

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

15¢

APRIL



TEN FEATURE BULL'S EYES!
FEATURE NOVEL

• **WELCOME TO HANGTOWN!**

by **ROD PATTERSON**

TWO NOVELETTES

• **BOOTHILL'S
ELECTION DAY**

by **CARL McK. SAUNDERS**

• **BUGLE CALL
TO GLORY**

by **HARRISON COLT**

- **BLACKBURN**
- **CHADWICK**
- **CARPENTER**
- **STEELE**
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
PUBLISHED
APRIL 11th

VOLUME XXXIII APRIL, 1947 NUMBER 1

1—Complete Novel—1

WELCOME TO HANGTOWN!.....Rod Patterson 6
Chet Logan's one-man war against the notorious Belle Prince made him first choice for a mob's hungry hangrope.

2—Feature Novelettes—2

BOOTHILL'S ELECTION DAY.....Carl McK. Saunders 44
In electing Matt Bannister sheriff, Wind River County had gotten itself a red-hot potato. For Bannister had just one system—shoot it out!

BUGLE CALL TO GLORY.....Harrison Colt 78
A murderous Apache enabled Lieutenant Carter to unmask a supercilious superior.

3—Short Stories—3

THE DEVIL'S AUDITOR.....Tom W. Blackburn 23
Juan Pohan turned bank robber—and cheated the most ruthless gent in town.

WHEN THE BONEYARD IS THE GOAL.....Richard Brister 30
Anything can happen when an aristocratic remittance man and a half-breed team up to seek a treasure.

SADDLE-BUM'S REVOLT.....John Jo Carpenter 36
When "Six Point" Buck got out of jail, he laid the groundwork to get right back in.

HERITAGE FROM HELL.....Gunnison Steele 59
Flash sent his outlaw partner to the gallows—and then collected the dead man's last gift.

YOKE CREEK LOSES A TENDERFOOT.....Joseph Chadwick 62
To survive on bloody Staked Plains, Quaker Will Mason had to learn to hate—and kill.

BUTTON'S LONG QUEST.....Ray Gauden 70
When the kid came looking for his brother, the Rocking R boys got tongue-tied.

WOLF-HUNGRY FOR TROUBLE.....Jerry Wing 72
Young Billy was set to burn up the West—till he met a horsethief . . . and a girl named Charlie.

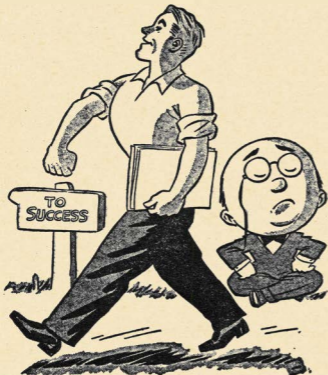
CROWBAIT SAVVY (Extra story this month).....Ray Vicker 90
The future of Buffalo Springs depended on a flea-bitten nag named Whiskey Kate.

Western Feature

NEXT ISSUE (Illustrated)..... 89
Preview look at "Johnny Hardluck Pulls a Boner" by Branch Carter.

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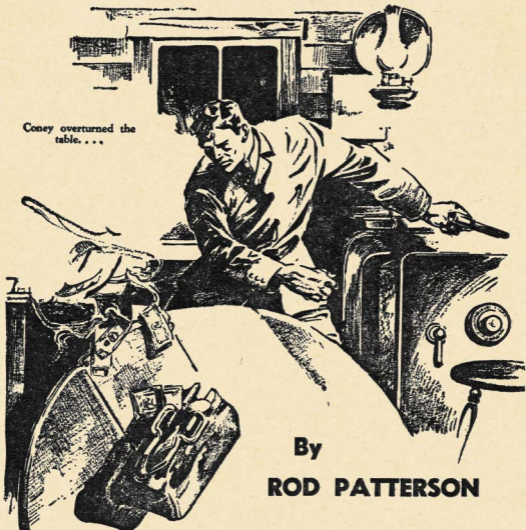
WELCOME TO HANGTOWN!

Chet Logan's one-man war against the notorious Belle Prince touched off a lynch-mad mob that made him first choice for their hungry hangrope.



*Dramatic Novel
of the
Roaring Frontier*

Coney overturned the table. . . .



By

ROD PATTERSON

CHAPTER

Trouble in Tug Fork

1

Chet Logan rode slowly into the central square at Tug Fork, Idaho, along toward six o'clock that Saturday evening in July. There was a baking desert heat in town, unbearable to a man fresh off the high hills. This was his first venture away from his horse ranch in nearly a year, an absence due mainly to the enforced necessity of tightening both belt and poke strings after horse thieves had cleaned him.

He racked his pony in the line-up in front of the two-story frame hotel, pausing to scan the town and all its slowly moving

traffic of wagons, riders, and crowds that drifted steadily along the crunching cinder walks. Unaccountably, he felt a sudden lift of spirits not wholly consistent with his normal mood of casual indifference.

Usually he would be quietly thinking of a few drinks at the Big Money Bar with friends he had not seen or heard from in so long. But this evening he was thoroughly aroused, and real excitement drew him powerfully toward a completely strange departure—the Belle Prince Dancehall, some two or three blocks away at the far side of the square.

For some reason, tonight he had the need of female company. Always a cool, reserved man, women rarely drew a glance

from him. But tonight he longed for the heady scents of old wine and new perfume, for the rustle of silk and taffeta and the lilting tones of feminine laughter and gay repartee.

Therefore, instead of dropping in at his favorite saloon, he headed at once up the walk to the Belle Prince.

Suddenly a big-bodied, red-faced, affable man accosted him from the crowd and grabbed his hand in a crushing grip. It was Horace Hibbs, the county sheriff, whom Logan had known well for many years.

"Why, howdy, you old horn' toad!" Hibbs greeted him expansively. "Woolly hair growin' outa your blasted ears! Where you been keepin' yourself, my friend?"

Logan grinned with a glitter of white, even teeth. "Up on the Jawbone, like always," he said in his pleasant, lazy drawl. "Came down for a big steak after a year on bacon rind and grits. And I need a drink like a duck in the desert needs a swim!"

"You'll get it," the sheriff boomed, taking him immediately in tow. "A drink, I mean, not a swim!"

Logan went willingly enough. As they swung together across the teeming square, he asked, "Who's in town? Anybody I know?"

Hibbs frowned, a ridging of his ruddy, good-natured face. "A few varmints up to no good. Bradford Coney's back again and workin' with Uncle Joe and Belle Prince. It's a bad combo, them three." They hit the yonder walk and headed for the nearest bar. "Francie Garland blew in on the Sundust stage a while ago," the sheriff said with deliberate casualness, though he shot a probing glance at his companion. "She looks fine, too; prosperous and prettier'n a pet pup. S'pose you heard her old man's out of prison on parole?"

"No," said Logan. His eyebrows bent into a black V and his eyelids came down a bit. "I hadn't heard of it. What's Francie doin' here?"

"Dunno." They went in through the batwing doors, pausing by mutual accord to look around. "Don't figure she'll ever go home, even though her father has. How's their ranch? It's right next to yours, ain't it?"

They moved to the crowded bar and elbowed themselves two adjacent places at the rail. "Whisky," the sheriff told one of the bartenders. "Best in the house. A double-rye for my friend, and beer chasers."

Logan did not demur at the order. He watched the drinks poured, thoughtfully silent in all the surrounding noise. Hearing about Francie Garland somehow moved him deeply. He caught himself wondering how things would have been if he had been the marrying kind and had taken her to his ranch after the tragedy of her father's arrest and conviction for horse-stealing a year ago.

He remembered the grief and pride in her voice when she had told him she was leaving the country and would never, never return. He had heard later that she had left Tug Fork with her fare paid to Denver. Now he wondered why she had changed her mind and had come back so near the scene of all her trouble and suffering.

Then he thought about Brad Coney, the mysterious, dark man who came and went from Tug Fork and who was rumored to be an unseen partner of Uncle Joe Prince, owner of the Belle Prince Saloon and Dancehall in town. Coney had connections with horse dealers in the far Southwest and bought up saddle stock at auctions and sheriff's sales for shipment south.

Coney had been involved with Slow John Garland, Francie's father, in the raid at Jawbone Creek, but had not been indicted because of lack of evidence. He had attended the trial, but Slow John had refused to implicate anyone. The old man went to the state pen/alone while Coney continued at liberty.

At this moment of reflection in the saloon, Logan knew a moment's keen regret and listened to that inner voice which had nagged him for a year, a voice that told him he had been a fool to let Francie Garland drift away from him, the only woman he had ever seriously cared about in his life.

He downed his drink, bought one back, then took leave of Sheriff Hibbs who had been watching him covertly at the bar. He felt Hibbs' pale eyes follow him as he left the saloon and went back to the crowds along the square and wondered what the

sheriff had on his mind that concerned Francie.

LOGAN idled up the street through a risen dust that glittered like tinsel-shards in the stirred air behind rolling wagons and incoming horsemen. Street lamps threw a yellowish glare across the gray false fronts and high flat roofs. He saw the four oil flares of the Belle Prince ahead of him over the bobbing hats of the throng.

A woman suddenly bumped into him, then staggered back with a quick breath. There was a man escorting her; a tall, dark fellow neatly dressed and hatted with a glittering cartridge belt.

Logan started an apology, then jerked off his hat, saying, "Why, Francie Garland!" His smoke-gray eyes lit up, then dulled as he recognized her escort as Bradford Coney. He stared into that suddenly handsome face with its greenish eyes and thin-lipped, cruel mouth. "Hullo, Coney."

Francie was dressed in a dark gray traveling suit with leg-o'-mutton sleeves, a feather-tipped, jaunty hat that set off the thin prettiness of her rather pale face. Her eyes were large and brown with arched dark brows and long, up-curving lashes.

"Chet," she breathed, color in her cheeks suddenly, "how have you been?" She held out a black-gloved hand which he took and pressed, then let it drop. She glanced uneasily at Coney. "I—we were—" She stopped, confused, embarrassed.

Logan ignored the dark man deliberately. He said, levelly, softly, "I wondered what had happened to you, Francie. But what on earth brought you back to Tug Fork?"

"Oh, I've been moving around—Seattle—Denver—" She made a gesture intended as flippancy, but it did not convince Logan of its genuine intent. Her eyes looked too frightened, too anxious, to indicate any emotion other than violent inner tumult. "I—I'm so glad to see you, Chet!"

"You're staying at the hotel?"

"Well, no—that is, I—" She looked at Coney who was scowling at Logan. Something passed between them as definite as words, but the tall horse-dealer chose to remain, although her look was a pleading dismissal. "I'm planning to work here," she said to Logan in a breathless rush.

"Work?" Logan held her with his stony eyes. "At what?"

She blushed painfully, took her gaze away, then brought it back determinedly. "I told you I'd never go home again. I meant it," she said half angrily.

At that moment Brad Coney projected his tall form between them. "That'll be all, Logan," Coney said harshly, his tone icy and edged with deliberate contempt. "Can't you see she doesn't want to talk to you?"

Logan's squarish face showed no affront. Only his mouth twitched at one corner and his eyelids dropped a bit. He did not move or speak for a short moment and this waiting, this stolid patience made his action all the more startling when it came. He stiffened and his right arm rose and snapped straight from the elbow. His fist clubbed Coney's jaw with a hard, swift jar.

Coney's head snapped back and he fell like a hammer-hit steer. His hat rolled in the cinders and his head bumped hard. He did not rise, but slowly turned over on his side, his left arm shielding his face as if from an expected kick. He stayed that way a moment, spitting cinders from his mouth and swearing in a soft and terrible voice.

A crowd began to form on the walk. Then Francie blazed at Logan who had not seemed to move at all. "You—fool! Leave me alone!"

His chest rose and fell gently, normally, and his look was undisturbed by her hot command. He met her flashing eyes a moment longer, then touched his hat and stepped around the fallen Coney. He walked on, a stolid, broad-beamed man whose face told nothing of his inner rage. He sauntered through the crowd which closed behind him like a held-back tide released.

He came to the dancehall with its flares and garish sign, *Belle Prince*, ascended the single flight of steps to the gallery, then pushed in through the swinging doors.

Sound and the hard flash of crystal and mirrors poured around him. He checked himself, scanning the huge crowd, the bar lined four deep, the whirling couples on the polished floor, the gambling tables.

In this barnlike room with its massive post-oak pillars and red-painted window frames and doors, a piano sent out crash-

ing chords in three-four time in answer to the massive strokes of a dark-skinned man in a cutaway coat and pearl-gray spats. A sign on the piano said, *Feed the Kitty—This Ain't Free!*

TWENTY or thirty couples pivoted and whirled on the broad dance floor, ducking the oaken pillars and each other with miraculous ease. These were the hardy dancehall girls in high-button shoes and flaming, dingy taffeta—and the cowboys, teamsters and miners in big hats, derbies and greasy silk hats. On a platform at the far end of the room, a girl in tights was singing in a shrill and insolent voice.

Logan went toward the bar and its glitter and confusion. His face was crag-like in its taciturnity. He shoved two men aside with ramming shoulders, demanding of the barkeep, "Whisky," in a surly voice.

He swallowed the first snort with an almost angry gesture and a following tightening of pale lips as though the liquor's fire had burned him going down. The piano kept up its grinding din and the big room shook and shuddered under all that weight of swaying, stamping men and girls.

In the next twenty minutes, Logan bought and finished twelve stiff drinks, feeling no lift, no effect at all beyond an acid burning in his throat. The flat-faced barkeep who served him wore a worried look. Finally the man said, "Dinin' room's closed, but I c'n git you some supper if you—"

Logan squelched him with a glance that had fight in it. The men near him pulled away as far as they could without making it too obvious. Logan turned with his back to the mahogany, a boot heel hooked over the brass rail. He watched the dancers, the drinkers at the bar, the faro and poker players at tables along the walls.

Suddenly he tensed, his jaw trap-tight. A man and a woman appeared on his right, moving between the tables, then out across the dance floor, heading toward a far door that had *Private* on its panel. The backs of the couple were turned his way, but he knew them both. Francie Garland and Brad Coney.

Logan left the bar, moving toward the dance floor with long, far-reaching strides. He butted the dancers out of his way,

ignoring the indignant cries, the angry threats. He saw Francie and Coney knock at the door which was the saloon entrance to the office of Uncle Joe Prince and his wife, Belle.

When Logan reached the door, he found it locked. He swung a clenched fist at the panel and hammered hard, three times. There came the scrape of chair legs inside, and Uncle Joe Prince's purring voice called out:

"Who's there?"

"Open up!" Logan said, his mouth close to the panel.

Another man's voice—Brad Coney's—said, "It's Chet Logan!"

"One moment," Uncle Joe said pompously, "and I will be right with you, friend." Then the bolt was drawn and the door swung inward revealing the heavy easy horsehair furniture in the room beyond.

Logan went in, halted in midstride, surveying the whole room at a swiftly-ranging glance. Two women sat on the sofa—Francie and Belle Prince. The latter had a coy look on her hard, roughed face. About forty, Belle had the coarse, sensual good looks of her type; dissipated, even blowsy; bleached blonde hair done up in coils with jeweled combs and pins. Her eyes were darkly mascara-touched, a china-blue in color with tiny red veins in their whites.

Brad Coney was not in sight. An open rear door indicated that the horse-dealer had departed in haste toward the building's rear. This was significant, and Logan's fury flared in his hard gray eyes. Francie faced him, no fear in her dark eyes, but very pale and tense, her hands locked together in her lap.

Logan turned his head and stared at Uncle Joe Prince. The saloon owner was in his fifties, a huge pot-bellied man in a cutaway coat and choker collar, with little red-rimmed eyes set moistly in a sweaty, loose-fleshed face. He was entirely bald. He wore a brocade vest with blue hand-painted forget-me-nots on its front. A diamond-studded watch chain lay like a glittering wreath on his massive paunch.

It was Belle Prince who spoke first. She pouted scarlet lips and said in her brittle voice, "Mister, you got a gall bustin' in this way on a business meetin'!"

Logan ignored it. He looked at Francie's defiant face. "I'm waitin', Francie. Come along."

Uncle Joe said in a blustering, squeaky tone: "Pity a man can't have privacy in his own place! I'll ask' you to leave here, Logan. Now!"

"Shut up!" Logan gestured contemptuously, but did not look his way. "Are you comin', Francie, or do I have to—"

"Listen, bum!" Belle had drawn herself up with exaggerated dignity on the couch. "Clear out of here or I'll call the bouncers and have you thrown out on your face!"

"Ma'am," Logan told her in a scathing voice, "I like to recite, so now listen to my little piece." There was a furtive movement from Uncle Joe which he quelled with a snapped-out, "You try and whip a pistol out of that cutaway coat, Joe, and you'll wish you hadn't!" Then, to Belle on the couch: "You, Ma'am, are a weasel! And your husband here's a skunk I'd just as soon shoot at as not! You've both got away with murder in this town so far, but it's gone too far when you corral an innocent girl for your damn' shop!"

Belle's painted and powdered face screwed up indignantly. "Hear that, Joe!"

But Francie spoke, white to the lips, only her eyes seeming alive, and they burned Logan with their deep-borne fire. "Chet, you'd better leave at once. I came here of my own free will to take a job Belle offered me last year."

"What's Coney doin' in the deal?" Logan cut her off in a savage, ringing voice. "I saw him come in here with you."

"Please go!" Francie rose from the couch, trembling, color staining her cheeks, her eyes resentful, accusing. "I need nothing from you, Chet Logan, and I never will again!"

"I'll drag you," Logan cried, advancing a pace, moving without threat but with a cold intensity on his face that made her gasp and sink back to the couch, her hands before her in a pushing gesture of protest and fear.

But Belle Prince sprang upright and blocked his way. He thrust her aside with a rough-handed blow that staggered her halfway across the room, then started toward Francie on the couch. Things happened swiftly then.

Belle gave an ear-splitting shriek and at the same time Uncle Joe, bellowing curses, brought a small pistol out from under his long-tailed coat. Logan made a complete swing on his heels and charged at the saloonman from a standing start. He hit the fat man with a ramming shoulder against his paunch before Prince could get his weapon lined and fired.

Logan got both arms around Prince as they staggered back together. Then they both went down with a shaking crash that jarred down a chunk of plaster.

The pistol went off with a thin report and a spitting threat of flame. The weapon Logan wrenched from the fat man's hand and fung it hard across the room. Then he devoted himself to the pleasant chore of beating Prince into a yammering insensibility. When the man lay still, Logan got up and wiped his hands on his jeans, swinging back toward Francie who sat transixed on the sofa, with Belle cringing at the end of the room, mouth open, eyes popping, shaking like an aspen leaf.

"Are you comin' now?" Logan asked Francie in a hard-breathing way.

"No!" She stiffened against the couch's cushions. Her eyes blazed at him. "Get out of here! I never want to see you again!"

Boots thudded toward the saloon side of the room. Voices yelled outside, and the door was hit hard with a solid object. Something died inside Logan as he stared at Francie. Then his eyes changed color and became hot points of steely light. He sucked in a short, hard breath, turned swiftly on his heel and went through the open rear door of the office into the dark night.

CHAPTER

2

Forty-Five Fodder

He was in the alley next to the Belle Prince when the gunshot came. One moment he was paused in the darkness, hesitant, grim; the next the weapon's muffled crash and a bright, stabbing jet of flame came from his left, toward the rear yard of the saloon, followed at once by the beating echo of the gun's report.

The bullet whiffed air close to his cheek and made him duck back, flattening his body against the rough siding of the sa-

loon's blank wall. The slug whined on streetward with the twanging sound of a piano string snapping when drawn too tight.

He lifted his revolver with a swift-dipping hand and laid its barrel on the spot where he had seen the flash. But not a movement or a sound came from the rear yard. If Brad Coney had fired that shot—and Logan was sure of it—Coney had now put plenty of distance between himself and Logan.

Logan decided he would settle with Coney later on, when the odds were more evenly balanced. . . .

Ten minutes later, after thrusting his way against the stream of traffic, Logan entered the county courthouse and jail. It was a structure of two stories, with adobe walls and slot-like windows, that commanded a view of the square like a fort.

No one on the street appeared to have noticed Brad Coney's shot. For Tug Fork, until recent years, had been a rough, wild frontier town, with five or six killings a month—more as the population grew. But law and some semblance of order had come with the election of a town council and a sheriff in the person of Horace Hibbs, a former cattleman.

Light sprayed through the door of the sheriff's office as Logan came in out of the racket on the street. He saw a pair of big-soled boots draped up on a desk, a wide-open newspaper behind them, held in a pair of stubby red-haired hands.

Horace Hibbs lowered his paper and stared inquiringly at his visitor. "Hullo, Chet. Figgered you'd be drunk by now and on the way back home."

"Not drunk," Logan said shortly, easing his big frame to the edge of the cigar-scarred desk and making a cigarette with steady hands. "Damn' good and riled, though. Brad Coney tried to shoot me in the back—and missed!"

The sheriff lowered his paper all the way, and dropped his boots to the floor gently. He wore a pucky, puzzled look on his rough, red face. "You sure it was Coney?"

Logan lit up and inhaled smoke, blowing it in twin blue cones through his flattened nostrils. "Of course, I'm sure. It's him or me from now on. So I'll have

to kill him when we meet or get killed!" He looked at the sheriff, frowning. "I want you to serve a warrant on Uncle Joe and Belle Prince."

"Huh?" Hibbs stared, mouth opening at bit, then clamping shut. Then he shook his head slowly, disapproval in his heavy-lidded eyes. "I can't arrest the Princes on a trumped-up charge. Francie Garland ain't a minor. She's twenty-two."

"Then you know about Francie goin' to work at the Belle?" Logan said it quietly, but anger edged his tone.

"Hell, yes!" Hibbs stiffened his expression with a frown. "I also knowed you'd blow off steam when you found it out. But there ain't nuthin' to be done about it, Chet."

Logan ground out his half-smoked cigarette. It was a gesture combining thoughtfulness and a slowly building ire. "That's where you're wrong, Horace. I'll take her away from there if I have to kidnap her!"

The sheriff eyed him carefully, measuring him, friendly but firm as he said, "Look here, fella, you can't bust in after savin' your hell a year and expect this town to set up and eat outa your hand! You was always a smart 'un, so don't do anything that'll make me change my mind about you. Better forget about Francie and ride on home and stay away from here for another year."

"The hell with it!" Logan rose to his full height and stared down challengingly at his friend. "I might do the first part of that, Horace, but not the last. I wanted to marry Francie once—or thought I did. Maybe I could forget *her*—but never what Coney's tryin' to do to her, what the Princes are set to pull!"

He left then, found his horse in the line-up, mounted it, and galloped homeward through the bluish, silver-shot haze of a moonlight night. A short distance from town, however, he had an impulse to wheel around and go back. It took him several minutes to fight that impulse down, but when he finally conquered it, he sent his pony northward at a faster trot.

His lowland spread lay in a valley between the dark, sullen Beartooth Hills and a meandering, low-banked creek known as the Jawbone. At ten that night he came up the trail that ran east-and-west along

this creek. A side road angled off on his right, ending in the fenced-in yard of Slow John Garland's ranch a half mile to the north.

Logan glanced that way and saw a star-like glint of light at about the spot where the old man's log house stood in his grove of small jack oaks. The light told him that the rumor was true—Slow John had been paroled from the pen and had drifted back to his deserted home in the hills. Logan decided to call on the old man the next day.

A few minutes later, he off-saddled near his own corrals and put the pony in the starve-out.

He made a meager meal in his lonely log house, eating without relish, then retiring at midnight. He slept almost at once, untroubled in his slumbers, shucking off his worries with an habitual facility he had owned since boyhood. He was up at dawn, catching up with his chores as the sun came up.

LATER he saddled up and rode over to Slow John Garland's place. He found the old man sitting on a bench, sunning himself. Logan greeted Slow John casually, as though this was one of dozen recent calls instead of the first in twelve months or more.

Slow John showed him no interest or affability. He did not even answer Logan's soft, "Hullo," but went on staring with the bleakest of blue eyes fixed on a point far out in the sagebrush and timber-stippled hills. Finally he growled, "What the hell you want, Logan? I ain't receivin' visitors as sech."

Logan let himself down on the bench, offering the makings which were declined without thanks, and then got to the point with his habitual directness. "John, I want to know if you hold it against me? My part in the trial, I mean."

"No." The old man's face showed a stubble of gray beard that glinted like steel filings in the sunlight. He was around sixty, tall, stoop-shouldered, gaunt, his complexion bleached and sickly looking from his imprisonment. "Why should I? I never denied ridin' in that raid, did I? All you said was that you'd lost a hundred head and saw five men that day at Kinney's Crossin'."

"I'm glad of that," Logan replied, smok-

ing slowly, not looking at the old man for a long time. He was a patient man, a man who made himself at ease in any company. But his silence now was due to uncertainty. He wondered whether he ought to speak of Francie's arrival at Tug Fork. Finally he said, "Brad Coney's in town."

If the old man was interested, he concealed it well. He grunted, "I don't give a damn who's in town! What made you think I did?"

Logan shrugged. "Just thought you ought to know. I remember you used to play poker with Coney and Uncle Joe Prince, and—"

"Keep your nose out of my business," the old man snapped. "And I'll keep outa yours."

Logan was thinking, remembering that Slow John had been inveterate with his gambling, spending all his spare time at the Belle Prince over games of poker and faro with the regular hangers-on. It had been rumored that Slow John suffered severe losses to Coney and Prince in these sorties on the green baize. Logan stiffened inwardly, throwing down and crushing his cigarette beneath a heel. Truth flooded through him suddenly like a bright light, and all at once he knew what the tie-up was between Brad Coney and Prince and Slow John Garland.

"Funny thing," Logan mused, still not looking at the old man. "but you were the only man in that raid that was recognized. Five in it, but all got away except you. I remember they were trailed into Arizona before their trail was lost."

"Don't wanter talk about it," Slow John growled. "Go 'way and leave me be, will yuh?"

"The horses," Logan went on doggedly, "were sold in New Mexico by a dark man, a dealer no one in that country knew. You know, John, I'll bet a plugged nickel that man was Bradford Coney!"

The old man sat bolt upright suddenly. He glared at Logan, his voice shaking as he cried, "What you drivin' at, Logan? I never said Coney was in that—" He coughed and stopped.

Logan glanced at him, commiseratively, almost pityingly. "How much money did you owe to Prince and Coney, John?"

Slow John went rigid. He jumped to his feet and faced the seated man, mouth

jerking, eyes staring out of their deep sockets, wild and desperate. "Logan, get out of here! I'm tellin' you for the last time, I don't want no interference from you nor anybody else—now or never! That mess cost me my daughter, my pride, every head of beef I owned on this range. I paid dear for that mistake I made, but now I want it buried till the day I die! I don't savy why you're fishin' 'round or what you're fishin' for, but I want you to git back on that hoss of yours and hit the breeze—and don't come back!"

Logan sighed. "I've a good reason for buttin' in, John," he said slowly, distinctly. "Francie's back. She's in Tug Fork. I saw her with Brad Coney last night at the Belle Prince."

"You—what?" Slow John looked as though he was going to collapse where he stood. His mouth opened and hung slack, and his eyes went round and wide and horrified. Then he blinked rapidly, beads of sweat cracking out on his forehead. "Francie at Tug Fork—with Coney?" It was dragged out like a gasp. Then he sat down and let his shoulders hang, his head lowered, his long jaw hung down almost on his chest. "I—figgered she'd gone for good, that I'd never see her again. I—"

Logan stopped him with his hard, thrown, brutal words, "She's goin' to work for Uncle Joe. She's goin' to put on a short skirt and dance for the boys."

Slow John lurched to his feet and hung over Logan, his hands opening and closing in quick spasms. Veins bulged on his forehead and his eyes were terrible in their fury. "Logan, you lie! Take it back or—I'll throttle you!"

Logan never moved. He took that stare and only shrugged. Pity stirred through him. He regretted it now, what his bitterness and anger had made him say. "John," he murmured, "you're forgettin' something. Once I wanted to marry her."

Slow John straightened slowly, a groan deep inside of him, but no sound on his lips. His mouth turned slack, then he stiffened it, stiffened his body to stand upright. "Logan I'll bring her home. And"—his tone went flat and harsh—"I'll kill any man that's done her harm. Coney's a sneak and a savage, and Prince is worse!"

"She won't come home," Logan told him

darkly. "I tried to make her come away with me. She fought me!"

"I'll make her!" Slow John was almost majestic in his wrath, and now he had himself in hand. "She's a good girl—she'll always be one—"

"You got a horse?"

"I'll walk. Shanks' mare brung me up here yesterday."

"Stop at my place. I'll lend you a pony," Logan said, rising, tense. "You'd better watch out for that outfit—Coney and the Princes. They're back-shooters."

"I ain't afeered of scum!" The old man bit the words off hatefully.

"If I can help—"

"I don't need any." Slow John stalked toward his door.

AT HIS ranch that afternoon Chet Logan restrained every impulse to saddle up and return to town. He feared now that if he saw her again, if he saw her with Coney or with the Princes, he would go berserk and bring the town, the world, crashing down around his ears, around Slow John's ears, around those of his friend, Sheriff Hibbs.

But along toward five o'clock his resolution wavered, then broke. He got his gun-belt and strapped it on under a duck jumper, clapped on his hat and left the house, half running. He roped his pony, saddled and cinched up, and hit the kack, forking the horse townward at a long high lope.

He made fifteen miles in a bit over an hour, running his pony, then walking it, stopping now and then to let it blow. It was full dark when he came down off the bench north of Tug Fork and saw the glitter of the street lamps and kerosene flares against the blue-black night.

It was Sunday night, but a night unlike others Logan had seen in other, tamer towns where church bells chimed and couples strolled to the meeting house in the vesper-quiet gloom. Here lights made a garish blaze, and the crowds were denser and more unruly than the night before.

He racked his weary horse in the line-up at the usual spot before the hotel, then swung along the cinder walk, sliding over the dust of the square, entering the Big Money Bar. He was looking for Slow John who must have arrived not long be-

fore, having had hours to make the walk from Jawbone Creek.

Logan felt guilty now. It was an unsettling thought that if anything happened to the old man, it would be his, Logan's fault, his responsibility. One glance into the barroom told him Slow John was not present.

Logan went back and kept on up the street, scanning faces. The oil flares of the Belle Prince made a smoky glow ahead of him. As he climbed the steps and stood before the batwing doors, sound washed past him—laughter of men and women, clattering poker chips, tinkling crystal—and mingled with the greater uproar on the square.

Two burly bouncers stood just inside the swing doors, facing the gallery, watching those who entered, relieving them of their weapons which were checked in a gun rack against the near wall. Logan reversed, moving off the gallery and sliding in the adjacent alleyway.

The narrow passage he faced was empty except for rubbish and a heap of beer barrels. He reached the side door of the saloon, found it unbarred, and entered a darkened corridor, with the door to the Belle Prince office before him. Light made a thin streak beneath the door. The low mumble of voices came to him, one belonging to Belle Prince.

He moved on past the door toward another at the far end of the corridor through which the noise of music and dancers issued. He paused before it, then flung the panel inward, checking himself and viewing the saloon beyond. He saw a ring of hats and silent, impassive faces around a faro table beneath a haze of smoke and the oil lamps in chain-suspended nickel frames. The table's green baize was almost hidden by the crowding shoulders of the players.

Then Logan saw Francie. She was standing at another table, beyond the whirling couples dancing on the floor, and talking to a blond man in a dark suit who was seated. She looked delicately beautiful against the glitter of the lights, wearing a black gown, longer than the short skirts of the dancehall girls, though its V was cut daringly low. Her hair was piled high in red-gold ringlets, like a crown on her fineshaped head.

For a single brief moment, an interval less than that of a quick-drawn breath, Logan stood motionless and let his anger flame. Blood drummed his temples and throbbled behind his eyes. Then he left the doorway and strode toward Francie through the jam of dancers on the floor. His advance was that of a solid force driving in a straight line.

CHAPTER

3

The Killer Prowls

She hadn't seen him yet. He came up to the table at the end of that relentless march, and seized her bare forearm and said, "Francie, I want to talk to you!"

Her face whipped toward him startledly, then her eyes widened and she gasped, "Chet! Don't, Chet, you're hurting my arm!"

The blond man half rose, a frown on his smooth, long face, the shine of anger in his hazel eyes. But he sank back with a shrug when Logan stared at him, a warning in his icy glance. Logan held the girl one-handedly. "Come out back a minute," then turned and started to pull her after him.

She fought him briefly, furiously, finally jerking free. "Chet, please don't! We may be watched!"

"To hell with 'em!" He grabbed her arm in a fresh grip, then added more quietly, "I've got something to say and it won't keep!"

She didn't resist him any more. "All right." She glanced around the crowded room apprehensively, then followed him willingly enough to the door through which he had entered a moment before.

He closed it and put his shoulders against it when he had her in the corridor. Her face was a pale oval before him in the dark, her eyes on him angrily as she said:

"Now what do you want?"

He took his time, watching her steadily, adjusting his eyes to the dark. Her gown distracted him. He fought his rage and finally said, "We've had enough of this. You're comin' home with me, Francie—tonight."

"No!" She stiffened defiantly. "I told you once before I won't ever—"

"You'll come," he ground out, "or I'll find Brad Coney and shoot him."

She flinched visibly, her hands at her throat. "Chet," she said finally, fighting fear, "Brad means nothing to me—except in a business way."

"*This business?*" He swept an arm toward the noise beyond the door. "It's not for you. I'd rather see you dead than—" He had gripped her arm again, and now she cried out, wilting against him, then flinging him back with a furious cry.

He let his arms fall against his sides. "Well, are you goin' to come peaceful or do I drag you all the way?"

"I won't go!" It seemed wrung from her as she cringed against the wall, in the dark, in loneliness, in pain. "Never! Never! Do you hear?"

Logan was like an animal, feeling through his senses, through his instincts, through his hunches. And now, as she let her voice flame out at him, his fury began to ebb. Perhaps there was no chance for him with her. Perhaps he had lost that chance, had lost it a year ago when he had let her leave the country crushed and beaten. Perhaps, even, he had never had a chance with her.

Maybe this dancehall excitement really appealed to her. He felt this change come over him, and then he said, "All right, you can stay. But I'll put Brad Coney where he'll never bother you."

She drew a shaken breath, then reached forward and seized his arm, his hand, then both of them. "Chet, will you do something for me?" It was desperately pleading, almost abject. "Will you, dear?"

