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44 Western MAGAZINE
JAN. 1948

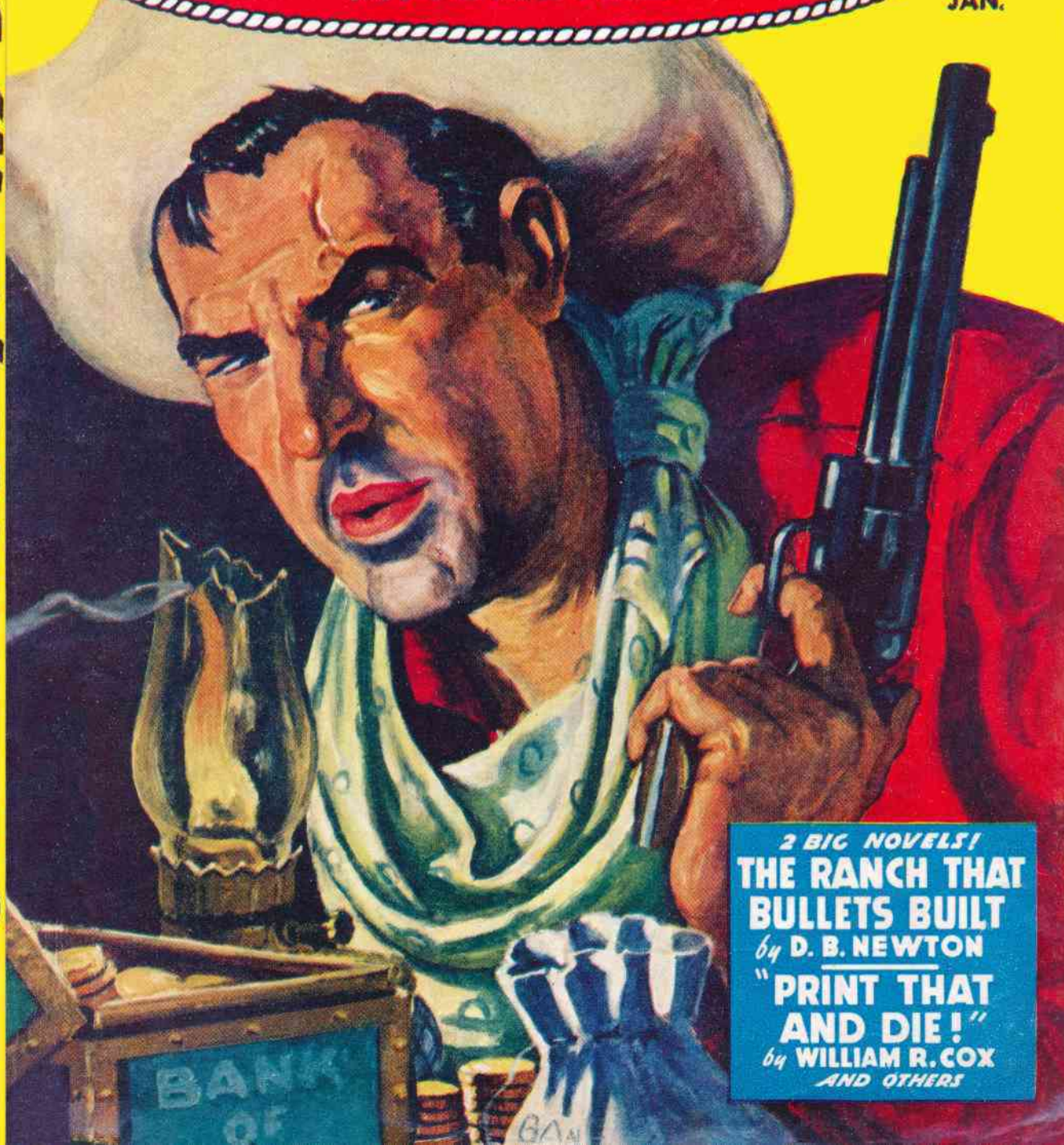
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44 Western

MAGAZINE

JAN.



2 BIG NOVELS!
**THE RANCH THAT
BULLETS BUILT**
by D. B. NEWTON
**"PRINT THAT
AND DIE!"**
by WILLIAM R. COX
AND OTHERS



For once they actually agree!

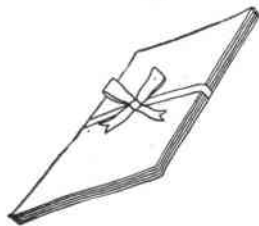
Hope and Crosby, in the movies, seldom see eye to eye.

But there's one thing they really do agree on —they both think U.S. Savings Bonds make wonderful Christmas gifts!

SAYS BOB: "They're swell for *anybody* on your list. You couldn't pick a nicer, more sensible, more welcome present. Even Crosby knows that."

SAYS BING: "I hate to admit it, folks, but Hope is right. And remember this—you can buy Bonds at any bank or post office in the U. S. A."

BOB AND BING (together): "This Christmas, why not give the finest gift of all—U.S. Savings Bonds!"

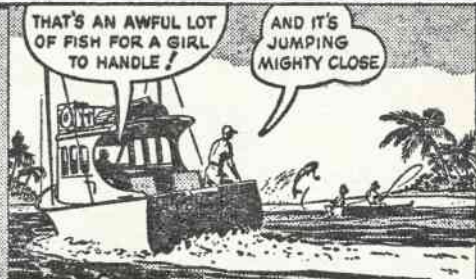


Give the finest gift of all ... U.S. SAVINGS BONDS

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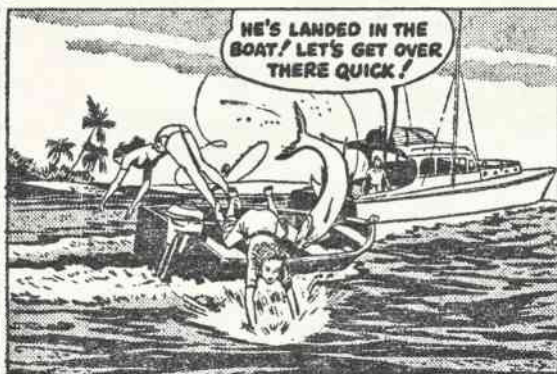
LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



THAT'S AN AWFUL LOT OF FISH FOR A GIRL TO HANDLE!

AND IT'S JUMPING MIGHTY CLOSE

JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM, WHEN . . .



HE'S LANDED IN THE BOAT! LET'S GET OVER THERE QUICK!



HE'S FOULED THE LINE AROUND YOUR MOTOR. WE'D BETTER TOW YOU IN



THAT'S OUR PIER

HOW'S MY FISH?

RESTING QUIETLY SHE'S A KNOCKOUT



PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"

WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA



SAY, THIS BLADE'S A HONEY. I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE

LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN



NEXT TIME YOU AND HELEN WANT TO GO TARPON FISHING, MY BOAT'S AT YOUR DISPOSAL

THAT'S A BARGAIN!

H-M-M-TALL, DARK AND HANDSOME.



MEN, THIN GILLETTES HAND OUT SHAVES THAT ARE CLEAN, COMFORTABLE AND GOOD-LOOKING. AMONG ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES, THEY'RE THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING. THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, TOO, THAT MEANS YOU ARE PROTECTED AGAINST SCRAPING AND IRRITATION. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES

THIN Gillette BLADES 4 for 10

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.44 Western

MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

NO REPRINTS

Vol. 19

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.44 TALK

ALTHOUGH the mines around Austin, Nevada, produced over 100-million dollars worth of gold, a lowly sack of flour brought more fame to the town than all of the mines put together, besides bringing peace to commonwealth.

When the Knights of the Golden Circle were scheming to have California join the Confederacy, they included Nevada in their plans—the great wealth of the Comstock and the Aurora mines could be of great help to the South. The scheme to take two States out of the Union met with failure, but it served to bring more bad-feeling between the adherents of both sides. Feeling was running high, and Nevada was on the verge of a bloody civil war of its own, when a fifty-pound sack of flour dispelled dissension and brought goodwill to all.

The matter started with an election bet. It was 1863, and the people of Austin were holding a mayoralty election. Ruel C. Gridley, a Democrat and Confederate, made a wager with a staunch Union supporter and Republican, Dr. H. S. Herrick, on the outcome of the contest; the one who lost the bet was to present the other with a fifty-pound sack of flour—after first carrying it around town for an hour.

The Republican candidate became Mayor of Austin. Doc Herrick, accompanied by the town's brass band, went to Gridley's store and picked out a fifty-pound sack of flour. Decorating the sack with small Union flags, he hoisted the burden onto Gridley's shoulders. As Gridley carried the flour around the streets of Austin the entire population entered into the cheerful aspect of the thing and joined the parade. Partisanship was forgotten, suddenly, and former enemies found themselves shouting and laughing with men who had been enemies only a short time before. A carnival spirit became evident, and the town declared an unofficial holiday.

After Gridley had carried the sack for the scheduled hour, he ceremoniously handed it over to Doc Herrick. Amid the noise and cheers, Herrick held up his hand for silence. "Ladies and gents," he announced, in a loud voice, "I aim to auction

off this sack of flour to the highest bidder! Whatever it brings, in gold, will be turned over to the Sanitary Commission!"

Herrick's announcement was welcomed with enthusiasm. The bidding was fast and furious. The Republicans and Democrats tried to outbid each other, in a good-natured way. The sack of flour went to Mort Moses, whose \$300 bid was the highest. Moses immediately gave the sack back to the auctioneer, to be auctioned off again. The second bidding brought \$500. From then on, the sack was sold and re-sold until a total of \$8,000 was realized.

The local newspaper printed a glowing account of the affair, which was copied by papers throughout the country. Pictures were taken of Gridley and the now-famous sack, and sold all over the nation, for the further benefit of the Sanitary Commission.

Virginia City, not wanting to be outdone by Austin, invited Gridley to bring the sack there for an auction. He was welcomed with a band and speeches; the whole town turned out for the bidding. Miners came in from miles around, loaded with gold. Here the sack of flour brought \$15,000.

Gridley then went to other leading mining camps and held auctions with the same sack of flour. Gold Hill donated \$6,000; Silver City came in for \$1,000; Dayton's contribution amounted to \$12,000. Other towns, not wanting to be left out, bid like amounts for what had become the highest-priced sack of flour in history!

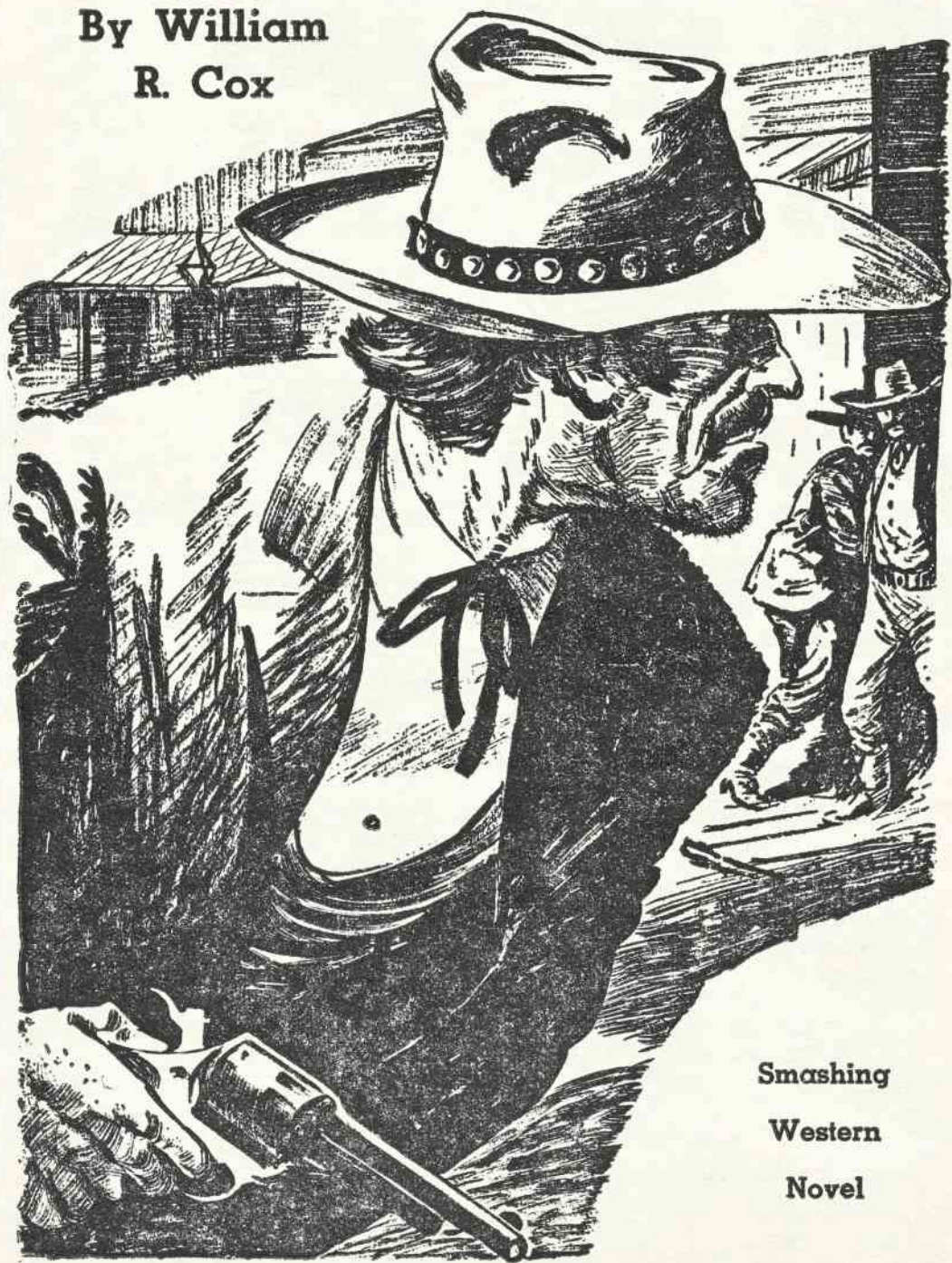
When the many auctions were over, the people of Nevada were happy to find that they had not only provided comforts for thousands of soldiers, both Union and Confederate, but that a great change had come over them all. They found that their former enmities and hatreds had dissolved—forgotten in their joint efforts to raise money for a good and universal cause. Hostility had been banished, and old friendships were renewed.

Peace and understanding came to Nevadans long before it did to the balance of the war-torn country, though a sack of flour was used in place of an olive branch.

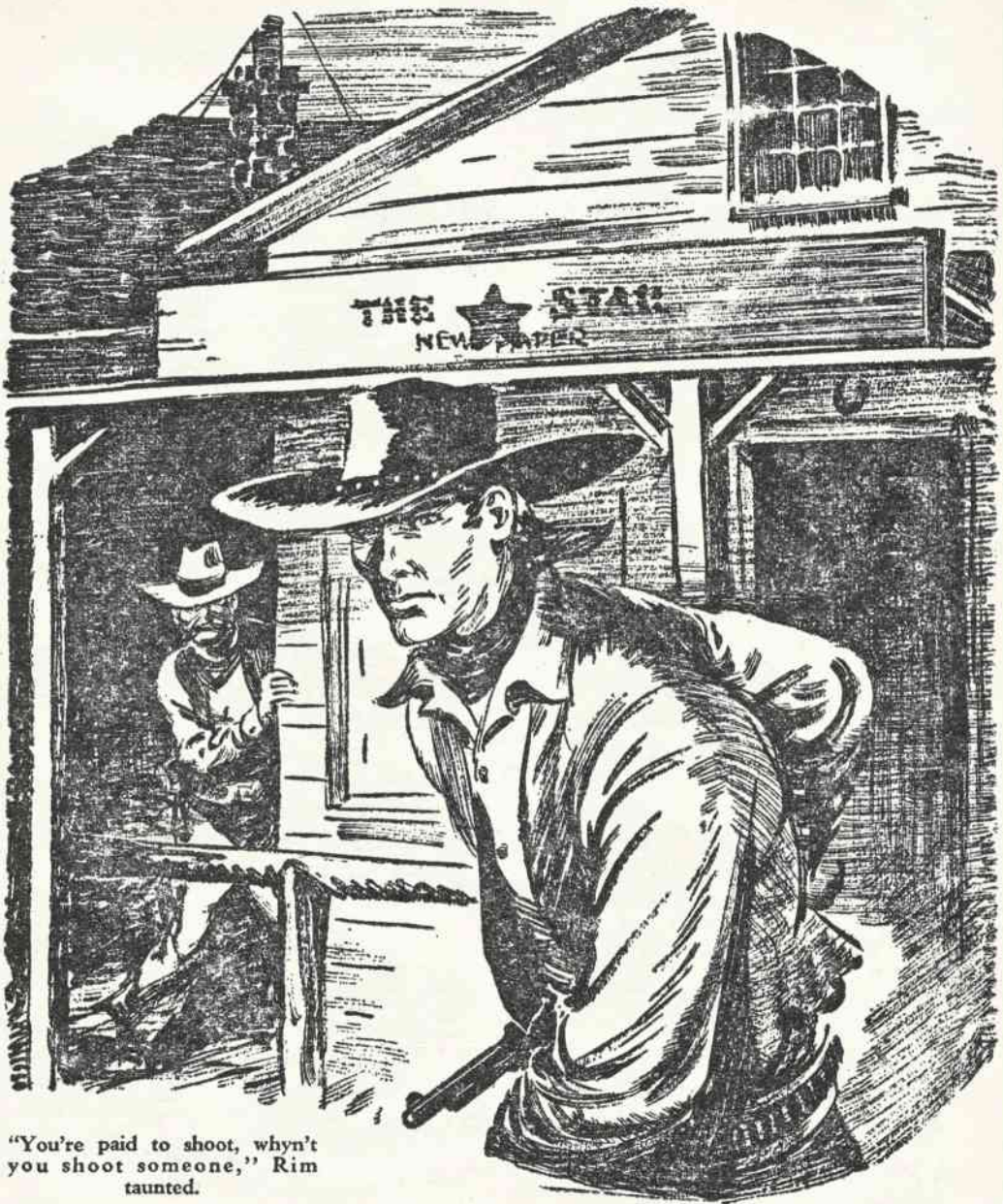
—By John T. Lynch

"Print That and Die!"

By William
R. Cox



Smashing
Western
Novel



"You're paid to shoot, why'n't you shoot someone," Rim taunted.

When that broken-down cow-puncher, Rim Hall, turned into a lead-and-ink-slinging frontier editor, the Devil himself had met his match, and Rim Hall learned that gunsmoke punctuation in his hell-hot editorials was the only way to save the man—and the town—he hated!

CHAPTER ONE

Hell Needs a Fighter

THE GIRL said, "Don't go out there, Rim. You know they're laying for you. Don't go."

She was a small, dark girl, with round, large, brown eyes and firm brown hands

that gripped him till her knuckles showed white.

"How can I get to be foreman of Wheel?" he asked her. "Your pappy has his quaint li'l ol' customs. I got to go."

She said, "You'll never beat Tony Beck. You'll get bad hurt, darling."

Rim Hall was slim. He was above medium height and his arms were wiry and his legs quick. But he did not pack the heft. He had a bold, reckless eye, a humorous wide mouth, and he weighed about one-fifty. He said, "Gettin' hurt is nothin', Honey. But if I lose, I'll have to quit."

"I know it, I know it," she mourned. "I can't stand it. Rim, Tony can whip two of you. Take your gun. . . ."

"Your pappy is dead against my gun," grinned Rim. "He plain said to leave it in the bunkhouse. You go in the house, darlin'."

"I can't stand this," she said. But she turned and went to the house, her head high, back straight. She was, after all, Michael Morosco's daughter. She was heirless of Wheel Ranch.

Rim Hall turned and walked without haste toward the cottonwood grove north of the main house. Wheel was big, it was important and Mike Morosco meant to make it more so.

In the clearing among the trees Morosco sat the big stallion called Shine. His brick red, Spanish-Irish face was amused, confident. He was a lean man, but wide in the shoulders, a domineering man, master of himself and his empire. He said, "Ah, Hall. Didn't think you'd come."

Tony Beck was a hulking giant. He had been four years with Wheel Ranch without shirking a task however difficult or unpleasant. His craggy face was solemn, he stared at Rim without emotion.

Nate Cool and Johnny Deer were nervous. They kept moving, and their guns creaked in leather holsters. Tony did not wear a gun. Rim Hall did not wear a gun. Cool and Deer watched Rim Hall carefully, moving a little on their high heels. They had been hired to carry guns. Morosco had the two of them always about him, a kings guard.

Rim Hall said, "If I had a lick o' sense I wouldn't of come."

Tony Beck did not even blink. Foreman of Wheel was the biggest job he could ever

hope to attain. This was his one chance.

Morosco was enjoying himself. He said, "You asked for the deal, Hall. You know the rules of Wheel. Best man gets the foreman job when it's open. If you can whip Tony—without your precious gun—you can have the job."

Rim Hall said, "Wouldn't do me much good, with you for boss."

Morosco's face flamed. "I warned you about your tongue. I warned you about consortin' with that stinkin' newspaper feller in Wheeltown. I warned you about hangin' around Honey. . . ." He stopped. He never lost control of his temper nor his tongue except when this cool, humorous cowboy crossed him. He got a firm hold on himself and said, "All right. Beck against Hall. No holts barred. Any tricks can be used, long as there's no weapon. Hands an' feet. Get back boys and let 'em tangle!"

Rim Hall laughed a little. Cool and Deer moved, spreading to keep him within two fires in case he should produce a hidden weapon. . . . He said, "Tony, you're plenty big an' tough. I'm plumb scared. . . ."

"You can quit, Hall," called Morosco. "You can drag your line right now an' save a beatin'."

"So you could tell Honey?" Rim Hall laughed again. "That's you—plenty smart thataway. Sometimes it plumb worries me—fer fear it might be hereditary!"

Mike Morosco almost leaped from his horse. But Rim Hall had snatched off his stiff-brimmed sombrero. With a quick flick of his wrist he sent it sailing across the clearing. It spanged into Tony Beck's face and behind it came the lean cowboy, punching like a rather stringy madman.

Beck staggered, blinded. Hall's fists beat a tattoo upon his face, into his oak-like ribs. A bruise appeared like magic over Beck's left eye. He shivered like an oak struck by the bite of an axe—but he didn't go down.

Beck went in a half-circle, bear-like forearms doubled, seeking to protect himself from earnest if unskillful blows. Rim Hall was no pugilist. He was simply agile and for the moment, very willing. Honey Morosco had wanted him to be foreman of Wheel. He was doing his best for Honey. . . .

He steadied himself, attempting a scientific attack, beginning with a stabbing left he had once seen a prize fighter use. Beck

rolled his bruised head and Hall missed. Hall stumbled forward, trying to throw the right.

Tony Beck's log-like arm extended itself. Hall impaled his chin on a fist the size of a small boulder. Hall's knees misbehaved. Beck came away from the tree, drew back his fist, wound it up and delivered it with a sweeping, majestic motion, as though throwing a very heavy rock.

The blow landed again upon the jaw of Rim Hall. It sent him backwards, floundering. He knew not where he went, nor why. He slipped on sod and fell, landing on hands and knees, head hanging like a pony ridden to death by an Indian.

Beck looked humbly at his master aboard the black stallion. Morosco said harshly, "He ain't through. Give it to him."

Beck walked without speed, his face swollen and discolored from Hall's punching, teetering a little on his high heels. He drew back his right foot and kicked, solidly, without venom, but efficiently, at Hall's face.

Hall's head jerked, he came half to his feet, his eyes glazed and staring, reaching, hands groping. Tony Beck hit him with another blow to the head. He went down.

Beck strode in kicking, at the ribs, then at the base of the jaw. Again and again the heavy foot landed. Soon there were no more jerkings of the torso, the head lolled, blood running.

Beck turned, shrugging, lifting his brows to Morosco. The owner of Wheel was smiling a small, secret smile. He said, "Once more in the face, Tony. Try for his nose."

Beck said stolidly, "He's out, Mr. Morosco."

"Not all the way," cried Morosco. "Kick him."

"All a' way," said Beck. He bent and picked up Hall with one hand and held him out for inspection. "See?"

The slim cowpuncher dangled as if dead in the grasp of the new foreman of Wheel Ranch.

Morosco said, "I see. . . . Okay, Tony. Leave him at the bunkhouse. You take over. You're boss of the gang now. Sixty per month and a cow for yourself—you know my men allus wind up with their own places—or on the trail outa Texas."

"Yes, Mr. Morosco," said Beck. He

tucked Hall under an arm. "I was raised in Texas, Mr. Morosco. I don't never expect t' leave." He trudged off toward the nearby bunkhouse, carrying Rim Hall, Cool and Deer trailing.

Mike Morosco nodded with satisfaction. There was a foreman, there was a man. For awhile he had been disgusted, thinking that he could have whipped either of the fighters himself. Now he knew he could not whip Tony Beck with his fists—that no ordinary man could vanquish the giant. The very sort for foreman—safe, yet powerful, a strong right bower for the owner.

He turned Shine toward town for a ride and a drink. With Beck as foreman, Nate Cool and Johnny Deer as guns, there would be a new deal in town soon, he thought recklessly. He had needed to straighten out at home before coming to grips with the enemy. Now he felt strong and unafraid. Shine strode magnificently into the gathering dusk and Michael Morosco was king again.

It was a heady, glorious feeling.

SOMETIME in the night Rim Hall awoke. His tongue was like a rolled blanket, hot in his mouth. He stifled a groan, recognizing instantly his whereabouts, knowing his bunk of the past year, the square of window opening westward, toward the big house. There was no part of him that did not ache.

He put one hand to his face. His fingers touched cold putty, something distorted and strange, not part of himself.

He got a foot to the floor. The men snored up and down the long line of cots. Cool, Deer and Tony Beck would be closest to the door. Rim Hall reached vaguely for his gun belt. It was gone, which was no more than sensible, he recognized. If he had come awake raging, he might have shot them up.

He got up, piece by piece, balancing himself on the edge of his bunk. He felt as though he had been torn apart and too hastily put together. He was glad they had not removed his boots, because he could not have managed them. He made a terrific effort and got himself to the door of the bunkhouse.

A vagrant moonbeam struggled in and fell upon the sleeping countenance of Tony Beck. A gun dangled in its holster and Rim

Hal recognized it as his own old six-shooter. He lifted it down, buckling the belt about his sore middle. Beck's eye was bruised, his face calm, bovine, sleeping.

Hall shrugged, kissed his fingertips to the new foreman. Then he was out of the building and across the yard. He picked up a pebble and beneath a certain window tossed it up, then another and another.

He hobbled to the corral, watching the window. The moon went under, time passed. Then a small, boyish figure came over the sill, a hand grasped the thick trunk of an ivy vine and in a moment a scurrying of small feet brought Honey Morosco to where he waited.

She said, "Rim . . . you fought him!"

"Hadda," said Rim.

"He beat you. He gave you the boots."

"He hadda," said Rim. The girl's small body shuddered in his gentle grasp. He did not hold her close, he merely touched her with his hands.

"I'll kill him, Rim," she said. The moon fitfully came out again and he could see the dark intensity of her, the brown eyes raging with deep fires, the brown fists clenched. She was beautiful in the moonlight.

"No," said Rim Hall. "I'm pullin' out, Honey. It's time."

She grew quiet, tense, her eyes fastened upon him. "Your face," she breathed. "He almost killed you. . . . Rim, you'll have to stay until you're healed. You'll have to wait. . . ."

"I listened to you, Honey, when I should've left six months ago. It's all right. This is nothin'. But I should've gone. Your pappy purely hates me. He hates anyone looks at you twice. I've got t' do somethin' on the outside, don't you see, Honey? I've got to make a stake, show myself, get able to take care of you." His voice was soft, steady.

She clung to him. "I can't live without you. I'll be too lonely. What'll I do out here, all by myself? You can't stay in Wheeltown, not bucking Dad. I'll never see you—and I've no one else. . . ."

Rim said, "Comes a time when we fish or cut bait, Honey. If you love me . . . yuh got to let me make good."

"At what? At cowboy wages? Forty per month? Rim—what can we do? We're lost, Rim. I've as much courage as the next one. But what can we do?" Her arms

clutched at him, seeking assurance she knew was not forthcoming.

He said, "I dunno, Honey. But I'm sure never goin' to be foreman of Wheel. So lemme hunt up somethin' new. There's Pork-Pie and M-Square and other ranches. . . ." But he knew better, and she knew better. They pretended for that little while, but they knew Rim Hall would never be foreman of a ranch in Wheel country. . . .

She said at last, "I'll go in . . . I'm scared to stay here. . . . I'm scared plenty, Rim. Please, please do something. It's too lonely, it's too awful to think about, without you. . . ."

He watched her climb the ivy vine. Michael Morosco would ease the watch when he left, at any rate. The Mexican woman could move her bed back to the quarters from the hall where she slept across Honey's doorsill. He slid into the corral and whistled out his chestnut cayuse.

He owned the horse, the saddle and the clothing he stood in, plus a Sunday suit and a bed roll. In the bank was two hundred dollars, his complete fortune. He threw the kak on the animal and mounted, groaning at each move, counting his blessings. Yet he could grin, riding into Wheeltown, remembering how he had boob-like walked into Tony Beck's thick right fist. That was his trouble, Rim Hall told himself—he never could stand prosperity. He had been doing all right until he walked into the strong man's fist.

"Ouch," he said as the chesnut shied at nothing and his ribs ground together beneath the bloody shirt.

WHEELTOWN was neither very large nor very small, neither riotous nor dead. It was a cowtown on a midweek night, with only the constant stud game to distinguish it from a thousand other towns, and only the fact that the stud game did not take place in a saloon to make it unusual.

Noose Galt was Sheriff of Wheel County. He was a fat, predatory man; a smiling man with stubby hands and steely eyes. He was the town undertaker. It was in the undertaker's parlor that the stud game took place whenever there was a quorum.

They were in there when Rim went by, beneath the funereal lamp, Galt, Strumm,

the Mayor; Fred Strumm, store-keeper—and Mike Morosco, sleek, smiling, slumped in his chair, peering at a hole card. The top men of the town—three of them in one camp and Morosco in the other.

Morosco had ambitions directed toward Austin. But first he must rule the home roost, of course, and here he had immediate trouble. For here Rack Duval, gambler, saloon-keeper and politician headed up against the owner of Wheel. Rim Hall knew all this, heading for Duval's Sugar Loaf Bar.

Strumm, the Mayor, was Duval's man. Galt, because Duval controlled a block of riff raff votes, had to be Duval's ally. The cattlemen were scattered and few—and that was why Morosco had brought in Nate Cool and Johnny Deer, Rim Hall suspected. Events were brewing in the cauldron of Morosco's ambitious, calculating mind.

On the surface all was friendly. Duval would be over later to play in the stud game, where Morosco would drawl taunts and the gambler would good-naturedly return them. But there was a scrap breeding, Rim Hall thought. It was in the edginess of Cool and Deer, in Morosco's haste to make big Tony foreman of Wheel and rid the ranch of Rim Hall. Morosco wanted only pawns to do his bidding. He was scheming, that was for sure. . . .

The other cattlemen were small potatoes alongside Morosco. Wheel was big, Wheel was all-powerful, the ranchers followed Wheel's lead. But Duval controlled the underworld—and the town people, who controlled the pendulum, voted with townsmen like Strumm rather than kowtow to a swashbuckling cowman. Rim Hall winced going through the swinging doors. Beck had really given him a fine going over and one kick had landed on his left side and he hurt from head to toe.

Blackie, the barkeep eyed his bruised face, stared, but said nothing, shoving whiskey bottle and shot glass across the mahogany. The Sugar Loaf was a fine saloon, with a long, polished bar and magnificent mirrors, the pride of Wheeltown. From miles about men had come to stare at themselves in those mirrors, watching inebriation take hold as they drank their liquor.

Rim Hall drank slowly, letting the whis-

key warm him. There was one chilled spot, away deep inside, which would not warm, but that did not alarm nor deter him. He could save that cold spot for later attention. Right now he was like a man ill with a fever—he wanted only to get over the symptoms, to resume normal living.

A beating is a bad thing for a man to take. Rim Hall had been soundly thrashed. He had known the result before he began the fight, but that did not help, not now, with the aches still in his limber, thin frame. His spirit was low, that was the trouble. He sipped the whiskey again.

Business was slow in the Sugar Loaf. Isaac Pate and Fancy Bob Roy were riffling two decks of cards, laying out solitaire. The two thugs were unprepossessing men. Rim Hall surveyed them for a long time, wondering if he could find some small balm in attempting a passage with the pair. He had always disliked them.

The swinging doors squeaked a bit and Hall said, "You'd think the dog robbers around here would oil that hinge." He stared pointedly at the two gamblers. They paid no heed.

Hall shrugged, turning back. He was not not drunk, but the liquor had acted upon his already aroused emotions. He was high, he knew. He saw the small figure of the newcomer to Wheeltown, Nathaniel P. Rowe.

This was a tiny man, with small hands and feet, a wispy man with much hair on his head. He wore black garments which had seen better days. He had a pointed chin, a sharp nose and wide-spaced eyes of deep, rich brown. He spoke in an outlandish manner, people were perturbed by him—he was owner and editor of the local newspaper, the Wheeltown Star.

"Mr. Hall," said the small man, bowing from the waist. "Shun me, Mr. Hall. Do not even speak with me, sir. I am a leper."

The cards stopped snapping at the table. Men in the bar edged away, leaving Rim Hall and Nathaniel P. Rowe isolated at one end. Blackie reached out and swept away the whiskey bottle, corking it with emphasis.

A door banged in the rear and Rack Duval came from his private office. He was a dark man with bushy brows and a mustache to match, a portly man with a hawk nose which did not match his fleshy

face. In his hand was a smudged newspaper. He said in cold accents, "You don't drink in here, Rowe."

Rim Hall adjusted his gun belt delicately and the men at the table scraped back their chairs. "Bring back the bottle, Blackie. And gimme change of this." He spun a gold piece on the bar. "I'm buyin' the bottle."

Blackie hesitated, but his eyes were on Rim's gun. He looked helplessly at his boss and returned the whiskey. Rim Hall carefully poured two drinks.

Duval strode forward. "Hall, you're goin' again your own boss. Read this . . ." He extended the paper.

The cowboy drained his drink. "And take my eyes offen the boys?"

Duval said, "This rat's attackin' us all. . . . Throw him out, men."

Isaac Pate and Fancy Rob Roy were the opposite numbers of Cool and Deer, town style. They were tough and they did what Duval told them to do. They came up, converging, ignoring Rim, going straight for the dapper little editor. Duval said warningly, "Keep out, Hall. This is for Morosco, too."

Rim picked up the empty shot glass in his right hand. The large expressive eyes of Nathaniel P. Rowe widened, but there was no fear in them, he saw. The sensitive lips tightened. Then the little man came away from the bar in a swinging leap, not waiting for the thugs to close in.

Before Rim Hall could blink, Rowe had gone into action. His fist ran out like a licking flame and caught Fancy Rob Roy over the eye, knocking him into Isaac Pate. It was a practised blow, shrewdly delivered and Pate stumbled. Rowe went past Roy and hit Pate in the belly.

Rim Hall yelled in delight, "Yippee! Jest like that prize fighter I seen." He threw the shot glass at Blackie, driving him away from the bar. His right hand dug out his six-gun. "I'm lovin' this. Give it to 'em, Nat!"

Pate was doubled over, gasping. Rowe hit Roy with a right hand punch which dropped him. His next blow sent Pate atop Roy.

Both hoodlums were reaching for their weapons. Duval said sharply, "None of that;" Duval was eyeing Rim Hall, who held his gun on the edge of the bar.

Rowe was blowing gently on his knuckles. He said calmly, "If you will bring the whiskey, sir, we might adjourn. I take it you are not any longer employed by Mr. Morosco?"

"You're right quick," said Rim Hall. He kept the gun in his fist. He turned to Duval and said, "Any man that kin write you inta such a sweat and then whup your boys must be good, huh, Duval?"

"You'll hear from this," said the gambler. He was cool enough, but his eyes were filled with fire.

The two hired men were picking themselves from the splintery floor. There were drops of blood and their eyes were dazed and amazed. They backed away until they were behind Duval.

Rim Hall said, "I'll give yawl first shot. I'm sorta achin' fer action." He winced as he moved. He was aching, all right, he thought grimly, grinning. "I don't know what this is all about. But I'm sidin' this lil fightin' feller and yawl can start now—or any other time—and you'll find me with him."

Duval said, "Morosco'll have you killed, Hall."

"Uh-huh," nodded Rim. "Wouldn't be surprised a mite if he tried. You're goin' over to the stud game. You tell him—I'm ready. Me and my friend here." He nodded and backed out, following Rowe. They went through the doors and into deep shadows. Rowe led the way and Rim Hall felt so good he did not care where they went. They traversed the Mexican quarter and came to an alley, then a door through which they passed into a cubicle of a room. There was a table, a chair and a cot and on the table was a large candle.

The flame guttered, then shot up straight. Rim Hall looked at the small, composed man and put the whiskey on the table. He said, "I thought you lived at the hotel, Nat?"

"Ostensibly, I do," nodded Rowe. "But a man needs a retreat, a place to solace his ego in peace." His hands were swelling, but he poured the drinks into Mexican goblets. "Furthermore, I have released a bolt of lightning, you may have gathered."

Rim said, "I always thought you was an all right jasper, ever since you come here. But jest what you after, Nat?" He sat down, sipping the whiskey. He was cur-

ious, he wanted to be alert. Already an idea was burgeoning inside his active brain.

The little man said, "A newspaper, my friend, is an instrument. Upon it tunes may be played. My aim is to make the devils dance to my tune."

"You sure made Pate and Roy dance," said Rim admiringly.

"At Harvard we boxed a lot," nodded Rowe with satisfaction. "Clumsy oafs, those hirelings. . . . However, what good? They could have slain me."

"Yeah," said Rim. "They coulda. But I'd have ventilated Duval."

Rowe said, "You were very kind."

"This newspaper thing. I kinda like the idee. There's somethin' goin' on. You know what it is?"

Nathaniel P. Rowe smiled merrily, without guile. "It is my business to know—or to guess very close. You might read this." He handed over a copy of the Wheeltown Star. He was watching Rim closely, the smile making him appear very young and quite gay. He was an attractive little man. He drained his whiskey, poured another. He was, Rim Hall knew, a hard-drinking character, a diminutive fighting cock sort of fellow.

Rim Hall read, without difficulty, for he had always been a curious chap and books were very apt to contain interesting information. He had learned to read as a boy and had never allowed the habit to die in him. He knew now that he was perusing a brilliant, incisive essay upon the political situation of Wheeltown, written by a master.

He read it all the way through, then reread it. The last paragraphs fascinated him. "It is obvious then that Wheeltown is ruled by bosses. At present one Rack Duval controls the elections by voting his element of demi-world henchmen in solid groups. Opposed to him are the cattle interests under Michael Morosco of Wheel Ranch. The ranchers are aligning for next month's election and the issue is somewhat in doubt at this sitting.

"It is the old story of town against country, with bosses ruling both sides, fighting each other. Taxes are high—too high. Schools are bad, almost non-existent and in education alone lies the future of the State. The common citizen pays the freight—the bosses play poker in Noose

Galt's funeral emporium day and night.

"And now we come to the point. The bosses play stud poker. Rack Duval, the Strumms, Galt—AND Mike Morosco.

"Mike Morosco is clever. He moves with discretion. BUT he plays stud poker—often—with Rack Duval. And the citizen pays the taxes.

"Could this mean an alliance? Could this mean an unholy behind-the-scenes conspiracy? Citizen, where do you stand?"

The acrid odor of the printers ink rose to Rim Hall's nostrils. There was challenge in the very odor. It tingled in his nose. He sipped at the whiskey and it tasted of the ink. It was not unpleasant, he found. He said, "Guessin', huh? Is that safe?"

"No. But could this not be true?"

"Morosco is smart. Too smart to be used by Duval." Rim drained the glass. "I dunno, Nat. But I don't think so. . . . Still there might be somethin'. I'd like to find out, that's for sure. . . ."

It was an idea. Morosco playing with Duval, teaming together on the underhand activities of the robbers and rustlers and wet-back traders which infested that part of Texas . . . it would be a great act, with much profit to Morosco and Duval.

Rim Hall stepped closer to the candle, bending his sombrero brim almost to the flame, seeking a light for his cigaret. There was a whining, ominous sound, the crackling of plaster. Hall had heard that sound before. He exhaled sharply, blowing out the candle. One long arm reached and seized the slight form of Nathaniel P. Rowe. The two young men hit the dirt floor of the adobe hut as one. Another shot hammered through the darkened window and spent itself in the bricks of the opposite wall.

The cowboy breathed, "Brother, you had yourself a re-treat. Once they might have been solitude hereabouts. But now, brother, you got yourself comp'ny, a load of trouble—and a new bodyguard. Namely—me!"

CHAPTER TWO

Hell's Handyman

THE PUBLISHING plant of the Wheeltown Star had once been a store. It was a long, low building, in need of re-

pair, close to the Mexican quarter. The pungent odor of printer's ink hung over all and always it was pleasant to the nostrils of Rim Hall.

At a printer's form Nathaniel P. Rowe stood, hammering a block out of a galley. In the rear stood the flat-bed press, with a slim Mexican lad monkeying at its innards. There was a huge crank which turned the fly-wheel, steam being lacking in this establishment of Rowe's. There was an elderly, red-nosed printer, who at that moment was busy with the block and roller, drawing proofs. To Rim Hall this was all very mysterious and impressive.

Without looking up, the dapper little man, now somewhat ink-stained, said, "Who is Napper Sandell? Why should people mention his name with bated breath? What is his business?"

Rim Hall drawled, "Me, I'm goin' to enjoy this. Napper Sandell is a gunslinger. Didn't know he was in town, but if he is, someone might possibly be headed for a trip to Noose Galt's funeral parlor."

