

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

25¢

JUNE



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!
FEATURE NOVEL

• TYRANT OF ORO GRANDE

by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR



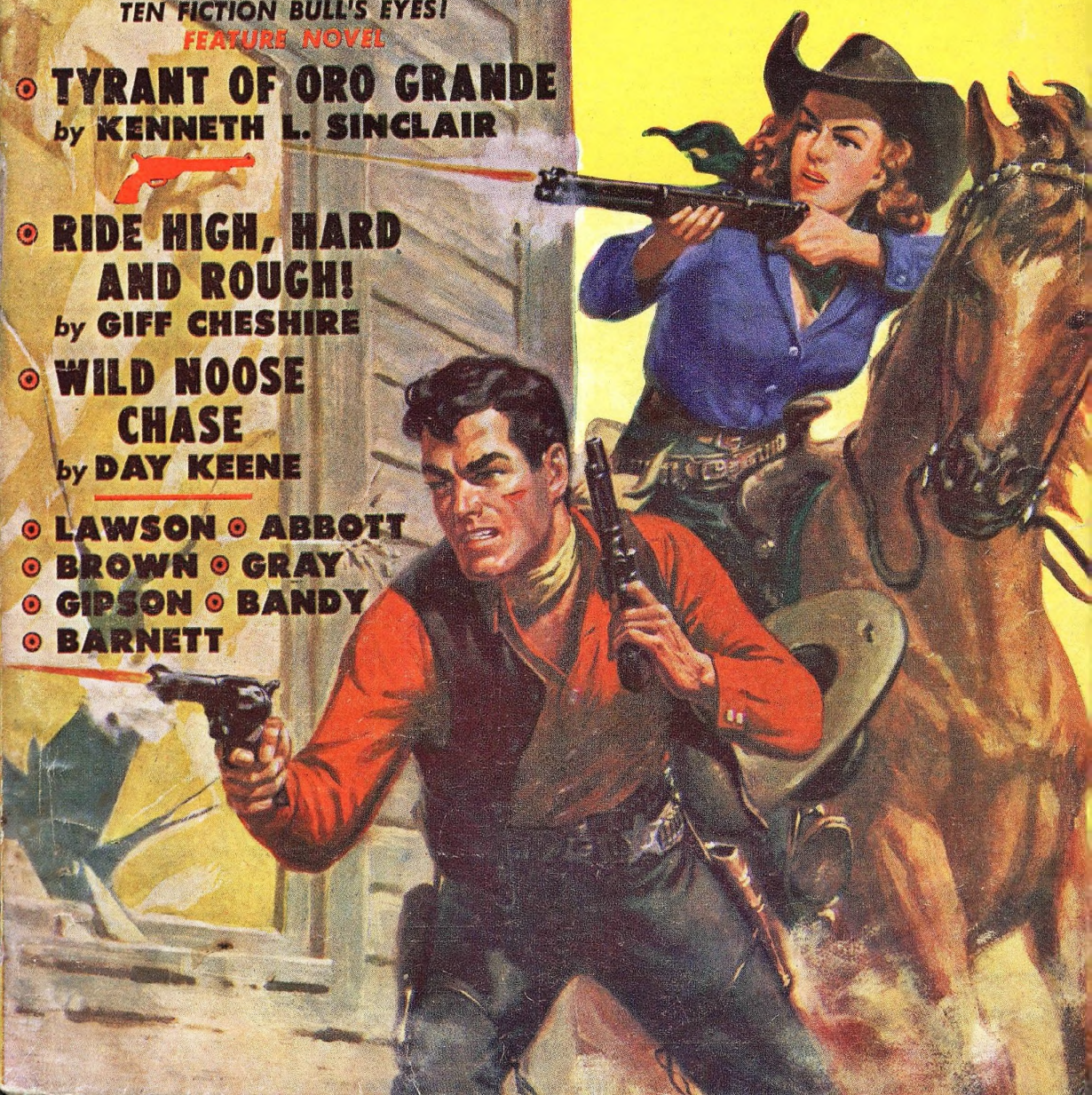
• RIDE HIGH, HARD AND ROUGH!

by GIFF CHESHIRE

• WILD NOOSE CHASE

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE



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PUBLISHED
JUNE 1ST

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Hanged as a bounty-hunting killer, lawman Tom Horn's only crime—was taking forty drinks too many.

By ED BARNETT

THE conspiracy by which he was convicted and hanged for a shameful crime which he did not commit has for too many years clouded the just fame of one of the West's greatest scouts, Indian-fighters and lawmen—Tom Horn.

Tom Horn was the ideal of everything that the frontier heroes were supposed to be. In person, he stood fully six and a half feet tall, with a lean, magnificently proportioned build. In all his acts he was as fearless and resourceful as any character in fiction.

There are many stories of white boys being raised by Indian tribes and "going native." Horn was one who actually lived this legend. Running away from his home while still a boy to become an Indian scout, he found friends in the U.S. Government's Indian service who got young Tom Horn adopted by an Apache chief. Horn lived with the Apaches for many years, learning all their lore intimately. This, of course, was to the Indians' disadvantage, for when relations between the whites and the Apaches flared into violence, Tom Horn joined the white army and perhaps more than any other one man was instrumental in the Indians' defeat. He is personally credited with the capture of the Apaches' great leader, Geronimo.

His reputation firmly established by his Indian exploits, Tom Horn became a sort of lawman-at-large in the West, serving at various times as a Pinkerton detective, a private range detective, and a deputy sheriff. So successful was he in trailing and catching train-robbers and cattle-thieves that he became known as the "Terror of the Rustlers."

Tom Horn is not known positively to have ever killed a man maliciously or for pay. In fact, his greatest and most successful campaign against rustlers was, according to the best evidence now uncovered,

conducted without his ever firing a shot.

Tom Horn, under the alias of Tom Hix, had turned up in the Wyoming territory, a region literally infested with rustlers and outlaws, especially in the Brown's Hole area. Horn's disguise, of course, was quite transparent, and evildoers all through the hills began quaking in their boots, for the rumor quickly spread, helped along by Horn himself, that he was being retained by the big cattle ranchers to kill off rustlers at \$500 per head. Though Horn's actual arrangement with the owners was otherwise, this rumor sounded very plausible, as Horn was not a man who would be content to live on the cowpoke's pay he received as Tom Hix.

One day, a small rancher named Matt Rash, who had stocked his spread with stolen beef, was shot in the doorway of his cabin. He had long been involved in a bitter feud with a neighbor named Isam, but as soon as the body was discovered, posters began going up in the neighborhood hinting in thinly veiled language that the man had been killed by Tom Horn for \$500, and warning all rustlers to beware.

When Isam himself was murdered a short time later, unquestionably by friends of Matt Rash, the posters again went up.

Then a rash of other killings among rustlers and desperadoes broke out, each man knowing he could bushwhack his enemy and pay off old grudges, and that all the killings would be laid to Tom Horn.

In terror, fully convinced that Horn was wielding a lethal scythe among them for the bounty on their heads, the rustlers began a mass exodus out of Wyoming. Old gangs broke up, and mountain fastnesses that the law had been unable to penetrate were cleaned out. The lawless elements trooped out of the hills like roaches scurrying from the cracks in a wall.

(Please continue on page 109)

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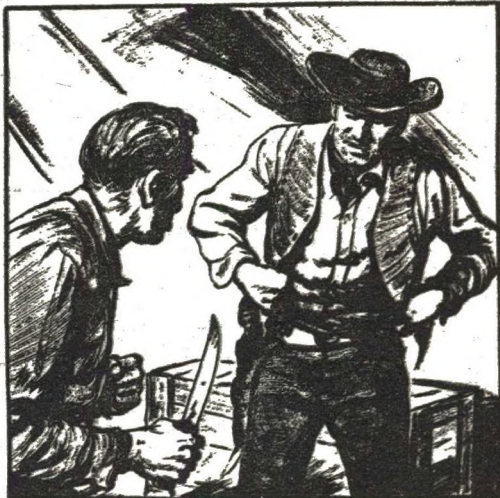
issue

June 1st

Howdy, folks. The next issue brings you tophand author Walt Coburn with an exciting tale of a trouble-dogged beef gatherer, "Satan Rode This Roundup!" It was a camp full of smouldering grudges. For old Jess Warner had been busted from ramrod to beef boss in favor of tough Oklahoma Kane—and Dingo Yates found himself thrown with the man who'd sent him to the pen.



The fuse was lit when old Jess found the body of Fox, the detective, in the wake of a stampede. It was murder—but the rotgut-loving sheriff called it suicide.



Then the nasty-tempered old cook got drunk and tried to knife Dingo Yates. Jess got the knife away before he succeeded, but every man there heard him call Dingo the killer.

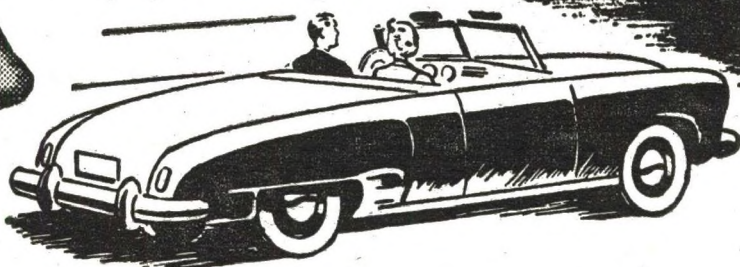


The Windy Kid was sick with fever—and fear. He told Jess he'd witnessed the murder and begged Jess to help him. For he knew the killer would get him next. . . .



The big showdown came between Oklahoma Kane and Dingo Yates. Kane crawled out of the tent—and the two guns went off together. . . . The complete story will appear in the next issue.

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SATAN WITHOUT SAND

◆ Portrait of a Badman by Jack Younger ◆

FRONTIER history is packed with stories of both good and bad men "dying with their boots on". But at least one California outlaw unlaced his boots and kicked them off before crossing the Great Divide.

Jim McCory was no ordinary bad man. At one time he was so well thought of that he was appointed deputy marshal of the newly created county seat of Visalia, which lies midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles in California's rich San Joaquin valley.

In later years McCory used to boast how as deputy marshal he once led a posse to track down a murderer, and the only reason why he wasn't successful in finding and hanging the killer was because he himself had done the shooting!

If one roamed California from the gold fields to the ranches and from the mountains to the valleys, a better man than McCory could not be found when sober. But when he was drunk, all the evil that can exist within man would show itself in him.

Stomping into the bar one night, Jim roared his greetings: "Come on. All drinks are on me, and when I can't pay for any more they'll be on the house. Drink up!"

As the eager men began to crowd the railing and even call their friends in, it wasn't long until McCory ran out of gold dust.

"Now we'll drink on the house!"

But the little Mexican bartender thought his employer might object.

"I said we'll drink on the house and I mean what I say. Fill those glasses up and be quick about it."

For a fraction of a minute, his last on earth, the Mexican barkeep hesitated.

Shifting his drink to his left hand, Jim McCory coldly shot him. As the bartender slumped to the floor, McCory raised his drink and offered a toast: "Here's to the next man. I hope he does better."

But his whiskey pals had no taste for any further drinking and managed to disarm the drunken gunman before he took a notion to shoot one of them.

In those days Visalia was mighty proud of its new ideas of justice. Rather than string up McCory, who when sober was a "jolly good fellow," his drinking pals turned him over to the sheriff for trial. One of McCory's defenders even argued that he should go free, declaring that one bartender more or less didn't make any difference. But when Jim McCory appeared for trial, the court held differently and passed sentence on him for fifteen years in State prison.

Before he ever entered the gates of prison, the quick-trigger gunman was free on technicalities and the trial was thrown out of court.

Each side was proud of the outcome, and when McCory announced that he was leaving town "to start life anew," Visalia rejoiced in its justice.

But soon word drifted back that the reformed killer had shot another man, apparently over a woman. What the argument was about was never proven, as there were few men who cared to question the fiery-tempered, quick-drawing McCory. A cattleman passing through Visalia on his way northward to the State capital brought news that McCory had drilled another man who had stopped to question him. Finally the score stood at some twelve men killed or wounded by the hot-headed gun-ace.

Then on the day before Christmas, 1872, McCory got a sudden longing to see some of his old buddies in Visalia. Besides, having just settled a little falling-out to his satisfaction, he thought that "Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men" might not apply to him where he was.

So hastily did he pull stakes that he had no time to stop at his lodgings. His wild ride back to his home town tore most of his clothing.

When McCory made his appearance at Charlie Allen's bar in Visalia, it was as if the devil himself picked Christmas Eve to make his appearance. But Allen remembered McCory from the good old days when they had been bosom buddies, and besides,

(Please continue on page 12)



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City.....State.....

(Continued from page 10)

wasn't it the time to give instead of receive?

So with his own money the generous, forgiving Allen purchased new clothing for his crony. Slicked up and with a bath and shave, the outlaw cast off his devil's role and came forth as a friend to all ready to stand a few drinks with the money his benefactor had given him.

As McCory ordered up rounds, Allen went to bed, leaving the bar in charge of his assistant, who was a Mexican and a past friend of the bartender who McCory had shot and killed a few years before.

Allen had no more than fallen asleep when he was awakened by his nervous Mexican helper. "Mister Allen, Mister Allen, wake up. It's that McCory. He's drunk and making trouble. Bad trouble. Said he going to kill me like he killed my friend. You got to help me, Mister Allen."

QUICKLY Allen dressed and started toward the bar. But it was his bad luck to be striding through the doorway just as the man he befriended was boasting, "I'm the last of the real badmen. I'm tough. I'll shoot the first man who moves."

Glancing to all sides, McCory saw Allen walking into the room and shouted drunkenly, "That goes for you too, Charlie."

"Now wait a minute," Allen began.

But McCory wouldn't wait. Instead he pulled the trigger of his gun. Allen clutched his stomach with one hand and threw the other across his face. "Don't shoot me, Jim! I haven't done anything to you!"

Jim McCory advanced on his old-time friend whose gift of clothing he was wearing and whose money he had been spending, and twice more he thudded bullets into Allen's defenseless body.

Allen crawled and stumbled toward his bar. As his head dropped down to the brass railing, McCory placed his pistol against the dying man's forehead and fired his fourth and final shot.

Standing with his feet firmly planted over the body of his dead pal, he aimed his gun at the frightened men around him and pulled the trigger.

But instead of firing his gun jammed.

Still trying to fire it, McCory ran out of the bar and hid in a nearby outhouse. There he was soon discovered, and before

he could clean and reload his weapon he was overcome by the angry mob.

But luck was still smiling on McCory, at least for a little while longer. Before the mob could avenge Allen's murder, the sheriff and the peace officers took over and hustled the murderer off to jail, amidst the ringing of church bells heralding Christmas morning.

Just as the Christmas bells sounded ten o'clock the persistent mob battered the jail door in, and forcing the deputies and sheriff aside, broke down McCory's cell door.

As the door to his cell started to give way, McCory hastily unlaced his boots and kicked them off. Standing in his stocking feet, McCory greeted the mob leader. "You wouldn't hang a man with his boots off, would you?"

Reading his answer in the angry, mad-crazed eyes of the mob, McCory fell to the floor in panic and frantically grabbed for some kind of a hold on his jail.

Quickly a rope was looped around his neck and the tough badman was dragged across the floor and through the entrance to the courtroom. Thoughtfully, so he wouldn't be choked to death prematurely, his one-time drinking pals lifted him over the railing which separated the prisoner's section from the rest of the courtroom.

When the revenge-thirsty mob found that McCory refused to walk, or was so paralyzed from fear that he couldn't, they continued to half-drag and half-carry him to their selected hanging spot while the church bells pealed, "Come All Ye Faithful."

Every so often water was sloshed in McCory's face to revive the semi-unconscious tough man. Soon the leaders of the mob reached the bridge where they were going to make McCory pay for his sins.

Since it was but four feet from the bridge to the water's surface, the rope was shortened and the murderous outlaw was rolled off the edge. There he strangled to death while the water swirled around his feet and the bottom was but inches away.

Then as if brought back to reality by the church bells ringing, "Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men," the mob members stood on the bridge and removed their hats in due respect to the late Jim McCory, who died with his boots off.

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State whether for Man ☐ Woman ☐ or Child ☐

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SINCE the very beginning of time no dream has ever fired men's imaginations more than the dream of gold. Yet the dream has always been also a fever of the blood, an illness of the mind, and once a man was smitten, he was doomed to a lifetime of travail. He would forsake family and friends, and becoming a solitary wanderer who trusted no man, obediently follow the beckoning of the golden phantom—El Dorado.

Men are still searching for the fabulous, lost San Saba mine, the chests of Santa Anna, Steinheimer's Millions, the Lost Nigger Mine, and countless other treasures they know exist with the fanatic certainty of those who have seen a revelation. Armed with their faith, their charts and maps, their forked sticks, they go into the wilderness where sooner or later they perish of hunger or thirst—or of crossing the path of others in search of the same chimerical bonanza.

One grizzled prospector, asked how long he had been looking for gold, answered, "Nigh on to forty years." Then he frowned for a moment and corrected himself. "Nope," he said ruefully. "Reckon only about ten years. T'other thirty I spent looking for my dang-blasted burros."

He was an honest man, and had he been a bit wiser and devoted the entire forty years to following his burros, the likelihood is that he would have been a much wealthier one. For ever since men have been looking for gold, animals have been far more adept at unearthing it.

Four hundred years ago a Bolivian hunter named Diego Hualca was chasing one of his goats up a steep mountain path. He grasped a bush to pull himself over a ledge, and the bush came up by the roots. Some-

thing glistened in the soil attached to the roots, and he peered at it closely. It was silver. The world-famous silver mines of Potosi had been found.

In 1859, a weak-witted prospector nicknamed "Pancake," perhaps because he had nothing better to do, stuck his hand into a gopher hole and scooped out a fistful of earth. It was liberally sprinkled with gold and silver. "Pancake's" other name was Comstock. He got the credit, but it was a gopher that found the Comstock Lode.

Two years earlier a group of army teamsters from Fort Bridger loaded up on Kentucky whiskey and decided to have a horse race. The lead horse stepped into a prairie-dog hole, pitching the rider high into the air and head first into another hole. When the drunken teamster extricated himself and looked at the gravel in which his head had been buried, he sobered instantly. The gravel was yellow with gold. Another rich strike had been discovered—through the intervention of a horse, this time—and in a few months the hills and mountains around the area swarmed with miners.

In 1880, an Idaho prospector named Dan Scribner was toiling up a hill on foot, hoping to spy his errant horses. He noticed a badger hole, and pausing to look at the earth the badger had thrown out, discovered what later became known as the Minnie Moore Mine, which sold for half a million dollars.

At Tonopah, Nevada, a mule belonging to Jim Butler kicked off a bit of rock and brought to light one of the richest ore deposits of modern times. Yet despite these, and scores of other cases, treasure seekers have persisted in following their own maps or their own hunches rather than following their horses or their mules.

By COSTA CAROUSSO

KILL THESE HAIR-DESTROYING GERMS

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SAVE YOUR HAIR

Beware of your itchy scalp, hair loss, dandruff, head scales, unpleasant head odors! Nature may be warning you of approaching baldness. Heed Nature's warning! Treat your scalp to scientifically prepared Ward's Formula.

Millions of trouble-breeding bacteria, living on your sick scalp (see above) are killed on contact. Ward's Formula kills not one, but all four types of these destructive scalp germs now recognized by many medical authorities as a significant cause of baldness. Kill these germs—don't risk letting them kill your hair growth.

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4. **Stops** annoying scalp itch and burn—instantly
5. **Starts** wonderful self-massaging action—within 3 seconds

Once you're bald, that's it, friends! There's nothing you can do. Your hair is gone forever. So are your chances of getting it back. But Ward's Formula, used as directed, keeps your sick scalp free of itchy dandruff, seborrhea, and stops the hair loss they cause. Almost at once your hair looks thicker, more attractive and alive.

We don't ask you to believe us. Thousands of men and women—first skeptical just as you are—have proved what we say. Read their grateful letters. Study the guarantee—it's better than a free trial! Then try Ward's Formula at our risk. Use it for only 10 short days. You must enjoy all the benefits we claim—or we return not only the price you pay—but **DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK**. You be the judge! © Ward Laboratories Inc., 1430 Broadway, New York 18, N.Y.

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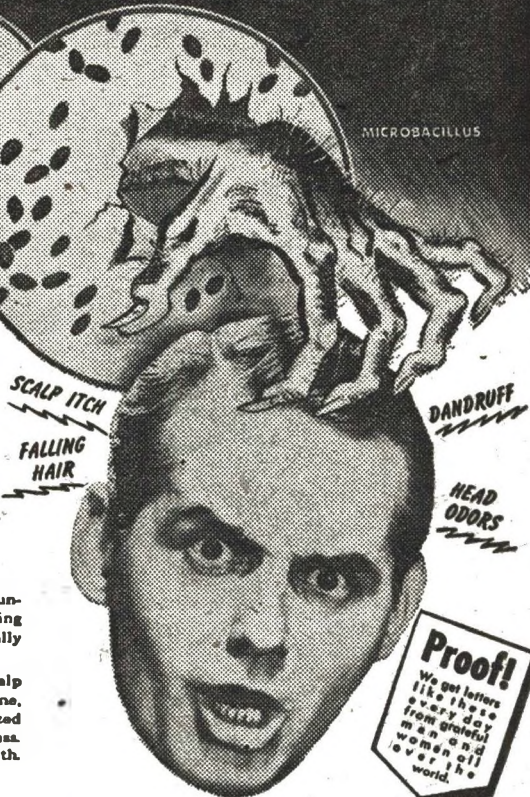
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Proof!
We get letters like these every day from grateful men and women all over the world.

I must admit I didn't have much faith in it, but I hadn't been using Ward's one week before I could see it was helping me. I could feel my hair getting thicker.
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After using Ward's for only 12 days, my hair has stopped falling out.
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I feel encouraged to say that the infuriating scalp itch which has bothered me for 5 years is now gone.
J. M. K., Columbus, Ohio

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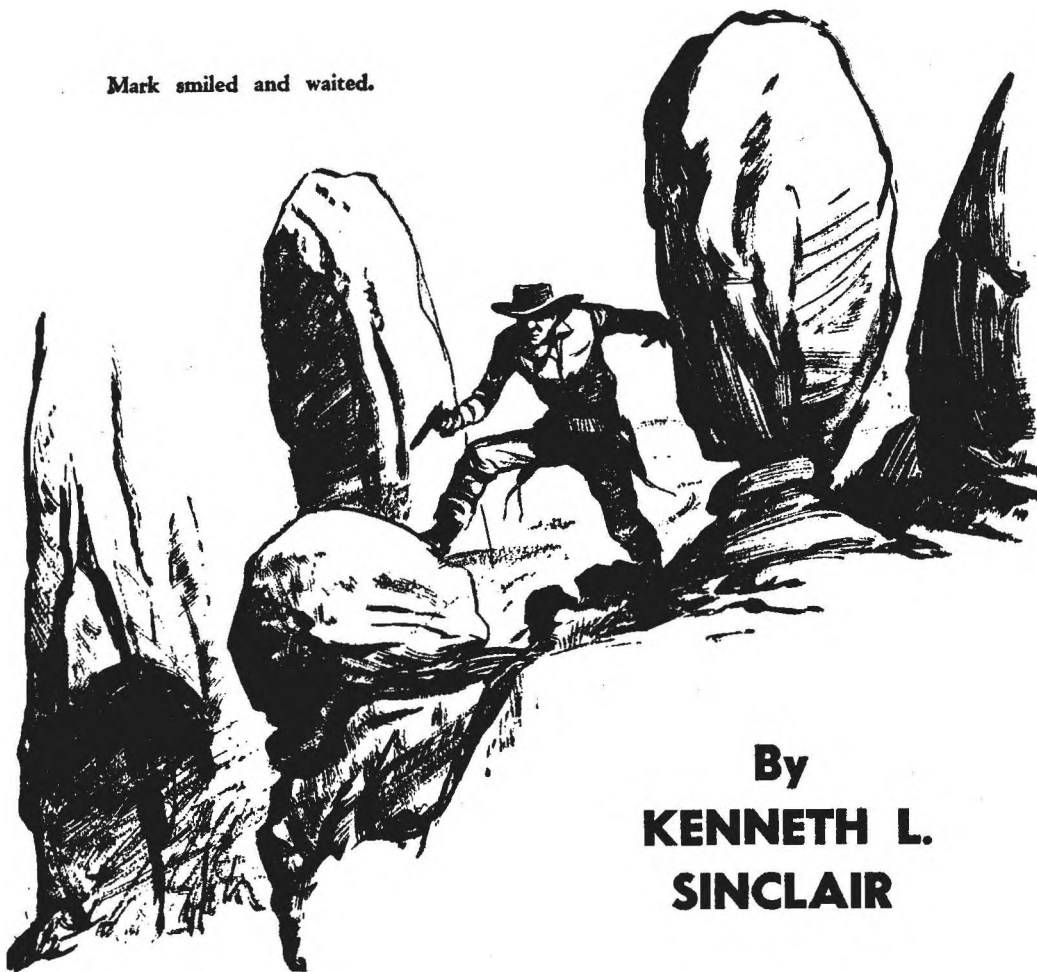
★ ★ ★ TYRANT OF ORO GRANDE

*Dramatic Novel of
Hardrock Hellions*

*Proud as she was beautiful—
and dangerous as she was
proud—was dark-eyed Kitty
Shannon. And she ruled Oro
Grande with the sting of her
frown and the flash of her
gold—until tough Mark Con-
way flung her a challenge she
couldn't ignore!*



Mark smiled and waited.



By
**KENNETH L.
SINCLAIR**

CHAPTER

1

Beautiful Bluffer

The stagecoach came to a halt at last, in the swirl of its own dust, and stood rocking gently on the straps. Mark Conway glanced out through the grimy window and saw that they were stopped in front of an adobe building with a sign that read, *Bank of Oro Grande—Butterfield Stage Agency*, over the door. He picked up his bundle and rose, swinging toward the door of the coach.

But the big man on the seat opposite put out an insistent hand. "I'll have one more try at it, friend. Will you go on to California with me?"

Mark looked sharply at the man. The opaque eyes, the carefully expressionless line of the broad jaw, told him nothing.

Yet he sensed that there was tension in the big man now—and that could hardly be warranted by a simple offer made to a traveling acquaintance.

Maybe the man knew. . . . Mark pushed the thought aside, and reflected that this masquerade was making him jumpy already. He made a deliberate grin. "My ticket says Oro Grande, mister."

"Damn your ticket. I offer you a good job, a mining job a notch above anything you've ever held. You turn it down flat to get off in this raw desert where you admit you've got not even a promise of work. That's not good sense, man!"

Mark grinned again. "I'm a hardrock miner," he said, "and not expected to show good sense."

Then he swung down from the coach and shouldered his way through the small group of onlookers. At the door of the bank he paused, an inner sense of warn-

ing tugging at him again, to glance back toward the coach.

Driver and guard were tossing down boxes from the boot, and the coach was swaying to their movements. Other men were changing the teams. The big man had not left his seat; he was staring out through his window with an expression of distaste for all that he saw. But now he nodded—a slow, definite movement of his head—to someone in the little crowd.

The nod was not repeated. It could have meant anything—that he saw someone he knew, or that he found one small thing in Oro Grande that he could approve. Or it could have been a signal. The offer itself could have been a test, and by turning it down Mark had admitted that he was not just a mining man in search of work.

He controlled his imagining with an effort and strode on into the bank, his cavalry boots making a dull sound on the plank floor. The state agency was a counter at one of the room.

"I need lodgings," Mark told the clerk. "This doesn't have the look of a place that would support a hotel."

The clerk peered up at Mark's face with rising curiosity. "You're staying in Oro Grande? Mister, I don't think—"

"I saw the head-rig of a mine over there on a hill," Mark interrupted. "That's enough for me."

"Well, *Señora* Garros has put up a miner or two, for a little while until they got places of their own. But I don't—"

"Where'll I find the *señora's* place?"

"Well, you go around the corner to the right and down to the creek. It's the first house at the other end of the footbridge."

Mark nodded and went out, into the brassy glare of the sun. The stage was gone. He rounded the corner and started down a street lined with adobe buildings, his mind noting that everything in Oro Grande gave a feeling of solid permanence.

A faint frown came to his face; he'd not had that feeling before, in any mining camp. He found himself walking in the sun and turned to cross to the shady side of the street.

He saw the carriage as it swung into the street from a road that ran parallel to the creek. Its low-slung and gleaming lines, its team of sleek blacks, its uniformed driver would have fitted into the scheme

of things back in Boston. But hardly here, in the West.

He saw that a woman with a sun parasol rode behind the driver. But he paid no more attention to the vehicle, even as it bore down upon him with dogs and chickens scattering from its path. He held to his course, his long, lean body moving at an unhurried stride. Seven months in a Yankee prisoner-of-war camp had given him a vast distaste for jumping at the other fellow's whim. The driver had seen him; and though the street was narrow, the man could slow his team a bit.

But the carriage did not slacken pace. The blacks were almost upon Mark Conway, their driver sawing the lines to keep them from swerving, when he leaped from their path.

The carriage rolled smoothly past him, its high wheels sending up streamers of dust. The woman turned her head to look directly at him in quick, cool appraisal. He saw that she was young, that her face held the deep, vital sort of beauty that could be accented by the wilful tilt of her chin.

Then the carriage was past him. He'd had a brief glimpse of the gold monogram on its side, but he had not been able to make it out because his attention had been on the girl. Now, in the swirl of its dust, he stared after it with anger building swiftly within him as he knelt to pick up the hat that had fallen from his head.

HE HEARD a chuckle behind him, and swung to face the man who lounged against the porch-post of a saloon.

"You'll learn to get out of Kitty Shannon's way, Johnny Reb," the man said. His eyes moved from the bit of a tattered gray uniform that protruded from Mark Conway's bundle, to Mark's face.

"And who is Kitty Shannon?"

The man lifted a thin, well-tailored shoulder. His right cheek bore a scar, and now the scar deepened as a wry and one-sided smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. He nodded toward the naked timbers that reared into the sky at the mine's head-works.

"She's the Scorpion Mine, mister. She's that big house you see on the other hill. She's Oro Grande's queen. If you've got it in mind to stay here, you'll find your success in that dependent on Kitty Shan-

non. You'll stay or leave, according to the whim that enters her pretty little head."

There was bitterness in the man's voice, a brooding hatred in his eyes. His was the unruffled manner of a gambler, yet the intensity of the feeling that was in him broke easily through that veneer.

"A woman's town," Mark said. "I hadn't expected that, on this frontier."

He picked up his bundle and moved down the street. But he heard the saloon doors crash open and turned to see a man in rough miner's clothing come hurtling out. The man fell sprawling on the porch and tried weakly to crawl away, but a second miner was upon him then, driving hard boot-heels down into his face.

Blood spurted, bone snapped with a crunching sound. The man who was down made a gurgling noise, threshed helplessly and then lay still, his breathing made spasmodic by the pain that was in him. The victor spat, turned, and strode back into the saloon.

Mark Conway looked at the gambler and said, "'A woman's town.'"

The gambler lifted a shoulder in negligent acceptance of this, and called to someone inside. Two men with bartenders' aprons came out and carried the fallen man down the street. . . .

The house to which Mark had been directed was a two-story adobe. *Señora Garros* was a plump and smiling little woman who finally understood his meaning and showed him an upstairs room.

He found it pleasant enough. It was cool, and there was a door opening on the inside balcony from which he looked down into a grassy patio. He stood there on the balcony for a time, looking up toward the raw rock of the hill where the mine was perched. He saw the big cable-sheaves of the head-rig spinning, lowering a skip down the slanted shaft. He saw men moving about up there, saw a spurt of steam from the hoisting engine. And he saw ore wagons toiling up the road that climbed the hill.

This, then, was the Scorpion. Black Mike Shannon's mine. He had killed five men to get it for himself alone, the heirs of his partner had said back in Boston. One of the men he had killed had been his partner.

Black Mike himself was dead now, killed

by a rock-fall in the mine. The Scorpion was in the hands of his daughter now, and it was producing only a dribble of wealth, not the full stream that it should yield. Kitty Shannon was sending the heirs careful accountings of the production and their half of the returns—but they had heard whispers that the Scorpion was producing more gold than her accountings showed. They wanted the truth, they wanted the mine worked to its full capacity, and they wanted their part of its wealth.

In the money belt that was strapped about Mark's lean body under his clothing he carried papers giving him full authority to act for those heirs, full control over a half-interest in the Scorpion. It gave him a feeling of power, and he was human enough to find that to his liking.

But he had decided that if he came to Oro Grande with those papers openly in hand, he'd succeed only in putting Kitty Shannon on her guard. Her father had killed his partner—presumably she was making payments to the heirs only to keep them reasonably quiet for awhile. But she had her father's blood, and if she were warned of Conway's purpose, she might make it impossible for him to get at the truth of this.

So he had chosen the guise of a mining man in search of a job. That would put him into the Scorpion where he could work toward finding out the facts that he must know before he showed his face cards.

The Mexican woman called him down to supper just after sunset. After the meal he returned to his room, and stood for a time on the balcony smoking a cigar and watching a full moon rise over the cactus-studded hills to the east.

His face, smooth-shaved in a time and place in which most men wore beard or at least a mustache, was composed. The strong planes of his cheeks were deeply tanned by years during which he had spent as much time as possible in the open. His mouth was firm, reflecting male self-reliance and the conviction that he could take care of himself in any situation. Only the eyes were restless roving, alert.

He found himself swinging his glance from the head-rig of the Scorpion, silhouetted now by the moon, to the big tile-roofed house on the other hill.

There were lights in that house. Kitty

Shannon's house. As he watched them, he wondered just what sort of woman Kitty Shannon was. Certainly she was pretty. But the gambler, who hated her, had said that she ruled all of Oro Grande. She needed more than mere beauty for that; she needed will and determination and a measure of ruthlessness.

Mark Conway, who knew the men of the mining camps, found within himself a sharpening curiosity about this girl who could rule them.

Abruptly, he put out his cigar. He would find out about Kitty Shannon tomorrow, when he asked for a job in her mine.

He undressed slowly and went to bed, keeping the money belt strapped about his body.

IT WAS a taut awareness of danger that pulled him awake. The room was dark, with only the faint light of the stars coming through the window that faced the balcony. The moon was down, then. It must be far past midnight.

Men were in the room. They were only vague and indistinct shadows, but their movement was full of purpose. When Mark bounded suddenly from his bed, they closed in; and he had landed only a blow or two when something crashed down upon his head, bringing first a blinding light and then blackness that was complete and empty.

When he struggled up to a position on hands and knees, his head was full of ringing pain. He shook it savagely, and though that intensified the pain it did clear his mind somewhat. The money belt was gone, of course. The room was empty now; the balcony door stood open.

But he heard the sound of a retreating footfall out there, the subdued tinkle of a spur, and a soft and mocking laugh.

He reared to his feet and plunged forward.

He caught the man on the plank stairway that led down into the patio. Moving soundlessly on his bare feet, he took the man entirely by surprise, grabbed a shoulder to spin the man around and drove a short, savage blow to the jaw.

The man grunted and fell sidewise, sprawling down the stairs to land on the grass.

Mark Conway bounded after him, but

the man was scrambling to his feet. He met Mark's attack with a crouching, cornered-animal sort of fury. They locked together, trading blows—but Mark was the taller and he had the advantage of reach and a confident know-how of this sort of thing. His opponent gasped with pain and then broke away, darting through a gate in the patio wall, his spurs jingling clearly to the frantic energy of his movements.

Mark followed, but found himself in an alley so narrow that even the faint starlight did not seem to penetrate it. He ran a few steps and then stopped, breathing hard, tilting his head and trying to listen for the spurs.

Only the sound of a coyote howling in the hills reached his ears. Here in the alley there were a dozen shadowed gaps between buildings through which Mark's opponent could have darted. The man was gone; and Mark Conway stood in a strange alley in a strange town, clad only in his underwear.

A feeling of futility burned within him as he climbed the stairs and moved along the balcony. His money was gone, and with it the papers that would have given him authority to act for the heirs of Charley Ott. True enough, the papers could be replaced. But that would take time, and the asking of it would go against the grain of Mark's pride. It would be an admission of the fact that he had made a bad start, that his real purpose in Oro Grande had been detected and that he had been dealt with neatly. And those heirs in Boston had been apprehensive enough, in their ideas about what might happen to their interests out here. Shaky enough, in the confidence they placed in Mark Conway.

Puzzlement creased his brow. The man with whom he had fought had worn spurs—and miners had no need for them. And there had been at least three men in his room when he was attacked. Two of them must have left while he was unconscious, but the third had remained behind to watch their victim struggle back to awareness. Why?

Why hadn't they killed him and been done with it? Was this a woman's doing? Was this a wry compensation for her ruthlessness, in line with her sending of money to the heirs of the man her father had killed?

HE PEERED at his reflection in the cracked mirror, next morning, as he shaved. There was an inch-long gash over his right temple, ugly now with caked and clotted blood. He had split a knuckle on his opponent's jaw, and his hand was stiff.

He cursed himself for not having possessed enough guile to place something seemingly important but actually valueless in that money belt. The real papers could have been hidden elsewhere: in the lining of his vest, in the sole of one of his boots. The trouble was that his mind had not worked that way. He was a hard-rock miner, full of self-confidence, and not a man of intrigue.

Now he was broke, and his opponents in Oro Grande knew his real reason for being here. But he could only go ahead. He'd go straight to Kitty Shannon and ask for work in her mine.

Just as he finished shaving, he heard a demanding knock on the door. He turned to face it; but then the door was shoved open and a stocky, powerfully-built man strode in.

"I'm Ben Lake, mister. Kitty Shannon's

manager. She's waiting in the carriage outside."

Mark looked at the man's boots and saw that he wore spurs. He looked at the broad, stubborn jaw, but he saw no bruises there. Lake had a stubby mustache and deeply tanned skin. His hands were large and roughened by a lifetime of hard work.

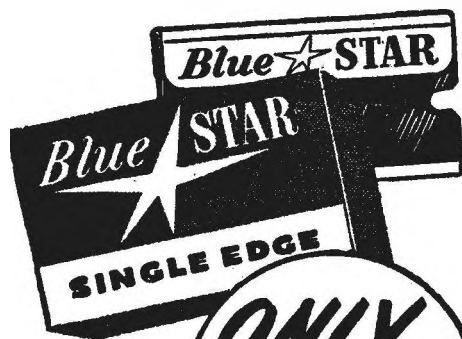
"Hurry up, man!" Lake said impatiently.

Mark shrugged, concealing the surprise that was in him, and put on a coat. Then with Ben Lake's boots thudding closely behind him, he went down the stairs and out into the street.

He moved unhurriedly toward the carriage. Its black sides gleamed in the morning sun, and the gold monogram shone brightly on the door. Kitty Shannon, he saw, was even younger than he had thought—probably just past twenty, though it was hard to be certain of years in the case of a well-groomed woman. Her eyes were dark and lustrous, matching the sheen of her hair.

She put her attention upon him, and said, "Your name is Mark Conway. You

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told *Señora* Garros that you intended to work in the mine."

"That's right," Mark said promptly, giving her a swift grin.

"Perhaps you don't understand about Oro Grande, Mr. Conway. You have the look of a man who has seen many mining towns, but Oro Grande is different. We are looking for a particular type of man, the sort who will build something permanent here. The tough element and the boomers move on."

Mark was thinking wryly of the fight he had seen at the saloon, and of the men who had broken into his room last night. He said, "You mean that if I meet your specifications I can stay. If not—"

"That's it exactly, Mr. Conway. If you convince me that you are the kind Oro Grande needs, you can ask Mr. Lake for work in the mine."

Mark kept his gaze on her, wondering what thoughts were carefully shielded behind those lovely eyes. He shook his head. "No, I won't talk to him for the kind of work I want. I'll talk to the owner of the mine herself."

Her eyes widened slightly. She said nothing, but she held her regard upon him expectantly.

"I started as a hoist-engine oiler in a coal mine," Mark said. "Then I was stope boss. After that, an underground survey man. Just before the war I was in charge of operations in a gold mine out in California. I want something along that line."

"You can't be much over twenty-five," she said. "You came up fast. I wonder what happened to the men who got in your way." She glanced down, then, at his cavalry boots. "And during the war?"

"I fought for the South."

"Why?"

The sharpness of her question caught Mark off-guard, and he groped for words. "Well, I happened to be in New Orleans—"

"I see. It was a chance to fight—and you like to fight, don't you, Mark Conway? I see that you've been in a fight just recently."

Anger stirred within him, and he wondered again just how much knowledge of what had happened lay behind her dark eyes. Either she was a beautiful little bluffer, or there was more crafty ruthlessness

in her than he ever had encountered behind a lovely face.

He let his gaze drop, deliberately, over the length of her tight-fitting dress. Hers was the first warm bloom of womanhood, and he smiled a bit in mocking admiration of her. He saw her chin come up, saw her eyes flash and saw color come to her cheeks in spite of the fact that she must have been accustomed to the alert scrutiny of men.