"Don't 'dear' me!" he growled.

"Don't quarrel with Brad," she begged him shakingly. "Don't have any trouble—"

"He let your father go to prison," he said in a hard voice. "He was mixed up in that raid. He kept his mouth shut, and let your father rot in the pen for a year. Hell's too good for a skunk like that."

"Have I ever asked anything of you before?" She was shaking his arms with her grip, and he caught the perfume of her hair, her body, close to him. "Have I, Chet?"

"You're out of it now. Coney's goin' to die and you've got nothin' to do with it!"

"Joe Prince will have you shot!"

"I'll handle that gutted ape!"

"His gang would hunt you down and

kill you!" Her voice was breaking, rising.

His impulse then was to tell her that Slow John had come back from the pen, but it occurred to him at the same juncture that she probably already knew it, and did not care.

"Chet, I'll do anything—anything—"

He tore loose from her grip as though she had smeared him with fire. "You're—you're no damn' good!"

She tried to hold him, but he strode back down the corridor toward the alley door. Then he heard the door close behind him, caught the burst of sound, then heard the silence, as Francie returned to the saloon.

He halted opposite the office door, weak, sweating, gripped by the power of his own emotion. His mouth was dry and he licked his lips while fury came lashing back.

Then a gunshot banged his ear drums. It was muffled by the hall's partition and the office door. Then he heard boots pound the floor in there, heard a woman's voice gasp, "Out that door! Hurry!"

LOGAN put his head against the panel, listening, confused, uncertain, wanting to smash things, wreck everything he touched in this saloon. Then he heard the music stop out front, heard the racket of men running, heard the yells. He tried the door; it was locked.

He pulled back and ran at it, butting his shoulder against the wood. His weight cracked the door from floor to ceiling. He made another rush, and the door caved inward. He went stumbling halfway across the lamplit room beyond.

Halted near the desk, he stared downward, seeing the man on the carpet at his feet. It was Uncle Joe Prince, on his side, a mass of quivering flesh that stopped its jerking spasms and lay still—stone dead.

Logan bent over him, turning him on his back while a battering started on the door on the saloon side of the room. A small black hole showed on the dead man's forehead.

Logan straightened, sobered, and he looked about him. The door at the rear of the office leading into a storage room stood tight shut. Whoever had killed Joe Prince had fled that way. Logan went over quickly, tried the latch. It was locked from the outside.

A grim thought came to him, as he faced around toward the racket of pounding and shouts in the saloon. *Slow John!* But he had heard a woman's voice, or thought he had! Who was the woman? Belle Prince? He ruled that out. Francie? It was entirely possible, but why had she taken part in the murder of her employer?

The crashing of men trying to break in grew louder. Suddenly the door split down the middle, and a man lunged into the room, a chair-leg in his hand. It was one of the bouncers, a burly fellow with sweating face and little piggy eyes. The crowd behind him fought to get in and jammed the opening with a crush of straining bodies.

Logan did the only thing he could do under the circumstances. He lifted out his gun and dropped its muzzle on the crowd. "Stand back!" he said.

The bouncer retreated against the wall, still gripping the broken chair, his eyes like small pinpoints sunk in sweaty flesh. A voice from the gaping crowd, a woman's voice, screamed, "That's Uncle Joe on the floor! He killed Uncle Joe—Belle! Belle!"

Logan advanced toward the door. "Stand back!" he repeated in the same harsh tone. "Don't make any trouble."

The crowd swayed away from the door, spreading back into the saloon beyond. Logan watched the bouncer and saw he was not armed. Then he stepped through the broken door and started through the crowd which fell back, opening up a lane down which he marched, a stolidness on his face.

The clank and jingle of spurs made a sound unnaturally loud in the soft hubbub in the barnlike room. Scowling faces glowered at him from two sides. There was not a man or woman in all that company who was friendly—probably not one but would have shot him down if it could be accomplished without risk to themselves. And so he was compelled to gamble and to watch both ways at once, a feat impossible with any degree of care.

He walked with the stilted, almost mincing steps of a man on high-heeled boots. He was nearly to the swinging doors when they exploded inward, and Belle Prince rushed in and halted in her tracks.

She was dressed in street clothing of some dark goods, but was hatless though she carried a black, beaded bag in one hand. Astonishment made her painted face

look ludicrous and blank. Only her eyes kept moving around the saloon, staring, questioning.

A voice yelled, "Look out, he just killed Uncle Joe!"

Logan motioned his gun. "Get out of my way, Belle!"

She pulled violently aside, watching him now from under puffy, lowered lids, her eyes like pools of hate. He dared not turn his back on her, so he turned it on the swinging doors and faced the crowd, gun still angled forward from his hip.

"Don't forget," he warned the room, "I can make it a massacre if I want!" He started backing through the doors. "I didn't kill Joe! You can believe it or not!"

A kind of wailing roar went up from the crowd. He had not convinced them, and he hadn't expected he could. He saw Belle on his right, her face contorted and inhuman, like a large pale cat about to spring and claw. Her powdered and rouged face looked ghastly, her twisted mouth like a splash of blood.

Logan paused against the doors. What happened then shocked him motionless and dumb. The office door yonder stood open and sagging, and through that jagged frame stepped Slow John Garland—tall and gaunt and utterly grim—into the crowd which swayed as though in a sudden wind.

The arrested attention of all those staring eyes was held now by the appearance of this old man who advanced slowly, almost carefully, looking at no one but Logan with his back against the swinging doors.

In this moment of tension, of weighted threat and violence a man's voice yelled, "They're in cahoots—the pair of 'em! Call the sheriff somebuddy!"

Logan faded out through the doors. He backed through them, backed across the gallery and down the steps—and into the arms of Sheriff Hibbs and three grim-eyed deputies.

There was a scuffle that ended with Logan losing his gun, with a swift, cold snap of handcuffs around his wrists. He gave up struggling.

The sheriff said, "Chet, you damn' fool. If you done a killin' you'll swing for it!"

Logan, held powerless by a man at either side, said, "Uncle Joe's dead, Horace, but I didn't do it! Slow John's in there, and you better—"

Inside the saloon shouting went up suddenly. There came the massed scuffle of boots, the low but swiftly building roar of a lynch mob forming under the chain-hung lamps. The sheriff nodded to one of his deputies. "Put Chet in a cell and hurry back. This'll be Hangtown tonight."

CHAPTER

4

Lynch Fever

Street lamps made a dull and wavering glow in the cell where Logan sat slumped on the short-legged bunk, listening to the faroff murmur of the crowd near the Belle Brince. Then the murmur became a rumble, and afterward a roar, as the throng surged up before the courthouse. Doors banged, boots thudded, voices yelled quick orders.

Finally Sheriff Hibbs' irascible words echoed against plaster and steel, "John, if you didn't kill Joe Prince, then for the luvva Pete who did?"

Footsteps came along the cell block. Logan stood up and went to the iron-barred door, wrapping both hands around the uprights, watching the two men approach through the shadows. Logan thought, *If Francie did it, he'll keep shut!*

Then Slow John spoke, angrily, with a cranky violence that puzzled Logan. "If Logan didn't do it, then I don't know who did! When I come in and saw him—he said he didn't . . . so that ends it! Logan never lies!"

The two men came opposite. Logan stopped them. "Thanks, John, for them kind words. But they ain't goin' to help either one of us if that crowd yonder starts what I think it's goin' to start."

Sheriff Hibbs looked worried. He seemed to hesitate. "I never see such a pair of fools!" he finally blazed. "Both of you buttin' into a murder that somebody else done and now has framed on you! I wish't to glory I knowed—"

"My Lord!" Slow John appeared to stiffen where he stood. His stubbly face in the half darkness turned pale. "You don't s'pose my Francie—"

"Listen!" The sheriff laid a silencing hand on the old man. Then they all heard the loud, strong voice of Bradford Coney outside the courthouse, the words not clear, but strangely pitched on a vehement, com-

manding note. That voice went on and on monotonously, rising, falling, growing louder and more demanding now as he harangued the mob and whipped it with his words. It sounded eloquent, sermon-like, against that background of rumbling, angry roars.

The sheriff cursed softly. "I can't leave you two here. That mob'll tear the jail apart to get at you, and I ain't got men enough to stand 'em off."

Logan gripped the bars. "Then let us out. We'll surrender when the danger's past."

Hibbs blew out an explosive breath. "Ain't got no choice!" He whipped out a huge key ring, unlocked Logan's cell and threw the door back with a clang that echoed alarmingly throughout the building. "Come on. Git, the pair of you, but Lord help you both if that crowd spots you!"

Logan asked the sheriff, "Lend me your gun. Mine's in the office."

Hibbs obliged, showing both Logan and Slow John along the corridor toward a stairway that led down to the rear courtyard. Logan put the gun in his holster, gripping Slow John's arm to hurry him. They went down the stairs in the pitch-blende darkness, found a door, and slid out into the fresh starlight.

Here the roar of the crowd was like the thunder of surf on a rocky shore. Logan felt a tremor run through the old man's emaciated body. He tried to reassure him. "You'll have to find my horse near the hotel, John. If you can't—any one you come to first! Work fast and then hit for the timber near my place. Hole up till I come for you." He gave Slow John a push. "Good luck, pard. I'll take care of Francie."

Then Logan stood alone, watching that gray shadow slide along the rear yards and finally vanish down an alleyway. He drew a breath, laid a hand on his gun, and headed for the street, his hat jerked down above his eyes.

The mob had spread out and completely choked the square for a radius of a block or more. Men were running toward it from all directions, and here and there a rider reared his horse above the heads of the crowd and fired a shot at the courthouse whose windows were bright with light.

Logan was bold suddenly. He deliberately mingled in the throng, elbowing his

way through it, heading toward the Belle Prince and the oil flares that seemed to beckon him in the smoky night.

No one noticed him. Brad Coney was not visible. But a large man in a big hat stood on the courthouse steps, bawling undistinguishable orders at the crowd.

Glass was shattered by a stone. Gunshots split the din of yelling voices like the crack of giant whips lashing the maddened people on to violence, to smash and wreck and maim and kill.

Logan broke clear of the crowd, moving diagonally across the square, heading at a jog-trot toward the dancehall whose lights still blazed against the gloomy menace of the night. He mounted the steps to the gallery, hearing men's voices and suddenly seeing the two bouncers coming toward the swinging doors, toward him. He ducked aside, and the two big men came out and lumbered past him, down the steps and off toward the roaring crowd, a block away.

Then Logan went in. He took one quick glance at the big room and saw it deserted, chairs and tables overturned, bottles and glasses and poker chips strewn across the floor. The office door yonder by the post-oak pillars had been temporarily repaired. It was shut, though a light gleamed beneath it against the floor.

HE WAS halfway there, when another door on his left opened, and Francie Garland came out hurriedly, a suitcase in her hand, her face as pale as death. She was dressed for traveling now, with hat and cloak and gray handbag. She saw Logan and stopped short, blanching, her mouth opening to scream.

She shrank back against the massive safe near the end of the bar. Logan advanced, his face inscrutable. She did not scream, but bit her lip and waited. He came up, and took her suitcase, opening the door and throwing it into the hallway near the stairs that climbed to the rooms on the second floor. He said, quietly, "If you killed Prince, I'll back you till hell freezes."

"No—no!" She shook her head so the ringlets bobbed. "I didn't kill him, Chet! I thought you—"

Voices mumbled from the office. Logan heard them, identified one as Belle Prince's

shrill soprano. He pushed Francie into the hall. "Go back to your room and stay there till I come for you." He shut the door against her, then whipped around and walked swiftly toward the office door.

He came against it, laid his shoulder to the panel, gripped the knob, then opened it slowly. The room lay before his narrowed eyes. He saw Belle standing near the desk, facing Brad Coney who had her in his arms. Belle said, "He had it comin', Brad. I don't feel no regrets you shot him when you did 'stead of waitin'—"

"Put your hands up, Brad!" Logan said, drawing the sheriff's gun.

They sprang apart as though jerked by invisible ropes. Belle seemed to shrink in size, her eyes dilating with the shock of her surprise. Coney went into a half crouch, his hands jerked shoulder-high, his swarthy face turned toward Logan. Coney was not handsome now. He was ugly and treacherous and sly. There was a gun on his hip.

Logan said, "Do what I tell you but don't make any rapid moves. Unbuckle your belt and let it fall."

Belle seemed about to swoon. She wavered, swaying, ghastly white. "Stand still, Belle," Logan warned her. "I'd just as soon put a bullet in *you* as not."

Her eyes bulged. She remained that way, seemingly suspended on shaking legs that might cave in at any moment. Coney let his arms down, very slowly, very warily. He unbuckled his belt, then came the thud of it on the floor. His hands shot up again.

Logan said, "Both of you walk this way. You're goin' to face that crowd and tell 'em how you murdered Uncle Joe."

"No-o-o-oh!" Belle wailed it, wringing her hands into a knot of diamond rings and straining knuckles. Huge tears welled up and rolled down through the powder and rouge like drops of glycerine.

Silence lowered like pressure on the room. It held on unbearably and then was pierced by a woman's fearsome scream—not Belle Prince's but someone in the saloon behind Logan.

He looked around before he thought, staring at the open door. Francie Garland clung to the door frame with both hands, her face stark terror as she gasped, "Chet! They're hanging Dad! They've got him

out there with a rope around his neck!"

At the same moment a rustling, scraping sound brought Logan's face back toward Belle and Coney. But he was too late. Belle had thrown herself in front of Coney and was shielding him with her body, her bare white arms outstretched, desperation twisting every feature out of shape.

Logan held his fire. Helplessly, he watched Coney back toward the rear door, hiding behind Belle who followed him, arms still outstretched. Then Coney turned and fled, running through the door to the storeroom.

Logan started toward Belle who stiffened defiantly, some color flaming back into her coarse pale cheeks. He grasped her arm and yanked her toward the saloon side of the room, hauling her past the transfixed Francie, into the lights of the dancehall. But Belle was like a catamount on a leash. She thrashed and jerked to free herself from that iron grasp.

He dragged her on out through the swing doors and to the gallery where he threw her flat and faced the seething mass of men and women in the street. The mob had surged up to the dancehall to utilize the high beam on the gallery for a gallows.

SLOW JOHN GARLAND showed in the fore of that crowd of maddened citizens. He looked like a man walking in his sleep, his eyes half closed, his muscles slack so he wobbled as men jerked him by the rope around his neck. He resembled a skeleton in loose and baggy clothes.

The mob surged closer, terrible now in its hushed and menacing movement. Only a kind of thin whine came from it, like a wintry wind blowing through a rock pile in the desert wastes. Then, suddenly, the throng had halted, and there was no sound at all, only the weakened moaning of Belle Prince where she huddled on the gallery, her blonde hair tumbled before her face, her shoulders trembling with huge sobs that shook her whole body.

Logan threw his voice into that hole in the silence. He spoke, not loudly, but clearly, slowly: "You people are goin' to hang an innocent man! Slow John never killed Prince! And neither did I!" His voice carried eerily to the remotest edge of the crowd, and it echoed hollowly between the buildings on the square. "Brad

Coney killed Uncle Joe—and Belle helped him do it!"

Francie had come out on the gallery, and now stood in the shadows, statue-still, staring at the crowd, at her father who seemed not to hear or care about what went on around him. Belle was on her knees, rocking gently at the hips, her hands covering her face, still sobbing, still moaning, pleading for mercy.

"Is that the truth?" Logan stared down at her. "Tell 'em, Belle! Is that the truth?"

She cowered, silent suddenly, but trembling in every limb. Logan reached down and gripped her shoulder. His fingers bit through her dress, into the flesh, like iron hooks. "Answer me, Belle!"

She flung up her head, her haggard, tear-streaked face a blaze of wrath and fear. "Sure, it's the truth!" she shrieked. "Brad killed him—shot him in the face! He done it because he wanted me!" Her voice rose, cracking. "And I'd do it again—again—again—"

The throng swayed back, breaking its ranks, then surged together again. Slow John was knocked to his knees and the rope jerked off his neck by rough, eager hands. Men started up the steps with avid looks at the crouching Belle who shrank against the boards, covering her face, her head, from the expected blows.

This was the mob Brad Coney had whipped into frenzied pitch, the howling crowd that was not to be thwarted in its clamoring for blood. One victim had been snatched from it, but a substitute had suddenly been thrown to it.

Logan, gun in hand, faced the leaders of the mob, thrusting them back from the gallery. The crowd roared, that rising angry shout that is the mob's voice, the sound of men and women hostile even to each other, determined to draw the last full measure of satisfaction from this, their hour.

Logan shouted at them, "She ain't worth it, you fools! Let her rot in a cell with the ghost of Joe Prince starin' through the bars!"

The roaring continued but now it abated some. A kind of weakness gripped the crowd, a momentary interval of indecision. And Logan breached that gap with his voice, arguing, pleading now. Slowly the

through fell back. He moved fast then. He looked at Francie, in the shadows, said, "Get her up and follow me. If we can make it to the jail—"

The next moments were freighted with danger for a man and two women who walked down a corridor in the ranks of the mob, a tall man and a tall girl, and a cringing, beaten blonde who staggered between them.

That walk seemed endless to Logan and to Francie, but they reached the courthouse finally, and Logan thrust both of the women inside and closed the door, hearing the ringing voice of Sheriff Hibbs. "Chet, come back! You loco fool—"

Logan walked toward the Belle Prince. Groups of men and women had formed and faces stared at him sullenly.

He climbed the steps to the gallery of the Belle Prince. It was deserted now, the lights inside turned low. It was this fact that checked him in midstride and turned him wary. Then he saw that someone had drawn a canvas curtain across the swinging doors.

He moved cautiously, his gun gripped again in a rock-like hand. He prodded his way along the curtain, behind the doors, then suddenly stepped into the room.

FIVE rough-looking riders were lined along the bar. They were strangers to Logan. But the sixth man who faced him from behind a table on the right was not. It was Brad Coney, alert, staring, a brightness in his eyes.

The safe near the bar's end stood open on its heavy hinges, its maw like the door to an empty cave. A large black bag stood on the table before Coney. Coney's

arms hung down straight, his hands invisible behind the table's edge. All the men in this room watched Logan and his lifted gun, trigger-tense, ready, waiting for the break that did not seem to come.

Then Logan spoke. "The mob out there is still in a lynching mood. They'll be in here as soon as I start shooting." He let that sink in, then said, "But Coney's my man, and I'll give you boys a chance."

The five men stood just out of the line of Logan's fire, but not one made a move to draw a gun. They were hired gunmen, cat-eyed fellows out of the brush country. "Start for that rear door," Logan said in the same soft tone. "Right now—and keep your hands in sight."

Uncertainty showed on their faces. Some of them might escape Logan's gun but none of them would escape the mob. Slowly, almost with eagerness, all five men slid across the room, ducking behind Coney and his table, then with a rush, dove through the hallway door.

Logan was in a position where he could watch the opening and Coney at the same time. When no movement came from the hall, he said, "I don't want it claimed I killed you without a gun in your hand. Get one up—and sudden!"

Coney appeared to gather his muscles for a spring. His mouth stretched back, and then he flipped his hand up from under the table with a revolver gripped in it. At the same moment, he overturned the table with his free hand, sending it end over end toward Logan to spoil his aim.

A flash and a roar came from Coney's gun, and Logan's hat was jerked on his head. There came two following shots that merged in a single hammering detonation



... ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT! ☆

—Coney's second shot and Logan's first.

Coney shivered as in a wind, dropped his gun with a thud, raised up on his toes like a man about to reach to a high shelf, then his elbows broke, and his whole frame seemed to come apart. He pitched to the floor on his face.

Logan stood for a long moment, bleakly staring at the motionless figure on the floor. Weariness pulled at the corners of his mouth and made sharp, fanlike lines beside his eyes. Then he turned and went out to the gallery, stripping the canvas off the doors as he passed through. A sizable crowd had gathered again, all these men staring puzzledly as Logan appeared before them for the second time that night.

He jerked his head toward the saloon and said, "You can go in there and get your man if you still want someone to hang. Coney's dead, though, and dead men don't kick when they're strung up!" He spoke mockingly, and with a deep disgust. Afterward, he descended the steps and strode off along the street toward the courthouse and the jail.

Logan faced Hibbs and Francie in the sheriff's office. The girl sat in an armed

chair near the desk, the green-shaded lamp made her face paler.

Logan said quietly, "Francie, I'll take you home."

This time she slowly nodded. "All right, Chet. I'm ready now."

Sheriff Hibbs said, "Belle broke down and told it all. She and Coney had planned to kill Uncle Joe for a year or more. They wanted to grab his cash and run the Belle between 'em, seems as though. Coney was in that horse raid last year. He was the dealer that unloaded the stock down in New Mexico. Slow John knew it, of course, but wouldn't squeal because he'd got into the mess on his own hook.

"John owed the Belle three thousand dollars he lost at poker and he rode the owlhoot for Coney and Prince to square it up. By the way, I've sent one of my boys home with your father, Miss Garland. They're about up there by now."

"Thank you, Sheriff," she said, rising to face Logan, who went to her and took her arm. "I—I've been a fool, I know. But it—was the Garland pride, I guess." She looked at Logan.

He put his arm around her waist. They walked slowly out of the sheriff's office. . . .

THE END

WORSE THAN A POLECAT!

The early fur trappers and traders on the rivers of the West used a queer but practical home-made boat that enabled them to navigate rough or shallow streams with a maximum of ease and safety. Known as a bullboat, it ranged in size from a small bowl-like affair to a craft 30 feet long, 12 feet wide and 20 inches deep. The larger bull-boats could safely carry a three-ton cargo of baled furs piled on poles in the boat's bottom. Manned by two men with poles, the fully loaded boat would draw no more than four to eight inches of water. At night the men would pole it to the river bank at a likely spot and unload the cargo. They'd then pull the boat, which was very light, onto the bank, turn it bottom side up over the furs. Later, they'd crawl under it to sleep in its shelter. The bull-boat was made by stretching buffalo rawhide, hair side out, over a framework of supple willow boughs. The rawhide was lashed and sewn with sinew; the seams were caulked with buffalo fat and ashes. Each morning, before returning the boat to the water, the seams were re-caulked. In one respect the bull-boat was worse than a skunk. Its thick stench was *always* with it.

J.W.Q.

THE DEVIL'S AUDITOR

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



Both men stiffened and dropped their hands. . . .

Juan Poker tused bank robber—at the banker's request—and cheated the most ruthless gent in the whole San Gabriel Valley.

A SANTANA wind rolled great clouds of dust through the evening darkness ahead of Juan Poker, flinging sand against store windows and the faces of buildings and sending eddies of rubbish and debris skidding along the walks. Poker felt the sting of the wind through his broadcloth coat. He had jammed his hat on so

tightly to prevent it from blowing off that his head was aching slightly.

Winter rains were gentle in the valleys of the San Gabriel and Santa Ana. Springs and summers were times of sunlight and bright moons and the cooling touch of evening breezes from the sea. But in the fall of the year, the devil had his own week of weather, in which he brought a piece of howling hell sweeping down from the distant desert.

Poker dismounted in front of a new establishment on the street, one which had opened up since the last time he had ridden through this settlement across from the neglected lawns of the ranchhouse from which Pio Pico had once ruled Spanish California as governor. A still-new sign, advertising the Grower's Bank of Pico, hung over the walk.

Waiting for a lull in the gusty wind, Poker opened the door and stepped quickly inside. Under a bracketed wall lamp, a man was pulling down the roll top of a battered old desk. He was already in hat and coat, his day at an end. He wheeled nervously at the flickering of the lamp and the sound of the closing door.

Poker was astonished at the change in Mark Green in the three months since he had spent a sizable evening with him in the taproom of a *posada* back of the mud flats and rickety wharves at the *embarcadero* in San Pedro. Young Green had been a Yankee New Englander then, with the freshness of salt wind in his cheeks and his eyes bright with the enthusiasm of a building man who beheld a country in which he could put his talents to work. Poker had been impressed with Green's sincerity, his understanding that the little people on the rich hills back of the California coast needed nothing so much as a little assistance and an appreciation of their problems to start them ahead in a new way of life which the advent of the Yankee flag had made so necessary. He had felt that Green was California's kind of New Englander. His ruddy health, his confidence, and his earnestness had been the basis of this feeling.

His appearance, now, had the impact of shock to Poker. His face had lost color and thinned. The thickness of his body had dwindled. Lines of strain were carved into his cheeks. And if this was not enough,

the light of fear was in his eyes. Poker knew the fundamental weakness of a man who was afraid, and he frowned. Green came down the room toward him, nervousness in his manner, his eyes peering sharply through the lenses of his glasses. Poker spoke quietly.

"I thought you'd be looking for me, Mark."

Green eased with a suddenness which was in itself distressing.

"Poker! Thank God you've gotten here."

"I could have made it two days earlier, if I'd known you needed me this badly," Poker suggested.

Mark Green grinned apologetically.

"Of course. I just asked you to ride past when you had time. But that was before trouble hit. I've been half crazy, afraid that you wouldn't make it in time. Excuse me—"

Turning, the young banker crossed to a rear door which apparently let into a back room.

"All locked up back there, Bert?" he called. An affirmative answer came out of the darkness beyond the doorway. "Come on up front, then. I want you to meet a man."

Green came back to where Poker stood in the middle of the bank's one business room. He was followed in a moment by a small, round-headed man with a deeply furrowed brow from which the hair had receded, and a sharp, truculent jaw. He wore an accountant's conventional alpaca work sleeves over his shirt, and pencils studded his vest. Otherwise, he was a diminutive double for the third mate of a Boston hooker. Powerful arms, coarse features, and hard, challenging eyes.

"This is Bert Sihler. Bert, this is John Poker."

Sihler's eyes flattened a little.

"Juan Poker?" he asked, almost involuntarily. "The—the—" He broke off.

Poker grinned easily.

"The bandit," he filled in. "The gambler. Something like that, Sihler?"

The small man colored darkly. Mark Green frowned.

"This no place for bar-talk, Bert!" he snapped. "Juan Poker is a good friend of mine. You know how legends grow in this country. For every black one I've heard about John, I know a dozen that aren't.

We've needed him, here. Badly. Now the Claytons will get the showdown they've been asking for!"

Green paused and grinned faintly.

"I haven't had an honest night's sleep in ten days. I'm going up to the house, tonight. I want you to sleep light in the back room, Bert. You're going to have company when the town lights are off. A tall man, knocking at the back door. A man just about as tall as Mr. Poker. You're going to let him in. He's going to find that the lock on the old safe got stuck again and that I didn't get it locked when I left. In the morning Pico is going to discover that the bank has been robbed and the Claytons are going to feel badly. The bank's gold will be at Mission San Gabriel, safe, and carried there in Mr. Poker's saddlebags. Understand?"

Sihler studied Poker. He nodded to his boss. Green took Poker's arm.

"I'll buy you supper, friend Juan," he said, relief lightening his voice. "We've got a little talking to do."

"Yes," Poker murmured. "I think we have!"

THE hour was a little late. There was no one in the little cafe. Green dropped down at a corner table where privacy was insured. Poker leaned back in his chair.

"My cut for robbing a bank runs high, Mark," he warned. The banker laughed.

"Juan Poker never robbed a bank in his life—not a cooperative bank owned by a lot of little men trying to hang onto their land and their living. The Bank of Pico doesn't have too much to be robbed. But what it does have in the way of gold is its only guarantee that the whole deal I have worked up here will continue to work. And it isn't safe in the bank building. Not now."

"Send it to San Gabriel, then," Poker agreed. "The *padres* will take care of it for you. But send it by courier. I didn't come up here to be a messenger boy."

"By courier?" Green asked. "Some boy out of one of the local families? Any of them could use the fee. But I'd be sending them out to be killed."

"So you choose me?"

"Juan Poker does not die easily," Green answered. "Listen, when you suggested that I come in here, you knew that Angus Clayton and his family had this whole area

in the tight grip of their fists. You knew that the families here were trying to make a living from their small holdings, and that Clayton was squeezing them to death."

Poker nodded.

"I knew Clayton was discouraging the use of new equipment and methods," he said. "I knew the Clayton family store was advancing credit for seed, tools, and food to the small growers and taking payment from the crop when it matured—at Clayton prices. Sharp enough practice, all right."

"This bank was the answer, I thought," Mark Green cut in. "I had no money of my own, but I knew how the bank should operate. When I came to Pico, I made my friends among the people I wanted to know—not among the Claytons. I talked the small growers into lumping together what little cash each one had, and I opened this bank for them. It has loaned them the operating money they needed—at a fair interest rate. It has taken paper on crop expectancy and, where necessary, on individual pieces of land. But only on a basis that the loans would be repaid—not that the bank would foreclose."

Poker nodded. He had hoped that Green would try something of this nature. In this country, accustomed for generations to the extremes of *peon* poverty and *ranchero* riches, there had been no middle ground—no level at which a man could succeed moderately well. There had been no middle class—and that was the need in California. Dairymen, food-crop farmers, store men and shop keepers. Men who would build towns and put their shoulders to the wheels of trade. A continent removed from its new parent country, this Yankee empire of the Pacific needed the self sufficiency and independence of its own internal trade.

"The Grower's Bank of Pico has succeeded, then—and the Claytons don't like its success," Poker said quietly.

Green ran his hand nervously through his hair and nodded.

"Don't like it is right!" he agreed. "Their store is doing a cash business only, now. And not too much of that, since the bank financed two more stores which are willing to beat the Clayton's on prices. Their old scheme of always lending more credit than a farmer has income to repay has stopped working—because the bank lends at a fair rate and goods are cheaper

in the newer stores. The Claytons were well on their way to getting title to every little plot of land in the whole basin. That's over with, now—unless they can discredit the Bank of Pico so thoroughly that the people of the basin will have nothing to do with it or with any other new plan which might come in."

Poker scrubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"I see. You think the Claytons may lift your gold reserve and then force a run which would put you out of business. So you intend to beat them to the theft."

"There's no other way. Send the gold off for safe keeping. Let them force their doors of withdrawals. Let them close the doors of the bank. Then, when it's quiet again, bring the gold back and open the doors. The people of the basin ought to understand the whole Clayton game by then."

"Understanding is something a little harder come by than you think, Mark," Poker said thoughtfully. "Understanding of devilry, at least. And you'll always have weeds in a field until you've burned out the weeds."

Green's face fell. The desperation which had been so marked in him at the bank returned. His hand clenched tightly.

"Then—then you won't take the gold to San Gabriel?"

Poker rose and smiled.

"I'd admire to take your gold, Mark," he grinned. "You go on home. I'll make any necessary arrangements with your man Sihler."

Green nodded.

"You'll find Bert a help. I've had him more than a month, now. He can't add three figures together, but he doesn't scare. I had to have somebody with me who wasn't afraid of what the Claytons might do. He's a good man with his hands."

GREEN shook hands and went out onto the street. The howling of the santana wind had not abated. It slammed the door closed behind Green with viciousness. From his table, Poker eyed the dark, dust-filled street. A made-to-order night for unpleasantness. The fat *californio* hostess of the cafe appeared in the doorway of her kitchen. Poker signalled for another cup of her singularly bad coffee. When she brought it, he leaned back in his chair.

"Do you know me, *Mamasita*?" he asked. She looked at him a long time. Finally a slow smile surfaced.

"*Pero si*!" she agreed. "From the moment you come in the door with Senor Green. But I did not know if you wish that I know you. So I say nothing."

Poker smiled. He put a round piece of minted gold down on the clean cloth of the table.

Outside, Poker leaned into the wind and walked till he came to a large store building in the center of the business block. He turned into this. The room, flanked by shelves on one side and a long counter on the other, was empty. A door at the rear led into a short hall running to the back of the building. This hall was wider than ordinary and held, just beyond the door, a large safe. Across from this a side door led into another room. Light streamed from this and Poker thought it likely it was an office. In the back wall of the hall was another door which apparently opened to the outside. Poker could see it vibrating with the buffeting of the wind.

Poker could hear voices from the office doorway, but they were unintelligible, drowned by the sound of the wind outside. He thought his own entry had probably been unheard for the same reason. Moving down the main room to near the foot of the counter, he rapped soundly on the planking. The talk ceased. A tall, gaunt man with thin lips and sharply-edged features stepped into the hall and strode out into the store. Behind him, ducking from the same door and scuttling down it toward the back entrance, Poker had a glimpse of another man. Only a glimpse. A small man with powerful arms and a round, half-bald head. The tall man came down the counter when the rear door had closed and halted across from Poker, his brows lifting up in an unfriendly, silent query.

"Mr. Clayton?"

The tall man nodded brusquely.

"Yes. Angus Clayton. What's on your mind?"

Poker smiled with an appearance of half apology.

"I'm just passing through Pico—on my way north," he offered. "I—I was expecting to find a little mail forwarded to me here from San Diego."

"This isn't a post office!" Clayton snapped. "But you damned drifters are always using it for one. I'll look. What's your name?"

"John Poker."

Clayton's eyes narrowed.

"I heard you were up around here. No mail for you. Wouldn't hand it to you if there was. Just a piece of advice. Be out of Pico before morning!"

Poker shed his apologetic manner. He grinned.

"I intend to be!"

Turning on his heel, he returned to the door and stepped again onto the street. He had accomplished exactly what he wanted. He thought he knew the man who had been in Clayton's office and the source of Clayton's information that Juan Poker was in Pico. And he had given credence to the story Mark Green would have to tell concerning the robbery of his bank—if certain plans in Poker's mind failed.

Drifting with the wind, Poker reached the bank, turned in behind it, and rattled the rear door. Bert Sihler let him into the back room.

"Where's Green?" Sihler asked.

"Your boss? Home, I think."

"And you're back," Sihler frowned.

"You work fast, Poker."

"It appears you do, too" Poker suggested, with a glance at the freshly wind-whipped color in the man's face. Sihler let it go. He crossed the back room to a battered strongbox set in a mortar against one wall. He rapped his knuckles against its dilapidated door.

"Green didn't lock it tonight—for you. But he might as well have. A good man could pick it with his finger nails."

Poker pulled at the handle. The door swung open. Some ledgers and half a dozen paper filing boxes were on a lower shelf. Above them, sitting in a neat row, were ten sock-size buckskin mint pouches, fat with the heavy coins they contained. Sihler lugged up a pair of worn calfskin saddlebags. He held these open while Poker dumped the leather pouches into them. When the straps were laced shut, Sihler tossed the saddlebags carelessly.

