" wailed Mrs. Fedwick. "There he is, Teddy. He's hiding behind the stove."

Teddy charged with his club raised and Gupp tried to get in front of him. He was no match for Teddy's size and strength, but he delayed him just long enough for the rat to scoot under the cookstove.

"He's under the stove," Mrs. Fedwick was saying, armed with a poker. "I'll watch from this side."

Teddy bawled, "Get in the door. Don't let him get out, that's all I ask."

"That's my rat!" Gupp was saying. "You ain't going to kill my rat."

Teddy shoved him away. He did not hear Gupp shouting warnings to his mother. He got down and commenced poking beneath the stove but the rat had gone. There was a scurry near the woodbox. Teddy grabbed the box, pulled it loose from its moorings, and upended it.

The rat cowered, not knowing which way to go. The club was upraised but Gupp grappled as it descended. His unexpected weight carried Teddy to the wall.

"You made me miss the rat, you danged old fool!" Teddy shouted.

"You leave my rat alone." Gupp backed up, looking for a weapon, but his picks and shovels and old Martha his shotgun were all outside. "I may not be so young, and I may not have muscles from a correspondence school but just the same nobody's going to come in my cabin and throw out my pancake batter and my ore specimens and then kill my rat—you and your chiny spittoons, your exercisers and your rowing machine—"

"This is the house where Ma and I are going to live and we're not going to put up with any rat."

"There he is!" screamed Mrs. Fedwick.

Gupp wrestled for the club. The rat scurried past them heading for the hole in the floor, but alas, Gupp had mended it. He tarried for an instant, only an instant, but the momentary pause had sealed his fate. The poker in the hands of Mrs. Fedwick descended, and the rat lay still.

"There!" said Mrs. Fedwick, blowing her breath. "I guess that settles that."

For an instant Gupp stared down at the dead rat. He walked to the door.

"Pick up the awful thing," Mrs. Fedwick was saying. "I can't bear to touch it."

Gupp went outside. There was his old ten-gauge double. He took a look to see that it was loaded. He advanced to the door, bent over the gun with both its hammers cocked.

"You varmints," he said, "git to packing!"

"You old fool," said Mrs. Fedwick, "put down that gun."

"Git out of my house, the both of you, and git out quick or you'll be picking birdshot out o' your hide clean from here to Champa Street."

Mrs. Fedwick tried to parry. "Why, Mr. Gupsworth, this is a peculiar attitude for you to take. Put up that gun—"

"Don't you try anything," Gupp said, attempting to watch both of them at the same time.

"All right," said Teddy; "let us get our stuff out."

Gupp lowered the gun. He just knew what Teddy would try and was ready for him. As Teddy swung a haymaker at his head he went double, brought the gun up butt-first, driving it deep into Teddy's belly.

"Oof!" said Teddy, his jaw limp and his knees sagging.

"So you did, did you?" said Gupp. "So you took lessons from Lionel Strongfort! Well, let me tell you about another Teddy I knew one time and a thing I learned off'n him. Teddy Roosevelt and the old Rough Riders and here's my Cuban special!"

Gupp swung up with his fist but he let his arm double over at the last instant, bringing instead his bent elbow into crashing contact with Teddy's jaw. He staggered to the wall and when he rebounded Gupp whooped:

"And this I named my singlejack punch, developed right up yonder in the U. S. Mint."

Mrs. Fedwick clawed a handful of Gupp's hair, pulling him away.

"Git away from me, you pink-plumed catymount!"

He lifted the side of one freshly tallowed boot, catching her fairly in the place where he had aimed. Then, with the gun once more aimed he said, "Git your stuff and git to packin', and if I see you inside of the lines of the U. S. Mint patent survey once after sundown I'll show you how I deal with claim jumpers."

It seemed unusually quiet when they were gone. He buried the rat and car-

ried everything back inside, putting it exactly as it had been before Mrs. Fedwick and her boy arrived.

He imagined they got a ride back on the mudwagon. He did not check to see. The minister did not arrive, so he supposed they had seen him and turned him back. It suited Gupp just as well. He wanted nothing to remind him of them.

He rescued his sourdough can and found a heel of the starter and added warm water and flour to it. He cooked baking-powder biscuits and salt pork for supper, using the can that sat in its correct spot between the lead carbonate and the cyanide. He even caught himself whistling *Buffalo Gals*, and stopped with a pang.

HE SLEPT AND AROSE next morning, and worked all day in the U. S. Mint. He worked extra long each day trying to leave home earlier than usual and come home later so as to forget about Herschel.

One morning, with a cold drizzle of rain outside he found himself whistling *Buffalo Gals* while frying pancakes on the cookstove. He stopped, hearing a rustle of movement beneath the floor. It was almost like Herschel had come back.

He got the hammer and pulled the mended portion of floor away, and into the room came a pack rat.

It was Herschel. There could be no doubt about it, it was Herschel!

In amazement he watched as other forms followed, little rats—almost transparent they looked, with bits of jet in their eyes and the tips of their noses, baby pack rats, five of them.

"Well," Gupp said, "you can blast me on a short fuse!"

He understood then. The other pack rat, the dead one, had come from town in that carton of groceries. That rat had escaped beneath the floor and become Herschel's wife.

No, come to think of it, that rat was Herschel's husband!

# ARMY WIFE

## By KENNETH FOWLER

**The captain was a martinet when it came to discipline, but he couldn't keep his own thoughts in line when he looked at the major's widow.**

THE FIRST THREAT of danger to the train of four Osnaburg-hooded wagons came at the end of the second day of its eastward-bound journey from Fort Hays to the station of the Kansas-Pacific Railroad at Eagle Tail. Captain Scott Tooner, of the Fifth Cavalry, in command of the train and official guardian of its one civilian passenger, was pressing for higher terrain, a half mile beyond the draw through which they were passing, when the mounted figure appeared on the ridge to the left. In the hazy autumn dusk it seemed momentarily to be no more than a granite statue etched starkly against the darkening skyline.

Riding his sweat-marked dun beside the lead wagon, Captain Tooner felt his spine creased by a faint chill as he made his deliberate study of the silhouette. It vanished like a wraith as the voice of First Sergeant Terence O'Donnell came from behind him.

"Hard to see in this light. You think it was a redskin, sir?"

"Quite likely, Sergeant. But possibly only a skulker."

"Been some latrine rumors Crazy Bear might be off the reservation, sir." The gob of chewing tobacco plugged in O'Donnell's cheek writhed like muscle as he spat. "If there's a band up there—" He let it fall away as the captain's eyes grew cold. "Very good, sir," he said.

Tooner was aware of a meager satisfaction. He knew, as well as O'Donnell did, that if a band of renegade warriors lay hidden beyond that ridge up there, an attack would come before the lumbering wagons could be swung out of the pass. But O'Donnell knew, too, the strict line he maintained between himself and his command. A good thing. A good thing the army still had a sprinkling of these case-hardened old regulars like O'Donnell—and God pity the kind of replacements they'd been getting lately.

Tooner's mouth locked into a thin line under his gray-ice eyes. He'd shove a ramrod up the backbones of those others. He'd make tough, disciplined soldiers out of them if they died for it—which they would, if he didn't.

"Sergeant," Tooner said, "we halt here. Order the wagons drawn up. If there's a fuss, no firing from the wagons till I pass the order."

"Yes sir!" O'Donnell saluted and barked the order as he wheeled his horse, and Tooner thought of the woman in the lead wagon and muttered under his breath.

Second Lieutenant Aaron Woodhull trotted his horse up from the rear and reined in beside him, lifting his arm in a limp salute.

"Cheyennes, you think, Captain? There's been talk of a break-out from the reservation at Spotted Tail."

Tooner's eyes made their acerbic judgment of the young West Pointer. A sapling, rooted out of its classroom hothouse and transplanted out here in this arid wilderness, to grow or die. His job: season it.

"I," said Tooner, "do not gaze into crystal balls, Mr. Woodhull."

"No sir. But—"

"Another thing. Dress up that salute, Mr. Woodhull. Even out here"—dryly—"we endeavor to create the impression that this is still an army."

A dark flush painted Aaron Woodhull's boyish face. "Yes sir. But Ann. I just wanted to make sure she is—"

"Your sister is my official charge, Mr. Woodhull. Kindly order the trooper detail to dismount and stand by the wagons. That will be all."

Lieutenant Woodhull stiffened in the saddle. His right hand snapped to the dusty brim of his hat. But as he wheeled his horse his eyes raked Tooner, bright with rancor.

Absently, Tooner scrubbed a hand across his brow, easing the band-crease from his campaign hat. *Someday they will learn*, he thought, and for a moment, following Woodhull, his eyes grew abstracted, holding the weight and years of his experience. *Yes, they will learn. Even shavetails. But not the way Fetterman learned. Not if I can prevent it.*

His gaze idled over the halted wagons, somber with this thought. Brevet-mad Fetterman, on Massacre Hill. Fetterman storming the ridge he had been ordered not to cross, and leading his troopers into bloody ambush. Fetterman, saving his last bullet for himself. And because he was a brave man, but also a fool, eighty men had died.

A cold anger bit through Tooner. Stay in the army long enough, get the harsh habit of discipline in your soul and your guts, and maybe you'll live. Maybe you'll never see a trooper whipped into a run by a band of shrieking savages, with his belly slashed and his blood spurting. Maybe you'll even be one of the lucky ones who will never ride up on a raided settlement and view the ultimate in savage deviltry—a white woman who did not get away. Maybe.

Not very likely, though.

Tooner heaved a sigh as he swung his horse toward the lead wagon. Corporal John Delaney, the driver, a raw-boned six-footer, had already tied his ribbons and was hunkered down beside the wagon's right rear wheel, examining a cracked felloe, as Tooner reached forward and rapped his knuckles on the wagon seat.

"Captain Tooner, Mrs. Penrose. I'd like to speak with you a moment, if it's convenient."

"Of course, Captain. Give me just a minute, please."

Tooner was stirred. He was always stirred at the unnaturalness of hearing a woman's voice in such surroundings, but the low, throaty-sounding voice of Ann Penrose was something particular. A man had his dreams, wherever he was, and a woman out here was a dream, a beguiling phantasy that oddly palliated his loneliness, and filled his mind with uxorious thoughts.

Presently, when the wagon flaps parted and she stood there behind the seat, her eyes, a clear hazel, held their usual quiet gravity casting down to him, and he was struck anew by her never-failing air of serenity. And, today, the roundness at her waist seemed more apparent to him than it had before, although it would be a full four months before she would have her baby.

"I heard you talking with Aaron," she murmured. Her eyes had a quality of remoteness, as if they were always looking back, seeking against a curtain fallen, a play ended. "Do you think there will be trouble?" she asked.

"We can't ever be sure. I think it will be safer, though, if you stay in the wagon."

"Safety!" A smile briefly skirted her pretty mouth. "I did not come out here to the plains expecting safety, Captain. By now, I am used to excitement." She nodded backward across her shoulder. "I have my husband's carbine in there. I can use it, if I have to."

Tooner's eyes struck measuringly at her. Her face had the lineaments of a finely cut cameo, with little of guile in it, but much of strength webbed into its essential gentleness. His glance lingered on her smooth black hair, with its links of polished braid gathered into a neat oval chignon at the nape of her neck.

Why did she have to speak of the Major as if he were still alive, as if nothing had happened to change her relationship to the army? A faint wryness edged his voice.

"I don't question your ability with a carbine, ma'am. If it comes to a brush, however, I think you can trust my men to handle the situation without support."

Her eyes mocked him gently. "Thank you for putting it so tactfully, Captain. I must ask you to remember, though, that my sex is not easily disciplined."

Tooner flushed. "This is for your own good," he replied stiffly.

"We are not easily disciplined," she smiled, "but we love being pampered. You need not worry about me, Captain. But thank you for being so earnest about my welfare."

When the wagon flaps had closed behind her, Tooner glanced up to the ridge. Quiet there now. No movement. Was it the calm before the storm?

A restlessness ran through Tooner. Why had he felt so unaccountably irked by her speaking of Randall Penrose as if he were just away for a time? The Major, killed in a minor scouting foray on the Belle Fourche, and dead

now four months. And now Ann Penrose, still Army, was going out. *Against her inclination*, Tooner thought. *She'll hate it, back in the cities. Even with that baby she has coming.*

Tooner dismounted and caught Delaney's eye. "Corporal?"

Delaney swung around, saluted. "Yes sir?"

Tooner walked his dun to the back of the wagon. He lowered his voice. "Delaney, you know what to do, if it comes to the worst. Save one shell in your carbine—for her."

"Right, sir."

Tooner led his dun to the rear. Night was coming down. It didn't look as if there would be any stars.

NO FIRES. COLD RATIONS, served out of knapsacks. A half-dozen troopers on picket, well out from camp. The dark acid reek of the horses, musk-sharp on the night air. The endless waiting. And perhaps for nothing.

Captain Scott Tooner, sprawled on a saddle blanket within the enclosure made by the wagons, felt the loneliness of command, the isolation of responsibility. And tonight, something else. Something apart from this gnawing impatience within him to get to Eagle Tail and get these wagons loaded for the return trip to the post.

Colonel Wayne Sealy, post commandant, had had a good idea, making this trip serve a double purpose. He could have ill afforded a special guard detail to escort Mrs. Penrose to Eagle Tail, and thence on her way back to civilian life. But this way the same heavy guard that would insure her safe arrival would also insure delivery of the needed supplies these wagons would carry back to the fort.

A post commander, Tooner reflected, had to think of everything. Get the wife to her husband, if she wanted to be with him badly enough to endure the hazards and privations of life in Indian country, on a remote army post. Get her back to where she came from, if anything happened to him. It was all of the same piece—an army job.

A little wryly, dreaming the improbable dream, Tooner considered the grandeur that would be his, if he were married. A married second lieutenant rated only a single room, with a detached shed for use as a kitchen. But his grade would entitle him to three rooms—a palace! A palace that would be papered with copies of the *Army & Navy Journal* in winter, to keep out the cold, and luxuriously decorated with tacked-up illustrations from *Harper's Weekly*. In a captain's quarters there would even be enough elbow room for kids, if a man had the nerve for that, in this hell-and-gone country.

Tooner thought bitterly, *God pity the kids!* and coming up on his feet suddenly, was conscious of a goading irritability. He looked up at the overcast sky. A few stars, and a splinter of moon hazed over by cumulus. The faint, low murmur of voices, from the wagons. Then, out of the sheltering darkness, a voice, chanting the familiar barracks tune:

*"Oh, go to the stable,*
*All you who are able,*
*And give your poor horse some*
*hay and some corn. . . ."*

Tooner spun around. Sergeant Terence O'Donnell's gangling figure came striding out of the dimness, and Tooner barked at him.

"Sergeant, find that fool and shut him up! And pass the word. The next

man who talks above a whisper tonight gets spread-eagled."

"Yes sir," O'Donnell said, and started walking rapidly toward the rear Number Four wagon, cursing under his breath.

*"For if you don't do it,*
*The Captain will know it,*
*And you'll catch the devil*
*as sure as—"*

The singing ceased abruptly. The tension in Tooner eased slightly. He started out past the wagons to begin a slow circle of the encampment.

He had a feeling, now, that no attack would come tonight. This was not a good camp from a tactical standpoint, but under the circumstances he'd had no choice but to halt where he had and hope that the night would pass without incident. How many private little hells like this had he gone through since he had been stationed out here?

He completed his tour and found everything in order: guards posted, the camp quiet now, and the men who should be, rolled up in their blankets.

Re-entering the enclosure, he found Sergeant O'Donnell beside the Number Four wagon, tinkering with the stirrup-strap buckle on the saddle of his bay. Something had been troubling him. Now, as he returned O'Donnell's salute, he suddenly knew what it was.

"I haven't seen Mr. Woodhull, Sergeant. Is he in Number Four?"

"No sir."

"Then where the devil is he?"

O'Donnell seemed to shrink momentarily into the blot of shadow cast by the bay. A weighted pause. Then: "He said he'd be gone just a minute, sir. I—I believe he wanted a word with his sister."

"Damn!" Tooner spun around. "Follow me, Sergeant."

LIEUTENANT AARON WOODHULL stood with his right foot planted on a hub of the Number One wagon, his head tilted upward. Above him, Ann Penrose's face was a pale sphere in the half-darkness. Tooner's voice went out like a whiplash.

"Mr. Woodhull!"

The lieutenant's boot skidded from the wheel hub as he jerked around. Seeing Tooner, his eyes froze into brief shock, then went blank.

"Yes sir?"

"I believe I made it clear, Mr. Woodhull, that your duties on this mission do not include parlor games and social chit-chat."

"I only wanted to see that my sister was comfortable for the night, Captain."

"That is my duty, Mr. Woodhull. Yours is to obey orders. You are restricted to quarters until further notice." Tooner's glance tilted briefly to Ann Penrose's stiff-lipped face. Then, cold and precise, his eyes whipped at O'Donnell. "Sergeant, march him to the rear. If it becomes necessary, post a guard over him."

"Very good, sir."

Above Tooner, Ann Penrose's voice was a soft and incongruous denial to the night's danger and Tooner's own rigid rule of discipline.

"He is only six months out of West Point, Captain."

"Six months or six years," said Tooner harshly, "if he can't learn to take an order, he can still lose his hair."

"Don't think I'm blaming you," Ann Penrose said. "Randall would do it the same way. He—" She stopped, her voice trailing into a sigh. "He was like you,"

she finished on a soft breath.

"The Major," said Tooner awkwardly, "was a fine soldier."

Ann Penrose looked vacantly away. "Yes. But the men hated him for his sternness. As they will you."

Tooner felt the embarrassment of a widening silence for which he had no words. A woman thought of that part, because hatred was an emotion, and in a woman emotion was a basic thing. But what purpose would be served by his telling her that it wasn't hatred, really, but more of a savage resentment. And focused on you, because you were the mark and symbol of an implacable system.

He had seen drunken soldiers doused in icy streams, repeated offenders spread-eagled on a caisson wheel. And, because of poor training and relaxed discipline, he had seen careless troopers with their intestines hanging out and their rooty scalps carried like bloody guidons on swinging tomahawks. Which was worse?

He looked up, but in the dimness he could not see the look of calm assurance on her face, the fatalism etched there by her experience as a bride of the army. But he knew it was there, and the thought of it moved a pride through him, and then a deep, scarifying sensation of loneliness.

He remembered the night they had brought Randall Penrose in. A thing to remember, a thing to forget. If you could. The feathered haft of the arrow, jutting from the blue tunic. A crimson crater where the head had been hacked and the scalp torn off. And later, the memory of her proud, straight figure beside the grave as the bugler had blown taps. A brass throat, to spill out the unuttered cry of her heart.

A coolness rippled through Tooner. To her, he needed to explain nothing; nothing. He said, "I hope you will sleep well," but there was no sign in her distance-set eyes that she had heard him.

He added, softly, "I don't think there will be any disturbance tonight," then, before she could speak, before she could weaken him with her nearness, he faced around, abruptly, and started back to the rear.

TOONER SLEPT FITFULLY. Every night sound held a preternatural loudness. The dry snap of a twig, out beyond camp. The sudden spinning flutter of a bird. The monotone of the breeze, rustling the verbena weed. On the trail, he was never fully relaxed. Mind and muscle were stretched springs, geared for instant activation, and the problem of command was with him always.

At four-thirty he was up, impatience already ignited in him. Night had passed uneventfully and now fires would make no difference and he ordered them lighted. Soon the pungent aroma of frying bacon and boiling coffee drifted over to him and he was conscious of hunger pangs.

He had coffee and bacon and hardtack, eating alone. He was not quite finished when one of the mules let out a honking bray, a sound that was instantly followed by men's voices, raised in angry altercation.

With controlled tension, Tooner put down his mess plate and rose. Forward, in front of the Number Two wagon, two of his troopers, Jenks and Forbush, stood toe to toe, wrestling for a blacksnake gripped by Jenks.

Suddenly, Jenks wrenched free and slashed down with the rawhide across Forbush's shoulders. With a bellow of rage, Forbush threw himself hard

against the other trooper and tore the whip from his hand. He hurled it across his shoulder and the butt smacked Tooner in the shoulder as he strode forward. Tooner coldly ignored it, ignored Sergeant O'Donnell as O'Donnell sprang suddenly from behind him and picked it up.

O'Donnell roared, "Ten-SHUN!" and then Forbush and Jenks stood rigid before Tooner and the abrupt stillness had an electric quality.

"What is this all about?" Tooner demanded coldly.

"Just a little private augerment, sir." Jenks spoke first, a burly, heavy-set man, with shaggy black hair and sullen dark eyes. "I won't see a mule beat, sir. It ain't no way to treat a dumb animal."

"*You* won't see it beat!" snarled Forbush. A rawboned giant with a face shaped like a hatchet, he stared at Jenks venomously. "It's my mule. I'll handle it any damn way I please," he said.

Tooner said icily, "I will correct you. It is the army's mule. And you will handle it the way I please."

Forbush glowered at him.

"Well?" Tooner said.

"Yes sir!"

"Sergeant?" Tooner said.

"Yes sir?"

"Hand that whip to Forbush. Then get me another. Give it to Jenks."

"Very good, sir." In a moment O'Donnell returned, carrying another blacksnake. He handed it to Jenks.

"All right," Tooner said to the two men. "Both of you wanted to fight. Now fight!"

The troopers seemed gripped by a shocked inertia momentarily. With an absent gesture, Forbush stroked a hand down the smooth shaft of his whip. Jenks stood motionless, watching him blankly.

Sergeant O'Donnell took a single advancing step.

"You heard the captain!" he roared. "Lay it on, ye good-for-nothin' spalpeens!"

Forbush struck first. His lash hissed out and bit at Jenks's sleeve, coming taut with a crack like a pistol shot. With a goaded yell, Jenks spun his own leather forward. The wiry tip fanged into Forbush's leg, and a patch of yellow piping flew from his trouser. Forbush swore, but when they each struck again the blows were low and perfunctory, aimed cautiously at the leather armor of their boots.

Tooner's flat, even voice evaluated the tactic. "This is no fight," he said. "Either put some tallow in those strokes or I'll have this job done from a caisson wheel."

Jenks's ebony eyes glittered, flicking at him, and the moment was Forbush's opportunity. His arm flew back and the snake streaked out, slashing across Jenks's cheek. Jenks yelped with pain. At the same instant, as if galvanized by the blow, he whacked out with a blind fury and the lash cuffed Forbush's hat, sending it spinning from his head.

Dust boiled under the troopers' scuffing boots. The lashes began to hack and bite, whistling as they flew out, and aimed now with a deliberate and vicious intent.

Tooner watched impassively, conscious of O'Donnell's great granite bulk beside him, like an immovable shield. A worm of blood wriggled down the slant of Jenks's jaw, where Forbush's lash had laid it open to the cheekbone. Half sheared away, the left sleeve of Forbush's tunic dangled from his shoulder like a scarlet guidon. Both men

were weaving groggily, circling each other with a feral deliberateness, like a pair of battered wolves, stalking in for the last fanged pounce.

"Captain! In heaven's name, can't you see that they've had enough?"

Tooner spun around and had the sensation of being kicked in the belly. Ann Penrose was standing behind him. Beneath the tar-shine of her black hair her face was a stark white, and a spasm of alarm quivered through him as his glance fell involuntarily to the rounded distension at her waist. A faint fear churned against the expanding spring of his anger. A sudden fright. Then a miscarriage. It didn't take much, sometimes.

But before these men he couldn't draw back. Let discipline rust, let the iron go out of it, and there would be no safety for any woman out here. Why in the devil couldn't she have stayed in her wagon?

He looked around at Jenks and Forbush. They were still circling, staring at each other out of stupid, oxlike eyes, but barely able, now, to hold to their feet. It was about finished. But it must not be finished by a woman's intervention.

Tooner turned. "Mrs. Penrose," he said firmly, "please return to your wagon."

"I will not! Not—not until you have stopped this barbaric exhibition!"

Tooner said, without moving his eyes from her, "Sergeant?"

"Yes sir!" O'Donnell said.

"Kindly escort Mrs. Penrose back to her wagon, Sergeant."

"Very good, sir." O'Donnell swung around. "You had better come with me, ma'am."

Tooner hadn't expected her to break. But she did, now. Her dry, heaving sobs were like a dam bursting as O'Donnell gently led her away, and Tooner felt a slow slackening of the compression in him, staring after her.

She would be all right now. She would hate him, as these men would hate him, but he would have his dregs of satisfaction in the knowledge that what he had lost was something he never could have had anyway.

He turned to see Jenks standing over Forbush, who had collapsed and now lay sprawled on the ground, with his head pillowed on an outflung arm. By some last iron fiber of will Jenks reeled around and stiffened to attention, and a little electric shiver of admiration reached through Tooner.

"Fight Indians like that, Jenks, and I'll see that you make corporal."

"Thank you, sir."

"But fighting in the ranks I will not tolerate for any reason." Tooner nodded down curtly to Forbush. "Throw a bucket of water over him," he said, and turning, walked back to where he had left his unfinished breakfast.

Sergeant O'Donnell rode beside Tooner, and forward, barely within sight of the advance wagon now, the four mounted troopers with the train scouted the trail ahead, alertly combing the hilly terrain to the left and right of it. The sun stood high, and burned down so powerfully that a man could feel it even under the crown of his hat and through the sweat-soaked shoulders of his tunic.

O'Donnell glanced obliquely at the man riding at his side. Captain Tooner's lean jawline, burnished to a dull coppery hue under the shadow of his hat brim, was taut, and the compression at his mouth gave his whole face a look of bleak and habitual severity.

*The man's lonely,* O'Donnell thought, with a faint surprise. *But any soldier who will do his job is lucky to serve under him. Pfaugh! The kind we're getting today, though. In the army, they give you one mold, and every damned man-jack's supposed to fit it. All right, then. Send us more officers like the Captain, there, and we'll do it. Yessir, by God!*

O'Donnell scratched reflectively at the salt rime under his left armpit, then sent a long glance back over his shoulder. At this distance, the smoke signal from the ridge behind them had the look of a scraggly chalk mark drawn against the dun skyline. O'Donnell's eyes pinched against the stab of the sun as he swung his gaze forward again. A far piece ahead, an answering signal cottoned the sky in rhythmic puffs.

The captain's voice synchronized with O'Donnell's thought. "They'll be joined up in an hour or two," he said. "I think we can get ready for a brush tonight, Sergeant."

"They'll be in for a surprise, sir. Only seven of us mounted. Lucky we've taken care to keep the men in the wagons well hidden."

"Yes." The captain nodded abstractedly. "Too bad, though, we couldn't be on our way back from Eagle Tail. There'd be no complications then."

"Always a hair in the butter, sir."

"Always." The captain's voice had a curt dismissive sound, and O'Donnell knew that the subject was closed.

Staring ahead, a pondering squint furrowed the sergeant's forehead. Inevitably, there had been the usual latrine rumors about Mrs. Penrose and Captain Tooner, back at the post. When Mrs. Penrose had lingered, after her husband's death, some of the men had been laying odds that after a decent interval the captain would be moving out of bachelors' row and over to the married officers' side.

Delaney was one of those who had been offering two to one that there would be a post wedding, O'Donnell recalled, and come to think of it, he'd covered ten bucks of Delaney's money. Must remember to hit him up for it, tomorrow. Shame, though, about the captain. Too damned straight-laced for his own good. But hell, women were scarce out here; a man had to grab his chance when it came, and to hell with the rules.

O'Donnell thought of his own wife and two kids, back on Soapsuds Row. Even in the army you could have a home, if you wanted it bad enough. . . .

They were coming to higher ground, and ahead O'Donnell picked out a seep where they could water their horses and mules. A cottonwood motte fringed the seep and made a brief break in the monotony of the prairie.