Down the street two riders came. It was noon. Rim Hall watched the dust come up from the hoofs of Shine, the black stallion. On a small roan filly the slim, graceful figure of Honey Morosco sat still and neat.

Rowe was standing at his shoulder, staring past him. On the little printer's sensitive features there was a glow. His voice was low, muttering. "She rides in glory like a goddess from above. . . ."

"Uh-huh," said Rim Hall. "You acquainted with Miss Morosco?"

"She has never spoken to me," said the editor. "I worship from afar."

Tony Beck, on a raw-boned buckskin, turned from the hardware store and joined the other two riders. They all dismounted at the hotel. Beck still wore a bruise, but then so did Rim Hall, several of them.

Rim Hall said, "Don't worship no closer, pardner."

At the steely note in the slim man's drawl, Rowe turned and stared at him. He said, "Ah, you too, eh, Brutus? . . . But then, who does not worship at the shrine . . .? Ah, well, 'tis not for me, I fear. . . . Not that your warning would deter me, sir."

"Huh? We-ell, no, I 'spect not," said Rim Hall. He was watching the man who came down the steps of the hotel. He was a

tall man, stoop-shouldered, mustached. He spoke briefly to Mike Morosco, came on past. He walked stiltedly yet he wore flat-heeled town boots. He came down the street, past the Sugar Loaf, past the general store. He moved slowly, yet with purpose.

Rim said, "G'wan back to your job. Git the paper out. I wanta read another editorial 'bout Duval and Morosco."

He stepped into the street. He was tingling all over. He recognized Napper Sandell, all right. He had seen the notorious killer in El Paso. He had seen Sandell kill a man in that hectic town.

He sensed the war now. It was a big war, and so far Nathaniel P. Rowe and his newspaper were a minor stumbling block, to be removed at once, but without the great importance they might achieve by remaining alive and healthy. He could feel the strength of Rowe and his paper, the power which the Star, if allowed to continue might wield in the country, and he felt deep down within him that this potential power must be preserved. He could feel all this, because he was a thinking man, a reading cowboy who had dreamed dreams and desired great things that he might have Honey Morosco.

Honey and her father were on the verandah of the hotel talking to Noose Galt. The sheriff was looking at Sandell, scowling a little. Morosco was talking in his flat, hard way. Honey's face blanched as she saw Rim Hall on the walk before the printing establishment.

Napper Sandell had yellowish eyes. He paused one moment to be sure of himself, then started past Rim Hall toward the door of the Star building.

Rim Hall said, "Howdy, Sandell."

The yellow eyes flickered, snake-like. "Don't b'lieve I know yuh."

Hall said, "That's all right, Sandell. You want the owner of the Star?"

"What's it to yuh? Better git goin', cowpoke. If yuh know me. . . ."

Hall said, "I'm part owner of the paper. I'm the man yuh want. Start any time, Sandell." He could have drawn, but recklessly he chose not to. Maybe it was because of Honey, watching, but more likely it was because Mike Morosco and Tony Beck were now looking down toward the Star office. Rack Duval came out of the Sugar Loaf, caught the tension and also stared.

Sandell said, "You ain't the one. . . ." He was slightly confused. Unaccustomed to being attacked, he was wary, his amber eyes went right and left, trying to smell out an ambush.

"Yore paid t' shoot, why'n't yuh shoot somebody?" Rim Hall taunted deliberately. "I'm a plain target. Go for yore iron, yuh hired Coyote!"

Sandell's hand swept down. He leaped sideways like a rattler, the trick Rim Hall had observed in El Palso. He was very quick, a deadly man.

It was not a question of gun-fighting, not altogether, Rim Hall knew as he drew. He was as quick out of the leather as the next man, but it was not entirely that. It was knowing he was right, that he was preventing a cold-blooded murder, defending Nathaniel P. Rowe.

He fired twice, as Sandell fired. His first shot was aimed low. It struck Sandell's gun-hand as he leaped. The second bullet plowed into Sandell's belt line, buckling the lean gunman into a heap upon the board walk.

Rim Hall walked past the dead body, blowing the smoke from his gun barrel. He had to do something to keep his hands from shaking, so he broke the weapon and inserted fresh cartridges, trying to walk steadily down to the hotel.

He looked only at Noose Galt. "Sheriff, yuh seen it. He drew on me. He said somethin' about the Star editorials and tried t' kill me."

Galt said, "Harrumph. . . . Uh—several people done saw it. No charges, Hall. . . . What's this about the Star?"

"I'm a pardner," explained Rim Hall carefully. "Me an' Nathaniel Rowe, we aim t' publish quite a paper. I'm a re-porter an' part-owner."

Noose Galt said, "Harrumph! Uh—this here is news."

"An' we'll publish it. Tomorrow, when the paper comes out. We expect to round up a lotta advertisin', with me workin' that end too." He let his gaze slide to Mike Morosco. He still had not glanced at the girl.

Morosco said harshly, "So yer a hired killer for that snivellin', yello-livered tender-foot. . . ."

Rim cut in smoothly, "Some jasper musta hired Sandell to shoot up Rowe.

Now, I wonder who thet coulda been?"

Honey Morosco started. Tony Beck growled deep in his throat and started forward, his big hand moving toward his gun-belt.

Mike Morosco said, "Back, Tony. . . . You can't outdraw this slicker. Leave him with his new pardner. Men find their own level in this country. This one had his chance at a man's job. He chose to be a hired killer. Let him try that. It'll get him a killer's end—that one." He gestured at the body being gathered from the walk by two Mexicans as Noose Galt superintended the job. "This country's got no use for your kind, Hall."

"I hear you oratin'," grinned Rim Hall. The strain was gone—he had detected the fakery in Morosco's oratory and knew it was designed to impress Honey. He turned now and squarely faced the girl. He said, "This country's due for a few surprises, I reckon. I'll be around. If I'm bodyguard fer a newspaper—at least it's a purely original job."

The color had returned to her cheeks. She said softly, "I don't understand all this, Rim. But if you're working at a job, and you believe you're right—right enough to shoot a man over it—I'll be waiting to see what comes out of it."

"Go into the hotel, Honey," ordered Mike Morosco in thundering accents. "I won't have you talking to the likes o' this rascal. I'm goin' to have a talk with Noose Galt right now. . . ."

"You goin' t' talk with Rack Duval, too?" asked Rim innocently.

Tony Beck again lunged forward. Morosco's voice lowered, his eyes were steady, venomous. "You'll take yer job too serious, mark my words, Hall. Yuh'll cross me once too often."

Rim Hall said, "That'll be Judgement Day hereabout, Morosco. . . . I'll bid ye good-day, Honey. Do like you say—stick around and wait. This here job suits me grand. I'll be workin' at it."

He sauntered away. He knew Tony Beck was aching to plug him, but he knew Beck would not try it while Morosco forbade him. He knew Morosco dared not gun him now, not openly, nor would he dare send Nate Cool or Johnny Deer after him. Public opinion would debar that procedure.

Bushwhacking was another matter. It

was not Tony Beck's style. Cool and Deer, being gun-slingers who rode at top wages for whoever paid best, were more of that caliber—but Hall would have to risk their attack. Meantime, he had work to do.

NAT ROWE had been dubious, but while he recovered from the beating he had taken from Tony Beck, the idea had spread itself in his mind and Rim had convinced the editor. Now the idea had to be put to the test.

Henry Strumm, the Mayor's brother, ran the general store. Rim went into its cool dimness and ordered cartridges for his revolver.

Strumm said, "Who was this feller you kilt, Hall?"

"A gunman from El Paso," said Rim. "Charge them cartridges to your account with the Star, huh, Henry?"

"The Star? I got no account with that rag!"

Rim said, "Thought you oughta have. Oughta take an ad."

"That lil scoundrel should be run outa town. . . ."

Rim said, "Uh-huh. Then it's true what he's been sayin' about your brother and you? Yer all in together to hoodwink the countryside?"

"No we ain't," shouted Strumm. "That lil sidewinder. . . ."

"Best proof's to take an ad. Yuh can say what yuh want in a paid ad. Run a sale on them old lanterns yuh got there, for instance, and write out a statement, sayin' yuh ain't with Morosco. . . ."

"Savvy. . . ." Strumm's mouth hung open. "That's an idee."

"Nat'll give yuh the prices," said Rim carelessly. "Spell yer name right, too, for everyone t' see."

He strolled out of the store. He went up and down Main Street, taking his own sweet time, letting word creep ahead of him. He got the two other saloons, but left the Sugar Loaf until last.

When he went into that emporium, Duval was waiting. The shoebrush mustache of the gambler was bristling. He said without preamble, "You can't leave me out of this, Hall. I got a right to be heard. I got my own interests to protect. Me and Morosco ain't in no sort of deal whatsoever."

"Who wants t' bar you out?" Rim raised his hand to Blackie and accepted a drink of the good whiskey. "Take a full page. Cost yuh a hundred, but you prob'ly got a lot t' say, seein' as you're the boss."

"I ain't boss of nothin'." Duval stamped with rage. "Strumm is Mayor and Galt is Sheriff. . . ."

"Yuh can do anything but cuss people in a paid ad," said Rim virtuously. He drank the whiskey. It had been a good day's work. "Say, Duval, who hired Sandell to come up here and shoot Rowe?"

Duval regained control of his temper. He said quietly, "I wouldn't know. You sure cooled him off. You're awful fast with that gun, Hall."

Rim said, "I'll take another drink. . . . I sure aim to learn who sent for Sandell. It ain't ethical, bringin' in outa town killers."

"Ethical? What's that?"

"Somethin' you run a newspaper on. Nat'll tell yuh some day," shrugged Rim. "You wouldn't know about it . . . it's like honor."

"I got as much honor as any man in this town," said Duval aggressively.

"Uh-huh. That's the trouble with Wheel-town," nodded Rim. He went out on the street. Men were scattered about town, talking together. Three went into the office of the Star.

Rim chuckled and made for the hotel. He slipped past the dozing desk clerk and went up the stairs to the second floor. In the corridor he paused, speculating. Honey Morosco would be here somewhere, waiting for him.

He heard heavy voices. He was standing outside a door to a room of the hotel. He tried the latch and it was open.

He stepped inside without hesitation, one hand on his gun. He heard a feminine squeak and saw Honey snatch a cover from the bed. He said, "Hush, darlin'. . . . Is Galt with yer pappy?"

"Rim! . . . You can't. . . . Oh, darlin', I don't know. . . ."

He was listening at the door. Galt's voice was oily, a fat man's voice. "That's the way it is, Mike. Duval's got them on his side. Ain't nothin' I can do about it. Me, I'm independent."

Morosco said sharply, "You mean you pick the winnin' hoss and ride him. You

figger Duval can't lose, so you're with him."

"Mike, you just de-fined the game o' politics," said Galt.

"You've got no guts. . . ."

Galt said without anger, "It might've been different if Sandell had done his job. It was smart to bring him in. But that cow-poke you threw out spiled the play."

There was a pause. Honey Morosco breathed in sharply as Rim bent to the crack in the door.

Then Morosco said, "Yuh think so, do you, Sheriff?"

"You goin' t' pay fer buryin' him, or is that on the county?" asked Galt.

"I reckon that's on the county," said Morosco. His voice was lowered now, and emotionless. "Yuh better run along now, Sheriff. I seen enough of you for one day."

"Why, that's all right. You don't have t' look at me," said Galt. "Although I'll be around—fer a long time way I figger."

There were heavy footsteps in the hall, a door slammed.

* * *

"I don't believe it," the girl said. She was dressed in her town clothing now, a dainty creature, with her hair soft and fluffy. "Father wouldn't do that."

"He had Tony put the boots to me," Rim Hall pointed out. He felt uneasy in her room, but she was close to him, holding his elbows as was her fashion when she was upset. "Someone paid Sandell good money to come here. Your pappy wants Rowe out of the way."

She said, "Why should he send for a killer? He has his man . . . Oh, he wouldn't do it. I tell you he wouldn't!"

"I'm supposed to get up a story for the Star," Rim said slowly. "I figgered I could dig things up that Rowe could only guess. Like this."

"You can't print this," she said. "It's not—not decent. Spying and listening."

"Nat says a newspaperman is entitled to get his news any ole way, on account of people ain't goin' to deliberately tell him things. Like we jest heard," said Rim slowly.

"You can't do it," she repeated. "It would shame me, Rim."

"Nat says you got to put the newspaper

above all feelin'," Rim said very lamely.

"It's not true. We'll go over there now and face father. We'll ask him. You can't refuse that!"

He looked down at the small girl. He sighed and said, "Reckon I won't report it. Not now, at any rate. Mebbe I ain't a very good newspaperman."

She said insistently, "Father's ambitious. He wants to be big. He wants to be Governor, I think. But he wouldn't bring in a killer to get Nathaniel Rowe."

"Yuh believe that," nodded Rim. He blinked and his mercurial mind shifted into another trend of thought. "Honey, you got faith. In me . . . in your pappy. It's a great thing, faith."

She said, "Women know certain things. Believe me, Rim, father is hard, but not dishonorable. He hates you. But it is because of me. He isn't a vile man."

Rim said, "I hear you, Honey. I'll be moseying out of here. You'll see me soon. They can't keep us apart." He edged out of the door, already making plans. She stood in the center of the room, her head high, her eyes following him and she seemed very small and alone. He took a last long look at her and tiptoed down the hall and out of the hotel.

Men spoke to him as he went, the workers and businessmen of the town. There was respect in them and a sharp, considering look in their eyes. He answered with his slow grin and a different wave of his hand. Women glanced at him askance, at the cowboy turned newsman who had killed the imported gunman. These were people who had reason to fear the political powers of the ones in power. They were wondering now whether they had a new champion, or whether he was merely a gunman working for Nat Rowe.

These people did not understand Nathaniel P. Rowe. To them the editor was an outlander, a tenderfoot who spoke a foreign language. Rim Hall thought hard about this, going to the building which housed the Star.

Again he sniffed the now-familiar odor of ink. The little man looked up from a littered desk and said, "You've learned something? Gad, Rim, the advertising you've sold will delay the paper another day. The things these men have written! Those who could write. . . ."

Rim said, "Let 'em ride, Nat. Jest like they writ 'em."

"Impossible! I was just editing. . . ."

"Don't do it. They'll be understood. It's their language." Rim picked up a piece of ruled paper and read. "'I want it knowed that I ain't had any part nor passel of bringin' in no hired killers. I'm for law and order as much as any man. . . .'" He glanced at the signature after the paragraphs which followed. Mayor Strumm huh? I didn't think he'd take an ad."

Nat Rowe said, "I think I see what you mean, about leaving the copy as it is. But what good would it do? Someone is lying. . . ."

"Let 'em lie in their own words," Rim said. "Our job is to find out who ain't tellin' the truth, then put it in the paper and let the people know, ain't that it?"

Nat Rowe said, "It's a big job, isn't it? Just we two. . . ."

"People are beginnin' to think. Bringin' Sandell here was a mistake."

"Morosco," said Rowe softly. "How can such a rascal have so lovely an offspring? It must have been Morosco."

"No," said Rim. He was surprised at himself, at his certainty that he was right. "Not Morosco. He's got Cool and Deed."

"Then who did it?"

"I'll letcha know," Rim grinned.

The editor said, "I'm going to work the editorial around these paid ads. I'm going to point out that someone must have imported Sandell. You'll be the hero, of course. He'd have killed me with ease—or run me out of town."

"You can't make no hero outa me," laughed Rim. "I got to go now. I got to try to find out who hired Sandell."

The little man's large brown eyes rested for a long moment on his new partner. Then he said, "Maybe you will find him. When you do—we will have won."

Rim went across the street and into the bank. He signed a slip and the teller said, "Drawing out all of it? Not leaving us, are you?"

"Nope. I just arrived," said Rim. He took his two hundred dollars and strolled along in the shade. He saw Morosco come from the hotel and call for his horse. The boy brought Shine and the smaller mount which was Honey's and the girl came slowly down and father and daughter rode quick-

ly westward out of town, toward Wheel.

Rim crossed the dusty street. The undertaking parlor was open. Noose Galt sat at the round, plain-topped table. Duval and Mayor Strumm sat opposite him. Rim walked in and took the empty chair. The three men stared at him.

"A plain cowboy wouldn't dast to play in this game," said Rim. "But newspaper owners—they're big folks. Deal 'em, Sheriff."

Galt said, "This here is table stakes."

"I'll take a hundred," said Rim carelessly. It had taken him a year to acquire that sum, but he was cheerful, buying chips from Galt. "I can pike along awhile, can't I?"

Strumm said, "You're movin' up in the world mighty fast."

"Sure," nodded Rim. "It's a swift ole world."

He did not look at his hole card. He got a king to begin with and bet five dollars. Duval, with a jack, called. Strumm played and so did Galt. The deal went around. Rim still led and bet ten dollars as no one paired. Everyone stayed.

The third card he received was a seven of spades. Duval got a ten, no one else bettered on the table. Rim said, "I bet fifty dollars."

Duval said sharply, "Make it a hundred."

No one else stayed. Rim said plaintively, "Now there yuh go. A man tries to pike along and he can't. Yuh know I only got thirty-five dollars, Rack. I'll jest call that and yuh can run 'em, Noose."

The cards fell. Rim got a nothing. Duval got a trey spot. Rim said, "Run a fella out in the first pot. That's big money and big people, alla time. Runnin' out the pore folks. Or rubbin' them out, mebbe."

Galt was running through the last card, impatient to end it. Duval drew a jack and said coldly, "Like yuh say, Rim. Yer run out."

"If I could bet another hundred," Rim said. "I'd bet you got an ace in the hole."

Duval sneered, "What of it? Yer beat."

"Funny game, stud," said Rim. "I'd bet I got a king in the hole."

"Yuh never looked at yer hole card. . . ." Duval paused, staring at Rim.

The cowboy pulled a hundred dollars from his pocket. "Bet?"

Duval said, "We got rules here, dammit. Show yer card!"

"Uh-huh," said Rim. "No honor among thieves." He grinned at Galt. "Sheriff, these gents have been playin' with yuh for years—an' I'll bet nary one every told yuh how you flap yore deal. It's a plumb careless habit—but I bet yuh never won any big pots on your own deal. I seen my king comin' and I seen Duval's ace." He lifted his card with his index finger. It was the king. Duval shoved his hand into the discard.

The gambler said loudly—too loudly—"Jest happened thataway. If I'd a seen his king, would I bet into him?"

"Yuh didn't see it, 'cause Noose turned his deck my way when he dealt it," said Rim. "But yuh seen yore ace an' Strumm's ten-spot."

The Sheriff's fat neck was growing slowly red. He said, "By damn, yuh mean to say these jaspers been readin' my deal all these years?"

Rim collected the pot and stacked chips in neat piles. "It's nothin' to me, Noose. I noticed it a year ago, when I was watchin' the game. Let's go ahead. All in fun, ain't it?"

Galt's neck had swollen until his collar choked him. His protuberant eyes went from Duval to Strumm, then to Rim. His gaze lingered on the cowboy as he passed the deal. He said, "I'm jest an old sucker. Musta lost thousands of dollars to you all. My friends!"

Rim said, laughing, "Now, Sheriff, you ain't made thousands of dollars off the taxpayers whilst you were in office, have you?"

Duval was expressionless, but his hands were taut, clasped on the edge of the table. His gun was concealed, but Rim knew the gambler could get it quick enough if Galt made a move. Strumm looked unhappy—and guilty.

"You sure get yore nose into things," Galt complained, staring at Rim. "Deal them cyards."

Rim stayed out of the hand. Galt and Duval tilted at each other, each with a queen showing. Galt won, grunting with satisfaction, when he paired a deuce. Strumm was uneasy. Rim played in the next three hands and won them all. He had the money of his opponents now and he had made them ill at ease. He was very cautious.

He won five hundred dollars. Duval, a big loser, arose with an exclamation and

announced he must relieve Blackie at the saloon. Strumm hurried out as swiftly as possible. The Sheriff sat heavily in his chair and paid off Rim as Duval left.

Galt said, "Yep. You mess into things. . . . What's the paper goin' to say this time?"

"Nat writes it. I just sell advertising." Rim put the five hundred dollars in his left hand pocket, his original stake in the right.

"You're plain quick with yore tongue—and thet gun," said Galt. "Beck give you an awful beatin', didn't he? I'm surprised you didn't go fer him when you got yore hawg-leg back."

"It was a fair fight," said Rim.

"Morosco had him boot yuh," said Galt. "Was that square?"

Rim said, "I ain't complainin'. Tony's a good man. Morosco—well, he's king on Wheel. He feels he's got a right to do what he wants."

Galt said, "He's got the same feelin' in town. You better walk slower, Rim. And you better control thet editor. People are complainin'."

Rim said, "Sheriff, who sent for Sandell?"

The fat man's fingers were short and butcher-like, drumming the table top. "You tell me . . . I'll jail him."

"I aim to do that," said Rim. "People didn't like that, either. You and me, we seem to be thinkin' of the people all of a sudden. . . . Well, see you later, Sheriff."

The fat man drummed a lively rigadoun, but did not return Rim's gaze. The cowboy went into the street. It was growing dark. He ate at the hotel and then went to the newspaper office. To his amazement the rumble of the press greeted him when he approached the ramshackle building.

He went into the aura of printer's ink and was caught up in the maelstrom. The boys, the Mexican, everyone was whirling, and in the middle of it was Nat. The steaming, somewhat smudged sheets came magically from the maw of the press.

He snatched one and avidly scanned it. It was a feeling he had never known, a prideful, anxious feeling. He saw the spread of advertising, saw the editorial headed, "Townfolk Speak Their Pieces". He read the editorial the little man had composed.

Again it was the last paragraphs. "Mi-

chael Morosco rules Wheel—but the attempt made to rule Wheeltown failed. The killer was killed by our esteemed contemporary, Rim Hall. Did Morosco bring in the killer, Sheriff Galt? If not, who did? We await an answer."

It was midnight when the last paper was run off. The boys were asleep beside the piles they would distribute the next day. Nat Rowe, pale and exhausted, produced a bottle. The hush in the establishment was in direct contrast to the previous hubbub and Rim's ears hurt.

They drank and Rim said mildly, "You laid it on heavy about Morosco."

"You did not tell me about Galt seeing him at the hotel," said Row quietly. He drank two quick ones. His brown eyes were fanatic. "I have small spies, Rim."

From his pocket Rim took the carefully folded five hundred dollars he had won. He said, "Will this make us equal pardners, mebbe? I'd admire to buy in."

Rowe looked at the money. He said, "You saved my life. That's worth a partnership."

"I want to pay," said Rim. "I'll get more. . . ."

There was a small silence. Then Rowe drew a sheet of paper toward him, wrote swiftly on it. He shoved the paper toward Rim. "There's a bill of sale . . . you own half of everything."

Rim said, "Okay." He put the paper in his oilskin-covered wallet with the two hundred dollars. "I feel like I own somethin' that amounts to somethin', now. And Nat . . . take it easy on Morosco. I heard somethin'—but I'm waitin' to see what it meant. I want to be around early tomorrow, when the papers are given out. I'll go to bed now . . . take it easy." He did not look at the bottle, but he knew the little editor would get drunk that night.

Rowe said, almost absently, "All right . . . partner. . . . All right." His brown eyes were far away, his ink-stained hands listless on the desk.

CHAPTER THREE

Sixgun Silencer

RIM HALL could not sleep. He tossed about on his sweat-wet sheet. Dawn came and he arose, his mind whirling with

half-dreams. The picture was not complete, he knew as he dashed water upon his heavy eyelids. He had ideas, he had suspicions, but he had not succeeded in tracing down the whole story. There was something brewing. Galt and Duval were in it, and it had to do with the local political situation. The people of the town seemed to feel it; their attitude toward Rim proved that. But he could not tie it down.

He thought of Michael Morosco, that hard man, who had ridden out of town with his daughter the previous afternoon. He combed back his brown hair and went down the stairs of the hotel. He remembered the brief conversation between Galt and Morosco which he had overheard. There had been something wrong with that dialogue, he knew now.

There were horses in the stable. He stared at them, recognizing the Wheel brand, recognizing Shine, the black stallion. Three others—they would be the mounts of Tony Beck, Cool and Deer. Wheel had returned during the night. The feeling of impending disaster rose within him. He went around to the front of the weather-beaten hotel.

There was a patter of feet. The skinny Mexican youth who had worked so hard for Nat Rowe rushed up to Rim Hall. He was babbling.

"Senor . . . the patron . . . muerto. . . . Come queek, Senor. . . ."

Rim Hall broke into a run. The Mexican youth fled before him. The rosy streaks of dawn threaded a grey sky. A waddling figure bolted from the door of the undertaking parlor.

Rim said, "You called the Sheriff, Tony?"

"Si, si, Senor, but of course. . . . The patron. . . ."

Rim ran clumsily in his high-heeled boots. The fat peace officer was turning in at the Star building. Rim closed the distance in time to cross the threshold a step behind Galt.

He stuck there. Galt went forward, moving with surprising lightness, bending forward, his round, pop-eyes shrewd and calculating. The sun burst from the horizon and a gleam of light crept in and shone upon the bowed shoulders. Nat Rowe looked very small indeed that day.

Galt said, "He never knowed what hit

him. . . ." It was the back of the editor's head. The shape was all wrong. Someone had delivered a very heavy blow at the base of Nathaniel P. Rowe's brain. The skull was broken and bloody. . . .

Galt said, "Here's a stack of papers . . . Notes, like . . . But the killer wouldn't of left anything of use t' me." He thumbed through the scribbled notes. He said, "H'mmm. Looks like he was writin' an editorial about me an' Duval bein' pardners." A moment later he stuffed the papers in his pocket. "But nothin' about Morosco."

"Take it easy on that," Rim warned. He had made himself come closer. His partner was dead. The shock was great—he had become fond of Nat Rowe. He took the oil-skin packet from his pocket and showed it to Galt. "You'll find the five hundred I won on him, mebbe. I own the paper now, 'til his heirs come in for their half. Savvy?"

Galt said, "That's right. The Mex said he was sleepin' in the back and heard nothin'. Found Rowe thisaway. The door was open. Anyone coulda done it."

Rim said, "I might's well tell you. Morosco come in last night."

"If he read the paper," Galt began. He stopped, his pale eyes searching Rim. "If he got mad. . . ."

"Take it easy," Rim said again. "A mob's a nasty thing. People are plumb riled. Nat had 'em goin' with his editorials."

There was a noise behind them. Rack Duval walked into the office. The gambler's face was cold and without expression. He began, "I wanta see the paper. I wanta see

if what I said was printed right. . . ." He broke off, his lips tight and white, his jaw dropping as he stared at the body behind the desk. He said, "Rowe . . . someone got him!"

Galt said, "He was about t' fry you an' me. I got the notes in my pocket." He did not look at Rim. "I reckon that kin be left outa things. I don't reckon it means much. . . ."

Rim said sharply, "It can't be left out. And don't try to run me around a cactus plant, neither."

Duval said, "Morosco's in town. Came in late. I seen them come. Beck, Cool, Deer and Mike himself."

Galt said, "Let's not fly off the handle." He was plainly deliberating. The fat man was smart, Rim Hall decided.

Duval said, "Was he robbed?"

The Sheriff went methodically through the pockets of the small dead man. The body shifted and Rim turned abruptly away and walked into the sunshine, the pale sun of early morning.

He kept on walking. An early riser glanced curiously at him, hesitated, went toward the newspaper office. Every man, woman and child in Wheeltown was interested in what Nat Rowe would write in today's paper. Rim increased his pace.

At the hotel he swung up the steps. On the second floor he ran, beating upon a door. Michael Morosco's voice said harshly, "Damn it, stop hammerin'."

The door opened. Morosco, in his underwear, stared at Rim.

The cowboy said, "Get out. Get to Wheel and fort up. Rowe's been killed and they are fixin' to frame you into it."

Morosco said, "Rack and Noose?"



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Rim said, "You didn't do it. . . . Never mind how I know. You came in last night loaded for fight, but you didn't murder him. But get out. Nat had the town with him. There'll be a mob."

Morosco was automatically donning clothes. He said, "You think Wheel is scared of a city mob? How was Rowe killed?"

"His head was cracked by a strong man," said Rim. "Like you—or Tony Beck. Crushed all to hell." He shivered despite himself. "Mebbe you ain't scared of a mob. But do you wanta shoot innocent people? Wheeltown people who've been led to think you murdered Rowe?"

"Duval and Galt," nodded Morosco. "It was time. . . ."

"You tried the political game," said Rim. "You thought you could play with them. Now they've got you in the cut. I'm tellin' you, Morosco, I've seen mobs. You can kill some of them, but they'll get you. Fort up and stand 'em off."

Morosco drew the gun from his belt, examined it. He said coolly, "The hell with you, Hall. I don't trust you none. I'll look into this myself—me and the boys."

"The mob will gather in no time at all," Rim said. "The Mexican quarter loved Nat. He had a way with them people."

"Greasers," said Morosco contemptuously. "I'll look into this." He buckled the belt. His face was strong and unrelenting. He said, "I know you come here on account of Honey. I ain't thankin' yuh for anything, because you ain't done nothin' for me." He shoved past Rim and called to his men. He strolled down the stairs and into the hotel lobby, as though he had all the time in the world.

Rim went down the back way. He shook the stable boy awake. He said, "Saddle the Wheel mounts. Get 'em ready and hold 'em at the edge of the stable, close to that open field. And if you ain't got 'em ready, I'll shoot you through the right eye."

He went down the street, searching for the Mexican boy who had discovered Nat Rowe's body. He could not locate him. He slid around the back way of the Mexican quarter. Every dark-skinned man was gone. He talked to a woman, and she was weeping, because Nat Rowe had brought her groceries when her husband had been injured.

He heard the growing growl of the crowd. He went into the Star building by the rear door. In front Duval was talking, with seeming reluctance. He was saying, "I'm plumb sorry, but it looks like Wheel busted in, read the editorial, didn't like it, took everything that might go agin them from Rowe's desk and—well, it can't be proven, but you know what happened."

There was no sign of Galt. Rim stayed out of sight behind the stack of papers. People were snatching up copies out in front and avidly perusing them. The reference to Morosco caught and held them.

Rim stared at the forms, still in the flat press. An ancient printer staggered in, still drunk. They always got drunk after the paper went to press, Nat had said. The thought of Nat, over in Galt's undertaking parlor, wrenched at him.

He said to the printer, "You sober up. Get the other feller and come back here. Tell the kids to take these papers out back and make a bonfire. I mean a big one. Burn every paper, you hear me?"

"You gone crazy?" demanded the printer. "This here run is all made. . . ."

"Burn 'em," snapped Rim. "Nat's dead and I'm boss. Burn every one."

He saw the crowd now, gathered in front of the building. He went out and across back lots. The townfolk were listening while someone read the last paragraph of the editorial. Rim cut through alongside the Sugar Loaf Saloon.

The roar went up. They were beginning now, and the Mexicans, who only understood that their beloved patron was murdered, needed only to catch a name. "Morosco!" They rolled it in liquid Spanish syllables, the name which had come originally from their own land.

Rim kept pace, then went ahead. He was out of sight of the swift-growing mob. He paused, and from the hotel came the four men.

It was very brave and very stupid. Michael Morosco walked ahead, his sombrero adjusted jauntily, his gun belt sagging at his right flank. A step behind came Tony Beck, huge, unflinching. On right and left flank Nate Cool and Johnny Deer moved more cautiously, each carrying a rifle.

The men of Wheel walked toward the mob which was forming outside the Star office. There was an instant's silence at

their appearance. Then a shrill voice cried, "Muerto . . . Morosco. . . ."

From the protection of the open smithy below the Sugar Loaf, Rim made a trumpet of his hands and called, "Nate . . . Johnny . . . Grab him and make him go back. . . . Get to Wheel and make a stand."

Nate Cool's eyes went sideways, picked out the crouching form of the cowboy. Morosco paid no heed, his jaw set, going ahead. Johnny Deer paused, then went on, gripping the long gun.

"It's a frame," Rim urged. His throat was dry, his voice hoarse. "They'll shoot yuh to pieces. They're all over the town with guns. . . . Git to Wheel and I might can fan you outa this."

Beck and Morosco did not even hear him. The dust curled up under their boots as they walked steadily forward, mincing in the manner of cowmen the country over.

Rim said, "Yuh got the whole town up in arms. They think you killed him. They don't know any better. Go back!"

Morosco heard at last. He said, "I don't see you out here sidin' us, Rowe. To hell with you."

"I'll spoil it if I show," Rim pleaded. "Think of Honey. . . . Go back to where I got your hosses ready. At the edge of the hotel. . . ."

The crowd had resumed its primeval growling. The Mexican voice called, "Keel him! El Diablo Morosco!"

Teeth showed white in the ruddy face of the proud owner of Wheel. His hand jerked toward his belt, did not quite reach his revolver. Tony Beck growled something. There was less than fifty yards of dusty street between the Wheel men and the mob.

A rifle spanged on the morning air. Rim groaned and sagged, watching. This was it—the first shot would be enough to ignite a hundred. Johnny Deer jerked up his gun and fired at someone on a roof.

But Michael Morosco had stopped. His feet stumbled. He made one effort to draw—and failed.

There was a scarlet splotch on the flannel shirt. Tony Beck reached out a hand and caught his boss before the sagging form met the dirt.

Rim yelled frantically, "Now! Take him back! Tony! To the hosses!"

Like an automaton, Beck wheeled. Or-

ders came to him; he obeyed. He carried the heavy master of Wheel as though he were a child. Nate Cool sprayed lead from his Winchester, but the gunman was aiming above the heads of the crowd, Rim saw with gratitude. Beck moved steadily, without fear. Still, it was a long way to go and already there were shouts of joy at the sight of Morosco's blood.

Rim gathered himself. He rolled a cigaret, making his hands do the delicate work without trembling. He struck a match, touched the tobacco and blew smoke through his nostrils. He sauntered out into the morning sun.

He seemed to be walking aimlessly, squinting at the crowd as though he did not quite know what it was all about. The Mexican with the shrill voice cried, "It ees the patron's other one! Do not shoot!"

The crowd's howl died for a moment. Out of the corner of his mouth, Rim spat, "Run, damn you! Get goin'."

Beck increased his pace. Cool and Deer trailed their guns, retreating while Rim stood, smoking, saying nothing, eyeing the approaching mob. Someone fired from the protection of the building and his hat whirled from his head. Bending to pick it up, he knew several other bullets missed him narrowly and the knowledge cemented what he had already surmised.

He saw Beck turn the corner of the hotel, saw the crowd coming, saw it break around him. He thumbed the hole in his sombrero and walked the other way, toward the office of the Star.

THE town was still as a church on a weekday. Over the desk where Nat Rowe had died the lean figure of the cowboy sweated and strained. The hammer of the composer in the rear went steadily at its task. The old man, spectacles perched athwart a smudged nose, was setting type from the scrawled copy. A red-haired boy stood watching Rim with sympathy.

The cowboy's hand ached and his fingers were stiff as boards. He wrote painfully, but legibly, in large script on flimsy paper. The boy took another sheet into the press room.

Rim straightened his back. His jaw was set like iron. Every man who could maneuver on a horse was out at Wheel. It was the biggest posse that country had ever

seen. They had all gone to Wheel, under Sheriff Galt, to capture—and hang—Michael Morosco and his men. The thought of Honey Morosco in that whirl of deadly events sent Rim back to his task.

The form containing the front page was pied. The old printer was working the copy back in as Rim wrote it. The largest type was already set for the headline. The red-haired boy danced on one foot, catching the import of Rim's story.

There were other boys. The red-head had seen to that. Rim had distributed coins, but joining in such exciting events would have been enough to gain him the services of every kid in town. He wrote the last words, taking care, as Nat had taught him in the brief time they were together. He re-read what he had written, gave it to the boy.

He worked the fingers of his right hand. It would take time for circulation to be restored. He drew his gun and from force of long habit broke it and reloaded with fresh cartridges.

He went back and said to the printer, "You've got to git it right the first time. Yuh sure you know what to do?"

The old man said testily, "I ain't a dumb, ignorant cow hand. I understand what's what."

Rim said, "There'll be dead men a-plenty if yuh miss."

"Tend to your own end of it," growled the old fellow. "I seen the boss dead in his chair."

Rim said, "All right. I'm ridin'. If I get through, okay. If I get shot, you do like I told you anyways."

"Git out," said the printer. "Lemme set this form an' start the press. The kid'll be in such a boilin' hurry they won't wanta turn the crank. . . ."

Rim went out. It was past eleven. He hastened to the hotel. His horse was ready. He took his rifle from the boot and examined it. He thrust it back, leaving off the cover. He mounted and rode westward.

There was a hill south of Wheel and many of the non-combatants had assembled there. It was easy to skirt this crowd unseen, but farther along the line would be tight. Wheel was surrounded. The building itself was old and strong, too strong to be rushed. As Rim closed in rifle fire crackled in a circle. There were a hundred

men with rifles against Morosco's little crew—and the girl.

There was an arroyo which ran parallel to the ranch, with a steep side wall within a hundred yards of the horse corral. Rim sent the pony into it. A Mexican with a musket of ancient origin saw him, paused, then nodded, satisfied that Rowe's partner had joined the posse. Rim rode on until he heard a voice ahead.

It was Duval. He was saying, "Lay down a general fire and we'll rush it. This spot is close enough to the corral. . . ."

Rim dismounted. It was the spot he too had chosen. He waited with his pulse pounding. Galt replied, "No sense in it. Wait'll sundown and we kin go in six ways."

"They know the country. . . ." The voices trailed off as the leaders of the posse went away from the strategic spot. Rim slapped the flanks of his horse, yanking his rifle from the boot. The cayuse sprang up the gully.

Rim went up the bank. His legs ached with the effort, but he had been smart enough to swap his boots for low-heeled shoes before he started. He hit the high ground and began running.

There were shots, but they were scattered, as the besiegers did not know whether it was an attack by their own forces. He heard Duval's curses, and the corral loomed. Bullets sprayed in earnest. One hit the low heel of his shoe. He dived at the fence, clambered over. A hammer-headed buckskin neighed and kicked at him. He crossed the corral in three bounds and went out the gate and around the back of the main house. Lead rained in earnest now as Duval howled, "It's Hall, the renegade!"

A door opened and he tumbled ingloriously over the threshold of Wheel. Honey Morosco wept, "Oh, I knew you'd come. I told them. . . . I knew you'd make it. Oh, Rim, what is it, what's happened to everyone?"

"Plenty's happened and plenty more is indicated," he told her. He looked around the big room. Johnny Deer was propped alongside one of the broken windows. Johnny had been hit in the hip.

Nate Cool lay on the floor and fired a rifle. Bullets sang through the openings. Honey sat on the floor and reached for an

unloaded gun. She was weeping, but it was for her father, Rim knew.

Michael Morosco was on the couch, out of the general range of the invaders. He raised his head and looked at Rim, then dropped back. He muttered, "No help there. . . . Jest cain't stand t' see the boys hurt. . . ."

Tony Beck came from the back, bringing a box of ammunition. He glared at Rim, loaded a Remington and began firing through a window. The big man was bleeding from a cut on his head, but otherwise unhurt.

Honey said, "They killed cooky and the other boys were cut off."

Michael Morsco said, "You and your damned newspaper. . . ."

Rim shrugged. "That was your own fault for playin' with Galt and Duval. You know Nat was partly right about that."

The boss of Wheel said, "Stirrin' them up. . . ."

"They'd 've had you anyways," said Rim coldly. "You were mutton to them, in cowman's country."

"Wheel don't murder," said Morosco fiercely. He was bad hurt, but his words were sharp and clear.

Rim said, "I might can getcha out. If I don't—I'll stay with it. And not for love of you, Mike Morosco."

"Nobody cares what you do," grunted the man on the couch. "It's jest the boys. They didn't do anything wrong. . . ."

Tony Beck said, "There's somethin' goin' on."

"It's a rush," said Rim quickly. "From the arroyo." He ran to the window on the east. Tony Beck lumbered after him. Four Mexicans appeared, coming over the top of the arroyo bank. Rim said, "Don't kill them, Tony. . . . Shoot low."

He began picking off legs. Two of the attackers dropped. Beck accounted for the other two. Rim said, "You notice they sent Mexicans. They didn't come themselves."

The giant foreman said slowly, "You saved our hides, there in town."

"Be careful," said Rim acidly. "Mike'll hate you if you talk to me."

"Yuh ain't agin us," said Beck bluntly. "I kin see that."

"Keep 'em off. Shoot to wound, not kill," said Rim. "An hour—maybe two. That's all I ask."

He went back to the other room. Johnny Deer had his head pillowed in his arms. Nate Cool was trying to move him from the window, but Johnny awoke and shoved him away. Rim took Nate's window and fired at a man on horseback. There was no sight of Duval nor his two men, Fancy Rob Roy and Isaac Pate, nor of the Sheriff.

The time dragged. Honey kept reloading the spare rifles, squatted on the floor, her face wet with tears. Her father groaned once or twice and she slipped into the bullet-ridden kitchen for hot water. Rim stared at the declining sun. If it got dark too soon. . . .

Then he was aware that there had been no firing for moments. He heard in the distance a shrill, small voice. He recognized that voice. It was the red-haired boy.

"Gitcha paper! Read the true story! Gitcha *Star* here! Don't nobody shoot until he reads the paper!"

He blew smoke from his rifle barrel. He drew his revolver once more, remembered he had removed and replaced the bullets once that day. Johnny Deer was silent, unmoving. Nate Cool said something and went and lay down in the corner near his sidekick. That was the first Rim knew Nate had been hit.

Honey busied herself with water and bandages. Tony Beck stood over Michael Morosco, brooding. There was a weird silence all around the besieged ranch house.

Then Duval's voice arose, "It's a pack of lies. There ain't a single word of truth in it. He can't prove nothin'. . . ."

Rim could see the boys now, running through the woods, distributing the copies of the *Wheeltown Star*. He poised, waiting. The old printer had the wagon up close and the horses were lathered with the run from town. The ancient who had seen his boss murdered had done his job well. . . .