"A light haul for Juan Poker," he commented. Poker nodded.

"The Grower's Bank of Pico doesn't run much to reserves in gold, does it?"

"That's Mark Green for you," Sihler said sourly. "Bull-headed. Plays too wide on the odds. This ain't a bank; it's a give-away. Every greasy son that's got a hunk of land and two hands is good for a loan. The lid's been dropping on Green for weeks. Banks don't work that way. He's been done since the minute he came in here and too stubborn to see it. This tumble of shacks don't need a bank, anyway. A horsewhip to drive these peons back to work is what's needed. A horsewhip, by hell!"

Poker took the saddlebags.

"I think you're right," he conceded agreeably. "A horsewhip—or powder-smoke!"

Sihler scowled darkly. "That don't make sense," he said uneasily. Then, as Poker turned toward the rear door: "A good ride and good luck!"

POKER turned the handle of the door. It swung open. Wind rushed in. And with the wind, Sihler struck, swinging a short bar of iron which he snatched up from a recessed shelf beside the door. Poker had been anticipating the move. He rolled his head, taking the impact on his shoulder. It was a hard blow with enough weight to jar reflexes. The saddlebags dropped from his arm. Keeping tight control over his actions so that he could carry out the deception in his mind without too much damage to himself, Poker staggered against the jamb of the door and then out over the threshold. Sihler crowded after him, the retrieved saddlebags in one hand and the bar of iron in the other. He prodded Poker roughly with his shoulder. As though still dazed, Poker staggered on a pair of steps obediently. Sihler pressed after him. More figures appeared. Poker recognized the tall frame of Angus Clayton. His whelps were with the old wolf—three of them. Family resemblance was too strong for error in identity. Poker, head down, swallowed a grin. Clayton's voice barked.

"Got it, Bert?"

"Sure, and he's out on his feet. I near busted his skull."

"Damn you if you overdid it!" Clayton growled. "Here, give me that leather. Now, get the play going!"

Two of Clayton's boys moved in.

"A damned bank robber, eh?" one of them snarled. A hard fist crashed against the side of Poker's face. "Caught red-handed. By hell, Pico'll teach you a lesson you won't forget, *hombre!*"

Big talk. Poker heard another of the Clayton boys yelp for a rope. Somebody else pointed out a tree. Considerable furor, with the howl of the wind making the whole thing unintelligible a score of yards away. Poker understood, and he continued to play into it. They were throwing a scare—at him. They had the gold. Now they wanted a thief who would run. He played up furtiveness, throwing his arms up to protect himself from further blows with an almost cringing gesture. He hunched, and when the Claytons backed a little, giving him room, he broke for the side of the building. There were yells behind him as forced as the talk of ropes and trees. He hit the street, found his horse still in front of the bank, and hit saddle.

After a dozen strides of the animal, when pursuit was a rapidly thinning possibility, the Claytons and Sihler ran out from behind the bank, shouting an alarm. Poker laughed.

He rode hard for a quarter of a mile, reined his horse off through a field, and slowed his pace. Circling, without benefit of the road, was careful business. Twice a fence made him detour. He was grateful for a number of lights now up in the settlement he had just quitted. They gave him a center on which to base his circling. As he came up behind the old Governor Pico house, he could hear the turmoil along the street, even above the pulsing roar of the street. Dismounting under the ground-sweeping branches of an old pepper tree in the Pico yard, he crossed the head of the street and ducked into the deep shadows hugging the buildings there.

The whole town, he thought, had turned out. Men were shouting, filing along the walks, talking excitedly. And there was an air of desperation about most of them. He saw a couple of long, angular Clayton forms moving from group to group. He understood. The news was out that Juan Poker, proving the brigandry attached to his name by legend, had robbed the Grower's bank. There were no reserves for run-of-business withdrawals. Loans would have to be called. There was no telling

what would be left of the wreckage. And each man who had a little share in the buckskin pouches Poker had lost at the back door of the bank would want to try getting what he could before the whole thing tumbled down. It was bank-breaking talk, run talk, skillfully encouraged by the Claytons. And it was exactly what Mark Green had expected, with one exception. The Claytons would see to it that Grower's Bank lost so much faith tonight that return of the reserves alone—at a later date, from San Gabriel Mission, as Green had planned—could not restore it.

Poker left the street and moved down across back lots. It was not hard to find the rear of the Clayton store building and the door at the back end of the hall was not locked. He waited for a crescendo in the wind, opened the door just wide enough for his body, and slid in. A light was on in the office. It fell across the hall onto the face of the safe he had earlier seen there. And the safe door was open. Poker moved far enough along the wall to see into the safe. The pouches from the Grower's Bank were there, along with three much larger canvas sacks. Poker drew his gun and took two long strides into the office doorway.

Angus Clayton and one of his sons were backed onto corners of a desk, trading a bottle back and forth between them. Obviously a celebration. Both stiffened and dropped hands swiftly to their belts. Poker's first shot took the bottle from Angus Clayton's hand, spraying the far wall with bad whiskey. He had no liking for the idea of a bottle flung at his head. His second shot took the younger Clayton through the forearm and thigh as the man's gun came up. His third shot flung the man backward off the desk.

The old man, his lips pulled angrily back, stalled, neither relinquishing his weapon or raising it. Poker knew the danger in this.

"Drop it, Clayton" he snapped. "You're finished!"

The old man shook his head.

"I'm just starting!"

POKER eared back the hammer of his gun. Clayton watched him coolly. An admirable demonstration of chill, hard, nerveless courage—and an indication of the absolute ruthlessness of the man against whom Mark Green's friendly sincerity had

been attempting to battle. The two of them stood motionless a moment longer. Then Clayton moved with a suddenness disconcerting in a man of his apparent age. He threw himself toward the floor, rolled, and flung his gun upward. It fired. Poker saw the flash of flame, heard the snapping rush of the bullet past his head. His own weapon shook the room with an answering concussion. Clayton's knees, drawn up to brace himself on the floor, slowly straightened. Poker stepped over one outstretched leg. He picked up a ledger from the desk.

Backing swiftly into the hall, he knelt in front of the open safe. The saddlebags he had dropped at the rear door of the Grower's bank were jammed, empty, into a corner beside it. He shook them out, dumped in the ledger. Pawing against time, he spilled the buckskin pouches into the saddlebags, added the three larger canvas sacks which clinked satisfyingly with Clayton profits, and straightened.

Swinging the saddlebags over his shoulder, he ran down the hall, hit the hall door, and was out into the wind again. The sounds on the street were rising unpleasantly above the singing of the wind. He ran on down across lots to the rear of the bank building. He tried the back door there. It was barred. He rattled it and was answered by the snap of a rifle. A hole appeared in the planking of the door and the skirt of his coat ruffled under the buffeting of splinters and the big slug. Leaping aside, Poker fired two more shots rapidly.

Backing, he ran forward and hit the panel with the full weight of his body. It swung sharply inward. He heard it strike some obstacle. Kicking it closed, he saw

Bert Sihler, rifle beside him, spilled down on the floor with an ugly welt rising on his forehead. Mark Green, pale, and harried, ran in from the front room, trailing a shotgun. Poker dropped the saddlebags and jerked his head at Sihler.

"Get some rope around him, Mark."

Green stared incredulously, then knelt beside Sihler with a length of cord.

"So Bert was against me, too!" he said heavily.

"That crowd outside will have my front door down any minute. The bank will be done. And it could have saved every farmer in the basin!"

"Open the door, then," Poker suggested. "Meet your withdrawals."

"I haven't got over a hundred dollars in cash left here!" Mark Green protested. "Are you crazy?"

Poker shook his head.

"No. Just in a hurry. You've got more than you think." He nudged the saddlebags with his foot. "Your reserves and—a loan from the Claytons. One they won't try to collect, I think. And when things have quieted a little, you'll find some books from the store that you could go over. It might be that you could figure a way of getting that Clayton money added to the right accounts in your bank—sort of put it back where it came from in the first place—from the farmers the Claytons tried to clean. . . ."

Green came up on his feet.

"John Poker, the devil's auditor!" he breathed. "Thanks." And then, as Poker turned toward the door, Green repeated Sihler's words, spoken earlier in the evening: "A good ride and good luck!"

But this time they were in earnest.

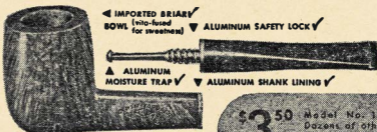
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WHEN THE BONEYARD IS THE GOAL

There on the stone floor
lay the bones.



By RICHARD BRISTER



Anything can happen when an aristocratic remittance man and a slothful half-breed team up to seek a treasure. . . . An unusual tale with a bang-up finish.

KINGDON was having a hair of the dog in Stapleton's bar, when he first heard the bones mentioned. A stranger, down by the swinging doors, was whispering: "Wisht I knowed where they was a bunch of 'em all in one place. Man could turn hissself a nice piece o' money,

the price that fertilizer comp'ny's quotin'."

Kingdon's handsome young head inclined instinctively toward the speaker. His blood-shot eyes narrowed at the mention of money; for it had been months since he'd received a check from his brother in England. He had strained his credit to the breaking point in this little cowtown, and was faced with the unhappy prospect of going to work for a living.

He smiled at the pair by the door, turning on his most gracious Old Country manners. "My curiosity's driving me crazy, Gentlemen. I couldn't help overhearing you mention a bunch of something. Mind telling me what—"

"Nothin' secret about it. Feller from back East just tacked a notice on the bulletin board out front. Go out an' read it yerself, since you're so all-fired curious."

Kingdon winced at the fellow's cuttness. But he vaguely recalled having cadged a few drinks from the fellow, and so he controlled his impatience with the man's church-like manners.

There were precious few here in Chugwater to whom he didn't owe money. He supposed he might take on some clerical job, or try his hand as an apprentice cow-puncher—but as a man of breeding and education, he cringed at the prospect. He much preferred to loaf the long days away here in Luke Stapleton's bar, playing the role of the genteel drunkard, until he received his next check from England.

Was it his fault, after all, that he'd not been the first-born son of his father? No, if his older brother was to inherit the estate and the title, Kingdon at least deserved to live without working.

Outside on the plank walk, he found a clique of idlers grouped around the new handbill on the bulletin board. They were illiterate fools, for the most part, and, for once in his life, Kingdon found a warm welcome among them.

"Move aside, fellers," one old-timer cried. "Kingdon here's college-eddicated. Let *him* read it to us."

Kingdon smiled disdainfully as they fell away to make a path for him. His blood-shot eyes flicked over the black print. "This is an announcement from The Anderson and Leeds Fertilizer Company of St. Louis. It says:

"To any interested in a profitable part-

time occupation, we are prepared to purchase, until further notice, quantities of bones, horns, and hoofs at a flat rate of five cents the pound, delivered at the Chugwater railroad siding.

"Bones can be any type, including cattle, elk, deer. Especially recommended to interested persons are the skeletons of buffalo, since these possess the heaviest skulls to be found. Arrangements for loading have been made with the local railroad authorities. Cars weighed before loading, again after loading, the difference subtracted, and a check in the amount indicated will be presented at the point of lading by our representative. Signed. . . The Anderson and Leeds Fertilizer Company."

"Say—that there's all right, ain't it? This here country's plumb covered with bleach bones. Me, I'm gunna borry a wagon rig an' start truckin' 'em in. Five cents the pound's a right decent offer!"

Kingdon's brain was so busy that he hardly heard the crowd clamor around him. Last spring, when he had drunk up his quarterly check from England, he had taken a two-week prospecting trip through the Goshen Hole country. He hadn't found gold, but at a desolate spot on Chugwater Creek, he'd found a deep gorge, where rim-rock sheered off in a sudden blind cliff face.

Years ago, a hapless buffalo herd had plunged over that cliff onto the hard stone floor of the gorge. There were literally hundreds of complete skeletons there, piled in a grotesque, twisted heap alongside of the creek. Why, he thought weirdly, there must be carloads of them! With a wagon and team to freight them in, he could realize a small fortune by Thanksgiving, at the price the St. Louis people were quoting!

A mood of exultation swept through him. He slapped his thigh, chuckling, then swept through the swinging doors of Luke Stapleton's bar. A rare piece of luck like this required a drink, he was thinking.

APACHE JOHN stood on the fringe of the crowd, watching the fiercely exultant grin twist young Kingdon's face, and thought craftily, *He knows something.*

The grizzled old quarter-breed had just returned to Chugwater from a fruitless prospecting trip of long duration. He stroked his stubby beard with gnarled brown fingers, then smiled grimly and

followed Kingdon through the batwings. *Mebbe I kin do some prospectin' right here in town, he was thinking.*

When the breed got inside, Kingdon had a foot propped on the bar rail and was saying to the white-aproned proprietor, "Make it rye this time, Luke."

Luke Stapleton's eyes narrowed. "Cash or credit, Kingdon?"

Kingdon straightened haughtily. "I'm expecting a check from—"

"From your brother in England." The saloon man scowled. "I know. Only, I've heard it too often." He turned his back on Kingdon. "You've had your last drink in my place, till you clear accounts with me. This ain't no charity business I'm running."

Kingdon frowned, stood there, hesitating. Apache John grinned, and stepped to the bar alongside of the disgruntled Englishman. "Let's have a horn here, Luke. And two glasses." Apache John nodded toward Kingdon. "Drink up, friend. I'm buying."

Kingdon frowned, lifted his glass in a grudging salute to the grimy prospector. "Health to you."

"Name's Apache John. Prospector. Have a refill, Kingdon. I don't git to town often, an' I mean to howl, plenty. Man needs talk, to help wash his drinks down."

Kingdon's stiff pride relaxed as the liquor warmed his insides. His smile looked less forced now. "I've got talk to spare. But at the moment, unfortunately, no money. . . . What's your short handle, friend? John—or Apache?"

"John'll do. . . . Drink hearty, Kingdon."

An hour later, the breed smiled craftily, watching Kingdon stagger uncertainly, gripping the bar with both hands, while he stared blearily at his reflection in the cracked bar mirror.

"Y're all righ', John," the Englishman said in a maudlin display of affection. "Know how to spen' y'r money, thash what. Shay somep'n, why'n't ya?"

Apache John chuckled craftily. "Ain't got a look-in, with you around, son."

Kingdon reeled and knocked his glass over. "Fill 'er up, Luke. John an' me mean to howl, see? A couple o' wolves, thash what. John's bes' frien' I ever had."

The breed nodded to Luke Stapleton. The saloon man shrugged and poured from the bottle, half-filling the Englishman's empty glass.

"I'd do anythin' f'r ol' John," roared Kingdon. "Y' hear me, Luke? Do anythin' f' im."

Luke Stapleton turned away in disgust. Apache John leaned close to Kingdon and whispered, "Reckon you could find some way to prove that, Kingdon, if you really mean it. Do anything for me, you say—but I got a hunch you're holdin' some kind of a secret inside you. Somethin' big. Somethin' you ain't fixin' to let nobody in on."

Kingdon blinked. "Y're a mind-reader, John. How'd y' know I'm holdin' a secret?" He laid a heavy hand on the breed's shoulder. "Y're my bes' frien'. I don't hold any secrets from you, John."

"Prove it," snapped out Apache John, and then, before the drunken fool could accept the challenge, and start babbling whatever he knew right there at the bar, the grizzled old prospector dragged him out through the batwings.

Five minutes later, he had the whole story of that rich cache of bones in the desolate gorge out Goshen Hole way. He told Kingdon to keep his blubbery voice down; then said, chuckling, "We'll hire horses an' ride out there fust thing in the mornin'. We'll figger how to git the most o' them bones to town, afore winter. . . . Now sober down, Kingdon, an' git some shut-eye. We'll need clear heads, in the mornin'!"

Kingdon stared blearily at him, then offered an unsteady hand. "Guess this makes us partners, John. Thash right?"

"Right," said the breed, but there was a crafty gleam in his veiled eyes as he pumped the Englishman's hand.

KINGDON'S head buzzed like a beehive, and he was in a sour mood. The sun burned down unmercifully on this dry stone floor of the canyon, and his saddle chafed him. He said wearily, "I know it's somewhere hereabouts. Let's camp, John. This heat's enough to drive a man crazy. We'll find the bones in the cool of the morning."

Apache John sat limply on his bay horse. His black eyes, under heavy gray lashes, burned at Kingdon. "Think, dammit. Where—"

"Mind your tongue," Kingdon flared. "After all, they *were* my find in the first place. I'm pretty sure we're close to the spot."

"Kingdon," the quarter breed said harshly, "if you've brought me on a wild-goose chase—if you been runnin' a bluff about them bones. . . ." He glanced significantly at the Winchester .30-30 which dangled by his leg in a saddle sling.

Kingdon gulped, and his truculence vanished. "All right, we'll keep looking. But I still think we ought to wait till morning. The horses are faged, for another reason. Why you insisted on trucking along all this blasted prospecting equipment—"

"I been a prospector for twenty years, Kingdon. I don't go nowheres without that equipment. When I spy the color of pay dirt, I want my tools handy."

The quarter-breed's stubbornness was rewarded less than an hour later. They rounded a bend in the narrow gorge, and there on the stone floor, beneath the high, sheer wall, the bones lay in a mountainous, breath-catching pile-up, just as Kingdon remembered them from last spring.

Kingdon licked his dry lips as he feasted his eyes on the booty in bones, and grunted at the breed, "Not such a wild-goose chase after all, is it? We've got a small fortune here, John. How many tons you suppose it'll come to?"

The breed clambered awkwardly onto the pile. His seamed face twisted with greedy pleasure. "We'll make enough for a comfortable winter, I reckon. There's—" His voice froze in midspeech. He stood like a statue, and stared fixedly at the base of the cliff which formed one wall of the narrow gorge. "Git my pick out of the saddlebag, Kingdon." He ran down the clattering pile to the spot at which he'd been staring. He was clawing impatiently at the rock with his bare hands, when Kingdon brought the pick at a run.

"What is it, John?"

"Gold, you damn' fool. *Gold!*"

He grabbed the pick from Kingdon, gouged a chunk of stone out of the wall, and carried it out to the sunlight. Kingdon could see bright yellow streaks in the surrounding gray.

"Is it—"

"Ain't plumb certain of it," the breed muttered darkly. "But there jist might be a rich vein, four or five feet fu'ther on in there. . . . Git the dynamite. We'll blast for it."

"But—" Kingdon scowled. "If you blast,

you'll bring down that whole cliff. You'll cover the bones."

Apache John snorted. "Where's your gumption, Kingdon? You'd turn down a chance at millions, fer a few hundred dollars worth o' bones. Use your brains."

Kingdon sucked an angry breath through clenched teeth. "The gold is a gamble. Why not save the blasting till we've got those bones out?"

The breed scowled disgustedly at him. "I've listened to you. You're a fool, Kingdon. Now quit augerin' an' git me that dynamite. Pronto!" The breed was already searching the cliff face for a likely fissure in which to place the charge.

Kingdon went toward the horses, grumbling. Every unwilling step toward that dynamite increased his anger. Hadn't he discovered this place, to begin with? That stubborn old breed would never have spotted his precious gold, except for Kingdon.

What right did John have to be giving him orders? In his mind's eye, he saw himself returning to town empty handed, all because of that gold-crazed old fool's mule-like insistence. The devil with him! Kingdon decided. He grabbed the Winchester out of its saddle scabbard, and walked toward the breed, pumping a cartridge into the breech.

"We're not blasting, John," he said in a soft but determined voice.

The breed turned slowly, and for a long time, his black eyes gazed at the Winchester's muzzle. His voice, when it came, sounded more like a hurt dog's whine, than anything human.

"No need fer this kind o' hijinx, Kingdon. We're partners, ain't we?"

"First the bones," Kingdon said doggedly. "Then the gold, if there really is any."

"Maybe," the breed said contritely, "I was just a mite hasty. I go crazy when I see the color. Could be, you're makin' sense, Kingdon. I—uh—I agree with you, see? Now, put down that rifle, an'—"

Kingdon debated. "Forgive me if I don't trust you, John," he said finally, and kept a firm grip on the rifle.

"S'pose I throw the dynamite in the crick? Reckon that'd convince you I've changed my ideas?"

Kingdon said warily, "If you try to pull any monkeyshines—" He followed the

breed at a safe distance, and did not relax his grip on the gun until the dynamite sticks were floating downstream in the choppy water.

The breed stared at him in an attitude of defeat. "Reckon you're ready to put down that gun?"

Kingdon checked the saddlebags to make sure there was no dynamite left within them. The bags were empty, but some sixth sense still cried aloud within Kingdon that Apache John could still not be trusted.

"I'll hang onto the rifle, John. What a man will do and say when his life's in danger doesn't count for much. Not the way I look at it."

The breed shrugged hopelessly. "Your show then, Kingdon."

Kingdon stood wrapped in thought. "Nothing for us to do but go back to Chugwater and get us a wagon, so we can start hauling these bones out. We'd better eat something, before we start riding. We'll need a fire." His eyes roved the bald, treeless floor of the gorge, and he frowned in frustration. "Must be wood somewhere around here."

The breed waved a hand upward. "There's some scrub mesquite atop the cliff. There's a spot downstream away, where a man could climb up purty easy." He made his voice elaborately casual. "If you want me to chuck some wood down over—"

"I'll get the wood," Kingdon announced flatly, and permitted the faintest of smiles to dimple his smooth cheeks. "Wouldn't want you to get ideas up there, John. Such as shoving a boulder down here on top of me." He saw disappointment in the breed's scrubby face. "And I'll take the rifle, just in case you find it too lonely down here, and try riding away with the horses."

Apache John looked at the ground. "Fine pair o' partners we're turnin' into. What's a man got to do, to make you trust him, Kingdon?"

"He's got to look less like a wolf," Kingdon said, "when he's talking to me."

KINGDON turned abruptly toward the spot downstream where nature had fashioned a twisting, rubble-strewn path up the steep side of the gorge. He turned several times to look back, and saw the breed lying on a large slab of rock, his grizzled

black head propped on his saddle blanket.

Near the top of the wall, the trail Kingdon was forced to follow took a sudden sharp twist, and he lost sight of the breed for some minutes. When he reached the top, panting from the undue exertion, he walked quickly up along the deep gorge to the cliff over which that herd of buffalo had plunged to certain death. He leaned on the Winchester and peered downward cautiously.

There was no sign of Apache John in the gorge beneath him.

Kingdon glanced frantically toward the spot where they had tethered the horses. Both mounts still stood dozing idly, tails swishing.

"John. You down there?"

From a spot directly below him, so close to the base of the cliff that it was cut off from Kingdon's line of vision, the breed's voice answered: "Shore, I'm down here. What's got you in a lather?"

"What're you doin'?"

"Takin' another look at this goldstrike. Relax, dammit! I'm a prospector, ain't I?"

The grizzled figure of the old quarter-breed swung out from the base of the cliff, moving unhurriedly down toward the horses. "Reckon I'll be gittin' clear, if you're fixin' to toss that wood down."

Kingdon fingered the trigger of the long-barrelled Winchester. If ever there was a time to do a man in, he thought weirdly, this was it. The breed's broad back made an inviting target, and if Kingdon wanted to put him away, there was nothing to stop him. Because, who'd ever know it? No one had seen him ride out of town with the breed this morning.

And after all, why *should* he share his good luck with that filthy old fool down below there? He'd discovered those bones. *He* deserved all the profit from them. And if there really was a rich goldstrike down there, he might make himself rich, and live the sort of luxurious, pleasant life he'd been reared to.

He felt his fingers grow sticky with nervous sweat as he lifted the rifle and lined the sights on the breed's broad back. There was a moment of panic when his nerve deserted him, then he gritted his teeth and tugged on the trigger.

The gun bucked and spat, sticking out a vicious, darting tongue of flame. For a brief

moment, Apache John continued to walk toward the tethered horses.

Kingdon swore in a savage panic, pumped a new cartridge into the breech, and again lined his sights on the man below him. As he was about to pull trigger, the breed staggered, pirouetted drunkenly, and glanced up at him in stark terror.

"You fool. You damn' fool, Kingdon." He fell, writhed like a wounded snake, desperately trying to scramble away from the cliff like some panicky lizzard. Kingdon continued to pump lead into the writhing body until the man lay quite still. "Fool, am I? Better a live damn' fool than a dead one. Better a rich fool than—"

The thunderous shock of the dynamite's explosion was such a total surprise that it paralyzed him. He lay frozen in panic, while the ground trembled and swayed beneath him. Scorching air drove past his face, like the hot breath of a blast furnace, and he heard the awesome crackling of stone, as a giant fissure appeared directly behind him, like an earthquake's jagged fault line.

He was flung outward, falling in a ripping, bone-crushing mass of hardrock. He was pushed to a lifeless pulp before he reached the floor of the gorge, to add his bones to those of the buffalo, which he had in life been so certain would make his fortune.

No need to berate himself now, for fail-

ing to see the wily breed hide one stick of dynamite in his shirt, while apparently throwing his whole supply of the explosive into the stream.

No need to regret his folly, for giving the breed a few minutes unwatched, time enough to plant that charge, to ignite the fuse that was designed to rid Apache John of his troublesome partner.

No need to scowl, a brief hour later, when a curious rider, attracted by a thundering blast, peered at streaks of yellow in the dynamite-gutted gorge wall and disgustedly muttered, "Wouldn't yuh know it'd *have* to be fools' gold!"

No need to agonize at the irony of it, some three weeks later, when a handbill was tacked on Luke Stapleton's bulletin board, back in Chugwater.

Due to the recent sharp rise in freight rates, we find it necessary to rescind our offer of five cents the pound to collectors of bones for conversion into fertilizer. We regret any inconvenience this decision may have caused. . . .

Inconvenience indeed, to the breed and young Kingdon, who met, got drunk together, became partners, quarreled, destroyed each other, and actually buried each other.

All because of a bunch of bones.



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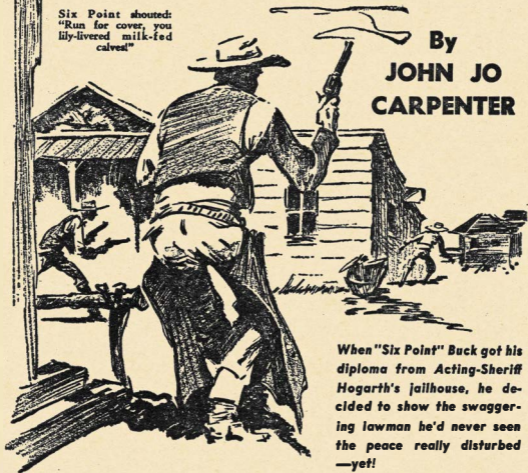
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SADDLE-BUM'S REVOLT

Six Point shouted:
"Run for cover, you
lily-livered milk-fed
calves!"

By
**JOHN JO
CARPENTER**



When "Six Point" Buck got his diploma from Acting-Sheriff Hogarth's jailhouse, he decided to show the swaggering lawman he'd never seen the peace really disturbed —yet!

THE jail doors clanged open, and clanged shut again, and Samuel Peter Buck—"Six Point" Buck to his friends—stepped outside. He had heard these doors clang countless times in the last two weeks, each time with quivering inner rage. Each time he had thought of how different it would be when they opened to let him out at last. It was different, yes. But not the way he thought it would be.

He stood there blinking in the hot sun a moment. The door of the front room, which was the sheriff's office, was wide open. Flies buzzed in and out of the door.

The heat was stifling after the cool air in the recesses of the stone jail, whose walls were two feet thick.

He stood there, reluctant to leave, even after he was handed his sixgun and the other pocket effects which had been taken from him two weeks earlier. Lew Hogarth, who had been chief deputy when Sheriff "Baldy" Knight was alive, and who would be at least acting sheriff until election, saw the indecision on the boy's face. He grinned, his small eyes half closing as his meaty face reddened with amusement.

"Skeered o' the outside, hey, Six Point?"

he guffawed. "Our hospitality is famous that way. You saddle bums get used to bein' fed and knowin' where you're goin' to sleep at night, and you plumb get the jail habit. But it breaks you of the habit of disturbin' the peace, you got to admit."

Six Point hitched up his pants and said, out of one side of his mouth, "You call that a disturbance—that little old occasion? Just watch! You ain't never seen the peace really disturbed here yet."

Hogarth leaped out of his chair and fastened one of his huge, hairy hands on Six Point's shoulder. The boy did not take his thumbs out of his britches belt, but he jerked lithely out of the officer's grasp, swinging his body so that his right elbow jabbed into the paunch in front of him. It hit the solar plexus. Hogarth doubled up, gasping for breath and clutching at his guts.

Just at that moment, young S. P. Buck did look more than a little like a buck deer in full six-prong antler. He was twenty-three, and two weeks of idle jailhouse life had not begun to soften the wiry, physical trimness which was his by nature. It was late fall—there would not be many more hot days like this. He had ridden hard for Stony Mathieson's Lazy M all summer, and every inch of him was work-toughened muscle. He rocked gently on his feet, poised like a buck deer, ready to flee or charge like lightning as the occasion demanded.

Hogarth got his breath back and straightened up.

"Sorry, Lew," Six Point said, with elaborate politeness. "I just can't stand being handled. I must have kind of touched you a little—strictly an accident, of course!"

Hogarth jerked his head toward the door.

"Outside," he snapped. "Last chance, saddle bum. Your hoss is in the lot back of the courthouse. I want you out of town by tonight—and there better not be any more accidents!"

"I won't be out of town, because I've got to get my pay from Stony," said Six Point, "and there won't be any more accidents. From now on, it's a-purpose."

Suddenly he felt like leaving—felt just as he had thought he would feel all those days and nights cooped up in a six-by-six cell. He had tossed it down in front of Lew Hogarth, and he could go now. He had let Hogarth know how he felt.

So he stepped out into the brassy sunshine and turned toward the courthouse. The streets were almost deserted, but looking down the slope he could see horses staked out under the pepper trees beside the livery stable. The stable was full, then, and the riders of this overflow of horses were keeping well out of sight. Six Point grinned.

He did not look back at the jailhouse. He had been stuffed through the door, fighting like a wildcat, two weeks back. He never wanted to see the place again, except to finish that fight. He had learned a lot in those two weeks. He had seen men come and go, cells fill and cells empty. They were all hard-nosed, rebellious young riders like himself. And he could read the sign.

In his day, the late, lamented Baldy Knight had been a beloved peace officer. Trouble was, his day ended long before he died, as old Baldy got decrepit and lame and a little childish. That was how Lew Hogarth got on as a deputy. That was how he worked up to First Deputy—by bullying the old man and holding threats of mayhem over the other deputies.

That was how he intended to get himself elected to the post at election time three weeks hence. The solid citizens, the propertied people, were being beguiled by Hogarth's vehement "law and order" campaign. He showed them a full jail, and they believed he was a good officer. A few of the town's "better element" came out against him, to be sure. But when no one else filed for the office, they were left without a candidate.

But it was for the young riders, the drifting cowhands who made up by far the biggest part of the county's population, that the worst hell was reserved. They caught the brunt of Hogarth's vicious, domineering ferocity. They filled the jails, branded as "criminals" by weak, frightened old Judge Mart Holiday, latest personage to become a tool in the acting sheriff's iron grasp. When Hogarth said they were guilty, Judge Holiday made it official.

Two weeks in jail for cussing out the owner of the pool hall, who had hung up a sign, "DOGS AND LAZY M RIDERS NOT ALLOWED!" Disturbing the peace, Judge Holiday called it. The pool room man was Lew Hogarth's friend.

Oh, there were ways a young buck could get along with Hogarth. He could join his growing gang of hoodlums. He could vote, then. He could swagger down the street, shoving people out of his way. He could pick up an easy two dollars every now and then, serving foreclosure papers on some poor devil who was in trouble with the bank. (The banker, too, believed Hogarth was "cleaning up" the town.) A man might even become one of Hogarth's deputies someday—if he chose.

But Six Point did not choose. Back in the Dakota country, the Buck tribe picked its own path. Down here in Dos Hermanos county, Arizona, the youngest of the tribe would do the same.

RIGHT now his path led him to the Paris Grand saloon. There were no horses at the hitchrail—nothing to excite the interest or suspicion of Hogarth or his rowdy-dow boys, who were all over at the courthouse, playing cards. But when Six Point stepped in through the swinging doors, his heart leaped joyously to see that the bar was lined.

He knew all of them. None was over thirty—several were under twenty. Some he had ridden with in the roundup which, for him, was interrupted by the little matter of two weeks in jail for swearing at a pool hall proprietor. Others he had met in gay week-ends in town.

Between him and a few, though, was a stronger bond. These were veterans of Lew Hogarth's "law and order" system. They had done time in the jailhouse because they could not get along with Hogarth, or Hogarth's friends. You could pick these out by the angry, bitter looks they wore. Criminals! You could have found a bruise here and there on some of them, because Hogarth's way of keeping order was a little rough, at times. Trouble-makers! You could have identified them by the reckless, independent swing of their shoulders, or by the fact that all were now wearing guns, or a number of things. A diploma from Hogarth's stone college changed a man.

There was Bob Ritter, a Lazy M rider who had occupied the next cell, and Jim Donovan, and Red Puro, and "Needles" Haycraft, and "Topaz" Bell, and Ancillus Goff. They all had diplomas. And they all wore guns.

Bob, a short, burly, dark youth in a faded pink shirt, had a drink of whiskey in front of him, but it had only been tasted. None of them had done much drinking. The bartender had a panicky look, and his doughy face was aglow with the sweat of fright. He had his investment to think of, and Lew Hogarth was going to take this little gathering very peevishly indeed, and yet he knew better than to say anything. He looked appealingly at Bob when Six Point came in, but Bob only shook his head warningly. Six Point took his place at the bar, refusing a drink.

"I don't see Stony Mathieson," he said. "Sick?"

Bob shook his head glumly and cursed. "No, and you won't see him, either. And he's not sick! Stony has just remembered he is a man of property. Stony just got religion. Stony is all for law and order. He won't be here."

"Won't be here?" cried Six Point. "Is he double-crossing us?" Bob Ritter nodded. "He owes me half my summer's wages," Six Point went on, bitterly. "Me in jail for sticking up for the Lazy M, and now he goes respectable."

Then a new thought struck him. "He won't go to Lew with this?" "No," said Ritter. "Stony's not that much of a skunk—yet! He said he'd forget we ever said anything, if we'd do the same. But I think you'd better kiss that wages-wad goodbye, Six Point. The pool-hall man put in a claim for damages, and Judge Holiday kind of approved it, and Lew Hogarth attached your pay, and—well, that's how Stony got religion."