"We'll noon up there." The captain's voice broke the silence between them. "Send a man forward to notify the scouts, Sergeant."

"Very good, sir."

Tooner swung his horse, heading it back toward the lead wagon.

THE ATTACK CAME AT DUSK. Tooner had been in worse brushes, but it was hot while it lasted. The train was encamped on a low hill, but some two hundred yards to the right a brushy ridge afforded the Cheyennes intermediate cover until they were close enough to the wagons to lay a scattering fire into the camp.

Tooner, with his men already deployed, some in the wagons, others barricaded behind them, stood behind

the Number Two wagon and made his quick judgment of the Cheyennes as they whipped their ponies down from the ridge, riding, as they always did, with a magnificent recklessness. Two score, maybe a handful more. His own force was half the size. But his men had the newly issued Henry repeaters as an offset, and Tooner knew the worth of those pieces.

Above the swelling thunder of hoofs, a staccato whooping detonated abruptly. A remote part of Tooner's mind pocketed these sounds, ignoring them. The sound that he had been awaiting came—a ragged popping, and this his ear accepted and classified.

*Old muzzleloading Springfields, if I'm any judge. And damned poor powder in the bargain.*

Tooner's glance lifted to the back of the wagon seat where Sergeant O'Donnell stood, looking down at him.

"Ready any time, sir," O'Donnell said.

"At fifty yards, Sergeant," Tooner said. "By volley."

In the normal pattern, the attackers had begun to circle the wagons when the first volley splattered them. The crash of the Henrys was a peremptory sound and had a peremptory effect. As if swept by an invisible scythe, the whirling merry-go-round faltered as the troopers' volley smashed at it. Scattered shots from the red wheel, broken now in a dozen places, had a pitifully puny sound as the Cheyennes grimly held rank, and at this moment O'Donnell's riflemen poured their second volley into it. Wild screams tore at the darkness and the ring around the wagons now widened perceptibly.

A quiet satisfaction rose in Tooner. He said, "At will now, Sergeant. See that each shot counts a coup," and turning, he strode forward and mounted to the seat of the Number One wagon.

Corporal John Delaney lay sprawled on the wagon bed, sighting his Henry over the up-chained tailgate. Ann Penrose sat with her back pressed to the wagon seat, and a faint anger ignited in Tooner as he saw the carbine locked beneath her arm.

"You will not need that," he said sharply. "Put it down."

She glanced up at him, briefly startled, then composed.

"You have bad manners, Captain Tooner."

"I have the responsibility, Mrs. Penrose, of getting you safely to Eagle Tail. I intend putting that ahead of the social graces."

Outside, a few sporadic shots slammed faintly, followed by a diminishing sound of hoofbeats.

Slowly, Ann Penrose stood, facing him, and seeing the lines of tiredness on her face, Tooner felt a stab of remorse. Soon she would be on the outside. Memories of her life as an army wife would fade. But his memory of her would not. And the pang in him would deepen, when she was gone.

He was not adept at reading a woman's mind, and now her faint smile was an enigma to him.

"You are a willful man, Captain. Where I am going, men do not snap orders at a woman. They take them!"

He remembered her words of the day before: *We are not easily disciplined, but we love being pampered.* What in the devil had she intended by that remark?

His thoughts turned dark with his loneliness, and then, for an instant, his mind conjured the dream, and she was back at Hays. Lamplight shining from the window of the little house on Of-

ficers' Row, and inside Ann Penrose, bustling about over some simple domestic chore, or perhaps seated cosily before the fire, leafing through a book of the latest Butterick patterns. The dream burst, like a glittering bubble. A dead fire, an empty house. . . .

"Captain, you didn't hear a word I said!"

Her tone, some faint teasing quality in her smile, pricked him back to awareness, and he stiffened suddenly.

"You will have to excuse me. I was thinking of other things."

"A penny for your thoughts, Captain!"

"I am thinking you will be able to sleep, tonight. By tomorrow noon, we should be in Eagle Tail."

"Ah, yes. Mission completed. You will no doubt be glad to have me off your hands, Captain." Her eyes clouded. Then, abruptly, her mood seemed to change. "Captain, I hope you will not red-line Aaron in your report. He was naturally concerned about me. Though," she added softly, "he needn't have been."

"Thank you. No, I have no intention of red-lining him. Your brother should make a capable officer, with a bit more seasoning."

"I am sure he will be well seasoned, Captain, with you supplying the condiments!"

Tooner flushed. There were times when he could not tell whether her words were intended to tease or to rebuke.

He said stiffly, "I hope you will spend a comfortable night. Good night, Mrs. Penrose."

"Good night, Captain."

An angry feeling of frustration threaded him as he climbed down from the wagon. Above him, Ann Penrose's black, silky hair made a dark mystery around her face. Then she was gone.

LOADED FOR THE RETURN JOURNEY to the fort, the wagons were drawn up outside the log trading-post at Eagle Tail. With Lieutenant Woodhull, four troopers stood inside the small corral behind the building, saddling their mounts.

In the driver's seat of the lead wagon, Corporal John Delaney was masticating a jawful of his favorite plug. Below him, sitting saddle on his big bay, Sergeant O'Donnell kept casting impatient glances back toward the little adobe station where Ann Penrose was with Captain Tooner, waiting for the train.

"What in time we waitin' for?" demanded Delaney. His grizzled jaw puckered and a tea-brown streak of juice spurted, falling with a soft slap in the roadside dust. "All this army ever does," he grumbled; "wait, wait, wait."

"And bellyache," O'Donnell said.

"You don't, I reckon."

"I do when there's something to bellyache about. Like now. You owe me ten bucks, Delaney."

"Worry about it," said Delaney fondly, "you big mick."

O'Donnell seemed not to hear him. He swung down ponderously from his saddle and tramped across the tracks to the station platform. Hell, why didn't the captain make it easier for himself and get it over with? Wrathfully, O'Donnell booted a tumbleweed out of his path.

*Plain as the nose on me face,* he thought darkly. *He's got the daunsy for her all right. And it's a bloody shame he must be like a moon-struck gossoon making eyes at the farmer's daughter.*

O'Donnell reached the grimy side window of the station and peered inside. He stiffened abruptly. Ann Penrose sat on the waiting-room bench, with the captain beside her. She was crying softly, and as O'Donnell stood frozen, staring guiltily, he saw Captain Tooner's arm hesitantly flank her shoulder, and then possess it.

O'Donnell's eyes popped. Then, like a man rocking gently out of a trance, he stepped back from the window and pulled a stemwinder watch from the pocket of his yellow-piped breeches. Five minutes. No, four. Four minutes to train time. With aching suspense, O'Donnell crossed his fingers.

*Maybe*, he thought compassionately, *there will be a wreck.*

Back in front of the station, he pulled a cheroot from his tunic pocket and nervously lighted it. Delaney yelled at him from the wagon and he ignored him. Distantly, a locomotive whistled, drawing a mournful slant of sound across the prairie stillness. O'Donnell tensed. The damned train was on time. The engineer must be a bloody Orangeman!

O'Donnell jerked around as the station door opened. Captain Tooner stepped down to the platform, one hand gripping Mrs. Penrose's arm, the other her traveling-bag. A dull weight sank in O'Donnell as he started across the tracks. The captain's voice checked him.

"Sergeant?"

O'Donnell spun around. "Yes sir?"

"I'll be obliged, Sergeant, if you will take this bag."

"Very good, sir."

"You can put it," said the captain, "in the Number One wagon."

O'Donnell gaped. "In—in the wagon, sir?" he blurted at last.

An unfamiliar grin tugged at the corners of the captain's mouth. He looked down at Mrs. Penrose.

"You see what I am up against, Ann?" he said. "Insubordination in the ranks. A clear-cut case, if I ever saw one."

"Perhaps," murmured Ann Penrose, smiling, "the sergeant is a little confused. As I am."

O'Donnell's later recollection was that he had failed to salute—for the first time in his military career. Corporal Delaney was looking at him with a smug expression as he reached the wagon and with a heave of his powerful shoulders hurled the bag up to the seat.

"This ain't on our manifest." Delaney stared down at the bag in mock surprise. "We only carry military supplies in this army, bucko."

O'Donnell let out a roar. "This army carries any damned thing I say it does!"

Delaney spat. "Cost you five bucks, Sarge."

O'Donnell flicked a hand across his forehead and snapped off a spatter of sweat. Slowly, a broad grin spread his big Irish mouth.

"Worry about it, bucko," he said relishingly. "Worry about it—you big mick!"

# Western Crossword Puzzle

By RUTH NALLS

**Solution on page 158**

ACROSS

1. Cowboy "rocking chairs"
8. Unbranded calves
10. Arizona river
11. Horse
13. Belt
14. French resort city
15. Small horse
17. Buddy
18. Utah pioneer
21. Foreman
23. Darns
25. Musical beats
27. Thick slice
29. Western Indian
30. Three in cards
32. Room (Sp.)
34. The "I"
35. Senior (abbr.)
36. Peasant
37. Pull taut
39. Tipped
41. Winter melon
42. Somewhat "skeered"
44. One of Elizabeth's nicknames
45. Registered Nurse (abbr.)
46. Insect egg
47. Broth
49. Painful
50. Hum
51. Acquires
53. Reddish-brown horse
55. Amer. "march" composer
57. College official
59. "Flying" dish

ACROSS

61. Fire residue
62. Rivers (Sp.)
64. Doctrine adherent
65. Vow
67. Flavors
69. Astonishes
70. South of the border ranchos
72. Favorite western sombrero

DOWN

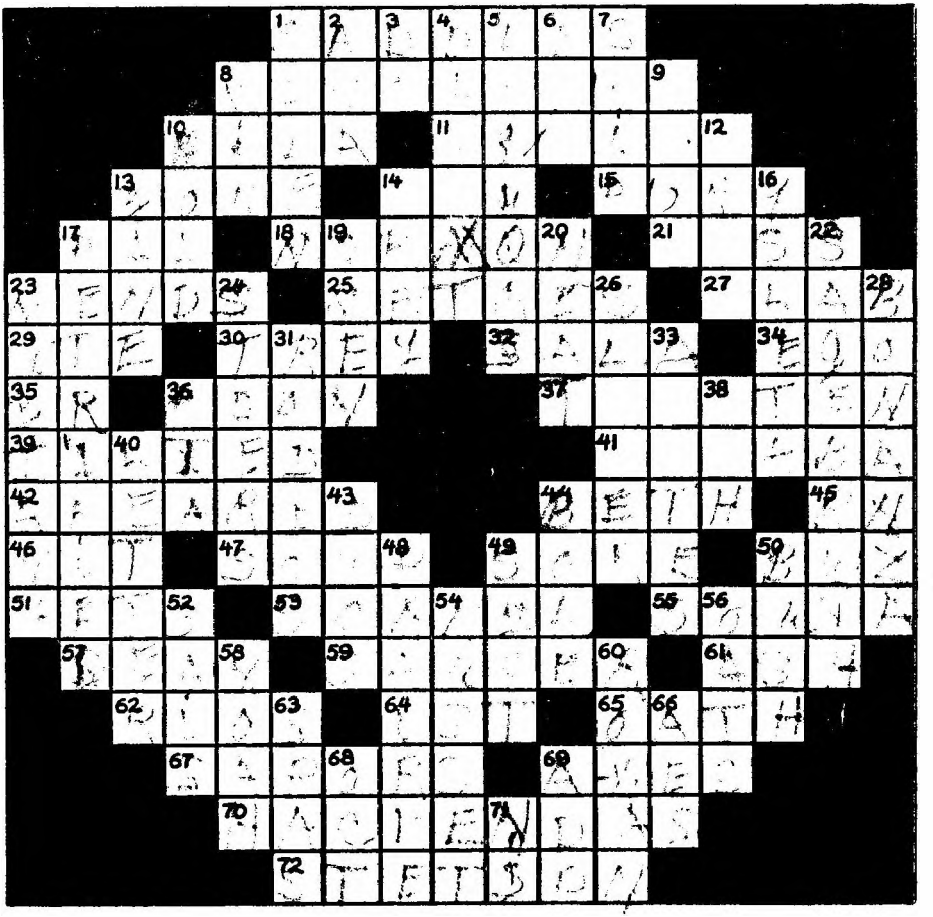
1. Oregon city
2. Actress Gardner
3. ___nver, Colorado
4. Had night "visions"
5. Alcoholic drinks
6. Small shield
7. Omit
8. Mrs. Andy Gump
9. "Holier than thou" person
10. What the fortyniners were after
12. Seth's son
13. _____ Grey, western author
14. Quarry
16. Oldest Texas town, near El Paso
17. The _____ Forest in Arizona
19. Sign
20. Tidy
22. Nevada state flower
23. Bronco
24. Beef animals
26. Carver
28. Rich gold strike
31. Cowboy shows
33. Marbles

DOWN

36. School-parents organization
38. Her Serene Highness (abbr.)
40. Epistle
43. Performances by two
44. Tree trunk
48. Wide open spaces
49. Denomination
50. Shrub
52. Ancient Egyptian city

DOWN

54. Idaho _____ potato
56. Horse's feed bag grain
58. Ark builder
60. The mountain ash
63. Health resorts
66. Roman bronze
68. Autumn month (abbr.)
69. Stir
71. Nova Scotia (abbr.)



# Knife Master

## By M. D. McELROY

**Restless, daring, colorful, Jim Bowie left his name on a knife—and written large in the annals of the West.**

"THOSE WILD BOWIES!" said the Cajuns with a hopeless shake of their heads when the Bowie brothers were mentioned. "Snare 'gators—beeg wans—in de swamps, den ride on dem lak horse. I tell you dose Bowie fellow—Rezin, John, Jeem—real devil!"

Sure they rode alligators, with ropes tied around the threshing reptiles for surcingles. But that wasn't their only sport in the Louisiana wilderness. Like the savages on the plains, they chased wild bulls with lassos and knives, instead of riding them down with a pistol as other frontiersmen did.

"Those wild Bowies" liked to play, but they could work, too. In 1814 they put up a sawmill on the banks of Bayou Boeuf, where they lived in a crude log cabin with only wild animals for neighbors. Before their mill was a year old, they were shipping lumber regularly down the Red River and the Mississippi to New Orleans.

The long days working at the pit-end of a whipsaw spread the shoulders of the six-foot, rawboned James; and the wilderness made him hard, sure, powerful. No one had to ask why he was called Big Jim.

Big Jim, fair of skin, had the Bowie eyes, deep-set and bluish-gray, keen and penetrating. His mother said he had a vivid imagination, which he may have had, but he spoke his thoughts to few. No one could know, for he never mentioned it, that his one ambition was to make money. Lots of money, so he could become a gentleman. And this determination was the fire that kept the fuse lit during the forty-one violent years of his life.

Soon he had a chance to make big money.

The brothers took turns in going to New Orleans to sell their lumber. When

Big Jim's turn came, he found all Creole Town talking about Jean Lafitte and his army of buccaneers at Campeachy on Galveston Island.

"Only God and Lafitte know how many blacks have been captured from the Spanish slavers," a sailor told Jim. "When we lay off Galvez Town last month the place was aswarm with them, and Lafitte himself admitted that he was getting so many they were creating a problem."

Jim made it his business to find out exactly how he could relieve the pirate captain of his problem, with a handsome profit for the Bowies besides. He gathered every detail of slave-smuggling and hurried back to Bayou Boeuf to persuade John and Rezin to join him in the traffic in black ivory. His brothers agreed that, since others were getting away with it, they could do it too. Within two weeks they had sold their mill and were on the way to Campeachy.

Their first sight of the outlaw city revolted them, with its filthy streets, its scarred and swaggering cutthroats and their women. Yet they went on to the Maison Rouge, the large red house with cannons staring out its second-story windows that rose above Campeachy's wooden shacks like a bloody fortress. There Jean Lafitte ruled among his spoils.

When the pirate met Jim, he took an instant liking to him. "We may have a number of things in common," he told young Bowie. "We should get on very well together." Many people said the two actually looked alike, although Jean was very dark and Jim very light.

Lafitte lived in unexpected magnificence and was a lavish host with his plunder. Jim reveled in the luxuries of Maison Rouge for several days before the Bowies got down to business. In the big corral where the human cargo was kept penned in squalor, they chose forty strong, muscular bucks capable of heavy work, examining each one as carefully as a horse trader examines his livestock. They paid $5600 for the lot.

They shipped their merchandise in small boats to the limits of the United States and left them, reporting to the customs house where officials could "find" forty blacks that had been smuggled in. The slaves were "captured" and put upon the auction block for sale. The Bowies bought them back and received half the purchase price as a reward for informing—all according to arrangements previously made. After all traveling and customs-house expenses were settled, the Bowies had turned a neat 600% profit on their investment.

After two more trips to Campeachy, they were handling all of Lafitte's slave business.

The brothers invested their money in plantations, which took so much of Rezin's and John's time that Jim began making the trips to Galveston alone. They built a dignified white mansion at Arcadia, their show-place plantation that boasted the first steam sugar mill in those parts. By all local standards the Bowies were wealthy, and slavery had done it. They had cleared $65,000 by the time the United States Navy put an end to Lafitte's privateering in the northern Gulf and cut off the source of the Bowie slave supply.

The brothers settled up their accounts then. John moved to Arkansas, bought plantations, and served in the territorial legislature. Jim stayed at Ar-

cadia with Rezin, who became an influential politician and served several terms in the Louisiana legislature.

Jim was twenty-four and a very eligible bachelor, though he had no interest in girls.

"He was social and plain with all men," John said of him, "fond of music and the amusements of the day, and would take a glass in a merry mood to drive dull care away, but seldom allowed it to steal his brains."

Jim was happiest when roping deer in the woods with Rezin, riding wild horses, or hunting wild cattle with a knife. He was at home in the wilderness.

Once when they were hunting Rezin lassoed a wild bull. He leaped off his horse for the kill, swung out with his knife but struck bone, and his hand slipped down from the handle onto the blade, almost severing two of his fingers. He promptly decided that crossbars were needed on his hunting knives.

That same night Rezin sketched a rough design for a new knife. He drew a guard between the blade and handle and gave the blade a slight curve at the point that promised to be effective and terrible. He took a broad file and his sketch to a blacksmith to have a knife made up into what became the first real "bowie knife."

However, it was later that the weapon took Bowie for its name. And it was Jim, not Rezin, who made it famous.

Jim Bowie was a master of the knife before he was out of his teens. He was never afraid to stake his life on a turn of the blade, and he frequently did.

Jim liked the new knife from the first. It was well-balanced, ideal for hunting, and it had "a good throw." Those were fierce and dangerous times when no man dared go without arms, and his choice was limited. The revolver hadn't been invented, so that left only the single-shot rifle and pistol, and the hunting knife. In a tight place, Jim said, it was easier to draw a knife than to reload a gun.

There were plenty of tight places around Alexandria and Natchez where a knife came in handy, with all the political violence among the hot-blooded river gentry. Once Jim was shot while unarmed. He started after his attacker with bare fists, and might have killed him had friends not intervened. He got a leather scabbard and swore he would wear a knife as long as he lived—which he did.

The political pot boiled over when a formal duel turned into a free-for-all at Vidalia Sandbar in the Mississippi River. Eleven grim-faced politicos of the two rival factions had ferried across to the Sandbar to witness the duel. As soon as the two principals fired, and missed, the rest of the party fell to with guns and knives.

Jim was shot in the hip; shot in the arm; clubbed down with a pistol; and stabbed with a sword-cane whose blade broke off and left several inches sticking out his back. He disemboweled one opponent, stabbed another, and kept the rest at bay until he fainted from loss of blood. Clearly, it was Jim Bowie's knife that saved his life that morning, and stories of the valiant weapon swept over the country.

After Vidalia, he had only to introduce himself, "I'm Jim Bowie," to see men turn pale.

Every penny-dreadful and yellow newssheet printed stories about him, and no matter how fantastic their fiction might be, readers believed it. His name became synonymous with daring

and quick fortune—Sir Galahad in the wilderness—at a time when lives were cheap and honor dear, with every man for himself in a survival-of-the-fittest conflict. A prominent Boston minister excused Jim Bowie with this explanation: "It is justifiable to kill in fair combat everybody and anybody who ought to be killed!"

Not long after the Vidalia fracas Jim decided to go to Texas.

It was March of 1828 when he set out for the West to make more money faster, with a brace of English pistols, a long rifle, a money credit for several thousand dollars, and his knife.

His destination was San Antonio de Bexar, center of Spanish-Mexican affairs north of the Rio Grande. In Bexar Jim took lodgings on Soledad Street near the palace of Don Juan Martin Veramendi, bought fine but conservative clothes, and set himself up as a gentleman. He was soon visiting in homes of the prominent Bexar families.

But it was the Veramendis whom he visited most, for Jim Bowie had fallen in love with the slender, dark-haired Maria Ursula de Veramendi, daughter of one of the wealthiest men in the province. The Veramendis were a First Family of Mexico, and her godfather is said to have been General Santa Anna, several times President of Mexico and conqueror of the Alamo. Within a short time Jim was baptized in the Catholic faith and was embarked upon the formal two-year engagement.

However, his restless attention was claimed by something more immediate, and he was fired by a vision of wealth that plummeted him into the bloodiest and most brilliant venture of his career: the search for the San Saba silver mines.

Soon after he arrived in Bexar, Jim noticed that a band of Lipan Indians always brought silver bullion, mixed with gold, when they came to town to barter. They didn't bring much, for they didn't need much, and they had been doing it so long that the Spaniards and Mexicans paid no attention to it. But gold and silver always caught Jim Bowie's attention.

He began to cultivate the Lipans and visit among them. He sent east for a fine silver-plated rifle to give to their chief, Xolic. These Indians liked the white giant who rode with them and was expert at shooting buffalo; they adopted him into their tribe.

After spending several months with them, Jim had his reward. In a cave near the Llano River they showed him what he had been scheming to see, and it was far more dazzling than anything he had expected! It was the treasure, or a part of it, first mentioned by Cabeza de Vaca four hundred years before, which had already led thousands of adventurers to death and bankruptcy.

Jim lost his head and deserted the friendly Lipans, rushing back to Bexar to lay plans for confiscating the treasure. But it was three years before he saw the Llano country again.

He planned, first of all, to go home, sell out his Louisiana holdings, and transfer the money to Bexar.

So up the Chihuahua Trail he rode, going by way of Washington in Arkansas to visit John. While he was in Arkansas two things of importance happened: he ordered the knife that was to become a tradition, and he met Sam Houston.

Although Jim had several knives, he wanted a superbly good one for the

mining expedition, one forged by James Black, whose fame as a cutler of fine hunting knives had spread over all the Southwest.

Jim whittled out a model, as was the custom, and took it to Black's smithy in Washington. The smith studied it and promised to have a copy in steel ready in a few weeks when Bowie made his return trip to Texas.

Back on the trail again, Jim stopped briefly in Helena. There he met Sam Houston, who was fleeing from his unfortunate marriage and the governorship of Tennessee into voluntary exile in the Indian Territory. Bowie and Houston were friends at once. Each recognized in the other a kindred soul and the same adventurous spirit.

By Christmas Jim was in Arcadia, spilling over with enthusiastic schemes for the lost Spanish silver—whether it was bullion or rich veins of ore he never would say. Rezin caught the fever and proposed to join him when the time was right.

It was probably on this trip to Louisiana that Big Jim met John Sturdivant in a knife duel in Natchez.

Sturdivant ran the shadiest gambling-dives in Natchez-under-the-hill, which was the most vicious city on the Mississippi. He lured the young son of a friend of Jim's into one of his dives, greased him with Monongahela, and took his roll of money at a fixed table. After warning the boy to keep his mouth shut or be thrown into the river, he pushed him out into the street.

The boy happened to meet Jim on the wharf and told his miserable story. Together they went back to Sturdivant's, where Jim took enough money from a game to repay the boy. This, of course, brought a challenge. In the duel, Jim cut the tendons of Sturdivant's knife hand, so he could never use his knife or deal a deck of cards again; but Jim refused to kill his helpless antagonist.

But Sturdivant wasn't so generous. His pride, as well as his hand, was wounded. He sent three hired assassins with instructions to kill Bowie. They set out after him and trailed him to Arkansas.

Unaware of the danger, Jim had started back to Texas by way of Washington and James Black's smithy. Black had two knives ready for him, one made after the wooden pattern and one of his own design made "for peculiar purposes." Bowie could take his choice. Jim chose Black's as the better of the two, for it was edged up both sides as far as the curve of the point, and he liked that.

After Jim left town, Sturdivant's bullies ambushed him from a thicket on the wilderness trail and closed in for the kill. When the first ruffian pulled at the reins of his horse, Jim drew his new knife and, with one stroke, cut off his head. The second attacked him with a drawn knife, so Jim leaped from his saddle and ran the man through the abdomen. The third turned and ran. Jim threw the knife and his aim was true; the double-edged point caught his skull and split it completely to the neck.

The Bowie Knife had been christened—in blood.

Stories of this episode flew over the Southwest like tumbleweeds before a norther; and the legend of Big Jim grew.

"Jim Bowie was like Barnum's show," said one of the early Texans; "wherever he went, everybody wanted to see him."

James Black was flooded with or-

ders: *Make me a knife like Bowie's* or *Make me a Bowie-knife.*

Back in Bexar, Jim found a new opportunity for speculation. President Bustamente had become alarmed over the influx of American colonists to Texas-Coahuila and prohibited the sale of public lands to the Anglo settlers, although Mexican citizens could still get eleven-league blocks of land at a small price.

Jim wanted some of this cheap land. In the summer heat he rode three hundred miles to Saltillo in Coahuila on horseback, where he persuaded certain Mexicans to sell him more than 730,000 acres at two to four cents an acre. He sold most of it to people in Arkansas and Louisiana at a fine profit.

It wasn't long before he himself became a citizen of Mexico, with the help of Don Juan Veramendi, newly appointed vice-governor of the province. Almost immediately he and Don Juan went in business in Saltillo, setting up a cotton mill and factory for which Jim seems to have put up most of the money.

That winter in Bexar was chiefly spent in courting the lovely Ursula, until April when the long engagement was over. He went before the *alcalde* to draw up the contract papers for his marriage dowery, providing a $15,000 wedding gift for his bride from an estate valued at almost a quarter of a million dollars.

Jim and Ursula were married in the most elaborate ceremony ever known in San Fernando Church, with a state dinner and three days of feasting and dancing afterward. They honeymooned in New Orleans, where he found the crown of success for his labors. He and his high-born lady were accepted by Creole society and entertained as notable visitors. He had achieved his goal; he was a gentleman.

A portrait by Benjamin West shows that Jim had put on weight in his thirties, his hair had darkened, and he affected the fashionable long sideburns that emphasized his aquiline nose and handsome cleft chin. But his eyes were still the dominant feature of his face—his eyes and the mysterious smile that was his reply to any question he didn't choose to answer.

Upon returning to Bexar, Señor Bowie built a stone-and-adobe home, where Ursula and her *Jaime* lived in the comfortable, easy-going manner of the wealthy. They were very much in love, but Jim's old restlessness continued to gnaw at him. During the summer he completed his plans to go to the San Saba mines on the Llano. He sent for Rezin, who arrived at Bexar in October.

The brothers rounded up a party of dependable Indian fighters and provided them with good horses and good arms. At daylight on November 2, 1832, their caravan set out. Jim was in high spirits as he slung a powder horn over his Mexican saddle, checked the pair of horse pistols at his side, and tucked Old Bowie into the waistband of his buckskins.

Strung out behind him were Rezin; Cephas Ham, a veteran of many Indian battles; a Caddo-speaker named Buchanan; Matt Doyle; Tom McCaslin; and three other experienced frontiersmen.