He sensed the tensing of Ben Lake, beside him. "Damn you," Lake said in a low voice, "watch your manners!" Then, to Kitty Shannon, "I'll run this popinjay out of town so far he'll never—"

"No." There was spirit in her, and with the chill little smile she gave to Mark she informed him that she would humble him in her own way. "We really need a man who knows mining to take charge of the Scorpion. Mr. Lake is busy with my cattle interests. You'd better see Doctor Beale, Mr. Conway, about that gash on your head and the split knuckle. Then you may go up to the Scorpion and inspect the workings. Report to me this evening at the house."

Mark heard the gusty breath of Ben Lake. He turned his head to see uncomprehending amazement in Lake's face. The man had sensed none of the subtle fencing between Kitty Shannon and Mark, and the girl's decision had struck him like a blow. But he made no further argument. In him Mark read a doglike devotion to the girl—and a jealousy that would bare fangs to anyone who tried to win her. Lake gave Conway a black look, then turned to climb into the carriage beside Kitty Shannon.

CHAPTER

2

Har rock Challenge

Mark watched the carriage out of sight. Then he let his long, unhurried stride carry him along the street until he found Dr. Beale's shingle.

The doctor's house was a small adobe, primly new and set back from the street far enough to give him a bit of yard in which he contrived to keep the only green lawn Mark had seen in Oro Grande. The front room served as Beale's office. When Mark entered, he found it filled with the liquid melody of a music box that stood in the corner.

The box was the biggest and most ornate of its kind that he had ever seen. Built something like a writing desk, it stood as high as a man, and the glass front of the upper portion revealed a slowly revolving metal disk fully two feet in diameter.

The doctor was a bald little man with a network of blue veins at his temples. He moved to shut off the music box and then turned to face Mark Conway. He saw the look of appraisal that Mark gave the expensive furnishings of the room, and he said, "A man may have to live on this damned frontier, but he needn't do without the comforts of civilization. Not if he has the strength of will to demand them. You're new in Oro Grande, my friend."

Mark nodded. "I'll manage the mine."

Beale gave his eyebrows a barely perceptible lift, and drew firmly at his cigar. "You have a look of capability about you. Can you deal with a strong-willed woman?"

"I can have a try at it," Mark said guardedly.

"Come now! You've more confidence in you than that. I like a man who asserts himself boldly. You'll need to do that to cope with Kitty Shannon—and with that foreman of hers, Ben Lake."

"Foreman?" Mark said.

"Yes. Black Mike Shannon was a cattleman before he was run out of Texas for being too free with his branding irons. He found himself a partner who knew prospecting and went looking for a stake. They were lucky—but the partner's luck didn't hold when he got a bullet through him. Black Mike dug the gold for himself, and with no proper regard for the metal at all. He worshipped grass. There's more of it in this desert country than you think, and up in the hills it stands as high as a steer's back, for summer range. Black Mike brought in a herd and laid down his rule that every man who works in the Scorpion must take a bit of ground and build on it. Your mine is only a means to an end. Kitty Shannon, who fancies herself a cattle queen, carries on that policy."

Mark said dryly, "I'll try to ignore the smell of cows. Do you think this gash on my head needs your attention?"

Beale frowned in annoyance and peered up at the wound. "Sit down here." He took a bottle from a shelf, put some of its contents on the gash and on Mark's split

knuckle, and then stepped back, a smile pulling his lips back from the teeth that held his cigar. The stuff burned like fire, and when Mark winced Beale said, "Hurts you, eh? You're lucky, my friend, that you didn't get a concussion out of it or worse. A blow on the head is always a chancy thing."

He bandaged the wounds deftly. When Mark asked the fee, Beale gave a negligent shrug and said, "Oh, make it four bits."

Mark gave him a coin and fitted his hat gingerly to his head. But as he turned to leave, Beale said, "You've not asked it, but I'll give you a little advice. Kitty Shannon is a lovely woman, and you're not the sort to overlook that. But watch out for Ben Lake."

Mark left the doctor's office and climbed the road, deeply rutted and churned by the wheels of the ore-wagons, that led to the mine.

His practiced eyes read the story that was here. Some convulsion of the earth had up-tilted the rock formations to an angle of perhaps forty degrees from the vertical. Ages of weathering had exposed the two-foot vein of quartz that thus angled down into the earth; and at the very top of the hill Black Mike and his partner had found their gold-bearing rock.

They had dug an open pit, at first, to enable them to eat away the vein with picks. But when the pit got to be a hundred and fifty feet long and half that distance in width, removal of the rock that overlay the vein at the depth they had reached became an impractical task. So they had sliced down into the earth, following the vein and making a cut only high enough for a man to work, with the ceiling of it supported by heavy timbers. How far they had gone with this Mark could not see from the edge of the pit, but he knew the task of getting the rock up to the surface had defeated them.

Next they had retreated a few feet from the end of the vein and sunk a shaft that ran parallel to it. At various depths there would be cross-cuts feeding upon the vein. A man-way occupied one side of the shaft, its wooden rungs worn by the boots of the miners.

Mark got a forbidding look from the hoist man as he swung into the man-way

and started down, but the protest went no further than that. Perhaps fifty feet down, where light reached faintly from the little rectangle of sky that was the shaft opening, he reached a lamp station. He found a lamp that held a full supply of carbide and water, lighted it and attached it to his hat. Then he continued down the shaft.

The skip came groaning up the shaft and passed him, carrying its cargo of ore toward the surface. Its runners squealed on the wooden tracks—a small thing, that lack of greasing, but it indicated inept management.

HE FOUND more evidence of that when he reached the bottom level where the work was going on. Water dripped from the slanting ceiling of the cut. That couldn't be helped, but the ankle-deep accumulation of it on the floor could and should be pumped.

The air was moist, and the heat shortened the temper of the men who toiled at the face of the vein. One of them stepped truculently toward Mark when he picked up a chunk of quartz from one of the baskets in which they carried it to the skip.

Mark said, "Good rock, this. But you'd get out more of it if you laid rails and put a pushcar in this stope."

The miner, red-bearded and naked to the waist, made a grunt. "If it's any of your business, this is the way Kitty Shannon wants it done. Slow an' steady suits her. Twenty tons of ore to the stamps every day, an' no more. Was you figurin' to change her notions, mister?"

Mark smiled and shrugged. But when he reached the surface again he had learned one thing—the ore of the Scorpion held finely divided gold, and though the mine was poorly managed there was little chance that simple high-grading could account for any large losses.

He followed the ore-wagon road down the hill and along a winding draw to the stamp mill. He stepped aside to let a Mexican drive past with a load of desert wood for the boilers; then he entered the mill.

The equipment here was up to date. There were two batteries of five stamps each—the thousand-pound stamps were set to a six-inch drop and they were making ninety drops a minute, filling the building

with their roar. The mixture of pulverized quartz and water in the mortar boxes under the stamps passed through screens and then ran slowly over fifteen-foot-long copper plates that were treated with mercury.

A man was scraping the resulting amalgam of gold and mercury from one of the plates and squeezing the water from it, then packing it into stone crocks.

Shouting to make himself heard, Mark asked, "Where's your retorting done?"

"Up the draw a ways, in Vern Sny's little fort. You want to get yourself shot, you go up there."

Mark strode up the draw and found a thick-walled adobe building with iron bars set across its windows. He knocked on the heavy timbers of the door.

A muffled voice called, "Who's there?"

Mark gave his name. "I'm the new manager," he said.

After an interval the door swung open a bit. A spare, hollow-chested man with a whiskey flush on his face peered out. "Kitty Shannon ain't said anything about this," he said suspiciously.

"She will." Mark pushed past the man to enter the building.

He found himself in the larger of the two rooms. This room was hot from the fires under the retorts. Jugs of mercury, separated from the gold and ready to go back to the stamp mill for re-use, stood along one wall. Through a doorway Mark glimpsed the interior of the other room, saw a cot with rumpled blankets in there, and the bottles of acid, a big mortar and pestle, the balance scales that were needed for assay work. A large safe stood in a corner.

"You sleep here, Sny?" he asked.

The man wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He kept away from Mark, hovering close to the rifle that hung beside the door, yet the reek of his whiskey reached Mark's nostrils.

"Yeah," Sny said. "Twenty-four-hour job, this'n, 'cept for the day the concentrate's took down to the bank once a week. Then I get out of this cage for a few hours. Since when you takin' over Ben Lake's job?"

Mark ignored the question. "I see you do your own assaying. How's the ore running?"

"Same as always." Sny's red-rimmed

eyes were wary. "'Bout twenty ounces, fine, to the ton."

Mark's quick mental arithmetic told him that the figure checked with the accountings that had been sent to the heirs of Charley Ott back in Boston. But suppose the ore ran a thousand dollars to the ton, or even five hundred. That left a neat difference to be pocketed by the daughter of Black Mike Shannon, while she ran her sweet-faced bluff and told the world that the Scorpion's ore ran only three hundred dollars or so.

Sny moved forward a step. Weakness was in the man, and fear was clashing with it now. "Say, you—you won't tell Kitty Shannon I been drinkin' on the job, will you?" he pleaded.

Mark shook his head. He wanted to make this visit seem but a casual one and he cut it short, leaving the retort house to swing down the draw with long, purposeful strides. He felt a driving certainty that if the Scorpion was being fleeced, the secret lay with the man he had just faced.

This thing was shaping up in Mark's mind now. He would return to that retort house tonight, and he would trick the secret out of Sny if he could, beat it out of him if he had to.

HE HAD gone only a short distance when he met the gambler who had lounged on the porch of the saloon. The man made his wry smile and said, "I hear you're Kitty Shannon's new hired man. Conway's the name, isn't it? I'm Lucky Madden. You and I will have to compare notes a little later."

"You mean that you've worked for Miss Shannon?"

The gambler shook his head. "Hell, no. I'm a tinhorn, not good enough to walk on the same side of the street with Kitty Shannon! Much less to ride in that thousand-dollar carriage of hers. Did you know that the thing was made in Dublin to Black Mike's order, shipped around the Horn to California, taken apart and packed on mules across the desert? Kitty Shannon uses it for a symbol, to prove she's better than the rest of us. But you're like me, bucko—you'll make a reach for her anyway." Madden's wry grin held a malicious pleasure. "We'll see where you light."

Mark watched the man, measuring the

hate that was in him. Madden had loved Kitty Shannon but she would have none of him, and now it was a rankling, bitter thing inside him.

"What are you doing up here?" Mark asked.

Madden lifted a shoulder. "A man needs to get away from the smell of beer and sweat and that perfume the percentage girls use. He needs to get some air and a chance to think. So I come up here. Any objections?"

Mark shook his head. He saw the wrapped bottle in the pocket of Madden's coat, and it was his hunch that this was the source of Sny's liquor supply. He nodded to the gambler and stepped past him, and strode on down the road.

But at a bend of the draw he left the road and climbed a knoll to look back. As he had expected, Madden was heading straight toward the retort building.

Mark stood motionless for a time, thinking about this. It might mean much; it might mean nothing at all. Finally he put it away in his mind and strode on toward Oro Grande.

Kitty Shannon had told him to call on her that evening. It was scarcely past noon now, but a driving impatience was coming to life within Mark Conway now. Someone in Oro Grande knew his secret, knew his purpose here. They had hit him once and they would hit him again if it served their ends. How much knowledge he could gain to arm himself before that time depended upon the speed with which he moved now.

He went up the hill to the Shannon house. A Mexican servant girl told him that the *señorita* was out helping with a roundup of some of her cattle a few miles to the south. He found a vaquero taking siesta in the shade of a corral, made the fellow understand that he wanted a horse and a saddle, and presently he was mounted and riding toward the south.

He found a sharp enjoyment in this. The air was clean and warm, fragrant with the scent of desert brush. Mark had not been on a horse since the war. Now this stallion wanted to run, and Mark let him break into a smooth gallop.

Kitty Shannon was driving some cattle up a wash, cutting back and forth with her mount, swinging a rope and yelling. She

wore a riding skirt and a blouse that was pressed to her firm young body by the wind, and she rode with a sure and easy grace.

Mark stared at her, watching the color in her cheeks and the warm redness of her parted lips, and wondered if this could be the same girl who rode through Oro Grande in her carriage. But she sensed his presence and reined sharply around to face him, brushing a wave of glossy hair back from her cheek.

An expression of pleasure came quickly to her face, putting a smile to her mouth and touching her beauty with magic. But then her chin came up, and the smile was gone. "I told you to call at the house this evening, Mr. Conway," she said.

He gave her an unabashed grin. "I never let a lady know what to expect of me, Miss Shannon."

"I'm sure you've been very successful," she said coldly. "But for a mining man, you sit a horse remarkably well."

"I was in the cavalry. Before that, I did a lot of riding in California. I've been up to the mine, Miss Shannon. There are some changes I'll want to make, things that will double your production of ore and—"

She held up a small gloved hand to check him. "I want none of that! Oh, I know your code, Mr. Conway—get out the gold, as much of it as you can, as fast as you can. And when the vein comes to its end, leave your ugly scar in the earth and go on to another mine. That won't do in Oro Grande. The gold that's in the earth is quite safe. It will not be squandered if we take it as it is needed, to build this range and give the men who work the mine a chance to get their roots down."

MARK reined his horse close to hers and looked deeply into her eyes. She seemed sincere in these ideas of hers, but it was easy for a man to be fooled in the case of a pretty woman. This could all be sham to cover her systematic fleecing of the mine.

"I'm wondering," he said softly, "if I've just heard the daughter of Black Mike talking—or Black Mike himself."

She caught her breath, and her eyes defied him angrily. "It was my father's wish. And it is mine, too."

Mark sat tall in his saddle, faintly smiling as he watched her. He was going to hurt her now, and see how she reacted to the sting of it.

He said, "Black Mike Shannon—run out of Texas for mavericking. He killed five men to make the Scorpion his alone. He doesn't sound to me like a man who would want to take its wealth slowly. If he wanted to build an empire for himself here in Arizona Territory, he'd build fast and sure, with no worry about giving his miners a chance to settle down."

Her face went pale. Her hand came up to strike him, but she let it fall slowly to the horn of her saddle. She looked quickly away, dropping long lashes that could not quite hide the hurt that was in her eyes.

"Has it ever come to your mind," she said, "that my father may not have been as black as he is painted? Everyone was mavericking in Texas. My father simply did a better job of it than others, and they resented that. Here in Oro Grande he was harsh because he had to be. There is little law in the Territory and a man has to defend what is his or it will be taken from him. You know the kind of men who swarm this land."

"Yes. And you sort them out in this town of yours. You decide who shall stay and who shall leave."

"I have to, or we'd be overrun. I make it my business to know everything that goes on in Oro Grande."

"Everything?" Mark was smiling now.

"Everything," she said firmly. "You are thinking that you saw a fight yesterday, at Lucky Madden's saloon. I am not a fool, Mark Conway—I know that men who work twelve hours a day underground will have their rough pleasures. But the man who picked that fight is gone from Oro Grande now."

"You're a despot, Kitty Shannon. A lovely little despot. You may be sincere, but—"

She struck at him then. He caught her arm, and for an instant she strained angrily against his strength and their faces were close together. On impulse he slipped his other arm about her slim waist and drew her to him and kissed her. Her lips were soft and the kiss was incredibly sweet, as he had known it would be.

She made no protest. She merely waited, and when he released her she drew back with her dark eyes full of scorn. "What was that supposed to prove?" she demanded. "That your polished manners can win you a kiss from every girl you meet? Don't try that again, Mark Conway, ever!"

He grinned at her, wondering vaguely at the swift hard pounding of his heart. "Fire me, if you wish," he told her. "I don't know why you hired me, anyway. You don't want production from the mine."

A faint tremor came to her lips, and was quickly gone. "I'll not fire you. We need a man who knows mines. There have been too many accidents in the Scorpion. One of them killed my father. Your job, Mr. Conway, is to run the mine so that no one else gets hurt."

"And if I find someone stealing from the Scorpion?"

She seemed surprised by that. "We employ honest men and pay them well. There is no high-grading."

"But if I do find a thief?" Mark prodded.

"Then deal with him as you think best." Kitty Shannon reined her horse away, then, and rode up the wash.

CHAPTER

3

Fugitive's Trail

Mark watched her until she was hidden by the mesquite. Then he headed back toward Oro Grande.

He had learned little about Kitty Shannon, and if she was playing a double game here he was as far away from it as ever. But he now wrestled with a new, disturbed feeling within himself. Part of it was guilt. He was working for Kitty Shannon and spying upon her as well, and the duplicity of it was not to his liking.

He had gone only a short distance when a rider spurred angrily out of the brush and forced his mount against Mark's. It was Ben Lake, and his face was dark with fury.

"After this," Lake snapped, "you'll stay away from Kitty Shannon. Any dealings you have with her, you'll go through me. Got that straight in your head now, Fanc-y Dan?"

Mark stared at the man, distaste pull-

ing at his mouth. He sensed that Lake had been watching and listening while he and the girl had talked, and the fact brought a rise of cold anger within him. "My name," he said flatly, "is Conway. Mark Conway. I'll see Miss Shannon whenever I damned please."

Satisfaction leaped in Lake's eyes. "All right! You do that, mister—but you better be packin' a gun when you try it, *sabe*?" Lake wheeled his mount around, used his spurs savagely, and was gone.

Mark did not hurry on his way back to Oro Grande. He reached the town just at sunset, had supper with the Garros family, then lighted a cigar and strolled along the street.

He left the last of the solid-looking little adobe houses behind and continued along a path that wandered among cactus and mesquite. He came to a wooden fence which bordered a small field; there were faint sounds of running water here, and the cool smell of it was fragrant on the night air. A man was working in the knee-deep stand of clover. When Mark hailed him, the man approached the fence genially.

"Yeah," he said in response to Mark's inquiry. "This is my ground here. I'm raisin' feed for my pigs. Most of the boys got their selves a few cows because they figure they'd be the least work. Me, I'm bankin' on pigs. I got water diverted from the crick to irrigate this patch an' raise feed. When the Scorpion peters out, it won't bother me at all. People always got to eat!"

Mark nodded in the gathering dusk. He was thinking that if Kitty Shannon was making a pretext while she fleeced the Scorpion, she was doing a thorough job of it.

"It was Mike Shannon's idea for each of you boys to get himself a piece of ground?"

"Yeah. Mike had a head on 'im, rest his soul. In spite of that temper of his."

"He had a partner," Mark prompted.

"Charley Ott, yeah. Kind of a dainty little cuss with a tongue sharp as a razor, but he knowed his rock. Him an' Mike was always arguin'. Mike favored the South, Charley was for the North. One day they got into a hell of a row an' Mike pulled a gun an' used it."

They talked a bit more, then Mark

thanked the miner and returned to Oro Grande. It was fully dark now, under a sky that was peopled with stars. Mark went to his room, got his gunbelt out of his bundle and strapped it about his lean hips. He thumbed cartridges through the loading gate of the gun and slipped the weapon into the holster, feeling the pull of its weight and finding no satisfaction in it. Miners fought with their fists, with their boots, with a length of timber if it came handy. Not with a gun. The use of a gun set a man apart from his kind, put a stamp of disgrace upon him in the eyes of all hardrock men.

But he might well have need of a gun, this night. He left the house and strode along the street, past the tinny tinkle of music and the whiskey-smell of Lucky Madden's saloon, and swung up-slope toward the retort house.

THERE was light showing through the barred windows of the place when Mark approached it. He moved silently, his weight on the balls of his feet and his eyes alert until he reached the door. He knocked sharply on the heavy panel.

A chair scraped the dirt floor inside. Sny's voice lifted, edged with alarm. "Who's there?"

"Pete." Mark put urgency into his voice. "The boss sent me. Open up!"

"I—I don't know any Pete."

"Yes you do. The boss says to get the high-grade out of there before the new manager finds it. You want to get yourself in bad, man?"

There was a fumbling at the wooden latch-bar. Mark put his weight against the door and it gave abruptly, swinging back to strike the man inside.

Mark was in the retort room then. His swift glance swung around to Sny, who had lost his balance and now was on his knees, the rifle that he had dropped a foot or two away from him on the floor.

The man was drunk. He blinked owlshly, moved his tongue around inside his lips as if they were too thick for speech, then made a grab for the rifle.

Mark kicked it away from him. He clenched his fists and moved toward Sny, towering over the man and smiling a little.

"You," Sny said. "Damn you—"

"Just you and I, here," Mark said, speaking slowly and clearly to get the words into the man's whiskey-fogged brain. "How much of a beating can you take, Sny?"

Without waiting for an answer, he jerked the man to his feet, drove a blow to the jaw. Sny was hurled back by the force of it. He struck one of the retort overfs, careened away from it and slammed against the wall. Blood appeared in a faint trickle at the corner of his mouth. The blow must have made him bite his tongue or the inside of his hollow cheek.

It jolted some of the whiskey-fog from him, however. His eyes went wild with fear as he read the cold purposefulness that was in Mark Conway. "You—you want the gold," he said. "Take it—there's a pit under my cot in there—"

"No," Mark said, "I'll not buy off that cheaply. You're putting part of the gold—the right amount for a twenty-ounce-to-the-ton assay—into the safe." He was moving toward Sny now. "Who gets the rest of it? Kitty Shannon?"

Sny pulled himself together with a visible effort, and a cornered-animal sort of craftiness came into his eyes. He said, "That's what you're after, eh? What's it worth to—"

The shot came then. It reached through the doorway, tugged at Mark's coat, then thudded into the wall to his left and knocked out a fist-sized pocket in the adobe. The report of the gun sent its echoes up and down the draw.

Mark spun to face the door. The man outside the retort house had been shooting to kill, and only the fact that Mark was moving had saved him. Now he wanted that man's blood.

"The lamp, man!" he snapped to Sny.

Then he was in the doorway, regardless of the fact that Sny seemed too stricken by terror to stir from his position and put out the light. He saw two shadowy figures out there. One was a horse, the other a man. He fired quickly at the man.

He heard a cry of pain. The man out there went down, but he was not done; he moved jerkily in the grass, probably searching for the gun that he had dropped when Mark's bullet hit him.

Mark wheeled back to put out the lamp. And saw that Sny had overcome his ter-

ror now. The assayer was moving, not toward the lamp but toward his rifle.

That put him in line with the window, however. And before Mark could make a move, the second shot from the man outside smashed the glass and struck Sny, spinning him far around as he fell.

Mark darted to the lamp and blew it out. He stepped over Sny's body and laid his gun across the glass-littered sill of the window. He fired four shots, laying them in a pattern across the bottom of the draw where the shadowy figure of the assailant moved.

There was one wild shot in return. But Mark was too well fortified up for the gunman's taste; the man was mounted again and riding away, pulling himself quickly out of range.

The assayer was unconscious but his breathing was strong. His wound was high in the right side of his chest—the bullet had gone through him from back to front. He was losing blood, but there was no crimson froth of it on his mouth, where the bleeding from Mark's blow had ceased now.

Mark debated, then lifted Sny's third body and slung it across his shoulders, and started down the draw toward Oro Grande.

DOC BEALE opened his door at last, in response to Mark's demanding knock. There was a nightcap on Beale's head, a lamp in his hand; he quickly saw what was wanted, and stepped back to allow Mark to carry the wounded man inside and put him on a couch.

Beale put down his handlamp and lighted a large, ornate one with a stained-glass shade. He stood silent for a moment, seemingly in admiration of the lamp. Then he glanced at Sny and asked, "What's happened to this whiskey-pot?"

"Bullet wound." Mark pulled open Sny's shirt, sodden with blood now, to show Beale the wound.

Beale took a cigar from the box on his desk, bit off the end and lighted it. Over the flame of his match he glanced meaningly at the holster on Mark's thigh. "You shoot him?"

"No. Somebody else. How does it look, doctor?"

Beale said nothing in reply to that. He

cocked his head to one side and listened to the sounds of drunken hilarity that came from Lucky Madden's saloon. "Listen to that!" he said. "Cheap liquor, two-bit gambling. What satisfaction can a man find in the wager of a few measly dollars? Let him gamble his life, or his future. You can respect him for that."

"Doc," Mark snapped irritably, "do you always have to talk before you get to your work? Get at this man—he's got to pull through!"

"Why? A sodden, worthless wreck, good for nothing but to put a few dollars in Madden's till!"

"He's the one man in Oro Grande," Mark said, "who can tell me something that I've got to know."

Beale peered up at Mark, plainly liking the drive and vigor he found in the younger man. "All right," he said. "The bullet went through him. I'll stop the flow of blood and put him to bed. Help me get the clothes off him. . . ."

When Mark stepped out onto the little porch of Beale's house, there were no more sounds of hilarity coming from Madden's place. There were no sounds of any kind, except the subdued whisper of moving boots in the dust and the tinkle of a spur or two. The group of men who moved shoulder to shoulder down the street swung in to press against the fence that protected Beale's little lawn. In an angry gesture a man kicked down a section of that fence; and they streamed through the gap.

Mark dropped his hand, brushing back his coat and getting his fingers around the stock of his gun. "That's far enough, boys," he said. "What do you want here?"

The big, red-bearded miner with whom he had talked at the bottom of the Scorpion put a boot on the porch. In the light that reached out from Beale's windows, the man's face was like rock.

"Somebody said you shot down a Scorpion man, Conway. What we want is to learn you that—"

"Somebody lied," Mark said. "And was mighty prompt about the doing of it!"

"We'll decide who's doing the lyin'," the bearded miner retorted.

"Get a rope on 'im, Big Red!" someone in the mob yelled hoarsely. "We'll take 'im to Lucky's for a trial!"

Mark knew this for what it was—a min-

ing-camp mob. He had seen its like before. He had seen a man tried, sentenced and hanged in a matter of twenty minutes, in the Mother Lode of California. Kitty Shannon had laid a veneer of permanence over Oro Grande, and she had chosen the men who were to remain here; but their ugly side remained the same. Or had she sent this mob because Mark had gotten too close to her secret?

That thought put a strange wry pain in him. He drew his gun, leveled it, and said, "You're making fools of yourselves. The man who shot Sny is around this town somewhere—he's got a bullet in him and sooner or later he'll have to come to Beale for attention. I brought Sny here. Would I have done that if I'd shot him? Think that over, while you're remembering that I'll put lead into the first five men who come near me."

Even as Mark spoke, he saw that his words made no dent in the dark and unthinking will of the mob. They had a sort of raw loyalty to their kind, and he was an outsider.

Big Red said, "Gunman, eh? What we had in mind was to slap you around, rip them fancy clothes off you an' run you out in the desert. You pull that trigger just once an' you'll hang, bucko."

"No gunman," Mark said. "But I'll defend myself."

It remained thus, his will locked against theirs, for perhaps a minute. Then Kitty Shannon's carriage swung into the street and rolled smoothly toward the mob.

THE moon was up now, flooding Oro Grande with its cool, deceptive radiance. Kitty Shannon wore a white dress, and she held herself erect, a sort of distant pride in her bearing. When her driver halted the carriage she stood up.

"Men," she said, "I give you thirty seconds. Any man who is not out of this street in that time will be out of Oro Grande before sunrise. I will deal with Conway myself."

They grumbled, but they obeyed her. She had ruled them so long and so thoroughly that obedience to her had become a habit not easily broken.

Yet Mark marveled at it. Her beauty was the sort to bring an ache to a man's throat, yet she had strength of will be-

yond that of most men. He watched the mob string out along the plank walk and head dispiritedly back toward Lucky Madden's. Then he holstered his gun and moved forward to help her from the carriage.

"Thanks," he said to her.

Her eyes met his fully, accusingly. "I'd have done the same," she said, "for a dog. Why did you shoot Vern Sny?"

"I didn't."

"Don't lie to me, Mark Conway!"

He grinned. "I shouldn't have to. You know all that goes on in Oro Grande, remember? You should know the truth of this."

He was challenging her now, and he hated the feeling it put into him. But she had hired him in spite of the fact that patently he was not the type of man to fit her specifications of permanence. He wondered why. He wondered if she was laughing at him behind those lustrous eyes that seemed so solemn now, while she carried the game along to some distant conclusion of her own.

"All I know," she said, "is that a man came to me from Lucky Madden's place and said they were talking of standing you before a miners' court. What were you doing at the retort house?"

"You gave me a free hand to deal with dishonesty where I found it."

"And what did you find?"

"Nothing." His eyes were mocking her now. "But a man followed me up there and shot Sny through the window before he could tell me what I wanted to know."

Almost imperceptibly, Kitty Shannon swayed toward him. "Mark," she said tensely, "get out of Oro Grande! I'm having a good fast horse brought to the back of Dr. Beale's house. If you ride fast you can—"

"Why?" he demanded. "Why should I run?"

"For your own safety, Mark." She was pleading now. "Those men think you shot Sny. There's wildness in them, and I—I don't know how long I can keep them under control. If Sny should die . . . Oh, I wish my father were here tonight!"

"A gap in your armor, Kitty Shannon," Mark said, and wondered at the tenderness in his voice.

Her eyes lifted quickly to scan his face,

and her red lips parted. "What do you mean?" she asked.

But before Mark could answer that, Beale's door opened and the doctor, fully dressed now, called, "You'd better come in."

The doctor faced them in his office, and said, "Sny died a couple minutes ago."

The jolt of that sent Mark forward a pace. "No! You can't let him go, man! Why, he wasn't hit badly—"

"Any bullet wound is a bad thing. I've seen them go when they seemed only nicked, and I've seen them live when they were shot half to pieces. The shock of it is the unpredictable factor. In this case there may have been a severed artery, internal bleeding. Sny was in poor physical condition and he was full of whiskey, which is a depressant. There was nothing I could do."

Mark heard Kitty Shannon catch her breath in what sounded like a sob. Then he heard something else—the faint jingle of a spur just outside the doctor's open window.

He darted to the window and peered out, in time to see the furtive figure of a man go dodging from the space between the houses and run toward Lucky Madden's. The sound of a laugh floated back. A soft and mocking laugh.

Mark had heard it before. This was the man who had been in his room when he was robbed of his money belt and the papers it contained.

He swung a leg over the sill, full of a rising urge to follow that man and beat the truth out of him. But Kitty's hand caught his arm.

"No! Mark! He'll tell the others that Sny is dead—there'll be no stopping them now! You've got to use that horse. Mark, please!"

She was propelling him toward the back door of the doctor's house, her urgency putting surprising strength into her slim body. And he knew that she was right. The mob would be blood-maddened now. There'd be no reasoning with them, nor stopping them with a single gun. He could only run. . . .

In the shadows of the alley, a *vaquero* waited with a horse. Mark turned to Kitty Shannon and said, "I hate to leave a pretty woman."



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"You'll find many such, Mark." Her voice was throaty and not quite steady. "I'll try to talk to the men, hold them here as long as I can. You'd better head west, to California. Good luck."

He swung into the saddle. He heard the rising, ugly sound of the mob now. But he sat with his body swinging to the restive movements of his horse and looked down at Kitty Shannon.

"Then I'm not to come back?"

She shook her head. "You know that miners don't forget. . . ."

He leaned down quickly, and found her lips warm and quivering beneath his kiss. When he straightened, she turned quickly from him, her hands lifting to her face, and he knew that she was crying. He reined the horse around and put him to a run, and when he emerged from the alley and swung down the street, the bitter yells and the wild shots of the mob followed him out of Oro Grande.

CHAPTER

Sold Out!

4

He took the desert road, riding fast, pushed by the knowledge that it would take a little time for the mob to find mounts and that the advantage he could gain now might prove to be precious later on.

He was thinking that Kitty Shannon had told him not to come back because she, too, thought he had killed Sny. Yet she had given him a mount and a chance to escape—and her kiss had been full of feeling and sorrow.

He knew that if he lived he would come back to Oro Grande.

The sunrise caught him in the middle of the desert. Far behind was the dust-cloud of his pursuers. Ahead lay a range of mountains, blue with the distance, thrusting jagged peaks into the sky. The road ran straight toward the highest of them, then made a big swing toward the north seeking an easier pass.

Mark debated. By sticking to the road he put himself in the position of one trying simply to outrun his pursuers. Some of them might be better mounted than he, and in the heat of their fury they would push their horses to the limit. They had a plain trail to follow. And in this nearly flat country they could see his dust for miles.

What he needed to do was elude them, slip away from them and circle back to Oro Grande. The mountains offered him a chance for that. They were rough and broken, and in them he would have an opportunity to dodge, to conceal himself, to outwit the mob. Too, his knowledge of geology told him that there would be water in those peaks, for his horse and for himself. In the long pull, that water might be the vital factor.

He recognized the element of risk in this. The country was strange to him. He might run himself into a box canyon from which there would be no escape. And there were some of Kitty Shannon's spur-jingling cowboys in the lynch mob behind, men who would know this whole area as well as they knew the streets of Oro Grande.

But he decided on the mountains. The risky thing, the bold thing, always had proven best for him in the past. Playing a thing safe was what other men expected of you, and they planned their moves accordingly. A bold course always surprised them and threw them into confusion.

The sun was high when Mark swung up the first lift of the mountain slopes and stopped for a moment to let his horse blow. He saw his pursuers strung out in a long, thin line on the desert. Those in the lead had gained on him a little, but not much. Those in the rear had fallen back. Probably they were miners, unused to the saddle and already beginning to feel the effects of the ride.

He turned back to the mountains and continued his climb. Cactus and mesquite gave way to live oaks and grass. A cardinal made a sound disapproving Mark's presence here, and flew on up the narrowing canyon with brilliant red plumage flashing in the sun. Thousand-foot, sheer walls of granite closed in, shutting out most of the sky. Their shade and the increase of altitude brought a coolness that was relief both to man and to horse as they moved on, ever climbing.

Abruptly, the canyon ended in a vertical wall. Mark reined his horse and sat motionless in the saddle, his eyes scanning the walls. A sense of despair lay heavy within him.

He had committed the very blunder he had feared. He was boxed.

The bottom of the canyon would afford

him scant cover for making a fight of it. There were scattered clumps of brush. A few rocks had fallen from the walls, but none of them were large enough to protect a man, let alone his horse.

But as Mark ran his glance back down the canyon he saw something that he had not noticed on the way up. Some trick effect of lighting had concealed it, perhaps, but now it showed clearly—a zig-zag scratch of a trail climbing one of the walls. Its beginning was perhaps half a mile down the canyon.

Mark wheeled his horse and raced toward the trail, listening for sounds of the mob. He reached the trail safely and started up; and only then did he hear the distant sounds of his pursuers coming up the canyon. He drew a deep breath and let it slide from his nostrils. He was reprieved, but it had been a close thing, close enough to make him fully aware of the narrow margin that lay, for him, between escape and death.

The trail was an erratic one. In places it followed a natural fault-plane which furnished good footing. In other places, where it rounded the out-thrust portions of the canyon wall, it was dangerously narrow. Mark surmised that it had been made by some prospector for himself and his sure-footed burros. But it was no place for a horse. Mark dismounted, spoke softly and reassuringly to his mount, and led the frightened animal upward.

The Oro Grande mob was in the canyon now. Mark could hear them down there, but could see nothing because the sun was slanting down now and throwing this whole wall and the bottom of the canyon into shadow.

He heard Ben Lake's voice raise a sudden shout: "The son's goin' up the side, that's where he's at! Throw some lead up there, boys. Maybe a lucky shot will pick 'im off!"

The hammering roar of guns filled the canyon. Bullets twanged past the trail. Mark pulled his horse back from the edge and stood waiting, with the fact of Ben Lake's leadership of the mob burning into his mind.

Had Lake been its leader from the very beginning, keeping himself in the background as long as they were in Oro Grande and Kitty Shannon was near?

THE futility of their gunfire forced itself into the minds of the men below, finally. The guns went silent. Mark heard Ben Lake shouting orders for the men to follow him up the trail.

Mark went on, then. There was enough light for him to see that this rock was heavily mineralized with green and blue compounds of copper, the yellow of zinc. The prospector had done some digging here and there, but had not gone deeply into the rock; he had been looking for gold, probably, and had found little.

Mark felt a wave of apprehension. Maybe this trail ended at the last of the prospect holes and never reached the top!

He put the thought from him. Weariness and tension were making him jumpy.

The light failed rapidly. Mark was forced to feel his way, but at last he reached the top.

The moon was rising now, and in its light he saw that he was in a little meadow with high peaks on either side. There was grass here, and the horse lifted his head to the smell of water.

This, then, was why the prospector had built his trail to the top. There was food and water here for his burros.

Mark located the spring by the heavy vegetation around it, and let his horse drink first. "You've earned it, fellow," he said softly.

He had won a little time by his ascent of the canyon wall. The mob would find it slow going in the dark. They might even wait to finish the climb by daylight because of the risky nature of the trail. But they'd be coming. This chase had barely begun, and Mark, the hunted, was well aware of it.

He let the horse graze a bit, then mounted up and rode on.

Hunger began gnawing at him the next day. He was far into the mountains now, and his yearning for food sent a weakness through all his body.

From a high ridge he looked back and down, and saw the mob following tenaciously on his trail. There were only five of them now, and from the way they sat their saddles Mark knew that they were cowboys.

The trail up the canyon wall had weeded out the miners. Heat and exertion had driven the whiskey from their bodies and

blood-lust from their brains. They had found themselves saddle-sore and out of their element, and they had turned back to Oro Grande.

But Ben Lake and his men clung to the trail.

Mark swung higher and higher amid the peaks. He doubled back and he zig-zagged, never taking the easy and obvious course. He sought out rocky ground where the hoofs of his mount would leave but little sign.

But always the cowboys were behind him, slowly closing the gap that was so precious to him.

The day ended, throwing a last burst of sunset light across the sky. Mark was reeling in the saddle now. He could go on, perhaps, for another night and part of another day, but that would be the finish. Trying to outlast Ben Lake and his trail-toughened men could bring him to but one ending.

His mood darkened. He must bring this thing to a decision before exhaustion and thirst forced it upon him.

He entered a rocky defile just as the moon rose. Some whim of nature had carved pinnacles of rock here, some of them topped by great misshapen heads standing askew on narrow necks. There was barely room for a horse to squeeze through, digging in with his hoofs to climb the steep pitch at the narrowest portion of the gorge.

Mark reined to a halt and dismounted. He stood there swaying, blinking and rubbing a hand slowly over his lean cheeks. This was a natural fort, and here he would make his stand.

Perhaps thirty minutes later, Ben Lake and his men came up the gorge. Mark put a shot low over their head. As the echoes of it slammed back and forth among the rocks, they dismounted and scattered for cover.

Ben Lake's voice beat down the echoes. "Damn you, Conway, you can give it up now. Or we'll come after you!"

"Come after me, Lake," Mark Conway called.

There was a little silence. Then Ben Lake darted around a rock, slipped into cover, rounded the next rock and found cover again, each move bringing him forward.

MARK smiled and waited. Lake would have to come fully into the open when he hit the narrow, steep pitch. Mark felt a rising urge to wait until then, throw himself onto the foreman and beat him down. That would be a miner's way—but he shook his head. If he tried it the others would cut him down.

When Lake was forty feet away, Mark stepped out into his view. Lake fired, but his eagerness sent the shot high. Then Mark's bullet was finding the foreman's stocky body, slamming him back and down. Lake moved weakly, trying first to find his gun and then to drag himself out of the open.

Mark retreated a step and let Lake's men hammer out a series of shots that screamed from the rocks in ricochet. Two of the men darted forward to drag Lake into cover. Mark let them go; there was no desire in him now to kill them. Lake had brought them here, and Lake had lead in him now. That was enough.

But the moonlight was coming fully into the gorge; in its light Mark saw something that he had not noticed before. Some cloudburst had washed a broken tree limb down the gorge, lodged it among the rocks. Roughly six inches in diameter and ten feet long, it would make a good pry.

He seized the limb and found it sound. He fitted its heavy end into a natural pocket in the rock, prying against one of the balanced heads with all the strength that was in him.

The head swayed. Mark pushed and rested alternately, trying to find the natural period of its mass. It swayed farther and then toppled, wedging itself down across the narrow trail with a crunching sound of finality.

Men could climb over the rocks, given time. But horses never. As far as Mark's pursuers were concerned the trail was blocked. And they had a wounded man on their hands. . . .

Mark turned back to his horse, pulled himself wearily into the saddle and rode on.

The gorge widened into a valley, the valley ended against a ridge. Mark angled to the top of the ridge and looked down upon a far reach of the desert that spread to the west. He had come through a pass, and the downward slopes on this side of

the mountains were almost gentle ones. To the north his eye picked up the threadlike white line that was the stage road. He fixed the directions in his mind, and started down.

It took him two days to get back to Oro Grande. He found a waterhole toward the end of that first night, and since there were no signs of his pursuers, he took the bridle from his horse's head and let the animal graze.

Mark lay down in the grass. This was to be a brief nap. But the sun was high when he awakened.

He mounted up again and rode. That night he spent in the desert, alternately riding and resting. Just at sunset the following day he rode into Oro Grande.

A miner, lounging on the porch of Lucky Madden's place, eyed Mark wordlessly as he dismounted. With a sort of distant disinterest, Mark waited a moment for the man to make a move. It wasn't in Mark to care much, one way or the other—his first concern was for food, and he was going to have it if he had to shoot his way to it. When the miner made no move at all, Mark went on into the saloon.