The others had crowded closer to listen and mutter their resentment. Stony Mathieson had been a drifting, hired rider like themselves, until he married the young Lazy M widow. Their red, blood-suffused faces showed that wrathful resentment had worked on them more powerfully than whiskey ever could.

As for Six Point Buck, he thought he knew how it was with Stony, with a new baby and all. But Stony had been his particular friend. Stony had guts—principle. If Stony could be kneaded into shape by Lew Hogarth, what chance was there for weaker ones?

"What's the program, Six Point?" said Bob.

"First I want to get my horse out of the courthouse lot," said Six Point, "and while I'm down there, I'll see how things look."

"There's as good a place as any to start," someone muttered.

Bob shook his head.

"See what Six Point says, first," he snapped. "It's his idea, and he's the first one to have guts enough to stand up, and if you remember the time we cleaned out the dance over at Scissors Creek, you'll agree he's a handy leader." And to Six Point he said, "Go get your horse. We'll wait here for you."

Six Point went outside, and the youths relaxed against the bar again.

It was only a block to the courthouse. Through its open window he could see two card games proceeding, one in Judge Mart Holiday's chambers, the other in the old sheriff's office—the one in use before Lew Hogarth persuaded the taxpayers to build him a new one of solid stone. As Six Point passed across the parched lawn of the building, he could hear a roar of laughter from one of the games.

He went around to the rear, where the county officials kept their horses, and then beyond that corral to a smaller one at the rear.

His first sight of his horse shocked him. The gelding was thin and unkempt, but he had expected this. His real fury did not come until the horse moved to answer his snapping fingers.

"Lame!" he exclaimed. "Hold still, Jiggs, and let's see what's wrong with your leg."

He ground his teeth in anger as he examined the swelling. It was an infected bite, the marks of a dog's teeth still plain, but now swollen shut. He knew Hogarth's bad-tempered, skulking hound had the nipping habit. He did not blame the dog, which had never been taught better. But he did hold Lew Hogarth accountable for his carelessness in letting the wound come to this condition.

"A little creosote compound a few days ago, or even a little lye soap and water, would have prevented this," he gritted. "Come on. Let's see if you can make it to Doc Steenocker's. He gets a fee for taking care of county prisoners, and another for taking care of impounded animals. Here's where he earns it."

WHITE-FACED and trembling with anger, he led the horse out of the corral and down the alley back of the courthouse. Another burst of laughter came from the card-players, and one of them leaned out to pitch an empty bottle into the growing pile under Judge Holiday's window. Six Point dared not look. They had time to gamble, but no time for a lame horse! Had he looked, he could not have kept still.

And this was the time for keeping still.

Still leading the horse, he passed up the main street almost to the Paris Grand, and then between two buildings across the street from the saloon. One of them, a real estate office, was closed. But he knew that Doc Steenocker would be taking his daily siesta in his "laboratory" in the other.

In the Paris Grand, they awaited him impatiently, growing more and more worried as time went by. One of the boys went scouting, using the back door of the saloon. He came back quickly, having found Six Point almost next door, arguing with Doc Steenocker in the latter's back yard. By the time they got there, Six Point had Doc backed up against the wall of his office.

"Quit stalling!" Six Point said, prodding the doctor's stomach with his gun.

"I'm not stalling," Doc said. "Honest, my instruments are over at the house. The horse is not going to save that leg, anyway. If I do help him, he's always going to be stiff in that joint."

"One more trick I owe Lew Hogarth," Six Point grated. "Now let's go get those instruments."

An exclamation of dismay came from Bob Ritter and the others.

"You can't do that!" Bob cried. "We haven't got time. Doc will give the alarm, anyway. Let's go down and clean out that courthouse."

"No," said Six Point, rubbing the gelding's thin ribs.

"The horse is going to be stiff-gaited anyway. He'll never earn his keep again as a cowhorse," Bob argued.

"He's already earned it. He's got a right to loll. No, Bob," said Six Point, shaking his head. "You go on and have your fun. I'll give you five minutes' start. Then me and Doc, there, are going after them instruments."

They argued with him. They reminded

him this was his idea, and he would be missing the fun. They reminded him it would not be safe for any of their bunch to be in town when it was over—particularly if he had a lame horse to care for, and Doc Steenocker's wrath besides. They had all decided to have one good blow-up at Lew Hogarth's expense, and then shake the dust of this country from their feet forever.

Six Point wavered. He heard that jailhouse door clanging in his ears again. He knew as well as they did what Lew Hogarth would save up for him this time. There was that punch in the belly—he had not told them about that—to add to everything else, and Lew would keep those accounts straight.

He closed his eyes, and for a moment he had that shut-in, locked-up feeling, like he wanted to get up and pace that little square cell again, like he wanted to tear down those thick walls, stone by stone, before he burst his chest with fury. That was what he was walking back into—that feeling.

He sighed and shook his head.

"Deal me out," he said, shortly. "Remember the time that steer kicked me in the ribs, when we was dehornin' over at Stony's south place? Old Jiggs, he took up the slack and held the steer until I got my breath. Old Jiggs stood by me then. I guess I'll have to stand by him now. Go have your fun."

"Then we'll have to go with you," Bob Ritter said wrathfully, "and see that no harm comes to you, because if the fool-killer happened into town now he'd choose you sure."

They argued until Doc Steenocker reminded them that his hands were growing numb from being held in the air so long. They had always rather liked old Doc, who was an easy-going fat man, and they apologized, and let him take his hands down. But they remembered he drew a big retainer from the "county gang," and they kept their eyes on him.

"Scatter out, then," Six Point pleaded, taking charge again. "Don't anybody show on Main Street but Doc and me. Doc, I'm not going to have my gun out, but somebody's going to have a bead on you every foot of the way. If we meet any of Lew's friends, don't stop to pass the time of day.

Tell 'em you're in a hurry. Understand?"

"I sabe," said Doc.

"Then let's go."

They stepped through to Main Street while the rest of them fanned out on both sides of the street. Doc and Six Point walked along slowly, making idle conversation just in case anyone was listening. The doctor puffed and panted, but he talked on in a shrill, nervous voice.

Six Point's skin crawled as the ugly, squat, jailhouse came into view. It was only a little way from the courthouse. Lew Hogarth came out of the front door and bellowed, and a head stuck out of the courthouse window, answering. It was one of Lew's new deputies. He disappeared from the window, and after a moment went running across to the jail in answer to Hogarth's summons.

"Answers like a well-whipped cur dog," Six Point muttered.

"Man's got to get along in town," said Doc. "Man has to get on with the officials if he's going to live here."

"Some do," said Six Point, "and some don't!"

They reached Doc's house. He opened the door, calling to his wife, but she was not at home. They found his instruments and medicines. He stuffed them in the little black bag and started out again.

Six Point had an uneasy feeling, a faint, warning shiver, as they stepped outside again, and he stopped, listening carefully. He heard nothing, and after a moment the feeling disappeared.

"Let's go," he said to Doc. "And remember—watch your step!"

DOC said nothing. They started up the street. Lew Hogarth came out of his office in the front of the jailhouse a block away and angled toward them, hitching his pants up over his gross belly in that characteristic way of his. Doc looked at Six Point out of the corner of his eye, grinning slightly.

"Let him come," said Six Point, in a low voice. "If he's coming our way, we can't stop him without raising a fuss. I don't want any fuss—and *there better not be any!* You're still covered, Doc, and he will be, too. All I want is to fix up my horse. If anything else happens, it's your fault."

Hogarth came up and fell in step beside them. He looked suspiciously from Doc to Six Point and back again.

The deputy who had come to the jailhouse from the courthouse now emerged on horseback and galloped away.

"Somebody hurt?" said Lew. "Didn't hear about anybody, Doc."

Six Point held his breath. This was the test. No use of his answering—Lew would want it from Doc sooner or later. How bad had they scared Doc?

"Nobody's hurt," Doc quavered. "I'm just goin' to take care of Six Point's horse. It's got an infected leg."

Again that suspicious glance, and Hogarth said, "You walked? In this heat? For a horse? Not of your own free will, I bet. Six Point—"

"You see my gun in place," Six Point snarled. "You see him walkin' along here. Ask him if it's his own free will. Or," he added, "ain't it enough that he's got a brave sheriff along to protect him?"

Hogarth cursed, and stepped around behind Doc. The manoeuvre put him in reach of Six Point—but it also shielded Doc momentarily. No one could have shot without hitting either Six Point or the sheriff. That was why Six Point ducked. He squirmed out of Hogarth's hands and got on the outside of Doc.

Doc was a heavy man on his feet, and for that, Six Point was thankful. He had not been able to make the break to freedom. He closed his eyes and wiped the sweat off his face.

"I come of my own free will, Sheriff," he quavered.

The deputy appeared again, riding hard. They could see him waving his arms and

yelling. Hogarth stopped and waited for him. Doc did likewise, and Six Point could not hurry him without arousing the sheriff's suspicions. The deputy pulled up beside them.

"Boss," he said, excitedly, "there's thirteen cayuses staked out down at the pepper tree grove, most of 'em that ornery Lazy M bunch. And there's Bob Ritter's buckskin and Red Puro's and Needles Haycraf's bays, and that pinto of Jim Donovan's that gave us so much trouble when we had Jim in the calaboose. What's up?"

Hogarth's face flushed.

"Get the boys," he said, shortly.

The deputy nodded and spurred away. Hogarth turned to Six Point.

"A sick horse, eh?" he said. "Well, we'll see. Let's take a look at that animal."

"He's right back of Doc's office," Six Point said, stalling for time, hoping the boys would hear and make themselves scarce. "I told you the truth, Lew. All you're going to get is a hot walk—just a few minutes walk, to bring you to a sick horse back of Doc's office."

"You know where they are, Six Point," Hogarth shot back. "They're your friends. They're around somewhere. They didn't ride into town the day you got out of jail just for the trip. I'm going to find them, Six Point."

"You prob'ly will, Lew," said Six Point, loudly, "but all you'll find back of Doc's office is my gelding, Jiggs."

He led the way. Hogarth's face fell when they came out behind the office and he saw the horse standing there. He watched suspiciously while Doc opened the wound, treated it, and tied on a creosote-covered sheath, to keep off the flies. Several of

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Hogarth's deputies had arrived meanwhile, but Hogarth sent them back to wait in front of the building, while others scoured the town for Bob Ritter and the gang.

"There!" said Doc. "Leave him stand here a day or so, and don't use him until that heals, and maybe he'll not have a stiff leg after all. But—"

A shot crackled distantly, followed by a hoarse yell of pain. A triumphant shout came from the other direction. Doc's face turned ashen, and he cowered. Hogarth let out a startled oath and clawed at his gun.

But Six Point Buck was already darting down the alleyway toward the street like a startled deer, and he was out of sight before the clumsy officer could collect his wits.

By the time Six Point reached the street, every deputy's saddle was empty and the last Hogarth underling was just vanishing behind cover—a rain-barrel across the street. Six Point came out shooting, to increase the element of surprise since there was little chance of any other advantage. He dropped an accurate shot into the rain-barrel and it squirted stagnant water. The deputy screeched and scuttled toward the alley. Six Point fanned him along with another shot.

"Run for cover, you lily-livered, bucket-fed calves!" he shouted. "This is our day to run things, and the peace is about to be disturbed *muy mucho!* Yay, that's shootin', Needles!"

Needles Haycraft had appeared magically from the real estate office, a gun in each of his freckled fists. They pumped methodically, raining lead until they were empty, and Needles had to retreat to reload in the shelter of the real estate office.

A deputy's slug tore off Six Point's hat and another chewed a sudden hole in the plank sidewalk between his legs, but there was no terror in him at their bite and whine. All the bottled-up fury of two weeks of jail had suddenly been released. He did not reckon costs; he just kept shooting.

Lew Hogarth, running hard, came out on the plank sidewalk so fast he had no time to duck back inside. Six Point shoved his empty gun back in its holster and launched himself. His bare head hit the sheriff's bulging stomach, and he threw his wily arms around the thick figure.

HOGARTH squalled, and over they went, fighting to get the pearl-handled forty-five out of Hogarth's holster. Six Point got it and leaped back. Hogarth stumbled to his feet.

"Dance!" Six Point said, thickly. "Dance like you made Topaz Bell dance in his cell that night. Start shuffling those big feet!"

Hogarth danced. Six Point dropped a slug between his feet, and Hogarth yelled and danced harder. It was good to see, and Six Point laughed to see it. Bob Ritter and Red Puro and Ancillus Goff came out of hiding to watch the sheriff dance, and each helped the music along.

But it was not all dancing. A wounded deputy flopped in the dust across the street. Red Puro fell, struck low in the side by an officer's slug. Another "jaillbird," one of the kids by the shrillness of his voice, nicked a deputy farther down the street and yelled the news.

What they had forgotten was the courthouse gang. Only a few deputies had come in response to Hogarth's first call. The others appeared suddenly, fogging up the middle of the street, guns blazing. Six Point's crew ducked for cover and pushed them back with a spray of lead, but when they looked up, Lew Hogarth had disappeared.

Firing broke out down the street on both sides of them. Six Point had taken refuge in the real estate office, along with a half-dozen more. He dared a glance over the sill of the shattered window.

"They're closing in, boys," he said. "I've got to stick around and see about my horse. You fellows can make it out the back way, sudden-like. Run for it."

They gave back profane refusals. Slugs poured in on them from all sides. The little office filled with choking gun-smoke. A man went down, and moaned on the floor with a smashed knee. They could hear Hogarth shouting, and his voice was coming nearer and nearer. He was ordering them to come out, with their hands up.

They came out—but not with their hands up. Six Point and two others came through the window, pumping lead, and the others came out the door. With every shot, a little of the jail bitterness went out of them. But it could not last long. They were shooting at an entire county, a well-heeled gang with plenty of manpower, plenty of ammunition.

Six Point felt his gun click on empty brass. He threw the gun away and advanced on Lew Hogarth with a strident yell. Hogarth stepped toward him, and Six Point heard the first shot tear into the wood behind him, close. All he wanted was time enough to get his hands on Hogarth before one of them dropped him. His wiry body squirmed, and he hurled himself at the big man.

But suddenly Hogarth dropped his gun and clawed at his arm. A foolish expression crossed his face. Six Point hit him then, and the two went over again. And when they lit, Hogarth screamed, and Six Point saw blood on the sheriff's shirt-sleeve.

"No, you don't! Let him up, Buck; and Hogarth, come up with your hands empty. I'm takin' over," came a peremptory voice.

It was Doc Steenocker. The fat physician had come out of the alley next to his office. He had one sixgun in his belt, another in his hand. He gestured pointedly, and the sheriff stood up.

"That's it—don't let him at me again!" Hogarth moaned. "He'll swing this time."

"I doubt it," said Doc. "I just plumb doubt it. Hogarth, I said I was takin' over. You and your gang are through. Look! Here come the folks that are really running this county from now on."

They saw the crew coming—fifteen mounted men, Stony Mathieson in the lead. The rest of them were solid men, substantial ranchers, the men who hired the wild young riders like Six Point Buck and Bob Ritter and the rest.

"You're goin' against the law!" Hogarth shouted. "I'll swear in a posse! I'll have you hung higher than Haman when they get here, Doc Steenocker."

"I'm goin' to give you a chance to prove that, Hogarth," said Doc, and the fat man's voice was icy-cool. "I'm goin' to hold you right here until they get here. Because I'm takin' a hand against you, and I think they are, too! We've put up with enough. I've seen the signs, which you didn't, because you were blind with power. "It took this kid, here—Six Point—to wake me up. He had his chance, and he made his choice. A sick horse meant more to him than vengeance. He stuck up for an old friend, and for principle. Lew Hogarth, I intend to do the same from now on. You're through!"

Stony's men were almost to the jailhouse now, and getting closer—close enough that they could see the guns sagging at their hips. Maybe—just maybe—they had become suspicious at the absence from work of Six Point's wild young sidekicks. Maybe that was why they had ridden into town—

But Six Point knew how Stony Mathieson's mind worked, and suddenly he doubted it. Lew Hogarth must have doubted, too. For it was fear, yellow, craven fear, that made him faint then, and not loss of blood.

He keeled over on his face with a moan. Doc tried to hand the gun to Six Point, so he could bind up Hogarth's wound.

But Six Point, with all his gang, had already started pell-mell toward the jailhouse. And by the time Stony Mathieson reached it, there was no jailhouse left. He rode past the wrecked building and the yelling cowboys, and turned to grin over his shoulder at the ranchers behind.

"Taxes," he said. "paid for that, but I reckon we can afford to build another one."



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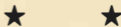
Sheriff Bannister Novelette



ELECTION DAY

By
**CARL McK.
SAUNDERS**

In electing Matt Bannister, the conservative party of Wind River County suddenly found they had a red-hot potato in their hands. For Bannister had just one system—slug it out . . . or shoot it out.



CHAPTER

Ballots For Sale

1

The votes were all in and counted and by early evening it was apparent that the new sheriff of Wind River County was Matt Bannister. It had been a close race. Matt Bannister had run far ahead in Spring Creek, in Waggoner and the Antelope Valley country and in the Crossroads district—but in Tiffany, the county seat, where the heaviest vote had been cast, Henry Tyler, who had been sheriff for years, carried most of the vote.

It hadn't been an honest vote here in Tiffany. Matt recognized that as he sat at dinner in the narrow dining room of the Tiffany House. There weren't as many against him as it seemed. In fact, there weren't as many people in Tiffany as had voted. Henry Tyler, with the support of Al Sparrow's crowd, had pretty well controlled the voting in Tiffany. Some of Sparrow's men had probably voted a dozen times.

Matt Bannister finished his meal and pushed back his chair. He got to his feet and headed for the hotel lobby. He was a tall man, broad shouldered, and his heavy frame carried a good deal of weight but it was well distributed. He had a square, rugged face, grey eyes set far apart, a wide mouth which could break into an easy grin



"There ain't no one going to arrest me!" said Little Joe.

and hair which was neither black nor brown but some shade in between.

He was thirty-five but looked older. Some dozen years before he had married one of the Ordway girls. Last Christmas she had died. This campaigning for sheriff and the break from the old routine of his life had satisfied the restlessness which had come over him since his wife's death and had done a good deal to steady him.

Matt paid his bill at the hotel desk and then stood there for a while, frowning. It occurred to him that this was really his last free evening. He would be sworn in tomorrow noon and from then on the problem of upholding the law in this part of the country would rest squarely on his shoulders.



He wondered how he would measure up to it. There were some, he knew, who thought he was too easy going. That argument had been used against him during the campaign. His frown deepened. Was he really too easy going? He didn't know.

Andy Chard came in and crossed over to where he was standing. Andy looked worried but then Andy usually looked worried. He was one of the most gloomy men Matt knew. He always looked on the dark side of things. He always saw difficulties as much greater than they were. He was an eternal prophet of disaster, but with all that, Matt had never known him to back away from a job or duck a responsibility.

"Henry Tyler is in the Cattlemen's Bar," he said to Matt. "He's pretty drunk an' he's talkin'. He says he's gonna have it out with you the minute he sees you. He says this country isn't big enough for you and him, Matt, an' that he intends to go on livin' here."

Matt Bannister shook his head. "Tyler won't feel that way tomorrow. He isn't all bad, Andy. He was a good sheriff before he got tied up with Al Sparrow and his crowd."

"Maybe so, but he's talked so much he can't back down now."

"Is Sparrow with him?"

"No, but Big Joe Wesson is, and half a dozen more of Sparrow's men are hangin' around. If you walk in there, Matt, you'll never walk out."

Andy Chard was a tall, thin man. His skin seemed glued to the bones of his head. He was stooped, hollow-chested, long armed. His eyes were dark and deep set and his lips were a thin, tight line across his face. He had worked for Matt Bannister for years and had reluctantly agreed to be Matt's deputy if Matt was elected, which he had said was impossible.

"Al Sparrow's back of this," Matt said slowly. "It's a trick I might have expected."

Andy Chard shrugged his shoulders. "No matter who's back of it, you can't duck it an' you can't win."

"Maybe I don't want to duck it," Matt answered. "Where's Al Sparrow?"

"In his office back of the saloon."

Matt said, "Wait here. I'll be back."

He turned and moved away, heading back into the dining room and from there to the kitchen. Mrs. Hemmingway, who presided over the hotel kitchen, looked up at him in some amazement but Matt only grinned at her and let himself out through the back door. From there he circled to the rear of the building housing the Cattlemen's Bar.

Lamp light showed through the curtained window of Al Sparrow's low-roofed office. Matt Bannister walked straight to the door and knocked and when the door wasn't opened at once he knocked again, more insistently.

Someone unlocked it and pulled the door back a little. Matt thrust against it and stepped inside. A startled look came over the face of the man who had opened the door, a short, thin man with shifty eyes and a pale, sallow complexion. His hand dropped to his gun.

The man back of the desk shook his head. He said, "Not now, Joe."

The man's voice was sharp. His features were sharp. He had a straight nose, a clearly defined chin, small, dark eyes. His forehead was high and his hair was black and straight. He sat very erect, not a large man but a man who made the force of his

personality felt by the very tension with which he held himself, by the tight, cold unchanging expression he wore.

This was Al Sparrow, gambler, business man, politician. Two years before he had come to Tiffany with less than a hundred dollars, it was said. He had won his title to the Cattleman's Bar in a poker game and since then had purchased a controlling interest in two other saloons and in the feed store. He was growing to be a man of affairs.

IF AL SPARROW was at all startled or uneasy, his face didn't show it. A humorless smile curved his lips. "This is an unexpected pleasure, Bannister," he said dryly. "I didn't expect a call from you quite so soon."

"Didn't you?" Matt answered.

The gambler shrugged. "What do you want?"

"There's a man in your saloon named Henry Tyler," Matt said slowly. "Your men are filling him with liquor and with the crazy notion that he wants to kill me. I want you to send him home and see that he goes."

"So you don't have to face him, Bannister?"

"Figure it any way you like. He was a good sheriff, Sparrow, until you got your hands on him. He deserves a better break than this. Send him home."

The mocking look was still in the gambler's eyes. He shook his head. "Tyler's a grown man, Bannister. He knows what he's doing."

Matt leaned forward. "I told you to send him home," he snapped.

"You're not sheriff, yet. You're not giving orders."

"I just gave you one."

The gambler's eyes narrowed. He stared at Matt Bannister for a long time as though trying to measure the man. "What if I don't?" he asked finally.

"If you don't," said Matt bluntly, "I'll be back here again but not to face Henry Tyler. I'll be after you, Sparrow, and not all the men you've got will stop me."

The short, pale faced man who had opened the door sucked in a hissing breath. "Let me take him now, Al," he said flatly.

Matt Bannister glanced at the man. Joe Elliott was his name but he was generally

called Little Joe to distinguish him from Big Joe Wesson, another of Sparrow's men. Joe Elliott sometimes served as a faro dealer but he was handy with a gun and either he or Big Joe kept pretty close to Al Sparrow. Big Joe Wesson was another man who knew how to use his gun.

"Not now, Joe," Sparrow answered, shaking his head. "This is the new sheriff you're talking about. Maybe we should do as he says."

That amused, mocking note was again in Sparrow's voice. Matt Bannister stared into the man's eyes and tried to read what he was really thinking but could only be sure of the fact that Sparrow's eyes reflected no amusement.

"Get him home," Matt said again.

Al Sparrow nodded. "Of course, Sheriff."

Matt wheeled away. He shot a look at Little Joe Elliott, then pulled open the door and stepped outside and stood there for a moment. He felt a little uneasy, aware of a vague apprehension. Al Sparrow had given in too easily. It wasn't like him to back down so readily.

Andy Chard joined him as he started away, moving quietly out of the deep shadows at the side of the building.

"I thought I was supposed to be your deputy," Andy growled. "What was the idea of trying to leave me back there at the hotel?"

"You won't be my deputy until tomorrow," Matt answered.

"And you won't be sheriff, but you sure acted like one."

"You heard what was said?"

"Most of it. The walls aren't too thick an' you talked loud enough."

They were back of the hotel now and had stopped. Matt Bannister was scowling. He said, "Andy, what will he do? Will he send Tyler home?"

"Maybe. He's a clever man. He plays a tight game. But we're not finished with him, Matt. He had his own way under Henry Tyler an' he's not going to want less from you."

"Suppose you go take a look and see what happens," Matt suggested. "I'll wait for you at the livery stable."

Andy Chard nodded and moved away and Matt Bannister kept on until he drew near the livery stable. This was at the far

end of Tiffany's main street and there were few lighted buildings near here.

Matt squatted on his heels not far from the stable door. He could see up the street, could see the blurred movement of men from one saloon to another. Several fellows rode past him coming into town and he caught snatches of their talk.

The night was dark but clear and a thousand stars shown overhead. Far to the north he could see the low outline of the Toltec Mountains. Wind River skirted the other edge of town after making its slow, uneven way down the valley from those distant peaks. East of here were the Indian Hills and beyond them Antelope Valley. South was the uneven terrain of the Crossroads district. West a dozen miles, was the desert.

This was the area whose problems became his, tomorrow. All this and Tiffany, where his most immediate problem lay.

Andy Chard finally joined him. "They took Tyler out the back way," Andy reported. "Took him home, I guess. I didn't have a chance to follow and see but he's not around the saloon making talk any more."

Matt Bannister sucked in a long, slow breath. He thought that here at least was the first danger passed and he turned to the stable for his horse. The sound of a single gunshot reached his ears as he mounted and it brought a scowl to his face. Tomorrow night a sound like that might mean real trouble for him.

CHAPTER

2

Ring of Doom

Henry Tyler's body was found the next morning within a hundred yards of the house where he lived. He had been shot through the chest. His gun was in his hand as though he had grabbed for it when faced by the man who shot him, grabbed for it when it was too late. Such money as he had had was still on his body.

Matt Bannister heard of Tyler's death when he rode into Tiffany just before noon. Andy Chard and Matt's brother were with him. There had been a good deal of joking between Matt and Paul Bannister on the way in but this news sobered them and brought a look of anxiety to Paul Bannister's thin, youthful face.

"How did it happen?" Matt asked.

Hugh Schemmerhorn, the storekeeper, told what he knew which wasn't much. He called Tyler's death a murder and he didn't look at Bannister as he talked. He seemed a little nervous.

Matt had stopped here for tobacco. He bought the tobacco and filled his pipe and walked out on the hotel porch.

Paul Bannister asked, "Who do you think did it, Matt? Who do you think did it?"

Matt looked at Andy Chard.

Andy nodded in answer to his unspoken question. "I should have headed out for his place last night, Matt," Andy muttered. "I should have made sure he got home."

Matt shook his head. "Neither of us figured anything like this."

Three men joined them on the porch of the store, John McAdams, Bill Ott and Jody Moore. McAdams was the biggest rancher in the Wind river valley and a power in the politics of the state. He had supported Matt's campaign for sheriff. He was big and red faced and had a booming voice which was curiously quiet this morning.

"I can see you heard what happened," he said bluntly.

"Schemmerhorn told us," Matt replied.

"They're talking down the street about the threats Tyler made against you last night," McAdams went on. "Sparrow says you ordered him to send Tyler home."

"I told him to have one of his men take Tyler home," Matt corrected.

"Sparrow tells it differently. He says he called Tyler back to his office right after you left, talked to him for a moment and then started him off toward home, alone. Sparrow says that maybe you were still around."

Matt Bannister stiffened. "And what have you got to say?"

"It could be made to look bad, Bannister."

"Maybe."

John McAdams scowled. He said, "Look here, Bannister. I haven't said you shot him. I don't think you did, but talk like this can ruin any chance you ever had to really take hold of things here in the valley. You wouldn't have the confidence and support of the men you need."

"So maybe I should resign. Is that it?"

"We could appoint someone else, tempo-

rarily, until this matter is straightened out."

Matt Bannister shook his head. "I've been elected sheriff and that's what I'm going to be. You never whip a thing by running away from it."

"I'm afraid you're making a mistake, Bannister."

"Then it's my mistake."

The older man's lips tightened. He looked at Bill Ott and Jody Moore but received no encouragement from either of them and he turned abruptly and stalked away.

"You need any help," drawled Bill Ott, "just call on me."

Matt grinned. He rather liked Bill Ott who was a man of about his own age and who had a small place up on the bench near the foothills of the Toltecs.

"I might be able to help some, too," Jody Moore offered.

Matt Bannister could appreciate this but he knew how serious McAdams' opposition could be. McAdams liked to have things his own way. He was a man very much impressed with his own importance and a good many people in the valley would listen to him.

"Where's Tyler's body?" Matt asked.

"At Ed Carson's, up the street."

Matt nodded. He said, "Thanks," and started that way. Andy Chard went with him.

ED CARSON took them to the back room of his saddle shop and showed them Tyler's body. It was laid out ready for burial. Carson, in addition to running a saddle shop, was Tiffany's undertaker. He was a dour-faced man in the sixties, almost completely bald.

"One shot," he said bluntly. "Straight through the heart. Tyler was dead before he hit the ground."

Matt Bannister stared at the body lying before him. He recalled the time when Henry Tyler had faced the Simmons brothers, alone, and had shot it out with them. The record of the Simmons brothers had been about as bloody as any outlaws the valley had ever known.

And he remembered how Tyler had cleaned up the Crossroads district six or seven years before. He had been a fine sheriff in those days, one of the best. What

had happened to turn him wrong? Had it been a long, gnawing greed or was it something that Al Sparrow had held over him? He wondered if he would ever have the answer.

Tyler's gnarled hands were crossed awkwardly on his chest in what Carson probably thought was an approved fashion. Matt noticed the faint, white band around the base of the sheriff's third finger. He said, "Who got the ring, Carson?"

"Ring?" answered the undertaker. "What ring?"

"The diamond ring Tyler always wore. The one in the wide gold setting. It probably wasn't a diamond but he claimed it was."

Carson shook his head. "There wasn't any diamond on his finger when he was brought in here."

"But his money was in his pocket."

"Yes, he hadn't been robbed."

"Who found his body?"

"Sam Addis. He called me right away. And Doc Spears."

Matt Bannister frowned. He knew Sam Addis and Doc Spears. He didn't think that either of them would have taken the ring. He didn't think that Carson would have taken it.

"Cover up his hand, Carson," he said slowly, "and don't say anything about that missing ring to anyone."

They moved outside the saddle shop and Matt reached for his pipe.

"You think the man who shot him took the ring?" Andy asked.

"Suppose you were Big Joe Wesson," Matt answered. "Suppose you had just shot Henry Tyler. You had been told not to take his money but as he lay on the ground you noticed his ring. You had heard him boast that it was a diamond and worth plenty. Well, no one is around. Would you take it?"

"I wouldn't have shot him in the first place. How do you know it was Big Joe Wesson?"

Matt shook his head. "I don't. Let's get over to the court house. It's close to noon."

* * *

There wasn't a large crowd present when Matt Bannister was sworn in as sheriff. McAdams was missing and a good many

of the men who had probably come to town for the ceremony. And there was nothing very friendly or very easy about the ceremony. Judge Ball seemed in a hurry and the men who stood around to watch were solemn and seemed a little unsure as to whether they belonged there or not.

Matt Bannister pinned on the badge which Tyler had so lately worn. He gave the proper answers and then turned to face the men in the room. His features had tightened up. His eyes had narrowed and his lips, pressed rigidly together, didn't seem nearly so full. The line of his jaw had squared. There was a rugged, stubborn look about him as he stood there with his face set and his shoulders squared.

"That's about all right now," he said slowly. "I appreciate the fact that some of you came here. I don't know what kind of a sheriff I'll make. I reckon you'll just have to wait and see."

This was at noon. At twelve ten, Matt unlocked the sheriff's office down the street and went in and sat down at the desk. At twelve fifteen he swore in Andy Chard as his deputy, not sure whether he was following the proper procedure or not. By one o'clock he was deep in the papers in the sheriff's desk and was wishing that someone could help him understand all that was there.

By one thirty he had given up. He had his dinner then with Andy Chard and at three he went to Henry Tyler's funeral, conscious of the curious looks thrown in his direction and of the whispered comments of some of the men, comments which he couldn't hear but about which he could guess.

Al Sparrow was at the funeral accompanied by Big Joe and Little Joe and several more of his men. Sparrow looked very solemn, but his eyes, when they turned on Matt Bannister, held the same mocking glint as the night before.

Matt was back in his office at three, fighting hard against an impatience which was nagging at him. He was still there at four and at five and at five thirty when he heard two shots from the direction of the Cattleman's Bar.

Andy Chard, who had probably spent the easiest afternoon he had ever spent in his life, came abruptly to his feet at the sound of the shots but Matt didn't move.

He said, "Wait, Andy. Wait. We'll hear about it in a minute."

They did. A man came hurrying up to the sheriff's office and told them what had happened. A rider named Link Edwards from the Crossroads district had been playing faro in the Cattleman's. Little Joe Elliott was the dealer. Edwards had accused Little Joe of cheating and had gone for his gun. Or Little Joe had gone for his. At any rate, shots had been fired and Link Edwards was dead.

Matt Bannister heard this without showing any excitement. He thanked the man for coming and after the man had gone he stood up, examined his gun and then dropped it back into its holster.

He said, "Wait here, Andy. I'll be back."

Andy Chard scowled at him and shook his head. "Not again, Matt. This time I tag along."

Matt hesitated.

"Don't think I want to go along," Andy added. "I think we're both crazy. You haven't got a chance, but a deputy's supposed to go along. See?"

A slow grin momentarily relaxed the lines in Matt Bannister's face. He said, "Sure Andy. I think I understand. Come on then. We'll sort of look things over."

CHAPTER

3

Big Joe's Bluff

There were several men standing in front of the entrance to the Cattleman's Bar. One of them, noticing the new sheriff and Andy Chard coming up the street, spoke to the others. They turned quickly inside the building. Matt Bannister saw this but wasn't surprised. He noticed John McAdams across the street with several other cattlemen. McAdams was watching him thoughtfully. Before the election McAdams had promised him all the help he needed in cleaning up conditions here in Tiffany. Matt wondered what McAdams would do if he asked for a little help now but he put the thought from his mind.

Those in front of the Cattleman's Bar stood aside as he and Andy Chard got there and Matt pushed the door open and entered and just inside came to a momentary pause. This was a wide open room with a bar along one side and gambling

tables in the remainder of the place. There were several high windows but they gave little light and lanterns were always in use. Halfway down the room and to the side away from the bar lay a motionless, blanket covered figure.

