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DEATH WEARS SIX-SHOOTERS

A SMASHING NEW NOVEL

BY HARRY F. OLMSTED

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CONTENTS APRIL, 1943

VOL. III, No. 4

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The Home Corral

SEEMS like Western Adventures really hit its stride when it grew up to 160 pages. Says Mr. Charles Sneed, of Bristol, Tennessee:

I bought my third big copy of W. A. the other day, and want to tell you the stories were swell. I think W. A. is the best magazine out, and that's why I'd like to do a little jawin'. I hope you won't think I'm too critical.

Instead of having two short novels, how about having one long one? I get all the good short novels I want in *Wild West Weekly*. I am sure most of your readers will side me on this. And another thing: How about some stories by Walt Coburn, who, I think, is top hand of them all?

Maybe I'll do some more jawin' after next issue.

Go right to it, Mr. Sneed. There's nothing we'd like better. About that long novel—we try to give you variety in W. A., and if we included a long novel it wouldn't be so easy. There are many who will agree with you about Walt Coburn, which makes him one of our most popular authors in *Western Story*. You'll find your long novels there, too.

More compliments and a question come from Mr. Juan de Baker of Chule Vista, California. Says Mr. de Baker:

Si, señores, those covers of Western Adventures are a delightful change and improvement over the silly, exaggerated action covers found on most Western story magazines. Too, the line drawings by Eggenhofer and Bjorklund and others are extremely pleasing and make fine illustrations for the text. But when an illustration is spread over two pages, why is part of it lost? I mean that part in the center where the magazine is bound.



If all of the illustration was reproduced the parts might be joined with paste and form a complete picture. I save illustrations because, as Confucius said: "One picture is worth a thousand words."

Confucius never said a truer word. That's why you'll find W. A. so intelligently illustrated. But you're a bit wrong about the double-page illustrations not forming a complete picture. They do, Señor de Baker. If you try again, I'm sure you'll find the ends can be matched perfectly.

Another letter, brief in content but long on praise, comes from Mr. R. Kemp of Memphis, Tennessee. Mr. Kemp says:

Just a note to hand you my compliments on your big December issue.

Best of all I enjoyed Shaw's RENEGADE ROUNDUP and Harrison's RECRUIT FOR BOOTHILL.

Are you going to give us more like them?

You can bet your last hipshot hammerhead we are, Mr. Kemp. Not only in this issue but in all the issues to come.

Well, that sort of winds up the tally book for this time, but we'll be on the same old opera seat again next issue, so crawl up and unlimber your jaw hinges. You're welcome.

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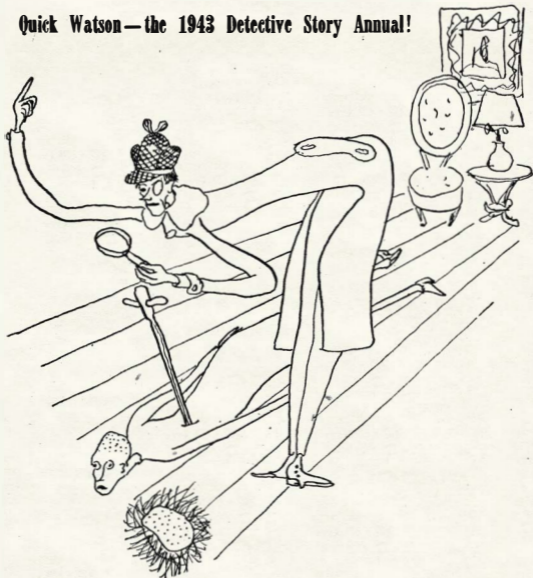
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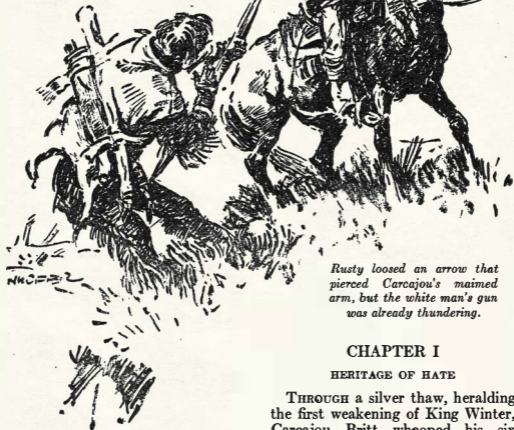
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DEATH WEARS SIX-SHOOTERS

by HARRY F. OLMSTED



Rusty loosed an arrow that pierced Carcajou's maimed arm, but the white man's gun was already thundering.

CHAPTER I

HERITAGE OF HATE

THROUGH a silver thaw, heralding the first weakening of King Winter, Carcajou Britt whooped his six snarling wolf dogs toward Pak-oghee Ridge. Behind him were ten lost years on the Skynomish, where the rivers Stiloguamish, Stehekin and Tyee are born. Behind him, too, were five hundred blizzard miles, with cold running in his lungs like flowing ice. But now—now the end was almost in sight.

It had been a grueling trip, with little food and a physical drain that

A vengeance-driven man's hymn of hate turned young Johnny Britt into a lightning-triggered gunster, but his smoke poles were taking orders from no one when the day of powder-smoke reckoning came. . . .

had sapped his dogs, leaving them ribby, rough-coated and mean. Carcajou's normally sharp profile was gaunter still, his eyes deeper sunken, his skin speckled black with frost-bite. But there was weakening neither in his spring-steel body nor in his hate. He was tough as cured *babiche*, and his soul a welter of bitterness. Hate sustained him, tempered his muscles, armored him against loneliness and punishment. It etched his face into a devil's mask and fired his cruel, sunken eyes.

For ten years Britt had fed that hate by staring at the stump of his right wrist and trying vainly to train his left hand to serve him on the trap lines as his right once had. Always he had planned to loose this hate against his one enemy, once that left hand was ready. Convinced now that it never would be—and that had taken ten years to prove—Carcajou lit out for the east, fighting his dogs into the teeth of a blizzard.

Now, with a heave of his shoulder, he helped the sled to the ridge back, where the wind was knife-edged. But he didn't feel it. His dark eyes were lowered into Pak-oghee Valley, half seen through drifting fog. It hadn't changed. Yonder was the frozen lake, hemmed by flat summer grasslands that seemed to push back the encroaching spruces. There was the shale slide, trickling down from hoary Manitou's Finger. And there—yes, there were the thinly wisping tepee smokes. Carcajou sighed. A lot of things can happen in ten years.

For minutes he studied those plumes, half doubtfully. Then, shaking himself: "Why shouldn't he be there?" he growled. "An' growed, too. Big an' strong an' ready fer some schoolin'." Bleakness crept into his eyes. "He better be, or I'll kill them damned Nitchies. Come on, boys."

Riding the runners, Carcajou sent the team down slope, the dogs barking as they sensed meat. With the animals running hard to keep the sled off their tails, Carcajou hit the flat, dipped into the creek bottom and up the far bank. It put him squarely into the village. A woman, bent under a load of firewood, squealed shrilly and dropped her burden. Indian dogs came snarling, swerving wide of the wolfish fangs of the sled dogs. The tepees seemed to disgorge their bronzed inmates. Carcajou halted his dogs, brushed frost from his whiskers and spoke a name.

"Calling Crow?"

Silence was his answer, and he knew the old war chief of the *Seth-withni-wuk* was dead. He gestured his regret and asked: "Who is chief?"

A tall Indian stood forth, lean and fit and straight-gazing. "I am Swift Running. What do you want?"

In badly spoken Cree, Carcajou said: "I am the Wolverine. Many moons ago I left my son with Calling Crow. I return for him."

AN old woman protested shrilly and talk ran around the closing circle. There was danger here, and Carcajou's eyes narrowed as he laid his left hand, poor as it was, on his belted pistol. Swift Running scowled, silenced the grumbling.

"You have not kept your agreement with Calling Crow," he told Carcajou. "What of payment every twelve—"

"Every twelve moons," Carcajou finished. "I could not get here. I bring payment on the sled, and Manitou help you if anything has happened to the boy. Bring food."

They brought fish for the dogs and a stew for Carcajou, who smiled

crookedly as he gorged himself, amused as the Crees chattered over prime beaver pelts, the pick of ten years' catch, carefully dressed and kept in an ice cave on the Skynomish. Carcajou chuckled as they enthused over ten black beaver skins—one for each year of exile. Now the chief came over.

"Payment good," he grunted. "Half for me, half for Falling Star."

Carcajou said nothing, raiding the chief's tobacco pouch as he waited. When he had lit his pipe, he nodded and Swift Running led him into a tepee where a woman sat with a blanket thrown over her head, rocking from side to side, wailing softly.

"White man bring many good skins, Falling Star," the chief said. "He come for boy." Then he went outside.

Carcajou sat down by the fire. "Enough dog howling," he said roughly. "Where's the boy?"

The mourning ceased. The blanket was flipped off and an old crone glared at Carcajou, her face tear-streaked. "I am old," she croaked. "I saw the first white man come here with fire stick more than seventy flights of the geese ago. Three times since Calling Crow bring me to his lodge, I bear him child. All die. Then you bring Hawk Boy. Calling Crow teach him to ride, to hunt, to fight. Now Hawk Boy big, strong, swift and wise. If you take him, Falling Star's heart is dead."

"Then bury it," said Carcajou dourly. "Bring the boy."

"Falling Star has many horses," the crone pleaded. "Money from big fur company and guns, powder and bullet. You take all; leave Hawk Boy here."

"I've come for the boy, you hear me? Where's he at?"

Finding no rent in this white man's

armor, Falling Star's faded eyes suddenly blazed. Her chin jutted forward and her lips curled. Speaking swiftly, harshly, she told of her dealings with white men, of their trickery and of curses she had put upon them. Curses that had defeated them in their houses, on the trail, in the hunt and in war.

"You come to take the son from my lodge," she charged. "I offer you all I have to leave him here, and you refuse. Take him then, but so sure as you take him, I shall lay the deadly curse upon you."

Carcajou's face contorted. He spat upon the ground and got up. "Curse and be damned!" he swore. "But fetch that boy here and make it sudden."

The old woman got up also, her face an angry mask, her gnarled forefinger wagging at him. "In whatever direction you want to go, One Hand," she crooned, "may Keechee Manitou bar the way. May there be no trust of you from man, no love from woman. May your fire go out, leaving you ever cold as your heart is cold. And in the end may the one you depend upon desert you and may darkness close in about you, crushing you in its black embrace. Death to you, One Hand, and worse than death."

She drew back from the sweep of his left hand, pulled her blanket close about her and ducked outside. Carcajou knew better than to follow her. In speaking the curse, Falling Star had admitted defeat. She would deliver the boy. He laughed at the curse as he sat down again, but the laugh was strained. He hadn't long to wait. The flap rustled and Hawk Boy stood looking down at him. Tall, straight and lean as the Crees themselves, the boy looked older than his sixteen years in his furs.

HAWK BOY was bronzed as the Indians from sun and wind and frost. And his face was as unreadable as that of any red man as he let his gray eyes touch the twisted man sitting by the fire. In perfect Cree, he said: "You are my father."

"I am your father, Johnny."

The youth started. "I had forgotten that name. They say you are to take me away from here. I would rather stay."

Carcajou's face grew bleak. "What kind of a greeting is this for your father, Johnny?" he said in English. "And I want you to talk my lingo from now on. I know it will come hard, but you can do it soon as your memory clicks." He motioned the boy to follow him, led him outside and through the ranks of the silent, brooding Indians and so along the path through the leafless trees toward the lake. As he walked, with the boy striding easily beside him, Carcajou talked, reviving the youth's memory of English and forcing him to answer in a tongue he had all but forgotten.

It came back speedily and in the hour they were absent from the village the boy surprised himself by his growing ability to use his mother tongue. As they retraced their steps, Carcajou said: "Kind of surprised you when I showed up, eh, Johnny?"

"We had come to believe you dead, father. I really didn't think much about it because Calling Crow and Falling Star treated me so well. I liked the life, and—"

"How much do you remember about me, about us, son?" Carcajou leaned forward, tense. So much depended upon Johnny's answer.

The youth narrowed his eyes, scratched his head. The old parade

of half recollections tormented him. Vague pictures and sounds. An old terror of loud, hard words and angry men, flashes of gunfire and a sweet-faced woman leading him away from it all. Then long days on a horse, riding with a man he feared yet whose daily treatment soon allayed that fear. Then—the Indians.

Johnny told it as best he could, admitting it was all a mix-up in his brain. Carcajou laughed contentedly. "You was pretty young, son. Not quite six, when they jumped me, tore my roots up from the post I'd sweated to build into a paying business and killed your dear mother while they was at it." He paused, conscious as before that Johnny's eyes were on his stump. "Yes, they did this to me, son. Shot me so bad I had to cut it off myself."

But as if the youth hadn't heard that last, he breathed faster. "Killed her? Killed my mother? Who did that?"

"Bailey Bartlett an' his breed renegades. I'd bought furs from Bartlett and had had words with him for shinin' around your mother. He made me an offer for the post, which I laughed at. Right there I wrote my finish. He jumped me, like I said. I got free, with only one hand an' a small boy to care for. It was too much for me. Sick an' discouraged, I left you with Calling Crow and rode into the wilds to teach my left hand to do what I had come to depend on my right hand for."

Johnny saw the answer in Carcajou's eyes. "To . . . to kill Bartlett?"

"To kill Bartlett, son. To pay the dirty skunk that killed the best woman there ever was, who shot off my right hand and who now grows fat on what is mine—and yours. But, try as I might for ten years,

I couldn't make much of that left hand. I'm too old to train it. I'll have to depend now on younger blood. Yours, Johnny. Can I?"

Carcajou seemed to have shrunk into a pitiful picture of woe. The youth's emotions were stirred. "Why not? Calling Crow made me a good shot with rifle and bow. He taught me there is no honor when a blood debt is unpaid. With the coming of the leaves"—he relapsed into Cree—"I would have taken the tests that would have made me a warrior. What better test than to kill the man who killed my mother, who crippled my father for life?"

Carcajou let a sob shake him, embraced the boy. "Thanks, son. I'm mighty proud of you. Tonight I'll make a deal with Swift Running—my dogs for some horseflesh. Tomorrow we'll head south toward Three Rivers."

When they re-entered the village, the one called Hawk Boy seemed to have grown in girth and stature. Already his responsibility weighed heavily on his young mind.

CHAPTER II

SCHOOL FOR GUNMAN

THAT night, when the fires in the tepees were burning low, and when each skin lodge echoed to the soft snores of the sleepers, Hawk Boy slipped from the dwelling of Falling Star and into the night. A strange voice murmured in the ice-locked foliage of the spruces, rattling the bare arms of the alders and birches and moaning about the bare ledges where the eagles nested. Water dripped everywhere and already the voice of the creek was taking on new robustness. A soft, almost warm breeze fanned Hawk Boy's cheek as he strode toward the low hill overlooking the lake. This

was the death knell of winter—the chinook.

As he knew would be the case, Hawk Boy found another on the lonely lookout where, in the past, more than one *Sath-withni-wuk* had spotted enemies moving across the lake. At his approach, a lithe figure, taller even than he, rose in his blanket.

"Hawk Boy! I knew you would come."

"Tracks-the-Wolf. Since the coming of One Hand, I have thought of you. And sorrowfully."

Their hands clasped and they stood there in the thawing wind, each trying to see what lay behind the other's lids. Companions, both of white blood, jealous of each other for ten years, yet willing each to die for the other if occasion should demand the sacrifice. Fifteen years ago, so the story went, an infant had come floating down to the lake in a canoe. A man and a woman were with him. Each had a bullet through the head. Nor did the current bring down any answer to the tragedy.

Horse races were held and Strong Lightning won the infant. And, after Hawk Boy came, the other boy learned what little he now knew about life beyond the hunting trails. It filled the one who was later to become known as Tracks-the-Wolf with restlessness. His foster parents, with children of their own, were no such parents to him as were the old chief and his spouse to Hawk Boy. In boyish confidence, Tracks-the-Wolf confessed his determination some day to quit the Crees for those of his own race. And Hawk Boy, after his companion had been beaten by his foster father, had sworn an oath to help him escape.

Their preparation for entering the warrior's state lessened Tracks-

the-Wolf's urgency, just as the startling news of Hawk Boy's coming departure increased it.

"You . . . you are going away with your father, Hawk Boy?" asked Tracks-the-Wolf.

"Tomorrow, my friend."

"Then I shall go with you. Do you think your father will take me?"

"Not unless Strong Lightning will release you."

Tracks-the-Wolf shook his head. "He will not do that. I am worth too much to him with the ponies and in the hunt. But I shall go anyway."

"You will only bring trouble to my father," cautioned Hawk Boy. "Strong Lightning will follow, and then—"

"I will wait a week," said Tracks-the-Wolf eagerly. "Then I will track you and join you, maybe not until a moon has passed. No Cree will follow so far. You think your father will let me go, too?"

"My father is kind," declared Hawk Boy. "He has suffered and needs me. Why will he not need a good friend like you? Before you join us I will tell him of you, make him look upon you as another son. Kee-chee Manitou guide you, Tracks-the-Wolf."

"And you, Hawk Boy." Their palms met again and they parted. Somewhere a wolf bayed his welcome to the chinook.

SUCCESSING weeks found Hawk Boy changing swiftly. His English improved and, with it, his hatred of Bailey Bartlett, factor of the stolen Three Rivers Post. Nor did Carcajou Britt lose any opportunity to nail home his reasons for reclaiming the youth.

Recurring freezes kept the snow from melting, and the winter-weakened ponies traveled slowly. Pur-

posely, Carcajou worked Johnny hard, complaining of disabilities which he charged to Bartlett. It strengthened Johnny's grim resolve, made him more receptive to the new course of treatment which was designed to make him a killer.

Down on the *Kay-ai-yu*, where high water kept them at Depuyer's Post for a week or so, Carcajou swapped a beaver blanket for a cap-and-ball pistol, powder and ball. "It's yours, son," he said, beaming at Johnny's pleasure. "An' I'm makin' you the best there is at pullin' an' shootin' it."

After that, they halted each day to shoot at targets or running animals, to practice fast loading, drawing and shooting. Practice, practice, practice. Carcajou was enthusiastic about his pupil's improvement and Johnny thrilled at the long, full days. Yet, despite praise and gruff kindnesses, Johnny was lonesome for Falling Star and the Cree village. And mostly he missed Tracks-the-Wolf, who must by now be getting close. It reminded him he hadn't spoken to Carcajou yet.

"Father," he said, and launched into his praise of the other boy. But Carcajou's increasing bleakness upset the speech Johnny had hoped to make. Somehow, fearfully nervous, he stumbled through, finishing: "He's a white boy, father, strong, brave and sure to be of good use to us—"

"No!" barked the man. "One lad's enough. If he shows up I'll boot him out."

"But, father, he's already on the way to join us, far from Pak-oghee, lonely and with nobody to turn to."

Carcajou glowered. "I oughta whale you fer pullin' a trick like that. To the devil with Tracks-the-Wolf."

Johnny Britt's face paled. Slowly

he rose, hitched up the deerskin belt that held pistol, knife, horn and pouch. "If that's the way you feel," he said, with quiet finality, "it's to the devil with me, too. I'll go find my friend, like I promised. I hate to hurt you, but if you do not want us both, you can go on alone." He busied himself, gathering up the things he would need on the trail.

Carcajou rose, his unbridled temper showing in narrowed eyes and clenched fist. Anger drove him, but a greater force—greed and hate—held it in check. Presently he flashed a strained and toothy grin. "Unroll yore stuff an' picket the pony, son. I was tryin' you out fer loyalty, that's all. I gotta have absolute confidence, you savvy why. When the younker shows I'll try him out. Now le's git some sleep."

Some nights later, while Carcajou boiled his bedtime kettle, a fox yapped on the hillside. Man and boy exchanged glances. Carcajou nodded, and Johnny slipped into the night. Moments later he was clasping his friend's hand. "Tracks-the-Wolf!" he cried joyfully.

"Hawk Boy! I have had much trouble. Sometimes I despaired of finding you. A cougar killed my pony. I was swept down a river, almost drowning. And hunger—"

"That's done," said Johnny. "Come, you are to be one of us. You must be loyal and never fail my father."

"I will not fail," said Tracks-the-Wolf fervently.

"Come then."

Johnny was shocked at his friend's painful limp and his extreme thinness. Carcajou eyed the newcomer critically and without pleasure.

"You're bony an' weak-lookin'," Britt said in Cree. "But I promised to give you a try an' a try you'll get. See that you do as yo're told."

JOHNNY was happier in the days that followed. He was proud to see his friend register surprise at his shooting. He was pleased that Tracks-the-Wolf's hollows filled out and the old sparkle came back to his eyes. And, though Tracks-the-Wolf had nothing more than bow and arrow, he brought in his share of game, which grew more plentiful with warmer weather. Even Johnny agreed that Tracks-the-Wolf would not do for a name, so they called him Rusty, from the color of his hair. Rusty Wolverton. He repeated it after them and grinned.

Rusty had no such flair for learning English as had Johnny, for he had never spoken it. But he was eager and forever working at it. Johnny helped him, largely losing interest in his gun practice and the grim chore at the end of the journey in his desire to help his friend. And each day Carcajou's eyes glittered more hotly at this one who had stepped into the picture and unhappily complicated it.

The farther south they traveled, the slower Carcajou set the pace. And when Johnny questioned him about it, he said: "Not ready yet, son. Not ready by a big jug full. Bartlett's a mean hombre an' a long ways from slow on the draw. You gotta burn more powder."

And burn powder they did. They stopped in a pretty glade in the upper Valley of the Yellow Stones, where Carcajou directed them in the rearing of wickiups—sort of a permanent camp. When the work was finished and Johnny had done his daily stint at the targets, Carcajou got on his horse and rode out without a word. And curiosity that had been building up in Rusty for days broke its bonds.

"All this shooting," he said. "Why

does your father have you do it, Johnny? Is it that he would make you ready to kill this Bartlett he speaks of often?"

"Yes," said Johnny, and wished he could turn the subject. "That's it."

"Why doesn't he do his own killing?"

"His gun hand is gone. Bartlett shot it off. His left is no good."

"But why all the waste of powder, Johnny? Tell me where to find this Bartlett and I will kill him. Just one arrow—that is all it will take. *Twang* . . . like that."

"Not so simple," argued Johnny. "Bartlett is factor of a strong post. He is surrounded by fighting men, renegades. It will be death to get to him. Let's see you hit that tree blaze with your arrow."

"Better yet," countered Rusty. "You have shot at nothing but targets with the pistol. You have not killed. You go that way and I'll go this other way. We shall return at sunset with the kills we have made—you with the pistol, me with the bow."

GLAD to turn the conversation away from Bartlett and Three Rivers Post, Johnny agreed. They parted. From opposite ridges they waved to each other, then plunged from sight. Once Rusty heard the echo of Johnny's pistol and hurried his step. He had seen game, but nothing within arrow range. His way led him to the brink of a gorge, at the bottom of which a torrent roared. He looked down, tossed a stone and counted the seconds till it hit the water. A sound behind him brought him up, whirling. Carcajou sat his horse, not ten man lengths away. His gun was in his left hand.

Never before had this youth,

trained in the camps of the Crees, looked murder in the face. Yet, looking at it now, he knew it instantly. Carcajou Britt's face was twisted into a mask of hate. His eyes burned hotly, and from his curled lips came one word. "Jump over."

Rusty gasped. "To jump here is to die, father of my friend."

"Over you go," rapped Carcajou, "or I'll shoot you over!"

"Why?" Rusty was unable to believe what he saw. "Why do you want to kill me?"

"'Cause I don't like yuh an' you're in my way. Johnny's bin talkin' to you."

"No," denied Rusty, suddenly as fearful for his friend as for himself.

"Don't lie to me. I was in the brush, outside camp, an' heard him. I'm givin' you three to jump. One, two—"

Rusty, already steeled to being tested as a warrior, flicked an arrow from his deerhide quiver, launched it from the bow—all in an action too swift to follow. The shaft pierced the already maimed arm of Carcajou, drawing biting curses and a shot that missed. Rusty was running like a deer along the brink of the precipice. Another shot. Still another. A bullet stung Rusty's side, staggering him. He cried out, half spun and reached for an arrow. His brain seemed to explode then, in sheets of flame. Reeling backward, he plunged over the rim and into space. He was falling—falling—

CHAPTER III

TIME FOR PAYOFF

FOR a long minute Carcajou Britt sat his pony, listening for hints from the forest that his act had been witnessed. A hawk screamed high

in the zenith. A bluejay chattered busily. A woodpecker rapped on the dead pine and a marmot whistled across the gorge. Chuckling, Carcajou carefully reloaded the spent cylinder compartments, holding the weapon between his knee and the saddle-tree. The arrow in his flesh was an agony, yet the purpose it could serve was ample compensation.

Had he taken time to look over the brink, Carcajou would have seen the limp form of his victim draped in the branches of a precariously placed and woefully stunted pine, ten feet down. But in his mind he saw the broken body in the rushing torrent, and that was enough. Carefully reining his pony so as to avoid brush touching the arrow, he returned to camp.

Johnny, returning at sunset with five fool hens, was shocked to find Carcajou writhing on the ground, an arrow through the meaty part of his upper arm, blood all over him and weak curses boiling over his lips. He ran at once to help, severed the shaft with his knife and drew it out. Deftly, he slit open one of the still-warm birds, placed it over the wound as a poultice, tied it there with a wide strip of buckskin. Not until then did he venture to question Carcajou.

"What happened?" he asked, a little weakly because already he had seen the mark of Tracks-the-Wolf on the arrow shaft.

"Happened?" The man sat up, glaring at him. "That precious white Injun you taken to our bosoms laid for me out yonder a ways, bushwhacked me an' run fer it. I bin leery he'd try somethin' like that ever since I seen the feller first. As he puts his arrier through me, an' it's jest luck I wa'n't kilt, he hollers back in Cree that he's tired

traipsin' around with a couple of damned fools, that he's headin' back to Pak-oghee. If I was younger an' less stove-up, I'd take out after him an' lift his hair."

"I can't believe Rusty'd do a thing like that," cried Johnny. "He must've gone crazy." Bitterness touched him. "After what I did for him you'd have thought the least he could have done was to behave himself. You were right, father. It would have been better if I had left Pak-oghee without speaking to him. Say the word and I'll go after him."

Carcajou's eyes glowed as he shook his head. "No, son. Let him rot with the Crees; there's work for us to do. When it's done we can laugh at him an' all others that have wronged us. Just you an' me, son. We don't dare trust no other."

Johnny nodded, but without enthusiasm. Loneliness gnawed at him. Still too angry to admit it, Rusty's revolt had left him shaken and bewildered. "Let's do what we've got to do, father, and get it over with. I'm tired of this traveling, traveling, traveling, shooting at targets and all that. I'm as good as I ever will be. Let's go get this Bailey Bartlett."

Carcajou's face grew icy. "You do as you're told," he rapped. "I'll do the thinking for both of us. An' I'll tell you when the time's ripe."

THROUGHOUT the summer they continued to follow the old routine save that they held to their camps for longer periods. One, two, even as long as three weeks, but never long enough to be identified with any given spot. Often they were visited by traveling woodsmen—strong, hearty fellows, spending the off season scouting for trap lines. After each such visit, Carcajou moved camp quickly and far.

One night, after Carcajou had left camp in one of his silent, sullen moods, he failed to return at nightfall. Next morning he was still absent and Johnny worried. Along about noon the man showed up. He was in a great good humor.

"I've bought us a cabin, son," he said enthusiastically. "Met a half-breed friend of mine who holds a trap-line concession from Bartlett. He don't like the treatment he's bin gettin', so he's shovin' off for the Milk River country. You an' me, we're movin' right into his shoes. An' our next move—" He chuckled as he wolfed his food.

Johnny said nothing, but his eyes were busy. He noticed blood on Carcajou's buckskin pants, blood that he had tried to wash out. It might have been blood from game, but Carcajou had never been particular about removing such stains. And his hands, seldom washed for any reason, had been well scrubbed.

"What did you use to buy the trap line?" the youth asked after a while.

Such heat grew in the writhing eyes of the bearded man that Johnny gasped and had to lower his glance. "That's none of yore business," hissed Carcajou. "But long as you've asked, I'll tell yuh. I bought it with information. Yeah, that's it, information about a country Pete Deschutes ain't never been to. Any other questions?"

Johnny shook his head, almost hating his father in that moment. He wanted only to avoid those things that lit the blazing fires inside the skull of this man whose troubles seemed somehow to have turned his brain.

A week later they moved into the tight cabin, set under the cliff in the wild, narrow valley of Grayling River. There was a corral with

three ponies and a young deer that bleated piteously for the man who had tamed it. Inside the cabin was a good stove, and comfortable bunks lined deeply with meadow hay. And in the lean-to, great piles of traps, oiled and cleaned and ready to be set. Moreover, there were provisions, blankets, bottles of musk, a full assortment of knives and several guns. For a man venturing into a strange land, Pete Deschutes must have set out on his trails equipped very lightly.

Johnny's suspicions as to how Carcajou had obtained this cabin and storehouse served to shake his confidence in his father. But, just as he had made excuses for Carcajou in the past, he did now. Carcajou had been through enough to kill an ordinary man. Bartlett had made him like this, maiming him for life, slaughtering his wife before his eyes, robbing him of a lifelong security. Bailey Bartlett. That was where all Johnny's resentment was spent.

It kept him at his practice, until now, almost instinctively, he could draw the pistol with incredible swiftness and put one bullet after another into a vital spot in a man-size target—at fifty paces. He was ready and he knew it. And already the first hint of fall was rustling the trees.

CARCAJOU left the cabin one morning, saying only that he would be gone some days. And while he was away a rain came, a slashing, thundering, chilling rain, with high wind and lightning. It brought the lonely boy in the cabin an added loneliness and memories of his life at Pak-oghee. And, more than all, it made him think about Rusty, the youth he had known as Tracks-the-Wolf.

After three interminable days and nights, the sun emerged and the

Valley of the Grayling River steamed. The river thundered and ate at its banks, and Johnny was watching when the earth caved and a shapeless bundle of rags and flesh toppled out of its shallow grave, plopped into the flow and was sucked under. Johnny shuddered. Pete Deschutes was started toward that far land, information about which he had paid for with cabin, trap lines and gear.

And then Carcajou came home and he had three men with him. "Beaver, B'tise an' Gooseneck, son," Carcajou introduced them jauntily. And as Johnny shook hands he smelled the whiskey on their breath and sensed the reckless good humor that rode them. "They're the Eagle Mountain Boys."

"So this is the younker," laughed Beaver, slapping Johnny stunningly between the shoulder blades while he held to his hand. "Shootin' fool from Canady, eh?" He looked the youth over with a leer and Johnny found him sickening. A great, fleshy giant with bulbous eyes and nose, matted beard and snaggy teeth. Johnny swallowed his aversion to the man and found it not much better with the others.

B'tise was a shifty-eyed breed of indeterminate age, diminutive and deadly, his stringy black hair hanging almost to his waist. His buckskins were ragged and filthy, but his weapons were beautifully kept. Gooseneck was a towering sliver of a man with an unbelievably long neck. His lower lip hung pendulously from long buckteeth and he, too, looked as though he had slept in his buckskins a full season without taking them off. And smelled that way, too.

They went into the cabin and Carcajou ordered Johnny to prepare meat. There was none and Beaver

volunteered to get some. He stepped out the door, leveled the rifle and fired. Johnny cried, "No!" and dashed to the door. But he was too late. Beaver was whooping drunkenly as he sped to cut the throat of the young deer Pete Deschutes had tamed and which Johnny had become attached to in the days Carcajou was away. He shuddered as he fried steaks cut from the loin of the pet—and hated the newcomers, every one.

ALL through the night those four men worked away at the jugs of whiskey they had fetched with them. And much of that night they worked on Johnny, trying to get him to drink the stuff. But he remembered when Calling Crow, that great good chief, philosopher and personification of kindness, had drunk a trader's rum, beaten his woman, set fire to a neighboring lodge just to see it burn, chased Hawk Boy to tattoo a mark of ownership on him, only to fall between the tepees where he lay for twenty-odd hours, his disgusted people refusing to drag him indoors out of the cold. That spree had contributed to Calling Crow's death.

So Johnny refused persistently to drink, and finally went out into the forest where he spent the night nodding over a small campfire. Next morning all four of the men were in a drugged sleep, and Johnny threw the one remaining jug into the river and watched it borne swiftly toward the distant sea.

When they were sober again, the three renegades calling themselves the Eagle Mountain Boys, claimed the Deschutes layout as first class and a good entering wedge for what they planned to do to Bailey Bartlett, factor of Three Rivers Post.

"Them boys hate Bartlett as bad

as we do," Carcajou told Johnny as they rode out the next afternoon. "Ain't a one of 'em but bears the marks of the cross he tried to nail 'em to. Ain't a one but hates him like the devil hates holy water."

"We agreed there was nobody we could trust but us," protested Johnny. "You didn't tell 'em about me . . . er . . . about what I'm goin' to do?"

"Not exactly, son. Though I reckon they'll come in almighty handy if things don't break just like we hope." Carcajou led the way up a long slope, drawing rein on a ridge back. Here he spread his hand, indicating the gap in the timber, where lush grass ran down to the cobalt-blue lake. "See them build-in's, son? Purty place, ain't it? Well, it's yores—an' mine. Three

When Carcajou hit the village, Indian dogs came snarling, and the tepees disgorged their bronzed inmates.





Rivers Post. See them three streams pourin' water into that lake? Water haul right into the Yellowstone an' down to the steamboat rendezvous at Fort Keogh. An' a thousand square miles of prime fur country lyin' above. Boy, it's one location in a million, an' to think that a human buzzard is runnin' it."

Johnny nodded, gulped and stared. He wasn't seeing the natural beauty of the setting. Mention of the place's advantages was lost on him. Before his vision floated pictures,

images. He saw the charge of the renegades under Bartlett. Guns spitting and ponies circling. He saw a harried man, carrying a helpless child, seeking safety in the timber behind. He saw them burying the dead woman with the pale, cold face in a grave behind the post. His fists grew taut and hard at his sides.

"It's about time to pay off, Bailey Bartlett," he muttered. "Won't be

much more in it for you, Bartlett—
but death.”

Carcajou cackled. “That’s the stuff, son. You’re a good boy an’ a comfort to a crippled old man’s heart.” Come first hard freeze, we’ll strike. When most everybody’s out on the trap lines.”

CHAPTER IV

THREE RIVERS POST

FOR some weeks life at the Deschutes cabin was a busy life. Flagging the lines, building cubbies, making ready for the rapidly approaching season. Then, somewhere, Beaver heard of the approaching visit of the post contact man.

“Time we got the transfer on the Bartlett books,” he said. “An’ that means B’tise. He’s the only one Bartlett don’t know. We’ll hold the layout an’ do business in his name. B’tise Coriot. Good a name as any.”

So it was left. Carcajou took Johnny aside. “Sign’s right for you to do a disappear,” he said. “Wander into the post like you’re lost. Injuns murdered yore maw an’ paw, south of the Crazy Mountains. You’ve just drifted, havin’ no kinsfolk to go to. But now it’s gettin’ cold an’ you don’t know what you’ll do. Bartlett’ll offer you a job an’ you’ll take it. When you learn of fur comin’ in, lift a smoke signal on that ridge where you first saw the post. We’ll meet you there an’ learn where at’s the fur. It’s mine an’ yores anyway, so—”

“What was my maw an’ paw doin’ south of the Crazy Mountains?” asked Johnny, nervous now that the test was at hand.

Carcajou scoffed. “Travelin’ to Utah to take up land. Or Oregon. What diff does it make? Fix up yore own yarn an’ stick to it. Bart-

lett’s a fool fer hirin’ help that’s cheap. Take whatever he offers an’ hold off the shootin’ till I give you the sign. It’s a big layout an’ there’s plenty angles to be cleaned up. Keep me posted.”

So Johnny, his buckskins ragged enough to support any kind of a story, jumped on one of the Indian ponies and rode for Three Rivers, tense with an inner excitement but coldly determined on the outside. There was no eagerness in him, that having passed long before. There was now only a dogged, bitter determination to stay with an ugly job until it was done, to right a lot of wrongs committed under the spur of greed, treachery and utter inhumanity.

Now the log stockade seemed to detach itself from the dark background of the timber and, while he was still half a mile distant, Johnny saw a cavalcade of trappers emerge with their heavily loaded pack animals and swing out into Middle Fork. One of them lifted his hand and Johnny answered the hail, and moments later he was riding through the gate.

Once inside the high, pike-tipped stockade, his courage faltered for a moment. And it was a voice—a ghost voice—that held his nerves together. His mother’s voice, he thought. “Be brave,” he seemed to hear, whisperingly. “Be watchful. Do to these men what has to be done.”

It pulled Johnny together and he rode boldly past a number of breeds who labored at their packs, on the broad trading ground. They seemed to pay little or no attention to him and he dismounted before a door through which came the clink of tin cups and the echoes of uproarious laughter. At that moment the door opened and a man came out, grin-

ning and chuckling. His face sobered and he came to a halt, regarding Johnny.

"Hello," he said. "You want somebody?"

"The . . . the boss," stammered Johnny. "I'm looking for the boss."

"You're looking at him, young fellow. I'm Bailey Bartlett. What can I do for you?"

BAILEY BARTLETT wasn't at all what Johnny had expected. He had pictured a brutal face, hard eyes and a raspy, driving voice. Instead, he looked upon a kindly-faced man with a trimmed beard, soft, humorous eyes and a mild voice. This couldn't be Bailey Bartlett. However, Johnny blurted out his story, confessed to a weariness of wandering and volunteered to do anything for the sake of a home, food and companionship. Bartlett listened soberly and, when the youth had finished, threw an arm about Johnny's shoulder, an arm the youngster flinched under as if it had powers of evil.

"Don't be afraid," said Bartlett. "Here you're among friends. You've had too hard a time for a boy of your age, but I think your troubles are over. I can use you all right, and I've got a boy here for you to bunk in with—one about your age and who's had maybe as hard or harder a time. You two should get along famously. What's your name?"

"Johnny . . . er . . . Johnny—" He stammered, biting back the name, Britt, which would have damned him forever in this post. He thought of the three renegades with Carcajou, toyed with the name of Coriot, and rejected it. How few names he knew. And, as was the case whenever he was harassed, he

thought of Rusty. "Johnny Wolverton," he blurted.

A broad grin twisted Bartlett's face. "No," he said doubtfully. "What do you think of that?" He leveled his forefinger. "Go to that door yonder and let yourself in without knocking. You'll find your bunkie there, mending his buckskins. Tell him I said to fix you up." Laughing softly, he watched Johnny walk to the door, enter and close it after him. He would not have laughed if he could have seen consternation come into Johnny's eyes as he looked at the youth working with needle and gut on the floor.

"Tracks-the-Wolf!" The gasp was wrung from Johnny's lips. "What—"

"Hawk Boy!" Rusty dropped his work and got up. There was a condemning coldness in his eyes. "You have come, as you promised, to kill."

Like a man treading the brink of a precipice, Johnny looked at him, sensed the enmity flourishing where once had been friendship. Temper tugged at him. "I don't like the way you say it, Rusty."

"How should I say it?" flared the other youth. "Bartlett took me in here when I was sick and hopeless without—"

"Which you should have been," broke in Johnny. "I've never been able to understand why you suddenly turned on us the way you did. You have been taught to lie beside the trail for an enemy, but never to kill a friend. Whatever made you try to kill my father?"

"He told you that I did?"

"Yes. And I would believe him, not you."

"Then there is no use arguing the matter," Rusty said flatly. "Sometime I will meet Carcajou Britt and settle the matter once and for all. In the meantime, I will not stand

by and see you kill Bartlett."

"You will tell him?"

"Of course."

Johnny studied, puzzled and deeply disturbed. What a bad break of luck to have found Rusty here. One word from him to the factor and Carcajou's whole deal was ruined. Anger touched him.

"Look here," he said. "If you speak to Bartlett, you can make trouble for me. But a man can't be punished for what he's thinking, so I'll only be turned away from the post. If that happens, you'll really be in for it. I'll tell Carcajou where you are. He'd give a lot to know that right now."

The two youths stood facing one another, cold-eyed, breathing fast in anger and plainly checkmated. Rusty spoke first. "I will not speak," he said. "But always I shall be on guard to see that you don't kill Bartlett. If you should, I'll kill you."

"Fair enough," said Johnny, and he was relieved. Faithless as Rusty had been, he would keep his word here. Of that, Johnny was sure.

IN his enforced truce with Rusty, Johnny didn't enjoy himself much those next few days. Especially as Bailey Bartlett delegated Rusty to keep Johnny busy. There were stables and corrals to clean, ponies to feed, firewood to chop and post shelves to be replenished. And through it all Rusty maintained a tight-lipped silence.

Johnny didn't see the Bartlett girl until his third day at the post, and then she and Rusty were joking and laughing together. From a covert, he watched them. The only girls Johnny had ever known were Indian girls, attractive enough in their way, but not to be compared with this slender, blond vision. He

suddenly envied Rusty and, later, was feeling sorry for himself when he met the girl face to face.

"Hello, Johnny," she said, and he felt clumsy and wordless. "I think it's funny you and Rusty are both Wolverton waifs and not related. I bet you'd find you are, if your folks could only talk to us."

"Maybe," Johnny conceded. "But what difference? All that counts is what a feller makes of himself. I aim to work hard to make something of myself."

She studied him, her laughter gone. "You will, too," she said. "Dad likes your seriousness and your thinking ahead. Most boys we've had only waste time making pretty speeches to me, but you—"

"I would, too," Johnny broke in, "if . . . if I could find the words."

That put a rosiness into her cheeks and sent her tripping away. Johnny watched her with pounding heart. Lovely though she was, caution warned him to fight down his admiration. She was a Bartlett, daughter of a thief, murderer, renegade whose doom he had sworn to seal. He felt his first distaste for his task.

Through a heavy snowstorm came the half-breed Le Duc brothers with a strange cage, woven of willow and fitted with runners. They pulled it at the end of their picket ropes, in it a full-grown cougar tom.

"We catch for you," Pierre le Duc told the Bartlett girl. "Him mak' fine pet, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Elsie shrank before the fiery eyes and tensed muscles. And Bartlett, joining her, upbraided the trappers for their folly. "That cat's a killer, boys. If he busts that cage somebody'll get hurt. Better kill him, Pierre."

"Not that, dad." Elsie, caring not for the beast, pleaded woman-

like for its life. "Let's keep it a little while. Please."

As usual, Bartlett gave her her way, ordering the breeds to place the cage in an angle of the compound wall. There, Elsie fed it and spent time soothing it. And with enough success that everybody grew used to the cat. One day Johnny shot a snowshoe rabbit which Elsie fed to the cougar. That should have ended her interest for the day, which made her scream, at twilight, all the more startling. The sound froze Johnny's blood.

When the scream was repeated, Johnny burst from his quarters, speeding toward the coughing roars and explosive spitting of the cougar. Johnny doffed his new Mackinaw and wrapped it around his forearm as he ran. Spinning about the corner of a building, he saw the great cat ahead, crouched before the open cage, behind which Elsie huddled, silent, frightened but unhurt. The brute's tail was swinging, its hams tensed to spring.

Hearing Johnny, it spun about and launched itself. Johnny side-stepped, took part of the lunge on his padded forearm. The power of the impact bowled him over and over until he banged into the building wall. Rolling to his elbow, unharmed and expecting to see the cougar going over the stockade wall, he was flattened again by a flashing, tawny shape with bared fangs and retractile claws unsheathed. In his ears was an awful roar, in his nostrils a fetid breath. His quickness, his strength, both were useless against that power.

Claws raked him. Those fangs were in his flesh. The cat was rolling him, to open him up as he would a porcupine. Streams of pain and shock were running through Johnny. Faintly, he heard Elsie's screams, the

tumult of man yells. And then, suddenly, the roaring and pummeling ceased. Johnny relaxed, staring fascinated at the great beast standing over him. Its mouth gaped open and blood was gushing over its tongue. An arrow stood fixed through its lungs.

Now the cat rallied, roared and leaped for the stockade poles. Its leap was short and it tried to claw its way over, failed and fell. Then Johnny's senses blacked out.

CHAPTER V

HARVEST OF HATE

JOHNNY came out of it in bed, with an angel hovering over him. The bed was in the post and the angel was Elsie. His sigh roused her.

"Thank God," she murmured, and fed him water with a spoon to quench his consuming thirst. He had been out for five days she told him. Rusty's arrow had saved him, where others were afraid to shoot. She had tried to release the cat, which had turned upon her and then upon Johnny.

Bartlett had doctored Johnny well. "Some of the scars," he told Johnny later, "you'll carry to your grave. That was a fool stunt, lad, but we love you for it. It'll take a lot of payment to square the account."

Weeks passed, weeks that would have been happy ones had not the shadow of his quest lain over Johnny. The shadow of his responsibility to Carcajou. Storms tore at the tight little post and, with time dragging as the trapping season got under way, the factor spent much time with him. He came right out and told Johnny he was planning to put him into the store, as soon as his condition allowed, to learn

the local dialects and the routine of grading peltry and checking out equipment and supplies.

"I'll teach you the business from the ground up," Bartlett promised. "So that when I get sort of glandered up, I can set back and let you take over."

"He means it, Johnny," Elsie told him later. "And it may not be as long as you think. Right now dad's suffering with rheumatism and is too stove up to ride up Middle Fork for the Le Duc furs. They're careless with their curing and dad likes to keep them pretty well checked up. But he'll have to send somebody else in the morning."

UP until that minute, Johnny had been growing more and more restless. Now he cast restraint aside. For days he had been up part of the time and strength was returning, making him eager to get out. At the moment he was alone. The day was clear and cold, the snow deep enough to be smooth.

Putting on his clothes, he let himself out the side door. It was the noon hour and nobody was on the grounds. At the back of the store he could hear talk and laughter at the counters, but nobody saw him take the snowshoes and leave the compound by a small side gate.

At first he reveled in the action, drinking in the cold, bracing air and reacting to this first running of his blood since being hurt. But strength was only transient in him. He failed, and by the time he reached the ridge overlooking Three Rivers Post, he was panting, jelly-legged and spent. After throwing himself down for a rest, he made a fire and sent the agreed signal spiraling upward. Witbin half an hour Carcajou Britt had joined him. The man was scowling, critical.

"Where in blazes have you bin?" he demanded. "I— Sa-a-ay, yo're the color of a fish's belly. An' what's them scars on yore face an' neck?"

Johnny told his story. It got him little sympathy. "Damned-fool play," Carcajou growled. "Bartlett's girl, eh? You'd oughta let the cat et her. Would o' served the old fool right, after what he tried to do to my kid. Humph! What you learned, if anything?"