He ordered a drink from a startled-looking barkeep, then moved to the free-lunch end of the bar. He was piling slices of meat onto bread when the door of a back room opened and Lucky Madden came forward.

"Well, Conway, I see Ben Lake didn't get you after all."

"Was he supposed to?" Mark demanded irritably.

"My bet is that he tried real hard. This is something of a record, a man getting away from Lake. Kitty Shannon is going to be disappointed in him."

"What are you getting at, man?"

Madden smiled his wry, down-turning smile. "You haven't a thing to worry about, friend. The miners won't bother you now—Doc Beale told them the truth of Sny's killing when they came dragging back to town. The Scorpion is down, padlocked by legal processes and not a wheel turning. You've made a good job of this, working with Doc the way you did."

"What do you mean by that? Where in hell does Beale come into it?"

"No need to carry the thing any farther," Madden said, biting the end of a cigar.

He seemed to be finding a wry pleasure in this. "You fooled us all. You fooled Kitty Shannon completely, damn her sweet face, and now she's done."

"Where is she?"

Madden lifted a shoulder. "I'm a saloon-keeper, friend, and not fit to be taken into her confidence. But I did see her carriage go by here a bit ago. . . ."

Distaste for this man was rising within Mark. He gulped his drink and left the saloon to stride down the plank sidewalk of the street. He could have gotten more information from the smirking Madden, but he knew that he'd have no confidence in any of it. He was filled with a driving urge to get the truth of this from Kitty herself. He saw her black carriage waiting in front of Beale's house, and he strode rapidly toward it.

Just as he reached the smashed fence that had protected Beale's lawn, Kitty came out of the house. She gave a little cry and ran toward him.

"Mark! Oh, Mark—you're all right?"

"Quite all right. But the man who tried to kill me is not well off. I think the others are bringing him down, from those mountains to the west. You may need a new foreman to protect all of your interests."

"Ben Lake?" she gasped. "You shot Ben?" Her lips quivered, and Mark saw that there were shadows of worry in her eyes. All of her high-chinned bluff and pretense was gone now, and she was near to tears.

"Haven't you done enough to me, Mark Conway? I'm going out to get Ben and bring him to the doctor. You'd better go in and talk to your real employer! He owns Charley Ott's interest in the Scorpion now. After tomorrow he'll own mine too, and all of Oro Grande! I'm sure he'll pay you well for what you've done!"

She whirled away from him and got into the high driver's seat of the carriage. She wheeled the team around, and then she was putting them to a wild run that carried her along the stage road toward the west.

Mark swung toward Beale's house with bafflement creasing his brow. The heirs of Charley Ott had sold out, without even waiting to hear from him!

He opened the door without knocking and strode into Beale's office.

CHAPTER

5

The Last Gamble

The doctor was working with a great mass of papers on his desk, his bald head glistening under the light of his ornately shaded lamp. "I knew you'd come back, Conway," he said simply. "Sit down; you'll find that red chair a comfortable one. Did you stop that damned Ben Lake?"

"He's wounded, at least. But there are things about this that I've got to know."

"Of course. It's your right to know where you stand. I've bought Ott's half-interest in the Scorpion from his heirs. Miss Shannon will sell the other half to me soon. I've petitioned in Territorial Court for a receiver and demanded an accounting in partnership, but that is only a temporary thing. You will manage the mine for me, if your wishes run that way. I hope they will. I want the Scorpion to teem with activity, and none of those fool notions that Kitty Shannon inherited from her father."

Mark said. "You're going ahead too fast for me. The heirs of Charley Ott gave me a free hand. They mentioned no pending sale."

Beale made a gesture of impatience. "I've been dealing with them for some time, making offers. They finally decided to accept. Sny talked to me, Conway, before he died. I couldn't very well tell you that before, with Kitty Shannon here to listen. Sny confessed that he'd been stealing over half the mine's output for her. He said that it was one of Ben Lake's men who shot him. To close his mouth, of course."

"Ben Lake's man?"

The doctor shrugged. "Ben Lake's, or Kitty Shannon's. What's the difference? Lake is a devil, the girl a fanatic. You can see the picture. She stole from the mine to build her cattle empire—why send half of all the Scorpion's wealth back East when a dribble would keep Ott's heirs quiet? You've done a fine job uncovering this, Conway. You'll have new machinery, new equipment, anything you want to help you develop the mine. How about it?"

Mark came to his feet. In response to an odd, instinctive stir of wariness within him,

he said, "I'll think it over, Doctor Beale."

"No. Ability needs no time for thinking things over. You've got that girl in your blood, Conway. I see it in your face. You're like every other man in Oro Grande. She's got your hands neatly tied, and you'll be of no use to me. The offer is withdrawn."

Mark looked sharply at the doctor. Beale's eyes seemed feverish; he had hold of something big now, and the feeling of power was in him.

"Oro Grande has another despot," Mark said. Then he wheeled and left the doctor's house.

His long and restless stride carried him toward the Scorpion. He stared at its head-rig, naked against the sky with the big sheaves motionless; then on impulse he swerved to his left and moved up the draw to pass the silent stamp mill and approach the retort house.

The heavy door was padlocked, a legal notice tacked across its planks.

Mark stared at it, disturbed by the uneasy gnawing of a conviction that he had been wrong, that he had missed some vital factor that was rooted here.

He moved to the barred window. Its glass had not been replaced. Mark stared into the retort room; and then he drew a quick firm breath as sureness ran through him again.

Vern Sny could not possibly have known who fired the shot that downed him. The window was tiny, it had been dark outside, and Sny had gone down immediately. *Beale was lying.*

It was then that Mark heard the crunch of gravel under a boot, the sound of a soft and mocking laugh as a man stepped from the concealment of some brush a short distance down the draw and fired at him.

Mark flung himself to one side and down; the bullet missed him. Some remote part of his mind was thinking coldly that he had heard that laugh twice before, once at *Señora* Garros' house and once outside Beale's window.

His shot struck the laughing man squarely. The man gave a sharp cry of amazement and agony, pitched down, and was still.

There was a sound of hurrying feet. Kitty Shannon came running up the draw,

stopped with a little moan when she saw the dead man, and looked toward Mark with hurt and sorrow in her eyes.

"How many more of my men are you going to kill, Mark Conway, before you're through?"

"That's the mistake I made," he said gently. "I thought that because a man took your pay he must be working for you. It doesn't necessarily follow."

"I don't know what you mean. Beale accuses me of stealing from the Scorpion. He says that Sny was doing it for me. What has this man to do with that?"

"Little, except that Sny and this one were both working for the same man. This one robbed me on my first night in Oro Grande. He tried to kill me just now. You made it your business to know everything that happened in your town, Kitty, but there are a few things that escape you."

Her eyes lifted to his face. Eagerly, and with a sort of little-girl pleading for understanding. "You said Sny and this one were working for the same man. Does that mean that you know they weren't doing what they did for me?"

"Yes." Mark strode toward her. He saw some of the tired hopelessness go out of her eyes and he knew, then, that he loved her.

"You're to worry no more. You've been trying to carry a load that no woman should have to bear, but that's behind you now, understand? Where is Ben Lake?"

"At Dr. Beale's. I met the men just outside of town as they were bringing him in."

"He'll not live ten minutes," Mark said.

"What? Why, Mark? He's not wounded too badly—"

"Neither was Sny!" Mark's head tilted down and he gave her a firm, reassuring smile. "I've made mistakes here, girl, but this isn't one of them." He kissed her, then he turned and raced toward Oro Grande.

BEALE was stirring a dark liquid into a glass, in the inner room of his house, when Mark broke open the locked door. Ben Lake lay on a table here, motionless and pale but fully conscious. Beale looked around toward Mark calmly.

"Another dose of the medicine you gave Vern Sny?" Mark demanded. "You call yourself a doctor, but there's no mercy in you!"

Beale put his regard upon the gun in Mark's hand. "Johnny Reb," he said, "is kicking up his heels. I was afraid that you might."

"So you sent a man to kill me! You could have had me killed on my first night in this town, but you were afraid of Ben Lake and you wanted to see if I'd kill him for you. Lie still there, Ben—you're safe enough now. This doctor of yours kills men with his medicine, and buys a mine with its own gold!"

Beale seemed oddly pleased by that. "You should have gone to work for me, Conway. We'd do well together."

"Then you're not denying that Sny worked for you and robbed the mine?"

Beale shrugged. "I'll not waste my time denying anything. Sny was a weakling, and unreliable."

"And he'd served his purpose? He'd kept the announced assay at its original figure while the ore's value soared, and he retorted the over-run and turned it to you. You bought the mine with it, though I don't see how you persuaded the heirs of Charley Ott to sell so quickly. You hadn't dealt with them before they hired me."

Beale made a cold little smile. "There's an Army telegraph up at Fort Whipple. It discouraged those heirs to receive a report of your failure in Oro Grande, confirmed by an accurate description of the papers you carried. Kitty Shannon is discouraged too. She'll sell her interest to me rather than face a term in prison."

Mark eyed the little doctor narrowly. The man was too calm, too confident now. Something was wrong—awareness of that crawled along Mark's taut nerves, but he could not identify it. He moved slowly forward. "You made a bold gamble, mister. It almost brought you all the fine things you wanted. But now—"

"A successful gamble," Beale interrupted. "I'll be no pill-roller, at the beck and call of every two-bit bum who thinks he has a bellyache! The stakes are big, yes. And the wise gambler covers his bet two ways. We'd prefer to deal with you without any noise in here—but if you'll look carefully to your right you'll see that we are prepared to put a bullet through you if necessary."

Warily, Mark turned his head a bit. Beale's lamp cast little light into the cor-

ners of the room; but Mark's eyes had become accustomed to the dim light and he saw the figure of the big man who stood in the shadows with a derringer in his hand.

It was the man who had ridden with Mark in the stage, and had made the offer that unmasked Mark's purpose in coming to Oro Grande.

"You've met before," Beale said softly. "Big Ed Glannis, here, is the legally appointed receiver of the Scorpion Mine. His accuracy with that derringer always amazes me. You can let your gun fall to the floor, or you can try to shoot it out."

Mark whipped his gun toward the big man and fired.

The derringer spoke at the same moment or a little before. Mark felt its lead tear at him and knew that he was hit. The jolt of it upset his balance and he went down on one knee, despair flooding through him.

But the big man was going down, and he struck the floor with an impact that shook the room.

Mark forced himself around, the effect and the slowness of it bringing cold sweat to his face. Beale was the danger now; Beale was digging frantically into the drawer of his desk and lifting a gun from it, while Ben Lake rolled off the table to get out of the line of fire.

Beale leveled his weapon, a feverish triumph in him now. And still Mark's body could move only with a shocked and agonizing slowness. He never would get his gun on Beale in time. . . .

Kitty Shannon's voice rang sharply through the room, then. "Dr. Beale, I'll kill you if you shoot!"

Beale's head twitched around, his eyes trying to pierce the darkness of the doorway where she stood, the gun in his hand wavering back and forth in indecision. He drew a ragged breath and made up his mind, and swung the weapon toward Mark with a cold finality.

The delay had given Mark time to get his aim, however. His bullet drove Beale back against the wall, and life was gone from him when he slid down it to the floor.

Mark forced himself to his feet, and swayed there as Kitty ran to him. His wound was in his side; he felt the spread-

ing numbness of it, yet he grinned down at her and said, "Thanks, Kitty Shannon, for worrying Beale with that gun of yours."

Her face lifted. "I had no gun," she said. "Mark, you're hurt!"

Ben Lake came hitching past Mark on his way to the door. "I had some plans," he said wryly, looking at Kitty and then at Mark. "I guess they wasn't meant to be. I owe you my hide, Conway, an' I aim to make it up to you."

Lake was gone from the room then; and Mark smiled down into Kitty Shannon's anxious face. "No gun," he said wonderingly. "You're a lovely little bluffer. You bluffed Oro Grande to a standstill. You almost bluffed me."

"I had to use bluff—it was the only weapon I had. You've got to believe, Mark, that we Shannons haven't been as black as we're painted. My father killed, yes. He had to, to hold what was his. But his—his fight with Charley Ott was a mistake. He thought Ott was pulling a gun on him. When he found that Ott had none, he sat down and cried. Have you ever seen a strong man cry, Mark?"

Mark shook his head. "That is past and done, girl. We'll look ahead. I came here working for the heirs of Charley Ott. But I'll work for you if you'll let me."

"I'd not want it that way."

He stared at her, trying to understand her sudden refusal. Then he saw the faint tremor of her lips, the frank warmth that lay in her eyes. And a sort of magic was between them, its compulsion pulling her into his arms.

"Girl," he said brokenly, "I've no words for this. But I'll not leave you. . . ."

"I know. I prayed that you'd come back to Oro Grande. And to me. I haven't any pride left—"

"Yes, you have. It's part of you, as lovely as all the rest of you. If you'll have me, girl, I'll see that you never need to bluff again. I'll run that mine—but I'll want to get out in the open, too, and learn the cattle business. I know a little meadow up in the mountains where no one would disturb a pair of honeymooners. The trail to it is steep but—"

Her voice was throaty, her eyes radiant as she lifted her face for his kiss. "I'll follow you, Mark, no matter what the trail."

THE END

WILD NOOSE CHASE

Old Jeff Higgins found out the hard way that a desperado's life ain't no bed of posies.

**By DAY
KEENE**

There was a note of regret in his voice. "Now, darn it, I got to kill you."



HIGH on the rim of the canyon, Jeff Higgins cackled as the posse rode by the draw where he had turned off. Right then, in his own opinion, he was cuter than a prime beaver in the sights of a hungry man with a hankering for tail meat. If things reckoned out right, the fools would ride clear to China, maybe even as far as Bloody Forks, before they'd realize he had tricked them.

Down in the canyon again, he chanced

a fire. Not big. Just enough for supper, coffee and a rasher of side-meat. Stage-robbing was a dead-eyed cinch.

"Throw down the box," he had ordered.

He chewed on the tough rind of the side-meat. "And the durn fool done it, too."

Finished eating, he washed his pans in the creek, rolled a brown paper shuck, and hunkered by the glowing coals. It hadn't been a bad supper. Nothing at all, of course, like the heaping table Molly set. . . .

The food and coffee had extinguished most of the whiskey glow. Suddenly, he felt ashamed of Jeff B. Higgins. He'd give his right arm, well anyway a piece of it, not to have done this thing. He wished he was home in bed. He was too old to fork his rheumatism all over a hoot-owl trail. When Molly heard about this she was going to give him holy hob. When the posse caught up with him, they'd hang him.

"Daggone you anyhow!" he told himself bitterly.

In his new-found virtue he kicked at his saddle bags. Pain knifed up his game leg as the heavy silver in them refused to give an inch.

Completely disgusted with himself, he yanked his saddle around for a pillow and lay looking up at the sky, contemplating the deviltries that whiskey could get a man into. He'd really busted it wide open this time. Unless he wanted to ride air, he'd best light a shuck for the border, start all over at sixty-five.

His lined face cracked in a yawn. He closed his eyes for a minute to cogitate on his sin. A moment later he slept, as old men will, and his strident snores filled the canyon.

He woke up knowing he was watched. Fresh fuel had been added to his fire. A slim youth in Montana bat-wings and a hard-brimmed Chileno sombrero was squatted comfortably on the far side of the flames. When he saw Higgins was awake, he grinned.

"What handle do you use, Old Timer?"

Old man Higgins swallowed hard. His sin had found him out. After a life-time of lawful peace-abiding—well, maybe he'd cut a small caper or two—he was doomed to pass into the great beyond, doomed to be hung in his prime, without even spending a dollar of the money or even eating a single one of the fandangos the fellows who had been to Mexico were always orating about.

"Higgins," he managed to gasp. "Name of Higgins. Jeff Higgins." A thin trickle of cold sweat sun-fished down his spine and he sat up.

"Mine's Shawn Dakin," the youth offered. "Where you headed, Jeff?"

Shawn was a hell of a name for a man. It was also none of the young fool's business where he was headed for. Jeff started

to tell him so and swallowed hard again as Dakin hitched twin ivory-handled .44s to the front of his muscular thighs. It never paid a man to be too hasty.

"Home," Jeff compromised. "I got a tolerable spread t'other side of the canyon, down Black Arroyo way."

Seemingly puzzled about something, Dakin flipped his dead butt in the fire. "Oh. Then what you sleeping here for?"

Jeff tried to think of a good excuse, and couldn't. Instead of answering, he got gingerly to his feet, expecting the young fellow to draw any minute. Emboldened when nothing happened, he got his hobbled mare and saddled her.

He didn't want to go to Mexico. All he wanted now was to be home safe with Molly. Or would he be safe? After Molly had brained him with a skillet, she would cry him sopping wet. And Bette would look at him sad-like with those big brown eyes of hers, like the time she'd put the forty-rod in the blackberry punch at the party for the new preacher.

"I'll ride with you, old man," Dakin said.

With an effort, Jeff managed to lift the heavy saddle bags and get them on the mare. "Go away, younker. Far. I got me enough trouble." The magnitude of it brought maudlin tears to his eyes. "I lost a hundred and forty head of cattle, Bette's pi-ano. an' two good men. I bin drunk for a week an' still got my wife to face. Go far away, some place distant."

"I'll ride with you," Dakin repeated. He whistled softly, and a big black walked into the circle of light cast by the fire and nuzzled him. "I want you should tell us about them cattle."

JEFF rode nervously, shifting in his saddle. Words came slowly at first. Then they poured out. Maybe Dakin was hoot-owl. Maybe he was after the stage-coach money. The big younker would probably get it. Jeff hadn't pulled a gun for blood in years. But he danged well had to tell someone beside a bartender about what happened to him.

"I got a spread," he began. "The Broken Circle. Ain't much but it's mine. You see, Ted Gutjart owns most of the range over that-a-way."

"Gutjart?" Dakin drawled.

"That's the name." Jeff grew interested

in his own story. "Anyway, Ted is getting up a big trail herd and I aimed to sell him the critters I mentioned to tail along with his. The money would have tidied us fine. Even aimed to send away and buy a pi-ano for Bette. That's my girl."

His voice grew bleak. "Started out come sun-up a week ago Monday with two hands, Slat's Larrimer and Joe Sloan. But we never reached Gutjart's spread. We run into a lead storm instead. Both Slat's and Joe were kilt. The cattle was drove off. And, being ambushed like we was, I never even got a shot at the devils who done her." He slumped in his saddle. "So I been in Kirby drunk all week, afeard to ride back an' tell Molly."

He skipped over the stage-coach business. Now that he was completely sober, he didn't even like to think about it. It all had begun as a drunken gag. All he'd meant to do was frighten the tar out of old man Keely riding shot-gun. All he had said was, "Throw down the box." And the darn old fool had done 'er.

They were out of the canyon now, on the road to Bloody Forks. Dakin was the first to hear the horses of the posse. It was made up mainly of Big Bend men, but Sheriff Dill Furness from Black Arroyo was riding point.

When he saw Jeff, he demanded, "Where in hell you been? Effen it weren't for my strong will power, Molly would of had me callin' out the militia. You heard me. Where you been?"

"Drunk," Jeff admitted meekly. He shifted his weight and silver clinked in his saddle bags and he had to cough loudly to cover the sound.

"Figured that," Furness said. "On account of your critters and Slat's and Joe, eh? Can't say that I blame you." He

sighed. "And now I got me a robbed stage coach. Both the shot-gun and the driver claim it was a young hardcase riding a big black stallion."

With relief obvious on his face, Jeff was glad the night was as dark as it was. "Ain't seen no one like that," he offered. He could feel the youth's .44s probing for a vital spot and added, "Me, nor my friend, Shawn Dakin."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Dakin," Sheriff Furness said and rode on with his posse, trying to pick up the sign they'd missed.

Dakin rolled and lighted a shuck. The match flare showed him to be grinning. "Close, eh, old man?" he asked.

Jeff assumed a virtue he didn't feel. "I don't know what you're talkin' about. Sheriff Dill Furness is an old and dear friend of mine and I'm always glad to see him."

A new and disturbing thought struck him. Both the driver and the shot-gun had described him as a young hardcase riding a big black stallion. And, unless he'd changed sudden since the last time he'd seen a mirror, he hadn't been young for forty-five years. More, the sway-backed nag he was riding would have to be foaled again to have a fifty-fifty chance of coming out a stallion.

However, the description fitted Shawn Dakin fine. Except that Shawn hadn't robbed the stage—he had. Jeff almost wished he hadn't gotten drunk. Anyway so drunk. He wished he knew what Shawn's game was. The younker was friendly and polite. He hadn't said ary word that was out of the way. But he stuck to Jeff tighter than a rodeo rider trying to win first money and keep his date with some baby-faced blonde.

He stood it as long as he could, then

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said, "Look. What you taggin' along with me for?"

Dakin grinned his slow grin. "Could be I like your company. Could be I'm job hunting. Having just lost two men, you ought to be able to use a hand."

Jeff thought of his sin and sighed. "You don't know what kind of an old hellion you'd be workin' for."

The younger man's voice was a slow drawl. "I'll change it. Besides, you wouldn't make a man ride all night for shelter, would you?"

"They's a hotel in Kirby and one to Black Arroyo," old man Higgins pointed out.

Dakin's grin split his face again. "Sure. But maybe I'm broke. Maybe I'm sorta expecting to come into some change and need a place to bed down till I do."

It was blackmail, that's what it was. Dakin knew he had robbed the stage. He knew what was in his saddle bags. Sighing, Jeff conceded defeat.

"Well, I'm probably being a fool. But come along."

There was only one white cow in the corral. But could be the big youngster could help him soothe Molly. She'd always been soft for a quick smile and a well-hinged tongue.

HIS homecoming was about as he'd expected. Molly raised holy hell, then cried, then said she was grateful to him for finally letting her know that he was still alive. Then she began to talk.

"For shame, Jeff." She pushed her iron-gray curls away from her face. "Losing the cattle didn't matter. But I didn't think you'd be the kind to run off and swill yourself full in some bar without even waiting until Joe and Slat were buried."

Dark-haired, sleepy-eyed, wearing a wrapper over her nightgown, Bette stirred up the fire in the stove, added a few knots of greasewood and put a pot of coffee to boil, meanwhile slyly eying Shawn.

Jeff cleared his throat. "Well, you see it was this way." And that was as far as he could get.

The big youth picked it up from there. "Jeff felt plumb sick about it, ma'am. And he ain't been drinking, ary a drop. We've been camped out in the canyon where it happened, trying to find sign, aimin' to

track the dirty killers down," he asserted.

Molly beamed at Jeff with approval. He was glad now he'd hired Shawn. He hadn't felt so proud of himself in years. "Yes, ma'am. Aimin' to track 'em down," he echoed. He added, as an afterthought. "Oh. Please to meet Shawn Dakin, our new hand."

"Pleased-to-meetcha," Molly said.

All Bette could do was sigh and spill the hot coffee she was trying to pour for Jeff.

"And I'm pleased to meet you," Shawn told her.

The next morning, more worried than ever by the jingling saddle bags under his bed, Jeff got up at dawn only to find Molly already in the kitchen.

"Just look at the wood box," she said.

Jeff started to say he'd meant to fill it and he would as soon as he'd had his breakfast, then realized the wood box was filled to overflowing.

"What's more," Molly continued, "Shawn has patched the corral fence, watered and fed the stock, and milked the cow." She sighed. "And when I mentioned that the gallery looked bare and—" her eyes hardened slightly—"you'd never gotten around to building me some window boxes, he built three and painted 'em green from the gallon you had left over from the wind-mill you've been going to build for five years."

Bette patted her hair. She was still in a slight daze. "He's nice. How come you know him, Pa?"

"I knew his pa," Jeff lied.

He could smell trouble ahead, a lot of it. He felt worse as the days passed. Now along with the damn saddle bags he had Shawn to worry about. If he wasn't careful, between them, they'd have him sick in bed. At his age to rob a stage. And when they finally tracked him down and hanged him, who would get his spread? Shawn Dakin would get the Broken Circle. Both Molly and Bette were crazy about the big youth. Molly had never set a better table. Bette couldn't sleep nights for thinking about him. Between them it was Shawn this and Shawn that from sun-up to sun-down and half the night beside. Jeff was almost tempted to give Shawn the saddle bags and tell him to get riding.

While he considered the matter, he rode the rocker on the gallery. He was riding it

the afternoon Molly drove the buckboard into Black Arroyo and came back with a load of staples and even more words than usual. As she cooked supper she talked and, without plugging his ears, there was no way he could keep from listening. Her words came out the doorway in snatches:

"... men are getting up a Vigilante committee ... think it's a good idea ... smoke out the dirty rustlers who killed Slat and Joe ... hang the road agent who robbed the stage ... lawlessness has to come to a stop ... said Mr. Gutjart was leaving with his herd in the mornin', soon as he finishes branding strays over in Lost Canyon." Molly came to the door of the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron "I do wish you wouldn't moon so, Joe. Come to think on it, you ain't done a lick of work since the night the stage was robbed. You ain't even took a drink."

Before she could think on it too deeply. Jeff got wearily to his feet and walked down the path to the room in the bunkhouse into which he had moved to be able to keep his eyes on the bags and prevent Molly from finding them. He kicked under the bed and an uncomfortable jingle answered. The damn money was still there. If he ever took another drink, the longest day he lived, he hoped that he enjoyed it.

He sat on the edge of the bed and looked up as Shawn's bulk filled the doorway. He looked tall and broad and somehow sinister in the evening dusk. His voice was its usual soft drawl. "Why not tell me about it, Old Timer?"

Jeff shook his head stubbornly. "I ain't got the least idea what you're hintin' on."

Shawn continued, "It must be something all-fired powerful to whup an' old mossy-horn like you who's licked his weight in both Apaches and wildcats."

JEFF couldn't help it. He was pleased. Maybe Molly and Bette were right about Shawn. He could sure measure a man. Maybe Shawn could help him figure some way out of this before the Vigilantes tracked him down and hanged him for stage-coach robbing along with the dirty rustlers who had killed Slat and Joe.

In sudden decision he pulled the saddle bags out and unstrapped them. "Look in there, son. Look in them bags and you'll see all the course of my sorrow. Them sad-

dle-bags is all filled up with pure shame."

Shawn fingered through the gold and silver and bills, then whistled softly. "If that's shame, Jeff, I'd like to have a couple hundred bales of it stowed away in the barn."

"No," Jeff said bitterly. "I'll take hay in my barn anyway. Especially with a rope-handy Vigilante committee about to git itself horn." Having gone as far as he had, he blurted out the whole story. "Now what in the name of time am I going to do?"

Shawn got to his feet holding the saddlebags. "The first thing is to get rid of these. Just leave everything to me, Old Timer."

Jeff heard him saddling his horse, heard him ride off. A few minutes later Bette flashed by on her Indian pony. The old man got to his feet. "Well, I'll be even more than a fool than I am!"

He saw the whole thing now. Shawn had known all the time. He'd probably seen him rob the stage. He could have taken the money away from him that first night in the canyon. But Shawn had played it smart. He'd known they might meet the posse coming back and he hadn't wanted to stretch rope. Shawn had let him carry the money, worry about it, guard it for him, until he was ready to leave. And now Shawn was riding off with the money. The money that Jeff had to return somehow.

Bawling for his gun-belt, he stormed into the kitchen and buckled it around his slim hips. A cherry pie in one hand, an apple pie in the other, Molly wanted to know, "What's the matter with you, you old galoot? Who you going gunning for now? Is there a tick on the milch cow, or what?"

Jeff gave her a dirty look and strode out to the corral. There was never any use in arguing with a woman.

Some of his enthusiasm waning, he saddled his mare and rode in the direction Shawn and Bette had taken. Their sign wasn't hard to follow. No one but a fool like old Sheriff Dill Furness, maybe, could mistake the tracks of Shawn's big stallion.

At the fork leading to Lost Canyon, the tracks of Bette's pony veered off toward Black Arroyo but those of the stallion continued straight on into the canyon. Jeff felt a little better now that Bette was out of it.

Jeff followed the stallion's tracks, walking his horse now, wondering, suddenly, about a lot of things. Now he came to

think on it, with the rustlers active as they had been, Ted Gutjart had never lost a cow. And him with such a big herd a man would think he would be the first one they'd pick on. Jeff's aged eyes narrowed with suspicion. More, there was a passable draw between Dead Cow Canyon, where he and Slat and Joe had been ambushed, and Lost Canyon. Only a few men knew it. But he knew Ted Gutjart did. They'd followed a wounded grizzly through it the day the bear had got two of Ted's dogs.

Ted was building up a big trail herd all right. But on the blood and sweat of his neighbors. Jeff's mind raced on. And Shawn was probably working for Ted. Ted had planted Shawn on Jeff to see if Jeff had any suspicions. That was where Shawn had gone when he'd ridden out so often nights. The stage-coach money was merely accidental, but Shawn had known he had it and had let him guard it for him until he was ready for it. And that was now. According to the talk Molly had brought back from Black Arroyo, Ted was starting his herd come sun-up. And Shawn Dakin would be with him.

THE canyon was open on the one end, boulder blocked on the other from an ancient earthquake. Three quarters of a mile wide at its narrowest point, it held the snake-like bend of the Black River in its mouth.

Jeff halted his horse on the rim-rock to have a last look at his gun. Then giving the mare her head, he rode slowly toward the not distant cottonwood-lined river bank. The floor of the canyon was filled with cows lowering and bellowing.

Jeff snorted. "Branding strays, my tail bone!"

From where he sat he could see a dozen blotted brands, most of them probably Broken Circle cattle. Gutjart, a big man dressed in black, Moss Lapin, his foreman, and Shawn Dakin were standing around a fire that was being allowed to die.

Hot tears filled Jeff's eyes. Angry tears. Three were too many for one old man. Or were they? He had six shots in his gun and if he put them where they belonged, all he needed was three. Swinging off the mare, he threw he reins over her head and walked slowly toward the fire.

The voices of the three men were plain

now. Ted Gutjart was laughing. "Sure, that will buy you in, Shawn. And leave plenty over for you to give the girls a whirl. But you can't blame me for playing it cagey." He dribbled a stream of gold eagles from one hand to the other. "For how was I to *know* you were the young hardcase riding a big black stallion who stuck up the stage?"

"Everything's all set then, eh?" Shawn asked.

"Down to the last detail," Lapin told him. "We'll start them out of the canyon two hours before sun-up."

Old man Higgins walked into the circle of light cast by the fire. "You dirty dog, Ted Gutjart! And you a neighbor of mine. A man I trusted. It was your boys who kilt Joe and Slat. It was you who stole my critters. Now, if you're half a man, go for your guns."

Gutjart laughed instead. "Your critters were scrawny things anyway, Higgins. An' neither Slat nor Joe ever did amount to much." His lips curled in contempt. "You're just like the rest of the small cheese hereabouts. Always a belly-achin' when a good man betters you." There was a note of regret in his voice. "Now, darn it, I got to kill you."

"You ain't done it yet," Jeff warned.

Still smiling, Gutjart went for his gun and in the cold silence of one split-second, Jeff knew how it was to be. It was not only three against one—he was too old.

Gunfire beat like a tattoo in the canyon and the penned-in cattle went crazy. Jeff wondered what was holding him up, why he felt no pain. Molly was right about him. He was just a no good, no account, drunken old boaster. His gun was still in its holster and he was dead.

OR WAS he? It was Ted Gutjart who was doing the falling. The big man was toppling slowly like a tall, undermined cottonwood on the bank of a river at flood-time. More, Shawn had his ivory-handled .44s in his hands and they were leveled not on him but on Moss Lapin.

"How about it, Moss?" Shawn asked. "You want to eat lead or chew rope? The choice is up to you." Holstering one of his guns, he took something Jeff couldn't see from his vest and showed it to the foreman.

"An association man," Moss spat. "A

dirty, yellow-bellied, range detective." Anger overcame his caution. His guns were already in his hands. He lifted them to blast Shawn, and Shawn pointed his and triggered.

The foreman's knees went slack. He tried to lift his guns for a second go-round and fell across Ted Gutjart's back.

"Saves a trial that way," was Shawn's only reaction. "I had the goods on both of them. But plenty." He grinned at the still frozen Jeff. "Not that it makes any difference but you kinda pushed my hand, Old Timer. On account of me getting married and all, I was going to play this one safe. I was going to wait until Bette got back with the sheriff before I yanked the chute doors open."

Jeff decided he wasn't dead after all and came to life. "I knew it. I knew it all the time," he lied. "I knew you for an association man as soon as I seen you."

Shawn prodded him good naturedly. "You darned old sneezer, you. You get drunk and have fun again and I'll sic Molly on you. You almost put the kibosh on the whole thing. I was supposed to rob that stage to get in solid with Gutjart, show him what a tough hombre I was. The driver and the shot-gun and myself had the whole thing fixed for them to give me that ten thousand belonging to the association, and then you come along whooping and hollering and waving that old dog-leg of yours and danged if they didn't think you was me and toss the money down to you."

Jeff grinned sheepishly. "I kinda thought that stage robbed danged easy when I come to my sober senses. But why did you let me keep the money?"

"I didn't," Shawn laughed. "I just kinda let you set on it for me until it was time for me to make my play with Gutjart. Which same was tonight." He waved his hand at the still milling cattle. "Then I bought a half interest in his stolen herd and any others we might brand between here and Abilene. You see, we've had our eyes on Gutjart for some time. But when we got him, we wanted to get him right."

Jeff swallowed hard. "You did."

Then hoofs began to clatter on the trail leading down from the rim-rock. A few minutes later Bette and Sheriff Furness, with a score of men behind them, rode up.

Shawn nudged Jeff. "Remember now. I robbed that stage."

"Yes, sir," Jeff said meekly.

Then he felt suddenly sad for Bette. She thought a heap of Shawn. And here he was a fixing to get married. Maybe now when he got his critters back, if he bought her that pi-ano he had promised, it might ease the prick of the gad some.

He tried to find her in the milling men around the fire and saw her, finally, in Shawn Dakin's arms. Jeff pushed his battered hat back on his head. Now he came to think on it, Shawn hadn't said *who* he was fixing to marry.

A sly smile brushed his lips. There was no need for a man to be hasty. He could hear music most any time.

Besides, from the way that Bette was a-hugging and a-squeezing and a-kissing Shawn, and the way that Shawn was a-hugging and a-squeezing and a-kissing her—well, it wasn't likely that either of them would take much interest in a pi-ano for quite some long time.

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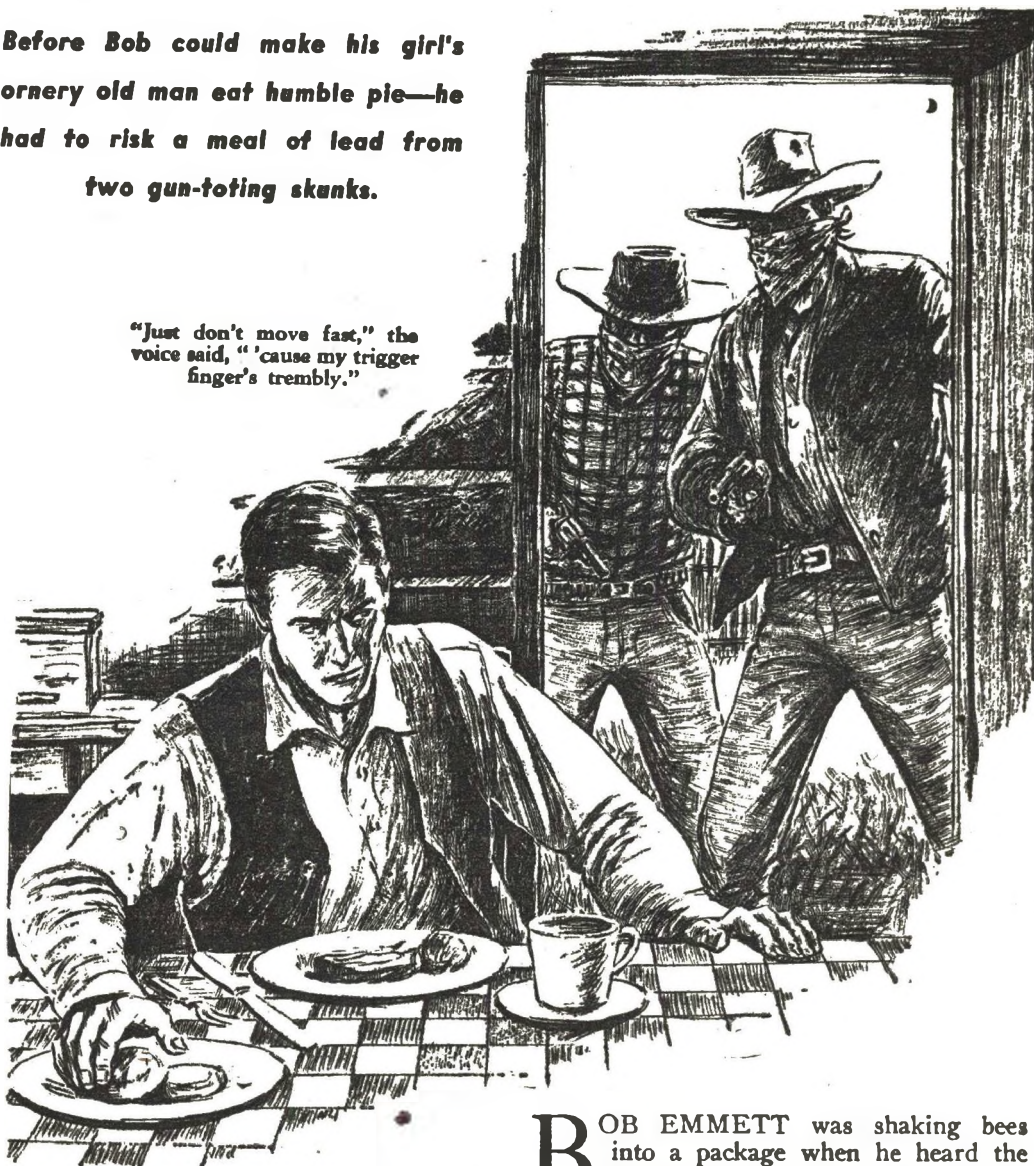


POWDERSMOKE

TEST

Before Bob could make his girl's ornery old man eat humble pie—he had to risk a meal of lead from two gun-toting skunks.

"Just don't move fast," the voice said, "'cause my trigger finger's trembly."



By CLARK GRAY

BOB EMMETT was shaking bees into a package when he heard the horseback rider turn in at the gate. Emmett called, without looking up, "Keep your bronc back. If he gets stung, he'll pitch like hell."

Emmett kept on shaking his bees out

of the upper brood chamber till the scales under the package registered three and one half pounds net weight. Then he replaced the brood chamber on the hive, removed the funnel and closed the package. He looked up and saw Judith Swanson on her white horse watching him across the picket fence.

Emmett said, "Judith!" Blood drained from his face. "Judith, what are you doing here? If your old man found out—"

"I came to ask your help, Bob," Judith Swanson said. "Dad's been robbed again."

Emmett untied the veil around his throat and looped it over his hat, making no comment. A stray bee promptly lit on his neck and stung him. Emmett brushed it away absently.

Judith Swanson smiled. "That's my Bob. Most people would holler like blazes at a bee sting. You don't even think about it."

"You get immune to the poison in the sting," Emmett said abstractedly. "Just a second, Judith. I've got to give these girls in the package a queen to keep 'em happy."

Emmett picked up the screen and wood package and moved toward the row of queen mating nuclei at the far end of the apiary. He was trying not to let Judith see the turmoil in him. Emmett was not sorry that old Dan Swanson, Judith's father, had been robbed again. In fact, he concluded that on the whole he was glad. Maybe it would bring to a head the things that had been smoldering too long now.

Emmett lowered his veil and opened one of the mating nuclei. Lifting the queen carefully, he placed her with a couple of worker bees in a specially prepared queen cage, then slipped the cage into its slot inside the larger package. Instantly the angry hum of the packaged bees changed to a cheerful note.

Emmett grinned across the picket fence at Judith Swanson. "Funny about bees. They'll raise the devil unless they have a queen. But give 'em that, and even these Cyprians of mine will gentle down."

Judith said quietly, "You're really making a success with beekeeping, aren't you, Bob? Even after all that's happened—Dad firing you from the ranch and all—you've stayed right here and worked and made a success."

Emmett flushed. Because he did not like

this turn of the conversation, he said curtly, "Come on into the house, Judith. I've got to ship this package on the four o'clock express. You can tell me about your dad."

THERE wasn't much to tell, Judith said as Emmett followed her into his little one room shack and set the buzzing package on his workbench. Her dad had drawn another large sum of money out of the bank. Eight thousand dollars. To pay for a thousand head of cattle at eight dollars a head. That was yesterday. This morning, early, two masked bandits had broken into his headquarters house, slugged the old man, dynamited the safe, and ridden off with the currency.

Emmett removed his bee veil and untied the strings around his pants cuffs. Bob Emmett was a windburned man of thirty, with hands that were tough enough to hold a plunging steer calf at the end of a rawhide lariat, yet gentle enough to handle a queen bee without crushing her. Emmett looked at Judith squarely.