Most of the men who had been here when the shooting had occurred had probably left but a few were still in the saloon. At a table near the front and far to the side, four men were playing cards. At another table there were two men. In the far corner, two more. Al Sparrow stood at the bar with Little Joe Elliott in apparent conference with the bartender, a long-faced man in a dirty apron.

In one glance around the room, Matt made his analysis of how things stood. The men at the tables weren't really interested in the games they were playing. They were Sparrow's men and had been placed where they were for a purpose.

Al Sparrow stood with Little Joe who had just killed a man and by that simple act, gave Little Joe his backing. The minute Matt Bannister and Andy moved forward, those at the corner table would be

behind them. They would be covered from every angle.

Matt's face tightened. He moved forward, heading toward Al Sparrow and Little Joe. Andy Chard leaned back against the side of the door. He hooked his thumb in his gun belt and grinned sourly at the men at the corner table, then watched Matt Bannister.

Al Sparrow turned as the sheriff approached and a brief, meaningless smile touched his lips. "Too bad things have to start off like this, Sheriff," he said casually. "Link Edwards was always a hot headed man. He went for his gun first. Every man here saw what happened."

Matt nodded. "We'll talk it over some more, Sparrow, back in your office."

"We'll talk it over here," Sparrow said sharply.

Matt was still moving forward. He brushed past Little Joe Elliott and his hand fell on Sparrow's arm and tightened. He turned Sparrow around. "I said in your office," he repeated.

Little Joe stiffened. He drew away and his hand dropped to his gun.

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"Don't try it, Joe," Andy Chard called. "I couldn't miss a rat from where I'm standing."

Little Joe Elliott took a look over his shoulder toward the man standing at the door. His shifty eyes blinked uncertainly. The men at the table in the corner had come to their feet but seemed to be awaiting some signal from Sparrow.

Matt Bannister with his hand still tightly on Sparrow's arm was urging Sparrow toward the office door. He seemed wholly unaware, or wholly unconcerned with what else was going on in the saloon. He reached the office door, opened it, thrust Al Sparrow inside, followed him and closed the door behind him. From back in the saloon he could hear Andy Chard's heavy voice: "Just stay where you are, everyone," Andy was ordering. "Let's keep this thing nice and friendly."

In the office, Al Sparrow had jerked around to face the man who had brought him here. There was an unaccustomed flush of color in the gambler's face and his eyes were wider than Matt had ever seen them. Sparrow's breath was coming fast, too. For once the man's stern composure was broken.

"Just who the hell do you think you are, Bannister?" he demanded. "No man living can do a thing like this to me!"

Matt Bannister's tight scowl was still on his face. He said, "Sparrow, I came here to talk to you about a man who was shot."

"He had an even break."

"Maybe so, but there in your saloon a man lies dead. It's happened here before, Sparrow, several times. It's not going to happen again. Starting right now, this bar is closed down. If the men in town want a drink they can get a drink someplace else, not here."

Sparrow stiffened. "You can't close me down, Bannister."

"Then try keeping this place open and see what happens. And one more thing. Let your dealers go. If a bunch of men want to play poker in one of your other saloons, that's all right. But we have no more house games."

The gambler moistened his lips. "You can't do that. You haven't the right."

"Maybe I haven't, Sparrow, so let's put it this way. You are deciding yourself not to run any more house games. No one can

make you hire dealers and run a house game if you don't want to, and from now on you don't want to."

"Like hell I don't."

Matt Bannister sucked in a long, slow breath. He said, "Sparrow, I don't know much about being sheriff. I don't know much about law. I may make a lot of mistakes on this job but I'm making no mistake about you. You're rotten straight through and I'm going to see that you don't spread it around too much. My advice to you is to get out, but if you don't you'll run your places the way I tell you, and that's final. Close this place up now and close out your house games in your other saloons."

The gambler's lips had tightened and he had his composure back now. His eyes were hard and cold. "You'll last as sheriff about one day," he said flatly. "I'll run my saloons the way I want to run them."

Matt shrugged. He opened the door into the saloon and called, "That's all, Andy. See you at the office. I'm leaving the back way." Then he closed the door and turning, grabbed Sparrow by the arm. "You're under arrest," he said bluntly. "Come along."

AL SPARROW caught his breath, taken wholly by surprise. He tried to jerk away. One hand clawed at his gun. Matt caught the gun as Sparrow lifted it. He twisted the gun from the man's hand and shoved him toward the back door, collared him there, opened the door and pushed him outside.

Back of him the door from the saloon opened and several of Sparrow's men showed up.

"Sparrow and I are taking a little walk," Matt said bluntly. "And Sparrow won't be back for a while."

He moved outside as he said that and closed the outer door. He didn't have much time and he knew it. In a few seconds Sparrow's men would figure out what had happened and they would wait no longer then for some direction from their boss.

Al Sparrow had fallen when he had been pushed outside. Matt took his arm as he got up and marched him toward the street. Andy Chard was waiting there and there was a glint of satisfaction in Andy's eyes.

"We've got a guest for the county," Matt

said as he and Sparrow reached the street.

Andy nodded his head and lined up on the other side of Al Sparrow and the three of them headed down the street toward the sheriff's office and the jail behind it. From across the street, John McAdams saw them and there was a curiously puzzled look on his face. . . .

Al Sparrow's men held a brief meeting in the saloon, then moved in a body toward the sheriff's office. Matt Bannister met them at the door and he had a grim, solid look as he stood there facing them. Others gathered on the fringes of the crowd, more than a little curious.

Big Joe Wesson acted as spokesman for the group. "We want to see Al Sparrow," he stated.

Matt Bannister shook his head. "You can't."

"Why not?"

A faint smile tugged at Matt's lips. "Al Sparrow's resting now," he answered. "He wouldn't like to be bothered."

"What's he arrested for?" Big Joe demanded.

"For the murder of Link Edwards."

A scowl showed on Big Joe's face. "Al Sparrow didn't kill Edwards," he answered. "We all saw what happened. Little Joe shot Edwards and it was a case of self-defense."

Matt Bannister shrugged. He said, "Sparrow's responsible for what happened. He runs the Cattleman's Bar and Little Joe works for him. Come to think of it, I guess we'd better lock up Little Joe, too. Andy, go get him."

Andy Chard moved past Matt Bannister and stepped to the street. The men there had stiffened and Little Joe Elliott had dropped into a half crouch.

"There ain't no one going to arrest me," Little Joe said grimly.

Matt Bannister drew his gun. He didn't jerk it up. He reached for it quite deliberately and held it ready. "Don't any of you try to interfere with this," he said bluntly. "Little Joe Elliott is under arrest. He can talk about why he shot Link Edwards in court."

Andy Chard moved steadily forward and suddenly he lunged at Little Joe Elliott and caught the man's gun arm. There was a brief struggle and Little Joe's gun fell into the street.

Matt Bannister still covered these men with the gun he held but he knew that it wasn't his gun alone which held them silent. It was what he represented. In the full view of the town these men didn't dare challenge the authority of his office. They were still bewildered and without leadership. They didn't know quite what to do.

Andy Chard hauled Little Joe Elliott back to the sheriff's office and inside and Matt put away his gun. "All this will be settled in court," he said flatly. "I guess that ends the meeting."

Big Joe Wesson glanced around at the others and at the crowd which had gathered. He had known just what he was going to do when he had headed up this way. He had meant to get into the sheriff's office and had meant to force the sheriff to release Al Sparrow. It hadn't worked out that way and there were too many men standing around, watching what was happening. Big Joe didn't know what to do now.

A sudden resentment against what had happened swept over him and he called, "We'll be back, Bannister. We're not finished with you."

As soon as he heard those words he knew he shouldn't have said them for it put him on the wrong side of the law. He did mean to come back but he shouldn't have boasted of it. A scowl settled over his face and he turned abruptly away. Those who had come with him followed him up the street.

The crowd in front of the sheriff's office disintegrated. Here and there up and down the street, men gathered in small groups and discussed what they had heard and what they knew of the situation. A good many of these men had felt they were well acquainted with Matt Bannister, but they had seen, this afternoon, a Matt Bannister they didn't know. A Matt Bannister who had acquired a stature which puzzled them, who acted with a decision which was startling.

In the sheriff's office, Matt Bannister and Andy Chard sat facing Little Joe Elliott. There had been a long moment of silence. Little Joe shifted uneasily in his

chair. His eyes darted to the sheriff's desk where a ring was lying, a gold ring with a sparkling stone which might have been a diamond. That ring had been found in Little Joe's pocket when Andy had searched him.

"Tell us about it," Matt Bannister said again. "Who was with you when you shot Henry Tyler?"

Little Joe shook his head. There was a look of fear in his eyes. "I didn't shoot him."

"Then how did you get the ring?"

"Like I told you, I won it at faro."

"That's a lie, and you know it. Who was with you when you shot Tyler?"

Little Joe gulped. "I didn't shoot him."

It was growing dark outside. Matt Bannister lit the lamp and drew the curtains.

"We wouldn't have to prove anything if this ring was found on Little Joe's body," Andy Chard suggested. "How about it, Matt? We could say Little Joe was trying to escape when he was shot."

Matt Bannister shrugged. "Maybe that would work."

"You can't do a thing like that," Little Joe said quickly. "I demand my rights."

"Then suppose you talk up," Andy advised. "Why did you shoot Tyler?"

"I didn't shoot him."

Matt Bannister reached for his pipe. He lit it and listened to Andy Chard working on Little Joe. This was a real break for them, he realized. The discovery of the ring would end in clearing up the mystery surrounding the former sheriff's death and would give an air tight reason for holding Little Joe and Al Sparrow in jail.

Andy Chard finally gave up. "I could beat it out of him," he said, scowling. "He won't talk any other way."

"Lock him up in the extra cell," Matt ordered. "We'll go to work on him again later on."

Andy locked Little Joe up and came back to the office. Matt turned to the door. He said, "Stick around a while, Andy. I don't want to leave those fellows too much alone. I'll grab a bite to eat, then you can."

"You're sure it's food you're after?" Andy asked.

Matt grinned. He said, "Just food."

The hotel dining room was pretty well filled but Matt Bannister found a table

near the back and sat down. His entrance had attracted attention. There had been whispers and looks cast in his direction and this brought a frown to Matt's face. He didn't like this part of his job, the public notice that seemed to go with it.

He gave his order and nodded to the men at his table. A couple of them spoke appreciatively of what he had done. "I hope you keep those fellows in jail a long time," said one of the men. "It's where they belong."

The men at Matt's table were almost finished when he got there and they soon left. Matt's dinner was brought and he started eating. Two men came over to his table and he looked up and saw John McAdams and Judge Ball. McAdams was frowning. The judge looked worried.

"We want to talk to you, Bannister," McAdams said bluntly.

Matt Bannister waved his hand toward the extra chairs at the table. "Sit down and go right ahead."

Both men sat down. McAdams drew out a cigar and lit it. He offered one to the judge but Judge Ball shook his head.

"Why did you arrest Al Sparrow?" McAdams asked suddenly.

Matt was about finished. He pushed back his plate. "Don't you approve?"

"Not of the way you did it. Just because you're sheriff, Bannister, you can't go around arresting people. Men have certain rights and you have to uphold those rights.

"You mean, Al Sparrow has certain rights. He can hire gunmen to manage his games. A fellow like Link Edwards can be shot down and it's all right."

"I understand that Link Edwards went for his gun first."

"What if he did, McAdams? The point is, men like Little Joe Elliott, men who are ready to kill, shouldn't be running games. Maybe a rattlesnake has rights but you wouldn't want to go to bed with one."

John McAdams shook his head. "I tell you, Bannister, you can't run the sheriff's office in such a high-fashioned manner. The judge here agrees with me. We both want to see Al Sparrow stopped but it has to be done according to law."

"You can't handle rattlesnakes the way you do rabbits," Matt snapped.

McAdams' lips tightened. He said,

"Bannister, I supported you in your campaign. I don't want to have to be sorry for it. You are new at this, I know, but there are a good many of us who have older heads and will be glad to work with you. Judge Ball will arrange a hearing and if there isn't sufficient evidence to hold Sparrow, you will have to release him. When that happens, plenty of us will back you in an effort to line him up the right way."

Matt Bannister got abruptly to his feet, shaking his head. "Sorry, McAdams," he said slowly, "but I've got to do this the way I see it. I—" He broke off, his body stiffening. A spattering of shots sounded from down the street in the direction of his office and he thought of Andy Chard alone there and the prisoners in the jail. He hadn't expected trouble so soon. He turned toward the door, running, and hoping that he was wrong in the guess that those shots had come from his office.

A CROWD was gathering down the street in front of the sheriff's office. Matt elbowed his way to the door and inside. Andy Chard was stretched out on the floor. Two men were bending over him and had turned back his coat. He had been hit in the shoulder. His eyes were closed and his face looked pale and tired and showed no sign of life.

"We've sent for the doctor," said one of the men looking up.

Matt crossed to the back door and to the jail just behind this office. The jail stood open. Al Sparrow and Little Joe were gone. He didn't have to ask what had happened. Sparrow's men had come back as soon as it was dark and only Andy Chard had been here to stand in their way.

Back in his office Matt Bannister's eyes searched the top of his desk. The ring they had found on Little Joe was gone. The ring was gone and Al Chard was dying and there went his proof as to the murderer of Henry Tyler. But suddenly that was no longer of any importance to him. What had happened to Andy was important. And it was his fault. He was learning fast. In a game like this you couldn't let up for a minute. If you were once caught off balance it was the end.

Doc Spears pushed through the crowd at the door and knelt at Andy Chard's side.

He made a swift examination, removing the pack which someone had pressed against the wound to hold back the flow of blood.

"Take that door off its hinge," Doc Spears ordered. "We'll put Andy's body on it and carry him over to my place."

The door was removed and several men crowded around the deputy's figure and lifted him. As they did this one of Andy's arms dropped down and his hand, which had been tightly clenched, opened. A ring dropped to the floor and rolled toward the desk.

Matt stooped over and picked it up. Tyler's ring. Andy Chard had remembered it and had probably reached for it even as Sparrow's men came in. If he had thought only of his own safety, someone else might now be lying here on the floor.

Matt left his office and turned toward the Cattleman's Bar and just outside was suddenly confronted by John McAdams. Judge Ball was again with McAdams and several other ranchers were in the group, ranchers who were quite close to McAdams.

"Where are you going, Bannister?" McAdams asked.

"I'm going after two prisoners who escaped tonight," Matt Bannister answered abruptly. "Two escaped prisoners and the men who shot Andy Chard."

John McAdams shook his head. "Al Sparrow came to Judge Ball just a few minutes ago. He offered to surrender to the judge. He said that his men had released him out of a sense of loyalty, that he hadn't expected it and didn't want to be released in that way."

"Where is he?" Matt asked.

"He is to appear in court tomorrow."

"And Little Joe Elliott?"

"Little Joe, too."

"What about the man who shot Andy Chard?"

"He has promised to find out who did it and let us know."

Matt Bannister stared soberly at this man who was defending Sparrow. He was still puzzled. It didn't make sense that a man as prominent as McAdams should champion a gambler of the type of Al Sparrow.

"I can't figure you out, McAdams," he said finally. "I don't know whether you're so damned honest that you lean over backwards or whether you're on Sparrow's

side—maybe even his silent partner."

McAdams' face hardened, "My deals are all in the open, Bannister."

Matt nodded. "Then you're just not thinking straight. The cause of most of the trouble we've had in Tiffany is Al Sparrow. Men like Link Edwards have been shot by the crowd he's drawn around him. Andy Chard is dying, shot by one of Sparrow's men. It isn't the Little Joes or the man who shot Al Chard that we've got to root out. It's the man responsible. It's Al Sparrow. You kill the roots of a weed and the weed dies."

"Sparrow will be in court tomorrow," McAdams said stiffly. "You can make your speech then."

Matt Bannister shook his head. Tomorrow would be too late. If Sparrow knew about the ring, Little Joe would have disappeared before tomorrow and Sparrow would be sorry and would offer to help find him after charging him with the death of Tyler and possibly the shooting of Andy Chard.

"Well?" McAdams asked.

"Sparrow will be back in jail tonight," Matt answered. "He'll be back in jail or he'll be dead, or I will. Want to come along with me?"

"I do," said a voice.

Matt turned his head and saw Bill Ott. The tall, lanky rancher was nodding his head soberly.

"I'll go along," Bill Ott repeated. "I think you've got it figured about right, Matt. I'll go along and I think I can dig up a few others."

McAdams' hard glance turned on Bill Ott but the rancher from the bench country met the look boldly. "We've got what we said we wanted, McAdams," he stated. "A sheriff with the guts to go ahead and I say it's up to us to back him."

Several others in the group murmured their approval. John McAdams bit his lips. He turned abruptly away.

conference. Matt Bannister, Bill Ott, Hobart and Johnstone from the Crossroads district and three men from Antelope Valley.

"They're all in there," said one of the men from Antelope Valley. "I was just inside for a drink but I got out, quick. They watched me too close."

"Who was there?" Matt asked.

"Al Sparrow, Big Joe and Little Joe, Keno Latham and Rex Sutton and a couple more I know by sight. The bartender, too."

"Any men from town or from the valley?"

"No, but a couple of McAdams' riders came in just as I left."

Matt scowled. He reached into his pocket and drew out Tyler's ring. He told the men where it had been found and said, "We want Little Joe Elliott alive. Don't take any chances but try to remember that. You three from Antelope Valley cover the back. Don't let anyone get out. Hobart and Johnstone, cover the front door. I'm going in the front way, Bill Ott the back. I'm going in first. Sparrow will want to talk. The shooting won't start right away. Ott will get there in time to cover from behind."

It wasn't a good plan and Matt Bannister knew it but he felt the need of moving fast, of moving before something could happen to Little Joe Elliott. He had to get in there and get Little Joe. There wasn't any other way to work it. He had to get Little Joe, for through him he could eliminate Al Sparrow. It was Sparrow who had ordered Little Joe to kill Tyler, he was sure.

"Ready, Bill?" he asked bluntly.

Bill Ott nodded and flashed a grin. He said, "On my way," and turned between two of the buildings. The three Antelope Valley men followed him. Matt glanced at the two fellows from the Crossroads district. "Don't get too anxious," he advised. "Just cover the door if anyone starts out."

He started along the street as he said that, noticing how deserted it seemed and how unnaturally quiet for so early in the evening. A few steps brought him to the door to the Cattlemen's Bar. He pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The arrangement of Al Sparrow's men was almost the same as in the late afternoon. There were three at the corner

Not more than an hour had passed since Andy Chard was shot, not more than fifteen minutes since Matt Bannister had faced McAdams on the street. Near the Cattlemen's Bar, a group of men stood in

table, two farther down the room, and at the bar, Al Sparrow and Little Joe. Big Joe was behind the bar with the bartender. The arrangement was almost the same but there was a difference which Matt felt the instant he stepped inside.

This afternoon these men had tried to act occupied, natural. Tonight there was no pretense. They watched him openly and in a grim silence.

Matt Bannister stopped just inside the door, his eyes fastening on Al Sparrow. He said, "Come on, Sparrow. Back to jail."

There was no hint of a smile on the gambler's face. His body was tense and showed it. He shook his head. "I talked to the judge and arranged to be in court tomorrow."

"I'll see that you get there," Matt said bluntly. "Little Joe, too."

Little Joe's hand was on his gun and Matt could hear the sound of his breathing. "Come on," Matt said again.

Al Sparrow again shook his head. "We're not going."

Matt Bannister's glance raked the room. He said, "Sparrow, it doesn't look as though I had much of a chance, but did you ever think of this? You don't either. Your men can get me, I know, but not before I get you. And Little Joe as well. Little Joe in particular, for I found Henry Tyler's ring on him when we arrested him and he admitted killing Tyler because you told him to."

Little Joe Elliott caught his breath. "That's a lie. I didn't admit anything."

Al Sparrow's eyes had narrowed. "You found Tyler's ring on him?" he asked slowly.

Matt drew the ring from his pocket. "Here it is and plenty of people know where I found it."

The gambler bit his lips and Matt could almost follow the line of reasoning which was churning through his mind. Here was something definite which could finish him. If little Joe blamed him for the murder of Henry Tyler, they would hang together.

"Joe," Sparrow said suddenly, "I told you to see that Tyler got safely home. If you killed him—"

Little Joe whirled around to face Sparrow, a startled surprise showing in his face.

"You killed him, didn't you," Sparrow

grated. "He was my friend and you knew it. You killed him for that ring."

A gun seemed to jump into Al Sparrow's hand. It exploded and Little Joe's body stiffened. The look of surprise faded from his face. Sparrow fired again and stepped aside as Little Joe fell toward him.

A startled silence followed those two shots and into the silence fell the heavy voice of Matt Bannister.

"I'd call this a murder, too. You didn't give him a chance, Sparrow. Drop your gun and come with me."

Matt was holding his own gun now and was covering the gambler. Al Sparrow's head jerked toward him and then the man's gun. Matt fired. He heard the whistle of a bullet past his face and he fired again. The gambler lurched suddenly against the bar. He tried to hold himself up but his hands and arms didn't have the strength and he slid to the floor, falling half across the body of Little Joe Elliott.

The door to Sparrow's office had burst open as the gambler was falling and Bill Ott appeared there with a gun in each hand. One of the men from the front corner of the room yelled a warning and fired at him and Bill's guns blasted back. From behind the bar, Big Joe Wesson was firing at Matt Bannister. Matt felt the burning scrape of a bullet across his arm. He took a shot at Big Joe but Big Joe had ducked down behind the bar.

Thrusting into the saloon from behind Bill Ott came the three men from Antelope Valley. They leveled their shots at the men across the room. Latham's voice boomed from the front doorway and Hobart answered him. The two from the Crossroads district had also decided not to wait outside.

MATT BANNISTER headed for the bar. He swung over it and rolled almost on top of Big Joe Wesson. The man jerked up, twisting and trying to get his gun in Matt's face. Matt caught Big Joe's wrist and threw all the weight of his body against the fellow's arm. He heard the snap as the arm broke and he heard Big Joe's shrill scream. But Big Joe Wesson wasn't finished. A rock-like fist caught Matt Bannister in the face. Big Joe Wesson fell on him, pressing his body back against the top edge of the bar.

Matt thrust the man away. His fist snapped up and caught Wesson under the jaw. He hit out again as Wesson staggered backwards, tripped and went down. After a moment the man sat up but he didn't get to his feet. Beyond him, half under the bar, crouched the bartender wanting none of this fight from the very beginning.

Matt Bannister wiped a hand over his face and looked around the room. Two of the men at the corner table were down. Sparrow and Little Joe hadn't moved. The others of Sparrow's men were standing against the far wall with their hands above their heads. None of the men who had barged in here to help him seemed to have been hurt excepting one of the fellows from Antelope valley whose arm was dripping blood and who looked a little pale.

"Short and sweet," said Bill Ott. "What do we do with those who are still on their feet?"

"Ride herd on them for a while. Talk to them. Maybe one of them knows about Tyler."

"I'll talk," said one of the men, "if you'll let me go. I didn't have anything to do with it anyhow. We all knew that Little Joe shot Tyler. We saw the ring he held out. He told us Al Sparrow figured that you'd be blamed for Tyler's death."

Matt Bannister nodded. "Listen to them and then ride them out of town, Bill. Our jail isn't big enough for so many. I'll see you later."

He turned to the door and stepped outside. Most of the men in Tiffany seemed to be on the street now, watching, and from one place a cheer went up when he appeared.

Matt Bannister scowled. He started toward the hotel, looking for McAdams, and in front of the Mesa saloon spotted the man. He crossed over and faced him.

"Al Sparrow's dead," he said bluntly. "Before he died he shot Little Joe Elliot, blaming Elliot for killing Henry Tyler. I can prove that Elliott did kill Tyler and that Sparrow told him to do it. There won't be any court session tomorrow. One isn't needed."

McAdams scowled. "I didn't know that, about Tyler," he said slowly. "Maybe I've been wrong about you, Bannister, but just the same—"

"I don't know who'll take over Sparrow's property," Matt continued. "Perhaps an examination of his books will tell us something."

McAdams shrugged. He didn't seem worried and Matt knew then that the books would never implicate John McAdams. If McAdams had really been involved with Sparrow, the record was well hidden. If McAdams was now taking a loss, he would take it and say nothing.

Matt had the conviction as he stood there that in the days ahead, he and McAdams would have trouble again. Perhaps real trouble. But for the present he pushed that worry aside. . . .

Doc Spears was in the Cattleman's Bar when he got back. He was working on the wounded arm of the man from Antelope Valley. It wasn't a serious wound.

"How's Andy?" Matt asked him and he was almost afraid of what the answer might be.

Doc Spears looked up. "More than an even chance, Bannister. I think he'll pull through. In fact, I'm sure of it, but you won't have a deputy for probably a month or more."

Matt knew a real feeling of relief. His shoulders straightened a little and he drew in a long, slow breath.

"Maybe I could fill in for a little while," Bill Ott suggested. "Things are well in hand up on my place and I could sure use the money."

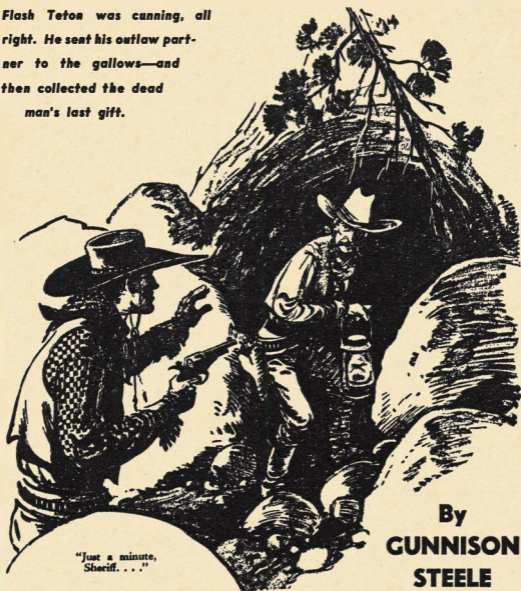
Matt Bannister nodded. "Bill, it's a deal, but you'll earn the money."

It was still early. He still hadn't been sheriff for half a day. Matt Bannister wondered how long a man could stand the strain of a job like this but he had a feeling that he hadn't made a mistake in taking it. Paul, his brother, could run the Bannister ranch, and if he really kept busy he wouldn't mind so much the fact that he was alone.

He crossed to the bar and ordered a beer and stood there drinking it, wondering what the days ahead might bring, but no longer worried about his ability to face whatever might come up. In these first few hours he had worked out his formula. Size up your trouble and strike at its roots, strike hard and never let up until the fight is over. That was a good creed, he decided. A good creed for a sheriff to follow.

HERITAGE FROM HELL

Flash Teton was cunning, all right. He sent his outlaw partner to the gallows—and then collected the dead man's last gift.



"Just a minute, Sheriff. . ."

By
**GUNNISON
STEELE**

"FLASH" TETON, a pair of old field glasses glued to his eyes, grinned with sly triumph at his own cunning. His hunch had paid off. The rider coming slowly across the desert toward him was Sheriff Sam Peters—and there was little doubt in Flash's mind as to where the old lawman was headed.

The sheriff's appearance, Flash reckoned,

meant that "Little Joe" Irons had been hanged. Although Little Joe had been his partner, the knowledge caused Flash no regret.

Flash cased the field glasses and slid off the ledge on which he had been crouched. Every day for the last week he had roosted here atop this wall on the side of Buzzard Peak, where he had an unobstructed view

of the flatlands off toward the town of Seneca Springs. Now his vigil was ended. And in just a little while, unless he had guessed wrong, Sheriff Peters would lead him to Little Joe Irons' loot cache in Squaw Canyon.

Flash had left his horse among a nest of cliffs at the base of the low peak. The big, redhaired renegade waited here, knowing that the lawman's course would bring him close to this spot. The mouth of Squaw Canyon was less than half a mile away. Flash had known that Little Joe's loot cache was somewhere in the canyon, but he'd never been able to locate it.

The rider came slowly on, passing within a hundred yards of the red cliffs without suspecting Flash Teton's presence. Sheriff Sam Peters was a wiry little oldster with handle-bar mustaches and pale eyes. He looked like a skinny old scarecrow as he rode slouched in the saddle. Dangling from the sheriff's saddlehorn was an unlighted lantern.

Flash grinned again when he saw the lantern. Squaw Canyon was full of caves, and he'd suspected all along that Little Joe had hidden the loot in one of them. The lantern proved that the sheriff meant to go underground.

After Sheriff Peters had passed, Flash mounted and followed him, being careful to keep to the shelter of thickets and ravines. Pretty soon he saw the old sheriff dip through a narrow passage between the two towering walls which marked the entrance to Squaw Canyon. Flash followed, using all the cunning with which his wolfish nature was imbued.

Flash Teton was proud of his cunning, his handsomeness, his courage. Now his lip curled with contempt for Little Joe Irons, who was dead because of his own stupidity. Always it had been Flash's brains which planned the jobs—always Little Joe who did the dirty work, faced the danger, took the hard knocks.

In contrast to Flash Teton's bigness and handsomeness, Little Joe had been little and scrawny and ugly. Maybe that was why Little Joe had stuck to him, taken his kicks and curses—because Flash was all he wanted to be but wasn't. But whereas Flash had recklessly gambled and drank away his money and flung it to the dance-hall flossies, Little Joe had hoarded his.

After each job, Little Joe had stubbornly insisted on a split. And because it was in his mind to eventually take Little Joe's share also, Flash had agreed.

Little Joe had hidden his cache well—somewhere in Squaw Canyon, Flash knew, because he had trailed the little outlaw there several times. But each time Little Joe had eluded him; and, search as he might, Flash had failed to locate the cache. Now Little Joe was dead, killed by his partner's treachery. And the law which Flash Teton so wickedly hated was leading Flash to the dead man's cache. . . .

Flash stopped his horse suddenly in a lodgepole thicket. After threading his way in and out among the needle-like spires and broken walls that laced the floor of Squaw Canyon for a mile, Sheriff Peters had stopped and dismounted. Before the sheriff was a dense belt of cedars, and beyond the cedars was a towering rock wall.

Sheriff Peters looked carefully about him, as if locating landmarks. Then, the lantern in hand, he pushed his way among the cedars and vanished.

Gun in hand, Flash ran across the open space that separated him from the cedars. He could hear the scuff of Sam Peters' boots in or beyond the thicket. Then the sounds stopped.

With the stealth of a puma, Flash crept through the thick cedars. A moment later he crouched at their edge. Twenty feet away was the boulder-clogged base of the cliff. Between two boulders gaped the ragged, head-high mouth of a cave.

Before the cave entrance stood Sheriff Peters. The wiry oldster was lighting the lantern.

Wicked triumph rioted through Flash. Here, he knew with crystal clarity, was Little Joe's loot cache. As the sheriff started into the cave with the lighted lantern, Flash stepped out of the cedars.

"Just a minute, Sheriff. I wouldn't go in there!"

THE little sheriff wheeled about, his pale eyes narrowing down on Flash. "So, it's you," he murmured, looking at the gun in Flash's hand. "Why wouldn't you go in there?"

Flash grinned. "No tellin' what you might find. Or do you *know* what's in that cave?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I been wonderin' where you was. You played it smart, didn't you? You figured maybe Little Joe'd talk before he swung, tellin' where he'd cached his loot, so you just waited and watched for me to come after it."

Still grinning, Flash stepped forward and took the sheriff's old gun. Sam knew that Flash Teton was a cold-blooded killer, that Flash had him cold turkey, so he offered no resistance.

"That's the idea, Sheriff," Flash said. "I figured I was due that money. It was me that planned how to get it and run most of the risk. Little Joe wasn't good for much except to hold the horses. He was plumb ungrateful, after all I'd done for him, hidin' his share away like that where I couldn't find it."

"Little Joe told me all about it, just before I took him out of his cell to hang him," the sheriff nodded. "He told me how you'd always kicked and slapped him about, makin' him do all the dirty work. He admitted doin' half a dozen killin's—killin's you'd shoved off onto him. Instead of lickin' yore boots, he should have hated you worse than he would a rattler!"

"But he didn't," Flash chuckled. "The little rat liked it, I reckon. I bet he didn't even get a mad on about what happened there outside Seneca Springs ten days ago, did he?"

"He didn't say," Sheriff Peters grunted. "That was a skunky thing to do, Flash—shootin' down yore own partner's horse there on the trail before the posse so you could make a getaway."

"Skunky, maybe, but smart! Knowin' Little Joe like I did, I figured he'd put up a fight and hold you lawdogs back long enough for me to make a getaway. And he did."

The scrawny lawman's lips curled with contempt.

"To save yore own neck, you doomed yore own partner to a hangrope. Flash, you're lower'n a snake's belly!"

"But alive—while Little Joe's dead. Did he mention me before he was hung?"

Sam Peters nodded. "Yeah, like I said, he told me how you'd booted him about for years. Said he'd like to see you before he died, that he had somethin' he'd meant to give you—a kind of gift—but you didn't know where it was hid."

"The loot, eh?" Flash grinned.

"I reckon. Well, he knew he wouldn't see you, so he told me where it was. He said, 'I meant for Flash to have it, but looks like he's kind of deserted me. So seemin' you've done nearly as much for me as Flash did, Sheriff, I reckon you might as well have it.' That was just before I hung him. Looks like you'll get Little Joe's gift after all, don't it?"

"I'll get it, all right. But we've wasted too much time talkin'. Light that lantern."

The sheriff obeyed. Then, with the outlaw's gun against his spine, he stepped through the cave entrance, closely followed by Flash. The cave was a big one, with great hairy tarantulas crawling over the rock walls in the ghostly lantern light.

Flash Teton peered eagerly about the cavern. At the back of the cave, partially blocking the narrow entrance to a tunnel that led farther back into the walls, was a jumbled mass of boulders. Sheriff Peters went toward these boulders.

"Accordin' to what Little Joe said, the loot's back in a crevice among them boulders, in a gunny sack. Mouth of the sack's tied with a strip of rawhide."

The crevice was between two boulders, down close to the floor of the cave. Sam Peters held the lantern low, and he and Flash peered eagerly into the opening.

"There she is—a gunny sack—just like Little Joe said," the sheriff grunted, without excitement, and reached for the end of the rawhide thong on the ground.