For one fleeting moment, Johnny was tempted to tell him he had learned nothing. Carcajou was smoke-blackened, and his clothes gave off the sour odors of the campfire. He was more snarly and ill-tempered than Johnny had remembered. Then he thought of what Carcajou might have been before Bartlett ruined him. That settled it. Why should a man like Bartlett be protected? Suppose he had done his best to restore Johnny to health; that was only fair exchange and did not alter the original debt. After all, he did have the blood of Johnny's mother on his hands. To hell with him.

"A man's goin' up to the Le Duc camp, tomorrow morning," Johnny reported. "He'll fetch down what furs the brothers have stretched up till now."

"Now yo're payin' yore keep," enthused Carcajou. "That's somethin' like. Me—I've bin figgerin' to drop into Middle Fork for a look-see. Now I'll combine business with pleasure. You go on back. Keep yore ears open, stay away from tom cougars, an' don't start gettin' ideas about Bartlett's gal."

Johnny was burning with resentment against the man after Carcajou had left and the difficult trip home had begun. But soon he had energy for nothing else than just keeping

erect and plodding ahead. He had far overjudged his strength. He was almost in a state of collapse when he staggered into the compound, where Bailey Bartlett met him with a worried face.

"Great Scott, lad," he scolded, "you gave us a scare. You ain't ready to be up yet, let alone kitin' around the woods on snowshoes. Here, let me help."

Johnny needed help and the bed felt good. "Just had to get some air into my lungs," he explained weakly, and fell asleep.

YOUTH rallies swiftly and, after a couple of hours' sleep, Johnny awoke refreshed. He found Bartlett still sitting by the bed, with the early dusk creeping into the room.

"Been sleeping like a baby," he said. "Feel better?"

"I'm all right," said Johnny.

"I hope so." Bartlett stared moodily into the twilight. "I'm getting as bad as Elsie, looks like. She thinks a lot of you, boy, and she's seldom wrong in her judgments. And me . . . well, I had a boy that would have been about your age if . . . if he'd lived. But"—a terrible hoarseness crept into the man's voice—"his mother was killed and the boy thrown into some forgotten grave by as treacherous an hombre as ever went bad."

"Ah," thought Johnny. "Here was something Carcajou Britt didn't know. History had repeated itself, paying Bartlett off in his own coin."

He said nothing, however, and Bartlett continued to stare out the window without seeing the fading scene. What he saw were pictures, recurring actions in a day when Three Rivers Post was younger. And, as those pictures flashed across his mind, words came to his lips,

broken phrases meant not for Johnny's ears, but springing unbidden to his tongue.

"—he turned to fury when I wouldn't sell him the post at his price. He chose his own time to threaten and terrify Katie. . . . I warned him, daring him to make good his threat to destroy me. I underestimated his savagery. He struck through the back of the living quarters. I was in the store . . . unarmed. He had Katie held before him as a shield. She grappled with him to give me a chance for my gun. He killed her. I killed three of his men, but he got away . . . with my boy. I've always known the brute wouldn't give the little fellow the care he needed. So—"

Bartlett paused, a shrunken, aged, almost pitiable figure silhouetted against the last light striking through the window. Johnny seemed suddenly to have lost the feel of the bed covers, as if his body was numb or as if he were suddenly disembodied. That story, he had heard it before. Many times before. With the characters and action reversed. And all at once a terrible fear was on him—fear of what he had planned and must surely have done, given time. He felt cold, shocked past thinking or speaking.

Suddenly, Bartlett roused himself, bounced to his feet. "Great guns!" he exclaimed. "Here it is dark and those young ones aren't home yet. What could be keeping them?"

"What young ones?"

"Elsie and Rusty. I sent them up Middle Fork for the Le Duc furs. They should easily have been back an hour ago. I must start a man up there to see what can be keeping them."

He hurried out, leaving Johnny shorn of everything he had leaned upon, bewildered. Yet no longer was there that shackling inability to move or think. He wanted to yell that the story was a lie, something to be eternally disbelieved. Yet, in the same breath, he wanted to denounce Carcajou Britt for making a boy believe something that had no basis in fact, thus inciting him to murder.

As a matter of fact, he did neither. For crowding through those conflicting doubts was fear—stark, ravening fear. Fear for Elsie. Fear for Rusty, who had always been his good friend until Carcajou came between them.

Reverting for one moment to his days in Calling Crow's lodge, Johnny prayed. "Kee-chee Manitou, touch the heart of Tracks-the-Wolf that his strength, courage and skill may prevail against all evil. Guard the girl with the corn-tassel hair, cloak her in night and lend speed to her pony."

He got up, donned his clothes and left the room through the window. Hurrying unnoticed to his and Rusty's quarters, he put on his belt, heavy with the gun he had mastered. Hastily verifying the loads, he dashed outside to the horse corral. His earlier weakness was only a memory, so buoyed was he now by rage and urgency. He had to help Elsie and Rusty!

He was leading the horse out when Bartlett's breed hostler came running. "I t'eenk you better wait, *hein?*" he cried, and sank down with a moan as Johnny buried the muzzle of his gun in the man's broad face. Johnny mounted, flashed toward the gate. As he quit the compound he saw Bartlett running toward the corral.

CHAPTER VI

TRAINED TO KILL

DISREGARDING the treacherous icy footing, Johnny scoured the pony up Middle Fork. The way was new to him, yet he knew the cabin the instant he saw it in the starlight. No lights gleamed. The door banged in the wind. Bodies lay in the dooryard and a wolf nosed among them. Johnny jerked his pistol as he roared in, holding his fire narrowly as doubt assailed him. For what looked like a wolf was a human being.

Johnny uttered a croak, quit the horse and fell. He got up slowly, went to the creature on hands and knees. It was Rusty. His blood made patterns on the snow. Cursing, struggling to quiet a rage that burned away his ability to think, Johnny made one last revolt against hopelessness.

"Elsie!" he cried. "Can you hear me?"

Echoes mocked him. Beside himself, Johnny darted to the Le Duc brothers. They were dead. Never again would their wild *chansons* boom out. It was almost too much for Johnny, dragging Rusty inside, bedding him under many blankets and making a fire on the hearth. For a moment then he weighed things, until he was convinced Rusty's chance was better here alone than being lugged through the cold to the post. As he quit the cabin, Johnny heard the horses coming through the night. Bartlett! Johnny sped away.

The Deschutes cabin was lighted and athrob with drunken laughter and song. Carcajou and his mates were exulting in whiskey, bought with bloodstained peltry. Johnny dismounted and stiffly approached the door, pausing a brief moment to

eye the body near the entrance. Gooseneck! The Le Ducs had taken toll before going down. That left three. Grim-lipped, Johnny jerked the latch string and entered.

The air was fetid, reeking of sweat, peltry and kinnikinnick. Fire crackled on the hearth. Carcajou, Beaver and B'tise sat with their jug, their maudlin song of the *coureurs de bois* cutting off at the interruption. The canuck said: "*Bo' jo', mon enfant.* You come een good time, eh, *mes amis?*"

Bawling a welcome, Carcajou met Johnny, shaking his hand and patting him with the stub. "I'd have fetched you back today if I'd knowed what I'd bag. A bale of prime fur, the full price of Three Rivers Post an' a chance to put a bullet into yore white Injun friend, Tracks-the-Wolf. How come you didn't tell me he was at the post?"

Beaver fetched whiskey, nauseating but strengthening. Johnny drank. "'Cause," he said evenly, "I didn't want you spoilin' things by huntin' him. What you mean full—"

"I mean," broke in Carcajou. "I've nabbed Bartlett's gal. You go back an' tell him he can buy her back with a paper makin' me full owner of the post."

"What if he won't do it?"

"He will. He knows me."

"Where is the girl?" Johnny saw their eyes flick to the barred door.

"None of yore business," rapped Carcajou. "You better get goin'." And as Johnny turned abruptly: "Hey, keep out o' that."

Johnny lifted the bar, popped inside and slammed the panel in Carcajou's face. There was a bar on the other side as well, and Johnny dropped it. Ignoring their pounding and cursing, Johnny scratched a sulphur match. Light pushed back the

gloom in the windowless room, showing him he had entered a trap. And, worse, Elsie was not here.

DEPRESSED by the thought that he had failed the girl, Johnny was shaking out the match when he saw a pile of trade blankets agitated. In a fever of excitement he got another match alight and looked into the pale, wide-eyed face above the coverlets.

"Johnny!" The faint cry was almost washed out by the tumult at the door.

He stumbled over stores, peltry, traps, and knelt beside her. "It's really me, honey. In their trap. Manitou help us." Elsie's answer was not in words. Her arms encircled his neck and her lips were on his. He returned the caress, the terror forgotten. Then the tempest passed, leaving him shaken. She stroked his cheek.

"Carcajou," she said, her lips at his ear, "told me about you, Johnny. How he stole you, trained you to kill the man who is really your father. I . . . I'm your sister, Johnny."

"Yes," he said. "I had figured it out." There was no joy in his voice. "A joke to find it out when we're trapped like this. Let them come." He drew his pistol. "Carcajou trained me to kill. All right; I'll kill them all before they touch you again."

She clung to him. "We'll fight together, Johnny. Give me a knife."

"No." He pushed her down roughly, despite his pride in her. "I won't need help." He rose as he said it, a cold lump in his stomach. The uproar at the door had ceased. Boot-steps pounded and an ax blade shivered into the panel. "Lie flat," Johnny told Elsie, and prepared to meet the onslaught.

Three times the ax bit deep, and light showed through. Johnny leveled, waiting for the fourth and maybe finishing bite. Instead, from outside, came sudden hoof echoes. A barked order: "At 'em, boys. An' watch where you shoot."

"Dad!" gasped Elsie, and tried to rise.

Johnny pressed her down again. "Stay where you are, girl. Lead's due to start flying most any time now."

Already Carcajou and the others were rushing to the front door to meet the attack. As they swung the door open, gunfire drove them back. And Carcajou was snarling curses, lashing Beaver to help him clear the fallen B'tise off the threshold so the door would close. Now it was accomplished and the door banged shut.

"Come out, Britt!" That was Bailey Bartlett roaring. "Surrender now or, by Satan, we'll snake you out by your ringed tails and hang you higher'n Haman."

Carcajou's laugh rang tauntingly. "What you think we'll be doin' about yore gal while yo're snakin' us out? Go ahead; start snakin'."

The inside of the cabin rocked with gun concussion, but there was no answer to Carcajou's shot. And when Bailey Bartlett's voice sounded again it was pinched, hopeless. "You got Johnny there, too, Britt?"

"I shore have, Bartlett. Cooped up like a fattenin' goose."

"What's your proposition?"

"Pass in a paper makin' me full owner of the post. Then take yore outfit down to Frenchman's Ford. I'll send the young ones to you there."

"I . . . I couldn't trust you, Britt. I—"

"Trust or be damned to you!"

Carcajou and Beaver had their

eyes glued to loopholes commanding the entrance. A slight noise behind them caused the pair to whirl. Johnny stood in the entrance to the storeroom. They had forgotten to drop the bar on their side.

JOHNNY'S pistol was leveled at his waist and there was a grim, determined look in the depths of his blue-gray eyes. In a voice he scarcely recognized as his own, he said: "Drop your guns, both of you."

Beaver, his bottled courage burned out in the white heat of fear, turned as pale as the cliffs of Chalk Mountain. He gulped and seemed to shrink, but he made no move to get rid of his rifle. Nor did Carcajou, who silently glared. A vein, purple as ink, stood out startlingly on his forehead. A deadly silence gripped the cabin, broken now by the double click of Johnny's cocking pistol. He spoke again in a strained, bitter voice:

"You fed me lies, Carcajou, making me hate as you've hated. You taught me to hate, brought me awful close to killing my own father. I still hate and there will be no relief until they've paid you off for the murder of my mother. A hang rope is crying for you, Carcajou. Drop your guns and get ready to pay. Or make a fight of it"

The echoes of his words ceased and Beaver moved. He cast his rifle aside with a snap of his strong wrists. The weapon sailed, took the smoky lamp off the table, plunged the room into momentary blackness. But, a clock tick later, the hot oil ignited with a puff of soot-throttled flame that ran along the puncheons like the weaving head of a chilled serpent. In that faint glow, Johnny saw danger, stark and ravening, lift its head against him.

Beaver, the instant he had flung the rifle away, had stabbed for his belted pistol. And Carcajou, bawling for Johnny's blood, had let the long gun slip from the fingers of his one good hand and was jerking his shorter weapon. Three guns snarled their hate tunes together in the restricted space of the cabin. One of the renegades missed; one didn't. Struck high in the thigh by the big leaden slug, Johnny was hurled to the floor, striking heavily on his shoulders. But his own bullet had sped straight and true, taking Beaver under the wishbone and smashing him backward and down.

Off balance as he lay on his shoulder blades, shocked into a state of nightmarish lassitude, Johnny lay there looking up at the terrifying vision of the man standing over him—a man gone berserk. The ruddy light of the crawling flames touched Carcajou's contorted cheeks and glittering eyes. It glinted off his bared teeth. Step by step, he advanced upon the helpless youth, his pistol cocked and pointed.

"So-o-o, you found out, eh? You're smart, like yore father. Too smart to live. Here's my answer to all that cross me. The bullet that'll make you beef for yore dad to paw over. Take it, you . . . you—"

"No!" Elsie's scream filled the room, and through the doorway to the storeroom flashed a small fox trap, its chain wrapped around it. Carcajou threw up his maimed arm to ward off the missile—and shifted his aim. Johnny heard the roar of a gun, saw Carcajou reel, lose strength and fall, bellowing. And then the lights went out for the boy on the floor, though he could hear a lot of things through a drowsy faintness.

"How did I find him?" That was

Bailey Bartlett. "We went up to the Le Duc cabin and found Rusty there, bad hurt and in bed. He was alive enough to tell us who had done it and who had put him in bed. We found Johnny's tracks outside and followed them. You know the rest."

"Dad." Elsie's voice was very low. "Did Rusty tell you what he told me? That he thought Johnny was . . . that you are his father?" And Bartlett must have nodded, for then Elsie added: "It's true. Britt confessed it."

"I think I must have known it from the very minute I laid eyes on him," said the factor. "Unlike the others who have come to the post, I loved him from the first."

"I, too," acknowledged the girl. "It'll be strange learning to think of him as my brother."

"If I know a son of mine," said Bailey Bartlett, "he will sometime love you as a bride, not a sister, so I may as well tell you now. When Carcajou Britt stole my boy, I adopted you to fill the emptiness in my heart. You have been a fine daughter and I love you like my own. My proudest day will be when Johnny makes you really my daughter. God has been good, Elsie. Rusty, thanks to Johnny's care, will live. Johnny has a nasty wound but it cannot keep him down long unless you neglect him now. If you want him, daughter, we better get him out of this smoldering cabin and down to the post where you can put him to bed and take good care of him."

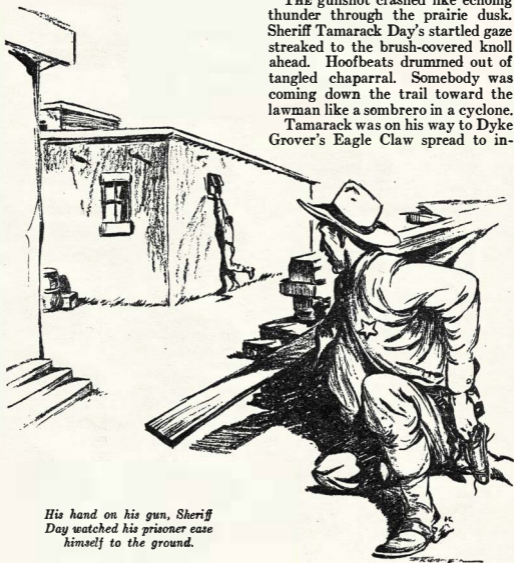
And Johnny smiled. His father's words went far to dispel the pain. The old hate, like its progenitor, was dead. And loneliness, that curse even during his life with the Indians, was already fading like the figment of a bad dream.

HOOSEGOW ROUNDUP

by
RALPH
YERGEN

Trading lead with renegades was a star toter's job, but Tamarack Day never figured he'd be called on to bait a death trap for his own pard. . . .

THE gunshot crashed like echoing thunder through the prairie dusk. Sheriff Tamarack Day's startled gaze streaked to the brush-covered knoll ahead. Hoofbeats drummed out of tangled chaparral. Somebody was coming down the trail toward the lawman like a sombrero in a cyclone. Tamarack was on his way to Dyke Grover's Eagle Claw spread to in-



His hand on his gun, Sheriff Day watched his prisoner ease himself to the ground.

investigate a complaint about some slow-elking. He had somewhat relished the task, for he could ride by way of the Half Moon and visit briefly with his good friend, ruddy-cheeked Johnny Clark. But the sound of the shot thrust thoughts of Johnny Clark to the back of Tamarack's mind.

Urging his horse through the dark junipers, he crested the knoll and looked down at the wide, grassy coulee. The oncoming rider was a dark splotch over his buckskin's shoulders, thundering up the slope. Beyond, a riderless bay horse pranced away from a huddled heap on the grass.

Tamarack's jaw protruded grimly. Tiny flame spearheads lighted the greenish depths of his eyes. He backed his horse between two junipers and loosened his Colt in its oiled holster. Tall and erect, he sat his hull with a calm confidence that marked him as no greenhorn even though he'd worn a sheriff's badge for only a few weeks.

As horse and rider swept over the knoll, they seemed to hang for an instant outlined against the fading sky. Tamarack saw that the killer was a swart, buck-toothed hombre, riding humped over like an ape.

The sheriff slid past the screening branches. "War whoops behind you, stranger?"

The oncoming horse snorted in sudden panic, pitched sideways. Tamarack saw the little beady eyes of the rider pop wide. Gun steel glittered, and the shadows rocked to the crash of the swart hombre's pistol. Hissing like a snake, the slug sped past Tamarack's bronzed temple.

Then the killer was fighting his horse into the brush across the trail. Spasmodic bursts of flame gushed

from his six-gun, but the bronc's bucking kept his aim wild.

IN a left-hand movement as deceptive as it was swift, Tamarack whipped out his revolver and fired. But branches blurred his target, and he heard his slug scream protestingly off the rocks beyond. Then the buckskin horse was streaking for the nearest ravine.

A derisive shout floated back at Tamarack. "So long, star toter. See you in Hades!"

As the killer tipped the ravine rim, Tamarack fired again. He saw the horse leap high, hoofs thrashing wildly, and collapse into the rocky defile.

The southpaw sheriff was out of his saddle in a flash, speeding toward the ravine lip. He kept to cover until he could view the killer sprawled on the lower rocks, a trickle of blood oozing from his bullet-shaped head. Discarding caution as no longer necessary, Tamarack clambered down the rocky pitch.

The horse was kicking its last. But there was life enough in the man. Merely knocked cold when he landed headforemost.

The mark of a professional killer was printed plainly upon him. Searching his pockets, Tamarack found papers identifying him as Blaze Vardon, notorious gunman from the south, a newcomer to the Peacepipe country.

Tying Vardon behind him on his horse, Tamarack rode on to where the limp heap beside the trail was now a dark spot on the darkening prairie.

The bushwhacked man was Rafe Snyder, a cattle rancher whose spread bordered Johnny Clark's. Vardon's bullet had gone through his head. Tamarack found where Vardon had crouched in the hollow of an

uprooted juniper. The fired rifle shell gleamed from the trampled sand.

Pulling a calfskin pouch from his hip pocket, Tamarack took out a cut plug of tobacco and clipped a generous slice and chewed thoughtfully.

"Money job," he grunted. "Blaze Vardon's never hit this country before. Chances are he'd have no personal reason to plug Snyder. Somebody hired him."

He caught the dead man's horse, loaded the body on it and started back to Peacepipe with his prisoner. That Eagle Claw slow-elking would have to wait. Dyke Grover could afford to lose a little beef. He was the richest man in the Peacepipe country.

A COUPLE of hours later, Tamarack had Blaze Vardon locked in a cell. Except for a bump on his turtle-shell skull, the gunman showed no effects of the clip. Cursing in a monotone, he paced the floor restlessly, a black scowl on his face, his long arms swinging almost to his knees.

Tamarack, slouching lazily in a rawhide chair, studied him thoughtfully.

"You're as good as hung right now," he told Vardon. "Whoever hired you to kill Snyder must have wanted you under the sod, too. Reckon it struck you as mighty queer that I'd be ridin' along so soon after the shootin'."

Vardon stopped his pacing to stare at the sheriff. Clouds of anger mottled his apelike face. "Did that double-crosser tip off the play? Why, blast him, I'd twist his—"

Vardon stopped, glaring at the lawman suspiciously.

Tamarack calmly sliced a fresh chew. "Why not let the lav stretch

his windpipe? All you've gotta do is to tell his name."

Vardon growled. "Why should I talk? You ain't shown me no proof he double-crossed me."

"I ain't showin' you nothin' but a judge and jury," Tamarack said crisply. "But you might save your bacon if you unload."

"Go to the devil!" Vardon growled harshly. "You ain't scarin' me."

Tamarack got up and stretched like a cat. "I think your skull is dense," he drawled. "When the rope tightens around your neck, maybe you'll wish you could talk."

The swart killer swallowed nervously. His fingers were white where he gripped the bars.

Tamarack turned casually toward his littered desk.

"Wait," Vardon gulped. His face was suddenly pale and drawn, as if he already felt rough hemp around his neck.

Tamarack watched, his greenish eyes narrowed. He could see that Vardon was losing his nerve. A coward at heart, the killer was going to squeal in hope of saving his own life.

"I . . . I've changed my mind," Vardon said huskily. "It's like you say. Why should I protect that rat, even if he didn't sick you onto the gun job?"

"Well, spit it out. Who hired you to shoot Rafe Snyder?"

"Hombre name of Johnny Clark!"

Tamarack Day didn't say anything for a minute. He just stood there, wave after wave of icy shock pouring over him.

Blaze Vardon licked his lips. "Well, what in blazes is the matter with you? I ain't lyin'. This Johnny Clark hombre sent for me. I met him the other day and we rigged it up. First time I was ever in this country. But Clark described

Snyder so I couldn't miss him, then showed me where to beef him when he rode for town tonight."

Tamarack's eyes sparked. "You're lyin' or crazy! Johnny Clark is a square shooter."

Blaze Vardon shrugged. "All I know is that Clark paid me a thousand dollars to kill this Snyder jigger."

Tamarack turned and stumbled into the front office. He dropped wearily into his favorite chair. Feeling sort of sick inside, he raised the window and spat out the brown cut that had seemed so tasty a few minutes before. The street lights of Peacepipe glowed feebly in the autumn darkness. Down the street, a drunk howled like a coyote.

The stunned sheriff kept telling himself that Blaze Vardon was lying. That Johnny Clark, of all men, would never think of cold-blooded bushwhacking. Tamarack had grown up with Johnny. They'd been saddle pards during the wild, rough days of trail drives north. They'd gone through hell and raw vinegar together. Johnny was the squarest gent Tamarack had ever known, the best friend anyone ever had. Of course Johnny Clark hadn't hired Blaze Vardon to kill Snyder. It was all a rotten lie, as rotten as men like Blaze Vardon.

NEXT morning Tamarack Day went to work on Vardon again. Try as he might, he couldn't shake the prisoner's story. Tamarack was a good judge of men. From long experience he could usually tell when a man was lying, and he couldn't help thinking that Vardon seemed to be telling the truth.

He remembered hearing of trouble between Johnny and Snyder a couple of times over boundaries and calves. Their spreads bordered, and Snyder's

widow, who didn't like high prairie country, anyhow, would probably sell out cheap now that her husband was dead. Maybe things had come to the breaking point between the two ranchers. Maybe Snyder had pressed Johnny to the point where he had to do something, and Johnny had gone sort of cracked. That could happen to any man. At any rate, Tamarack knew he'd have to pick up Johnny on Blaze Vardon's statement.

At noon Tamarack went down the street toward the restaurant. Two men stepped out of the bank, almost as if they had been waiting for him. The ruggedly built man in the business suit stabbed him with a pair of black eyes, like points of obsidian.

"Pried anything out of Vardon?" he asked the sheriff, in the tone of a man accustomed to ordering people about.

Tamarack Day's cool eyes roved over the rugged banker-ranchman. Somehow Dyke Grover always rubbed his fur the wrong way. Without answering Grover's question, Tamarack shifted his gaze to the sleekly handsome Keno Sprinz, the Eagle Claw foreman.

"Howdy, Keno," he said. "Any ideas about who might want Snyder out of the way?"

The foreman smiled thinly, opened his mouth to say something; then glanced at Grover and shut up like a clam.

Grover jerked a cigar from his vest pocket and clamped it between yellow teeth. "Sheriff, I was just going to tell you I saw this Blaze Vardon gun tough jawing with Johnny Clark day before yesterday over on Humbug Creek. Near my Eagle Claw white-face herd."

Tamarack's eyes searched the cattleman's flinty features. Dyke Grover was a hard man to read.

"Clark tried to buy out Snyder once—" Grover went on.

"And so did you," Tamarack cut in softly.

Keno Sprinz's lips clamped tight. His sloe eyes flicked from one man to the other.

Grover didn't change expression, but his voice became stiff, harsh. "Look here, Day. I'm tryin' to help you clear up this thing. I know Clark is a pal of yours. But you wasn't elected to protect your friends. And if you think I had anything to do with it—"

"No need to get your quills up," Tamarack interrupted. "Vardon talked last night. He said Clark hired him to pot Snyder." There was no use holding back the information. It would have to come out when Johnny Clark was arrested.

Dyke Grover smiled. His eyes glittered like diamonds. Then, suddenly, his smile was gone, leaving his face stolid, inscrutable.

"It's none of my business, sheriff," Grover drawled. "But it seems to me you ought to nab Clark pronto instead of dallying here. If he gets wind of this, you'll have the devil of a time catching him."

"Right the first time. It's none of your business," Tamarack said crisply. "But Johnny won't run off. I'll ride out after supper and get him."

Striding between the two, he walked on to the restaurant, thinking about that meeting with Dyke Grover and Keno Sprinz.

THE sultry afternoon wore away. With the shadows of sunset stealing across the heat-withered range, Tamarack Day rode out of Peacepipe toward Johnny Clark's ranch. His spirits were dragging in the trail dust. Unless he could shake Blaze Vardon's story, Johnny Clark was a

sure bet for the noose. Vardon's sworn statement would convince any jury that Clark was guilty.

All of his life Tamarack Day had wanted to be a star toter. Now that goal was achieved. But things weren't as rosy as he'd pictured. He'd figured on trading plenty of lead with gun thugs. He'd even been prepared for a bullet in his back sometime—the final reward of most frontier sheriffs. But he had never dreamed he'd have to hang his best friend.

He saw the rider, then, jogging leisurely toward him. It was one of Johnny Clark's punchers, lithe, curly-headed Bill Swift.

Tamarack pulled up and waited. "Johnny out to the ranch, Bill?" he asked when he had exchanged greetings.

Swift shook his head. "No, Johnny saddled up before chuck. Said Dyke Grover had sent him word to come to his house early this evening and talk over the note Grover holds against Johnny's ranch."

"So that's it," Tamarack said. He was thinking it was funny that Grover hadn't said anything about sending for Johnny. But then Grover could be clam-mouthed as well as bossy.

Bill Swift nudged his mount. "Well, so long, sheriff. I got to git along to the Double K or I'll be late for the blackjack mix."

The puncher took the trail fork to the west. Tamarack turned his horse, spurred it to a lope back to Peacepipe. The bank being closed, he took a short cut toward Grover's house, secluded in a cluster of maples at the far end of town.

TAMARACK was passing the back of his combined office and jail when he spotted a man easing himself down the wall beneath the

barred window. Looking again, the sheriff saw that two of the cell bars were missing. Catlike, he dropped off his horse and edged along behind a pile of old boards.

The man was Blaze Vardon. The gunman squatted uncertainly for a moment, then started for the junk-littered alley.

Tamarack thrust his left hand gunward. He might have to wing Vardon.

Suddenly a shot roared out of the shadows between two buildings down the block. Vardon stumbled and lurched headlong. He landed with a dull thud and lay still.

Tamarack held his fire, straining his eyes to pierce the gush of smoke that filled the alley. The marksman didn't appear. Quick suspicion flooded the sheriff. Springing over the lumber pile, he raced through the smoke, his gun ready.

The rush of retreating feet rode the dying echoes of the shot. Tamarack ducked between the buildings, glimpsing an indistinct figure vanishing around the corner. Tamarack threw a quick shot that chipped the wall. Plunging on, he gained the side street, but it was deserted. All he could hear was the hubbub from several saloons.

Tamarack gritted his teeth helplessly. He was certain, now, that the man who fired that shot was the man who had paid Blaze Vardon to kill Rafe Snyder. Maybe it was Johnny Clark. Maybe it wasn't. Anyway, there was no chance of catching him now. He'd probably slipped in the back door of some saloon and mingled with the crowd.

Returning to the jail, Tamarack found Blaze Vardon still unconscious. A heavy slug had plowed a bloody furrow along his thick skull. Tamarack carried him inside, doused his head in a pail of water.

The swart killer came out of it at once. His vitality was amazing. Sitting up, he blinked his eyes.

"Who shot you?" Tamarack demanded.

"That mangy, double-crossin' polecat, Johnny Clark!"

Tamarack stared at him. "You sure?"

"You bet I'm sure," snapped Vardon. "I seen him raise his gun when I dodged into the alley. While ago he sneaked in here with a hack saw. Then he roosted in the alley and tried to beef me so I wouldn't talk, the yeller coyote!"

That bewildered feeling came again to Tamarack Day. He made Vardon move to another cell and locked the barred door.

"Give me a hogleg," Vardon begged as Tamarack turned to leave. "I can't get out. That sidewinder is liable to plug me through the bars."

Tamarack shook his head. "He won't come around again for a while."

LEAVING the cell block, Tamarack sat down behind his desk. He felt like a whipped dog. All the evidence was against Johnny Clark now. It was like finding his best friend suddenly turned into a snake.

Lingering in the back of Tamarack's mind all along had been a suspicion that maybe Vardon and Dyke Grover had been in cahoots to frame Johnny Clark. That was squelched now. For if Grover had sprung Vardon and then tried to kill him, the gunman would have no reason to protect the banker. He'd be sore enough to want to see Grover stretch hemp.

There remained but one hope for Tamarack to cling to. Johnny was supposed to see Grover about the

note. Maybe Johnny had been over at Grover's house all evening, talking to the banker. That would give him a steel-cased alibi.

Grasping at the straw, Tamarack got up and left the office.

The autumn night was warm, and a dozen loafers slouched at the tie rail in front of the Ryeglass Saloon. Tamarack saw Keno Sprinz flip a cigarette butt into the street, split the batwings, and enter. Before the doors flapped shut, Tamarack spotted a familiar figure in the smoky glow of the ceiling lamp above the bar. Dyke Grover was in the Ryeglass.

Wheeling abruptly, Tamarack trailed the Eagle Claw foreman into the saloon. Grover was leaning against the polished bar, toying with a glass of whiskey. He looked at Tamarack questioningly, his black eyes overbright in the yellow glare.

"Well, did you loop Clark?" he demanded.

Tamarack came up close and lifted a foot on the brass rail. He kept his voice low so that only Grover could hear.

"Bill Swift said he was at your house. What about it?"

Grover's eyebrows raised. "He was supposed to be. But he didn't show up. I been home all evening. Just came down for a drink."

Tamarack felt that last faint shred of hope flow out of him, leaving only bitterness. A queer hatred and distrust for Dyke Grover seeped into his mind, as it always did when the banker was near. A plan shaped in his thoughts—a plan that wouldn't do any harm even if it failed.

As if acting on impulse, Tamarack told Grover about Vardon's attempted escape.

The banker listened, poured himself out another drink and gulped it.

"What did I tell you? Nab

Johnny Clark and you'll have your man."

"You're right," Tamarack conceded. "I'm goin' out to round him up now. But somebody has to keep an eye on the jail. Clark might dodge me, sneak back and try to beef Vardon again. You're a man I can trust, Grover. Suppose you go over and camp at the jug until I get back."

"Why, sure," the banker agreed readily. "I'll be glad to watch Vardon while you catch Johnny Clark."

At the office Tamarack left Dyke Grover. "I'll be back before sunup with a prisoner dead or alive," he promised.

"Now you're talking." Grover grinned and went inside.

WITH a queer twist to his firm lips, Tamarack plunked up the pine sidewalk, circled the block and threaded the shadowy alley to the back of the jail. He slid along the dark side wall, crouching in the stubby bushes beneath a partly open window.

What he could see of the main street was deserted now. Minutes dragged past. There was no sound except the rhythmic pacing of the caged man drifting through the opening.

Tamarack risked a look. The lamp hung where he had left it, dimly lighting the corridor. In the nearest of the four cells, Blaze Vardon ceased his pacing and planted himself dejectedly on his bunk, his stubble-covered jowls dished in his hairy paws.

In the darker front office, a cigar glowed an undulant red.

Tamarack drew down beneath the shrubbery. Doubtless he was wasting time playing Peeping Tom when he should be snapping the cuffs on Johnny Clark.

move. He just opened his eyes and looked up at Keno Sprinz, who was bending over him, fumbling at the key ring secured to his belt. He was lying on the floor. The foreman, he guessed, had dumped him through the window.

Grover's voice jarred Tamarack back to full consciousness. "Unlock Vardon's cell, Keno. I'll drill the big ape and we'll drag him out and stick a fired gun in his hand. Then we'll plug the sheriff and pin his keys back on his belt. Make it look like the sheriff accidentally forgot to lock Vardon's cell. I'll spin the story that Vardon threw a gun on us when we came in here. He shot Day before I could finish him."

"You're a smart one, Dyke," the foreman said admiringly. "Watch this sheriff hombre. He's awake. He ducked when I swung on him. Didn't soak him square."

Taking the keys, Sprinz strode over to the steel bars. Vardon was crouched in the far corner, his face a sickly yellow.

The voluble Grover kept talking in low tones. "Good thing you followed me over here, Keno. That new badge flasher has more brains than I figured him for. But they won't do him any good after I blow 'em out."

Tamarack saw Grover's ugly-nosed gun swing around, point between his eyes. The cold, merciless, unfeeling expression of an executioner was on the banker's face.

His strength flowing back, Tamarack fumbled at his belt. Then he cursed under his breath. His gun was gone.

Grover's black eyes glittered like a snake's. Suddenly, his gaze whipped about. A boot had thudded on the step outside the front door. The knob was turning.

Grover moved with startling

speed, slipping out of the corridor and behind a wall cabinet. Keno Sprinz dropped the keys and snared his right-hand gun with nervous fingers.

The door opened, disclosing a ruddy-cheeked, deep-chested young man in cowman garb. Strength seemed imprinted on his rugged features. He squinted his dark eyes down the corridor.

"What in thunder!" he said, puzzled.

Dyke Grover moved into sight, his gun covering the newcomer. "Keep comin', Johnny Clark. Careful with the hardware. This is sure a streak of luck—three birds in one bag."

"Clark too?" Sprinz piped. "How'll you explain that?"

"Easy," the banker said confidently. "I'll say Clark was in here helping Vardon to escape when me and the sheriff walked in. During the scrap, the sheriff was killed, along with Clark and Vardon. You, Keno, bobbed in just in time to see the last of it and can back up my story. It's a cinch. You'll get a good job out of it, Keno. I'll buy Snyder's ranch cheap from his wife and I'll doctor that note against Clark and take his place through the bank. And we'll get this pesky star flasher out of my road all in the same deal."

Before Dyke Grover finished his spiel, Tamarack saw danger signals flash in Johnny Clark's eyes. Johnny had sized up the situation and was going to draw. But he wouldn't stand a chance, Tamarack knew. Grover had the drop.

Desperate, Tamarack bunched his muscles, every fiber in his lean, wiry body alert. Keno wasn't paying him too much attention. He was listening to his banker boss, evil admiration stamped on his sleek, catlike features.

Tamarack sprang. There was

nothing graceful about it, but he was hurtling across the floor as Keno Sprinz swung up his six-gun.

"Look out!" Grover roared. "Blast him, Keno!"

KENO'S shiny weapon mouthed a red stream of flame. The hurried shot seared Tamarack's ribs as his rocklike shoulder smashed into the foreman's side, pinning him against the steel bars.

Then Tamarack caught a glimpse of Johnny's gun hand flashing thighward.

With a terrific effort, the lawman shoved Keno's weapon aside as it flamed again. His left hand circled the struggling foreman and found Keno's left gun, still in its holster.

A flying elbow smacked Tamarack between the eyes, knocking him backward. He reeled drunkenly, but he didn't relax his grip on the foreman's extra pistol. The middle pearl button on Keno's fancy vest was his target.

Gun thunder rocked the building. Keno's gun blazed, and the bullet whispered close to Tamarack's ear. The foreman's next shot splintered the ceiling and his death screech as Tamarack's bullet found him made the night quiver.

Another gun crashed thunderously. Tamarack staggered back, gasping, as the slug plowed through flesh and bone. Dimly he saw Dyke Grover's hulk looming near the sprawled figure of Johnny Clark. Johnny was hit.

Red rage poured over Tamarack Day. It seemed to restore a measure of faltering strength. He lurched against the wall, narrowly missing the sputtering lamp. The movement took him out of line just as Grover triggered again.

Tamarack's gun started to dance

in his fist. He felt blunt lead slap his body. Dyke Grover was cutting him to pieces, shooting him to ribbons. But the wall was holding him up. As long as those red goutts of flame stabbed out of the smoke fog, Tamarack kept on firing, throwing a pattern of lead that didn't miss.

Then, abruptly the smoke began to drift away. Yellow lamp rays reached out and touched the limp, motionless heap that was Dyke Grover.

For the second time that night, Tamarack opened his eyes to see a man kneeling over him. This time it was goat-whiskered Doc Nathan. Tamarack tried to boost himself up but the medico pushed him back.

"Hold on," Doc Nathan said sternly. "You ain't goin' no place."

"Johnny—" Tamarack's voice was husky.

Doc Nathan grinned reassuringly. "Shucks, he's all right. Grover's slug just tore up a few shoulder ligaments.

He's on the next cot."

Tamarack turned his head and grinned a greeting to his friend. "You old wart hog, what brought you down to the office tonight?"

"Why, dang it, I went to Dyke Grover's house to talk over a note with him," Johnny said aggrievedly. "His Mex cook said I should meet him at the Eagle Claw. So I rode down there and no Grover. I got tired waitin' and came back to town. A barkeep said you was lookin' for me, so I hiked right over. What was it you wanted to see me about, anyway?"

Tamarack cleared his throat, looked away, and reached for his cut plug. "Why, I don't seem to recall, Johnny. But you sure came just in time to save those two sidewinders from making a dead star totter out o' me!"



*"Let's make it close," the Wolf said.
"Then it won't be such a messy job
for Handlebar."*

*When Captain Eddy gave Oliver the chance to
redeem his life, Oliver grabbed it—even
though he knew it meant walking right into a—*

GUN-THUNDER TRAP

by C. K. SHAW

CHAPTER I

THE JAILBIRD

As Oliver Seeley hoed in the prison garden he could look across three rows of beans and meet the

eyes of Red Cowan. Oliver drew a shallow breath. Red's eyes were bloodshot and his hands were gripping the handle of the hoe too tightly. The guard was noticing. It was a shock to see Red so tense

instead of deliberate and snarling. Red was overdoing the salving; the guard's eyes were squinting to icy lines. Something had to be done to get the guard's mind off Red. It would not do for the leader of a jail break to come under suspicion the last afternoon.

Oliver threw down his hoe. "I'm getting a drink," he said. "If you want this hoe used the next five minutes, lean on it yourself!"

He swerved to pass close to Red, aiming to warn him but Red's hot voice filled the slight gap of time. "Feed him sugar, you fool! Your damn temper will give all our plans away!"

Old Brandy Ellis, the guard, walked up. "O. K., get a drink, Seeley," he said, "and take time off for a smoke, then get back to that hoe."

Oliver Seeley went for his drink. No use fooling himself, Red Cowan was jittery, nervous. The thought made the warmish water Oliver was drinking burn his throat. Red was not standing up like the tough member of a hard-shooting gang that he had pictured himself. What if Baldy Gibbens was right about Red? What if Red was a big bluff who would turn on his pals if he got in a tight spot?

Oliver looked down the row to Baldy Gibbens. Baldy was even with the spot where Oliver had left his hoe, waiting for Oliver to return.

"So the break's tonight, huh?" Baldy asked as Oliver approached.

The small, wiry man might have been talking about the weather.

"Break?" Oliver hissed at him. "We gave that idea up—too dangerous."

"Good," Baldy said. He was a lifer, and ten years before one of Montana's outstanding gunmen.

His eyes were faded, but occasionally a glint of the old steel appeared in them. "I laugh when I think of your five-year sentence," he said. "With only three to go. And you just a boy."

"Three to go! That might as well be a life ticket. I'd sooner be six feet under than spend three more years here. Gibbens, prison has busted you! You used to be a man of parts, but since coming back of these walls, you've curled up like a frosted leaf. You can sit around and wait to die if you want, I'm doing something."

"You won't mind so much from now on, Ol," Baldy said. "When you get out you can go see Captain Eddy about that job, and—"

"When I get out I'll see Eddy, but not about a job. I'll put a bullet through him! I'm not asking favors of the man that put me in here!"

"Anyhow, I'm glad you've give up the break. With the case of shakes that Red Cowan has, he'd run amuck."

Oliver laughed, the sound was louder than he had planned, but he let it flow for it cooled his lips. He saw Red start, afraid of so much noise. And old Brandy Ellis, the guard, was watching. Brandy had sheriffed for twenty years before he settled down to this jail job. Red said the old codger would be easy to handle, but Baldy Gibbens had warned against rushing him. There was the young whipper-snapper guard at the other end of the row, but he wouldn't pile up very high.

Oliver glared at Baldy. "Don't worry about Red and his shakes," he snapped. "Watch your own hands for palsy. Hands that aren't used for anything but hoeing get old fast."

Baldy moved on down his row, hoeing neatly and swinging a bit as he worked. Oliver knew that Gib-

bens was still a good man, and wished he was going with them to-night. It would help to offset the bloodshot, nervous eyes of Red Cowan, for Baldy would be swift, silent and sure of every move. But Baldy had said that he never mixed with men of Red's type, even in a jail break.

The sun slid rapidly toward some high distant trees. Later, say in August, it would set behind the low, barren knoll. Seeley snapped off this thought. He would not be here this August. He would be free and he would have the job of Captain Eddy of the Montana detective agency taken care of. His first bit of work was going to be to kill Eddy, who was at present in charge of investigating the holdups and murders at Mary's Pass for the Montana Freighting Co.

OLIVER ate his supper slowly. He looked up at the swinging lamps with their tin reflectors, at the gray dirty walls, and down the long, oilcloth-covered table. Baldy Gibbens and some of the men were joshing. The young whipper-snapper guard was laughing with them, and reminding Baldy that this was his night to scrub the kitchen. Red was bending over his plate, shoveling in his food. Old Brandy Ellis would have noticed Red's tense shoulders, but the young guard seldom caught such fine points.

Oliver held back in the march to his cell. This was when Red was to give him the key and gun. Red could have done it with less chance of being caught if he'd slipped it to him while they were hoeing, but Red was afraid to lug the thing away from its hiding place. One of Red's gang had visited the jail and placed four guns and four keys in a box beneath a wall seat. Each night

for four nights Red had slipped out one of the packages. It was not such dangerous business with the whipper-snapper guard on duty. Red's friends knew a man or so about the prison, and things had been arranged, even to having the guards in the kitchen at eleven o'clock.

Red shoved the gun and key into Oliver's hand and his whisper burnt at his ear. "Eleven," he said. "Listen for the kitchen clock! There's work goin' on down there that'll make noise—we won't be heard. But if we are, plug everybody you see! Clean the halls out in front of you!"

Oliver entered his cell, stepped back from the door as he heard old Brandy Ellis coming. The light was dim, but when Ellis squinted it always seemed like he could look through a board. What was the old he-wolf doing in the halls now? Why wasn't he down resting?

The time passed slowly as Oliver waited for eleven. For the third time he fitted the gun to his palm. It had been two years since he had handled one. It seemed bulkier than it should. It didn't fit. Maybe he had become too used to grasping a hoe. Maybe it was because he wasn't thinking straight. He remembered Red's last words. *Plug everybody in sight! Sweep the hall clean!*

Faintly he heard the clock striking eleven.

He reached through and tried the key Red had given him. It unlocked the door. There would not be shooting, not with men as smooth as Red's friends taking care of things. He stepped out into the dim hallway.

"Get back into your cell," a cool voice ordered.

Oliver tried to reach the gun he

had secreted, but the man at his side was too fast. His weapon jammed into Oliver's stomach.

"Get back into your cell!"

Oliver fell back. The voice had struck like a dagger. Then he saw who the man was—Baldy Gibbens. Oliver's anger blinded him and his hand darted again for his gun, but Baldy reached first. Oliver's fingers clutched on the spot where the gun had rested. Baldy Gibbens twisted backward, clicked the cell door shut and locked it with the key Oliver had left in the lock.

"I got to get back to the kitchen 'fore I'm missed," Baldy whispered, and vanished.

As Oliver Seeley leaped at the door in a wild rage, shots burst out down toward the far end where Red Cowan's cell was. The commanding voice of old Brandy Ellis rode above the din.

THE whipper-snapper guard was killed that night along with two of the convicts. Red Cowan received a bullet through the lungs and it was thirty days before they hanged him. Oliver Seeley visited him that last evening and he found the man who had once talked boldly about dying rather than rotting in jail, digging the floor of his cell in terror. The next day Oliver managed a few minutes' talk with Baldy. It was their first conversation since the day of the break.

Oliver looked into the faded eyes of the man whom he had thought prison had broken. "Baldy," he said, "you were right about Red."

Baldy just nodded.

"He shot the whipper-snapper down in cold blood and sprayed lead at old Ellis," Oliver went on. "I miss the whipper-snapper, Baldy. He laughed and told jokes, and—" He kept looking straight into Baldy's

eyes. "It might have been I who killed him but for you. Thanks, Baldy."

Baldy's faded eyes grew chilly, steel crept into them. "I was taken in once by some men of Red's stamp, Ol," he whispered. "I couldn't just stand back and see you bein' drawn in."

It was several days before Oliver felt easy enough with Baldy Gibbens to ask him where he got the gun he used the night of the break. "Do they grow on trees here in jail?" he asked. "Can just anybody pick one off?"

"I had late work in the kitchen that night so I wasn't locked up. That wasn't a gun, Ol, that was a salt shaker."

"I might have killed you," Oliver said solemnly. "Baldy, any other man here would of let me go to hell in my own particular way. You stuck to me—even to risking your life. Maybe sometime I can do you a favor. I'll be out in three years and waiting for your word. You must expect to try a break some day, Baldy."

"When you're out, don't go mixing into anybody's prison breaks!" the small man snapped. "Yes, you can do me a favor—go see Captain Eddy and tell him you want a job."

CHAPTER II

NEW GRAVES FOR THE CARELESS

OLIVER was shown into Captain Eddy's office. The spring sunshine laid bare the cracks in the wallpaper, as well as the seams in the face of a gaunt man who rose to meet him. Captain Eddy offered his hand and spoke.