A man bearing a copy of the paper came forward, waving it. Rim stared at Henry Strumm. The Mayor's brother hollered, "Hall! We're doin' what you say. We're sendin' 'em in. It's up to you, now."

Leave it to the Strumms, Rim thought. Politicians to the end. He stepped outside the house, staying near the door in case of emergency, but showing himself. From the woods the men came, reluctantly, but angrily and with their guns strapped on.

There was the sheriff, fat and ungainly, but lightfooted. There was Duval and his two gunmen, Roy and Pate. They walked into the clearing before the house as Rim Hall stepped out to face them. Galt had a copy of the ink-smearing *Star* in his hands. Galt's dewlaps quivered just a bit. The men of Wheeltown waited, ranged in a great semi-circle, just inside the trees.

Galt said loudly, "Rim, you double-crossin' coyote, this here's all a tissue of lies."

He beat his hand against the paper. The two-inch black headline screamed its message, "MOROSCO FRAMED BY GALT—DUVAL."

Rim said as loudly as he could, "Why Sheriff, you forget. I was Nat's pardner. I knew you and Duval were fillin' him full of that stuff about Wheel and Morosco on the q.t. Why, you even framed the fight in the Sugar Loaf. I done had a fight, I knew a li'l feller, even a boxer, couldn't whip Pate and Roy like that. You wanted me in there, you wanted me to fight Sandell and kill or be killed. You knew I was in the hotel that day, you tried to make it sound like Morosco had hired Sandell. You and Duval sent for Sandell. Why, Sheriff, just like I said in the paper, all this was known to me and Nat."

He paused for breath.

Duval said, "Damn him . . . Let's get him . . . Strumm'll hold them."

Yet he knew they could do it. He knew they could get him, among them, and then that would be the end. He knew that well enough.

"Duval and his gunmen killed Rowe," Rim said, raising his voice so all could hear. "They tried to get him to write a hotter editorial about Morosco. I had warned him not to. So they killed him. Then they took all the stuff about Morosco and destroyed it, to make it look like Wheel men had done the killin'."

The gambler licked white lips. He looked right and there was Galt, breathing through his mouth, his fat quivering at the destruction of all that he had built through years of chicanery. He looked left and there were his henchmen. He uttered a curt oath and leaped back, producing a gun from beneath his coat.

Rim drew and fired in one motion. He

could already feel the bullets coming at him, but he knew it had to be like this. He fired once at Duval. He saw the gambler spin, saw his second bullet strike Fancy Rob Roy in the middle of his gaudy waistcoat.

Then he dropped to one knee, cool, taking all the time he needed. He saw Galt unlimber a big Peacemaker. He fired at Galt. Then there was a concatenation of shots, blended together and he was moving along the ground on his knee, trying to see through clouds of smoke.

The smoke lifted slowly. In the woods the men stood silent, watching. Behind Rim, Tony Beck's voice boomed, "Rim's right, see? Plumb right. Any fool kin see he's right. Pick up them bodies and carry 'em back to Wheeltown. Somebody'll have t' bury the undertaker—we don't want him or them on Wheel!"

When the lamps were lit in the evening and blankets shrouded the broken windows and the wounded were ranged on cots about the big room, Michael Morosco looked up from the copy of the *Star* he was reading. Honey sat very close to Rim Hall.

Morosco growled, "How did ye KNOW all this?"

Rim said gently, "Mike, I didn't rightly KNOW. But it stood to reason. They was cheats and town scum. Galt was a fat sneak. Honey told me you couldn't do them things. . . . Nat put it in my head. He said you couldn't always KNOW, but you could guess."

The boss of Wheel said, "I reckon you'll be the next Sheriff. The people think you're some kind of big medicine. . . . I suppose you'll run that paper into a small fortune."

"I wouldn't go agin my father-in-law," said Rim. "Say he wanted to run fer office, I couldn't campaign for someone else. . . . Unless he was onery and started messin' with crooks. . . ."

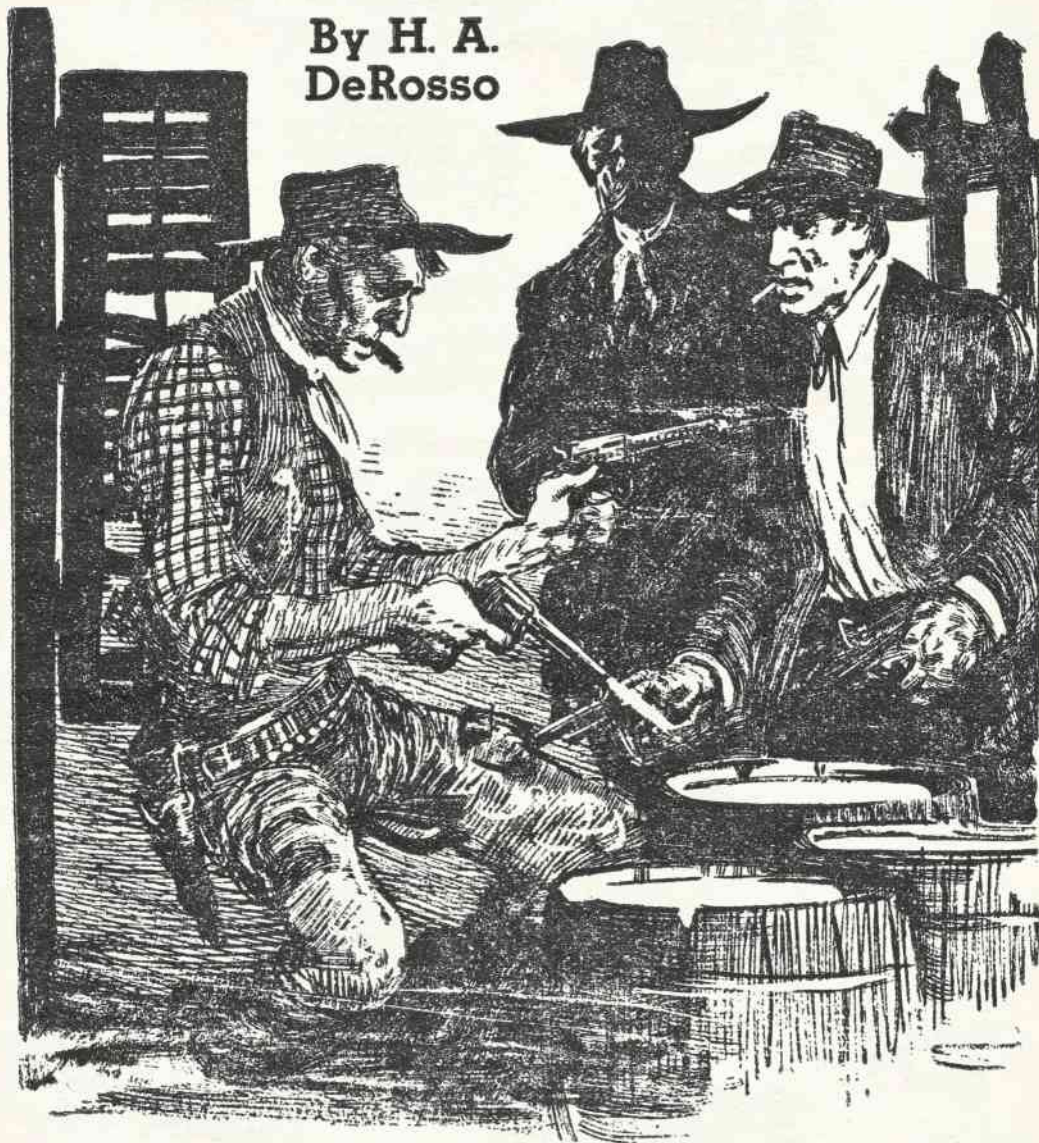
"That's enough," roared Michael Morosco. "You're disturbin' them pore sick boys. Cantcha get outa here? I wanta read my paper in peace."

There was a moon. The girl stayed close to him. Rim said, "Honey, let's us walk down to that cottonwood grove. I kinda like that spot."

THE END

JACK O' DIAMONDS

By H. A.
DeRosso



Jack O' Diamonds watched the would-be killer slump forward as the slugs bit in.

Out of the dim past of his back-trail appeared the wraith of a chill-eyed killer, sworn to brand Jack O' Diamonds a double-crossing, thieving tinhorn . . . then, for good measure, fill him with a bellyful of lead slugs.

THEY called him "Jack O' Diamonds." It was a rare time he used his full name. And he always had to pause before he could pronounce it—John Diamond Destry. But perhaps it was just as well, he often thought, for he could not be called a credit to his family.

He was a gambler and he lived an itinerant life, never letting the dust of any one place linger long about him, but there

came a day when he realized a sadness, and the knowledge that his drifting, lonely ways were becoming distasteful to him. And he learned to dream, to dream of a home and a woman and children, knowing that such a dream could never be reality for a footloose, restless man. So his life paled on him and the ways of the cards were no longer bright to him and he yearned to stop somewhere some day and say: "This is my home. I'll not leave it ever . . ."

So when he heard that a Tim Destry had a ranch on the upper reaches of Sun Creek, Jack O' Diamonds saddled up and headed there. He'd left home when Tim had been fourteen and ten years had passed that Jack had not seen his brother. He had always known that driving, restless urge and he had never learned to conquer it; but now he wanted to, before it was too late and he found himself growing old, alone . . .

He came to Tim Destry's TD spread in the early hours of afternoon. The place was not very prosperous, but the corrals were in good repair and the small house was sturdy and neat and there was an orderliness about everything that bespoke hard work and precious care.

Tim was seated on the doorstep. Jack wondered that his brother was not up and about, for the appearance of the ranch suggested that Tim was not an idle man. There was no mistaking Tim, Jack thought. Just as skinny as ever, with that hooked nose and unruly mass of black hair and piercing black eyes. His clothing was plain and faded from many washings.

Jack O' Diamonds pulled in his gelding and said, "Hello, Tim."

Tim looked up and the gambler thought he saw a flash of despair in Tim's glance. And the lines in his face were the imprints of worry.

"It's Jack," the gambler said, stepping out of the saddle and approaching with outstretched hand. "Long time no see . . ."

Recognition dawned and Tim Destry leaped to his feet, taking his brother's hand, and then they talked as men will talk when they have not met for years and they have so much to tell about. Tim's wife came out of the house, carrying Tim's eight month old son in her arms, and Jack found himself envying his brother.

A faint sense of shame possessed Jack.

He knew that his clothing marked him for what he was. His expressionless face, the lips that were so thin and smiled without humor, dark eyes that mirrored none of his emotions, and the long black coat and black trousers that was the uniform of his profession. A profession that set its members apart from other people and at times even made them outcasts.

The talk turned to many things and finally Jack said, "This is a nice looking place you have here, Tim."

Tim's face clouded and he looked at Susan, his wife, and Tim's fists clenched.

"That's the trouble," he said through his teeth. "I don't have it any more."

"How's that?"

Tim laughed bitterly. He turned his gaze over his fields and the muscles of his face tightened.

"It's all very simple," he said. "There's a mortgage and I can't pay up. That's all it is."

"But haven't you a chance? Can't you raise the money?"

"Look, Jack. I don't like to talk about it . . . But I'll tell you this much. The bank had the mortgage in the first place. Then a rancher name of Walt Every bought it from the bank. Every owns more land than he knows what to do with but he wants my TD. I've got a good spring here and some good alfalfa land. He won't extend my time and the bank won't lend me more because they don't count me as a good risk any more."

"That's how she stands. I've just about gone crazy trying to figure out what to do. But time is up at midnight and I can count on Every showing up here in the morning to foreclose. So we won't talk about it no more . . . I've had enough . . ."

JACK STAYED a while and then said he was riding into town. He had noticed Tim eyeing his fine clothes and the diamond stickpin in his cravat and Jack was more than a little ashamed to be unable to offer Tim any help. Jack felt Susan's eyes, too, and he would have given anything to have been able to draw a roll of bills from his pocket and say, Here . . . Pay me back when you can . . .

But Jack O' Diamonds was broke . . .

The cards had not been falling in his favor of late and since Jack had never

turned a crooked card in all his life he had only his clothes, the diamond stickpin and a five dollar bill. So he rode away, turning down Tim's offer to stay for supper.

Jack O' Diamonds rode into the little settlement of Sundown toward evening. He stabled his horse and then he looked around until he located the pawn shop. He haggled for half an hour, finally knocking down fifty dollars for his diamond. He ate a light meal and with the first shadows dimming the streets made for the Commercial Bar.

He found two men seated at a card table in one of the rear rooms. One of the men was pale-faced with the black eyeshade and black sleeve guards of a houseman. He sat idly riffling a deck of cards and keeping his glance on the table top.

The other man must be one of the town merchants, Jack figured. The man was big and muscular but there was a lack of color to his face and his hands were not the hands of one who works cattle. He sat sprawled in his chair, looking Jack up and down.

"Mind if I sit in?" Jack asked.

"Not at all," the shirt-sleeved houseman said without raising his eyes. "Shall we start, George?"

George straightened in his chair. "Sure. Might as well. There should be others dropping in soon. Three's enough for a start . . ."

The houseman broke the seal on a new pack and began shuffling the cards. He spoke with a flat impersonal twist of the lips. "The sky's the limit. Dealer's choice of the game. Whites are one, reds five, blues twenty-five." His eyes lifted suddenly

to Jack O' Diamonds' face. "But you should know all that."

"Sure," Jack said. "I've worked for the house in my time . . . Do you mind my sitting in?"

"Not at all," the houseman said. "I can take care of my end . . ." He started dealing the cards. "Deuces wild," he said.

They played moderately at first, more to pass the time than for anything else, Jack felt. They seemed to be waiting for bigger game. Then the bets would rise and the game would work into their blood. In the first half hour of play he broke even . . .

George was shifting restlessly in his chair. "Walt should be here," he said to the houseman. "Told me he'd show up. I got a crack comin' at him. I dropped plenty the other night and I want another crack at him."

"You'll get it," the houseman called Deuce said, "Here he comes."

The man was tall and heavy with a square-jawed face that was the color of old leather. His chest was wide and his waist large but there was no fat to the man, only solid flesh, and the floor creaked under him. His gray eyes were icily direct and he carried himself with the air of one who fears no man . . .

He smiled at Deuce and George. "Evenin', boys. See you didn't wait for me."

"Hi-yah, Walt," George said. "Howdy, Everyt'," the houseman greeted. "No, we didn't wait. This here fellow showed up and we thought we'd pass the time until you came."

Everyt' settled himself into a chair between George and Deuce. The houseman was looking hard at Jack O' Diamonds.

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"The stakes are going up," the houseman said. "You won't get far on your fifty."

"I have more," Jack declared, meeting the other's stare.

Deuce said, "I wonder . . ."

Jack placed his hands flat on the table. "I don't like your ways, mister. I don't like them at all!"

"Come on, let's get started," Everyty said in his booming voice. "If he's only got fifty dollars he won't have it long . . . I can clean any tinhorn."

"You think a lot of yourself," Jack said.

"Why not?" Everyty countered, stacking his chips. "Poker's my game. I've never lost at it which is more than I can say for most tinhorns. They are often down and out. Me, I've never been broken at cards . . ."

"There's always a first time," Jack murmured.

Everyty laughed and Jack could not help but feel he could like this big man. "Feeling lucky?" Everyty asked.

They played and the cards were in Jack O' Diamonds' favor. About time, he told himself. I thought I'd never break this drought of bad luck but this is my night and my killing. I've got to make a killing—for Tim's sake. I can't stand remembering that beaten look on his face and those lifeless eyes. There's Susan and the kid, too. I got to win tonight!

Thus the thoughts ran through his mind, desperate, flushing thoughts that would have brought sweat to another man's brow and hot color to his features; but Jack had long schooled his face to show none of his inner emotions and so he sat there, stiff-featured and unsmiling.

He could not help but feel the surge in his blood, the surge a gambling man knows when Lady Luck is his and the warmth of her smile mellows him. Yet he sat there as the chips grew before him, feeling Everyty's stare every now and then and Deuce's cold hostility. George had dropped out of the game and there were two others sitting in now, but Jack had no heed for their names. He knew only that the cards were falling for him and he could not lose . . .

Watchers had drifted into the card room, standing around in the pale swirling tobacco smoke, looking down at the players . . . But the eyes of one of them

seemed fastened with savage intensity on Jack O' Diamonds' back and he felt that gaze and turned.

The man was directly behind Jack's chair. The fellow was small with a narrow face and spare shoulders. He looked like the unobtrusive sort with his washed out eyes and receding chin; but he wore his gun low and tied down and though his left hand was gloved, his right was bare . . . He smiled with his lips alone when he met Jack's stare . . .

Jack turned his attention back to the game, feeling the sudden descent of coldness on his spine. He knew the little, weasel-faced fellow. Steve Forrest, brother of one Bob Forrest, tinhorn gambler, whom Jack had caught cheating at cards. That had happened in a lawless boomcamp and Vigilantes had hanged tinhorn Bob Forrest. And word had come to Jack O' Diamonds that Steve Forrest had vowed he'd never rest until he had Jack O' Diamonds over his gunights . . .

Everyty was talking. The chips were gone from in front of him and his face was pale about the lips. He seemed to be holding himself in and he spoke with a forced huskiness to hide the anger and frustration that stirred within him.

"I have no more cash on hand," he told Jack. Everyty had drawn a paper from his shirt pocket. "Here's a mortgage on a small ranch, the TD. It expires at midnight. I'm riding to the TD in the morning to take over . . . I don't like IOUs. So I'll make you a little side bet on the next hand. This mortgage against fifteen hundred . . ."

Jack O' Diamonds was looking over the paper but he was hardly aware of the print on it. This was a break he had never expected. This was the chance he had never banked on. It was his deal and to smooth the tension that was building up in him he riffled the cards and said:

"Sure . . . I'll take that bet . . ." And as he dealt he murmured, "Straight draw . . ."

The two new players dropped out. Deuce asked for three cards, Everyty for two. Jack had drawn a pair of aces and he took three cards. He was hardly aware of the sullen houseman. Deuce might as well not have been present. The houseman looked at his new cards and threw his hand

into the discard with an air of disgust.

Jack felt Every's stare. The big man threw down his cards. "Three of a kind," he announced. "Kings . . ."

"Full house," Jack intoned, laying his hand down slowly and knowing a fierce exultation and in his triumph momentarily forgetting Steve Forrest who still stood watching. "Aces and jacks . . ."

THE GAME had broken up then and Jack O' Diamonds had carefully folded the mortgage to the TD and placed it in his pocket. Tim Destry was going to have a pleasant surprise in the morning and a slight smile curved the gambler's lips.

When he cashed in his chips and found himself flush with wealth he knew a pleasantness that hadn't been his for years. He'd made a killing this night. He had enough to make a down payment on a small ranch. He'd start looking around tomorrow to see if he couldn't pick up something along Sun Creek close to Tim's TD. Settle down and forget the way of the cards.

He had paused outside the Commercial Bar, relishing the freshness of the night breeze, when Steve Forrest came out and stopped beside the gambler. Lamplight spilling out of the saloon's window fell on Forrest's face, revealing the hate in his eyes.

"It's been a long time, friend," Forrest said.

"What do you want?" the gambler asked, a sudden coldness wiping his triumph away.

Forrest smiled humorlessly. "I want to kill you," he said quietly.

"I have nothing against you, Steve. I don't want trouble with you . . . Bob had been cheating in that game in Hardrock. I caught him at it and took his derringer away and knocked him down. That was all I did. But he'd been cheating before and he'd shot a couple of miners who had dared to call him. So when I took the hardness out of him the Vigilantes came and hanged him . . . That was none of my doing, Steve . . ."

"Nothing you can say will ever change my mind, friend . . . I'll hold you to account for Bob."

Jack knew a sudden, rising fury at the man's stubbornness. "All right," Jack said

crisply. "All right. Let's have it out here and now!"

"No, friend, not now . . . I want to wait a while. I've waited so long a few more days will make no difference. I want you to wait—and worry . . ."

Jack O' Diamonds slept well into the morning. He had ridden far the previous day and the strain of the night's card playing had brought a heavy weariness upon him. So sleep had been a welcome surcease.

He arose and had breakfast. He was humming to himself as he made his way to the stable. But first he stopped to redeem his diamond stickpin. He walked along with a spring to his step, knowing such a complete content that he'd never experienced before. He'd ride out to the TD and hand the mortgage over to Tim and ask him to tear it up. It would be worth something to watch the whipped look fade from Tim's face.

Jack stepped into the stable and Walt Every came out of the shadows and beckoned to the gambler. "I'd like to talk to you," Every said, starting toward the rear.

Jack followed the rancher out the back door into the yard filled with light and heavy wagons and framed by a corral. Every halted. He pushed his hat back from his forehead. He stood like a glowering bull ready to charge.

"I want to tell you something," Every said, his voice the rumble of distant thunder. "I want to tell you that you're a low-down, dirty cheat, Mr. John Diamond Destry!"

Jack O' Diamonds recoiled. His chin thrust up, and despite his years of schooling, he could not keep the flush from his cheeks. "I don't get you, Every," he said levelly.

Every spat his laugh. "Don't act the innocent one! You came to Sundown, hiding your real name, passing yourself off as Jack O' Diamonds . . . You came here to get that mortgage on the TD, your brother's place. But you didn't go about it like a man! I don't know how you knew I'd have the papers on me, but I do know you dealt yourself a full house!"

There was bitten anger inside Jack. In all his days he had never before been accused of cheating. His honesty had

been his one great pride. There had been times, he confessed, that he'd known the temptation to mark a card or stack a deck, but he'd never let the temptation go further than that for he knew that if ever he turned a crooked card he'd never be able to live with himself.

"Things like that happen in poker, Everyty," the gambler said, striving to keep his voice even. "A full house in a game of draw is not unknown . . . And then, why didn't you make your gripe last night?"

"Because I'd taken you for a man!" Everyty declared fiercely. "Because I didn't know who you really were. Because I didn't know you were a cheap, double-dealing tinhorn!"

"You're sounding off almighty wild, mister! Where is your proof? Were the cards marked?"

"No," Everyty admitted slowly. "The cards were not marked . . . But you're a clever shuffler, Destrty."

"If you're a poor loser, I'll pay you," Jack O' Diamonds said. "I'll pay you the value of your mortgage."

"Damn the mortgage!" Everyty shouted, bringing his left hand across the gambler's face. "Will nothing make you fight?"

The big rancher was in the full grip of his rage now. His right hand stabbed for the sixgun at his hip and Jack drove desperately for his own weapon. He was fast, fast with years of practice behind him, and his .45 whipped up in one swift, smooth movement and as Everyty was lining up his gun Jack fired.

He'd been so much faster than Everyty that Jack had had time to pick his spot and he drove his bullet into the rancher's gun-arm, just below the elbow. Everyty's .45 exploded with a reverberating roar, the bullet plunking into a corral post, and then the gun had fallen from the rancher's hand and he was on his knees, groping for his weapon with his left hand.

The gambler kicked the sixgun out of Everyty's reach, then picked it up and broke it. Jack tossed the empty .45 at Everyty's feet. The gambler was white and shaken. He'd never killed a man but he'd known a brief instant of killing fury a few seconds back and the memory left him weak.

"Don't ever crowd me again, mister," Jack said grimly . . .

HE ENTERED the stable and saddled his gelding. People were rushing through the place to the rear. The marshal ran after Jack as he led his horse from the stable. Jack turned on the lawman.

"He pulled first," Jack said, his lips a thin white line.

The marshal shrugged. "Everyty says to forget it, that he wants to settle with you privately. Well, I don't want trouble in Sundown and you've caused enough. I just want to tell you if you're ridin' away from here, you're doing the right thing . . ."

The marshal strode away. Jack was all set to swing into the saddle when he spied Tim standing on the walk, watching him. Jack went over to Tim, who was standing there with the old beaten look on his face.

Jack drew the mortgage papers from his pocket, handed them to Tim. "On me," Jack said, smiling. "Tear 'em up, Tim."

Tim just looked at the papers and then at his brother. Tim's face did not change expression. "I didn't mean that, Jack," he said. "I didn't mean for you to go and get them like—like you did."

Jack stared at his brother a while before saying, "Do you mean you believe all this hogwash of lies that's been spread about me? Do you— Oh, no, Tim! You know me better than that!"

Tim shook his head dolefully. "I haven't seen you for ten years. A man can change in that time. No, Jack. You keep the TD. It's yours and maybe it won't weigh on your conscience. But me, I'm leaving this range. I have my things loaded on a wagon and I'm heading south in the morning. You keep the TD. I'd like it to be mine—but honestly mine!"

Jack returned his horse to the stable and then the gambler went to his room at the hotel. He lay on his bed, staring up at the ceiling while strange laughter shook him. It all seemed so ridiculous . . .

He'd been so content this morning. With money in his pockets and peace in his heart. He'd begun making his dreams of a little spread close to Tim's. A pine board cabin with vines creeping up the walls and, perhaps, a woman in the doorway when he should return home in the evenings. He'd even picked out his own brand—the Diamond J.

But he should have realized, he thought

bitterly, that his dreams were only—dreams. That the itinerant life the only life for him. The way of the cards the only way for him. He should have realized all that long ago and destroyed his silly dream about honesty and helping others . . . He should have realized that the only one to help was himself—and to hell with all other men . . .

Thus his bitter thoughts ran when the knock came on his door.

He rose, aware that the sun had gone down. Strange, he thought, that he'd not noted the passage of time. Only when he stood on his feet did he realize his hunger.

He opened the door and there was Tim. "I came to warn you, Jack," Tim said. "After all, you're my brother and I owe you something . . . They're aiming to run you out of town. Tar and feather you and run you out on a rail . . ."

Jack began to laugh, his mirth rolling through his clenched teeth. "They're wrought up about you," Tim was saying. "For cheating Everyt at cards and then shooting him up. Everyt is well liked in Sundown. They're starting to gather, Jack. You still have a chance to get away. . . I thought I'd tell you . . ."

He was gone as suddenly as he had come. Jack O' Diamonds turned back into his room, picked up his duffel and, assuring himself that his sixgun was loaded, hurried down the back stairs.

He opened the rear door cautiously and peered out. Night had fallen completely and as far as Jack could make out there was no one in the alley. He started to walk briskly, carrying his duffel in his left hand, turning his head to peer to the right and to the left. Despit his vigilance he ran smack into the gun . . .

Steve Forrest was holding the gun. He'd been standing in the shadow of a leanto and he had stepped out so suddenly that Jack had pulled up with the gun barrel scant inches from his belly.

"You're not going anywhere, friend."

"Is this what you were waiting for?" the gambler queried.

"Yes." The word hissed through the gunman's lips. All pretense of humor was gone from him now and he was only a deadly little man. "This is what I waited for, friend. To see you broken and running

away, leaving behind you the memory of a cheat and coward . . . Yes, I've waited for this a long time, friend . . ."

Comprehension dawned on Jack O' Diamonds and he felt his blood run hot. "It was you, Forrest," Jack said angrily. "It was you who spread those lies about me!"

Forrest uttered his maddening chuckle. "Yes, friend. It was me!"

The gunman's breath was sharp and fast and Jack told himself, This is it! He had not lifted his hands and Forrest had not ordered it for the gunman's .45 was only scant inches from the gambler's middle and Jack could not hope to make any break before Forrest could fire.

He released his duffel and swept his left hand over against the gunman's wrist, driving that arm down and aside; but Forrest's .45 roared and Jack felt the sear of hot lead against his right thigh. He stumbled aside, jerking his own sixgun, as Forrest swung about, gun aflame. Jack heard the angry hiss of bullets past his cheek and felt the heat of their passing but his own .45 was recoiling and bucking in his fist.

All of a sudden Steve Forrest was screaming and crumpling up against the side of the leanto. He kept trying to lift his Colt but the effort was beyond his waning strength and the gun dropped from his fingers and he sank slowly, stretching out upon the ground. He lay on his back, blood flowing out of his chest, yet he looked up at Jack with triumph in his glazing eyes.

"You haven't won, friend," Forrest whispered. "You haven't won at all . . ."

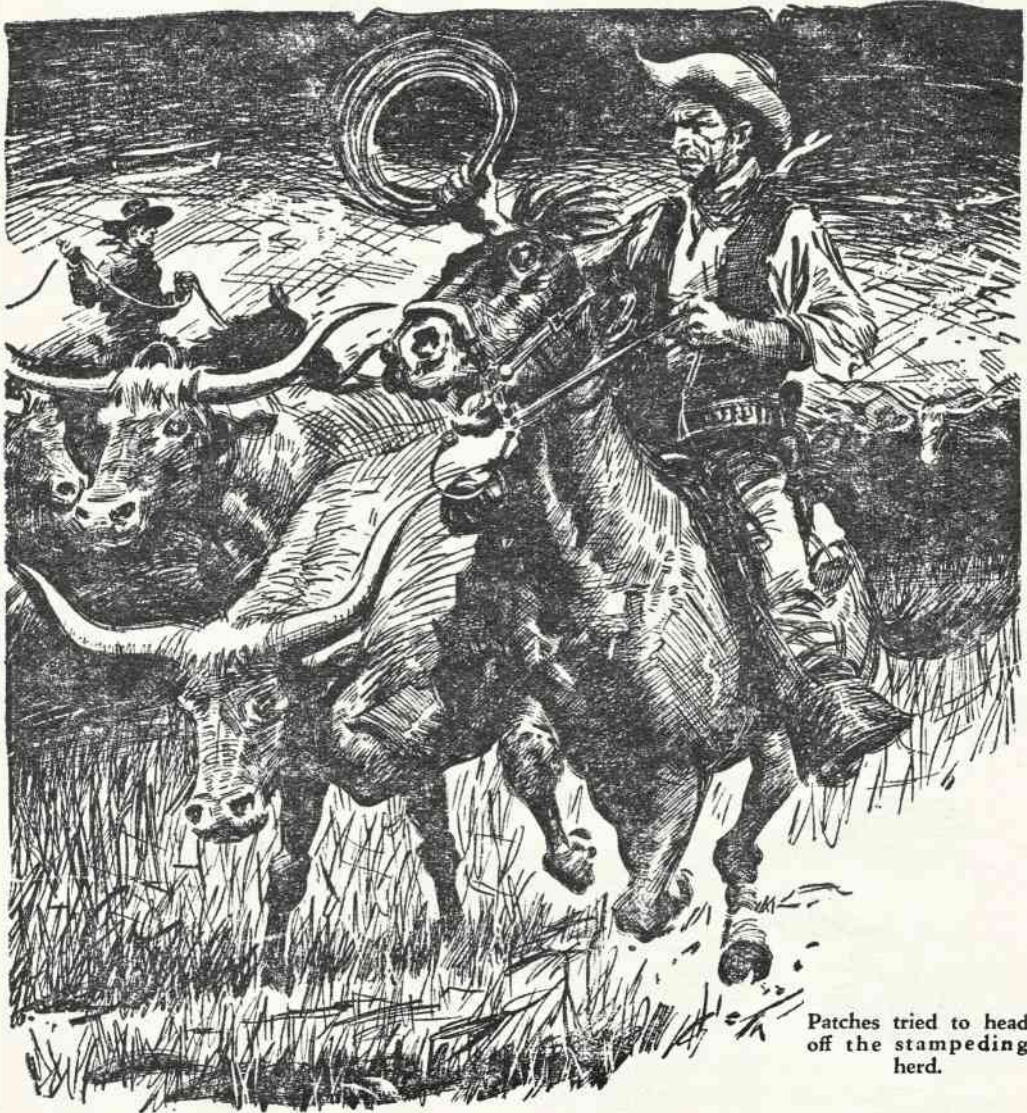
And Jack knew that the dead gunman was right. The lies he had spread had yet to be disproved and there was no way of disproving them. That was the knowledge that would plague Jack O' Diamonds the rest of his life. That was the knowledge that would build for him a hell on earth . . .

"Easy, mister. I heard it all . . . I saw your brother enter the hotel and I reckoned he was going to warn you. I was waiting, like Forrest, for you to come down those back stairs. I had a gun to kill you before you could run out. But Forrest stopped you first and I'm thankful for that. I was on the other side of the leanto . . . I heard everything Forrest had to say. We'll never be able to make it up to you . . ."

"You already have," Jack said.

ACE in the HOLSTER!

By Will C. Brown



Patches tried to head off the stampeding herd.

That range stray called Patches helped shove the Triangle herd into lawless Roan's Crossing. . . . And lift the deuce in a deadly whipsaw game that was rigged to leave his widowed mother with one less mouth to feed!

THE PINK-HAIRED rider they called Patches, with the perpetually blistered look and tight-mouthed as a wooden Indian with lockjaw, signed on with the Triangle trail crew when the herd was two weeks short of Roan's Crossing, outbound north. He reined up at the chuck wagon where the outfit was making night

camp and sought out Stillwell, the trail boss. He looked to be in his early twenties, with good shoulders and direct blue eyes of the caliber that made you wish you could see behind them but reluctant to try it. You knew automatically that everything in the world he owned was on his back, or on his hip, or on his brush-scratched cayuse.

Slim Mertz looked up negligently from where he was reclining against a wagon wheel.

"The boss?" Mertz repeated in a sour drawl, in answer to the question. "Why he's ridin' in yonder. . . . But we already got a cook!"

Somebody chuckled and the stranger's face went redder than it already was at the lazy insult.

The trail hands, lounging about, waiting for chow, noted that the pink-haired stranger was garbed in run-over boots and clothes that had seen better days. Neat, well-sewed patches liberally sprinkled his garb, from the seat of his pants to even a small one covering a hole in the thinning crown of his old felt sombrero.

He had elected to ignore the remark by Mertz and turned to watch Stillwell's approach from the night herd. Mertz was a gimlet-eyed hand who had joined the outfit at Santone. He wasn't the kind who would let the newcomer ignore him.

"Whyn't you put a patch on yore crow-bait, too?" Mertz drawled insolently. "He looks like he's about to fall apart at the joints! Haw-haw!"

And that is when the name "Patches" took hold.

The young man took three steps toward the sprawled Mertz, his reins still in his hands.

"My mother sewed these patches on these clothes," he said in soft, clear words that had a challenging fringe on them. "She's a seamstress in Del Rio, and a good one. Any objections, friend?"

Mertz squirmed, his black bead eyes turning to slits, the arrogant humor fading off his face. He got to his feet, sizing up the stranger as he unfolded, not missing the old .45 that sagged in a frayed holster. Somebody laughed shortly, but the laugh was aimed at Mertz and his mouth went hard and mean.

Old Ben Bradshaw ambled forward but he moved too late. Mertz flicked out a long

arm and Patches' hat went flying to the ground.

"Hell, I thought I saw a tranchler crawl-in' on yore hat," Mertz bared his teeth in mocking alarm. "Reckon it was just that patch that fooled me. 'Scuse me."

The stranger's off-color red hair seemed to bristle. Before the pop-eyed crew could exactly understand what happened, a hard red palm was spread against Mertz's chest and a worn boot had slipped behind his heels. The swarthy one went sprawling on his back in the dry grass. Patches picked up his hat, slapped it against his leg, jerked it tightly down on his head and stalked away to the rope corral where Stillwell was turning his mount in to the remuda boss.

Trail crews were chronically short-handed and the Triangle outfit was no exception. Stillwell's range-wise eyes spotted that special look of a man who's a natural at handling cattle, and he told Patches he had a job. He started away then, but Patches stopped him.

"Just as far as Roan's Crossing, mister. That's as far as I want to go."

Stillwell whirled back, frowning.

"Roan's? Why just to Roan's? This herd's got to go to Kansas, son."

"You need riders from here to Roan's as bad as anywhere," the young man said flatly. "You'll pick up other riders at the crossing. I'll want my pay there so I can head back south."

Stillwell's face took on a look of distaste. "You wouldn't be scared of something in Kansas, would you?" he asked sharply.

Patches' peeled face turned redder than ever. He knew what Stillwell meant.

"My name's Roy Baker and it's on no reward posters!" he said evenly. "I can just go as far as Roan's, that's all. I've made the drive before and I know the trail and the crossing job. I'll be worth my pay, even for two weeks, till you get this herd across the river. If you don't want it that way, I'll go hunt another trail foreman that does."

Stillwell had no intention of passing up an experienced trail hand, but his expression showed he didn't relish the deal. He finally nodded curt agreement.

"All right. To Roan's, then."

Roan's was known as a good fording point, with sloping banks, shallow water and no quicksand. Other than that, there wasn't much that could be said for Roan's.

It had a town, of sorts—a cactus-hided town, peopled mostly with transients, trail riders, Chisholm stragglers and state-line riffraff. It was the last settlement on the Red River where cattle crews could muddy their dusty throats at a bar and have a final fling of carousing before slagging off into the dismal Nowhere that stretched between Texas and the Kansas markets.

Roan's had those things, and possibly one other item that added to its dubious distinction. It had Red Mabry. The notorious Red Mabry was the house gambler at the big Quicksand Saloon, owned by the burly, bewhiskered and seldom-seen John Smith. Mabry was known as bad medicine, all up and down the trail.

ONE NIGHT, still a week out Roan's Crossing, the name of Red Mabry came up around the Triangle chuck wagon. Slim Mertz still smarted from the way Patches had set him down that first day and the hands could feel the sure sparks of trouble being fanned toward open flame.

"I'll bet Patches here could beat Red Mabry at poker and outshoot him blindfolded," Mertz sneered. "Bet you're a fast man on the draw. Like yore ma is with a sewin' needle!"

Patches' hand shook very slightly as he put a hot cup of coffee on the ground beside him.

"Wouldn't want to have to shoot it out with Mabry," he spoke briefly. "I know his reputation."

"Bet you've killed a lot of men," Mertz kept needling. "You ever shoot anybody with that old .45 you're packin'?" Mertz winked around at the others. Observant old Ben Bradshaw saw Patches' blistered lips tighten a fraction.

"Yeah," Patches nodded quietly. "About a thousand stumps and a couple hundred tin cans and four or five coyotes."

"What I thought," Mertz sneered. "Facin' a live man with a gun ain't as easy as that!"

No, it wouldn't be easy. Patches reflected later that night, sitting his horse in the dark prairie where the herd was being held. Not easy to face a man, both of you with guns in hand. But that was his life's goal, almost. That was why he had been making the drives north to the Red River. Some day he might hear the name of Bullet Troy.

Somewhere, on some of these trails, at some river crossing point, somebody might know what had become of Bullet Troy. Patches wished he could ride farther north, could hunt trace of his man in Kansas. But the months required for that would be too long for him to be gone. This way, he could pick up a little salary to help feed and clothe the five younger children, help supplement the modest income his mother made taking in sewing.

And what would he do if he ever found Bullet Troy? He thought grimly about that. Maybe he would be the one who would not live to ride away. But one of them would have to die. He would confront Bullet Troy. He would remind him how, five years ago, Troy had headed north in charge of a widow woman's trail herd—and how he had never come back when the cattle were sold. He might even have time to tell Troy how the woman lost her ranch because Troy stole her money, how she had struggled to rear six children, how they had lived from hand to mouth in Del Rio, crowded into a dismal little 'dobe house.

Patches' hand always tightened on his reins until they were stiff, when he thought of those things. They were taut now, and his mouth was grim in the dark. Maybe he was wasting time, making these trips, hoping to hear of a clue to Bullet Troy. The man may long since have changed his name, and probably had; long since changed in appearance, too. Patches had been five years younger, then, and he didn't remember Troy very well. But something always drove him to try again.

His horse had ambled sure-footed on a wide, careful swing about the quiet herd. Patches came out of his bitter memories at the unexpected sound to the south. He heard the movement of horses, off to his left in the mesquite draw, then the sound of moving cattle.

He tied his horse to a mesquite and bent low, working his way toward the sounds. The thin moon extended a puny light from behind swabs of overcast skies. He gained on the sounds and finally he spotted two riders, perhaps half a dozen head of cattle.

It was an old trick and he was surprised that anybody in the Triangle crew was involved in such lowly thieving. A rider in cahoots with the small-fry trail thieves would let a few head of stragglers drift be-

hind him, lost in the brush. A dozen, two dozen maybe, at a time. His waiting cohorts would move them off in the night, adding them to small herds similarly collected from trail stragglers, back in the rough country to either side the main trail.

A nervous old longhorn suddenly cut back, headed for the point where Patches was crouched in the brush. A rider, cursing, whirled his horse and applied the spurs. Patches had to jump aside to the protection of a larger mesquite, or get run down.

At his movement, the horseman jerked up and Patches saw the gun silhouetted against the sky.

"Who th' hell is that over there? Come out, you sneakin' son—or I'll blast yore hide off!"

The man did not wait for Patches to stand up. With an angry curse he blasted a shot at close range and mesquite bark showered upon Patches. He struggled to his knees and another shot splashed dirt into his face. Then the heavy Colt in his hand roared and bucked. The rider swayed in his saddle. The horse turned of its own accord, frightened, and Patches saw it race away in the scrub, the rider seeming to cling desperately to the saddlehorn.

Patches drove the cattle back toward the main herd. A rider loomed up.

"What the hell's going on down here?" It was the voice of Stillwell booming out. "You want to stampede these critters?"

"Couple of riderse trying to get away with these strays," Patches explained. "One of them started shooting at me."

Two other Triangle men rode out of the night.

"Likely yarn, Stillwell!" Patches recognized the voice of Slim Mertz. "The damn'

son let them strays get past him—probably asleep on duty. And made up that shootin' story to save his face."

"We'll look for traces in the morning," Stillwell said shortly. His voice was tinged with suspicion. "Get those steers back to the main herd, Patches. And be careful. You've got 'em all fidgety with that dang shootin'. Wouldn't take much to scare 'em into a stampede."

"If there's any doubt, Stillwell, you can find tracks down there in the draw. Maybe blood traces, too. I think I winged the thief that shot at me."

"I'll go take a look." Mertz rode off without further word from Stillwell.

The Triangle boss appeared undecided. The other rider, a thick-nosed husky named Doggett, spoke. "I'll go help Mertz." He took off.

When Doggett rode off a gun suddenly appeared in Stillwell's hand. He kicked his horse close to Patches.