But Flash Teton grabbed his thin shoulder and flung him aside. In the dim light the big outlaw's tawny eyes shone.

"Get over there against that wall and stay there!" Flash snarled. "This loot's mine—Little Joe give it to me. I'll take care of it!"

Sheriff Peters leaned against the wall, where Flash had flung him, the lantern still in his hand, and watched.

Flash stooped, head and shoulders in the mouth of the crevice, took hold of the rawhide thong and pulled. But the gunny sack seemed to be wedged. Snarling with angry impatience, Flash jerked on the thong.

Twin tongues of flame suddenly lashed out of the crevice, a blasting roar shook the cavern, and Flash Teton was smashed backwards, half across the cave, as if a monstrous fist had hit him. And in that instant,

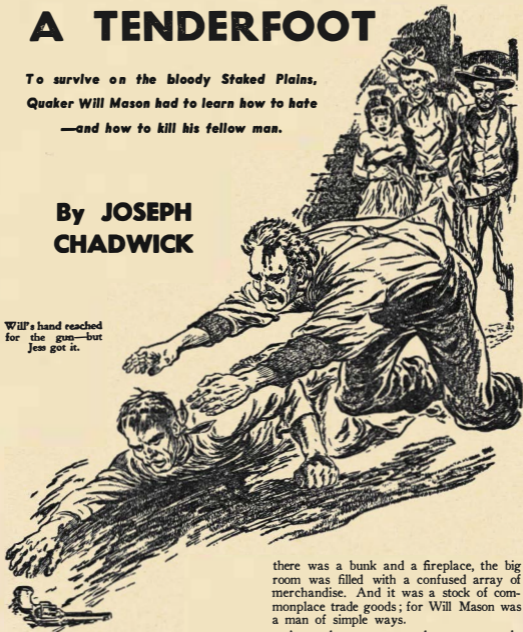
(Please continue on page 98)

YOKE CREEK LOSES A TENDERFOOT

*To survive on the bloody Staked Plains,
Quaker Will Mason had to learn how to hate
—and how to kill his fellow man.*

By **JOSEPH
CHADWICK**

*Will's hand reached
for the gun—but
Jess got it.*



there was a bunk and a fireplace, the big room was filled with a confused array of merchandise. And it was a stock of commonplace trade goods; for Will Mason was a man of simple ways.

A rancher or cowpuncher, some newly arrived settler, or one of the few remaining buffalo-hunters, could ride in from fifty or a hundred miles to barter or buy an iron kettle or skillet, a bolt of calico, a needle and thread, matches or a candle, an axe or tin cup. Will Mason's stock was varied. The only man who could not deal at Ma-

WILL MASON'S cabin was big and solidly built, like the man himself. It served both as home and trading post, and the rolling plains of the Llano Estacado surrounded it with loneliness. Except for a small space at the rear, where

son's Place was he who desired liquor or firearms. Will Mason had Quaker up-bringing.

The two riders now swinging in toward Will's place with a *remuda* of a dozen saddle mounts were such men. Will had them marked even as dust and confusion boiled up in the cleared space before his log building. The horses were half broken cowponies, difficult to handle, and the two riders had trouble halting them. The animals were being driven, not led.

Each horse was marked with a Half-Moon brand. A trail herd marked with the same brand had passed by the day before. Will, watching from his doorway, judged that this string was on its way to overtake the herd. When the horses were finally halted, the two men rode over to the cabin. Both were half drunk.

"You, trader—fetch us some likker!"

The younger of the two spoke, in the arrogant way of a man used to giving orders and being obeyed. He dug into his jeans, brought out two silver dollars which he flung toward Will. The coins dropped close to the trader's boots, and lay there bright in the dust.

The young rider ordered, "Pick up your money, Mister, and hurry up with our drinks. We're plumb thirsty."

Will stepped down from the doorway, but he did not reach for the money. "I have no liquor for thee, my friends," he said slowly. "If thou are thirsty, there is plenty of water in my spring. Help thyselfes, and water thy horses. That will cost thee nothing."

Both men stared. The younger one was dark-skinned, steely-eyed. He was big, thick-bodied, but despite his size there was about him a look that made him seem like an over-grown boy. He said, in his loud voice, "*Thee and thou!* What the hell kind of talk is that, Sam?"

The other rider said, "Quaker talk." He grinned lopsidedly, the liquor in him making him foolish. "I heard about this hombre. He's from back East—Philadelphia. His sort believes in brotherly love. They don't like trouble, Jess—no trouble at all."

"He'll sure as hell find trouble," young Jess growled, "if he don't give us some likker." He reached for the canteen that hung from his saddle horn, then dismount-

ed. He was unsteady on his feet, coming toward Will Mason. "Mister Quaker, I aim to have this canteen filled—" He held the canteen in his left hand, and with his right he drew his sixgun. "Peaceably—or otherwise."

"I told thee I have no liquor," Will said. "I am not a man to lie."

"You mealy-mouthed son!"

The sixgun swung up. If it had been a downward blow, Will might have avoided it. But as the weapon swung upward its barrel caught him under the chin. Will's head rocked back, and the sharp pain stunned him. Another blow—this time it crashed downward—slammed against the side of his head, and dropped him to his knees.

Will grabbed out blindly and wrapped his arms about his attacker's legs. He heaved upward, lifting, and he toppled the half-drunken Jess over backward. The man landed hard, gasping for breath. He yelled wildly, "Get him, Sam!"

Will whirled as he caught the quick thump of hoofs. He had lost his hat in his struggle with Jess, and his thatch of yellow hair was no protection against a smashing gun-butt. Leaning from the saddle, Sam hit him again and again. Pain exploded through Will's skull. It seemed to him that the ground was heaving and spinning. He heard the crazily yelling Jess shout, "Get him—get him!" He went down, flat on his face, gun-whipped into unconsciousness.

It seemed to Will Mason that he had been knocked down but, even as he sprawled in the dust, he had tried to regain his feet. So he was startled when he finally managed to get up, and stand swaying, to find that his two attackers were gone. Horses and men were gone. And he knew then that he had been unconscious.

He held his throbbing head with both hands, and felt a spilling of blood from his opened scalp. His vision was still blurred, and there was a great roaring in his ears. Despite his pain, he shook his head—tried to shake the haze from his mind, and to clear his vision and get the roaring out of his ears. His vision cleared just a little, but the roaring remained. A loud crackling mingled with the roar. And then he knew.

He'd faced the open plains on picking himself up. Now he turned and saw that his cabin was in flames. Dense gray-black

smoke was rolling upward, reaching skyward in a billowing funnel. He started to run forward. His knees buckled, and he fell sprawling. He picked himself up, staggered to the doorway. He plunged into an inferno of smoke and flames and ovenlike heat. A groan escaped him, for he saw that there was no hope of saving the place. Every part of the stock-filled room was ablaze. Shielding his face with his arms, he stumbled blindly to the rear of the cabin. He reached the bunk and found the blankets upon the floor—and his money bag gone.

A louder crackling lifted, and he looked up to see a portion of the flame-engulfed ceiling start to fall. He jumped away in time, and fought his way to the door. He stumbled from the holocaust, choking on smoke and beating at the tongues of flame that ate at his jeans and shirt. A sound much like a sob escaped him.

A year of work, and nearly ten years of saving and planning—all gone up in smoke. If a man could weep, Will Mason in that moment would have bawled like a baby.

THE smoke poured high in a thick black column, and miles to the south the riders of a trail herd saw it and guessed its origin. Two riders broke away from the herd and arrived to find Will Mason bloody and dazed. One of the riders was a girl. She asked:

"Will, what on earth happened?"

He turned slowly, until then unaware of their approach. For a moment, he did not seem to recognize them. Yet he knew Kate Amber and her brother, Fred, very well. The Ambers were his nearest neighbors. Their ranch was eighteen miles south. Will had been an invited visitor there on many occasions.

"Kate—Fred," Will said flatly, "I've lost everything."

"But how, Will?" the girl cried. She swung down from her pinto pony, a tall girl in mannish range clothes. She gazed at him with hurt in her eyes—hurt because the man she cared for was hurt. "You've been beaten, Will! Who did it?"

"Two men. I didn't know them."

"Why—why did they do it?"

"They were drunk," Will said heavily. "They wanted liquor, and I could give them none. It's as thee know, Kate—I don't deal in whiskey."

Kate was biting down on her under lip, trying to hold back threatening tears. She turned away, hurried to the spring among the cottonwoods, and returned quickly with water in a wooden pail she had found there. She had Will sit down on a log, and with her neckerchief she washed blood and soot from his face. Her touch was gentle, and her voice, whispering, "Oh, Will—Will!" was full of compassion.

It was Fred who said, "What were those two hard-cases like, Will?"

Will tried to remember. For a moment, the faces of the two men who had beaten and robbed him were obscure. But then his memory cleared, and he could see again the half-boyish, half-brute face of the man called Jess—and the lop-sided grin and mud-yellow eyes of Sam. Slowly, in a flat tone, he described the two.

"The younger one was called Jess, the older one Sam," he ended up. "Their horses were marked with a Half-Moon brand." He saw brother and sister exchange a look, and asked, "Thou know them, my friends?"

Fred nodded. "Jess Lang and Sam Crewson. I suspected it might be those two wild ones. They overtook our herd on the trail, and I had to order them to ride on—with a gun in my hand. Such hombres only savvy talk backed by a gun. That Jess Lang always tries to shine up to Kate, when he comes up-trail."

Kate's cheeks were suddenly too bright. "If I were a man," she said bitterly, "I would make Jess Lang crawl!"

"If I'd guessed he was going to pull something like this," Fred said, gesturing toward the smoldering ruins, "I'd have gut-shot him when I had the chance. He's a lobo, and only his old man, Big Matt Lang, keeps him from running hog wild."

"Matt Lang is little better," Kate said. "He just won a range war down on the Yerba. He squeezed out a lot of little ranchers, and now he feels that he owns the earth. Like father, like son—that's Jess Lang." She faced Will Mason, and now all her tenderness was gone. "Will, you're not letting those two get away with this?"

"Kate, if the law can—"

"The law!" Kate cried. "Will, that's something you've got to learn. This isn't an Eastern city. It's the Staked Plains, and the only law is what a man carries in

his holster. Jess Lang and Sam Crewson beat you and they burned your trading post. . . ." She paused, breathless, and stared at him. Her woman's intuition must have told her about the missing money bag, for she said, "They robbed you, too?"

Will nodded heavily, and he sensed a sudden difference in the way Kate and Fred Amber looked at him. There was impatience in the girl's manner, and in her brother's eyes there came a puzzled look. It was as though the two were measuring him as a man—and were finding him lacking.

They could not understand his easy submission to defeat. The were of the cattle country, which knew little tolerance for the wrongs of men. Will knew how it was with them: their kind met violence with violence, and a wrong called for vengeance. It had not been many months ago that Fred Amber and some of his riders had fought a pitched gun battle with a band of cattle rustlers. . . . Now, watching him, neither Kate nor Fred could understand why he showed no righteous anger and a desire for revenge.

Kate said, shakenly, "Will, back where you come from it might be all right to be tolerant. But here you've got to be hard."

"I understand thee, Kate."

"Then you'll settle this thing?"

"I will do what can be done," Will said. "In my own way."

Once again, Kate studied him. Finally she shook her head, her impatience stronger. She turned to her brother, who still sat his horse, and she said, "Fred, give me your gun. . . . Your cartridge belt, too."

Fred frowned, but he unbuckled the heavy rig and handed it to her. Kate walked over to Will, stood looking down at him as he sat there on the log, a man as dazed by disaster as by the beating. She held out the cartridge-studded belt with its holstered Colt, and said, "Take this, Will."

He took the gun rig, but said, "I know nothing of firearms."

"You can learn," the girl said sharply. "You can fire that gun, and you can reload it and fire it some more. When you've used up all the cartridges, you can travel up-trail to the nearest town and get some more ammunition. . . . Then, when you know that you have the law in your hand, you can go after Jess Lang and Sam Crew-

son—and demand payment for the loss they've caused you."

"It's not my way, Kate."

"It's the only way," said Kate Amber, and turned to her horse.

Will rose and watched the two ride away. They headed across the flats toward the billowing dust cloud that rose from the hoofs of the Dodge-bound trail herd. Neither of them looked back.

FOR Will Mason, a gun in his hand was new and troubling experience. His earliest boyhood memories were the strict teachings of his Quaker parents; he had been warned against violence, against hatred and the ugliness of vengeance—but he had not been taught how to settle such a matter as this. Now, holding the heavy weapon, he could think only of Kate Amber's eyes. It had seemed that she had silently asked, *What manner of man are you?*

Will picked up the wooden pail that Kate had used when she bathed his battered head. He set it upon a boulder, then stepped back and lifted the long-barreled pistol. His hand was not steady, but he managed to thumb back the hammer and squeeze the trigger. The pistol's recoil threw his arm upward. Its blast roared in his ears. Will peered through powder-smoke and found the pail unchanged. He had missed his target.

There had been six shots in the pistol. Will wasted five of them. His sixth shot jumped the pail off the boulder, sent it toppling to the ground. But he had fired that last shot from a distance of no more than five feet. By then he knew the truth.

It was not that the weapon was untrue, or that his hand was too unsteady. The trouble lay in his eyes. His vision was befogged. Will looked about, frightened by his discovery. A distant landmark, a high rock spire like a church steeple, was blurred—when always before it had stood out clear and sharp. He closed his eyes for a long moment, then looked once more. There was no denying the truth. Those smashing blows upon his head had distorted his vision.

Will Mason still had his big Murphy wagon and his team of four bay horses. It was the rig in which he had hauled his merchandise and provisions from Dodge,

nearly a year ago. When morning came, after a night of troubled sleep, Will went to the corral and opened its gate. The bays trotted out and headed for water.

Near the corral was a lean-to that served as a barn, and Will went there for grain. He measured a mixture of oats and corn into four nose-bags, then whistled for his horses. They came to him, as tame as kittens.

He carried the harness from the lean-to, readied it for the team. The wagon was long unused, so he greased the axles and tightened the hub nuts. He fumbled the simplest chore, for his vision was still distorted.

Hunger came and was a knotted lump inside him, so he dug in the charred debris of his cabin until he found a covered kettle that contained bacon and beans.

Later, Will got the bays into harness. He climbed to the seat, took up the reins, shouted to the team. The bays strained against their collars, and the big wagon began to roll. Will glanced back only once, and it was a bleak look. His hopes and plans for the future seemed as dead as that heap of ashes.

The Amber trail herd was somewhere ahead, and beyond it, by a full day's drive, was the bigger Lang herd. Will swung a little to the west, not wanting to overtake either herd just yet.

The prairie miles fell away under the wagon's big wheels. By sundown Will reached a settlement along Comanche Creek. It was a colony of Ohio farmers, a dozen families who had sought a new life on the great plains. Will talked to a bearded farmer named Jessup, who said, "Sure, I can let you have provisions, friend."

Will had no money, but he took out his watch. It was a gold, key-wind timepiece that instantly caught Jessup's eye. Handing it to the farmer, Will said, "Give me what thee thinks it is worth."

He received provisions enough for the long trip to Dodge, plus two homespun blankets, and he spent the night in Jessup's log farmhouse. In the morning, he hitched up his team and headed north. His eyes continued to bother him, and there was a constant dull pain in his forehead. The pistol Kate Amber had given him lay untouched beside him on the seat.

WILL overtook the Amber herd at the Canadian River, which was in flood and so delayed a crossing. The Amber crew was holding the cattle five miles down from the trail town of Maroon, at a spot where the grazing was good. It was sundown when Will drove into the camp, and the outfit's Mexican cook was busy at the chuck wagon.

Kate was helping the cook, adding to the trail fare of beans and bacon and sourdough biscuits by baking some dried apple pies. Her face lighted up at sight of Will, and she left no doubt in his mind but that her feelings for him were deep and real.

She called out, "Fred, Will's come."

Her brother came striding over from the *remuda*. Fred Amber was much like Kate, gray-eyed and tawny-haired—quick smiling, but he was a man with a grave side to his nature. He shook hands, and said, "You've settled things with Jess Lang and Crewson?"

Will said, "I've been on the trail all this time."

Fred frowned, and Kate's smile faded.

"I will settle it," Will said, "as soon as I overtake the Lang herd. I stopped here only to tell thee that a gun is of no use to me."

There was a silence, heavy and accusing. Then Fred said, "Will, you've been in these parts for nearly a year, but you haven't learned our ways. You can't drive up to the Lang camp unarmed and get justice. That whole crew, from Old Matt Lang down to the cook, are tough hands. They'd laugh in your face, then run you off."

"Fred, do thou think I'm a coward?"

"I figure you're not the kind of man for this country."

"I'm sorry that I disappoint thee," Will said heavily, and turned back to his wagon.

Kate's voice halted him by saying, "Don't go without supper, Will."

It was like an invitation extended some chance stranger, and Will accepted it only because he was uncertain as to what he should do. He took care of his team, watering and graining the bays, and by then the cook was calling chuck. Will ate with the crew, hunkered down by the campfire. Kate did not join the others, and Will knew that she remained away because there was disappointment in her. When the meal was over, Fred Amber rolled a smoke.

"The Lang herd is grazing up close to Maroon, Will," Fred finally said. "Tell you what, friend—I'll ride up there with you. We'll take a couple of the boys along."

He paused, studying Will.

"I'm obliged to thee, Fred, but I don't want to make trouble between thee and the Lang outfit," Will told him. "It was my place that was burned and my money that was stolen, and I, not thee. must settle with Jess Lang and Sam Crewson."

"But how, man?"

"Thou said Matt Lang is a sensible man. I'll talk with him."

"He's sensible, all right," Fred said sourly, "when he's faced with determined men willing to fight for what they want." Suddenly he was angry. "Have it your way."

"That is best, Fred," Will said, rising.

He took to his wagon, and, driving off, had only a glimpse of Kate. The girl had walked down to the river and she was standing there in the thickening dusk, staring out over the high and fast-flowing water. Will did not call to her.

It was full dark by the time Will reached the Lang trail camp. Over at the bed grounds, a cowpuncher riding night herd was singing in a lazy, off-key voice. Near the chuck wagon, a campfire glowed ruddily. Two men were seated by the fire. One called out:

"Looking for somebody, stranger?"

Will climbed down from his wagon, and stated that he was looking for Matt Lang.

One of the men rose and, coming forward, said, "I'm Matt Lang. What's on your mind, friend?"

Will gave the rancher his name, and explained that he had owned a trading post on Lost Yoke Creek.

Lang nodded. "Heard tell of you. Quaker gent, eh?" He was tall and thick, and his hat was shoved back off his brow and so a mane of iron gray hair was revealed. He gazed at Will Mason with impatient eyes. He had a hooked beak of a nose, and his mouth, beneath an untidy mustache, was as humorless as a scowl. "Go on," he said as Will paused.

Will talked slowly, careful of each word; for it was difficult to face a man and make accusations against that man's son. Without mentioning names, Will told how two half-drunk riders had stopped at his place and demanded liquor. He told how that visit

had ended. And it was clear that Matt Lang guessed the identity of those two riders.

"Why come to me with this story?" Lang finally demanded. "If my son and one of my riders wronged you, why not face them?"

"What good would that do?" Will asked. "It would only bring on more violence. If I was a gunfighter, I would settle this matter in the way such matters are always settled here on the frontier. I would kill the men who wronged me, or they would kill me. That would be senseless. The day they came to my place, both men were half drunk—and so not wholly responsible for what they did. I am told that both Jess Lang and Sam Crewson are wild ones, and I know such men cannot be held responsible. But, thee, Sir—"

"You figure I should stand good your losses?"

"It seemed that I should talk with thee," Will said.

For a long moment, the rancher was silent and thoughtful. Then he said, "Maybe you're right, after all. But I've got only your word for what's happened. If you can make either Crewson or my son admit they burned you out and stole your money, I'll pay through the nose. Those two wild buckaroos are in town now. I'll ride there with you."

"Friend," said Will, "thou are a reasonable man."

They climbed to the seat of the Murphy wagon, and Will took up the reins. For the first time since the trouble on Lost Yoke Creek, he felt easy in his mind. It was not as Kate and her brother thought; not all men believed only in violence. Big Matt Lang was proof of that.

It was perhaps a mile from the Lang camp to the trail town of Maroon, and while the big wagon headed toward the few yellow patches of light which marked the town Will Mason made plans in his mind for the future.

He would rebuild his trading post. With the money he received from Matt Lang, he would drive to Dodge City and purchase a new stock of merchandise. And Kate Amber, who now could not doubt him, would certainly smile upon him again.

Will smiled to himself, pleased that his way of dealing with trouble had proven

sound. He knew that when Kate—and Fred Amber, too—learned of his bargain with Matt Lang, they would laugh together.

Will and his passenger had covered more than half of the distance to town when a small group of riders passed by in the darkness. The riders loped by within a hundred feet of the lumbering wagon, but even so Will's handicapped eyesight could not identify them.

MAROON was a town of rough-board shacks, built by the cattle trail so as to extract toll from the north-pointed herds. The toll was collected over bars, across gambling tables, and by a few gay ladies. Loud talk and harsh laughter came from the deadfalls, and somewhere a guitar was being strummed. Saddle mounts belonging to several cow outfits lined the single street. Will Mason stopped his team by a dark building, a hide warehouse by the smell, and climbed down.

Matt Lang said, "You're forgetting your gun, Mason."

Will shook his head. "I'll not need it—thanks to thee."

The burly cowman muttered something about "blundering fool," and swung down from the wagon.

They walked to the nearest saloon, pushed open the swing doors. The glare of lamplight struck Will's eyes like a fist, and the faces of the half dozen men at the bar inside were indistinct. He asked, "They're here?"

Matt Lang gave him a curious look. "No. . . ."

They crossed the street and stepped into a bigger saloon, one with a long bar and numerous tables where men drank or gambled. It was here that the guitar was being tormented. Mingling with the rowdy men were two women with painted faces and gaudy dresses. Matt Lang said, "Here's Sam Crewson," and moved toward the bar.

The gaunt-faced Crewson swung about, recognizing Will Mason at once. His yellowish eyes narrowed down, his lop-sided grin came and went. He put his hand on his holstered gun.

Matt Lang said, "Sam, this man is unarmed."

"Unarmed, is he?" Crewson said drunkenly. "What of it? Me, I don't know him. What's he accusing me for?"

"Sam, you shouldn't drink," Matt Lang growled. "It loosens your tongue. You deny your guilt before you're accused."

"I accuse thee now, Crewson," Will said. He spoke quietly but his words carried throughout the saloon, for the crowd had fallen silent to listen. "Thou beat me with a gun, burned my cabin, stole my money."

"A damn' lie!" Crewson shouted. "I never touched your money!"

Will turned to big Matt Lang. "Thou can see, Sir. He denies only part of my accusation—"

A man shouted, "Watch it!" One of the house girls screamed. Shots blasted. Will whirled around and saw Sam Crewson fall forward and hit the floor with a dull thud. The man's gun had dropped from his lifeless hand. It had been fired, a wisp of powder smoke leaked from its muzzle. Will faced about, his eyes searching. The man who had fired one of the shots—the shot that had killed Sam Crewson—stood just inside the doorway. It was Fred Amber.

In the moment of quiet that followed the shots, Will Mason began to understand that a man could not live by reason alone in a land where violence ruled. Sam Crewson had tried to kill him, when his back was turned—and only Fred Amber's shot had saved him. That Fred should be there was not too much of a surprise. Will remembered those hurrying riders who had passed him on the way to town. They had been Fred and the Amber crew.

"You, Matt Lang," Fred said flatly. He was a grim-faced young man, now. "You led this man into a trap. But it's not going to work. My men are outside, we'll see that Mason doesn't get back-shot."

Lang's heavy face turned dull red. "It was no trap, Amber. I made a bargain with Mason, and I came along to see him hold up his end of it. It's not my grief if he goes unarmed and turns his back to a man he accuses of being a thief."

"What's this bargain?" Fred demanded.

"That he could make Crewson or my son Jess admit they stole his money!" Matt Lang shouted. "Keep your men and your guns here in town, Amber—but let Mason tackle Jess on his own." He walked from the saloon. A crowd had gathered in the street. The roar of sixguns had emptied the other dives, and men were clamoring to learn what had happened. Four of the Am-

ber crew sat their horses in the middle of the street. And one called out, "Mason, your man is at Kline's place."

Will nodded and turned along the street, and it seemed now that his eyes were as keen as they needed to be. Danger evidently sharpened a man's senses. His gaze found the sign that read: *Kline's Trail House*. He saw Jess Lang step from the saloon. The burly young tough had his arm about one of Kline's house girls, hugging her to him and laughing. Behind Will, Matt Lang yelled, "Jess, watch it!"

Jess' laughter froze. He shoved the woman aside and grabbed out his sixgun. In that first moment, fear lay chill in Will Mason's heart. He knew then why even honest men kept a gun within easy reach.

A sixgun was a man's law, his only defense against violence. It was an instrument against evil, and he who used one righteously—as Fred Amber had done—was surely blameless. Too late, Will Mason was aware of the truth. His hands were empty. And Jess Lang was leveling his weapon. A hush lay over the street. The whole town watched this thing.

Will forced down his fear and took a forward step. "Jess, thou can kill me—and be murderer as well as thief." He heard the gun being cocked, but took still another forward step. "With that gun in thy hand, thou are a brave man. But without it, thou wouldn't dare face me."

"You're a liar!"

"It's the truth, Jess."

Old Matt Lang yelled, "Drop your gun, boy! Beat the hide off him!"

Jess lowered the sixgun. Will lunged at him.

THE gun roared, its shot going into the ground. Jess swung it up, using it like a club. The first blow knocked Will's hat off; the second made his head bounce, and started blood gushing from his scalp. Will's head was roaring with pain as his shoulder slammed into Jess Lang. He wrapped his powerful arms about the man. But Jess broke free by driving his knee into Will's stomach. He struck again with the gun, hitting Will's left shoulder.

Will reeled back, his breath sawing a sudden quiet. The blood trickled down his face, and he had the taste and smell of it. He braced himself, as Jess came at him,

and grabbed for the clubbing sixgun. Will got hold of it, tore it from Jess' grasp and flung it aside.

"Now we are even," gasped Will.

Jess tried again to drive his knee into Will's stomach. Will grabbed the lifted knee and spilled Jess over backward. Jess groaned, rolled over onto his belly and levered himself up on his arms.

Somebody called out, "Use your boots, Quaker!"

Will let Jess get back onto his feet.

They crashed together again, and blows landed with dull meaty slaps. Will thrust his fist against Jess' mouth, and felt the man's teeth break beneath his knuckles. Jess backed away then, his eyes rolling. He came up against the wall of Kline's saloon, and hung there. Will went after him, driving his fists in the man's belly. Jess made a sound like a whimpering child.

Will hit him across the bridge of the nose, hit him again, hard on the angle of his clenched jaw. Jess Lang dropped to his knees, the breath bubbling out of him. He muttered, "Enough," and sagged down.

Will went back and leaned heavily against Kline's wall, his head reeling and his belly empty. He heard somebody—Fred Amber, maybe—shout, "Watch him, Will!" He looked around incuriously, and Jess Lang was crawling toward the sixgun that lay in the street.

He shoved away from the wall, stumbled into the street. He fell, sprawling beside Jess Lang. His own hand reached for the gun, but Jess got it. Will threw himself over onto Jess. The gun roared—Jess Lang screamed. He went limp, and let go of the smoking sixgun.

Jess Lang was shot in the right side, and the pain of smashed ribs made him writhe in agony. Will went through Jess' pockets, bringing out handfuls of coins—gold and silver coins. Men crowded up.

Matt Lang came. The burly old man's face was gray and stiff.

Will asked him flatly, "Did Jess have this much money of his own?"

"No," Matt Lang said in a tired voice. "It's yours. The rest of your losses will be made up—by me." He bent over his son.

The crowd made way for Will. Fred Amber followed him to his wagon. The young cattleman said, "Jess Lang whipped

(Please continue on page 98)

BUTTON'S LONG QUEST



"I'm Ronnie Hunt," he said proudly. "I'm lookin' for my brother Jack."



By
**RAY
GAULDEN**

THE ROCKING R crew were having late chow when the kid rode into their round-up camp there on Willow Creek. Dan Lovett, the grizzled old ramrod, had his back against a wheel of the chuck wagon, squatting on his run-over boots, listening to the boys swap their windies. He heard the mutter of hoof beats off there in the darkness, and a little later this

When the freckle-faced kid came looking for his brother, the hard-bitten, ready-talking Rocking R boys got tongue-tied.

freckle-faced kid rode into the circle of fire-light.

Dan Lovett forgot about his plate of sow-belly and beans. He blinked his faded old eyes and stared hard, for there was something mighty familiar about that thin-faced youngster, sitting there on the back of an old crow-bait horse.

Talk around the fire broke off and there wasn't much sound for a moment. Then the kid said, "They told me in town that I would find the Rockin' R outfit here."

Dan Lovett nodded, a queer, tight feeling inside him that he didn't understand. He said, "You've come to the right place, Son. I'm Dan Lovett, the ramrod. What can I do for you?"

The youngster sat there with both his skinny hands around the horn of his scrap-heap saddle. His eyes, Dan noticed, were very large and very bright. "I'm Ronnie Hunt," he said proudly. "I'm lookin' for my brother Jack."

Dan Lovett looked at the crew and he thought they looked like a bunch of statues, squatting there about the fire, not moving, not making a sound. But they were watching him, he knew; they were waiting.

Ronnie Hunt's face fell and the eager light fled from his big, blue eyes. He said shakily, "You all know my bud, don't you? He wrote that he worked for this outfit."

Dan Lovett set his tin plate down on the ground and fumbled for his tobacco sack. He said, "Well, he did work for us, Ronnie, but he pulled out about a week ago. Reckon he didn't know you was comin'."

Ronnie was slumped dispiritedly in his saddle now, staring off into the darkness. He sighed and finally he said, "I—I was kinda lookin' forward to seein' him."

Dan Lovett swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, Son. But now that you're here, how about a little chuck?"

The cook was rattling pans and Ronnie glanced in that direction, his eyes brightening a little. "I could sure use some of that grub, Mister. I'm hungrier than a she wolf and nine little uns."

The cook heaped a tin plate high and Ronnie dismounted, started to sit down, then he glanced over his shoulder at the bony horse. "I reckon," he said, "that Doc is pretty hungry himself."

Dan Lovett motioned to one of the punchers. "Go ahead and eat, Ronnie. Ed

MacDonald there will take care of Doc."

Ronnie sat down a little apart from the others, and the way he went after that grub made old Dan wonder how long it had been since he'd had a square meal.

Ed came back and put some more wood on the fire, and then Dan Lovett said, "I never knowed Jack had any folks. Where'd you come from, Ronnie?"

"Texas," he said, souping a piece of bread around in his plate. "A town called Del Rio, down along the Rio Grande. Got a little spread not far from there."

Dan Lovett flipped his cigarette into the fire and began to roll another one. He said, "You're kinda young to have a ranch, ain't you, Ronnie?"

He didn't take his eyes from the plate, but he said, "Oh, it ain't all mine. But I do most of the work since my Dad died. Mom used to help a little, but she ain't been feelin' so good lately. The doc says she worries too much. She's been doin' it ever since Jack left home three years ago. Course, he never was much of a hand to write, but he kept sendin' money along."

There was a choking feeling in Dan Lovett's throat. He licked at his dry lips and heard the kid saying, "A couple of months ago, the money stopped comin'. I didn't figure it was anything to worry about, even if we did need the money. But Mom was gettin' worse by the day. So I told her I'd ride up here and see Jack and find out what was wrong."

Dimly, Dan Lovett could hear the sound of the creek, the water lapping at the sandy banks. His cigarette had gone out, but he made no move to relight it. He said, "Well, Ronnie, that bud of yours is kinda fiddle-footed, and I guess he'll always be like that. It's too bad, though, 'cause he's a top hand and a— a gent that will do to take along."

Ronnie wiped his hands on the legs of his faded jeans and his eyes grew bright as though in remembrance. "He used to take me huntin' and fishin'. He taught me to rope and ride. When he left home, he said he was gonna make a lot of money and then he was comin' back."

The boy sighed and looked at the old ramrod. "Didn't he say where he was goin' when he pulled out?"

Dan shook his head. "Reckon he didn't

(Please continue on page 97)

★ WOLF-HUNGRY FOR TROUBLE ★



By **JERRY WING**

His bullet smashed into Kilgore as the horsethief clubbed Bannock. . . .

Fresh from a Pennsylvania farm, young Billy Storm was raring to burn up the West—till he tangled with a murdering horsethief . . . and a girl named Charlie.

AFTER the Union Pacific rolled across Wyoming and branch lines began fanning out, the lawless crowd reined in long enough to note the changing of the times and discovered there was nothing much new to plunder. There was no profit in stealing rails or ties, but horses were different. It took horses to build railroads, and horses were worth

more dust than ever in a quick cash deal.

A raw earth grade crawled north from Steele City, but now it was night and wind whipped rain against the tents of the graders. Old man Bannock was busy with his evening chore of keeping the timebook on his teamsters when young Billy Storm stepped inside the shack on wheels that passed for an office.

"Well," said Billy, "you lost some more horses."

The green-shaded lamp splashed light across a red bullet track on the edge of Billy's hair. His sunburned face was pale.

Bannock started cussing as he came to his feet. He was a bull-shaped veteran of mule-skinning from Omaha clear to Promitory Point. His experience had given him a real grip on the kind of language that gets things done. Now he ran out of words.

He finished up in a whisky-roughened whisper: "Why in hell does the railroad waste money on special agents? I've never seen a snooper who could find a tick on a hairless pup. And you're a farm kid who is still cuttin' teeth! Why in hell did they hand you a job like this!"

Billy Storm ignored him. "I forgot to tell you that I know the name of the horse thief."

Bannock snorted. "And what good will his name do you? This country is full of scoundrels waitin' to steal us blind. Shoot on sight—that's all you can do."

Seeing Billy's wound, he tried to help the boy—but the youngster, with pride sticking out all over him and a badge on his chest, cut across the shack on his own legs and dropped to the buffalo-skin on the bunk in the corner. Bannock trailed along and worried over that gash in his head.