After three weeks spent in "examining the nature of the country," a friendly Comanche overtook them and warned that Indians in warpaint were on the way. Jim wanted to push on to the safety of an old fort which the Spanish had built eighty years before

while working the mine; but the going was too rocky and slow. They had to dig in about six miles from the fort and treasure cave, where they threw up a simple fortification of loose stones and brush in a grove of thirty or forty live oaks, each tree about the size of a man's body. They also cleared out a circular pathway in a near-by thicket that could be used for cover.

At dawn the next morning they saw a hundred and sixty-four Caddos, Wacos, and Tehuacanas riding over the crest of the hill. Eighteen-to-one.

When the braves began stripping off their clothes to commence battle, Rezin decided to try for a peace parley. Jim covered him, while he and Buchanan walked into the clearing. They stopped about forty yards away from the line of whooping warriors, while Buchanan announced in Caddo that they came in peace and asked the leader to step out for a powwow.

A Waco horseman replied in English, "How-de-do! How-de-do!" But it wasn't a peace greeting. He was waving a fresh scalp, which seemed to be a signal for more fresh scalps, because a dozen Indian muskets cracked.

Buchanan fell, his right leg broken.

"Don't miss, boys! Don't miss!" yelled Jim, running into the clearing with Cephas Ham and two others.

They didn't miss. Four Caddos fell, and the advance guard retreated, while Jim and Rezin got Buchanan to the shelter of the grove.

The Indians swarmed back, peppering the oaks with bullets, but they failed to hit a target.

"Make every shot count, boys!" said Jim. "If they charge now, we're lost!"

A volley from the grove took five more red men. When one of the chiefs began organizing his band to move forward for the charge, Jim called, "Who is loaded?" Cephas was the only one who had had time to reload.

"Then shoot that *valiente* on the horse, and make a good job of it." The chief went down, and the Indians retreated for their archers.

From then on the Bowie party had to dodge arrows as well as lead. They settled down to firing, reloading, firing, reloading, while every shot from the live oaks seemed to topple a half-naked, screaming savage from his horse.

At midmorning another chief, with painted buffalo horns fastened upon his head, rode along the hill's crest to rally his men for a charge. Jim raised a rifle, took a quick shot, and the chief dropped.

Meanwhile, a dozen or so Tehuacanas had crept down the creek bed just west of the stand of live oaks. The Bowies were showered with bullets that whistled from the creek only forty feet away. Matt Doyle caught one in his breast that went on through his body.

"Where's the Indian that shot Doyle?" shouted Tom McCaslin, standing up to take aim.

"Don't do it!" Jim warned. "Keep down! Those snakes are riflemen, and they'll get you sure." Tom never got to pull the trigger; a bullet killed him where he stood.

One dead, two wounded. Only six left.

Jim decided their best chance was to cross to their clearing in the thicket, where they could move around without being seen. They concentrated their fire on the creekbed until it was clear, then crossed to safety, carrying Matt and Buchanan and their equipment. By the time the Indians figured out what was going on, it was too late to stop them.

The red men made two more charges but were driven back, for the Bowies could see them well, while the braves, unable to sight their target behind the ten-foot screen of brush, had to aim at the places in the thicket where guns were fired.

Then Jim issued an order that saved the expedition: as soon as a man fired, he must move swiftly six or eight feet away before reloading. Time after time, he saw the dust spurt up at a spot where one of them had fired only a few seconds before. Even with this ruse, another one of the party was wounded.

As soon as the Indians realized their disadvantage, they set the prairie afire to drive the white men out of their shelter. A strong wind blew the fire down both sides of the thicket where the Bowies were hiding.

"They're bound to come now," Jim said, peering through the smoke screen with his rifle primed. "And if they do, they'll have us."

"Looks that way," Rezin agreed from behind his double-barreled gun. "I'm sorry we brought the other fellows into it."

Cephas Ham spoke for the rest of them. "Don't be worryin' about us, suh. Whatever comes, it's been a right enjoyable fight, one o' th' best."

All of them agreed to stick it out, no matter how few were left. They would use their knives when the ammunition was gone.

But the wind changed in the middle of the afternoon. The fire turned away toward the creek and gave up. The Indians slunk off with their thirty-five wounded and fifty dead.

Jim's men were tired, and three needed medical care badly. He had nothing for bandages except buffalo skins. So he turned back to Bexar, even though he was so near his treasure.

To him the expedition was a failure. But not to the Texans. Once again Big Jim had proved his mettle. The plazas buzzed with talk of the San Saba fight, and the Veramendis were proud of the *bravo* whose courage brought such glory to their name.

The Comanches who came into Bexar that winter avoided him. They reported that all over the western range Indians marveled over the nine men who shot eighty-five warriors and drove off almost a hundred more. They called Bowie "the fighting devil."

Jim divided the next year among his business complications, Texas politics, and Ursula. Then tragedy struck. In the spring an epidemic of Asiatic cholera swept over the province. The Veramendis fled to their summer home in Monclova, two hundred miles south, where they hoped to be safe. Urgent business took Jim to Louisiana instead, but he planned to join the family in the fall.

When he returned from Arcadia on the way to Monclova, he stopped at San Felipe, where news was waiting for him from Ursula's uncle: the entire family had been stricken by the cholera and were dead within three days. Ursula was gone, she and their two children.

Jim's grief was terrible. By the time he got to Bexar, his friends could scarcely believe that the gaunt, ravaged man was the *caballero* they had known before.

He never recovered from this loss. The great unrest that was a part of him began to grow until it consumed him entirely. He sought escape in drinking, but liquor no longer produced "the merry mood." He hid in the wilderness he loved, but it no longer comforted

him. He organized another expedition to the mines, but rain or Indians or a landslide had covered the markings and closed the cave. Nothing he planned worked out. Lady Luck turned her back to him, stacked the cards against him on every play.

So he plunged into the Texas Revolution. Master of men, slave to fortune, Jim Bowie had stormed over the Southwest and left his footprints in blood from Kentucky to Mexico. The trail ended in Bexar—in more blood.

He still had his smile and he still had men to follow him. He also had orders from General Houston to blow up the Alamo garrison and leave the town to Santa Anna.

Leave his town to Santa Anna? Leave his home where the ghost of Ursula still haunted his memory? Never! He would rather "die in these ditches than give it up to the enemy."

Yet when the time came for the last defense of those ditches, he was helpless. A wooden cast boxed up a broken hip, and the strength of his powerful body lay wasted by exhaustion and typhoid-pneumonia.

When Travis marked the line upon the earth floor of the Alamo on that midnight and asked for men to stand beside him, Jim Bowie couldn't go.

"Boys, I can't make it by myself," was his admission of defeat, "but I'd sure appreciate it if some of you would give me a hand."

They did. They carried his cot across the line and stayed with him.

When it came time for the last deal in the game, however, he, like any good frontiersman, played his hand for all it was worth. He fought out his last hour, half-unconscious from pain and disease, with a handful of guns and Old Bowie, until his body was riddled by bayonets.

Among his possessions later found in the garrison were a Masonic apron, a suit of dress clothes and a hunting outfit, several pocketbooks, a set of saws, firearms, a woman's apron, some schoolbooks and personal papers. These things draw a striking picture of James Bowie. Hunter, lumberman, prospector, speculator, slaver, husband, patriot, and gentleman—he was all of these.

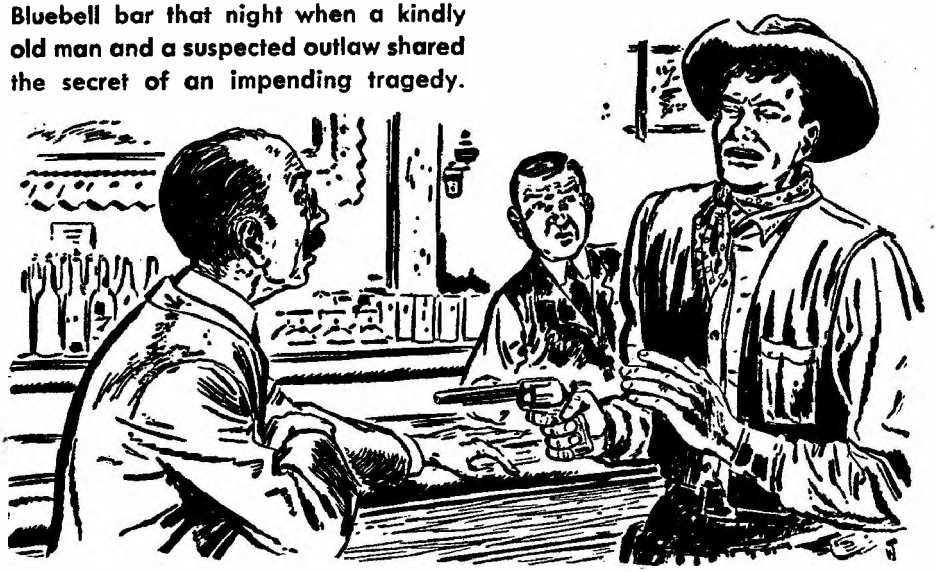
In his hunger to become a gentleman, Jim Bowie had gambled his time, his gold, and his life. He lived his years as he played his favorite game of twenty-card stud: the cards were dealt to him face down, but he played each hand as though it held a royal flush.

## WILDERNESS WARNING

"No, I DON'T NEVER GIT LONESOME up here in the mountains," said Mr. Boosty Peckleberry, the sad-whiskered Sage of Swayback Mountain, "but livin' solo in the desert—that's different. I tried it once, and it purt near got me. I didn't think much about it when I caught myself talkin' to myself, and it didn't worry me any to speak of when I started talkin' to the lizards. In fact, I never even caught on when the lizards begun talkin' back to me, but when one day I suddenly realized that *I could understand what they were sayin'!* I knowed it was a warnin' for me to git back here to the mountains before I *sure 'nough* started goin' crazy!"

—THE SQUIRE OF SAPELLO

A momentous decision shaped up in the Bluebell bar that night when a kindly old man and a suspected outlaw shared the secret of an impending tragedy.



# Mr. Hemlock

## By MARVIN DeVRIES

MR. HEMLOCK TOOK A LOOK at himself in the backbar mirror to see if he showed any signs of stress and strain. After a long thorough look, he decided he didn't, and turned to face the room again. His hand went into his pocket, touching the pepperpot derringer, and jumped out again. His eyes roved around the smoky place, hunting for something to set his thinking straight; his fingers stroked the smooth surface of the bar, like a horse pawing dirt at the hitchrack.

The players around the poker table didn't seem to notice anything unusual. Even Bles Hand, who had horned in late and wanted to leave early, was acting entirely true to form with his bluster and brag.

Eagan, of course, who knew Mr. Hemlock's dilemma, was watching him closely, pretending not to, and, naturally, wondering how far he would decide to go, and, once decided, how far he could get with it.

That, too, was the question Mr. Hemlock was trying to answer for himself. Bald and uncompromising, it faced him, and out of his quiet and sedate nature he had to find the answer.

Did any man have the right to take another's life? Mr. Hemlock could say "Yes" to that, if, for instance, a man was defending himself or his family or friends from imminent danger. But suppose the danger wasn't quite so imminent. Suppose a man was planning some savage outrage as soon as he got a chance to carry it out—tonight, perhaps, as soon as the Bluebell closed, or later, if chance didn't favor him now. What ought a man to do in a case like that?

"Somebody ought to shoot his head

off," Abe Cochran, who always waited on trade in the evening, had remarked less than a week ago. It was a comment idly made, and idly listened to, and Mr. Hemlock couldn't find much comfort in it. Stripped bare of its random nature, would Abe say it again? Did Mr. Hemlock dare to say it, and, in the end, carry it out?

Struggling for the answer, he looked back for respite or conviction to the time and place where the first vague swirls of his plight had started to take shape. . . .

THE BLUEBELL WAS CLOSED for the night. Mr. Hemlock and Abe Cochran stood under the wooden awning outside and gossiped awhile before going home.

"Somebody ought to shoot his head off," Abe remarked grumpily, referring to Bles Hand. "He galls me to death."

"Someone will sometime," Mr. Hemlock assured him. "I've been hoping he would grow out of it, but I'm beginning to get my doubts. How old is he, anyway? I lose track."

"He's nineteen, a year older than Nancy. Old enough to know better!"

"I've spoken to him several times about it, Abe."

"I know it."

Mr. Hemlock chuckled a little. "I can't say I want to get into a rumpus with him, either, Abe. He might pull his gun on me. He's rattle-brained enough, but I'll try to find a way to handle him."

Mr. Hemlock sighed, this time about the weather. It seemed to him that Nebraska always drowned in spring. He was far into middle age, and the wet weather put rheumatic twinges in his bones. He had them now as he listened to the gurgle and drip. He fancied he could hear the yellow river at the end of Grant Street nibbling at the edges of Black Arrow, like a hungry animal gnawing its way up the street.

"It's a bad night, Abe," he remarked.

"I hope it changes before tomorrow," Abe said. "We're expecting you at the wedding, Mr. Hemlock."

"I'll be there. Eddie's been reminding me all day."

"I hope they make a go of it." Abe sounded extremely dubious.

Mr. Hemlock put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about that, Abe. Eddie knows what he's doing, and so does Nancy."

"I know, but I don't like the notion of them going out to take up land, living in a soddy like a prairie dog in a hole, no near-by folks to call on. S'pose they got into trouble of some kind—who's there to help?" He shook his head anxiously.

"They'll get along. Eddie's a town boy, but he's got enough gumption to take on all the work he can find. He's been working mornings for me two years now, and the day hasn't come when I had to tell him what to do. Besides that, he's rented a piece of land out of town and put some cattle on it. He's out there every afternoon, and he's made some cash out of that, too. Don't worry about them, Abe."

Abe Cochran smiled reluctantly. "I reckon you're right. You usually are."

Mr. Hemlock walked forward toward the step. "Thanks for helping, Abe."

"Don't mention it," Abe said. "Good night, Mr. Hemlock."

"Good night, Abe."

Mr. Hemlock went up Grant Street in the direction of the river, facing the drizzle and wading through mud where the board walk had been torn up.

He was pleased about the coming wedding. Eddie Samson washed glass-

ware and tidied up at the Bluebell every morning. Afternoons, he rode a five-dollar horse and took care of his stock on Summoner Creek. He had built a soddy on a homestead almost a day's ride farther up the creek, and that was where he meant to take his bride after the wedding. Mr. Hemlock was pleased, but, like Abe Cochran, he had a nubbin of worry to chew on.

Bles Hand had tried time and again to spark Nancy Cochran, but had never gotten anywhere with it. He blamed Eddie for it, and had frequently threatened him with a beating, or worse, if he didn't keep away from Nancy. Eddie sometimes came to the Bluebell with his anger still boiling, and Mr. Hemlock usually got the whole story before the morning was done.

It didn't seem likely that Bles Hand would try to make a fuss at this late date, but the idea rattled around in Mr. Hemlock's head, nonetheless.

He turned off Grant Street onto Gilbreth Avenue, leaving the last listless light behind, and was about to turn in at Mrs. Timbro's boarding-house where he lived when he saw someone coming toward him from the opposite direction. He thought it was Eddie Samson. The Samsons lived next door to Mrs. Timbro's, with a vacant lot between.

"Is that you, Eddie?" he called.

Eddie stopped at his gate, and said it was. "Bad weather, isn't it, Mr. Hemlock?"

Mr. Hemlock agreed. "I hope it'll be better for the wedding tomorrow, Eddie."

"I think it's going to clear."

"Anyway, I'll see you then, Eddie. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Hemlock."

Mr. Hemlock heard the Samson gate squeak open and saw Eddie move forward. He started to turn in himself, but a sudden sound, sharp and brittle, like bone snapping, stopped him. Eddie let out a smothered groan, and Mr. Hemlock heard him fall.

"What's wrong, Eddie?" he called, and ran that way.

Eddie was threshing around in the hedge along the walk. At first, Mr. Hemlock thought his foot was caught in a broken board, but it was worse than that. He was caught in a bear trap.

The vicious jaws were clamped around his leg above the ankle and bit into flesh and bone with a grip that Mr. Hemlock couldn't break. Eddie pounded dirt with his fists, his face twisted with pain, his trapped leg sticking out over the board walk as if he were trying to trip someone.

Mr. Hemlock called for help. A second-story light came on at Mrs. Timbro's, and the window went up. It was Eagan, the newcomer to town, and Mr. Hemlock asked him to come down.

Eagan came with a lantern, and between them they got the trap off Eddie's leg. "How in heaven's name did he get into a bear trap?" Eagan asked.

"It was set there right on the walk," Eddie put in. "I stepped right into it." He wiped his face with his sleeve and shook his head, as if he were trying to get his wits back.

Mr. Hemlock noticed that Eagan was wearing his gun, and thought how typical it was. Eagan was a stranger to Black Arrow, but Mr. Hemlock had put him down as an outlaw the first time he came into the Bluebell. It was written on his face and in his wary ways with branding-iron clarity.

"Are you feeling all right?" Mr. Hemlock asked Eddie, holding onto his arm.

Eddie said he was, but the full shock of it suddenly hit him, and he started

to wilt. Mr. Hemlock caught him before he fell.

"Take hold of his legs," he told Eagan. "We'll get him to Dr. Sunday. It's on the other side of Mrs. Timbro's."

Dr. Sunday came to the door in his nightshirt. He made a careful examination, and claimed the bone wasn't broken, but a piece might have been splintered off.

"It'll be very painful for awhile. He'd better stay here tonight. I'll send the squaw over to tell Mrs. Samson."

"That's the boy who's going to get married, isn't he?" Eagan asked on the way back to Mrs. Timbro's.

"That's right," Mr. Hemlock answered. "He's getting married to Nancy Cochran."

"Not tomorrow, I'll bet," Eagan said, and shook his head incredulously. "A bear trap, for God's sake!"

EAGAN WAS RIGHT. Morning brought clearing weather, but the wedding had to be postponed. Eddie stayed in bed at Dr. Sunday's. Mr. Hemlock stopped in on his way to the Bluebell and got a look at the leg. It was puffed and swollen and badly discolored, but Eddie was still talking wedding.

"I can't let a little thing like this turn everything upside down. If somebody'd give me my pants—"

"You couldn't get that leg into it," Mr. Hemlock told him. "Who do you think would do a thing like that?"

"Mr. Hemlock," Eddie said, "I don't need to think. I know."

"Yes, of course," Mr. Hemlock agreed, working his lips. "Well, you listen to Dr. Sunday. You can't get married without your trousers, and he'll give them back to you as soon as he thinks it's advisable. I'll stop in again."

He stopped in at the sheriff's office and saw the big bear trap lying on Port Younger's desk. It was a brand-new one, and Port had traced it back to the hardware store, which was one of several places that had been pilfered during the past few months.

"Hooligans," Port said. "Hooligans trying to joke up a wedding. Wait till I get my hands on them."

Mr. Hemlock pursed his lips, thinking it would be a long wait. He had nothing against Port, but he didn't consider him a qualified sheriff. Small things kept him too busy, and he always seemed a little too eager to please.

"It's hardly a joke," he remarked.

Port got a little more outraged. "I'll say it ain't. A thing like that could bust a man's leg like a toothpick. Wait till I get my hands on the guilty party. It won't go easy with him."

"Do you think you could name him, Port?"

Port Younger shook his head. "It stands to reason, though, it's the same mangy hound who's been bustin' into all these places on Grant Street."

"That sounds reasonable, since the trap belongs to Curtis. Could you guess who it is, Port?" He sounded a little pushing, as if he wanted Port to know there might be others who could make a very close guess.

Port frowned. "Guessing ain't my business, Mr. Hemlock, but—" his frown deepened, and the rest came grudgingly—"I asked my boy, Tate, if he saw anything of you-know-who last night. He said he didn't." Still more grudgingly, he added, "They pal around together once in a while, you know."

"Yes, I've noticed. Well, I'll keep in touch with you, Port."

"You do that."

Eagan was waiting at the Bluebell, and Mr. Hemlock unlocked the door.

As soon as he got inside, he noticed the broken side window, but he served Eagan his drink before investigating.

"Perhaps a hard wind," Eagan remarked.

Mr. Hemlock smiled dismally. He went to look at the cash drawer and found it empty, although he had left between twenty and thirty dollars there when he closed up. Some glassware was smashed, accidentally, perhaps, and a small hoard of choice rye he kept for special customers and occasions was missing.

"Shall I fetch the sheriff?" Eagan asked.

Mr. Hemlock shook his head. "Never mind. Give him a little time with his bear trap."

"You shouldn't leave cash here," Eagan said.

"I know, but if I was in the habit of taking it home, they might have robbed me. I would rather have a broken window than a broken head."

"That's one way of looking at it." Eagan took a sip of his whisky. "Do we score this one against Bles Hand, too?"

Mr. Hemlock looked surprised. "I didn't know you knew him. You've been here only a day."

Eagan shrugged one shoulder. "I've seen him. I know the breed. Every town's got one. Missing much?"

Mr. Hemlock said it was inconsequential, but he was vexed all the same, and knew Eagan could see it.

"It's just the idea," he said, and flushed at the trite remark. Everyone, robbed of a trifle, said the same thing. Surely, the loss in cash and merchandise, a few bottles of Peppero's Special, could hardly cramp the operations of the Bluebell, but he wasn't sure it was "just the idea." Perhaps twenty or thirty dollars, or whatever it was, did mean more to him than it ought to. At any rate, it was high time someone named the petty thief.

If Eagan had any curiosity left, he smothered it, finished his morning drink, and went out. Mr. Hemlock threw a stray glance at the glass wreckage, tossed Eagan's coin into the empty cash drawer, and tried to make a start with the day.

He felt lost without Eddie's help, but he went at some accounts that needed checking with the supplier in Kendall, if he ever got there. He had put this day aside for the wedding, but now it would be a day or two, or a week, before Eddie would be in shape to go through with it.

"If the weather holds," he told himself, "I'll go to Kendall tomorrow and get this bookkeeping straightened out."

It began to get hot. Soggy gusts, loaded with heat and damp, poured in through the broken window. The accounts annoyed him. He had no head for figures and didn't want one. He considered them merely another chain a man forged for himself as he went through life. A man needed more symbols than the dollar sign to figure his profit and loss.

But the empty cash box and the gone rye still rankled, and anger threshed around in his head. He was positive Bles Hand was to blame, but, like Port Younger, he could only say "you-know-who," because Bles Hand had left no proof behind.

He got up and walked around the spacious place, trying to shake off his gloom. Some pictures on the wall held his attention awhile. They were pencil sketches done by a stray artist a long time ago. Mr. Hemlock liked them and he'd had frames made for all of them. They were all Western scenes: an In-

dian with a scalp in his hand, a puncher losing his hold on a wild horse, an emigrant wagon with a broken wheel, all scenes of calamity and distress.

Even the one he liked best, the picture of a man standing at the door of his soddy, his hands empty, his eyes turned to the far touch of land and sky in a prayer he seemed to doubt would reach that far, had the sting of disaster in it, as if a man were born to defeat, no matter how hard he tried. He saw Eddie Samson in the picture and suddenly shared Abe Cochran's doubts.

"Try anyway, Eddie," he mused. "That's most of it. Try to reach what you see."

Mr. Hemlock looked around his neat saloon and wondered bleakly if he had tried enough. Sometimes it seemed a strange paradox to find himself the proprietor of a saloon when he completely disapproved of drunkards. Sometimes he thought he was being deliberately perverse, in order to show that a man's occupation need have no relation to his stature. He had won the deep respect of the whole town, and he valued it. He had shown that any man could do the same, and that at least was no trifle.

He was glad to see Tate Younger, Port's boy, come in, so he could quit thinking. He thought Tate might want Eddie's job, and Mr. Hemlock would have been glad to have him, but that wasn't it.

"It's about the robbery last night, Mr. Hemlock," Tate began in a shaky voice. "That's what I want to talk to you about."

"Oh? Sit down, Tate. I didn't know you knew anything about that. I didn't know it myself until just a little while ago."

"I know all about it, all right," Tate said solemnly. He was dark and smoky-eyed, something like Eddie, and, right now, filled to the brim with trouble. He sat down on the edge of his chair and put his hands between his knees to keep them from shaking. "I came here to tell you I did it, Mr. Hemlock."

Mr. Hemlock gave him a stunned look. "You did?"

"Yes, sir."

"I—I don't believe it, Tate."

Tate Younger insisted.

"All by yourself?" Mr. Hemlock went on, still dubious.

Tate squirmed at the question, but finally said he had. He pointed at the window. "I broke in there."

"What about the whisky? I don't believe you like whisky, do you?"

"It—it was just something to take."

"What do you want me to do? Turn you in to your father?"

"I don't know. That's up to you, but I want to pay it all back, regardless, for the whisky and all, if you'll set a price on it."

"How much cash did you get?"

"Twenty-eight dollars."

Mr. Hemlock pursed his lips. "I imagine fifty dollars would cover the whole thing"—his voice had a sudden stab in it—"if you intend to pay back Bles Hand's share, too."

Tate Younger flushed. "I didn't say anything about him."

"No. I was just guessing."

"I've got fourteen dollars." Tate got it out of his pocket and placed it on the desk. "I'll need time for the rest."

"Fourteen dollars. Just half, eh?"

Tate flushed again. "Yes, sir."

Mr. Hemlock shook his head. "I can't understand it, Tate. You don't do things like that."

"I've been all up and down Grant Street doing the same thing," Tate blurted.

"Why?"

"I had to. That's all I can tell you."

"That's either too much or too little, Tate."

What Tate had to say came hard, but it came. He didn't mention Bles Hand's name, but he said he had been pulled into it by a friend.

"He's got me on a hook. I can't tell you any more." But he did, in an explosion he probably regretted later: "My father's got a good name around here, and I want to keep it that way. Don't prod me."

Mr. Hemlock nodded gravely. "You came of your own accord, and I won't take advantage of that, but I don't know what I ought to do. Just paying it back can't settle this. There are other things involved."

"I know, but—"

"I'll think about it, Tate, and see if I can find a way to handle it. I'm going to Kendall tomorrow with Jesse, but you come in again the next day. We'll see."

Tate Younger wiped the sweat off his dark face, let out a relieved breath, and left. Less than twenty minutes later, blustering Bles Hand himself came in, pushing open the swing doors with his elbows, his thumbs hooked in his pants' belt, but, unlike Tate Younger, he had nothing to confess.

"A shot of rye," he ordered, slapping a hand on the bar, his voice a little rougher than nature intended. "Peppero's Special."

Mr. Hemlock detested a showoff, and Bles Hand always touched off both barrels, but Mr. Hemlock served him with as much civility as he could muster, suspecting the "Peppero's Special" business was a deliberate taunt, because he had never ordered it before.

"No Peppero's Special," he answered quietly, "but I'm sure this will suit your taste just as well."

Bles Hand eyed him suspiciously, as if he suspected a dig, but he drank it down and slapped the empty glass back on the bar for another. He wore a gun strapped down to his leg in approved outlaw fashion and looked ready to use it on anyone who annoyed him. He stretched himself lazily and gave himself a satisfied look in the backbar mirror, rubbing his jaw for possible whiskers, then tipped his hat back and wiped his forehead, as if he had just come off a hard grind on the old owlhoot trail.

"I hear you was robbed last night," he remarked, his tongue rolling along his cheek.

"Yes, I was," Mr. Hemlock admitted stiffly.

"Now ain't that a dirty mean trick," Bles Hand went on with sly mockery. "Robbin' a man with one foot in his grave. You got any idea who done it?"

"Yes, I have," Mr. Hemlock answered.

"Is that right? Who would you say?"

"I would say you."

Bles Hand was taken completely by surprise. For a moment, it looked like he might wilt under the direct accusation. His eyes slid down and his hand shook, but he finally threw it off and started to bluster again.