"Keep your hands high. Don't move." Stillwell leaned forward in the saddle and grabbed at Patches' gun. "I'll take a look at your iron."

He examined the gun and Patches kept his hands up.

"One bullet's been fired," Stillwell grunted. "And I heard three shots, so I guess you're clear."

He caught the Colt by the barrel and extended it butt-first back to Patches. Patches stuffed it in his holster.

"Keep your eyes open, feller. You hired to go as far as Roan's. I want you to make it—alive."

Patches thought he caught a friendly note in the foreman's words as Stillwell rode off toward camp.



Bert Lowe*

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RED MABRY was a tall, thin man whose Kansas City-made suits hung too loosely on his bony frame. His thick hair an off-color red, was brushed smoothly back and parted on the side above the tight skin of his white forehead and in spite of the pallor of years' of dim light at a saloon gambling table his face looked perpetually blistered. His icy blue eyes of late held a strained, glassy look. And here of late the little hacking cough had become a deeper, clawing pain in the gambler's tight-skinned chest.

Mabry wearily leaned back now in a deep chair across from John Smith in the saloon owner's back office and stared at the sharp eyes peering hard from Smith's big thick-whiskered face.

"No, you'll have to stay here, Mabry," John Smith was saying in low, emotionless words. "No matter what the doc said, I can't afford to have you running loose. You know too much."

"You never did trust me, did you?" Mabry tried to force an ironic smile to his white lips.

Smith shook his massive head and kept his beady eyes on the gambler. "Only when I can see you—and when you're making money for the Quicksand. I'd hate to have to send a couple of my men looking for you, Mabry. Don't try it."

"I figured it would be that way." Red Mabry gave a long sigh and then coughed sharply. "The doc gave me final word," he added in a moment. "Just a matter of weeks now. Unless I get away, out in the open. Even that'd just prolong it."

"That's right." There was no compassion in the whiskered man's words. "It'd just prolong it. So you might as well die here, Mabry, as anywhere else."

"That's final, then?"

"That's final." John Smith stared at him. "And I'll give it to you straight, Mabry—I'll breathe easier when it happens."

Mabry stood up, working his long fingers. Early dusk was making a shadow in the ornate room. Sounds outside in the big saloon were rising in their early evening concert of booted feet, reckless laughter, ribald words. Hoofbeats in the street, heavy steps on the plank walks, and, in far away distance, the incessant undertone of thousands of bawling cattle, all combined to play a familiar overture and lift another curtain for a typical night in the Quicksand. Mabry

listened to it all a moment with a nostalgic, distant look in his blue eyes, then he shrugged. The little revolver in his waistband was as high as the bearded head across from him was watching. John Smith's heavy bulk was a foot or two back from his desk, and his silver-trimmed Colt was loose in the holster in his fat lap.

"You're doing well with the cut I'm paying you out of house winnings," John Smith remarked.

The ironic smile came again to the white lips. "Yes. . . . You think I'll find a place to spend it, John Smith, in boothill?" A sharp laugh, followed by a brief coughing fit, accompanied Mabry out the door. He closed it behind him, walked through the corridor and came out into the lamp-lighted space and smoke of the big main room.

It was all a familiar scene. He let his eyes run over the players at the tables, the lineup at the bar. At the end of the line, a little apart, toying with a beer mug, was a stocky young rider.

Patches looked up from the foamy mug and locked glances with Red Mabry. Icy blue eyes met their counterparts. Mabry was leaning slightly against the end of the rail, sipping the weak whiskey highball that Pat Dooly had placed before him. Patches felt a strange kind of fascination, to be staring eye to eye with the notorious Red Mabry.

"What the hell you gawkin' at?" grunted the Triangle hand next to Patches. "What's the matter with your beer?"

Patches wandered through the crowd after a while. He listened to talk here and there, asked a quiet question occasionally, always hoping to hear the name Bullet Troy. He watched Red Mabry at the main gambling table, intrigued by the gambler's graceful hand movements, by the chips stacked in front of him.

"That damn Slim Mertz and Doggett're drunk," Ben Bradshaw came up and whispered. "They're talkin' it that you tried to slip some steers off to some trail thieves. Better avoid 'em, son."

But Mertz gave him no chance. Mertz was staggering toward him.

"Damn trail thief!" Mertz mumbled, and a dozen nearby men heard the words. "Ma does sewin' in Del Rio while he rides the trail stealin'. Hell of a note, men!"

The crowd knowingly fell back. Patches

and Mertz were left alone, facing each other across a close four feet of the Quicksand's spur-scarred floor.

"Yeah, damn' trail thief," Mertz repeated, raising his voice and pointing drunk-enly.

Stillwell was moving angrily toward Mertz, but he came too late. Patches took a quick lunge forward. Mertz's gunhand flashed, and Red Mabry, at the silenced poker table, groaned inwardly. The fool red-head wasn't going for his gun. He was drawing back a fist. Mabry saw the sweep of Patches' left arm slap the gun aside, so that the bullet grazed across his left shoulder. And then the big pink fist crashed to Mertz's jaw. Patches hit Mertz again while the Santone man was falling, and that is when Doggett's knife flashed through the air. Patches whirled enough to take the blade through the flesh of his upper left arm. Blood gushed out and the pain was sickening to him, but he plunged on toward Doggett. He tripped over the feet of the fallen Mertz, and Doggett was bringing up his sixgun. It was Stillwell's heavy Colt that crashed down upon Doggett's head, and it was Stillwell and old Ben Bradshaw who helped Patches along the plank walk outside, up the street to Doc Taylor's house.

While the Doc took stitches in Patches' slashed arm, the young rider told them his story, why he had been making the trail rides to the river, his hunt for a clue to Bullet Troy, and of his mother and the younger children back home.

Stillwell and Ben Bradshaw listened in silence. "I never heard of Bullet Troy," Stillwell said grimly. "But if I ever do, Patches, I'll get word to you. No skunk low enough to steal the last dollar from a widow with six kids has got a right to live on this good earth." Old Ben nodded solemn agreement.

"Funny thing," Doc Taylor said talkatively. "Feller came in here the other night with a bullet crease just like you got. Somebody took a potshot at him in the dark."

"Anybody with him?" Patches asked quickly.

"Yeah," the doc nodded. "Another rider."

"They mention anybody's name?"

The doc thought carefully. "One of them," he said, trying to concentrate, "re-

ferred to somebody by name. Slim! That was it. Slim Mertz!" The doc snapped his fingers and beamed.

"I figured it," Stillwell looked at Patches. "Mertz and Blodgett were working with that trail thievin' in cahoots with that pair. You interfered with their stunt. The way Mertz rode around them tracks that night, covering up all traces, was too well done to be accidental.

"What does that call for?" Old Ben wanted to know. "Scrape 'em off the Quicksand floor and throw a double necktie party?"

"Wait till we get up in the Territory a ways, Ben," Stillwell grunted, his jaw muscles showing. "Then I think we can figure a treatment. Ever see two men runnin' across the sandy flats, afoot, with .45 slugs licking at their heels? Ought to be a good show for everybody in the crew!"

They left the doctor's house and in the street Stillwell turned to Patches. "Come on back to the Quicksand. The boys will have lugged Mertz and Blodgett back to camp by now. You need a good slug of raw likker to help that arm. Darned if the doc's sewin' didn't hurt me worse than seein' the original cuttin'!"

"He won't have to see Mertz and Blodgett no more," Ben grunted. "But Patches, you can always think of us up there in the Territory, when we turn them two loose in the sand flats. Maybe I'll let my bullet come a little too close to their flyin' heels. I dunno. Gonna be mighty temptin'!"

The raw whiskey burned Patches' throat, but it felt good, too, and offset the throbbing in his arm. He looked up at the back bar mirror. There was the reflection of a tall, thin, familiar figure, and hair that almost matched the color of his own. The man at his side was the notorious Red Mabry.

"Next time you get in a fix like that," Red Mabry said in thin, ironic humor, "you'd better forget your fists and try using that Colt. Fists are all right, but slow. Or did you just plain forget you had a gun?"

"It wasn't that," Patches said quietly, holding a level gaze on the gambler. "It's just that I always told my ma I never would use it till I had to."

Red Mabry chuckled then with real humor. "My friend, if that wasn't a time when you had to use it, I hope you never

have one! Only thing—don't expect to be that lucky next time!"

"This here is Roy Patches Baker an' his ma's the best seamstress in Del Rio!" Old Ben Bradshaw cut in talkatively, throwing a possessive hand to Patches' good shoulder. Ben had slugged down three quick straight ones. "This here boy," he orated to Red Mabry, "is tryin' to help her make a livin' for five little 'uns, an' at the same time a-huntin' a skunk named Bullet Troy what sold out their last cow a long time ago and run off with the money, leavin' that widow woman to shift fer her whole family!"

Red Mabry turned his eyes sharply to Patches and looked at him for a long time. Then his eyes, icy again, flicked briefly to the closed door at the rear of the building, the door that led to John Smith's office.

"Roy Baker . . . Bullet Troy." His voice was a hoarse murmur.

Red Mabry seemed to make a sudden decision.

"With luck like you're having tonight," he spoke in a tight voice, "you ought to try the poker table."

"Never did gamble much." Patches shook his head. "Couldn't afford it."

"Come on," Mabry took him lightly by the arm and there was soft insistence in his tone.

"Go on and try your luck." Stillwell urged. "Hell, I'll stake you, if you don't want to use your own dinero. Maybe Mabry's right—maybe it's your lucky night."

Patches let Mabry steer him to the big round poker table. He sat facing the rear, opposite Mabry who faced the front of the saloon. Patches watched Mabry's sure and nimble fingers loosen a new deck.

"So you're looking for a man who cheated your family," Mabry said almost gaily. "Well, Patches—that was a low-down trick. If I was twenty years younger and had my health I'd join the hunt with you." He pushed chips to the center. Four other men were in the game. "But instead of that," Mabry chuckled, and Patches caught an odd expression in the gambler's tone, "it don't look like I can get out of town—unless it's to boothill graveyard."

Patches lost a little at first. Then he won a pot, a big one. And then he won again. He lost a few hands, won another big pot.

The chips in front of him mounted. Some of the other players cursed their luck, threw in their hands, and others slid in to take their places. But Patches' luck held. He was both dumbfounded and fascinated by the way the cards were falling for him. Mabry was playing silently, in a run of hard luck, a peculiar thin smile on his mouth. Finally, Patches realized that he had more money in front of him than he had ever expected to own in his life. Must have been over a thousand dollars in chips. He wished he could quit. But the chips kept coming his way and he stayed, and the spectators were pop-eyed at his luck.

It was late when he looked up from his cards and saw the bearded face in the rim of smoky light just back of Red Mabry. A chill went through Patches. How long the big bearded giant had been watching, he did not know. But the little black eyes above the thick beard were murderously hard, and they were fastened on Red Mabry's hand, and there was an angry line of a mouth somewhere beneath that beard.

Patches' stare caused Mabry to turn and look up.

"I'll expect that money to be won back," John Smith said hoarsely, and all the crowd could hear the raging hatred in the words. "That's my money you're using, Mabry."

"The man's just lucky, John Smith," Mabry tried to laugh. A cough shook his thin frame.

"He is," Smith replied evenly, his tone ominous. "And I know *how* he's been lucky, Mabry."

"Cash your chips in, Patches," Mabry spoke abruptly. He pushed back and stood up. "I've had enough for tonight."

"No you haven't!" John Smith's voice roared out now, a bellowing blast of hate. "You'll sit there until some of those chips change sides, Red Mabry!"

Mabry was standing. The little revolver in his waistband gave off nickel-plated sparkles of lamp light.

Patches sensed the impending violence there, as did the others. He, too, pushed back from the table and got to his feet.

"Cash his chips, Bullet Troy!" Mabry spat the words at John Smith. "The house owes him over a thousand dollars. His name is Roy Baker!"

The men around dived for the floor when they saw John Smith's right hand come up

with the blasting silver-trimmed sixgun. Red Mabry moved too late for the revolver in his waistband. He would not die of tuberculosis in the cactus-souled crossing town.

His last words were a hoarse, mocking whisper but they carried to the strained men around him.

"ROY BAKER," Red Mabry said again. "Meet *Bullet Troy*. And go . . . for that gun . . . now . . . Patches!"

Red Mabry was dead. But *Bullet Troy* was alive. Alive, and for a moment frozen, while the name Baker hammered at his brain, beat into his mind from out of the past. And Patches was frozen, too, in that first moment, the words hitting at his comprehension. And then he looked again at *Bullet Troy* and knew, and already *Bullet Troy* was cursing and bringing that gun up again, and Patches' own gun hand felt slow and weighted.

He did not know when his trigger finger jerked, or how close *Bullet Troy's* shot came to him. But *Bullet Troy* was sagging, his gun hand already limp, and the gun held by Patches kept bucking and roaring, following the falling, bearded man all the way down to the floor. And at the end Patches, alone at the table, looked down at his scattered chips, down at Red Mabry's lifeless hand lying careless among bloody cards. And down at the floor where the

whiskered face of *Bullet Troy* was ugly in death.

Patches worked his gun into its holster and turned away.

"How about a drink of whiskey?" Still-well murmured. "Personally, I want two, myself—and it's probably your whiskey. If *Bullet Troy* got hold of this place with your ma's money, you own every damn' stick of it and the court'll see that you get it!"

"And don't forget you got a thousand dollars worth of chips to cash in!" blurted old Ben, pop-eyed. "Damn, I never saw such luck in my life!"

Patches turned to look at the form of Red Mabry, now being lifted from the table. Yes, he thought. He had been lucky.

"To Red Mabry," he murmured, and downed the drink.

And then he thought of how he would ride up to the 'dobe house in Del Rio and spread a thousand dollars in currency before his mother's startled eyes. Just the thought of it made him smile. He would not tell her how *Bullet Troy's* slug had come so close it had ripped his pants at the hip. He would not ask her, either, to put a nice neat patch on the rip. Hell no! No more sewing, no more patches! Still-well and old Ben, for the first time, heard a deep, mirthful chuckle come out of the blistered lips and saw eager happiness melt the ice from the laughing blue eyes.



TAR 'EM TO HELL-AN'-GONE!

That strangely sinister politico, Jacob Frome, rode the twisted Powder River trails, slicing that frontier country like a melon into country districts, for the profit each rich slice might yield. Sudden John Irons figured that other folks should share that golden feast—even though the first course was a mess of hell-hot politics, topped off with boiling tar and feathers, in Rimrock's "Vote-and-Die" election.

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With a savage snarl, Leloo sank her fangs into the man's forearm.

WILD KILLER QUEEN

By Tom Roan

Leloo, queen wolf of the high country, knew death lurked wherever she caught the dreaded man-scent—but one time she knew she was stepping into the trap that would hang her pelt from the man-creature's fence, and spread her carcass for the vultures. . . .

SHE lay flat on her belly, shining black muzzle on her forepaws, eyes copper slits and ears half-cocked to catch every whisper of the night wind softly murmuring down the coulee. It was an uncertain wind, a mere stir at one moment, as still as death at the next, each stirring raw with the bite of snow on the high walls of hills rimming the western end of the valley, up there where a faint little moon hung low-tipped on the ragged skyline, and a high world not yet touched by the hint

of spring in the lower deeper valleys.

Hope still burned in the cold, cunning brain of Leloo, the big black timber wolf, as she watched the low, rough-log cabin on a bench of flat ground at the head of the coulee six hundred yards away. Darkness and evil odor held everything about it, the pale squares of light from the lopsided windows having vanished hours and hours ago.

Behind the cabin, the sod-roofed hut flanked by low sheds was like some low-

squatting monster to the eye of a wolf. Around it was a tall fence made of flattened oil tins, old boards and planks, the outer side of it covered with the pelts of wild animals, skunks and cougar, coyote, wolf and bob-cat, better fur drying among bearskins under the sheds, making it a trapper hut as far as the eye might see or a keen nose could smell.

Every wild animal with a price on its coat in the valley and hills for miles knew the owner of the cabin by sight and smell. Crump Goosby's footsteps dropped anywhere in the high or low places were an abomination to all that walked or flew, his scent left behind an evil omen in the air hours on end after he had passed.

Crump Goosby was always going somewhere, always a figure in brown, long, lean and sloping, an old cap slanted on his head, hair a matted yellow lump at the back of his neck, his step creepy, pale eyes wandering right and left, up and down, eagerly seeking. Even at night he was apt to be sighted stealing through a forest glade or slow-poking along a ravine, the rifle forever ready for a quick kill.

Leloo had encountered this long, ungainly two-legged thing in various ways a number of times in the past four years. Sometimes it was only in his scent and the remains from his rifle or traps, often the bloody carcass of some unfortunate animal left behind after it had been robbed of its hide and fur. Once, wind against him, he had passed within a couple of rods of her while she hugged the rocks and brush of a small rise, body as flat and still as a shadow until the man had gone on his way.

Leloo might have gone on to the end of her time avoiding him, keeping herself clear of his traps and out of sight or range of his keen eye looking along a rifle's barrel. But Crump Goosby had brought dogs in.

Year after year the old den at the head of the gorge had been safe and snug enough for any wolf. Four litters of cubs had been born there, had waxed fat or grown lean according to the way of the wild, through the times of plenty or long famine, and had gradually learned to take to the outer world and shift for themselves.

It had been too much good fortune to last. Another wolf might have had only one litter there, then moved on as the others came, never twice risking the un-

certain business of trying to rear a second family in the same place. But it had held Leloo. The deep, quiet and rough gorge was a place where she had never encountered a prowling lynx, bob-cat or cougar—the one place that had seemed utterly free of all dangers until Crump Goosby came with his dogs. Leloo had returned one night with four fat jackrabbits slung across her shoulder to find that the cubs were gone, dragged from the den by a wire-wrapped leather snare on the end of a long pole.

Scent told her the rest of it, even as it told her everything now when the wind came whispering and softly fish-tailing down the big coulee. The cubs were still alive up there on the rise, prisoners in a wire-floored and wire-walled pen under the west overhang of the shed along the south side of the long, sod-roofed hut.

Getting to those cubs and freeing them was the problem here. Leloo had come each night to let them know that she had not forsaken them. Her wails up and down the valley had told them that. Her scent drifted to them on the wind had made them doubly certain that she was out there.

Wails, even from afar, were not good, several times stirring the scared and impatient cubs into whimpering and pup-wailing outcries, getting the dogs to yelping and baying their heads off inside the big cabin or behind the wire fence surrounding it.

Crump Goosby had been too quiet for comfort, no light appearing. If he had spoken at all to the dogs his voice had been low and guarded. A two-legged thing was smart, not going to spoil a trap set and waiting for its victim; and Leloo knew the trap was there, not one, but probably a dozen of them.

With dawn not far away she came to her feet and shook herself violently. There was time yet to take another turn of the cabin. The coming of light would send her away to wait for darkness again. Seeing her tracks here and there in the snow, Goosby might try to start his dogs on her trail. He had tried it twice, and she had lost them within a couple of miles, making fools out of the last one of them with all her sharp tricks of trail-blinding.

Her last trip was back over the same ground, half-circling, making a dip to

southward, then west to the bench and up along it until she came to a pine-fringed rise two hundred yards behind the shed-winged low hut. Her eyes were on every foot of the way, studying every stone and bush, yet she had covered them almost step by step less than an hour before.

There was no snow here on the bench, an unusually warm chinook having blown up from the south to clear away the blanket of white a week before the cubs were taken from the den. One of those cubs whimpering in the distance was her undoing now, a sound she could not resist any more than any mother at the sound of her young indictress.

She stole closer and closer, halting many times, knowing the danger, every bristle lifted, a snarl listing her lips, all the wolf in her cunning brain tense with the sheer, cold knowledge born of the wild that she was making a great, great mistake. Her eyes were still on every stone, clump or brush or low tree, nose razor-keen. At each halt her entire body quivered, a fore-foot lifting, ears cocking and head turning from side to side as she listened.

There was another pine-covered little rise ahead of her now, one not much more than sixty feet behind the wire-covered end of the shed. She eased into it for one close look, all the cubs now up and staring, their tails lifted, knowing by the wind that she was here, almost with them. The three whimpered at the same time. Leloo answered them.

Go back! Danger! danger! danger! The sharp wolf brain might have been pounding the warning, but she could not turn. The cub whimpering was an unseen force that drew her, moving leg and muscle. She was sliding with the greatest of caution between two little trees when it happened, striking as a sudden stroke and as quickly as a high-powered rifle's bullet might rip through a brain.

She was in the air now, a thin cable of steel around her, fangs slashing right and left. Overhead an old cowbell clanged somewhere near the tree-top, adding terror to terror, dogs braying now, a light springing through a crooked little window, a man's voice bellowing something inside the cabin, the three cubs scurrying for the darkness of a large, grass-floored box in the corner of the pen.

MAN-BRAIN had conquered wolf-brain. The snare had been a masterpiece, so cleverly designed and hidden a man on the lookout for just such a thing might have walked or crawled into it without realizing it was there until the trigger was touched and the steel cable had snapped around him.

The bell still clanged when Crump Goosby stepped out the door with a lantern in one hand, a rifle in the other and a stout club under his arm. He kicked the dogs back, both inside the cabin and the forward part of his wire-fenced yard, and slipped out the rude gate, knowing before he had gone anywhere just what he would find in the snare.

Except for a convulsive little jerk the hidden bell had ceased to ring, above the roar and yelp of the mad dened hounds behind him. That meant that the snare was choking the life out of its victim, and it made him hurry all the more, a man stumbling and swearing to himself, lantern bobbing its pale circle of light. Between snare, rifle and club there could be little danger for him. He came on to a distance of three yards from his prize, and stopped to look at her hanging there with only one hind foot touching the ground.

The catch was perfect. In a minute or two more the wolf would be dead. To hasten it he sat the lantern on the ground, leaned the rifle against a low limb, and stepped in to deliver a blow with the club, but a thought stopped him. This was something that could wait. He could use this fine catch if he worked quickly enough. Turning, he raced back to the cabin and returned with a coil of rope taken from a corner post of the fence. A master in the art of looping and tying, he had the wolf exactly as he wanted her when he slacked away the cable and let her come to the ground, the rope securing her from nose to heels. In no more than five minutes she was being flung into the pen with her cubs, and he was whipping the rope clear from a safe distance.

It was good business, no sympathetic softening about it. The cubs in the pen needed the milk in the fat udders of that big bitch-wolf to finish rounding them out. Not one of them had touched the chunks of bob-cat meat he had flung in the cage, but they would take to their own mother's

milk, and in time the mother would take to the meat and teach the cubs to eat it. That would mean that they would fatten, the hair get longer and better day by day until he was ready to kill and skin, dry the pelts on the fence or under the sheds, and be assured of top prices for his fur when it was time to sell.

CRUMP GOOSBY never missed a bet where a dollar was concerned. He had tapped the wolf only a couple of times with his club while tying her. Thrown like a dead dog in the pen, she was back to consciousness when he came out of the cabin to look at her again after he had had his breakfast and fed the dogs.

"My, she's a beauty!" he told himself gloatingly. "Biggest damn she-wolf I ever saw. Maybe the biggest in Montana!"

He walked on along the side of the pen, eyes on her as she stood now in a corner, cubs crowded against her, her eyes on him, lips lifted to bare her fighting fangs. Her eyes still held that half-dazed stare from the light clubbing, but they would soon clear. And she was a slick one—sleek an' slick in the vernacular of the trapper. Her coat was long and heavy, coal-black and shining like a mirror—one of those good, thick and stout coats that always made a fur-buyer's eyes gleam a little as he upped the price.

"Forty dollars for that hide!" he told himself, chuckling. "Not a dime less. I know a good thing when I see it!"

Leloo only watched him, heart pounding furiously, the cubs cowering as close to her as they could get. It was not given to a wolf to know why this two-legged thing always prowled, killed and trapped;

not given to her to know that bounties were paid for killing a wolf in addition to the prices of hides and fur in the big eastern markets, back there where men were smart when it came to the high tricks and deeply shady business of dyeing and tipping common wolf pelts and selling them to women as the most expensive silver fox.

The safety of the cubs and the freedom to roam the hills, valleys and canyons again was all that mattered here. Without his guns, dogs and traps this smelly two-legged creature here was no match for her. Tooth and fang against hand and foot she could tear him down and rip him apart, spilling his blood and gut if forced to it on a couple of yards of fair fighting ground.

But half-fairness had no place in this slaughtering man. Goosby let his dogs come up as one of the first things, their wailing, barking and wild scratching at the wire a thundering din until the man was sick of it himself and kicked them aside. After a day and night, tired of it themselves, the hounds paid little attention to her and the cubs.

It was the third day before she could stomach the meat flung to them. The cubs had been first to take to it despite her growls that tried to tell them in wolf language that there was some trick to it, even the smell of it dangerous once a man had touched a thing. But it was good meat after all, bob-cat and lion, and finally the fresh liver from an old horse the man was using for special bait for traps somewhere.

Leloo ate when it was dark, and took water from an old wooden pail in the corner of the pen. No hour passed without a rigid inspection of her prison. At night she had tried to scratch a hole under the



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fence, and had found that the stout wire flooring placed flat on the ground was more than her paws and claws could tear away.

Given a larger place to run and finally to romp uncaringly in their times of youthful forgetfulness, the cubs might have learned to thrive on it. With so much meat around them merely for the taking, they were getting fat and sometimes quarrelsome, their hair beginning to take on that certain thickness and sleekness of coat so dear to a fur hunter's heart instead of being unruly and ugly, more of a fuzz than anything else.

Then big Lige Luke, another trapper from down the valley, came the day Crump Goosby was to kill and skin. It had turned bitter-cold under a still sky and a brilliant sun, the air clear enough to see two hundred miles away. Tucker—broad, thick and short, bearded and wild-haired as a buffalo bull after a long winter of raging winds, snow and ice—arrived in a stout but rattling wagon drawn by two shaggy black horses. Behind the wagon limped a one-eyed and worn-out gray mare, one that had seen her hard years of service on the range and too old and tired now to know what was in store for her.

Goosby killed the mare first, saving a bullet by blind-folding her, then standing on the rear end of the wagon to furiously bring an old poll-axe smashing down on her head. The mare merely grunted and dropped to the ground. Long used to submitting to the strange acts of man she had not so much as stamped a foot when the old grain bag was wrapped around her head and eyes and tied under the throat.

Bear and mountain lion bait was needed for new traps, deadfalls and snares. Bears were already venturing from their dens here and there after a long winter of hibernation. The grizzly was usually first. Unlike the rest of the usual run of bears, they were apt to be found out of their dens for a short prowling even in the months of the most severe cold that ever settled over the land.

Nervously pacing the pen, Leloo watched them skin the mare, carefully peeling the hide from one side, then rolling her over for the other. They hung the hide on the fence, coyotes in the far distance catching the smell of the blood and wailing their hungry woes to the skies as the carcass of

the mare was cut and slashed into chunks to be loaded on the wagon.

Even the cubs could sense that something was going to happen to them when the meat was on the wagon, Goosby taking time to toss chunks of it to the ever-hungry hounds whimpering and pawing inside the fence, then the two men were coming in to stand and stare at the pen. The cubs had darted out of sight in the straw-floored box. Goosby reached a lean, bloody hand through the wire and pulled a string, letting a slide lid on the box drop, fastening the cubs in.

"Guess we'll take the old un first." His voice was a grunt. "Save us seein' 'er jumpin' an' snarlin' all over hell at the sight of the young uns dyin' in front of 'er."

"Gonna shoot 'er?"

"Nope, I'll use my snare-stick." He squirted tobacco juice to one side. "There ain't never no use in bein' wasteful. Just catch 'er, choke 'er down, an' slip the knife in where yo're gonna hit the heart, an' it's all over but the shoutin'."

The dogs were in the front yard, watching it all through a strip of woven-wire fence. As if knowing what was coming they started yelping and scratching at the wire when Goosby stepped to one side and picked up his snare-stick with the wire-wrapped slip strap on the end of it.

"An' that big un knows what's comin'." Lige Luke cleared his throat with a gentle hacking sound. "Yep, that she-devil knows. Look at that look in her eyes!"

"They allus know, somehow." Goosby again squirted tobacco to one side and looked at his stick critically. "Plum queer the way these wild critters have when it comes to catchin' on to things. Sorter stand to my side an' watch this gate."

"An' yuh watch yoreself, kinda, Crump," warned Luke. "Somethin' tells me she's gonna make one hell of a fight of it."

"Which won't hurt me." Goosby squirted tobacco, chuckled, then grew serious. "Fact is I kinda like 'em to fight. Makes me kinda mad, then it ain't so hard to kill 'em, so powerful kind-hearted I am."

Leloo watched the stick with bared fangs, rump against the wire at the far end of the cage, forefeet spread, body rocking. She snapped at the dangling strap, then whipped her head out of the way just in time. The strap was around a forefoot a

second later, but she was free of it before the man could snatch it tight from the other end of the stick.

"Wiry, all right." Goosby swore after the first minute of trying. "Maybe oughta just shoot 'er, but sometimes them high-power bullets can split a skull wide-open, an' then yuh lose the bounty on 'em. There!"

The strap had caught. Leloo felt it snatch into a fierce grip around her jaws and ears, and slung back with all her weight. The strap held, the man hauling it tighter and tighter from the loose end in his hand. In a few moments she was being dragged forward, body still bucking and twisting from side to side. The cubs saw her through the wire screen of the drop-door to the box, each setting up a whimpering.

Leloo flung herself against the box, getting her shoulders behind the edge of it, forefeet braced. Goosby swore and gave her a more furious jerk, his anger mounting by the second, and anger, as usual with men proved a sudden wreckage of the box. Leloo was snatched forward, big Lige Luke now giving a strong hand on the end of the stick there in the half-open gateway of the pen, and suddenly, boards snapping and popping, the entire front of the box came out, the cubs yelping, dogs beyond the two men setting up another din of yapping and baying.

It would have been over in a few moments. Crump Goosby had done this thing many times in the past. Cubs pouring out of the box behind her, the big wolf was free of all entanglements, but she had angered Goosby beyond measure. He gave her another yank, twisting his stick now to throw her off her feet. A pull brought her forward on her back, legs up and violently thrashing the air.

"An' now the knife!" he grunted, releasing the pole with one hand and pulling it from a sheath at his hip. "Won't take a second."

Leloo made one more desperate move to free herself. Lige Luke had both hands on the stick. He gave it a furious twist, flattening her down and choking her there in the edge of the half-open gate. Goosby reached forward quickly, long knife going for the vital spot. At that instant the strap broke, the wire wrapping uncoiling like a

spring. "Damn it!" Goosby tried to fling back, but it was as if the lightning had come down to strike him, powerful jaws snapping upward to seize the wrist holding the knife. "I'm bit! Help me, dammit."

It was worse than that. He had dropped the knife, long fighting fangs ripping down the wrist and tearing into his hand. Blaming it all on Luke in an instant, he fell back, stumbled, and hit the ground on his rump, the next instant finding his face rammed full of fighting wolf forced now to try to kill a man.

"Get 'er off!" He threw up his arms. "Damn, she'll kill me!"

Leloo split his chin and mouth, flopping him back on the ground, and wheeled on Luke as he turned to run. Before he had gone a yard she had caught him just behind the right knee, the ham-stringing wolf in action now. With a yell of pain Luke was down, fists hammering backward in his furious attempt to keep her off.

"Help me!" he bawled. "She's gone crazy!"

Crump Goosby was not thinking of helping any one but himself at the moment. He saw the cubs scurry out of the gate. Like a big, long hog he humped himself forward, straight into the pen for his own safety now. Before he could close the gate Luke was there, a bigger, fatter hog sprawling himself atop of him, one foot jerking the gate closed, the dogs making a terrible din of it beyond the strip of wire fence.

"Damn to hell!" wailed Goosby. "This—this is the worst fix I've ever been in!"

Neither man had a six-shooter. Even the knife was gone now, kicked a full-yard away from the gate. A rifle stood leaning against the wall of the cabin. It might have been standing in the middle of Mexico for all the good it was doing at the moment.

And there was nothing funny about it, nothing for any man to laugh about. The Devil, himself, it seemed, had suddenly taken sides with a bitch-wolf and her cubs, helping her jail her would-be killers, making them look like two scared apes behind wire.

For a second or two there was the freedom of the yard, then the wolf in Leloo made her realize that she was miles yet from being free. The men would know how to work themselves out of the rear end of

the cage. In a very short time they would have their hands on guns.

She sat back and wailed, a spontaneous outburst of terror in itself, the cubs whimpering in the din of the barking, raging, scratching helpless dogs. When she wailed again a snort came from the other side of the fence. She raced to the fence and struck it with all her weight, startling the two old wagon horses beyond it.

"Whoa!" yelled Luke. "Whoa, yuh fools out there!"

He might have cracked a whip over the horses. Smelling the blood of their own kind behind them, dogs barking, a wolf having howled twice close at hand, they were moving forward, swinging on around the fence—two old broken-down plugs trying to start a run-away, and the Devil again must have taken a hand in it.

LELOO heard the crash as the rear hub of the wagon struck the corner of the fence, old boards and tin falling. In a second there was a hole, the valley and the hills looming beyond it. With a snarl to her long-legged cubs she made for it, Goosby and Luke yelling their heads off behind them, the old horses raking the wagon on around the fence, playing havoc with it.

Now it was freedom again for the moment. Cubs behind her, one eye looking back over her shoulder to watch them, Leloo headed for the nearest ravine. She struck it, racing down it, the wolf hunting cover with all her might. When she was forced to break for higher ground an ever-dreaded crash sounded behind her, a bullet whistling just to the right a second or two before, and now the wild baying of dogs.

Goosby and Luke had come out of the cage, Goosby rushing straight for the rifle, Luke's fat and bulky figure bounding on to throw open a gate in the front yard and let the dogs take up the trail, foolish wagon horses forgotten for the moment, only those fleeing wolves mattering.

"Forty dollars on the big un goin' to hell!" wailed Goosby as he fired again and again. "At least thirty a piece on the little uns! Get them hosses! They're hung up again a tree down the slope!"

"I'm nigh bleedin' to death, Crump!"

"Don't talk about blood!" fired back

Goosby. "Look at my pore hand! Wrop a damn rag 'round it!"

The dogs came first, young and foolish, unschooled in this business of trying to pull down a full-grown wolf. Leloo saw them as she mounted a slope near the south side of the valley. Behind the dogs Goosby was soon appearing, bareback on a tall old black horse, rifle in his hand, his heels furiously pounding the animal's ribs.

Knowing that the cubs could not last long in an open race, Leloo was making for the roughest ground. One of the cubs was already becoming winded, another limping by the time she reached a deep crevice sloping upward at a dangerous angle in the side of another rough rise. By this time two of the hounds were getting close, traveling with the speed of whippets, long ears flapping, cries rising and falling with a near-musical ring, the rest of the dogs behind them, the thing on the black horse bobbing along in the distance.

She stopped and turned back at the top of the rise. The cubs stopped at the same time, bunching into a wad, not knowing what else to do. She waited only two or three minutes, tail down, ears flat, nose pointing down the crevice. As the first dog started getting close she dropped to her belly, cold-blooded murder in her eyes.

It was over in a matter of seconds. The foolish dog ran right into it, black lightning rising and striking him in the face. Long fangs tore half the muzzle off him, silencing the yelp of terror and pain. In another second she had torn half the right shoulder out of him, giving him a sling that sent him rolling back down the crevice and almost atop of the one coming up behind, turning that hound with a yelping of terror of his own as he scrambled, fell, rolled and bounced back down the slope, landing among the others to scare the eagerness out of them. At that moment a bullet wailed, smashed a flat stone just to Leloo's left, and she was again flashing on, trying now to herd the cubs in front of her as she made for even more dangerous territory.

Any other man but Crump Goosby would have turned back. Lige Luke, concerned with his own wound, had flatly refused to follow him on the second horse, going so far as to call him a damn' cheap skate for not shooting the old one in the first place.

Knowing all these hills, Goosby came on, urging the dogs as he was forced to take to the gentler slopes with the old horse. The hounds could track, and they kept it up for more than an hour. Coming out of a pine thicket on the back of a tall ridge, he heard them raising the devil below, sounding as if they had the wolf at bay.

He had to leave the horse tied to a bush a short time later. He had come to what looked like the rim of some ancient volcano crater. No hint of spring had touched here. It was snow and ice, steep and dangerous now, but tracks in the snow showed that the dogs had gone on ahead of him and seemed to have the wolf cornered down there on a rim of ice that was a deep lake in warmer weather.

It was dangerous, but he was used to danger. Using the butt of the rifle as a prop, he started down, slipping here, sliding there, the noise of the dogs still filling his hairy ears. Near the bottom he slipped and took a terrific fall, sliding and slopping from side to side for sixty or seventy feet, losing the grip on his rifle to let it go scooting and bouncing on ahead of him. The last thing was almost a sheer drop of twenty feet, but he landed in snow up to his waist, and saw the rifle lodged in an icy crevice to his left.

Now he could see what was happening. The dogs were less than two hundred and fifty yards away across the lake, ganged up around the ice-covered butts of a couple of old windfalls that had been tumbled over the rim high above by some storm in the past. This meant that the wolf was there, at bay in that windfall, the young dogs afraid to go in and tackle her—and good sense on the parts of the dogs at that.

He recovered the rifle and started on, stamping his feet on the ice. A layer of snow covered the most of it, and he started following the trail left by the wolves and the dogs. Before he had gone fifty yards he was stopping suddenly, the din in the distance not enough to deaden his ears to the faint sound of a gentle crackling around him.

The ice was dangerous, strong enough to bear the weight of dogs and wolves running in a strung-out line across it, but it would be disastrous for a man to keep on, and he turned back. All the hurry and

bluster had gone out of him, the ruddy flush of anger wiped from his face by a sickly-yellow coloring. It seemed that he held his breath until he was sure he was on safe footing once more.

Shouting encouragement to the dogs, he now ran along the edge of the lake, hugging the rocks and making a wide half-circle of it. As he ran and yelled the hounds were going crazy ahead of him. They had heard him and they had seen him.

And Leloo was already giving ground. She had torn an ear off of one foolish brute, had ripped the cheek of another, and badly cut a forepaw of a third. Without the man coming up she could have killed them all bite by bite, slash by slash. Her cubs were behind her, sent on up a narrow, winding break in the rocks and to be hidden from all sight below until they reached the top.

Snarling her worst now, she moved back and back, eyes on six objects that had come out from under the lower log—little fellows that could make a full-grown grizzly turn tail and give ground.

Now the dogs were piling in through the old roots and limbs, their barking a terrific din. That din was suddenly turned to yips and yelps, dogs floundering back, blinded, faces and coats filled with musk as six little black and white tails lifted and flipped, appearing to turn the air to a poisonous yellow all around.

Rifle ready, Crump Goosby ran right into it, a sudden stirring of the wind taking the smell away from. In a second the man was falling back, pawing at his face and eyes, rifle and wolves forgotten as he sought clearer air.

"Gawd A'mighty, skunks!" he yelled. "Polecats, yuh fools, *polecats*, an' yuh a runnin' me right into 'em!"

The dogs were catching it then, butt of the rifle slapping right and left, half-blind brutes yelping with their hurts. Out of the windfalls the yellow pall kept from an old mother-skunk and her five kittens coming, the wind changing to spread it over man and dogs alike while high above them a wolfish face looked back and down, something of a satisfied grin in the curling lips; then Leloo was moving on after the cubs, knowing that there was not a dog behind her that would be able to smell a trail again until it was hours and hours cold . . .

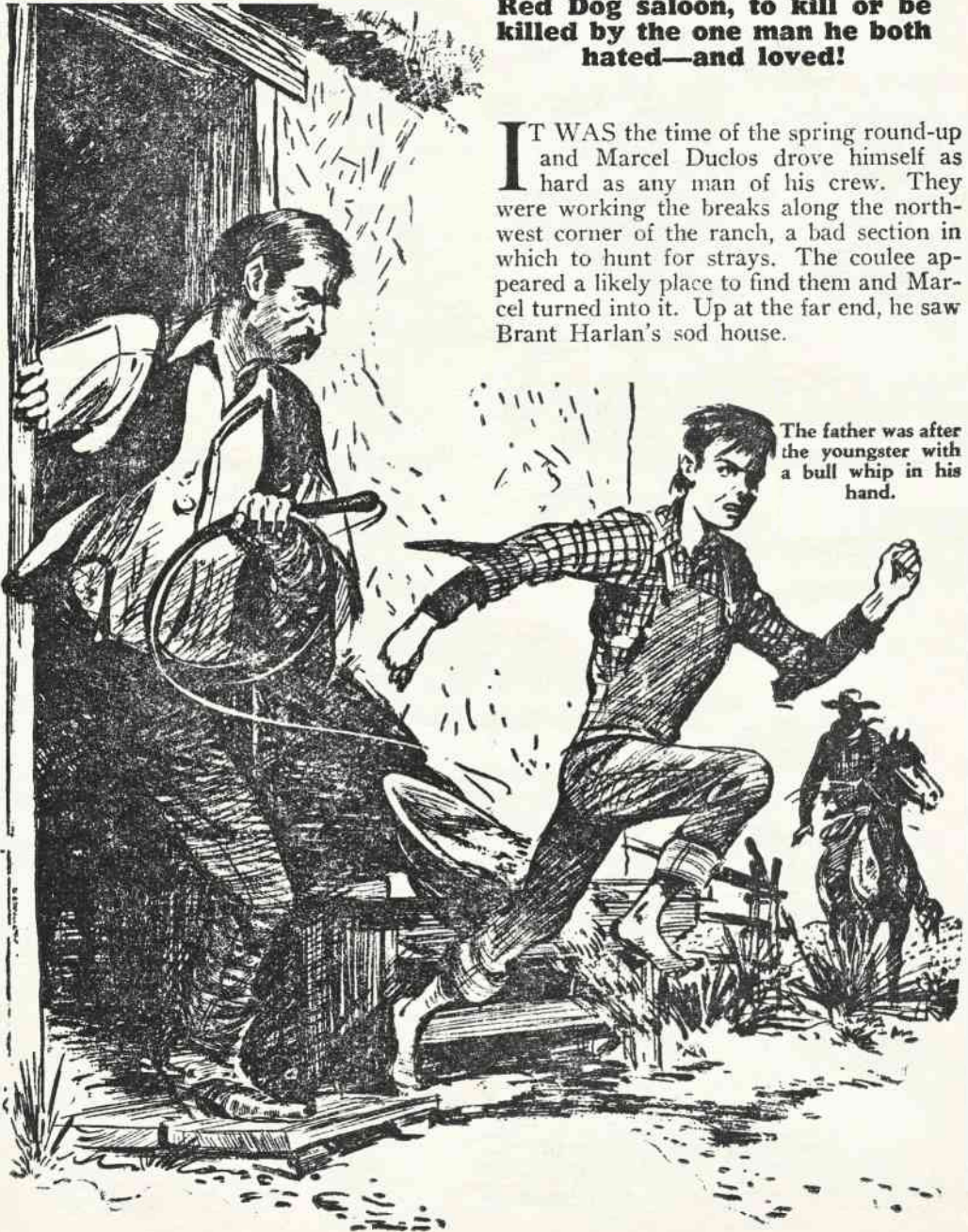
Yellow Streak Hero

By Lee E. Wells

The saffron brand of coward could never be blotted from Tige Ellis' hide until that fateful instant when he walked out the Red Dog saloon, to kill or be killed by the one man he both hated—and loved!