"Does your dad think I had anything to do with this one?"

"No, Bob," Judith said, and she dropped her eyes to her hands. "He—he knows you couldn't have anything to do with—this robbery."

Emmett could see the shame on Judith. It did not look good on her. Judith was a girl to be happy, with her hair the color of pale clover honey, her blue eyes, and the wide mouth that looked so beautiful when Judith smiled. Emmett broke off his thoughts, grimly aware that they could lead him nowhere. He said:

"I didn't have anything to do with the other one either, Judith. Your dad must know that by now. Somebody else tipped off the outlaws that he had money in his safe. It wasn't me."

Judith nodded miserably. "I think he knows it, Bob. But you know Dad. He wouldn't admit he'd made a mistake if it killed him."

"He's proud," Emmett said, and he thought of his own pride. He had been straw boss for Dan Swanson. Not because he like to work for another man, but because he wanted independence, and steady wages was the quickest way to get it. Emmett had saved his money, hiding it in an old sock under his mattress. He had

made Dan Swanson a good hand, even closing his eyes to the fact that Swanson restocked his ranch every year with cattle delivered at night and sold for a ridiculously low sum.

Restocking with wet cattle from across the Rio Grande was common enough among the cattlemen in this part of south Texas. So Emmett didn't blame Swanson a whole lot for that. It was just bad luck that made Emmett show his savings to Dan Swanson the day of the first robbery, a year ago.

Swanson had had ten thousand dollars in his safe that day. Ready to pay for a big shipment of stocker cattle—in cash as this business required. After the robbery, when the old man had a bullet hole in his arm, Emmett had felt sorry for his boss. He'd hauled out his savings and offered them to Dan Swanson.

"So you're the dirty scoundrel!" Swanson had roared at sight of the money. "I knew somebody tipped off them outlaws I had cash here. You're trying to cover up by offering me your pay-off money. I'll see you hang for this, Emmett!"

THERE'D been no hanging. The old man couldn't prove something that never happened. There was no arrest, no trial. No court found Emmett guilty except the court of his neighbors and friends, who listened to old man Swanson's belated denunciations.

Emmett said again now. "The old man is proud, Judith. And a fool."

"I know, Bob." Judith eyes filled with tears. "But he's my Dad. I have to—"

"Excuse me for saying that, Judith." Emmett was instantly contrite, seeing he had hurt her. He touched her shoulder, "Look, honey. I like the old man, too. Even after what he's done to me—to us. But—"

He broke off, bitterly realizing the futility of this. He crossed the room to where the package of bees rested on the workbench. He touched the package absently, and then Emmett's control left him. One moment he had it; next, it was gone. Almost savagely Emmett recrossed the floor and pulled Judith Swanson to her feet.

There was nothing gentle about the way Emmett kissed her. He clasped her tightly, feeling the softness of her back under his

callused hands. Judith's lips were warm and clinging as she responded to him. Then the moment passed and Emmett pushed her from him, remembering that Judith was something he could not have.

Emmett said harshly, "Sit down, Judith. I'm sorry that happened. It won't happen again."

Judith was a little flushed. She tucked back a stray whisp of honey-colored hair, and her blue eyes were shining with an emotion that Emmett could not analyze.

"Why are you sorry, Bob? I'm not."

"No?" Emmett crossed the floor and this time he stayed there. Bitterness put a hoarse rasp to his voice. "I could never marry the daughter of a man who believes me a thief, Judith. That's why I'm sorry. If that first robbery hadn't happened—if your dad hadn't fired me—we might have gotten married the way we planned it. But not now."

"You're proud," Judith said. "You're worse than Dad."

"All right. So I'm proud. At least I've got something to be proud about. My reputation—or anyhow what it was before your old man ruined it."

Judith said quietly, "I came to ask for help, Bob. Dad thinks the men who robbed his safe this morning might try to cross the river here. He wants you to keep a lookout."

"Do you think," Emmet growled, "that I would help your dad so much as catch a jackrabbit, after what he's done?"

Judith said, "Yes, Bob. I think you would."

Emmett turned his back on Judith and stared through the window, sorting his emotions. He could see the river from here, and the blooming mesquite that surrounded his apiary for miles. Emmett had picked this spot because water was available here for his bees. He had bought the land cheaply. The place was known as an outlaw crossing into Mexico and was therefore unpopular.

Emmett had only needed a few acres to house his apiary. With his savings he'd bought the land and one hundred colonies of bees which he'd picked up at a bargain. He'd settled down a year ago to enjoy his independence.

He'd sold beeswax, and mesquite, cats-claw and huajillo honeys. In addition, he

was now producing queens and package bees, shipping them by fast railway express to beekeepers in the northern states. He was getting by, but he'd never forgotten that he was a cattleman.

Emmett said thoughtfully, "I've seen plenty of night riders go by here in the last year. I've never asked any questions. They've never bothered me. But Judith, they'd wipe me out if they thought I was spying for your old man."

Judith left her seat and joined him at the window. Emmett felt her hand at his arm.

"Bob," Judith pleaded, "Dad lost eight thousand dollars. Your whole place, including the bees and the land and equipment, is worth less than two thousand. Besides, you could move if you had to. You could come closer to home."

"I like it here," Emmett said stubbornly. "And Judith, it wouldn't change anything if I did help the old man. You've said so yourself. Nothing will make that hard-headed old coot admit he's wrong."

"What do you want, Bob?" Judith asked. "You want him to get down on his knees and beg you to forgive him? That's hardly fair, is it?"

"It'd help," Emmett grunted savagely. "Damn it, Judith, quit pestering me! Likely them boys have already crossed the border some place. Come on, let's talk about something pleasant. You want to stay for lunch?"

Judith had intended staying before she even came, Emmett thought. For she accepted his invitation, and when he returned from stabling her horse, she had already found steaks and was kneading biscuit dough in the corner of the room that he reserved for his kitchen. Emmett sat in the rocker and watched her, taking a deep primitive pleasure in her presence here. There was no doubt in his mind at all that Judith loved him enough to marry him. Emmett toyed with the idea. It tantalized him, but he rejected it grimly, knowing such a thing was not possible as long as blustering old Dan Swanson lived. Emmett was sitting at the neat table that Judith had set when he heard the faint tap of hoofbeats coming downtrail.

Judith heard it almost at the same instant. Her eyes went wide; she stared questioningly at Emmett. Feeling her gaze

on him, Emmett became aware of the responsibility he now had. If this was the robbers . . .

Emmett said quickly, "There's a little attic above the ceiling to this room, Judith. Trap door's over the workbench. You better get up there and stay there."

Judith nodded breathlessly. "Put away the extra plate and cup and silverware, Bob. Otherwise they'll know there's two of us." She hesitated. "Bob, what will you do?"

Emmett said, "I don't know, Judith. But I sure as hell ain't going to play hero, especially with you here. My gun's hanging on the wall, and it stays there. Now git."

Judith got. While Emmett was hurriedly putting the extra set of eating utensils back on their shelves, he heard her scurrying through the trap door. The door closed softly behind her; a ceiling joist squeaked; then silence. Emmett dropped into his chair at the table as the hoofbeats halted outside. He speared a piece of steak to his plate and was reaching for one of Judith's fresh-baked biscuits when the voice came.

"Just rest easy, neighbor," the voice said. "Just don't move fast, 'cause I'm a tired man and my trigger finger's trembly."

EMMETT had his fingers on a biscuit. He kept them there, feeling the warmth of the oven-hot crust soak into his fingers. Footsteps moved inward from the door. Emmett grunted,

"This biscuit's a mite hot. Mind if I take my hand off it?"

"Take it off," the voice said. "Move slow."

Very carefully Emmett turned. Two men faced him over bandana masks. Their shoulders were white with trail dust. Their eyes were red-rimmed. One of the men was removing the shells from Emmett's gun which had been hanging on the wall.

The taller of the two spoke again. "We need horses. Two of 'em. We been ridin' double a ways—since my horse spooked and stumbled. Got any?"

Emmett nodded. "In the shed. A white and a gray."

The second outlaw tossed Emmett's gun behind him through the open door, then grunted wearily.

"Jim, let's eat. That there steak and

biscuits looks too dangd good to waste on this bee-keepin' pilgrim."

The tall outlaw glanced at the table: Emmett could see the hunger in his eyes. Hunger battled with caution and won.

"All right. Close the door. You, pilgrim, move over against that workbench. I think you've got sense enough not to try anything."

Emmett said, "Yeah. I got sense enough."

Moving to the bench, Emmett reflected that these men would have to lower their bandanas to eat. And he thought he recognized the tall bandit as Jim Denton, a cowhand who worked for old Dan Swanson. At the bench, Emmett turned, putting his back against the buzzing package of bees. The tall outlaw called Jim had located the extra plates and silverware. He sat down at the table, peered intently at Emmett an instant, then pulled down his bandana.

Emmett grinned. "Thought I recognized you, Jim. How's things at Swanson's?"

Jim Denton had never been much of a cowhand. Lazy. He'd liked poker better than work, but hands were scarce and the old man had kept him on. Now Denton forked a slice of meat into his mouth and chewed hungrily, eyeing Emmett steadily till he was ready to speak.

"You might as well know it now as when the posse gets here. We hoisted the old man's safe again."

Emmett said quietly, "Again, Jim?"

"Sure." Denton laughed. "You caught the blame for the tip-off the other time. Sorry you weren't around today, Bob. We needed another sucker."

Emmett said, "I see," and an idea came to him. He could, Emmett knew suddenly, turn the tables on these two outlaws and make them helpless. The outlaws were at his mercy and didn't know it. Jim Denton, in fact, was laughing again.

"For a straw boss," Denton chuckled, "you're about the dumbest I ever saw, Bob. You never even suspected it was me behind that other job."

"I never suspected anybody," Emmett said gently. "I guess I'm not the suspicious kind, Jim."

Emmett turned and picked up the package of bees, making the movement casual. He brought it around in front of him and

lifted the small, thumb-sized queen cage out of the larger cage. Instantly the cheerful buzz within the cage changed into an angry hum.

Emmett said, "See my bees, Jim. Three pounds of 'em. That's about eleven thousand bees."

Opening the tiny queen cage with his forefinger, Emmett cupped it in his palm and shook it gently until he could feel the queen crawl into his hand. He didn't like to do the next thing, but it was necessary. He mashed the queen between his fingers, feeling her stinger penetrate the skin. Then he opened his hand and let the dead queen fall. With his other hand, he slid back the cover of his three pound package.

Emmett's bees were Cyprians, a notably bad-tempered race. And because these bees had lost their queen, they were confused and angered. They funneled out of the package in a cloud, broke apart and filled the room with a maze of darting and buzzing objects.

Jim Denton shouted, "Great snakes!" when he saw the bees coming. Instinctively the outlaw slapped for his forty-five, then seemed to realize that such a weapon was useless. Denton bellowed, "I'll kill you for this, Emmett!" and began to slap desperately at the bees. The infuriated insects were attracted to the waving hands; they settled there and began to sting. Denton screamed in hoarse pain and dropped to his knees, where the bees immediately followed him.

QUITE nonchalantly, Emmett stood motionless beside his workbench. The bees were everywhere now, blazing yellow arrows spearing chaotically about the little room. A few settled on Emmett's neck and face. One or two stung, but Emmett was used to the small prick. It was the poison in the sting that hurt, and Emmett was immune to the poison from constant exposure.

Jim Denton and his companion had no such immunity. Each sting was followed by a hot spreading burn that would last, Emmett knew, for several minutes. The outlaws clawed and slapped frantically, and these efforts only infuriated the bees, setting them swarming around the two screaming men.

At last Jim Denton made a stumbling

break for the door, followed by a buzzing cloud. Standing beside the table, Emmett heard the frightened neigh of the outlaw's horse, then the drum of hoofbeats as the animal thundered away riderless. Emmett knew without looking that Jim Denton was running frantically around the yard now, trying to outdistance the angry bees. But that was as hopeless as trying to outrun raindrops. Finally Denton discovered that. Bursting back into the cabin he began to plead.

"Get 'em off, Bob. For God's sake, get 'em off."

Emmett did not move, except to grin slowly. It was a cruel torture in a way, he thought. But less cruel than Jim Denton's allowing him, Emmett, to be branded a criminal. Finally Emmett called:

"Give me your guns. Both of you. I'll have to make 'up my mind."

Desperately the two embattled outlaws drew their guns and slid them across the floor. Emmett scooped them up. He walked calmly out the door. A few bees stung him, alarmed by his movements, but Emmett paid no heed. Once outside, Emmett advanced slowly to the nearest mating nucleus and opened it. He removed a small frame of brood comb. He carried this little rectangle of comb back inside and gently deposited it in the nearly empty package.

A cruising bee inside the screened package touched the comb. Emmett thought he could hear the peculiar note it sent out. Maybe he didn't hear it; maybe he only imagined it. But the bees heard. Within the space of a few seconds, the confused maze of bees entered the package and began

to settle on the brood comb. The angry buzz shifted into a contented and steady hum.

Emmett locked the door and faced the two outlaws with a drawn gun in hand. But there was no need for a weapon now. Both men hunched moaning to their knees, faces and hands a huge mass of purpling welts.

Bob Emmett said mildly, "The bees will be all right now. They've got what they wanted. They lost their queen, but they can make another one out of the worker eggs in that piece of comb. You fellows just don't understand the little critters."

Then Emmett raised his voice. "Come on down, Judith. We've got to use all the baking soda in the house to doctor these boys. I reckon that means no more biscuits."

The sound of a slap came from over Emmett's head. Judith's voice drifted down, muffled.

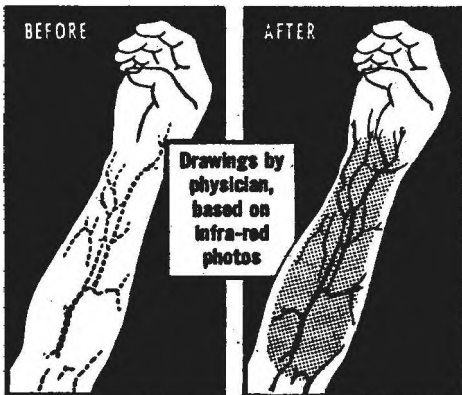
"One of the little devils got up here. Bob, remind me to tell you I love you, darn you. Even if you did manage to get me stung."

Emmett grinned. "I'll remind you tomorrow, Judith. In front of the first preacher we can find—after the wedding."

"Wedding?" Judith's voice was curiously choked. "Did you say wedding, Bob Emmett?"

Emmett said, "Uh-huh. And if the old man don't like it, maybe a little talk with Jim Denton will convince him. If Jim can still talk. Come on down, honey."

Judith said, "Get out of my way, darling. I'm going to jump."



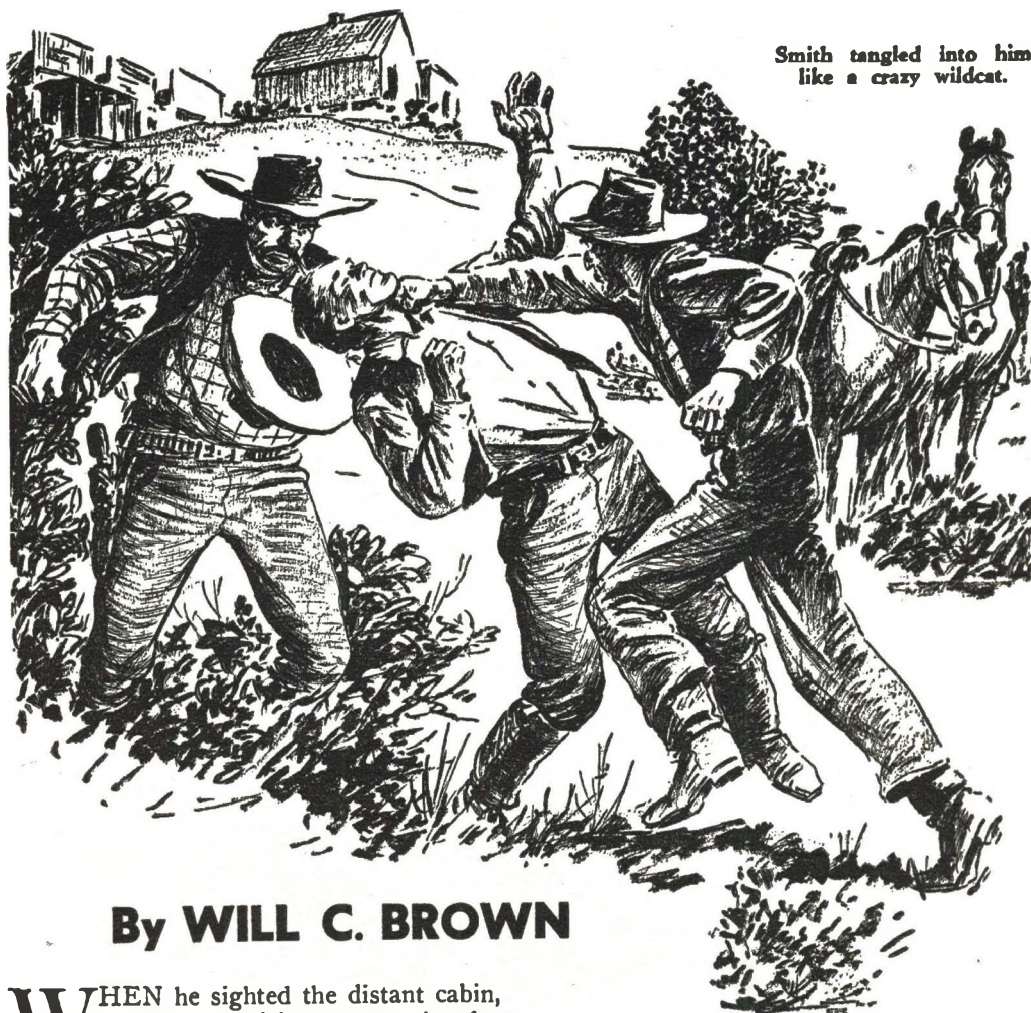
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All the long, dusty miles from Indiana came would-be rancher Jones—to learn it took both guts and fists to win the right to the . . .

BRAND of a TEXICAN



Smith tangled into him
like a crazy wildcat.

By WILL C. BROWN

WHEN he sighted the distant cabin, the Texas prairie was greening for April and there was a smell in the morning like bluebonnets thinking to bloom. The folks in the cabin could have seen his rig limping south since sun-up milking time—maybe heard it, too, for the axles were sufferin' dry from crossing the Territory. But with the Red River fording now behind him and sure enough Promised Land spilling under the wheels, all sounds were music to Jonathan Jones. He would have raised his head and sung to the warm dap-

pled sky for the sheer elation in him except that it might not be befitting. Now that he was a Texas rancher, or practically so, a man would be right smart to know his neighbors, first, before acting unseemly.

He pulled up the mules a respectable distance from the yard and climbed down with long-legged dignity. He took off his floppy hat and made a stiff-muscled bow to the woman, letting his glance hurry up the stairsteps of children and back to the man.

He spoke his name proper and the man spoke back, saying, "I'm Sam Moseley. Be glad to have you noon with us. New in these parts?"

"Just crossed the river," Jonathan nodded. "Bound for G Ranch. I got the location of my place in these deeds and on the map." He brought out papers much wrinkled from many unfoldings at Territory night camps. "You can tell me if I'm on the right track."

The Texan cautiously took the papers, flicking a dead look back at his silent family.

Jonathan glanced past him at the calico line again. And that is when he saw Martha. She was coming to the door, a slim, dark-haired silhouette against the inside of the house. As she stepped from the porch into the sunshine, it seemed to him that a bright new flower had suddenly blossomed in awesome sweetness in that fine prairie world. He could hardly move his head, but had to just gawk and swallow.

She walked lightly, with antelope poise, joining her mother, rightly not looking too direct at the tall young man, but not seeming timid, either, and barely smiling so that the dimples made shadow spots in the corners of her mouth. And it was in him so strong that it might have shown in the open frankness of his dusty face that Texas sure was going to be a wonderful country and the Moseleys the most wonderful neighbors to have.

"You bought this place from a stranger," Moseley was saying, "then I reckon you loaded up all you owned and headed down here to be a cowman." There was no enthusiasm in Moseley's tone and Jonathan reined his attention back.

"I was already loaded up. Drove all the way from Indiana. Knew I was coming to Texas but never knew where I'd settle, till I met that man in Kansas City. He offered this place cheap and we made the deal."

Moseley pushed the papers back at him. "G Ranch," he muttered. "Even had a name!"

"No, I named it myself," Jonathan explained. "G for Grandma. Grandma Blake, back in Indiana. She helped me raise the money to head for Texas. Something I've dreamed about since I was knee-high. I promised her I was going to name my brand for her."

"This fellow you bought the place from." Moseley spoke with extreme gentleness for such a husky man. "Ever see him after you made the deal?"

"No." Jonathan looked at him. Dread hit him hard and sure. "What's the matter? Anything wrong?"

Moseley stared off to the west, eyes deep and squinted.

"Looke here, Jones." He raised his arm, pointing. "See that haze line over there? That's the Red River flats. The river bends south and west. You forded back east of there this morning, I reckon. Well, over there where the river meanders, that's your ranch."

Jonathan Jones nodded. "Yes, sir. That fellow, Plackard, he told me it was handy to the river."

"Sure is," Moseley said flatly. "It's *all* river. Son, you've bought a strip of quicksand."

IT CAUGHT Jonathan with his mouth open. He had a feeling like a sudden fever, and the Promised Land staggered beneath the dead weight of his boots. He peered hard at Moseley, almost belligerently, as if his eyes were two fists trying to batter back the truth. He put the hat back on and took it off. He turned and stared westward. Over there the haze of the river bend smouldered dark blue, and all the slow and worrisome back miles he had come seemed to catch up and crush him.

"Quicksand!" he murmured.

"Just red sand and flood gullies, that's all," Moseley said patiently. "Things like this have been done before. He sold you three miles of nothing. You been royally took."

His voice was hoarse and hard to find. "That's right hard to take, mister. Why, I even had a lawyer examine those papers."

"Oh, the title's all right. You could get that kind of stuff for just filing your claim. Only trouble is, that strip of land wouldn't raise a good-sized catfish."

He could think of nothing to do or say. He smiled one-sided at them, though it hurt his face like lockjaw.

The woman spoke then. "You better decide to noon with us, Mr. Jones. I've got turnips and beef on... Sam, you go water his team. Martha, show the young man

where the wash pump is," she beckoned.

He stood with lean frame slackened and one long leg bent, seeming to hold himself up by a left thumb hung hard in the wide black belt. He crushed the floppy hat back on his dark head, long unscissored, and turned trail-smarting eyes again to the distant blue haze line of the river barrens. The family moved away.

He followed the girl to the back yard. "That G brand will look right strange on the mud turtles over there," he murmured.

She cast a studying, unsmiling glance upward, and spoke with an understanding that surprised him.

"I know you're bad hurting inside. You've worked hard to make it this far, haven't you? Well, you don't have to say anything or talk about it right now." Her voice lowered. "At least you're not like Pomp Suggs. It happened to him, too, and it turned him mean. You don't want it to do you that way."

He heard her words as wisdom part and parcel of the land, as if she knew from bed-rock what went on inside a man. Yet he felt the limp weakness no less, as though he had been hollowed out inside with a knife, as though every sun-blistered inch of hide and bones were coming apart from too much pounding. The worst, though, was the bitter anger of being hobbled and helpless, unable to fight back at anything.

At the pump he splashed cooling water on his dusty face, not answering her.

"Sometimes," she murmured then, "this is the best way to make a Texan out of a man."

He let the water drip back through hands callused by the team lines, and straightened to look down at her.

"You don't have to be polite," he said. "I was just a greenhorn, an easy mark that got took by a Kansas City slicker."

She sat on the end of the wash bench, adjusting the soft folds of a long calico skirt about bare brown ankles.

"But you'll be wanting to see your land anyhow, I guess."

"Why?" he demanded harshly. The bitterness at last overcame his control. "What's there to look at? I've already seen red quicksand where I forded. All I want to do is get out of here!"

"You mean—you're not staying, Jonathan?"

He laughed shortly. "I'm a fool that thought he could come to Texas and get a start! Well, I'm turning back that wagon the way it came and the devil can have Texas!"

She spoke slowly, looking off, as if she were trying one last time. "You don't just buy a piece of land and get made a Texas rancher. There's more to it than that. Seems like out here you got to do a thing a harder way than anywhere else, Jonathan. We been through it. So have a lot of others."

She turned, and he saw the searching of her gaze, and felt peculiar resentment that she was peering under thoughts he would not even look at himself.

He grinned, not with humor, but hard-twisted in a way that showed how hot it was prodding him inside.

"Maybe you're trying to say that I haven't got the stuff it takes out here. Is that it?"

Her dark eyes came up to him, restrained. "I wouldn't be passing judgment on a body. It's only—maybe it could be that the first bad jolt, though, is the way of Providence, to get us set for the other bad ones that follow for certain."

"You're mighty young, aren't you, to be preaching?"

He saw that Martha's expression did not change. But on her olive cheeks came quickly a new tone, a dull burnished color. She stood abruptly, smoothing her skirt against the breeze. "When Papa's finished with your team, you-all can come in to dinner."

MOSELEY was approaching, having watered the mules at the pole corral and tied them in the shade of a scrub pin oak. Martha went into the house.

"I might mention, Jones," said Moseley, "I could use a hand here. My herd's a-building and I been needing a rider. You don't look work-shy. If you haven't got something better in sight, the pay around here's thirty dollars and keep. There's a bunk in the loft over the barn."

"I've got something better!" Jonathan retorted. "I'm getting out. Had about all of Texas I want."

Moseley shrugged. "Well, that's up to you. Just thought I'd mention it."

Then Jonathan thought that his short

words to Moseley were spoken in bad grace. After all, the man meant well, offering him a job—even if it was a starvation job. Common range hand, working his hide off for thirty dollars a month. Moseley didn't understand that he had come to Texas to boss his own range, build his own herd. He'd never planned and worked and saved and dreamed and come half-way across hell's own country to wind up slaving for bare tobacco money and beans.

He tried to tell that to Moseley, tried to temper the curtness he had shown in informing the man he'd have no job like that.

"All right," Moseley nodded. "Guess it's been a bad blow to you. Seems like a man's got to weather a pack of disappointment out here, before he even half gets started."

Jonathan was only half listening. All he could see now was the loss of money and opportunity, the gruelling miles back home, the empty-handed journey.

"If you need supplies," Moseley added, "you can go by way of River Station. It's northeast, not much off your route and nearest thing there is to a town."

"Thanks," Jonathan said dully. "I'll go that way. Need feed for the team and grub for myself before I hit the territory."

Moseley briefly eyed Jonathan's gunless belt.

"River Station's got some tough customers hanging around. You come all the way without packing a leg gun?"

"I've got a rifle in the wagon. You don't ask for trouble, you don't find it, I figure."

Moseley sighed, a sound like the noon wind troubling the little mesquite branches in the yard. They entered the dim room, and Jonathan smelled warm odors of hearth-simmered beef gravy and fresh cornbread. But his appetite for food was gone. Martha's eyes were on him from behind lowered night-black lashes and her two brown hands were gripped across the top of her chair. The bitterness stayed tight in his chest and he had no heart for the food, nor for the quiet-spoken grace Moseley was saying....

River Station was a shack town spraddled on a barren bluff, and it did nothing to improve a man's taste for the country. While the store clerk was filling his supply list, Jonathan unhitched the team on the back lot and staked them off a way to graze.

He returned to the one sandy red front street, blinking uncertainly into the dust and mid-afternoon sun haze. His eyes came to a focus on a man he had noticed before, still loitering in the shade of the store's board awning. The man spoke as Jonathan approached.

"Going north, friend?"

"Yes. Is there a place to eat around here?"

"Border Cafe, down the street." The man motioned with a heavy hand. "Going that way, myself."

He fell in beside Jonathan and presently they were straddling adjacent stools in the eating house. There, Jonathan turned to give the man a sidewise scrutiny.

He saw a nose like an old potato, thick and flabby features, little, red-laced eyes almost lost behind bushy eyebrows.

"I'm Pomp Suggs," the man said. "Looks like you didn't stay long." Jonathan caught the rancid whiskey smell that came out with the breath. Suggs' clothes, none too fresh, were strained by the load of beefy muscle they tried to wrap.

"Long enough to smell the stink," Jona-

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than said. The thick mouth tightened. Jonathan added, "Texas, I'm talking about. Getting out while I still got a shirt on."

"Had a little trouble, myself, when I hit here," Suggs growled amiably. "Got fast-talked into buying some worthless land. It's pulled on a lot of newcomers. Lost every nickel I had. Can you beat that!"

"Same thing happened to me," Jonathan retorted grimly. He felt an unhappy kinship with Suggs. Vaguely, he remembered that name—something Martha had said. He related, in a quick, bitter nutshell, what had happened about G Ranch.

Suggs' shaggy head nodded in sympathetic listening. Then he asked easily: "Got your papers on you?"

Jonathan showed him the map and deeds. "Listen, son," Suggs' words were low. "Why don't you sell this stuff? Maybe you can make a deal and kinda even things up. Hell, you ain't the only sucker ever born. Right now there's a camp of new immigrant nesters up the river. I been looking 'em over. They're just crazy to buy 'em some land and start being ranchers. Pomp Suggs has learned a few things around here. You turn it over to me, I'll make a deal and we'll split. Only way to get any of your money back."

Suggs reminded him of something shapeless and slimy hooked up from the river mud. But if there was anything to be salvaged out of his worthless papers, he would not turn it down because of a man's looks. The ruthless country had robbed him of his own hard-found land stake, blasted his dreams—and it owed him a debt he had a right to try to collect.

"No way I could lose, considering," Jonathan said.

Suggs hoisted himself off the stool. He had one eye fixed in a chummy wink. His dilapidated gunbelt and holster dragged at his bulging middle to the weight of an old Colt.

"You leave it to me, partner."

"Think you got a prospect?"

"Just leave it to Pomp Suggs. You got a tolerably honest face—a stranger will likely believe what you say. You meet me in a couple of hours."

"Well, no longer than that. I'm heading out north tonight."

"You be down at the fording place at the bottom of the street." Suggs lowered his

voice. "Don't say anything to anybody. Leave all the talking to me." He winked again and lumbered out like a hungry buffalo scenting green graze.

The cafe man sauntered over. He mumbled bleakly, "If you're a stranger around River Station, friend, I might mention Pomp Suggs ain't exactly considered a choice sidekick for a newcomer to take up with."

Jonathan threw a silver dollar to the counter. "I guess I can take care of myself, mister. I'm beginning to learn how things are done in Texas."

HE WAS at the foot of the street, where the bluff sloped, rocky red, to the fording place, when late-afternoon sun slanted its rays along the sluggish water. Jonathan waited off the deserted road in a shadowy stand of sickly elm and creek willows. As he watched for Suggs, he had time to realize that he had no stomach for this business. Suggs was crawly and so was the whole scheme. The low rustle of the still leafless saplings made a husky sound. The sound bothered him. It reminded him of the voice of Martha Moseley. He had to admit it—he had been hearing her voice somewhere inside him all the time.

You got to do a thing the harder way here, Jonathan.

Two horsemen, blurred shapes against the sun, loomed on the shoreline to the west. He saw them take form as Pomp Suggs and a stranger. He moved out to join them as they dismounted.

"This here is Cleve Smith," Suggs rumbled hurriedly. "From Ohio. I happened to mention you had a dandy little ranch you had to leave in a hurry."

"Yeah, I reckon that's right," Jonathan mumbled.

"I told him how you got called back east on account of your grandma dying," Suggs said. "Too bad you got to move out quick and sacrifice your place. But Smith here is of a mind to buy. Your hard luck's his good luck, seems.... Gimme the papers."

Jonathan produced the papers. He could see the cagey eagerness on Smith, the way the man was almost pointing a bargain like a foxy bird dog. The immigrant was a middle-aged man, in old farm garb, and now he talked volubly of his plans to set up in Texas ranching.

"Too bad about your grandma," Smith wound up. "But if you've got a real bargain like Suggs here says, then I ain't one to turn down some cheap acres."

Suggs could have left Grandma Blake out of this, Jonathan thought. Suggs had sure fed this newcomer a nice pack of lies to condition him. Didn't seem proper, though, saying Grandma Blake was dead. Didn't seem proper for her name to be spoken by Suggs in any manner. Suggs and Smith already were poring over the deed and map. The price that Suggs kept repeating sounded like a real bargain—about half what a man would expect to pay for Texas grass.

"Well, my wife and kids'll be right tickled I found a buy like this," Smith cackled, his Adam's apple jerking. "But I always was one to spot a bargain. I guess the rest of them in our camp are going to take their hat off to Cleve Smith when they find how I stumbled on to a good buy so quick. I'll already be ranching while they're still looking!"

"You're mighty lucky," Suggs nodded. "You're a sharp man, Smith, I can see that. Well, what you say we close 'er here and now, then go have a drink to cinch it. You got the money on you?"

"Sure as shootin'," Smith said, and fished into his overalls.

"Wait a minute." Jonathan found his lips had set hard. His voice burned sharply out of him even before he knew what he was saying. "Wait just a minute, Smith." He took the papers from the immigrant's hands.

"You ain't backing out?" Smith's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"You don't want this place, Smith," Jonathan said slowly. "Your wife and kids—they wouldn't be very well pleased with G Ranch, I guess." He shoved the papers back into his own pocket and looked off, miserable and sick at heart.

"Why, damn you!" Suggs' voice was belligerent. "What—"

"It's no deal, Suggs." Jonathan turned to Smith. "Mister, you can't turn yourself into a Texas rancher just by moving in and buying a piece of land. It takes more than that. Maybe more than you or me'll ever have. Mister, this land is no good. It's a strip o' damn quicksand and my grand-

mother is not dead, least I hope not, and you got to wise up or you'll get royally took. Just like I was took, and Suggs here. We're all greenhorns, thinking we were ready for Texas. But we got to learn first, the hard way. I'm not fraudin' you out of your money. You just go on back to your camp and watch what—"

Suggs' hard breathing turned into a rumble. Jonathan noted also that Smith's face was turning from pale to red in the waning light. Smith was drawn up tight, like a man who has seen a snake. He was mad, too.

"Trying to rob me, huh!"

A man mad and scared was likely to do anything. Smith's teeth showed in a snarl and he swung a hard-knuckled fist.

Jonathan caught the blow full in the eye. This was a crazy way for the man to show appreciation. But Smith was an animal who had come close to being caught in a trap. His panicky resentment was strangely directed at Jonathan, not at Suggs.

That first blow rocked Jonathan back. He tried to throw up his arms, to swing back on Smith. But Smith tangled right into him like a crazy wildcat. Then Suggs was on him, too, swinging hard.

"Damn double-cropper!" Suggs snarled.

Pain and thuds rumbled in his head like the running hoofs of a thousand stampeding longhorns. He sank to his knees. The last he remembered was that he was glad Grandma Blake was not really dead...

The wagon creaked plaintively in the thin moonlight. Occasionally, he got a blurred glimpse of the moon to guide by. The cold yellow disk was hard to see when he tilted his aching head, for both eyes were swollen.

But even if he could not see much out of his eyes, he sure could see plain, all at once, what Martha and Moseley had been trying to say to him. A lot of things he saw better, he reckoned. He spoke to the silent night, his voice very polite, rehearsing how he would say it.

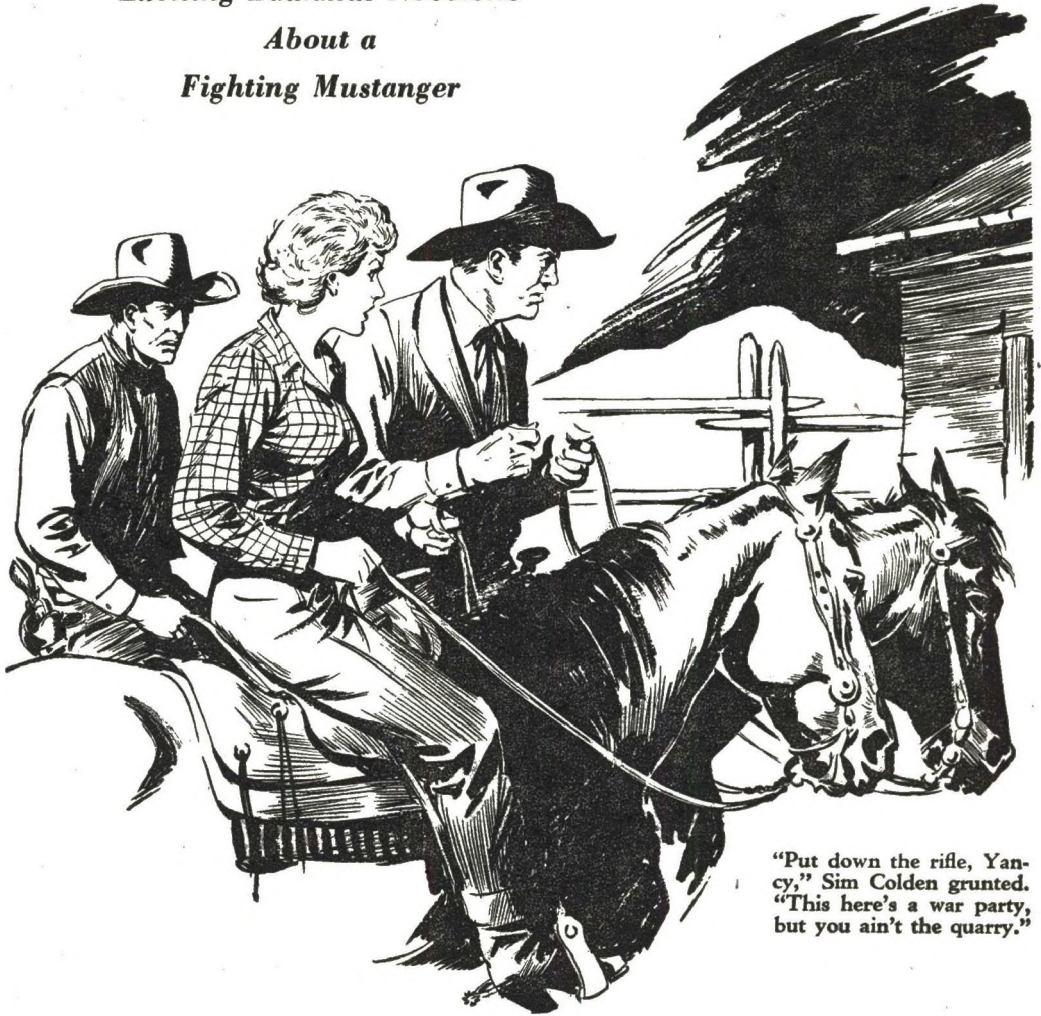
"I decided to come back and take that job, Mr. Moseley, if you're willing to hire a beat-up Texan."

He clucked to the mules to step along. The wheels creaked on southward, and the axle sounds were no longer dry groans to his ears, but music pretty as cordons in the evening.

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*About a
Fighting Mustanger*



"Put down the rifle, Yancy," Sim Colden grunted. "This here's a war party, but you ain't the quarry."

Yancy Banting was just badlands scum to the purse-proud Colden clan—until salty Josie Colden rode right into the menace of outlaw guns and only Yancy could save her!