"Ol Seeley." The tone was dry, but the grip firm and the eyes interested.

"You said the day they sentenced me, Eddy, that I was to come and see you when I was free," Oliver said.

"And you told me to go roast in hell. I expected any message from you would be wrapped around a bullet."

"If they'd let me out the first year or two, it would have been. The big house is tough when you've done nothing to deserve it. Recall, all you had against me was that I was sitting eating supper with those four thieves and murderers. I told the truth when I said I'd never seen a one of them before I rode up to their camp that night. If one of them had been left alive after that posse hit, he'd have told you the same thing."

"Your story was thin, and you hadn't anyone to back your word of riding for a lost horse. I didn't blame the jury, though with me, Seeley, it was a lot your background. It's my business to keep cases on the young crop of gunmen and you topped the list for skill. Your history was part bad, part good." He held up his hand to check Oliver's protest. "You know your history better than I. I figured with the emphasis you were placing on a fast draw, you were following in the steps of your two uncles that were hanged for express robberies."

"Do you still figure that?"

"It's still an even bet with me."

"Then you were just shooting off your mouth about having a job for me when I was finished my five years?"

"No. If a man is a fifty-fifty shot, I give him rope. If he's less than that, I try to get him six feet under sod before he kills any good men. Job? What have you in mind, Seeley?"

"What have you in mind?"

"Something easy or something tough?"

"A tough one might keep me occupied. I've waited to call till I got the shake out of my gun arm."

"I notice it swings easy." Captain Eddy smiled. "You young fellows snap back quickly. How would you like a job on Alfred Denison's Circle O. He'd give you a square deal."

"What's the tough job?"

Suddenly a silver ribbon seemed to lie beneath the man's lowered lids. "Working for me," he said.

Oliver shrugged. "I couldn't get you any leads, Eddy. I don't know any of the men you're after."

"This is a hotter job, Seeley, than hanging around outlaw camps, picking up leads. This would be really going out and fetching home the bacon."

"Maybe you'd be afraid to trust me on a real job."

"I'd not trust you entirely. I'd be forced to hold back certain points, so if you should have a change of heart after you got on the field, you couldn't give the man already on the job a bad time. I'd consider him ahead of you. I wouldn't give you his name, but your work would be to assist him in clearing up a murder mystery. He's a man that likes to work alone, but this is too dangerous for one man. I sent two men in with him, but they've been killed." Captain Eddy paused a second, then continued. "This other man I mention may be dead also. I haven't heard from him for thirty days. If you are interested, Seeley, I'll show you the last letter I received from the job—it was from the murderers of my two agents."

"I'd like to see the letter, Eddy."

CAPTAIN EDDY opened a drawer and took out a single sheet of paper. Oliver took the paper and read:

CAPTAIN EDDY: This is to inform you your two agents arrived. We have them safely put away under six feet of sod. There is a vacant forty around them, plenty of room for any more men you care to send.

Oliver handed the letter back. "They don't know about this other man?" he asked.

"Evidently he has been too smooth for them—or else he's been killed and they haven't seen fit to mention. I'd gamble he's alive, though. I'll say this, he's an emotionless fellow. If you got yourself in a jam first off he might not throw in to aid you, knowing that would spoil his set-up."

"I won't expect help from him."

"Then you are taking the job?"

"Yes, and I'm ready to start to work now."

Captain Eddy explained to him the mystery of the Montana House in Mary's Pass, as he so far understood it. Mule trains had camped at its door, never to be heard of again, as though washed from the face of the earth over night. And always they were rich trains. The government was sending in special agents to see what was happening to wealthy caravans disappearing in these mountains.

"Mack Wood is sheriff in that section of the Ruby Mountains," Eddy said. "He's honest, but if you made yourself known to him, you'd likely have so much law barking around your heels that the wolves would hole up. Seeley, of the seventeen men listed as lost crossing Mary's Pass, twelve have been absolutely known to have spent a night at the Montana House. They could

have been lost in the mountains beyond, for the trails to the gold camps are festering with cutthroats, but not a single skull has been found, not the bones of one mule. The hub of that section is the Montana House. Stay close to it, Seeley, and if they don't plant you in that vacant forty, you'll get a clue."

"I'll stay close," Oliver Seeley said. "Is that all?"

"I'm going to give you a password that will identify you with my other agent. You simply say, 'Are you Mr. Duncan?' and the reply will be, 'Martha is my sister.' Or if you should be asked if you are Duncan, reply that Martha is your sister. Understand that Seeley?"

"It's clear, Eddy, but how am I going to spring it when I don't know this fellow?"

"You'll get suspicions, but I'd warn you to go slow about using the password. If you should use it on the wrong man it might tip your hand to a dangerous person: And it could be that this agent on the job wouldn't care to reply to you. Don't rely on the password to work any magic."

"I'll rely on this hip cannon for my magic, Eddy," Oliver said. "As I see this job, it's to find out how the Montana House is making away with men and mules without leaving carcasses."

"Your job is to aid the man already on the field, Seeley," Captain Eddy said quietly. "When I say he's a lone worker, I don't mean he'll not welcome assistance. I want you to find him, make things easier for him." His lips tightened. "If he's still alive."

Oliver smiled thinly. "I'll be making things easier for myself, Eddy. But I'll keep watching for this man I don't know, and who

probably won't answer the password when he hears it."

CAPTAIN EDDY brought out a ledger from his desk drawer. "What information do you wish to leave on our records?" he asked. "In case you don't turn up, to whom shall I pay your earned wages?"

Oliver leaned forward with a chuckle. "Pay any money I don't claim to Baldy Gibbens at the big house. It'll buy him extra smokes."

Captain Eddy looked up. "Baldy Gibbens? One of the trickiest gunmen ever to be buried alive. Friend of yours, is he?"

"Offhand, I'd say he was the only friend I had. He was the man that beat the fires out of my brain back in prison. He didn't let up till I'd promised I'd come see you about a job."

"Do you know I am the man who sent him up?"

Oliver felt as though a grave had opened at his feet. "No," he answered, "Baldy didn't talk much."

The captain's eyes were suddenly like twin blades. "He talks the least of any man I've ever known," he said. "Baldy Gibbens has locked away the information needed to convict three cold-blooded murderers! He has refused to talk for ten years, and I know now he'll die without talking."

"Gibbens was not the man I was chasing ten years ago—it was his three friends. Friends who used Gibbens to further their murderous schemes. He just looks at me when I tell him this, looks and keeps silent. Seeley, I've visited him twice a year for ten years, held before him the chance of a pardon, and he shakes his head. Do you know anything, *anything* regarding these three friends of his?"

Oliver thought back to the mo-

ment when Baldy had stood beside him, warning him against Red Cowan. "Eddy," he said, "I believe Baldy Gibbens hates the three men you are calling his friends. I saw a flash of that hate once, and it stopped me from joining in a jail break."

Captain Eddy sighed. "The trio was new to this section ten years ago, no good description was had of them. After this murder, where they left Baldy wounded, they dropped from sight. Ran off and left him that night, and yet he shields them."

"I never understood Baldy Gibbens," Oliver said. "But he's a mighty good friend. About that pardon—"

Captain Eddy shook his head sharply. "I'll never stir a finger so long as he protects that trio of murderers." He extended his hand. "Good luck, Seeley. Move carefully, test every inch of ground before you put any weight on it, and keep remembering that vacant forty waiting for you if you slip up."

CHAPTER III

DEATH IN THE STORM

ONE of the first storms of early summer was lashing the mountains as Oliver Seeley rode through Mary's Pass. Unusual heat had made the timbered pass breathless as the storm had gathered. A black cloud from the west had swept across the strip of blue sky and now the wind and lightning were in command. Oliver was midway of the pass, near the Montana House, when darkness closed in. As he came to marshy ground, bridged by poles laid side by side, he knew he was near his journey's end. Mary's River was boiling through the pass, swollen from a shallow stream to a torrent several feet deep. At each

ford since twilight, the water had seemed more like swirling ink.

Lightning spread across the black heavens as Oliver rode around a bend onto the Montana House, and outlined for him the scene toward which he was riding. The mountain was close at the back of the buildings, lifting in rims that climbed like stairs to the top. The river followed close to the base of the mountain for a distance, then made a big loop that took in the buildings of the roadhouse.

A second flash showed Oliver the Montana House. It was blunt-roofed, sprawling and poorly lighted, judging from the weakness of the rays coming from the windows. There was a front porch whose flat top seemed to be railed in to form a veranda. The river, darkly agleam under the lightning flashes, shut the roadhouse away from three angles. The road Oliver followed led him to a tall pole gate which he opened without getting off his horse.

The rain was coming in large, wind-driven drops as Oliver rode toward the house. He buttoned his coat to keep his holster dry. A second gun he carried under his right arm. In a pinch a left-handed draw was a neat surprise. He dismounted and tied his horse to one of the porch pillars, a thick cottonwood pole. The floor of the porch was earth, pounded to the hardness of iron, so it seemed, as he dragged his spurs across its surface to the door. He rapped once, then pushed the door open.

As he stepped inside the long room, lightning flashed in a white blaze, followed by crashing thunder. At the far end a man rose from beside a long table laid for supper and waved Oliver to close the door.

When the thunder faded he said his name was Kil Mooney.

"Bad night, stranger," he went on, moving down the room to greet Oliver. His deep slow voice seemed geared for a sermon. His long-tailed black coat carried out this theme, but the two holsters padding his hips were jarring notes.

"Are you staying the night or just waiting out the storm?" he asked. When Oliver replied that he wanted a bed and supper, Mooney waved to a small man sitting in the shadows of an open stairway leading to a black upper floor.

"Get a man to care for the stranger's horse, Nugget," he said.

Nugget, Oliver judged, was the gunman of the place. He was not young, but his movements were swift and there was no mistaking the cruelty of his eyes and mouth. There were three other men in the room. One sat hunched at a shadowed card table, the second swayed his lanky body as he mopped at the homemade bar, and the third stood sourly before the bar, water trickling across the floor from his dripping form. As Oliver glanced at this third man, the fellow hitched open his coat and exposed a dry holster.

"I've heard your brag, Handlebar," he snarled at the bartender, "that you always set out good whiskey. I figure to see tonight if it's a lie."

"Handlebar Jones don't have to lie about his whiskey," the tender replied in lazy words that matched the swipes of his towel. "I'm right here behind this slab of pine to prove that there was real stuff back of that braggin' you mentioned."

The snarl of the other simmered down some as Handlebar Jones swung down a bottle from a shelf, whipped it in a high arch and filled a glass with an expert flourish.

"Warm your gullet with that!" Jones cried, his long mustache twitching below his chin. "And let it be on the house!"

The ill-tempered stranger tossed the whiskey down, looked at Handlebar over the empty glass. "I apologize," he said. "When I'm treated right I'm a sociable gent. Tonight's a good night for men to stand together and drink warmin' liquor—while the storm rips the guts outta everything outside." He waited then for the thunder to die away before he continued. He waved a long arm to the room. "Come up and have a drink on Ace Daniels, every mother's son of you!"

JUST then a man came from the blackness that shrouded the head of the stairs, and ran lightly down the steps. He was dumpily built and his face was round and smooth. He wore his sleeves rolled to his elbows, and there was a freshly scrubbed look about him. He paused on the last step.

"Am I included?" he called down the long room to the bar, "or was I late in entering?"

"I said ever' mother's son and that's what I meant. Gents, get on your pins and amble to the bar. Ace Daniels don't bid nobody drink with him that he don't want, and when he bids, he wants everybody to rear up and paw for a glass!"

Kil Mooney introduced Ace Daniels to the dumpy man standing on the last step of the open stairway. "Daniels this is Dr. Nelson, keep him in mind if you want any bullets dug out—he's good. We're glad to have him stopping with us." Then Mooney spoke softly to Oliver. "Step over to the bar and keep smiling. Ace Daniels is like a stick of dynamite, and I'd rather not have

him touched off here at the Montana House."

As Oliver and Mooney walked forward, Daniels stared toward the shadowy figure sitting at the card table and spoke sharply. "Are you hard of hearing down yonder?"

The man at the card table did not stir. Thunder crashed on the heels of a blinding flash of lightning, and gradually the room lost the echoes.

"You, a settin' at that table!" Daniels shouted. "Get on your pins!"

The man looked up. "I don't crave a drink," he said.

Ace Daniels slid away from the bar, his body charged with menace. "You mean you're refusin' to drink with me?" he asked.

"I'm refusing to drink with anyone."

The man at the card table rose as he spoke and came out from the shadows. Each step was part of an entire body movement that centered around the right hand swinging near his gun.

The dumpily built doctor stepped squarely into the path between the two hostile men, his round, scrubbed face shedding light like a billiard ball. His sharp voice lifted above the rappings of the wind.

"Mr. Daniels, this gentleman is a stranger in our midst, a lone wolf. In fact we call him Wolf. He never drinks with anyone."

"He drinks when Ace Daniels says drink, Fatty. Move out of the way while I handle this."

Dr. Nelson complied with surprising swiftness, considering his short legs and ample waistline.

"Mooney," he breathed to the man beside Oliver Seeley as he reached them, "stop this thing. It's a bad night for Handlebar to be sanding blood off the floor—and I'm in no mood to probe for bullets."

"Men as unsociable as that Wolf," Kil Mooney said, "will have to lie in the bed they make. This time perhaps, he'll lie a long time. I've heard Ace Daniels is fast."

OLIVER'S breath hung in his throat. *Unsociable! Lone Wolf!* That was the way Captain Eddy had described the agent he had come to the Montana House to assist. When Kil Mooney had consigned the man to death at the hands of Ace Daniels, his voice had held no displeasure. Perhaps Mooney suspected him of being a secret agent, perhaps this was the way he took to plant him in that vacant forty. There was something too pat about the way this thing had swung into a gun fight. Oliver stood perfectly still, watching the two men move closer together. Even if he were certain this was Eddy's man there was no way for him to help.

The Wolf was moving swifter than Ace Daniels, and in a lull of the storm he spoke across the narrowing distance. "Let's make it close. Then it won't be such a messy job for Handlebar."

Ace Daniels' dry lips moved. "Nor too many bullets for the doc to dig out," he added.

Handlebar Jones draped his form across the bar and snarled. "It ain't human for a fellow to be as unsociable as Wolf. He'll deserve all Daniels gives him."

Oliver shifted so his right hand was near his holster. It had been five years since he'd lifted that gun from its leather in dead earnest, but he felt no uncertainty. He had practiced back in the mountains until his arm had swung with the old power. If the Wolf should win this battle, and then the house turn against him. The man was going

to need help. It was his, Oliver's, job to supply that help.

When only three of the foot floorboards separated them, the Wolf and Ace Daniels jumped their guns from their holsters. The log building, already shuddering to crashes of thunder, throbbed under a fresh rumble. The guns exploded as one, and then a single wild shot hit the window and sent glass flying about the end of the room near the bar.

Ace Daniels fell with blood staining the left side of his shirt. The Wolf leaned on a chair with his left hand, still holding his gun in his right, and braced himself until he was certain that the wild shot Daniels had sent through the window was his last. Then the Wolf's knees folded and he slid to the floor.

Dr. Nelson walked over to Daniels first, knelt and made a hasty examination. "Too bad he didn't buy us those drinks before the battle," he said. "Anybody that waits for him to treat now will be dry a long time." Then he went to the Wolf.

Oliver kept Kil Mooney and Handlebar Jones under his vision, but the small man called Nugget Smith managed to bury himself in the shadows of the stairway.

Dr. Nelson spoke to Kil Mooney. "Get somebody to help me lug this man up to my office." He stood up. "Kil, I told you to stop this affair!"

"He looks done for to me," Kil Mooney said in his deep, slow voice. "Is there any use to probe for the bullet, doc?"

"There is plenty of use to probe for the bullet. He'll die before morning, but I want to show a clean bill to the law. The sheriff's looked sour at some of the death certificates I've handed in lately. I want to be able to meet him with this death pellet in my palm."

"I suppose that's best," Mooney

said and stepped close to the Wolf. "He'll not last more than an hour, I'd guess, maybe blink out while you're working on him."

It seemed to Oliver that Kil Mooney had looked very hard at the doctor as he spoke, but if the medico caught a hidden meaning there was no indication on his smooth round face. Mooney called two men from the kitchen and they, with the doctor, carried the Wolf toward the stairs. Oliver understood then that the doctor's office was on that upper floor, and that he was staying here at the Montana House.

"Sit down and I'll have your supper on the table in a jiffy," Kil Mooney said to Oliver. "That is if this affair hasn't taken your appetite."

"My stomach is passingly strong," Oliver replied. He took a chair at the long table, glanced toward the men carrying the Wolf away, then nodded toward the doctor who was straining under his part of the burden. "I suppose that bulge in his hip pocket is a liniment bottle," Oliver said.

Mooney smiled sadly. "That bulge is a gun, stranger. Dr. Nelson is called upon to travel lonely trails at night, and even a man on a journey of mercy is not safe. The doctor that was here this spring was found murdered at the head of the pass. You perhaps have noticed we all carry weapons."

"I noticed," Oliver said, "and I've heard about the cutthroats that ride these gold trails. I suppose affairs such as this one tonight is just a passing event."

The three men carrying the Wolf had reached the top of the stairs, and someone lighted a lamp. Oliver listened to try and locate the doc-

tor's office. The heavy feet moved on and on, almost, it seemed, to the front of the long building.

"Events such as this one are very rare here at the Montana House," Kil Mooney said severely to Oliver. "Tonight is an unfortunate night for a double death. The sheriff will be paying us a call soon. He's in these parts with a posse running down two jailbreakers."

Handlebar Jones and Nugget Smith finished with the business of removing Ace Daniels, and Handlebar directed the sanding up of the floor.

"Now, Handlebar," Mooney said, "bring this guest a drink such as you were bragging to Ace Daniels about."

Handlebar Jones came down the long room with the drink. The lightning quivered through the building as he set it down. Oliver waited until the following crash of thunder had subsided, then lifted the glass and spoke. "May the rest of us live out this storm," he said.

Handlebar's eyes squinted as he smiled, but behind their flimsy curtain of hospitality was solid ice. Oliver felt chilled even as the warming liquor hit his stomach. Upstairs things had grown quiet, the doctor was probably at work taking out the bullet. Oliver ate as rapidly as he dared, for to arouse the suspicion of Kil Mooney or Handlebar Jones would be to destroy the slender chance he had of saving the Wolf. Nugget Smith had gone back to the shadows beneath the stairway.

"Stranger in these parts are you?" Mooney asked.

"My first trip to the mines," Oliver answered.

Before Handlebar or Mooney could press him for more information, the front door swung open and

a gust of rain whipped across the floor. With it came a man in a soaked woolen shirt and pants tucked into high boots. He threw his hat on the bar and it fell like so much lead, water spraying to all sides. Handlebar Jones, whose job it was to keep the bar tidy, frowned.

"Any luck with the jailbreakers?" Kil Mooney called to the soaked man.

"One of them is dead," came the answer. Oliver knew this was Sheriff Wood, for a star hung on his shirt.

Kil Mooney strode to meet the lawman, and Nugget Smith came from his shadows beneath the stairs. "Which one did you get?" Nugget

asked, and his thin lips seemed to pinch off each word.

"Two-gun Billings," the sheriff answered. "We followed Baldy Gibbens to within a mile of here, then he give us the slip. But only for a time. He's headed this way, and I'll get him when this blasted storm lets up."

CHAPTER IV

SHOT IN THE DARK

SHERIFF MACK WOOD sat down at the table beside Oliver Seeley and told Mooney to send for some coffee. When it came he put in sugar and stirred it thoughtfully.

"So you think Baldy Gibbens is

Handlebar leaned across the bar, his rifle ready. "One more dead man won't be out of line, what with all the shooting that's been going on," he said.



headed this way," Nugget Smith asked. "I got three good men I can spare to help you in the hunt, sheriff, and you don't need to keep anybody here at the house; me and Handlebar and Mooney will take care of things."

"I already have my men stationed, Smith," the sheriff said. "I'll be in and out of the house myself—and I'm expectin' the Wolf along to help."

"The Wolf is upstairs on the doc's table," Nugget Smith said. "The man he killed is out on the back porch."

The lawman shoved his coffee away and his jaw set. "A dead man on the back porch?" He rose.

"Go ahead and drink your coffee," Kil Mooney urged. "That dead man will be waiting when you're finished."

"But maybe the Wolf won't be waitin'! I got a hunch, Mooney, you and Nugget and Handlebar wouldn't mind havin' the doc make a mistake on Wolf."

Mooney shook his head and said sadly, "I wish he'd kept his killings away from my door, and I hope he doesn't die under my roof. But if you mean I'd suggest the doctor neglect Wolf, you're wrong."

"I'll take a look upstairs," Sheriff Wood snapped.

Just then Dr. Nelson came to the head of the stairs and called for more hot water. "A big bucket this time," he ordered. "That last wasn't enough for a cup of tea." When he saw the sheriff, he took two steps downward. "I fear I have bad news for you. Your friend Wolf is fatally wounded."

"You certain the wounds are fatal?" the sheriff barked back. "Wolf is tough, and you've showed yourself smart at cuttin' out lead. Better sing a more hopeful tune!"

The dumpy figure on the stairs came to stiff attention. "I'll do my Sunday best on the patient, sheriff—you know that. If there was any hope I'd be glad to say so."

Sheriff Wood stamped toward the stairs. "There's always hope as long as a man's heart is beatin'. I'll set with you as you work. If any of my men call for me, Mooney, get me word pronto."

"Certainly, sheriff," Kil Mooney replied, "but Baldy Gibbens won't be likely to show his head at the Montana House."

The sheriff paused, as if uncertain where duty lay. The issue was decided for him when the front door opened and a voice called out:

"Nick says he's sure Gibbens is in the left wing of the stable!"

NUGGET SMITH moved as swiftly as the sheriff in the dash for the door. The storm seemed to be blowing itself out, for now no rain lashed in as the door opened and closed. Kil Mooney glanced about the suddenly still room.

"Keep your shotgun ready, Handlebar," he said, and he felt beneath the tails of his coat to be sure about his own weapons. He looked sharply at Oliver Seeley.

"This convict Gibbens that has escaped is a dangerous man," he said. "A killer."

Oliver felt the stillness of the house, especially of the upper floor. The job he had undertaken called him to the side of the wounded man who lay at the mercy of the round-faced doctor, but out there in the night was his best friend, with a posse closing in. Then Oliver remembered the steely eyes of Gibbens as he had seen them that night of the Cowan jailbreak. There had been shrewdness and power in those eyes, and that same power would be

in them tonight. With wind and thunder to cloak his movements, there was small chance of Gibbens being captured. Oliver took a step toward the stairs.

"Even a dangerous killer couldn't keep me awake tonight," he said to Mooney. "Which room do I get?"

Kil Mooney called a man from the kitchen and Oliver followed him up the stairs and down the hall to the second door. The fellow took a lamp from a shelf, lighted it, and left without saying a word. Oliver sat down and began to remove his shoes. The hall had been dark but for a strip of light coming from beneath a door at the end of the building. That would be the doctor's office and it would face out onto the front veranda.

Oliver hooked his shoes over his arm by their tied laces, blew out the lamp and tried the window that looked toward the river. It slid up easily. The storm seemed to be moving rapidly away now, and only a drizzle of rain struck him as he crawled outside, hung an instant by his hands and then let go.

He tipped backward as he lit and caught himself on the palms of his hands. He waited a bit to see if the noise of his dropping had carried into the long room that served the Montana House as bar and dining room. When the silence continued he crawled to the front of the building and to one of the cottonwood poles that served as porch pillars. The thunder was distant and the lightning weak, yet a strong flash might any second sweep across the valley. He began to climb the pole, knowing he would have to take the chance that if lightning revealed him, none of the sheriff's men would be looking at the porch.

In a couple of seconds he was swinging over the low rail of the

veranda. He had been right about the doctor's office facing the front. A window was before him with two inches of light showing beneath the blind. He crawled forward and looked in.

The room he saw was boxlike in size, accommodating one chair, a table holding the lamp, and a small chest of drawers. There was a door standing an inch ajar that led to another lighted room, and from this space came a low groan. Oliver tried the window and found there was no latch on it. He waited, holding it this fraction of an inch open as the door from the hall opened and Handlebar Jones barged in.

"Doc, Mooney wants you to guard the kitchen door against Baldy Gibbens. You got that bullet out, ain't you?"

Dr. Nelson appeared. "I have the bullet, which I hope will clear me in the eyes of the law. The patient still lives."

Oliver was lying close to the wall of the house, watching beneath the blind. He saw the baggy face of Handlebar cloud, and his mustache twitch. "You was plenty long on the job, doc," Handlebar said. "You'd 'a' thought the Wolf's pelt was worth something."

Dr. Nelson drew forth the gun that had bulged on his hip. "Mooney wants me to hold the kitchen against Gibbens, huh? Fine! But what makes Mooney think Gibbens will try to bust into the Montana House?"

Handlebar snapped forward. "Just do as Mooney says and never mind the questions."

THE two of them hurried into the hall. As their steps died, Oliver Seeley raised the window and stepped into the outer office. He noticed then that there was a narrow

door at the end that could not possibly open anywhere but to the outside. Nothing seemed to be latched about the Montana House, for the knob turned under his touch and he opened the door to look down a narrow, black flight of stairs. He closed the door and hurried to the inner room where the Wolf lay. That stairway would make it much easier to get the wounded man away.

Oliver stepped swiftly to the bed. The Wolf's eyes were closed and he was murmuring in a thin, delirious whisper. Men seemed to be chasing him bent on taking his life. Oliver placed a hand on his chest.

"Are you Mr. Duncan?" he asked close to his ear.

The bloodless face ceased its twitchings for a second, the lids began to lift. The glassy eyes focused on Oliver.

"Get your dirty work over!" he breathed. "Kill me fast!"

"Are you Mr. Duncan?" Oliver repeated slowly, trying to hold the gaze of the wild eyes. "Answer me and—"

"Get your work done!" he whispered, his voice trembling with weakness. Suddenly he seemed to be trying to drive back the fever from his brain. "Who are you?" he whispered. "Who . . . are you? They sent Ace Daniels to get me, now you come and—"

The wild eyes gazed past Oliver's stooping body to something beyond. Oliver swung to face Dr. Nelson. In the man's plump hand was a gun.

"Do not try to draw unless you want to die," the doctor said in a businesslike voice.

The hall door behind the doctor opened and Kil Mooney came in. "What's this?" he asked sharply. "How come you're not watching the kitchen, doc?" Then he stepped

into view of Oliver Seeley. "Ah, the stranger. Was he paying a visit to the patient, doc?"

"I heard a window lift," the doctor said. "I was worried about the, er—safety of my patient."

Oliver wondered why the doctor and Mooney wasted time this way. The doctor had come back to kill Wolf and Mooney must have come to aid in disposing of the body. Kil Mooney lifted a gun from its holster and trained it on Oliver Seeley.

"I'll handle this stranger, doc," he said. "With the sheriff racing about shooting holes in the night, he hasn't time for this job. Get back to the kitchen. And, doc, if Gibbens should try to break in there to escape the posse, *get him*. The Montana House can't risk its good reputation by giving shelter to an escaped convict."

"I understand," Dr. Nelson replied.

Kil Mooney whisked Oliver's gun from its holster, patted him for extra weapons and found the under-arm hideaway.

"The left-handed draw often proves effective," he said, "especially when the victim is unaware. I carry my guns on my hips—for everyone to see. Follow the doctor down the stairs."

OLIVER obeyed. At the foot of the stairs, Dr. Nelson vanished into the kitchen. Kil Mooney marched Oliver down the long room to the bar behind which stood Handlebar Jones.

"I found the stranger about to spirit away the Wolf," Mooney told Handlebar. Then he asked if the sheriff and his men were at the stable. When Handlebar said they had Gibbens trapped there, Mooney gave his entire attention to Oliver.

"Captain Eddy is sending men

thick and fast!" he snapped. "Before we get the Wolf planted, you arrive. We like them to come fast—we get that vacant forty filled more rapidly."

Handlebar Jones had swung a rifle across the bar and trained it on Oliver's heart. "We can tell the sheriff we found his body out in the brush and that some of his men must have killed him for Gibbens."

"I'm not an Eddy agent," Oliver said quietly. "I didn't come to spirit the Wolf away, I came to kill him! My name is Oliver Seeley; I'm only a short time out of prison." He leaned toward Mooney. "Eddy is the man that put me there—through the work of the Wolf."

Mooney's eyes did not falter in their cold hate. "A smart story; did Eddy think that up for you in case we got you? I'll step outside, Handlebar, and make sure none of the posse is close. We'll tell the sheriff we fired at a sound in the brush."

Kil Mooney left, holding the door closed to a crack at his back. "It seems quiet," he said. "I'll stay out here and block anyone that should try to investigate the shot. Work fast!"

The door closed. Handlebar Jones leaned farther across the bar, his rifle ready. "Finding a body in the morning won't be out of line, with all the shooting there'll be when they close in on Gibbens. I'll see that yours is left in the right spot." His eyes glowed, his mustache twitched.

Oliver leaped for the bar, swaying aside from the aim of the gun. He realized Handlebar Jones was an expert at this job Mooney had given him, and he knew the gun would flicker to cover his heart as the trigger fell. But anything was better than dying like a rat in a trap.

He had covered half the distance

between him and the bar when Handlebar's gun roared. Oliver weaved back. Dimly he saw Handlebar's face. It was distorted, the eyes seemed about to spring from beneath their lids. Then blood flowed over the twisted face and Handlebar Jones began to slump.

Oliver leaped behind the bar and caught the rifle as it was slipping to the floor. Handlebar was dead, had died before he could direct the lead that was to kill another Eddy agent. The front door opened and Mooney came in with Nugget Smith. To them the room looked empty.

"Finished and gone!" he cried with a chuckle. "Old Handlebar improves with age."

"Shootin' that agent now was a fool thing to do!" Nugget snarled. "What if somebody sees Handlebar draggin' him off?"

"Does Handlebar usually get himself seen?" Kil Mooney asked. He was richly pleased with what he thought was Handlebar's speed in dispensing a bad job.

As they disappeared into the kitchen, Oliver Seeley ran from behind the bar to the front door. He stepped into the night with Handlebar's gun ready for action, and hurried to the post where he had left his shoes.

Who had killed Handlebar Jones? That question was burning his brain like a hot coal.

"Oh!" came a whisper. "It's me, Baldy."

OLIVER moved swiftly toward the thin sound, and found Baldy Gibbens flattened against the building.

"Your friends don't seem to like you," Baldy whispered.

"Then it was you killed Handlebar Jones!" Oliver breathed.

"It was me picked off that fellow

about to murder you. I was sorry for what I heard you say in yonder, about bein' here to kill that agent of Captain Eddy's. If you'd 'a' been on solid footing I'd 'a' never made connections with you, but when I heard you talking in there I thought we might as well team up."

"Baldy, I didn't break my promise to you—"

"We ain't got time to talk about that now. The sheriff will soon find out I've slipped through his net and be after me. There's a foot bridge across the river straight down from the kitchen. I left my horse there. Get him and ride out of the pass. The fellow that escaped with me has been killed, so I'll drop down the river a piece and get his horse."

"I've got some work to do before I leave, Baldy."

"Ol, get that job out of your system. Keep your record clean."

They began to slide along the wall toward the back of the house. Oliver decided to make Baldy think he was leaving. If he told him about the work he was doing for Captain Eddy, Baldy might insist on staying to help him. If that happened, Baldy Gibbens would be picked up by the sheriff before the night was over. They came to the window that Daniels' bullet had broken, and through which Baldy had shot Handlebar. The blind was whipping gently, for the storm was almost past. Suddenly a cry sped across the big room.

"Kil! Handlebar is here behind the bar—dead!"

The voice belonged to Nugget Smith, and Kil Mooney raced to join him at the bar.

"The snake he was guardin' got him!" Nugget snarled.

"That fellow was dead under Handlebar's sights when I stepped out the door!" Kil Mooney snapped.

"Somebody else got him!"

"The window!" Nugget cried, then his voice snuffed out. He and Kil Mooney both seemed to suddenly feel the draft from that broken glass.

Baldy Gibbens chuckled and indicated by a pressure on the arm that he wanted Oliver to follow on toward the kitchen and that trail to the foot log. When they reached the kitchen, the voice of Kil Mooney boomed out to them.

"Get to the stables and find the sheriff!" he ordered some of his men. "Tell him that Baldy Gibbens just killed a man here!"

Baldy chuckled again. "Sounded nervous, didn't he?" he asked.

CHAPTER V

BULLET RECKONING

OLIVER SEELEY had his gun in hand as he opened the door which he was certain shut away the stairway leading upward to Dr. Nelson's office. His foot struck a step and he reached out with his left hand and found a wall on both sides of him. The flight was barely wide enough for one person to ascend. Back at the kitchen, Oliver and Baldy had separated, and Oliver had let Baldy think he was crossing the river to find the horse hidden there. To allow Baldy to mix into things tonight would probably mean his death.

He found the door at the top of the flight of stairs unlocked. He inched it open silently and stepped into the small outer office. The lamp on the table was now out and light came from only the inner office. Oliver stepped toward this door, the gun he had snatched from Handlebar ready for battle.

It was so still he could feel the silence against his ears. An inner sense told him that danger lay be-

yond that gaping door.

He pushed the door open wider. A lamp was on the table near the bed, and a bottle with its cork beside it. But the bed was empty! Oliver stepped into the room. There, holding himself erect by the foot of the bed, stood the Wolf. He was almost fully clothed, even to a holster sagging on his hip, but his eyes were feverish and wild. Those wild eyes noted the gun Oliver held, and the reeling brain flashed a warning. The Wolf's gaunt frame stiffened and he reached toward his weapon. Oliver lowered his gun, and as he did so he felt a presence behind him. He spun, trying to throw the barrel of his gun upward, but he was too late. A club crashed against his head and he began to sink to the floor.

In the weaving picture before him he saw the dumpy figure of the doctor. He thought dully that the round face was like a cannon ball with eyes. The doctor was speaking rapidly to the Wolf. Oliver could not quite catch the words because of the thumping at the side of his head. The doctor had the Wolf by the arm, dragging him toward the outer office. Then Oliver did hear the doctor say:

"Listen, listen hard! Answer me! Understand, answer me! *Are you Mr. Duncan?*"

Duncan! Oliver tried to remember what was important about that name.

"See, I'm putting your gun in your fingers," the doctor was whispering to the Wolf. "*Are you Mr. Duncan?*"

Duncan! Oliver remembered—it was the password Captain Eddy had given him. He tried to speak, but his lips were too stiff. The fog was clearing before his eyes, but he still could not move. He tried to call

and only a groan came. The doctor had the Wolf at the door, then he drew back.

"There's someone coming up the stairs," he said. "Stay quiet in here—very quiet. I'll handle them."

Dr. Nelson stepped into the outer office just as the man coming up the stairs opened the door. It was Nugget Smith, and his voice came in a snarl. "Why ain't you in the kitchen helpin' to guard the house against Gibbens?" he cried. "Seems you're mighty concerned over your patient. Maybeso more than in obeyin' Mooney's orders. Mooney told me to take over the patient. He thought I might have some medicine that'd do him good."

"Nugget, the patient is dead."

Dr. Nelson's voice came smoothly. Oliver felt the blood warming in his arms and hands and he was able to pick his gun from the floor. He began to rise to his knees. He understood the play at last—Dr. Nelson was the agent he had been sent to assist. Nelson had made the same mistake as he, Oliver. Both of them thought the Wolf was the other agent.

"Dead!" Nugget Smith whispered. He laughed a little.

Then Oliver heard the voice of Kil Mooney. Evidently Mooney had come up the stairs from the dining room and had entered the outer office from the hall. Mooney, too, was interested in the welfare of the patient.

"The Wolf is dead!" Nugget informed him. "Now maybe the doc will stick at his job of guardin' the kitchen."

"You and Nelson will guard these front windows," Kil Mooney said. "The sheriff sent me word just now that he has Baldy Gibbens surrounded in the strip of brush down from the porch."

Oliver began to rise. He had crawled to the wall and was testing the strength of his knees gingerly, for he knew a breath of sound would spoil things for Dr. Nelson. He was straightening when he sensed a movement behind him. He looked up to see the Wolf gliding toward the door, his wild eyes blazing. Before Oliver could stay him the Wolf had turned the knob.

SHOTS burst in the outer office as Oliver leaped. The Wolf, who was in the doorway, firing wildly, suddenly collapsed.

"Dead, was he!" screamed Nugget Smith. "Doc, we've been suspicious of the way you've stuck to the Wolf. He's dead now and you soon will be!"

Oliver sprang over the still form of the Wolf. As he lit in the doorway his gun roared. Nugget Smith had heard his move and spun from the doctor to face him. Nelson was standing with his right arm soaked in blood, his gun blasted from his hand. Oliver pressed trigger, and then felt Nugget's lead graze his cheek when he swerved to trigger again. Nugget Smith fell forward over his gun as he fired a final shot.

Oliver had sensed the crumbling of Nugget and turned his weapon on Kil Mooney. For that first second Mooney had left the active work to Nugget, holding the doctor out of the battle. Now as he saw his gunman go down, Mooney leaped backward into the hall, both guns blazing. Dr. Nelson dropped to the floor for his gun, but Mooney was gone before he could fire. Oliver followed to see him vanish into a bedroom.

Jumping back into the office and pulling the door shut, Oliver spoke to the doctor who was now on his knees, gun in his left hand.

"Are you Mr. Duncan?" he snapped.

The doctor's round face was swept by surprise. He did not answer.

"I figured the Wolf was Duncan," Oliver said rapidly. "Then I heard you trying to get the password out of him. *Are you Mr. Duncan?*"

Moisture broke on the doctor's round face. "Martha is my sister," he said, and then he took time for a round of sharp cussing. "You should have let Nugget finish me," he snapped. "After that crack I gave you on the head."

A groan came from the doorway and Oliver turned to see the Wolf sitting with his back braced against the wall.

"Give me my gun," the man whispered. "I got work to do! My father and brother were murdered in this house!"

Dr. Nelson spoke to him quietly, telling him to wait until they could all strike together. He tried with cool words to still the flickering brain, but the Wolf kept whispering feverishly. Oliver worked to check the flow of blood from the doctor's wound, and in those few moments Nelson told him something of what had happened.

"I slipped up to help the Wolf get away and found him dressed. He hadn't been wounded fatally by Daniels' bullet, so I have him a heart stimulant. Then you came. It doesn't look like this last shot he got will kill him either. The three of us can hold out here until we get word to the sheriff."

At that instant, shooting burst out in the brush beyond the porch.

"Gibbens just leaped onto the veranda!" somebody cried. "Sheriff, Gibbens is trying for the house!"

There came the sound of running feet in the hall as though Kil Mooney were retreating to the din-

ing room instead of staying upstairs to guard a window. Oliver leaped to put out the lamp in the inner room, then ran to the porch window and threw it up.

"Baldy!" he called softly as a rain of lead swept the end of the house. "Baldy, in here!"

Baldy Gibbens threw himself into the room and dropped to the floor. "I thought I told you to get out of here," he snarled at Oliver.

"And I thought I was keeping you from mixing into this. I wanted you—"

"Who's in here with you?" The whisper was thin as a steel blade.

"One of Captain Eddy's agents. I was lying to Mooney—I'm working for Eddy."

"Good," Baldy Gibbens said. "Who is this dead man on the floor?"

"Nugget Smith. I had to kill him to—"

"Good! Now you fellows get to your business and I'll get to mine. It wouldn't look right, Ol, for you to be caught helping an escaped convict."

"There's no cinch any of us will get out alive," Dr. Nelson snapped. "Mooney knows now that we're agents. He'll have the sheriff set to blast us off the earth at first sight."

Just then the voice of the sheriff roared up the stairway from the dining room. "Gibbens, give yourself up! I got the house surrounded. Come down the stairs with your hands up."

"I'll talk to him," Dr. Nelson whispered. "Maybe it'd be best for you to give up, Gibbens—it looks like that or death. Gibbens?"

"Baldy?" Oliver whispered.

The shooting had ceased out to the front and the room was very still. Baldy Gibbens was gone!

THE Wolf had gotten to his feet and was stumbling across the little room. He found the door leading to the outside stairway and opened it.

"Get away from there!" snapped Dr. Nelson. "Listen to me! Get away!"

The Wolf was muttering wildly. Suddenly his voice rose to a thin scream and he plunged down the dark stairway. For a step or two he held to his feet, and his gun blasted at an imaginary enemy. Then his knees gave and he fell.

Oliver was kneeling by the window where Baldy Gibbens had been, as the Wolf plunged down into gunfire from the guards of the passage. The man's wild scream still echoed in the little office as shouts of vic-



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tory came up from the bottom of the stairs.

"We've got Gibbens!" was the cry.

Oliver's fingers were moist and sticky from feeling his way along the floor. He now knew Baldy had been wounded.

"Get to dickering with the sheriff, Nelson!" he snapped over his shoulder. "I'm following Gibbens—he'll need me."

Without waiting for Dr. Nelson to reply, Oliver slid through the window to the veranda. Under cover of the excitement around by the stairs where the Wolf had been taken, Oliver slid down a post to the muddy earth. The sheriff's voice was booming out as he raced toward the spot where the guards still thought they had Baldy Gibbens.

"Don't shoot!" he thundered. "I want Gibbens alive!"

Oliver moved along the wall of the house to the window with the broken glass. This excitement might give Baldy a chance to escape, but Oliver did not think he would avail himself of the opportunity. Gibbens could have been out of the pass before now had he chosen to go. Something was holding him here at the Montana House. Oliver looked into the long room. The sheriff was almost to the bar on his way to reach the supposed Baldy Gibbens.

From the shadows of the stairway, Kil Mooney stepped out to follow the lawman. "We don't want a murderer like Gibbens alive for another second!" he snarled.

Sheriff Wood plunged out the front door and the still active wind banged the door behind him. Kil Mooney stepped into the thin mist of light sent out from a lamp on the bar, and Oliver saw he had his

gun drawn. His body was rounded forward until the black coat seemed to be buttoned upon a huge vulture. He was hurrying after the sheriff and did not see the man that lifted from behind a table. The man was Baldy Gibbens.

"Want to make certain I'm dead, huh?" Gibbens asked. "You left the job to one of your henchmen before, and I lived—to spend ten years in jail!"

Flame leaped from the hands of both men, but from Kil Mooney's there was only a single spurt. Baldy Gibbens fired again as the long figure was crumbling. As the spray of light struck the gunman's face, Oliver saw the bitter hate die out, saw a terrible grayness mask the thin features.

SHERIFF WOOD was racing for the front door to investigate the firing in the room as Oliver Seeley blocked his path. A light had been flashed on the Wolf and the posse knew that Gibbens was still at large.

"Halt!" Oliver was so close to the sheriff he could feel his breath. "Hold your men back, Wood, if you want to stop this bloodshed. Baldy Gibbens just collapsed from wounds—I'm seeing that none of Mooney's men kill him."

"I want Baldy Gibbens alive," Sheriff Wood snapped. "I want to know what was calling him to the Montana House."

"So do I, sheriff," came the calm voice of Dr. Nelson, and the dumpy man stepped from the shadows near the end of the house. "Sheriff, that man with a gun in your middle is one of Eddy's agents; I'm also an agent. Call your men off and let's go in and see Gibbens."

The sheriff ordered his men back and he and Nelson and Oliver

walked into the Montana House. Baldy Gibbens had slid to the floor, but his back was against the bar and his steel-gray eyes were cool.

"I wished you'd let them come blasting in, Ol," he whispered as Oliver knelt beside him. "I'd 'a' rather gone out that way than be taken back to prison."

Dr. Nelson looked at the still form of Kil Mooney. "You seem to have attended to that business you mentioned earlier, Gibbens," he said.

"Yes," Baldy replied. "My business is all attended to. Tell Captain Eddy that Handlebar Jones, Nugget Smith and Kil Mooney are dead—only he knew them by different names. Tell him that Baldy Gibbens has talked—talked in lead." His head began to sink to his chest.

"Carry him up to my office," Nelson said to Oliver and the sheriff. "I'll get some hot water from the kitchen. Sheriff, the mystery of the Montana House is solved. I'd been staying here for thirty days, and tonight Mooney trusted me with my first job—to kill the Wolf as I removed the bullet. I wouldn't be kicking now if Ol Seeley hadn't slipped a slug of lead into Nugget Smith after Smith found out I was trying to sneak the Wolf away. We know a lot, sheriff, but we still don't know where the men murdered under this roof are buried."

"We soon will!" the sheriff growled. "The Wolf wounded one of Mooney's henchmen as he tumbled down the stairs. I'll not be long making him talk."

DOC," Oliver said the next morning as they sat beside Baldy Gibbens' bed, "Captain Eddy told me he had promised Gibbens a pardon if he'd talk. He's talked."

Dr. Nelson smiled. "And mighty straight. You can count on that pardon, for Eddy had done some work on it before he promised Baldy."

Oliver Seeley looked into the eyes of the wounded man. They seemed peaceful and a bit faded. "How about us teaming up?" he asked. "That five years we spent together makes us sort of acquainted."

Baldy smiled. "You'd make a good pard, Ol," he said.

"And he makes a good agent," Nelson said. "Both of you see Captain Eddy after the pardon goes through. I see the sheriff coming back from that ride he took into the hills. Let's get down and see what he's got to add to the unraveling of the mystery connected with this shack."

Sheriff Wood had little to tell, but it covered the entire story. The prisoner he had induced to talk had told him where to find the plot of ground where the victims robbed at the Montana House were buried.

"It is marshy," he said gruffly, "and hid away back in a spot where the river loops across a willow flat. It would be easy spading."

"What did they do with the mules?" Oliver asked.

"They have a canyon back in the mountains that opens to a wide meadow a couple of miles up. They keep them fenced there until the law has stopped looking, then drive them across the other side and sell them in Idaho."

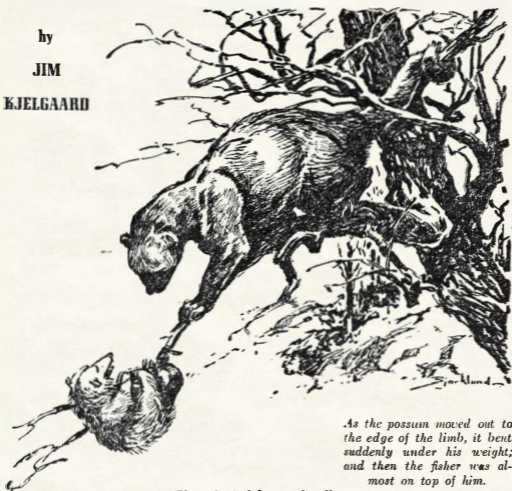
"They were smart," Nelson said. "They got two of our men, and they'd 'a' got me but for Seeley. Sheriff, shake hands with Eddy's new man, then come upstairs and have a look at the patient. I figure Captain Eddy will be hiring him, too, in a short time."