"You got a lot of gall, mister," he blazed. "That's loose talk, the kinda talk that gets you a slug in the ribs. I ain't goin' to have my reputation blasted by no two-bit barkeep. Git that through your thick head."

The last shreds of Mr. Hemlock's intention to be reasonable deserted him. Exasperation and outrage flailed at him, and he grabbed Bles Hand by the shirt front and pulled him halfway

across the bar.

"Don't talk to me like that, young man," he flared. "I've stood about as much from you as I intend to, and so have a lot of others. Now get out, before I lose my temper." He gave a hard shove and sent Bles Hand sprawling across the floor. "You and your bear traps."

Spouting profanity, Bles Hand jumped to his feet. "So that's it! Now it's bear traps! Everything that happens around this damn' town I git blamed for."

"Let me tell you this much, Bles," Mr. Hemlock stated solemnly, "if you ever make another move against Eddie and Nancy Cochran, I—I'll kill you."

Bles Hand guffawed. "You and who else?" He reached out and gave Mr. Hemlock a hard shove that sent him reeling against the backbar. "That ought to learn you to keep your hands off'n me. Next time I'll drill you, that's what I'll do." With that, he stormed out.

Mr. Hemlock pulled himself erect. The swing doors screeched at Bles Hand's heels, and except for the screech a sudden silence engulfed him. Groping around for something to get his equilibrium back, he found an oil can in the storeroom and oiled the door hinges.

THE NEXT DAY, Mr. Hemlock took the stage for Kendall. He was the only passenger and tried to keep himself occupied with his business in Kendall, but more often than not his mind wandered back to events in Black Arrow.

His threat to kill Bles Hand made him cringe inwardly. It was about the silliest thing he had ever heard himself say, and Bles Hand's big guffaw was certainly the right answer. In spite of this latest rumpus, he tried not to feel prejudiced. Part of it was his own fault, because he had let his temper go. Lord God, how he had let his temper go.

Scantling youngsters, groping their way to manhood, had a right to some indulgence. In the end, most of them floundered on to something worthwhile, but, try as he might, he couldn't see how Bles Hand could ever make it. He scorned every friendly gesture and mocked the man who made it. He bluffed and intimidated his way through opposition and jeered what other men respected. He was trying to win standing as an outlaw, unaware that men like Eagan usually regretted what they were, and could point to some outrage of fortune that had put them on their sorry path.

Tate Younger was a different matter. Somehow, concern for his father had gotten him into difficulties. Trouble, real or fancied, engulfed him, and Mr. Hemlock meant to help him if he could possibly find a way.

At Empire, the junction with the main line from the south, a whisky drummer by the name of Krell got aboard. He looked green, and Mr. Hemlock asked if he was new to the territory. He said he was.

Jesse Crumb, the driver, tooled his four-up team through the rough country that lay beyond Empire, and, at last, up the appalling switchbacks of Snake Ridge. Mr. Hemlock paid scant attention, but the drummer was frozen with fright.

"He'll kill us both," he breathed. "I'm going to report him."

"I've come this way twenty years," Mr. Hemlock tried to reassure him. "It hasn't happened yet."

"If it had, you wouldn't be here talking."

"That's true. But we'll soon be at the top, then a quick run down, and it's over. The faster it goes, the quicker it's over with, you know. By the way, do you stock Peppero's Special?"

"Never heard of it," the drummer muttered. "Is that a whisky?"

Mr. Hemlock bristled a little. "As a saloon keeper with twenty years' experience behind me, I dare say it's the finest whisky made."

The drummer gave him a surprised look. "Are you a saloonkeeper?"

"Yes."

"I wouldn't've thought it."

"That's why I told you."

They had reached the top of the ridge and were starting down when Jesse Crumb let out a sudden complaining howl and came to a stop. Mr. Hemlock looked out. On one side, rocks and boulders rose like thunderheads to the sky. On the other, a talus slope slanted down to the bottom. Ahead, a small clutter of rocks blocked the road.

Jesse Crumb must have supposed it was a natural slide. He started to get down, and when he had both hands occupied, a masked man stepped out from behind a rock and covered him with a gun. Jesse let out a yelp, but he was helpless.

The masked man took Jesse's gun and told him to climb back up. He mumbled his words, an obvious attempt to disguise his voice. His hat was pulled down low, his neckpiece lifted up over his nose.

"Cover me," he called over his shoulder, and Mr. Hemlock discovered another masked man leaning over a rock higher up, his gun pointing down at the stage.

The drummer had a sudden dangerous notion he could do something about all this and pulled out an old-fashioned pepperpot derringer, but Mr. Hemlock knocked it out of his hand and told him to behave himself.

With Jesse back on the driver's seat, the masked man ordered Mr. Hemlock and the drummer to step down. He picked up the pepperpot off the floor and threw it over the drop-off. The drummer's fat wallet, probably filled with collections from his customers, a stickpin, a ring, and a watch went into his pocket.

Small muddled sounds of distress sizzled out of the drummer's throat. His face was chalk-white, his hands shook violently. After the frisk, he had to sit down on the step to get his breath.

"Git inside," the outlaw told him, "an' stay put." He turned to Mr. Hemlock. "You step around behind here, buster."

He backed off a step to give Mr. Hemlock room. Oddly enough, unless he knew, he took it for granted that Mr. Hemlock wasn't armed.

Sudden forebodings swarmed through Mr. Hemlock's head, but he stepped around the rear wheel and put his back against the boot. He couldn't have said, from anything he saw or heard, that the man behind the mask was Bles Hand. He wore a different hat than he did in town, different boots, neckpiece, shirt. Even his hands, a dead giveaway because they were badly freckled, were covered with gloves.

*But I know*, Mr. Hemlock told himself, *just like I know who set the bear trap.*

Without warning, the outlaw raised his gun and struck Mr. Hemlock across the face with it. It was a hard, stunning blow that brought tears of pain to his eyes, and, according to the tirade of abuse that poured off the outlaw's lips,

it was only a starter.

Apparently, he wanted to make Mr. Hemlock cringe, he wanted him to get to his knees and beg for mercy. Mr. Hemlock thought he wanted to kill him, but couldn't quite set up his nerve to do it.

"Quit it," the stake-out higher up broke in finally. "We got to clear out." His voice sounded close to panic. "Don't mess with him. I told you I wouldn't—"

"You mind yore own business," the one in front of Mr. Hemlock snarled back. "Who's runnin' this? You don't tell me nothin'." With his open hand, he reached out and slammed Mr. Hemlock's head against the boot of the coach.

The other masked man repeated his demand, his voice almost riding out of control. He stood up to his full height for the first time, but his body was still hidden to the waist by the big rock in front of him. Without any attempt at disguising what he intended to do if he wasn't obeyed, he leveled his gun at his partner and told him to come up.

Muttering angrily, the man in the road backed away from Mr. Hemlock. Grudgingly, he started to climb, as if he intended to let his balky partner have his way. The one higher up stowed his gun and waited.

"I wouldn't've butted in, Tony, but—"

Without warning, without the faintest semblance of his intentions, the climber raised his gun and fired. He fired twice, and both bullets hit the unsuspecting victim in the chest. He swayed unsteadily a moment and his head started to wilt, pulling him forward until he sprawled across the rock, head and arms dangling, and lay still.

Shocked speechless, Mr. Hemlock took a step forward, and a shot came his way. It hit the wheel and screamed away. Another followed it, but Mr. Hemlock threw himself over the edge and slid down until a chance foothold stopped him.

He stayed down there until Jesse Crumb looked over the edge and motioned him to come up. The drummer stayed in the coach, too weak to move.

Mr. Hemlock reached the road and went on, up the other side. The dead man's hat had rolled off, and Mr. Hemlock didn't need more than one look to say who it was.

"It's Tate Younger, Jesse," he called down. "Come up here and give me a hand."

TWO DAYS LATER, the postponed wedding took place. Eddie Samson still had a bad limp, but he could get around, and he wouldn't wait any longer. It was an early-morning ceremony, because the trip out to the soddy on Summoner Creek would take a whole day, and Eddie didn't want to get caught on the open prairie on his wedding night.

Mr. Hemlock didn't open the Bluebell, but hung a *Gone to the Wedding* sign on the door, and went on to the Cochrans. He heard Eddie and Nancy say their vows, threw a handful of rice, and saw them get into the buckboard and ride away, Eddie shining-proud, and Nancy filled with quiet joy. The buckboard was loaded with presents and supplies. Two lead horses were tied to the end-gate.

Abe Cochran shook his head and said, "My, my!"

Mr. Hemlock didn't like to see them go any more than Abe did, but he waved a hand and watched them blur into the distance, feeling as gloomy as if they were his closest kin.

Port Younger didn't come to the wed-

ding, but when Mr. Hemlock was walking back to the Bluebell, he tapped on the office window and called him inside. He looked old and tired. Tate's death, occurring under such scandalous circumstances, was a hard blow, but he tried to act as if it were only another case to solve, hiding his grief as best he could.

"It probably doesn't change things any, Port," Mr. Hemlock told him again, "but I'm sure he was up there to try to save me from getting shot. He knew I was going to Kendall. I told him myself, and You-Know-Who probably made threats against me after that rumpus we had in the Bluebell. Tate thought he could do something for me."

Port shook his head. "I'll tell you why he went along. It was because Bles Hand threatened to ruin me if he didn't. That's how it's been right along. Years ago, before I came to Black Arrow, I had some trouble. Bles Hand knows about it. I was trying to keep it hidden for Tate's sake, and Tate was trying to do the same for me. It cost both of us more than it was worth."

The sheriff pulled himself together. "I wish I'd been up there on Snake Ridge. I would've shot Bles down and made an end of it altogether."

"Like Abe says, somebody ought to sometime, but a man doesn't just pick up a gun and go at it. I s'pose you've talked to Bles again."

"Yeah, but I can't get anywhere with him. He's got more gall than I thought. If I threw him in jail, old Timley will have him out in ten minutes on a habeas corpus. I can't arrest him unless you say point-blank it was him."

"I can't, Port. I can't point to anything that would pin it down. As I've told you, Tate called him Tony. That doesn't mean anything, of course. It was probably something they rigged up between them, but—"

"I've got to have something to go on. Jesse Crumb won't say any more than you, and the drummer doesn't know them, anyway."

"I could identify his clothes, if you could find them."

"I've looked for a cache. I'm goin' out again today. I got a hunch I might find 'em somewhere up there on Snake Ridge. Was Bles at the wedding?"

"No."

"It worried me a little. I thought maybe he would try to raise a rumpus of some kind."

"Well, they're married. He can't do anything more about that."

"No," Port agreed.

Mr. Hemlock went on to the Bluebell. Groman's handyman came and replaced the broken window.

"Groman been hoping one would grow back in if he waited long enough?" Mr. Hemlock asked him.

The glazier snickered. "It slipped his mind till this mornin'."

Mr. Hemlock wondered again whom he could get to replace Eddie Samson. Eagan didn't come in. Mr. Hemlock wondered if Port Younger had the slightest inkling there was a real outlaw in town, and if, perhaps, somewhere, he didn't have a dusty dodger that would point him out.

He saw Port Younger ride out of town on his way to Snake Ridge. He was getting a late start, and it would surely be long past dark before he returned. More than likely, he would night-over in Empire.

Business was slow all day. Just before dark, while he was lighting the wall lamps, he heard a rider pull up at the hitchrack outside, and looked out. It was Eddie Samson, aboard one of

the lead horses he had tied to the buckboard when he and Nancy rode away.

Mr. Hemlock hurried outside. "Good grief, Eddie, what're you doing here?"

Eddie looked thoroughly exasperated. "Port Younger sent for me to come right back. He said it was important. I figured it must be something about the bear trap, or Tate, or something like that, so here I am. Now he isn't in."

"He's gone out to Snake Ridge, Eddie. He left this morning. Where's Nancy?"

"She went on with our stuff. I expect she's there by now. This is a fine note." The ride hadn't done him any good. He looked worn out. He was limping badly and had to sit down on the step.

"Who told you Port wanted you?"

"I got a note. It was fastened to a stick in the middle of Summoner road, Injun-fashion." He got it out of his pocket and showed it to Mr. Hemlock, who had seen enough of Port's writing to know the sheriff hadn't written it.

"I don't think this came from Port, Eddie. It's probably somebody's sorry idea of a joke, like the bear trap." His stomach suddenly knotted up, and his breath caught in his throat. He darted a quick look at Eddie and went on lamely, "Everybody in town gets funny ideas when a man gets married."

"Maybe I better start back. I told Nancy I'd be there by morning. I could make it sooner if—"

"No, Eddie," Mr. Hemlock said, "you're played out. You'd better get right home."

"I was all right sitting in the buckboard, but I hurried back. This horse near killed me."

"You go home and get some rest. I'll see Port when he comes in. Nancy'll be all right."

Eddie limped up Grant Street leading his horse. Mr. Hemlock went inside. Like the bear trap, he thought; exactly like the bear trap. Nancy wouldn't be all right, because Bles Hand had written the note, and when she got to the soddy on Summoner Creek he would be there waiting for her.

He calculated time and distance and knew it was already too late to do anything about it. He found his pepperpot derringer, the only weapon he owned, and put it in his pocket. It was a sorry enough weapon, identical with the one the drummer on the stagecoach had carried, and Mr. Hemlock felt he couldn't do much more with it than the drummer had, but he meant to try.

Several regular patrons came in. A poker game started. Abe Cochran arrived and took his place behind the bar.

"I have a little business to 'tend to," Mr. Hemlock told him. "It may take some time, but you close up as usual if I don't get back before then."

Abe nodded, and Mr. Hemlock went out. He started for the livery, wondering whether to hire a saddler or a rig, knowing the futility of what he was doing, that it was all foredoomed to failure because it was already too late. At the corner, he came to a full stop and stared. The lamplighter was lighting the street lamps, and two riders came into the yellow glow.

He recognized Eagan first. The other was Bles Hand. Eagan waved, and Mr. Hemlock turned around and went back. When he reached the Bluebell, Bles Hand had already gone inside. Eagan was waiting on the gallery, leaning against an upright.

"I took a ride up Summoner Creek today and ran into him," Eagan told him. "We sort of decided to ride back together."

Mr. Hemlock knew what that meant. Eagan had gone on no idle ride, and Bles Hand hadn't done much deciding with whom, or where, he would ride. Eagan had done it all for him, and made it stick.

Mr. Hemlock felt a little short of breath. "I didn't know what to do. Eddie came back, and I—I got into a sort of stew. Is—is everything all right?"

"Sure, Mr. Hemlock, everything's okay. The only thing is, I can't very well ride herd on him all night, and I can't take him to bed with me. What time do you usually close?"

"At midnight."

"It isn't as far as I thought to Eddie's place. A few hours on a good horse takes care of it. That's a good horse Bles Hand's got there." He pointed at the hitchrack.

In plain words, Bles Hand could turn around and go right back, and Eagan was saying that was what he meant to do as soon as he got out of Eagan's reach.

"Somebody ought to shoot his head off," Mr. Hemlock muttered, recalling that he was echoing Abe Cochran's idle remark of less than a week ago.

"Yes, Mr. Hemlock," Eagan assured him; coming from him, it didn't sound idle.

They went inside. Bles Hand was at the poker table. Slant-eyed, he watched them come, and tossed a poker chip into the pot. Eagan sauntered to the far end of the bar. Mr. Hemlock stopped before he got that far. He glanced at the clock and was surprised to see how late it was.

"This is a crummy game," Bles Hand complained, yawning. "I think I'll hit the hay." His eyes clashed with Eagan's, and he took another hand. He glanced at the clock and chuckled briefly, as if he knew this would come to an end of its own accord in a way that suited him.

Mr. Hemlock watched him closely. *He's going back*, he thought. *I can see it in his snaky eyes. Even if he don't go tonight, he'll go some other time when it suits him. He's scared of Eagan only while Eagan's watching.*

Bles Hand lost a poker chip, and it rolled across the floor, making a whirring sound. Mr. Hemlock picked it up and brought it back.

"Thanks," Bles Hand said mockingly. "Good service. Didn't know it was in yuh, Hemlock."

Mr. Hemlock went back to the bar. He glanced at the clock, and watched it snip off his time with busy unconcern.

*I've got to know if there's another way*, he thought, and explored, once again, all the hazy labyrinths of his mind.

He could throw this at Abe Cochran, because Abe was Nancy's father, but it wouldn't reach to the core. It would only pose the same question for Abe. He could send for Eddie and get him on his way right now, or raise a hue-and-cry that would get him nothing except Bles Hand's galling mockery of innocence.

All these explorations came to a dead end, because Bles Hand could bide his time, and Mr. Hemlock couldn't. Bles Hand was a constant threat who would despoil and ravage again unless he was brought to a halt here and now, . . .

AT LAST, MR. HEMLOCK got his question answered, and stepped to the poker table again. He put his hand roughly on Bles Hand's shoulder.

"I want you to settle up for what you stole out of my cash drawer the other

night. You ought to have enough to take care of it after holding up the stage the other day."

It was blunt and raw, and loud enough for all to hear, and it had the effect he wanted.

Bles Hand froze a moment, his eyes whipping wildly as if he were trapped. Then he put his hands against the edge of the table and pushed it away from him.

"You little shrimp!" he exploded, adding a lot of scorching profanity. "Who d'you think you are? I ought to pop your head off!"

"Like you did Tate Younger, I suppose."

It was another brazen stab, and brought Bles Hand to his feet, with another burst of profanity.

Another chair scraped back from the table, and someone cat-footed to a safer place.

"Mr. Hemlock," Abe breathed from behind the bar. "Please, Mr. Hemlock."

Bles Hand gave Mr. Hemlock a shove and sent him floundering. He wound up against the wall, bounced a little, and straightened up.

"I don't need to take no damn' loose talk like that," Bles Hand mumbled and then, as if he had cleared himself to his own satisfaction, he turned his back and started for the door.

Mr. Hemlock reached into his pocket. His hand closed around the pepperpot derringer, but it was stuck there. It wouldn't come out, because Mr. Hemlock couldn't go through with it. He had used all his courage baiting Bles Hand to draw his weapon and fire a shot that would send all the rest of the Bluebell patrons swarming down on him.

A shot like that would have landed Bles Hand squarely in the pen, or on the gallows, according to its results. That was the answer Mr. Hemlock had found at the end of all his searchings, but it had failed him. Bles Hand was too cunning, or too cowardly, to try it.

He moved on to the door, faster and faster the nearer he got, probably convinced by now there was a scheme afoot between Mr. Hemlock and Eagan to trap him. He pushed open the door, then suddenly stopped at a word from Eagan.

Eagan had moved sideways away from the bar. His hands hung limp at his sides. He wasn't an imposing figure, a little weathered and worn with age—a man, perhaps, who had come here to Black Arrow to leave his past behind him if he could. His gun lay out of reach on the bar.

"I've got a little to add to Mr. Hemlock's statement," he said. "I want you to hear it, Hand."

Bles Hand hesitated, then came back into the room. He probably saw Eagan's gun lying on the bar. Mr. Hemlock did, and it amazed him, until he realized that Eagan was trying the same thing he had. It was more likely to work, too. Eagan was an outlaw, and, after the ride back down Summoner Creek, Bles Hand probably knew it. Eagan was bounty money, and anyone could throw down on him and get off scot-free. Eagan couldn't answer it without bringing all his past tumbling down on top of him.

"You ain't got a thing to say," Bles Hand spouted suddenly. "I warn yuh."

Eagan moved still farther away from his gun. "I've got this to say—" he began, but got no further.

Bles Hand crouched suddenly and grabbed his gun. Like all of his actions, it made a lot of show and bluster, but it wasn't fast. Fast or slow, it was all

the same to Eagan. He didn't move. But Mr. Hemlock did. He called Bles Hand's name and hauled out the pepperpot and saw Bles swing at him and fire a shot. The pepperpot answered it.

Bles Hand's gun made the most noise, but the pepperpot did the business. Mr. Hemlock was amazed again, and stared as hard as any of the rest.

Bles Hand's gun slid out of his hand and clattered to the floor. A second later, Bles Hand followed it in a lifeless heap, and Mr. Hemlock sagged into the first vacant chair he could find.

Later, still a little unnerved, Mr. Hemlock closed up the Bluebell, going about it with all the whims and crochets of old habit. Before dousing the last bracket lamp, the picture of the far-seeing man standing beside his soddy caught his eye, and for an instant he saw Eddie Samson standing there, and he marveled at the strange ways providence found to help those in need, despite their clumsiest efforts. How wrong things would go if a man couldn't depend on that!

He smothered the last light and went outside where Abe Cochran was waiting.

"I'm still shaking," Abe told him. "I thought you'd gone out of your mind."

"I s'pose I was very foolish," Mr. Hemlock agreed, "sounding off like that."

"I wonder what Eagan was going to say."

"I don't know. Something just as foolish, probably."

"I wonder if he's going to stay around here?"

"I hope so. After this, Abe, whenever he wants a drink be sure to serve him the Peppero's Special."

"Always?" Abe sounded a little shocked.

"Yes, always. By the way, did you know Eddie came back?"

"Yes, I know. He told me all about it before he came here. You'd think Port would give a man a little consideration, wouldn't you, at least on his wedding night?"

"He probably didn't think of that, Abe," Mr. Hemlock remarked, reminding himself to see Port first thing in the morning so he would have some kind of explanation ready. "We often don't when we start to get old. Anyway, Eddie still has it all to look forward to—Eddie and Nancy both."

"Yeah, that's true, I s'pose." Abe sighed a little, with a father's abiding concern.

"Well, good night, Abe."

"Good night, Mr. Hemlock."

# The Man Who Would Play the North Wind

**The strange giant who came to the Flying U range was running from something. He was seeking something, too—just what he didn't know, until he heard the wild song of wind and wolf and prairie. First published in the Popular Magazine forty years ago.**

*A Western Classic*

**By B. M. BOWER**

THE DOOR OPENED windily, and he came in, blinking at the sudden change from darkness to yellow lamplight. Big, black-browed, broodingly somber, with the poise of one who has many times faced—and swayed at will—the multitude, he bulked huge on the threshold, while the men in the hotel office stared at him curiously.

In one hand he carried a large suitcase thickly sprinkled with labels—in a strange language, many of them—which betrayed journeyings afar; under his left arm was a time-scarred violin case. He did not seem in the least embarrassed before the faces which stared; instead he stared back with a certain haughty appraisement of the place and the people before he closed the door

against the whooping wind which the dusk had brought out of the west.

Pink, leisurely chalking a billiard cue in preparation of a nice shot which, if successful, should make for the complete discomfiture of his opponent—who was Andy Green—glanced at the stranger idly, smiled across at Andy, and looked again, more attentively. Andy Green's gray eyes, following Pink's glance, widened in recognition of the type, if not the man himself.

"By gollies, Pink, looks like we're due to listen at some grand opera," he murmured, sliding closer to the other. "Barring the open-front vest and swallowtail coat, and footlights, and flowers all over the place, you've got the whole show right there; billed six weeks ahead of himself: fifty cents, one dollar, two, and two-and-a-half, and all the boxes taken by sassiety's elected. I wish somebody'd tell me how he got to Dry Lake, though. He's just about as appropriate as a marble statue of Venus down in the blacksmith shop!"

The stranger walked over to the bar. Before he spoke a word, before he had moved, other than to close the door behind him, he dominated the place. When he had taken two steps forward, Mikey began feverishly wiping his hands on a corner of his bartender's apron, and to experience the internal fluttering of the housewife who sees unexpected company at her door on wash day.

"A room, if you please," said the stranger in a voice like the middle tones of a bass viol. "Weeth bath."

Mikey felt a chill along the spine. There was not, to his knowledge, a room with bath nearer than Great Falls; certainly none in Dry Lake. Mikey swallowed a nervous titter, rolled eyes at his fellows for moral support, and surprised himself by weakly apologizing for the deficiencies of the hotel he represented.

"I can give you a room, the best we've got—though that ain't saying much for it, either—by doubling up a couple of the boys. We're pretty full tonight. I'm sorry we ain't got any bathroom."

He set his teeth defiantly upon further abjectness, and fumbled among the keys on a rack behind him. Mikey was a self-poised young man as a rule, and it was his boast that it took a good deal to faze him. He pulled himself back to his habitual cynical indifference toward the traveling public, beckoned Missou' over to attend the bar in his absence, and led the way out with his chin as high and his back as stiff as that of his guest who stalked after. At the door there was a halt in the measured steps of the stranger.

"My luggage—you haff forgotten it, boy," he reminded gently.

And Mikey, swallowing hard, went meekly back and picked up the suitcase. He was a bartender primarily, and the guests who lodged oftenest in that hotel were the men of the rangeland all around. They waited upon themselves as a matter of course. The duties of a porter, therefore, went hard with Mikey, but he did not say anything; and although his ears were strained to catch the laugh of derision, there was silence—the silence with which men pay tribute to death, strange femininity, and greatness.

Dry Lake, with all the self-sufficiency of little towns and little people, was not much given to paying homage to God, man, or devil. But whether it would or not, it paid homage to this big, dark man: the homage of ill-at-ease silence to his face, and of burning

curiosity about him and all he did, as soon as he had turned his back. If they had been at all given to psychological analysis, the men of Dry Lake might have found the situation even more interesting.

This strange man did nothing and said nothing to arouse one's curiosity. He ate when the others ate, silently—with dainty habits and seeking glances for those niceties of service which Dry Lake had never possessed—and with a manifest desire to be unassuming and inconspicuous.

He sat much by the window in the barroom, with his hands—wonderful hands they were: long, white, supple-fingered, and nervously sensitive—drumming idly upon the whittled chair arms, and stared broodingly out upon the bleak, brown sweep of the hills to the west. The crowd was quieter when his big, black-clothed form was sitting there; there was not the slightest reason why it should be so, for he did not seem aware of his surroundings.

He never talked to any man, nor did any man attempt speech with him beyond a tentative remark, now and then, upon the weather. His answer, then, was courteous—so courteous as to be alarming—and brief, and inattentive. He went back invariably to his brooding and to staring at the brown hills, and the man who essayed speech with him went sheepishly away.

In a week they learned that his name was Olafson. One hardy soul asked him if he ever played the fiddle, and received a wince and a headshake for reply. And that was as much as Dry Lake knew of him.

One day Pink and Weary and that other irrepressible, Andy Green, were loitering in the hotel, dreading the long ride to the Flying U in the teeth of a chill east wind. Olafson was sitting by the window, which faced the west and the hills, by his mere presence subduing somewhat the hilarious atmosphere which ever surrounded the boys of the Flying U when others greeted them after an absence.

Pink was sitting on the end of the billiard table, swinging his feet and smoking while he watched Andy doing card tricks, when he became aware that a hand was laid upon his shoulder. He glanced up quickly, and found himself staring into the face of Olafson; and stare he did, without in the least knowing why he did so.

"I should like a little conversation weeth you, if you haff the leisure and weel be so kind," said Olafson.

Pink slid off the table like an obedient child, and followed the other without a word. In the armchair by the window, Olafson settled himself again and caressed abstractedly the whittled notches on the chair arm with those white supple fingers, and gazed out at the hills. Pink pulled up a chair and sat down, and waited.

"It iss a wild, silent land," said Olafson, and turned his dark, unfathomable eyes upon Pink. "You know it well, do you not?"

"Yes," Pink answered docilely.

"Do you know of a place where it iss far from other places; where no person would come often; where one might live alone, and see no face, and hear no voice unless he should choose—do you know such a place?"

Pink grinned briefly. "It's pretty much that way all over," he said candidly. "It keeps the rest of us busy riding around the lonesomeness."