IT WAS the time of the spring round-up and Marcel Duclos drove himself as hard as any man of his crew. They were working the breaks along the northwest corner of the ranch, a bad section in which to hunt for strays. The coulee appeared a likely place to find them and Marcel turned into it. Up at the far end, he saw Brant Harlan's sod house.

The father was after the youngster with a bull whip in his hand.



He had heard that a new family had come in up this way, but he was surprised to find them so close to his own holdings. The grass-shaggy walls of the sod house broken by a single, low, planked door, extended out from the clay bank and there was already a careless litter around it. Not far off, a bare pole corral held a couple of horses, a decrepit buckboard pointed its shafts to the sky.

Marcel had time for no more than a swift, all-inclusive glance. Then a woman screamed and he jerked upright in the saddle. The planked door opened and a long-legged kid came flying out of the house. The woman screamed again, a mingled sound of fright and fury. A man bellowed angry obscenities. He rushed after the boy, a big bull-whacker whip in his hand.

His arm flashed back and the long lash uncurled ahead of him, snaking out toward the kid. It wrapped around the boy's legs and he sprawled headlong, face plowing into the dirt. The man pounced on him, jerked him to his feet. Marcel heard the flat smack of the man's hand across the boy's face. The kid's head rocked on his shoulders as the man's punishing blows continued.

"*Sacre bleu!*" ripped from Marcel's lips. He set the spurs and raced forward. A woman appeared in the doorway, a rifle in her hands.

Marcel brought his horse to a sliding halt and dropped from the saddle. He grabbed the man's arm, swung him half around. Marcel had a glimpse of a lean, dark face strained with fury, the black eyes wild, almost demented. With an amazingly powerful sweep of his arms, the man sent Marcel staggering back and he pounced on the kid again. Marcel scrambled to his feet, lifted his Colt from the holster and smartly rapped the barrel over the man's head. He collapsed. Marcel turned, saw the woman with the rifle. He warily eyed her.

"Is he dead?" she asked. There were still traces of beauty in her lips and eyes. Marcel shook his head.

"*Non*, he will live, I think. I am sorry, but you un'erstand?"

"I'm sorry you didn't hit harder," she answered. Marcel heard a sound behind him and turned in time to see the kid race away across the coulee, scale up the wall

like a goat and disappear beyond the rim. The woman sighed.

"That's Tige. Brant would have killed him." She looked sharply at the unconscious man and then at Marcel. "Maybe you'd better ride out while he's still asleep. No telling what Brant'll do."

Marcel shrugged. "I am not afraid."

"I am, Mister. You got my thanks, but I wish you'd ride on. It's better that way."

Marcel turned to his horse and mounted. He watched the woman put aside the rifle and kneel down beside Brant Harlan, still sprawled and unmoving. She looked up, a touch of annoyance in her face. Marcel pointed toward Brant.

He is always treat the little one that way?"

"When Brant's drunk or mad, he's crazy, Mister. Other times he at least keeps his hands off Tige. Will you please ride out before there's more trouble?"

"*Oui*," Marcel nodded. "I ride. But tell him that I will come this way again and I ask about the boy."

"I'm telling him nothing that'll rile him more," the woman answered. Her voice lifted in pleading. "Mister, please get out of sight!"

Marcel neck-reined the horse and rode back down the coulee.

So it was that he first met Tige Ellis and Brant Harlan. He expected trouble, but it didn't develop. The spring round-up took most of his time. It was a month or more before Marcel returned to the coulee.

This time Brant was not at home. His wife looked ill and worn but she made Marcel welcome. The kid was a little larger, legs too long for the tight, faded levis, bony wrists protruding beyond the frayed edges of his clean shirt.

He had a thin body and pinched face that needed feeding, dark eyes that were a little too large and defiant, a sullen mouth. He scowled and nervously rubbed one bare, dirty foot against the other. Marcel's Gallic heart was touched with pity and he hinted that he would be glad to help.

Mrs. Harlan instantly became distant and cold. Marcel sensed and applauded a self-pride that would admit no charity. A few minutes later, Marcel arose to go. He glanced sharply at Tige, saw no marks on the lad's face or legs.

"He is well treated, eh?"

"Well enough, considering," Mrs. Harlan answered stiffly and it was a final dismissal.

Marcel never returned again as long as Mrs. Harlan was alive. But whenever any man on his Diamond D payroll was near the coulee, on Marcel's orders, that man stopped by the sod house. The men had nothing good to report of Brant Harlan but they had a deep respect for his wife's courage. Tige was apparently running wild and Marcel worried about his schooling.

"This thing is not good," he said to his dark-eyed daughter, Louise. "He is your age, *ma petite*, and he cannot so much as spell, I betcha."

"Then you can bring him home, Papa, and he can go to school with me."

Marcel tugged reflectively at his mustache and shook his round head. "*Pardieu*, that would be hard! His Mama would say 'no' because she is proud. His Papa would refuse because he is very bad and mean. I wonder what sort of a man he will become!"

TWO YEARS passed and then, just before the first snow flurries, one of the men reported that Mrs. Harlan had died. Marcel saddled up, looked to his Colt, and rode to the coulee.

The sod house appeared the same. The yard was more littered and Harlan had managed to build a lean-to shelter for his horses. Not far away was a fresh mound, the raw clay surmounted by a crude wooden cross. The door was closed as Marcel dismounted, dropping the reins over the horse's head.

He had just raised his fist to knock when he heard an outburst of profanity. Glass crashed as furniture was knocked over. He heard a thud, a whimpering cry that abruptly choked off. Marcel cleared his coat from his holster, put his beefy shoulder to the door and pushed it open.

Brant Harlan was drunk. He whirled around as Marcel entered, eyes wild and staring. Tige stood plastered against the far wall, face white with fear, a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth. He had grown a good foot or more since Marcel had last seen him. Harlan's eyes were crazy wild.

"Get out!"

Marcel glimpsed the over-turned chair, the broken bottle, the damp spot on the wall beside Tige's head where the man had flung it. He shook his head.

"I'm taking him home with me."

"Like hell!"

Marcel lifted the Colt into his hand, let it dangle at his side. "Get your clothes, Tige. We go—now."

"I ain't leaving," he boy rasped. Marcel watched Harlan and spoke without moving his eyes.

"Get your clothes. At the Diamond D there is not the fist and the curse. I give you nothing—you work for it. You are hired on my ranch."

"By God—!" Harlan leaned forward. Marcel lifted the Colt.

"You are close to Diamond D land, *m'sieu'*—maybe on it. I do not know. Until now I do not care. But sometimes the cow disappear. You do not work for any ranch, you have no cow of your own. You do not farm. I think maybe I look into this, eh?"

"Accusing me—!"

"*Non*. The sheriff, he will find out, eh? Unless, of course, you are gone. Tige, you are ready perhaps?"

So Tige Ellis came to the Diamond D, and shortly afterward the sod house in the coulee was abandoned. Some said Harlan had joined the wild bunch in the badlands.

About a week after Harlan left the coulee, a slug crashed through the kitchen window, missed Marcel's head by a whisper and broke a mirror on the far wall above the washbasin. The ambusher escaped in the confusion that followed and Marcel ordered his crew not to talk about it around Tige Ellis.

For Tige was a problem then—and in the years to follow. He was uncertain about Louise until he accepted her as a part of his new life. School was another problem. Time and again, Marcel felt like throwing his hands up in surrender.

Tige managed to conform to the rules. But first, he had to whip every boy his age and one or two older. That done, Tige turned to his lessons. He did well, striving for superiority in knowledge as well as in games and fists.

Tige grew and filled out, finished his schooling and took his share in the ranch work. On weekends he'd ride into town with the crew. The town was called Sunup

then, a string of false-fronted saloons and stores, a few box-like frame houses that served as a supply center for the ranches. The Diamond D always came racing into town, blowing off steam with wild cowboy yells, guns blasting up into the sky. From Saturday until Monday morning there was seldom a time when the guns were entirely silent. It was mostly in fun but, even so, the Sunup graveyard steadily grew.

The druggist started collecting cartridge cases and placing them in the hard-packed ground before his store. The doctor's knowledge of gunshot surgery gradually increased and he almost forgot how to treat measles, croup and lumbago.

At least once a month, there was a dance in the big livery barn at the edge of town. Folks would attend for a hundred miles around. Fiddles sang until Sunday dawn while cowboys kicked their heels and swung their partners.

Tige treated Sunup as he had the school, a place wherein to prove his ability to handle his fists. By now he was a handsome kid, pressing nineteen. He was tall and muscular, with an easy smile, black hair that was always a touch unruly. Louise had turned into a beautiful woman with the dark coloring, brilliant eyes and lovely figure of her long-dead mother. She had swains for miles around but none of them were for Louise. It was Tige she watched, and Tige was blind.

Marcel soon realized how it was with his daughter. Heretofore, he had taken Tige's escapades and fights as a matter of course. Now, since his daughter was involved, he considered and weighed them. It did not make a pleasant picture and Marcel was sure Tige would never change.

He spoke to Louise one Saturday night when they were alone at the ranch.

"You do not go to town, *ma petite*,"

"No." She lowered her embroidery and stared at the lamp. Marcel puffed on his pipe, eyes sharp and clear under the heavy lids.

"But there is the dance, eh?" *Sacre bleu*, is it that there are not the young men to take you?"

She laughed and he detected a bitter note. "Oh, there's plenty, Papa. But I just—didn't want to go."

He considered that. "But Tige, he does not ask, eh?"

"I—" She hesitated then lifted her shoulders in the ancestral Gallic shrug. "That's it, Papa."

"I see this thing for some time. It is not good. He thinks too much of the muscle."

"He'll change, Papa."

"Maybe—maybe. That I do not know. I tell him that real courage comes from the heart: that a loser is—*plus brave*—sometimes, than a winner. Ah, he listens but he does not understand."

"You like him, Papa?"

"Almost as much as you, *ma petite*. I grow old and someday there must be one to take my place. I think maybe Tige can do it. I think maybe he will make you a good husband. Then—I am not sure!"

They both heard the rapid beat of hoofs and an excited voice called the house. Marcel opened the door and saw one of his crew race into the light.

"Rustlers! They hit that bunch we was holding on Buck Creek. Shorty's bad shot and Windy got creased."

"The boys are at Sunup," Marcel said.



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"I get them, and the sheriff. We return to pick you up. Saddle a fresh horse and be ready. By gar, maybe we catch those thieves!"

It was a big posse that picked up the trail just before dawn and followed it into the badlands. Once within the broken country the rustlers tried to lose their pursuers. Sheriff Mitchum knew the country fairly well and Tige Ellis had sharp eyes that picked up the faint signs. Just before noon, they caught up with the outlaws.

There wasn't much of a battle, but Tige Ellis was in the thick of it. A flurry of shots, a bandit downed, another unsaddled when his horse was hit, a swift flight for safety and it was over. Four bandits got away; two were captured besides the man who lost his horse; one was killed. No one in the posse was hurt.

Tige Ellis came back from a vain pursuit of one of the renegades and trotted up to the men bunched around the captives. He dismounted, pushed into the circle and stopped dead, face paling. His step-father, Brant Harlan, was one of the prisoners. He glared wildly at Marcel, lips working, then his staring eyes rested on Tige. He took a deep breath.

"By God!" he said and spat contemptuously at Tige's feet. "By God!" he said again, and nothing more.

Tige sat between Marcel and Louise when Brat Harlan was sentenced to ten years. As he was led out, he looked back over his shoulder. He had only contempt for Tige, but his eyes flamed raw hatred for Marcel, whose bullet had killed his horse and prevented his escape.

THERE was no more rustling around Sunup and life went on as usual. The druggist collected more cartridges each week to place before his store, the shells forming a brass pavement that came to be known as the Cartridge Walk.

Tige assumed more duties on the Diamond D, becoming a second foreman within two years. Then, without warning, he suddenly realized that Louise was a beautiful and desirable woman. He took her to the dances. She blossomed and moved in a cloud of happiness. Marcel dreaded the day when Tige would come to him.

It happened one Sunday morning. There had been no dance the night before and

Tige had gone into town without Louise. He had a mouse under his eye when he came into the ranch office and nervously sat down. Marcel swung around from the battered rolltop desk, peered closely at Tige's face.

"I have heard of the fight," he said. "You won?"

"Sure," Tige answered and brushed it aside. "I come to talk about Louise."

"This man, he was a good fighter?" Marcel asked gently. Tige shrugged.

"Good. But that's not what I come to talk about."

"Louise," Marcel nodded sagely. He folded his hands over his stomach and looked thoughtfully out the window on the neat ranch yard. "This fight, he is also important to me—and Louise."

"I don't get it," Tige said, looking blank. Marcel smiled.

"I am old man, Tige. I am once *voyageur* from Canada with the Northwest Company. I am Indian scout and guide with the army. I am rancher. I see many men, eh?"

"I suppose so. But—"

"So maybe I know some little thing about men, eh? Always I see the man who fight—for good reason or none. He fight just to show he is brave, eh? Or good man with his fists, or his knife, or maybe fast with the gun. You are like that, *mon fils*. I am not sure it is good. My Louise need a man with courage—"

"But I'm not afraid!"

"Of other men, no," Marcel agreed. "Of something your hands can touch and your fists beat down, no. That way you are not afraid. But always with you it is a test. I see that. In your heart, you are not sure. When you are a boy, Brant Harlan brands and burns you with fear. So even now you fight to prove to everyone that is not so—you do not fear. But never do you prove it to yourself, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Tige stared at him, started to protest and thought better of it. Marcel nodded, knowing he had scored.

"It will take strong man to keep Diamond D after I am gone. It will take brave man to face drought and the blizzard. How you knock them down? How you fight low prices and no markets, eh? These things I see, Tige, when I think of you and Louise."

Tige arose. "Then you don't think that I'm right for her?"

"That I do not say. I do not know. Let us wait yet awhile. I am strong for many years more perhaps. I think about this and then I decide, eh?"

"Years!" Tige said and his eyes flashed. Marcel chuckled.

"See! You fight delay. You wait, that is all. No, I do not take years. I know how young men are and it is good that you think of Louise. It will not be long."

The round-ups came and then the winter clamped down with an iron hand. Tige waited but Marcel said nothing, nor would Louise go against her father's wishes. At times Tige wanted to force matters. Again, he thought of riding off, for he could easily get a job elsewhere. He managed to control these impulses. Marcel saw and approved. Winter passed and spring's first greening was in the grass.

One Saturday morning, Tige rode into Sunup with Marcel and Louise. They had no more than stepped down from the saddle when the sheriff hurried up. Mitchum was a blunt and direct man.

"Marcel, have you seen any sign of Brant Harlan?"

"Harlan!" Tige exclaimed.

"He broke loose from the pen, killed a guard. I got a telegram about it last night. He might be heading this way, and he never liked you folks none."

"We'll watch for him," Marcel said.

"Point is," Mitchum continued, "Harlan's gone killing insane. I always thought them wild spells of his would work into something. You be careful, all of you."

The news depressed them until they assured themselves that every lawman in the state searched for Brant Harlan. Though the penitentiary was not far away, Harlan could never get through the cordon.

There was a dance that night and Tige took Louise while Marcel remained at his favorite poker table in the Red Dog Saloon. Tige forgot Brant Harlan in the gay rhythm of the music, Louise's smiles and soft eyes.

The fiddles and the rhythmic pound of boots on the rough floor drowned out the shots. Tige had just "promenaded" toward the door with Louise on his arm when one of the Diamond D crew hurried in. He caught Tige's attention, motioned him over. Something in the man's face made Tige step out of the dance, Louise still on his

arm, and push through the onlookers to him.

"Brant Harlan's in town," the man said in a low, tense whisper. "Slipped in somehow."

"Papa!" Louise said in alarm. The puncher shook his head.

"Marcel's safe in the Red Dog so far. The Sheriff spotted Harlan in front of the drugstore and tried to arrest him. Mitchum's down—dead, maybe. You'd better see what you can do with Harlan, Tige, before he kills anyone else—or finds Marcel."

Tige ordered Louise to stay in the barn. He slipped out with the puncher and they entered the Red Dog from the rear. Marcel stood at the bar, restrained by two or three men.

"Because of me he comes here," Marcel argued. "He find me, he will not kill anyone more. I think maybe I can take care of myself."

"Where is he?" Tige asked. The men turned and one of them gestured toward the batwings.

"Still in front of the drugstore. We oughta shoot him down like we would a mad dog before he murders anyone else."

"He's loco," Tige shook his head. "He don't know what he's doing."

"But who'll get him there?" someone demanded. "He's armed."

"Turn out the lamps," Tige ordered.

The Red Dog darkened and Tige looked out over the batwings. He saw Brant Harlan standing before the drugstore. The sheriff lay huddled and unmoving at his feet. Light glinted on the old cartridge cases in the walk. Brant's head moved slowly from side to side, the big Colt in his hand making a threatening arc that followed the sweep of his eyes.

Tige knew the sensible thing would be to shoot the crazed killer. Yet that was not right. Maybe an asylum would straighten him out. It would be far better than killing his step-father as though he were a ravening dog. Tige licked his lips, unbuckled his gunbelt so that the sight of it would not further excite Brant Harlan. He stepped out into the shadows of the porch.

"Brant!" he called.

The man on the cartridge walk instantly swung toward him and the Colt lifted, leveled. Brant's head was hunched between his shoulders, eyes peering at the shadows.

"It's Tige, Brant. I'm glad you're free again."

There was a silence and then Harlan chuckled. "They couldn't hold me. No one can. Tige? Tige? I used to larrup the hell out of you."

"That you did, Brant. Maw didn't like it."

"Helen don't know how to raise a young'n. Fine girl, though. Where is she?"

Tige thought of the soft mound in the coulee. He rubbed his sweating hands on his levis and sharply studied the demented man. He thought suddenly of what Marcel had said. Here was something that fists and guns couldn't conquer. He wondered if he had the wits and cold courage needed to get that Colt from Harlan's hand.

"Maw ain't far away, Brant," Tige said. "She wants to see you."

"I gotta kill a man first," Brant answered. "I gotta shoot him dead. He sent me to jail. He killed my hoss. He run me out of the coulee."

"Maw wants to see you right away. You can kill the man afterwards."

Brant considered it. He swung the Colt at his side. "All right. You take me to her."

Tige stepped off the porch and started across the street. He took measured steps, though every instinct cried out to rush across the street and grab the Colt. But he dared not. He fought to hold down the rising panic and his breathing was short, shallow. He was three-fourths across the street when Brant abruptly crouched back against the drugstore window and the Colt lifted. Instantly Tige halted, balanced on his toes.

"Maw told me to bring you," he said swiftly. He could see Brant's wide eyes now, the gaunted, stubbled cheeks, the bony jaw. The man's lips worked and he threw wild glances from side to side. Then he smiled at Tige.

"They tried to stop me, Tige, but I wouldn't let 'em. I broke out and I'm gonna kill that damned Duclos. I ain't mad at you, Tige. You're just a worthless skunk that run off from me and Helen. Where is she?"

"Not far. Around the corner. I'll take you."

He started forward again. His boots

touched the cartridge walk and the sheriff lay at his feet. There was blood on Mitchum's shirt but he was alive, injured and playing possum. He watched Tige from beneath lowered lids.

Tige came closer to the window and his muscles tightened. Just a few more feet. He couldn't hurry. Steady step and, for God's sake, keep the strain and inner panic out of his face. Another step.

"I know you!" Harlan suddenly exclaimed. "You helped put me away!"

The Colt blurred upward. Tige threw himself forward, taloned fingers spread and straining. He missed his grip on Harlan's arm, but he deflected the gun just as it exploded. He grappled with the man and it was like holding down a wagon load of steel springs. Tige was flung half aside, but he grimly held on, both hands tight on Harlan's gun wrist. Boots pounded close and a wave of men smothered the maniac. It was over in a couple of minutes, Brant Harlan threshing but harmless. . . .

TIGE ELLIS never forgot the cartridge walk. In the short time it took him to leave the shelter of the Red Dog and cross the street, he learned what courage was.

Brant died in the asylum. Tige and Louise were married and, in the course of time, Marcel Duclos was buried beside his wife on the Diamond D.

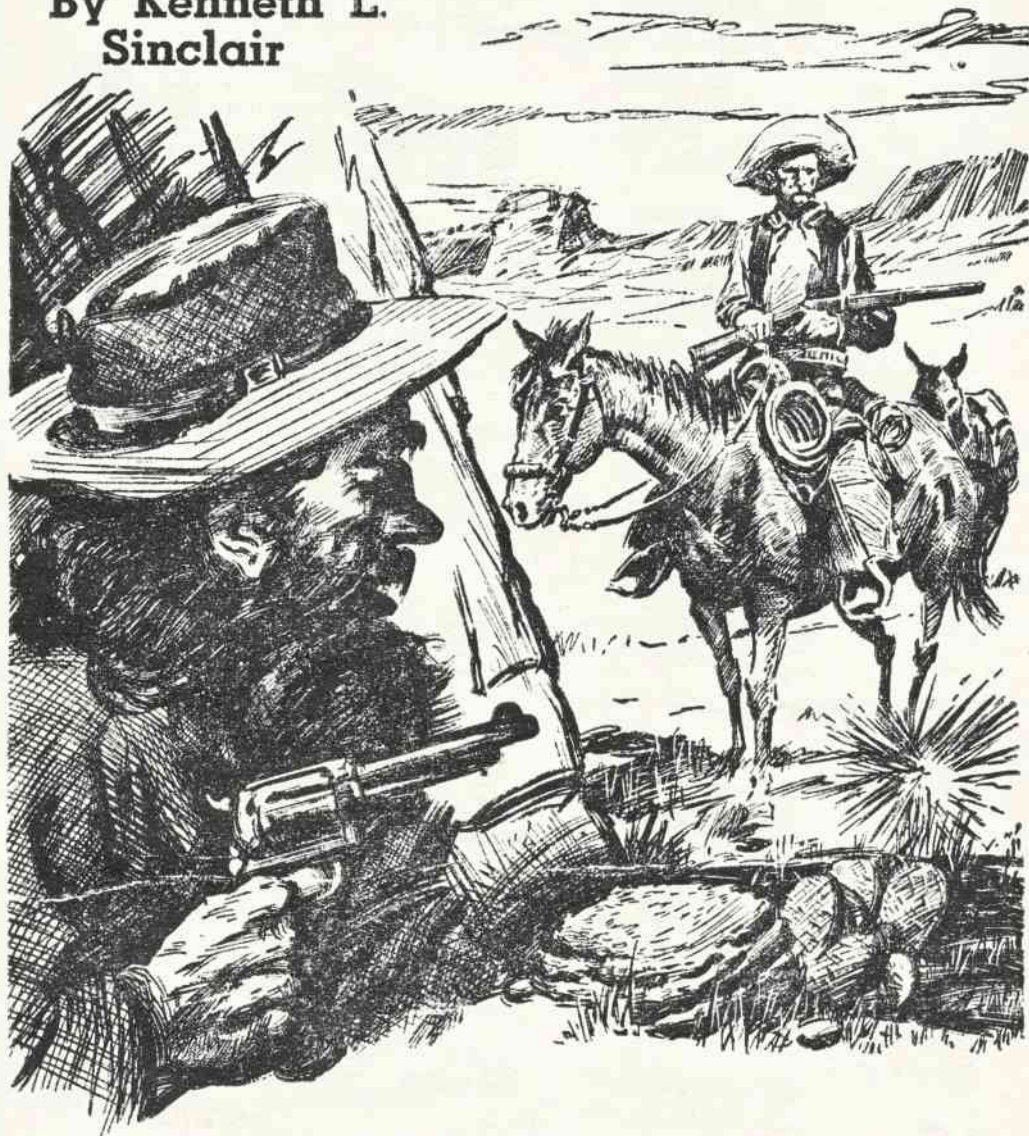
Sunup changed into a typical modern cowtown, a collection of neat frame houses and small store buildings, fronted with modernistic glass and chrome, topped by garish neon signs in blues, reds, greens, and yellows. There is a concrete sidewalk.

All those changes, but Tige never forgot. His grandson will drive up in front of the drugstore in the station wagon and Tige will get out, leaning heavily on his cane. He will look for a long time at the coppery sheen of the shells in the cement. He'll touch the spot where Brant Harlan stood and Tige lost forever the brand of fear. He'll look contemptuously at the Tic-toc Club where neon, glass and venetian blinds are poor markers of the old Red Dog.

So long ago! But still, standing on the cartridge walk, the old man, like Atlas, gains new strength from that one square of bullet-studded pavement. So long as he lives, it will always be there.

The Devil Wears Buckskin!

By Kenneth L.
Sinclair



The Hermit watched the approach of old Buckskin.

"Yore pard's kid made the brag that he was joinin' that damned Hermit killer," they told old Buckskin. So that grizzled trapper set out across the mountains to keep his last rendezvous with his pardner—if he had to kill the boy he was sworn to protect!

THEY were waiting for old "Buckskin" Bailey, there at Kicking Horse Crossing. Restless, bearded trappers jumped up from their stacked bales of furs and hurried tensely forward to greet him when he rode into the clearing.

Ed Crile was waiting too. On the split-pole porch of the trading post the wiry little

Crile, who had quit the American Fur Company to invade the White Mountains on his own hook, let a satisfied grin ease across his face. His eyes appraised the bales that were tied to the pack-saddle of the mule Buckskin led.

"Looks like you made a good catch this year, Bailey," the trader called. "Decided to forget all that talk you made an' sell to me, I reckon."

"Sell tuh you?" Buckskin's face, weathered to a leathery hue, hardened abruptly. "By the time yuh down-grade my pelts, an' charge me triple prices f'r powder, lead, an' grub tuh carry me through another year, I'd just break even. No, yuh've had yore last whack at me, Crile. I'm hittin' the trail f'r Fort Spokane an' a square deal!"

Crile spat over the porch rail. "Suit yourself," he snapped. "You've got a three-hundred-mile trip ahead of you. And the Hermit will rob you, sure as shootin'. Then how'll you get grub an' possibles for next winter?"

Without waiting for an answer, Crile wheeled and stamped back into the trading post.

"Sure of hisself, ain't he?" Buckskin commented, easing his tired body in the saddle and looking down at the men who had gathered around his horse.

"The grinnin' little skunk!" said Sam Pike, who trapped the Bitter Spring Valley. "He's been madder'n a bear with a tick in his ear, ever since we-all tol' him we was holdin' our furs till we seen what yuh aimed tuh do. Yuh sure-'nough goin' fr the fort?"

Buckskin nodded grimly, letting his hand fall to the stock of the flintlock rifle he carried in a scabbard. "Crile has cheated me once too many. I'm goin' through, regardless o' that robbin' Hermit! An' seein' as how yuh gents have held yore furs, we c'n go it together, make up a regular brigade. Reckon that lone Hermit'll be afraid tuh tackle us then!"

The trappers looked at each other, uneasily. It was Pierre Marais who finally spoke up.

"But *M'sieu*—the Hermit, he ees not alone now, *non!* He 'ave got the help. W'en you hear, *M'sieu*, you maybe sell the *plieus* to Crile . . ." The Frenchman shrugged hopelessly.

Buckskin stiffened, subtle fear running

through him. The "Hermit" was Saul Hudspeth, a surly, bearlike renegade who had come to the White Mountains about the time Crile opened his trading post. Hudspeth was rarely seen—he avoided all human company. But he preyed upon those who tried to use the Fort Spokane trail, which was the only route from the Crossing to the outside.

The idea of the Hermit having a helper jolted old Buckskin, mainly because he well knew who that helper might be. Young Cleve Stallard, the son of Buckskin's dead partner, had left Buckskin's cabin a month back, at the first break of spring.

Cleve had a restless wildness in him. He'd inherited it from his sire. And all winter he had been like a caged creature, doing his work on the traplines but bitterly complaining that there was little use in it because Crile would cheat them as he cheated all the trappers.

Their work would go for nothing, Cleve said, as long as Crile held the country in his grip. And Cleve, who wanted to marry a girl down at the Crossing, aimed to get himself together a stake.

Now old Buckskin snapped, "What in blazes are yuh drivin' at, Pierre? Out with it!"

Pierre looked down at his moccasins. Sam Pike said, "I reckon yuh've guessed it, Buckskin. Yore pard's younker made the brag that he was joinin' Hudspeth. They been seen together. Maybe Cleve figured it was a quicker way o' gettin' a stake than wallowin' through snow on the traplines. We're all plumb sorry about it, ol'-timer."

Buckskin's body sagged in the saddle.

HE HAD watched Cleve grow up, from a rambunctious button to a rangy young mountain man of twenty. Ever since Cleve's father died in an avalanche, Buckskin had regarded the youngster as he would a son.

So this wild move of Cleve's stabbed deeply.

Up there in the high, rugged country among the Blizzard Peaks, where Buckskin got his choice beaver furs, a man could get mighty lonely. He had made his plans, figuring to give Cleve the best of the traplines and help him build a cabin for himself and that Arnetta girl from the Crossing. And

then, he'd reckoned, an old codger could sort of settle back and watch the young folks, and know that he was not alone.

But now he recalled, in a flood of bitter memory, that Cleve had done a heap of practicing with that new .44 Colt's pistol he'd bought on the trip to the Crossing last year. Cleve must have been planning this move for a long time.

Buckskin straightened in his saddle. "Gents," he said, "I'm goin' through tuh the fort! Reckon yuh all better wait here a spell—this is my chore. The Hermit an'—an' his pard will be pretty shore tuh jump me, an' I aim tuh clear 'em out of yore way!"

They stood back, respecting his feelings. Yet it was not a matter of feelings alone—two men, fortified up in the rock defiles of the canyons where the Hermit waylaid his victims, might kill several of the trappers before they were finished. In a gunfight, that new pistol of Cleve's was a deadly thing, firing six shots as fast as a man could work the hammer.

And if it came to a battle young Cleve would be done for. He couldn't kill them all—sooner or later the enraged trappers would surround him and exact their penalty.

Here, where the only law was in a man's ready fists and long rifle, justice was quick and deadly.

Buckskin had to keep things from getting to that point, somehow. His affection for the youngster died hard—if he could just get Cleve and make him realize that he had taken the wrong trail. . . .

The old trapper's jaw was grimly taut as he rode out of the Crossing.

A few miles down the trail he cached most of his furs and made up false bales of cedar boughs, with a few pelts on the outside to deceive the Hermit's greedy eyes.

Then he rode on. Entering the first of the canyons, he looked to his rifle, making sure that there was dry priming powder on the pan.

He had gone perhaps a mile down the canyon, and was letting his horse pick its way among the great boulders that had rolled down from the walls, when a hoarse shout beat against his ears.

"Hol' still thar, pilgrim!"

That would be Hudspeth's voice. But it echoed from the canyon walls, so that Buckskin couldn't be sure where it came from.

He moved, though, with the lithe quickness of a mountain lion. Swinging down from the saddle with his rifle in his hand, he faced the point from which the voice had seemed to come. His finger slipped nervously through the trigger-guard.

But young Cleve Stallard stepped out from behind a boulder, facing him. Cleve's .44 was lined on the old trapper's middle.

"Hold still, Buckskin!" the taut-faced youngster said, almost pleading.

The trapper quivered with wrath. But he couldn't bring himself to lift his rifle. And behind him, Hudspeth's hoarse bellow of humor mocked him.

"Echo fooled yuh, didn't it? Thought I was over there, eh? Keep yore gun on 'im, Cleve, while I help myself tuh these pelts—looks like we made us a haul, prime beaver an'—"

Buckskin didn't listen to any more of it. He lashed out at Cleve Stallard.

"Yuh blasted young renegade! Don't yuh know where yuh'll wind up? On the end of a rope, that's where!"

Cleve's lean face twitched, and his eyes shifted warily. He kept looking past Buckskin, toward Hudspeth.

Then the Hermit let loose a roar of fury. "Cedar boughs! We been tricked! Why, yuh schemin' ol' coyote, I'll put a bullet through yuh!"

Buckskin wheeled around, expecting at any instant to feel the impact of lead tearing into his gaunt body.

But Cleve Stallard's warning had a whip-lash positiveness. "Don't try that, Saul!"

Hudspeth, his great shoulders hunched and his hands clawed, stared in stupid amazement. He had a gun like Cleve's, sheathed in a holster. Above his matted black beard, his brow was furrowed.

"Backin' out on yore bargain, younker?" he demanded.

"Not any." Cleve retorted. "But you told me you didn't do any killin'—said you didn't have to!"

Hudspeth snorted. "Fact that this ol' buck was yore dad's pard has nothin' tuh do with it, I suppose! Yuh young fool, he's up tuh somethin'—he come here a-purpose tuh get held up! Mebbe it's a trap!"

"Then we better take what furs he had, an' get out."

Hudspeth was silent, his slitted eyes

measuring the younger man. Finally he said, "All right—but I ain't finished with yuh, younker. Take that long-gun o' his'n an' throw it in the crick."

Cleve Stallard took the weapon from Buckskin's hand and tossed it into the water.

Buckskin said, "I trailed the length o' the Rockies an' back, with yore dad. He was a wild 'un, happen so, but I never seen anything in him that'd account f'r his son comin' down tuh bein' a coyote-sneakin' thief!"

"Ferget that palaver," Hudspeth ordered. "Pile on yore hoss, yuh old fool, an' get down the trail."

WITH the Hermit's pistol backing the command, there was nothing for Buckskin to do but obey. He mounted up wearily, and rode.

Sick despair flooded through him. He had gone into this with the hope of bringing young Cleve to his senses—and if he had to kill Hudspeth, as a matter of mountain justice, that would have been all right. But he had botched the play.

He felt very old and tired. Yet he wasn't finished, happen so. He rounded the bend of the canyon, where he was out of the thieves' sight, and he reined to a halt.

It was the code of the mountains, that honest men stood together. His feelings toward young Cleve didn't count now. His duty to the other trappers was plain—he had to put an end to the thieving that forced the trappers to deal with Ed Crile.

His rifle was at the bottom of the river, thrown there by Cleve himself. But Buckskin still had his wits, and his skinning knife.

He waited a bit, then he rode cautiously back to the scene of the robbery.

Hudspeth and Cleve were gone. They'd torn apart the bales and thrown the cedar boughs aside, taking with them the beaver pelts.

Buckskin dismounted, his narrowed eyes searching for sign.

The thieves hadn't gone back up the canyon. A stretch of sand, deposited by high water a few yards upstream, showed only the hoofprints of Buckskin's horse and pack-mule, no moccasin marks.

That meant Hudspeth and Cleve had scaled the canyon wall. Buckskin searched,

clambering among the big boulders. At last he found a narrow crevice that reached upward, with a tramped-down fern stalk to tell him that men had passed this way. He toiled up the crevice.

Just as he reached level ground at the top, in an open stand of pines, he heard the crash of not-too-distant gunfire.

Two shots, closely spaced. Their sound echoed against the mountain silence, trailing thinly away.

Buckskin set his teeth, remembering Hudspeth's threat that he wasn't yet finished with Cleve for blocking his angry impulse to kill old Buckskin.

At a dog-trot, following the sign in the pine-grass, the trapper trailed the two who had robbed him. Skirting a thicket of tamarack, he angled down the slope of a little draw.

There at the bottom, he found the dead man.

But it wasn't Cleve. It was Saul Hudspeth, his big body stretched out with arms and legs awry and glazed eyes staring upward. A great dark stain covered most of the front of Hudspeth's shirt.

Buckskin leaned weakly against the bole of a tree. Trembling, he felt a moment's relief—Cleve hadn't been killed. But then came the crushing conviction that Cleve must have killed his partner in order to get the furs all to himself. The fact that the furs were gone leaned in that direction. Cleve had taken them, aiming to cash them in and divvy with no one!

Shaking his head, Buckskin rested a minute. Then he took up Cleve's trail, grimly, doggedly following the scant sign of the younger man's passage.

The trail led into broken, jumbled country. Country that even Buckskin would have sworn no man could get through. Yet he scrambled through, guided by a broken twig here and there, a bit of moss scraped from a rock by Cleve's moccasin toe—inevitable signs that a man had passed by.

At the end of a box canyon he found the hideout cabin.

It was hardly more than a shanty, crudely put together, with pole walls barely four feet high and a roof made of heavy slabs of fir bark. An iron stove-pipe projected from the roof, giving off a lazy plume of thick smoke.

That pipe was one of the new-fangled

things Crile offered in his store—at a dollar for a two-foot length.

Young Cleve Stallard was inside, inspecting the beaver pelts he had spread out there. Now he whirled, his hand stabbing down to his gun.

But the hand fell away when he saw Buckskin. A strained, crooked grin of relief came to the younker's face.

"Reckon yuh seen Hudspeth, if yuh trailed me here," he said.

"Reckon I did! Cleve, have yuh gone plumb crazy? If they's anything lower than a thief, it's a man that'd kill his pard tuh get the whole loot f'r—"

"Hold on, old-timer!" Cleve protested. "Hudspeth tried tuh kill me."

"Mebbe that's the truth," Buckskin said. "An' mebbe it ain't!"

"Hold on!" Cleve repeated earnestly. "I reckon Hudspeth suspected what I was after—standin' up for yuh, in the canyon, I sort of give myself away. The minute he decided that I'd joined up with him tuh get proof that would hang him, he decided tuh kill me."

Buckskin blinked. The room was smoky—though the damper in the pipe above the little frontier stove was wide open, smoke trickled from the fire-box door.

"What are yuh tellin' me?" he demanded. "Yuh didn't join with Hudspeth tuh get yoreself a stake quick an' easy?"

"Not any. But the way Crile had it fixed, with Hudspeth robbin' any trapper who tried tuh reach the fort tuh get a fair-an'-square price, there wasn't much chance. So I let on tuh be tough an' managed tuh meet up with Hudspeth in the woods."

Buckskin's eyes were smarting, and not from the smoke alone. "Son," he said, "I'd shore like tuh believe that."

"I'm tellin' it straight! What I was after was proof that Hudspeth was workin' for Crile. But Saul was mighty sly, an' never would let me be around here when Crile was comin' tuh talk over their plans."

"Today, after uh'd started for the fort I reckon, there was some shots fired, over toward the Crossin'. A signal, I figure. Hudspeth jumped right up, an' we started out. What I aim tuh do now is wait till Crile shows up tuh get the furs. That'll prove him an' Hudspeth was workin'—"

Young Cleve's body jerked, his eyes

swinging toward the doorway. His hand slapped the stock of his .44.

But a rasping voice, behind Buckskin, snapped, "Don't try it, younker! Not unless you want me to put a bullet into this old galoot's back!"

"Ed Crile!" he said bitterly.

CRILE chuckled. "Good thing I've always come up on this place careful-like, since you've been here, younker. Now lift that gun of yours with two fingers and drop it. That's right! Now, Buckskin, get over there on the other side of the stove. I'm taking no chances with you! Where's Hudspeth?"

"He's dead," Buckskin said.

Crile's mouth tightened. "Killed him, did you—you old catamount!"

Cold-eyed, deliberate, Crile lined his pistol on young Cleve Stallard.

Old Buckskin upset the stove with a sudden, forceful kick. It toppled toward Crile.

The gun in Crile's hand bucked and roared. But the shot was wild—instinctively afraid of fire, Crile was lunging frantically to one side.

In desperation, when he saw Cleve drop to the floor to recover his weapon, Crile gathered his wits and thumbed hammer for another shot.

But before he could fire it, he was blinded by the cascade of soot from the broken stove-pipe. Cleve's bullet slammed him back into the corner, and he gave one moan as he pitched face-down on the dirt floor.

"The soot did it," Cleve panted. "Plumb blinded him!"

"Figgered it would," Buckskin said. "From the way the stove smoked, I knowed that pipe was full o' soot. Son, why didn't yuh tell me what yuh was up tuh?"