THE POSSUM

by

JIM

KJELGAARD



As the possum moved out to the edge of the limb, it bent suddenly under his weight; and then the fisher was almost on top of him.

Threatened by a deadly foe, the little possum would need all his wily skill to save himself

THE river was a white-capped, racing thing that flung itself down the rock-walled canyon. The possum that was following its course upstream halted and looked toward the water. Then he turned his grayish-white head and, by the light of the bright stars that glittered in the sky, looked at the cliff to his right. With all the studied attention of a

born climber he studied its fine and its weak points. He walked to the bottom of the cliff and peered up.

A sudden cold blast from the north set him shivering. The possum ducked his head and stared back toward the river—the direction from which the cold had come. He reached forth to scratch at a frozen clod on the canyon's side.

Another icy blast swept in from the river and the possum humped his back. Winter was coming, was almost here, and the possum knew that he had to find a suitable den or freeze.

Rearing against the cliff, he hooked his front paws over a rock and drew himself up. Catching hold of little frozen lumps of shale, he climbed ten feet farther. Some trailing vines helped him there, and he continued up the almost perpendicular wall. It was painfully slow work.

A relic of the dim past, his whole life was guided by only three steadfast rules. Eat, keep warm, and, when cornered by an enemy, feign death. But the fact that he had survived and that he continued to survive, proved the merit of his three rules.

Two hundred and fifty feet up on the cliff the possum balanced precariously on a bit of rock and looked down. The river rushed by beneath him, and the narrow path he had followed beside it was no more than a thin, wavering ribbon from this height. He curled his hairless tail beneath his body, buried his pointed nose in his flank, and tried to sleep. But the biting wind was blowing almost steadily now, and he was too uncomfortable to sleep. The possum climbed philosophically on.

The cliff here was thickly plastered with trailing pine, long tough vines that swept over the rocks, twined and intertwined to form a solid blanket. The possum grasped it with his paws, and climbed steadily until he had pulled himself over the top of the four-hundred-foot cliff. Safely over, he turned once more to look back down. It had taken him an hour to make the climb.

What the possum could not know

was that it had taken him nearly a hundred years to reach this place. His ancestors had ridden across the plains and over the Rockies in the covered wagon of a Tennessee mountaineer who, willing to dare the new world with all its dangers, still had not wanted to lose contact with everything he had loved in the old. He had met the new world's dangers—a young Umatilla chief and twenty warriors—and had died with his gun roaring defiance at them. The two possums he had brought with him had set up housekeeping in a hollow tree near the burned cabin. This one, the hundredth generation, was only a hundred miles from where the cabin had stood. But he still clung to the tried and proven rules of his ancestors.

The wind was lashing the trees now, bending their branches and forcing them to play the weird, wild music of coming winter. The possum wandered a little way into the great, shaggy-trunked firs on top of the cliff. He came back to the top of the cliff and followed that. Not often were dens of the type that he must have available in such a forest. What he needed was a hollow stub, or a hole in the ground, something into which the cold could not send all its forces.

The possum peered back over the cliff, wondering mildly if it would be the part of wisdom to go back down to the river again. But he hadn't liked it down there. Skipping over the top of the water the wind had drenched him with cold spray. Besides there were no trees down there, and he always felt more comfortable when there were trees to climb.

FIVE hundred feet farther on he came to a thorn tree, a wind-lashed, storm-twisted thing that overhung the canyon. But it had

borne a good crop of fruit. Little red thorn apples, already raided by chipmunks and squirrels, rabbits and birds, lay thickly on the ground. The possum ate his fill, champing his jaws and smacking in satisfaction because the food helped warm him. When he had eaten all he wanted, he left the tree and continued on.

The path along the top of the cliff proved a lucky choice. Scarcely a hundred feet from the thorn tree he found exactly the den he had been looking for. It was a fallen tree, the end of which still clung to the stump that had at one time held it erect. A small opening in one end bulged wide in the center. The possum crawled into it, and saw a second opening through a long branch that sloped to the ground. But the hollow tree was dry and warm, filled with leaves. The possum curled up in them and, warm for the first time in nearly twenty-four hours, went to sleep.

An hour later a slight noise at the end of the tree awakened him. The possum sat up and listened. The noise was repeated, and there was wafted into the tree the strong, rank smell of a hunting fisher. The possum crawled down the branch to the ground. He had followed the first two of his three rules. But the fisher did not have him cornered, and it was not yet time to pretend death. The possum made toward a small pine, started to climb it.

But he heard the fisher behind him and knew that it was coming fast.

The possum moved slowly on the ground. But, once started to ascend the small pine toward which he had fled, he climbed swiftly and almost gracefully. Twelve feet from the ground a wind-tossed branch swung on a little upward slant, and the possum crawled out on it. When he

came to the narrow end, he went more slowly. Finally, almost at the very end of the smallest needle-clothed twigs, he halted.

The twigs bent beneath his weight, but the possum had a secure grip with all four paws and his tail was curled about another twig. He felt half-safe, for since time immemorial his kind had found refuge in the trees.

But at the same time there was a half-feeling of insecurity and peril. The possum's remote ancestors, the two that had crossed the plains in the covered wagon, had survived in this wild country partly because they were lucky and partly because they had stayed close to the burned cabin—and no predatory enemy had ventured near it.

Little by little they had learned that this land was vastly different from that to which they had been accustomed. There were swift-striking, vicious things here, fisher, marten, cougar, lynxes, that made a tree no longer an absolutely safe haven. Each succeeding generation had learned the same lesson, and the possum was worried because he knew that the fisher could get up into the tree.

The stars shed a wan, yellow glow over the top of the forest and palely lit up the deep chasm down which the river raged. The possum peered into the gap, saw and faintly heard the rushing water far below him. Then he curled his four paws a little tighter about the four twigs they gripped and took a fresh hold with his tail. The fisher was running up the tree.

The possum saw him come to the branch and drift out on it, a fleeting black shadow in the shadowy night. The branch bent, and he halted. White fangs flashed as his teeth parted in a snarl. The possum

looked at him once more, a sinuous, black whip of an animal that could flash into and out of these trees with all the agility of a squirrel. Then he buried his face in the twigs and hung grimly on.

He knew that the fisher looked terrible, but could not know that he was even more terrible than he looked. He was a fearless thing, unafraid of anything else that roamed the woods, capable of attacking man himself.

THE possum moved a little farther out. But the limb was very slender here, and already bent by his weight. The fisher looked toward the ground, saw no intervening limbs to offer a foothold if he should fall. He drew back a little, staring alternately at the possum and at the ground. Twelve feet was not a long fall, but he had no mind to go down if he could help it. His white fangs shone in the starlight as he snarled again.

He crawled a little farther out on the limb, and it bent suddenly toward the ground. The possum tried to take a firmer grip on his precarious perch, but the fisher had accidentally found out how to dislodge this strange beast without suffering the inconvenience of falling himself. He dug his powerful claws into the branch then suddenly straightened his body. The limb jerked, and bent again as the fisher tensed. He increased the tempo, and the limb whipped madly up and down.

The possum's left front paw slipped from the twig on which it had a grip. He snatched wildly for and found another hold. But it was only a bunch of needles, and they pulled out. His right front paw was shaken from its hold, and he hung head downward with only his two back paws and his curled tail to hold

him. As the wildly lashing limb gathered momentum, those holds were broken and the possum fell.

His fat body landed with a soft thump on the needle-carpeted ground, but immediately he arose and started running. But he had run scarcely ten feet when he was aware of something else before him. The possum stopped uncertainly, saw the thing that crouched beside a tree. It was a lynx with a bearded face and tufted ears—the fisher was not the only beast of prey abroad tonight.

Like a huge, stalking tomcat the lynx crept forward. The possum turned, opened his mouth and displayed his flat, pointless teeth in the closest thing he could manage to a snarl. It was no use, the lynx didn't even hesitate. Obviously the time had come for the possum to fall back on the last of his three rules.

He sprawled limply on the ground, made not the slightest motion even when the lynx seized him by the scruff of the neck and swung him into the air. The lynx started trotting away. Then, suddenly, he dropped the possum and covered it with one paw. A snarl rippled from his throat, and from out of the darkness an answering snarl floated.

The fisher had come to claim his prey.

FOR a bare moment they faced each other, two great personages of the wilderness, two that most others feared, now ready to tear at each other's throat. The fisher arched his back, fluffed his tail, and a hoarse mutter of indignation rolled continuously from his throat. The lynx answered with snarls, and waited for the fisher to begin the attack.

He began it, a black ball of slashing fangs and ripping claws driven

by a fury that recognized no odds and granted no equal. Straight at the snarling lynx he drove, and his two front paws simultaneously raked both sides of the big cat's face while his teeth found and left a bloody gash in the lynx's forehead. Then he withdrew to make ready for another attack.

But he took his own wounds with him. The lynx had kept one paw on the possum. His other had worked like the animated streak of light it was. His curved claw had found the fisher's flank, entered there and ripped a strip of glossy black hide. For a moment the fisher's wound, just back of his left fore leg, was a dull red. Then it filled with blood.

The silence that followed was more deadly and more pregnant with menace than any snarls could be. The fisher had wanted only the possum that he had found. It hadn't occurred to him—and wouldn't have made any difference if it had—that the lynx had caught the possum and had an equally just claim to it.

But the painful wound in his side roused the fisher's always uncertain temper to the peaks of fury. Now, in addition to taking the possum, he would punish the thing that had dared defy him. And, like the stout-hearted buccaneer he was, he carried the fight to the enemy.

They clenched like a pair of wrestlers. But theirs was a deadly game, one that must end in death. The fisher rose to clasp both front paws around the lynx's neck, his jaws dived in for a throat hold and began to grind. The lynx snarled his anger and fear, and carried both the fisher and possum with him when he retreated a few steps. The possum was his. He would hold on to it as long as he could.

The possum lay limply. His eyes were closed, his muscles relaxed, and his head dragged on the ground when the lynx retreated. Then he opened his eyes. And, because he saw a turn in the battle, he kept them open.

The fisher had swung his hind quarters from the ground and was raking the lynx's breast and belly. His black legs worked like pistons, and ripped fur from every place they struck. His jaws dug deeper, and the lynx's breath was rattling in his throat. But the top of the fisher's head was a bloody mass where the lynx had chewed and bitten it. His side was ripped and torn.

The possum wriggled suddenly, gave all the strength in his tough body to a quick sideways turn. The lynx's paw slipped, and hit the ground beside him. The lynx raised his paw again, desperately determined to keep the thing for which he was fighting. But the fisher was boring in with redoubled ferocity. The lynx reared, called both front paws into play. But the fisher's grinding teeth at last found the jugular vein. The lynx wilted like a dying weed, and with the fisher clinging to him tumbled backward into the canyon.

The possum walked slowly to the edge and peered over. He saw the locked bodies separate in mid-air, but both struck the rocks four hundred feet below at almost exactly the same instant. They bounded, and the river seemed to open a hungry mouth as it received them. The possum muttered his wonder at animals whose ways of living were so complicated that it brought them to such ends.

Then he returned to the hollow stump, crawled in where it was warm and dry, and went to sleep.

THE END.



Gary saw the flame flare from Kearn's gun, and felt the heat of the slug against him as he fired.

Gary Blake knew he was in a tight when the powerful Breece-Finny syndicate said, "School's out!" But Gary had been hired to do a job of teaching, and he allowed he'd do it, either with—

BOOKS OR BULLETS

by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

CHAPTER I

TEACHER FOUR-EYES

THE first day Gary Blake clanged the bell of the Mesquite schoolhouse he sensed trouble in the job he had taken. He stood behind his desk, near the slate blackboard, and watched the youths who were to be his pupils straggle into the room.

There was no expression in his face to hint the sharp run of his thoughts. He was quietly relaxed. He wasn't a tall man, and the whippy compactness of his body was stunted by the loose coat he wore. His eyes were coolly bright behind horn-rimmed glasses.

The youths filed into the room, and there was unruly derision in their stares. That same glint of blunt mockery was in the eyes of those who lined the walls and packed the open doorway.

Gary Blake thought, "They're out to get me first off."

There was more in this than the antagonism of youths who resented the confinement of seven months of school lessons. Hostility rolled around Gary Blake like an invisible wave from both the students and their elders. He had been hired to teach the Mesquite school, but he wasn't wanted. They would drive him out if they could, just like they

had driven out the last schoolmaster. Their stares were as plain as a blunt statement.

A tow-headed boy of eight snickered. "Teacher four-eyes!"

A rough-bearded miner—one of the key men employed by the Breece-Finny syndicate—was in the back of the room. He was the boy's father and echoed that snicker. "Jack, that ain't no way to talk to the big man."

A thin rise of heat colored Gary Blake's face, and he centered the towhead with a level glance. "Your name is Jack Winger, I reckon."

"Yep."

"You don't want to start off havin' trouble with me, do you?"

"Yep."

The boy's father snickered again. Anger gouged Gary Blake. He covered the students with a slow glance, ignoring their fathers. When he spoke to his pupils it was as though he spoke to grown men. His voice was low and quiet.

"I was hired to teach you folks some of the things you ought to know. Some of these things come out of books, and some of them don't. It looks like I'll have to start off by teaching you those things that don't come out of books."

He halted his glance on a yellow-haired youth slouching near the towhead. This was Tobe Winger, Jack's older brother, he knew from the two days he had spent drifting around town. Tobe was no more than fifteen, but he had height that would tower above Gary Blake's five feet eight, and he had a bony frame that already was beginning to pack on a man's weight. Tobe wore a battered felt hat pulled low over eyes that held bald contempt.

"Tobe, the first thing you've got to learn is that a gent don't wear his

hat indoors," Gary Blake said gently.

"I'm wearin' mine, ain't I?" the boy jeered.

"Take it off," Blake said evenly.

Stubborn defiance knotted in Tobe Winger's stare. "Pa says if I ever want to do anything, to hell with anyone who don't want me to," he flipped back.

Jake Winger snickered from the back of the room.

"Your pa isn't teaching this school," Blake answered. He rounded the corner of his desk, and halted in front of the yellow-haired boy. "Are you taking that hat off, or do I take it off for you?"

"Don't lay hands on that lad!" the miner called out roughly.

Blake didn't lift his tone. "Shut up, Jake." There was cold anger behind his words. "Are you taking it off, Tobe?"

JAKE WINGER flared an oath. "Don't do it, Tobe, unless you want to. I'll teach that runt if he tries to make you."

Gary Blake lifted his glance with slow temper. He took off his glasses, and put them carefully on the desk behind him.

"Looks like I'll have to open this school by teaching manners to these kids' fathers," he said coldly. "You're inside this room, Jake, and you've got your hat on. Take it off."

A glint of rough eagerness soared in the miner's eyes. "Listen to the banty crow!" he brayed. A harsh laugh of derision rolled through the room.

Blake paced down the aisle until he stood before the big man. There was brute power in the miner's heavy shoulders, the strength of a rock crusher in his long arms, but that didn't halt Gary Blake.

"I said take your hat off while you're in here, Jake," he said softly.

"Maybe you'd like to do it for me," the man sneered.

Blake didn't hesitate. He jerked off the miner's hat, and that same instant Winger swore, smashed out a ponderous round-arm blow. But Blake wasn't there to catch the punch. He was like a shadow, so swift did he move. He bobbed his head under the blow, and the momentum of the miner's swing spun Winger half around, facing the opposite direction.

Blake slid in close, quick and balanced, and what he lacked in strength he made up in leverage. He straight-armed his hand against the miner's back, then planted his boot hard against the seat of the man's pants. Winger went through the doorway as though kicked by a steel spring. He hit the ground on his hands and knees, rolled over, flaring out his fury. He lurched to his feet, but Gary Blake didn't give him a chance to get set.

It was cool and methodical, the way Blake did it. He slid in close, and rocked the man with short, straight blows. Winger stumbled back off balance, and Blake prowled after him, crowding hard. His blows traveled only scant inches, but the twist and jerk of his shoulders hammered a surprising strength into his fists. He slammed the miner's thick middle once, twice, three times, kinking the man forward and chopping all the air out of him. He tilted Winger's square jaw up with a curving left, then crossed a right that made a fleshy splat of sound against the shelf of the miner's chin.

Winger went down as though his legs had been chopped out from under him. He didn't move after he hit the ground. The rest of the men had been boiling out of the school-

house door, but the sight of Winger falling halted them. One of them broke out a hoarse oath of amazement.

"Damn if I ever thought I'd live to see that! And by a skinny runt, at that!"

Gary Blake turned, raking the men with anger-clouded eyes. His voice came thin and cold, cutting them like a whip.

"All right, clear out, all of you! I've got a school to run, and I don't need the help of any of you."

The voice of one of the miners followed him as he strode into the schoolhouse.

"Don't think you've seen the end of this, Blake. We never had any book learnin', and our kids don't need it. Before we're through, you'll wish this schoolhouse never had been built."

CHAPTER II

BOOKS OR BULLETS

THE second day of school Blake could feel the pressure piling up against him. The town was openly hostile, what he could see of it. Surely there must be something more behind all this, thought Blake, than just a bunch of ignorant miners who had no sympathy with book learning. The citizens that favored him kept noticeably out of sight, giving the street to the miners who worked in the tunnels of the Ophar and Ladybug mines. They stared at him as he went by, sullen and sardonic, and if he felt the heat of their hatred he gave no sign of it.

They seemed oddly derisive, he thought, as though waiting for something they alone knew was coming.

As he went past Tom Honand's harness shop, he heard the old leather worker's guarded call of

warning. "It's Tracy Shane today, teacher."

Gary Blake strode on as though he had heard nothing to drive that knife-blade chill into him. So they were throwing Tracy Shane against him! First they had used fists, and now they were turning to guns. Tracy Shane was the killer who posed as a guard for the Ophar-Ladybug mining syndicate.

It was a thing that scraped rough and warm along Blake's nerves. He hadn't wanted trouble, but he was getting it. Getting it with a quick ruthlessness that tightened his mouth and brought forgotten thoughts out of the core of his mind. It halted him in front of the general store, and he stood there a moment on the plank walk, undecided, weighing everything carefully.

He could find only one answer. He had been hired by the county commissioners to run a school that the mining men didn't want. The other schoolmaster had been chased out the first day, and now the miners were sending Tracy Shane to drive Blake out. And Tracy Shane never worked unless he had a gun in his hand.

Blake could feel the sultry hatred of the miners as he turned abruptly and strode into Allenby's general store. Burt Allenby came limping along the counter toward him, and there was sharp interest, a glint of worry in the man's faded eyes.

"You're the new schoolteacher, I reckon." The store owner's tone was friendly, troubled. "All I got to say is—"

He never finished it. The scrape of heavy boots jerked his glance to the door, and he closed his mouth like a trap. Gary Blake turned slowly around. Two of the Ophar miners stood just inside the doorway, grim-eyed and silent.

Blake said, thinly mocking, "Keeping tab on me, boys?"

The miners didn't answer, but a flush of anger darkened their faces. Blake grinned, and swung back to the counter.

"That Colt up there," he said coolly. "I'd like to buy it. Add the belt and holster, too."

Alarm widened the store owner's eyes. His glance flicked to the miners, then whipped back to Blake. "You're a schoolteacher, Blake," he said hoarsely. "What do you need with a gun?"

"Never can tell."

"But dang it, man! What do you know about usin' one of them things?"

There was a trace of bitterness in Gary Blake's smile. "A man picks up things here and there. Are you refusing to sell me that Colt, Allenby?"

"No, but—" Allenby hesitated.

One of the miners warned harshly, "This ain't no scab on your nose, Burt."

Temper flared in the store owner's eyes. "To hell with that!" he said hoarsely. "You Ophar men have run this town long enough, but you can't scare me out of warning this man what he's up against." He looked at the schoolteacher. "They've sicked Tracy Shane on you, Blake. Strap on a gun, and they'll be digging a grave for you before sundown. All Shane wants is an excuse to throw his cutters."

Without expression, Gary Blake laid his money down on the counter. "That the right price, Burt?"

Allenby stared at him intently, then shrugged his thin shoulders. "It's your funeral," he said. "You've had your warning."

One of the miners growled grimly. "We'll be seein' you, Allenby."

GARY BLAKE strapped on the gun belt, adjusted the holster on his lean thigh, and loaded the Colt. He seated the gun in its pouch, and there was something bleak in the slow swing of his stare to the miners.

"Don't do anything you'll regret, gents," he said softly. "It's books or bullets from now on. I brought my books with me when I hired out here, and now I've got the bullets. If you've got any sense, you'll jump to the safe side of the fence and stay there."

A miner snorted as Blake went out the door. "A fool and his nerve!" he sneered.

Gary Blake didn't look around. There was something about him as he turned up the street that made him no longer an ordinary schoolteacher. The change was not visible to watching eyes, except for the gun he now wore.

"So the banty growed up and sprouted a hogleg!" a man hooted derisively.

And yet the change was there, cocking his nerves and sharpening his senses. He was like a cat on the prowl as he moved along the plank walk, testing each shadowed window and doorway with his flicking glance. The first shadow of bitterness that had touched his mouth was gone, and his lips were flat and hard. It was as though he had reverted to something he used to be, and he knew grimly that was how it was.

The parting words of a Wyoming sheriff came out of a forgotten corner of his mind.

"Your turning schoolteacher is a good thing, Gary, and I'm all for it. This country needs someone to start the kids off right. Only one of your reasons for turning teacher won't work. You say you're tired of

fighting, but there are some things a man can't settle with book learnin'. You'll find that out some day."

And Gary Blake was finding that out now. Danger was waiting for him on the top of the schoolhouse hill, and he felt that old surge of wildness stir through him. He tried to analyze it, and then realized there was nothing to analyze. It was elemental, something rubbed off the thin veneer that made a gentleman out of a fighting man. That thin veneer had gone from Gary Blake in the short space of minutes, and he felt no surprise, no regret.

There was nothing complicated about it. It all tapered down to one grim fact: a killer was waiting at the schoolhouse to drive him away from an honest job, and he was going to meet that killer. That was all there was to it.

The hill bulged a hundred feet above the outskirts of the town, making a knob on the end of the ridge that split the middle of the valley. Blake paused as he topped the last barren pitch.

Behind him the town was quiet, grimly waiting. Below and to his right were the Ophar-Ladybug holdings, the tunnels and gallows-frames, the ugly heaps of slag spilled by the iron cars from the copper smelter.

To the left of the ridge were the iron roofs, the hoists, and latticed gallows-frames of the small independent mine operators. Silence rolled against Blake from all sides. Scattered men were working up the slopes of the hill, tense and expectant. Blake smiled thinly. They knew what was coming. Some of them were eager for it; most of them didn't want it but were afraid to do anything. For the first time Blake began to sense the iron grip the Ophar-Ladybug syndicate had clamped on the county. It put a

bleak glint in the glance he shifted toward the schoolhouse.

A crowd was there, mostly syndicate men, flanking the walls of the frame building, and Blake knew instantly word had preceded him that he was packing a gun. Blake could pick the syndicate men from the others by the virulent glitter of mirth in their stares. One of them snickered as Blake shifted toward the school.

"All fanged up and ready to bite! Beats all how a banty can figure he's man-sized once he's strapped on a gun."

TRACY SHANE stood near the school door, and Blake wrapped his attention around that man. Tall and stringy, Shane was oddly like a huge cat, with balanced danger in every line of his body. His eyes were unblinking and tawny, glinting cruel mirth. His smile was a frozen twist of thin lips, and contempt dragged through his biting drawl.

"You been readin' your own books too much, teacher. A man don't learn how to throw a gun with mail-order lessons. You picked a quick way to commit suicide, mister."

A dozen paces separated the two men, and Blake shortened that distance with slow, poised strides.

"You worrying about my health?" he murmured. It was a trick he had learned, holding a man's eyes and keeping him talking, and he knew Tracy Shane's breed. Once he hesitated or showed a sign of weakness, the killer would make his play. So he crowded the gunman with his voice and with the impact of his stare, playing for time by keeping Shane's thoughts off balance.

"Who sent you here, Shane?" he went on. No more than ten paces separated them now.

Derision flamed in the gunman's eyes. "You think you can talk yourself out of this, teacher-man?"

"I'm not trying to. Afraid to tell who sent you, Shane?" The distance had shortened to eight paces.

"Hell, no, I'm not afraid. It's no secret. The syndicate sent me—Joe Breece and Harv Finny."

Seven paces, six. "Why?" Blake pressed softly.

"You know damn well why!" Kill lust was beginning to cloud the man's eyes. His hands were sinking almost imperceptibly toward his guns.

"To shut up this school?" Blake goaded.

"Keno!" Shane sneered. "Go to the head of the class, four-eyes."

"To drive me out of town?"

Cocked nerves were beginning to shake the killer's fingers, pull the slack out of his muscles. "Don't come no closer, teacher-man!" he rasped.

Five paces, four. "To drive me out of town?" Blake repeated softly.

Shane laughed harshly. "Smart as a tack, ain't you?" he jeered. "Yeah, to drive you out!"

"You figure to do all that alone?" Blake's question was low-pitched.

Amazement soared in the killer's eyes. "Alone?" he brayed. "You think I need help to handle you?" His amazement changed abruptly to something black and murderous. "I'll drive you out or kill you!" he cursed.

"Or maybe get yourself killed," Blake said softly. It was a statement that hit the gunman like the jolt of a fist. Coming so coolly it jarred Shane's confidence. He showed an instant of uncertainty, and then he throttled that with a vicious flare of temper.

"Who do you think you're bluffin', anyhow?" he snarled. He seemed

suddenly to realize how close Blake was, how thoroughly he had been gripped by the teacher's voice. It startled him, threw a savage glitter of murder lust into his eyes.

"I told you to stay back!" he yelled harshly.

Gary Blake's laugh was low and mocking.

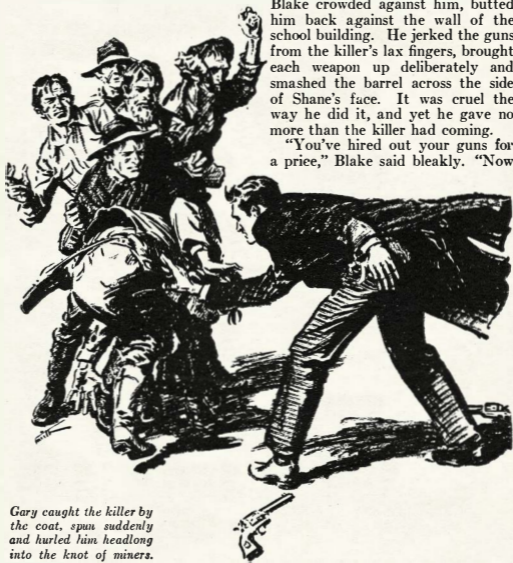
SHANE'S hands plunged madly for his guns, and Blake crossed the short space between them with a single pouncing stride. Not once

did he reach for his own weapon. What he did was even more brutal than a bullet from a gun.

The momentum of his leap added power to the left fist he smashed into the killer's middle. Air gushed explosively from Shane's lungs; his face whitened and he kinked forward from the hips. His guns, just clear of leather, sagged, and a spasmodic jerk of his fingers blasted twin geysers of dust from the ground at his feet.

Shane tried to stagger away, but Blake crowded against him, butted him back against the wall of the school building. He jerked the guns from the killer's lax fingers, brought each weapon up deliberately and smashed the barrel across the side of Shane's face. It was cruel the way he did it, and yet he gave no more than the killer had coming.

"You've hired out your guns for a price," Blake said bleakly. "Now



Gary caught the killer by the coat, spun suddenly and hurled him headlong into the knot of miners.

take some of your own medicine. You're lucky I'm not handing you what you'd have given me if you could."

Pain and hatred broke wild through Tracy Shane's eyes. He drew a hoarse draft of air into his lungs, and used it to yell his oath. The dark lust to kill twisted his hard face. He hooked long, powerful arms out for Blake, but Blake didn't back away. He just stood there, cool and balanced, and chopped a gun barrel down against the meat of the killer's two arms. The pain from those blows took all the fight out of Tracy Shane.

From the corner of his eye, Blake saw stunned fury in the faces of the miners change to raw virulence. One of them growled with throaty hatred, "Get that hellion!"

CHAPTER III

KING COPPER

THE sight of the knot of miners shifting toward him, sullen and deadly, was like a wind fanning up the fires of Gary Blake's temper. The knowledge that Tracy Shane had been ordered to drive him out of the country had filled him with a cold and stubborn wrath.

But this was different. Shane was but one man, and a dozen hard-eyed individuals made up that crowd of Ophar-Ladybug miners. Shane was a gunman, but those thick-shouldered miners were just as dangerous. Maybe more dangerous, if they got in close enough. They would follow no code or rule if they could reach him, Blake knew. Clubs, boots, and gouging fingers were their weapons, and the will to batter and smash, even murder, was a hot glitter in their eyes.

It knocked all sense of caution out of Gary Blake, flooded a heat

that was wild and primitive and reckless through every fiber of his hard-packed body. He laughed with soundless derision. He moved quick and sure, and he knew all the tricks of leverage and momentum that added an advantage of every ounce of his one hundred and fifty pounds.

He dropped Tracy Shane's guns. He caught the sagging killer by the coat, jerked the man toward him as the miners lunged closer. He took a single step backward, pulling the gunman off balance. He spun with sudden violence, and released his grip, sending Shane pitching headlong into the knot of miners.

"There's your baby!" he bit out tauntingly.

Shane's stumbling body hit the miners head-on, and the impact sent them staggering back. Blake bent, scooped up the guns he had dropped. He straightened as the miners shoved Shane's falling body aside.

A miner swore harshly. "We ain't got guns. He won't shoot and let himself in for a lynch rope! Get that runt!"

Gary Blake backed into the door of the schoolhouse, his eyes cold and bright.

"Don't stand there and talk about it!" he jeered. "You're big and brave, and I'm only a sawed-off school-teacher. Come on and get me!"

The miners came. They moved slow at first, testing him to see if he meant to shoot. And when they saw that he had no intention of firing, they quickened their strides, spreading out to block off any attempt by Blake to escape.

But Blake's position in the door of the school building forced them to bunch in. A miner suddenly lunged out of that tight knot, powerful arms slogging. Blake laughed harshly, and dropped that man with a savage slash of his gun barrel.

The others came on, swift and violent, fighting each other to get to the man in the doorway. Gary Blake was like a shadow in front of them, weaving, dodging, swaying, and the barrels of the two guns he gripped were clubs that chopped and slashed with savage speed.

Another miner sagged and went down. A third squalled an oath of pain, stumbled out of the fight with both hands clamped around a smashed nose. Another, half stunned by a wicked blow, lurched blindly for Blake, missed and hit the side of the door with an ugly thud of sound, and blocked off the violent rush of the others behind him. The men tangled up, kicking and cursing each other, and then the sheer weight of their numbers forced Blake back through the door.

A FIST raked the side of his jaw, but there was jolting power even in that glancing blow. It pitched Blake around, and another fist smashed a bolt of pain into his side. He caught his balance, fighting desperately against those clawing, clubbing hands, but he had lost the advantage of his position.

The miners had forced him back into the schoolroom. A chair skidded behind him as he backed away, hit a desk and pinned him there. He tried to dodge away, but two men leaped to one side and blocked him off. They ringed him in from three sides, and they knew they had him. That grim knowledge held them off for a taunting moment.

"It's your turn now," a man sneered.

Murder was in their eyes, and a thought streaked through Gary Blake's mind. "*I couldn't prove they meant to kill me. If I shoot it'll be murder.*"

A man lunged at him from one

side. Blake clubbed savagely with a gun barrel, and that man went down. But another miner took that man's place, crowding against Blake savagely. An arm that was like an iron band wrapped around Blake, pinning his hands to his side. He twisted and kicked, but he couldn't escape. A fist scraped across the point of his jaw like liquid fire, left him stunned and weak.

Someone got in behind him, strained him against a knee planted in the small of his back. Pain knifed along his spine, and Blake could feel his stomach muscles stretch tight.

A thought cut a wild track through his brain. "*They're going to break my back!*"

But it wasn't that. The pressure against his back ceased growing, and there was a moment when he could see sneering hard faces through the red film that swirled before his eyes. He heard a miner's voice, harsh and brutal, close to his ears.

"Stretch him back a little farther, Riggs. I'll bust his stomach wide open when I hit him!"

Then another voice, slicing in from one side, chopped through the roaring in Gary Blake's ears.

"Hit him, Webb, and you'll never hit another man! I've got a little stomach buster here in my hand, and I'll use it if you make me. Turn him loose, Riggs."

The inexorable squeeze of Jake Riggs' arms around Blake lessened slightly. His vision cleared as the pressure decreased, and he could see the cowman crouching at the side wall over a leveled gun. That would be Ed Clayton, a shoe-string cowman from down around Arroyo Prieta, who made his living selling beef to the Ophar-Ladybug syndicate.

Jake Riggs' voice broke out blunt

and harsh from close behind Blake. "Are you forgettin' who's been buttering your bread? Damn you, Clayton—"

"Turn him loose, Jake." The cowman's tone was dangerously flat.

Tony Webb, who had been about to slam that murderous blow into Blake's middle, straightened slowly. He was a short, thick man, dark and bearded, and there was a poisonous glitter in his small black eyes.

"I guess maybe you want some trouble, Ed," he said with slow menace. "Breece and Finny will have plenty trouble for you when they hear about this. Maybe you better go out and have a drink. It'll be better for your health."

Temper flooded a ruddy cloud through the cowman's face, and his voice jumped out, harsh and bitter.

"Don't try to throw your threats at me, Webb!" he flared. "Breece and Finny have bullied me and the rest of the county long enough. It took this sawed-off schoolteacher who's got more guts than sense to get me up on my hind legs, and damn if I'll stand by while you murder him. Riggs, I said turn him loose!"

THERE was unmistakable danger in Ed Clayton's bitter tone. Jake Riggs' arms loosened, and the sudden pain took all the strength out of Gary Blake. He fell to the floor, powerless to move, wondering if the miner's iron-muscled arms had broken his back after all.

He watched the cowman crowd the miners out of the room with his gun, heard the savage slash of the man's voice.

"You got friends scattered around here where Blake dropped them," Clayton rasped. "Take 'em with you, Webb, and here's something else you can take along. If Blake's

back is busted, I'll be callin' on you personal."

Gary Blake stirred against the hot ebb and flow of pain. He pried himself up from the floor, and then pushed weakly to his feet. The room twisted and lurched around him, but he managed to hold his balance. He stumbled around an overturned chair, and caught the door, holding himself erect.

The white glare of the sun outside hurt his eyes, and he could see Tracy Shane and the miners bunched in by Ed Clayton's gun, backing away from the building.

"Wait a minute, Ed!"

He pushed away from the door, and moved to the cowman's side, biting his lips against the pain branching out from his spine. He slid a slow, bleak glance across the miners.

"I just want to say this," he said grimly. "I was hired to run this school, and that's what I aim to do. Your syndicate seems to be the main outfit trying to drive me away. Tell Breece and Finny I'll be lookin' them up in a couple hours, and I'll be packing a gun."

Tracy Shane sneered, "That'll save us huntin' you down, four-eyes."

Gary Blake nodded icily. "Just tell your bosses what I told you," he said softly.

Shane laughed harshly, and swung away.

The pain in Gary Blake's back died to a dull ache of strained muscles after the miners had left, and Blake walked back and forth, working the knots out of his arms and shoulders. No man had come up the hill from town now that the fight was over, and Blake knew by that the power the Breece and Finny copper syndicate held over the rest of the county.

Copper was the lifeblood of Mesquite, and the Ophar-Ladybug outfit furnished the money that supported the town. The small miners, Blake sensed, were dependent on the syndicate. Breece and Finny owned the smelters, and if the ore of the small outfits was shut out they would be forced to spend their lean profits shipping out to the nearest smelters at Bisbee.

But why the syndicate was trying to block the school was something Blake couldn't understand. He stopped his pacing and turned to find Ed Clayton watching him in bitter silence. Now that his anger had burned out, a dark cloud of worry had settled in the cowman's face. Blake smiled faintly.

"You sort of played hob with yourself, buttin' into that fight, didn't you?" he said quietly. "You've got my thanks."

Blake's gratitude was a thing the cowman didn't seem to hear. He was lost in his own troubles, and the tone of his voice betrayed it.

"If I'd sent a slug into my brain, it wouldn't have been much worse."

Blake's smile faded. "That bad?"

"Not that I'm sorry for what I did, but figure it out for yourself," Clayton broke out harshly. "Selling beef to the syndicate is the only thing that's kept me and my family alive. They won't be buyin' from me from now on, even if Breece and Finny don't sick one of their pet gunmen on me."

"What about the independent mining outfits?"

THE cowman laughed acidly. "They know where they stand. If they bought beef from me or anyone else, Breece and Finny would double the price for smelting their ore. The independents are running on scratch now, and the syndicate keeps

them bled out so they won't get too strong."

"Tell me about it," Blake asked softly.

Clayton spat bitterly. "What is there to tell that you ain't heard already?" he rasped.

Blake nodded grimly. He had already heard the only story Ed Clayton could have told. The syndicate had tried to buy and force out the independent outfits, and had failed. So Breece and Finny had settled down to a systematic bleeding of the independents, charging them heavily for anything they bought or did.

"You got any idea why they don't want this school?" Blake's question was quiet, toneless.

"The same idea everybody else has," Clayton grated. "Breece and Finny hire kids at cut wages to do a good chunk of their jobs, and kids can't work and go to school at the same time."

But something told Gary Blake that was not the real reason. There was more to it than that. He slid a narrow glance across the cowman's face.

"It ain't too late for you to make peace with Breece and Finny," he said slowly.

Anger jerked the muscles of the cowman's face. "I never run out of a fight yet," he snapped back. "I've crawled for that syndicate long enough, and I reckon I can keep my chips in any game that a tender-foot schoolteacher can play."

There was no contempt in Ed Clayton's blunt statement, but rather a note of respect. Gary Blake smiled thinly.

"Maybe there are other gents who'll feel the same way," he put in coolly. "Suppose you have a talk with the independent outfits. If they won't come out in the open

against the syndicate, tell them to be in town this afternoon. Maybe something will happen that'll change their minds."

The cowman's eyes narrowed slightly. "And while I'm doin' that, what'll you be doing?"

Blake's mouth hardened. "I won't be running for cover, if that's what you're afraid of."

Clayton cursed harshly. "Dang it, I know that!" he growled. "If you was that kind, you wouldn't have lasted this long. Only—" He hesitated, goaded by bitter suspicion. Then, "You might as well know this, Blake. The independents are ready to fight any time someone shows them they got a chance. Maybe you're that man. But if someone was to trick them into a fight that would wipe them out—" He didn't finish, but his threat was bleak and unmistakable.

Gary Blake smiled thinly. "I'm going to hunt up a lawyer, if that answers your question."

Bitter derision knifed the cowman's outburst. "So that's it! You figure Breece and Finny are that kind of fools? They've raised hell here, but they've busted no laws."

Blake shrugged grimly. "You talk to the independents, and I'll worry about my end," he answered coldly. "Maybe this is one of the times a book is as good as a bullet."

He turned woodenly, and strode toward the path that dropped down the hill to the town.

CHAPTER IV TRIGGER TUTOR

BLAKE found Charley McLean's law office in a single small room above the general store. The lawyer opened the door at Blake's knock, a short, gray man who had picked up weight with his years. McLean was

seated in a wheel chair, his twisted legs slanting down to the footrest, and there was sharp interest in the quick strike of his bright eyes.

"You'll be Gary Blake, I reckon."

Blake nodded.

The lawyer's tone was rough and blunt. "I figured you were. You're the only stranger I've seen in town, and I've got plenty time to sit and look for new men." His stare probed the length of Blake's slight frame. "So you're the schoolteacher who's been disturbin' the peace around here. You ain't much on size."

Gary Blake grinned. "I reach the ground," he drawled.

Charley McLean grunted acidly. "But you don't stick very high up."

Blake met the lawyer's sharp eyes levelly. "Which means I can get up easier when I've been knocked down," he said coolly.

He thought he detected the trace of a smile on the lawyer's flat mouth, but he wasn't sure. He knew McLean was testing him for weakness, and he spent that same space of time cataloguing the lawyer. McLean was a crusty individual, and in spite of his useless legs he asked no quarter of any man. Nor gave any, Blake sensed.

"I figured you'd show up here sooner or later," McLean growled. "I can tell you right now, you're wasting your time and my time. You can throw some petty charge at Breece and Finny, but they'll pay off the court and come at you harder than ever. I can't help you."

Blake's drawl was flat and easy. "Have I asked you for any help?"

The lawyer's eyes widened, and for the first time he showed an expression. It was surprise, a flicker of amused curiosity. But it was a shallow expression that he hid quickly with a scowl.

"Then what in blazes did you come here for?" he snapped.

"To read." Gary Blake grinned. "That's all, McLean, just to borrow some of your books and read."

McLean gouged Blake with a searching stare. Blake went on coolly. "I know I'm poison to this town. If any man looks at me more than once, he'll have Breece and Finny to answer to. So if you figure I ain't healthy to have around, I'll hunt me up some other law books to read."

A smile shadowed the lawyer's hard mouth. "My books ain't been cracked for a month," he grunted. "Help yourself."

He wheeled himself back from the door, and Blake followed him into the little law office.

Blake suggested quietly, "Breece and Finny might not like it, and they seem to call the cards in this town. Maybe you'd better drift along to some place where I ain't."

McLean snorted dryly. "In this wheel chair?"

"I'll help you down the steps."

McLean jerked his head. He grinned. "I never could stand the afternoon sun," he growled. "Besides, there are too many stinkers walking around down there on the street. The syndicate wolves are out, and the air is cleaner here." He eyed Blake narrowly. "Well, go ahead with your reading, young fellow. If you can find anything interesting in my books, you're a better man than I am." He wheeled himself around his desk to the front window, and stared down at the street below.

THE leather-bound volumes of Blackstone were gray with dust. Blake settled himself down in the lawyer's desk chair, and began reading. An hour had passed before a flicker of interest stirred in his eyes.

He took off his glasses and cleaned them, then read that page again. He closed the book. Charley McLean swung around in his chair.

"You find Blackstone interesting?"

Gary Blake's grin was thin and bleak. "Not half as much as the 'Acts of the Territory Legislature,'" he said. He was silent a moment, a rash, hate-hot glint filling his eyes as the whole pattern of greed and cunning built up in his mind. The little sounds of the day floated through the open window to him, the lazy, half-interested yap-yap of a pup challenging a wagon that rattled down the street, the low murmur of men's voices and the scuff and thud of boots on the plank walk, the whicker of a horse in the livery.

These were the small sounds that helped fill out the days in any peaceful town. These were quiet, placid sounds, but there was a note of impending violence flowing under them like a deadly current, something Blake could feel but not hear.

"The Ophar-Ladybug must have shut down for the day," Charley McLean said pointedly. "I just saw Breece and Finny go into the Pick and Shovel Saloon, and that's where all their men are."

Gary Blake nodded, his eyes cold and bright behind his glasses. He felt the lawyer's intent stare on him.

"You find what you wanted?" McLean asked.

Blake was expressionless. "Let me get in a question before I answer that," he said. "Who owns Schoolhouse Hill?"

Charley McLean frowned, and his eyes narrowed. He spoke slowly, as though his mind already was far ahead of his words, trying to locate the reason for Blake's question.

"Old Jeff Melrose owned it first. Jeff is the man who discovered cop-

per here. He filed claims all around here, but he sold his east-side claims to old friends of his. He held onto his Ophar and Ladybug claims, but he didn't keep them long. He got drunk one night, so the story goes, and sold them to the Breece and Finny syndicate. Anyhow the syndicate had Jeff's name on a bill of sale, and Jeff couldn't deny he sold. We found his body at the bottom of a mine shaft a couple days later, and all the signs said that he fell in the hole while he was drunk."

"That still doesn't tell me who owns the school hill," Blake pressed quietly.

A harsh shadow crossed the lawyer's seamed face. "Hell, the town owns it, I reckon," he growled. "It ain't inside the town limits, but just the same old Jeff's will gave the hill to the town. Jeff Melrose was a funny old coot. To look at him, he was just another prospector. He never talked much, but he had his share of ideas about this country. Good ideas, too. He never had a book education, but he believed all kids ought to have a chance to get one. That's why he left the hill to the town. His will said the town was to put a school on top of the hill. If the school ever failed, the hill was to go back to his estate."

Blake's eyes were cold and bright. "And Jeff's estate?"

Charley McLean snorted acidly. "You can ask more questions than a lawyer," he grunted. "Jeff didn't leave an estate. The only estate he had was the Ophar-Ladybug claims, and he sold them to Joe Breece and Harv Finny."

Gary Blake's smile was a bleak and deadly thing that stiffened McLean in his wheel chair. The lawyer leaned forward, grim and intent.

"That seems to tell you what you wanted to know, but I still don't

know what it adds up to," he rapped out.

"You'll know soon enough," Blake drawled softly. He started to turn away toward the door, only to be halted by the jerk of the lawyer's hand.

"Wait a minute, dang you!" the lawyer growled. "You're a tight-lipped cuss, but I've lived around this town long enough to know trouble when I smell it. Breece and Finny and their gun toughs are the reason I'm sitting in this wheel chair. You've got a ruckus lined up with them, and I'm dealin' myself in. Wait till I get my shotgun, then help me get this rolling coffin down them stairs where I can use it."

CHAPTER V

SHOWDOWN

BLAKE left Charley McLean seated in his wheel chair outside Allenby's general store. A group of miners were scattered along the store front, and Blake knew they were the independent owners by the sight of them, rough-dressed men, work-gnarled and bitter-eyed.

Caution kept them from giving him any open support, but one of them voiced a grim statement that gave Blake all he needed to know.

"You show us where we've got a decent chance, teacher, and we'll back you from here on in."

It was different with Burt Allenby and Ed Clayton. They had stood up for Blake in front of syndicate men, and they knew they were marked. They had nothing to lose, and now that they had made their break they were anxious to get it all over with.

"My Sharps is just inside the door, and I'll drag it out when you give the word," Allenby growled. He

wasn't a fighting man, and he was nervous: but he had guts.

Ed Clayton was out of another mold. He had lived his life on the range where he had been forced to fight Indians and renegade whites to keep what he had. He knew what he was up against, and was grimly prepared to make the best of it.

"My boy is just inside the harness shop," he said coolly to Blake, "and I've got a hired hand loaded for bear down at the livery. If you've got anything to stand on, the independents will take care of the syndicate miners. But Breece and Finny got a dozen guns backing them, so you see where that puts you. This ain't a fist-slingin', nose-bustin' job. You let Allenby, McLean, and my outfit do what we can against the syndicate gunnies. You'll be a heap safer if you shuck that cutter you're packin'. Bluff won't work in this fight."

Gary Blake smiled icily. "It won't be bluff, Ed," he said.

Looking across the street, he saw the batwing doors of the Pick and Shovel hinge open. Tracy Shane came first, moving in his balanced, catlike stride, his hands swinging close to a brace of holstered guns. Another man, short and slope-shouldered, moved at Shane's side.