"Ah!" For the first time since he appeared in Dry Lake, Olafson smiled, and Pink sat abashed before him. Like

a gleam of sunlight on the storm reflections in a lake, it was. "Weel you tell me of a place—a hut—never mind how small and mean a hut, or cabin, if you like, where one might live in the midst of the solitude; alone weeth all the unpeopled wilderness—" He caught himself, as it were, from rhapsodizing, and smiled again reassuringly at Pink.

"I am not mad, young friend," he said gently. "I am weary; weary weeth the soul weariness which makes one sick for the great solitudes. Of peoples I am sick—sick unto death. There iss a cure; it's there." He lifted his right hand and, with a turn of the wrist, inexpressibly easy and graceful, indicated the hills beyond the little huddle of houses which was Dry Lake. "Weel you help me to find that cure?"

"Sure," said Pink, and for the first time in his life, perhaps, was keenly conscious of the crudity of the expression.

Olafson smiled again—one could see that there was a sweetly sunny quality in his big, rugged, brooding nature. "A hut far off from peoples," he stipulated, with some eagerness. "Lonely—oh, so very lonely and far away, where no one would come. Do you know a place like that?"

"A dozen, if you want them." The dimples stood in Pink's cheeks.

"But one iss sufficient; the loneliest of them all—where iss that one?"

Pink meditated for a moment. "If it's lonesomeness you want, and straight-up-and-down, I'd say, try One Man Coulee. I wintered there once, so I know. The shack there is pretty fair, considering nobody ever lives in it if he can help himself, and the water is good. But it's away off from the road, and except when we ride circle over there in roundup, or the outfit uses it for a line camp, I don't suppose three men a year ever see the shack."

"That iss good!" The fingers of Olafson beat a nervous tattoo upon the chair. "I weel go to that hut and I weel find the cure for my soul weariness." His rugged face lighted briefly and settled again into the almost forbidding look of gloomy introspection.

"There weel be matters to attend, what you call details. Your face, I like; I do not like many—but you, yes. Weel you give me assistance with the details?" He held up a hand and absently inspected his fingertips. "One must eat," he sighed, "and of the providing of food I know little."

Pink sensed his utter inability to cope with the practical side of his plan, and straightway set himself the task of attending to the details. Andy and Weary he would have enlisted also in the cause; but Weary wanted to catch the next train for Fort Benton, and so excused himself. Andy, however, bent his head over the list of supplies which Pink was painstakingly compiling, and offered now and then a suggestion, of value and otherwise.

Olafson sat back in his chair, drummed nervously with his fingers, and watched the two abstractedly, with now and then a wistful glance toward the hills for whose solitude he yearned.

"Say, if he's got money enough to stand the extra cost," Andy suggested under his breath when the list seemed complete, "we better put down more canned stuff, and not so blame' much bacon and beans. *He* can't live on line-camp grub, Pink. Ask him how much he can spend on grub, why don't you?"

Pink hated to do that, and fidgeted over the list with his pencil. "I wonder if he can make sourdough bread, or anything like that?" he whispered anx-

iously. "If he can't, he's up against it. You ask him, Andy."

"Ask him yourself; he's your orphan, not mine." Andy licked his pencil and drew a heavy line through *Pruens, 10 lbs.* "No gazabo that wears his hair like that, and a frock coat common, and that shines his fingernails every day of his life, is going to eat ten pounds of prunes in a thousand years," he chided in Pink's ear. "Nor any gallon of Honey-dew sirup. This is a dickens of a grubstake for a man with a sick soul!"

"Wish I knew how much he wants to spend," Pink whispered back in a harassed tone, too worried to resent the criticism.

"Well, *ask* him, why don't yuh? He don't look to me like he'd bite."

So Pink, for once in his life showing in his cheeks the flush of embarrassment, broached delicately the subject of expense. Olafson brought back his thoughts from far journeyings into the past, grasped the difficulty, and unbuttoned his black frock coat. From a leather bill folder with initials tooled intricately upon the side, he produced a couple of banknotes, laid them upon Pink's knee, and looked at Pink inquiringly.

"It iss enough?" he queried. "If not—"

"It's aplenty, and then some," Pink assured him, folding the bills together after he had surreptitiously shown Andy the denomination of them. "Two hundred for grub—we can turn ourselves loose on the canned stuff," he whispered jubilantly.

Straightway that list suffered revision as to plain necessities, and reckless expansion as to luxuries. Andy, drawing upon his fertile imagination rather freely, deduced a variety of eatables which seemed to him best fitted to find their way beneath that frock coat. He leaned rather strongly toward pickles, preserves, and condiments, and would have disdained such plebian foodstuffs as coffee, bacon, and flour. But Pink was more practical. He stuck doggedly to the staple lines, standing pat on his twenty pounds of white beans and ten pounds of brown, with salt pork for seasoning.

Men sidled up curiously to see what it was all about, to be waved off by those two who wrote, scratched out the writing, sucked their pencils, and wrote again, arguing in undertones the while. They did not believe in doing things half-heartedly. Since they had taken upon themselves the responsibility of this strange man's physical comfort, their inclination was to discharge that responsibility with perfect satisfaction to themselves and, if possible, to Olafson himself.

When half a writing-tablet had been consumed, and their tongues were blackened to their palates, and their nerves on edge with argument they took the many-times revised list to the store. There they added and subtracted items desperately as fresh labels on the shelves caught their eyes.

It occurred to Pink that Olafson would need a bed, and a few cooking utensils. A stove stood in the cabin, he remembered. So they frugally curtailed the supply of luxuries somewhat—taking off, among other things, two bottles of chili sauce, one of Worcester, and some stuffed olives—that they might not be compelled to ask Olafson for more money.

They made arrangements for a team to haul him and his outfit to One Man Coulee, bought an ax at the last minute, and, after that, a lamp and a case of coal oil, which they had overlooked, and then wondered if they had not for-

gotten matches, and so got another fifty cents' worth to make sure; after which they went over to the hotel and told Olafson they had everything ready, so that he could start next morning if he wanted to. And Pink, with a certain conscious pride, went down into his pockets and brought up a twenty-dollar gold piece and some silver, which he handed over, along with the store bill of goods.

"The team we didn't pay for; but don't yuh let Pat Morrisy stick you for more than fifteen dollars," he warned. "He ought to haul you out for ten—but he won't, most likely. And your bed and everything is on the bill, and we'll tell the Old Man about you using the shack. That'll be all right—he won't care."

Olafson looked from one brown face to the other, and at the money in his hand; looked again into their eyes, and thanked them with grave words spoken primly, after the manner of one who has learned his English from books. He did not make the blunder of offering them money, and they were more kindly disposed toward him because of the omission.

"Peoples I do not care to see," he said simply. "But you gentlemen weel be always welcome. Come, and I weel play for you." He smiled—and the smile was infinitely tired and sad. "I would not play for others, and that iss why I am here, perhaps; but for you I weel play."

"We'll sure come," they promised heartily, and wished him luck and left him, wondering vaguely at his paradoxical aloofness and reserve, and his childlike candor and helplessness.

IT WAS BECAUSE of this helplessness that, without saying much about it to each other—and to the Happy Family nothing at all—they took occasion to ride next day to One Man Coulee. They found the stovepipe pulled apart by many battering winds, and they joined it and braced it well with wire which they hunted a long while to find.

They dragged up some posts from the old corral, and would have chopped a pile of wood if there had been an ax upon the place. They made shift, with a stub of broom, to sweep out the accumulation of dust and rats' nests—and it was when he was pushing the trash off the doorstep that Pink stopped with a look of tragedy.

"So help me Josephine, we never bought Ole Bull a broom!" he cried, and stared doubtfully at the wreck of one which he held before him.

"Gosh!" Andy ejaculated in dismay. "Are you sure, Pink?"

Pink nodded. "And we never put down a water bucket, and dipper, either, did we? Nor soap, nor—"

"We got him a dozen cans of sauerkraut, anyway, and a big hunk of limburger," soothed Andy. "Nobody but a Dutchman ever says 'iss.' And he don't look to me like he'd know how to use a broom if he had one. It kinda seems to me we did put down soap. Say, this is sure a lonesome hole!"

"Well, that's what he wanted," Pink retorted defensively. "He asked for the lonesomest place I could think of—and this is it."

"A good scrubbing wouldn't hurt that floor a blamed bit," Andy observed irrelevantly. "If I had a broom and a bucket—sure you didn't order a broom, Pink?"

Pink was listening to the far-off *ka-chuck* of a wagon bumping over the uneven prairie sod, with a rock here and there to accentuate the bumps.

"He's coming," he announced, and gave a last glance around the bare little room, where the dust of his energetic sweeping had not yet settled. "I don't envy him the winter none, and that's a cinch," he observed. "I don't believe a sheepherder could stand more than a month here without going plumb loco."

"Ole's loco now," Andy asserted with conviction. "If he wasn't he wouldn't be out here at all. He'd be living up to his hair in some city, and ladies would be passing up flowers tied with wide ribbons when he quit playing."

"I don't know," said Pink, "why we take it for granted he can play; nobody's ever heard him."

"Well, he can, I'll gamble on that. Look at the way he wears his hair! And did yuh notice of his hands? I'll bet you money he can play!"

Olafson came, sitting aloft upon the high spring seat beside Pat Morrisy, with a dirty canvas horse blanket over his broadcloth-clothed knees, and the violin case cuddled in his arms like a sleeping child. His hair, like the mane of a lion dyed with India ink, fluttered in the stiff north wind. His face was as stonily calm as the Sphinx, his eyes sullen.

Pat pushed the brake forward to the last notch with a yank not far from vicious, and came skidding down the rough slope to the cabin. His "Whoa" was a menace to his team, and the very set of his shoulders betokened distaste for the journey and dislike for the man beside him.

"Good thing we're here," murmured Andy, apprehending the situation. "Pat's been trying to pump Ole Bull, and they don't love each other a little bit. He'd dump the stuff on the ground, and collect his money, and drive off, if he was here alone with him."

Pat came near doing that very thing, as it was. He regarded the two with a snort meant to express his scorn of their mission, unloaded as hurriedly as might be, gave another snort or two by way of reply to Andy's remark that it was a nice little drive out from town, pocketed the money which Olafson extended haughtily in his direction, climbed up to the high seat, released the brake with another yank, and yelled ferociously at his team.

"It iss good," said Olafson, when Pat had driven out of sight, standing before the cabin, with his eyes greedily fixed upon the barren coulee which seemed all there was of the world, so jealously did it hug its barrenness to itself. Only to the south did a twisted arm reach out coaxingly to the prairie beyond, so that one glimpsed the wide land as through a half-open doorway.

"It iss good," he repeated, and walked slowly down into the bleak hollow, with his violin case still cuddled in his arms.

Pink and Andy carried in the supplies and unpacked them. Pink also made Olafson's bed upon the board bunk in one corner, while Andy chopped wood with the new ax, and started a fire, and put some coffee on to boil.

"Say," began Andy in the tone of one who has worked out a problem to its logical conclusion, "a helpless son of a gun like him ain't going to make out very well alone, here. I'll bet he never made a bed in his life, or washed a tin plate, or boiled a pot of coffee. We can't hang around and be his hired girls *all* the time. What the deuce is he going to do?"

Pink flipped that last quilt over the bunk so that it lay smoothly, tucked in the end, and pushed his hat back off his curls.

"Search me," he said impatiently. "I was just thinking about that myself. It's the darned 'details,' as he calls them, that's going to stick him if he don't look out. He ought to be in here right now, learnin' a few things about cooking his own grub. Where's he at, anyway?"

Andy went to the door, looked out, and pointed an eloquent finger. Far down the coulee, seated upon an outcropping ledge of sandstone, his face upturned to the jagged coulee wall opposite him, and to a hawk circling slowly above it, was Olafson. From the lift and sweeping gestures of his arm they knew that he was playing his violin, and, as they listened, certain strains swept, thin and sweet and evanescent, to their ears.

For long minutes they stood there in the doorway and watched him and listened for the vagrant strains which could penetrate the distance, detached, yet clearly defined, like jagged peaks thrusting nakedly up through a thick blanket of fog which hides all else.

They did not like to disturb him. Perhaps they vaguely understood that there is an intoxication of mood which sweeps one above and beyond the realities of life, and wipes out, for the time, the physical need of food, or warmth, or rest.

Since it was Sunday, and their time was their own, they spent the next hour baking a supply of bread—baking-powder bread—sufficient to last Olafson for several days, and cooked what other food they thought necessary for his needs. They cut a generous supply of wood, and then, being hungry and seeing no sign of Olafson's immediate return to the cabin, they ate, and afterward washed the dishes.

Then they mounted their horses and rode down the coulee on their way home, meaning to speak to their strange protégé, and bring him back from his dreamings. But Olafson gave them no heed beyond a stare and a negligent nod as they rode past, so they left him alone upon the ledge and went their way.

"He ain't real nutty," Andy diagnosed shrewdly on the way home. "He's a genius, I take it; and there ain't nothing much you can do for that. I guess he won't starve or freeze, anyway."

So, having done for him what their humane instincts demanded of them, they rewarded themselves by making a great tale for the ears of the Happy Family; a tale which was received with incredulous jeers and set the bunkhouse buzzing with argument till bedtime.

Once after that Pink and Andy rode over to One Man Coulee, and were received courteously enough. They saw that Olafson gave slight heed to the bothersome "details," and that his eating was desultory and of the kind to breed dyspepsia. They cooked a pot of beans, another supply of bread, washed his dishes, and swept his floor; and Olafson remembered his promise and played for them while they worked.

It was sure great stuff. Pink said afterward, but there didn't seem to be much tune to it. He would greatly have preferred a two-step, though he did not like to tell Olafson so.

Andy, who had instincts for the bigger things of life, told him bluntly that he ought to go buy him another musical clock; it was, he accused, about as high a brand of music as he was equal to. For himself, he listened intently while Olafson played, and was silent long after the music ceased, looking at

Olafson with something akin to awe in his gray eyes.

After that, Andy frequently rode alone to One Man Coulee, and sat quiet by the broken stove and listened to the wonderful music which Olafson drew from the violin he handled so tenderly, caressing the strings with the light touches a mother gives to the face of a sleeping child.

ONE SUNDAY WHEN THE SKY and the leaden air promised snow and wind and biting cold, Andy thought of Olafson alone, ignorant of weather signs and the ill they often foretell, and rode to One Man Coulee. The sorrel team of Pat Morrisy stood before the door, with tails tucked between shivering hind legs; and because of their presence he went in distrustfully. Inside were Pat and another—a thin man in a glossy fur coat.

The thin man looked up, saw only a brown-faced young man with an unobtrusive manner, and went on talking, ignoring his presence. Olafson, hunched sullenly before the stove with the broken front grate, through which red coals fell now and then to the hearth, listened and said nothing in reply.

The thin man talked of a broken contract, and of big seasons, and of packed houses, and money being wasted by Olafson's insane flight from the world that clamored for his music.

"I weel not go," said Olafson doggedly, when the thin man came to an anxious pause.

"But you can't stop here, Olafson!" the other protested. "Think of what you owe the world! A talent like yours—you can't bury it here in this hole; and the squalor—man, it's suicide! Nothing more or less than suicide."

"It iss freedom!" Olafson raised his shaggy head and looked at his old manager with sullen defiance. "Always it iss money of which you speak. The peoples, they do not love the music—they love to sit weeth others and listen to Olafson, because Olafson iss the great violinist and hass won much fame. All my life I haff played for money. All my life I haff hated that thing money. You would harness Olafson to the plow—to deeg up money!"

He sprang to his feet and towered over the other, and his eyes blazed with the hot rebellion that surged within him.

"It iss freedom!" he cried, flinging out a long arm so suddenly that he of the glossy fur coat shrank farther away. "Neffer pefore haff I been free. Always haff I been the slave—the slave that vorks for hire. Music—you would make of my music a slave. The great, beautiful music, you would haff it come for hire. Peoples they must pay money if they would listen! Bah! It iss that you make chains to bind me and my violin to the plow."

He lifted his head, shaking back the mane of black hair with an unconscious gesture of scorn "These hills, they do not pay. They hear the great music of my violin—" He stopped as if his thoughts had grown too vague for speech.

"It iss enough," he said, with haughty finality. "I am not a slave. My violin, it iss not a slave. I weel not go."

He sat down again before the stove and brooded there, and gave no further heed to the expostulations of the man. So, finally, they drove away and left him there, the giant who refused longer to plow the furrow for hire.

When they had been gone for some time, Olafson raised his head and look-

ed around the tiny cabin; saw Andy sitting there, and smiled vaguely upon him.

"It iss good. They are gone, and you remain; and the hills, they remain, and the freedom which I came to seek, it remains also." He fell to staring at the coals as they dropped through the broken grate. "So fall the years, and turn black and dead like the coals as they fall," he muttered dreamily.

The north wind, which had blown in half-hearted gusts all day, with periods of leaden quiet between, rose and *whooed* lonesomely around the cabin; the crooning wail of it won Olafson from his dreams of what had been, perhaps, and could never be again except in his dreaming.

"The north wind, it iss of those dead years it iss singing," he said to Andy, who sat quietly smoking on the other side of the stove, waiting until the impulse seized Olafson to play.

He had learned that Olafson's music came of its own volition, or it came not at all, and he had learned also that silence and dreams were the conjurors to call it forth. So he waited, and smoked, and put more wood in the stove, and thought his own thoughts.

Down the bare, brown hills came another song, the howl of the gray wolf as he sniffed the coming storm. Eerie it came, and mingled with the wailing of the wind. Olafson lifted his head and listened to the cry, and his eyes, though they still stared unseeingly, were no longer dreaming eyes; intent they were, seeing more than the ears could hear.

"That—it iss not of the dead years. It iss of the ages to come. It iss the Song of the Ages. I weel play." He listened, lifted his huge body from the creaking old chair, and went into the shadows—for the storm was bringing an early night. When he came back he held his violin, and his hands trembled as they touched the strings caressingly.

"They sing," he murmured to himself. "They sing, the north wind, and the wolf, and the wide, unpeopled prairie! Great iss the song—they sing of the ages to come. Tonight we, too, shall sing—what never pefore has been sung by the violin. We shall sing as they are singing, the north wind, and the prairie, and the wolf!"

He poised the bow above the strings and waited, for the wind had lulled for the moment and the wolf was silent.

"It wass for this we came, my violin and I, and we did not know," he said, his eyes glowing toward Andy. "I knew only that we hungered to be free. But it wass for this song that we came."

They came again, rising mournfully—the north wind and the wolf, singing together as they had sung when the prairies were young. The bow dropped lightly upon the strings, and they, too, sang wonderfully, rising weirdly with the long-drawn howl of the wolf, falling and murmuring with the wind at the cabin's corner. Andy's cigarette dropped unnoticed from his fingers, while he leaned forward and listened.

The eyes of Olafson stared straight before him. What they saw—and what Andy saw also—was a wide, wide land lying stark under a brooding night sky, with bars of faint moonlight stealing furtively into the hollows; with the north wind, a great, tangible shape, rushing wantonly after the moonbeams, singing, shrieking when they shrank away; and a lone wolf, buffeted upon a hilltop, his coat roughened by the wind's ungentle hands, pointing his nose to the bleak sky and howling his challenge to all the world.

"It iss not the song of the ages to come," said Olafson, while he played. "It iss the world-old song—the folk song of the north wind, and the prairies, and the wolf!"

It was a wild unearthly rhapsody that he played, and the minutes slid into hours with the sliding of his bow across the strings. It was a plaintive, wailing thing that he played, and Andy forgot to feed the fire, so that the room grew chill. But it was not the north wind that he played, nor the wolf, nor the whisper of the storm which now beat upon the cabin.

The fingers of Olafson hesitated, moved uncertainly. The wind mimicked the wailing strings, and then whooped off into a wild song of its own, where the violin could not follow. The wolf howled derision, and he could not catch the notes of its eerie cadences. The blizzard, heralded throughout the day by leaden skies and a fitful wind, buffeted the little cabin as Andy had fancied the wolf upon the hilltop, and shook clods of earth loose from the sod floor, and sent them thudding upon the floor.

"This, it iss the storm wraith of the folk song," Olafson, listening, muttered. "The folk song of the wild! Never before haff I lived, never before haff I played, until now!"

Then—he played, did Olafson! His long, lean fingers caught the visions his staring eyes saw, and carried them to the strings of his violin; while across Santa Gertrudis corrals, Juan Ortiz held his breath and listened. He played as blew the north wind, as swept the blizzard, as howled the wolf. Tone for tone, sweeping waves to a passion of sound, shrieking, whistling eerily like drunken elves at revel—how he played, did Olafson!

Again he paused, his fingers groping for the tones to match a whining croon at the corner. His breath came in half sobs with striving. At times he had almost caught the song, but even as the strings began to echo it exultantly, it eluded him like a mocking demon that could never be made captive.

"Oh, to play the song!" He sprang to his feet, sobbing, still playing wildly. "They mock me—the north wind, and the prairie, and the wolf! But I shall play their song. They shall not say that Olafson—Olafson the master of the violin and of music—they shall not laugh among themselves and say that Olafson, he could not play their song! I shall play it! I shall triumph over the north wind, I shall laugh at the prairie, I shall send the wolf shrinking ashamed to his den! Ages have they sung the song, and they alone. But tonight I, the human thing, and this instrument which humans have made, we shall know their song!"

He paused just long enough to jerk open the door, and he stood there looking out. "I shall know their song. I shall go to the north wind, and to the prairie, and to the wolf, and they shall teach me their song, ages-old—the folk song of the wind!"

Andy, sitting there under the spell of his playing, watched him while he stood a moment still, gazing into the night. Then he was gone, and after him went Andy, stung back to realization of what it all meant.

He heard afar off a high, sweet strain, like the wind singing in the treetops upon a mountain. Then the blizzard, a white wraith, came sweeping past, and muffled jealously the sound, so that Andy, stumbling blindly after, was bewildered and could not follow.

Once again he heard faintly a single high, sweet, exultant note, long-drawn. Then the wind whooped anew, and the blizzard flung its burden of snow into the straining eyes of Andy Green, and when it lulled again the sweet, high note was still.

And though he searched, and called through half the wild night, and with daybreak summoned help and searched anew, neither Andy nor any other human ever heard again the music of Olafson, the man who would play the north wind.

# THE ROUGH REQUIREMENTS

***By S. Omar Barker***

THEY say that a cowboy ain't worth thirty cents
Whose carcass can't stand a few permanent dents,
And if his south end or his feelin's is tender,
His chances of bein' a cowpoke are slender.

They tell me a puncher just ain't worth his feed,
That swallers his prunes without crackin' the seed,
And if he drinks coffee with canned milk and stuff,
It proves that his innards just ain't tough enough.

I've also heard fellers, who claimed that they knowed,
Say cowboys ain't never no good till they're throwed
A few dozen times, just to settle their brag,
And prove that you can't tell a man by his tag.

A cowpoke may be awful big or a runt,
But still no-account if he don't savvy grunt,
For when you're a-snubbin' a bronc to the post,
It's that good ol' gruntin' that helps you the most!

A puncher with schoolin' may git along fine,
Or do just as well if he can't read a line,
For the livestock with which he is ass-ociated,
Can't tell if he is or he ain't educated!

The cowpoke don't need to be smart like his boss,
Nor even as smart, in some ways, as his hoss,
But that cowboy sayin' is true, you'll allow,
That rates him some smarter, at least, than the cow!

# ETERNAL LONGHORN

## By HAROLD PREECE

**The mightiest range critter of 'em all will never die, vow the old-timers. The legend of Old Slate, mossyhorned monarch of the range.**

HE NEVER BROUGHT IN an oil well or challenged the world to whip Texas. Wherever he wandered, he was becomingly modest, which is no general trait of us who are born under the Lone Star. There is no record of his ever having painted a town red with bourbon, or plastering it green with dollar bills. Neither is a hamlet nor a bar named for him in his native land, to which he yielded an allegiance marked as much by its determination as by its patience.

But to many an old saddle sport, he symbolizes Texas far more than this post-branding-iron era of millionaires who build hotels with ruby-inlaid swimming-pools. He stands for the blanket and skillet against the Beautyrest couch and the mélange of forks which fluster an old-timer. As genuinely as the Alamo and the hoofs that thundered up the Chisholm Trail, he was our past. And, so say our elders, he is our future.

As they cock seasoned eyes to earth's ceiling they make out his emerging hoofs and horns in the shape of the gathering clouds. Even the quiet blue of an untroubled sky reminds them of the hide that made him stand out above other steers, like a fancy-diked *caballero* outdazzles ordinary cowpunchers at a fandango.

"There's Old Slate," they say whenever memory makes them scout the heavens. "The wind has brung him

back like his hanks always used to bring him back." And afterward, in a joking voice more serious than it's meant to be:

"One of these days, he'll light down. Then Texas will be Texas again."

For Old Slate had one quality which is absent in many a Texan who toasts San Antonio or Houston with highballs, but meanwhile keeps thriving in one metropolis or the other of the dam-yankees. He didn't just threaten, tongue in cheek, to head for home ground.

*He always went back.*

I never saw him, since the last big herds had made the last long treks overland from the Nueces and the Rio Grande years before my birth. But I do remember gawking at a certain oversize steer, said to be his grandson, in the sideshow of a seedy little wagon circus that toured Texas during my boyhood. I recall that my dad was less impressed, and yanked me out of the tent after observing that the bull was undoubtedly half-Hereford.

"Humph!" he grunted. "You wouldn't have caught Slate rutting around spindly old shorthorns. He was too self-respecting a beast to mate with anything except *gen-u-wyne* longhorns."

Of Slate's amours and of what bovine strains he went for, I can say little, except to remark that Texas seed gets sown in many places. But the years keep adding to his legend as they did to his size, and legend among my countrymen declares that he made the Bull of Bashan look like a scrubby bantam.

Seven feet he stood, from hoofs that were as wide as fan wheels to shoulders so broad that no man's arms could span them. Eleven feet wide were his antlers, that curved in intricate, thorny coils and never stopped growing.

He was already a patriarch among longhorns when he was rounded up with other wild cattle on the Santa Gertrudis Ranch of the South Texas brush country. For patches of thick green moss, sprouting from his crown of horns, not only testified to his age, but contrasted fittingly with the seamy blue hide that gave him his name.

Age might have spared him one exodus after the other from his homeland if Kansas buyers had not been plunging heavy in Texas steers, in that money-mad decade of the 'seventies. Venerable old bulls, pushed out of the herds by spryer young rivals, were being caught in the dragnet of lassos and hustled up to Wichita or Dodge. Young calves whose hoofs were still tender also found themselves thrown into the bellowing herds that weaved across the Lone Star State in an endless parade of beef.

Little ranchers became hog-rich overnight from run-of-the-mill stock, but it was Texas's biggest cattle baron who was responsible for nabbing Texas's biggest steer. Captain Richard King, owner of the Santa Gertrudis and other ranches making up his million-acre private duchy, offered his Mexican vaqueros bonuses for prime beeves that they might bring in from the chaparral jungles. So it happened that, on a bright morning in early spring, two men named Pedro Mendoza and Juan Ortiz rode out to beat a patch of bushes where longhorns seemed to multiply faster than jack rabbits.

They hadn't ridden far into the chaparral when they heard hoofbeats like those of a hundred steers in motion. Slowing down their horses to a quiet walk in order not to alarm the herd, the vaqueros moved cautiously forward.

The vaqueros paused before a six-foot wall of catclaw and mesquite, looking for some place where they and their ponies could squeeze through without being torn to ribbons. And at that moment, a gigantic pair of horns came into sight over the barricade.

The horses snorted in fear and plunged backward. The horns moved to cut, with the cleanness of an ax, some overhanging branches of mesquite. The earth groaned as a huge body lumbered forward. A sunbeam descended on the great antlers, then raced across them in flashes that half-blinded the men.