"No," said Billy. He recalled how the railroad officials would have talked in their offices as they puffed cigar smoke. "This campaign against crime will have to be done legal. These outlaws will have to be brought to trial."

He reached for a whisky bottle and swallowed a huge mouthful. He hoped the mountain dew would drive some of the weariness out of his big frame. But he choked on the stuff and his throat burned until tears ran from his eyes.

He tried to cover up with some more talk. "I followed your horses far enough tonight to run into an ambush. But I

proved something—the man is Clint Kilgore."

Mention of the name seemed to disgust Bannock. "Charlie's brother," he grunted.

"Who's Charlie?"

"You'll be better off if you never know," said Bannock firmly.

Billy shrugged. He pulled a battered black hat from his wet shirt and threw it on the floor.

Bannock stared at the hat. "Where'd you get that, Billy?"

"That hat belongs to Kilgore. He's escaped hanging so far because he covers his tracks so well. Tonight he lost his hat in the willows when he put your horses across the river."

Bannock lifted his eyes from the hat on the floor. "You think you're ready for a showdown?"

Billy sniffed. "It's up to Kilgore. If he'll surrender peaceable—"

"You're a dam' fool. Why should he? He'll shoot, if he sees you first."

"Sure."

"Kilgore and his kind are on the opposite side of the fence from you. You're a dumb kid, and you'd better forget about decency and honesty and fair play if you want to live out here."

"Sure."

"Well, go out there, then!" exploded Bannock. "But don't holler for help. A man can do as he wants, as long as he don't drag his friends down with him."

"Are you my friend?" grinned Billy Storm.

Bannock grunted and started to work on the youngster's head wound.

Billy shifted, restive as a young stallion, and wished he could have corraled Kilgore along with his hat. That would have done something for his reputation—which was still a puny thing that people didn't seem to talk much about.

Meanwhile, he listened to the weather outside the shack—wilder and rougher than anything he had ever seen on the Pennsylvania farm he had left six months ago. Night was riding with spurs down the valley. Something worse than bad weather was about to hit him, too, and he had no shelter of any kind. He remembered what old man Bannock told him, what other folks had said about the wildness of the West, and his blood warmed up a mite. He

was wolf-hungry for trouble. After all, he was out of a respectable family, only twenty-one, and had yet to kill his first man.

AS HE listened to the wind and the rain, his ears rustled up something new. Several horses had stopped on the new roadbed outside the shack. His eyes dropped to the hat on the floor, and he did a heap of brain work in a hurry. Considering the time and the place, there was only one answer. Kilgore wanted his hat back—and had fetched some help.

Billy lifted his voice so it would carry out into the night. "Are you coming in, Kilgore—or shall I come out?"

Surprise ran over old man Bannock like a dash of cold water. He lumbered around to face the door of his shack, but it was already opening to the storm. A girl came in, and the sweet smell of her came clear across the room. The sudden pleasure of looking at her face was like nothing Billy had ever felt before. Behind her, a solid-bodied man completely filled the doorway. A grin creased his heavy face as he padded into the room. It was Kiowa Smith, a hill squatter, and he sent his voice back over his shoulder: "Here he is, Clint." Billy heard old man Bannock's breath come snorting out of him, but it was Clint Kilgore's flat voice that started things off:

"You ain't lookin' for trouble, Bannock."

Kilgore stepped inside the shack and jammed the door shut with his shoulders. He rested his bony frame in that position. He set his wary gray eyes on Billy and said, "You stopped runnin' too soon, Sonny."

Billy noticed that the girl was wearing boys' clothes—a homespun shirt and trousers stuffed into riding boots. Her cheeks were wind-flushed and her body was slim and strong. But her color and lines were fresher than any Pennsylvania flower, plumb tantalizing. She was strongly out of place and she demanded his attention, but Billy resented Kilgore's taunt. He could hardly wait to throw the man's words back in his face.

"Kilgore," he said, "you hide in the hills and live small. You ought to know something about running."

He saw interest begin to dance in the girl's eyes. Her eyes were mighty fine. Her smile exposed white teeth as Kilgore's voice droned on: "Also, I lost my hat. I'd like to have it back—if you're through crowin' over it."

Billy's eyes settled on Kilgore. He had a feeling that this man was a battle-wise wolf—maybe too wise. Little needles of excitement tingled in his scalp and made him more brash. He had no intention of letting Kilgore get away with anything—or leave the shack a free man.

"Sure." Billy grinned. "The hat's on the floor. I've found out all I need to know."

"What do you know?"

"You're a horsethief. And when I find those railroad horses, I'll see you hung up to dry."

"If you live that long."

Billy was suddenly aware that Kilgore and his big friend Kiowa were not here for a hat—they were here for blood. The cool breath of danger dampened his forehead. Bannock felt it, too, for the old man settled himself on his legs and tried to limber up his stiffened fingers. The girl seemed out of the picture now, flattened against the wall. But she made Billy feel his young oats, and he lifted his voice insultingly: "Well, you thieving coyotes, are you afraid to pick up that hat?"

Kilgore grunted, "Damn you—" He relaxed in the instant that it took him to straighten from his brace against the door. And in that instant Billy grabbed for his gun.

Old man Bannock had already taken a hand. But instead of trying to reach his Sharps on the wall, he launched a bare-handed attack at Kilgore. Kiowa Smith stared at the old man with his mouth gaping. He shifted uncertainly at the side of the door. He didn't seem to be able to think fast enough. Kilgore yelled at him: "Stop the kid, you big fool!"

Billy lunged to his feet. He had the big bones and awkward ways of a farm colt, but his reflexes were sharp. He didn't bother with Kiowa. His gun made a short sweep, his bullet smashing into Kilgore as the horsethief clubbed Bannock across the head with his own drawn gun barrel.

On the heels of the first blast, Billy threw a shot at Kiowa. He knew that he had missed even as his hammer fell.

Kiowa Smith had stampeded. Snapping into action, the big squatter's straining foot hit a smear of mud. His body spun like a crippled top. Billy's angry chunk of lead tore across the shack inches out of line.

Kiowa's flailing hand hit the door and he hurred himself out into the night. The door swung in the wind, letting in the sound of a campful of tough graders coming to life.

THERE was abrupt silence in the shack—as violent as the action had been. There was the girl against the wall, Kilgore's body and the stunned Bannock on the floor. Billy braced himself on his feet. He laid a hand on his thumping head wound, a mite disgusted with the spell of dizziness that passed over him.

He walked over to the girl, his young brashness beginning to lift his shoulders again. "This was no place for you. What are you doing here, anyhow?"

Her eyes flamed green. "You lousy snooper," she said.

He tried to grin. "Aw, now. I ain't hurt you none. Why—"

She waved a hand at all that was left of Clint Kilgore. "He was my brother, that's all."

"Aw." He was serious all of a sudden. A wave of remorse tightened his throat as his upbringing came back, all his mom and pop had told him about right and wrong and such. This was no way to treat a girl. . . . "But—but that's Clint Kilgore."

"What of it?"

"Why, stealing horses ain't a healthy trade. And you got no business running around at night—"

"Damn you," she breathed, "it is my business. Running around nights or any other time. There's money in horses—and the railroad's easy pickings."

The way she said it put a hog-tight fence between them and their ways of living. She was the sister of an outlaw and made no bones about it. He felt young and innocent and outraged. He said, "Well, Miss—"

"My name is Charlie—and the whole country knows me. Here's my calling card." She laid a handful of slim fingers across his face so hard that the sting

was still there minutes later. Her frowning glance wandered over his features for a space, and then she was gone through the door.

Billy Storm turned to old man Bannock and lifted him to the buffalo robe. He was beginning to have a misery in his belly, everything upside down and jittery. It was like the time a bull had cornered him on the farm and he had skinned over the rail fence one jump to the good. The shock of this first gun-battle was beginning to hit him. But mostly he was thinking about that Kilgore girl and the fact that she hated him. He didn't like that and was ashamed. He was beginning to like her—and she wasn't his kind, not a bit.

Bannock groaned and felt around for his bruised head. "You fool kid! You bring trouble like a dawg with a nest o' hornets on his tail."

"Was that girl Charlie?"

"She was. And you oughta be glad she's gone. Now will you stop ridin' your luck and go back to the farm?"

"Where does she live?"

"Above the stage station on Cottonwood Creek—when she's not ridin' with a bunch of scoundrels all over from Cheyenne to Deadwood. It'll be a great day when she breaks her neck."

Young Billy had no back talk. That was right. It would be a great day when a critter like her met the Lord's punishment. But he couldn't seem to convince himself.

He gave Bannock a drink and eased out of the shack as the graders began to gather. She had slapped him. Her name was Charlie and he couldn't get her out of his mind. He had his horsethief and should have been content, but he kept wondering if the girl and Kiowa Smith were headed for the same place—and suddenly he decided she had no business associating with trash like that. He was a little under the weather, but it would take less than half a man to corral a coyote like Kiowa.

Billy headed for his waiting horse. He put in a mile on the rain-whipped Cottonwood road, holding his head like a cracked egg. Then the pain from the bullet furrow dragged him to a stop.

He took his bandanna from his neck and wound it around his head. He tied it as snug as he could in the darkness. For a minute the pressure made him squirm like

a cat with a twisted tail. Then the pain was squeezed down to a dull throbbing.

Billy rode on. He was in the timbered blackness of the foothills with the storm roaring over his head. It was next to hopeless, sticking to a trail, but Charlie had come this way and so could he. And he would not have admitted that he was lost when, hours later, he came out of the dripping timber and saw a lighted window staring at him across a little clearing.

HE STOPPED and thought it over. He didn't know what he was getting into, but offhand it looked like deep water. Even if he didn't find Charlie and Kiowa here, any of these soreheads in the hills would be glad to take a shot at him. Any way he looked at it, he was throwing his reputation to the dogs. All for a girl his mom wouldn't let in the house.

The night was thick in the edge of the timber. He rode around the clearing until that cabin squatted with its face away from him.

He heard a horse come around the corner of the cabin. It was late for anyone to be up and around, so he figured he was on the right track—he knew two people who had been out. . . . He eased his own mount through the trees until his path crossed that of the man leading the other horse. The rain-soaked pine needles on the slope made footing mighty treacherous. Billy heard labored footsteps come at him and then two shadows loomed up.

The horse snorted and the man stopped. It was Kiowa Smith.

Billy pushed his body from the saddle like a bulldogger aiming at a steer. Kiowa's feet skidded on the wet needles as Billy hit him. Billy's hands closed on his neck. One moment their legs kept pace with them on the slope; then they went wheeling in a sickening circle. Billy kept his grip in the fall, but it felt as if his head had been split wide open. He tried to get up, but the desire to fight was not enough.

Kiowa hauled him to his feet and growled in his ear: "Damn you—how far would you follow a man?"

The cabin in the clearing showed signs of life. A door opened carefully. Kiowa pushed Billy forward, holding him up with a strong hand. Billy went around the corner of the cabin like a puppet on a

string and put his wet boots through the door.

He sensed movement around him before his dizzy eyes could adjust themselves to the light. Someone stood in front of him, still and slim—and there was a familiar fragrance there. And someone was across yonder by the lamp on the table. Then as his eyes got on the job again, he saw Charlie before him with that half-wildness in her face. Her lips looked like a woman's now, full and parted and anxious. An old man squatted by the table. He straightened on his stool and stared at Billy like a wolf eyeing a young calf. He had a dirty-white mustache and the tough skin of his throat sagged like the wattles of a buzzard.

"Here he is, Pop," said Kiowa. "Here's the railroad snooper who got Clint."

Billy tried to brace himself on his feet, but they were still like lumps of lead. The smell of murder was strong in the room, but he said what he had to say in the face of it.

"I think," he said to the girl, "that you're running around with the wrong breed of cat. So I'm going to get rid of Kiowa and take you with me."

Kiowa snorted. "Get rid of me? Why, you're half dead already—"

Charlie seemed to be coiled spring-tight inside as she started to move—though Billy had no idea of her intention. "Hold on, Charlie, my girl," said Pop. "We want him to be able to stand up when we put the rope around his neck."

"I won't hurt him much," said Charlie in a casual way. But it occurred to Billy that she was in an entirely different kind of mood and he couldn't understand her. Her eyes were bitter-black with fear. She made half a motion as if she were trying to warn him to get out of the cabin. Maybe she had changed her mind about him.

He started to step forward, and Kiowa clouted him on the side of the head. He fell backward to the floor and Kiowa, chuckling, let him fall. His head, banging on the rough boards, touched off a new spasm of pain in his battered skull.

Charlie stood looking down at him with the shadows of her thinking moving in her eyes. Wetness gathered there. She was a full-blooded woman now, and desperate emotion showed in her trembling hands. Billy could see that she was about at the

end of her rope, about to rebel against the move of decisions here.

"All right," grumbled Kiowa. "Let's wring his neck!"

Charlie turned on him. "What right have you got to talk? Have you told Pop what you were doing when Clint got shot?"

"Every man for himself," said Kiowa. "And you're a fresh female to be askin'—"

"I'll ask you, then," broke in Pop. "How did it happen that this kid, with a hole in his head, was able to beat our Clint to the draw?"

The big squatter snorted nervously. He started to explain. "It was a mixed-up mess. This snooper, here, started to draw, and about then old man Bannock butted in. He jumped Clint. Clint hit him with his gun-barrel and yelled—"

"What did he yell?" prompted Charlie softly.

"Why, he yelled for me to take the kid," said Kiowa. "But I slipped—"

"Slipped—" added the girl, "right out the door."

FOR a minute there was no sound in the room. The girl Charlie and old Pop Kilgore had shifted their interest away from Billy, and the burly Kiowa was beginning to feel the pressure. He rolled his eyes from the old man to Charlie and back again, as though his neck muscles were paralyzed. His sudden intake of air was like the snort of a frantic bronc. Something snapped in his system. He whirled.

His goal was the door—and he would have made it—but young Billy Storm was still kicking. Blood ran freely from his scalp. The animal strength had drained from his legs, but he managed to lift a boot far enough to trip the stampeding Kiowa. As Kiowa hit the floor he hooked a hand in the squatter's trousers and hauled himself onto his back. He was after Kiowa's gun, and got it, as Kiowa thrashed around in an effort to regain his feet. He clubbed and Kiowa went out cold.

Billy climbed to his feet and stood with an unsteady brace, looking at Charlie. "I think you've changed your mind about me," he said. "I didn't mean to cause you any sorrow, and I'll do anything—"

Charlie said quickly, "You'd better get out of here."

"Have you lost your mind?" growled Pop. "After he killed Clint?"

"It was a fair fight." She stepped forward until she was close to Billy, looking up at him with the frankness of a wild critter that had never been hampered by manners. But she gave him one last warning. "Don't lose your head over me, Billy boy," she whispered. "Get out before I do you wrong."

"There ain't nobody can do me wrong now," he said stubbornly. "I've already turned my back on everything I was working for. Now I start from scratch—if you'll go with me."

She shook her head slowly as she talked. "People know me—we couldn't ever stop."

"Then we'll go where nobody knows us. I've heard about Oregon—they say it's like Pennsylvania, only nicer. Only I don't want to go alone, since I've met you."

Old Pop suddenly ran at them, yelling, "You danged fools!" He looked mighty funny, but his eyes were plain murder. He struck out with both fists. Billy laughed at him.

"Sorry, Pop," he said, and flung the old man into a corner. He got Charlie by a wrist and pulled her into the night.

"Billy," she whispered, "he'll never stand for that. He'll kill you."

"Then we'll high-tail it outa here."

It was considerable after midnight and plumb black in the clearing. Charlie rustled her horse and they found his in the edge of the timber. There she stopped again.

"Let's get this straight. I've raised my share of hell, but I'm ready to start from scratch, too. Only I don't want you to get cold feet and leave me somewhere afoot."

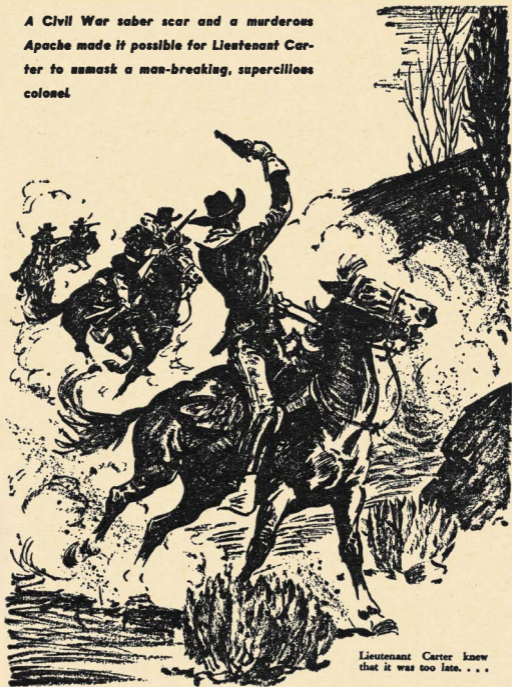
That settled it. She was good stock, all right. He didn't ever have to be afraid of her going rotten on him. "Why," he said, "that badge I been wearing was no fence between us at all. I love you—that's all that counts." He boldly put his arm around her, for an instant half expecting her to slap him down. But she didn't, and Billy felt so good he had to complain.

"Mighty sad," he grumbled. "Nobody'll ever know how much of a scrap it took me to land you. That would have cinched my mark out West!"

"You can brag to your kids about it," Charlie said.

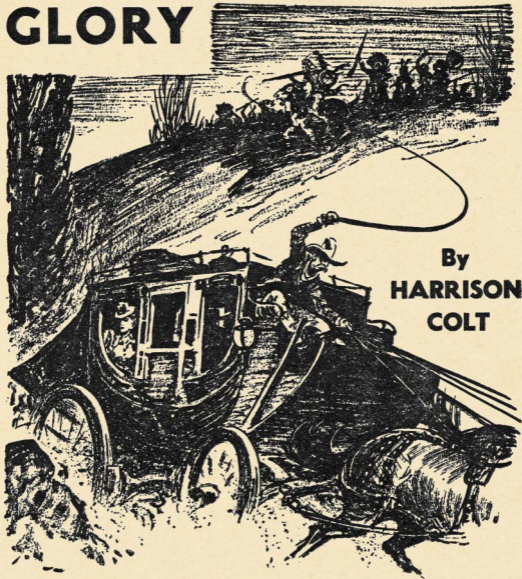
BUGLE CALL TO

A Civil War saber scar and a murderous Apache made it possible for Lieutenant Carter to unmask a man-breaking, supercilious colonel.



Lieutenant Carter knew that it was too late. . . .

GLORY



By
**HARRISON
COLT**

Gripping Pioneer Action Novelette

CHAPTER

Stagecoach Overdue!

1 The cavalry detail had come to a halt before the sunbaked adobe stage station at Split Rock. The dust of their arrival had not yet settled. It hung in the air about their horses' hoofs like fallen wisps of cloud. Blinking up through the bright, blinding brilliance of the mid-day sun, Fat Jack Heenan, proprietor of the station, re-

garded the lieutenant with open curiosity.

"This must mean the Apaches are up to their old tricks," he said thoughtfully. "What kinda hell them devils bin raisin' now, Lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Stephen Carter was a wide-shouldered man in his early thirties. He sat his saddle with an air of careless pride, and his features were sharply defined, sensitive, with a touch of rashness and devil-may-care humor about the corners of his

mouth. He would have been handsome had it not been for the jagged, ugly scar that disfigured the left side of his face.

"There's not much to go on yet," he replied. "All we know for sure is that several ranches south of here have been burned, and five or six people killed. My guess is that Victorio has slipped across the border with a raiding party."

"Victorio?" The stout man gave a low whistle. "You figger that blood-thirsty ol' devil is still alive? I heard that General Crook finished him off a year ago."

Lieutenant Carter shook his head. "At the time, I didn't see anyone who looked like Victorio among the Indian dead. No, I'm afraid he's very much alive."

Heenan's eyes, pale, amber-colored, were clouded with thought. "That's right, Lieutenant. You were with Crook, weren't you?" He paused, then after a moment's silence, said, "I should think a man with your experience in Injun-fighting would be out trackin' down Victorio, 'stead of bein' assigned to escort duty with the stages."

The lieutenant was silent for a moment. From the first he had kept his head turned slightly from the other man's gaze, as though seeking to hide the brutal cut where a slashing saber in the hands of one of Jeb Stuart's gray-coated cavalymen had bitten deep into his left cheek. It was an old habit of his, and by this time it had become so much a part of him as to be done without his own awareness.

"That's up to Colonel Whitley," Carter replied curtly. "He gives the orders. My job is to carry them out."

He reined his horse about, facing the column of dusty, perspiring, blue-clad troopers. There was a hard, bitter look to his dark eyes.

"Corporal," he barked harshly, "while we're waiting for the stage, the men can water their mounts and stand at ease. If the stage pulls in before I return, send a man down to Nick Tavelock's to fetch me."

Corporal Trask, a short, thick-set man with a square jaw and reddish hair, stared at him, his sober blue eyes worried. He hesitated for a moment, then said, reluctantly, "Yes, Sir. Very good, Sir." His hand came up in an automatic salute.

As Lieutenant Carter swung away in the direction of Tavelock's place, a quarter of a mile down the road, he was acutely aware

of the odd, half-masked stares of the men. He felt anger grow within him. Damn 'em! What business was it of theirs what he intended to do at Nick Tavelock's place?

The whiskey that Tavelock dished out to his customers was not all that it might be, so far as quality went. But it helped one to forget things one wanted to forget—among them was this latest indication of Colonel Whitley's opinion of Stephen Carter's worth as a fighting man.

Stiff, correct, humorless, Colonel Whitley had seemed to resent the younger man's dash and recklessness; his greater experience in actual battle; the fact of his proven skill in outguessing the wily and cunning Apache, gained in half a dozen campaigns under Crook and Major Randall.

Now, while green, inexperienced officers rode out at the head of their platoons on the trail of the Indian raiders, Lieutenant Carter was assigned to the strictly routine, unexciting task of guarding the stage line. In the past, a capable corporal or sergeant had been thought qualified to command escort details. The lieutenant knew this was Colonel Whitley's way of making it clear to the entire post as to how he rated Carter's efficiency as an officer.

Raging inwardly, Lieutenant Carter dismounted, tied his horse and stepped through the low doorway of Tavelock's road-ranch. When, half an hour later, a trooper rode up to report the arrival of the stage, Carter felt in a somewhat more mellow mood. He followed the messenger out into the hot sunlight, and again swung up into the saddle.

WHEN Carter arrived back at the station, he found the stage nearly ready to go. The stock-tender was just finishing his task of hooking up six fresh horses. The driver, a lean, bent little man with snowy hair, stood in the narrow strip of shade close to the wall, talking with Fat Jack Heenan.

"Hello there, Bill Akers," Lieutenant Carter greeted the little stage driver.

The driver looked around, and his leathery, wrinkled face broke into a grin of recognition. He advanced across the yard to shake hands.

"Dawgone!" he exclaimed. "If my old eyes ain't playin' tricks on me, it's Lieutenant Carter! Glad to see you, Lieuten-

ant. I understand you're gonna ride with us a spell?"

The lieutenant nodded. "I got orders to play nursemaid to you and your Concord wagon, and any mail and passengers you may have aboard. I see you and the wagon and the mail. Got any passengers?"

"Yep. They're inside, havin' their vittles. Three of 'em this trip." Akers leaned forward and lowered his voice slightly. "One of 'em's a San Francisco business man. Then there's a pretty young widder woman with her little girl. I feel plumb sorry fer that little lady."

"Sorry?"

"Yep." The stage driver nodded soberly. "She's on her way to the coast to git hitched to the business man. Lookin' at her, you'd think she'd have more sense!"

Lieutenant Carter's eyes shone with a faint gleam of humor. "You don't believe in widows marryin' again, Bill?"

The old man shook his head. "'Tain't that," he said. "It's the feller she's figge'n' on gittin' hitched to." He paused, and frowned glumly. "I can't figger it. A nice girl like that."

"Don't you think you're a little hard on the bridegroom-to-be?"

"That conceited, puffed-up bag of wind?" Akers eyes gleamed with anger. "Would you believe it, that ornery cuss had the nerve to tell me I made a mistake in weighin' the girl's baggage? Claimed I was overchargin' her by ten pounds. Forced me to weigh it a second time in front of the express agent. Turned out it actually weighed five pounds more than I had intended to charge her for. No, I can't see why she'd want to marry a gent like that—unless she's doin' it on account of her little daughter."

Carter grinned. He knew that Bill Akers was a man of violent and sweeping likes and dislikes. But just the same he was curious to catch a glimpse of this man the old stage driver had formed such a distaste for.

"Cheer up, Bill," he said. "Might be that the Apaches'll get their hands on him before he has a chance of marrying the lady."

The stage driver chuckled. "Hadn't thought of that. You do look on the bright side of things, Lieutenant." He pulled a thick gold watch from his pocket, and regarded it carefully. "Eatin' time's jest about

up. Guess I better go and fetch 'em out."

The lieutenant watched the old man head for the door of the adobe stage building, then turned and rode back to the column of dismounted cavalymen. Corporal Trask came up, leading his horse. "Time to leave, Lieutenant?"

Carter nodded, and a moment later Corporal Trask's voice rose sharply in the heat of the station-yard, barking brisk commands. The men swung into their saddles and moved up in a column of twos to take their places a short distance behind the rear wheels of the stagecoach.

Lieutenant Carter rode to the head of the column and waited, his dark eyes fastened on the door of the stage station. He saw Bill Akers come out and mount to his place on the box. A moment later the woman and child emerged into the bright glare of the station-yard. He had the impression that she was pretty, but couldn't see very well because she was bending over the child, wiping her mouth with a tiny handkerchief.

Following them, a man stepped through the door and cast a swift, disdainful glance about him. He was perhaps forty, a stout, rather handsome man with a big black cigar clenched firmly in his teeth.

Suddenly the woman straightened, her curious glance swinging to the double line of troopers drawn up behind the stage. For the first time, Lieutenant Carter caught a glimpse of her face. He gave a start, and his face paled under its tan.

Abruptly, he jerked his horse about, facing his men, careful to present only his broad, blue-coated back to the woman's gaze.

"Corporal Trask," he decided hurriedly, "I think a change in procedure may be in order. I intend to take two men and form an advance scouting detail. You and the rest of the detachment will remain close to the stage. Keep your eyes open, especially when you get in the neighborhood of Look-out Rock."

CORPORAL TRASK'S sober blue eyes widened, and he stared at his superior with no attempt to hide his startled surprise. And the look of astonishment still lingered on his wide face a moment later, as he sat watching Lieutenant Carter and his scout detail of two gallop past the wait-

ing stage in a smother of dust and head in the direction of Red Cliff.

Bill Akers gave the three departing riders a quick, startled glance and stared back at Corporal Trask and the other soldiers in evident bewilderment. Then he cracked his whip above the backs of the leaders, and the stage lurched forward.

The advance detail proceeded swiftly. They rode well in advance of the rapidly moving plume of dust that marked the progress of the stagecoach and its escort across the desert.

The lieutenant rode in grim silence. There was a bleakness to his eyes and a pallor about his features that did not invite conversation. The two men who accompanied him exchanged puzzled looks, but also remained silent.

Ahead and to all sides of them lay the flat, sun-scorched desert, dotted with prickly-spined cactus. To the southwest, distant blue hills broke the flatness, becoming more distinct with every passing hour.

Steadily they jogged forward through the sweltering afternoon, grateful when at last the fierce sun began to drop behind the distant mountains.

Dusk was deepening into night when the advance detail rode into Red Cliff station at the edge of the desert. As Lieutenant Carter glimpsed the squat buildings through the darkness, he cursed the regulation, only recently enforced, barring liquor from being sold at stage stations. If ever in his life he had needed a stiff drink, it was now! But here there was no Nick Tavelock's down the road where one could laugh at stage company rules.

Ten minutes later he was waiting in the deep shadows of the stables as the stage drew up before the main building and eight weary troopers rode toward him through the darkness.

A little later, Bill Akers sought out Carter where he sat beside a campfire at the rear of the stables eating his evening meal.

"What in tarnation got into you, Lieutenant?" the old man asked irritably. "The way you kept away from me and the Concord, I was beginnin' to think I must have an advanced case of small-pox."

Carter was silent for a moment. "I had my reasons, Bill. There was someone aboard that stage that I didn't want to meet."

"Was, hey?" The stage driver squinted through the faint, ruddy glow of the campfire. "The girl, you mean?"

The lieutenant shot him a quick glance. "How'd you know that?"

"We had no more'n pulled out of the station-yard when she leans out the window and calls up to me to find out if the lieutenant's name ain't Steve Carter. So I tells her it is, and after that she don't say no more. She an old friend of your'n, Lieutenant?"

Stephen Carter nodded gloomily. "I was hoping she hadn't recognized me. It would have been much better that way—for both of us."

"Fine way to treat an old friend," growled the veteran driver. "I should think you'd be glad to see her. A nice sweet girl like that."

"You don't understand, Bill. Our meeting would only stir up old memories that are better forgotten—and cause her pain and embarrassment. I'm afraid she's already suffered too much of that sort of thing at my hands."

There was a short silence. Finally Akers said, "I understand this is as far as you ride with us?"

"Yes. Our orders are to wait here for the east-bound stage and escort it back to Split Rock. Sergeant Kells is guarding the east-bound. He'll be riding with you over the hills to Horseshoe Creek."

"The Split Rock stage is over-due right now. You think they could have run into trouble?"

Lieutenant Carter said, "I don't think so. There're many reasons, besides Apaches, that could cause a slight delay. It'll be along soon."

But just the same the delay in the east-bound coach's arrival bothered Carter. It should have been in an hour ago—about the same time the west-bound coach had reached the station. Both Carter and Colonel Whitley knew that the hilly, rolling country that lay between Red Cliff and Horseshoe Creek stations was the most dangerous stretch of the stage route. Here in the gulleys and narrow valleys between the hills, Apache raiders were most likely to lurk in ambush.

That, Lieutenant Carter reflected bitterly, was the reason Whitley had assigned it to Sergeant Kells.

Apache Handiwork

2

Time dragged slowly. The troopers, finished with their evening meal, took advantage of the delay by stretching out on their blankets. The camp at the rear of the stables became quiet. A lone sentry moved softly in the shadows, peering into the black mystery of the hills west of camp.

The campfire had burned low. Its embers glowed redly, lacking brightness. Lieutenant Carter and Bill Akers sat staring moodily at the dying glow, both men strangely silent.

The next moment Carter came quickly to his feet, staring into the blackness between the stables and the main building. He smothered an exclamation and stepped back into the deeper shadows, away from the feeble ruddiness of the fire.

A young woman moved toward them, the faint glow of fading fire-light dimly outlining her slender form. Her voice was soft and gentle as she said, "Stephen, I couldn't go away without talking to you just once more."

"Hello, Julie." There was a tenseness in Carter's tone.

Bill Akers, gazing at the two indistinct figures beyond the fire-light with wondering eyes, got to his feet. "Guess I'll ketch myself forty winks," he said, and moved toward the main building.

After he had gone, the woman stepped closer to the lieutenant in the darkness. He felt a strange fear that, even despite the darkness of the night, she would be able to see his face. It was more than habit now that kept the left side of his face turned away from her slightly.

"I—I know you've been trying to avoid me," she said. "But we're both grown-up people now, and what happened between us—well, that was so long ago, I thought it would be silly to let it stand between us."

"Julie, the only reason I tried to avoid you—it wasn't that I didn't want to see you again." He paused. "I figured you might not care to see me. After what happened—"

"Stephen, you talk as though I was a child. We had a childhood infatuation. How old was I then? Seventeen, I think. And you were twenty. You were going away to war, and you did look so handsome in your

uniform. Any girl would have promised to wait for you."

"But you did wait?"

"Of course, I waited—for a while. Until another man came along that I liked well enough to marry. And while I waited, I grew up. I realized that I had no right to expect you to keep a foolish promise made to a silly child in a moon-filled garden. You had a right to change your mind."

"It wasn't that!" he blurted out suddenly. "I never changed my mind about you! It was just—"

He broke off abruptly. She waited a moment for him to continue, then asked gently, "What was it, Stephen?"

He was silent for a long moment. Then he said, almost angrily, "What's the use of talking? We both know it's over and done with. . . . I understand you intend to be married again?"

"Yes. His name's Harley Lathrop, and he lives in San Francisco. It hasn't been easy since my husband died, and Gloria—that's my little girl—I feel she needs a father, someone who can give her security and a good home."

"You love this Lathrop?"

"I—I think so. Of course, it isn't the kind of blissful, starry-eyed love that youngsters feel for each other. I—I know Harley is a good man, and that he has a real affection for me. That's all I could ask."

After that there was a long, uncomfortable silence.

The lieutenant broke it. "I hope you'll be very happy, Julie," he said. There were other words, words of explanation, of endearment, that he wanted to say. But he closed his mouth grimly. They had better be left unsaid.

She whispered softly, "Good-by, Stephen." The next moment she was gone.

Some time later, Corporal Trask came up to where his superior sat staring into the dying fire. "About that Split Rock stage, Sir. Do you think the Apaches could have turned it back? It's three hours late now."

Carter gave a little start and looked up quickly, almost guiltily. "The stage? . . . I'm hoping there's some other explanation for the delay. At any rate, Corporal, there's nothing we can do until daylight. If it hasn't come in by then—well, that'll be time enough to consider what to do."

BUT when the fierce yellow desert sun crawled up into the eastern sky the next morning, there was still no sign of the missing stage. Carter decided to hold the Horseshoe Creek stage at Red Cliff station while he and half of the escort scouted the hills to the west.

He returned shortly after nine o'clock, having explored the stage road for five miles without encountering any sign of either stage or hostiles. When he dismounted behind the stables, two men were waiting for him. Carter saw the leathery-faced stage driver and his passenger, Harley Lathrop. From the way the sleek, well-fed man rolled the big cigar around in his mouth, it was evident he was angry.

"Any luck?" inquired Bill Akers.

"Lieutenant Carter shook his head. "No sign of anything, far as we went."

"Just what does that mean?" growled Lathrop. "The driver here informs me you're the man responsible for delaying us at this God-forsaken hole in the desert."

"That's correct, Mr. Lathrop. Until the stage comes through from Horseshoe Creek with Sergeant Kells and his party to furnish you with an armed escort, I cannot permit the stage to proceed."

"Damn the armed escort! I'm a busy man and I've got important matters to tend to on the Coast—matters that won't wait!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lathrop. I'm afraid they'll have to wait."