"Rudy Kearn," Ed Clayton breathed in Blake's ear. "He's as fast as Shane, and double-mean. Here comes Breece. Next one is Harv Finny. Look at that pack! Enough hired guns there to clean out the town. We ain't got a chance."

"Easy," Blake said softly.

He was thoroughly cool as the syndicate gunmen filed out of the saloon. There was nothing new for him in this. It was all just the same as it had been when he had worn a

deputy sheriff's badge five years ago—the same deadly pattern.

Only he hadn't thrown a gun for five years!

A man loses speed from lack of practice in that length of time. Gary Blake wondered how he would be, and then shut that thought out of his mind.

He moved out into the hot dust of the street, steady and unhurried, picking out each man in the gun crowd and filing away his possibilities. They were all dangerous, but Tracy Shane and Rudy Kearn would be the most deadly.

Blake let the distance between them shorten to a dozen paces, and then halted. The syndicate crowd halted, waiting for Breece and Finny to lead the play out into the open. Breece said nothing, watching Blake with contemptuous certainty. Harv Finny was silent, searching Blake with his bright eyes as though suspecting some trick.

Silence crawled through the town, and tension piled up in the street. Danger became an invisible whip slashing the air, cutting nerves and muscles and senses. Tracy Shane grinned wickedly.

"Howdy, four-eyes," he said.

BLAKE stared evenly at Shane. "You don't seem to learn your lessons well," he drawled.

Hatred flooded Shane's face dark, but he wasn't a man to forget his orders. He fought his temper down, and laughed harshly.

"Boss, meet Mr. Gary Blake, the town's new schoolteacher."

Joe Breece grinned crookedly. Harv Finny was a man of caution, and he wanted to test the ground before he went too far.

"I hear you're a little on the tough side, Blake," he said. His voice was thin and scratchy.

"Tracy Shane and a few more of your men seem to think so," Blake said coolly. He was content to let Finny lay out the preliminaries.

"Keep in the same rut, and you might run up against something tougher than you. We don't want that school here."

"I'm being paid to teach that school, and when I take a job I earn my money."

"Your pay might get you in trouble," Finny scratched out.

"I like trouble," Blake said softly.

It was Joe Breece who broke it out into the open. "To hell with that round-the-hill talk!" he blared. He jabbed a stiff finger at Blake. "What I've got to say will be short and sweet. We don't need a school here, and we don't want it. We don't aim to have it. You've beat up some of my men, and I don't like that."

"They seemed grown-up to me,"

Blake said with soft derision.

Joe Breece smashed through Blake's voice roughly.

"I could have you thrown in jail for what you did to my men," he jarred out. "I've tried to be easy on you, and hold my men off. You've worn out your welcome here; now get out!"

"Go to hell," Gary Blake drawled.

A wicked, baldly eager glint flared in the big man's eyes. He had made his warning statement only for the benefit of the town, and now he was ready to carry on in his own ruthless way.

"All right, you've had your chance!" he said. "You've used up your luck with your fists. Tracy Shane says you tricked him into that fight and beat him up. This is a man's town, and you've asked for what you're going to get. I'm not holding Shane back any longer. It's you and him from now on."

Breece started to swing away,

leaving the street to his hired killer, but Blake halted the man with a sudden piercing yell.

"You're not out of this, Breece!"

His voice was like a whip slashing the man. Breece spun around, suddenly tense and dangerous. He stared at Blake as though hunting for something he knew was there but couldn't see. And Blake gave it to him in a cold, stinging voice that carried the length and breadth of the street.

"You're not out of this, Breece!

You're in this neck-deep, and you won't get out. You tried to freeze out the independent miners, but they wouldn't fold up. But that didn't change your plan to get their claims. That's why you went out to stop the school."

A sudden glitter of understanding leaped into Breece's eyes. Gary Blake laughed contemptuously—and knew he was crowding himself into a fight he stood little chance of surviving.

"You didn't want that school shut down just to keep the older boys on your pay roll," Blake sneered. "You wanted that school stopped because the hill would be sold if no school was there. You planned to buy that hill because you knew it apexes all the independent claims, and the law says a man owning an apex claim can follow an ore vein wherever it leads him! That would make everything the independent outfits own legally belong to you and your syndicate."

Murder lust flared raw and vicious in Joe Breece's eyes. He said harshly, "He's yours, Shane!"

BLAKE'S eyes jerked to Shane and Rudy Kearn, and that was his mistake. The bullet that hit him came from a gun in Joe Breece's blurred hand. It slugged him high

in the left shoulder, knocked him around and down into the dust of the street.

Falling, he heard Ed Clayton's piercing yell. "Bud! Clem! Get in this!"

Hitting the street, Blake heard the roar of Charley McLean's shotgun, the ugly whip of the double charge of buckshot churning the air above his head. A man near Breece went down heavily, and another spun off in a blind half circle, squalling in agony.

Joe Breece, hit by half a dozen slugs from the shotgun, sank to the street as though his legs had melted under him. Harv Finny clawed for a gun and then lost his nerve, whirled and ran wildly until a bullet tripped him up and sent him plunging loosely through the thick dust.

The street was a chaos of roaring guns and cursing men. From the corner of his eye, as he rolled over, Blake saw a crouching line of syndicate killers raking the opposite side of the street with murderous fire.

They were the men Ed Clayton had said could clean out the town, and Gary Blake knew they could do it. They were professional killers, trained to the trigger, deadly and ruthlessly methodical.

Tracy Shane's virulent yell cut through the smash of weapons. "Get Clayton and that jasper in the harness shop! Get them, and we'll cut this town to pieces!"

Gary Blake drew his gun and pushed to his feet. "Around here, Shane!"

Shane's spinning body was something that pulled Rudy Kearn with him. They whirled as though jerked by a string, deadly and violent.

Blake didn't hurry his shots. He threw his first slug into Tracy Shane's middle, and without wait-

ing to see where his bullet had hit, swiveled his Colt on Rudy Kearn. He saw flame flare from Kearn's gun, felt the heat of the slug against his cheek, and knew that he had fired that same instant only by the kick of the recoil against his bent elbow.

The pound of his gun seemed to knock all the noise out of the street. A sudden silence closed around Gary Blake. He saw Shane and Rudy Kearn go down; he saw another gunman, dying on his feet, sag and fall.

And then abruptly he realized that it was over, that the remaining gunmen had thrown down their weapons, that independent miners were rushing around him, that Ed Clayton was ripping away the blood-soaked cloth on his shoulder. He heard the cowman's voice through the confusion, quick and relieved.

"You ain't hit bad!" Clayton blatted out. "Be healed up in a week, that hole. Blake, I saw you pull that gun. You were greasy fast on that draw."

Without thinking, Blake said, "Five years ago I was a deputy."

"You can have the job right here, if you want it," Clayton broke out. "We could use a lawman like you."

Charley McLean came wheeling into Blake's vision in his wheel chair, his crochety voice cutting the cowman short.

"I got first call on him! He found a law in my books I never knew anything about, and it busted Breece and Finny wide open. If he takes any job, it'll be in my law office."

Gary Blake grinned against the pain burning in his shoulder. "I got a job," he said. "I was hired to run a school, and I'll do it if I have to gun-herd my students to class. This town has had its share of bullets, and now I'm going to see that it learns something about books."



CUTTIN' HOSS

by S. OMAR BARKER

They asked me: "What's this cuttin' horse them cowhands talk about?"
 So I told 'em: "He's the pony that sorts the cattle out.
 You take them ol' range cattle, an' you bunch 'em in a herd,
 The roundup boss, he views 'em, an' he passes out the word
 To cut fat steers for shippin', or cows an' calves to brand,
 An' the cuttin' horse, *he does it!* Well, of course, some ol' cowhand
 Sets up there in the saddle on the cuttin' pony's back—
 But shucks! He ain't much needed once his horse has learnt the knack!
 For mostly all he's got to do is indicate which critter
 He wants unraveled from the herd—then watch that pony git 'er.

"The cuttin' horse works quiet an' he holds his head out low;
 The way he starts to cut a cow is easylike an' slow,
 But if the critter tries to dodge or make a turn that's false,
 The way he whirls to head her beats a fancy Mex'kin waltz.
 His eager ears keep workin' as he shoves a critter through—
 Which shows he sure does like his job, an' knows just what to do.
 Cow tails may be a-switchin', but his eyes ain't never shut;
 He never does no pitchin' when he's workin' on a cut.

"He ain't built spindle-legged like a race horse long an' tall;
 More likely he is coupled short, an' even kind o' small,
 Because, when cuttin' cattle out upon the open range,
 He's got to turn upon a dime—an' leave a nickel change!
 No dancin' cowpoke ever swang his gal with prouder zest
 Than cuttin' ponies seem to feel when workin' at their best.
 A Philadelphia lawyer may be mighty smart an' keen,
 But a cut horse is the smartest thing a cowboy ever seen.
 O' course he don't talk Mex'kin like some two-pronged hairpins do,
 But plenty cowboys claim he *could* in case he wanted to."
 They asked me: "What's a cuttin' horse?" Well, folks, I'll tell you what:
 He's what a cowhand's prouder of than anything he's got.
 For when you step acrost him you don't have to show him how—
 He's just a chunk of horse meat—but he sure does savvy cow!



Moore ducked under a pole fence as Hardaman appeared menacingly, armed with that deadly weapon, in the rear door of the barber shop.

TOP-HAND PRIDE

by WILLIAM F. BRAGG

That fugitive cowpuncher, doom-branded for two bushwhack killings, met up with a close shave in more ways than one!

WHEN he hid his buckskin pony in a patch of timber on the ridge above Keg Springs and slipped into town for a shave, Jack Moore told himself that he was taking a fool's chance. A man heading north to-

ward Canada to outride a charge of murder shouldn't mind three days' growth of dark whiskers bristling on his face. But then—before night he expected to meet a woman. Pride forbade him to appear before her

looking so shaggy and dusty from the trail.

Keg Springs wasn't his town. But five years before, he'd ridden through it with his friend, Tom Hazen, who ran a small ranch five miles north on Saddlehorn Creek. He remembered a small barber shop, at the end of the street nearest the hills, run by a Chinaman named Wah Lee. The barber wouldn't recognize him. And Jack felt sure that he'd outridden news of the crime with which he was charged.

The little town drowsed in the warm light of late afternoon as Jack entered the shop and relaxed in the red plush chair. Wah Lee, a bland little man with shrewd brown eyes, waddled into the shop from a room in the rear.

The soft touch of the warm lather, the deft strokes of Wah Lee's razor relaxed the taut muscles of Jack's lean right cheek. He stretched out more comfortably in the chair, half-closing tired eyes that night and day had watched a back trail for the dust of pursuit.

But he straightened up with a grunt of pain as the barber pinched the flesh of his chin preparing to round it with his blade. There ran the inch-long red welt where Luke Hardaman's bullet had plowed its mark as Jack Moore knelt on the ground, bending over the body of a dead foeman.

The twinge of pain from the slight wound brought the whole scene back to Jack etched in colors of black and white, as it had been that blazing afternoon down there in the Sand Coulee badlands with the huge red cliff facing him—the cliff whence had come the bullet that had tumbled Ace Willoby from his saddle.

The whole Sand Coulee country knew of the feud that lay between Jack and the partners of the Cross

Ten outfit over a waterhole. It had come to a head that afternoon and death had resulted. Jack shivered as he recalled the meeting. Mounted, he faced Ace—and their bitter quarrel ran to the point where Ace reached for his six-gun. Then the hidden gun had cracked from the high cliff and Ace had slumped forward in his saddle, clawed one brief moment for the horn and slipped to the earth while the amazed Jack looked on in stupefied horror.

"Your face hurtee some?" the barber asked. "You getee kicked by hoss, mebbe?"

"Mebbe," Jack growled, opening his eyes and staring up into Wah Lee's round face. "Go ahead. But take it easy when you work on my chin."

"I go easy. You waitee one li'l' minute." Wah Lee stepped toward the front of his tiny shop while Jack again relaxed in the chair.

If Luke Hardaman, who was Ace Willoby's partner, had approached silently, Jack Moore wouldn't now be here in Wah Lee's chair, enjoying a shave. He'd be dead, instead. It was the soft thud of hoofbeats on the badland sand that had caused Jack to turn his head as he knelt there above Ace's sprawled body, staring down at the widening red stain on the dead man's back. Jack had turned and looked into the mouth of death—the black muzzle of Hardaman's six-gun—as Ace's partner had swung down his weapon to make his kill. The merest flinch of his head had saved Jack. The bullet had scraped the side of his chin. Then he was down on his stomach, his own gun drawn and hurling lead. The gunfire had stamped Hardaman's horse. Jack had retained a grip on his own bridle reins. So he had mounted and fled

while Hardaman sought to control his panicked pony.

NOW Jack Moore opened one eye and surveyed Wah Lee. The Chinaman, it appeared, was taking plenty of time to finish the shave. Then Jack opened both eyes. The front of the shop was empty. Wah Lee had disappeared.

That same dread omen, which had ridden for three nights and days with Jack like a comrade of the trail, brought him out of the red plush chair. The long towel hampered him as he reached beneath it for his gun. Now he cursed himself for the fool pride that had brought him into this trap.

As he stood there, braced on widely set lean legs, Wah Lee padded into the shop. The barber's chubby face no longer appeared bland and carefree. His brown eyes glittered. He flourished his razor.

"You my plisoneh!" he warned. "Betteh be good or I cuttee thloot. You Jack Moore. You worthee five hun'ed dollahs!"

Jack talked to gain time, for the stock of his gun had become entangled in the towel.

"How do you know I'm Jack Moore? You never saw me before in your life."

"Mebbe no see. But special dep'ty sheliff, he comee into town 'long 'bout noon. Say mebbe Jack Moore come this way. Moore killee his pard, Ace Willoby. He mebbe got sore chin. He say he gieve five hun'ed dollahs reward for you." Wah Lee advanced cautiously, razor held expertly for a slash at Jack's tanned throat if he so much as moved. "You my plisoneh."

The long towel hid the tensing of Jack's muscles as he mustered strength for a catlike spring toward the barber. He'd rush the China-

man, warding off the razor with his left arm, striking with his right fist. If he failed to plant a saving punch, Wah Lee's steel blade would perhaps end his trail right here. But Jack Moore had vowed when he galloped away from Ace Willoby's body that he wouldn't be taken alive to be hanged like a sheep for a crime of which he was innocent. That was the thing which had driven him north toward Jim Hazen's ranch, where he hoped to hide out until he could again hit the long trail to Canada. It was the knowledge that the cards were out against him and that, because of his feud with Ace, he could not prove to the law that it hadn't been his gun which had knocked the Cross Ten owner off his horse.

It was a blend of fear and pride, perhaps. Moore wasn't sure. But during the long black hours of night, hiding in the silent mountains, he had pictured himself standing bound hand and foot on the drop of a gallops while the sheriff of Sand Coulee County slowly cut off the sun and the far-reaching brown hills of Wyoming with a dread black cap. Fear of death there, but hurt pride too that he, a top hand, should be choked to death for a wrong he had never inflicted: the treacherous sin of shooting a man through the back.

Slowly he closed his right hand, preparing for the knockout punch that meant life or death. Wah Lee came nearer, another wary step. The razor circled slowly, flashing in the sun rays as they shone through a window in the shop's west wall.

"Better be good!" Wah Lee warned again. "Or I makee you good. Fo'get you gotee gun. No can gettee gun! Puttee up hands!"

Jack balanced on his toes, preparing for the spring that he hoped would bring him near enough to

Wah Lee for the knockout punch. The muscles of his left arm, the arm which might be slashed to the bone in another second by a razor, tightened up like balls of steel wire.

Then—and the action came so swiftly that it threw Jack off balance—Wah Lee was abruptly cleared out of his path. A man, slipping into the shop, struck Wah Lee a sharp blow with the barrel of his six-gun and knocked the barber across the shop. His fat body crashed against the wall, collapsed. Wah Lee sat with head slumped forward while Jack Moore faced the newcomer.

It didn't surprise Moore that the man was Luke Hardaman. Hardaman, too, was shaggy and dirty from long trailing. His hard face was half-masked by bristling dark whiskers. But Luke hadn't come here for a shave.

"I been watchin' this town since noon," said Luke. "I knew you were a friend of Tom Hazen's. So I figured you might head there for a hide-out. Figurin' that saved me time trailin' you. Everybody here was ready for you if you showed up. The Chinaman tipped me off a minute ago as I rode back into town after lookin' over the trail west along the ridge. So here I am."

"I suppose," Jack said hoarsely, for his throat felt as dry as though he had swallowed some of the soap which still covered half his face, "that you'll take me back to Sand Coulee for them to hang."

Luke felt safe now that his clever calculations had shortened a long hard trail. Both of Jack's hands were in sight, and plainly he couldn't easily reach a gun beneath the barber's towel. Ace Willoby's partner, a wolf-lean rider, marked his words with leisurely gestures of his gun barrel as he talked to Jack.

"No," Hardaman said slowly,

"I'm not taking you back. You're the man who killed my partner by shooting him through the back. Killed him cold in a squabble over a little alkalied waterhole that wouldn't carry ten head of cattle for a week. You don't deserve no talkin' back. That is"—Luke smiled slightly—"not alive."

Jack knew he couldn't dive through the west window ahead of Luke's bullet. It was too far away. But here, near his right hand, was Wah Lee's stand, holding an array of shaving implements. On it stood a huge white ironstone shaving mug.

"I'd think," Jack drawled, "that you'd enjoy seeing me hanged."

"I shore would. But you're too slippery a customer. You're slick as a fish eye. You got away from me once. You won't do it again. I'm right sorry you got to go out with just half your face shaved. For I know you were always a heller for looks. But the chink can finish his job when he comes to."

"You sure treated that chink swell after he'd helped you out." Luke glanced toward Wah Lee. The barber hadn't so much as stirred since the gun barrel had cracked against the side of his round head. Even the razor had fallen from his limp fingers and now lay on the floor, almost at Luke's boot toes.

"The fool could never have taken you with a razor," Luke said contemptuously. "I told him to stay outside. But he wanted to earn five hundred dollars. I'm not wastin' money like that."

Jack laughed harshly. "You're sure a dead-game sport," he said. "You'd go any route for a dirty dollar." He paused, then asked: "What's next? Do I put up my hands while you give it to me? Or mebber"—his gray eyes flashed—"you want me to turn around so you

can put a bullet through my back. Kill me—just as Ace Willoby was killed." Moore's voice rose and he went on bitterly: "I was a fool to run away. I should've stayed and fought it out in court. Everybody in San Coulee knows I wouldn't shoot a man through the back. I see it all." He glared at Luke. "Somebody used my fight with Ace as an excuse to kill him. I don't know just why. But I begin to think that *you*—"

Luke said harshly as he steadied his gun: "Put up your hands and take it!"

"I'm puttin' 'em up." Jack's right hand swept up from his side, a natural gesture in response to Luke's command. But he felt his fingers close around the smooth shaving mug. He hurled it—straight toward Luke. And swerved his body low and toward the right as he did so.

The crash of Luke's gun shook the flimsy shop walls. Jack Moore never knew what happened to the bullet that should have killed him. For ducking to avoid further gunfire, he caught his right shoulder beneath the edge of Wah Lee's shaving stand. He straightened, endeavoring to escape what he believed was an obstacle to freedom. The entire stand, littered with brushes, razors, mugs, wire hot-towel tray, all surmounted by a heavy mirror, overturned with a clatter—just as Luke Hardaman leaped toward his victim.

Jack Moore and Luke Hardaman were knocked down and pinned beneath the heavy counter. Jack felt his right shoulder go numb and knew he couldn't punch with his right fist for the moment, nor handle a gun—not even if he could clear his weapon of the entangling towel that still hung from his neck.

But he crawled out from under the counter first. For he knew the

crack of Luke's gun would arouse the town. As he crouched for a moment in the center of the room, right arm trailing, weight balancing on his left hand, he saw Luke's Colt six-gun resting on the boards not a yard away. The counter had knocked it from its owner's hand as he rushed toward Jack.

Jack flung himself forward, reaching for the gun just as Luke scrambled groggily out of the counter's wreckage. Jack's fingers touched it. Then he felt on his wrist the sharp pain of a shod foot grinding into flesh. He looked up. Wah Lee had entered the deadly game. He had risen, tottered across the room just in time to prevent Jack from seizing Luke's gun. But Wah Lee was still weak from Luke's pistol whipping.

"You my plisoneh!" The fat barber panted. "Mebbeso man no wantee givve me five hun'ed dollahs. But I takee you anyway!"

If the barber had worn heavy boots he might have crushed Jack's wrist bones into splinters. But like many of his race, Wah Lee wore felt-soled slippers. Jack whipped back his arm, freeing his imprisoned hand. He upset Wah Lee's stance and the barber dropped to his knees.

Jack heard the thud of boots outside on the plank walk in front of the shop, the excited voices of men. He looked desperately toward the west window that overlooked the ridge where he'd hidden his horse. Escape that way was suddenly blocked by Luke Hardaman. Stripped of his gun, Luke had seized Wah Lee's razor, circled around the shop while Wah Lee stood with one foot planted on Jack's wrist.

NOW Luke came darting forward, razor poised chin-high, flickering back and forth like the darting tongue of a snake. Jack retreated,

fumbling, as he stumbled backward, for the gun still hidden beneath the towel. His shoulders struck a door and it opened. He turned and ran through the small room from which Wah Lee had emerged when Moore had entered the shop for a shave. Jack saw a couple of green-topped tables as he fled, and knew that in his leisure moments Wah Lee turned a dollar or two dealing poker. In a corner was a small iron safe that doubtless held the barber's bank roll—a roll to which Wah Lee had hoped to add five hundred of Luke Hardaman's blood dollars.

Jack laughed grimly as he kicked open the rear door and leaped out into Wah Lee's back yard. They'd missed their chance of earning that blood money. He was in the clear now. They could never take him. For finally, and clumsily, since he must use his left hand for the unaccustomed task, he had drawn his gun from beneath the towel.

Moore reached and ducked under a pole fence. On beyond it were the timbered hills that hid his horse, the long slopes pointing toward Saddlehorn Creek where Tom Hazen would give him shelter.

Luke Hardaman charged out of Wah Lee's rear door as Jack rolled under the bottom pole of the fence. Hardaman still flourished the razor. Jack snapped a bullet that cut splinters from the door frame. Luke dodged back hurriedly into Wah Lee's poker room.

Keg Springs townsmen were fanning out into a skirmish line as Jack began climbing the side of the slope that led up to the timber where his horse was hidden. They fired on him but he knelt behind a boulder and threw back two warning shots. That held up pursuit long enough for Jack to dive into the cover of a shallow draw. He scrambled up its

length to the crest of the ridge, turned and rushed into the patch of quaking aspens where his horse had been tied.

He stopped dead in his tracks, despair gripping his heart. His horse was no longer tied to the tree. Somebody had taken the animal while Jack was in town.

The Moore pride, that had sent him into a trap because he hated to face a woman while dirty and unshaven, had brought him into a second deadfall. He stood here afoot, right arm still useless, five miles from shelter, and the foe closing in.

He thought bitterly that all his life had been marked by such bad breaks. And he'd met every bad turn of fortune by relying on his fierce pride. Thus he'd ridden the roundup years ago with Tom Hazen and both had been fond of the pretty little Sand Coulee schoolteacher. But it was Tom who had won her. And pride had impelled Jack to serve as best man at the wedding. Then Tom had moved north and Jack had run into the long range feud with the Cross Ten Ranch over range rights to precious desert waterholes. Ace Willoby and Hardaman of the Cross Ten were larger operators with more riders, and Jack had fought always at a disadvantage. But he'd met the test until that unknown ambusher's bullet dropped Ace Willoby from the saddle. Then, feeling fate against him, Jack had fled north—to this tough situation.

A gunshot sounded, not far distant, and a bullet plowed into the thicket. A few green leaves fell silently to the earth, cut from a branch by the flying lead. The townsmen and Hardaman were throwing a cordon of guns around this grove. Soon they'd comb every inch of it with a hail of bullets if he didn't surrender

and go back to stand like a sheep on the Sand Coulee gallows.

For a moment there came the urge to surrender, to abase himself to the law. Then Moore remembered the sneers of Luke Hardaman down in Wah Lee's shop. He'd fought his way from that trap and he'd escape from this one.

Riflemen fired on him as he loped across a bit of cleared ground toward the nearest tongue of dark-green timber that slanted away toward the deep valley of Saddlehorn Creek. But the light was failing. He took cover a moment, lungs overdriven by the thin air of this high-altitude country. He saw men slipping toward him through the blackened stumps of an old fireburn. He couldn't be sure, for the range was lengthy, but the leader resembled Luke Hardaman.

Jack checked that bold rush with five evenly spaced shots. He fired on the man who resembled Luke, knowing he had small chance of hitting his target at such range with a six-gun. But he'd not have been better armed even if he had reached his pony. For he had fled on that horse from the scene of Willoby's murder. And since he'd not ridden forth to kill anything, he hadn't carried a rifle in the saddle boot.

The man he fired on ducked hurriedly behind a black stump. Jack was flattened out behind a huge down log on the edge of the clearing that represented the mighty sweep of a forest fire. He considered it thick enough to check bullets, but it almost proved his undoing. For the rifleman fired from around the stump. His bullet cut a groove across the charred top of the down log and flung stinging dust into Jack's eyes.

Half-blinded, Jack squirmed hurriedly away from the log, retreating

blindly into thicker timber. In the gloom, and handicapped by his lack of good sight, he blundered into a devil's woodpile of crisscrossed down timber, huge pines uprooted and hurled helter-skelter in all directions by some roaring gale of the mountains. Huge branches, sharp as spears, threatened to rip into his racked and driven body as he fought and clawed his way ever deeper into this dangerous tangle.

At bay like an animal in the darkness of the forest, he crouched in a crater torn up by the roots of a mighty tree as it had fallen. He heard the voices of men as they crossed the ridge above him, but he couldn't see them. He could now use his right arm though it was stiff from the bruise inflicted by the heavy barber stand. But he reloaded his gun as he crouched there, then the red flash of the weapon lit up the gloom as he fired two more warning shots.

They must have known he would be dangerous now as a trapped grizzly. They didn't come down toward him. He rolled out of the crater and crawled into a natural barricade of down logs while his pursuers moved by easier trails to cut off his avenue of retreat.

Though he risked breaking his neck or his legs in the darkness, Jack clung grimly to the stretch of down timber while he slowly worked his way toward the north. That was a bitter night, for his clothing had been almost ripped from his body and the wind from the snow-capped peaks on beyond Saddlehorn was chill and it cut to the bone. But he wouldn't allow himself to be taken alive by Luke Hardaman. That vow kept him moving when the strength seemed to drain out of his weary arms and legs like water.

SO in the gray dawn, with the morning star still shining in the sky, he came down to the well-known crossing of Saddlehorn Creek. Five years before he'd spurred his horse through the clear stream, a man of peace then, riding beside his friend and his friend's wife, the woman he now didn't want to face unshaven and dirty from the trail.

It was late June and the creek was at flood tide. He forced his way through a tangle of chokecherry trees and currant bushes until he reached a high bank where he could look down upon the swirling muddy torrent. A man or horse in full strength might swim it here. At the crossing, a strong horse could breast the water. But Jack knew that at this moment he didn't possess the strength to cross Saddlehorn Creek.

But it must be crossed if he hoped to escape. For Tom's ranch was located on the other side. As Jack Moore stood on the bank, estimating his chances, knowing well the odds were against him, the brush crackled. He whirled. Since all night his wits had been attuned to terror, his gun flashed up. He covered the man who'd followed him to the creek bank.

"Put up your hands," Jack began, then his eyes widened. And a great smile expanded his half-shaven face. "Tom!" he said. And he felt relief as he stepped forward. "Tom—my old partner!"

Tom Hazen, a lean and sun-baked man, eyed Jack coldly. Hazen carried a rifle. Unsmiling, he answered his former partner's greeting.

"Hand over your gun," he ordered. "I'm taking you in to Keg Springs."

The change in Tom astounded Jack Moore. Here where he had expected to find a haven, Jack met hostility. He'd have bet on Tom's unselfish friendship to the limit. But

Tom had ordered him to surrender.

"You can't mean that, Tom!" Jack said blinking. "Why . . . why you and I were partners for years down on Sand Coulee. You knew all about my trouble with the Cross Ten over land. Ace Willoby was a bully. I wasn't the only small rancher he'd tried to run off the range. I'm tellin' you straight, Tom, I never killed him. You know I wouldn't shoot a man—even one like Ace Willoby—through the back."

Tom's long face looked hard as flint. "I didn't say I was arrestin' you for shootin' Ace. Word had reached me of that killin'! Even though you ran away like a fool, I wouldn't believe you guilty, for Ace was shot through the back. But . . . but mebbe I was wrong all along in you. I've heard you can live around a man for years and really never know him until he runs up against somethin' big and his real nature shows up plain. Reckon that's what happened to you, Jack. Otherwise you wouldn't have handled poor old Wah Lee like you did."

"Wah Lee? I never even touched him yesterday. All he did was start to shave me. You can see that by my face. Luke Hardaman came in and a fight started. I never saw Wah Lee after that. I've been out in the hills all night, tryin' to reach your place, figurin' I'd get some grub and a fresh hoss—"

"We all thought the same," Tom said. "That you'd show up here and ask for help. Before daybreak, old man Trooper, who's marshal of Keg Springs, woke me up. Before that I'd refused to help watch for you. But when he told me about Wah Lee, I knew I had been wrong. So I agreed to stand guard and light a signal fire on Saddlehorn Peak if I caught you. Well, the peak's just south. I can touch off the fire as

we ride in. I got my hoss here. He'll pack double. We'll be in town in an hour. Then—I'll turn you over when the rest of the posse shows up. Not many of 'em. Only five or six. Only old men like Trosper was around town when you showed up. Young fellows are all on the roundup, forty miles east."

"But what about Wah Lee?"

"Wah Lee's a good old fellow. He's helped out plenty of us in this country when we needed a little money. He's a thrifty Chinaman and always had a pretty good bank roll in his old iron safe. Well, the middle of last night, while men were out huntin' for you, you backtrailed to town. Reckon you was mad because Wah Lee exposed you yesterday. He had stayed in town with a couple of other old-timers who couldn't ride much. You woke him up with your gun, made him open his safe. After you had taken his bank roll, you wasn't satisfied. You told him you was gettin' even for him givin' you away. You shot him through the back. He tumbled over and you thought he was dead. You bent over him to make sure. You was wearin' a neck scarf tied around the lower part of your face for a mask. But Wah Lee wasn't *quite* dead. He was fadin' fast but he looked up as you bent over and he saw, beneath the lower edge of the mask, that the man who had robbed him and then tried to kill him was *half-shaved*."

Jack rubbed the dark stubble which had grown during the night on the right cheek of his face. Another frame-up. He'd run away from the first one. He'd been a fool for that. If he had stayed to face the music, Wah Lee might be alive today.

"Tom," he said quietly, "I'll go in with you. But I don't give up my

gun. I may need it."

"You're a dangerous man. You've turned wolf. I aim to disarm you before you kill some more helpless folks like Wah Lee. Give me that gun, Jack."

"I've got the drop on you, Tom. I'll go in to Keg Springs. But *not* as a prisoner. I'll go in to face the music the way I should've done in the first place. But I got enemies, Tom."

Tom advanced a step. His face was unyielding, his eyes bleak.

"A wolf like you don't dare to look a man in the eyes and shoot him," he declared. "Hand over that gun."

"Tom—think of your wife. Don't *make* me kill you, Tom!"

Tom kept on advancing. He was that sort of a man, of iron will once he had determined to carry through any sort of a job. He would disarm Jack Moore or die in the attempt. And in his burning contempt for his former partner, he didn't believe Jack would shoot him. He came on. And in the clearing behind him, his pony cropped grass, unconcerned with the strange conflicts of men.

Jack retreated toward the bank of the flooded stream. He made one last despairing appeal as he lifted his gun to cover Tom.

"Don't force me to make your wife a widow."

"You haven't got the nerve to do that. You won't shoot me."

There was no other way out. But Jack had vowed he wouldn't surrender.

"No," he said, and he dropped his gun at his feet, "I won't. I just *can't* shoot you, Tom. But—no man can make me surrender."

And he stepped backward off the bank into the swirling waters of Saddlehorn Creek. Although he had decided that a man weary as himself could never swim across it, it offered

a fighting chance for survival. And whatever happened to him, he would not make Tom's wife a widow.

That was the way his confused thoughts ran as the icy green water closed over his head and the undertow gripped his writhing body with its fierce clutch.

HE fought the undertow for his life. But his right arm, weakened by the injury received in Wah Lee's shop, hampered him. The roar of angry water beat against his ears. Falling from the bank, he had heard Tom's shout. And that lingered in his mind, even as the bullet-swift current seized him and flung him down the stream toward the black rocks jutting above the surface where the creek rushed into a small canyon.

He broke surface and the echo of Tom's shout still lingered with him. The undertow was gripping his legs. On the high banks, it seemed to his dimmed eyes that objects like tall pine trees and patches of brush were rushing past with express-train speed. Then he saw, through flying froth where the wild water boiled around huge boulders, that the shout wasn't an echo. He saw a horseman on the bank and the man was shouting.

As Jack went under, he flung up his left arm. Weakly. Then the cold flood closed over him, and water, laced with sand, filled his throat. This was the end of the trail. But even as his senses faded and he yearned only to float and find rest, he was dimly conscious of an unyielding drag on his weary body. A drag—but not so strong as that of the undertow.

And Tom's shout—that *hadn't* been an echo. Moore had thrust up his left arm, because Tom had been mounted—and a horse could drag a

man from this flood if its rider were expert enough to get a lariat loop placed. Now there was a drag on his left shoulder. Suddenly Jack Moore wanted to live. He wanted to go back and face the music. He'd never shot an old Chinaman through the back. Living meant fighting. *Always fighting.* Men fought because they were proud, greedy, determined. Men fought because of a number of things. But men fought hardest for survival.

WHEN Jack Moore opened his eyes, it was dusk and he felt the heat of a fire. He opened his eyes and there above him stood Tom Hazen.

"My hoss and I got you out just in time," Tom said huskily. "I brought you over to the ranch. You're in the living room now. You've been asleep or unconscious for hours. I stripped off your wet clothes and rolled you in a blanket and the wife fed you some hot soup."

Jack straightened up angrily.

"You mean you let your wife see me when I was all wet and dirty and half a crop of whiskers on my face?"

Tom called out, Molly!" and a woman entered the room. She greeted Jack with a cheerful laugh. He couldn't return it, for he saw that Tom's wife wore a white bandage over her eyes.

"She couldn't see you," Tom explained gently. "She . . . she's blind."

"Blind? Why, Molly had the prettiest blue eyes in Wyoming."

"I hope they're still pretty, Jack," Molly interrupted gayly. "And I'm not permanently blind. That is—if Tom can take me to a physician in Omaha for treatment. You see it happened this spring after a late snowstorm. I was careless and

failed to put lampblack under my eyes to shut out the sun glare. As a result, I became snow-blind."

"Folks get over that."

"I wasn't so lucky. But Tom investigated. So you can ride herd on the ranch, Jack, while he takes me to Omaha for the operation." She left the room abruptly. Jack saw sudden tears rolling down her cheeks.

"She isn't so sure about that operation," Tom said soberly. "Nor am I. Cattle business wasn't good this year. You know how hard times hit us ranchers. But she must be operated on soon as possible."

"What'll it cost?"

"Around five hundred dollars. Might just as well be five thousand so far as I'm concerned."

Jack said briskly: "Loan me some dry clothes. And rope a hoss for me. I'm leavin' here right away."

"You can have the best I got. I hope you reach Canada all right. I know now"—Tom's voice broke—"after the way you went into that flood to keep from shootin' me, that you never shot *anybody* through the back. I hope you make it over the line ahead of the law."

"To hell with Canada! I'm not ridin' north. You and me are headin' south to Keg Springs." Jack grinned. "I won't even take time to shave. I've learned a lot about fool pride. You're takin' me in to face the music."

"I won't do it!"

"And by doin' it, you earn the five hundred dollars for Molly's operation."

"I ain't a skunk of that stripe!"

"You'll take me in, Tom, if I have to make you do it at the point of a gun. The blue eyes of Molly are worth more—far more—than the ornery neck of a jackleg cowboy. If they won't believe me when I face

'em, then let 'em stretch me. Go get those hosses, Tom."

THROUGH the black night, the flaming beacon that Tom had touched off during the ride to Keg Springs informed lone watchers of the forest trails that the chase was over, the killer had been captured. And in the little cow town, Jack Moore faced the music.

While Tom Hazen sat by silently, hating himself for bringing in his partner, Jack calmly told old man Troser, the town marshal: "I never killed Ace Willoby or the Chinaman. I haven't got much evidence to prove I'm innocent. But I'll take my chances. There's just one thing I want to make sure of—that the law forces Luke Hardaman to shell out five hundred dollars to Tom here for taking me. Luke made that offer fair and square. Make him stand by it."

Troser said: "Luke's still out huntin' for you. Been on the trail steady since he near took you in Wah Lee's shop. When he comes in, he'll be glad to pay. Meanwhile, we'll all go up to the barber shop. Somebody there who'd like to talk with you."

The man who faced Jack in the barber shop was the grizzled old sheriff of Sand Coulee. While he questioned Jack, weary riders, grimy from the dust of the trail, rode into Keg Springs. The audience in the little impromptu courtroom grew.

The sheriff laid a rifle on the barber stand which now served for a desk.

"You ever see that rifle?" he asked Jack.

"No."

"We found it up in a crevice in the red cliff near the spot where Ace Willoby was killed. Somebody hid it there but it slipped down to where

he couldn't reach it in a hurry. If you had stayed around to talk things over, you might've found out that Ace was killed with a rifle—not a six-gun, such as you carried. But you ran away."

"I'm here now," whispered Jack. "If I had thought, at the time—"

"Lots of men don't think until it's too late. But we know that you weren't packing your rifle the day Ace died. We found your rifle in your cabin. Of course, you might've borrowed this one. But—there's a man's initials on it, a man who wouldn't be likely to loan *you* a gun."

Outside red streaks of coming day shone on the eastern divides, but here in the shop, men still talked and watched each other by the light of smoky lamps. A horseman halted outside and his spurs clanked as he walked stiffly into the shop.

"Hello, Luke," the sheriff greeted him quietly. "You been a long time gettin' here."

"I'd be farther north if I hadn't seen that signal fire on the peak. Who took the murderin' skunk that killed Ace?"

"Tom Hazen. Fork out the reward money, Luke."

"Hazen? Jack's partner? Some-thin' strange about that!"

The sheriff rose and commanded sternly: "Pay the money, Luke."

Hazen stood up and protested. "I won't take blood money."

Jack arose. He was unarmed but they hadn't tied his hands. He leaned on the table and said to the sheriff: "Luke offered that reward to the man who'd bring me in to the law. Tom did it. Now—let the law make good."

The sheriff smiled and leaned back in his chair. He faced Luke, who stood just within the shop entrance

where the lamplight was clear on his dark face.

"Luke," the lawman drawled, "you can stand payin' out five hundred dollars. You're a rich man now. We found the partnership agreement recorded in the courthouse, Luke, after Ace was killed and you started after Jack. It showed that whichever of you partners died first, the other would inherit his half of the Cross Ten. So you can easy afford five hundred dollars, Luke. You better pay it now before the court ties up all the proceeds of the Ace Willoby estate."

Luke took one step forward. "Why should the court tie up the estate?" he asked harshly.

"They do that when there's some doubt about the way it was inherited. Maybe *unlawful* ways was resorted to gain money and property. They're *doin'* that in this case, Luke, because I came up here with a warrant to arrest you for the murder of Ace Willoby. We found your rifle, Luke, where it had dropped down into that crevice in the cliff. Bullet we took out of Ace matches the size of the gun. There's still ca'tridges in the magazine, Luke."

Hardaman ripped out an oath. "You lie!" he snarled, and he retreated toward the door. He reached for his gun. The lamplight fell strongly upon his face. To Jack Moore, the man had appeared in that hostile guise the day before, sullen, hostile of eye, *unshaven*. But any man knows the difference between beards.

Jack whipped up the rifle. The lever clicked as he threw a cartridge into the barrel.

"You wolf!" he shouted. "I remember now. You picked up the chink's razor durin' our fight. Carried it with you when you chased me. So the idea came to you that

you'd make the frame-up tougher against me. You shaved off half your whiskers, came back, and killed the Chinaman. But then you had to stay outa town to let your beard grow back. Well, if the chink was alive to prove it, he'd know the difference, as an expert barber, between four days' whiskers on one side of my face and a day's growth on one side of yours. You—"

Luke pitched forward his gun. Jack Moore was down on his knee. He fired and the crack of the rifle snapped above the roar of Luke's Colt. Luke leaped backward through the door. Men were crowding to the four walls, startled by the sudden turn in the murder hearing. Jack reached the entrance.

His right arm hampered him. Luke was putting a hand to the saddlehorn. But he swung and threw a bullet that cut splinters from the door frame. Jack steadied his rifle barrel above that bullet mark, pulled trigger. Luke flung up his arms, pitched forward on his face in the dust. His horse bolted, dragging the reins. Jack went out and stood over the quiet body. He said angrily as Tom ran up: "Now he can't pay you that reward money."

The Sand Coulee sheriff joined the little group of men there in the dawn light. "The county put up the same amount as Luke for the arrest of Ace Willoby's killer. I reckon you sort of *arrested* his career, Jack. What you do with the money is your business."

"But Wah Lee? If I hadn't

stopped for a shave, this skunk wouldn't have killed him."

The town marshal drawled: "Wah Lee ain't dead. We got a doctor and he says Wah Lee will recover. But it wasn't until late today that Wah Lee could talk much to us. Then we knew you never tried to kill him. It was a riddle to us who did, until the sheriff rode into town last night. Then we knew that Hardaman had tried to frame you again. But we had to take chances and wait for him to come back to town. There was always a chance somebody would tip' him off and let him know the chink was still alive and able to talk. If he'd known that, he'd *never* have come back."

"Why?"

Trosper grinned. "Appearances," he said, "are not always what they seem. Pride goeth before a fall and a lot of other things, as you know now. But Wah Lee told us today that you couldn't have been the man who tried to kill him. You see Wah Lee's an expert barber. He remembered that he had shaved half *your* face but hadn't taken any whiskers off your chin. The man who killed him *didn't know that*. He took it for granted—as most men do—that a half shave means cheek and at least half the chin. He digged a pit for himself, as the Good Book says."

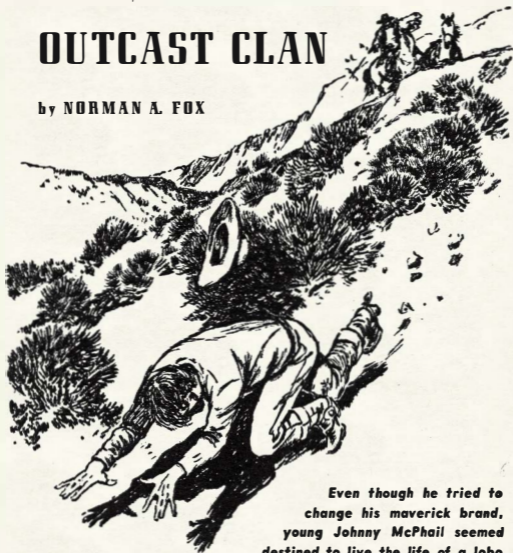
Jack gazed down at Luke's limp frame. "And Hardaman never will know it now," he said. "We both came back to face the music. But one of us was long on whiskers and the other too short."

THE END.



LAST OF THE OUTCAST CLAN

by NORMAN A. FOX



Even though he tried to change his maverick brand, young Johnny McPhail seemed destined to live the life of a lobo

Hurling himself out of the saddle, Johnny somersaulted down the slope, and then the lawman's gun began to bang.

CHAPTER I

ONE AGAINST THE OX-BOW

FOR almost an hour he had hunkered here in the ranchhouse's littered living room, the rifle in his

hands, his blue eyes sighted along the barrel he had laid across the window sill as he watched that lone rider toil up the slope to the little McPhail spread high in the Lost Horse Hills. Some folks had friends who called upon them, young Johnny McPhail reflected bitterly. But any rider was an enemy, real

or potential, when your name was McPhail and you were the last of that outcast clan. Tightening his grip on the trigger, he waited, lonely as a cornered lobo.

Now the rider was nearer, much nearer, a grizzled oldster who stepped down from his saddle before the McPhail gate. There was little menace in the fellow's manner, Johnny noticed, but his horse bore the brand of the neighboring Ox-bow. Remembering the many petty persecutions of that domineering spread in this last month, Johnny thrust the rifle forward and said coldly: "That'll be about close enough, feller!"

He wasn't much more than a boy, this Johnny McPhail, a tall, lean, tow-headed youngster who needed a haircut and shave. But the savagery in his voice brought the oldster to an abrupt stop.

"I've fetched a note for yuh," he quavered. "Take it easy now, kid. I ain't here to make trouble."

"A note, eh?" Johnny said, suspicion edging his voice. "Set it on the fence and put a rock on top of it. Then see how scarce you can make yourself."

The oldster hastened to obey, Johnny watching him warily the while. That fellow was the Ox-bow cook, Johnny knew, and his unexpected visit made no sense. But the Ox-bow man was into his saddle again and well down the trail before Johnny ventured from the house, the rifle in the crook of his arm. Then he had the note in his hand and was reading the delicate, feminine writing: "There'll be a dance in the Cloudburst Community Hall tonight. I'm saving a waltz for you." Jean Duane's name tagged that brief message, and Johnny read it again and again.

A dance! An invitation to a

dance! Those were alien things belonging to a world from which the wild McPhails had been excluded by common consent of a range that had known four McPhails and weighed three of them, finding them wanting. And Jean Duane was inviting him, Johnny McPhail, to such an affair!

Yet that very fact made Johnny wary as a wolf who scents a trap. Jean Duane must hate him now. She was the daughter of Burk Duane, who owned the powerful Ox-bow, though he left the running of the spread to big Grip Satterly, his foreman. True, Jean's trail had often crossed with Johnny's in those happier days before a killer's bullet had burned down Scotty Stagg, an Ox-bow man, and Thad McPhail, Johnny's long-haired older brother, had stood trial for murder. Jean had been more than kind to Johnny, and she'd said, "I'm sorry," that day in court when they'd led Thad McPhail, cursing and raging, back to his cell, a condemned man. But Jean Duane belonged to the Ox-bow, and was therefore on the other side of the fence from Johnny.

Was this a lure to toll him into town where the Ox-bow crew might be waiting to finish the feud that the killing had started? Johnny hadn't seen Jean since the trial. He had avoided everybody, holing up here at the ranch where each familiar thing in the home he had shared with Thad was a mute reminder of his doomed brother. Thus Johnny's bitterness had blossomed, and now, with Thad that much nearer the hang noose, he, Johnny, had been invited to a dance!