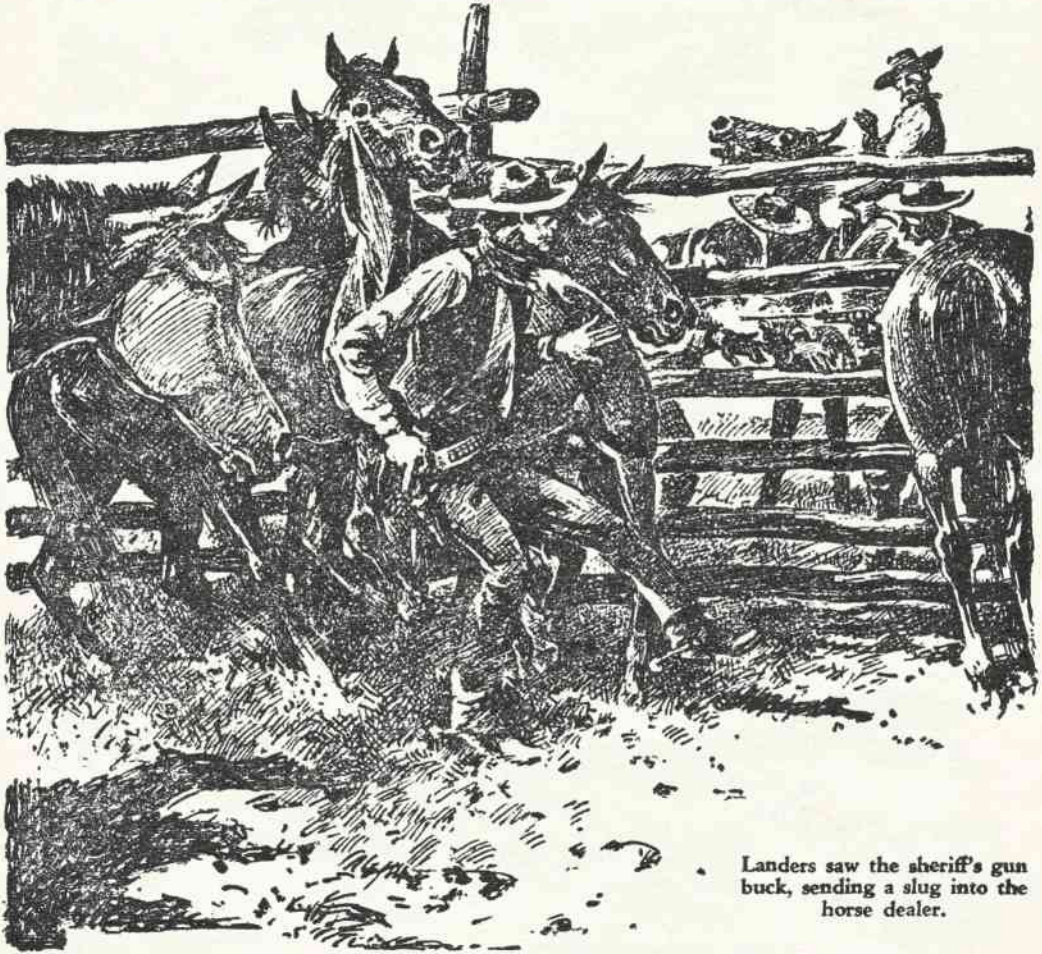
"Yuh shore wouldn't have let me tackle that plug, had I asked yuh!"

"Reckon not," Buckskin agreed, a great gladness running through him. Cleve would have that cabin in Blizzard Basin, now. He'd bring his bride. And Buckskin would not be alone. Chuckling, Buckskin added, "We'd best head f'r the Crossin'. Reckon yuh know the way out o' this maze o' rock an' gullies. An' I got me a hunch that Arnetta gal is goin' tuh look plumb funny, after yuh kiss her. Yuh got enough soot on yore face f'r two!"

Blood Can Shine a Badge

By Ruland Waltner

Seth Landers came back to Sunrise Valley with a bullet in his thigh and murder in his heart. . . . And with all the chance of a celluloid cat in hell of bucking the ruthless crew who nailed his rancher dad's hide to the fence with bushwhack bullets.



Landers saw the sheriff's gun buck, sending a slug into the horse dealer.

SETH LANDERS stopped his bay horse with its four white feet on the hill above Walnut Creek. Even with Sheriff Jarrod Ames and his posse fanned out on his backtrail, he stared with eager eyes on the wide grazing lands of Sunrise Valley. He had been gone for years, but nothing seemed changed since the days when he galloped over its unfenced vastness at his father's heels. The grass was as

tall and green. Cattle dotted it as thickly. The clumps of trees that marked its few scattered ranchhouses stood as high and gracious.

"But it has changed, Jug," he said to his horse; and it was not pain from the bullet in his leg that made his lean face harden. "Look at the fence Ames has strung! He's swallowed Cutler's place and Branch's! Maybe Sunrise by now. There's miles of

wire—like he is saying 'I named my spread Trail's End and that means all trails end with me.' I reckon everything's changed but Jarrod Ames."

He glanced down his backtrail. Not a puff of dust hung over it, but he could not take it for granted that he had given the posse the slip. He never took any thing for granted. That was why, after three years as deputy United States marshall he was still alive. It was also why he had been given this assignment and why he chose to keep Sheriff Jarrod Ames from knowing he was in the vicinity.

Below him, the creek ran wide and shallow between steep banks. Twisting and turning through the lush grass of Trail's End, it cut into Sunrise Ranch, wriggling through the grove of black walnut trees Landers' mother had planted near the house when she came there as a bride.

He eased Jug down the hill and splashed along the shale creek bed toward the grove. The water would hide their tracks and oily walnut hulls rubbed on Jug's white stockings would darken them enough to deceive any one looking for the man who had shot Rip Wrench back in Three Fingers and ridden away on a white-footed horse.

The grove was deserted. Last year's nuts lay thick and brown under the trees with a sprinkling of green ones fallen among them. The stain worked better than Landers had hoped. He had turned Jug's snowy ankles as dark as his shining hoofs when he heard a buckboard in the distance.

Leaving Jug with trailing reins, he moved cautiously through the trees toward the sound. A cloud of dust hung in the still air over the wagon ruts that skirted Ames' fence, shrouding the two pintos and the buckboard they were pulling at a fast clip in spite of the weight of their driver, squatted huge and motionless behind them.

"Rattler Swale, or I miss my guess," Landers thought. "What's he doing here?"

The pintos turned toward the ranch-house, and Landers lost sight of them behind buildings that had been his father's pride.

He hurried back to his horse. He stripped off the saddle and bridle and turned Jug loose to graze. Shedding his chaps and vest, he rolled them into a ball and hid them with Jug's trappings under some bushes. In his faded gray shirt and worn blue jeans,

he bore little resemblance to the man the posse was hunting.

He thought with a slow regret of the fight at Three Fingers. It might destroy his usefulness on an assignment whose success depended on the information he could pick up. The Red Front Saloon had been almost deserted. The bartender, a wisp of a man with a dirty apron tied under his armpits, dozed on a barrel and a single cowboy with stringy, black mustaches, poured his own drinks from a squat bottle on the bar.

When Landers came through the batting doors, the man turned and stared at him with flat, unfriendly eyes.

Recognition leaped between them.

In the old days, Rip Wrench had been one of Ames' riders. Perhaps he still was. Hot tempered and ugly, a dead shot, with a nervous thumb at the hammer of his triggerless six-gun, he did all the things Ames preferred not to do himself.

"I know you, bud." Rip muttered, too low for the bartender to hear. "Fork your hoss and ride less'n you want to go like your pa did."

Landers stopped short. His father's death had been called an accident when his horse came in with an empty saddle and his boys followed its tracks to Jack Landers' crumpled body. The ache of that day had lain hidden in his son and Rip Wrench's words opened it, raw and smarting.

"Talk some more, mister," Landers said shortly. "You're saying things I want to hear."

Rip Wrench had already said more than he intended. His sallow face flamed and his flat eyes flared sudden fire. He bellowed so that the bartender leaped from his barrel and dived behind the bar in a single motion, "Them's fighting words, stranger!"

His dirty brown fingers flashed to his gun, but Landers beat him to the draw.

Landers left Three Fingers in a hurry. Even if the bartender told a straight story which he might not do since the trouble was between a local man and an outsider, he could not afford to meet the sheriff, for the sheriff was Jarrod Ames.

If his mother ever suspected that his father's death was not an accident, she had not told him. She sold the ranch to a man named Webster who moved his family in

two weeks before they could move out; and, during all the bitter days of his boyhood that followed, Landers dreamed of the time he would return—but not on an errand like this. Big, bluff Jack Landers had not only been a good father to his son. He had been a good friend to Jarrod Ames when Ames came to Sunrise Valley, fresh from Vermont, a failure at thirty—penniless and hungry—with dreams of empire in his sunken eyes and only his two red, sensitive hands to build it. Pilgrim Ames, Cowboy Ames, Rancher Ames—Landers remembered them all. Sheriff-rancher Ames, with judges and Indian agents taking his orders, was a man he had heard of back at the Army Post when he stopped to pick up information; and he wondered if Ames was the link that held the past and his father's death to the present and the job he was here to do.

Landers checked his guns. He shifted them more to his liking and started for the ranchhouse. All men in his profession were fast on the draw. The one who could outshade the others the fraction of a second was the one who survived. Any minute now, he might be called on for that test. He was going to learn why the purchasing agent who was particularly busy just now buying horses for the Army Post fifteen miles away and cattle for the Indian reservation five miles farther, was here at Sunrise Ranch. Nine chances to ten, it had something to do with things the post commander told him. The quality of horseflesh turned over for his regiment was never worse. The beef was poor and tough. More than half the cows bought for the Indians died before they reached the reservation. The Indians were starved and restless and the situation was growing more serious daily.

SETH LANDERS stepped softly through the big double doors at the back of the barn his father had built so many years before. It was the only one in the valley and had earned him much good-natured joshing in a land where cows toughed it through the bad times or died. Here he kept his weak stock, the blizzard born calves and the mavericks too young to shift for themselves with hay to tide them over the worst spots of winter. Big Jack had laughed at his neighbors banter and the

barn had more than paid high dividends.

Landers searched the shadows. There was no stock here now. The silence that wrapped the building was so deep that he wondered what had happened—whether or not the Websters still lived here or whether the Sunrise too had become part of Trails' End but was not yet put under fence.

He moved closer to the doors that opened on the yard between the house and the big barn. Some one was talking—Rattler Swale, his voice thin and surprisingly soft for such an oversized man.

"I've come for my answer, Miss Lucie."

"Then you've come a long way for nothing."

Landers could see them both from the shadows—Swale still sitting in his buckboard drawn close to the porch railing, the girl in the shadows, peeling potatoes. She made a bright touch of color in the afternoon, her dress blue against the brown house, her hair curly and golden as he remembered it. Though her words were stiff with impatience, her voice had a clear, true quality that pleased him.

"It's the same as it was last week," she added, "and will be next. No."

Swale laughed. "Your no sounds sweeter than another woman's yes, Miss Lucie. But that don't mean I'm taking it. I'll be back next week and as many more as need be. But while you're changing your mind—"

He hesitated. He was obviously afraid of offending her and just as obviously determined to speak.

"You can't win against Jarrod Ames, Miss Lucie. If you'd cooperate instead of fighting—"

"Cooperate! Just how can a mouse cooperate with a cat without being caught?"

"It's this way!" His voice took on a confidential note. "Your riders left because they know it takes a better man than any one of them to stand up to Ames. Ain't a man in the valley'd dare work for you, knowing how things are between him and you."

"Would you?" asked Lucie Webster crisply.

"Now, Miss Lucie, he protested. "I got a good job and I ain't a rancher. But if you was to say yes, I'd take care of you. I'm that kind of a man."

"You're wasting your time," said Lucie Webster.

Again he laughed. "You're a woman of spirit, Miss Lucie! That's why I'm crazy about you. But what are you going to do with all your cows? With no one to ride herd, they're apt to disappear. You and Tom and Kenny—"

"My brothers are still boys," she admitted, "but we'll get along. Good day, Mr. Swale."

Nothing she could say seemed to anger him. He sent his pintos closer till the buckboard scraped the porch railing.

"You got cows ready for market, Miss Lucie. Get Ames to sell them for you on commission. He can drive them in along with his. I can buy them at a good price. And I'll see he does right by you."

Landers thought grimly, "The old fool is crazy about her. Not that I blame him. She's pretty and smart as new leather. But he's not going to buck Ames for her. He'd rather hatch up a scheme that'll get Ames a cut than go over his head. And maybe there's something on the other side of that."

"Better give in, Miss Lucie," Rattler Swale urged earnestly. "A woman as pretty as you needs a man to handle other men for her."

Seth Landers left the shadows of the barn. He lounged across the space between it and the ranchhouse, hiding his limp in careless shambling until he reached a post that stood no more than ten feet from the pintos head.

Gingerly, he leaned against it, hiding in its shadow the bullet hole in his blue jeans and the dry blood that stained the lower part leg. A plan had come to him, preposterous and audacious. Its whole success depended on the girl. He had no right to expect that her mind would leap to meet his—a stranger's; or that she would gamble her future on his leadership; but she, too, was in a desperate position and probably realized it.

He cleared his throat and Rattler Swale jerked around on the seat of the buckboard. His hair bristled above a forehead that was fat and unlined. Small dark eyes stared unblinking between lashless lids. His nose was short and broad, his mouth narrow and full, and his chin carried a roll of fat from ear to ear.

"Miss Lucie's already got a man to handle men for her, Swale," Landers said idly. "I'm her new foreman and I can do what-

ever needs doing." Swale's thick tongue wiped his lips.

Lucie said nothing, and Landers did not dare glance at her to see how she was taking his announcement. He kept his eyes on Swale, lazy but unflinching.

Swale began to laugh.

"I declare I admire you young man," he said in the same thin, high voice Landers heard first. "I doubt you know what you're getting into though. Stranger to these parts, I take it. But I'm glad you can help Miss Lucie for a while. Maybe, before you leave, I can get things figured out for her. I've always found there's a way over or around most things, if a man gets time to find it. I always—"

His voice died and a blank, listening look swept over his face.

"Hear that, Miss Lucie? Ames' men, most likely."

"Most likely," said Lucie Webster. "He always comes in numbers!"

"Where are your brothers?" asked Rattler Swale.

"Where he won't see them," she said enigmatically.

The sound of loping horses came louder from the east, along the trail from the Ames ranch. Landers listened. There were some twenty horses, he judged—no doubt the posse he had tried to lose.

He glanced at Lucie. She had not denounced him; but neither had she accepted him. She had merely held her tongue. She had grown up since he left the Valley. She was pretty—but more than that. There was strength in her, like the strength of a slim, young ash. Her eyes lifted and met his. They were more curious than unfriendly.

Jarrold Ames headed the riders who loped around the corner of the barn and stopped near the porch.

Swale said, "Howdy, Ames."

The gaunt, gray man did not answer or turn his hatchet face to him. Either he did not see Landers, leaning against the post, or chose to ignore him as a shabby cowhand who could be dealt with later.

His straight, thin lips scarcely moved as he asked, "Seen any one riding a bay with four white stockings? We're looking for a killer, Miss Lucie."

"Killer?" piped Swale.

"Shot Rip Wrench back in Three Fin-

gers. We followed him to Walnut Creek and lost him." Ames turned to his men. "See if you can find his horse. Take a look in the corrals. He might have tried to hide it in among the others."

"I come in along Walnut Creek," said Swale. "Didn't see any one."

The posse began to scatter and Swale turned the buckboard and followed the men toward the corrals.

"You ain't said, Miss Lucie," Sheriff Ames prompted her, ignoring Swale's departure as he had his presence. They might work together but obviously there was no love between them.

Landers thought he saw Lucie throw him an appealing glance, almost as though she said, "The cards are down. Get ready to play." But there was no weakening in the face she lifted to Jarrod Ames.

"The last time you were here," she reminded him, "you told me you hated doing business with a woman. So you might talk to my foreman. He's been on the range most of the day."

Jarrod Ames followed her glance to the post where Landers still lounged, quiet and unobtrusive. He looked at him with fierce, hawk eyes and asked, "Where you been riding most of the day? Seen any one?"

The question was exactly what Landers might have wished. Here, ready made, was an opportunity to muddy the waters for his pursuers. No gun fighting stranger could know of the fertile, hidden grazing land on Sunrise Ranch called Box Canyon. His acquaintance with it might, in itself, prove his claim to be Lucie's foreman.

"Up Box Canyon," he said carelessly. "And seen no one."

Sheriff Jarrod Ames' eyes grew more fierce—round and burning like a hawk's sighting his prey.

"How's the water holding out?" he asked.

Landers knew that he was testing him. He knew, too, that at this season, water was usually low in the canyon. He said so but Ames pressed him, "Everything all right?"

"I report my boss's business to my boss!" Landers drawled.

Under Jarrod Ames brown skin, the blood rose, but he did not admit rebuff. He grunted, "You look familiar, but I don't recall where I saw you."

"I've been around," said Landers and turned to Swale and the first deputy who were drifting back to the dooryard.

"Did you find any white stockinged bay out there?" he asked.

The deputy shook his head.

"Nope," he said. "We looked them over careful."

Sheriff Jarrod Ames pushed his horse closer to Landers. He said, "I told Miss Lucie last week there'd be no more branding of calves on my side of the fence by any rider of hers, regardless what cow it sides."

Lucie Webster rose from her chair and put her pan of potatoes on the railing. She said in a clear, pleasant voice, "He will notice, Sheriff, that some one cuts the fence between our ranches and lets my cows drift onto your range. He'll know what to do."

Sheriff Ames shot her a long look that told nothing. He said with all the hard compulsion in him, "It's your business, not mine, Miss Lucie, to keep your cows from getting in with mine. And don't forget, we hang cattle thieves in these parts."

"O. K., Sheriff," said Landers. "That's the way we like it."

Rattler Swale snickered, "Comical, ain't he, Sheriff?"

Again Ames ignored the purchasing agent. He said to Landers, "I offered to buy Miss Lucie out. You might talk to her about it. You might even suggest that there are ways of getting land when a man wants it bad enough, and Jarrod Ames always gets what he wants."

Lucie's voice came from the porch, sweet but firm, "This land is mine—mine and Tom's and Kenny's; and I'll hold it or die on it."

Jarrod Ames said to Landers, "Some folks'd think Miss Lucie's too pretty for a corpse, but I ain't been one to bother with women or be bothered by them. When it comes to a showdown, if she plays a man's game, she'll take her earnings like any man."

Landers wished the sheriff would go. His leg ached in the position he had kept it so long, but if he left the post some one might see the blood on his leg.

"You're sheriff, Mr. Ames," he said indifferently, "but the lady's my boss. What she says goes; and any corpses found in the valley won't be off the Sunrise."

Again Swale snickered.

The sheriff drew sharply back on his bridle reins and the big black stallion he was riding pivoted on its hind legs. Its forelegs flailed air close to Landers' head; but he did not move, not even when the posse circled the barn and struck for the creek, not even when Rattler Swale took his flat topped hat off his wiry hair and smiled at Lucie Webster.

"Goodbye, Miss Lucie," he said in his high voice that was friendly now. "Don't forget I'm coming back next week and maybe you'll change your answer. One of Jarrod Ames boys just told me he bought out the bank at Three Fingers. He took over your note on the Sunrise and he'll close you out, sure as shooting, if you don't pay off in October. That's why he bought the bank."

The girl's face went white as paper, and her eyes were wide and frightened in spite of the effort she made to control herself. She leaned toward Swale over the railing.

"You're sure about the bank, Mr. Swale?"

He nodded. "He's been after it a long time. But you don't need to say I told you. It's common talk around town. You could pick it up most anywhere if you was to ride in. So maybe it's too late to get him to send your cows into the post. No use him helping you pay off your mortgage when he don't want it paid anyway."

She asked urgently, "Whatever made you think he'd drive my cows in for me?"

He shrugged. "I'd planned to talk to him on the side. I had some ideas I thought I could work out with him."

"Why don't you buy from me yourself?" she demanded. "Why did you have to talk to him and want me to talk to him?"

"There, there," said Rattler Swale soothingly. "Jarrod Ames is a very direct man. He goes after things like a dog at a ground squirrel hole and—" he snickered—"There ain't no use getting dirt thrown on you unless you have to. See what I mean?"

"No," she said. "I don't see anything."

Swale said gently, "He got himself made sheriff so he could do things in the law he can't get other men to do for him the way he wants them done. Now, me, I always figure if I can keep figuring long enough, there's a way around and over things."

Seth Landers pushed away from the post. Dusk was gathering and Swale was not apt

to see the stain on his pant leg. He was not apt to see anything but Lucie Webster leaning toward him over the railing.

Landers said, "You and Ames both got to remember one thing. When doing dirt with in the law prospers a man, pretty quick he outgrows the law. Then he's an outlaw. I got a feeling it's nip and tuck who gets there first—you or the sheriff. Good night, Mr. Swale."

The roll of fat that circled Swale's chin from ear to ear dragged downward. His mouth sagged open and he stared at Landers.

"We'll still be here when you come back next week," Landers assured him pleasantly. "We'll be here long after you and the sheriff leave the valley. Good night—again—Mr. Swale."

Rattler Swale closed his mouth and clapped his hat on his head. He drew back on his pintos, swung them around, and left the dooryard faster than he came.

The girl's eyes were still frightened when she spoke to Landers.

"Wont you come onto the porch and let me help you dress your wound?"

"My wound?" he repeated, numb with surprise that she should have noticed it.

"I saw it before you leaned against the post to hide it. It should have been tended to long ago."

"O. K.," he said, coming stiffly onto the porch.

He turned up his pant leg and pulled off his boot while she got water and bandages. The bullet had left a long gash in the flesh but it had torn through clean. She bathed it deftly.

"Why didn't you tell Ames?" he said.

"Shooting Rip Wrench doesn't prove you're a criminal. Besides, my back is to the wall. It has been for a long time. And I can't afford to refuse help—no matter where it comes from."

"You refused Swale."

Instead of answering, she asked, "Why were you in Box Canyon?"

"I wasn't," he said.

"Then how did you know the water is low?"

There was no reason why he should not tell her, since she knew about Rip Wrench and the posse.

He said, "I used to live here years ago."

She tipped back her head and looked at

him, a long look in the gathering shadows.

"I know you," she said. "You're Seth Landers, Tom and Kenny will be glad you're back."

"They wont remember me," he said. "They were too young when I went away."

"Yes, they will." She was positive. "There was so much to make us remember. We gathered nuts together in the grove by the creek. The rope swing you left on the big locust tree on the other side of the house is still there. When you go upstairs, you'll find your name carved on the window sill in your old room. Your mother told me it was the only time she ever whipped you, and then she was sorry. There are so many things here that wouldn't ever let us forget you."

"Where are Tom and Kenny?" he asked somberly for her words had called back on him a host of memories that he tried to forget.

"They both like horses but don't care much about cows. Shorty Swayer's a bronco buster who worked with out father. He and Tom are breaking a bunch at the line camp beyond the canyon. Kenny rode up this morning, but he'll be back by dark." She finished her bandage and looked up at him with luminous eyes. "We've got a bunch of cows back of wire in Box Canyon. The boys rounded them up before Ames scared them into quitting. We'd planned to sell them at the Post. But now—I don't know."

Landers said thoughtfully, "So that was what Ames was driving at!"

"What?" she exclaimed.

"I'm not sure, of course; but my guess is that he's run off all your cattle."

In the silence that followed, they heard the rattle of horse's hoofs from the direction of Box Canyon. Some one was hallooing—a shrill, boyish voice.

"Hoh! Hoh! Lucie!"

She rose and ran down the shallow steps to the dooryard.

Landers rose, too. He went to the rail and looked into the night. The boy out there, tumbling off the careening horse, was Kenny, the younger of Lucie's brothers.

He was saying with long drawn gasps for his breath, "Coming down past Box Canyon, I saw the fence was down. The canyon is empty. Our cows are gone, Lucie! Every one of them."

INSPECTION showed that the cattle from Box Canyon had not been driven off the Sunrise. The wire penning them in had been cut and they had been scattered over the range. They could not be rounded up in time to sell to the purchasing agent without additional riders and Jarrod Ames had seen to it that Lucie could hire no more.

The horses Shorty and Tom had been breaking and those that could be spared from the saddle stock at the corrals could, however, be driven to the Post by the five of them and might bring enough to meet the note at the bank if they got in before Rattler Swale had filled his current quota. Further, such a trip presented a perfect setup for Landers to learn what he needed to know of Swale.

As they traveled toward the Post, he struggled with contending emotions. Being with Lucie made him realize that her image had lain in his heart all the years he was away. It had warned him that the Sallys, Jeans and Doras he met were not for him. Slim and lithe in her saddle, quick to haze a bronco back in place, never so tired she lost her ready smile and understanding, she was wakening in him a longing that was hard to silence.

To add to his personal problems, she said one day in a rush of gratitude. "We haven't felt so safe since Father died. His accident happened two days after he got the loan at the bank. Jarrod Ames had been snapping at our heels, trying to gobble us and we got it just in time. Everything about the accident reminds me of your father's death. Old Ranger was tame as a house cat but he came home with an empty saddle. Father's neck was broken."

There it was again, the suggestion of a link between Jarrod Ames and the death of men who owned the Sunrise Ranch, between the sheriff's greed and the means he might have taken to satisfy it! But Landers had no right to run that trail now. His job was to learn whether or not the Army and the Indians were being cheated and, if they were, how.

He was glad when they sighted the corrals where Swale did his buying, snugged in the hills below the Post.

One of Swale's men rode down to meet them.

"Sheriff's brought in a bunch," he said in a loud, important voice. "The boss's

going over them. Hold yours way back here till he's done."

The face Lucie turned to Landers was tragic with disappointment, but her head was high and her lips tried to smile.

She said, "We have all afternoon, Seth."

"All afternoon," he repeated. "But we wont waste it."

Leaving her and the boys with the horses, he rode up to Headquarters. The major in charge welcomed him. He was a man to trust or to fear, tall, with gray mustaches, a wiry body, and a whimsical smile that compelled attention.

He greeted Landers warmly.

"Just after you left," he said, "I got word Swale was moving on. His job here is finished. If we don't get a break, he'll pull out tonight, technically in the clear, to play his game somewhere else."

"What have you learned?" Landers asked.

The major shrugged.

"Nothing I can prove beyond errors in judgment; and, if a man has the 'right' connections, you can't jail him or even get his job for making mistakes."

Landers nodded.

"I've complained to him and to my superiors and he's full of sympathy for my 'bad luck'," said the major, "but I can feel him laughing at me. The more I watch him, the less I find out. So I've ordered my men to stay clear of him. The buying corrals are out-of-bounds for them so long as he is here. If he thinks he has everything his way, he'll get careless."

"He's sure to," Landers agreed. "Nothing makes his kind overstep themselves faster than feeling safe."

Landers went alone toward the corrals. The one for receiving and inspecting herds connected with a second for holding animals passed for purchase. Only a few remained in the receiving corral. So far as he could tell, there had been no rejects.

He passed Swale's buckboard, standing horseless and abandoned in the sun, and lounged up to the corral rail. If this was Swale's last deal here as purchasing agent, it might be a good idea to make sure Ames knew it.

The two men, each with a tally sheet, were in the first corral where Swale made his inspections. A man was stationed at the connecting gate to open and close it as

needed. Another on horseback hazed horses up to Swale, drove them to the gate, and made himself generally useful.

"Miss Webster's got a good bunch, Swale," Landers called. "Better throw out some of these culls and take hers. You ought to make your last buy here a good one."

Swale looked up, startled. Sweat broke out on him, beading into big drops. The day was warn; but Landers was sure it was not the afternoon sun that worried him but the warning he had given Ames.

Swale said sourly, "Miss Lucie got herself a smart young man for a foreman, eh, Sheriff?"

"A smart alec too big for his breeches!" Ames answered, his face blank.

"Johnnie!" Swale called to the gatekeeper. "Open up. We're taking them all. The sheriff's hosses are good enough for me!"

The last of Ames' horses were hazed into the purchase corral under the sheriff's narrowed eyes.

"Might as well tell Miss Lucie to drive hers back home," said Swale genially. "I got a taste for doing business with men—just like my friend Ames."

He nudged the sheriff's ribs playfully, but Jarrod Ames shoved him away with so much force that the fat man staggered.

"You ain't fooling me," he said gruffly. "I been wondering all afternoon what was eating you. Now I know. You're done here!"

"Who says so?" Swale blustered. He turned to his helpers. "You boys are through for today. Come around in the morning for your money."

"O. K., boss," said Johnnie.

Landers still stood beside the rail. In the purchase corral, he could see horses no honest buyer would pass for army use—sway backs, weak necks, crooked hocks. But he was not ready for a showdown. He would have to take too many things for granted that he might not be able to prove. Yet he could not afford to let Swale leave and perhaps move out of reach. The time had come to try to push the two into a quarrel that would bring out the partnership between them.

He said, "Better collect now, Johnnie. Swale's skipping out tonight, and you may have trouble finding him."

The effect of his words was not what he expected, but he was satisfied. Swale's helpers bored in on him, and Ames left them to saunter over to Landers.

"You know too much for a foreman of a sick little ranch," he said.

Landers looked him squarely in the eye and grinned. He took his foot off the bottom rail and hitched up his pants. He said, "It's my home stamping ground, Sheriff. You used to think a lot of me when you rode for my father—even after he made you foreman."

"Seth Landers!" Ames exclaimed, but no liking showed in his hatchet face. Evidently, he had become incapable of even the pretense of liking, and he no longer looked hawkish. More than anything else, he looked like a bullet-eyed, razor-backed hog when alarm brings its head up from the trough where it has been guzzling. He said bluntly, "You aint a man who'd come back to the valley just to work on some one's ranch. Why didn't you say your name the other night?"

Landers shrugged, but his grin broadened. "I heard you and Miss Lucie were having trouble. I figured if she wanted you to know, she'd introduce us."

Ames snorted, a fierce sound of denial. "If we was having trouble—Well, you decide whether she'd be here now! And take my advice. Keep your nose out of my business. I'm law in the valley now, and I'm getting along right well!"

"I can see that," said Landers, and still he grinned for he knew his good-nature annoyed Ames. "But you ought to remember what I told Swale. When doing dirt within the law prospers a man, pretty quick he outgrows the law. That goes whether he's got a star on his vest or is just plain folks."

"Ready to check up, Sheriff?" Swale called across the corral.

Ames hesitated. Plainly, he wanted to push his discussion with Landers but Swale's call promised pay for his horses.

"I'll see you later, Landers," he said ominously. "If you stay in this country."

"I'll stay, Sheriff. Fact is, I may settle here."

Ames hurried to join Swale; and Landers thought, "There'll never be a stronger magnet for him than gold." But he welcomed the interruption. Knowing whether all of

Ames' horses were as bad as the last ones Swale sent through the gates might be worthwhile. He sauntered along the rail.

He found them a motley lot that must have been culls from a dozen ranches. Only a buyer who was getting a cut on every animal would pass such a bunch.

He straddled the corral bars and moved quietly among the close-packed horses, trying not to excite or disturb them. There was only a mangy roan between him and the rail. He could see Swale sweating again, and his full face gleamed as though it had been dipped into a barrel of melted fat.

"You listen to me, Ames," he burred. "I need that cut to get away from here. Folks up north are riding down on me. A fellow named Smith and me pulled a job they don't like. They strung Smith up. They ain't doing the same to me!"

Landers had heard all he needed to hear. He drew away from the roan; but, just as his hand found his gun, a clatter of hoofbeats came from down the hillside. Some one hailed Ames in an excited voice and Johnnie loped out of the deepening gold that the setting sun was sifting over them.

He wheeled his horse to a stop and shouted, "Bad news, Sheriff! Rider from Trail's End come past, hunting a doctor 'cause glanders can go awful fast! He says tell you some one turned Swale's pintos into the lower pasture with your best breeding stock. The pintos got it bad, and he cut his hand on your danged barb wire trying to get them out. He's scared to death he'll get it, too. And it'll plumb bust you, Sheriff!"

Jerrod Ames looked like a stricken man. He said in a husky voice, "I don't believe it! Aint been a case of glanders closer'n Meadsville. And that's a hundred miles north. North!"

He swung on Swale. "You brought your pintos here! You said 'North' just now. Did you turn glandered horses onto me?"

Swale's fat knees trembled. Sweat poured through his shirt. It even stained the heavy fabric of his pants.

"I figured you'd not pay me if you got wind I was leaving, and I figured most likely you would. You can't do me dirt and some off Scot free!"

Ames' hand rose toward his gun.

Swale cried, "I didn't do it! I swear I didn't!"

He clawed for the gun that hung on his thick thigh. Ames' gun crashed.

The roan lunged against Landers throwing him to his knees; but he bounded up near the rail, straddled through it, and out of the corral.

Swale lay on the ground, motionless, and Ames faced Johnnie, all the craft in him uppermost and plain to see. Johnnie could prove he had shot Swale and killing him was safer than letting him go.

"Throw down your guns, Ames!" The words shot between Landers' lips. "You're under arrest."

Jarrold Ames stopped stalking Johnnie. He turned on Landers, his six gun blazing, his voice raw with hate. "Take it, lawman, or give it back!"

In the corral, horses squealed as his shots plunged among them. Landers' gun answered. Ames buckled and fell on rough ground that half hid him from view, but he did not stop firing. He emptied one gun and dragged another from a shoulder holster. Now his shots came with slow deliberation, perhaps because he knew he would have trouble reloading or perhaps because the bullet in his side pained him so that he had to aim more carefully.

Landers worked his way along the corral to where he could get a better target. He called, "My first shot was for Jack Landers. This one is for Bill Webster."

His bullet caught Ames in the shoul-

der, knocking him flat. Ames turned to his side, still firing until a shot tore through his neck. He lay still.

Landers holstered his gun as the major and a detail of soldiers galloped up.

The major listened in silence to Landers and Johnnie; and, when they had finished, he said quietly, "This is one report I shant mind making—all but the glanders angle. As soon as Ames' man rode in for treatment, our doctor had us set a squad to work on the horses at the Post. You were lucky to have held Miss Webster's herd so far back. Swale never drove his pintos over that ground."

Landers nodded.

"We'll keep them on fresh grass for a while," he said, "and, when you need replacements, come see them."

"They're a fine bunch," said the major. "I think you'll hear from us."

When Landers loped back to the herd, Lucie rode out to meet him, her face white and frightened.

"Are you all right?" she cried.

"I'm all right," he assured her. "And from now on, things will be better for all of us in the valley."

She looked at him gravely. "Aren't you taking things for granted, Seth?"

"No." He smiled. "Whether you marry me or not, I wont let you worry about the mortgage any more. But, I am asking you to marry me now, Lucie."



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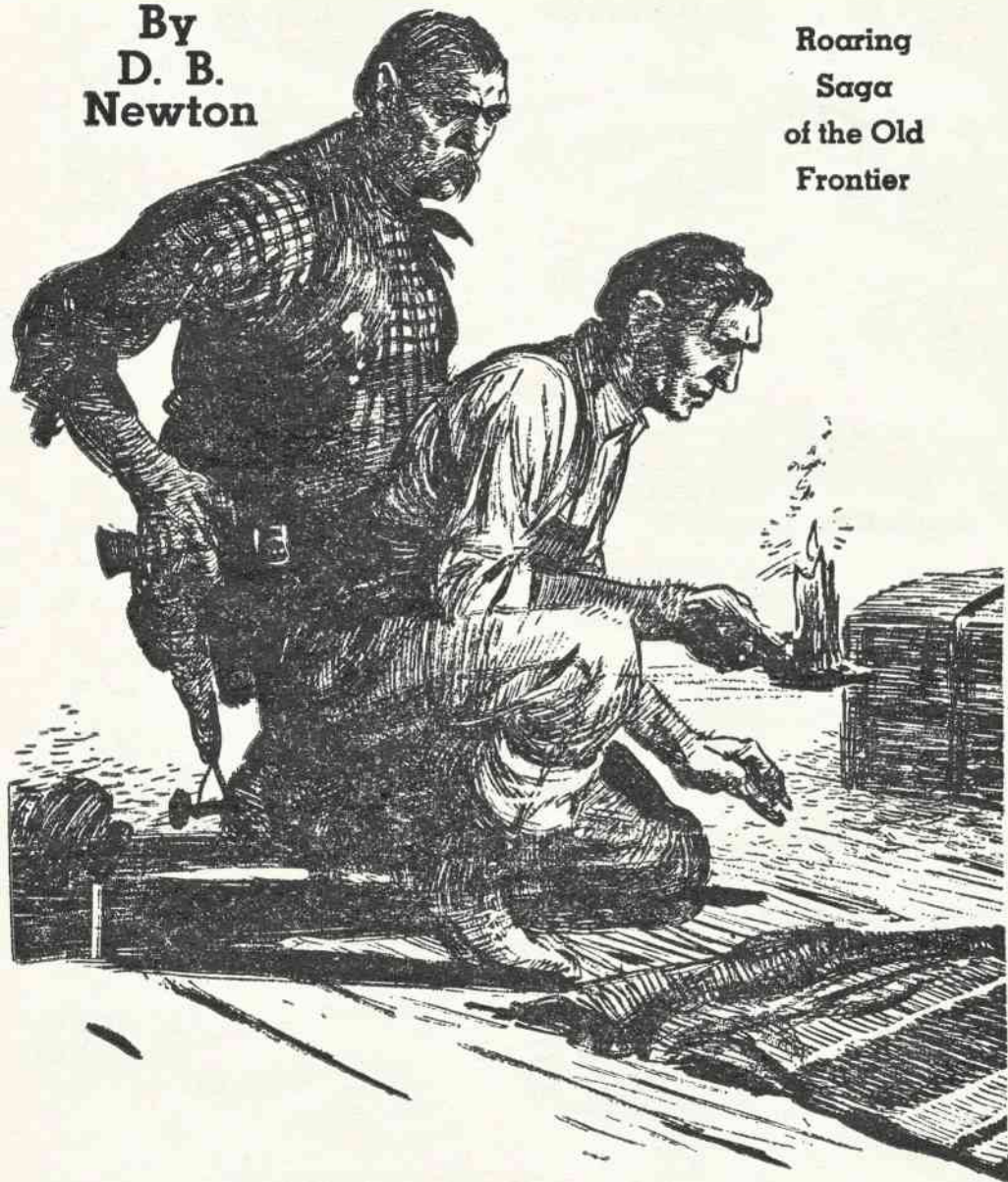
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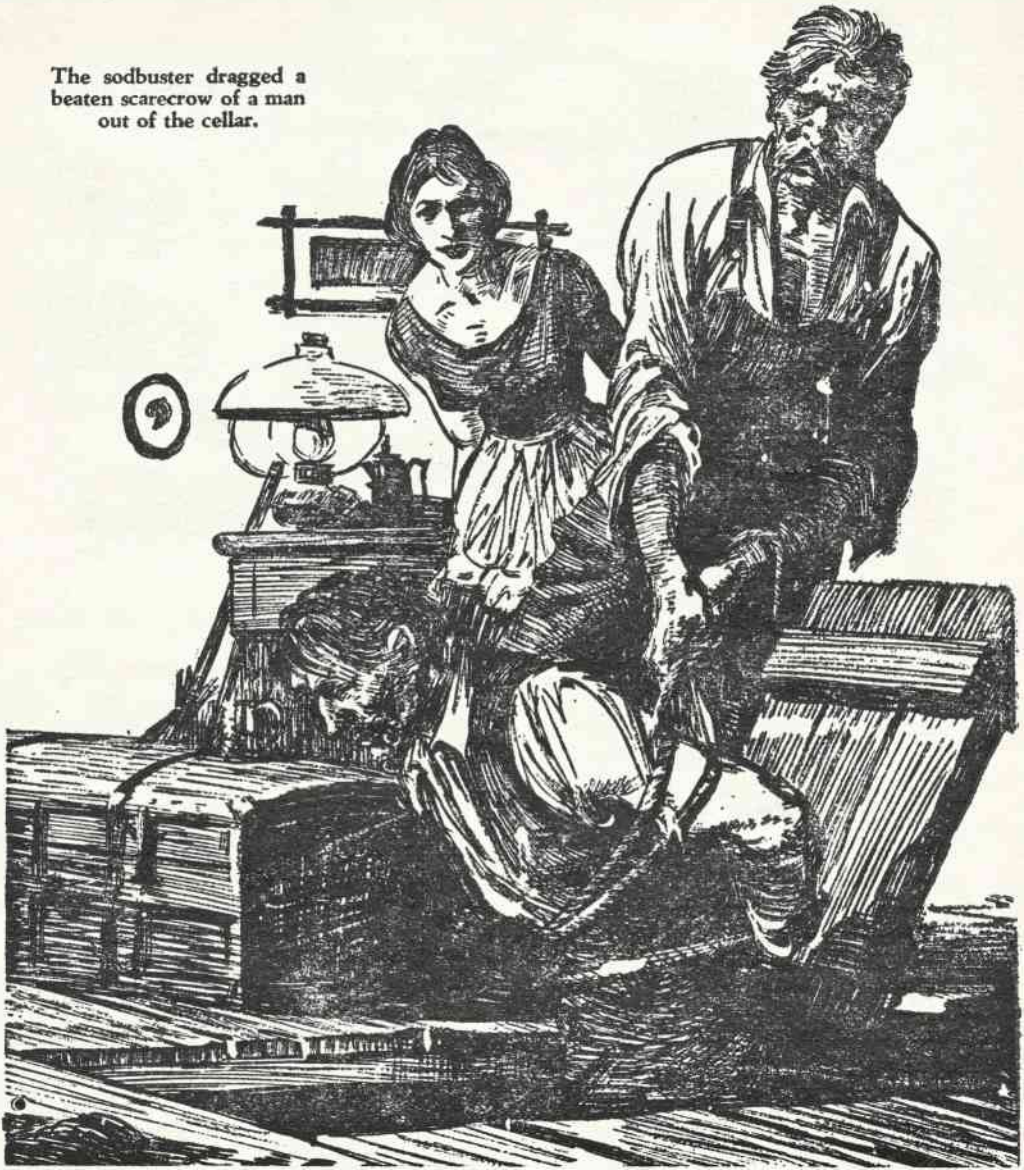
By
D. B.
Newton

Roaring
Saga
of the Old
Frontier



Britt Kimberly knew a bargain when he saw one—and wasn't afraid to make a down-payment on a pig in a poke. . . . But the porker turned out to be a barbecued bob cat, served with red-hot bushwhack sauce . . . with Kimberly committed to feast on his own funeral baked meats!

The sodbuster dragged a beaten scarecrow of a man out of the cellar.