The man bit off a piece of the cigar in his mouth and spat it out furiously. "Lieutenant," he snapped, "even if the U. S. Army is frightened by reports of a few cowardly Indians on the loose, I'm not! I've got an important business deal waiting me in Frisco. Besides that, I'm planning on getting married. I demand that you allow us to proceed, escort or no escort!"

Carter tried to conceal his dislike for the man. He said quietly, "You seem to be forgetting, Mr. Lathrop, that you're not the only passenger. There's a woman and child aboard that stage. I can't take the responsibility of endangering their lives."

"This is the most stupid thing I've ever heard of! As for the woman, I'll have you know that she's my future wife. I'll assume full responsibility for her and the child."

"I'm afraid that's impossible."

"Impossible, is it?" An angry red came up into the smooth, fleshy features. "We'll

see about that! I've got some influence in Washington, and I'll use it to see that a pack of fools galloping around in Army uniforms don't interfere with the business of citizens whose taxes pay to keep them up!" He turned and stalked away toward the main building.

Bill Akers grinned and dropped an eyelid. "Well? Was I right?"

Carter ignored him. He stood frowning over at the rolling up-thrust of hills from which he had come just a few minutes before. He turned suddenly. "Bill, you can get ready to roll. I've decided to escort the stage as far as Horseshoe Creek or until we meet up with Sergeant Kells."

The old stage driver's grin faded. "You mean you're gonna let that wind-bag tell you what to do?"

"It's the only thing I can do. If the Apaches have attacked the east-bound stage, Kells might need help. If not, we may encounter him on the trail."

Again they proceeded as on the previous day, Carter moving ahead with two men, while Trask and the rest of the detail hung close to the swift-moving coach.

Shortly past noon, the advance detail swung around the brow of a low hill, and came to an abrupt halt. Before them, in a narrow gully where rocky buttes lifted against the blue of the cloudless sky, stood what was left of the east-bound stage.

A short distance away, lay the bloated bodies of two arrow-riddled horses. A blue-uniformed body hung limply from one of the windows. The contents of a slashed mail sack littered the ground.

Carter rode forward cautiously until a little further along he caught sight of half a dozen stripped and mutilated bodies. One of them he recognized by the dark-stubbed, pointed jaw and bristly black mustache as Sergeant Kells.

"What do we do now, Sir?" asked one of the men with him.

Carter stared off into the broken line of hills to north and south. "There's only one thing we can do. Get out of here damn fast! Come on!"

With the two troopers pounding at his rear, he spurred his horse back down the road up which they had come. Ten minutes later, they met the advancing stage, coming full tilt down the road.

Carter threw up his arm in a signal for

it to halt, and reined up in a flurry of dust. His voice arose in sharp, brittle commands. Bill Akers, his leathery face paling, yelled anxiously at his six horses and swung the swaying Concord wagon in a hasty half-circle.

As Bill Akers sent the stage bouncing and careening furiously back down the road, Carter fell in beside Trask at the head of the escort. The corporal stared at him curiously. His sober blue eyes were thoughtful.

"You think we've got a chance to make it back to Red Cliff station, Sir?"

"I don't know. But it would be suicide to try to get through to Horseshoe Creek. I'm certain it's Victorio, and he has a large band of warriors with him."

FOR another quarter of an hour, they moved swiftly ahead. Then Corporal Trask gave a sharp explanation and flung out one heavy, blue-sleeved arm in the direction of a tall hill to the north of the road ahead.

"I'm afraid it's too late, Sir," he said grimly.

The lieutenant, shifting his gaze to the direction indicated, could make out tiny figures of horsemen crawling across the face of the hill in the distance.

He spurred his horse alongside the wildly jogging and rolling coach and shouted up to the lean, leathery-faced Akers on the box.

"Give 'em the whip, Bill. They're ahead of us, moving to cut us off. You've got to keep going! Remember that, Bill—you've got to keep going! It's our one chance!"

"I'll keep goin', Lieutenant! Don't worry about that! Ain't nothin' kin keep these six scavalantin' high-steppers once they git under way! Hang on to your seat below!" His long whip lashed pistol-loud across the backs of the hard-driving leaders. The coach lurched forward and the spokes of the wheels became blurs of motion.

Lieutenant Carter caught a glimpse of the girl's face, pale and startled, in the window. She was staring at him with a strange intensity. He reined in sharply and dropped to the rear, but he knew it was too late. From her expression it was plain that she had seen his face.

He shrugged disgustedly. There was nothing to be done about it now. Besides,

he had more pressing matters to consider at the moment.

The stage swung around a bend, rocked over a low rise, and dropped abruptly into a wide, sloping valley, the cavalry detail pounding hard at its rear.

Now, over the brow of the long, rising sweep to the north of the stage road galloped red horsemen. The fierce Apache yell broke from savage throats. Brown bodies bent low over the backs of sure-footed Indian ponies. They swept down the slope to intercept the careening coach.

Rifles cracked and puffs of smoke dotted the hill-side. Arrows sang through the air. A trooper gave a sharp, strangled cry and fell from his saddle, a feathered shaft protruding from his back.

Carbines in the hands of galloping troopers began to speak with deadly effect. Here and there an Indian pony dashed ahead riderless.

Another blue-clad horseman tumbled to the ground as an Indian bullet found his horse. He jumped up quickly and stood coolly firing into the yelling, maddened horde of warriors that swept down on him.

One of his comrades pulled up his horse and seemed about to turn back in a desperate rescue attempt. But just then a painted, loin-clothed Apache horseman, far out-distancing his fellows, threw himself upon the soldier with a wild shout of triumph. His knife flashed in the bright sunlight, and when he climbed to his feet a moment later it gleamed redly in his hand.

The fallen soldier's comrade was cursing in a shrill, hate-filled voice. Quickly his carbine came to his shoulder. There was a sharp report, and the Apache spun around crazily and slid to the ground.

Corporal Trask managed to make his voice heard above the confusion of pounding hoofs. "Look, Sir, they're trying to close in on the stage!"

Carter saw a number of Apaches swinging off from the main body of attackers, intent on cutting off the stage. They paralleled its lumbering course, and with every passing minute they narrowed the distance.

Lieutenant Carter lifted his voice in a harsh command. The tiny detachment of troopers spurred ahead desperately, coming up alongside the lumbering, creaking coach.

Carter shouted at the top of his lungs, "Draw sabers! Prepare to charge!"

He glanced back at the thundering column of cavalymen, and a sudden fierce pride ran through his veins. They were a queer assortment of men, these guardians of Uncle Sam's frontier. Reckless adventurers; ne'er-do-wells; wanted men, some of them; living a hard and thankless existence; miserably under-paid. Yet, in moments of need, they compared favorably with any fighting men the world had ever seen.

He stood erect in his stirrups and waved his saber in a flickering circle overhead.

"Charge!"

CHAPTER "I Beg to Report...!"

3

A wild, furious yell broke from their throats. As one man they swung away from the stage road, raced to meet the on-coming Apaches. The drumming of hoofs and the fierce yelling exploded into ear-splitting sound, as they closed in. There was a wild melee, a tangled confusion of racing horsemen.

Carter closed with an Apache, hacked at him with his saber, saw him go down, instantly swallowed in the billowing dust. Then another vengeful red face loomed near. A rifle exploded almost in his face, and the sudden shock of a bullet nearly spun him out of the saddle. Numbing pain ran through his arm, and the saber fell from his fingers.

Corporal Trask efficiently pistoled the Indian who had wounded Carter. Now Lieutenant Carter's eyes were fixed on an Indian who rode a little apart, as though directing the attack. Excitement stirred in the lieutenant's eyes.

He spurred his horse forward in a sudden dash and, as he rode, he shouted a name. At the same time tugging at his holstered dragoon pistol with his left hand. There was a look in his eyes as fierce as any reflected in the black, snake-like eyes of the attackers.

The Apache, a proud, fierce-visaged warrior, swung to meet him. He gave a wild yell and closed in, pulling a knife from his loin-cloth. The impact tumbled both men from their horses.

Corporal Trask gave a despairing shout. He swung his horse around and galloped back, two troopers at his rear. Then came

the sharp crack of Carter's dragoon pistol. Carter staggered to his feet, peering anxiously about him for his horse. The Apache lay still.

Trask swung out to recapture his superior's mount, then galloped ahead. Carter ran to meet him, hastily found the stirrup, and jerked himself into the saddle. It was not a minute too soon.

There was a new note, a savage vengefulness in the cries of the Apaches as they swept forward once more. Another ripple of shots, the flicker of crimson-splashed sabers, and then the fury of the moment eased.

The Apaches, nearly a dozen of their number killed or wounded, began dropping behind. They fired their rifles and shouted sullen insults at the troopers as they slowed their mounts. But there was no doubt about it, they were giving up the pursuit.

Corporal Trask swiftly reloaded his pistol. "Looks like they've had enough, Sir."

"For the moment at any rate," returned Carter. "Well, let's get the hell out of here."

A few minutes later, as they swung down the road to overtake the stage, now nearly a quarter of a mile ahead, the lieutenant was breathing easier. Beside Carter and Trask, there remained six men, although one of these was badly wounded. He had to be held erect in the saddle by two others. After the first shock of the bullet in his arm, Carter had almost forgotten his wound. Even now the dull, throbbing pain did not claim as much of his attention as the girl in the stagecoach.

Trask glanced back, and a wide smile lit up his square-jawed face.

"The Apaches got a bellyful, Sir. They're riding south!"

The Apaches seemed to have given up all ideas of pursuit. Clouds of dust marked their progress over the hills to the south.

As they rode on, the soberness came back into Trask's blue eyes and he seemed to be lost in thought. Once he frowned slightly. "Sir," he asked suddenly, "doesn't it strike you as queer that they should give up the pursuit so suddenly? I got an odd feeling about that."

A slight easing of Lieutenant Carter's mouth gave faint suggestion of a smile. But he rode on without saying anything.

THE soldiers galloped into the yard of Red Cliff station late in the afternoon. The stage was standing before the adobe building. The woman passenger and her little girl were waiting beside the coach. Harley Lathrop stood in the doorway, an impatient look on his fleshy, handsome features.

"Stephen!" called Julie.

Lieutenant Carter reined in, and watched Corporal Trask and the rest of the detail move wearily toward the stables and their previous night's camp. Then his eyes swung back to Julie and the impatient man in the doorway. Carter slid from his saddle, and staggered a little as he hit the ground.

"Stephen—you're wounded!"

He managed a faint grin. "Nothing more than a flesh wound in the arm. It doesn't even hurt. . . . You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes," broke in Harley Lathrop from the doorway. His voice was scornful, mocking. "She wants to thank you for saving our lives. She thinks you're quite a hero, Lieutenant. But me—I'm wondering if an officer who knew what he was about would have led us straight into an Indian trap. . . . Well, dear, I shall go inside. I'm afraid this tender and touching scene is likely to bore me."

A slight flicker of anger came into Julie's soft gray eyes, then as quickly was gone. "Don't mind what he says, Stephen. I believe the poor man is jealous. He knows very well that if it hadn't been for you and your men, none of us would be alive now."

"I'm glad you think so, Julie."

"Is there anything else to think?"

Carter shrugged. "You heard what he said. Maybe there'll be others to suggest that if I'd kept my eyes open I wouldn't have led you into the trap in the first place."

Her chin lifted. "I refuse to believe there would be anybody so stupid as to think any such thing!"

Carter smiled soberly. Although he didn't say so, he thought it not unlikely that Colonel Whitley might be delighted to arrive at precisely that conclusion. Carter said:

"I'm sending word to the post. In a day or two things may be cleared up sufficiently to allow you and Mr. Lathrop to proceed in safety. Now, if you will excuse me. . . ."

He turned away, leading his horse in the direction of the stables. He was aware that

she stood for a long moment without moving, staring after him.

Hurriedly, he scrawled out a brief report to Colonel Whitley, and despatched a messenger to the post. But he knew that reinforcements could not be expected to arrive before evening of the following day at the best.

Thus, that same evening just at dusk, he started to his feet when he caught the sound of bugles to the east of the station. They came clear and sweet on the evening breeze.

Half an hour later, there was the sound of trotting horses and the jingle of accoutrements, as two troops of cavalry rode out of the darkness.

A colonel of the cavalry rode forward to where Carter, Trask, and four troopers stood stiffly to attention beside the cooking fires. The colonel was a thin, fallow-faced, dark-bearded man.

"Lieutenant Carter," the colonel said sharply, "what is the meaning of this? You had distinct orders to return to Split Rock with the east-bound stage. Yet I find you encamped here in flagrant disregard of my orders!"

Carter said quietly, "I despatched a messenger to the post late this afternoon, Sir."

"Lieutenant Carter, I hope—for your sake—that you have a reasonable explanation for your conduct."

Carter felt anger and hatred building up inside him. His mouth tightened into a hard line. "I'm ready to justify my actions, Sir." He detailed, in a curt, clipped voice, what had taken place.

Colonel Whitley listened, a frown on his fallow, bearded countenance.

"Kells and his entire party, eh?" He shook his head. "You have any idea who the Indians were who attacked Kells and tried to trap you?"

"A very good idea, Sir. It was Victorio and a band of his Apaches from over the border."

"Victorio! You're sure of that?" Colonel Whitley leaned forward slightly in the saddle and his eyes gleamed. He turned to one of his aides. "Detach a strong escort to convey the stage to Horseshoe Creek. As for the others, have them water their horses. We'll press on at once!"

He turned back to Carter. "How many men did you lose, Lieutenant Carter?"

"Four men killed, two wounded, Sir."

Colonel Whitley frowned down at him. "I need hardly tell you, Lieutenant, that heedless and reckless action, placing the lives of your men and the stage passengers in jeopardy, can little reflect to your credit."

Old Bill Akers stepped from the shadows where he had been listening. "Hell, Colonel!" he growled. "You can't be such a damn fool as you sound! Why, if it wasn't for the lieutenant there wouldn't a bin one of us had his hair attached to his head!"

The sallow-faced Colonel gave him an icy stare. "Who in hell are you?"

JUST the stage-driver, that's all, Colonel. An' if there's any need fer any testimony before a military court, I'll be happy to say the same thing, only louder. Yep, wa'n't a one of us woulda escaped if it weren't for Lieutenant Carter here."

Colonel Whitley frowned at him a moment. Finally he said, "I made General Crook a promise before he left for the north. I told him that if Victorio ever again set foot north of the line, he'd never get back across it again. I intend to see that that promise is carried out. Lieutenant Carter, do you have an opinion as to where the Indians were headed?"

"Yes, Sir. They were moving southward, heading for Mexico."

"Well, Victorio won't get away this time. Are you ready to move, Gentlemen?"

"One thing more, Sir," said Carter. "I mentioned it in the despatches I sent on to the post by messenger. I beg to report—"

"Later, Lieutenant," barked Colonel Whitley impatiently. "At the moment, we haven't an instant to lose! We shall have to act swiftly to cut off Victorio." He swung his horse away, and a moment later, rode out at the head of the column.

Carter watched the pairs of riders, black against the greyness of the evening, move across the shoulder of a hill to the southwest, then drop out of sight.

Corporal Trask turned, his sober blue eyes filled with curiosity. "If you don't mind my asking, Sir—just what was it you were about to tell the colonel?"

Carter grinned. Suddenly he broke into a laugh. "I merely wanted to inform him, he didn't need to worry any more about Victorio. You remember the Apache who

tumbled me out of the saddle, Corporal? Well, that was Victorio!"

"Why—why, then Victorio's dead!"

"That's what I was trying to tell the colonel when he interrupted me!"

It was almost the first time Carter had ever heard Corporal Trask laugh.

* * *

The escort, thirty men, waited in the stage yard. Lieutenant Carter drifted across from the stables to see the stage leave, and say good-by to Bill Akers. At least, he told himself that was the reason.

He saw the bulky Harley Lathrop, emerge into the yard, stand for a moment blackly silhouetted against the yellow rectangle of the door. He paused beside the Concord and waited. Then a slender figure, a child beside her, joined him.

Carter stood some twenty feet from the stage but the light of a window must have out-lined him dimly in the blackness. Suddenly the girl, about to enter the stage, turned and moved swiftly toward him.

"Stephen," she said softly, almost in a frightened voice. "I may be a silly fool. But there's one thing I must know."

She hesitated. He peered through the darkness at the vague oval of her face, said gently, "Yes, Julie?"

"The reason you didn't come back to me—was it because of—"

"Yes, Julie. I didn't want you to see me—like this. I never did stop loving you—not one instant. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Yes! Yes, of course, that's what I wanted to know!" She made a quick movement forward. Her arms slid about his neck and her mouth was warm and sweet against his. Carter's arms went about her and he kissed her hard and long.

The girl was saying something over and over in his ear, half a moan, half a sigh. "You poor, silly, gallant fool! Did you think it would make any difference?"

"But Lathrop? What about him?"

"Do you want me to get back in that coach and ride away with him? Is that what you want, Stephen?"

Lieutenant Stephen Carter swallowed hard. "No," he said. "That isn't what I want, Julie."

They walked back toward the stage, arm in arm. . . .

THE END

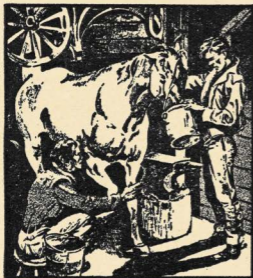
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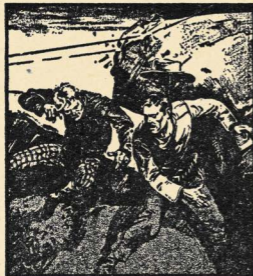
April 11th



JOHNNY HARDLUCK'S welcome to the Savoran foothills was a warning by the stableman: "Strangers ain't stopping around here longer than they have to—especially tonight." Johnny had expected this; for he had come to see two old rancher friends—Bob Tolin and Giff Ord—who were now bitter enemies.



GIFF ORD had been drygulched. And his foreman, Rance, figuring Johnny to be the bushwhacker, captured him. But the town kingpin, Fraser, wanted to lynch Johnny on the spot. . . . Johnny leaped clear of Rance's cowboys, snatched a gun and faced the townsmen, calling: "Fraser, if you want me so bad—come and get me!"

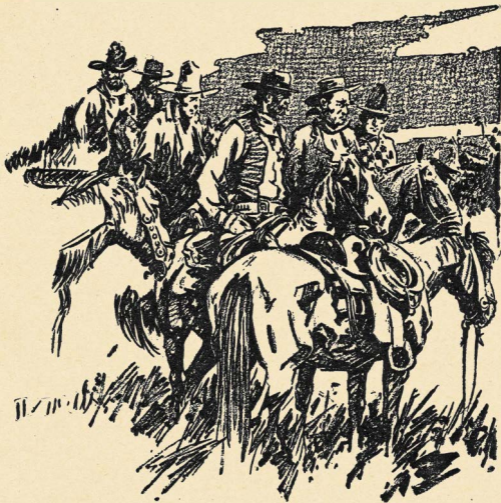


LATER, when Johnny Hardluck identified himself, Foreman Rance showed him around the Savoran ranges, telling about the grim feud of Bob Tolin and Giff Ord. . . . Suddenly Johnny felt a bullet rip his sleeve and heard a rifle crack. Johnny and Rance ducked for cover, knowing that Fraser was again making his play.



AND Fraser's final play was Killer Waller—an expert in his line—with supreme confidence in his lightning gun-hand. Now, Fraser stepped forward, hand over sixgun—as Johnny Hardluck came for a showdown. . . . The complete story will be told in Branch Carter's novel—"Johnny Hardluck Pulls A Boner"—in May issue.

CROWBAIT SAVVY



The boys linin' the trail coulda been watchin' a funeral 'stead of a hoss race. . . .

By **RAY
VICKER**

The folks of Buffalo Springs faced a long, lean winter—with all their money bet on a horse that couldn't beat a jackass on a down-grade.

I SHOULD know trouble was comin' the moment that beefy stranger rode up to my hitchin' rack leading a long-legged sorrel on a halter behind him. I could see him through the window wavin' his big arms and shoutin' orders to the Injun kid with him, an' naturally everybody else in the saloon gravitated to the front of my place. Strangers ain't a common sight in Buffalo Springs.

A moment later he tromped in, big, red-headed, and burly as a corn-fed bull, with a swagger to his walk like he'd made the first payment on the town.

"Howdy folks!" he roared. "Is this a saloon?" With that he began to laugh like all git-out, his thick chest bobbing up and down and his holstered gun knockin' against his leg.

I looked at him kinda sour. "Yuh! Whut's yores?" My sign out front said *Whiskey, Beer and Hard Lickers*. I wuz proud of my place.

"Whiskey!" he sang out, "an' don't give me none of yore embalmin' fluid. Nuthin' but the best fer Jasper O'Hara." He took a-hold of the edge of the bar with his huge, red-haired hands an' shook it until all my beer glasses rattled.

Some people I don't like nohow. Jasper O'Hara was one of them.

"When Jasper O'Hara drinks—everybody drinks!" He pounded on the bar with his fist an' there was a scramble fer places along the brass rail. I hurriedly poured out a row of glasses an' then looked blank when O'Hara tossed two-bits on the bar.

"When Jasper O'Hara pays—everybody pays!" he bellowed an' then began to laugh again, a deep rumblin' roar like a spring freshet comin' down a mountain.

Nobody said anythin' but O'Hara got a lot of dirty looks.

"Another drink, bartender," he shouted, "an' pass the cork around fer the boys to smell. I'm drinkin' tuh the best hoss in Arizona, that little sorrel out front."

You coulda heard a cockroach walk across the bar. In a cowtown the quickest way to stir trouble was to brag up a hoss. I said, "They's some here thet might think different." I wondered if O'Hara was born with that flat nose or if someone had smeared it all over his face fer him.

"Ho! Ho!" His laugh grated like a bucksaw catchin' a nail. "There ain't nuthin' but crowbait in this burg. Where's the glue factory?"

Blackie Miller jumped to his feet, his unburned face red as barn paint. "Nobody talks like that about my hoss, see? My little buckskin is the fastest critter this side o' hell."

O'Hara set his glass on the bar and turned around. He was still smilin' but his little blue eyes gleamed wickedly. "Right smart language, friend," he drawled. "But why don't yuh back up yer brag."

Somebody knocked a beer glass over an' the crash was like thunder in the silence

that fell over the bar. Our town ain't no heller an' we don't have shootin's very often.

Blackie turned white but he was a game kid. There mighta been lead flyin' if I hadn't leaned over the bar between them. "Why not settle the argument with a hoss race?" I said, real quick fer I was tryin' tuh beat a pair of gunhands.

O'Hara grabbed at the bait an' I saw I had said jest whut he wanted. Sure! Why not?" he bellowed.

"Suits me," Blackie said. "I'll run yer hoss right into the ground."

O'Hara took out a roll of bills big enough to choke a steer. "If yer so sure of thet, why don't yuh back up yer hoss with some real dinero?" He had a cagey grin that shoulda warned us but didn't.

Quick as a flash Blackie pulled his wad from his pocket. "I ain't got but a hundred, but it says my buckskin wins."

"How about the rest of yuh boys?" O'Hara looked around with a goading smile thet coulda put a sky pilot on the prod. There was a rush to the bar. All the boys knew Blackie had the fastest hoss in Co-chise County an' I guess they wuz all hankerin' tuh take some o' lippy O'Hara's money from him. Before yuh could gulp a shot, O'Hara had two thousand of his money covered.

I hung back. I'd heard before about tin-horn gamblers blowing into a cowtown an' pullin' a sleeper with a Kentucky thoroughbred. O'Hara shore seemed to fill the bill.

The boys elected me as stake holder.

Once the bets were down O'Hara didn't waste time. We all moved into the street an' it was agreed to start the race in front of the saloon. The course followed the river road outa town, circled on the Tombstone trail, an' came back into Main Street at the other end of town.

"How about them cattle guards?" Blackie chimed in when we were plannin' the course. There were several cattle outfits just outa town an' we'd built a bobbed-wire fence around Buffalo Springs to keep out wanderin' steers.

The only gaps in the fence wuz where the river road an' the Tombstone trail left town. In those places a dozen steel rails had been laid across the highway. Cattle won't walk across that kinda footin' no-how an' riders comin' in or goin' outa

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town had to git down and lead their hosses across.

"Simple," I said. "We'll jest lay planks across the rails fer the race an' the hosses won't break their strides."

O'Hara kept his sorrel under wraps in the livery until we were ready to start. The moment his Injun jockey kneed that sorrel through the crowd filling Main Street, I knew we had been bilked. That red-headed hoss had the stamp of thoroughbred on him from his long, clean-limbed legs, to his deep chest. Beside him Blackie's shaggy buckskin looked like a tramp.

That buckskin was fast fer our part of the country, but it looked like even more of a trap after the marshal's sixgun started that race. I could see the whole course from the second story porch of my saloon. At the first cattle guard the sorrel jumped into a half-length lead.

Along the river road the Injun quirted the daylight outa that red stallion and that long-legged sonovagun increased his lead at every stride. When the sorrel swept past the finish line the buckskin was jest crossin' the second cattle guard comin' into town.

"Whoopie!" O'Hara let out a shout like an Apache sightin' a wagon train. "Pay up, boys!"

BACK in the saloon the boys all watched gloomily while I handed their money to the grinning O'Hara. Two thousand dollars is big money in Buffalo Springs. It kinda looked like a dry winter fer all hands.

You'd expect that the least O'Hara woulda done wuz to order a drink fer the house. But no, not him! He pounded on the bar like he wanted to put a hole in it and waved a hundred-dollar bill. "Gimme a drink, bartender," he said, cracking his freckled face in two with a smug grin. "I'm shore gonna enjoy this one." He turned to Blackie an' said. "This is yer money payin' fer this one, yuh know?" With that he throwed the slug into him an' blew the breeze into Blackie's face.

There mighta been a fight right there if Marshal Simpson hadn't been in the place. Nobody ever started anythin' with that tough old goat around.

CROWBAIT SAVVY

"Fill 'er up again," O'Hara said, laughing fit to split thet big body of his. He hoisted his glass an' faced the mournful bunch lining the bar. "I might as well git good an' drunk on yer money, boys. It ain't everyday thet I git a two-thousand-dollar donation fer my health an' well bein'."

He tossed a dime toward me. "Here, bartender! This is fer you."

We ain't hard losers in Buffalo Springs but O'Hara didn't have no cause to be rubbin' our fur the wrong way like he wuz. I'm a little runt but just about thet time I wuz riled enough to bean him with a whiskey bottle. Then I had the idea. I said:

"Yuh think a lot of thet hoss of yourn, don't yuh?" I wiped the bar in front of O'Hara like he wuz my best customer.

"Best in the West," he said, pointin' that squashed nose at me like a beacon light.

"If yuh think so maybe yuh'd be willin' to let him run again against another fast hoss we got in town. Jeff Bowry there has a right spy bay mare thet'll give yuh a run fer yer money." I winked at Jeff to keep him quiet—but Jeff didn't get my idea a'tall.

His mouth sagged in his gray whiskers and he popped out, "Yuh crazy, Ed. Thet beat-out hoss of mine can't—" he stopped short, seein' I had somethin' in my noodle.

"Well—now I don't know—" O'Hara's shaggy brows wrinkled all up. "Two races in one day might be too much fer my hoss."

"Yuh got four thousand here," I said quick-like. "The boy'll cover thet bet fer yuh, won't yuh fellers?"

Nobody said a word an' they all looked at me as if I wuz touched in the head. O'Hara was quick tuh see how little confidence the boys had in Whiskey Kate. Jeff Bowry's old mare, an' some of his doubt left him.

"Speak up, boys," I said to the others. "The honor of Buffalo Springs is at stake. We can't let O'Hara, here, walk away with all our money."

Everybody was unanimous with thet, but nobody made a peep. They all knew Whiskey Kate couldn't beat a three-legged dray hoss, an' she didn't have spunk enough to buck even when she had sandburs under her saddle blanket.

O'Hara's grin came back. "Whut's the

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

matter, boys, yuh yeller?" He dropped all his wad on the bar an' laughs at them. "Here's four thousand thet says my sorrel is still the fastest hoss in Arizona."

I said, "Maybe I can persuade the boys tuh take a chance." I corraled everybody who had lost money to O'Hara at the end of the bar and whispered tuh them what I had in mind.

"Are yuh shore it will work?" Jeff asked doubtfully. "Yuh know damn well thet Whiskey Kate ain't nuthin' but a wore-out pack hoss."

"It's worth the chance," I whispered back. "We gotta cut this hombra to size somehow."

Well, Blackie had the most nerve of any of 'em. He went over to the bank, drew out his winter feed money, an' plunked four hundred on the bar. "I'll take thet much of yer money, O'Hara," he said.

The others were slow in puttin' up their bets an' O'Hara became more genial every minute thinkin' he had a pushover. Jeff Bowry finally took the last hundred dollars.

O'Hara leered at me. "Whut's the matter with you, bartender? Ain't yuh got the nerve tuh back up yer own hoss?"

I hadn't put up a dollar.

Everybody looked at me. I'd been the one to talk the male population into puttin' their last dollars on this race an' now it looked like I wuz a piker. If my plan failed I knew I might jest as well clear outa town.

"It ain't thet," I said, kinda slow. "It's jest thet I had a special bet in mind. Yuh think quite a bit of thet sorrel, don't yuh?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I think quite a bit of this here drinkin' emporium. I'll put up my saloon against thet sorrel. Whut dya say?"

O'Hara thought thet over fer a minute. The spiritless way in which everybody had done their bettin' musta decided him. "Sure thing. I do enough drinkin' tuh have a bar of my own. Yes, Sir!" He laughed real loud. "Yer gonna be swampin' fer me come nightfall."

It was agreed then thet the marshal should hold stakes and act as judge fer the race. With all the money in Buffalo Springs involved in this contest we needed a two-gun man to keep the edgy crowd under control.

CROWBAIT SAVVY

When Jeff Bowry rode his spavined mare up to the startin' line, O'Hara laughed until the tears ran down his fat cheeks. "Yuh boys must all be crazy," he said. "But if yuh want tuh donate four thousand dollars an' a saloon fer my welfare I'm game tuh take it. That crowbait couldn't beat a jackass on a down-grade." The marshal started the race.

WHISKEY KATE got off to a slow start an' she was eatin' dust in the first thirty yards. The boys linin' the trail coulda been watchin' a funeral 'stead of a hoss race fer all the noise they made. Only the boisterous O'Hara seemed to be havin' a good time. I guess he was eyein' his speedin' sorrel too close to see the two fellers workin' on the cattle guard near the end of the course.

The sorrel had a six-length lead at the halfway mark. Swinging down the Tombstone trail on the way back tuh town, the Injun's arm was goin' up an' down with the quirt like a windmill an' that sorrel sure covered ground in response.

Jeff Bowry did the best he could with Whiskey Kate, but dynamite couldn't stir up that critter.

"Pack up yer duds, Ed," O'Hara yelled to me when the sorrel came pounding down the home stretch with a big lead. "I'm gonna be movin' into yer saloon, pronto."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth then a strange thing happened. The fast movin' sorrel reached the cattle guard. All of a sudden all four legs stiffened an' the hoss came to a dead stop like a well-trained cowpony on the end of a rope. The

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BUTTON'S LONG QUEST

(Continued from page 71)

know, Son—just headin' over the hills with an itch in his feet. But I wouldn't worry too much. I've got an idea that Jack ran a little short on cash. I bet that by the time you get back home, he'll have some dinero there for you."

"I hope you're right, Mister," Ronnie said. "Looks like I had a long ride for nothin'. But if it's all right with you fellas, I'll spend the night."

For a long time after Ronnie Hunt had gone to sleep, Dan Lovett hunkered there staring at his curled-up form. A soft breeze came up and carried bits of a nightherder's song in from where the cattle were bedded down out there across the creek. It was a lonesome sound and Dan shivered a little.

The next morning, right after breakfast, the old ramrod and his crew stood around the chuck wagon and watched the kid wave goodbye and ride away.

Dan Lovett had a lump in his throat and his arm felt like a piece of lead, but he managed to lift it and wave back. Nobody spoke for a long minute; then one of the punchers breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

Dan Lovett looked long and steadily at his crew and he said, "Dig down deep, cowboys, 'cause we're sendin' a little old lady down in Texas some dinero—and we're gonna keep on doin' it every month."

They nodded soberly and old Dan knew they felt the same way he did. Jack Hunt had been a bad one. But why let the kid know that? Why tell him what had really happened? That two months ago they had caught Jack Hunt rustling Rocking R beef, and hanged him to the nearest tree.



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 61)

before he ceased to know anything, Flash Teton knew that the gift Little Joe Irons had been saving for him was Death. . . .

Shaken by the narrowness of his own escape, Sheriff Sam Peters stepped out from the wall. Holding the lantern away from him, he peered warily into the crevice, grimacing at what he saw. The twin barrels of a scattergun had been jammed tightly between two rocks at the back of the fissure, aimed full into the cleft. The rawhide thong, fastened about the top of the gunny sack, was tied to the triggers of the cocked shotgun. The guntrap had been rigged with devilish ingenuity.

Sheriff Sam Peters glanced at the grotesque figure on the cave floor.

"Maybe Little Joe wasn't so dumb, after all," he murmured grimly. "He out-figured Flash, knowin' Flash would be watchin' me to find the loot. This was what he wanted Flash to have—a gift straight from hell!"

(Continued from page 69)

a lot of tough men, already. It took a good man to show him up."

Will nodded. "I owe thee my life, Fred," he said slowly. "If thou hadn't come with thy crew, Sam Crewson would have killed me. I've been wrong, and thou were right. Some men are mad dogs."

Fred Amber took it up. "This country is overrun with mad dogs, Will. And the only defense against them is a gun. But the day will come when these parts will be law-abiding and safe. When that time comes, I and men like me will lay aside the gun—because we hate that brand of law as much as you do." He paused, and grinned. Then, "That's not to say my way is wholly right or yours wholly wrong. I always figured the only cure for a hombre like Jess Lang was to kill him. But he'll live—and I'd gamble he's learned a lesson that'll make a new man of him. Turn around, Will. There's somebody waiting for you, yonder."

Will turned and saw Kate Amber. She was sitting her paint pony, and she was smiling at him. Will knew that her smile meant that in her eyes he measured up. He was sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him, now. He went toward her, taking long and hurried strides.

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