Yet in his heart, Johnny couldn't believe that golden-haired, blue-eyed Jean Duane was baiting a bush-whack trap for him. And even if she was? He'd grown tired of living alone with ghosts and memories. If

this invitation was a challenge and a trick, it was at least a promise of action. Running his hand over his stubbled chin, Johnny went to look for razor and shears and soap.

TWO hours later, resplendent in a clean shirt and as tonsorially perfect as he could make himself, Johnny McPhail rode down onto the tawny flats toward Cloudburst, a gun at his hip and an invitation in his pocket. Whatever waited at trail's end, he was ready for it.

Night had settled over the cow town when he came to the big, barn-like community hall on its outskirts. Light splashed from the many windows, and the music of a violin, an accordion and a guitar announced that the dance had already started. The doorman who took Johnny's ticket said: "Better check that gun, mister. It ain't proper to be wearing one here."

"It is for me," countered Johnny, and went on in.

A polka had come to an end amid a medley of laughter and talk and the swishing of long dresses. There was quite a crowd in the hall, but Johnny's eyes singled out Jean, sitting along the far wall, a blue gown accentuating her blond loveliness. Beside her sat her father, bluff, hearty Burk Duane, his right leg, incased in a cast, supported before him. Johnny came to the girl just as the musicians began a waltz.

"Well?" he said.

Jean slipped into his arms, and Johnny whirled her awkwardly into the center of the floor, for he knew much more about saddle whacking than he did about waltzing. Around them startled murmurs rose as dancers gazed upon the amazing spectacle of Burk Duane's daughter in the arms of the last of the McPhails. But the music built a wall

of sound and behind the protection of it, Johnny said: "I came, Jean. Why did you send for me?"

Jean lifted blue eyes to his. "To bring you to your senses, Johnny."

"My senses?"

"They say you haven't poked your nose out of your ranchhouse since . . . since the trial," she said. "Sheriff Harless rode up to talk, and you ordered him away with a rifle—and him the law of Cloudburst! It won't do, Johnny. What's happening to Thad can't be changed. Don't go on making an outcast of yourself."

"An outcast!" Johnny echoed, and anger thickened his tongue. "Cloudburst range did that to us, Jean. There were four McPhails once—Iron Mike, our dad, and Zeke and Thad and me. One by one we've been hounded to death. Maybe Iron Mike and Zeke did stray off the straight and narrow. It was a hard range when they first come here. Thad and me tried to live down their rep, though, but folks never gave us a chance. And now Thad—Jean, is he still here in Cloudburst? I've tried to lose track of the days."

"Mort Reeve, Poe's deputy, took Thad to Bristol on tonight's train," Jean said slowly.

JOHNNY stepped on her foot without being aware of it, stricken by this news that was as heartbreaking as it was inevitable. He didn't need to be told why Thad had been sent to the county seat, ninety mountainous miles away. They kept a gallows in Bristol.

"It'll soon be all over, Johnny," Jean said softly. "But you've got to understand that it's the beginning of a new day for you."

"With the Ox-bow cutting my fences and shooting what few cattle I've got?" Johnny asked bitterly.

"With Grip Satterly hating my guts for what he thinks Thad did? Am I supposed to turn the other cheek, Jean?"

"Grip and Scotty Stag were pards," Jean said. "You can't blame Grip for being bitter. But dad will see that there's no more persecution, Johnny. These last few weeks we've been living in town, down at the old Rankin cottage. Dad's been having a broken leg doctored. But once he gets back to the Ox-bow he'll make Grip ease off."

"And the rest of the range will just naturally forget that the name of McPhail is bad medicine," Johnny scoffed.

"I said a new day was beginning, Johnny," Jean reminded him. "That's up to you."

"Meaning?"

"There were four McPhails once. The name belonged to all of you then. No matter what you did to make it a good name, Johnny, another McPhail could blacken it for you. Now it's your name—and yours alone. Whatever that name means from now on—good or bad—will be your doing. Don't you see, Johnny? The old stigma can be erased forever if you'll try. That's what I wanted to tell you when I sent for you."

"And who'll believe that a McPhail could be anything but bad?" he demanded. "Who'll give me a chance to prove myself?"

"I will," Jean said.

And because there was so much faith in that simple statement, Johnny suddenly saw that the thing she proposed *could* be so, and a whole new vista of living opened before him and a clean McPhail name was very much worth fighting for. Jean had showed him the way when she'd said, "It's your name—

and yours alone," and he said, very humbly, "Thank you, Jean. If it can be done, I'll do it!"

"Then come shake hands with my father," Jean urged, and Johnny realized that the music had ceased. "There'll be an end to the feuding between the Ox-bow and you tonight."

"Sure," he agreed. "But just a minute, please."

Striding to the doorman, he extended his gun, butt forward. "I was a little forgetful tonight, feller," he said. "I'll be obliged if you'll check this for me."

Then he crossed over to Burk Duane and took the cattleman's proffered hand.

"My daughter has had much to say about you, McPhail," Duane said. "She feels that your family has been more sinned against than sinning. I'm a blunt man and I'll admit that I'm not so sure. But Jean thinks you've got a chance coming, and I'll back her from blazes to breakfast."

"That's good enough," Johnny conceded. The music was starting again and he turned to Jean, and for the first time in a month he was smiling. "That last one was the dance you saved for me," he said. "This one I've had earmarked for you."

JEAN came into his arms again, but before he could swing her out upon the floor a hand fell upon his shoulder, spinning him about. Thus he found himself staring into the blazing eyes of Grip Satterly. The heavy-featured, big-nosed Ox-bow foreman hadn't been in the hall before, but he was here now, and hostility edged his voice.

"Keep your hands off her, McPhail!" he stormed. "Maybe she chose to dance with you rather than

raise a rumpus here in public. But she don't have to be pawed around by no bushwhackin' skunk of your breed. Now get to blazes out of a place where decent folks are gathered!"

Johnny heard Jean's startled gasp and Burk Duane's stiff words of reprimand. But he heard them too late, for he wasn't waiting for the Duanes to set Satterly right on matters. His fist was already arcing, his knuckles exploding against Satterly's ponderous jaw, lifting the foreman from his feet and sending him sliding across the dance floor.

Satterly bounded erect like something made of rubber, his fists flailing, his voice raised to a bellow. "So it's a fight you want!" he roared. "Here's one for Scotty Stagg, burned down by that back-shootin' brother of yours!"

He launched a blow that would have been murderous if it had landed, but Johnny dodged under it. A red, roaring rage throbbing through him, Johnny came in swinging like a pile driver.

"Here's one for Thad McPhail!" he panted. "And one for Iron Mike and Zeke who didn't have a chance because of narrow-minded skunks like you!"

Satterly was the heavier man by twenty pounds, but Johnny had youth to back his fists, and his anger and hate were as great as the Ox-bow man's. As a fight it was something of a shambles, for Johnny's relentless fists beat down Satterly's guard, smashing staggering blows to body and face, leveling the Ox-bow man half stunned upon the floor before the crowding spectators could tear them apart.

It was over and victory was Johnny's, but Jean was regarding him with wide, startled eyes, and the taste of triumph was ashes in

Johnny's mouth as sanity came back to him. Just for a few minutes he'd forgotten himself, meeting a situation as Iron Mike or Zeke or Thad would have met it. A fine start this had been toward showing folks that the last of the McPhails was determined to give his name a new meaning!

And yonder through the doorway came Poe Harless, the law of Cloudburst, a scowl on his face as he strode forward.

CHAPTER II

RIDER FOR THE LAW

IN distant Bristol sheriffs came and sheriffs went, but no matter who held that august office in the county seat, Poe Harless remained under sheriff at Cloudburst, handling his job with a machinelike efficiency that kept him indispensable. A tall, gaunt, poker-faced man, he was reputed to be as hard as he was impartial. The McPhail clan had known him well and liked him little, and Johnny matched the lawman's scowl as Harless came into the dance hall.

"Whatever the fracas was about," Harless observed, surveying the situation quickly, "it appears that only one of you gents is in shape to be jailed."

"Just a minute, sheriff," Burk Duane interjected. "I believe in backing my boys, but I'm sorry to say that Satterly asked for what young McPhail gave him. You can't jail the boy."

"That," said Poe Harless, fixing his frigid stare upon the Ox-bow owner, "is for me to decide. Come along, Johnny."

If he'd had his gun, Johnny would have gone for it then, for he was remembering that jail doors swung only one direction for men of his name. As it was, he had to let

Harless lead him through the lane that parted for them, and prisoner and captor trudged up the night-shrouded street to the jailhouse. But once into Harless' office, the lawman lighted a kerosene lamp and waved Johnny to a chair.

"Sit down, kid," he ordered. "I'd like a palaver with you."

"Nothing doing," Johnny said curtly. "I know what you want to ask—the same thing that fetched you up to my spread after Thad's trial. You figger I know where Thad hid the money Scotty Stagg was packin' when he was killed. But I can't tell you what I don't know, so lock me up and get it over with!"

The lawman built a smoke with meticulous care and, surprisingly, tossed the makings toward Johnny. "You still figger Thad's innocent, eh?" Harless asked.

"Of course he's innocent!" Johnny declared. "But this range had the Injun sign on him before he ever come to trial. Oh, what's the use of talking about it?"

"I'm listening," Harless said.

IRON MIKE robbed a stagecoach and killed its guard years back," Johnny said. "The crowd that hung him might as well have hung my mother, too, for it killed her, though she took two years dying. I ain't sayin' pa wasn't guilty, and I ain't sayin' Zeke wasn't guilty when he was hung fifteen years ago for hoss stealing. That was before your time, Harless, but you've maybe heard how Thad was caught with Zeke. Thad was fourteen then; I was seven. The big-hearted jaspers who caught 'em decided to go easy on Thad, seeing as he was just a button. But they earmarked him like a steer so's folks would remember he'd once been caught stealing horses. That's why Thad wore his hair long—to

cover up those notched ears."

"I've heard the yarn," Harless said. "But consider the facts. Scotty Stagg repped for the Ox-bow when that outfit sent prime beef along with a trail herd to Bristol. Scotty hung around Bristol a day longer than the other gents who'd built up the herd, and he rode back alone—with thirty thousand dollars in a satchel. It was common knowledge that he was coming, and thirty thousand dollars is enough to tempt any man, even one who'd walked the straight and narrow."

"But Thad didn't kill him!" Johnny flared. "Man, don't you savvy that Thad was cured of owl-hoot ways when he was a kid? He'd seen what happened to Iron Mike and Zeke, and he had notched ears to remind him of what almost happened to him. 'This range is just waitin' for you and me to make a wrong move, kid,' Thad told me a hundred times. 'We can't afford to step out of line.'"

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Harless asked dryly. "Ox-bow riders, coming to meet Scotty, saw the killing from a ridge, too far away for them to get to Scotty's aid. But they weren't too far away to swear that a long-haired galoot of Thad's build was the killer. These aren't frontier days, and Thad was the only gent hereabouts who wore his hair long. And he streaked off in the direction of your spread when the Ox-bow boys tossed lead and took after him. And what was his alibi? He was off in the hills lookin' for strays that day and nobody had seen him! It was pretty thin, kid!"

"But Thad didn't do it!" Johnny insisted. "Sometimes he got mighty bitter at the way folks frowned on us, but he never made a wrong move. Some long-haired stranger must've done for Scotty. And I can't tell

you what happened to Scotty's money satchel. I never saw it—and I don't reckon Thad did either."

Poe Harless ground out his cigarette and proceeded to fashion another. He took a long time doing it, and the hanging silence was ominous and oppressive. At last he said: "I've hard news to break, kid, and I might as well get it over with. You figger Thad was innocent. Maybe so, maybe not. But, like a sky pilot would say, he was judged by a higher court. He's dead, kid."

"Dead!" Johnny cried unbelievably. "But he wasn't scheduled to—"

Harless shook his head. "I got the news by telegraph and I'm still waiting for the details. The train never got to Bristol. That trestle over Wolverine Gulch caved, and the train piled up. They found Thad and my deputy still handcuffed together, both of them goners."

TO Johnny it was like being hit by a wagon tongue. A sob shook him and he was unashamed of it. But even in the depth of his grief he found some consolation in the knowledge of how Thad McPhail had come to his end.

"You said something about a higher court," he managed to blurt. "Looks like that court decided Thad didn't have a hanging coming to him. And now he's dead . . . dead and—"

Poe Harless averted his eyes and waited in silence while a clock somewhere in the room noisily paced off the minutes. At last Johnny said: "Thanks for telling me, mister. I don't feel like talking any more. Will you shove me in whichever cell you've kept dusted for me?"

"I'm not holding you, kid."

"Not holding me?"

"I try to be a fair man," Harless

went on. "I've been against you McPhails, but a lawman's got no business forming opinions without evidence. There's something almighty wrong here on Cloudburst range, but I'm not too sure the McPhails have been at the bottom of it. Johnny, how do you feel about Grip Satterly?"

Johnny looked at his bruised knuckles. "Do I have to tell you?" he countered.

"The running of the Ox-bow has been left almost entirely to Satterly, especially since Duane busted a leg," Harless said. "I've got a suspicion that Satterly is feathering his own nest, running Ox-bow beef into the hills from time to time. That's only a hunch, without proof. But I want a man to scout the Lost Horse Hills, keep an eye peeled for real evidence. And I think you're the man."

"Me?"

"And why not?" Harless asked, a ghost of a smile breaking the blankness of his face. "A snooping badge toter would scare wide loopers into laying low. A fellow like you might cut sign. Now I'm only guessing that Satterly's up to something. But if you'd like to try getting the truth, you've got a job. Want the chance?"

Did he want the chance? Johnny's first impulse was to refuse, for all his days he'd considered the law as his natural enemy. His second impulse was to laugh at the irony of a McPhail riding for the law. But he neither refused nor laughed, for he was remembering what Jean Duane had said: "It's your name—and yours alone." He'd gotten off to a poor start toward redeeming that name, yet three people had shown faith in him in varying degrees—Jean, her father, and now Poe Harless. So he said: "I'll take a try at it. When do I start?"

"Right away," Harless decided. "Head back to your spread and get whatever supplies you'll need. You haven't got a gun, I see. Here." Dipping his hand into a desk drawer, he extended a .45. "I collect a heap of irons in a year's time. Keep it handy while you're snooping in the hills, kid. If you run across anything interesting, come back and report to me. Good luck."

Johnny came erect. "This chance means more to me than you know, Harless. You won't be sorry."

"I hope not," Harless said, but the tone of his voice indicated that his judgment was reserved. "I'll promise you this, kid. If you do a job for the law, you'll have me on your side from here on out."

They shook hands, and with their pact sealed in this manner, Johnny strode down to the hitch rail where he had left his horse. Music still blared from the community hall, and he fought an impulse to go and tell Jean Duane that he was on his way to redemption. Better to wait until he'd won, he decided, and headed for his hill spread.

THUS it came about that Johnny McPhail turned his back on his spread the next day, a rider for the law. And, oddly, he felt freer than he had in all of his twenty-two years,

Tightening his grip on the trigger, Johnny waited like a cornered lobo, for any visitor to the McPhail spread was bound to be an enemy.



and gradually it dawned on him that Thad's death had given him this new sense of freedom. He'd always believe in the innocence of that ill-starred brother of his, but now Thad was gone, and by virtue of that fact Johnny's destiny belonged solely to himself.

Riding along, he drove ever deeper into the wild, tangled hills, following a cliff-bordered trail that grew gloomier as the sun dropped to the west. He knew this country well, did Johnny, for he and Thad had ranged through it many times. Soon he was across the unmarked border that divided McPhail land from the Ox-bow's holdings. Up yonder gulch was an unused line shack belonging to the Duane spread, and Johnny headed for it to spend the night beneath a roof.

He was in the shadows of a thicket of box elder trees, and the shack was a dim shape ahead when the gun spoke, a bullet zipping dangerously close to the brim of his sombrero. Coming down out of his saddle with considerable alacrity, Johnny unleathered his borrowed gun and peered ahead. Someone had fired from the shack, yet there was no light yonder to betoken human presence.

Tethering his horse to a sturdy bush, Johnny snaked through the trees, his nerves tingling. Already he'd cut sign on something almighty wrong, and he hoped fiercely that the trail would lead to Grip Satterly. That gunman hadn't had a real glimpse of Johnny; not in this fading light. The fellow was set to shoot any intruder, proof that the man was beyond the law. Johnny aimed to find out the whys and wherefores.

Inching forward, he came to the clearing before the shack. There was nothing to do but expose him-

self. Darting quickly, he zigzagged ahead and saw that the shack's door was open. He expected snarling lead to stop him in midstride, but he reached the shack with no bullets coming to bar his way. And there, on the threshold, he paused, suddenly realizing why there hadn't been a second shot.

The man who had fired lay sprawled upon the floor unconscious, his gun still gripped in his hand. And the heart went out of Johnny McPhail at the sight. For the man was his brother, Thad McPhail, who was supposed to have died in a train wreck the night before.

CHAPTER III

WHEN BLOOD TOLD

THAD McPHAIL—here! Dropping to his knees, Johnny examined his fallen brother. Thad's long hair was caked with blood from a bullet wound. Lifting his brother, Johnny toted him to a rude bed in one corner, and as he did so he was struck by a wild suspicion. Had Poe Harless known Thad wasn't dead? Had Harless, shrewd as always, sent one McPhail to track down another? But such a theory made no sense. Harless would have known that Johnny would side his brother instead of capturing him.

Thus Johnny came to a decision without being aware that he had faced one. Thad was in trouble, and Johnny was going to help him. Twice now he'd had a chance at redemption, and twice he had thrown the chance away. Jean Duane had expressed faith in him, and then Johnny had lost his head and messed up Grip Satterly. Poe Harless had given him a second chance, and here was Johnny already aiding a wanted man! But blood was thicker than water

Thad was burning with fever, muttering deliriously, and Johnny wondered where his brother had found the strength to fire that one shot. Fetching water from a nearby creek, Johnny put it to simmer on a crazily tilted three-legged stove which, with the bed, a table, and a scattering of crippled chairs, made up the furnishings of the shack. Washing Thad's wound, Johnny used his own undershirt to fashion a bandage. Thad had lost a lot of blood, Johnny guessed, but, barring infection, he wasn't in bad shape.

Thad's babblings were a blur of words running together, a meaningless gibberish, but at last he fell into a quiet sleep, and Johnny dozed in a chair beside him. Thad woke about midnight. He blinked owlishly at a lantern Johnny had unearthed and lighted, but the madness was gone from his eyes.

"You, kid!" he said weakly, his hand faltering to Johnny's. "Thank God!"

"Poe Harless told it that you'd died in a railroad wreck not far out of Cloudburst," Johnny said.

Thad closed his eyes, wincing. "When we hit the bottom of the gulch, everything was upside down and the coach was afire," he explained. "Mort Reeve was dead from the fall, and I had a mighty bad moment, kid, figgerin' I'd be cremated 'alive, me being shackled to him. But I got through his pockets and found the key to the cuffs."

"But Harless said—" Johnny began in bewilderment.

THERE was a dead passenger jammed in on top of the two of us," Thad went on. "I handcuffed him to Mort. Some crazy idea, I guess, that the fire would do a lot

of damage and nobody would guess that I'd got away when they found two dead men handcuffed together. I don't rightly remember getting out of that coach. I stumbled away, and some place near Cloudburst I hit a little ranch. There was nobody home, so I helped myself to a horse and a gun. Then I struck out for our place."

"But that hole in your head?" Johnny interjected. "A bullet did that!"

"Just before dawn, crossing Ox-bow land, I met riders coming home from the direction of town, Grip Satterly at the head of them. They called for me to stop, but I didn't. Satterly fired—darn near knocked me off the hoss. I kept a-going, out-run 'em, fell off the horse sometime today. I remembered this shack and headed here. Was it you I saw out in the trees, sneakin' up? Sorry, kid. I was half out of my head when I fired—"

"You missed me a mile," Johnny lied. "Now you'd better rest, Thad. We'll have to get you across into Canada mighty soon. If Satterly saw you he'll have the whole Ox-bow combing the hills, seeing how he hates us McPhails. We've got to be on the move."

"I'm not going!" Thad declared, and the hysterical, delirious note crept back into his voice.

"Not going?"

"I've had a lot of time for thinking," Thad amplified. "Days when I sat in jail, nights when I couldn't sleep. I tried to play 'er straight on this range, kid, but they tolled me into a hang-noose trap just the same. I never shot Scotty Stagg. Yet they aim to string me up for that killing. The way I figger it, a man can only be hung once, so I've got some bullets with Ox-bow names

on 'em. I'm stickin' here, kid, and I'm gunning for Grip Satterly and Burk Duane!"

"No, Thad, you can't!" Johnny cried, wondering where he'd find the argument to make this persecuted brother of his see things as he, Johnny, had begun to see them.

"Like thunder, I can't!" raved Thad. "You remember Grip Satterly in court, shoutin' that he wasn't gonna rest till Scotty Stagg's killer was dangling? He helped swear me into a hang noose, and, by his own testimony, Satterly wasn't even up on the ridge with the rest of the Ox-bow hands who claimed they saw me kill Stagg! And Burk Duane's no better. A word from him in my favor would have helped in court. I'm gettin' both of them, kid!"

He sank back exhausted, and Johnny stared, horror in his eyes, as he saw his dream of a new life destroyed. Sometimes Thad slept in the ensuing hours, sometimes he raved and muttered. The dawn found Johnny hollow-eyed and hungry, but Thad's fever had dropped and he was breathing easier.

"Me, I've been traveling light," Johnny told Thad when his brother woke. "Figgered my gun would fetch me grub. I've rummaged this shack and it's mighty short on food. Beef broth is what you need, and I'm going to get the makings for you."

He paused in the doorway, casting an anxious glance at his brother. "You were pretty delirious last night, Thad," he added. "Reckon you didn't mean half what you said."

"You mean about fighting the Ox-bow? You don't see it my way, do you, kid? But that's the way it's got to be!"

WORDLESSLY, Johnny closed the door and went outside, heading for his horse. Within an hour he found a couple of Ox-bow strays, but he left them unmolested. On Cloudburst range, as on many others, it was customary to eat your neighbor's beef in preference to your own, but a McPhail would be censured for doing what anyone else might do with impunity. Veering steadily toward his own spread, Johnny came upon a McPhail steer before noon.

He shot the steer and dressed the animal out, burying the hide and entrails away from the trail, and headed back toward the line shack with the meat. If Thad couldn't ride for a few days, the beef could be jerked and kept handy to use meanwhile.

Riding along, Johnny kept a wary eye peeled for man-haunting riders. Grip Satterly had glimpsed Thad McPhail, and Satterly would never be content until the fugitive was recaptured. And he, Johnny, was just as deep in trouble as Thad, for he'd stood by his brother. A fine unofficial deputy he had turned out to be! Yet what was a new name worth if he'd had to buy it by betraying his own brother?

Thus he came toward the line shack, and because his thoughts were heavy and oppressive, they took the edge from his wariness, and he blundered right into a trap. He was out of the saddle before the shack's door when it was sprung, a slight movement in the box-elder thicket swinging him about. He turned to run, but guns crashed from cover, peppering bullets cutting off his escape. A half dozen men came charging forward, guns in hands, and all of them belonged to the Ox-bow. Grip Satterly, leading them, bellowed: "Put 'em up, you

fist-slingin' son! Put 'em up or we'll shoot to kill!"

It was odd, Johnny reflected in that dismal moment, that Satterly was even giving him a chance to surrender. Then he saw Under Sheriff Poe Harless stalk from the thicket, and he knew that the law's presence had put a restraint upon any intentions Grip Satterly might otherwise have nursed. But Harless' poker face was drawn together in a scowl, and there was no sympathy in the gaze he bent upon Johnny.

"I told you that if we hid out for a while we'd bag at least one of these skunks," Satterly crowed. "Maybe Thad got away on us, but we sure nailed this one!"

Thad had escaped! Clutching eagerly at that news, Johnny turned to Harless. "Tell them what I'm doing hereabouts," he insisted. "Tell them who sent me into the Lost Horse Hills."

"I sent you, of course," Harless admitted. "But not to side Thad McPhail. Satterly, here, come to my office yesterday and claimed he'd seen Thad streaking across Ox-bow range. Meantime, I'd gotten a telegraphic report with a full description of the man who was found handcuffed to Mort Reeve's corpse. That description didn't fit Thad McPhail. We come man-hunting this morning, but Thad heard us coming and hit for the timber."

"And you figger—" Johnny began breathlessly.

"Don't bluff! I know you've been helping him," Harless went on relentlessly. "Inside the shack we found a basinful of bloody water and some rags torn up for bandages. Even then I might have figgered Thad had been patchin' himself. But Satterly had a hunch that if we waited around, the gent who had

been doctoring Thad would come blundering back, not knowing Thad had lit out. And here you are—totin' a beef carcass big enough to feed both you and Thad for a long spell."

"Let me at him, Harless," interjected Satterly, stroking his ponderous jaw which still bore the marks of Johnny's fist. "Let me have him alone for just fifteen minutes, the two of us on equal footin'. I'd like to prove to him that he was just plain lucky the other night at the dance. The boss give me orders to lay off him, but I reckon Burk Duane won't care much what happens to this galoot once he hears that the youngker has been helpin' an escaped killer. How about it, Harless?"

"No!" the sheriff said firmly. "He belongs to the law, and he's going to jail. Take his gun, somebody. Pile back onto that horse, kid. I gave you your chance, and this is what you made of it. Once a McPhail, always a McPhail seems to be the rule."

CHAPTER IV

LOBO ON THE LOOSE

HARLESS hadn't fetched along handcuffs, so Johnny's wrists were roped together and tied to his saddlehorn. When the sheriff stepped up into his own saddle, Grip Satterly announced that he'd ride part of the way with Harless and the prisoner.

"Me, I've got to get back to the Ox-bow to tend to a chore or two," he said. "The rest of you boys stay right here in the hills. Fan out and beat the brush for that other skunk. He's wounded and afoot and he can't get very far. I'll join you quick as I can."

Then the three were heading to-

ward distant Cloudburst, Johnny riding between scowling Grip Satterly, who alternately reviled and taunted him, and poker-faced Poe Harless, who said nothing. Johnny, himself, rode in stony silence, but his mind was busy and all of his thoughts were bitter. But when the trail forked and Satterly took his separate way down to the Ox-bow ranch building on the flats, Johnny turned scathing eyes upon Harless.

"What kind of a turncoat game are you playing, sheriff?" he asked. "One day you talk about putting the Injun sign on Satterly, and send me into the hills to get proof that he's rustlin' from his own spread. The next day you're siding Satterly to put the McPhails into jail!"

"This," said Harless, "is a horse of a different color, kid. I told you that all I had was a hunch about Satterly. Maybe I've still got that hunch. But when Satterly come to me to report that an escaped killer was roaming the hills, my job was to hear him out and back his man hunt. True, I'll grant that he's after you McPhails for personal reasons, but you're proved owlhooters and he isn't. The situation's sort of been reversed."

"But I didn't know Thad was in the hills until I stumbled onto him," Johnny protested, and proceeded to tell the entire story. He was riding slightly ahead of Harless, and he couldn't see the lawman's face, but Harless listened in attentive silence.

"Don't you see?" Johnny added when he'd finished his tale. "Thad's likely to turn lobo, and being hunted through the hills with the whole ox-bow crew snarling at his heels will make him more bitter than ever. He's threatened to get both Grip Satterly and Burk Duane, and he means it! Harless, you've got to turn me loose!"

"To help Thad outrun the law?"

"To save him from turning killer! To keep Duane and Satterly from stopping bullets. Thad will shoot down any man hunter that gets within gun range of him. But I could get to him, maybe talk sense to him. I don't reckon he'll ever surrender, seeing that a rope's waiting for him if he does. But maybe I can get him out of the notion of notching his guns to square things with the Ox-bow!"

"You're going to jail," Harless said firmly. "Me and the Ox-bow crew will run Thad down before he gets a chance to carry out his threats. Kid, you might as well save your breath. What sort of fool would I be to turn you loose when you've already proved that Thad McPhail is more important than anything else to you?"

JOHNNY fell silent again, but his mind was busier than ever, and he began to tug at the rope holding his wrists to the saddlehorn, a cold sweat starting out all over him as the rope gave a little. He had to get to Thad. He had to stop Thad before it was too late. What might happen to Grip Satterly didn't matter so much, but there was Thad, himself, to think about, and Jean Duane, who'd shown faith in Johnny, and whose father would die if Thad got within gunshot of him.

Keeping half a horse ahead of Harless, Johnny tugged as hard as he dared, working frantically yet being careful not to make such a display of effort as to arouse Harless' suspicion. They were still in the hill country, not far from the McPhail spread, the two horses moving along in single file as the trail followed the shoulder of a ridge with a rock and brush-mottled slope sweeping downward at their left.

And here Johnny's hands came free.

He waited a few breathless moments until circulation was partially restored, and then, suddenly, he was hurling himself out of the saddle, somersaulting down the slope. He heard Poe Harless curse stridently, and the lawman's gun began to bang, the bullets peppering dangerously close, kicking dust into Johnny's eyes as he careened downward.

Coming up against a bush, he wormed behind it, then dived for the cover of another. Far above him he saw Harless still sitting his saddle, firing with cool, mechanical precision. But each step was taking Johnny farther out of range, and, at the bottom of the slope, a cluster of chokecherry bushes screened him effectively.

Yet his was the sorry predicament of having jumped from the frying pan into the fire. Harless, patently not eager to risk his neck by riding down the slope, had touched spurs to his horse and was racing away atop the ridge. He'd gotten away from Harless, but he was afoot and unarmed, and he knew the lawman would soon be on his trail.

Sprinting along, Johnny veered in the direction of the McPhail spread. There'd be horses there, and a gun or two as well, but to try to get those things would be mighty dangerous. Surely one of the Ox-bow crew would be posted at the McPhail ranch against the chance that Thad might come there for food or shelter. But it was a risk that had to be run, and an hour later found Johnny skulking along the same slope that he'd once watched while the Ox-bow cook had toiled up here to fetch him a note.

When had that been? To Johnny, harassed and hunted now, it seemed an eternity ago, a timeless span in which he'd reared a hope that had

crashed to earth. But there wasn't time to dwell on his troubles, not when Thad was out somewhere yonder, also harassed and hunted, and determined to have his pound of flesh to repay for the persecution he hadn't deserved.

Clinging to any kind of cover, Johnny inched toward the little ranchhouse, doubly alert when he saw a saddler stomping in the corral, a horse bearing the Ox-bow brand. Reaching a corner of the house undetected, Johnny almost stumbled over a pile of fresh dirt and was astonished to see that a hole some two feet in breadth had been excavated here recently. But why? He dismissed the mystery for the time being, hoisting his eyes above the level of a window sill and peering into the ranchhouse.

An Ox-bow hand, a tall, gangling cowpoke, sprawled in a chair in the littered living room, a man obviously bored with the monotony of an assignment that had proved uneventful. Yet the fellow's presence barred the way to any stray guns within the ranchhouse. And it was going to be a mighty touchy job getting gear onto a horse since the guard would come running at the first sound of a disturbance in the corral.

But there was a horse standing waiting—the cowpoke's own—and Johnny eased to it and slipped into the kak. Now he was a horse thief, he reflected ruefully, but one more mark against him wouldn't matter at this stage of the game. He was beginning to understand Thad's theory that you couldn't be hanged more than once!

EASING back the corral gate, Johnny touched spurs to the horse and streaked across the ranch yard, the thunder of hoofs bringing

the startled cowhand to the door. Bullets were zipping as Johnny zig-zagged down the slope, and it came to him that he'd been dodging lead with alarming frequency lately. But he had a horse under him and it would take that Ox-bow hand awhile to get gear onto a McPhail cayuse. By the time the timber swallowed him, Johnny was sure he'd outdistanced pursuit.

There wasn't much left of the day, and he welcomed the descending darkness as he streaked toward Cloudburst. Every man's hand was against him now, and he'd need the cover of night. He might have turned back into the hills, but they were swarming with Ox-bow men and likely Poe Harless was there as well. Scant chance of penetrating through the man hunters to reach Thad. But if Thad had succeeded in escaping, then he would be seeking out Grip Satterly and Burk Duane. Johnny's job was to reach Duane first.

Thus he streaked across the miles, blanketing twilight dimming his trail. He might have been conscious that he was ravenously hungry if other needs hadn't crowded the thought aside. He might have wondered about that hole somebody had dug near the McPhail ranchhouse, but that was a riddle without an answer. And then, with deep darkness upon the range, he saw Cloudburst's lights twinkling ahead.

It was nearly midnight, he judged, as he walked his horse up the false-fronted street, and he was glad the street was almost deserted, the residences darkened, the saloons alone still splashing light upon the boardwalks. No matter what lay ahead, he'd need a gun, and his first thought was to get one. Poe Harless had once provided him with a weapon, and Johnny grinned mirthlessly as

he slipped from his saddle and stole toward the dark jail building. Maybe Harless had other guns to spare.

The office door was unlocked and, inside the room, the furnishings loomed ghostlike. Harless was apparently still out in the hills. Easing open desk drawers, Johnny found them crammed with odds and ends, but one contained what he sought—a collection of guns. Appropriating a distinctive-looking ivory-handled .45, Johnny dropped it into his holster.

Out upon the street again, he headed for the old Rankin cottage which had stood empty until recently. But the night of the dance Jean had told Johnny that she and her father were living there while Burk Duane stayed in town for doctoring. Johnny had to see Jean, warn her that Thad was on the prowl and that Burk Duane must keep under cover. Possibly Poe Harless had already delivered such a warning, possibly not. And Johnny also wanted to tell Jean the truth, explain the ironic circumstances that had made the last of the McPhails an outcast, too.

She wouldn't believe him, he supposed. She'd refuse him a second chance just as Harless had refused him. But there was no turning back for him, and he came to the isolated cottage, finding it dark and seemingly deserted. But when he stood in the black well of the vine-shrouded porch, his knuckles poised to knock, he discovered that the door stood slightly ajar.

SOMETHING ran through Johnny McPhail then that was like an icy sword, a wild fear that sent him stampeding into the house. Stumbling in the darkness, he crashed blindly into furniture, striking a match as a measure of sanity

came back to him. And in the dim glow he saw Jean bound and gagged upon the floor, a black bruise upon her cheek, her eyes wide and fear-stricken.

Down on his knees, Johnny tugged at the knots holding her, working frantically. And when he helped her sit up she cried: "I thought nobody would find me until morning. Ride to the Ox-bow, Johnny! Father headed out there early this evening. He can sit a saddle now, providing somebody helps him into one. And he's going to be killed!"

"Jean, who did this to you?" Johnny demanded. "Who tied you here?" But he knew what the answer would be.

"I don't know," she faltered. "He came to the door, not very long ago. I couldn't see him plainly out there on the porch, and he talked as though he had a bandanna tied over his face. He asked me where dad was, and I lost my head and blurted out that dad had ridden out to the ranch. And . . . and—"

"Yes?"

"He hit me with his fist. It stunned me, but I didn't go unconscious. He tied me up and gagged me, muttering something about going to kill my father and saying that he was making sure I didn't get there first to warn dad. He . . . he was like a crazy man! Oh, Johnny, you've got to hurry!"

No lie about that! Burk Duane had gone to the Ox-bow, a ranch deserted save for its foreman, for the crew was out in the hills. But there was something Johnny had to know, and his voice was insistent, his fingers biting into Jean's arm.

"You've got to give it to me straight, Jean!" he said. "You know who he was, don't you?"

"Yes, Johnny," she confessed, her

voice faltering. "Poe Harless spread the word around town about the train wreck, and it's common knowledge that Thad escaped. And dim as the light was, I couldn't mistake that long hair of Thad's tonight. It was him, Johnny, but you'll stop him! You won't let him kill dad?"

But the desperate thought of Johnny McPhail was that already he might be too late.

CHAPTER V

CORNERED KILLER

HITTING the street running, Johnny came to where he'd left his stolen horse, and he made it into the saddle without touching the stirrups, swinging the animal around and heading it toward the distant Ox-bow Ranch.

Once Johnny had hunkered in the McPhail ranchhouse, a rifle in his hands, standing off the law and any other interlopers who'd ventured near. Once he'd thought that the lawless heritage of the wild McPhails was his, but now, at showdown, he knew differently. He wasn't Iron Mike's kind of man, or Zeke's, or the kind Thad had become. He was Johnny McPhail, who hated any kind of killer, and would stop one—even when the killer was his own brother.

Thus he thundered across the miles, the stars fading as he neared the Ox-bow buildings in the darkness before dawn, and he came down out of his saddle then, mindful that anybody's lead might greet him here. He was tethering his horse in a coulee when the animal whinnied softly and, in the dawn-tinged darkness ahead, another horse answered. Stealing forward, Johnny made out a bay with heavy saddlebags slung across it.

Drawn by something that was half

premonition and half curiosity, he wasted a precious second delving into one of those saddlebags, his eyes widening as his probing fingers identified crisp packages of bank notes. There was money here—a great deal of money. And suddenly Johnny understood why a hidden cache had recently been unearthed at the McPhail ranch, just as he also understood what that cache had contained. Here was the money Scotty Stagg had been fetching back to the Ox-bow when he had been killed!

So Thad had been guilty after all! Thad had buried his loot beside the ranchhouse before his capture a month ago. This morning, escaping from the Ox-bow line shack, he had managed to get a horse and reach his loot. Obviously he'd done his digging before the Ox-bow had thought to send that lanky cowpoke to keep an eye on the McPhail spread. And then Thad had set out to even his score with Duane and Satterly before quitting this range forever.

TO Johnny, it was like seeing the last of his hopes go winging. Yet it filled him with a greater and grimmer determination, and he was easing out of the coulee when a gun spoke ahead, the sound snapping Johnny to rigid attention, then lending fear to his hurrying feet. Somewhere in the dawn-hazy ranch yard he almost stumbled over a moaning, grotesque figure crawling upon all fours toward the ranchhouse where light blossomed in one of the windows.

"Who are you, feller?" a weak voice demanded, and Johnny recognized it as Grip Satterly's. The fallen Ox-bow foreman tried to focus pain-bleared eyes upon Johnny. "Hurry . . . help side the boss.

Thad McPhail . . . shot me . . . gone toward the house—"

His voice trailing away, Satterly slumped into a heap, the strength running out of him. But Johnny was sprinting already desperately and silently now, heading for the gallery that stretched across the front of the ranchhouse. Easing onto the porch, he had a glimpse through the one lighted window, seeing Burk Duane, who had obviously been aroused by that shot, hobbling about with a cane, a long nightgown flapping around his ankles.

But the man who interested Johnny was the long-haired one silhouetted against the window, the man who was tilting a gun, looking along the sights at Burk Duane. Jabbing forward with his own gun, Johnny said: "The game's up, Thad. Drop that gun and get moving!"

His prisoner stiffened and, reaching, Johnny took the gun from the other's lax fingers and tossed it away. Then, without Burk Duane being any the wiser, Johnny was marching his prisoner off the gallery, herding him toward the corals. And in those moments Johnny McPhail fought the greatest battle of his life, for two loyalties struggled, one with the other.

"I might have stopped you from turning killer, then given you a chance to run for it, Thad," he said thickly. "But that was before I found what you had in the saddlebags on that horse you've got tethered in the coulee. I thought both you and me were of the same cut, Thad, a pair of McPhails trying to live down the rep that Iron Mike and Zeke saddled onto us. But—"

Then his words trailed away into a startled, "You!" He'd stepped around to face his prisoner, a long-haired man of Thad's build—but it

wasn't Thad McPhail. It was a moment when Johnny might have doubted his own sanity, for the long-haired man was Under Sheriff Poe Harless, of Cloudburst!

"Harless!" Johnny ejaculated, and then the truth hit him. He knocked away the lawman's sombrero, and with it went a wig—a long-haired wig that had given the man an amazing resemblance to Thad McPhail.

"Yes, it's me," Harless admitted, his poker face as stolid as ever. "Now that you know, what do you figure on doing about it?"

BUT for a long moment Johnny was silent, a thousand chaotic thoughts whirling through his mind. Piece by piece, he was assembling a puzzle—and all the pieces fitted.

"I savvy," he said softly. "I savvy the whole thing! Part of it is guesswork, but it all adds up. It was you who killed Scotty Stagg. You said yourself that thirty thousand dollars was enough to tempt any man and, seeing as you're about Thad's build, you must have had that wig prepared—which proves you had some owlhoot schemes in mind ahead of time and were just waitin' for a chance when the loot would be worth the risk. If anybody happened to see you from a distance they'd think you were Thad, him being the only long-haired galoot hereabouts, and you knew this range would be quick to blame any owlhoot doings on the McPhails. When the Ox-bow boys spotted you and began tossing lead, you headed for our spread to make the play look even better. Thad was out looking for strays and I was gone, too, so you buried the loot beside our house. Then you must have doubled back to town, figgerin' you'd get the loot when things weren't so hot."

"Go on, kid."

"After the trial you come up to get the money, but I run you away with a rifle. Then that night after the dance, you made up a lot of hog wash about suspecting Satterly of rustling and sent me into the hills for evidence. You knew I'd brushed with Satterly and would be anxious to put the Injun sign on him. That's how you figgered on getting me out of the way so's you could dig up the loot."

"Figgered the rest of it?" Harless asked softly.

"I reckon. When you came with Satterly and arrested me at the line shack, you were set to pack me to jail," Johnny went on. "I'd served your purpose, so I didn't count. But Thad was on the loose, and that worried you. Thad claimed he was innocent, and as long as he was alive there was a slim chance he might prove it. You wanted Thad dead and the case closed, and I played right into your hands by telling you how Thad had gone loco and aimed to beef Satterly and Burk Duane. You put on the wig again, found out that Duane was out here and even hit Jean. Ain't that the size of it, Harless?"

"You've figgered it to a T," Harless admitted blandly.

"But it didn't work in the long run," Johnny reminded him.

"No," Harless said coolly. "You didn't happen to get that ivory-handled gun out of my desk, did you, kid? That iron looks mighty familiar. Did you look it over good. That gun's got a busted spring!"

JUST for an instant Johnny's eyes dropped to the gun, and in that instant he realized that Harless was bluffing. There was nothing wrong with the gun! But that one unguarded moment gave Harless his

chance. The lawman leaped at Johnny and his strength was that of a desperate man. Together they hit the ground, rolling and struggling, the gun between them, and somewhere in the midst of their writhing the gun went off.

Johnny came to his feet panting and disheveled, the gun in his hand. "Get up!" he ordered brusquely, but Harless didn't obey. For Harless was sprawled upon the ground, a bloodstain widening on his shirt.

"That one . . . had my name on it," he said between gritted teeth. "I'm done for, kid . . . but the laugh's on you. What'll folks believe . . . when they find . . . the sheriff dead? They'll blame the McPhails—"

And in that stricken moment Johnny saw victory turn into bitter defeat, for he knew that that was exactly what the range would decide. He had torn the mask from mystery, cleared the McPhail name, but where was the proof? A wig—a pile of bank notes—a garbled story that had been based on guesswork! Poe Harless, dying, had indeed won, for Johnny was still a hunted man who probably wouldn't even have a chance to tell his story if he was captured.

"No, they won't, by thunder!" a voice cut in on Harless, jerking Johnny around. And now he saw Grip Satterly, who'd managed to crawl another few feet and who lay only a short distance away. "I've been stretched here too weak to crawl farther," Satterly muttered. "But I've heard everything that's been said. You're through, Harless. Do you savvy? Through!"

They lifted Johnny to joyful heights, those words. And they tore the inscrutability from Poe Harless' face, and for an instant he was a

trapped man, fear-stricken and thwarted. Then the old rigidity returned to his features, and this time it was death masking his features. Then Johnny was helping Grip Satterly to his feet, supporting the man.

"I've got to ask you to forget a lot, kid," Satterly was saying. "I was dead against you McPhails, seeing as Scotty Stagg was my pard. I rode Thad hard at the trial, and I deviled you afterward, but I was wastin' my hate on the wrong man. Look, here comes the Ox-bow crew a-ridin', and they've got a long-haired galoot tied to a saddle. But Thad McPhail will be free five minutes from now, and the whole range will know the truth before sundown. I'll see to that. And I reckon this range will think twice before suspectin' the McPhails of anything again, seeing how wrong we've all been. Kid, if you could see your way clear to shake hands—"

"Why not?" Johnny said, taking the proffered hand. "Shucks, Satterly, I was as wrong about you as you were about the McPhails. And I'm mighty glad you're alive to straighten things out. It'll mean a heap to me—and to Thad. I'm thinking that the truth will burn all the bitterness out of him."

Then he was easing the Ox-bow man to a comfortable sitting position beside the corral, for Johnny's eyes had fastened upon a lone rider limned against the spreading dawn. Jean Duane had gotten a horse in town and was hurrying to her father. Johnny McPhail wanted to be the one to tell her that Burk Duane was safe and that hatred and danger had been banished forever from Cloudburst range. And he wanted to be the one to tell her that that new day she'd once spoken about was already beginning to break for all of them.

As O'Malley started to drag the sheriff's body out of the passageway, Hayes brought his gun down on the renegade's head.



Only flaming lead would wipe out Jim Hayes' score against Sheriff Bryson, but he wasn't taking a double-crosser's dinero for doing the job

RENEGADE'S RETURN

by

ARCHIE JOSCELYN

THE town of Sundown was a two hour's ride ahead. Plenty of time to loiter awhile, because he preferred to get there just about sundown. That was a more appropriate hour for killing a man, Jim Hayes reflected with sardonic grimness, and relaxed his big frame a little in the saddle. Sundown was just about

the time that Sheriff Bob Bryson would be returning to his office, after having had his supper in Ruby's Restaurant. Darkness would follow close after.

And Hayes was going to kill Bryson tonight. Nothing was going to stop him from doing the job that he had dreamed about for nearly three

years now. Three years locked up behind gray stone walls, three years in jail for a crime that he didn't commit. They had called him a renegade when Bob Bryson arrested him and sent him up—and they had succeeded in making him a renegade. Tonight Bryson would have to pay for that.

Someone was in the road ahead, where it narrowed and ran between thick-set spruce on either side. Hayes hesitated, then, jaw clamping, rode ahead. It was a horseman, and he sat there as if waiting for someone. The next instant Hayes recognized him; Curt Arnwein. Arnwein overflowed his saddle, a mountain of gross flesh, little eyes peering out from the moonlike face of him. By contrast, Hayes looked almost like a scarecrow.

Arnwein held up a hamlike hand, and something intended for a smile creased his face, though it was more of a grimace. Good humor had never set its mark there.

"Been expectin' you'd be along, Hayes," Arnwein said wheezily. "I wanted a word with you."

Hayes pulled his horse to a stop. He felt tense, and he tried to relax, for he'd need to be relaxed tonight. But he had never liked the big saloonkeeper in the past.

"Yeah?" he asked noncommittally.

"You used to be pretty good with a gun," Arnwein suggested slyly.

"Mebbe I was." Hayes waited.

"How about hirin' that gun out to me for a little job?" Arnwein asked bluntly.