CHAPTER

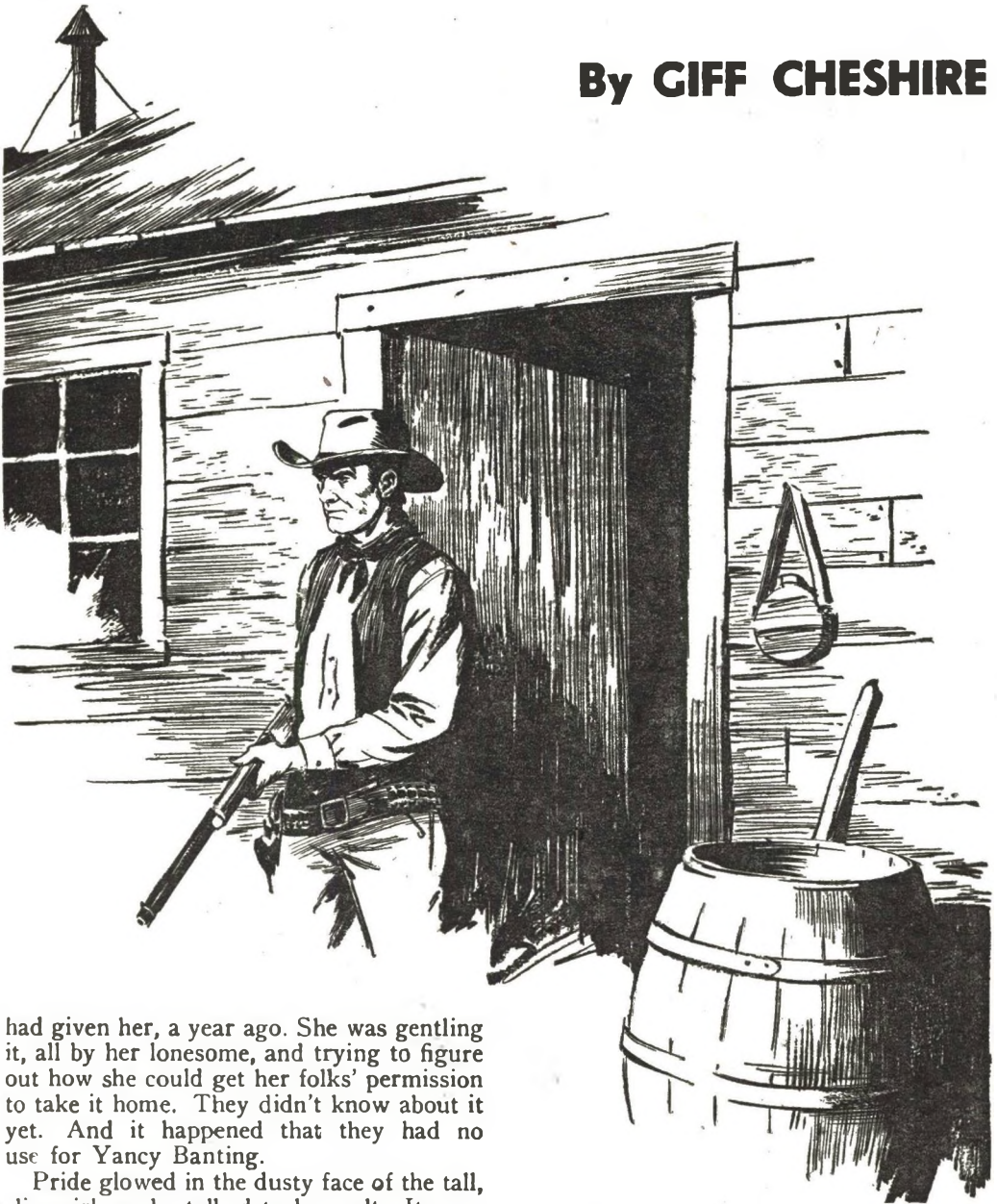
1

Little Rebel

Yancy Banting knew he was in trouble. Josie hadn't yet seen what looked like her whole family riding up from the sun-beaten flat. From the top pole of the breaking trap, the young mustanger looked down at the nineteen-year-old girl. She was still petting and talking to a colt he

HARD and ROUGH!

By GIFF CHESHIRE



had given her, a year ago. She was gentling it, all by her lonesome, and trying to figure out how she could get her folks' permission to take it home. They didn't know about it yet. And it happened that they had no use for Yancy Banting.

Pride glowed in the dusty face of the tall, slim girl as she talked to her colt. It gave Yancy a sense of satisfaction. In the whole basin, with all its cow spreads, he guessed no one but Josie Colden bore a love of horse flesh to equal his own. Josie had fallen for a little old oreana colt Yancy had brought in with a catch of broomtails. He

had given it to her on the spot but had raised it out here at his wild horse camp. He had sort of shut his eyes to the fact that Josie was sneaking off from home to visit it.

Josie left the colt that, with more imagination than proof, she had named Whirl-

wind. She came across the corral in a light, boyish stride, a pretty girl who by rights should have been born a boy, Yancy figured. Her hair was cropped short and was an odd shade of light yellow. If she was aware of her increasing womanhood, it seemed to mean little to her. Now Yancy watched her spot her folks, filing up the slow grade, and he grinned when she winced painfully.

"Lord a'mighty!" Josie breathed. "If I don't get a hiding, I'm a three-legged sage grouse. Yancy, here comes Ma and Pa and Rick, and even Eudora. I've got to scoot. Help me get my horse before they reach here."

Yancy swore under his breath. They could distrust him all they wanted, and he didn't give a hoot. But it beat him how anybody in his right mind could suspect this kid of flightiness. "No you don't," he said. "There's nothing I'd like less than for your ma to think I been helping you deceive her. Brace your feet, youngun, and if you've got medicine coming, swallow it."

Josie tried to grin, but her slender shoulders slumped instead of squaring back. Yancy knew why. Amanda Colden, who ran spread, family and as much of the basin as she could manage, had a tongue like a cactus needle.

Josie rubbed her sweaty palms on her worn jeans, and Yancy saw she was really scared. He had always pegged her as a rebel, different from the rest of the Coldens. They couldn't feature a girl like Josie sneaking out here to the edge of the badlands simply because she liked to be around horses. Amanda was apt to hold Yancy Banting responsible, and the prospect worried the mustanger more than he showed. He had brushed with Amanda before.

Simply to loosen Josie's nerves, Yancy said, "When they see Whirlwind mebbe they'll understand, Josie. Shucks, nobody could look at that little old scalawag and not like him."

She glanced at Yancy, and there was a stubborn, rebellious look in her eyes. "I guess I let you in for something, Yancy. The last time she got wind of where I'd been, Ma threatened to have Pa horsewhip you and me both if I come out here again."

Yancy grinned. "Now, Sim Colden horsewhippin' me would be a sight worth the punishment."

Josie's mouth was bitter. "If Ma makes

up her mind to it, Pa'll try or live on a hot skillet till he does." Then she smiled reluctantly. Sim Colden could walk under Yancy's arm without bumping his bald head. He wasn't what could be called a menace.

Yancy leaned against the fence and rolled a cigarette, a rangy man with a weathered face. He was dressed in shabby clothes that showed the marks of the badlands. Though only twenty-five, he had put in two years out here on the scoured bottom flats, mesas and benchlands where the big wild horse bands ran. The oppressive summer heat and punishing winter temperatures had toughened him until he seemed a part of his rough surroundings.

This horse camp, he knew, with its half dozen sorting corrals and the dried-out little shack he called home, made a poor contrast to the Coldens' headquarters ranch, with its shade and creek and painted buildings of which Amanda was so proud.

The Coldens came up over the last rise, with Amanda two lengths ahead of the others and riding with purpose. She sat sidesaddle with her long skirts primly gathered about her ankles. Yancy saw that Josie's face had turned white. He had been wondering all along if Amanda would ever let Josie accept the colt and bring it home. That was probably what had turned Josie cold with apprehension, as much as the threatened tongue-lashing. Otherwise, when it came to a risk or a ruckus, there was little fear in the girl.

Amanda Colden rode in, but the others pulled down their horses a little behind her. The woman's voice was shrill and caustic. "Who did you think you were fooling, young woman?" she demanded of Josie. "Claiming you were going fishing. I told you what would happen if you sneaked out here again. Well, this time we're going to put a stop to it!"

"Ma, I've got a secret I've been keeping!" Josie pleaded. She pointed to Whirlwind. "See him? He's mine. Yancy gave him to me a year ago. I've about got him broke all by myself. I've been going to surprise you. Yancy says I can take him home any time now. Then I won't need to come out here again."

Amanda Colden's face was ageless, maybe because she had never known a real, carefree youth herself. "You get your own

horse," she ordered, "and hit for home! Your pa's going to take care of this worthless tramp. He'll deal with you when we get there."

"It's not Yancy's fault!" Josie insisted. Her mother snorted.

Stricken, Josie turned and started for the saddle corral, her head dropped forward and her shoulders slumped.

ANGER repressed for the past two years blew up in Yancy. His seamy face turned hard. "Amanda Colden," he barked. "Josie told you the pure truth. She's been coming out to see that colt and for no other purpose! She didn't dare tell you about him, and she's had to sneak off for one simple reason. You."

"Me?" Amanda breathed. There was pure enmity in the eyes she held on Yancy. "You and your hidebound notions. You wouldn't have let her take the gift, would you?"

"I sure wouldn't," Amanda answered promptly. "I thought I made my opinion of you plain, Yancy Banting, when you had the gall to try and court my Eudora. No girl of mine's taking up with a half-wild mustanger. And when he starts luring one to his trashy camp, it's time something was done. Sim's here to do it."

"Together with Rick and Eudora, I see," Yancy commented.

"They're here to witness that we found Josie here, in case you make trouble over what Sim's going to do to you."

"If Sim trys his luck, they're sure going to witness trouble."

"Sim, take your quirt to the man!" Amanda yelled. Her thin face had started twitching. She turned her head and flung a glance at her husband. "Well, do something! Are you going to sit and listen to the way he's been talking to me?"

Sim Colden wasn't a big man, and he had a way of seeming to pull his head down between his shoulders. Though he ran a prosperous spread, he always looked tired and discouraged. But he stiffened and stared back at his wife. "Tuck in your shirt tail, Mandy. That's a fine-looking colt. Knowing Josie, that explains it to me. And it makes a lot more sense than the underhanded thing you keep trying to make out of it."

The shock that rose on Amanda's face

was worse than anything Yancy had put there. She backed her horse a little as Yancy started toward her.

"And now," Yancy said, "let's get on with the debate. I'm all you've always claimed. I live in a horse camp. I like it. And I don't intend to do anything else. But when you make that suspicious talk, I've got something to say about it."

Amanda jerked her head back in amazement.

Yancy waved a hand toward Eudora, still going strong. "There's a girl whose spirit you broke, if she ever had any. Before you found out how I earn my living, she showed signs of liking me. I let myself get sweet on her. Well, you had your way about that. Eudora sent me packing. She'll marry a man you approve of and maybe grow up to be like you. The man's welcome to her. But Josie's another matter. You keep using that Spanish bit, and maybe she'll give you something real to worry about."

Amanda cut a desperate look at her husband, who only shifted his chew from one cheek to the other. "You going to take that, Sim?" she shrilled.

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"Yonder goes Josie," Sim Colden drawled. "Swing your horse and go with her. I told you it was a silly business comin' out to raise hob with Yancy. You git too, Eudora."

Amanda threw back her head but she rode off. For a moment Eudora stared at Yancy, but he couldn't tell what she was thinking. The oldest of the children, she was dark where Josie was fair, and very pretty. There had been a time when Yancy was fool enough to think he might induce Eudora to come and live in a wild horse camp. The wound of it hadn't healed yet. But Eudora looked away, turned her horse, and rode obediently after her mother.

The eyes Sim Colden turned on Yancy were still cold and unfriendly. "Now, Yancy," Colden said, "Mandy's got her side of it. Maybe you ain't egged Josie on, but it ain't right for a girl her age to hang around a place like this. Mandy won't stand for Josie taking that colt from you, so the girl's apt to sneak out here again. I'll try to put a stop to it. But if she shows up, you run her off."

Yancy's brow knit darkly. "You listen to me, Sim Colden. Josie's dreamed about taking that colt home for a year. Not letting her is the meanest thing I ever heard of. Just because your wife thinks it'd look bad for Josie to take the gift of a horse from a man she's been visitin' sometimes. Colden, if you want to buy that colt and give it to Josie yourself, I'll tear up your check as soon as you're out of sight."

"I don't do business that way, Yancy."

"Well, Josie's your daughter. But I'm telling you one thing. If you let your woman talk you into punishing Josie for today, don't let me hear about it. Now, as far as I'm concerned, you and Rick can git outta here, too."

Rick Colden looked embarrassed, and Yancy knew he had liked none of this. He was between Eudora and Josie in age, resembling them both in nature. There was talk about him that would raise the hair on Amanda Colden's head if she heard it. Yancy knew that Rick slipped away from the spread in the small hours of the night, sometimes, to spend short stolen intervals in the shebangs in town. Knowing Amanda and her hard hand with her family, nobody blamed Rick, so the open secret had never reached his mother.

Without another word, the father and son rode away. . . .

The position of the coppery sun told Yancy it was time to rustle some supper. He started toward Whirlwind to turn him into the creek bottom horse pasture when something turned him around to look at the Colden family. He could see them strung out down the slope, Josie far in the lead and riding her horse like the wind. A bleak look showed in Yancy's eyes. She was going to take this hard, and she was old enough to get into real trouble.

Anger boiled in him for her sake but Yancy acknowledged that it was wanting another look at Eudora that had turned him about. He guessed he had never got her completely off his mind since the day Amanda had ordered him to stay clear of the spread, nearly two years back. He had seen Eudora in town, since then, and made his final plea. Eudora had turned him down for good, reluctantly he thought, but in submission to her mother's will. That should have turned Yancy's stomach and it had in a way. But her pretty eyes and figure, the provocative curve of her mouth, were memories that burned in his mind like fanned embers.

"It's not that I don't like you, Yancy," Eudora had said that day. "But it's like Ma says. It's so lonely and sorry-fitted where you want a wife to live. If you really cared for a woman, you would get into something else."

"Your ma's own words, no doubt!" Yancy had exploded. "Why should I get into something else? There's enough mustangs in the malpais to keep a man going his lifetime. Gentled right, they make cow ponies this country's anxious to get and willing to pay for. That's my business, and I make more money than I could on a rag-tag cow spread. My wild bunch looks out for itself. I got no worries, and I'm my own boss. But let me marry you, and I'd have a boss. Your ma. On account of you won't ever cross her, no matter what."

"Why, Yancy!" Eudora had gasped. Then she had tossed her head and marched down the sidewalk, looking for all the world like Amanda.

That should have fixed it, but now Yancy Banting knew a man could disapprove of a woman and yet love her with every fiber of his being . . .

Josie had shown up one day, a few weeks after Yancy quit calling at the Colden spread. That time, he guessed, it was just a friendly visit because she had always been excited about the wild horses he worked with. Yancy had thought nothing of it, and on her second visit he'd had the oreana colt in the horse pasture with its wildling mother. Thereafter Josie had come out every chance she had to slip away from home, and Yancy had sort of shut his eyes to the deceitfulness in it.

YANCY turned the colt out, finally, and went to the shack. Plain it was—ugly, he was willing to concede if he had to—but it was neat, comfortable and only temporary. His camp was set under a high rim, back of a creek with good bottom grass, and was shaded most of the day. The air was fresh and clean, and his living was in there in the roughlands. He had plans for a lot better place in a few more years.

The edge wore off his temper as he cooked supper, and Yancy began to rebuke himself. Maybe if he hadn't shot off his face, Amanda Colden could somehow have been persuaded to let Josie accept the colt, which would put a stop to her sneaking out here to see it.

Yancy ate, cleaned up the shack, then went outdoors to watch daylight ebb from the atmosphere. He tried to shake off his dejection, telling himself that what really mattered had been settled long ago, when Amanda broke up him and Eudora. But he kept thinking of the kid Josie and the stricken look she had worn when she rode away. She wasn't set in the Colden mold. She had no high, fixed standards of what a person had to be in order to be called respectable. Living in a horse camp would be heaven to a kid like her. In a few years, maybe, she would find some mustanger and marry him, telling Amanda to go chew on a horse blanket. There'd be none of Eudora's truckling when it came to Josie's man.

Yancy was willing to admit he'd played the fool, telling them off that way. If he had taken a different tack and buttered up Amanda, showed her his bank book and told her of the fine place he aimed to build, she might have revised her estimate of him a trifle. But a man who chased and rode thunderbolts for a living wasn't inclined toward gentle manners.

Well, he had blown off steam and fixed things for keeps, and he was a man given to accepting realities.

By morning the whole thing was relegated to the past. Yancy had hard work on his hands and he got at it. In the fenced bottomland pasture he had a sweep of forty-odd oreanas he had brought in from his last horse chase. The wildlings were mixed in with a parava of gentled mustangs to keep them settled. The new ones were in various stages of training, some broken, some in process, and some as wild as the day they were born. Yancy resumed work, getting them all peeled out so he could take another string of them out to the horse auction.

It was a couple of days later when four riders came out of the badlands and stopped to water their horses and pass the time of day. They were hard-looking individuals of a cut Yancy saw much of out here, men who came and went without Yancy's asking questions. It was late afternoon, but they showed no signs of wanting to hang around and eat with Yancy. But they looked over his horses with appreciative eyes, which pleased him. He always, liked to meet up with somebody who knew good horseflesh. Once the quartet had ridden on, Yancy forgot them.

In the middle of the night he was roused from sleep by the sound of fast-moving horses. But the sound slowly faded, without coming close to the camp, seeming to thin out against the malpais. He wondered if it was the strangers going back in there and, without caring, fell asleep again.

Yancy was taking the ginger out of a broomtail, late the next afternoon, when Rick Colden fogged in on a lathered horse. Since he had started something he had to finish, Yancy rode the mustang down. When he had cleared the saddle and got out of the trap without getting his head kicked off, Rick called, "Hey, Yancy, have you seen that fool kid Josie?"

Yancy pulled up straight. "No, I ain't seen Josie," he blared. "Howcome you Coldens think of me every time she shows up missing?"

"She's been gone all day, Yancy," Rick answered. "Just slipped off. Last night Ma tied into her fierce. Ma's scared she's agoin' to have another case with Josie like she had with Eudora. It's mainly the girls

she don't trust when it comes to you, Yancy. Me, I didn't like what happened out here the other day. But Ma was bound Pa was comin' with her to put an end to the business. She wanted Eudora to come catch Josie here and see what kind of under-handed hombre you are. Me, I poked along to help Pa restrain her, if I had to. Sometimes Ma'll listen to me where she won't to him."

"That makes no never mind," Yancy answered. He was worried. That little old Josie was a girl who might do almost anything if crowded hard enough. There was no doubt she was being crowded. "You have any special reason to think Josie headed this way?" he asked.

"Well, she told me on the quiet, the other day, that she was going to catch her own oreana colt if she couldn't have Whirlwind. It struck me the notional kid might have gone riding up into the badlands trying to rope one."

"She ain't fool enough," Yancy began, then he paused. Maybe Josie was. And the malpais was a piece of country that ran a hundred miles northeast, fanning to a width half that. It made a lot of territory, and men had got lost in there to die of thirst and hunger. If Josie had done what Rick feared, hunting her would be like seeking a needle in a whole blamed hayfield. Yancy added, "Shucks, Rick, she's just out riding off her mad. You don't have to worry about that gal."

Rick kept the worried scowl on his face. "Mebbe. But you know where Tonkin Creek comes out of the lava buttes? It's closer to our place than where you go into the malpais. Well, me and Josie were in there once and we seen a wild horse band that was sure a dandy. It got into my head that mebbe she went in there. But me, I get lost in that kind of country. Wonder if you'd mind taking a little look up that creek with me?"

Yancy thought it was a pretty far-fetched idea, but he agreed. He saddled a horse and presently rode with Rick, wondering why he had had a touch of cold dread on his heart ever since he heard about Josie. Nothing serious could happen to a capable youngster like she was. Ordinarily. But the girl was worked up and rebellious, in a heedless frame of mind. That made a difference.

2

Into the Trap

He rode at a fast clip beside Rick, wondering about him, too. Rick had taken after his father mainly, but there was a streak in him Yancy had sometimes puzzled over. Yancy knew the boy worked hard and was a top hand on his father's spread. But on those stolen town visits, Yancy also knew, Rick sometimes took up with characters most men would steer clear of instinctively. Lately, Yancy had heard, Rick had been playing in games where the stakes were beyond his means. Rick didn't show Josie's brand of rebellion, but his mother's restraints chafed him. He was another one Amanda Colden's iron will was apt to make into the very thing she feared.

Dusk was beginning to show itself by the time they reached the Tonkin Creek water gap. But there was light enough to let them scout around. Yancy could find no sign of any horse having entered the gap that day, and Josie would have no reason to try to foul trail by riding in the water. It eased Yancy's mind to an extent he found curious.

"You go on home, kid," he told Rick. "Probably she's come in from her pout and got her supper tucked in, while you missed yours."

"Hope so," Rick said. "Anyhow, thanks, Yancy. I'm obliged." He swung away.

"You let me know if she ain't showed up," Yancy yelled after him.

Yancy rode home at a slow and thoughtful gait. He was passing through his own bottom pasture when suddenly he pulled down his horse. Something vaguely bothering him had registered. It was full dark now, but his mount hadn't let out a nicker nor was there sight or sound of a horse here in the pasture. Yancy dug in his spurs and did some fast riding, from one end of the long bottom to the other. There wasn't a piece of horse flesh left inside his fences.

He checked the gates to make certain he had left none open, then rode the fences without finding a break. Human hands had swung one of the gates open and then shut it behind a string of driven horses, the parava and oreanas together.

Yancy sat his horse for a long moment, scratching his jaw. It was too dark now

to set out to trail them, and his mind was on the strangers who had been lurking about.

They sure got a break, he thought, with Rick smoking in hunting Josie and taking me off. Must have had a spy keeping tabs from the rim somewhere. Rick sure done them a unknowin' favor . . . A wave of cold climbed Yancy's spine. Rick's insistence on checking that far water gap hadn't seemed reasonable. Yancy shook his head in disbelief. The kid couldn't have been helping horse thieves.

Yancy rode in to his shack too riled to want the supper he had missed. He had to fight his own head to keep from lighting out loaded for bear. The chances were ten to one the horses had been hazed back into the malpais. It would be suicide fogging in there in the middle of the night.

These men would have to be experienced to handle oreanas in their native runs, where a fairly bright mustang could outsmart all but the most experienced human. Likely the thieves had picked some box canyon to hold them in, relying on standing off pursuit until disposition could be made of the stolen stock. Yancy reckoned he could use help on the job, but he was a man given to lonehandedness. He went to bed to rest up for it.

He was up an hour before daylight and ate a breakfast big enough to make up for his lost supper and to sustain him through the imponderables ahead. It was still short of dawn when he heard the clatter of horses coming up in the distance. Yancy's brow darkened and he stepped outdoors with his Winchester in his hand.

But the riders smoked in openly. Yancy frowned when he made out three Coldens in the half light: old Sim, Rick and Josie. They pulled their mounts to a halt.

"Put down the rifle, Yancy," Sim Colden grunted. "This here's a war party, but you ain't the quarry. Yancy, we had every head of saddle stock in our horse pasture cleaned out last night. Tracked it to where it went into the malpais, three-four miles south of here. We don't need no help handlin' horsethieves, but we do in findin' our way outta there again. You of a mind to give us a hand?"

Yancy heaved a sigh that was almost relief. There was Josie, safe and sound, and if Sim Colden had lost horses, it was all

the more unlikely that Rick could have taken a part in the thieving.

"It happens," Yancy said, "that I was about to take a sachez in there on my lone-some. You ain't the only picked goose. Somebody got away with my wild bunch and parava, last night, while me and Rick were out hunting Josie."

"Hunting me?" Josie asked. But before she was answered, her thoughts ran on and she said, "Whirlwind, Yancy? Don't tell me they took Whirlwind! They can't have him! He's mine!"

"Temporarily, at least," Yancy said, "he's their'n, too." The troublesome thought was stirring in his mind again, and he added, "Where were you yesterday, younker, that Rick and me'd have to go out looking for you?"

His heart sank when he saw young Rick swallow.

"I wasn't anywhere," Josie answered. She twisted her slim body to stare at Rick. "What were you hunting me for? You knew I was going over to spend the day with Patience Hawthorne. She's good for me when I've got the wingdings. And I told you so, Rick, before I left."

Rick set his face and stared back at her. "After the way you been fibbing, was I to believe that? You've been fussin' about that colt, and you've been talkin' about catching a oreana of your own. When it got on to evening and you hadn't come home, I set to worrying. And I had Yancy help me check up on it."

"It would have been quicker to check at Hawthornes'," Josie retorted.

"You can stop the cat-and-dogging," Sim Colden commanded. "Yancy, how are we going to tackle it?"

YANCY'S renewed suspicion of Rick was bad enough. Sim's ready assumption that help would be coming really tripped the mustanger's temper.

"Till you need me," he blazed, "I ain't fit to come onto your spread and pass the time of day with your daughter! I'm a man to be threatened with a horsewhippin' for letting Josie visit my camp! Me, I've got a idea how to get my horses back. What makes you think I care a hoot whether you get yours?"

Sim Colden grinned. "Yancy, I don't blame you for tarrin' all us Coldens with

the same brush. But it happens we run to differences the same as any other batch of humans. Might pay you to draw the line 'twixt one and the other. After all, you once run a risk of gettin' Mandy for your mother-in-law but got out of it with a whole hide. The rest of us got to live with her. By and large, we've all learned what's smart and what ain't from the long range view of it." The man kept his grin, and Yancy felt his temper going down. "Now, what kind of caper do we cut?" Colden concluded.

"You take Josie and clear out for home," Yancy said. The malpais is no place for the cavalry. I got a notion me and Rick would do better handling it just between us."

Colden bristled. "Don't rub it in. Me, I don't ask any man to catch my horsethieves for me. Josie, you cut for home where you should have stayed in the first place instead of talking me into letting you see that Whirlwind again."

"Let me stay at Yancy's place till you come back," Josie pleaded. "Then I won't have so long to wait to see if you've got back my colt."

From the way Colden gave in, Yancy was beginning to see that the man could be a different person when he was away from his woman. Remembering the mannerisms and reactions Eudora shared with her mother, Yancy felt better all at once about losing her. It was too bad Eudora hadn't run more to the lines young Josie had.

Yancy told the Coldens to saddle his horse for him and took Josie into the shack. He gave her a long look and said, "Why do you suppose Rick pulled that sandy about looking for you last night?"

He saw her stiffen guardedly and knew he had roused her loyalty to her brother. "One of Rick's silly notions," Josie said, and she shrugged in a matter-of-fact way. Then she said in a rush, "Yancy, you take care of yourself in there!"

His eyes widened at the real concern on her face. Without the usual dust and unabashed perspiration, he noted, her face was prettier than he had realized. Not that she looked anything like Eudora. But it struck him suddenly that a man couldn't honestly call it a kid face any more.

Maybe she mistook his interest, for she smiled a little and kept right on watching

his eyes. Yancy didn't know what got into him then. He stepped closer, and when she didn't budge he found himself tipping his head down toward her. When her mouth tilted up, his met it, and something surged through him like a shot of corn whiskey. He stepped away thinking wildly, *By damn, Amanda did have something to worry about. Kid or not, she's plain dynamite. Good thing I didn't find it out till they'd put a stop to her visitin'.*

"I cried all night, Yancy," Josie whispered. "Not because of Whirlwind entirely, either. And I've made up my mind. I won't let Ma ruin my life the way Eudora let her ruin hers. From here on I aim to see as much of you as I blamed please."

"Now, wait a minute!" Yancy said. "I got an idea that your pa'd let you take Whirlwind home if we get him back."

Josie's face darkened. "You may know horses, Yancy. Maybe you know men well enough to figure out Pa and Rick. But when it comes to—"

At that moment Rick rode up to the door leading Yancy's horse, and Josie didn't finish.

Yancy didn't want Sim Colden along. If Rick had helped the horsethieves, he probably knew where they were holed up or if they had managed somehow to clear out of the country already. Getting the truth out of him would save a lot of work and risk, but Yancy didn't want to go after it before the kid's father.

He let Colden ride along with them toward the 'scarp break entering into the malpais just south of the camp. Within five minutes they cut a slant into the wide and scuffed path left by the moving horses.

"They must have picked mine up before yours," Yancy told Colden. "I slept light, last night, and didn't hear anything. So they must have taken your stuff in some other way."

Colden nodded. "So I figured. We picked up sign easy. Then they put the band into Ander's Creek for a long ways. We followed it a while, then decided to get hold of you before we found where they come out and went into the badlands."

"We'd save time," Yancy said, "if you'd go find out where they went in. Rick and me'll ride this sign far enough to give me a idea where they headed. Then we'll go in the other way, and I'll have a kind of a

fix on 'em." He let it ravel lightly since his only purpose was to get shed of Colden for a while.

Colden nodded and pulled his horse off at an angle. Yancy rattled the extra ammunition in his pocket and didn't try to put the pressure on Rick right off. Rick's face had turned wooden, and he kept his shoulders back with a touch of defiance. The kid knew what was on Yancy's mind, all right. He was sweating his cold sweat and trying not to reveal the fact.

FINALLY Yancy gave Rick a cool grin. "Supposing, younker," he said calmly, "that you save everybody a lot of trouble. You'd feel better making a clean breast of it than letting your pa or me get killed."

"A clean breast of what?" Rick blustered.

Yancy pulled himself straight, then, and his brow blackened. "Cut it, kid. You pulled a sandy last night so clumsy a fool could see through it. Did it surprise you when they raided your pa, too, or was that supposed to turn suspicion away from you?"

"Blast it, Yancy, I don't know what you're driving at."

"Either you made some wrong friends," Yancy went on implacably, "or you need a piece of money you're scared to hit up your folks for. It makes no never mind. Horsethievins' hanging business. And the only way they can foul trail on a bunch that big is with a gun. You want somebody to stop a slug, or would you rather tell me where they're holed up so I can figure out how to go about it?"

"You're talking crazy!" Rick spat. "What do you want me to say? I told you the truth, and you won't believe it."

Yancy shrugged. "Your bluff's weaker'n dish water, kid. But if you want to run it, you want to run it. We'll go back and see if you can keep it up in front of your pa."

"He won't believe you! He'll climb your frame for accusin' his own flesh and blood of horse-stealin'!"

"If he don't climb yours for being guilty."

They rode out of the malpais and back to Yancy's camp. Josie's horse wasn't there. Yancy supposed she had ridden out with her father or decided to go home. They waited there, with Rick silent and sullen and growing more jumpy by the minute. An

hour later, when Sim Colden rode in, Josie wasn't with him.

"Josie?" he said, at Yancy's inquiry. "Never seen anything of her. If her horse is gone, she likely decided to go home. Me, I found where them horsethieves went into the brakes. Through that 'scarp break the other side of Injun Butte. That mean anything to you?"

"It means," said Yancy, "that they're likely camped somewhere on Little Lost River, in there. They'd have to have meadow and water to hole up for a while. And that'd be a good place to fight off trouble. Let's get at it."

Yancy happened to notice then that Rick's face had turned ashen. The boy got up from the shade of an alanthus and stumbled toward his horse.

"I'll be blamed," Sim Colden breathed. "It's got the boy boogered."

"Yeah," Yancy answered. His patience was about at an end, for every hour his horses were probably getting farther away from him. But even yet he couldn't bring himself to betray Rick to his father. The boy had swung aboard and put his horse into fast motion in the direction from which Colden had appeared. "Sim, you go round up a few neighbors. Rick and me'll poke in and scout it out. We'll meet you somewhere along the sign. Then we'll hit 'em."

"If you can ketch Rick," Colden granted. But he assented, for it sounded sensible.

Yancy swung up and cut out after Rick. The boy was digging in the spurs, really fogging it. Yancy forked a good horse, but it was hard put to overtake the other, some two miles down country.

Yancy swung in beside Rick and called, "What touched you off, kid? You ain't fool enough to think you can warn 'em."

The starch had gone out of Rick now. When he answered, the words came out in a shouting rush. "Knowed the minute Josie found out about that windy I pulled last night that I was in for it. Yancy, that fool youngun's likely gone in there on her lonesome! To find out if it's true what she suspicions!"

"Josie has?" An icicle big as a cow's horn drove into Yancy's back.

"She seen through it in a minute! She knew I needed a piece of money bad. I been losin' it at poker, and I been signin' *iou's*. I tried to talk Josie into helping me mustang

to raise the dinero to buy 'em back. And I showed her a little old blind canyon in the malpais I figured would make a good trap. That Josie's wonderin' if I didn't get to figuring it'd be a good place to hide some stolen horses, too. She knows what kind of heat I had on me. Yancy, a couple of fellas holding my chits have been threatenin' to come to the folks to collect. Was it just Pa, I'd take a horsewhippin', and be glad to, to square it. But Ma—" Rick's slumped shoulders made words unnecessary.

"What harm in Josie's taking her a look at that blind canyon?" Yancy demanded of him.

Rick gulped. "That's where they're holding up the horses! The way she dresses, they'll take her for a man! Some back guard's goin' to knock her outta her saddle without her ever knowin' what in the world hit her!"

"Oh, Lordy!" Yancy moaned, and in that moment everything her kiss had started in him cut loose again, except this time it was mixed with a terrible apprehension that he had seldom felt before.

"We got to hurry, Yancy!" Rick moaned, which was slightly ridiculous since their mounts were pounding at their utmost.

It would help, Yancy figured, with Rick knowing just where to go. It would give them a chance to surprise the horsethieves and get in a few good licks before they recovered. But that was relatively unimportant to Yancy now. A single picture filled his brain, that of young Josie falling stricken from her saddle. In this hour he wondered why he had ever seen anything fetching in Eudora, why he had supposed nineteen years of growth weren't enough to fashion a full-fledged woman worth a man's attention.

"But this caper wasn't my idea," Rick yelled, as they pounded on. "A man I owe arranged it with these four fellas and threatened me into it. Threatened not only to tell Ma but to do it in public so she'd never simmer down again in my lifetime. Yancy, you just don't realize—you can't possibly know what—"

"Oh, don't I?" said Yancy.

"But I don't care two hoots what happens to me now if we can keep Josie from ridin' into a bushwhack bullet!"

3 *Guns in the Malpais*

They ploughed steadily southward, hugging the high rim, sometimes riding heedlessly through them. Even so, Rick Colden kept trying to shove their speed higher. They passed Injun Butte and came to the 'scarp break and saw heavy signs of recently driven horses. They cut in without slowing.

Yancy kept trying to pick up signs of Josie's unshod mount, which was hopeless in this general scuffling. He kept telling himself they had only a supposition that she had gone into the badlands here, but something within kept hurling the reassurance back at him. Either way, there was horseflesh ahead that belonged to Yancy Banting, with four tough customers ready to question that ownership.

The defile between the two hovering rock masses stayed flat and wide for a distance. Then it narrowed and began to bend, slowing them. They came abruptly to a climb where the horse band had been turned into a high-walled and narrow lateral. Yancy saw where a rider had stationed himself to head the horses in. And in the next moment Rick saw something that brought a wild, protesting yell from him.

"Lord, Yancy, there's where they got her!"

Yancy stopped his horse on sliding haunches, and his heart stood still. They had cut a piece into the narrow canyon, and there was still no sign of Josie or her mount. But Rick had swung down and was hunkered at a darkened spot on the hard, hot earth. There were horse tracks about it, the prints of some man's boots. Now Yancy could see where somebody had hit the ground. There was a blind shoulder ahead, which was the point whence the shot had come. But they'd taken Josie and the horse on, maybe to hide the evidence of cold-blooded murder, because somebody had surely spilled blood.

Rick cut out in a streaking gallop, and Yancy was right behind him. He never quite caught up with the kid while they climbed the sharp lift of the floor and presently broke out on a high, grassless bench of little width. Beyond this a heavy moraine

deposit dropped roughly to the floor of a wider canyon. Rick went down heedlessly, with Yancy following. When Rick lifted his gun, Yancy did likewise. They had no plan, and Yancy's brain was too stunned to build one. Rick didn't need one with the hard, guilty drive fogging him on.

This area was new to Yancy, close-quartered and deep. Presently they came to one of the rock-cut, rushing little streams that made the badlands habitable. The walls began to push farther apart, with grass appearing on the bottomland. A high shoulder loomed ahead, and Rick motioned toward it.

"Once around there and we can git at it."

"Now hold on," Yancy said. "Maybe you'd like to get yourself killed, thinking it might square you. But we don't know that Josie's dead. We don't even know if it was her they knocked loose from the saddle. But if it was, we'd help her most by playing it careful."

There was a bitter impatience in Rick, but he nodded. "Take over, Yancy."

Presently Yancy pulled down. They left their horses and went on afoot. Yancy expected trouble with a sentry at the cliff ahead, but they didn't encounter anyone. They rounded the rock face and went forward. Yancy saw a long, narrow bottomland that the little stream fed. They made their way through the last nest of rocks, then Yancy saw horses, recognizing many of his own.

Five hundred yards on down smoke lifed above a thicket. Cutting to the rocks under the high rim, Yancy and Rick moved in. A hundred yards from the camp they had climbed high enough to see into it. All four men were in sight, and they were nooning. Yancy could see no sign of Josie and hated to cut loose at that camp not knowing for sure where she was. But it had to be done.

He went forward again, with Rick a little to his right. They moved as high as they could get on the shale talus. Yancy opened the ball by lifting his gun, picking a target and waiting for Rick to line his sights before he squeezed trigger. Their guns spoke together.

A man in the camp arched his back and fell forward, seeming to land in the fire. Bending, Yancy shoved ahead, figuring there was more advantage in fast, surprise shooting than forting up would offer. He

didn't have to encourage Rick to wade into it.

The three standing men in the camp had whirled around, clawing up guns and bending, aware that a rush was on them. Weaving through the rocks, Yancy and Rick came on with blazing guns. Lead was screaming back at them, the crackling reports of the guns welling loud in the narrow canyon. Yancy was certain Rick dropped a second man, then his heart sank when Rick went down. Yancy drove straight at two men blazing away at him. He thumbed and fired in cold fury. His hat sailed from his head. Something caught his shirt and tugged it. But suddenly he saw only one man there, and then he was bolting up to a camp that seemed empty.

It wasn't, for he saw Josie. Heedless of a possible shot in the back, he ran to her. She lay face down, unstirring, and her shirt was bloody at the right shoulder. But her chest rose and fell slowly. A bullet had pierced her, fired by one of these outlaws.

Yancy whirled with a growl in his throat. But there was nothing left to vent his fury on further. Two of them were dead by his and Rick's guns. The other pair looked ready to die at any minute. Yancy hoped they did. Rick might be dead, too, but Yancy figured the boy had cleaned his slate. He didn't want to turn over to the law somebody who would drag Rick back into it.

Then he heard Rick's yell. "Hey, Yancy! Come and help me! Them sons knocked a leg out from under me!"

YANCY took the precaution of gathering up the weapons of the horsethieves. Knowing Sim Colden would ride the sign in here eventually, sided by a few neighbors, Yancy devoted himself to Rick and Josie. The outlaws, he saw, had lacked the decency to bind Josie's shoulder wound to stop the bleeding. Yancy didn't know if it was the shock that had knocked her out or the loss of blood. He found a clean shirt in an outlaw saddlebag, and got a compress bandage on her shoulder. He covered her with saddleblankets and pillowed her head.

Not till then would Rick let Yancy touch him, nor did Yancy want to. Thereafter he repeated the performance, finding a clean bullet hole through the flesh of the outer side of Rick's thigh. He wasn't sorry when,

dutifully, he got to the two outlaws and found he was too late. They had got exactly what they had asked for by pressuring a kid into this skulduggery.

Josie still hadn't recovered consciousness when Sim Colden rode in, late in the afternoon, accompanied by five others. They were all grim-featured, and since there was nothing to do but get home again, they rode out to bring in the horses the gunfire had frightened farther down the canyon.

It was late that night before they knew that Josie was going to be all right. Yancy was there at the Coldens, as was the doctor.

It gave Yancy no lift of spirit that he had turned into something of a hero in the eyes of Eudora and her mother for having helped rescue Josie. They didn't know how it had come about, and Yancy didn't aim to tell. In these past few hours he had discovered that, in spite of everything, Amanda bore a real love for her children.

With Josie's crisis past, Rick came in for attention. Yancy had reassured the boy that his secret was safe. But it appeared that Rick had his own idea about that. He called for his father and mother to come into his bedroom with Yancy.

"Yancy wouldn't ever tell you what I'm going to, though you've treated him like dirt under your feet. Here's something for you to put in your proud pipe and smoke, Ma. I was in with them horsethieves, after money to square some gambling debts I run up. And I'd of stayed in except for Josie's buttin' into it."

It was the first time Yancy had ever felt sorry for Amanda Colden.

"What's this nonsense?" she demanded.

"It's the truth, Ma. I want Pa to promise to take up them *ious's*; then I want him to send for the sheriff."

Yancy pulled back his shoulders at that. "Who's going to press charges? Your own pa, or me?"

The crisis had passed, and Amanda Colden's old self was beginning to work again. Yancy watched the outrage gather on her features. Staring harshly at Rick, she breathed, "You—bringing a disgrace like this on your family!"

Sim Colden swung toward her, and his head no longer looked pulled in between his shoulders. He said, "Mandy, you've spoke your last piece to our younguns. If any-

body's guilty of anything, it's you. After the way you've treated Yancy, nobody could blame him if he wanted to see you disgraced by sending Rick to the pen. But you didn't have to humble that pride of yours and ask him not to. It just ain't in a man like Yancy to do a thing like that. Me, I'm telling him he's more than welcome on this spread from now on. And if he'll come, I hope he comes a-courtin'. I'd admire to have him for a son-in-law."

"I'm beholden to Yancy," Amanda admitted reluctantly. "I been wrong about him, and I know it. But as for Rick—"

"That'll be quite enough, Mandy!" Sim snapped. "I've knowed for quite a while Rick's been sneaking off to town nights when you figured he was sleeping. I'll pay his debts and I'll see he gets to go free and open, the way a young buck should. And if I ever hear you mention this—"

From the way Amanda stared, Yancy reckoned she suddenly saw an altogether different man in Sim's boots and didn't exactly dislike him.

Yancy went out, leaving the Coldens in there alone to patch it up. Eudora greeted him with a soft, gentle smile. She had on a fresh apron and had prettied her hair, and her face was excited. Yancy had a sudden wonder if she had somehow been close enough to the door to hear her father invite him to come often and a-courting.

"It looks like things are going to be better, Yancy," Eudora breathed. "It'd be nice having you around again, if you care to come."