"Let—let us go, *amigo*," Pedro Mendoza managed in a stammered whisper to his comrade. "Yonder stands the Devil himself. It is better that mortals be away from him, *pronto*."

The two flexed their legs, intending to spur their horses for a quick exit. But feet froze in stirrups and the ponies stood petrified as the soil about their hoofs trembled and the wall cracked like kindling.

Through the debris walked a monster whose azure pelt glistened like its horns, and whose hoofs plowed deep furrows as it shambled toward the two riders.

"*El Toro Diablo*—the Devil Bull," Pedro Mendoza moaned. "See even his coat is blue from being warmed by the fires of hell."

The little brown man crossed himself and began whimpering prayers that may have been addressed to Christian saints, Aztec deities, or both. The bull came to a standstill, and stared curiously at the vaqueros. It was probably the first time he had ever seen men at close quarters.

Juan Ortiz shifted in his saddle, his practical mind unwinding from the shock and figuring, with peasant shrewdness. A few more *pesos* for a few more *frijoles*.

"Fool!" he hissed to Pedro. "You would ride off and leave the finest steer ever captured by vaqueros in Texas! Señor King will pay much extra *dinero* for him."

He maneuvered his horse to place himself between bull and the thicket. "*Prisa!*—hurry!" he shouted to the hulk of steer flesh. "Señor Toro, you are taking a trip. Allow me to conduct you to the starting-place for your journey."

Maybe the Castilian courtesy impressed the bull. Or possibly it was just the trusting nature of so many Texans who have never set foot out of their fatherland. Anyway, the behemoth shambled obediently toward the Santa Gertrudis corrals. Juan Ortiz rode ahead to show the way; Pedro Mendoza, still maintaining some margin of caution, rode behind.

Bull and escorts reached the ranch headquarters where a trail herd was shaping up under the direction of that celebrated cowboy, Jim East. Four different sets of vaqueros, trail-branding cattle for the march, scattered in four different directions when they saw that oncoming jumbo of a steer.

Jim East's eyebrows rose at the blue hide and the giant horns. But he had long since arrived at that happy state in which a man is hardly surprised by damn nigh anything.

"Back to work, *hombres!*" he bawled to the vaqueros. He squinted his eye toward the bull to convince himself, beyond all doubt, that the monster was real. "Put Old Slate in that corral to the right. I reckon those frisky young heifers will hold him there."

And that, say the elderly punchers who have outlived younger and better days, is how Old Slate got his name.

That, they claim, was the beginning of his record of unwavering devotion to his country.

A WEEK AFTER OLD SLATE had appropriated the harem of heifers, the herd set out on the thousand-mile hike up the Western Trail toward Colorado. By the majesty of his antlers and the might of his tonnage, Slate immediately installed himself as the monarch of the drive. Rivals, aspiring to the lead position, quickly backed down when the mammoth bull flourished warning horn tips at them.

Regally, Old Slate marched ahead of the herd, his great hulk towering above the other longhorns like Texas does above its sister states. Sometimes he would turn his head and crane his neck to examine the Laurel Leaf trail brand burned on his hide—what Texan ever shied away from laurels?

Now and then, he would snuggle up to Jim East, riding a few feet ahead as trail boss. Jim would feel antler knobs thrust under his shoulder. And after he had finished giving Slate a playful rub, green moss from the horns would be mixed with gray dust from the trail on Jim's blue-denim shirt.

North by west, the drive headed. Old Slate's feet left deep indentations in the South Texas brush land, the rocky knolls of the Central Texas mountain section, and the flat, hoecake terrain of the Panhandle. Hoof pits, that later filled up with rainwater and hatched tadpoles, were the landmarks of his pilgrimage.

Slate took in everything with proud eyes as he plodded along. Peaks or prairies, sage patches or cactus clumps —they were all Texas. All his country.

It was only when he reached Doan's Store, the final camp site in Texas, that he began showing some uneasiness. It was sundown when the herd pulled up at the famous old trading-post and, for the first time, Slate rebelled against authority.

Jim East ordered the cattle bedded down for the night. Then he gave the punchers, with the exception of a few detailed to ride night herd, permission to visit the store or pay sociable calls at the campfires of other outfits waiting to cross Red River.

Slate strayed to the river bank when the rest of the herd lay down to slumber. He looked across the stream to the foreign land that was Indian Territory, and sniffed nervously. A cowboy rode out to cut him back into the herd. Slate gazed at him reproachfully, then obediently trudged back to rejoin the sleeping phalanx of beef. But as soon as the puncher's back was turned, he bolted past a column of surprised and awakened steers to dash madly off south.

Three riders took after Old Slate, and they ran him three miles before they caught him. Ten minutes later, he was off again. This time, five men in pursuit and five miles of good sprinting were the measure of his speed. And all night, from dusk when the moon rose till dawn when it shrank like a gutted lemon, the marathon continued.

The Texas earth shook with the pound of Slate's hoofs in flight and mustang hoofs in pursuit. Punchers of other outfits bawled serenades of cowboy songs and camp-meeting hymns to keep their aroused cattle from stampeding before the commotion. Jim East had to cancel the duty-leaves of his drivers and send out a courier to round up the men from the campfires—all to contain one stubborn monster who'd asked for no passports from Texas.

Weary-eyed punchers and a weary-

eyed steer were still at odds when the herd was driven across the river next morning. Most of the cattle plunged into the channel with only scant prompting. Slate dipped a hesitant hoof in the water, then let out a bellow that split the air and whipped up a wave that nearly drowned a couple of yearlings. Backing away, he shook the water from his hoofs and once more tore off south.

A puncher dabbed a lasso over his antlers. Slate rose on two hoofs, jerked his head once, and the rope snapped in the cowboy's hands. Jim East, bossing operations, leaped on a pony and signaled for two men to fan out and circle the runaway.

They closed in on Slate by an abandoned line shack. His back to the wall of the hut, Slate began shaking his antlers and pawing up dirt. His eyes blazed redder than any campfire, his tail threshed; his hoofs started pounding a challenge. He was flexing his muscles for a charge when he looked up to measure his antagonists—and noticed that Jim East was one of them.

He exhaled a doleful little bellow. His antlers dropped, and his shoulders sagged. Jim rode forward.

"Come on, Slate boy," he said. "It's tough going, but we might as well be starting."

Thirty minutes later, Slate was across Red River, his hoofs making their first contact with alien ground. But as the drive progressed across the dreary stretches of Indian Territory, Slate abdicated as king of the herd. He fell far to the rear, so that even the drag men minding the slower cattle had to lash his rump to make him keep up with the sorriest yearlings. Even then, he would often balk and refuse to budge till Jim East would ride back and give him a consoling pat on the nose.

The drive reached the Arkansas River, and that strip of Colorado which was the jumping-off place to Kansas. There a rancher named Bert Miller, operating the Triangle W, offered Jim East a tempting price for the herd. Jim remembered, years afterward, that Old Slate stood looking at him with a hurt, quizzical look as he delivered the steers and headed back for Texas.

THE NEW OWNER DECIDED that a bull of Slate's quality would bring more as a stud than as steaks and chops. Ranchers for miles around flocked to the Triangle W, some bringing heifers to breed and some to gape at the biggest cattle-critter ever seen on any range of the West.

It should have been bull's heaven for any longhorn. But it was no life for Slate. Snow, which he had never seen before, froze his tongue when he tasted it, mistaking it for salt. The arctic winds of the Colorado Rockies chilled his hide; the warm breezes of the Texas brush land had warmed it. Icicles mocked his exile by clinging to his tail and forming hard, crusty sheaths around his horns.

His belly began shrinking from the stubby mountain grass, after having been used to the tall, high growth of his home range. Hay and bran that Bert Miller had shipped in from Denver failed to tease his appetite. He began neglecting his stud duties so that, like as not, heifers brought to his corral were greeted only by sullen looks. Whenever he was turned out to graze, he made straight for a tall hill whose summit was turned toward Texas.

"'Tain't nothing the matter with Slate but homesickness," declared a Triangle W puncher, suffering his own

nostalgia for Texas because a certain sheriff made it inconvenient for him to return there. "But that's a powerful thing to ail a man—or a bull."

Christmas came, and the worst blizzard in twenty years swept down from the Rockies. When the storm was over, the Triangle W punchers rode out to tally the cattle. A lot of steers were missing, and so was Old Slate.

Bert Miller ordered a detachment of punchers to track down the prize bull. The expedition set out under the command of the Texas puncher, who may have had no mind for running down a countryman.

Wherever the pursuers rode, they found signs that Slate had left to follow. Parings from his hoofs, so large that no ordinary steer could have shed them. Horn-moss on the trunks of trees that he had rubbed against. The mangled bodies of four mountain lions that had tried to gang him, bloodying the immense tracks of the bull.

Each time, the prints were not many hours old. But whenever they were very fresh and very new, the Texas puncher always halted the party, claiming that he "had to stop and study these tracks to find out which way Slate went."

Every delay in the chase gave Slate that much more vantage. So that the day came when the pursuers could only follow him by faint hoof traces leading to the Arkansas River.

On the banks of the Arkansas, the Texan ordered his partners to pull in their reins.

"'Tain't no use of tailing that bull any further," he said drily. "Old Slate ain't gonna be naturalized."

Bert Miller posted a reward of a thousand dollars for anybody who would capture the runaway and bring him back to the Triangle W. The offer caused scores of men to scour miles of range for the blue steer. Nobody spotted any sign of him. Other and pressing matters came up to occupy their attention, though Slate remained a lively subject of discussion when men huddled together around stoves in the bunkhouses.

But another spring came to Texas. And on another day when a sunny breeze lazed across the Rio Grande from Mexico, Pedro Mendoza and Juan Ortiz once more rode out toward the brush. This time, however, their mission was not to waylay wild steers but to shoot wild pigs.

They stopped before a canebrake from which came heavy, crackling sounds. "There are many *javelinas* there," Juan whispered to Pedro. "I will fire my gun to flush them out, then we shall make short work of them."

Juan lifted an old blunderbuss that was probably a family heirloom. The gun banged. The bushes parted. Out stepped not a squealing pack of *javelinas*, but Old Slate.

Wisps of shattered moss, dangling from his antlers, showed where the bullet had struck. A deep dent in one prong indicated where it had glanced off harmlessly. He stood eyeing the vaqueros benignly, showing not a trace of hard feeling for being shot at.

"*Caramba!*" exclaimed Juan Ortiz. "He came back—after Señor East, himself, told us of leaving him in *el estado de Colorado*." Then in a more businesslike tone:

"Welcome, *toro amigo*. You bring us more *pesos* from El Capitano King. This way, Señor Slate."

Jim East had left off herding wild bulls to go to New Mexico and help

Sheriff Pat Garrett hunt a wild buckie called Billy the Kid. But a few days later, Slate set out at the head of another herd, being driven to Wyoming by another trail boss.

The new man delivered him with the rest of the consignment to a buyer in Cheyenne. Yet when the first cold blast nipped at his horns, he pointed his antlers homeward. The vaqueros found him in mid-November, tasting the juicy and familiar grass of the Santa Gertrudis, bearing scratches probably made by Apache arrows on his pelt.

FOR THREE MORE SPRINGS, the vaqueros rounded him up and sent him up three more trails. Nebraska, New Mexico, and Montana—Old Slate beheld all those alien lands in his ramblings. Each spring saw him moseying along and taking new rivers, like new ranges, in his stride. But every winter brought him back to Texas, where a Texan belongs.

Up and down the West, men were talking about the longhorn that wouldn't forsake Texas. Punchers swore that he would swim the Atlantic Ocean back to the Lone Star State if he were shipped across with a cargo of beef on the hoof. Every spring, bets were laid from Dallas to Dodge that "Slate won't make it home this year." Every winter, thousands of dollars changed hands when word got around that the giant bull had been sighted in the brush land.

By now, following so many trips, his hide was a patchwork of brands—the Laurel Leaf trail brand and the brands of all those ranchers who had claimed him as property. There were some who observed that the green moss of his horns was becoming ashy-gray in spots, like the mane of an aging bronc. Others remarked that his step was becoming less spry after having done more hiking, across more peaks and more prairies, than any steer ever known to history.

Finally, he became so gentle from so much contact with man that any tot of a *muchacho* on the Santa Gertrudis Ranch could go up and stroke his hide without his raising an antler in protest. He took to hanging around ranch headquarters, where the vaqueros gorged him on dried apricots. And it was his trust of man which finally proved his undoing. That and a new contraption, running on iron tracks, which spelled the ultimate end of the old days and the old trails.

Spring of 1880 came, with Slate ready, as usual, for his annual commuting. The herd started hoofing it up that very first route leading to Kansas which he had traveled on his initial jaunt, four years before. Far up in the Panhandle, the trail boss quit and his replacement was none other than Slate's first friend among men, Jim East.

Jim rode out to size up the herd. Slate saw his old friend, and the blast that roared out from his cavernous jaws sounded louder than the trumpets of Jericho. Jim spurred his horse forward to the bull, then reached down from his saddle to stroke the colossal horns, raised proud and erect toward the Texas sun. Pieces of grayish-green moss fell in brittle flakes from the boss cowboy's hand as he grasped his bridle reins and shouted orders to get the herd moving.

By rights, Slate should have lived in boundless ease after that touching reunion of two partners, long absent from each other. Ideally, he should have, like many a countryman before him, taken his annual spring and sum-

mer vacation in one of the cooler climes, returning in winter to warm up and fatten in his own mildly tempered homeland. That it happened otherwise must be laid to the account of his friend.

On that last exodus-by-foot of Santa Gertrudis longhorns, Slate clung more closely than ever before to Jim East. Never did he let more than a few inches of drifting trail dust separate his nose from the hoofs of his partner's pony.

Changes were taking place in his country. Tar-paper homesteader shacks —patches of runty cabbages sinking precarious roots in sand and alkali— barbed-wire fences blockading long stretches of the trail and forcing the drivers to make wide detours with the cattle.

Slate's first encounter with barb, when he innocently rubbed up against it, added new slashes to the marks left by Indian arrows and the scratches inflicted by lion's claws on his hide. But rails, shiny new ribbons of steel spanning land just being deflowered by civilization, were far worse terrors. Rails, and the smoke-puffing things that rode them, made feeble his mighty defenses of horn and hoof. When Slate saw his first train bearing down a track, his hide began quivering, giant ripples cascading on the blue pelt like breakers on a blue sea.

He froze as the train thundered nearer. Then, convinced that it was rushing forward to attack him, he charged.

The challenger roared by, unmindful that its dare had been called. But a hot cloud of steam from the engine singed the moss on Slate's horns, then blew a stinging spray into his eyes. His frightened bellow and mad flight caused the cattle to stampede, and it took the punchers two hours to round them up.

After it was over, Jim East ordered that Slate be hobbled by day and belled by night. Now he marched in the rear of the herd, crown lowered, pride gone, like a deposed and shackled king. Every night, after the hobbles were removed, he tried to steal away and head back for the Santa Gertrudis. But every night, the line riders tracked him down by the sound of the bell and drove him back into captivity.

He was lean and broken in spirit, like a saddle tramp hit hard by life, when the drive ended at Caldwell, Kansas. Slate's years were now twenty-five and his horn span, say the old-timers, was eighteen feet.

The punchers began loading steers into a cattle car. Slate saw that he was booked for the maw of the monster that ran on rails, and started butting his way through the herd. Jim East looped his horns with a lariat.

"Take it easy, Slate," he coaxed. "You've done a lot of walking. Now it's time to rest your hoofs by doing a lot of riding."

Slate looked at the man who had humiliated him with bells and hobbles. He scratched his hoof dubiously in the Kansas dust. Then Jim reached down to lay his hand affectionately across the ex-monarch's crest.

That did it—for who else can a Texan trust in a foreign land but another Texan? Four punchers it took to shunt him sideways into the car; his hulk and his horns were too big for a direct entrance through the door. The engine began gathering steam.

Through the slats of the stock car, Jim East saw Slate gazing trustfully at him.

"Damned if I didn't have to turn my head to keep from bawling, knowing I'd betrayed him to the butcher," Jim confessed long afterward. "And damned if I didn't feel like Judas Iscariot when those wheels started rolling."

Slate showed no fear as long as he could make out the form of Jim standing by the track. But confidence started ebbing away when the train rounded a bend on its way to the stockyards at Kansas City.

The train gathered speed; its rapid motion caused Slate's stomach to turn sick. Jerks and bumps and stops made it hard for him to keep his footing. He tried to butt down the slats, only to find that the fragile-looking wooden bars were reinforced by exteriors of hard steel.

Lions and wolves, Apache tribesmen, bulls that had tested him in gory tournaments of horn—Slate had met and bested them all. But this new enemy, coiling and writhing like a snake when it turned the grades, was more than his match. He was whipped—swallowed alive by this foe that churned him around in its belly as if he were a sprig of grass.

Twenty-four hours of it left Slate lying limp and exhausted on the car floor. At Pierce City, Missouri, the train made a temporary stop. The cattle were unloaded at the railroad corral to be fed and watered before completing the journey to Kansas City.

Slate's eyes brightened a little when he found himself in a corral. This enclosure reminded him of any range pen in Texas. Then he looked back over his shoulder and saw the train impatiently swishing steam. It was plain that the monster meant to glut him down again.

Ignoring the hay tossed to him, he shambled toward the water trough. He took one gurgling sip, then backed slowly toward the center of the corral. His muscles bunched; his hoofs rose. With one last spurt, he went sailing through the air and over the corral fence.

Texans swear to this day that it was the mightiest leap ever made by a cattlecritter since that sally over the moon executed by a certain cow in the nursery-rhyme books. Once over the bars, he struck a long lope down a country road. Voices sounded behind him: voices of the cowpunchers who had been detailed to ride with the herd to Kansas City and of the corral attendants joining in the chase after one steer hell-bent on getting home.

Five miles he ran, with the dust from his flying hoofs choking and blinding the men behind him. The road dwindled to a dim trail; rocks and stumps began slowing him down. The pursuing voices sounded louder. Slate veered in panic across a patch of open sward bounded by a grove of hickory trees.

Just then, a party of farmers who had been scouting for squirrels stepped from the grove. Slate stopped still. The clodhoppers stood, eyes bulging, mouths open.

"Biggest steer I ever seen," commented one. "Must be one of them Texas cattle they're shipping through to Kansas City. But I didn't even think they grew 'em that big there."

"Ain't surprised at nothin' that comes out of Texas," grunted another. "But he's beef enough to last every family around here all winter."

"Better let that old bull be," warned a third. "Them horns have got plenty of fight left in 'em."

"Hell," scoffed a fourth. "I ain't afraid of no critter whose hide'll take bullets. Let's let him have it."

The farmers raised their rifles and spread out to circle Slate. The big bull looked at them in a puzzled manner. He stared at those faces that were hard and mean, unlike those he had known in his own country. Then, suddenly, he knew the score. This time it was strangers, not familiar vaqueros, who held the guns.

He braced his huge body and dared them with his look. It wasn't the first time in history that a Texan, fresh off the trail, had stood at bay against a mob of Midwest grangers. But none of them had ever run from plow pushers. And none worth shooting had ever fled from shooting-irons.

Fingers curled on triggers. Old Slate pawed the ground, daring the clodhoppers to come within horn reach. They drew back a little farther, but their guns were covering every part of him, from horn to tail.

Head on, Slate charged. Ten guns popped, and every bullet found a mark in his flesh. A second volley—more lead tore through his guts and his arteries, but Slate stayed on his feet, answering every salvo with a proud, defiant bellow.

Eight volleys later, with Slate managing to kick up one last fog of alien dust before he slumped to the ground, his eyes glazed and gushing red poured over the gray-green moss of his horns and the shattered blue of his hide.

The grangers were already slashing steaks from his carcass, still warm, when the party from the stockyards came rushing up. The group paused. A Texas cowboy stood looking in disgust at the gang of cornhuskers.

"I hope every bite of him will choke you jaspers," he said curtly. He reached down to touch the stained, mossy horns, then reverently doffed his sombrero.

"He'll be coming back," the puncher said. "You can't keep away from Texas somebody who loved it as much as he did. Wherever you hit a Texas waterhole, Slate's hoof marks will be there. Nothing and nobody can kill the longhorns. God made Texas for them to graze in. And, someday, they'll all come hoofing it home—every last one of 'em—to push out the damn-blasted shorthorns and claim what the Lord gave 'em."

The big ranges have gone since that day when an illustrious Texan met his end—met it standing on his feet like anybody from his country ought to die. Nowadays, the docile and fence-broken shorthorns yield more beef on smaller pastures.

But that elegy which a nameless cowboy pronounced for Slate and his kind still rings as a prophecy of times ahead, in the ears of many an unhorsed old Texas waddy.

Louder than the metallic throb of the oil pumps, they hear the hoofs roaring across the trails that lie buried under the hard layers of macadam and concrete. Over the syncopated din of name bands cluttering up the ether, they catch the echoes of all the songs that cowboys ever made up to herald the parade of beef that moved from Texas to Abilene and Cheyenne.

It will all return, because God never meant Texas to be closed-up country, like lesser lands which shelter the tamer specie of man and beast. The concrete will crumble and, once again, the trails will be clear and fresh under a man's mount. The chuck wagons will roll and creak where the Cadillacs now whizz and purr. The barbed wire will wither, and the ranges will be broad

and free, like the Texans who shot it out at the Alamo found them.

It will all happen when the great breed marches back to the home pastures, led by the giant bull whose horns are moss-green like the forests felled for suburbs to house millionaires.

Joshingly they say it, the old-timers whose dreams soar as their days ebb. But their earnestness blunts the joke when they look up to see some huge thundercloud whose jagged streamers are like the horns of a bull, and as they listen to rumbling crashes sounding not far from the cloud.

"There's Old Slate," they declare, pointing to the cloud. "Hear all that racket just behind him?—that's the hoof rattle of the herd. Slate's comin' back, and bringin' back all the longhorns. Bringin' 'em back to the place where the grass is so green and the water so cool."

If you challenge them for more proof than some little upset in the heavens, they are quick to call your draw. For, so legend testifies, that king bull's antlers were set in an unmistakable direction when he went down before the barrage of foreign artillery.

Old Slate's antlers pointed straight—straight as a compass—toward Texas.

## TRUNK LINE

THE Saratoga trunk of the last century might have been an absolute necessity for the well-bred young woman traveling West, but to the tough old Western stage drivers it was an invention of the devil. Its great bulk made it almost impossible to stow away properly on the coach, and every time one showed up the problem of loading the stage was magnified a hundred times.

One grizzled old driver won himself a measure of immortality (anonymous, unfortunately) because of his particularly violent hatred of the unwieldy trunks. He had picked up a passenger for Tahoe, a young lady from the East whose baggage, of course, was a single monstrous Saratoga. When the stage arrived at Tahoe, she was dismayed to find that the trunk had been left behind.

"No room fer it," the driver explained, "but I'll sure bring it up next trip!"

The next trip found the woman waiting for the stage. There was no trunk on board, and she proceeded to give the driver a violent tongue-lashing. He replied with an earnest and lengthy explanation of the difficulty of loading such a big item.

"But I got it licked now," he concluded, taking up the reins and preparing to leave on the return trip. "Figger it'd be best to haul it up in sections, like. Got a man busy right now, sawin' the derned thing in three pieces!"

P.S.: The next day he brought the trunk up, intact, and delivered it to a young woman who took an oath always in the future to travel light.

—BOB BEAUGRAND

A NOVELETTE BY JOHN E. KELLY

# *Place for Thunder*

**Purple eyes, a pretty face, and a fancy figure lure young Tom Welldon into a "treasure hunt," the goat for a team of slippery operators. In the end, the "Thunderer" takes the measure of them all.**

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Wanted: A Sucker*

MANY passengers complained of the heat and dust on the day-long trip from Sacramento to Redding, but Tom Welldon rode happily, enjoying the view. The best scenery was just across the aisle from his coach seat. Slender, spikeheeled high-button shoes of gray kid ranged primly on the worn floor. With a tantalizing glimpse of silk hose, striped satin of rose and black billowed over sedate girlish knees, cinched a hands-breadth waist, puffed in muttonleg sleeves. Under a froth of snowy lace the gown clung to the base of a tender column of creamy throat.

Hi-falutin' duds and city gal, Tom Welldon appraised, noting her white skin innocent of tan. That and his own newness in California overrode Tom's customary shyness with young females.

"Ma'am," he ventured, proffering his rumpled Sacramento newspaper, "you hankerin' to read the *Bee?*"

"Why, thank you kindly!" Purple eyes flashed smilingly under the girl's poke bonnet, a pomaded hand in fingerless lace mitt took Tom's extended sheet.

Beaming, Welldon pointed to a feature article topping a column.

"Here's real news—*Spanish Treasure Sought*," he read. "Wouldn't it be great to find a pile of gold and jewels?" he asked. "Right over in Trampas County, too, where I'm headin'."

To his utter surprise, the girl turned silently away, her dark head bent studiously over the *Bee*.

"Uppity!" Tom huffed, throwing himself back in his seat. He stared morosely through his window, missing the thoughtful glances that the girl stole over her shoulder at intervals.

A brakeman clumped through the swaying car. "Redding!" he called. "Thutty minutes fer dinner. The chow at the Chink's 'crost from the *dee*pot ain't killed nobody yit."

Welldon took his saddle from the baggage rack overhead. He settled his new white Stetson at a rakish angle, using the window as a mirror. A light touch on his elbow brought him eagerly about. The girl, smiling again, handed back the paper.

"Thank you so much!" she said. Again giving Tom no chance for reply, she turned to look out the window at the scattering handful of men on the station platform. Welldon scowled, snatching his saddle, but as he left his seat, the girl confronted him.

"I don't see my uncle," she said in pretty distress, gazing appealingly up at Welldon's lean height. "I don't know how I'll ever get my things to the Mountain House—"

"More'n glad to, Ma'am!" Tom interjected hastily.

Spirits soaring, he marched down the aisle behind his charmer, shouldering her brassbound box as if it were tumbleweed. Now, certainly, she couldn't go cold again. Maybe even, he thought thrilling, with her uncle away, she'd have dinner with him. Rather than eat lonely—self-righteously—and, anyhow, folks said city gals wasn't so persnickety about chaperons.

Words tumbled from Welldon as he set her box on the cinder platform. A half-smile froze on the girl's face. She looked nearer twenty-five than the eighteen of Tom's first guess. Avoiding his eyes, her glance darted over her luggage, winnowing the hurrying crowd.

"I couldn't think of such a thing," the girl said, her voice hard.

Tom felt confusedly that she took offense to cover another emotion. Brick-red, he shuffled his feet and mangled his hat, longing to turn and run.

"Oh, here's Uncle Mal now!" the girl cried suddenly. Her voice dropped. "He won't like me talking to strangers. Good-by, Mr.—" Without smile or thanks she was gone, moving toward a figure that plowed impatiently through the crowd.

Even in kinder mood, Welldon would have been hard put to like the newcomer on sight. Under a huge black hat, his body exhibited the hooked beak and gangling limbs of a bird of prey. A vulture, Tom thought, staring hostilely, six feet tall and mean all over.

Feeling like a slapped young 'un, unwilling to witness the meeting that wrecked his hopes, Welldon crossed the street to the beckoning lamps a barkeep was lighting in the *Big Bonanza*.

THE VULTURE'S GREETING was in character.

"Belle," he snapped, "was you lallygaggin' with that young saddle tramp? Where'd you meet up with him?"

The girl's eyes turned agate-hard. "He was on the train, Mal," she said defensively. "When you didn't show up to meet me, he toted my box and satchel. That's all."

"Who'd you say you was?" Mal demanded.