"If you got anything to say, say it," Hayes growled.

"All right, I will. You ain't got no cause to love Sheriff Bryson. Neither have I. He framed you, sent you to the pen. Framed your brother John the same way, and he got killed when he tried to get away.

Yore ranch is gone to the dogs. I don't like that kind of a lawman. I want him killed. I knew you'd be comin' back, so I came out here to meet you. If somethin' happens to Bryson—well, you can come around and collect five hundred dollars from me. Kind of help you get started again."

HAYES stared, startled. It was as if Arnwein had read his mind, had known his intentions. Those references to the past had been putting salt in raw wounds. And now Arnwein was offering to pay him for doing the thing that Hayes had long since determined on. It was almost too good to be true.

That thought rang a warning bell in Hayes' mind. If Arnwein wanted something, that was the time to look out for a trap. Hayes drew back a little.

"If you got some killing you want done, better do it yourself," he suggested.

Arnwein shook his head, gently. It was like a barrel rolling on his fat shoulders.

"I'm makin' you a fair offer," he said. "Better think it over. I can be a good friend when you need one. And you ain't got no cause to love Bryson. You're out of jail, havin' served your term, and he's the man who sent you there! But if you don't do as I say—well, there's other evidence come up since your trial. Plenty to send you back for a lot longer stretch, on other counts. Better think it over."

That was an open threat. Anger boiled in Jim Hayes. He'd come back here to kill Bryson, but he wasn't going to be intimidated nor placed under the greasy thumb of this man. He leaned forward with craggy jaw outthrust.

"I did come back here to kill

Bryson, if that interests you any, Arnwein," he admitted. "And I sure as hell aim to do it. But I'll do it in my own way and for my own satisfaction! As for you—go to the devil, and don't bother me again!"

He swung his horse abruptly past; then, around the first bend in the road, pulled as suddenly off into the timber. In the last few years Jim Hayes had come to be something like a hunted wolf, his senses doubly sharp for trouble. Now, more than ever, he scented a trap. He had played into Arnwein's hands by losing his temper and defying him, he realized, doubly so by admitting his intention.

Anger rubbed his nerves raw. Why did that fat fool have to interfere, just when he was about ready to do the job that he'd lived for all those months in prison? He wasn't going to be cheated of the pleasure of killing Bryson, but the thing had lost its keen edge for him already, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that, even in doing what Arnwein wanted, he'd be making a fool of himself.

For nearly an hour Jim waited where he could watch the road, and irritation increased in him as Arnwein failed to return along it to town. Finally, in disgust, Hayes headed for an old, deserted cabin which he remembered, a couple of miles away in the woods. It would be a good place to wait for sundown.

Some prospector had built the shack years before. It stood now, with an appearance of long desertion, the little clearing on three sides partly grown up to trees and brush, a coulee on the other side. Leaving his horse to graze, Hayes tramped across and shoved open the door. He stepped inside, and halted suddenly, staring.

THE lawman he had come back to kill lay sprawled on the old plank flooring in a little pool of his own blood. Sunlight filtered dimly through a long-unwashed window and fell across him, making the sight more ghastly. Bob Bryson had been shot not long before—within the last hour, Hayes guessed, as he stared down, horrified. Shot in the back!

In his dreams, for the past three years, Jim Hayes had pictured some such scene as this, and the pleasure he would feel in viewing this man's dead body. But the reality brought no elation. Not only had he been cheated of his vengeance, but the way the killing had been done was revolting. Bushwhack bullets! He had aimed to face the sheriff, to shoot it out in an even break for both of them. He had been fully determined on killing, but murder was something else.

Hayes took a couple of slow steps forward, whirled like a cornered wolf at the sound of a footstep by the door. His own hand had darted toward his holstered gun, but he checked the motion as he stared into the black muzzle of a gun already drawn, with the little, piglike eyes of Curt Arnwein behind it.

"That's better." Arnwein nodded. "Nothin' to get excited about. So you killed him, did you?"

Hayes stared back, unwinking. Arnwein's eyes were obsidian, unblinking. Yet in them dwelt a sly triumph, and it was easy enough to put two and two together—Bryson dead with a bullet in his back, Arnwein lurking here. Hayes' lips thinned in contempt.

"You dirty killer!" he said furiously.

Arnwein's lips thinned as well. He grunted.

"It'll look right good, the two of you here, dead," he said gloatingly.

"Easy to make folks think you got each other."

Hayes leaped suddenly. Arnwein's fat finger was already starting to squeeze the trigger, and to hesitate was certain death. Hayes felt the sharp sting of the bullet in his left arm, above the elbow and just below the shoulder, but no bones were hit. His headlong leap had come just in time to save the bullet from finding his heart.

He thudded against the sprawling bulk of the man in the doorway, bowling him aside, and was through. There had been no time to think, only to act. Half-consciously, Hayes had figured on swinging, jerking his own gun, and following up his advantage. Instead, he kept going.

For there were two other men racing toward the cabin, jerking at guns, sending hasty shots at Hayes as he scudded into the shelter of the trees beyond. Even in the excitement he recognized both of them. Ben Kelly, who had been a saloon hanger-on for years, and Chick O'Malley. They were known in town as the Irish Twins—probably because neither of them were Irish nor did the names they had chosen come to them honestly. But they were gun henchmen that Arnwein could always depend on.

Hayes could hear the three of them crashing in pursuit, and a moment later the Twins at least had secured their horses and were after him. They had cut him off from his own horse, and aimed to hunt him down and kill him. There could be no doubt of that.

BREATHING heavily, Hayes crouched in the shelter of a clump of dogwood, to take stock. He still had his gun, and knew how to use it. But one against three made uninviting odds, and his being

on foot now was a double handicap. They'd soon find him if he stayed here, and if he went on ahead, there was too much open ground ever to get across it alive.

For the moment, though, they didn't know just where he was. Pausing to twist his neckerchief about his wounded arm, Hayes turned, started slipping back toward the cabin. If he could reach it unobserved, they'd figure he had gotten away, and it would probably be the safest place to hide.

To hide! His lips twisted bitterly. Even if he escaped the trio of killers, they would spread the word that he had murdered the sheriff, and the story would be readily believed. Everyone had known how bitterly he hated the sheriff, before he was taken away to serve his term. Now the law would be after him again, and this time, if they caught him, he'd hang. Hayes' lips thinned. Arnwein had cheated him of vengeance, but he'd stay loose long enough to settle with the saloonman.

The cabin looked as deceptively peaceful as it had a half-hour earlier. More cautiously this time, Hayes tried the door, slipped inside. Then he stood, blinking in bewilderment.

Sunlight still came raggedly in at the dirty window. There was still that bloodstain there on the floor. But Bob Bryson was gone.

The thing was incredible. A dead man couldn't get up and walk away, and the three killers hadn't dallied around the cabin long enough to move the body. No one else had approached it.

There was only the single room in this old shack. Hayes looked around, gun drawn now, took a couple steps ahead, then stopped at a sound. It was a groan—ghostly, hollow, which seemed to come from beneath his feet.

He heard it again, this time accompanied by a sort of shuffling sound. Suddenly Hayes bent down, inserted his fingers in a crack in the flooring, and tugged. He wasn't surprised now when a section of the floor lifted, revealing a trapdoor. It had been cleverly built, but this time it had not closed quite tight, enabling him to see enough to guess at what it was.

Down below was a hole, what looked like a tunnel, or passageway, leading off to one side. It appeared to be about four feet square. And lying down there, in the bottom just under the trapdoor, was Sheriff Bob Bryson.

Hayes could hear the lawman's heavy, irregular breathing now. His first guess had been wrong. The sheriff wasn't dead. He had been unconscious when Hayes had seen him before, and he was unconscious now. But it looked as if he must have regained his senses for a brief period. Evidently he had known of this trapdoor and the underground passage, and he must have believed that Arnwein would be coming back. Somehow he had managed to open the trapdoor and get through it, then he had fainted again.

THE sound of footsteps somewhere outside the cabin, but heading toward it, decided Hayes. He dropped down beside Bryson, closing the trapdoor again, then crouched there in the darkness, a riot of thoughts chasing through his mind.

Beside him, and utterly at his mercy, was the man whom he had come back to kill. He had dreamed of such a chance as this, and what he would do. But that had been with Bryson as a whole man, able to fight back. Now Arnwein had tried to murder the sheriff, and he was intent on killing Hayes as well. It

was a strange twist of fate which made the two of them alike fugitives, and allies of a sort.

There were footsteps up above now, echoing loud on the old plank floor—steps of not one, but all three men. Their voices, perplexed and angry, came to Hayes.

"I don't see where the blazes he could have gotten to," Arnwein raged. "We've got to find him and kill him. He knows too much—plenty to hang all of us."

"Where's the sheriff?" demanded O'Malley.

"What the devil—"

There was a moment of silence as the trio considered this development. For just a moment they had been too intent on Hayes' own disappearance to notice that Bryson too had vanished. Hayes held his breath. Would they see any signs of the trapdoor? More to the point, did they know anything of its existence?

Arnwein's orders came popping, gunlike, giving speedy answer.

"Hayes must have circled back here. He couldn't have got outside with Bryson. We'd have seen him. That means they're in the hole under the floor. Get it open!"

Swearing under his breath, Hayes was already moving back down the black passageway, dragging Bryson's inert body with him. With his left arm sore from the wound, it was doubly hard to do. This was a poor-enough place to make a stand, but from back in the tunnel he'd have some chance, for if they wanted to shoot at him, they would have to get down in the hole as well, and give him a target in return.

Light filtered down as the trapdoor was lifted, then Arnwein was again speaking sharply.

"They're back in there," he said. "Hear that? Kelly, you go to the other end of that hole and see that

they don't get out. We've got 'em trapped."

Kelly's boots clomped loud on the floor as he dashed to the door and out. Hayes' heart sank. They were trapped, no doubt of that. He did a bit of quick calculating. This passageway led off into the coulee, of course. Probably the other opening was screened by rocks or brush. Kelly would wait there, out of sight, ready to fill him full of lead if he tried to get out.

SILENCE had fallen. Hayes waited, grimly. If they wanted him, they'd have to come and get him—and that might not be so easy a job, from their standpoint. Presently he heard Arnwein and O'Malley talking, low-voiced.

"I think that there's just Bryson down there," O'Malley said. "He knew of that trapdoor, and it must be he wasn't dead. Mebbe he come to and tried to hide out down there. But he has no gun and isn't in any shape to put up a fight. Hayes wouldn't be helpin' him."

"Mebbe you're right," grunted Arnwein. "If you want to go down and see, go ahead. I'm too big for a job like that."

O'Malley hesitated, trying to convince himself.

"Hayes didn't have a chance to get back here. I'll go down."

He dropped down and started crawling back. He came slowly, stopping frequently to try to peer ahead. Hayes left Bryson by himself, and crouched back in the deeper gloom. O'Malley came on, then raised his voice.

"Bryson's here. He's all alone, and out cold. I'll drag him out."

Arnwein swore. He stepped to the door and called to Kelly to start hunting for Hayes again. Hayes grinned, leaned forward, and laid the

butt of his gun across O'Malley's skull.

For the next five minutes he busied himself, using O'Malley's neckerchief to make a compress bandage for the sheriff's wound. It could be worse, but the bullet had gone clear through him, and though the wound was clean, it was a miracle that the sheriff was still alive. Hayes shook his head in wonder as he finished the crude job. The last thing that he'd ever figured on doing was to work to save Bryson's life, but Arnwein's eagerness to kill the sheriff altered the picture.

Arnwein was back in the shack now, telling O'Malley to bring the sheriff back there. Hayes lifted the inert form of the sheriff. He got out into the open, in the coulee, and saw a saddled horse grazing near by with dragging reins.

He'd hoped for better luck, but the other horses were too far off to reach, and Arnwein, growing suspicious, was starting to come this way, lumbering like a sick elephant and yelling for Kelly. Kelly answered from close at hand. There was no time to lose. Hayes lifted Bryson onto the horse, wincing with the effort, then swung into the saddle behind him and rode away. A sudden volley of shots peppered at them, just too late.

But the others were running for their horses, taking up the pursuit. The confusion had given him a slight lead, but Hayes was under no illusions. He had an unconscious man in front of him, which made riding at a fast clip doubly difficult, and gave his horse a double burden. It still lacked several hours to darkness. He couldn't hope to keep ahead long.

His only chance, and Bryson's only chance, lay in eluding the pursuit. Hayes turned the horse. Not more than half a mile away, back

in a wooded hill, was an old mine, which some prospector had dug hopefully, years before. If he could fool them, and reach that, it would be a pretty good hide-out for the next few hours.

A hundred yards from the hill a creek wound past. They reached it, and Hayes dismounted and, lifting the still unconscious sheriff down, sent the horse running in another direction, with the reins tied to the saddlehorn. If the killers chased it for a while, that would be all to the good.

HAYES paused long enough to soak the compresses across Bryson's wounds, fitting them tighter. Then, groaning with the pain of his own throbbing arm, he set his teeth and picked the sheriff up, stumbling off through the woods and up the hill.

An old dump of rock and dirt dug out from the tunnel sprawled down the hill for thirty or forty feet, and it was stiff going to circle and climb to reach the dark mouth of the old shaft. Nearly spent, Hayes staggered inside and laid his burden down.

Bryson was still alive, but that appeared to be about all. There was no sound of the pursuit now. This old tunnel was not an inviting sort of place, leading back into the hill, the old timbering rotten and with some cave-ins, but it was a good hiding place. Hayes carried the sheriff back for forty feet or so, well out of sight, then returned to the creek and filled his hat with water.

With that he bathed Bryson's face and tried to get a swallow or two between his lips. The wounds had stopped bleeding, though Bryson was far from being in good shape. But the amazing vitality of the man was proven by his having revived once

and gotten through that trapdoor.

Hayes checked, tense. Curt Arnwein's rasping voice sounded from behind him.

"Elevate, Hayes! And don't make no wrong moves, or I'll drill you both full of holes!"

For a moment, Hayes remained frozen, unmoving. He had his hands full with his water-filled hat!

He gauged the chances swiftly. Right beside him was a pile of dirt where some ground had caved down from above. And the light was poor, back here. He could chance flinging himself down there, grabbing his gun and shooting it out.

But if he did that, he knew that Arnwein would do as he had just threatened—he would callously, methodically turn his gun and finish killing Bryson, who would be left fully exposed.

A few hours before Jim Hayes would have called any man crazy who might have suggested that consideration for the sheriff would ever influence any move he made, especially when his own life was at stake—and when in saving it he could assure Bryson's death, which was the thing he had wanted. Now, however, he knew better. They were in this together, and Bryson was wounded and unconscious. He couldn't save himself at the expense of the sheriff, under such circumstances.

"Make it quick," Arnwein warned. "And careful!"

SLOWLY, Hayes allowed his hat to drop, raised his hands. Kelly and O'Malley were both crawling up to join Arnwein. O'Malley evidently hadn't stayed knocked out for long. "Go get him," Arnwein ordered his men. "Bring him back here."

They did so, dragging Hayes along roughly. O'Malley crashed his mal-

letlike fist deliberately into Hayes' mouth, almost knocking him unconscious. Hayes was dimly aware that his hands were being jerked behind his back and tied tightly, his wounded arm throbbing painfully; then his feet too were trussed like a log. As his head cleared a little from that vicious blow, he heard O'Malley asking an eager question.

"Shall I bash his head in, boss?"

Arnwein shook his head.

"I got a better notion," he said. "I've got a couple sticks of dynamite. We'll leave these two hombres back in here, and set a blast. Blow down the front end of the tunnel. That'll dispose of 'em for good and all."

O'Malley was setting about it, without waste of time—going back to within a few feet of the mouth of the tunnel, affixing fuse and cap to the sticks of dynamite, and shoving them back at the side, where the roof shelved down so that it was only a little way above the floor. Hayes didn't need to be told what would happen.

Having fixed the charge to his liking, Arnwein lit the fuse, grunting with the effort. Then the three of them hurried to get out. Another sound caused Hayes to try to look by turning his head. Bryson had recovered consciousness.

He was lying there, desperately weak, but conscious. The sight of him stirred Hayes to new frenzy. Those three killers figured that this was the final act, but maybe they were wrong. Desperately, Hayes heaved himself, started rolling, over and over, toward the mouth of the old tunnel and that tiny, spitting bit of fire which was dancing its way along the fuse.

It was hard work, tied as he was, to roll, but there was a slight downward slope which helped. As he

neared the dynamite, he saw that the fuse was getting short.

Hayes managed, twisting desperately, to turn. Back in here there was barely room enough for him, flat as he was, to move. Then his head came close to the dynamite. He wriggled forward a little, kicking with his feet. There were only two or three inches of fuse remaining as he brought his mouth down, closed it over that inching line of fire. For a moment it seared his tongue, then he drew back. For the present, at least, that bomb was harmless.

The trio would be waiting somewhere outside, for the blast to go off. But they would wait quite a while before investigating. Yet in the end they'd come back, and the end would be only a little longer delayed. Hayes was tied too tight to get loose.

"CAN you roll back to me, Hayes?" That was the sheriff's voice, weak but steady. Hayes saw that Bryson was crawling slowly, painfully toward him. Grimly, Hayes tried to roll back. It was tougher going now, but he progressed slowly. Bryson's voice came encouragingly. "Think I can get you loose—if we can get together."

Another few minutes of slow work, and then Hayes saw that Bryson had managed to get a knife out of his pocket. It was hard work for him to open it, and Hayes could see that, desperately weak from loss of blood, the sheriff was fighting against nausea and the threat of recurring unconsciousness. Then he had the blade open, and was working frantically to slash the bonds which held Hayes' hands.

Hayes felt a thong pop. He twisted his hands loose and grabbed for the knife. Bryson had fainted again with the magnitude of the effort he had made. As his feet

came free, Hayes heard the voices of the trio, somewhere outside. It was long past time for the explosion, and they were aiming to investigate.

Arnwein had taken his gun. The knife would be useless as a weapon. But there was something else! Hayes found a match in his pocket, and as the voices came close, accompanied by the sound of climbing on the old dump, he struck the match and applied the flame to the short-ended fuse. The killers were just outside now.

"Get away!" Hayes yelled. "It's death to come closer!"

"That's bluff," Arnwein growled. "It didn't go off, and he's just tryin' to scare us—"

Head and shoulders were heaving into sight, raising a gun with them. The fuse was almost at the end. Hayes hurled the dynamite out from him. He fell flat, and heard the shaking thunder as the bomb crashed, and debris rattled down. Then there was silence.

THE sheriff had revived again as Hayes carried him to the open air. Going past, Hayes took one look at the devastation of the dynamite

among the trio, and then looked the other way as he lugged Bryson down to where the horses of the three had been left.

"We'll get you to a medico, and you'll pull through yet," he assured the sheriff gruffly.

"Guess I will, thanks to you, Hayes," Bryson agreed. "It's lucky we met up. Arnwein, he set out to kill me. I'd been investigatin' that case of yours, for I never did quite like it. I found some queer things, includin' proof that you'd been framed, and never was guilty. And Kelly, he killed your brother, at Arnwein's orders. I uncovered plenty to send Arnwein and his two killers to the noose. They been usin' your ranch like it was their own, the last three years, which maybe explains some. They got wind of what I was up to, somehow, and aimed to get me and you both. Looks like they picked on the wrong man that time, though."

He held out his hand and Hayes took it, sudden relief and gratitude welling up in him as he realized that the threat of the owlhoot would never haunt him again.

THE END.

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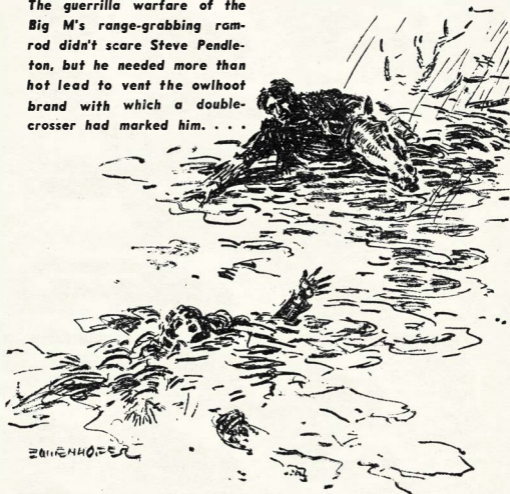
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CHAPTER I

BATTLING RAMROD

THE blistering heat billowing in from the Devil's Dustbowl like blasts from hell's own forges made a tawny sea of the blue stem cloaking Hachita Valley. But it was chill compared with the hot anger burning in young Steve Pendleton as he rode through the Big M ranch

gate and bore down on the bunkhouse.

Bracketing his fine lips were the lines of suffering this raw, inhospitable country had dealt him since his arrival. Now the last barb had been driven into him, scarring his soul with the deep bitterness of defeat. He was just another small fry to be consumed by the gluttonous appetite of the Big M which Dave Mallory

Hatred and feuds were forgotten as Steve and Burke struggled to save Sarah from the avalanche of flood water.



permitted his foreman, Burke Kildea, to manage to suit himself.

Just ahead the big log bunkhouse seemed to weave and sway crazily in the midafternoon heat. There Steve knew Kildea and his riders would be slicking up for their regular monthly pay-day blow-out in Hachita town.

Near the front door two punchers, whooshing soapy water over their faces from tin wash basins, looked up at the sound of Steve's approach.

"Here comes Steve Pendleton," said one with quick interest. "Hades won't be lonesome tonight if he's coming here to brace Kildea."

"You said it, Gabe," agreed swart Slat's Weber, grabbing up a grimy

towel and quickly drying himself. "And you can bet this month's wages that's just what he's going to do after what happened today. He's got plenty of nerve coming to the Big M. This'll be worth seeing."

Gabe Bronson nodded a red-thatched head. "If there's anything I ever did want to see," he said eagerly, "it's Steve Pendleton and Burke Kildea in an all-out frolic with no punches barred. Come on!"

The long room of the bunkhouse was foul with stale tobacco smoke and the floor was littered with gear and discarded clothing. Excitedly the two punchers hurried to where Burke Kildea was peeling off his range shirt beside his bunk. Rope-like muscles corded across the foreman's bent back and shoulders as

he straightened, bare to the waist. He towered over the two cowpokes like a mighty oak over scrub willows.

"Looks like you've drawn the lightning for sure this time, boss," said Gabe Bronson tersely. "Steve Pendleton just rode in and is headin' this way bold as brass."

A tremor of excitement shot through the half a dozen other riders in the room and all eyes turned to the burly ramrod. Kildea's barrel chest swelled with an intake of breath and then his beady black eyes flamed. An ugly grin built on his flat mouth.

"He's packin' hardware, too," added Weber, his cadaverous face aglow with anticipation, "for the first time since he hit Hachita. He's on the warpath, Burke, and honin' to tell it scary."

Kildea's not unhandsome face beamed. He tilted back a leonine head and guffawed. "So the nester man has worked up enough guts for a showdown, huh?" he said, and grabbed his guns and belts from the peg driven in his bunk post. "Here's where he gets just what's prescribed for a—"

His blustering tirade was cut short by the abrupt appearance of Steve Pendleton in the doorway. The nester was tall and rawboned, with the angular build of a man who has spent most of his life in the saddle. Young, in his late twenties, the full vigor of manhood was in his springy step and in his pale, smoky eyes. His lips were set tightly now, white at the sides. His blocky chin jutted with purpose and the nearness of his toil-hardened right hand to the tied-hard gun at his thigh indicated that he was on the alert and ready for any kind of trouble that might develop.

EVERY movement in the room hung suspended now, and except for the heavy breathing of the Big M crew a pin could have been heard dropping. There was nerve and courage in Pendleton's coming here to brace the wolf in his own den and everyone knew it. Steve's cold eyes swept the tense faces and locked with fixed intensity on Kildea.

"You won't need your guns, Kildea," he said softly. "Hang 'em up."

The threat in his voice, the nearness of his hand to his gun heel, warned the foreman that he was caught flat-footed in the act of buckling on his belts. A slow, antagonizing smile built on his lips as he tossed the weapons aside.

"I get the idea, Pendleton," he rapped. "Guns or fists make no difference to me. It's your finish, either way."

"That remains to be seen," Steve told him flatly. "You know what I'm here for. My twelve head of bald-faced breeders are dead—trapped in my corral an' roasted to a crisp when you tossed a lit shuck into the hayrick while I was in town. Every one of those critters was heavy with calf, Kildea. That makes twenty-four head I lost today, plus ten ton of feed and two acres of garden truck completely ruined when you choused your Big M steers across my land. You owe me exactly eleven hundred and forty-eight dollars, Kildea. I'm here to collect."

Kildea's bronzed, flat cheeks whitened. "That's a hot one!" he gave back. "Why, if I paid off every fool nester around here for what they lose because of their own stupidity, I'd be in hock the rest of my life. Besides, where's your proof I had anything to do with it?"

"Right here!" Steve said coldly, and from his patched shirt pocket tossed the stub of a machine-made

cigarette at Kildea's feet. "You're the only one around here that smokes tailor-mades. There's a pack lying on your bunk right now. I found that stub just where you flipped it today—on my spread."

Kildea's eyes glittered like those of a cornered badger. He scrubbed a hairy forearm across corrugated brows and belled forward.

"All right, supposing I did! So what? That two-bit layout you call a spread was chiseled off Big M property. That means I can drive my stuff over it any time I like and no doggoned squatter is going to stop me. You got a gall asking for payment for critters you probably rustled in the first place—"

Minute fires ignited in Steve's eyes. "Careful, Burke," he said warningly. "Don't talk yourself into a grave."

"You ain't heard nothing yet." Kildea's voice took on a keener edge. "I'm telling it scary. You're washed up here in Hachita. We been investigating you and now we all know you ain't the hard-working, peace-loving nester man you try to let on. Before you came into New Mexico from Arizona your name was Clay Lucas, but you ain't got Bucky Lucas and his gang backing you now. You rode with that bunch over there, and you're Bucky's own brother!"

"You're a liar, Kildea!" flared Steve. "I never had any part in Bucky Lucas' doings. You're just trying to hide another steal of homestead land like you've done before. Prove your charges if you can!"

"I will if you live long enough," asserted Kildea flatly. "As far as we're concerned, you're Clay Lucas. When you started looking calf-eyed at Sarah Mallory I just thought I'd look you up before you got your hooks in too deep. I had a tip who you was, now you take one from me—go back to the owlhoot. Chousin' cows and raising garden truck

ADV—9G

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ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

amongst decent folk ain't your racket."

"I didn't come here for advice," said Steve softly. "I came for eleven hundred and forty-eight dollars. If I don't get it—now, it'll be just that much tallow off your carcass."

Kildea's massive shoulders were hunched aggressively. "Think you're hell on a fence post, don't you?" he snarled. "If you wasn't freighted down to the hocks with hardware, owlhooter—"

OWLHOOTER—renegade! The names stung Steve like the touch of a hot branding iron. Over in Tombstone, the fighting lawman of one of the West's toughest frontier towns, had told him: "Never let any man call you an owlhooter and make it stick, son. If you get that brand you won't be welcome anywhere but in renegade hide-outs. You'll have to use the moon for a sun to live. That means you'll be boothill bound. Take the law of any skunk that tries to spray you with the owlhoot smell!"

Steve knew the wisdom of the famous lawman's words. He realized in a flash what it would mean to him here in Hachita Valley. One hint of any connection, past or present, with the owlhoot trails would make him an outcast. He would have to move on, and if there was ever one place in the world he yearned to be, it was here.

"I'm shuckin' my gun, Kildea," he gritted tersely, and let his weapon fall to the floor, kicking it aside. "Just what did you have in mind?"

A note of pure eagerness leaped into the mountainous ramrod's voice. "I'm going to make you wish you'd never come to this range!" he said, and swung straight for Steve's stony face.

With the speed of a striking rat-

ter, Steve's left arm came up to ward off the blow. He brushed it aside easily, but his whole arm went numb from the shock of iron-hard knuckles against his elbow. A guttural growl crowded from Kildea's throat. His steel-thewed arms drew back and his head lowered on his shoulders as he set himself for the attack.

This was showdown, Steve realized. It was his greatest bid for the peace and happiness he craved. If he lost he knew he would have to ride on and wherever he went it would be the same. The reputation of his infamous kin would follow him. It would end like that lawman had said.

For almost a year now Steve had hidden his real identity here. All his labor and money had gone into his little Bar P spread. After a life of sadness and family turmoil, he had found joy there on the toes of the Three Devils Hills, happiness in nurturing his small herd and watching the virgin soil produce under his guiding hand.

He realized now that he was battling for this, for survival and the chance to stand on even terms with Sarah Mallory. As an impoverished nester he could only worship her from a distance and knowing this was perhaps the reason why she had frequently encountered him at work, even against the wishes of her father. Those were cherished moments to Steve, moments in which he could glimpse the materialization of his dreams in all their glory.

But now the stigma of the notorious Bucky Lucas had risen to devil him again. In building here he needed the best wishes of the people rather than their contempt. It would be nip and tuck from here on out, but as he sparred for an opening in Kildea's guard, Steve made

the grim resolve to stay to the last.

His right speared out. Kildea caught the blow flush on the mouth. His head shot back on his shoulder blades and blood began dribbling from puffing lips.

"That's my answer to your advice, Kildea," Steve said determinedly. "I'm staying in Hachita Valley. A rolling stone gathers no moss. I've sunk my hooks and from here on out the moss spreads. I'll also collect for the damage done to my property—in cash or your blood!"

"That's what you think," sneered the ramrod. "You're here to spy out the country for Bucky Lucas, but you'll be going back to him—in a pine box!"

CHAPTER II

ONE AGAINST HELL

LIKE the impact of infuriated bulls, they came together, fists flailing. In a moment Kildea's bare torso was a mass of red blotches where Steve's knuckles beat hard against him. Steve's own body absorbed the sledgelike hammerings of the ramrod and his slabbed muscles corded against the shock. They fought back and forth at close range for a time and then Steve pumped solid blows on the sweating, red-dened face bobbing before him. He felt joy as his arms tingled under the jolting shock of his punches. They separated, which was more to Steve's liking, for he knew the reputation of Burke Kildea.

The big ramrod was known as one of the best rough-and-tumble fighters in the country. The strength that slumbered in his mighty frame could crush a man to death, and Steve had no intentions of being caught in a strangling bear hug.

A howl lifted from the Big M punchers when he drove a jolting

right to Kildea's chin, smashing his head back. Blunt bits of advice came from them.

"Bulldog the owlhooter, Burke, and let's hear him hoot!" yelled Slats Weber. "Pound him down a rat hole!"

"Claw his eyes out, boss," encouraged Bronson. "Shucks! They won't be no good to him after he leaves here, anyhow!"

In the center of the clamoring ring the two men fought like a pair of infuriated grizzlies, straining, clinching, sparring and smashing with bleeding knuckles. With a terrific effort, Steve swung at Kildea's bobbing face and missed. The impetus of his lunge carried him forward and through the open door into the yard where he fell.

Immediately Kildea was after him, prepared to throw his weight down upon him to finish the fight in the style he liked. The punchers swarmed out after him, their frenzied shouting and taunting insults smashing at the young nester who faced alone the fighting power of the Big M.

Steve surged up just in time to meet Kildea's savage onslaught and shut the frenzied bedlam from his ears. They met again with an impact that would have shattered the bones of weaker men. Like a steel spring suddenly uncoiling, Steve flicked out his right fist. It slammed solidly against the foreman's sturdy jaw and staggered him back against the log wall of the bunkhouse. Kildea was pinned there for an instant, a strange mixture of surprise and hatred in his eyes.

In the charged silence that followed, Steve read the meaning of that mounting hatred and it shocked him no little. It dawned upon him suddenly that the real reason for Kildea's mean efforts to destroy him

and belittle him here in Hachita was—jealousy. Mention of Sarah Mallory proved that now. The foreman resented her interest in Steve and was out to disgrace him, have him driven away, thus removing competition for her affections. A chill, mocking laugh surged to Steve's lips.

"Come on, Kildea," he challenged. "I thought you was hell on wheels in a scrap. You ain't showed me anything yet!"

Kildea charged, thrusting himself from the wall with his elbows. Steve steeled his muscles for the avalanche of blows the ramrod let loose. The punchers began their insulting clamor again, but Steve heard nothing. His head rolled with a whistling right from Kildea and jolted up when he crossed with his left.

Lights exploded in front of the nester's eyes and he felt his knees wobble. Quick to take the advantage, Kildea showered Steve's head and shoulders with blows, but failed to penetrate the tight guard his arms formed over his head.

"You got him, boss!" yelled Bronson. "Flatten him out and tromp his gizzard!"

STEVE PENDLETON'S foggy brain fought for clarity. He gave ground before the ramrod's furious attack. Then he felt strength pouring back into his rubbery legs. He ducked suddenly and came up bobbing at Kildea's side. The foreman spun to meet him. Drawing on his utmost power, Steve threw himself forward, slugging, feinting, side-stepping. With quick cunning he changed his attack, first to the head and then to the body. In a moment Kildea was breathing hard from the pounding blows. His lips were a red gash now and there was a cut beneath his left eye where the nester's knuckles rasped open the skin.

Seeing his advantage waning, Kildea's fury grew. He threw caution to the winds, lowered his head and bored in. Quick as a flash, Steve straightened him with a one-two. Silence settled over the onlookers now that the battle was turning in Steve's favor. He was aware of the menacing looks of the punchers, but he had no time to speculate on their interference.

Pounding, pushing, pummeling, he kept Kildea stumbling backward. The foreman's mighty torso heaved and writhed as he gave ground. Like a juggernaut, the desperate nester followed after him, his fists flicking out like pistons, to the face, the stomach. Blood dribbled down from Kildea's smeared jaw and mixed with the matted red hair on his chest.

So intent was Steve on finishing off his antagonist, he failed to notice the buckboard coming through the gate and picking up speed as the girl holding the reins lashed the horses into a run when she saw the battling men. Nor did Kildea or his riders see her. But Sarah Mallory's curved lips were drawn tight, her clear blue eyes filled with repugnance at what she saw unfolding in front of the bunkhouse.

She tooled the buckboard expertly forward, her lithe body swaying easily with the lurching of the seat. Her auburn hair, highlighted by the burnishing sun, whipped out in streamers behind her shapely head.

Beside Sarah on the seat, his saddled horse tied to the tailgate, sat Sheriff Henley who, on pay day each month, accompanied the girl home from the bank in Hachita with the large pay roll. Shafts of light struck off from the law badge pinned to Henley's vest. He rode with the bearing of a man who looked with supreme contempt upon such violence as taking place here.

In a cloud of dust and flying grit, Sarah reined in the running team and set the brake. The buckboard slid to a halt and she was leaping down to the ground, her riding breeches allowing her full freedom of movement. With agility surprising from a man of his age, Sheriff Henley lit down, snatched out his two holstered guns and shouldered the punchers aside to get at the fighting men.

Just then Kildea recovered the initiative and lashed out with a booted foot that caught Steve in the groin. Sarah Mallory's hand flew to her throat as Steve doubled up. All color draining from his face, he

slowly slid forward, his lips writhing in anguish. Gleeefully, Kildea bore down upon him, a killer light blazing in his battered eyes. Before the girl could find her voice, his boot toe thumped with a hollow sound into Steve's side. He poised himself again for another blow and then Sarah's scream halted him.

"Stop it, Burke! Stop!" In a streak, Sarah was at the foreman's side, shoving him off balance. He wasn't nice to look at. His face was bruised and his battered hulk was splattered and smeared with blood. He dropped his head when he looked at her and nursed his bleeding fists.

HENLEY stepped forward, holstering his weapons. "Get a shirt on, Kildea!" he ordered crisply. "You and Pendleton are going to



A man reared up from behind a boulder and Steve knew he was facing the gun of one of Bucky Lucas' outhoot wolves.

town with me under arrest for disturbin' the peace."

"Perhaps that will teach you a lesson," cried Sarah. "You remember, Burke, that when dad went down with fever and left me to run the ranch business, I warned you I'd tolerate no trouble. After what I've just seen you do, kicking a man when he's down, I hope you stay in jail for six months! And get this: For every day you're off the job, I'll deduct that much from your wages! They're yours, sheriff!"

She helped Steve, his face twisted in pain, to his feet. As Bronson emerged from the bunkhouse and handed him his shirt, Kildea growled sullenly: "That's Bucky Lucas' brother, Clay, you're helpin', ma'am. He's a lawbreaking renegade that don't deserve help from his betters."

Sarah caught her breath, looked searchingly for an instant into Steve's eyes, then turned back to Kildea. "Just who do you think are his betters, Kildea?" she said scathingly. "Seems to me he was having the best of you till you fouled him!"

She spun on her heels and walked off toward the ranchhouse.

"Get going, you two," Henley snapped. "Nothing like a rap in the calaboose to cool a man off. As for you, Pendleton, I'm going to do a little investigatin' on my own and if what Kildea charges is true, it might go plumb hard on you."

"I'm not worried," said Steve. "You can't hang a man because he has the wrong name, and you'll never be able to prove any lies Kildea might tell you about me!"

"We'll see about that," sneered the ramrod, shoving the tails of his shirt into his Levis, and turning to his punchers. "You jaspers show up at the jail this evenin' and bail me out, you hear? If you don't there'll be a lot of new hands ridin' for the

Big M come next pay day!"

The punchers nodded as one and watched the prisoners being led to their mounts. "You all heard the orders," said Bronson glumly. "Means we kick in our dinero to get him out or hunt new jobs. Hang it! We won't have any fun tonight, bein' broke!"

"You're right," another muttered. "It ain't fair. The nester was takin' Burke's taw till he booted him. Now I wish Pendleton'd gone all the way. Taken some of the crust out of Burke!"

"Yeah," murmured a puncher beside him. "Pay day only comes once a month and Kildea ain't got no right to expect us spend it twiddlin' our thumbs so's he can strut out of jail."

Steve's body was one terrific ache as he swung into the saddle, and he was bitter at the realization that he had gone down to defeat again at the hands of Burke Kildea. He condemned himself for having been so careless and overconfident as to permit the ramrod to catch him off guard. His groin felt as if a million little devils were pitchforking him mercilessly. Each time he breathed his side hurt and he wondered if his ribs had been caved in by the ramrod's heavy toe.

Without demur he reined in beside the sheriff, his cup of bitterness overflowing. His defeat meant the dashing of all his hopes, the loss of his homestead—and Sarah Mallory. He felt his courage wavering and wondered if a continued battle was worth the effort.

Glancing at Kildea, he drew some consolation from the big ramrod's condition. Kildea was slumped in the saddle, his face twisted as though every step of the horse conjured fresh agony in his battered body. His nose was a bulbous red mass, his lips puffed up twice their normal size.

Patches of darkness were beginning to show beneath his eyes. He gripped the nubbin of his saddle with both hands to ease the jolting of the ride to town.

CHAPTER III

RENEGADE GUNS

STEVE PENDLETON and the Big M ramrod received little sympathy from the sheriff when he thrust them into adjoining cells in the Hachita jail house. Through pain-dulled eyes, Steve saw immediately that he was to share his cell with a gray-haired oldster who sat on a bench in a corner regarding him dolefully. The corners of the old man's lips drooped, his walrus mustache curling down to match the curving lines of his mouth. His Levis and plaid shirt were patched, his range boots run down at the heels. An enormous cud of fine cut bulged his leathery cheek. Obviously he was just a saddle bum, but never in his life had Steve seen a man with a sadder face.

"Which was it, son," the oldster said in a voice that was kindly; "a threshin' machine or the Dodge City express you ran into? You look to Sad Brownlee like a buffalo stam-pede caught up with you."

Steve grinned despite the pain it caused him. "I feel like it was all three," he replied, and indicated Kildea sitting in the next cell nursing his hurts like a battle-scarred grizzly. "Me and him tangled. I could take his punches, but there must be a mule in his family somewhere along the line, judgin' by the way he kicks."

Sad Brownlee rose and shuffled forward. "I reckoned as much when I saw you holdin' your side," he said. "Shucks, every time you breathe I can almost hear busted ribs sawin' against your backbone. Lay down and let me have a look-see."

Steve was glad to ease himself on a bunk. He made no protests when the oldster pulled up his shirt and deftly felt his battered ribs. "You've got the touch of a medico, mister," he declared. "Not one gone wrong, are you?"

"I been a lot of things in my time," murmured Brownlee cryptically. "I've seen men killed under the boot. You were lucky to get off with a good bruise. That's all I can find wrong."

Steve gave a sigh of relief. "Thanks," he said. "What got you in here?" He made no effort to rise.

Brownlee shrugged. "What difference does it make, son?" he evaded. "Important thing is, I'm here—till Henley gets tired feedin' me."

Steve was too weary to carry it further. He sank back on the bunk, unable to relax because of the turmoil seething within him. The sheriff would investigate him, he was sure. It would take time to send to Arizona for particulars. But he was confident the lawman would learn no more than other bounty hunters had sought about him.

There was one thing uppermost in Steve's mind. He must get out of jail as soon as possible. If he didn't, his Bar P would revert to the government as abandoned homestead land. The inspector was due any day now to check up on his improvements. Unguarded, his ranch would be ruined by stray Big M cattle. The fences would be broken down, his waterholes destroyed, and what was left of his truck acreage would dry up from lack of irrigation.

Steve wondered if Henley would allow him to bail himself out. A hundred dollars reposed in his wallet, saved by self-denial to buy fencing for his waterholes. But Henley was the type not to take chances.

He would hold Pendleton here in jail until he was convinced his prisoner was free of any guilt in connection with Bucky Lucas' lawlessness.

Steve groaned and tried to fight the turmoil within him. Unable to, he gave it up and succumbed once more to deviling thoughts. What did it matter now whether he was in or out of jail? He was whipped. The name he had been trying to hide had reared itself again to mock him. People would stare at him now and point him out as the renegade brother of Bucky Lucas. He saw again the scorn that had leaped into Sarah's eyes at Kildea's charge. Without her to work for, the building of the Bar P into something worth while seemed only an empty gesture.

VICTIM of his own imagination, Steve put in a thoroughly uncomfortable afternoon. His ruggedness threw off his lesser hurts and now only the dull pain of his ribs and groin remained. The sun was well down in the west and the cell block was growing gloomy when he heard voices out in the sheriff's office.

Kildea belied to the bars. "This is where I leave you in stony lonesome, owlhooter!" he taunted Steve. "My boys are comin' to get me out of here. I hope you rot in this jug!"

But he was due for a surprise when the door of the office opened and Sarah Mallory entered with Sheriff Henley. They halted at Kildea's cell and she faced the rascal sternly.

"Jail is too good for you, Kildea!" she said hotly. "The boys told me you ordered them to go your bail or be fired. Well, I'm getting you out, but you're the one that's fired! After what you've done you ought to be horsewhipped out of town, and if Steve Pendleton brings charges

against the Big M, it will be you who will have to face them!"

Sheriff Henley grumbling unlocked and opened the cell door. Kildea came out and whirled at Steve.

"You're responsible for this, Pendleton!" he roared furiously. "Tryin' to protect my boss and rid the country of an owlhooter has cost me my job. Before I'm through with you, you'll wish you'd never come to Hachita. No sneakin' brother of Bucky Lucas can make a bum out of me!"

"No, I reckon not," Steve said caustically from his bunk. "That was done long before I ever left Arizona."

Kildea glowered at him and stalked noisily out. Henley placed his key in Steve's cell door. "And it might be a good idea if you went back there, Lucas," he said, "before you find yourself in our local boot-hill. Come on—you're leavin'."

Steve was flabbergasted. "You mean you're letting me out?" he asked, rising from his bunk and stepping forward.

"Right," replied the lawman. "I been in touch with Sheriff Johnny Behan over in Tombstone by telegraph. From the description, you're Clay Lucas all right, but Johnny says he ain't never been able to prove anything on you, so take my advice and move on."

Humble under Sarah's condemning eyes, Steve stepped into the aisle. As he did so, Sad Brownlee attempted to push past, but the lawman thrust him back.

"What you think this is, old-timer?" Henley grunted. "Old home week? You stay till you can furnish bail."

"But you know I'm broke, sheriff," pleaded the oldster. "Shucks. You've kept me here a week already."

"You can work it out cleanin' up after this hombre leaves," the sheriff said uncompromisingly. "I'll fetch you a broom, bucket an' a mop!"

As the door clanged shut in the oldster's disappointed face, Sarah stepped to Steve's side.

"So you *are* one of the Lucas gang!" she said softly, her lips trembling. "Just a common renegade hiding under a false name!"

"If that's what you believe, I reckon nothing I can do will change it," Steve gave back bitterly. "I've no regrets, no alibis. The name is Clay Lucas. If I denied it, you'd likely say I was lying."

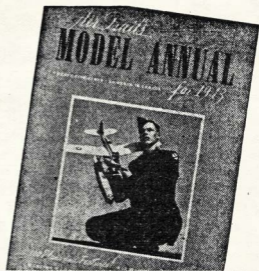
SOMETHING seemed to go out of Sarah at his admission. He saw her shoulders droop a little. "In that case you'd best follow the sheriff's advice. Renegades aren't welcome in Hachita Valley," she said in a voice that sounded hollow.

Her head dropped and she turned away quickly to hide the tears that came to her eyes. She was gone when Steve reached the lawman's little office out in front. He paused at the doorway. From there he could see the evening colors changing on the scarps of the distant Three Devils Hills and the Big Timber Mountains beyond. A strong sense of loneliness claimed him. Out there was home—the home he'd built with his own hands. It meant all that he had held dear, but it seemed empty now.

Turning back to the sheriff, Steve drew out his wallet and reached for the little sheaf of bills it contained. "How much is Brownlee's fine?" he inquired softly. "I won't be needin' any fences now."

"Fine dollars and costs," said Henley. "Totals an even hundred."

Without hesitation, Steve tossed the money onto the scarred desk and walked out. The air that greeted



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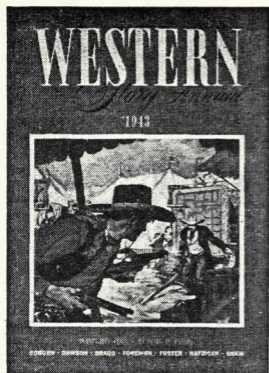
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him was still hot, but clean. Big twilight was settling, endowing Hachita with a false illusion of beauty, and since it was pay day for the ranches in the valley, riders were already thronging the streets and bars.

Steve was glad for the shadows that cloaked him from prying eyes. His clothing, tattered and torn by the fight with Kildea, made him self-conscious at a time when everyone wore his Sunday best for the regular monthly dance held in the town hall. Unobtrusively he made his way to the stable behind the jail where his horse had been left, saddled quickly and, taking a side street, headed out of town.

In utter dejection he rode, his shoulders drooping, head bowed. His spirit was at low ebb. Try as he might, he could not understand what made people so heartless. Those loudest in their condemnation, he reasoned, were usually those cloaked in the thinnest veneer of respectability. Probably many a skeleton hung in the closets of Hachita Valley, but Steve drew no solace from that thought.