Yancy looked into her eyes, an action that once would have set his heart going like a newly saddled mustang. All that happened was that he realized suddenly he hadn't eaten since breakfast and was very hungry.

"I'll be coming," he promised. "Often."

She started to put a hand on his arm, but he turned away from her. He wondered what would happen if he walked right into Josie's bedroom and told her how much he loved her. But she was a beat-up girl and needed quiet and rest. That would have to keep a while. He found his hat and left.

He could almost hear Josie crowing, one of these days. "Yancy, I'll always have a bullet scar to show our younguns how I finally got you hooked!"

THE END

By **ART LAWSON**

Slim slashed in savagely, and for a moment Ben's back was up against the wall.



A fellow could get rich fast on Muleshoe Bend—provided he could handle both a fiery old competitor and a . . .

BUSHWHACK PARD

TRAVELING with a party from Boston headed for Oregon, Ben Sears lost his wagon in Cottonwood Hollow. Here the trail was so steep they had to unhitch their oxen and let their wagons down by ropes. Somehow Ben's wagon broke away and smashed itself to pieces at the bottom of the slope. He took the accident as an omen rather than a tragedy.

"This is where I settle," he said.

He had plenty of offers from the Boston train because he was young and rugged, a good man with cattle, axe or gun. But Ben had made up his mind. He drove his six span of oxen up to Fort McKnight, threw them out on pasture and looked for unclaimed land nearby. The Muleshoe Bend seemed ideal: bottomlands of deep, black loam, the mountains to the north for protection in winter, plenty of wood and

water. As a simple courtesy he dropped in at the fort to tell the factor what he was up to.

Grizzly John was not cordial.

"First thing you know you'll be getting ideas," Grizzly said. "You'll be setting up a trading post of your own. You'll be trying to buck me."

"I'm a farmer, not a trader," Ben said. "Two thousand people over the trail this year. There'll be twice that next. I could put in crops—wheat, potatoes—and turn an honest dollar."

"You put in crops and the Injuns'll figure you've come to stay," Grizzly said. "They'll run you off."

"Then I'll raise cattle," Ben said. "Indians don't care about cows."

Grizzly John suggested: "Take a little side trip up Mad River, couple miles. Feller built a fort there a few years back. His gravestone's still standing. Just look around a little before you dig in."

"I will," Ben promised.

But he did nothing of the sort. With a borrowed cart he hauled into Muleshoe Bend what he could salvage of his outfit and set to work with an axe to build a cabin.

Grizzly John's daughter rode out one day to see how Ben was making out. She had been with the Boston outfit, too, traveling back home after two years at school in the East. The fort was the end of the trail for her, too. Though her father had insisted she stay with relatives in Saint Louis, she was determined to run a school for the fort's children.

Ben was stripped to the waist and a little embarrassed by the way the girl looked at him when she stepped down from her mule. Then she smiled with warm friendliness.

"What you building, Ben?" she asked. "A chicken coop?"

Ben felt his ears grow hot. The cabin, already taking form in logs with the bark left on, was about nine by twelve feet.

"Big enough for me," Ben said, "and easy to heat. Besides, I don't reckon on having anybody else cluttering up the place."

Lily John laughed brightly. Her even, white teeth flashed in the sunlight. Her eyes were a brilliant blue of the mountain sky after a storm. Walking most of the

way from the Missouri River had slimmed her waist and put a lithe straightness into her back.

"You rose to that just like a trout, Ben," she said. Her laughter eased. "Outfit from Illinois came down the Hollow today. They're in bad shape. Driving too hard, I reckon. But they seem to have lots of money, and if you felt like trading some of your cattle you could likely make a good thing of it."

Ben said: "Why not?"

He put his axe away in the canvas shelter he had arranged as a temporary home, slipped a buckskin shirt over his head, and joined the girl. She was standing in the middle of his half-built cabin, hanging mental curtains though there were no windows as yet.

"You would want a window-box on that south window," she said, "for geraniums. I can give you some cuttings. And there," she pointed, "you'll want to leave space for a door—for the spare room."

"A man alone don't need a spare room," Ben said. "Let's get up to the fort."

THE men from Illinois were desperate.

Expecting to find a highway leading to the coast, they had started off with too much freight in their wagons. Now they jettisoned an incredible array of goods, four-poster beds, chests, iron stoves. Ben traded his twelve husky oxen, well rested after nearly a week on good grass, for three times the number of foot-weary cattle, one milch cow, a tired gelding, a wagon and some gold. He got the bed, the dresser and stove for nothing; and Ben, much to his astonishment, was in business. He gave the horse and cow to Lily John for her commission.

"I didn't do anything, Ben," she insisted. "I can't take them."

"They're yours," Ben said.

She said: "Besides, one of Stone-Thrower's braves would steal the horse and the next bunch of emigrants to come down the trail would take the cow."

"Then I'll keep them for you, out to my place."

There was an unexpected thrill at that "my place." Ben's place was a nine by twelve square of logs, three deep, not even up to the windowsill. But it seemed like a mansion to him during the three days he

had to lay off to build a leanto for the horse and cow; and early on the third day, Lily John rode out again.

"You ought to build your dutch oven right into the fire-place," she said. "Then you could bake real bread, instead of only biscuits."

"I got an iron stove," Ben said.

"Iron stoves are no good," Lily told him. "Too hot or too cold. But a good dutch oven is always exactly right. It ought to go right here against the north wall." She sighed, and her eyes were deep with mystery. "An outfit came in to-day that needs help."

"I'll drop down to the fort," Ben said.

He trailed his twelve best oxen to the river and made a trade. Because his twelve best were not too good, he only got two to one for them plus a sow that had barely escaped being butchered. Two kegs of Missouri whiskey were thrown in as well as a barrel of flour and a sack of black-eyed peas. He also acquired Slim Peck. Slim was about twenty years old and built like a fence post.

"Don't even have bunions no more," Slim said. "Wore 'em off. Walkin', walkin', walkin'. I'm goin' to set right here."

"I could use a hired man on my farm."

"You got one," Slim said.

Ben sent Slim out to the Muleshoe Bend with the newly acquired cattle while he looked around for likely loot. A box of books abandoned by an emigrant went into his wagon. He added a fine mahogany table, some andirons and a hand-painted Pennsylvania Dutch cradle.

Lily John came over while he was shoving the big sow up a plank into the wagon.

"This sow is for you," Ben said. "I'll keep her for you. I got a hired man."

"A hired man?" Lily said with interest. Then she noticed the cradle. "Now, what on earth are you going to do with that?"

Ben began to blush. Lily could make him turn red quicker than a heart-beat.

"Might have a dog someday," he said. "That would make a fine bed for a dog."

"You don't need a dog," she said darkly. "You've already got one. You."

She left with a flirt of her long skirts while Ben gaped after her. As she got closer to the fort's stockade, she began to run. Ben went back to shoving the sow into the wagon.

SLIM made a banjo from a round cheese box, a stick of hickory, some buffalo bones, and gut from a mountain lion Ben had surprised stalking Lily's sow. Slim was mighty handy around the ranch. He baked clay bricks for a genuine fireplace instead of the mud and wattle affair that Ben had planned. And at night he sat by the campfire in front of the leanto he shared with Ben and told of the great things he would do.

"Run a trap line this winter and get us some beaver. Maybe mink. Maybe otter. Maybe martin. These mountains look like they were full of martin, Ben."

"Beaver ain't worth anything any more," Ben said. "As for martin, I wouldn't walk a mile for one of them. And what can you do with a mink? Those little bitty kittens ain't good for anything but making hats for kids."

"Lots of kids in the world," Slim countered. "Lots of hats. And, besides, you wouldn't have to walk a mile for a skin." Slim plunked at his guitar as he talked and his conversation became a sort of chant. "Trap them off the door step."

He was a kid full of energy and brashness.

"You get a martin off our doorstep and I'll give you a hundred dollars for it," Ben offered.

"All you need is the right kind of bait," Slim chanted. "Right kind of bait will trap you anything."

Ben threw a stick on the fire, and pushed up the coffee pot. The blaze was almost too hot against his cheeks, making the skin feel tight.

"What kind of bait?"

Slim broke into a tune that was popular with the emigrants that year.

*The bright ruby wine may be offered,
No matter how tempting it be,
From poison that stings like a viper,
My boy, have courage to flee;
The vile gambling dens are before you,
The lights, how they dance to and fro,
And if you are tempted to enter,
Have courage, my boy, to say NO!*

"If you figure on trading that Missouri whiskey to the Indians—"

"You know I wouldn't do that, Ben," Slim said.

Ben leaned back and lighted his pipe.

Having a hired man sort of took the loneliness out of his project. This bait of Slim's, he reckoned, was mostly boastfulness. It would not catch otters; nor would it put Stone-Thrower's Indians on the warpath.

Ben said: "We should of took the howl out of that lion before you made the guitar, Slim. All the squalling settled right in the big cat's guts."

Slim grinned. "You gotta holler when you sing a song like that. How's this?"

Hangtown girls are plump and rosy,

Hair in ringlets mighty cosy,

Painted cheeks and classy bonnets,

Touch them and they'll sting like ho'nets.

"That's mighty good," Ben admitted. "I could stand touching a gal about now. But not one of those."

Slim plucked the guitar. "I got bigger ideas," he said, "than calico."

SLIM'S bigger ideas developed slowly.

He seemed willing to hang around the ranch, not going down to the fort very often. That suited Ben fine. The emigrants coming up the trail these days were in a dickens of a hurry. White capped the higher mountains ahead, and the promise of autumn was in the air. These were days when Ben could trade nearly anything. He had put Slim to work making steerhide shoes for the oxen whose feet were not too sore. He would swap an ox, shoes and all, for two or three worn-down animals. He picked up horses to trade to the Indians, and mules, and a big red boar.

Then a whole day passed without a single wagon train. Ben got to thinking of Lily John and could not remember having seen her for several days. So late in the afternoon when it was obvious that he was not going to do any business that day, he ambled up to the fort. The stockade seemed curiously empty without the usual crowd of land-hungry men. Indians sleeping against the walls; clerks worn thin and pale from two hectic months of emigration; old Grizzly John, himself, looking over the fort that had been so busy one day and was so empty the next.

Grizzly invited Ben up to his quarters for a drink. He motioned to a comfortable chair beside the hearth where cottonwood logs blazed. Grizzly, as factor of this fort, lived in high style.

"Set!" The old man's voice carried authority. As ugly as his daughter was beautiful, Grizzly had gotten his name and a good deal of his ugliness from a long-ago battle with a bear. He got his Green River knife into the heart of the beast in time to save his life, but he had been frightfully clawed. "Lily!" he shouted. "What's the matter?" he snapped at Ben. "Scared of that chair?"

"Hell, no!" Ben said, and sat down. As quickly, he was on his feet again, bowing slightly to Lily John, who stood in the open doorway. Her doeskin jacket was soft as silk and moulded close to the lithe lines of her body. The skirt came just to the knees with a beaded fringe that played a tiny tune, and her moccasins were intricately embroidered with dyed porcupine quills. Ben gaped. "Evening," he got out.

The girl laughed, causing the beaded fringe to tinkle around her legs. "Evening to you," she said. "Were you calling, Pa?"

"Ben and me want a little of that Napoleon brandy we picked up from those Frenchies from New Orleans."

The girl crossed the room on silent feet, and hunkered down to open the lower doors of a corner cupboard. Ben could not help but watch her as she moved. Embarrassed, he glanced up and saw that Grizzly was watching him. When he looked around at the girl again, she had two small glasses in one hand and the bottle she had selected in the other. Carefully she set them on a small table before the fireplace.

"Anything more, Pa?"

"You can pour us each a drink," Grizzly said. "Then you can hang around just in case we need something else."

The girl was meek and mild, and Ben was puzzled. The brandy was so smooth it seemed to Ben that it evaporated before he could swallow it. Grizzly motioned to the girl to pour a second. He held his glass for a moment in contemplation.

"Been a good summer," he said.

"Couldn't of been a better one," Ben agreed.

"You got some pretty good horses out there?"

Ben could smell a trade a mile off. Grizzly oiling him up with brandy and the even more heady presence of Lily.

"Some of the best hosses you ever seen."

"Glad to hear it." The momentarily af-

fable Grizzly turned tough as his name. "Cut out a half dozen of the best for you and some more for that hired man of yours. Travelling fast you can still get to Oregon ahead of the snow."

At that instant Ben wished he could see Lily, to learn if she had expected this. But she had ducked around behind him.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said slowly, "but I don't figure on leaving. I got a ranch needs looking after."

"Name your price."

"Ain't any," Ben said.

Grizzly said: "I spent most of my life building up this trading post, and I don't figure to have any competition."

"But you weren't trading in bulls—"

Grizzly shrugged. "You got two-three kegs of Missouri whiskey up there, and your partner's building a still. You're figuring on trading with the Indians. And I'm figuring on keeping you from it."

"The right kind of bait," Ben said softly. So that was the way Slim expected to catch his pews.

"What's that?" Grizzly snapped.

"I said, I don't figure to tread on your toes, Grizzly. And I reckon you can keep off mine."

Grizzly turned the scarred side of his face toward Ben in a deliberate gesture. Where the bear's claws had raked him, livid streaks showed beneath his beard.

"Tell him good-by, girl!"

Lily bit her lips. Her eyes were very direct, and one of her hands toyed with the beadwork on her jacket.

"I'll send one of the boys over for my cow and pigs," she said. "Thanks for keeping them, Mr. Sears. It's been a nice summer."

"What are you waiting for?" Grizzly snapped.

"I'm waiting for her to say good-by."

The girl whispered it. "Good-by!"

Ben flung his brandy into the fire, sending up a sheet of bluish flame. Turning on his toes he reached for the girl and kissed her violently on the lips.

"This is the way we say good-by where I come from," he said, and he kissed her again.

Grizzly had reached for a heavy iron poker. Ben ignored him, but on the way out he walked close enough so Grizzly could have beaten his brains out if Grizzly

had been so minded. The old man let him go.

BEN found Slim cooking supper in the fireplace he had built. It was exactly the sort of fireplace that Lily John had suggested. From the dutch oven with its sheet-iron door came the delicious aroma of a baking dried-apple pie. Slim had put potatoes to bake in the ashes, and there were a couple of good antelope steaks waiting.

"Too bad you ain't a female," Ben said. "You'd sure make a good wife for a man."

Slim grinned: "What we need is a squaw," he said.

Slim spread the steaks on a big skillet that was already sizzling hot. The snapping and crackling was like some miniature artillery barrage. Slim put the pan back on the fire.

"But when I get me a squaw," Slim said, "she won't be no Indian."

"Then you better get off your hunkers and grab one quick," Ben suggested. "No wagons through today. Only one more train reported coming in. You want a white girl, that's your last chance for a year."

Slim whistled a tune, and Ben went outside to wash. He slicked down his unruly hair. The cabin had been roughly finished. Chinks were not yet filled with clay and sticks, nor had proper doors and windows been put in. But the main part was done; and most of it had been built by Slim Peck according to the design of Lily John. For the first time Ben realized the fact, and recognized the girl's hand in the house.

The pigsty had been set down the prevailing wind. The chicken coops were fairly close to the house where a woman could get at them easily. The shed that had housed one cow, now sheltered six and a bull. It had grown with the herd; and beyond it, in the fields more than a hundred oxen grazed with two score mules and a baker's dozen of good horses that Ben locked up nights so Stone-Thrower's braves would not steal them. There were even some sheep blatting foolishly in a pen that protected them from the coyotes. He had hired a pair of broken-down old trappers with their squaws and children to help Slim.

Slim was hollering: "Come and get it!"

Ben turned his back on his herds and

stepped into the one-room house. The doorway cut to a spare room that had not yet been added took on a special significance tonight. Ben was astonished at how blind he had been.

His train had been one of the first to reach Fort McKnight; his wagon had smashed on the fifth of July and now it was well toward the end of August. For the last month he had been working among the wagon trains, trading, while Slim had been staying at home—building a still, maybe, but building a ranch, certainly, to fit the plans of the only white girl in the fort.

Ben sat hesitantly on a salvaged mahogany chair, and stared moodily at the fire.

"Dinner can wait a minute, Slim," he said. "My ma used to turn purple when Pa wanted to wait dinner. But this is a special day, sort of, and I want to tap one of them whiskey kegs."

"This'll hold," Slim said putting the frying pan near the fire to keep the steaks warm and poking holes in the baked potatoes to let out the steam. The pie in the dutch oven was not yet baked.

Ben fetched a pitcher of whiskey. It had been good corn to begin with, and the long, jolting ride across the prairies had improved it. It was so strong they had to water it down or scorch their throats. Ben poured a second, and Slim reached for his banjo.

"Just had a couple of brandies with Grizzly," Ben said.

Slim played a chord. "Didn't know you and him were on such good terms."

"We ain't," Ben said.

A number of things were moving into place. Lily John must have spent a lot of time up here at the ranch while Ben was down-river trading cattle. Now that his eyes were open, he saw her hand everywhere. Slim had even built a pair of window boxes for Lily John's geranium clippings. And now that he started to think of it, Ben had brought back many a water cask for Slim. "Rainbarrels," Slim had called them. Yeah, Slim was dreaming big dreams.

Ben filled the glasses again. He threw in his surprise. "I'm pulling out tomorrow, Slim."

"My Lord!" Slim said.

Ben said: "I'm taking some mules and

heading East." Slim could not hide his satisfaction. "I'm going to show him, pardner, I'm as big as he is, and as tough."

"The hell with him," Slim said.

"All I asked was permission to court his daughter," Ben said mistily. "An' you know what he tol' me? He tol' me I wasn't big enough or tough enough to court any gal of his."

"You're bigger than he any day!" Slim plucked at the banjo, and his words made themselves into a chant. Slim was dreaming. "You can lick him. You can marry that li'l gal."

"Sure can," Ben said. "Goin' East. I'll come back with enough stuff to trade old Grizzly right out of his fort. You and me, pardner."

"You an' me," Slim nodded.

"That li'l gal will keep one winter, I reckon," Ben said.

Slim beat at his banjo.

*Oh, Susanna, don't you cry for me,
I'm bound for Alabammy, wid a banjo on
my knee . . .*

BEN made elaborate preparations. He picked out ten of the mules, repaired a light but strong spring wagon he had acquired when its gambler-owner had been shot by another tinhorn, and laid up supplies for a long, fast trip. He did all this quite publicly, and just as openly, he showed remorse at leaving Slim behind. He packed all their gold and money in the seat cushions.

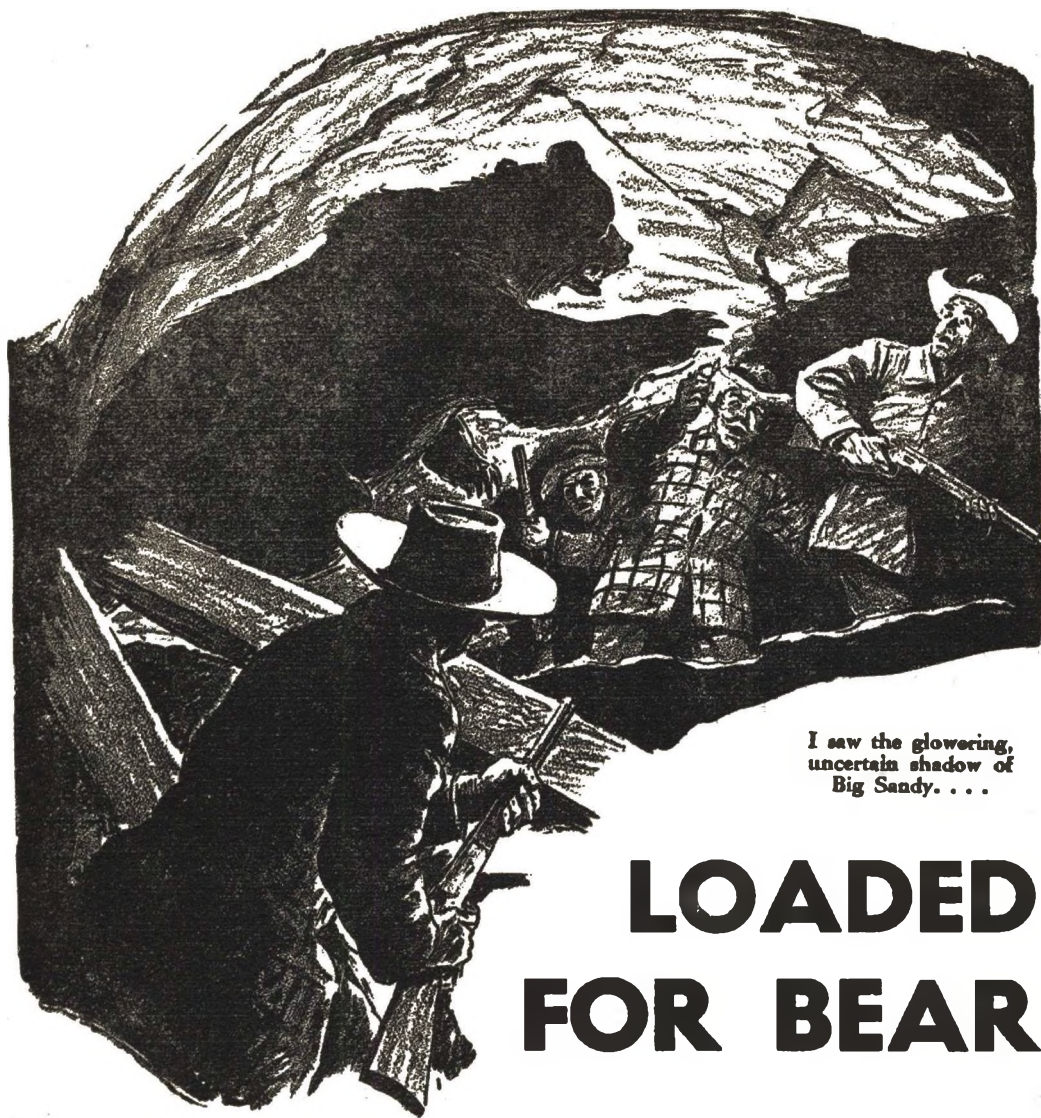
"Maybe we ought to toss up, Slim, and see who goes. Grizzly won't be too happy with the one who stays."

"He can't scare me," Slim said.

The plan Ben invented was for him to head straight for the Missouri River to buy supplies for the next summer's emigration—sugar, coffee, flour and bacon. He would make contracts with trains to provide them with replacement draught animals at the Muleshoe Bend. Meanwhile Slim would look after the home ranch and put in a garden as early in spring as the ground could be worked. You could sell eggs to the emigrants at fifty cents each and fresh butter at a couple of dollars a pound. Sears, Peck, and Co., would show old Grizzly how to run a trading post.

Ben would cut Slim in on the profits, he

(Please continue on page 110)



I saw the glowering,
uncertain shadow of
Big Sandy. . . .

LOADED FOR BEAR

—By G. W. BANDY—

I was both hunter and hunted on that freezing day. For even as I tracked the gigantic brute called Big Sandy, I myself was being trailed—by three ruthless gunnies who would rather kill a man!

THAT dawn I eased quietly from my blankets and carried my clothing outside. But first I got the carbine from its place over the door. Shivering in the freezing cold, I dressed hurriedly, wanting to get away in haste. Snow had blanketed the Sangre de Christo Range, weighting the pines until they sagged beneath their load and making white mounds of the log hovels of Elizabethtown. But as careful as I was, I wasn't careful enough. A stick snapped beneath my foot and I

jerked up, listening for any further sound. "Dan?"

It came from inside and caused the blood to quicken in my veins. As I hesitated, I debated whether to tell him. In a matter of minutes the red glow would paint the mountains to the east and I knew already there was bustling activity in the miners houses along the hillside. Even as I waited, smoke curled from a rock chimney, spiraled up until it came against the wall of freezing cold, then angled across the floor of the canyon. It was then he called my name the second time, weakly.

Easing through the heavy door, I said, "Did you call, Tom?"

His breathing came heavy, tightening the dread in me. It was too dark to make out his form in the bunk across the room from my own, but I could visualize the wasted look left by a month of illness. His breathing quieted a moment and he asked, "Where you goin', Dan?"

I laughed a little. "Why, to the mine of course. Don't I always about this time?"

The breathing came up again, then eased off while I waited for the effect of my lie. "Need your gun, Dan?"

It came to me suddenly that, with the door open at my back, I was outlined in the gray light. I was gripping the carbine until my knuckles ached. And Tom saw.

"Okay," I said. "I'm not goin' to work. I'm goin' after meat."

He was silent at that. I could imagine him, lying there thinking of the beans we'd had for two weeks now, beans without the seasoning taste of bacon rinds the last few days. I could imagine the flow of saliva in his mouth, already tasting the sweet life-giving flesh that the doctor said he needed so badly if he was to pull through. I could imagine that because my own healthy body was crying for something besides beans; and every time I thought of elk or deer, or bear even, roaming the Sangre de Cristo Range, and how it would taste broiled or fried, I was left as weak as paper.

I leaned against the door frame now, and heard him say, "What about the sleds?"

I laughed bitterly. "Now that the wagons can't make it through, he'll send sleds to Maxwell's, over on the Cimarron. If they're lucky they'll be back in a week or more with Maxwell beef, beef they'll sell, Tom, formoney."

"I know," he said. "Branscum lets the meat out to cash customers. Still...."

"It's no use, Tom. We can't go on without meat. I'm goin' after it."

"But—Branscum. What will he—?"

"Branscum be damned!" I spoke the words with all the hate that had burned in me through the summer months. "I'll get the meat. Branscum won't do a thing or I'll—"

I shut up, suddenly knowing the threat would add to Tom's other worries, and I headed for the door. His next words stopped me.

"Where you gonna get shells, Dan?"

That sent a thin thread of futility through me. Branscum sold the only ammunition available. He hoarded his cartridges like a miser hoards his gold, selling to a few personal friends and supplying his dirty-work boys. He had the freighting business and he had the trading post. We hadn't got hold of a shell in a month now.

"Don't you worry about shells, Tom," I lied, trying to keep my voice casual and confident. "I've got some cached outside. Had 'em for some time."

As I went out the door, I heard him say, "You'll need more'n shells against Big Sandy."

So he had guessed! There was no remonstrance in the words, just a warning. He knew me well enough to know that I was fed up with Branscum's high handedness and that he couldn't budge me from my determination to get meat on my own hook. And he also knew that, game being as scarce at it was, I wouldn't waste time hunting. I'd go where I knew it was. Knowing that, he was telling me to watch out for the bear. He knew I'd watch out for Branscum.

I considered that as I listened to the crunch of my feet in the frozen snow. Tom wouldn't let sentiment keep him from eating the meat once I got it and that removed some of my anxiety. Before I got to the cluster of buildings, I stepped off the main trail and left the carbine against a piñon. I didn't want an argument with Branscum, and I would come nearer getting the shells without the gun.

WHEN I tried the door to Colonel Branscum's trading post, it gave to my weight. The Colonel always opened

early so as not to miss any bets. He was ex-army, had been court-martialed over some missing money he was responsible for, and he had hit town a couple of years back with a roll that would choke up a shaft. He also brought an uncanny ability for putting his money where it would do the most good.

In the two years, Branscum had managed to get his big hands into just about everything of importance, if you measured importance by the returns. The Colonel owned controlling interest in the mine. He also had the trading post. Since most of the residents worked in the mine, he forced them to trade at the post and usually kept them in debt.

The Colonel also ran a freighting service down Cimarron Canyon to the Maxwell Ranch, which meant that his was the only meat-supplying service. That was what galled me the most.

I had come to Elizabethtown in the spring hoping to build up a freight trade of my own. I had left my wagons and mules at Santa Fe. But I soon found out the deal.

The Colonel had the residents afraid of trading with anybody else for fear of losing their jobs. And the two-bit operators, like my brother Tom, weren't organized. They, too, were in debt to the Colonel. So I wound up by going to work in the mine myself, barely making an existence so that Tom could go ahead with his claim. Tom thought he was close to pay dirt, but his accident had blasted our hopes.

A month ago a mysterious cave-in almost did for him, and he had been lead up at the point of death. The crisis was passed at last, but the doc said he'd have to have stronger nourishment than beans. And the Colonel would sell meat to cash customers only!

I was still thinking of Tom's great need when I pushed into the Colonel's store. I found myself in a large stern room that had its liquor cases, its leather goods, its clothing and grocery supplies all neatly arranged in separate compartments with military neatness and precision. A shining mahogany counter ran the width of the back of the room. It had been polished until it shone. Over it, on the back of the wall, hung the Colonel's self portrait.

He had painted it big and you could tell

his self-opinion by looking at the strong, craggy face lines and the deep-set, black eyes that were rimmed by iron ambition. He had left off the flabbiness that showed in real life. But stark will was there, as true in the picture as in the person of the Colonel. The black eyes bored into me now and I looked off quickly to see Beth Hazlitt coming through the door.

Beth was the daughter of one of the miners. She worked for the Colonel part time and still she found odd moments to look in on Tom. She was slender and she was pretty. It was always a marvel just why she seemed to like me. I didn't wait for an explanation, though, but had gone ahead and basked in the warmth of an association that went beyond friendship.

She now regarded me through warm blue eyes, and her full lips were parted a little in a smile that gave me a dizzy feeling. "You're a good sight to begin the day with," she said and I knew she meant it. For a moment I forgot why I came.

"And just what about me changes your general outlook?"

She came from behind the counter. She had her small hands on her hips and looked pert in a bright print dress. Her head was turned to one side and she puckered her rather full mouth into mock judgment.

"You're handsome and young, and you're big and—"

"And you're prejudiced," I laughed and I caught her shoulders. "And I've got no time for flattery. I've come for shells. Get them and I'll be on my way."

ALL the sunshine left her. She looked at me quickly and she said, "Branscum—"

"Quick," I said and I hated myself for pushing her. "I'll explain later. I've got to have them and you'd better hurry before he comes."

"He's getting the sleds started for Cimarron," she said quickly in a low tone. She started to ask me again. Then, thinking better, she went for the shells. She didn't even have to ask for the calibre. She knew.

She came back and handed me a package in brown wrapping paper. Her eyes were a study on my face. "Big Sandy?"

Avoiding a direct answer, I laughed and said lightly, "You watch out for the old goat while I'm gone."

She blushed, but it got her mind off the bear. "There's a loaded gun under the counter and there's another in the back room." She had matched my banter with her voice but her eyes were not joking and somehow I felt better. I had a big job ahead of me, and worrying about her wouldn't make it easier.

Part of the job was waiting for me where I had left my carbine. Lounging against the piñon, an evil grin on his lean, dark face, was Blackie Pinkston. He was a no-good hanger-on at the various saloons and one of the boys who did the Colonel's dirty work.

His presence put a sick feeling inside me. He must have been watching as I came down. With sharpened wariness inside, I started to brush past him and get to the carbine. I didn't quite make it. He pushed me back with an arm and I saw a big hand close around the carbine.

"If this is your'n," he said in a mocking tone, "then it'll be safer with me. If you've got ammunition that'll be safer too. The Colonel—"

"The Colonel can go to hell," I exploded. "I've got ammunition and I'll use it as I like."

As soon as it was out, I realized the mistake. It struck me that the reason Blackie hadn't made off with the carbine already was because he wanted to see if I had cartridges. Now he'd have the gun *and* the shells.

He grinned a little more at the revelation, showing yellow teeth, wide spaced, and his small black eyes fairly jumped from his head. His hand seemed to tighten on the carbine. "The Colonel'll want me to take them cartridges," he said. He held out his free hand.

I was caught by a sudden rage, fed by desperation that Beth's part in this would be known. I cursed myself for playing stupid and letting him know. He was six feet and weighed close to two hundred, and he was noted as a dangerous rough and tumble fighter who had killed a couple of miners with his bare hands. I measured the size of him, comparing it with my own six feet two, hundred eighty. And all at once I got smart. If the Colonel saw the need for taking after me, then they'd leave Beth alone. For the time at least.

"Sure," I said, "I've got shells, and I'm

going after meat. And not only that I'm startin' competition against the Colonel. I'm startin' my own meat service. Tell the Colonel that."

His grin washed away and left his lips tight and without color. "Give me the shell," he said in a quiet, tense voice.

I gave him the shells—with a hundred and eighty pounds of work-hardened muscle behind them. The brown package caught him square against his skull and felled him like a giant pine. He lay down quietly in the snow as limp as a sheet. I got my gun and I got out of there, knowing he wasn't out for long and that he'd have the Colonel and his boys on my tail. I was counting on the Colonel coming along to see after me personally.

The first hour, I was scared. As scared as I had ever been in my life, and I'd bucked against some pretty tough situations in my twenty-five years. I'd worked in logging camps and I'd hunted with mountain men and I'd fought Indians.

But the Colonel was different. He had a good deal in Elizabethtown, all sewed as tight as his wicked lot of cutthroats could sew it. And he wasn't going to sit back in Elizabethtown, arms folded, while I busted into his game.

If I got meat on my own, that would embolden others to do the same. To prevent that all he would have to do was to make some kind of example of me. I knew he'd see to it personally. He'd have his cutthroats on my trail shortly.

I KEPT looking back across the down-sweep of country—I was heading west—and studying the snow-covered expanse. And when I saw no one back there on my trail, some of the scare went out of me.

Action, they say, is a good tonic for what ails you. It was good for me now. I was beginning to catch my second wind. I am naturally an outdoor man and I resented working inside the mine. Now I watched the breath-taking upthrusts of the Sangre de Christo Range, as white as angels, and it did something to me.

I stretched and I breathed the pure mountain air deeply. I flexed my muscles and felt elation over what I had done and what I was going to do. Once Tom had red meat in his diet, he—

Tom! Alone in the cabin. Would they

strike at him? Would they take this as an opportunity to finish what I had suspected they had started with the cave-in?

As if to increase my fear, I saw three black dots on the trail, just out of the mining camp. They were not trees. The trees were covered with snow. These were men. I hurried ahead as the wind came up, cutting through my makinaw and stinging my face with the lash of small frozen particles.

Another hour and I stopped, breathing heavily. They were still back there. I hadn't gained on them but they hadn't got closer, either. They were clinging relentlessly on my trail and coming as if they had all the time in the world. It didn't matter to them. They could get me either before or after I got my game. Either way I would have my mind divided—between them and meat for my brother.

But suppose I took care of them first?

I laid the rifle against the trunk of a spruce, the package of extra shells in the snow beside the gun. I blew my breath against my hands. They'd ambush me if they got the chance. I thought of the men who had crossed the Colonel. Some of them had been killed in barroom brawls, or knifed in the back on a lonely street. Some had simply disappeared to be found in a forsaken mine shaft with a boulder on them. I thought of Tom, helpless back there. And I thought of Beth.

Suddenly I grew warmer. I was sweating beneath the makinaw. Decision tensed my body. They were ambushers. I could become one. And the ironic thought came to me that the place to do it was the spot where I intended to get meat for Tom. I'd get them and I'd get Big Sandy too. But I'd get them first.

Now I walked along the ridge, walked right past the yawning shaft that Tom had dug straight back into the mountain side, and on past the larger cave opening. I went right on by and around the side of the mountain. Then I cut back, higher up so they wouldn't see my returning tracks. Scrubby timber above the shaft hid my approach. I dropped into the mouth of the man-made hole and I waited breathlessly.

There was some time for thinking. And as I thought, I blew my breath again and again upon my fingers and flexed them all the while.

This was Tom's shaft. The natural cave, a few yards farther along, belonged to Big Sandy. It was characteristic of Tom, I thought, that he had refused to sink his shaft in the back of the cavern, not wanting to disturb the bear. In fact the whole thing spoke a lot about Tom and was one of the many reasons why I loved him the way I did.

Tom had come to the country at the beginning of mining activities. He had worked in the mine. He made friends fast—with both men and animals. It was always a curiosity to the other miners that he would never lift a gun against a deer, an elk, a bear. He would tramp days to catch sight of them, but would never shoot a single animal.

One day he had stumbled upon this spot and had caught sight of the bear, then only a cub. He called the bruin Little Sandy then. Days he would come and watch until it grew to almost mammoth size. Then he got frightened. Hunters were searching the hills for game. One or two had got a glimpse of the bear, and he knew it was a likely target for their hunt.

In desperation Tom staked off the cave as part of his claim. Then he placed "Keep Off" signs all over the place. He saved Big Sandy from the hunters. And when the Colonel hit Elizabethtown, Tom was secretly glad there hadn't been much shooting in the hills. Big Sandy was safer that way.

To make it look like he really was carrying on mining activities up here, if anyone ever got curious, Tom dug his shaft a few yards away from the cave, going straight in, then heading down. Somehow he got his directions tangled and for a long stretch his shaft ran along close to the floor of the cave. It was the cave floor giving way that almost got Tom.

If he dreamed of striking it rich, I knew what he intended to do with the money. Back in Philadelphia he'd been a zoo keeper. And ever since that lung trouble had sent him out here to the high, mountain air, he'd had notions about going back—and taking Big Sandy with him.

Now I waited just inside Tom's shaft. I was going to kill three men. Then I was going to kill a bear that Tom had saved from the hunters. I hoped the bear would save Tom.

THE old fears came up as I waited. Then I saw them come into my line of vision—the Colonel, Blackie Pinkston, and a third man I did not know.

I had the Colonel's big frame in my sights and I could have dropped him there. I could have shot his two henchmen before they could reach cover. God knows they would have done as much for me had our positions been reversed. But I could not bring myself to squeeze the trigger.

Soft? Maybe. Call it whatever you like. I'd thought about it enough and had it worked out in my mind. It was one of those things you premeditate and get pleasure from planning to the little details, like watching the strong lines of the Colonel's craggy face sag to lifeless flabbiness, and saying, "There go the ruthless dreams of one who was a dictator in his own right. But a simple little lump of lead was his Waterloo."

Those were the premeditations, putting a kind of joy in the long days I'd watched his power grow in Elizabethtown and felt the heel of his boot. But this was the reality and I found that I could not shoot a man in cold blood. But if I warned them I'd never live to take meat to my brother Tom.

There I was, still sighting and suddenly seeing the Colonel make a military turn smartly and head toward me. His rifle was at ready. The guns of the hardcases, following, were alert.

The first sweep of fear gone, I suddenly played wise again. They couldn't know I was in here with those tracks going on by. For some reason I couldn't tell, they were coming in. And I wanted to find out that reason.

I lowered my gun and I withdrew to the interior until I came against the debris that lay underneath the cave-in. Here, nerves as taut as wire, I waited. Was the criminal returning to the scene of the crime? Was it the Colonel who had been responsible for the accident that almost killed Tom?

I couldn't answer it yet I felt close to knowing. And the knowledge, plus the warmth of the shaft, brought the sweat out so that I became drenched. I got out of the makinaw and I kept working my fingers and blowing away the numbness. My mind became clear. I could not see but I was listening.

When I heard their voices, far away at

first, then louder as they drew near, I realized that I was right in thinking they did not know of my presence in here. Then I realized they were not in the shaft at all but were on the floor of the cave above.

Through the darkness of the hole I knew to be above me, I heard the crisp, authoritative tones of the Colonel.

He said, "Back here the gold vein starts. It was uncovered by the cave-in and they'd have seen it when they took out Withers if they'd had half an eye. I slipped in later and spotted it. A fortune of the stuff for the taking. It's a mystery what caused the cave-in."

Blackie Pinkston laughed. "Nature didn't do as good a job on Tom Withers as a knife will do when the time comes."

The Colonel snapped, "Get young Dan out there, and we won't have to worry about Tom. I got that much out of the doc. He needs nourishment. Get Dan and we'll have the gold."

I could hear their quick, excited breathing above the scuffling of feet, and I knew what they were going to do. They were going to strike a match to see the yellow stuff, and the light would expose me. I tried to draw my mind to this danger but part of me was still tasting the surprise that gold was here, and the other part was laboring with the question of the cave-in. If not the Colonel, then who?

THE sulphuric explosion seemed gigantic, out of proportion to the size of a small match head. It showed me their startled faces, like the faces of men who are reaching for a wine glass and discover it is filled with poison. I was the poison.

The carbine never wavered in my hands. And I was as steady as the sights that lined the Colonel's thick chest. I started to say, "Gentlemen, I've been expecting you."

That's what I started to say just for the hell of it before I let loose there in the hole. But I had just got past the "Gentlemen" when I heard a deep growl. I saw the startled lift of their faces as horror swept them. I looked then and saw the glowering, uncertain shadow of Big Sandy across the chasm from them, upright, teeth bared, giant arms spread, already in movement.