CHAPTER ONE

Hot Lead Reception

BRITT KIMBERLY was one man who had learned to trust his instincts. Years of riding a lone trail, of standing or falling by his own impulses and by the things he read for himself in the wind and the sky, had taught him this. Now an inner voice warned him that the man across the big desk wasn't the kind he wanted to do business with.

He shifted carefully on the edge of his chair, one spur rowel scraping the floor with a rasping sound. "Tell you frankly, Mister," he grunted, "I'm just looking around. I can't be sure I want to buy into this range until I've seen more of it." And he bunched his feet, ready for the first opportunity to get on them and leave through that office door yonder, that opened onto the welcome sunset coolness flooding the street outside.

"You're passing up a bargain!" fat Vance Dean insisted earnestly. "It's very

fortunate you dropped into my office this afternoon, because, I'm convinced this Buckhorn Basin property is exactly the place you have in mind for a cattle ranch. The homestead section itself has buildings and improvements and will give you permanent title to all the water you need, as well as several acres of fine native hay. Your herds can run in the Basin, and on the hills in summer."

"But this state's getting a mite crowded," objected Kimberly. "I wouldn't want to put cattle on government land and then have homesteaders move in and push me back onto my one patented section."

Vance Degan shook his head positively. "Don't worry about that, Mr. Kimberly! The Basin just isn't right for farming. Except for Indian Springs homestead, and the Piney Creek meadows at the valley's other end, the soil there is too dry for anything but cattle graze."

"What about this other gent—this Abner Roush, that you tell me used to have the Section? What happened to him?"

"Why—" The land company man coughed dryly into a fat palm. "Unfortunately there was some trouble there, for which I'll have to hold myself partly responsible. Roush, you see, was a farmer—and I'm afraid he got himself in bad with M-on-a-Rail—the big ranch controlling the Piney Creek end of the Basin. There was some riding at night, some shooting—flumes and crops were destroyed. Finally Roush got so far behind in his payments that I was forced to take him over."

"Maybe you'll understand, then, it's for the sake of peace up there in the Basin that I'm particularly anxious to see Indian Springs go to a cattleman this time, instead of another farmer. That's why I'm willing to give you a very special price."

Kimberly said, "Maybe it wouldn't be any better. Maybe this M-on-a-Rail outfit just don't like neighbors so close to them."

"Easy enough to find out," suggested Degan, simply. "Wirt Magoffin's the owner. If you don't want to take chances on it, you could have a talk with him—find out at the beginning whether your two irons will get along."

Britt Kimberly considered. It sounded like a bargain, all right—in fact, it had sounded too good at first and that had been the chief cause of Britt's quick suspicions.

But Degan's disarming frankness had had its effect on him. Certainly, at the price, Indian Springs deserved to be looked into even if he decided not to buy.

Yes, he could have misjudged Vance Degan—but then his gray glance moved on to the other man who forked a tilted-back chair in gathering shadows near the window, and his frown deepened.

There was still only one name for that one and his cold-eyed, hawk-faced type. Monk Salter had had nothing at all to say during the interview, after the first brief exchange of introductions. He had merely sat there, looking bored but with a leashed energy showing in him and a gunhandle jutting from the gap of his open coatfront. A gunman . . .

If Vance Degan was honest, why did he have to have a bodyguard sitting at his back at every minute? Just what was the man afraid of?

Again Kimberly felt wariness tighten up inside him, and he said coldly, "I couldn't buy a piece of property I'd never laid eyes on."

"Naturally," the fat man agreed. "But make a down payment, Mr. Kimberly. Then take five days to ride into Buckhorn and look the proposition over. Take a week! After that, if you decide you don't want to buy, I'll guarantee a full refund. I'm that sure you'll like the place—and I'm anxious to sell Indian Springs to a cattleman, and avoid any more trouble."

Britt decided quickly. "Very well, then," he said, "put that guarantee in writing. I don't see as I stand to lose anything."

"You're absolutely right!" agreed Vance Degan. He was already reaching for pen and paper.

. . . An hour later, still wondering a little what he was getting into, Britt Kimberly left an eatshack and moved up the town's single street to buy himself an after-supper whiskey at the saloon. Sunset had faded out and night was pouring into the street like blue water. Above the town loomed the rampart of piney hills, shouldering a deepening sky.

Beyond those hills lay Buckhorn Basin, and Kimberly was trying to decide whether to try a room in this town's hotel or push on and camp somewhere along the trail. He did not much like a town, or the jostling of other men's elbows against his own.

And certainly there was nothing to hold him here—his horses were at the livery stable, fed and rested now; he had Vance Degan's signed agreement in a pocket of the filled money belt snugging his waist. Seven days, he thought, was not too much time for investigating the setup in Buckhorn, determining whether Indian Springs was the place to sink his stake.

Kimberly had worked long and hard for the money in his belt; and an honest man saved up that kind of money only once.

He had his drink, standing aloofly at the bar and still uncertain of his plans. The kerosene drop-lamps had been lighted against thickening night; every minute or so the batwings stirred as new men joined the early evening crowd. A lowered voice near Kimberly spoke suddenly; "That's him, sitting down to the poker table yonder! That's Gill!"

"Hondo Gill?" echoed another, in an incredulous murmur.

"Yeah. And three of his tough bunch. They've been in town near a week, now."

Britt Kimberly searched the dingy bar mirror. He saw the reflection of the two cowhands whose voices he had heard, and then following the line of their concealed looks he spotted the quartet of hard-looking riders handling cards at one of the round gaming tables, bottle and glasses before them.

He placed Gill because the man had an undefinable air of authority about him—looked meaner and harder than the other three. Dead black hair showed under the brim of a pushed-back hat; lean, wind-whipped face held no expression as the man watched the stud cards go around.

Hondo Gill was a man with a three-state reputation, and his dark-trail crew were handpicked; this much Kimberly knew about them.

Kimberly heard one of the men beside him mutter, "He's got a nerve, bringing his guncrowd right into this town! I reckon, though, he savvies there's no law hereabouts worth mentioning—and it's handy to the hills if a posse should dust in."

"I dunno but what there's more to it than that," grunted the other. "Talk links him up with Magoffin, and the trouble in Buckhorn. I understand Ed Wherry has been sighted talking to Gill. Wherry's M-on-a-Rail range boss, you know . . ."

"Aw, Hell! Wirt Magoffin wouldn't tie up with such a bunch of snakes!"

"What do you know about it?"

"Why, I trailed through Buckhorn once, a few months back. Spent the night in Magoffin's bunkshack and talked to the old man some. Magoffin struck me as hard but he's fair. And he's got him a girl that's sure something to look at!"

The other man snorted. "That's what I call pure logic! I suppose then M-on-a-Rail didn't smoke out that Roush family?"

"Well, that's different," was the sullen answer. "That was nesters . . ."

The two drifted away from earshot, and with a frown Kimberly paid for his drink and went out of the saloon. A night breeze down from the hill rampart brought pine-scent with it; he stood on the walk a moment, breathing it in.

This was getting tangled, he thought. Maybe the talk he'd heard was only rumor, but it still didn't sound good to have Wirt Magoffin's name linked with Gill's wild bunch . . . But then Kimberly shrugged. He'd made his down payment on the Indian Springs place; he would go ahead now and have a look at it—but he'd remember to keep his eyes peeled for trouble.

Meanwhile, one point had been decided for him: with a beltful of cash around his waist he had no desire to hang around the same town with an outfit like Hondo Gill's bunch. The Hotel didn't look too promising, either, he decided; probably the mattresses would be hard or at least inhabited. And no locks on the door . . . This determined him and he swung down the broad steps of the saloon, making directly for the livery barn.

Later, riding out with his pack mare trailing, Kimberly passed the saloon again and this time saw a pair of men standing on the steps, and silhouetted blackly against the half-doors. Their heads seemed to work on swivels, watching as he went past through patches of lampglow that splashed the street. Light from the window behind them limned their faces briefly and he recognized one of the hardcases he had seen earlier at Hondo Gill's table. The second man, he realized suddenly, was Monk Salter—fat Vance Degan's bodyguard!

That gave Kimberly a cold and somehow a slimy feeling. More than once, pushing up the trail, he found himself halting his

horses and twisting in saddle for an uneasy look behind him. The night was dark, without a moon. But he heard no sounds. And he felt easier as soon as the town dropped away and he was alone with the lift of the hills about him.

Here he was at home, as always, under the stars and the open, windy sky. But he couldn't help wishing he hadn't been seen heading out. Monk Salter, at least knew he had money on him. And he figured Salter was a gunhawk of the same ruthless stripe as Gill's followers . . .

He did not ride far. He got up into the hills and then drew off the track, cricled broken pine slopes until he found a good camp spot by a seep spring, with grass for the horses and a high granite outcrop above him. Here he offsaddled, picketed the animals, and spread his groundsheet. He had no need for a fire. He smoked a cigarette through before sleeping.

When he woke the sun was on the edge of the hills. And there had been no disturbance during the night hours.

There was a clear trail to Buckhorn Basin and it was close to noon when he came out onto the rim and reined in for his first view of the place. It looked good. The folding of the hills had made a sheltered floor under the shouldering ramparts, and along the bottoms Kimberly could see good graze that the worst of the winter's storms would miss. A long ridge belted the center of the Basin, dividing it almost in half. He remembered Degan's description—that ridge gave the valley a complicated water system, and it was Piney Creek he could see flashing in the high sunlight yonder on what would be M-on-a-Rail's range. The near portion was dependent on Indian Springs for moisture.

With plenty of summer graze in the hills, and the ridge tending to keep their herds separate, Kimberly thought there should be no real reason why two ranches could not get along here in neighbor fashion. Unless, of course, this Wirt Magoffin turned out to be a mere range hog who wanted to keep both halves of the Basin for himself, fair or foul . . .

Kimberly followed the wagon track on down by easy grades and switchbacks toward the basin floor, riding alertly, pack mare trailing at its anchor rope. Near the foot of the slant the way led through stunt-

ed jackpines, a scattering of crumbled talus boulders. And it was here that he received his first welcome to Buckhorn—in the shape and sound of a steel-jacketed rifle shell, that hummed at him out of the shelter of one of those quartz-glimmering boulders!

CHAPTER TWO

Last-Ditch Stand

IT WAS meant for the rider, but it got the horse instead. Britt Kimberly's gray crashed under him, going down so fast and so hard that he scarcely had a chance to pull clear of the stirrup and save his off-leg from being pinned under. He pitched free, landing solidly, and then the shod heels of the pack mare were sweeping past him, just missing his skull as the animal squealed and jerked at the rope anchoring it to the dead bronc's saddle.

Britt rolled hastily, in a frantic effort to save his brains from being stomped out by the fear-crazed horse. Yellow trail dust was boiling around him, chokingly; for a moment he lost all sense of direction, so that he hardly knew sky from solid earth. But then he felt weeds under his face and knew he had reached the border of the trail. He got his hands and knees under him, shoved up.

The spinning reeled to a halt and then he was hunting for his ambusher, while one hand fumbled for the sixgun in his hip holster. A metallic click made him jerk his head around. Just behind and above him he saw the dark form of the man, standing in full sight; saw the rifle barrel streak sunlight as the other glimpsed his intended victim through the swirling dust and shifted for a second try at him.

Pivoting awkwardly on one knee, Britt Kimberly swept his gun out as he tried to get around to meet the menace of that rifle. The ambusher fired; dust gouted within inches of Kimberly's crouching form. Then he had his own six in line and hit the trigger, twice.

At his second shot the other man dropped soundlessly, thrown half around by the weight of lead that pounded into him. The rifle clattered on rock and went end for end, and after that the man was lost behind the boulder. But Britt Kimberly had

little doubt that the bullet had done its job.

He got to his feet, a little shakily, still clutching his smoking gun. Echoes of the shots faded out on the stillness and the dust was settling again; the pack mare had quit its frantic bucking, was standing with legs spread wide, its pack twisted a little, its head bent to the rope that held it to the saddle of the dead gray. Kimberly said, "Easy, girl!" and laid a hand on the animal's quivering flank.

The gray was dead all right, shot through the head. Kimberly left them as they were and walked around to look at the man he'd dropped.

The body lay against the glistening boulder, face upturned. It was Hondo Gill's man—the one who had stood in front of the saloon last night with Monk Salter and watched him trail his pack animal out along the Buckhorn Basin trail.

Kimberly stood there a long moment, feeling the beat of the high sun, smelling the scent of heated sagebrush and pine needles—and the sour tang of spilled blood. Some points seemed clear enough, but others were badly muddled. Salter, apparently, had passed on to Gill's man the news that this stranger was riding for Buckhorn, and the latter had pushed on ahead—either passing him on the wagon road during the night, or beating Kimberly's time over some mountain short cut—and laid for him. The important question was: Why?

To get a chance at that money-belt with its stuffing of greenbacks and silver? Such was the obvious answer. But there could be something more to it. "Just thinking out loud," Britt Kimberly muttered, "could be part of this gent Magoffin's schemes to keep customers away from Indian Springs—to keep all of Buckhorn Basin for himself . . ."

Rumor had it that Hondo Gill and his crew were secretly on Magoffin's payroll. So might be this Monk Salter jigger—paid to sell out his fat boss, Vance Degan, and slip the news to Magoffin's hired killers whenever the land company man sent an interested party in to look over that disputed homestead.

In the confusion of possible answers, one thing stood out clear enough: If this Indian Springs was to belong to Kimberly, it would have to be bought with more than

silver and greenbacks! And that was a thought that brought out all the stubbornness in Britt Kimberly's gray eyes and blunt, hard jaw.

His next chore was a grim one, for he had some way to dispose of the body of the man he'd killed. "Be a lot better for me if he just drops out of sight," he reflected. Off in the tumbled rock he found a narrow crevice and he lugged the bloody remains there and covered them with rock and stone.

He also found the man's horse tied in brush not far from the ambush boulder—a nondescript animal, bearing no brand. He stripped off saddle and gear and hid them, turned the bronc loose. His own dead mount he had to leave where it had fallen; he transferred his kak to the mare, removing the pack and stowing it in the crotch of a tree for safekeeping. The body of the gray would, of course, be sure, mute testimony that something had happened here along the trail, but that was a thing he could do nothing about.

So, in saddle again and with fresh loads in his holstered sixgun, he rode on into Buckhorn—this time, with a little more caution, a little more careful survey of the land around him. The trail leveled off onto the Basin floor—broad, rolling acres of bunchgrass and sage. The far side of the box was curtained from him now by the low pink ridge thrusting into the middle of it. He saw a few scattered head of cattle bearing the Magoffin M-on-a-Rail brand. But mostly this was empty region, and he liked it better all the time.

Another trail branched off toward the hills at his right, and judging that this would lead him to Indian Springs he took it, in growing eagerness to see the homestead section that he figured would make headquarters for his new proposed cattle spread.

He saw the Springs themselves first, lacy cottonwoods standing about them. He saw the wreckage of plowed fields, of smashed flumes, ripped-out fences—evidences of the night-rider attacks that had ruined the former occupant, Abner Roush. And finally the buildings, still intact, and shimmering in the distance with a reflected smear of hot sunlight. All this was as he had expected to find it.

What he hadn't expected was the men.

THERE were three of them, three still figures in the beaten-earth dooryard of the place, just standing there watching as he rode in on the little clutter of buildings at a slow walk. Once Kimberly had a wild impulse to haul rein, to turn his bronc and get out of there; that was when he saw the sun wink on the barrel of a shotgun cradled in the arms of one of that trio. And though he went ahead at the same jogging pace, he let his right hand drop and swing loosely to the motion of the mount, ready that way for a quick move toward his holstered gun.

He rode right into the yard without any effort being made to stop him. Only then did the one with the shotgun call sharply, "Well, are you just waiting for me to blow your brains out through the top of your hat? You just waiting to see if I'll do it?"

Britt pulled rein, ran a look over the three. He saw now that two of them were no more than boys, with tall, gawky frames that would fill out solidly in time. Family resemblance marked them as the sons of the mahogany-dark hungry-looking man with the gun. They all were dressed in shapeless jeans that were patched and bleached from many tubbings. In the half-open door of the shack behind them, peering out with frightened eyes, stood a woman as gaunt and desperate-looking as her men.

Kimberly said: "Squatters, huh? Don't you know this isn't government land, friend? It's private-owned!"

"Cut out the small talk," snapped the other, "and do what you was sent for. Either that, or git! I don't care who sent you—Magoffin or Vance Degan, whichever one! When a man's gettin' pushed from every side at once he at least has got the advantage of knowin' that everybody's his enemy." He added, "I'll give you just ten seconds—"

The twin hammers of the shotgun were back, the triggers pressing against his hard, bent finger. From the doorway the woman's voice came faint and trembling with terror: "Now, Abner—"

The name struck home, hard. Britt Kimberly stared. "Are you Abner Roush? The man that lost this place to Degan?"

"That's right! Except that you can see I'm still holdin' onto it—me and the boys here—and it's gonna take something pretty rough to put us off!"

"The Law, maybe?"

Roush's face hardened. "You're a lawyer, I suppose—sent out to dispossess us. They should of sent the cavalry!"

"I'm no badge-toter," Britt said quietly. "And I'm not a Magoffin man or anything else. I'm just a gent that seems to be getting deeper tangled every minute into a row that's none of his starting."

He introduced himself, then; told of the down payment he had made to Vance Degan. He added: "I don't mean harm to anybody. I only want for to build me a ranch—and I kind of think Indian Springs is the one place I been looking for."

For a long moment Roush said nothing, squinting up at the man in saddle. "So what happens?" he grunted, finally.

"Frankly, I dunno," said Britt. "I got a few days to make up my mind and close the deal. But I don't think much of sinking all my money into a piece of property that another man is holding down with guns!"

Roush made a flat gesture. "I don't want the Springs! You can have 'em, for all of me—this ain't fit land for cultivating, and neither is the rest of the Basin. But I ain't gettin' off till I've had a settlement with Vance Degan! Hell, he knew what he was gettin' me into when he sold me on the place—painting such a purty picture that I even sent word to my cousin, Joe Timson, for him to bring his folks and foller me here! Mister, I've lost every dime I had on this proposition, and though I ain't got any legal claim against that fat skunk, he ain't gonna find me easy to get rid of!"

"You hold Degan responsible?" said Britt, frowning. "But I understood it was Magoffin's night riders that finished you, by tearing out your fences and destroying your flumes and crops."

"M-on-a-Rail!" The nester spat into the dust. "Damn killer outfit, that's what they are! But it was Degan put me in here, with my wife and boys, to face Magoffin's guns singlehanded. Why? Why didn't he warn me? I can't fight an outfit that size—but damned if I can't hold out until somebody makes good to me for what I've lost here. I might as well try, anyhow—I can't afford to move on and settle anywhere else. My pockets are stone empty!"

Slowly, Kimberly lifted his gunhand and rested it on the pommel of the saddle. Talk had stilled the nester's suspicions too, and

the twin muzzles of the shotgun were pointing now at the dust. The woman had opened the door of the shack and come out upon the stoop, where she stood now listening anxiously with hands wrapped in her apron.

Britt Kimberly said, "It looks like a hopeless proposition—"

"What if it is?" Roush retorted. "What if I ain't got a gnat's chance of winning? At least, Vance Degan is worried. So you just get the hell out of here now and stop trying to argue with me!"

"Maybe I don't want to argue. Maybe I'd like to help—"

"Help?"

A change came over the man's face, an incredulous look spread across it. He grunted: "Why, I think maybe you mean that!"

"I do. In a way, Roush, you and I have a lot of things in common. We're both little guys trying to get along in the face of a big cattle outfit and despite a fat man loaded with money-power. I think we could get together."

The man's suspicions were slow to die. But then he turned and spoke gruffly to one of the half-grown boys. "Dale, take the gent's horse. Put out another plate, Maw! Mister," he added, and his tone was very changed. "We eat humble chow here but you're welcome to dip into the pot with us. It's nigh on to dinner time."

"Thanks, Roush," said Britt quietly, swinging down. "Seemed I'd been smelling something right good, through the window. And a man can talk more friendly like, across a table . . ."

IT WAS good food, all right—beef stew, with dumplings. Spearing a hunk of the meat on his fork, Britt glanced up and caught the nester's eyes on him. Roush said heavily, "You're thinkin' that's a Magoffin steer you're eating. Well, you're right! And you bein' a cattleman, I know what else you're thinkin'." He shrugged heavily. "But after them night riders got done with us, there was nothing else left for us to eat!"

Britt said only, "I've been hungry myself—" And that moment's tension passed.

They talked more, as they ate. Roush told something of himself—of his home in the East, his struggles to find a new life

in a new land, the heartbreaking experience here in Buckhorn. Kimberly found himself liking the man, and his hard-worked wife and the two boys, Dale and Bertie. But he secretly believed there was little likelihood of Roush gaining himself anything out of his last-ditch stand, on a homestead that he had already lost, and with all the force of the Law available to Vance Degan at any time the fat man chose to move him off.

Then why, Britt asked himself, was he sitting here breaking bread with these hopeless people—inviting himself deeper and deeper into the Basin's muddled affairs. Certainly there were other places where he could buy in and not face half the confusion and odds that met him here. Why didn't he just saddle and get out of this? Why, for that matter, hadn't he heeded the instinctive warning that told him to have nothing to do with this setup, in the first place?

He didn't know. Maybe it was stubbornness. Or maybe something stronger told him Buckhorn Basin was really his range.

The talk had switched to himself. Abner Roush was drawing him out, learning about this stranger's cowpunching years, about the work and toil that had won him his stake, his dreams for the Lazy K iron he hoped someday to own. The nester seemed satisfied with his answers; he appeared to have lost all suspicion of Kimberly by now. For suddenly he broke in as though with quick determination:

"Mister, I'm afraid I haven't told you quite everything. I got an ace in the hole that I was holding back; but right now I aim to show it to you!" He got up, prowled to the open door and took a long and nervous look outside. "Bertie," he said, turning to one of the boys, "you git out there and keep watch. Take the shotgun and fire off a signal if you see anyone coming. Maw, fill the extra plate."

While Britt watched in puzzlement, the boy grabbed the gun and went running out of the cabin, his father closing the door and putting half-darkness in the tiny room. The woman was on her feet, gaunt hands clutching the back of the chair she had been sitting on. "Abner!" she exclaimed, doubt muffling her voice. "You—you sure you know what you're doin'?"

"Aw, hell!" he grunted. "You got to

trust somebody. This gent talks straight enough; I don't think he's ary thing but what he claims to be. Now, get that grub ready. Dale, gimme a hand here with the door. You'll have to move, Kimberly—"

There was a rag rug underneath Britt's chair. He stood aside now and saw them jerk that rug aside, revealing the square outline of a trapdoor beneath it. Rusty hinges groaned; steps showed, leading down into musty darkness. Dale Roush had a candle lighted and father and son went down the steps. When they reappeared a moment later they half-carried something between them—a man, dressed in filthy clothing, his face matted with unshorn whiskers and eyes blinking as they hauled him up into the light.

"What the hell!" Kimberly demanded.

Roush shoved the man into a chair and removed the rope that thonged his wrists together. The woman set a plate of food in front of him and without a word the prisoner threw himself at it, gobbling the stew noisily as his thick shoulders hunched over the plate.

"A souvenir from M-on-a-Rail!" Roush said grimly. "The first time they came they weren't even masked—Wirt Magoffin himself sat his bronc right out there before the house and said if we didn't leave pronto we were in for trouble. Then a week ago they come again, at night, and wrecked the fields and the flumes. We couldn't stop 'em—but I did get a shot and knocked this one out of the saddle, just as they were scattering. Maw patched up the hole in his arm and since then we've been keeping him down in the root cellar, feeding him when we had to and trying to think of a way to use him."

The man continued eating, noisily, stowing the food away as though it was the only thing in the world that mattered. Britt frowned.

"Use him?" he echoed. "How?"

"I dunno," Roush admitted. "But it seems a cinch he ought to be of some value. Trouble is, I haven't any proof he's a Magoffin rider—I don't remember seein' him, the first time they came. But if I could get a confession out of him—something I could show to the sheriff—something that would nail down M-on-a-Rail as the outfit that raided us, then—"

"Then what?"

The nester shrugged. "Why, maybe I

could use it to make Wirt Magoffin throw in with me against Degan. If M-on-a-Rail would only back me, and help me get back the money I lost on this place, then I'd agree not to prosecute Magoffin. All I'm after is my money, and a chance to try again somewhere on land that's fit for farming."

"I see . . ." Yes, Abner Roush had a head on him. A confession would put Magoffin over a barrel—force him to throw his weight behind Roush in the settlement with the land company man. "But this guy won't talk?"

"He ain't yet. Not in a week! But by God—" Suddenly Roush strode forward, jerked the prisoner around in his chair. "Listen to me!" He grabbed a handful of the matted hair, pulled the man's head back so that he was staring fiercely into the sullen eyes and the pinched and ugly face. "Where the hell's this gettin' you?" Roush demanded. "You want to lie down in that cellar till you rot? Why won't you talk and have it over with?"

No expression showed in the heavy features. With a curse Roush struck the man across the face with his free hand. The other blinked and grunted, tongued stinging lips, but he still would say nothing although he cringed visibly as the farmer's hand lifted for another blow.

Then Britt Kimberly interrupted that. "It's no good," he said. "There's something he's more scared of than he is of you. Beating him up won't make him talk!"

Roush released his grip on the prisoner and stepped back, breathing heavily. "In the cellar again, then," he gritted. "Sooner or later, he'll break all right! He's got to . . ."

Britt Kimberly had a lot of thoughts to chew on as he forked his bronc again, heading away from that shack and the nester family making its lone, fantastic, hold-out fight there. What his own next move should be was entirely problematical. There was no need of further inspection of the Basin—he had seen enough to know that Indian Springs was what he wanted and, at the agreed price, too good a bargain to be passed up.

Magoffin? Yes,—that was the angle that needed studying. He was becoming steadily more curious about the M-on-a-Rail boss; the things he had heard conflicted,

but the general impression was that of a tricky, hard, and ruthless neighbor. Kimberly made his mind up. He would head right now for the other end of the Basin and have it out with the M-on-a-Rail boss—have this out in the open, and know how much trouble he could expect from that quarter if he went through with his plans of taking over Indian Springs.

He sent his mare, then, along a wagon track that snaked across the flats, apparently skirting the end of the jutting ridge that cut across the waist of the Basin. "Watch your back!" had been Abner Roush's final words as he left the homestead. Kimberly had reason to know that was a sound warning—he had neglected to tell these people anything about the bushwhack try that already been made against him here. Now he rode cautiously, not knowing what he might discover next in this place of surprises.

When a rise of land lifted him to a point where he could see the wagon road snaking down the hill wall at his left—the road that had brought him in that morning—Kimberly suddenly hauled rein, staring. He couldn't at first believe what he saw. Wagons, a dozen of them; canvas-topped, swaying through swirling dust as mule teams brought them down the switchbacks of the road. Mounted outriders moved ahead of the train. Now a shifting in the faint, sage-scented breeze brought him the sound of the wheels, the voices of men shouting at their animals.

An emigrant train, by the looks of it; a whole company of nesters moving in on Buckhorn Basin! Moving in with their families and household furnishings—and, in their wagon boxes, probably bags of seed and plows with which to furrow up and destroy the rich graze of the Basin floor!

Incredulous anger in him, Kimberly put spurs into his bronc and went forward at a gallop, veering away from his original course to aim instead straight for the vanguard of that invading wagon train.

By the time he came in on them, the tail-end of the string was taking the last loops in the trail and the bulk of the wagons had strung out onto the sage-dotted Basin floor. Closing in, trailing a tunnel of dust, he saw that the lead wagon had been halted for some reason; and then he made out the knot of mounted men gathered near the head of the column.

These were not all members of the train, he sensed quickly. Four, who ranged their broncs close together and facing the others, had something more the look of cattlemen. Then Britt caught the M-on-a-Rail brand and at the same moment saw that one of the four was too small to be a man—that, moreover, beneath the flat-crowned hat bright curls swept down toward shapely shoulders. And he remembered then that Wirt Magoffin was said to have a daughter.

All of these people were too engrossed in talk to notice Kimberly as he rode nearer, a tension in the scene; and now the voice of one of the wagon men came crisply across the flat ground: "You're wasting your threats, Mister! This is government land, open to homesteading—and we've come a long way to farm it!"

"Damn it!" rasped a big, shaggy, black-bearded figure on one of the M-on-a-Rail horses. "I'm not threatening you—yet!" He let the last word hang a moment for emphasis, then went on flatly: "I'm trying to tell you that this Basin wasn't meant for growing anything but grass. I'm trying to tell you that before you go to work and break yourselves tryin' it—and ruin the range at the same time. I'm doing you a favor, if you ain't too stupid blind to see!"

The girl said: "Dad! Go easy, now!" Kimberly, sitting motionless and unheeded only yards away, had a good look at her face as she turned to say that to the black-beard. Even in the tension of the moment he had time to think that the man in the saloon had certainly been right: this was as lovely a golden-skinned girl as he had ever seen, and her figure was slim and trim and nicely molded under the riding skirt and open-throated blouse she wore, and the fancy, red and green bolero jacket.

The leader of the wagonmen was obviously a man of quick temper. He had colored some at the bearded man's final words and he lashed back harshly: "Your name's Magoffin, ain't it? I heard some things concerning you, outside the Basin."

"You probably heard right," answered Wirt Magoffin in mounting anger. "That is, if you heard I'm a man that thinks God made this country for cattle, and that He's got no more use'n I do for sodbusters! The grass-killin', beef-stealin' breed of—"

Rage whipped the color through the other's cheeks. And suddenly one hand was

pawing at his waistband, dragging out the single-action Colt that was stuffed away there.

Kimberly had gone into action, almost without thinking; he only saw that neither Wirt Magoffin nor either of the men with him was making any motion toward a weapon—and that the farmer, carried too far by his emotion, was going to shoot in spite of that. It would be murder if he got a bullet off, and Britt Kimberly was not sitting by and watching such a thing. Almost before the long barrel of the farmer's gun came clear of waistband and arced into line, Britt's weapon was clearing leather. He fired across the saddlehorn. The other man gave a howl of pain as his gun went spinning out of his fingers, exploding and sending its slug harmlessly into the ground before it too plopped heavily into the dust.

All at once, Kimberly felt a little sick. That had been awfully narrow—and a lucky shot on his part. But his smoking gun held level and his voice was crisp as he snapped: "This don't seem to me to call for gunplay. Somebody almost got killed then!"

Stunned silence clamped down as the echoes of the gunfire threaded out. Every head was swiveled to stare at Kimberly, the leader of the wagonmen hugging his hurt hand against him. "Who the hell are you?" he gritted. "Who wrote you into this?"

"I'm writing myself into it," Britt said, his gun still ready. "Who I am don't matter. But you better listen to this Magoffin hombre because he's telling you the truth and trying to save you a lot of grief before you get sunk too deep to draw out again. This range is just the way he says it is—not right for farming."

"We'll decide that for ourselves!" the nester leader growled. "Damned if we'll let any strangers make up our minds for us. And damned if any handful of men can stop us from going ahead—not when we outnumber you three to one!"

It was true enough. And obviously the thing was past argument. Ignoring Kimberly's leveled gun, the leader walked his bronc over and leaned from saddle to pick up the weapon that had been shot from his fingers. Then he turned his back and went at a canter toward the lead wagon; and the others of the farmer group trailed him.

This was more than bravado. Right now they had the numerical edge and they knew it.

Britt Kimberly jacked the spent shell from his gun, replaced it with a fresh one and shoved the weapon into holster. None of the M-on-a-Rail men made any move to stop the nesters. Big Wirt Magoffin said heavily, "They'll find out, later, what a mistake they're making!" And then he turned on Kimberly.

"Well, I don't know you, hombre—and I reckon there ain't much to say except that you've got me living on borrowed time. You certainly saw that play starting before I did, and you more than matched it. My thanks!"

Britt accepted this with a curt nod. "Just so we don't get off to a false start," he grunted, "I better tell you exactly who I am. Kimberly is the name—I got an option on the Indian Springs place and I aim to take it up and run cattle on this end of the Basin. What kind of neighbors we'll make depends on the M-on-a-Rail!"

Some of the friendliness froze in the big, black-bearded giant. "I see!" he grunted; and added bluntly: "Did you think maybe I'd hang out the welcome sign?" Even if you did save my life, does that make it any easier to see half of the range I use stolen away from me—especially by a man that a crook like Vance Degan sends into the Basin?"

"Now, Dad," the girl exclaimed anxiously. "What good will talking like that—?"

"Shut up, Jo!" Magoffin snapped. "I got this to say and I'm gonna say it and get the cards spread out on the board. Degan—and that sneakin' traitor of an Ed Lamb—done me out of Indian Springs and I let 'em get away with it without a fight. But that's gunna be the last time! Am I talking clear enough?"

"No!" replied Kimberly. "I ain't too good at riddles—and there seems to be plenty of them mixed up in this. Just who the hell is Ed Lamb?"

"Why, who but the cowhand I put on Indian Springs in the first place, to prove title to it? The skunk was supposed to sell his patent to me and then, with Piney Creek, I would have had a legal control of the whole Basin. But instead, he sold out to Degan at a higher price, while my back was turned, and skinned out of the

country before I had a chance to get my hands on him and tear the doublecrosser limb from limb!"

This part of the story was new to Britt Kimberly; it put a different light on things. "So that's how Degan beat you out of the Springs, huh? And then he sold them to this nester, Abner Roush? Well, I can see you wouldn't have much love for Degan or for anybody he sent in here—But—"

Kimberly shrugged. "It still adds up the same. It was your own mistake, not picking a more reliable man to prove up the Springs for you! As it stands, you're the loser—and you got no right making it tough for a stranger that comes in, peaceable inclined, to start him a spread on range he bought in all good faith. You better make the best of it."

Color mounted into the sundarkened face, above the heavy beard. "Maybe I ain't ready to make the best of it!" he gritted. "Maybe I tried that once too often—and now I'm going to fight!"

"This isn't getting us anywhere!" the bright-haired girl broke in bitterly, and impulsively she sent her sorrel roan between the two of them. "I'm Jo Magoffin, Mr. Kimberly," she said. "I want to apologize for Dad talking this way, when you saved his life. We're cattlemen and whether Dad sees it or not, we've got to stick together: Because—after this—"

A gesture of her small brown hand indicated the line of nester wagons, moving now in a long, undulating line into the very heart of Buckhorn Basin. Her meaning was clear, and so was the concern that marked her pretty face as she added: "No telling what may come of all this. But I know that I love this Basin, and I want to see it kept the way it is and not destroyed, by war or by the thoughtless plans of people who don't know any better than to try and take a plow to it! I've lived in Buckhorn all my life; I—I couldn't bear to see it scarred and turned to dust for the winds to blow away."

"Maybe you think of it the same way, Mr. Kimberly. Or maybe you don't know what I'm talking about. But in either case—I hope that we're going to be able to call each other friends!"

She thrust her hand at him as she said that. Leaning across from his own saddle,

Britt Kimberly took the hand earnestly.

He said: "That's one thing I figure I'd be proud to have you call me, Miss Jo!"

CHAPTER THREE

Gunsight Transaction

FROM the top of the grade, Britt Kimberly reined back and took another look at Buckhorn spread below him. Sunlight flashed on water, and it shimmered back from canvas wagoontops of the invading nester train. Yes, the girl was right! Hard to tell what would come of all the elements that had been stirred together, into the devil's brew simmering here in the Basin.

Down the slope of the rim, three horsemen were coming up the trail behind him. Magoffin and the two M-on-a-Rail men. One of these, he had learned—the lean, towheaded one with the drooping blond mustache—was the foreman, Ed Wherry. He could see the mounted figures shifting through the straight trunks of the pines now, climbing toward him, and wondered with a quick scowl if they were trailing him. No, maybe not—they were taking their time. But Kimberly didn't like being alone on that little-used trail, with that dangerous trio at his back.

He put in spurs and sent his mare across the rim, into the timber, and went along the wagon road at a fast clip for a couple of miles before he drew to an easier pace. With that much lead and a close eye on the backtrail, he would feel altogether easier.

It was eight o'clock and not wholly dark when he reached town. He came down the grade and into the end of the street, rode aound to the livery barn. "Give the mare a rubdown and a feed of grain," he told the attendant. "Then put the saddle back on. I'll be wanting the horse again."

The old man gave him a curious look. "Seems like you had two animals when you rode out of here last night."

"Sure seems like it, for a fact," Britt replied shortly and went off through the gathering dusk, spurs ringing along the near-empty sidewalk.

He kept his gun hanging free and a careful eye on the shadows around him—he didn't know anything good of this town, not with Hondo Gill's outfit running the place and like as not Wirt Magoffin and his two

riders already here by now. If Gill were indeed taking orders from Magoffin, and if the M-on-a-Rail owner still held the hostility toward Kimberly that he had shown back yonder in the Basin— Well, Britt only knew he had no intention of staying in town long. He wanted some words with Vance Degan, and then get out again into the open hills where he could lose the tightness that streets and crowded buildings always seemed to twist into his shoulder muscles.

First, though, he had late supper at an eatshack that was nearly empty. He took a table in a rear corner where he could watch the plate glass windows and he took his time with the meal. When he left the waitress had the shades pulled and had to unlock the door for him. Outside, full night had come, and the stars were a bright pattern across the dark sky.

Degan, a bachelor, lived in a cubby-hole back room of the building where he had his land company office; so Britt was not surprised to see lights in the office window despite the lateness of the hour. Sight of three horses tied to a rack before the building, however, interested him; so did the glimpse he had, riding slowly by, of the men seated inside that lighted room. "Magoffin!" he grunted. "Is this what he rode into town for? A confab with Vance Degan?"

The neighboring building sided on a dark side street and on an impulse Kimberly turned up this, dismounting at the mouth of a straggling alley that ran behind the houses. Snubbing reins to a fence post, he moved up the rutted alley and into the slot between the two buildings. A side window of Degan's office stood open against the summer evening. Kimberly edged in on this cautiously, flattened himself against the rough siding and looked inside.

Yes, Wirt Magoffin and his two riders were there, and Degan behind his scarred desk, and the inevitable Monk Slater half-lost in shadows behind him. Kimberly pulled back out of sight, stood pressed close against the clapboards and listening to the angry voices that came through the opened window at his elbow.

"Damn it, I've stood for all I ought or am going to!" It was Wirt Magoffin speaking. "I stood by and let you and that double-crossing Ed Lamb take Indian

Springs from me, and the whole eastern half of the Basin with it. I held back when you shoved that Roush family in there. But this is just too damn thick, Degan! A whole trainload of them—"

"But I swear I don't know anything about this!" the fat man bleated with genuine fear in him. "I didn't send those nesters in! I've told you I don't want any more trouble with you or the Basin."

"You're a liar!"

The foreman, Ed Wherry, put in in a mild tone, "I'm keeping an eye on that Monk Salter jigger for you, boss. He won't interfere. Go ahead and give this fat slob what he's got comin'!"

There was the scrape of chairlegs as someone rose ponderously. Degan's voice lifted in terror. "Now, wait! Wait, Magoffin! You're making a mistake! I swear I'm telling the truth—I swear I don't want to make any further trouble!"

"Prove it!"

"I will!" And the fat man blurted out his offer: "How'd you like to buy full title to the Springs from me, cheap? Awful cheap! I'll pull clear out of the Basin!"

There was a taut silence. Wirt Magoffin said scornfully: "Just how many times do you think you can sell one piece of property, you skunk?"

"I know what you're thinking," the man agreed hastily. "Abner Roush—he lost his title to the place but he's still holding out. But don't worry about him, Magoffin. I'll see that he's cleared off of there for you. That—that's a promise!"

"Yeah? Why haven't you fetched the county sheriff and gone in long before this, and ordered him off? What the hell are you stalling for?"

"Because—well, because it's dangerous! The mood Roush is in, he'd kill anyone he saw within gunshot of the Springs. So I've worked out a safer way."

"I suppose you're talking about this gent, Kimberly."

Britt heard a choked gasp. "What—what did you say? What do you know about him?"

"More than you figure I do," snapped Magoffin. "I know you sold him an option on the Springs and sent him in there—probably figured Roush would pop him off and give you an excuse for sending the sheriff and a posse into the Basin after

Roush on a murder charge, and you'd not have to risk your own hide at all. That's it, isn't it? And you're so sure Kimberly must be dead by this time that you figure it's safe to go ahead and offer me a price on the Springs despite the option you gave him! Well, maybe it'll interest you to know Kimberly isn't dead! He's not only alive but probably here in town right this minute—we've talked to him, and he was a few miles ahead of us all the way in from Buckhorn!"

"But, it—it can't be!" cried Degan. "I mean—"

"You mean you'd made damn sure I would get killed, isn't that it?"

Britt Kimberly was in the window, one lean leg across the sill, his gun out and leveled at the bulk of the land company operator. As every head in the room jerked around he eased his other leg through the opening, straightened up, his eyes never leaving Vance Degan's face.

The fat man was staring at him, open mouthed, a shine of sweat across his face and in the creases of his thick neck. He stood behind his desk, pudgy hands on the battered top of it, the fingers trembling. Wirt Magoffin, too, was on his feet, and behind him Ed Wherry and the other M-on-a-Rail hand were still seated. Monk Salter's gray features were a blob in the half-shadows at the back of the room.

Kimberly said: "To be certain sure I wouldn't come back from Buckhorn alive, you had one of Hondo Gill's gunslingers ride ahead and meet me with a bushwhack bullet, on the trail going in. Unfortunately, the bullet only killed my bronc. And I had better luck with my own shot—"

Ed Wherry exclaimed: "That must have been your dead horse we saw lying dead along the trail off the rim. . . ."

"That's right," said Britt. "I buried Hondo Gill's man not far from the spot where he fell."

"It—It's a lie!" Vance Degan had found his tongue. "I don't know anything about all this."

"The hell you don't!" snapped Kimberly. "The truth is written all over your face! Magoffin you're just as easy to read!" he added, turning to the rancher whose bearded features wore an expression of baffled anger and bewilderment. "You're wondering just what the deal is. You brought Gill and

his men into this country to fight your war for you—and right this minute you don't know who the hell they're working for, you or Degan. I'd say it looks like somebody's sold you out again. You have damn poor luck that way!"