What struck an odd note to his bitter thoughts was the way Sarah Mallory had urged him to leave Hachita. She hadn't been exactly angry, for her attitude had been one of sadness rather than scorn. He shrugged, trying to be indifferent. It was too late now to guess at her intentions. He was through now, washed up, and Sarah had told him to ride on.

THUS Steve rode long into the night, prey to body pains and the bleeding scars reopened in his tortured soul. The moon came up and made the rugged land bright as day with its soft white glow. Not until his horse halted on the banks of the Canadian did Steve realize he had ridden so far from home on a trail

that led directly toward Arizona to the west. He turned in his saddle and gazed back at the towering Big Timbers far behind him.

Longing that he could not deny surged within him. In the clear air it seemed he could almost toss a stone into the fertile valley where the little log cabin he had built nestled. The happiness derived from that toil paraded before his mind in an unending panorama and he lost himself in reverie.

Once more he saw himself staking out his homestead claim, measuring it off with the turns of a wagon wheel. He had found joy developing the waterholes, selecting his breeding stock, harvesting the winter feed. Greatest pleasure of all came when Sarah Mallory happened to visit him. A catch came to his throat, made it ache. Had she just happened to be riding by as she had said, or had she intended her visits to be more than casual? Could her lack of anger at the jail, he asked himself, mean that she loved him and was hurt by the discovery of his real identity?

Something seemed to snap inside of Steve. His head came up a little. To the west lay disgrace and boothill. Back on the toes of the Three Devils Hills was the scene of the only happiness he had ever known. He couldn't turn his back on that now as you would toss a shuck away.

Yearning for more of that happiness rocked him. He did not realize it, but he was fighting the biggest battle of his life here on the banks of the Canadian. On the verge of complete disaster, some stronger inner sense came to his rescue and before he was aware of it he was reining back over the trail toward the Big Timbers. In his mind sprang a grim determination to hang on, to fight and perhaps by his valiant ef-

fort to live down the stigma that dogged him. If he did that, then Sarah Mallory might change her opinion of him.

IT was daylight, when Steve rode into his Bar P yard and what he saw there made the eager lights in his eyes fade abruptly. A wave of bitter fury shook him and a curse leaped to his throat. The Bar P was no more! The cabin was a mass of charred ruins and the mushrooming sycamores shading it were now only black stumps. The barn, its hay loft stuffed with winter feed when he had left, was now a black circle of ashes against the brown earth. Even the outbuildings and cribs were gone and not one hen of his little brood of fowls remained alive in the run.

In a daze, Steve dismounted and it was then that he saw Sad Brownlee hunkered down beyond the ashes of the house, poking at the ground with a stick. Suspicion put speed into Steve's legs and he charged down on the oldster like a thunderclap. Before Brownlee could rise Steve had him by the throat.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded furiously.

Brownlee struggled under the merciless grip, "Hold it, you young fool," he croaked hoarsely. "Looks like your friend Kildea has been here first. If I'd have done it I wouldn't have torched your barn and shacks, would I?"

The truth of it smashed through Steve's blind rage. Brownlee was right. There was only one other answer to the wipe-out. Burke Kildea had followed through with his boast. The Big M ramrod had come here during the night and burned him to the ground.

"My apologies, Brownlee," Steve bit out. "I should have known only

Kildea would do this to me. You heard him make his threat at the jail, but he can't be far away."

His eyes wintry bleak he spun to his horse. The oldster gripped his arm.

"Where you goin', son?" he asked.

Steve shrugged his hand away. "To kill a man!" he gave back fiercely. "I came back home thinkin' to stay and battle out my troubles peacefully, but now I'll show them what a real owlhooter can do when he cuts loose. Brownlee, if Bucky Lucas is bad, watch me from here on out! I'll make him look like a schoolboy playing with marbles!"

Brownlee regarded him understandingly. "I know how you feel," he said, "but it wouldn't do any good to trigger Kildea when at least five men had a hand in this. Look here." He picked up the stick again and drew a circle around five copper disks lying in the dust. "Could you have lost these five pennies here, son, or did the men who burnt you out leave 'em for sign?"

Steve's voice was bitter with hatred when he spoke. "Bucky Lucas!" he ground out savagely. "Bucky Lucas and his Five Pennies! That's his sign, Brownlee. I've never known him to miss leavin' it at the scenes of his dirty work, he's that rotten vain. It means he's come over into New Mexico from Arizona and maybe Kildea is in cahoots with what he might do here. But it makes no difference. If he's ridin' with the Five Pennies, I'll kill him along with Bucky Lucas an' the rest!"

BROWNLEE watched the grimness rise in Steve's face. It made the oldster flinch, for he knew that before him stood a man who would stop at nothing to achieve

vengeance. During his life he had seen that grimness in many men and he hated to see it in this one. He liked Steve Pendleton. Here was a man who knew the difference between right and wrong. He was good and clean and generous almost to a fault.

"You wouldn't have a chance against them by yourself, son," Brownlee murmured softly. "I ain't forgettin' you did me a mighty big favor at the jail." His watery eyes took on a fatherly look. And there was mystery in them, too, that Steve did not miss. "By doin' what you did and by what you've just been sayin', I figure you're a man worth fightin' for. You've got yourself a side-kick who can use a pair of lead squirters with the best of 'em. My guns are yours, son." He patted the two tied-hard holsters at his creaky thighs.

"No, but I'll take one of them, Sad," Steve said in a grateful tone. "I never figured on you paying me back. Just loan me a gun and belt. I left mine at the Big M yesterday. That's all I ask of you. This is my job alone. All my life I've been trying to hide from Bucky Lucas, but the bad penny always turns up. Now I'm through runnin'. I'm makin' my stand here in Hachita Valley. From here on out it's Bucky Lucas or me. I'm tellin' you something I never breathed before, Brownlee, so you'll be able to tell the world if I fail. Bucky Lucas is my foster brother. When my dad died, my mother married again, a man named Lucas. His kid was Bucky. I was too young to know much, but they gave me the name of Lucas. Bucky always was wild, taught by his dad to steal from hell to breakfast. They tried to get me to do it, too. Bucky and I didn't get along and when we

Continued on page 144

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Continued from page 142

got old enough, Bucky took to rustlin'. I whipped him once for causin' mother so much trouble and he framed me into the Tucson calaboose.

"Since then he's never overlooked a chance to run the owlhoot brand on me," Steve continued. "My real name ain't Lucas; it's Clay Steven Pendleton, after my dad, and I'm going to fight for it. I've never done a wrong thing in my life, but from here on out they can call my actions what they will. My guns will never stop smoking till Bucky Lucas and every one of his gang are dead, or they beat me on the draw. And I've got a strong feeling it was Kildea that fetched the gang here, which means he's chalked up a mark for me to rub out along with the others!"

There was emotion in Brownlee's seamed face as he listened. Steve Pendleton had unburdened a troubled soul. With the story had come harsh lines of bitterness at the sides of Steve's mouth, the kind of lines that stamp men who begin living by the gun and are forced to keep at it to survive.

"Happy hell an' cold fires!" he murmured softly. "You got reasons to be proddy, son. But you need help. With your hundred dollars you bought yourself a gunhand. I'm stickin' to you like a wood tick in a dogie's ear an' you can't shake me off. And maybe when the powder smoke clears away you'll find you ain't so far outside the law as you're thinkin'. Like I told you back in jail, I've been many things in my time, but nobody ever said I let down a pard."

Steve eyed him curiously. There seemed to be a peculiar significance to his words. He felt a mounting warmth for this mysterious, sad-faced oldster and reached for his

hand. "I'm beholdin' to you, Brownlee," he said.

THE oldster's grip was tight. "Wait'll the frolic's over." He grinned. "It'll be me doin' the beholdin' to you for cuttin' me in on this deal. Maybe your investment in me wasn't made for nothin'. Now for your stingers, son—"

He stepped quickly to his horse and from the saddlebags took out a pair of matched guns and twin holsters laced to a single, hand-tooled cartridge belt. Steve's eyes bugged with admiration.

"I'd feel naked without a pair of cutters on an' tied hard." Brownlee stepped back and handed the weapons to Steve. "Put 'em on and see how you like the heft. Always carry an extra brace along just in case."

Steve eagerly strapped on the belt. He had a fondness for fine guns. The holsters fitted snugly against his thighs at just the right height. He thonged them down and straightened.

"They must've been used by a man my size," he grinned approvingly. "Fit perfect."

"They was," said Brownlee with his mysterious chuckle. "Your height an' build. Hombre's name was Curly Ed Grant."

"Curly Ed?" Steve gasped. "Why, he could trim the horns off a horned toad at fifty paces with a pair of cutters. Ruled the renegade roost over in Galeyville near Tombstone and had everybody buffaloed with his guns."

"Everybody excepting maybe one," Brownlee said cryptically. "If you're half as good as he was before he tried to buffalo a certain drifter, you'll do."

"Renegade guns," Steve murmured, the significance of the oldster's words lost on him. "Dished

out plenty of misery for a good many folks. I'll put 'em to better use, Brownlee." He nodded at the five copper pennies glinting in the dust. "Set 'em up in a row over by the well."

In a jiffy they were placed. Brownlee stepped back. Like bull bats diving in feeding flight, Steve's hands went to the guns in one fell swoop. The silence of the Bar P was smashed by the rolling echoes as the guns bucked under rolled hammers. Five shots tipped out so rapidly that Brownlee failed to tally them. The five pennies vanished as if by magic.

"That's my challenge to Bucky Lucas and his Five Pennies," the young nester clipped, and slid the weapons back in their pouches.

"Happy hell an' cold fires!" Brownlee gasped. "You'll do to ride the river with. Only once did I ever see a jasper squirt lead that fast an' straight—a feller up in Dodge. How'd you come by it, son?"

"Always figured some day I'd have to settle with Bucky through gun smoke," replied Steve bleakly. "When I had nothing better to do, I just practiced."

The oldster nodded. "It's a gift," he said. "You got it or you ain't. Usually them that have an' realize it either become renegade killers or—lawmen."

CHAPTER IV

RENEGADE GUNNING

SAD BROWNLEE watched the young nester as he jacked the empty shells from his borrowed guns and reloaded. Colt hate put a steadiness to Steve's hands that meant he was taking up the powder-smoke trail with the grim resolve to stick to it until his tasks were finished. He was burying his soul, sending it to hell with vengeance vows.

There were many things the mys-

terious oldster wanted to impart to Steve, information that might be of great help, advice that would build his courage to even greater heights. His better judgment willed him to keep his counsel and play out his hand close to the vest. One misstep might bring to an abrupt end all his plans and he was too close to attaining his own goal now to take chances. In the career he followed, he had to be as cunning as those he hunted.

They were silent, each with his own thoughts, as they turned to their horses and swung up. Steve twisted about to look once more at the charred ruins. "If they'd let me," he murmured with a passion and fervency akin to prayer, "I'd have built up and grown here."

"It ain't too late yet," Brownlee said placatingly. "The harder you have to fight for something, the more appreciated it is when you win it."

"Maybe you've got something there, Sad," Steve admitted, "but for me, all I can see is a headboard in boothhill with my name on it."

Then they were spinning to the sound of hoofs approaching at pell-mell gallop. Two pair of hands dove for tied-hard guns as they quit their saddles. Then they were chocking back into leather again as Sarah Mallory raced up out of a coulee and onto the level of the valley again.

She slid her horse to a halt in a shower of dust and grit and lit down running in front of them, her eyes red from tears and smoldering with hate.

"I didn't expect to find you here, Pendleton, or . . . or Lucas!" she cracked out in a voice that was brittle with fury. "But I want to know where you've taken him?"

Her ungloved hand was white gripped tightly about the heel of the gun at her thigh. Steve found the

directness of her stare disconcerting and he fought to meet it levelly.

"Taken who, Miss Mallory?" he asked harshly. "What have I done now?"

"As if you wouldn't know." Her voice dripped scorn. "You've accomplished what you came here for. I suppose you feel proud of yourself—and of your brother, Bucky Lucas! You came to scout our cattle for wholesale rustling, but found out a way of getting a bigger haul—snatching my father from his sick bed and holding him for money?"

Steve's eyes smoked as he looked puzzledly at Brownlee. The oldster's face had lost its sad look. Now it was stern, bleak as a winter wind.

"When did all this take place, ma'am?" Brownlee asked the girl, meeting her burning eyes with calm gaze.

"Last night," she gasped out, and her voice was breaking as if she were ready to cry again. "While I was attending the dance in town. The Lucas gang—they left five pennies—took dad from his bed and made off with him. They left word with Ching Lee, our cook, to send one man to Kingfisher Pass in the Big Timbers with twenty thousand dollars within three days or they'd do—"

She broke down and her hands went to her eyes to hide the tears that were welling there as she spoke. Roughly Steve grasped her shoulders and shook her. "This is no time to break down," he bit out. "Tell it all!"

His roughness steadied her and she took fresh control of her emotions. "They said they'd send us one of his ears if we failed the first time," she went on, her voice quivering. "Then if we didn't meet their terms they'd kill him and take our cattle to boot. Oh, Steve . . . he's sick

with fever! The exposure will—"

"That's one of Bucky Lucas' favorite tricks!" Steve interrupted tersely. "Kildea is in with him on this, tipped him off to all the details. Have you seen Kildea since you bailed him out yesterday, Sarah?"

HE came to the dance last night," she replied, searching his hot eyes probingly. "He'd been drinking a little. I danced part way through one dance with him. He wanted me to rehire him. Perhaps I would have if he hadn't been ugly about it. When I refused, he became abusive and I left him on the dance floor. He walked out and I haven't seen him since."

"I think I can trace his trail since then." Steve's voice shook with anger. "He came here to meet Bucky Lucas and the Five Pennies, who must have been waiting for me to come home. When I didn't show up they did this—" With a sweep of his arm he indicated the ruins. "Then they went to your place as part of Kildea's scheme to ruin me, knowin' I'd be blamed for some part in the deal. He figured if he could get me out of the way, you'd fall on his neck. Well, I'm still here!"

The girl's anger had been building up again. "Yes, you're still here," she said bitterly. "Why? Kildea had nothing to do with it; he wasn't with the gang when they raided our place. You're Bucky Lucas' brother, aren't you—by your own admission. Blood is thicker than water. You're the one who did the planning, choosing a time when you knew all our hands would be in town. All this"—she matched the sweeping gesture of his arm about the ruins—"is just a cover-up for you, an alibi to keep you out of prison so you can continue scouting for your filthy gang. Well, if dad wasn't sick I wouldn't

play your rotten game, Clay Lucas. But since he is, I'm prepared to meet the terms." She grabbed the saddlebags from her horse and tossed them into his hands. "There's your money. Have dad released at once."

Steve's face drained of all color. "I ought to spank some sense into you," he ground out fiercely, and his hands trembled as he threw the bags back across her saddle. "You get back home before I lose my temper. And stay there out of the way! Your father will be coming back to you—pronto!"

Before she could say more, Steve scooped her into his arms and hoisted her toward the saddle. In that moment he wanted to hold her close to him forever, but he knew now that could never be. Always Sarah Mallory would think him a renegade who had lost his nerve at the last moment.

He placed her gently in the saddle; handed her the dangling reins and clouted her horse across the rump with his hat. It leaped away into a spooky run toward home, leaving Steve staring after the girl morosely.

Brownlee's chuckle aroused him. "Son, she sure has a way of tellin' a man off," the oldster said. "Got plenty of spunk to face a . . . er . . . renegade like that. But don't you worry 'bout her temper. Love'll always find a way. Right now we got to find Bucky Lucas and his bad pennies."

Grimly Steve turned. "You heard their orders," he said grimly. "They ask for one man to come to Kingfisher Pass. I know the place. They can see out over the whole valley. If we both go they'll get suspicious and probably kill old Dave Mallory, so I'm electin' myself as a posse of one to run them down."

Before the oldster could protest,

Steve hit the saddle and was running at a high lope toward the Big Timbers. He failed to hear Brownlee's voice calling after him, nor did he look back. Ignorant of the fact that Sad Brownlee hit leather and took off in a diagonal direction, Steve rode on blindly as if trying to shut the scene of carnage behind him from his mind.

He did not want to look back on that home he had loved. He had seen it for the last time. If he came through the task that lay ahead in Kingfisher Pass, he would continue on to the other side, into Colorado and on up to Wyoming. Hachita Valley would see him no more. He would go on until he came to the end—boothill bound.

AS he rode, Steve wondered if he would find it hard to face Bucky Lucas over his gun sights. He knew his mother would rather see her stepson dead and buried than continuing his lawless career of murder and robbery. She had been good to Bucky, had treated him like her own flesh and blood. But the son of a tinhorn father, Bucky had spurned all that was good and clean for the action of the owlhoot. Steve knew this was the showdown. He held no illusions about it.

Steve was sealing his own fate as well as that of Bucky Lucas. Before killing is justified a man must have the backing of the law. He had nothing like that. To kill even Bucky Lucas or Burke Kildea would make him a murderer, too. That meant dodging the law, the riding of dim trails, hard runs to escape the lead of eager bounty hunters. There was plenty of gray matter between Steve Pendleton's ears, but if he was destined to be boothill bound, it was beyond his power to prevent it. He would become another of the gun

ghosts driven to using the moon for a sun because of circumstances beyond his control.

Lost in his thoughts, he covered distance rapidly, noting unconsciously that the sky over the Big Timbers was steadily darkening. Now as he hit out along the toes of the mountains he was conscious of the black thunderheads shoving their cottony lances deeper and deeper into the aluminumlike heavens. Over the high scarps of Telescope Peak a storm was festering and he knew that when one broke in the Big Timbers like this one threatened, it broke with all the fury of the skies.

It was with keen appreciation that Steve realized that the drought that the Devils Dustbowl country had visited upon northeastern New Mexico was about to be broken. With the pending storm would vanish the awful heat of these blistering days. Cattle would rejuvenate under the damp coolness. The tawny sea of blue stem cloaking the Hachita would once more turn green and new tendrils of grass would put market fat upon the thousands of cattle roaming the ranges. It hurt him to think of that, for his own cattle lay dead in his burned corral.

Against the increasing chill, Steve drew his bandanna closer about his throat. Thunder rolled in the distance and lightning began playing over the Telescope. He wondered if Bucky Lucas knew that a cloudburst or even a heavy downpour would send a wall of destructive flood water rushing through Kingfisher Pass. Once he had been trapped there while hunting strays and had almost been drowned by the sudden rush of water down the canyon. But old Dave Mallory would know that, if Lucas didn't, and would tell the outlaw of it. Perhaps already the gang had re-

treated to the high walls on one side or the other of the pass.

Just how far up in Kingfisher Bucky would have his hide-out, Steve didn't know as he at length swung his horse into it. He was sure, judging from Bucky's past performances, that the renegade would have plenty of men staked out to guard the entrance to the pass and would watch for the emissary from the Big M. Slowing his pace and rescating his guns in their pouches, Steve rode up the little-used trail. Fresh droppings and tracks told him his quarry was somewhere within the narrow defile. He was glad, for this meant showdown for him, the end of the constant uncertainty hounding him everywhere he went.

His every sense was on the alert now for the odds he faced. He did not underestimate them. There was no telling how many long riders had rallied to Bucky's renegade crew since he moved into New Mexico. The reputation of the outlaw would draw criminals to him as a light attracts moths. But there was not the slightest hesitation in Steve's advance up the canyon.

He flexed his hands and blew on them to keep the blood circulating against the increasing cold of the storm. If there was one thing he needed now, he reasoned, it was live trigger fingers.

Cold gloom descended over the land, blotting out the sun completely now. The thunder that rolled down from the high scarps was like the explosions of heavy cannon. Lower over the pinnacled peak of the Telescope dropped the ominous black crown of clouds. At any moment now, Steve knew, the storm would break and he felt it to his advantage to reach Bucky Lucas before the deluge overtook him.

Continued on page 150

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He stiffened suddenly as between thunder peals he heard a significant click of a gun hammer being eared back near at hand. Then out of the tails of his eyes he saw the head and shoulders of a man rear up from behind a boulder along the trail, the rifle stock snug against a flat cheek.

"Pull up and light, mister!" he cracked out. "And keep your hands high!"

Grimly Steve swung down as bidden. The man detached himself from the boulder and came forward, lowering his rifle to hip position. The killer light in his close-set eyes warned of his eagerness to trigger on the slightest provocation.

"Lookin' for somebody or just ridin' through?" he demanded tersely.

"Where's Bucky Lucas?" Steve gave back, cold tides coursing his spine. "I'm supposed to meet him here to deal for Dave Mallory's release."

Avarice sprang into the man's face. He nodded his head up the canyon, his eyes never leaving Steve. "Up yonder," he answered. "I'll follow along behind you."

Every nerve taut to the straining point, Steve stepped away from his horse to proceed on foot up the trail. His movements carried him closer to the outlaw and then he was exploding into action. With his left hand he brushed the rifle barrel aside and scooped up his right gun. In a whistling arc it came down, the heavy weapon smashing solidly along the side of the renegade's head. He fell like a poled ox and lay still.

PALMING his other gun, Steve hastened up the canyon. He threw all caution to the winds, aware that he must reach the outlaw hide-out before the buffaloes renegade could recover and give signal of

trouble. If that happened the outlaws could trigger Steve Pendleton to rags before he reached Dave Mallory.

He was thankful now for the increasing gloom of the storm and the almost steady roll of thunder that muffled the scraping of his boots on the trail. But as he ran around a sharp bend of the canyon a second voice greeted him.

"What's all the hurry for, you?" a man ground out from underneath a clump of piñon where he sat on his hunkers. The short hairs crawled at the base of Steve's neck. Bucky Lucas had this canyon covered from all angles. He realized abruptly that his guns were necessary now.

He triggered as the man leaped up and scooped for his pistols. The renegade stiffened to full height and fell forward, his body rolling like a log down the steep canyon wall.

Steve's jaws set tight as the lifeless heap of flesh came to a stop against a nearby rock. He knew the man was dead, but in his present mood it made no difference. He would kill and keep on killing until every man of this infamous crew was dead, paying for all the injuries their diabolical schemes had visited upon him.

He went on around the bend and saw that the canyon widened here. Up against the far wall a shelter had been built of brush to ward off the hot sun. It would be little cover, he saw, from the deluge that threatened. Beneath it, seated against the wall, shivering under a saddle blanket sat old Dave Mallory, the living picture of desperation and despair. The cattleman's face was white from the sickness he had been through and his eyes were set deep in shrunken sockets.

That much Steve saw at a glance, but had no time for more. Three

renegades converged upon him from different angles, running down to investigate the sudden burning of gun powder. Others began appearing magically and in a moment Steve found himself in a hornets' nest of lead. At that moment the storm broke in all its fury high up in the Big Timbers. Lightning struck hot bolts at the high spire of the telescope. Rain pelted down and the thunder that crashed overhead with such deafening peals seemed to rock the canyon under its concussions.

It all but drowned the small, flat smashes of exploding guns. Lead tore about the young nester, clutching at his clothes like invisible fingers. With legs braced wide apart, guns bucking in his hands, he faced the worst the gang had to offer. Unmindful of the elements or the death that moaned about him, he triggered down the first three men who charged him. They died in their tracks.

The fury of Steve's deadly attack shocked the half a dozen others who remained. They ducked behind whatever coverts they could find, leaving old Dave alone beneath the shelter, exposed to a vicious cross fire. Weak and helpless, the rancher cringed there, his sunken eyes feverishly following the uneven battle.

He saw Steve Pendleton go down when a slug smashed through the flesh of his left thigh. On one knee the nester kept triggering and brought another renegade from his covert with an ounce of lead squarely between the eyes. The man reared up, screamed once and writhed down, digging dying fingers into the red mud of the canyon floor.

FROM behind Mallory lead reached out for Steve and he realized that to spare the cattleman the risk of being killed in the cross

fire, he must reach the man's side. Desperation drove him to his feet. His left leg felt numb. Blood glued his Levis to the skin as he forced himself into a swift run for the oldster. As he went a shout beat up above the quickening splatter of rain.

"Get him, you fools!" It was Bucky Lucas' high-pitched voice. "It's that damned brother of mine, Clay Lucas! Trigger him down, gunnies!"

Steve blinked the rain from his eyes and spun toward the direction of the voice. He caught sight of Bucky Lucas' kill-crazy face just as he ducked back behind a boulder across the canyon. Furiously he triggered, but the slug ricocheted off the rock and sang harmlessly away.

Targeting was made difficult by the deluge of rain that fell now in an almost solid blanket. Steve could have thanked that for sparing him. Like a man running a gantlet through hell, he raced over to the side of the shelter and hugged the canyon wall.

"Keep your chin up, Dave," he encouraged the bedraggled oldster. "I'll get you out of here, somehow."

"Just give me a gun." Mallory's voice shook. "I'll help."

But Steve knew the lack of strength in the cattleman's fever-weakened hands. He kept triggering and when one gun clicked empty he tossed it and a handful of cartridges into his lap. "Load 'em up, pronto!" he ordered. "We'll plug some of those bad pennies so they'll be out of circulation for a long, long time!"

Eagerly the oldster began jacking out the spent shells and then suddenly a series of quick shots smashed against the rain from another direction. With lead slapping about him, Steve's first thought was that some

of Bucky's outriders were returning to reinforce him.

Then, like a jack-in-the-box, a horseman came slogging down the side of the hill beyond, hedge-hopping low boulders and brush, then sliding forward at a dangerous pace. The big horse made the rider look small in the saddle. He had a gun in either hand, triggering at the outlaws below like an avenging angel.

Hatless, his silvery hair plastered flat on his leonine head, Steve recognized him instantly. A tremor of hope shot through his sodden, bullet-weary body.

It was old Sad Brownlee!

A strong warmth claimed Steve for the mysterious oldster who could doctor a man as well as kill him as he was doing now. Under Brownlee's guns Steve saw one of the renegades pitch up into view from behind his covert, stumble a few feet away and fall on his face, hands clutching a chin that was partly torn away.

"Give me my gun, Dave!" Steve yelled. "Fill 'em up in this one! Between you and me and Sad Brownlee, we'll make mincemeat out of the Five Pennies Gang!"

Before he could get in a shot, a yell beat up from one of the renegades, his voice frightened with alarm. "It's a posse!" a man shouted. "Get out before we're trapped!"

"You said it!" Sad Brownlee yelled back, thundering on, both guns bucking as he rolled the hammers. "We got you all flat-footed! Pitch up or run for it!"

CHAPTER V

FIVE BAD PENNIES

THE Five Pennies chose to run. They scrambled desperately for mounts hidden on up the canyon. Steve could have picked off one or

two, but held his fire, hoping for a shot at Bucky Lucas. But that worthy was nowhere to be seen in the curtain of rain that poured down.

Sad Brownlee slid his big horse into the bottom of the Kingfisher and lunged up to the shelter amid clots of mud tossed up by the animal's flying hoofs. Wonder gripped Steve. Who was this strange, sad-faced man, anyhow? How did he get here at just the right moment? There were many things this oldster could have answered, but right now he had a chore to do.

Like a wraith, Brownlee lit down, tore a yellow slicker from his cante and ran to the shelter. Above the crash of the thunder, Steve became suddenly conscious of a distant but growing hollow roar that seemed to make the ground beneath his feet tremble. In blue-steel streaks lightning slashed the skies, seeming to rend them apart. The following thunder rattled the nester's teeth as he helped Brownlee slip the raincoat about Mallory's thin, impoverished shoulders.

"This'll keep some of the cold off your hide, Mallory," Brownlee said. "But I bet you could take in a hoe down feelin' a lot worse than you do now, and show youngsters like Steve and your Sarah a thing or two."

"Almost." Mallory grinned gamely. "Though my legs feel like rubber and my tongue like it was sandpaper."

"Then if you can't run," suggested Steve, "maybe you can bounce. We better get going before those renegades get their guts back and return." He turned to Brownlee. "Where's that posse that scared them off?"

The oldster's eyes twinkled. "Shucks," he chuckled, "there ain't none but me. I just figured

they'd scare themselves into a rout when they saw me drivin' down at 'em. But they'll come back soon as they discover their mistake. We better be long gone from here by then."

With Mallory sandwiched between them, they half carried him to Brownlee's horse, boosting him into the saddle. Already the Five Pennies were realizing their mistake. They were coming back with exploding guns and yells of anger.

Lead hummed about the three escaping men. Brownlee clutched his reins with one hand and sent lead up the canyon with the other. Mallory gripped the saddlehorn desperately to keep from tumbling from the plunging animal. His weakness was almost overpowering, but he was game. Steve admired that trait in the old cattle baron. Stubborn to

a fault, he was, something like Sarah. But his sickness had taken plenty out of him and there was doubt in Steve's mind that he could hold on until he reached his own mount.

Shouts from the rallying outlaws drove the three escaping men on. In the pouring rain they could not be seen, but the Five Pennies kept firing blindly down the canyon. Their slugs sent up geysers of mud and water about them. The display of lightning overhead was awe-inspiring, and the hollow rumble lifting from the depths of the pass was growing louder by the minute.

Already the fleeing men were sloping through ankle-deep water covering the trail. The increasing roar from back in the Big Timbers caused Steve to halt suddenly and listen. Icy tides coursed up his spine as he realized what it was. He leaped

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ahead to Brownlee's side.

"Let's get out of here, fast!" the young nester shouted to make himself heard above the pounding rain and thunder. "Head up the side of the canyon for the ridge. In another minute the pass'll be under water! Flood's coming down from the hills!"

POUCHING their guns in soggy holsters, they scrambled up the canyon side, dragging Mallory on the horse behind them. Slipping, sliding, progressing slowly, they made their way up the slant. The roar of the flood coming down Kingfisher Pass behind them became a thing alive, filled with growing menace. The ground under their feet shook with the struggles of untold tons of flood waters racing down the canyon, carrying grinding rocks and boulders along with it. As if awed by this unloosed wall of power and destruction it had caused, the storm slackened here, moving on westward to spend itself somewhere in the distant Taos range.

Their blood hammering from the exertion of the steep climb, they reached the ridge. Below now they could see half a dozen renegades leaving the canyon bottom in a race against the death that was steadily roaring down upon them. A mighty wall of turgid brown water suddenly appeared up the pass, choking it solidly to a height of almost halfway up to the ridges. It came on with the speed of an express train, rolling boulders and whole trees along with it.

Steve tensed as he saw two lagging renegades trapped like flies on the canyon wall, their horses fighting frenziedly for footholds in the slippery red clay. They disappeared beneath the brown juggernaut of death as if a mighty hand had swept them away. Their cries were small sounds against the deep-throated roar of the flood.

The Kingfisher was speaking in a

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tremendous voice, booming out a death sentence upon the Five Pennies. As if its cavernous maw was yet unsated by the two outlaws, the flood brought new terror to the others. Striking at the bend in the canyon with the power of a battering-ram it bit into the wall below the remaining renegades. Suddenly the earth seemed to buckle under them. Then it was sliding down, carrying the four screaming men with it. They hadn't had a chance.

"Well, son," said Brownlee gravely to Steve, "I reckon there goes that no-good brother of yours, along with the rest of the Five Pennies. Happy hell an' cold fires! They had to come all the way from Arizona to save the good folks the expense of hangin' them."

"That's what you think, old-timer!" Bucky Lucas' voice, freighted with threat, came from behind them. "There ain't nothin', not even a flood, big enough to down Bucky Lucas. Turn around, Clay, and take your last look at me!"

Slowly Steve and the others turned, sure that the renegade leader had them under his guns. They were right. Bucky Lucas stood beside a boulder, his wet face mocking, his tall, slab-muscled body bent slightly forward in a deadly crouch over his weapons. Rain dripped from the brim of his soggy range hat. His clothing was plastered to his angular frame. At his back stood Burke Kildea, a sneering grin stamped on his bruised and battered face.

BITTERNESS flooded Steve afresh at meeting the two men who had thrown him on this unwanted trigger trail. Once more they had risen to devil him, to destroy his last chance of victory. But this time, instead of having another brand put to his

name, he would find it scrawled on a headboard. He read his death warrant in the eyes of Bucky Lucas, in the smirk of Burke Kildea's swollen lips.

"I've got you under a split stick this time, Clay." Bucky's voice was bleak as the wind that came down the fresh white cap of snow on the pinnacle of the Telescope. "You recall the promise I made to you years ago—that I'd devil you clear to hell. Remember how you whipped me to within an inch of my life and turned my old man over to the law?"

"You had it comin', Bucky," Steve bit out. "Both of you. Pouch your weapons and I'll do it again."

Bucky Lucas laughed mirthlessly. "I've had enough of your brand of fightin'," he said. "It's my turn now. I been lookin' for you, Clay. Didn't know where you were till Kildea wrote me a letter. I'm makin' this trip pay both ways, you and old Mallory there. This is it, kid!"

Steve saw the outlaw's trigger fingers whiten as he drew them tighter. "It would be just like you to gut-shoot me without a chance," he said scornfully. "I've never known you to do a decent thing in your life; I don't expect to see you do it now. Well, what are you waitin' for?"

"Tunnel him through the brisket, Bucky," Kildea urged. "If you don't, I will!"

Killer lights glowed in Lucas' eyes. "It's all my pleasure, Burke," he ground out. "On your knees, Clay!"

"You go to—" Steve had no time to finish. A gasp tore from Mallory's chattering teeth, interrupting him.

"Sarah!" The cattleman's voice was anguished. "She's ridin' right into it! She'll be killed!"

Every head jerked in the direction of his gaze. Down below a lone

rider was racing into the mouth of Kingfisher Pass, squarely into the flood that was roaring down the canyon. It was Sarah Mallory, garbed in a yellow slicker. Apparently she had lost her hat, for her sodden hair was plastered in thick folds about her bare head.

"Sarah!" Mallory's scream was a rusty squeak. "Stop! Get out of the pass!"

The girl couldn't hear him, and kept on until she disappeared from view in the belly of the canyon. Steve's heart leaped into his throat. Bucky Lucas' guns hadn't frightened him. But he felt his blood run cold now. Apparently unable to withstand the torture of uncertainty, Sarah had come to Kingfisher Pass herself to look for her father. And he knew she was riding into almost certain death in the water-choked canyon which as yet had not spilled its grinding flood down into the valley proper. Blinded by the rain and knotted hair, hearing impaired by the clatter of her mount's flying hoofs, she seemed totally ignorant of the destruction she was racing to meet.

"We'll settle this some other time, Bucky!" Steve threw at the renegade. "Unless you want to shoot me in the back as I ride!"

With new strength he reached up and pulled Mallory from the saddle as if the rancher were a sack of grain. Before they could stop him, he was vaulting into the kak and riding, fast, down from the ridge toward the canyon bottom. His whole being was aflame with a fervent hope—that he could cut in, somehow, between the flood head and the girl and lead her out before that wall of water struck her.

Something came over Bucky Lucas. Try as he might, he could not muster the nerve to shoot down

the man he had sworn some day to kill. There were no blood ties here to stop him, yet his fingers seemed frozen on his triggers. And there was approval in Kildea's eyes when his guns also lowered and slid into the dripping holsters. Their glances locked for an instant with understanding. Then they were running to their mounts anchored behind the boulder. Steve turned in his saddle and saw them riding out and down the slippery ridge at full gallop.

CHAPTER VI

THE KINGFISHER SPEAKS

STEVE'S first thought was that Lucas and Kildea were pursuing him to gun him down. Bitterly he weighed his chances of escaping them and snatching Sarah from the hungry maw of death. What they might do to him after that, he didn't care. Bucky had killed men. He'd kill again if he could.

Without regard for the danger of sending his mount down the slopes, Steve rode on recklessly, the horse's hoofs slipping and sliding beneath him. One misstep of the gallant beast, he knew, would send both to their doom. He drove steel to the animal's flanks unconsciously.

His teeth were clamped tight, the muscles knotting along the sides of his bluish jaws. He felt the brave animal between his legs slither in the red muck, but with a magnificent effort it recovered its footing and surged on, taking the slope in great leaps that almost snapped the rider's spine.

Then Steve became aware of his two enemies surging up on either side of him. His hopes fell. They would trigger him here and let Sarah Mallory ride to destruction. But no! Their guns were holstered. And then Bucky Lucas, as he rode his

plunging horse, let his weapons fall into the mud to lighten his body for the chores he might be called upon to do down below.

"Get that jughead goin', Clay!" the outlaw yelled at him. "We're sidin' you in this! Your best girl is down yonder! Pick 'em up and let 'em down!"

A strange feeling swept over Steve Pendleton. At last everything seemed right between him and the wayward lad with whom he had always fought. His throat ached suddenly. Why couldn't this have happened before? If it had, his mother would not have gone to an early grave, mainly from grief. But Steve felt she was proud of her foster son now. Bucky Lucas was driving to almost certain death, at last a real man, bent upon saving a life instead of taking it away. There had been

a spark of decency in Bucky Lucas after all, Steve thought. Range-bred as he was, it had taken the danger of a girl to bring the spark to the surface.

Kildea's purpose in this race with death was apparent to the nester. The Big M ramrod held more than affection for his boss' daughter. Shorn of his job by jealous acts, he had done what weaker men always do, turned to drink and lawlessness. But Burke too was range-bred. The life of a woman was something dear, something to be cherished. Kildea rode like a centaur, his huge body glued to the saddle of his powerful Morgan gelding.

Now Steve saw the girl again, riding up the canyon bottom. From his position on the slope of the ridge he saw at the same moment the coming of that wall of water around

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a bend up the narrow defile. As the roaring brown juggernaut hit the bank, it seemed to slow up and then rush onward, scarcely more than a hundred yards between it and Sarah.

Steve leaped his horse from a diagonal course along the slope to a sliding run straight down. From his throat came a sharp cry of warning to the girl, but she kept on. Then suddenly Kildea's guns were out. In thundering smashes he emptied them into the air, never once slackening his reckless pace downward.

The canyon walls tossed the gun echoes back and forth. Sarah Malory heard them faintly and looked up. Instantly she saw the three riders bearing down toward her. Steve waved his arms madly, gesturing to the dangers approaching down the pass. She drew rein, shoved back her sodden locks—and heard the roar of the coming flood.

By then Steve knew it was too late. She would have no time to claw herself beyond reach of that oncoming brown wall. It would catch up with her even as she clambered up the slope. Now she saw it coming and with a desperate lunge she threw her jaded mount up the slant toward them.

STRUGGLING gamely for solid footholds, the pony slid to its foreknees, squealed frenziedly, and recovered. Ten feet up it lost its foothold again. And then the flood hit them, licking at the horse's hind quarters. Sarah's scream sheared the deep roar of the water as the wall passed her, gouged the mud from beneath her mount and dragged them both in.

Kicking off his boots and dropping his guns, Steve caught a glimpse of her yellow slicker as she rose to the surface, her face a graven image of hopelessness. Then three horses hit the water at the same time. Steve's

breath caught as he saw Bucky thrown from his saddle and beneath his mount's churning hoofs. But Bucky bobbed up like a cork and was swimming desperately with the current, gaining with each powerful stroke.

Almost side by side, the nester and Kildea rode their swimming, plunging horses downstream, gaining little by little on the bobbing form in the yellow slicker ahead of them. Sarah's paint pony was gone, the suction of the flood head being too great for the animal to remain on the surface. With a fervent prayer, Steve saw the battering nose of the stream sweep on rapidly out of sight, leaving him fighting only the terrible current and the debris spinning down with it. He knew that the flood would spend itself over a wide area once it reached the open valley. He wondered if they could keep afloat till then.

His hopes sank when he saw that blob of yellow ahead of them disappear suddenly. Scarcely a dozen feet separated them now. A great log, shorn of its branches, shot past and slid on directly over the spot where Sarah had gone down. A cry came from Steve's lips, blue now with the cold and the loss of blood from his wounded leg. But he had no thought for that. He cried to his plunging mount and the gallant beast churned the water with fresh effort. And then Steve saw that yellow slicker bob up again.

SWIMMING feebly, coughing water from her lungs, Sarah battled the current, praying it would swing her to either of the steep banks where she might take hold of some outcropping of rock or brush. Steve yelled to her to swim with the current, but the roar was too great for her to hear. She was spending her

strength against the current.

Gradually Steve's struggling mount plunged closer to her. If he could only keep Sarah afloat until the flood carried them out of the defile and into the valley! Then out of the tails of his eyes he saw a great log crash into the rump of Kildea's horse. Both went under, but not before the Big M ramrod called out to him, "Go it, Steve!" Then Burke disappeared, bobbed up again and was smashed under once more by a battering branch of the tree trunk.

No man could survive such a blow and as the log slid on past him, Steve saw bubbles rising, flecked with Kildea's blood. He glanced around for signs of Bucky. The renegade was gone, probably hammered to his death by the same juggernaut that had sent Kildea beneath the surface.

Battling alone in the raging torrent to save the girl he loved, Steve devoted his every ounce of energy to the task. Now his plunging mount was almost within reach of her. Twice she had gone down, and Steve could tell by the way she struggled she was almost ready for the final plunge. He cried to his horse again, but the courageous animal was doing its utmost. Then he saw Sarah sink down once more, her hands raised above her head.

With all his strength Steve pitched himself from his mount's back and struck out toward her, plunging himself beneath the surface as she went down. Blindly, he reached out for her, felt his groping hands entwine in her hair. Her desperate struggles drew him deeper, but he hung on, his lungs almost bursting.

After what seemed an eternity, Steve came up, Sarah's struggling arms encircling him. He gulped air into his tortured body, fought

against her strangling embrace. It was ironical, he thought, that both should die when safety was within reach. He could see out across the valley now where the power of the flood was spending itself. If he could only hold on a few moments longer, both would be cast onto land by the very surge that threatened now to drown them.

Like a demon the half-unconscious girl fought him as she struggled against death. With a mighty effort, Steve lunged upward, drew her head above the surface. A sob racked him as his fist caught her smartly on the tip of her small, rounded chin. Her body relaxed instantly. He threw himself beneath it, wrapped her arms about his throat and held them there with one hand, striking out with the other. His powerful legs, beating against the silt-laden water like pistons, kept the two of them afloat.

LUNGS laboring, muscles weary from the desperate struggle, Steve managed somehow to keep Sarah's head above the surface. The weight of their clothing and the suction of the current seemed slowly and relentlessly to be dragging them under. A little voice hammered in his throbbing ears: "Keep fighting, Steve! Go it, Steve!" it said. "Win out this time and you've won your right to respect!"

He closed his eyes and battled on, lips clamped tight. Then he felt the current pick up speed as the flood roared out of the canyon and the water spread into the valley. Something struck him a glancing blow on the temple and made his senses reel. He felt himself going under and used his last strength to battle against it.

His laboring legs struck against a rock at the mouth of the pass. A searing burn coursed the length of

his body, jarring his numbed senses into greater effort and he tried to touch bottom.

He felt the current draw the gravel from beneath his feet, but the feel of land sent hope surging through him. The pull of the flood had lessened now. He could feel its power spending like grain from a split sack. Now his feet struck solid ground and he was drawing Sarah's inert body to a safe place.

Falling to his knees beside her, he worked over her, rubbing her cold hands and slapping her colorless face. She stirred finally and her eyes opened, fear and desperation in them.

"It's all right now, honey," Steve murmured softly. "It's all right. Just relax and we'll have you home in a jiffy."

"Dad!" was her first word. She struggled to rise.

"He'll be with you, Sarah," Steve said soothingly. "Everything is—"

A low moan cut him off. Turning, Steve saw a mangled body lying lodged against a rock just beyond. It was Bucky Lucas, his face torn and bleeding, his body grotesquely twisted in a way that indicated a broken back. Quickly, Steve rose and went to the outlaw leader.

"Bucky." Steve's voice drew the outlaw's eyes open. There was a softness in them now that Steve had never seen before. "We got her out all right, Bucky, the three of us." His voice choked in his throat.

"Good work, Clay." Bucky's colorless lips parted in a ghost of a smile. "I knew you could win out after a log smashed me down. It took nerve to do what you did, Clay, and I was just vain enough to try to beat you to it." A spasm of agony racked him, brought blood and froth to his lips. "I was goin' . . . to shoot you down like a . . . dog," he went on

brokenly. "I... I couldn't, because... you're a real man, Clay. You proved that when... you rode out. Me, I'm no good. Never was I could see you was... in love with the girl. You ran from... from my rep and guns all your life. You're runnin' ends here. I'm payin' off... for all the hate and sufferin' I've caused you and your mother. There... never was a Lucas worth his salt, kid. You're a Pendleton. Forget you ever heard of us. Adios—"

His sodden, grotesque body quivered once, then relaxed. Unconsciously Steve breathed a fervent prayer for him, his lips trembling as he fought to hold back the emotion crowding them. He drew Bucky's bandana up over his face and rose to return to Sarah who was sitting up now watching the approach of her father and Sad Brownlee riding two outlaw mounts the mysterious older had captured.

DIZZILY, Sarah stood up and walked to her father's side. Steve came forward on shaky legs to meet them.

"I'm beholdin' to you, son." The cattleman placed a hand on his shoulder. "I wouldn't have staked a yearlin' on your chances of pullin' her out of that. Any man with your kind of guts is good enough for me."

"You're forgettin' Bucky Lucas and Burke Kildea," reminded Steve.

"No, I ain't," Mallory returned. "We passed Burke's body over yonder. He'll get good buryin'. As for your brother—"

"I'll take care of my own kin," Steve cut in, "if the law'll let me."

Sad Brownlee looked at him curiously. "The law ain't got nothin' on you, Steve," he said. "Do whatever you want with Bucky's remains, and then go on buildin' up the Bar P."

Steve laughed bitterly. "I'll have to stand trial for gunnin' some Five Pennies," he reminded. "There's no

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gettin' away from murder."

Brownlee looked up at Mallory. The cattleman winked.

"Don't be an idiot." The mysterious oldster poked Steve sharply in the ribs. "Happy hell an' cold fires! It ain't murder when a U. S. deputy marshal knocks off a few renegades that needed killin', is it?"

"What do you mean?" Steve's eyes widened. "I never saw any law dogs around to help us out."

Brownlee laughed and flipped back his vest. "You're lookin' at one right now, Pendleton," he said, and his face was no longer sad and doleful. It was stern as death itself. "I'm the critter and you been my deputy ever since you bought me out of Henley's jug. You'll get your hundred back. I had Henley put me up there hopin' to learn somethin' about Bucky Lucas' whereabouts from some of the other prisoners. Then you came along an' Kildea gave me a clue. Happy hell an' cold fires! I been after Bucky Lucas for years, workin' with Johnny Behan over in Tombstone."

"You mean your name isn't Sad Brownlee?" Steve was overwhelmed. "Just one of the many names and disguises I use to track down renegades." The oldster chuckled. "Now you and Miss Mallory pile on my horse. I can see by the way you limp you ain't able to walk, and she ain't, either. I'll see you all to the Big M and then come back for . . . them." He nodded toward Bucky's remains. "And whilst you two are ridin', let's see how much lost time you can make up for. I promise me an' Dave won't look."

And they didn't, openly. Riding double, Steve held Sarah close to him, sure now that he would never let her go. She relaxed against him, her head riding his shoulder, happiness written on the lips her upturned face offered him.

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