"I didn't," the girl retorted. "He didn't ask me. He's just simple."

"I'm layin' no bets to that," Mal said. "When I brung you up here, it was understood plain that you wouldn't talk to no one, so's they couldn't blab. But you can't keep away from anythin' in britches! I'm warnin' you fair, Belle, if that feller is onto our plans, I'll fix your purty face so you'll scrub floors, 'steada finaglin' for a livin'!"

"I don't need you, Mal Sist!" The girl faced the thin man, small fists planted on her rounded hips. "I did all right in the city. My fingers're crossed on your scheme, anyhow. I'd just as lief take the next train back."

A trace of anxiety softened Sist's tone. "Don't go off half-cocked, Belle," he urged. "Your share o' our killin' 'll set you up with the toniest honky-tonk in the city, or buy you a real swell for a husband, if you figure on turnin' respectable."

"I'll stay with the deal," Belle returned, mollified by the thought of quick fortune. "Fact is, I been studying how to better it, and I got the answer, Mal."

"Whoa!" growled Sist. "My plan's watertight, and no woman's monkeyin' with it!" Then, warned by the flash in Belle's eye, he feigned indulgence. "What's your idee?" he asked.

"It come to me when I saw that young feller," Belle began.

"So, you lied to me!" Sist interrupted ominously, seizing her wrist. "I oughta cut your face here and now."

Belle twisted free. With a lightning motion she swept the muttonleg sleeve to her left elbow. Before Sist saw clearly the tiny Derringer strapped to the girl's forearm, its twin muzzles threatened his heart. The thin man recoiled.

"Fer gosh sakes, Belle," he gasped, "put that thing away! You want the law on us?"

"Then you simmer down and listen to me!" The contempt in the girl's tone evinced her control of the situation. Stepping back a pace, she replaced her weapon.

"You figgered out the gettin', Mal, but not the getaway," Belle explained. "I don't crave dodging the law the rest of my days. We need a sucker the posse can ride down and string up."

"Why'd they do that?" Sist asked. "He wouldn't have no gold on him."

"The lawdogs'd figger he cached it," Belle said impatiently. "By the time they learn different, our trail 'll be colder than a Madam's heart."

"Supposin' thet punk knows who you be?" Mal demurred.

"Not him," the girl replied confidently. "I'm a sweet young thing he's hankerin' to pertect."

Sist remained unconvinced. "What makes you so certain you can get him?" he asked with scarcely veiled masculine contempt for woman's prowess.

The station porter lit a coal-oil lamp, affixing it to a bracket over the train announcement board. Belle's eyes flashed in the yellow light.

"I can get any man," she said throatily. The fine fabric swathing her bosom tautened as the girl squared her shoulders.

"Any man I *want*," Belle added hastily, as Sist moved toward her. "Not includin' you, *Uncle* Mal." Her tone held loathing.

CHAPTER TWO

*The Setup*

TOM WELLDON toyed with his breakfast. The Big Bonanza's forty-rod curdled his stomach in a St. Vitus dance that black coffee slowed hardly at all. The blond youngster held his head, cursing his hangover and the barkeep causing it. He was just starting on the girl for driving him to drink when he saw her coming through the door.

Belle crossed the Mountain House dining-room with an undulating walk refined yet provocative. None could call her bold, for her skirt held smoothly to its modish ankle length, yet no man could ignore her presence. Least of all Tom Welldon, whose spirits soared incredulously as the girl, after a momentary pause to reconnoiter, made straight for his table. He stumbled to his feet, spilling his coffee in an inky waterfall.

Black eyelashes fluttered shyly up at Tom; a timid smile stirred the girl's lips.

"Are–aren't you the gentleman who was so kind yesterday?" she asked in a breathless voice.

"Shucks, Ma'am–" Welldon kneaded his hands in embarrassment–"that wasn't nuthin'." Startled, he heard his tongue slip its lead: "Nuthin' to what I'd do fer you, if you was to ask me," he blurted out, crimsoning at his daring.

The girl's smile was dazzling.

"Oh, how wonderful!" she cried. Her husky contralto held a warm personal note, telling Tom it was he who was wonderful. "You make it so easy, what I was afeard to ask you."

"Anythin' at all, Ma'am!" Tom said eagerly. "Name it and it's good as done, a'ready."

The girl appeared to reflect.

"Didn't you have a saddle with you?" she asked.

"Sure do, Ma'am," Tom replied. "I jest brought it from Colorado, a new-fangled double-cinch tree. It oughta go great in these mountains! I don't reckon there's ary one like it in these parts." Youthful pride rang in his voice.

The girl swept the room with her strange eyes, seeming to shrink from the avid glances ringing her.

"Can't we talk more–privately?" she asked, coloring as she dropped her voice. Deftly she deflated Tom's soaring hopes while holding him securely hooked. "I thought perhaps the ladies' parlor would be empty," she murmured, "seein' it's still so early."

TALL FOR A GIRL though she was, and well made, she looked doll-like and fragile perched on a huge red-plush parlor chair, one shoe peeping from under her flounced hem, its mate tucked demurely beneath her. The impulse to aid this maiden in distress had Tom on the edge of his seat, leaning forward.

"Talk free, Ma'am," he urged. "We couldn't be more by our lonely was we–" He tromped on his runaway tongue.

"You mean–married?" the girl breathed. Through the veil of her lashes she watched Welldon's face flame. Her hands rose, breast-high, palms out, as if repulsing a bright vision.

"I couldn't think of myself," she whispered, her eyes dilating and darkening as they held Tom's, "while Uncle

counts on me."

"Uncle?" Welldon echoed dizzily, his spirits plummeting.

"Uncle Mal," the girl affirmed. "He's in trouble, bad. Some awful card sharks —I hope you'll forgive me usin' such a word, but Uncle says they're cruel and heartless as the ones in the sea—robbed him when Uncle Mal thought it was just a sociable game. So you see I have to help him—" the long lashes fluttered over a blush—"before I could dream of happiness like other girls."

Tom Welldon didn't see, knew only that he was drawn irresistibly toward this girl whose hints stoked his pulse to fever pace.

"But if he's lost his money, how could you help, Ma'am?" Tom asked blankly.

The girl craned her white neck toward the far corners of the room, seeking eavesdroppers. She pursed her lips so that her words carried only to the eagerly waiting Welldon.

"It's about the treasure," the girl said.

"Treasure?" Tom barked in surprise, clapping his hand over his mouth as his voice echoed loudly in the cavernous room.

"Please be careful!" Warm fingers pressed anxiously upon Welldon's wrist. "Yes, treasure. Only Uncle knew it, we thought. That's why I was so upset when you showed me the *Bee*. It's Uncle's only chance to get rich again and nobody, *nobody'll* get it away from him! I'd do almost anythin' to stop them!"

With her dark brows knit in determination, Tom found her very beautiful. Some lone kernel of his brain, watching her facial curves freeze, sensed her underlying hardness, but Tom crushed the thought savagely.

"We need help," the girl went on. "Uncle's getting old but he dassn't trust anyone around here. That's why I thought, you having your saddle and all, you could ride out of town and meet us on the Bear Camp trail. That way nobody'd suspicion. If you'd take Uncle Mal's pack mules, too, anybody seeing us'd figger he was just showing me around for a few hours."

"Sure, sure, Ma'am," Tom assented. "Anythin' you say. Where do I pick up the mule critters?"

He listened intently to the girl's directions, drinking in her sparkling eyes as excitement painted her cheeks with glowing color.

The girl rose. "I must go to Uncle now," she said. "He's taking me to buy some trail duds."

"I'll squire you there," Welldon offered eagerly. "Seems like I oughta meet up with him anyhow 'fore we leave."

The girl came close, almost brushing Tom's shoulder with her cheek. "If they saw you," she whispered, "it might spoil everything. You and Uncle Mal can talk on the trail."

"Who's 'they'?" Tom asked.

The girl's hands pressed quickly on his arm. "Wait here five minutes after I'm gone," she said, "so nobody'll see us together." Her eyes met his for a long instant, then she passed soundlessly through the portieres into the hotel corridor.

Left alone, Tom smiled fondly. She was just a kid, play-acting. Making out like a bear hid behind every chair. He'd talk to Mal on the trail, right enough, but he didn't aim to waste much time in Uncle palaver. Not with the girl there! He saw her, straight in the saddle, a new Stetson hanging by its bonnet strings while the mountain sun-

light played in her ebony hair. Whistling, he strode down the corridor.

"Wasn't that Belle Sennett?"

Welldon whirled in stupefaction. The voice came from a recessed doorway, deep enough that a man might stand therein without notice until a passer-by was abreast.

The speaker was of Tom's height and age, dark as Welldon was fair, with a square resolute face creased by a scowl. The gray broadcloth trousers of his townsman's suit were tucked into square-toed black boots.

"Well, speak up!" the stranger demanded. "Was that the Sennett woman?"

"I can't rightly say, suh," Welldon replied. "I never did hear her callin' name."

"Eh?" the other jeered. "And you jawin' with the dame private-like in the parlor!"

Tom flushed. "Listenin' snoopers are lower'n mud puppies," he grated. "Keep a civil tongue in your head when you're talkin' 'bout ladies!" He took an angry step toward the recess.

The stranger showed no sign of alarm. "If that was Belle Sennett, she's bad medicine for any man," he said doggedly. "Don't be fooled by that purty face." While Welldon boiled with speechless rage, the other deftly shot his question: "Was she askin' you for help?"

"Ye—" began Tom, then clamped down on his tongue. "What's it to you anyway?" he growled, furious at his slip.

"She wanted you to help 'her uncle'?" the stranger persisted.

"If you was snoopin', you'd know," Welldon retorted. "What's wrong if she was?"

"Just that that busted tinhorn, Mal Sist, ain't her uncle. With them two in cahoots, look out."

"Look out your own self!" Tom cried, cocking his right for an uppercut to the stranger's jaw. "I'll teach you to flannel-mouth a lady!"

The dark man's hand moved, but only to flip his lapel. A gold badge was pinned beneath.

"Don't mess with Uncle Sam," the stranger said evenly. "You're takin' on trouble aplenty if you throw in with them two."

Welldon drew back, dropping his arm.

"You're so persnickety 'bout callin' names," he said sullenly; "what's yours?"

"Les Parman, Deputy Marshal," the dark man replied.

"Are you fixin' to arrest that girl?" Tom demanded.

Parman shook his head. "Got no warrant," he admitted. "I'm up here on other business."

"Mind it, then!" Tom said angrily. "The next time you bother that girl, I'll make it my bus'ness to learn if Uncle Sam really deputized you. Likely"—inspiration smote Welldon—"Belle Sennett give you the mitten an' you was fixin' to do her dirt, bein' loco jealous! Lucky fer her, you met up with a knowledgeable feller that didn't swaller your palaver."

Before Parman could reply, Tom brushed past him. His spurs rang triumphantly on the stairs and along the street.

Feeling himself Belle's knight, he inspected Sist's pack animals in the livery corral behind the hotel and rented a mount for himself. A deep-chested bay, the mare was no thing of beauty but soundly dependable for rough country.

## Chapter Three

*Di'monds, Pearls, and Such Doodads*

WELLDON'S mood persisted on the morrow as he drew rein under the first pines of the foothills and turned to await his traveling companions. Almost immediately he saw them, riding at snail's pace along a converging trail from the lower part of town.

Sist played his role well, seemingly idling away a dull Sunday. He halted frequently to point out landmarks with an outstretched arm.

For long minutes Tom thought Belle had remained in Redding. His heart sank. Then it rose again, buoyed by his throbbing pulse. His eyes focused telescopically upon the slight figure of Sist's charge.

Could that be the demure Sennett girl? Crinoline and bonnet, mitts and buttoned shoes were replaced by jeans and Texas boots. Old Jake Levi, fashioning his honest garments for rugged wear, never guessed their glamour possibilities. Belle wore hers tight as a second skin, with swelling of thigh and bosom calculated to captivate friend and foe alike—if they were male. Under the cream-colored Stetson, shoulder-length ringlets shone like polished ebony.

No hint of the impression she had planned dimmed the twinkle of impersonal friendliness in Belle's eyes as she rode up to Welldon.

"What a wonderful day for a ride!" she caroled, stretching her arms toward the unclouded blue above.

Tom tore his eyes away from graceful curves as Belle fluffed her curls. He licked his dry lips.

"Powerful purty, Ma'am!" he assured her enthusiastically. "I never mind to see a purtier." It might have hailed sidewinders and scorpions for all Tom noticed.

Confident she had Tom hog-tied, Belle relaxed.

"Have Uncle Mal tell you about Redding," she said brightly. "It's so interesting!"

Welldon reluctantly came back to the business in hand. "Make me acquainted with yore uncle, Ma'am," he besought the girl, eying the cadaverous man distastefully. "We got some bus'ness to chaw over."

"That'll keep!" Sist snapped. "We got ter be safe 'cross the Divide 'fore we're missed." He pushed his big sorrel gelding between the two and rode up the trail.

"Foller me close, Belle," Sist ordered. "And you, young feller, keep them pack mules steppin'," his voice lashed at Welldon.

"If he wasn't Belle's uncle, I'd swear the ol' coot was bilin' jealous," Tom muttered.

Over the burdened mules, Welldon caught glimpses of Belle and followed gladly where she led. Tom rode on clouds; not so Belle. Her erect carriage that showed to best effect her tiny waist, shoulders soft to cushion a lover's head, drooped with the westering sun. Her Stetson pitched untended over her brow; she shifted painfully in the saddle.

Sist held a steady pace without halt at noon until dusk overtook the party well across the Divide. The thin man left the trail on a flat screened by willows fringing an icy thread of turbulent creek.

Welldon saw Belle sway in her sad-

dle and ran to help her dismount. The girl's dead weight came into his arms, molding her soft flesh against his chest. He carried her to the shelter of a cedar windbreak where Sist had dropped his bedding roll and saddlebags.

Belle lay inert, seemingly acquiescent, but when, carried away by her perfumed nearness, Tom sought her lips, she turned deftly aside. Welldon crimsoned at the rebuke and raised his glance to find Sist within arm's length, hate blazing in his eyes.

"Put the gal down!" Sist snapped at him.

Tom complied, less from fear than need to free his gun arm. Moving swiftly, he misgauged his distance and sat Belle down hard on a hummock of limestone.

"Oof!" groaned Belle, massaging her bruised contours. "Of all the slew-footed—" She caught herself and softened her glare to doe-eyed adoration. "Tawm, honey," she murmured, "you're so strong—"

"Let's see him tote the firewood, then," Sist broke in.

Tom faced the human skeleton, thumbs hooked loosely in his gun belt, deceptively nonchalant. Inside, his nerves crisped to come to grips with the other.

"I didn't sign up as no camp wrangler!" Welldon's voice was held in tight rein. "It's high time you and me had us a little palaver!"

"Eat first," demurred Sist; "plenty of time after."

Tom gathered dead twigs and a driftwood backlog jammed against the willows by the last flash flood. It was soon apparent that Sist had no intention of cooking. Belle was little better. She pouted prettily at a scorched thumb, wiped smoke-teared eyes with sooty fingers, begging Tom in dumb show to take over.

Welldon did, but the girl's glamour wore thin. He felt put upon, and Parman's warning came back. In silence he served up coffee and flapjacks, carrying his rations to the creek's edge to eat alone.

Behind his back, Belle whispered urgently to her lanky companion. Goaded beyond his sulky resistance, Sist spoke as Tom spread his blankets below his saddle-pillow.

"Reckon you got a right to know whar we're a-headin', now's we're safe outa town." The gaunt man's voice took on confidence as his rehearsed tale went smoothly. "There's an ol' Spanish treasure—"

"That was in the *Bee*," Tom interrupted. "Likely a whole passel of folks is diggin' it up a'ready."

"Let 'em dig," Sist scoffed, tapping his breast pocket. "I got the only map, the one made by the ol' Dagoes theirselves."

Tom extended a hand.

"I sure hanker to see that ancient writin'," he said.

The other drew back. "Time enough when we're pacin' off the directions," he said. "Anyhow, the ink faded so bad a man couldn't riddle it out in this light."

"What's the treasure?" Welldon asked.

"Gold!" replied Sist. "Old pirate pieces of eight, big as 'dobe dollars, scads of 'em." He read Tom's face shrewdly and pressed his advantage. "Likely there'll be plenty of jools, di'monds bigger'n grapes, pearls, and such doodads."

Welldon felt rich. "We're splittin' it thirds?" he asked.

"Couldn't hardly do that," Sist ob-

jected. "I promised a feller a cut for the map. There's heavy 'spenses for this trip—"

Belle caught Tom's gathering frown and drove her elbow surreptitiously into Sist's ribs. Instantly he changed tactics.

"But shucks, I'm a generous feller," he said. "I'll carry all them 'spenses myself and the cut for the fence—" Sist caught himself—"the gold buyer, that is. We'll divvy his check fair and square three ways."

Welldon strove to analyze the gambler's proposal but his attention was held by Belle's beaming smile.

"Isn't Uncle Mal wonderful, Tom?" she cried. "With all that money you could—you could—" her face flamed like the afterglow staining the horizon —"set up housekeeping!"

His mind awhirl with rosy visions, Welldon warmed toward Sist. But when he laid Belle's bedding roll between those of the two men, Sist snarled like a loco cougar.

"Don't go gettin' idees, young buck," he said furiously, hurling the girl's blankets beyond his own. "You're hired for work, not lallygaggin'!"

Tom flushed. "Am I botherin' you, Ma'am?" he demanded angrily of the girl.

Belle busied herself with her blankets, a graceful stooping silhouette against the dying fire.

"Uncle Mal's my only kin," her voice came muffled from her exertions. "Natural, he's touchy for me, but he don't mean nothing against you. Forget it, and turn in. We've a right far piece to go."

Welldon fancied a secret warmth, a private meaning in the girl's speech. Mollified, he rolled into his covers, turning his back on Sist.

## Chapter Four

### *Promise and Invitation*

DAWN'S dew was clammy on his fingers when Tom fumbled at the mare's picket rope to lead the bay to drink. Suddenly Sist came up at a half run.

"Hold her nose," the gambler whispered; "horses comin' down the trail."

Peering through the screen of willows, Welldon saw a wiry, clean-shaven blond man of twenty-five, with a mouth like a steel trap, heading westward. At his heels a second figure rode into the focus of Tom's recollection.

"Ease up," he whispered to Sist, kneeling tensely beside him with gun half drawn; "them ain't the varmints you're dodgin'. The one in city duds, name of Parman, ain't even from Reddin'."

Sist held his pose, his glance raking the retreating riders.

"How come you know him, if you only just come out from Colorady?" he asked.

"Met up with him yestiddy," Tom explained.

"What'd he 'low his callin' was?" Sist's question came swiftly.

"Deputy marshal," Welldon replied.

"Marshal!" Sist's gun whipped from its holster and dug into Tom's solar plexus. "I knowed you come with us too easy—that fool gal thinkin' she bamboozled you!" Sist's finger tightened on the trigger. "If you're in cahoots with that lawdog—"

Sist was still mouthing his threat when Welldon moved. Faster than a striking snake, his hand closed on the barrel of Sist's Colt, twisted it from the

other's grasp, and tossed it in the creek, all in one smooth motion. Tom threw himself on Sist, knocking the gambler upon his back and punishing him with hammer-blow jabs to the short ribs.

Sist fought crab-fashion. His long legs coiled about Tom's, striving to throw him, while his fingers raked Welldon's cheek, clawing toward his eyes. The filthy nails were an inch away; Tom jerked his head aside and felt steel prick his nape.

"Let Mal up or I'll slit your gizzard!" The voice was feminine but hard and metallic as the clank of spurs. Belle's face was in keeping. Her great purple eyes were thinned to slits, her peach-blossom cheeks darkened and furrowed with rage.

"You, too, Mal!" she cried, waving a needle-sharp stiletto at the recumbent antagonists. "I didn't come up here to see kids wrastling; there's better stomping and gouging any night on Jackson Avenue. Once we get the treasure, you can pound yourselves to jerky, and good riddance!"

Sist sat up, combing his disheveled hair with his fingers.

"Don't get uppity, gal," he growled. "I cut you in on this deal."

Belle's temper soared. "'Cut me in'?" she shrieked. "You tinhorn pack rat! Who rolled the young Dago for the map?"

"'Rolled'?" Tom echoed suspiciously.

The girl did a lightning about-face. "Dice," she explained. "You don't think a friendly game once in a while would be unladylike, do you, Tom?" Her voice was low, sweet, anxious for his approval.

Sist choked, earning a kick from Belle's pointed boot. Tom didn't note, having turned away in pursuit of his mare, which was wandering across the flat.

THAT DAY AND THE NEXT, racked by mutual suspicion, the three rode silently southwestward, into the lowlands and crossing the first spur of the Coast hills. On the third morning the trail dipped into a narrow valley, running steep-walled from the south. A strong creek growled white-lipped amid the boulders of its bed.

From a lone Indian fisherman Sist sought directions. The red man raised a bare arm upstream.

"Him Timberfork," he said. "Place for Thunder."

Belle developed stirrup trouble, requiring Sist's assistance. Miffed at being passed over for a greenhorn, Tom rode deliberately beyond range of their whispering. Dismounting sullenly, he shied pebbles into the frothing stream.

His mood melted in the glorious day. A faint breeze, fresh with the fragrance of pines, tempered the rising sun. Up-valley the mountainsides were banded pale green below the dark labyrinth of the cedars.

"Quit moonin', bub!" Sist called harshly. Mounted again, he turned into a narrow track heading up Timberfork.

Belle moved into her customary place at his crupper. To Tom, writhing in the coils of jealousy, she was never lovelier. Her midnight hair, uncovered, shone with a blue-steel sheen. The straining second button on her boy's jeans shirt clung precariously, grimly denying beauty and surging youth.

Soon after leaving the forks, the trail crossed a small natural clearing, an oasis of languorous heat, carpeted with short wiry grass. Belle nudged her mount aside, letting the pack mules pass to rein in beside Welldon. Her

smile was radiant as the morning.

"Wouldn't it be heaven to stay here, Tom?" she asked gaily. "Just we two!" Her large eyes, amethyst in the sun's glare, held his mesmerically.

Tom fought her spell. "I reckon we'd get a mite tired of roast road runner and fried gopher," he said drily.

Belle's smile became intimate, meaningful. "You forgetting the treasure?" she asked. "We'd eat off gold plates. And I'd dance for you—" her lissome torso swayed sinuously—"in my pearls!"

Riding close to Welldon until her leg was cupped under his, Belle threw her arms about his neck. The girl's full lips locked demandingly, expertly on his. Tom's senses swam; he drank in the heady scent of sandalwood from her hair.

Belle withdrew her mouth. With a hand flat on either of Tom's cheeks, she turned his head and looked deeply into his eyes. Her nostrils flared sensually.

"Tom!" she whispered huskily. But when, shaken with need of her, Welldon put out his arms, Belle spurred lightly out of reach.

With his keen gambler's ears, Sist had caught the lessened cadence of hoofs, swiveled in his saddle, and saw the long embrace. He fought down the instinctive jerk of his gun arm. A caricature of a grin stretched his froglike mouth as he rode on.

About noon they came to a fence, a green wall of prickly pear crossing the valley from side to side, broken at the trail by a pole gate bound with rawhide. Beyond stretched an apparently endless field of young corn. Welldon looked in amazement at the first crop he had seen since Sacramento.

"How come?" he called to Belle. "I didn't reckon to find nesters out here."

"They're not stopping us," she replied shortly, obviously unpleasantly disturbed.

In midafternoon a second fence separated the plowed land from a rocky pasture, closely grazed by longhorns and small Mexican milch cows. The valley narrowed between frowning heights.

A faint throbbing hung in the stagnant air. Tom shook his head to clear his ears but the pulsing persisted. Not the hum of bees, it grew slowly louder as they moved upstream.

The sun set early behind a conical peak; in the gathering dusk the valley turned eastward. Sist drew a folded parchment from his wallet, studying it covertly. Reassured, he waved his followers onward with imperiously flailing arm.

Riding closely bunched now, Tom saw the light over Sist's shoulder. Pinpoints of flame lit a rectangle in a dim white bulk under a grove of giant trees. A bell jangled harshly as the gambler pushed open a third gate. Sheep bedded in the trail for the night scuttled aside bleating; unseen hounds barked alarm.

A torch flared suddenly, turning the dim bulk to a whitewashed adobe structure of imposing size. A man who held the blazing lightwood knot dipped in pitch came forward, followed by an Indian servant carrying a shotgun at the ready.

Under the cone of light, the former's features showed clean-shaven save for a close-cropped chin beard, his silk shirt and slacks white and spotless. Welldon judged him in the mid-fifties, well set up, bearing easily the habit of command.

"Good evening, *Señores*," the newcomer greeted them. He shifted his

torch to throw more light on the third rider. "And *Señora*," he added, interest growing in his tone as Belle's jeans disclosed their unmasculine contours. "Miguel Lozano, your humble servant! Welcome to *El Trueñodor*, which Indians call 'Place for Thunder.'" His Spanish accent softly slurred the English words.

"We're jest ridin' through to the Coast, figurin' on homesteadin'," Sist replied. "Ain't there a way 'cross the hills here'bouts?"

"But yes," Lozano said, "an Indian trail, steep, rough, wet always from the spray of the *caida*—the waterfall. It is not for night, *especialmente* for *la Señora*." He bowed fluidly to Belle.

Tom saw Belle's flattered smile, her teeth flashing in the torchlight. The hackles rose on his nape. With an effort he heard Lozano.

"Do me the honor to pass the night in my poor house," the rancher said. "But rarely have I guests—"

"Wa'al, seein's how you put it that way—" Sist spoke with apparent reluctance—"I do reckon the gal's a mite tuckered. But we gotta mosey on, first thing in the mornin'."

## Chapter Five

### *Nightmare and Waking Horror*

A PAIR of beeswax candles, thin as a man's thumb, long as his arm, burned at either end of the long dining-table. The dark wood, polished mirrorlike from decades of rubbing, reflected their flames and the galleon shape of a silver centerpiece.

The unpainted, unpaneled rosewood door, wide enough to pass three abreast, through which the rancher led his guests, was matched by a twin in the far wall. Long unopened, repeated whitewashings had blurred its outline. Through the open windows the burgeoning night breeze, blowing down-valley, puffed its cool breath into the huge, high-ceilinged room.

Lozano occupied a high-backed chair, carved with armorial bearings, at the head of his board. Welldon sat opposite, Sist at his host's right.

At the left, where the candles' light fell full upon her, Belle beamed. Her raven locks were plaited with a scarlet ribbon, her piquant face was painted and powdered. Having no dress to change into, she attained evening décor by loosing a third button of her shirt. The rancher and Tom devoured her with their eyes; Sist glowered sourly.

"What is that damned pounding?" he asked irritably.

"The Thunderer?" Lozano smiled. "One becomes used—I do not hear unless I listen. *El Trueñodor*—but look for yourselves."

On the wall behind Welldon hung an ancient oil painting. Of indifferent execution, with paint cracked and scaling, it displayed a great column of water falling from a mountain top into a wooded valley.

"Is it really like that?" Belle shivered. "I'd be afraid to live so near."

"But no, *Señora*, only Lozano's enemies fear *El Trueñodor*. Never you!" The rancher's smile was for Belle alone. "One time, long ago, when my grandfather sit in this chair, wild Indians, *bravos*, came, burning, killing. Look you, the night was bright with stars, but when they cross the *arroyo*—" Lozano fumbled for the word—"the Timberfork, going home, comes a flood from the *caida*. All drown'.

"Men came to my father later on with papers claiming the ranch. They dig for gold behind the fall. One day, *whoosh*, whole side of Thunderer cave in. Men still under."