Magoffin's stubby, powerful fingers were working spasmodically. "Mister, you're doing a hell of a lot of guessing and talking for an outsider who's shoved his beak into something that's too hot for him!" he growled, scowling blackly. "Just where do you think you fit into this, anyway?"

"Right into the middle, it looks like," Britt Kimberly answered bleakly. "With my tail caught in a crack and every side against me. . . ."

In that moment, facing that bunch of men, he held the only drawn gun and for once the scene was his; but any lapse of weariness might turn the tables and destroy him. No man here was his friend—that much he knew for certain. And he knew, too, what common sense would tell him: that the thing for him now was to get his down-payment money back from Vance Degan, wash his hands entirely of the mess in Buckhorn Basin and fork his saddle out of this country while he could. It was probably the last chance to clear out with no loss, other than the saddle horse a bushwhack bullet had knocked out from under him, on the Basin trail.

What he actually did was to slip his free hand into the front of his shirt, unhook the fastenings of his money belt and jerk it loose, toss it upon the desk. "Count out the price for Indian Springs," he told Degan, curtly. "Then give me the deed and a receipt in full. Hurry it up!"

It took the fat man a long minute to move to obey the order. The M-on-a-Rail faction looked thunderstricken and furious. Wirt Magoffin thundered: "Mister, are you a complete fool? Do you think you can barge in and grab those Springs, with nothing to back you up but one damn lone gun against the field?"

"Maybe I am a fool," Britt agreed tightly. "But I taken a fancy to the Basin. I'm exercising my honest legal rights by taking up that option within the time limit agreed on. My conscience is clear."

"Maybe your conscience is, but your future ain't!" said Magoffin. "I'm warning you! M-on-a-Rail won't take this layin'

down." The old rancher's eyes blazed.

Kimberly ignored him. "Come on, Degan!" he snapped. "The deed!"

With fumbling fingers, the fat man did as he was ordered. Britt watched him count the money out of the belt, fill out and sign a receipt, get the legal papers from a drawer of the desk. He pocketed these, took the belt—almost empty now—in his free hand. "All right," he said. "I'll leave you gents to finish your chat—that is, if there's anything left for you to talk about!"

He moved back toward the open window, got one leg across the sill. But in doing so he had to take his glance off the other men for a fraction of an instant and that almost cost him his life.

Kimberly heard the whisper of gunmetal against leather, caught movement out of the tail of his eye and jerked around quickly. But before he could target anyone two other guns crashed, together. The windowpane above Britt's head went out with a smash, showering him with splintered glass; and then, gun still smoking from that shot, Monk Salter was pivoting, breaking going down in a lifeless heap.

Big Wirt Magoffin stood crouched, above a drawn gun, its smoking muzzle trained on Degan's dead bodyguard. As the thunder of the combined shots ribboned out to silence, Britt Kimberly grunted: "Thanks, Magoffin! That was fast work. He'd have nailed me sure!"

"Skunk's been asking for killing!" the M-on-a-Rail owner said. "And that cleans the slate, for you saving my life this afternoon. Now there's nothing to tie my hands, so—get the hell out of here, while I'm of a mood to let you. Because, from here on, Kimberly, when we meet it'll be you and me across gunsights!"

There seemed no answer for that; Kimberly didn't try to make one. He dropped through the window into darkness, boot-heels crunching on broken glass. And then, pouching his gun, he turned and went at a run toward the alley and the waiting mare.

He jerked loose the reins, went up into saddle quickly. He didn't know whether to expect immediate pursuit, but there was no point in taking chances with Magoffin's present dangerous mood. And certainly he had no reason now for staying in this town. His bronc was rested, fed and ready to travel . . . He found the trail and headed

once more into the hills, going toward Buckhorn, and letting the lights of town drop away into shadows behind him.

HE PRESSED forward through the night, through the silent hills and the shouldering masses of jackpine and juniper. He had quickly discovered that riders were on his backtrail, and he had the devil's own time losing them even in the thick darkness. It was M-on-a-Rail, of course. Wirt Magoffin, beside himself now at the way things were running against him, was out to get that land title to Indian Springs, by whatever method, and letting neither himself nor his men rest as long as the stranger, Kimberly, had it in his possession.

Britt stuck to the ridges, not letting those others get above him, and by the faint starshine he cut his own trail westward toward Buckhorn. He had been in saddle almost constantly, now, for better than eighteen hours, and fatigue was dragging heavily at him; but he kept going, pushing the tired mare, and finally he hauled rein and after a good twenty minutes of listening and scanning the shadows convinced himself that he had shaken pursuit from his trail.

It was too dangerous, though, to risk being surprised in these hills, and Kimberly did not make camp. He rode on, always westward. Dawn was washing the sky when the Basin opened once more before him and he hunted out a ravine that took him down out of the hills and into the grassy cup.

Tired as he was, Britt Kimberly could appreciate the fresh beauty of this place under the pink and gold sunrise. Each pinetop stood up, separate and distinct, upon the yonder ridges. A morning breeze stirred the bunch grass and sage. Yes, this was a range worth fighting for. . .

He saw the canvas tops of the emigrant wagons, circled in camp on an open flat, and swung wide of them. And then, finding the faint wagon track toward Indian Springs, he let the weary mare out again and came in on the last leg of the journey.

Cottonwood leaves flecked golden morning light above the water of the Springs. This was his, he realized suddenly, if he could hold it! He rode directly in on the ramshackle buildings. Abner Roush's gaunt shape showed in the doorway of the house and Kimberly lifted an arm in greeting.

The man moved back inside as the newcomer rode up and swung down wearily from saddle.

"All right!" said Abner Roush's voice. "Step inside!"

Something in the tone made him turn quickly, and he looked into the twin muzzles of the shotgun. "What the hell!" Kimberly exclaimed angrily. "Do we have to go through this again?"

"Come inside," repeated the farmer, shortly.

With an angry shrug, Kimberly left his horse and moved toward the house. His temper was short from lack of sleep and long hours of riding; it made him think of his holstered gun but he let that ride, determined though that he was not going to take much foolishness off this man with the shotgun. He found himself wondering suddenly about Abner Roush's sanity. Maybe this lone fight had somehow unbalanced him. . .

Then, as he cleared the low doorway and stepped into the gloomy interior of the shack, Kimberly felt the gun being plucked from his holster and he jerked around quickly. He recognized at once the man who had disarmed him. It was the leader of the wagon-train emigrants.

"Yeah, it's him all right, Cousin Ab," this one snarled as he brandished the captured weapon. "It's the skunk who horned in and used a bullet on me when I was about to give that M-on-a-Rail boss his needings!"

Something half-forgotten clicked then in Britt's mind—something Roush had said about a cousin, Joe Timson, that he had sent word to bring his family and friends and settled here in Buckhorn. So this was Timson—and these two other strangers, in worn shirts and levis, were part of his train. The Roush boys and their mother were watching, white of face, from across the crowded room.

"All right, start talking!" Abner Roush challenged, the twin muzzles of the shotgun unwavering. "Explain why you rode away from here yesterday saying you were going to help us—and then right away threw in your gun with that Magoffin range hog!"

Anger lashed up in Britt Kimberly. "Damn it, could I stand by and watch murder done? Magoffin made no play for his gun. It would have been murder, if Timson had shot."

"You threatened us!" the latter retorted. "You joined Magoffin in warning us out of the Basin."

"I only told you the truth—that Buckhorn isn't fit for farming! No doubt Roush has already been telling you that himself, now that you've had a chance to talk things over." He turned to Roush. "I didn't know these were your people; but even so I couldn't have done any different."

There was no change in the coldness of Roush's look. He jerked his head at the eldest boy. "Get that trapdoor open, Bertie. Looks like another candidate for the root cellar—and the last time I'll take the trouble to talk fair with a man, once he admits he's a dirty cattleman!"

"If I go into that cellar, you'll put me there dead!" gritted Kimberly. "Good God, man! Use your head, won't you?"

"I'm using it—and it tells me you and Magoffin must have come to terms and agreed to split the Basin between you and throw us farmers out. No doubt you come here this morning to pull some sort of a trick on me and make me let loose of that night rider. Deny it, if you can!"

Kimberly said, "I can and I will! In my pocket is clear title to Indian Springs—I had to take it off Vance Degan at gun's point last night, and Magoffin and his men have been trailing me through the hills ever since trying to get it. Even at the price of a killing!"

Disbelief curled the lips of the farmers, but Abner Roush said curtly: "Go on!"

"What I came here to tell you this morning was this: With title to this section in my name, you can stop worrying about the law putting you off. We people can help each other, if we'll stick together—we can help me protect my lawful holdings from Magoffin, and help you get back from Vance Degan the money that he as much as stole from you, when he sold you land he must have known you didn't have a chance of paying off.

"Will you go along with me on that kind of a program? Will you give me back my gun and throw your own in to back me?"

A long silence, heavy with suspicion, followed his speech. Then Abner Roush said:

"Supposing we believed you—which I ain't saying we do. But supposing we take you at your word. What way do you have

in mind of winning this here damn fight?"

"The way you suggested," Kimberly answered promptly. "The man in the cellar! I don't know how, exactly, but I got a notion he's the key that's going to spring this thing wide open—if we just know how to stick him in the lock and turn it!"

"What you say does make sense of a kind!" Roush admitted, reluctantly. "Could be you actually mean it!" he lowered the shotgun, grounded it with a thud of the stock against the floorboards. "But we take nothing for granted!" he added fiercely. "We don't give you your gun back until we're plumb sure. We don't trust you any further than—"

His glance flicked past Kimberly, and with a curse he was trying to get the shotgun up again—too late. For the heavy voice of Wirt Magoffin came through the doorway: "Hold it! Don't anyone touch a weapon or we'll work you over. We've got this shack covered!"

Britt Kimberly pivoted. The M-on-a-Rail boss stood flatfooted in the opening, sixshooter leveled. Ed Wherry was beside him, and Britt's eye caught the shadow of the third man at the room's one window. Anger at himself was a bitter thing, in that moment. After his night of dodging these three among the hills, he had left his back unguarded and they had moved in on him—and caught the roomful of nesters in their trap, as well.

Magoffin said now: "Move back against the wall, all of you, and keep your hands away from your guns. Not you, Kimberly! You stay put where you are—and fish out that deed and hand it over. I'm through fooling around!"

The expressions on the nesters' faces was interesting, as they moved to obey the pointing guns. At least, Kimberly thought, they knew now that what he had told them was the truth—that M-on-a-Rail was as much his enemy as theirs. But there was small enough satisfaction for him in that.

Abner Roush, one arm protectively around his wife's shoulders, exclaimed: "You can't get away with this! There's limits beyond which a man can't go—not even you, Magoffin!"

"Shut up!" growled the bearded rancher. "I've put up with a lot—I've been lenient. But I'm ending that now!"

Roush snorted. "Lenient! Sending your

night riders to tear out my fences and flumes, to destroy the crops I had growing in the fields—"

"You accusing me of a thing like that?" Wirt Magoffin took a step forward one arm lifted as though to strike. And Kimberly got his cue, saw a single desperate chance.

"We've got proof!" he lied. "We've got the signed confession of one of the men who rode for you. It's on its way to the county seat right now, but it can be intercepted if you're willing to come to terms. If you won't, you'll have to face the sheriff when he comes in here with a posse and a law-breaking charge against you. Which way do you want it to be?"

The big man swung on him now, stood flatfooted for a long moment staring blackly at Kimberly's hard face. His mouth twisted under the heavy beard. "A bluff!" he grunted. "A bluff, and a damn poor one! Any evidence you got against me is a miserable, no-good pack of lies!"

"Kick that rug aside!" cried Abner Roush, catching Britt Kimberly's inspiration. "Lift the trap door underneath it and you'll find the dirty night rider." He added quickly: "Of course, he's apt to lie to you—apt to swear that he never signed no confession. But you'll just have to decide for yourself who to believe. He looks like a yellow kind of a coward that wouldn't tell the truth if it weren't poled out of him!"

A thunderous expression rode Magoffin's heavy features. He crossed a look with his foreman. "By God, Ed!" he growled. "Find out what the hell they're talking about, will you? Look out for a trick—"

The whole room waited as Wherry moved in cautiously, kicked the rug aside. A grunt broke from the foreman, seeing the trap door beneath; with his gun ready he leaned cautiously, seized the edge of the door and lifted it open. In that tense moment Britt Kimberly knew only one slim hope—that sight of the craven prisoner would convince Magoffin what they said was true, would back their bluff and give them some slight edge in making terms with him.

But what happened when Ed Wherry came out of the root cellar with the prisoner stumbling and blinking before him was very far from anything Kimberly expected. "You!" the bearded ranch boss thundered. He lunged forward, crumpled the man's

shirtfront into one huge fist. "I told you what you could expect if I ever laid eyes on you again!"

"Don't, Wirt!" Utter terror was in the other as he cringed back, ducking his head sideward as if to avert a blow, bound hands struggling to free themselves.

"I don't get it!" Kimberly blurted. "Who is this guy?"

"He's Ed Lamb—the dirty, double crossing snake! The man I paid to prove up on Indian Springs for me—only to have him sell out his patent to Vance Degan at a higher price and give Degan control of this whole half the Basin!" The big hand closed into a fist. "I oughta smash your ugly face right back into the skull!"

Now Magoffin did hit him, a crushing blow, and let the traitor slump to the floor as he crumpled, unconscious. The big head lifted, the black eyes sought out Britt Kimberly.

"Better try again!" he snapped. "That bluff didn't work. They're ain't any sheriff coming in after me, and you know it!"

"Damn it!" cried Britt, and he felt the color draining from his face; he was talking against time. "Can't you see it's Vance Degan who is our common enemy? Why can't we work together?"

Magoffin shook his head. "I'll settle with Degan. I got no reason to work with any of you, that I can see; all I want is the title to Indian Springs, and after that you're getting out of Buckhorn—all of you. Peaceable or otherwise!" He extended his big hand. "Now, pass over that deed!"

Kimberly's jaw hardened, in futile rebellion. "You're gonna have to take it off me, you damn range thief—"

It was at that instant that the M-on-a-Rail man outside the window cried: "What the devil! A rider coming, boss—hell for leather. It's Jo!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunsmoke Finish

WITH AN angry grunt Wirt Magoffin heeled around toward the open door. Bright hair and gay bolero jacket flashing in morning sunlight, Jo Magoffin was slanting in toward the homestead at a hard gallop. When she saw her father she cried

out sharply and a minute later was sawing reins, leaning from saddle to voice frightened warning:

"Look out, Dad! There's a big bunch of riders heading for here, with Vance Degan leading them. They look dangerous. I was out riding when I saw you head this way, and then I sighted them pouring down the rim trail. They're right behind me. . ."

"Vance Degan?" big Wirt echoed, staring up at her without comprehension. "Who'd ride with him?"

Belatedly, the cowman acted. His stocky arms plucked the girl down from saddle, almost threw her into Kimberly's arms. After that Magoffin slapped the girl's lathered horse and started it running, scooped up stones and hurled them at the other broncs loose-hitched before the shack to make them clear out of the line of fire.

From that onswEEPing line of riders a gun spoke, its bullet clipping into the shake roof of the cabin. Britt Kimberly was pushing the girl inside, into safety, even in that moment of stress he had time to admire the trim build of her, the frightened loveliness of her face as she tried to break away from him, to return to her father.

The door slammed as Magoffin followed them into the shack, at his heels the M-on-a-Rail hand who had been stationed outside the window. The bar dropped into place. Britt heard Ed Wherry's curse. "We're packed in here like cattle in a boxcar! They can't miss hittin' somebody!"

The first volley crashed upon his words and then bullets were lacing the flimsy sides of the homestead shack.

Britt Kimberly had forced Jo Magoffin down to the floor just before the raiders struck. Leaving her there he lunged up and ran, crouched over, toward the single window. He saw the dust, the shuttling figures of horsemen. He dropped the barrel of his sixgun across the sill and triggered twice—saw one of Hondo Gill's guncrew go spilling head over heels out of saddle.

There were a dozen of the raiders—two to one against the guns of the beleaguered group within the flimsy shack. Horses milling, trampled dust boiling toward the far sky, they poured their shots into the tiny building; and gun thunder built up into a mad crescendo. The nester woman screamed, seeing Abner Roush collapse as

lead struck him. Another wild bullet hit the chimney of the stove and it broke apart, scattering the room with soot.

Coughing against that and the burn of powder, Kimberly fired again and again through the window. He emptied another saddle, then ducked as a hot stab of pain streaked his exposed arm. His hammer tripped on a spent shell; hastily he reloaded, thumbing new cartridges from the loops of his belt. He snapped the gate shut, lined down and fired again—and that time he could have sworn it was Hondo Gill himself who went down, bronc crashing under him.

Next moment Jo Magoffin's voice was in his ear, her hand clutching him. "Look!" she cried. "Over yonder—on the rise!"

He saw them, then—horsemen, pouring in upon the scene of battle, brandishing guns and rifles.

"It's the men from the wagon train!" he exclaimed suddenly. "They must have heard the shooting and knew they were needed here!"

Under that onrush from the rear, the attackers were suddenly breaking up. Some went down quickly with nester bullets in them; others tried to answer the fire and then, in panic and confusion, let their horses bolt with them. All at once Britt Kimberly was charging to his feet, turning toward the door. Jo Magoffin seized his arm, tried to hold him back. "Where are you going—?"

"To finish this!" he gritted. "Vance Degan's out there. He don't deserve to escape!" But he had to pull himself free of her hands, for she did not want to let him out into that storm of flying lead. Then he was at the door, throwing it open, plunging through. And he saw Vance Degan.

The fat man had lost his mount and he was trying desperately to catch another. He ran after it, heavy-footed, gun smoking in one hand while with the other he grabbed wildly for flying reins and missed. Through the swirl and confusion of battle, Britt called: "Degan!"

Vance Degan heard. He whirled, with surprising speed for his bulk. And at the same time his gun was whipping up and he fired, almost as though by instinct. The hasty bullet found its mark. It took Kim-

berly and drove him backward, slammed his shoulders against the wall of the house behind him.

He saw the fat man's twisted face, discolored, streaming with sweat. He saw the gun gaping at him, ready for another shot. Then, through the momentary paralysis that gripped him, he squeezed the trigger of his own weapon that was suddenly a heavy weight in his hand . . .

It was over. Britt knew first that the chaos of gunfire had ceased, and then that he was sitting in a loose heap on the ground with his shoulders against the rough wall. He felt hands working to open his shirt and he tried to push them away, only to hear Jo Magoffin's voice say, "Behave yourself, can't you? I've got to see how bad that bullet hit you!" But her pale and frightened face was smiling tremulously when he focused on it.

Britt was looking for Abner Roush and found him coming across the hooftorn ground, one arm in a bloody sling. The nester's wife had an arm around him, trying anxiously to support him, although Kimberly could tell the man was not badly hurt. Kimberly called to him: "Roush, if you'll look in Degan's pocket you ought to find a wallet full of bills. It's clean—money I paid over to him myself, last night, for the title to Indian Springs. I think you deserve to have it."

The farmer looked at him soberly. He nodded, then, "We'll take it! We'll take it, and pack our belongings in Joe Timson's wagon and go with the others to find us new land, on some other range. We'll leave this Basin to you cattlemen, which is the way it should be."

"Good enough, Roush!" Kimberly looked at big Magoffin. "That suit you, Wirt?"

"Hell!" The bearded man made an angry gesture, and his face was colored darkly. "It's better than I deserve!"

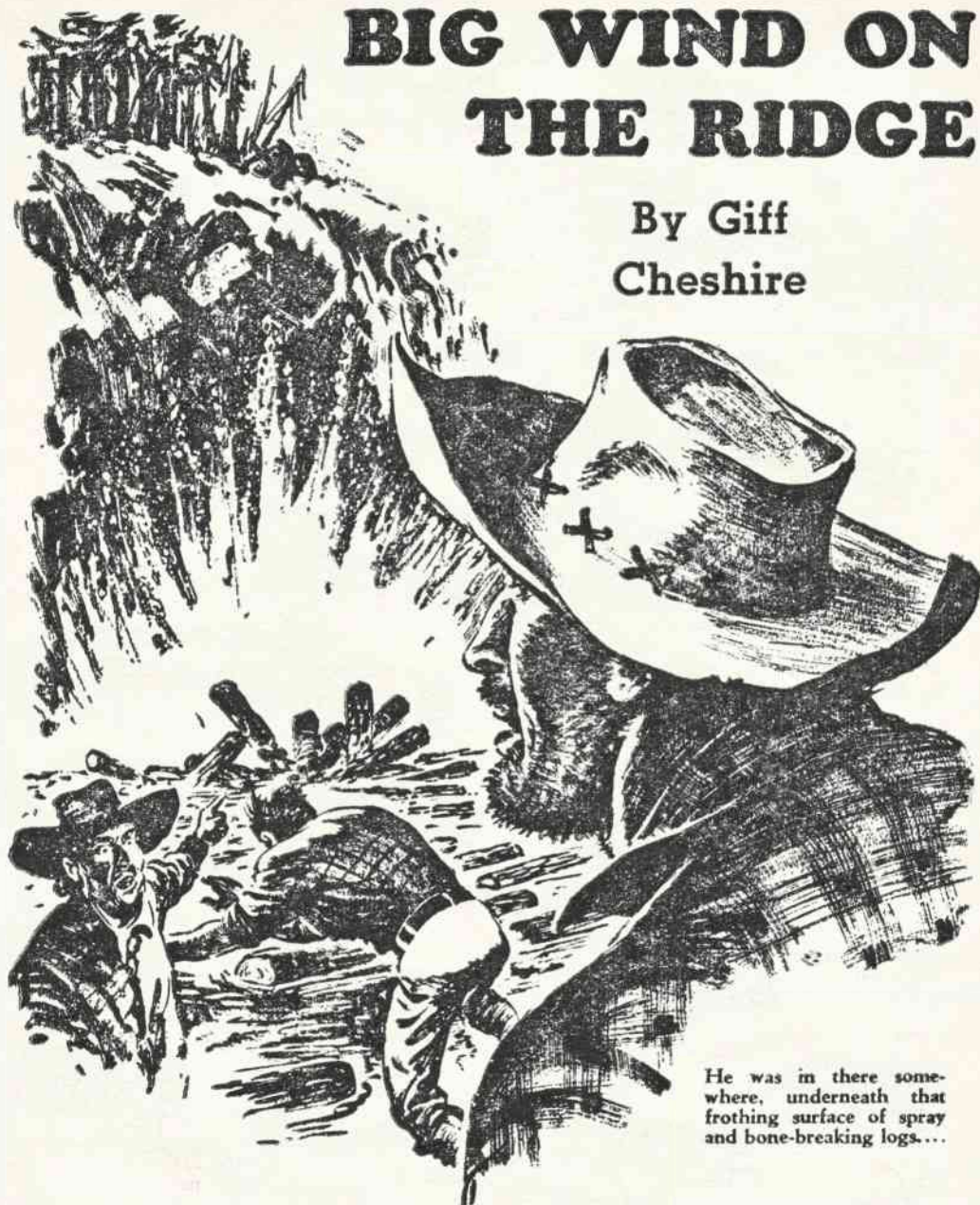
"It's a new world, I guess," he added, gruffly. "And maybe I'm too old a dog to learn how to make a decent neighbor. But we'll share the Basin, all right—and maybe this new generation can teach me some pointers I need to know, about how to get along together."

"Yeah," said Britt Kimberly. He smiled at Jo. "Yeah—maybe, at that, we can!"

THE END

BIG WIND ON THE RIDGE

By Giff
Cheshire



He was in there somewhere, underneath that frothing surface of spray and bone-breaking logs...

In that churning basin of crashing logs and black water, a boy battled for his life, every bone-crushing stick there a murderous man-breaker, and the two men who might save him were locked in a more deadly battle. . . .

A MAN had hard listening even to follow his own thoughts down in Beaver Hollow. Big John sometimes said that a one-horse sawmill's main output was racket. If it cut a little rough lumber on the side, that was to the good. The day his boy Kip went in the mill pond, Big John was at the main saw, ripping knotty slabs off a twenty-four foot butt. The big saw shrieked in anguish as he shoved

it through the green, sap-filled wood.

Just beyond the carriage, Lindsay Fellows' cut-off added its higher screams. Beneath the mill deck steam cylinders chuffed and gushed, and the heavy thuds of butts, cants and cuts beat through it. At the upper end of the mill pond the big logs, snaked in from the woods, rolled down a ninety-foot cliff with a howl and a great splash.

Big John Hearn noticed but didn't understand why Lindsay Fellows heeled around from his cut-off, staring over his fat shoulder. Lindsay yelled something, but only the beat-up remnants of his words reached Big John. Then Lindsay bolted and ran. Big John stopped the carriage then, motioning to Ding Adams to watch it, and leaped down. He paced swiftly along the rollers and by the time he reached the log haul he was running.

He saw that Duke Ambler, who was firing that day, was ahead of him. Big John cut down the incline and across the splintered planking of the yard just as another log came bouncing down the cliff, spinning and growling, to hit the pond with an enormous upheaval. Ed Monroe pointed wildly as Duke pounded up to him, a finger stabbing toward the water that still churned and washed, his whiskered jaw working soundlessly. Duke hit the water in a clean, running dive, and not until then did Big John think of Kip. Duke went immediately out of sight, swimming under the logs that almost covered the surface of the pond.

Monroe looked at Big John, glancing quickly away again. "I just happened to see it, John, from the slab pile. I run to get Duke. I can't swim—!"

"Kip?" Big John roared.

"Yeah, John. He was trying to ride out the wash when a log came down!"

Big John went racing over the logs that bobbed on the pond, lightly for a man weighing over two hundred. They couldn't see this from the top of the cliff because of its bulge, and Big John's orders were strict about working here below. It was just like Kip to see how close he could come to danger.

Big John tore his thoughts away from this small spot of temper in concern for his son. Kip was fourteen and had been working as pond monkey all summer, herding the big logs down to the sawmill. Only the day before Big John had laced him

down for flirting with trouble here below the spill.

When he saw Duke's head bob up between two logs, Big John nearly sat down in the water from weakness. Ed Monroe was yelling his head off to prevent the woodsmen on top from tumbling down another sawlog. Duke's powerful shoulders broke water. Big John jumped two logs to get him. The dead look went out of Duke's eyes as he heaved Kip up. Big John grabbed the boy, hoisting him lightly, and went bounding toward the bank. Kip was inert. His father drained the water out of him and in a kind of stupor began to apply artificial respiration. He heard yet another log chug into the pond and only dimly wondered if Duke Ambler had got clear. It would serve him right to have his brains knocked out and drown. Duke was responsible for this.

Kip began breathing again far sooner than Big John had dared hope, color creeping slowly through the ghastly gray under the tan of his cheeks. Ed Monroe tried to nudge him aside and relieve him, but Big John glared at him. He didn't stop until, breathing normally, Kip opened his eyes. Then Big John climbed to his feet and stomped away.

Relief let his anger boil up in him. He returned to the main saw and, with quick, impatient movements, got the mill to work again, as if he begrudged losing time for such trivial reasons. His gesture of sanity jerked the crew out of its trance. Big John saw Duke take Kip around the pond to their shack. He scowled as he sized up a log, kicked it over and let the saw howl into it. It was to cover up the weakness that hit his knees suddenly.

He still felt a little nausea when they knocked off for noon. Duke Ambler had returned to his firebox, and now he loitered so as not to have to walk home with Big John. Kip, still a little pale, had their meal going when his father tramped in. Big John observed this with a start, but the darkness never left his face. Kip was making as light of it as he could, hoping to mitigate the wrath he knew he had called down upon his head.

Calmly, Big John said, "You know I'd of fired anybody else for working in too close there."

Kip had placed three tin plates on the

bare table. Now he got cups. "Why, I got a log crossed and I figured—well, Murphy was spilling 'em down faster than I thought—"

Duke Ambler came in before Big John could answer. They were of the same age and size, both a couple of years short of forty. Duke's face now wore an easy, challenging grin and, studying it, Big John reflected that it looked ten years younger than the reflection that came to him when he got around to shaving. Duke had never had any worries to speak of. He had had a lot of fun. Sobered by the near-disaster, Big John admitted that Kip would probably find his uncle more attractive, more colorful than his own father.

There was in Duke's eyes now a subtle claim of triumph. Big John went outside to wash up, regretting the day he had welcomed Duke back so warmly. As he soaped and scrubbed his weather-bronzed face and neck, John Hearn regretted a number of things, the main one being that Mary, his wife, had died and left him a boy, whose heritage naturally made him hard to handle, to bring on to manhood alone.

Duke Ambler's return had come at the worst possible time. Kip had finished up at the country school, two miles down the valley on the Duggsville road. Though outwardly compliant, all summer he had brought up a score of reasons why he should not go off to board in Eugene for the winter to go to high school, and maybe the university in time. It was now the middle of September, boarding arrangements were made in Eugene, and Kip was due to go in another week.

In the same subtle fashion, Duke had sided with Kip ever since he came. He was her brother, but Big John had known Duke a long time before he met Mary. This was why he had welcomed Duke with a roar of deep pleasure. For a couple of weeks his life had become rich and warm, gassing with Duke of an evening. Remembering. He had been scarcely past twenty when he first ran into Duke in a Washington logging camp. For three-four years they had made a high old time of it.

DUKE came out to wash now, eyeing Big John in truculent speculation. Big John wet-slicked his black hair, not returning the glance. The last weeks had turned

into a silent, deadly battle for the control of Kip.

"Hell, John," Duke had exploded once, "Mary and me were the same flesh. So the kid's as much mine as yours."

"I'm his father!" Big John had roared. "By God, Duke, you gotta stop planting them wild ideas in his head. He's going to get schooling. He's going to get something outta life!"

"I stopped school in the sixth grade," Duke said calmly. "And I got something outta life. More than you, John. Ain't that so?"

"Not by a hell of a lot!" Yet in moments of strict honesty John Hearn had wondered many times if it were not so, even in the years when Mary had been with him. He hoped that she had never guessed that. It had not been in Big John Hearn naturally to settle to the exactions on a family man.

He had wanted to, but something deep inside had rebelled, at wide intervals when rightly it should have been long dead. A man like that had a strike on him in the quieter pursuits of life, something that seemed always to defeat him. John Hearn had had a long string of hard luck, working for others, farming, at last trying to start this dinky mill on Beaver Creek for himself, to provide Kip's education.

Now remembering Duke's brutal, piercing question, Big John told himself it had been worth it. But that wasn't the question. If given his own unhampered choice, Big John didn't know but what he would tell Kip to do what he wanted with his life. And now he admitted that Mary had imposed no obligations on him, no last request. It was just that he knew what she had always wanted for Kip.

They ate in tight silence. Big John couldn't help noticing how Kip's glance strayed continually to Duke, as if seeking the unspoken support he should have known he had. Since he had discovered how things stood. Duke had made a point of sharpening the issue. He made a bragging thing of how he had been knocking down a high climber's big wages when he was sixteen. He wasn't too careful boasting about the women he had had, scores to Big John's one. He had played poker with Kip and taught him sharp tricks. "So's you can look out for yourself, boy." For the same reason he showed him a lot of rough, logging camp

fighting, perfecting him in a secret punch Duke claimed had won him a dozen battles.

It was imitating Duke's dare-deviltry that had got Kip into trouble that morning, Big John knew. Truth was, Duke Ambler was as good at the show-off things as he claimed to be. Kip just didn't realize that it took years of practice. Big John had been as good once, and the memory of it hit him now like an acid washing through his veins. Better, maybe, for he could always outdrink Duke Ambler and whip him in a fight. While the pair of them could lick any four other men alive.

Sopping up the grease left in his plate by the bacon, Duke now said, "John, stop scowling. We drug the kid out, didn't we?"

Big John lifted a hard, thoughtful gaze. "You did. Since you also got him into it, I don't figure I owe you any thanks." Now he was forced to admit privately that it had been a cool, daring thing Duke had done, going under those logs while knowing that at any minute Murphy might send down another. He had to admit that Duke's big, boyish heart held a real affection for the boy. There had been a dead look in Duke's eyes when he surfaced with Kip—bleak fear. For Kip. Big John swallowed the rest of the quarrel building in him, got up and stomped out.

For a couple of weeks he had been wondering if he shouldn't send Duke packing. He had hoped that Duke would soon grow restless and ramble off, as he always had before. Thinking of it now, Big John recalled that there had been a foreign feeling to Duke when he first got back. He had seemed quite interested in the little sawmill Big John had built up from a three-man back-breaker to a going concern in his most recent absence of two years. At first Big John had wondered if Duke wasn't showing signs of settling down in his middle age. Duke had looked over the operation with appreciative eyes and even made some good, long-term suggestions that had sounded funny coming from him.

Duke had just been building it big, John Hearn now realized. He recalled the times they had done it together, saving up stakes with remarkable self-discipline for some mighty venture, then spending it all on a town bust. It had been after one such that, broke, they had visited Duke's home, the first time for Duke since he had run away

at fourteen. It had broken up the active partnership, for Duke's kid sister had grown to ripe womanhood meanwhile. Looking at her the first time Big John had felt something happening to his heart that kept happening for a dozen years.

Duke had gone on alone with his rambling, lusty living. Mary had held a theory about his eternal boyishness. "Dad was too hard on Duke, trying to force a better start on him than he had himself. He turned Duke against the very things he tried to make him want."

At irregular intervals, Duke came to visit them, and these were always periods of excitement to Big John, which he tried to conceal from Mary. He knew that Duke pitied him, though he was not one to talk against his own sister.

No, Duke had just been building it big in his excitement over Big John's growing sawmill. After a couple of weeks the old restless signs began to appear; Duke's recollections grew more colorful and frequent. And Kip had eaten it up. It was then that the dark fear began to grow in John Hearn's heart. What if Duke left again suddenly, taking Kip with him, saving him from the horrors of education and a restricted life? Duke, with his bullheaded impulsiveness, would do it if he wanted. And could do it. Little by little, Big John had helplessly watched the control of Kip pass from his own awkward hands into Duke's clever ones.

And the hard thing was that Big John Hearn was half in sympathy with the pair of them.

The quarrel seemed forgotten by the time evening came, and Big John Hearn, smoking his pipe on the bench under a fir, watched Duke scuffle with Kip. The boy was at the age where his body had nearly reached stature, under a child's face. It was a hard time for a lad, with impulses big and wisdom little. Yet Big John was privately proud of the way Kip handled his size. Once the boy sent in the secret punch Duke had taught him and nearly knocked Duke off his feet. Duke recovered his balance, his merry face breaking in a grin.

Yet each day of the following week tightened the cords around John Hearn's heart a little more. Kip's new suit and extra slacks and sweater were in the closet, ready to be packed, with the new shirts, under-

BIG WIND ON THE RIDGE

wear and socks. Big John dreaded the day when he would have to tell Kip to pack up. His triumph in getting him to leave, if he could, would be offset by a growing awareness that he was going to miss the boy. More and more he had the feeling that the big explosion would come before then. Sunday. A half a dozen times Big John was on the point of himself telling Kip it was all off, but always there was that wish that had been his mother's.

As the last days passed, the glinting triumph in Duke's eyes grew hard to bear. Always the cleverer of the two, Duke now was taking private pleasure in gloating in a way that at least John Hearn could detect. There was some kind of understanding between him and Kip; Big John was sure of it. Tension, unspoken but bitter, began to build again.

At noon Saturday, Duke lighted a cigarette after his dinner and looked at Big John. "John, why don't I take the truck and run in to town for some groceries? I'll be back in the morning." He winked with the eye Kip could not see.

At any other time John Hearn would have grinned, understanding Duke's need for some town fun. He recalled that Duke hadn't been out of Beaver Hollow in a month and was most likely itching. He reflected that it would give him the last evening alone with Kip, and he welcomed the prospect. Still, he was suspicious, but at last he nodded. "Hop to it. Kip'll have to tell you what we're short on."

WHEN the mill shut down at five o'clock, Big John was still unsure of himself. He helped Kip cook supper, not speaking, aware of blocked words in Kip's own throat. At last, as they sat down to eat, Kip spoke.

"Pop, I don't want to go to school."

His father nodded, knowing that a quarrel at this juncture would be ruinous. He thought gravely, then said, "Kip, I'd like to let you stop, but if I did you might hate me for it ten years from now." He did not mention Kip's mother, nor try to exploit his boyish memories of her.

Kip's jaw tightened, then he put it again. "What I mean is, I'm not going to school, anymore."

Still without raising his voice, Big John

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said, "You are, Kip. If you feel the same way at midterm, we'll talk about it again." He buttered a slice of bread. "We'll pack your suitcase after supper."

Kip packed, all right, neither rebellious nor submissive, but detached, as though it was a useless thing. Recalling how excited the boy had been with the new clothes, a bitter taste lay on the back of Big John's tongue. So he watched, making no ceremony of it, not talking. Afterward he sat under the fir, dusk pulling in around him, smoking his pipe. His eyes were on a far ridge, studded with green timber, rippled by an early autumn wind so that it looked like stroked fur. The trees and the wind—both were eternal things. Mary had been like the trees, roots deeply down and a little deeper with each passing day. Duke—yes, and himself—were the wind, gathering into gusts and blowing, but formless, passing.

It was a question Big John Hearn could not answer. Sound told him presently that Kip was going to bed, but his father did not stir. The mill would not run again till Monday; Big John sat long into the night.

Unending millwrighting jobs took the most of John Hearn's Sundays, and the next day he was at the sawmill until noon. Around eleven he saw Duke Ambler driving along the other side of the little lake, coming home from his town bust. At twelve Big John went around to the shack. Drawing in earshot, he heard Duke's rocking laughter, stimulated by the hair of the dog. He felt reluctance pulling on his legs as he drew nearer; after dinner he would have to tell Kip it was time to be starting for Eugene.

Duke was at the table, a pleased expression on his face, watching Kip cook their noon dinner. He looked none the worse for wear, and Big John remembered he had always been able to drink through the night and go to work without sleep. Duke grinned at Big John, who frowned thoughtfully and went back out to wash. When he came in again the food was dished up. There was a guilty look in Kip's eyes. The boy poured his father's coffee, standing off a ways, Big John thought. Swiveling in his chair, Big John sniffed.

"Whiskey!" He turned to stare at Duke. "You gave him a drink!"

A flushed truculence showed in Duke's

BIG WIND ON THE RIDGE

cheeks. "What of it? He's no baby! Want him to learn what likker's like at home or in some damned joint in Eugene?"

Big John shoved back in his chair, the blackest of rage filling him. He stood slightly bent for a second, then lunged across the room. He seized Duke's shirt front, hoisting him lightly from his chair. His fist cracked solidly against Duke's chin.

Duke let out a pained grunt. Yet there was a tough stamina in him. He reeled back, a sweeping arm beating off Big John's fists. He danced aside, pulling his huge body straight, tilting it forward. He came in, one-two, and a gong seemed to have been struck in the back of Big John's skull.

It was a dozen milling, pain-fraught minutes later that Big John knew he was going to take a beating. He had not fought in many a year, and hard work had stiffened him, robbing him of his old cunning. Blood streamed down his pulpy face, pain and a leaden inertia filled his every fibre. Even had he not felt it in his own body, he could have read his defeat in the icy glint of Duke Ambler's eyes. Shame choked him that Kip should see it.

Big John fought until he could barely lift his arms, until he could barely see through the blood pouring into his eyes. He saw Duke's last swing start and didn't try to duck it. He didn't go out. A coldness traveled through him and he stumbled and fell. Muscles uncoupled from his dazed brain tried to lift him. Then he slumped, watching what happened next with dull eyes.

There was a look of savagery on young Kip Hearn's face as he stepped across the room. There was a grin of satisfaction on Duke Ambler's bruised, torn face. Kip's fist flashed wickedly, and Duke's head snapped back. He went down in dead-weight, hitting the floor so hard that the overturned table bounced noisily. Kip's breath whistled through flared nostrils and above pinched lips. He waited, but Duke did not get up.

Big John climbed drunkenly to his feet, his own shame buried now beneath a quiet pride in his boy. He stumbled outside to wash up, ashamed and filled with sickness. It was not in being beaten by Duke for the first time. It was not in Kip seeing that humiliation. It was in the

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knowledge that the flesh he had bruised and torn, that the flesh that had whipped him, had been shaped in the womb that shaped Mary. He turned down to the pond and walked along it. Presently someone went up the road in the other direction, and he saw it was Duke. He turned back to the shack, crossing the porch and halting in the doorway, staring.

Kip had on his new suit. He said, "I guess it's time we were going, Dad."

IT WAS late that night when Big John got back from Eugene, and he frowned when he saw the light burning in the shack. He put up the truck, and when he stepped into the house Duke Ambler looked at him uncertainly, lifting a hand in greeting. The place had been straightened up and was pin neat.

"You haven't gone yet," Big John said. Duke grinned, with a funny twist to it. "Pretty soon, John. I kind of wanted to say goodbye."

"We said it. You better go, Duke." "A last drink together first, John?" Duke lifted a fifth from the floor.

"Why, you—!" Big John halted in mid-sentence, looking closely at the bottle.

"My town bottle, John. The only one I had. Didn't mean to tell you, but I couldn't leave you thinking I'd slipped the kid much of a slug."

"There ain't enough gone from it to put in your eye."

"Don't take much to smell up a man's breath, John. He didn't see me fix it. About a thimbleful. The rest water. Made him feel big."

Big John's eye had widened. "You damned fake. You wanted that fight."

"It had to be real, John. It had to be good to persuade him. Ever had a woman going for you, John, when you didn't want her to for her own sake? I never figured I was anything for Kip to pattern himself after, but he was doing it. You been a little hard on him, John, and I know how that is, too. I fed him some of the stuff he needed. It had to be handled easy. Did I try to talk him outta the kind of life I've lived, he'd never have believed me. Takes years to learn it ain't worth much, John, and I ain't even sure I've learned it."



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