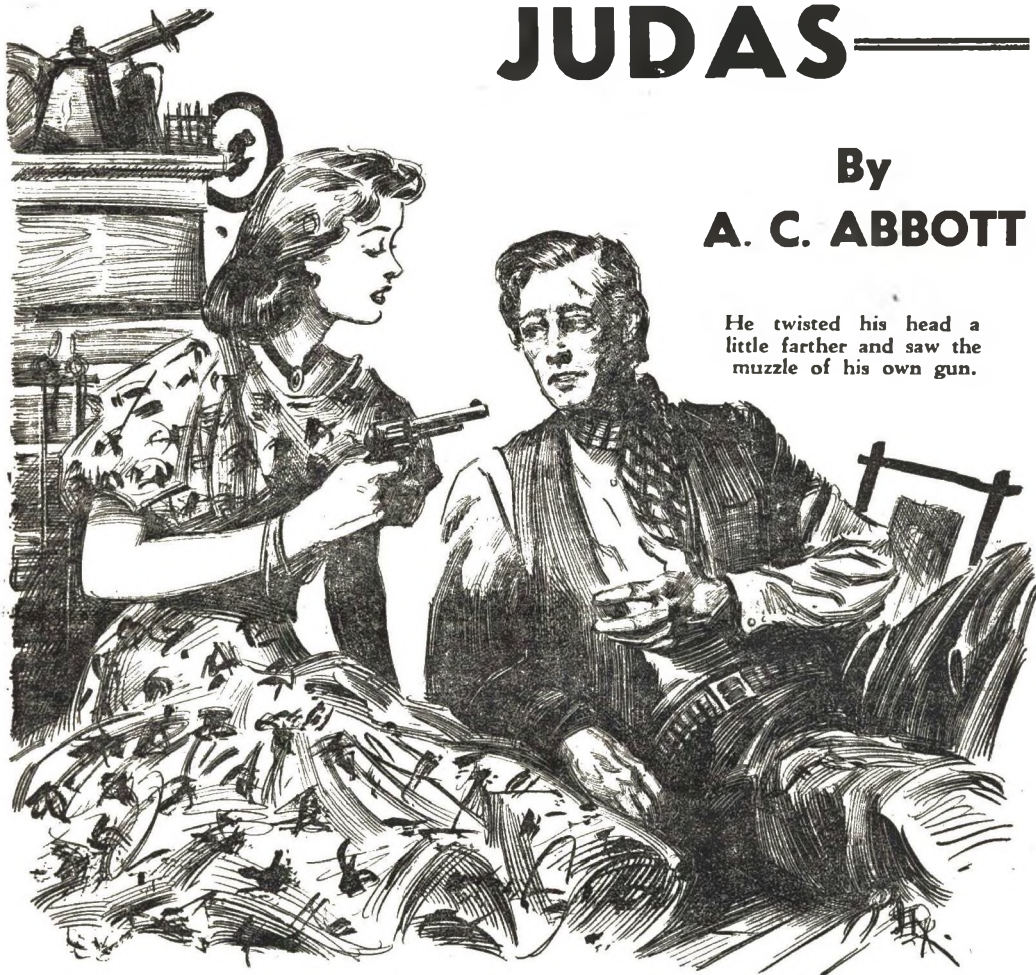
My gun's roar filled the hole, deafening me. At the same time the match snuffed

(Please continue on page 113)

BROTHER JUDAS

By
A. C. ABBOTT

He twisted his head a
little farther and saw the
muzzle of his own gun.



★ *Did even a sacred promise bind Bren Rocklin to be his
sidewinder brother's keeper—and die for his brother's
crimes in a lynch mob's noose?* ★

A MILE out of town, Bren Rocklin pulled his horse out of the trail, grabbing for the saddle horn as the animal came to an abrupt halt. The pain in his back stifled him, and he could feel the blood running down into his levis, hot and slippery. That slug must have cracked a rib before plowing its way out his side. He clung to the fork of his saddle, trying to quiet the hammering of his heart and draw in enough air so that he could pause

to listen for sounds of inevitable pursuit.

His horse was still trembling, shifting his hind feet and whipping his tail at a burning pain he couldn't brush off. Rocklin wondered how badly the bay had been hit in that sudden flurry of gunfire, wondered if the animal would go down before he did. His running so far had been the wild, straining rush of a terrified soul rather than the smooth coordination of hard, willing muscles.

It had seemed coincidence, that fiery eruption in the night; but a familiar icy dread clutching at the pit of Rocklin's stomach told him that it wasn't. It was Wayne, somehow. Wayne Dahl. Every grief Rocklin had had for the past ten years could be traced directly to the blond-headed, shiftless kid his dying mother had begged him to look out for.

"He's so thoughtless, Bren, and so reckless; but he's got good stuff in him. Stick with him. Make a man of him!"

Rocklin swore bitterly. A chill wind blew out of the mountains towering above him to the north, sweeping down across the valley that lay deceptively quiet under a cold, impersonal moon. He was shivering, but that was familiar, too. His ranch over on the Salmon was a good spread, but the house was always cold and barren and empty. He couldn't ask a woman to help him make it home as long as he had to keep riding out on Wayne's trail.

He tried to straighten, to look behind him, but the effort was too great. There was no use, anyway. He knew they were coming, men with rifles in their hands and ropes on their saddles. Men who would waste precious little time with a wounded, and therefore guilty, stranger.

He didn't know the country, and they did. With a wounded horse, a bleeding back, he could never hope to elude them out in the open; but the last thing they would expect him to do would be to circle back to town. He couldn't remember the name of the cowboy who had told him; but he could remember the words, ringing now with an ironic comfort.

"Wayne's there, all right, bunking down with an old saddle maker in the back of his shop and strutting around like he owned the valley. Claims to have a lot of money and to be looking for a ranch to buy. What you reckon he's up to now, Rock?"

Trouble, that was a cinch. But Rocklin needed shelter, and he needed more time than his bleeding back was apt to give him. It would be different at least, he thought bleakly, for *him* to be crawling in through the dark with trouble he couldn't handle.

He lifted the reins and spurred his horse away from the trail, swinging up a brushy ridge and then turning back through the rocky, pine-covered foothills. He had ridden into town from the opposite direction,

up the river road that formed a T in its junction with the main street; but he had caught a glimpse of the saddle shop where Wayne stayed and believed he could find it.

As he approached the rear of the long line of business establishments, a stable loomed on his left and beyond it a curtained, glowing window. Rocklin pulled up, hesitating. Other doors and windows of temporary living quarters stretched to either side, all dark, all strange to him. He hadn't counted on this. The town was obviously booming. Everywhere was the tang of raw lumber, but no one had taken time as yet to put any of it into residences.

A spasm of pain decided him, twisting him, tumbling him out of his saddle. He caught the horn and fell heavily against his horse's shoulder, clinging there until his head cleared. Then he shoved away and, with painfully careful steps, headed for the door of that lighted room.

It opened with a slight creak under his hand; and he stepped into a small, neatly furnished room, warm and cheerful with its brightly blanketed couch and its gay lamp shade. He paused, frowning at the strange mingling of odors that smote his nostrils, knowing they didn't belong to a saddle shop. An open door loomed blackly across the room, evidently leading to the business out front, and Rocklin moved clumsily toward it.

He had taken but three steps when a girl appeared in the doorway with the suddenness of an apparition, and an apparition she seemed to the staggering Rocklin. She carried her small head proudly, her dark hair folded softly over the shoulders of her tight-bodied, gray-blue dress. The eyes in her oval, rose-tinted face were the deep blue of a summer sky.

She stopped short with a gasp as she saw Rocklin, but for a moment he couldn't shake free from the dream that had enveloped him. The cheery warmth of this room could be a part of the ranch on the Salmon, with a girl like this.

"What do you want?" she demanded sharply.

Rocklin became instantly, shamefully aware of the dark stubble of beard on his face, of the rough appearance of his worn batwing chaps and brush-scarred leather jacket. He felt his cheeks grow hot.

"Excuse me, miss," he mumbled; his

voice thick. He started to reach for his hat, but dizziness swayed him and he had to grab the table for support.

Her eyes flared hotly. "You drunken loafer! Get out of here!"

"Yes, ma'am. I didn't mean—" His face was flaming. Never had he felt so utterly shamed and worthless. With tight-lipped effort he straightened his shoulders and said slowly, "I was looking for Wayne Dahl but must have got into the wrong house. I beg your pardon, lady."

He let go of the table and turned, concentrating on the cold air that would hit him when he got outside. It wasn't far to the door—or shouldn't be—but the panel of wood kept dancing away from him, farther and farther. Finally it vanished into nothingness.

Instinctively Rocklin threw out his hands. He felt them sliding over a hard smooth surface and realized it was the floor. . . .

HE AWOKE with an incomprehensible sense of urgency and started up blindly, shoving with his hands and striving to remember what was wrong. A hard object rammed into the back of his neck, and a sharp voice cut into his dazed brain.

"Lie still!"

He had heard that voice before. Carefully he turned his head, seeing first the blanketed couch and then the girl kneeling beside him; and he remembered. He still lay face down on the floor where he had fallen, but his shirt and jacket had been pulled up and a cool pressure lay over the fiery hole in his back. He twisted his head a little farther and saw that the hard object holding firm against his neck was the muzzle of his own gun.

Rocklin grinned with a slow appreciation, sinking back against the cool floor with his eyes once more on the lovely face of the girl. "Yes'm," he said.

"Lie still," she repeated, "until I get this rib tied together and the bleeding stopped. Why didn't you tell me you were hurt?"

Rocklin didn't answer, watching her as she laid the gun on the floor, out of his reach, and turned to the bandaging with swift, efficient fingers. His glance played hungrily over the full, firm line of her lips, the flushed cheeks, the eyes hidden behind thickets of black lashes. A girl with the

fortitude to patch a man up and then throw his own gun on him could hold up her end of a lonely cow ranch.

"That smell," he said suddenly. "What is it?"

"Medicine. My dad handles the drugs and the doctoring around here."

"What's his name?"

"Sorenson."

Her brief glance told him plainly that she understood why he had asked, but she didn't vouchsafe her own name. Rocklin let it go at that, relaxing and reveling in the comfort of the tight bandage she was winding around his body. Soon there would be questions, and a gun to retrieve—but for the present he was content to lie quietly, watching her and feeling her merge into a long dormant dream in his heart.

When she had finished, she picked up the gun and moved back, still on her knees and with the gun unaimed but ready. Rocklin rolled over and sat up, bracing himself against the wall and reaching for tobacco.

"Thanks."

"Maybe," she said, "you won't be thanking me when we're through. How did you get that wound?"

Rocklin rolled his cigarette, tapering it carefully before answering. "I was on the wrong end of a gun that went off," he said slowly, "but I don't know who was holding it nor why. What came off around here this evening?"

"Don't you know?"

"No, ma'am, I don't."

"Maybe," she said, "you'd better tell me what you do know."

"That won't take long." He lit his cigarette, inhaling deeply and relishing it in spite of the pain in his cracked rib. "I'm from the Salmon River country. I was just riding in to see Wayne—"

"Why Wayne?"

"He's my brother, ma'am. Half brother," he corrected with a pointedness he hadn't intended to use. "My name's Rocklin. Anyhow, just as I got to the intersection out here, a horse went by me in the dark, running hard. It spooked my horse, made him jump out into a patch of light. I heard somebody yell, 'There he is!' The next thing I knew I was having bullets for breakfast, dinner and supper."

"You ran?"

"Yes, ma'am! My bronc stampeded and

I let him go. The fellas that were doing that shooting weren't asking questions or preparing to give out civilized answers." He shrugged wearily. "That's all I know, ma'am. I circled back and was trying to find Wayne when I got in here by mistake."

"You mean to tell me," she demanded, "that you just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

Rocklin looked down at his cigarette, his lips tightening grimly. No, he didn't believe that himself. It was too well timed, too pat.

"I don't know, ma'am, but I wish you'd tell me why that rider was leaving town so sudden."

"He had just robbed the safe over at the general store and beat old Matt almost to death. Dad thinks he'll die."

Rocklin swallowed hard, staring at her but seeing instead the darkened windows of the saddle shop next door. Where was Wayne Dahl, and where had he been when that robbery took place?

Possibly because of his blank stare, the girl explained further, her tone less like granite. "We don't have a bank here yet. Old Matt has the only safe in town and he's been taking care of our money, over in his store. Somebody made him open that safe tonight and then deliberately beat him over the head. If Cap Pringle hadn't gone over to get Matt for a poker game, it wouldn't even have been discovered until morning."

"Who's Cap Pringle?"

"He runs the saddle shop next door where Wayne's been staying. We haven't got a hotel yet, either."

"I see. Is Wayne home now?"

"No, I think he's out with the posse. We haven't got any law officers within thirty miles, but all the men rode out." She paused, eyeing him narrowly. "Wayne's been out all day, looking over ranches. You know, he's planning to buy one."

"Yeah, that's what I heard."

"He and Cap and some of the boys had a poker game planed for eight o'clock, but they—never got to play."

ROCKLIN dropped his head. The last time he had seen Wayne, six short months ago, the kid had been flat broke, as usual. It was the report that he was now

claiming to be wealthy that had pulled Rocklin once more away from his ranch, knowing there was a crooked wind blowing out of the north.

That crooked wind had struck tonight, with the chilling force of a blizzard. Rocklin knew it; and he knew, too, the grip of a helpless anger at the binding promise he had made his mother. Make a man of him. Make a man of a wide-looping wolf whose father hadn't been worth the lead it took to kill him!

The girl's cool voice cut into his bleak thoughts. "Cap said he hit you. They're all out looking for you now, but they'll be back."

"Yeah, they'll be back." He looked up, his haggard feeling stiffening before the challenge in her eyes. "Miss Sorenson, could you believe I didn't pull that job? If you can find more than ten bucks on my carcass, you can have it."

"You could have ditched it."

"Yes, I could have. I've nothing to offer except my word."

Her eyes darted over his face uncertainly, searching him to the depths. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know what to think. I've been wondering ever since you started to leave without even telling me you were hurt. I know Wayne well and like him. It doesn't seem possible that his brother—I mean, you act like a gentleman."

Rocklin grinned with a dry humor. If her appraisal of him was no more accurate than her appraisal of Wayne, then he was anything but a gentleman.

She studied his grin with doubtful eyes. "But even if I could believe you, there isn't a man in this town who would."

"That," he said, "is why I kept going awhile ago. I could see from the way they were pelting after me that they'd lower the boom on me first and then ask me who I was. Please believe me, miss. I've got to see Wayne."

He pulled himself to his feet, leaning back against the wall and feeling the welcome surge of renewed strength. Warmth and rest and a tight bandage had worked wonders.

The girl also stood up, the gun hanging loosely at her side as she continued eyeing him with that troubled expression. He could see the struggle going on within her,

her sense of duty conflicting with an intuitive desire to believe him. He felt a quick stab of jealousy as he wondered whether she hesitated because she thought him a gentleman or because she liked Wayne too well; but he kept his gaze riveted steadily on her, unconsciously pleading with her to believe him. Never before had it seemed so important that anyone accept him as a man of his word.

Abruptly she stepped forward and extended the gun. "Mr. Rocklin, I'm going to trust you," she said evenly. "I don't believe a murderer could look at me as you're doing."

The patches of color in her cheeks deepened and spread as she mentioned his glance and he hastily shifted it, taking the gun and slipping it into his holster before daring to look at her again.

"If Matt regains consciousness," she went on, "he'll probably be able to tell us who did it. If he dies, I'll be duty bound to tell Dad that you've—been here."

"I'd expect you to do that. Miss Sorenson, I—"

Impulsively Rocklin reached for her but caught himself in time, lowering his hands and dropping back once more against the wall. For a moment he struggled to find words. Abruptly he leaned to pick up his hat, staggering as he straightened. She made a grab for his arm, and the quick concern in her eyes lifted him out of his helplessness. He grinned.

"Thanks, miss, for everything. I'll see to it you're not sorry." He turned to the door but paused, his hand on the knob. "Are you—in love with Wayne?"

Her answer was quick and straightforward, leaving no doubt as to its sincerity. "No, I'm not."

His long searching gaze brought a wave of crimson to her face, and his grin broadened. "I'll see to it," he repeated softly, and let himself out the door.

His horse stood where he had left him, humped up over his dragging reins with his tail to the wind. A quick examination by the light of the chill moon showed the animal's wound to be a long but shallow furrow across the left hip, neither dangerous nor disabling. Only for a moment did Rocklin eye the stable, wondering which business establishment it served. In any case, it would be safer than leaving the

horse out in the open, that was certain.

He led the animal inside, finding the stable empty but with fresh hay in the manger. He put the horse in the rear stall, removing the bit from his mouth and leaving the headstall draped over his neck in lieu of a halter. Then he went out, closing the stable door and crossing quickly to the living quarters Wayne shared with Cap Pringle.

The room was chilly, but he wanted neither to light a lamp nor build a fire. He put his back in a corner, squatted on his spurs and rolled a cigarette, trying to concentrate on Wayne and the problem at hand but finding that his mind would not stay off the girl next door.

That blush of hers, it seemed to him, was almost an admission of interest; and she *had* trusted him when all the evidence was against him. Which proved that this heady, tingling feeling was not his alone. That ranch on the Salmon would be a different place if there were someone waiting in the evening with hot food and, perhaps, a laughing account of what the kids had been up to during the day.

He was in the middle of his third cigarette when a step at the rear door brought him to his feet, a hand on his gun. His cigarette he held in his cupped left hand, its glow shielded. The creak of the door was accompanied by the jingle of spurs; and a man stepped into the room, briefly silhouetted as he turned to close the door behind him.

ROCKLIN recognized the high, graceful outline of Wayne Dahl; and a quiver of dread shot through him. He stood motionless while Wayne crossed the room, thumbing a match and set it to the kerosene lamp on the cluttered table. Then he spoke quietly.

"Where have you been?"

Wayne whirled, his gun half out of the holster before he recognized the man who had addressed him. Even then he did not immediately shove it back, crouching by the table with the cold, tense readiness of a startled cat.

"Where have you been?" Rocklin repeated.

"My gosh, Rock." Slowly Wayne straightened, wiping his sleeve across a jaw that was suddenly glistening with

sweat in the lamp light. He laughed shakily. "I wondered whose horse that was out there. Where'd you get that bronc and where'd you come from?"

"I bought the horse and I came from the ranch. *Where have you been?*"

Wayne's pale blue eyes were not exactly shifty but at best they held an unsteady light. They wavered now. "I been out riding with the posse. We had a robbery here tonight."

"Yeah, that's what I hear. Where did you join the posse?"

"I caught up with them just outside town. It was a wild goose chase. We never even saw the fella. What you doing here, Rock? How'd you know where I was?"

Rocklin moved deliberately out of his corner, keeping his eyes on Wayne as he approached the table and jammed his cigarette into a sardine can that served as an ash tray.

"I hear," Rocklin said, "you're looking for a ranch to buy. Where'd you get the money?"

"I've been prospecting. Struck it rich over at Placerville."

"You're lying."

"Say, listen—"

Rocklin grabbed his shirt front, jerking him away from the table and giving him a ruthless shake. "You struck it rich over at Matt's store."

Wayne's hands were lifted but he made no move to fight, nor did he meet Rocklin's eyes. "No, Rock, I didn't. I swear it."

"You arranged that poker game and timed it to suit you. You *wanted* Pringle to interrupt that robbery so you could slip into the posse and help chase the wrong man."

"Rock, don't," Wayne pleaded.

"When you were out this afternoon, supposedly looking for that ranch, you saw me coming and knew about when I'd get into town. And that's all you needed—a sucker to hang for you!" Rocklin shook him again, nearly jerking him to his knees. "You black-hearted pup! You deliberately laid a trap for me!"

"Rock." A dry sob racked Wayne's throat. "I didn't know it was you. Honest, I didn't."

Rocklin gave him a shove that sent him sprawling. "You spineless skunk!"

Wayne shoved himself to a sitting position, but he couldn't lift his head. "I didn't mean it to be so bad, Rock. My mask slipped and old Matt saw me. I had to kill him!"

"What did you do with the money?"

"It's out in the stable in a money belt. Nobody'll look for it there." He looked up, his face twisted painfully. "Don't give me away, Rock. Please! I want to buy a ranch, for Dell."

"Who's Dell?"

"Adele Sorenson, the sweetest girl you ever met. She likes me, I know; and if I can win her, Rock, I'll settle down. Honest. I'll never cause you any more trouble."

Rocklin swung away savagely, making a gesture at his bloody shirt. "That's the bullet hole Miss Sorenson dressed for me awhile ago. If Matt wakes up, he'll clear me. If he dies, she'll put her dad on my trail."

"On *your* trail!" Wayne's voice dropped to a whisper as his eyes widened with shock. "My Lord, Rock, what are we going to do?"

"Yeah," Rocklin said with hard challenge, "what are we going to do?"

Wayne merely stared at him, and Rocklin flung the remnants of his cigarette away with cold fury.

"Mother asked me to make a man of you," he said acidly, "but God himself couldn't do that. You're just like your dad, a worthless, selfish snake that dragged Mother down to nothing. You think I'll let that happen to Adele? I've met her, I tell you!"

He saw the shrinking protest in Wayne's eyes, but he didn't let up.

"I've tried a dozen times to break my promise to Mother, to let you go to hell, and I can't do it. I've tried every way I know how to fire a spark of decency in you, to find something that even resembles a man. I can't do that either. Now what am I going to do? If Matt dies, they'll hang *me* unless I turn my back on you and Mother both. For the love of God, Wayne, haven't you got any respect even for your own mother?"

WAYNE had no chance to answer. The back door whipped open, and three men stepped into the room with guns leveled. Rocklin heard the door behind

him jerk open at the same instant and knew that other men had slipped in through the saddle shop. The guns he could see were all pointed at him.

"Get your hands up," ordered the foremost man, a small, neatly dressed individual with clear blue eyes.

Rocklin heard him but didn't move, his eyes flashing to Adele Sorenson, who had stepped in behind the men. A bulging money belt was clutched tightly in her hands, and her eyes were fastened on him with a fathomless stare.

The small man repeated, "Get your hands up!"

"Wait, doc!" Wayne choked and lifted a trembling hand. "This is my brother."

"Adele told me. She trusted him, believed his wild story. When Matt died, we went out for a look at his horse and found this." He jerked his head toward the money belt, without for a moment taking his eyes off Rocklin. "I won't tell you again, young man. Get your hands up!"

Still Rocklin didn't move except to turn his head for a direct, piercing look at Wayne. The blond-headed would-be rancher was sagging against the table, staring at him with numbed horror.

"My Lord, Rock!" he whispered.

Rocklin lifted his hands and stood stonily silent as they closed in on him. He glanced once at Adele and then looked at her no more. The wrench in his wound as they tied his arms behind him was nothing compared to the sickness and humiliation that dulled her eyes.

Nor did he look at Wayne again. He kept his head high, his eyes riveted straight ahead of him as they shoved him from the room and headed toward a corral fifty feet farther along the rear of the buildings. The freshly skinned poles glistened like gold in the moonlight, forming an incongruous background for the deadly high crossbar over the gate.

Rocklin stopped of his own accord under the bar, turning and sweeping the small group of men with a cold glance before looking beyond them. He saw Adele rooted in the doorway they had just left, the back of her hand flung across her mouth. He saw Wayne lagging to a stop fifteen feet away, and even at that distance he could see the shaking of his brother's hands.

The rope sailed over the bar, the honda striking Rocklin's face as it fell. He hardly felt it. One of the men, with swift fingers, jerked out a noose and flipped it over his head, taking up the slack until the rough fiber bit into his throat.

Rocklin swallowed twice, but he couldn't relieve the pressure that seemed already to be choking the life out of him. There would be no question of a hangman's knot, no question of breaking his neck. They would merely pull him up and let him strangle.

"You got anything to say?" the doctor asked curtly.

Rocklin looked at Wayne, all the bitterness of his soul pouring out at the man who had ruined ten years of his life and was now taking it. He should have known, but it had been a last desperate effort. His lip curled as he said, "I'll tell Mother I saw you."

The doctor stepped back with an upward jerk of his hand. "Take him up."

The rope closed like a fanged vise around Rocklin's throat, snapping his head to one side as his feet left the ground. Instantly he was twisting and straining, writhing futilely against the agony screaming through him. Only dimly did he hear the cry.

"Let him down! He didn't do it—I did! Let him down!"

Rocklin didn't know when he hit the ground; but he was lying against it, dragging in great lungfuls of air, fighting to clear his reeling brain. It was the memory of crashing gunfire that brought him up, staggering into the gate post as his gaze fastened on Wayne's crumpled body. His gun lay beside him in the dust, still smoking.

The doctor put out a quivering hand. "Rocklin, why in the world didn't you tell us?"

Beyond him Adele was coming, stumbling forward with her hand still over her mouth, her sobs of relief plainly audible in the terrible quiet. Rocklin thought, *I can do it now. I'll take her home with me.*

To the doctor he said, "You wouldn't savvy. It was a promise I made Mother."

"Well, I savvy one thing," the doctor said gruffly. "She'd be awful proud of you tonight, son. Proud of both of you!"

MASSACRE AT DEAD MAN'S PASS

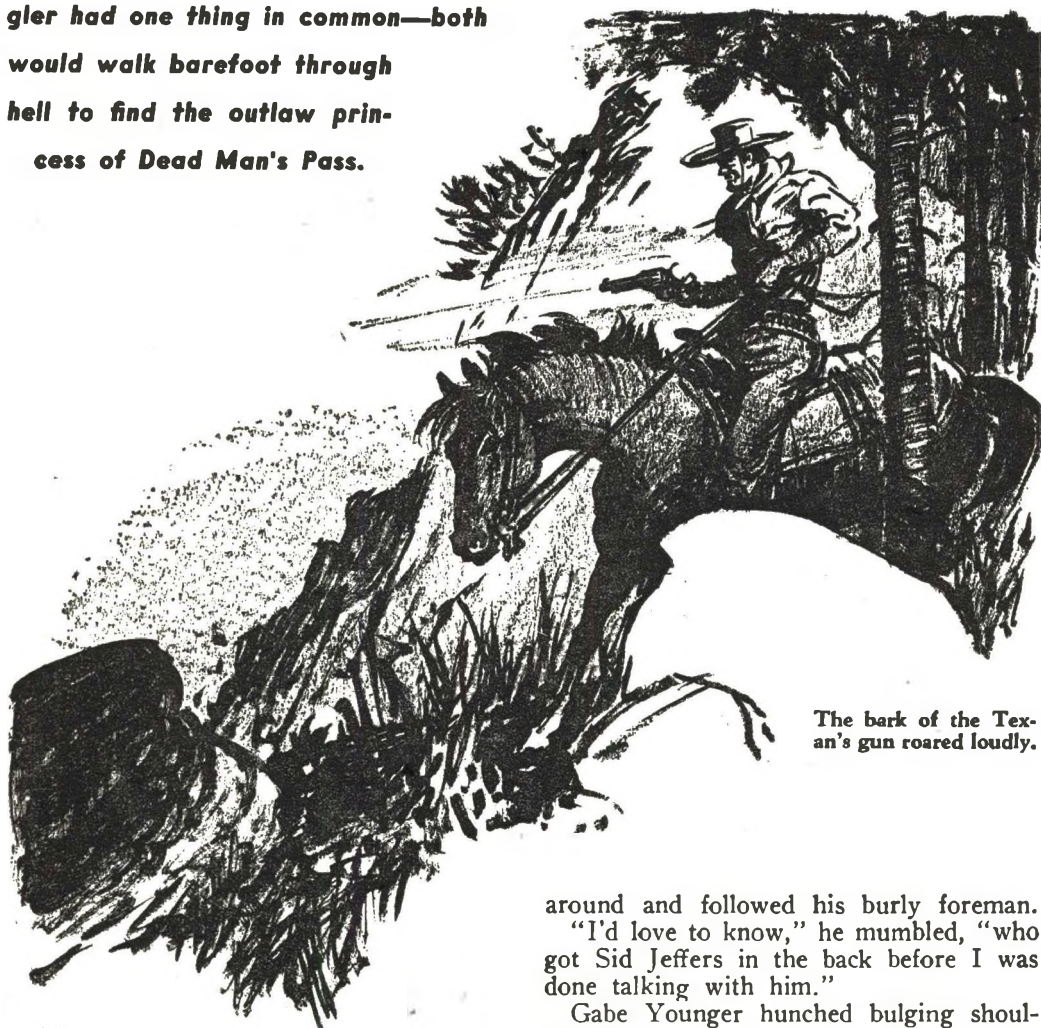
*Blazing Western
Action Novelette*



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By FRED GIPSON

The lord of a thousand miles of Texas range and the homeless horse smuggler had one thing in common—both would walk barefoot through hell to find the outlaw princess of Dead Man's Pass.



The bark of the Texan's gun roared loudly.

CHAPTER

1

On the Prod

Cibilo Creek was on a high lonesome. It was bank full and humped in the middle. Gabe Younger took one look at the vicious yellow flood and told his boss, John Moulder, "We'll never cross that before morning. Better head for that miner's shack upstream and shelter there till the rain lets up."

John Moulder tilted his head so that the driving rain ran from his hat brim in a splattering stream. He reined his horse

around and followed his burly foreman.

"I'd love to know," he mumbled, "who got Sid Jeffers in the back before I was done talking with him."

Gabe Younger hunched bulging shoulders impatiently. "Forget it, John," he advised gruffly. "You can't put no stock in what one of them Jeffers boys has to say. I still say that was whiskey talk. Or some jacked-up scheme to prize you loose from money. Them Jeffers boys is hoss thieves and hard cases. Somebody handed Sid Jeffers what he had coming to him."

"Maybe," said John Moulder. "But fifteen years is a long time, Gabe. And then just when a man's about to get a lead—"

"I said forget it!" Gabe Younger cut in sharply.

The squat, Single J foreman was so used to hollering "frog" and having somebody jump that he sometimes forgot he was

talking to his boss. John Moulder never seemed to mind. In fact, John Moulder didn't seem to mind much of anything these days.

Below them, the creek roared in sullen anger. Jagged lightning flared, and heavy thunder rolled in the desert canyons.

They pressed on through the humming rain. Gabe Younger, a blocky, dark-faced, middle-aged man with a bulldog set to his jaw, rode in the lead. John Moulder trailed him. John Moulder was an old man—older than his years, some said. He rode with his chin sunk on a scrawny chest. The rain poured down under the back of his collar, but he didn't bother to raise his head. When a man's memories are riding him roughshod, a little water running down his backbone means nothing.

They rode up to the abandoned shack in premature darkness. Gabe Younger swung down with a grunt of satisfaction. "I'll rustle kindling for a fire," he said, stamping into the gloom beyond the door.

John Moulder led the horses under a shed roof that slanted from one side of the cabin. He heard his foreman fumble around in the dark. He heard him stumble against a table or something, then cut loose with a vicious oath. There came the dull sodden sound of some soft, heavy object striking the floor—then tense, acute silence.

John Moulder stepped quickly back around to the door. "Gabe," he called, "did you fall and hurt yourself?"

"No," said a strange, cynical voice. "Gabe hurt himself and fell. Come on in and light a match—before I shoot you out of that door!"

"All right," said John Moulder softly. "Take it easy. I'm coming in."

HE STEPPED inside, careful not to stumble or make a quick move. He reached in under his slicker and drew out a dry match. He dragged it against the wall. When it flared, he moved toward a dirty coal-oil lamp that hung on the opposite wall.

Gabe Younger lay flat on his back in the middle of the floor. There was a goose-egg knot bulging his shock of coarse black hair. A trickle of blood seeped out of one corner of his mouth.

The third man stepped to one side and

kept his gun pointed while the old rancher lighted the lamp. He was a young man. The flaring match high-lighted his features—a set of gray eyes blazing, a clean-shaven face that was a mask of damnation, and thin lips cynically peeled back over an even row of white teeth.

"You can lay your gun beside that lamp, Moulder," he commanded.

John Moulder spoke without rancor. "I don't pack a gun." He pulled back his dripping slicker and let it slide to the floor. He looked down at his foreman. "Have you killed him?" he asked.

The young man smiled sardonically. "No," he said. "But I'll get around to it later. Maybe I'll get you, too. You recognize this handsome face, Moulder?" He leaned forward into the light, giving John Moulder a better look at his bold, reckless face.

"Yes," said the rancher. "You're Milam Jeffers. Gabe claims you and your brother, Sid, dealt in wet Mexican cattle and horses. I dunno. Maybe Gabe's right."

"He is," said Milam Jeffers. "About me. But he's barking up the wrong tree about Sid. Sid starved along with his little bunch of cows and gophered in that two-bit silver mine like a dog, trying to make an honest living. Sid never made a crooked track in his life. But the minute he makes a little strike in that mine, he's shot in the back like a yellow dog!"

He stopped and stared hard into the faded blue eyes of John Moulder, then continued: "Sid sent me word about that strike. Asked me to meet him across the Rio, in Ojinaga. I ride in a day late and learn the killing takes place while Sid's holding a little palaver with the great John Moulder. That's a little matter we'll settle here tonight, my friend."

The scrawny little rancher bent at the knees and sat back on a rickety bench. There was weariness in every line of his body.

Milam Jeffers' voice ran on, quiet and mocking. "You're rich, Moulder. You've got more mines and cattle than you could count in a month of Sundays. I imagine you'd give away a lot of that stuff right now, just to be back home with your whiskey jug and surrounded by your pack of gun dogs. You're pretty scared, ain't you, John Moulder?"

"No," said John Moulder. "I'm not scared. Fifteen-twenty years ago you might have scared me, son. Tonight, I just don't give a damn about you and your gun or my property or anything. Except what me and your brother Sid were talking about when he got shot."

Milam Jeffers watched the old man warily. "And just what was that?" he wanted to know.

Gabe Younger groaned and blinked his eyes.

Milam Jeffers whirled. He grabbed a fistful of the big man's black hair and yanked him to a sitting position.

"Gabe," he said savagely, "who killed my brother Sid?"

John Moulder sat very still. For the last fifteen years his holdings back in the Chinati Mountains, just north of the Rio Grande, had grown to the proportions of a small empire under the hard, grasping hands of Gabe Younger. John Moulder had never inquired very carefully into his foreman's methods. He hadn't been too interested.

Milam Jeffers slapped Gabe Younger's face a stinging blow with the flat of his hand. "I asked who killed my brother?"

The burly foreman came to his feet, roaring and slobbering.

John Moulder said: "Hold it, Gabe. Sit down a minute."

The foreman's clenched fists dropped. He backed toward an upturned powder keg and sat down.

"You think," began John Moulder, "that we'd kill your brother over a bunch of cull cattle and a mine that'll barely pay a man working wages?"

"Yes," was Milam Jeffers' flat answer. "I know what's happened to other little shoe-string outfits that got in the way of the Single J. You'd cut the throat out of your wife, John Moulder, if you thought she'd swallowed a silver dollar!"

THE old rancher jerked to his feet and, for the first time in years, Gabe Younger saw a return of that grim fighting spirit that had made John Moulder a man to give room to in his younger days. But it was only a momentary flash. The fierceness died out of the faded eyes and the man sank back onto the bench. His voice was calm when he spoke.

"Plenty of men hate me," he said. "But you're the first with the guts to stand on his hind legs and tell me to my face." He stared reflectively at Milam Jeffers for a moment. "I might," he added, "find a place for a man like that."

"Yes," said Milam Jeffers contemptuously. "A place in boothill!"

John Moulder nodded. "There's a chance of that, too," he admitted. "But what I have in mind might lead to your brother's killer. That's what you're after, isn't it?" He was studying the young man intently.

Bafflement showed in Milam Jeffers' grim face. He kicked Gabe Younger's gun out of the foreman's reach, and slapped Younger's fat jaw for trying to inch toward it.

"If you've got to talk," he said stubbornly to John Moulder, "talk quick and get it over. The way I see it, you tricked Sid across the Rio Grande, where it'd be safe to make a killing. Then you held his attention while a Single J gunman shot him in the back. But spout your piece, old man. I might listen. Or I might get a crawful and shoot you between the eyes. There's ain't no way of telling."

A shrieking gust of wind shook the old cabin. The oil lamp flared and smoked. Rain lashed the clapboard roof, driving a fine spray of mist down upon them. John Moulder's faded eyes were looking back down through the years as he talked.

"Fifteen years ago, the second of May, your brother Sid was fishing down on the Rio Grande below Polvo. A rain like this'n come up and Sid backed into a bank cave for shelter. While he waited for the rain to blow over, he saw a big man with a steel hook for a left hand swim the river on a roan horse. The man had a slicker, but he wasn't wearing it. He had it wrapped around a bundle he kept hugged to his belly.

"Sid was just a kid then and didn't pay much attention. He didn't tell what he'd seen. But a couple of days ago, he was in Ojinaga and saw this same man. He inquired around and found he was an outlaw who hangs back in the country beyond El Paso de los Muertos in the Santa Cruz Mountains. I reckon he learnt something else."

Moulder paused a moment, then went on slowly, "He sent for me, and I rode in

with Gabe and some of the hands. I was talking to Sid on a street corner after dark when somebody in an alley behind us got him in the back. Sid hadn't told me this outlaw's name yet. I want to know that, and I want to know what he was carrying wrapped up in that slicker."

Milam Jeffers' laugh was short and harsh. "Fifteen years ago," he recounted, "you were expecting home a wife that your close-fistedness and hair-trigger temper had drove from the Single J. That wife was killed in a stage holdup this side of Shafter. You lost five thousand dollars in that holdup, I've been told. Maybe you think that outlaw Sid seen swimming the river had your money wrapped up in that slicker he wasn't wearing. Well, to hell with you and your filthy money."

If John Moulder even heard the outburst, he gave no sign. He continued in the same voice of remembrance.

"They tell me," he said, "that's bad country back yonder the other side of El Paso de los Muertos. Outlaw country. They say there's a wild girl there, who rides with the owlhoot bunch. They claim she's got black hair and blue eyes and bee-stung lips. They claim that more than one man has followed her out of Ojinaga. Followed her into that pass and never come back. Seems like if I was a young man, I'd want to find out about that girl!"

Horses splashed in the muck outside. Milam Jeffers leaped for the door. Gabe Younger shoved out a boot, and Jeffers tripped, falling heavily. Single J riders crowded into the room, guns out.

The hawk-nosed Langtry Dodd was in the lead. "What's coming off here?" he inquired sharply. The bunch held their guns on Milam Jeffers. Langtry Dodd said to the foreman, "We thought something was up when you and the boss didn't come in. We swum the creek higher up and come a-hunting."

"Yeah," rasped out Gabe Younger. "Something's up, all right. Just watch this, Langtry, and you'll see something worth a long ride through the wet!"

He stooped and picked up his gun. He turned toward Milam Jeffers, swinging the gun above his head. There was murder in his squinted eyes.

"Hold it, Gabe!" said John Moulder, sharply. "Don't hit him!"

Gabe Younger froze there in the pale glow of the oil lamp. For a long moment it seemed that he would ignore John Moulder's order. Then he slowly let out a pent-up breath. His huge arm dropped to his side.

John Moulder smiled a faint, thin smile. "This is one for you to forget, Gabe," he said. "Go get the horses."

THE rain was slackening off. Milam Jeffers, alone and unhurt, listened to the diminishing splash of horses' hoofs as the Single J bunch rode off. Jeffers' mind drifted south of the Rio Grande. . . . A wild girl, riding with an outlaw bunch. A black-haired girl with bee-stung lips. . . . He swore suddenly and put a clamp on his thoughts.

He stepped quickly across the room and blew out the lamp. At the door, he paused, studying the gloom outside. Softly he leaped through and to one side.

Gun flame speared wickedly through the rain-swept night. Hot lead shrieked through the open door and splintered a board in the far wall. Milam Jeffers was laughing harshly as he ducked low and triggered twice at the wink of light.

A squalling shape rose before him, then pitched sideways. Milam Jeffers leaped forward. Sheet lightning flared, momentarily lighting the upturned face of the man on the ground.

"Don't move, Langtry!" warned Milam Jeffers. "John Moulder ought to've knowed better!"

Langtry Dodd's mouth was strained open to the rain. "It wasn't Moulder," he gasped. "Gabe sent me back." His voice broke. "How bad is it, Milam? How bad am I hit?"

Milam Jeffers struck a match. It flared only a brief second before a drop of rain knocked it out. "It's bad, Langtry, plenty bad. You won't last long. Who shot Sid in the back?"

"I don't know," Langtry Dodd gasped. He groaned and bared his teeth in pain. "Get me to a doctor, Milam. Give a man a fighting chance!"

"Yes," said Milam Jeffers with bitter sarcasm. "I reckon you call that a fighting chance you just gave me. I reckon that was a fighting chance Sid got, too. Forget the sawbones, Langtry. You won't last

till I can saddle a horse. Now tell me who killed Sid."

"I don't know," Langtry Dodd repeated. "But Navasota knows."

"Navasota? And where can I locate him?"

"In Ojinaga. Gabe left him and Turk there to find a hook-armed outlaw. Something Moulder wanted to know—" The Single J rider gasped and then lay still

CHAPTER

2

Outlaw Girl

At noon the next day, Milam Jeffers rode across the Rio Grande to the Mexican side. The old outlaw town of Ojinaga sprawled on the high, clay banks that rose a mile back from the river. He rode up the long dusty trail in the blazing sun and entered a darkened cantina that smelled strongly of stale beer and unwashed glasses. He found a paunchy Mexican barkeep asleep on the bar, and poked him in the ribs with his thumb.

The Mexican snorted and came awake grabbing for a knife tucked under his belt. Milam Jeffers beat him to the knife and stepped back, smiling faintly.