"Promise you'll never turn it loose on me," Belle coquetted.

"Never while I live," Lozano replied, hand on heart.

Barefooted Indian servants circled the table, pressing unfamiliar Spanish dishes upon the guests. Only Belle did them justice. Lozano plied the girl with flattery and wine, leaning close, neglecting his own plate.

Tom's stomach contracted with rage, a green mist swam before his eyes. Crouching in his place like a turkey buzzard in his black broadcloth, beaked head extended on his leathery neck, Sist picked at his food while his mind laid snares for the others.

Belle was all woman, preening herself in Lozano's adulation. Confident of her conquest of the rich rancher, she ignored Welldon. Tom seethed. He hated Belle—and wanted her until the blood ran riot in his veins. He must break her infatuation for Lozano, shatter the spell. Recklessly he threw the fat in the fire.

"Ain't there an old Mex treasure buried here'bout?" he asked loudly.

The silence following tore at his nerves. The candle flames jiggled in the ceaseless throbbing of the Thunderer. Three pairs of eyes bored into Tom's. Sist's threatened murder; the suffused purple of Belle's foretold refined torture and agony. Only Lozano showed surprise.

"Treasure?" the rancher asked with slow intentness. Tom thought of a cougar watching a game trail. He threw his next bombshell into Sist's slit-eyed mask.

"Your map showed the treasure on Timberfork, right?" he asked.

"Map?" Lozano laughed thinly. "The world is small, so." He made a circle with thumb and forefinger. "Two, three month now, my son Juanito go to San Francisco. When he is gone, I cannot find the old map of our grant, the land my great grandfather have from King Carlos. No matter; everybody know our line is the top of the mountains."

Lozano's stern glance swept his guests. "I think maybe you come for treasure, not homesteading," he said silkily. "You have Juanito's map? Such a pity; my father find the treasure long time past."

White-lipped, Sist got to his feet. "Damned Dago chow set my gut afire!" Clapping hands to his stomach, he staggered toward the door.

All solicitude, Belle ran to aid the sufferer. As she reached Sist behind Tom's chair, Tom heard the thin man's swift whisper:

"Get the Dago away! I got it riddled out."

Left alone with Lozano, Tom rose uneasily. The rancher eyed him with cold courtesy.

"I hope your friend is well by morning, *Señor*," Lozano said. "You are leaving *muy*—very early."

With Belle absent, the fever ebbed in Welldon's blood, leaving only disgust and an immense weariness.

"Okay," Tom grunted. "I'll hunt my beddin' roll."

"But no need," Lozano rejoined, mollified by Welldon's manner. "Tonight you sleep in bed. Come, I show you."

The room was a whitewashed niche, narrow and bare as a monk's cell, opening from the main corridor. Grateful to Lozano for separating him from Sist,

Tom threw himself on the drum-taut cot of woven rawhide strips and was instantly asleep.

NIGHTMARE STALKED HIM. *El Trueñodor* poured from the zenith, drenching him. Teeth chattering, he hugged himself in a Tucson blanket. The throbbing thunder approached, deafeningly. It roared above Tom, encompassing him, shaking the cot to which the sleeper clung desperately.

A final crash broke his grip. Tom sat up in a cold sweat. His ears rang, the sharp scent of burned powder stung his nostrils.

In a bound Welldon reached the door, which he had left ajar. It was closed, the latch-string gone. Clawing until he broke his nails, he could not prize it open. The planks resisted stolidly, giving slightly, taking up the slack while he sought a fresh grip.

The creeping motion told its story; the rawhide string, tied to the latch, had been looped about a bar spanning the doorway. Panting, Tom turned to the window. The wide opening was secured by a manproof grill in Spanish fashion.

The ironwork formed an ebony tracery on the lesser dark of the night without. Unwilling to concede defeat, he pushed his head through the largest aperture. His shoulders stuck hopelessly.

As he struggled to withdraw, faint light streamed from an adjoining window. To Tom came the sounds of struggle, thud of bare feet, the crash of an overturned chair, Belle's voice high and menacing.

"Stay where you are!" the girl cried. "Take one step to follow me and—"

Twin shots, magnified by the close space, echoed and re-echoed through the dark house.

Tom tore himself from the grill's embrace, ripping both shirt and skin, and dashed to the door. To his utter amazement it hung ajar. In the pitch-black corridor he collided hard with a slight form. Sandalwood assailed his nostrils.

"Belle!" he cried. "Who shot? Are you hurt?"

Wordlessly the girl twisted in his grasp. Metal struck stunningly against his temple. Tom swayed, fighting to keep his feet. His arms closed on emptiness, a mocking laugh floated out of the dark. Only then did he realize she had been naked.

A cold rage cleared Tom's head. Groping back to his bed, he strapped on his belted gun, stamped into his boots. Holding the Colt tensely leveled, ready for ambush, he tiptoed toward the dining-room.

Before him the fumes of blasting powder grew stronger. His toe found the threshold. Holding his breath, every sense alert, Tom waited until his lungs ached. No breathing, stir of body, or odor betrayed human presence.

He mapped the great room in his mind. Suddenly he took five swift crouching steps, coming up, as he had figured, against the long table. Now he must discard the protection of darkness. Shielding the match with his body, Tom struck a light and held it to a pair of the long candles. Whirling while his finger froze on the trigger, Tom swept the revealed room. His gamble had won; he was alone.

Powder had done its work; the whitewashed door gaped splintered, its secret plain, the treasure looted. Pieces of eight dribbled from a shattered strongbox. Alongside, a clear rectangle on the vault's dusty floor marked a jewel case snatched within the hour.

Snagged on a broken panel hung a jagged strip of black broadcloth.

Through the barred window Tom heard the faint jangle of the gate bell. His jaw set—Sist and the Sennett strumpet were hitting the trail with their loot!

Face against the grill, Tom stared into the night, cupping his hands to shut out the candle glow. Near the fence a shotgun boomed, suddenly loosed hounds yipped and roared as they tore down the valley. A six-gun barked in their path; a dog howled and the pack fell silent. Straining his eyes, Tom thought to make out dim figures moving, only to lose them under the trees.

A dim sound in the depths of the house brought Tom whirling about, hand gripping his gun. A slithering sandaled foot—a stealthily opened door rubbing the tile floor?

Silently as he could, Tom crossed to the inner door, mouth wide to lessen pressure on his eardrums. He heard nothing—nothing but the devilish drumming of *El Trueñodor.*

Down the corridor faint light illumined a doorway. Forgotten in the rush of events, the twin shots crowded into Tom's memory. Might they hold the secret of the night's violence?

Anything was better than staying where he was, a sitting duck to hovering weapons. Rushing to the table, he blew out the candles with a great gasping breath. Feeling for the corridor, he moved slowly forward, left shoulder against the wall. His breath caught in his throat, his hands went cold. Dropping his sombrero backward on its cord, he inched ahead and peered past the jamb.

He was looking into the master bedchamber. Large as the dining-room, it was sparsely furnished in the style of *Californio* ranches. Bear and cougar skins scattered on the red tile floor. A stout oaken chest with brasswork stained green by time buttressed either end of a massive walnut wardrobe. Muskets and sheathed *machetes* hung from hand-wrought spikes. In a far corner a candle guttered before a tiny shrine let into an adobe pilaster.

These Tom noted mechanically, as his eyes swept the room from right to left. Then, with a sudden shock, he saw the foot. So close that he could have touched it. Bare, motionless, toes pointing upward, it protruded from a high disheveled bed.

Tom stole into the room. Spread-eagled, head toward the wall, Miguel Lozano sprawled where flying lead had knocked him. An expression of startled rage contorted his livid features. Thick arterial blood matted his hairy chest; above the heart twin punctures oozed, their pump stopped.

Tom bent close over the wounds. But for the powder marks they might be the mark of monstrous fangs. Tom whistled soundlessly. Some shooting!

Perversely his spirits rose. Belle packed no gun, that he'd seen. A girl could hardly shoot so fast, so straight. If she *did* hit the first time, her second shot would split the door, like as not. Probably she'd been sleeping like he was when she heard Lozano dry-gulched and lit out of her room not thinking to dress. Poor kid, what must she have thought of him, grabbing her like he was dead set on— And her sweet on him, talking of getting hitched and all! Tom blushed, feeling lower than a mudpuppy in dry season.

In an access of good feeling, he closed the dead man's staring eyes. The body was barely warm. He lifted a limp arm

to cross it on Lozano's chest, goggled unbelievingly, and let it fall. Gingerly, as if seizing a snake, Tom pulled a bright-colored cloth from under the corpse's shoulder.

Redolent of sandalwood, the cloth had bound Belle's hair at dinner.

## Chapter Six

### *The Trap Has Jaws*

DISILLUSION crushed Tom Welldon. He sank limply on the bed, slack-jawed, glaring at the scarlet proof of treachery. Wrapped in gloom, he had no ears for stealthy movements beyond the door, knew nothing until a human avalanche hurled him to the floor. Bruised, bound with rawhide thongs digging mercilessly into his flesh, dazed by the concussion of his fall, Tom stared bewildered up into a dark circle of glowering Indian faces.

A foot stone-hard from decades of trail loping prodded the prostrate man. Outlandish syllables assailed him, a horny thumb gestured toward the bed.

"*Mató a Don Miguel?*" It was more accusation than question.

Border cattle drives had given Tom a smattering of Spanish.

"No!" he shouted, shaking his head.

A sandal stamped upon his mouth. "*Silencio!*"

Above him acrimonious debate raged. Hearing "*Juez,*" he prayed his captors would turn him over to the law. Even frontier justice was preferable to Indian reprisals. Shouts of "*Cuelguelo!*" were gibberish to the prisoner, but the pantomimed noosed neck and protruding tongue all too ghastly plain.

The grunts and shouting ended in a muttered decision, which Tom could only guess in fear. Some of the Indians departed, others squatted close to their captive, fixing him with basilisk stares. The candles burned out; the chill of the night damp struck through Tom's jeans. His bonds choked off circulation; his legs ached excruciatingly. He must move, if ever so little. He raised his knees; a rain of cudgel blows beat them down again.

The night, the false dawn dragged through a dazed eternity. Additional Indians, the night's dew soaking their drill pantaloons, came to gaze poker-faced over the shoulders of Tom's guards. The rising sun sighted through the grill on the captive's face and the flies had found his defenseless eyes when the corridor resounded with the jingle of spurs, the rasp of booted heels.

The brave who had shouted "*Juez!*" returned with three white men at his heels.

The newcomers had eyes only for the corpse. They crowded about the bed, commenting to one another in low tones. The eldest, a *Californio* with a white goatee lending dignity to his loose linen clothing, turned at length to the Indian guide.

"His pistol," he said in Spanish, and took Tom's Colt from an outstretched bronze hand.

The three examined the weapon while Tom's anxious gaze raked their backs. The old man must be the judge; but the others—? Memory nagged him, limning a mountain flat, a screen of willows—

"Parman," Tom croaked.

The man in gray swung about, instant recognition in his eyes.

"You!" he said in a hard voice. "Then we know two more of the gang. How many others were with you?"

"None," replied Tom, working his dry mouth. "Listen, I—"

"Hold it, you'll get to talk," the deputy interrupted. He looked keenly at the trussed prisoner. "If I have you cut loose, will you give me your word to stay here 'til I say?"

"You bet!" said Tom eagerly. "I—"

"You sure do run off at the mouth!" Parman exclaimed impatiently. "Give your ears a chance. You set right there 'til I come back. Move and the Injuns let daylight through your carcass with your own gun. Savvy?"

Tom nodded; anything to be free of the torturing rawhide.

"*Sueltelo*," the judge ordered. Sullen brown faces turned toward Tom; fingers gone clumsy fumbled at his knots. A spatter of Spanish followed.

"He's tellin' 'em to keep you close corraled," Parman told the prisoner. "Now he'll hand over the gun."

The guide reached eagerly for the Colt, hefting it, training it on Tom. His dark eyes gleamed.

"You're a dead pigeon if you mess with them," Parman warned Tom. Deferentially the deputy marshal addressed the judge. "If Your Honor's seen enough here, let's look around outside. I got a hunch this ain't the whole story."

Surreptitiously Tom flexed his muscles, feeling the needlelike sting of blood flowing again in his freed limbs. He kept his bargain, ignoring the provocative jostling of the Indians, who were eager for an excuse to shoot him.

PARMAN CAME BACK ALONE. Retrieving the gun, he herded the discomfited Indians from the room. Leaning against the door with a nonchalance that masked hair-trigger alertness, he regarded Tom sardonically.

"Talk!" he ordered.

Tom did, spilling the whole sorry tale from the encounter on the train until the Indians swept over him. Only one item did he omit. He could not mention Belle's nudity.

The deputy marshal nodded. "That makes you out such a sucker I'd bet it's the truth," he said.

Tom bristled. "What do you mean, sucker?" he asked. "We was splittin' three ways."

Parman laughed shortly. "Yes, sure," he mocked. "Sist and the Sennett dame get the loot—and you get jail, though they meant worse."

"Huh?" Tom gaped.

"I don't believe you see it yet," the deputy said in wonderment. "They took you along for a fall guy, to be caught and strung up, taking the heat off of them."

"That's where you're plumb wrong!" Tom retorted triumphantly. "If they was fixin' to get me caught, why'd Belle open my door?"

"My grannies!" The deputy struck his forehead in exasperation. "Ain't you weaned yet? They had to let you out—after the robbery. If you was found with your room locked from the outside, it would be proof plain that you had no part in all this—" he swept a hand toward the corpse. "And you wouldn't be walkin' far, in them Texas boots. Where'd you leave your hoss?"

"In the small corral, front of the house," Tom replied.

"It's plumb empty."

"My Colorado saddle!" Tom cried, the true rider's love for his leather overshadowing all else.

"There's a couple that seems a Don like Lozano wouldn't have, settin' on the top rail," Parman said. "One's new with double—"

"A couple!" Tom stared at the deputy. "Was the other small, nigh black, with a high cantle?"

Parman wrinkled his brow in thought. "Seems like," he admitted. Excitement gripped him. "Say, you ain't fixin' to tell me—"

"Sist double-crossed Belle, too!" Tom shouted. "She's bound to be close by."

"If she hightailed down the river trail, Bart'll pick her up."

"'Bart'?" echoed Tom.

"Bart Crowell, my sidekick. You seen him in here," the deputy explained. "The best damn bloodhound in north Californy. If he has to foller Sist plumb to Redding to get him, he'll do just that.

"I'll take my hunch you're right about Sennett bein' nigh—and that you're on the square," Parman mused. "Judge's gotta bury Lozano, an' I may need a hand." He handed over Tom's Colt. "I'm deputizin' you."

"You're no sheriff," Tom said doubtfully, slapping his gun into his belt. The accustomed weight on his hip restored his confidence; the night was a bad dream—until he looked at the bed.

"This Lozano was a high-up Don," the deputy said. "That makes the killin' international and brings us Feds in."

## Chapter Seven

### *The Thunderer Repays*

AT THE outer door they stood in a box canyon, narrowing swiftly to the apex of the Thunderer. Parman scanned the precipitous slopes.

"Couldn't no woman climb 'em," he said. "If Sennett didn't take the road, she's holed up hereabouts."

"Lozano 'lowed there's an Injun trail crossin' the mountain by the waterfall," Tom observed.

"Hey? That's it!" Parman cried. "Why're you so damn shut-mouthed? Come on!" He set out running.

A narrow, little-used trail led from the house across a close-cropped V of green pasture to a knot of rain forest hemming in the base of the waterfall. Icy water dripped incessantly from the leaves of holly, live-oak, and *madrone;* strangling vines wove the trunks into a spiny rampart. The Thunderer's flood crashed upon a pyramid of house-sized boulders, beating the white water to froth. Speech was impossible, eyes and ears ached from the intolerable concussion.

The route skirted the right edge of the rock pyramid, braving a blinding curtain of spray to gain a narrow aperture in the forest wall. Within, the trail climbed abruptly in semi-darkness, rude steps and footholds interspersed with steep stretches of greasy mud.

Parman put his mouth close to Tom's ear. "That dame must want out powerful bad, if she come this way," he shouted. "I gotta know fer sure." He struck a hell stick from his match safe, holding it over the trail. "By damn, she did," he cried, pointing. "Look there!"

In the black ooze were prints of small boots, climbing.

"Sennett couldn't 'a' found this place in the dark," the deputy reasoned. "She come after sunup, all a-sweat to get over the mountain." He read sign. "Yonder she slipped. Here she grabbed ahold—" Parman studied the twisted briar—"yeh, an' cut herself plenty on the prickers, judgin' from the blood. She ain't over three hours ahead of us."

They went up, clinging, clawing, giving each other a hand. Three hundred feet above, where the forest thinned, they came out on a patch of bare rock. The trail forked; Parman found no sign of their quarry's passage.

"We'll split up," the deputy panted, "an' meet on the ridge. You take the left fork. Fire twice if you locate Sennett."

The trail continued, steep as before, but dry now, the trees making way for scrub brush and weedy grass. The mid-morning sun beat upon the slope; bees buzzed, drunk with honey, among the wild flowers.

Tom lifted his eyes, entranced by the beauty of the scene. The ridge, an immense tilted wall, was framed in cloudless blue. Close to his left the torrent tumbled downward, its thunder muted by the height. The lip of the fall, still far above, glittered as new silver.

Framed at either bank by the deep green of buckbrush, the smooth expanse of the flood was broken by a row of close-ranked rocks, like ancient battlements. The hurrying water surged atop the lower stones, writhed between the taller, tearing its smooth skein into ribbons whose erratic fall produced *El Trueñodor's* demoniac drumbeat. Tom plodded resolutely upward.

The lip was at his elbow, the trail ran straight between dwarf jungles of hardhack.

Tom stopped in mid-stride, frozen by a sudden sense of peril. His glance swept the lichened rocks of the path for a weaving gray-white head.

"Maybe Californy rattlers are dumb," he muttered.

To Tom's left a shoulder-high boulder parted the scrub, crowned by dense foliage of *manzanilla.* The tiny lacquered leaves, motionless in the noonday hush, made a crazy quilt of gold-stippled green on the shadows of the interior. Made a pattern—Tom grew cold—of twin purple glares, twin metal muzzles.

"Belle!" Tom cried, taking a long step forward.

The woman's voice spat like a cornered cat. "Keep walking, sucker! Tip off the lawdogs and you'll get what the Dago did."

Tom ignored the snarl, the leveled weapon. He saw only the girl who had stolen his heart in the daycoach.

"Belle," he besought her. "The law's at Lozano's house, and on the trail at the crest. You can't get away. Give yourself up!"

"And hang!" the ambushed woman jeered.

"No," Tom returned; "they won't have no evidence."

"Ain't the Dago dead?" Belle demanded.

He nodded. "And buried, by now."

"You must think me dumb as you," sneered Belle. "Any lawdog'd know the slugs in the Dago come from my derringer."

"Throw it in the 'fall," Tom replied, gesturing. "The law'd never find it and they're bound to turn you loose."

A slight warmth appeared in the woman's voice. "Are you on the level?" she demanded.

"Yes, Ma'am!" Sincerity rang in Tom's tone.

"We were fixing to frame you," Belle said, consideringly.

"Sist was," Tom said stoutly. "You never."

"You wouldn't testify against me?"

"I couldn't," Welldon replied. "I never saw nothin'."

"Then who shot the Dago?"

"Sist, o' course," Tom said. "Tinhorns

pack them pocket guns."

"I ought to have you as my law wrangler," the woman said admiringly. "Looks like I'm in the clear, sure enough."

"You heard the shootin' and lit out," Welldon prompted. "Can't nobody fault you for that." He moved closer to the boulder. "Give me your gun and I'll get rid of it."

Belle emerged from her concealment. "Reckon I'm not safe while the law could get this," she said. "Throw it 'way out where the water's deepest." As she held out the derringer, Parman appeared beyond the hardhack, coming downtrail at a lope.

"Dirty double crosser!" the woman shrieked, snatching back the gun.

The twin muzzles blazed as Tom threw himself aside. Lead tore his holster, seared his thigh. He rolled with the impact and came up, Colt in hand. The trail was empty, save for the racing Parman. Belle escaped through the brush, but that way lay the stream.

"Come back, Belle, come back!" Tom yelled at his lungs' utmost.

The figure in jeans did not pause. She leaped to the nearest rock, a second, as if they were stepping stones. With incredible nerve and balance she neared midstream.

A rock was awash, slippery with weed. Belle staggered, fell prone, clutching desperately. She lost her hold.

On the lip of the falls the white water showed a smudge of ebony hair.

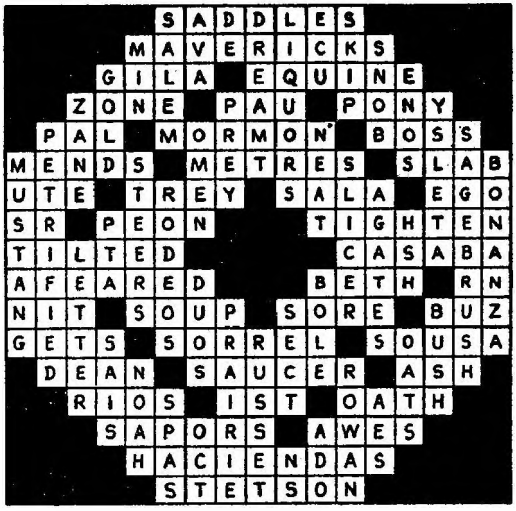
Parman whitened. "I'd liefer hang," he breathed.

"Lozano said," Tom whispered, "if anyone done them Dons wrong, the 'fall would get hunk. It sounded crazy then, but now—"

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

THE END

## Solution to Western Crossword Puzzle on page 90



# free-for-all

YOUR EDITORS take extra pleasure this month in presenting another short novel by L. L. Foreman—"The Mustang Trail." Typically, Foreman chronicles the adventures of a Westerner who throws a long long shadow; the Foreman gallery is replete with them (remember Bain Foyle of "Powdersmoke Empire" and Mike McLean of "Last Stand Mesa" and Drew Day of "Call Me Solo"?) but it seems to us that Rogue Bishop, border bravo of "The Mustang Trail" throws the longest of 'em all! Agree?—Have another favorite?—Letters welcomed!

We're happy, naturally, to announce that another Foreman novel is on the way; it's untitled as yet, but you can count on its being a ringtailed ripper, actionwise.

● Two novelettes this month, differing mightily, but we're confident they'll both please you a lot. John E. Kelly's "Place for Thunder" uses the greenhorn-hero theme, whereas George C. Appell's "Borderland" hero is on the sophisticated, perhaps slightly jaded, side. Nope, it's not Ross Ringler, either! But we haven't seen the last of roamin' Ross yet: he's already slated to appear in another yarn or two.

● A Dan Cushman short is something your editors have been wanting to bring you for some time; finally it's here. "The Feminine Touch" is a chuckle-producer, as you'd expect in a story by the author of "The Ripper from Rawhide." Dan's Comanche John, by the way, may be showing up in these pages again before long.

● Old-time devotees of B. M. Bower—as well as new recruits to Bowerdom—will welcome this month's reprint, "The Man Who Would Play the North Wind," another classic tale of that not-to-be-forgotten Flying U bunch.

● Harold Preece's fact-fiction piece, "Eternal Longhorn," is liable to get under old-timers' skins, too. Hal reckons it one of his best efforts, allowing he put into it full measure of his nostalgia for Texas and the undying things of her past. Certainly, Old Slate must rank as one of the noblest Texans of them all!

● Another Texas hero is brought back to life in M. D. McElroy's "Knife Master," the story of Jim Bowie. Author McElroy reports:

"I was born on the 'Comanche Line'

and bred on stories of the Confederacy and the frontier. One of my great-grandfathers was a Texas Ranger Captain before he rushed to California with the Forty-niners; he came back to make honest Texans of his family. My earliest memories are of playing leap-frog with the calves, eating 'cowboy bread' for breakfast, and sitting on the top rail of a cedar fence watching the home-town rodeo where local hands performed such feats of daring that the city-programed rodeos I see now always seem anemic in comparison.

"And always I remember listening to Dad's stories. He could spin a wonderful yarn, and I was an eager listener. He made the frontier hardships and triumphs very real to me, and many of the old-time heroes like next-door neighbors. I began writing while a high-school junior, turning out a weekly column for two years on the local paper, and have done newspaper work off and on ever since. I worked my way through college and to a master's degree with a variety of jobs, mostly ghost-writing. Anything and everything about the West is meat and drink to me; I collect frontier stories and have sold quite a few of them."

● In past issues we've given you a sampling of readers' reactions to Clay Fisher's novel, "War Bonnet" (February, '52). A couple of our authors have had comments to make, also:

"I never read such anatomical frankness in any of the four languages at my command; but nothing to offend, very well done—the proof of the master pen." (John E. Kelly.)

"The first magazine fiction I've read about the mountain men that had guts and teeth and sounded like the real thing. Congratulations. . . ." (Hal G. Evarts.)

● Two Dell Book Westerns go on sale in September: *Saddlebum*, by William MacLeod Raine; and *No Range Is Free*, by E. E. Halleran—topnotchers both!

—The Editors.

# CALIFORNIA CONDOR

MAJESTIC IN FLIGHT, on wings ten feet from tip to tip, a fabulous bird scans distant earth for food. This is the California condor, world's largest flying land bird. When carrion is sighted or a carefully watched coyote leaves its kill, the condor lands to tear hungrily at the carcass. The condor eats heartily and a thirty-pound bird can devour an entire cow in remarkably short time. Though magnificent aloft, the bird is clumsy on the ground, presenting the ugly, untidy appearance of all vultures. At one time the condor's range extended throughout our West-coast states. Today the giant bird is nearly extinct, having succumbed to poison bait set out for predators, to its own unprolific nature (one egg in four years), and to the invasion of nearly all wilderness by man. Shy and easily frightened, the condor will not attend its nest if man is near. For the past twenty years bird lovers and naturalists have been making great efforts to provide sanctuary for the condor. Pressure by these conservationists has resulted in a refuge at California's Los Padres National Forest. Here live the last of the California condors, a grand total of sixty remaining birds.

EARL SHERWAN

# *In this Issue:*

**THE MUSTANG TRAIL, *by L. L. Foreman***

A novel of high adventure and sizzling conflict in the colorful days of the Southwest, featuring Rogue Bishop, top gambler and gun master. Trouble is Rogue's trade, and he's packed his winnings out of tough towns from Montana to Old Mexico, but Hell's Hundred proves the toughest one yet. After a bottle-heaving battle leaves him financially on the light side, Rogue tackles a horse-hijacking venture with his eyes open and his six-guns handy. Trouble multiplies—in the persons of a grafting army officer, a brutal buffalo tramp, a suspicious horse raiser, a fascinating gal (who just may be a witch), and a slick long rider with a fast gun and an abiding grudge against Rogue Bishop. A hair-trigger action yarn by a master storyteller.

**BORDERLAND, *by George C. Appell***

A powerful novelette. The last free land to be opened for homesteading offers thousands of folks the opportunity to make a new life. To Dr. Jeff McCall, haunted by past tragedy, it means only a chance to forget the old one.

**THE FEMININE TOUCH, *by Dan Cushman***

Even an old sourdough miner's apt to get the lonesomes, but it turns out that a mail-order bride can leave a lot to be desired when it comes to real companionship!

**PLACE FOR THUNDER, *by John E. Kelly***

A novelette in which a pretty face and a fancy figure bait a trap for a footloose range rider. The slickers, though, find the "Thunderer" a tougher nut to crack.

—and other stories and features, including "Mr. Hemlock," by Marvin De Vries; "Eternal Longhorn," by Harold Preece; and a reprint classic by B. M. Bower.