"There are two Texans in town," he said softly in Spanish. "They are called Navasota and Turk. I would learn of them."

There was shrewd cunning in the little black eyes that peered out through rolls of face fat. The Mexican stared a long time at Milam Jeffers, then motioned toward a barred window. The American followed the barkeep toward the window and looked out over his shoulder.

"There, my friend," said the barkeep, pointing upward, "is the Peak of the Sainted Cross." He pointed with his other hand toward the middle of Ojinaga's main street. "And there, my friend, lies a huge stone."

He turned to face his questioner. "Now the story is told that the *Señor* Devil lives in a cave at the Peak of the Sainted Cross. And there are times when he is displeased and he stands yonder on that mile-high peak and ropes this stone here in the center of town. Then he ties his rope to the peak and slides down the rope. And death comes quickly then, my friend. It comes to Texans who have dared to cross the Rio Grande."

"Yes," said Milam Jeffers, his voice soft as silk, "and I know a fine tale, also. It is of a girl with hair black as the feathers of a raven, teeth white as pearls, and lips like a slit in the side of a ripe peach. She is a wild girl. Many men have followed her beyond the Peak of the Sainted Cross—and these men have not returned. Now where in the hell are those Texans—Navasota and Turk?"

The Mexican grunted as Milam Jeffers jabbed a gun muzzle into his fat paunch. "All right, my friend," he breathed heavily. "Follow the *Señorita* Johnnee Dreescol into El Paso de los Muertos. That is where your friends have gone. And that is where your troubles will end."

"So that's her name—Johnny Driscoll," mused Milam Jeffers. "Don't worry about me, Mex."

"No," said the barkeep, "I shall not worry." His belly-shaking laughter was callow and shrill. It followed Milam Jeffers out into the street.

THE SUN was setting behind distant peaks. In El Paso de los Muertos the evening air was cool and damp. The trail led Milam Jeffers out upon a mesa, and far below he could hear the swift rush of water. This was the country beyond the pass—the outlaw country from which no stranger ever returned.

He paused to listen. From below, he heard the rush of the water in the gorge. Up above, a fox barked twice, then hushed. An owl hooted mournfully. Milam Jeffers quickly reined his mount into a brush clump as his alert ears picked out the clicking sounds of horses traveling along a sandy, rock-littered trail.

Two shadowy riders clattered past Jeffers. Deep tones rumbled from the giant in the lead: "I don't like leaving only Johnny back yonder with that kid. If Menjoz was to find out—"

"Salty'll take care of her," the second rider broke in. "But you hadn't ought to 've let that breed come in, Hook. . . ."

They rode on down the trail that led into the pass, and the voices faded. Milam Jeffers left the brush clump and walked his horse cautiously out into the trail. The path curved around the point of a brush-covered slope and led through tall, up-ended boulders. Here Milam Jeffers halted.

In the clearing before him, off the trail apiece, two figures sat at the brink of the gorge. They had their backs turned to him. Saddle horses stood close by, heads drooping over trailing reins.

Milam Jeffers sat and watched them awhile, listening to the mumble of voices. A movement on the left side of the trail caught his attention. Two men had emerged from the brush there. Two men on foot, who skulked like stalking coyotes, then suddenly flung themselves upon the pair seated beside the gorge.

There was a flashing glint of metal and a sudden choking sob. The knife-man shoved, and a body pitched over the rim. Milam Jeffers heard a low cry of horror and saw the two skulkers clutch a struggling girl between them.

WITHOUT a word, the Texan hooked spurs to his horse. The two men whirled at his approach, freeing the girl and clawing for guns. The bark of the Texan's gun roared loudly in the canyons. The knife-man staggered, lurched sideways, and followed his victim over the edge of the cliff. The other man darted behind a boulder and was gone. A second later, the clatter of hoofs sounded, receded rapidly.

Milam Jeffers sat quietly in the saddle and jacked out the empty shell, marking the direction of the hoofbeats.

The girl had sunk to her knees, peering over the rim. "They killed him," she said incredulously, without looking up. "They killed Salty and pushed him into the gorge!"

She was a dark, crumpled form there on the rim. Milam Jeffers spoke quietly, careful not to frighten her. He didn't want to see a third body drop into that chasm below.

"You're Johnny Driscoll?" he asked.

She rose to her feet and looked up at him. "Yes," she said. "Who are you?"

Milam Jeffers' voice was mocking. "That don't matter whatever," he said. "But you can bet your bottom dollar, sister, I didn't come in here trailing you. Do you know a man called Navasota?"

The girl took a step backward. "No," she said in a frightened voice. "No, I never heard of him."

"Who were these men?" the Texan

crowded. "The two that jumped you—and your last love victim?"

The girl shivered. "I don't know," she said. "Menjor' men, maybe. They came so quickly Salty didn't see them either. I—what do you mean, love victim? Salty was just a kid. Like a brother. And they killed him!" Her head bowed, her shoulders quivered.

Milam Jeffers let her cry.

When she raised her head at last, she said quietly: "You better go now. The shooting will bring them back."

"Bring who back?" Milam Jeffers wanted to know.

"My father and Billy Lauton. If they find you here—"

"Was the big man called Hook your father?" he interrupted.

"They'll kill you," she said sharply. "You'd better go. They'll be coming—"

"From what I hear tell," he said, "I wouldn't be the first duck to get killed on account of you." He stepped down out of the saddle and dragged a match into flame across his hip. He cupped it in his hands. "Just want to get a look at that fatal beauty," he said.

The dim light touched the wild loveliness of the girl's tilted face. For a moment they remained facing each other, both still as stone. A slow fire began to smoulder in the man's eyes.

The match went out. Milam Jeffers sucked in a deep breath. "John Moulder's nobody's fool," he said. His laugh was harsh and reckless as he reached and caught the slim girl to him. "And I can play at this game, too, sister," he said. His kiss was hard, brutal, on her soft lips.

She fought to free herself. Milam Jeffers turned her loose. "And that's the fatal kiss, eh?" he taunted.

"Damn you!" the girl panted and brought up a gun.

Milam Jeffers laughed and turned his back on her as he mounted. His teeth showed an even, glistening line when he looked down at her again. "You are the prettiest thing," he said, "that I ever gave a chance to shoot me in the back."

Muffled hoofbeats hammered in the pass. The girl let the gun drop to her side. "They're coming," she said breathlessly. "I told you they'd come. You'll have to hurry."

The despairing urgency in her voice sobered Milam Jeffers. His act seemed crude now, distasteful. "I reckon I made a mistake, miss," he said gravely. "I'm sorry—if that'll help." He swung his horse out into the brush and boulders.

A saddled horse with reins looped over a dead tree snag stood beyond the first heap of boulders. Milam Jeffers crowded his mount close and peered down at the brand. It was a Single J, all right. So the men who had attacked Johnny Driscol were Navasota and Turk. Which of the two had gone over the rim, Milam Jeffers had no way of knowing. He swung east in the direction taken by the John Moulder rider who was still alive. He found a faint trail and followed it at a quickening pace.

A single shot shattered the darkness somewhere ahead of him. After that, the Texan took it slow, his eyes probing the deep shadows. The trail left the erosion-tumbled basin in the top of the mesa and climbed through a gap in a low ridge.

A voice called from the darkness of an overhanging ledge. "All right. Speak up. Who is it?"

"Billy Lauton!" Milam Jeffers grunted in pain-racked tones. "I'm hit bad."

He slid sideways out of the saddle. Then: "You can lift 'em!" he said.

THE man's breath whistled between his teeth. His hands clawed upward. Milam Jeffers took the outlaw's gun and slung it out into the brush.

"A man rode through here a minute ago. Was it Turk Bolden or Navasota Myers?"

"I—I don't know. I didn't see—"

Milam Jeffers jammed the gun harder into the man's midriff. "A sawed-off jasper with a cotton head, or a long, dark drink of water. Which was it?"

"A long, tall man. I don't know his name. He tried to rabbit on us and Mendoz shot him in the foot. They took him back to camp to make him talk."

"Get your horse then," said Milam Jeffers. "We'll ride into camp."

They could see cabin light shining through the timber from the far side of the gap, and halted their horses there.

"That's camp," said the outlaw.

A quarter moon was rising and Milam

Jeffers could see three riders jogging across the basin ahead of them. They were riding at an angle to the trail he was on and were headed for the tiny cluster of cabins below. Even at this distance, Milam Jeffers could make out the girl riding with a gigantic figure of a man. The third rider, he decided, would be Billy Lauton. The three dismounted before a cabin and went inside.

Milam Jeffers asked: "Who's Hook Driscol?"

"Hook Driscol," said the outlaw, "is the big wolf of this hell hole."

"And who's Menjоз?"

"Pasqual Menjоз? He's a big flashy breed that hates Hook's guts. He wants Hook's girl, Johnny, and Hook has threatened to kill him. When the sign comes right, I reckon them two'll lock horns."

Milam Jeffers swung down from his saddle and reached for his rope. "Get down," he ordered. "Which is Menjоз' cabin?"

"The far one," said the outlaw, stepping down. "The one with the light."

The Texan left his outlaw companion lying on his side, gagged and with his feet and hands tied behind him. He started on foot toward the far cabin. Tension gripped him. He was getting closer every minute to the man who knew about the murder of his brother Sid.

The moon rose higher. The pothole valley was washed in a soft, warm radiance. Tight-jawed, Milam Jeffers stalked quietly from one shadow to the next. His nerves were humming at this game he played with Death, and yet the memory of the kiss he'd taken from Johnny Driscol kept burning his lips. His encounter with that outlaw girl had done something to him that he wouldn't admit to himself.

A man left Menjоз' cabin and hurried across an open space to a larger one. Milam Jeffers crouched there in the brush shadows and watched. Nothing else stirred. He moved on again, approaching Menjоз' cabin from the far side, and eased around to the front. A man leaned indolently by the door, a limp cigarette between his lips.

The Texan slid out his gun and leaped. He got a flash of the outlaw's startled face as the man turned, then he brought down

his gun in a vicious blow. The man dropped suddenly. Milam Jeffers waited a moment to make sure there had been no alarm, then stepped to the door and shoved it open.

A lamp burned inside. On a bunk, bound hand and foot, he saw the tall, dark man he was seeking—Navasota Myers. The Single J rider's lean face was covered with beady sweat and contorted with pain. One glance at the soles of his bare feet and Milam Jeffers realized why. They had been burnt and burnt deeply, and the odor of scorched flesh was strong in the room.

CHAPTER

3

Menjog Takes Over

Milam Jeffers' stomach tightened. He quickly cut the rawhide bonds holding the man. The Texan held a dipperful of water to the rider's mouth. Navasota Myers gulped the liquid. Then he stared at Milam Jeffers questioningly.

"What are you doing here?" he croaked.

"I heard," said Milam Jeffers, "that you know who shot my brother Sid. I come to find out who that was."

Navasota Myers swallowed with effort and nodded. "It was Gabe Younger," he said huskily. "I was leaving by the back door of a cantina when I seen Gabe slip into a dark alley. I looked around the corner in time to see him hand it to Sid in the back. I told Langtry Dodd I knowed who done it. But I didn't tell him who it was."

Sudden energy gripped the gunman. He lurched to a sitting position, his eyes rolling wildly. "It was Gabe done the killin'!" he gasped in fright. "You got to believe me, Jeffers!"

"Maybe I do," said Milam Jeffers. "How come you and Turk attacked that girl back on the trail to the pass?"

"Them was Gabe's orders. He sent us in here to capture Hook Driscol's youngun, if he had one. We didn't know Driscol's name, but Gabe told us how he looked and we found out about him and the girl in Ojinaga. I ain't sure, but it looks like Gabe's trying to hand John Moulder the double-cross on something."

The gunman set his bare feet to the floor, then jerked them back with a moan. "Look at my feet!" he gasped in horror. "They

burnt my feet, Jeffers. They've ruint 'em. I'll never walk agin!" He grasped Milam Jeffers' arm in desperation. "Take me out of here, Jeffers!" he pleaded. "Get me out of this hell hole before that Menjog devil comes back!"

Milam Jeffers gently pulled himself away from the hysterical gunman. "Keep quiet," he said. "I'll have to get horses."

After Milam Jeffers stepped out of the room and shut the door behind him, the gunman sat there on the bunk, swinging his tortured feet back and forth and emitting grunting groans. His feverish eyes lit on a long-bladed machete hanging from a nail on the opposite wall. Instantly, he was down on his all-fours, crawling across the room. His sweating features were twisted in an expression of Satanic joy. Milam Jeffers had told him that the guard lay unconscious beside the door. . . .

Milam Jeffers was slipping past the last of the cabins when a door opened and two men stepped out. One was the gigantic Hook Driscol. They walked away from the cabin, coming closer to Milam Jeffers. The giant halted abruptly and said:

"This is far enough, Menjog. What's on your mind?"

The outlaw half-breed had turned so that the moonlight fell upon his bold Latin features. "*Señor* Driscol," he said, "a few little touches of the hot poker to the stranger's feet loosened his tongue."

"You damned Yaqui devil!"

Pasqual Menjog palmed a gun. "*Señor* Driscol," he said, "the stranger says that fifteen years ago—the day after the stage holdup near Shafter—a big man with a hook for his left hand was seen swimming the Rio Grande below Polvo on a roan horse. He tells that this man carried something wrapped in a slicker—" The breed took a backward step, snarled, "Lift the hands. Pronto!"

That murderous steel hook reaching for the breed was stopped in mid-air, and Hook Driscol's right hand stopped with the fingertips touching the butt of his gun. Slowly the outlaw leader lifted both hands.

The breed's thick lips parted in a thin smile. "*Señor* Driscol," he asked, "what thing was wrapped in that slicker?"

Hook Driscol made no answer.

"It is possible, *Señor*," baited the breed,

(Please continue on page 100)

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(Continued from page 98)

"that I can guess." The moonlight gleamed on his silver-chased gun and on the white teeth he showed now in a broader smile.

The features of the giant outlaw's face set, the lines hard as granite. "You slimy, crawling breed," he growled. "I raised that girl like she was my own. It was the only decent thing I ever done in my life. I raised her decent and she'll stay that way as long as I can draw a breath. Now, damn you—shoot!"

The breed shot. The explosion was half-muffled against the big man's body. Hook Driscol hunched mighty shoulders and clamped both hands to his stomach. Pasqual Menjor whirled and ran, calling loudly in Spanish.

HOOK DRISCOL folded up and pitched face-forward on the ground. Doors were flung open. Men rushed from the cabins, their guns blazing. It looked to Milam Jeffers as if this had all been pre-arranged. He reckoned this was Pasqual Menjor's way of taking over the outlaw leadership.

It had all happened so quickly that Milam Jeffers still stood transfixed when the door of Hook Driscol's cabin opened and the slim form of Johnny Driscol darted out into the turmoil of flashing guns and cursing men.

Milam Jeffers ran toward her. A bullet knocked his hat off. Dark, savage forms with moon-silvered faces reared up at his side. He fled past them. A slug slammed into his shoulder, knocking him down. He came to his feet, still running.

He saw an outlaw clutch the girl. He triggered once and the man went down. Without slowing his pace, he flung his good arm around the girl and whirled her around into the shadow of the cabin.

She looked up at him with fright in her eyes. "Where's my father?" she cried.

"I'm afraid they got him, miss."

Johnny Driscol gasped in horror.

Then the breed's voice rose shrill above the shooting. "The girl!" he cried. "Get the girl!"

A low moan escaped the girl. She caught Milam Jeffers' arm and led him on flying feet past the cabin and down a nearby slope.

The shooting ceased. But behind them

came the outlaws, running like a wolf pack—the shrill, triumphant cry of their new leader, Pasqual Menjor, urging them on.

A half mile away from the cabins they halted a moment for breath. Behind them they could hear the outlaws crashing through the brush, drawing nearer.

"I've got horses the other side of camp," Milam Jeffers told her.

"It's no use," the girl said. "El Paso de los Muertos is the only way out and Menjor will have guards there. Come on!"

Milam Jeffers followed her, gasping with the pain of his useless arm. She led to the end of the valley and circled to the left. Thirty minutes later they came out on the brink of the gorge, not far from the cabins. The girl crouched and crawled on hands and knees into a clawing thorny thicket of low brush that grew down to the rimrock. She halted and waited for the Texan to struggle through behind her.

"It's here!" she said in relief. "Father fixed it for me, if I ever needed it."

A scrub oak had tough roots growing into the crevices of the rimrock. In the moonlight, Milam Jeffers could see a rope tied to the oak and dangling into the chasm below. Milam Jeffers reached for a pair of gloves in his hip pocket. "Put these on," he said. "They'll save your hands."

That left him only a bandana handkerchief to wrap around the one hand he could use. He followed the girl down. The descent was interminable, it seemed to him. The handkerchief wore through; the rope burnt his bare hand. He dropped the last fifteen feet—and it was only the girl's catching him in time that saved him from pitching off the narrow landing into the black, swift water below. He sank down on the ledge and felt sweat popping out on his face.

"There's a raft here," the girl said. "Three logs roped together. But we can float down through the pass on it." She moved a little further along the ledge, then gave a startled cry.

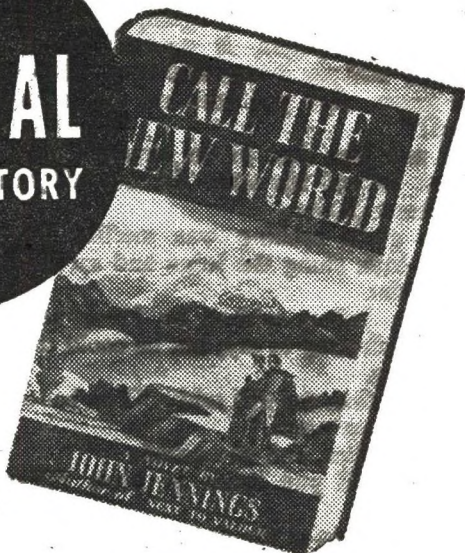
"It's gone! The raft's gone!"

Milam Jeffers squatted on his heel, his back to the rock wall, seeking a position that would ease the throbbing agony in his shoulder. He could feel blood running down his arm and soaking his shirt.

(Please continue on page 102)



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(Continued from page 100)

The girl's voice came again, quieter this time, and hopeless, it seemed to him. "Father told me it was tied here. No one else knew. Are you sure my father was killed?"

"I saw him shot in the stomach," said Milam Jeffers, his voice drifting off into significant silence.

The girl's sobbing was muffled. She moved back along the ledge and sat down beside him.

Milam Jeffers wished he knew something comforting to say, but he could think of nothing.

After a time the girl said: "You haven't told me your name."

He told her, and she asked:

"Why did you come in here, Milam Jeffers?"

He stared up at the dark, frowning walls above them. "I came in after a man," he said. "I found him. But it doesn't seem to matter much now. You didn't tell your father about me, I reckon."

"No," she said. "Other men have come through the pass and were killed. Some followed me, I think. Somehow, I didn't want that to happen to you."

She came suddenly to her feet. "I know," she said. "We'll climb back up and find us more logs. We can tie them fast together with our clothes or something."

Milam Jeffers had already thought of this. "I reckon I can't make it," he said dismally. "I'm shot in one shoulder."

The girl uttered a startled cry and sank down beside him. "You didn't tell me," she said. "How bad—"

"Too bad to climb a rope," he said.

A silence settled between them. He heard a sigh and felt her warm breath on his cheek. He reached out with his good arm and drew her to him. Her hair was soft against his face and he felt himself drifting. Then she was up again, reaching quickly for the rope.

"I can get the logs," she said determinedly.

"No!" he said sharply. "No, Johnny, they'll catch you!"

"They won't catch me," she said. "I'll get logs and we'll get out of here, Milam Jeffers. You wait and see!"

He let her go. He didn't know what

else to do. And he cursed himself in a frenzied rage for hours. Johnny Driscoll didn't come back.

* * *

THE stars had paled for daylight when Milam Jeffers went into the water. He'd removed his boots and strapped his helpless arm to his body with a belt and stepped off into the racing water. Somewhere in the blackness he hit a rock. . . .

He lay on his side and was retching when his senses returned. His lungs burned and the top of his head felt sore, as if he had been yanked out of the water by his hair. He heard a mumble of voices and rolled over, blinking his eyes in the gray dawn.

Gabe Younger sat on a horse a few yards away, grinning ferociously down at the half-drowned man. "Shoot him in the belly and kick him back into the water!" he ordered.

Beside Milam Jeffers was a hawk-faced rider with a little pinch of mustache under his pointed nose. He held a gun on Gabe Younger. "Listen, big un," he said in a high nasal twang. "You throw your weight around too much. We'll take you to Menjoz, like we promised. You claim you got a deal for him. All right, you can make it—if you're man enough. But don't try ordering us around, see. . . . What'll we do with this wet duck, Rader?"

The outlaw Milam Jeffers had left tied and gagged above camp the night before rode closer on a fiddle-footed black.

"We'll take him along," he said. "That breed's liable to want to ask him a question or two."

A white fog seemed to drift through Milam Jeffers' brain. He was out before the hawk-nosed man reached him.

When he came to again, he was in Pasqual Menjoz' cabin—tied as he'd found Navasota Myers tied the night before. The bright yellow light of the rising sun poured through a window to beat against his eyes. His head ached, his shoulder ached; his whole body was one quivering mass of pain. He twisted his head.

Gabe Younger and Pasqual Menjoz sat at a table behind him. The breed was talking.

"You forget, my friend," he said silkily,

MASSACRE AT DEAD MAN'S PASS

"that your man, Navasota, spilled the beans. We know your little secret. Pasqual Menjoz has nothing he will not sell. At the same time, he has nothing to sell cheap. It will cost you ten thousand dollars. American, delivered in three days."

"You're crazy as hell!" Gabe Younger flared. "Five's aplenty."

"Ten," said the breed. "Or I keep the little spitfire. I think the taming of that one will give me great pleasure."

Gabe Younger pounded the table with his fist. "Damn you!" he shouted. "You drive a hard bargain. But it's a trade." He swung about in his chair. "And how about Jeffers, here?"

"Him?" the breed said. "We play a nice little game here. When meddlers come through the pass, we throw them into the gorge and let the water take them out. Their remains found below makes a good scarecrow for other meddlers." He got up and called inside to the men who had brought Milam Jeffers and the Single J foreman to him.

"Take this one to the gorge," he ordered. "We shall give him one very fine push!"

CHAPTER

4

Boothill Gorge

Gabe Younger was escorted to the entrance of the pass by one of Pasqual Menjoz' men. From there, intending to ride back to the Single J, the burly foreman went alone. He was pushing out of the end of the narrow pass when a rope swished over his shoulders, yanked tight, and jerked him out of the saddle. His head struck a stone and he didn't move.

A rider came out of the brush, moving hand over hand up the rope. "John Moulder was right, Bert," he said to a companion behind him. "He said this is where Gabe would head for. Reckon you better go back and get the old man."

His companion nodded and moved off downstream. Presently he came back along the creek bank with old John Moulder. The little rancher's faded eyes were bright with a hard shine these two riders had never seen before. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"You boys can go now," he said. "This is between me and Gabe!"

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The Single J riders took in their ropes and rode off around the bend. John Moulder took Gabe Younger's gun from its holster. He squatted on the creek bank. He cocked the six-shooter and laid it on a rock, handy to his reach. He rolled a cigarette and smoked patiently in the sun.

Gabe Younger began groaning and wallowing his face in the dirt. Finally he sat up and wiped his face with a hairy hand. Then his eyes opened. They were dull at first, but when they focused on the scrawny figure of John Moulder squatted there beside him, those eyes blinked in disbelief.

"Yeah, it's me, Gabe," said John Moulder quietly. "And I brought the Single J crew along with me. We trailed you from the ranch, Gabe. It was slow going, but we stuck with it. And I figured all along this is where I'd find you. In here to make sure Turk and Navasota didn't bungle it?"

Gabe Younger groaned and wiped at his face again.

"You just as well set still and hear it all, Gabe," John Moulder continued. "You done rode your luck too far to back up now. You set still and listen."

"Twenty year ago I married a mighty fine little woman, Gabe. But I was young and ambitious and hard in them days. I was too hard for her. She left me. But later I saw I'd been wrong, and I kept writing her till she promised to come back. She said she'd come back and bring a surprise with her. She was coming back on that stage that was held up out of Shafter. Every person on that stage was killed, and a couple of outlaws with them.

"But the outlaw that got away didn't know there was a woman and child on that stage when he jumped it. The woman was killed before he realized it. So he did the next best thing he knew how to do. He carried the baby girl off with him.

"Me'n you guessed what was wrapped in that slicker, and I let you send Turk and Navasota here to trace the man who carried it. I figure you may have given them orders to do a little kidnaping and killing on their own hook. Did you, Gabe?"

Gabe Younger's right hand crept slowly downward. "No," he said. "Why should I?"

"Because," said John Moulder, "I have

MASSACRE AT DEAD MAN'S PASS

no relatives, Gabe. And you expected to fall heir to the Single J or a good part of it."

Gabe Younger snatched at an empty holster. John Moulder reached and picked the foreman's gun off the rock, stood up.

"I've got the gun, Gabe," he said. "Now tell me why you sent Langtry Dodd back to shoot Milam Jeffers. Was it because you figured he'd come in here and find out I had a daughter?"

"No. Milam Jeffers has always been a hell-raiser and a trouble-maker. He thought I'd shot his brother, Sid, so—"

"Yes," said John Moulder, "and that's what I'm thinking, too! You shot Sid Jeffers in the back to keep him from telling me about my daughter. In fact, Gabe, I've just realized that in the twenty-two years you've been on my payroll, I've never known you. I trusted you all that time, Gabe, and didn't have sense enough to realize how badly you wanted to get your stinking hands on all the Single J holdings. I've been a blind fool, Gabe, and I'm the one you ought to have murdered. Not my wife, whom you hired Hook Driscol and his bunch to kill!"

Sweat popped out on Gabe Younger's dark forehead. "It's a lie! I never—"

"Yes. It's a lie you're telling, Gabe. For only a couple of hours ago, I talked to Hook Driscol. We found him on the creek bank a mile below here. He was shot in the belly but he escaped through the pass here on a raft. He was ready to cash in his chips."

John Moulder's faded eyes were burning like live coals now.

Gabe Younger threw up his hands. "Wait, John," he cried. "Give me a gun. Give a man a chance!"

"Did you give my wife a chance, Gabe?" asked John Moulder. "How much chance has my daughter had? Likely killed by now by the same bloody scum who killed her mother and the man she thought was her father. Oh, they'll pay, all right, Gabe. But you'll pay first!"

He pulled the trigger once, and watched the surprise and horror spread over the burly foreman's face as the man sank to the ground. Then he laid the gun back on the rock, bent his head in his hands and cried as only a broken old man can cry.

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THE outlaw called Rader and the hawk-faced one with the little pinch of a mustache under his thin nose held Milam Jeffers on the brink of the gorge and waited for Pasqual Menjor to come.

"Did he mean for us to do the pushin', you reckon?" asked Rader.

"No," said the other. "The Yaqui devil will want to do it. He always does. The pleasure he gets out of a thing like this gives me the crawling creeps. Like burning that jasper's feet last night. I helped, but I didn't like it."

"Maybe," said a voice behind them, "you'll like *this*!"

The two whirled. Milam Jeffers tore his eyes away from the horrible fascination of the chasm and saw Navasota Myers behind them. The Single J rider was down on all fours, with a machete between his teeth and a cocked six-shooter in one hand.

Since Milam Jeffers had released him the early part of the night, Navasota Myers had been crawling and dodging through the undergrowth. Now sweat and dirt streaked his livid face and his red-rimmed eyes held a terrible glitter.

Then Jeffers came out of his trance. He jerked a gun out of the tall outlaw's holster, then grabbed Rader's. He stepped back, but turned at the sound of gunfire coming from camp. Yells arose. Then the high-ringing crash of Winchesters opened up. Over the rise, but coming toward them, was the sound of running horses.

Milam Jeffers started up the rise, running bare-footed, with a gun in each hand. A cry of horror came from behind him. He came to a sudden halt and looked back.

Rader was already out of sight and the tall dark outlaw, slashed in his chest by Navasota Myers' swinging machete, was toppling backwards over the rim.

The Single J rider swung about on his knees and waved the bloody blade triumphantly at Milam Jeffers. "That's three of the foot-burning dogs!" he yelled. His high-pitched laughter sent a chill up the Texan's spine.

A runaway horse came tearing over the ridge and thundered down the slope toward Milam Jeffers. The horse wore no saddle, but on his back, her long black hair streaming in the wind, rode Johnny Driscoll. Close behind her was Pasqual Menjor.

MASSACRE AT DEAD MAN'S PASS

The loss of blood had made Milam Jeffers weak. Weaker than he had thought. He stood there on trembling legs and tried to catch the breed outlaw between the sights of his guns, but the guns kept wobbling. He had fired his fourth shot when a slug from the outlaw gun got him in the side, spinning him around. He hit the ground on his side and lay there, unable to move.

He could see as clearly as ever, but his fingers didn't even have the strength to tighten around a gun-butt. And straight down on him rode Pasqual Menjor, his bold eyes searching for the girl.

At the brink of the gorge a gun roared. The outlaw's horse slid to a halt, reared, and fell sideways. Pasqual Menjor flung himself clear of the saddle with the agility of a cat. He was steady on his feet and shooting at Navasota Myers before his horse had quit rolling.

THE Single J rider was on his knees now, sitting back on his burned feet and bracing himself against the ground with his left hand. He was firing with the other hand, as slowly and deliberately as a man shooting clay pigeons.

Pasqual Menjor's gun stopped firing and sagged. The breed took a backward step, then slowly crumpled to the ground.

"That's four!" croaked Navasota Myers.

Through a misty white cloud that was enveloping him, Milam Jeffers saw the Single J rider lean forward and place the smoking gun carefully on the rock. Then the man sat back and began to grope and pull at his ragged, blood-smeared shirt. Suddenly he stiffened, screamed hoarsely, and pitched backwards into the gorge. . . .

Milam Jeffers felt Johnny Driscoll cushion his head in her lap. It did not seem at all strange to hear old John Moulder's voice above him.

"A shoulder smashed and some ribs broken. It's not too bad. I'll get help and we'll carry him to one of the cabins."

Milam Jeffers opened his eyes and tried to speak. The girl pressed her hand over his mouth.

"Hush," she whispered. "Everything's all right. They're friends, Milam. They have cleaned out this camp, burnt it to the ground."

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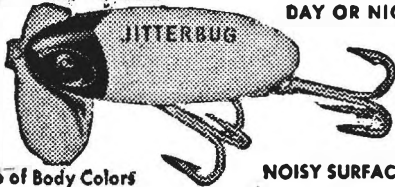
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

"I was told," said John Moulder, "that the girl they call Johnny Driscol was dead—else we'd have come sooner. You're a pretty thing, girl, pretty as your mother."

Wonder showed in the girl's wide eyes. "You knew my mother? I can barely remember her. I was four when she was killed and my father brought me here. What was she like?"

"We'll get to that later," said John Moulder. He bent a look on Milam Jeffers. "A Single J man killed your brother, Jeffers. But I had nothing to do with it."

Milam Jeffers sat up with an effort. For the first time, he saw how infinitely old and lonely John Moulder was.

"It was Gabe Younger who killed Sid," he said. "Where is Gabe? I want him."

"Gabe's dead," said John Moulder. "Gabe set out fifteen year ago to inherit the Single J. Murder wasn't too big a price to pay for it. What Gabe inherited an hour ago was six feet of Mexico dirt."

The old man turned. "You two stay here," he said. "I'll go get help."

He started to leave, then hesitated, his faded eyes drinking in the beauty of Johnny Driscol. He noticed how the girl kept holding to Milam Jeffers' hand. A look of softness crossed his features. Then his eyes turned cold.

"Jeffers," he said hoarsely, "I'm taking this girl back to the Chinatis with me. She's my girl and I'm keeping her. And no wild wet-horse runner like you can keep me from it. If you want to brace up and come run the Single J for me and my Johnny, I'll take you on. If you can't, and drag her back into the same thing she's had to live with here for fifteen years, I'll spend every dollar I own running you to the ground. Take it or leave it!"

For a second, Milam Jeffers was too startled to speak. He heard the girl gasp and he saw the look of shocked wonder in her eyes. He laughed hoarsely.

"Under those circumstances, John Moulder," he said, "I reckon you've hired yourself a foreman."

The hard look went out of John Moulder's eyes. Without a word, he turned and headed back over the ridge. Milam Jeffers thought he'd never seen an old man with so much spring to his step.

THE END

\$500 A HEAD!

(Continued from page 6)

Unfortunately, Horn's clever operations were too successful for his own good. A great many of the small ranchers in the neighborhood had at one time or another conducted rustling operations on the side. These ranchers joined with the sheep-growers in the country, who resented bitterly the large cattle owners who employed Horn. The sheep-raisers and the rustlers were natural, if somewhat incongruous, allies.

Therefore, when a fourteen-year-old boy named Willie Nickell was shot by a bush-whacker in one of the range feuds, his enemies decided to pin the killing on Horn, and thus get rid of him.

A deputy marshal named Joe LaFors was sent to feign friendship with Horn and to frame evidence against him. Faking an offer of a stock detective job, LaFors and some others got Horn to "admit" killing the rustlers. Actually, LaFors, knowing that Horn was at times a hard drinker and inclined to boasting and exaggeration when in his cups, bought him whiskey—one record says forty drinks—until he was ready to respond to any suggestion. Then his words were twisted and garbled into the shape of a damning "confession" by a man secretly taking notes.

Still not satisfied, LaFors continued with Horn on the spree. Egging him on to boast of his marksmanship in a Denver saloon, LaFors succeeding in making him brag, in the hearing of a crowd of men, that with a rifle he could "hit a dime at a hundred paces—and a nickel at five hundred."

This meaningless boast was immediately seized upon as a confession of the murder of the boy, Willie Nickell. LaFors rushed to swear out a warrant for his arrest.

No one who knew Tom Horn or had any acquaintance with the case, believed a conviction was possible. Horn had a perfectly good alibi, since he had been on a train far away at the time of the killing. But a jury packed with sheepmen and petty cattle-stealing ranchers ignored all the evidence and railroaded through a verdict of guilty. Under the guise of "justice," they ended with a noose the "Terror of the Rustlers," and one of the proudest figures in the annals of the West.

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(Continued from page 76)

promised, and in a couple of years they would be the richest men west of the Great Divide. They would make a piker out of Grizzly John. That is, they would if Grizzly did not make corpses of them first. . . .

Ben Sears drove his outfit down to the fort. He had been working on his whiskey keg fairly regularly since his decision to pull out and was in a thoroughly foul mood. He had been trying, with no success whatsoever, to drown his conscience. Double-crossing a man did not come natural to Ben Sears—even when that man was Slim Peck, who had planned to double-cross him.

He stopped off to say good-by to old Grizzly.

"I'm dragging my freight," he said. "Pulling out. Going East. Maybe I'll see you next summer. Or maybe I'll be putting flowers on your grave. I hope."

"Now, don't take it so hard, Ben," Grizzly said. "You're showing sense not bucking me. You showed sense trading animals this summer. I can use a feller like you who can think up a way to turn a dollar."

"You can use the devil," Ben said sourly.

With what little dignity he could summon, Ben left. Climbing aboard his wagon, he nearly fell out the other side. When he clucked to them, the well-matched mules trotted briskly away; six mules in harness; four trailing behind on picket lines.

He avoided the last train of the season that camped briefly near the river, and crossed over on the Mormon ferry. With a good will, the mules put their shoulders to their collars. In Cottonwood Hollow, where Ben's wagon had cracked up a couple of months ago, he pulled up the team. An alternate route had been discovered since then with less precipitous grades, and the place was as deserted and as uncomfortable as a haunted house.

The effect of the liquor was wearing off, leaving a dull ache in his head. A pull at the jug he had brought along would help him forget, he thought, would help bury the two months of working, sweating, fighting, haggling, trading to build the fortune he had thrown away—to end up just where he was on the fifth of July at the bottom of the steep slope in Cottonwood Hollow. But he let the whiskey lay in the jug, for it had not served him as a prop, nor had

BUSHWHACK PARD

it brought him wisdom in his hour of decision.

Swearing at the mules, he turned them around to head back toward the fort. They had hardly taken the slack out of the traces when a horse and rider trotted down the trail where ruts had been cut deep and wide by the wheels of many wagons. The horse was gleamingly wet, and the girl's bare knees shone in the lowering sun. The bangles of her doeskin skirt hung limply damp as she brought the horse around and back, close to the front wheels of the wagon. Ben gave her a hand when she swung up onto the wagon seat beside him.

"I swam the river," she said. "But Pa'll discover I'm gone. Any minute he'll be after us."

"Let him come," Ben said.

Her eyes searched his. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going home," he said.

She put an arm around him. "I hoped you would," she said softly.

"Slim's a fool," Ben told her. "Building a house for you. Building a house for a girl he never could catch. Building a still for trading whiskey that would only get his throat cut."

"What are you going to do to him?" Lily John asked, her voice trembling.

"Why, nothing," Ben said. "Nothing at all. I already killed him—in my head. And that's dead enough for me. If I'd gone on East the Indians would have found that still—or Grizzly would have bushwhacked him. But it would have been me doing it, really."

She turned her face up to him. Because her mouth was close to his, he kissed her; and because time was fleeting he made it brief and laid his whip upon the mules.

BEN and Lily surprised Slim lashing a pack on the back of a fast horse. A second horse stood ready saddled with a rifle resting snug in a boot slung to the horn. Slim's expression when he recognized Lily on the wagon seat with Ben was one of disbelief, then consternation.

In his typical way he acted without thought. He reached for the rifle carried by the saddled horse. Ben slashed out with his long whip, cutting the rump of the horse who leaped a full length in his first stride.

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Slim stumbled and Ben jumped from the wagon seat onto his back. Slim bucked him off. There was more fight in that boy than Ben had thought. Ben had gone soft through the weeks of arguing with emigrants. Slim had toughened up chopping logs for the buildings, toting rock and bricks.

Slim slashed in savagely, and for a moment Ben's back was up against the side of the house. Slim was cutting him to pieces. Ben charged, bellowing, butting Slim away with his head. Slim smashed a knee into Ben's chin, and Ben reached for Slim's heel. Slim turned completely over. Ben kicked him in the chin, laying him cold. Then Ben threw a pail of water on Slim to bring him to. Slim glowered at him.

"You were getting ready to come after me and bushwhack me," Ben said. "You had half the ranch and wanted all of it. But you wouldn't of gotten any, Slim. Grizzly would have taken it all, boy, the second you started trading whiskey for plews. He would of taken you, too, and I was willing to let him. What I started out to do was as bad as what you figured on."

Slim denied nothing.

Ben said: "Toss down them seat cushions, Lily, and hop down. Slim's taking the wagon."

Lily dropped the heavy, gold-laden cushions onto the ground and Slim took the reins.

Ben counted out Slim's pay for the summer. He stood back far enough so Slim could not reach him with the whip. There were plenty of provisions in the wagon for a fast trip to Oregon. Slim could go out tomorrow with the last train that was so feverishly camped by the river.

Slim lifted the reins and cracked his whip over the mules. After they were gone, Ben was surprised to find that he was holding Lily's hand.

"We better go tell your Pa," Ben said. "He won't like it."

"He's got to like it," Lily said. Then she added brightly. "There's a preacher in that wagon train. They're moving out at midnight. We better hurry."

Ben caught the horse Slim had saddled, and they rode double to the fort.

LOADED FOR BEAR

(Continued from page 82)

out and threw everything in complete darkness. There was screaming and thrashing about and the sound of men running. Why I aimed at the bear I don't know—except in that terrible moment, I wanted to save them from that kind of death. I had hit Big Sandy but I hadn't killed him. He was a part of that noise.

It had all happened so suddenly that dirt from the bear's lunge still trickled down through the opening and into my face. I could feel it but I couldn't see it. Then a terrible roar and a crash filled the front of the shaft.

There were more screams and the deep grumble of the animal. I waited, frozen to the spot. Dust, drifting back, made me want to sneeze but I held it back. All was quiet. After awhile I moved forward a few feet.

A match showed it. There was the pile of dirt and shale with a tangle of legs and arms showing. I counted off three men. On top of the pile-up was the huge form of Big Sandy, dead finally from my shot. His lunging weight had been too much for the thin space between Tom's shaft and the cave. Suddenly I knew what caused that other cave-in, the one that almost got Tom. The weight of Big Sandy had done it.

I went outside and I waited a long time, breathing in the high, mountain air until the dizziness left. Then I went back into the shaft.

An hour later, I made my way down the snow blanketed slope toward Elizabeth-town. I was carrying meat. Good, fresh life-giving bear meat that would put iron into a man's blood and bring color to his cheeks.

I felt better than when I came up. I would let Tom manage the mining part of the gold vein. There'd be a lot of details for me to see after. Freighting. Building a store that would give the miners honest values that come from competing with other stores. And I knew that Beth Hazlitt would be mighty happy about the whole new arrangement.

After all, managing the house of the man you love is a lot better than working in the store of the man you hate. I went down the slope whistling.

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